

A magical night scene with a large, glowing blue moon in the sky. A girl with brown hair, wearing a pink and blue plaid shirt, is sitting on a log, looking out over a dark, rocky landscape. In the distance, a castle with multiple towers and spires is perched on a cliffside, illuminated by a soft blue light. The sky is filled with stars and a few wispy clouds. The overall atmosphere is dreamlike and mysterious.

the  
lady moons

V. A. JEFFREY

# THE LADY MOONS

## A Secret Doorway Tale: Book Four

By V. A. Jeffrey

Book cover art by Claudia McKinney

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It was late in the evening and she could smell the savory scent of dinner wafting out from the kitchen window. Anne was digging around in the ground, trying to find just the right depth to plant her seedlings. They had gone to the gardening store earlier and as a treat her parents bought her a few daffodil and tulip bulbs. They also bought a fountain, tiles and stones, soil and all sorts of other things. Dad was planning to build a koi fish pond in the summer and she couldn't wait!

She was planting a few beans just to see how they would turn out. The breeze was cool and she could feel goosebumps pimpling up along her arms. A very light rain was drizzling down in the west, heralding the fragrant month of April. Early spring had arrived. With spring came longer days and she liked watching the sunset colors fade down. In the eastern sky the tiny clouds above looked like a sea of white paint daubs blushed with pale rose, like one of those wistful paintings she once saw at the art museum. *Maxfield Parrish*. The teacher said. The last of the winter snows had melted away with the March winds. But even with the fading away of winter, something stayed behind. A *something* that wasn't quite right. She dug down through the cool soil, planted her seedlings in the small holes and then covered them up. Then she set a large rock beside the last mound to mark the row. Maybe dad would let her plant another row later, if she took good care of these seedlings. She looked up once more at the sky. The sun was now nearly hidden in rain clouds. Even so, embers of sunset color streaked through the clouds and she could even see the pale moon, hanging in the sky like a circle of frosted glass.

"Anne! Dinner's ready!" Called mama. As she turned to go inside she saw the ginger cat sitting behind her, staring intently at the freshly turned soil.

"Zi! Where have you been? Don't you go digging that up! It isn't a litter box you know!" That cat merely gazed at her. She picked it up on her way to the porch. The bowl by the porch that she always set outside for the cat was empty.

"I guess you drank up your cream. Maybe I can bring you some dinner but be careful so they don't see you." She scolded gently. The cat squiggled out of her arms, leapt down and went bounding across the yard and around the house. Anne shrugged and went inside.

"My goodness! You have dirt all over your clothes. Please wash and get ready for dinner." Said mama in irritation. She always seemed to be irritated these days. Irritated or distracted. Anne's hands were caked in dirt, even under her fingernails. She didn't mind it and she didn't know why it was always so important to wash up. After all, from the smells inundating her from the kitchen – molasses marinated spare ribs, which were always a messy affair – her hands were just going to get dirty again!

Late that night Anne gazed at the moon. The ginger cat was sitting by her chair. She'd been experiencing strange dreams of late. Nothing like horrible nightmares but they were bordering on unpleasant. Mama had one too. She overheard her telling dad about it one night. Snatches of conversation that she knew weren't meant for her ears. The ginger cat had been coming in to spend the night in her bedroom every few days or so and this seemed to keep outright nasty dreams away. Now, it wasn't that she had these odd dreams every night because she didn't. It was that she couldn't quite remember when she'd had a truly *good* dream. None of this came as a surprise considering the chaos Queen Faye had caused. Long after she had been subdued the effects were still being felt, like undercurrents in water. Only, Anne could see the undercurrents while other people just felt them and wondered why life and nature was so weird all of the time.

There was one particular dream that she didn't like and it was darker than the others. It was the dream where she was being pulled underwater, struggling for air. It was also what the gnome grandfathers called a recurring dream. Great Grandfather Aldy said that those kinds of dreams could have meaning. Nothing in that dream pleased her and she dreaded its meaning, whatever it was suppose to be. The cat purred softly and she continued to gaze out at the moon and stars, thinking of dreams and nightmares and eventually falling asleep.

Anne gathered with her friends near one of the playground corners where a large group would often congregate to play kickball. Today the three of them decided to sit out the game. Emma and Tanya had something on their minds – bad dreams!

“It happened again! The same awful dream! I'm sitting at the table eating dinner, except I'm always by myself which is weird, and I'm eating some kind of vegetable – which is also weird because I hate vegetables! Suddenly, I start growing vines out of my ears and eyes and my fingers and toes grow stalks and vines and roots and leaves. I grow so tall that I bust a hole in the roof and then I grow all the way out to the moon! This time someone comes along with an ax and as soon as they start to chop me down, I wake up!” Said Tanya. Then she blew a big, purple gum-bubble and popped it.

“You didn't say anything last time about chopping.” Said Emma.

“That's because the dream gets weirder every night. Don't know why.” Tanya said shaking her head. Her beaded braids swayed and clattered together softly. She turned to Anne. “What about you?”

“I have the same one all of the time too. The one where I'm underwater.”

“Ugh!” They both exclaimed.

“Well, mine isn't the same every night. I have a different one each night. This last time I was in the car with my mom and dad and my brother and these monsters with long horns and tails were crawling and jumping around all over the freeway. The car stopped and we couldn't get it started again so we jumped out of the car to see what was wrong with it and then the monsters surrounded us. Then I woke up. Thank goodness!” Emma said and then spit out her gum. Anne and Tanya shook their heads in sympathy.

It wasn't pleasant, going to sleep knowing your brain would conjure up creepy stories that you didn't understand. Anne shivered as she recalled the dream of the night hounds. That horrible dream stopped appearing long ago but she did have other odd dreams. The ginger cat seemed to keep them at bay but her friends didn't have a fairy cat to comfort them. Neither did anyone else, as far as she knew. As Tanya and Emma discussed their dreams further, Anne's attention wandered. Her eyes roved the playground. She saw, at the other end of the playground, one of the trouble-making fifth grade boys, Jordan.

Jordan tended to be the less obnoxious of the bunch and amazingly, today he was by himself looking lost and afraid. This was the first time Anne had ever seen Jordan by himself and he never seemed to be afraid of anything! His eyes met hers and he quickly looked away. *What's wrong with him?* She wondered. She saw the principal come out of the building, walk over to him and tell him something and then Jordan meekly followed her back into the building. *Must have gotten into trouble, again. Wonder where his friends are?* She thought. Then she turned her attention back to her friends and their nocturnal troubles. If her friends were having odd dreams who else was? The Winter Queen's drama shook a lot of things out of place and she would need to do something about it. She knew it required traveling back to Other Land at some point but thought that perhaps she could find some books about dreams and the brain in the school library before she went home. After all, if it kept on this way, things would become dreadfully worse!

It was already rather late and Anne had dawdled in the school library longer than she had intended. She gathered her books and stuffed them in her backpack. The school building was almost empty.

“Bye, Miss Gail!” She called to the librarian.

“Bye, Anne. See you later!” Gail smiled and went back to putting a small stack of books away.

The building was quiet with the exception of the janitor's cart rolling down the far end of the hallway around the corner. Anne turned left, making for the exit that led to the playground. She was headed down the steps when she heard an odd sound coming from the basement level. Peeking around the corner and down the stairs that led below the ground floor, or Level 1 as it was called, were thin waves of whispering mists rolling up from Level 1. Now, Anne knew right then and there that something from the fairy world was afoot! Curious as she always was, she slowly tip-toed down to the basement level floor to investigate. The rolling mists were seeping out from underneath the boiler room door. Anne sidled along the wall until she was right in front of the door. Setting her backpack down, she crept up to the door and turned the knob. It creaked and whined but it was unlocked. Slowly she opened the door and found. . .another unlocked doorway! On the other side of the door was night and a wide field spread out under the soft light of the moon. A single, full moon which looked unusually large. Stars twinkled faintly in the sky and all around were the cool, rolling mists. The mists were so thick that she couldn't see the ground beneath. No trees, no plants, just mists and the night and the moon. *But where is the other moon? Aren't there two moons in Other Land? Is this Other Land or another place?* She was so busy thinking hard about this that she was startled to see someone approaching her out of the mists.

It was an old woman dressed in soft gray robes. She had long, white hair and curious gray eyes with tiny white lights in them. She smiled at Anne and held her hand out to her.

“Won't you come? Come and see what wonders are in store for you? Come with me!” The woman moved towards her. But something in her eyes made Anne back away. Normally she would take grandma Veronica's advice to help someone who asked for it, to be courteous, but something about the woman made her cautious. Anne backed away, refusing to let the woman touch her. At this reluctance the woman's voice became more insistent, demanding.

“No, do not go that way! Just a few steps forward. Here, just a few steps. . .” Said the woman, her eyes glittering. The woman dug into the folds of her robe and held out a pearly stone.

“A pretty gift for a pretty girl. Take it, my child. Take it!” It was a moonstone and an extraordinarily pretty one but Anne already had a moonstone and she did not take things from complete strangers. Especially strange folk appearing in unlocked doorways. Anne heard footsteps coming up behind her and strong, rough hands grabbed her, yanking her away.

“No!” The woman cried. Her eyes darkened into black pools. Anne felt herself being picked up, hauled around and set down firmly on the floor. The boiler room door was slammed shut.

“Mighty close call you had there kid! What are you doin' down here anyway?” It was the janitor.

“I . . . I just saw the mists and I was curious about where they were coming from and. . .” Anne tried to explain but the janitor was in no mood for explanations.

“Well *now* you know! You just saw for yourself that things down here ain't right. The boiler room is right royal trouble and that ain't no joke! Kids don't belong down here anyway! Principal's orders! Now, you just be on your way and don't let me catch you wandering around down here any more! You hear me?” He warned gruffly. Anne nodded, snatched up her backpack and ran off, all the way home!

The next day in homeroom Anne was sitting with her friends and they were all trying to piece together an intricate puzzle when their teacher got a phone call.

"Uh-huh? Yes, she is." Sandy turned and looked in Anne's direction with a quizzical expression. The other students turned to see who she was looking at. Anne felt her stomach drop. Then the teacher hung up the phone and motioned towards her.

"Anne." She got up and approached the desk.

"Please class, mind your work." Said Sandy. "Anne, the principal wants to see you."

"Am I in trouble?"

"I don't know. It didn't sound like it, but only you would know that." Said the teacher with a concerned look. Anne sighed, feeling many eyes boring into her back.

"Oooooooh! Anne's in trouble!" A boy sitting in the back of the class teased. This aroused snickers from a few classmates. She ignored them.

"I said mind your work, class." Sandy said sternly. Tanya and Emma were staring at her with great curiosity when she happened to glance back at them. She knew they would require all the gory details at lunchtime. She left the classroom, slowly shut the door and started down the hall.

Once she got to the front office she trudged across and into the principal's office. The secretary smiled at her but it didn't make her feel any better. She'd never had to go to the principal's office before! When she walked in, Principal McCullough was sitting at her desk. She smiled at Anne, which was surprising. The principal was never one to suffer unruly behavior and usually never smiled.

"Please, have a seat." Anne sat in the chair facing the tall, imposing desk. She could hear the tick-tock-tick of the clock on the wall. It seemed to sound especially loud to her. Anne had a feeling she was here because the janitor blabbed on her. *Dumb janitor!* What would her parents say?

"I heard it from someone that you were seen on Level 1 yesterday, after school was out. Is this true?"

"Yes. But I wasn't doing anything wrong!"

"Have I said so?"

"No."

"I'm going to ask you an important question, Anne. Did you happen to see anything strange down there?" Principal McCullough raised her left eyebrow in that certain way she did which meant she would tolerate no fibbing.

"Well, there was a lot of mist down there and it grew sort of cold." Anne answered, marveling at the question. It was quite unexpected. Then the principal asked an even more pointed question.

"And what else besides mist? Did you see or hear *anyone* down there?"

"The janitor was down there."

"Who else? I know the mists weren't caused by him."

"Um, well, there was this strange old lady in the boiler room. She tried to give me a moonstone." Principal McCullough drew in a sudden sharp breath, as if disturbed by this answer.

"Yes." Her gray eyes darkened and her expression became more serious as she seemed to ponder on this. Then she seemed to relax again. Anne cocked her head to the side and frowned. Did Principal McCullough know something about doorways to other worlds?

"Obviously you didn't take it from her or you wouldn't be here. That's a good thing. We've had two close calls in one week it seems. That room," She sighed as if she wasn't sure how to proceed. "well, most of the time it's just the boiler room. But sometimes it's like a path to another place."

"I know! It's called a doorway! It leads to Other Land!" Anne blurted out.

"What?"

"Other Land."

"You mean, you know about that place?"

"Yes! I've been there three times but the doorways usually open in my house. I have a special key that can unlock them." Anne said. Principal McCullough stared at her for a long time.

"Do you have a bone key?" She asked. Anne nodded excitedly.

"So do I. It's been. . . many years since I've been there. Here's the thing, there are both closed doorways and open doorways."

"I know." Said Anne smiling. The principal looked even more surprised but went on.

"Then you know that the closed doorways are usually safer?" The principal said, giving her a pointed look. It was more of a statement than a question. Anne nodded.

