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The Fable of Fire

Jennie Broadwell
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The Fable of Fire

by

Jennie Broadwell

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies

Through the Department of English Language, Literature, and Creative Writing

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of Master of Arts at the

University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2018

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The Fable of Fire
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Abstract

This creative writing thesis, *The Fable of Fire* features a fantastic journey depicting young people with exceptional abilities, who save their world from malevolent forces. The plot features para-normal elements, drawing on ancient mythologies including Celtic and Gaelic, coupled with some Christian symbolism. This novella is aimed at a young adult audience. The story transitions from the rescue of a loved one to the defence of their community. *The Fable of Fire* focuses on the conflict between good and evil and the importance of cooperation.

Dedication

To all the ordinary children on extraordinary adventures.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. Jirgens, my readers Dr. Markotic, and Dr. Phipps, as well as my Mother for encouraging me to write.

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Introduction

Dire circumstance can push even the most ordinary of people into heroics. That is how I, a simple basket weaver came to play a small role in deciding the fate of a kingdom. This tale began when the kingdom of Dimittetur was in peril from an imminent volcanic eruption. The volcano at the centre of the kingdom had been dormant for centuries, so most of the citizens believed that it was only a mountain. But, as the volcano began to stir, the region would be forced to change. The King and Queen remained happily oblivious to the danger, and continued ruling as if nothing more sinister than the occasional drought or group of bandits threatened their subjects. The people were equally unaware of the danger they faced, as they assumed that the increasing heat coming from the volcano was merely the effect of an exceptionally warm summer. They continued their daily lives without any inclination that they may soon be buried under a cloud of ash.

By pure chance, the volcanic activity did not go unnoticed by everyone. The kingdom's army, the Royal Guard, held rigorous patrols which often brought them around the base of the volcano, and they occasionally scaled the mountain to gain a vantage point. They soon realized that the heat rising from the volcano would not remain contained for long. The Royal Guard captain, Nocens decided that it would be best not to inform anyone else about the volcano until he was able to devise a plan to counter the threat. He believed that evacuating the area around the volcano would be too chaotic, and if anyone outranking him were to find out, they might interfere with his methods of investigation.

The Guards' search for a way to combat the volcano led them to a woman named Serenity from a nearby village. She told them about her visions of a dragon awakening from a deep sleep at the volcano's base, and of the magma gradually rising to the brim. Believing that the dragon was responsible for the volcanic activity, the Royal Guard captain questioned Serenity about where the dragon was and how to defeat it. Serenity told the captain that her visions were incomplete. However, the captain believed that she was withholding information, perhaps because she was working with the dragon, so, he took her into custody for further questioning. While the Guards were taking her away, Serenity's two children Ember and Zephyr, who had their own special abilities, heard of their mother's imprisonment and set out to rescue her.

They searched their home looking for clues about their mother's whereabouts. Finding no traces or signs of where the guards might have taken her, the twins decided to seek help from their long-lost aunt, Bridget. With no clear sense of direction about where to begin looking for Bridget, these intrepid heroes hid in the back of a cart heading out of town. And this is where my story begins.

Chapter 1

“Hold still! He’ll hear us,” Zephyr whispered harshly at his sister. Ember tried to shift her body around.

“Then, move over. My leg’s falling asleep.”

“There’s no room. Now shush.”

Ember listened to the creak of the wheels, and squinted through a gap in the cart’s wall to try to find clues about their progress.

“How long do you think we’ve been in here?”

“What part of shush don’t you understand?”

“Ok, but do you think we’re almost there?”

“How should I know? Also, what ‘*there*’ are you talking about? We don’t have a ‘*there*’ yet.” Ember and Zephyr kept their voices to a whisper, so that the driver wouldn’t hear them.

“Don’t be difficult. You know what I mean. We want to jump out before he stops, so how will we know if he’s approaching a village or a town?”

“Well, why don’t you figure out a way to keep track of time? We know it will be roughly two hours before we reach the next village.”

“Keep time? Like how many times we go over a bump?” Ember replied sarcastically.

“Sure.” Zephyr pretended not to notice her tone.

A few minutes passed before Ember decided that counting was better than doing nothing.

“There’s one.”

“I meant in your head.” Zephyr suspected that she had only started counting to annoy him.

“How high should I count?” She asked with mock sweetness.

The cart began to slow and both siblings snapped to attention. Zephyr put a finger to his lips and slowly opened the door on the back of the cart. He shielded his eyes from the bright rays of the sun. They'd been sitting in the dark for hours. Ember slung her backpack over her shoulder and sidled up beside her brother. The cart slowed to a crawl along an unmarked path. She handed Zephyr his backpack, and held up three fingers. Ember lowered each finger in quick succession and when her hand closed, they slipped quietly from the back of the cart, and crept off the path into the nearby forest.

As soon as they were amongst the trees Ember felt safer, but kept creeping quietly. Zephyr beckoned for her to start running. He was still whispering. "Come on, we've got to cover more ground in case the driver stops and notices the back of his cart is open."

"I doubt he'll stop to search for us." Ember retorted, but she started walking quickly again all the same.

"What makes you think that?"

"Didn't you notice where we were when we jumped?"

Zephyr shrugged. "Not really, the only thing I saw was this forest. We should go further into it, and quickly."

"Exactly, only forest. There was nothing around. Why would he slow down in the middle of nowhere? There's no town for him to trade his goods at, so he's probably meeting someone."

"Or maybe he needs to rest his horses. You know he'd bring us straight to the authorities if he catches us. The Royal Guards are not too pleased with us, since we botched up tracking Mom right after they took her. Now they know what we look like. They'll be looking for us everywhere." Zephyr grabbed Ember's hand and started pulling her through the woods.

Dear reader, it is here that I will interrupt my story. First, please allow me to introduce myself. I've already mentioned that I am but a humble basket-weaver who was drawn into the rescue. My name is Gwen. I will tell you how I met Ember and Zephyr later in this tale. For now, all you need to know is that our two young heroes have stumbled into a mystical forest. This forest is inhabited by ancient trees which have the gift of speech. These trees are very old and extremely wise. They communicate with each other, but sometimes they can speak to specially gifted humans. To most human beings their voices sound like simple rustlings, as though the wind was sweeping through their branches, unless you listen extremely carefully. If you have sensitive ears then, you might make out a few words spoken by our woodsy friends. I learned of the journey of Ember and Zephyr after their adventure ended. And I can retell nearly everything that happened. During the first phase of their journey, Ember and Zephyr found themselves within the forest of talking trees, but they were oblivious to what the trees had to say. I shall make no further interruptions, and now back to the forest.

“As I was saying Maple, you really must learn to pay better attention when your elders are speaking to you.” Willow bristled at the younger tree, indignant that Maple had once again rejected his offer to teach him sacred poetry.

“It’s no use Willow,” Oak offered, *“The younger trees have no respect for our traditions. Isn’t that right Birch?”*

The ancient tree swayed back and forth in consideration. *“You saplings bicker so much you’d think you were bewitched by wizards.”*

Willow continued his indignant tone, *“I’m hardly a sapling, nor is Oak. Besides there are no wizards anymore.”*

For a moment Ember and Zephyr thought they might be hearing voices, but dismissed it as their anxious imaginations.

“Did you hear something? I thought I heard quiet voices, as if they were floating on the wind.” Zephyr whispered.

“Perhaps the driver discovered the door open on the back of the cart and he’s talking to himself, or maybe he’s just talking to his horses.” Ember retorted.

“If he catches us, he’ll surely bring us to the authorities.”

“Listen.”

Zephyr strained his ears, but could not hear anymore voices. “I only hear the wind rustling through the tree-tops.”

“Perhaps it’s nothing.”

“Let’s focus on getting to Aunt Bridget. She’s the only chance we’ve got.”

Ember voiced her concerns with their flimsy plan. “But, we haven’t seen her since we were 6. People change a lot in 8 years. For all we know, she could be a law-abiding citizen who enjoys her privacy and will bring us straight to the Royal Guards.”

Zephyr let out an exasperated sigh. “Our only other option is to go back home and pretend none of this ever happened. I’m sure that if we’re very good the scary uniformed men in hoods will bring Mom back and we’ll all bake cookies together.”

Ember scowled. “There’s no need for sarcasm. I’m just saying we shouldn’t get our hopes up. Even if we do find Aunt Bridget, we may still be on our own.”

Zephyr realized he’d been a bit harsh. “Yeah, I know that. I’m the first person who’d suggest having backup plans A through Z, but we have a destination right now, sort of. If we

can't rely on our Aunt, then, we'll have to figure something else out, but right now Aunt Anarchy is our best chance of getting Mom back."

"Aunt 'Anarchy'?" Ember chuckled, "That's a good nick-name for her. Especially since she decided to leave her job with the Royal Guards after insulting the Captain of the Guard."

"I just think we should have a plan in place if she tries to turn us in, or we can't find the multi-coloured sky to the west she kept mumbling about, before she left."

Maple resumed the conversation among the trees. "*How would you know whether or not humans have magic if you never pay any attention to them. Have you ever seen a wizard? How would you know the difference between one human and another?*"

"*Of course, I've seen a wizard. I give them great council about their meetings with dragons,*" Birch replied, oblivious to the fact that Maple's comments had been directed at Oak.

"*That was all in the past Birch, but I remember as well, although faintly. I was a sapling back then.*" Oak reminisced.

"*I was as well, but I recall enough to know that current humans do not have the powers they once did,*" Willow added.

Birch continued, "*Oh, I don't know about that. The dragon may have other ideas.*"

Maple sighed with annoyance. "*Here he goes again.*"

"*Birch we have not seen a dragon in a century. They are all gone,*" Oak began patiently.

Zephyr and Ember wound their way through the thickets of the forest. Suddenly, Zephyr's foot fell through the forest floor, he lurched forward, dragging Ember with him when he tried to grab her to regain his balance. They suddenly realized that they were crashing into a pit. They landed in a heap at the bottom and began detangling their limbs.

"What just happened?" Ember fussed, staring at the walls of dirt surrounding them.

“It’s a trap, obviously. The Royal Guards must have known we’d come this way and dug pits everywhere to capture us.”

“But if they knew where we were why would they bother with such traps? And how did they know exactly where we’d be in this woodland? How could they have known that we’d jump from the cart at this point in the forest? And, if they knew we were here, why didn’t they simply arrest us as we got off the cart?”

Zephyr’s voice could barely contain his panic. “What’s it mater? We have to go before they…”

Zephyr was cut off by a shadow sliding over the pit. He grabbed his sister’s hand, when the owner of the shadow poked her head over the top of the hole and gave an exasperated,

“Again!”

Ember leaned against the side of the hole in relief. “She’s just a kid. We’re still safe.”

“Hey, who are you calling a ‘*kid*’ trap-wreckers!”

Ember spread her fingers in a placating gesture. “Sorry, we didn’t mean to use your trap. We’re just glad you’re not after us.”

“Why would I be after *you*? I’m trying to catch a cow for the circus.”

That broke Zephyr out of his relieved silence. “I’m sorry, *what*?”

The girl leaned over the side of the pit and started explaining her dilemma with wild hand gestures. “A cow, for the *circus*. We have all sorts or regular animals like bears and tigers, but I’ve never *seen* a cow! I’d also settle for a wolf since they’re so cute and fuzzy, but all I ever get are lost people.”

“How many people have you caught in traps?” Zephyr’s concern was returning.

“Yes, and how is it that you have you never seen a cow?”

“Where I come from, cows are rare. Our trapeze expert, Eugene told me all about them. He said they’re huge animals, with horns, eight stomachs, and black and white spots, like a zebra or a leopard, but not. Oh, you probably need me to get you out of there. Hold on I’ll go get a log or something.” She began wandering away from the hole in search of something to help her accidental victims climb out.

Zephyr was perturbed that she had ignored his question about the number of entrapped victims, but he was in a hurry to get moving. “Don’t bother, we can get out on our own.” He gripped Ember’s hand firmly. There was a flash of light, and they landed an inch away from the top of the pit, and almost stumbled back in.

The girl sprang excitedly back over the pit to stand next to them. “Wow, amazing! How did you do that?”

Zephyr turned to leave before the girl could start asking them more questions. “It’s my secret. Don’t tell anyone about this, and we won’t tell anyone about you trapping travellers in the forest. It was nice meeting you, but we’ve got to go.”

The wind rustled Birch’s branches, stirring him to reply, *“I could explain if you would stop interrupting. The dragons are always here, whether awake or asleep, for thousands of years they are always here.”*

“He says the same thing about everything. It’s because he’s so old, and he thinks everything has always been here. Like birds, and squirrels, and leaves, and annoying woodpeckers,” Willow muttered, bristling his branches so much that the robin perched at the top flittered to a more relaxed tree.

“Listen Willow, Birch is older and wiser than you, and what’s more, you shouldn’t disagree with him, because we’ll never hear the end of it,” Maple hissed, wanting to avoid dissent among his deciduous friends.

“I am old but not deaf or dumb, saplings,” retorted Birch.

The trap-digging girl slapped her forehead. “Nice meeting *me*? Oh, how rude of me, I haven’t even *introduced* myself. I’m Melody and I live with the travelling circus. Who are *you*?”

“I’m Ember, and this is my brother- ouch! What’s that for?”

“What part of travelling in secret don’t you understand?” Zephyr hissed.

“The part where it includes you teleporting us out of the hole Mr. Show-off. Calm down, maybe she can help us. As I was saying, this is my brother Zephyr, and I think he would be much less restless if we kept moving.”

Melody began walking and talking at a hasty pace. “Okay, are you going this way? I’ll go too. So, can you fly too, Ember?”

Despite his reluctance to trust strangers, Zephyr didn’t want his powers to be misunderstood, especially after he’d used them in front of Melody in his haste. “No, I can’t fly. I can instantly travel from one place to another in a flash of light.”

“Oh, I thought you flew out, and I just didn’t see you because of the light. Can you teleport too Ember?”

“No, I can’t teleport, but, our hasty landings are sort of my fault. One time when we were first practicing our powers Zephyr tried to teleport across the yard but ended up with his leg half inside a rotting tree stump, so I panicked and set it on fire to try and get him out, but that just made it worse. In the end, he just had to teleport again to get out, so I gave him severe burns for nothing. I manipulate fire.”

“It doesn’t matter how many times you tell the story it still won’t be your fault. I just made a mistake, and now I always aim a little high or a bit to the side to make sure that I don’t get stuck somewhere. Sometimes I miscalculate, but I’m getting better. Anyway, those weren’t severe burns. I’ve had worse from the stove.”

“I’m hardly a sapling anymore,” Oak declared. “Please Birch, why don’t you tell us about the dragons, since you’re the only one who remembers them clearly. Would that make you feel better?”

Birch chose to ignore the note of condescension in Oak’s request and replied matter-of-factly, *“I feel fine, and I’ll tell you about the dragons. They’re enormous lizard creatures with magnificent wings who poses great power.”*

“Birch everyone already knows that,” Willow interrupted. “Can you tell us about some of the times when you actually met and spoke to some dragons?”

“And what were the humans like when they had magic?” Maple added.

“Well things are always quite lively when humans are playing with magic, especially when there are dragons around.” The setting sun gave Birch’s leaves a warm glow. To Maple’s delight, Birch began a story about two weather wizards who kept sending rain clouds over each other’s houses until they gave up and finally got married.

Willow and Oak were both chagrined, because Birch was recounting a tale about wizards instead of dragons.

Melody decided that sharing some of her own mishaps might make her new friends feel more comfortable. “Ah, so it’s sort of like the time I snapped a tent pole by shoving it in the ground without digging the hole first, or maybe like the time I jumped over the trapeze instead of onto it and almost landed on Eugene’s head. Remember, he’s the one who told me about cows.”

Ember stopped in her tracks. “Wait, are you, umm, *special*, too?”

“Yeah, I’m really strong, but you can breathe fire!” Melody led the two along a winding overgrown path.

“Well, I don’t actually *breathe* fire. I just shoot it out of my hands, and sometimes make things randomly burst into flames when I’m nervous. So, travelling in the back of a very flammable and cramped wooden cart earlier was very nerve-racking.”

“Or, sitting too close to the teacher’s desk during a test,” Zephyr teased.

“Shush!” Ember shoved her brother so he had to hop out of the way of a tree.

“I’m just saying that if the teacher hadn’t had those matches so close to his magnifying glass, then the class would have started asking a lot of questions about how that fire started.”

“*Listen! There’s someone here! A human almost bumped into me!*” Willow interjected, as Zephyr side-stepped his trunk. But, the others were too preoccupied with Birch’s story about the wizards playing weather pranks to notice. He dismissed the matter and returned his focus to Birch’s story. Birch straightened some of branches, and his voice rose in dignity.

“*Now, among the humans, there are not only weather wizards, but there are also tree wizards. The tree wizards are among my favourites. They always appreciate my council and we don’t need a mediator to communicate.*”

“*But all that was in the past, Birch. No humans can hear us now-a-days.*” Oak contended.

“*Oh, the past you say?*” Birch said with amusement. “*It was only several seasons ago, that tree wizards visited this very grove, and warned us about that incoming swarm of termites. In fact, those very same wizards convinced the termites to eat the raspberry bushes near the river-side. They saved us a lot of bother.*”

“I recall that particular incident was at least 70 years ago.” Willow commented.

Maple ignored Willow’s comment and replied to Birch. *“Not only that, but we can still hear humans, regardless of whether they understand us.”*

“And that proves that we trees are far more learned than those foolish human beings.”

Oak shivered his acorns when he made this proud pronouncement.

“So, how often do you put on shows with your powers?” Melody asked, dashing ahead and then walking backwards so she could watch both twins at the same time.

Zephyr shook his head. “We don’t do that. It’s safer if no one knows about us.”

Melody’s smile flickered.

“So why are you running away? What happened?”

“We want our mother back,” Zephyr half-answered.

Ember changed the subject. “So, you mentioned catching other people in your traps. Ever get anything fun?”

Melody’s face brightened a bit. “Well, a few years ago I ran away from the circus to try and catch a cow for the first time, but instead this very strange boy fell into my trap. He was really very nice and gave me dinner after I helped him out of the hole, but I don’t think he was the smartest, since he couldn’t get out by himself, even though he was there for hours. Once, I even caught my parents when they came looking for me. Anyway, I went back to the circus and my parents were terribly angry, but, I really want to help you find your mother.”

Zephyr sighed at her. “Thanks, but how are you going to do that?”

“I can help you protect yourselves, or you can come back to the circus with me and pretend to be performers while we look for her, or call the Royal Guard.”

Ember shook her head. “Melody it *was* the Royal Guard who took her. It probably has something to do with our powers. Or hers. We don’t know how they found out. That incident with the teacher’s desk catching fire is the only time I’ve ever lost control in public. We only ever practiced our powers in our own back yard which is surrounded by trees. Nobody could see, and nobody knew our mother had powers. Most people just thought she was wise. If they found our mother, then they can find us, and they can probably find you, too.”

“*Harrumph. The only thing humans are good for nowadays is chopping down our fellow trees. The less often humans come here the better,*” Willow declared.

“*I Agree. I remember the last pair of humans who visited nearly burnt the forest down,*” Oak shook with the memory of the nearness of the flames before the rain put out the fire.

“*Now, now, I don’t think they meant to start a fire.*” Birch offered.

“*That is not the point!*” Oak and Willow bellowed in unison before settling into silence.

Melody resumed her attempts to help her new friends with their problem. “So where will you go?”

Zephyr kicked a branch out of his way. “We have an aunt who lives out here somewhere, probably. Mom says she used to work for the Royal Guard in some way, but then left after a fight with her superior. I just remember her muttering something about chaos and a colourful sky to the west, so we assumed she might know *something*.”

“Then I’ll go there with you. Wherever you think ‘*there*’ is.”

Zephyr wasn’t convinced. “You said your parents came to find you last time. What makes you think they won’t find you again?”

“This time I told them I was going out on my own. They agreed and gave me the circus’ tour schedule. I know all of the towns they’ll be visiting, and the dates, so I’ll be able to find them on their circuit, anytime.”

“Zephyr, if she really wants to come we can’t stop her, and it might be useful to have an extra set of eyes, especially attached to a person the Royal Guard doesn’t know.”

Melody’s face recovered its full sunshine. “So, we’re on a quest!”

“Will that make you feel better?” Zephyr asked sarcastically.

Melody didn’t notice the sarcasm at all. “Definitely.”

Ember replied before her brother could offer another snide retort.

“A quest. Ok, then I guess that’s what we’re calling it.”

It was close to sunset. As the last rays of sunlight faded under the forest canopy, Ember conjured a small ball of fire in her hand to light their way. The three new friends shared a moment of silence as they began their journey together. However, the unusual light within the forest stood out from the growing dark. The trees attention was drawn to the three mysterious humans walking among them.

Chapter 2

Ember dodged around a group of trees, trying to keep the fire in her hand as far from the leaves as possible, while still giving everyone enough light to see. Melody watched her new friends fade in and out of sight with the flickering light. Suddenly, Melody had an idea.

“Have you ever thought about getting caught on purpose?”

Zephyr grabbed his sister’s non-fire hand and pulled her away from the smiling circus girl. “Ember, your new friend is crazy.”

Ember pulled her hand back to try and placate both of them. “Melody, we do want to see our Mom again, but only as we’re rescuing her, not joining her in captivity.”

“But if you get caught and they take you to her, then it saves you the trouble of finding her, and then you can just jump away.” She waved wildly at Zephyr, as if his ability was triggered by hand gestures.

“Were you not paying attention to the part where I ended up stuck in a tree stump? I have to see where I’m going.”

“Okay, couldn’t you just set the prison on fire? And then, Zephyr could see where to go.”

“I could, as long as no one minds being trapped inside an unfamiliar burning building.”

“Oh yeah, I guess finding your crazy aunt really is the best idea.”

Zephyr rolled his eyes and sidestepped a tree that seemed to appear out of nowhere. “So glad we have your approval. It’s getting dark, should we set up camp?”

“Great! Except I didn’t bring my tent. I wasn’t expecting an adventure to come up.”

Melody held up her small bag, “All I’ve brought is a blanket and some food.”

“And we had to leave on short notice, so, we’re not really fully prepared to camp out.”

“What’s in the backpacks?”

“We’ve each got some bread, dried fruit, a blanket, and some rope.”

Melody understood the dilemma but was not without her own resources. “I have some salted rabbit, should we have that for dinner?”

Zephyr shook his head and pulled out some bread. “No, save that. We’ll have bread first, because this loaf will go mouldy if we don’t eat it soon.”

Melody snickered and started rummaging around in her bag. “Bread isn’t dinner.”

Ember put out her flame to pull her companions hands together. “How about we put a little bit of the rabbit on the bread. That way the bread won’t spoil, and we’ll still have *some* rabbit for tomorrow. Will that make everyone happy?”

“Great!”

“Fine.”

Ember made a pit for a fire so she could have her hands free. The three of them set about dividing the rabbit meat for their sandwiches. While the trio prepared their dinner, one of the trees realized that he had seen one of the humans before.

“I’m sure I’ve seen the girl who digs holes several times before.” Willow commented.

“Why can’t that dreadful girl just leave us alone. She’s always coming in here and digging holes all over our lovely forest floor,” Oak shook in frustration, causing acorns to spill to the ground.

Maple attempted to defend the children. *“Well she has only done it twice. Perhaps she’ll grow out of it.”*

“Twice in five years is far too often. What is she looking for?”

“I heard her say she’s trying to catch a cow,” Birch offered.

“Preposterous! There are no cows in this forest. You must have heard wrong,” Willow snapped.

Oak tried to redirect the others to the problem at hand. *“But now she has two others with her, and one of them has fire!”*

“That is strange. I haven’t seen three humans with such strong magic in at least 100 minutes. I wonder if it’s related to the dr-”

“I think you mean years Birch,” Maple corrected.

“That is not the point. We must get them out of here before they destroy our woods.”

“Oh, look Willow! One of the magical humans is climbing you,” Birch pointed out.

“What?!”

