

# THE MOUNTAIN KING

## A Secret Doorway Tale: Book 5

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Book cover design by V. A. Jeffrey

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The old walnut tree, long healed of its miserable disease of worms and webs stood tall and proud. Its expansive branches were cloaked in new spring leaves, providing shade for the yard beneath and the next. It waved its branches slightly but no one saw or noticed. A light breeze blew through its leaves but that wasn't the only thing rustling them. The neighborhood children were playing in its branches and it was ever watchful of them. Especially over one child in particular for it was she who rid it and its kin in the surrounding woods of the pestilences they had endured for years.

“Higher! Higher!” Taunted Sam.

“I can't climb that high!” Complained Sarah. She had finally made it up the trunk to the first section of lower branches. Her brother Sam was nearly at the top of the tree, rocking back and forth on a large branch as if riding a rocking horse.

“You're not supposed to be up here anyway. You're too little.” He warned.

“No I'm not!” She protested.

“Whatever. Come on, Jamie and Anne, hurry up! I can see the whole forest from up here!” Sam urged. Jamie was making his way deftly up towards the highest branches. Anne followed behind. She was pretty good at climbing trees but she had never climbed this high. Still, the height did not frighten her. She had stood on trees far taller than this.

Sam was right. They really could see the forest and the tops of all the houses from their lofty position. She managed to get close to Sam and Jamie. Sarah, far below, fussed at them indignantly for leaving her behind.

“Just stay where you are Sarah. It's too dangerous for someone small like you!” Anne called down. “You might fall.”

“I am Captain Fizzbott! Ruler of all I survey!” Announced Jamie.

“Haha!” Laughed Sam. Their voices receded into white noise as Anne surveyed the sight below. She could see the wide spray of daffodils in her backyard, little yellow paint daubs from her vantage point. The koi fish pond gurgled happily in its little corner of the yard. Their brightly colored scales sparkled in the sunlight. She turned and her eyes caught movement in the field of wildflowers across the way. Someone was trying to get into the shed! It was Jordan, one of the popular fifth graders from school. He had an old stool and he was standing on it, climbing through the broken window. Suddenly the stool rocked off its legs and he slipped and fell inside! Anne looked around to see if anyone saw this incident and began to climb down. In her rush towards the branches below she slipped and fell.

“Ah - woah!” She cried and unwittingly let go, feeling herself in free-fall. She saw nothing but whirring leaves, branches and streaking sunlight in her panic. She heard the other kids screaming and then she felt her back abruptly hit something. It wasn't quite hard but neither was it soft.

“Did you just see that?”

“I saw it!”

“Me too!” The other kids began scrambling down. Anne was breathing hard, feeling herself itch with perspiration and adrenaline. She'd landed into a nest of branches, twigs and leaves.

“What happened?” She asked in slight daze.

“The tree! It liked. . . moved!” Said Sam, his face flushed with fear and excitement.

“Yeah. It twisted its branches and caught you before you fell all the way down!” Said Jamie. Suddenly the tree trembled and deftly lowered her to the ground. The other kids gasped.

“It's. . . *alive!*”

“Sooooo cool!” They all gathered around her, gazing up at the old walnut tree in wonder.

“Thanks.” She whispered. It trembled again and the other kids backed away when it rumbled something low and incomprehensible.

“You can talk to a tree?” Whispered Sarah, wide-eyed.

“Whaa?” Exclaimed Jamie. Anne knew what it meant.

“Thanks?!?” Exclaimed Sam. “I've lived in this house my whole life and I've *never* seen that tree move by itself! How did it do that?”

“Do you like trees Sam?” She asked.

“Yeah. Sure.”

“Take care of them and they will take care of you. They might even talk to you.” Sam just gaped at her. As the other kids

began speculating on how and why a tree would move and talk of its own accord Anne glanced over towards the field in the woods.

“I’ll be right back!” She said, climbing over the gate. As sure as the sun, the shed was standing there with its old green door, locked, the window having long since been shattered. And there was no sign of Jordan.

*Who does he think he is? That's MY special place!* She was throwing shoes in the closet and slamming clothes away in drawers. She stalked across her room and looked out the window. She couldn't see the field from here which made her even angrier. The shed wasn't a place for jokers who only cared about fart jokes, burping and picking on other kids! It wasn't a place for kids who didn't take anything seriously. It was special. It was dangerous. What did *he* know? Besides Lady Grey's visitation at school what made him think the shed was a portal? *Why does he even care about it? Who told him he could go to Other Land anyway?* She shrieked mentally.

"Anne? Are you cleaning your room?" Called dad. This pulled her out of her spiraling, angry thoughts.

"Um, yeah!"

"Ok. Sounds like a tornado up there!"

"No! No tornado!" She finished straightening her room, albeit with slightly less zeal than before. After she stuffed the last pair of slippers in the closet she hopped on the bed, thinking of what to do next. She thought of the times he and his friends teased her, of the time they had mocked Great Grandfather Aldy – and were stricken with boils for it. She wondered how that had gone. Ever since winter break Jordan had been rather – changed. More solemn. *What if he gets hurt out there by himself in Other Land?* She didn't think he or the rest of them looked like the type to read books unless forced to and one thing you needed to do was know what you were getting into, which meant you needed to read. Books were a guide for her. Even then, there was no guarantee of safety. She decided that she would have to find out what he knew. After all, he might need her help. Suddenly, she didn't feel so jealous. She didn't like him but she'd met some dangerous creatures in Other Land and though she had a ring and a hammer and Zi to help her she often just barely survived nasty scrapes. It was settled then. She would have to devise some way to question him and see what he knew, without his friends around. It would have to be the library. The library was guaranteed to scare away his friends. Anne went to her nightstand and got out a notebook and pen. She wrote:

Jordan. meet me at the library alone!!  
after school – very important!!!

She put extra exclamation marks in for emphasis. She would be waiting for him tomorrow. He must know *something* about the fairy world, but what?

Anne had arrived at school earlier than usual, rushing through all her morning ministrations and through breakfast. She hurried along to school with dad scrambling behind. As she had expected, Jordan and his gang had not yet arrived. As her dad saw her off she began searching for his homeroom. Most of the fourth and fifth grade classes were on the other side of the school and Jordan's homeroom teacher was Ms. Day.

Ms. Day was one of the meanest teachers to ever set foot in any school since the dawn of time, as far as all kids at John Adams Elementary School were concerned. Second to her was Mr. Muenster who snidely berated his students for any perceived mistake in class and both of them gave ungodly amounts of homework! Her parents insisted that they were just very strict and expected kids to do their homework and behave in class but Anne didn't believe that. In fact, she suspected that Ms. Day turned into an ogress at midnight. In fact no one liked it when Ms. Day looked at them. She always glared and her black eyes glittered like wet stones. It was very unsettling. Between Ms. Day's snarling and Mr. Muenster's sarcasm she dreaded entering the fifth grade.

However, that was a worry for a future day. As Anne approached the door to Ms. Day's classroom she could see from the window that the lights were out. A good sign. The halls were rather sparse but she had to hurry. Teachers were arriving and the first bell would be ringing soon and kids would come pouring in. A few were already mingling around the playground. She slowly turned the door knob. It was unlocked. *Good!* She slipped inside. The room was rather boring looking. Not decorated with art and science projects like Miss Sandy's room was. But she had no time to judge the room's lack of decoration further. She went over to the other side of the room looking for the cubbyholes and was very surprised. They didn't have cubbyholes. She looked around, feeling desperate, glancing at the clock. Each desk had a name written in bold black marker ink on white tape and all of the desks were in perfectly neat rows. She went up and down the rows and finally found one that said: "Jordan." She lifted up the top and slipped in her note. There was another door leading directly to the playground on the opposite wall. Thinking she'd make an easy escape she went over to it and tried to open it hoping to slip out unnoticed but it was locked. She would have to go through the way she came in and hope that Ms. Day had not yet arrived. Some of the class were already lining up outside the door by the sounds of it. Anne turned on the lights and opened the door to find a small group of fifth graders standing there.

"Wait. . . what?" Said one of the girls in surprise.

"What are you doing here?" Questioned one of them imperiously.

"Yeah, what *were* you doing in there anyway?" Chimed another kid. They nearly towered over her but she remained calm.

"Nothing." She said.

"You're not supposed to be in there!"

"The light was on and I thought it was Miss Sandy's room."

"Miss Sandy's class is," the first girl pointed down the hall, "that way!"

"Fine." She said. She felt someone punch her backpack. She tripped forward but kept going, rolling her eyes. Fifth graders didn't intimidate her anymore but some of them were really annoying. She turned around and glared at the girl who punched her backpack and was just about to give her a good telling off when Ms. Day turned the corner. She quickened her pace when she saw Ms. Day striding down the hall. The theater was just across the hallway and Anne ducked into the theater to find relief from further exposure just as the bossy fifth graders began tattling on her.

"Ms. Day! We saw that third grader come out of your classroom!"

"Who?"

"We don't know her name but she has long, curly brown hair and a blue sweater and she just went that way!" By then Anne was behind the stage, through the exit and on the playground. The first bell had just rang. She was now within a part of the school grounds that she was unfamiliar with. She wandered around the white satellite buildings that surrounded the main school. Soon she heard the theater exit open. Quickly she hid behind one of the satellite buildings. Sure enough it was Ms. Day casting the area with that suspicious glare. It was early morning and the shadows among the buildings were long. Anne could see Ms. Day's shadow, cast upon the ground. It didn't match Ms. Day's corporeal shape and it was, in fact, far larger than any morning shadow she had ever seen, and grossly misshapen. She hoped Ms. Day would not venture out any closer.

Ms. Day, not seeing anyone, went back inside. Anne wondered what this meant. Did the principal know? What was Ms. Day's real reason for being here? Pondering on that she nearly forgot about class! *Oh no! Where am I?* She thought frantically. She would be late for class and this all because she'd decided to help Jordan! She was beginning to think that this wasn't such a great idea after all. Suddenly, a shadow crept over her and around the corner appeared Mr. Barnes, the music teacher.

"Hello there! What are you doing back here?"

"I got lost and I need to get back to Miss Sandy's room but I don't know where it is from here."

"Oh. You're one of Sandy's students? Here, I can get you back to where you need to be." He said. Mr Barnes always had a sunny disposition. His friendly smile made her troubling thoughts nearly disappear. She was thankful for the kind Mr.

Barnes!

Plan A was now launched. *Now for the second part.* She smiled happily as Mr. Barnes walked her back to her homeroom class as the late bell rang.

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She waited right outside the back exit from where she could see who was coming and going from the school library. It seemed like an eternity! Then she began wondering if he even knew where it was! Maybe it was a bad idea telling him to meet her at the library. If his friends showed up, and she would see them coming down the hall, that was a no-go and she would go home and leave him to bumble about in Other Land on his own. She closed her eyes momentarily, thinking about summer break and summer in Other Land when she heard someone approaching. Sure enough it was Jordan and she didn't see his friends. He opened the library door tentatively as if angry bees were on the other side of the door and then he finally went in. Immediately she went inside the school and followed him in.

Miss Gail, as usual was too busy organizing books to pay them much mind other than a quick hello. Jordan was looking around for his secret person. Anne walked past him and sat at a table near the back. There were a couple of kids browsing, but for them and the librarian, the library was empty. She waved at him. Jordan frowned at her. She merely waited, expectantly. He finally seemed to figure out that she was the secret person who wanted to see him and made his way to the table. He flipped the crumpled note onto the table in front of her.

"Did you write this?" He asked, giving her a suspicious look.

"Yes."

"Why? What do you want?"

"I saw you go into the shed in the woods on Saturday." Silence. Then:

"So?"

"Did you see anything strange in there?"

"Strange like what?" He sounded irritated and began looking around as if he were ready to go. Anne decided to push.

"Like what you saw on Level 1 a couple of months ago?" Jordan's eyes widened in surprise. She now had his full attention.

"Well?" She pushed.

"Uh, well, what I . . . wait a minute! How do *you* know about Level 1?"

"I saw someone mysterious down there in the boiler room. Did you?" She said. He looked around cautiously.

"Yeah. I did."

"Well, the shed is also like that."

"It was just an empty, musty old shed."

"So what made you climb in through the window?"

"I was just curious. I like to climb trees and into empty houses and stuff. Me and my friends always do that. So what?"

"So, in order to find the world behind it you have to unlock the door with a special key. I have a special key to the shed."

"I don't want to meet anymore creepy old ladies."

"She's not really an old lady. She can change shape."

"Like what? What can she change into?"

"In the other world where she lives she's a dragon!"

"A dragon? I don't believe you." He gave her that suspicious look again. "How do you know that?"

"I've been to the other side. More than once. That's how I know." Jordan's eyes were as wide as plates now.

"How do you get there? I mean, how do you get a key?" He whispered.

"You have to know one of the creatures who live there. It's dangerous. You shouldn't go by yourself."

"But the boiler room wasn't locked."

"I know. Not all of the doorways to the other world are locked. The ones that aren't are even more dangerous because bad things can get out."

"The principal told me to stay away from there because it was special and dangerous. She said it was like a place where the fabric of two worlds came together but was invisible to most people. She wouldn't explain any further though."

"She's right. Now really, what made you interested in the shed?"

"I already told you!"

"You're sure you didn't see anything strange?"

"Well," he looked around and then lowered his voice again. "Once when I was walking home from the store I passed by it and I saw a bright light shining in there."

"Ah-ha!"

"Ok so what was it?"

"It means the fairy world beyond the green door appeared again."

"Fairy world? What do you mean?"

"It's dangerous." She warned.

"Tell me!"

“I'll tell you but only because if you go by yourself without the right information very bad things will happen to you.”

“Ok.” He said eagerly.

“The place is called Other Land. At least that's what I call it. The land of the fairy folk. Some of them are good, some of them are in between and some of them are evil. You don't want to be caught there alone and unaware of what to expect. . .”

She and Jordan stayed at the library for a long time, mapping out when they would leave for their adventure. She grilled him about what he knew as well. As it turned out, not only had Lady Grey tried to lure him to her domain but he actually saw the portal open in the shed's window. He also figured out that the little "boy" that he and his friends used for snowball target practice wasn't a little boy at all. He had guessed this when he got home and broke out in the middle of the night in hideously stinky, oozing boils all over! It gave his parents, especially his mother a terrible fright as he didn't even look like himself. He spent three days of winter break in terrible pain and then as soon as that, the boils were gone. When he found out that his friends had the boils too he knew something weird was up but kept his thoughts to himself. His parents thought it was a bad allergy attack and his friends thought it was a gnarly three day disease. No one would have believed that it wasn't a natural phenomenon.

It was on the following Saturday, mid-morning, and they were to meet at the little old shed in the field. The wildflowers were fragrant and heavy with scent. Anne was slightly disappointed as she had been looking forward to strawberries and cherries for breakfast this week but for some reason they had not come into the stores. Usually tulips and many other flowers were in full bloom by now but only the wildflowers and the early bloomers like daffodils were in bloom. The ginger cat was nowhere in sight today nor all week for that matter. She supposed Zi had business elsewhere. Putting on a pair of shorts and a t-shirt and sneakers she hung her seemingly bottomless and increasingly bulging leather bag over her neck and shoulder. Making sure no one was watching she made her way towards the mass of blackberry bushes by the back fence and slipped out to the familiar dirt path and up towards the field. Jordan had not yet arrived. Hoping that the way to Other Land would open again behind the green door she sat on the grass near the shed and waited. There was always the Way Wanderer if a portal didn't open here but who knows where the Way Wanderer would take them? The sun was high in the sky with only a few clouds drifting across, pushed along by a slight breeze. She looked up at the trees. Her thoughts turned back to last weekend when she fell from the walnut tree, yet it had caught her in its branches, breaking her fall and saving her life. They were silent, still perhaps watching her and watching everything in their own way. Old Tree said that trees saw and remembered many things, especially good deeds done to them and their kin. She thought about how they might talk to each other and felt a calm come over her, feeling the ancient life and slow movement of the world in their deep roots. . .

