

The Chronicles Maëdor

ADVANCED READER EDITION

KRISTINA SCHIRAM

BLIP

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I awoke with a start and shot up straight in my small, ruffled bed. My heart pounded like a jackhammer as my eyes darted rapidly about the shadowy room. It was only when I realized I was still safe in my bed, still living in the cramped apartment I shared with my dad, that the wild thumping went away.

I pushed strands of dark brown hair off my sweaty forehead and flopped back onto my flattened pillow. I'd just had that awful dream . . . again. In the fifteen years I'd spent on this planet, I'd had that dream more times than could be considered normal. Or healthy. Or sane.

I can't ever remember the details of what happens, thank goodness. But the feeling of horror I experienced every time I woke up from that dream, which haunted my nights more and more often, was starting to wear me down. I couldn't stand it—this sense of impending doom. But what I hated even more was that I was absolutely convinced my dream was going to come true some day.

That's what I dreaded most of all.

~PART ONE~

PORTAL MANOR



CHAPTER ONE

THE GATE

Todd Crow raced his dusty Toyota along the curvy road. He wanted to drop his beastly passenger off as soon as humanly possible and get out of this godforsaken backwoods maze. This place gave him the creeps.

As he drove, he savored the thought of getting rid of Viddie Mors. He'd had to put up with her antics for four long years, far too long for any decent person to handle. During that time, she'd done a lot of weird things, though her annoying habit of staring at him and then telling him exactly what he was thinking was the worst. The tiresome girl's seeming ability to read his mind was unnatural, and he was thoroughly sick of it.

Even more unsettling was the notion that one day she might share some of his less-than-loyal thoughts with her dad. If his professor and mentor, the illustrious Dr. Andrew Mors, found out what his teaching assistant really thought of him, all his tedious brown-nosing and

schmoozing would go down the toilet. Then where would he be? It was too disturbing to think about.

He braked around a sharp curve, then sped up again. He was shifting into fourth gear when something large loomed up out of the thick fog directly in front of him. He slammed on the brakes, and the old car skidded sideways on the loose gravel. It rattled to a stop in time to avoid crashing into a massive wrought-iron gate rising out of the heavy mists like black, skeletal fingers. Mumbling curses, he backed up the battered car, spitting small rocks into the air.

“Watch out!” a high-pitched voice hollered from the back seat.

Todd glanced in the rearview mirror to see the girl’s screwed-up mouth and tightly crossed arms—her typical pose whenever she looked at him—and rolled his protuberant, yellow-brown eyes as he gave a martyred sigh.

“How was I supposed to know they’d put a gate in the middle of the road? You should be grateful I was willing to take time out of my busy schedule to drive you here, you little brat! Your dad should’ve made you take the bus.” He shifted the car into park, grinding the gears. “I’ve never known anyone so ungrateful.”

“So you’ve been saying for the last three hours,” the girl replied.

Todd heaved another sigh and glared at her in the mirror. It had been a long trip.



It *had* been a long trip, I thought to myself, but only because the Toad had made it that way. For most of the drive we fought about stupid stuff, like bathroom breaks. I wanted to take them; he didn’t. After the two-hour mark, I nearly lost my battle with the call of nature

before he finally caved in and pulled into the grungiest gas station he could find.

The Toad didn't like me. In fact, he loathed me—a sentiment which came through loud and clear every time he glowered at me, told me to shut my trap, snapped my bare arm with the red comb he always carried in his back pocket, or tattled on me to my dad (to name just a few of the despicable things he did when no one was looking).

It wasn't his toady behavior, however, that earned him his nickname. The first day Dad introduced his new teaching assistant to me, I renamed him "the Toad" and refused to call him anything else. He had big, bulgy eyes hooded by heavy lids that opened and closed very slowly—like a toad's. His cold, clammy skin was dull gray and covered with warts, and his broad face was mostly nose, with no chin to speak of. Rumor had it that when he was born, his own mother took one look at him and fainted.

Obviously we couldn't stand each other, which was why this seemingly endless trip had been so awful. To make matters worse, we were now stuck in the middle of a dark, foggy road, both of us staring miserably up at the massive gate blocking our way and wondering how much longer this nightmare was going to last.

