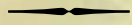


THIS COLLECTION OF SEVEN SHORT STORIES takes the reader to the Kingdom of Imlay, a coastal realm still filled with magic and mythical creatures great and small. Characters such as the inquisitive Ya, the precocious Aurora, and an ambitious, future-seeking King face monumental decisions that will affect those they hold dear. Along the way, they are challenged by the need to make personal sacrifices for the greater good, use the power of truth to break through hurtful intentions, call upon magic to help people, and choose between possible future lives. Original and thought-provoking, these tales will stimulate the intellect and engage the imagination.



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KIRKUS REVIEWS

“Nancy Joie Wilkie’s stories capture the simple language and romantic ethos of fables, and many of her tales could entertain children at bedtime. Yet she has grounded her fantastical Kingdom of Imlay with very human lessons that will resonate with adults as well—tales about the power of love and goodness as well as the dangers of hubris and darker emotions. In *The River Keeper*, she drew a spark from a *Wake Forest Magazine* story of a magical day on the Yadkin River with its former keeper, Brian Fannon, a man she rightly perceived as well-suited to magic and inspiration.”

CAROL HANNER

Managing Editor, *Wake Forest Magazine*

US \$22.95
CAN \$30.95

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THE RIVER KEEPER AND OTHER TALES

NANCY JOIE WILKIE

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THE RIVER KEEPER
AND
OTHER TALES



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THE RIVER KEEPER AND OTHER TALES

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Subplot Publishing, an imprint of Amplify Publishing Group
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Herndon, VA 20170
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Library of Congress Control Number:
CPSIA Code: PRV0824A
ISBN-13: 979-8-89138-202-2

Printed in the United States

*These stories are dedicated
to my now departed friend, Jon.
A dream for a dream, indeed.
Thanks for planting the seed.*

*These stories are also dedicated
to Laura and Carolyn.
My prayer is that the truth
will one day set you free.*

*Thank you so much
to my wonderful editor,
Rebecca Carroll Christensen,
for polishing up things.*

THE RIVER KEEPER
AND
OTHER TALES

NANCY JOIE WILKIE

ILLUSTRATED BY
ANDREA ALEMANNIO

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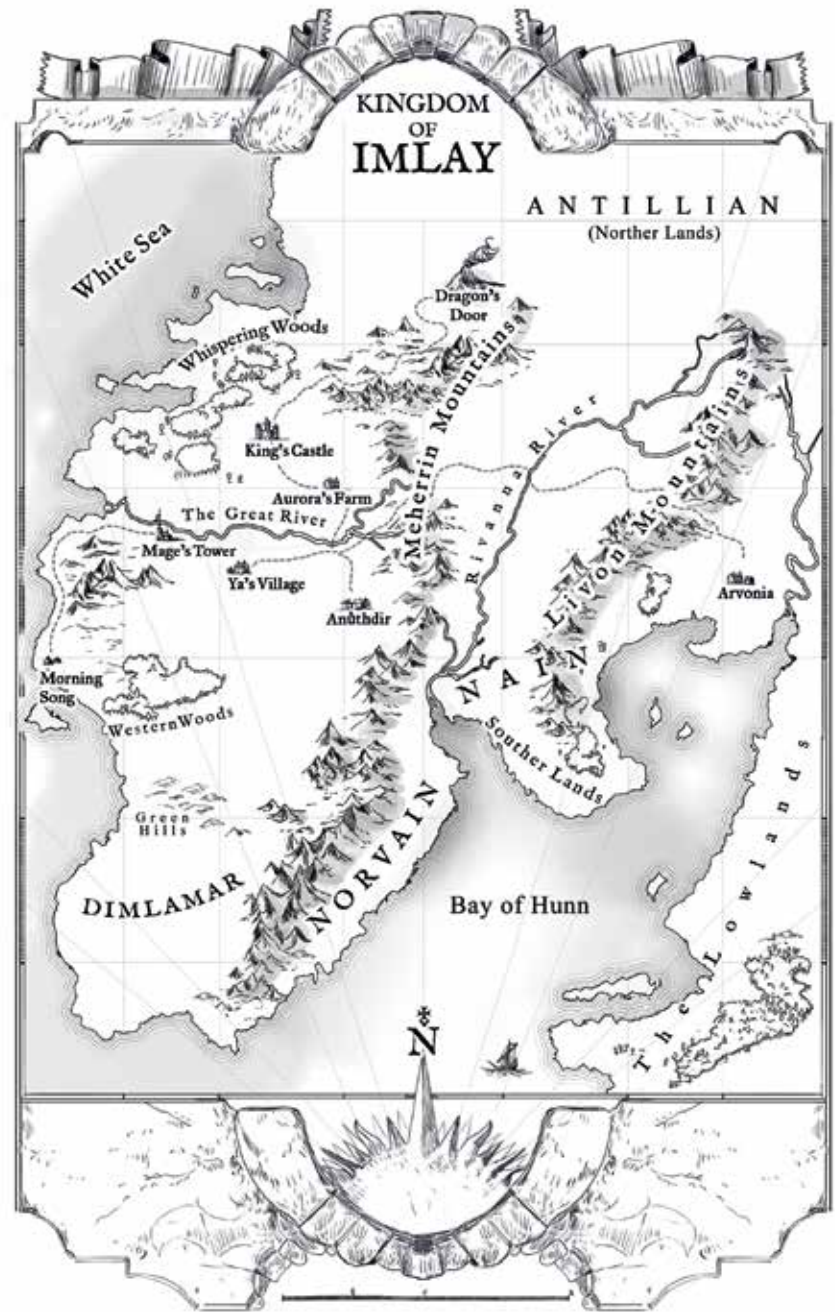
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A Word Before

During the spring of 1979, I sojourned to Europe. A dear friend of mine purchased a Saab directly from the factory in Gothenburg, Sweden. He had to travel to Europe to collect his new car. He also saved a considerable amount of money when the car was eventually shipped to the United States because he did not have to pay new car taxes! The money he saved paid for his trip. He figured if you had to go all the way over to Europe, you might as well spend some time traveling around the continent in your new car. And of course it is much more fun to take such a trip with someone, so he invited me along.

On the flight over the Atlantic Ocean, I started reading the biography of J.R.R. Tolkien by Humphrey Carpenter. In the two years before this trip, I had read *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* for the first time and was captivated by Tolkien's world of Middle-earth. In this biography, I discovered information about where Tolkien lived in Oxford, England, as well as his burial site north of town. On one cold and rainy Sunday afternoon, my friend and I drove from Gosport to Oxford to visit Tolkien's home and traipse through a cemetery to find his final resting place and the tombstone on which he likened himself and his wife to Beren and Lúthien.

But the last important thing the biography revealed to me was that Tolkien had written several shorter stories outside the bounds of Middle-earth, stories such as "Leaf by Niggle," "Smith of Wootton Major," and "Farmer Giles of Ham." These often overlooked gems inspired me to write the seven stories in *The River Keeper and Other Tales*.



The River Keeper

ONE

Ya felt anxious, and she wasn't sure why. Whenever something troubled her, she would go to her favorite place. A grassy meadow down by the edge of the Great River beneath a grove of shade trees. There she would sit or lie down, close her eyes, and listen to the breeze blow through the moss-draped branches or catch the murmuring of the river. Those sounds always put her soul at ease.

But on this particular day, Ya did not find the peace she sought. Something was wrong, out of place. The summer sun felt warm on her face. The wind whispering through the trees sounded as it always did. No, it wasn't any of those things. The river, she realized with a start! *Something wasn't right with the river!*

She stood, pushed strands of her long ginger-colored hair behind her ears, and strolled over to the riverbank. A stick floated by at the expected slow, leisurely pace. When she studied the water close to her feet, it didn't boast its usual clarity. Instead, it looked cloudy, murky. *Maybe there had been a great rain upstream. Maybe silt was causing the river to look this way.*

Ya stepped down closer to the water's edge and stood on a large, flat rock. She inspected the current as it meandered by, then knelt down to touch the water. As soon as her fingers broke its surface, she pulled her hand back.

Wait, what? Her body shuddered. She shook her hand

vigorously as if to throw off something that didn't feel right.

It is the river! The river is sick!

Her arms outstretched to keep her balance, Ya carefully chose her steps back up the mud-spattered embankment and onto the grass. Her friend, Ty, stood next to one of the shade trees, watching her. A boy tall for his age with strawberry blond hair parted in the middle and somewhat of a prankster at heart, he had followed Ya down to the river.

“What’s the matter? You look like something in the water bit you.”

“No. It’s not that. I felt the river, and it’s sick.”

Ty left the shadow of the leaves to join Ya, laughing at his friend. “What are you talking about? A river can’t be sick.”

“I don’t know how I know, but when I put my hand in the water, I could feel the river’s pain. Something isn’t right, I tell you.”

Ty sauntered down to the river’s edge and poked his hand in the water. He left it there for a long minute to demonstrate that Ya’s experience might somehow be inappropriate. “Nope. Nothing,” chided Ty, shaking off drops of the water. “I don’t feel anything. I think you’re being silly.”

“Well, think what you may. I know what I felt, and the river is not happy.” Frustrated with her friend, Ya began walking back to the village.

“Hey! Wait! I’ll walk with you.”

“Okay. Just no more talk about what I felt!”

TWO

The Great River divided the northern half of the Kingdom of Imlay from its southern half. It flowed from the Meherrin Mountains in the east, where its snow-fed waters rushed downstream fast and cold, to the White Sea in the west, its estuaries shallow and serene. For much of its course, it ran clear and clean, feeding the aquifer and keeping everyone’s wells full. It brought life to the farmlands and the fields of flowers, and it was a perfect home for rainbow trout, content to wallow in the fishing holes along its shores.

The river passed by many villages on its way from east to west. On hot summer days, the children of the land took great delight in swimming in its cool currents. Older folks paddled the length of its many tributaries, making day trips to secluded meadows for a private picnic lunch and an afternoon nap. In winter, when the river’s surface froze, villagers engaged in all sorts of games on the ice.

The people of Imlay had no reason to think the river wouldn’t go on providing for everyone, much like a doting grandparent would forever spoil a favorite grandchild. No one ever considered what might happen if the river’s life-giving properties began to fade.

THREE

“Mama! The river is sick! And it’s hurting everything it touches!”

Myranda stood quietly, her skeptical eyes observing her anxious daughter.

“Now why in the world would you say such a thing?”

“Because it is, Mama! I know it is. I felt it!”

“You’ve been down to the river again, haven’t you?” Myranda admonished, pointing to Ya’s muddy feet.

“Yes, Mama,” confessed Ya, embarrassed.

Her daughter’s look of dejection and acquiescence reminded Myranda of her own youthful indiscretions. Understanding overtook her frustration.

“You’re right,” Myranda admitted. “The river is sick. In fact, it’s dying. And that’s why I didn’t want you anywhere near the water. It’s not good to get its water on you.” She reached for a towel and knelt down to clean her daughter’s feet.

Ya, now calmer, said, “What about the River Keeper? I’ve heard stories that he can heal the river. Are they true?”

“I don’t know, dear daughter. I don’t know,” Myranda repeated, placing the soiled towel into the sink and drying her hands on her apron. “But I have faith he can. Because if he can’t, the river will die and so will our village, I’m afraid.”

“But is the River Keeper a real person?” asked Ya, more insistent than before.

“I’d like to think so.” Myranda thought for a moment and said, “You know, I wonder if the Book of Records that the Village Council keeps has anything to say about this. I’ll tell you what. Tomorrow I will pay a visit to Old Mallon and ask him what he might know.”

“Okay,” sighed Ya, only slightly reassured.

“And I think I might even ask Old Mallon to call a council meeting. We do need to have some sort of plan. Yes, I think I will do that.”

“Oh, thank you, Mama,” said Ya, a broad smile spreading across her angelic face.

Myranda looked at her daughter, pinched her cheek, and said, “You’re going to make a fine Council member when you’re old enough.”

FOUR

The Town Hall stood in the center of the village. The town used it for all sorts of social functions: weddings, celebrations of new life and life passed, and gatherings when folks would come together to pray for rain or healing. The Council members met whenever a particular need or concern facing the community arose.

Old Mallon served as the leader of the Village Council, a role reserved for the one who had witnessed the most cycles of the harvest. Myranda had visited him the day before and requested a meeting to discuss the river and what might be done to bring about its healing.

“Thank you all for coming,” welcomed Old Mallon. The shuffling and whispering of the Council members died down as everyone turned their attention to the center of the room.

“Most of you know why we are here. But for those of you who don’t, let me speak of recent concerns brought to my attention. The Council has suspected for several months something is amiss with the Great River. No one is sure what the problem is. But the other day, Council member Myranda came to me and told me her daughter had said that the river was sick. When I first heard this, my response was, how can a river be sick? Sickness is a thing only we mortals can experience.

“I went to speak with Myranda’s daughter. This perceptive girl told me things which were most unsettling. She believes the river communicated to her.” Old Mallon raised his hand to quiet the questioning naysayers and continued. “She told me fish are dying, crops are not growing as they should, and people are becoming ill all because the river is dying. All of these things are indeed occurring, so she is right, of course. Also, I have received reports from other villages that folks are starting to fall ill. So, we must develop a plan. I open the floor for your comments.”

Old Mallon returned to his seat at the center of the raised dais among the murmuring and whispering of those gathered.

Myranda stood to speak. Everyone in the village knew her to be a decent woman, strong of spirit, and considerate of her neighbors. “Since it was my daughter who first said these things to me, I feel as though I should also tell you what else she told me.” She paused to prepare for what she knew would be a controversial statement. “My daughter asked me about the River Keeper and ...”

“It’s a myth!” shouted one of the recent additions to the Council.

“There’s no such person!” echoed a second member.

The murmuring turned into multiple discussions between the individuals, all going on at once. Finally, Old Mallon reached for his gavel and banged it loudly three times. “I ask for quiet. Please let Myranda finish.”

“Thank you, Mallon,” said Myranda, quietly. “I know many of you do not believe in the existence of the River Keeper. After all, none of us has ever seen this person. What we know of him ... or her ... has been handed down to us from generations long passed. And how could such a person live for all of these years? How can one person be responsible for the health and welfare of an entire river? All very good questions. But my daughter, for whatever reason, has convinced me we should at least try to contact this River Keeper and seek out his or her help.

“Unless someone can propose some other plan for dealing with this problem, I think we should charge a small group of villagers to follow the river’s course upstream, all the way into the mountains to its source if necessary. I propose one of two things might happen if we do this. First, we might determine the source of the river’s problem along the way. Did someone pollute the river? Did something bad fall into the river? Second, we might actually meet this River Keeper if, in fact, he really exists and ask for his help. In

the absence of any other suggestion, I don't see why we shouldn't at least try."

Myranda turned from facing her fellow Council members back to Old Mallon. "Thank you. I yield the floor back to you."

"And thank you, Myranda, and thanks to your daughter. I would like to make a motion that we designate a team of folks to follow the river's course eastward, determine what's making it sick, and report back to us when they return. Is there a second to my motion?"

Lordin raised his hand, indicating he approved of the motion.

"Okay, then. There is a second. All in favor of the motion raise their hands."

Almost every member raised a hand.

"All those opposed?"

The two Council members who questioned the existence of the River Keeper raised their hands.

"The motion passes. Myranda, if you are willing, I would ask you to be the leader of this party and select five other individuals to accompany you. They need not be members of this Council. Please prepare yourselves tomorrow for what will be a journey of many days. You will need food, water from our well, and tents. I suggest you ready yourselves as quickly as possible so you might take advantage of this stretch of fair weather we are having."

"I accept," replied Myranda.

"Good. Then if there is no other immediate business, I motion we adjourn this meeting." Lordin again raised a hand to signal a second. The motion passed unanimously.

"I am sure we all send our prayers for a safe and successful trip. Thank you, Myranda and your team, for your service."

FIVE

"Now, you must promise me you will be a good girl for your grandmother while I'm away."

"But I want to go with you!" exclaimed Ya. "I know the river!"

Myranda looked down at her daughter. "I'm sorry, my dear. We don't know how long we will be gone or what dangers we might encounter," Myranda said in a calm and reassuring voice.

"I don't care! The river needs my help!"

Myranda looked at her mother and shrugged her shoulders. "I'm not sure what to tell you. You might have your hands full," she grinned, leaving Ya with her grandmother.

Myranda considered whom she wanted to accompany her on this trip. Not knowing the terrain they might encounter as they got closer to the mountains, she thought it a good idea to include Navirra, a middle-aged woman with perpetually tan skin and known for finding paths when no one else could. And because no one knew how long the trip might last, she would ask Garnth, a stocky fellow and the best hunter in the village, whose skills might be called upon to secure food for the party.

To address any possible injuries along the way, she added the village healer, Mirinth, reputed to be the best medicine woman in all of Imlay. Aryinda, a young woman serving as Mirinth's apprentice, knew all about plants and their properties and could gather any special herbs or roots needed for healing. At last, she wanted someone who knew how to build shelters and bridges and boats should they need such things. Olmir, a skilled carpenter, strong and resourceful, would be a good fit for that role.

Once she decided upon the party members, she went out into the village to speak with each of her choices. She wanted to give them ample time to prepare should they accept her invitation. And,

fortunately, each agreed to accompany her, even though it meant leaving their families behind. But all knew of the importance of their mission; failing to do anything about the river could well mean illness and death for their loved ones.

Myranda returned to her home to pull together necessary supplies. First on her list was a firestone, needed to build fires for cooking and for warmth. Next, she found the knife gifted to her by her father. Recounting reports from travelers who periodically passed through their village and spoke of the cold mountain air, she picked out clothing to keep her warm. She found her thickest blanket and rolled it up, securing it with two short pieces of rope. She carefully wrapped dried meats and fruits in leather pockets. And last, she retrieved a pair of her father's old boots, convinced they would prove useful as they hiked along rocky trails.

She packed the supplies in a backpack with a sturdy frame, rearranging items several times until everything fit into the smallest space possible. Once satisfied with her packing, she set the pack and her water pouch by the front door and returned to her mother's to retrieve Ya, wanting to spend this last night together with her. No one knew how long it might be until the party returned.

SIX

The company of six villagers set out on their quest to find the River Keeper at dawn the following day.

“Now remember everyone, we cannot drink water from the river. That's why we are carrying so much water from our well. And we should not touch the river water either. We don't know what effect it might have on us.”

All the party members nodded, acknowledging Myranda's warning.

They made their way down to the river and followed it upstream, eastward toward the Meherrin Mountains. Only when the sun set low in the western sky did Myranda signal a halt. The first day of hiking proved difficult as none were prepared for the rigors of such a journey. The weight of their packs pulled on their shoulders, and their untested legs ached. They made camp atop a small hill. While the rest of the company unpacked the tents and prepared for their evening meal, Navirra went on ahead and scouted out the path for the following day.

When she returned an hour later, she said, “I saw smoke rising from the fires of the next village. We should get there by midday tomorrow.”

“Good. Smoke means someone is there,” replied Myranda. “I wonder if they have noticed the river's condition. And if so, I'm curious if any of their villagers have fallen ill and if they have connected those illnesses with the river.”

The party settled down around their campfire to eat their dinner in silence. After adding extra wood to the fire, they quickly fell asleep to the sound of crickets and their cadenced serenade.

SEVEN

Ya spent the day after her mother left gathering things she needed for her journey upstream to find the River Keeper. She found an old backpack among possessions her grandmother had saved after her grandfather's passing. It smelled of mildew and even though the frame felt a bit too big for her back, it would have to do. She found an old blanket and lashed it to the bottom of the frame. Into the pack, she placed extra clothes, a firestone, several candles, and as much food and water as she thought she could carry, all the while hoping her grandmother wouldn't discover what she was doing.

Ya had never traveled farther than the river or the fields surrounding the village and never with a heavy pack on her back. She had no idea how long her journey might last or what unanticipated situations she might encounter. She knew she had to try because if the river grew any sicker, everyone she loved would soon die.

She waited until dark to make sure her grandmother was asleep. Just before leaving, she placed a short note on the kitchen table, apologizing for disobeying her mother's request and promising to be careful. Returning to her bedroom, she lifted the heavy pack, strapped the belt around her waist, quietly exited out the back door, and disappeared into the night.

The full moon gave Ya just enough light to find the trail even though she knew her way down to the river by heart. Once there, she followed its course eastward and walked until daybreak.

As Ya made her way along the Great River, she studied the plant life along its banks, marveling at the variety of trees, shrubs, and wildflowers. With each passing day though, she noticed the once vibrant color of the leaves in the trees starting to fade. Fewer flowers along the trail had blossoms, and wild berries hung withered on their vines.

I wonder if the sickness in the river water is affecting all of the plants.



EIGHT

Everyone in Miranda's party awoke early; their bodies stiff and sore from sleeping on the hard ground and feeling the effects of the chill morning air. They ate a quick breakfast, packed their things, and set off toward the next village before second hour.

Soon they saw the column of smoke rising from the center of the village, just as Navirra had reported the previous evening. As they drew closer to the village, an awful stench arose, one they knew all too well.

"The smoke is from a funeral pyre," uttered Garth. "Someone has died. I wonder if they died because of the river."

Mirinth dropped her pack to open it and reached inside for a bandanna. "I think we should all cover our faces. It might help reduce the possibility of breathing something that might make us sick as well."

The rest of the party followed Mirinth's lead, and, with faces covered, they continued on through the outskirts of the village. At its center, they saw a single man throwing wood onto a funeral pyre, its flames starting to engulf a body dressed in ceremonial attire. The man turned to reach for another log and saw Miranda and her party.

"Miranda? Is that you?" asked the man. "What in the world brings you to our village?"

Because of his bandanna, it took Miranda a moment to recognize the man. "Addison? I'm so sorry to see you've lost a member of your village."

"It's not just one villager. Quite a few have died over the past week or so. Something is making us sick and killing those who are older and weaker."

Exhausted from the morning's hike, everyone lifted their packs off their shoulders and dropped them to the ground, grateful for the

break. Addison's report gave each of them new reason to appreciate the seriousness of their mission.

"How about your village?"

"It's the river," Miranda said. "The river is sick. And when you drink its water, you get sick. Since we are further downstream, we haven't experienced the same degree of deaths as your village."

"You say the river is sick?"

"Yes. That's right," confirmed Miranda. "That's why we decided to organize a party to journey upstream to find out the source of the problem. Maybe even look for the River Keeper and ask for his help."

Addison responded with a dismissive motion of his right hand, "That's an old wives' tale." He then added, unsure, "Isn't it?"

"Our Book of Records contains stories of such a person. And maybe it is a myth. Maybe it's not. But with few options to address the problem with the river, we decided it couldn't hurt to try."

Addison looked back at the funeral pyre, its flames now soaring with sparks shooting out across the town center. "I suppose you're right," he said, acknowledging the remark. "Tell me of your plans and how it is I might help."

He led the six members of the party into their Town Hall. Miranda recounted the events of the past week, her daughter's warning about the river, and the decision to mount an expedition to find the River Keeper.

When she was done, Addison said, "I'd like to accompany you, but I'm afraid there aren't many of us left here who are healthy enough to prepare meals, tend to the sick, and deal with those who've died."

Miranda nodded. "And we would like to stay and help, but I'm afraid there is precious little time left for all of us, especially now that we've seen the toll this problem is taking on your village. I'm

wondering if the villages we will pass as we work our way further upstream might have even more people sick and dying. I think it best we be on our way. But I do ask one favor of you. Might we refill our water pouches from your well?”

“Sure. But you said it was the river water making us sick.”

“That I did. But I think the ground serves as sort of a filter. And even if there is some small portion of whatever is not good for us in the well water, at least it might delay us from getting sick long enough to find the River Keeper.”

“Okay. Help yourselves,” replied Addison. “And I have one favor to ask of you. On your way back to your village, assuming you make it back from the mountains, would you be so kind as to stop here and tell us what you found?”

“Of course,” answered Myranda sympathetically. “And we will pray for health for you and your village. Let’s hope our plan works.” They all retrieved their water pouches and followed Addison to the town’s well.

An hour after entering the neighboring village, water pouches full, Navirra led them eastward along the riverbank. Always east toward the mountains.



During the next few days, Myranda noticed Garnth lagging behind the rest of the party. At times, she lost sight of him, so she would call a halt and everyone waited until he rejoined the group. Finally, she confronted the hunter.

“You seem like you’re having a tough time. Are you alright?”

“I’m thirsty,” came Garnth’s slow words.

“Do you still have well water in your pouch?”

Garnth didn’t answer but finally shook his head from side to side.

“Have you been drinking river water?”

Without waiting for an answer, Myranda called ahead to have Mirinth fall back and join them.

“Mirinth, I think Garnth’s been drinking river water. He’s not able to keep up with the rest of us,” said Myranda, concerned.

Mirinth gazed at Garnth, checking his eyes for signs of sickness. She returned to Myranda’s side and whispered, “I’m afraid his illness is rather advanced. I’m not sure what to tell you.”

“Garnth,” addressed Myranda, turning her attention back to the heavysset man. “We are worried about your ability to travel. Do you think you’re able to keep pace with the rest of us?”

“I will try. But I’m so thirsty.”

Myranda paused for a moment, then replied, “I’m sorry, dear friend, but none of us have much well water left in our pouches. Given the urgency of our mission, it is imperative that at least some of us locate the River Keeper, and, in order to do that, what well water remains should go to those of us still able to travel.”

Mirinth nodded in acknowledgment. “I concur. I’m sorry Garnth.”

“Our day’s march is soon over. The sun is starting to set. How about we walk for another hour and then make camp for the night. Do you think you can make it, Garnth?”

“Yes,” he mumbled.

“We can decide what to do tomorrow morning. If you can’t travel anymore, we may have to leave you. I know this is difficult to hear, but we have to consider all of the lives in our village and all of the other villages along the river.”

Myranda signaled to her fellow travelers to continue their trek but stayed back to help Garnth.

As the day’s light began to leave the trees, Navirra found a clearing and directed everyone to pitch Garnth’s tent first. By the

time Myranda and Garnth found their way into camp, everything was ready for Garnth to lie down. Without eating any dinner, he fell into a deep sleep.

Mirinth pulled Myranda aside and in a hushed voice said, “I don’t know if Garnth will make it through the night. His face is ashen, and his brow is burning with fever.”

Reaching out to embrace her friend, Myranda said softly, “Thank you. You’ve done what you can do under these difficult circumstances. Get a good night’s sleep. We’ll see what the morning brings.”

Myranda lay awake for some time, thinking about Ya, about the village they left behind, and whether this errand she had proposed might be destined for failure. *We’re almost out of well water! How long will it be before more of us fall ill or die?*

She listened to the raindrops beginning to fall, hitting the tent’s surface. *Wait a minute! The rainwater should not make us sick!*

She threw off her blanket and crawled out of her tent. “Everyone, wake up!” she shouted, excitedly. “Quickly! Get everything capable of holding water and set it out to collect the rain! We may yet accomplish our task!”



Members of the company went to wake Garnth the following morning, but he did not respond to repeated efforts to rouse him. Mirinth knelt next to Garnth’s body, pressing her fingers on the side of his neck, checking for a pulse.

“Nothing,” she said, drawing his blanket over his face. The rest of the party gathered around, several wiping away tears.

“We can’t leave Garnth here like this. But we don’t have the time or the tools to bury our friend, and I think it unwise to erect a funeral pyre here. I propose we build a cairn. There are plenty of rocks scattered about.”

Everyone agreed. Mirinth and Aryinda wrapped Garnth securely in his blanket, took down his tent, and used it as an extra layer to cover his body. The other members of the party gathered rocks and began building the cairn. Once they finished their work, Myranda gathered everyone together and offered a prayer for the safe passage of Garnth’s spirit to the next world.

Before leaving their campsite, they retrieved the rainwater collected during the night’s rain and transferred it into their water pouches. Pleased with the amount of water, the company hoisted their packs onto their backs. They gave a final salute to their friend and started up the trail, everyone wrapped in their own thoughts, questioning whether they might be the next one to succumb to the sickness.

NINE

For six days, Ya made progress on her trek upstream, following the same path as her mother's party. She spotted boot prints in muddy places along the trail, a makeshift bridge across one of the river's lesser tributaries, and their abandoned campsites. At each stop, she knelt down to feel the stones surrounding the fire pit, checking for warmth.

Ya deviated from following her mother's path only to detour around the villages she encountered. She did not want to lose valuable time by engaging in unnecessary discourse with their residents. And she didn't want to take the risk villagers might find it odd a young girl was traveling all on her own and think her efforts misguided. But she also knew it meant giving up any opportunity to obtain news about her mother's progress.

She finally did find a firepit with stones possessing a little bit of warmth on the seventh day. *Perhaps I am slowly catching up to them*, she thought. *Maybe I can travel faster than them because I am a party of one, and they are a party of six, only moving as quickly as their slowest member.*

Encouraged by her find, Ya redoubled her pace. Soon she came upon a place where the river split into two fair-sized branches, each wider than the creeks and streams she had previously encountered. Unsure of which branch to follow, she scanned the shoreline for a reassuring clue and spotted a crudely built raft banked on the far side, leading off to the right.

Aha, that's the way they went. But I don't have the time to build a raft!

She took off her clothes, stuffed them in her pack, and waded into the shallowest stretch of the river, holding her pack above her head. She recounted the warnings from her mother about not touching the river's water, but she felt invigorated by the river, felt

it encouraging her to continue on her trek upstream. After reaching the other side, she dried off as best she could and put her clothes back on.

Her newfound energy vanished when she came across the mound of rough stones covering someone's earthly remains, protecting them from wild animals. Ya knew of such things but questioned why a cairn was out in the middle of nowhere alongside the river. Horrified, a thought struck her. *What if someone in my mother's party died? What if it was my mother?*

She knelt beside it, bowed, and uttered a short prayer. Please, not my mother! Please, not a member of my mother's party!

Ya pushed notions of losing her mother out of her mind and continued her march eastward. On the eighth day, Ya caught a glimpse of smoke in the distance, either from another village or her mother's party.

She set off in the direction of the smoke but always kept the river within earshot. *It seems odd I never feel tired. Seems like the further upstream I travel, the more energy I have.*

As she hiked along, she worried, *what will my mother say when I catch up to them? Will she be surprised? Angry? Will she allow me to accompany them as they continue on their quest to locate the River Keeper?*

She didn't plan to give her mother any choice in the matter, assuming she was still alive.

TEN

Nine days after Myranda's party had left their village, the land began to slope upward, an indication they had entered the foothills at the base of the Meherrin Mountains. Their progress slowed as the path Navirra chose became steeper and filled with more stones and roots. Worse, as the day wore on, more of the party started feeling ill.

The rainwater they had collected days earlier finally ran out, leaving them little choice but to drink from the river. Aryinda advised they boil the water before drinking, hoping whatever was in the water causing the illness might be neutralized by the heat. Everyone in the party knew their time to find the River Keeper was quickly running out.