"Hi! Sorry but it took me a while to get here." She was startled out of her thoughts. It was Jordan. He was dressed in shorts and a t-shirt like her.

"Hi Jordan."

"So, is it there yet? The light?"

"I didn't check yet. Let's see." She peeked in under the door. "I see it!"

"What's the bag for?"

"Stuff, special things I was given by friendly fairies. Important things." She drew out her ring and her key.

"You see this? It's a key made from animal bone. I have a friend who had it made for me. It's the only sort of key that opens these sorts of doors. The ring can sometimes make me invisible but not usually. What it mostly does is warn me when someone bad is nearby by glowing blue."

"It glows?"

"Yes. You'll see. Do you bring anything with you?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Remember what we discussed? In order for it to cross over this doorway it has to be carried in a bag made of leather or some other organic material like cotton. Otherwise it will disappear." Jordan took a small box from his pocket.

"It's a kit that I use to pick locks." Anne frowned at him. Jordan grinned and shrugged. She shook her head and put the box in her bag.

"I'll give it back to you as soon as we cross over." Anne stuck the key in the lock, turned it three times and the rusty little green door unlocked with a creaking sound. On the other side was light – the light of midday in Other Land. Anne smiled and glanced at Jordan. Belated surprise lit up his face.

"So our first thing to do is go to the Realm of the Baobab Prince. We'll visit some fairies I once met. They'll be happy to see us."

"The Baobab Prince." He said quietly. "Who is he again?"

"I haven't met him yet, only his musicians. We'll find out more when we get there." She rummaged around in her bag and fished out her Way Wanderer.

"What's that?"

"It's called a Way Wanderer. It can help you find a certain place if you don't know the way and don't have a map." He gazed at its glistening gold and copper markings in wonder.

"Wow."

"Come on. The Realm of the Baobab Prince is a long way from here."

They set out east and traveled a long time, following Anne's thin thread of bobbing light. It was difficult for her to see in the bright light of the sun and Jordan couldn't see it at all. In fact it was only a few minutes into the adventure when he began complaining.

"How do you know where we're going? I don't see anything."

"Only the owner of a Way Wanderer can see its light but you can feel its heat. Put your hand here." He waved his hand out in front of the whistle.

"It feels really warm."

"That's the light." That seemed to satisfy him and there were no complaints for some time. Jordan had time to drink in all of the sights and sounds and marvel at flowers the size of houses and other denizens of Other Land. And the trees!

"Hey Anne! A while ago I saw the biggest tree ever! It was way in the distance but it seemed to reach up into outer space!"

"That's Old Tree. The oldest tree in the world. It can talk but it's asleep now. It might be a thousand years before it wakes again."

"It looks as big as a moon from here. You can still see it. What does it sound like when it talks?"

"Like an earthquake." Truly, she would have liked to speak to Old Tree again but Old Tree did not seem inclined to wake from its long nap any time soon.

They traveled the wide meadows and fields, called the Great Meadow, edged about in the distance with the beautiful blackwood and bloodwood trees; the fields were full of colorful grasses, waving like currents at sea. Anne caught a glimmer of blue from her ring.

"Look! My ring. Danger is coming. See?" She showed him the soft light of blue around her finger. The yellow stone darkened and dulled in color. She frowned.

"What kind of danger?" He asked looking around.

"Creatures that would hurt us or worse. We have to find a hiding place."

"What about that fallen log over there?" Jordan pointed to the edge of the woods. They ran over to the log, hiding themselves just as the thudding footsteps of a lone ogre hiking across the fields could be heard. The ogre carried a large sack which was wet, the fabric darkly stained. A stench in the air grew as he drew near the woods towards their hiding place. He was solemn and silent, his sole eye, black as a bottomless pit, was sweeping across the meadow and the forests. When he approached the woods he halted and sniffed the air. Anne and Jordan remained still and quiet as mice. Then suddenly he roared in rage and took off through the trees, ignoring the fallen log, to their relief. He shook the smaller trees along his path as if they were little more than newly sprouted flowers as he ran off, far away.

"What do you think made him so mad?"

"I don't know." She said, just as puzzled as Jordan. "The ogres have been raiding Other Land since the winter."

"So that was an ogre? He looked like a cyclops! Are there any other giants around here like him?"

"Yes. They were once trapped underneath the Ice Sea but the Winter Fairy Queen woke them up to use them in her war. She lost the war but they are still around now."

"How did they get here in the first place? Why were they in the sea?"

"You know that creepy old lady we saw in the boiler room?" She asked. He nodded. "Well, she gave birth to them. She's their mother and there's a fairy called the King of the Dark Mountain who is their father."

"What?!? That makes no sense!"

"Jordan, we're in a land full of creatures that supposedly don't exist. If you've ever read Greek mythology or folk tales or fairy tales it actually isn't all that weird." She reset their path with the Way Wanderer and they continued east.

"That smell coming from him was awful!" Said Jordan.

"I know. Ogres smell strange but that was a different smell."

"I think that whatever it was, it was in that sack he had. Something dead and bloody."

"I'm almost afraid to know what was in it."

"Maybe he was hunting."

"Ogres are always hunting. Their father is a great hunter, the Mountain King. I'll bet he had dead people in that sack."

"Why?"

"Remember the *Jack and the Beanstalk* story?"

"Kind of."

"Well the giants in that story ate people." Anne looked around cautiously. The grasses swayed in the breeze and the beauty of the land did not speak of the dangers lurking but Anne knew the dangers were there. Cautiously they continued on.



As they followed the thread of light Jordan had lots of questions. It was hard for her to keep up with his many and very pointed questions about every creature she'd encountered and what adventures she had been on, plus his interrupted attention when seeing the odd tiny sprite, following them with amused interest or the occasional giant flower they passed. In fact, as they went on, the field turned into a sea of brilliantly yellow daffodils. And a mighty cropping of daffodils they could see in the distance sitting in the field like an atoll in a sea of smaller flowers, tall and graceful stems and tendriled leaves and filaments reaching upwards like great organic sculptures. It was strange to her though – she saw nothing but clover and daffodils and a few wildflowers - not the variety she had expected to see. Something was amiss. There was another thing she couldn't shake. The feeling that they were being followed. The stench they had smelled before had appeared again recently, now fainter but it lingered. It wasn't the ogre or the contents of his sack that was causing it. She looked at her ring and though the light was faint, it glowed blue once again. Jordan noted it too.

“We're being tracked, aren't we?” He whispered. She nodded. The thread of light was leading them straight to the daffodil islet and they picked up their speed, trotting towards it.

As it turned out, it was a little city. Flowers and vines like stairways rounded and twisted around the central Daffodil Palace in an elaborate orbit of pathways and the center palace flower was so bright it seemed that it had fallen from the sun.

“I just know someone lives here. I'll bet it's someone important.”

“Do you think they'll be friendly?” He asked.

“I think so. I don't have a bad feeling about it and besides, I think it's best to take our chances here than waiting for whatever is following us to catch up with us. Maybe we can get some help here.” Which was her hope, to at least gain shelter from whoever was trailing them. They both ran full steam towards Flower City.

Anne and Jordan had not gotten far when they were descended upon from all sides by a small army of flying insects commandeered by pixies.

“Stop! Stop I say, in the name of Princess Blossom!” They could see nothing but swirls of light and color and faceted wings from fairies, dragonflies, butterflies, bumblebees and many stern eyes from guardian sprites.

Before they could say anything in their own defense both of them were carried up by the swarm and carried off to the palace. They were flown and dropped right into the center chamber where right on top of a bright orange platform stood a small train of winged pixies and between them sat a fairy girl. She did not seem particularly angry, unlike those around her, but was very curious about them.

“Who are you?” Blurted Jordan who then began sneezing violently. Pollen drifted softly about them like light snowfall.

“Who am I? This is my home. I am Princess Blossom. I am a fairy of spring. Who are you?” Anne took this occasion to speak.

“My name is. . .”

“I know of you!” The Princess said excitedly. “You defeated the Winter Queen! What happy news to have you here again! Your name is Anne!”

“Who is this Winter Queen?” Whispered Jordan.

“An evil queen who wanted to destroy the Summer Queen so she could make winter last forever!” Said Blossom, her lovely face darkening with a frown. “What brings you here Anne and who is your friend?”

“We are on our way to the Realm of the Baobab Prince. This is Jordan.”

“So far away, the Land of Baobab Trees. Why, that's days from here.”

“How many days?” Asked Anne.

“I am not sure exactly but, many days. I had you brought here because something has been stolen from me, something precious. I apologize if you were treated less than gently but my guards are protective of our Flower City. My friends here have searched and searched for it but we cannot find it! I thought at first that you two might be the culprits. There are many nasty things skulking about lately, ogres being some of those nasty things. Oh yes, my bag of gold dust. That is what was stolen.” She said sadly.

“Gold dust? What do you use it for?” Asked Anne.

“When we came back from the other side of the world for spring here in the western lands I prepared to bring about all that is needed for the season. My gold dust is in a green bag, as green as emerald leaves and it is woven of eternally young leaves and chutes. It holds in it an unending stream of gold dust. It helps me usher in the season; with planting crops and blooming flowers. It was stolen one night before I could finish my tasks!” She said. Her eyes, blue as the clear sky shined with tears. She had hair like fine spun gold and she wore a bright green dress of vines and leaves and a crown of bright daffodils in her hair and she had faceted pale yellow wings. She looked every bit a spring Princess and they all sat in a place so bright that it seemed to Anne they should all feel joy but there was apprehension and anger in the fairies around her and great sadness in the Princess. Jordan it seemed was moved by her tears and blushed a bright red. Anne smirked at him which made him blush even deeper.

“I'm sorry if my friends and helpers frightened you,” she said wiping away her tears, “but they can be zealous and now because of this theft we are all out of sorts.”

“It's ok. We weren't hurt.” Said Anne. Jordan nodded, still in awe of this sudden and new experience. “I'm sure it was the ogres that stole it.” She added.

“The giants have been a menace lately but I don't think it was them that stole it. We would have heard such a foul creature even before we smelled him. I've sent many a word out over the land to see if anyone has any news of where my bag of gold dust might be. No word on the gold dust but I have gotten word of a persistent rumor among many. I fear that this thievery is inspired by one person. The King under the Dark Mountain. If I cannot find it before the end of spring, spring itself will fade away and summer will suffer for it and fall will come far sooner than it should.”

“You think he's behind it?”

“He does seem to love precious things and above all, gold! He is known of old to search high and low for precious objects.”

“Something is weird. His children have been raiding and stealing. They must be working for him. Why does he want all that gold?”

“Ahem!” Coughed one of Blossom's helpers.

“Yes Orin? What is it?” Asked the Princess. Orin about as large as the Princess and he looked very much like her.

“Well, it is only a rumor but I have heard it from a source I trust that the Fairy King has a certain plan for all this gold after the fall harvest season but no one really knows what that plan is.”

“We must find out what this plan is. We can't ignore it.” Said Anne.

“Can't you make more of this dust?” Asked Jordan.

“I can but it would take an entire cycle of seasons before it would be ready to use. Who knows what could happen by next spring?” She said sadly. “If in your travels you find anything out, you will let me know won't you? Ask the Baobab Prince if he has seen anything strange in his realm. The Fairy King may have many creatures in his employ all over the land. Perhaps the Prince has seen something or knows something.”

“We'll do our best to find out.” She said. A tiny green-skinned sprite with wings fluttered and twittered near her ear. He

was one she recognized with his shock of brown hair.

"I know you." She said and held out her hand. He alighted on it and bowed low, his blue wings buzzing with rapid fire speed.

"He is one of my most reliable messengers. Lito is his name." Lito twittered something and smiled.

"So, how long do you think it will take us to get to this Baobab Land?" Jordan asked the Princess.

"Too long to travel there by yourselves safely. I can help you. Lito, find someone who will make a long trip to the eastern lands, to the Realm of the Baobab Prince." Said Blossom. In less than a second Lito disappeared.

"If I can shorten your journey I will. A great disturbance is brewing from the western woods."

"What is he like? The Fairy King?" Asked Jordan quietly to Anne.

"I don't know. I've never seen him. I've seen the Summer and Winter Queens and they are very beautiful."

"He is as handsome and tall as the trees of his forest with a face that is beautiful and eyes as hard as the mountain fortress where he dwells. He is vain and cruel and rides a beautiful black steed called Night Sky who is equally vain. He, like Queen Faye loves himself above all other things and regards all beings outside his fortress as mere prey for sport." Warned Blossom. "All but the most powerful beings stay out of his way, especially when he goes riding forth to hunt."

"My dad's a hunter too." Said Jordan. At this Blossom's eyes darkened and her gaze became very serious. She turned to Jordan.

"Yes, the King under the Dark Mountain is a great hunter. He especially loves to hunt during the fall and winter. So far we have not seen or heard him ride forth with his host, as it is spring, but when he goes on the hunt he does not merely hunt animals like your father, Jordan. He will run down anything and anyone in his path and those he does not kill are compelled to join him in the hunt. It is not a sight that any mortal can survive without losing their mind or their life." Said Princess Blossom. "Truly, it isn't the Fairy King or his children that worry me most right now. It is other creatures that might cause us subtler trouble. The ones we can't easily see. Unfriendly Gryps, for one thing and goblins too. They are craftier and wiler than ogres."

"I've heard rumors of another battle brewing among the brownies that take care of the ring around the Mirrored Lake." Said Anne.

"Have you? I have heard those rumors too. Between Light and Dark there is always a battle it seems. Always." Said Orin. The Princess said and sighed.

"Don't give up yet! We're on the case!" Said Anne. Just then they heard a great buzzing sound of giant dragonfly wings. Anne and Jordan were led out of each world of the flower palace from the Princess's inner chambers, each world larger than the last and up a steep vine pathway above the palace where a great dragonfly was hovering above them. Princess Blossom followed them.

"What is that?" Asked Jordan pulling back.

"This is Sog. He won't hurt you. I've ridden on his back before." Anne said.

"Sog will take you to see the Baobab Prince. He is quite busy these days especially in the spring and summer. Hurry or he may decide to leave you!" Said the Princess. Anne scrambled up a ladder of vines to Sog's back. Jordan had to be nudged by Blossom. Feeling embarrassed in front of her he finally decided to climb up and seeing that Anne was confident and unafraid he relaxed and made it up the ladder and onto Sog's back behind her.

"I can't believe this! It's like something out of a weird dream!" He said.

"Nope, it's not a dream!" They strained to hear each other over the noise of Sog's great wings. Sog lifted himself slowly from the palace. Blossom and Orin waved at them both as they rose high into the air.

Like a neat patchwork quilt the land lay below and yet the trees even in the Land of the Baobabs were majestic in size. Sog's wings were invisible blurs against the sky.

"It's so different here than at the other place!" Remarked Jordan. And so it was. They had long left the soft green rolling hills and meadows and the many hues of greens, yellows and blues for a land of oranges, reds and browns and golds. Islands of grasses surrounded by red rock, brilliant jewel colored lakes surrounded by vast stretches of red - brown plains, small mountain ranges dotted with thick short brush and just over a hill rose the baobab trees. Tall they were but different from the other trees they'd seen. These had great, fat trunks that seemed smooth as skin with no branches, yet the foliage nested at the tops of these trees, bright green and in full bloom. The tops of the trees were flat and wide like large hands. In the distance rose the greatest of the baobab trees, a tower reaching into the setting sun. It was the Mother Tree.