“If you climb that tree, you’re going to fall and break your neck, you understand that, right?” Ember scolded her brother as he tried to make himself comfortable on a Willow branch.

“If you two want to sleep on the ground and get eaten by bears that’s your choice. Just remember, I told you so.”

“Does he know bears can climb trees, and reach branches that are only a few feet from the ground, and that they’re really fuzzy and don’t eat people?” Melody whispered far too loudly.

“Don’t encourage him he’ll just climb higher.”

Melody shrugged and curled up on the ground. “Okay, goodnight up there Zephyr, night Ember.”

“Goodnight.” The siblings chimed in unison.

“The nerve of those humans.” Oak shook with frustration.

Maple tried to calm the other trees, *“Well it’s only the one.”*

Willow ignored his words. *“I’ll have them fleeing from this forest by morning.”*

The branch under Zephyr tilted sideways dumping him onto the ground. “Oof!”

Ember rolled over under her blanket. “That was fast. I thought you’d at least be asleep before you fell.”

“I didn’t fall the tree moved and made me slip.”

“Are you sure you didn’t dream it?”

“I was awake.”

“I guess that tree just doesn’t like you.”

“Ha, ha very funny.”

“Maybe the wind moved the branches,” Melody suggested.

“I didn’t feel any wind, but I suppose that must be it. I guess the ground will have to do.”

“My turn, let’s see how they sleep with my acorns bombarding on them.”

But, our heroes were saved from being barraged with acorns by the arrival of two new youths. Their names were Lucas and Simon, and they were a pair of Royal Guard cadets who sought to capture the fugitives before their superiors had the chance. They knew little about why Ember and Zephyr were fugitives from the law, as they had not been assigned to this mission directly. They also knew little about Ember and Zephyr’s mother, or her capture. Their only thought was that capturing a pair of fugitives with special abilities was a sure way to heighten their prestige within the Royal Guard.

“Look! More humans!” Oak cried, drawing attention to the two new intruders.

“I don’t like the way these ones look. I think we should redirect our efforts to chasing them out, and let the other three stay,” Maple suggested.

Willow echoed Maple's sentiment. *"Yes, yes, those other three haven't caused any real harm apart from a few holes, but there is something I don't like about these two. Those uniforms remind me of others like them who cut down large swaths in our woods. Let's get rid of these two, but allow the trio to remain."*

"Agreed." The trees chorused.

The trees endeavoured to impede the path of the two cadets. Simon complained that it was difficult to navigate around the trees. Roots and brambles hindered their every step and Simon fell and stumbled regularly. Lucas suggested that Simon pay closer attention to his feet if he wanted to avoid tripping again.

"I didn't trip! The tree tripped me!" Simon grabbed the scrape on his arm where he'd landed on a rock.

"That is exactly the same thing."

"No, it isn't!"

"I will write to your sister and tell her you are being ridiculous again. Remember, she says you have to listen to me and stay out of trouble."

Simon had not been paying attention to what Lucas had been saying; however, it was not out of rudeness, rather, he was distracted by the whisperings of the trees. He could not understand them completely, all he could gather were stray words and fragmented sentences. Without any clear meaning, these overheard conversations melted into idle noise and began giving Simon a headache. Needing an outlet for his frustration, he snapped.

"Would you stop that!"

Lucas, unable to hear the trees at all, assumed that Simon was lashing out at *him* for bringing up the fact that his younger sister could boss him around. This was a shock to Lucas

since, in all the time he had known him, Simon been perpetually cheerful. However, he didn't have time to ponder this outburst because he had to pull a very distracted Simon aside before he marched into a Birch tree.

“Stop being grumpy, it's creepy.”

“I can't help it. All this whispering ...ouch! That tree just dropped a branch on my head!”

“Simon the tree did not...”

“This forest makes me uneasy. It feels like it's conspiring against us!”

“How hard did that branch hit your head? Should I write to your parents?”

“Oh, leave them out of this.” Simon yanked his arm away and tried to storm off in a huff while avoiding more roots and branches.

Lucas followed and wondered about his new role as nurse maid.

Simon could feel the beginnings of a migraine.

“You are acting really...*oof!*” Lucas slipped and narrowly avoided smashing his head against the tree in front of him. “How did all these acorns suddenly roll under my foot? I can't get a grip.”

“See! I *told* you the trees are out to get us!”

“That's ridiculous, we just have to watch where we step.”

Despite his headache, Simon moved to help Lucas. “Maybe you just didn't see those acorns. It *is* getting dark.”

“Thanks. You're right. We should be more careful now that it's growing dark. I guess you miss your family. I'm a bit older, so, I'm more independent, but I know how you feel. Is everyone in your family all right?”

“No, it’s not that. I *really* think there’s something odd about this forest. But now that you mention it, you know how we used to think that Gwen’s weaving might somehow be magical? Well, we all think it actually might be. She’s unusually quick and her weaving is incredibly durable. Hey! Look out for that bra...”

Lucas walked straight into a Maple branch. “Gaah! Stupid branch!”

The trees had been in conference with the squirrels and were about to send their rodent friends to chew through the intruders’ boot laces, when Lucas gave up brushing leaves off of his light blue cadet uniform and turned around.

“I think you’re right. This forest is far too dark for us to find anything. We could walk right past the targets and never know it.”

“Let’s come back tomorrow when it’s quieter.”

“I think you mean brighter.”

“That too.”

The two Royal Guard cadets hastened back through the forest with their eyes peeled and their hands out in front of them to avoid crashing into any more trees. Shortly after they left the forest, Simon’s headache began to subside. Once they arrived back at the Royal Guard cadet barracks, they tried to act casual pretending they had just come in from a stroll. Many of the other cadets had already settled into their bunks. Some were reading, others drowsing. Lucas and Simon didn’t want to give away the fact that they had just returned from an unauthorised expedition, so, they climbed into their bunks and began griping about their work environment.

“And, the food here is the *worst!*” Several other cadets nodded from their bunks.

“That’s right! Have you tasted the soup? How can they mess up soup? It’s not that difficult. All you need is some water, seasoning, meat, and maybe some vegetables.”

“Yeah, the chef has no idea what he’s doing.”

“You mean Grandpa Tur? Yes, he’s the worst. Hasn’t tried a new recipe in years.”

“Yeah, his repertoire is soup-erbly repetitive.”

“Maybe if he wasn’t always loafing around the bread wouldn’t always be stale.”

“And you can’t digest it! It’s like the lasting supper.”

“That’s for sure. It’s in-dough-structible!”

“It sounds like everyone’s been stewing on this for a while.”

They kept up the gripes until one of the senior cadets told them that he was weary of their complaints. He told them all to put a sock in it. Lucas and Simon sat on Simon’s lower bunk and quietly began to speculate about their favourite conspiracy theories involving the Royal Guard Captain.

“All I’m saying is that I’d be more inclined to trust what the Captain tells us if he’d actually let us see the entire base. Every time I see him go in or out of that restricted warehouse he has an unsettling grin on his face.” Lucas whispered.

“You mean he actually smiled? I thought he only did that when he talked about his promotions.”

“So, what do you think is in there?”

Simon took a moment to consider possibilities. “If it can make the Captain smile it has to be at least as good as a secret supply of cake.”

“No, that would make *you* smile. I think he’d actually burn up if he ever encountered that much concentrated saccharinity.”

“Or it could make him *nice!* Hey, do you think...”

“No. We are not baking the captain a cake. The last time I let you try, we weren’t allowed within 50 feet of the kitchen for a month. As it is, Chef Tur said if we ever try that again he’ll chop us up and bake *us* up in a cake.”

“Yes. He was quite annoyed.”

“Let’s focus on the plan. We really have to catch the fugitives. No coming back unless we’ve got them with us. They can’t replace us after a success like that.”

“Thanks Lucas. I knew there was a reason you were my best friend.”

“You mean apart from the fact that we were assigned as partners, and you’re too annoying for anyone else put up with?”

“I’m not annoying! Name one time when I’ve been annoying.”

“I can’t. All the other times you’ve been annoying will feel left out, and I couldn’t possibly name them all.”

While the two cadets made plans back at their barracks, Ember, Zephyr and Melody slept in the forest. Melody was in the middle of an incredibly vivid dream. She dreamt she was 6 years old again, playing beneath the multi-coloured tent of the circus after a show. The trapeze artist was trying to keep everyone organized, while the animals scuttled around. The animals ran around to avoid bath-time, which always followed the end of a show. Melody was rounding up the animals, but she wasn’t looking where she was going and rushed head long into, Bridget, the fortune teller who had recently joined the circus.

The fortune teller staggered back upon the sturdy child’s impact. Realising that the girl had been less affected by the collision than she had, the fortune teller smiled in recognition.

“Are you all right? I didn’t see you there.”

“I’m okay, but I have to go help catch the animals now. Bye.”

“You certainly like helping friends. How would you like a little reward for your efforts?”

“You mean like sweets? Mommy says I can’t have too many sweets because they give me too much energy and I bounce around the tent like a spring.”

“Then how about I take a look at your future and let you know if I see anything exciting?”

“Okay, but can you do it fast? After I round up the animals, I have to help put away the tent.”

“It’ll only take a minute. Hold my hands dear.”

The fortune teller took Melody’s hands and closed her eyes for a moment. After what seemed like minutes for Melody, the fortune teller opened her eyes. “There is a wall of fog around my visions of you my dear, but one thing is clear. It seems you will be incredibly important in the future.”

Young Melody pulled her hands free and looked doubtfully at the fortune teller. “Of course I’m important to the future of the circus, my parents run it, and I’m the best at cleaning up. Maybe you should practice some more. Bye.”

As young Melody dashed off, the poles of the circus tent began to slowly morph into trees, and she awoke in the forest, where Ember and Zephyr had also begun to stir. Once everyone was awake, Melody told the twins about her dream. As she spoke, they resumed their trek through the woods.

“It’s strange, after that time I don’t think Bridget ever read my fortune again.”

Zephyr snapped to attention. “Wait! The fortune teller’s name was Bridget?”

“Yes. Why?” Melody answered.

Ember replied excitedly. “Melody, our aunt’s name is Bridget.”

“Well that’s quite a coincidence. Do you think she’s the same person?”

Zephyr quickened his pace through the woods. “There’s only one way to find out. I’m quite anxious to meet this fortune teller of yours.”

“The first step is finding our way out of this forest.”

So, the three adventurers continued on their way in the hope of finding answers. However, as the day wore on and they saw no sign of the edge of the forest, their enthusiasm wavered. After hours of walking their goal was replaced by the desire to escape from the forest, which seemed to go on forever.

“We’ve already been this way. I recognize that tree.” Melody complained at Zephyr’s latest proposed direction.

He replied with exasperation. “It’s just a tree! They *all* look the same.”

“*How rude!*” Willow shook his branches and dropped a load of leaves, which the children sidestepped instinctively.

Oak was equally offended, but had finally realized that trying to drop things on this group of travellers never seemed to work. “*And to think, we can recognize one of them after five years but they can’t be bothered to tell us apart.*”

“*I have a mind to tangle their feet in so many roots they’ll never enter another forest for as long as they live.*” But, Willow had failed to notice the children’s aptitude for detangling their feet from roots.

Maple attempted to calm the others, but he too was bemused by the children’s lack of direction. “*They have to get out of our forest first, but I can’t see them doing that very quickly if they keep walking in circles.*”

Birch drooped his leaves in a sigh. *“Bad luck they have, passing through the dragon ring.”*

Willow seemed confused. *“Does anyone know what he’s talking about? I do not hear any ringing.”*

“Not that sort of ring sapling. I mean the sort that never ends.”

“Birch, does everything always come back to riddles and dragons with you?” Maple questioned the older tree.

Birch ignored Maple and continued his thought. *“It might not have been a problem if they weren’t so magical.”*

Meanwhile, Ember decided that they needed a better vantage point to find their way out of the forest. *“Hold on, I’ll try to climb up to see if I can tell how far into the woods we are.”*

Melody interjected, *“Let me do it! I’m a really fast climber. Most of the time on the trapeze I didn’t even use the handholds, and I got to the top faster than Eugene, and he’s the expert.”*

Zephyr rolled his eyes at her constant enthusiasm and ability to relate almost anything back to the circus. *“We need someone who will actually remember what they see, not just jump up and stare at the clouds.”*

“Well if you’re so great at remembering, why don’t you do your teleparty thing to above the forest so we’ll know where we’re going the whole time.”

While they bickered, Ember climbed a nearby Maple so that she could peer over the canopy of leaves.

“Well, if the people trying to kidnap us see a boy magically appear above the trees they’ll know exactly where we are. Besides, there are no footholds in thin air, so I might fall to the ground and break my neck.”

“Then why not just aim for a high branch and sit on it.”

“Because, I would probably end up inside a bunch of little branches as well, which is rather unpleasant.”

“I’m sure you could learn to aim better with a little practice.”

Ember hopped down from a low branch to interrupt. “Bad news, we are surrounded by forest for as far as the eye can see.” Ember waved at the tree she had just climbed. “Go ahead, Melody, take a look and you’ll see the same thing.”

“All right, I’ll be right back.” Melody ascended, leaping from branch to branch until she poked her head through the top of the green ceiling. She shouted downward. “I think we’re stuck in the biggest forest in the world.”

“Has human vision been impaired recently? They should be able to see that they’re close to the edge of our forest.” Oak mused.

“It’s the ring. It keeps them from seeing outside the forest until they’ve met with her.”

“Met with who?” Willow asked.

“The dragon of course.”

Maple swayed as he commented. *“Birch this forest has no dragon.”*

“So, it may seem, but in truth she sleeps undetected beneath her dragon ring.”

“Should we split up and see if one of us can find a way out?” Melody suggested.

Ember shook her head. “No, then all three of us would be lost and alone in the forest.”

“Being alone in the forest isn’t so bad. Oh wait, I forgot about the kidnappers.”

“She does have a memory.” Zephyr replied sarcastically.

“Zephyr, start focusing on getting unlost instead of how to bicker or I will set your shoes on fire.”

“Oh, just *my* shoes? What about Melody’s?”

“She’s not my sibling.”

“Would you really set his shoes on fire?” Melody asked, concerned that she was causing grief between brother and sister.

“Of course, she wouldn’t. I can’t walk around a forest without shoes.”

Ember pulled the conversation back on track. “So, how are we going to get out of here?”

“Since we got lost I’ve been marking trees with a notch as we pass them, and I’m almost positive we’ve been walking in a straight line, but we keep coming back to trees I’ve already marked.” Zephyr offered.

“Maybe someone who was lost before us used the same markings as you?” Melody mused.

“I suppose it’s possible.”

“Hey, what if the Royal Guards find the marks and follow them to us?” Melody asked, suddenly worried that there might be other people in the forest.

“Well we can’t keep wandering around the forest forever, they’ll find us then for sure.” Zephyr pointed out.

“I wish they would stop carving notches into all the trees. Soon the whole area will be defaced.” Willow complained, while Maple tried to calm the other trees.

“They’re not cutting very deep. The squirrels do more damage.”

Oak rejected Maple's assessment. *"It's the principle. Why couldn't they just leave a trail of stones, or carry a spool of thread if they were going to get lost."*

"I think they want to exit the other side of the forest. It sounds as if they're being followed," Maple reasoned.

"A trail won't help them in the dragon ring. It was designed so you could not accidentally leave until you'd had your audience." Birch informed the younger trees.

"Does this mean we'll have magical humans walking in circles and carving up our forest until someone resurrects a dragon for them to talk to?" Willow lamented.

"I doubt that will be necessary."

"When I climbed up, the sun was on the left, so if we keep going in this direction, then we will go straight for a while." Ember pointed.

"Okay, but I really feel like we've been going straight the whole time." Melody responded.

Zephyr tossed aside the rock he was using to notch the trees. *"I agree, but we're running out of ideas."*

"We're going to be stuck with them forever, aren't we?" Oak joined the lamenting.

"Well, I suppose we could try to guide them out." Birch suggested.

"Should I drop acorns on heir heads every time they go the wrong way?" Willow asked hopefully.

"No, no, that won't work. We simply have to close the path behind them and open the one in front of them."

"Won't they notice that and find a moving forest suspicious?" Maple asked.

"Perhaps. Try to be subtle."

So, the trees began rearranging themselves to push the children towards the forest's edge, using shadows, tricks of the light, and sudden drops of leaves or acorns to ensure the youngsters wouldn't notice them shifting, bending, and swaying in and out of their path.

Chapter 3

Inside the Royal Guard base, captain Nocens was engaged in one of his favourite practices, interrogating prisoners. This evening, he only had one subject, but she was proving more challenging than he anticipated.

“Tell me everything again, and start from the beginning!”

“As I’ve told you before, I had a vision of rising magma and a waking dragon. I do not have any control over these visions or events. I only wish to warn people of this danger, but your detaining me here only puts more lives at risk.”

“How long have you been conspiring with the dragon?”

Serenity sat motionless, bound in a chair set in a darkened, rat-infested cell. Most prisoners struggled against the bonds for the entirety of their interrogation; however, Serenity sat completely still as if the bonds didn’t exist. “I will answer you for the final time. I have not conspired with anyone.”

“I can’t believe that, because you know far too much about the volcanic activity even though the Royal Guard has not announced anything to the public yet. If you want to help the people of this country so badly, then, why don’t you just tell me where the dragon is?” Nocens circled behind Serenity’s chair so that she couldn’t see him. She remained completely still.

“My visions around the dragon are hazy. I don’t know where it is. The only thing I can see clearly is the danger posed to the people near the volcano.”

“Now Serenity, I find it difficult to believe that a gifted prophetess like yourself would be unable to sense the dangerous power from an evil dragon.”

“I can sense no malice coming from the dragon. *You* are another matter.”

This pushed Nocens into a rage and he kicked Serenity's chair onto its side, but she hardly flinched as the chair collided with putrid cobble-stone floor. "That's it, witch! If you don't want to confess to your crimes perhaps your children will be more forthcoming."

This got her attention and she finally began to struggle in the chair. "Leave them alone! They have nothing to do with this!"

A cruel smile crept back onto Nocens' face. "But you've left me with no choice. If you won't tell me why you're conspiring against the innocent people of this country with a vicious dragon, then I'll have to get your dear little twins to explain it to me."

"If you lay one hand on them I'll..."

"You'll *what*, glare at me from your cell? Or, are you saying that you'll communicate with your dragon friend and plan to seek revenge on me?"

Serenity tried to regain her composure. Her fists remained tightly clenched. "I've already told you everything I know. Please leave my children alone."

"I'm afraid it's too late for that, they're being brought to me even as we speak." Nocens lied. "I think I'll leave you to think about that. I'll be back later if you change your mind and want to talk." With that, Nocens locked the creaking iron door behind him, cutting off Serenity's protests.

After he had gone, one of the other Guards entered the cell and unbound Serenity from the chair. She nodded in gratitude. After the guard relocked the iron door, Serenity counted his steps until she heard him reach the main door of the jail. Fifty-Six. She was fifty-six steps away from possible escape.

Meanwhile, with help from the trees, Melody, Ember, and Zephyr had found a way out of the forest. However, their sense of time had been distorted wandering around the dragon ring and the sun was setting past the mountainous horizon. The dimming light made it difficult to discern the path that led before them, but from what they could see it was not well travelled, and was overgrown with weeds, and covered with leaves and branches. Zephyr nodded approvingly at their newest direction. Such a remote path would decrease their chances of encountering Royal Guards on patrol. Bushes and rocks on the sides of the path could provide quick cover if needed.

Melody glanced around her new surroundings with curiosity, because she hadn't had many occasions to explore outside the circus. She watched jagged clouds blocking the setting sun. She marvelled about the fact that she could watch sunsets whether peeking from a hole in a tent, or wandering a mysterious path with new friends. Somehow the path seemed mysterious. Perhaps because everything seems mysterious on a quest. Or, it could have been the quiet. For as long as she could remember, Melody had always been surrounded by sounds. Sounds of people rushing about, sounds of workers putting tents up and down. Performers practicing their acts. Cheering crowds during shows. Even once she began the journey with her new friends there had always been the sounds of the forests and their conversations. And now, this unnerving quiet.

They walked along the path in silence for a few minutes with the evening breeze sweeping their faces. As the breeze picked up into a gust, Ember wondered where they would find shelter for the night. Up until this point of their journey they had always found abandoned sheds or carts to spend their nights. Even the tangles of the forest provided shelter from the elements and the eyes of pursuers. She doubted that bushes along the path would provide much safety.

Ember was about to share her concerns with her friends, when she felt a quick pull on her ankle and heard a thread snap. Suddenly a net was launched from beside the path landing overtop of the trio. The rope tightened, swept the trio off their feet, dragging them into the air. They found themselves deposited into a large pit. They struggled to escape.

The surge of the net had complicated things and despite their best efforts Ember elbowed Melody in the head three times, Melody kicked Zephyr twice in the shins, and Zephyr headbutted his sister in the jaw. Once they managed to re-situate themselves more comfortably in the net, Zephyr decided it was time to ask the obvious question; “Melody, is this one of yours? Because if it is, I fear for any cow unfortunate enough to cross your path.” He tried to regulate his tone of voice to sound more conversational, but the question still came out as accusatory.

Melody hardly noticed the bite in his voice, as she was too busy examining the pit they had dropped into. “No, I’ve never come this way. Besides, my traps are much nicer than this. Look, the walls of this pit aren’t even straight, and it isn’t a perfect circle either. It is pretty deep though, and this net seemed to fly out of nowhere.”

Ember started looking for a way to burn through the ropes without singeing her companions. “Can we admire the craftsmanship from outside this net? With our luck, someone else will fall on top of us.”

“I really don’t think there’s much to admire in this one. I don’t think the trap-builders were especially concerned with opinions.”

The pit in question was about eight feet deep and six feet across at the bottom; however, the top of the hole was about seven feet across as the sides sloped on a slight angle. The floor of the pit was strewn with sticks and leaves that had previously concealed its presence from the trio. Presently, the trappers leapt from behind the bush they’d been using as cover, abandoning their

dinner of salt ferret. They had been waiting for hours and suspected that the trio had by-passed them. But, they were unaware that their quarry had spent most of the day trapped in an enchantment, walking in circles. The trappers were almost ready to abandon their snare, when they heard the crashing sound of people falling through leaves and branches.

“Did we catch them, is it *them*?” Simon asked excitedly as he and Lucas peered over the side of the hole to examine their quarry. It had been his idea to lay a trap outside the forest along the only path that led westward from the forest. He avoided setting a trap within the forest, because he kept imagining voices. Lucas deduced that the trio would be travelling west.

“Hey, were you two trying to catch a *cow*? You know, I’ve been trying to catch cows for years.” Melody asked brightly. She seemed unaware of the other two huddling behind her, their eyes fixed on the uniforms worn by the two cadets poised at the perimeter of the pit.

The uniforms were light blue, the colour of the Royal Guard cadets. Ember and Zephyr’s eyes were drawn to the dark green armbands on each boys’ forearm. They had no idea that the boys who set the trap were merely cadets. Such green armbands were worn by the Royal Guards who had taken their mother prisoner. It was only by luck and Zephyr’s teleportation skills that they had managed to escape.

Simon answered Melody, who looked far too enthusiastic for someone who had just been captured. “What would we want with a cow? We’re after fugitives. Are you fugitives?”

Lucas shielded his eyes from the glare of the setting sun and frowned into the pit. “You look like the fugitives. But we’re only searching for two people, and there are three of you. But those two huddled behind you seem to match the descriptions.”

Simon called down into the hole. “Excuse me smiling girl, what are you doing with those two, and do you know if they’re fugitives from the law?”

Melody tried to stand up while pushing the net aside. “I met them a few days ago, and we’re on a mission. I don’t know anything about fugitives. So, we’d like to leave now if you don’t mind, unless you’d like some advice on trap digging. I’ve been setting traps for years. Yours isn’t very good.”

Lucas looked offended. “What do you mean it isn’t very good! We built a net-launching catapult, hooked it up to a trip wire, dug a pitfall for safety, and camouflaged everything! And, it *worked!* We caught *you*, didn’t we?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t realize we were supposed to compliment the people trying to kidnap us.” Zephyr snarked.