After several minutes of uncomfortable silence, waiting nervously for someone to open the gate, the Toad honked the horn with as much force as his puny forearm could muster. When no one appeared, he lowered his window to peer out. Watching his head swivel back and forth, as though searching for flies to eat, I realized something . . . the Toad didn't like this place; in fact, he was scared of it. He was actually sweating as he looked around, beads of perspiration popping out on his big forehead like dewdrops gathering on a mushroom. His increasing uneasiness made me feel less wretched about our situation, though only a little. He was the one who got to

go home again.

“Why couldn’t my dad have driven me himself?” I mumbled as I stared out the window. My dad’s decision to have the Toad drive me to my destination really bothered me. It was bad enough to be sent away from home like some kind of juvenile delinquent—which I wasn’t—but to have my dad refuse to take me himself, condemning me to ride with the Toad? That was cruel and unusual punishment.

“Listen, kid,”—the Toad’s croaky voice dripped with impatience as he raised the window, then turned on the wipers to clear away the mist that had settled on the windshield—“I’ve told you a hundred times already: Dr. Mors has to finish his presentation for the annual Scientific America Chemistry Convention coming up. He’s a busy man.”

I sniffed moodily. My dad was always busy with some paper he was writing or experiment he was working on or class lecture he was preparing for. He didn’t have enough time for me—had *never* had enough time for me. I accepted that he had a lot to do, really I did. What I didn’t like was that he never made any effort to spend time with his only child. Driving me to my new home would have been a nice place to start.

I wondered whether he wanted to be around me at all. From the time I was a little kid, I’d picked up on the strange way he would sometimes look at me, as though he was afraid of me. I didn’t mind that the Toad was scared of me, but my own dad? Parents shouldn’t be afraid of their kids, no matter what strange things they might do, and especially after they’d worked so very hard to stop doing them.

I felt a familiar stinging sensation in my eyes and pinched my arm hard enough to hurt. I’m not going to cry, I threatened myself. I’m *not* going to cry. Unfortunately, it

seemed that all I had to do lately was think about my miserable life and the waterworks turned on like a faucet. But darned if I was going to let myself cry in front of the Toad! That would make his day.

“Is this the place?” I asked, although I was afraid to hear the Toad’s answer. There was something familiar about the gate, in an unsettling kind of way. I shuddered and looked away.

“It better be,” the Toad retorted. “It took long enough to get here, and it’s a long drive back.”

I sighed. *A long drive back.* How many chocolate bars would it take to bribe the Toad into turning around and taking me with him? I wondered. The ride would be horrid, but it’d be better than being left behind, especially since I hadn’t wanted to leave home in the first place. From the start, I’d had a bad feeling about this whole scheme. But the Toad would never take me back with him. To say he was thrilled I was leaving would be an understatement. He was ecstatic.

My eyes drifted toward the window again. Chin propped on my fist, I stared at the huge gate, which connected two high stone walls, then stretched endlessly off into the distance on either side. Thick, brown vines covered with spiky thorns and dark green leaves climbed the rough surface of the walls like snakes racing each other to the top. Through the heavy fog, I could barely make out the black iron spikes standing alertly on top, daring anyone to try to enter the premises without permission. Or . . . maybe the sharp sentinels were there to keep people in. People like me. I shuddered at the thought.

To distract myself from the depressing image this created, I focused harder on studying the gate. As I stared at it, the letters *P* and *M* popped out from amongst a thick tapestry of iron curlicues and spikes. I wondered what the

letters stood for, then wondered why I cared. I wasn't staying here. First chance I got, I was heading back home to prove to my dad that I was a normal kid, even if I had to lock him in a room to do it. I'd throw the Toad in there, too, and leave him there to rot, I thought defiantly as my eyes continued to follow the patterns in the ironwork.

A light breeze picked up and cleared away the fog, revealing the entire gate in all its glory. At that same moment something clicked in my mind, like a key turning in a lock, and I knew at once why the gate looked so familiar to me and why I'd had a bad feeling about this trip. My heart thudded in my chest as I shook my head in denial. It couldn't be! I pulled back and looked up at the imposing structure again. It *could* be. Goosebumps prickled my skin. It seemed impossible, but my dream, my lifelong nightmare, was coming true. My hands rubbed together nervously. I had to get out of this car. I *couldn't* go through that gate—it was the one in my dream!