"I think the Prince lives there!" Shouted Anne over the hum of Sog's wings. Jordan said nothing, he merely gaped. Sog glided swiftly towards it.

The Mother Tree had a massive trunk, smooth and dark like chocolate and its branches at the top spanned so wide that more than one village could fit within its foliage. As they approached a platform of leaves and branches it seemed that carved into the tree right beneath its canopy was a great face of a woman, her eyes closed and the trunk it seemed was rounded and graceful in form, like some ancient goddess icon.

"Is it alive?" Asked Jordan.

"All trees are alive." Said Anne.

"But like, alive like we are? It sort of looks like a giant statue made into a tree. Or a tree made into a statue!"

"I know. I've never seen this tree before but it is awesome. They can see and they watch a lot of things." She said and wondered if this baobab tree was anything like Old Tree.

"I don't see a castle." Said Jordan looking around.

"I don't think he lives in a regular sort of castle." This was true. In fact, the Prince's dwelling was right in the midst of the tree's branches and sat above all the other dwellings.

The court of the Baobab Prince sat within a grand system of pavilions and tents made of linens, silks, leaves and wood, his tent pavilions, naturally, being the largest and most comfortable. The tree canopy was also crisscrossed by a system of natural bridged walkways within the branches that linked each dwelling within a village. As Anne looked around she could see this system of villages within all of the baobab trees within sight. The Mother Tree stood on a small grassy plain beside a lake. The sun was a goldenrod orb sinking down into reds and burnished orange color waves which made the warm colors of the plains and coppery fields even more burnished and brilliant.

"Look!" Said Jordan excitedly. By the lake where he pointed a small herd of winged zebra were gathering. They ignored Sog as he slowly began his descent towards the Mother Tree. The sky was deepening quickly into scarlet and twinkling stars were just beginning to peer in at the horizon. The heat was searing. Sog's wings rippled up waves of hot air as they neared the platform. A group of Aziza all wearing the same brown skirts approached. Anne and Jordan hopped down from the dragonfly's back and he was off again headed west. Many little faces peered out from tents and pavilions to stare at the visitors.

"May I ask who you are and why you are here?" Asked one of the fairies standing on the platform. They looked suspicious and they carried long wooden spears.

"We are here to see the Baobab Prince, if that's ok with him. His court musicians invited me. Also, Princess Blossom the Spring Fairy asked us to ask *him* something very important." Said Anne. "My name is Anne and this is Jordan."

"You know the court musicians? That is well but what message has the fairy in the west given you?"

"Well, she had something important stolen from her, her bag of gold dust and she has seen and heard strange things. She wants to know if the Prince has seen anything strange or seen or heard of its whereabouts." They frowned at this.

"Why would our Prince have any thing to do with that?" The lead guard demanded. Anne shrugged. They looked at her suspiciously but the leader spoke up again.

"Something strange is happening. And now strangers come boldly to our land. Come with us." Jordan shot her a warning look as they encircled them and marched them up to the Prince's pavilion. It was a long march. By this time hundreds of Aziza had come gathering outside their tents, curious about the newcomers.

"I hope you know what you're doing Anne." Said Jordan.

They began their ascent upwards. A long, winding procession they became by the time they had reached it.

"We will bring you in shortly. Stay here." The guard commanded and his troupe left with him, disappearing inside. The tent itself was richly painted and woven with shapes and designs of the sun, the moon the stars and animals and trees. It was painted with the colors of the land itself. A curtain of delicate, fine linen separated them from the Prince's grand chamber where he received guests. Just then another coily head popped out from behind the curtain. It was Ngozi.

"Ngozi!" Cried Anne in excitement! Ngozi's face broke into a huge smile.

"You came, like you promised! Come inside. The Prince wants to meet you and your. . .uh, who is this?"

"He's my schoolmate. I didn't want to come to see the Baobab Prince by myself. This is Jordan."

“Welcome, Jordan!” Ngozi nodded then motioned for them to follow. They followed him down a hall walled with soft, airy fabrics that allowed the breeze from outside into the pavilion. The floor was of branch and twine and grasses tied into intricately weaved patterns.

“I am afraid that all is not well Anne.” Said Ngozi quietly. “You will understand shortly.”

“That might explain why the guards weren't exactly all that friendly.” Said Jordan.

“I wonder what's in store for us this time.” She said. They entered the grand room which sat behind another delicate linen curtain where the Prince was seated upon an elaborately carved ebony throne stool with carved elephants on each end of the stool. Around him in a semi-circle close by sat his court musicians and storytellers and many others sat in an outer circle. Everyone gazed with great curiosity at the new and unexpected guests. Tree branches ran this way and that in the floor and in those branches were carved stories in shapes and symbols. The musicians sat on golden woven mats and pillows. Zi was among them. He looked surprised to see them. But again, there was an air of sadness where there should have been laughter and light.

“Welcome to my court. My name is Efosa. Come and sit by me. You are welcome to my court and my home Anne, you and your new friend here. Zi, your friend, is known to me and has related all your valorous deeds. Why, even my musicians told me what they heard of your great feats of bravery!” He said. The Prince was small of stature, like a child, as were all of his people. He had very dark skin and was quite hairy and he had great curious brown eyes but unlike the others he had a long, tapered black beard. In it was woven beads of wood and gold in elaborate braided patterns that seemed to go on infinitely if one looked long enough. Some Aziza had smooth skin others were hairy but all wore simple light tunics or skirts. Most of them wore highly polished wooden jewelry. Important ones wore gold. Prince Efosa himself wore a gold ring with a black stone and had many golden rings pierced through his ears.

A wide wooden bowl of fat cashews sat in front of him and he offered these to Anne and Jordan. Anne took some and passed it to Jordan who took a large handful. They were creamy and buttery, the best tasting cashews she'd ever tasted and she took a few more. Jordan's cheeks were stuffed with them. The Prince nodded his approval.

“What happened?” Asked Anne.

“My most perfect and powerful things were stolen! My golden oud! So sweet was its music. The sweetest and most beautiful music in all the land it would make whenever I would play upon it. And my golden and wooden staff with which I use to lead and shepherd my people this way or that. It too was stolen! My staff was made from the wood of the Mother Tree herself.” A cry rose from the gathered fairies.

“Of fine bands of gold it was ringed! My staff and my oud are missing, stolen!”

“What's an oud?”

“Like a lute. A stringed instrument that one plays like this.” He played as if he were holding his precious instrument cradled in both arms.

“Oh, like a guitar.” Said Jordan. The Prince made a dismissive noise.

“I suppose but far superior.”

“Who or what do you think did this? Do you think it was the ogres?” Asked Anne.

“Ogres? No! They rarely come this far and when they do everyone hears them coming. They could not have done it. It had to be someone with great trickery and craftiness of mind.”

“I mentioned it because the Spring Fairy had her bag of gold dust stolen too. She wonders if you've heard or seen anything suspicious.”

“Is that so? So I am not the only victim here! Ho! I have seen many suspicious things. The man-serpents, those with faces like a man but the body of a serpent have been unusually active. Always seeking to make a meal of an unwary Aziza! And the monsters of the night who have no shape, who come in and swallow up entire villages – they have risen again. It is difficult to describe them. They look like the night itself and when they open their jaws all the stars go out before one meets their doom. When I had my staff and my oud these beasties were held in check but now it will be harder to stop them. They thrive on sadness, fear and doubt. But even they could not simply come up here and snatch my most precious objects from me. I would know before they set foot or slithered near the Mother Tree.”

“Yet the ring around our great Mother is dying.” Said Ngozi. Prince Efosa nodded sadly.

“Something evil came this way and did this. To kill a fairy ring! Why?”

“A spy, maybe? Someone that looks like someone you know or someone who can blend in so you don't notice?” Jordan piped up. Everyone looked at him and he coughed nervously.

“You may have it. A spy. Most likely sent from the King under the Dark Mountain. One thing – when I discovered that the things were gone I also noticed an odd smell. Entirely unpleasant!” The Prince wrinkled his nose.

“How do you know the Fairy King is behind it?” Asked Jordan.

“I have spoken to our Mother before she fell into sleep. She told me that her distant kin, the trees of the western woods told her he has them hidden in a secret room within his fortress and that he has been gathering many special golden objects to himself.”

“But he didn't come this way himself and neither did his ogres.”

“No he did not. Someone else is in his employ. Some sneaky thing able to take any shape or form. A shape-shifter. That or

some small spy are the only things that could get past me or my guards.” Said the Prince. “Zi has pledged to go and find them for me.”

“Yes and I must insist that this be a small mission.” Said Zi.

“If you insist, Zi.” Said Emeka in disappointment.

“Well, I'll go with Zi to help him find them.” Said Anne

“Are you sure? It is a dangerous mission. But then, you already know this.” Said the Prince. Anne nodded.

“If you guys are going I'm not staying behind! I'm going too. Besides, I want to see this Fairy King for myself!” Said Jordan.

“Three adventurers. Well then. Three is a goodly number. If you are able to bring back my golden staff and my golden oud you each will receive a rich reward!” Said the Prince. Ngozi spoke up.

“Music is the lifeblood of our people; it is our way but it is not the same without the Prince's oud. If only you could hear him play it.”

“Yes.” Said the Prince mournfully.

“Can't you make another one?” asked Jordan.

“I could. But the Fairy King has some evil intent with it and must be stopped. Besides, I have had it for so long that it is like an old friend who knows my fingers. It is nearly a thing with its own life and its own voice, now to be sacrificed for some dark purpose! It must be said that King Alberich is dangerous and selfish and above all things loves the hunt! He has no love for anyone but gold and treasures and the hunt. Be careful that you do not incur his notice or his wrath. Here,” the Prince pointed to Kojo who was holding a pile of hides in his arms. He laid three of the hides at the Prince's feet. “are three fox hides to help you on your mission. When you put these on your backs you will become fleet and quick as foxes. You will have the cleverness of foxes but retain the mind of Man.” He shook and rolled them out. Anne took them, thanking him.

“Looks like we have someone extra to help us and three is a good number.” Said Anne. She smiled at Jordan.

“And share the glory!” Said Jordan excitedly.

“Just so long as we survive the adventure, first.” Said Zi.

“Why did you bring him Anne?” Asked Zi when they had been shown to their own quarters to rest.

“He's already seen the doorways open up. In fact, Lady Grey tried to grab him like she did to me. I thought it would be best if I showed him the way instead of him going by himself.” Zi was silent for a while, pondering this.

“I'm sure one of my woodland friends would have seen to him but I suppose this is better. Still, I hope he's as willing to learn and extend himself as you are.”

“You don't think it was a good idea to bring him?”

“I do not know. He's an unknown quantity right now. I suppose you were too, in the beginning.”

“I'm sure he has a different purpose for being here. I think he'll find it. After all he's been shown a doorway. Once that happens things change.”

“Not everyone who sees a doorway is fit to walk through it and even if they are they may not come back unscathed or come back at all.”

“True but danger exists everywhere, here and in my world too. We can't hide doorways so we might as well help the kids who find out and don't know the dangers.” Zi looked thoughtful then nodded.

“Well if you trust him I will not argue the point any further. Perhaps you are right. We should get to sleep. Tomorrow and the next few days will be very interesting.” He curled up on his pallet and went to sleep.

They were in a small pavilion covered with delicate linens and skins near the Prince's quarters. A distant boom of thunder sounded out of the night and with it a cool breeze that seeped into their room and blew away the scorching heat. Anne opened the drapes to see the wide view of the night horizon. The sky was black and tinged with gray as storm clouds were rushing in. Far below she saw myriads of tiny points of light – fires and lamps burning throughout the many tent dwellings of the tree cities. Then she heard it - at first it was barely a whisper, like a soft crush of chattering voices. Rain was coming from the far west and sweeping across the land like a wide wave. Gales whipped up the drapes and blew in, ruffling the tent walls like sails at sea. Anne surveyed the gray black sky for a moment more, feeling thin rain drops fly against her face, then she opened the copper lantern and let the fireflies fly away and with them the light in their room. *Someone posing as one of the people. A disguise or shape-shifter of some sort. However would we even find such a creature?* She thought before closing the drapes and lowering the flap of hide to the doorway. She could hear Jordan sleeping soundly on the opposite side of the room. It was a long, tiring and crazy day for him, no doubt. She sighed and turned to her own pallet wondering darkly of this new portent.

The next morning started off damp and cloudy but the heat was quickly drying the ground. They descended down and another dragonfly was waiting for them, a great orange and yellow one. They heaved the hides onto their backs. Anne sat on the ground at the base of the platform. The dragonfly cleaned itself as they waited and it was then that she noticed the wide grassy ring around the Mother Tree. The grasses certainly did look dead and that wasn't a mistake. Whoever stole the staff and oud got past the ring unseen or unnoticed and a dead ring served little protection for its denizens. In fact, if a fairy queen's crown could be stolen anything could happen.

If someone could sneak into the Prince's realm and steal his things from under his nose then safety was relative. This gave her a chill that she hadn't felt since traveling to the castle on the Ice Sea. She gazed at the face of the Mother Tree. For a moment Anne thought that it seemed to raise its eyes and then close them, then take a deep sigh. A troupe of Aziza had gathered to see them off.

"She sighs. Perhaps an auspicious day after all even through the storm clouds." Said Nneka. "I'm sure you will prevail Anne, you and your friends. A good force seems to watch over you." Anne smiled. She needed that.

"You ready?" Asked Jordan excitedly.

"Ready." She said standing up and gathering her bag and her fox hide. The sigh of the Mother Tree calmed her spirit. She hugged Nneka, Ngozi and the others in the Prince's music troupe and then she, Jordan and Zi climbed onto the back of the dragonfly. They had been warned earlier that morning that dragonflies would not fly over the western forests. Unfriendly Gryps and trolls and ogres would attack or shoot them down, thus the Prince offered the enchanted fox hides. Anne knew Antigone would not do such a thing and didn't think that Aes would either but she could not vouch for the behavior of other Gryps. Most of the truly evil Gryps had joined the Winter Queen's realm and were now in slavery to her and most Gryps knowing that Anne was a friend of Antigone probably would not harm her but she could not be sure of Jordan's safety. She knew that Zi could take care of himself.

"I just wonder how are we going to find out who did it?" Asked Jordan yelling over the hum of the wings.

"By this." Said Zi and pulled out a small wooden sphere. He then applied pressure, cupping it in his hands and opened it. Such a terrible cloud of funk came out that Anne and Jordan nearly yelped in disgust.

"That's that smell we smelled before we were grabbed by those pixies!" Cried Jordan.

"Yes! That's it!" Cried Anne.

"You've smelled the scent before?" Asked Zi.

"Yes!" They both said.

"Something was following us and it smelled just like that!" Said Anne.

"Then who ever stole these objects is most likely in service to the Fairy King or working with him for some purpose and is also following you. especially you, Anne. Your name has grown in the land and not everyone finds it pleasing."

"Why would they follow her?"

"She defeated the Winter Queen and all those who gave her their allegiance. Even to the evil creatures who had nothing to do with the Queen hear the name "Anne Greene" and curse it."

"Sounds like you're famous and not in a good way." Said Jordan.

"It's a good name for those who aren't up to anything bad." Said Anne. But it did worry her. She didn't enjoy making enemies but she supposed she was once again out to make more enemies. Such was the fortune of people who got involved in the plights of others.

"How did you manage all that?" Asked Jordan.

"It's a long story." Said Anne.

"Well if we have time later tell me 'cause I want to know." Said Jordan. The dragonfly slowly ascended and then they flew away back towards the western woods.