"The doorway behind the boiler room door is an open doorway and always has been, for as long as I can remember. Whenever the way to Other Land appears, the boiler room door becomes unlocked. Anyone can enter it. And anyone can

enter this world from there. Anyone or *anything!* Now I must tell you something else.” She said. Anne listened intently.

“There are ways to open doorways on your own – ways to create a doorway if you wish. But they cannot be closed, as far as I know. They close on their own.”

“You can open a doorway?”

“Yes. Only some adults can open them but the ones you open are always the open doorways, never closed ones. Those of us who can open them are called guardians.”

“What’s a guardian Principal McCullough?”

“We are the ones who guard these open doorways. There aren’t very many of us, not enough to guard every special door that is out there in the world but there are different kinds of open doorways and so, there are different kinds of guardians. I suppose all of this might be confusing to you, Anne and I don’t have much time to go into detail.”

“No it isn’t, actually. It’s interesting. I didn’t know there were guardians! That makes me feel a little better. I don’t like the open doorways.” Said Anne quietly.

“When I was young I didn’t like them either. They are dangerous so being wary of them is wise, which is why you should stay away from the boiler room. However, try not to look at them as good or bad things. Open doorways can be used but with great caution. The land of the Fey is perilous.”

“The Fey?”

“Fairies. You will learn that there are many names they are called by. This woman you saw, you say she tried to offer you a moonstone?”

“Yes. When she tried to grab me the janitor caught me and told me to stay away.”

“Do you know who she is?”

“No, I’ve never seen her before.”

“I met her when I was a child, long ago. She is Lady Grey. The fairy queen of the kinds of dreams we all dislike.”

“The Lady of nightmares?” Anne asked. Principal McCullough nodded.

“Who would want to be queen of nightmares?”

“She just is. She didn’t choose that way but that was the province given to her in the world of Fey. We did not choose to be human, yet that is what we are.”

“I didn’t think of it like that.” Anne said. Principal McCullough’s gray eyes smiled.

“You know what Ms. McCullough? An unlocked doorway opened once in my bedroom.”

“It did? What happened?”

“Some winter pixies tried to carry me off. They had bad intentions.”

“My goodness! How did you escape them?”

“I had help from a Gryp. Her name is Antigone. She rescued me.” The principal was astonished but after some seconds she recovered.

“Well! It would seem you’re an old hat at this Anne! You even managed to befriend a Gryp? I did some pretty amazing things when I was a kid in Other Land but I never got the chance to know a Gryp. I was too afraid of them!” Anne just giggled.

“Be that as it may, it is still a dangerous place, even amidst the wonders and beauty of it all. The next time an open doorway appears, do not go through it and it should disappear within a few hours’ time. As far as things making their way here, I keep this silver bell on my desk for many reasons and one of those reasons is to chase them back through the doorway. Our dear janitor has one as well. He isn’t a simple janitor. He is also a guardian of this school. Appointed, like me, by those who know of the dangers of open doorways. That’s why he chased you away. We do not have the power or the numbers to guard all open doorways but we try our best with the ones we’ve found. We don’t want any child lost, so be very careful, even with the closed ones. Even so,” she said, her smile returning in her eyes with a merry twinkle. “it is good to know that I am not the only one who knows of this. Never lose your imagination and sense of wonder, Anne and you will always be able to see the life behind things. The world of Faerie; the world that most people have forgotten about.”

“Ms McCullough?”

“Yes, Anne?”

“Who are the people who made you a guardian?”

“A small order of other guardians, most of them quite old now. They keep watch on those who can see the doorways and appoint guardians to dangerous paths leading to the Faerie world. That is all I can say about them Anne. One day when you get older they will contact you and ask you if you would like to be one of us. That choice will be up to you. But that is a long way off.”

“So, the guardians are good?”

“Most certainly. I wouldn’t be one of them if they weren’t!”

“And the Grey Lady. . . is she bad? Like Queen Faye?”

“Bad? It’s difficult to say. Queen Faye is wicked. No doubt about that. Lady Grey is not quite like her. There is good and there is bad. But then, there is, what we adults call “gray areas” where you don’t know absolutely if something is good or bad. That is where you have to use your conscience to decide. If your conscience does not work well, or if you do not

have one at all, there lies the danger with gray areas. Lady Grey deals in the realm between Night and Day where things are mostly gray. Nightmares can be bad but not always and not all pleasant dreams are beneficial. When she speaks, she speaks in dreams like her sister. The sort we wish to forget or avoid thinking about. But even bad dreams may have a point.” The lunch bell rang.

“Why do we even have to have them?”

“Usually dreams, good and bad, are just the mind's way of clearing out mental junk and adjusting itself for the next day. However, they can do more than simply disturb us. Sometimes nightmares are a reflection of the turmoil in our lives. Sometimes they reveal that we may be on a bad course and warn us to turn around. Sometimes they can serve as a forewarning. Think on that. In the mean time, stay away from the boiler room.” Anne bit her lip, pondering this new information. She got up and went to the door. Then, a thought that was sitting on the edge of her mind during the conversation finally became clear.

“Ms. McCullough?”

“Yes Anne?”

“How do you open doorways?”

“In dreams, of course. However, the doors only open during good dreams, not the bad ones. Strange, isn't it?” Anne nodded.

“Yet, it is what it is and it's probably a good thing. The doorway can only be opened in an unreservedly good dream and the Lady who bestows good dreams for some reason no longer speaks. Why that is, I don't know, yet. Have a good lunch, Anne!”

“Thanks Principal McCullough!” She went off towards homeroom, thinking hard on all the principal said. Sister moon of Lady Grey, Lady Moon of good dreams? She didn't know her name and realized that she had forgotten to ask! Whatever Lady Grey's sister's name was, if she was no longer bestowing good dreams to people, that *couldn't* be good. Not at all. Anne trudged down the hall, her thoughts pensive and serious. She stayed close to the wall as kids poured out in waves into the halls, pushing and streaming past. Across from her on the other side of the hall she saw Jordan. He was looking lost again. She caught him staring at her and then he looked away.

“Hey, Anne! We're going to sit with Marisa and Dakota and the others from chorus class!” Tanya called from down the hall.

“Ok. Just let me get my lunch!” Anne called back. So they would be sitting at a different table today. She would have to explain the principal's office visit too. *The boiler room*. No one was really suppose to be down there anyway, except the janitor. Which made the boiler room a prime place for snooping. She'd just leave the important stuff, like open doorways and seeing the Lady Grey down there, out. *I wonder what Tanya and Emma's dreams mean?* She hoped it was nothing truly bad. Anne finally reached homeroom and went to her cubby-hole and grabbed her lunch box. When she came out, the hall was nearly empty and Jordan was gone.



Friday night after dinner she was up in her room examining her moonstone pendant. The cat was curled up on her pillow.

“You know Zi, there was a boy at school that I think found a doorway. Did you know that there's an open doorway at school?” The cat's amber eyes brightened but it made no sound, only gazed at her.

“An old lady tried to get me to walk through it but the janitor came and closed the door. Today the principal told me that he's a guardian. Do you know about guardians?” She asked. At this the cat seemed to nod its head, briefly.

“I wonder who they all are and where they are. Anyway, I think Jordan found it too. The doorway, I mean. I don't have any proof but I have a feeling.” The cat mewled. *I wonder what Jordan saw?* She thought.

“My friends say that their dreams have been weird. All week long Tanya and Emma have been having this “dreaming session” thing going on during recess where all we do is talk about the bad dreams we're having. Now the whole chorus class is in the dreaming session trying to figure out what everyone's dreams mean and why. No one knows. Except me and you. Sort of.” The cat mewled softly again but its eyes were bright like glowing coals.

*Down, down, down she went under the water. She held on tightly to the moonstone pendant as she descended into the depths. Above the surface she saw the stars wave and ripple. Beautiful seahorses of all colors sailed past her, staying just out of her reach. Many creatures, some beautiful, some ugly, swam past: blow fish, dolphins, sting rays and octopuses, giant Siamese fighting fish, beautiful koi fish. All sorts of creatures swam and paraded around her as if she were on an underwater carousel. She stopped short of the black waters below. Long rays of moonlight sliced through the water. In her hand the moonstone glowed in response to the light above. A bright green seahorse with coral stripes sailed by, then stopped, turned and floated close to her. She got on its back and it raced down to the dark depths. Help! Help! I don't want to go down there! But she was trapped on its back as it swam down, quick as lightening. Her moonstone pendant flew from her hand and floated away, a tiny light disappearing in the darkness. Then she could feel the water rushing up her nostrils, filling her lungs so that she could no longer breathe. . .*

. . . and it meant many things. The most important thing being that it was time to go back. This much she knew. The ginger cat was gone but there was a note sitting on her pillow. It read:

saturday night. basement door.



Late Saturday night, once again Anne was packed and ready to go. This night was warmer than usual so she pulled out a plaid shirt and some jeans from a drawer and put on a pair of sneakers; her favorite worn out sneakers with the holes that mama no longer allowed her to wear to school. The ginger cat was right there, nearly underfoot. They made their way, quiet as mice to the basement. Sure enough, golden shafts of light emanated from under the door. Anne got out her key, put it in the lock and turned three times. The cat mewed and twitched its tail.

“Shh, Zi! You'll wake up my parents.” The cat stood up on its hind legs and pawed her and then started purring. She reached up and turned the knob, unlocking the door.

It was late evening in Other Land and the sky was clear and studded with stars. The moons were bright silver and hanging like long scythes, low in the sky. A light breeze rustled the tall colorful grasses. In fact, they were standing in a wide meadow. The cat bounded through the grasses and Anne followed. Soon after she heard a familiar voice.

“Hurry up, Anne!”

“How do you change so fast?”

“A talent I have. So, you want to solve the mystery of the dreams?”

“Yes I do. As my dad would say, we need to get to the bottom of the pot!”

“Very well, but in order to even get to the pot, first we'll have to go see Old Mole.” Zi said as Anne approached, finding him sitting cross-legged on the ground.

“Who's that?”

“The one who can get us to the *pot* we seek.” He said playfully.

“But Zi, we need to go to the Mirrored Lake! I wonder what it looks like now. The last time I was there it was filthy and poisoned.”

“Yes. The Mirrored Lake. Now that it is no longer frozen over, all of the ugliness trapped there. . . now dark dreams are rising everywhere.”

“So, how do we get there?”

“We cannot simply jump into the lake and travel to the moons. We must go to Old Mole to open up a way through the lake. Old Mole is an alchemist who mixes many elements together to make special potions for various uses. He's also known as Professor Celsius but most just call him Old Mole behind his back. Getting to the moons will require one of his potions.”

“I have my Way Wanderer so let's go. . .” She went rummaging around for it when they both heard singing voices far off. Zi listened intently then he grinned.

“What is it?”

“If I am not mistaken, some old friends of mine! Anne, put away your Way Wanderer. A friendly troupe comes this way!”

“What kind of troupe?”

“Why, they look a lot like me. They are tree sprites. Except, they do not have orange hair.” Anne felt her excitement growing as the voices grew closer.

“Come, I will introduce you.” He said. They pushed through the tall grasses approaching the sound of the voices.

*“Up and down, up and down  
over anthills, through the brush  
we travel by night and under the moon  
by dawn we journey back home again  
home to tree and fairy mound,  
up and down, up and down!”*

Anne and Zi climbed up a giant rock, Zi leaping upon it graceful as a cat and then pulling her up behind him. They then came face to face with a singing troupe of Aziza. There were five of them. They were small like Zi and Anne, they all, except one, had short, black woolly hair and dark, shining complexions. Some of them had half-shaved heads and they all wore silk and cotton skirts. Each carried a spear made of dark wood and one of them had a spear ringed with copper bands. He also carried a golden machete. There was one girl and she wore a brown silk tunic and she had thick braids, black as night and the braids in her hair were so intricate and elaborate that they seemed to cross and wind themselves into infinite designs, ever smaller and smaller. She had many hoops of fine gold in both of her ears and she wore many bangles of gold and highly polished wood. None of them had wings.

“Zi! It is good to see you again. It has been a long time since we last met. Who is this?” The leader, the one with the machete asked, pointing towards Anne.

“Ngozi, this is my friend, Anne. We are on an important mission.”

“Anne! We have heard many good things about you from the Summer Queen. I am Ngozi, a musician from the court

of the Baobab Prince and these are my companions, Kayin, Emeka, Kojo and this is Nneka, my sister, the storyteller.” He said. The others gathered around Anne.

“We have heard of your defeat of the Winter Queen. Welcome!” Said Nneka, her great brown eyes shining and her gold rings clinking in delicate musical notes.

“I couldn't have done it without my friends' help.” Anne said modestly.

“Perhaps you can add more friends to your current mission. What is it you want to do this time?” Asked Ngozi.

“We are going to see the Lady Moons.”

“Which one?” Asked Ngozi. Zi and Anne looked at each other, perplexed.

“We're not sure yet.” She said.

“Why not go and see Lady Pearl?” Suggested Ngozi.

“Lady Pearl? So that's her name! But Lady Pearl doesn't answer anymore. Only Lady Grey answers. She even tried to kidnap me at school!”

“Did she now? That does not surprise me. None of us have ever seen the Lady Moons. What will you do there?”