That afternoon, they came across a clearing in the woods and found a crudely constructed tower in the center of the field. Its timbers were held together with rope lashings, weatherworn, but still sturdy. Navirra suggested a break and took the opportunity to scale the tower, careful to test each brace before placing her full weight onto it.

Looking out to the west toward their village, she expected to see columns of smoke rising from each of the villages they had passed. Much to her surprise, only cloud shadows racing across the land and miles of swaying treetops filled the distance. *Did this mean the villagers were so sick they could no longer maintain their fires? Were the villagers even still alive?* She turned her gaze to the east, the distance punctuated with the few remaining foothills and the indigo peaks of the mountains waiting for them.

She worked her way back down and reported her findings to Myranda and the others. "We are almost through these foothills. Tomorrow our path will get much steeper. And I'm sorry to say I didn't observe any smoke columns in the west. Let's hope we can

find this River Keeper." Then she added, "Soon."

The party picked up their packs to resume their march toward the mountains. Grateful for their now lighter loads, but mindful of their diminishing supplies, they continued on.

ELEVEN

Ya started her ascent up the mountains the following day. She soon felt something drawing her up the path, higher and higher. The tents of her mother's party came into view at midday. *Why had they not started the day's hike? It was already third hour. Or had they abandoned their tents? Were they getting weaker and the tents too heavy to carry?*

At first she considered stopping and checking on them. But some inner voice told her to make her way around the camp and continue up the trail. Not understanding the growing sense of urgency, she made a silent promise to come back to them as soon as possible, offering a quick prayer for their safety.

Thoughts that she might be close to finding the River Keeper soon filled her. She tried to imagine what he might look like. *Gray hair, to be certain. A beard, perhaps. How will I know?*

Farther and farther up the trail she climbed, ignoring the burning in her legs. After rounding a formation of large boulders, an opening to a cave appeared, causing her to stop mid-step, not knowing if there might be some sort of wild animal lurking inside. Perhaps a bear or a mountain lion? She had never seen such creatures, but tales of their existence had reached even as far downstream as her village.

Quite to her amazement, a sense of peace quickly replaced her fears. She continued toward the mouth of the cave slowly, cautiously. At the entrance, she paused to give her eyes a chance to adjust to the darkness.

"Is someone there?" A weak voice called out from inside the cave.

Startled, Ya instantly froze. "Hello?" she managed. "Is someone inside?"

"Yes, my dear. I assure you there are no wild animals in here. If there were, I would surely be dead by now. Please come in."

Ya continued into the darkness until she saw the light of a solitary candle burning next to a bed of leaves with an old man lying there.

"Come over here and sit next to me." The man motioned for her to sit on an outcropping of rock. "I have many questions for you." Sensing her hesitation, he reassured her, "Come, now. I won't hurt you. Look at me. I'm in no condition to do much hurting of anything."

Without taking her eyes off the old man, Ya made a few tentative steps to the rock and sat down. When she settled, he continued.

"Tell me. Why have you come here?"

Ya remained silent for a moment, still staring at the cave's occupant. She had never seen anyone so old, with so many wrinkles and with so much white hair. "The river is sick. I know it's sick because I felt it. And now there are people who are sick, even some who are dying, and some who have already died. I think it's because they drank water from the river. When our village realized the river's sickness, some started sharing old stories about a River Keeper. Others believe the River Keeper to be a myth.

"My mother sits on the Village Council, and she brought my concerns to the Council. After a long discussion, they decided to send a small group of folks to follow the river's course eastward in hopes of finding the River Keeper. My mother was chosen to lead the party. Before she left, she made me promise to stay in the village with my grandmother. But the day after they left, I snuck out in the middle of the night and have followed them for the past week."

"Courageous thing for a young lady to do. Does your mother know you followed her?"

"Not yet. But she will soon," answered Ya apprehensively. "I came upon their camp on my way here this morning. I don't think

they are well because they had yet to strike camp for the day. They might have run out of the well water they brought and drank from the river. I will go back and check on them.” Then Ya added, “And I didn’t stop because I was pretty certain my mother would admonish me for running away from my grandmother and following the party.”

“And how about you? Have you drunk from the river? You don’t seem ill. And what about food? Have you eaten?”

“I, too, have been drinking from the river. But for some reason, I do not feel sick. As for food, I took several loaves of bread and pieces of fruit from my grandmother’s house before I left. I made a quick stop one night in a village I passed through along the way and took some more food. So, I’m okay. Thank you for asking.”

With some difficulty, the old man sat up in bed. “Alright. But why are you here, now? You must have had a reason for going against your mother’s wishes.”

Ya looked away, at first embarrassed, then empathetic, “You might find this silly, but I do believe the stories about a River Keeper. I want to believe there is such a person and that he can heal our river. Do you know where it is I might find him?”

The old man laughed. “My dear child, you have found him.”

“What?”

“That’s right. And the river is indeed sick. It is sick because I am sick. My days on this Earth are numbered. The truth is, I am hoping you might help me find a new River Keeper.”

The old man closed his eyes to rest for a moment or two. When he opened them again, he reached out with his right hand and said, “Come closer, my child. Let me feel your forehead.”

Ya slid off her rock seat and dropped to her knees, inching closer to the old man’s bed. She leaned forward so he might touch her. He placed his thumb on the center of her brow.

“It is you. I wondered if it could be.”

Ya backed away with a start. “What do you mean?”

“You are the next River Keeper! That’s why you first noticed the problem with the river. That’s why you have been able to drink its water without becoming ill. It is you who will be able to bring about the river’s healing.”

“I don’t know how to heal a river!” exclaimed Ya.

“You will. You will after I teach you. But there isn’t much time left, you know.”

“But my mother, my life in the village! What about all of that?”

“I have no joy in telling you this, but if you don’t take on this responsibility, your mother and all of those in your village and in all of the other villages along the river will soon die.”

“But ...” Ya’s shoulders slumped as tears rolled down her face.

“My dear child,” sympathized the River Keeper. “I remember years ago when the river was last sick. I undertook a journey such as the one you have taken. When I found the previous River Keeper, he charged me with the same task I now ask of you.”

“And what was your response?” Ya sobbed wiping away her tears.

“I didn’t want to do it either.”

Surprised and curious, Ya asked, “What made you accept the charge then?”

“He told me about how fulfilling it was to bring life to the land and its people. He told me how he could feel the river’s water and feel it as it flowed from the mountains to the sea. And I can now tell you everything he said was true. My life has been long and satisfying.”

“But why does a river need a keeper, anyway?”

“A good question,” responded the old man. “And one worth

answering. You see, the river has a soul. It is a very old soul and stretches out across the entire Kingdom of Imlay. For the river to give life to the land, someone needs to give life to the river. That's what I have done. And you learn to have a relationship with the river, to love it."

"How can the river have a soul? If it had a soul, that would mean it was alive. And the river can't be alive, can it?"

"Oh, the river is very much alive," replied the old man. "You see, all life originates in water. And whether you know it or not, you are mostly made of water."

"I am made of water?"

"That's right."

"But what if I don't want to live in the mountains in some old cave," protested Ya.

"You don't have to. Part of the responsibility of a River Keeper is to travel along the entire course of the river from time to time, making certain everything is in order. And if you find something or someone that is wrong, you fix it."

"What about food and water? Where will I find them?"

"Funny thing about the river. It will provide everything you need to survive."

"And if I am out traveling, can I visit my village and my family and friends?"

"Of course, you can. But here's the thing," the River Keeper said, looking directly at Ya, "and this is important for you to understand, when you bond with the river, it will add many years to your life you would not have had otherwise. There will be a day when you visit your village, and all those you know will be gone. You will still appear as you do now, but no one will know who you are."

"Did you go back and visit your village?"

"Of course. But that was hundreds of years ago. I stopped going

there when I realized no one remained there who remembered me."

The immensity of the River Keeper's revelations sunk in and caused Ya to start crying again.

"I know. Everyone always thinks long life is a gift. But it is also a curse. But you will always have the river. It will always be there for you. It will always love you."

Ya returned to sitting on the rock in silence.

The old man stirred, knowing time was of the essence. "This is what I want you to do. Go back to your mother's camp. Tell her everything I have told you. And if you decide to take on the role of the River Keeper, ask for her blessing. Assuming she approves, return here, and I will show you how to bond with the river."

Ya said nothing.

"Go now. There isn't much time," implored the River Keeper.

Ya stood up and left the cave. Lost in her thoughts and burdened with the old man's charge, she retraced her steps back down the path.

Me? The River Keeper? I can't believe it!

TWELVE

Ya followed the trail from the old man's cave back to her mother's camp. She found her mother's tent and threw back the flap. Ya sat down cross-legged on the ground next to her.

"Mother?" She gently touched her mother's shoulder to wake her.

Her mother stirred. "Ya, dear daughter, what are you doing here? Am I dreaming?" Myranda opened her eyes quickly, suddenly alert. "I remember telling you to stay with your grandmother!"

"I know, Mama. But something was pulling me here, up to where the River Keeper lives," replied Ya, relieved to see her mother still alive.

Myranda struggled to prop herself up on her left elbow. "What are you saying? You sound like you found the River Keeper."

"I did. I did find the River Keeper. He's real."

Ya's mother peeled the blankets from her upper body. "Really? That's ... that's amazing! Tell me what he said. Did he know about the river being sick?"

"Yes. He knew. The river is sick because he is sick. In fact, he is dying."

"What?"

"He explained to me that the river gives us life, and so someone must give the river life. And that someone is the River Keeper." Ya then recited everything the old man shared with her.

"So if I'm hearing you right, if he dies, the river will also die."

"That's right."

"Shouldn't we find a new River Keeper, then?"

"He already has found such a person." She paused before

continuing. "Me."

"What? You? Why would he say that? How would he even know?"

"He said it's because I was able to feel the river's illness; the river could tell I was the next River Keeper. That's why it didn't make me sick when I drank its water."

Myranda lay back down and pulled her blankets up to cover her shoulders. After a moment, she faced Ya again and asked, "So, do you believe him? Do you accept what he's told you?"

"I do."

"What are you going to do?"

"If I do not take on this charge, he says you will all die. I cannot allow that to happen. So, he sent me here, back to find you, to ask for your permission to do this thing."

"Oh, dear daughter," sighed Myranda. "You certainly do not need my permission. You are so brave for one so young. I am very proud of you. Look at you. You made the trek from our village all the way here by yourself. No. If becoming the new River Keeper is what must be done to save the lives of everyone along the river, who am I to say no?"

Tears welled up in Ya's eyes.

"You have my blessing, dear daughter. What will happen next? Will I see you again?"

"You will. I will come back after the River Keeper shows me how to bond with the river. And even though I will need to travel the length of the river to check on things from time to time, I will always visit you." Despite being hesitant with the next piece of news, she forged ahead, "The River Keeper also told me the river will give me many extra years of life I would not have had otherwise. He said he has lived for many hundreds of years. So, you will see me the way I am now for the rest of your life."

“You will always be my little girl,” Myranda smiled, reaching her hand up to touch her daughter’s face, wiping away her tears.

“Go now. Don’t keep the old man waiting,” whispered Myranda.

“I will return as soon as I can. And do not drink anymore river water until I get back.” Ya crawled out of the tent, secured the flap, and left.

THIRTEEN

When Ya returned to the old man’s cave, he was sitting on a ledge, waiting for her.

“Hand me my staff. We must go down to the river.”

Ya retrieved the staff and helped the old man to his feet. She followed him out of the cave and up the path for a short way.

“There,” he pointed. “To the left. You see the path down to the pool between those big boulders? That’s where we must go.”

At the edge of the water, they stepped into the pool.

“It’s cold!” said Ya, surprised.

“I know. But that will soon pass. Come. Out to the middle.”

The two figures waded waist-deep into the pool. The River Keeper cupped his hands to fill them with water and poured the water over Ya’s head. “I pass my bond with the river to you.” The old man touched his heart and then extended his arms to touch Ya’s shoulders.

Ya immediately felt the river welcome her with warmth radiating from her shoulders outward throughout her entire body. The earlier chill vanished. A feeling of cleanliness enveloped her, like waking up after a good night’s sleep or a pleasant dream.

As her awareness merged with the river, healing began, first in the pool, then quickly spreading downstream, passing each village and all the way out to the White Sea. The river was finally free of its illness.



In the next instant, the old man faded from view. A whisper of his essence merged with the water. The last thing Ya saw of the old River Keeper was the smile on his face. And she shared in that happiness. All of her apprehension about taking on this new role disappeared. She knew this to be her calling.

FOURTEEN

Before leaving the pool, Ya collected the cleansing water in her pouch to take back for her mother and the others in the camp where she instructed everyone to drink. Once everyone felt well enough to travel again, they began their trek back down the mountains, through the foothills, and along the Great River, halting briefly at Garnth's cairn to offer prayers of thanks to their departed friend. They stopped at each village and related to everyone the news about finding the River Keeper, the healing of the river, and that its water was now safe to drink.

Their arrival home proved to be bittersweet. Many villagers had died while they had been away; many others were in various stages of sickness, including Ya's friend, Ty. Upon hearing the news of his illness, she excused herself from the gathering in the Town Hall to pay him a visit.

"I'm back," Ya said, wincing at the sight of Ty's ashen face. "And I've brought you something that will cure you." She removed the cap of her water pouch and held it to Ty's mouth, encouraging him to drink.

Ty swallowed several mouthfuls and pushed away Ya's hand. "I'm so sorry."

"Whatever for?"

"I'm sorry that I doubted you when we were down by the river, and you told me it was sick. You were right."

"I know. It's alright. Everything will be fine," said Ya, reassuring her friend, reaching for Ty's hand and giving it a gentle squeeze. "For now, just worry about getting better. The water you drank will heal you soon. I'll be back to visit tomorrow. Right now, I have other villagers who need tending to."

"Tomorrow will you tell me about your adventure along the

Great River?"

"Tomorrow," smiled Ya, turning to leave. "Yes, tomorrow."

The weeks and months following Ya's encounter with the River Keeper passed quickly. She still considered the old man to be the River Keeper even though she now bore the responsibility for the river's health and well-being.

Ya found much joy in acquainting herself with all the places along the Great River new to her. She felt great delight seeing the White Sea for the first time and the endless horizon of water stretching out to the edge of the world. She came to know the quiet of the river as it flowed underneath branches of the now-healthy trees hugging the banks. Fields of colorful blossoms and vines hanging heavy with ripe berries reminded her of the river's love for the land. She made friends with the many birds, fish, and turtles who lived along the shores of the river. And the animals who came down to the river for a midday drink would always look at her as she paddled by in her canoe, grateful for the cool water.

Each day, no matter where she was or what the weather was like, Ya took a few minutes to swim in the river to feel its spirit embrace her. After drying off, she would give thanks and savor the gift the River Keeper had given her.

Whenever she passed by the spot where she had once found peace, she would stop, pull her little boat onto the shore, and find her favorite patch of grass. She would think of Ty, now an old man. She wondered what stories people told their children and grandchildren, tales of a young girl who became the River Keeper and saved the lives of all who lived along the Great River.

The Morning Song



ONE

The village of Morning Song lay not far from the shores of the White Sea. Though not a large village, it was widely known throughout the Kingdom of Imlay for its Ritual of the Morning Song. After the ringing of the dawn bell, all of the inhabitants would gather on a hillside overlooking the sea and face the western sky to watch the setting of the Morning Star.

As was the custom, a different person initiated the start of the Song each morning, and everyone else would join in as they felt their calling, each new voice adding a wondrous harmony or introducing a whimsical rhythm. The Song would continue until the Morning Star dropped into the waters of the sea. Then the townspeople would return to their homes, break the fast, and begin their day.

The villagers took turns leading the Song so it might take on different dimensions, something reflective of each leader's unique spirit. Sometimes a leader might suggest a particular phrase or distinctive beat to the others before starting the Song. But most times, the leader would simply begin by humming a simple melody or chant and allowing the Song to wander wherever it might choose to go. A favorite verse they often sang was "The Blessing of the Day."



*Praise be to the night for its gift of stars!
Praise be to the day for its gift of sun!
Praise be to the dawn for its gift of light!
Praise be to the gods for this gift of life!*

During the day, a villager might say to another, “’twas a wonderful harmony you added this morning” or “quite the creative rhythm you came up with today.” Any visitor to the village quickly noticed how this practice of singing the Song made everyone feel good about themselves and another day of life. And many visitors came from time to time to witness this Ritual of the Morning Song, often joining in. Others simply sat cross-legged with arms outstretched to savor the Song and soak in its energy.

At the end of each singing, the Song Master would alert the person leading the next day’s Song, giving him or her ample time to think about what course they might want the Song to take. The role of the Song Master would shift to a different villager with each cycle of the moon, entrusting everyone with the honor of taking charge of the Song at least once in their lifetime.

Something else a visitor to the village might notice would be the names the villagers gave to their children. Certainly, the name Melody was a popular choice, but so were Harmony, Aria, Carol, and Cantrell. Some parents opted for more unique names: names such as Liron, Daina, Odele, Mavis, and Crystal.

Morning Song was a wonderful place to live, and all of its inhabitants felt very blessed to call it home.

TWO

All was well in the village of Morning Song until one year when a boy was born to parents Zimri and Laya. From his very first moments of life, there was something unusual about the child. Whereas all children were born crying, this boy was silent, coming into the world without screaming or babbling. Nothing. This was most perplexing for the parents. Because of this, they named the boy Tysten, which meant quiet one.

Tysten grew to be strong and fair of face, with dark, red hair and forest-green eyes. Zimri and Laya soon realized that not only could their son not speak, but he could not hear either. In an effort to communicate with his parents, Tysten developed a series of gestures using his hands. His parents learned what various signs and motions meant. Others in the village watched Tysten sign with his parents, fascinated, but with no clue what the signs meant. From time to time, his parents would make attempts to teach others the meaning of the gestures so their son could communicate with them. But most of the villagers couldn't remember the signs. Not surprisingly, Tysten became somewhat of a loner.

As the years passed, Zimri and Laya would take Tysten to the hillside for the Ritual of the Morning Song, hoping some of the magic or whatever energy the Song gave to each villager might touch Tysten, heal him, and enable him to savor its music. But that did not happen. After all, one cannot benefit from the Song if one cannot hear it. Day after day, they would watch their son sit alone while other young folk went to school or work. They felt sorry for him and were constantly trying to find ways to help him.

Then one day, Zimri and Tysten went to town to purchase fruits and vegetables for their evening meal. While there, Zimri overheard two visitors from the Norther Plains mention the name of Amarach, one of the King's mages. They said he had healed a young boy suffering from a devastating illness. Zimri wondered if maybe this

mage might be able to grant his son the ability to hear and speak.

After hurrying home with their purchases and spilling them onto the kitchen table, Zimri said to his wife excitedly, "I heard news today that might be the answer to our prayers!"

"Careful," admonished Laya, retrieving a wayward apple off the floor. "Whatever do you mean?"

Zimri told her about how Mage Amarach had healed a young lad. "Do you think maybe this mage might be able to help Tysten?"

Laya responded doubtfully with a sad, exhausted shrug of her shoulders, "I don't know. We've tried for so long to find a miracle for Tysten. He will soon be a young man, and we haven't found anything to help him. How can we be sure this mage's magic will even work? You know we have but a few gold coins to pay for his services even if we could find him."

Zimri, used to Laya's worries and doubts, gently cupped his calloused hands around her cheeks, calming her. "These are all good questions, my dear. What if we take a trip to the mage's tower and simply ask for his help? Nothing says we must make a decision today. Just think about it. Meanwhile, I will go to the Village Council tomorrow and ask them if they know anything about this mage and his abilities. When we have more information, then we can make a good decision."

"Fair enough," sighed Laya, with a tentative smile, wrapping her own hands around Zimri's. "Now, why don't you help Tysten with his schoolwork while I prepare dinner."

"Alright," said Zimri. "I'd be happy to."

THREE

The next day Zimri walked back into the village to consult with the Village Council about the Mage Amarach and how one might make a trek to the mage's tower. He waited patiently in the Town Hall to speak with Ardin, the leader of the Council, who at long last stepped out of his office and motioned for Zimri to enter.

After offering Zimri a seat, the stout man tucked his hands under his suspenders and asked, "Now, what can I do for you this fine day?"

"Yesterday, I heard some visitors speaking to one another about a mage named Amarach," said Zimri. "I'm sure you recall he is one of the King's magicians. Apparently, he has some sort of magical powers to heal people. The visitors said this mage fellow healed a young boy suffering from a devastating illness. I wonder if this mage might be able to heal my son, Tysten, grant him the ability to hear and speak. Do you know anything about this mage, his powers, and where we might find him?" asked Zimri.

"Yes, I see." Ardin leaned back in his seat, pondered what Zimri had said for a few moments, and then offered, "Well, I suppose there is no harm in trying. I can't tell you much about the fellow or what he can do, but I can tell you where you can find him. The mage's tower is a three-day walk from here. Two days due north along the coast and one day inland following the Great River upstream. The trails should be well marked. Will it just be you, or will your wife and son accompany you?"

"All three of us should go, I think. If there is any chance this mage is able to cast some sort of spell or incantation, I would certainly want my son there. We will carry enough food and water for the journey. The weather is favorable. I will propose to my family that we leave tomorrow morning, after the Ritual of the Morning Song, of course. I want everyone to know where we went should they inquire."

"Alright, then. I wish you and your family a safe trip. We will look forward to your return in a week or so. And we will send prayers for Tysten's healing your way."

"Thank you, Ardin. We appreciate your blessing. I'll head home to prepare."

FOUR

“I know it’s a long trek. And I know it is asking a lot. But I think we have a better chance of succeeding if you are with us,” Zimri said in earnest, explaining everything to Laya.

“Alright, then,” Laya agreed reluctantly. “I best get busy preparing food to take with us and gather other things we might need along the way.”

“Thank you, my dear. I will help Tysten get ready. We should leave early tomorrow morning after the Ritual of the Morning Song. Perhaps it might grant us safe passage.”



The following day, Zimri and his family left home and soon found the trail leading north out of the village without any trouble. They made great progress on the first day. The trail was wide and well-maintained, rising and falling as it snaked in and out of valleys and around the ridges of hills as they reached down to the sea. They spent their first night camped alongside a stream cascading down from some unseen mountaintop. Its gentle gurgling and splashing lulled all three into a peaceful sleep.

The second day required them to ascend a series of switchbacks for the first mile. The morning sun warmed their backs but the trade winds blowing inland kept them cool. As they walked along the ridge several hundred feet above the crashing surf, the winds brought clouds in from the sea, and a light rain began to fall. By the time they reached the mouth of a large valley, the trail had become muddy and slippery. The switchbacks leading down to the valley floor proved to be problematic.

Laya’s pace slowed to a crawl. At one point, they stopped, and Zimri took things out of her pack and placed them into his own, hoping to ease her load.

When they finally descended into the valley, they marveled at all of the varieties of vegetation. The trees bent heavy, full of mountain apples, sweet guava fruit, and coconuts. Clusters of wild orchids, their delicate purple flowers thriving along the trail, gathered under the trees. Other blossoms of yellow and orange, pink and red, all with centers of yellow or white, claimed the space between the orchids.

The three travelers took their lunch in the shade of a large mango tree, careful not to sit on any ripe fruit lying around its base. Energized from the food Laya had packed, they started their climb out of the valley, grateful for no more switchbacks. They caught their first glance of the Great River late in the afternoon, its wide mouth interrupting the curving coastline. They stopped for a moment to take in the view, following the river inland.

“Tomorrow, we will walk eastward along the southern shore. With any luck, we will be at the mage’s tower by the end of the day,” predicted Zimri.

They were down off the ridge after another hour and began looking for a good place to make camp. “I think we should spend the night here in this grove of trees,” signed Zimri.

“We’ve walked for two days, and we’re here at the river, just as Ardin said.” Tysten looked at his parents and smiled.



Anxious to reach the mage’s tower, Zimri woke early and prepared a quick breakfast for Laya and Tysten. Once they stowed their belongings and pulled on their hiking boots, they continued their trek, following the path along the Great River. From time to time, they would encounter other travelers traveling westward toward the White Sea. Each party would exchange a “good morning” or “beautiful day” or just a simple wave and a smile.

“It’s hard for me to realize I am actually looking at the Great River. It is mentioned in so many of our tales and songs, and here

it is!” Zimri turned to Laya and Tysten and signed, “I am truly grateful you are here with me to see these sights. The world is an amazing place!”

By midafternoon they rounded a bend in the river to witness their first glance of the mage’s tower, sitting atop an earthwork bank. Circular and wider and taller than they expected, the tower was made of gray stone. A flag sporting the red and gold emblem of the Kingdom of Imlay flew from the top of the keep.

“Not far to go now,” said Zimri as he stood staring at the impressive structure.

At its base, they found a stone walkway winding its way up the mound. After three revolutions, they arrived at the tower’s door, with its seven imposing vertical wooden slats held together with iron timber brackets and hinges. A large ring knocker hung in the center and, on the right side, a doorknob worn down with age.

“I guess we are supposed to knock?” Zimri was nervous, having never solicited the help of a magician before.” Zimri reached out for the iron ring, banging it as hard as possible against the door.

After several minutes of waiting, an old man with a long white beard and a pointed nose answered the door. “And what is it you want? Have you been sent by the King?”

“No, sir,” stammered Zimri. “We are here to request the assistance of the Mage Amarach. Are you he?”

“I am. What help do you seek?” asked Amarach, displeased at having his afternoon work interrupted.

“Our son, Tysten, was born without the ability to speak or hear. I know you recently healed a young lad who was very ill, and ...” Zimri took a breath and continued, “we were wondering if you might be able to heal our son, help him to speak and hear.”

“Wait here,” mumbled Amarach, shutting the door in Zimri’s face.



“Okay,” said Zimri after a few moments. “I guess Amarach is going to help us?”

Laya harrumphed a reply, her old concerns resurfacing. “Are you sure? He didn’t look too happy to see us. He probably gets a lot of people wanting him to cast all sorts of magic spells.”

The door creaked open again after a long wait. “I must tell you, I did find a spell which will restore your son’s hearing and speech. But know this, all spells come at a cost.” Amarach saw the look in Laya’s eyes at the mention of cost. “But the cost will not require gold coins. Since this spell deals with sound, so too will the price it demands. I cannot tell you the exact nature of the price or when the spell will demand payment, but you must be prepared before consenting to the application of the spell.”

“We understand,” consented Zimri. “Anything we can do to give our son the ability to hear and speak is worth whatever price is demanded.”

The mage pointed at Tysten and motioned for him to step forward. He placed his hands over the young man’s ears and murmured a spell. Then he put his hands over Tysten’s mouth and recited a second incantation. “Your son is healed,” declared Amarach, finished.

With those words, Tysten looked around at his parents and at Amarach. He signed his way of saying “thank you.”

“You can speak now!” said Laya, shedding tears. “Can you say ‘thank you’?”

“Dang ewe,” muttered Tysten.

“That’s right!” exclaimed Laya. “Good! Try again.”

“Dank yoe.”

Laya looked at Zimri, matching his broad smile. Then she turned her gaze to Amarach. “Oh, thank you, kind sir. We are most indebted to you.”

“Just remember what I said about the spell and payment for its work.” The old wizard turned and went back into his tower, closing the heavy door behind him.

Laya looked down at Tysten again and said, “Dear son, there is so much I want to say to you and teach you.”

Zimri added, “Well, my wife, we have a three-day hike before us. That should give you plenty of time to speak with our son.”

The three travelers started down the spiral path and circled it three times until they reached the trail.

“Let’s see how far we can walk before darkness sets in,” said Zimri.

FIVE

The morning after Zimri, Laya, and Tysten returned from their trip to the mage's tower, they woke early and prepared for their walk down to the hillside above the sea. It had been many days since they last partook of the Ritual of the Morning Song, and they were looking forward to it, especially since it would be the first time Tysten could hear the Song and participate in its singing. And they were eager to share the good news with the village that their son could finally hear and speak.

Down their usual path to the hillside they went. Zimri thought it odd they hadn't seen anyone else as they made their way to a favorite spot. When they rounded the last curve in the path, they found no one there.

"Wait a minute," said Zimri, slightly distressed. "Where is everyone? Did something happen while we were away?"

"Come to think of it, we didn't hear the dawn bell ring either," said Laya, echoing Zimri's surprise.

"I think you two should go back to our home. I'm going to the village and see if I can get some answers."



Zimri noticed a few folks out and about but wondered why no one called out a morning greeting or spoke to anyone else. When he got to the Town Hall, he frantically knocked on the door to Ardin's office. The door opened, and Ardin stood there making motions with his hands Zimri didn't understand.

"What happened here?" asked Zimri, urgently. "The dawn bell did not ring this morning. And no one was at the Ritual of the Morning Song. We wanted Tysten to experience the Song now that he can hear, speak, and sing."

Ardin continued his efforts to convey a message to Zimri using his hands. He pointed to his ears and his mouth, frantically shaking his head from side to side.

"Oh my," said Zimri in astonishment. "You cannot hear or speak!"

Zimri motioned he understood using the signs he had taught Tysten. He pointed to the clock hanging on the wall and mouthed the word "when," hoping Ardin would understand. The large man stepped back to his desk and found a piece of paper and a writing quill. He scribbled a day and time on the paper, then held it up for Zimri to see.

"Oh no!" Zimri gasped. "That is the exact day and time when Amarach cast his spells on Tysten. So, this is the cost of the spell? Tysten gained what everyone here has lost? This is terrible!"

Zimri left the Town Hall in a rush. He flew out the door and ran all the way back home to tell Laya and Tysten the price of the spell. What Tysten had gained, everyone else in the village had lost.

All three sat in silence for a long while, not knowing what to do or say. Finally, Zimri announced, "This is all my fault. If I had not heard those two visitors mention Mage Amarach's ability to heal and insisted we travel to seek his help, none of this would have happened."

Tysten gave his father a big hug. "Father, I know you feel guilt over your decision, but I want to tell you how grateful I am to be able to hear and speak for the first time in my life. And even if the spell were reversed this very instant, I would still feel the same way. You have given me a wondrous gift."

Laya nodded in agreement and began to cry.

"I wish I could fix this terrible situation," lamented Zimri. "I'm just not sure how."

"I do," offered Tysten. I am going to go back to the mage's

tower and ask him if it is possible to reverse the spell. I cannot savor my newfound gifts knowing everyone else in the village is now destined to go through life unable to hear or speak. And, apparently, there will be no more Rituals of the Morning Song unless something is done.”

“Are you certain?” queried Zimri. “We cannot ask you to make such a sacrifice.”

“And you did not ask. This is my decision.”

“If you are certain, then I will go with you.”