“Don’t antagonise them.” Ember whispered.

An uneasy silence fell over the path. The racket raised by the entrapment caused nearby birds to fall silent. Even insects ceased their buzzing and flying. In the silence, Lucas noticed his captives whispering and called down into the hole, “Hey, we don’t want any trouble. If you just agree to come with us quietly we’ll let you out of the trap.”

“What about the girl who isn’t a fugitive, she could be a hostage.” Simon tried to clarify the situation with Lucas. Simon was willing to give Melody the benefit of the doubt since she had been quite honest about the construction of the pit. He had to admit that the pit was somewhat lopsided, but didn’t want to hurt Lucas’s feelings.

While the two guards were discussing the matter, the three friends in the pit formed a hasty plan using whispers, hand gestures, and nods. Ember spoke to the two cadets. “If we go with you, will you take us to our mothers?”

Lucas turned his attention back to the hole. “We don’t know anything about that, and don’t try to change the subject. We’re just supposed to bring you back to the base. After that you’re not our problem anymore.”

“But aren’t Royal Guards supposed to protect people?” Zephyr asked.

“Then you couldn’t be going to a safer place than the Royal Guard base. Now would you like us to let you out of the pit and will you come quietly?”

“All right, we’ll come with you, but you have to let us stay together,” Ember called up.

“We only have orders about two possible fugitives, but if your friend wants to follow us she may,” Simon offered helpfully.

The three friends nodded. “All right, let us up,” Melody called.

With great effort, Lucas and Simon hauled the net over the side of the pit to the path. Lucas then cut through the knot at the top of the net with his knife allowing the captives crawl free. As they exited the net, Simon tied their hands behind their backs.

The two Royal Guards began walking their captives back towards the base. Lucas led the way, Zephyr, and Ember followed him, and Melody trailed behind. Simon followed all of them. After marching for a few moments along the path, Ember lit the ropes binding her wrists. Simon could not see her actions because Melody’s body blocked his view. Melody shouted “Fire!” Ember pitched the burning ropes into a nearby bush which caught flame.

Both guards spun away from their captives and ran towards the bush, hoping to extinguish the flames so that they wouldn’t have to explain a fire that might spread to the forest. Their superiors would surely blame such calamity on them. Flames and smoke arose from the shrubs. While the two cadets were distracted by the burning bush, Ember released Zephyr who then tackled the two cadets and teleported to the bottom of the pit. He then neatly teleported back

out again. Ember released Melody, and the two ran back to where Zephyr had deposited the cadets into the pit.

“Hey, what’s the big idea?” Simon complained, pounding his fist against the dirt wall. Lucas seemed both surprised and furious. He shouted at the three, “You realize that you are now guilty of resisting arrest.”

“Since when can kids arrest people?” Melody shouted.

“We are not kids!” Lucas snapped, “We’re Royal Guard cadets, and if you know what’s good for you you’ll let us up and we’ll forget this whole escape attempt ever happened!”

“We’ll leave you a rope if you answer our questions.” Ember offered.

“We’ll see about that!” Lucas retorted.

“Go ahead, ask your questions. We’ll just catch you later.” Simon added.

Zephyr sat at edge of the pit. “Where is our Mother? Why was she taken? What do you want with us, anyway? Why can’t you leave us alone? And, why did they send real Royal Guards after her, and cadets like you, after us?”

“I think we already told you that we don’t know anything about anyone’s mother being taken by guards.” Lucas sighed.

Simon interjected, “We might only be cadets, but we’re still on duty, trying to capture two known fugitives. It’s clear that you’re the ones we’ve been searching for. Also, magic is rare and dangerous and you three set fire with your minds, teleported, and resisted arrest. That’s all we know. Can we have the rope now?”

“It’s not our fault we have magic. We’re not hurting anyone, so what’s the problem?”

Ember was eager to return to their original line of questioning.

Lucas snapped back at her. “You really think we can ignore powers as strong as yours? It’s not as if you do harmless things like holding your breath for ten minutes or knowing how many leaves are on a tree with a single glance. Abilities like yours have to be monitored so that...” Lucas trailed off as he realized that he didn’t really know what the Royal Guards wanted the fugitives for.

Simon picked up where his partner left off. “Hey, we just want to protect our families.” As he finished his last thought Simon stared up at the trio.

Melody noted that the shorter boy seemed a bit panicked. “Are you afraid of small spaces? Philip, the knife thrower at the circus once told me that if he’s stuck in a tight spot it makes him really nervous. You should see Philip’s act. He’s amazing. I once saw him throw a knife through an apple sitting atop his assistant’s head. The audience loved it. I’ve seen him place his assistant in front of a large board. Then, blindfolded, he surrounds her body with knives that he throws from ten paces. He hasn’t hit her yet. That’s another crowd favourite. He loves applause. But, I think he’s a bit claustrophobic. Are *you* claustrophobic? I’m not. Do you want me to make the hole wider for you?”

“Will you please shut up!” Zephyr and Lucas shouted at the same time.

Ember, sensing that there was another reason for the guard’s panic asked another question before he could answer. “Why are the Royal Guards looking for people with special abilities, when they are not a threat to the community? What’s behind this agenda?”

“We don’t know of any agenda, but you are our prisoners!” Lucas shouted back.

Melody jumped in. “That’s funny. Just who has imprisoned who?”

Zephyr, interjected, “Um, excuse me, we don’t want more people coming after us.”

“But they will. They have orders, and Royals Guards always follow orders. And, I hate to ask foolish questions,” Simon called, “but why do you keep talking about cows? The smiley girl mentioned them earlier and I’m starting to feel left out.” Simon hoped that if he could strike up a friendship, then, perhaps he could talk the fugitives into accompanying him and Lucas back to base. Plus, he was curious about their cow fixation, and wondered if it was a magical thing.

“Oh, well you see...” Melody began her explanation about the first time she had set out to catch a cow but caught a boy who was running away from home instead, but her friends interrupted her to point out that they had been talking to their supposed captors for a long time and the sun had already disappeared beyond the horizon. The three friends stepped away from the pit to decide what to do with their would-be captors and came up with a plan.

Zephyr peered over the edge of the entrapment. “We’re leaving now, but we’ll hang a rope over the edge of the pit. It’s dark now and you won’t be able to see where we’ve gone, so don’t bother trying to follow us. If you do, we’ll just teleport away.” With that, the trio tied a portion of the rope-net to a nearby boulder and set off.

“Good-by and good luck!” shouted Melody and the trio ran off to hide behind a clump of bushes part-way up the path.

Chapter 4

The moment Melody dropped the rope into the pit, Lucas began to clamber out, but promptly slid back. After a brief argument about how to climb a rope, the two arrived at the top of the pit and set off in pursuit of the three fugitives who by now had disappeared in the scrublands.

While tracking the trio, Lucas speculated on whether the fugitives would continue their westerly route, or return to the forest. After hours of blundering, they found themselves back at the base. “How did we get back here?” Simon pestered Lucas with uncomfortable questions.

“We’ve lost them! How are we going to find them next time?”

“I don’t know. It would help if we knew more about them. It seems there’s a lot the Captain isn’t telling us.”

“We could ask.”

“Yes, I’m sure if we just go up to him, tell him we’ve been on an unauthorized mission, caught the fugitives and let them escape, that he’ll tell us all the secrets we need. Maybe if we mention that they caught us in our own trap he’ll also let us into that off-limits prison-house.”

“Well, if you put it *that* way...”

Hidden in the bushes nearby, Ember whispered to the other two, “Off limits prison-house? That sounds like a good place to start our search.”

“But how do we know which building it is?” Melody asked a bit louder.

“If you were captured and thrown in there, you’d know. Now, shush.” Zephyr chided.

As the cadets entered the base’s front gate, the fugitives hid behind the surrounding treeline. The base was surrounded by a six-foot-tall fence, with torches placed at regular intervals and guards positioned in watchtowers. It was already evening, and they observed small plumes of smoke emerging from chimneys atop the various barracks. Zephyr observed that half of the

towers were unmanned, with only a few guards on foot. The trio skirted the perimeter of the base, arriving near a foreboding stone building next to a watchtower. In contrast to the barracks and other buildings, this one was unlit and surrounded by a tall barb-wired fence.

“I think we found the prison-house.” Melody whispered.

“We have to find a way in without being seen.” Zephyr replied.

“Can you teleport over?” Ember asked.

“I can get to the door, but that’s it, otherwise I could end up inside a wall. And, my flash of light might attract attention.”

“I can take care of the door, but it would probably be loud and attract attention, as well,” Melody offered, “We need a distraction.”

“Leave that to me. A few fires on the other side of the base will do it.”

“All right, we’ll meet back here when you start the fires.”

Ember stole towards the base’s south side. Moving along the eastern perimeter, she spotted a pair of guards, and immediately crouched low. One of the guards paused to scan the fence surrounding the encampment. Ember remained stone still. After a moment, the guards resumed their patrol.

Upon their departure, Ember exhaled and continued to the southernmost point of the encampment. The fence itself was loose wire and she easily slipped beneath it. She spotted an empty barrel near one of the barracks and lit it. She crawled through the shadows, and discovered a small wood-pile and set it aflame as well. Some of the sparks leapt onto the roof of the adjacent barracks, setting the thatch ablaze.

The cadet officer had called for lights out and Lucas and Simon were just settling into their bunks when they heard the cries of fire. Lucas jumped off his bunk, grabbing his coat on the

way down, and slid into his boots in seconds. He was ready to run out the door, until Simon, attempting to get ready just as quickly, got his foot caught in a blanket, lurched off his bunk and collided with his partner. The boys ended up in a heap on the floor. Outside an officer brusquely commanded the roused cadets, “Cadets to attention! Orderly lines out to the water brigade.” Simon and Lucas recovered themselves and raced out.

The two cadets raced to the kitchen where chef Tur was handing out large pots. The officer commanded soldiers and cadets alike to form a chain passing pots of water drawn from the camp’s well. Working next to each other, Lucas and Simon passed pots of water along the line. “How could such a fire start?” Lucas wonder out loud. “Could someone have knocked a torch over without noticing? Was the tower guard asleep?”

Simon passed another pot of water along the line. “It makes no sense.”

Simon was interrupted by a shout from Captain Nocens, “Cadets! Quit yapping and pick up the pace, or I’ll throw you on the fire as well!”

As soon as Zephyr heard the first call for water, he grasped Melody’s hand and teleported to the prison door. The building was made of stone and the door from iron. Zephyr could have hurled himself against it all night and gained nothing but bruises; however, Melody smashed the door off its hinges with one solid kick. The door flew into one of the guards, shattering his shoulder, leaving him stunned on the floor. Hearing the commotion, a second prison guard charged up the corridor. Zephyr raced forward, slid across the floor, and took him out at the knees, while Melody whacked him over the head with her fist. Zephyr skidded to a halt in front of the last cell.

“She’s in here!”

A groan came from down the hallway as the guard who had been hit by the door came to his senses. Melody stepped forward to kick the cell door, but Zephyr grabbed her shoulder and barked, “Be *careful* this time!”

“Right! No kicking this time.” Melody grabbed the door’s edges, pulling it off its hinges. The commotion alarmed a family of rats who scurried out of the cell. Zephyr ran to where Serenity was slumped against the wall, but when he saw his mother in the dim light he began to shake. Her forehead was crusted with blood from a gash, her arms covered in bruises and insect bites, her ankle twisted at an odd angle. “Mom, wake up! Mom it’s me, we’re getting you out of here!”

Her voice surprised him. It caught in her throat so all she could utter was a rasping cough. Zephyr gritted his teeth and took his mother’s hand, “I swear when I find whoever did this I, I’ll...”

“Calm down Zee-Zee.” Melody interrupted. “Let’s focus on getting her out of here!” Zephyr grimaced, while Melody pulled Serenity over her shoulder. “Time to go!”

They raced down the hallway. Melody lightly kicked the stirring guard in the head, just hard enough to ensure he’d be asleep for a few hours. They paused briefly at the front door to ensure no one was watching, then, Zephyr teleported them to the tree line. The light from his teleportation did not go unnoticed. Still passing pots of water, Simon saw the flash out of the corner of his eye, and as he turned, he saw Ember creeping through the treeline towards the others. He paused with a pot in his hands, and was about to shout that the fugitives had set the fire, when he saw the woman hanging limply over Melody’s shoulder.

“What’s wrong, why did you stop?” Lucas asked breathlessly.

Simon turned from the fugitives, “Nothing, I was just thinking that if we had some marshmallows they could be put to some use.”

Lucas looked baffled, “Did your brain boil? How much smoke did you inhale? Are you seeing spots?”

“No, I didn’t see anything.”

“Cadets! Who told you to stop passing water?”

Ember arrived at the meeting spot, but when she saw Serenity over Melody’s shoulder she ran towards them. “Mom, Mom what’s wrong? Is she all right? Is she..?”

“We need to get her out of here.” Melody led both siblings through the forest.

The three rescuers paused at a moonlit clearing about a kilometre into the woods. Serenity had fainted from the ordeal. Using water from a nearby rivulet, they cleaned the blood off her face and were relieved to find that the gash on her forehead was not deep, and miraculously, did not appear infected. Their next concern was her ankle.

“I should be able to put it back in place so we can splint it, but it’ll hurt a lot.” Melody offered.

Zephyr took his mother’s hand. “I suppose it’s better to do it now while she’s unconscious.”

“This stick will work well.” Melody was used to dealing with injuries from the circus. She gently felt around the bones and joints in Serenity’s ankle, grasped the fractured limb, pulled it out slightly, and guided it into place. Serenity let out a cry that was muffled by Zephyr’s hands positioned over her mouth. Their pursuers might not be far behind. Serenity’s eyelids flickered for a moment as she slowly exhaled.

“Ember, Zephyr? What are you doing here? Are you all right? Who is this girl?”

Zephyr hugged his mother, “We came to help you. We couldn’t leave you locked up.”

Ember suppressed a sob and joined the embrace. “We’re fine Mom. This is our friend Melody. We never could have rescued you without her help.”

“Melody, thank you for helping us.”

Melody joined the group hug. “Hi Ember and Zephyr’s Mom. I hope I didn’t hurt you.”

The four of them sat for a few moments until Zephyr broke the silence. “We should get moving. Once the Guards get the fire under control they’ll notice the break-in at the prison-house and come after us.”

“Do you want me to carry you again? You probably shouldn’t put any weight on that ankle for a while.” Melody offered.

“Thank you dear, but wouldn’t it be easier to support me between two of you? We have a long road ahead of us.”

Melody giggled, effortlessly lifted Serenity off the ground, and marched in a short circle around Ember and Zephyr. Having finished her demonstration of strength, she gently placed Serenity back on a soft patch of grass. “I can carry you easily. You don’t even weigh as much as Eugene, and I throw him up to the trapeze all the time. Well, maybe not all the time. Sometimes he worries that I’ll miss, or get him tangled in the net or something. Oh, I know! You guys can hide at the circus! No one will find you there. We move around all the time and there are a bunch of great places to hide. I can show you my favourite places, like behind the...”

Serenity interrupted. “I’m sorry dear but we won’t be able to hide out indefinitely. We have more pressing concerns than the guards at this point.”

“What do you mean?” Ember asked.

“While I was a prisoner, I had another vision.”

“Another one?” Zephyr interjected. “You didn’t even tell us about the last one.”

“I know, I’m sorry. I was trying to keep you safe from all of this, but I see now that I may have placed you in even greater danger. We are on the brink of a catastrophe; a volcanic eruption is about to happen. If the volcano erupts it will destroy the forest and the town. Flames will devour everything we know. Ash will fill the air, blocking the sun, the moon and the stars for months, perhaps years. It will wreak untold havoc. And, I had a vision of a dragon.”

Zephyr interrupted, “A dragon! We must destroy it!”

Serenity continued, “No you mustn’t! This is an ancient and wise dragon, a friend to humanity! It will help prevent the disaster. And in my vision, you three can seek its aid. Much will depend upon your actions over the next while.”

“Maybe she got a concussion?” Melody offered to the group.

“I know it sounds outlandish, but my visions gained clarity in the past few days of my imprisonment. You will all play a vital role in averting this calamity, but you will not be acting alone. Once the dragon awakens, she will assist and guide you.”

“Who’s she?” Melody inquired.

“The dragon my dear children, the dragon. She will awaken soon. Perhaps in a week’s time, perhaps less, but once she does, time will be short. You must be ready to act immediately.”

“Do you have directions to this dragon?” Zephyr asked.

“I have seen its waking in a mystical place in an ancient forest.”

Melody gave Serenity an apologetic look. “I hate to sound cheeky, but aren’t all forests around here ancient? That doesn’t really narrow it down.”

“In my dream, it is North East of here.”

Melody shouted excitedly. “You know what else will be north of here right now?”

“Let me guess, your circus.” Zephyr replied dryly.

“Right you are Zee-Zee. We can go there to regroup.”

“Do not call me that. You called me that back at the prison-house. I don’t like that nickname. Don’t ever call me that again.”

Ember snickered, “Hey Melody, when did you come up with that? Can I use it too?”

“Neither of you can. Now, can we focus on this imminent disaster?”

Serenity thought for a moment, “Melody how close are we to this circus?”

“Really close, if we hurry, we should be able to make it by morning.”

“Mom, do you have the strength to go on?” Zephyr asked.

“With your friend Melody’s help, I’m sure it will be simple enough.”

“All right! Follow me to the circus!” Melody exclaimed. She gently lifted Serenity into her arms and marched along the path into woods.

Back at the Royal Guard base, the fire had been extinguished and the guards were inspecting the barracks to ascertain the level of damage sustained. At the time this was taking place, Nocens investigated the prison-house and found that the door had been broken in. He entered and found still unconscious guards. He quickly proceeded to Serenity’s cell and found it empty with the door ripped open. He tried and failed to contain his rage as he exited the prison and bellowed at the top of his lungs, “Royal Guards, attention! A dangerous prisoner has escaped!”

Chapter 5

The Royal Guard base bustled with the activity of patrols forming to search for the fugitives and the escapee. Even the cadets were assigned to squads. Lucas and Simon shuffled with apprehension, for they would be marching behind captain Nocens. Soon several guard patrols would fan out throughout the local villages seeking signs of the fugitives and the escapee.

Zephyr, Ember and Melody had been trudging through the forest all night long. Even with her extraordinary strength, Melody was growing tired carrying the sleeping Serenity. The group arrived at a clearing on the edge of the forest. Melody shouted and leapt for joy upon seeing her home again. Her jostling awakened Serenity and startled the other two. “I told you we could get here by morning!” She shouted and beckoned to the twins, who were straggling behind.

Morning light created a rainbow pattern on the dirt floor as it streamed through one of many patchwork circus tents. Several rays caught Eugene’s eye. He’d served over a decade as the trapeze artist, in this travelling circus and was enjoying his morning slumber. He tried to block the sunlight with his hand, but as he did, he overheard unfamiliar voices outside. He roused himself, rubbing sleep from his eyes, and moved to the tent doorway. He was met by the ragged group of travellers.

“Who goes there?”

“It’s me, Melody! I’ve brought some friends with me!”

“Ah! Melody! It’s about *time* you came back.”

Eugene regarded the ragged state of the group, and hollered to the rest of the circus folks that Melody had returned, with guests in need of attention. In moments, the roused performers

emerged from their tents. Melody's parents, Corona and Regulus rushed outside eager to see their daughter. Canna the minstrel whistled a happy tune on her piccolo. Philip the knife thrower emerged juggling three blades. Julia and her entourage of animal friends arrived. She was still half asleep and was flanked by Bulba the bear and Nala the tiger, while Manny the horse trotted behind. Lewis, the strong man tossed a smaller anvil from hand to hand as part of his morning work-out. The last to emerge was Bridget the fortune teller, who dignifiedly glided towards the group, until she saw the woman cradled in Melody's arms.

Bridget ran forward and cried, "What's the meaning of this? What's happened to my sister?"

"Aunt Bridget? You're our Aunt Bridget, right?" Ember asked, vaguely remembering the woman from her childhood. Bridget turned to address the twins.

"Yes, and there will be time for catching up later. You haven't answered my question."

"We just rescued her from the Royal Guards' prison. She needs to rest." Zephyr replied curtly. His last memory of Aunt Bridget was of her leaving with nary a word of goodbye.

"It's so wonderful to see you all again!" Melody jumped in. "These are my new friends Zephyr and Ember. And *this* is Serenity. I told my new friends we could help them, but we're on an important mission, and we must go on a journey very soon. We would travel better without carrying an injured person. If you don't mind, she'd be better off here, if someone would care for her."

Corona spoke up. "Melody, your friends are more than welcome here. I can see you have quite a story to tell us, but first let's go inside the meeting tent. Bridget, this is your sister. Please join us, and if you would attend to her needs. The rest of you travellers, please come into the

tent, and make yourselves comfortable. Then, you can tell us what happened. Everyone else, go about your business, we'll inform you of the situation later.”

The crowd dispersed and Regulus led the group into the circus' meeting tent, where Melody placed Serenity gently atop several cushions on the floor. Bridget took a seat to Serenity's left, while Ember and Zephyr sat to her right. Corona and Regulus sat facing the group. Melody began explaining the events of their quest; however, she told events in a disrupted order according to what she found the most exciting. Her mother stopped her. Then, Ember and Zephyr detailed their journey, from their mother's initial capture, to meeting Melody via her pitfall trap, encountering the guards, the rescue, and finally, Serenity's revelations about the volcano and the dragon. When they finished, there was silence for a moment before Bridget spoke.

“I understand you three must travel soon. Don't worry about your mother. She can rest here, I'll look after her.” Serenity, who had regained some of her strength during the story, chuckled.

“Once I recover, I can earn my stay by telling fortunes. We can call it a competition to see who can pick the most exciting stories out of the crowd.”

“Pick exciting stories out of the crowd?” Ember asked.

“Well the crowd won't be excited by me telling people their crops will be ready in August, because they already know that. But, I can share my visions of people's fortunes. You'll see in the show this afternoon.” Bridget answered.

Regulus stood up, and started for the door. “Before that, you must join us for breakfast. The breakfast crew should have prepared it by now.” With a grin, Melody picked up Serenity and followed her parents out of the meeting tent, while the twins and Bridget tailed her. They

entered the meal tent and were greeted by a multitude of wonderful smells. The table had been set with loaves of fresh bread, plates of scrambled eggs, an assortment of cheeses, smoked kippers, mackerel and marinated herring, accompanied by overflowing bowls of apples, pears, grapes, and wild-berries. The rest of the performers sat politely at their places, waiting for their guests to be seated. Melody placed Serenity in a chair and found herself in a spot between Julia and Eugene. Once everyone was seated, Corona gave a signal and the circus began its breakfast ritual.

Philip the knife thrower began by tossing kippers across the table onto his friends' plates. He then set about tossing small blades and fruits into the air, slicing them into smaller pieces before they landed back on the main plate. The blades embedded themselves harmlessly into the wooden table-top. Lewis the strongman filled everyone's cups by pouring juice from a hogshead barrel. Canna the minstrel began playing the spoons on her knee with one hand and shoveling eggs onto her plate with the other. Their clackity-clacking set a cheerful and energetic mood around the table, and the performers found themselves unconsciously tapping their feet or drumming their fingers in time. Ember was shocked when her request for someone to pass the cheese prompted Eugene the acrobat to pick up the platter and hop across the backs of everyone's chairs around the table to set the plate in front of her. Melody gleefully tossed morsels to the animals, even though she knew Julia was very particular about what could be fed to her animal friends. Bulba the bear and Nala the tiger were not to have cheese, because it upset their stomachs. Manny the horse was forbidden from eating bread because he tended not to chew it properly, resulting in it getting stuck in his throat and bad cramps later on. However, Melody knew that Bulba loved kippers, and Nala was partial to mackerel, and Manny would eat blueberries all day if he was allowed. Melody also knew that Julia indulged her animal friends by

allowing them such treats, provided that they ate enough of their regular food to gain the proper nutrients. Bridget passed Zephyr a slice of bread before he had the chance to ask for it. She also gathered and passed a plate of sliced pears and herring for Serenity without having to be asked. Corona and Regulus, the ringmasters, exuded an aura of benevolence that inspired confidence in the entire entourage.

