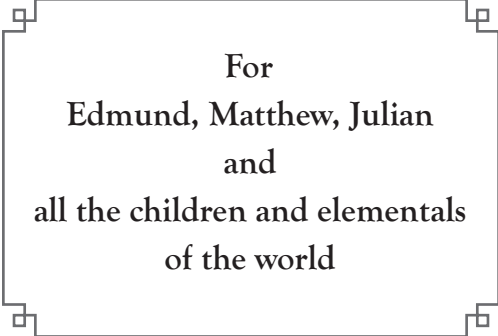


The Invisible Boat



Eric G. Müller



For
Edmund, Matthew, Julian
and
all the children and elementals
of the world

The Invisible Boat



by
Eric G. Müller

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part one



The Day of Departure

1 *Early Morning*

“Get up!”

The voice jolted Julie from sleep. She looked around, her heart thumping against her chest. Apart from her brother, curled up under the orange quilt, smiling slightly and snoring softly, she saw nobody. Black-capped chickadees, gold finches and robins traded songs outside the window. Blinking the sleep from her eyes, she sighed and murmured, “I must have been dreaming.”

She closed her eyes again when she suddenly remembered their plan for the day. Excited, she forgot her fatigue, jumped up and flung open the green window shutters like she did every summer morning. At once the fresh morning air and sun streamed in, lighting up the tiny room of the tree house. The rustic structure with a narrow ledge that served as a deck was securely wedged between three sturdy boughs of an old oak tree.

“Wake up, Leo. It’s a beautiful day, and we shouldn’t waste a single minute—especially not today.” A grunt was the only response she got. Sighing and shaking her head she knelt down beside her younger brother and whispered into his exposed ear, “Hey, it’s our last day here, and we’ve got to get out there and

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say our goodbyes as planned. Remember?” Loose strands from her thick reddish hair tickled his face and he grunted, turned around and continued to sleep. “Come on,” she said a bit louder, shaking him gently, but firmly.

Leo groaned. He bolted upright, rubbed his eyes, whisked the tousled blonde hair from his brow and spluttered, “What-what-what?” The momentary scowl gave way to his usual sleepy smile. “Oh, yeah... I forgot.” He squinted into the bright morning light, stretched, yawned loudly, threw the quilt aside and jumped up. In his hurry to get to the tiny window, he stumbled over his fully packed suitcase and almost fell.

“Told you to shove it to the side.” Julie said, grinning at Leo’s impulsiveness.

“Yeah, yeah,” he said, scratching his head, yawning again and scrutinizing the state of the morning. “The sun’s almost as high as the roof of the chicken shack. Come on, Julie, or we won’t make it to all our places before we leave for the city.”

“Exactly! So get dressed and let’s go. But don’t worry, it’s early enough. Mom and Dad’s curtains are drawn, so they must still be asleep.” She pointed down to their parents’ bedroom over on the other side of the lawn in the main house.

“So where should we go to first?” Leo asked, zipping up his khaki shorts with the many pockets—almost all his pants were patched with extra pockets his mother had sewn on for him, giving him places to store all the things he liked to carry around with him.

“Hawk Gorge.” The voice came from the roof.

“Did you hear that?” A puzzled Julie looked at Leo. They listened attentively, but heard only the urgent call of squirrels scuttling over the roof. “Sounded like ‘Hawk Gorge’ to me, but

maybe I was just thinking that,” she said, shrugging it off and slipping into her blue sneakers.

“Sounds good to me. Let’s go there. I’m ready,” Leo urged, reaching for his sandals from under the stool on which Julie’s neatly packed suitcase lay, propped open.

“Coming.” Julie quickly pulled a maroon alpaca sweater over her blue overalls, tugged and tossed her waist-long hair out from under the sweater and, with one quick movement, harnessed the tresses into a ponytail with a turquoise hair tie.

They stepped out onto the narrow platform and carefully climbed down the rope ladder to the bottom of the ancient oak tree. Someone from above shouted, “Hurry.” When they looked up they saw only a branch rubbing against the roof of the tree house.

“Did you hear that?” This time Leo looked puzzled.

“Forget it, there’s nobody there – most likely just a gust of wind,” Julie said, not wanting to dwell on it, though she’d heard it plain enough. They followed the advice anyway and ran quickly over the lawn, wet with dew, crawled through a small opening in the thick juniper hedge and followed the narrow path across the pasture down to the river. Stepping onto a dead, old hickory tree that had fallen across the river, they crossed over the gurgling waters with arms outstretched for balance.

“Hurry!”

“I am,” Leo shouted to Julie, who was in front of him. “Do you want me to fall in or something? ’Cause I will if I go any faster.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You didn’t?”

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“No! I thought it was you,” Julie said, once they’d made it safely to the other side of Elm River.

“Hmm, still, we should hurry if we want to see the sun rise over the water.”

They entered the narrow, dark gorge and ran up along the edge of the river till they came to a large boulder that jutted out into a deep and clear rock pool. They helped each other as they clambered onto the granite outcrop. Panting, they sat down on the flat surface and listened to the lively river as it splish-splashed and wound its way down to the lands below them.

“Made it! And we’ll be just in time to see the sun rise through the crack at the top of the gorge.” Julie untied her sneakers and rolled up her overalls.

“Good thing we ran.” Leo slipped off his sandals and plunged his feet into the refreshing water.

“It’s hard to believe that we might never come back here again,” Julie said, gingerly putting her toes in the chilly water.

After a short pause Leo asked, “Why exactly are Mom and Dad selling the farm?”

“They can’t afford to run it any longer. I guess they need the money. The other day I heard Dad say, ‘The economy is going south, so we might as well go south too.’”

“But why to the city?” Leo picked up a pebble and threw it into the center of the rock pool. After it plopped he said, “Can’t we help somehow? How about we sell lemonade and cookies in the city for the rest of the summer? What do you think, Julie?”

“It wouldn’t be enough.” Again they fell silent.

“So today is really the last day we’ll ever spend here?”

“Looks like it... I never thought the day would come.” At that moment the sun peeked over the ridge and shone directly

onto the boulder where they sat, bringing immediate warmth. “Ah, that’s more like it.” Julie closed her eyes for a few seconds and let the sun stroke her cheeks. At this time of year, the big rock was always the first thing that was lit up in the gorge.

They watched as the sunlight spread over the glistening water until it caught the spray of the small waterfall on the far end of the pool and created a rainbow that spread from one side of the narrow gorge to the other. It was their grandfather who’d first brought them here and showed them this rock. He’d called it the Sun Catcher. Before he died, they’d come down here with him often, to sit on Sun Catcher and watch the sun rise. This was the first time they’d returned since his death late last spring.

“Remember all the fun we’ve had here?” From one of his many pockets Leo took a crust of stale bread, broke it into little pieces, threw them into the water and watched the fish come to nibble.

“Sure I do.” Julie pulled off her sweater, lay back and peered up at the crack of blue at the top of the gorge.

“The dams we built and the boats we made out of bark and stuff,” Leo reminisced, wiggling his toes in the water and flicking the rest of the breadcrumbs to the fish.

“Yes, and how we raced our boats from here all the way down to the rock pool on the other side of the fallen hickory tree.”

“And all the houses, castles and towns we built. The animals and people we made out of clay, acorns and twigs. Ah, good times,” Leo said, standing up, snatching up his sandals and jumping off the rock onto the embankment. “Sure was fun.” He grabbed a bunch of pebbles and threw them high up over the pool, listening to the soft patter as they plopped into the

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water, creating a maze of ripples. Leo was about to grab another handful of pebbles when they heard the distant chime of a bell.

“That’s Mom – breakfast is ready,” Julie shouted, getting up, putting her sweater back on. “We’d better go.”

“And where should we go after breakfast?” Leo asked, sliding his wet feet straight into his sandals.

“Lost Cave.”

“Who said that?” Julie and Leo cried out together. The voice came from the top of the gorge. They looked up. Two red-tailed hawks flew by, uttering their piercing, mournful cry.

“Hey, that’s why it’s called Hawk Gorge,” Leo laughed, momentarily forgetting about the inexplicable voice.

“Goodbye, Hawk Gorge,” Julie sang, waving her arm.

“Yes, goodbye, thanks for all the fun,” Leo added.

“Goodbye,” a chorus of voices answered from the far end of the pool by the waterfall. They both heard it distinctly.

“This is getting a bit weird,” Julie said, thinking that she might not have dreamed the ‘get up’ call after all. “This isn’t the wind or the water playing tricks on us, is it?” She pulled the pink socks over her wet feet.

“Maybe the place just wants to say goodbye to us, just as we want to say goodbye to it. Why not?”

“Goodbye,” the children shouted once more. But this time they heard nothing, save for the mournful cry of the two hawks circling overhead. As she grabbed for her sneakers, one fell off the rock and landed in the water.

“Oh, my shoe! Don’t let it get away.” Like a little blue boat it floated downstream, upright on its sole.

“Don’t worry. I’ll get it for you.” Leo gave chase down the gorge, but it wasn’t as easy as he thought. Repeatedly he tried to snatch it, but the shoe was either going too fast, or was just out

of reach. Once he almost had it, only to be beaten by a swirling eddy that pushed the shoe back out into the main current. Leo was convinced the river was laughing at him, was playing games at his expense. Luckily, the sneaker got stuck in a clump of rocks near the fallen hickory tree. “Got it,” he said and held it up triumphantly. “And it’s still dry inside.”

As he placed the shoe down on the small patch of grass next to him, a dark, purple flower with seven petals caught his eye. What struck him was the pure white little pillar in the center of the purple crown, surrounded by six, shiny black stalks.

“Look what I’ve found.” Leo plucked the flower from its home between two large ferns and showed it to Julie as soon as she arrived. “Do you know what it’s called?”

“Not a clue. I’ve never even seen a flower like this before. It’s beautiful.” Spellbound by its luster, the two children stared at the flower. “Look how white the pistil is and how black the stamens,” she said, instructing Leo as she often did with what she’d learned in school, adding, “It makes the purple glow.”

He was duly impressed that Julie knew the botanical terms. But then again, she was almost two years older than he. “I wonder if it means something that we found this flower on our last day,” Leo said, holding up the flower and turning it.

“Maybe.”

“Anyway, put your sneaker on. Let’s go, I’m hungry.” While waiting for Julie, Leo carefully stuck the stem of the flower through the uppermost buttonhole of his stone-grey flannel shirt.

“Okay, I’m ready,” Julie said, standing up.

“I’ll race you back!” Leo yelled and ran off with Julie at his heels, and they left the river to gurgle and giggle behind them.

2 *Flower and Lost Cave*

Mr. and Mrs. Temple had tried their best to prepare one last memorable breakfast, even though most of the kitchen utensils were already wrapped and packed up in boxes. Waiting for Julie and Leo was a large dish of apple pancakes, festively placed between two beeswax candles that gave off a quiet light in the bay window of the bare kitchen. The aromatic smell of Mr. Temple's coffee was as inviting as the mugs of hot chocolate, topped with whipped cream.

"Just in time! No, no, don't sit down yet—first wash your hands," Mrs. Temple said firmly, hanging up her apron next to the sink. As always, she was impeccably dressed. Her long, blonde hair, parted in the middle, contrasted with the light blue blouse and copper-colored, sequined skirt. She looked youthful and only her worn pair of running shoes hinted at all the chores that still needed to be done.

Mr. Temple, clothed in his usual white-collared shirt and black jeans, had just finished setting the table. He sat down and watched the children jostling one another as they washed their hands, all the while wondering how they would fare in the city. He sighed and poured himself a cup of coffee. The thought weighed on him, but seeing them laugh and splash each other made him glad that they still lived mostly in the moment and were adaptable. At least they weren't burdened by all the details of the move.

Julie and Leo didn't notice how little their parents ate that morning, while they devoured one pancake after another, topped with maple syrup. Their morning run to Hawk Gorge had given them hearty appetites. Slurping down the last bit of hot chocolate, Leo said, "Come on, Julie. Let's get going."

He stood up and was about to run off when Mrs. Temple said, “Leo, wait. Show me that flower stuck in your shirt.”

“Oh, I forgot about it. Here, it’s beautiful, isn’t it?” He handed the purple flower to his mother. “Do you know what it’s called?”

“As a matter of fact, I think I do. But let’s take a closer look.” She examined the flower, carefully turning it this way and that. “Where did you find it?” She held it up to the light while Mr. Temple leaned in to get a closer look.

“Down by Hawk Gorge. Why?”

“Because you might just have found one of the rarest flowers in the world, indigenous to the Bricanus Mountains up north.” Her voice quivered with excitement. “You see, they are usually found only in high altitudes... and in the most secluded spots. I’m surprised you found one down here – or that you found one at all, for that matter.”

“So it’s special.”

“I’ll say.”

“How do you know so much about it?” Julie asked, staring at the flower with renewed interest and awed by the surprising things her mother knew.

Mrs. Temple smiled. “When I studied agriculture in college, I once wrote a research paper on the growing patterns of rare flowers. But in this case it was your grandfather who first made me aware of this unique flower. And he knew more about plants than any of my professors. He taught me as he taught the two of you.”

“So what’s it called?” Leo asked again, proud of his find and staring at the flower with growing wonder.

“Well, if I’m not mistaken it’s a *Flora hermeticus*. But I’ll only know for sure once I’ve done the test.”

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“What test?”

“You’ll see. However, if I do the test, we lose the flower.” She paused for a moment. “Yes, I am almost sure it’s a so-called *mast* or *gregarious* flowering plant, which means that it flowers only once in many years, in this case, once in every twelve years.”

“Wow,” both children cried spontaneously.

“But let’s see if I’m right.” Mrs. Temple held the flower up in front of the children. “Open your mouths and very gently breathe onto the flower.” The children breathed gently onto the purple flower, as if they were breathing against a window pane to make it misty. To their surprise they saw the purple gradually give way to the colors of the rainbow. The children gasped, including Mr. Temple, who brushed back his thick, black hair and whistled. After a few seconds the colors faded back to purple, though paler. “*Flora hermeticus* it is,” Mrs. Temple declared festively. There were tears in her eyes.

“What’s the matter, Mom? Are you crying?”

“I’m just thinking of Grandpa. When I was a little girl, he once found a *Flora hermeticus*, and he showed me what I just showed you. It was the only time I’ve ever seen that flower.” She paused, blinked and wiped away a few tears. “But watch...” They saw the purple petals slowly curl up, break off and drop onto the kitchen table.

Leo tried to pick up a curled petal, but it immediately dissolved into the finest dust, leaving a faint purple shimmer on his fingertips. “That’s what happens after they’ve changed color,” Mrs. Temple said. “Even if we had put it into a glass of water, it would have lasted only a few hours.” They stared in silence at the remaining six curled up petals. Julie also tried to pick one up, and it immediately turned to dust.

“Run along now. Didn’t you want to go to the caves?” Mr. Temple said quietly, putting his arm around their mother who was lost in thought, staring at the remaining petals.

“Right! I’ll fetch the flashlights and meet you at the woodpile,” Leo said to Julie. He wiped his mouth with his sleeve, jumped up and ran off.

“I’ll be there in a minute,” Julie shouted after him, poking the last piece of pancake with her fork and popping it into her mouth. She watched her mother lightly blow the five remaining petals into the palm of her hand. They turned to powder as soon as they touched her skin. Ceremoniously she rubbed her hands together until not a trace of purple could be seen anymore. Then she stroked Julie’s cheeks, getting an immediate response. “Oh, nice. I like the way it tingles.”

“This flower has health-giving properties.” Mrs. Temple smiled and turned to her husband and stroked his cheeks, and he hummed appreciatively. “Imagine the kind of medicine that could be made if they’d grow like daffodils or dandelions. Oh well.” Seconds later she clapped her hands twice and said cheerfully, “Julie, you’d better run along now. Your brother’s already out the door.”

“Thanks for the pancakes, Mom.” She got up. “And, oh, we’re also going to climb up Puff Mountain one last time. See you later.” Leaving her parents sitting alone at the kitchen table, Julie hurried after her brother. After a while they too got up. There was still so much to do.



Julie and Leo climbed up the neatly stacked woodpile and jumped over the fence behind it. They ran along the narrow path that led up Puff Mountain, aptly named, for little clouds

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often hovered above the rocky peak, which made it look like it was puffing smoke. This morning was no exception. Wisps of white clouds rose gently into the otherwise clear blue sky. Only after they'd veered off the main path and entered the forest did they stop running. "There's no need to rush, you know," panted Julie, catching up with her brother, "especially after breakfast. Besides, I think I had one too many pancakes."

"I know, me too, but I just couldn't help it," Leo said, smiling mischievously up at his older sister, proud that, for once, he'd managed to stay ahead of her. "But sure, we can walk."

"Let's just go," Julie said, irritated. Quietly and at a slower pace, they followed the overgrown trail up and around boulders and trees until they came to the tapered entrance of Lost Cave, well hidden by undergrowth and a large pine tree that had toppled in front of the shallow opening. They crawled under the tree and entered the cave. Once inside, they sat down on Thief's Throne, which was an oblong flat stone placed firmly upon two boulders.

"Do you really think thieves used to live here?" Leo asked in a hushed voice, as he dangled his legs off the thin, but solid slab of stone.

"I guess so," Julie answered, just as hushed. "I mean, Grandpa should know. And remember, it wasn't just thieves who used this place to hide or meet." They'd heard all sorts of stories about smugglers, robbers, murderers, fugitives, orphans, shepherds and even wild animals that had sought shelter in the cave. Grandpa had also told them wild and exciting tales of dwarfs and trolls that had battled over this cave because it led deep down into the earth for endless miles.

But it was the humorous and harrowing accounts of his own adventures as a young boy they liked the best, especially the story of how he found a grimy and lethal-looking dagger, wrapped in leather on which a map was drawn, leading to a treasure within the cave. Unfortunately, after a failed attempt to search for the treasure, he'd lost both the map and the dagger during a storm. Though he'd retraced his steps again and again, he'd never found the dagger or the map.

"Do you think all those stories Grandpa told are true?" Leo asked, picturing himself stumbling across a huge chest of treasure.

"I used to think so, but not anymore," Julie said. "Some of them are just too crazy."

"Me neither... but sometimes I do." Leo sighed, picked up two stones with his left hand and started juggling.

"And now we'll never know." Julie leaned forward and put her chin into her palms. "But I sure loved listening to his stories." She missed her grandfather.

"Let's ask him, and let's also ask him about the treasure," he said, now juggling the two stones in his right hand.

"How are we going to do that, stupid," Julie responded almost fiercely.

"We'll go to the graveyard and ask him," Leo responded, shrugging his shoulders. Julie looked at him questioningly. "No really, I mean it," Leo insisted. "Yesterday you said yourself we should go to the graveyard to say goodbye to Grandma and Grandpa. If we can say goodbye to them, then we can ask Grandpa about the treasure."

Leo picked up another stone and began juggling with three stones.

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“For a klutz, you’re getting really good at juggling, Leo. I’m quite impressed,” Julie said a tad friendlier, watching him spin the stones through the air.

“Thanks. So, what do you think?”

“Think about what?”

“You know, asking Grandpa about the treasure.”

“Sure, why not?”

“And we’ll ask about the stories?”

“Yes, and the stories.”

“Great, so now that that’s settled, let’s go to our favorite chamber.” Leo dropped the stones, hopped off Thief’s Throne and wriggled out two flashlights from the large side pocket of his baggy shorts. “Here’s yours,” he said, handing her the red one. “Come on, let’s go.”

3 *Curly Beard*

Carefully they stepped over boulders to the rear of the cave. The beams of their flashlights bobbed up and down along the rocky walls. They slipped through the craggy little gap and entered their secret chamber, which was much smaller. Over the years they'd come here often, playing out stories their grandfather had told them. Today they just stood in silence, taking in the scene one last time, shining their shafts of light around the bare, rocky cave, remembering quietly to themselves.

At the far end was a hole that dropped down about ten feet into a tunnel that snaked its way underground for untold miles. As a boy Grandpa had once climbed down there with his best friend, the father of Mr. Phipson who was now buying their farm. They got thoroughly lost and wandered through the most marvelous caverns filled with spectacular stalagmites and stalactites. He said that they would never have made it out alive had it not been for the Lord of the Cave.

Grandfather had called him Curly Beard, on account of his thick and curly beard, the brown coils of which were so long that they swept the ground. It was Curly Beard who'd led them safely back to the chamber in which Julie and Leo were now standing. Before he departed, Curly Beard had said, "If ever you come across a key, engraved with a seven-petal'd purple flower, bring it here to me. It is beautifully crafted, large and pointy."

To his disappointment Grandpa never came across such a remarkable key. Both Leo and Julie were thinking about the strange request as they shone their lights into the dark, steep hole, down which they'd always wanted to climb but were too

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afraid in case they would also get lost. Grandpa had asked them on numerous occasions to keep a lookout for that prized relic, but they too had been unsuccessful.

On impulse, Julie suddenly said, “Goodbye, Curly Beard. Sorry we couldn’t find that special key for you. We have to leave this place now and won’t ever have the chance to find it anymore.”

“Yes,” continued Leo, emboldened by his sister’s words, “we’re leaving for the big city tonight. We might never come back here. Goodbye, Curly Beard, Lord of the Cave. We always loved playing here. Thanks for allowing us to do so.”

Feeling a little embarrassed at their words, they crawled out of the secret chamber and back to the main cave. Again they said their goodbyes and began crawling under the fallen pine tree. At that moment they heard a loud crash behind them.

“What was that?” Leo cried, clutching his sister’s shoulder.

“I don’t know,” she said softly, frightened by the noise. They looked back into the darkness and were shocked to see that a large chunk of rock had fallen from the roof of the cave right onto the center of the Thief’s Throne, cracking the slab in two. Had it fallen on them they could have been severely hurt—or even killed.

“Let’s get out of here,” Leo urged, about to jump right over the pine tree.

“No, wait! Look, Leo. Just take a look at that.” Julie shone her flashlight onto the broken slab. Something glistened. “It’s a crystal, Leo.” She stepped closer to it. “It must have been part of the big rock that fell.” She picked it up and brought it over to Leo.

As she held the single crystal up for him to see, it tingled in her hand. A ray of sun pierced through the canopy of trees

and shone directly onto the six-sided crystal, lighting it up. The lucent stone reflected a rainbow from within. Though that was beautiful, they saw something else far more striking than the colors. For a moment both Julie and Leo clearly saw Curly Beard sitting cross-legged on top of the crystal, waving goodbye.

They recognized him immediately by his long beard that fell right into his lap. He fit Grandpa's description perfectly, except they'd always imagined him much bigger. He smiled and said, "See you soon," and, as if he'd read their minds, he added, "I can be larger if I choose to be." At that moment the swaying trees blocked out the sun and Curly Beard disappeared.

Julie was about to put the crystal back where she found it by the broken slab when a voice said, "Keep the crystal. It is your first gift and will prove important." There was Curly Beard, standing near the back of the cave, now over two feet tall. An instant later he was gone. Julie glanced over at Leo. She knew by his wide-open and astonished blue eyes that he'd also heard and seen him.

Without a word she put the crystal into the pocket of her hoodie. Lost in thought they left the cave and slowly made their way up Puff Mountain. Only few minutes later they paused and wondered: *Had they really seen or heard Curly Beard?*

4 🌸 *The Stone Pillar*

Finding the main path which they followed uphill, Julie and Leo walked through the woods in silence. Of all the places they intended to visit, the top of Puff Mountain was the most important—it was where Grandpa had loved to go the most. Soon they reached the edge of the forest, and the climb grew steeper and increasingly rocky, but they were glad to be out in the bright, warm sunshine again. The last stretch was strewn with large, moss-covered boulders. Though both were beginning to tire, they didn't stop until they reached the summit, where they slumped to the ground and allowed themselves to enjoy the expansive view.

It was a particularly clear day and, through the odd few puffs of clouds that still lingered, they could see the distant snow-covered peaks of the Bricanus Mountains to the north, the low-lying plains in the south, and the endless forests to the west. To the east, they got a glimpse of the ocean, which was rare, because it was usually obscured by layers of haze. Below them they saw their farmhouse, tucked snugly into the foothills of Puff Mountain, with the Elm River cutting through Hawk Gorge, after which it wound gracefully along the Valley of a Hundred Hills and passed by Shepston, the village where they did their shopping and had gone to school.

“Oh, look, the moving truck is coming up the driveway,” Leo shouted, getting up on his haunches.

“I guess we should be there to help,” Julie said, more to herself, leaning back against a rock.

“No, we'd just be in the way—that's what Dad said, anyway. As long as our stuff is packed and ready to go, he doesn't care, not Mom either. I'm all packed, are you?”

“All done. Still, I feel a bit bad.” The truck stopped, two men jumped out and talked to Mr. Temple, after which the loading began. They could see Mom walk over to the cowshed with two buckets.

“That’s the last time she’ll milk Lopyy and Harpy,” Julie mused.

“We’ll have to say goodbye to them as well.” Leo stood up. “And to our goat Googoo, our sheep Willy and Wooly, and Pericles, the donkey. Oh, and the chickens, can’t forget the chickens.”

“Mr. Phipson will never take care of the animals like we did,” Julie said, her face flushed.

“I’ve never liked him. Why would Mom and Dad sell the farm to him?”

“I don’t know, but he offered them the best deal, and Mom has known him since they were kids. Remember, Grandpa was friends with his dad. Besides, he owns most of the land around here anyway, and he’s always wanted this farm. Even when Grandpa was alive, he came over a few times and offered to buy it from him.”

“Yeah, and it always annoyed him. Grandpa would never have sold the farm. He loved his land too much. Phipson is sneaky. But I don’t want to think about him anymore.” Leo took out a coin and began twirling it between his fingers, palming it this way and that, and finally making it disappear up his sleeve, a trick he’d learned from his father. “Speaking of Grandpa, let’s go to the cemetery and say goodbye to him.”

He was about to run down the mountain, when Julie shouted, “Wait a minute! We haven’t said our goodbyes to the mountain yet.”

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“Sorry. I forgot.” He skidded to a stop, turned around and ran back up to the highest point of Puff Mountain where there were three stone pillars—a large pillar with a smaller one on either side. The tall one was made up of hundreds of well-placed stones, each one balanced on top of the other.

Their grandfather had been a master stonemason and had built a number of stone walls on the farm. He had started the tallest tower himself when he was a boy. He’d placed the initial stone as a way of formally marking the moment of his first climb up Puff Mountain. It had happened on the very same day he’d moved with his parents to Honey Creek Farm. He’d been a boy barely nine years old—about Leo’s age now.

When Julie and Leo first began to accompany their grandfather up the mountain, they had each started their own little tower. Today they chose two flat stones and placed them on their respective piles.

“They look like little hobbits wearing hats,” Julie said, laughing, “which is good, because we’ll most likely never come here again. A kind of goodbye, you know.

“You’re right,” and Leo giggled at the two funny-looking little men. “But how about we put one last stone on Grandpa’s pillar before we say goodbye. It also needs a hat.”

“Yeah, I agree... and also, it would be a way of honoring him. He’d like that, I’m sure. But it needs to be a special stone, not just any ol’ thing.” Immediately they searched around, and though they picked up and scrutinized dozens, no stone was good enough. At length Julie got impatient and said, “Well, we don’t have all day, so let’s just pick the next best stone,” and they continued their search.

“Come over here, Leo, I think I’ve found it, but you’ll have to help me,” Julie yelled back, half hidden between two massive

boulders. Leo crawled to her and saw her lying and looking over the edge of the vertical cliff on the southwestern side—The Chimney, as Grandpa had referred to it. “Hold my legs so I can grab it. It’s perched on a little shelf just out of my reach.” The almost-polished-looking granite stone was slightly cone-shaped and facing the sun. Leo cautiously leaned over to have a look.

“Perfect,” he shouted. He gripped her feet tightly and braced himself against the adjoining boulders. Slowly, carefully, Julie crept forward over the edge of the ledge.

“Just a few more inches,” Julie shouted over her shoulder. Holding on even more tightly, Leo let her slide forward, just enough for her to get her fingers round the stone. With a quick movement she snatched it up. “Got it!” she exclaimed.

But as soon as she’d lifted the hat-sized stone, a strange voice yelled, “Hey, what’s going on?” At first she thought it was Leo getting impatient, but the voice sounded too high and chirpy, like that of a bird. Again she heard the voice, this time quite distinctly and very close to her. “Who’s taken my roof away?”

That’s when she saw him.

5  *Ektanaan*

He was shielding his eyes from the sun and appeared no bigger than the size of her hands. He had a round face and a long beard that was like a puffy cushion of blonde fluff. He wore floppy pants that were patched together from many colorful leaves and were loosely fastened round his portly waist with a belt of twisted straw. His shoes looked like little mounds of moss, and his shirt was made of woven grass, which blended well with his oak-bark jacket. Slung around his shoulder was a bronze bugle that sparkled in the sun.

Taken aback and feeling slightly guilty, Julie tightened her grip around the stone and said, "I'm sorry, I was just looking for a rock to put on my grandpa's pillar."

"And who are you and why can you see me?" asked the little man, getting up and standing, arms akimbo, in front of her.

"I'm Julie. But who are you? And why should I not be able to see you?" She swallowed and cleared her throat. "I've never seen anybody like you before."

"You are Julie? Ah, of course, I knew that." The little man chuckled, bent down and grabbed his pointy, blue hat and put it on his head with an emphatic jerk. "Indeed, I've seen you many times before. I should have recognized you immediately, but I was doing what you would call sleeping."

"Why are you talking to yourself?" Leo shouted from above. "My arms are tired of holding you. Come on up."

"I'm coming," Julie shouted back.

"And who's that?" the little man asked.

"That's my brother, Leo."

"Right! Leo, your brother—I knew that. Now tell me, why did you want that particular stone for your grandfather's pillar?"

“I don’t know why, really. It looked the nicest, I guess.”

“Well, it’s far more than that,” the little man said. “Let me tell you the whole story.” And he sat down again, making himself comfortable.

By now Julie was aching all over and not comfortable at all. She was not used to this awkward position of hanging upside down over a precipice, held tightly by the ankles, with blood rushing to her face.

“Oh, tell me the story, but first I’ve got to get back up onto the ledge,” she said, wriggling and heaving herself to safety while Leo pulled and tugged at her. All the while she was holding on to the stone that was getting heavier and heavier in her arms. Once she was back up, panting, she put the stone down and leaned against the boulder.

“Why were you talking to yourself?” Leo asked accusingly, rubbing his arms.

“I wasn’t. I was talking to a little man. But look, how do you like the stone?”

“Great, let’s put it on Grandpa’s pillar and go. Wait! What little man?”

“Just a second,” and Julie bent over the edge and shouted, “I’m ready now to hear your story.” But he was gone. “Hey, where are you? I want to know.”

“Who are you talking to?” Leo asked, also looking over the edge at the little ridge where the stone had been. From there the cliff dropped down steeply over a hundred feet, and he realized that, had he not held her ankles so tightly, Julie could easily have fallen to her death.

“A little man who was sleeping in the shade of the stone,” Julie answered.

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“A little man? Really!”

“Yes, with a fluffy beard, a bugle and a leaf outfit.”

“Yeah, right! I don’t believe you. I’m tired, let’s go.” Muttering, he got up, took the stone and walked back to the three pillars. “She’s weird.”

Disappointed, Julie followed her brother. She really did want to hear more about the stone.

“Leo, wait, it’s true! Come on, you heard the voices this morning, shouting ‘hurry’ and ‘goodbye.’ Oh, and Curly Beard who said ‘See you soon.’ Remember?”

He sat down. Now that she mentioned it, he did remember. How quickly he’d forgotten, though it had happened only that morning. Somehow he’d convinced himself that he had just imagined it all. Leo chose not to respond.

In silence they lifted the shiny and naturally-sculpted granite stone and placed it carefully right on the top of Grandpa’s pillar. Leo had to stretch and stand on his tiptoes to help Julie place the stone into position. After turning it back and forth a few times it fitted perfectly, like a cone-shaped hat on top of all the other stones. “The whole thing looks almost like a man,” Julie said.

“Yes, yes. It looks like Grandpa wearing a party hat,” and he laughed at his own joke. “But I really do like the stone you found. It’s nice to look at.” On the lower front end of the smooth granite there was a little opening like a natural door.

For a moment they stood in silence, admiring the pillar that now appeared complete. Julie had to agree with Leo that the pillar did resemble their grandfather in its gesture. She noted that it matched Grandpa’s height exactly, and it was as if he were suddenly standing right in front of them. Getting tears

in her eyes, she thrust forward and hugged the stone pillar. She missed him so. Leo followed her example and also hugged the stone pillar. They looked at each other and turned to go.

“You see, what happened was that your grandpa put this very stone exactly where you placed it now,” a voice cried after them. Julie and Leo turned around—and there he was again, the little man with the fluffy beard, standing right on top of the pillar.

“Oh, it’s Ektanaan,” Leo shouted excitedly, and turning to Julie he said, “Grandpa told us many stories about him, remember? Had you told me it was Ektanaan, I might have believed you.” He suddenly felt foolish for having doubted her.

And Julie remembered at once, impressed and surprised at how quickly Leo had identified him. Julie had to think that maybe this was Grandpa’s way of telling them that the stories he had told them were true. Leo took a step closer and asked, “Am I right? Are you Ektanaan, the Lord of the Mountains? Grandpa said he talked to you often when he was young.”

“Indeed, you are right. I am Ektanaan. And yes, sometimes I am called Lord of the Mountains, though I am also known by other names.” He smiled mysteriously, his deep-set eyes glowing in his round, well-shaped head.

“I always imagined you much taller, though,” Leo added, which Julie thought was a rather rude thing to say.

“You did, did you?” said Ektanaan, smiling mysteriously again. At that moment a gust of wind blew across the mountain peak. Ektanaan grew tremendously in size and stood in front of them like a giant cloud in the form of a gaunt, wizened man. Now he wore a long purple gown, across which was sewn a crimson band of sparkling jewels. An instant later he was small

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and smiling once again. They were awed by the vision, though it lasted only seconds and then receded like a daydream.

“Please tell us what you were going to tell me, and please excuse my brother for being too forward with his remarks.” Julie’s quiet voice was filled with admiration, as she sensed she was in the presence of someone who was far more than he appeared.

“He is only being honest. And I commend him for recognizing me.” He laughed heartily, holding his paunch with both hands. “But thank you.” The sound of his voice echoed round them like raindrops on bronze bells. Ektanaan sat down on top of the stone with his legs stretched out in front of him, which made him look almost like a child. “But now to the story.” He slapped his thighs and began.

“The last time your grandfather came up here, he came alone. He carried the stone all the way up Puff Mountain from Lost Cave, the one you have just come from.”

“How did you know we were there?” Julie asked, surprised.

“Curly Beard just told me.”

“Curly Beard? Is he here? How can he just have told you?” Julie asked, puzzled.

Ektanaan laughed again, which made his long, fluffy eyebrows wiggle above his lively dark eyes. “Ah, questions... your grandfather was just the same, especially as a child—always asking questions. Questions, questions—it must be a common human trait. But not all questions need immediate answers. They often lead to greater confusion. But I’ll give you a clue. What are you carrying in your pocket, Julie?”

As Julie hesitated, Leo shouted out, “A crystal!”

“That’s right, and where does the crystal come from?”

“The cave—Lost Cave,” Leo answered at once.” Leo loved riddles and games, and so, it appeared, did Ektanaan.

Julie, not to be outdone, said, “And the crystal belongs to Curly Beard.”

“Almost right,” Ektanaan said, still smiling. “It did, but now it belongs to both of you. He gave it to you. It was no accident that the crystal fell from the roof of the cave. It was his way of getting your attention. He’d tried earlier, but though you looked, you never saw him.”

“So was it Curly Beard who spoke to us this morning, telling us to get up, hurry, go to Hawk Gorge and all those other things?” Julie asked, in sudden wonder.

“Indeed, it was. He also showed you the flower”

“And it really *was* Curly Beard sitting on top of the crystal!” Leo said softly.

“Yes, though he wasn’t sure whether you’d see or hear him,” Ektanaan said. “And in truth, I am quite surprised myself that you can see me. Most humans don’t see us. Or if they do, they think it’s only a flight of fancy. Even your grandfather stopped seeing us after he grew up. All those smart thoughts dim the eyes to see. That happens to most children when they get older. They forget about us. Only as an old man did your worthy grandfather see us again. And that is partially due to you. Without the two of you he would never have told all those stories. And through the stories he remembered us. Yes, and then he sought us out. But enough of that. I was going to tell you about the stone here.”

He pulled up his legs and rested his stocky arms on them. Leo and Julie sat down on the rocks and listened. Both were determined never to forget about the little people, as Grandpa

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referred to them. “You see, your grandfather felt he was rounding out his life when he placed this very stone on top of all the other stones of this pillar,” —and he patted it with his left hand— “those that he’d lovingly put here over the last seventy years. He knew it would be his last stone. Only three weeks later, on the day he died, a bolt of lightning struck this pillar and knocked the stone off. It rolled between the two boulders and down onto the tiny ledge where you found it today. Truly, it’s quite remarkable it didn’t fall down the cliff into the rubble below and shatter.”

“Yes, I remember there was a terrible storm the night he died,” Julie said softly, choking up at the memory of her beloved grandfather.

“And to think we found it today, our last day before leaving the farm.” Leo was impressed by the coincidence.

“Half the answer is that it was a test—to see whether you would put it back in its rightful place, which you did. You succeeded,” Ektanaan said ceremoniously.

“Why does it matter?” Leo asked.

“My dear boy, because the tower would not be complete without that stone,” Ektanaan’s eyes twinkled, “and because it pleases me and honors your grandfather.”

“And the other half?” Julie asked.

“Well, that’s obvious, isn’t it?”

“No,” they both said together.

“So that you would meet me. Had you not decided to say goodbye to the mountain, you would never have found this stone and it would never have been replaced. Indeed, your grandfather would be very proud of you. When you came to say goodbye to the mountain, you really came to say goodbye

to me, Ektanaan—which, in this case, is more like saying hello. Thank you for that act of courtesy. It has just changed all of our lives. It was your grandfather's last wish that you would meet me and others like us. That wish is beginning to be fulfilled. Indeed, indeed." He chuckled and stood up. "When next you see me, it will be under very different circumstances."

With that he took his shiny bugle, and, turning his small, stocky body with charming grace, he gave four short blasts to the four cardinal directions: first to the North, then East, then South, then West. While the sounds still echoed all around, he waved and then slipped through the doorway of the cone-shaped granite stone and was gone.

"Goodbye, Ektanaan, goodbye Lord of the Mountains," the children cried.

6 *The Graveyard*

The graveyard was on the far end of the apple orchard, enclosed by a sturdy, split rail fence on the front side and a low stone wall on the remaining three. An old yew tree gave ample shade and protection against wind and rain. There were only five graves, each one marked by a natural headstone hauled from the riverbed, on which the names and dates of the deceased were engraved.

After the meeting with Ektanaan, Julie and Leo walked down Puff Mountain instead of running as they typically did. Besides, they were full of amazement and very tired as the afternoon sun bore down on them as they approached the cemetery. From one of his shorts pockets, Leo produced two fruit bars on which they munched as they talked about Curly Beard and Ektanaan and wondered what he meant by a future meeting ‘under different circumstances.’ They both sensed the importance of his words. Rather than feeling sad about leaving, they felt excited about what the future might bring. “Looks like the stories Grandpa told us were all true,” Julie said. Though they’d just had two highly unusual encounters, they both felt quite normal.

“We’ll go and ask him anyway,” Leo responded.

Now they stood in front of the graves. Their great grandpa and great grandma were laid to rest on the left side of the yew tree, and on the right side were the graves of their grandma and beloved grandpa. In between the two, in front of the yew tree, was a small grave commemorating their sister, Sophia, who had died at birth, two years before Julie was born and almost four years before Leo.

Looking down at the little grave, Julie wondered once again what it would be like to have an older sister. Often she felt her presence close by, and at times she talked to her. Nor had they ever met their grandmother. She had died many years before they were born. On the other hand, Grandpa had lived into his eighties and was a spry old man to the day of his death last spring. He was the one who'd run the farm. Their parents helped out wherever they could, but Mr. Temple had been a teacher in the local village school, and Mom, who'd grown up on the farm, had taken over tending the farm store after Grandma died. Selling the farm produce, household goods and other knickknacks, she was the one who did all the paperwork and knew how steeped in debt they were. It was soon after Grandpa's death that the decision was made to move.

For years it had been Grandpa who'd mostly cared for them during the day. They would follow him all around the farm, and he'd show them how to tend to the animals, plant vegetables, sow wheat and corn, chase away the crows, take care of the trees and harvest the crops. Together they went for long walks where he'd point out the different types of plants and herbs and explain their medicinal properties. He taught them the difference between edible and poisonous mushrooms. He named the multitude of songbirds for them and had them imitate the different bird calls.

On their rambling walks he'd often stop and peer up at the sky to determine what changes the weather would bring. His predictions were never wrong and, if he were unsure, he'd remain silent. Nothing escaped his notice and everything had a story. That's what they loved most about him—the stories. Through the stories they learned reverence for nature. They

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observed him talking to the trees, flowers and stones, and when he thought they weren't looking, he'd leave food and drink in special places. But sometimes they did notice, and then he'd chuckle and say, "Oh, it's just a small gift—my way of saying thank you to nature—giving back a little of what she gives us." And he'd raise his eyebrows and cock his head, which meant there was more to tell, but they'd have to wait.

"Before we go, Grandpa," Leo asked in a soft and hushed voice, "are the stories true that you told us—the ones about the hidden treasure in the cave, the dwarfs, fairies, trolls and elves?"

"You know, we met Ektanaan and Curly Beard today, and we think that the stories might be true," Julie added, her voice just as soft.

"Are they?" Leo whispered these last words, pleadingly.

They stood in silence. Maybe they hoped for a sign, some confirmation or answer, but there was nothing, just the usual sounds of nature—the breeze through the trees, birds singing their carefree songs, the distant barking of Mr. Phipson's dog, the distant snarl of a propeller airplane far above them.

At length they finished saying their goodbyes, assuring Grandpa that they'd be back someday. As they walked away, through the apple orchard and back home, they realized how much they were leaving behind. At the top of the hill they stopped and turned round one last time.

The tall yew tree cast a long shadow in the afternoon sun. It appeared as if the shadow came to life, as if an arm extended toward them and a hand was waving goodbye. The shadow grew bigger and took on the form of Grandpa's silhouette. An instant later a cloud covered the sun and the entire valley darkened. When the sun reappeared, the yew tree's shadow

looked normal again and small. For a moment a feeling of awe settled on them both.

“Let’s go. I’m feeling hungry,” Leo said, tugging at Julie’s sleeve.

All the furniture and household goods were neatly packed in the truck. Sipping coffee from a thermos and sharing jokes as the children walked up the path, the movers were ready to go. Mr. Temple came out of the house with a piece of paper, followed closely by Mom. “Here are the directions and the address. We’ll see you at the apartment tomorrow afternoon.” The two men shook hands with Mr. and Mrs. Temple, got into the truck and drove away.

“Almost everything we own is on that truck.” Mrs. Temple sighed as she watched the yellow truck slowly roll down the driveway and disappear behind the maple trees. The move was not easy for her. It seemed as though her whole life was packed away. As soon as the truck was gone, she went back inside, while the other three waited till the truck reappeared from behind the trees and then watched it get smaller and smaller as it wound its way down the windy road till it was only a yellow speck in the distance, and finally, like a sunset, it was gone.

Turning abruptly, Dad said, “Come on, kids, Mom’s prepared some soup and salad—last meal we’ll have here. Let’s enjoy it.” Dad was in an uncommonly good mood. Unlike Mom, who’d grown up on the farm, Mr. Temple was used to moving and had grown to enjoy it. As a child his parents had never stayed in one place for more than four years. Like Grandpa, he was also full of stories, except that his were stories of the world, of traveling to distant, exotic places with interesting, strange people and odd events. They were stories of the world, while Grandpa’s tales were otherworldly.

7  *The Bottle*

After a late afternoon snack, Leo and Julie went to the barn to say goodbye to Lopy and Harpy. Standing between the two cows, breathing the comforting smell, they felt at peace “I think things will be just fine,” Julie said, gently patting Harpy’s soft nose.

“I hope so,” Leo said, feeding Lopy some hay. “Think we’ll make any new friends?”

“Sure.”

“Good.”

Next they went to the chicken hatch. “Bye, y’all—and keep laying those eggs,” Julie shouted cheerfully. At the far end of the barn they cuddled up to Willy and Wooly, digging their fingers into the sheep’s soft wool that had already grown considerably since the spring shearing. “Every time I wear my sweater I’ll think of you.”

Googoo, the goat, blinked at them accusingly from the neighboring pen. “Goodbye Googoo, and we’re sorry, but there’s nothing we can do about it. Who knows? Maybe we’ll be back someday,” Leo said, going over and scratching the goat behind the horns while Julie filled up a pail of fresh water.

Lastly, they said goodbye to Pericles, the donkey, who stood patiently under a tall sugar maple. “I’m going to miss you the most,” Julie whispered, stroking his neck as he nuzzled into her shoulders.

“Me too, and you were never stubborn,” Leo added, patting his back and feeding him a carrot which he’d pulled from one of his pockets. “You know we’re leaving, don’t you?” The two children lingered in silence, not wanting to leave Pericles.

“Julie and Leo, where are you? It’s time to go,” they heard Mom shout from the main house.

“Bye,” both children whispered. Leo sniffed, swallowed and wiped away a tear. Julie noticed and patted him on the shoulder, saying, “It’ll be all right. Come on now, I’ll race you back,” and off they ran.

Mr. Temple was putting a suitcase into the van as they approached. “Ah, there you are. Get your things. We’re as good as done here. It’s getting dark and we’re running late.”

They sprinted off and climbed up the rope ladder to the little tree house for the last time. Though they thought they were all packed and ready to go, they discovered some wayward socks, scarves and hats, which they hastily stuffed into their suitcases. Fastening the suitcases to a rope, they lowered them down to their father.

“We just need to roll up the mats and say goodbye to the tree house. Okay?” Julie called down to her dad from the platform.

“Fine, but hurry.” He grabbed both suitcases and walked over to the van.

“I’m really going to miss this tree house,” Julie sighed as she tucked her hands into the front pocket of her hoodie and looked up and down the now sparse and empty little hut.

“Yeah,” Leo agreed. “I loved sleeping here every summer. Grandpa really knew how to build.”

“Right—the way he used the tree’s thick branches as rafters, and how he worked around the sturdy boughs so that they made up part of the wall.” Feeling the crystal in her pocket, she took it out, fingered its smooth sides, and paced around wistfully.

“I always felt safe here, even when it stormed.” Leo knelt down, “Oh well, we’d better roll up the mats and go.”

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“I guess so.” Julie placed the crystal on the windowsill and the two of them quickly rolled up the mats and tied them together with a bungee cord. Just as they were about to turn and go, the setting sun shone through the tiny window and lit up the rustic room.

“Hey, Leo, look!”

“What?”

“Look how the crystal catches the sunlight. And see how the reflection of that one sun ray is shooting right up to the rafters.”

Leo followed the golden beam of light with his eyes. “Hey, I think I see something—it’s shining onto that tree hollow.”

“You’re right! And it looks as though there’s something glistening inside,” Julie cried with excitement. “Funny, I’ve never noticed the hole in that bough before.”

“Me neither. Must be because it’s so well-hidden by the rafter in front of it. Well, let’s see if there’s anything inside that hole.” Leo stretched and went on his tiptoes, but he still couldn’t quite get to it.

“Here, let me try.” Julie, who was almost a head taller, reached up and warily put her hand into the cavity. “There’s something there, all right.” Delicately she removed what looked like a large egg. Slowly, with both her hands cupped around the find, she brought it down.

“What is it?” Leo whispered. Julie walked over to the window where there was more light and opened her hands. “Wow! It’s a little bottle—and look, there’s a tiny sailboat inside.” They lowered their heads to take a closer look. “I’ve never seen anything like that before.”

“Never,” Julie affirmed. “Look at that delicate square sail... like it’s woven out of silken twine.”

“And the boat’s sparkling deck is made of precious stones.”

“Diamond’s and crystals and things. And the boat’s hull looks like it’s been carved out of petrified wood or ebony. See how it shines.”

“Incredible! Look at the tiny cabin with the slightly slanted roof. It’s perfect in every detail. Even the little portholes have real glass, and the doorknob is bronze or something.” Leo whistled and his eyes shone and grew big.

“And the anchor is forged out of some fine metal, and the ropes are as thin as a spider’s web. But most beautiful of all is the boat’s figurehead of the swan. It almost looks alive.”

“You’re right, and the swan is smiling.” Leo was convinced the swan winked at him with her eyes. “I wonder where this boat came from and how long it’s been hidden in that hollow. Go and check if there’s anything else inside there. Here, I’ll hold the bottle.”

Julie gave him the bottle, felt around inside the hollow again and pulled out a strip of soft fleece.

“It must have rested on that sheepskin... kept it from breaking.”

“I wonder who put it there.” Leo said, mesmerized by the beauty of the boat. “And isn’t it amazing that we found it—today of all days.”

“That’s because it’s your goodbye gift to give you a little lift,” a little voice from the window chirped. The children looked over and saw a dwarf sitting cross-legged on the crystal, smiling up at them.

“Oh, it’s Curly Beard. We didn’t think we’d see you again so soon,” Julie exclaimed, elated by his sudden appearance.

“Are you really giving this beautiful boat to us?” Leo asked in disbelief. He’d secretly always wished for a boat in a bottle. “But why?”

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“So that you will always remember us.” As soon as he uttered the word ‘us,’ a group of dwarfs appeared, standing and sitting around the windowsill, all of them wearing pointy hats of different colors. And above him a flock of little fairies swayed and hovered in the air. “One and all have decided that you deserve the Swan Boat.”

“Of course we would never forget you! Oh, thank you—all of you,” Julie cried, her face visibly flushed.

“Ah, unfortunately it’s all too easy to forget us.” With those words all the beings vanished except for Curly Beard. “You see, we’re always around, but hardly ever seen or found.”

“Why have they disappeared again?” Leo asked, disappointed.

“When they’re shy, they fly. You must understand that they’re not used to humans seeing them. It will take quite some time before the relationship between humans and all of us in-between folk will be reestablished.” Curly Beard stood up as if to give his words more weight.

“It is the mission of a few of us, like Ektanaan and me, to pave the way for future times, when it will again be normal to work together. And likewise, only a few humans can see us, such as you. That’s both a gift and a responsibility. You have been deemed worthy of the boat. And we trust you won’t forget us, because so much will depend on that.”

“We won’t,” they both assured him.

“But for now, take good care of the Swan Boat on which we dote. It is a masterpiece that has been fashioned by the ancient artisans of the deep and the high.”

“We will, we will,” they again promised.

“Good, because there is a secret to this boat.”

At that moment Mr. Temple shouted from down below, “What’s holding you up, kids? I’ve put your bags in the trunk and Mom’s already waiting in the car.”

“It’s fine, I’ll tell you the secret some other time. Go now, and take good care of the boat. Always make sure it is in a safe place. Oh, and if anybody asks you who you got it from, tell them you got the boat from your grandfather.”

“From Grandpa?” Julie asked, surprised.

“Yes, you see, this boat belonged to him for a while. He always wanted you to have it. And after you bade farewell to him at the graveyard, we knew that he wanted you to receive it today, and we agreed. The sunbeam directed your gaze to that hole. You could have easily missed the moment. Look, the sun has already shifted. It’s gone and not as strong.” They suddenly noticed how dark it had become. “Take the boat as a parting gift from your grandfather and us. There are secrets connected to this boat in a bottle that even your grandfather did not know—but that’s for another time. Enough! You’d better go now. You can’t keep your parents waiting any longer.” In the next instant he was gone and Mrs. Temple was honking the car horn.

Leo covered the boat with the fleece and put it into his biggest shorts pocket, and Julie retrieved the crystal and put it into hers. Quickly they climbed down the rope ladder and ran over to the minivan. “Sorry, we just had to say goodbye to our tree house,” Julie said, out of breath, as they got into the car.

“That’s fine. Just fasten your seatbelts and make yourselves comfortable. It’s going to be long drive through the night, so try to get some sleep,” Mom said. Slowly they drove down the driveway, through the vista of red maples and under the large sign, carved by their grandfather, that read “Honey Creek

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Farm.” Both children looked back, waved one last time and whispered, “Goodbye.” Mrs. Temple watched the children, then turned to face the road ahead before anybody could see her tears.

part two



The Boat's Secrets

8 *Arriving in the City*

When Leo awoke it was raining. He looked over at Julie who was still sleeping, her head resting on a huge teddy bear that she'd had for a long time. The windshield wipers were waving rapidly back and forth. The rain was thrashing the car on all sides. He could hardly see anything out the window. Putting his face right up close to the window, he could see that they were crossing a large bridge with long lines of cars in front of and behind them, all with their lights on.