Kar, brother of Sog, dropped them off right on the edge of the woods. From there it would take them nearly two days to reach the fortress. The forest from Kar's back seemed a rich carpet of light and dark green tree foliage, but on closer look it seemed as if spring had long dawned and had been cut off suddenly. It reminded Anne that there was a third thing they needed to bring back, the bag of gold dust. As Kar flew away the forest loomed dark and forbidding. They got out their hides, Anne and Jordan looked at them curiously. Zi shook his out with one flip, looked for the head and slipped it on over his own head and right before them he became a little red fox!

"Well come on you two. We do not have eternity!" They put on their hides in the same fashion, Anne careful to swing her bag over her back before fitting hers on and suddenly there were three little red foxes on the edge of the woods. Anne could barely feel her bag at all. It was a brand new experience. Suddenly they could hear and smell things out of reach to them before. Everything was sharper in flavor, sounds deeper, intensified. Zi led the three as they entered the woods.

"Is there a path to follow?" Jordan asked.

"There is a roadway further in, leading to the mountain fortress but it is perilous. We will go a pathless way. Besides, when was the last time you saw wild animals traveling down a path?" Asked Zi.

"Ogres have a particular scent. Like fresh blood, a slight metallic scent and also slightly of rotting meat and the deep sea. It is unmistakable and the closer we get to the fortress the stronger the scent will become."

"I've smelled it before." Said Anne.

"I don't smell anything yet except the forest." Said Jordan sniffing the air. "Well, I can smell lots of things but I don't know what they are."

"Keep your senses peeled and be on alert." Said Zi as he gingerly pawed through the thick bushes. Every woodland scent was an experience for them and it became a struggle to remain focused. Birdsong was more melodious, insects a constant distraction, small creatures were rustling in their hideouts near the forest floor under leaves and other hidden places were easier to spot and track. Every scent presented itself either as a delicacy or a loud nuisance. It was a new world and they reveled in it for a little while, especially Anne and Jordan. Zi would patiently stop on occasion as the other two would snap at each other playfully, frolicking here and there. Under thick clumps of bush and tree they traveled as Zi carefully sussed out their path.

"Look! You guys! There's a tiny person sleeping, curled up under this leaf!" Said Jordan.

"The small folk of the land and forest. They are everywhere. Do not harm them and no harm will come upon you." Said Zi.

"Oh I wasn't going to do anything. But what is it? A pixie?"

"Yes."

"And the mushrooms! Some of them are huge!"

"I know. They are special and can be used in potions, some for healing. However, unless you are familiar with mushrooms it is best to leave them alone. Do not even sniff them." Said Zi. They eventually turned their conversation towards the ogres and stolen gold.

"I've heard that there's a river of gold flowing from the Dark Mountain." Said Zi. "But I have never actually seen it for myself."

"Maybe it's an underground river." Said Jordan.

"Rivers are underground?" Asked Anne.

"Some of them. I went camping to this place once and we saw one underground, in a cave."

"Wow."

"If this Fairy King likes to collect gold he might have liquified all of it and created a river of gold." Said Jordan.

"Why would he do that?" Asked Anne.

"I don't know. Just sayin'. What does he need all that gold for anyway?"

"Now that is a mystery Jordan. I wonder the same thing." Said Zi.

"Sometimes people just want a thing even when they don't need it. Probably greed." Said Anne.

"That is true but I suspect he has a darker purpose than simple hoarding." Said Zi.

"When Zi and I went to see the Sister Moons, Lady Grey told me that the ogres tried to steal all her treasure, her silver and her moonstones because their father the Fairy King told them to. I've wondered why he would put them up to that?"

"What did she do?"

"She put them in a deep sleep and cast them into the Ice Sea. They were there for a really long time and then Queen Faye woke them up. Now they are stealing and looting again."

"Why did she wake them up?"

"They are very powerful and she could control them. It's easy to use them to do your bidding if you know how. She wanted them because they are strong."

"Seems like everyone uses them. Sort of like my friends. They use people to do stuff for them all the time." Said Jordan and then he was suddenly silent as if he had not meant to say such a thing.



“Ogres don't think.” Said Zi sourly. But Anne thought on Jordan's words. It *did* seem like everyone just used them and threw them away when they tired of them. Would the Fairy King throw them back into the sea when his plan was finished?

They came to a bubbling stream. Zi sniffed at it and began to drink. The other two pups taking their turn drank their fill. *This is what it must be like to be the wolves.* She thought happily. Soon they were off again and traveled for hours, the Dark Mountain looming ahead behind the trees like a black wall. As dark as the forest was, long wide shafts of sunlight fell through to the forest floor creating bright patches of light here and there. The trees here were giants but had thinner trunks, not the great house wide trunks of the southern forests. Bloodwood and blackwood trees and great fir trees of many kinds mingled. As the day wore on the sunlight faded behind clouds and the rain came again, this time with a vengeance. As evening drew near Zi began looking for a place for them to sleep. He found it in a small hollowed out stump hidden behind a large clump of bushes near a lodge made of black logs. They shook the water from their coats, nestled in and listened to the rain fall and the faint noises of the small creatures of the wood.

“Is that the home of the Blackroot family?” Whispered Anne. Zi nodded. The Blackroot family lodge rested firmly and stoutly within a small gap of trees and all around it was a low, black stone fence.

“It is said that some members of the Blackroot family have had dealings with the King of the Dark Mountain since old times.” Whispered Zi.

“Why?”

“I don't really know, I can only guess. They live within a day's reach of the Mountain King's stronghold. I would imagine that such close proximity sometimes requires alliances or understandings in order for the two to get along. I would not call it a friendship though. But it is a rumor, after all.” Said Zi.

“I'll bet the ogres don't mess with the lodge.” Said Anne.

“If they do they'll smart for it. Likely there is an understanding otherwise the lodge wouldn't be here.”

“I wonder if they can help us. If there is an alliance maybe they know something about the fortress.” Said Anne.

“Who are they?” Asked Jordan.

“A powerful gnome family. I've met the head of their family before. His name is Grandfather Blackroot.”

“In the morning take off your hide and approach the lodge. I'll stay here with Jordan. See what you can find out.” Said Zi. Jordan remained quiet but alert, his eyes shining with curiosity in the dark.

“Ok.” Said Anne. She hoped they would receive her and if they did, that they could help. Any information about the fortress was sorely needed.

Early that morning the rain had finally stopped. Dew and dampness was heavy and the woods were blanketed in light, cool mists. A wide slice of sunlight shined down on to the stout lodge and around it was a ring of small black mushrooms. Surely another fairy ring and one that she was sure wasn't dead. Anne noticed as she approached that the gate and fence were covered in vines and brambles full of thorns. Big, sharp curved thorns as fearsome as long fangs. Her ring was glowing slightly but she had no idea if it was from this or from some other thing hidden from her eyes. Taking a deep breath she walked up to the door, a heavy wooden door with a rounded triangular shape at its apex. It had a long silver emblem shaped like a gnarled root fastened under the peep-door. Even the path to the door was of black pebble and rock. A rather imposing, dark place if smaller than the Whitestone Lodge. Off to the side in the front garden she thought she saw something lying on the ground. She leaned over to get a closer look. A shape or mound that looked like a body was being sucked down into the ground and it was pierced through and covered in thorny vines. Down into the soil it sank before she could make out what it was. It made her skin crawl. She looked around cautiously for any other sign of slithering brambles and vines. All was silent. She went back to the door and knocked.

The house seemed dark and quiet as if no one was home. Then she heard a rooster crow. A slight breeze slipped its way through the woods. Finally she heard footsteps. The peep-door in the main door was opened but she could not see who it was.

Silence.

Then it was shut and the door opened. Anne stepped back. A gnome woman with jet black hair tied in a tight, neat bun peered out suspiciously at her, all pale skin and alert black eyes. She was wearing a bright, crisp white apron over a black dress and she stared hard for a few moments and then her face rose in delighted recognition.

“Anne Greene! To see you here! How on earth did you get out here girl?”

“Oh, my companions and I are on the way to recover some stolen objects. Important mission, you know!” Said Anne.

“Another mission? Well! But where are your friends? I see no one about.”

“We've seen ogres and other creatures about so we found a hiding place. Zi and Jordan stayed back. We don't have a lot of time to visit though which is why it was only me who came.”

“What do you need child?”

“I wanted to see if someone here knew anything about getting into the fortress in the Dark Mountain.” Anne lowered her voice as she said this. At this the woman's eyes widened in surprise and she looked around furtively.

“And what would you be wantin' with that place?”

“The ogres there have been stealing special objects for the Fairy King and we are charged by the Baobab Prince and the Spring Fairy to bring back three things that were stolen from them: a golden staff, a golden oud and a bag of gold dust.”

“I see.” The woman looked serious. “Well then. You'd be wantin' to speak to my father, Grandfather Blackroot.” She said in hushed tones. “Come inside. 'Tis not safe to speak of the Fairy King outside these walls, in the western woods lest you bring his wrath down upon you.” She drew the door wide open and Anne came inside.

“My name is Erynth. Wait here and I'll tell my father he has an important guest.” With that she disappeared down the hall.

The Blackroot Lodge had a main hall, a roundish room which was where Anne stood waiting and from what she saw, one long hallway that stretched down with rooms on either side and a door at the other end of this hall. At the very end of the hall servants were coming and going through that door quietly, not paying her much heed. She thought she detected the kitchen fires behind that door straight ahead down the hall. The lodge was dark and cool and no doubt the rest of the household had not yet begun to stir. Except for the kitchen hearth there were no fires burning yet and it was a sparsely decorated lodge with large and heavy, hard furniture. Compared to the stately yet comfortable Whitestone Lodge, the Blackroot Lodge was spare. Anne guessed that the Blackroots were quite stark and severe in their habits. Erynth appeared again down the hallway.

“Come. My father says he will see you.” Anne followed her down the hallway, the walls filled with family portraits of family long gone, to a study near the end of the hallway, the last door on the right. Erynth knocked and then opened the door.

“Here she is.” Said Erynth guiding Anne inside and then she went off to the kitchen. The study was dim, as the heavy drapes were drawn shut and only a sliver of light seeped in from a thin streak of opening between the drapes from one of the windows. Soft light from a small oil lamp sitting on the desk lessened the dimness.

Grandfather Blackroot was an austere looking gnome, as gnomes went. He had the characteristically long white beard, braided, with a jet black stripe running through it and a few silver bells tied within. Like his daughter his hair was pulled back but his ended in a neat, single braid.

His eyebrows were arched high over penetrating black eyes. His robes were plain black wool. In fact, he was rather more intimidating than the Whitestone but as soon as he saw Anne he permitted himself a slight smile. A little black dog sat near his heavy wooden chair gnawing a bone. When Anne entered the dog immediately looked up and emitted a low growl. He had the look of a miniature night hound about him which made her nervous.

“Hush, Rootbear!” He commanded sharply. The word sliced through the air like a sword. “Never mind him. He's being trained as a guardian dog so he is not overly fond of strangers.”

“Is. . . is he dangerous? He looks like a night hound.”

“He is actually. A scion of one of the Fairy King's oldest hunting hounds. One of the runts of the litter rejected by the King's household, but stout enough for the Blackroots. As he is a pup he is not venomous, yet.” Anne was relieved to hear that. Rootbear eyed her warily, his little eyes shining like starlight pinpoints, and then he went back to gnawing his breakfast bone.

“The Fairy King has hounds too?”

“Oh yes, didn't you know? The Winter Woman's hounds are scions of his hounds as well. No need to trouble yourself over Rootbear though. He won't attack unless I see you as an enemy to me or to this house. Of which you certainly are not! Now, my dear, what is this I hear from my daughter? She tells me you are yet on another quest!”

“We're trying to get some stolen objects back to their rightful owners.”

“I see. Three golden objects is it? The lute, or what I believe the Prince calls an oud, his staff and Princess Blossom's bag of gold dust.” Anne nodded. “And what can we do for you?”

“I was curious if you knew anything about the Fairy King's castle? Like a secret tunnel or passage?” Grandfather Blackroot studied her intensely for a moment, as if divining her very thoughts.

“Interesting question. And what made you think of the Blackroot Lodge?”

“Well, the Blackroot Lodge is awfully close to the Dark Mountain. I thought it wouldn't hurt to ask. Maybe there's a secret passage underneath this lodge to the Fairy King's fortress?” He chuckled at this but his eyes glittered with intensity.

“Hmm.” He said finally. Then he spoke, carefully.

“The Mountain King and his folk and the Blackroot family rarely have dealings with one another but when we do it is always of benefit to both parties in some way. However, centuries ago some of my kin found an ancient passage into the fortress, yes. It is lost to all but a tiny few and we do not go that way. After all, we want no one invading our underground tunnels so we do not invite such trouble. Long ago even before the passage was, *found*,” with that he gave her just the barest of winks, “after an arrangement with the Fairy King, the Blackroot family built the ancestral lodge in the western forest. The King still regards it as his forest but it is just as much our home as his. We do not cower in fear of him, however, he can be a powerful enemy. I'm sure you understand.” She nodded.

“What you ask for is dangerous. And yet, I see no reason why you should not have information. After all, we do not hold with all this open villainy going on.”

“Have the ogres ever tried to steal from you?”

“They have not. But there are trolls and other creatures in his employ who have tried. And died.”

“Oh.” She thought of the creature out front being swallowed up by the soil and thorns.

“So! We have some very old maps, quite ancient actually, of this legendary tunnel. It may be blocked or walled up by now. I do not know the condition and neither does anyone else, as far as I know. But I will make a traced copy of the map for you. Please be aware that once you arrive at the fortress the markings on the map will disappear, so I hope my dear that you and your companions have good memories.” He got up and went to an old Gothic armoire across the room and unlocked a small drawer in it. He pulled out a large, yellowed looking scroll. Getting a leaf of thin, wide paper and a piece of graphite he laid it on his desk and made a careful tracing of the old map.

“Come and see. See, this is where you are now. You will travel west of here following a haphazard trail of black mushrooms. This trail starts one hundred paces west of the ring around the lodge, not far from a small creek. Follow this trail and in a few hours' time you will reach an old bridge going over the creek, here,” he pointed, “at this point, where its waters have long since dried up. You will know instantly because there will be a large gathering of black mushrooms about the bridge. Do not eat them and avoid touching them if you can for they can make you delirious. Under the bridge there should be a door or some sort of opening. This tunnel will lead you right inside the bowels of the fortress. There is another thing – there is a rumor in the family that certain doors in the fortress are marked by a sign that signal treasure or other secrets. But there are many secrets there you may not wish to see. The place is guarded and so there is great danger in this. These doors are marked with an invisible substance made by the black mushroom. It is an ink that can only be seen by through certain devices.” He went back to the armoire and pulled out a tiny spyglass from the drawer and handed it to her. “Keep it safe. It may be useful if there is any truth to the rumor. One more thing. The door you want is marked with an “X”.

“X”. She mouthed quietly, studying the map.

“I do say, my dear, how did you and your companions get so far without being seen by his folk?”

“The Baobab Prince gave us fox hides that turn us into foxes. We travel through the forest and no one knows who we are.”

“They may know you are no ordinary animals if you talk and play like children too much. Be careful of that. However, that is a mighty gift. I do not think it will avail you once you get into the King's stronghold though.”

“Who all lives in the fortress?”

“Trolls, goblins, ogres and such. Most trolls and ogres are not overly bright. Goblins can be a cunning bunch however.”

“Thank you, Grandfather Blackroot.”

“You are very welcome. I will set a watch and a warning for you and your friends. If you are not back in three days I shall raise an alarm.”

“Thanks!”