During the meal Corona stood and explained the situation to the rest of the circus people. “Melody is one of us. She has brought friends with here. That makes them *all* part of our fold. As you know, according to the code of the circus, we must now honour our friendship and allegiance by offering these travellers our hospitality and protection. The two known as Zephyr and Ember will depart very soon, along with our beloved Melody. They are on a mission of great importance, but one which we cannot say much about, except that the fate our future depends upon them. I know that I can trust all of you to support these young adventurers in their cause.”

Once the meal was finished, helpers came to clear the dishes and to tidy up. Melody brought Ember and Zephyr to a tent where they could all rest. Melody was excited by the fact that her three new friends would be able to witness a circus performance like none other, later that afternoon.

“I know you’ll be thrilled with the performance this afternoon, but I’m also eager to help you on your mission. Your mother’s prediction gives us little time to act. So, we can sleep a little now, and rest our tired muscles while we watch the performance, but then, we’ll have to go.”

Zephyr and Ember were exhausted and agreed willingly. The three drifted off to sleep in the guest tent, and though he was drowsy Zephyr remained restless thinking about the Royal Guards.

The trio was awakened some hours later by the sounds of people milling around outside.

Melody arose and pulled open the tent flap. “Ember, Zephyr, wake up! The performance is going to start soon! Come on! I know the best place to watch the show. It’s on the observation platform where we sometimes watch the show to see get an aerial view of the performance and the audience.”

Melody led the twins around the back of the main tent. They entered through a door flap meant only for performers. Inside, they saw a three-ring circus arrangement. Above the centre ring was a tightrope held in place by two towers that were secured using guy lines staked to the ground. The three rings were surrounded by ascending bleachers. The dirt floor inside the three rings was strewn with straw. At one end of the enormous “big top” tent there was a preparation area hidden by broad curtain where performers readied themselves before entering one of the three rings. The peanut vendors were already in place as the audience slowly trickled in.

Melody led them up the ladder to a curtained off observation platform overlooking the centre ring. Eugene was already there, watching through the curtains and assessing the gathering crowd. He turned to Melody, “It’s a good crowd! It looks like the whole town is here today. We have to be sure to put on our best show. We want them to come back again, and to spread the word about our circus.”

The three settled on the platform and heard the loud voices Regulus and Corona welcoming the crowd, and preparing for the show that was about to start.

Corona began with her arms held high above her head. “Ladies and gentlemen! Young and old, and all those in between! Prepare yourselves to be dazzled, dizzied, and dumbfounded by a performance unlike any other! The hair on the back of your neck will rise! You’ll cheer, you’ll fear, you’ll forget to breathe. Your stomachs will become kaleidoscopes of butterflies, churning with excitement. Your hearts will pulsate, pound, and palpitate!”

Regulus stepped forward and continued the speech. “Ladies and gentlemen! Young and old, and all of you in between! Gaze about, and you will notice our vendors offering you delicious treats of roasted chestnuts, salted peanuts, and hot buttered popcorn, along with beverages of your choice to add to your delight this afternoon. Prepare for shivers, shouts, and shocks! Your ears will perk up, perceive, and be pleased by exquisite acrobatics, astonishing feats of strength, and encounters with dangerous blades of death during our knife throwing act. You’ll shriek with delight and you won’t believe your eyes! So, don’t blink for a second! Yes! Keep those peepers peeled. The colour, the creativity, the cast! We have gathered the best of the best! And it is our great pleasure to welcome you to the Starlight Circus!”

The crowd cheered and Corona added with a flourish, “And now, introducing our first performers the precise projectile pitcher Philip and Canna of the cascading cadence.” Canna entered the centre ring first, playing a jaunty tune on her piccolo and the crowd instantly began to clap along, but their eyes were drawn to the minstrel’s strange headwear. Balanced atop Canna’s head five candles burned in a candelabra. Philip the knife-thrower entered the other side of the ring, juggling five daggers. As he juggled, he plucked a knife out of the air and launched it towards Canna’s head. The crowd gasped as the knife cleanly extinguishing the centre candle. He repeated this process twice more as the audience strained to see the paths of the gleaming blades cutting through the outside flames. Philip then snatched the remaining two daggers out of the air, turned while flinging them behind his back at the swaying musician, severing the final two wicks. The crowd cheered and stomped their feet to the sound of Canna’s quickening beat and Philip dangerous derring-do. Philip and Canna slowly marched from the central area to the east ring, and as they did Philip juggled stilettos behind his back while Canna kept up a merry tune.

Regulus clapped above his head and announced the next act. “Joining the stage and pulling the audience into the show is our uncanny clairvoyant Bridget!” Bridget glided to the centre ring, scanning the crowd as she walked. She pointed to a man three rows back. “You Sir, what would you like to ask?”

The man stood up and spoke loudly. “I’d want know what’s become of my son, but there’s no way...”

“Your son left six months ago to marry his sweetheart, of whom you did not approve. During the journey, he contracted a terrible fever, but his beloved helped him to a nearby town, where a doctor cured his illness. Your son asked the doctor how he could repay him. The doctor replied that he had difficulty growing his medicinal herbs. So now, your son and his wife are raising an herb garden in a village five days south of here.”

“Hector always had a way with plants,” the standing man said with relief. The crowd sighed in admiration.

Corona pulled a string of colourful scarves from her sleeves and whirled them over her head to attract the audience’s attention. “And now, Ladies and Gentlemen, prepare to be astonished by the gymnastic wonders of Julia accompanied by her animal companions!”

Julia cartwheeled into the centre ring, followed enthusiastically by Bulba the bear, Nala the tiger, and Manny the horse. Julia immediately performed a flying flip, her body rotated twice while airborne as her hips passed over her head. She landed softly and raised her arms for an initial round of applause. She followed this action with a tumbling pass moving diagonally across the centre ring with a series of layouts, double-half-twists, triple-layouts, concluding with a full quadruple mid-air flip landing lightly and perfectly on her feet. The bear, tiger and horse, pranced nearby, as if in approval. Bulba had brought a large green ball with her. As Julia

continued her astonishing acrobatics, Nala the tiger leapt into the air and smacked Bulba's ball with her powerful front paw. The green sphere soared high into the air, and as it returned was quickly swiped by Bulba. The ball hurtled across the ground towards Manny whose mighty hind legs sent it soaring one more into the air. Much to the audience's amusement, the animals played their game of "keep the ball up," while Julia cartwheeled, summersaulted, tumbled and flipped, in between and around them. The audience roared its approval.

While Julia and her animal friends migrated to the smaller west ring, Regulus's booming voice introduced the next act, "Burly as bear, and nearly as friendly, here is our strapping strongman the mighty Lewis!" Lewis entered the ring tossing an anvil from arm to arm. Placing the anvil on the ground, he pointed and invited an imposing hulk of a man from the audience to come on stage. Lewis asked the man to lift the anvil. The hulk heaved with all of his strength, barely pulling the anvil to his waist. Lewis seized the anvil with one hand, and then lifted the man off the ground with the other, while holding both high above his head. The man was shocked, but then began to laugh hysterically to the cheers of the audience.

While Lewis sent the man back into the crowd Corona called out, "And now to complete our ensemble, raise your eyes high, terribly high to elevated platform and flimsy tightrope above centre ring. Witness, behold and be amazed by the high-flying trapeze mastery of our acrobatic ace, the astonishing Eugene!"

Eugene skipped easily from the trapeze stand onto the tightrope and then front-flipped into a handstand. From there, he walked on his hands across the rope, occasionally pausing to terrify the audience by swing around the tight-rope clinging on with only one hand, before resuming his hand-walk to the far end of the high-wire. Then, using both hands he gripped the wire, spun twice around it, flipped high into the air, and landing lightly on his feet. He followed

this action with three somersaults rolling forward along the wire, ending with a pirouette in mid-air to reverse his direction, and then, concluding with a series of three round-off back flips as he returned to the tiny tightrope platform. The audience erupted in cheers, and spontaneously rose to a standing ovation.

Regulus continued, “One and all, enjoy your time here as your senses are overloaded by our exceptional ensemble, now performing for you in all three rings simultaneously!”

The crowd’s cheers ensued as the three rings overflowed with action. Canna trilled away on her piccolo and danced over to Julia and the animals. Julia cartwheeled to the tune, weaving between her carefree companions as they happily chased each other around the ring. Bridget tossed paper flowers into the air, which were quickly pierced by Philip’s blades. In the centre ring Lewis tossed barrels to the height over the tightrope while Eugene flipped and cartwheeled between them. The crowd cheered and clapped uproariously.

Suddenly, in the midst of the grand finale, a squad of Royal Guards burst forward into the centre ring. The audience paused in their applause. Was this yet another act? The royal blue uniforms looked dazzling as Captain Nocens bellowed loudly as he stomped into centre ring towards Corona and Regulus.

“Nobody move! We are searching this area for some dangerous fugitives! If everyone cooperates you will not be arrested.”

The audience immediately grew silent. Some giggled thinking it was still part of the performance.

“Silence! Or you will be tossed into the kingdom’s darkest prison!”

Corona and Regulus crossed the ring to block Nocens's path, and Bridget made a hurried exit to secure Serenity's safety. The Royal Guards accompanying the Captain fanned out menacingly amidst the three rings. The performers suddenly stopped.

Corona shouted at Nocens. "What is the meaning of this, we're in the middle of a performance!"

"As I've said, we seek dangerous criminals fleeing from custody."

"And you think that they would have stopped to watch the circus?" Corona replied sarcastically.

"We've fanned out in all directions. You will cooperate or face the consequences. The sooner we complete our search, the sooner you can get back to your little show. Unless you'd like to come to the base for questioning."

The ringleaders stepped aside and the guards surged began searched the crowd, while others searched behind the canvas curtain of the preparation area. Others searched props, boxes, coils of rope, barrels, and tarpaulins laying the floor. One Guard tried to make Bulba the Bear roll over to see if anyone was hiding under his stomach, instead the offended bear swatted him flat. Julia coaxed Bulba into standing up. The guard could clearly see that the bear was not hiding anyone. Lewis the strong man hugged Nala the tiger who hissed while swiping her claws at Nocens who kept verbally threatening both Corona and Regulus.

Back at the circus entrance, Lucas and Simon were dismayed at having been left to keep watch. They paced back and forth and listened, straining to make sense of the commotion coming from within main tent.

"I wish we knew what was going on in there." Lucas grumbled.

"Do you think the fugitives are really in the circus?" Simon asked.

“It doesn’t seem like a logical move. Fugitives would want to hide, while a circus’ main goal is to draw attention to itself.”

“I suppose, but something about this place seems like it would be safe for fugitives, somehow.”

“Well, safe or not we need to keep watch and make sure no one leaves.” Lucas began scanning the surrounding area with renewed diligence.

Inside the big top tent, Nocens noticed the observation platform. “What’s that up there? I’ll need to inspect that as well.”

One of the guards called back to him, “There’s a ladder out here sir!”

Followed immediately by several armed guards, Nocens mounted the ladder and burst onto the platform. A large rumpled canvas lying on the floor caught his eye. He stalked over to the canvas and threw it aside, to reveal three wooden targets for future knife throwing acts. In the bushes outside Ember breathed a sigh of relief. “Good thing we got out when we did.”

“What about Mom? What if they find her again?”

“Don’t worry, I saw Bridget sneak out of the tent as the guards arrived. She’ll find a good place to hide her.”

“Then we should get moving before they find us.”

Before they could move, a figure darted from around the tent and rushed at them. It was Eugene, who quickly shoved an armload of fruit, dried fish, and three canteens at Melody, and then darted back around the tent. The trio jogged hastily westward. Melody had to stop periodically to pick up some of the supplies she’d received from Eugene.

Ember reminded the others of Serenity’s words, “Mom said that we’d find the dragon west of here after two days’ travel.”

After nearly an hour of hustling they came upon a stream. Melody deposited their rations on the bank as they took the opportunity to re-fill their canteens, when a shadow came up behind them.

“Who are you?” came an unfamiliar voice.

The trio turned to see a girl approaching the stream with a water jug. They started to panic, until Ember realized that this girl would have no idea who they were. “We’re just travellers. We’ll be on our way in a moment.”

The girl noticed the supplies on the ground. “If you’re travelling, why didn’t you bring a backpack?”

“We left in a hurry, without thinking. We picked up the supplies along the way.”

The girl raised a questioning eyebrow, but didn’t press the issue, “Why don’t I make you a bag so you don’t keep dropping things on the ground.”

Zephyr was about to reply that they didn’t have time to waste on craft making, when the girl gathered a handful of reeds from the stream and wove them together with blinding speed. In moments, the reeds had been transformed into a small basket.

“Here you are.” The girl offered the bag to Ember, who merely stared at her in disbelief.

“My name is Gwen and I live in the village just south of here. Who are you?”

Chapter 6

Ember took the basket from Gwen and smiled with curiosity. “How did you weave that basket so quickly?”

Gwen smiled, “It’s my special skill. I just came by to fetch some water and found you three here.” Gwen lifted her water pot as if to prove her point. Zephyr and Melody grew closer to examine the freshly-made basket.

“I’ve never seen anyone weave that quickly, that’s astonishing!” Melody took the basket from Ember to examine it more closely.

The group was suddenly startled by a snapping twig behind them. Lucas and Simon emerged from the brush, determination clouding their brows. Lucas stood in a threatening posture, one hand on his dagger hilt. “Gwen, step aside! Those are dangerous fugitives!” Lucas barked, as he and Simon stepped towards the small cluster of travellers.

The forest grew still as the two groups eyed each other, with Gwen in between. She looked to her brother, “Simon! What are you and Lucas doing here? I was just fetching some water, and...”

“Silence! Gwen, I’ve already warned you to step aside! He drew his dagger from its sheath and waved it dangerously toward Gwen’s face.” Simon stepped and tugged on Lucas’s sleeve, but didn’t dare speak. Lucas was the one who always took charge.

Zephyr moved to grab Ember and Melody and teleport away, but Lucas shouted another warning, “Don’t try any funny business! Or, you’ll never see your mother alive again!”

The group froze. “What do you mean?” Ember blurted.

“We found her right away, and she is again, *our prisoner!*” Lucas proclaimed. He began advance slowly, almost imperceptibly.

“Where is she?” Zephyr demanded. He stepped towards the guards threateningly, keeping an eye on their daggers. His teleporting was useful for quick escapes, but not for a close-quarter fights.

“We found her hiding in the forest. And she told us where to find you, too!” Lucas gloated.

“You’re lying!” Ember shouted, “We left her at the...” Ember stopped herself, realizing she might inadvertently give away her mother’s actual location. “Anyway, she would never reveal where we were! I *know* you’re lying!”

Simon turned his face downward. Lucas paused, caught in a lie, “It doesn’t matter, we have you now. Are you going to surrender or do things have to get ugly?” He brandished his knife at them. Gwen wondered what she had stumbled into, and why her brother and his friend, were trying to arrest these three strangers. She looked to Lucas who glanced briefly in her direction. “These three just broke a criminal out of jail and are fleeing from justice.”

“We rescued our mother from unjust imprisonment!” Zephyr bellowed. He stepped towards Ember and Melody preparing to teleport. The two groups were at a standoff.

Gwen, attempting to defuse the situation spoke, “Well, why was their mother imprisoned?”

Simon attempted to answer his sister, but his own doubts about the legitimacy of Serenity’s confinement raced through his mind, “She... well, I’m not sure. It must have been something important.”

Simon’s answer did nothing to convince her, so Gwen slid a few steps closer to the trio. She couldn’t imagine them endangering lives of others by setting a dangerous criminal loose, “Simon, who ordered her capture?”

“The captain, of course!” Lucas tried to sound authoritative but his own dislike for Nocens crept into his voice.

“Isn’t he the one you always complained about? The one that lies all the time?” Gwen prodded.

Melody grew impatient with the debate. “We’ve escaped you before. We’ll do it again. Now, let us move onward. We have an important mission that affects everyone’s lives!”

Lucas snarked. “As far as I can see your only mission has been causing trouble, but that ends today.”

“No! We have to stop a volcanic eruption.” Melody sassed back.

“Volcano?” Simon asked. He turned to Lucas to try and confirm that stopping a natural disaster overruled a jailbreak.

“Ridiculous! How could you three stop a volcano?”

Melody crossed her arms indignantly. “You idiots! Serenity prophesied that we must visit the dragon who will advise us on how stop the volcano. It’ll be on *your* heads if we can’t complete...”

Ember interjected, “If we fail, this entire region will be decimated. The magma is rising even as we speak. When it erupts, the lava will burn the surrounding forests, then spread to set fields and villages ablaze. The ash cloud will turn the air to poison and block the sun. The few creatures that survive the initial scorching will starve, because nothing will grow in this area for years!”

Simon’s eyes were wide, but Lucas was unconvinced. “Nice story, but I think the Royal Guard would know of such a threat! So, is this Serenity is such a prophet, why hasn’t she told anyone else about it?”

“She told your captain. *That’s* why he threw her in jail!” Zephyr snapped. “Instead of seeking her advice, he accused her of setting off the volcano! He kept her in that horrid rat-infested cell, instead of spreading her warning!”

Gwen interrupted, “Can you think of why Nocens would want to hide such important information?”

“Well no...” Lucas trailed off.

“Lucas, you know he’s power-hungry. And we’ve both wondered about his motives about the throne.”

“Shut up, Simon! What you’re saying could be thought of as treason!”

“But, Lucas, what if Nocens is the treasonous one?” “We didn’t know Serenity was in jail until these three helped her escape. Nocens kept her imprisonment secret.” Simon offered.

“That does sound suspicious; like he was trying to keep her quiet,” Gwen reasoned.

Simon made his way over to the fugitive side and now stood opposing Lucas. “The captain does have a habit of not telling the public important things. Remember last year when he wouldn’t let anyone mention that escaped serial killer until he’d been recaptured?”

“All right, I’ll admit the captain isn’t the most honest man, but really, a volcano and a dragon?”

“If we were making it up, don’t you think we’d have come up with a more believable situation?” Zephyr reasoned.

“Please, just let us go. Lives depend upon it!” Ember pleaded.

Melody spoke as much to her comrades as to their adversaries. “If we don’t stop the volcano in time, everyone will die, including you two!”

The trio joined hands and prepared to teleport away, when Lucas finally relented. “Fine, what you say makes sense. But, if this is so important, then you’ll need help. We’re going with you to ensure the safety of the region.”

“We are?” Simon asked with a dumbfounded smile.

Zephyr bristled. “You think we’ll just let you come with us after all of this?”

Lucas shrugged. “You can try to leave without us, but we’ve become quite adept at following you.”

“Zephyr, we need all the help we can get. Let’s let them join us?” Ember said.

“I’d like to come too. My skills are humble, but I believe you three and I want to help.”

Gwen smiled and took Melody’s hand.

Melody smiled back, “Works for me. Now let’s go. We have dangerous work to do.”

The group set off, with Melody and Gwen leading the way, Ember and Simon in the middle, and Lucas and Zephyr bringing up the rear so they could keep an eye on everyone. There was an air of uneasiness as they walked. Zephyr checked back over his shoulder every few minutes and Lucas flinched whenever anyone made a sudden movement. Melody ignored this tension and told Gwen all the details of their journey so far, “I met these two, then we fell in a hole, but we got out, and we put your brother and his friend in that same hole, then we rescued Zephyr and Ember’s mother, then we visited my friends and family at the circus and had a great breakfast, I had eggs and mackerel and slices of pear, not too thinly sliced mind you because I like them in chewy chunks, and then Serenity, that’s Zephyr and Ember’s mother, gave us a prophecy about the volcano and a dragon, and how we’re supposed to help, and then we set off, and then, we stopped for water, and then you made us a basket, and then, your brother and that

idiot Lucas tried to arrest us, and now we're walking in the woods again. We seem to walk in the wood a lot these days..."

The others chiming in occasionally to add details or make corrections to Melody's account of the events. Gwen couldn't help but snicker at the idea of her brother and her friend caught in their own trap. She and the two cadets were aghast at the reported conditions of Serenity's captivity. Lucas remarked that Nocens had definitely been flouting Royal Guard regulations.

As they moved through the forest, the two groups grew more at ease with each other. Melody and Simon chattered excitedly at the prospect of meeting an actual dragon, while Ember and Gwen smoothed over any differences in opinion that arose among the others. Lucas and Zephyr remained vigilant, but their focus shifted to potential outside threats rather than each other, and they were both grateful for another pair of observant eyes. After half a day of walking, Simon began to complain of a headache.

Gwen touched his forehead. "You don't have a fever. Have you been getting too much sun?" Gwen asked.

Simon held his head covering his ears. "No, I just keep thinking I'm hearing voices, but nothing they say makes any sense."

"What do they say?" Zephyr asked cautiously.

"They all seem quite offended by woodpeckers and squirrels, but they seem to like sunlight. Also, something about hedges being snobs."

"Have you ever heard these voices before?" Ember asked.

"No, well, yes, but not this clearly. Come to think of it, this is the same forest where we were originally chasing you."

“Enough of Simon’s active imagination, shouldn’t we be focused on finding this supposed dragon?” Lucas pointed out.

“Yes, you can tell us all your subconscious gripes with woodland creatures and shrubbery after we’ve neutralised the deadly volcano.” Zephyr agreed.

“It’s not my gripe with woodlands or anything like that... why is everything suddenly so quiet?” Simon trailed off as they noticed that they were entering a silent section of the forest. No birds sang, the insects were silent, even the leaves ceased their rustling. The group drew closer together.

Melody turned back to look, “Ember, are you burning something? I think I smell rotten eggs or something...”

Zephyr seemed uneasy, “Did you notice something about the ground? It seems to be thrumming somehow...”

Lucas spoke next, “Look along the path up there. It’s a great log blocking our way, we might have to go around it.”

Melody replied to Lucas, “Can logs move? It seems an odd colour – are there blueish coloured logs?”

They all paused as a rumbling noise shook the ground they stood on.

Lucas’s breath caught in his throat and he felt like the pressure would suffocate him. Melody pulled Ember and Zephyr closer to her, as if their combined presence could somehow protect her. Then, they heard a voice, unlike any voice before. It rumbled yet it seemed quiet at the same time.

“My friends, I see you have arrived. Time grows short and there is a vital errand you must perform.”

The group turned to gaze at the source of the voice and all were rendered speechless. The dragon was enormous. Her head nearly brushed the tops of the trees, and her cloudy emerald eyes bore into the children sternly, but without malice. Her shimmering scales were cerulean and rippled in the changing light filtering in through the trees. She sat with her great wings folded behind her back, each with a sharp hoary spike protruding from the top. She had four muscled legs in addition to her wings, each with five razor sharp claws that could readily shred a horse or bear. The dragon gazed at them with one half-opened eye. The other eye remained shut. They had found the mystic dragon circle. A strange but powerful aura of energy emanated from the dragon.

Melody was the first to regain her voice, although it wavered and shot up an octave. “Great dragon we seek your aid in our mission to save this region.”

The dragon let out a low rumble that could have been a chuckle. “Younglings, I know of your quest. It was I who facilitated the prophetic visions. There will be time for more explanations later. For now, we must stop my nemesis before it is too late.”

Gwen spoke up confused. “Your nemesis? I thought the danger was a volcano.”

The dragon shifted its sleepy gaze towards Gwen, “The volcano *is* a danger, but the greater menace is she who stokes it with her breath. She has created an unnatural enhancement to her power in the form of a blood red stone. You must seize that stone if we are to have a chance at defeating her.”

Ember hesitantly raised her hand. “Who is *she*? And, if you don’t mind my asking, why do you need us? We can hardly stand up next to your power so I don’t think we’ll be a match for someone you call your nemesis.”

