

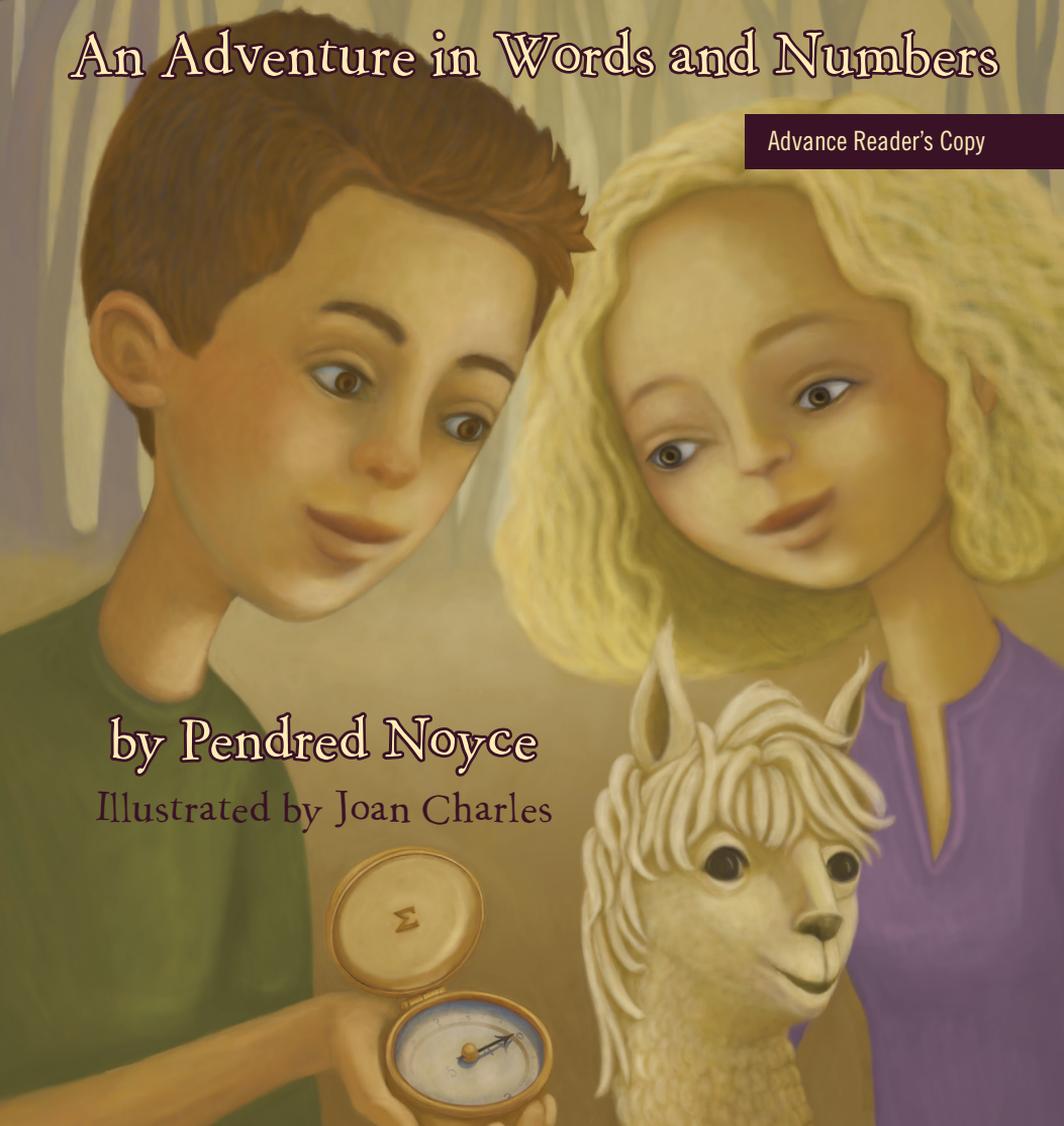
Lost in Lexicon

An Adventure in Words and Numbers

Advance Reader's Copy

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CHAPTER ONE

Great Aunt Adelaide



For a while it seemed as if the old summers were back and Ivan and Daphne would never run out of things to do. The two cousins built a raft of branches and rode out onto the river below the bridge, where the raft promptly sank. They chased the neighbor's sheep. One afternoon, tracking a porcupine, they almost stumbled on a skunk. They climbed trees and tried to find a good place for a rope swing.