I grabbed the door handle and pulled as hard as I could, but the door wouldn't open. I jiggled the handle again and then realized the door was locked. I hit the automatic lock button and the knob popped up. When I tried the handle again, the door remained shut fast. I pulled and tugged at the handle, my heart thudding in warning, until I heard a snicker coming from the front seat. I met bulging eyes in the rearview mirror. The Toad was smirking at me.

"Child-proof lock." He grinned. "I flipped the switch when you got out to use the bathroom at that last gas station. Now you can't get out of the car until I want you out. We wouldn't want anyone getting lost, would we?"

"Let me out of here, Toad!" Panicking and angry, I whacked him on the back of the head with the paperback book I'd been reading. I wished I could have afforded the hardcover version; it would've made a better club.

The Toad whipped around in his seat, his usually gray face red with fury. I shrank away from him, driving my legs against the vinyl seat. “If you don’t shut your trap, Viddie Mors, I’ll tell your dad about your little *incident* at school.”

My mind spun like a top, and I felt myself grow cold with dread. My dad had never heard that particular story. I’d never intended that he would. So how had the Toad found out? This was bad.

“Who told you about that?” I managed to choke out through a suddenly dry mouth.

The Toad grinned malevolently. “Your teacher called about it one day when I was at your apartment picking up papers to grade. The professor was busy, so I answered the phone. She thought I was your dad—a mistake I didn’t bother correcting.” He chuckled. “She told me the whole story. I never said anything to your dad because I didn’t want to bother him with his crazy daughter’s problems. I also knew that one day this information might come in handy.” He grinned as he turned back around, knowing he’d won this battle. “And now it has.”

That *jerk!* He knew I didn’t want my dad to find out what had happened that day at school, or at least not the version the Toad had probably heard. If my dad learned the truth, he’d have tangible proof that something really was wrong with me and would never let me come back.

With a defeated sigh, I dropped my cold hand from the door handle and nibbled on my pinkie fingernail. I needed to get out of this car. But to do that I had to calm down and figure out what to do next in a rational, logical manner. Unfortunately, I’m not too good at doing things calmly, and in a rational and logical manner. I unwrapped a candy bar and munched on it in silence, wondering with each bite how long it would take the caffeine to kick my thought processes into gear.

“They better not expect me to open those gates myself,” the Toad muttered. “I can’t afford to pull something. My teammates would kill me.” He was the coxswain for the rowing team at college, which meant he steered and yelled.

“*That* would be a tragedy,” I replied as I peeled back more wrapper.

He gave me an evil look in the mirror and honked the horn again, putting all his weight into it. After the seventh or eighth honk, the sound reverberating like a foghorn in the misty silence, a part of the wall began to move, startling the Toad and me. A teenage boy about my age pushed his way through a small opening next to the gate, battling against the tangled mess of leaves and vines that hid a door.

Free of the grasping vines, he loped toward the car, covering the ground between us quickly. With each step, his features solidified. He was almost as tall as my dad, who was six feet tall and beanpole skinny, as if he couldn’t eat fast enough to keep up with a recent growth spurt. He wore a navy blue turtleneck sweater, faded blue jeans, and a scowl. I thought about asking him to open my car door for me, but changed my mind when I saw the look on his face.

The boy walked around the front of the car and came to my side. Leaning over, he motioned to me to lower my window. When I did—it was one of those windows that only went halfway down, barring *that* escape route—he leaned forward to study me suspiciously, as though I were some kind of criminal intent on robbing the place.

He had bright, blue eyes and dark brown, unruly hair that covered his forehead and tickled the tops of his bushy, black eyebrows. All that extra hair was probably meant to hide the red spots spattered on his tanned forehead. Freckles, along with a few more pimples,

covered the crooked bridge of his nose, and a thick, white scar cut through his left eyebrow, giving him a satirical look. He seemed strangely familiar to me, although I was certain we'd never met.

Without saying so much as a "how's it going," he pushed himself away from my window and took his time walking around the car before stepping up to the driver's window. I squirmed nervously. This guy was trouble.

The Toad lowered his window. "Is this going to take long?" He had deepened his voice to sound manlier. "It's getting late, and I've really got to get back and study for my Bio-chem test tomorrow."

"I need to see some identification," the boy told him, holding out his hand.