“No,” replied Tysten. “I need to do this on my own. And I can travel faster if I go alone. This situation demands immediate attention. Besides, you two are now the only people in the village who can hear and speak. The others might need you while I am away.”

“Let me at least pack food and water for you for your trip,” said Laya. “Why don’t you two gather together everything else Tysten will need. Then we can go to bed early and get a good night’s rest. You can leave bright and early tomorrow morning.”

Zimri nodded in agreement, then added, “And son, know this. Your mother and I will always love you and support you regardless of whether you can hear and speak.”

“I know. Thank you.”

SIX

Tysten hiked north along the trail the next day, thinking, *it’s ironic that the sign language I developed with my parents and tried to teach the other villagers might be the only way they will be able to communicate if my efforts are unsuccessful.*

And he knew that, sooner or later, the villagers would learn the mage’s spell cast at the behest of his father was the reason for their loss of hearing and speech. He prayed they would understand this exchange was unintentional. Yes, he was thrilled to be able to hear the sound of the waves crashing against the shoreline, the wind blowing through the trees, and the birds calling out their morning songs, but it wasn’t worth the sacrifice of so many.



When Tysten arrived at the mage’s tower late in the morning of the third day, he knocked on the old wooden door. After several minutes, he knocked a second time.

“Alright, alright,” came a muffled voice from inside the tower. “I’m coming.”

The door opened, and Amarach saw the young man standing there, his backpack resting on the ground, leaning against his leg.

“You again. And without your parents,” grumbled the mage. “Why have you returned?”

“I am so sorry to bother you, great wizard. But something has gone terribly wrong at our village, and I think it might be connected to the spell you cast. You see, I can speak and hear now, but everyone else in the village cannot. If no one can speak or hear, then the Ritual of the Morning Song cannot be performed every day, and we will miss its blessing.”

The mage leaned on his staff and let out an audible sigh. “Come

in then, lad. I suppose I should give this predicament some consideration. But no promises,” he said, opening the door a bit more to let Tysten in. “You can leave your pack down here.”

Up the spiral staircase the old mage climbed, with Tysten always several steps behind. When they got to the tower’s top floor, the mage stopped, caught his breath, and rummaged around to find a chair for Tysten and invited him to sit.

The mage’s workroom brandished total disorder. Glassware containing brightly colored liquids, vials filled with magical powders, half-unrolled scrolls, and old books lying open covered every square inch of numerous tables.

“Now, where did I put my Book of Spells?” mumbled the old mage. He shuffled around the room, scrabbling beneath piles of paper as he searched for the missing book.

“Ah, here it is,” he said, satisfied. Before opening the book, he turned to face his guest. “Do you remember me telling your parents that every spell cast demands some sort of payment? And that one never knows when the payment might come due?”

“Yes, sir,” nodded Tysten.

“Based on what you’ve told me, it appears that payment for you regaining your hearing and your voice came at the cost of everyone else in your village losing their hearing and voice. Perhaps this is an unfair price, I don’t know.”

“Yes, I understand. I guess I’m asking if there is any way to reverse the spell?”

“You know you will be deaf and dumb again, do you not?”

“I do,” answered Tysten. “But I can’t live knowing I caused so many people to lose two of their senses. I will gladly make the sacrifice.”

“Brave soul,” murmured Amarach. “Let me see if there is anything in the Book of Spells about undoing a spell.”

“I can wait.”

The mage looked at his guest again, somewhat frustrated, and said, “If you must.” He opened the Book of Spells to a page still bookmarked from Tysten’s previous visit. The wizard’s eyes darted back and forth. Finally, after many long minutes, the mage closed the book and set it down on a stack of papers.

Tysten watched Amarach move from one side of his workroom to the other. Opening books, unrolling scrolls, retrieving pieces of glassware, and mumbling to himself the entire time. An hour passed. Then a second hour.

Finally, the mage said, “Well, I have a choice for you to make. I found a spell which will reset everything back to the way it was. The downside of this new spell is that it can never be tampered with again. What it means for you, young man, is that no magic will ever bring back what you have now.”

“Okay,” nodded Tysten. “What is the other choice?”

“If my memory serves me correctly, I told you and your parents spells like to be repaid in a currency relating to the nature of the spell. Say I cast a spell having to do with time, the spell would want payment in a means involving time. In your case, the spell had to do with sound. When the spell reached out for repayment, it collected the ability to hear and utter sound from all of your fellow villagers.

“I have another spell allowing one to exchange a payment already paid with some other form of payment. That would mean you get to keep your hearing and ability to speak, all of the villagers regain their hearing and speech, but you must make an alternate payment, something relating to sound.”

“And what might that be?”

“That, young man, is for you to figure out. I cannot say.”

“Before I make any decision, what might happen if I were to die? Would the villagers regain their lost abilities then?”

The mage stared at Tysten. “Don’t you think that’s a drastic alternative? If your parents were here right now, they would not agree with that approach. They sacrificed a great deal for you, you know? But to answer your question, I simply don’t know what would happen. Something, maybe nothing.”

“So, I guess my only question is this. Do I need to decide now, or can I think about it, perhaps wait until I can discuss it with my parents?”

“Normally, I would say no. But this is a unique situation, and I admire your courage. So, I will write down the spells and instructions on how to recite them. You can take these with you. Give me an hour or two to prepare the note.”

“Thank you so much. I am most grateful.”

The mage hobbled off across the room to his desk, searched for a blank piece of parchment, then sat down to write.

When finished, he said to Tysten, “Now you must follow these instructions exactly as I have written them. And if you decide on the second option, what you offer the spell in exchange for the payment it has already extracted must be of greater value than what it has already collected.”

“I understand,” answered Tysten.

“Now go. And may the magic be kind to you.”

SEVEN

As Tysten walked along the southern shore of the Great River, he contemplated the choice the mage had given him. It would certainly be easier to simply use the spell to reverse what had been done. There would be no need to find an alternate payment to the original spell, payment the spell might find more desirable than the hearing and speech of those in the village. And what would that even be?

As the White Sea and the place where the trail turned south loomed closer, he grew tired and decided to stop and rest. He took off his pack and sat down, leaning against the trunk of a large tree. Then he heard what he assumed to be music, very faint at first. Not being familiar with music, he wasn’t sure what to make of it. But it crept into his being, calming him, coaxing him to search for the source of its pleasing melody.

He followed the trail for a short distance to a smaller side path leading into a clearing. There were two red brick chimneys in its center, and the inner surface of each wore the black stain of a fire. Fresh spring grass swayed in the early afternoon breeze and covered the ground all around the chimneys. Flowers of reds, purples, yellows, and blues peppered the pasture. Long strands of a wild species of ivy hung from the top of each chimney, anchored in some unknown reservoir of moisture and nutrients.

“Hello?” Tysten called out. The music stopped.

A gentle, reassuring voice replied from somewhere in the tall grass. A curious creature three feet tall appeared, with glistening wings on its backside, all dressed in green, and holding some sort of musical instrument in his arms.

“Hello. My name is Morningstar. I’m a water fairy, a sea sprite. Perhaps you know of me if you’re from the village of Morning Song. I fly out to the edge of the ocean every morning, wave goodbye to the stars as they leave the sky, and follow them as they

work their way around the world before returning here, spending my days chasing butterflies and playing music.”

“Yes,” replied Tysten, surprised. “Our village sings the Morning Song each morning as we watch the Morning Star set over the edge of the White Sea. Except no one has been singing the Song for the past week or two, not since they lost their ability to hear and speak.”

“I wondered why they stopped their ritual,” said Morningstar. “I always so enjoy hearing the Song, and I always send them a bit of my magic each and every day as my way of saying thank you. So, do you know how this happened?”

“I do,” Tysten said. “It is because of me.”

“You? Really? Why would that be?”

Tysten sat down in the grass with the water fairy and shared how he had been born without the ability to hear or speak, how his father learned of the Mage Amarach, their trek to the mage’s tower, and the spell which created the current dilemma. He explained his decision to seek out the mage’s help a second time and the choice he was now facing.

“I savor the sounds now that I can hear,” Tysten admitted. “And I love the songs the birds sing, the rustling of the leaves the wind brings, and the crashing of the ocean waves. But how can I enjoy these things knowing I’ve caused everyone in my village to lose the very thing I’ve gained.”

“Seems as though the second choice the mage gave you would be the way to go,” suggested Morningstar.

“Yes, I know. It would be wonderful to keep my new gifts and for everyone else to regain what they’ve lost. But what do I have to offer the spell that it would find more valuable than what it already has? The only thing I can think of is my own hearing and speech.”

“So,” said the water fairy, “what might be greater than your hearing and speech? How about you?”

“What do you mean?”

“Your ears and your mouth are only a part of what makes you whole. What if you were to offer a bigger part of yourself? Like, for instance, your heart.”

“My heart?”

“Oh, I don’t mean your actual heart. No, no. What I mean is give something of what is in your heart. Something like gratitude, for example. Or love.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand,” said Tysten. “How can one give gratitude or love?”

“Because you have spent your entire life unable to hear, you have yet to appreciate the power of music and its ability to communicate emotions, both through the notes of the song and the words sung with the notes. Just for fun, sometimes I will hide lyrics in the songs a babbling brook sings as it flows along. Other times I place notes in the leaves of the trees or the clouds overhead. Some folks say that if they listen very carefully, they can hear the songs nature plays for them.”

Tysten pondered what Morningstar said. “You know, until I heard your music just now, I didn’t know anything could be so beautiful. Perhaps you’re right.”

“May I play for you one of my favorite songs? Then maybe you might begin to understand,” offered the water fairy.

“I would like that.”

The little creature retrieved his harp and began to pluck its strings. After a brief introduction, he began to sing. Tysten did not recognize the words because Morningstar sang in a language older than the hills and the woods. But it didn’t matter. Tysten closed his eyes and focused on how the music made him feel.

After several minutes, Morningstar stopped singing and playing and set the harp down in the grass. “Now, then. How did that make

you feel?”

“Oh my! It was wonderful! I feel so good, so warm inside! The song gave me some sort of energy!”

“There. You see? That is a thing the spell might find to be more valuable than what it took from the villagers. What if you were to share your sense of the gratitude you feel from gaining your hearing and speech? What if when you return to your village, you lead the Ritual of the Morning Song?”

“But I have never sung a song before. I have never written a song before, for that matter. So, how will I know what to do? I simply don’t have any experience with this sort of thing, you know?”

Morningstar hung in the air, fluttering his wings. “May I teach you a few things about music and singing?”

Tysten nodded his enthusiastic approval. “Oh, please! That would be a big help!”

For the next few hours, the water fairy taught Tysten all about melodies and harmonies, verses and choruses, and chords and rhythms. He even shared his harp with Tysten so he might practice what he had just learned.

When they were done, Tysten said, “I had no idea music could be so ... so complicated!”

“But that’s what makes it so interesting,” explained Morningstar. “There are an infinite number of ways to arrange notes and rhythms. It gives the composer a lot of tools to use when creating a new song. And that’s what you can now do when you get home.”

“Oh, thank you! Thank you so much for teaching me all of this! And thank you for giving me the confidence to lead my village in the Ritual of the Morning Song.”

“I’ll be listening for it. Goodbye! I need to go now!”

Morningstar flew up to the sky and disappeared among the clouds, leaving Tysten with the harp and a smile on his face.

EIGHT

Five days after Tysten set off for the mage’s tower, he returned to Morning Song. Several people working out in the fields saw him at a distance and ran to signal others of his return. In his absence, the town’s people relied on Zimri and Laya for help in learning sign language. The villagers were surprised how quickly the language came to them now that they depended on it for everything.

Tysten went straight to his family’s cottage. He opened the door and yelled excitedly, “Mother? Father? I’m back. Are you home?”

There was no answer. Tysten checked the garden to see if his parents were watering their tomatoes, then looked in the nearby field thinking they were picking ears of corn for dinner. But dusk soon came, and, still, he could not find his parents. Unable to think of any other option, Tysten left their house and made the short walk to the village where he saw a large gathering of villagers. He watched with horror as they silently shook their fists and pointed pitchforks at his mother and father.

Tysten’s father gestured frantically to the crowd. “Friends. We understand your anger. But we did not enter into this agreement knowing what the price of the spell would be. Had we known, we would have never agreed to its terms.”

There was more fist-shaking and waving of pitchforks.

Tysten approached the crowd, making his way through the gathering of people to stand by his parents, giving them a quick embrace before raising his hands, gesturing for calm to the angry villagers.

“Good friends,” Tysten signed. “I have just returned from another trip to seek out the counsel of the Mage Amarach. I have been given two options for correcting this situation. Tomorrow morning I will attempt to invoke a spell which will return your

hearing and ability to speak and allow me to keep what I have gained. However, if that spell does not work, I will invoke the second spell and sacrifice my newfound gifts for your benefit. Either way, you will once more be able to hear and speak.”

Anger still simmered in the eyes of many of the villagers. Tysten turned to his father and said, “Will you please go into the Town Hall and get some paper and a quill. I will write a simple message to the villagers asking that they appear on the hillside overlooking the sea tomorrow morning, as they used to do.”

Zimri quickly made his way to the Town Hall and returned with the requested items. He wrote down the message Tysten dictated, then held up the paper for all to see. As each villager read the message, they quieted down, lowered their pitchforks, and signaled their acknowledgment.

Tysten gestured, “Thank you.”

After most of the villagers left to return to their homes, Laya embraced her son, so happy for his safe return. “We are so proud of you. Come. Let’s go home, and I’ll fix us dinner while you tell us of your travels.”

NINE

Tysten, nervous, stood in the center of the hillside. He and his parents arrived early, an hour before the dawn bell would have normally rung. They waited patiently as the villagers arrived in groups of twos and threes.

Tysten gave his father a worried look and said, “What if all of the villagers don’t come? Will my plan work? I really don’t want to resort to the mage’s other option, giving up my abilities for everyone else.”

“I know,” Zimri replied, placing a reassuring hand on his son’s shoulder. “They will come. Have faith. And if they don’t, I’m prepared to return to town and coerce the stragglers to put down their work and make their way here.”

Tysten reviewed the song he planned on singing. The Morning Star shone brightly in the western sky, so he knew the water fairy was there, chasing the stars over the horizon, waiting for the Ritual of the Morning Song to begin.

Tysten looked around and noted a few people were missing but decided to start anyway, hoping the remaining villagers would soon arrive. He dismissed his growing anxiety about the performance with a quick laugh, realizing any errors with the Song would initially go unnoticed as no one would yet be able to hear.

He retrieved the piece of parchment with the spells and recited the second of the two spells precisely as instructed. Closing his eyes and focusing on the sound of the waves crashing on the shore beneath them, he felt his gratitude for the gift of hearing.

Gripping the harp Morningstar had given him, he plucked a string, then a second, and a third in the order the water fairy had shown him. The vibrations of the strings touched him, opened his mind, and prompted him to begin a chant, unsteady at first as it

proceeded from verse to chorus and back to verse again, Tysten felt his confidence grow. The warmth in his heart grew and spread to his arms and legs, then to every part of his body.

The Song grew stronger and stronger. He became aware of the harmonies his parents added as they joined in with him. With each successive verse, additional voices chimed in. New rhythms and counter-rhythms entered the soundscape, each opening like a spring flower illuminating the world with brilliant color. The Song, now loud and clear, no longer required accompaniment of the harp, so he stopped playing. Soon, all of the villagers were singing and clapping and dancing with arms outstretched and smiles on their faces.

When he opened his eyes again, he looked out over the waters of the White Sea at the Morning Star. It shone brighter as each new voice joined. Tysten felt the magic sent by the water fairy and savored it deeply. This was what he had been missing his whole life!

When the Morning Star dipped into the sea, the Song began to fade. So thankful for the return of their hearing and voices, the villagers laughed and hugged one another, rejoicing for the recurrence of the Ritual of the Morning Song and the warmth it brought to them.

Tysten looked around at everyone and whispered a silent thank you to the mage and to Morningstar for their help setting things right. Zimri and Laya embraced their son for a long time. One by one, the villagers stepped toward the young man to embrace him and welcome him to the world of sound and the joy of the Morning Song.



*Praise be to the dawn for its gift of light!
Praise be to the day for its gift of life!*

A Dream for a Dream



ONE

The Children didn't know their parents. In fact, they didn't know what parents were. They would dress themselves, tie their own shoelaces, and go to the schoolhouse every morning without anyone helping them. They did their chores after class without anyone telling them what to do. And they played in the yards and fields around their village without anyone reminding them not to get dirty or calling them home for dinner.

Every so often, a new Child would appear in their midst. No one questioned this because they had each, in their own turn, appeared in a similar manner. The Children would show the Newcomer where to eat, where to sleep, where to wash, and invite them to join in their games.

The older Children took responsibility for the more essential chores—managing the fields where wheat and corn grew, preparing the meals twice each day, teaching the younger Children how to read, and showing them how to repair the tools and equipment periodically requiring attention.

They all lived in little cottages, two Children per unit. Lar lived with Ali. Cay lived with Vio. Elo lived with Bea. Tha lived with Rik. And so on. Each cottage contained two comfortable beds with plenty of colorful quilts, some with reds and oranges and golds,

others with blues and greens and indigos. There were two chests for storing clothes and two wooden desks for studying. Two rocking chairs sat on the front porch of each cabin.

No one knew who built the cottages, constructed the furniture, or sewed the quilts. No one knew how long ago these things happened. Patches of rust grew on the outside fixtures, loose threads slowly unraveled from the quilts, and the rocking chairs made loud squeaks when one started rocking. But most things functioned well, and if not in need of immediate repair, attention shifted to more pressing tasks.

Life went on day after day, week after week, month after month. The Children were content, and that seemed to be all that mattered.

But just as a young Child would appear from time to time, an older Child would disappear. No one knew why or where the older Child would go. Powerless to do anything about it, the Children learned to accept these disappearances.

TWO

One morning as the Children gathered for their communal breakfast of oatmeal, strawberries, and wild honey, Cay, a young girl with straight blond hair and deep blue eyes, asked a question.

“Lar? A strange thing happened to me during the night.”

Lar redirected her attention from the kitchen to her friend. “Yes?”

“Well, it seemed like I was somewhere else, only I knew I was asleep. And other people were also there with me. They all looked different than us, though. Maybe they were older than us. I don’t know. I’ve never seen people who looked as old as they were.”

“Go on,” encouraged Lar.

“These people said they knew me. They all greeted me by name, except it was a different name. They took me by the hand and led me to a building. It might have been someone’s home. But there was something very familiar about it. It felt like I had been there before. It was very strange. What do you think happened?”

Lar took off her apron, came into the dining room, pulled over a chair, and sat next to Cay. “Dear One, you just had a dream.”

“What’s a dream?” asked Cay bewildered.

“A dream is like a story your mind tells you while you sleep. The stories can be about real things or people or imaginary things or people. Some dreams can make you feel happy; some can make you feel sad or even scared.”

“Have you ever had a dream?” asked Cay.

“Every once in a while,” answered Lar. “But if you ever have a dream that scares you, know that the dream is not real, and you will be okay.”

Cay thanked her friend, content with the explanation.

The following day Vio said she dreamed about a different house and people claiming to know her. Her description of the dream seemed very much like the description Cay gave the previous morning.

Then Elo and Rik reported similar dreams the next morning. Within a week, all of the Children had experienced at least one dream, and some even remembered having two or three. Lar finally decided to call a meeting that afternoon to talk about these dreams.

THREE

The little cottages in which the Children lived formed a big circle, with each building facing inward to the middle of the ring. In the center was a larger structure housing the kitchen, a dining room, and a meeting room used for all sorts of gatherings.

Once everyone found a seat, Lar stood up in front of the room. Quite tall for her age, she quickly commanded their attention.

“Now, we have all had at least one dream over the past week. All of the dreams involve other people and other places, both of which are familiar to us. I have thought about this and can’t help but wonder if these places are where we might have been before we came here, and the people were the people who cared for us.”

Lar noticed a lot of Children nodding in agreement. Bolstered by the group’s shared experiences, she continued. “We just can’t remember the days before we arrived here. All of us, I know, have wondered about this.”

She waited, acknowledging the silence following her remark, when Ana, one of the newest arrivals, raised her hand to speak.

“Yes, Ana?” said Lar.

“I’m scared,” expressed the young girl, shrinking back quickly into her seat. Several of the other Children piped in with their fears, as well.

Lar walked over to Ana and the others to give them comforting embraces. “Of course, you are. No shame in being a little scared. But together we will figure this out.”

Finally, after everyone had their say and all of the Children settled back into their seats, Lar announced her plan.

“So here’s what I think we should try the next time anyone has another dream. In your dream, ask these people who they are

and where you are. Let's see if we can get some answers. While we can't control these dreams, we might at least understand what we are dreaming about."

"But how do we do that? Can we really talk to people in our dreams?" asked Bea.

"I don't know. I think it's worth a try, though. If we can't, then we'll have to think of another idea, okay?"

The meeting adjourned, and the Children were excused to go back to whatever activity they had been doing.

FOUR

In the village surrounding the High King's Castle, lived the Adults. Most of the Adults worked at jobs with many responsibilities. Some were farmers, others were blacksmiths. Several managed shops selling all manner of things. Still others watched over everyone else's money. Many were parents and had babies. And some took care of those babies so the parents could go to work.

Their lives might have sounded idyllic, but this was not the case. Every time a Young One reached the age of four, they would disappear. No one knew why this happened or where the Young Ones went. With each disappearance, there ensued great weeping with passionate prayers asking for the return of the Young One. But none of the Young Ones ever returned, and so the Adults would attempt to fill the empty spaces in their hearts with another baby, knowing full well what the future held.

Because of the large community, not everyone knew everyone else. When a new person arrived, most people weren't aware of the Newcomer. Oddly enough, these Newcomers could not recall from where they came. Most of them could not even remember their names upon arrival. In fact, everyone in the community had been a Newcomer themselves at one time or another.

The managers who assigned the Newcomers occupations and living quarters also gave them new names, names such as Quarn, Janza, Bakka, Satha, and Jenir.

The Newcomers would gradually blend into the community, make friends, and sometimes even find a partner with whom they could share their life. Not long after their arrival, people no longer considered them to be Newcomers, but Adults, just like everyone else.

And the Newcomers eventually learned about how Young Ones would disappear at the age of four, a terrible and unforgiving

turn of events. But they came to accept this as how the life of an infant brought into the world would unfold and realized they had no control over such things.

FIVE

One morning all of the Children gathered in the dining room for their breakfast. Cay looked around the table. “Where’s Lar? She’s not here.”

Elo chimed in, “I wondered the same thing.”

“It’s not like her to forget about making breakfast for us,” added Tha.

“What if it was her time to leave us?” lamented Cay. “How are we going to do all of the things she did? Who will take care of us as she did?”

The Children discussed the situation and decided there wasn’t much they could do about it. They agreed to wait a while and see if Lar returned. Elo volunteered to prepare their morning meal. After they were finished, they all went about their assigned tasks, expecting Lar to return at any moment.



That very same morning in the village where the Adults lived, Satha awoke early with the echoes of a dream holding his consciousness hostage. Try as he might, he couldn’t shake it. It kept playing over and over again in his mind. His morning prayers eventually crowded out the images, giving him a modicum of peace.

Once out of bed, he went about his daily routine, fixing something to eat, getting dressed, and making lunch. When he stepped out of his front door to go to work, he realized he was no longer in front of his home but instead in a place he had seen in an earlier dream. But this dream felt different, somehow strangely real.

Satha did not report for his assigned duties that day. And since Satha was undoubtedly older than four, he would not have simply disappeared. No Adult had ever disappeared as far back as anyone

could remember.

Satha's coworkers were perplexed as he had never missed an hour of work, let alone an entire day. They reported his absence to their manager but found it difficult to keep their minds on their respective tasks the rest of the day, postulating about his whereabouts and concerned about his welfare.

SIX

Lar awoke that very same morning, not in her little room, but instead, standing in the middle of a meadow, filled with milkweed, hibiscus, and a cornucopia of colorful plants dotting the pasture in no apparent pattern. Their blossoms swayed in a gentle breeze. Hummingbirds darted back and forth between the plants with the brightest colors, collecting their fill of nectar, battling each other for the most prized blossoms. Groups of butterflies swarmed around the milkweed plants.

Lar looked up at the sky. Azure blue with the occasional fluffy white cloud scudding by unfettered.

"Where am I?" She asked her question out loud, not expecting an answer and not getting one. "Everything is so ... beautiful."

"How did I get here?" Again, no answer.

Not knowing what to do, she sat down on a large, gray boulder and began to inspect her surroundings more carefully. She noticed a footpath leading from the boulder up a gentle slope to a large oak tree several hundred feet away. A person sat under the tree but was too far away for her to determine who it might be or anything about them. After a few minutes, Lar decided to follow the path up the hill. The person under the tree saw her coming and waved a greeting.

"Hello there!"

As Lar approached this person, she could see it wasn't a Child from her group and not even a Child at all. Thoughts of the dream described to her by Cay and the others came to mind. This person looked older, perhaps what a boy might look like after many years. Lar did not know the word "man," so she labeled him "older boy." He had dirty blond hair and blue-gray eyes, a shade much different than her amber-colored eyes. He looked familiar. When he stood

up, he was most definitely taller than anyone she had ever seen.

“Hello,” Lar said. “Who are you?”

“My name is Satha. And you?”

“I am Lar. I am one of the Children,” she said with pride in her voice.

The man looked at Lar in a curious manner, then asked, “How old are you?”

“What do you mean? How would I know that?”

Satha asked, “Don’t you mark age by how many cycles you’ve traveled around the sun?”

“I’m not certain what you mean by cycles around the sun. Where I’m from, we do not mark the passage of time like that. It’s not a thing we have any interest in.”

“Hmmm.” Satha scratched his chin, not knowing what to make of her answer.

“Okay. Well, then. How did you get here?”

Lar shrugged her shoulders and replied, “I’m afraid I can’t answer that, either. I went to bed last night and awoke here this morning, not too long ago.”

Satha stared at Lar, noting the color of her hair and eyes, the features on her face. Because she was tall for a Child, he reckoned she might be someone in her late teenage years. Satha returned to his seat, wrapping his arms around his knees. Lar found a small, flat rock nearby and sat down. Satha’s glance followed her as she got comfortable.

“Can I ask you some questions,” asked Satha, “questions about you?”

“Okay.”

“Do you remember your early years? Do you remember your parents? Do you remember where you were born?”

“What are parents?”

“You mean you don’t know the word?”

“No.”

“Well, let me think for a minute,” Satha replied.

“Okay,” he said, turning back to face Lar again. “Parents are the two people who can create a new life. A man and a woman meet, fall in love, take one another as their life-mate, and when they are ready, they give birth to a young one, a baby.”

“Baby? I don’t know that word either.” Lar continued impatiently without waiting for an explanation. “But to answer your questions, I do not remember my early years or those you call parents or where I was born. Did I say that right?”

“Yes. You did fine. And you probably wonder why I’m asking you these questions. But you remind me of someone I once knew, someone very special to me. Her name was Janna.”

At the mention of that name, Lar stared at Satha and uttered, “That name ...”

At that instant, a person materialized several feet in front of the pair, dressed in a gray cloak and leaning on a wooden staff.

Satha and Lar immediately stood and backed away from this person, not knowing his intentions. Defenseless, Satha commanded, “Please! Keep your distance! We mean you no harm!”

The stranger stood still, staring intently at Satha and Lar, his deep-shaded eyes studying the pair he had summoned, noting the close resemblance between the two. “I mean you no harm. I brought the two of you here because I know you have questions. And I will answer them as best I can.

“I am a conjurer, one who practices magic and can summon spirits,” began the strange being. “Some call me a Dreamkeeper because I can make the dreams of others come true, as I now hope to do for each of you. I have lived for hundreds of cycles around the sun.

“I want to begin by saying you and all of those with whom you live have suffered a great injustice. Adults and Children were never meant to be separated, and Children were never meant to forget their parents, to be alienated from them. And Adults were never meant to miss out on dozens of years with their Children.

“I want to tell you two a story, a story explaining why you are here now, why the Children live separately from the Adults, and why the Children cannot remember anything about their lives before appearing in the Whispering Woods.”

Satha and Lar relaxed and reclaimed their respective seats.

“Many, many years ago, I met a young lady. She had long black hair and mysterious eyes, and she was very beautiful. Her name was Ilsa. She was a sorceress, someone who could control minds and matter, someone who could change a person’s reality with just a word. After a time, I fell in love with her and agreed to live with her.

“It was then I discovered she had a dark heart and was only interested in me because of my ability to conjure up spirits and make dreams come true. I learned there was darkness inside her and that it was growing, so I knew I must take my leave from her. One evening, when she was out collecting herbs and roots, I left, traveling for three days and nights through woods and fields and over raging rivers before I stopped to rest. And though she tracked me throughout the surrounding land, she could never catch up with me, at least not initially.

“One day, after crossing the Norther Lands and making my way through the foothills of the Meherrin Mountains, I spotted a castle in the distance and decided it might be a good place to hide for a while. I met the King and Queen who ruled over those lands, a kingdom they called Imlay. After telling them my story, they invited me to stay and gave me shelter from Ilsa.

“As the days turned into weeks and the weeks into months, I had the occasion to meet their daughter, Allora, the Princess. She

had golden hair and ocean blue eyes and was quite striking and of pure heart. After a time, I asked the King for his daughter’s hand, and we were soon married. Several years later, we were blessed with the birth of a little girl we named Arianna. Her spirit was radiant, and her hair was as golden as her mother’s. The Princess and I loved our daughter dearly.

“Then, on the fourth anniversary of her birth, Ilsa appeared at the castle gate. With her charm, wit, and a magic spell, she manipulated the guards into believing she was an elderly woman needing help. They opened the gate for her. Once inside, she regained her true form. She went to the center of the courtyard, emptied out the contents of a vial into the fountain, and spoke a terrible spell over the water. In an instant, our precious daughter and every other child throughout the kingdom over the age of four disappeared.

“When we confronted Ilsa and asked what she had done with the Children, she laughed. In a shrill voice, she said they were now in another place and had no memory of us or their lives here. Then I watched her dissolve into a dark mist and vanish in the evening wind.

“I hurried to tell the King and Queen of the disappearance of their granddaughter and of all the Children of Imlay, that Ilsa sought revenge against me because I left her many years ago. I then told my beloved Allora of my plans to set out into the lands north of the Great River in search of the Children and that I would not return until I found them.

“I eventually did discover their whereabouts in a place known as the Whispering Woods. But Ilsa had created an impenetrable shield around their village, one my magic could not counter. I returned to the castle with news of my success in finding where the Children had been taken but also of my failure at breaking Ilsa’s spell.

“That all happened hundreds of years ago. The King, Queen, and my beloved Princess are now long dead. And ever since that terrible day, every Child in the kingdom who reaches the age of

four is magically taken away from their parents and their memories wiped clean.”