“Visit the kitchens and my daughter shall have them pack you something for your journey and take a few things to eat to your friends. May the Builder keep you, my dear.” Anne beamed and Grandfather Blackroot's smile lit up his face and suddenly he was not so severe looking any longer. Even Rootbear began wagging his tail. *Think of that!* Thought Anne. If a night hound was actually not ready to tear her limb from limb this quest had one more good sign to recommend it. She happily rolled up the map copy and the spyglass and stuck them in her bag and went to the kitchen. The household was just beginning to stir. A gnome serving woman was busy tending the fire in the great hearth.

“Food you'll need my dear. Come.” Erynth said upon her entrance. “Erya, child, fetch the knapsack!” Erya, her little daughter beamed at Anne, her little black shiny pigtailed quivering. She pulled a white knapsack out of one of the lower cupboards and handed it to Anne.

“Thank you.”

“There's brown bread and cheese and a few apples in there.” Said Erynth.

“I'm going on adventures when I grow up!” She said happily.

“Adventures are fun but they can be dangerous. You have to be careful!”

“Erya, you have chores. We'll see you Anne! In three days we will be looking for you.”

“Hopefully we'll be back before three days.”

“So do we. That place is an evil place!” Said Erynth. Anne took her knapsack, thanked them again and set off back towards the hiding place.

When she came back with the map and the spyglass they were all abuzz with excitement. Over breakfast they studied the map. They still had a day of travel but it seemed simple enough. Just follow the string of black mushrooms near the creek.

“But how will we know which door it is? We have no idea which room he's hiding them in. Could be anywhere.” Said Jordan.

“We'll have to find it by using my Way Wanderer. It may give a weak signal but it's the best thing we've got besides the spyglass.”

“If it works.” Said Anne. “He said that this map is old and was inspired by a rumor so we could get in or we could find it walled up and unable to enter. There's another thing. He said that once we get to the fortress the markings on the map will disappear.”

“They will? That stinks!”

“We have to commit it to memory.”

“Well Jordan, it looks simple enough. We should not have a problem remembering it.” Said Zi.

“But why would they disappear?” Asked Jordan.

“To cover their tracks if we get caught? That's my guess.” Said Anne.

“I have guessed that the King's treasure room is in the very heart of the fortress from overhearing ogres talking one day. So it is neither in the bowels of the fortress nor the very top.”

“That's still a lot of ground to cover.” Said Jordan. “How did they come by this map and this so-called secret tunnel into the fortress? It seems impossible that the King wouldn't know of it.”

“I don't know. I didn't ask but I've wondered the same thing. They don't seem afraid to live deep in the woods under the Dark Mountain even when he goes hunting. He said that a long time ago the family made some kind of arrangement with the King.” She said.

“I do not know very much about the Blackroot family, they are secretive but I do know one thing – one does not go round making bargains with devils unless one is foolish or a bit devilish themselves. And the Blackroots do not strike me as fools.” Said Zi.

“Are you saying they're bad?” Asked Anne.

“I'm saying that there is more to them than meets the eye.”

“What kind of bargain did they make with him?” asked Jordan.

“I have no idea nor will I inquire as it is none of my business but it most likely is the sort of bargain that innocents do not strike. Let us leave it at that for they have proven to be allies when they are needed.”

“Grandfather Blackroot also told me that it's best if we don't talk so much.”

“Why?” Asked Jordan and Zi.

“Because our voices will give us away if anyone is following us.”

“Excellent point.” Said Zi and with that they traveled in silence.

As the fox pups continued on, the forest did indeed become darker. In fact, Anne thought that they had mistakenly wandered into the northern forest. That thought made a shiver tear down her spine. Her ears perked up and her nose caught familiar scent.

“I hear something.” She whispered. The only sounds they'd heard all day was the occasional breeze, chirping and buzzing of insects and their own foot-paddings through the woods. Not even a bird or a pixie could be heard though every now and then they saw or sensed furtive creatures hidden here and there. And the occasional moth or ladybug. Anne felt the urge to jump up and snap at the moths as tasty morsels, a little beastie spirit in her she found was growing and it intrigued her but she restrained herself. It was no time to snack or play.

“Do you hear them yet? Singing!”

“I can hear them now. I can smell them too.” Said Zi. Their ears twitched. All three of them hid quickly in the underbrush, watching and waiting. In about half an hour a large group of ogres came marching through, tramping and stamping carelessly, and singing:

We walk through the dark wood  
the Mountain King's Hall we long to see  
for we have gone far and wide  
for gold on Lord Father's bidding.

He bid us take what we will  
and go here and there.  
Those who oppose Lord Father's will,  
beware, beware!

Our father, King of the Dark Mountain  
loves us, loves us so  
his children of the moon and sea  
cast away by our Lady Mother.

Now we have one home,  
our mountain halls of stone  
the halls of our father who loves us still.  
But for all else he loves them not!  
Beware, beware!

The foxes remained well hidden until the troupe had passed and when the sounds of their brutal footsteps had faded they finally ventured out again after sniffing the air. They remained silent and wary until they'd reached the old bridge on the map. It was early evening.

“What a strange song.” Whispered Jordan.

“Yes. Beware. We now enter the halls of the Mountain King.” Said Zi quietly, trepidation in his voice. They shook off their hides and hid them in the grasses of the dried up creek along with Anne's leather bag. There was a small opening beneath the bridge covered over by vines. After clearing away some of the vegetation they entered the abandoned tunnel, dreading and hoping that it would lead them to a dead end.

The abandoned tunnel stank of decay; the long mouldering of musky organic viscera, a heavy and oppressive smell that hung in the air like a dead thing. When it had been created no one could remember but it was primitive to say the least and looked nearly like a natural formation. Moss and volumes of cobwebs entombing dead insects were all around. Anne nearly screamed aloud in fright at the webs and both Zi and Jordan had to wrap their hands around her mouth to keep her from belting out a full cry.

“You defeated an evil fairy but you're scared of spiderwebs?” Asked Jordan in irritation.

“Shut up!” She hissed. Jordan rolled his eyes. The tunnel became wider as they made their way through.

“Stop.” Warned Zi. They fell silent, straining to hear. The sounds around them became different, from the dull sounds of an enclosed place to the deep echoing of large cavernous places. They were within the very bowels of the fortress. Muffled sounds of many heavy footsteps marched above them.

“We are in. Right beneath the ground level.” He whispered. It was so dark it seemed like a suffocating blanket of nothingness around them. The light from Anne's ring was bright blue and burned so that she had to take it off and put it in her pocket. They had approached a wall but they could feel a small column of air just above them. Zi took out a small candle from his pouch, said a word and lit it. The small flame flickered and sputtered.

“Somewhere close there's an opening into the fortress proper.”

“I wonder if it's big enough for us to get through?” Asked Jordan.

“If the gnomes can get through it, it should be.” Said Anne. They wound around the wall on an incline, sidling along until they found a very narrow opening where the air was flowing from. The walls between were made of crumbling rock. Removing just enough debris to get inside they squeezed in, enduring crumbling pebbles and drifting dust and found themselves in a hearth in a dark room full of even more cobwebs, dust and – bones. Bones of creatures they knew not.

“I wish I'd brought my hammer.” Whispered Anne.

“I know but carrying around an iron hammer in the fortress might attract attention we do not want.”

“So, you think that the objects are in the center of this place?” She asked.

“I think so but I will use the Way Wanderer to be sure. I do not think the light trail will remain stable right here in the center of the Mountain King's center of power but it is the best thing we have to locate the treasure room.”

“Maybe I should use mine too.”

“Yours may be too weak to work in here Anne. Mine will barely work as it is.” He drew it out from the pouch on his hip. It gleamed softly in the darkness. As it flared up it illuminated their small corner and they saw that along the wall leading to a stair was a broad case of shelves and stacked on those shelves were many skulls of strange looking animals and also what looked like human skulls to Anne and Jordan's horror.

“He hunts people.” Said Jordan, fear in his voice.

“Anything that gets in his way, anyone that falls in his path. No one is safe when the Lord of the Hunt goes riding forth.” Said Zi. They could hear menacing growls and ferocious barking and even guttural language and wails far away in the dank bowels of the fortress.

“What are those sounds?” Jordan whispered.

“Night hounds.” Whispered Anne. They slipped up the stair. The door was locked.

“I can pick locks.” Jordan fished in his pocket. They all listened intently for any sounds on the other side of the door. Zi gave the signal that all was clear, stepped aside and Jordan pulled out a pocket knife from a kit in his pocket and set about picking the lock. It seemed like an eternity but after a short while the door was unlocked it seemed with an unnervingly loud clank. They stopped, still listening and when they thought it was safe to move they slowly opened the door.

“We should have waited until dawn. There might be less movement in the fortress at dawn.” Said Zi.

“It's too late now.” Said Anne. “Besides, who really wants to stay around here for another day? Let's just get the things and get out of here.”

“As you say.” Said Zi. Going first he stepped out into a long hallway lined with torches and very few windows. Zi whispered a command to his Way Wanderer to find the three objects. For a moment nothing happened. Then a sluggish stream of light sputtered forth down the hallway and to the right.

“I can't feel its heat.” Whispered Anne.

“That may well be good. It may mean that our enemies can't either.” They peered down the hallway. Besides the distant cacophony of the hounds there were voices and even singing elsewhere.

The fortress walls were stone overlaid with gleaming copper, gold and silver brickwork and all along lined with torches. Only some of them were lit, casting shadows along the walls and the bare stone floors. They followed Zi who followed his sputtering light stream. They turned the corner slowly and all three of them froze. A guard was standing to attention in full armor, a long spear in hand.

“What do we do now?” Asked Jordan. Zi gazed intently at it then he smiled.

“It's only armor hanging on a post.” They sighed in relief. The armor stood beside a wide, open door. As they approached, Anne carefully peeked inside.

“Hey! It's a room full of armor! We can disguise ourselves.”

“Cool, an armory!” Said Jordan. They slipped inside. It was windowless but well lit with large oil lamps. Rows upon rows of suits and helmets were hanging neatly. The giant ogre armor suits were fear inspiring to look at.

“How are we going to find anything to fit us?” Asked Anne.

“Just keep looking.” Said Zi.

Even though ogres were huge, trolls and other creatures came in varying sizes and as they passed by each row they found that the suits armored gear became smaller. Rows and rows they passed until they found suits that might fit. Anne and Zi were able to outfit themselves rather easily with a few pieces of armor and gear and helmets. They had to help Jordan with his gauntlets and armor. They had no time to put on complete suits but enough to seem reasonably like little goblins if no one stared too long. Further back was a door with a copper ax welded to its front. A sign for the weapon room but it was locked. Disappointed, they headed out behind Zi. They passed many rooms, halls, most closed some open but empty. The light stream led them up another steep stair. As they approached the next level they could hear movement and voices.

Sure enough they approached a wide hall filled with trolls playing a game consisting of bones and tiles while other trolls were lounging around.

“That dragon scale would be nice about now.” Whispered Anne.

“It would not work in here. Just act normal. As if you belong here.” A few trolls looked up, glancing at them and then resumed their gaming. They were all centered around a broad floor board, moving skulls around and gathering tiles. They ignored the three little intruders, who continued their way down the hallway. They passed by a small room of ogres smoking crudely made pipes and singing songs:

Come one, come all  
to the Mountain Hall  
to seek your fame and fortune!  
Come one, come all  
by black nightfall  
the path to the Dark Mountain  
is lit by the Blood Moons!

Come the Blood Moons,  
Oh Hunter's Moons,  
we go riding forth  
to the Eternal Hunt!

The smoke was strong and pungent, making Anne and Jordan cough but the ogres were singing so loudly that they paid no heed. They quickly passed on from there so as to not attract attention. In fact, they passed several more rooms filled with smoking and gaming trolls and a few ogres. All three affixed their helmets on tightly to make sure their disguises stayed in place. As they moved on Zi suddenly halted.

“What?” The other two asked.

“My light went out. But before it did I saw it wind around the corner down the hallway to the left.” They followed and when they turned the corner they found themselves at a dead end. In front of them stood the open doors of a massive dining hall. A long wooden table and three huge iron chandeliers hung in a single row down the middle of the ceiling. There were two floor to ceiling windows on either side of the hall, both covered with tapestries. The table and chairs were massive, fit for ogres. All around the room was filled with mounted heads of exotic and powerful animals. Stags, boars, bears even mammoths and lions that were far larger than any Anne or Jordan had seen. Jordan stood transfixed at the mounted heads. Just then, they heard an army of footsteps coming. They scrambled to find a hiding place. A giant wooden chest sat by the far wall under a great mirror. Opening the chest they found a mummified animal that they couldn't identify. The chest had a strong, sweet smell of decay and dirt that assaulted them. After gagging with disgust, Anne and Jordan quickly composed themselves and jumped in with Zi. Footsteps descended heavily into the dining hall. Anne and Zi peeked out of the keyhole.

Ogres! Lots of them were pouring into the room, and a few ogresses as well. The ogres all crowded in and stood around the long table. Lastly a giant, a head taller than even the ogres strode in. Handsome he was and powerfully built like a strong tree with a mass of thick, long hair that changed color with the light and flat black eyes with no pupils much like the Winter Queen. There was a wild light, like a small fire that burned in his eyes. It was King Alberich himself. He swept in and took a seat at the head of the table. The gathered ogres seated themselves.

“My sons, my daughters! Soon the plan will come to fruition. I have acquired many things, the latest being the gold dust of spring, the golden oud and the golden and baobab staff of the Prince of the East. I require only one more thing and that is the golden crown of the Queen of Summer.”

“Aye! Gold! Gold! Gold!” Shouted the ogres.

"Now that you have been called home and have done your duty by me we shall all rest until the Fall."

"But Lord Father, what about our brothers up north? Under the control of the Winter Woman?" Asked one of the ogres.

"There is naught we can do for them now. It pains me as it pains you but they made their choice to serve her instead of me. You, my *loyal* children came to me when I called, when I found you had been awakened. Forget the Winter Woman. She will have a hard go of it for a long time to come."

"But how will we get the crown? She took it and now she suffers for it."

"What is that to me? She failed to keep it. I shall not fail once I capture it. If I fail, there is always another day in the future to try again. Besides, someone else shall do my bidding in this. Our Stinkthief shall do the deed." Laughter.

"Won't she know, Lord Father?"

"Queen Titian will know nothing until it is too late. I'll deal with her when the time comes and as for that troublesome girl and those who aid her, I will soon deal with them as well. Ah! Stinkthief, here you are at last! Why are you late?" The King demanded. Stinkthief was a hobgoblin no bigger than Anne. In fact, nearly a head shorter.

"I was on the trail of the girl. She brought a friend with her." Said the hobgoblin.

"Beware how you address the King!" Threatened one of the ogresses. King Alberich waved his hand.

"Do not trouble yourself over him Ratha." The King chided then turned his dark gaze back to Stinkthief. "Is that so? Where are they now?"

"Last time I saw they were captured by the Spring Fairy and her ilk." Stinkthief said.

"Fool! You lost them?" Stinkthief began to whimper.

"Oh no, your Lordship! I merely made sure they did not come this way." He quickly bowed low and groveled.

"Stop groveling you fool! It will do you no good if she shows up here. No matter. Flower City is a long way from here. How is it that you lost them?"

"I lost their scent. Wherever they were taken they did not come back this way, Lordship."

"You are sure?"

"I am sure, Lordship."

"Humph." The King was derisive. "You had better hope they do not for your own sake or I shall feed you to my hounds like I did your brother. Or perhaps I shall give you over to my alchemists instead. They will find something useful about you for their experiments, no doubt. Do not fail me!" Stinkthief bowed low and remained silent. The King then turned his attention back to his children.

"Rest from your labors now, my sons. Later we shall sup. Summer is not far away and when it comes the goblin will get the crown. When he does, by the Blood Moon of Fall we and all the host shall ride forth in glory!"

"In glory!" They shouted raising their fists in the air.