The Toad dug out his wallet and showed his driver's license to the teen. "I'm Todd Crow. Dr. Mors sent me." He jerked his thumb back at me. "This is the prisoner."

I kicked his seat; he sniggered at me in the mirror. He loved torturing me. Why couldn't my dad ever see this side of the Toad?

"Knock it off, will you? You're acting like a three-year-old. Anyway,"—he turned back to the teen—"this is Dr. Mors' kid. I'm his teaching assistant." He added the last part importantly.

When the boy said nothing, the Toad frowned. "He asked me to take time out of my busy schedule to bring her here. I hope this is the right place. I've really got to get back. It's getting dark and I don't have good night vision and there's my test . . ." He looked out the window nervously.

"This is Portal Manor, all right," the boy replied. *Portal Manor*. That explained the letters *P* and *M* in the ironwork. He looked down at the Toad's driver's license and carefully studied the piece of plastic. "Go on ahead," he directed as he handed back the card, giving me a sharp

look. He pointed a black object toward the gate, and the metal structure began to open.

The Toad gave a dramatic sigh of relief as he shifted the car into drive. “Thanks, kid. I appreciate it.” The “kid” frowned, and I smiled to myself. Apparently he didn’t like being called kid, either.

The car lurched forward and my amusement quickly died. We were going in. I unbuckled my seatbelt and stuck my head out the car window. Seeing the ground pass by below me, I didn’t hesitate. I shoved my body through the narrow opening and got my arms out the electric window before the Toad could shut it. It whirred as it slid upward, catching me mid-torso. I pushed down on the glass and leaned farther out. “You’ve got to help me!” I pleaded to the boy, who stood watching us go, an unreadable expression on his face. “Don’t make me go in there!”

He stared at me, his countenance stony.

The Toad stomped on the gas and the car sped through the gates.

“Please!” I begged as the window threatened to crack a rib.

“Sorry,” he shrugged. “But it’s not up to me.” He aimed the object at the gate to close it.

With a resounding clang, the gate swung shut behind us. We were inside now, the boy nowhere to be seen in the thick fog.

There was no going back.



CHAPTER TWO

A GHOST TO GREET ME

The car rolled forward into the fog and . . . nothing happened.

I tried to recall what my dream had prophesied about this day, but I couldn't retrieve anything solid. I could only remember the gate and feeling like something bad was going to happen to me once I went through it, though I had no idea what that bad thing was or when it would occur.

Maybe it wasn't meant to happen right away.

I fell back against the seat of the car and thought about the boy back at the gate, the one who'd left me to my fate. Why wouldn't he help me? *Sorry*, he'd said. *It's not up to me*. Well, who *was* it up to? And who was he, anyway? Being only a teenager, he surely couldn't work for my dad, who owned the place. My dad's mother, Grandma Mors, had left it to him years ago, although I had found out about its existence only the week before when my dad

informed me I'd be moving. Alone. He'd also mentioned that my "guardian" would be a Mrs. Keeper, but said nothing about doofus back there. Not for the first time, I wondered how much my dad knew about the people living at this place, this prison I was being sent to against my will.

My imagination was running amok about my future and what my guardian might do once she got a hold of me, when I saw something strange up ahead. A group of people rose up out of the mists and moved rapidly toward the car.

Still wedged half out the back window, I strained to get a better look, the misty air cool on my face as I stared at the approaching figures. I soon realized they weren't people at all, but life-sized stone statues. We were the ones moving, not them. The grayish-white figures peered down into a small, dark pool of water as though searching for answers—all of them, that is, except one. This particular statue gazed directly at me, his hands reaching out, imploring me to help him.

Time froze as I stared into those large, round eyes. The statue looked so real, I would almost swear he was alive. And I would almost swear that I'd seen him somewhere before. We gazed into each other's eyes for what seemed an eternity—I couldn't look away—and then time snapped. The car left him behind, the fog enveloping the statues around the pool as we drove onward.

Up ahead, the fog cleared a bit and a large shadow loomed into view—a pirate ship sailing on a sea of green grass. My eyes widened in amazement, and I promptly forgot about the stone statue. Portal Manor wasn't a house; it was a mansion.

