

THE PUMPKIN PRINCESS

A Secret Doorway Tale: Book Two

By V. A. Jeffrey

Book cover photo by [Duccio](#)

Copyright 2011

In a wood in the middle of a clearing there was a wooden shed with a green door. It once led to a place called Other Land, where all manner of fairy tale beings lived, but not anymore. Of the door, I mean. But of course, you might already know that and in case you didn't, the short of it is this: there was an adventure that began and ended with the green door and a little girl named Anne Greene and then the way to Other Land was shut.

But there are other ways. . . .

School started when the weather was still hot but that had been a month ago and then October had come. The month of October ushered in the full fall season. Sometimes a very thin frost could be found in the morning and some of the trees were just beginning to turn their coats from green to gold, scarlet or caramel. Anne was excited to go back to school. It meant new teachers, new classmates and old friends to see and catch up with. It also meant homework, which Anne only liked some of the time. This particular morning she was slow to get ready and slow getting to school. She'd had a bad dream the night before and didn't feel well that morning. She had been groggy and a bit grouchy. She dreamt that she was being chased by long, pointy shadows with cold, starry eyes. She couldn't stop running and there was nowhere to hide. They chased her over rocks and mountains, over trees and snowy fields and into an icy sea. Then she awoke suddenly to find the alarm of her ladybug clock going off.

Later that afternoon she was walking home from school with two of her friends, Emma and Tanya. All three of them were engrossed in conversation over who at school was suddenly wearing lip gloss, who had collected the most Fashion Princess dolls (there were 20 of them) and what they were all going to do over the weekend. Being that it was Friday, they were more excited than usual and since there was a Teacher's Planning Day on Monday they had a three day weekend which made it even better! Emma and her family were going to Pacific City to visit her grandma. Tanya was going shopping for clothes and gadgets with her family. Anne's family would hold to their yearly tradition of visiting the pumpkin patch on Sauvie Island. Anne loved going to the farms out there and mama and dad always let her pick out her own pumpkin.

They passed a group of boys, fifth graders all, playing a game of catch while walking home. The very same boys that broke the window of the shed, Anne noted.

"Boys are so loud!" She said, annoyed. "If it were girls, they could play catch without being so loud!" Tanya snorted and laughed.

"My little brother makes *so* much noise when he's playing! He especially likes to pretend he's a tiger and even puts a belt in his pants and runs around the house on all fours! It drives me crazy!" Tanya said.

"My brother and his friends love to play football in the house when mom and dad aren't home," Said Emma, "and they always manage to break something important!" They all laughed and rolled their eyes. Anne didn't have a brother or a sister. Sometimes she wished she did have one. Even if it *was* a little brother, she decided. She didn't want one that ran around breaking things all of the time though. The wind suddenly picked up, rustling tree tops and blowing through the girls' hair. On the wind current Anne heard something odd. The fallen leaves, crusty and dry, rustled and whirled lightly but between the wind and the leaves there was a voice so low it was barely audible. Or rather, it was many voices made up of organic things pressed together. Neither Tanya or Emma seemed to notice it but Anne heard it. It was speaking to her through the crackling pops of dry leaves and the thick, wooden timbre of the branches.

"Anne. *Anne*. The Winter Queen grows stroooooong. Yooooouuu must come baaaaaack." The wind, the drifting leaves and waving branches whispered. Tanya turned down a dirt road to catch her school bus and Emma had nearly reached her house.

"See you guys on Tuesday!" Tanya waved.

"See ya." Anne and Emma chimed. Emma said goodbye to Anne and ran up the driveway to her house. Anne continued on to the trail towards her own house. She looked up at the sky, listening for anything else unusual. The sky was a blanket of gray. A chill coursed through her when she heard the voice mention the Winter Queen. As she reached the clearing she saw her dad standing near the little shed, waiting for her.

"Little one! How was school today?"

“It was good.” She said quietly.

“You feeling better?”

“Yeah. I didn't get any homework today.”

“Well how about that? Mama might not be too pleased to hear that.”

“Mama will just assign me more books to read this weekend. Which is fine because I *like* reading.” She said, feeling a bit grumpy again. Her dad chuckled.

“Well, let's get home. Grandma Veronica is coming to dinner.” Anne's face lit up.

“Oh, and mama is making our favorite dish!” He added.

“Grandma! Lasagna! Yay!!” She cheered. Dad smiled and they started off home. The clearing, once a wild, riotous tangle of wildflowers was now a field of tall, dull grasses and some grayish brown weeds, the wildflowers gone with summer.

Even though it was dark outside the little yellow house with the white shutters was full of warm lights and good smells. Specifically, freshly baked cheese bread sticks and lasagna baking in the oven. They were sitting around the dinner table waiting for mama to bring out the lasagna. Grandma Veronica and Anne had just finished setting the table. Anne couldn't have been happier. She was always happy to see her grandmothers. Grandma Barbara didn't visit as often; she was always traveling in some far away land. She was in Bangkok currently, but she always sent Anne special trinkets from her travels and some of them almost seemed magical. Grandma Veronica told lots of stories about Anansi the Spider and many other mythic fables and even stories about adventures she had when she was a little girl. This evening she was regaling them about the time when she had gotten a new dress for picture day at school.

"They had picture day when you went to school too?" Anne asked, incredulous. Grandma and dad laughed.

"They sure did! Even way back in the Stone Age, child!"

"What happened?" Anne asked. Dad gave her a knowing look and a smile. He had heard this story before.

"Well, one day I came to school for picture day dressed in the prettiest dress you ever saw!"

"What did it look like?"

"Oh, it was pale purple silk and satin trim with a lace pinafore and trimmed with tiny pearls sewed in it with a large beautiful ribbon that tied in a huge bow in the back. I'll tell you how I came by such a dress. One day as I was walking to school I met a woman so old she looked older than dirt itself. She had cracked, flaky skin and a thousand and one wrinkles and one tooth. Her eyes were white with film, like she was blind, but she seemed to see me just the same. She called out to me. I was always taught to be respectful and courteous to my elders so I asked her if she needed any help."

"Could you please show me where N.E. Going street is, dear? I can't see too well." She asked. I gently took her by the arm and we walked two blocks down to N.E. Going street

"Here it is." I said to her.

"Thank you dear. That was good of you. Any wish that you have will be granted. One wish. Just pick up a dandelion seed head, make your wish and it will come true for you." She said and hobbled along her way. Now, I didn't know whether to believe her or not, but I loved blowing dandelion seeds anyway, so I picked one, made a silent wish, blew it, forgot about it and went on my merry little way. Well, when I got home a big surprise was waiting for me. Guess what it was?"

"Your purple dress?"

"It sure was! I used to see that dress in the window every time we passed by the department store. There it was lying on my bed. I was so happy I didn't know what to do!"

"Did your mom buy it?"

"It was my grandmother. For some reason she said that she just had to buy it for me as a gift. Well, I wore it to a big congregation picnic and another girl from school who had wanted the dress saw me with it. It made her very mad. I wore it for school picture day and she saw me standing at the bus stop waiting for the school bus. So she came over and shoved me in the dirt, dirtying and tearing my dress! I cried and cried and she and her friends laughed and laughed. The old lady, strangely enough, was standing and watching across the street. I went to school and went to the girls' bathroom to try and clean my dress and lo and behold, it was like new again! However, when it was time to take the pictures, that mean girl's clothes suddenly disappeared while we were all standing in line. No one quite understood what had happened but she wasn't wearing any clothes in front of the whole school! She was just standing there in her underwear and the whole school was laughing. She ran screaming and crying to the girls' bathroom!" Grandma said. Anne laughed and clapped her hands. There was a girl at her school that didn't like her either and always had something mean to say to Anne and her friends.

"She deserved that!" Anne said, mustering up as stern a voice as she could.

"You reap what you sow." Said grandma.

"And the other moral of this story, mama?" Asked dad.

"Reaping what you sow is the obvious one, but yes, there's another one. Even when you meet people who seem a little different, be courteous and kind. People deserve to be treated nicely unless they give you a good reason not to. Good manners and kindness can take you far, even when you have nothing else to offer. Besides, you never know who it might be. You could be talking to an angel and not know it!" Grandma's eyes twinkled. Last year, Anne would have only half believed her but after this summer Anne knew better than to dismiss such stories. After all, that old woman could have been someone special. Like a fairy godmother. Who knew? One thing was sure. Neither grandma Veronica or Grandma Barbara forgot about the life behind ordinary things. Grandma Barbara always said that just because you grow up doesn't mean you have to *Grow up!* Anne wasn't exactly sure what it meant but she suspected it had something to do with imagination.

Mama came in, holding with thick mitts, a deep, red baking dish of steaming hot lasagna. It drew a collective "oh" from the family.

"Now Anne, remember, no elbows on the table." Mama gently chided. Anne grinned sheepishly and placed her hands in her lap. Besides the bread sticks and the main dish there was a green salad and also chocolate pudding for dessert. Of course there was grandma and her stories too. Anne was happy. Nothing was amiss and tomorrow they would be going to

the pumpkin patch. The only disappointing part of the evening was that grandma was not staying over for the night. Later that night after grandma kissed her and gave her a small bag of chocolate coins tied with a chocolate colored satin ribbon, Anne helped mama with clearing away the dishes and got ready for bed. Mama came up stairs to pray with her because of her nightmare the night before. After that, she tucked Anne in and said goodnight and left. Anne turned on her night light and got out one of her new books, *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. She read *The Devil with the Three Golden Hairs*. After she read the story she clasped the book shut in confusion, wondering why people in fairy tales always had such impossible tasks to complete. Somehow, they managed either by being smart, being good or just being fortunate. It made her think of Titian the Summer Queen, who still hadn't been found. The ginger cat visited her from time to time and she had convinced mama to let her leave a bowl of cream for him – for which he greatly appreciated, but as the weather became cooler, his visits had become sparse. She hadn't seen the little purple dragonfly in ages. Anne sighed. It was after all, fall, and Zi and Mera were summer fairies. *Are there fall fairies?* She wondered. *Who would find Queen Titian? How could they find her?* Queen Faye was stronger now than she had been in the summer and she was a fairy *queen*, besides. How could Anne possibly find Queen Titian without lots of help? The voices in the trees and the wind had called to her. A call for help. All of these serious things made Anne's eyes droopy and soon she slumbered. Fitfully. She dreamed again, but this time not of black shapes and shadows.

Her room was dark and the wind whistled loudly through the trees outside. The moon was full and bright. She was laying down in her bed. She could hear a voice outside carried by the wind. It was wailing, a little girl's voice, crying. Who is it? Who is crying? Anne closed her eyes. Then opened them again. Sitting on her chest was the ginger cat. His eyes were bright amber flames in the dark. He was kneading the blanket that she lay under. Finally he began to knead so hard that his tiny claws caught her flesh. She could feel the claws piercing and stinging her and suddenly. . .

. . . she was awake to find, lying on her chest, a small wooden whistle as long as two of her fingers and a little rolled up note tied to it.

Ever since Anne had come back through the green door and planted the seed, summertime had hummed along tickety-boo straight into fall. Until this week, when she had that nightmare and then also this morning. Anne felt a sense of dread after the new dream. These dreams meant something. There was no doubt about that. The dreams, the voice in the wind – it all added up to something and the twisty feeling in her stomach said that something was *bad*. She heard mama down the hall getting ready for the trip. Anne put the whistle under her pillow and got bathed and dressed. She put on her favorite jeans and wore her orange pea coat and a little orange beanie hat. She put the whistle in her pocket. Breakfast was light; thick, homemade yogurt with honey, some juice for Anne and coffee for mama and dad. They would mostly be eating out today. They piled into the minivan and were off to get the best pumpkins they could find. Anne took the whistle out and studied it closely now that she had the time. It was small and thin, made of light colored wood – a honey color. There were three holes along its length and when Anne examined it more closely she saw that the grains in the wood moved and swirled slowly. There were soft golden swirls and ribbons of gold that made its surface glitter and shine. It felt warm to the touch and she felt subtle vibrations in her hand as she held it. The note said:

this whistle is a *way wanderer*
 it can help one who is lost.
 those that hear and heed it's call will know
 it is from a friendly voice. it can open
 a path to help you on your way to
 where you are going.
 Only speak your destination
 then blow into the way wanderer, 1-2-3.