Lar looked sadly at the Dreamkeeper. “The Children where I live have all been having dreams recently. Are you telling me these dreams are about our parents and the homes we once knew?”

“That’s right. You see, Ilsa’s spell also took away the Children’s ability to dream. I suspect the return of your ability to dream is a sign Ilsa’s spells are beginning to weaken. My ability to bring you two here together is also an indication she is losing her control over me.

“And one last thing. Because of her magic, Ilsa has also lived hundreds of cycles around the sun. And even though her spell keeping Adults and Children separated is starting to fade, she is still powerful. She often uses her magic to change her appearance. I warn you to be careful. Anyone you come in contact with might be her in disguise.”

Satha, worried he might miss something, asked, “And how would we possibly know if someone really is this Ilsa in disguise? Is there some sort of sign we might look for?”

“No, unfortunately, there isn’t,” replied the Dreamkeeper. “I know this is a lot for each of you to take in. Your lives and the lives of those around you have unfolded without knowledge of why things are as they are. Today, I am giving you the gift of truth. But I do not have the power to bring all of the Adults and all of the Children here to this in-between place and give them all the same gift. That’s why I brought the two of you here. I need your help to bring an end to Ilsa’s spell. If everyone knows the truth, her spells will fade away.”

The Dreamkeeper reached into his leather pouch and produced two smooth gray stones, each the size of a person’s fist and with a single bindrune cut into one side.

“I need you both to take a Stone of Truth back to your

community. Then you must touch the forehead of everyone you encounter with the stone and utter the following incantation. ‘Know the truth of all things. It will set you free.’ Repeat this three times, and the person will come to know the truth as you now know it to be.”

The Dreamkeeper presented the stones, one in each hand. Satha and Lar reached out to accept them. The instant they touched the stones, the last truth yet unspoken about them burst forth. “Wait!” exclaimed Lar, whirling around toward Satha. “You are my father?”

Satha quickly slumped over, clutching his heart at the news.

“That’s right, dear friends,” explained the Dreamkeeper. “You are father and daughter.”

As the stunned parent and child reached out to embrace one another, their surroundings dissolved, each returning to their own beds, waking from their respective dreams with a Stone of Truth in their hand. The duty given to them by the Dreamkeeper luckily remained in their consciousness as did the knowledge of the loved one they had found and how things truly were.



EIGHT

“I just had the strangest experience,” said Satha, joining his wife in their kitchen. Jenir stood in front of the stove, reaching for the tea kettle as it started its whistle. She poured the steaming water into two identical mugs, each with tea leaves in a strainer and a spoonful of the local honey.

“Yes? Tell me about it,” Jenir said, curious as she sat down at the kitchen table, waiting for her tea to cool.

“Well, I think it was a dream, but I’m not really sure. There were two things about it I did not understand. First, there was a young girl. She said her name was Lar, but when I looked at her, she reminded me of Janna, only she was much older. She had dark auburn-colored hair and hazel eyes and was quite tall. I asked her about her parents, but she didn’t know the word ‘parents.’ She said she lived with a group of children. And as the dream ended, I learned the girl really was Janna.”

Satha took a reluctant sip of his tea, checking to see if it had cooled. Jenir stared at him with cold eyes in a manner he had never seen before.

“And the second thing you found unusual?”

“When I woke up, I had this stone in my hand.” He reached into the pocket of his robe and produced his Stone of Truth, turning it over with the bindrune facing up. “And there were two of them; this one and the one given to Janna.”

That’s odd, Satha thought. Jenir looks terribly uncomfortable.

Jenir put down her mug, shifted in her chair, and finally said, “What do you make of all of this?”

“I’m not sure. But I do know I was charged with an important task, and it involves using this stone.”

“Is there anything else you remember?”

“Someone else was in the dream or whatever it was. His name had something to do with dreams. Yes. He said his name was the Dreamkeeper.”

With the mention of that name, Jenir quickly rose to her feet backed away from the table, knocking over her chair. “You need to get rid of that stone now. It has evil in it.”

“Whatever are you talking about? The Dreamkeeper called it a Stone of Truth.”

Jenir continued to back away, holding her hands in front of her chest as if to shield herself from something terrible. “It is not a Stone of Truth! It is a Stone of Lies!”

Satha reluctantly returned the stone to his pocket. “Come and sit, my dear. This is only a rock. It can’t hurt you.” Jenir remained standing at the entrance to the kitchen, a pained look on her face. Satha again said, “Come and tell me why you called it a Stone of Lies.”

“No!” Jenir turned and ran through the living room to the front door, pushing it open and letting it bang shut behind her. Satha immediately stood and followed her, confused and questioning what was happening. *So strange*, he thought, *and so unlike Jenir*. He got to the door and looked out, but Jenir was nowhere to be seen.

Satha returned slowly to the kitchen just as his wife entered the kitchen, completely unaware of the previous events.

Jenir asked, “What was all of the commotion about? Who were you talking to?”

NINE

Lar lay in her bed thinking about her dream and wondering how she now possessed a Stone of Truth if her experience had truly been just a dream. None of it made sense. But she did understand the importance of doing what the Dreamkeeper asked of her.

Suddenly a bright flash of lightning slashed through her window accompanied by a loud crack of thunder. Everything in her little cottage shook and rattled for a brief instant.

She lay there for several minutes, waiting for the rain that usually followed such lightning and thunder. But the rain did not come. Worried, she clambered out of bed, dressed, and went to the door of her cabin. Thinking it odd there were no other Children outside, she began to walk around the community, calling out the names of the Children. No one answered.

“Elo? Bea? Is anybody here?” All Lar heard was the rustle of the nearby trees in the breeze. She went door to door checking all of the cottages. “Tha? Rik?” There were no responses.

She checked the meeting room, the kitchen, and the dining room. No one. The Dreamkeeper never warned her this could happen. She wasn’t sure what to do and realized she still had the Stone of Truth in her hand.

Muttering under her breath, Lar asked, “What good is a magic stone if I can’t use its power? And where are the other Children? How will I teach them what they need to know about their dreams if I can’t find anyone?”

A soft, scared voice answered her. Lar whirled around to see Cay peering up over one of the wooden barrels used to store rainwater.

“Lar? Where did you go? And where are all of the other Children?”

Lar motioned for Cay to come out from her hiding place. “Come and sit with me,” she said, walking toward the nearest front porch.

Cay looked to her right and then her left, still not confident it was alright to come out. When she noted Lar walking across the clearing without incident, Cay ran toward her as fast as her little legs would go. When she reached the bench, she huddled up close against Lar.

When Cay’s breathing slowed down, Lar asked, “What happened here?”

Cay started crying. “I was out in the far field collecting flowers for our tables when there was a terrible crack of thunder. I ran back to the courtyard where I saw someone who looked like an older girl.”

Lar started. “A woman? Older girls become women, and older boys become men.” After a short pause, she said, “Hmmm. I wonder if that woman was Ilsa. The Dreamkeeper did say she was still alive and might be dangerous.”

“Yes, yes! It was a woman! She had long white hair, and she was dressed all in black. She held up some sort of stick with a bright shiny rock at one end. When she brought it down and hit the ground with it, all of the Children who had come out to see what was going on froze. Then she walked around our village, touching each of them with her stick. And when she did that, each Child disappeared.”

Lar asked, “But she didn’t see you, and that’s why you’re still here?”

“I guess.” Cay pushed up against Lar again for comfort and reassurance.

“Now it is time for me to tell you my story and where I went.”

Lar told Cay about meeting Satha and the Dreamkeeper and

his tale about how the Children were separated from their parents and the woman who just made them vanish.

Cay’s voice was shaky when she asked, “So what do we do now?”

“I’m not sure,” replied Lar. She looked down again at the stone she held in her right hand. “The Dreamkeeper gave me a magic stone before sending me back here. I’m supposed to touch the forehead of each Child, and it will give them back their memories of their lives before coming here.”

“You mean like the things we’ve been dreaming about?”

“That’s right. Our dreams were, indeed, about where we lived before we came here and those who cared for us. The Dreamkeeper told us we started having those dreams because Ilsa’s spell is beginning to weaken. She can no longer prevent us from remembering our lives before we came here. And if everyone remembers the truth, then Ilsa’s spells will be broken.”

“Does that mean we might be able to go back to our homes?”

“I’m not sure. But for right now, let me restore all of your memories.” Lar held the stone to Cay’s small brow and recited the incantation three times as the Dreamkeeper had instructed. A smile grew across Cay’s young face as she learned about all of the things which had been hidden from her.

TEN

Satha was confused. He had just watched a person who he had assumed was his wife act strangely, get up and leave the house, and then disappear. And yet, now, here stood his wife without the slightest clue of what had just happened. In an instant, he remembered the Dreamkeeper's warning about someone named Ilsa and her ability to take on any form she wished. A shiver traveled along his spine. Fingering the stone in his pocket, he got up and walked over to where his wife stood.

Jenir asked, "Why are there two mugs of tea? Who was here with you?"

Without answering, Satha placed the stone on his wife's forehead and recited the incantation three times. When he was done, Jenir shuddered, feeling out of sorts from the experience. She then said: "Now I understand! You found Janna? And she didn't remember us or her own name until this Dreamkeeper worked his magic?"

"That's right. She introduced herself as Lar. It has me thinking that maybe our other daughter might also be in this village where the Children live." Jenir's eyes widened with the knowledge her daughters were alive. She smiled at Satha and said, "How about I make some fresh tea, and you can tell me about your time with Janna and this Dreamkeeper person."



Once Satha finished his story, his wife asked, "So how is it that we are going to spread the truth about things throughout the entire village? There is only one stone, and there are so many people."



"A good question. I'm thinking we should invite our closest friends and family to come and visit us, one by one. After that, there would be at least a dozen folks who know about the spell cast by Ilsa. They can help to spread the word without the Stone. People will likely think the story to be fantasy at first. But I will do my best to use the power of the Stone to convince everyone of the truth. Then we will see what happens."

"Sounds reasonable. But what about our daughter, Janna? Or what did you say she called herself? Lar?" Jenir asked with tears of happiness welling up in her eyes.

"If she is doing the same thing we are going to do, then all of

the Children should regain their memories of us and our homes. Then all we need to do is find out where these Whispering Woods are and rescue them.”



The next day Satha reported back to work. His coworkers, curious about why he had missed a full day of work, pummeled him with questions. He gave only short answers, offering only a fictitious explanation he had felt ill.

But at the end of the day, he invited them to join him at the local tavern for a pint of ale, saying he had an important story to tell. Everyone accepted his offer. Once drinks were ordered and served, Satha began his tale about where he had been the day before.

“I’m not sure I’m buying this story,” said a hesitant Quarn.

Then Flora spoke. “Can you show us this Stone of Truth you mentioned?”

Satha reached into his coat pocket and produced the Stone. He then placed it on Quarn’s forehead, recited the incantation three times, and removed the talisman.

“I don’t know what that thing did to me,” said Quarn, overwhelmed with what he learned. “But according to this truth of which you speak, we all, at one time or another, spent years away from here at this Whispering Woods and have no memory of our earlier years. This explains so much.”

Satha looked at Flora and accepted her unspoken invitation to touch her with the stone. After regaining her memories, she spoke, “Oh, my goodness! Why would someone purposefully inflict so much pain and heartache on everyone for so long? This Ilsa person sounds so evil.”

The others there marveled at the return of long-lost memories to Quarn and Flora by the Stone of Truth and asked Satha to repeat the process for them. Afterward, they all talked about what they

had learned and compared notes. Some were curious to know if they were related or if they had been in the Whispering Woods at the same time.

Satisfied, Satha reclined in his chair, confident they would all go home and tell their family and friends about their experience. Before they finished their pints, Satha thanked them for coming and being willing to listen to the story. Then he said, “If any of your family and friends wish to be touched by the Stone of Truth, please tell them to let me know, and I will pay them a visit.”

Over the next several weeks, word about Satha’s experience and how one could regain lost memories spread like wildfire throughout the community. Eventually, memories returned for all of the townspeople.

ELEVEN

After the encounter with Satha and Lar, the Dreamkeeper returned to his cottage, not far from the Whispering Woods. He stoked the fire, added more firewood, put water in a kettle, and hung it over the fire. After it boiled, he poured a cup of green tea and went to sit in front of the fireplace.

He felt uneasy about placing so much of his plan in the hands of Satha and Lar. *Will they be able to convince people of the truth? Of course, they will. The Stones of Truth will not fail,* he thought with half a smile. But what about Ilsa? How could he stop her from creating more pain, perhaps even defeat her for good?

He knew this whole unfortunate situation started because of his decision to pursue her, back before he understood the true color of her heart. Had he ignored her and not started a relationship, this might all have been avoided. Every time he had these memories, he came to the same conclusion. *It was my fault the Children do not know their parents, memories were lost, and dreams foiled! My fault! And if that is so, shouldn't it be me that pays the price for my bad decision? Shouldn't I be the one making a sacrifice for the good of everyone else?*

What if I go to Ilsa and offer myself to her? She wants to bring me pain. If she has me as a prisoner, she can hurt me as much as she wants. But I think she also wants my power to conjure up spirits and make people's dreams come true. What if I rid myself of those abilities before our encounter?

Convince her to trade my life and my powers for the lives and memories of Adults and Children? Will she follow through on her end of the bargain and recant all of her spells? How will she react after discovering I no longer have the powers she covets? How will she react when she realizes she has been tricked? Can I trust her to revoke her miserable spells?

The Dreamkeeper retrieved his Book of Spells and looked for an incantation which would remove his ability to conjure spirits and make dreams come true. After several hours of study, he found what he was looking for and memorized the passage. When he was convinced he could recite it perfectly, he left his cottage and went looking for Ilsa.

TWELVE

After searching for several days, the Dreamkeeper found Ilsa as she crossed a desolate landscape. Above the two solitary figures hung a dreary sky, full of clouds gray and restless. No shred of green or blue could be seen anywhere. The air pressed heavy, chill, and damp.

“So,” began Ilsa, “after all of these years, you have come to do battle with me. You’ve not endured enough pain?”

“Oh, pain I have endured,” said the Dreamkeeper in a slow, purposeful voice. “You have taken from me the one thing I held most dear ... my daughter.” He let the echo of his words die out, then continued, “She is now long gone. But your thirst for revenge is not. Perhaps it is time to end this.”

Ilsa laughed. “Whatever do you mean? Do you think I will lift one finger to stop the suffering you are feeling? In case you haven’t been paying attention, I am out to make your pain last until the day of your final breath.”

“I know,” he sighed. “That’s why I have come to make you an offer. You want to punish me for leaving you. You want to steal my power from me, twist my abilities for your own evil purposes. And I want to return all of the Children to their parents. I want each of them to be able to recall their memories of one another.

“So, I am willing to make you a deal, a trade. I will give you my life in return for the lives of the Children and their Parents. A dream for a dream, so to speak. Your selfish desires have caused too much suffering for too many people, and I can no longer stand by and watch. No. I’m here to give you what it is you want. Me.”

Ilsa laughed again, only this time her laughter was even shriller. “Whatever makes you think I want you?”

“It’s no secret. You pretended to offer me love so you might gain access to my abilities to conjure up spirits and control the

dreams of others. I was just never sure what spirits you wanted to contact or whose dreams you wanted to control. But no matter.

“Recently I have sensed your power to keep the Children separated from their parents to be waning. They are starting to dream again and are regaining their memories of their homes and their parents. After all of these years, the strain on your power is finally taking its toll, and for the first time, I have been able to undo some of your spells.”

Ilsa stood motionless, unwilling to accept the Dreamkeeper’s offer. The chill wind blew around her, blowing her hair this way and that. “How do I know you are not tricking me?”

“You know I am speaking the truth. If I know you and how desperate you are to cause me pain, I would guess you’ve already been to the village where the Adults live and to the Whispering Woods where the Children live and done something to bolster the power of your fading spells and to keep Adults and Children apart. Am I right?”

Ilsa said nothing, didn’t move, and stood frozen like a statue. The Dreamkeeper watched her for a moment or two, then approached her, touching the back of his hand to her cheek, a cheek which was ice cold. He didn’t know in that instant that all of the Adults and all of the Children now understood the truth of how things were. And it was that truth that broke all of Ilsa’s spells.

The Dreamkeeper slowly unclamped Ilsa’s hand from her staff, lifting her stiff fingers one by one. He then took the staff, turned it upside down, and smashed it hard into the rocky ground.

Much like the ripples in a pond when one casts a stone into its water, waves caused by Ilsa’s counterspells flowed out across the Kingdom of Imlay, washing over its villages and the Whispering Woods. In that instant, everyone’s memories were restored: memories from their early childhood and memories from the time the Children spent away from the Adults. And all of the Children Ilsa

had made disappear were returned to the village around the High King's Castle, as were Lar and Cay.

The Dreamkeeper bid the woman he once loved farewell, leaving her frozen body standing in the middle of the barren landscape. He returned to his cabin deep in the woods, not worrying about Ilsa's wrath for the first time in three hundred years. *Perhaps I will sleep a peaceful sleep this night. Perhaps I might dream peaceful dreams.*

THIRTEEN

Lar and Cay woke up at the exact same instant. They looked around at the bedroom neither had seen in years. Everything was exactly as it was the last time they had been here—the curtains hanging on the windows, the bedspreads on their beds, and the stuffed animals sitting on the shelves above their beds. Then they looked at each other through their sleepy eyes and giggled, relief in their laughter. Their memories of life with their parents, Satha and Jenir, of their house, of the fields where they played and picked flowers, had returned. And they now knew they were sisters, though they had never known one another in this house, as Cay had been born after Lar had already disappeared.

They both threw back the covers, clambered out of their warm beds, found their slippers, and dashed off to their parents' bedroom. They scrambled onto the high bed and began jumping up and down until their father and mother opened their eyes.

Cay, now breathing heavily from all of her jumping, asked, "When are you sleepy heads going to get out of bed?"

"Maybe in a while," smiled Satha. "I just want to lie here and savor this moment. Both of my wonderful daughters have returned. My dreams have come true. I am so proud of each of you. From what I understand, you Children did quite a great job taking care of each other while you were gone."

Cay looked at Lar, thanks in her eyes.

Lar smiled back, *you're welcome.*

"Now, then. How about you girls go and make us some breakfast?"

Aurora's Ring



ONE

Aurora lived in a time of magic, the world still filled with mythical creatures great and small, dragons and fairies, some good, some bad. But most folks didn't much care for magic. Most were simple farmers living happy lives, managing fields and orchards, growing vegetables and fruits, and raising animals, all so their families had enough food to eat. Aurora lived on one such farm in the Kingdom of Imlay along with her father and mother and her brothers and sisters. All of the animals were her friends, and she knew the names of every plant and flower in the nearby countryside by heart.

A young maiden of seventeen years, she had light-brown hair falling to her shoulders, bright hazel eyes often flaring with mischief and mystery, and an impish smile. Certain their daughter would mature into a beautiful, intelligent woman, her parents worried her spirit of adventure might outweigh any interest in settling down and marrying a young man.

Each day after Aurora and her siblings finished their chores, they would ride horses out to explore the fields and woods surrounding their farm. On one particular day, her chores done early, and not wanting to wait for her brothers and sisters to complete their assigned tasks, Aurora went out for a walk to her favorite meadow to collect a bouquet of flowers for her mother. A waxing afternoon moon looked down on her as she strolled along the well-trodden path, with fields full of springtime blossoms on each side, lilac and

lemon yellow, bright ocher and indigo. She bent down to pull up a bunch of especially colorful daisies when a golden ring fell out from the dirt, still clinging to the flower's roots.

Now Aurora had heard tales told about magic rings lying buried for ages, only to be discovered by some unlikely individual. The rings possessed great power and thrust the poor souls who found them into the middle of great battles. Aurora's imagination came alive as she broke the ring loose from the tangled roots. She wiped away all the dirt and placed the band on her ring finger. But too big there, she tried it on her middle finger—and it fit perfectly. She held up her hand to the sunlight and admired the golden glint reflected off the ring. "What a treasured find," she said, smiling.

Hmm, she mused. I wonder if this particular ring has any magical powers.

After a moment, she commanded, "Ring, make me stronger."

A minute went by. *I don't feel any stronger.*

Then she said, "Ring, make me smarter."

Another minute went by. *I don't feel any smarter.*

Aurora looked at the ring and lamented, "Well, little ring, I know there's magic in you. That much I can feel. I just have to figure out how to unlock it. And I have to find out what power you might grant me."

She took the ring off her finger, wrapped it in her bandanna, and placed it securely in the pocket of her overalls. She retrieved all of the flowers she had picked earlier and retraced her path home as the first quarter moon began dipping down toward the horizon.



Aurora decided to keep the discovery of the golden ring a secret from her family, at least until she knew if it harbored any magical powers, fearful of the relentless teasing she would no doubt receive from her siblings. Every time she was away from the farm, she would slip on the ring. And each time she did, she imagined some new power she might ask the ring to grant her.

“Ring, make me bigger.”

Nothing.

“Ring, make me smaller.”

Nothing.

“Ring, give me the power to change my shape at will.”

Still nothing.

But deep down inside, Aurora believed this ring could understand her, and so she kept trying to uncover its power whenever she had the chance.

TWO

Galabraith was a young man just shy of his twentieth birthday and quite strong from the demanding work on his father's farm. He passed the hours while tilling fields, harvesting grain, and tending to the animals with dreams of exploring the world beyond the farm's borders.

On one warm spring day, he was plodding along behind one of the farm's many workhorses and guiding a plow through untilled soil, when the plow's blade struck something different than the normal offending stone. But this didn't feel like a rock. It didn't sound like a rock. It sounded metallic. He commanded the horse to stop, set the reins aside, knelt down on his knees, and began to dig with his hands.

As he dug deeper into the ground, a long blade and the hilt of a sword appeared. Astonished, he lifted the sword from its resting place. *This must have been the talisman of some great warrior from long ago!*

Galabraith tucked the sword in his belt, retrieved the reins, and signaled the horse with a command to continue on its path to the end of the field. Up and back he went, all the while imagining a myriad of scenarios explaining how this beautiful sword had found its way to the farm.

That evening, after bedding down his horse, Galabraith walked the short distance from the barn to the house he shared with his aging father.

“Is that you, my son?” called out the old man from the sitting room.

“Yes, father, it is me. Give me a minute to wash my hands, and I will join you by the fire. I found something extraordinary today and wish to show it to you.”

Galabraith gently wiped away the remaining clumps of encased dirt. Little by little, the hilt began to shine through, revealing words engraved along the blade in a language he did not understand. When the sword was unsullied, Galabraith carried it into where his father sat.

“Look, father. Look at what I found today buried out in the middle of the northern field.”

The old man's shoulders slumped. “No,” he said simply.

“What do you mean?” asked the young man. “What's wrong?”

A tear ran down his father's face. “I thought I had rid myself of that blade once and for all,” he lamented.

“Whatever do you mean? Do you know this sword?”

“Oh, I very much did know it years ago,” replied the old man.

“I am sorry, father. I didn't mean to cause you any angst.”

“No, of course, you didn't. But then again, I have never shared a very painful tale from my younger days ... the story of how I lost your mother.”

“Mother? What does she have to do with this blade?” Galabraith was perplexed.

“Many years ago when you were a small infant, a great dragon flew down from the wastelands far to the north. When he came, he stole our cattle to feed his gluttonous appetite. He set fire to our homes and our fields. One day when the warning bells rang out in the village, I ran to retrieve my sword and shield. No sooner had I left our house than the evil creature landed next to our barn.

“I charged at him with the blade you hold in your hand, but this dragon let loose a stream of flame at me. My shield spared me from serious injury, but in the next instant before I could strike the beast, he let out a second stream of flame at our house before flying away. You and your mother were inside. I was able to save you, but your mother ... your mother,” he sobbed.

Every time Galabraith had ever asked his father what had happened to his mother, he was met with only silence.

His father continued. “I couldn't save her.” He repeated, “I could not save her.”

“I am so sorry, father. I am glad to finally know what happened to my mother. But how did the sword come to rest in our field?”

“I rebuilt our home. I rebuilt the barn. And I managed to start growing crops and raising animals again. But it was never the same without your mother. Never the same. Every time I saw that sword, it reminded me of your mother and how I was unable to save her. So I buried it because I couldn't bear the memories anymore.” The old man stared into the flames dancing in the fireplace.

“If I might ask, father. There are runes engraved along the blade. Do you know what they say?”

“I do. The sword is not an ordinary sword. It was crafted long ago by the Nainish, a group of folks short of stature living on the eastern slopes of the Meherrin Mountains. They are known to infuse magic spells into the blades they forge. The inscription on this particular blade says, ‘fight fire with fire.’ Something, of course, I was never given the chance to do.”

“What would you like me to do with the sword? Should I go and bury it again?”

“No, my son, let's not rebury it. I should never have buried it along with your mother's story. I am so sorry. There will be a day when that evil creature returns, and we—you—must be ready. Hopefully, it's not too late for you to become familiar with the handling of such a weapon.”

Galabraith, taken aback at the daunting task, looked at the sword and his father, with new respect. “Wait, father. You mentioned a shield that protected you from the dragon's flames. Wouldn't I need it as well if I am to fight this creature?”

“Yes. Tomorrow morning, go out into the barn and climb the ladder to the loft. There in the back corner beneath a tarp, you will find the shield.”

The two sat in front of the fire for some time: the father mulling over things long past, the son imagining things the future might hold.

“There is one more thing,” said the old man. “There is a legend about that dragon. It says he will return when the wandering stars are aligned with the moon. You know I have not been out much at night lately. How are the wanderers?”

Galabraith closed his eyes and said softly, “They are aligning themselves now.”

THREE

Echoes of the dawn bell reverberated off the cold walls of the High King's Castle, stirring King Mathirion from his restless sleep and his dreams of doom, dread, and darkness. The dreams showed glimpses of his knights, dozens of them lying dead, with the earth beneath them stained a deep red. He saw the valleys of his great kingdom barren, burned, utterly without any of the green he so loved.

The worst part of the dreams, though, was finding his Queen gone. The King quickly looked across his bed and saw Queen Fiorra sleeping peacefully. *Thank the Gods*, he whispered. *It was only a dream.*

He dressed as quickly as he could and made his way to his study. He called upon his chamberlain and asked him to send a message to Mage Amarach. “Tell him I had a dream, and tell him I need to know what it meant,” he instructed his servant.

At high noon, a black crow landed on the highest rampart of the High King's Castle. Once it landed, it changed its form, becoming an old man with long white hair and beard, dressed in a dark robe, and holding a crooked staff. The man found his way down through the circular stairways and knocked on the door to the King's study.

“Come in, mage,” the King called out. “I can always tell it's you by your knock.”

“Ah, yes, Your Majesty. And you always say that to me when I appear.”

“So I do. So I do.”

“Now then,” said the mage, shifting his stance, leaning on his staff to steady himself, “what's this about a dream? Tell me of it.”

“When I awoke this morning, I remembered having a most terrible dream,” began the King. “In it, Queen Fiorra had been taken away. Then I saw the entire kingdom scorched, all of the

green burnt away. And finally, I saw my knights, all of them, I think, all lying dead on the ground. I don't know who did these things. I only recall black wings flying high on the morrow's wind. I need to know anything you might be able to tell me about this dream."

The mage slowly eased himself down in one of the two arm-chairs in front of the fireplace. "You know my specialty is casting spells. But I do have some experience with dreams. A tricky thing, they can be. One never knows whether they are fanciful visions or the foretelling of things to come." He paused and then, looking directly at the King, repeated, "One never knows."

"So far, my good wizard, you have not told me anything that is of any help."

"My apologies, Your Majesty. Tell me, you made reference to black wings flying on the morrow's wind?"

"I did."

"I wonder if that might not be the dragon who was imprisoned in its lair many years ago. It is foretold he might one day awaken, escape his bondage, and seek to take vengeance upon those who imprisoned him. The wanderers are aligning with the crescent moon. Such a sign in the night sky might suggest it could happen soon."

"But the dragon was locked away twenty years ago! And we didn't do that, our parents did!" The King demanded, "Why would the dragon come after us?"

"The dragon doesn't much care which man he harms. Men imprisoned him, and it will be the children of those men he seeks out. And there is another thing you must know. If the dragon really has awakened, your dream may well have foretold the future. A dragon's dark magic is potent and can radiate outward to place fear in the hearts of those he seeks to harm."

"I called upon you because if this dream is giving me a glimpse into future events, then my greatest concern is for my Queen. It may

well have been the dragon who stole her away in my dream. I'm not certain I could go on without my Queen at my side. No more golden evenings together, no more dancing under the moonlight," the King lamented. "I guess what I need to know now is what preparations I must make so these awful things don't happen?"

"It is fortunate I brought my crystal ball with me this day. If you give me a moment, I will see if it might show us some hint of events to come." The mage removed the orb from his cloak, held it in his left hand, chanted several spells over it, and made motions with his right hand to awaken its magic.

After several minutes, the mage said, "The mist is beginning to clear. I see a young maiden ... and I see a bold young knight. They are standing by the lifeless form of the dragon. There is a great gash across its head. Then I see them leading your Queen out from the Dragon's Door, returning her here to your castle."

"Oh, thank you for your mastery of the magical arts. It is so appreciated. I must now find this maiden and this knight. And I will redouble the guard around the Queen in case these events play out."

"Wise actions, sire. It may well be these events happen before tomorrow's morning sun."

"Then no rest shall there be until preparations are made!" The King dismissed his mage and searched out his knights to give instructions.

While the two men talked in the King's study, the Queen awoke, stretched out her arms, and rose to dress herself. She looked out the window to a beautiful day without a cloud in the sky.

I think I shall take a quick walk along the castle wall before going down to breakfast.

She scaled the spiral staircase out onto the southern parapet. While looking out at the farmlands surrounding the castle, a loud rushing of wind sounded behind her, a sound like the beating of a drum. Before she could turn to address the commotion, sharp

talons found their way around her waist. Without missing a beat of its wings, a fearsome black dragon lifted her off the wall and flew northward to its lair.

The Queen, air knocked out of her, managed only a short, muffled gasp of pain which went unheard, even by the closest guards patrolling the castle walls.

After the mage left the castle, the King returned to his bed chambers to wake the Queen. When he didn't find her there, he went off in search of her. None of the servants reported seeing her leave her room. It wasn't long before he realized the dream had indeed been a foretelling of future events.

"I must find this maiden and this young knight with all due haste!"

FOUR

Soon after Galabraith discovered the long-buried sword, learned the story of his mother's demise, and retrieved the shield, his father breathed his last breath and joined the spirits of those long departed. *It is time to avenge my mother's death, to fight fire with fire*, thought the young man.

After completing the summer season's planting, he left the farm in Anûthdir in the hands of a family friend and set off for the High King's Castle, several day's journey to the northwest, certain someone there must know where to find the dragon's lair.