The Toad let out a low whistle. "I thought you guys didn't have any money," he said, staring up at the massive building. He was obviously thinking about all the time he

had put into writing grants, begging for money for my dad's latest experiment, time he could've spent getting better grades (like more time could have helped him).

"That's what I thought," I replied.

I studied the mansion we owned. A tangle of dark, leafy vines crawled up the smooth stone walls, covering most of the facade. The tendrils seemed to know not to grow on the many windows of varying shapes and sizes that stared blankly out at the front yard. I wondered why there weren't any lights shining through them on such a dreary day. Could it be that a house in this day and age didn't have electricity? The thought was distressing.

The Toad lowered the window a little and I knocked my head against the window frame as I drew myself back inside the car. Rubbing at the sore spot, and still searching for any sign of light, I suddenly realized I was staring directly at a figure standing in one of the upper windows. But before I could be sure of what I was seeing, it disappeared.

Feeling apprehensive, I forced myself to look over the rest of the building. I'd learned from my experiences at my old school that you should know where all your escape routes are—a sad lesson to learn, but a necessary one after the Incident.

On each side of the house immense, vine-covered towers pressed up against the main walls, supporting the giant building between them. The two towers rose high above the mansion's roof, their tops disappearing into the fog. A large glass structure leaned against one of the towers and the south part of the main building. Yellow leaves from a nearby tree spotted the top of the glass roof with bright bits of color. Inside, large, shiny green leaves pressed against the glass, straining toward the sky. I wondered what grew within those fragile walls. From my vantage point, the scene resembled a jungle. At any

moment, I expected to see Tarzan swinging past, searching for Jane.

In front, wide stone steps led up to two doors made of rich, dark wood large enough for two elephants to pass through side by side. On the face of both doors, surly gargoyles gripped large iron rings bigger than my head in their petulant mouths and challenged any normal-sized person to lift them. Maybe I could convince the Toad to make an attempt. With any luck, he'd hurt himself trying and leave here with a little injury to remember me by.

On either side of the stairway leading up to the doors, two lion statues crouched arrogantly on broad pedestals. Their hungry mouths, opened in a threatening roar, did nothing to make a person feel warmly welcomed. In fact, the entire house looked ready to eat whatever victim was dumb enough to enter.

If I had any say in the matter, that dumb victim wouldn't be me.

Behind the building a mighty hill rose up like the back of the Loch Ness monster, adding to the dark, Gothic atmosphere of the mansion. Trees covered the hillside like a heavy fur coat, and I wondered what monsters might be hiding amongst them.

I bit my lip. Portal Manor was supposed to be my home until I finished my schooling. Four long years. I shook my head in disbelief. No way was I staying here for that long, not if the mansion was the same place as the one in my dream. Then again, maybe I was being an idiot about all this. Most kids would jump at the chance to stay in a big mansion and attend private school. Especially if the apartment you'd been living in was a tiny hovel and your old school crammed full of Neanderthal creeps who thought you were a witch because of something you might have done once . . .

Going to a private school, however, did not sound at all

appealing to me. The afterschool specials I'd watched over the years depicted private schools as torturous institutions filled to capacity with snobby rich kids picking on a few nerdy, poor ones. *Not* my idea of a good time, especially since I happened to be one of those nerdy, poor kids. On the other hand, living in a mansion might be pretty cool. Under normal circumstances, I would probably be psyched about staying here. But these were not normal circumstances; everything I'd felt and experienced up to this point warned me to get away from Portal Manor.

More worried than ever now, I reached up to stroke the large medallion I wore on a thick, tarnished silver chain around my neck. My dad had told me once that it had been a gift to me from my grandmother, his mother, to be given to me at my birth. When I asked him what had happened to her, he replied that not long before I was born his mother had left on a trip to Alaska—from time to time she took these sojourns about the country—and had never returned. Apparently, while driving to a small town outside Anchorage, a blizzard blew up and she was never seen or heard from again. After telling me this much, Dad refused to say any more on the subject.

Up until now, I'd always thought Grandma Mors' disappearance was a fascinating mystery, but after seeing this place, I no longer found the idea of someone disappearing so intriguing. More like terrifying.

Still, I wore the necklace everywhere I went. Even in the shower. It wasn't clear to me why, since I hadn't even known my grandma, but it seemed like the right thing to do. Now I was glad I had it on. Simply knowing the necklace was there made me feel a little better. Like I was taking a small bit of home with me.