Nneka asked. Anne and Zi shrugged.

“Try to bring back good dreams to the world, though we are not sure what to expect. What we do know is that Old Mole can help us travel to the moons.” Said Zi. The others huddled together, whispering amongst themselves. Then they turned back to Anne and Zi.

“Let us go with you! A merry group we will be and there is safety in numbers. Besides, there have been ogres running loose in the land since the winter.”

“You're coming with us? Sounds good to me!” Said Anne.

“Good! Besides, we know where Old Mole resides and getting to his place can be tricky.” Said Ngozi.

“Yes, especially if you have never been there.” Said Kayin. “The Mirrored Lake is just a lake, unless you have the key. That key will take you through the lake and to the moons, or so we have been told.”

Anne felt the tingly sensation of excitement and adventure welling up inside her.

“Let us go!” Cried Ngozi. The little troupe, now increased by two, started off for the mysterious Old Mole and his mysterious abode.

They traveled over hills, through bush, over creeks and under thick, moving vines and under giant fragrant flowers. Anne was careful not to touch them lest some of them might be flesh-eating flowers waiting for a good meal! Ngozi and his troupe laughed and informed her that it was only gnomes that kept and cultivated flesh-eating flowers.

Light and deft they were in their movements, all of them singing along the way. Anne barely managed to keep up. Sometimes tiny firefly-like sprites would drift along, following them, curious about Anne mostly, and always the moons lit their path over head. She had learned to pay close attention to the things around her from Hunter and his pack; to be alert to things that first seemed invisible. In the far distance, even at night after some time her eyes could detect the faintest silhouette of Old Tree, so very far away. At first she wasn't sure what she saw; perhaps a pale shadow-like thing in the distance against the black sky, standing impossibly tall and remote, like a mountain. Her eyes could barely see it, as if it were a mere apparition, barely a faint shimmer of an outline against the black sky. But it was there and it was no apparition. *Old Tree. Probably sleeping.* Anne thought. *I wonder when Old Tree will wake up again?* Sudden, sharp crashes in the far distance jolted her out of her reverie.

“What's going on?” She asked. The others stopped suddenly, standing as still as statues.

“Ogres come this way!” Whispered Ngozi.

“Curse them!” Hissed Zi.

“They've been making their way more and more eastward these days.” Whispered Nneka. They all gathered together and hid beneath the tall grasses and giant flowers like ants under foliage as they heard the tramping of giant feet approaching.

“Ay! I smell food!” Said one of the ogres.

“It's probably your own foul breath!” Said a second ogre.

“No! I smell fresh meat! Live meat!”

“Where?”

“Somewhere in this field!”

“And I say you are smelling your own stink! I can smell you from here! You smell worse than a troll!”

“Call me a *troll*, will you? Why I. . .”

“Stop it and let us keep going! Father won't be too pleased with us being late for supper!” A third ogre said.

“You two can go and jump in the poisoned lake! I smell food, I say, and I'm gonna look for it!” Said the first one. At this Zi and Ngozi did something that Anne had not seen before. They imitated birds, throwing their voices far off.

“Where are you two louts going? Whatever it is, it's over there in the woods! Not here in the meadow!” Said the third one in irritation.

“If you say so. Still. . .” The hungry one insisted but the others were off, tearing towards the woods. He eventually followed, casting a suspicious glance back toward the meadow once more, then he was gone.

“That was close!” Said Anne. “That was a neat trick! I didn't even have to get out my hammer!”

“Curse them, I say!” Said Zi again.

“One cast stone into a lake can cause a ripple that moves and flows ever onward causing more ripples. So the Winter Queen's hand is still felt in some way, though she is now subdued.” Said Emeka.

“True,” Said Ngozi, “yet the stars shine on us tonight and we are on a good mission! Let us go forth again and let us not speak of the darkness!” He said. Once they had crept out of their hiding place and confirmed that it was safe they continued on. Anne now turned her attention to her new traveling companions as they made their way through the tall grasses and tangles of daffodils.

“Ngozi, where do you and your friends live?” She asked. He laughed.

“And why should you ask, when it is a wonderful place?”

“Well, maybe because it's a wonderful place?”

“Its name, which you cannot say, means music and mirth. Once people come, they do not want to leave. It is far away and very hot, where baobab trees sprout up like grass! We all have the privilege of living in the grandest baobab tree of all, the Prince's Great Tree because we are the new court musicians. We care for all the trees in that land, but we especially love the silk cotton trees and the beautiful baobab tree.”

“What's a baobab tree?”

“Our home, where we live. They are immense trees, some fat, some tall and they have flat tops though none so grand as the one at the center of the principedom. The Great Tree. The trees store water and food for us and they live forever. The baobab is Mother for we eat the leaves, the fruit and it gives us water and shelter. You must visit us some day so you can see its grandeur for yourself.”

“Oh I will!” She said, already planning her next trip. She tried to imagine what a giant tree with a flat top looked like.

“Ngozi,” asked Zi, “you said that you have never seen the Lady Moons but I have heard other rumors.”

“Oh? What have you heard?” Ngozi was busy slicing through thick, tough grasses and vines with his golden machete.

“That a troupe of musicians from the land of the Baobab Prince had gone to see them and that they sang for them.”

This invited laughter from the troupe.

“It did not happen quite like that!” Said Nneka.

“We do not usually share our lore with just anyone but since the mortal you have brought along with you is a heroine, perhaps we will share just this one. Who knows? It may be of help to you.” Said Ngozi, glancing at his sister. Nneka's many gold and wooden bangles clinked together as she affixed a stray braid. Then she began to tell the story.

“Lore says that many years ago some musicians were traveling by the Mirrored Lake and one of them accidentally fell in. The others went to pull him out and they all fell in too. Soon enough, they found themselves at the fore-gate of the Moon Palace. There, they were let in and found their companion sitting in front of a grand throne made of pearls. In it sat a beautiful giantess and she smiled and welcomed them. It was the Lady Pearl. She showed them many fair delights and enchanted them with celestial wonders and they stayed for a long, long time. Yet, after many moons of time they desired to go home. However, the Lady Pearl and her sister do not like to lose anything once it lands upon their doorstep. She requested that they stay longer and being that she was so persuasive, they stayed. Still, they missed their home and her enchantments no longer enticed them to forget their homeland. They found that both of the sisters loved music and if it was beautiful enough, it would lull them to sleep. So, the greatest musician of them thought of something. He composed the greatest piece of music he could think up and they all practiced it and when the time came they played their best! Lady Grey fell asleep so they then played for Lady Pearl. Once she fell asleep they took some moonstones and by stealth they left. Once they came back through the lake and traveled home to the Land of the Baobab Prince, their story spread far and wide and soon the Prince of the Aziza heard of it and bade them come and be his royal musicians. They also gave him the moonstones as a tribute. The Prince had the stones set in his throne. It is said that at night the throne of the Baobab Prince becomes a place where you can sit among the stars but it only happens on a blue moon.”

“Wow! You can go to the stars from his throne?”

“Yes. Or so I have heard.”

“Did the sisters get mad?” Anne asked.

“Maybe. Maybe not. We do not know. The Prince might know but he does not tell us lowly musicians such things. Moonstones are not easy to come by in this land and the Lady Moons do not like to part with them, which is why they are so precious.” Said Nneka. *Music!* Anne thought.

“Did you bring your whistle Zi?” She asked.

“Certainly.”

After a fair bit of tromping through the meadow they came to a swamp. The moons overhead were now high in the sky, peering down at them through the maze of vegetation like two half-closed eyes, watching silently.

“I don't have my boots on! How do we get through?” Asked Anne. She did not feel like having wet feet and you never knew what was lurking in a swamp! The swamp air was warm and heavy.

“There is only one way to cross it. Once we do, we'll be right at Old Mole's doorstep.” Said Ngozi.

“Kojo! Call them!” He commanded. Kojo produced a long, thin wooden pipe with a wide lipped rim at its bottom, like a slender horn, with carved pictographs along its length. He knelt down by the water's edge and lowered the pipe horn partially into the water and blew into it. It made no sound from what Anne could hear but the pictographs glowed brightly and a soft bubbling sound in the water was produced. Besides the occasional breeze, night bird or cricket song they could hear nothing from the swamp. At first. However, silently sliding up to the swamp edge out of the water were several white logs. With tails.

“Ah, there they are.” Said Ngozi.

“What are they?” Asked Anne.

“Our canoes into the inner islet.”

“Magic canoes!” Anne exclaimed. Kojo laughed.

“Not quite. Alligators.” He said. Anne's mouth formed a surprised “Oh”. Sure as the sun, the white logs were *not* logs. Two of them lifted their heads out of the water and she saw they were full of teeth! There were two very large ones nearly as long as small trees and three little ones.

Now, Anne liked crocodiles and alligators, but only on television. She wasn't so sure she wanted to ride on the back of an alligator, off into a swamp at night. However, Zi and the others did not seem troubled at all. Then one of the alligators spoke.

“Ngozi, welcome! We have not had visitors in a long time. At least not pleasant visitors. What could you want at this hour?” Asked the largest one.

“We come seeking a key from Professor Celsius.”

“Ahh. You've come for a potion!” The alligator smiled, revealing rows of many sharp teeth.

“Indeed! We have two travelers with us who need it. They are on an important mission.”

“Yes,” Anne spoke up, “we're on a mission to bring back good dreams.”

“A goodly mission. Fortunately for you the Ladies are not at their full power. They are more, changeable, you could say, right now. At least the Lady Grey is. Otherwise it would be a fool's errand. Come ride upon our backs. We will take you to the Professor. As always, he will be a bit grumpy. Even more-so since it is nighttime, but come anyway.”

“Are you sure they won't eat us?” Anne whispered. Nneka answered.

“So long as you manage to stay upon their backs. Old Mole, or Professor Celsius as he likes to call himself, has given anything found in the swamp waters to the alligators to eat. They aren't likely to eat those coming to see him, though it isn't unheard of. Just be careful and stay close to us. We won't let you fall.”

“Yes,” said the other alligator, “we do not generally eat the Professor's visitors. It's bad form, you know.”

“That makes me feel a little better.” Anne said wryly.

“Good. I'm Leuk and this is my mate, Leucy. The little ones are our children. They don't talk yet!” Ngozi, Kojo and Kayin and Emeka climbed on to Leuk's back and Anne, Zi and Nneka on to Leucy's and they slid out into the swamp, slowly floating through the dense growth. The babies swam in between the two large ones, blowing colorful bubbles and turning somersaults in the water. One of them swam close to Leucy and Anne gingerly reached out to pet its belly as it flipped over.

“Oh never mind them. They love to play.” Said Leucy. They made happy gurgling noises, very much like the sounds of cooing babies. Zi hummed one of the Aziza's traveling songs as they made their way towards the islet.

“Here is where our dear Professor lives.” Said Leuk.

In the middle of the islet, which was not much bigger than a neighborhood block, sat a tumbledown shack that looked as if it were sinking into the ground. It was pieced together with wood, stones and vines. All around the little shack outside was a dim, greenish light.

“What are those lights? Those aren't. . .”

“Pixies? Oh no. They are mushrooms. Jack-O-Lantern mushrooms.” Said Zi. They carefully walked across Leucy's back and hopped off to land. The ground was soft and smelled of decaying plants and rotten wood. They marched single file up to the ramshackle shack. Zi knocked. At first there was only silence. He knocked again. Then they heard a gruff voice shout from inside.

“Who goes there?”

“It is I, Zi of the southern forests.”

“I know no one by that name! How did you come to be here?”

“Your servants Leuk and Leucy brought us here. My companion and I have an important mission but to do it we need your help, Professor!” There was a great amount of shuffling and bumping around and finally the door was unlocked and it creaked open. To Anne's dismay, there was quite an ugly creature on the other side of that door! He peered out at them, holding a lantern full of bobbing fireflies.

“You and your companion, you say? That would be two! So why do I see seven?”

“These five are from the realm of the Baobab Prince. We all traveled together to be safe. There are ogres about these days.”

“Humph! No doubt about that.”

“My friend that will be on the mission is right here. This is Anne.” Zi pointed to her. She crept behind Zi and smiled nervously. The creature glared at her, looking her up and down with suspicion.

“Your friend, you say? Hmmmm. So what is this mission? What do you want me to do?”

“Well, um, Professor Celsius, we want to go to see the Lady Moons. We have to bring back good dreams so nightmares don't take over the world.” She blurted out. At this the creature's eyes widen in slow recognition and then he looked at her with great surprise on his face.

“Are you the one who defeated that dreadful Queen of Winter?” He asked. Anne nodded.

“Well! Fancy seeing such a heroine here! You want to visit the sister moons now, eh? Bring back good dreams?” He seemed to be saying these words to himself, stroking his scraggly beard with a faraway look in his rheumy eyes. Then he cleared his throat.

“Well, Anne. If you seek such a noble course I shall not hinder you. In fact, I can be of assistance to help you and your friend get there. But only *you* may enter. These others must stay outside. I cannot stand too many people peeking about and rummaging around in my things!” He grouched. Anne stopped short. This Professor Celsius looked quite a bit more trollish than he did mole-ish and she did not want to go in. In fact, he *was* a troll!