After traveling for two days, he came across a large farm with numerous fields of newly planted grain. Looking for hay and water for his horse, he stopped and knocked on the farmhouse door. Aurora's father answered, always willing to help a stranger.

While placing hay and water before the horse, Aurora's father queried, "And where might you be headed, stranger?"

"Hearsay is an old dragon might be on the loose again, attacking villages to the north. I'm betting the High King is looking for able-bodied men to help rid the land of the beast," explained Galabraith. "Perhaps I might lend my assistance."

"A noble errand. But how do you expect to fight a creature who can fly and breathe fire?"

"An appropriate question, kind sir," replied the young man. He walked over to his horse, opened a long leather bag, pulled out his sword, and handed it to the farmer.

"This sword was forged by the Nainish and is filled with their magic spells," said Galabraith with pride. "It once belonged to my father."

"An exquisite blade if I've ever seen one," observed Aurora's father inspecting the talisman.

When his horse ate its fill of hay and quenched its thirst, Galbraith thanked the farmer, mounted his steed, and gently squeezed it with his legs, signaling it to move forward. As he was leaving the barnyard, he noticed a young woman standing on the farmhouse porch. He smiled, tipped his bycocket hat, and gave a courtly wave with his hand. *What a beautiful young woman! If I survive my quest, I may have to return here and meet this fair maiden.*

Down the lane toward the High King's Castle he rode, his heart filled with her image while humming a tune about Venus and Mars.

Aurora had overheard the discussion between her father and the handsome young man. *Perhaps my ring and its magic might aid the King in the battle with the dragon. If I could just figure out how to use it.*

Over the next week, she snuck away whenever she could, determined to discover the secret power of the ring.

"Ring, grant me the power to shoot fire from my fingertips."

Nothing.

"Ring, grant me the power to change stones into gold."

Nothing.

"Ring, grant me the power to fly like the birds."

Still nothing.

Frustrated, she lay down in the grass of her favorite meadow and began to watch the clouds float by. The warmth of the sun on her face and the songs of the birds in the nearby trees slowly worked their way into her heart. "This is all so beautiful. I guess maybe this old ring doesn't have any power in it after all. Oh, but still," she looked again at the beauty around her. "Still, I wish the sun could stand still."

At that instant, the sun's warmth vanished. The birds ceased their chatter. And the clouds stopped their meandering across the sky. Aurora looked at her ring again. *What just happened? What*

did I say to make time stand still? Was it the word "wish"?

Worried, Aurora prayed she could undo what she had just done, so she ordered, "Ring, I wish for time to start again." Immediately birds started chirping again, and the clouds continued their trek across the sky. She could feel the breeze blowing through her hair.

"So," she said gleefully, "the ring needs me to state my request as a wish, just like Mama taught me to say 'please' when I want something." Aurora happily repeated the process of stopping and restarting time again. *Yes! I've done it!* She wrapped the ring in her bandanna and headed home, excited she had finally tapped the ring's power.

The following morning, she lay in bed for a good long while, thinking about how she might sneak away from the farm to find this young man and help him search for this dragon. After finishing all her chores that afternoon, she hurried back to the bedroom she shared with her siblings, making certain they were all out exploring the nearby woods, so she might test the ring by stating her previous requests in the form of wishes. But none of the powers she suggested to the ring manifested themselves even when phrased as a wish.

If only I were outside right now instead of in this cluttered room. In her mind, she imagined being outdoors in her favorite meadow. "Ring, I wish for the power to create illusions." Instantly the bedroom wall transformed into the image of the field. The tall grass was blowing in the breeze, the clouds were rolling along, and butterflies were fluttering about.

Finally! Now I have both the power to stop and start time and the ability to create illusions. I can surely help this man in his quest to find the dragon with these powers. She commanded the ring to stop the illusion. The walls in her bedroom instantly returned to their original state.

Aurora started imagining where the young man might be and

without thinking said, "I wish I could catch up to this fellow." In the next instant, a barren wasteland greeted her. Stunned at the ring's power and unsteady on her feet, she saw a party of knights on their horses off in the distance.

Still disoriented and a little frightened, Aurora stood on the desolate hillside with a cold wind howling around her. *And so I have another power. I can go anywhere I want with a simple wish. She began to shiver. I need to return home and don some warmer clothes if this is where these knights are to battle this dreaded creature.*

"Ring, I wish to return home." The next moment she was back in her bedroom again; she heard her brothers and sisters returning from their late afternoon outing and quickly hid the ring. *I will have to figure out a way to sneak away from here without arousing too much suspicion.*

FIVE

Galabraith arrived at the High King's Castle the day after leaving Aurora's farm. There, he offered his service and that of his magic sword to the King. The King, impressed with the young man and his story about the sword, quickly knighted him. Galabraith gladly joined the large number of knights assembling at the castle, one hundred and fifty strong, figuring he had a much greater chance of avenging his mother if he was with so many seasoned warriors. There were knights from White Sea in the west to the villages east of Anúthdir. All had come answering the call of the King to fight this dragon and rescue the Queen.

The next day, the party of knights, clad in their shining armor, marched northward in search of Dragon's Door, the supposed lair of the winged creature. As they passed beneath the castle's gate, the leader of the knights sang out:

Follow me, follow me! March on as if to war!
O'er these mountains, o'er this moor!
Down through the valleys, up every slope!
O'er the fields! Gather your courage, gather your hope!

It had been many long years since anyone had ventured to the dreaded Dragon's Door. Tales of those who had imprisoned the dragon in its lair were still sung by the bards who frequented Imlay's taverns. But with the abduction of the Queen, it was apparent the chains no longer held the dragon.

One cold and gloomy morning, the dragon awoke from its dreams of gold. Hungry for the taste of blood, the evil creature flew out from its lair. No sooner had it taken to the sky than it caught the scent of the knights on the wind. Eager for vengeance, the dragon called for its legions of lesser fire-breathing beasts and visious orges to join him.

Close to the Dragon's Door, the knights watched the northern

sky turn black. Distant wings came into view. The dragon and its army attacked the knights with blazing hot breath and blades filled with dark magic. A single stroke of the dragon's tail instantly killed half a dozen knights. Cries of pain mounted all around, muffled only by the sound of swords clanging and shields bashing.

"Fight on, fight on!" shouted Galabraith, "Into the flames!" But their quest lay scattered with scores of knights dead, all hope for victory dashed.

At that moment, Aurora returned to the same hillside, the sky now dark with hundreds of the lesser beasts. The dragon stood in the center of the battlefield, belching out blasts of flames and wildly swinging its spike-covered tail. Some knights tried to distract the beast so others could attack it from the rear. Everything they tried failed, and their failures came at considerable cost.

Aurora held the ring high to wish herself down closer to the battle. Her sudden presence diverted the dragon's attention. She then wished for the ring to create a grand illusion of reinforcements. The beast watched, stunned, as a thousand knights descended from the southern slope, some placing arrows in their bows, others preparing to throw spears. The gambit gave Galabraith just enough time to approach the dragon from its left side, raise his sword, and bury it deep in the side of its head. The beast whipped around and sent a blast of fire at the young knight.

Instead of using his shield to block the incoming assault, he held his sword high in front of him. The blast of fire hit the blade and immediately redirected back at the creature's eyes. The heat of its own flame blinded the dragon long enough for Galabraith to strike a second blow, this one squarely across its forehead. The dragon let out a howl rivaling the loudest crack of thunder. Unable to see, its one final blast set fire to a horde of ogres rushing in to attack Aurora.

As flames swallowed one of the ogres, it hurled a stone at Aurora, striking the young maiden's temple. Before losing

consciousness, she made a quick wish of her ring, asking it to send her back up the hillside, praying her departure from the scene had not led to the knight's demise. As she fell to the cold ground, she caught a glimpse of Galabraith standing tall before the dragon, sword held high.

Galabraith cried out, "Fight fire with fire, indeed!" He gazed into the ominous sky and shouted, "Mother! I have avenged your death by this horrible creature! Father, I did this for you! Your soul can now rest."



SIX

The smoke from the dragon's fires hung heavy in the valley outside the Dragon's Door. Only the occasional crackle of flames broke the silence. Galabraith stood next to the head of the dead beast, its blood dripping from his sword. After catching his breath, his thoughts turned to flashes of a young maiden, a blazing gold ring around her middle finger, and her ability to command incredible illusions of thousands and thousands of the King's knights coming to join the fight. *But what of the Queen? That was the mission, after all, was it not? Rescue the Queen from this evil beast?*

He redirected his gaze to the north, to the mouth of the dragon's cave, the infamous Dragon's Door. He placed his sword back into its sheath, not bothering to clean the remaining blood from its blade, and started walking toward the slope leading to the opening. Rocks of all sizes and shapes covered the hillside. Galabraith assumed this to be the spoil dump created by the dragon when it dug the passageway into the mountain, creating a place to hide the treasures it had plundered.

It made sense there was no path leading to the entrance as the dragon could simply spread its formidable wings and fly when it exited the tunnel. Every step up in the climb resulted in sliding back two. Galabraith had to use his hands to ascend, but the sharp edges of the shards soon made this approach futile. Unsheathing his sword, he jabbed it into the rocks and pulled himself upward, repeating the process again and again until he finally reached the flat area at the top of the heap and the entrance leading into the mountain.

Wasting no time, he started down the passageway. As Galabraith continued his descent, he noticed three things. The air grew colder with each step, a fetid stench grew in intensity, and his still unsheathed sword began to glow in the darkness. Grateful for the

increased light in otherwise absolute blackness, he held his blade high above his head.

Down the young man went, further and further into the mountain until the light from the entrance disappeared entirely. When he reached a fork in the passageway, he called out, "Queen Fiorra! Can you hear me? I am Galabraith, a knight sent by the King to rescue you. Know that the dragon now lies dead. Please, call out if you can."

Galabraith stood motionless and listened. Nothing. He called out again. Still nothing.

Choosing the right tunnel, he continued on through the darkness, occasionally stopping to call out to the Queen. After a time, the tunnel came to a dead end, causing him to retrace his steps back to the fork and follow the left tunnel, again stopping periodically to call out and listen. A reply never came.

Ten minutes later, the passageway opened into a large gallery. The dim light from his sword only reached the walls immediately to his right and left, not being strong enough to illuminate the entire chamber. As he inspected the walls visible to him, he noticed doorways to other passageways or perhaps rooms.

This place is a maze! What if I can't find the Queen while she yet lives?

He decided to follow the wall to his right, stopping at each entranceway to peer in and see if maybe the Queen was there asleep—or worse. Piles of gold and silver coins littered with precious gems filled the rooms. Galabraith eyed the riches, more than he would ever see in his lifetime. Pushing those images aside, he worked his way along the gallery's wall, stopping at each room and calling out for the Queen. After a dozen rooms, he heard a faint voice answering his call.

"I am here. Follow my voice."

"I hear you. Keep speaking, if you are able."

Galabraith passed by another two doorways and stopped to listen. The voice repeated, only this time, it was louder and presumably closer. "I am here."

He passed another three of the small rooms and halted once more when a whimper came again from the entrance to his right. Holding his sword high, he entered and found the Queen lying in the middle of the floor with an iron bracelet around her left ankle connected to a chain.

"Oh, my Queen!" cried out Galabraith, kneeling quickly at her side. "I am so glad to see you are still alive. I have been sent by the King to find you and take you back home."

The Queen, weak from days without food or water, could only nod.

"Now, let me see about removing this shackle from your leg." His sword quickly severed one of the links of the chain. "Thank the Heavens this chain is old and rusted. You are free now, Your Majesty. Are you able to walk?"

The Queen, helpless, simply whispered, "No."

"Fear not. I will carry you as I am able." Galabraith hung his sword from his belt, leaving it unsheathed so its light could help them find their way out. Bending down, he placed his arms under the Queen's arms and legs and lifted her.

Retracing his steps along the gallery wall, now on his left, he tried to remember how many rooms he had passed and whether he might recognize the entrance to the passageway leading to the surface. *I should have left some sort of mark for myself!* After passing a dozen openings, he stopped and put the Queen down.

"I will be right back for you. But I need to find which of these openings is the one we want."

He hurried off, leaving markers along the wall. One minute later, he gave a euphoric shout of success. On his way back, he

stopped for a moment to collect a few of the gold coins. *The King may wish to return here one day and recover some of what this beast has stolen.*

He returned and retrieved the Queen, carrying her to the mark he made. The opening to Dragon's Door soon appeared as a small gray dot against the backdrop of blackness. Only the pale glow from Galabraith's sword gave them enough light to avoid the shards of rock laying about the uneven floor. The Queen, despite being weak from her many days of imprisonment, indicated she could walk. Leaning on the young knight, they climbed up the long slope to the entrance. The faint light at the entrance grew brighter as they ascended until, at last, the mountains surrounding the battlefield came into view. The sight greeting them stunned the Queen.

"Oh no!" she gasped. "Is everyone else except you dead?"

"Yes, my Queen. All dead."

"And they all did this for me?" Tears streamed down her face. "How will I ever be worthy of their sacrifice?"

"Please, my Lady," Galabraith started. "Do not think of their sacrifice as a thing they did only for you. If this dragon and its minions had been allowed to live, they would have continued their reign of terror, attacking the villages in your kingdom, burning its fields, stealing the cattle, and killing your subjects."

"How do you know this?"

"Because, my Lady, twenty years ago, this dragon attacked the village of Anûthdir, where I am from. And this dragon killed my mother." Galabraith looked down from the entrance at the motionless corpse of the dragon and said nothing more until the Queen broke the silence.

"Earlier, you said a maiden appeared as the battle was turning in favor of the dragon and its army, that she had some sort of magical powers which eventually brought down the dreaded dragon who now lies dead. Where is this maiden now? Is she dead, too?"

"I don't know. I wanted to look for her before I came to rescue you, but the smoke was still thick from the many fires. The winds from the north have now cleared the battlefield. With your permission, I should like to have another look for her before we begin our journey south."

Galabraith helped the Queen down from the perch outside the cave entrance. They slipped and slid on the rocks as they worked their way down to the edge of the battlefield. Galabraith found a spot out of the chill wind and lay the Queen down against a large boulder.

"I will be back as soon as I can," said Galabraith as he handed her his canteen. "Here, drink what is left of my water. While I'm out looking for this maiden, I will see if I can find more water and maybe even some food for us."

The Queen nodded her approval, and Galabraith stepped out onto the plain. The fires had burned themselves out, and their smoke had dissipated. The carnage was considerable. The charred remains of the dragon's minions were everywhere. Every so often he stumbled across the crumpled body of a knight and his horse. Swords and shields littered the ground.

Whenever Galabraith found one of his companions, he took their canteen and opened the saddlebags on their horses in hopes of finding food. Eventually, he procured enough food and water for him and the Queen for at least several days. But he did not find any trace of the maiden who had helped him beat the dragon.

Returning to where the Queen waited, he heard a faint cry. Looking up the hill on the south side of the field, something or someone moved. He immediately dropped everything, scrambled up the slope, and found the young maiden struggling to stand. Her cloak was soiled and burnt in places, her light-brown hair matted and smattered with cinders.

"Young maiden! You are alive! Thank the Heavens! I assumed

you to be dead.” He knelt to help her. When she turned her face toward him, he said, “Wait a minute! I have seen you before. Yes! You’re the farmer’s daughter, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” whispered Aurora. Finally propping herself up on one arm, she asked, “Is the dragon now dead?”

“It is, indeed!” replied Galabraith with a smile. “And it could not have happened without you! I’m not sure what wizardry you commanded, but whatever it was, made all the difference. It allowed me to approach close enough to deal it a fatal blow. There is quite the gash across its head.”

Aurora smiled in return. “Please help me stand. I wish to see the dragon’s corpse.”

SEVEN

All of the knights’ horses had been killed during the battle with the dragon, forcing Aurora, Galabraith, and Queen Fiorra to find their way to the castle on foot. For three days they walked, their legs tired and their feet sore when they finally stood atop the last of the foothills at the edge of the Meherrin Mountains. From their vantage point, they could see many miles to the south, with the flatlands in the center of Imlay clearly visible. They even caught a glimpse of the golden spires of the High King’s Castle off in the distance.

“We’ve done it,” said Galabraith in a soft voice. He faced the Queen. “We’ve found our way home. Another day or so, and we should have you back to your King.” Fiorra replied with a weary smile.

Aurora reached out and grabbed Galabraith’s hand, pleased their journey was almost over.

“I think we should make camp here tonight. We have a good view of our surroundings, and it looks like there’s plenty of wood for our fire. What do you think?” Both of the women agreed.



When the three were only a few hours’ walk from the castle, they met a young squire sent out by the King to keep watch for any who might return from the quest. The young man dismounted from his horse and ran to meet the trio, bowing before the Queen.

“Thank the Heavens! Our Queen has been rescued from the dragon! But where are the knights sent out to find you? Tell me what happened.”

The Queen looked to Galabraith, granting him permission to speak for her.

“Young squire, the Queen is tired and has been through much

since the dragon stole her away one week ago. Let us save any storytelling for the King.”

The squire replied, “Of course, Sir Knight.”

Galabraith said, “Here is what we command you to do. Ride back to the castle with all haste and tell the King what you have seen and heard. Send a party back our way with three extra horses. We will rest here until your return.”

“Yes, Sir Knight.” The squire faced the Queen and bowed. “Your Majesty, I will do as you wish. I am so grateful you are safe.”

The three travelers watched the squire gallop off toward the castle, their hearts filled with joy, their quest soon over. There would be plenty of food and water waiting for them, and their wounds would be tended to. Each wore a smile.

Not long after their encounter with the squire, a dozen riders approached from the south. Much to their surprise, the King led the company. The King quickly dismounted and ran to his Queen, embracing her, both shedding tears at their reunion. The King led his Queen back to one of the extra horses, with Aurora and Galabraith following behind. Once he had secured the Queen on her steed, the King turned to face the Queen’s companions, knelt on the ground with arms outstretched and a generous bow, and offered his sincerest thanks for her return.

The company rode southward, and within an hour the castle was in plain view, its gates wide open. Banners hung from crenels and flags flew from the turrets, each with the red and gold seal of Imlay. As the party crossed over the drawbridge and entered the courtyard, the people lining the battlements let out a great cheer. Drums banged out ruffles, and trumpets blew flourishes. The King turned to his Queen, shouting above the noise from the crowd, “You’re home, my love! Praise be the Heavens!”



The following day the King called for Aurora and Galabraith to join him, the Queen, and his mage in his private study.

“When I last saw you, brave swordsman, you left this castle with a party of more than one hundred of my finest knights, and, yet, none returned with you. How did this happen?”

Galabraith recounted his travels northward and how the knights found the Dragon’s Door. He described how the dragon and its army of ogres and lesser beasts had emerged from their lair. And though hopelessly outnumbered, the knights fought valiantly.

Curious, the King asked, “If you were outnumbered, how were you able to defeat the dragon and its army?”

Galabraith turned to Aurora. “Please, young maiden, explain what you told me during our journey back to the castle.”

“My King, I am honored by your hospitality and to be able to sit in your company. The story Galabraith wishes me to tell you is about how I came to have this ring I am now wearing on my middle finger.” Aurora presented her right hand for all to see. She recounted how she found the ring and how she discovered the powers it granted her.

“Excuse me, young maiden,” interrupted the mage, anxious. “Might I examine this ring? There is something about it which is familiar.”

Aurora took off the ring, handing it to Amarach to inspect in the light of the fire.

“You have described the three magical powers it granted,” reiterated the mage, “the ability to control time, the ability to create grand illusions, and the ability to travel instantly between places. While we are all grateful you found this ring, discovered how to use it, and dared to join the battle which eventually beat our foes, I must tell you about magic rings.”

Everyone sat still, waiting for the mage to finish his account,

the only sound in the room came from the crackle of the flames in the fireplace.

“Magic rings are like magic spells. Their use comes at a cost. You were unaware of this when you found the ring, understandably so, and used its powers many times while learning what it could do. But each time you used it, it kept track of what it would one day demand from you.”

Frightened, Aurora said, “You mean I owe something to the ring for all it has done for me—for us—helping to kill the dragon? It doesn't seem fair.”

“Fair or not,” replied the mage. “You were the wielder of its power, and you must be the one to pay its price.”

Tears rolled down Aurora's cheeks.

Galabraith reached over to place a comforting hand on hers.

“Is there nothing we might do to help this brave maiden at her time of need? After all, she left her home and fought bravely to secure our victory. We could not have rescued the Queen without her.”

The King nodded his agreement. “Most certainly. The Queen and I owe the two of you a great debt. I will give you whatever it is you ask.”

“I'm afraid it's not that simple,” continued the mage. “The ring does not want gold or silver coins. It only wants what it gave you.”

“What do you mean?” asked Aurora. “How will I pay this back?”

“You used the ring to stop and start time, create illusions, and travel great distances in an instant. I wish I could tell you how the ring might want compensation for those tasks. As I have mentioned to the King in our previous meeting, my expertise is with managing spells. Interpreting dreams and knowledge of magic rings is not my area of expertise. I am sorry.

“I think you have a choice to make, young maiden. You might offer something you hold in great value to the ring, or you can simply carry on with your life and wait for the ring to decide what it wants from you one day. A known commodity versus an unknown commodity. That is your choice.”

“You will have to give me a little bit of time to think about this.” Looking into the eyes of Galabraith, Aurora continued, “Will you help me?”

“Most certainly,” replied the young man. “Come. Let us walk atop the castle walls and speak of this. We can let the good mage know your answer when you are ready.”

Galabraith rose and held out his hand, and Aurora followed his lead out of the King's study. The two scaled the spiral stairway in the southern turret. A gentle breeze from the north greeted them as they walked along the parapet. They found a stone bench and sat down.

“The words of the King's mage are most troubling,” sighed Aurora. She looked into Galabraith's eyes, searching them in hopes of finding some sort of solace. “What do you think I should do?”

“The mage said the ring will want compensation for the work it has done for you. For us. For the King and the Queen. He also said it will want something of great value. What do you value more than anything?”

Aurora sat for a moment, thinking of all of her favorite things. “Well, of course, I value my life.”

“I don't think the ring would ask for such a thing,” said Galabraith thoughtfully.

“And I value my father and mother ... and my brothers and sisters.”

“Again,” replied Galabraith, “I don't think that is what the ring will want.”

Aurora's hand tightened around Galabraith's work-worn hand. "And I value you and what we have done together."

"And the ring? Do you value it and the power it has allowed you to wield?"

"Of course," answered Aurora. "It has changed my life. I am here with the King and Queen of Imlay, in their castle. Crowds of people have cheered for us because of the great deed we did. Our feat will, no doubt, be put to song and told and retold for many years to come."

Galabraith looked down and touched the ring with his thumb and forefinger. "What if you were to give up all of that?"

"Whatever do you mean?"

"What if you and I travel back to your father's farm, return to the field where you found this ring, and place it back into the ground? And as you do so, you give the ring all of your memories of these few weeks—starting from when you found it."

"But then I would lose my memory of you." Aurora cried. "And I love you."

Galabraith smiled, "And I love you, too. But if I accompany you back to your farm and am with you when you return the ring to the ground, perhaps you will see me as you first saw me, and then we can fall in love all over again. Maybe the ring will allow that to happen."

He tucked a wayward lock of her hair back in place, embraced her, and the two joined in a gentle kiss. Before returning to the King's study, they took one last long look out at the lands of the kingdom they helped save from a great evil.

"Come," said Galabraith. "Let's return to the King and the Queen and tell the mage of our plan."

EIGHT

The next day Galabraith and Aurora took their leave of the King and Queen and made the journey back to Aurora's family farm just on western edge of the Meherrin Mountains. Pleased to see their daughter and the young knight again, Aurora's parents greeted them with much joy and relief. Over dinner that evening, everyone peppered the two with questions. But Aurora and Galabraith did not speak of their adventure or the battle or anything about the ring. If memories of these events were what would be offered to the ring when they buried it, they didn't want anyone to know of their deeds.

The following morning Galabraith and Aurora went out on a walk. Aurora led Galabraith to her favorite field of flowers, the exact spot where she had found the ring so many weeks earlier.

"Are you ready, my love?" said Galabraith.

"I am," she replied, retrieving the ring from her pocket. She unwrapped it from her handkerchief. "If anything happens, I want you to know how glad I am to have met you and how much I love you."

Galabraith smiled. "Me, too."

Aurora put the ring on one last time and said, "Ring, I wish to release my memories of finding you and using you and your power. I set you free to find another bearer in the future." She removed the ring from her finger and dropped it into the hole left weeks earlier. With her foot, she pushed dirt and stones into the hole.

When she looked up, she saw the last glimmer of an image fading away into the splendor of the meadow and its flowers.

Why am I out in this field? I don't remember what I was doing here.

Aurora turned around and followed the path back to the farmhouse. No one there remembered anything about Aurora being gone

or the appearance of a young man or news of an evil dragon attacking villages. Life went on just as it always had.

One day, a handsome young man rode into the yard between the barn and the farmhouse. Aurora's father greeted the young man and asked how he might be of help.

"Good day, kind sir. My name is Galabraith. I hail from a village to the south called Anúthdir. My father recently passed away. Since I have no more family, I thought it time to leave, explore the world, and see what it has to offer. But for now, I am looking for work. I managed my father's farm for several years. Might you be needing help on your farm?"

"Well, I do have several sons and daughters, and they help me with many of the chores. But I could use someone to take care of the business side of things. Why don't you tie up your horse and come on into the house? I'll introduce you to the family."

As they climbed the steps of the front porch, the farmer turned to the young man and said, "You know, I have a daughter about your age. Her name is Aurora. I think you might like her."

THE LAY OF AURORA AND GALABRAITH

Long ago woke a dragon of old
With raging fire and thirst for gold
Flew from the north, broken chains
Out o' the cold, down to the plains

Maiden o' the Moon,
From fields o' flower
You found the ring
You found its power

Far'way to the south, it flew
Away to our lands and seas of blue
We hid in the hills, hid from all
Waiting for one to stand so tall

Lady o' the Ring
Praise to you we sing
Long life your way, we pray
Oh, this happy day

O' brave Knight and silver Sword
Praise to you, gallant lord
King and Queen, grateful they are
To celebrate you, who came from afar

O' shining Sword and magic spell
How thankful we are
The Black One, it bravely fell
Across its head, a deadly scar

The blade found its mark
Its edge quenched the spark
No more shall we hide
To the sun we now ride

We dreamed of this day,
With no more gray
We'll dream now of you,
And skies so blue

Let the bells ring so bright
No more dread, no more night
From e'er hill to distant shore
No more fear of dragon's roar

The Pit of Truth



ONE

Once upon a time, there lived a Farmer and his Wife. They met, fell more or less in love, and married like most young men and women did. Shortly after they married, the Farmer inherited a farm from his grandparents. The farm was very productive and allowed the Farmer to sell his crops, dairy products, and some of his animals in town for a handsome profit. He soon amassed a reasonable amount of gold coins for his efforts.

Several years later, a beautiful baby daughter blessed their lives. They named her April in honor of the month new growth came to their farm. The Farmer and his Wife doted over their daughter. April had everything a young girl could want. She came to know how much her mother and father cared for her.

Then things began to change. The Farmer's Wife developed an ever-increasing collection of ailments. The Farmer was supportive and assisted his Wife with the cooking and household chores, even after a long day of work on the farm.

At first, the Farmer's Wife handled the aches and pains well. But with time, she became more vocal about her ailments, complaining about them at every opportunity.



“Oh, dear. I don’t think I can get out of bed today,” she sometimes said to the Farmer. “Would you be a good husband and get April up and off to school?”

The Farmer’s usual routine had him out in the fields before April awoke, so he rarely saw her until she arrived home in the afternoon. But the Farmer obliged, enjoying the occasional morning time with his daughter.

The years passed, and the ills of the Farmer’s Wife grew in number and severity. One day her head would ache terribly. Another day her stomach would hurt. Her legs would often hurt so badly she couldn’t walk. The maladies kept her in bed for much of the day, and the naps she took during the day kept her awake much of the night. She gathered an impressive assortment of potions and ointments and became well acquainted with the local healer and alchemist. Her ailments eventually caused her to require special foods at special times.

The Farmer tried to be a good husband, but soon the burden of maintaining the farm, doing the daily chores, and raising April began to take its toll. He became increasingly tired with each passing season, eventually feeling angry at his Wife. He watched the beautiful young woman he had married several years earlier turn into a rotund, lethargic woman who was rarely happy. His Wife now required him to do just about everything for her.

Finally, after a particularly long, hard day in the fields, the Farmer’s resentment got the better of him.

“Oh, dear husband, could you make dinner for us this evening?” the Wife asked. “There is a new batch of rhubarb I need you to cook my special way.”

“That does it!” hollered the Farmer. “I am dead tired from a long day. Most other farmers have a warm dinner waiting for them when they come in from the fields. I haven’t had dinner prepared for me in months! In fact, you don’t even ask me about my day or allow

me a few minutes of rest before you begin making requests of me.”

The Wife exclaimed in disbelief, “Well, I never! After all I have done for you! You must not love me anymore.”

The Farmer turned around on his heel and stomped off to the kitchen to prepare the evening meal. He even cooked the rhubarb the special way his Wife requested. He placed his Wife’s dinner on a tray and carried it up to her bedroom. Without a word, he returned to the kitchen and ate his meal in silence. April joined him, but she had never experienced this sort of behavior from either of her parents. She sat wrapped in her own silence, trying to make sense of what she had seen and heard.

TWO

Over the following months, the Farmer’s anger did not subside. Resentment of his situation took hold of him, its roots becoming firmly entrenched in his heart and mind.

During this time, the Farmer’s Wife began to feel betrayed as the distance grew between herself and her husband. This only made her aches and pains become more frequent and more intense. While the demands on her husband continued, she began to ask her daughter to do more and more. After April arrived home from school every day, she did the chores her mother requested, completed her homework, and then walked out to the barnyard to visit with her animal friends. This ritual became an escape from the coldness she sensed growing between her once-loving parents.

The Farmer’s Wife soon noticed her husband going into town more frequently. Subtle at first, an idea struck the Wife one day. *What if my husband goes into town to get away from me?* Often the items for which the Farmer needed to buy seemed less important, almost trivial. Once this idea hatched in her imagination, the Farmer’s Wife grabbed onto it and repeatedly mulled over it in her mind.

Each time she thought about it, she became more convinced of its truth. As her fixation on her husband’s withdrawal increased, the Farmer’s Wife became obsessed with her illnesses, coddling them as if they were some affectionate pet looking for attention.

All of this was difficult for April. Her mother lived her life in the bedroom, venturing out only on rare occasions. Her father did his best to keep all the family going, working in the fields, doing the chores, and cooking the meals. April continued to seek comfort in her friendships with the farm animals. She had favorites with whom she would regularly visit. Lilly the Cow, Callie the Chicken, Ryan the Goat, Sarah the Turkey, Schwartz the Pig, Eric the Horse, and Seth the Dog.