She read it again and then a third time to make sure she understood it. 1, 2, 3. She fingered the little holes along its length. She looked up, out the window and gazed at the tall, graceful arches of the St. Johns Bridge rising up before them. It wouldn't be long now before they would get there. The sky had a leaden, dull look. There was no sun peaking out from behind that thick blanket. Anne put the whistle back in her pocket. They turned off St. Helens Road towards Sauvie Island and up ahead Anne could see the vast field of pumpkins. Everything looked well enough. A mist covered the fields like a light shawl. Dad parked the car on the gravel lot next to the market store and they got out. They had arrived early – the crowds hadn't arrived yet. Among the few families that had already arrived Anne didn't see any kids that she knew.

“Alright sweetie, go and look for your pumpkin and remember, don't wander off too far!” Mama said. Anne nodded and they started off towards the patch. Rows and rows of pumpkins, almost as far as she could see, some much bigger than her head and some smaller, all entangled in jade green vines. In the distance the mist seemed much thicker and obscured the farms farther off. Anne walked along the rows slowly, pondering each pumpkin's size and color. She looked around at the endless rows, wondering which one would be best to pick. She looked for a small one, naturally, something as big around as her head. She smiled as she thought of the delicious desserts that they would make from the fresh pumpkin. She thought of mama's pumpkin bread, pumpkin spice cookies and pumpkin pie and dad's delicious pumpkin soup! She drew in a deep breath and suddenly caught a whiff of something. A sweet smell but not sweet in a pleasant way. It was more of a sickening, rotting scent. She frowned, looking around again. A dreadful feeling of realization began to creep up. A feeling that something was wrong in the pumpkin patch and her dream had something to do with it. She looked at the other people milling about. A few were holding their noses. Anne knelt down and with great effort, pushed the large pumpkin in front of her over. To her terrible dismay the pumpkin was black and rotten on the bottom! A slimy, soupy substance covering its entire bottom. It was as if the pumpkin was dissolving slowly into a black, grayish liquid! The substance stank and the rotting stench and the substance had gotten on her fingers. Anne wiped her hands in the soil and took a closer look at the vines and leaves. Now that she was kneeling down on the ground she could see that the underside of the vines and leaves were also black. She got up and walked several feet and inspected another pumpkin, and another and another one still. The entire patch she feared was infected with the stinky, black stuff and now the foul smelling goo was all over her hands! She wrinkled her nose and held her hands out to her sides, wondering what to do next. She could hear cries of disappointment from other people at finding out that the pumpkins were rotting. People were bewildered. Some were angry but Anne was sure she knew who was behind this mischief and an evil bit of mischief it was!

“Anne! Come! It looks like we'll have to substitute something else for fresh pumpkins. Or maybe we'll get canned pumpkin instead.” Mama called. Anne's hands were beginning to sting. The black substance was not only smelly but seemed to seep into the pores and it wasn't a good feeling but she didn't want to wipe it all over her clothes either. Her dad looked at her hands.

“My goodness! We need to get you cleaned up!” He wrinkled his nose. Anne rubbed her hands together vigorously and got some of it off but when she rubbed her hands together it stung even more. The farmer had come running out of the store. Apparently, the blight had come suddenly this morning and took him and his family, as well as customers by surprise. It

took everyone by surprise. Except Anne. Dad found a hose where Anne could wash off her hands. They were slightly red but the stinging sensation was gone, thankfully. As they left the pumpkin patch Anne recalled the farmer and his wife's unhappy faces. She felt bad for what had happened to them. All of their pumpkins ruined! It was high time she found out why. She had felt glum earlier this morning after the dream and now she felt downright blue! She wondered why she hadn't heard from Zi? No matter. The real problem was how was she going to get back to Other Land to find answers? The green door was closed. The whistle was the answer.

They had spent nearly the entire day driving from farm to farm and from supermarket to supermarket. They even went to the farmer's market downtown. What they found was a creepy phenomenon; all the pumpkins in town were rotting! It had come so quickly and mysteriously, baffling farmers, store managers and employees as well as customers looking for pumpkins. And the smell! The Winter Queen's hand was in this. She had managed to blight every pumpkin in sight! Not only that, but this same terrible blight was found on the winter squash too! No squash, no pumpkins would be available this fall!

Dinner was pizza and salad as her parents were tired and confused over the failed pumpkin patch trip. They sat in the living room after dinner talking in bewildered tones about the strange and sudden phenomena. All of Anne's emotions and thoughts had become a massive jumble jangling around in her head. She went up to her room and sat on her bed, thinking things over. This past summer was different. She was only 7 then. She was nearly 8 now and a little wiser. For one thing, she knew that Other Land was real and that there were many doorways that lead to it. She also knew that you needed to know something about fairies before entering their dwellings. Those who entered in ignorance usually didn't make it back home. She also knew enough this time to be afraid. What, with flesh eating creatures like Gryps, evil fairies, wicked queens and such, it wouldn't be rainbows and sunshine. Anne was afraid to go back but she wanted to see Zi again. Besides, all gourds everywhere were rotting on the vine or in the store and no one knew why. She had to stop the blight, after all, what if it spread to other crops? What if they woke up one day and there was no food to eat at all? There was also the matter of the dreams. *But how do I get back to Other Land?* She then felt something grow very warm in her pocket. *The whistle!* She pulled it out. Its golden ribs were glowing with light and suddenly sharp, thin rays of light shot out from it and under the door. Amazed, Anne got up and followed the light. Her parents were busy downstairs. They paid no heed to her. She padded silently down the stairs and towards the basement door. The basement was dark and because of that, the beams of light seemed to grow much brighter, cutting through the darkness like beacons. As she crept down the stairs the light bent around the corner and shot straight to a door behind the furnace behind old boxes and bags. Pale light seeped out from underneath the creaky, wooden door. It led to a storage room; a room that was mostly forgotten. Dad had filled it with boxes and boxes of old papers when they had first moved in. Now it had become another doorway! Anne felt both delighted and nervous. At least now she knew how to get back! She carefully waded through the boxes, bags and old furniture until she finally reached the door. It was locked with a small padlock. Anne recalled that Zi had told her once that there were two kinds of doorways to Other Land. Locked and unlocked. The locked doorways were safer. Anne was very glad that this new doorway that had opened up in her own house was locked! She drew herself up – it was settled then! She would go and find out what was happening. Both of her parents would read her favorite story to her when she was little – *Alice in Wonderland*. Alice was only a girl and she had no super powers or special objects to help her, nor was she a great warrior. She was, however, brave and curious. Anne would have to be like her. Later tonight when her parents were asleep, she would begin her second journey into Other Land. Which meant that she needed to get packing!

Anne got her leather bag out of her toy box and packed all the things she would need – her hammer, her key, her ring, her whistle and her bag of chocolate coins. She also put in a box of nails she had found in the basement. She had on her warm cotton purple pajama set. She slipped on her favorite orange pea coat and beanie hat, for the nights were cool and she didn't know what to expect of the weather in Other Land. The house was still and silent except for the occasional rush of wind twirling up dead leaves outside. She could hear both of her parents snoring softly down the hall. She put on her blue rubber galoshes with the the white cats and slung her bag over her shoulder and crept downstairs. She slowly opened the basement door, fully expecting to hear loud, squeaking protests. Amazingly, it was quieter than usual. Anne let out a relieved sigh and started downstairs. She switched on the light and made her way down into the cold air of the basement. She put on her ring and fished out her key and made her way towards the storage room door behind the furnace. She would need a step stool to get through the door as it sat in the wall but did not reach the floor. Anne built a ladder of sorts of old briefcases and crumpled boxes and climbed on top. There were thin, long cobwebs hanging from the ceiling. Anne disliked cobwebs but she composed herself enough not to squeal. She put the key into the pad lock, heard it snick and then she turned it three times. As she cracked the door open a small plume of dust swirled down from the top corner of the door. Anne jumped back as the dust motes showered her face. She opened the door and upon opening, found that it led directly into a deep wood. The daylight was fading; it was late evening. Dusk was creeping in. Anne stepped out into the wood of Other Land, put away her key and then found her whistle. It was time to find out what was going on.

It was late evening in Other Land, those deep colors of wine in the sky told it, except they were muted by a thin gray blanket of clouds. The trees, massive and gnarled, stood like arthritic fists up against the sky. Fall had come, as in her own world, though it seemed strange, for the jewel colors of fall were tainted; some leaves were gray instead of brown or red or gold and a few trees even had black leaves. *Has this ugly thing even spread to the trees?* She wondered. Anne pulled her bag close and drew her whistle to her lips. She closed her eyes and said softly: "I want to find Zi." Then she blew into the whistle. A warm c- note sounded. Zi was her first friend and guide here and she would start by finding him. Perhaps he had answers. The whistle's tiny golden ribs glowed brightly. A thin line of light, quite unlike the sharp beams she saw emanating from it at the house, flowed out like a tendril of a spiderweb and wound its way through the pathless wood, a tenuous looking thing. Anne held the whistle tightly and followed the light, running her hand along it, feeling the warmth against her skin. It lead her through thick shrubs and bushes, along tiny creeks and around many smaller trees until it seemed to settle itself right at the base of an especially fat tree. It was hard to see around its trunk or beyond its thick foliage against the deepening dusk. The tree was full of knobs and misshapen bumps on its trunk and it had snakelike roots rising and falling in the soil beneath it. The light tendril ended right at the tree's roots and then slowly dissipated into the air. *Huh?* She thought, confused.

"Where am I? This doesn't look like Zi's tree!" She said indignantly, to no one in particular.

"And why would I be Zi's tree? Trees are never owned, child. Only tended to or used." Answered a voice. Anne jumped in surprise and tripped and fell to the ground.

"Who's there?" She asked, looking around.

"Do not look about, child. I am standing in front of you." It was the tree. Anne stared in astonishment. There were no visible features nor a face that she could see, yet it was speaking. Its branches swayed and slithered along each other like big brown snakes. *Well, Zi said trees could talk. I guess that's normal here.* Anne thought. Quickly she composed herself and stood up and brushed the dirt off her clothes.

"Um, hello Mr. Tree? I'm looking for my friend, Zi. Do you know him?" The tree grumbled something incoherent, then spoke again.

"I do. He is engaged in other business. War is in the air. *Your* business, what called you here, is with the Pumpkin Princess. That is why I drew you here instead."

"The Pumpkin Princess? Who is that?"

"Think, child. You heard her in your dream. She needs your help, and quickly."

"Did the Winter Queen do something to her?"

"Indeed she did. Tricked her into eating a poisoned seed. All gourds everywhere thrive or die under her care. She is now grievously ill, thus the blight on all gourds everywhere." The tree's voice was as deep as an ocean and as hard as its thick, serpentine roots.

"But Zi can help me help her! That's why I need to find him!"

"Perhaps. Or not. His power is being spent elsewhere. The Queen keeps him and others busy fighting her encroaching poisons and destruction. She has unleashed all manner of evil upon the land. Who knows when you will see your friend again? You must help the princess or she will die."

"I can't do this by myself!"

"How do you know?" Questioned the tree. Anne, confused, just shrugged. Then she had a thought.

"Do you know the Old Tree?" She asked. The tree made a sound that shook the ground and rattled her teeth. It took a moment for Anne to realize what the sound was. It was laughter.

"I *am* the Old Tree. All trees are my kin. I speak through my kin like a man would blow through a horn. Or a whistle. The vessel you see before you is not my trunk nor my branches or roots but I choose to speak through it, presently."

"Was that always your name? Old Tree? What's your real name?" Anne hoped she wasn't being rude but she really wanted to know. It wasn't every day that she got to talk to a tree.

"You could never pronounce it. If you tried you would sound absurd, if you could even remember it. In fact, I am not even sure if I remember it. Let it suffice to call me Old Tree. Since that is the truth."

"Well, Mr. Old Tree, can you help me find her?"

"I can. The princess has been hidden at the bottom of a lake within a ring of mushrooms of black and brown. These mushrooms would be giants to you. The Mirrored Lake, it is called. You cannot miss it – it was once calm and beautiful, a place of wonder and enchantment; of dream and deep thought. Now the Winter Queen has poisoned it. It has an evil stench and foul vapors rise from it. It was once crystal clear but now its waters run black. Only the winter folk can touch the waters and not be harmed. Hurry. I fear for her the longer she languishes there."

"The Mirrored Lake. Thank you, Old Tree. But, Old Tree, did *you* call me back to Other Land? Was it *you* speaking through the trees?"

