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The eagle soared through the clear blue sky. Sleek and beautiful, it rose higher and higher. Suddenly it dipped and dived, screaming through the air like a jet fighter.

Rebecca Williams watched in delight as the wonderful creature swooped low toward the ground. Then, at the last second, it pulled up and sailed high into the sky in a graceful arc.

And what a sky. Becka's delight changed to wonder as she saw that the sky had taken on a dark, purplish hue. But what really mesmerized her was the weird geometric pattern covering the sky: lines, triangles, and squares swirled in a concentric pattern that made them impossible to distinguish from one another. And yet the pattern was strong and focused, making an instant imprint on her mind.

The eagle's harsh cry rang out across the horizon, distracting Becka from the pattern in the sky.

"Becka! Be careful!"

She turned to see Ryan Riordan shouting and running toward her. She looked back at the eagle. Now it was diving toward her. She threw her hands in front of her face and darted

to the left. But the eagle did not follow. It swooshed past her, heading directly for Ryan.

She turned and saw Ryan's mouth open. He lifted his hand to protect his face. He began to scream, but it was too late. The sharp, leathery talons slashed at his neck and—

“Nooooo!” Becca woke up with a start. Sweat dampened her face, and her breath came in gasps.

Before she could get her bearings she heard, “Will you stop all that whimpering?”

She spun around to see Scott, her younger brother. She was about to yell at him for being in her room when she realized that she wasn't in her room at all. In fact, she wasn't even in her house. She had been napping on a plane.

A plane heading for New Mexico.

“Honey, are you all right?” Mom looked at her from the seat next to Scott's, her face showing concern.

“I'm okay,” Becca said, wiping the perspiration from her forehead. “I just had ... It was only a dream.”

“Must have been pretty weird,” Scott said. “You were making all kinds of noise.”

“It was an eagle,” Becca explained. “A huge one. It flew right at me and then wound up attacking Ryan.”

Scott held her gaze a moment. There was no missing the trace of concern in his eyes. This had happened before. Her dreams. Usually they had something to do with an upcoming adventure. Finally, he shrugged. “You're just worried about the trip.”

She could tell he was trying to reassure her. “Yeah. It's just ...”

He glanced back at her. “Just what?”

“This whole assignment.” She hesitated, then continued, “Doesn't it seem a little stranger than the others?”

Scott gave a half smirk. “Stranger than fighting voodoo in Louisiana?”

Becca said nothing.

“Or tracking down make-believe vampires in Transylvania? Or facing down demons in Los Angeles?”

Becka took a deep breath. Okay, so he had a point. Life had become pretty incredible. Still . . .

“What are you guys talking about?” It was Ryan, Becka’s sort-of boyfriend. He had turned around from the seat ahead of them and was grinning.

Becka felt a wave of relief. She knew she’d been dreaming, but it was still good to see him and know he was all right. Come to think of it, it was always good to see Ryan Riordan. If not because of their special friendship, then because of the gentle warmth she always felt inside when they were together.

“We were talking about this trip,” Scott said. “Becka’s afraid this one is stranger than the others.”

Ryan’s smile faded. “What makes you say that?”

“I don’t know.” She shrugged. “Just a feeling, I guess.”

“At least we get to stay in a fancy hotel again,” Scott said. “What’s it called? The Western Ground on the Cliff?” He leaned back, folding his hands behind his head. “Sounds pretty hoity-toity to me. Like one of those expensive, something-on-the-something hotels in Beverly Hills.”

“I’m just glad to be going this time,” Ryan said. “I went crazy when you guys were in L.A.”

Becka was glad he was with them too.

“Well, Becka’s right about one thing,” Scott admitted. “Something’s definitely up. Z never sends us out on boring assignments, that’s for sure.”

Becka and Ryan both nodded in agreement. Z was their friend from the Internet. He’d sent them to help people all over the world. And yet, to this day, Scott and Becka had no idea who Z really was. Not that they hadn’t tried to find out . . . but somehow, somehow, their attempts had always met with failure. Z’s identity remained a mystery.

“Actually,” Ryan said with a grin, “I’m pretty excited to be

visiting an Indian tribe. I mean, I've always liked reading about Native American culture. I think they're a noble people who got a raw deal."

Rebecca nodded. "Taking their land was a wrong that we'll never fully repay. Kinda like slavery. And you're right about their culture. They've got a real respect for nature."

