

# LAST GATE TO FAERIE

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& CHRISTY TOHARA

**T**REE REMAINS FILLED THE FOREST, CHOKED BY THE “vine that took over the South.” It seemed kudzu could survive even nuclear fallout. The vines, albeit mostly yellow, draped over black and white branches like garlands adorning skeletons in a *danse macabre*.

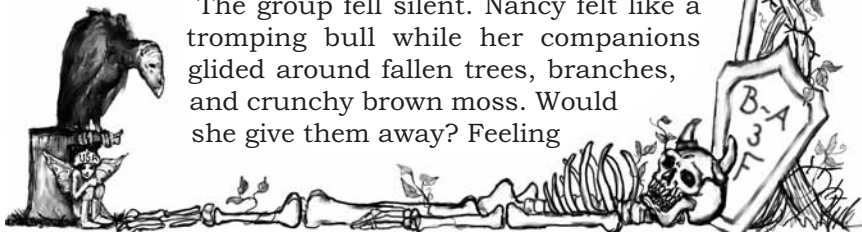
“There’s still life,” said Morrow, the dark-eyed, half-troll female who had rescued Nancy when the Crossroads Gate nearly exploded onto her head. “This Gate’s still active.”

Nancy nodded, daring to hope. Could she make it back home?

“And I don’t think the Black Crosses—or any surviving humans—are comfortable with woods,” added Vikar, the black-haired weaponsmaster. He hadn’t spoken of his lineage, but Nancy expected he was part Sidhe. Few full-blooded fae had survived the nuclear fallout. And they were trying to avoid most of those who had, anyway. “They still view it as fae territory.”

Timo, the punky, purple-haired squirrel spirit who led the small group through the woods, chuffed. “Not so uncomfortable they wouldn’t have troops here,” he hissed. His words chilled her heart.

The group fell silent. Nancy felt like a tromping bull while her companions glided around fallen trees, branches, and crunchy brown moss. Would she give them away? Feeling



a soft touch on her back, she glanced at the petite, pink-haired Dee—a mix of pixie, Sidhe, and human—who winked and took her hand.

Timo motioned for them to stop, looking at Vikar and Morrow. Dee yanked Nancy to the ground as the other three fired and took cover behind trees.

“What—”

Dee smooshed her hand against Nancy’s mouth, holding a finger up for silence, then motioned for her to follow at a crawl. They took refuge with Vikar behind a maple.

“Timo’s down,” he muttered, ducking as bullets shook the ground and tree. “Morrow’s got him.”

“Gods!” Dee breathed.

Nancy bit her lip. In a flash, Vikar was firing again.

“Black Cross,” he said, returning to cover and checking ammunition.

Nancy’s heart sank. She grabbed Dee’s small hands. “Please, I just want to get back to my husband and baby!”

Vikar scowled. “We’re almost a quarter mile from the Gate. Morrow needs to get Timo outta here—”

Distant gunfire thundered. In a blink, he was up surveying, then back down.

“And we’ve got company. Kal’s soldiers are already here.”

“They didn’t open the gate, though?” Dee made a face.

“That’s your department, Dee,” Vikar said.

“I’m saying he didn’t. *Asking why.*”

“Hells if I know, pixie!” He stood and fired a few more rounds. “We need to move.”

“I’ll tell Morrow to get Timo out—”

“Morrow needs cover if she’s gonna get them both out alive.”

“Fine, you cover them. I’ll cover Nancy, get her through the gate, and blow it before the Crosses can get missiles here.”

“If they even drop—”

“I know.” Though she looked like a human twelve-year-old, the fierceness in Dee’s face made Nancy wince.

Vikar gave the pixie a look.

Dee leveled magenta eyes at him, grabbed Nancy’s hand, and took off. Nancy could hardly fathom their movement, bouncing from tree to tree. In the center of a clearing, one ancient oak still looked healthy, un-poisoned by whatever fallout had drifted over the southern states. Though a hollow split its middle, green-leaved branches sprouted on either side.

Nancy heard screaming plane engines.