They were firmly stuck in slow-moving traffic, just what Mr. and Mrs. Temple had hoped to avoid. Mrs. Temple sat in the front seat with a map on her lap, straining to see through the window—which she had to wipe constantly because it kept fogging up on the inside—and tried to make out the street signs. Mr. Temple looked grim and exhausted. Stopping and starting in the heavy traffic, they entered a congested maze of narrow roads. Leo had never seen so many cars and tall buildings before, and with his face squashed flat against the cold window pane, he looked out in fearful wonder. He was still very tired and everything passed him by like a dream.

He'd been sleeping in fits and starts, the darkness outside accompanied by the constant sound of the car's purring motor.

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Now it was different. Cars honked and trucks roared as they idled in the traffic. Police sirens sounded in the distance, buses and taxis pulled out in front of them, and the sidewalks were filled with crowds of people rushing hither and thither, armed with umbrellas, mostly black, none like his green umbrella. And all the while, the rain kept on pummeling the roof of the car. The constant stopping and starting was making him queasy.

“Are we there yet?” Julie asked, waking up and raising her head from the bear.

“So you kids are finally awake,” Mrs. Temple said, turning around and looking relieved. Now she could give Gerald the instructions without worrying whether she’d wake the children. After more than an hour of inching along, they finally came to a stop.

“Here we are at last, number 237 Port Road—and welcomed by a vacant parking space right in front of the entrance. Hey, I take that as a good omen,” quipped Mr. Temple, whose mood had immediately picked up on arrival.

“Thank heaven for small mercies,” sighed Mrs. Temple, relieved that this part of the ordeal was over. The rain had let up a little, and they all looked up at the old brownstone in front of them.

“Well, come on, everybody. Let’s have a look at it.” To his wife he said, “Angie, honey, it’s not as somber as it looks. Your artistic touch makes every place beautiful.” He knew the move was the hardest on her because she loved the country and the farm.

The apartment was on the top floor, and the children raced up, glad to move their arms and legs again. They could hardly wait for their parents to climb up the four flights of stairs to

let them in. They'd been warned how cramped it would be compared to the farm, so they were pleasantly surprised to find it more spacious than they'd imagined, though Julie and Leo would now have to share a room. They especially loved the large, wood-paneled living room and the kitchen with its maplewood cupboards.

After opening every drawer and peeking into every nook and cranny, they went out onto the landing. In their zeal to explore their new surroundings, they climbed up the narrow metal stairs which led to the rooftop. By now it had stopped raining completely, and they skipped happily to the edge of the building, stepping into puddles on the way, and leaned against the cast iron railing.

"Wow! Julie, I've never seen anything like this before," Leo gasped. As far as the eye could see there were buildings, the taller ones still enshrouded by shifting clouds.

"Sure is different from the farm, where we saw the green and gold of fields, forests and mountains. I'm already missing it. As far as the eye can see it's all just grey and black."

"Remember, just yesterday we were running to all our favorite places—the river, the cave, Puff Mountain..."

"Yes, and down to Grandpa's grave... saying goodbye to everything—to Lopy, Harpy, Googoo and Pericles. I wish I could be back there right now."

"Me too," Leo sighed.

"I guess we'll just have to make this our home—somehow. We can do it," Julie said comfortingly, though she also felt the pang of homesickness well up.

"Just look at those skyscrapers! There must be millions of people living here."

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“There are, so if they can live here and be happy, then so can we,” Julie said reassuringly, putting her arm around Leo’s shoulder, pulling him toward her and giving him a quick squeeze. “Now, come on, let’s take a look over on the other side,” and she ran off with Leo hot on her heels. The two of them arrived at the railings at the same time. A surprise awaited them.

“Look Julie! Green! It’s a park!” shouted Leo. “A big one, too!” The clouds parted again and a ray of sunshine slipped through as if to mark the moment. “Look, it’s shining right onto that rock in the middle of the lake.”

“How pretty! Oh, and look, there are some colorful paddle boats moored by the jetty,” and Julie hopped up and down in excitement.

“You’re right. And I can’t wait to run along those paths zigzagging through the park, in and out of the trees and up and down the little hills.”

“Maybe it won’t be so bad living here after all, huh, Leo?”

“Maybe. Let’s go and tell Mom and Dad what we saw.”

“Let’s! Race you,” and off they charged.

9 Eyes

The movers arrived about an hour later. Julie and Leo helped unload the truck and carry everything up to the apartment. They did not have the benefit of an elevator as they lugged boxes, cases and sundry objects up the four flights of stairs umpteen times. Whenever they passed the apartment on the first floor, they noticed that the door would open slightly, and then shut as soon as they began climbing the stairs. When they looked more closely, they saw only two large eyes peering out at them from the shadows. On the sixth or seventh round, Leo waved at the eyes. Immediately the door shut and didn't open again.

When they were finally finished and the movers had departed, the four of them slumped down between the boxes. Utterly exhausted, they looked around at all their worldly possessions scattered across the floor in disorderly heaps. They'd spent many days packing everything up and now they'd have to unpack it all. Suddenly, Mr. Temple began to chuckle and laugh. Wondering what was so funny, the others looked at him, but that only made him laugh all the more. They hardly ever heard him laugh so loud and uncontrollably. "What on earth is the matter with you, Gerald?" Mrs. Temple asked, slightly put out.

"Well, just take a good look at yourselves," he answered, his eyes sparkling. "Really, we all look so pathetic, sitting among all these boxes, as if we're a bunch of stranded refugees." They looked at one another, and without quite knowing why, they all started laughing. At first they laughed because Dad was laughing, but then they laughed at each other, at the comical

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sight they made. They laughed and laughed. They laughed away the sorrow of leaving the farm and all the things they'd loved; they laughed away the fear of the new; they laughed away all their exhaustion, the work they had done and all the work that still lay ahead of them; they laughed at all they'd lost; and they laughed because they were still one happy family.

"Oh my," sighed Mrs. Temple after they'd all calmed down. "That was really silly, but I feel better now."

"Me too," Leo said, still giggling and jumping up and sitting on his dad's lap. "You're funny, Dad."

"Well, in the future, let's all remember this moment—how we all laughed together on the first evening we came to the city," Dad said, giving Leo a gentle little noogie. "But now I need you and Julie to help me assemble your bunk bed, our last deed of the day."

"And I'll fix us a bite to eat. Nothing special, mind you, just some cheese and tomato sandwiches." Wiping a tear from her smiling face, Mrs. Temple retreated to the kitchen. She was glad to be alone for a while.

After dinner Leo and Julie went straight off to bed, worn out and tired. But Leo couldn't sleep. He heard his parents rummaging around in the living room. It was a comforting sound. But after they'd retired to bed, he heard other noises, too, sounds he couldn't place or recognize. They were all around. From above and below he heard sounds of rustling, thumping, creaking, clattering, scraping. Was it the other people living in the building? Was it mice, rats, or insects scurrying around in the dark? Unable to bear it any longer he whispered, "Julie, are you awake?"

"No, what's the matter."

"Are you hearing what I'm hearing?"

"What are you hearing?"

"Noises."

"What kind of noises?"

"I don't know... all kinds. But they're keeping me awake."

"I'm sure it's just our neighbors walking around and stuff. No big deal. Just ignore them and get some sleep."

"Okay." For a while he focused on the sounds coming up from the streets. Though he wasn't used to them, at least they were recognizable, and he almost dozed off. But then the other strange noises started up again, and he was startled wide awake. It was as if the walls themselves were talking.

Listening to the unfamiliar sounds, he wondered who else lived in the building. He knew that a retired bus driver lived below them. He had come out to greet them, giving Julie and Leo a bag of salty pretzels. But that was all. Then he remembered the door on the first floor that had opened each time they'd passed by on their way up the stairs. "Julie?" he whispered again.

"What's the matter now?" Julie answered, clearly tired and exasperated. "I was asleep."

"Sorry, but who do you think was watching us from behind that door, this afternoon?"

"Oh, I don't know and I don't care at this very moment. I just want to sleep. Leave me alone."

"Okay."

But it was impossible for him to sleep. The noises, though never loud, grew more insistent, and whenever he thought he'd figured out what it could be—a ticking clock, the wind in the gutters, someone shuffling from below, the sound of the fridge

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from the kitchen—a new sound arose, layer upon layer. Now he was afraid. The noises crowded in on him, startling and challenging, mocking and taunting him. Then he remembered the boat. It was still in the side pocket of his khaki shorts. Suddenly he really wanted to hold that bottle. As softly as he could, he got up and walked over to the chair on which the shorts lay. Of course, the floor creaked with every footstep.

“Leee-oh! What are you up to now?” Julie moaned. “You woke me up again.”

“Sorry... I just remembered the bottle. We promised we’d take good care of it. It’s still in my pocket and I don’t want to leave it there.”

“Well, hurry up, will you,” Julie hissed.

“Okay.” Leo returned to bed with the bottle. Almost immediately the noises subsided and gave way to a feeling of serene peace. Safely under his comforter he wondered about the boat’s secret, but within seconds he was fast asleep, clutching the boat-bottle between his folded hands, close to his chest.

10 *The Surprise*

Head in hands, elbows resting on the sill, Julie stood by the window. She watched the morning traffic as it moved along in fits and starts. Looking over the busy streets and all the people hurrying to work made her feel small, insignificant and queasy. Her body felt limp and heavy, and she had trouble breathing, brought on by a sudden pang of homesickness. Just thinking of her donkey, Pericles, and the way he'd rested his head on her shoulder put a lump in her throat. At this moment she'd give almost anything to be back on Honey Creek Farm.

Quietly, so as not to wake Leo, she tiptoed out into the living room. Both her parents were already sitting by the sunny kitchen window, drinking coffee and eating croissants. "Why didn't you call us for breakfast?" Julie asked, feeling left out.

"Oh, sorry, honey," Mrs. Temple said. "After yesterday's exhausting day we thought you'd want to sleep in."

"Come over here, my little princess." Mr. Temple held out both his arms toward her. "Though you're already eleven, you aren't so old that you can't sit on my lap anymore." Julie smiled, forgot her grief, jumped on his lap, leaned her head back on his chest and rested her feet on the ribbed, white radiator by the wall.

"Here, have a croissant. We got them at a wonderful bakery just around the corner. They're still warm. Your dad was happy at the discovery, especially that they also happen to make good cappuccinos. Do you want some orange juice?"

"Yes, please, I'd love some. Thanks."

"Better pour some for Leo as well," Mr. Temple, said. "I hear him shuffling around."

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Sure enough. A minute later he appeared wearing shorts, sandals and a *Here comes trouble* tee shirt. “So, what’s up?” he asked, rubbing his eyes and trying to appear wide awake. Everybody laughed. “What?”

“Nothing... come join us. Here’s a fresh croissant,” Mrs. Temple said.

After breakfast they continued unpacking boxes. Initially, Leo and Julie moaned at the task, but they quickly got lost in rediscovering their toys: the dolls, cars, trucks, model airplanes, paints, train set, stuffed animals, books and other prized possessions. In between boxes they played with one or the other, quite forgetting about all the other boxes that still needed unpacking. They began to arrange the room, trying out this and that. When Mrs. Temple called them for lunch they were both surprised how quickly the time had passed. The room was still in a mess, and much was left to unpack and sort through.

That afternoon Mrs. Temple took Julie and Leo for a walk in the park. The skies were washed clear, and many people were enjoying the lush, green commons. Both children felt a bit intimidated by the crowds. They weren’t used to such numbers. When three boys flitted by on their skateboards, followed by two more on rollerblades, they were amazed and impressed, but also a little uneasy. Leo wondered whether he’d ever be so self-assured. Many of the girls, even younger than Julie, were fashionably dressed, and it irked her that she felt so out of place. She looked critically down at her well-worn overalls and decided that a wardrobe change was needed.

Over at the lake some children played with remote-controlled boats, and Leo watched in quiet fascination. Mrs. Temple noticed that both Julie and Leo had fallen silent, their

initial enthusiasm faded. She bought them an ice cream and offered to take them out on one of the paddle boats.

"Maybe some other time," Julie said, noting the long line of boys and girls waiting to rent a boat. Leo agreed, so they continued walking along the little paths where it was quieter.

"Why did we have to move to the city?" Julie asked, unable to hide her pain.

"We couldn't keep the farm after Grandpa died. It just got to be too much for us. And Dad was offered a very good teaching position at the college he graduated from. Furthermore, I've been given a grant to develop educational programs directly related to agriculture. My farm experience will not go to waste."

"But why did you have to sell the farm?" Leo took hold of his mother's hand.

"We really had no other option. But you shouldn't have to worry about these things, children." She squeezed Leo's hand and smiled at him.

"But did you really want to let go of the farm?" Julie persisted.

"Of course not. I grew up and lived on the farm all my life except for the years spent at college and grad school. It's my home. Believe me, had we been able to keep it, we would have. Remember, even though Dad is a cosmopolitan, he loved the farm. It was his dream to stay on the farm and write his books and keep his bees. It broke his heart the day Mr. Phipson took the beehives over to his own farm. He loves nature deeply, even though he is not the farmer type."

"What's a 'cosmopolitan,' Mom?" Leo asked.

"A man of the world."

"Oh." After a moment he added, "But why did you sell it to Mr. Phipson? I saw him hit Pericles with a stick once, and he

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never greeted us kids. And you know he's not going to be nice to the other animals. Admit it."

"Sure, he's a bit of a grouch, but on the whole he was a decent neighbor. He's had an eye on the farm for years, and he works hard. The farm won't go to waste. And besides, he offered us the best deal. We hold the right of first refusal, which means if he decides to sell the farm one day, he can't sell it to anyone else before he has offered it to us. But I really don't want to talk about it anymore. It's getting late and I still want to unpack the sewing machine and hem the curtains." Julie sensed that her mother was suffering from the move as much as they were.

On the way back upstairs, Leo and Julie noticed the door of the apartment on the first floor open and quietly close as soon as they looked up. For a second they saw two large, bright eyes staring at them.

"Who else lives in this building, Mom?" Julie asked.

"Well, there's Mr. Travers, the retired bus driver whom you met yesterday. Then there is a man who only comes here on the weekends. I forget his name. Apparently he's a filmmaker. An elderly couple lives on the second floor—two sisters, I believe. And the others I don't know yet. We'll find out soon enough."

"So you don't know who lives on the first floor?" Julie asked.

"Not yet I don't, no."

Back in the apartment Mr. Temple greeted them with a smile. "I've got a surprise for you," he said, brushing his thick, black hair off his forehead with both of his hands.

"A surprise?" both children shouted.

"Yes, it's in the bedroom. But you have to be very careful and very quiet."

"What do you mean, careful?" Leo whispered.

"You'll see."

In the center of their bedroom stood a large cardboard box covered with a blue cloth. "Go on, remove the fabric," Mr. Temple urged in a whisper. Leo took one end of the cloth and Julie the other. Together they slowly pulled it aside. They peered into the box and spied a puppy, curled up and asleep.

"Is it ours?" Leo asked in hushed wonder.

"Yes it is. I thought the two of you needed some brightening up—especially after all your goodbyes. Well, here we have a little *hello*." Both children hugged their father tightly, while still looking down at the sleeping dog in the box.

"The dog will be a piece of work, you know," Mrs. Temple said, knowing that she'd end up carrying the brunt of the responsibility. But she was happy for the children, seeing how their faces glowed.

"Oh, Mom, it'll be fine. Besides, we're used to chores. We took care of Pericles and the other animals, remember?" Julie said.

"I remember," answered Mrs. Temple, not looking too convinced.

"Can we call him Sidney?" Leo asked, his eyes caressing the dog tenderly.

"Why Sidney?" Mr. Temple asked.

"I've always wanted to have a dog called Sidney."

"Well, if it's fine with Julie, then it's fine with us."

"Sure, why not? But what kind of dog is he anyway?"

"He's a basset hound," Mr. Temple answered. "But, come on now—Let sleeping dogs lie, as the saying goes."

"Come on, Gerald. Let them play with their new friend."

"Fine, but wake him up gently."

11 Settling In

A week passed by and most of their time was spent looking after their new dog, Sidney, and trying to get him house-trained, which was quite an undertaking. Those first few days he left a trail of puddles all over the parquet floor and bedroom carpets. But they could never get angry at him because he'd look up at them with such adoring, sad, sweet eyes, that they'd immediately forgive him, though they argued vehemently as to who should clean up the mess.

The apartment was now beginning to look like home, even though it did not yet smell like it, since Mr. Temple insisted on repainting the entire apartment. Familiar pictures were hanging on the walls, and curtains framed the windows. Books were ordered into bookshelves and the furniture was put in place. All the empty cardboard boxes were folded and disposed of in the blue recycling dumpster at the end of the block. The rest of their belongings which couldn't be fit into the tiny apartment were stored in the basement.

They were still in the middle of summer vacation, which allowed them plenty of time to get used to their new life in the city. At least twice a day, the children went to the park with Sidney, did chores around the house or ran errands. By and by they got to know some of the other people living in the apartment building.

Most often they ran into retired Mr. Travers, the self-proclaimed janitor, who was always repairing something or other around the old building. Whenever he saw them he broke into a smile, said, "How 'r' ya doin', munchkins?" and followed with a little joke or yarn. In contrast, the two elderly twin sisters who lived on the second floor never smiled. They

wore round, silver-rimmed glasses, kept their grey hair in buns, and dressed in white, frilly blouses and black skirts. They always appeared preoccupied and the only sounds they ever uttered were variations of “hmm.” On the same level as the elderly twins lived Mr. Hoover, a tall and thin detective who always carried a black umbrella, even on the sunniest of days. Best of all they liked Mr. Thompson, the filmmaker, because he always made them smile.

He was a young man with thick, shoulder-length, red hair and a deep voice. “Welcome to the *palace*,” were his first words as Leo bumped into him in the narrow hallway on the ground floor where Mr. Thompson was checking his box for mail.

“Sorry,” Julie apologized. “My brother’s a bit of a klutz.”

“Am not,” Leo said, punching Julie on the arm, but feeling embarrassed. “I was just running after our dog.”

Mr. Thompson wore two pairs of glasses, the second pair resting on his large bony forehead. He smiled and pushed the first pair up so that both rested on his forehead, which gave the appearance of six eyes looking down on them. “Not to worry, kids.” Stuffing the wad of envelopes into the inside pocket of his leather jacket, he bent down to scratch Sidney’s ears. “Cute little puppy you’ve got there,” at which Sidney jumped right up and planted a barrage of wet kisses on Mr. Thompson’s nose, mouth and cheek. “And a smoocher, too,” he laughed, wiping his face with both his hands. “Good to meet you, kiddos – and you too, Smoochy. Okay, got to go,” and out he went. Whenever they saw him he was in a rush, though always upbeat and smiling.

But they still did not know who was living on the first floor, though the door would open a crack almost every time they passed by.

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Not a day went by without the children's thinking and talking about the farm, about the life they had led out in the open countryside. They missed it terribly. It was a good thing they had Sidney, because he needed to be taken for walks, fed and house-trained, which distracted them from feeling too homesick.

12 *Learning to Sail*

"Julie, do you see what I see?" Leo asked one evening after lights out.

"No, because my eyes are shut, and I'm trying to sleep."

"No, really, take a look at the boat," Leo urged. Julie opened her eyes and looked over to the windowsill, where—after much debate—they'd placed the bottled boat next to the crystal from Lost Cave that very afternoon. Before the children had gone to bed, Mrs. Temple spotted the boat, immediately recognizing it as having belonged to her father. Much to the children's relief she hadn't asked any questions beyond wanting to know where they'd found it. "I'd always wondered what had happened to the boat," Mrs. Temple said almost to herself. "He used to keep it in his bedroom, also on the windowsill. But that was before you were born. I'm glad you found it." She was about to say something more, but kissed them and bade them goodnight instead.

"Wow, Leo, you're right. It's glowing."

"It took you a while to notice," said a strangely familiar voice, soft but distinctive.

"Curly Beard? Is that you?" Julie whispered.

"Indeed, it is I."

"Where?" Leo cried, sitting up in bed and looking around.

"Say, no need to look away. I'm right here. Oh, and keep it down. I fear your parents might hear." Curly Beard sat cross-legged on the fleece in front of the bottle.

Leo and Julie jumped out of bed and rushed over to the windowsill. "It's so good to see you again. I was beginning to think we'd just imagined you."

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“That shows how it goes—just as I said.” The dwarf was wearing a brown felt hat and a peach-red tunic that hung down to his boots, fastened around his waist with a leather belt. Over the tunic he wore a short-sleeved, brown jacket. “All too easily memories of us and our world turn into fantasies, then fade away and are soon forgotten. That’s why we’re invisible to most people,” and he smiled, though his eyes looked sad for a moment. “Anyway, as promised, I’ve come to tell you about the Swan Boat’s secret. I would have come earlier, but you didn’t put out the crystal, and without the crystal it is more difficult for me to travel all the way here and appear. Besides, all your attention was devoted to your delightful, new dog.”

Curly Beard got up and hopped nimbly onto the bottle. “But we did lose a few precious days. Be it as it may, how would the two of you like to go sailing in this little boat?” Both children laughed at the idea.

“You’re funny,” Leo said, happy to see Curly Beard again, who represented a link to their old life on the farm. “First off, it’s too small, and besides—it’s in a bottle,” and he giggled at the absurdity of the idea.

“You’re astute and observant. All the same I’ll ask again: would you like to go sailing in this boat?”

“Of course we would,” Julie said, also giggling.

“Good! You need say no more. That’s all I wanted to hear.” With that he jumped from the bottle onto the beautiful crystal that Julie had placed next to the boat. “Step one: Gently remove the cork from the bottle.” The children stopped giggling and looked down at him, bewildered. “Come on, one of you, do as I say. Hey, you want to go sailing, don’t you?”

“Yes, we do.” Leo cautiously picked up the bottle, and as he gently pulled on the cork, it slipped into his hand by itself.

“Well done. Now we can have some fun. Listen carefully, for here’s the first secret.”

“We’re listening,” Julie said.

“Bear in mind, this is no ordinary boat. It has a life of its own, but loves to serve.”

“What do you mean?” Julie asked.

“No fear, it will all become clear. Go on—ask it to come out of the bottle.” The children looked quizzically at one another.

“You ask,” Leo said in a whisper, nudging Julie.

“How should I address it?”

“Just like you would a person or a friend. You talk to Sidney, don’t you? You always talked to your animals on the farm, like Pericles, the donkey. This is no different.”

Julie looked straight down at the boat and ceremoniously said, “Come out to us, dear boat in a bottle.” At once they saw the mast and sail fold back flat against the deck while the boat slipped easily through the bottle’s neck. Both Leo and Julie took a step back, their mouths wide open, looking at the boat that now hovered in the air in front of them.

“See, it’s happy to be out of the bottle.” The mast returned to its upright position and the sail unfolded. “It loves to go sailing as much as you love to go outside and play.” Turning to the boat Curly Beard said, “Come here to me.” The boat sailed gracefully through the air to him, allowing the dwarf to step on board with ease. “Well, do you want to join me?”

By now both children looked astounded. “Step two, here’s what you do: Put the cork back in the bottle and put the bottle safely into one of your pockets. It needs to be with you at all times. You cannot lose the bottle.” Leo corked the bottle and put it into the breast pocket of his pajamas. “Good. Now, step three: Hold hands, look at the boat and say, ‘On the boat.’ It’s

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that simple—as long as one of you has the bottle. Come on now, let’s have you on board.”

Leo and Julie locked hands, looked at each other questioningly, and said, “On the boat.” Instantly they found themselves standing right next to Curly Beard on deck. No longer was it a toy boat, but a big and beautifully crafted ship, the square sail flapping a little, as if it was impatient to glide away. Curly Beard burst out laughing as he saw their astonished faces. Now he was almost as tall as Leo. In contrast, the room suddenly appeared gigantic around them, so much so that they instinctively ducked down, which made Curly Beard laugh even more. “No need to be afraid. You’re safer on this boat than almost anywhere else in the world.”

“But we’re floating in mid air,” Julie said, barely daring to look over the side.

“You could call it that, but I prefer to call it sailing. Instead of water, we’re sailing on air, that’s all.” His voice sounded much deeper, now that they were standing right next to him and reduced to his size. He stepped up to the prow and leaned against the raised stempost that was exquisitely carved with interlacing patterns, ending in the figurehead of a swan looking forward. “As you can see, the boat’s square sail makes it appear much like a vessel from ancient Greece and Rome, or like a Viking ship.”

The children looked up at the white, silken sail, in the center of which was a finely-stitched purple flower with seven petals. Leo and Julie immediately exchanged glances, remembering the flower they’d found at Hawk Gorge. Julie was about to ask about its significance, but the dwarf went right on talking, as if he purposefully didn’t want to answer that question. “And

right in front of you there's a tiny cabin, which you can enter through the sliding hatch."

The children took a tentative pace forward. "Yes, go on, you can go inside, but watch your head." Julie slid open the hatch, and they stepped down three shallow stairs into the dark interior. On either side were berths and two portholes that let in some light and could be opened with a little latch. It was tight but cozy. Julie at once lay down on the bed, stretched out and began laughing. Leo followed suit, rolling from side to side, imagining the boat sailing the high seas. "Well, you'll have time enough to look around, but let's sail a bit, shall we?" The three of them stepped back out onto the deck. "So, who would like to steer the boat first?"

"I would," Julie volunteered.

"Fine. Go sit at the stern behind the cabin and take hold of the tiller." Leo sat down on the seat in front of her, wishing he'd spoken up faster.

"It's simple. If you want to turn right or left, you move the tiller toward or away from you, just like on any other boat. The rest you can leave up to the boat. All you need to do is tell it where to go. Go ahead—ahoy!"

"Please sail up to the ceiling in slow circles." At once the boat began to float upwards, cutting smoothly through the air.

"Very good. Remember, if you steer with the tiller, it makes it easier for the boat. The boat will go wherever you command it to go, but it is polite to help it along." Timidly she steered the boat upwards in concentric circles. The boat responded to her slightest movement. Before long Julie felt more comfortable and she became more adventurous. She sailed around the chair, up to the bookcase, through the legs of the little table and back

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to the windowsill, where they hovered just above the crystal. “Excellent! “Now it’s your turn,” Curly Beard said, pointing to Leo. The children exchanged places and Leo took hold of the tiller.

“Dear Boat, sail up to the corner of my bunk bed and land on my monkey.” Gently the boat glided up and cradled itself between the monkey’s long arms, helped along by Leo’s steering.

“And now, spiral down to the carpet as fast as you can,” Leo said. At once they were thrown to the floor as the boat began its whirlpool descent. Both children screamed, and Curly Beard told the boat to slow down, grabbed the tiller from Leo’s hand and steered it to a safe landing on the carpet.

“You have to be careful what orders you give to the boat,” Curly Beard said, helping the children get back up with his strong arms. “As with everything else in life, it all has its consequence. So, remember: Be clear about your intentions, foresee what might happen and be ready for the unexpected. If you remember these simple points, you’ll stand a better chance of remaining in control.”

“Sorry,” Leo said rubbing his knee. At that moment they heard footsteps approaching.

“It’s Mom or Dad,” cried Julie. What should we do?”

“Boat, go under the bed,” Leo said instinctively, because that’s where he always hid when he was in trouble. At once the boat sailed under the bed.

“How do we get out of this boat,” Julie asked, afraid that their secret might be discovered.

“Just hold hands and say, ‘Out of boat,’” Curly Beard said.

No sooner had they said the mantric words than the door opened and the light was switched on. “What’s going on in

here," Mrs. Temple asked. "Why are you still talking?" There was a pause. "And where on earth are you?"

"Here we are, under the bunk bed," Julie said, and the two crawled out, looking sheepish.

"Now I don't even want to know what you were doing under there, but I want you in bed—now!"

Once their mother was gone, Leo whispered, "Julie, is the boat back in the bottle?"

"I don't know."

"It's fine, don't worry, I took care of it." Curly Beard said, standing on the bedpost. Leo took the bottle out from his breast pocket, and they saw the boat was safely returned to its place in the bottle and corked. Leo put the bottle back on the fleece by the window and both children went to bed.

"Well, you've both made good progress and learned the rudiments of sailing. I'll be back tomorrow to show you some more of the boat's secrets. Then you'll be ready to go on a journey."

"What journey?" Both children asked.

"I will tell you tomorrow. Good night, do right, sleep tight." And with that he was gone and the boat's glow faded.

"Good night, Curly Beard."

13 *Anticipation*

“What are you two whispering about?” Mrs. Temple asked, entering the kitchen and spotting immediately that the dishes were still not washed and dried.

“Nothing, Mom. We’re just talking,” Julie said nonchalantly, elbowing Leo to get back to drying while she plunged another plate into the sink and scrubbed away vigorously.

“You’ve been acting strange all morning, as if you’ve got something to hide. Besides, you’ve never taken this long to wash a few breakfast dishes.”

“We should get a dishwasher, Mom. Everybody’s got one,” Julie said to change the subject.

“Yes, yes, all in good time,” she said, looking at them intently. They both felt uncomfortable under her scrutinizing gaze. Mrs. Temple had a way of getting to the bottom of things. It was almost impossible to deceive or lie to her—in the end she always found out everything. But they couldn’t possibly tell her about the boat’s secret—not even Mom whom they trusted unconditionally. And even if she did believe them, she might not approve and take it away from them. No, they couldn’t let that happen.

Just then Sidney entered with a box of chocolate chip cookies firmly ensconced in his slobbery mouth. He’d chewed right through the cardboard box and plastic wrap to get to the cookies. “Oh, Sidney, you, silly dog! What have you done now?” Mrs. Temple grabbed the box from the dog. But he held on tightly, wagging his tail furiously. After a brief tug of war, the box and bag ripped and the cookies went flying all over the linoleum floor. At once Sidney let go of the box and pounced

gleefully onto the scattered cookies. "Julie, get this mess cleaned up! And, Leo, take that hound out for a walk."

"I'm on it," Leo said, and straightaway hung up the dish cloth. "Come on, Sidney, we're gonna have some fun in the park," he shouted, clapping his hands and then clutching Sidney by the collar. Leo was only too happy to get out of his mother's way.

"Wait," ordered Mrs. Temple. "Who left the cookies on the coffee table in the first place?"

"Sorry, Mom, it was me," Leo confessed, clipping the leash onto Sidney's collar. "It won't happen again – promise. See you." And he ran out the door.

Naturally, throughout the morning they discussed their previous night's adventure. They couldn't wait for nightfall when they'd go sailing in their boat again.

Leo let Sidney drag him wherever he wanted. Normally Leo liked to be in charge, training Sidney and getting him to sit and heel. Today he just ambled along behind the puppy, sniffing around wherever he chose and for as long as he liked. Meanwhile, Leo was dreaming about the boat's possibilities – all the places they could visit – Honey Creek Farm for sure, but also beaches, mountains, forests, towns and all the faraway places he'd heard of from his father and grandfather. Leo relived his experience of flying around their room. Gazing dreamily at the pigeons and other birds in the park, he smiled and thought, *I used to envy you, flying around above our heads. But now I can do the same... sort of.*

On his way back up the stairs, he heard the door on the first floor open. He slowed down, but as soon as he looked up, it shut with a soft click.

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That evening Julie and Leo feigned tiredness and went to bed early. They could barely wait for Curly Beard to arrive, to learn more secrets about the boat and to go sailing around their room again. Most of all, they wanted to hear more about the journey Curly Beard had promised to take them on.

14 *Setting Sail*

But Curly Beard did not show up. They waited and waited, called out to him, watched for the boat to begin glowing, but he did not appear. "Should we board the boat without him?" Leo asked, sitting on the edge of the upper bunk bed, his feet dangling down.

"No, definitely not. He wouldn't want that. Besides, we haven't learned everything about the boat yet. We might do something wrong."

"We could just sail around the room here, practice what we've already learned. Practice makes perfect, you know."

"Leo, no!" She pulled his leg for emphasis. "Curly Beard might get mad, and we wouldn't want that."

"Okay, okay," Leo said, slipping back under his blankets and looking out the window. The sickle moon rose from behind one of the buildings, as if it were pointing to the little boat. Julie also lay back, staring at the boat, wishing it would start glowing again. Both children wondered how such a fragile-looking little boat could do anything at all. Had they really boarded her and sailed around the room?

"I can't believe Curly Beard would lie to us," Leo murmured, more to himself.

"Of course he wouldn't," Julie reassured him. "Something must have prevented him." At that moment a cricket began to chirp. It was soft and soothing and came from somewhere under the windowsill or behind the beautiful crystal. They listened to its rhythm and it cradled them to sleep.

Nor did Curly Beard come the next night or the night after. Instead, the cricket sang them a lullaby, and they fell asleep contented. On the third night they weren't even expecting him

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anymore, but as soon as Mom had tucked them in, switched off the lights, and shut the door behind her, they heard Curly Beard's bronze toned voice: "Up you get, No time to lose, no time to snooze." The little boat was glowing and there stood Curly Beard on top of the bottle. He wore chainmail underneath his vest and an axe dangled from his belt.

"Where have you been the last few nights? We waited for you," Julie asked, almost accusingly, though she was relieved to see him.

"No time to explain. I was held up. That's why I sent Crispel, the cricket, to offer my apologies."

"Oh, so that's what it was trying to tell us," Leo said. "We didn't understand, but his chirping made us feel good."

"Why are you dressed so funny?" Julie asked and giggled.

"No time for silly questions. Now get up and get dressed yourselves."

"Dressed?" They both shouted.

"And keep your voices down." Curly Beard tugged impatiently at his long beard. "Yes, dressed. You don't want to travel in your pajamas, do you?"

"Travel where? I thought you were going to show us and teach us some more stuff before we're ready to go anywhere." Leo climbed down from his bunk bed.

"No time for that. You'll learn as we go. Now hurry—and keep your voices down." Leo was in so much of a hurry that, as he bent down to get his shorts and tee shirt that lay on the chair, he bumped into the bookshelf, sending a stack of books to the floor. They expected their mother to come running in, but she just shouted from the living room to keep it down and get some sleep.

“Yes, Mom. Sorry, Mom,” Leo yelled back, slipping into his favorite khaki shorts with the many pockets. Moments later, Julie, already dressed in jeans and a loose, light grey hoodie, uncorked the bottle and let the boat out. Curly Beard jumped on deck and Leo took hold of Julie’s hand and whispered, “I’m ready.”

“Here goes.” Julie squeezed Leo’s hand, glanced over at him and together they said, “On the boat.” As before, they immediately found themselves on deck next to Curly Beard, whose eyes flashed with urgency.

“For this journey we’ll have to use the ethmaroll.” Curly Beard stood next to the tiller and motioned to the children to sit down in front of him. “It is the boat’s biggest secret.” Before either of them could say a word, he put up his hands and said, “I’ll explain as we go,” and he pointed to a red ruby handle left of the tiller. “A roof made of the finest, yet most durable substance is folded away into the stern’s hull, which will convert the boat from an open-air vessel to an enclosed one.”

“Oh, like a convertible,” Julie exclaimed, slapping her knees.

“I suppose you could call it that, except that it is entirely see-through. Observe,” and he pulled the round, ruby lever up. At once a translucent roof unfurled over the entire boat, clicking into the boat’s prow within seconds. “It’s a protective covering.”

“Why do we need that?” Leo asked. He was impressed at how smoothly the transparent cover rolled over the rigging, and he touched it with his fingers. “What is it? It feels so smooth—a bit like a full-blown balloon. Are you sure this won’t pop?”

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Curly Beard laughed. “It might appear flimsy, but no arrow, axe or knife can penetrate the ethmaroll – not even a bullet.”

“There’s not a wrinkle, not even the slightest crease in this material – whatever it’s made of,” Julie said, caressing the ethmaroll, pleasant to the touch like silk or satin. “And everything on the outside looks even more detailed and clear. Look at that spider’s web in the top corner of the room. You’d usually never see it that clearly.”

“True, the colors and forms are enhanced through the ethmaroll. But enough with all this talk. We have to go.”

“And where exactly are we going?” Leo asked, unable to contain his curiosity. Julie noticed Curly Beard’s agitated state and nudged Leo to be quiet.

“To the Cavern of the Tombs,” Curly Beard answered tersely. “Just keep your seats. Make sure you can hold onto something when the ride gets rough—and rough it will get, though not for long. There are leather straps for your feet, and you can hold onto the handles in the hull when the time comes. Oh, and, Julie, you’re still holding the bottle. Put it away safely into one of your pockets. You won’t need it for a while.” She made sure the cork was in place and gave it to Leo to put into the largest side pocket of his baggy shorts.

“Fine. Now that we’re ready to go, I can show you the boat’s other big secret. Let’s get underway.”

“Yawr,” Leo growled like a pirate, elbowing Julie in his excitement. Full of anticipation they set sail, and Curly Beard steered the boat slowly toward the door.

“Now watch what happens when I push the tiller down. The dwarf pressed it down, and as he did, the door grew larger and larger.

“What’s happening?” Julie cried in fear. “Why is the door getting so big?”

“It’s not getting big, but we’re getting even smaller.” Curly Beard steered the boat directly toward the keyhole. “Looks like I’ll have to push it down almost as far as it can go. Otherwise we won’t make it through.” The keyhole grew into a large portal, and they sailed right through it into the living room where Dad sat in his favorite armchair, with his legs crossed, engrossed in the newspaper. Mom was bent over her laptop working on the new educational programs she was developing. Julie and Leo felt exposed as they sailed silently and slowly past them.

“What if they should look up and see us?” Julie whispered, crouching down.

“Don’t worry,” Curly Beard said. “They won’t see you. That’s part of the ethmaroll’s secret: Whenever it’s pulled up, the boat becomes invisible.” At that moment Mr. Temple looked up—right at them—and it was hard to believe that he couldn’t see them. “But he is sensing that something is going on, judging by his questioning frown,” Curly Beard admitted. “So let’s sail quickly to the kitchen before he decides to check on you.” Curly Beard steered the boat into the kitchen and made right for the sink, hovering above it for a moment.

“We aren’t going down the drain, are we?” Julie asked, turning pale as she peered down at the black hole below her, looming large and menacing, the sides still plastered with food scraps that looked like giant reefs.

“We have no choice. We’ve got to. Make sure your feet are in the straps and hold on tight! This is where the ride gets rough and tough.” With that he dipped the boat down and they disappeared into the darkness.

part three



Losing a Friend ~ and Finding a Friend

15 ❁ *Down the Drain*

Down the dark drain they dashed. Julie caught a last glimpse of the yellow clock on the kitchen wall in the shape of a smiling tea pot—then, pitch black. At least she knew it was 8:30. Leo gripped her arm tightly. The tempo of their heartbeats had doubled, pounding right up to their temples, accompanied by the sound of gurgling, roaring and flushing water. The boat shook and shuddered and they raced along at a tremendous pace. Above the cacophony they heard Curly Beard grunt and groan, uttering incomprehensible words, like rocks crunching together. Would this hurtling descent never end?

Suddenly it did—with a great splash! The children lost their grip and were knocked from their narrow benches onto the deck. After churning in the water for a few seconds, the boat surfaced and was pulled along by a strong current. At least now they could faintly see their new surroundings. They were sailing along at a fast clip inside a round, corrugated duct. But not for long, for it merged into a larger, concrete culvert pipe. Only seconds later they plunged down a chute, and as they fell they saw murky water bubbling and foaming all around them.

Only the silk-thin sheath of the ethmaroll separated them from the rough turbulence.

When they finally merged into a large subterranean tunnel, where the water flowed along more evenly and the noise subsided, Curly Beard said, “You can relax now.” Curly Beard lifted the tiller up slowly and the boat went back to its usual size. “I’ll pull the tiller up even farther and the boat will grow into a regular-sized boat. It’s also better for you to be your normal size.” It was rather pleasant expanding back to their natural state—a bit like entering a warm house after being out in the cold. Even the dwarf grew in size, though not beyond Leo’s shoulders.

Curly Beard helped the children up and invited Leo to take over the tiller. “We’ll be on this stretch for a while. There are only a few curves here and there.” Curly Beard put his feet up on the bench, leaned back, took a short pipe from his pocket and stuck it between his teeth, while Leo took over the tiller and Julie made herself comfortable on the starboard side of the boat.

Julie felt satisfied that she knew that ‘starboard’ meant ‘right’ in sailors’ terms. Her father had taught her the word two summers ago when they’d gone boating. Curly Beard began cleaning his pipe with a goldfinch feather. “Sorry we had to go this way. It’s not what I intended, but it couldn’t be avoided. I thought our first journey would take us to a different place—at the very least a more scenic route.”

“And what place would that have been?” Julie asked, clearly not liking her present surroundings.

“To my home, deep under the mountains. I was asked to introduce you to King Brathnar, sovereign of the Bricanus

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Mountains, but the King himself ordered me to take you to the Cavern of the Tombs first. It was this sudden change of plans that kept me from coming to you earlier as promised. It was deemed more urgent, and King Brathnar thought it would prepare you better.”

“Prepare us for what?” Leo wanted to know.

“All in good time,” Curly Beard answered, blowing the loosened dregs from the pipe’s bowl and pushing the feather through the stem.

“So he knows about us?” Julie asked.

“He knows about you, and he knows you.”

“How?”

“As I said—all in good time.”

“Where is this Cavern of the Tombs?” There was a bit of fear in Leo’s voice.

Curly Beard tucked away the feather, chewed on his pipe a little, readjusted it and said, “Well, little Leo, the Sacred Cavern, as it is also called, is deep under the city, though I’ve never seen it myself. I’ve traveled far and wide in the tunnels that spread like roots for untold miles underneath the far-flung ranges and beyond, but I never roam far from my own mountain, nor could I before now. That is all changing now.”

“So why are you here now? It doesn’t make sense.” It was clear that Julie was not too happy with her present excursion, which could be heard in her voice.

“I’m here only because the boat was made in our very own smithies, deep under the Bricanus Mountain range, by the great master builders from the venerable Koormanoc line of craftsmen. I myself am from the Koormanoc family, though most of those ancient secrets are long lost to us. The beautiful

crystals and fossils out of which parts of this boat are fashioned come from the oldest and deepest part of the mountain, as does the delicately forged anchor, albeit from a different range.

“You, as the new owners—or should I say guardians—of this boat should know some of its history and magical qualities. This boat is older than you can fathom or imagine, and has had many guardians in its time. You are just the last in the line of the carefully chosen few. It was built in the Palta-yugom Age when I was still a youngster, long before my beard was curly—long before I even had a beard, back in the eternally misty days when humans still conversed with us, worked with us and understood us.

“As I was saying, I am only here because of the boat. Otherwise we dwarfs don’t like to travel—especially where there’s water.”

“But you’re traveling now!” Leo said, smiling for the first time. He loved to listen to Curly Beard, to the lilt in his sonorous voice.

“Indirectly it’s your grandfather’s fault. He set me up to it, or rather, he set you up to all of this.”

“Us?” they both shouted.

“Yes, he said you two would surely help us in our need.”

“What need?” Julie asked again.

“I suppose I should tell you a little more, shouldn’t I? And seeing as we’re floating along so peacefully—for a while, at least—I don’t see why not.”

16  *Quiet Conversation*

From a round leather pouch Curly Beard took a pinch of golden-green powder and sprinkled it carefully into the mouth of the pipe. From an inside pocket of his vest, he carefully removed a tiny vial and let two drops fall onto the powder. There was a slight hiss, the pipe was lit and smoke issued from his mouth. But it wasn't really smoke. It was a soft vapor that smelled different according to the respective colors of the rising curls. One moment it had an aroma like freshly-rubbed mint leaves, the next like the clean smell of brookside moss, the next like the pungent fragrance of a lily. It was like walking through a garden, getting whiffs of the wonderful scents of different plants, like being back on their farm, like walking along the flower-filled banks of their beloved Elm River.

"Now, let's see—there's not too much to tell, but more to do, though the more there is to do, the more there is to tell. I suppose you ought to know some things, and then all will be well." He puffed thoughtfully on his pipe, releasing red and crimson vapors that smelled of wild roses at sunrise. They watched it float up and form into a question mark.

"When your grandfather was a boy, not much older than you are now," and he pointed at Leo with the stem of his pipe, "he spotted me while he was exploring Lost Cave at the foot of Puff Mountain. I was sitting on the edge of Thief's Throne, smoking my pipe, just as I am now. I was very much surprised because we have become so used to humans not seeing us.

"Usually we keep our distance because humans have not been kindly disposed toward us over the last few centuries. So when he asked me who I was, you can imagine my astonishment. He was full of questions just like the two of you. That, in itself,

was strange. We dwarfs aren't used to questions. We just know things, and what we don't know does not interest us. We know everything we need to know.

“Different beings know different things because they have different tasks. Why, for example, should I know too much about the wind? I don't have much to do with wind. I leave that up to the wind beings, the large and diverse family of the sylphs. It's the same with animals, really. Take the bees, for example they make honey and know exactly how it's done; they don't care too much about how cows make their milk. Well, we are the same. As I said, knowledge is there for the doing.”

Curly Beard looked at both children to see if they were still following him, puffed on his pipe and continued, “But suddenly, there I was, confronted with this boy, your grandfather, asking me all these questions. Partly I'm thinking: *Is he putting on a bluff not to know such elemental stuff? Or is he stupid?* But other questions made me think. They puzzled me, you see. Though I could answer most of them, there were a few I couldn't, and they, in turn, cracked open important questions within me.”

Curly Beard blew a deep purple cloud into the air that formed into an exact replica of Lost Cave. He puffed another two thin streams of smoke into the cave, and there appeared a little dwarf sitting on the stone slab talking to a boy. The image lasted only a few seconds but it appeared so alive and real that the children could hold on to the picture once the smoke had faded. “How could this boy see me? Why did he want to know so much? Why was I talking to him – and enjoying it?” The dwarf chuckled. “Why was I even interested in him? Why did I like him? Why was I so intrigued?”

“Later that day, Ektanaan, whom you met on top of Puff Mountain, told me that we'd entered a new age, the age of

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Amysta Pheric—in your language, the Pulse of Light. It’s the task of this dawning age to find a renewed pulse of light here on earth, which will happen only when humans can once again reestablish contact with us Soleitharmins, or the beings of the in-between or twilight realm.” Curly Beard stopped talking and stared at the children and pondered whether to continue.

“Go on,” Leo urged. “We’re listening.” He noticed that even the dwarf’s eyebrows were curly.

Curly Beard leaned forward and said softly, gravely, “If humans continue to ignore us and the existence of the wonderful Soleitharmic sphere — something terrible will happen to us.” He paused, puffed and discharged a thick cloud of dark-grey smoke, streaked with striped, yellow-black snakes that momentarily obscured his face. “Yes, over time we will forget what we know. Some of us will begin to freeze, dissolve or burn up. Many more of us will change shape and form and turn against the good of the world and against the well-being of humans. It’s already happening, and has been happening over the last few decades.

“And it holds true for all Soleitharmins—all the elementals or little folk you know by names such as elves, fairies, wights, imps, salamanders, leprechauns, gnomes, goblins, pixies, sprites and any other beings that enliven and enrich the four elements of earth, fire, water and air. In other words, we will not be able to perform our duties any longer, which will have ruinous effects on the world and all its living creatures, seen and unseen. Indeed, the bees, our brothers and sisters, are starting to die. They link humans to us, but humans don’t understand how to see the truth of their presage.”

“What do you mean?” Leo’s mouth hung wide open.

“Simply put—the earth will get very ill and might even die! It has already begun, as we can see with the poor bees.”

“Oh no!” Julie cried out, putting her hand in front of her mouth.

“Exactly, and that’s why we came up with a plan,” Curly Beard said, sitting back again and puffing a little sailing ship like theirs into the air.

“What plan?” Julie asked, still looking pale.

“First of all, your grandfather began to teach me the ways of humans. And I, in turn, taught him the ways of the dwarfs. But that was only the beginning. Many of the stories he told you of dwarfs, fairies and gnomes are true and acquainted you with our world. Remember, you had that as a question when you went to say goodbye to him at the graveyard. Your grandfather answered the question through me. The stories prepared you for your own mission. And because you proved to be worthy, you received this very boat you are sitting in. Your grandfather wanted you to have it because he believed that you would be able to help reunite the two realms—the humans and the Soleitharmins. Though he knew some of its secret, he never sailed on it like you. The time was not yet ripe.”

“So we are on a journey planned by our grandfather?” Leo said, more to himself.

“In a manner of speaking. More precisely, you have been called upon to usher in a new age, an age of the sun, which, yes, does include this trip with more to come, because, as I said, there is much work to be done. Some of it will be terrible, but some will be fun.”

“Does it all depend on us?” Julie asked, overawed at the responsibility with which she suddenly found herself burdened.

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“No, not entirely. All over the world there are people, especially children, who are able to see us and talk to us. And there are a few of us—and it is still only a few—who have been asked to help these growing numbers of youngsters to recognize who we really are. We are there to guide them, just as I’m guiding you now.”

“But what role will we have to play?” asked Leo, who had wound a red rubber band round his middle and ring finger so tightly that they had turned blue.

“We will find out as we move forward.”

“And who guides you?” Julie asked, her cheeks still pale, her eyes alight with new understanding.

“Know that the world has mighty beings beyond your imagination, which are presided over by even grander, more powerful and sublime beings, known as gods in the world’s mythology. But enough, we will not talk of them. We have our work to do.” Curly Beard put his pipe away and said, “Leo, get ready to steer the boat into that water main that’s coming up to our right. Think you can manage? It’s a tight turn.”

“I’ll try.” To the boat he said, “Please slow down so I can make the turn.” Leo pulled the tiller and the boat entered a stream of wild and murky water.

The quiet minutes of smooth sailing were over. The pipe they’d entered slanted downward, and the boat was carried along at a rapid pace, alongside cans, old shoes, boxes, clothes, plastic bottles and garbage of every kind. Faster and faster they sailed until they were spewed out into a large cavern the size of three subway stations, with ledges to the right and left. At first they couldn’t see much because the ethmaroll was covered with sludge. As it cleared Leo shouted, “Oh, look, Julie! Look over there on that ledge.”

17 *The Binagatorials*

Julie gasped, tried to say something, but gulped instead. She stood up and slowly turned around to get a better look. On the ledge nearest to them were two bulging, smudge-white creatures as large as sea lions, with long, wide snouts, reminiscent of alligators, but blubbery and flabby. Sunk into the middle of each forehead was a single eye, the size of a tennis ball and as yellow, which darted back and forth haphazardly. Julie had to slap a hand to her mouth to muffle a scream.

The ledge to their left widened into a spacious platform. The raised flat area was filled with hundreds of these ugly, one-eyed creatures, crammed together, many lying squashed on top of one another. Most were dosing, but some snapped at one another in their attempts to make themselves more comfortable.

“Welcome to the Cavern of the Tombs, or Sacred Cavern, as it’s also called,” said Curly Beard, though his face looked grim.

“Well, this isn’t exactly how I imagined the Cavern to look like.” Julie’s voice was infused with fear and disgust.

“I’m sure,” Curly Beard said, running his thick, gnarly fingers through the curls of his beard. “It used to be the sacred burial place of the great and lofty rulers of the past, many hundreds, even thousands of years ago, when we still conversed with them. We supplied them with burial jewelry to send them on their journey after death. After a powerful earthquake, which shut off the main entrance to the tombs, the Sacred Cavern was forgotten, and over the generations our relationship with these sublime leaders of humanity dwindled and eventually stopped.

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“When the city above us was built, the cavern became part of the sewer system. How could anyone have known it was once the blessed burial site of the mighty? By the time the excavators arrived, this entire cavern was already filled with water. Though it was partly drained, the tombs, deep down in the watery depths, have remained undiscovered. What’s more, the tombs are now covered with a thick layer of mud and debris. For decades no humans have come down here, nor to the other earlier and holy reservoirs under the city. It is best they remain undiscovered. Let the ancients rest in peace for ever more.”

“And now it’s filled with all these hideous creatures. What *are* they?” Julie inquired in a hoarse, horrified whisper, as she stood, still holding on to the mast. The idea that they were in a place that had once been a burial site gave her a chill.

“These creatures are called binagatorials.”

“Bina- bina- what?” Leo asked.

“Long ago they were wonderful water beings—very pretty and petite—helping to keep the water clean, alive and vibrant. As the village grew into a town and then into a large, sprawling city, they could no longer keep up with the purification of the water, especially when all the natural caverns down here became part of the sewage-system maze. As a last resort these dainty nymphs ingested the increasing slush, trying to transform it.