"We shall conquer the land and then we shall cross over into the mortal world and conquer it too! Never shall the Hunt end!"

"The Hunt! The Hunt!" They chanted. It was nearly hypnotic.

"Ratha, daughter, go and check on the progress of the alchemists. It is careful and painstaking work they do but I want my potion ready before the Blood Moon rises."

"Yes, Lord Father."

"Excitement! I can feel it crackling in the air. To the eternal Hunt!" He raised his gloved fist and they all shouted proudly and began singing. The King got up and swept out of the hall. Stinkthief skulked out behind him but before he left, shot a queer look around the hall. Eventually the ogres filed out singing raucously as they left.

"What was that about?" Whispered Jordan.

"A diabolical plan to empower himself so he can ride forever on the hunt." Whispered Zi.

"Why?"

"He loves the hunt. He never wants it to end. I knew something evil was afoot!"

"So that's what he's stealing all that treasure for." Whispered Jordan. He then turned to Anne. "They're looking for you Anne."

"I know. They're always looking for me."

"My father likes to hunt but I can't imagine people just hunting forever. Nothing would be left!"

"He plans to do this in this world and ours. He has to be stopped!" Said Anne. The fetid smell of the chest was becoming unbearable. Zi quietly opened the chest and they climbed out gasping for air. The bulky, ill-fitting armor they wore did not help matters. The mounted heads seemed to glare at them accusingly, as if to say that they did not belong there.

"I don't like this place. And I think I've seen enough of him." Said Jordan.

"I don't like it either. However, we have new information. Now we know who was following us and who probably stole the objects. That hobgoblin. We'll have to watch out for him. Come! We do not have much time to waste and I think Stinkthief suspects that something in the fortress is amiss." Said Zi.

"Why do you say that?" Asked Jordan.

"Just a feeling I have."



They lurked further along down the hallway after waiting to make sure all was clear. It seemed to be a leisurely day for all those who dwelled in the fortress. Most of the King's folk were either at work in the deep depths of the fortress, sleeping, gaming or taking their ease in their own quarters. No one was looking for or expecting trouble.

The fortress itself, built directly into the mountain was a network of serpentine halls and stairs around the perimeter with most of the rooms near the center. Dank, dim and drafty, the central circle of the fortress, which they had finally reached, housed most of the trolls' quarters and when they passed by the privy chambers it took all the strength the three could muster not to retch. Unfortunately the odors from the privy chambers masked other smells. The light from Zi's whistle would only work in stops and starts, sputtering out in a few moments after he gave it a command. Slowly they climbed another stair and wound their way towards an inner chamber to the left. Zi put his whistle in his pouch. This chamber had lots of doors. Red doors. The light fizzled out completely after leading them there.

"Well which one is it?" Asked Jordan. He reached out to touch one of the doorknobs.

"Wait. Listen first." Said Anne. She pressed her ear against the door to listen for sound. Jordan looked underneath the door.

"Looks dark."

"Doesn't sound like anyone is in there."

"Shh!" Warned Zi. He motioned for them to come close and they gathered around him. "Let's use the spyglass. Maybe one of these doors is the one." He whispered. As he was going into his pouch they heard a nasty little giggle behind them. *Stinkthief!*

"Thought you could evade me, did you? I'd wondered where you two had got to! And now you've brought a third." It was indeed Stinkthief, sneering at them, showing sharp, yellow teeth. Jordan cleared his throat and puffed up his chest.

"We're on the Fairy King's business!" He then looked to Zi and Anne, a little nervously. Anne nodded vigorously and crossed her arms.

"It would be best if you did not interfere." Warned Zi.

"Oh really? On the King's business peeking under doors? If you were on the King's business you'd have keys. Especially for *these* doors." He bared his teeth. They all three looked at each other knowingly.

"Like he said, we have business here!" Insisted Anne, trying to sound as gruff as she could.

"Liars! I can smell that you are different and you certainly aren't trolls or goblins on the King's business!" Said the hobgoblin.

"We're not afraid of you!" Anne said defiantly.

"No? Not very smart then. Not very smart at all, *little girl!*"

"Don't call me a little girl!"

"And what if I raise the alarm?"

"Then your lord and master will know that you've allowed his enemies into his stronghold. He won't thank you for that and he will punish you just as severely as he will punish us." Said Zi. The hobgoblin seemed to fear this prospect his sneer faltering for the briefest of moments. He quickly composed himself.

"You will still find yourselves in hot water." He said, grinning so widely now that it seemed his xerotic skin would crack at the corners of his mouth. He turned and ran off. Anne, Jordan and Zi followed him, looking for an escape and ran right into a trap! All three were caught by two burly trolls waiting right outside the doorway and thrown into a giant burlap sack!

"Help! Help!" Jordan's muffled screams rose in terror. There was laughter, crude and cruel.

"Screamin' won't help you none boy!" Laughed one of the trolls.

"Here, Brug. You carry 'em." He heaved the sack onto his companion's shoulders.

"You might say I've come up with a better plan. All three of you will be skinned and cooked in a delicious stew for supper tonight. That way the only thing the King will know is that supper will be especially delicious tonight!" Called out the hobgoblin as the trolls made their way towards the fortress kitchen.

"Hee! It's gonna be good eatin' tonight! Good eatin' Krat!" Said Brug happily. As they were being carried off, far down the hallway they could hear the goblin's hateful and uncontrollable giggling at their doom.

Through the frayed holes in the sack Anne managed to get a glimpse of the lay of the kitchen. The kitchen was a cavernous, dome-shaped room. There was a fireplace at the far end to the left near a large grouping of cupboards, a rounded iron door on the opposite side from the fireplace and a large fire pit in the middle of the kitchen. In that pit sat an enormous black stone pot over a lively fire, boiling and steaming. Behind the pot stood a large, old wooden table.

“Ah! Easy pickins today Brug. Easy pickins. His Lordship'll be very happy with supper tonight!” Said Krat, removing the lid and stirring the broth.

“But why do he and his children get to have 'em for supper? It was we that found 'em.” Complained Brug.

“You know how things go 'round here. Ogres get the best, them being his children and all, trolls come second. Goblins last. Best get used to it if you plan on dwelling in the fortress. We'll get what's left, and I'm making plenty stew for extra. Make sure you request His Lordship and everyone at table to save the bones. We'll need them to make more flour. We're runnin' low.”

“Huh! Greedy, pampered ogres!” Spat the other troll. Krat ignored the remark.

“Put the sack there. There's herbs to gather, roots to chop plus more meat in the ice cave to be prepared. The knives need sharpening too. Bring the other leftover carcasses from the ice cave. We'll put 'em all in the stew tonight. It's Mulligan stew we're havin'!” Said Krat and he began to hum a tune. Brug dumped the sack on the floor, which was covered in stale rushes, scraps of food, rodent droppings and dirt. He left the room momentarily and then they could hear large slabs of something being dragged over the floor into the kitchen. Anne could only wonder what it was. A powerful wave of scent rolled over them. The smell of fresh blood. Then they heard the ugly and gleeful voices of the trolls break out in song:

*“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 Brug grabbed it again 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. . .”

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Quiet as a whisper Zi slipped out of the sack, careful not to rustle or make any unnecessary noises, and he sneaked along to the other end of the kitchen towards the cupboards near the empty fireplace. As soon as he got himself into position Anne and Jordan began singing loudly, a silly song. The troll turned and looked over at the sack.

“Quiet, I said!” He roared. He moved over towards the sack to give it a vicious kick. Just before he reached it a sack full of flour sailed through the air hitting him squarely on the head. With the troll, momentarily stunned, Zi grabbed another bag of flour and launched it, again hitting him on the head. Anne and Jordan scrambled out of the sack and Jordan grabbed a handful of flour and flung it in his face. Zi had managed to grab several pots and rained them down on the troll's head, one after another. With the last pot he dashed towards the giant bubbling pot of broth, scooped up a potful and flung it in the troll's face. Krat let out a blood curdling cry of agony and rage.

“Help me! Help me push him in!” Yelled Anne. He was making so much noise that she was afraid someone would eventually come and investigate and Brug was sure to come back any moment with the salt! All three of them charged him wildly and repeatedly until Krat lost his balance, stumbled and fell right into the pot of boiling broth! Quickly they grabbed the lid and heaved it, with some difficulty, over the pot and covered it and as Krat gurgled and tried to lift it they all three jumped on top and sat on it until all movement from the troll underneath stopped.

Then there was silence. Except for the boiling, bubbling broth under them.

“You think he's dead yet?” Asked Jordan.

“Yes. I feel kind of bad now.” Said Anne.

“Why? Someone was going to be cooked. Better him than us.”

“Jordan's right, Anne. Your distractions saved us. The only way we would escape out of here with him still alive is through soup bowls and later down the privy pots!” Said Zi.

“How do we find the treasure room from here?” Asked Jordan.

“We already found it. Stinkthief gave it away. We were very close to it right before we were kidnapped. I think I can retrace the trolls' steps. It isn't far from here.” Said Zi. “When we were put in that sack and taken from the hall with the red doors they went to the right and from there I remembered each direction they took. We will just retrace them.

“Awesome!” Cried Jordan.

“Shh! We do not have much time. Eventually someone will find out that the cook is cooking in his own pot!”

They found their way back to the hall with the red doors quickly. Anne's heart was pounding wildly. It would only be a matter of time before someone would find out that intruders were on the loose! Jordan was sweating under his armor.

"I don't see or smell the hobgoblin." Whispered Zi.

"Good. He probably thinks his job is done and is off playing a game of skulls and bones or something." Said Anne. The light stream from the whistle flickered and then fizzled out.

"Hurry! The spyglass!" Said Anne. Zi pulled it out. It was so thin it seemed barely visible. Squinting his eyes and peering through it he looked at all of the doors. One of them, two doors to the left on the left-hand side of the hall had a small marking. It was barely visible but it was there. A tiny, glowing white "x".

"I see it!" He hissed and handed the spyglass to Anne. She looked through it.

"How did the gnomes put it there without anyone knowing?" She asked and handed it to Jordan.

"That is anyone's guess. However, that it was members of the Blackroot clan who did this does not surprise me. They and the Bluehills have always been keepers of esoteric knowledge. The Blackroots are also the most dangerous as well. If anyone can tangle with the Fairy King, it would be them."

"Wow." Said Jordan looking through the spyglass at the mark.

"What do you think could be on the other side of that door?" Asked Anne.

"What do you mean?" Asked Jordan.

"In some stories treasures are guarded by dragons and some doorways are guarded by three-headed dogs. Could be a horrible monster in there."

"You could be right but we have no other way of knowing. We have already come this far. Let us be brave and open it." Said Zi. "See if you can pick the lock Jordan." Jordan looked dismayed and hesitated at the mention of monsters but finally reached in for his pocket knife to pick the lock. It clicked open after a few minutes. Slowly they entered and saw that it was merely another dim hallway lined with torches with an arched open doorway at the end. However, Anne's ring burned even hotter in her pocket as soon as she stepped into the passageway. She didn't even want to look at it, as it burned under her armor. They entered and closed the door behind them and slipped as quietly as mice, their shadows flickering along the walls like imp shadows.

They crossed the hall and into the open room. In this wide room there was another open doorway to the right that led down a steep incline. They heard noises coming up from this opening. Below was a vast workroom. In the room they stood were many wooden carts, some of them brimming with gold and jewels, others with silver and there were many barrels stacked on top of each other. Just above them was yet another incline. At the top of this incline were two trolls guarding a door. They quickly pulled back.

"How do we get past them?" Whispered Jordan. Zi thought for a moment.

"The carts." He said. Just then they heard trolls approaching. Trolls were coming up the incline from the bottom room with carts laden with sorted treasures. They could see trolls coming and going and one was on his way towards the room they were in. Just then they heard a gruff voice down the hall behind them.

"Who left this here door unlocked? Blockheads! Louts!" Shouted the voice.

"You two, hide in this cart here with the gold. That room at the top there is the treasure room, I just know it and these carts full of gold are going to that room! I'll stay out here and watch for trouble. Find the objects!" Whispered Zi. With that he disappeared behind some barrels. Anne and Jordan climbed into the nearest cart full of gold and jewels, burrowing into the treasure. The troll came striding in from the hallway and pointed at the two guards above him.

"Someone left the door open!" He shouted accusingly. Long golden keys dangled from a thick, studded leather belt around his tunic.

"Well it wasn't us that did it, Commander!"

"I didn't say you did. I'm just sayin' it's the King's treasure room is all and he'll have our hides if anything goes missin'. Be sure to watch what's goin' on 'round here! What's this cart of silver doing here? Silver don't belong in the high treasure room it belongs in the low treasure room. Grak, Darog! You louts, can't you do anything right?" The Commander, in great irritation, called down to some trolls in the workroom. He then descended down the incline into the workroom cursing whoever made the mistake.

"He's right about that. Always takin' somethin' out our hides. Couldn't have been his precious ogre sons and daughters that did it, could it now?" Said one of the guards sarcastically. The other guard chuckled. Two trolls came up from the workroom pushing carts of glittering, golden treasures and left them near the doorway. Then they began pushing the carts waiting in the second room up the second incline towards the upper treasure room. Thus, Anne and Jordan made their way into the King's secret treasure room.

"Asleep on the job are ya?" Taunted one of the cart-pushing trolls.

"It's dead up here. If I want to catch come sleep what's it to you?" Said one of the guards.

"Just don't let His Lordship catch you!"

"He won't and so what? He don't care for any of us. We're just servants and slaves 'round here."

“Well servants an' slaves got jobs to do last time I checked. You two happen to be servants with an easy job. That's all I'm sayin'.”

“Really? Sound's like you're sayin' more than you ought to, like you got a point your tryin' to make.”

“Well maybe I do.”

“And I don't wanna hear it so pile up the treasure in there an be off!” Said the lazy guard, angry for being chastised.

“Yeah,” Said the other guard, smirking. “you're interruptin' his beauty sleep.”

“Alright, fine.” Said the cart-pusher. He and his companion laughed heartily as the guards opened the door for them and piled the treasure on the ground and left with their carts. With that, the door was shut. Both of the children scrambled out from under the mounds of gold and jewelry they were hiding under.

“Sounds like some trolls are unhappy being here.”

“I've noticed. You know what? I was just thinking. Maybe the Blackroots have a spy in here. Someone who works for the Fairy King but doesn't like him.” Said Anne.

“There might be more than one.” Noted Jordan.

“Well let's find the objects.”

“What are we looking for again?”

“A staff, an oud, which looks like a lute and a bag of gold dust. All gold.”

“Huh.” Murmured Jordan looking around. “The King wants these particular objects for his plan, so they wouldn't be treated like regular treasure. They'd have to be in a special place in here. Like a special chest, a box or wardrobe or something.”

“Brilliant deduction!” Said Anne. Jordan smiled. Amusement turned to awe at the tremendous, careless wealth in front of them. It was gold upon gold upon gold sprinkled with precious jewels everywhere that the eye could see.

“Don't take anything Jordan. Only get the things we came for.” She warned.

“Why not?”

“The Fairy King is evil and his things may be cursed. We should only take back the things he stole.”

“It's just treasure.”

“No it isn't. Why do you think dragons hoard treasure? Or greedy people hoard money? It's usually ill gotten gains and they won't part with it and will do anything to keep it. It can have power over you if you let it. Treasure from an evil person can be dangerous. It can be cursed to prevent others from having it.” Jordan pouted but continued to look without touching.

“Hey, what about this? This red chest over here?” He called to her. She approached the chest, a deep blood red color. Like the doors in the hall. It was enormous.

“I'll bet they're in there.” She said.