In the evenings, Great Aunt Adelaide wouldn't allow television or computers. She brought out puzzles or cards or board games. Ivan was hopeless at Scrabble, so Daphne played with Aunt Adelaide. Daphne clicked her tiles as she rearranged the words, making Ivan keep score because she refused to do any math over the summer. One night they set up a special table for a never-ending game of Monopoly and appointed Ivan the banker.

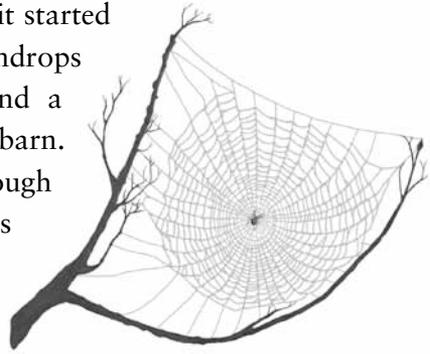
Each day, new books showed up on couches and stair landings, shelves and night tables. Aunt Adelaide, a former children's librarian, doled them out from her hidden stash—science books and mysteries, poetry, tales of adventure. Ivan dipped into a couple of puzzle books but found them pretty lame, no match for the thrill of a good video game. His thumbs itched for the real thing, the feel of the controller in his hands.

Early in the second week, it started to rain. The first day, raindrops sparkled in the sunshine, and a rainbow settled over the barn. Ivan and Daphne walked through the woods finding spiderwebs festooned with tiny droplets.

By the second day, the barnyard and garden had turned to gray porridge, and the pathways trickled like miniature brooks. Daphne dragged Ivan out to help her build a mud slide on the riverbank, so she could slip down it in her bathing suit, pretending to be an otter. But it was too cold, and she quit after a couple of tries.

By the third rainy day, they had lost interest in going outside, and Ivan was sick of Daphne's company. Aunt Adelaide made them sit at opposite sides of the couch to read, but Ivan poked Daphne with his feet. She kicked back, and before long they were up and yelling at each other.

Aunt Adelaide glared and plunked them down at the kitchen table to work on a puzzle. She hid the box cover,



but Ivan recognized the famous picture of stars whirling in pinwheels over a darkened village. He claimed the sky, so when Daphne leaned over to put in one of *his* pieces, he nudged her in the ribs with his elbow. Lightly. But she squealed.

“Now that’s enough!” said Aunt Adelaide. “You kids are going out to play in the barn.”

“There’s nothing to do out there,” moaned Daphne.

“Nonsense. You used to find plenty to do when you were younger.”

Daphne rolled her eyes. “Well, now that we’re thirteen, our entertainment needs are more *sophisticated*.”

Aunt Adelaide crossed her arms. “I must say I find that tragic,” she retorted. “To think that imagination and initiative have died out in you so young! Nevertheless, off you go.”



Ivan gazed out the window toward the barn. He could see nothing but wet, gray gloom. “We used to put on plays out there,” he said. “We even had pretend actors playing the other parts. How dumb can you get?”

Aunt Adelaide sighed. “I miss your plays.”

“Sometimes you made treasure hunts for us,” Daphne reminded her. “Maybe you could make one now.”

“When you’re little, you need to be led to treasures. Now you’re old enough to find them on your own.”



Ivan felt his thumbs twitch. “Sure, but not around here. If I were home right now, I’d be playing online with my friends, and we’d be about to reach the Radium Jewel of Ra!”