“For a while it helped, but as the waste increased, it began to take over their physical form. Initially, the changes were so slight that no human eye could have seen them. But as the waste became more toxic, their bodies turned to jelly. They grew into toad-like creatures and eventually, after decades of swallowing chemical poisons, they transformed into these creatures that we now call binagatorials.”

“So there’s truth to these urban legends?” Julie asked in disbelief. “I thought they were just myths nobody believed in.”

“Funny, but just the other day I saw a comic strip about mutated alligators, whatever ‘mutated’ means.” Leo said, still playing with his red rubber band. “It was peering out of a gutter.”

Curly Beard laughed and said, “Well, as you can see, they are most definitely not a legend. The binagatorials are living down here by the thousands, and they have quite forgotten their original mission of cleaning the water.”

“Why are you showing us these terrible creatures anyway?” Julie wanted to know.

“Oh, you haven’t guessed?”

“No, why?”

“It’s quite simple: You and Leo are going to help rid the city of them.”

“Very funny!” Julie sat down and crossed her arms. “Okay, I think I’ve seen enough. I’d like to go back home now,” though she felt somewhat special at having been chosen. Mostly she felt like crying at the tale of the creatures and the enormity of the new responsibility.

“Why us?” Leo asked softly, looking out at the lubberly, slimy creatures lying lazily on the large ledge.

“I told you—because you’ve been chosen. And if you don’t do it now, you’ll meet up with them again some time in the future... but then it might be too late.”

“What do you mean?”

“They are multiplying and getting increasingly hungry. The more they grow, the more they want to devour. It won’t be long before they’ll crawl out of the drains, toilets, gutters and

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manholes to snatch people and pets away. It's already happened. That's how the urban legends got started. At present they still make do with rats, stray cats and dogs—whatever rodents they can find. But, trust me—that will not last for much longer. If we don't do something, we'll soon see hordes of them overrunning the city. The city will succumb to the white plague. Something has to be done—and quickly. In fact, right now!"

18 *Now Follow Me*

“No, you can’t be serious! There’s nothing we can do,” Julie cried.

“Yes, we can,” Curly Beard stated, almost apologetically, but firmly. “Look up above you.” They looked up at the rocky roof. At first it was too dark to see anything clearly, but then they saw, hanging in the cracks and crevices, thousands of little, embryonic binagatorials. Like bats they hung, in all stages of development. Some were as small as frogs, while others were the size of baby seals, all covered with blobs of jelly. “When they’re mature, they fall into the dirty water where they harden until they are as tough as the ones you see on the ledge. Look over there, to your left—one of them is about to drop.”

True enough, they saw the gooey globule stretch and expand till it snapped like sticky elastic. Resembling a large water balloon, it plopped into the dark water with a muffled thud, causing their little boat to rock violently. “And look, there’s another one about to drop, but that one will still take a couple minutes.” They looked in silence at the awful baggage above them, like bombs that could easily hit them if they weren’t careful. “Now, do you see why we have to do something? Every day hundreds drop down. As I said, it won’t be long before they will venture out into the streets.”

“But what can we do? There are so many of them. It’s an impossible task.” Leo steered the boat away from the main ledge and then asked the boat to stop. Julie, meanwhile, sat petulantly on her hands wishing she were back in her room, tucked cozily in her bed.

“Nothing is impossible. But first, let’s find out how tough they really are. Or, should I say, let’s determine their weak spot.”

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Curly Beard stood up, hopped on top of the cabin and looked around with squinted eyes. “Leo, see that niche up above the ledge. That’s where we’ll go. There are no binagatorials there—one of the few places left in this cavern. That’s where we’ll moor. Go!”

Leo took hold of the tiller, whispered orders to the boat and up they sailed. The niche was small, but they landed safely and securely. “Good job, Leo.” Curly Beard pulled back the ethmaroll, and at once the putrid stench of the binagatorials hit them.

“I think I’m going to throw up,” Julie gasped.

“No, you won’t. Now follow me.” Carefully the three of them climbed out. They noticed a rough-hewn gutter leading through the rock down to the lower ledge where an exceptionally large binagatorial lay sleeping, slightly separated from the others.

“We’re in luck. He’s the most powerful of them all—you might call him the chief binagatorial. Look at the length of hairs growing out of his knobby ears, hanging down like bundles of old, wet shoelaces. None of the others have hairs as long. Their length determines their age. It’s him we’ve got to get,” Curly Beard said, determination written all over his lined face.

Slowly they crept down the fissured, slippery gutter. As they approached the creature, the smell got unbearably odorous. Both children felt a fit of nausea coming on. Curly Beard, seeing their plight, took out his pipe, filled it with the strange powder, lit it with a drop from the vial and blew the fresh vapor into their faces. The clean, woodland smell revived them immediately, giving them the strength to continue. The binagatorial looked even larger than initially anticipated—and uglier. Curly Beard took out two shiny daggers from two

leather hilts attached to his belt under his jacket. “For you,” he whispered, handing them the exquisitely crafted weapons. For himself, he took the axe.

“Now, you two spread out to the right and left of this sleeping monster and I’ll face him up front. When I give the word we attack. Understood?”

“What? You mean we have to kill this thing?” Julie hissed in disbelief. She’d never killed an animal in her life before, even though she’d grown up on a farm. She loved all creatures, even the creepy-crawlies.

“Shhh! We might be heard.”

“I can’t do this,” Leo whimpered, tears welling up.

Curly Beard stood squarely in front of them and looked at them with controlled authority. “I’m proud of you that you do not want to kill—even this terrible binagatorial. But listen to me carefully. Every one of these hideous fiends is a transformed water sprite. Though it might seem as if we are killing it, we are actually freeing the nymph—giving it back its life, the one that was taken from it, and the one that it sacrificed, all because of the humanity’s inability to live in accord with nature. In other words, that good spirit is still inside that binagatorial. If we kill the monster, we will free the enchanted water sprite.”

For a moment the children sat looking back at the stern-looking dwarf. At that moment the huge binagatorial gave off a loud guttural, stinking burp, which almost made the two children retch on the spot.

“It will wake up soon, and then our chances will be lost,” Curly Beard urged again.

“Fine, let’s do it,” Julie said with sudden vehemence, overcoming her revulsion. “If we’re freeing a water sprite, then it makes sense.”

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“Yes,” Leo agreed. “Then it’s more like we’re doctors doing surgery.” He lifted his dagger and said, “I’m ready!”

“Good!” Curly Beard looked relieved. “Now, listen carefully, if we succeed—” he stopped and corrected himself “—when we succeed, we will have to find the little water sprite and take her back with us. Our mission will only succeed with her help. So, my little warriors—are you ready?”

“Yes!”

19 ❁ *The Fight*

But they didn't feel ready at all. The idea of plunging a dagger into this sleeping creature—no matter how vile—went against every natural instinct. They saw Curly Beard raise his axe above his head, ready to strike.

“Wait,” Leo whispered hoarsely, putting up both his hands.

“What now?” Curly Beard asked, visibly annoyed and lowering his axe. The glare of attack still glowing in his eyes.

“How about we capture it, tame it, and then lure the water sprite out of it. I've got a rope,” and he quickly undid the rope which doubled as a belt and began making a lasso.

“I tell you, it can't be done!” At that moment the binagatorial lifted its head and snorted. “Oh no, it's waking up. We've got to attack—now!” But they were too late.

The creature opened its bulging yellow eye, embedded in bone, and instantly lifted its head. Curly Beard raised his axe again and rushed forward, but was immediately whacked over the head with the monster's huge, webbed paw, sending him sprawling. The binagatorial waddled toward the dwarf, lifted its paw to pound him again when a rope suddenly flew over and around its thick-necked head. Leo had thrown the lasso perfectly and was now tugging it as hard as he could, with the help of Julie, tightening the knot around its wide, blubbery neck. Taken by surprise, the creature lost its balance, and as it fell, it yanked both children off their feet, giving Curly Beard enough time to get up and retrieve his axe.

“Let go of the rope,” Curly Beard shouted as he readied himself to attack again. The binagatorial, with fury in its single bloodshot eye, reared itself up on its hind legs and tail, which split into two gnarled tentacles. It opened its large, flat and

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protruding jaw and lashed out at the dwarf, who looked very small in front of the monster.

But Curly Beard ducked deftly. Again the reptile swiped at him with its floppy paw, and again the dwarf ducked, but this time he swung his axe and slit the monster's throat. As it fell, the creature let out a high-pitched scream like that of a pig in slaughter, which echoed shrilly through the entire cavern and along subterranean tunnels. At once it was answered by hordes of binagatorials, each warning bellow setting off an avalanche of barking, till the sound was overwhelmingly loud.

"Back to the boat—at once!" Curly Beard ordered, though his voice got lost in the cacophonous upheaval. They didn't have to be told twice. They ran up the slick and craggy drainpipe to the narrow ledge above them, while Curly Beard stayed behind to fend off the fast-approaching binagatorials.

They stumbled, tripped and fell in their haste to get back to the boat. "Hurry! They're almost on top of us," Curly Beard, who'd grown taller with anger, yelled as he kicked a binagatorial off the lower platform back into the water with his boot, took a swipe at another one to his right, slashing the unfortunate beast's rump. Dark yellow guck oozed from the wound. Leo was the first to scramble back into the boat. Close behind, Julie slipped again and toppled backwards, but Curly Beard ran up and caught her just in time.

"Get in," he shouted, giving her a push. At that moment one of the smaller, faster binagatorials crawled up the pipe and bit into Curly Beard's calf, but the dwarf's axe was quick and the monster bellowed in pain as he tumbled into the others behind him, deep gashes in his paws and chest. Curly Beard, however, was dragged halfway down the pipe. He hit

the binagatorial repeatedly on the snout with the axe before he could free himself. Quickly he clambered back up and had almost reached the boat when another binagatorial who'd scaled up and around the outer edge—holding on to the vertical wall with the suction pads on his front paws—jumped on top of him. The children watched helplessly as the creature swung its long, double-tongued tail around the dwarf, the tentacles pinning down his arms. It picked him up and held him in front of its large maw.

“Pull up the ethmaroll and get out of here!” Curly Beard shouted to the children.

“We can't leave you here,” Leo shouted back, about to jump out of the boat again, dagger in hand.

“There's nothing you can do to help me now!” By now Curly Beard was hanging upside down. “Get back and go!” The two children stared in horror as the binagatorial began licking the dangling dwarf, covering him with a thick layer of saliva. His feet and legs were already thickly coated. Soon it would cover his head.

“Surely there's something we can do,” Julie screamed.

“Yes, there is something—go to Brathnar, King of the Dwarfs. Tell him what happened! Ask for his help!” The binagatorial kept licking and was now up to his shoulders.

“How do we find the King?” Julie asked, holding Leo back, who still thought he could save Curly Beard. The beast slathered on the molasses-thick muck with incredible speed. By now the dwarf's head was almost entirely covered.

“Find the King's Tunnel under the Lion's Rock in the park, and then follow it.”

“Where to?”

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“GO!” It was the last word he uttered. The binagatorial’s tongue licked across his mouth and his face froze behind the transparent slime—eyes still open.

By now other binagatorials had climbed up the narrow drain and were making toward the boat. Leo pulled up the ethmaroll. It shut with a soft click just as two creatures spat their sticky slime at them, covering the boat. Though the boat itself was now invisible, the sticky spit was not and it took on the form of the boat for all the binagatorials to see.

“Take us home as quickly as you can,” Julie shouted to the boat, while Leo grabbed hold of the tiller. Instantaneously the boat lifted from the ledge and tried to sail away. But they were pulled back, glued to the ledge by the gunk. More binagatorials jostled to the top, spitting their sticky liquid at them. The boat tugged and tugged, twisting this way and that, a powerless Curly Beard looking on. “Come on, dear Boat, you can do it,” the children shouted, but to no avail.

“Lift the tiller,” Julie shouted. “It’ll make us bigger.” Leo yanked the tiller up and immediately the boat grew in size, breaking the bonds of the sticky strands. “That’s it! Now go!” With added encouragement the boat tugged itself free. Julie and Leo fell back, not without shouting, “Good work, Boat... you did it!” Below them they could see hundreds of binagatorials bellowing in uproar.

But the children had not escaped yet. The mounting bawling and hollering had brought the very walls of the cavern to tremble and quake, causing the baby binagatorials who were hanging from the ceiling to drop down like little bombs, some of them hitting the boat. The pounding pushed the boat close to the murky water where the monsters were spitting and

spluttering up at them, trying to envelope the boat with their goop.

Leo scrambled for the tiller, shouting, “Go, Boat, go,” steering the boat in rapid zigzags toward the tunnel from where they’d come. At last they escaped into the narrow chutes and pipes, away from the shrill turmoil. It grew very dark and quiet, except for the intermittent gurgling and flushing. “I have no idea where to go,” Leo said after a while, pushing the tiller down again to reduce their size.

“Nor do I,” Julie said, coming to sit next to Leo on the other side of the tiller. “At least the yucky mess of the binagatorials is slowly sliding off the ethmaroll.” As it did, the boat began to glow again, and they could see their surroundings more clearly. “Maybe the boat remembers how to get back.” Julie’s voice was suddenly tinged with hope. “Boat, can you find your way out of here? Can you take us home?” As if in answer, the boat flew a few feet into the air and came down with a friendly splash. “I think it is telling us that it can.” Julie clapped her hands.

Whenever they came to a junction, the boat leaned either to the portside or to starboard, letting Leo know which way to steer. But each time they went up a chute or a pipe, the boat lifted off on its own accord. After many twists and turns, ups and downs, they sailed out of the drainpipe into their kitchen.

But now they were alone, without Curly Beard, and their hearts were heavy. Silently they sailed through the keyhole back into their bedroom. Thanking the boat, they held hands and disembarked. Once the boat was safely back in its bottle and moored in its berth on the fleece by the windowsill, they quickly went to bed, and fell into a fitful sleep.

20  *Walking the Dog*

As the wet tongue smothered her, she shouted out in panic, “No, get away, you beast,” lashing out with her hands. At once she heard squeals and a whimper, which woke her up. She opened her eyes and saw Sidney by her bed, paws on the comforter, his droopy eyes looking sadly up at her. “Oh, sorry, Sidney. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“So, you’re up at last.” Mrs. Temple stood smiling in the door-way. She wore a light blue, linen skirt and a loose, white, breezy blouse, embroidered at the neckline. “Do you know how late it is?”

“No, why?”

“It’s almost eleven thirty. That’s the first time you’ve missed breakfast—both of you.” Leo sat up and rubbed his eyes. “You never sleep in so long. I guess it’s good for you, but what on earth did you do last night? Sidney’s been nosing and scraping outside your door for ages, wanting to go for his walk. I finally had to let him in. Well, at least he woke you up.”

“Yeah, by putting his wet, snotty snout into my face like a horrid binagatorial,” Julie cried, shuddering at the thought.

“A what?”

“Oh, nothing. Just some funny animal from a story we once heard,” Leo answered, coming up with a quick save.

“I see. Well, now that you’re both awake, I want you to take Sidney for a walk. I couldn’t get a stitch of work done with the dog pestering me, and I’ve got deadlines to meet.” Shaking her head, Mrs. Temple left the room.

“Julie, I don’t think we should mention the binagatorials, or anything like that again—ever! Should Mom or Dad find out what we’ve been up to, they’ll take away the boat.”

“I know. It just kinda popped out.” At that moment Sidney jumped right up onto her bed, wagged his tail profusely and slobbered all over Julie’s pajama sleeves. “Okay, okay, I’m coming.”

Julie laughed as she hopped out of bed and hurried off to the bathroom. “Leo, go ahead with Sidney. I’m taking a quick shower. I’ll meet you in the park in fifteen minutes, by the bench next to the big birch tree overlooking the lake.”

Leo got dressed, gulped down a glass of milk, stuffed two granola bars into his back pocket and grabbed a string cheese to chew on the way. He fastened the leash to Sidney’s collar and walked down the stairs, or rather, was pulled by the dog, so excited to go sniffing around the park. As Leo passed by the door on the first floor, it clicked shut quietly, though he didn’t notice it this time, as all his strength was going into controlling Sidney, who was remarkably strong for such a young basset hound.

It was a sunny, mild, summer morning. The park was filled with people relaxing on the grass and enjoying themselves in a wide array of activities—basketball, Frisbee and catch or just strolling along. But Leo hardly looked at any of them. On any other day he would have yearned to join the groups of children in their games, but not today. His mind was stuck on all that had happened the night before: the trip through the pipes and tunnels, the binagatorials and the terrible fight at the end. He shuddered at the very thought of the monsters that had attacked them—it’s a miracle we made it out alive! But, worst of all was the image of Curly Beard, caked in the sticky spittle.

Alternating between a fast trot and sniffing around bushes and trash cans, Sidney led Leo around to the far side of the lake. Coming to the green bench next to the birch tree, Leo

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took out the granola bars. At once Sidney sat down, put his head on Leo's lap and looked expectantly up at him with large, watery eyes.

"Yeah, yeah, don't worry, you'll get some." Leo unwrapped the bar and was about to break off a piece when Sidney jumped up and snatched it out of his hand. "Ouch, you silly dog," Leo cried, wiping his wet hands on his khaki shorts "No need to rip off my hand." Sidney bowed his head guiltily for a moment, before he turned his full attention to the tasty morsel he'd pilfered. "Fine—keep it, but you're not getting any more." Leo unwrapped the second granola bar, making sure it was out of Sidney's reach.

As Leo nibbled on his bar, he wondered where the king's tunnel under the Lion's Rock could be. Is it in this park or another one? There were numerous rocks and boulders in the park. But which one was Lion's Rock? Is it a large or small tunnel? Would they have to push down the tiller and shrink themselves to fit through the tunnel?

He couldn't pursue any of those questions because Sidney was already up and tugging at the leash. Leo walked down to the lake, unleashed Sidney and threw a stick out into the water, which he retrieved immediately. Leo threw the stick a few more times, all the while glancing down the path for Julie. *What's keeping her*, he wondered. *She's usually never late*. Finding a bigger stick, he threw it even farther out into the lake. After a couple more times, he finally decided to let it be, return home and see what was keeping Julie.

21 *The Stranger*

After her shower and a bite to eat, Julie, humming, left for the park. As she skipped down the stairs, she heard the familiar click of the door opening on the first floor. She slowed down. As expected, the door was slightly ajar. Though Julie didn't look at the crack directly, she saw something move in the narrow slit of darkness. Once she'd passed the door, she heard it creak. Julie walked on as if she hadn't noticed a thing. But then she turned abruptly to face the door. Immediately it shut with a bang. For a moment all was quiet. Someone sniffed softly behind the door.

Quietly Julie walked up to the door and whispered, "Who's there?" No answer.

"I know you're listening," she said a bit louder. "Who are you, and why do you spy on us every time we pass by?" Still no answer. "Come on, open up. Show yourself." She waited a bit longer, but finally Julie shrugged her shoulders and walked off. Besides, Leo must already be waiting.

Then she heard what sounded like sobs. She paused, stepped back to the door and said, "Don't be afraid. I'm not angry at you." Silence. "Oh well, I'd love to meet you, but I'm going now," and Julie turned to go.

"Wait."

Julie looked back and saw the door opening a crack. Whoever was behind that door was well-practiced in opening it silently.

"Wait," the voice repeated. "You're Julie, aren't you?"

"Yes. How do you know?" It was a girl's voice, that much Julie could determine.

"And your brother's name is Leo?"

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“Why don’t you open the door so I can see who you are?”

“Do you want to come in?”

“Sure.”

“Good, but give me a minute. I’ll call you when I’m ready.”

“Fine.” Julie found it a strange arrangement, but she waited. From beyond the door she heard the soft shuffle of footsteps and a strange tapping sound that she couldn’t place – then, silence.

It was more than two minutes before she heard the faint voice call from the interior, “You can come in now, I’m ready. Oh, and please close the door behind you.”

Julie pushed the door open, stepped through, shut it behind her and walked down a dark hallway, lined with many strange-looking wooden masks hanging on the walls of both sides. Some were laughing and grimacing, while others looked down at her ominously. To her relief the living room was light and airy. One of the windows was wide open and the late morning sun shone through, brightly. “Hello? Where are you?”

“Here, in my bedroom.”

Julie followed the voice and entered a spacious room. On the far end, seated in a large, black upholstered chair, was a little girl. She wore a white dress with loose, long sleeves and ruffled cuffs. It hung right down to her bare feet and contrasted with her shiny skin that was almost as dark as the upholstered chair. The little girl’s hair was in neat corn rows, interlaced with colorful beads, and fell down past her shoulders. Around both wrists and ankles she had silver and copper bangles and bracelets. Julie was taken aback by how fragile and beautiful the little girl looked in the large chair that could have easily fit at least three girls her size.

“Please, sit down.” The girl gestured toward another smaller chair with carved, wooden armrests. “My name is Annabel.”

“Hi, I’m Julie... but I guess you know that already.”

“Yes, every time you come up or down the stairs I listen to your conversations. I learned your names the first day you moved in.

“So why did you never show yourself?” Julie asked, adding, “We could play together.”

“I’m not allowed to go outside.”

“Why not?” At once Julie noticed the girl’s lips and chin tremble. Hastily, she added, “You’ve got a nice place here. Airy, bright and open. Except for the dark hallway and those scary masks,” and she laughed. “Yep, nice room.” Three handmade dolls lay on the neatly-made bed, their heads resting on little embroidered cushions. The walls were adorned with many paintings and drawings, some of them framed. By the window was a large desk, strewn with papers and books.

“Thanks.” Annabel swallowed. “My aunt works all day, and I can’t go anywhere without her. And when she gets back from work, she’s too tired to take me anywhere.”

“So what do you do all day long?” Julie asked, feeling sorry for the girl, who looked as if she were about eight or nine—Leo’s age.

“I read,” and she pointed to a stack of books lying on the bedside table. “Or I draw and paint. Sometimes I knit, sew or make dolls... and I sleep a lot.” She bit her lip, almost embarrassed at her confession, her dark, sparkling eyes looking even sadder.

“So you made the dolls on the bed and did all the drawings and paintings hanging on the walls?”

“Yes.”

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“Well, I’m impressed. Both Leo and I like to draw, but you’re better than both of us put together.”

At that Annabel smiled, her white teeth adding to the radiance on her face. For a while neither of them spoke, and Julie wondered what it must be like to be cooped up inside all day long. “Don’t you ever want to go out and play?”

“Of course I do.”

“Is it only that you don’t have anybody to play with—is that it?”

“Sort of...”

“Okay then. You can come with me. I’m supposed to meet my brother in the park—actually about ten minutes ago. Let’s go.”

“I can’t.”

“You can’t? Why? Your aunt won’t let you—is that it?”

“Yes and no. The thing is I really can’t.”

“What do you mean—can’t?”

“Look,” and Annabel sat up, put her feet on the ground and slowly pushed herself up, awkwardly. Then she began hobbling over to Julie, very slowly. With every step she almost fell over. Shocked, Julie noticed that both of Annabel’s legs were lame and that she could move only with great difficulty.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, I didn’t know.”

“It’s quite all right, and I’m a lot faster with these,” said Annabel, grabbing a pair of crutches leaning against the bookshelf. “Still, it’s hard to get around. My exercise is walking to the front door and back. It’s become so much more interesting since you’ve moved in. It gives me something to look forward to every day. We haven’t ever had children in this building. You see, I know the sound of everybody’s door in this place.

Whenever I hear yours opening, I go as far as I can to get a peek at you or your brother. These last two weeks I've often dreamed of getting to know you. But I've always been too shy." Annabel walked over to the window with her crutches. "Look, your brother is coming back from the park. I guess he got tired of waiting for you."

Julie got up and stood next to Annabel. Looking out they had a perfect view of the park, and they saw Leo, pulled along by Sidney.

"So, if you had the chance, would you like to go out into the park?"

"Of course I would. All the time I dream of going places. That's why I like to read so much. It takes me to places where my legs will never take me. But I tire so easily."

"Well, you need to get outside. It'll be good for you. Today Leo and I are going to take you to the park."

"But my aunt would not want it. She's always scared I'll fall and hurt myself, which I have. And the doctors have told us many times that I need to rest and not do too much. And getting down those stairs to the lobby is strenuous, even though it's just a few steps."

"Surely your aunt won't mind if we're with you. And we'll help you," Julie said with conviction.

"I guess, but I don't want people to see me struggle. Last time I tried, I collapsed and had to be carried back home."

"That won't happen this time. Trust me, you'll be perfectly all right. So, you wait right here. I'm going to go and tell Leo we have a new friend. He's going to be so excited to meet you. I'll be back." With that she gave Annabel a quick hug and ran off.

"I'm not going anywhere." There was joy in her voice.

22  *A New Friend*

Instead of running down to Leo, Julie sprinted up the stairs, entered her own apartment and ran to the bedroom shouting, “I forgot something, Mom.” She grabbed the boat in the bottle, rolled it up carefully in the fleece, and ran back out, yodeling, “See you later, Mom. We’ll be in the park.” Julie jumped down the steps, three at a time, and met Leo in the lobby just as he was entering the front door.

“Where have you been?” Leo asked accusingly.

“You’ll never believe me, but—”

“Listen, after last night I’ll believe anything. But at the moment I’m really mad at you for letting me wait forever.”

“I know, I’m sorry. But there’s a good reason. You see, I’ve discovered who lives on the first floor.”

“You did? Really! Who?”

“Come on, follow me,” and without another word, the two ran off. For once, Sidney was dragged along, hardly able to keep up. Annabel’s door was still slightly ajar and Julie pushed it open. “Hi, I’m back with my brother,” she shouted down the hallway.

“Come in,” said the faint voice from the far end of the apartment. She was sitting in the large upholstered chair again, but on her desk she had three glasses of orange juice and a bowl of cookies. “I thought you might like a little something,” she said smiling at the two of them. “Help yourselves.”

“Thanks. Meet Leo, my little brother,” Julie said. “Leo, meet Annabel, our new friend.” Leo stood perfectly still and for a moment couldn’t say anything at all. He had not imagined that the mysterious stranger peering at them through the doorway would be a petite, delicate, black girl his own age.

And he couldn't help but notice how pretty she was. "Well, aren't you going to say hi to her?" Julie prompted, giving him a little punch on the arm.

"Hello Annabel, pleased to meet you," Leo said shyly, remembering his manners. He felt the light skin of his face flush bright red. To hide his momentary embarrassment, he added, "I'd love to have a cookie and some juice. I'm really thirsty after Sidney pulled me through the park," and he pointed to the tail-wagging hound.

"Do you want a cookie, too?" Annabel said, offering Sidney one. To Leo's and Julie's surprise, Sidney trotted up to Annabel, sat down, put a paw on her lap and waited patiently to get a cookie. Instead of snapping it out of her hand, he took it gently from her and lay down at her feet—quietly.

"Well, Sidney likes you, that's for sure," Julie said and sat down on the low bed. Leo joined her and the three of them munched cookies, sipped their juice and looked at one another. After a while Julie said, "Leo, I promised Annabel we'd go out to the park together."

"Sure," Leo answered, nodding his head, while Julie looked meaningfully at Leo until he met her penetrating gaze, then at Annabel, and back to Leo. "What? Why are you looking at me like that?" Leo asked.

"Well, the thing is..." and Julie hesitated.

"What she means to say is that I can't walk very well—my legs are lame, or almost," Annabel said.

"Lame?" Leo asked, feeling very sorry for her and looking down at her thin legs showing through her white dress.

"Yes, so I figured..." Julie cleared her throat, "that we could ... you know... help her."

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“Sure we will,” Leo confirmed. “You go on one side of her and I’ll go on the other.”

“No, silly, you don’t get it. That’s not what I meant. Besides, she’s got crutches. I was thinking of taking her to the park on the boat.”

“The boat? Us alone with her!” Leo exclaimed, both aghast and thrilled.

“It would be so much easier... and quicker.”

“But without Curly Beard...” At the mention of his name they both fell silent, remembering what had happened the night before. In one way it seemed so real and the images of the binagatorials were painfully vivid, especially how the horrible monster had caught and covered the hapless dwarf with its sticky paste. On the other hand the memory was like a fast-fading nightmare.

“What are you two talking about? What’s all this about a boat? And why are you suddenly looking so wretched? If it’s going to be such a problem, we don’t have to go to the park at all. My aunt wouldn’t like it anyway.”

“I’m sorry, Annabel. It’s just that, well... it’s hard to explain,” Julie said.

“It’s settled. Let’s just do it.” Leo’s mind was made up. “How long has it been since you’ve been outside?”

“Almost a year, except for my monthly visits to the doctor, which don’t count because the taxi comes right up to the front door to pick me up.”

“You’ve been cooped up here all this time?” Leo asked, visibly upset at the thought.

“More like three years, really, ever since I had an infection and my legs began to give out. Before then I could walk and

run perfectly. And the doctors are worried that it will spread to the rest of my body. In a few years I might not be able to move at all. But with lots of rest and fluids, I might rehabilitate.”

“Well, that settles it. I’m going to fetch the boat,” Leo said, almost fiercely.

“No need, I’ve already got it right here,” and Julie unraveled the fleece, revealing the boat in the bottle. “We can go right now.”

Annabel looked at the boat in wonder. “It’s exceptionally beautiful. I’d love to draw it some time. Is that what the real boat looks like? And where is it—down by the lake?”

“No, this is it.”

Annabel looked disappointed, and Julie noticed straight away. “Annabel, what we’re about to do will appear strange, unbelievable really. But it will feel quite normal once we’re inside the boat.”

“What boat?”

“This boat!”

“Fine, whatever you say. I’ve got a good imagination. I just thought that you actually meant sailing in the boat and going outside.”

“That’s exactly what we mean. Now, let’s go,” Leo said and walked over to Annabel.

Julie stood up, uncorked the bottle and whispered, “Come out, dear Boat.” At once the mast and sail folded like butterfly wings and the boat slid out and hovered in front of the three children. “Now, let’s hold hands.” Leo and Julie took hold of Annabel’s hands, as she was still sitting in the chair. Leo noticed how warm and soft Annabel’s hand was—full of life and vibrancy. “On the boat,” Julie said and immediately the

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three of them, still holding hands, were transported onto the deck of the boat.

“What just happened?” Annabel gasped, looking around her in amazement, finding herself floating in the middle of her room that now looked like a gigantic hall. “How is this possible? Where did you get this marvelous boat?”

“We’ll tell you some other time, but for now, sit down and let’s go out to the park.” At that moment they heard a loud bark.

“It’s Sidney, we forgot Sidney,” Leo shouted. “He’s got to come along. I’ll fetch him.” He let go of Annabel, grabbed the bottle from Julie and said, “Out of boat.” At once he appeared as a huge giant to the little girls on the boat. They screamed and laughed. He looked down at them and said, “Cute.” Without wasting another second, he clutched Sidney by the collar and said, “On the boat.” Sidney didn’t seem to notice the change. He trotted over to Annabel, licked her hand and lay down at her feet.

Leo took his position at the tiller and said, “Now, take us to the park, dear Boat.” At once the boat floated through the open window in the living room and sailed softly down toward the park below them.

23 *In the Park*

Leisurely, they sailed around the park, just above the trees, like a hot air balloon. Sniffing with satisfaction, letting his tongue hang out and taking in the scene from the unusual vantage point, Sidney loved it and held his head over the side.

“This is so much more pleasant than last night’s trip through all those pipes and tunnels,” Leo observed.

“It sure is,” Julie confirmed. “And the world looks so different from up here.”

“What do you mean—pipes and tunnels? Where were you last night?” Annabel asked, looking puzzled.

“Oh, that’s all part of a long story. We’ll tell you later, I promise. Let’s just enjoy this. Cool, huh?”

“Sure is. It’s the best thing that’s happened to me in a long time. And I’m so glad to get out of the stuffy apartment, breathe the fresh air and see people and things up close again.”

At that moment there was a shout from below. One of the boys playing soccer in the field next to the lake spotted them. “Hey, guys, look at that funny thing up there.” They all looked up. “It looks like a remote-controlled boat... but what’s it doing in the air? Maybe it’s some fancy, swanky newfangled toy or something.” All the boys began to talk at once, pointing at the boat.

The ruckus attracted the attention of others in the park, all of whom looked up at them and pointed. “How can it fly by itself?”

“It’s not making any noise.”

“Look, there’s a teensy dog on board, and it’s alive.”

“No way!”

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The three children ducked down. “Keep perfectly still,” Julie ordered, “and don’t let them see you.” At that the boat stopped in midair and they hovered over the growing crowd. One of the boys picked up a stone and threw it at them, shouting, “Let’s see if it’s real.” It skimmed the stern of the boat. More stones were thrown, but they missed the boat. Another stone flicked Sidney in the head. He whimpered, which made the group of boys laugh. “It’s a real, itsy-bitsy dog.”

Julie took charge and pulled up the ethmaroll, but it got stuck on Sidney’s leash. Leo quickly tugged at the leash, and the cover sprang into place just as another stone hit the hull, which shook the boat so violently that they would have fallen out had it not been for the ethmaroll. From below they heard a cumulative gasp.

“Where’s it gone to?” a voice shouted.

“Dunno, man. It was there a moment ago. Now it’s gone.”

“I didn’t see it move away.”

“It just vanished.”

Leo looked at Julie, relieved. “Phew! That was close.” He took his place next to the tiller and they sailed away over the lake.

“What just happened?” Annabel asked, looking a bit nervous at the sudden turn of events.

“You see, as soon as we pull this covering over the boat, we become invisible,” Leo explained.

“Invisible!” Annabel cried in disbelief. “What kind of boat is this?”

“Oh, this is a very special boat, all right. It can do even more,” Leo bragged. “If I push the tiller down, we get even smaller, and if I pull it up, we get bigger.” He pulled it up and immediately they all expanded in proportion to the boat.

“And you’re really sure we’re invisible?” Annabel was not convinced.

“Sure... watch!” Leo, proud of the boat’s power, steered it back toward the crowd, but nobody noticed or saw them. “Now, we’ll open the ethmaroll again.” Julie was about to tell him not to, but Leo had already pulled it back.

“There it is again!” someone shouted from below.

“Wow! Look how big it is!”

“Hey, there are people inside.”

“Someone call the media.” The crowd started whooping and hollering. People ran from all over the park to get a glimpse of the strange boat hovering just above the treetops. Some took out their cameras and iPhones and snapped pictures. But others picked up stones and took aim at the boat.

Julie immediately pulled the ethmaroll shut. From below they heard screams of disbelief. “Leo, what were you thinking? That was a really stupid thing to do. Not only could they see us, but because you pulled up the tiller, we’re normal size, in other words—big. Someone could have recognized us.”

“I’m sorry. I had no idea that the boat would still be big with the ethmaroll open. I thought it only worked when it’s shut. I thought we’d be small again.”

“I’m sure Curly Beard would not be happy with what we just did.”

“No, you’re right. And he did say that he still had a few more things to show us about the boat.”

“And who is Curly Beard?” Annabel asked. “Or is that also part of the long story that you’ll tell me some other time?”

“Sorry, Annabel. Let’s find a nice place to land and get out and lie in the sun. Then we’ll tell you all about it,” Julie suggested.

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“But where?” Leo wondered. “We can’t take the risk of anyone seeing us again when we pull down the ethmaroll.”

“How about we go to the island in the middle of the lake? Nobody’s allowed to go near there with the paddle boats,” Annabel suggested.

“What a good idea,” Julie said.

“We can land between the paws of Lion’s Rock. It’s really secluded.”

“What did you just say?” Leo and Julie asked simultaneously.

“All I said was that we could land between those two rocks.”

“Yes, yes, but what name did you give it?” Julie asked.

“Oh, Lion’s Rock, of course. The island is called Lion’s Rock because it looks like a lion—mane and all. I thought you knew that.” Julie and Leo scrutinized the island and recognized at once its remarkable resemblance to a lion, with its two large paws stretched out in front of it like a sphinx. It looked very majestic.

“Amazing,” Julie said. “Funny, I never noticed that before.”

“That’s what Curly Beard meant when he said, ‘Find the King’s tunnel under the Lion’s Rock in the park,’” Leo mused. “How cool is that! Thanks, Annabel, you have just solved a big mystery for us.” In his enthusiasm he hugged her, immediately abashed at his exuberance.

“And I still don’t understand anything at all.” Annabel looked down, feeling a little stunned by the spontaneous hug. Recovering quickly she added, “But as soon as we’ve landed, I demand to know exactly what’s going on.” She sounded almost stern.

“And you will,” Julie assured. “Okay, Leo, steer her toward Lion’s Rock.”

“Aye, aye!” They sailed over the lake and landed gently in the shade between the two large, granite paws of the lion. Leo pulled back the ethmaroll and they disembarked. As soon as they stood on firm ground, the boat reduced to its original size, hovering like a toy in front of them. Julie quickly let the boat slip back into its bottle, corked it and handed it to Leo to put it into his shorts pocket. She then helped Annabel lie down comfortably in the grass while Leo put Sidney on a leash.

Sitting on either side of Annabel, and Sidney with his head and paws on Annabel’s lap, Julie and Leo began to tell their new friend the whole story of the boat—from the day of their departure from the farm to the journey into the sewers the night before.

24 *Annabel Joins Them on the Journey*

Later, back in Annabel's bedroom, the three of them, and Sidney, were discussing the upcoming trip. Annabel insisted on coming along to find the King of the Dwarfs, no matter how dangerous the journey might be. Secretly they'd both hoped she would join them, and their friendship was sealed. At once they began to plan their expedition.

"It's got to be as soon as possible," Julie stated, taking charge. "Curly Beard's life is at stake." At the mention of his name, the three children dropped their heads and fell silent, all wondering whether he was still alive.

"And who knows how long it will take before the binagatorials will start attacking people above ground." Leo took out two round stones he'd picked up in the park and started juggling. "Curly Beard seems to think it will be soon."

"Best if we go tonight. There's not a moment to lose," Julie suggested. "And stop juggling those stones, will you? It makes me nervous."

"Sorry, it's just a habit." Leo put them away in one of his many bulging pockets.

"The only problem is that this mission might take longer than one night," Julie mused, looking pensively out the window.

"I hadn't thought of that." Leo fished a red rubber band from his pocket and started twisting it around his fingers.

"Hey, I know what we can do." Annabel leaned forward. "Ask your parents if you could sleep over at my place. My aunt always leaves for work very early in the morning, even before I get up. That would give us a whole extra day. We'd just have to be back before sundown." Julie and Leo looked at her, almost in surprise. "Well, what do you say?"

“Sounds like a plan,” Leo said. “How about it, Julie?” The elastic band shot from his hand and hit her on the side of the head by accident.

“You can be so annoying,” and she slapped him lightly on the shoulder. “Yes, I think it’s a great idea.”

“Good, then I’ll call her right now and ask her.” Annabel got up, grabbed a crutch and hobbled over to the telephone in the living room. Moments later she came back smiling. “It’s all good with her.”

“Fine. Come on, Leo. We’ll go up and ask Mom. If she says yes, we’ll pack our things and come straight back down, okay? Want to come?” Julie asked.

“No thanks, I’ll get everything ready down here.”

“Okey-dokey. See you soon,” Julie said, and both children ran off, pulling a reluctant Sidney along.

Later that evening Mrs. Temple came down to meet Annabel’s aunt to confirm the sleepover. Aunt Miriam was a short, stout woman with kind, but tired eyes and a determined chin. She was thrilled that Annabel had found some new friends at last.

Miriam was not her real name, of course, as Annabel explained later, when all three were snuggled up in their sleeping bags, waiting for the right moment to get up and go. She’d taken it on when she came over from Africa to be with her sister. Annabel’s voice suddenly began to quiver and she stopped talking. Both Julie and Leo didn’t ask any questions.

Annabel’s room was large. The moon shone through the window onto the drawings and paintings on the wall. Another wall was lined with bookshelves, filled with hundreds of books. Leo, who didn’t like to read, was impressed. He wasn’t a very good reader and always made fun of Julie when she had her

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nose buried in a book. Quietly, for himself, he now decided to change that and begin reading more. Over the chair and on the table were half-finished handwork projects. Although Julie loved to be outside most of all (she was called a tomboy at school), seeing the projects inspired Julie to want to do some art and handwork herself.

As soon as Aunt Miriam went to bed, they quietly got up and arranged their beds, stuffing their blankets and sleeping bags with cushions and clothes. “There, that should do,” Annabel said. “If she pops her head in tomorrow morning before going to work, it’ll look like we’re all still fast asleep,” and she giggled artfully.

“Are we ready?” Julie asked, looking around and surveying the scene.

“Aye, Captain,” Leo said, and saluted.

“Wait,” Annabel whispered. “I almost forgot.” Taking one of her crutches, she quickly limped over to the desk and picked up a brown paper bag. “While you were upstairs I prepared some sandwiches and a thermos of hot tea.”

“Ah, very thoughtful of you,” Julie observed, knowing at once that they’d made the right decision to take her along with them. “Leo, open the window, but not too far.” Then the three of them sat down on Julie’s bed. Ceremoniously Julie held the bottle in front of her and uncorked it. “Come out of the bottle, dear Boat.” As soon as the boat was out, they held hands and she said, “On the boat.” Instantaneously they found themselves on deck, floating in the middle of the room.

part four



In Search of the Dwarf King

25 🌸 Wilamelee

It was a warm evening. The moon appeared and disappeared between the skyscrapers and tattered clouds. Beneath them the park lay almost empty. A hobo spread newspapers over his body as he made himself comfortable on a park bench. The lake lay perfectly calm, reflecting the myriad lights of the tall buildings all around.

As they sailed down and circled above it, Lion's Rock looked more like a dinosaur than a lion in the dark. That afternoon they'd taken a quick look around for an opening that could possibly lead to a tunnel, but found nothing. Nor could they see anything now, though they sailed slowly around the entire island three times.

"Leo, pull up the ethmaroll, will you?" Julie said suddenly and with conviction.

"Why?"

"Remember, Curly Beard said that the tunnel would be *under* Lion's Rock, so that's exactly what we'll do—go under it. So, pull up the ethmaroll. We're going underwater." Leo did as he was told, and they gently broke through the surface of the water, descending into the darkness below.

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“I wish we could see something,” Leo said, straining his eyes through the dark wall of water.

“Me too,” Julie confirmed.

No sooner said than a soft light began to grow and illuminate the water around them. The mysterious light had its source in the gemstone hull of the boat. It radiated around them like gentle moonlight. Most of the lake was shallow, just a few feet deep, but around the rock it was like the deep end of a swimming pool and deeper. They could see wrecks of model boats at the bottom, next to rusty knives, old bags, bottles and other refuse people had dumped into the lake. But there were also schools of fish that swam around silently, some of them halting momentarily in the boat’s soft aura. More and more fish came swimming along to bathe in the gentle glow.

“Isn’t it beautiful,” Annabel said dreamily, leaning her back against the mast and looking up at the silent world, enthralled, her lame legs stretched out comfortably in front of her.

“It is,” Leo agreed. His forehead was flat against the ethmaroll as he followed the path of the fish.

“Yes – all very nice, but we’ve got to find the tunnel that Curly Beard was talking about,” Julie remarked. “So keep your eyes open for that.”

Bit by bit they circled Lion’s Rock, straining their eyes, peering through the ethmaroll, looking for anything that could be an opening. A couple of times they thought they’d found a hole, but each time it proved to be just a little gap or crack in the rock. Though it had many shapes, the granite was fairly smooth. They found nothing, though they must have circled it a dozen times, spiraling around from the bottom to the top. All three of them were beginning to feel drowsy when they were startled awake by a soft tapping sound.

“What’s that?” Julie asked. “Shhh, listen.” They heard it again – *tap-tap-tap*, like raindrops dripping into an empty bucket. The sound came from the boat’s prow.

All at once they saw her. At first glance it looked like a girl riding on a large goldfish. She was tapping against the ethmaroll with her slender, fin-like fingers and smiling. Her green, serpentine hair was flowing around her entire body that looked like a green tourmaline, translucent and shimmering. Her skin, smooth as polished stone, was as soft and delicate as a soap bubble, but covered with tiny scales that shimmered in different colors with the slightest movement. Her lips were full and her large eyes were like shiny ripples in a pond.

As soon as she had the children’s attention, she gestured for them to follow her. The boat responded immediately while the children watched the tiny being riding on the back of a large goldfish. She led them along the left leg of the Lion that stretched into the lake, away from the main part of Lion’s Rock. At the end of it she suddenly disappeared. The boat stopped, and all were puzzled. A moment later she reappeared from underneath the claws of the bulky paw, gesturing to them again, still smiling.

Sailing in closer, they could see a narrow, dark hole that looked like a shadow. The mysterious girl disappeared again into the shadow.

“That’s where we’ve got to go,” Julie said. Once they passed through the oval slot, they followed the channel along the inside of the lion’s paw until they were within the body of the granite lion. But as soon as they’d caught up with the mysterious fish-girl, she disappeared again.

“Where’s she gone to now?” Julie was baffled.

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“She went straight down,” Annabel answered immediately. True enough, there was a shaft that dropped vertically into the depths.

“You’re right. Let’s follow it.” Down they went, as if they were in an elevator. The farther they descended, the less light the boat radiated, as if, straining against the increased pressure of the water all around, it had to use all its strength to keep up with the smiling sprite. In the end they could barely make out the rock wall surrounding them—just dark, black granite flitting by. All three children began to feel queasy and their ears clogged up from the pressure and hurt.

Just when they thought they could bear the strain no longer, the fish-girl tapped on the ethmaroll window again. She raised her hand for them to stop. Then she pointed to the left where they saw an arch. Off she swam again, through the archway, holding on to one of the goldfish’s fins. They followed. On the other side of the arch, the shaft led back up at a gradual slant. They knew that they must now be a long way beneath the city and far below even the deepest sewer pipes. The shaft widened and, as they slowly rose, the light returned to the boat. Then, quite unexpectedly, they popped up above the surface of the water.

They found themselves on a small pond. The boat seemed relieved to be sailing on top of the water again instead of under and through it. Immediately the little nymph appeared next to them. She stood up on the back of the goldfish and hopped nimbly on to a boulder on the pebbled embankment of the pond. As she jumped, her fins expanded like wings, carrying her gently through the air. She sat down and dangled her thin legs into the water, while her hair, thinner than gossamer, fell around her like living silk.

Leo opened the ethmaroll and the first thing they heard was the little fish-girl's silver-belled laughter. "Wilamelee welcomes you and thanks you," were her first words, which trailed off in fine little chimes of laughter. As she laughed her hair lit up and danced around her slight body. "She thanks you for saving her."

"What do you mean?" Julie asked.

"Wilamelee was locked up for such a long time in the smelly and vile body of the binagatorial—and you freed her. And for that she is grateful. Wilamelee thanks you."

"Then you must be the water sprite! So it is true what Curly Beard said—there's a water sprite imprisoned in every binagatorial," Julie said, happy and surprised.

"Of course it is true. Curly Beard speaks only the truth."

"But how did you find us?" Leo asked, sitting on the boat's prow.

"Oh, that was easy. As soon as Curly Beard killed the binagatorial, Wilamelee slipped out of that horrid hunk of reeking flesh and hid in a puddle next to your boat. She heard every word that passed between you and Curly Beard."

"That's when you heard about the tunnel and Lion's Rock."

"Yes, Wilamelee knew you'd come and she knew you'd need her help. And again, she thanks you—also for your willingness to help free all the other water sprites. Curly Beard was right to choose you."

They noticed with amusement that she talked about herself in third person. "Can you help us to find the King of the Dwarfs?" Julie asked.

"Wilamelee can show you the way, that's all. But it will be up to the Dwarf King whether he wants to be found or not." Wilamelee splashed her legs so that a fountain of spray fell all

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over her. “Now listen with your eyes, ears and breath. First, cross over to the other side of the pond where it is darkest. There you will see a river flowing into the pond. Follow the river upstream until you come to the Hall of Grottos.”

Wilamelee suddenly stopped smiling, pulled her legs up, clasped them with her slim arms, and her fine-looking face became serious. The sheen left her skin and she almost melded with the dim, grey bolder on which she was perched. “This is where it gets dangerous, because you will have to go in search of the *right* grotto. That will not be easy because there are hundreds of grottos... thousands, really, if you count all the small ones. But once you’ve found the right one, it will lead you to the King. However, if you enter the wrong grotto... you will never make it out alive. So, be very careful of the choice you make. The choice is yours and yours alone... as with so many things in life,” and she smiled again. “Wilamelee wishes you a good journey.”

“Aren’t you going to come with us?” Annabel asked, sounding disappointed.

“No, Wilamelee can’t. She has to hurry back to Curly Beard. He’s wrapped up in layers of binagatorial saliva, which will diminish him if Wilamelee does not go back to care for him. That’s what these monsters do with all the creatures they catch: cover them with their sticky stuff, wait for them to be reduced into small, hardened chunks of spittle and then eat them like dumplings. It’s what Wilamelee endured for endless years.”

“That’s terrible – awful – dreadful,” the children cried out together.

“It is, but Wilamelee can help him. She can pierce through the sticky jelly and feed him purified water.” The children

wondered how she could pierce through such thick layers of tough gunk. She looked so dainty.

We are really going to miss you,” Annabel said, who’d become fond of this charming nymph, even though they’d barely met. “I so hope we’ll meet you again.”

“You will. Wilamelee knows. And when we do, we will dance together.”

“I wish I could,” Annabel sighed, looking down at her lame legs.

“We’ll sing and dance—all of us,” Wilamelee repeated with her watery, silvery voice. “But now Wilamelee must go. In the name of all the water sprites, Wilamelee thanks you.” With that she stood up. She had beautiful slender legs, like a ballerina, and her dainty feet looked similar to those of a frog.

“Wait!” Leo shouted. “How are we going to find the *right* grotto?”

Wilamelee flicked her lusciously light green hair back and it fanned around her like a skirt twirling in the breeze. Her face became serious and she spoke slowly, stressing every word: “Don’t go into any grotto in which you *want* to go!” With that she jumped into the air, her wing-fins spread wide, and the large goldfish popped out of the water at the precise moment for her to land on its back. She waved one last time, laughed like tiny silvery bells and sang, “Go with happiness,” before disappearing below the water’s surface, leaving joyful bubbles that rippled and lapped gently against the hull of their boat.

26  *Annabel's Secret*

The river on the other side of the pond was easy to find. And though they went against the current, they sailed along quickly. Leo slowly pulled up on the tiller to restore them to their natural size, and the boat glowed happily, casting a gentle light all around. The water was calm and the air was surprisingly fresh, considering they were so far underground. The sides of the tunnel were covered with moss. They sat in silence, huddled together, until Annabel stretched and said, "Anybody up for something to eat and drink?"

"Great idea!" Leo perked up at once.

Annabel unpacked the neatly-wrapped sandwiches and handed them out. They tucked in at once with hearty appetites.

"Mmm, thanks, Annabel, this really hits the spot," Julie said and took another bite.

"Yeah, thanks, Annabel. I'm so hungry I could eat a horse." Leo spoke with his mouth half full, wiped the crumbs from his lips and looked appreciatively at Annabel.

"I guess I should have brought some more food," she said, noticing him eagerly inspect the empty paper bag. "Sorry, Leo, but here's some tea." Annabel unscrewed the thermos and filled three mugs with fragrant peppermint tea.

"Oh, good!" Julie clasped her cold hands around the warm mug. "It's a bit chilly down here, isn't it?" The children savored the snack as the trusty little boat meandered through the tunnel.

"I wonder which way we're going," Julie remarked after a while, as she munched away on her cheese and tomato sandwich.

“Well, I can tell you that.” Leo took out his compass. “North-north-west, to be precise.”

“Anything that’s north is good,” Julie said, also wishing there was a second sandwich.

“Why’s that?” Annabel wanted to know.

“It takes us closer to the farm where we used to live—north of the city—and of course, to the Bricanus Mountains where the King of the Dwarfs lives.”

“I’ve never been out of the city,” Annabel responded.

“Never! You can’t be serious.” Julie put down her mug and looked at Annabel.

“It’s true. I was born in the city... in a very noisy and dangerous part of town. And when I was little, I saw and heard people fighting all the time... even shooting at each other in the streets. I was about four when we moved from the projects to the apartment I’m in now. I was so happy. The year we moved was the best year of my life. The park was my backyard and I played there all the time with my brother, till...” Annabel suddenly choked up, looked down, and her chin trembled. “Sorry... you see... I had a brother and my parents were still...” She tried to go on, but couldn’t. Two big tears rolled down her cheeks. “Anyway, after that... well, my legs gave out.”