"No. My kin from the outside, your world, called to you on their own. They remembered what you did for them, how you healed their brothers and sisters. For that, they are truly grateful. You have made a good name for yourself among tree-

kind, Anne. Trees see many things and over the ages remember good deeds. Our memories become as long lasting and solid as stone when it comes to such things. All plants are our cousins, of a sort. The gourd-lings cry out in anguish. The trees remembered your help and they have in turn, cried out to you.”

“The Queen's poison worked fast! We never heard anything about rotten pumpkins. It just happened one morning!”

“The Winter Woman strikes like a snake! These are dark days. Fair folk attacking their own kind. The winter folk have always been cruel but none so cruel as the Winter Woman. She grows worse by the turning of the moons. The Pumpkin Princess ushers in the fall harvest. Soon, all crops will fail if she is not rescued.”

“If I need to talk to you again how can I call you?”

“My roots grow tired again, even now. Soon the sleep will come upon me and it will be an age before I speak again. You will not be able to speak to me. Go to the Great Whitestone Lodge. A family of gnomes live there. They can be of some help to you on your journey, child.”

“Thanks!”

“Go! Be quick about it, child! No more questions! The Winter Woman is not at rest. Evil brews in Other Land. The sleep comes upon me. Once again, I see and say nothing.” Old Tree's voice faded away into the ground like a heavy tide being pulled back out to sea and the gnarled tree stopped waving it's branches and became very still. She stood there for a few moments, watching for another sign that the tree might speak. It did not. Then, committing to memory all that Old Tree had told her, Anne used her whistle to find the Great Whitestone Lodge.

As Anne followed along the slender tendril of light she could see that sunlight was fading fast into twilight. The twin moons were shining, full and big as dinner plates, bigger than the moon at home. Dark herds of cloud drifted past them and over them, covering the moons for a few moments, then drifting away so that they revealed their sharp, silver light again. The wind picked up and dead leaves danced and twirled in the air in tiny dervishes. Anne's legs were getting tired from all of the walking over rocks, through bushes, around bushes, through tall grasses, climbing up banks and picking her way around the thick woods. From time to time she heard odd animal sounds and glanced at her ring every time she did. To her dismay, it shimmered blue, ever so lightly. Danger was about but not close enough to be of any harm. Yet. Still, the sooner she found cover the better she would feel. Her little legs felt like logs. Tired and feeling her belly rumble with the beginning pangs of hunger she found a large rock hidden within a thick tuft of tall grasses. Satisfied that it would hide her from plain view she sat down on the rock to rest a bit. She couldn't see it but she could hear the murmur of a little stream nearby. She put the whistle in her pocket but the light tendril still stretched out beyond her hiding place. *That isn't good!* She thought but she didn't know what to do about it. Anyone behind her probably wouldn't see it but anyone coming from the other direction, it would lead them right to her! She decided that she would have to make her rest a short one. She dug down into her bag and rifled around until she found the little bag of chocolate coins. Finding it, she sat munching on them and thinking about all the things Old Tree had told her. She peeked out from behind the grasses of her hiding place. The tendril of light wavered and bobbed slowly in silence, winding around a large tree. She wondered how many trees she would have to circle before she would find this lodge. What did these gnomes look like and would they really help her? Even if she were able to rescue the princess, whether or not she would be able to actually heal her was another matter. There were no more magic seeds, Zi was somewhere far away in some battle and still no one knew where the Summer Queen was. It was fall. Along with the Pumpkin Princess being captive and in terrible danger fall crops would fail. Some already had. Anne sighed. There was so much to do and it was too big for her! She suddenly wasn't sure if she was going to be helpful at all! She would have to do one thing at a time. Right now, she had to find this gnome family to see if they could help her save the princess. She would think about other things later. She got a glimpse of blue light as she ate another coin. It was brighter and her heart nearly skipped a beat. The ring grew warm on her finger. She looked around and listened. She heard nothing but the gurgling stream but something was coming closer. Still far away, but ever closer as she sat resting! She quickly put the coins away and hopped off the rock and hurried through the grasses and around the tree. About 100 steps ahead was a wide clearing and in it sat a wide, squat building made of logs and white washed stone. It was a short building but it was massive. It looked very much like a log cabin and stone mansion – for little people. There, all along down the path towards the front porch were lanterns glowing with warm light and the front porch was well lit. The chimneys were smoking. There was a large flower garden in the front and among them grew giant dahlias, their stems thick and tall as small trees and petals as big as pillows. They stood on either side of the white stone paved pathway up to the porch. Their colors were deeply muted in the night but she caught a glimpse of colors hard to describe in the twin moonlight before the clouds once again shadowed the moons. She could smell salty, sour smells in the air mixing with the fragrant scents of the giant flowers. In fact, there were many delicious cooking smells emanating from the lodge. It looked, in a word, like a warm and inviting place. She ran all the way to the clearing and up to the door and knocked. The tendril of light dissipated as soon as she had reached the door. In the light of the lanterns she caught long shadows moving slowly behind her in the corner of her eye. She flinched, looking back, expecting to see whoever it was that might be following her. Her ring glowed dimly. She turned back to the door. There was silence at first and then she heard feet shuffling behind the wide, wooden door. The door was thick and sturdy, made of dark wood with a great golden lock and a golden knocker in the shape of a little smiling face. Set into the door under the knocker was a bright, white stone, highly polished and set into the wood around this stone were fine pearls. The door opened. Anne was expecting a live garden gnome on the other side of the door. Instead was a small, plump girl about half Anne's height with rusty red hair and a round button nose, wearing a red and white dress. Her hair was done up in elaborate braids with red ribbons tied through it. She looked very much like an ordinary little girl, just smaller and with a funny looking round nose. She stared at Anne in utter surprise with her mouth open in an "oh."

"Who is at the door at this hour?" Someone called from inside the house. The little girl continued to stare.

"Well, who is it, girl?" The voice roared.

"A giant, father! A giant!" The little girl exclaimed in fright and slammed the door shut. Anne knocked again, this time more frantically. The door opened again and this time a barrel of a man, of Anne's height with thick black hair, a long thick braided beard and bushy eyebrows stood before her.

"Who are you!" He demanded. "How did you slip past our guardians?" *Guardians?* Anne thought. She would just tell him the simple truth.

"My name is Anne Greene. I was sent here by Old Tree. He said this was the Great Whitestone Lodge."

"Indeed it is. Why would he send you here?" He narrowed his eyes, glaring at her. Anne trembled.

"The Pumpkin Princess needs help and I have to find her!" Anne blurted out. The man continued to look at her with suspicion.

"Old Tree, you say? Hmm. Old Tree hasn't spoken anything in an age. How do I know you aren't some kind of wicked

imp looking to cause trouble to me and mine?" He asked. Anne didn't know what to say so she just shrugged.

"I'm not an imp. I'm a girl."

"Well, I can see that!"

"All I know is that if someone doesn't help her, all crops will fail. I know where she is. Old Tree told me but I have to get there and I'm tired and I need a rest. Old Tree said that the family here might help me." She said, her shoulders falling. She didn't want to be out here at night alone. Something was out there trailing her. The man looked around behind her, scowling.

"The Pumpkin Princess, aye? Why you?" He persisted.

"The trees told me. I also heard her cries in a dream. When I went with my parents to the pumpkin patch to pick pumpkins, all of them were rotten. That's all I know." She said. The man's scowl softened.

"You know what has happened to the princess?" He asked, his eyes widened just a bit. Anne nodded. A woman, an inch shorter than him appeared at the door, a spitting image of the girl but older and fatter.

"A human child wandering these woods? She's no wicked imp, Glumgorg! If she were, the flowers would have devoured her before she got to the porch! Let the child in!"

"And just why should I do that?"

"Because she is our guest, husband! That's no way to be treatin' a guest and a young girl, no less!" She chided him. Then she turned to Anne.

"You are the one who escaped the Winter Queen's clutches!" The woman exclaimed. Anne nodded vigorously.

"And Old Tree has roused himself to speak to you? A great bit of fortune this is! We have been beside ourselves wondering what happened to the princess and what will happen to the fall harvest."

"Oh alright! In you go!" Glumgorg said brusquely, glaring at her ring. It was no longer glimmering.

"No worries here. There are guardians and shields up all around our home. Some of them being the flesh eating flowers out there in the front yard. You never can be too careful these days, what with fair folk attacking their own!" Said the woman. She had a kind face with sparkling green eyes and rusty red hair shot with a few white streaks and a mass of freckles. She and her husband had the same round button noses. She looked at Anne's ring as she pulled her into the house.

"Now that's a pretty piece of silver there. It looks like gnome make. How did you come by it?"

"My grandmother gave it to me and my friend Zi made it into a special ring that tells me when danger is near."

"Ah. Your grandmother's love and your friend's care. That ring has good power then. It will become more and more protective as you become older. Take good care of it. Now" she clapped her hands together eagerly, "you are our guest tonight! We were just about to have supper." Anne now got a chance to see the inside of the lodge. It was small by grown up standards, but for someone her own size – which the gnomes were - it was both very large and roomy. It was also cozy and filled with well made handcrafted furnishings and other handmade knock-knacks. They seemed a very well -off family to Anne. In fact, it was the only handmade building Anne had seen in Other Land. She wondered if there were others. Surely they weren't the only gnome family in the land. As soon as that thought crossed her mind Anne began to notice that many gnomes had gathered in the front hall to gape at her.

"You have a big family!" She said.

"Oh yes! Many have come from other family lodges to visit. We Whitestones are related either by blood or by marriage to every gnome family in the land! I'm Rhiora, by the way and the gruff one here, my husband, is Glumgorg!" The fat little woman beamed and it lit up her whole face and Anne's spirits. Even Glumgorg stopped scowling and looked upon her with kinder eyes. Anne felt she was at home with her own mother and father or one of her grandmothers. She felt safe. Rhiora had a warm spirit about her, like grandma Veronica, that made her smile.

"Well, if my wife thinks you are fine, then I have no complaint against you." Glumgorg declared and he strode off towards the dining hall.

"Come, all of you! What are you all staring at? Dora, help your mother with our guest!" Glumgorg shouted. Some of the other gnomes followed him but many others continued to stare in amazement. Especially the young ones.

"Dora, you apologize to Miss Anne for slamming the door in her face! I swear, that girl!" Rhiora scolded.

"That's OK She didn't know who I was. . ." Anne began.

"Oh no, that will never do! Courtesy is everything!" She said and turned to her daughter once more. "You come here and say you are sorry!" Rhiora scolded. Dora blushed and wore a sheepish grin on her face. She no longer seemed afraid now that her mother and father approved of their new guest.

"I'm sorry miss Anne." She said. Anne smiled.

"It's OK, Dora. May I put my coat and bag away?" Anne asked.

"Of course! Dora! Please take care of Anne and then bring her to the dining hall!" Rhiora said. Dora did as she was told. It appeared that she had many brothers and sisters who, having got a good look at the new guest, were now full of excited questions.

"You escaped the Queen?"

"How big are humans, grown?"

"Are you really a giant's daughter?"

“What's the other world like? Are there any trees left?”

“Have all the trees been cut down?” They began crowding in all around her.

“Now children! She doesn't need all of you hurling nosy questions at her.” Rhiora hurried them all out of the room.

The children filed out of the front hall towards the dining hall, whispering and twittering excitedly, following their elders. Many kept throwing curious glances back towards Anne. Rhiora's dress billowed behind her as she bustled about. Dora took Anne's hand and led her down another hall, long and lit with lanterns hanging from the low ceiling into a little bedroom.

“This is a room for guests. We have many rooms here but not many people like you come to visit!” She helped Anne with her coat and bag, struggling with both. The room had a low ceiling, a small four poster bed, a table, an oil lamp and a wardrobe. Dora stepped onto a wooden footstool by the bed and carefully laid Anne's coat and bag onto the bed.