“I don't see a lock.” Jordan picked up a rod of copper and they both pushed and lifted the lid. In the chest were deeply brilliant gemstones, chalices and rings – and also the three golden objects, glimmering amongst the jewels.

“I wonder what's so special about those jewels.”

“Me too. Maybe they were made in some other part of the universe.” Jordan gave her a funny look.

“Well you never know. It's possible. I know someone who could tell you many things about the comings and goings of creatures from different worlds and the things carried back and forth.”

“Who?”

“His name is Professor Celsius. Anyway, we've found the objects. Let's go!” Anne took the bag and the oud and Jordan grabbed the staff.

“Now, how do we get out of here?” He asked. “There's no escape passage that I can see.”

“We'll have to create more mayhem and confusion.”

“I don't know Anne. That might not work this time.”

“The only way past those guards is a distraction. If they'd left the carts in here we could ride back out in the carts. But they didn't do that.”

“Mayhem and confusion. Seems like that's what we're good at doing anyway.” Said Jordan, sighing and glancing at the door.

There was a sudden, loud banging behind the door.

“What was that? Something strange is going on! Wake up, you!” The guard said to his companion.

“What? I don't hear nothin'! Get off!” The other shrugged him off and turned around to go back to sleep. But the other guard persisted.

“I tell you, something's in there!”

“Then go have a look. It's probably your imagination.”

“If anything turns up missing it'll be our hides!” The guard opened the door.

“Huh.” Snorted the lazy guard, disinterested. The other guard looked around, then unlocked the door, went inside and peeked around the door. Nothing. He took a look farther inside the room and from a pile of golden coins and jewels near the

exit sprang up Jordan and Anne.

“Aye!” He yelled. “Hobgoblins ain't allowed in here!” They ran outside, right smack into the other guard! Anne dug into the gold dust bag with a clumsy gloved hand and threw out a big clump of glittering gold dust into the troll's face! He sniffed, then sneezed and then he was truly awake. The other troll was out the door.

“Hobgoblins got no business here. Hey!” He peered at them closely with his beady black eyes. “These ain't no hobgoblins! These is mortal children!” He said, surprise spreading across his face.

“I told you to pay attention! How'd they get in here anyway?” He cried. The lazy guard began laughing maliciously.

“No worries. The King don't have to find out nothin!” Anne threw more gold dust at both of them and he slapped her arm down but not before the dust sprayed a fine golden mist about the trolls. Afterward it did nothing and the trolls laughed and grabbed them both.

“And I suppose you think you've disappeared, eh? We can't see you now, is that it? Gold dust indeed! Worthless stuff I say. Give me that, girl, and give me that staff, boy!” He snatched the bag and then went for the staff but then something strange happened. Both of the trolls began sneezing violently and uncontrollably. Snot began flying everywhere and right before the children flowers and vines and thick foliage started growing out of all of the guards' orifices. Flowers and roots sprouted and twined around the trolls as they scrambled to extract themselves from their wildly growing prison but too late! They dropped the children but were unable to scream as they had plant matter growing from their mouths. Their toes became rooted into the stone floor, cracking it as they became mutant trollish trees covered in bark, roots, leaves and flowers. Their arms turned to branches and their legs trunks. Anne snatched the bag and she and Jordan dashed off. Zi was waiting below, watching in fascination.

“More guards are coming! The Treasure Guard watch will be changing over soon. I overheard them talking and their replacements are late!” They ran down the hall towards the room with the red doors and closed the door behind them.

“Do you remember where we came from?” Asked Anne.

“Yes. Get prepared. That staff is also a weapon. The golden tip. When you see anything move toward us in a threatening manner Jordan, look directly at the enemy and point!”

By the time the three had gotten down to the abandoned tunnel from the cellar room an alarm had been raised. They had managed to skulk by through most of their return journey through the fortress until they'd reached the ground floor when they had to blast three trolls, several doors, some tapestries and a goblin with the staff and turned an ogress into a tree with the gold dust. Two fires were now raging in the fortress. Goat and ram horns blared in a terrible cacophony throughout the fortress. The staff tip was smoking when Jordan was finished and three trolls lay in pieces. Using Zi's candle, flickering in a faint beam they clung to that light as if it were life itself, a hope in the cloistered dark. Shouts were ringing out from all directions above them as they sneaked their way out the opening under the bridge and down the dried up creek. They flung off their goblin armor and found their hides. Anne strapped on her leather bag and stuffed the bag of gold dust and the oud in it. Anne and Jordan carried the staff in their mouths as they followed Zi through the forest.

When they had traveled for a few hours Anne and Jordan began to tire out. Jordan complained that his muscles were very sore.

"From using the staff no doubt. It takes a lot of energy and skill to use it. I am sorry to make you use it so roughly when you were not ready." Said Zi.

"Well, it was either that or die horribly in there!"

"We're tired Zi. We need a rest!" Said Anne. Zi sniffed the air,

"I don't know. I think we should keep moving." He kept looking up at the darkening horizon. It was late evening.

"Just for a little while. We're long gone now. And they don't know we're disguised." She said.

"I can't believe we got away with it!" Jordan crowed. They had dropped the staff and began rooting around for a resting place. Anne nestled finally beneath a small bush. Zi relented and they all three rested for a while, Anne and Jordan dozing softly, Zi feeling restless. The sky grew dark with cloud and the looming night. Shafts of sunlight were disappearing from the forest floor and the tiny denizens of the woods had grown utterly silent.

"I think we need to keep going." Zi finally said, nudging them awake.

"What's wrong?" Anne asked, yawning.

"A storm is coming." Anne sniffed the air and her ears perked up.

"Maybe we should stay hidden. It's not safe to be out in a storm."

"This is no regular storm. *You* know what we did. We stirred this storm up. We need to get on the move, Anne and Jordan. Now!" Neither of them argued as they sensed the danger as well.

"It got dark all of a sudden." Said Jordan as he went to fetch the staff. They were back on track behind Zi, making their way eastward. They could hear a sound nearly imperceptible, a sigh, sweeping down far behind them. Rain. Then the distant boom of thunder. This quickened their pace. Wide plumes and waves of glowing color flew from the trees, bushes and from other hiding places.

"What's that?" Asked Jordan.

"Tiny woodland fairy folk and birds." Said Zi.

"Why don't they hide?"

"Some do but hiding does not always protect you from the Wild Hunt! The Fairy King comes!" He broke into a trot as the thunder growled louder and the rains swept down in earnest. In the far distance they heard the primitive, wild sound of the horns blaring.

"The host is gathering. He knows. He knows!" Said Zi. They all began running, fleet as the wind but it would take hours to escape the woods and even then once the hunt was underway nothing but the most powerful of fairies could stop it and not even powerful folk were willing to intervene when the Fairy King rode through.

"Wait! Maybe we should bury the objects?" Said Jordan, dropping the staff from his mouth.

"This is his home and he will surely find them if we do that! If the King were allowed to get the objects back, his potion would be made and he would be able to conduct the hunt eternally and everywhere! That could never be allowed to happen! Better to let the hunt ride forth this night and create chaos and then dissipate in the dawn than to let that happen!" Cried Zi. Jordan picked the staff up again. They all ran in a near panic, each wondering where they might find a hiding place. Anne stumbled over the roots of an old tree. Her bag under her hide shifted and she fell over. Jordan leaped over her.

"Wait!" She cried but in their haste they did not hear her.

"Ssssssstop!" Said a deep, inhuman voice. It sounded like deep ocean waves rising and falling. It stopped both Zi and Jordan in their tracks, if only for a moment. When they made to move again, it spoke again.

"Ssssssstop, I ssssay, for you will never essssssescape the hunt! Not on your own." It was the tree Anne lay beside. She got up and it pulled its roots out of the ground and grabbed the foxes.

"Old Tree!" Cried Anne.

"It is I, child. The Mother Tree has awakened me and has made known your dangerous journey to the Dark Mountain. My kin have warned me that the King of the Dark Mountain rides forth after you. The trees shall deliver you. Branch upon branch, root by root you shall travel and your feet shall not touch the ground!" They could hear the wild calls of the host and baying of the night hounds coming closer.

"The hounds and the host come." Said Old Tree. With that the tree lifted them up towards its top and from there they ran through the tree tops. The host was fast approaching and they could hear the savage cries of the King and his ogre children and all the other creatures that rode out with them. The black hounds bayed savagely and in all those contemptible voices the foxes could hear the cry: "Thieves! Thieves!"

The sky grew black and thunder boomed as they scrambled to stay ahead of the hunters. Suddenly arrows zipped by. Each time an arrow whizzed past, a branch or leaf was there to shield them. The screeching from the hunters became so loud that Anne thought her ears might bleed.

"You shall not escape, thieves!" Shouted King Alberich, his voice was terrible and powerful with rage and nearly made them halt but tiny branch switches whipped them out of trance and forced them to keep leaping and running. A volley of arrows came by once again, missing them but not before grazing Jordan's leg who yelped and nearly stumbled. A vast sea of roots and knobs and branches entangled the hunting host so that there were shouts of surprise and confusion below. The ground began trembling and rocking. Roots rose up in rebellion against the Fairy King while Zi, Anne and Jordan fled away. Soon a great hand shaped from roots grabbed all three firmly and they went smashing down under the ground and tumbling into a hole that closed up over them and then they found themselves in blackness, soaked through and very cold.

"Zi? Jordan? Anybody?" Called Anne fearfully. Silence. Then:

"Yes? I'm here." Said Zi softly.

"Yes." Said Jordan weakly. A light flickered on. It was Zi's whistle. He had taken off his hide and was his spritful self again if rather frazzled looking. Anne was glad to see light once more.

"Where. . . where are we?" Whimpered Jordan.

"Underground, somewhere." Said Zi.

"Maybe it's a gnome tunnel." Anne said hopefully taking off her hide. She felt dreadfully tired.

"What just happened?" Asked Jordan.

"The trees came to our aid. Or rather to Anne's aid and since we were traveling with her, we were saved as well." Silence.

"Jordan? Where are you?" Anne called. Jordan moaned.

"How should I know? I don't think I can walk." He said. Zi and Anne found him lying upon a small pile of torn roots. Sitting down by him they took a look in the dim light at his leg. It was bleeding.

"Arrow wound. And I think the arrow tip was poisoned." Said Zi.

"It's bleeding too but not too much."

"I'm more concerned over the poison, Anne."

"Poison?" Asked Jordan in dismay.

"Yes, but thankfully it only grazed the skin." Said Zi. Anne fished around for her tin of salve and rubbed it in the wound. It stung and Jordan cried out in pain.

"Night hound saliva. They must put it on their arrows."

"We have to get help for him soon or he will have a terrible plague of nightmares, sleeping and waking." Zi spoke a command for a way out. They helped Jordan out of his hide, rolled the hides up and supporting Jordan on each side, who stood a bit taller than both of them, they followed the stream of light. Their shadows waved and slid along the walls. Little flickers of color they could detect from deep in the caves on either side of them among the stalagmites and stalactites and water pools. Anne was reminded of her previous travail through the secret tunnels of the gnomes on her way to the castle on the Ice Sea. They could hear approaching footsteps and saw softly glowing lanterns lighting up the passageway ahead in the dark.

"Who are they?" Whispered Jordan.

"Gnomes, I think." Said Anne.

"Ho! Stop! What's your business here?" A commanding voice called out to them. Suddenly they were completely surrounded by heavily armed gnomes wearing blue emblems stamped on their chest-plates.

"Who are. . . well by my grandmother's grave mound! It's the girl who came back alive from the Ice Sea and her sprite friend Zi!" With that exclamation a cry of recognition came from the other gnomes.

"There is a small troupe out looking for you three. The Blackroots said you were on your way to the Dark Mountain on royal business from the Prince of the East. Is this true?"

"Yes! I'm sorry if we've caused a lot of trouble but the Fairy King stole some important objects and he was planning something really bad with them. We just *had* to get them back! When he stole Princess Blossom's bag of gold dust he even put spring in danger of fading away." Explained Anne. The lead warrior stepped forward and saluted them.

"I am Hyran and we are of the Bluehill clan. Your friend there, he looks injured."

"He was grazed by a poisoned arrow. Night hound venom." Said Zi.

"Black hound venom, you say? Let us get all of you back to the lodge. We must make haste before it gets worse! How did you get down here?"

"The trees." Said Anne. The other warriors looked puzzled but Hyran seemed nonplussed by this answer and gave her a knowing look.

"Come, we will discuss many things over tea even in the eye of the storm above." He said. "Lucan, let the others know



that the three travelers have been found and that they can end the search.” Then Lucan saluted and went off, his swinging lantern retreating into the dark. Three of the patrol guards carried Jordan while the other continued on patrol, following Lucan. Hyran led Zi and Anne back to the Bluehill Lodge which they had reached in a few hours' time. They were taken to the dining hall which was quiet and empty save for a few older family members. Most of the household was asleep. Many things in this lodge were blue; blue furniture, blue drapes, blue tableware and many paintings of blue starscapes, seascape and blue landscapes. Adjacent to the dining hall, Anne noticed, was a library.

“We are a scholarly bunch as gnomes go.” Said Hyran. They helped Jordan who was dazed and sweating profusely, into a spare cot pulled out into the dining hall right in front of the fireplace and washed and tended his wound before it could get any worse. He was tittering on the edge of a fever. Zi and Anne were fed a meal of slug soup with brown bread and butter and hot, sweet milk tea which warmed them to the core. Anne avoided the slugs and just drank the broth. After supper she sat by Jordan's bed. Zi sat quietly by the window, wrapped in his own thoughts. Hyran eventually came by to speak with her.

“My father is journeying as he always does. The Lord of Bluehill Lodge is always searching for new things, knowledge far and wide. I hope I can fill his shoes.” They briefly listened to the roaring of the Wild Hunt raging far away outside. They could hear the distant cries and howls of the Fairy King and his host.

“How long will they be out there?” Asked Anne.

“All night. Just so long as you stay inside these walls you shall be fine.”

“How many will get hurt?”

“One never really knows. Some may be carried off or die but there is nothing to be done nor should you blame yourself for stopping an evil purpose from coming to pass. It is the way of things.” Anne looked at her feet and sighed.

“The Fairy King won't forget this.”

“No doubt he will not, but he will soon have his hands full of the doings within his own household.”

“What do you mean?”

“It has come to my attention that many trolls are chafing under his rule. He may have his hands full yet with angry servants to deal with.”

“Oh. You know, we noticed that too.” She said. Hyran nodded.

“How do you know about that?” She asked.

“One gains a fair amount of knowledge by simply listening. If you listen and watch enough, you can learn much. Think on it Anne. I am sure that being in the King's stronghold you have heard many interesting things that you may be able to use to your own advantage later.” He said. She grew quiet at this. Right now it all seemed a dark blur but perhaps later she could suss out some detail, some clue or memory that might help her in a later journey.

“So, what did you take to bring down King Alberich's wrath upon the land?”

“His ogres stole the Baobab Prince's golden staff and his golden oud and the Spring Fairy's bag of gold dust. He was planning to melt them down into a potion which would give him the power to ride and hunt forever. So we took these objects back.”

“A worthy quest. So *that* was his aim.” Hyran, who looked quite young to Anne with only a scruff of beard looked concerned, his blue gray eyes considering her words.

“He is always looking for a way to extend the Hunt. Always, that is his aim.”

“They sang a song about what he was planning, something about the Blood Moons.”

“Ah! So you *were* listening and observing, not merely out there swashbuckling! The Blood Moon. It is another name for The Hunter's Moon. A favorite portent of his.”

“What does it mean?”