Deeply moved by her pain, Leo and Julie just stared at Annabel. At that moment they both realized how lucky they’d been, growing up on the farm, free and easy.

“I’m so sorry, Annabel. You don’t have to tell us anything if it hurts too much.” Julie put her arm around Annabel’s shoulder and gave her a hug.

“Thanks, but I want to tell you.” Annabel said, shaking the cornrows from her face. “I owe it to you.” She paused and

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breathed deeply. “It all happened so quickly. We were such a happy family, and then... within a few months it was all over. You see, shortly after my brother disappeared, both my parents died.” Another tear rolled down Annabel’s smooth, black cheek—a glimmering bead in the boat’s aura of light. “It happened about a year after we moved.”

“Your brother disappeared?” Julie exclaimed.

“Yes, my older brother. He used to take care of me when my parents were at work... He did everything for me. Even when we lived in the ghetto... I was never scared when Massud was around.” Annabel wiped a tear away and sniffed. Julie took out a tissue and gave it to her. “Thanks.” She blew her nose.

“But then everything changed—everything. What happened was...well, he went out one afternoon to buy groceries—as he always did—and never came back. Gone. My father went to look for him and was told that two men had grabbed Massud outside the grocery store, thrown him into the back seat of a white Mercedes and driven off. Apparently the white Mercedes had a large dent on the back lefthand side. That’s all the information he had. He called the police immediately, but they didn’t come up with anything. We put up posters all over town. We got a few responses, but all the leads were dead ends. But my dad never gave up. Every night after work he went out and searched for Massud, showed his photo to hundreds of people and kept an eye out for a white Mercedes with a dent.”

“Did he have any luck?” Leo asked.

“Yes, but it cost him his life. After a couple of months, he was able to track down the owner of the white Mercedes. I don’t know the details, but there was a fight and Dad was stabbed. He died in the hospital a few hours later in my mother’s arms.

After that my mother lost her will to live. She stopped eating and got very sick with pneumonia.

“That’s when Aunt Miriam came. My mother made her promise she’d look after me in case she died. Well...” Annabel wiped a few more tears from her face, took a sip of tea, swallowed and continued. “A few days before she died, she called me to her bedside and said, ‘Annabel, I know your brother is still alive. Never forget that you have a brother. Pray for him, and when you’re older, look for him.’ I pray for him every night...”

“I’m so, so sorry,” Julie said, and squeezed both of Annabel’s hands. Leo put his hand tentatively on Annabel’s shoulder. He wanted to say something comforting, but he couldn’t. They were both overcome with emotion. “I’m so sorry,” Julie repeated.

“After that, my legs began to give out. I don’t know why. I always thought there was a connection, although the doctors didn’t think so. They said I got an infection, possibly from Aunt Miriam who came from Africa. For a while I was quarantined in my room. Though I wasn’t infected for long, the damage was done.

“There was a nurse whom I really loved. She urged me to paint, draw and do as much handwork, reading and writing as possible. She said it would improve my immune system. So that’s what I did, in the hope that I’d get stronger. And I have, but I still can’t walk properly.”

Leo didn’t know what ‘quarantined’ or ‘immune system’ meant, but he knew it was serious and wished he could do something for her. Julie just sat there, holding Annabel’s hands.

“But it’s okay,” Annabel said, laughing away the tears and trying to break the heavy mood. “I got so used to staying

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inside. I love reading, painting, drawing and doing all sorts of handwork projects. It takes my mind off things, and after a while I didn't really want to or dare to go outside anymore – not until you two came along.”

“You've had to go through too much.” Julie wiped away a tear from her own cheek. “But we're here for you now.”

“And I will love you like a brother,” Leo added, blushing.

“Thanks,” she whispered, smiling. “I'm glad I told you. It's good to have friends.”

They sailed on in a silence that covered them like a protective blanket. The tunnel continued almost unchanged, sometimes wending to the left, sometimes to the right. Although they were going against the current, they were sailing along at a fast clip, the boat hardly making a sound as it cut cleanly through the water. Feeling tired they fell asleep, their heads resting on each other's shoulders.

27 *The Hall of a Thousand Grottos*

They woke up with raindrops splashing across the deck and on their cheeks. At first they had no idea what was going on and it took them a few moments to remember where they were. But raining? How could it be raining? Puzzled, they peered through the downpour and saw that they were still underground, though they found themselves in a large cavern.

“Quick, Leo, pull up the ethmaroll before we get totally soaked!” Julie didn’t have to tell him. He was already at it. “What a rude and wet awakening,” she continued, “I was so fast asleep. How about you?” The others nodded.

“I guess we were more tired than we thought,” Annabel said, wiping the sleep and rain from her face. “Look at the size of those raindrops. They’re huge, almost three times the size of normal raindrops.” The drops plopped loudly on the ethmaroll, and Leo had to raise his voice to be heard.

They could hardly make out the arched, rocky ceiling high above them, but they did notice that it was very porous and that the water seeped rapidly through the countless holes. In places the water poured down like long, thin colonnades, splintering into drops near the lake’s surface.

“Oh, of course, we’re in the Hall of Grottos,” Annabel exclaimed, turning around and pointing into every direction. “You know, the one Wilamelee told us about. Just look at them. There must be hundreds and hundreds of them.”

“You’re right,” Julie observed. Further down the holes changed into gaping grottos, barely visible except for the faint light shining out of every one of them. They were in the middle of the lake where the rain thrashed down the strongest.

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“Well, let’s see what’s inside those grottos.” Leo steered the boat to the nearest cave. As they approached the rain eased off to a drizzle and then stopped entirely, permitting Julie to pull back the ethmaroll. They were awed at the sight of the innumerable holes in the rock wall all around them. The light in each grotto had a slightly different hue, though none was bright or distinct. There was something beautiful, yet unearthly about the soft glow.

They stood up as they neared the first grotto, and uttered a communal gasp the moment they peered inside. From the edge of the cave, which was the same height as the boat’s deck, a velvet carpet led into a spacious room. On the far end was a large stone hearth, in which a fire crackled merrily. A round table was set for three, as if it had been laid especially for them, and the most delectable dishes in fancy cutlery were on display – the smell of baked, cooked and sautéed foods wafted toward them. Crystal glasses were filled with red, sparkling grape juice, and the food was steaming hot. A silver trolley beside the table held many delicious choices of desserts.

Off to the side, were three comfortable beds, freshly made, and newly-pressed clothes were spread out over chairs next to the beds. Annabel and Julie saw dresses they’d always dreamed of having. One set of clothes was clearly for a boy, and Leo saw that the pants, shirt and vest had many pockets and pouches – exactly the way he loved them, and he immediately imagined how many more things he could carry around with him.

The welcoming sight made them acutely aware of how cold and hungry they really were. They hadn’t had a cooked meal all day and night, and each of them spotted their favorite dishes on the table.

“Let’s go eat and rest for a while,” Leo said.

“Yes, let’s,” Annabel agreed. “Those beds look like they’re the most comfortable in the world.”

“And I’d love to warm myself by that roaring fire for a while,” Julie said.

“Me too, but first I want some of that yummy lasagna,” Leo yelled, and in his hurry to climb out of the boat Leo tripped over Annabel’s legs and fell to the side, knocking his head against the mast. “Ouch, stupid, why do you have to stretch your legs out like that?” Leo shouted, rubbing his head.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to trip you,” Annabel apologized, about to cry, her voice quivering.

“Hold on,” Julie shouted. “Remember what Wilamee said right before she left us?”

“No, what?” Leo asked gruffly, still rubbing the growing bump on his head.

“Yes, I do,” Annabel answered softly. “She said, ‘Don’t enter any grotto that you *want* to enter,’ or something like that.”

“Exactly,” Julie confirmed. “And already we’ve forgotten her most important advice. It was lucky for us that you tripped, Leo. Maybe it was a warning of sorts—a reminder. From now on we’ll have to be more careful.”

“Sorry Annabel, I didn’t mean to shout at you. I don’t know what came over me. I’m really very sorry.” Leo felt ashamed. He liked Annabel too much to ever want to hurt her in any way.

“It’s okay, Leo, it doesn’t matter.” Annabel smiled kindly up at him.

Julie took hold of the tiller and steered the boat away, her eyes fixed straight ahead of her. Annabel and Leo looked over their shoulders, still feeling the pull of the homey interior.

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Regretfully, they sailed on to the next grotto. It was smaller and filled with many dolls of all shapes and sizes, dressed in all colors and costumes. On each side of the room stood a doll house, the biggest the girls had ever seen. In the middle of the room, in a large, green, upholstered rocking chair, sat a plump, white-haired old lady who had the kindest blue eyes. Perched on her little, red nose were round spectacles, and she was sewing and stitching away at a new doll. The moment they looked in, the sweet, old lady raised her head and beckoned them to enter, smiling and waving.

“I’ve never seen so many new dolls before – ever. And look how beautiful they are,” Annabel murmured, her voice sounding dreamy, and her eyes glazed over with a faraway look.

“Me too,” cried Julie, who suddenly itched to get her hands on one of the dolls.

“No!” shouted Leo. He grabbed each of them by the shoulder, shook them and pulled them back – just in time, for they’d already climbed halfway out of the boat. “Have you already forgotten what we remembered just a minute ago? *We shouldn’t enter where we want to enter!*” As soon as they looked at him, the spell was broken and they remembered. None of them looked back into that grotto as they sailed on to the next.

This one was large and contained an intricate and beautifully constructed miniature landscape that took up almost the entire space. Towns and villages were nestled between hills and snowcapped mountains. A little toy train of at least ten silvery wagons was chugging along contentedly, the black locomotive spewing tiny ringlets of steam. Red cable cars and tiny gondolas stretched between the Alps and connected valleys to mountain peaks. From behind a hillock another train appeared and

whistled before it disappeared behind a waterfall and entered into a tunnel. Little fountains in the village squares were spurting real water. The far end of the landscape was shrouded in night, with stars and a sickle moon lighting up the firmament. The front end was bathed in bright sunlight. People were sledding and skiing down the snowy slopes. Others were ice skating on a frozen pond next to a hamlet huddled into the hillside.

There was soft organ music coming from the village church, and on the side, in a niche, sat a bearded man with twinkling eyes, wearing a conductor's uniform. In front of him was a control panel, over which his fingers moved. When he saw the children, he blew into the train whistle that hung round his neck, chuckled, and said, "Come in, dear children and enjoy my kingdom. It will delight your hearts. Step right up," and he whistled again.

"Wow, I've never seen such a great train set before. Just look at the layout – check out all the miniature people, animals, cars, houses... and there's even an outhouse by that old farmhouse. And, hey, over to the right, there's a hot-air balloon floating between those two mountains, one of which looks just like the Matterhorn," Leo cried out in pleasure, clapping his hands together. "There's so much to see."

"Right you are, my lad. So come on in, all of you. The more you look, the more you see. You can each have a turn at the controls. Who wants to be first?"

"I do, I do!" Leo shouted in excitement. He would have jumped out right there and then had Annabel and Julie not held him back—and it took quite some force to do so.

"Don't be mad," Julie scolded. Don't you see what is happening? Each grotto has something that one of us really

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wants—or all of us, for that matter. We can go inside only if we *don't* want anything. Or—as Wilamelee said—we won't ever get out alive.”

“I don't even dare to look into any more grottos,” Annabel said, sounding afraid.

“But we have to,” Julie answered, “if we want to get to the Dwarf King.”

“But let's be more careful before we peer into these weird caves, and let's take care of one another. Hey, Leo, did you hear what we just said?” Annabel asked, seeing how Leo was still thinking about the wondrous landscape he'd seen.

“Yeah, I did,” Leo said halfheartedly.

“And from now on, only two of us will take a look, so that the third person can pull us back in case we forget and get lured inside.”

And so they sailed from grotto to grotto, and every time, without fail, there was something to entice at least one of them to enter. In each instance they had to resist and pulled back just in time. There was a grotto filled with the cutest puppies, kittens and other animals that just called out to be petted, stroked and cuddled. In another there was a scrawny artist with a black, handlebar mustache, who painted with incredible rapidity the most spectacular creatures that immediately stepped, flew or swam off the canvas only to disappear into the shadows at the back of the cave. There was a baker, covered with white flour, who wore a large, puffy, white cap and was preparing the most delicious puddings, pies, cakes, cookies and other pastries. There was a bird sanctuary that blessed the ear with the most beautiful songs; a room with every imaginable toy; a hot springs pool with three diving boards of different heights; a weapons room filled with knives, daggers, cannons,

rockets, bows and arrows, spears, missiles, bombs and more—ancient and modern. There was a furnace where glass smiths blew the most delicate and extraordinary shapes of insects, exotic birds, plants and animals; an aquarium with exotic tropical fish of every size and color; a musical instruments store; a clothing store with the latest fashions; a garden with exquisite butterflies and flowers; and an especially large grotto packed with the latest technological gadgets, many of them with screens showing television programs, movies and games. Sometimes they gazed for only a few seconds and could pull themselves out of enchantment easily. At other times it took great strength to break the spell.

They had already gone round more than half the huge Hall of Grottos, and in every one there was something that fascinated the children. But there were still hundreds more to go, and they were eager to see more. There was a magician who performed the most cunning tricks and a troupe of jugglers who mesmerized Annabel and Leo so deeply that Julie was forced to slap their cheeks to get them to snap out of it. There were acrobats, trapeze artists, sumo wrestlers and boxers; musicians playing unusual instruments with the greatest virtuosity; sportsmen, storytellers, gymnasts, mime artists, dancers and actors.

What the children failed to notice is that the more they looked, the less will power they could muster to withstand the glories of the next grotto. They wanted to look into every grotto and began to argue whose turn it was to look next. They were brought to the utmost brink of endurance. To get to the grottos that were higher up, they ordered the boat to fly. In one grotto, when it was Julie and Leo's turn to look, they saw Pericles, their beloved donkey standing underneath their tree house with the rope ladder dangling down.

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“It’s our farm,” both children cried. “Look, Annabel, that’s where we used to live.” Annabel was about to look when the square sail flapped against her face causing her to blink. It was enough to make her come to her senses, and she quickly put her hands over the eyes of Julie and Leo. They decided that, from then on, only one person at a time should look into a grotto.

By this time they’d arrived at the topmost grottos of the hall. These were darker, but just as powerful. Often, when they first looked they couldn’t see much. After their eyes got used to the pale light, they could make out the scene. In such a fashion they went through about a dozen more, which included a carnival scene, clowns, Chinese fireworks, fakirs climbing up ropes to nowhere, and other exotic scenes from faraway countries. Then they sailed to the darkest grotto almost at the top of the porous ceiling, close to where it was raining.

In this particular instance it was Annabel’s turn. At first she saw nothing. Then a match was struck and a candle lit. She was peering into a room, covered from top to bottom with books. A small desk stood in the center, also stacked with books. More books were piled on the floor all around, some stacks towering six feet high and balancing precariously.

Someone was sitting alone by the table. After he’d lit the candle he opened a heavy tome and began to read. She couldn’t see what he looked like because his back was turned to her. As if he sensed that someone was looking at him he slowly swiveled around and gazed straight at Annabel. He was black like her and appeared familiar. Immediately he stood up and smiled. Facing her he opened up his arms and said, “Annabel, it’s you. I never thought I’d see you again.”

“Massud,” Annabel cried out, “my brother, is it really you? Yes, it is! I’ve finally found you. Oh, Massud!” Julie and Leo were so surprised to hear her talking to her brother that they forgot themselves and also looked into the grotto. He was a few years older, about fourteen or fifteen, but already had the features of a man. Though smiling, his face appeared grave as if he’d gone through terrible pain and suffering. Tall and handsome he stood, immaculately dressed in a pinstriped suit, replete with dress shoes and a silver tie. *So that’s Annabel’s brother*, Julie thought, and her heart beat faster.

“Oh, I’m so glad you’ve found some friends, dear sister. I was so worried about you all these years. Come, introduce me to your new friends. We’ve got a lot to catch up on.” He took a step forward.

Once again the three of them had quite forgotten Wilamelee’s warning and were about to step off the boat. “I’m coming, my brother, I’m coming,” she shouted, proceeding to clamber clumsily off the boat with her lame legs.

But at that moment the boat tilted sharply to the side, throwing all three children back onto the deck, and at once the spell was broken. This time Annabel was crying. She didn’t even try to hold back the tears that streamed down her face and smeared across her lovely cheeks as she tried to wipe them away. She was sobbing uncontrollably, and it was a long time before Julie and Leo could calm her down. Meanwhile, the boat slowly descended on its own accord and landed on the water where it stayed, floating gently.

“Let’s get as far away as possible from these awful grottos,” Julie said in anger. She hated to see her new friend crying so pitifully. Leo pulled the ethmaroll shut and they steered back into the

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downpour at the center of the cavernous hall. Shrouded in rain the dim and enticing light of the grottos could barely be seen.

“But what are we going to do now? We still haven’t found the right grotto, and I’m not going to look into one more ghastly grotto—not for anything.” Julie slapped her fist into her palm. “I’d rather return home having failed than risk our lives in these grottos of no return.” A long silence ensued.

Annabel stopped sniffing and took a deep breath. “Do you know that it was the boat that saved us?” Annabel said finally.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, we were about to disembark when it tipped to the side. Had that not happened, we’d have gone into that grotto. No doubt about it. She was looking out for us. And before that, when you saw your farm, the boat hit me with its sail. Yes, the boat saved us on two occasions. We owe her, big time.”

“You’re right,” both children answered. All three felt thankful to the boat and a strong feeling of love poured toward their trusty vessel. The boat must have felt it, because all the rigging began to shake and jiggle, sounding like joyful, little bells. After that they sat in silence, listening to the rain as it pitter-patted on the ethmaroll.

“So, what do you say—should we go back home?” Julie asked. Nobody answered. After a few more minutes she said, “Well, we can’t stay here all night. Yes or no, are we going back or not?” They answered with a sigh and a nod, and Julie began steering the boat back to the mouth of the river.

They were about to enter the tunnel, leaving the loud and heavy rainfall behind them when Leo shouted, “It’s there! I see it! I know exactly which one it is. Stop! Turn around. I see the grotto which will lead us to the King of the Dwarfs.”

28 *Into the Burrow*

“Where?” the two girls asked.

“There,” and Leo pointed to a large, gushing waterfall pouring out of the biggest grotto.

“It’s huge! Funny we didn’t see it on our way in,” Annabel said.

“We were sleeping,” Julie reminded her, “and woke up in the middle of the lake with pouring-down rain.”

“Or we were too fascinated by all the other grottos,” Annabel added. “Besides, we were facing away from it when we entered. It’s only clearly visible going back toward the river.”

“Whatever the reason, do you really think that’s what Wilamelee meant?” Annabel asked. “I really don’t want to go in there.”

“Nor do I,” Julie agreed. “Just look at the force with which the water is hammering out of the grotto... must be hundreds of tons a second.”

“And it’s like a murky fortification,” Leo observed.

“Exactly. There’s not the slightest space for us to enter, no matter how small we make ourselves,” Julie said, repulsed by the very idea of it.

“We’d have to sail through the water.” Annabel added, and the boat shuddered involuntarily.

“Not even the boat wants to go there,” Julie argued.

“So we’re in agreement—none of us wants to enter that grotto, right?” Leo asked.

“Right,” Julie and Annabel said emphatically.

“Okay then, let’s go.”

“What do you mean?” Julie protested.

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“Don’t you get it? This is the only grotto we *don’t* want to enter—so, logically, it’s the right one. I told you I’d found it.”

The two girls looked utterly dismayed. At length Annabel said, “Well, I do hope our boat can make it through the waterfall.” At those words the little boat gave an audible “humph” with its riggings.

“But we don’t even know what’s on the other side. How do we know we won’t die trying?”

“We don’t. That’s why none of us wants to go. We have to trust Wilamee. Curly Beard never said it would be easy.” Both Julie and Annabel were impressed with Leo’s words, the wisdom of which surpassed what usually came out of his mouth. “And as far as the boat is concerned, she can handle anything,” he added. “Can’t you, dear Boat,” he said, patting the roof of the cabin with his hand. “Now, let’s go.”

With those words of encouragement, the boat slowly rose from the water until it was level with the waterfall. It paused for only a moment before it blasted off toward the turbulent, roaring mass of falling water. “Brace yourselves,” Julie shouted. They tucked their feet in the leather straps and held onto the mast with all their strength.

As soon as it slammed into the dense wall of water, the boat was thrown into a tailspin. They screamed involuntarily as the boat was pulled down into the depths. “Come on, Boat, you can do it,” Leo shouted above the roar. The intrepid little vessel, in a fight of its own, managed to free itself from the maelstrom and was ejected from the claws of the falls like a spinning top.

Quickly it regained its composure, steadied itself, and then circled round to have another go at the powerful opponent.

This time the stalwart boat shot straight from the bottom up, penetrating the snarling monster like a missile, fully prepared for the onslaught. Even so, it was stopped almost instantly, though it sliced much deeper into the belly of the wild beast than the first time and didn't go into a tailspin. The tiny boat held its own and pushed forward, inch by inch, foot by foot.

The children felt as if they were in a boiling cauldron. Through the ethmaroll they could see the bubbling water raging. The deeper they infiltrated the furious fiend, the darker and denser it got. They could hear the boat creak and groan as it strained forward, until at last, to their surprise, it broke through and catapulted out on the other side of the wall of water. The sudden loss of resistance made it shoot straight toward a rock.

"Watch out! We're going to crash right into that rock wall," Julie shouted.

"Stop, Boat—stop!" Leo commanded. It came to an abrupt halt just a thumb's breadth away.

"Phew, that was close," Annabel said, giggling nervously. They were all still clasping the mast, but apart from looking disheveled, they were none the worse for wear. Seeing they were safe on the other side of the waterfall, they looked at one another for a few seconds before bursting out laughing, letting go of the mast and clapping—a tribute to the boat. The boat jiggled happily and sailed down to land.

They looked around and found themselves in a large cave, lit up by a diffused yellow light, casting soft shadows across innumerable rocks and boulders, shiny with moisture. A thin, diaphanous mist hovered all around, which gave the place a peculiar feel. Closer to the waterfall the spray was a thick,

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broiling mass. The torrents of water charged through three large chutes near the outer lip of the grotto, converged into one gigantic waterfall and gushed furiously out into the Hall of Grottos.

They drew back the ethmaroll, and the roar of the waterfall was deafening. They noticed that the wall they'd nearly crashed into was really a large, rocky outgrowth that tapered and towered up above them. The top of the natural pillar was the only place that was free of any vapor. To their amazement a dwarf was standing on its pinnacle, like a sentinel looking down at them, as puzzled as they were. He had a dagger and a bugle fastened on the side of his wide, embroidered belt, and he held a short, flat spear in his hand. Across his shoulder hung an axe identical to Curly Beard's, except for the inlay on the handle, which was not as detailed. In fact, he looked remarkably similar to Curly Beard, though his beard was not nearly as long or curly—and he was taller. He had the thickest and fullest dark brown beard they'd ever seen, and he wore a hat made out of willow bark. His vest was of woven moss and he wore leather leggings.

Julie plucked up her courage and shouted, "Can you take us to the Dwarf King?" but her voice got lost in the roar. The dwarf was clearly astonished that the children could see him and that one of them was addressing him. Leo shouted even louder, but likewise his voice was drowned out. At last all three of them cupped their hands and shouted up to him, "Can you take us to the Dwarf King?" It was futile. Their voices vanished like a feather in a hurricane.

The dwarf, as if he suddenly understood what they were saying, broke into a wide smile, nodded and signaled for them to follow him. With astounding speed and agility, he rappelled

down the rocky tower and hopped, jumped and skipped over the boulders and rocks to the back of the grotto. They followed him in their boat, maneuvering carefully to avoid bumping into any outcropping or rocky overhang. From a ledge at the far end of the grotto, the dwarf picked up a lantern that had spread its calm light throughout the place. Deftly he leaped up another three ledges toward a small, black hole. Halting for a second he turned around, flicked his hand for them to follow and disappeared.

The hole was quite small and they had to push the tiller down until they were small enough to fit through. It was always a bit unpleasant when they shrank, like going down an elevator a bit too rapidly. Once they were inside the burrow—for that's all it was—they saw the dwarf's light bobbing far ahead of them. "He sure seems to be in a hurry," Julie said.

"Well, let's just make sure we don't lose him. I'd hate to think what would become of us if we did," Leo remarked, having to lower the tiller even more as the passageway narrowed.

29 ❁ *Subterranean Symphony*

Umpteen burrows crisscrossed one another from all directions. Without the dwarf they would have been hopelessly lost, but he looked back often enough to make sure they were keeping up, though he never slowed down his rapid pace. After what seemed like an endlessly long time, they emerged from the tunnel into a large cave, different from any they'd seen before, and they gasped at its beauty. They pulled up the tiller to increase their size to normal, which made them feel more comfortable.

Over the last few days they'd seen their share of pipes, drains, tunnels, caves and grottos, but never something as spectacular and beautiful as this. They felt as if they'd just stepped into a spacious cathedral with colonnades of stalagmites and stalactites. Some were so ancient and massive that they were joined in the middle and ten to twenty feet thick. These giant pillars reached almost two hundred feet high.

When they pulled back the ethmaroll, a silence greeted them, interrupted only by the constant, but irregular, sound of dripping. It was cool, but not chilly. They were filled with reverence. They could tell they were in a place that deserved veneration. The natural splendor alone engendered awe and respect. The silent dwarf halted and looked across the splendor as if he too were paying homage.

Without a word the dwarf walked down the well-worn path into the majestic cave. Floating along in their boat, their eyes wide with wonder, the children followed. The path led down through a vista of natural stone pillars that were festooned with lanterns of many colors, lighting up the incredible shapes. Some pillars looked like gnarly, old trees, others like enormous

candles, dressed in dripping wax. Some were hollow, and when drops of calcified water dripped down on the smooth surfaces of the stalagmites from the stalactites hanging from the roof of the cave, it sounded like a soft symphony of melody and rhythm, melding into the most mellifluous harmonies. Some sounded like tiny bells, others like xylophones, chimes, or the plucking of a harp. Others, yet again, were like the muted roll of distant drums, never loud and always in concord with the other sounds.

All sounds were cushioned by a caressing silence that entered the children's hearts like a healing balm. They just sat in their boat and listened and looked as the path wound its way through the underground wonderland, as they followed the silent dwarf who had picked up his pace again.

So they traveled on for another hour or so through the magical landscape. The large cave gave way to countless tunnels and passageways that disappeared into all directions. The dwarf led them along the main path, and they passed through a succession of portals naturally formed by the stalagmites and stalactites, briefly lit up by the lantern, casting shadow-shapes that looked back at them.

Sometimes they descended for hundreds of feet, the dwarf almost running down ancient steps roughly hewn into the stone floor. Only rarely did the path lead back up. Intermittently they saw ponds and lakes off to the sides that reflected the magnificent and natural stone sculptures like giant mirrors. Leo wondered whether these were the same caves in which Grandpa had gotten lost. They were certainly as spectacular as the ones he'd described—even more so. But he kept the thought to himself, not wanting to interrupt the almost sacred hush of the caves.

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At length they came to a great clearing at the center of which was the largest pillar of them all. The dwarf stopped right in front of it. Putting down his lantern, he reached for a large mallet that hung from a rocky peg. It appeared to be very heavy and they saw the dwarf straining to lift it above his shoulders. He swung the large mallet against the mighty pillar that stretched almost three hundred feet to the roof, the colors on the knotted surface gradually changing from yellow and orange to the deepest blue near the top. When struck, it made the deepest, most full and sonorous sound the children had ever heard, and they felt the tremor of the vibrations go right through their bodies. Two more times he struck the enormous pillar. The sounds overlapped and echoed on while the dwarf replaced the large mallet on its rightful peg. The sound of this phantasmal, vertical gong vibrated on for many minutes. It resonated and receded into the farthest depths of the cave.

When it had faded, they heard gongs and bells answering from the dark, deep distances. At first they heard only a few, but the chorus of bells grew until it crescendoed like a mighty orchestra all around them. The sound tasted like nectar in their ears and they eagerly swallowed the fluid tones. The music they'd heard beforehand paled in comparison to what they were hearing now, as if hundreds of hidden musicians were playing the stalagmites and stalactites for miles around. Sounds rippled and cascaded from every direction.

Listening intently, the dwarf stood perfectly still with his head cocked to the side. Once the subterranean symphony came to an end, the dwarf smiled and resumed the journey—at an even more rapid pace than before. They sailed after him.

The path led uphill and grew smaller and narrower, as did the pillars. After the last stalagmite there were no more lanterns

except for the one held by the dwarf, which cast little light and large shadows. The darkness made them feel drowsy, except for Annabel who was entranced by every detail of the journey. At length the dwarf stopped. They'd reached a dead end. The dwarf turned round, gestured briefly with his hand and, in the next instant, was gone.

They found themselves in complete darkness except for the faint glow of the boat, which dimmed even further and was finally extinguished, too exhausted to shine. Julie and Leo would not have noticed because they'd dozed off, but Annabel, who was suddenly afraid, prodded them awake.

"Where are we?" Leo asked.

"I don't know," Annabel said, but I think the dwarf wants us to wait here for him."

"Or maybe he's left us in the lurch," Julie said, grumpy at being wakened. "Maybe it's a trap."

"I don't think so," said Annabel, who had taken a liking to the dwarf and trusted him. "In fact, I have the distinct feeling that he knows about us."

"Actually, I think you're right," Leo agreed. "It was as if he was expecting us. Maybe he was standing on that rock so he could look out for us."

"But then he wouldn't have looked so perplexed. And why hasn't he spoken a word?" Julie asked.

"I don't know," Annabel said. "I've been wondering about that myself. Maybe he's in too much of a hurry."

"Well, he doesn't seem to be in a hurry now. We've waited here long enough," Julie said, getting impatient.

"And what did it mean when he banged against the hollow pillar?" Leo asked.

"Maybe it was a signal... to let the others know he's coming."

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“Yes, I bet that’s it—or that *we* are coming,” said Leo. “But it was so beautiful,” Leo added. “I can still hear it in my mind.”

“Shh, I can hear something else,” Julie whispered. They listened. First it was more like a feeling, as if the earth itself was quivering. Then they could hear it distinctly—a low rumbling. Though it didn’t get too much louder, it grew fuller and thicker—and nearer.

“What on earth is that?” Annabel asked, suddenly fearful.

“I don’t know,” Julie said, and she took Annabel’s hand in hers. The rumbling sound went on for minutes, breaking over them in waves, sometimes louder, sometimes softer. Then it stopped and silence, a silence as complete as the darkness, surrounded them.

After a few more minutes, they heard a grinding sound. It came from right in front of them. Ever so slowly the stone wall rolled to the side and as it opened up, a bright, glowing beam of light shone through from the other side. It was so dazzling that the children had to shield their eyes until they got used to the light after such acute darkness. Standing in front of them was the little dwarf, smiling.

“Welcome to the realm of the Dwarf King.”

30 *Into the King's Valley*

After disembarking from the boat they stepped forward into what they thought was broad daylight. Julie made sure the boat was safely moored in its bottle, corked and tucked away in her front pocket. They were standing on a wide ridge, halfway up a mountain, looking down over a vast, expansive valley with waves of green hills as far as the eye could see. Initially this was more of a green blur because their eyes were not accustomed to the sudden brightness after the hours spent in dim light and complete darkness.

What caught their attention was a narrow mountain that towered over the far end of the wide valley, on the top of which stood a magnificent castle that glistened and sparkled. The word ‘castle’ was a mere approximation, for they’d never seen a building quite like it before—not in any books nor in their most far-flung imaginations. It rested firmly on massive crystal pillars that grew out of the mountain’s rounded summit.

The main shape was that of a pyramid or a ziggurat, but umpteen towers and arches spiraled up the edifice and down the mountainside like garlands of different colors. But that too was an inadequate description, because the entire mountain was a gigantic rockery replete with hanging gardens, interspersed with fountains, ponds and waterfalls.

A moat wound around the base of the entire spectacular protrusion. The water looked golden in the bright light of day. But when the children looked up, they saw no sun, only slow-moving clusters of vapor. In between, where the cloud-swaths parted, they saw a firmament of rock and crystals thousands of feet above them, but no sky. Suddenly it hit them—they were

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in a land deep within the earth. And they realized that, though it felt like morning, it could have been any time of day or night. They'd heard and read stories about such outlandish places, but until now had never believed in their existence.

"Where's the source of light?" Julie muttered.

"The light comes from here," laughed the dwarf. He took a few steps forward on the large ledge on which they stood and pointed down to their right. Carefully the children stepped up close to the edge of the cliff that protruded out from the mountain and dropped down hundreds of feet below them. Julie and Leo instinctively held on more tightly to Annabel, supporting her between them.

They looked in the direction the dwarf was pointing and saw a lesser mountain, crowned with a massive circular crater lake. The water was even more golden than the water in the moat around the castle at the base of the botanical mountain. Steadily, clouds of vapor rose from the lake, filling the sky. A long narrow bridge or walkway crossed right through the center of the lake, though it was almost imperceptible to the eye. It appeared from under a thick cloud of vapor and disappeared again into another cloud, just as dense.

"This is the Crater Lake of Light," the dwarf said, smiling.

"But what is it reflecting?" Julie asked.

"Nothing. It is a lake of liquid light. And it's the source of light for this entire valley. The clouds that rise from the lake help to disperse light throughout this realm, which is much larger than you might think." Fascinated, they looked at the calm, golden water and vapor. It appeared like any other lake, except that it was luminous. Torrents of fluid light fell over a mighty waterfall at the far end of the crater, from where the

river meandered through the middle of the valley, all the way to the moat around the castle. The river continued behind the mountainous castle and wound gently into the vaporous distance.

“It must be very hot, this lava-river,” Leo mused.

“In truth, it’s not hot at all, nor is it lava, but more like liquid sunlight.”

“Well, that is hot, isn’t it?”

“That’s what most people would assume. But if you could go up to the sun and enter it, you’d find it quite pleasant, really,” and the dwarf smiled.

“So, the scientists are wrong!”

“No, but they aren’t totally correct either. There are different truths. Water boils at different temperatures, so why can’t there be different temperatures of light, of sunlight?”

“I suppose so,” Leo said, not entirely convinced. On either side of the placid river were luscious fields of green grass. Bushes and trees covered some of the rolling hills in patches. Streams of fresh, clear water drained into the river. “I guess that’s why there’s no steam at the places where the streams enter the river of light.”

“The Sun River, as it is called. Yes, you are right – well observed. But enough talk. We have to go. The King awaits.”

“The Dwarf King? He knows we’re coming?” Julie asked.

“Of course. That’s why I sounded the Great Pillar. Didn’t you hear the sound of the dwarfs answering my call? They were spreading the news. You are expected, and have been for a while. Nevertheless, I didn’t think it would be so soon and many dwarfs didn’t believe it would ever happen. That’s why there’s so much excitement. You must have heard that, too.”

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“You mean the rumbling sound that went on for such a long time?” Leo asked.

“Yes, but you could hear it even beforehand, when the dwarfs were conveying the signals by playing the song of your arrival in the Great Cave.

“Why didn’t you tell us earlier, when we were still in the cave?” Julie asked.

At her words the dwarf looked distressed. “Because we all took a vow of silence until the return of the Lord of the Caves.”

“Why, what has happened to him?” Annabel asked.

“He has gone missing. All of us dwarfs who work and live in the Great Caves have sworn an oath of silence within the caves until his return. We know that his life is in great danger, for he should have returned by now.”

“What happened to him? Where did he go?” Annabel asked.

“Ah, that is a great mystery and for once we don’t know. He was ordered on a mission to help the Queen of the Waters and all the watery beings that dwell in her realm. They are in the greatest peril. If he does not succeed in his task to help them, then we in turn, the entire dwarf kingdom, might not survive. And who knows what consequences that will have for the fiery and airy realms.

“Do you see the urgency of it all? It was also the Lord of the Caves who told us you would be arriving, though he only talked of two children, not three.

“That must be Curly Beard,” shouted Leo. “Grandpa called him the Lord of the Caves, remember Julie? It must be him.”

“Of course I remember” said Julie. “Yes, it must be him.”

“And right you are,” the dwarf said. “That’s one of the names he goes by. But enough of all this talk. We must be on our way.”

Julie took the bottle out of her pocket and was about to remove the cork when the dwarf stopped her. "I'm sorry, but from now on we have to walk. Make sure that the boat in the bottle is carefully concealed and safe."

"Why?" Julie wondered, thinking how much quicker it would be if they all just hopped into the boat.

"It is better this way. And make sure it cannot fall out."

"Give the boat to me. I'll put in my zipper pocket," Leo said, holding out his hand. Reluctantly Julie handed him the boat.

The Dwarf suddenly looked grim and determined. "Let's go."

"Wait," whispered Annabel, tears in her eyes. "I can't walk."

"What do you mean?" snapped the dwarf, still looking grim.

"My legs have little strength. I can only hobble. There is no way I can walk all the way to that castle." She was about to cry. The dwarf's harsh tone had frightened her.

His expression softened at once. "Then I will carry you. You two, come here and lift her onto my shoulders," he said resolutely. Leo and Julie wondered how the small dwarf would manage, but they did as they were told. The dwarf grew visibly taller as they placed Annabel gently on his shoulders. Now he was only a head shorter than Leo.

Annabel could feel the dwarf's sturdy, strong muscles underneath his tunic. At once she felt comfortable and secure. "Don't worry; you're no burden for me. I've carried many tons of rocks in my life. Carrying a little girl will be like carrying a bouquet of flowers... and sorry I was so abrupt with you just now." He smiled reassuringly.

"Let's go. We have a long way ahead of us before we reach the King's castle... and there might be danger along the way." The last words were mumbled, but Annabel heard them.

31 *Steps, Rocks and Boulders*

The stairs that led down the sheer escarpment were uneven and rough. At times they were so steep that Julie and Leo had to crouch down on all fours. Some of the stones were jagged and loose and occasionally they got dislodged and hurtled noisily into the valley below, which garnered grim looks from the dwarf. They descended slowly, scared they might stumble and plunge into the depths themselves.

On the other hand, the dwarf was as sure-footed as a mountain goat, even with Annabel on his shoulders. “Follow me and you’ll be fine,” he said softly, though they detected a troubled undertone in his voice. They watched carefully where he placed his feet and they followed suit, though it didn’t lessen their fear of falling.

About an hour later, they noticed with dismay that they still had hundreds of steps to go, and they realized how deceiving distances could be. Nor did the descent become any easier. Soon enough, Julie and Leo’s legs ached, and an eerie silence pervaded the air, which increased with every footfall. They longed for the safety of their boat and wondered why they hadn’t been allowed to use it. How much easier that would be.

To make matters worse, Leo had the distinct feeling of being watched. He’d see something move out of the corner of his eyes, but whenever he looked around, he saw nothing but rocks and boulders. Moreover, the boat that made his side pocket bulge began to feel like an uncomfortable load, as if a strong magnet hidden in the rocks was wielding its force of attraction.

At last the ancient steps, hewn into the rock, ended and turned into a path, no longer as steep, though just as rocky. The

boulders around them were bigger, and there were no plants in sight, although some of the larger rocks were covered with dry layers of grey-green lichen. The crater with the lake of light was hidden from view, and they'd entered a narrow gorge. At least they knew that every step took them farther down toward the luscious, green valley they'd seen from above, which gave them the courage to continue.

As the path leveled out, the dwarf walked even more rapidly. He was untiring, but, as she glanced at him, Julie thought he looked grimmer than ever. He was worried about something – that much was clear. On one occasion she attempted to ask him why he was in such a hurry, but no sooner had she uttered one word when he spun round and silenced her with a stern hand gesture. After that he broke into a trot, and they could hardly keep up with him.

Leo felt eyes staring at him from every shadow, crack and crevice. The boulders themselves seemed to be looking at him. But he saw nothing, though he thought sometimes he heard a faint hissing sound, barely audible – like a pebble shot from a sling. Weary, he picked up his pace to be closer to the dwarf. Leo wondered whether Julie was feeling as worn out as he was. He couldn't tell. All the while she wondered how long it would take to reach the Dwarf King's castle and if they'd make it back in time to save Curly Beard.

Maybe it was the exhaustion. Suddenly Leo thought he saw the rocks moving to the right and left of him. Yet whenever he focused on one, it just lay there, totally still. He ached to ask how long they'd still have to march through this dead and deserted landscape, but he remembered the dwarf's reaction when Julie had tried to talk to him, and he kept silent. Nor did Leo want to make any sound in this place that now seemed to

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encroach upon him from all sides. The boulders were larger and they found themselves walking through a tapered, dark canyon. Everything was absolutely still around them, save for the sound of their own panting. Then it happened.

He heard a strange hissing sound and tripped over a cord that was strung across the path. It hadn't been there a second ago, or the others in front of him would have tripped over it first. He opened his mouth to scream.

Too late! A boulder that crouched by the side of the path reared up. Two obsidian sharp eyes flashed coldly at him, while a wiry, thin arm at lightning speed, pulled some lichen off its own back and stuffed it into Leo's mouth, plugging his scream. Simultaneously, the long arm that had tripped him, curled around his chest and dragged him with incredible strength and speed toward itself, helped along immediately by two more arms that shot out from underneath the belly of the boulder.

Leo could see in an instant that he would be devoured by the partially hollow boulder. He had to do something to get the attention of the others before it was too late—but what? The boulder-monster was wrapping its arms and legs around him rapidly, dragging him along. He put his hands in his side pockets and felt the rubber band he often played with. Though his arms were entwined by the strong, cable-thin limbs of the boulder, he managed to shoot it at Julie. The next moment he found himself under the boulder and it closed over him without a sound.

32 *Attack of the Granapods*

“Ouch!” Julie squealed as the red rubber band hit her cheek and fell to the ground beside her. “Leo, this is no time to play games,” she hissed, turning around. He was nowhere to be seen, which annoyed her even more. “Stop hiding. I know you’re behind one of the rocks. Come out of there immediately.” No answer. Dead silence.

“He’s not hiding,” said the dwarf. “They got him. I was afraid this might happen.” And quietly to himself he mumbled, “And they’ve got the boat.”

“Afraid? What do you mean?”

“Knowing we might get attacked by the granapods, I was in a hurry to get through this part of the gorge. Most of the rocks you see are just that—rocks, but some are alive and only look like rocks. I didn’t say anything in case you’d get scared.” While explaining, the dwarf quickly, but gently, placed Annabel on the ground in the middle of the path. “Now, Julie, take this dagger and if anything comes toward you, use it. Understand? Use it—don’t hesitate—not for an instant.”

Annabel, who’d dozed off, opened her eyes, and on hearing the last words, looked as if she was going to cry, but checked herself at once when the dwarf ordered, “Shhh! Don’t make a sound. We haven’t a second to spare.” With that he clutched his axe and examined his surroundings closely. There were hundreds of boulders lying around, big and small.

Rapidly, but warily he tapped on this and that rock, listening intently to whether they were solid or hollow. Suddenly Annabel shouted, “Look, that one’s moving.”

“Which one?” the dwarf shot back.

“Right behind you!” He turned around and stepped toward

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the large boulder when Annabel added, “So is the one to your left.”

“And two more right over here!” shouted Julie.

“One of them must have caught Leo,” the dwarf yelled, “but which one?” At that moment two of the boulders raised themselves up and attacked. “Well, it’s not them,” shouted the dwarf, jumping to the side. With two swift and mighty blows, he shattered the boulders with the back of his axe. Immediately they crumpled into separate heaps, the wiry, cord-like arms twitching out from underneath them.

Instantaneously, two more rose up on their short, stocky hind legs and crawled like crabs rapidly over to the girls. Their feet were shaped like jagged clogs, each one equipped with a forked toenail that jutted out like sharp pincers. These sharp tongs were poisonous. The smaller granapod ejected one of its four long, wiry arms toward Annabel. It curled tightly around her legs. Julie jumped to her rescue and sliced into the fiend’s spindly arm. It was tough like leather. With the speed of a whip, another arm curled itself round Annabel’s neck, choking her. Julie hacked and sawed furiously until the arm around the legs went limp. But already two more cable-arms curled themselves around Annabel’s ankles, dragging her swiftly into its cavernous belly, out of Julie’s reach. The dwarf’s axe came crashing down on the granapod’s back just in time, before she was swallowed up. Annabel quickly untangled herself. Meanwhile, the bigger creature tried to wrestle Julie’s knife from her.

“No, you don’t,” she screamed defiantly, taking the knife in her other hand and slashing through the arm in one sweet stroke, much to her own surprise and delight. The granapod let out a crunching screech, and the obsidian eyes under its

dense, rocky cranium flashed dangerously. Another arm twisted itself around both her wrists, so tightly that they cut into her flesh. Julie yowled in pain and dropped the dagger. Another arm reached out for it, but Annabel lunged for the dagger and grabbed it away from the granapod. She reached up and hacked off the granapod's offending arm with surprising agility. But two more arms shot out from the rock's shadowy innards, clambering around both girls simultaneously, tying them up and hauling them off the path.

"Not so fast, you blundering boulder," snarled the dwarf, as he pounded down on the granapod's lichen-covered back with his gem-studded axe, splitting it asunder.

No more granapods showed themselves. "Don't be fooled. They're still around, so watch out. We've only scared them off a bit, that's all," growled the dwarf. "Good work, girls. Utterly impressive!" The flash of battle still shone in his eyes and he chuckled. A second later his face turned grim again. "But we have to find Leo. He cannot survive for long. He is underneath one of these boulders, but which one?"

"Wait, what's that? Quiet! I hear something," said Julie. They listened. Muffled, but distinct, they heard a squeaky sound. "It's him, for sure," said Julie.

"How do you know?" Annabel said.

"It's his rubber ducky."

"Rubber ducky?" Annabel cried.

"Yes, he's got all sorts of things in his pockets: batteries, pencils, wires—and, yes, a rubber ducky. It was on a children's shampoo bottle Dad gave him. I remember telling him he was silly for keeping it in his pocket because some of the shampoo spilled into his shorts."

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“Shh, there it is again.” The dwarf said. They listened.

“I think it came from one of these boulders next to the cliff face,” Annabel said, hobbling over to them on her lame legs. “Yes, there it goes again.”

“It’s got to be one of those three,” said the dwarf, pointing to three of the largest boulders. After a moment’s thought he said, “And I know exactly which one. Come on, you’ll have to help me.”

“How?” Julie asked.

“We’ve got to lift it over onto its back. Hurry, before it’s too late.”

“Why don’t you just crack it open with your axe?” Julie asked, not relishing the idea of fighting off any nasty, wiry, curly arms again.

“Because that might kill him. No, we’ve got to roll it over, like a tortoise. The granapods are helpless on their backs.” The dwarf took hold of the bottom of the rock. “Get a good grip.” Annabel shuffled forward as best she could, and the two girls crouched down and grabbed hold of the rock. “Got it? Fine—now here we go... and—hibble-dy, dibble-dy, doe!”

At ‘doe’ they lifted the boulder with all their might. The girls were astounded at how easy it was to roll the big boulder onto its back—mostly due to the dwarf’s uncanny strength. The dwarf had guessed correctly. Now that it was upside down the creature was rendered harmless. Inside, like a nut inside a shell, they saw Leo, entangled in the four arms, almost blue in his face, with one of the sinewy arms wound around his neck. The granapod, finding itself on its back, released the boy immediately and began flailing about with its long wiry limbs. It looked pathetic. Even its short legs and pincer-toed clog-feet seemed feeble, as they jerked helplessly in the air.

The dwarf lifted Leo out of the craggy hollow and sat him down on the ground. The dazed boy was still clutching his yellow rubber ducky. Straightaway the dwarf took a small root from the inside of his tunic and handed it to Leo, "Chew on this, and you'll feel better in a minute." No sooner had he given him the root than they heard guttural screeches in the distance, as if someone was crunching rocks together. Within seconds it grew to sound like an avalanche. It came from a few hundred yards up the canyon.

"It's more granapods," the dwarf shouted. "Quick, run! Sounds like there's a whole army of them. We can't fend them all off. Go, go, GO!" He yanked Leo to his feet, swung Annabel onto his shoulders, and they ran.

For the first time the children knew what it meant to run for your life. Leo, who'd only chewed on the root for a few seconds, was amazed by what vitality was already surging through his limbs. Off they dashed, along the narrow canyon. The noise behind them grew louder and nearer. When Julie turned around she spied the first of them. But behind them were hundreds more, some as small as footballs, others as large as cars and trucks. Although their segmented, clog-like feet were clumsy and served more as springboards, their four arms, growing from inside their cavernous bellies, propelled them forward at a tremendous speed. They moved like long-legged spiders with the agility of monkeys, catapulting forward, their four arms able to hold on to the smoothest surfaces of the cliff faces around them. No doubt, the granapods would soon be upon them.

The dwarf knew it too. Still running, he took out his bugle and blew three loud, sharp blasts that echoed off the canyon walls. Rounding a corner the path straightened out and led straight down into the luscious green valley. They could see

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the river of light gently meandering through the meadows. But they still had another two or three hundred feet to go and the granapods were almost on top of them.

Julie had tears in her eyes. She was so frustrated to see the beautiful land so close in front of her and to know the monsters were going to get them before they could reach it. The first of the granapods was only about twenty feet behind them. They picked up speed, but it was no use, they could not escape. The dwarf noticed that Julie had slowed down and was about to give up. “No!” he shouted. “Keep running. Don’t stop!”

At that moment they heard a bugle blasting from right above them, followed by dozens more, each one louder than the last. From all around dwarfs jumped down or appeared from behind rocks and boulders, their axes lifted high above their shoulders, ready to face the raging horde of granapods.

Not a moment too soon, for the granapods rushed like a landslide toward the band of dwarfs. The children didn’t wait to watch but kept on running, faster than ever, but they heard the deafening sounds of axes crashing down on the stony backs of the monsters. With each blow the dwarfs released a piercing shout of victory. More and more dwarfs appeared. Brandishing their axes, they smashed, shattered and cracked open the granite-hard, crusty shells of their foes. The children sprinted until at last they were free of the gorge.

The dwarf led them to the grassy banks of a fast-flowing stream. Placing Annabel down under an old tree with big, lobed leaves he said, “You’ll be safe here. Just lean back against this loyal friend and rest. Julie, take care of Leo. I’ll be back soon.” With that he took out his axe, turned and ran back into the fray. His kind eyes turned fiery, glinting with the renewed anticipation of battle.

part five



King Brathnar

33 🌸 *Arriving at the Castle*

When Leo awoke, he found himself lying comfortably in a hammock that was tied to a long pole supported on either side by a dwarf. They were trotting along at a brisk pace, and it took him a few moments to get his bearings. With a jolt he remembered the attack of the granapods, how he'd been stuck inside the rocky shell, hardly able to breathe, feeling his life draining from him, after he was pierced by the poison pincers. The last thing he remembered was collapsing under the old, shady tree, thick with foliage. He reckoned he must have fallen asleep quite quickly, and now he wondered what had happened since.

Lifting his head, Leo peered around and saw Julie and Annabel, also being carried along in hammocks woven out of colorful plant fiber. They were still asleep. Dozens of dwarfs accompanied them, their faces and bushy beards hidden by hats pulled low over their heads. Soon his eyes caught sight of the huge castle that rose majestically in front of him. Even from a distance it had looked impressive, but he was amazed at what he now beheld.

At the foot of the mountain was a botanical garden filled with plants he'd never seen before. There were transparent

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trees in which one could see the rising sap spreading through branches and twigs, feeding right into the multi-hued leaves. Flowers drooped over the edges of walls like colorful banners, each large petal intricately embroidered. Others stood tall, like slim columns from which long blossoms dangled, continuously intertwining like ribbons around a maypole.

There was no end to the floral range, each one more stunning than the other. Hundreds of paths meandered through the groves, flowerbeds, glens, woods and orchards. Tiny rivers streamed through this paradise, with little bridges, beautifully arched, connecting the various trails.

The crystal pillars supporting the massive ziggurat-shaped castle were even bigger than he'd imagined, some as thick as thirty feet—and there were hundreds of them. The tapered edifice was so tall that the topmost towers got lost in the swirling, colorful vapor. Insects of all shapes and sizes populated the gardens, some flying in swarms, creating the most beautiful patterns in the sky. Others circled the parapets like eagles or stood by ponds like graceful flamingos.

As the party approached the moat filled with liquid light, a drawbridge fashioned out of clear crystal was silently lowered. Stepping on the smooth bridge the dwarfs' footsteps resonated like many bells. The soft tintinnabulation of boots on the glass boards woke the two girls. Leo saw they were as overcome with astonishment as he was, their eyes growing big and wide as their jaws dropped open.