“For supper we are having pork and potatoes!” She said eagerly. Anne's stomach growled as she recalled the mouth watering scents wafting through the front hall. She followed Dora down the hallway and to the dining hall. The lodge was a strong, rustic, home exposing fat, wooden beams and stones in its walls and ceilings. There was a fireplace in every major room, including the dining hall. All of the furnishings were made of heavy wood or polished white stone. The dining hall was a very wide room with a table so long it fit the entire Whitestone family – a very large family - and their relatives who had come to visit and they had room for Anne too. The children sat at their own tables in the kitchen. The family dinner table in the hall brimmed with sturdy white stoneware filled with all sorts of hearty fare. Many dishes consisted of some variation of pork or potato. Or both. There was a large pot that everyone seemed eager to dip into called squiggle greens and mouse tails and another seeming favorite, earthworm and egg casserole with smoked cheese. One of the women, she had strawberry blond hair and bright brown eyes exclaimed to Anne each dish and how delicious they all were. Danila was her name, Rhiora's sister. The squiggle greens looked suspiciously like fiddle head ferns. Anne did not like fiddle head ferns. And mouse tails! She decided she would pass on the greens and mouse tails and the worm casserole, though the gnomes all seemed to think those two the best dishes for miles around! Glumgorg stood up from his great wooden chair and banged his stone mug on the table. Four gnomes carried out a barrel of home brewed ale from the kitchen.

“Brothers, sisters and all family and friends! Tonight we have, as you all know by now, an honored guest. The girl who escaped the Winter Woman's wicked clutches! Anne Greene is her name!” He announced.

“And a fine name it is!” Said someone at the far end of the table. Shouts of approval rose.

“Let us welcome her for she is on an important mission, not unlike us. She goes to search for the princess of the harvest.” Another cheerful shout rose up. All beaming eyes were on her. The gnomes carrying the ale sat the barrel on a small table near Glumgorg's chair.

“Old Tree has sent for her. Since this child is on a mission of good we must help her in any way we can. Anne, later you must tell us all about your talk with Old Tree and we will see what we can do to help.” He said. She nodded, excited at the prospect of collecting something special from the gnomes for her journey.

“Now, we come to it! Golmarg, open the evening meal.” Golmarg, who looked very much like his elder brother Glumgorg, stood up.

“Good ale, good meat, by the Great Builder, let us eat!” He said.

“Aye!” A shout was raised by all and they began the feast. Anne was offered each dish first as the honored guest. There were, of course, potato this and potato that, boiled, fried, baked or sliced and pickled, ham steaks with gravy and little onions, onions stuffed with curdled cream and cheese, spiced ham and onions and potatoes and onions with bacon, a pork stew and vegetable dishes made with wild greens and flowers, a dish of wildly colored mushrooms baked in a pie and also fried centipede brown leaf buttered tarts. There was also the greens with mouse tails and the worm casserole, which she politely passed on. One of the gnomes brought her a small mug of ale. She tasted it. It was both sour and sweet and very fizzy, in fact so fizzy it made her burp loudly which produced much laughter. It was strangely familiar and it made her feel more alert, giving her added vigor. *I know what this is!* Her dad made it at home, one of his alchemical food potions. *Kombucha!* But theirs was sweeter and with a very strong spiced flavor. Although she wasn't hugely fond of it at home she drank it down quick at the gnomes' table and decided that it was rather nice.

“That's it. Going on a journey, one needs strength! Ale gives strength! Drink up!” Said Golmarg. He looked like Glumgorg but his beard was shorter and unbraided and he wasn't quite as burly. He smiled and drank deeply of the sweet and sour ale. Anne herself ate the bacon dish, putting away quite a few thick generous slabs of it and she even ate the little flat onions in the dish, sweet as fruit and she had some of the pork stew and some boiled potatoes with cheese. She even nibbled on a centipede and brown leaf tart! It was delicious, even if it did have crawly-creepers cooked in it! It smelled and tasted rich and buttery, very much like mama's homemade buttery onion and cheese biscuits. She also had some fried potatoes with peas. From what Anne could see of all the steaming, savory dishes sprawled down the table, gnomes seemed to have a prodigious appetite for food and especially for potatoes.

“So my dear, what is it that Old Tree told you? How will you find the princess?” Asked Rhiora. Anne wiped her mouth with a napkin, her fingers sticky with meat juices and grease.

“I have to find the Mirrored Lake. He said that she's at the bottom of the lake.” This produced a collective gasp among the gnomes who were sitting near her.

“That lake is poisoned! Does Old Tree think that this is the source of the most recent blight?” Danila asked.

"The Pumpkin blight, yes."

"I wonder what made Old Tree rouse himself to speak? He hasn't spoken in many, many years." Wondered Danila out loud.

"I'm sure the dire circumstances in which we all find ourselves must be the reason, sister." Said Rhiora. She turned to Anne again.

"You had a dream, from the trees, you say? Some voices?"

"Yes. They spoke to me. They wanted me to help the princess. I also had bad dreams. One of them about the princess."

"Ah. A visionary we have here! That does not happen very often." Rhiora said.

"There have been other blights too. In fact, there's a terrible poisoned ice frost encroaching the northern edge of the southern forests, unnatural in every way! Everyone has been trying to throw hedges up about it and hinder it, trying to stop it. In the summer it was much easier to get rid of it but now, we are losing the battle. Many summer folk have already fled to the other side of the world where summer still reigns. If Queen Titian does not come back, they will never return to this side." Danila said sadly.

"It has been a tough battle making sure our stores remain full and our harvest decent. We gnomes have our own ways with plants but even so, we have lost part of our harvest for the year and the blight will make it hard this winter. Next year is when the true cruelty of winter will be felt. When there will be nothing but ice and snow and evil." Said Rhiora.

"What is frost blight?" Anne asked.

"Queen Faye strikes plants, trees and especially crops with her poisoned frost. Sometimes she will use a sprite or fairy's own power against them as in the case of the princess and the black blight. All things full of life and living energy she delights in turning to poison and with the coming of winter it is getting much harder to fight the blights. I don't know if you have noticed but even the fall colors are affected. Many trees that should be showing fall's colors are turning black with rot! It's just terrible!" Said Danila, wringing her hands. Rhiora patted her sympathetically on the shoulder.

"She even kills off animals! We once had many cows and a few oxen for the plowing but no more! We managed to save a few cows. We would hitch up the oxen and give you a ride on wheels if they were still alive. But after their deaths we've had to keep a constant vigil on the lodge and surrounding land. We sorely miss our oxen and cows. There will be far less milk, cream, butter and cheese now for the winter. Who knows what's next!" Said Rhiora. A serious air settled upon the room and many of the gnomes quieted themselves a little, listening and pondering the troubles they would all be facing soon.

"Well, the sooner she finds that princess the better fall will turn out, I say!" Said one man. "It's still early yet!"

"If she is found alive. Who can know?" Another woman cautioned.

"True."

"But the Mirrored Lake is poisoned and no one can enter it without dying from its black waters! No telling what other troubles will come of that in the future, it being the doorway to dreams and such."

"Dreams?" Asked Anne.

"The Mirrored Lake is the province of the Lady Moons, but that later! The more pressing problem is the princess. The blight has destroyed it and no one was around to stop the damage. If the princess is at the bottom of the lake and who knows how long she's been there. . ." A collective shutter rippled through the hall and the women gasped.

"It can't be. She must be dead already!" Said a young man.

"We don't know that yet until I get there." Anne said. "I have to try! I can't give up and neither can you." The gnomes looked at each other in consternation.

"How will you get there? Do you know the way?"

"I have a whistle that can help me get there. It leads me there with light that points in the right direction!"

"A Way Wanderer you have then?" Glumgorg asked.

"Yes, a Way Wanderer. That's it."

"A good gift! It will help you find nearly any place here. We may not be able to spare a man for you in your journey for we are off to fight the frost blight tomorrow, but we can give you something to protect you if you need to do battle."

"I do have a hammer and I've used it before!" She said proudly.

"You do? On who or what?"

"On one of the Queen's black dogs and on one of her servants who tried to eat me!" Anne said.

"That is all well and good child, but every warrior needs his armor. We'll fit you out with something sturdy to help you even more in a fight, Anne." Said a deep voice, weathered and quiet but powerful enough to carry across the dining hall. It came from an ancient looking gnome at the far end of the table. He smiled at Anne.

"We are off to fight the blight tomorrow and if we succeed. . ."

"We *must* succeed! There is no other way." Said Glumgorg.

"If the princess is truly gone. . ." Started Danila.

". . . *if* we succeed, we must then find the Mirrored Lake and assist Anne. *If* we succeed. Something tells me that Anne will have help from unexpected places, however." The old gnome said He had a beard that nearly came down to his knees, snow white and thick and braided into intricate braids and many golden and silver rings were wound through it. Rhiora

smiled at Anne warmly.

“Where are the pixies that travel with her? What if the princess is no more?” Worried a young woman.

“Let's not say that until we know for sure.” Said Glumgorg sternly. Anne heard the resolution in his voice but it was a troubling thought. Where were those who worked with her? Most of the gnomes shuttered at the very mention of the name of the lake and seemed to hold out no real hope that she was alive. Perhaps Anne really was the only one who could dare the depths of the foul lake but the thought was scary. The black blight at home stung her hands even if it was only a little sting. What would swimming in a lake of the stuff do to her? It seemed an impossible task. It was certainly harder than snatching seeds from a bowl and she had almost failed at that, but she hoped an answer would present itself soon. She had her ring at least and her hammer. The ancient gnome lifted his hand and spoke again and everyone hushed.

“If the princess was dead I would know for a certainty. The matter is dire, yes, but not yet hopeless. I have no doubts in my mind that the girl here will succeed if her heart is true. I have seen this borne out many times.”

“Perhaps Great Grandfather Aldy, but simply being true of heart does not ensure safety or success.” Said one man.

“I did not say it would be simple or easy. Or safe. But what may look like sure failure or folly at first may turn out to be what enables one to triumph. Let us not lose hope. She could be the hidden ray of sun in the coming dark clouds.” He said calmly. This seemed to end the matter with all those at the table for the time being.

After everyone had eaten to contentment and supper was over the women began clearing away dishes while the menfolk went to various drawing rooms and back halls to roll and smoke on homemade cigars.

“Do you need any help?” Anne asked Rhiora.

“Oh, no dear. You have enough to worry about. My daughters and I will take care of it. Dora, show Anne to her room.” Rhiora gathered up a plate piled with mugs in her arms.

“Great Grandfather Aldy will have something brought up for you for your journey.” As they were leaving the hall Anne saw the ancient little gnome out near the front hall gazing out the window.

“Good night, great grandfather!” Said Dora.

“Good night, Dora! And good night, Anne!” He said smiling both of them..

“Good night, sir!” Anne said. He nodded and went back to gazing out the window. Anne supposed, disappointed, that they didn't eat dessert. It was just as well. She was as stuffed as a brand new teddy bear. She followed the little girl back to her bedroom for the night. Dora lit the little oil lamp and two older girls, Nora and Cora, they told her, followed them bringing in heated stones carried in a heavy wooden bucket and with tongs placed them in a large, shallow stone bowl that sat on top of a short table at the foot of the bed. The stones glowed deep orange like low embers. Soon the chill of the room was chased out. They asked to see Anne's hammer and Anne would have gladly obliged them but for their mother calling them to finish up their chores. Reluctantly they left, but Anne promised them that she would try to visit again if she was able to come back. Pleased with this, they left to finish their chores. Anne closed the door and took off her boots and put her coat and bag in a chair by the window. She blew out the lamp light and lay down. She sighed, thinking about just how she would rescue the princess from the poisoned lake. Her ring was blessedly silver; not even a hint of blue, for once. Anne closed her eyes. Her belly full and within the safe confines of a powerful stronghold, she slept soundly.

