


SEEDS OF DOOM

A stylized illustration of a young boy with red hair running through a dark forest at night. He is wearing a dark blue hoodie with a green and black camouflage pattern on the sleeves and dark pants. He has a surprised or scared expression. In the background, a suspension bridge is visible through the trees, and a line of evergreen trees is silhouetted against a dark, greenish night sky. The scene is framed by the dark trunks of large trees in the foreground.

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The message on the sign was very clear. ‘Keep Out. By order of the Corporation’. But Felix didn’t need to read it. All the Academy pupils knew that the old woods were strictly off limits. He dropped his school bag at the base of the metal fence and sat down to wait for Clara’s signal. At the far end of the playground, a strolling teacher glanced over. Felix waved casually. The teacher glared. Felix dropped his eyes and drummed his fingers on the post. All this sneaking around just for a stupid dare!

There was a rustling sound behind the fence.

“Clara?” he called, his voice hushed.

A flash of blonde hair appeared, followed by Clara’s face. “Hurry up!” she whispered urgently.

Felix continued staring at his fingers for a few moments before deciding to risk a quick glance up. “Coast’s clear!” he murmured. With that, he thrust his school bag through a small hole in the metal fence and scrambled after it. Clear on the other side, he somersaulted down a grassy slope before springing onto the balls of his feet.

Clara laughed. “You bounce everywhere!”

Felix ignored her. “You got the stones?” he asked.

She opened her hand to reveal two perfectly flat stones. “Do you think I’d make all this effort and NOT bring them?”

He shrugged.

She held out a couple of felt tip pens. “I know in the legend they *paint* their stones but...”

“Doesn’t matter,” he interrupted and grabbed a black felt tip. He glanced around nervously, peering into the thick darkness of the wood. “Have you found the cairn?”

Clara nodded. “This path leads up towards the top of the hill. It’s about half way up.” She pointed vaguely into the gloom.

The edge of the path was lined with straggly looking, yellow plants. Felix stroked the leaves; they were as soft as velvet against his skin. He snapped off a dried seed head and popped open the leathery pod. A sprinkle of tiny black seeds filled his palm. If he hadn’t picked it the wind would have scattered the seeds to grow naturally in the wood. He grinned. These were not Corporation-approved seeds of doom! He tipped them into his top pocket. “Dad will like these!” he muttered to himself.

“What?” Clara asked.

“Nothing. Just talking to myself!” He smiled. “Weren’t you scared? Alone in the wood with the ancient spirits...”

“It’s just a story!”

“I guess.” Felix turned his back on Clara and uncapped the felt tip pen with his teeth. According to the legend of the stones you could wish for anything and the spirits of the wood would hear you. But that was just a legend. He stared at his stone. Now it was time to draw something on it, his mind had gone blank. He darted a look over his shoulder in an attempt to see what Clara had drawn. “You finished?”

Clara closed her fingers around the stone. “If I show you my picture, my wish won’t come true.”

Felix drew a couple of stick figures on his stone. He stared at his efforts and sighed with dissatisfaction. He added a few dots around the feet and then a cloud with rain falling. “Done!”

Together, they jogged up the path, hanging onto branches to stop their feet from sliding backwards on the muddy ground. The scent of the woods filled Felix's nose; the dampness was almost overwhelming. Within a couple of minutes, they had reached the fork.

"There!" Clara pointed at a knee-high pile of stones.

"Are you sure that's it...?" Felix asked in disbelief, his voice trailing off.

Clara nodded.

"But it's so small."

"It's a *cairn* not a mountain!"

"Yeah I know but..." Felix ducked under the branch of an overhanging fir tree and crouched down. Now they were actually at the cairn the dare felt a bit ridiculous. He held out his stone. "Shall I put it on top?"

Clara shook her head. "You have to bury it so that only the spirits of the wood will see your message."

Felix rolled his eyes and let out a moaning sound. "I am a spirit of the woods!" He waved his arms in the air. "Woo-oo..."

"Ha ha!" Clara shoved him to one side. "You shouldn't start dissing the spirits you know."

"Clara! You don't really believe this whole 'spirits of the wood' business, do you?"

"Course not! But, well... you never know, do you?"

Felix stopped suddenly. He pointed beyond the cairn. "There's a footprint!" He bent and ran his fingers over it. "And the ground's still damp. I've got a bad feeling about this. Come on, let's get out of here!"

But Clara didn't move. "Not until we've finished the dare," she said and held out her stone.

“Stupid dare!” muttered Felix as he pulled apart two football sized boulders at the base of the cairn. He yanked out two smaller stones and poked his hand in the gap. “I’ll bury them here.” He was about to place their stones when he gasped.

“What is it?” Clara asked.

Very slowly Felix straightened up. “Someone’s already left a stone,” he said.

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. Look.” He pulled out a stone. It was small enough to fit in the palm of his hand. Two words written in white capital letters filled its surface.

“BRING SEEDS,” Felix read.

“What does *that* mean?”

Felix shrugged. “How should I know?” he muttered uneasily. An image of his dad’s collection of illegal seeds flashed into his mind.

He turned over the stone. “There’s more writing. *Monday. 10:00pm. Bridge of Dreams.*”

“Weird kind of a wish...” Clara said.

“I don’t think it’s a wish,” Felix interrupted. “I think it’s a message!” He bent and gently replaced the stone. He put the larger rocks back on top.

“Hang on. I wanted to have a proper look ...”

“No!” interrupted Felix. His mind whirled. Today was Monday. Did the message mean today?

“What?” Clara asked.

“There’s no time, we need to get out of here!”

Clara cast him a surprised look. “What’s with the sudden crazy rush?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

She shook her head.

“This must be a drop spot and we’ve just interfered with one of the messages. That message was written by...” Felix hesitated, remembering his dad’s warnings about the dangerous Resistance fighters. He glanced around, as if someone might be listening. He dropped his voice to a whisper, “It’s got to have been written by someone in the *Resistance*.”

“The Resistance?” Clara squeaked, her eyes filling with alarm. “How do you know?”

“Who else would leave messages hidden in *these* woods? The Corporation declared it off limits years ago!”