Daphne added, “If I were home, I wouldn’t be missing all my best shows. My friends and I could be texting our votes, winning free tickets to the teen fashion finals in Omaha.” She paced in a circle. “We might even get on TV!”

Aunt Adelaide stretched her long neck and peered at each of them in turn. She looks like a heron planning to spear a fish, thought Ivan.

“Is that what it’s come to?” asked Aunt Adelaide. “You need a screen to entertain you, and without it you’re determined to be bored?”

“It’s a fast-moving world, Aunt Adelaide,” Ivan told her.

Daphne spread her hands. “We just like what other kids like.”

Aunt Adelaide’s tall form quivered. “I thought I could hold back that world,” she said. “But sadly, it is upon us.” She walked around the kitchen and sitting room, scooping up books and putting away puzzles. “No need for libraries, no need for books. No need for invention.”

Daphne ducked ahead of her great aunt, rescued a couple of books, and hugged them to her chest. “No, don’t say that. Leave the books, we’ll read them, we promise.”

“No room for imagination,” continued Aunt Adelaide. “No need to make your own fun. It’s been all arranged for you already, audience-tested and prescreened.” She tipped the Monopoly game board into the box.

“Hey!” said Ivan. “No fair! I was winning!”

Aunt Adelaide turned toward him, her blue eyes sparking and her white hair, escaped from its braid, standing out from her head. “Were you?” she asked. As if overcome with sudden weakness, she sank onto the couch.

Daphne and Ivan exchanged an uneasy look. Not that they thought of Aunt Adelaide as frail—she went on African safaris and volunteered to help find new wildflowers in the Andes. But they’d missed coming here last year after she broke her hip on a caving expedition in Mexico. She was *old*.

Aunt Adelaide shuddered and took a deep breath. “I guess it’s time,” she said.

“Time for what?” Daphne asked, in her most polite voice. “I mean, is there some chore or something you need us to do? We’re glad to do whatever.”



“Time, after all, for a treasure hunt,” Aunt Adelaide said. “So here’s the first clue. It has two parts. The first part is ‘copula.’

C-O-P-U-L-A.

A copula is a small linking verb like ‘to seem’ or ‘to be.’ A copula tells you that you are, or will be, or seemed, or were.”

They waited, but nothing more seemed to be coming. She’s lost her marbles, Ivan thought. We’ve upset her by being too modern, and now she’s blown a fuse.

Aunt Adelaide stood up from the couch and said, “The second part is ‘anagram.’ Now go out to the barn, and solve the puzzle. You’ll find a task that’s yours to do. Listen to me, children. Don’t worry about coming back until you’ve completed your quest.”

She’s acting very weird, thought Ivan. He looked from Daphne to the doorway. Outside, the rain streaked down, but it was clear from the set of their great aunt’s mouth that they couldn’t stay inside. Ivan and Daphne put on their jackets. While Daphne struggled with her zipper, Ivan stuffed his pockets with chocolate chip cookies. Aunt Adelaide was an eccentric old woman; it could be hours before she let them back in. They pulled up their hoods, hunched their shoulders, and made their way out into the pouring rain.



CHAPTER TWO

The Cupola

Rasperry bushes, drooping in the rain, shuddered and dripped as they passed. “What made her so grumpy all of a sudden?” Ivan demanded. His foot slipped on a stone, his sneaker plunged into a puddle, and he felt cold water seeping into his sock.

“It was your fault for poking me,” Daphne said.

“It was your fault for crowding me.”

Daphne didn’t answer, and Ivan decided to drop it. They were stuck with each other for the afternoon, and silence would be better than arguing.

Ivan heaved back the barn door on its creaking rollers. The space within smelled strongly of hay. The pig lay on her side in a stall, with her eyes half-closed, the fine hairs on her side quivering as she breathed. Chickens fussed around the cousins’ feet.