Anne awoke, well rested. Sharp, bright rays of sun pierced the windows. She could smell savory cooking odors wafting through the lodge and could hear the low whistle of a kettle. Anne got up and looked around. There was a knapsack tied neatly and sitting on the table by her bed. She went to the table and opened it. She found two pears, an apple, a small block of hard cheese, some dark brown bread and a generous handful of raisins. Smiling with delight she put the knapsack in her bag and put on her shoes and coat. Something fell from the table as she was getting dressed. She glanced over at the floor. A pair of leather gauntlets and a leather and plate vest lay there. They were a rich brown color with gold laces and the gold plates shined with high polish. Characters were etched into the leather; characters that she could not read, in gold. Anne marveled at them and wondered what a full coat of gnome armor looked like and how strong it would be. Surely these would help her in her journey! Anne stared at the gauntlets, not quite sure what to do with them but she put them in her bag. There was a bowl and a pitcher of water sitting on the table. Anne washed her hands and splashed her face and dried them on clean cloth, got her bag and then started down the hall. She stopped to gaze at the paintings that hung all along both walls. They were family paintings, the sort she had seen in big, historic museums. Except these were all gnomes with button noses and pointy, funny looking ears. They looked comical to her, some dressed in ancient looking mail and plate, some in rich robes or other fancy dress. At the end of the hall near the doorway was a full leather and plate armor dressed on a life-like, wooden figure. A helmet, a vest with more of the funny golden characters written across it, gauntlets and leggings crisscrossed with gold and silver lacing. The leather was of different shades of brown and red, worn and dinged. It looked ancient; armor that had seen many battles from the looks of it. The helmet especially, was beautiful. It was gold at the crest and a band of silver around it with leather laces tied in intricate braids of scarlet and brown down either side. The golden top shined and gleamed like a light. It was a thing of wonder. She wanted to continue staring and wished she could to stay and explore the lodge but she had to go and there was breakfast to eat. She wandered through the hallway and out to the front hall. At the entrance to the front door was another wooden figure dressed in a full leather and plate coat of armor, in fact, two of them, one on either side of the door, standing like guardians, with silver topped helmets and golden hammers at their sides. She hadn't noticed them before. *Gnomes must be good fighters!* She thought. Suddenly, both of the armored figures saluted her. She nearly jumped. Apparently they *did* guard the front entrance! She wandered into the dining hall where a place was set for her, and a generous plate. There were two pickled eggs, three thick slabs of bacon, a bowl of heavy cream with stewed pears and some more ale in a small mug. When she began scarfing down the second egg someone walked in from the kitchen.

"I see you are finally about breakfast. Good! My dear! Where are your gauntlets and your vest?" It was the lady of the lodge, Rhiora, clucking about her like an old mother hen again. Anne took her gauntlets and vest out of her bag.

"They have strange letters on them. What are they?"

"Oh, those are the family names written on them. Armor is usually passed down from parent to child. Each gnome who receives a coat of armor has his or her name etched into the leather. The more names etched in and the older it is, the more protection. Don't let the old weathered look fool you. These are very old gauntlets and a vest from my grandfather. Great Grandfather Aldy. He is known among all gnomes as Great Grandfather Whitestone. You met him last night. He's so old now that he no longer fights. He is one of the few gnomes who has visions and one of the great sages in the land. His gauntlets and vest are still in good shape and should be of good help to you. I will show you how to lace them up." She helped Anne lace them on tight. Anne had to take off her coat to get them on but once they were laced up they were as light and thin as her own skin.

"They are made to be light on the body but very, very strong. No one knows how to build armor like gnomes! Our leather work is unmatched. Any leather and plate armor of ours is worth ten times any human made coat of mail and any creature wanting to take a strike or a bite out of you will hurt sorely for it! We don't give our things to just anyone, Anne. Very rarely is something like this given to anyone outside of a family. These are different times and you have some purpose here, we think."

"But if other gnomes see me wearing these what will happen to me?" Anne asked worriedly.

"To you? Nothing. Great Grandfather Aldy sees many things. He likes you. Therefore, you'll have no trouble from the rest of us or the other clans. Look here. See these newly made characters here near your wrist? These spell your name and whom the armor was issued by. Anyone seeing this will know this was *given* to you by a gnome family." Anne stared at the characters, beautiful and tiny, shining softly in gold. She couldn't read it but if it said Anne Greene in Gnomish, she was happy.

"Thank you Mrs. Whitestone." Rhiora laughed heartily.

"It's Lady Whitestone, if you please, but just call me Rhiora!"

"OK. Rhiora. I feel better already going to save the princess now!" Anne put her coat back on and drank the rest of her ale and finished her breakfast.

"Remember the name Whitestone, Anne. If you ever need our help in the future and we are able to give it, we will do all we can to aid you!" Rhiora smiled and hugged Anne.

"Now, I must go and attend to things in the kitchen. Come this way! We have a back door that leads to a beaten path

that can set you on your way.” She followed Rhiora through the dining hall and into the kitchen which was roaring with cooking fires in its two great hearths. Other gnome women and girls were busy canning, cooking, chopping, fermenting, pickling and cleaning. They all glanced at her either in curiosity or smiled in kindness. Out the back door they went into a sprawling garden and beyond that, a small apple orchard. Off to the side was a miniature barn. Anne could hear the soft lowing of a cow.

“There isn't so much as a wing or a pixie in sight but my sister sent message ahead to anyone friendly to the Whitestone family to watch over you and help you get to the lake.”

“How did she do that?”

“We gnomes can speak to the plants and flowers and the soil we tend and till. They in turn, speak in their own language to the smaller, wilder folk out there in the woods. It's a round-a-bout way to communicate but it's our way. If there is anyone out there left who hasn't fled, you should get some help at some point along the way.” She smoothed and fussed about Anne's coat as if she were her own daughter.

“Now child, there within, through the orchard, the path in our backyard goes. There is a wooden gate beyond the orchard. After you pass the gate the path continues for nearly a league then forks into two paths. Take the right hand path. That right hand path will take you to the Mirrored Lake.” Anne thanked her again and started on her way.

The sky wasn't entirely overcast. Thick gray clouds dotted the sky but peaks of sunlight shot through in patches. Now that it was broad daylight and she had a better look at things, this forest wasn't as dense as the one she had encountered in the summer and for that she was grateful. It didn't feel quite like walking straight into night. The trees were big and twisty and Anne noticed again as she walked on that many were full of dead or dying leaves, some were black. The gnomes had been right. Instead of the jewel colors of fall some looked as if their leaves had been dipped in charcoal. It seemed strangely empty. The path was wide and thankfully flat. After she had walked for what seemed like an hour at least, just as Rhiora had said, she had come to a fork in the road. To the left, the sky seemed to lighten considerably as it led to a wide, bright clearing in the distance. To the right, which led to the Mirrored Lake, the forest looked forbidding. The clouds seemed to hover low over the tops of the trees. The left hand path looked sunnier but the right hand path was the path she had to take. Anne turned to the right but before she continued on she decided to have a snack. She pulled out an apple from the knapsack. It was so bright and red that it looked like a giant ruby. She took a bite. It was crunchy and juicy. Juice ran down her chin and her crunching was so loud it sounded thunderous. When she had finished she threw the core to the side into the bushes and started on her way again. After a few minutes she finally saw something. A tiny fairy sitting on a rock. She was about six inches tall with bright orange braids and orange eyes and wings streaked with black. She flew to Anne upon seeing her, twittering frantically. Anne couldn't understand what she was saying but she understood that she was in some kind of distress.

“What's wrong? Are you worried about the princess? I'm going to find her.” Anne tried to reassure her. The tiny being cocked her head to one side and then in a fright, she flew off.

“Wait!” Anne cried out. She looked around. Then she looked down at her ring and understood. It was glimmering again. The little fairy flew back. Fluttering around her head and then tugged on her coat trying to lead her towards the bushes, towards a hiding place. Anne followed the fairy through the thick bushes and found a hiding place behind a large rock that sat behind some dense bushes. The fairy touched her finger to her lips as if to say “*Shh*.” Anne said not a word. Waiting for danger to pass seemed like an eternity until Anne finally heard someone approaching. Footsteps came flapping down the path and by the sound of it, more than one person. Then she heard sinister sounding voices. One she recognized. The voice was singing a malicious little tune.

“Enough! No more singing! Sing one more song and I'll tear your tongue out and eat it! We're here on a scouting mission, not a tea party, you fool!” Said a sinister voice she didn't recognize. The other voice whined sullenly like a smacked child. The whining went ignored.

“I thought I'd seen someone down this way.” Said the sinister voice.

“Why would they come down this way? Unless it was one of our own, this leads to the lake! Whoever it was probably took the other path. We should go back.” *Grendo!* She thought in dismay.

“I know I saw someone around these parts! They ran and hid themselves at that cursed Whitestone enclave before I could catch them!”

“Bah!” *Grendo* spat. “One day the Whitestones will be made to submit to the Queen like everyone else. Once they fall, all the other clans will fall too. All these gnomes walking about as if they owe no loyalty to anyone! They will be put to The Question soon enough. They think because they are holed up in their lodges and their hedges all about their places that they can defy the Queen!” *Grendo* whined.

“That surprises you? Gnomes are loyal to their family clans. They are free folk. Be careful how you talk. The Queen doesn't hold sway over all places in the land, yet. Some of ours have disappeared on their scouting when coming too close to these free folk holdings.”

“Whose side do you fight for?” Whined *Grendo*.

“The Queen's. Don't be a fool! Until winter comes when we can travel in large companies, speak and travel with cunning, unless you are in the northern forests. These woods have ears.”

“Never mind these gnomes! She'll deal with them soon enough. It could be anyone we're tracking. Could even be that girl that was here.”

“You mean the one that gave your face a nasty kiss with her hammer?” The other creature barked harshly with laughter. Grendo growled.

“Don't growl at me Grendo. That's a fight you won't win. I'll lay you out like a piece of rolled dough. You know that.” The other creature laughed again.

“It could even be that treacherous wolf boy! I say we look down the other path first!” Grendo grumbled.

“Alright, then. Have it your way. We'll go down the other path and when we don't find whoever it was we were trailing last night I'm going to give you a sound beating.” The meaner one then mumbled some guttural curses and Anne heard fast footfalls recede back into the distance towards the fork. Anne let out a soft sigh of relief. She looked around for the little orange fairy but she was gone. Anne thought about what to do next. She dare not continue on the open road now that Grendo and that other creature were out searching for lone travelers. Anne pulled her knees to her chest and rested her chin on her knees, thinking. *I could follow the path along from the underbrush where I can hide.* . . . she looked around the bushes hoping to see another smaller path to take parallel to the one she just fled. She thought about using her whistle and asking it to give her a second path to take to the lake. Then she thought she detected movement in the bushes just beyond her hiding place. Thinking it was Grendo and his companion doubling back to sneak up on her she hurriedly reached for her hammer.

“No need for that, Anne. Had I any desire to harm you, I would have pounced upon you long ago.” The voice said. Anne saw two black, shining eyes and a long snout with a black nose peering out at her from beneath the tangle of bushes.

“Who are you?”

“I'm known as wolf boy. My name is Hunter.” Anne recognized this voice as well. Wolf boy, from the Great Hall. Except he was now a wolf. Hunter stood up and shook himself vigorously; leaves, dirt and brambles flying like projectiles every which way.

“You and the pixie, one of the princess's retinue I take it, woke me from my sleep when you came climbing in here. I suppose you were hiding from that ridiculous Grendo and the other scout.”

“It is hard imagining Grendo as a scout. The other one sounded a lot smarter.”

“Grendo is more of a pet than a soldier but the Winter Queen changes her mind about things and people as quickly as the wind changes. She has a new pet these days. Another sniveling, weak-minded fool, no doubt. Scouts, patrols, no matter. Things are in a state of flux. The Queen is beginning her takeover of the southern forests. She already controls the northern forests. The Queen has fastened her grip on the land even more tightly. No one is allowed to go roaming free anymore by themselves unless they want to meet up with trouble from her crowd. Her minions fall upon anyone not traveling in large groups. Many still openly defy her will but that may soon change as winter envelops the entire land.” Hunter said. He gave her an inquisitive look.

“What brings you back?” The wolf asked. Anne looked at her ring. It didn't glow. Hunter truly wasn't hostile, according to the ring. If he were, he hid it well. She spoke.

“The Pumpkin Princess needs my help. I heard her cry for help in a dream so I've come to find her. Old Tree told me that the Winter Queen put her at the bottom of the Mirrored Lake. That's where I'm going. Can you help me?” She asked. The wolf nodded his great blue and white head.

“I will help you. The lake you say? I wondered whether the Queen had a hand in that. We'd better hurry. There are many of her minions roaming the land in bands. If her minions see us on the open road they would kill me and kidnap you and put you to The Question. Or they will try.”

“What question is that?”

“Who are you for; winter or summer? After that, she will demand fealty and loyalty to her person, indefinitely. I left her service a few days ago. I have no desire to be put to anymore “questions” nor can I abide her abuses any longer. She even demands the allegiance of the free folk, who owe neither her nor the Summer Queen their loyalty. Since the dawn of the world there are those beholden to the seasons and those beholden to other powers. She has disregarded all ancient rules and boundaries. Winter has always been changeable, hard and cruel. That is the nature of winter. But she goes too far this time.”