“The Hunter's Moon in our world and yours is the first full moon after the Harvest Moon, which in turn is the first full moon near the Fall Equinox. The Harvest Moon allows farmers to keep harvesting even into the night because there is less darkness when it rises and crosses the sky. Likewise the Hunter's Moon allows hunters enough light to hunt by the light of its reddish light. Thus, the songs of the Hunter's Moon, or Blood Moon, as they like to say. The Fairy King and his folk can be a rather dramatic bunch.”

“Are there other kinds of moons?”

“Many. Moon lore is a favorite subject of mine. The moon is as changeable as Lady Grey's moods.”

“Have you met her?”

“Not in person.”

“I have.”

“An experience you won't soon forget. I'm sure you learned a thing or two while you were there.” He said, smiling. Anne nodded.

“What kinds of things does your family collect?”

“Exotic objects from far and wide, knowledge strange and wonderful.”

“Sort of like Professor Celsius.” She said. Hyran smiled and chuckled.

“The Professor is an old friend of this family, Anne.” Then he sighed. “The boy there,” He nodded towards Jordan who was quietly sleeping. “I have not seen him before.”

“He's traveling with me. A doorway to this place opened for him. I thought he needed someone who's been here before to help him on his first trip.”

“That was thoughtful of you. I have notice you did not call him friend?”

“Well, before now he wasn't a friend. We didn't really like each other before but he isn't so bad. In fact, he's kind of alright.” She said. Hyran nodded.

“Sometimes friends are found unexpectedly. That one, he's a swashbuckler, I suspect. He needs your friendship and you'll need his. Once again, fortune has come your way Anne. I think both you and I have an appreciation for knowledge, do we not?” He asked. Anne nodded. She supposed that at this point Jordan really was a friend.

“Well then. Tell me about the trees' part in this tale. . .”

Anne recounted her tale since the first opening of the green door. She was reminded of her own close scrape in the Great Hall with the night hounds. No one it seemed left Other Land without battle scars.

Early the next morning Jordan's leg was beginning to heal, his wound was wrapped and cleaned and they breakfasted on butter biscuits and strong kombucha. The Bluehill Lodge was not easy to find and they had gotten there quite by accident, thanks to the trees. It sat in the middle of high grasses near a gurgling brook within the Great Meadow that led the way towards Flower City. Verdant and green was the land but missing the full flowering of spring blooms and crops. Happy to see them repair the spring mischief of the ogres the Bluehill clan sent out messages to the Spring Fairy to help the trio get on their way within the hour. Kar was waiting to take them back to the city of flowers. The family was gathered to see them off, wondering who it was that had unleashed King Alberich's wrath through the woods and the countryside. Most of them wore spectacles, even the children. And now that Anne got a good look at the lodge during the light of morning the ceiling in the main hall was made of heavy glass to let the light in and this light seemed to flow through the larger rooms of the lodge. It was nearly the opposite of the dark, closed Blackroot Lodge. In fact, Hyran informed her that all of the rooms' ceilings could open. And in all nooks and crannies everywhere in the lodge, she finally noticed, there were books! Stacks of books and scrolls and papers and quills. The family all cheered as they sent them off.

Jordan was groggy and very sore and slept most of the way. The sun was set to rise, yet was hidden behind large fluffy clouds tinged with gray. A light rain fell, but instead of instilling an ominous feeling in her, Anne felt refreshed by it. The land below looked like a soft, misty blanket of green; wide, wide meadows and fields spread out with knots of daffodils here and there. It was finally time to see all the flowers of spring and all of the colors of spring. *Perhaps there will be a few berry crops too.* She thought hopefully. They could see Flower City far off, surrounding the Daffodil Palace, the home of Princess Blossom.

“The Hunt was on the move. I could feel it in the trembling of the ground no matter where we fled. But I am so happy you found it! Now I can finish my work before Summer arrives. I owe you much and if I can help you in any way please tell me.”

“Of course Princess Blossom, I have no requests of you. I was merely along for the journey. However my friends may have some requests?” Said Zi, looking at them questioningly.

“I know what I would like. I want a huge crop of berries and cherries everywhere!” Said Anne. Princess Blossom smiled.

“We shall do our best. Are you sure there is nothing else?” The Princess asked. Anne shook her head. Jordan looked unsure.

“Do not be afraid to ask for something. You accomplished a great deed Jordan.” Said Zi proudly.

“I don't know what to ask for.” He said shyly, blushing. Little Lito was hovering near the Princess and he whispered something in her ear. Princess Blossom smiled which made Jordan feel even more bashful and she disappeared behind a petal wall within the next worl then came back with a long, thin green vine, twined in a coil around her arm.

“Here is a useful gift. If you ever come back you may find that you need it. You can use it as rope and also as a lasso. It obeys commands if you need to rustle or catch something. Treat it with care and water it once every other day and it will live and work for you in your adventures.” She unwound the vine from her arm and handed it to Jordan.

“I give you this as a gift from the Princess of Spring. Keep it with care, Jordan.” She said. Jordan took the vine and handled it gently, as if it were a holy oracle.

“You are its new keeper Jordan.”

“Thanks!” He said. Blossom smiled.

“Come all! We have work to do!” She called out to her friends. Myriads of fairies and sprites gathered to her as she lifted her leaf bag of gold dust and her wings began to flutter for take off.

“Sog and his brother are waiting to take you back to the Land of the Baobabs.” With that, Princess Blossom and all those gathered to her busied themselves finishing the work of spring. Anne, Jordan and Zi began the long flight back to the Realm of the Baobab Prince.

When the three intrepid adventurers arrived with the staff and the oud the whole realm was ready to celebrate. Many saw them before they had landed and had already guessed that they brought good news with them.

"But how did you know?" Asked Anne.

"The Mother Tree told us." Said Nneka, her dark eyes dancing.

"Now you will see what a princely celebration is like!" She was part of a delegation of fairies come to welcome them back. They were quickly ushered to the grand pavilion atop the Mother Tree. Prince Efosa was overjoyed.

"My staff and my oud have finally been restored to me. Now I can make the most beautiful music again and rule with utmost confidence!" Prince Efosa took his staff and ran his hand down its smooth wooden and gold length.

"I can now set about healing the ring around our Mother Tree." He said. Then he frowned slightly.

"It has been used. In a fight, eh?" He looked at the three of them, especially at Zi.

"In our flight from the fortress I instructed Jordan to use it in order to avoid capture. I am sorry if that offends you but we had no other choice, Prince Efosa."

"Sorry? Do not be sorry for defending yourself! Rather, I am surprised the boy could handle it at all without hurting himself. How do you feel Jordan?" The Prince looked at him with a question in his gaze.

"I feel really sore."

"Yes. It takes much energy when you use it as a weapon. Its true purpose is to help one lead and guide but sometimes we must fight too. I am surprised you could manage it! I am proud of you all and I shall present you with gifts, especially for you, Jordan, wielder of the golden staff! Come forward all of you!" He motioned to them. They all came and sat by the Prince's throne stool. Ngozi who was sitting by the throne stood up carrying a long, polished wooden box in his hands. Many fairies crowded into the throne room to watch. The golden tip of the staff lit up like a small torch in Efosa's hand.

"Zi, step forward my friend." Zi stepped forward. "For your friendship to my court and to many others in Other Land, for your bravery and friendship in helping Anne Greene in her travails, I give you this signet ring. You are a bringer of news and tidings. You may come and go from this court as you please and this ring lets everyone in the land know that you are my friend!" Ngozi lifted a copper ring with a black stone fastened with copper wire set in it and gave it to Zi. The Prince raised his staff above Zi's head and lowered it then set it aside. Then he turned his gaze on Anne.

"Anne, come forward!" She came forward.

"For your courage and bravery and your friendship with the trees I give you this horn. When you are in trouble and need help, blow this horn. If one who is a friend of my court, whether sprite or sprig hears it, may help from them swiftly come your way no matter where you are. Use it wisely for it is not for frivolous use. It has a twin and the twin is my own. They were given to me by a faun from the south long ago." Ngozi handed her a small, curved goat's horn with symbols etched in its sides. Again the Prince lifted his staff over her head and then lowered it and set it aside. Then he looked at Jordan and he smiled.

"Jordan, come forward." Jordan stepped forward.

"For your courage and bravery, though this be your first time in these lands, to you I give this longbow and arrow. It was especially made for hunters. In order for it to work well in your hands, not only must your aim be true but your heart must also be true. Never use it to harm creatures for sport but to protect yourself and others, or for the hunt - to feed and nourish yourself." Ngozi handed the longbow, made of baobab wood and copper which was highly polished with a string made of sinew. Jordan took them, feeling in awe of the whole ceremony.

"When it is truly yours, your name will appear upon it. Use it wisely and it will obey you when you most need it." Said the Prince as he lifted his staff over Jordan's head. Then the Prince raised his torch bearing staff three times.

"I, Prince Efosa of the Land of the Baobab Tree, Keeper of the Mother Tree say this: these three, Zi, Anne and Jordan I give them the title Most Splendid Royal Adventurers and Explorers of the Court of the Baobab Prince!" With that, a cheer rose from the gathered crowd.

"And now let us celebrate! Bring food and drink and bid all in the land to celebrate for the Prince has his oud and his staff again. Music!" With that the Prince blew out the fire from his staff and lay it at his feet, picked up his oud and led everyone in song and dance. Ngozi played his whistle, Emeka, Kayin and Kojo played their drums and Nneka sang and shook her bells. The whole land rejoiced with such happy and joyful music that had not been heard there or anywhere else in a long time. Cooking fires were lit and soon food was being shared and passed everywhere. A special drink made from baobab leaves mixed with milk, yam fritters, corn, lots of nuts, roasted and candied and meats with spicy sauces and many other delights were had and they sang and played music and danced all night until the next sunrise.

The sunrise was glorious and cloudless. Jordan peered out of the opening, yawning widely as he and Anne sat in their cots looking out beyond their pavilion, the drapes pulled back so they could see the view. Zi remained asleep, snoring softly in his cot.

"Anne, how do you know so much about this place and the people? How do I learn about this place?"

"I read fairy tales. I'm still learning new things. But books are only a loose guide or a map. If you read them they can give

you an idea of what it's like.”

“Huh. So I should read fairy tales?”

“It helps.”

“I can't let my friends see me though.”

“Why not?”

“Well they think books are stupid.”

“That's too bad. You don't have to let them see you but you shouldn't care and if they were your real friends they wouldn't pick on you. Besides, after what you've been through are they really that scary?” Jordan thought on this. Then shook his head.

“You're right.”

“About what?” She asked.

“About them. They aren't real friends.” He looked over his new gift. Anne smiled. Perhaps they could really be friends after all. It was good to have a friend to share her adventures with. Not just a fairy friend like Zi but a regular friend.

“So, Anne, tell me about the trees. How did you get them to save us?”

“Well I didn't really *get* them to do anything. It's just that I like trees a lot and wanted to save them. Sometimes when you do something good for someone it can come back to help you later.” It was then that she was able to tell him about all of her adventures and perils in Other Land, this time uninterrupted. If he decided to come here alone, his adventures would probably be quite different but at least he wouldn't be entering the perilous land not knowing what to expect.

And the one thing to expect was the unexpected.

Having adjusted her timepiece they arrived back without it being too late. Anne handed over Jordan's lock kit and his bow and quiver of arrows to him. He marveled briefly at its seeming endless bottom and then hurried home up the road from the old shed.

"Thanks Ann!" He said without looking back. She locked the door behind her and went to her own backyard. She climbed over the fence, trudged through the yard to the porch and into the house. It seemed so strange that they had spent days somewhere else but only a few hours had passed back home. She felt the tiredness one feels after having a long but wonderful trip and yet she was in for a pleasant surprise.

"Anne I've been wondering where you were! Your dad and I want to go to the beach for an overnight trip so get packing. We're going to Depoe Bay. Don't forget your toothbrush!"

"Yes!" Anne danced up and down in excitement. She loved the beach.

"Mama, are we going to the Sea Hag?"

"Most likely we'll eat there tomorrow."

"Yay!" She ran upstairs to get packed and put her leather bag under the bed. Later that evening they were off on their family trip.

However, when they came back home the next evening they were in for a nasty shock. It seemed that the whole house had been overturned! Clothes had been thrown about and some of them even ripped to shreds. Chest and dresser drawers were thrown down, toys broken. The kitchen was where most of the damage was found.

"Heavens!" Exclaimed her dad.

"What in the world. . ." Mama was in shock.

"What happened in here? What could have done this?"

"Did you leave a basement window unlocked?" Asked mama.

"No, I don't remember leaving anything open or unlocked." Said dad.

"It must have been raccoons. Raccoons did this!"

"But how did they get in here?"

"I don't *know* how they got in here! You must have forgotten to close a window or something!"

"I just *told* you I didn't. . ." Her parents began arguing. She had not seen them this angry with each other, ever!

Footprints of dirt, mud and stinky-poo were everywhere and had even been wiped on the walls! Food was mashed into the rugs or thrown on the walls, glasses and dishes broken, chairs overturned and gnawed down - it was a mess! Even the backyard had not escaped abuse. Anne walked outside to the backyard and to her horror the koi fish pond had been destroyed. There was no water in the pond and there was mud and dirt piled all around the edge of the pond. The fish were dead or missing, the ones still left were half eaten. Even the flowers and vegetables had been pulled up and thrown about and smashed and giant holes had been dug up all over the yard. In a panic Anne fled to her room. Her room was a wreck. And the smell! She remembered that awful smell! Her bedding was torn and ripped apart, the mattress torn and her clothes strewn about. Some of them soiled. And her leather bag! She searched and searched for her bag but it was gone and everything in it, even her precious ring and her new horn from Prince Efosa!

Everything except her hammer. She sat down on her bed, stunned. It was slowly dawning on her. The smell she recognized on her journey across the Great Meadow. This was too vengeful and petty for raccoons. It had to be the hobgoblin.

Anne felt her face growing red hot with anger while her parents' arguing grew even louder downstairs. He did this and was probably secretly watching somewhere, enjoying the chaos. Her parents' anger was upsetting but more than that, something else was growing in her. She tried to calm herself by taking deep breaths, slowly. She picked up *Star* and went over to her bedroom window. The curtains were ripped and thrown down and pooled around her feet. She gazed out of the window down at the wrecked yard.

*This. Means. War.*

**THE END**

**Note from the author:**

This is the end of book five of the series.  
I hope you enjoy reading  
them as much as I enjoy writing them.  
Book six, the final book of the series  
should be coming out in early July so 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. Thanks so 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.

**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 and information and news from the author at her website:**

<http://epistlepublishing.com/>

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Check out the other books in the *Secret Doorway Tales* series:

[\*The Green Door\*](#)  
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And coming soon:

**The Battle of Dusk and Dawn**

**By V. A. Jeffrey**

from book six in the series

**Secret Doorway Tales**

**Here's a special preview:**

## Goblins.

There are many kinds of goblins in the world, one of those kinds being hobgoblins. Hobgoblins are at the core of this particular story so this brief prologue will focus mostly on them.

They can be a mischievous bunch and *not* in a good way. They are often said to be spiteful, rude even cruel and that they love to hold grudges over the smallest absurdities. All of this is basically true. Sometimes clustered in tribes (depending on where they hail from) or in rare cases even families, they are usually thought to be solitary beings and have been the bane of human domestic existence for as long as anyone cares to remember.

Often when strange sounds and evil smells erupt in one's house after a night of hobgoblin mischief – usually in the kitchen – it is thought to be the work of the usual suspects such as mice, roaches or, Lord forbid, rats! However, it can just as easily be hobgoblins. Hobgoblins, as a general rule, enjoy being wicked and can be a terrible pain in the backside but they do not have much power beyond being a nasty nuisance. However, many hobgoblins all packed in together with nothing constructive to do (and why would a self-respecting goblin of any sort get up to anything constructive?) can get up to all sorts of wickedness. . .