Chapter One – Visions

Nate found himself a little disorientated as he pulled himself to his feet. He was always disorientated after the jumps. After all, he never knew when they were going to happen, and this time he had been fast asleep. The sparkling firecrackers that always went off as he zoomed through the twirling tunnel of air were disintegrating slowly around him.

That particular jump found him standing in the middle of a very large room, his bare feet soaking up the chill of the old stone floor. As he stood in the centre of his protective shimmering bubble he sighed heavily.

Not another vision! These were getting old.

Pressing his hands against the sides of the liquid capsule, he pushed his face forward to see what it was this time.

How weird. He was in the middle of an old looking castle, staring into the face of a rather tired looking bearded man. Of course the man was oblivious to Nate’s presence. No one in his snapshots of the future ever knew he was there. He was merely an unwilling observer.

But to be in a castle had to be classed as the strangest yet. Even stranger than when he had witnessed a woman set her own hair on fire in a university chemistry lab.

“What on earth is this blasted necromancy useful for!” bellowed the man to the silence of his lobby. Nate jumped a mile as the man smashed his crystal whiskey glass at the dank stone wall of the castle. The tumbler split into a hundred sparkling gems before proceeding to rain to the marble floor in a dance of misery.

Even from behind the safety of his bubble, Nate felt nervous. This man was not happy and he could feel the stress he was under.

As the man moved away, Nate noticed a portrait hanging on the wall. The person depicted in it was the man standing in his vision, only he was looking extremely regal and on top of his head sat a crown. So he was a King. But what Kings lived in castles in 2013? Nate had visited Buckingham Palace last year as part of his PSHCE lessons, and that looked nothing like what he saw right then.

Nate jumped once more as a door somewhere behind him slammed open. He had to calm down, he was perfectly safe.

But his ‘safe’ thoughts didn’t prepare him for what came sliding past him on his right.

 “What?” Nate whispered into the air as a large red dragon slinked past. A dragon? Well that settled it. It wasn’t a vision, it had to be just a really vivid dream. No way on earth would dragons be appearing in any future he was a part of. So what explained the bubble then?

“What have you decided to do King Jordain?” the dragon spoke in a deep voice that shook Nate’s bones. Nate detected the faint smell of smoke seep through the walls of his bubble as the dragon opened its jaws.

“I have decided to take back the emerald. It needs to be brought home.” replied the King.

“And THEN they will let Shyla go?”

Who was Shyla?, thought Nate quickly. He was actually quite interested in this particular vision. It was like watching a mini movie. The dragon alone was enough to engage his curiosity.

“That is what they have said.” said the King wearily. “We can only hope that they will stay true to their word.”

“And what if they don’t.” pushed Kavator. Nate thought the dragon incredibly rude for pressing the issue when clearly the King was upset.

“I have to believe that they will. It is the only thing that is keeping me going right now.”

“Very well then, what do you need me to do?” Kavator must work for the King Nate surmised watching intently.

“I need you to go and collect the emerald and its keeper. And then bring them safely to me. Once we have them both under the protection of our army, we can go and pay Morvonia a visit.”

“I will leave right away” the dragon’s voice had conviction to it. “Has the beacon been set yet?”

“Not yet” the King shook his head. “I thought it be best that you arrange that part, you know these woods better than anyone.”

“I’ll do it without delay”. Nate watched as the dragon turned to leave, only to be stopped by the King.

“Kavator, do be careful. I don’t need to remind you how extremely important it is that this emerald reaches us safely and without delay.” the King said firmly.

“I will not fail you” replied the dragon, and finally Nate saw it thunder out of the room. Once again the voice vibrated through his body. The animal was certainly loud.

Then the bubble started to wobble, indicating that time was up. Focusing back on the King, the last thing that Nate saw before the room faded to black and his vision was over, was the king sinking heavily into his plush velvet chair, a look of defeat etched deeply into his face.

\*\*\*

Nate woke up, heart racing, lying in a puddle of damp sweat. Never before had a vision seemed so real to him. The ones he hated the most were the ones where complete strangers would be in great danger, as he knew he was completely unable to help them, but somehow he felt involved in this particular one. Somehow he felt he could do something to help. But what?

 “Nate” he heard his mum’s muffled call from downstairs. “Are you up? You need to come and have your breakfast or you will not have any energy for the competition.”