“I don't blame you for running away. She sounds crazy.”

“Bah! Never let it be said I was a coward who ran! Rather say, I *took* my freedom. And yes, I believe she has lost her mind.”

“Hunter, when winter comes, what will happen to you?” Hunter looked at her, his eyes large and serious.

“I don't know, Anne. When winter comes, we will see what we will see. That is all I can say.”

“But won't something bad happen to you? You have to hide or have somewhere to go, don't you?”

“I'll do my best to survive. Sometimes there are definite answers to the future and sometimes you just do not know. Even so, you must face the unknown with bravery and hope for the best. Come, Anne! If we are to find the princess, we must go now.” Hunter bounded out onto the open path. He was so large that standing on all fours he stood nearly as tall as Anne. He knelt down, stretching out his forelegs and paws.

“Get on my back. That will get us there faster!”

“Thanks, Hunter!”

Things were moving in swift motion now. Her heart soared. Help sometimes came in unexpected places and at unexpected times. She would have to thank Danila for her help in this. She climbed on and away they fled, off to the Mirrored Lake. But though they traveled nearly as fast as the wind, niggling doubts began to creep up again. Anne wondered if they would find the princess dead or alive and if this was all for naught.

"Can you smell it?" Hunter sniffed in disgust. She felt his great body shiver as she rode on top.

"I can't smell anything. You mean the lake?"

"What else? Perhaps we are not close enough for you to smell it yet." The path began sloping down a hill and in just a few moments after Hunter began trotting downward she could detect the smell from the lake. The path ended in front of a mushroom, fat and tall as a small shed. Some were as small as dog houses. Others far larger. There was a ring of them, just as Old Tree said, many shades of brown; some solid, some mottled with spots. As they entered the ring, Hunter tread slowly and gingerly. Anne could smell the vociferous bite of the lake's stench as they approached. She nearly retched.

"Definitely her work." He growled.

"Oh! It's horrible!" Anne cried. It smelled both rotten and sweet, like Grendo, yet a hundred times worse! If all of her parents' neighbors had piled their garbage in one place out in the open and left it there for two weeks and the garbage men forgot to come and pick it up – that's what the lake smelled like. Added to the terrible stench was the destruction it's poisoned waters wreaked on the flora around it. As they crept closer all they could hear were the thick glub -glubs of the nasty lake water. The trees near the lake's edge were dead, twisted black things. The grasses had turned into a jungle of hard, ugly weeds. The water was grayish black and didn't move and flow like true water. Instead, it bubbled and frothed in places throughout the surface of the lake like a foul stew. No flowers of any kind grew there and the sides of the mushrooms that faced the lake were turning black. Black vines of poison snaked up and around their fat trunks like veins and pulsed sickeningly. At closer inspection, though they were careful not to get too close, they saw curved thorns growing out from the vines. Vines with teeth. The vines crawled out of the lake in hundreds of long arms and lay hold of all plants near the lake's perimeter, killing them, choking them and piercing them with their thorns. There was also a very mysterious thing. Every so often there were translucent, pearly bubbles that rose to the surface, broke through and rose into the air and off into the sky.

"What are those?"

"I don't know. It can't be good. They're being released into the air. Whatever they are, it's being caused by the black blight." Hunter growled. The stench was so powerful it seemed like a living, breathing organism. She covered her nose, feeling dizzy, but that was useless.

"It's one of her favorite methods of destruction."

"Why?"

"Because it takes less effort from her than wind, ice and snow."

"How do we get the princess out of this lake?"

"I will go in. If you entered by yourself, you would drown. The lake is deeper than we know. I am a winter creature. Her poisons won't harm me. Still, it won't be much fun."

"Where should we start looking?" Anne asked. Hunter looked thoughtful for a moment.

"I saw her use this mischief on someone before. These vines, I suspect are coming from the princess. It's like a seed that is planted within, usually the person is tricked into eating something that has been poisoned. It then sprouts these black-thorned vines. Be prepared for the worst, Anne! I would not be surprised if she has become nothing more than a monstrous root. We shall see." Steam hissed and floated in thick, bilious columns from the lake's surface.

"I hope not! I *hate* that Winter Queen!" Anne stamped her foot. Then she had a thought. She had packed a box full of iron nails with her. She fished them out.

"What is that?"

"Iron. Fairy magic can be fought with iron. Let's see if this works." She said. She took a nail out and walked to the edge of the lake and threw it in. At first it sat on the thick waters as if it couldn't penetrate them. But slowly it sank down and as it sank the water parted, withdrawing from the deadly element. Eventually a large hole formed around the nail.

"Well! This is a bit of good fortune! We have to find the best place to put these nails. I have no fear of iron as I am not a natural born fairy. Let's get to the shore since most of the vines are there." Hunter said. They carefully made their way to where the largest crop of vines were crawling from the lake.

"Get your hammer out and throw in the nails and make a pathway for us. Once I go in I'm going straight for the center of the lake. I don't know how deep it is or even if I can find the bottom. I don't know if I will find her." He stepped in and his paws were soon muddied and black. Anne followed and came along beside him. She took a small handful of nails and threw them in before them both and the waters parted in a hurry from before them, steaming furiously. Further and further they walked into the lake, searing an iron path and cleaving waters to the left and the right until Hunter stood still and sniffed. The stink was all around them, the fur on his lower legs and paws soaked and black with the foul mud.

"I think I can smell her through the stink, if it's her. It could be something else. Perhaps a dead body. I sense there is a sharp drop down at this point on the lake floor. I will dive in to try and rescue her. Watch my back and watch yours as well!" He barked and then he leaped down into the waters. Anne looked back at the shallow, wide parted path of the waters behind her. She stood on a slope and wondered how deep the lake really was. Her ring started to glow brightly and she grabbed her hammer and held it close and turned to face the path they had cleaved behind. Coming down the muddy path she saw Grendo and the other creature, a tall bony thing with large, pointed ears like a bat, black within black eyes like all of the

Queen's folk. His teeth, like Grendo's were sharp and he had huge curved talons on his knobby hands and giant feet.

Grendo, missing a nose having a grossly misshapen head from their first encounter jumped up and down with wicked glee.

"Look what we've found! Look what we've found! This time you won't get away! Not this time!" He grinned, full of malevolence. The other one did not grin at all but his eyes glittered just the same. Anne had some idea about how to control Grendo but the other one frightened her more. She decided to deal with Grendo immediately.

"Grendo! Stop this and leave!" She shouted. They both laughed and crept closer. Her heart beat faster. She said it again.

"Grendo! I'm warning you! Stop or you will regret it!" Grendo leapt and ran towards her, slaving and ready to attack. She nearly quailed but gathered herself up and said it once more.

"**Grendo!!!**" Her voice this time carried through the thick air with the force of a sharp whip and stopped him dead as if he had run into a wall. His eyes became as wide as plates as he realized his folly. Her hammer grew warm in her hands, buzzing with power from her own fear. The other one jerked to a halt too. Grendo, who had nearly reached her had tried to snatch her by the hair. With a nasty thump she smashed him squarely on the head - 1, 2, 3 - smashing it in, completely. He had no time to cry out. White foam bubbled forth as his head came apart in a grayish white, stinking sludge. The other snarled but stayed just out of reach after seeing what happened to his companion. He stared at the hammer warily. Then he began rolling his clawed hands fist over fist, over and over again and Anne saw that he was spinning a thick web. It grew bigger and bigger and then he threw it over her, entangling her and then giving the web a pull, throwing her to the ground! All the while steering clear of the hammer. He laughed cruelly.

"Grendo was a fool! A pet who had no business doing the work of a scout but not me! You will never know my name, girl!" He dragged her along the filthy lake bed screaming and struggling, back towards the shore. He had dragged her all the way, her hammer and arms entangled hopelessly so that she was unable to use it. He turned, stopped and began sharpening his claws. Then he turned his glittering black stare on her and started towards her. The troll ripped Anne's coat to shreds trying to rip at her flesh. His claws caught in her leather armor and he screamed and jumped back in pain, holding his clawed hand in surprise. He stared at the armor she was wearing beneath her torn coat and then in with a vicious snarl raked at her face. Anne turned her face away just in time to miss a terrible blow. One claw caught her cheek and the side of her neck, making deep scratches. Suddenly, they both heard a roaring, vicious snarl and the massive wolf leaped from the lake bed, his fur soaked and covered in filth. He ran and leaped between Anne and the troll, snarling and snapping, showing long terrible fangs.

"Hunter! You traitor! The Queen will here of this and she'll know what to do with you!" The troll sneered but he backed away slowly. He began rolling his hands again to create another web.

"Not unless I allow you to go back and flap your lips! Don't bother with that, Grunkor! You've spun your last web!" Hunter snarled and leapt upon him with lightening quickness and tore his throat out. The troll gurgled while rivulets of grayish white foam seeped out of the gaping ruin of his throat. Hunter took Grunkor's head in his great mouth and with a vicious yank, tore it off and flung it into the lake. Then he ran back down the lake bed and gingerly picked up a small figure and dragged her by her arm in his mouth until he reached the shore again. Then he helped untangle Anne from the web, biting through it with his teeth. Hunter had found the Pumpkin Princess.

"She's barely breathing and in a terrible state. We must get her somewhere safe where she can be healed." He said. Anne got up and knelt beside the fairy girl. Hunter sat on his haunches. She was Anne's size and looked very much like a girl Anne's age. Her body was wrapped tightly and pierced with black vines and thorns. Vines were streaming from her mouth, ears and eyes. It was as if she were generating some evil plant from her body. Her large wings were torn and broken, her red hair a hopelessly tangled mess of thorns. She was a frightful sight. Anne felt like crying.

"She needs a long time to heal from this and the fall season grows late. This bodes ill for all of us."

"This is the princess?" She whispered.

"Yes."

"She must be stopped. The Winter Queen."

"I admire your resolve Anne but how do you plan to stop her? How can we help the princess? How do we help her get better from this illness?" Hunter asked. Anne wiped away the streaming blood from her cheek as best she could and pulled out her whistle. She closed her eyes, thought for a minute and then said: "Take Hunter and the Pumpkin Princess to the place where Zi lives." She blew into it and immediately a tendril of light stretched out, southwest of the lake, far into the distance.

"Zi gave this whistle to me, a Way Wanderer, to help me find my way in Other Land. Follow that light."

"I see no light but I can smell its presence. Only the owner of a Way Wanderer can see its light. Here Anne, help me get her on my back and you must find yourself a good hiding place. I will take her to your friends' dwelling. I'll come back for you as soon as I can. I have no idea how they will receive me since I am not one of them. Remember Anne, hide yourself and cover and pack those wounds you have with mud far away from this lake! Do not rouse yourself from your hiding place until I get back!" He warned. Anne helped place the princess, with a struggle, onto Hunter's back. She thought of something and decided to ask before Hunter left. Perhaps he might know something about the Summer Queen..

"Hunter, you said that you left the Queen a few days ago. Have you heard anything about the Summer Queen? Has she

told you anything?"

"Me? She hasn't said anything to me as I am just a hired hound in her eyes but I see and smell many things. Queen Faye has abandoned The Great Hall and has set up her court permanently at her castle beyond the northern forests in the Ice Sea. There, somewhere in the depths of the castle is where she holds Queen Titian captive. I left before she got a notion to move her court there."

"How did you find out?"

"We wolves have ways of communicating from far distances. I am not the only one to leave the Winter Queen's service. Very recently my pack and a few others have left. They traveled across the Ice Sea. I wonder if all of them made it. They travel south now. It will be many days before they reach these parts." *The Ice Sea? Queen Titian was somewhere in a castle in a place called the Ice Sea!* It was a start and it flooded her mind with a flurry of thoughts. Finally, an answer!

"Thanks Hunter! I couldn't have rescued her without your help!"