The dwarfs carried them up a grand, stone stairway, which split into three smaller stairs at the first landing, two of them curving up and around like embracing arms. They continued walking straight up the broad central stairs. At the second landing the stairs leveled into a large, well-kept path

that spiraled around and up to the base of the massive crystal pillars that supported the immense castle. Each pillar had a different tone, and in between them were numerous fountains and rivulets.

In a shady glade the dwarfs untied the hammocks from the poles and fastened them securely to some smaller pillars. Leo wanted to ask them what was going on, but he didn't dare. Nor did Julie and Annabel say anything. Once they were firmly secured between the crystal pillars, the dwarfs disappeared without a word and the children were left alone, overlooking a small pond, fed by a gurgling stream that gushed over and through porous rocks, surrounded by big, leafy plants.

"Well, it sure is beautiful here," said Julie, letting her arms sway on either side of the hammock, "and so nice and warm, compared to the dark cave."

"And it smells so good, like in a florist's shop." Annabel breathed deeply and stretched her arms.

"I'm so glad we didn't have to walk all the way to the castle." Leo sat up. "But do any of you know how the battle with the granapods ended? I must have fallen asleep straight away."

"So did I," Annabel said.

"Me too," admitted Julie.

"Well, if you must know, we thrashed them good and solid!" They turned their heads at the sound of the familiar voice. It was their loyal guide, laughing and carrying a tray filled with food and drink. "We sent them scurrying back up into the mountain, but not before we smashed hundreds of them to smithereens." The dwarf's face was all smiles, and it was hard to imagine that he could ever look grim and stern. His cheeks were red and his eyes twinkled.

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“Oh, it’s you!” Annabel said, laughing and clapping her hands in joy. All the children were happy to see him again.

“Yes, me it is—Grilpy at your service.”

“Grilpy?” all three children asked at once.

“That’s me. I’m sorry I never introduced myself, but I didn’t want to reveal my name until we were safe. Of course, by now I know all your names.” He laughed again, cleared his throat and added, “But you must be hungry, yes? Here, I’ve brought you some sweetmeats. This will sustain you and make you feel ripe and ready to meet the Great Brathnar, King of the Bricanus Mountains and Ruler of the Dwarfs in the North.”

Immediately Leo tried to climb out of his hammock, but the dwarf cautioned him, “Not just yet. You stay put. After you have strengthened yourselves you can get up. You are all weaker than you think, especially you, Leo. The granapod sucked some of your vitality from you. I saw the mark of the poisonous pincers on your foot. A few more minutes and...” For a second he looked serious, but then broke into a smile again. “Don’t worry, you’ll be fine. I rubbed some balm over the wound. But you’ll have to pace of yourself. Now, drink some of this juice, made from vines irrigated by the Sun River’s fluid light.”

The dwarf handed them crystal goblets filled with a cool, glowing red liquid. It tasted so good that all three children let out appreciative *hmms* after every sip. “And here is some cake for you, made from the seven roots still preserved from the Kulta-yugom Age and baked in a natural stone oven next to one of the most ancient lava veins in the world.”

As they bit into the cakes they had a taste experience that went beyond the elixir they had just drunk. It was as if each root could be savored separately and in successive order, the

one flavor merging into the next, and each one tastier than the previous one until, in the end, they all merged harmoniously, like seven melodies weaving together in a tasty tapestry of sound.

“I always knew the Bricanus Mountains were special,” Julie said, still chewing.

“So what’s next?” Leo asked once he’d finished every last drop and morsel of the delicious repast.

The dwarf smiled and said, “You may all get up now. It’s time to meet King Brathnar. He is already waiting for us.” They climbed out, and Grilpy lifted Annabel gently onto his shoulders. “Follow me, and take care you don’t say a word until you are spoken to.”

34  *King Brathnar*

Grilpy led them from the secluded glade along a narrow path to the largest of the numerous crystal columns that supported the castle like stilts. The hexagonal pillar pierced right through the massive base of rock up above them—the solid rock that formed the colossal foundation slab on which the rest of the fortress was built. They entered through an arch carved into the pillar, adorned with obscure patterns. Once inside the hollow column, the dwarf uttered a sound and the translucent platform on which they stood rose like an elevator.

“Do you have electricity down here?” Leo asked, awed by the smooth ride.

“No,” laughed the dwarf. “The earth contains many powers, and this ‘elevator,’ as you call it, is powered by one of these untouched forces. But people aren’t ready for them yet. That’s one reason why you are here. But, shhh, we shouldn’t be talking anymore. I forgot myself. More will be revealed when the time is at hand.”

They rose through the umpteen floors of the castle, higher and higher, until they reached the top of the crystal shaft and exited onto an open terrace with a spectacular view. In the distance they could see the mountains from which they’d come and the Crater Lake of Light, which now looked quite small and remote. Grilpy led them along the walkway of the battlement and up some narrow stairs to a smaller terrace. Leo’s sneakers squeaked as they strode along the polished slate, and the singular sound made them aware how eerily quiet it was.

There was no one in sight. After climbing a broader flight of stairs between two tall towers, they entered a great courtyard

surrounded entirely by marble colonnades. The expansive floor was one large kaleidoscopic mosaic of granite tiles. On the far side of the square, up against a gold-plated wall and between two of the largest white pillars, was a half-moon shaped platform, covered in richly-engraved amber and on which stood a large throne carved from a single, knotted tree-root. Two simple stone benches were placed on either side.

Grilpy stopped, lifted his shiny bronze bugle to his lips and blew a rhythmic five-tone melody, sweet to the ear, yet commanding. Within seconds it was answered from all the ramparts above and below, like a hundred echoes of the same simple melody that tugged at the core of the children's hearts, inviting them to hum along. What followed left the children blinking with disbelief, though by now they'd come to expect almost any event.

The air around them began to blur and thicken, and almost instantly they were surrounded on three sides by a multitude of dwarfs. The courtyard and all the ledges, terraces, paths, stairs and trails were filled with dwarfs – dwarfs of every kind and every shape and size. The children marveled at the variety. Many thousands had suddenly materialized, not really arriving, but coming into focus. Once they'd all assembled, King Brathnar emerged on the throne. Again, they'd not witnessed him walking in. He just came into view, from one moment to the next.

The King gestured for the travelers to approach and Grilpy led the way forward. He was proud to escort his esteemed guests to the King. In the expectant silence the strange troupe passed through the throng of diverse dwarfs, all of them wearing hats. Julie towered above them all, and even Leo, who was almost a

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head shorter than his sister, was taller than all of the assembled dwarfs. But most unusual for the dwarfs was to see Grilpy—one of their own—carrying Annabel on his shoulders. The crowd respectfully parted for the extraordinary arrival and began to hum. The closer they approached the King, the louder the dwarfs hummed—rhythmical and pleasant to the ears, like the purring of cats, tuned to a chord that shifted almost imperceptibly from one harmony to another.

King Brathnar was two hats taller than all the rest of the dwarfs. He wore a long, purple gown, across which was sewn a crimson band of sparkling jewels. In the center of his pointy red hat was a large, intricately-cut diamond, above which was stitched a purple flower with seven petals, which was duly noted by Leo and Julie, reminding them of the *Flora hermeticus* they'd found in Hawk Gorge on the morning they left the farm for the city. What was its importance? Feathery white hair fell from underneath the King's hat and merged into his long fluffy beard, which forked into two plaits, each one brushing the ground on either side of him. His face, though round and ruddy, was riveted and furrowed, and his deep-set eyes looked as if they'd seen times beyond the most ancient mountains. His eyes changed color depending on where they fell, from black, through purple, violet, blue, green and silver.

Once the group came to a standstill directly in front of him, the humming of the multitude stopped abruptly. Grilpy placed Annabel gently on her feet, and she stood with her hand on his shoulder for support. All four of them were met by the flash of the King's incisive gaze.

"Ah, so you have arrived," were his first soft words, as if they were meant only for them. Yet, they could be heard by all, echoing gently off the walls like the flutter of pigeons' wings.

He paused a moment. “Yes, he did say you would come. In that he was right. I did not think it would happen. Not so soon, anyway. At times I wondered if it would ever happen, or could happen. But I was given hope on the day of our brief meeting.”

These last words were spoken even more softly, as if he was talking to himself. Julie and Leo wondered what brief meeting he was referring to. They certainly could not remember ever meeting him. And who said we would come? Did he mean Curly Beard? The King continued to speak, his voice down to a whisper, like wind in a cave. “But I thought there would be only two of you.” He looked over to Annabel, who looked down, blushing.

After a thoughtful silence King Brathnar stood up and let his gaze travel over all the dwarfs gathered in front of him before he looked back at the children. “Welcome! All the dwarfs of my kingdom welcome you!” The words were uttered like a proclamation, and now his voice was loud and sonorous, like an echo in a cave. “And let it be known that all the dwarfs from the realms of the north, south, east and west welcome you! They cannot all be here today, but we have let them know. The news has spread like a quiver of excitement through the ailing and aching earth. They know—every one of them, and they welcome you! Today marks a new beginning.”

He raised his aged, gnarled hand into the air and made three quick gestures, each one answered by an explosive, sharp shout from all the dwarfs present. He repeated the mysterious gesture twice more and each time the shouts exploded like fireworks. Though tall, he had a portly waist that pushed slightly through his long robe. Though ancient, there was something almost youthful in his bearing.

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“Now, my friends, please sit down. There is much to be discussed and even more to be done—and very little time to do either.” He sat down and with a slight wave of his hand, beckoned his guests to sit on the benches on either side of him. Facing out over the mass of dwarfs, Julie and Leo sat to his left and Annabel and Grilpy to his right.

35 ❁ *The Audience*

“That you have arrived so soon gives us great hope,” began the King in a resonant and calm voice. “But it also fills us with dread, for you have come alone, without Ribbodon, your guide and mentor.” Murmurs rippled across the vast gathering of dwarfs. “When Ribbodon did not return, I sent out sentinels to the outer edges of the kingdom in hopes of finding out what had happened to him. Never did any of us expect to see you venture into our realm without Ribbodon. This speaks highly of your courage and loyalty. You could have lost your way many times over, or fallen into grave danger. It is a miracle you made it all the way to Issimilarooth, realm of the northern dwarfs. And it was indeed lucky you met Grilpy, one of the sentinels, who could welcome and lead you here.”

The King paused and gestured over to the stalwart dwarf who smiled widely, but shifted uncomfortably in his seat at the royal mention of his name. “He fulfilled his task in a laudable manner.” A shout of approval erupted from the gathered multitude. King Brathnar lifted his hand and silence was immediately restored. “But now, tell us briefly what has befallen Ribbodon, and why has he not accompanied you as was the initial plan?”

“Do you mean Curly Beard?” Julie asked, her voice quivering with unease, for she had never spoken in front of such a vast crowd before—or in the presence of a king. All the while, she feared for Curly Beard’s life, and involuntarily, the image of Curly Beard’s capture flashed up in her mind.

“Yes, he sometimes goes by that name, though to us he is Ribbodon, Lord of the Caves,” the King answered, smiling reassuringly. “Go ahead, child. Tell us so that we may all hear.”

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Julie told the full story, from the first time they'd met Curly Beard outside Lost Cave, followed by his appearance in the tree house on Honey Creek Farm, and finally to the battle with the binagatorials in the sewers underneath the city. She swallowed hard and had to fight her tears when she related how the dwarf had been covered with the thick, sticky spittle of the binagatorial. "That's when he urged us to find you—'Go to Brathnar, King of the Dwarfs. Tell him what has happened! Ask for his help!' Those were his words." Julie wiped the tears from her eyes, forcing herself to be brave. "So, here we are, and I hope you can help us save his life."

"Help will be given. I praise you for listening to Ribbodon, for following his plea and for not forgetting him. It is easy for humans to forget. Ribbodon's initial task was to bring you here for very different reasons—ones that concern us dwarfs directly, such as the attacks we constantly face from creatures like the granapods, only much more dangerous and vile. That will have to wait. At present, our most important task is to free Ribbodon and to vanquish the binagatorials." At the mention of the binagatorials the crowd growled angrily.

He continued, "They have become too strong. And, as I have just mentioned, there are growing hordes of powerful creatures on every front, posing terrible threats not only to us, but to the entire earth. We used to be able to manage them ourselves, but that is no longer an option; it is no longer possible. We can no longer work separately. Those days are over. Now we have to work together. All the manifold beings from the realms of fire, air, water and earth must come together to share their respective gifts and powers for the sake of all.

"But, most importantly, human beings are called upon to be involved, partly because human beings, in their ignorance,

created some of the monsters through their relentless greed and cruelty, and partly because the time has come when the chasm between the visible and the invisible needs to be bridged. That is why your arrival at this time fills us with hope. Humans have begun to see, or at least children see.” Again the dwarfs murmured, this time with approval.

“What can we do?” Julie asked.

“In order to save Ribbodon you must first seek out the Queen of the Waters. We have no time to lose. We can help you find her if you are willing to undertake that journey. But first I ask you—and I ask each one of you separately: Are you prepared to find the Queen of the Waters to help free Ribbodon?” Absolute silence followed, a silence that could be felt throughout the legions of gathered dwarfs.

And without knowing what they were getting into, the three children, one at a time, answered “Yes,” which was followed by a great cheer.

“Good. So be it.” The King stood up. “We will begin immediately with the necessary preparations.”

“Do we have to go alone again?” Annabel asked in a soft and anxious voice. Knowing she’d spoken out of turn, she felt ashamed. She sank her head and bit her lip.

“Do not be afraid, dear child. You have shown so much courage and openness that we are all indebted to you. Rest assured, you will not have to go alone. Grilpy will accompany you. He has proven to be a worthy sentry and trusty guide—if he is willing.”

“Oh, I was hoping that I might be found worthy enough to go,” shouted Grilpy. He was so pleased that he jumped up, stood on his head and twirled around on his pointy cap like a spinning top, much to the amusement of all. “Yes, it would be

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an honor,” he added contritely after landing back on his sturdy feet. The crowd of dwarfs knocked their knuckles together as a sign of respect and approval.

“I have one more question.” Leo lifted his hand as if he were in school. He hadn’t dared to speak up until this moment.

“What is it, boy-of-many-pockets?”

“King Brathnar, you mentioned that you had once met us briefly, which gave you hope. When was that? I cannot remember such a meeting.”

“Nor I,” said Julie who had wondered the same thing.

King Brathnar smiled. “I will remind you.” He tapped the diamond in the center of his cap. Immediately a light swirled out, and as it unfurled it brought along a gust of wind, which made the children blink. The King shrank until he was a little dwarf wearing floppy pants, patched together from many colorful leaves and held in place by a belt of twisted straw. For shoes he had little mounds of moss, and his shirt was woven grass, which blended well with his jacket of dark bark.

“Ektanaan!” Julie and Leo shouted at once, recognizing the dwarf they’d met on top of Puff Mountain, the day of their departure from the farm. The very next moment the spell was broken and the King stood next to them again, the diamond still glowing in his cap for a few seconds more. They could now see the resemblance between the two, though King Brathnar was much taller, more regal and ancient. The King smiled and whispered, “I change according to time, place, need and the hat I’m wearing.” Then he stood up, took a step forward and addressed the packed courtyard.

“It is settled. I now end this audience.” The King lifted his hands into the air, struck a three-tiered sign and shouted, “Krash-ma-ruck.”

“Eima-klado-mie,” immediately issued from tens of thousands of throats, followed by the entire crowd stamping their boots three times in unison on the granite floor. Twice more he cut the three-tiered sign in the air, but the last time he remained silent, gazing intently over his minions, holding the gesture until they disappeared as mysteriously as they’d appeared.

With that the King stepped down from his wooden throne, turned around and tapped lightly on the marble rock behind the platform with his fingertips. It opened noiselessly to reveal a passage lined with flickering wall sconces. “Follow me,” he beckoned to the children and added, “You too, Grilpy.”

36 ❁ *Through Sixteen Doors*

The four followed King Brathnar through long and narrow passages. Every one of his steps equaled three of theirs and they could barely keep up with him. In his hurry Leo accidentally tripped over his own shoelaces. He quickly retied them and ran after the others to keep up. King Brathnar, who seemed to be floating rather than walking, ignored the incident and only increased his pace until they came to a black, transparent crystal pillar that glowed in the gentle light. They entered the column through an elaborately-carved archway and stood on a smooth glass platform, which immediately took them down into the depths.

It felt as if they were freefalling, and Leo let out a gasp. Annabel held tightly onto Grilpy's hat and forehead as she sat on his shoulders. Julie closed her eyes and held her breath as she felt her stomach going topsy-turvy. At length they came to a gentle halt and stepped out into a large circular chamber that was dimly lit and had twelve passageways leading into every direction, equally spaced, like numerals on a clock. "Wait here," ordered the King and disappeared down the nearest passage right in front of them.

"Where are we?" Leo asked in a hushed whisper.

"The Black Crystal shaft is the centermost pillar of the entire castle and it took us down to the deepest point of the citadel," Grilpy said in a soft, reverent voice. "Very few dwarfs have ever set foot here. It was built in the Kultayugom Age by the Kuramanoc master builders. It is the place of sacred treasures. I've met only one other dwarf who has been down here and then, only after the sacred key had been stolen." At the mention of the key, Leo and Julie looked at one another.

“Is that the one that has a seven petal’d purple flower engraved in its handle?” Julie asked.

“Yes! How did you know that?” asked Grilpy, suddenly looking afraid. “We dwarfs never mention the sacred key amongst ourselves, though in all of our travels we are constantly searching for it. How did you know?”

“From our grandfather who told us to keep looking for it, just as he had been told by... Ribbodon.” Julie was going to say Curly Beard, but the gravity of the moment made her choose his formal name.

“Ah,” said Grilpy, relieved.

“What’s so special about the key?” Leo added.

At that moment King Brathnar returned with a long staff, checkered black and white. “Sit and hold tight,” he ordered. They looked about and saw that there were twelve granite stone stumps placed evenly on the circular platform around the crystal pillar. They each sat down on one of the stones. At once King Brathnar took the long, checkered staff and placed the tip into a small socket on the floor and pushed. To their amazement the circular slab on which they were seated began to move slowly around the black pillar.

The King lifted the staff and found the next socket and pushed again. There were twelve sockets in all, matching the doors and stone stumps, and he punted the large granite slab like a gondolier, causing them to move faster and faster in a circular motion as if they were on a carousel. Accompanying the movement was a low drone that grew louder with speed, sounding like the undertone of a massive singing bowl when a pestle is rubbed along its rim.

The children held on tightly to their stone stumps. Tiny holes carved into the sides of the stones allowed them a firm

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grip. Everything around them began to blur and the children feared falling off. This was even worse than the descent down the crystal shaft. The only one still standing was the King, legs planted firmly apart, pushing repeatedly with his staff. After twenty-four rotations King Brathnar stuck the checkered staff out horizontally in front of him so that it struck against the entrances of the twelve passages, sounding like a giant ratchet. The rotating stone disc lost momentum and slowed down until it stopped, the outstretched staff pointing into one of the passageways into which King Brathnar immediately disappeared, gesturing them to follow.

The children felt queasy after this game of roulette, especially Leo, who usually loved merry-go-rounds. But he suppressed the nausea and walked bravely after the others, though his steps were a bit wonky. Rounding a corner after only a few minutes, they came upon a closed metal door. King Brathnar lifted his long staff and pushed it into a central keyhole.

With a quick rotation and a forceful downward thrust, he broke off the black tip. At once the door opened. Removing the broken piece from the hole, he gave it to Julie for safekeeping. Steep steps led down to another metal door. Again the King shoved the staff into a little hollow, turned it and cracked off the next segment. The door opened and he gave the white piece to Annabel. The passageway narrowed until it led to yet another door. Again the staff was quickly inserted into the slot and snapped at the tip. This time Leo received the broken-off black section.

And so it went, the staff serving as a key till they'd traversed sixteen doors. The children received the broken off segments until they had five each. The last piece, however, which opened

a magnificent bronze door the size of a church portal, the King handed to Grilpy. They entered a spacious, round chamber that appeared more like a reservoir, for it contained the liquid light that they'd seen in the crater and that flowed through the valley. Though the water shimmered gently, their gaze was lifted upwards to the stone cross-ribbed vault high above them, fanning out like exotic leaves.

They were standing on a narrow ledge that went round the entire hall, just above the surface of the golden water. Stepping stones led across the reservoir to a grassy island with a pergola in its center, hung with trailing plants of purple flowers. Underneath the sturdy crossbeams and open lattice that supported the wooden vines stood a black marble plinth, with nothing on top of it. King Brathnar stepped over to the island and stood in front of the empty pedestal. He plucked one of the purple flowers and laid it ceremoniously on the shiny stone, murmuring some words as he did so.

"Julie, look. All those purple flowers are exactly like the flower I found in Hawk Gorge."

"You're right—the *Flora hermeticus*."

Grilpy whispered, "The key with the seven petals used to lie on that black pedestal." Leo wanted to ask a question but Grilpy put his finger over Leo's mouth. "Not now." Next, King Brathnar took a slender bottle from deep inside his robe, bent down and filled it with the golden liquid. Carefully he corked it and wiped off the drops with the tip of his beard.

The air was fresh. The golden water was clear like royal honey and exuded a pleasant aroma, reminiscent of jasmine. They felt at peace, for a moment quite forgetting they were in the deepest part of the castle, thousands of feet underground. The moment

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of rest, however, was short-lived, for King Brathnar looked back at them, nodded and continued to lead them onwards. Walking carefully along the narrow ledge rather than across the stepping stones, they arrived at the far end of the round chamber, where the wall was a mosaic of stained glass windows, which reflected the lambent light of the luminous water. King Brathnar opened a glass door and they passed through – into the treasure chamber.

37 ❁ *Three Hats*

They stood under a large, coffered cupola. The octagonal sunken panels were covered with bronze, lit up by five of the largest white candles the children had ever seen, evenly placed around the edges of the rough-hewn, circular wall. The wax pillars reached halfway up to the rounded ceiling and were as thick as old oak trees at their base, and layered with countless years of dripping wax.

But what really caught their eye was the immense collection of treasure, dispersed around the whole hall. Goblets, pots, chests, shelves, coffers and caskets were overflowing with rings, bracelets, diadems, necklaces, sculptures, figurines and coins of every size and metal, mostly gold and silver. The walls were hung with swords, spears, battle axes, shields, flails, spike clubs, halberds, maces and other weaponry, inlaid with gemstones, ivory, mother of pearl and diamonds.

The three children stood and marveled. Leo wished for the chance to spend hours searching through all the astounding riches, but the King led them swiftly through the lodes of treasure to the darkest part of the chamber, where the light of the candles could barely reach. The children walked around a big, empty hole in the floor, right in the center of the rotunda and cordoned off with a twisted red rope. “Looks like something used to be in there,” Julie said.

“Yes,” Grilpy whispered. “It held the King’s most prized treasure. It was stolen together with the key.”

“Stolen?” Leo gasped.

“Yes, but hush... we can’t talk now.”

The King entered a rectangular portico in which were two niches, one on either side. From the left niche the King

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cautiously lifted down a large glass jar. Methodically he removed what looked like three rolled-up yellow pancakes. “You’ll need these to free Curly Beard,” the King said, handing the children what turned out to be hats with tassels. “Go on, put them on.” The texture of the hats felt silky, smooth and cool to the touch. They also gave off a scent, faintly reminiscent of pure beeswax.

Reverently they placed the hats on their heads, and at once they began to shimmer like crowns. A sense of calm, peace and joy overcame the children. “These hats will reduce your fear and give you confidence in times of need,” the King said. “Nor will they ever fall off, no matter how you twist and turn.”

Hearing these words Leo couldn’t help but test them by shaking his head vigorously—yes, the cap remained comfortably on his head. They all laughed. Even the King smiled at Leo’s antics. “But there’s one more thing,” the King added.

“Annabel, take hold of the tassels and pull them.” Annabel, who was seated on one of the treasure chests, did as she was told. At once she disappeared.

“Annabel, where are you,” Julie shouted, full of concern.

“I’m right here. I haven’t moved. Don’t worry, I’m all right. Come on, try it—it feels wonderful, like a cool breeze on a hot day.”

“And when it’s cold, it will feel like a warm summer’s breeze,” added the King.

First Leo and then Julie pulled on their tassels and at once the cool, silky caps rendered them invisible. Though hidden from the world, they could still see Annabel, except that their hats now looked purple instead of golden.

“They are made of the same material as the ethmaroll of your boat, only thinner and softer. To regain your visibility you just pull the tassels again” said the King. They did so and the

hats were yellow again. “Use the hats only if you really need to,” cautioned the King. “For now, take them off and store them in a safe place.”

King Brathnar looked them over solemnly. “Remember, if you wear the hats just for pleasure, they will lose their luster and the power will fade. A sword will lose the sharp bite of its edge if it is used before it’s needed. The same applies here. Make sure you don’t fall into that mistake with these hats.” He paused, letting the words sink in. For a moment King Brathnar looked fierce and seemed to grow in size. In a whisper he added, “Only when it is really urgent!”

The children nodded, gulped and put the hats away into their safest pockets. The King smiled again and put the jar carefully back alongside three other crystal jars in the dark niche. Leaving the treasure chamber behind them, they followed the King through another low, pillared portico, until they came to a thick wall of vapor through which it was impossible to see. The wall was constantly in motion, swirling and twirling, changing color with the slightest movement. Two small, lively waterfalls issued from the rock face on either side, plunging into a narrow pool from which the vapor rose.

“This is where I must leave you,” King Brathnar said, standing in front of the narrow pool and vaporous wall. He had to raise his voice to be heard over the sound of rushing water. The children felt dismayed. They had come to feel so secure and protected in the presence of the Dwarf King. Reading their thoughts, King Brathnar smiled reassuringly and said, “Don’t worry. Grilpy is an excellent guide and he will lead you well.” At those words Grilpy’s face lit up and turned red, and his walnut-brown beard did a little dance.

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“But before you leave on your journey, you could use some strengthening. Cup your hands and dip into the two troughs on either side of the wall. One sip from each will be enough to see you on your way. There is no better sustenance for worthy wayfarers.” The King laughed and pointed to the two little waterfalls. “But take care, the water to your right is quite hot, and the water on your left is very cold.”

One by one they followed his bidding. The water from the wells tingled refreshingly on their tongues and quenched their thirsts immediately. Moreover, the heat and chill of the water ensured that they only took small sips. Leo thought of his mother’s saying: “Everything in moderation.”

At that very moment, back in the city, Mr. and Mrs. Temple were sitting in their kitchen, sipping coffee and enjoying a peaceful breakfast by themselves – until Sidney jumped up, snatched one of the fresh croissants and knocked over a jug of milk in the process.

Back in the deep earth, after they’d each had their turn, including Grilpy, the King brought forth the slender bottle containing the golden liquid. “Please give this to the Queen of the Waters. It is a gift from me. Tell her it is the sun juice flowing in the depths of the earth. Tell her we will protect it until it reaches the surface, until it enters her oceans, seeps into her realm. Tell her it will lessen the source of the pain that flows into her tears. And tell her too that her tears will turn into seeds of hope.”

He handed the bottle to Annabel. “I entrust it to you. Your two friends chose well. You were as unexpected as the golden liquid when it first appeared in our river just over two millennia ago. We cannot rely solely on the prophecies of old any longer,

but must always be open and ready for the unexpected. This journey needs you, even more than you need this journey.”

Awed at the lofty compliment, Annabel was pleased that she had been entrusted with something as important as a gift from the Dwarf King to the Queen of the Waters, and her heart swelled.

“Farewell, gentle warriors of truth! If you succeed in freeing Ribbodon from his bondage with the binagatorials, then we will meet again. Otherwise—well, who knows?” His tone was grave. “More than you can imagine depends on you three—not only what you do, but how you will go about your tasks. I look forward to your return. Until then, my friends.” He lifted his hand, mumbled some words, struck a quick gesture in the air—like a blessing—and was gone.

At his sudden departure Leo felt a lump growing in his throat, and he coughed to get rid of it. He noticed that Annabel wiped away a tear and Julie sniffed.

“Well, let’s go then, shall we?” Grilpy said, as comfortingly as he could. “We’ve got a long walk ahead of us.” Grilpy grew in size, picked up Annabel and placed her on his sturdy shoulders.

“Where are we going?” Julie asked as confidently as she could.

“Why, through that wall, of course. Here, take my hands—and Annabel, you hold on tightly to my head and shoulders.” Grilpy took Julie’s hand in his right and Leo’s in his left. Annabel leaned low over his shoulders and clasped his head. Then they stepped across the narrow pond into the swirling wall of vapor.

38 ❁ *The Wall*

The thick fog was in constant motion, spiraling, curving and coiling around them. With every step they took, the interweaving colors grew more intense. They could not see each other anymore—not even the faintest blur or outline. But what they did see was so marvelous that they walked along in a trance. The vapor did not feel very wet and did not dampen their clothes. The shapes and forms that appeared directly in front of their eyes made them forget that they were cloaked in a dense fog.

Vortexes and vistas opened up, and they could peer through long, corkscrew tunnels, at the end of which they could distinguish what appeared to be gardens or villages. But before they could clearly make out what they saw, another splendid cloud would roll by, changing shape from something as remote as a flying sphinx or a flamingo sitting on the topmost tower of a pagoda to something familiar like a puffing locomotive, a Ferris wheel or a guitar. It was all so marvelous that none of the children wondered why the vaporous wall was so thick.

With Grilpy in the lead, they just kept on walking, overcome with a feeling of utmost well-being, like life after a wholesome, tasty meal. With every breath of the wall—for they could not help but breathe in the vapor—they could taste and smell flavors of their most favorite fruits—peaches, pears, raspberries, strawberries and oranges—which gave rise to new visions. They were in a rare state of rapture and everything became insignificant except for the magnificence surrounding them.

Deeper and deeper into the ocean of vapor they walked, giving themselves over entirely to the joy of all their senses.

The sensations shifted and were in a state of flux, none ever lasting too long, though never quite fading either. After seeing, smelling and touching the mystifying properties of the moving, penetrable wall, they also began to hear it. Faintly at first, but then, ever louder, the colors sounding melodiously with their graceful movements. It was the most beautiful and harmonious music the children had ever heard. Everything they'd ever listened to up till now seemed downright dull in comparison.

Still they kept walking. By now they'd lost all sense of space and time. They even forgot about one another. Their hands went limp, and had Grilpy not held them fast, they would have let go of his hands and simply stopped or followed one of the mesmerizing visions. Annabel was comfortably slumped over Grilpy's shoulders, her head resting on his sturdy hat, eyes and ears wide open to all the fabulous sights and sounds. It was good that Grilpy walked so steadily, otherwise she might have lost her balance and fallen.

Onward they walked as in a dream. Now the enchanted children began to see visions of their childhood swim by—scenes from the best times of their lives. Annabel saw all the different times she'd played with her beloved, lost brother. She saw herself cradled in the arms of her mother and out in the park, laughing. Those were the days when she could still walk and run around with other children. She could feel the effects of each kind word she'd ever uttered, each tender thought that had gone through her mind. She was enveloped by the love others had felt through her. Those were happy days, and they felt even more so now.

Likewise, Leo and Julie were transported back to all the wonderful times they'd spent out on Honey Creek Farm. But

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now they were reliving those moments through the eyes of others—the joy their parents and friends from school had felt through them—even the animals they'd cared for—Googoo the goat, Willy and Wooly the sheep, Pericles the donkey, Lopy and Harpy the cows. They experienced in the greatest detail the best of times they'd shared with their parents and especially their beloved grandfather. They were overwhelmed at the joy he took in them. They had no idea he loved them so much. Overcome by the love they'd given and received, the children felt tears well up.

Slowly the sights, sounds and living memories began to fade and recede as the wall began to dissolve. Faintly at first, and then with ever greater detail, they could see each other again. Above and below them the vapor was still shifting about. Grilpy stopped and they found themselves standing in the middle of a large lake on a long, narrow, wooden bridge. They were shocked to see that the bridge—or rather, a boardwalk a few feet above the water—had no railings whatsoever. Had they stepped a foot to the right or left they would have fallen straight into the lake. Instinctively they huddled closer together around Grilpy.

“Where are we?” Julie finally asked, as if she'd wakened from a deep sleep.

“You're standing in the middle of the Lake of Light.”

“You mean the same lake that we saw when we came out of the Great Caves?”

“The very same.”

The children remained silent and in awe. The water was calm and golden, not as bright as they'd imagined, nor as hot, but rather pleasant like a sunny morning in May. After a while

Leo asked, “Have we been walking on this narrow walkway for a long time?”

“Yes, though it took us quite a while to get to the banks of the lake. Remember, we were far below the castle. You have walked much farther than you think.” He chuckled. “By the look in your eyes I can see that you’ve lost all track of time.”

“Well, it’s a good thing I didn’t know I was walking on this bridge, because I would have been terrified,” Julie said.

“Not me,” Annabel said. “I trust Grilpy completely,” and she ruffled her hands through his beard.

“And so you can,” Grilpy said, smiling. “But now let’s move on. We’ve still got a long way ahead of us.”

The children were dismayed when they saw that the long, narrow bridge was leading straight into another wall of vapor that was already beckoning to them. But remembering how wonderful their walk had been up till now, they didn’t mind too much—though all three gripped tightly onto Grilpy. And so, once again, they approached a misty wall that twisted and snaked in front of them.

From the moment they entered this dense fog, they noticed a marked difference. This time the vapor felt heavy, damp and clammy. No colors appeared. The dark and grey shapes were rough and jagged, jumping and hopping mockingly around them. They took on different forms, shifting continuously, turning into creatures that resembled giant spiders, vulture-sized bats, dinosaurs, dragons, and enormous rats and toads, slugs and snakes—ferociously ugly and menacing. Fear gripped all three. Their legs grew leaden. Every step was an effort and their breathing was strained. All they wanted to do was turn around and go back.

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They yearned for the beautiful visions they'd seen earlier on. Annabel gripped Grilpy firmly around the neck. She closed her eyes, but the beasts kept up their macabre dance in her mind, and she found it easier to keep her eyes open and simply face the barrage of smoggy fiends.

Both Julie and Leo tugged at Grilpy, trying to get him to stop. They couldn't see him, but they felt his tightening grip. He pulled them forward, not giving in to them. The desire to reach for their hats was strong—to place them on their heads and feel relief from fear. Surely this was a moment that warranted the wearing of the King's gift. But the hats were tucked away safely under their jackets and they would've needed both hands to retrieve them. They would risk falling off the narrow bridge into the lake if they let go of Grilpy's hand.

Deeper and deeper into the ghastly, dark haze they walked. Creatures pressed in upon them, accompanied by a bitter taste and harsh sounds—not harmonious melodies like before, but smashing, cracking, slashing sounds, sounds that whizzed by like rockets and missiles, sounds that roared like helicopters and monster trucks, ear-piercing sounds of sirens and jet engines, sounds of machines in factories, clanging and clonking away.

The cacophony of sounds toppled all around them with increasing crescendo. Annabel instinctively put her hands over her ears and would have lost her balance had Grilpy not lifted his elbows up to support her, which nearly jerked both Leo and Julie off their feet. Space and time contracted. Every second became endless and every step was painful. Julie and Leo did not know how long they'd be able to hold out.

Onwards through the nightmare they plodded. The shapes and forms began to loosen around them, but it was no relief, for in the place of the brutish creatures, scenes from the worst

times of their lives began attacking them like phantoms. They saw all the mean, nasty little things they'd done to others and felt the pain of the others—pain they had caused. All the spiteful thoughts they'd ever thought took on vile shapes that slashed into others, causing harm and hurt, even to the ones they loved. They saw the hideousness of their actions and thoughts reflected to them with cruel clarity. They were suffocated by the hate and anger and disappointment others had felt through them—the results of each harsh word and ruthless thought. Tears of guilt flowed from their eyes.

Through the noise and horrible visions of the past, they heard someone singing. It was Grilpy. It was a simple and jolly little tune, sung in a tongue they could not understand, but it gave them courage and new cheer. It helped them block out the noises, horrible shapes and unsightly scenes that encroached upon them. Not to be outdone, the ghostly beasts returned with renewed vigor, and the nauseating noises tried to drown out Grilpy's jaunty song. But the intrepid dwarf increased his pace and sang all the louder.

Though the children could barely find the strength to walk, they followed and lumbered along as best they could, panting and gasping, focusing on Grilpy's song. This aggravated the vaporous apparitions and they attacked with hateful ferocity.

That's when Grilpy stopped singing and shouted as loudly as he could, "Run! Run as fast as you can!" His voice was desperate. Summoning the last vestiges of energy, Leo and Julie forgot their fatigue and ran, pulled along by Grilpy. But it was too much for them, and both Leo and Julie stumbled—almost at the same time. As they fell they pulled Grilpy down with them. Annabel screamed as she tumbled from his shoulders.

39 ❁ *Piecing a Way Out*

Silence. The first thought that leaped into Leo's mind was: *How is Annabel? Was she hurt?* Her scream had pierced him to the core. *And what about Julie?* Fearing the worst, he hardly dared open his eyes. But, to his relief, he saw Annabel caught in Grilpy's arms, while Julie's head rested on Annabel's back. They lay in a heap on the ground, stunned. They'd made it through the wall of vapor. For a few seconds they just stared at one another in shocked silence. Realizing they were all safe, alive and well, Annabel started to giggle and whimper, followed by Leo, and soon all four of them fell to laughing and crying so hard that tears rolled down their cheeks. Behind them the wall of vapor looked flat, dull and harmless.

"Phew! That was hilarious, but I guess we needed that," Julie said, catching her breath, getting up and straightening out her hoodie and jeans. "I'm just glad to get out of that hideous fog. Was it as terrible for you as it was for me?"

"Horrible. But let's not talk about it, not now, anyway." Annabel pushed herself up, but lost her balance. Immediately Grilpy helped her to her feet. "Thanks." She steadied herself, looked over at Leo and cried, "Hey, Leo, you've got a bump the size of a goose egg on your head."

"Have I?" Gingerly he felt his forehead. "Right, but don't worry, it's nothing." Still, he felt dizzy and leaned against the cave wall.

"Here, chew on this." Grilpy took out a chunk of the same root he'd given him after the attack of the granapods. "In fact, we should all have some after what we've been through." He broke off four small pieces of the dry, stringy, dark brown root. It tasted faintly like licorice and earth combined. Within

seconds their heads cleared, and a surge of energy pulsed through their veins.

“Hmm, good stuff! So, where are we and how do we get out of here?” Julie asked, ready to tackle the task at hand. She looked around the cave that was more like a grotto and no larger than their living room in the city, though with a much higher ceiling. A large, flat-topped boulder stood in the center with many rocks scattered haphazardly all around. After all the magnificent caves, chambers and tunnels they’d passed through, this seemed very dingy. “There doesn’t seem to be any way out of here—not counting the wall of vapor, of course, and I’m definitely not going through there again.”

“No way,” Leo agreed.

“And we don’t have to,” Grilpy said. “But it will take some work. There are only two ways to get to and from the treasure chamber: the way we entered with King Brathnar and the way through the wall of vapor. Either way it’s almost impossible, which makes the theft of the hallowed key all the more baffling. Of the twelve passageways we encountered as we entered, eleven lead into a maze of no return. Without King Brathnar we would never have found the right entrance. And then we still had to get through the sixteen doors with the help of the checkered staff.”

For a moment Grilpy looked stern and serious. “And anybody who even dares to enter from this end would still have to pass through that endlessly long wall of vapor—though I believe someone tried. Just look at the mess they made of this grotto—the way the rocks are scattered about. Anyway, as I was saying, we would not have made it through the vapor, also known as the Mists of Def-al-Khan, without the King’s blessing.”

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“Was that when he spoke some words and did a funny sign in the air with his hand?” Leo asked remembering how impressed he’d been with King Brathnar, his quiet, sovereign power.

“Yes, it was,” Grilpy smiled. “And also, because he put his trust in us. His trust has power, and it gave us the strength we needed. Nevertheless, it was a great risk. He knew that you might not make it, because it takes immense inner force to pass through the treacherous vapors and to cross the narrow bridge. But all three of you overcame the temptations of the first leg of our journey, and you withstood the fierce attacks of the second half.”

All three children were silent at those words. They knew that without Grilpy they would have yielded to the beauty of the wonderful shapes, forms, colors and sounds. Nor would they have been able to withstand the numbing and cruel attacks of the fierce creatures. But they kept these thoughts to themselves, feeling guilty and ashamed at their weakness.

Grilpy saw their dilemma and smiled. “No, you were strong and I’m proud of you. You withstood the Mists of Def-al-Khan, which is like standing up to death.” The children looked alarmed at these words, and Grilpy realized he’d said too much. “Oh, and the reason why you tripped was because of the raised threshold to this grotto. But enough of this, we ought to get out of here, and as soon as possible. We don’t want anybody or anything to know we’re here.”

“So, what do we do?” Julie asked, still ready to spring into action.

“First off, we need the broken pieces of the staff, the ones that King Brathnar gave you. You should have five each.” They quickly took the pieces out of their pockets.

“I have only four,” Leo said.

“We need every piece or we’ll never get out of here. Look again.” Grilpy looked grim. Annabel and Julie paled at the thought.

“Come on, Leo, it’s gotta be in one of your pockets,” Julie said edgily.

“All right, all right!” Leo emptied all his jacket and shorts pockets, one after the other. When he was finished there was a whole stack of things on the floor—string, rubber bands, a pocket knife, pencil, notebook, paperclips, broken cell phone, a guitar-playing nerf, chalk, marbles, a keychain flashlight, harmonica, the yellow rubber ducky, foreign coins, thimble, a busted digital wristwatch, golf tee, slingshot, magnifying glass, a whistle, wires, batteries and more—but not the missing piece of the staff.

“Are all your pockets totally empty?” Julie asked, accusingly. “I don’t see your magic hat. Is it maybe in that pocket?”

“No, I already looked there. I just didn’t want to take out the hat or the boat.”

“Take the hat out,” Grilpy said. “If the piece got covered, it might be invisible.”

“But I would have felt it,” Leo said.

“Just have another look,” Grilpy urged. Sure enough, when Leo took out and opened the hat the missing piece appeared in one of the folds.

“Thank goodness,” Julie said, relieved.

“You see? Whatever the hat covers completely not only becomes invisible to the eye, but also to touch and any of the other senses.” Grilpy smiled reassuringly. “But now that we have them all, we have to search this cave for sixteen keyholes—one for each piece. Well, to be precise they are not keyholes,

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but key-pegs, for you will see that each one of your black and white sections of the staff is hollow.” The children looked at their pieces made from ebony and ivory, and noted that there was a hexagonal hole through each one of them.

“And, Leo, it was very good that you couldn’t find that piece, because we got to see all the things you have in your pockets, and some of them will be very useful to us to find the right doorway out of here—like the flashlight and the piece of chalk. The light emanating through the vapor is just not enough. Now, Annabel, your job is to sit on that rock over there and shine the flashlight down.” He picked her up and placed her on the big rock in the center of the grotto. “Now, let’s find these little pegs. Remember they could be anywhere, under your feet, between rocks or—”

“I found one,” Leo shouted. “When I leaned back on the wall I felt something poking into me, and... Yes! Look, it fits.”

“Now turn it clockwise,” Grilpy said. Leo was able to turn it to the right with ease. Nothing happened, but they heard a faint clicking sound. “Now, take that piece of chalk of yours and mark the spot. On no account can we turn the same one twice.” Leo drew a cross next to that key-peg.

“I’ve found one,” Julie shouted from the far end of the cave. The piece fit perfectly. She turned the key, and again they heard the faint clicking sound.

“Don’t forget to mark it with the chalk,” Grilpy said as he saw Julie move on.

“Sorry,” Julie said. “Come on over here Leo and mark it.” Leo was feeling pretty good about the things in his pockets suddenly proving so useful.

There’s another one,” Annabel said, shining the flashlight to the cave wall she was facing. She handed Grilpy one of her

pieces and he put it on the peg and turned it. Again they heard the sound of clicking.

The first twelve key-pegs were relatively easy to find, equally spaced around the grotto's periphery like the hours of a clock. Annabel, Leo and Julie each had one piece left. But they couldn't find any more pegs, though they looked and looked. At length Grilpy said, "We haven't searched the ceiling. There might be a few up there."

"Hey, check it out. There are three bigger rocks that look like they've got steps carved into them," Annabel cried, shining her flashlight to the far end of the grotto.

"You're right!" Grilpy jumped on the rock and said, "Come on Leo, climb on my shoulders and look up there."

"Cool!" With a hop, skip and a jump, Leo was on the rock and perched on top of Grilpy's strong shoulders. "Hey, Annabel, you're lucky, I wouldn't mind being carried by Grilpy."

"I know, it's fun," and she laughed, shining the flashlight up to the rocky ceiling so Leo could see better.

Leo felt around with his fingers. Taking out his pocketknife he scratched away at a small stalactite. "Yes, just as I thought." He cleared the deposit of calcium salts from the peg. "There we go," and he put his piece over the peg and turned. The clicking sound confirmed his success. "Yep, and I think there's another one to my left."

With Leo still on his shoulders, Grilpy stepped carefully onto the second rock. Leo scraped around the peg with his knife, slid Julie's piece on it and turned. Sure enough, there was another peg above the third rock.

When Leo turned Annabel's key, the clicking sound was much louder and they looked around to see if something was opening. Nothing.

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“Still no outlet and we’ve used up all our pieces.”

“Not all. Remember, King Brathnar gave the last piece to me. You had five each and I have the last one, which makes sixteen. It took one staff to open sixteen doors. Well, now its sixteen pieces to open one door.”

“But we’ve looked all over. There’s no other peg,” Julie said, feeling frustrated.

“You’re right. But this last piece is the key to the one and only keyhole in this cave.”

“Oh, that’s going to be impossible to find. There are so many little nooks and crannies everywhere,” Julie said.

“No it’s not, for I know where it is. Annabel, shine your flashlight right above you.” She pointed the shaft of light straight up to the highest point of the cave, where they saw a dark little hole.

“But we’ll never reach up there,” Julie said. “We’d need a long stick or cane for that.”

“True, and we have one.”

“We do?” Julie asked.

“Remember, the pieces once made up a long, sturdy staff, before they were broken off, on by one. All we need to do is put the pieces back together again. But we have to be careful.” Grilpy went around collecting all the pieces, joining them together one by one. They were carved in such a manner that each piece fit tightly into the previous one, until at last they had a long, sturdy staff again. “Now, I will attach my last piece,” Grilpy said, taking out the black section of the staff that was slightly longer than the others, the end of which was carved into a bear’s claw.

“To ensure that the staff will be strong, we need to dip it into the waters of the Lake of Light.”

“Does that mean we have to step out onto the bridge again through the wall of vapor?” Annabel asked in fear.

“No, of course not,” said Grilpy, though he did walk over to the wall of vapor carrying the checkered cane. There was a trough right next to it, which they only noticed now. It was similar to the ones from which they had drunk the hot and cold water, except it was long and thin. “You each had a sip of the water from the Lake of Light. Now the same strength-giving water will re-forged this staff and make it sturdy and whole again.”

With that he placed the staff carefully into the trough. It was the exact length of the staff. It glowed as he lifted it back out, dripping with drops of liquid light. They marveled at the grandeur of the staff that, now in Grilpy’s hand, looked bigger, stronger and more powerful. “At last. We are ready to unlock the one and only door of this cave that will lead us out of here.”

40  *Out of the Cave*

Grilpy handed the checkered staff to Leo and said, “Do us the honors and unlock the hidden door.” Leo was so happy to be asked that he tried to pole-vault up onto the flat-topped boulder, but fell. Julie wanted to say “Klutz,” but thought better of it. Once he’d climbed up, he couldn’t reach the hole in the ceiling with the staff, no matter how much he stretched and stood on tiptoes. “It’s much higher than it appears.”

“I’ll help,” Julie said, feeling a little guilty for almost calling Leo a klutz. “Sorry, Annabel, you’ll have to make way for me.” Julie clambered onto the rock beside Leo, while Grilpy helped Annabel off the rock. “Okay, Leo, get on my back.” Without a word Leo climbed on her back—a little too abruptly, for she teetered and almost lost her balance.

“Sorry,” Leo said, steadying himself with the staff. “Hey, Annabel, can you shine the flashlight right onto the hole?”

“Sure,” Annabel answered. Carefully Leo directed the long staff into the gap, and the carved bear’s claw slipped in perfectly.

“Now turn it to the right,” Grilpy ordered.

“Nothing’s happening,” Leo said, squinting and straining his neck to see.

“You have to use more force. It’s not been used in years,” Grilpy said. Leo exerted more strength and still nothing happened.

“Come on, Leo, I can’t hold you much longer. You’re getting heavier by the second,” Julie cried, her leg muscles beginning to quiver.

In desperation Leo gave the checkered rod such a hefty jerk that Julie lost balance and crumpled to her knees. They both

screamed as they fell. With tremendous speed Grilpy lunged and caught Leo by the collar before he hit the ground. Julie bumped into Annabel and they rolled off the boulder on top of Grilpy, which softened their fall. The flashlight was knocked out of Annabel's hand and shattered to the ground. Once again the four of them lay in a heap in the darkness, stunned. But they heard the familiar clicking sound, except that this time it did not stop.

"You did it! The door is opening," Annabel yelled in delight. She was sandwiched between Leo and Grilpy, and trying to sit up. "I hope nobody's hurt," she added in a hushed voice. They assured her they were fine, but their attention was now drawn to the grinding noise that grew in strength. Accustomed to the dim light given off by the vapor, the children looked up, expecting a door to open above them, but instead they saw the big boulder on which Leo and Julie had stood slowly descend.

"Uh-oh! Get ready to jump onto the boulder as soon as it is level with the ground," Grilpy shouted over the grinding and clanking noise. The dwarf helped Annabel to her feet and lifted her onto his shoulders. "And someone grab the staff. We can't leave it here."

"Where is it?" Leo shouted.

"I see it," Julie yelled and ran around the boulder to the far side of the grotto where it had fallen.

"Hurry," Grilpy yelled. The moment before the flat-topped boulder was at ground level, they jumped on, except for Julie who was still a few yards away. "Come on, Julie—jump!" The sinking boulder was a good three feet down before Julie leaped.

"Ouch!" The last thing they saw was Julie's face pinched in pain. The next moment they were engulfed in darkness. "Don't worry about me, I'm fine." Julie hastened to add, as the

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others gasped. "I just twisted my ankle a bit. Nothing serious." Slowly and in silence they descended the dark shaft. Many long minutes later the boulder came to a stop with a jerk.

"Hand me the staff," were Grilpy's first words.

"Here you go," Julie said, handing the staff in the direction of Grilpy's voice. They heard Grilpy tap around in the darkness.

"There's a ramp here. Now, hold on to the staff and follow me." Grilpy held the staff out horizontally behind him. As soon as Julie and Leo had clasped it, he led them off the boulder. Seconds later they heard the grinding sound. "Good! We made it. That's the boulder going back up." When the grinding ceased they were shut off completely from the grotto above them. "Sit down where you are. And don't move."

"Where are we? How can we continue in such complete darkness?" Annabel asked, but there was no answer. Grilpy was gone. It was cold. They felt alone as never before. For a few minutes none of them spoke and the silence pressed in on them. Eventually Annabel whispered, "What if something should happen to Grilpy and he doesn't return?"

"But I *have* returned," Grilpy said in a low voice. "And I've got what I was searching for." A moment later there was a small flash followed by the calm, yellow light of a lantern in Grilpy's hand. They found themselves on a platform, hewn straight into the rock and leading into a square tunnel. "Julie, take the staff and use it as a walking stick so you don't have to put all the weight on your injured foot." Grilpy handed Julie the checkered staff, swung Annabel onto his shoulders and said, "Let's go." And off he trotted.

"Why is he in such a hurry?" Julie wondered, limping after the dwarf, glad to have the support of the staff. After about fifty yards they came to a four-way juncture. Without a moment's

hesitation Grilpy chose the left tunnel. The farther down they walked, the warmer it got. The children began to sweat and they felt thirsty and tired. They wished they'd had time to drink from the trough before leaving the grotto. The rock around them was black and jagged. The air was stuffy and they began to pant. "Don't worry, we don't have too far to go anymore," Grilpy said.

"Where are we going?" Julie asked, her ankle throbbing.

"You'll see, but for the moment, save your energy and don't talk."

The dwarf picked up the pace and Leo's legs began to ache. He also felt dizzy and his head began to spin. In the distance he thought he heard noises.

"Hurry," Grilpy urged. "Just hold out a bit longer."

"Something's wrong," Julie said, ignoring Grilpy's warning not to talk. "I hear something. What is it?"