Ivan pushed the chickens out of the way and went to check their nest boxes for eggs. Nothing. He picked up a pitchfork and stabbed at the straw beneath the pig's feet. Maybe if he cleaned the stall, that would be enough of a "quest" to get Daphne and him back inside the cottage.

The pig grunted but didn't move.

Daphne watched him turn over the straw. "What do you think Aunt Adelaide meant about a treasure hunt?"

Ivan snorted. "Nothing. There's no treasure hunt. She said we have to find our own treasure. That means there's no prize."

"But she gave us a clue."

"Doesn't mean anything. She obviously didn't have time to go out and hide any more clues. It's a dead end. She was just trying to get us out of her hair."

"Still, it must mean something. 'Copula, a small attaching word, like *is*.'"

"As in, 'This *is* pointless.'"

"Or *seems*, as in, 'This just *seems* pointless,'" Daphne said.

Ivan shook out a forkful of straw. "Great, we'll look for an *is* or a *seems*."

“There was another part to the clue.”

He leaned on the pitchfork. “Yeah, ‘anagram.’ You know what that is, I assume?”

“Of course,” Daphne said.

There was a moment’s silence. “So, tell me,” Ivan said. “You do know, don’t you?”

Daphne grimaced. “It’s on the tip of my tongue!”

Ivan snorted and went back to turning over the straw.

After a while, Daphne said, “Let’s go up to the loft and look around, just in case.”

Girls can be so annoying, thought Ivan as he leaned the pitchfork against the wall and climbed out of the pig’s stall. In disapproving silence, he followed his cousin up the narrow stairs to the hayloft.

Dim light slanted in from the high windows, and the sweet scent of alfalfa blended into the dry scent of dust. Bales of hay lined the walls, and wisps of straw lay scattered across the floor. At one end of the loft, in front of the wide shuttered window, there stood a small, elevated stage, where they’d put on plays for Aunt Adelaide when they were younger. A couple of rickety, child-size chairs still sat on the stage, and an old blackboard leaned against a hay bale. Under each chair lay a small pile of books.

Daphne picked through the books. “Didn’t we have a schoolroom in our last play? Here, wait, a notebook, I’ll take that.” She slid it into her jacket pocket. “I remember these books! *The Silver Chair*. *The Phantom Tollbooth*. *The Number Devil*. And here’s a dictionary.”

Ivan peered over her shoulder. He made sure his voice



sounded bored. “So, okay, look it up. Anagram.”

She turned the pages. “Here it is. *Anagram*. Of course. *A word or phrase formed from another by rearranging its letters*. I knew that!”

Ivan let that pass. “So what are we supposed to rearrange? COPULA? She said the clue had two parts.” He traced the letters in the hay dust on the floor. “I hate this kind of thing. POLUCA. PALOCU. LOPUCA. We need your Scrabble tiles.”

Daphne pulled out her notebook and a pencil. “ALPUCO,” she said. “Isn’t that an animal? No. POUICAL.”

Ivan hung over her shoulder. “COUPLA. As in, ‘What a *coupla* idiots we are.’”

“Hey, that sounds really close. COUPLA. . . That’s it. CUPOLA!”

“What’s a cupola?”

“Why, it’s a . . .” Daphne shuffled the pages of the dictionary. “Kyoo-puh-luh. *A light domelike structure on a roof, serving to admit light or air.*”

“You mean like that thing up there?” Ivan pointed.

A trapdoor hung half open at the peak of the ceiling. They couldn’t see where it led, but Ivan recalled seeing a small squared-off tower with four windows. Ivan had never climbed up inside the tower. But he noticed that the trapdoor had a hole near one edge, with a length of rope dangling out of reach.

“We could build a stairway out of hay bales,” he said.