“Well what are you waiting for, girl? You and your troupe wake me up in the middle of my nighttime nap, bother my alligators and now you insult me further?”

“Anne, he is one of the good ones.” Said Kojo. The others nodded.

“Oh, I see. It's my ugly face that bothers you? Let it bother you not, then! Not all of us trolls are wicked you know and not every pretty-pretty thing is roses and sunshine! But if I'm too ugly for you to be bothered with then you and your friends can be on your way and figure out how to get to the moons on your own!” He sniffed, greatly offended and he shut the door so hard that the whole shack shook. Anne sighed and scratched her head. Her experience with trolls had not been pleasant so far. What should she make of this? However she felt about trolls, they had an important thing to do and this troll could help them.

“He is a friend to good folk, Anne. Grumpy but good.” Said Nneka.

“Ok.” She said. Anne stepped up to the door and knocked softly.

“Professor Troll . . . I mean, Professor Celsius, please open the door. I will come inside.” She said reluctantly. At this, the

door re-opened.

Inside, candles were burning brightly everywhere, on tables, stools, shelves and nooks and crannies in the walls. The air inside smelled like old grease, mildewed apples and was thick with the scent of the warm swamp air. All of the worn, broken-down furniture looked as if they had been crammed and jammed together towards the middle of the room. It was, in fact, a tiny place.

"You just have a seat there and let me see about getting that elixir started." He mumbled and turned towards a shabby curtain of woven leaves and went behind it into another room that looked no bigger than a closet.

The Professor, or Old Mole as many would call him when out of earshot, although not beautiful, was rather distinguished looking, for a troll. He had a long beard, though scraggly, and it was braided into several braids that were then tied into one braid with tiny vines twined through it. His pointed ears were bent with many hairs sticking out and he had great bushy eyebrows, large, tired looking eyes and robes that, while once regal, were now a bit shabby and he wore a silver ring on one of his clawed fingers with a yellow stone at its center, much like the one the Summer Queen had given her. He had a long, crooked nose that looked like it had been knocked out of joint and he was stooped over. Indeed, he was ancient.

"What's an elixir?"

"Eh?" He called from behind the curtain.

"An elixir, Professor. What is that?"

"A special potion or drink, if you will. Usually to turn common metals into gold or into some other precious metal but in this case, it will make your flight from the earth possible and take your waking mind into the place where your sleeping mind rules. It will take you from a lower place to a higher place. Something like that. In short, you can go to the moons where you can converse with the queens of Sleep."

"Why don't the others need it? Ngozi said that the Aziza have been there before. Did they get an elixir from you?"

"Oh, no my dear." He said, peeking out from behind the curtain. "Fairy folk do not need anything special to travel here and there or cross boundaries like you do. You are a mortal. For you to cross such boundaries takes some extra doing." He said importantly and pointing a long, pointy claw at her.

"In order to cross that boundary you will have to go through and then *under* the lake. This elixir will keep you from drowning, my dear. Now, let me get started. . ." He rummaged around in the folds of his robe and pulled out a pair of old copper-rimmed spectacles, put them on and went behind the curtain again. Anne was surprised by this. She'd supposed that they would go to the lake and somehow a staircase to the moons would appear. She could see a dim glow of light emanate from behind the tattered, leafy curtain and lots of muttering from the Professor as he was searching for all of the right ingredients and instruments. She heard him throwing things behind him absently and what sounded like pushing heavy books aside and moving papers here and there. *He certainly seems disorganized.* She thought. *But not wicked.* Anne took this time to investigate the shack further. On a small table in the middle of the shack by a makeshift stove that looked like a great, oversized coffee can was a misshapen clay bowl full of wormy apples, a plate full of half eaten crusts of bread and what looked like the small bones of some animal. On a shelf to the wall behind it were many odd and interesting things. Rows of many seedlings in pots, a row of jars with glowing flowers and shimmering plants of varied colors, butterflies with wings of colors she could not describe, books on herb lore, some with pictographs etched on the spines that she could not read. They were bound in leather with silver or gold leaf engraving that gleamed. There were little toys of metal that moved by themselves, maps hung on the walls with strange lands she had never seen or read about before and many scrolls. By that shelf was a giant floor globe of copper, wood and vellum cross-crossed with gold wire latitude and longitude lines. Anne crept up to it, fascinated. It's seas swayed and swelled across the globe and the continents shifted slowly across its surface. "Wow." She said, then she started giggling. She reached out to touch it. Her hand went down, down, down past the horizon of thin, high clouds. The clouds were slightly moist and moisture beads welled up on her wrist.

"I think I have it!" She heard him say. She quickly pulled her hand away from the globe.

"What is this Professor Celsius?"

"What is what, my dear?"

"What is this globe thing? The seas and the land on it move!"

"Oh, that! Do not touch that! Unless you know what you are doing it will take you to places you may not wish to go!" He warned. He shuffled out of his lab as quickly as he could.

"This is why I do not allow too many people in here all at once. Or at all. It's hard to keep track of things enough as it is and when someone sticks their hand into something they don't quite understand. . .but no worry. I understand. It is quite a lovely thing and fascinating too."

"I'm sorry Professor Celsius, but, what does it do?"

"No need to be sorry. It is a globe of another planet long ago, before it lost all of its water. The globe works very much like an ancient machine and in fact it *is* an ancient machine, of a sort."

"An ancient machine? What do you mean?"

"Well, ancient people used machines just like you do today. It is sort of like a, oh, what do you call it? A traveling machine."

"A traveling machine? Is that like a time machine?"



"In a way, yes. But not in the classic sense. You don't simply go to whatever time you want to go to. It's a portal to the past of another planet."

"Which planet is it suppose to be?"

"Oh, I've forgotten the name. Ares or some such name. It was given to me ages ago by an old sage passing through the land. He was on a visit here. His world is nothing but deserts now. Cold, cold deserts and some ice here and there. This globe here is something of a doorway but not like the ones you're used to walking through and certainly not a safe one for mortals." He moved it out of sight behind a door to another tiny room. Anne caught a glimpse of a bed and a small, lit oil lamp.

"Where did the sage go?"

"Who knows? He would not tell me where he was going. He may have stayed here in the land of Faerie or perhaps he moved on. I do not know. He merely said to me to keep this safe and hidden. So I try."

"Does anyone else know about this?"

"Very few, besides me. If certain people knew about this globe they could wreak all kinds of havoc from one end of the universe to the next. Things like these must be guarded carefully and hidden from those who have evil designs."

"Like Queen Faye?"

"Yes, definitely from someone like her but she isn't the only one. There are those from this land and yours that can be deadly and unstoppable when they possess these kinds of objects."

"How?"

"Well, it is not easy to find the secrets out, but if they are found out, more of them can be built. Objects like this can enable one to travel back in time! Once they can travel back in time to one place, they can travel back in time to other places too and there is far more to the heavens and the earth than most mortals even dream of!" He said in reverent tones. Anne gazed at the globe, awed by it.

"Professor, are you a guardian?" She asked suddenly. Professor Celsius cocked his head to one side, gazing at her with interest.

"Why yes, I am. I guard certain kinds of doorways. I take it that I am not the only guardian you have encountered?"

"Nope! There's some at my school too." The more she explored and the more things she encountered the more curiouser things got! He smiled at her and suddenly any reservations she had about him melted away.

"There are many wicked people in the world Anne but there are good ones that keep watch on the wicked and those of us that prevent them from acquiring powerful objects like this. I see that we are on the same side." Anne smiled.

"Come, my dear, let me show you a harmless thing. Here, over here." He pointed to a corner at the far end towards another shelf. On it was a checkerboard with little wooden pieces, light and dark that slid along the squares by themselves. Professor Celsius went back to his lab to finish his work. This game amused her for a little while but she became curious about the potion he was making in his lab. She heard mixing, stirring and the flickering flames of a small fire. She tip-toed over to the leaf curtain and peered in. Professor Celsius was mixing up a concoction in a cast iron pot that was sitting over a small fire, stirring in leaves here, throwing in a pinch of something from a bowl there and sometimes the concoction would bubble up and burst into a rainbow of colors! Beside the pot was a mug of hot, steaming liquid that he would sip from occasionally. Behind him stood a chest full of vials, candles, twigs and other old objects. Behind that was a case of shelves that spanned from the ceiling to the floor groaning with bottles and bowls of herbs, potions, tinctures and salves. Beside that were stacks of old books with yellowed vellum pages all jumbled together on the shelves. Sitting by the shelves was a fat stone urn full of slender incense logs.

"I see you are interested in what I am making. Come on in then. Might as well, as you will need to drink it to get to your destination." Anne opened the curtain.

"It smells like incense in here. My mama uses incense sometimes."

"It has many uses. One use is to make the place smell better. Now, do not disturb me. This is careful work!"

"Ok." She whispered, staring intently at the pot.

"The elixir is almost done now. Just a few more things. . ." He began muttering again. "Ah! I know!" He said and turned to the shelves. He grabbed three Jack-O-Lantern mushrooms from a bowl and threw them in. Instantly, tiny fireworks burst from the concoction.

"I saw those outside!"

"Jack-O-Lantern mushrooms are poisonous, you know."

"So why did you put them in?"

"Because they will help you to see and find your way under the dark waters of the Mirrored Lake. Do not worry. They will not kill you. Only make you feel under the weather, as your folk say. However, the last ingredient will counter their poison. And that, my dear, is this." He produced, from a pocket in his robes, a small lacquered box. In it was a beautiful, tiny moonstone. He put it into what looked like a metal claw and positioned the claw over the pot and into a clamp. He pushed the levers of the clamps together and the moonstone was crushed into a very fine powder that drifted into the elixir. He gave it one last stir and then through a funnel he poured the contents into a small vial and then stoppered it. The potion was pearly white and gray. Separated, as if it were made of water and oil. Anne peered at the vial suspiciously.

"What does it taste like?"

“I do not know. I have never been to the moons. This ingredient list was given to me long ago by a wise woman. However, I have heard that it tastes first like bitter melon, then like sunshine, then hot as fire, sweet as candied clouds and then like stars! Or something like that. Keep it safe, for it is precious. The moonstone, I have only one more left. If you and your friend would be so kind as to procure for me another moonstone, it would be greatly appreciated!”

“Well, I’ll try Professor Celsius.”

“Thank you much! And now take your potion, put it in a safe place and be off! But be careful! Some weeks ago ogres came this way splashing and splashing around in my swamp and just making a general mess of things! Fortunately, the alligators hid themselves well enough. Those cursed ogres ate all of the swamp fish, pulled up nearly all the trees out of the water and only left when I enchanted the swamp and made everything taste like poison! Then I shot poisoned arrows at them! They’re thieves, all of them! They’ve robbed half the countryside of food, jewels and special objects. Beware the western forests especially. I’ve had a terrible time setting things right around here after their banditry.”

“I know. We almost ran into some on the way here. They didn’t find us though. We heard them coming before they could find us. They make a lot of noise.” She said.

“Well, that is one advantage you have over them – ogres can be endlessly stupid creatures! They make a tremendous amount of noise where ever they go, tromping and stomping here and there.”

“I hate ogres, Professor Celsius.”

“So do I. Yes, well now, be off my dear. I need my nap!”

“Thanks Professor Celsius!” Anne said. She gazed at the strange liquid in the vial. It felt warm in her hand. He saluted her, picked up the mug of hot, steaming swamp water tea and sipped it. It fogged up his spectacles. Anne turned and then she was off. She would be glad to visit again with the Professor, or Old Mole, not only to replace his moonstone but to explore his ramshackle shack of curious objects, herb lore books, strange plants and ask him more questions. But for the present, she and Zi were on an important mission. The only downside she could see was that they now had to be on constant watch for marauding ogres!

Together they traveled over mounds, hills, through wood and across the moonlit fields, all the while listening out for ogres, which wasn't hard to do when they finally reached the Mirrored Lake. It looked different since the last time Anne had seen it.

"This is where we must part company my friends." Said Ngozi.

"Perhaps when you come back from your journey you can visit us in the land of the Baobab Prince!" Said Kayin.

"When I come back we'll visit! I promise!" Said Anne. With that, the troupe of Aziza said their good-byes and marched off into the night.

Zi and Anne neared the mushroom ring. It was crawling with sprites who were very carefully cleaning the giant mushrooms. The lake itself was calm, its surface smooth as glass with barely a ripple to be seen.

"Zi! I know you, but who is this?" Inquired one of the sprites.

"We've come to see the Lady Pearl. This is Anne. Of course, you have heard of her." At hearing her name many looked up in wonderment. The first sprite hopped down like a little frog from his mushroom.

"My name is Mortimer. We are caretakers of this ring. The poisons chased us away but things are beginning to heal again. How do you plan to enter the lake? Aren't you afraid?"

"We know that seeing any fairy queen can be a perilous business but. . ."

"No, I mean the lake itself. Although you cannot see it through the dark of night, the lake's waters are still different. Much of the poison is gone but it is not the same as it was. We ourselves have not yet dared to enter." Said Mortimer.

"She has a special elixir from Old Mole so we will soon see how well it works. As for me, I will take my chances. As you say, the poisons are largely gone. It is the dream world that must be fixed now. Once that is fixed I'm sure the lake will become clear again." Said Zi.