His mum’s familiar voice dragged him back into reality. “Coming” he replied.

Giggling out loud, he chastised himself. “Dragon’s indeed. There’s no such thing. Just a stupid silly dream.” He turned his mind onto the task of crawling out of his warm bed, purposefully ignoring the fact that he found himself having to wipe slimy bubble residue off his slippery hands onto his duvet cover.

Begrudgingly he dragged himself out of his nice warm bed. Mornings were not his favourite thing.

After a quick change into his dull, uninspiring school uniform, he picked up his skateboard as nervous jolts pinched at his stomach. Finally the day had arrived. The competition. The event he had been practicing for all his life. Everything he had ever done had been building up to that point. And he was petrified.

Heading to the door, he paused to check out his reflection in his mirror. No time to flatten down the ever infuriating cowlick with his super strength waxing gel that morning. It would just have to do.

He was just about to move away to the door, when the reflection of something falling off the shelf at the back of his room caught his attention. Turning around, he looked to see what it was. Not noticing anything on the floor, he next looked to the empty spot on his shelf. For the life of him, he couldn’t remember what had been sitting on that shelf.

He guessed it couldn’t have been anything important, but he did find it a little strange that it had fallen. After all, his window was shut so the wind couldn’t have blown it off.

Oh well he didn’t have time to worry about it just then, there was a trophy to be won. He would ask his mam to have a look for it when she was making his bed later.

“Nate” he heard his mum call for a second time, this time impatiently. “You’re going to be late. Come down this instant.”

“Alright” he shouted back, looking at his clock. 8.30. Yikes, his mum was right. He really was going to be late. His sister would most likely have left an hour ago.

Forgetting all about the mystery object, he rushed out of his room with his skateboard, slamming the door shut behind him.

\*\*\*

It was finally crunch time.

Nate was standing right at the very top of the skateboarding ramp, clutching tightly onto his custom made super turbo racer skater. It was the top of the range model, all of the cool kids owned one, and Nate so badly wanted to keep up with them. His palms were sweating with the anticipation of a thousand worried wimpy kids just about to enter a big kid’s party. His heart was pounding wildly in his ears, not singing to any one tune. His pulse had never been so erratic. He let go of his skater for just a moment to free his right hand so that he could nervously flatten down an annoying blonde front cow lick that had haunted him persistently since he had been old enough to have proper hair.

“You can do this Nate.” he whispered to himself quietly as he repositioned his hand on the scooter and rebalanced.

Thinking back to just moments before to when the crowd had been going wild as Jake Johnson, the year eight student who had gone on before him, had pulled off a faultless spectacular 180 double front flip with ease, Nate felt daunted as he, himself, was greeted with nothing more than an eerie silence. It was just another indication that he had to do something drastic to improve his standing in his school. That was why he had entered this competition in the first place.

This was the biggest competition of the year for Meadwell Middle School West, and not something that Nate would have dared to enter normally, but he had pushed himself after being the butt of some silly prank last month that had ended up with him having a jam sandwich stuck to his butt for at least half of the lunch time dinner period.

Sure, the fact that the winner won an all-expenses paid one week trip to Euroville Wonderland was a bonus, but what he really was in it for was simply to win more friends.

But today was going to be HIS day. He deserved it and he was going to win.

He stood staring down the ramp. It seemed unusually higher than normal, and he had practiced on it enough times in the previous fortnight to know his path inside out. He swallowed hard and squinted. The glare of the lights was starting to hurt his piercing green eyes and a slight pounding was developing in his temple. Great, not another headache!

Shaking it off, he ignored the dryness spreading in the back of his throat, and visualised his moves for one final time.

He had decided to attempt a three point double triple swing back flip. If he pulled it off, and pulled it off well, it would guarantee a win. No one had attempted anything nearly as difficult as that all day, and he knew he could do it. He’d been doing it since he turned nine.

“Think of Euroville!” he muttered to himself looking at his scuffed trainers. “Think of being the cool kid for once. Everyone will love you.”

Looking back towards the attendant, he saw her nod as a signal it was time for him to go and he forced down a fresh wave of nerves.

This was it. He took one final wobbly step to the edge of the ramp. He breathed in deeply. He could feel the crowd watching his every move, waiting to see what he was about to do, whether or not Nate Blackwell, most weird kid in year seven, would be able to do anything great at all on his skater. He positioned himself ready to go, putting one foot behind him, leaned his weight forward, and paused. He was ready.