With much grunting and argument, Ivan and Daphne shoved and tugged and heaved the bales into place. Hay

dust billowed up into the slanting light. They climbed onto the top bale, and then Daphne stepped into Ivan's cupped hands, keeping one of her hands on top of his head. She caught hold of the rope and pulled. The trapdoor grated open. A folded ladder lay snug against the inside of the door. When Daphne tugged on it, the ladder started to extend. Ivan staggered; Daphne fell. Then they shoved the bales aside to pull the ladder all the way down.

"No way Aunt Adelaide climbed up there," Ivan said.

Hay littered Daphne's hair, and her cheeks glowed. "She could have, maybe, a long time ago. Anyway, let's go see." Daphne jumped onto the ladder and climbed, brushing cobwebs away from her face. Ivan still had his foot on the first rung when he heard her step onto the cupola floor and gasp.

"What's going on?" she asked.
"What happened here?"

Ivan scrambled up the creaking ladder. "Let me see!"

The first thing he noticed, when his head cleared the trapdoor, was that the sound of rain had vanished. Daphne stood in a bright room, gaping at the window.

He joined her and looked out into a world that made no sense.

His first thought was that there had been a flood. The barn now stood in the middle of a pond with water



reaching halfway up its sides. But why wasn't water pouring in downstairs, around the edges of the door and into the stalls?

The countryside beyond the pond didn't look right, either. Ivan saw no sign of Great Aunt Adelaide's farm—no cottage or garden, no river spanned by an arching bridge, no highway beyond, no wooded hillside—just a broad expanse of rolling meadow strewn with wildflowers under a cloudless blue. Sheep grazed in the distance, and far off at the horizon, steep white-and-purple mountains cut into the sky.

"It's another land," breathed Daphne.

"Not possible." Ivan stood with his feet planted on the floor, trying to push away what didn't make sense. "It's some kind of optical illusion. A mirage."

"*To seem or to be,*" Daphne said. "I think it *is.*" She unlatched the window.

Ivan drew back. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going out there to see," Daphne said, pushing the window open.

"You shouldn't!" Ivan caught at her arm. "It might be—some kind of parallel universe or something. You might disappear and never get back."

She shook him off. "Don't you ever read any books? We go in, we have adventures, we come home. Maybe we find treasure."

"Right," he said. "Nothing could go wrong with that."

She stamped her foot. "Don't wimp out on me, Ivan. If we turn this down, we'll never get another chance." She

climbed over the windowsill and edged out onto the roof.

Ivan hesitated. This wasn't the way he liked to do things, plunging in without a plan. Daphne did that and got scared later.

He sighed. All the more reason he couldn't let her go alone. With a groan, he crawled through the window after her and got gingerly to his feet.

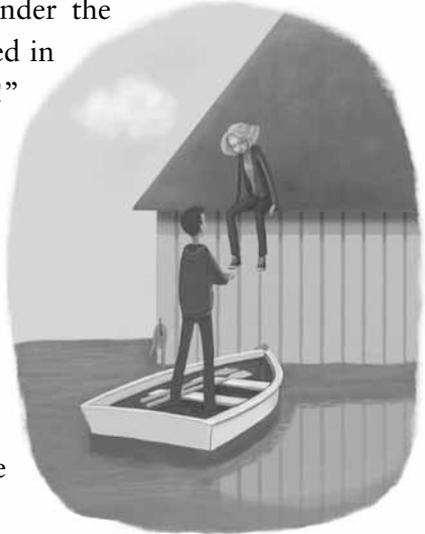
Ivan's sneakers gripped the asphalt roof shingles. The countryside looked freshly scrubbed. A breeze carried the scent of fresh dirt and jasmine. He took a deep breath and felt the musty grumpiness of the last few days begin to blow away.

"How are we going to get across the pond?" Daphne asked with a squeak in her voice.

Ivan felt his own confidence rising. "We'll swim if we have to. Don't worry."

They edged down the roof like crabs and spotted a rowboat tied to an eyebolt under the eaves. A pair of oars lay crossed in the bow. "Just waiting for us!" Daphne said.