The Toad pulled the car up to the front steps, tires screeching. He didn't bother to turn off the engine before leaping out of the car and running to the trunk to unload

my luggage. I wondered whether he shared the same uneasy feeling I did, that someone or something was watching him. He probably regretted convincing my dad it would be best if he drove me to my new school. He'd volunteered because it was the only way he could be sure I wouldn't talk my dad out of going through with the plan. My dad was a genius in the science field, with several journal articles, books, and inventions to his name—that's why the Toad sucked up to him—but the Toad also knew that when it came to dealing with his own kid, my dad was hopeless.

Untying the rope holding the trunk lid down, he pulled out the first of three steamer trunks and heaved it to the steps, where he dropped it with a thud. He then moved to the one strapped onto the roof of the car. I sighed and unwrapped the last bit of my third candy bar of the trip. It looked like bribing the Toad wasn't going to happen. His behavior confirmed what I'd already suspected . . . he was overjoyed at the prospect of dumping me here to live with the Addams family.

I popped a piece of chocolate into my mouth, savoring the buttery richness for perhaps the last time, then leaned over Ms. Penny Dolittle and carefully gave her a vigorous shake. Having learned from hard-earned experience, I quickly pulled my hand back, as waking Ms. Penny was like trying to wake a hibernating bear . . . nearly impossible and almost as dangerous. That little coon had sharp teeth.

Ms. Penny is the result of my dad's nearly forgetting my tenth birthday. That morning I'd reminded him, as usual, that I was now a year older. The look of bewilderment on his face told me that, true to form, he'd once again forgotten. But luck was on Dad's side that year, or on mine, really, because one of his colleagues had discovered, upon bringing home an abandoned baby raccoon he'd

found in one of the university dumpsters, that it didn't like the competition of his nine-month-old baby daughter. Obviously, Ms. Penny had to go. My dad, who'd just happened to be looking for a gift for his own daughter before going home to her that night, told his colleague he'd take the animal.

She's the best present I've ever gotten.

Ms. Penny's about the size of a large cat and has a poofy black-and-gray-ringed tail. A dark mask frames her beady, little eyes, and she has a cute, tiny, black nose. Despite the mask, she looks very sweet and innocent. Don't be fooled, though; she's a terror, and an incurable thief, stealing anything that isn't nailed down, especially if it's shiny. She also likes to make messes. Even though she's a pain in the butt, she's a loyal friend. She's always been there for me, and *she* doesn't think I'm scary or weird . . . unlike everyone else who knows me. She loves me for who I am, and I love her, too.

Fondly, I pushed the little imp again. Ms. Penny groaned and scooted away from the annoying finger rudely disturbing her blissful dreams of termite shakes and giant mango pies.

"Wake up, sleepyhead. We're here."

Ms. Penny whimpered and tried to move away, but I poked her again. Finally, after a few more well-placed prods, she opened one brown eye and gave me a dirty look before sitting up on her haunches to peer out the window. Apparently satisfied with what she saw, which wasn't much with all the fog, she leaped to my shoulder. I gave a sigh of relief. When Ms. Penny didn't like something, she'd sulk about it for days. It could be very trying.

The Toad flung the door open for me, and I climbed out of the car with Ms. Penny precariously balanced on my shoulder. She was small for a coon, but big enough to do damage if she felt the need to dig her sharp claws into my

skin to keep from falling. She looked around, then gave a screech of approval, ready to explore. I wasn't sure I felt the same way. I was all for adventure (I liked them in my books, anyway), but my dream made me afraid of what I might find while poking about. With my luck, I'd end up finding a severed head.

Taking a deep breath for courage, I climbed the broad steps leading up to the door and, as the Toad was nowhere to be seen, struggled to lift the heavy knocker. I was about to give up my fight to raise the iron ring when the doors swung wide open, as though a giant, powerful hand had punched through them.

"Hello?"

After a few seconds, when no one appeared, I took a cautious step forward and peered into the darkness. Ms. Penny followed my example, peeking around my head for a closer look. I saw no one through the crack, nor did I hear anything. I was about to take another step forward when a ghostly figure appeared in the doorway, quick as a flash of lightning. I stumbled backward, catching myself with the railing in time to keep the two of us from tumbling down the stairs.