"How will you return? So many have disappeared and have never come back!" Asked one of the sprites. She was a young girl with pale blond pigtails.

"I don't know yet. But I managed to escape the Winter Queen so maybe I'll figure this out too. You never know unless you try." She said. The others stopped their cleaning and gathered around them.

"We are mighty grateful for your courage Anne but I fear things are not so clear." Said Mortimer.

"What do you mean?"

"Like a ripple in a pond one thing can lead to another. The poisons in the lake has caused an upset. Now one sister is stronger than the other. Lady Grey will not take kindly to any change to balance things. Lady Pearl has fallen asleep and her sister would keep it that way."

"And yet, we need Lady Grey's weavings just as we need her sister's." Said the girl.

"Why do you think we need nightmares?" Asked Anne.

"The same way an ill person needs medicine. In any case, if you go and if you are able to get one, please bring back a moonstone for us!" She said.

"The Mirrored Lake used to be a place of beauty and peace, a place for deep thought. Will it ever return to it's former glory?" Mortimer asked.

"The only thing I can say is that we will do our best to bring it back to its former beauty and we will try to bring back some moonstones. But I cannot guarantee anything." Said Zi.

"Usually we demand payment from mortals before they enter but since your quest is noble and you have saved Other Land from eternal winter you can pay us when you get back." Mortimer said slyly, smiling at Anne.

"Thanks." She said, frowning. Zi just smiled. "You imps will have your treasures."

"Zi, we truly need one in this case. We cannot say why, but we do not ask out of greed or caprice." Said Mortimer, a serious expression growing on his face.

"Oh, and one more thing. Once you get to the gate the guardian there will demand of you an answer to a riddle. If you do not answer it you cannot pass, naturally."

"A riddle?" They both asked. Mortimer and the others nodded.

"A word for you; the riddler loves riddles that are obvious."

"Good to know. I suppose we should be going. Anne? You've got your elixir ready?"

"Right here." She said patting the vial in her bag. She thought of the pendant that Lady Whitestone gave her. This one was hers alone but if she could not acquire any new stones she would have to decide who to give it to – Mortimer or Old Mole. She felt a bit guilty even thinking about giving it away.

One of the sprites disappeared, fetched a small branch and then threw it into the lake. As soon as it touched the surface, right before them the branch became a small row boat. Zi and Anne stepped in.

"You will have no need to direct the boat. It will take you where you need to go, only drink your potion *before* you get to the middle of the lake!" Mortimer said. They all stood on the shoreline and waved goodbye and then pushed the boat off into the lake.

"I don't remember Ngozi and his troupe saying anything about riddles at the gate!" She complained.

“Neither do I. That is the interesting thing about being lead by lore and legend. The skeleton is there but when fleshed out the details can be strange and unexpected!” He said.

“Which means things might not be what we expect when we get there?”

“Naturally. But since we haven't been to the moons, what would we expect?” Anne settled in, delighting in their new adventure to the moons. Zi touched her shoulder.

“Anne, drink your potion.”

“Ok, ok.” She said. She looked across the far side of the lake and she did not see anything but fields and forests. A feeling like butterflies fluttered in her stomach as she took her elixir from her leather bag, unplugged the stopper and took a sip. It was very bitter, much like Old Mole warned it would be. In fact, so much so that she gagged.

“Drink it down all at once! Our boat is getting close to the center of the lake!” Said Zi urgently. She took a deep breath and gagging once more, she drank it down, making a face. More bitterness in waves upon waves assaulted her tongue, then as soon as that sensation came and went down her throat it tasted like tangerines and lemons, then like hot pepper seeds, which made her cough violently and then more waves swept over her taste buds – the taste of cotton candy filled her mouth and at last a sparkling sensation like champagne. She thought she saw stars and felt firecrackers burst in her belly - but not in a bad, painful way. More of an extra, super-duper-fizzy-pop-candy sort of way. After that subsided the boat reached the center of the lake and she felt a sudden surge of fear. What dangers would this journey hold? Hunter's words came floating back to her like a distant whisper: “*She has created imbalance. We work to heal that violence.*”

She wondered where the wolves had gone and whether they were well. Soon after that thought came to her, they began sinking down, down, down. . .

As soon as their heads went below the surface they both sank like stones. All the way down they went, into the black waters. Anne felt her lungs fill with water after she opened her mouth inadvertently in panic. But as soon as she thought she might drown she could breathe again as water flowed in and out and through her nose and mouth like heavy air. She felt herself relax and she blew out bubbles from her mouth and nose. It seemed quite some time that they were sinking though she could not see Zi through the darkness of the waters any longer but soon enough she discerned pale lights swimming here and there which when she concentrated on them turned out to be small water creatures. Frogs, fish of all sorts with their brilliant colors, shapes and sizes and sea horses so colorful they glowed like neon lights. As she descended to the floor of the lake she saw all sorts of fantastic and scary, deformed creatures; oddly shaped fish, water bugs and creatures with sharp teeth that scuttled slowly along the lake floor. They did not bother her or even seem to notice her. As soon as her foot touched the lake floor she saw Zi. They held hands and the ground around them turned upside down and fell into the sky and soon after, there was a stairway made of water, mists and cloud leading all the way to the moons!

They were now standing on the surface of the lake and draped all around them were mists. Like what she saw behind the boiler room door. The moons loomed fabulously large. They began climbing up into the sky and as they climbed the stairway seemed to move. Finally, they were in the sky, surrounded by seas of stars.

“Ha!” Said Anne in amazement. “I’ve never seen the sky like this! I feel like an astronaut!” In the distance on the surface of the moon stood a pale palace and before it, a huge gate. As they approached they saw that the stair only led to one of the moons. The gate spanned across as far as the eye could see for miles down in each direction. As they walked alongside the gate, Anne noticed that in the stone of the gate were carved many figures of sea animals, dragons and wolves. They reached a doorway and at the entrance was a massive carved head of a wolf.

“A wolf. Of course. Wolves can talk with the Lady Moons. Hunter and his pack-mates told me.” She said staring in wonder at the stone face.

“Wolves do have a special relationship with the Lady Moons. They always have.” Said Zi.

“One of the wolves told me that a she-wolf gave birth to the Lady Moons. Is that true?”

“Not likely, though I’m no sage on moon lore. Or wolves. There may be some kernel of truth to it. We will have to ask the Lady Moons themselves.”

“I wonder what the secret password is?”

“I don’t think there’s a password but rather, a riddle we must solve.” Zi said. Suddenly the head opened its eyes – fearsome eyes of white, glowing half moons.

“Who are you and why do you seek the Ladies at this hour?” It questioned. Its voice was hard, gravelly and grating, like a great, old machine being turned on after many years of disuse. Anne spoke up.

“We’ve come to see the Lady Pearl. Good dreams will soon disappear from the world forever if she doesn’t wake up.”

“Awaken the Lady Pearl? And how can that be possible by a mere mortal? She sleeps soundly now. Let her sleep. People these days, all they want is butterflies and sunshine.” Said the Wolf’s Head.

“But sir, we just want to bring balance back to dream land.” Said Zi.

“Balance. Hmm. I suppose there is nothing wrong with that, but to enter you must answer a riddle. Answer correctly and you can enter, but what good it will do you, I do not know. The moons are waxing to fullness and once they reach the height of their power there is naught you can do to escape, for they are jealous of all things that enter here. Especially the Lady Grey.”

“But we have to do something!” Said Anne stubbornly. The Wolf’s Head sighed and the sound was an immeasurably sad sound, like a distant fog horn out at a misty sea.

“Very well then. Here is the riddle: at night they come unbidden. By day they are gone but not lost. What is the answer?” Anne and Zi were thoughtful for a little while. Anne looked up at the star-scape around them and she remembered that the riddle at the gate would be an obvious one. Zi gave her an expectant look as if he already knew the answer.

“Stars!” She answered. With that, the Wolf’s Head opened its great mouth full of stone teeth and fangs and a majestic howl that sounded very much like a roar came rolling forth and through its mouth lay the road to the Pearl Palace.

The palace was farther than it first appeared but when they reached it, it seemed empty and deserted. No one was there to greet them.

“Hello? Anyone here?” She called out. Her voice echoed and trailed off into space. Zi went to the great stone doors and pushed them open. Cautiously they entered. They were now standing in a large entrance room. It was dim inside and hazy, as if they were walking in a dream. At the end of the room was a winding staircase and throughout the room were large, mysterious bubbles.

“Look, Zi! Those strange bubbles I saw floating up from the lake! Here they are!”

“I think I know what those are. Remember hearing about the missing?”

“I remember.”

"I suspect those are the missing folk that went to the lake or were thrown in after it was poisoned. Those that didn't die were captured by the moon sisters and brought here, I think."

"I'm sure their families miss them." She said. Zi nodded thoughtfully. The opaque bubbles bobbed silently. They walked up the grand staircase to the next level. They wandered the palace halls and rooms, finding them empty except for many gilded mirrors and these were dark; they showed no reflections. The floors were made of crushed pearls that gave them a delicate shimmer. They walked through rooms and halls until they reached a grand, gilded ballroom, also empty. They walked to the balcony and down the balcony stairs and found themselves in a courtyard filled with many rows of giant white moon flowers and white water lilies. At the end of the courtyard, to their amazement, sat the very one they were looking for, a beautiful giantess, a fairy woman sleeping upon a silver and pearl chaise. She was draped in a delicate white gown and sheathed in web-like veils. She was nearly the size of an ogre. Yet beautiful as a white-winged butterfly.

"The Lady Pearl! How do we wake her up, Zi?" Whispered Anne.

"Well, that is the very question. It is up to us to figure it out." He whispered. Anne looked beyond the chaise and saw the other moon, looming like a mountain on the edge of the horizon. The fairy woman was wearing a large moonstone choker. Anne was awed and a little afraid. After all, what would happen if they got too close? If she woke what would she say to them? She pulled out her pendant from her bag and put it in her pocket and then she remembered something. Her ring! She rummaged around for it and fetched it out. It did not glimmer or glow, though the yellow stone in its center glittered faintly. *No danger so far.* Zi was hunting around cautiously in the flower garden for something.

"What are you looking for?"

"I don't know yet. I suppose we can call her name. It does not look as if anyone has been here for a long time."

"Lady Pearl! Oh, Lady Pearl!" Anne called out, ready to hide behind one of the flowers if she woke up in a bad mood.

Nothing happened. Zi laughed.

"I had to try something! Maybe if we get closer to her throne." They edged closer and closer to the peacefully sleeping fairy queen until they were directly under the chaise. There was a stairway carved into one of the gracefully curved front legs of the chaise, winding, bending and leading to a table that sat next to the chaise. They climbed the stairs until they reached the looming face of the Lady Pearl. Her countenance was one of serenity and she smiled slightly as she slept, her form rising and falling slowly like the tides of a calm sea. Something like faint stardust shone on her pale complexion. A silver scepter with an immense pearl at its apex leaned against her chaise.

"Hello?" Anne called out.

"I think I have an idea." He said and pulled out his whistle from the knapsack at his side. He began to play a tune, inviting enough to make anyone dance. It had no effect. After three songs Zi looked quizzically at Anne.

"What will we do now?" She asked. He sighed. Anne took out her moonstone, fumbling with it and it fell from her hand, all the way down to the ground.

"Oh No!"

"Look, Anne! Lady Pearl's stone!" Zi said in sudden alarm. Anne turned and looked at the sleeping queen and sure as the sun, it was beginning to shimmer, its light like a faint, distant star, but it was steadily growing more intense. Lady Pearl's brow furrowed into a frown though she did not open her eyes.

"If your moonstone is not on your person the Ladies can enchant you!" He cried. The queen's eyes were slowly starting to open.

"My ring is glimmering too!" Anne said nervously. They both hurried down the stair and she grabbed her moonstone pendant. As soon as that, the queen fell back to deep slumber and her choker went faintly pearlescent again.

"It looked like she was going to wake up Zi!"

"Yes, but we do not want her waking up and enchanting you. Do you want to remain here forever?"

"No. But this doesn't get us any closer to solving the problem!" She said in frustration. She shoved the moonstone in her pocket and began looking around for any sort of sign or idea as to what to do next. Behind the chaise was another gate with a dolphin's head. Out of its mouth and beyond flowed a river of stardust and cloud. Giant water lilies bobbed gently at the gate's entrance.

"If we can't talk to *her*, there is someone we *can* talk to." She said.

"I was hoping we could avoid her but it seems circumstances demand it." Said Zi. They both walked to the gate and got into one of the lily boats and set off down the river. It was fragrant and bright against the night, its petals strong enough to hold them afloat, yet soft as silk. Slowly they went at first down the stardust river towards the other moon, then faster, swiftly up and down the currents, off to see Lady Grey.

They entered a cave as soon as their boat touched the surface of the second moon and down they went over a small waterfall and then they plunged into an underground lake of dust and mists. Even in the darkness of the cave the stardust lake gave them enough light to see by. They disembarked from the boat, looking around cautiously, then slinked along the cave walls. There was only one path leading from the lake. As they walked, the soft light emanating from the lake dimmed but they detected a diffuse light source up ahead. The air became hazier as they continued forward. Anne noticed the walls were filled with paintings and pictographs of moving animals; sea animals and wolves and dragons. They could hear the low humming of a mysterious voice. They entered the mouth of a second cave. High above, it had no roof and they could see the stars above. All around they saw glittering mounds upon mounds of moonstones and silver jewels. In a recessed lair at the other end of this cave, half hidden in shadow and watching them both with great interest was the Lady Grey.