“I am so concerned about my Mommy and my Pop,” she lamented to Lilly the Cow one day. Lilly, her favorite since the time April could first walk from the house to the barnyard, always comforted the young girl.

“It is a good thing you can come to me and express your feelings,” reassured Lilly. “Please remember I am here whenever you need to talk.”

“Pop seems angry all the time now. I think he is mad because he feels he has to do all the work on the farm and in the house. But Mommy is sick and can’t help. I know she would if she could. Oh, I don’t know what to do,” cried April.

Lilly made sure she understood April’s concerns by always repeating back everything she heard. April would often say, “Oh, Lilly. You are such a good listener.”

The Farmer’s Wife knew April cared for the animals a great deal and thanked the gods April could go to them for comfort. It gave her more time to scheme and plot against her husband when April visited Lilly.

Unknown to the Farmer and April, Seth the Dog started making periodic visits to the Wife’s bedroom. The Farmer’s Wife told him of all the events that had transpired in recent months, about the Farmer’s anger, and the distance growing between them. Seth’s eyes grew wider with each word of the Wife’s story. His saliva dripped to the floor with increasing frequency as the sessions went on.

“Do you think you can help me?” the Wife pleaded. “I so much would like to rid myself of my husband. He has become so difficult to live with. As long as I have his money, I can hire workers to come and do the chores necessary to keep the farm running. That way, dear sweet April and I and all of you animals can stay on the farm we all love so much.”

But the Wife had no intention of remaining on the farm and didn’t share this with Seth. Once free of the Farmer, she would take

April and all of the gold coins her husband had saved and move to town to live with her parents. She would sell the farm and live comfortably off the profit.

After contemplating the situation, Seth answered the Wife. “I will help you. Here is what I want you to do.” Seth then explained to the Wife his plans for getting rid of her husband. The Wife could hardly contain her gratitude. She immediately set about putting the plan into motion.

But Seth hatched his own private scheme. He planned to keep all of the gold coins for himself. He also wanted control of the farm and all the animals. But, first, the Wife must commit to the plan to a point where she could not back out.

“Patience,” he muttered as he left the Wife’s bedroom and returned to the barn. “Patience.”

THREE

Part of Seth's plan involved April and took advantage of the girl's deep affection and loyalty toward the farm animals. One day after school, the Farmer's Wife planted the seed from which the entire plan would grow. She called April to her bedroom.

"Dearest April. I have the most dreadful news which I must share with you. I know you love your father and that he dearly loves you, but he hasn't been himself lately. And I know you love the animals on this farm, too. That is why I must tell you that your father plans to sell Lilly the Cow, Ryan the Goat, and Schwartz the Pig. And even more awful, I know he is going to kill Callie the Chicken and Sarah the Turkey so we might have enough food to eat."

"No, Mother! This cannot be! Father loves the animals just as much as I do."

"I am sorry, my darling. I know this is hard for you. The other day, Seth the Dog told me he had overheard your father making arrangements to sell the animals. Later, he said he saw your father behind the barn sharpening his ax."

"Perhaps if I talk to Father, I can convince him otherwise," proposed April.

"No, my dear. Seth told me he will take care of things. We mustn't interfere with Seth's plan. He is a smart dog. We must trust him. Okay? Promise me you won't say anything to your Father."

"Okay," replied April. "If you say so."

And so, Seth's plan took root.



The farm buzzed with secret activity during the next month. Seth's selfish interests and the constant urging by the Farmer's Wife gave him the incentive he needed to begin his work on the other farm

animals. He told them the same story the Wife had told April. Soon, rumors and gossip reverberated throughout the farm. The Farmer could sense things were amiss but wasn't quite sure why. All the animals took pains to avoid him, and April was unusually quiet around him.

Seth and the Farmer's Wife continued to meet secretly. But being more cunning and clever than the Farmer's Wife, Seth took on most of the work to carry out the plans. He proposed the digging of a large pit somewhere on the farm, covering it with branches, then tricking the Farmer into going to the pit so he would fall in. If the pit was deep enough and its walls sheer enough, he would be unable to get out without assistance. Seth would be there to provide that assistance, but only after the Farmer signed over everything to him. Of course, Seth told the Wife he would have the Farmer sign over everything to her. Seth coerced the Wife to hire two men from town to dig the pit.

Late one night after twilight and under cover of darkness, Seth, some of the barnyard animals, and the two men went to dig. At first, they found the ground soft due to years of dried vegetation slowly decomposing, making the digging easy. Every time the tarp next to the growing depression filled with dirt, several animals grabbed its corners and dragged it to the nearby woods to dump it. As the hole grew deeper, the work became harder, and the light from the setting moon dimmer.

The digging and moving of dirt went on for six nights. Finally, when the pit reached twelve feet deep, Seth called a halt.

"I hope it is now deep enough," said Lilly the Cow.

"It will have to be," replied Seth. "Now you animals go gather brush, tree branches, and any other camouflage you can find so the men can cover the hole."

They finished just as the stars began to disappear from the night sky, and all stood back to marvel at their masterpiece.

FOUR

The next day Seth put the second part of his plan into action. The mangy dog knew farmers feared four things when it came to their crops: drought, blight, fire, and insects. He would use this knowledge to lure the Farmer to the trap. Seth told the Wife exactly what to say.

“Dear Husband,” she said to the Farmer as he prepared to go to the fields. “The animals told April late yesterday that the stream running through the southwest corner of our farm has suddenly gone dry.”

The Farmer’s ears perked up. The stream provided water for the irrigation of the crops and drinking water for the animals. “I don’t see how that could be! I checked it two weeks ago, and everything was fine. But I will check it first thing, nonetheless.”

Off the Farmer went to the designated corner of the farm along the well-trodden path he always followed. Seth had counted on the Farmer taking this trail and had placed the pit squarely in its middle, just around a bend after it entered a grove of elm trees.

The Farmer focused on his chores for the day as he hurried along the path, agitated he had to take time away from his many jobs to investigate the stream. He paid little attention to the ground in front of him as he rounded the bend. Just after he entered the woods, his foot stepped on the delicate branches covering the pit. As his weight transferred to his forward foot, the covering gave way, and the Farmer fell into the hole.

At first, he lay there in the dark trying to figure out what happened. He inspected himself for injuries, finding only several bruises, and then stood up to assess his situation.



Not surprisingly, his first questions were how did a giant hole get there, who dug it, and why? He inspected the walls for footholds or handholds to climb out and found none. The opening in the earth had been fashioned such that the walls were completely smooth, and worse, the walls slanted steeply inward, making climbing out incredibly difficult. His only chance of getting out appeared to be waiting for someone to come looking for him. And wait, he did. The Farmer waited and waited for more than half a day for help to arrive.

“Well, now. It seems as though you have had a most unfortunate accident,” chided Seth the Dog, looking down into the pit.

The whining voice startled the Farmer. He gazed up at the circle of animal eyes peering down at him. He yelled, “Get me out of here now!”

“Not so fast, my dear Farmer. We must have patience.”

The Farmer was furious. “Whatever are you talking about?”

“I am talking about the price for our assisting you in your effort to gain your freedom,” replied the Dog. Saliva dripped from the corner of his mouth as he savored the success of his plan.

“Price? You must be joking, right? What could a mangy mutt like you possibly want? Extra bones on which to chew?”

“Not at all, my good Farmer. I hold here a legally binding contract saying you will turn over to me the deed for the farm and its contents, as well as one hundred pieces of gold,” gloated Seth.

“What? That’s outrageous! I will never do that!” The Farmer glared back up at Seth from the darkness of the pit.

“I am sorry you feel that way. But, you see, if we leave you here, you will surely die. Then the farm will go to your charming Wife, who will have little choice but to rely on my wise counsel to manage it. But more importantly, if you die, you will never again see your lovely daughter, April.”

The Farmer reached up and made several vain attempts to scale the side of the pit. Finally, he returned to the center of the pit, utterly helpless. The thought of his Wife controlling the farm was distasteful enough, but the notion of never seeing April again brought great pain to his heart. Several more failed attempts to find a way out finally convinced him he must consider the offer. “For you, April,” he whispered reluctantly. “I do this.”

The Farmer bellowed, “Alright! Send down your contract, Dog! You have tricked me. So I might see my daughter again, I will sign it.”

“A wise choice, friend Farmer,” replied the conniving canine. Seth knew that even as the Farmer signed the contract, the Farmer’s Wife rode safely on her way into town to live with her parents, taking April and the contents of their home with them. The Dog also knew that the Wife had no intention of letting the Farmer see his beloved daughter ever again. But Seth found the Farmer to be a man of his word and someone who expected as much from others. This would be the Farmer’s downfall.

The Farmer received the contract at the end of a long section of twine lowered just far enough so he could retrieve the legal agreement, with a pen conveniently provided. He quickly read through the contract detailing the passage of ownership of the farm and its contents from the Farmer to the Dog. It also had a cleverly framed clause stating that he freely and voluntarily made the transaction without duress to do so. The wording churned his stomach.

He had worked these last years to build upon the legacy his grandparents had left him. What would they think about him now? Then he considered life without his daughter again and knew he had no choice. With a deep sigh, he scrawled out his name at the bottom of the agreement.

As soon as the pen left the paper, Seth grinned with a disgusting gleam in his eyes for having successfully completed his plan.

“Go ahead and lower the rope, my fellow distinguished animals. Pull up our dear Farmer and escort him to the house so he can gather his belongings,” ordered Seth.

When the Farmer stood squarely in front of him, the Dog said, “I remind you that our agreement calls for you to be off the farm by sundown, and you may take only what you can carry or place in your wagon, assuming you can find an animal willing to pull it.”

His heart heavy and burning with anger for the swindler, the Farmer felt the urge to strike the miserable creature, thought better of it, and turned to go back up the path toward the farmhouse.

What greeted the Farmer when he arrived at the old farmhouse was even more devastating than the loss of his precious farm to the Dog. During the hours he spent in the bottom of the cursed pit, his Wife had cleaned out their home, taken April, and departed. A few family heirlooms left to him by his grandparents were all that remained. A small note perched on the kitchen table contained a brief message:

Dearest Husband,

I am sorry things had to end like this. What a shame. If only you had loved me more. I wish I could have the old Farmer I married back again. Good luck in life. You will need it.

Your Dear Wife

The Farmer let out a cry heard in all corners of the farm. The pain from having lost everything was more than he could bear.

FIVE

But what the Farmer had not been privy to were the events occurring while he waited for someone to find him at the bottom of the pit.

Not long after the Farmer left to inspect the false report of the dry creek bed and fell prey to the trap set out for him, Seth appeared at the front door of the Farmer’s residence along with his posse of animals. Several loud barks brought the Wife to the front porch.

“It is done, my dear Farmer’s Wife. Your husband has fallen victim to our ingenious plan. Shortly, his signature will conclude our scheme, and we can then go about our respective lives.”

“Oh, Seth. You are masterful! Thank you, thank you. How can I ever repay you?” asked the Wife with a smile.

“Well, now that you mention it, my services do come with a price. And since I have delivered all I said I would, I deserve adequate compensation,” the Dog stated presumptuously. “One hundred pieces of gold is my price. Pay me now and be on your way. Refuse me, and I will deny you the services of Eric the Horse, who has agreed to pull your wagon into town.”

“What? That’s outrageous!” The large woman protested, “That’s a very steep price, and it will leave poor April and me with barely enough to live on! That’s, of course, until I receive the proceeds of the farm following its sale.”

“That’s my price, my dear lady. Take it or leave it.”

“Well,” said the Wife, “my parents will just have to help us for the time being. Let me go and get the gold.” The Wife disappeared inside the house and quickly returned with a leather pouch containing the requested one hundred pieces of gold. As she placed the bag on the top step, she inquired, “You will see to the sale of the farm and the transfer of funds to me in town, won’t you?”

“You can trust me, my good woman. Consider it done. Now hurry and pack. I will return at noon to make certain you have finished before I go and get the Farmer’s signature on the agreement turning over the property to you. Run along now.”

Seth privately congratulated himself. *What a brilliant plan! What a clever dog I am!*

Once inside, the Wife found April standing in the middle of the living room.

April cried, “What is going on? Something is wrong, isn’t it?”

“Yes, my precious child,” said April’s mother. “Seth was just here to give us terrible news about your Daddy. He fell into a deep hole and is ... well ... he is dead.”

April covered her ears and screamed. “No, Mommy, no! There must be some mistake!”

“And now, my dear daughter, we must pack all of our things and go into town to stay with Grandma and Pappy. We need their help right now.”

April wailed, “But why, Mommy? What about Daddy? What about all of my animal friends? What about Lilly?”

The Wife responded point by point. “Your Daddy is gone, and Seth tells me there is nothing we can do to get him back. As for your friends, they must stay here on the farm. Maybe we could visit them once in a while. Perhaps, if Lilly agrees, she might come with us. No promises, you understand? Now go along. Start packing your belongings. We leave at lunchtime.”

And with that, April’s mother bent over and started putting their things in a large oak trunk, unsympathetic to April’s sorrow.

At noon, Seth and many of the animals went to the house to bid April and the Wife farewell. A large open wagon sat parallel to the front porch, full of the family’s furniture, linens, clothes, kitchen utensils, and personal belongings. The Wife, anticipating this day

for quite some time, had been packing in secret, a little bit every day while her dutiful husband worked in the fields.

As Lilly the Cow approached the house, April ran down to meet her, crying the entire way. She threw her short arms around Lilly’s neck and sobbed.

“I don’t believe my Daddy is gone! I don’t believe it! And now my Mommy is making me move away from all of the things I love! How will I make new friends?”

“Now, April,” mused Lilly, “we must settle down. Your mother knows what’s best for you. I understand you are upset at the loss of your father. It is only natural to feel pain inside when you lose someone special. But from what I hear, you are moving to be with your grandmother and grandfather. I know they love you very much. And you will make new friends. Children always do.”

“Will you come with us? Oh, please, please, please!” begged April.

“Yes, I will come with you. My usefulness on the farm is over, anyway. With no one to milk me every day, I don’t serve much purpose,” Lilly sighed. “Come, let’s go back up to the house, and you can tie me to the rear of the wagon.”

April exclaimed as she wiped away her tears, “Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you!”

Once preparations were complete and April and her mother had climbed aboard, Eric the Horse struggled to get the loaded wagon and its cargo into motion. Lilly followed behind with her clanging bell marking off the cadence.

April peered back over the pile of belongings and watched the farm disappear behind them. She burst into tears again at the sight of the only home she had ever known fading through the trees.

SIX

Just before sunset, the Farmer finished packing what possessions he could carry and set off down the road leading away from the farm. Seth dismissed the animals, granting them leave to go and do as they pleased. The Dog then counted his gold coins and dreamed about the gold he would have after the sale of the farm and its contents. The thought of even more gold coins made him salivate. He laughed at the Wife's gullibility and how easily he had manipulated her.

And Seth knew just the type of buyer he wanted to find. A young father with a wife and child would do quite nicely. He would set about finding his buyer in the morning. *Enough hard work for one day.*

He added his one hundred pieces of gold to a large canvas bag he had dragged out of hiding earlier in the morning. Countless pieces of soft yellow metal filled the bag. You see, this had not been the first time Seth, the Clever Dog, had done this.

The Day After Tomorrow

ONE

There once lived a young King who wanted to see into the future. He had ascended to the throne after the unexpected passing of his father only one year earlier. A good student, he had tried to follow the example set by his father but knew there remained much to learn. He thought that an ability to see into the future would help him become wise and do great things for everyone in the kingdom.

One day he sent word to Amarach, the oldest and most skilled magician in his court, asking him to appear at his earliest convenience. The mage had served the King's father well, conjured up all sorts of spells, and provided advice on matters of great import. Several days later, the mage appeared at the High King's Castle, leaning on his staff and looking his usual disheveled self.

"I would like to be able to see into the future," the King announced to the mage. "Do you have some magic potion or incantation to give me that power?"

"Well, now," started the mage, slowly stroking his long, white beard. "Time is a very tricky thing with which to tamper. It can get one into all sorts of trouble, yes it might."

"I assumed you might say that," uttered the King. "But I think it's worth the risk if I can help my kingdom and its subjects with any knowledge I might gain."

"As you wish. I will go back to my tower and consult my Book

of Spells. It could take a few days.”

“That’s fine. I can wait. I look forward to your return.”

The mage drew his cloak around himself and disappeared with a puff of smoke.

Amarach reappeared in the King’s throne room three days later, this time cradling a leather-bound book under his left arm.

“So glad to see you again,” welcomed the King. “What have you found?”

The mage ambled over to a table at the side of the room and set down his thick and very old Book of Spells. He opened it cautiously to a bookmark nestled between the brittle pages containing the relevant spell.

“I’m afraid I only found one spell that even comes close to what it is you are seeking,” he said, pointing to a passage with one of his bony fingers.

“Go on,” said the King, eager to hear what his mage had to report.

“The spell, if cast properly, will provide you with a quick glimpse of the future, but only from the day after tomorrow, to be exact. Every morning when you wake and hear the dawn bell ring, you will receive a vision. It will be short, and you will quite likely not understand what you see. You might not know anyone you see, and you might not know where the image is set. These glimpses into the future may not benefit you or help you in any way. Remember, you are not predicting the future, only seeing a sliver of what is to come. Your mind is simply a portal through which events yet to happen can be seen.”

The old mage closed his book gently, still leaning on his staff for support. “Do you understand everything I’ve said?”

“I do. One question, though. From what I know of magic spells, gaining such ability will undoubtedly cost me something. Can you

tell me what that might be? How many gold coins I must pay?”

“You are indeed correct. It will cost you” confirmed the mage. “But money cannot repay all debts. Because this spell gives the recipient a power related to time, the cost will also be related to time. I have not ever used this spell, nor do I know any mage who has, so I cannot tell you its cost. I can only say this. There will come a day when you must pay whatever cost it asks of you.”

“So you are saying I must decide whether or not to follow through with this spell without knowing its cost. Hardly seems fair.”

“I do not have control over how spells work. I only cast them.”

“Alright then,” replied the King. “I will need time to consider my decision. I will send for you when I have made up my mind. Until then, I thank you. You may take your leave.”

The mage gave a slight bow, retrieved his book, and disappeared in his usual manner.



That evening the young King sat in the study once occupied by his father, King Mathirion. Portraits of his grandfather and great-grandfather hung on the wall, one portrait on each side of the fireplace, each man dressed in his ceremonial uniform and looking distinguished and confident. Books passed down from generation to generation lined the shelves around the room. He wondered whether any of them might help him with his decision. *Should I accept the spell offered by the mage? Did my father ever think about seeking out such a spell?*

Memories of his coronation came flooding back, the castle’s main hall decorated with colorful banners of reds and golds hanging from the rafters and echoing with the calls of the trumpet ensembles. All eyes of the courtiers, the castle staff, and his subjects looked to him. He felt the weight of their expectations and his own fears of failure. He questioned whether his desire to peek into the

future was some sort of shortcut to addressing his doubts.

He mulled over the words the mage said about not always being able to discern the meaning of the daily visions. *What good would it do to have an ability that might not yield any benefit? And then have to pay some unspecified price?* The point of this power was to gain a means by which he could help his subjects. He wanted them to see him as a wise King, just like his father had been before him.

Reminded of the need for sleep as the waxing moon set, the King blew out the flickering candles and headed for his bedchamber. He found his bed turned down, the fire stoked, and the room nice and warm. The King changed into his bedclothes, climbed into bed, and quickly fell asleep.

Early the next morning, with the ringing of the dawn bell, he knew he wanted the visions, glimpses into the future, even if only for a hint of things to occur the day after tomorrow. He sent word of his decision to the old mage later that day.

TWO

The spell now cast, the King woke every morning at the ringing of the dawn bell anticipating that day's vision. And just as his mage predicted, the visions would last only a moment. Sometimes, an image of an unfamiliar place or an object appeared; sometimes it was a portrait of someone he did not know.

After several weeks, he realized possessing this ability garnered no benefit to him in any way. He was none the wiser. The chance to help his subjects had yet to materialize. He began to feel he had made a mistake in accepting the spell's ability.

Then one autumn morning, the first vision of any significance finally came to the King. A field appeared, and he recognized the hills and trees in the background. But because it was autumn, he didn't think anything of the sheaves of dried corn stalks arranged haphazardly in the field with the harvest complete. While glad to recognize the place the vision showed him, he was uncertain about what to make of it. What was the significance of the image? Why would he see a random field from the day after tomorrow? After much contemplation, he let it pass and hoped that another vision might clarify things.

The following day brought an image of the same field. Again, the King recognized the field but did not understand the significance of seeing the same vision two days in a row. The next morning, however, was different. The vision was of the same field, but this time flames engulfed the sheaves of dried corn stalks with embers shooting high up into the sky. He knew this event had yet to occur, so maybe there was time to warn the farmer who owned the field.

The King sent word to the farmer, asking him to come to the castle. Upon arrival, the King's chamberlain escorted the farmer to the throne room.

“You are probably wondering why I have sent for you,” began the King.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” replied the nervous farmer.

“I am curious to know if your fields have ever caught fire?”

“Well, yes, indeed they have. Every three years, I set fire to one of my many fields to clear away stubble and weeds before planting my next crop. In fact, I plan to burn one of my fields the day after tomorrow. Why do you ask?”

The King smiled, not wishing to share his newfound ability to witness the future, and simply said, “No reason, really. I’m trying to learn how farmers in the kingdom care for their fields. Thank you so much for taking time out of your schedule to answer my summons. It is appreciated.”

With that, the relieved farmer bowed and turned to leave the King’s throne room.

After the farmer left, the King mused, *at least I know the spell is doing precisely what it is supposed to be doing.*



One week later, another vision of relevance came. This one full of dark clouds, pelting rain, and strong winds causing trees to bend and sway with each gust. The King didn’t see any particular harm that might come from the storm, and he certainly could not control the weather, so he took no action.

Sure enough, two days after the vision, torrential downpours drenched the kingdom. The streams and rivers filled with runoff from the fields and overflowed their banks. Tree limbs snapped, and debris flew this way and that across the land. The King watched from a narrow window high in one of the castle’s turrets. *Yes. The spell is indeed doing exactly what it is supposed to be doing.*



Autumn turned to winter, the days became colder, and the amount of daylight dwindled. Then when the chill of winter finally began to fade, the King had another vision. He saw himself standing at the far end of the drawbridge, looking at the front gate of the castle with the drawbridge down and the front gate open. Much as with his first vision of the field, he didn’t know what to make of it, so he waited to see if another vision might help him understand what he saw.

The following day the vision came from a different vantage point, though it was still an image of the drawbridge. This time a man dressed in black led his horse over the bridge and into the castle grounds. A sword and shield hung from the horse’s saddle. The King couldn’t tell from the vision whether the man was friendly or seeking to bring harm to the castle.

Two days passed, and the King and a small company of palace guards assembled in the castle’s courtyard. At high noon, the man from the King’s vision appeared out of the neighboring woods riding a horse and soon arrived at the drawbridge. The King instructed the guards to let the man pass through the gate. When the man and his horse entered the courtyard, he immediately dismounted and knelt down on one knee before the King.

“Your Majesty. I did not expect to see you here waiting for me.”

The King replied, “And how may we be of service to you?”

The man stood and said, “Your Majesty. I bring most distressing news to you. There is an army from Dimlamar on its way here. They are one hundred men strong. They should arrive here in three days’ time.”

“I am grateful for such an advanced warning. But how is it that you come by this information?”

“I live on the outskirts of the Kingdom of Imlay, not far from the lands to the south. From time to time, a knight from Dimlamar will ride through my fields and stop to ask for water and hay for his horse. To stay on good terms with the knights, I oblige. And

while the horse eats its fill, I talk to the knights. Sometimes they speak of their plans.”

“And why would you risk your safety to let us know of their plans?”

“A fair question. Over the past few months, some of the knights have taken advantage of my generosity. They helped themselves to some of my harvest and even took several head of cattle. I don’t mind providing an occasional helping hand, but I fear their exploits might put me in jeopardy. So I came to request your protection.”

“Come inside, then. We can speak more about this over food and drink.” The King signaled for one of his guards to take the man’s horse to the King’s stable.

“Thank you, sire. You are most gracious.”



THREE

Knowing an army of knights from the south marched toward the castle and was three days away gave the King and his generals time to develop a strategy. Part of their plan involved sending word out to all able-bodied citizens asking them to report to the castle in two days. Additionally, the King instructed his troops to gather as much food and water as they could and stockpile it inside the castle, just in case things did not go well.

Two days before the arrival of knights from the south, the King had another vision. This time a chest filled with gold coins appeared, but the chest and where it sat remained unrecognizable. *Perhaps tomorrow's vision might help me to understand the purpose of what I saw.* But no other visions of any help came the next morning.

The day before the attack, several hundred subjects gathered at the High King's Castle. They were instructed to take cover in various locations around the field through which anyone approaching the castle would ride. Some hid in trees, and some dug ditches and covered themselves with branches. They all lay in wait through the night as they didn't know when these knights might appear.

On the third day after receiving a warning of the attack, the army of knights from the southern Kingdom of Dimlamar came out of the woods and onto the field, approaching the castle only to find the drawbridge closed. Their leader shouted up to the guard stationed at the top of the castle wall.

"Lower the drawbridge and surrender yourselves! Should you refuse, we are prepared to lay siege to your castle until you do!"

The King stepped forward, presenting himself in the crenel directly above the gate, dressed in his suit of armor, holding his shield with the family crest. He waited for the shouts of men on both sides of the battlement to die down.

"Our scouts detected your approach several days ago. We will not surrender."

The horses of the attacking knights grew restless, prancing about this way and that.

"You do not look so formidable. I only see several dozen of your knights. We have you outmatched."

The King signaled his bugler to sound the call to assemble. With that call, all of the kingdom's citizens, several hundred strong, appeared from their hiding places and surrounded the attackers. Armed with swords, pitchforks, and spears made of wood with iron tips, they began to shout. At another signal from the King, they stopped their cry.

The King shouted down, "What do you knights from the south say now? Do you still wish to attack us? It is you who are outnumbered, four to one by my count. If you wish to live, then surrender, and we may let you return to your homes. The decision is yours. But be quick about it!"

Several of the attackers huddled together. Then the leader of the knights rode back to the edge of the moat. He looked up at the King and said, "Perhaps we might strike a bargain?"

The King responded, "And what do you have to offer?"

"We will give you a chest of gold coins if you allow us to leave unharmed."

"I see," replied the King. *So another vision has proven to be correct.* "Let me confer with my generals." The King disappeared from view, letting several long moments pass, hoping to make his adversary nervous.

When the King reappeared, he said, "We accept your terms under one condition. You must never again appear anywhere within our borders, even those lands on our southern fringes."

Again, the commanders of the attacking garrison gathered to

discuss the terms of the surrender. The lead knight yelled up, “We agree with your conditions, will give you the chest of gold, and swear to never trespass on your lands again.”

And with that, four of the attackers dismounted, lifted a chest of gold coins from the back of their supply wagon, and placed it on the ground. They returned to their mounts, turned, and galloped off.

Convinced his foe was gone, the King ordered the drawbridge lowered and sent out men to retrieve the chest of gold coins. He also sent a group of his best knights to follow the would-be attackers at a distance to make sure they kept their word and returned to the south. Before he dismissed all who had helped in the confrontation, the King spoke words of thanks and made certain each person left with several of the gold coins left by the attackers.

At the end of the day, the King felt good about finally being able to use his newfound ability to help his subjects. He realized he might even have gained a bit of respect from them for his handling of the situation.

FOUR

Every morning after the incident at the castle gate, the King anticipated receipt of more revelatory visions. But once again, weeks went by without a vision of any use. And while he had agreed to accept the spell to help his kingdom, it did occur to him that maybe the visions might reveal some aspect of his own life, perhaps when he might meet a young lady to become his queen. Undoubtedly, plenty of maidens resided in the Kingdom of Imlay, but finding the right one might prove difficult.

As spring burst forth across the kingdom, the King finally did have a vision of a maiden. He did not recognize her, but she was quite beautiful. *How might I meet her? Patience. Wait for another vision*, he reminded himself.

His patience soon paid off. The very next morning, the vision showed the same woman, this time in front of her cottage. Several tall trees stood in the background and a fence surrounded the front yard. The King called in his chamberlain, described the cottage and its yard full of colorful flowers now coming into bloom, and asked if he knew where it was.

“In my younger days, I would take long rides on my steed,” explained the chamberlain. “I passed many a home and rode through many fields and forests. This home may be in the Western Woods, north of the Green Hills. Would you like me to organize a party and look for it?”

The King’s eyes lit up. “Yes. That would be wonderful! But before you do that, let me describe to you the maiden who lives there. She has long hair, the color of golden honey. Her skin is fair, and she has hazel eyes.”



The chamberlain acknowledged the directive, bowed, and was gone. Later that day, a party of riders left the castle in hopes of finding this maiden and her home. Their search lasted for many days as they followed every road and path in the kingdom. Finally, one afternoon, they came upon the cottage the King had described. There was a fence around the yard, tall trees surrounded the place, and the garden was full of flowers.

The King's chamberlain dismounted, walked up to the front door, and knocked several times. The door opened, and the woman, who the King had described perfectly, answered.

She asked, "Yes? May I help you?"

The chamberlain removed his hat and bowed. "My Lady, I am the chamberlain of the King. He has sent me with an invitation for you to join him at his castle for a late lunch. May I tell him that you accept his offer?"

The woman, quite taken by what she heard, crossed her arms over her chest, catching her breath. After a moment, she replied, "Why would the King want to extend such an invitation to me? I am only a simple country girl taking care of my father, who is quite old. I cannot leave him here alone as he is unable to care for himself."

"My Lady, might I suggest this. I will ride back to the castle and explain this to the King. Perhaps we might send a carriage to bring you and your father to the castle. That way, your father can be tended to by the lady-in-waiting while you dine with the King."

"I don't know what to say. But how can I refuse the request of the King? If it is possible, could you return here the day after tomorrow, and my father and I will be ready? Say, midday?"

"Yes, my Lady. That will be acceptable. Until the day after tomorrow, then. I bid you farewell."

The woman closed the door. The chamberlain mounted his horse, and the riders of his party trotted off toward the High King's Castle to deliver the news that the invitation had been given and accepted.

The King felt nervous the entire morning. None of his visions during the past two days had given him any hint about how this first meeting would unfold. He instructed his servants to set out the finest china, polish the silverware, and fill the dining room with freshly cut flowers from the castle garden. He asked his chef to prepare one of his favorite meals and then went down to his wine cellar to select a vintage appropriate for the main course. *Everything had to be perfect.*

At the second hour past high noon, the carriage entered the castle courtyard. The horses came to a practiced halt, and the coachman climbed off his perch and opened the side door. After helping the lady down, he turned his attention to her father and made sure his footing was firm after he touched the ground. A lady-in-waiting greeted the woman and her father, leading them inside to the foyer before taking their cloaks. There the King stood waiting for them, dressed in his formal military jacket, white trousers, and polished black boots.