"I suppose," Scott said. "But aren't some tribes really involved in weird spiritual stuff? You know, like shamanism and séances and visions?"

Ryan nodded slowly. "But some of that is in the Bible."

"So?" Scott asked.

"So they must have some truth to them."

"There's some truth in everything," Scott countered. "That's the devil's favorite trick . . . a little truth, a lotta lie."

Before Ryan could answer, Becka called out, "Wow! Look down at that canyon!"

Mom and Scott crowded in close to her so they could see out the window. There below them lay a beautiful canyon, its cliff walls shimmering red, yellow, and purple in the sunset.

The captain's voice sounded over the loudspeaker. "Well, folks, we're beginning our descent into Albuquerque. Please fasten your seat belts. We should be on the ground in just a few minutes."



On the ground far below the plane, an Indian brave ran through the desert. Above him, the huge canyon walls towered and rose toward the sky. Beside him, a river flowed, its power thundering and cutting into the rock and sandstone.

Swift Arrow ran because he wanted to crest the hill at the far end of the canyon in time to see the sunset. As he neared the top, he could see the bright yellow sun dipping behind the mountain ahead. When he arrived, he raised his hands to the

sky and called, "Father, you are the master creator. I praise you for the beauty you have made."

Far in the distance, a rumble caught his attention. He turned and looked behind him. Dark clouds were beginning to gather. A storm was brewing. Suddenly a great lightning bolt cut through the sky and then another and another. Jagged lines seemed to fill the sky, forming triangles and squares, all arranged in a swirling, concentric pattern . . .

Swift Arrow stared as the light from the bolts faded, his heart beginning to pound in fear. He'd seen that sign in the sky before. He lowered his head and began to pray. "Lord, deliver my people from their bondage. Free them from the snares of a thousand years. Help them to see beyond the old legends, the old fears, the ancient beliefs. Help them see your truth."

Another burst of light startled him, and he raised his head just in time to see the remainder of its jagged tail slice through the sky.

Swift Arrow grimaced as a mixture of fear and concern swept over him.



Becka lurched forward in her seat as the Jeep roared across the bumpy desert road. It had been nearly three hours since they'd boarded the vehicle at the Albuquerque airport. And judging by the bruises she was accumulating and the perpetual look of discomfort on Mom's face in the front seat, it was about two hours and fifty-nine minutes too long.

Of course, Scott and Ryan enjoyed every bone-jarring bounce and buck. They were busy having a great time. Red rock formations rose all around, high into the bright blue sky. To the left of the vehicle, three colossal boulders, each about three stories high, balanced on top of each other. To their right, a five-hundred-foot butte jutted upward, its smooth, flat top a stark

contrast to its jagged sides. In the distance rose a vast range of peaks. Their driver pointed to those peaks, saying, “The village is in the middle of that mountain range. I can drive you most of the way up, but you’ll have to go the last few miles on foot. No one can reach Starved Rock by car or truck.”

“You want us to climb those peaks?” Scott asked in alarm. “Are you kidding?”

The driver laughed. “It’s not that hard, boy. And it won’t take you too long. Come Saturday, I’ll be waiting at the drop-off point to pick you up. Noon sound all right?”

Mom nodded. “That should give us enough time to make our flight, Mr. Doakey.”

The driver grinned. “Just call me Oakie. Everyone else does.”

“Oakie?” Scott asked.

“Sure, when your last name is Doakey, what else would you expect?”

“Oakie Doakey?” Scott laughed. “That’s good.” He threw Ryan a look, but Ryan didn’t seem to notice.

Becka frowned. Ryan had spent most of the ride in silence, his attention focused on the scenery. When he had spoken, it was in a soft and reverent voice—almost as though he were inside a huge church. Granted, he seemed peaceful and relaxed. But he also seemed preoccupied—as if he wasn’t entirely there. Becka wasn’t sure why this made her uncomfortable. Maybe it was just jealousy. After all, she was used to being the focus of much of Ryan’s attention. But deep inside, she knew that wasn’t it. Something else was bothering her . . .

She couldn’t put her finger on it, but she could swear something was happening. Something . . . unnatural. Try as she might, she couldn’t stop the feeling from rising up inside her. Something was wrong.

They’d been in New Mexico for only a few hours, but already she knew something was very wrong.