"If you must know, it's the granapods. They know we're here. They knew that we would leave King Brathnar's realm sooner or later. They've been watching out for us, wanting revenge. But I'm sure they did not think we'd come this way, otherwise they'd have pounced on us by now." They broke into a run, the little lantern wobbling wildly in Grilpy's hand. Julie's whole left foot felt like it was on fire and with every footstep, pain shot up her leg. She thought she would pass out.

"Here we are," Grilpy said at last. They'd come to the edge of a massive cliff. There was nowhere else to go. It dropped down into a bottomless, black hole. Behind them they heard the raucous sounds of the approaching granapods. Grilpy put down the lantern and lifted Annabel off his shoulders. "Safe at last," he said smiling.

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“What do you mean?” Julie asked, panting. “There’s a deep hole in front of us, those horrid granapods are behind us—and you’re saying we’re safe!”

“We’re at the edge of an old, dormant volcano. All we need to do is go to the top.”

“It looks like an impossible climb.” Leo looked skeptically at the cliff face stretching up above him, and Julie almost collapsed at the mere thought of it.

“You don’t have to climb the cliff,” Grilpy answered. “And you’d just better take it out immediately, while we still have time.”

“Take what out?”

“The boat, of course,” Annabel said, realizing what Grilpy was getting at.

“She’s right,” Grilpy said. “Now that we’re about to leave the caves, we can use it again.”

“Of course! How could I forget about our boat?” Julie felt relieved, and for a moment the pain in her ankle receded. Leo unzipped his side pocket and reached for the bottle as the clatter of the approaching granapods grew more intense.

“Hurry,” Julie urged, remembering how he was almost devoured by one of them. “They’re almost here.” Her voice was frantic. Leo uncorked the bottle and bid the boat to come forth. As soon as it floated in front of them, they all held hands and boarded the boat. Leo stowed the bottle back in his pocket and immediately took his seat by the tiller. The girls sat down next to one another on the starboard bench while Grilpy placed the checkered staff under the port bench.

At that moment the horde of granapods appeared on the ledge and attacked, their cable-thin arms lashing out at the

boat, hitting the hull hard with their jagged clog-like pincers. Some plunged over the edge in their furious attempt to reach the boat, their pitiful shrieks echoing off the crater walls. In a frenzy those behind tried to capture the boat by coiling their wiry, twitching arms around the mast and neck of the beautifully carved swan.

The boat instinctively jerked to the side, pulling three more granapods off the edge. Unable to hold on to the boat, the rocky fiends fell into the black void, shrieking. “Boat, fly to the top,” Julie yelled, while Leo flung the ethmaroll shut. The boat shot up toward the mouth of the crater, leaving the granapods flailing about, their spindly arms and legs whipping the rocky ledge in rage.

41  *Back on the Boat*

It felt good to be on the boat again, like coming home—relieved, though not quite relaxed. Seeing the black volcanic cliffs shoot past them as they elevated to the top, they couldn't help but imagine the possibility of crashing into the black rock face. And what if the volcano decided to erupt at this very moment?

Grilpy set them at ease. "Maybe one day the volcano will erupt, but that's not going to happen today. I'd feel it in my beard," and he stroked the long thick brown tufts and smiled at them with a twinkle in his eyes. "Nor are we going to crash. This little boat is far too wise for that." Nevertheless, they sat in silence for the rest of the way up until they finally flew out of the crater into broad daylight. It was so bright that they had to cover their eyes. Once they got used to the sunlight, they marveled at the beauty spread out beneath them.

"Welcome to the Bricanus Mountains," Grilpy announced.

"Amazing!" Julie exclaimed, pulling back the ethmaroll. "We'd always see them far to the north of us, looking blue and mysterious. I'd always dreamed of coming here one day."

"Not only are you here now, but you've been deep inside them as well," Grilpy said, not without some pride. "You are right. They are full of mysteries—inside and out." Though it was summer, many of the peaks were still topped with snow. The meadows and forests in the valleys, were lush and green, connected by meandering rivers and dotted with lakes. A few isolated houses were sprinkled about.

"Spectacular!" Leo leaned over the edge, letting the cool winds blow his hair back. "You can see almost every detail."

“I’ve never seen something as beautiful as this—except for the King’s Valley,” Annabel agreed. “You don’t know how much this means to me.” She looked up at Leo and Julie. “Thank you again for bringing me along.”

“You’re welcome,” Leo said, “but, to tell you the truth, I’d enjoy the view more if we had a good snack. I’m starved. Where’s an air hostess when you need one?”

“Here I am, at your service,” said Annabel, smiling.

“I wish.”

“No, really, right here.” She took out a brown paper bag from her jacket.

“I thought we’d finished all the sandwiches you made.”

“We did, but I ate only half of the cake that Grilpy brought when we first arrived at King Brathnar’s castle—you know, the one made from the seven roots. It’s not much, just one bite for each of us, but it’s better than nothing.”

“That’s like the best cake I’ve ever tasted. Annabel, you’re just the best,” Leo said. “But are you sure you want to share it with us?”

“Of course, silly. And I think there might even be a drop of tea left,” and she reached underneath the bench, retrieved the thermos and shook it. “I was right. There’s enough for a sip or two for each of us. Leo, take out your pocket knife and cut the cake into four pieces while I fill the mugs with the last bit of tea.”

“Thanks, but no tea and cake for me,” Grilpy said, smiling. “I’d rather just puff on my pipe. You three share it amongst yourselves.”

“You sure?” Annabel asked, unscrewing the thermos.

Grilpy just smiled, took out his pipe, filled it with powder from a leather pouch and lit it with two drops from a vial

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like the one that Curly Beard used. Sitting back he puffed an aromatic cloud of mist into the air that turned into a dancing giraffe, before it changed into an eagle and flew off.

“Oh, do that again,” said Leo almost forgetting about the cake for a second. To his delight Grilpy puffed a hippopotamus twirling on its hind legs like a ballerina. They leaned back, ate and drank, while Grilpy puffed on his pipe and made them laugh with his funny smoke formations.

By the time they were finished, they’d left the big mountains far behind and were traveling over a hilly area and farmland. The children looked down. They saw more houses and some villages dotted around. Julie shouted, “Hey! Down there—I think I recognize that place. Leo, do you see what I see?”

“It’s Puff Mountain,” shouted Leo. “And there—Look, it’s our farm—Honey Creek Farm!” As if it had heard them, the boat slowed down and flew toward the farm, descending to only a few hundred feet. “Look, Annabel, that’s where we used to live.”

“How beautiful. Why would your parents ever want to move away from such a lovely place? I’d give anything to live on a farm like this, or at least, spend some time on one. I’ve never been on a farm before—ever.”

“And we’d give anything to live there again,” said Julie. “Our parents just couldn’t afford to keep it going anymore.”

“Oh, and look, there’s the tree house. We used to sleep in it every summer,” Leo said. “Come on, let’s go down there and show Annabel around. Oh, please, let’s, let’s!”

“As much as I’d love to do just that, we don’t have any time,” Julie said, looking at her watch. “We’ve got to be back before Annabel’s aunt returns home, and we still have a long way to go.”

“But the boat can travel faster than any car, train or plane,” Leo insisted.

“Sorry, Leo, but I have to agree with Julie on this one,” Grilpy advised. “Even this boat will not be able to make it back in time if we tarry here. We’re already running late.”

“Oh, fine,” Leo said, staring down at Honey Creek Farm with an aching heart, watching it fade away into the distance.

“We’ll go back there some time,” Julie promised, patting Leo on the shoulder. She noticed that both his eyes had watered up and his chin was quivering. Leo just stared down at the farm and didn’t answer, while the boat rose and sped off as fast as it could in the direction of the big city. They fell silent, and soon the children, overcome by fatigue, slipped off into a light afternoon nap. Grilpy kept puffing on his pipe.

part six



In Search of Queen Marquellamoosh

42 ❁ *Back Home*

They woke up in the late afternoon while sailing over the park toward their apartment building. Below them the usual group of basketball players was passing, dribbling and dunking balls in a serious scrimmage. “Better pull up the ethmaroll,” Julie said. “We don’t want anybody to see us this time.”

“You’re right.” Leo slid the protective covering over their heads.

“And look, there’s my aunt, about to unlock the front door,” cried Annabel. “She’s going to wonder where we are. We’ve got to get back inside before she does.”

“Quick, fly up to the window,” Grilpy ordered. The boat flew around the apartment complex and made straight for Annabel’s bedroom window. Leo pulled the tiller down so that they were reduced to the size of a cigar and swiftly slipped through the crack.

Once inside Leo pulled back the ethmaroll and they disembarked. The boat quickly slid back into the bottle and Julie corked it up and tucked it safely away in her front pocket, just as Annabel’s aunt walked in. As soon as she did,

Grilpy, who was standing on the desk about to say something, immediately disappeared.

“Hi, sorry I’m late. Oh my, you haven’t even made your beds,” she said laughing.

“Hello Auntie,” Annabel said, grabbing her crutches and hobbling over and giving her a hug. “How was your day?”

“Can’t complain. How about you? Have you all had a nice day? Not too boring for you, sitting around here all day long?”

“Oh no, we talked, played and, you know—did all sorts of things.”

“Except make the beds. Anyway, I’m about to put a pizza in the oven. You’re welcome to stay, if you want.”

“No thank you. We promised to be back for dinner. In fact, we should get going,” Julie said, grabbing Leo by the arm. “But thanks, anyway. And thanks for having us.”

“Anytime, sweeties, anytime. But now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got to get that pizza ready.”

“Whew, we just made it,” Annabel said after Aunt Miriam had left the room. “That was a bit too close for comfort.”

“You’re right... okay then, see you tomorrow.” Julie said.

“Bye, Julie, ’bye, Leo. Thanks again for taking me along.”

“It wouldn’t have been the same without you,” Leo said. “See ya.”

As soon as they opened the front door, Sidney jumped all over them, his tail tossing over a couple of boots from the shoe rack in the hallway. “It’s like you’ve been away for weeks,” Mrs. Temple shouted from the living room, laughing, shutting the laptop and placing it on the coffee table.

“It almost feels like it,” Julie answered, flopping down on the couch, taking Sidney by the ears and twisting them lovingly.

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Sidney could hardly contain himself, and the children knew they couldn't keep the secret of their adventure from him. He sniffed them up and down, curious about the many strange smells that clung to their clothes. At least he couldn't talk.

"I've never seen the dog so excited," Mr. Temple said, shaking his head in amusement and looking up from the book he was reading. "But where were you this morning? I'd bought some cranberry muffins from the bakery for you." He looked at them quizzically. "But nobody answered the door, although I knocked and called repeatedly."

"Oh, we were most likely too engrossed in play... you know, crawling through caves, flying through the air, getting caught by monsters and hobnobbing with kings in castles—you know, the usual," Julie said evasively, rubbing her ankle that still hurt.

"You didn't go out or do anything you shouldn't have?" Mrs. Temple asked, getting up and scrutinizing them. "Looks like the three of you got a good workout playing together. I hope you didn't tire poor Annabel out too much." Mrs. Temple smiled and switched on the light.

"Well, we did zoom over to the park once," said Leo, scratching his head and imitating the sounds of an airplane.

"My goodness, what on earth have you done to your head? That bump looks awful. What happened?" And she bent over Leo, brushing his hair to the side.

"Oh that! It's nothing. I just stumbled and knocked my head on the floor, that's all."

"Well, we're going to put some cream on that right away. It's already turning blue."

"Looks like you two really hit it off with the new girl from downstairs," Mr. Temple said as Mom administered the salve

on Leo's bump. Julie wished she could get some cream on her ankle, but she remained quiet.

"She's the best," Julie said, and Leo nodded vigorously in agreement.

"Hold your head still," Mrs. Temple said. "The cream is not meant for your hair. There, that should help." She screwed the cap back on the tube. "Now, let's eat. And, Leo, it's your favorite dish—mac and cheese."

"Yesss! Sweet," and he pumped the air with his fist.

After dinner, Mr. Temple, while reading the newspaper, suddenly blurted out, "Now here's the strangest story. Listen to this: 'Flying boat in Lion's Park.' Hey, that's our park right here." Immediately Julie and Leo looked at one another, alarmed. "Imagine that! And there's even a photo of it. See, there it is, flying right over the pond," and he held up the paper for Julie and Leo, who had come to his recliner, to see. "That's so silly. I don't believe a word of it."

"What else does it say?" Julie asked, taken aback that they'd made it into the papers and afraid that their secret might be discovered.

"Nothing much. Just that some boys in the park, who were playing basketball at the time, claimed that they almost caught hold of it. There seemed to have been about fifty witnesses."

Fortunately, the photograph was fuzzy. But a basset hound could be seen clearly, leaning over the edge of the boat. "You know, if I didn't know better I'd say that looks exactly like Sidney." Mr. Temple, put on his glasses to get a closer look. "Angela, you've got to see this. I can almost make out the collar."

"I'm not even going to bother with such nonsense," she said. "I've got better things to do, like finishing off this article on the importance of serving organic food in schools."

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“But it would be fun to sail through the air in a boat,” Leo quipped, which immediately earned him a box in the ribs.

Julie didn't have to pretend when she yawned and said, “Whatever. I'm beat. I'm going straight to bed.” On her way out she took the jar of cream that her mother had placed on the bookshelf.

43  *Off to the Queen*

The next morning straight after breakfast, Mom put them to work, clearing the table, washing the dishes, going grocery shopping with the dog, cleaning their bedroom, vacuuming the carpets and setting the table for lunch. In between chores she asked about Annabel. They told her all about the loss of her brother and the condition of her lame legs. She was thankful that Leo and Julie had met such a nice girl with whom they could play. It certainly helped to fill the gap after the loss of the farm. She felt reassured.

Sometimes she wondered whether the move was the right decision, whether they should have tried harder to hold on to the farm—for the children’s sake. Yet, she also knew the move was good for them, and, besides, Gerald was happy to be at the university again, teaching. After lunch Leo and Julie took Sidney for a long walk through the park. On their return they visited Annabel who’d slept through most of the morning.

“We can’t stay long,” Julie said. “We have more chores to do.”

“Okay, but listen to this: Last night Grilpy told me that we have to leave before the storm.” Annabel looked concerned.

“Grilpy! Oh, what happened to him?” Leo asked, slapping himself across the head. “I didn’t even say goodbye to him. After we all got off the boat, he disappeared.” Leo sat down on the bed, frowning. “I feel so bad. I kinda forgot about Grilpy.” He looked up at Annabel. “So you spoke to him?”

“Before I went to sleep last night, he came and stood on my bedpost and said that a huge sou’easter is going to hit us in three days from tomorrow. And he also said that we have to free Curly Beard before then and conquer the binagatorials.

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“That’s impossible!” Julie said. “Remember, we still have to go to the Queen of the Waters. We won’t have time for all that.” Julie sat down next to Leo and shook her head.

“There is a way.” It was Grilpy’s voice. He was sitting on a stack of books on Annabel’s desk. He was wearing a sailor’s outfit – white, bell-bottomed trousers, duck jacket with blue collar and vest.

“Oh, Grilpy, there you are,” Leo cried, glad to see the little dwarf again.

“I’ve been here all the time. Just because you don’t see me doesn’t mean I’m not around,” and he smiled.

“Hello Grilpy,” Julie said. “So what do you suggest?”

“We have no choice. We have to leave tonight. If we don’t, we might lose Curly Beard forever.” As he said that his smile faded and his face turned solemn. “Get down here with the boat as soon as you can. Annabel and I will wait for you here.”

The three children exchanged anxious glances. “Well, I guess we’ll see you tonight then,” Julie said. “Come on, Leo, let’s go. Mom’s waiting and she wants us to clean the bedroom windows and do some ironing.”

“By the way, I applaud your mother for making you do some work around the house,” Grilpy said, tugging his thick beard and smiling again. “Good, honest work puts everybody in a good mood. You’ll see. And it will help you get an early start tonight.”

Grilpy’s words proved true. Mrs. Temple was satisfied with the children’s work and was glad to see them go to bed early. “You deserve a good night’s rest. You have really helped me out today and I’m thankful for that.” She tucked them into bed, sang a song, kissed them goodnight and switched off the lights.

Once they heard her settle down with a sigh and the newspaper next to Dad on the sofa, they got up and quickly

slipped back into their clothes. Leo stuffed four power bars into his jacket pocket, while Julie uncorked the bottle. The little boat, eager for another journey, darted out. They held hands, hopped on board, and without a sound sailed out through the crack of their open window down to Annabel's room. She and Grilpy were already waiting. This time Annabel boarded with her crutches.

"So, what now? How do we get to the Queen of the Waters?" Julie asked as they hovered in midair.

"The Queen of the Waters lives wherever there's water, so she's everywhere, though she's nowhere," said Grilpy, perched cross-legged on the roof of the little cabin. He was smiling again, enjoying the confused look on all three children's faces. "Yes, we'll have to track her down where time is as flexible as water, where it stops, starts and eddies." Now they looked even more confused. "If we just went out to look for her, it could take us a thousand years or more. There's so much water in the world and she's in touch with every drop no matter how small. She's here, there and everywhere, yet she's not."

"You're talking funny," Annabel said, "but I kind of like it," and she laughed. Leo just looked befuddled and Julie twitched her lips impatiently.

"So, where are we going, because we don't have a thousand years?" Julie asked again, slightly on edge.

"Of course we don't have a thousand years. In fact, we have only tonight to do what will take a week."

"How's that possible?" Julie flicked her long, auburn hair over her left shoulder. She was in no mood to listen to riddles.

"That's why we have to go to the hidden hole in the middle of the seventh island off Narwhal's Horn."

"I like the ring of that," Leo said.

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“And wondrous it is, a place where no human being has ever set foot.”

“You mean never ever, ever?” Leo asked, marveling at the thought that there were still places in the world that had not been touched by human hand or foot.

“No, never. You’ll be the first. Things are changing, and I have been given permission to take you there. We live in a very special age.” With that he clapped his hands and said, “Come on, dear Boat, take us out to sea,” and off they sailed, slipping through Annabel’s bedroom window and drifting higher and higher until they were beyond the highest skyscraper.

“How beautiful the city lights look from up here,” Annabel said, who was easily pleased.

“Enjoy it while you can. Soon we’ll be sailing through hours of darkness,” Grilpy said. The boat kept on ascending and they’d never been as high before, not even when they flew over the Bricanus Mountains. It was getting cold and they closed the ethmaroll to keep warm.

By now they were already sailing over the ocean, and the city lights were disappearing in the distance. “You should all take a nap until we reach the seventh island. You’ll need all the strength you can get. I’ll wake you up when we get there.” The children stretched out on the deck, made themselves comfortable and went to sleep.

44 ❁ *Seventh Island*

“Wake up, wake up! We’re almost there,” Grilpy whispered loudly, shaking them firmly but gently. They had fallen into a deep slumber, and it took them a few moments to remember where they were and to gather their wits. When they looked down they were surprised to see hundreds of islands. It was a splendid sight. An almost full moon bathed the wide ocean in its silvery light. The stars glittered above them like thousands of tiny islands in the sky. The boat descended slowly, and they could see that some of the islands were lit up, while others blended in with the dark ocean, except for the waves that broke around the islands like white collars.

“Are you sure this is the right place?” Julie asked. “There are so many of them.”

“Just look carefully and you’ll see where we’re meant to go.” They looked in silence.

After a while Leo said, “I see what Grilpy means. He’s right...”

“Where? What?” Julie and Annabel crowded around Leo.

“Over there,” and he pointed to the left. “See, it’s like a tail attached to the main bunch of islands, and if you count them, they add up to seven.

“You’re right, they do,” said Annabel, impressed with Leo. “That was clever of you.”

“Yes, indeed,” Grilpy confirmed. “The archipelago, or cluster of islands, is shaped like a giant, arched narwhal and the seven islands that extend out from the body in a straight line represent the twisted ivory horn of the narwhal.” He patted Leo on the shoulders. The children looked in silence. “The

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people living on the other islands never settled on the ‘sacred seven’ as they were called.”

“Grilpy, how do you know all this stuff?” Annabel asked, amazed at Grilpy’s vast knowledge.

“I am a dwarf and dwarfs know things. And since we’ve been part of the earth since the earliest formations of rocks, we know a great deal. Dwarfs inhabit every rock, stone and pebble. We live in the entire crust of the earth. What one dwarf knows, we all know, or can know. We share knowledge with one another like you humans share the air you breathe and the light of the sun. We don’t have to acquire the wisdom of the earth. We have it like birds have wings.”

Annabel was about to ask another question when Julie shouted, “Hey, wait, there are only six islands, not seven.”

“Whatcha mean?” Leo asked.

“Count for yourself.”

They counted again and indeed, there were only six. “I could have sworn I counted seven,” Leo mumbled, a little put out.

“You’re both right,” Grilpy said. “Remember when I told you that no human being has ever set foot on the seventh island. Why? For the simple reason that sometimes it is there and sometimes it is not, and it’s hard to know when it will appear or disappear. But let’s get a closer look.”

As soon as they sailed farther down, they understood what Grilpy was referring to. Below the surface of the clear water they could see the island, looking like a coral reef. “It’s really a floating island, but it floats only up and down, never away. We’ll wait until it rises and then we’ll enter it.”

“Enter it?” Julie asked.

“Yes, you’ll see what I mean.” The children watched and waited. For a long time nothing happened, and they looked up at Grilpy questioningly—maybe he wasn’t always right. “There she comes,” Grilpy said, seeing the waters above the island begin to churn.

The children watched in amazement. Slowly the island began to emerge, large waterfalls pounding into the ocean as the water rolled off the island’s back. The spray blinked and glistened in the moonlight. That was only the beginning of the watery spectacle. From a large spouting hole in the center of the island, a fountain of water erupted high up into the sky. Moments later, another funnel of water shot up even higher. The children gasped, and Leo thought it looked a bit like Puff Mountain.

“There’ll be one more surge, the biggest of them all, and then we’ll have to dive down as quickly as we can into that hole.” The children had no time to voice their fear and trepidation because the island spewed its biggest colonnade of water into the dark blue of the night. Like a geyser it kept on coming, pushing higher and higher, accompanied by a loud roar that penetrated right through the ethmaroll. Though they were off to the side, some of the spray hit them and the boat swayed dangerously. They were thankful not to have been caught by the full force of the powerful jet of water.

The moment the water subsided, which it did with astounding abruptness, Grilpy shouted, “Hold on as tightly as you can. We’re going down!” And with that the boat tipped forward and they plunged at full speed toward the dark hole in the middle of the island.

45 ❁ *Entering the Island*

They expected to plunge into a pool, but they entered the island's gaping mouth, which was lit up by phosphorescent water gushing and dripping from the craggy walls all around them. Every drop was aflame with greenish light. They landed on a lawn of gently swaying seaweed. There was seaweed all around, even hanging from the ceiling in long cords like lianas in a jungle.

"How magical," Annabel remarked, eyes and mouth wide with wonder, as she peered all around.

"Yes it is, but we have no time to lose, so let's find a safe place to moor the boat," Grilpy said.

"Why do we have to moor the boat when we can just take it with us?" Julie asked.

"We must leave the boat in a safe place where any one of us can get to it in case of need—there's a chance we might get separated from one another, and we don't want to take any risks." Julie did not like that idea at all. Didn't Curly Beard want them to have the boat close by at all times? She felt herself to be the guardian of the boat and did not want to be separated from it, not for a moment. Nor did she want to be separated from the others in the group. It seemed much more of a risk to leave it behind than to take it along. But she kept quiet.

Out of the corner of her eye, Annabel saw some flickering lights below her. When she looked more closely, she saw a small tract of seaweed with three will-o'-the-wisps beckoning to her, laughing. They looked friendly and their glittering arms waved in the air. "How about down there?" Annabel suggested, pointing to the little pasture, tucked into a little cove. As soon

as she spoke, the fiery wisps disappeared, but not before Grilpy caught sight of them.

“No, we cannot go there,” he said firmly. At once he looked in the opposite direction to a ridge above them that slanted back into a smaller cavern. Annabel wanted to ask why, but she refrained when she saw the fierce expression in Grilpy’s eyes. Glancing at Leo and Julie, she knew that they’d not seen the wisps. As they sailed up, Annabel turned around and spied the three will-o’-the-wisps dancing around and laughing, softly mocking her.

“This ledge will do just fine.” There was even a little pool of water in which the boat could float. “We’ll have to secure the boat so that it does not shift when the island begins to move,” Grilpy said, releasing the tiny anchor for the first time. “Leo, fetch that coil of rope under the bench, and let’s debark.”

Though the smell of salt water and seaweed was strong, the air was fresh. There was a cool breeze coming in through the hole above them. Once Grilpy and Leo had firmly secured the boat with the rope, they set off. Annabel insisted on taking her crutches, against Grilpy’s advice. She did not want to burden Grilpy. As they carefully climbed down from the ledge, they noticed that the walls were covered with beautiful starfish and corals. In the little, rocky pools all around there were hundreds of colorful fish of different shapes and sizes.

But it was the ocean phosphorescence that caught their eyes the most. Leo took a handful of water, threw it into the air and laughed in delight when he saw how the droplets immediately lit up like silent fireworks. Julie and Annabel couldn’t resist doing the same.

“Come on, there’s no time to waste. I know it’s fun, but we have to get away from here before the island sinks.” Grilpy

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looked worried. “If it does, we’re in trouble.” Even with the dwarf’s urging, the three children, laughing in delight, couldn’t help but throw one more handful of water into the air. As they did, the three will-o’-the-wisps reappeared, jumping, hopping and skipping between the shiny droplets.

“Oh, look. Let’s go and play with them,” Leo said, seeing them for the first time and pointing at the three laughing, flaming figures.

“Throw us some more funny water and come dance with us,” they sang in chorus, waving their fiery little bodies mischievously. All three children bent down, cupped their hands and were about to splash more water when Grilpy leaped in front of them, grew in size and blocked off their view of the three hissing, flaming sprites. He looked angry.

“Think of Curly Beard,” he bellowed. “Every second we lose diminishes his chances for survival.” He stared at them for a moment longer before his face softened and he was again reduced in size. “Ignore them. They are there to mislead us, which often happens when something important has to be accomplished. Always remember that.”

They walked on feeling remorseful and ashamed. How could they have forgotten Curly Beard’s plight? To make matters worse they noticed that the meadow of seaweed down below was already covered with a thin layer of water. “There’s a passageway on the other side of all this seaweed. Look, you can already see it. That’s where we have to go. It leads into the lower part of the island where we will be safe from the rising water—and those roguish hinkypunks,” referring to the will-o’-the-wisps. “But we’ve got to hurry, because this grotto will be flooded soon.”

They clambered on, but it was slow going, especially because Annabel had difficulty climbing down to the bottom of the grotto with her crutches. To make matters worse, the three will-o'-the-wisps kept on appearing and disappearing, distracting her and the others. But they remembered Grilpy's stern warning and ignored their mocking mirth as best they could. There was no path, just crags and rocks jutting out. "We're never going to make it at this pace," Grilpy yelled back over his shoulder, seeing the others falling behind him again.

"I can't go any faster," Annabel yelled back, getting tears in her eyes, knowing full well that she was the one holding everybody back.

"Grab hold of one of the strands of seaweed hanging from the ceiling and slide down. That will save us time." Grilpy ran back to where Annabel was struggling, grabbed her around the waist and with the other arm clutched hold of a cord of seaweed and slithered down. Taken by surprise, Annabel closed her eyes and screamed. At the bottom he put her down on a rocky protrusion and shouted up to the others, "See, it's easy. Come on down." After some trepidation they took hold of the long, slick cables of seaweed and followed suit. Leo whooped as he shimmied down at full speed. He wanted to climb right back up to do it again, which immediately earned him a *don't-you-dare* stare from Julie.

They continued to walk around the edges of the large patch of seaweed. The water rose and steadily covered their feet and ankles. At one point Annabel's crutches slipped off a rock and she landed with both her feet in the seaweed. Using her crutches she tried to get out, but they only sank right down. The more she struggled, the deeper she sank into the soft mesh of green.

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She saw the three ghostly imps again, beckoning, singing, promising her safety. “Quick! Pull her out,” Grilpy shouted to Leo, who was nearest to her. He had seen what happened and feared the worst. Leo grabbed her by the arm and pulled. “Don’t struggle or move your legs,” Grilpy yelled to Annabel, “or the seaweed will curl around them and slowly pull you down. And don’t listen to the hinkypunks.”

Faster and wilder they danced, singing their irresistible song. Annabel closed her eyes and went limp, giving herself over to Leo who pulled as hard as he could. By now Grilpy was at their side and grabbed the other arm. With their combined effort she slid out, but her crutches were lost forever in the swamp of seaweed. Annabel was saved and the will-o’-the-wisps vanished.

“Phew! We were lucky,” Julie said.

“Thanks,” Annabel said, looking up gratefully at Leo and Grilpy, but feeling embarrassed. She knew that she should not have insisted on bringing the crutches. She just did not want to be a burden to Grilpy. How she wished she could just walk, jump and run around like the others.

“Hurry! We’ve lost precious time,” Grilpy said, lifting Annabel onto his shoulders and jumping from rock to rock, as agile as a mountain goat. He stopped in front of a dense curtain of seaweed and waited for Julie and Leo to catch up. “Through here.”

At that moment they felt the entire island grumble and shudder. “It’s getting ready to sink again. We don’t have much time.”

Annabel repeatedly touched the vial of golden liquid in her pocket, to make sure she still had King Brathnar’s gift for the

Queen of the Waters and because it gave her courage. She was relieved that it had not fallen out during her struggle in the pit of seaweed.

The water was now spurting and gushing from hundreds of little holes, gaps and fissures all around the grotto. And though it looked beautiful it terrified the children. “The water is rising fast, come on.” Grilpy pushed the heavy strands of seaweed aside and they ran up a short corridor. Julie wondered why they were going up when they needed to go to the lower part of the island. Though it didn’t make sense, she was glad because they were escaping the rapidly rising water.

At the top of the tunnel they came to a ledge that overlooked a big, gaping, dark hole, the edges of which were rounded and smooth as glass. Far down below they saw what looked like a giant jellyfish stuck fast in the hole. Its glossy blue back moved like slow-bubbling porridge and the stench from the pit was almost unbearable. To make it worse they could hear the growing roar of the water behind them beginning to catch up. “Now’s the time to put on your hats from King Brathnar—then jump!”

“You can’t mean down into that wobbly heap of jelly?” Julie yelled in disbelief.

“Yes! Do it now! Otherwise you’ll die,” Grilpy commanded. The water was already lashing against their ankles, spilling over the glassy precipice. The island shuddered and shook again, even more powerfully than before. They needed no further reminder to take out their hats. “Jump now!”

No sooner had Annabel put the cap over her head, when Grilpy leaped into the hole with her on his shoulders. They could see her astonished face as she fell from view. Julie and

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Leo watched in shocked disbelief as they hit the huge jellyfish that was squashed into the hole like a cork in a bottle. Grilpy and Annabel were catapulted back into the air, as if they'd hit a trampoline. But the second time they fell onto the mass of jelly, they were consumed by it—and disappeared.

Again the island quaked and quivered. Another wave of water flooded through the tunnel and bashed into them. The island began to sink. Seconds later they'd be engulfed by water. Leo was still frantically going through his stuffed pockets searching for his hat. "Got it," he shouted and pulled it over his head. At once all fear left him.

Julie clasped Leo's hand and without a second thought they jumped. As with Grilpy and Annabel, they were both hurled back up, but as they fell down the second time, they saw the center of the jellyfish open up like a blubbery mouth. They slid down a slimy chute and were swallowed up by the monstrous hunk of jelly.

46  *The Queen's Tears*

This is what it must feel like to be swallowed alive, they both thought, as they got pushed down the soft sides of the jellyfish in rhythmic spasms. Everything around them was dark and blurry, and they felt as if they were receiving a deep-tissue massage. Just as they began to wonder how long they'd have to endure the rigorous rubdown, they dropped out of the wobbly pudding and fell into the depths. The jellyfish's long tentacles hung down like scores of sparkling ribbons. They tried to hold onto them, but failed.

Seconds later they fell into a small, deep pool of water. As soon as they'd struggled to the surface, they swam to the side and scrambled out. Once they'd taken off their hats and tucked them safely back into their pockets, they saw Grilpy and Annabel sitting on a nearby rock, smiling and waving down at them. Leo laughed and said, "Wow—that was fun!"

"No, it wasn't," Julie scowled. "I'm soaked to the bone." Before she could speak another word, they heard a loud thud and were thrown to the ground with a tremendous force. "What was that?" Julie asked, getting back up and looking around.

"The island has stopped sinking. Well, we made it—just in time. And we're all still in one piece. And if it weren't for the jellyfish, we'd be drowning—actually, two jellies, squashed tightly together. You see, we squeezed through them. And by the way, they belong to a very rare species of medusa that are not free-swimming, except for when there's a blue moon."

"What happens then?" Leo asked, who loved to hear unusual facts about the world.

"On those rare occasions they leave the hole and swim out into the ocean where they give birth to their young. They look

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like large, translucent moons as big as whales, gliding around in the water. But nobody sees them because they go down into the deepest depths of the ocean – miles down. After giving birth they return and settle back in their hole.”

“What happens to the island while they are gone?” Leo continued to ask.

“During that time the island remains under water. But they are gone for only a few days. The young that survive—and only a few survive—find their own holes to squeeze into, and always in twos.”

“Cool. I think I want to become a marine biologist when I grow up.”

“That sounds good, but now we’ve got to get going,” Grilpy said and stood up.

“Do we have very far to go?” Annabel asked wearily. She was still recovering from almost losing her life in the seaweed pool, not to mention jumping into the abyss of the giant jellyfish.

“Not too far,” Grilpy assured her, patting her on the back. “But it all depends on how one determines distance in relation to time, or that which lies between the here and the there, the aim and the achievement.”

“Now you’re talking weird again,” Annabel said, though she wasn’t smiling this time.

“Ah, but as soon as you meet Marquellamoosh, the Queen of the Waters, you will realize that it has all been worth it. You will be dazzled by her splendor, and you will bathe in her glory. So, take heart, there is something to look forward to.” Grilpy paused and looked into the distance. “But we aren’t there yet, and no goal is ever for certain until it has been attained, so come on.” He lifted Annabel back onto his shoulders and set off. Julie and Leo followed.

Once they'd walked around the jellyfishes' myriad strands that had obscured their sight, they came to a large, flat beach spread out in front of them. The sand was black and coarse. However, it was not the quality of sand that caught their attention. It was something entirely unexpected: innumerable, shiny, multi-sized drops falling very slowly from the ceiling high above them. As they fell, the large, pear-shaped drops changed form, rounding out into perfect orbs or lengthening to look like wobbly worms. Others flattened out into platelets that gently fluttered down like snowflakes or feathers as soft as down. There was ample space between each drop, which gave the children time to focus on the splendor of each one as it glided along.

Once each unique sphere touched the sand, it burst like a soap bubble, sparkling in a puff of spray. Some were bright, fanning out like the spray of a popped bottle of champagne, while others curled inward into rich purples and blues, disappearing in their own interior. Others, yet again, looked like flowers or petals. As far as they could see, the beach was an explosion of little quiet fireworks, but close to the ground instead of above.

"Now take off your shoes, tie them together and hang them over your shoulder. It will make it easier for you to walk through the sand." Grilpy paused and looked straight at the children. "You see, we will have to make our way across and through this slow downpour of the Queen's tears." Grilpy's voice was hushed, hardly daring to interrupt the spell of this singular spectacle.

"The Queen's tears?" all three asked simultaneously.

"Yes, Queen Marquellamoosh is easily moved to tears of sorrow or laughter."

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“Is she happy or sad now?” Annabel asked. “The tears are so very beautiful.”

“I do not know. What you see now are the tears that she has shed in the past. She cries for everything that dies, and she laughs for all things born. Her tears restore balance to life. Each tear, whether sad or happy, is nourishment to the earth.” Grilpy fell silent and the children felt as if they’d learned a great secret, a secret they could not understand. “Now, make sure you don’t touch any of the drops as you cross this beach. We have to be especially careful not to disturb this endless flow of tears. Some of them go back a thousand years. Some even belong to the future.” He fell silent while the children’s eyes widened at the wonder before them.

At length Annabel asked, almost in a whisper, “What happens if we do touch one of them?”

“It will be a tear cried in vain. It will disturb the earth’s delicate stability. Each tear is like a seed, and if it is touched before its time, nothing will ever grow from it—the power of its seed will be lost for ever. Not only that, the power of the seed will enter you, and it will make you sick until you have redeemed it. In other words, you will have to help restore the earth’s balance, which otherwise would have happened through the force of the tear.” Annabel did not quite comprehend what Grilpy was saying, but she sensed its importance.

“You see, every little thing, even a tear, has a consequence. Most people don’t realize this. Because there is always something significant behind whatever you see, hear or sense in the world.”

“In what way would we get sick?” Julie asked

“Each person gets sick differently. I cannot say in what way. It even holds true for us dwarfs, or any other being of the

neighboring realms—elves, fays and fairies, though we don't call it sickness—we just dwindle and lose our forces.

“Do we really have to pass through here? Is there no other way to get to the Queen?” Julie asked, not wishing to risk catching an unknown disease.

“Not for us. If we had more time we could maybe find an easier way, but that will take much, much longer—too long. And there are always dangers, no matter what route one takes. How else would we learn?” Grilpy smiled again. “Now, don't you fret. It is not as difficult as it looks. Just be alert and careful. It's a little tricky, but only at the beginning and at the end.”

At that moment the island began to shake again. “Oops, the island is rising already,” Grilpy observed. “We'll have to wait until it settles down again. We wouldn't want to risk bumping into a tear while the island is so turbulent.”

They sat down in the quivering sand and waited, feeling the earth tremor all around them. The tears continued to fall in a calm and soft manner, even as the island rose and shuddered. Then they heard the terrific roar of the island spouting the water into the air. It sounded like the spewing of a thousand whales. They winced and immediately covered their ears. The sound was strangely majestic, though it was overpowering and shuddered right through their tiny bodies. As the last bit of water was discharged over the ocean, the sound diminished like a symphonic diminuendo.

Once complete silence was restored, Grilpy got up, shouldered Annabel and stepped cautiously into the soft, slow rainfall of the Queen's royal tears. Without a word Julie and Leo followed.

47  *Walking through Tears*

The Queen's tears fell steadily but slowly all around them. They enjoyed the feel of sand between their toes and were thankful for the warmth that had almost dried out their clothes. When they looked up they saw a mass of tears glistening in the phosphorescent light, and they had to remain vigilant at every moment in order to avoid them.

"Don't look up," Grilpy immediately warned them. "You might lose your balance and bump into one of them. Keep looking straight ahead." Easier said than done. There was no end in sight, and the thousands of teardrops had a hypnotic effect. "Focus only on the few tears immediately in front of you," Grilpy cautioned.

They walked on in silence, carefully avoiding the tears. As advised, Julie fixed her eyes on the tears right in front of her, reminding herself that they'd already survived the wall of vapor — so why not this beach of tears? As for Leo, he was rather enjoying dodging the tears, treating it like a game.

Annabel, who felt safe on Grilpy's back and didn't have to worry too much about hitting any tears, took simple pleasure in following individual ones as they quietly descended until they burst. Looking closely, she noticed that something was happening within each drop. At first she thought that the colorful surface of each drop merely reflected the surroundings, but then she saw people and events taking place within each orb. But before she could focus on what was happening in each bubble, it would touch the ground and collapse. The farther they walked, the slower the tears dropped and she could see more clearly. "Look, there's something going on in each tear," Annabel said, unable to contain her excitement any longer.

“Really?” Leo shouted, as if he’d missed out on something. Up till now he’d imagined himself as a war hero making his narrow escape in a hail of bullets, and hadn’t looked too closely at the teardrops. “Wow, you’re right,” he said laughing. “Funny, I didn’t notice anything before.”

“You’re right,” Julie said. “It’s like each tear is showing its own film.”

“Each tear holds the memory of its origin,” Grilpy explained. “What you are seeing is what caused the Queen to cry. The scenes played out in each tear are the living memories of her great sadness or happiness.”

There were many happy scenes of people enjoying water in all its forms—washing, bathing, swimming, surfing, sailing, boating, diving and splashing. But there were also gruesome scenes of cruelty that many sea creatures have endured at the hands of humanity throughout the ages. They saw harpooned whales, dolphins caught in nets, seals and walrus clubbed to death for their pelts and tough hides, thousands of dead fish in polluted waters, birds in oil spills... Some tears showed natural disasters—floods, mudslides, violent storms that felled trees and downed power lines, devastating hurricanes, cyclones and typhoons and the ravages of tsunamis.

But then again there were natural wonders: rainbows, halos, waterfalls, sinkholes, hot springs, coral reefs, geysers and the most glorious sunsets. There was no end to the variations. There were scenes from the distant past, when fishermen, ferrymen and travelers crossed rivers, lakes and seas with their dugouts, rafts, and kayaks; when pirates, Vikings, explorers, conquistadors and merchants navigated the oceans in their frigates, galleons, warships, brigs, clippers and schooners. Some

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of the tears were large like beach balls, in which they could see clearly all that had happened, whereas others were small like marbles or peas, and it was almost impossible to make out what had gone on to cause these tears. The very little ones usually came in clusters.

“Don’t get lost in the looking,” Grilpy warned. “Remember, we have to make it through to the other side.” Some of the tears got awfully close to the children whose attention was diverted by what was happening inside the spheres. Grilpy’s warning brought them back to their senses, and they tried not to stare too closely into each globe.

But the temptation to look only grew stronger. As they trudged on they noticed that the descending tears were slowing down, staring back at them like eyes—a multitude of eyes gazing at them, each one harboring an alluring secret. It was as if each eye said, *Look into me. Let me show you my secret.*

“No!” Shouted Grilpy. “Don’t look inside. Keep your bearings.”

“But you said we should focus on the tears right in front of us,” Julie argued, her eyes following a barrel-sized bubble until it burst.

“Be strong and only look at the reflection, not inside.” But they could not withstand the mesmerizing power of the floating “eyes.” The children felt drowsy, their feet became heavy, and after a while the countless drops in front of them blurred. When Grilpy felt Annabel slump down over his shoulders, he shouted, “Keep awake, everybody, and keep moving!” He shook Annabel. “Stay alert!”

Looking over his shoulder he shouted, “Whatever you do, don’t stop. If you stop, even for just a second you’ll drop and

fall asleep. That will mark the end of our trip, and then we'll never be able to save Curly Beard." Grilpy's voice seemed to travel over to Julie and Leo from a great distance.

Too late! In his attempt to avoid bumping into a tear, Leo tripped over his own foot and began to stagger and stumble, trying to regain his balance. Julie rushed forward to catch him. At that moment there was a loud noise, as if someone had shot a pistol.

"What was that?" Leo yelled, wobbling around, but still on his feet.

"Julie bumped into a tear, as she tried to catch you," Grilpy said, looking dismayed.

"Watch out," Annabel shouted. "Behind you!" But it was too late. Another pistol-like shot rang out and echoed across the endless beach.

"For the Queen's sake, don't bump into any more tears," Grilpy shouted, and it sounded as if he were on the verge of tears himself. "It gives her tremendous pain. More than you can imagine."

"Sorry," Leo said, feeling shocked and guilty.

"I didn't mean to, I just..." Before she could finish her sentence, Julie had to swerve to avoid a drop that almost burst on her left shoulder.

"Just keep moving." Grilpy quickly examined them all over as if he were looking for some injury the tears could have caused. "I'm just glad you both are all right." But he looked worried. "Hurry! We're barely half way there." At least the children were wide awake now. As they set off again, Julie couldn't help but wonder why Grilpy had scrutinized them so closely.

48 ❁ *Separated*

Each step became an ordeal. Their bare feet and toes sank deeper into the black, coarse sand, and they couldn't shake off the growing weariness. But they pressed on. Even Grilpy, who never showed any signs of weakness, was not walking as sturdily as before, and he constantly had to tug Annabel's legs to keep her awake. For the first time he began to stagger under her weight. Though small and spindly, she was getting heavier by the second. Back in the Bricannus Mountains, he'd often carried heavy sacks filled with stones, precious metals and crystals. He was used to carrying heavy loads, but nothing could compare to the growing burden of carrying Annabel.

They plodded on. Luckily it had become easier to avoid the tears because they were falling slower and slower. At one point they stopped falling entirely and came to a complete standstill. Every teardrop hovered motionlessly in midair, and the silence was complete. They couldn't even hear the sounds of their own breathing or their feet crunching through the sand. Grilpy looked around at the three of them and said something, but they only saw his lips moving—not a sound left his mouth. Leo tried to respond, but his words remained mute. Finally, Grilpy gestured for them to continue.

As they journeyed on, the teardrops began to move again, imperceptibly at first, like the movement of the stars in the firmament. As the pace gradually increased, they noticed, to their amazement, that the drops no longer fell, but rose. They'd changed direction. The orbs were growing out from under the sand, and those tears that had been suspended in midair reversed direction and soared up again. The children

were afraid they might step on a tear as it emerged from the ground. At least their weariness began to lift.

“Watch your step,” Grilpy said. His voice was clear and audible again. “The sand will glow a little before the tear appears, which will give you time to walk around the spot.” They had to shift their focus, heeding what came from underneath instead of what was falling from above. When they followed the rising tears, they could see them explode far above them on the ceiling.

Beautiful as it was, they did not get lost in the splendor of it all. All they wanted was to reach the other side and be free of the tears. Besides, both Julie and Leo felt an uncomfortable itch at the very places they’d bumped into tears. The itch was spreading with increasing speed, and the faster the tears ascended, the greater the itch.

“We’re almost there,” Grilpy yelled encouragingly. Not too far in front of them, through the inverse rain of tears, they now saw a pool of clear, blue water, surrounded by soft, green vegetation. There were no giant jellyfish squeezed into the rock above, but a welcoming, terraced waterfall that embraced the cool and peaceful-looking pool. Julie and Leo had to dance around the tears as they rose up around them with increasing speed. They recalled Grilpy’s words that the beginning and the end would be the trickiest. For once, Leo was thankful for all the times Julie had forced him to play hopscotch on the farm.

“What’s that on your back?” Annabel suddenly shouted, pointing at Julie.

“Oh no,” Leo cried. “What is that? And it’s growing fast. It looks like a bubble and it’s covering your whole back.”

“Ah, it has happened. I feared as much,” Grilpy sighed. “It’s because you bumped into one of the tears,” he explained.

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“Don’t stop. When we get out of here, we can do something about it.”

“I have it, too,” Leo shrieked. “It’s growing out of my elbow.” Grilpy and Annabel watched helplessly as Leo and Julie were beginning to be enclosed by the rapidly expanding bubble.

“Do something,” Annabel shouted down to Grilpy, thumping his pointy hat with her tiny hands.

“I can’t do anything now. First we have to reach the other side. Run, run, we’ve almost made it!”

But it was too late. The bubbles puffed up like balloons until they engulfed Julie and Leo completely. To their utter dismay, Grilpy and Annabel watched as Julie rose into the air, followed moments later by Leo.

“No!” Annabel shouted, with panic in her voice. “Come back, come back.” But the two bubbles rose, getting smaller and mingling with the countless others. Julie disappeared first. For a while Annabel could still see Leo, looking down at her like a lost, forlorn, puzzled puppy. “Leo, Leo...” she wailed, lifting both her arms in his direction. Then he was gone amongst the host of other tears.

Meanwhile, Grilpy had run as fast as he possibly could, dodging every tear with deft footwork until he’d escaped the strange, rising rain and had arrived at the garden pool. He put Annabel down just a few feet from the curtain of tears.

“We can’t just let them disappear like that,” Annabel cried.

“Don’t worry. I’ll think of something. We need to rest first,” Grilpy said.

Annabel was too upset to notice how exhausted Grilpy was. “No, we’ve got to do something now, right now!”

“We will, we will, I promise you,” Grilpy said, taking out his pipe and filling it.

“I can’t wait for that!” And before Grilpy could do anything Annabel hobbled and crawled rapidly toward the rain of tears and smacked the first drop she could with the flat of her hand. At once the silence was torn by a loud crack, louder than the last two pistol shots combined.

“What have you done,” Grilpy yelled, pulling her back immediately.

“Simple, I’m going to join them, and this is the only way I could think to do it.” Already a little blister had begun to form in the middle of her palm.

“Oh, Annabel, I told you I would think of something. This will only make it more difficult.” But there was no anger in Grilpy’s voice, just pity and despair. He filled and lit his pipe and blew smoke over the growing bubble. It eased the itch, but did not slow down its growth. And the bigger it got, the faster it grew.

“Here, take some of this.” Grilpy gave her a piece of the refreshing root. “It won’t stop the growth, but it will give you some strength.” Helplessly he watched the bubble grow and engulf Annabel like the bubbles of Julie and Leo.

Just before the bubble closed over Annabel, she said, “Sorry, Grilpy. I didn’t mean to shout at you. I didn’t mean to go against your advice. I’m so sorry.”

“That’s quite all right. Just keep up your strength.”

“I know I should have listened to you. You’ve been so good to me.” Salty, little tears rolled down her smooth, dark cheeks.

“Now, now... it’s only because you were so concerned for the others. You are the kindest human being I know.”

“So, what will you do now, Grilpy?” she asked softly.

But before he could answer the bubble closed off around her and rose into the air. Instantaneously Grilpy jumped

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forward and clutched the bubble as tightly as he could to his chest. Surprisingly, it did not burst. With all his might he tried to hold it down, but to no avail. It rose, lifting him up as well. Instead of letting go, he held on and slowly it floated higher and higher, merging with the thousands of other tears. He did not see the surprised look on Annabel's face for he'd closed his eyes. This was not like flying around in the security of the boat. He was exposed, and dwarfs don't like heights. They like solid ground beneath their feet.

49 *Inside the Bubble*

Julie wasn't afraid, but the pain of separation was acute. The looks on their faces as she floated upwards made her realize how deeply she cared for them, and she felt guilty about all the times she'd let her annoyance get the better of her. She vowed to have more patience in the future, should she ever see them again. And the way things were going it certainly did not seem very likely. Here she was, suspended inside a bubble with her back firmly attached to the sides. All she could do was reach out and touch the transparent shell. It was cold and as hard as glass, not like the ethmaroll that always felt warm and soft like transparent beeswax.

She tried to free herself, but no matter how much she wriggled she remained stuck. She gave up and looked around. Normally she would have found it spectacularly beautiful, but in her position she could not enjoy it one tiny bit. She pondered her situation. Here she was, trapped in a bubble and inside a floating island in the middle of the ocean, far from home. Just a few weeks ago she was running around Honey Creek Farm with her brother. How quickly things can change.

And rapidly the ceiling drew nearer. What would happen? Would her bubble burst? Would she plummet to her death? She'd find out soon enough, for she was only a few yards away from the fractured rock face. Just before the impact she closed her eyes.

The jolt was tremendous, and she did fall, but only a few inches. To her surprise she was intact and still within her bubble, which now clung to the ceiling like a birthday balloon. It had not exploded. But the force with which she'd banged

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into the rock had dislodged her. If nothing else, she could now move freely within her bubble, her back no longer stuck to the sides. The crash had left her none the worse for wear. At least she was alive. *And as long as you're alive there's hope*, she told herself. Julie began to look for Leo, who she supposed would not be too far behind her. She peered around and scrutinized all the approaching tears, hoping to spot Leo in one of them. But instead, what she saw made her gasp.

Scurrying around the crevices were loathly-looking creatures trying to capture the tears before they burst. It was not easy to gauge how many there were, nor to get a good look at them, because they melded perfectly with the dark rock. But as soon as a teardrop approached, two or three of them immediately bloated up and began to blow at the bubble, stopping it before it hit the rock. With each breath they croaked like toads, and the tear would spin around, lose its luster and turn sickly white, after which, one of them would grab it with its curved pincers and scuttle off.

Again and again she watched this routine. For the little drops it only took one of the creatures to get hold of a tear, but it took up to five creatures to carry off the very large ones. Sometimes they failed and the tears burst anyway, but mostly they got their prey. Every time they carted off a tear, which their breath had made to look like a poorly-poached egg, she saw that it was taken through a hole not too far from where she was stuck. The creatures moved like crabs and had sharp pincers, but underneath their hard shells, they looked like toads, and their hind legs were soft and webbed. When they bloated themselves up, they grew to almost three times their original size.

As she wondered what they were doing, she saw one of them scurry toward her. Up close it looked even uglier and she was horrified. She expected it to bloat up, but the creature simply clutched the bubble with its long pincers and carried it off toward the hole in the crevice. Overcome with fear she wanted to put on her hat, but it was a bumpy ride and she had to use her arms and hands to avoid getting her head smashed against the hard surface of the shell.