Being a simple country woman raised by a single father, the King's guest did not own any ball gowns or elegant attire. The aureate-colored dress she wore, the only one she owned, had once belonged to her mother. The flutter sleeves and tea-length skirt flattered her slender frame. It did not have any bows or ruffles, but a matching sash encircled her waist. Her long hair was pulled back and arranged in a waterfall braid. She wore no jewelry as she owned none.

"Welcome, my Lady," the King said. "To whom do I have the pleasure of meeting?"

The woman curtsied and replied, "Your Majesty. My name is Wynneth. My father and I are honored that you would invite us to your castle." Wynneth's father looked nervous as he bowed slightly, communicating his respect for the King. When he looked up again, his face flashed a radiant smile full of pride.

"Welcome then, Lady Wynneth."

The King turned his attention to Wynneth's father. "I have arranged for my chamberlain to escort you on a tour of the castle and its grounds and then to treat you to samples of some of our kitchen's dishes."

Wynneth's father bowed again. "Thank you, Your Majesty. I am most grateful for your hospitality."

The King's chamberlain led Wynneth's father out of the room.

The King, taking a moment to study his guest, said, "My Lady. I have to say you look most beautiful. I am honored you accepted my invitation. Shall we find our way to the dining room?"

As they walked down the main hallway, Wynneth said, "You will have to excuse me if I look around at everything, Your Majesty. I have never been in a castle before, and the stonework, the paintings, and the suits of armor amaze me. It all speaks well of your family and its history."

"Thank you. Sometimes it is difficult for me to accept all of this when I know there are subjects ... no, let me rephrase that ... when I know there are people throughout the kingdom who are not so blessed. I wish I could share some of this with everyone."

When they entered the dining room, the King pulled out the chair for Wynneth and gently pushed it in once she sat down. He walked around to the other end of the table and seated himself. While the servants served the first course and poured wine, the King began by asking questions of his guest.

"So, tell me about yourself. I know only your name and have only now learned that."

"There is really not much to tell, sire. My mother died when I was four years old. I do not have any brothers or sisters. It is just my father and I living in our cottage, growing our own food, raising animals we sometimes sell, and enjoying all that nature around us

has to offer. I consider myself quite blessed. What about you, my Lord?”

The King sat trying to focus, thinking about what to say, but all he could do was stare at this woman and marvel at her beauty. He finally found his voice again and shared, “I, too, lost my mother when I was young, Queen Fiorra. And, of course, I lost my father, King Mathirion, only one year ago. I still think of him as the King. I have been trying my best ever since he passed to be the sort of king he was. He set a very high bar. And I think that’s a good thing.”

“Well, you are doing a splendid job, from what I can tell. The few people with whom we have been in contact with all seem to think that.”

“Thank you for those kind words. You’d be surprised how little feedback I get. People are afraid to render any criticism, I suppose. But to answer your question, I like to take long rides out in the country. I want to learn more about the kingdom and its people. And I like to read. My father collected quite a large number of books in his time.”

After an awkward pause between the two of them, Wynneth spoke. “Your Majesty? May I ask a question of you?”

“Certainly. Anything.”

“How is it that you came to invite me to your castle? I have never visited this place and only rarely find my way into town.”

“A fair question,” replied the King. *Perhaps a little white lie is permissible in this instance*, he thought before continuing. “One of the courtiers noticed you on one of your trips into town and thought I should meet you. Apparently, some folks are concerned they have no queen or heir to the throne and want me to spend time addressing that.” The King laughed but still did not mention anything about the spell or its visions.

After another pause in the conversation, the King changed the subject. “So how do you like your soup?”

“Everything is wonderful. And the wine is well matched for the meal.”

“Thank you. I picked out the bottle only this morning. The grapes were grown here on the castle grounds. We employ a particularly skilled vintner. We are so lucky.”

Their soup finished, waiters brought out plates with roasted pheasant, small broiled potatoes, and a medley of fresh vegetables. The two ate in silence for a time.

But the nervousness each felt eventually fell victim to the wine. They spoke of all sorts of things and found they had many mutual interests. The King mentioned the incident with the knights from the south. Wynneth commented how people were pleasantly surprised to receive the gold coins. The time passed quickly, and when the meal was finished, the King asked, “I am wondering if I might call on you again, assuming your father will approve.”

They both smiled at one another.

Wynneth replied, “Most certainly. You are a charming host, and I would like for my father to get to know you. He hasn’t many years left, I’m afraid. And I know he worries I spend too much time tending to his needs and not enough time tending to my own.”

“Good,” said the King. “Then it’s settled. I will ride out to your cottage one week from today. Perhaps we can share lunch and maybe a walk around your land?”

“I would enjoy that.”

The king rose, walked around the table, and pulled out Wynneth’s chair. They returned to the foyer where Wynneth’s father waited for them.

“I must say,” said the King to Wynneth’s father, “you have raised a remarkable daughter. You should be most proud.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty. I am,” replied the elderly gentleman, bowing slightly.

Once they had put on their cloaks, the King walked out with them to the waiting carriage. He smiled and waved as they rode off.

I hope that went as well for her as it did for me!



The King and Lady Wynneth enjoyed many visits together over the weeks and months following their first meeting. The King made occasional day trips out to Wynneth's cottage in the Western Woods. She showed him all of the flowers in her garden and took many long walks through the forest with him. Before long, the King fell hopelessly in love.

FIVE

One particular morning in midsummer, the King woke with the dawn bell in a cold sweat and a dreadful premonition. It contained the image of his new love lying on the ground, presumably dead, with a puddle of blood next to her motionless body. People gathered around her, anxious and murmuring.

The King calmed his growing apprehension by reminding himself that this terrible thing would not happen until the day after tomorrow. There was still time to prevent it from occurring.

But the vision gave no clue as to where this event would happen or exactly when it would happen. *I must send word to Wynneth and bring her to the castle for safekeeping!*

Then a horrible prospect struck him. *What if the event he saw in his vision happens because of his efforts to save her life? What if something happens on their way to the castle? What if robbers attack her escort? What if enemies of the kingdom attack the castle after Wynneth arrives? What if, what if, what if? And what if he did nothing?*

Once again, he sent for Amarach and, upon his arrival, presented his dilemma.

"I cannot help you, sire. Any decision you make must be yours and yours alone."

"But ..."

"Until this point, you have not acted to change the future the visions have shown you. You prepared yourself for the incident at the gate because of the stranger who rode from the south and warned you. Your vision did not dictate how to respond to the planned attack.

"Seeking out the woman your previous visions have shown did not change anything. The future unfolded exactly the way in

which it was supposed to in each instance. Now you are talking about trying to change an event shown to you. What if the event will happen no matter what you decide to do? Perhaps it's not about whether you can prevent something from happening, but rather something happens because you tried to prevent it."

The King fell silent. Feeling sick to his stomach, he walked over to the window to look out at the countryside. Out there lived his subjects, people he had sworn to protect, protect with his life if necessary. Now his actions might cause the death of his newfound love.

This ability to catch glimpses of the future is a curse, not a blessing, he realized with regret.

He turned back to face the mage. "If what you say is true, then no matter what I choose to do might be the very thing that causes Wynneth's death. Is there no way out of this situation?"

"Do you remember that I told you the spell would require payment?"

Hesitant, he answered, "I do."

"And have you made any such payment yet?"

"No. Not that I recall."

"Perhaps this is the time that the spell might require you to make such a payment."

The King looked perplexed. "What are you saying?"

"What if whatever action you take—or don't take—in an effort to save this woman's life does indeed prevent her death? If I were to speculate, I would guess the spell might then demand its payment."

"I follow you. So, you are saying the results are not inevitable?"

"That's right. Remember, the event you saw is not supposed to happen until the day after tomorrow. That means you still have another morning in which to receive a vision when you wake. Perhaps that vision might give you some information to help you make your decision."

"Yes," said the King, pointing a finger at the mage. "Yes. I understand. If tomorrow my vision shows Wynneth alive and well, then I know whatever my decision is today will save her life."

"Just remember, sire. There is no guarantee tomorrow's vision will have anything to do with this situation. You know all too well your visions do not follow any predictable pattern."

"You're right. But it's a chance worth taking. I will order my knights to go and bring Wynneth and her father here. I'm betting my knights can handle any situation that might endanger her life along the way should it occur. And I'm certain this castle is secure against any attack."

"Very good, sire," nodded the mage. "Will there be anything else today?"

"No. You may go. Thank you for your counsel. I pray it will all work out."

SIX

Very early the next morning the King woke from his dreams with a start. The dreams depicted terrible images of death and destruction. He lay back down and closed his eyes, praying the dreams would not return. Several minutes after the dawn bell rang, he opened his eyes again and realized he had not seen any future vision. This puzzled him as this was the first morning since Amarach cast the spell in which he did not receive a glimpse of the future.

Not knowing what else to do, he got up, dressed, and descended the stone staircase to his throne room. He called for a messenger and asked him to deliver an urgent note to his mage. Hours passed before the mage answered his summons.

The King relayed his dreams and the absence of any vision to the wizard. "I'm sorry, but I can't stop thinking about this. It's as if I am missing an old friend who just died. I'm starting to get really worried about what this might mean. Did the nothingness mean I won't have a day after tomorrow?"

"It might," responded the mage. "It might not."

"Always speaking in riddles, are we?" The King responded, frustrated.

"I am sorry, sire. But you knew the visions could sometimes be impossible to interpret and that the spell would one day ask a price of you when you accepted its power."

"I know. But it makes me wonder if some action I undertook in an attempt to change the future caused this to happen. As you pointed out yesterday, it is the first time I have tried to change the future shown to me. Maybe I'm not supposed to bring Wynneth to the castle. Maybe I should let time play out the way shown to me. But am I really supposed to allow my love to die? Did I 'break time' if there is such a thing?"

"I warned you that time does not like to be tampered with. Making changes without understanding the ramifications of the change could make things worse. Perhaps you will save a life by your actions. It might be that time is now asking for a life in return."

"And that life would be my own?"

"That's right."

The King felt a shiver run down his spine.



The following morning the King did not come down from his sleeping chambers for breakfast at his usual time. Concerned, his chamberlain decided to check on the King's well-being. He knocked lightly on the wooden door to the King's bedchamber. There was no answer.

"Your Majesty? Are you awake?"

Still no answer.

"Your Majesty? Are you alright?"

Again, no answer. The servant pushed the door open and peeked in. He let out a gasp when he saw the King lying in the middle of the floor. There was a pool of blood next to his body. The spell had come and collected its payment.

The Innkeeper



ONE

The morning sun washed over the fields just outside the village, painting the treetops the color of apricots. The new light found a stranger sitting on the stone bench encircling the fountain in the center of the little town. He wore a long white robe with a braided cord wrapped around his waist and a confused look on his face.

The stranger closed his eyes and waited patiently for the sun's rays to touch his face. Even with his eyes closed, he sensed the brightness increasing all around him. Once convinced his surroundings were completely visible, he opened his eyes and surveyed the buildings around the square's perimeter. He had seen this setting before. He knew it. He just couldn't remember when.

Again he waited. He had a feeling the villagers might want to meet a visitor from some faraway place. But he couldn't explain why.

A young boy darted out into the square, exuberant with a shot of energy from the new day. The boy ignored the stranger and disappeared down a side street.



The stranger stood and slowly walked to the entrance of the inn at the west end of the village square and let himself in. Once inside, it took several moments for the stranger's eyes to adjust from the bright sunlight to the darkness of the stone-walled tavern.

The room loomed empty at this early hour. The regulars, the townsfolk who took their first meal of the day at the inn, had yet to arrive. The stranger chose a table in the back corner. He paid little heed to its wobbly legs and sat down and waited.

A tall, bearded man clad in a clean white apron came out from the kitchen with a large pitcher of water and began preparing the morning's coffee. Looking around, he noticed the stranger sitting across the room.

"Good morning, traveler. I'll be right with you."

The stranger nodded and continued to sit patiently.

A minute later, the man came back into the room and approached the table. "Now, what can I get you this beautiful new morning?"

The stranger looked at the man and said in a soft voice, "Are you the innkeeper?"

"That I am."

"I haven't anything to offer you in return for food or drink."

"No matter," replied the innkeeper with an understanding smile. "I'm always happy to greet a visitor to our little town with a free meal. It might be a while before you get situated here. Until then, maybe you can help me out around the inn. Washing dishes. Changing sheets. You know, odds and ends like that."

"You are most gracious. I'm willing to help out any way I can."

"Alrighty. Now that that's settled, what can I get you?"

"Some of that coffee you're brewing would be fine. And some bread and fruit if you have it. Don't go to any trouble, though."

“Not at all. Oh. And sorry about the wobble.” The innkeeper bent down to adjust one of the table’s legs. “There. That oughta do it,” he said as he turned to answer the low whistle of a tea kettle.

The innkeeper walked back into the kitchen and returned quickly with an empty mug. He filled it with fresh coffee and served his guest. The stranger blew on it before taking a sip. When he set the mug back down, he said to the innkeeper, “So what I don’t understand is why I can’t seem to remember anything. My name, where I’m from. It’s a very helpless sort of feeling.”

“I understand,” replied the innkeeper, folding his arms. “You’re not the first person to arrive here with that problem. It happens quite frequently, actually. It’s all part of the process.”

The stranger started taking sips of the coffee, then asked, “By the way, what’s the name of this place? I mean, what’s the name of this village?”

The innkeeper laughed. “So. You travel all the way to a faraway place, and you don’t know its name? Now that doesn’t make much sense.” Without answering the question, he returned to the kitchen and prepared a list of chores he imagined the stranger could do. When the freshly baked bread cooled, he took several slices, a bowl of fresh fruit, and the list out to the stranger.

“Here you go,” said the innkeeper, setting the bread and fruit on the table. “And here’s a list of chores for you to do. Nothing too fancy. And no hurry on any of them.”

The stranger picked up the list, gave it a quick look, and said, “Okay. I’ll start after breakfast. Thank you again for your kindness.”

“Oh, you’re more than welcome. Maybe tomorrow we can have a little talk. You deserve some answers. And maybe by then, you might remember a few more things, eh?”

The stranger took another sip of his coffee and said, “Fair enough.”

TWO

The next morning the innkeeper awoke, dressed, and clambered down the back stairs to the kitchen, just as he did every morning. He poured water into a percolator and placed dough into the oven. While he waited for the coffee to brew and the bread to bake, he went out into the Great Room to open the blinds and make the place ready for the townsfolk who would soon arrive.

And there in the back corner sat the stranger in his same seat, watching the day unfold through the window. The innkeeper walked over to the stranger’s table and offered a pleasant greeting. “Good mornin’. Your coffee is just about finished brewing.” Then added, “Have you remembered anything yet?”

“Actually, I have,” replied the stranger. “I think I’m from a different place. I remember a bright light and a feeling of deep peace. Before that, I think I was standing in a field surrounded by many people. They were all familiar to me somehow. Each one wanted to embrace me. They wanted me to feel welcome. And they thanked me, though I can’t seem to remember why. Before that? Nothing.”

“Good. I am glad some memories are returning. In time, other memories will come back to you. Like I said yesterday, you’re not the first person to arrive here and have difficulty remembering things. Okay, I’ll be back in a few with your breakfast.”

Several minutes later, the innkeeper returned to the dining room with a tray containing coffee, a bowl of steaming hot porridge, and a small jar of honey with a dipper. The innkeeper unloaded the tray and pulled up a chair, took off his apron, and sat down. Before the stranger touched any of his breakfast, he looked across the table and said, “You never answered my question yesterday. Where is this place? Does it have a name?” He paused and then continued after a moment, “Is this heaven? Am I dead?”

“Well, now,” replied the innkeeper clearing his throat, “those

are some pretty important questions. And they all deserve answers. Yes, they do. So, yes. Yes, to both questions. Yes, this place is what some folks might call heaven, though it's a name given by those in the mortal world. I prefer to think of it as a place of rejuvenation, an in-between place. But we'll talk about that more later. Oh, and yes to the second question. The body you once knew, I'm afraid, is no more. The essence of who you were in that other place is who sits here now with me."

The stranger sat silent for a while, contemplating the innkeeper's answers. Before reaching for his spoon and sampling the porridge, he said, "As bits and pieces of memories started coming to me yesterday, I wondered if that was the case. So, is everyone else here dead, too?"

"More or less, but only if you use the word 'dead' to mean the physical body they once inhabited is no more. The fact that you and I are now having a conversation means your spirit is most definitely alive, yes? And new people do appear here every so often, just like you did."

"And they don't remember anything about their previous life either?"

"Not initially. But like you, they do eventually recall things. Maybe not everything, and maybe not all at once."

"And what is it that we, those of us who come to this place, are supposed to do once we get here?"

"The short answer is whatever you want. Some folks find mentors who teach them things. It's sort of what you might call school, but without all of the formality and tests and grades and such. The single biggest thing, though, is for everyone to learn to feel happiness and joy, for everyone to rejuvenate, to recover from whatever trials and tribulations they might have experienced in their previous incarnation, and to figure out what they might want to do next."

The stranger gathered honey on the dipper and quickly transferred it over to his bowl of porridge where he allowed the honey to run down onto the rest of his breakfast.

"It's time we figure out your name. Whatcha say?" proposed the innkeeper.

The stranger cocked his head, curious. "And how exactly do we do that?"

"Everyone has a name here. Whether it's your forever name or the name given to you before your arrival. One day, when you leave, someone will likely give you another name. But that will only be what people call you while you're away."

The innkeeper watched the stranger, giving him a moment to absorb that part of the story.

"You see, one day you will return to another world. After a time here, you'll be given a chance to choose which world you want to go and what sort of life you wish to live. Then you'll have the opportunity to learn all of the things you need to know in order to succeed in whatever place you choose."

"This is a lot to take in," said the stranger. "It might help if I knew what I did before coming here."

The innkeeper pulled out a piece of paper from his shirt pocket and unfolded it. "I did some research last evening. We keep records on everyone who has ever come through here, oh yes, we do. Turns out you've been here before. Several times. Quite a few times, actually."

"I agree," confirmed the stranger, nodding, "and that explains why everything looked familiar when I first arrived." He paused for a moment, lost in thought, then said matter-of-factly, "Huh. So, I have been here before."

"Yep. According to my records, the name you had in your previous life was Mims. A simple name. And it seems as though

you had a talent for writing. Maybe you were an author before you arrived?”

“Yes. That’s right,” agreed Mims. “I think I wrote stories.”

“Okay. It’s good you’re remembering this. You’re making great progress.”

Other people started entering the tavern. “I have to get back to work now. Folks will be wanting their first meal of the day. We can talk more later.”

“That would be fine. And thanks for helping me to remember things.”

“That’s my job,” said the innkeeper with a wink. He put his apron back on and turned his attention to the folks sitting at the next table.

Mims picked at his porridge and sipped his coffee. *So, this is heaven. Huh.*

THREE

Several days later, after collecting and washing the morning dishes, the innkeeper invited Mims to take a break.

“Seems like you’re recovering nicely,” said the innkeeper. “Perhaps it’s time I answer a few more of your questions.”

Mims nodded in agreement as they walked out to the Great Room to talk.

“This place, this inn, is a guest house,” began the innkeeper. “It’s the first place everyone comes to when they arrive back at this in-between place. I take care of them for a few days until they recover from their journey. Then I introduce each individual to one of our caregivers living in the village. You live there for the remainder of your stay, no matter how long that might be. The care provider will guide you as things start making more sense. They will answer your questions and help you feel more comfortable.”

The innkeeper waited a moment to give Mims time to comment, then continued. “I’m thinking I might call on one of my favorite helpers for you. Her name is Gabrielle. She is a particularly good guide. And she’s a pretty good cook, too. Yep, you won’t be going hungry.”

Mims asked, “And what about you? What part do you play in all of this? You don’t seem like one of the folks who come and go and stay only for a while.”

“Nope. You’re right about that. I’ve been here quite a long time. Quite a long time, indeed. Someone has to keep this inn going.” The innkeeper’s laugh echoed across the now-empty Great Room.

“Are you God?” asked Mims.

“Now that is quite the question! You do have a writer’s imagination.” The innkeeper flashed a quick grin. “Why would you think that?”

“Well, it seems to me that if this is heaven, then someone needs to be in charge, and, in this case, it seems like you’re the one in charge here. I always assumed God was the one in charge of heaven. But then again, I always envisioned God having white hair and a long beard, and you don’t have either.”

“Sound reasoning,” replied the innkeeper. “But to answer your question, I’m not really sure. If you were to ask me if I brought the universe into existence in six days, the answer is definitely no. I do wonder if stories like that are the fanciful creations of ancient bards and not a factual account of how things came to be. But do I watch over the comings and goings of souls from this place to the mortal world and back? I am guilty of that.”

“I don’t know what to think,” said Mims with a look of confusion. “None of this is what I expected the afterlife to be. I might need some time to make sense of everything.”

“Alright, then. How about tomorrow after breakfast I take you to Gabrielle’s cottage and introduce you two to each other? It’s only a couple of blocks from here. I think you need to get out and explore this wondrous place. But you’re welcome to continue helping me out around here if you like.”

“Thank you for the answers. It helps. And sure. I’ll still help out.”

FOUR

Gabrielle had shoulder-length brown hair with the slightest bit of curl to it, amber eyes that twinkled if they caught the light just right, and a slightly asymmetric nose. If he had to guess her age, and that would be her age in the mortal world, he would say she was in her forties. Mims found her to be a most accommodating guide and quite knowledgeable about all things regarding the in-between place and the comings and goings with the mortal world, just as the innkeeper promised. *The innkeeper had chosen well.*

After returning from his afternoon chores at the inn one day, Mims entered Gabrielle’s cottage and found her sitting in the living room waiting for him.

She asked, “And how are things at the inn?”

“Pretty much the same as they are every day,” answered Mims.

“Come. Have a seat with me.”

Mims sat down on the sofa in front of the picture window.

“So,” started Gabrielle. “You’ve been here in this place of in-between for some time now. What’s on your mind? You must have some questions for me.”

Mims considered his answer for a minute or two before speaking, then offered, “It seems as though every soul here and in the mortal world is supposed to have some sort of purpose, yes?”

“That’s right.”

“I have been trying to think about what my purpose might be going forward and about what plan I arrived at during my previous visit here. I just can’t remember. Was I supposed to do something in my most recent life to make amends for a past transgression? Learn about love or how to deal with fear? I don’t know what my purpose was and what it’s now supposed to be.”

Gabrielle gave Mims another minute to see if he might continue, then said, "If I remember things from your previous stay, you wanted to help people."

Mims shifted his gaze from the paintings on the opposite wall of the living room to his hostess. "You seem to know a lot about me and my past life. Why is that?"

"Believe it or not, I was your guide when you were here the last time. I know what life you chose. And I remember you having difficulty accepting that any good might come of it."

"If you know about my life, or perhaps my lives, then how did I do? Did I help people?"

Gabrielle gave a broad smile and replied, "Yes, my friend. You most certainly did. You helped a lot of folks in your most recent incarnation."

"Then why can't I remember any of that? Seems like every time I start to recall more of my life, I get a bad feeling inside. I don't understand that. Any ideas on why that might be?"

"You did help many people in your life, and you did so quite well. It's just that many of those same people did not fully appreciate what you did for them. In fact, some became downright jealous of you because you were so good."

"Really?"

"Yes. They didn't deserve you and the things you did for them. They often felt inadequate when you were around them. They did not have your skills, your talent, or your resources. The very things they needed from you were the very things that caused them angst. And they would often misdirect anger about their lot in life at you when their anger should have been directed at themselves."

"But I did help folks, yes?"

"That's right," said Gabrielle, pushing back in her reclining chair. "I know you are having difficulty recalling certain aspects of

your previous life. Maybe this might help. When you started writing in your later years, you used some of those less fortunate souls as role models for your characters and their untoward lives as source material for your stories. I'm curious, though. Do you remember any of your life before you became an author?"

"No," sighed Mims. "And I'm starting to think I may not want to remember."

"I understand. But it is important that you do remember. Let me help you." Gabrielle continued, "You met a woman in your late twenties. You were lonely. She was looking for a way to escape from a very dysfunctional family, though you didn't know that at the time. The two of you got married and, some years later, had two children. But your marriage did not go well. You both had things that needed fixing, and, instead of working on those things together, you each went off in different directions. The marriage eventually fell apart."

Mims rubbed his hands together and asked, "Why do I not remember any of this?"

"Probably because what happened next wounded you so deeply that you spent the rest of your life trying to block out all memory of it. So, for you to grow and move beyond where you are now, I need to tell you about those things."

"Okay. If you must. I'm placing my trust in you and the innkeeper." Mims felt an uncomfortable tightness beginning to grow in his stomach.

"Alright, then," acknowledged Gabrielle. "As your marriage fell apart, your wife made some very serious allegations against you. The things she accused you of were not true, of course. But as so often happens in such instances, it is difficult to prove a negative. And so you lost contact with your children when they were quite young, and, despite your repeated efforts when they were adults, you never saw them again."

“Wow.” Mims winced. “I am starting to remember that now. There was so much pain. So much pain. And for so long.”

“I know. And I am sorry I had to make you feel that pain again. But the only way to continue on your spiritual journey is to examine your previous lives and learn from them. As difficult as this is for you, Mims, I think it will help you choose what your next life will be.”

“So, was I right when I said our reincarnations are about payment for past transgressions?”

“Well, yes and no,” answered Gabrielle. “The journey each soul must make is not about receiving some sort of punishment for actions you did wrong or because you failed to learn a thing in a previous life. That is not what our journeys are about. Souls here love you and forgive you. We are not here to judge you. Rather, everyone is trying to help one another develop into the entities we ultimately wish to become. Do you mind if I ask you another question?”

Mims closed his eyes and quietly replied, “No.”

“Why did you become a writer?” asked Gabrielle. “If my review of your most recent life is correct,” Gabrielle said, “writing was not the occupation for which you trained when you were last here.”

“Nope. And I don’t remember ever studying creative writing, here or during my mortal life, if that’s what you mean. Now to your question. Why did I become a writer? As I think back on this past life, I recall many times when I felt like I wanted to become part of something, part of a group, or a family. I wanted to feel loved. I guess I assumed if I became a published author, people would be more inclined to gravitate my way. Folks seem to hold published authors in high esteem for some reason or another. Who knows?”

“Go on,” encouraged Gabrielle. “Seems natural you would want to be part of a family when yours was ripped away.”

“After losing my children, a deep, dark hole grew inside my being. I wanted to fill it in any way I could, to find other people who might fill the void, to be around folks who would call me and invite me to their family events.”

“And did that happen?”

“Well, somewhat. But not to the extent that I wanted it to.” Mims looked down at the floor again, avoiding Gabrielle’s eyes.

“And did you find things got better as more of your writing was published?”

“No.”

“So what lesson might all of this be trying to teach you?”

“Lesson? Right,” Mims laughed sarcastically. “The conclusion I would often come to was simply this: people don’t seem to need me in their lives as much as I need them.”

“Do you really think that?”

“Well, it’s either that, or I’m just not the kind of person folks want to be around.”

“Now I find that hard to believe,” proffered Gabrielle. “You are smart, interesting, hardworking, and worthy of praise.”

“Thanks for the compliments. But as a former supervisor once told me, your greatest assets are also your greatest liabilities.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Those character traits you just mentioned? I sometimes wondered if certain individuals in my life looked at me, thought about everything I’d done, and then looked at their own lives and realized they didn’t have much to show for their time on Earth. Maybe they didn’t include me in their little groups because they didn’t want that reminder. I’m like a bright, shiny mirror. When they looked in that mirror, they didn’t like what they saw.”

Gabrielle raised her eyebrows and simply said, “Wow.”

“Yep. Wow and kind of sad, too. Not a pretty picture.”

Gabrielle brought her reclining chair to its upright position, stood, and said, “I think we’ve done enough hard work for now. How about I serve us some dinner? I’ve been simmering some stew all day long. It should be ready soon.”

“Sounds good. And thanks for your guidance.” Mims nodded at Gabrielle and said, “The innkeeper was right in suggesting I seek out your advice.”



The following morning at breakfast, Mims asked Gabrielle about something else bothering him.

“The innkeeper said I’ve been to this place of in-between several times, maybe even more than several times. I got to thinking about this last night as I lay in bed. Seems to me there might be different levels of souls. Young souls, old souls. Things like that.”

Gabrielle looked at Mims and grinned. “You, my friend, are making great progress! Your thinking is absolutely correct. The more times a soul passes through this place, the more mature that soul becomes.”

“So, how about you? Where are you on that scale of maturity? How many lifetimes have you lived?”

“Quite the question to ask! If we were in the mortal world, I might say, ‘You don’t ask a lady her age!’ But we are not in the mortal world. So, I will tell you I have lived more lifetimes than I can remember. Once a soul has learned everything the mortal world has to offer, a soul can elect to stay here, just as I have done. Using the terminology of the mortal world, you might say I have graduated to become an angel.”

“Really? You’re an angel?”

Gabrielle replied back with great amusement, “Yep. That’s right.”

“Wow. The longer I’m here, the more this whole living and dying thing astounds me. And I guess that explains why you know so much about me and my journey.”

FIVE

Gabrielle gave Mims time to think about things and grow more accustomed to being in the in-between place before engaging in further serious discussions. A few evenings later after dinner, they retired to the living room and took their usual seats.

“So, have you come to any conclusions about what lessons you think you need to learn during your stay here?”

“Yes,” replied Mims. “I think there are four great lessons each soul must learn.”

“Really? And what might they be? I’m curious to hear your thoughts.”

“The first thing is one must learn how to work. The second is one must learn how to play. Those are the easy ones, I think. The third lesson is when things start getting difficult.” Mims paused, then said, “One must learn how to love.”

“I’m with you so far,” concurred Gabrielle. “Keep going.”

“The fourth and final lesson, and I think the one I have failed at the most, is learning how to be loved.”

“Ah, yes. I agree with all of them. Perhaps you might go into more detail on each of these.”

“Sure,” agreed Mims. “When I look back at my previous life, I think I probably worked too much. And I always put work before play, even at the expense of all play.”

“So you are saying working can be a bad thing as well as a good thing?”

“Of course. Not working hard enough might get you labeled as being lazy. But working too much might serve as an avoidance mechanism, perhaps an escape from part of your life you don’t want to face. Things like dealing with family problems or relationships.

As I look back at my most recent life, I seem to remember working right up to the very end. Yes. I remember being obsessed with writing one last story. When I finished it, I climbed into bed, started dreaming, and then appeared here.”