The dragon nodded. "It is a heavy burden, younglings, but one I must share with you. I would gladly retrieve the stone and battle my adversary myself, but, I have not completed my one hundred years of slumber. This I must do, or my powers will not be at full peak. My nemesis holds tremendous strength that has been enhanced further by the blood-stone. This task cannot wait. You must intercede immediately. I will aid you soon enough. Where is my teleporter?"

Zephyr nervously stepped forward. "Right here."

"Remember this spot. Once you have captured the blood-stone it will increase your power enough to return here within an instant. But be forewarned, the stone is corrupt, and its power may confound, intoxicate, and overwhelm you."

"I am so confused," Simon whispered to Lucas who elbowed him into silence.

"It would delight me to tell you all the whole story of my kind, but you will learn soon enough. I must return to my slumber, but first I'll share this wisdom." The dragon focused her gaze on Simon. "Your gift is barely tapped, allow me to help it along. Go stand next to that willow tree. He's fairly personable."

Simon obeyed, and suddenly the distorted voices he'd heard in his mind became clear. One voice in particular addressed him directly. "*My fellow trees, regard! Another human wizard who can hear us! Attend to my words young sapling, I mean young wizard. If you can understand these thoughts, then know that my kin, my fellow trees will inform you of all you need to know as you journey farther.*" The other trees murmured their approval.

"The willow can talk! And so can the other trees!" Simon stammered in surprise.

The other five youths looked at him curiously. The dragon started to close her eye. "You must proceed northward, for one day. You will find the stone deep in a blue crystal pond

surrounded by hostile weeds next to a large stone outcropping that resembles a bird of the night.

The trees will guide you. And now, I must return to my slumber.”

The dragon gave a flap of her wings to let the group know the conversation was over. The group turned and began a brisk pace northward.

Chapter 7

The group of heroes left the dragon ring and marched northward through the forest. They had originally entered the forest unsure of how their meeting with the benevolent dragon would help them prevent a volcanic eruption, but now they faced a deadly task ahead. As they proceeded to the site of the second dragon, their minds reeled with their monumental objective. Gwen was the first to speak, “What did that dragon *mean*? A blue crystal pond? A stone? Hostile weeds? What are hostile weeds, anyway? I’ve never seen a weed show *any* kind of emotion. And what did she mean by a stone outcrop resembling a bird of night? And how could trees possibly guide us to a place they’ve never been? *None* of this makes any sense!”

The trees did not allow the group to wallow in their new problems for long. They began addressing Simon all at once.

“It’s been quite a while since we’ve been visited by a tree wizard. Would it be possible for you to interpret for us?” Willow asked.

“Yes, do tell your friend the fire wizard to keep her flames contained.” Birch continued in an aggravated tone.

“If you start wandering off course I’ll gladly drop acorns by your feet, to keep you on the correct path.” Oak offered.

“Do you know any new secrets to dealing with termites?” Maple asked in a rather self-centred way.

Simon clutched his temples as the trees’ voices rattled around in his head. “Could you all please speak *one* at a time? Please?”

“What’s wrong, Simon? Are trees talking to you again? What are they saying?” Gwen asked for the rest of the group.

Simon blurted out a confused reply. "I'm supposed to interpret acorns and tell Ember not to set fire to termites. No, that doesn't seem right."

Willow sighed, *"I will speak for my brethren, for the time being. Birch is often cryptic, and the others can be hasty. We will guide you towards your destination, but we ask that you avoid damaging our forest along the way."*

Simon relayed the message, and Willow continued. *"I think it would benefit you to know the magnitude of the conflict you have just stepped into. There is much about the dragons you do not yet know. Much you may never know."*

Simon interrupted. "That reminds me, do these dragons have names? I thought about that earlier, but was too afraid to ask since she already seemed to know who we were."

"They do indeed, but their names are not for me to tell. Names have weight and can draw powerful energies. There are things I dare not speak of, but other things you must know. Let us call the mystic creature you just spoke to, the dragon of benevolence. I can relate that dragon's tale to you now, my young wizard."

"Good, and then I can relate the tale to my friends."

"No, I hope you take no offence, but there is an alternative way for us to communicate."

"What is it?" Simon asked the willow. Simon's conversation with the trees made Lucas cringe. It unsettled him that his partner seemed to be conversing with thin air.

"If you allow me into your mind, I can speak through your body so that all may hear. I will use your voice to speak to the entire group. It is a painless process but quite personal, usually reserved for comrades who are more familiar with each other. And, your group can continue walking while I communicate with you, at least to the edge of this vast forest, which stops just before your destination." Willow explained.

Simon nodded. "I see. Well, it's worth a try if it makes things easier."

"Very well." The old willow focused its thoughts on Simon. The boy felt a brief tingling behind his eyes, followed by the alien sensation of another presence in his mind. He still felt like himself, but at the same time he felt distant, as if his thoughts were seconds away while being replaced by another's. The sensation deepened as he felt the faint presence of all the trees connected to Willow on the fringes of his consciousness. After a few moments, he became aware of sound coming from his mouth, even though he hadn't tried to speak. He realized that the voice was not quite his. It was similar, but more wispy and aged. Simon was fairly certain he could stop the voice if he really wanted to, but that seemed rude, and he wanted to listen.

"Hello my young friends." Willow began, *"Please continue northward. I will guide and accompany you, to the forest's edge. I can see that your adversary is another dragon and that fact has unsettled you. You have courage and you can still triumph. Courage is lacking in the corrupt creature known as the malevolent dragon. All her wicked deeds are motivated by fear."*

Zephyr interrupted, "Why would an ancient dragon have such overwhelming fear, and how does that connect to setting off a volcano?"

Simon's eyes glowed a faint mossy green, as Willow fixed Zephyr in his gaze. *"Patience, young one. You are correct that dragons are ancient and powerful, but not immortal, not all-powerful. They live for millennia, as do the trees, but every half millennium, in your frame of time, they must rest for a hundred years to consolidate power. One reason for the necessity of resting is because magic flows out from them into gifted humans. Special ones, like this tree wizard, and you other five, all now have special powers that were granted to you by the benevolent dragon's seeping energy."*

Gwen interrupted, “Ember’s fire powers and Melody’s strength make sense, but are you saying my basket weaving is an ability that comes from dragon magic?”

“In a manner of speaking, yes. Your attributes are your own, you would’ve been a very talented weaver in your own right, but the dragon magic has enhanced your skills exponentially.”

“Well, it’s better than nothing.” Lucas retorted. “But you said *all* of us are somehow specially gifted. What’s my gift?”

Willow ignored Lucas’s question. *“There are more pressing matters to speak, at the moment. You all should know that if a dragon fails to slumber for the appropriate time, then it will grow weak and die. Most dragons accept these facts and live with them for millennia, but there are those seek to avoid the necessary periods of rest by finding another way, a more selfish way, that allows them to accumulate power and wealth. Our adversary is one of those. There is a rare type of stone, ancients call it the “blood-stone,” which some dragons wish to hoard, because it allows them to retain their energies without sleep! Their energies seep into the stone itself, and if they remain close to it, then, they can exist for thousands of years without sleep. If, however, something was to affect such a dragon stone filled as it was with a dragon’s stored energy, then you could overcome the beast by destroying the stone. The malevolent dragon you will face fears death and the loss of her power and will use her full destructive and forbidden magic to prolong and strengthen her life.”*

“You mean that stone thing the good dragon sent us to get?” Melody asked.

“Correct, the blood-stone augments the user’s power, but that too is limited, because it will not grant a dragon immortality. The effects of a blood-stone are finite, and some dragons

choose to create more than one stone in order to perpetuate their evil existence. Of greater importance is that forging such a stone comes at a terrible cost.”

“I don’t like where this is going,” Lucas muttered. He didn’t like all the talk of powerful beings that made him feel insignificant, but what he disliked more was that it was coming out of Simon’s usually simple mouth. Gwen was also having difficulty reconciling the foreign tone coming from her brother. She tried to look elsewhere, and pretend it was a stranger talking, but the voice was too similar. She kept wondering which of the trees was speaking through her brother.

Willow was oblivious to the group’s sense of discomfort and continued. *“The stone’s key component is human terror. Fear is a terrible force and can be concentrated into mystic blood-stone. Beware! For the malevolent dragon seeks to create a second stone!”*

“Then the volcano...” Ember trailed off.

“An eruption of that magnitude would be a powerful force and would create panic and fear throughout the region. The malevolent dragon could easily shape a new blood-stone out of the human terror that would arise. That is why you must succeed. You can save this region, and our forest. If you fail, others will suffer and this dragon will grow stronger and continue to spread fear in other parts of the world,” Willow concluded.

Lucas spoke first. “But this doesn’t make much sense. I don’t have any of the powers that this talking tree spoke of. And there’s *another* thing.”

“What’s that?” Zephyr asked.

“Well, what’s that malevolent dragon’s point in hurting people to live longer, if just it just keeps spending more time hurting people to live even longer? It’s not really getting much done.” Simon rationalized.

“Why are you expecting a genocidal monster to think rationally? You just spent the last five minutes possessed by a tree you just met! For all you know you might grow leaves now. That was hardly a rational decision.” Zephyr countered.

“Yeah, Zephyr’s right,” Melody agreed, “what’s the point in living forever if you’re scared of dying and terrifying other people the whole time.”

“It seems more like a punishment than an objective,” Ember added.

Gwen thought for a moment. “I suppose fear is a powerful motivator, even for humans. You’d run faster if you were being chased by a bear, than if you just wanted to get somewhere.”

“Some of my best friends are bears,” Melody interjected.

“Melody, not all animals are as friendly as your circus friends,” Zephyr reminded her.

“That’s not the point!” Gwen exclaimed. “We’re talking about how fear motivates that evil dragon.”

Willow resumed speaking through Simon. “*Whether the wicked dragon is making good use of her time is not your concern. Your mission is to stop her.*”

“Maybe if we understood her we could convince her that she’d have more fun playing with the other dragons than hurting everyone. Then we won’t have to stop her again,” Melody suggested.

Zephyr replied, “That seems unlikely. Can you imagine walking up to an evil, fire-breathing, human-eating dragon, and saying, “You need to get out more, make friends, why don’t you come to the circus with us?””

Melody scoffed at his reply.

Willow continued to speak through Simon, “*In the distant past, this dragon did hold close friendships. Deep bonds only heighten the malevolent dragon’s fear by adding the fear of*

loss to the fear of death. She and the dragon you met earlier were hatchlings. We trees looked after and nurtured them. The one now known as the malevolent dragon developed a special friendship with a human youngling, a tiny girl. They shared great love, and met often in the depths of the forest. The dragon flew the youngling on its back through great valleys over mountaintops and across placid lakes. But, as time wore on, the female youngling grew of age, took on a family of her own, took a husband, had children, but she never forgot the dragon. Eventually, time caught up to her, and like all humans, she died. After that, one we now know as the malevolent dragon, touched by the fear of death, and angered by the loss of her dear friend began wreaking havoc throughout the world. Fear began to fester until it consumed that dragon. The creature she once was is gone. All that remains is a being of terror seeking to sustain itself through the fear and the destruction of others.”

Simon shook his head to try and lighten himself after the somber tree’s speech. Melody sighed sadly. She understood how friendship with the dragon had failed. Still, she wondered. The others continued to walk in silence.

Lucas pondered the idea of how one might be possessed by fear for centuries. He knew he could get rather snippy when he was nervous, and even angry if anxiety continued. He felt a twinge of sympathy for the enraged dragon, but quickly dismissed the thought. Whatever her motives, she was trying to destroy innocent lives in the process. He told himself that this creature could not be reasoned with. Melody’s idea of befriending it was absurd, yet the thought still festered at the back of his mind.

Willow continued to guide the group through the forest. The group kept up a quick pace, rarely stopping to rest. They sometimes passed food and water flasks as they journeyed northward. As evening approached, the trees began to thin and the adventurers found themselves

watching the ground for loose stones and clusters of rocks. At one point, Melody slipped from atop a boulder and plummeted down, but she managed to roll with the impact while turning her landing into a series of summersaults.

“Melody, no need to show off, save your energy for the dragon.” Ember was growing weary of this difficult trek.

The others were not nearly as agile. Lucas bit back a curse when he skinned his hands upon sliding from a stone. Willow’s voice was growing faint. *“We are approaching the forest’s edge. It will not be long before you reach the blood-stone. In this place, its energy feeds the dragon and her fear comes through it. Take courage and ignore that source of anxiety. I dare not communicate with you for much longer. Dragons can sense communications between forest dwellers and humans. Continue straight on once you come to the rock in the shape of a bird of the night, then you will come to the deep pond where the blood-stone is kept.”*

“Just to be clear, what kind of bird are we looking for? An owl?” Melody asked.

“Does it matter?” Zephyr replied. “How many bird shaped rocks do you expect us to pass out here?”

“The bird you seek is a raven, younglings. Make haste, and good fortune.” Willow fell silent and retreated from Simon’s mind.

“Wow, my head feels so empty now! I was getting used to having a tree friend in my mind.” Simon exclaimed.

“Well, we all thought it was a little bit creepy.” Lucas replied.

They continued working their way through the outcroppings of rock in silence. Willow may have left, but Simon felt like they were not alone, as if there were eyes boring through his skull into his mind. He felt a sense of dread. Before he could comment Ember spoke.

“I don’t like this place. There’s something evil about it. I feel as though ice is encircling my heart. I’m afraid...”

“You’re right!” Melody broke her silence. “I have a horrid feeling that spiders are crawling all over my body, and in my hair! Agh!”

Zephyr urged the group forward. “It’s what that tree-person said. Fear! Remember? That Willow voice said that if we were near the dragon’s blood-stone, then, we’d all experience a sense of dread. We must be close. Keep moving!”

Suddenly, Ember shouted, “There it is!” she pointed to an outcrop of stone a hundred yards ahead of them. It had the shape of raven, almost as if it had been carved by hand instead of worn away by time. The blackened rock was nearly ten metres tall, and looked as if it had folded wings. The beak appeared slightly open, as if to screech a warning to travellers to go no further. But its eyes were the most haunting; shallow pits sunk in the stone.

The group huddled around the bird-shaped outcrop, reluctant to move past it, until Gwen reached out and placed her hands over the bird’s face. “See, it’s just a rock. It can’t hurt us. If we have trouble with this, how are we going to face a dragon?”

The rest of the group nodded their agreement and they all started forward as a unit, until they came to a dark pond surrounded by blood red reeds.

Chapter 8

The group of heroes walked cautiously past the stone raven, towards the pond. The setting sun cast shadows over the water so its ripples alternated between blue and black. The blood red reeds surrounding the pond waved tauntingly in the wind.

Zephyr moved to part the reeds, but as soon as he was within reach, the reeds wrapped around his wrists and knees, cutting off his circulation and dragging him to the ground. More reeds reached forward and began encircling Zephyr's neck, and he futilely struggled against the wicked weeds. Ember rushed the side of the pond, setting her hands ablaze to burn the reeds off her brother. As soon as they felt the lick of the flames the reeds released Zephyr and he reeled back, gasping for breath.

"What was that! Are you all right?" Melody asked, rushing over to where Ember was helping Zephyr to his feet.

"I'm fine." Zephyr stammered.

"Well, now we know what the dragon meant by hostile reeds." Lucas observed.

"She could have mentioned that they would try to strangle us!" Gwen added.

Simon heard a series of hissing voices. "*Humans are not welcome here.*"

"We must protect the treasure."

"Drown the intruders!"

"Never mind the fire. We can regrow."

"Everyone, the evil reeds are planning to drown us!" Simon blurted out.

"What? One can hear us."

"How troublesome."

"No matter, no matter. He'll drown just the same."

“Simon, what are they saying?” Zephyr croaked.

“They know I can hear them, but they don’t seem to care.”

“Try talking to them.” Melody suggested.

“All right, I’ll try. Hi, um, pond reeds. What a beautiful colour you all are.” Simon began.

“It tries to flatter us. It will not work.”

“Humans are thieves. They only want our treasure.”

“We’re not thieves. We just need something to fulfill our task and then we’ll leave you alone.”

“They want the treasure the master entrusted us with.”

“We must drown them.”

“They seem a bit narrow minded.” Simon looked around at the others for help. He wasn’t used to dealing with plants that only seemed interested in killing him.

Melody piped up, confident the reeds could hear her even if she couldn’t hear them. “Listen up you pretty pond decorations! We need to find something at the bottom of your pond, otherwise we’ll *all* be in big trouble.”

“They want our stone!” The weeds cried out in unison.

Simon interpreted. “The good news is, the stone is definitely here. The bad news is, they’re obsessive about protecting it.”

“It isn’t just humans who will be in trouble if we fail to get the stone.” Ember added. “There’s an evil dragon about to set off a catastrophic volcanic eruption.”

“They know of the master.” The weeds hissed.

“There’s worse news. The evil dragon’s their master.” Simon relayed.

Gwen had an idea. “You say the malevolent dragon’s your master, but does she actually care about you? Did you know she was planning on setting off the volcano? An eruption of that size will destroy *you* as well. Even if you’re not caught in the lava flow, the ash cloud will block out the sun. You’ll have no way to gain energy. You’ll wither and die.”

“It matters not.”

“The master entrusted us with the stone.”

“The stone will sustain us.”

It was Simon’s turn to have an idea. “Do you really think your master will let you keep the stone when she’s ready to move on? She’s a dragon. She left it with you so it would be nearby and no humans could get it, but when she’s ready to leave, she can just roast you with fire and take the stone back.”

“She’s put all this effort into sustaining herself for centuries. Do you really think she’ll leave behind any remnant of power to sustain a group of weeds?” Lucas added, playing to the aura of fear and suspicion emanating from the pond.

The weeds began to shudder. *“Will we truly be destroyed?”*

“The stone is cherished by the master. She would not leave it.”

“But humans lie!”

“But we’re not lying!” Simon retorted. “Even your fellow plants have helped us on our quest. I’ve had a Willow tree inside my head telling stories and giving us directions all day.”

The reeds were momentarily taken aback. *“A mind bond with one of the elder trees?”*

“The human lies again.”

“It would be simple to check.”

“Really? How?” Simon asked.

“Step closer. We shall see if there is any residual tree energy in your mind.”

“All right.” Simon started forward, before Gwen and Lucas caught him by the arms.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“Weren’t you the one who told us that they want to drown everyone?”

“It’s okay, they’re just going to check my head for tree to see if they should believe us.”

Simon replied calmly.

“And you believe them? They nearly strangled me!” Zephyr pointed to the red marks on his wrists for emphasis.

Ember placated her brother. “It may be risky, but it’s better than standing around arguing with the plant life. Melody, hold on to Simon in case they try to drag him into the pond. I’ll be standing by to burn them off if they try anything.”

With their roles assigned, the heroes watched breathlessly as Simon crept to the pond’s edge. A few of the reeds circled his head and swayed back and forth before retreating.

“He certainly has been communicating with the trees.”

“We do not believe he can lie.”

“He does not need to drown.”

Simon retreated from the pond. “Does this mean you *believe* us? And you’ll let us take the stone to stop the volcano?” The weeds angrily responded in unison.

“No!” Simon tried to reason with them.

“But...you’ll all die from the lava.”

“It matters not. We cannot allow humans into the pond.”

“Yes, the pond is sacred. No humans are permitted.” Simon’s confusion grew.

“Sacred to what?”

"It is not for humans to hear." A hint of pettiness crept into the reeds' voices.

Simon relayed the weeds' decision to the group. Lucas threw up his arms in frustration.

"I suppose if we tried to go in anyway they'd go back to drowning us."

"I'd say that's a safe assumption." Zephyr replied.

"I don't suppose you could teleport to the bottom of the pond, grab the stone, and teleport back up?" Melody suggested.

"Maybe as a last resort, but I have no idea how deep the pond is, or how wide it is at the bottom. I'm likely to get stuck in a wall, or caught by reeds and drown."

"If I understand this correctly, then, the reeds are willing to have us remove the stone. They know that they will die if the volcano erupts. But, for some reason, they cannot allow human beings into their pond. So, what if *we* don't go into the pond?" Gwen mused.

"Do you have another way to get an evil magic stone from the bottom of a dark sacred pond surrounded by homicidal reeds?" Ember asked.

Gwen expanded on her idea. "Maybe. Simon, even if *we* don't go in the water, might they let us lower something into the pond? We could take the basket I made for Melody, tie a rope to it, weigh it down with rocks until it sinks to the bottom, and then try to scoop the stone up."

The weeds had been listening to the group's conversation. *"If a human touches the water, they must drown."*

"Show us this basket."

"What is it made of?"

Simon interpreted. Melody gave Gwen the basket so she could empty the food supplies. Then, Simon held the container out to the reeds. The reeds began to deliberate.

“It is made of plant, so it may touch the water.”

“The plants are dead. It cannot be permitted.”

“I sense that the plants were dead before they were woven. It may enter.”

“Yes, plant materials are permitted in the pond. But what of that thing they call a ‘rope’?”

“Yes! What is this rope-thing? Is it also of the plants?”

Simon relayed the conversation to the group. Lucas withdrew the rope from his knapsack and passed it to Simon, who cautiously approached the reeds with the rope coiled over his arm. The reeds paused and considered.

“Yes, this is also of the plant world. I recognize it. It is our cousin hemp. It is permissible.”

“Yes, and the plant fibres were made after the plant died, there is no harm in it.”

“This rope-thing may also enter the pond. It is not among the forbidden things.”

“Humans may not enter the pond, but you may lower the basket into the water.”

Once the reeds came to their decision, to allow the basket into the water, Lucas fastened his rope to the handle. Melody gathered several rocks and placed them in the basket, before handing it off to Simon. He carefully approached the pond. The reeds parted and allowed him to swing the basket into the pond, where it easily sank. The group watched Simon during the nerve-wracking process of trolling the dark pond for the stone. He had to trace the basket along the pond’s bottom without splashing himself, or slipping on the damp ground. Simon brought the basket up several times, retrieving load after load of mud, before handing the rope off for Melody to try. Melody hauled the basket this way and that, but her efforts also met with little success. The next to take a turn was Lucas. After pulling up one basket full of mud he tossed the

basket directly to the centre of the pond. The resulting splash made him flinch, his foot slipped, and he fell flailing into the depths of the pond.

The reeds were furious. They quickly entangled Lucas and dragged him to the bottom. Lucas held his breath and pulled at the reeds with all of his might, but their roots were strong. The water was dark and he could barely see the light from the surface. Swallowing the last of his breath, Lucas kicked and lurched, sending up a cloud of mud. As the pond floor was disrupted, Lucas registered a new source of light. His eyes focused on the fist-sized, blood-red stone emanating a malevolent red glow. Lucas let out an involuntary gasp and immediately regretted that action as water filled his lungs.

Lucas waited to drown. The reeds were still holding him under water, but once he stopped holding his breath, he found he could breathe water as well as air. Pulling against the reeds, he reached out and grabbed the blood-stone. As soon as he touched it, a sense of foreboding closed around his heart like a fist. He felt paralyzed with a horrible dread. He went limp, and the reeds, assuming he had drowned, released him. Despite his new freedom, Lucas remained motionless. With the stone in his grip, his mind filled with a paralyzing and all-engulfing horror. His thoughts faltered. He no longer saw the purpose of life. He was seized in the suffocating grip of hopelessness. Death seemed to beckon with welcoming finger. His thoughts shifted to eternal rest. A strange voice began to speak to him;

“Sleep after toil, port after stormy seas, rest after war, death after life, these do greatly please. Rest your sinews and muscles, you are entangled here, forever.” Lucas felt as though he was a frozen block of ice. At the same time, he felt as if he was on fire.

“It is better to stay here. The bottom of this pond is as safe and calm as your own bed. Sleep, sleep now. There is no place better than here. The surface is rife with danger.”

Lucas languished on the pond floor. He had surrendered to the inevitable. He believed he would be better off never moving again. He believed he would be safe if he stayed completely still with the stone in his hand forever. His slowly began to close his eyes.