"We can trade pleasantries and debts of gratitude later. I will go!" With that, he sped away like lightening through the woods with the limp body of the princess. Anne left the shores of the lake and the dying mushroom ring, dragging herself over to a thicket of trees and tall grasses. She dug up the damp earth and pat it into the gashes in her neck and face. After a few moments the bleeding stopped and then she curled up and lay down. She felt light headed as well as tired. She closed her eyes and soon fell asleep under the grasses. While she slept a light rain fell. Charcoal gray clouds pressed in, hanging low and threatened heavier rains and a storm. When she woke up it was evening. The sky was significantly darker. Daylight was waning. It was also raining harder. Hunter had not come. Anne sat up. Her ripped coat was damp but not yet soaked. The lake, while a ways off was not so far that she couldn't make it back there in just a few moments. She thought about hiding herself from the rain under one of the giant mushrooms but thought better of it. The Mirrored Lake was enclosed in a fairy ring. Touching mushrooms in a fairy ring could bring trouble. *It is dying, though*, She thought. The rain was cold and she didn't want to get sick. *I'll just sit under one of them. I'll be careful. I won't touch them!* She picked up her bag and her hammer and set off down the path back towards the lake. Her nose had already become accustomed to the lake's smell. Once she got on the path she looked back. *Maybe I should start off towards Zi's home instead.* She thought again, not sure what to do. *What happened to Hunter?* Her finger began to itch. *Why hadn't he come back? Did he get lost?* As she was wondering about these things a wide shadow came down, as swift as the wind and silent. Her ring, she finally noted was blazing blue! She had not been paying attention to her ring but now it was too late! She tried to run away and hide but a huge creature with great green wings, the head of an eagle and its body glistening with violet, blue and green scales and fearsome claws swooped down right in front of her and screeched shrilly in triumph. Its eyes were deep green and shined brightly like lights. It whipped its long snake's tail back and forth like an angry cat and glared intently at her. Anne, shaking, eyes twitching in terror, gripped her hammer tightly, her ring blazing like a tiny blue star. It was a Gryp.

The Gryp glared, cocking its head to one side.

"I've flown high and low, wide and far and have seen many things! Darkness is loose in the land! The Mirrored Lake, once the calm and beautiful vessel of the Lady Moons where dreams and visions were given has been fouled! No creature with good purpose would ever come near the lake now, none but the Winter Queen's minions! You are covered in her filth, carrying powerful weapons and you smell as foul as the lake! Tell me true or I shall dismember you: What evil mischief are you up to? Is it not enough that your mistress has captured Good Queen Titian and will rule forever, come winter?" The Gryp was shaking with fury, its eyes blazing. Anne was in shock. What could she say? She did look guilty to someone who did not know her business. The only thing that she had was her hammer and the truth. So she told the Gryp her name and then told the truth. This did not satisfy the Gryp.

"You lie!" The Gryp's anger was implacable. Anne's legs and knees felt wobbly. Anne, tears streaming down her face thought this would be it for her! Not only would she be eaten for dinner but she would be thought of as a bad person and in cahoots with the Winter Queen! She didn't know what upset her more! Anne had wanted nothing more than to stop the Winter Queen's destruction of Other Land and her destructive forays into Anne's own world. She would never see her parents, her grandmothers or her friends again. She wiped her face, sniffled and choked down a sob and then stuck her chest out in defiance.

"I AM *NOT* A LIAR AND DON'T YOU ACCUSE ME OF BEING ONE!! If you try to eat me I'll hit you with my hammer! But don't you accuse me of being her minion because I *hate* what she's doing and I'm *not* like her!" She shouted, her voice high with panic and anger. The Gryp rolled its head back, surprised. It stared at her for a moment in silence

"Who are you?" It asked in curiosity.

"I *told* you already! I'm Anne Greene from outside Other Land.!" It looked at her for another long moment, studying her face. Its bright green eyes then settled into a twinkle.

"Well, you are not lying, I can see that now. Had you told me a lie I would have had to do battle with you and although you may have done some damage with your hammer I certainly would have ripped you apart! I have the ability to see the truth or the lie and I cannot abide lies or wickedness. I am sorry to cause you so much consternation, Anne. My name is Antigone. I am pleased to meet you." Now it was Anne's turn to stare in silence. After a long moment of that, Anne sat down on the ground in exhaustion. She was ready to fight and perish and this Gryp was now making introductions.

"I . . . I'm pleased to meet you too."

"So, why have you been left here by your friend? Where is he? It is dangerous by day and even worse when night falls."

"He meant to come back. I don't know what happened to him. I hope he is alright." If the truth be told out loud, he *had* told her to find a hiding place and stay there until he came back. She felt rather foolish now. At least her ring was no longer glowing blue.

"A wolf you say? One of the Queen's wolves?"

"He was. He left her service."

"Ah, Hunter. I know of him. It will be dangerous for him and his pack. The pack revolted against her soon after he left. They are making their way south through the black forests of the north." *More wolves are headed this way.* Not all winter folk went along with the Winter Queen's plans. That was a very good thing but Anne was puzzled about the Gryp.

"I thought that Gryps were supposed to ask riddles?"

"The wicked ones do. They ask impossible riddles for an excuse to have a tasty meal. I merely ask questions. I only ask that I am given the truth to my questions and I only ask those who look like they might be up to some wicked. I am sorry if I caused you distress but I had to know. Too many evil folk running around now."

"We encountered two of them here. They tried to keep us from saving the princess. We fought them and won. Hunter and me."

"Is that so? Well, you have tremendous courage! You look a right mess, though. Where shall I take you Anne? We can't stay here. On my way here I saw a small band of evil looking fairies headed towards the poisoned lake. Jump on my back and tell me where you need to go!" She spread out a wide wing and lowered it. Anne happily climbed on her back.

"Your clothes are ripped to ribbons. See that your friends take care of that!"

"Oh, they will." Anne said. Antigone hopped up and flew off, climbing high into the sky. Anne used the Way Wanderer to find a path to Zi's tree home from high in the sky. The rain pelted them heavily but Anne held on tight, feeling the excitement of flying on wings! The wind whipped through her hair and pushed against her cheeks roughly with cold, wet fingers as they flew further south. She felt her heart jump into her throat as they soared and dipped in the rain along the path of the light tendril. Eventually she could see, far off, the frightening majesty of Old Tree, its mass of branches snaking through the clouds in the heavens. By the sight of it she knew that she wasn't far from Zi's tree home. She nestled her head against Antigone's neck.

"There! There is the tree where he lives!" Anne pointed to where the light path ended. Antigone quickly lowered and circled down until she made a soft landing on the ground. The ground was nearly dry as the rain had not yet penetrated the

forest floor yet. Anne slid down from Antigone's back and over her wing. She walked up to the base of its trunk, climbed through the thick clump of bushes obscuring a small door and knocked. All seemed quiet.

"Hello? Anyone here? It's me, Anne!" She called out, looking around. Suddenly the door in the tree opened and a little face peered out, gazing at Anne suspiciously. Then, a flicker of recognition.

"It is you!" The little imp exclaimed. His face was round and pale, like a moon pie and he had a tuft of brown hair that looked as tough as tree roots. He had lots of dirt under his finger nails and had a sour smell but he looked friendly enough.

"Yes! Is the princess here?" Asked Anne.

"She is. She is in terrible straits but she is safe now." The imp replied, blinking dumbly.

"Hunter brought her here. He's a wolf. Is he here too?" The imp ignored her last question and instead gaped at the Gryp.

"You consort with winter wolves and Gryps also? How is it that they have not torn you limb from limb?"

"Not all Gryps deal in pointless riddles, imp! The Pumpkin Princess was brought here by the wolf under Miss Anne's orders! Is Hunter here or not?" Antigone snapped.

"No, he is not." The imp answered insolently.

"Then bring Anne to the princess at once and stop wasting time!" The imp stuck his tongue out but disappeared at once.

"Well, he was rude!" Anne said in annoyance.

"Don't pay it much mind. Some of these rock and hole dwelling imps can be rather silly. Whoever allowed him to stay here and watch the front door is in desperate straits for sure!" Anne giggled at that. Then Zi came running out, elated and nearly as tattered looking as Anne.

"Anne, you've come! Oh thank you for rescuing the princess! I'm afraid that had it been left up to us we would have gotten to her too late. . . ." Then he looked at the Gryp in confusion.

"Who is this, Anne?"

"She brought me here after she found me by the Mirrored Lake, which is a horrible, stinking stew by the way!" Anne said, frowning. Zi nodded and seemed to accept the strangeness of it all.

"Many bad things will come of the lake being poisoned, but that later! Thank you for helping my friend, Madam Gryp." Zi said graciously, bowing his head. The Gryp bowed her head slightly in acknowledgment. She then turned to Anne.

"Anne, if you ever need my help, call my name out 3 times. Do not call it in vain though." Antigone said. Anne nodded and smiled.

"Thank you very much for your help. I won't forget this!" She said. With that, Antigone flew off. Anne turned to Zi.

"However did you manage to guess her riddle?" Zi asked.

"I didn't. There are good Gryps and evil ones. The evil ones ask riddles and the good ones just ask simple questions to get the truth. At least that's what she told me. I believe her. Otherwise I would have been dinner!"

"Well I'm delighted you've managed to befriend one. You will need strong friends like her."

"I'm glad we're friends too. I'll bet not many things can stand up to a Gryp!" Anne said proudly.

"Well, other Gryps can. A few other things too. But Anne the hour grows late. . . ."

"Zi, where is Hunter? He brought the princess here. He was supposed to come back to get me but he never came back to the lake." She asked, worry in her voice. Zi frowned.

"He came. With the princess on his back. At first we thought he had harmed her but when we heard his story about you and what happened at the lake. . . he left her here with us and he sped off in a hurry, to go back to get you, I thought. If he didn't make it back we don't know why. We don't much care for winter folk nor do we trust them Anne, so our business with him was brief."

"Hunter isn't bad though. He told me he left the Queen's service and refused to follow her anymore. I trusted that he would bring the princess here and he saved me from Grendo and another troll."

"Grendo? What was he doing there?"

"They were scouts, roaming around looking for people traveling alone. They tried to hurt me and Hunter saved me. If he hadn't been there very bad things would have happened to me and the princess." Zi's amber eyes were wide and thoughtful.

"If that is the case, I bear him no ill will. Come. The princess is very ill but she will not die." They went inside. It was not busy as it had been the last time she was here. Many had left for the other side of the world where it was summer again.

"She is resting. Thankfully you found her before the poison could destroy her but it has done enough damage. She won't be able to tend or bring in any harvest until next fall. If there *is* a next fall. She will take a long time to heal. Those black vines, the thorns!"

"I know. All of her hair was tangled and her wings were torn."

"Yes, her wings. It will be a long time before she can fly again. She wants to see you Anne."

"She wants to see me?"

"Yes."

"Zi, why didn't I see you? Old Tree said that you had some other business. . . ."

“Oh. Yes.” Zi wiped his brow. “The Winter Queen and her warriors have been making attacks on strongholds, freezing over forests, poisoning food, freezing over lakes, rivers, streams, destroying crops everywhere with the blight. Those of us who have not fled to the other side of the world and the free folk have been fighting her poisons with our own powers, trying to undo the damage. We put up protective barriers around the places she poisons so that it cannot spread but it is no longer working very well. She grows more powerful still. She has taken to sending out scouts and guards to kidnap hapless travelers. We cannot travel alone now unless cloaked. She has frozen over the northern forests and now it is spreading to the south and soon the east and the west will freeze. I wanted to send someone trusted to the doorway to travel with you but the doorways can be unexpected and random unless you know how to open your own doorway. I never know where you may be crossing but next time if you come back I will send word to friendly folk to watch for your arrival.” That made Anne feel much better about coming back.

“Many have fled, fought or are hiding.” He explained, leading her to a system of tough vines, twine and pulleys and a large wicker basket, big enough to fit several people. It served as an elevator. Down they went, beneath the earth into the thick system of roots to a cavernous earthen room. It was cool and smelled of decomposing leaves and burning pine needles. They got out of the basket went to one of the many little holes nestled around the earthen hall's perimeter. The tree roots wound everywhere and little rooms had been built around the roots. The princess was being cared for by a small retinue of tiny orange, red, brown and golden fairies. She was resting peacefully on a bed of leaves and moss. Warm, heated stones had been set beneath her bed and around it. The little fairies were nimbly picking the last of the poison vines and thorns from her ears and burning them, little flashes of light crackling and shooting from their hands. Anne knelt by the moss bed. The princess opened her eyes to look at her. A little orange fairy, the one who hid her from Grendo and the troll hovered about the princess's head. Anne smiled at her. The fairy twittered something and smiled back.

“Lys has told me that you had come to find me.” The princess said softly. She motioned to the orange fairy near her head.

“She saved me from two evil creatures by finding a hiding place for me.”