Ivan lowered himself over the edge of the roof. He dangled his legs over the side, with his hands holding on to the gutter. Then he plummeted into the boat, which tipped drunkenly. Once he managed to steady it, he



stood to guide Daphne's legs as she, too, inched her way over the eave and into the boat.

"How do we get back up?" asked Daphne.

"I guess we figure that out later," Ivan said.

Neither of them had ever rowed a boat. They spun in circles for a while, arguing about whether to sit backward or forward. Finally, they managed to paddle their way across the water. After about twenty minutes the bow nudged the shore, and they dragged the boat onto dry land.

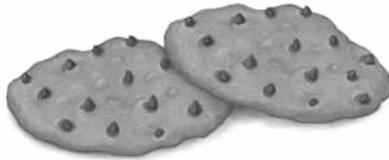
"Now what?" asked Daphne.

Ivan turned around. From the spongy grass underfoot, to the blue-gray line of trees in the distance, to the sheep grazing off to one side, this world looked so convincing. His heart skipped. This wasn't a dream. They were really here.

"If it's an adventure, we should just set out," he said.

CHAPTER THREE

A Plague of Punctuation



They selected a path and left the half-submerged barn behind. On either side, purple wildflowers ducked their heads in the rippling grass, and sulfur butterflies dipped and danced on the breeze. Once they spied a creature some way off that looked like a llama, but when it caught sight of them, it leapt away into the trees.

After they had walked for about an hour, the path led over a rise, and they saw a rising line of smoke and a cluster of thatched cottages. Around the huddled cottages stretched a patchwork of cultivated fields. Farther out, herds of white-and-brown spotted sheep grazed in the meadow while swallows flitted overhead. Daphne and Ivan paused to rest.

All at once, the scene erupted into movement. People ran out into the fields, waving pieces of cloth and beating on pots. The villagers kicked and flailed at the ground. The

clang of metal on metal reached the cousins' ears, along with fragments of shouting.

Ivan and Daphne looked at each other, and Ivan raised his eyebrows. Maybe their adventure was about to begin. As they started down the hill, the villager's shouts grew so urgent and their flailing so frantic that the two cousins broke into a run. They pulled up, breathing hard, in front of a woman flapping her long skirts at something around her ankles.

"Please, ma'am, what's wrong?" asked Daphne—only she half swallowed the phrase, so it came out, "Wha's 'r'ng?" which didn't make much sense. At the same time, Ivan felt a hundred tiny irritations hit his neck and ears.

"It's 'em! Th're b'ck!" said the woman, indicating the ground and air all around her. "Eatin' th' pl'nts. 'n' shortn'nin' all th' w'rds."

Daphne slapped at her legs. The ground swarmed with little black bugs of some kind, dots and curves darting from plant to plant. Ivan tried to shoo them away, but their numbers only increased.

"Y' see?" said the woman, holding up a leaf that had been chewed into flimsy green lace. "Eat'n' 'n' eat'n'."

"Can you speak more clearly?" Ivan tried to ask. What came out was, "C'n y' sp'k m'r' cl'rly?"

"L'k 't 'em!" Daphne said, waving at the bugs. "They're shap'd— Th'y l'k— I th'nk they're punct— they're . . . oh, d'rn it, comm's 'n' apost . . ."

"'N' p'int's," added the woman. "That's t' say, peri'ds. Th'r' g'tin' 'n th' w'rds."



“Punc . . .” tried Ivan. “Punc . . . tu . . . a . . . tion. Hey, l’k, I, c’n—I . . . mean . . . if . . . I . . . talk . . . real . . . slow . . .”

“M’be it’s ’cause you’re usin’ up th’ per’ds!” cried Daphne. “Per . . . i . . . ods.”

“El . . . lips . . . es!” said the woman. “It . . . w’rks! . . . It’s . . . good! Maybe . . . commas . . . would . . . work . . . too . . . I, mean, may-, be, we, could, talk, us-, ing, com-, mas.”