“And how about learning to play?”

“Life is such a gift,” mused Mims. “If people don’t take time out to savor all the world has to offer them, then they miss out on so much. I never wanted to lie on my deathbed, regretting that I didn’t enjoy life. But I think I might very well have done just that.”

“And what about learning to love and learning how to be loved?”

“I’m reasonably sure I failed on both counts,” admitted Mims.

“Why do you say that?”

“I think I’ve always associated love with fear. Reaching out to another person entails a certain amount of risk. If you’re unwilling to take on that risk, then you may never know if another person feels the same way about you.”

“And learning how to be loved?”

“Simple. Despite all of your external skills and talents, if you have low self-esteem and believe yourself unworthy of receiving love, then you push people away.”

“Let’s go back to fear for a minute. You’ve mentioned fear several times in our discussions. What is it that you are afraid of?”

“Being alone. More specifically, dying alone.”

“So, on the one hand, you’re afraid of being alone, and on the other hand, you’re afraid of being rejected if you reach out to someone else for love. That’s a no-win situation.”

“It is. And I never quite figured out how to navigate that paradox.”



Several days passed before Mims felt like having another discussion with Gabrielle. One evening the two sat on the front porch of Gabrielle's cottage, listening to the crickets and watching the heavenly stars make their nightly appearance.

Mims started the conversation by saying, "I overheard some people at the inn this morning talking about soul families. Do you mind filling me in about what they are?"

"Soul families," repeated Gabrielle leaning back in her rocking chair. "Did you know you are a member of a soul family and that you've been evolving together throughout many lifetimes, each helping the others in their plans for spiritual growth, even if it means making some sort of sacrifice?"

"So, when you examine my prior life and see the damage done by my former wife and even my children, how can that be seen as helping my spiritual development?"

"Did you learn anything by going through that terrible scenario?"

"I suppose it strengthened my faith in whatever Higher Power is in charge of this universe. And it helped me appreciate the power of forgiveness. One more thing, now that I think of it. It taught me that there are people in one's life you can only love at a distance."

"And, despite the distance between you and your children, do you think they might have learned anything from you?"

"I am sad to say I never had the chance to ask them that question, so I don't know. And I have to confess, if members of a soul family are supposed to be helping one another grow, how is being part of an awful experience considered helpful?"

"Okay," started Gabrielle. "I understand this is difficult to make sense of. Let's say we decide one of us needs to learn a certain thing and that the learning involves great sacrifice on the other person's part. We both become incarnate, meet, and then experience the event requiring the previously agreed-upon sacrifice. We both

eventually find our way back to this place of in-between. Then we decide that the next time around, we switch places. In that way, members of our soul families help each other grow and evolve throughout many lifetimes."

Mims, still bewildered, said, "I'm still not getting the big picture. But I am curious. Are there others here that are part of my soul family?"

"There are."

"Really? I would love to meet some of them. I don't suppose you might be able to help me find them? Perhaps speaking with them about this might help."

"I can. There are probably some folks living nearby. I will reach out to some of the other guides and find out who is in their care. If they are folks you should meet, I'll let you know. Perhaps we can arrange a meeting."

"I'd appreciate that. I have to admit that I'm still finding this whole experience to be quite ... well, let's say, it's not what I expected."

SIX

Mims finished his chores at the inn early one morning and walked the three blocks back to Gabrielle's cottage. She sat rocking on her front porch.

"I'm glad you're back," she said. "I've made arrangements for you to meet someone you knew."

"Really?" Mims stepped back off the stairs, almost losing his footing.

"Yep," Gabrielle said. "You remember our chat the other night about you being a member of a soul family? I managed to connect with someone you knew for a few years, someone you held in high esteem and learned a great deal from."

"Okay," replied Mims, curious.

"You knew her as Rose. But her forever name is Marie. She is waiting for us at the village park."

"Wow."

The two set off down the lane. As they approached the park, Mims slowed down. "I'm a little nervous about this."

"Why's that? There's nothing to be nervous about."

"It's just that Rose ... Marie ... whatever ... died nine years ago. I've never met anyone who's died before."

"That's not true," replied Gabrielle.

Mims turned to look at his guide, a bit confused. "Oh, you mean you. Right. But the difference is I didn't know you before. With Rose, we worked together for two years and experienced a lot of ups and downs."

"Don't worry. You'll be fine," Gabrielle encouraged. They entered the park and its beautiful lawn covered with patches of

shade. A chorus of birdsongs greeted them. Gabrielle stopped at a bench and said, "I'll wait here for you. Take as much time as you want. Your friend is over there." She pointed toward a brightly colored gazebo.

"Alrighty. Thanks for arranging this."

Gabrielle sat down and watched Mims walk over toward his friend.

"Hello, Rose," said Mims. "Mind if I join you?"

"No, of course not." Rose looked up and smiled. "When I learned you were here, I hoped I would have a chance to see you."

"Yep. Pretty weird, huh?" Mims asked, "Could we have ever imagined this whole in-between place and its innkeeper and a chance to connect again?"

"No. Definitely not. But here we are. And I don't need to wear glasses anymore! These heavenly bodies keep us in perfect health."

"You know, I have to tell you I was upset when I learned of your diagnosis and that you had already left the state to be with your family. I didn't have a chance to say goodbye. I remember feeling guilty I hadn't visited more often after leaving the company."

"Oh, stop," laughed Rose. "You paid me plenty of visits! More than any other former employee I ever had."

"I hope you know I stayed connected with you because I had a lot of respect for you. I would have never succeeded in my next position had it not been for everything I learned from you."

"Oh, yes. I loved what you read at my memorial service! I loved your recounting of all of the things you learned during our time together."

"So you heard all of that, did you? Well, it was all true, you know."

"I know I was hard on you at times. I'm sorry for that. I guess I always believed you had so much potential."

“Thanks for your vote of confidence. And thanks for taking me on when I desperately needed a job.”

Rose agreed, “We did do some good work together, didn’t we? But I need to ask you a question. You changed how you interacted with me after the first year, and we got along so much better. What was your secret?”

Mims smiled. “Ah, yes. Well, I recognized that you were a wounded individual like so many people are. You needed compassion, and I tried to give it to you. And it worked!”

“And so it did,” replied Rose. “During that second year, I always knew you had my back. I am grateful for your kindness.”

The two old friends sat talking for a long while. After they said goodbye to one another, Mims and Gabrielle walked back to her cottage. Over the next few weeks, Mims met with several more members of his soul family, grateful for the opportunities to reconnect with so many special folks from his previous life.

SEVEN

After Mims had stayed with Gabrielle for some time, the innkeeper paid them a visit.

“Mims, I think it’s time we start preparing you for your meeting with your Council of Seven,” announced the innkeeper.

“Council of Seven?” queried Mims. “Say more about that, if you don’t mind.”

“Everyone passing through this place must sooner or later decide where they want to go next. This place isn’t somewhere one stays for good, at least not until the mortal world runs out of things to teach you. And each person who travels through this place has a Council of Seven who will guide you as you explore what your next incarnation is to be. When you’re ready, I will arrange the meeting for you.”

Mims agreed to the meeting. Several days later the innkeeper and Gabrielle escorted him to an oval-shaped building on the south side of the village.

“Gabrielle and I will wait outside for you,” said the innkeeper. “You must meet your guides without us.”

Mims acknowledged with a nervous nod and opened the front door to the building and entered. Lights the color of lime, aquamarine, and indigo lit the room. A long curved table lined the wall to his left with seven individuals seated behind it. He could make out the faces of the first four, but dark shadows shrouded the faces of the three at the far end of the table.

Sam? Dad? Leon? Adele?

“Wait a minute!” exclaimed Mims. “I know you. You were significant players in my previous life!” He immediately recognized the speaker, his bald head and bow tie unmistakable. Sam had been one of his teachers at college. Mims’s father sat to Sam’s left, and to

his father's left, his favorite uncle, who had helped him on many occasions. The last individual sitting in the light was a woman full of wisdom and a dear friend he had always considered a spiritual advisor. They all smiled at Mims. Speechless, Mims could only smile back in kind.

So good to see you all again! Wow!

"Actually, we've been significant individuals in all of your past lives. We have been guiding you, coaching you, helping you grow and learn the things you must learn before your spirit is fully evolved and you can stay in this place for good. Please, have a seat."

Mims took the chair in the middle of the room and sat facing the Council.

"Before we start, do you have any questions we might answer?"

"Yes. I'd like to know why I can't make out the faces of the three individuals at the far end of the table."

"Of course. They are in shadow because they are living in the mortal world right now. Even those who sit on Councils of Seven are not fully evolved spirits. Each of us is still on a path of learning. Each of us has our own Council of Seven."

Still overwhelmed at seeing his father and uncle, Mims uttered only, "Thank you."

"Now, then. Today, the purpose of this first meeting is to show you three future lives you may wish to consider living. We have reviewed dozens of future lives, hoping to identify lives we think would help you grow the most. After we show these lives to you, you will have ample time to contemplate each one and ask questions of us, Gabrielle, or the innkeeper. Then, when you feel you are able to make your decision, arrangements for your return to the mortal world and the life you've chosen will be made. Do you understand?"

"Yes. Please go ahead."

"I direct your attention to the screen on the opposite wall. What you will see are only brief flashes of future lives. Remember, these events have not yet happened. We are merely looking into a possible future if you choose that life. Should you wish to see a more detailed presentation, we can do that for you."

"No. I'm fine with only seeing summaries now. It will help me to get my bearings. Please continue."

Lights in the room dimmed. Mims turned around to face the opposite wall. The first images appeared on a large screen. A young boy attending a school with teachers who looked to be nuns. Then a man working hard, keeping to himself, and struggling with his emotions, fear to be exact. Followed by a prison cell and a hearing in a courtroom. Finally, images of a cave, a ledge, and then falling from a great height.

The second series of images began to play out. A teenage girl. An orphanage. A young man trying to help her understand why her parents would abandon her. An eventual confrontation with her mother. A message from her father. Leaving the orphanage. But no hint about how this life would end.

Finally, a third life materialized. Mims saw a man sent out to learn about a new world, lonely and often lamenting about his inability to meet someone special. Then he discovers a thing in this new place he thinks might help him and takes advantage of it, only to question whether he made the right decision.

The screen darkened, and the lights in the room flicked back on. Mims turned to face the members of the Council of Seven.

"So. What do you think about what we've shown you?" queried Sam.

"Fascinating. You do know these three scenarios portray short stories I wrote. The man who has to purge himself of fear, the young girl who must make peace with a father she doesn't remember, and the man who looks for love and comes to regret how he eventually

finds it? The innkeeper did say there would be things I must learn in whatever next life I choose. But I'm not sure what lessons I would learn by living out stories I wrote?"

"Let me say we know of your previous life. In your later years, you were an author. What we've shown you here today are indeed glimpses from stories you wrote. You had a friend who once said your stories were full of the wreckage of twisted lives. He accused you of taking perverse pleasure in birthing defenseless creatures, invading their dreams, and causing them unending pain and hardship. He even postulated that you dumped all of the agonies you refused to accept onto these characters."

"Yes. Yes," sighed Mims. "I remember the conversation. My friend's name was Ormon, quite the critic of my writing. He was always looking to find some issue or another with my work."

"But you wrote one last story. It was different from all of the other stories your friend critiqued and the ones we just showed to you."

"That's right," confirmed Mims. "It was a story about a savior of sorts. The main character was someone who felt only love, not pain, not anger, not sadness, and could give only love. And in the story, I sent this savior to console all of the less fortunate characters I had created. I wanted them to have someone who would love them and take on their pains as his own."

Sam then asked, "So what would you think if we offered you that sort of role in your next life?"

"Wow. Never in a million years would I have considered I'd have the chance to live out one of my stories."

"Would you be surprised if we told you all creative works come from this place? All music, writing, and art? We placed that story in your mind hoping you would bring it to life. And you did so before arriving here. But we also hoped you might see yourself in the role of your main character."

Mims sat motionless, reflecting on this latest revelation.

"We know this is a lot to take in. That is why we are not asking you to make any decision until you are ready. We want you to understand how this proposed life might contribute to your spiritual growth."

"Okay," agreed Mims. "But here's what I don't get. The innkeeper told me that I've been here before. I guess that means I've been in this room before, been shown possible lives before, and made decisions about the course of my spiritual path before."

"That's right," confirmed Sam.

"So why is it that I don't remember any of this?"

"The simple answer is this. The goal of each spiritual journey is to learn. It has been shown that learning from a blank slate is better than knowing in advance what could happen to you because of what you did before."

"Alright. This makes some sense, I guess." Mims sat quietly for a minute or two. "I'm going to need some time. I'll let you know when I'm ready to come back with my questions and any decision."

"Our prayers are with you, Mims. Until next time, then?"

Mims gave a quick wave to the Council of Seven before leaving the room.

I'm going to have to ask Gabrielle about arranging a meeting with my father and uncle. Yep. Never in a million years would I have thought I might meet them again!

EIGHT

In the days following Mim's meeting with his Council of Seven, he took long walks after completing his chores at the inn. Some days he struck out for the countryside, looking for new and interesting paths. On other days, he followed a well-worn trail down to the ocean. The sound of the crashing waves and the smell of the salt air always invigorated him and helped him think. But regardless of where he went, the decision about which life he should choose followed him.

One delightful afternoon, Mims invited Gabrielle to accompany him on one of his walks. After they scaled the hill overlooking the village, they rested on an outcropping of rock.

"I've made a decision," announced Mims.

"Really?" Gabrielle replied, her curiosity piqued.

"Yep. I've decided that I'm staying here in this in-between place."

Stunned by this declaration, Gabrielle challenged her companion. "So, are you saying you think the mortal world has taught you everything it can?"

Mims did not answer.

"Oh, I see," continued Gabrielle. "You just don't want to return to the mortal world because you're afraid of getting hurt again, because your burdens might be too great to bear? That's it, isn't it?"

"Yes," conceded Mims.

Gabrielle took a few bites of her apple, trying to figure out how to respond to Mims's decision. After a sip of water from her canteen, she continued, "But what about the potential future life shown to you by your Council of Seven? Are you saying you do not want to consider it?"

"I suppose that's what I'm saying," admitted Mims. He took a deep breath and sighed. "You know what? I'm tired. And I don't mean being physically tired if there even is such a thing here in this place of in-between. I mean, I'm spiritually tired. I don't have the desire to return to the mortal world, deal with people and their problems, and learn whatever it is I'm supposed to learn."

"I hear you. How about I have a chat with the innkeeper? Maybe we can work something out," countered Gabrielle. "I'll make a visit to the tavern tomorrow."

Mims did not reply but simply nodded in the affirmative and continued to stare out at the countryside.

NINE

The lunch crowd had left the tavern for their afternoon activities. The innkeeper started clearing tables and carrying dirty dishes and glasses back to the kitchen for Mims to wash. After a couple of trips back and forth, he noticed Gabrielle sitting at a table next to the window watching him, waiting for him to notice her.

“Welcome, neighbor. What can I get you this fine afternoon? Did you come over for some dessert? Some pie, maybe? The apple pie is still warm.”

“I think we have a problem,” she said, ignoring the offer of pie.

“What do you mean?” The innkeeper pulled out a chair and sat down. “What’s on your mind?”

“I don’t think Mims wants to reincarnate.”

“That’s not a good sign. He still has important things to accomplish in the mortal world before staying here for good.”

“I know. But I haven’t been able to change his thinking. I’m wondering if we should risk telling him what we have in store for him. I know it’s not routine practice, but his situation is different.”

“We are asking quite a lot from him, that’s for sure. If he had any hint of how much pain we are expecting him to bear, I’m sure he would resist every effort we might make to send him back to a mortal existence. Has he given you any explanation for his decision?”

“Well, I think his most recent incarnation was difficult. So many bad things happened to him. He simply does not want to agree to another round and risk further hurt. He doesn’t see the value of living the life suggested to him by his Council of Seven.”

“I take it he still doesn’t understand the importance of that last option. He hasn’t realized it’s about the future we want for him.”

“No. I don’t think he does.”

“I wondered if this might happen. Perhaps I should have another chat with him.”

“Thanks. I hoped you might say that,” replied Gabrielle, grateful for the help.

“When we’re done cleaning up here, I’ll suggest a walk along the beach. He seems to enjoy those walks the most. Please keep me advised on how he’s doing. He is very important to us.”

“I know. Thanks, my friend.” They both stood and gave each other a quick embrace before Gabrielle ventured out into the afternoon sun.



The innkeeper returned to the kitchen and proposed a walk along the beach to Mims after completing their chores. Mims gladly accepted the offer. Twenty minutes later they set off on the trail leading down to the beach, leaving their shoes at the edge of the sand. The sound of the crashing surf and the mournful cries of the gulls greeted them.

The innkeeper asked a question, raising his voice above the roar of the waves, “So, how are things coming along with your decision?”

“I have to admit that I don’t want to live another life,” replied Mims. “Now that more of my memories of this place and my past lives have returned, I’m not quite sure what more there is I can learn. And I definitely do not want to endure any more pain. Apparently, I’ve lived more than a few lifetimes trying to learn about love and faith and overcoming my fears. I think I’ve pretty much hit a dead end. I really don’t see how one more life will magically help me improve on any of those things.”

“I know you’re reluctant to return to the mortal world for another round. But I will tell you a thing I almost never tell folks who have shared your same feelings.”

Mims picked up a shell and examined it. “And what might that be?”

“Your experience in your previous life was a test,” said the innkeeper.

“A test?” Mims threw the shell into the surf.

“That’s right. You were put into an amazingly difficult situation, forced to carry the burden of other people’s misdeeds. You sacrificed much, your wants and needs, your desire to be proven innocent of the accusations made by your spouse, and your ability to be with your children. You sacrificed so much.”

“Yes. But what was the test?” Mims avoided the innkeeper’s gaze, choosing instead to watch the little sand crabs as they scurried about.

“The test was to see how you would react to those situations.”

“Why would you, or my Council of Seven, or the Good Lord himself, want to do that to me? What was the point of it?”

“Because we want you to incarnate again. Only this time, we want you to bear the burden of many more people.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Mims suppressed an urge to laugh.

“No. The world needs someone to hold up a bright shiny mirror. People need to see themselves and recognize how much fear is in the world. And the single biggest fear they all carry is the fear of death, the fear of dying.”

“You sound like you’re describing a savior. Wasn’t that tried once before?”

“Yes, but we are not asking you to be Jesus. He lived in a time before the world became enlightened. Think about it. There was no electricity and no means to communicate with massive numbers of people. Getting his message out to the world was like getting a small spark to start a large bonfire. It took hundreds of years for the fuel to catch fire.

“But to the point of what I want to speak with you about. Gabrielle shared with me your reluctance to return to the mortal world, and I understand your reasoning. But here’s the thing. We need someone who can tolerate pain and who can tell a good story. Someone like you.”

“Why? Forgive me for being perplexed.”

“We need you to write a book for us, a book written in the mortal world, a book about your experience here from your viewpoint. We want the world to learn about how things really work. We want the world to know about souls and reincarnation. We want the world to let go of their fear of death.”

“But if we don’t retain any memory of our time here, how would I write a book about this place?”

“A good question! And the answer is quite simple. The author of this book will be allowed to keep their memories,” explained the innkeeper. “Let me tell you a little secret. There is a thing I like to call spiritual memory. When one arrives back in the mortal world, that spiritual memory lies dormant for most people. But for you, the memory of this place and your experience here will return once you come of age. We need someone to deliver our message. Most folks will think what you’re saying is pure fantasy, but there will be those who will believe you and help you get the word out.”

“And this is what you want me to do? I dunno.”

“So here’s the deal. You return to the mortal world, write about your experience here, deliver our message, and you will never have to reincarnate again. You can stay in this place for all eternity.”

“You mean like Gabrielle?”

“Yes.”

“Does that mean I would be an angel?”

“Maybe someday,” the innkeeper laughed. “Don’t press your luck.”

The two walked along the beach for several minutes without speaking. The sound of the shore birds and breaking surf filled the air. The sun peeked out from behind a cloud, shining down and transforming the green-gray waves into beautiful blues with white foam caps. Finally, the innkeeper asked Mims what he thought about the offer.

Mims sought confirmation, “Just one more incarnation, you say?”

“That’s right.”

“And I have to follow through on your assignment?”

“Yep. But before you decide, know this. There will be much you must learn before you return. Gabrielle will teach you and test you to make certain you understand the message you must deliver. The road you’ll walk won’t be easy. Powerful people will come against you. They will call you a fanatic and accuse you of blasphemy. But remember, we will always be with you. Be not afraid.”

“But what about the other lives offered to me by my Council of Seven?”

“Not to worry. I will take care of that. They want this next life for you just as much as I do. And we’ll see whether you need to meet with them again. Yep, we’ll see.”

“One last question,” said Mims as they returned to the trailhead to retrieve their shoes. “During our conversation, you kept saying ‘we.’ Who exactly are the ‘we’?”

The innkeeper laughed as he followed Mims up the trail. “Now I can’t go telling you all of the secrets of this ol’ grand creation, can I? Nope. Not just yet.”



After Mims agreed to reincarnate again, he noticed his body starting to change. His rheumatism began to fade, and he felt stronger and full of energy, no longer an old man. The next time Mims spoke

with the innkeeper, he asked, “I can’t help but notice, but am I getting younger?”

The innkeeper grinned, “You are, indeed! We can’t have you going back to the mortal world looking old and wrinkled, now can we?”

“So does this mean I will continue to ... I don’t know how to describe it ... continue to grow young?”

“That’s what it means. You’ll be little more than a newborn infant when you leave this place. I will give your spirit back to the mortal world, and you’ll enter your new body and begin a new life, but your spiritual memory will retain everything you need to complete your assignment.”

“You know, even with my writer’s imagination, I never imagined such things were possible. More to contemplate in my spare time, I suppose.”

TEN

“Miss Gabby?” said young Mims.

“Yes, little one,” answered Gabrielle patiently. She bent over to face the boy, barely half her height now, before turning back to the sink and the evening meal’s vegetables.

Clambering up one of the kitchen stools, he asked, “Tell me about the gate.”

“A gate? You know what a gate is. It’s like a door, only outside. You go through it to get from one place to another.”

“No, Miss Gabby. Not a gate, *the* gate,” corrected Mims.

“What do you mean *the* gate? And why are you asking me that?”

“Cause some of the boys in town were talking about *the* gate, and I didn’t understand what it was all about.”

“Okay, little one. I suppose it’s time I tell you about these things.”

Mims looked at Gabrielle with expectant eyes, waiting for her explanation much as a hungry animal might wait for its owner to deliver a treat.

“Out toward the sea at a place where a rock formation arches out from the high cliffs, there stands a gate. It’s like an arch, circular though. The lower portion of it is buried. It’s made of stone. And low stone walls stretch out from each side of the gate to the edges of the outcropping.”

“Have you ever been there? Have you ever seen the gate?”

“Sure, Mims. We all have. We just don’t remember it. I’m telling you only what I’ve learned from others who have been there during their stay here.”

“The boys say that you shouldn’t go through the gate. Is that true?”

Gabrielle put down the vegetables and turned to face the boy again. She dried off her hands on her apron and sat down on a stool next to him.

“You sure are asking a lot of questions. What did your friends tell you?”

“They said if you go through the gate, you will go to a bad place full of monsters and bad people.” Mims hesitated, almost ready to cry.

“Come here, young one.” Gabrielle reached over to give him a hug.

“There are no monsters or bad people on the other side of the gate,” said Gabrielle grinning, trying to suppress a smile, but pleased the boy still asked questions about the world outside their little village at his now young age.

“Some people say anyone who walks through the gate leaves this world, never to return, that they go to a wonderful place full of lush green hills and trees full of fruit. But not everyone believes that. Some folks say that when you go through the gate, you simply disappear.”

“Disappear? Forever?”

“Yes. Disappear. But it’s not forever. After a time, you will come back here. You will be older, and you may not remember being here.”

“I can’t imagine that. How can you disappear and go nowhere?”

“I don’t know,” Gabrielle replied, worried about her charge’s curiosity. “Now, what’s all of this about? Is this really just your friends talking about a thing they don’t understand? Or is it something else?”

Mims lowered his gaze, silent for several moments. Then he

finally confessed in his small, quiet voice, “One of the boys dared me to walk through the gate. Then he said if I didn’t do it, I was a ’fraidy cat.”

“You are not a ’fraidy cat. And you are not to listen to those boys. In fact, I probably should speak to whomever is watching over them.”

“Oh, no, Miss Gabby! Please don’t do that! Then they will really tease me.”

“Okay,” agreed Gabrielle. When she had Mims’s attention again, she added, “But only if you promise to never go to the gate or try to go through it.”

Mims pondered the offer, weighing out the cost of his promise.

“Alright, Miss Gabby, I promise.”

“Okay, then. No more talk about this.” Gabrielle returned to the kitchen sink, picked up her peeler, and continued cleaning the vegetables.

ELEVEN

The innkeeper cradled the infant in his arms, wrapping the blanket securely around his precious cargo. He scaled the stone staircase leading to the gate, careful with each step.

The early morning mist covering the land began to lift. The innkeeper could see the tops of trees and hills off in the distance grow as he arrived at the platform hugging the bottom of the gate.

At the top of the stairs, he paused. Before him stood a structure as old as the world itself, handiwork created to serve as the portal between this place of immortality and the mortal world. The barrier shimmered as the sun appeared from behind a cloud.

The innkeeper approached the gate and knelt down inches from the barrier. The infant responded with a slight shiver as the innkeeper unwrapped the blanket.

“Live well, my child. Bring back to me memories of all you will have accomplished. I look forward to your return one day.”

The innkeeper held out the infant child at arm’s length until the infant passed through the barrier. An instant later, he felt the weight lifted from his hands, then pulled them back, empty. Looking up at the sky, he uttered a silent word of thanks for the gift of this new life.

Live well, dear one. Live well.



Aftermath

inner reasonings
flow like the tides
of the sea.

you will never know
my thoughts, nor the games
within me.

you are suspended
before me, at a fork
in the path.

breaking the silence
into a million pieces
of aftermath.

september 1979
(for ann)

About the Author



Nancy Joie Wilkie worked for more than thirty years in both the biotechnology industry and as part of the federal government's biodefense effort. She served as a project manager, providing oversight for the development of many new products. Now retired, she composes original music, plays a variety of instruments, and has recorded and released many of her original compositions. She has also created a series of greeting cards displaying her artwork and photographs. Her cards and prints can be viewed on her website: www.mindsights.net.

The River Keeper and Other Tales is her third collection of stories. She released *Seven Sides of Self* in November 2019 and *Faraway and Forever* in July 2023; both collections were published by She Writes Press. She is currently working on more science fiction novelettes. She resides in Brookeville, Maryland.

A Word After

Folks often ask me where I get my story ideas. Sometimes an idea comes from listening to a certain song, watching a favorite show, or having a discussion with a friend. Then again, sometimes the Muses magically show up and drop an entire story into my mind. Regardless, I thought you might find my inspirations of interest.

The River Keeper

The idea for this story came after reading the Spring 2021 issue of *Wake Forest Magazine*, a quarterly periodical published by my alma mater. The main story was about a fellow who is the River Keeper for the Yadkin River. The name of the main character in my story, Ya, pays homage to the Yadkin River, a river on which I spent several idyllic Saturday afternoons floating down the river.

The Morning Song

Perhaps I am giving away my love for The Who and their first rock opera, *Tommy*. Unlike *Tommy*, the main character in this tale, a young boy named Tysten, was born deaf and dumb. His loving parents propose an idea for helping their son gain the ability to hear and speak, but it comes with disastrous consequences.

A Dream for a Dream

I was in the middle of a recording project for a dear friend when I started writing most of these stories. Just as we were finishing the recording sessions, he was called home by the Good Lord. But I finished his collection of tunes titled *Three Little Words*. It was through this project he had his dream of releasing a CD of his original songs fulfilled, even though he wasn't around to see it—or would that be to hear it? And I had my dream of producing a CD for someone else and meeting more talented musicians fulfilled.

Aurora's Ring

Several years ago I retreated to the front deck of my beach place for happy hour. Along with my favorite beverage, I had my guitar. I picked it up and out came a song, which became “Aurora’s Ring.” After recording the basic tracks, I asked a friend if he would be interested in contributing some vocals and a lead guitar part. He turned the song into something really special. What was even better? He suggested we put together a concept album centered around Aurora’s story. Its title? *Dragon’s Door—A Tale of Ring and Sword* (Mindsongs Musique, released on December 25, 2022).

The Pit of Truth

This tale wins the contest for being the first of these stories to be written, some twenty years before all of the other entries in this collection. It is an allegorical look at events that happened to me. And many of the characters were modeled after key individuals in that terrible time ... Seth the Dog and Lilly the Cow. Enough said.

The Day After Tomorrow

This tale was simply a response to a thought. What kind of story could I write around this title? Then it struck me. What might life be like if we could peek into the future?

The Innkeeper

The final tale in the collection ties together stories from my two earlier collections. The character Mims was introduced in the story titled “Old Mims,” the last story in *Seven Sides of Self* (She Writes Press, November 2019). The assignment he is given for his next and presumably last incarnation is to write a certain book, *The Chronicles of the Second Coming*, a book that serves as the focal point of “The Last Sunday of Summer,” a story from *Faraway and Forever* (She Writes Press, July 2023).

Creations by Nancy Joie Wilkie***Seven Sides of Self—Stories***

(She Writes Press, November 2019)

“Deconstructing Dad” (Published in *Pen In Hand*,
Maryland Writers’ Association, January 2021)

Faraway and Forever—More Stories

(She Writes Press, July 2023)

“Perfect Prayers” (Published in *Reflections—
Maryland Writers’ Association Anthology 2023*)

CD: “Meditations on the Day”

(Mindsongs Musique, February 2016)

CD: “Pauper Piper Princes” (Mindsongs Musique, March 2017)

CD: “Venus in the Trees” (Mindsongs Musique, March 2019)

CD: “Aurillian Tales” (Mindsongs Musique, June 2020)

CD: “Songs of the Sun” (Mindsongs Musique, December 2020)

CD: “Dragon’s Door—A Tale of Ring and Sword”

(Sparrow’s Tale with Stephen Bloodsworth,
Mindsongs Musique, December 2022)

Greeting cards and prints by Mindsights Mediaworks

Produced by Nancy Joie Wilkie

CD: “The Long-Term Side Effect Soundtrack”

(by Dannie Snyder, LivCreations, 2015)

CD: “Frespirity”

(by Robin Anita White, Mindsongs Musique, May 2016)

Song: “Get Up!”

(by Beyhan Çağrı Trock, Music by Beyhan, December 2017)

CD: “Three Little Words”

(by Jonathan Reeve, Mindsongs Musique, August 2021)

Visit www.mindsights.net for updates on new creations.