“So, you have come and you have brought a friend, though I do not know him well.”

“You knew we were coming?”

“One cannot come here without my knowing it.”

“This is my friend, Zi.”

“How do you do?” Said the Lady Grey. Zi bowed his head slightly but remained silent. Anne frowned, peering in at the shadowy figure in the lair. Anne was expecting to see another giantess. Or the old woman. What they did see was something quite different. In fact, it was something quite fantastic and unlike anything she had seen so far in her forays into Other Land. Lady Grey crawled out of her lair revealing silver-gray glistening scales and a gloriously long tail and great webbed, white wings. Lady Grey was a dragon! Zi and Anne quickly hid behind a giant mound of moonstones.

“Do not be afraid. There must have been a good reason for you to come here. I still have the moonstone I offered you. In fact, I have many of them as you can see, amongst my treasure.” She snaked around her hoard until she found them, trapped between her and a great mountain of moonstones.

“We have no need for moonstones, but thank you, my lady.” Said Zi.

“No need? I do not believe it. Besides, I was not speaking to you, earthbound sprite! Everyone from the land of the Baobab Prince to the forests of the Dark Mountain desire my moonstones. Tell it true! You are here to steal my treasure!” Lady Grey suddenly declared angrily. Her eyes, at first light gray orbs, darkened like pools of ink-tainted water with pinpoints of light shining in them.

“Actually, Lady Grey the reason why we came here is because your sister fell asleep and because of that good dreams have left the world. We couldn't wake her. Can you wake her?”

“I cannot.” Said the dragon, calming herself. “But why must she be awakened? Perhaps she sleeps because she is tired.”

Lady Grey said slyly.

“But the Winter Queen did this by poisoning the lake! She created all sorts of problems and one of them was banishing good dreams. We want to bring them back. To bring back balance.” Explained Anne. Lady Grey snorted and blew out hot vapors from her snout.

“Do you, now? Dreams are dreams. Balance, you want to bring? Why? It lulls people, bores them. Then they forget what is important. I can show you many, great things. Let others wrestle with their dark dreams. Perhaps these dark shapes and visions will remind them of things they want to forget but *should not* forget!”

“What do you mean? Forget what things?” Asked Anne.

“As many things as there are people in the universe. It matters not to me! And why should someone young such as you be concerned?”

“My mother and my friends have lots of bad dreams all of the time, Lady Grey. That can't be good for long!”

“I feel no happiness for that. Nor do I feel great pity. They happen for a reason. Do you think that I create bad dreams, Anne?”

“You don't?” They both asked in surprise.

“I can, but many think I create them all. It is not so simple. Let me show you a thing. Hop on my back, you and your friend.” Lady Grey said. She lowered herself to the ground and reluctantly they climbed on. Anne's stories about dragons told of hard dragon scales but she was not prepared for how warm the scales felt. With her in front and Zi in back Lady Grey rose in thick, bilious vapors, roaring majestically and she flew up through the opening in the cave ceiling. As they rose far above the moon's surface and into the sky they dove in between the horizon of the world and the moons. So high they were that they were merely a swiftly streaking star across the night to anyone's eye and they could see the thin clouds below them, spread about like delicate sheets and the blue black horizon filled with stars above them.

“In between waking and slumber memories and thoughts are made by the mind and given to us, the Sister Moons. We queens of Sleep take these things – the shapes and thoughts given to us, the delightful, the mundane, the frightening or strange and we make sense of them the best way we can. We create stories and give these stories back to their owners. Give them back in the shape, color and form according to the life from the mind that gave them to us. Those stories are what you call dreams.”

“I've never heard that before.” Said Anne. “So, you and your sister just shape them and color them?”



“Yes.”

“But how do you get them in the first place?”

“Through sleep, of course. They collect together in a special lake in one of my caves as little clouds. It is hidden and no one may see it but myself. My sister has a special mirror in her palace, a hidden one that she uses. There, when I or my sister choose to go to sleep the dreams come and we weave and color and fold and shape them and give them sense. They are doorways that can only be traveled through when asleep.”

They dived and flew into a great mass of storm clouds. The clouds rolled along silently like herds of buffalo, back-lit with soft flickers of lightening. In the flickers of lightening they took on eerie shapes. Giant bats, lizards, insects, even trolls and ogres, misshapen. They seemed to move toward them and grasp at them with vaporous claws or fangs as they flew by. Then they flew upwards again towards a furious, heaving mass of cloud. A cyclone!

“These are all remnants of nightmares and things I use to make my weavings.”

“But you said that sometimes you can create bad dreams on your own.”

“I can, when it is warranted but it is rare when I do. It is a lot of work making them out of nothing, you know. Usually bad dreams come from the person's life, his own life. His own *self* is speaking to him. Perhaps there is something on his conscience he must lay bare. Perhaps there is something he is running away from he must face. Maybe bad things are befalling him and simply reflect his tragedies and sorrows. Or maybe it is a harbinger of something to come. Or just nonsense.”

“Harbinger?” She could barely hear above the roar of the storm.

“A sign of things to come.”

“I've had that kind of dream before!”

“I know, child. I know. And you paid attention to it. Many do not, especially now that people only care about what seems logical or rational. Dreams speak with emotion and irrational things to give shape to the rational, the awake place.”

The great finger of gray and black cloud was whirling and swirling and they were approaching fast!

“But Lady Grey, we're getting too close!” cried Anne.

“You will be fine as long as you are with me. This is one of my creations. The Malediction, I call it. When I decide to create a nightmare I send the Malediction to those who are deserving. It has been busy as of late, thus, the reason why you can see it. My sister sends the Blessing. But very few deserve such extremes. So we are content to work with what we are given instead of creating what is not necessary.” The cyclone was majestic and frightening to behold. Up they went through the funnel which was pure blackness at first and then a streaks of lightening lit up the funnel bright as day and they raced towards the eye. Anne's hair whipped violently against her face, stinging her eyes as the roar of the storm was all around them. Then they came out and above it and sailed away among the stars.

She set them down before her in her favorite cave while she luxuriated upon her favorite mound of treasure, a deep well of silver coins. She fed them a sort of thin cake made of stardust that tasted light and with the sweetness of honey and gave them something called moon water, which had no actual flavor but tasted like hot, sparkling water.

“Lady Grey? I was wondering about something. About dragons.”

“Do you like dragons?”

“I think they are magnificent.”

“And so we are.”

“But also from what I've read, they are. . . kind of dangerous. So, why are you a dragon? I mean, you can choose to be anything you want, right? Your sister is a fairy and when I saw you in the boiler room you were an old lady.”

“Well, you can be anything you want in a dream.”

“Is this a dream?” Anne asked. Zi munched quietly on his paper thin cake, listening. “Even if it is, why are you a dragon?”

She asked again. The dragon sighed softly then made a face that looked to Anne like a smile.

“Why, indeed. I have many aspects, many forms and faces. Sometimes different names, depending on what I am going to do. Is that strange to you?”

“It's a little confusing.”

“Yes, I suppose. But for those of us that dwell in the heavenly realms, it is not strange at all. I love dragons and wolves, and of those two, dragons best of all. I choose to be a dragon to remind those who dream, those come here and myself of the majesty and the wonder of that beast! You see Anne, long ago when my sister and I came into being by Ancient Law, my first children that I alone formed and gave birth to were the wolf and the dragon. My sister birthed the creatures of the sea. Did you know that there was once a direct road from the realms of Faerie to your world? That road is gone now and the doorways are hidden to all but a few perceptive ones, usually children. Like many of the creatures of Faerie, the dragon has diminished and is now only a creature of legend and tales in your world. But the wolf! My child the wolf has endured in both worlds. Still, I wonder, will he always endure? Perhaps he will diminish too and only be a legendary creature like the dragon. Even my sister wondered about her own children diminishing someday. If they all diminish and become creatures only for tales, the so-called real world, your world, will cease to be. Yet the wolf will always be, here. And the dragon.”

Anne nodded as the dragon said this with great sadness in her voice. It reminded Anne of Hunter's words to her on the edge of the Snowy Beach. She wondered where he was and what he, Edda, Dorga, Nys and Dragon were up to.

"Do you know Hunter? I haven't seen him or his pack in a long time. They said that you and Lady Pearl talk to them. Do you sing to them too?"

"Sing? I do not sing to anyone these days. If I sang to you fully, in all my glory your ears would bleed. My singing is something you could not withstand directly. But in the rhythm of the tides, the flow of the bodies of water, the breeze at night on a full moon you can feel my singing and also my sister's singing, when she was awake. As to Hunter, I know of him. Great and proud he is. He is well and runs free. They roam as wolves will do. Once you are a wolf's friend you have earned his devotion. You have earned that, I know." She said approvingly. Anne wished she could see them again. She missed them but it was good to know they were alright.

"You said that you had other children?"

"Yes. Giants."

"You mean the ogres?"

"Ogres, yes."

"They've been running around creating all kinds of trouble!" Said Anne disapprovingly.

"I know. I'll have nothing to do with them now. It was so long ago and I had nearly forgotten them, since I do not want them. Long ago I had many children after the dragon and the wolf were formed. Children to comfort me in my loneliness when the others left to make their way in the world. But they tried to steal all my treasure, induced by their wicked father! They even dared to try to put me in bonds! Wicked children! My silver and my moonstones they tried to take, no doubt a trait they got from their father, that thieving King under the Dark Mountain! Dark indeed! He is wicked and therefore our children were inclined to evil. I had no choice but to cast them into the sea and there they slept. Now that foolish Queen in the north has awakened them. The wolves told me. Who helped her, I wonder? I am sure it was the King under the mountain! I have plagued both of them many a night with terrible dreams since I cannot do anything to make the ogres sleep again from up here. I shall continue to plague *her* with foul visions and nightmares for as long as I can!" Lady Grey's scales shimmered and her eyes blazed. Anne was beginning to almost feel sorry for the Winter Queen and then she remembered the nasty game the Queen played on her at the castle and changed her mind. No, she *didn't* feel sorry for her at all.

"Who is the King of the Dark Mountain?"

"Why, he is the King of the westernmost mountains and all of the forests of the west. Not very far from the north. A scoundrel and a thieving rascal and a great hunter! *That* is who he is!" Lady Grey nearly spat out the words.

"I didn't know Other Land had a fairy king!"

"Humph! Now you know!" Said Lady Grey.

"How can someone else make them go back to sleep? The ogres, I mean?"

"Singing can calm them, even enchant them. I sang to them and then cast them all in to the Ice Sea. Singing put them to sleep. Singing is what must have awakened them."

"Must have been quite a song!" Said Zi appreciatively.

"Singing." Anne said thoughtfully. The dragon suddenly grew angry again.

"Some wicked song she must have sung to wake them to such mischief! I will have my revenge on her all the way until winter comes again!" She flared, her wings flying open and her tail twitched and lashed against the silver coins like a bullwhip. Silver coins flew through the air and Anne and Zi both ducked down. Anne wanted to know more about the King of the mountain but Lady Grey was not inclined to discuss the matter further. Feeling nervous about Lady Grey's changeable temper, she turned back to the wolves.

"But Lady Grey, you can at least *talk* to the wolves, right?" Lady Grey settled back down upon her mound.

"Sometimes. We sisters love music and the wolves have always spoken to us and serenaded us and we answer them with songs only they can hear, as well as all the sea creatures of the ocean deep. But wolves and all their kind are special to me." Anne found Lady Grey unsettling. She could understand why a child would be punished for bad behavior but for a mother to say she did not want her children? But then ogres were so awful maybe all mothers who had them hated them! When reading about trolls and ogres in her books and seeing their actions firsthand, it wasn't hard to hate them. She certainly didn't want anything to do with any troll or ogre. Except, she had almost forgotten about Professor Celsius. He wasn't wicked. Still, a mother should love her children even if they were behaving badly, right? She should just punish them. It was very strange to Anne. She wasn't sure how she felt about that and she didn't like *not* knowing how to feel about something. Interesting as it all was, they had not accomplished a thing they had set out to do! Anne looked down at her hand, looking over her silver ring with the golden jewel. Ever so lightly it glowed with that blue light, the glitter of the yellow stone a sharp contrast. Which meant they needed to tread carefully. She wished it were summer already.

"You are a friend of the Summer Queen." The dragon said, looking at her ring with growing interest.

"Yes. She gave this stone to me."

"A gracious gift. It will not avail you here, though." She said smugly. And that was a rather unpleasant thought to Anne.

"Lady Grey, I want to know more about ogres. I mean, why. . ." She said began.

"No! We will not speak of them!" Flared the dragon again, her scales changing color and growing dark. Her eyes flashed.

“Sorry, I didn't mean to. . .”

“You have not fallen under any spell, I see!”

“What do you mean? What spell?” Asked Anne.

“Do not be coy with me, child! I know you have a moonstone! All of them belong to me!” She cried petulantly.