Concentrating with every last cell his brain power could muster, after one last dramatic pause, he finally pushed off. The same feeling of exhilaration he felt every time he pushed off from the top of that ramp whooshed through his veins. Skateboarding was the one place where Nate felt truly himself, like he could take on the world. That day was no exception, he felt at home right at home.

Forgetting momentarily where his was, he navigated the ramp with the ease of a professional.

The wind pushed his hair back as he whizzed down one side of the curved wood and up the other. As soon as he reached the top he twisted his body to the left whilst in mid-air and turned about.

Bang, he hit the side of the ramp perfectly. Yes! Twist one completed.

Once again, he was rapidly whooshing smoothly down one, and then up the opposite, side of the ramp. To the top for a second time. A second turn. This time, he reached down and touched the tip of his skateboard as he completed his turn. And once again, he hit the ramp again graciously, without any problem.

The crowd was starting to take notice, sitting forward in their seats and paying close attention. Nate knew what they were starting to think; maybe this kid Nate wasn’t such a loser after all? Nate quickly noted that the sure winner, Ashton Appleby, was starting to squirm.

Nate cracked a smile. *Two perfect turns*, he thought. *One more twist and flip and I’ve won.*

He was now onto his third and final run up to the finale. This time with a flip. He was concentrating hard. He blocked out the crowd around him. It was only him and the board.

He went up the ramp for the last time and flew off the top. He turned as before, perfectly. Everything was going fantastically. He just needed to do the final flip before he hit the ramp again and he could relax and bask in the glory that was sure to follow. It was money in the bag.

And that was when it happened. His second vision of the day. Very weird, he never normally had more than one a month, and there he was, having two in the space of six hours.

Immediately everything suddenly stopped still. But this time there was no bubble. This time he was suspended in mid-air, frozen, unable to move. The crowd were just as still as himself. It was as if time itself had stood still. He still had the power of his thoughts though. Just what the heck was going on?

Nate feeling weak, not to mention freaked out, waited for something. And then that something did happen.

Black clouds started to gather directly above him, high up in the gym, near the ceiling.

He immediately had a very bad feeling about this one. It was not like the others. There was no protective bubble keeping him safe. And this time the vision was coming to him.

Watching the clouds knit together to take shape, he slowly tried to make out the form that was appearing.

When the image finally took shape, clear as day he could see a witches’ face looking down on him in the space directly in front. She was extremely menacing looking, appearing like she meant to hurt someone. The large beauty spot growing right on the edge of her upper lip did little to soften her cruel glare. Her eyes made Nate’s blood run cold. They were staring deep into his, their emerald light piercing his thoughts.

Well they couldn’t actually see into his thoughts, he was invisible to her. But that thought didn’t stop a cold shiver from running down his spine. He was scared without his bubble.

Never before had a vision frightened him so much. He hoped it would hurry up and finish and he could get back to the safety of the school’s gym. His toes were curled for goodness sake.

He started to relax a little as his wish was answered, and the vision started to disperse. Still, Nate couldn’t tear his eyes away from the witch’s. They were just so wicked.

And then the unbelievable happened. The second before the image completely disappeared, the witch smiled once more and winked at him. “Nate” she whispered ominously into the air as she vanished away to nothing.

Nate’s heart skipped several beats off the trot. He honestly thought he was about to have a heart attack. Did he really just hear what he thought he had? Did that witch really just whisper his name? It was impossible. His visions couldn’t interact with him. That was part of the deal. They simply couldn’t. He was seriously freaked out.

In fact, he was hyperventilating so much that he forget where he had been before the vision and he had lost all of his momentum.

With a foggy mind clouded with disbelief, he forgot that he was in the middle of his final seconds on the skateboard ramp, and as soon as he started to move again, he lost his balance mid flip. Nate came crashing through the air and banged into the side of the ramp, continuing to slip down to the bottom in a flailing tangle of arms and legs. His skateboard loyally followed him, and smacked him on the back of his head as he lay face down on the polished wood.

Nate groaned and just lay still, mortified.

After an initial pause of a shocked silence, the crowd erupted into a sea of heartless laughter. The first aider ran over to him, a plump woman in a white nurses’ hat.

“Are you ok?” she asked, the only one in the room showing any inkling of concern.