Lucas's thoughts were interrupted by sudden flashes of light on the surface of the pond. It looked like fire was raining down around its edges, but that was impossible. Fire didn't come from the sky, unless... Lucas's mind snapped back to reality as he remembered his friends waiting on the surface. He pushed back the debilitating horrible dread and began kicking his legs. Slowly his body began to rise towards the surface. The reeds, realising that the transgressor still lived, resumed their efforts to seize and drown him. However, somehow his kicking gained power. He felt propelled upwards faster than the reeds could grab for him. He realized that the power of the stone had somehow enhanced his strength.

When Lucas's head broke the surface of the water, he saw Melody and Zephyr holding Simon and Gwen back as they tried to jump in after him. Ember continued hurling fireballs at the reeds. Wide swaths of reeds were ablaze, others closer to the water's edge smoldered with a suffocating smoke. As soon as the group saw Lucas's head pop out of the water, Zephyr teleported into the pond, grabbed him, and teleported out.

The reeds increased their frenzied attack, and the heroes retreated from the pond. Gwen seized the end of the rope that was still tied to the basket. She didn't bother coiling it, but bundled it up in her arms, as the entire group retreated across the stone field back toward the Raven Rock. Back at the stone outcropping the group collapsed on the ground, huddling together, while catching their breath. Melody was the first to speak.

"Lucas! You're alive! But how can that be? You were underwater for nearly five minutes! Those reeds trapped you at the bottom of the bond. You could've drowned!"

“They almost finished me, but once I stopped holding my breath, I realized I could breathe underwater.”

“How?” Zephyr asked.

Gwen answered. “Remember when Willow said that all six of us had mystic powers? I think Lucas just found his.”

“I wonder why it took you so long,” Simon mused.

“Gee Simon, maybe because I haven’t spent a lot of time actively trying to drown myself. Why did it take you so long to start eavesdropping on trees?” Lucas retorted. Now that Lucas had been retrieved from the bottom of the pond, he felt a renewed sense of dread creeping through his body. He hastily threw the blood-stone away from himself towards the middle of the group. Ember stooped to look.

“You found the stone! Look everyone! *This* is what we came for! We’ve *done* it! Look at this stone!” Ember grabbed the blood-stone in her left hand, but as she touched the stone, her eyes glazed over. She sank to her knees. Ember felt a horrid wave of despair flood her body. She simultaneously felt sad, anxious, empty, hopeless, helpless, worthless, guilty, irritable, angry, ashamed, restless. She felt paralyzed with a wretched fear. Mortified, she became a block of frozen ice. At the same time, she felt as if she was on fire.

“What’s wrong with her?” Zephyr cried.

Lucas pulled Ember’s hand open so the blood-stone dropped from her grasp. “It’s the stone! When I first touched it, it seized my will with an inescapable dread. I felt engulfed in a dizzying helplessness. I was content to just lie at the bottom of that pond forever. And there was this horrible voice. A voice that drained all of my energy, all of my will power. It took the fireballs raining from Ember’s hands to awaken me. I don’t want to touch that *thing* again.”

Ember shook her hand to get rid of the feeling of the stone. “That giant raven looks even scarier at night, but for some reason I just wanted to curl up and hide behind it forever.”

Melody piped up. “So, touching the stone is bad, but we still need to bring it with us to the benevolent dragon. How can we do that without touching it?”

Simon spoke up. “I know – they taught us this in cadets. We can put the blood-stone in the basket and tie it to the middle of a long pole. With one person at the front and another person at the back of the pole, we can safely carry the load while staying away from the stone. We used to carry heavy objects this way, sharing the weight. This stone isn’t heavy but it’s dangerous.”

The ever-talkative Melody concurred. “Yes! That will work. We can take turns at either end of the pole, and carry that stone back to the benevolent dragon. I volunteer to go first!”

“Agreed!” Simon spoke up. “But we must not touch the stone. You already saw what happened to Lucas and Ember.” Simon used a pair sticks as tongs to scoop the blood-stone into the basket. The group then found a short branch of suitable strength and then secured the basket to it.

“We should go. I don’t want to be anywhere near here when malevolent dragon realizes her power source has moved.” Ember suggested.

“Zephyr, if you remember the location of the dragon ring then, could you teleport us there? It would save a lot of time.” Zephyr replied.

“Yes, I memorized it clearly.”

“We won’t end up stuck inside any trees! Right?” Melody asked.

“No, I know exactly where we need to go. There was a nice clearing near the spot. But, we all need to touch. Melody and Simon will hold the pole from either end. I’ll grab their hands. The rest of you form a chain grabbing their other hands. The group moved into formation.

“Everyone stay connected. We’re off to stop a volcano.” The group held hands tightly and Zephyr teleported them away.

Chapter 9

The night air within the dragon ring was still. The trees were quiet and the benevolent dragon lay on the edge of sleep. Suddenly, there was a flash of light, and the six heroes appeared in the clearing. The dragon opened one emerald eye to take in the new arrivals. The six youths were disheveled, with dark circles under their eyes from travelling all day. They carried a basket suspended by a branch between them. Inside the basket was a large red stone. The stone emitted a red glow, but did not provide comfort against the darkness of the night. Instead it augmented the shadows, twisting their forms into grotesque misshapen figures. Melody took no notice of the stone's ill effects.

“Nice job Zee-zee! You didn't get us stuck in a tree!” Melody congratulated.

“I told you not to call me that!” Zephyr snapped back.

The dragon spoke in a clear, calming tone. “I am pleased you have returned safely my young heroes. You have fulfilled your task and retrieved the blood-stone.”

Lucas spoke up, “So, can you destroy it? I'd like to spend as little time around this thing as possible.”

“I would like to dispose of the blood-stone quickly as well, but dark magic such as this can not be dealt with hastily or with brute force alone,” the dragon replied.

Birch spoke up. “*I believe our assistance may prove useful my liege.*”

“*Yes, we can contain the evil and dispel it over time,*” Willow agreed.

“I would not ask this of you if there were a better way my friends, but I fear you forest allies may be our best option,” the dragon replied.

The young heroes glanced around themselves in confusion, unable to hear the trees in conversation with the dragon. Simon pointed between the trees and the dragon and whispered to the group, “The dragon is talking to the trees.”

“My heroes, place the blood-stone at the base of this willow. Be careful not to touch it directly, lest you be paralyzed by its aura of terror,” the dragon instructed.

Melody and Simon lowered the basket to the ground in front of the tree and carefully deposited the blood-stone amongst Willow’s roots. As soon as the stone touched the base of Willow’s trunk, his leaves began to turn and wilt and his trunk took on a tinge of red. Immediately, the other trees extended their roots entwining them with Willow’s and his degradation slowed as the surrounding trees took on a portion of the blood-stone’s corruption.

Although many of Willow’s lower branches were already bare, his crown still retained many leaves. But, the other trees started to shed their lower leaves.

“What’s happening to them?” Simon exclaimed.

“The blood-stone holds a deep well of negative energy. It can enhance the strength of the holder, but counteracting its energy is a draining experience,” the dragon explained.

“Will they be all right?” Simon asked.

“We will survive young ones, but purifying and destroying the stone will sap our strength for some time.” Willow answered, and Simon relayed this message to the rest of the group.

“So, if the trees are sapping the malevolent dragon’s power source, will the volcano become quiet?” Lucas asked.

“No, even without interference, the volcano will still erupt if left unattended, and the malevolent dragon still has significant power accumulated,” the benevolent dragon replied.

“Then, how do we stop the volcano?” Melody asked.

“The first thing you must do is rest for tonight.”

“But time is of the essence!” Zephyr exclaimed.

“That is true younglings, but *timing* is also essential. By morning, I will be at my full strength, you will have recovered from the ordeal of the pond. We will have the light of day on our side. The dark dragon will surely sense our approach to the volcano and will intercept us. We will need to be at our full strength and we must give the trees time to drain the stone further.”

“Is it all right for us to sleep so close to the blood-stone?” Gwen asked.

“The trees will protect you young one, and so will I. Come here all of you, and lay your heads against my wings while you sleep. I will allow more power to flow into you as I finish my rest, to better equip you for the final task ahead. But, before you rest, there is one important thing for you to know. And this you must promise not to share with *anyone*. Consider it a secret.”

Melody could not contain her excitement. “What is it? We won’t tell anyone. I promise you. What is it?”

The dragon responded. “Very well. I will share the secret of my name and the name of the evil dragon. Many centuries ago, long before your ancestors walked this earth, I was born. My parents gave me the name, Sariel. When I was a hatchling I met the other dragon. We were friends for what you humans call ‘centuries’ but as time went by, the other dragon took on evil ways. The foe we face is named Tabbris. The names of dragons must not be uttered because they will come to you, and sometimes that is not a good thing. So, while you know our names, do not speak them.”

The group took in this new knowledge and agreed to rest. They lay down with their heads resting on the blue folds of the dragon’s expansive leathery wings. Within minutes, their exhaustion overtook them, and they each fell into a deep sleep. When morning arrived, Melody

was the first to awaken, closely followed by Ember. The two girls gasped when they saw the state of the forest in the morning light. The forest floor was covered in dead leaves, and the trees looked bare and withered. Their branches drooped and their bark was tinged with red and grey. Even the moss on the northern sides of their trunks had dried and crumbled to the ground. The girls quickly awakened the rest of their group, who rose from their sleep with the usual protests and grumbles. Once they were awake, the rest of the group shared in the shock of seeing the emaciated forest.

Simon leapt up and dashed over to his friend the willow tree, and was about to embrace the frail looking trunk when the powerful voice of the dragon stopped him. “Stop! You must not touch that tree Simon. He is in direct contact with the stone and is sharing its burden with the other trees through the entwinement of their roots. If you touch the trees, you will be drawn into their burden and affected by the blood-stone.”

“The dragon is correct Simon, but do not waste your thoughts on us. You must stop the volcano, or this entire region will suffer fiery destruction.” Willow whispered hoarsely.

The dragon stood up and shook out the stiffness of her long sleep. “Come my heroes, climb on my back and hold on tightly. I will fly us to the volcano and show you what you must do.”

The group clambered onto the dragon’s back and held on with full strength as Sariel beat her powerful wings and rose from the ground. They soared through the air at blinding speed. The heroes had to close their eyes and huddle low to protect themselves from the sheering wind. Within moments, Sariel touched down at the base of the volcano. The group slid to the ground and tried to regain their balance after the turbulent flight.

“We have arrived at the most perilous part of your journey my young heroes. Do you see that discoloured section at the base of the mountain?” The dragon indicated a portion of mountainside that was a lighter colour than the surrounding rock. The light-coloured rock was the size of a large bear. The dragon explained.

“Behind that weak layer of stone there is a passage to the heart of the volcano. Melody, you should be able to break through the stone without creating too many vibrations. Remember, any shock-waves or seismic activity might awaken the volcano. Once through the portal, you must follow the passage through the depths of the mountain. It will lead you to a cavern and a precipice just above the rising magma.”

Gwen interrupted. “Wait, you want us to walk into an active volcano, towards the lava? But, we’ll burn before we get close enough to do anything!”

“Only three of you will enter the volcano, I have another task for the rest. Ember’s mastery of fire and Melody’s power and durability will offer some protection from the heat of the magma. After last night’s rest in my surrounding aura, Ember now has the power to absorb the heat for a while. And the extra power I poured into all of you last night has enhanced your abilities.”

“Yes, but who will be the third one into the volcano?” Zephyr asked.

“You are, young Zephyr. If you stay in contact with your sister and Melody, their powers will protect you as well.”

“So, what do we have to do inside the volcano?” Ember asked.

“That is related to the task I have for the others. Lucas, do you see that spring near the edge of the forest? You will have to direct the water from that spring through the pathway to cool the magma. There are many weak walls and blockages along the path, so Melody will need to

clear the way before you can proceed, and Ember must absorb much of the heat from the tunnel, or the water will boil and turn to steam before it reaches the magma. Zephyr must teleport out to tell Lucas when Ember has sufficiently cooled the tunnel. And then Zephyr, you must quickly return to retrieve the two who remain within the volcano, lest they be swept up by the water and washed into the magma.”

“There’s a problem with that plan. I can breathe underwater, but I’ve never directed it before, especially not over land through a tunnel.” Lucas complained.

“What you did before was merely the awakening of your power, and I have further augmented it. You are capable of this task. When the time comes, you must communicate with the water, visualize exactly what you are asking it to do.”

“What about us? What are we to do in the meantime?” Simon asked.

“Your role is important too. I have faith that we can succeed in this task; however, Tabbris, the malevolent dragon, will soon realize what we are doing and will attempt to stop us. I will engage her to give you time, but should I be defeated, then the two of you must warn the others and escape. If I fail, then, this region will fall. Other regions will also be destroyed, if the malevolent dragon succeeds. If I fail, then you will have to regroup and find ways to undermine her on your own,” the dragon cautioned.

“It won’t come to that. We’ll save everyone now!” Melody exclaimed.

“Hold on to that confidence. Now quickly, to your tasks!”

At the dragon’s words the six heroes leapt into action. Gwen, Lucas, and Simon raced to the pond to wait for their moment. Melody charged against the light-coloured section of mountain, ramming her fist through the thin layer of rock. She jumped back as a wave of heat vented through the hole she made. Melody repeatedly smashed in the rock, until the opening was large

enough for her and the rest to walk through. Melody, Ember, and Zephyr joined hands and set off at a jog through the sweltering tunnel.

As soon as the trio entered the passage, they felt a great rumble shook the volcano. The trio outside shrank back in horror as they saw a giant green shape hurtling above the horizon. The malevolent dragon shot across the sky towards the mountain, her eyes red with fury. Tabbris was a rippling shade of green that shone luminously in the morning sun. Her jagged claws were hooked sharply and she barred her gleaming fangs as she dove at Sariel who rose to meet her adversary.

The malevolent dragon let out a low growl that reverberated through the morning air. “So, you’re awake Sariel. I should have known you were involved the moment my connection with my blood-stone weakened. Return it to me! If you comply, perhaps I’ll allow you to live.”

Sariel beat her mighty wings in defiance. “You will not regain that cursed stone Tabbris, nor will you make another. My heroes are putting a stop to your plan, as we speak. Use your remaining time wisely.”

Tabbris roared with contempt. “You think a gaggle of insignificant humans can interfere with me! I’ll rend their flesh from their bones the minute I’ve finished with you!”

With a shriek of rage, Tabbris lunged at Sariel. Sariel surged through the air swinging her powerful tail. Tabbris drew back as the razor edge of the Sariel’s tail slashed past her eyes. The green dragon renewed her attack, throwing back her head and spitting a torrent of flame. Sariel countered with her own blasting blaze. The two bursts of flame collided scorching the air, gaining intensity until both dragons paused to breathe. The respite only lasted for a moment, as Tabbris resumed her assault. She snapped her mighty jaws, aiming to tear Sariel’s wings to render her flightless, but Sariel batted her opponent back with a swipe from her claws. Unable to

overcome Sariel through maneuverability, Tabbris shifted to brute force. She lunged at the blue dragon, ignoring the claws that stuck out to repel her. Tabbris crashed into Sariel's neck. The benevolent dragon was sent spiraling downwards, smashing into the earth.

Within the volcano, the shockwave from the impact disrupted the tunnel, showering rocks down onto Melody, Ember, and Zephyr. The trio had been making quick progress through the tunnel. Melody broke down any rocky barriers they encountered, while Ember focused on absorbing and quelling the intense heat surrounding them.

At the forest's edge, Lucas, Simon, and Gwen watched the two dragons battling near the ground. They flinched as the malevolent dragon rained blow after blow onto the benevolent dragon.

"We should help her!" Simon exclaimed.

"How can we help, Simon? You talk to plants, I weave vegetation into baskets. Lucas breathes underwater. Maybe he can splash them. I don't think we can make much of a difference in this fight," Gwen reasoned.

The thorn bushes nearby had been listening to their conversation and offered their assistance.

"There is a way for you to participate, at least in a small way. Our nettles are small but, they do sting. If you make a sling, you can distract the malevolent dragon to give the good dragon time for a counter attack."

Simon relayed the message to the other two, and Gwen quickly shaped a handful of nearby vines into four slings.

"Why four slings?" Lucas asked.

“Lucas, you need to move the spring-water. Both Simon and I have two good arms.”

Gwen answered. Seizing some nearby tall grass, Gwen quickly shaped a pair of baskets, one for Simon and one for herself. “Simon, you take the left side and I’ll take the right. The malevolent dragon won’t be able to focus on both of us.”

The two siblings quickly formed some mud-balls packed with spikey thorns. They filled their baskets and dashed to either side of the brawling dragons. They carefully took aim and sent the stinging balls hurtling towards the malevolent dragon. Many of the nettles bounced off the dragon’s gleaming scales, but a few of them found their mark on Tabbris’s soft underbelly. The malevolent dragon showed some annoyance, and when more rounds of nettles found their mark, she swivelled her head looking for the source of the distraction. Tabbris’s fierce eyes settled on Gwen who immediately fired her sling at Tabbris’s open eye.

Tabbris roared, blinking in pain, and Sariel used this distraction to bite down on the malevolent dragon’s neck. Tabbris squirmed and slashed. Sariel pinned her opponent’s claws and held firmly on Tabbris’s neck. The malevolent dragon thrashed wildly.

Deep inside the volcano, the twins and Melody arrived at the end of the tunnel, and stared at the bubbling magma below them. They were drenched with sweat, and the waves of heat rising within the cavern made it difficult to see. Ember stepped to the edge of the precipice overlooking the magma. Ember continued to absorb the heat from the tunnel behind them, but this roasting lake of magma overwhelmed her with a wave dizziness. She faltered momentarily, but Melody grabbed and held her up.

Placing Ember’s arm over her shoulders, Melody shouted above the sizzling magma. “I’ll hold you up. You just focus on cooling that tunnel.”

Ember nodded and renewed her concentration. Zephyr loosened his grip on his sister's hand.

"Hold on for just a few more minutes. I'll inform Lucas to send the water. Then, I'll come right back to get you."

With a flash of light, Zephyr disappeared from the magma chamber, and reappeared next to Lucas. "Everything's ready. Flood the volcano!"

Lucas dipped his hands in the spring-water pond. He willed the water to flow into the tunnel. The surface of the spring bubbled and some splashed onto the grass, but then settled again. He tried once more, and this time the water moved beyond the edge of the pond but no farther. "I can't do it!" Lucas choked in panic.

In the midst of her battle with Sariel, Tabbris sneered. "You see! Humans are weak! You've poured too much of your power into them! I am stronger now. In the end, they'll never be able to save themselves. I've drawn on their fear to make my blood-stone. That is all they are good for. Surrender! You fight a losing battle. I may yet let you live, old friend. Watch! Soon, your precious heroes will burn, and their terror will give me the additional strength I need."

"Shut up!" Gwen shot another thorn-ball, while yelling at the dragon.

By this time, Simon made his way back to the spring, where Zephyr paced, wondering if he could somehow teleport the spring-water into the tunnel. Lucas kept trying to move the water, his actions grew frenzied with panic.

"The dragon said you can do it!" Simon shouted.

"But, I don't know how!" Lucas cried.

"Remember what the dragon said! You must *communicate* with the water, and then, *visualize* where you want it to go!" Lucas dipped his hands into the water once more.

“Yes, I remember, communicate and visualize! Yes, I’ll try!” Lucas plunged his head right into the water.

“What are you doing! You’ll *drown!*” Simon took on some of Lucas’s sense of panic.

“No he won’t! Remember! He can breathe under water!” Zephyr shouted.

Once under the surface of the water, Lucas grew calm. The cooling spring relaxed him. He began to breathe the liquid as if it was air. He became one with the spring. He began speaking under the water.

“Oh, noble spring, forgive this intrusion. We have urgent need of your help. The fate of this world rests with you. There is a tunnel nearby. Can you flow through it immediately? There will be a great heat, but your waters are endless. Will you help?”

Lucas then withdrew his head from the spring-pond. “I don’t know if I said the right thing.”

But suddenly, the water surged forth the spring and nearly leapt into the tunnel and cascading its way through to the magma chamber. Lucas kept the image of the water surging through the tunnel so. He pictured the spring-water cooling the magma and wouldn’t let that image go.

Zephyr reclaimed his sense of purpose and quickly teleported back to the magma chamber to retrieve Ember and Melody. Inside the volcano, Melody was still supporting Ember as she worked to contain the tunnel’s heat. They heard the deluge of the water crashing through the tunnel towards them. The sound grew louder, and the two girls exchanged nervous looks. Suddenly, in a flash of light, and Zephyr appeared. He grasped their hands and teleported back outside.

The spring-water flowed onto the magma. Instantly, the cavern filled with billowing steam. As the water hit the magma, the cavern erupted with crackling, hissing and sizzling reverberations. Rocks cracked spontaneously, smoke whirled while the magma abruptly cooled gradually swirling downward. From outside, thunderous crashes and terrifying roars echoed through the tunnel into the volcano's cavern, as the two dragons continued their battle.

Chapter 10

At the base of the volcano, the two dragons slashed and clawed at each other's throats. Gwen was still shooting balls of thorns at Tabbris, but the two dragons were lunging and weaving too quickly for her to aim, and her projectiles bounced uselessly off the green scales. Lucas and Simon were struggling to think of ways to aid Sariel without getting in her way, but their minds were consumed by panic and confusion.

Sizzling and crackling noises emerged from the inside of the volcano. In a flash of light, Zephyr, Ember, and Melody appeared beside the spring beside the mountain. Tabbris shrieked furiously, "You think your meddling makes a difference, I'll reheat the magma as soon as all of *you are dead!*"

While Tabbris shrieked Sariel used the distraction to swipe her opponent's legs from beneath her. Tabbris beat her wings to try attempting to regain her balance but Sariel tackled her, pinning the wicked dragon's claws beneath her. "Admit it, you've lost!"

Tabbris twisted her head and spat a torrent of flames, escaping Sariel's grip. The two circled each other, neither giving the other an opening. "You can't kill me old friend, especially not in front of these children. Your heart is too soft, your mind too weak. Your protection of lesser beings is futile. I am destined to win! Even if you stop me once, I'll return stronger than ever. But, I'll be merciful. If you reignite my volcano, terror will reign, and my power will increase, and then I'll lead you to your *own* volcano, and you can taste the power for yourself."

Sariel placed herself firmly between Tabbris and the volcano. "This is your last chance to surrender. I will do whatever it takes to stop you."

The dragons lunged at each other again, causing the ground to shake under their power. The six heroes gathered in front of the spring. "How can we help?" Zephyr asked.

“I could use my strength and fight with Sariel.” Melody suggested.

“No,” Ember cautioned, “you’d get too close to those claws and jaws. Even *you* can’t punch through dragon scales.”

“Ember, what about your fire? You can use that from a distance.”

Lucas interrupted, “No more fire around the volcano. We’ve cooled it for now, we can’t risk heating it again.”

Their brainstorming was interrupted by the sounds of heavy boots crashing through the forest.

“Follow me men! Faster, I can hear something up ahead!”

Lucas and Simon exchanged a look of terror at the familiar voice bellowing through the forest. They had no time to warn the others before Nocens burst through the treeline, followed by a battalion of Royal Guards. Oblivious to the battling dragons, Nocens’s eyes fell on Lucas and Simon’s uniforms.

“Cadets! I see you’ve captured these fugitives, but you’ve failed to tie them up!”

Lucas, Simon, and Gwen moved protectively between the fugitive trio and the guard captain.

“Sir!” one of the guards shouted, “look ahead, there are larger matters than rogue fugitives!”

Perturbed at the interruption, Nocens looked further into the clearing and saw the dragons battling fiercely. “I see! Those must be the fugitives’ wicked partners! Men, here’s our chance! Bring down those dragons!”

“No! The blue dragon is trying to protect us!” Melody cried.

Nocens charged forward, despite Melody's plea, "Ignore the fugitives. Their minds have been corrupted. We can imprison them after we've defeated the beasts."

The guards leapt into the fray, swinging swords wildly at the battling dragons. Their blows bounced harmlessly against the dragons' scales. A few managed to leave shallow gashes on the beasts' soft underbellies. Tabbris grumbled at the intrusion into her battle, but then had a wicked idea. The green dragon reared back her head and breathed a jet of flame at the guards beside Sariel. The blue dragon leapt in front of the targeted guards and flinched as Tabbris's flames licked her scales. Oblivious to Sariel's good intentions, the guards attacked her back.