For a while everything around her went black. Not for long though, for soon she was brought into a large, shallow cave. It was crammed full of tears, stacked on top of one another like a huge mound of skulls. The creature clambered over them to the far side where he dumped her on a smaller pile of clear bubbles. With one deft stroke the creature lifted its left pincer, punctured a tiny hole, and proceeded to blow into the bubble. Its breath was worse than the detergent her mother used to get rid of stubborn stains. The foul, acrid smell made her nauseous and ate like acid into her eyes and lungs. After that the creature scurried off, leaving her alone.

The other bubbles near her all contained something inside of them – fish, shells, eels, birds, bats, worms, frogs, spiders and other insects. She suspected that they too had bumped into the tears by mistake. What troubled her was that none of them looked alive anymore. Would the same fate await her? She turned away, feeling her head ache.

She noticed the tears in this cave weren't all white. Only the new ones were white, but the others were different shades of sickly green and purple, and the ones lying in a heap to the right of her were almost black. About five creatures squatted around this pile, breaking them open with their sharp pincers and

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eating them like clams or nuts. No sooner had they devoured one when they scrambled off to make room for another hungry creature.

By now her head ached so much it felt as if it would burst. She tried to keep her eyes open, and she fought with all her might against falling asleep. But the poisonous breath of the monster got the better of her. She collapsed just before another bubble was dropped right next to her with a little boy inside.

50 ❁ *On the Beach*

When Julie woke up she found herself lying on a white, sandy beach in the shade of tall palm trees, the warm sun tickling her exposed toes. She was puzzled. A soft, cool breeze stroked across her skin and through her hair. A feeling of well-being filled her. *Could this be a dream?* she wondered. In the distance she heard the cry of seagulls. She closed her eyes again to sleep some more. It felt so comforting.

But no sooner had she shut her eyes when she remembered what had happened to her in the cave. She sat up with a start, trying to throw off the awful memories of being encased in a bubble, the ferocious scuttling of the strange crabs and the piles of sickly white, green and black poached tears. Just the thought of the rank odor made her nauseous all over again. She gasped for air and opened her eyes. What a relief to find herself still on the beach with not a single ugly crab around.

She spotted Annabel, Leo and Grilpy standing down by the water's edge, their feet in the water, looking over the quiet blue lagoon. She wondered how she had ended up on this tranquil beach. For quite a while she just sat there, taking in the calm beauty of the scene, her mind almost empty, but her heart filled with an overwhelming sense of peace and thankfulness. Eventually she got up and walked over to the others, who hurried toward her as soon as they noticed her.

“You’re awake—finally!” Leo hugged her.

“We were getting worried about you,” Annabel cried, hobbling over and putting her arms around both Leo and Julie.

Grilpy, who was puffing on his pipe, just smiled and blew thick clouds of smoke that descended over the three children

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like an aromatic blessing. “Good to see you so fresh and rested,” he said.

“What is this place? Where are we? How did we get here? How did I get out of the bubble? And what about you? What happened to you?” Julie asked, shouting out each question without a pause.

“Yes, Grilpy, can you tell us now—now that Julie is awake?” Leo pleaded. How they ended up safely on the beach was just as much of a mystery to Annabel and Leo as it was to Julie.

“First, let’s sit down in the shade and eat,” Grilpy suggested.

“You’re right, I’m starving,” Julie said. “What’s there to eat?”

“There’s so much fruit around,” Annabel said.

“And we’ve collected enough for a banquet,” Leo laughed, pointing to a pile of coconuts, bananas, melons, pawpaws, mangoes, and other fruit underneath the nearest palm tree. “And we really had to restrain ourselves, but we decided to wait until you woke up.”

“So what are we waiting for? Let’s prepare a feast. We’ve got a lot of peeling, cutting, slicing and squeezing to do.” Julie, suddenly wide awake, was taking charge again and enjoying it. “Leo, we’ll need your pocketknife, and Grilpy, your dagger would come in handy too.”

“Oh, this is fun,” Annabel chimed in. “And let’s make it look as beautiful as possible.” Even Leo, who usually moaned about having to lay the table and do any work in the kitchen, got excited. Annabel set about peeling and slicing the fruit, while Leo looked around for wide palm leaves to use as platters. Grilpy took his axe and cracked open coconuts, handing the fresh watery milk to the children for an appetizer. Julie spread

out and arranged the array of fruit and slices of coconut meat on the palm leaves as beautifully as she could.

Once they'd made themselves comfortable in the shade and settled down to eat, Grilpy, who never ate anything, explained what had happened. First he told how Annabel, in order to follow them, had struck a tear on purpose. The two of them were astonished that Annabel would sacrifice herself for them.

"But then Grilpy jumped onto the bubble himself, which was really brave," Annabel added. "And by doing that he saved our lives."

"But how? What happened? What did you do?" Julie asked impatiently. Immediately she checked herself. She remembered the vow she'd taken not to be so impatient anymore. "Sorry, Grilpy. Please go on with the story."

He smiled and nodded. "As soon as our bubble hit the ceiling, I hid in a crevice, away from the croomps."

"You mean those beastly creatures that cooked the tears with their awful breath?" Annabel asked, pulling a face at the memory of them. "Croomps, so that's what they're called, huh?"

"That's right." Grilpy continued, "Well, I didn't have to wait too long for one of them to get hold of Annabel's bubble with its pincers and cart it off. I followed the croomp through the tunnel and into the same shallow grotto where they'd stored you. They dropped her right on top of you. I was happy to find you again, though you both looked half dead."

"When I spied Grilpy following me, I knew things would turn out all right, though I must admit I had some doubts when the croomp filled my bubble with his stinky breath," Annabel said, holding her nose at the memory.

The Invisible Boat

“The truth of the matter is that you wouldn’t have lasted too long in the bubble after inhaling their poisonous breath. I had to get you out of there as quickly as possible. I had to get back to the boat. It was the only way. So I made my way through the maze of tunnels, hoping to find a way back to the grotto in which we’d left the boat. I had to be careful, because the whole upper area of the island is crowded with croomps.”

“Why does the Water Queen even allow them to exist?” Annabel asked.

“They used to belong to Queen Marquellamoosh’s host. But instead of serving her, a number of them broke away and wanted to serve only themselves. A powerful rival of the Queen drove them to it. You must remember that whenever there is anything good in the world, there are those who go against it, who fall behind, or who follow someone else for small favors. That is also true for human beings. Over time, those who no longer wanted to serve the Queen of the Waters were transformed into these ugly creatures we call croomps.”

Grilpy paused and puffed thoughtfully on his pipe. “But one day they too will be transformed. You see, they are deeply unhappy with their lives. They blame their misfortune on the Queen, and that’s why they hurt her by eating her tears, thereby disturbing the natural balance of the world. What they don’t realize is that they are merely feeding their own discontent.”

“And there’s nothing she can do?” Annabel asked again, feeling sorry for the Queen and even a little bit for the croomps.

“We are, at this very moment, helping just by being here. Your willingness to help us dwarfs, to help the Queen of the Waters is, as has been said before, a first step. Now that we are working together with humans, the world will change for the

better. You are now getting a small—a very small—glimpse of the other world that influences your world from behind, so to speak.

“In the sweet by and by you’ll see and learn more about it, and so will others.” There was a long silence and the children felt daunted at the responsibility, though they didn’t fully understand what Grilpy was saying—why their role was so important. They ate in silence.

“So, I presume you made it back to the boat, yes?” Julie asked, ever so careful not to sound impatient, but wanting to steer the story back to how they had been saved.

“Yes I did, and the boat was still lying where we’d left her, safely anchored and secured. I got in and pulled the ethmaroll down. I sure did not want any croomp to see me or even suspect my whereabouts. At once I returned through the maze of tunnels, fissures and holes, till I was back in the shallow cave.

“I was alarmed to see five croomps sitting around and feasting on the black tears, but even more so when I saw one of them crawl over to where you were lying in your bubbles. Sitting on his slimy hind legs, the croomp picked up one which had a flying fish in it, cracked it open with his pincers and quickly devoured it. Grunting and croaking in delight, another one loped over and picked up the bubble in which Leo was lying.”

“Oh no!” Annabel couldn’t help but exclaim.

“That’s exactly what I thought. There was no more waiting around. I had to do something. The croomp was already raising its pincer about to pierce the bubble when I steered the boat’s prow full force into its extended belly. It fell onto its back, hissing and belching, flailing with its pincers. The other

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croomps immediately sat up on their hind legs, pincers drawn and ready to fight. Luckily I was invisible. I knew that it was useless ramming into all of them. It would only attract a horde of other croomps. I had to get them out of the cave.

“So I sailed down one of the tunnels, pulled back the ethmaroll and imitated the sound of a seal with my trumpet. Then I quickly darted down another tunnel and did the same. The croomps not only love the meat of the seals, but they also hate them and have always been at war with them. Again and again I blew my trumpet, till I had utterly confused them.

“When I returned to the shallow cave, it was empty of croomps, as I’d hoped it would be. But I knew they’d be back as soon as they discovered my deception. Quickly I loaded you on board. Not a moment too soon, because the first croomps were already appearing from the cave’s nooks and crannies. I didn’t even have time to close the ethmaroll when I sailed out of there, a band of croomps in hot pursuit. Though I was fast, they were hot on my trail for quite a while till I found a gap in the rock that let me out into the open. From there I sailed to the Queen’s favorite lagoon on a neighboring island, which is where we are right now and where we’ll meet her at sundown.”

“She’ll be here soon?” Annabel asked, picking up a peeled lychee, her eyes aglow with wonder.

“Yes, she will.”

“How do you know?”

“I spoke with her, and she gave me her word. She is looking forward to speaking with all of you.”

“Really?”

“Of course, really. How else do you think you got released from your bubbles? You can thank the Queen for that. You

see, I tried to break open the bubbles, but I couldn't, even with my sharp little pick. Those pincers of the croomps must be quite something to be able to crack open those bubbles. One of the Queen's mermaids, bathing in the shallow waters, noticed my struggles and called out to me. When she heard my dilemma, she called the Queen. The Queen cried a few tears over you and they melted the bubbles almost immediately. She said she'd return this evening, together with her friends and then disappeared into the waves."

When he'd finished the story, the children were silent and pondered his words. At length Leo said, "How about we go for a swim? The water looks so inviting. Anybody want to come?"

"Yes, let's," Julie shouted and jumped up. "Come on, Annabel, you're coming too."

"Of course."

51 ❁ *The Queen of the Waters*

For the rest of the day the children swam in the ocean, built sandcastles and searched for shells. In between they snacked on the abundance of fruit and talked. Not once did they think of home. For a short while they simply enjoyed the warmth and beauty of their surroundings. In the late afternoon faint clouds began to gather over the horizon. The children watched the swaths of rain falling like gentle brush strokes across the sky.

As the billows slowly approached, they merged into one huge cloudscape, lit up by the setting sun, creating intense and vibrant colors. The children on the beach looked on in admiration. The spectacle came to a glorious highpoint just above the lagoon. The huge cloud parted and they were showered with the softest sprinkle of rain they'd ever felt—and the most refreshing. The sun, shining from behind, lit up the tiniest little drops, causing the sky to glisten with sandillions of diamonds. A rainbow slowly emerged, spanning from one end of the lagoon to the other, with a second rainbow above it.

All the necessary preparations being made, the quiet waters in front of them began to stir. The gentle ripples grew into large waves that broke over one another. For a moment it seemed as if a storm was brewing. But then the waters parted and a vast creature, part woman, part fish, emerged, rising higher and higher, merging with the warm rain.

“Behold, the Great Queen of the Waters—Marquellamoosh,” Grilpy whispered majestically, while Annabel reached out to hold Julie and Leo’s hands. The Queen was almost translucent, and her many, flowing fins billowed gently in the breeze. She looked as if she were made out of colorful veils in constant

motion. Though only half her body was above the surface of the water, she reached up almost to the top of the rainbow.

“Come closer, children,” the Queen beckoned with a voice that gurgled like the soft jingle of chimes. The children got up and approached her. Annabel deftly removed the vial that King Brathnar had given her, hoping to find an appropriate moment when she could give the precious gift to the Queen. Though limping and supported by the others, she walked more fluidly, as if the sight of Queen Marquellamoosh brought strength to her shriveled legs. “Do not be afraid of the water. Come as near as you can.” They waded into the water until it was up to their knees. She lifted her hand of slender, veiled fins and beckoned them to stop. “Now you may sit down. They sat down in the tepid, invigorating water, enjoying the slight swash and backwash massaging their waists and chests.

“The world is changing.” She looked down at them from her great height. A slight flicker of a smile flitted across her large, full lips. “Yes, it is changing... changing in two ways. All that is beautiful in nature is slowly losing its luster, sullied by the waste of the world, poisoned by factories and machines that leave behind debris of every kind. You call it pollution. We who uphold nature experience and see it as an illness. It will be the death of us if it continues unabated. Whole legions of us have fled into the remotest corners of the earth, but even there we are no longer safe from the waves of poisons. Of course it must happen, and it will continue to happen.”

At that moment she looked overwhelmingly sad and tears formed in her large, round eyes—one on top of the other, like separate pools of different colors. Once her eyes were filled, they began to roll and drop from her rounded, shiny cheeks.

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At once winged fish flew out of the water, caught the tears and disappeared into the depths with them.

“And then there is the second change. The dwarfs have already told you about this tremendous change that will spread across the entire earth, which gives us hope that the world will not only retain and maintain its beauty, but surpass it. That is why this meeting between you young humans and us is so important.

“You have already had an audience with the Dwarf King. He is in need of you as we are in need of you. One day you might also meet the High One from the sky and fire’s Fast One—the lofty sovereigns who are not yet convinced that any relationship with humans will work. But they are looking on with interest. They have sent along their heralds and messengers.”

As she spoke a group of elves flew out from the cloud and circled over their heads. Leo leaned back so far to see them that he lost balance and fell with a splash into the water, so that only his feet stuck out, to the delight of the elves, who laughed like the happy trills of larks, before dashing back and disappearing into the large, undulating cloud that surrounded the Queen like a great aura. “Oh, and they have taken an immediate liking to you, judging by their joyful song.” The great Queen paused, smiling. “That you have come all the way to these blessed islands is proof enough that you can and want to help us.”

“We do, we do,” Leo said, having regained his poise, punching the water with his fist for emphasis.

“Of course we will,” Annabel confirmed, laughing as if it was self evident.

“Yes, please tell us what we have to do,” Julie almost shouted.

After the children’s vigorous outbursts, they heard chuckles coming from behind them. Grilpy had not followed them into

the water, but was sitting on a weathered log that had washed ashore. “I told you they were eager and ready,” Grilpy said, laughing again and blowing little rainbow rings from his pipe.

“Then I will tell you what to do.” The Queen’s royal voice rippled across the lagoon. As she continued to speak, the children noticed that the colorful cloud around the Queen was actually made up of thousands upon thousands of water sprites. They were floating, flying and flitting around the Queen like flocks of tiny birds—multitudes of them—no bigger than honeybees and hummingbirds.

The children wondered why they had not seen them before. These hosts of undines clapped their little wing-fins together in a melodic symphony of jubilation. Moments later they were hidden from view again, and the children wondered whether they’d seen correctly. Once again they appeared as a sparkling mist hovering around the Queen.

“Here’s what you will have to do,” she began.

52  *Instructions*

“Wait for the first storm that will come after the full moon. The binagatorials fear storms. They prefer stale and putrid water, which makes them fat and gives them strength. The storm’s water will flood the reservoirs underneath the city where the binagatorials live and breed. Seek out all seven reservoirs and, with your boat, create whirlpools in each one. The monsters will try to attack you, but you will have to be faster. If you do exactly as I say, then you will conquer the binagatorials. If not, well...”

“How do we know when exactly the storm will come?” Julie wanted to know. “And whether it will be strong enough?” she added.

“Don’t worry, it will be strong enough, because we will create the storm, and a terrible tempest it will be.”

“You can create storms?” Leo asked, his eyes wide open.

“We create all storms,” the Queen said, smiling. “And the storm to chase out the binagatorials will be one of the biggest, though we will take heed not to create too much damage for you humans. You will hear about it in all the news media. The weather stations will give ample warning.”

“Sounds terrific,” Leo said, looking around at Julie and Annabel, excited at the prospect of waging war against the binagatorials. Having the Queen’s help gave him confidence and courage.

As if to temper his confidence Queen Marquellamoosh said, “But first you must free Curly Beard. His life is almost spent and without his direction you will never be able to overcome the binagatorials. Only Curly Beard can lead you through the

underground labyrinth. You will need him as much as he needs you—we all depend on you.

“And how can we find and free Curly Beard?” asked Julie

“Listen for the music. The music will lead you to him. That’s all you need to know.” Queen Marquellamoosh began to sink slowly back into the water. “There is one more thing you will have to remember,”—her large and beautiful face now hovered close above them—“and this is of utmost importance: Once you have freed Curly Beard, you must tell him to enter the belly of the shrew. Can you remember that?”

“Enter the belly of the shrew,” all three children repeated in unison.

“Very good! Otherwise he will not manage to steer the boat successfully through all seven reservoirs.” A smile flitted across her lips. “I must go now. I have to travel across the ocean to tell the King that the time for the big storm is at hand. He will be happy. He has been looking forward to this storm for a long time. It will be the storm of many storms to come. If you succeed, future storms will not have to be as fierce.”

When she was almost level with the surface of the water, the Queen put her long-finned hand on her cheek. “Here, take this. Give it to Curly Beard when you free him.” Leaning forward she dropped a small tear from her left eye into the palm of her webbed hand. It was one of the most beautiful little tears they’d ever seen. Two water sprites flew out from the cloud, lifted it from her hand and flew with it to the children.

They flew straight to Annabel, who sat between Leo and Julie, and placed it in her cupped hand. “Keep it safe until you see Curly Beard,” the Queen cautioned. “I will see you again when the water ignites the sky with fire. Goodbye until then, my young friends.”

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“Wait!” exclaimed Annabel, who still held the vial in her other hand. “King Brathnar has a gift for you.” Shyly Annabel held out the vial toward the Queen. The same two water sprites flew down to her and carried the little bottle up to Queen Marquellamoosh, who took it and scrutinized it carefully.

“So it is true... there is another kind of water forming in the deepest marrow of the inner earth.” She opened the vial with veneration and held it out in front of her. It glowed like a sun-spark. “This gives me hope, more than you can imagine.” She let seven glistening drops fall into the ocean. “Though they are only drops in the ocean, they will spread throughout the seven seas and bring hope to all the creatures of the water.” The last three drops she swallowed herself, and her whole body flickered faintly for a few seconds. “I thank you, and I thank King Brathnar. Venerable dwarf, please tell your King that this gift has sealed the unity of our realms.” She bowed her head. “Farewell.”

With that the Queen disappeared beneath the surface of the water. Quickly the children got up and retreated up onto the beach, so as not to be covered by the rolling waves of her descent. From there they watched the colossal cloud disappear into the distance, just as the sun dipped behind the horizon. The lagoon looked quiet, drab and empty. For a few minutes, the four of them just stood there, looking over the ocean where the Queen had been.

At long last Grilpy broke the silence, “No time to waste. You heard the Queen. We’ve got work to do. So, all hands on deck!”

“Aye, aye Captain,” Leo shouted. At once the children gathered their belongings and got dressed. With great care Annabel put the Queen’s precious tear in her jacket pocket,

folded safely into the center of the special hat, given to her by King Brathnar.

Grilpy handed the bottle with the boat to Julie. “Do us the honors.” Julie uncorked the bottle and asked the boat to come forth. They all held hands. “On the boat,” she said ceremoniously.

As they sailed away they saw the floating island rising from the ocean, spouting a grand fountain of water into the air as if it were saluting them. The children waved goodbye to the island. The seven sacred islands looked beautiful in the twilight as they soared higher and higher.

“Oh no,” Leo suddenly cried.

“What’s wrong,” Annabel asked.

“We’re going to be in so much trouble when we get back home.” It was the first time any of them had thought of home.

“Why?” Julie wanted to know.

“Because we’ve stayed away way too long—more than a day.”

“No, we didn’t,” Grilpy said, laughing.

“How not?”

“Because you went through the rain of tears. When they slowed down, time also slowed down. In fact, it stopped altogether.”

“No, it didn’t. I just saw the sun set. It takes time to do that.”

“Ah, but that is time within time. The time of your world was folded shut behind us. I know it is hard to understand, but think of it like a dream. When you dream, you do all sorts of things over a long period of time. Yet, it is always only a few seconds. Except, of course, what we went through was no dream.” And Grilpy smiled again.

“So, we won’t be in trouble?”

The Invisible Boat

“No.”

“And we’ll be back in time?”

“Yes, and take a look over there.” Grilpy pointed to a vast, dark cloud in front of them, alive with lightning flashes zigzagging through. “Leo, you’d better close the ethmaroll.”

“Do we really have to pass through that storm?” Annabel asked, clasping her head with her hands.

“Oh, it’s only a small little storm. Yes, we have to pass through it, because we passed through the Queen’s tears.”

As they bolted through the massive cloud of a thousand lightning flashes, they got dizzy, and their eyes were blinded momentarily, though they heard no thunder, just the sizzling sound of electricity. It did not last long and soon they were flying silently over the ocean.

“Now we’re back in normal time,” Grilpy said. “Look over there. You can already see the lights of the city. Not long and you’ll be back in your comfortable beds, fast asleep.”

part seven



To the Rescue

53 ❁ *Julie's Resolve*

“Get away, you slobbering beast,” Julie shouted at Sidney who’d jumped right onto the bed and was licking her face. “Off, off! Mom, why did you let Sidney into our room?”

“Nothing else seems to work. You both didn’t show again for breakfast. How many times do I have to call you? It’s almost lunch time. Looks like you haven’t slept for a week—both of you. I let Sidney out for his morning doo, but now he needs to go for a walk, and I need you to do some grocery shopping.”

“Mom, that doesn’t mean that you can let Sidney jump on my head.” She pushed the dog off, which did not deter him one bit, his tail drumming rhythmically against the closet.

“Fine, I’ll keep him at bay for another few minutes, but only if you get up right now,” and she took Sidney by the collar and left the room.

“Come on Leo. Didn’t you hear what Mom said?—Get up!”

“I heard,” and he turned around in his bed, pulling the pillow over his head.

“Oh no you don’t,” Julie hissed and ripped the pillow from under him.

“All right already, no need to get so mean.” Leo stretched, sat up and scratched his head.

The Invisible Boat

Ten minutes later they were dressed and tucking into peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Still chewing, they put Sidney on the leash and made for the corner grocery store. Passing the newspaper stand and picking a paper off the rack, Julie stopped and muttered, "What the...? Listen to this," and she waved it in front of Leo. "It's made front page news: 'More Sewage Monsters Sighted!' You know what that means... don't you?"

Leo didn't answer. Though Julie didn't usually read the paper, she put it in the cart. After they'd bought the groceries they walked through the park, or rather, they were pulled along by Sidney. At the lake they sat down on a green bench, and Julie began reading the article. But Sidney was not content to sit around and tugged on the leash. "Just walk around with him a bit, will you?" Julie said, annoyed at the constant interruption.

"You're in a bad mood today," Leo observed

"Well, you're not much better. Besides, I didn't get much sleep. Now, buzz off."

"Fine!" Leo sauntered off, much to Sidney's delight. As he walked past the basketball players, he tucked his head down low and increased his pace, just in case one of them would recognize him—or Sidney. But they were too engrossed in their game to notice them. It seemed long ago when they'd flown over their heads with the boat. So much had happened since then. Leo peered over at Lion Rock, thinking back on their journey to the Dwarf King that had started so innocently. Looking around at all the people filled him with a sense of urgency and responsibility. *What if hordes of binagatorials should suddenly emerge all at once from the gutters and take over the city? How did we get involved in all of this anyway? Why us?*

At that moment he tripped over Sidney's leash as the basset jumped up on a trash can. The dog managed to grab a plastic

bag, dragging it to the ground and spilling bottles, cans, cartons, Styrofoam cups and fries all over the grass and pavement. “Silly dog,” Leo muttered as he quickly cleaned up the mess, though Sidney did manage to feast on a half-eaten hot dog. “That’s it, you horrid hound, we’re going back. Enough park time for you.” Leo stuffed the plastic bag back into the green trash can. This time Leo was dragging Sidney, and, sensing that Leo was in no mood to play games, for once Sidney complied.

When Leo came to the bench, it was empty. For a moment he got worried. She wouldn’t just leave him, not without telling him. He saw the newspaper neatly folded and stuck between the slats of the bench. He pulled it out. It was missing the front page. At the bottom there was a note, scribbled in Julie’s hand. *Leo, I’ve gone to see Annabel. Come at once, it’s urgent—J.* It took him a minute to piece the words together as he still struggled to read. “Come on, Sidney. Let’s run,” and off they sped back to the apartment. He was glad that Julie hadn’t left him with all the groceries.

“Where are you going in such a hurry?” asked his mother who had just come down to fetch the mail.

“Oh, just going to see Annabel,” Leo responded as casually as he could.

“Have you bought all the groceries?”

“Yes, Julie’s got them.”

“Make sure you bring them up to me soon. Dad needs the vegetables for lunch. We’re going to have ratatouille and rice, and Dad’s cooking today.”

“I’ll tell Julie,” and off he ran to Annabel’s apartment, with Sidney smiling and slobbering behind him. Leo knocked and Julie opened the door. She looked pale. “Glad you’re here. We’ve got to make a decision—now!”

The Invisible Boat

“Mom wants the groceries first. We’re going to have ratatouille—Dad’s cooking.”

“Darn. Come on then. You take one bag, I’ll take the other.” They hurried up to deposit the groceries. Whistling, Dad was already in the kitchen slicing onions. “Groceries as requested,” Julie said, placing the brown paper bag on the counter. Still whistling, Dad gave a thumbs-up sign. “Later—We’re down at Annabel’s if you need us,” Julie sang, and they ran back down.

Leo stood in front of the girls who now sat on Annabel’s bed. “Julie, why did you run off and leave me in the park? Couldn’t you have waited five minutes?”

“No, because we might be too late already,” Julie answered. “You see, as I already explained to Annabel, the authorities are planning to send an extermination crew down into the sewers,” and she pointed to the newspaper article she’d read.

“So, isn’t that good? Then they’ll get rid of them, which means we won’t have to do it.”

“You don’t get it, do you?” Julie said, getting all red in the face, throwing her long hair back.

“What she’s trying to say,” continued Annabel more calmly, “is that we have to save Curly Beard before they get down into the sewers to spray poison. Or we might never see him again—and our whole mission will fail.”

“Not only that, but remember, we aren’t just getting rid of the binagatorials, we are also freeing thousands of water sprites. If the binagatorials are all destroyed by the toxic poisons, it means that all the good nymphs will perish as well. And we can’t let that happen.”

The three children sat on the bed, sullen and silent. They all knew what they needed to do, but nobody dared say it out loud. At last Annabel said, “I wish Grilpy were here.”

“If he doesn’t show up soon, we’ll just have to go without him,” Julie said with conviction.

Leo grew pale at the thought, but all he said was, “I wish Grilpy were here, too.”

“The paper says they’re planning to send people down into the sewers tomorrow and possibly as early as today.” Again they sat in silence. “There’s no choice—we’ve got to go down now!” Julie got off the bed and paced around the room like a caged tiger.

“How are we going to do that?” Leo asked. He did not like the idea of setting off so soon on another journey. He still had not recovered from the last one.

“Here’s how,” and she stopped pacing and faced them. “First we’ll tell Mom that we’re having another sleepover here. Then we’ll leave Annabel’s aunt a note that we’re sleeping over at our place”

“What a great idea,” Annabel said, “except that,” and she paused and looked down at the ground, “isn’t that lying? I don’t want to lie.”

“It is, sort of, but it’s for a good cause,” Julie argued.

“I don’t know. It’s bad to lie,” Annabel whispered, her eyes looking like two pleading pearls set within her beautiful, dark skin.

“Maybe we should just wait for tonight and do it as we did before,” Leo suggested.

Julie walked over to the window and stared out, thinking. Suddenly she said, “Hey, come over here and take a look at this.” Annabel grabbed one of her spare crutches and hobbled over to the window. Down in the streets they saw two workers open up a manhole and climb down. They were wearing white rubber suits and carrying large canisters on their backs. “That’s

The Invisible Boat

it! We're going to free Curly Beard right now!" Julie said. "Are you coming or not?" Her words were like a challenge.

"Yes," the other two said meekly.

"Good. Annabel, write a note to your aunt, and we'll go up and tell Mom our plan of sleeping here. We'll be back with the boat in about ten minutes."

"Wait!" Leo said. "I have a better idea. Why don't we tell Mom and Annabel's aunt that we want to camp on the rooftop. It's a really warm summer's evening. We'll just take our sleeping bags up there and some food. That way we won't be lying to anybody."

"You're a little genius," Annabel said, and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "What do you think, Julie?"

"Hmm... not bad at all... you're right. It's a good idea. Okay then, let's get ready."

54  *Down the Manhole*

To their dismay it took them another hour before they could set up camp on the rooftop. Mr. Temple had insisted they have lunch first. He got them to help cut the vegetables for the ratatouille. At least he and Mom weren't against their spending the night on the rooftop. Mom wanted them to take the tent, just in case it rained. Luckily they could use the free-standing dome tent that only took about five minutes to set up.

After lunch, to which Annabel was invited and which they all enjoyed, much to Dad's delight, they went up to the rooftop, pitched the tent and spread out their sleeping bags, making sure to stuff them with plenty of clothes. Julie, who'd contained her impatience for over an hour, finally took out the bottle, uncorked it and summoned the boat. Seconds later they were on the boat sailing from the top of the building down to the manhole, which was still open, but barricaded.

They missed Grilpy, especially Annabel, who wondered whether they'd been foolish to set off on their own. "We must go deeper down," is all that Julie said, taking charge. After many twists and turns, they realized they were hopelessly lost in the underground labyrinth. On top of that it was dark and unpleasant. After almost an hour of meandering to and fro, they slowed down and drifted along on the shallow and inert waters of a pipeline. "I think we should go back," Annabel said. "This is hopeless."

"I agree," Leo immediately affirmed.

Julie sat with her head in her hands, looking glum. At length she said, "Maybe you're right. The question is: How do we get back?"

The Invisible Boat

“Perhaps the boat knows,” Leo suggested. “She was able to find her way back home last time, after we lost Curly Beard.”

“You’re right. Come on, Boat, take us home, please. We’re lost.” At once the boat sped up and turned into a chute that took them to a higher level, turning left until they came to a bigger waterway. “It appears she knows the way and is glad to get out of here. I feel better already.”

“Me too,” Annabel said, “except that we’ll have to wait for Grilpy to show up before we can free Curly Beard.”

“Stop!” Julie suddenly shouted. “Look,” and she pointed straight in front of her. The boat halted and they spotted five men in white rubber suits wading through the water about thirty yards up ahead. Not only did they have spray tanks strapped to their backs, but they were also holding black truncheons and had pistols in their holsters. “Quick! Turn around before they see us.” The boat did not have to be told and veered around. They had not gone far when they saw another group of men, also armed with spray guns and clubs. Their flashlights shone into their faces and one of the men shouted and pointed straight at them.

“Where to now?” Julie said frantically.

“Pull up the ethmaroll!” Annabel cried.

“Got it.” Leo pulled it quickly over the square sail and the boat sailed past the astonished men. Further on they spotted five more men in single file, wading through the shallow water, but this time the boat, on its own accord, swerved off left and down a duct. For a while they were in darkness until they came to a larger canal.

“There might be hundreds of men crawling around down here by now. They’re sure to find the binagatorials soon. Then

Curly Beard will die, and it will all be our fault.” Julie looked desperate. As if to confirm her words, as they rounded the next corner, they saw another crew of men, sloshing through the murky water in front of them.

“This is hopeless,” Leo said. “They’re all over the place—”

“Shh, I hear something,” Annabel said. They all listened. Faintly they heard the sweetest singing coming from behind them. It sounded like someone was playing musical glasses. “What is that?”

“Whatever it is, it’s beautiful,” Julie said. Even the boat had stopped and appeared to be listening to the haunting sound. “Is it the wind through one of the chutes?”

“I don’t know, but we’ve got to follow it.”

“Why?” Julie frowned.

“Remember, the Queen of the Waters told us to follow the music.” Leo swung the tiller around and steered the boat down the tunnel.

“You’re right: ‘Listen for the music. The music will lead you to him. That’s all you need to know.’ Those were Queen Marquellamoosh’s exact words,” Annabel said, smiling. The singing continued, accompanied intermittently by a melodious rhythm that sounded like a glockenspiel or a xylophone. Hope and excitement filled the children as they followed the music.

55  *Following the Music*

“Look... isn’t that...? Yes, I’m almost sure it is!” Leo scrambled over to the boat’s bow to get a better view. “Yup, just as I thought. It’s Wilamelee—she’s the one singing. See, there she is, flying and skipping in and out of the water.” Julie and Annabel leaned forward and, with squinted eyes, peered in the direction Leo was pointing. Leo threw back the ethmaroll and shouted, “Wilamelee, here we are! We’re coming.”

Happy to see the water sprite, the boat sped up. Wilamelee smiled and waved but did not stop. She led them through many chutes, tunnels and canals. Sometimes, when there were metal pipes running along the walls, she would tap them rhythmically. She moved along rapidly, sometimes disappearing from sight, but her voice, like a silver thread, always reached their ears.

“We must be getting close,” Julie said.

“How do you know?” Leo asked.

“Well, can’t you smell the binagatorials? What a stench!”

“You’re right. It’s awful,” Leo agreed, and pulled up the ethmaroll.

“No, don’t do that,” Annabel said. “We won’t be able to hear Wilamelee as well, and we don’t want to be lost again.” They sat and listened. She was right, they could hardly hear her.

“You mean we have to smell that awful smell?” Julie squirmed at the thought.

“We don’t have a choice,” Annabel argued, almost apologetically. She looked pleadingly at Leo. Reluctantly he pulled back the ethmaroll. At once the stink hit their noses again, but at the same time they heard the very faint strains of Wilamelee’s

plaintive song. "Come on, dear Boat. Catch up as fast as you can."

On they sped, until at last they came to the vast cavern filled with thousands of binagatorials. The population of the beasts appeared to have grown, and they were looking even bigger and more ominous. Dropping down every so often, hundreds of the little ones still hung from the ceiling. Loath to enter the open cavern, the children remained hidden in the dark entrance of the tunnel.

"I wonder where Wilamelee is," Annabel whispered.

"Right here!" Wilamelee jumped lightly from a ledge above them onto the roof of the cabin, looked down at them with her big, round eyes and smiled. "Wilamelee was afraid you wouldn't make it and had almost given up. She gets lonely down here, being the only water sprite amongst all these brutes," and she waved with her webbed hand in the direction of the cavern. "Wilamelee was beginning to wonder if the binagatorials would ever be conquered." At the thought big tears rolled down from her eyes. "So glad you came. That gives Wilamelee hope." At once she looked up and laughed. "But now, let's free Curly Beard."

Wilamelee hopped lightly from the roof of the little cabin to the top of the square sail and looked down at them with big, shimmering eyes. "Did you actually get to meet the Queen?" For a moment she appeared pale, but seconds later her cheeks were flushed with emerald green. "Oooh, Wilamelee can see from your faces that you did! What did she say? How did she look? Who was with her? Wasn't she wonderful!" and she clapped her little hands together and gurgled with joy.

"Slow down, dear Wilamelee," Julie laughed. "You're too fast for us." They all laughed. They were so glad to see her

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again. Her presence gave them confidence. “Yes, we saw the Queen, and she gave us specific, if not plain instructions. But first we have to free Curly Beard—and she was very clear about that. Otherwise we cannot free the others. Trouble is she didn’t tell us exactly how.”

“That’s why you have Wilamelee.” For an instant she beamed, then hung her head and the color drained from her cheeks. The children thought she might start gushing tears again, but she continued. “Wilamelee pricked through his hardened layer of saliva and fed him. That gave him strength and kept him alive.” At the thought of Curly Beard’s plight, a few tears did roll down her soft, green cheeks. She slid down the mast and sat on the railing next to the figurehead of the swan, stroking its neck. “Now, with your help we can finally free him. Wilamelee alone was not strong enough. And even with the three of you, it is going to be difficult. Let’s go!”

“Where is he?” Leo asked, ready to go.

“Exactly where you left him,” and she pointed up to the ledge on the far side of the cavern. “See you there. Make sure you keep the ethmaroll down until the last moment. We don’t want any of them to see you. They are a little more watchful since you were here last.” With that she jumped into the water and was gone.

Leo pulled up the ethmaroll, and they sailed slowly over and up to the ledge. The children gasped when they saw Curly Beard behind the thick, globular wall of jelly. He appeared frozen and his face looked taut and knotted. They landed on the slippery rock, almost in the same place as before. Wilamelee was already waiting for them, standing next to the mummified dwarf. The children disembarked, and Annabel, helped along by Leo, used only one of her crutches to get out.

“Pooh,” Leo exclaimed, “it’s so much worse than it was the first time we were here.” He wrinkled his nose at the smell.

“That’s because it hasn’t rained for quite a while, and there’s hardly any water flowing through here. There’s no movement in the water,” Wilamelee explained.

“It’s worse than a cesspool.”

“It’s amazing he’s still alive, caught up in that disgusting yuk,” Julie whispered, covering her mouth and feeling nauseous.

“But not for long if we don’t start right now. One of the binagatorials in the shallow waters down on the lowest platform is already stirring. He’s a guard and will be coming up here soon to check on him. He must be wondering why Curly Beard has not yet dissolved into paste. Lucky for us, or they’d already have gulped him down.” The large binagatorial rolled and heaved out of the shallow water.

“Ready?” Wilamelee asked.

“Just tell us what to do.” Fierce determination glowed in Julie’s eyes.

“Simple: We rip the hardened spit off Curly Beard.”

“But we can’t do that. We’ll get stuck to it, just like Curly Beard,” Leo remonstrated.

“True, so listen carefully to what Wilamelee tells you to do. Let’s get going—hurry!”

56 🌸 *The Fight for Curly Beard*

“Now, be careful. Don’t get any of the saliva on your skin. Not anywhere – not even your clothes. The saliva will immediately stick to you and sap the strength from that area.”

“So how are we going to get that yucky stuff off him?” Julie nervously eyed the binagatorial that was wobbling along the lower ledge.

“With vivified water.”

“What’s vivified?” all three children asked in unison.

“Pure and alive. So, let’s get to work,” Wilamelee said, standing closest to the smothered dwarf.

“Where are we going to get this *vivified* water?” Julie’s anxious eye was still on the monster approaching below them.

“Stick out your hands, all of you.” As soon as they complied, she bent over and spat into their palms in quick succession.

“Hey! What’s that for?” Leo asked, taken aback.

Wilamelee giggled and said, “Now rub it thoroughly over your hands, wrists and arms. Quick—do it!” It felt cool and invigorating.

“Sweet! I love it,” Leo said. “Can I have some more? It’s like that stuff that Mom sometimes gives us—odee clone.”

“You mean eau de cologne,” Annabel said, smiling.

“Stop blathering and do as Wilamelee says,” Julie ordered. The beast below sat down to scratch itself. At least it would give them a bit more time.

Once they were done Wilamelee said, “Hold out your hands again,” and immediately spat another blob of her vivified water into their palms. “Now rub it over your faces.” They quickly rubbed their faces with Wilamelee’s stimulating liquid. “Good!

You're ready. Now start pulling off pieces. Start from the top and work your way down."

At once they set to work. Fiercely the children stuck their hands deep into the goop, tugging, ripping and tearing big chunks from the gelatin mass. At first it came off quite easily. "This is fun," Leo shouted, pulling off a large layer with both hands. "Come on, Wilamelee, join the fun."

"Wilamelee is not strong enough. But don't shout so loudly. Even though the binagatorials are making a racket, we could be heard."

After a while they noticed that some of the pulp was as hard as dried paint or papier mâché. In order to soften it, Wilamelee spat right onto those clumpy sections. "Hurry! The binagatorial is already halfway up," Julie shouted, who had never let the approaching binagatorial out of her sight.

"Come on, cup your hands. Let me give you a refill." Wilamelee squirted more cool water into their hands. Just over a minute and already they'd freed Curly Beard's head. Wilamelee immediately spat into his face and gently rubbed his eyes with her tiny, dainty hands. Curly Beard began to move his head slowly. "Curly Beard, can you hear us? We've come to set you free." Wilamelee slapped him gently on his bearded cheeks. He didn't respond. "Wake up, we don't have much time." She slapped him a bit harder, but he only rolled his head back and forth and uttered a few grunts. She spat into her own hands and massaged his face thoroughly, even down to his neck, murmuring, "Please, you've got to wake up, we cannot do this without you." No response.

"If he does not wake up, we'll never be able to save him." Wilamelee looked miserable.

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“Oh, I think I know what could help him.” Annabel unzipped her jacket and fumbled for something. “Here, I almost forgot.” She held out her hand to show Wilamelee. “The Queen of the Waters instructed me to give this to Curly Beard.” When the nymph saw the beautiful teardrop lying in Annabel’s hands, she laughed with delight.

“Yes, this will help. I’m so glad you remembered.” Gently she opened the dwarf’s mouth, took the teardrop and placed it on his tongue and spat water down his throat. Curly Beard swallowed, coughed and shook his head. For a moment the children stopped and looked on fretfully. Color entered his face and moments later he opened his eyes. He looked at each one of them and smiled.

“I thank you all for coming back.” His voice was weak, but his eyes were instantly awake and alert, and he immediately took stock of the situation. “You have not let me down. But we have no time to waste. Free my arms. Then I can help with getting myself out of here.”

At that moment the binagatorial below let out a massive roar and began lumbering up the connecting tunnel. “He’s spotted us,” Julie cried. At once dozens of others squatted around the lower ledge, snarling and banging their jaws together in anger. “Oh no! They know we’re here.”

“Don’t worry about them. Just get me out of here,” Curly Beard urged. The three children mustered all their energy and tore at the mush with all their might. “That’s it, good work. Keep at it.” While the children slashed and cleaved away, Wilamelee rubbed and massaged life back into the dwarf. As soon as his arms were free, he attacked the rest of the sticky, fleshy tissue with incredible strength and speed. By now Wilamelee

was spitting nonstop, and the gooey paste was almost melting under her potent spittle.

“Stand back,” Curly Beard said at last. “I think I can pull myself out of here now.”

“Hurry! The beast is almost through the tunnel. He’ll be here in seconds,” Annabel screamed, unable to contain her voice any longer.

Curly Beard yanked one foot free, but the other one was still immersed and stuck to the rock. “Come on, Leo, rip it away. I’m almost out of here.” Leo formed his hands into two claws and began to hack and haul with all his might. When the binagatorial reached the upper ledge and saw the dwarf uncovered and almost free, he trumpeted like a raging elephant.

“Quick! All of you, get back into the boat,” Curly Beard ordered. At that moment the binagatorial lunged forward, but Wilamelee squirted him right in the eye. He shrieked in pain. It stopped him long enough that Curly Beard could free his other foot entirely.

He took charge at once. He lifted Leo, who was closest to him, and shoved him deftly onto the deck of the boat. Julie hauled herself over the railing and held out her hand to Annabel, who was hobbling in the rear. The dwarf attempted to pull Annabel toward him, but the binagatorial knocked him down with his gnarly paw. Curly Beard flew over the ledge, but he managed to grab hold of a protruding rock that stopped his fall—barely. He was left dangling precariously over the foul waters, boiling with fuming beasts.

Sure of victory, the binagatorial lifted himself up onto his gnarled hind legs and split tail, opened his great jaw and was about to discharge a wad of gob all over Annabel. She could

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see it grow in his gaping mouth. Despite her timid nature, she took her crutch and rammed it down the binagatorial's throat. The creature choked on his own spitball and inadvertently swallowed half the crutch, which gave Curly Beard enough time to pull himself back onto the ledge and lift Annabel onto the boat. Leo caught her in his arms and they both fell onto the boat's deck.

Quickly Curly Beard jumped on board and immediately pulled up the ethmaroll, while the binagatorial shook and twisted around in a mad effort to wrench the crutch from his own mouth with his stunted paws. As he tumbled around in a rage, his thick, stubbly tail hit the side of the boat, knocking it off the ledge, causing it to plunge into the waters below. A growing horde of bellowing binagatorials awaited them, ready to smother the boat with layers upon layers of sticky spittle.

57  *The Boat's Struggle*

As the boat toppled down from the ledge, the children were knocked about violently. Desperately they tried to hold onto something, but not before plunging into the water. "They've caught us," Curly Beard shouted. "Hold on tight! This is not going to be easy." Through the ethmaroll they could see a blur of binagatorials madly licking the boat, slathering it with ooze. "Heave ho, boat, heave ho!" Curly Beard commanded. "You can do it. Free yourself."

They could feel the boat strain against the strands that stuck to the boat like superglue. The intrepid boat frantically tugged to free itself from the growing web, but the binagatorials licked the boat from all sides like a lollipop. The poor swan figurehead was already covered. "Heave ho," Curly Beard yelled again, more forcefully. By now the children had sufficiently recovered from the topsy-turvy fall and joined in with Curly Beard.

"Heave ho," they all yelled in unison, and the boat, hearing their call yanked and jerked with all its might. "Heave ho," they shouted even louder as they saw the ethmaroll get smothered in green-yellow jelly.

"Pull up the tiller," Leo shouted. "If the boat gets bigger, it might free itself. It helped last time." Curly Beard tried to pull it up, but it wouldn't budge.

"Heave ho," they yelled again. In vain! Down into the murky depths they sank, and soon they saw nothing at all through the ethmaroll. By now the boat had given up the fight, and they soon found themselves in pitch darkness, pushed and pulled along by the binagatorials. Not long after, they came

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to a stop with a sudden and hefty thud. Again they bumped and toppled over and against one another. Complete silence followed. The boat had come to a standstill.

After a while Annabel asked, "Are we all still here? Is anybody hurt?"

"I'm fine, I think," Leo said.

"Me, too," Julie confirmed. "Just some bruises."

"What about Wilamee? Are you here?" There was no answer. "Did anybody see her get onto the boat?" Annabel asked with a trembling voice.

"No, she didn't come on board," Curly Beard affirmed. "I don't know where she could be." In the silence everybody was thinking of Wilamee, wondering what had happened to her and hoping she was safe. "She knows how to take care of herself," Curly Beard said reassuringly, though he didn't sound too confident.

"It's so dark. Can't the boat glow, the way it did when we were sailing along toward the Dwarf Kingdom?" Leo asked.

"No, because this poisonous saliva takes away all strength, even that of the boat," the dwarf answered. "The binagatorials have death forces. They suck the life out of the earth and out of us. They have sealed us off, and by doing that, the life forces from the earth are sealed off. They have drained the light from our boat."

"So what can we do?" Julie asked. Although it was dark, Leo could picture the worried look on Julie's face.

"For the moment we should stop talking."

"Why?"

"Because we're sealed off and we have to conserve the air that's left in this boat."

“But we have to make a plan, we have to...”

“Shhh, no more talking,” Curly beard insisted. They lapsed into silence. None of the children knew what the other was thinking, but the mood was glum.

Many minutes passed before Annabel whispered. “I have an idea. Can I say it?”

“Go ahead,” Curly Beard responded. “But keep it short.”

She spoke so softly that they had to strain their ears. “We all have a little of Wilamelee’s vivified water left on our hands, right? So, let’s rub the rest of it onto the checkered staff, then open up the ethmaroll and push it through the sheets of slime. Then we might get a bit of air.”

“The checkered staff! I quite forgot that we still have it under the bench. What a great idea,” Julie said. “Though I don’t think that will work,” she added in a downcast voice. “My hands don’t feel wet anymore.”

“Let’s try it anyway,” Leo urged, his voice sounding faint with fatigue.

“She’s right. Wilamelee’s water is more powerful than you think,” Curly Beard agreed. “It’s no ordinary water. It doesn’t dry as easily. It’s more like oil, although it doesn’t feel like it. It’s an elixir of the purest kind, and even just a little of it can work wonders. But what’s this about a checkered staff?”

Annabel groped for it, and gave it to Curly Beard. “Here it is. We got it from King Brathnar. It helped us—”

“Shush, not another word. You can tell me later.” As soon as his fingers touched the staff, he recognized it. “This checkered staff, or Staff of Opposites as it’s rightly named, might be just what we need.”

“Let’s do it,” Leo said.

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The children and the dwarf rubbed it thoroughly from one end to the other, even with the backs of their hands and their faces.

“Rub the tip especially,” Curly Beard said. “That’s the most important part.” Although it was a simple task, they felt as if they were lifting cement, each movement costing them tremendous effort.

“Good. Now, let’s unlatch and lift the ethmaroll,” Curly Beard ordered. All four of them shoved with all their might against the tight grip of the saliva around the boat. It budged slightly.

“There, did you feel it? Come on. Again – on the count of three,” Curly Beard urged. “One, two, three!” Again they strained with combined effort. It opened another crack, but not enough to let the staff pass through. “Come on, we can do it!” Twice more they pushed, and the crack was finally wide enough to poke the sturdy pole through.

“What if the slime is too thick, or if we’re under water?” Julie wondered.

“We’ll have to take that risk,” Curly Beard replied. “But let’s thrust the rod through this stuff.” They positioned the staff and pushed as if they had a battering ram. Nothing moved, no matter how hard they rammed and pressed the checkered staff.

“It’s no use,” Julie said, and she was about to cry. The children were exhausted.

“Turn it while you jab it in,” Curly Beard cried. It worked! One twist and a push—at once it slipped through as easily as if they were poking through soft mud. They pushed and pulled, twisting all the while, making the hole bigger and bigger. Suddenly they heard a hissing sound and felt a cool breeze enter the boat.

“We did it! Yes! Air... we can breathe freely again... Yippee!!” the children cried, gulping in the precious air. At once they felt their energy return.

“At least we won’t die quite yet,” Leo laughed. “What a brilliant idea of yours it was, Annabel!”

“Yes, Annabel, you’re just the best!” Julie affirmed.

Annabel beamed, though nobody could see her in the darkness. “But we’re still stuck,” she added softly. Their momentary elation was dampened by that realization and they fell into silence once more.

As they sat, miserably wondering what to do next, they heard the sound of a soft voice: “Hello? Is anyone in there?”

58  *Escape*

Though faint, the voice was distinct. “Hello,” it said again.

“Hello,” they all answered.

“Oh, thank goodness. It’s good to hear your voices.

“Is that you, Wilamelee?” Annabel asked

“Of course it’s Wilamelee. Who else could it be?”

They were overjoyed to hear her gurgling, soft voice and to know she was safe. It gave them renewed hope. “Can you help us to get out of here?” Annabel asked.

“Wilamelee will try, but the beasties sure wrapped you up thick and tight. They had no intention of letting any of you escape. Must work from the outside while you work from the inside out.”

“How?” Julie asked.

“Do you have a cup or a bowl in there?”

“Maybe, we’ll look.”

“Anything that will hold water,” Wilamelee said. Leo felt around in the darkness, went into the cabin, but did not find anything.

“Annabel, you didn’t by chance bring the thermos along?”

“No, sorry. I didn’t think this would be a long trip.”

“That’s fine. How about my shoe—will that do?”

“Perfect. Now hold it under the hole and Wilamelee will send a few drops of water down.” They heard her spit, and at once tiny drops rolled down the funnel with surprising speed, like shiny drops of mercury into Leo’s sneaker. Quickly they rubbed their hands in it and started digging. They set to work in silence. In between Wilamelee spat through the widening hole, keeping them supplied with vivified water. They made good progress getting rid of layer after layer of the jelly coating.

“We’ll need to use the staff to scrape off the top layer and in places we can’t reach. It’s long enough and—lucky for us—the tip is shaped like a bear’s claw and will serve as a shovel,” Curly Beard added. He was right.

“I think we’re ready to roll back the ethmaroll,” Curly Beard said after what seemed like hours of steady work. They tugged at the ethmaroll and after a few jerks it folded right back. At once the boat began to glow again, though only faintly. It was enough for them to see where they were. Carefully they scooped up the heaps of goop that had accumulated on deck and threw them overboard. At last they climbed out of the boat, exhausted. Now they could get a good look at where they were.

They found themselves in a dead-end tunnel, strewn with heaps of bones from many animals. With a shock they saw Wilamelee lying in the midst of the bones, as if dead.

“Wilamelee,” Annabel cried, hobbling over to the frail nymph on her rickety legs. “Wilamelee, what’s wrong?” All three children knelt down beside her. She looked pale and transparent. Her eyes were closed and her delicate hands and legs were limp.