“I’m fine” moaned Nate, still positioned face down. “Please just help me off the ramp”.

“As long as you are sure there are no broken bones. That was quite a tumble you took.”

Nate groaned again. He really didn’t need to hear how bad he had messed up. The first aider took his hand and helped him up.

“Can you walk?” she asked shortly.

“I think so.” Nate hung his head, purposefully avoiding the crowd, who were still giggling uncontrollable. Out of the corner of his eyes, Nate swore he even saw a few kids hi-fiving each other over his epic fail. What nice people!

“Come on then, let’s go.” the lady bustled him away. “Do you need a lie down?”

“No, I’d really rather just be alone.”

“Well Ok, if you’re sure there are no broken bones.” She inspected his arms and legs, and assuring herself that all was right in the world of first aid, she rushed off to her plastic viewing seat.

“Gee, thanks.” Nate said sarcastically after she had left. Nate had a sneaky suspicion that this lady was less concerned about his welfare, and more concerned about any possible law suit that the school may be faced with if he went home with a fractured limb.

Trying his best not to limp as he joined his friend James Jackson (he figured he had given the crowd enough entertainment for one day), Nate could hear the commentator saying something about his fall over the loud speaker as the crowd sat delighting in the fall, but the actually words were a blur to his ears. Admittedly, if it had happened to anyone other than himself, he would have been laughing too, but this had happened to *him*, and he was crushed. This was definitely NOT the way to win any popularity votes.

 “What happened?” James gasped Nate reached where James was waiting in the side lines. The curly mop of hair plonked on the top of his head flopped into his eyes as he leaned in towards Nate.

Nate’s face flushed with embarrassment. “Well, I fell didn’t I?” James really could be a pain at times.

“I could see *that*, but what happened to make you fall. You were doing so well.”

“Oh you know, just one of those things.” said Nate trying to appear nonchalant.

“Not another vision!” speculated James correctly, much to Nate’s annoyance.

“No” Nate lied, not wanting to get caught up in another interrogation on the matter of his visions. He had learned to keep his mouth shut a long time ago; it saved him a whole heap of trouble. James was the only one who actually kept bringing it up.

“It was, wasn’t it?” pushed James, oblivious to Nate’s attempt to sidestep the issue. “I could tell. You were fine one second, and then bombed out a moment later. It’ so obvious that’s what happened. What was it this time?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” said Nate, knowing full well how crazy he would sound if he started spouting off about witches.

Apart from James, and of course his sister, no one at Meadwell actually had believed Nate in the past when he used to stupidly share his predictions. They had all thought he was just a big fat joke. A reputation that still haunted him in year 7.

“OK” said James “but you know I’m here if you want to talk about it.” Moving the subject on, James nodded towards a group of boys sitting across from where they were sat. “Don’t look now, but Ashton and his friends are talking about you.”

Nate sighed. He wished there was a hole in the floor that would open up and swallow him whole. But that wasn’t likely to happen, was it? After all, there had been no vision about *that*.

Nate reluctantly looked over. Ashton and the rest of his gang were indeed whispering and looking their way. They were sniggering. It was obvious they were laughing about Nate.

Nate was crushed. He knew his chances of winning were well and truly over. He’d be lucky if the judges awarded him a measly two pity points, just out of sympathy.

“Well the judges have decided” boomed a loud voice from over the speaker system.

Nate stood up. “Let’s just go” he said despondently to James. James stood up to follow.

The two friends could hear the announcer shout out the winners as they walked towards the entrance to the gym.

“In third place, Charlie Jones”. A round of applause. “In second place, Rachel Sampson”. A louder round of applause.

“And in first place, the winner of our annual skateboarding competition, and the all expenses paid trip to Euroville”. There was a dramatic pause as the crowd held their breath. “Ashton Brown. Congratulations Ashton.” The audience exploded into a series of cheers and loud ‘Whoop Whoops’.

“Knew that was going to happen” said James matter of fact as he pushed open the door to the hall. “As if that guy isn’t popular enough.” And he walked through.

“Yeah.” said Nate quietly looking back. Ashton was standing there gloating ungraciously, a cocky smile plastered widely over his crazily freckled cheeks, as he held up his new gleaming trophy while photographers from the local paper flashed away.

“Don’t worry, there’s always next year” James cheerfully encouraged.

Nate just shrugged and followed his friend out of the room. He was not in a very talkative mood at all.