The heroes dashed forward to pull the guards away from Sariel. "Can't you see she's protecting you!" Gwen shouted at the Captain of the guards. In response, the Captain threatened her face with his sword. Enraged, Lucas and Simon tackled the guard, knocking the blade from his hand, but three more guards rushed at them, leveling their swords at the cadet's faces.

"Can you get us all out of here?" Ember screamed at Zephyr, backing away from the guards.

"Yes, but Sariel needs our help!" Zephyr shouted.

Tabbris pressed her advantage, lashing out at several guards who had circled around Sariel and charged at her. She turned her attack back to Sariel. "Flee while you can or I will kill you!"

Sariel leapt past the guards and feigned a swipe at Tabbris's face before whipping her tail across the green dragon's underbelly. "They may be misguided, but these humans are still under my protection. I'll not let you have a single one."

Several of the guards noticed that the blue dragon never retaliated against their blows, and instead shielded them from the jaws of the green dragon. They began to call questions to their captain Nocens.

Nocens fumed at the guards questioning of his orders. “It’s a trick, you idiots! Either beast will snap you up for its dinner the moment the competition has been ended. Bring them *both* down!”

The guards rallied, but before they could renew their attack a commanding voice called out from the edge of the forest. “Enough! Lower your weapons.”

Everyone in the clearing froze in shock, even the two dragons, and they all turned to the source of the command. Two prominent figures on horseback, a man and a woman emerged from the edge of the treeline. A battalion of elite guards surged around them. The man and the woman on horseback each wore an intricately decorated circlet of silver and gold. The noble man held aloft an impressive sword, while the woman glared fiercely, aiming a drawn recurve bow. The guards behind them brandished an assortment of gleaming swords, bows, and axes.

“Y-your Majesties!” Nocens stammered out, before offering an awkward bow. The rest of the guards followed his example, although most kept an eye on the dragons behind them.

Tabbris regained her composure and snickered. “So, you’re the rulers of this little kingdom? Did you see us soaring across the sky and come to investigate? I see you have small gifts of your own, a commanding voice for a king and a petrifying stare for a queen. But, they won’t work on me.”

The King spoke, his voice reverberating through the clearing, “Be that as it may, wicked dragon, you will leave our kingdom, whether by your own will or by force.”

“Your Majesty,” Nocens sputtered, “you’ve arrived just in time to see my guards and me rid the land of these foul beasts! There’s no need for you to dirty your hands with them.”

This time it was the Queen who spoke, fixing Nocens with a cold stare. “You fool! Use your eyes. The blue dragon you attacked has been defending our land from harm. She has even protected you, putting herself in harm’s way in the process.”

Nocens was about to stammer a reply, when Tabbris grew impatient and lunged at Sariel. The blue dragon leapt out of the way, then charged at Tabbris again. The Royal Guards were at a loss, but at the King’s command quickly withdrew. “Royal guards, fall back. Elite guards, assist the blue dragon.”

“Archers ready,” the Queen called, prompting the guards to follow her lead, “Aim for the underbelly and the face of the green dragon, but do not hit the blue one.”

The Royal Guards moved back to the treeline, releasing the cadets and fugitives. The six youths watched the battle with mouths agape. The King led the swordsmen towards the green dragon. From the treeline, the Queen and her archers fired arrow after arrow at the wicked dragon, causing her to twist and contort with pain and rage, so that she left many openings for Sariel’s attacks. Sariel continued to battle, untouched by the Elite archers’ arrows.

The battle raged on, with Sariel gradually gaining the upper hand, until, with a swift sweep of her tail, she knocked the green dragon to the ground and sank her teeth into Tabbris’s neck. The green dragon roared with agony and spewed a blazing torrent of flame not at Sariel, but at the monarchs and their guards. Sariel flung herself into the flames path and grimaced as she felt the heat searing her scales. Tabbris used this chance to heave herself off the ground and take flight. She focused her remaining strength into her wings, propelling herself faster and faster, until she became a shrinking green dot on the horizon.

“We must follow and capture the beast!” Nocens shouted.

“You fool!” Gwen and Zephyr called in unison. Then they, and the rest of the young heroes raced to where Sariel lay injured on the ground.

“Are you all right?” Melody asked, kneeling beside the dragon’s face.

Sariel lifted her head to meet the eyes of the six worried faces before her. “I will survive my heroes. It will take time but I will heal.”

The King and Queen and their entourage gave the group a respectful distance, in deference to Sariel’s noble battle. However, Nocens lacked their tact. He marched over to Lucas and Simon and began berating the two cadets.

“You two dirty deserters! I had considered giving you the benefit of the doubt. I considered that perhaps you were trying to capture the fugitives yourselves. Now I see you’ve been conspiring with the enemy! I’ll have you expelled from the cadets and flogged so hard your own families won’t recognize you!”

“You will do no such thing.” The King’s voice boomed. “It appears your judgment has been severely clouded captain. These youths have aided our protector, not our enemy.”

Nocens made a clumsy bow before continuing. “No. You see your Majesty, they have been aiding these fugitives. And I suspect they also helped the escape of a dangerous prisoner.”

“Our mother isn’t dangerous! Her visions helped to stop the volcano.” Zephyr snapped.

“You jailed a prophetess!” The Queen rebuked. “On what grounds?”

Nocens began to sweat. “She was uncooperative your Majesty. Spewing baseless drivel about a volcano and a dragon. She had to be locked up before she caused a panic!”

The King's face darkened, "And you did not seek to share this information with the palace? Of all the... I'll deal with you later. But now, I believe introductions are in order for our young friends. From the looks of them, they have quite the story to tell."

Melody's ears perked up at the thought of recounting their adventures. "Oh, your Majesty, it all started when these two fell into a trap I made for a cow, and then, there was the circus, and the talking trees, and the evil weeds..."

Ember interrupted, "We mean no disrespect your Majesty, but could you wait to hear our story until later? The tale is long, and we've had an exhausting day."

The King nodded graciously, "Of course, I did not mean to hear the entire tale right now. I simply wish to know the names of my guests before inviting them to the palace."

"Thank you for your consideration, your Majesty. Excuse me, did you say before inviting us to the palace?" Ember stammered.

The Queen spoke kindly to the group, her icy stare replaced by an amused twinkle in her eyes. "Of course, my dear. It is clear from your familiarity with this great dragon that you have played a much larger role than we have seen and faced much hardship. Such actions must be honoured. Speaking of hardship," her eyes briefly glared at Nocens, "where is this propheticess who was wrongfully imprisoned. I should like to honour her as well."

"She's with my circus! It's called the *Starlight* circus!" Melody proudly piped up.

Zephyr clarified, "After we rescued our mother, we needed a safe place for her to heal and hide, so we brought her to the circus run by Melody's family."

"So, this circus aided in your quest as well? Are there any others we should extend an invitation to?" the King asked.

“No. That is everyone. Wait, are you saying that my circus friends are invited to the palace as well!” Melody squeaked.

“Certainly,” the King assured her. “And the prophetess, as well. Tell me where the circus people are and I’ll dispatch a messenger to deliver the invitation for our forthcoming celebration.”

“But, what about Sariel? We can’t just leave her alone.” Gwen interjected, placing a protective hand on the resting dragon forehead.

The Queen nodded. “I agree. If only there was a way for us to transport her to the palace with us.”

“Zee-Zee can do it!” Melody yipped.

Zephyr turned bright red and it took all his self-control not to throttle Melody for using her nickname in front of the King and Queen. He took a slow breath before responding. “Yes, your Majesties, I can teleport myself and others from one place to another in an instant, but only to places I’ve been before.”

The monarchs looked quizzically at the young man. The King spoke admiringly, “That settles it. You shall return to the palace with us. A group of Elite guards will remain to protect the blue dragon. Young man you shall accompany us to the palace. Then, when you have seen it, you can teleport here then return with the noble dragon to our palace grounds.

The nearly forgotten Nocens began muttering, “Excuse me your Majesty, but what of me and my soldiers?”

The Queen gave Nocens another cold stare. “You and your subordinates will return to your barracks, where you will remain until this matter has been investigated thoroughly. You are

dismissed.” The Royal Guards with Nocens at their head, began the long march back to their barracks.

The King clicked his fingers and a dozen Elite guards marched into a protective formation around Sariel. “Follow me my young heroes. You can use some of the Elite guards’ horses. They are tied up just beyond the treeline.”

“Horses?” Melody asked excitedly.

“Naturally,” the Queen smiled. “We’ll arrive at the palace within the hour on horseback. You all look exhausted from your ordeal.”

The group nodded at the Queen’s assessment as they were led through the trees to a group of finely groomed horses. Several Elite Guards assisted the young heroes onto the backs of the animals before swinging into their own saddles. Once they were mounted, the entourage began a brisk trot northward, towards the palace.

The young heroes lacked the energy to converse with each other along the way. Ember and Lucas’s eyes began to droop, and even Simon contented himself by admiring the embroidery on the uniform of the guard ahead of him. He thought Gwen’s embroidery was superior, but he kept that thought to himself. As the queen predicted, they arrived at the palace within an hour.

Zephyr slid off his horse and gestured to the courtyard in front of him. “Is this a good place to bring Sariel?”

The monarchs nodded, and Zephyr disappeared in a flash of light. He reappeared at the base of the volcano a few yards from Sariel and her guards. The dragon raised her head in greeting, and Zephyr was glad to see that her expression was no longer pained. “Welcome back young one.”

Zephyr was about to instruct the guards to hold onto the dragon, but they informed him that they would return to the palace on their own. Zephyr nodded, placed his hands on Sariel's shoulder, and teleported back to the palace courtyard, landing a few paces from the King and Queen. The rest of the group was resting in the yard.

“That certainly was quick.” The Queen remarked. “The honourable dragon may rest here, and the guards will show you all to our guest quarters where you may recover from your ordeal. I believe you will find the accommodations comfortable.”

The heroes nodded their assent and followed the monarchs and guards into the palace.

Epilogue

After the ordeal with the volcano and the wicked green dragon, the six heroes were able to rest at the castle. They relished the opportunity to sleep indoors on soft beds without the threat of danger. After several hours they awoke to find the castle bustling with activity. The castle staff hurried about, hanging banners, setting up garlands of flowers, and preparing massive tables for the upcoming feast.

The heroes were granted free reign of the castle, but instead visited Sariel in the courtyard. The blue dragon was recovering well, and welcomed her young friends' companionship. Melody skipped happily around the dragon, telling her about the fancy decorations inside the castle. Lucas and Zephyr told the excitable girl to calm down and let the dragon rest, which was met with a chuckle from Sariel. Ember and Gwen stroked the dragon's neck.

During their gathering on the courtyard, the group was greeted with shouts of recognition, when the Starlight circus arrived with Serenity in the lead. Melody, Ember, and Zephyr raced to embrace their families and friends, and quickly introduced Gwen, Lucas, and Simon to the group. Serenity thanked the children for their help, and the circus people boisterously congratulated them on their success. The entertainers lifted Melody and tossed her into the air in celebration, resulting in a fit of giggles from the joyful girl. They repeated this process with each of the young heroes, despite Lucas's protests that he preferred not to be thrown into the air.

During their reunion, the King and Queen gracefully emerged from the castle to greet their guests and thank them for protecting the kingdom. The Queen took a special interest in Serenity and asked if they could discuss the details of her visions during the feast. Serenity

courteously agreed, before she was interrupted by the entire circus taking turns bowing to the monarchs. Some of the circus troop became overly enthusiastic in their salutations to the monarchs and began performing acrobatic moves including somersaults. Each strove to make their bow more extravagant than the previous performer's, until the King and Queen announced that they'd seen enough kneeling, curtsying, and respectful tumbling for the afternoon.

After exchanging pleasantries, the royals excused themselves to prepare for the celebration. After the initial shock of seeing the young heroes conversing with a dragon, the circus people quickly adjusted to the sight and began amusing the recuperating dragon with versions of their acts. The acrobats tumbled and the musician played an upbeat tune. One of the castle's chief organizers observed the merriment and asked if the circus performers would like to demonstrate their talents during the celebration. He offered a handsome payment if they agreed. The performers eagerly concurred and began setting up for a show of thrills and excitement.

When evening arrived, the guests were ushered into the large banquet hall. The tables were filled with elaborate dishes. There was an abundance of delicacies: Fresh salads drizzled with oil and lemon, trays of battered fish, freshly oven-baked bread and pastries. Nearby rested silver platters adorned with fruits cut into elaborate shapes, as well as roast fowl, ducks and geese. Beverages included large barrels of spring water and bubbling apple cider. The heroes watched as a large barrel of cider was transported to Sariel, along with a massive platter of roast fish and goose. The wanted to ensure that Sariel was included in the celebration.

The guests were courteously seated, with the heroes on either side of the King and Queen. While they dined, Melody excitedly explained the details of their journey, while the others jumped in whenever Melody digressed too far, or began gushing endlessly about their adventures. The royals declared that the forest that drained the blood-stone's power would be a

protected area, off limits to any woodcutters. Afterward, Serenity told them about her visions, how they were strongest in her dreams, but still visible while awake. The Queen shared the details of her own gift, her ability to momentarily petrify others with a stare. The heroes eagerly asked for a demonstration, and Melody volunteered to be frozen. She arose from her seat and began capering beside the table until the Queen fixed her with a cool stare and Melody immediately stopped in mid-step. After a moment, the Queen released her gaze and Melody bounded forward again. She let out a low whistle and flexed her limbs, then giggled and rushed back to her seat.

After the meal, everyone was led outside for the ceremony. The heroes stood alongside Sariel as the King gave a speech about bravery in times of troubles. Then, the Queen called the heroes forward individually to place their medals around their necks. The medals were made of sparkling silver, and molded into the shape of stars. When the royals addressed Sariel, instead of presenting her with a medal, the King and Queen bowed before the dragon and thanked her for protecting their kingdom and its subjects. Sariel indicated for the monarchs to rise, and told them that watching the people persevere and grow under her care was a greater joy than any medal they could have crafted.

As the ceremony concluded, the ringmasters called for everyone's attention and announced that a performance was about to begin. The audience eagerly moved to the centre of the courtyard where circus had set up their acts. The presentation began with Lewis the strongman who juggled anvils, and all at once tossed them with great accuracy into an empty barrel several metres away. The barrel shattered to great applause. Next, Julia presented her solo acrobatic act as her animals drowsed, sleepy from their large meal. She cycled through handsprings, cartwheels, and backflips with a ballerina's grace and elegance. Following Julia,

Bridget the fortune teller, Canna the musician, and Phillip the knife thrower took the stage. Philip sent his blades through sets of candles placed atop Canna's head as she danced and sounded her cheerful flute. Bridget stood nearby with her eyes blindfolded and accurately predicted which candle would be extinguished each time. The groups' performance concluded with a daring tightrope act, as Eugene cartwheeled and performed backward handsprings across an impossibly thin wire suspended perilously high above the courtyard. He swung in great circles, hanging only by his fingertips, and appeared to dance in midair.

Then, the feasting resumed. Court musicians struck up a merry tune, and after the meal there was much dancing and merriment. The crowd clapped and cheered at the show, giving it their full attention, except for Sariel, who smiled softly at her charges' amusement, but pondered what had become of Tabbris. The wicked dragon had been defeated and injured. It would take time, but Tabbris's wounds would heal, and surely, she would plot her revenge. Sariel's musings were interrupted by a hand on her neck, as Melody pointed and laughed at the antics of her circus friends. Sariel relaxed, and decided that whatever the future held, her six heroes would be ready to respond.

So, my tale ends with merriment and celebration. And this is how I, Gwen, a simple basket weaver came to play a small role in rescuing our kingdom.

The Fable of Fire: A Young Adult Heroic Fantasy

This creative writing thesis, *The Fable of Fire* features a fantastic journey depicting young people, with exceptional abilities, who save their world from malevolent forces. The plot features para-normal elements, drawing on ancient mythologies including Celtic and Gaelic, coupled with some Christian symbolism. This novella is aimed at a young adult audience; however, that does not disqualify it from being appreciated by mature readers.

The focus of the story switches between two sets of protagonists who merge into a single group in order to overcome an evil presence in their community. The group is composed of Ember and Zephyr, thirteen-year-old fraternal twins (one female, one male). Both possess para-normal abilities. Ember controls fire, and Zephyr teleports. The two seek to rescue their mother, the prophetess Serenity, who has been captured by Nocens, a misinformed Captain of the Royal Guards. Nocens fails to realize that the mother poses no harm to the community, and can in fact offer a solution to an ensuing crisis. Very early in the story, Melody, a rambunctious twelve-year-old circus girl joins Ember and Zephyr in their quest. Melody is very talkative and possesses remarkable physical strength and a high degree of curiosity. Ember, Zephyr and Melody are pursued by Lucas and Simon, two Royal Guard cadets aged fourteen and thirteen who seek to capture the protagonists as a means of gaining promotions within the Royal Guard cohort. However, after encountering the three fugitive heroes, the two Royal Guard cadets learn of Ember, Zephyr and Melody's worthy quest and decide to join forces, accompanied by Simon's sister, Gwen, the basket-weaver. The entire tale is told from Gwen's point of view. The quest soon includes an encounter with Sariel, a benevolent dragon who empowers the group so

that they may face the threat posed by Tabbris, a malevolent dragon who uses a mysterious blood-stone to feed on human fear while seeking to destroy the countryside by causing a volcanic eruption. With help from the benevolent dragon, the heroes succeed in thwarting Tabbris's plan, and are celebrated by their community for their heroism.

The Fable of Fire is a romance. According to Northrop Frye in his *Anatomy of Criticism* a romance has three stages: 1) journey, 2) adventure, and 3) climactic battle, followed by the acclamation of the protagonists within their community (187). The tale is set in a literary past world, where magic and mythical creatures exist and serve as an allegory for good and evil. The main focus of the plot is on the evolving quest of the heroic youths. The adventure begins with a journey, results in a battle with forces larger than the protagonists had anticipated, and concludes with a reunion with their families and community, along with a celebration of the heroes by the King and Queen for their bravery.

The novella is a comic romance. In addition to the overall narrative, there are lesser comic arcs throughout the plot-line, as the heroes overcome lesser challenges during their journey. For example, after rescuing Serenity from the Royal Guard prison, the heroes find shelter at Melody's circus. This small comic arc parallels several other lesser comic arcs within the larger comic curve of the novella. Other lesser comic movements in the novella include; escape from the cadet's trap (38-39), the rescue of Serenity (43-46), successfully finding the ally dragon (70-71), the recovery of the mystical blood-stone (93), and the acclamation of the heroes (120-21). As such, the overall comic pattern includes lesser comic moments contained within a single larger comic curve, thereby creating a sinusoidal plot wave as follows:



The smaller comic movements within the larger plot-line become analogues for a life affirmative *ethos* that lies at the heart of this comic-romance quest pattern.

The heroes and the benevolent dragon act in a life-affirmative manner, while Tabbris, the evil dragon pursues a destructive path because she is unable to accept the inevitability of death. Tabbris seeks to prolong her life by exploiting the fear and misery of others. The knowledge that death is her ultimate fate consumes her until avoiding her demise becomes her primary reason for existing. While the concept of self-preservation is not wrong in itself, when taken to an extreme it turns Tabbris into a monster. On the other hand, the human characters do not put their own lives ahead of the community, but they fight for life affirmative values, and embrace happiness while it lasts, while working for the good of others, despite their fear of death. Regardless of their individual weaknesses, which sometimes take on amusing forms, the heroes display a nobility in their willingness to sacrifice themselves for the benefit of their community.

The conclusion of this novella is reminiscent of endings found in fairy tales which depict life affirmative values, while displacing life negating ones. Fantastic novels and fairy tales share common traits with heroic romances. They present life as it *ought* to be, rather than as it *is*. Joseph Campbell writes, “The happy ending of the fairy tale, the myth, the divine comedy of the soul, is to be read not as contradiction, but as a transcendence of the universal tragedy of man.”

(28). *The Fable of Fire* depicts this sense of transcendence as the young heroes face death for the benefit of others thereby transcending a potentially tragic situation.

The characters in *The Fable of Fire* overcome a range of obstacles on their quest and reunite with their families at the end, as their world returns to a state of harmony. This harmony marks a return to normalcy after their homes and communities were threatened by Tabbris's malevolent plan of destruction. Young readers can relate the heroes' struggles to their own lives, and take comfort in the discovery that seemingly impossible difficulties can be overcome. The high fantasy setting of this novella invites consideration about complex moral questions such as good, evil, and the areas in between, allowing those topics to be depicted within the framework of a fantasy. Gustav Davidson explains that the name "Tabbris" is an allusion to the angel of self-determination, and "Sariel" is an angel of healing guidance (Davidson 280-283). In of itself, self-determination is not undesirable, until it is taken to an extreme or when it can harm the lives of others. By contrast, Sariel's guidance in the story helps to heal the overall community. The life-affirmative ethos and moral values in *The Fable of Fire* may inspire admiration and aspiration in young readers. While this novella is aimed at a young adult audience, it adheres to the forms of high fantasy literature. The term "high fantasy" was introduced by Lloyd Alexander in a 1971 essay, "High Fantasy and Heroic Romance." His essay was originally presented at the New England Round Table of Children's Librarians in October 1969. Alexander's essay is available through the on-line archive, *Horn Book*. In that article he speaks of the literary form of heroic romance:

In modern literature, one form that draws most directly from the fountainhead of mythology, and does it consciously and deliberately, is the heroic romance, which is a form of high

fantasy. The world of heroic romance is, as Professor Northrop Frye defines the whole world of literature in *The Educated Imagination*, “the world of heroes and gods and titans..., a world of powers and passions and moments of ecstasy far greater than anything we meet outside the imagination. (n.p.)

These forces of imagination serve as elements of wonder in the story, but also bring the trials of the characters to a level beyond their expectations. Despite these challenges, the heroes persevere in order protect their loved ones and community. *The Fable of Fire* demonstrates elements of heroic romance through its incorporation of fantastic elements within an otherwise ordinary world.

High Fantasy inevitably involves a hero overcoming great obstacles in a battle against malicious forces. Lloyd Alexander identifies several key elements of heroic romance and he traces the lineage of related works as they link fantasy and ancient myth:

While its full meaning remains tantalizingly unknown, we can still trace mythology’s historical growth into an art form: through epic poetry, the *chansons de geste*, the Icelandic sagas, the medieval romances and works of prose in the Romance languages. Its family tree includes *Beowulf*, the *Eddas*, *The Song of Roland*, *Amadís de Gaule*, the *Perceval* of Chretien de Troyes, and *The Faerie Queene*. (n.p)

Theorist William Harmon in his *Handbook to Literature* provides backgrounds on the literary forms cited by Lloyd Alexander. David Leeming in *The Oxford Companion to World Mythology* also offers related backgrounds. The *Chansons de geste*, are medieval historical

romances written in French verse, typically connected with the heroics of Charlemagne (Harmon 290-291). Icelandic sagas are prose works from the 9th to 11th centuries, focusing on genealogical and troubled family histories (Harmon 246). Medieval romances focused on chivalric and heroic deeds are recorded as either prose or verse narratives, popular during the early 13th century (Harmon 290). The well-known legend of *Beowulf* involves a hero fighting a monster named Grendel and its mother. Later, Beowulf defeats a dragon, but is mortally wounded (Leeming 149). The *Eddas* feature Icelandic heroes in both prose and poetic form (Leeming xxxiii). *The Song of Roland* is the oldest surviving work of French literature. It depicts a heroic battle during the time of Charlemagne (Leeming 130). *Amadís de Gaule*, a prose romance depicts chivalric action set in Spain during the late medieval period (Leeming 205). The *Perceval* of Chretien de Troyes is part of Arthurian legend and the quest for the Holy Grail (Leeming 75). Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* is an allegory about a knightly quest for virtue. Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* is based on a traditional English romance (Spenser, 542-765). As a high fantasy, *The Fable of Fire* includes many of the features of such heroic romances, while borrowing from ancient mythology, including the Celtic tradition.