“There, in your bag or somewhere on your person, you have one! It is mine!” The dragon blew out hot steam in voluminous plumes and clouds, shrouding the cave with cloud and steam. Anne and Zi soon got separated. Anne ran nearly sightlessly to try and find a hiding place, her ring the only thing to shine a light in the cloud and steam. She reached into her pocket and grabbed the moonstone. She could feel a warmth in her hand as she held it and felt it protect her from the near scalding steam. Everywhere she turned she thought she saw dark shapes, strange half-formed creatures and suddenly one morphed into what looked like her grandma Barbara and then as suddenly as it had come, it disappeared. *Why?* All this smoke and anger reminded her of how changeable fairies could be and that perhaps it was time to find a way to escape.

“I will find you and you will stay here always, both of you! All moonstones are mine and I care not who gave it to you! You shall never escape the moons!” The dragon roared. Soon after, Anne could hear the keening, light music of Zi's whistle. The vapors, which had been growing hotter by the minute gradually rolled back and settled, much of it dissipating.

“Perhaps some music for the lady?” Said Zi quickly and graciously, smiling.

“Yes. Music then.” She said, calming herself. At that, Zi played many merry tunes. Lady Grey settled back on her favorite mound and blew smoke rings and shapes that ran, marched or swayed in time to the beat of the songs. Anne knew they would have to find some way to trick her. So Anne composed herself, found her way back to the cave room and tried to make conversation again, this time about something she thought that Lady Grey might like.

“I heard my dad once say that there was something called the Music of the Spheres. What does that music sound like?” She asked.

“Ah! Wondrous it is, but you cannot hear it. It is the sound of the movement of the stars, the moons and the suns in the universe. They all have their own special hum and sound and together it is music. Beautiful as it is, it is not music you can feel in your heart or your gut. It is great but nothing that thumps in your soul or moves you to tears or ecstatic joy. At least not me. It is music of the mind. I prefer more earthly music, even music from the fairy folk.”

“Then my lady, I shall continually play for you many tunes!” Said Zi.

“You remind me of a troupe of musicians that came here a long time ago but they left.” She said sadly. Zi smiled and then played more music and told many riddles, to the Grey Lady's delight and then played more music.

“Delightful! Can you play, Anne?”

“No, but I can sing a little.”

“Sing for me then. I grow tired of singing for myself. So very tired.” Anne thought of some of her favorite songs. She sang *Alouette*, *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star*, and a few others she learned at school. Then she hummed a tune called *Lament* from an album her dad bought her called *Once Upon A Time*. Even as she sang it, she felt a great sadness wash over her. Lady Grey listened intently to this song, her gray eyes wide and dark.

“Sing more songs in that vein.” She said. Zi and Anne looked at each other. Anne thought long and hard of another song, one she had heard in a movie once and she began to sing it. It was called *Gollum's Song*. She remembered the haunting sound of it very clearly. Zi listened and then picked up the tune and played an accompaniment to her song.

“Wonderful! Now play a happier tune! Many happy tunes, if you please!” Anne sang and Zi played and an invisible force from him, like small, gentle ripples pulling and pushing through the air could be felt by Anne, nearly lulling her to sleep. She looked over at Zi who was no longer playing his little wooden whistle but the whistle was playing by itself. However, Lady Grey really *was* asleep! He tip-toed over to her.

“Here's our chance to leave! I think I've found a way to wake the Lady Pearl. The happy songs made Lady Grey fall asleep but I do not know how long this will last.” Zi's amber eyes were bright with excitement. Anne became excited too. Finally, they were getting somewhere!

“So you think the other sister might wake up if we play sad songs?” She asked in a whisper. Zi nodded quickly.

“We must hurry!” He whispered.

“Zi, don't forget the moonstones!” She grabbed one and he grabbed a few and they stuffed these into their bags. Then they went in search of the stardust lake. Quietly she climbed inside the lily boat. Zi pushed it off and hopped in. It sailed silently back towards the other moon and through the dolphin head gate, which squeaked cheerily at their arrival and let them into the garden where they found themselves in the courtyard of Lady Pearl, once again.

“I hope the plan works Zi or we came all this way for nothing!”

“I think it will work. Or I hope it will. Sometimes it happens that way. You stumble across things by accident. But if we had not come at all we would never find anything out.”

“The Ladies love earthly music, inordinately so. It's something unique and special to them. It enchants them. Some things aren't what we think they should be. Lady Grey loved the sad songs very much but she fell asleep to the happy sounding ones. I thought that perhaps if we play and sing sad songs for the Lady Pearl she will be roused.”

“Sounds good to me.”

“The sprites trapped in the bubbles may awaken also. If that happens we will have many lost ones coming home with us!”

With flip of his fingers and a word Zi had his whistle back in his hands.  
“Now, let us see if we can awaken the Lady Pearl.” He said with a twinkle in his eye.

They climbed up the stair of the chaise again and positioned themselves right in the middle of the table. Anne sat down and for a moment she looked up at the vast spray of stars above. It would either be the last time she saw them this close or she would see this heavenly sky forever.

“Zi, it looks so different. It's like I can just jump out into the sky and reach one of them. I wonder what it was like here at the palace when she was awake.”

“Wonderful, no doubt. As of now I am concerned with the other sister. Lady Grey may awaken and find us and some of her treasure gone and no matter how few trinkets you take from a dragon's hoard, they do not look on it kindly.”

“But she has so much already! And how do we know she didn't steal it from someone else? I don't care what she says, I'm not giving my moonstone pendant to her!”

“It is hard to believe that every treasure she hoards was come by honestly, but I do think that most of those treasures truly belong to her. Yet, we have need of these few moonstones.”

“Well this pendant is mine! She can smoke and steam all she wants about it!”

“As you say.” Zi chuckled. “So, what shall we sing first, Anne?”

“Well, I'll sing *Greensleeves*. That sounds kind of sad.”

“True enough.” Said Zi. They played many sad and beautiful songs, Zi on his whistle and Anne sang when she knew the words. Some of them she remembered grandma Veronica singing to her. Often with Zi's songs she didn't know the words so she merely hummed along. After a time, they could hear the faint whisper of voices behind them. The opaque bubbles were sinking to the ground and popping and out would come a sleepy gnome, a fairy or some other sprite!

“Zi! It's working!” They were coming slowly out of sleep and looking around, puzzled. And then all of Anne and Zi's hopes blossomed. There was a deep sigh from Lady Pearl. Then she yawned and finally, after many months of slumber she awakened! Her eyes, light gray and limned with blue, fluttered open. In her eyes the lights of the stars shined. With the graceful, sweeping movements of the waves in a calm sea on a summer day she sat up on her chaise. Her great, gossamer wings unfolded and fluttered soundlessly. Zi and Anne stood up. Zi bowed deeply and Anne followed his lead, bowing awkwardly.

“Greetings, My Lady Pearl!” He said in his most gracious sounding voice.

“What is this? How strange I feel. And who might you be?” She said softly, gazing at them both.

“I am Zi of the southern forests. This is Anne Greene. We came because your long slumber has nearly done away with all good dreams. We came back to wake you. I hope we have not offended you, dear lady.”

“Offended? No, rather I woke from a sleep where I saw many terrible things; things I could not stop. I tried my best to lessen the harm, thus many poor hapless folk have been guided here, though I could not save them all. After that, a darkness, a terrible plague came and I fell from dreams into the darkness of deep slumber. Darkness all around like an ocean deep. I thank you both for waking me.” She said kindly and smiled. Then she gazed at Anne.

“You have come a long and perilous way to see the Sister Moons. How did a mortal such as yourself get here? It has been a long time since any mortal has come this way.”

“Lady Whitestone gave me this,” she showed her pendant. “and Old Mole gave me a drink made with moonstone dust.”

“I am glad you came, Anne. I would give you a moonstone had I any besides the one,” she touched the choker at her neck, which to Anne's relief, remained pearly and did not shine. “but my sister hoards them all. However, I have no jewels to give you, but I have mystery and visions of loveliness and the wonders of the celestial lights I can weave for you before you leave. I have slept for a long time and you find me not quite myself, yet, but never let it be said that I did not treat the guests who entered my realm with proper courtesy.” She reached over a long pale arm and touched her pearl-tipped silver scepter. When she rested her hand upon it, it began to glow with a faint inner light. She beckoned for the lost fairies and folk to come forward. Then she stood up and the many delicate veils she wore shifted like ocean currents. Her hair was a luxurious mass of waves the color of midnight blue with what looked like tiny constellations of stars adorning her tresses.

“Come all of you,” She called out, her voice musical and gentle. “for I know that you have been lost on account of the Winter Queen. I shall send you home if that is what you wish, though I would give you refreshment and merriment before you depart.” Slowly they streamed to her chaise. The courtyard became awash with pastel color. The white flowers became tints of pale blue, mint green, pale yellow, pink, and peach and many visions of amazing things appeared and entertained them – a mystical circus of dancing punchinellos and carousels, ponds swimming with beautiful fish and dancing shadow puppets and many other amazing things. There weren't any stardust honey cakes or food of any sort but there was ice cold moon water that sparkled like champagne and in any flavor they could want which satisfied any hunger and refreshed them. Many good things according to the wish of each one they saw and enjoyed themselves with. After watching the shadow puppet parades Anne rode on a white Pegasus, racing Zi through the stars and then she rode to her heart's content on the magical carousel and it seemed to her that her friends were there with her. When Zi wasn't riding the stars on a Pegasus, he played his little wooden whistle.

The jollity had gone on for some time until they heard a great, fear-inspiring roar from far off. The festivities began to dim and then dissipate like mists in high sunlight.

“Zi, Anne, it is time for you to go! My sister has roused herself and she is most upset! Have you something of hers?” She asked. Anne quickly spoke up.

“She told us that she wanted us to stay forever after we got to her cave and, well, of course we didn't want to, so when she went to sleep after the songs we played for her, we left. I think she's mad over that.”

“She is loathed to give up anything that comes to her lair. I perceive that you also have a moonstone of your own, otherwise you would not want to leave this enchanted place. Before you go, there is a certain thing you must know, Anne, lest you are lost here among the moons forever. When you leave through the Wolf's Head Gate and down the stair to the lake floor you will see some of my children, those that stay in the lake. Many are beautiful to look at, many are deformed and hideous. Once you are in the Mirrored Lake you must wait until they come near to you. I can feel the lake churning now. Do not choose a beautiful creature but only choose a plain or an ugly one. If you do not heed this warning, you will fall under their enchantment and you will be trapped in the lake. You will never want to leave and once the elixir wears off you will drown! Choose only the plain or the ugly creatures to escape to the surface to the other side. Heed this warning and you will escape and go home.”

“I can help. . .” Zi began but Lady Pearl raised her hand and a shadow fell over them.

“No, Zi. Anne must break the surface of this journey by herself or she will not live past the work of the elixir. Time is against you. You must hurry!” Zi glanced at Anne worriedly.

“If I can go to the castle on the Ice Sea and come back, I can do this too!” She said resolutely.

“Then let us be on our way!” Said Zi. Lady Pearl waved at them and they waved goodbye to her. They raced through the courtyard and through the palace with most of the lost fairy folk right on their heels but some chose to stay and simply waved goodbye to them.

“Give our regards to our folk!” They called to Zi.

“Why are they staying?” Asked Anne.

“It is a hard thing to leave a good dream.” He said. They went through the Wolf's Head Gate and then down the staircase. Lady Pearl created thick white clouds to obscure her sister's sight as they made their escape down the cloudy stair. They could hear her raging cries but they could not see her nor could she see them. As they descended into the lake the waters were roiling in turbulence. Just above they could see the great silver-gray dragon hovering by the stair. Her wings were beating swiftly and loudly, the sound like great rugs being beaten. Anne, who was last of all, jumped into the water as the dragon blew clouds of scalding steam down the stair after her. Her sense of balance was immediately thrown and the world turned upside down again and as soon as she felt as if she would faint she was deep underwater and standing on the lake floor. The waters were roiling furiously, as if being whipped into a froth by a storm. She saw Zi and all the others standing on the floor as the water creatures that had either lain dormant or swam lazily by before were now racing around in a frenzy or swimming up and disappearing towards the surface. Zi glanced at her and at the procession of animals, grabbed a black and white striped sea horse and away he went to the surface. The others followed, taking the first creature that was willing to bear them on its back. On and on, sea horse, koi fish, blow fish, sting ray, all of brilliant colors and each one would be grabbed and a fairy would jump on its back and away they went to the top. It looked easy enough. Anne was now the only one left on the lake floor and she was becoming fearful. On and on the procession of creatures came on like a carousel, one more brilliantly marked than the last. The waters were so violent that she was being lifted from the floor. She could barely keep her balance and most of the creatures had left the bottom of the lake. She panicked. How would she ever get out of here? One little sea horse, a bright blue one with a white tail swam near her. Was this the only one left? But didn't Lady Pearl say not to choose one of the colorful ones? The sea horse swam even closer to her and made a querulous sound, its eyes questioning her. She shook her head. *No!* It made a sad sound but then swam off, disappearing in the darkness. It was becoming impossible for her to see anything. Anne started floating upwards, feeling lost and afraid. The effects of the elixir slowly began to wear off. It was becoming more difficult to breathe. Out of the depths she saw a small dark shape swim towards her, another little sea horse, a mottled, mousy gray color with a grossly misshapen snout. It remained buoyed in the water, gazing at her. Anne struggled valiantly to hold her breath and she dog paddled her way through the water and climbed on its back and away they went towards the surface. She could feel the waters flooding into her lungs even as she saw faint rays of moonlight slicing through the depths. They were getting closer to the surface! She felt herself drowning when they broke through to the surface. . .