“It’s, slow,” said Ivan.

“It, helps, all, the, same,” said the woman. “Hey, neighbors! Lis-, ten, these, kids, have, found, some, thing. We, can, talk, with, paus-, es!”

Around them, the other villagers tried talking slowly and began to nod their heads. The punctuation marks found a place in the slower sentences without breaking up the words. The people no longer had to bang their pots and beat at the punctuation marks. Gradually, their frenzied movements subsided.

“Well, we, can, talk, but, they, are, still, des-, troy-, ing, our, crops,” pointed out one old man in a farmer’s hat. “Soon, we’ll, have, no, whole, words, to, talk, with.”

The people gathering around the cousins nodded and gestured, looking disconsolate, as the commas and apostrophes, the periods and semicolons and colons, spread busily over their fields. Ivan heard the commas’ tiny munching.

“C’n y’ h’lp us?” blurted one man.

“They, think, we, can, help,” Daphne said.

Ivan didn’t know what to do. Even his thoughts were almost too abbreviated to understand. He tried to slow them down. “I . . . do . . . not . . . know . . . what . . . to . . . do,” he

said to himself. But that wasn't much help.

Frustrated, he pulled one of Aunt Adelaide's chocolate chip cookies out of his pocket and took a bite.

All at once the little black bugs swarmed over his hand and flitted at his lips. "Ugh!" he cried, jumping back and dropping the cookie. Commas, periods, and apostrophes, then a few random exclamation points and question marks shot in from all corners of the field, coalescing first on the cookie, and then on one another. In a moment, the cookie became a seething mass of punctuation.

"Quick!" said Daphne. "A pot!" A tall, awkward boy with reddish-brown hair hanging over his eyes thrust his pot over the ball of black marks and set his foot squarely on top.

There was a pause, and then cheers broke out. Ivan pulled out another cookie and broke it into four pieces. Daphne handed the pieces to different villagers, who marched to the corners of the field carrying bits of cookie. A cloud of punctuation rose from the crops to follow them.

The remaining villagers surrounded Ivan, pounding his back and congratulating him. They shook Daphne's hand, too, pumping it up and down, and the hand of the lanky boy who kept one foot on the pot. "Well done, well done!" they cried. "Aye, we've saved some of the crop, at least."

"Who are you, then?" they began to ask after a while. "You're new around here. Were you sent from Origin?"



“Where’s Origin?” asked Daphne.

“You can’t tell me you don’t know Origin,” said a tall man in a straw hat. “(Zero, zero.) Unless you’re . . . oh, my Logos!” he exclaimed, turning around. “What if they’re foreigners, translators, come from Afar?”

“We’re not translators,” Ivan said uneasily. “I mean, I can’t speak any languages at all, except English, and even that—well, I’m terrible at grammar.”

“Terrible at grammar! And yet a punctuation tamer, with some kind of magical bait.”

“They’re just cookies,” Ivan said. He felt uncomfortable getting credit for something he hadn’t meant to do.

“We could give you the recipe,” offered Daphne.

“Could you really?” asked the first woman they had addressed. “What a lucky day this has turned out to be! Now come on, Jack,” and she pulled on the coat of the gangly boy with his foot on the pot. “Run back to the village and call for a meeting. Yes, yes, we’ll give them dinner. Take those beasties with you. We can’t have them getting out here again.”

She turned back to the cousins. “Surely, you must be hungry from your long journey. We’ll bring you to the village, where you can teach us how to make these ‘cookies,’ and then we’ll feed you right, and you can tell us why you came.”

“Oh, I hope . . . ,” a woman started to say. “Do you suppose . . . ?” a woman started to say.”

But the others shushed her. “Wait, let them rest, let them eat.”

Chatting and exclaiming, the farmers escorted Ivan and Daphne into the village.