For example, at one point during their quest in *The Fable of Fire*, the heroes move through an enchanted forest of talking trees. The trees' mystical powers are reminiscent of those evident in "*Cad Goddeu*" ("The Battle of the Trees") a medieval Welsh poem preserved in the 14th-century *Book of Taliesin*. That Welsh poem refers to a traditional story in which the legendary enchanter Gwydion animates the trees to help him in battle. I drew on the writing of specialists such as Caitlin Matthews's *The Elements of the Celtic Tradition*, as well as Robert Graves's *The White Goddess* who recount the mythological meaning of "The Battle of the

Trees.” Similar to the trees in the Celtic tradition, the trees in *The Fable of Fire* are capable of mischief, telepathic speech, and subduing negative energy. Of importance here, is the relationship of the sentient trees to time itself. In *A Psychiatric Study of Myths and Fairy Tales* Julius Heuscher discusses the idea of the relativity of time and space, “the experience of time and space precedes, exceeds and encompasses measurable time and space” (91). In high fantasy works, as in actuality, time is relative to the position of the observer. Human time elapses at a different pace from the life-time of trees and dragons. The trees serve an important purpose for the questing heroes by providing a connection to deeper history that is beyond human memory. The trees serve a bridging function connecting past, present and possible future.

More recently, Eleanor Cameron discusses the relativity of time in *Green and Burning Tree* and discusses the metaphor of a “globe of time” to illustrate the concurrency and connectedness of past, present and future (71). The future may flow into the past as easily as the past flows into the present. For example, the talking trees and other characters in this novella create a bridge between fantasy and actuality. The trees hold factual knowledge about the past that is beyond human memory. Similarly, the prophetess, Serenity, can foresee the future. The fantastic elements in this story (e.g.; prophets, dragons, talking trees, etc.) serve to link time past with time future in a mythic space that is both beyond time and part of all time. The mythic time and space in *The Fable of Fire* is affected by immoral and moral actions.

While all the ancient forms of heroic romance listed above involve moral actions, all but one typically depict *male* heroes. Icelandic sagas are the exception and often feature female heroes. In her essay, “Character Delineation of Women in Old Icelandic Sagas,” critic, L. L.

Bjarnason explains that female characters repeatedly performed heroic deeds in the ancient sagas: “Nowhere is this artistic tradition more clearly evident than in the character delineation of the women in the Icelandic Family Sagas. One can scarcely call to mind a single major saga that does not have at least one woman of heroic stature” (142). Unlike other literary precedents, the Sagas regularly feature women as prominent protagonists within the heroic romance tradition. The use of powerful female characters in the Sagas parallels my own use of women as heroic protagonists in *The Fable of Fire* who are involved in a successful battle between good and evil. In *The Wave in the Mind*, a collection of literary essays, critic and author, Ursula K. Le Guin, emphasizes the importance of the moral aspect in this literary tradition. She speaks of the conflict between good and evil, “In many works of high fantasy, this conflict marks a deep concern with moral issues ...the conflict is a power struggle” (274). The moral dimension is an aspect that recurs in both heroic romance and in high fantasy. In the aforementioned essay, Lloyd Alexander explains: “In modern literature, one form that draws most directly from the fountainhead of mythology, and does it consciously and deliberately, is the heroic romance, which is a form of high fantasy” (Alexander n.p.). Alexander’s comments help establish a direct link between heroic romance literature and high fantasy. Of importance here is the fact that both literary forms are directly engaged with moral issues and the importance of overcoming malevolent forces. Building on the ancient tradition of the battle between good and evil evident in heroic romance narratives, as well as in high fantasy literary works, *The Fable of Fire* depicts a power struggle between opposing forces representing good and evil. In doing so, it brings some moral consideration to its readers’ attention.

The Fable of Fire comes closest to the Saga form because the majority of its heroic figures are female and involves a familial and community crisis. Alexander credits earlier writers of high fantasy, including J. R.R. Tolkien, T. H. White, C. S. Lewis, James Branch Cabell, Eric Eddison, Lord Dunsany, and William Morris. Alexander's list favours male authors. However, there have been celebrated female authors writing literary works that fall within the category of high fantasy. Madeleine L'Engle's novel, *A Wrinkle in Time*, is currently enjoying renewed popularity because it has been made into a major motion picture. In her recent article, "The deep faith of 'A Wrinkle in Time,'" in the on-line version of the *Washington Post*, Sarah Pulliam Bailey notes that *A Wrinkle in Time* was published in 1962 and became an instant hit, winning the Newbery Medal the year following its release (n.p.). Bailey adds that L'Engle's novel is often compared to the works of C.S. Lewis because it addresses questions of morality "while overtly dealing with problems of evil" (n.p.). *A Wrinkle in Time* features a prominent female heroine and her brother who are on a quest to battle evil with the help of three enablers. My novella features a similar pattern, with a female heroine and her brother accompanied by four allies also on a quest to defeat evil. In my novella, during the struggle, good is represented by the benevolent female dragon Sariel, a prominent "enabler" figure. Evil is personified in female form through the guise of Tabbris, the malevolent dragon. Many of the key figures in my novella are female. In the late twentieth century and in the twenty-first century there has been an expansion of novels written by women, featuring strong female protagonists. High fantasy novels by authors such as Ursula K. Le Guin and Madeleine L'Engle are part of an expanding field of literary works written by women featuring heroic female protagonists.

Two very recent examples of novels by women writing within this field include: *The Chaos* (2012), by Nalo Hopkinson, where a young mixed-race girl must face mythical challenges and her own sense of self in order to save her community and the world. Her experiences during the course of the novel become a rite-of-passage into adulthood. *The Fable of Fire* also features a separation from family and a similar rite of passage. Sarah Raughley's novel, *Fate of Flames* (2016), features four girls with extraordinary abilities who must learn to work together to protect the world from supernatural threats. During the course of events in this novel, the young protagonists also undergo a rite of passage. In the same way, *The Fable of Fire* features female characters overcoming conflict as they join forces with other allies. All the young heroes in my novella fall within the *Bildungsroman* (rite of passage) literary tradition. Both Hopkinson and Raughley are Canadian authors and are part of an expansion in this growing literary field. Recent and ancient works arising from this literary tradition have much in common; specifically, the quest pattern which is typical of both heroic romance and high fantasy. There are also significant parallels with ancient folk storytelling traditions, such as those discussed by theorist, Vladimir Propp.

In *The Morphology of the Folk-Tale* Propp notes that heroes typically undergo the following pattern: a) the hero or heroine departs on a quest, b) reacts to or interacts with the donor, c) hero encounters the "sought-for person" & familial connections (e.g.; father/mother/spouse), d) is sometimes met with an inter-diction (you must not do... some thing or action), e) inter-diction is violated (sometimes bringing mixed results), f) hero overcomes series of difficult tasks, g) hero is pursued, h) hero is re-united with community, family, loved-one(s) and may be wed, i) hero returns home (56-64). The patterns found in folk tales parallel those

found in heroic romance and in high fantasy. In *Fable of Fire* nearly all these experiences are depicted.

The Fable of Fire follows nearly all the elements outlined by Vladimir Propp: a) the novella begins with Ember and Zephyr on their quest, where they are quickly joined by Melody. b) Ember and Zephyr unwittingly acquire increasing power from the dragon Sariel who functions as a donor sending energy through the earth, c) after Ember and Zephyr are joined by Melody they pursue the “sought-for-person” in the form of their imprisoned mother, Serenity (familial connection), d) the heroes are met with an inter-diction (they are prohibited from entering the Royal Guard base in order to rescue their mother), e) they violate the law (inter-diction) by breaking into the Royal Guard prison in order to release their mother, f) they overcome a series of difficult tasks (meet with Sariel, retrieve blood-stone, flood the volcano, battle Tabbris), g) the heroes are pursued, earlier by the Royal Guard cadets, Simon and Lucas, and later by the Royal Guard leader, Nocens and his battalion, h) after the successful battle, the heroes are re-united with their communities, families, and loved-ones and, i) they return home. Since these heroes are young adults, there is no marriage, except a symbolic one representing their union with higher spiritual values as suggested by their willingness to endanger and even sacrifice their own lives, if necessary, in order to preserve their community, i) the return of the heroes takes place in the *gamos* or celebration at the end of the novella. This *gamos* is typical of a comic plot-structure and includes feasting and revelry in the company of family and community. The term “*gamos*” can indicate a sexual union (*gamogenesis*) that arises out of marriage which is preceded by a wedding feast and accompanying celebration. However, since the heroes are young adults and too young for a sexual union through marriage, the end of the novella features a different type of

union involving comradeship between the heroes, as well as a re-union between the heroes, their families and their larger community. In keeping with the overall comic structure of the novella, there is also a re-union on a socio-cultural scale involving a joyous turn of events that results in the restoration of a state of order, and a displacement of discord. In addition, there is yet another kind of union that emerges through the youthful heroes “rite of passage” into young adulthood, thereby taking a step towards unifying them with the adult community.

A concern for moral questions continues as a staple in high fantasy works. According to Ursula Le Guin in her study, *The Wave in the Mind*, in high fantasy, power struggles and clashes between empowered beings regardless of their moral affiliation are a common occurrence, especially the irresponsible use of great power (Le Guin 274). How their abilities should be used is a question many face, especially the idea of whether it is acceptable to harm one party in order to save or protect another. High fantasy questions whether it is justifiable to break lesser social rules in order to achieve a greater good. In the novella, the young heroes start a fire and break an interdiction, but for a worthy cause and a higher purpose. Epic fantasy, like its forebears, myth and legend, is informed by high purpose which includes struggles of mind, body, and spirit.

According to Sheila Egoff in her study, *Worlds Within: Children's Fantasy from the Middle Ages to Today*, “There are worlds to be won or lost, and the protagonists engage in a deeply personal and almost religious battle for the common good” (6). *The Fable of Fire* matches this description, as the protagonists’ personal journey to find their mother evolves into a quest to save their entire kingdom. If they succeed, then their lives as they were will be restored; however, if they fail the entire region will be wiped out by the volcano, and the malevolent

dragon will grow stronger to continue wreaking havoc on the world. The actions of the heroes have pivotal importance, which is a relatable feeling for young readers who may also face crises of mind, body and/or spirit. Young readers may feel that they are too insignificant to make an impact on the world or their community, and may draw comfort from the idea that the actions of young people can bring about desirable change.

Some may argue that because the exploits in fantasy literature are farfetched, that they can not serve as a guide or consolation to real world problems; however, supernatural elements do not disqualify emotions and ideals from translating into reality. Jane Yolen reminds us that fantasy, “tells us of the world as it should be. It holds certain values to be important” (64). What readers learn from fantasy stories is based on the heroic values demonstrated by the protagonists. Such values include friendship, loyalty, cooperation, compassion, and belief in self.

Similar values are evident in C.S. Lewis’s *The Chronicles of Narnia*, where the real world exists alongside the fantastic world of Narnia, but the two dimensions are generally kept separate, except for the actions of children who cross from one to the other. My novella depicts similar juxtapositions of the fantastic and the ordinary, including mystical beings who serve an allegorical function, much the way they do in C.S. Lewis, and with a similar purpose of endorsing moral values. While Aslan the lion represents a Christlike allegory, the dragon Sariel is not explicitly tied to one religious figure, but stands in for general supernatural benevolence. The juxtaposition of fantastic and ordinary also works differently in *The Fable of Fire*, as there is no “real world” for the children to return to. Instead, supernatural elements are placed alongside mundane ones. For example, the youthful heroes in *The Fable of Fire* all have supernatural

powers, but aim to rescue a relatively ordinary community where these abilities are not commonplace. In the *Chronicles of Narnia*, Lewis uses children as protagonists while depicting rites of passage, change and growth. Rites of passage are fundamental to *The Fable of Fire*. All my youthful heroes undergo a *Bildungsroman* experience involving trials of mind, body, and spirit, in order to transition into young adulthood. There is a psychological dimension to such rites of passage in folk-tales, fairy-tales, heroic romances, and high fantasy works.

The rite of passage is part of a long history of related literary works. The Bartleby “Bibliographic Record” on Edmund Spenser’s “The Faerie Queene” confirms that the hero must face twelve crises involving private moral virtues during a battle between the appetites of personal vice and physical needs (Bartleby, n.p.). Spenser’s *Fairie Queene* is not only the tale of a chivalric knight’s quest, but a rite of passage and an allegorical account that features a parallel psychological quest. The physical challenges that the hero faces include co-related psychological difficulties that also involve spiritual challenges. The psychological dimension is identified by critic Lauren Silberman in her article, “‘The Faerie Queene,’ Book II and the Limitations of Temperance”:

The climactic trial of Guyon's Temperance in the Cave of Mammon reveals the fatal inability of that virtue to accommodate both the physical and psychological components of the passions. In the Cave of Mammon, Guyon faces a test of the senses on two levels simultaneously: those of desire and of basic physical appetite. (12)

Silberman’s comment helps affirm that the hero’s physical difficulties are allegories for physical, psychological, and spiritual challenges. Silberman goes on to list a series of similar crises in “The Faerie Queene”:

The limitations of Temperance in mediating between the individual and experience are reflected in the critical examination of allegory that begins in earnest with the appearance of the allegorical figures Furor and Occasion [2.4]. (15)

The allegorical depictions of crises of the mind, body, and spirit in epics such as “The Faerie Queene” recur in heroic romances, and high fantasy novels which create parallels between mental, physical, and psychological hurdles. *The Fable of Fire* features similar allegorical parallels. For example, when Lucas is pulled into the pond that contains the powerful blood-stone, he feels an overwhelming desire to surrender to death. The power of the blood-stone affects his psychology, and in spite of the fact that he can breathe under water, he feels it no longer necessary to continue with the quest to save the community. With the help of his friends, Lucas escapes entrapment under water, but with great emotional difficulty. He undergoes a trial that challenges his mind, body and spirit, and succeeds with a little help from his friends. Like its literary predecessors, *The Fable of Fire* features direct parallels between physical difficulties and psychological challenges that engage belief in the quest and one’s self. The battles or challenges depicted are physical, mental and spiritual. Lucas must rise to the spirit of the battle and must believe in his cause before he is able to overcome the evil enchantment of the blood-stone. Ember also touches the blood-stone and experiences a similar battle of mind, body and spirit. Such challenges are faced by other characters throughout the novella. For example, Serenity must endure the psychological and physical torture practiced by Nocens while she is imprisoned, but she knows that her spiritual quest to help rescue the community must not be abandoned. This engagement of mind, body and spirit is evident in the other characters as well. They must overcome hurdles that test their minds, bodies and spirits. The depiction of such hurdles raises deeper psychological questions.

In his study, *The Uses of Enchantment*, Bruno Bettelheim comments on fairy tales and related literary forms and their inherent existential predicaments, noting that childhood dependencies must be relinquished in order to achieve selfhood and self-worth along with a sense of moral obligation and identity (6). This relinquishment of selfhood accompanies the rite of passage into young adulthood. Bettelheim's view is supported by Julius E. Heuscher, whose *Psychiatric Study of Myths and Fairy Tales* speaks of longing, dreams, rational, and irrational behaviour as they are connected to the human unconscious (87). Heuscher references C.G. Jung's notion of a "collective unconscious" that includes a precipitation of preceding cultures and a *collective* psychology. Similarly, my novella features the emotional and psychological development of protagonists as they overcome obstacles to succeed in their quest. *The Fable of Fire* features a *collective* unconscious shaping the quest pattern. The heroes in this novella have consciously *and* unconsciously adopted the moral values of the community they live in. The "collective unconscious" aspect of the novella is enhanced by the "power" that Sariel sends through the earth helping to empower the heroes. The initial differences that Simon and Lucas have with the trio of heroes (Ember, Zephyr and Melody) while trying apprehend them, disappear after they become more informed. The group of five become united in their consciousness when they all understand the importance of the quest. It is as though they are joined by a collective unconscious drive which is shared with Serenity and the benevolent dragon, Sariel. This group consciousness drives the action of the quest pattern forward.

Psychological aspects are equally evident in children's literature and in young adult literary works. The realms of psychology and fantasy are linked in such fictional scenarios. Literary critic Deirdre Baker writes in *Key Words For Children's Literature* that fantasy, "takes

us into the heart of story-making—imagination and reason” (79). She continues; “Fantasy’s earliest and primary meanings belong to scholastic psychology and refer to a faculty of mind: ‘mental apprehension of an object of perception; the faculty by which this is performed,’ or ‘the image impressed on the mind by an object of sense’” (79). Fantasy literature typically features an inter-connection between the conscious and unconscious mind. Ursula K. Le Guin’s high fantasy novel in the heroic romantic tradition titled, *A Wizard of Earthsea*, features similar psychological elements.

In her article on Le Guin’s novel, “High Fantasy: *A Wizard of Earthsea*,” Eleanor Cameron discusses the growth of fantasy characters in terms of Jungian psychology. “Jung, in discussing archetypes and the collective unconscious, calls the inferior side of ourselves, which is to be found in the personal unconscious, the *shadow*. And the shadow represents, for him, all that we do not allow ourselves to do, all that we do not want to be” (n.p). In my novella, Tabbris represents this “shadow” element. How fantasy characters deal with negative traits and emotions such as fear and greed determine whether they become heroes or villains. In *The Fable of Fire*, the heroes work to overcome their fears and emotions for the good of the community, while the villain Tabbris is controlled by her fear, and allows it to dictate her actions to harm others. In fact, Tabbris extends her own sense of fear into the community to such a high degree that she eventually can use that fear as a source of power. Fantasy and Fairy tales are not merely tools for escapism. Rather they depict cathartic emotional and psychological experiences. These cathartic moments offer an optimistic view of how the world *should* be, where hard work and determination lead to happy endings.

In his essay, “On Fairy Stories,” J.R.R. Tolkien writes on the effects of heroically overcoming both physical and psychological difficulties. He explains that the result is a sense of *joy* that spreads a belief in the abilities of the self to overcome seemingly impossible challenges: The consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending: or more correctly of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous “turn” (for there is no true end to any fairy-tale): this joy, which is one of the things which fairy-stories can produce supremely well, is not essentially “escapist,” nor “fugitive.” In its fairy-tale —or otherworld—setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of dyscatastrophe, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is evangelium, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief. (22)

As Le Guin, Cameron, and Tolkien *all* suggest, romantic heroes of high fantasy must endure hardships involving the body, mind and spirit. Once these hardships are successfully overcome, a sense of joy and union with the community results. One might even say the heroes acquire a sense of “Serenity.” However, fantasy stories do not deny that sorrow and tragedy will happen, but they offer hope that these conflicts can be resolved and harmony can be restored. In *The Fable of Fire*, the characters undergo many hardships that also lead to a sudden “joyous” turn, as Tolkien puts it. These hardships include psychological trauma (e.g.; Serenity’s torture and interrogation by Nocens, the entrapment of the trio of heroes by the two cadets, Lucas’s encounter with the deadly blood-stone within the pond, the life-threatening lava within the volcano, and the battle against the malevolent dragon Tabbris). While the young heroes must strive against these physical hardships, they must also face emotional struggles involving

suspicion (Ember and Zephyr wonder about Melody's motives), loyalty (Lucas and Simon question the authority of Nocens and decide to join the quest), civil disobedience (when the group breaks the law and rescues Serenity, anxiety (when the group must battle Tabbris), and abject terror and surrender to death (whenever anyone in the group physically contacts the "blood-stone"). This latter form of hardship moves into the realm of spirit where one must overcome not only physical and mental challenges, but those involving a *belief* in one's purpose. So, the external hardships reflect inner struggles thereby showing a connection between body, mind and spirit. However, it is through their belief in the validity and importance of the quest as well as their contact with the benevolent dragon Sariel that gives the heroes the faith to continue against all odds. Eventually, the heroes overcome these trials through their allegiance with each other and they succeed in bringing about a "joyous" turn of events. As a result, they are rewarded for their perseverance by their larger community. However, the goal cannot be met without the heroes breaking some form of a social "inter-diction." Civil disobedience emerges as a growing consideration in such tales, because it demands that protagonists evaluate lesser social rules against a higher moral purpose. Such subversion of social rules brings with it a degree of humour.

For example, when the group of heroes rescue Serenity, they must find refuge. They turn to Melody's circus friends. The circus people immediately grasp the higher moral purpose involved with the quest and provide shelter to Serenity and the youthful heroes. While it serves a benevolent moral purpose, this flaunting of the law takes on what Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World* calls "carnavalesque" elements involving the subversion of the dictates of the dominant power group through humor and chaos. Bakhtin explains that the history of such

gatherings is partly connected with the “Feast of Fools” (*festa stultorum*) (6). The “Feast of Fools” arose in Northern France, as a kind of Saturnalian festival, a brief social revolution, in which power, dignity and impunity is temporarily conferred on people in subordinate positions. While the heroes take refuge at the circus, they partake in a great feast, replete with humorous actions by the circus troupe members. Bakhtin explains that such carnivalesque gatherings involve a spirit of freedom against more conventional legal dictates, “During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part” (7-8). In *The Fable of Fire* a former prisoner (Serenity), along with former roustabout (Melody), plus the two apparently inconsequential youths (Ember, Zephyr), evade the law, and are temporarily provided an elevated position in what amounts to a “brief social revolution” because the protection of these dissidents contravenes local jurisprudence, but for a greater moral purpose. There is a degree of humour that emerges throughout the novella in cases such as this.

This novella derives humour from ridiculous situations and dialogue that arises when opposing characters interact. For example, Melody’s over-enthusiastic re-counts of recent events must sometimes be restrained by her comrades. In other cases, Melody’s outgoing personality and exclamations lead to further humour. Zephyr is both embarrassed and annoyed by the nickname Melody gives him (96). He objects to being called “Zee-zee,” and is terribly embarrassed when Melody uses this nickname before the King and Queen (115-16). In his essay, “Comedy's Intention” critic, Benjamin La Farge notes that humour arises from a subversion of expectations. La Farge echoes Henri Bergson’s *Laughter* by stating that; “To understand laughter, we must put it back into its natural environment, which is society” (4). Humour in my

novella serves a social function and is shaped by a subversion of expectations. For example, the circus girl, Melody has never seen a cow before, because she has always lived at the circus. Her inquiry into the appearance and behaviour of bovine quadrupeds becomes absurd and outlandish because she believes they are mythological creatures. Even after she encounters actual mythical creatures, Melody still remembers her curiosity about the common cow. However, her search to discover cows leads her to join the heroic quest with its high moral purpose. In most cases, humour arises from Melody's ongoing verbosity, and the way the minions of the law are tricked. Such socially inspired humour is in keeping with the carnivalesque.

The carnivalesque element aligns itself with my plot-line which involves a partial inversion of the existing *status quo* or dominant power structure by refuting the dictatorial orders of individuals such as Nocens, leader of the Royal Guards. In *The Fable of Fire* children are better informed than adults, and by disregarding the orders of their superiors, work towards the common good. The heroes' refuge at the circus is followed by a performance featuring members of the troupe.

The scenes featuring the circus people performing their acts happen during a time when the entire circus community has agreed to disregard local laws by providing protection to the refugees. In the novella, the first main circus scene arises through the pursuit of a higher moral purpose that transcends local legal stipulations. The circus' performance that follows the feast is disrupted by the Royal Guards who are exercising their legal power in search of the fugitives. However, the circus people disobey the Royal Guards by hiding Serenity and helping the young heroes escape. By the end of the novella, when evil has been overcome, the King and Queen,

assist the youthful heroes, and invite the circus to the castle. So, the dominant power has rightfully shifted from Nocens, who has been disgraced, and the Royal Guards to the King and Queen. During the feasting and celebration at the end of the novella, the circus folk are happy to perform for those in power. Hence, questions of morality and immorality do not lie with individuals or organizations holding power, but with opposing the misuse of power. This is an important theme in a novella aimed at young adults, because determining which authority figures to obey or follow, and which to turn away from is part of a rite of passage into adulthood. *The Fable of Fire* extolls the virtues of morally inspired curiosity, free-thinking, and discovery.

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