“Wilamelee, can you hear us?” Julie whimpered into her ear. “Please, answer us!”

“She overexerted herself trying to save us,” Annabel said, and she put her soft dark hand on the Wilamelee’s pale green brow.

“Look how beautiful and slight she is. This was too much for her, poor thing,” Julie said, stroking Wilamelee’s silky, blue-green, gossamer hair.

“She’s not dead, is she?” Leo whispered, choking on his own words.

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“Let me have a look at her.” They made room for Curly Beard. Gently he touched her neck, forehead, cheeks and hands.

“Well, is she dead?” Julie could hardly hold back her tears. She suspected the worst.

“As good as...”

“Oh no.” Julie cried.

“But there’s still a flicker of life in her.” Without a word Curly Beard took his pipe from his belt. From inside his tunic he brought out five little pouches, each one a different color. From each he took a pinch and filled his pipe with the mixture. He lit the pipe with two drops from a vial and lightly blew the aromatic vapor into Wilamelee’s face. The sweet aroma smelled especially good in that dark, dank dead-end tunnel. Curly Beard proceeded to blow the vapor all over Wilamelee’s limp little body—head, face, neck, shoulders, chest, arms and tail. While he was gently blowing the fragrant essence, her fingers and eyelids twitched slightly, and a shimmer of light crossed her slight body. Curly Beard sighed in relief. “All is not lost, but it will take time for her to recover. She gave off too much of her own water. She is literally dehydrated. Her skin, which should always be moist like a dog’s nose, is parched.”

“But she will survive, yes?” Annabel asked anxiously.

“Only with your help.”

“Of course, we’ll do anything,” Julie said.

“Tell us,” Annabel urged.

“Leo, you help me carry her into the boat. Julie, prepare a soft bed for her on deck. Use coats and jackets for that. Annabel, once you’re back on the boat, I want you to cradle Wilamelee’s head in your lap and stroke her head, giving it

warmth. Make sure that the ride back is as smooth as possible for her.”

They carried her into the boat. Curly Beard closed the ethmaroll, Leo took control of the tiller, Julie held Wilamelee’s hand, and Annabel gently supported the water sprite’s head. Off they sailed down the tunnel. At the far end two binagatorials sat guard.

“Where are we going?” Julie asked.

“Wilamelee needs clear water as quickly as possible. She also needs a place where she can rest and regain her strength. It’s best we go back to your place right away,” Curly Beard said.

“Good, but what about the binagatorials? And besides, there are still humans hunting them down at this very moment.” Julie suddenly remembered the men in their rubber outfits with spray tanks on their backs.

“They won’t find the binagatorials that easily. The monsters have evaded men for too many years. Don’t you worry, they’ll evade them for a few more days. Besides, there’s nothing much we can do now, anyway.”

They passed unnoticed between the two beasts and continued to sail under Curly Beard’s command. The boat was sluggish. The ordeal had been hard on her as well and the journey back took much longer. Even the swan’s head drooped. They flew out of the manhole in the light of dawn. Instead of flying to their tent up on the rooftop, Curly Beard set course for the park.

“I thought we were going home,” Leo said, rubbing his eyes and wishing he could still get in a few hours of sleep.

“No time for that. We haven’t a moment to lose.” Curly Beard’s voice was grave. “Wilamelee needs our help immediately, or she will slip away into another realm.”

59  *To the Flowerbeds*

They sailed straight for Lion's Rock and landed between the paws. Curly Beard opened the ethmaroll, took Wilamelee as gently as he possibly could in his strong arms and jumped out. The others wanted to follow him, but he said, "No, I need you to do something else. We could lose her in a matter of minutes, and there's only one thing that can save her."

"Tell us and we'll do it." Annabel said.

"Sail over to the flower beds and collect as much dew as you possibly can. If anything can save her it, will be that. Meanwhile I'll try and make her feel as comfortable as I can. Now go!" At once Leo steered the boat to the flower beds situated behind a row of sycamore trees.

"Even though there's hardly anybody in the park this early in the morning, we have to be careful that nobody sees us getting out of the boat," Julie warned. Leo landed behind a green dumpster and they held hands and got off the boat. Julie took out the bottle and let the boat slip back in. It felt good to be their normal size and selves again.

"What can we use to collect the dew?" Annabel wondered, looking around.

"I know—there's bound to be a cup or something in this dumpster," Leo said, lifting the lid. "See, I was right."

"Yeah, all used and yucky," Julie retorted, screwing up her nose. "Wilamelee needs clean, pure water." Leo ignored her and fumbled for a paper cup and a yogurt container. "They'll be fine. We'll just wash them at that water fountain over there. Oh, and here's a porcelain tea cup with a broken handle." He handed it to Annabel and gave Julie the paper cup. At once

they ran over to the water fountain and rinsed them as clean as they could.

“I suppose they’ll do,” Julie admitted. “Now let’s collect some dew,” and off she dashed to the nearest flower bed which was covered with an abundance of dew. It was a cool, but clear morning, and the tiny drops glistened even though the sun had not yet reached down to the park. Tenderly they shook the little potent pearls from the leaves, petals and blossoms into their cups.

Limping along on one crutch, Annabel whispered a little blessing each time she tapped some dew into her cup: “May this water save dear Wilamelee, may the water give her strength....” The liquid jewels fell readily for them and soon their containers were filled. Careful to not spill one precious drop, they walked back behind the dumpster.

“Here, let me take that for you,” Leo said, noticing that Annabel was having difficulty carrying her cup and walking.

“Thanks, Leo,” and she smiled so sweetly at him that his heart fluttered. Well-hidden behind the dumpster, they boarded the boat and sailed back to Lion’s Rock. They were glad to see that Curly Beard had created a beautiful shelter for Wilamelee on a bed of moss and grass. But they were shocked at how weak and withered she looked in the light of day. Curly Beard’s expression had never been more serious. Wilamelee’s hands looked like wilted leaves and her face was shriveled like a prune. They could hardly believe how quickly she had lost her vibrancy. Even ten minutes ago she hadn’t looked quite so faded.

Without waiting for them to get out of the boat, Curly Beard took out a flask from his tunic and asked them to pour

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the dew into it as carefully as possible. As soon as it was full, he took it over to Wilamelee. Ever so gently he parted her lips and fed her the dew—drop by drop. The water disappeared as if it had been sucked up by a sponge. Once it was all gone, he had the flask filled up again, this time from Julie’s cup. The third time he took the dew and dropped it on her face, gently massaging it into her delicate skin, as Wilamelee had done for him just a few hours before. He did the same with her withered, webbed fingers.

Slowly the wrinkles evened out and disappeared. The children marveled at how much liquid this tiny body could absorb. They had not said a word throughout the entire procedure, but they were glad to see how her skin was regaining some of its lush quality. Though she was improving, she still looked extremely frail and was still not moving.

“Annabel, take that silk scarf you’re wearing around your waist and soak it in water. She will need to be covered with a cloth for the next day or two.”

“Where should we keep her?” Annabel asked, untying the magenta sash.

“I don’t know. You’ll have to figure that one out yourselves. I have to go now and report back to the King of the Dwarfs. He is waiting for me. He’ll be glad to hear that you were able to save me.”

“Must you go now?” Julie asked, not wanting him to leave.

“Yes, but I will be back very soon, together with Grilpy.”

“When?”

“Just before the storm... Till then, take good care of Wilamelee,” and with that he jumped over the Lion’s left paw and was gone.

60 🌸 *Caring for Wilamelee*

With Wilamelee carefully rolled up in Annabel's silk scarf soaked in dew drops, the three children, sailed back up to the rooftop. As much as they would have liked to get into their tent and sleep, they knew they must first arrange a safe place for Wilamelee to rest.

"How about the fish tank?" Leo suggested

"Good idea." Annabel patted Leo on the shoulder and Julie nodded. "Let's go down right now and make her feel at home in the fish tank," Julie added.

As they stepped into the living room, Mrs. Temple was surprised to see them. She was still in her apricot nightgown with floral-embroidered lace, drinking orange juice and reading a book. "What? Up so early? I thought you'd sleep a while longer. Was it too uncomfortable in the tent?"

"No, we're famished and wanted some good breakfast." Leo went up to his mother and put an arm around her shoulder. "Mom, would you make us some apple pancakes?"

"Well, I don't know. Dad's still asleep."

"Please," Julie pleaded.

"Oh, fine, but you'll have to help me. One of you can lay the table and someone can peel and slice the apples."

As soon as Mrs. Temple was in the kitchen, Julie said, "Okay, I'll lay the table and, Annabel, you can help cut the apples, while..."

"...I take care of Wilamelee in the aquarium," Leo added hastily.

"Exactly." The two girls followed Mrs. Temple into the kitchen, and Leo went about making a new home for Wilamelee

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in the aquarium. He rearranged the two rocks to make an island in the middle of the tank. From the hibiscus on the mantelpiece, he took some dried leaves and yesterday's rolled-up red petals and prepared a soft bed for her. Gently he laid her down, still nestled in the dew-drenched silk scarf. She looked so petite and helpless, and very beautiful – the way her soft, green hair fell down on either side of her smooth, pale face. He'd just placed a large conch over the ailing nymph when his mother announced the first batch of pancakes. Just like a little hut, the shell hid her from sight.

"Come on, Leo, didn't you hear me? Breakfast's ready," Mrs. Temple said cheerily, stepping into the living room. *Good timing*, Leo thought to himself.

"I'll be there in a sec." He turned back to the aquarium. At that moment Wilamelee's eyes fluttered and opened, and she looked up at him from under the shell. "You're safe now," Leo whispered to her.

Her round eyes, though not as watery as usual, were kind and filled with thankfulness. "You and Julie and Annabel are the first humans Wilamelee is not afraid of."

Leo could see that those few words strained her. "And we love you. We owe our lives to you."

"Love? Wilamelee is beginning to understand what that word means." Her voice was a mere whisper. "It feels good." A faint smile flickered across her lips.

"And through you I'm beginning to understand what it means to be loyal and..." Before he'd even finished the sentence, her eyes were closed and she was sleeping again, the smile still lingering on her lips.

61 *Evening before the Storm*

“Looks like it’s going to be quite some storm!” Mr. Temple looked out the window, put down the newspaper and poured himself another cup of tea. “Flash flood warnings have been posted for the entire city region and beyond. We’re in for some fun.” He smiled and sipped his tea as another hefty gust of wind rattled the shutters.

“As I was listening to the news earlier, the forecasters were saying the worst of it will hit us in the early morning hours,” Mrs. Temple added. “The storm is moving up the coast toward us, gathering momentum.”

The three children sat on the carpet in front of the fish tank, drinking lemonade and eating cranberry scones. From the moment they awoke from their afternoon nap and heard the distant rumble of thunder, they knew that the time had come. Leo and Julie had quickly run up to the roof to dismantle the tent while Annabel helped Mr. Temple prepare afternoon tea. Secretly she hoped that at least another day would pass before they’d have to set out on yet another quest.

Now, they sat cross-legged on the carpet, wondering what the night would bring. In between they secretly looked over at Wilamee. She was still lying in her cozy bed of leaves under the conch, sleeping deeply. Some of her color had returned.

“So, how about a game of Monopoly?” Mr. Temple asked, smiling, clapping his hands together and looking over at the children. “No need to look so glum.” The children immediately jumped at the idea, and Leo, who loved any and all board games, ran off to get the well-used cardboard box.

By now it was so dim outside that Mrs. Temple switched on the lights. Thunder and lightning were fast approaching.

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“Quite foreboding,” Mr. Temple quipped, still smiling. “But now to the game. I’m gonna make you guys pay, so you’d all better watch out. Julie, you can be the banker.”

“I’m in no mood for playing,” Mrs. Temple said, retreating to the bedroom with her laptop. “I’m feeling unusually tired, but I still want to work on my research project for a while. So it’s fix-your-own tonight, in case anybody’s feeling hungry.”

They played for over an hour with a great deal of laughter, especially when Mr. Temple landed in jail or on one of the children’s properties, loaded with green houses or red hotels, which happened often. Mr. Temple, as always, ended up losing, though he loved to trash talk before and during any game. Playing took their minds off the upcoming adventure, until a huge bolt of lightning, followed immediately by a terrific thunderclap interrupted their mirth. The entire building shook, and the lights flickered for a moment and then went dead.

“No worries, I’ll light some candles. It’ll be romantic.” Mr. Temple lit a match, winked at the children, and got up. “Time to pack up, kids. We’ve almost come to the end of our game, anyway. Count the money, and whoever has the most is the winner. And we all know it’s Julie.” Mr. Temple went out into the hallway to get the candles.

As soon as he was gone Curly Beard appeared on the coffee table, looking grim and determined. He was wearing Wellingtons and a green raincoat. “We have to leave as soon as you are ready. The Queen has sent us this storm. We cannot let her down.” At that moment Mr. Temple returned carrying a box of candles. “I’ll be waiting at the boat—hurry!” And gone he was. The dwarf’s disappearance coincided with another loud roll of thunder, as if to accentuate the gravity of the moment.

“Dad, can Annabel sleep here tonight?”

“That’s fine by me.” He yawned, twisted one of the new candles into the bronze candle holder and lit it. “But you’ll have to ask Mom.” He yawned again.

“What? Again?” Mrs. Temple asked, appearing from the bedroom, holding a flickering candle. “But it’s fine with me if Aunt Miriam does not mind. We love having you here, Annabel,” and she patted the girl on the shoulder.

“Thanks, Mom, you’re the best,” Julie said, jumping up and giving her mother a hug. “Oh, and can we eat in the bedroom, seeing as all the lights are out? It’ll be like having a midnight feast.”

Seeing her hesitate, Leo pleaded, “Mom, come on, it’s still vacation. Let us have some fun together.”

Mrs. Temple looked at the children quizzically before giving an answer. “Fine, but first you go down to Annabel’s aunt and see if it’s okay with her.”

“Oh, she’ll let me sleep over,” Annabel said, laughing. “Come on then. Let’s go and ask her.”

It wasn’t difficult to persuade Aunt Miriam. But just as they were about to leave, she said, “Wait! Annabel, why are you only using one crutch?”

Not wanting to lie or spend time giving a roundabout answer, she said, “My legs are feeling a lot stronger, so I’m trying to go with only one.” And in truth, her legs had begun to feel stronger since the beginning of the adventure. But she felt guilty for having lost three crutches.

“Hmm, fine, but take care.”

“Good save, Annabel,” Julie laughed as they climbed back upstairs. “Now let’s get the spare mattress and make you a nice bed in the middle of the room.”

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“Oh, I wish it weren’t just for show and I really could have a good night’s sleep.”

“Once this is all over we’ll have a real sleepover, without any adventures, just us hanging out—promise,” Julie assured her.

Five minutes later Mr. Temple entered their bedroom with a tray. “I fixed you a midnight feast—some sandwiches, corn chips and dip.” Mr. Temple placed the tray on the carpet. “Now don’t you stay up till midnight, and take care not to get crumbs all over the floor.”

“We won’t, Dad. Thanks,” Leo said, grabbing a sandwich.

“And watch those candles. We don’t want a fire, now do we?” He smiled and added, “Remember, I don’t want to come back to tell you to be quiet. Mom’s already in bed, so don’t disturb her. We’re both really tired.”

“We promise to be quiet,” Julie assured him.

The moment they were alone, Curly Beard appeared again, together with Grilpy, who was dressed in a yellow anorak and blue rubber boots. “Oh, Grilpy, you’re here as well!” Annabel exclaimed. “I’m so glad to see you. Where have you been?”

“No time for questions,” Curly Beard said. “We have to go—now!”

“Can’t we just finish our sandwiches?” Leo asked, biting into his cheese and tomato sandwich.

“No, but you can bring them along.” Reluctantly Leo put down his sandwich, but not before taking one more huge bite. Annabel hastily wrapped them up in paper napkins.

“But we can’t go yet. Mom and Dad are still awake. They might check on us.” Julie looked worried.

“No they won’t. Didn’t you notice how tired they were? Earlier on I put some drops in their tea. They’re really drowsy,

trust me. The darkness will make them feel even more tired. No, they'll be fast asleep in a few minutes. Even the loudest thunder won't wake them."

To be on the safe side, they stuffed the blankets with clothes and were ready to go. Julie took the boat and was just about to uncork the bottle when they heard soft singing.

"What's that?" Annabel asked. They all stopped and listened. It was barely audible and they wondered from where it was coming. It sounded like the soft strains from a lyre or bowed psaltery.

"I know what it is," Curly Beard said. "It is Wilamelee. She's singing, saying she wants to come along."

"But she's too weak. She almost died last night," Julie said, looking anxious.

"Yes, but she wants to go with us."

"What should we do?" Annabel asked, concerned for little Wilamelee, whose life was hanging by a thread.

"Bring her along," Curly Beard advised. "Why not? It might even give her strength. And I think we'll be very glad that she's along."

"But if she dies, then it will be our fault."

"All of life is one big *if*," Curly Beard said. "Now, are you going to fetch her or not?"

"I'll get her." Leo opened the door and softly tiptoed into the living room. He was surprised that his parents had already retired to their bedroom. Wilamelee was waiting for him, sitting up in her little cot under the shell. She smiled at Leo.

"Thanks for taking Wilamelee along. She won't let you down. Must go, even if it..." Leo did not let her finish her sentence, but gently lifted her into the crook of his arm and

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carried her back to the others, still wrapped in Annabel's thin silk sash. Julie uncorked the bottle, the boat sailed out, and all six of them boarded.

"Now tell me exactly what Queen Marquellamoosh told you." Curly Beard sat by the tiller, his brow furrowed, eyes flashing. "Did she give you any instructions?" Julie told him in detail about seeking the seven reservoirs, creating the whirlpools, and having to enter into the belly of the shrew.

"The belly of the shrew!" He sighed. "Well, if that's what she instructed and if there's no other way, then to the belly of the shrew we will go." At once the Swan Boat, with its unlikely crew of three children, two dwarfs and a water sprite, sailed off to meet the storm.

part eight



Storm and Dance

62 ❁ *Over the Edge*

Instead of going down a manhole, drainpipe or sink, Curly Beard ordered the boat to sail through the open window and head north over the city. Even though the ethmaroll was firmly shut, Julie checked to make sure it would not fly open by accident. Thunder and lightning flashed and crashed all around them. Grilpy, seeing the children's fear, assured them they were safe. Below them the city lights sparkled and the streets were filled with traffic. But their attention was captured by the ceaseless display of lightning as, with a mix of excitement and trepidation, they peered into the sky. "They're having fun, aren't they?" Grilpy smiled.

"Who?" all three children asked.

"Them," and he pointed up and around. As the children looked more closely, they made out huge figures hurling and casting lightning bolts and guffawing as they did so with roars that issued from deep inside their cloud-gullets. The sky was like a massive football stadium with giants playing with lightning instead of a ball.

"I haven't seen them this active in years." Grilpy leaned back against the mast and stared as the storm-behemoths, thousands of times his size, thrashed it out.

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“Queen Marquellamoosh gave them her blessing, and they are allowed to do whatever they choose – without any restrictions,” Wilamelee said, sitting up for the first time, looking excited, her cheeks glowing green. The growing might of the storm infused her with new life. “Usually the Queen limits their activity, but not this time.” Wilamelee was smiling now, and she looked like she wanted to join them. Indeed, other sprites could be seen darting and dashing between the explosive flashes.

“Of course, it will be tough for some people,” Curly Beard remarked pensively.

“What do you mean?” Julie asked.

“Flooding. There’ll be a lot of flooding. But it is necessary if we want to clean up the water. And only a huge storm is going to get rid of the binagatorials.” The children felt overwhelmingly small and insignificant in the face of this tempest. Annabel reached for Julie’s hand, and Leo was fidgeting with one of his rubber bands.

The city’s downtown was nestled in the foothills of a large mountain that embraced the city with two large arms stretching to the right and left. The children wondered why they were flying toward the mountain, but they didn’t ask and just stared up at the storm’s unfolding spectacle. Initially the lightning flashed once every few minutes, but now, every second, hundreds of bolts lashed through the sky. It was as though someone had switched on a gigantic strobe light.

As they approached the mountain, Curly Beard steered the boat toward Cliff Lake. It was a popular weekend retreat, large enough to allow for fishing, water-skiing, swimming and boating. There were two campgrounds, one on either side, and numerous picnic areas. The children had never been there but

had always wanted to go. Now the rain beat down hard and fast, and the wind lashed across the lake's serrated surface.

"The water level has risen even faster than I thought," Curly Beard noted. "It will spill over the edge within minutes. We'll go to Shrew Falls and hover around there till it does." The children had heard stories of these falls. Most of the time it was just a massive cliff face, but with every large storm it transformed into a spectacular waterfall. It got its name because of the water's peculiar screech and roar whenever it gushed over the jutting cliffs—like a ranting, raving woman. Over the years, every so often, a few people had had the misfortune to be washed over the edge during a flash flood, their bodies never found—eaten by the shrew, as the saying went.

"Why do we want to go to Shrew Falls?" Annabel asked, well aware of all the dreadful stories. She feared the worst. "Don't you know that nobody's ever survived these falls?"

"I do, and it's because the water disappears into a subterranean river that drains into the underwater system of the city. And if people plunge over the edge and fall into the vast hole at the bottom of the cliff, they get pulled along by the strong current of the underground river."

"So, you mean we're going to let ourselves be sucked down there?" Julie asked. It suddenly dawned on the children what Queen Marquellamoosh had meant by instructing Curly Beard to enter into the belly of the shrew—and they didn't like the idea one little bit.

"It's the only way. There are many pockets of binagatorials that have to be dislodged. If we can budge the ones further up, then it will be easier to get rid of the others, especially the hordes down in the Sacred Cavern."

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“And we’d better get down there right now,” Grilpy yelled over the noise of the storm. “The water is beginning to spill over the edge. We can’t wait too long, because if there’s too much water, we won’t be able to create the whirlpools.”

“Right you are,” Curly Beard confirmed. They landed on the water. Instantly the current took hold of the boat, and Curly Beard lifted the tiller to increase their size a little. “The force of the water will lead us to the selected chambers. But there is no guarantee. Even I might get lost. Finding the right tunnel after creating the whirlpool will be extremely tricky. There are so many of them. So we’ll just have to rely on the current to direct us on our way.”

“No! Wilamelee can make it easier for everybody.” She stood up and skipped to the boat’s prow. “Let Wilamelee out. Must lead you. You can’t rely on the current alone. Too easy to miss a few pockets of binagatorials.”

“You can’t go out in this terrible storm,” Julie said, horrified at the thought. You haven’t recovered enough. You’re too weak.”

“Water is home. The storm gives Wilamelee strength. All the lightning, thunder and churning waters are more invigorating than even the purest dewdrops. No, Wilamelee can do this. She wants to free friends, locked up as they are in the vile binagatorials. Let Wilamelee out!”

“Go, my little watery friend,” Curly Beard said, almost like a blessing, as he drew back the ethmaroll for just a moment. At once the rain lashed into them.

Wilamelee was gone in a flash, and they could see her small form flitting over the water like a tiny dolphin—her skin gleaming and sparkling with every flash of lightning. She swam

to the edge, looked around, beckoned them to follow and was pulled over the edge.

“Strap up and hold on tight! We’re going over too,” Curly Beard shouted. The children screamed as they once again plummeted into the depths.

63  *Spinning in Circles*

Their landing was softened somewhat by the upsurge of spray at the bottom of the waterfall. For a few seconds they balanced precariously at the top of the fountain until they were sucked into the tongue of water that flushed them underground. Like a torpedo, they hurtled along the natural tunnel.

“Keep an eye open for Wilamee,” Curly Beard shouted. “By now she knows her way around here better than anybody else. She has explored every pipe, tunnel, canal, reservoir and underground lake in her attempt to find out exactly how many binagatorials there are and where they gather.

“And they always stick together like a herd of hippos or a pod of seals,” Grilpy added. Curly Beard nodded. “As Queen Marquellamoosh implied, they are located in seven places, each one bigger than the previous one. The herd in the Sacred Caverns is the biggest. And it is also a reason why nobody ever finds them, because as soon as people approach, they quickly retreat to another location. But they return as soon as the extermination crews give up or move to another area. No, the binagatorials aren’t that easy for humans to track down.” Curly Beard shook his head for emphasis. “And besides, it has hardly ever happened.” Though the boat was hurtling through the dark, Curly Beard and Grilpy appeared calm.

“That’s why they remain an urban legend,” Julie whispered, almost to herself, her heart beating fast.

Wilamee jumped onto the boat’s prow, clasping the neck of the swan, and waved three times through the ethmaroll and then leaped back into the water. She flew in and out of the water ahead of the boat at a tremendous speed until she

reached the tip of the watery tongue that surged down the underground tunnel. All three children gasped at the sight. There was nothing to suggest that she'd been deathly ill just a few hours earlier.

"She's trying to tell us that we're coming to the first reservoir," Curly Beard shouted. The boat flew over the edge of a small waterfall and catapulted into the first chamber. Dozens of binagatorials lazed on the rocky protrusions on the side, oblivious to the imminent flood. Just as in the Sacred Cavern, young ones hung suspended from the rocky roof.

Wilamelee jumped onto the boat's anchor and made a circular motion with her hands. Immediately she jumped off again, gesturing them to follow her. She began swimming in circles, faster and faster, to the amazement of all. Curly Beard lifted the tiller slightly to increase their size and followed as closely as possible.

As they raced around they created a whirlpool of increasing force. The rising floodwater pummeled the outer edges of the cave and ripped the unsuspecting binagatorials from their resting places and into the maelstrom. Not one of them could resist the pull of the revolving water.

Still the water rose, and the rush of the swirling mass got louder and louder. Eventually it hit the ceiling, tore off the dangling binagatorials like flimsy old wasps' nests and sucked them into the vortex. As soon as the last one was dislodged, Curly Beard shouted, "Done! Now let's get out of here. Everybody look out for Wilamelee."

"There she is," Annabel yelled, spotting Wilamelee in a rocky niche. The nymph pointed down and dove into the raging torrent.

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“We have to follow her.” At Curly Beard’s command the boat plunged after her.

All around them they saw helpless binagatorials swept along by the relentless current. “They haven’t got a chance!”

“Don’t get sidetracked by the binagatorials. Keep your eyes open for Wilamelee. We need to find the entrance to the next tunnel, and all the spinning water will make it tricky to find. We could easily crash into the walls from the sheer force of the water.”

Wilamelee flew back onto the prow of the boat, and again pointed down. “We have to go even deeper.” A few feet farther down, she pointed to her left and disappeared. Curly Beard yanked the tiller abruptly to the left. There was a bang as they hit the wall, but they’d made it into the tunnel. Leo was sure that the swan figurehead flinched.

“No damage done. One down and six to go,” Grilpy shouted, dancing a little jig, and tugging his beard in joy.

“Are you sure we got them all?” Leo asked.

“Almost positive! What’s more, none will survive for long because their herd mentality will make them follow the others, even to their deaths.” Curly Beard stabilized the boat, and it was a relief not to be going in circles anymore.

Seconds later Wilamelee jumped back onto the boat and stood by the exquisitely carved, raised stempost, urging them to speed up. It was important to catch all the binagatorials by surprise. Otherwise they might slink off into some side chambers or tunnels that lead deep into the earth, and then the success of their undertaking might fail. In this time of need the children witnessed just how fast the boat could go. It advanced with rocket speed. Wilamelee held onto the boat’s

swan figurehead, and together they made an inspiring pair, her hair fluttering furiously behind her, as they both stared forward into the water's unabated fury.

Within a minute they reached the front of the flash flood's tongue, and the boat could ride the wave. Wilamelee lifted her arm in triumph, turned around and made a circular motion with her hands. "We're coming to the second binagatorial stronghold," Grilpy yelled.

"Get ready for the next merry-go-round," Curly Beard shouted above the watery din.

"Oh no, I haven't yet recovered from the last one," Julie said, feeling queasy.

"Me neither," Leo added. "I think I'm going to be sick."

"Here we go," Curly Beard laughed. He was clearly enjoying this roller-coaster ride. The tongue of water hurtled them over the edge of another overhang and they fell into the second reservoir. Once more he pulled up the tiller to increase their size. As soon as they resurfaced, Curly Beard drove the boat in circles, chasing the slight, but swift form of Wilamelee and creating an even more powerful whirlpool. The binagatorials had no idea what hit them and were easily swept out of their chamber.

Overcome with nausea, Julie retreated into the cabin, where she retched uncontrollably into the round, copper sink beside the bed. Leo followed close behind her. Both lay sprawled on the bunk beds, with their heads over the edge, holding on tightly to the bedposts. Surprisingly, only Annabel seemed immune to the dizzying ride.

In the meantime, they raced along, creating one powerful whirlpool after another, methodically flooding the creatures'

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citadels. Each one was larger, and the chaos greater, the binagatorials bashing into one another, together with their desperate bellowing and trumpeting. Curly Beard pulled up the tiller a little more each time to enlarge the boat a little more, which increased the power of the whirlpools. Wilamelee guided them confidently from one reservoir to the next, always urging them on to race to the tip of the flash flood's tongue so that they could continue taking the binagatorials by surprise. Thousands were swept along by the tough current.

By the time they reached the Great Cavern of the Tombs, the binagatorials had been warned and were trying to escape. But it was too late. The torrents of water were so fast and strong that even the monsters who had escaped into side tunnels were washed out.

For Julie and Leo this last part of their topsy-turvy journey was a pure nightmare. Leo was knocked off the bed and lay on the floor, still holding on to the bedpost with both his hands and feet. Julie, hanging onto the side of the sink, continued to vomit sporadically, though nothing came out anymore. By now the children's vision was blurred, but they could not block out the head-splitting roar of the rushing water. Through the clamor they occasionally heard Curly Beard or Grilpy shout commands or warnings. Binagatorials constantly battered the boat, and it sounded like the ceaseless firing of cannonballs. "When will it ever stop?" they both wondered, as they whirled round and round and raced through the widening tunnels at tremendous speed.

Of the children, only Annabel witnessed the dislodging and final clearing of the largest reservoir. Clutching onto her crutch while lying face up on the deck, she'd wedged it between

the mast and the bench to serve as a safety bar. Through the ethmaroll she saw thousands of binagatorials swept out of their reservoirs and carried out the widening tunnels.

It was only when Annabel peered into the cabin that the two sick children realized the boat had come to rest and that the noise had stopped. “You have to come out and see this. It’s unbelievable. It’s... it’s—oh, I don’t know—incredible!”

“Not now. I feel awful.” Julie moaned. Leo opened his eyes like a lost, confused rabbit and looked up at Annabel.

“No, really, you have to come and see what’s happening. You *must!*”

64  *The Sky and Water Dance*

As soon as they stumbled out of the cabin, Grilpy gave them a piece of root to chew on, which helped to restore their strength and wits. The moment they beheld the extraordinary sight in front of them, they forgot how sick they were and simply stared.

The boat nestled in a grassy bank on top of a hill overlooking a turbulent ocean. In the valley behind them was the great Nedebaz River, into which they'd drained. The rushing river had sprung all its banks, flooding huge tracts of farmlands. Together with the binagatorials, the valiant crew had been washed toward the ocean, many miles from the city. From their lofty vantage point on the hill, they saw tens of thousands of the puffed up, pale white binagatorials, bobbing on the surface of the water, lit up by the constant flash of lightning. But something most remarkable was happening to them.

The rains had slowed down to a steady drizzle, though the clouds were still crouching low. And from these dense clouds little bolts of lightning shot forth, each one zapping a binagatorial. As soon as the creature was struck, it exploded in a sparkle of colors that rose high into the sky, scattered and disappeared like a flock of little hummingbirds. Out of the midst of every one of these swarms, they saw something familiar.

“Oh, look, it's Wilamelee,” Annabel shouted.

“There she is again—and there, and there!” Leo cried with excitement.

“They might look like Wilamelee, but they are all water beings, each one slightly different if you get up close,” the cheerful water sprite said, clapping her tiny, webbed hands.

“What’s happening?” Julie looked in amazement at the spectacle.

“Every time a binagatorial is struck by lightning, a little nymph is set free.” Curly Beard was smiling, taking great joy in the event’s unfolding.

And so it was! This time, however, it was the children of the cloud giants who hurled little spears of light down at the mouth of the expansive river, frothing with binagatorials. “Look how colorfully they explode. It looks like each spark is alive.” Leo stomped his feet on the deck, unable to contain his excitement at the sight.

“Every bit of color you see *is* alive. The explosions have attracted thousands of tiny sylphs, who love to play in the sparks. They are sharing the happiness of the nymphs.” Both Grilpy and Curly Beard were sitting on the boat’s prow, dangling their legs, smoking their pipes, taking delight in the display in front of them. Wilamelee sat between them, leaning against the regal figurehead of the swan.

“This is like the best fireworks I’ve ever seen.” Leo’s mouth hung open and he stared at the ongoing explosions—up to a hundred a second. The bright sparks lit up the clouds, making them into massive lanterns. It thrilled him to watch the brood of cloud children casting down the tiny lightning bolts. They, in turn, came in all shapes and sizes, and took on different forms, depending on how they chose to throw the bolts. Some lightning bits were thrown like a spear or lance, others skimmed across the water like skipping stones before hitting their mark. Or they were flung like thin, sharp darts that went straight to their targets. Some curved in beautiful arcs or did loops. Some made sounds, ranging from high-pitched sirens to low purrs and even little melodies if they zigzagged to their mark as each

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sharp turn became another tone. Some were rhythmic, others harmonic. Not one lightning strike was the same in sound, shape or size.

But the most moving observation, especially for Annabel, who loved all creatures and even took pity on the binagatorials, was that the binagatorials would break out in laughter the moment they were struck by lightning. For in that split second, before the sylphs descended to welcome the nymphs, the binagatorials rejoiced – glad to be relieved of their onerous existence. No, it was not a massacre, but a celebration.

The skies cleared as the numbers of binagatorials dwindled, and gradually the clouds rose and dispersed, making way for the stars and moon. The moon looked like a smiling boat, hovering in the sky. Here and there some lone, low clouds still flew close to the water like clumsy dirigibles from which the cloud children flung the last of their lightning spears until every single binagatorial had burst with a rush of sparkles.

At that moment the host of newly-freed nymphs cheered and broke out into song that was as simple as it was beautiful. As their silvery, clear voices rose into the air, the water sprites joined hands and began to dance on and in the water. They moved slowly in circles and lemniscates until they formed a gigantic five-petaled rose, which steadily changed into a six-pointed star. The forms became increasingly complex and their unfurling melodies warmed the night air.

From above, the dance was answered by the colorful swarms of sylphs in the sky, mirroring and complementing the flowery patterns of the water sprites. The sylphs too began to sing, echoing the harmonies of the nymphs, though the airy voices were higher and more decorative, like the songs of nightingales

and larks. Schools of fish, knowing that something special had come to pass, became streams of flames, swimming just beneath the glowing surface of the ocean. And beyond the nymphs' dance, dolphins, trailing showers of gold, shot out of the illuminated water.

The children felt someone take hold of their hands. It was Wilamelee, and she was dancing, bidding them to join in. Her movements were slow and fluid, and they imitated her. Although Leo had never danced before, he was so mesmerized by all that was going on that he let his body take over. Wilamelee even got the dwarfs to dance. At first the two sturdy dwarfs were reluctant, but when they saw Annabel dancing as best she could, supported by her crutch, they smiled and joined in.

And so they danced on the deck of the boat, together with all the sylphs and newly-freed nymphs around them. Annabel laughed. "Your words have come true, Wilamelee. After you told us how to get to the King of the Dwarfs, you said we would all dance together when we met again—and you were right."

When they thought they'd seen and heard it all, they spotted a phosphorescent cloud on the horizon and pools of light approaching swiftly from deep under the ocean. The whole host of water nymphs parted to the left and right and fell into silence as did the sylphs up above. The ocean surface burst and the burnished mist parted, revealing Queen Marquellamoosh in all her glory. She was accompanied by a shimmering multitude of beings that came to a halt right in front of them, their lofty forms reaching up to the sylphs in the sky.

65 ❁ *Parting and Words of Good Wishes*

The Queen lifted her head and webbed hands in greeting, and then, to their amazement, gently bowed down in front of them and said, “The six of you have shown admirable courage in the face of a most difficult challenge. You have helped to release thousands of binagatorials from their terrible plight, and in so doing, you have given new life to innumerable nymphs.”

Julie immediately wanted to respond that they had only accompanied Curly Beard, Grilpy and Wilamelee. And Leo felt they’d gotten in the way most of the time. As for Annabel, she thought the whole adventure was a tremendous gift, and she was humbled and honored to have been part of it. But none of them uttered one word, overcome with the gravity of the moment.

A hush fell over the entire gathering as the Queen spoke. Even the waves calmed down to listen. “You have achieved more than you can imagine. You children might think you have not done much, but it is of great significance that you wanted to help, tried to help and, indeed, did help. That counts for much in our uncertain times.” The Queen paused and a wave of light pulsed from her head along her entire body down to beneath the ocean. “You had the will to take action and because of that, you have taken a great step toward making all of us more visible to humans and to each other.

“Today marks the beginning of great changes to come. The unseen world has been convinced that it is worthwhile to reveal ourselves to humans. May our bond continue to grow.” Again she paused. Nothing moved. All were listening. Even the fish in the ocean had stopped swimming. The silence was like a grand

suspended breath. “Children, we honor your help and for that you may each have one heartfelt wish which we will help you to fulfill.”

Annabel immediately thought of her long lost brother and wished he were safe and that she could see him again. To her embarrassment, she also thought how wonderful it would be to have strong legs again, to walk around freely, without constantly having to hobble around or rely on crutches. She lowered her head at the thought. Julie and Leo both wanted to be back on Honey Creek Farm or, at least, to be able to return to it whenever they chose. When they looked at one another they knew they shared the same longing.

“There’s no need to speak. We have heard your wishes,” said the Queen in a sing-song voice.

“Little Annabel,” the Queen continued in her imposing, yet friendly, gurgling voice. “Look for the flower garden where fire and water cross. In the eye of that cross, your legs will regain their rightful strength.”

“And now to you, Leo and Julie,” the Queen continued, smiling down at them, “you will be able to return to your cherished farm when the dwarf’s lost key with the seven purple petals has been found.”

“That’s been lost for eons,” declared Curly Beard, “and all the searching by the greatest tracking dwarfs has not located that holy key of the ancient kings. Does that mean there’s hope?”

“There is always hope. Your newfound friends will be of great help to you in the finding of that relic.” Curly Beard bowed, for he understood. “The granting of these wishes will not come easily, nor are they guaranteed. We can help, but

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it will still depend on you to carry them out. If you fail on the way, or give up, then your wishes will not be fulfilled—not because of us, but because of you.”

The Queen noticed the children’s anxiousness at once. “Take courage in the words of Queen Marquellamoosh. Every day life promises you a new day. Likewise, we promise you the fulfillment of the wishes that are deeply harbored within your hearts, but only if you pursue them. Know that we will always stand behind you in that great endeavor. People easily forget their deepest wishes, or get distracted. Humans especially have a hard time distinguishing between flights of fancy and true wishes. The one is an illusion to serve the self, and the other is a vision for the good of all.”

Annabel still looked unhappy. She had not heard a word of encouragement about her brother. Might he be dead? She dared not speak.

“We have heard you, sweet Annabel,” the Queen added in a gentle voice, leaning forward ever so slightly. “Whether the two of you will be reunited will depend more on your brother than on you. You will meet him, but you might not recognize each other.” The Queen looked almost sad as she uttered those words.

“Before we depart, a word to the dwarfs. Your help has strengthened and enlivened the bond between our two realms, which in turn, will benefit everyone in these doubtful times. We are grateful and in your debt. Call on us if you are ever in need.”

Queen Marquellamoosh paused before directing her gaze to Wilamelee. “And on behalf of all the water sprites and all the creatures of the sea, I thank you. You have proven yourself

most worthy in these recent events, and you will be needed in the future. Until then, accept this gift.” Two water sprites immediately flew down to Wilamelee and, around her neck, placed a necklace made from the most sparkling of the Queen’s tears.

All the nymphs cheered, which sounded like the ringing of many thousands of little bells. The water frothed golden with the splash of tiny, webbed hands beating the surface of the ocean. Wilamelee blushed and turned deep green, bowing her head in joy. “Water sprites around the world await your leadership!” the Queen continued. This was received with another round of cheers from all the nymphs and sylphs.

At that moment a huge gust of wind swept in from the north, south, east and west, creating a great whirlwind. The children’s hair was blown haphazardly in all directions and the ocean grew rough, cresting with white-capped waves. Seconds later a colossal, diaphanous figure became visible above them. Though the Queen of the Waters was large, she was dwarfed by the four-headed giant above all of them.

“I am the Wind of the North, East, South and West,” the four huge heads spoke in chorus. “Messenger sylphs have blown into my ears and informed me of everything that has happened here tonight. I am pleased at the news. Very pleased! Call on me if you ever need my help.” And with that the four heads separated again and flew off in the four cardinal directions— with a host of sylphs in tow.

The Queen of the Waters smiled at the quick appearance and disappearance act. “My father was never one to stay very long in any one place. But now you also have The High One as a friend and ally. He was skeptical, but is convinced now that

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humans can be helpful. His approval is a great gift, you can be assured of that.” She beamed down at the six little heroes. “We too must now depart. However, not before all of us give thanks to one more selfless hero in our midst.”

Everybody wondered who she could be talking about. The children and the dwarfs looked at one another questioningly. “Without her, none of this would have been possible. Please raise your voices to show your gratitude for the Swan, the bold and gallant boat that served this mission so nobly.” As thousands of voices, the loudest of which were the three children, cheered for the little boat, the majestic swan smiled and the whole boat bowed.

“Now remember, children: This is only the beginning of great changes to come, and you have set that change in motion. Hope has become a reality. Farewell for now, my gentle warriors – and know that wherever there is water, we will be close by.” With that Queen Marquellamoosh vanished in a vaporous cloud and sank beneath the ocean. The thousands of freed water nymphs followed, swimming, jumping and flying after her. The water danced with their renewed life.

Standing between Leo and Julie, Annabel put her arms around their shoulders. She’d found not only two new friends, but thousands more. Julie and Leo put their arms around Annabel’s waist.

Likewise, Wilamelee put her emerald-arms around the shoulders of the two dwarfs. “Wilamelee must also leave. There are many long-lost friends she wants to talk to.” With that she stepped forward, faced the children, spat in her hands and rubbed their faces, which refreshed them right away, right down to their bones, with an inner warmth and clarity. It felt like a blessing. “Not only did you save Wilamelee, but you showed her

what love is. Love—it's like vivified water, only much stronger," and she gurgled with pleasure. "May our streams meet again." With those parting words she waved to the children, dwarfs and swan, and dove gracefully from the steep embankment into the ocean below and was gone.

They sat a long time, listening to the waves breaking against the shore. Annabel remembered the sandwiches they'd brought along and handed them out to Julie and Leo. Glad of the victuals, they ate in silence until the glow on the water's surface had completely faded and only the clear light of the moon and stars remained.

At last Curly Beard broke the silence. "Time for us to depart as well." He got up and sat down by the tiller. He patted the boat lovingly on the hull. "Indeed, the binagatorials have been freed, and we couldn't have done it without you."

"Here, here," the others shouted and clapped once more in appreciation, patting and stroking the boat. The boat's rigging jingled in joy and slowly it rose, sailing over the flooded, low-lying lands in the direction of the city.

When they reached the city, they did not pull up the ethmaroll, but enjoyed sailing quietly over the dark metropolis that had not seen such a dramatic night in years. It was over now, nothing much was going on except for some utility crews working to restore power. No traffic, no planes, no crowds on the sidewalks, no lights. Just silence—a serene silence.

And no more binagatorials underneath this liberated city. But that was a glorious secret only they knew about. They sailed back into the bedroom, said goodbye to Grilpy and Curly Beard, put the boat back into the bottle, corked it, slipped into bed and fell fast asleep.

66  *The Next Morning*

Something was different. Julie looked around. Annabel and Leo were still sleeping peacefully on either side of her. A shaft of bright sunlight shone into the room. The boat in the bottle lay on the fleece by the window, and the intricately carved gemstones reflected the light in many colors. Trying to hold onto the wondrous dream, she stretched and yawned, when she suddenly remembered what had happened during the night and that it hadn't been a dream at all. A feeling of well-being flowed through her heart. But something was different.

Then she realized. It was the silence. Usually she heard the traffic outside—cars, trucks, police sirens, shouting—or her mother, rummaging around in the kitchen! At that moment Sidney whimpered and pawed against the crate in which he spent the nights because he still wasn't fully house-trained. "That's strange. Mom would have let him out long ago," she mumbled to herself.

She got up quietly and went out into the vacant living room. The door to her parents' bedroom was still closed—most unusual. Sidney began pawing more frantically at the crate door, accompanied by little yelps. "Oh, you poor, little dog! Looks like nobody's taken you outside yet," Julie cried, quickly going into the kitchen to let the dog out. Too late, he'd already soaked his mat.

On his release, he immediately slobbered all over her. His tail thumped against the refrigerator and knocked over a basket of beans that had been left on the three-legged stool. "Oh, you silly dog," Julie cried, picking up the beans. Sidney looked up at her with his doleful eyes, which said, "Breakfast, yes? Now!" Julie knew better than to make Sidney wait. She threw him a

crust of bread to chew on while she got his bowl ready. Once that was taken care of, she went back to the living room and gently opened the bedroom door of her parents' room. The blinds were still down, and both of them were fast asleep. Finding it odd she whispered, "Mom? Dad? Are you okay? Why aren't you up yet?"

After a few grunts and groans, Mr. Temple asked, "Why? What time is it?"

"I don't know. She looked over to the digital alarm clock, but it was blank. Glancing over her shoulder at the clock on the mantelpiece she noticed with a start how late it was. "Almost 9:50."

"Impossible, we never sleep this long." He looked at his wristwatch. "You're right! Oh no, I'm late for a meeting," and he jumped up and ran off to the bathroom. Julie smiled as she thought of Curly Beard and the magic drops that he'd put into their tea the night before.

Julie returned to the bedroom. Leo and Annabel were still fast asleep. When she looked out the window, she gasped. "Mom, Dad, have you looked outside yet?" She ran back to the living room, pulled aside the curtains of the big window and peered out. "Mom, Dad, you've got to have a look at this!"

"What is it, dear?" Fastening the burgundy robe around her waist, Mrs. Temple ran to her side. She was about to say something, but when she looked outside, she just gave a little helpless squeal. After a slight pause she shouted, "Honey, don't worry about being late for work. Just come here."

Mr. Temple stepped out of the bathroom, his chin lathered in shaving cream. He looked outside, laughed and said, "Blow up the dingy! Let's go for a boat ride."

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Most of the streets were under water. The cars had water up to their door handles. The entire park was one large lake with treetops sticking out and a few islands here and there. The water reached up to the mane of Lion's Rock. "It sure did rain last night. What a downpour, and to think I slept right through it. Unbelievable!"

"That's why the alarm didn't go off. We don't have any electricity."

"Still, that we slept so long and through the storm is a bit uncanny." Shaking his head, Mr. Temple returned to the bathroom to finish shaving.

"What's going on?" Leo rubbed his eyes and came to the window.

"Look! There are already a couple of people in a kayak, paddling along the streets."

"Wow, Annabel, you've got to have a look at this."

Leo ran back, helped her up and handed her the crutch. "Thanks," she said, smiling kindly at Leo as they walked over to the window.

For many of the city's children, the flooding was more like a celebration. While it lasted, they played in the water, made homemade rafts and enjoyed the streets turned into canals, free of traffic. For the adults, however, it was a tremendous burden. Basements and apartments on the ground and first floors had to be pumped out. Most houses in the suburbs were flooded. The damage was incalculable. It took three days before the water finally receded, and weeks before the basements and cellars were dried out. Some areas were without power for more than two weeks.

In the higher elevations, life resumed to normal the next day, but the downtown was closed to traffic until the fourth

day. The subway system was shut down for ten days, which left many commuters stranded and scrambling to get around.

Nevertheless, everybody remarked how fresh the air felt and how remarkably clear the water was. Scientists were quick to publish articles on the reasons why. A cleansing had taken place, and people sensed it. There was even talk about the “sewage monsters.” One newspaper report contended that if there’d been any truth to the stories, some of them would have been washed out into the streets or into the Nebedaz River. But none were ever found. How ridiculous! The very idea of creatures living in the sewage system under the city, and so they remained an urban legend.

But Julie, Leo and Annabel knew better.

67  *Sealed Scroll*

The three children had not heard from Curly Beard or Grilpy since the night of the storm. Weeks went by and they thought they'd never see them again. Nor did they have any wish to sail in their little bottle swan but preferred to use a normal paddle boat on the park lake that was back to its normal size again. On one occasion they even went with their parents up to Cliff Lake, together with Annabel and her aunt Miriam. They rented a boat and rowed out close to the edge of Shrew Falls.

But now it was not dangerous, and no water poured over the fierce-looking cliff from which the lake got its name. They fell silent, all of them thinking about what had happened just a few weeks earlier. Mostly they thought of Curly Beard, Grilpy and Wilamelee. It was almost a relief when Leo said, "Let's go back and have our picnic. I'm starving."

At the end of the summer, they enrolled in a school only three blocks from where they lived, and life took a turn. Annabel, who'd been home schooled, asked if she could attend the same school as her two new friends. After some hesitation, Aunt Miriam agreed, and so the three of them set off together every morning. Weeks passed and schoolwork took over. They hardly ever spoke of their adventures, as if they thought they might lose their vivid memories by speaking about them. But every day all three thought about what had happened.

At dawn one Saturday morning, about six weeks into the school year, when the days were growing shorter and the warmth of summer was yielding to cool days and cold nights, Leo woke up to find a small sealed scroll lying next to their little bottled boat. He wanted to open it right there and then, but resisted

the temptation. Instead, he got dressed and carefully tucked the scroll into the long side pocket of his khakis. Only then did he wake up Julie and insist they go down to see Annabel.

“Why, what’s the hurry?”

“You’ll see.” Leo enjoyed keeping Julie in suspense.

“But does it have to be before breakfast?”

“Yes. Come on, before Mom gets up and makes us do stuff. Shush—don’t disturb Sidney.”

“Fine, but this better be good.” Quietly they snuck out of the apartment and knocked on Annabel’s door. Aunt Miriam opened it and was surprised to see them so early, but she let them in with a smile and an invitation to join them for breakfast, which they readily accepted. Aunt Miriam made the best waffles.

Once the three of them were sitting on Annabel’s bed, Leo said in a low voice, “Look what I found this morning on the windowsill next to the boat.” Ceremoniously he removed the rolled-up parchment from his pants pocket.

“Wow! It’s beautiful. Do you think...?” Annabel didn’t dare finish her sentence.

“Yes, of course, it must be from the dwarfs,” Julie exclaimed. “Open it,” she urged.

Reluctantly Leo untied the golden ribbon, handing it to Annabel. The purple seal had an imprint of a purple flower with seven petals—the *Flora hermeticus*. Ever so carefully he broke the seal and unrolled the coffee-colored parchment. The script was presented in striking calligraphy. Leo looked at it for a moment.

“Here, you read it,” he whispered, handing the parchment to Julie. Julie deferentially took the scroll. It felt heavier than

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expected. She admired the beauty with which each letter and word was written. Now that she had it in her hands, she hardly dared to read the missive.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” Annabel said, sitting very close to Julie.

Julie began to read: “Hereby, King Brathnar of the Great Granite Mountains, also known as Bricanus Mountains, invites Julie, Leo and Annabel to the 77th Earth Council, to be held on the eve of the upcoming Winter Solstice. We would acknowledge it as a great honor if the three of you could attend. If you accept this invitation, please sign your names below and leave the invitation next to the boat where you found it.” Julie paused, looked up at her two friends, and then broke into a wide smile.

“Yes!” all three of them shouted, slapping their hands together in excited delight. Annabel immediately rummaged around in her desk for her calligraphy pen. One by one they signed their names, as neatly as they possibly could. Leo was impressed by how beautiful and well-formed Annabel’s signature was. In comparison his looked clumsy and it smudged.

“Maybe this adventure will bring us a step closer to the fulfillment of our wishes,” Julie said, as she put the cap back on the pen.

“That’s what I have to think,” Annabel concurred.

That evening they placed the scroll back on the windowsill next to the boat. The following morning it was gone. In its place were three gold coins, adorned with the emblem of the seven petal’d purple flower. The coins lay on a piece of bark, on which was scrawled in a hasty, but tidy script:

*Be ready to sail on the eve
of the Winter Solstice.*

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