. . . and she opened her eyes.

She was lying on her back. And drenched through. She could see the two moons high in the sky. Zi and the caretakers of the mushroom ring were standing around her.

“She's awake.” Said the girl sprite.

“Well I can see that!” Mortimer snapped.

“No need to get angry about it.” She retorted.

“Shh!” Said another in irritation.

“I knew you'd make it!” Said Zi happily. Anne opened her mouth and shuttered in panic, thinking that another flood of water

would come rushing down her throat, but it was only fresh air! She sighed in relief. She felt for her bag, finding it miraculously dry.

“Did it work? Do you think it really worked?” She asked, sitting up and wringing out her hair.

“It did. We will see the evidence in the coming days.” Said Mortimer.

“I remember her saying that she plagues the Winter Queen for waking the ogres. Now that we took some moonstones she'll do the same to us!”

“She would, but now that Lady Pearl is awake, thanks to us, I doubt that we will be plagued too badly. Balance is being restored, bit by bit. Besides, compared to the Winter Queen and the King of the Mountain's offenses against her, our small offenses hardly merit a Malediction.” Said Zi.

“Lady Pearl will temper her darker sister's weavings. Do not worry over it.” Said Mortimer.

“You have your moonstones, Mortimer. I hope you are happy.” Said Zi.

“Happy? I would prefer to say satisfied.”

“What do you need it for? You said it was for something special.” Anne asked. Mortimer's troupe looked at one another apprehensively.

“An old feud is brewing among our folk. I won't speak of it further but we do need it for something important.”

“You mean a war?” Asked Anne.

“It isn't quite so big as a war. Yet” Said the girl sprite.

“Uh-oh!”

“One thing at a time Anne. There are many things happening. One thing at a time.” Zi said.

“Well, I have a moonstone left. We need to go back to visit Old Mole.” She said.

“I suppose we will see you again one day. Or not. Who knows these days? Things are so topsy-turvy, even for us. We thank you for the pains you took Anne and we are in your debt.” Said Mortimer.

“You're welcome. Maybe the next time I come back we can have a big party instead of worrying about monsters and scary queens.”

“I would love a gathering but it will take some doing to rid ourselves of all this strange mischief, first. Until we meet again.” Mortimer said and blew her a kiss. Then he and his band quickly disappeared into the woods.

“You know Anne, we wouldn't have been able to trick her if the moons were full.”

“I'm sure there was a reason why our adventure happened when it did, so that we *could* trick her.” She said slyly. Then a sudden thought came to her and she looked around.

“Zi, where are all the ones who came with us?”

“They went home. It is time for us to do the same.”

“I wouldn't mind exploring some more places on the way back.” He smiled, then pulled out something from his pouch. It was a silver dragon scale.

“I pulled this off of Lady Grey when we went riding through the sky. It will help camouflage us while we travel. If you have your silver ring on, we can go about unseen, at least from some creatures. Gryps and ogres are out and about, plus other things we may not like.”

“Let me set my time piece. It will be a long time before I get back and there's a lot of neat things Old Mole has in his shack! So, we're going to be invisible?”

“Sort of. I prefer to say, hidden. Perhaps we can play some tricks on any naughty creatures we see. Ogres especially. This dragon scale will be just the thing!”

“There's been something I've been meaning to ask you about.”

“What?” Asked Zi.

“About guardians.”

“Ah! Guardians. Perhaps when we get to Old Mole's swamp we can sit down with him over some swamp water tea and talk about guardians. There is much lore about such important ones!”

She wasn't too sure of the swamp water tea but she grinned from ear to ear thinking about learning more fairy lore and finding out secret things. The air was warm and inviting and she could feel her clothes beginning to dry. So, off they went into the moonlit night to see what they could see.

And of course, to bring Old Mole his replacement moonstone.



It was Sunday and Anne was busy reading. Or rather, trying to read but for some reason she felt that things around her weren't quite right and she couldn't shake the feeling away. Usually after an adventure things were one step closer to being Right in the world. Not this time. This feeling kept bringing her right out of the book. Mama was on the phone which was distracting and didn't help matters. Anne's mind began to wander through her memories of the Mirrored Lake, which had been fixed. *Right?* She loved the Lady Pearl but she still did not understand Lady Grey. She did not like Lady Grey and the more she thought about Lady Grey the angrier she became. Shouldn't mothers love all of their children? Even if they were bad? Why would a mother love some children and not others?

But then, she was not a mother. What would it be like to have children that stole from you? Or turned against you? It made her head hurt and it didn't make any sense. Besides, she took something from Lady Grey's treasure, didn't she? Even if it was only something so small. After all, others needed it and Lady Grey was simply hoarding all that treasure and just laying around on it! *Still.* . .

Her mother's voice pulled her out of her brooding thoughts.

"Anne? Where are you?" Her mother's voice was shaking, which set off a mental alarm. Worried, Anne rose slowly and went downstairs and into the living room. Her mother was sitting on the couch, gazing at her. Her complexion seemed washed out.

"Your grandma Barbara is coming home to visit."

"She is?" Anne's spirits wanted to rise. Mama took a deep sigh.

"Yes, sweetie. Grandma is sick. She has to go to the doctor."

"Oh." Anne looked at her mother. Obviously, there was something else. "Why is she sick?"

"She has a very bad illness."

"But she'll get better, right?"

"I don't know yet, Anne. Grandma doesn't know yet either. But she needs me and she'll need you too. Something told me that she would need us both soon. Grandma would love to see us, so she is coming to town in a few days to stay with us for a while." Anne didn't know what to think or what to make of this. She was excited to see grandma but now grandma was very sick. A bad kind of sick. Not a cold or a flue kind of sick. Was that why she saw grandma in the moon cave? Or why mama was having bad dreams about her? *Warnings.* Warnings that either they had to help grandma or warnings that perhaps soon grandma would be. . . gone. If this were true, this would be the worst thing she'd ever have to face. She had many questions she wanted to ask. Many questions. But not now. Her mother held out her arms and Anne sat down beside her. She put her arms around Anne and they just sat together.

It was two weeks since grandma Barbara had come into town, just as merry and rosy as usual, her blue eyes shining brightly when she saw Anne. In the days afterward grandma spent a lot of time in the hospital and recently she shaved her head and began wearing beautiful head wraps and scarves with great big, dangly earrings. Grandma was doing well so far from what her parents said. But no one was sure about things, really. Or that's what Anne suspected.

It was late at night and Anne was sitting by her windowsill because she couldn't sleep. The chill of early spring had given way to warmer temperatures. Her window was wide open and she felt the warm breeze brush against her face and through her hair like delicate fingers. The gibbous moon loomed large and its light spilled over the sill. She had so many somber things to think over. And wonderful things too. Professor Celsius had told her and Zi a great deal about guardians and other secrets and legends of the fairy world. A few of those secrets he kept in his shack.

Things weren't always what you'd expect them to be. Some things, while unpleasant, may serve some useful purpose. Maybe bad dreams were useful. Sometimes they warned you about things to come or taught you a lesson in their own way. But a pleasant thing did come out of all this. Once again, with Zi's help she accomplished a mission; to bring back good dreams. And both Lady Pearl and Professor Celsius had given her something to carry her through whatever might lay ahead – a moonlit memory of happiness. A memory of all the things she loved; fantastic stories and lore, beautiful and amazing found things, stars, trees and flowers, gardens, her friends, her parents, grandma Veronica and grandma Barbara and the knowledge that there was a force for Good in the world. That gift tempered her fear and sadness of what may or may not happen in the future. It was what Lady Grey called the Blessing.

One of grandma Barbara's favorite poems came floating through her mind as she drifted off to sleep:

*Lady Moon, round and bright  
like a tart lemon drop  
sitting high in a diamond star sky*

*drift to sleep on a summer night  
under the lemon moon, lady moon  
of the soft fingered light.*

**THE END**

**Note from the author:**

So, we've come to the end of book four of the series.  
I hope you enjoy reading  
them as much as I enjoy writing them.  
Book five should be coming out in late April!  
Stay tuned!

**Thanks:** I want to thank all those who have downloaded the books in this series and enjoyed reading them enough to post a review, a rating or leave a comment. Whether you got them for free or purchased them, it means a lot to me. Thank you very much!

**Dedications:**

this series of books was inspired by many of my favorite things; nature,  
German, Irish, Scottish, Russian and Dahomey (Benin) folk tales and fairy tales.  
It was inspired by my favorite author of all time, J.R.R. Tolkien  
and most of all, by my wonderful niece, Olivia.

Do you like the cover art? I love it! It was created by Claudia McKinney.  
You can check out more of her fabulous work at her website: <http://phatpuppyart.com/>

**About The Author:**

Victoria A. Jeffrey grew up in Portland Oregon, attended Portland Community College and studied graphic design. She is an author and an avid reader of science fiction and fantasy. She also enjoys reading historical fiction and non-fiction. She has written three collections of poetry, some short stories and a book of fairy tales and fables. She is currently working on the *Secret Doorway Tales* children's fantasy series.

**Discover other titles by V. A. Jeffrey at her blog:**

<http://www.pencilword.blogspot.com>

Check out the first three books in the *Secret Doorway Tales* series:

*The Green Door*  
*The Pumpkin Princess*  
*The Winter Wolves*

And coming soon:

**The Mountain King**

**By V. A. Jeffrey**

from book five in the series

**Secret Doorway Tales**

**Here's a special preview:**

*“What do I have in my kitchen? What do I have for my pot?  
Three little mice for the evening stew?  
Three little mice to chomp and chew?  
Or three little piglets to roast with carrots,  
and served with a pie full of baked parrots!”*

Sang the horrible and tuneless voice.

“Even better than that, Krat! We have,” Said the other troll in between smacking his lips loudly. “two little children and one o' them tree sprites!”

*“Three children, delicious to eat,  
cut 'em up, boil 'em down,  
season and serve them  
for the evening's feast!”*

He sang and danced around gleefully, clapping his big, clumsy claws together while the troll standing by the pot waved his spoon about in the air. Anne could see through the frayed burlap sack but not enough to see where they were and where they could make an escape. Footsteps from big, flappy feet slapped their way towards them. All three of them began struggling frantically in the sack as one of the trolls grabbed it and heaved it over his shoulder. Trapped between the musty fabric of the sack and the troll, Anne and Jordan started gagging. He smelled like an unwashed toilet! They went flying through the air and were plopped down unceremoniously somewhere else on the filthy kitchen floor. The great boiling pot full of savory broth, bubbling and foaming over like a churning sea, was now even closer!

“How are we going to get out of here?” Whispered Jordan. The evil little songs reminded her of something. Anne closed her eyes as her thoughts raced back to her fairy tale books. Suddenly she had an idea.

“Singing might help us!”

“Singing?”

“I've read that goblins don't like music.”

“These are trolls!” Hissed Jordan.

“Yes, but what might work on goblins might work on trolls too. I don't have my hammer and Zi doesn't have his bow and arrows so we can't fight our way out of here!”

“So, we sing our way out instead?”

“Do you have a better idea?” She asked pointedly.

“These smelly trolls and goblins have been singing all along since we got here!”

“But they hate music from humans and good fairies.”

“Your plan would work on goblins, to be sure,” Whispered Zi. “and trolls do not like music either, unless it is their own crude, rude songs. As to whether it has any power over them or frightens them, I am afraid it does not.”

“We don't need power, Zi we need to irritate them!”

“You mean distract them?” Asked Zi.

“Yes!” She hissed impatiently. One of the trolls began rummaging around in the cupboards.

“Argh! Krat, where be the salt?”

“We ran out yesterday. If I remember right, I told you *yesterday* to go and get some more! Now, why don't you run along and get some from the storehouse instead of staring in the cupboards like some dim-witted ogre!”

“You don't have to be rude about it!”

“You ain't seen rude yet, Brug! Just you go and fetch us some salt! Serve a dish that ain't seasoned right and his Lordship won't thank us for it!” Krat scolded. The other one grumbled and muttered curses under his breath as he left the kitchen.

Anne shifted and turned over on her stomach to get her bearings.

“Stop struggling over there or I'll beat the three of you like boggarts in a sack!” Krat threatened. They all went deathly still.

However, Anne was now in a better position to see from the holes in the sack, once again, where they were, what the kitchen looked like and where the door was located. The troll then put down his spoon, picked up a massive cleaver and began to sharpen it on a sharpening stone.

“What's he doing Anne?” Whispered Jordan.

“What's it sound like?” She whispered back. They all shuddered when he finished this task and heard his heavy footfalls start towards them. Then he abruptly turned and went to the old wooden table in the middle of the kitchen and busied himself chopping up roots and vegetables. When it seemed that he was no longer concerned with the sack by the pot, in a whisper she spoke again.

“Ok, Here's my plan. . .”