“Lys is ever watchful. There were so many nightmares. Nightmares that told me I had destroyed harvests everywhere. I dreamed of nothing but blackness and thorns spreading all over, choking out all good things to eat. All good things. I could not stop it. Everything turned to ash.” She murmured sadly.

“It wasn't your fault.”

“Oh, but it was. The Queen tricked me, gave me poisoned honeyed seeds to eat. I was to bring in the fall harvests. But now my power is scant. I must wait until next fall. What will they do this year?”

“In my world only pumpkins were destroyed. We can survive without pumpkins this year.”

“That is not right, but here in *this* land some will starve if they do not flee. Anne, I am in your debt. If winter was not coming so soon I could regenerate quick as a wing's turn and the land would be filled with the harvest of fall but my power withers. My handmaidens can do some of the work but without my help it will be a hungry winter. Even so.” The princess tried to sit up.

“You should just rest.”

“But I have much to say before I rest.”

“I heard you in my dream, crying.” Said Anne. The princess nodded.

“You truly do have the touch of the visionary about you. I cried out to the Lady Moons. Only one answered. She told you through your dream. The gourd-lings cried out to their brothers, who then spoke to you. You have a good name among growing things.” The princess took a deep breath, then spoke again.

“My name is Tryssa. Thank you for hearing my cry. I would surely have rotted away in the lake if you had not come. Before you go, I want to give you something. A gift.”

“But you are still sick. . .”

“Not so ill that I forget my debts. Let me do this one thing. Healing comes from within as well as without. Besides, I hate to owe anyone anything at all and I owe you a great deal. It is not fitting for a fairy to owe a human anything.” She smiled, then closed her eyes and cupped her hands together. Her handmaidens gathered around her to watch. With the exception of Lys, their expressions were inscrutable to Anne. She thought they were so beautiful with their delicate looking and brilliantly colored wings but they did not much acknowledge her. Tryssa's fingertips turned into long, pale green vines and leaves. In the ball of her hands Anne could see a tiny yellow light. It was faint but grew bigger and brighter. A small pumpkin formed from the seed of light and a stem grew from one of her tendriled fingers that joined with the growing pumpkin. It shimmered with bright white light for a few seconds and then the light died away until there was only a beautiful pumpkin, round, bright and orange. The stem was still attached to her forefinger. She twisted her hand and tore it off, sap dripping from her finger as she handed it over to Anne. Anne took it from her carefully and cradled it. The only pumpkin for miles around! Princess Tryssa lay back down in exhaustion, turned her head and went to sleep. The little fairies all gathered up leaves to cover her while she slept and Lys tended to the princess's tangled hair. Anne herself suddenly felt all the adventure she had experienced press in on her like a boulder and felt like falling asleep herself. She got up and went looking for Zi. He was sitting in the middle of the cavern, a soft ball of glowing light in his hand.

“Let's take care of your coat before you go home.” He took her by the hand and led her to one of the other rooms. A

hole in the ground had been dug out and walled with stones, bits of copper and pebbles. It was filled with hot water and petals.

"I'll have your coat fixed and cleaned for you." Zi said taking it under his arm. Underneath she had her leather and plate vest.

"You collect more and more things as you journey through here!" He said, smiling. "That's the work of the gnomes!"

"I'm so glad I visited the Whitestones! They gave it to me because they thought I would need it and they were right." She said.

"One day you'll have an entire suit of armor to go with your hammer." He said and disappeared. Anne took off her boots and filthy pajama pants, unlaced her vest and gauntlets and got in the bathing hole and washed herself clean from head to toe, even her hair, which was tangled and dirty. The water smelled strongly of pine cones and fir needles. The scent was so sharp and fresh that it renewed her and she didn't feel so tired anymore. The wounds on her neck and cheek, while angry looking, were only superficial. She cleaned the packed mud out of the wounds and climbed out and dried herself with a dry brown leaf as wide and tall as herself. As the leaf soaked up the water from her it crumbled and fell away. Her clothes and boots had been mended and cleaned while she bathed. Anne marveled at how fast pixies worked. A tiny bottle of ointment had been left by the bathing hole. She picked it up. It was a healing salve. It smelled of earth and had a silvery color. She took a little and dabbed it on her wounds. It felt soothing and as she rubbed more of it in the skin around the wound began to knit itself back together and the wound cleared up. She did the same for the one on her face. She was going to have to find a helmet one day. Cuts and bruises were never good and especially not on the face! She put on her clothes, pulled on her boots and dropped the salve in her bag. Then she went out to the cavernous room. Lit with balls of hanging light flickering silently along the walls the cavern was awash in shadows. Anne could see the occasional fluttering shadow of a fairy or imp flying or racing by silently here and there.

"Here is your coat." Zi handed it to her. It was bright orange and whole again just like the day mama had bought it for her. Smiling in relief Anne put her coat back on to ward off the cavern's chilled air.

"When you go back home, we will be leaving this place." Zi said quietly.

"Where will you all go?"

"We have an underground stronghold. The princess will be safer there too. I can't tell you where by words but the Way Wanderer should find it should you return. Though, I don't know what things will look like if you come back, except that they will be grim."

"I *will* come back, Zi. Before January."

"It will be even more dangerous then, Anne." Zi said worriedly.

"I'm still going going to come. Both mama and dad say that bad things happen because people ignore them. Either because they are afraid or because they don't care. I don't want to be like that." After all, she now knew where the Summer Queen was. What she was going to do about it wasn't so clear.

"Well, you have four things to use as weapons against this evil. Your hammer, the ring, your armor and your friends."

"We have something else, Zi."

"Oh?"

"Hunter told me where Queen Faye took the Summer Queen." Zi's eyes became wide, his eyes lightened like new fire."

"I have heard rumors, but. . ."

"Her castle on the Ice Sea."

"But how can you be sure he is telling the truth?"

"My ring doesn't glow at all when I am near Hunter. He's my friend, like you are. Why would he lie? He ran away from the Winter Queen and he is in danger now."

"This is one of the most important things to happen since the spring and summer battles! Anne if this is true, perhaps we can. . ."

"What?"

"I don't know. Even knowing where she is hidden, the Ice Sea castle is Winter's stronghold. We need a plan. Still. . ."

Anne could see excitement in his eyes. They had hope, even if it was a small one. Anne frowned. Knowing where Queen Titian was great but what to do about it was another matter. Still, she had collected more friends who might be able to help them.

"The ring tells the truth. If you trust Hunter's word then I will take your word!" He said after much thought. Anne put up her hand for a high five. He clasped it.

"Friends are the best!" She said. Zi smiled, his eyes like fire.

"There is one more thing you must have." He produced a pocket watch from the folds of his torn tunic. It was silver and it had two knobs. It looked like an ordinary watch that her grandfather used to use before he passed away. On closer inspection it had suns and moons in place of numbers.

"It is of gnome make and origin. I requested the gnomes of Brownwood Lodge a long time ago to make one for you. They made the whistle too. Gnomes are gifted at building things and making devices."

"They are good at farming too!" Said Anne, remembering the bountiful table of the Whitestone family.

"That too."

"What's it for?"

"The next time you come here, you may be forced to stay longer than you intend. Each sun and moon represents a day. A day that passes here is one hour in your world. Listen to this carefully: note the time right before you leave your world. If you stay longer than one day and one night then, right before you cross the doorway to go home, turn the clock back to the time it was right before you left home. That way you won't have too much lost time" Anne cupped it in her hands. It was beautiful with a tree in bronze etched on the back.

"This is so cool!" She was excited to have it. Besides, it wouldn't do to have to explain to her parents why she was gone for an entire weekend!

"Do not abuse it, Anne."

"Oh don't worry, I won't." They climbed into the basket and Zi pulled on a rope of twine. The pulleys pulled them up to the ground floor. They walked outside and waited at the entrance of the great tree. Anne called out Antigone's name three times and hoped Antigone wouldn't be too grouchy over it. They both stood silently listening as the wind blew through the trees and thunder rolled softly in the distance. They could see off in the distance after some time a figure in the deepening dark sky coming, growing larger and then swooping down through the trees.

"I must go Anne and when you come again, together may we find good Queen Titian!" He said and disappeared inside the giant tree. The rain began to pelt and beat the earth beneath the forest again, slipping through the canopy and dripping everywhere. Besides the steady beat of rain the thunder rumbled louder. Anne could hear Antigone's great wings beating against the wind as she dived down and settled by Anne.

"I'm sorry to call you so soon but I have to go home. . .I'm afraid to walk back by myself in the dark. Could you take me home?"

"Of course! It would be rather foolish to go tramping about alone now. Climb on my back and point me in the direction you need to go Anne." Anne got out the Way Wanderer, put away her new pocket watch and said earnestly: "Please take me back to the doorway in my parents' basement." She then blew into the Way Wanderer and a long tendril of light flowed up and out.

"Can you see the light Antigone?"

"No, I see no light but I sense strands of heat. I can follow that! Hurry, a storm is brewing!" Anne climbed on and up, up and away they went.

"Even in the short time that I was gone I have seen and heard alarming things!" Said the Gryp.

"What things?" Her hair was getting wet again and her curls and coils were plastered to her face.

"Gnomes. Hundreds of them, northern families, streaming out of the northern forests and traveling back to their old family strongholds in the south even now as we speak. Blights, deadly frosts and poisons cropping up and growing in new places like a disease running amok. Many folk are turning up missing. Just now I left a large roaming band of winter fairies in one of the southern valleys, beyond the poisoned lake. Winter is fast approaching before its time."

"Did they see you?"

"They did. I made them feel sorry for it. I tore a few of them apart, catching them by surprise and I flew off before they could retaliate but there were so many of them and they have their weapons. There are Gryps that support the Queen, oddly enough. I don't know what they expect to get out of making deals with that treacherous fairy but some have chosen to side with her, so I must watch for them as well." That gave Anne a chill. She hated to think of a bad Gryp attacking Antigone, especially right now when she was riding on her back!

"Why would they want to serve her? I thought Gryps were free folk?"

"We are. Some cannot see farther than their own clawed feet. Those supporting the Winter Queen have lots of power these days. They are very strong because she is very strong. They think that if the Winter Queen succeeds in destroying Queen Titian, they will rule forever with her. That is their hope and she indulges them for now. They forget that fairy Queens rule alone. Once she no longer needs their strength, they will be her servants, like everyone else. They will no longer be free."

"I have to think of something. If Queen Faye ruled forever that would be the most horrible thing in the world!"

"I agree. We all must think of a plan or we are done for!" Antigone said. They flew above the clouds and Anne saw thick, milky arms of stars and constellations that looked wholly different from the ones she often saw at home. They were bigger, brighter, even. She saw the twin moons, so peaceful looking, so silvery white. The sun had gone down but weak embers of violet and red dappled the tips of the thick bed of rain clouds while thin, icy clouds hung above them. It was a most beautiful sight; like flying in an airplane at sunset or sunrise. They suddenly saw the bright back lit flicker of lightening in the thick, gloomy clouds. Then a terrible boom of thunder sounded and they heard a voice in the air howling with rage. Antigone dove down into a break of cloud, barely missing a lightening bolt flinging through the sky. Antigone screeched in fear and anger.

"Hold on Anne!" She cried.

"You destroyed my lake! *My lake*, with iron! How dare you profane this place with it! You think because you snatched

the princess from the lake that I cannot reach her again? Or you?" The Queen cried. Thunder and lightning boomed and struck wildly.

"You will pay for this, Anne! You and all who are helping you!" Another lightning bolt streaked after them. Antigone seeming to anticipate the strikes, diving down again and sideways until they were back underneath the rain clouds and the heavy rain.

"Anne! Where is the way back? I cannot sense the heat any longer!" The thin line had faltered and flickered out. Anne again took out the Way Wanderer and plucked out the way once more. They did not hear the Queen again but they saw her power rage on in the storm. Neither one of them said a word until Antigone reached the doorway. The rain fell hard and the thunder boomed ominously. The Queen was mad and there would be big trouble. It was night but the Way Wanderer's light shined brightly, illuminating the door as it stood, solidly, as if built into a wall, though it stood by itself with nothing on the other side but forest.

"Here it is!" Anne said. They were both panting. "That was close!" She hugged the Gryp.

"I'm sorry I almost got you hurt. I don't want anyone to get hurt because of me."

"It is too late for that, Anne. The Queen forces our hands. We all have to make a stand some day. Best to know what you are about now rather than later. Always know where you stand. If you don't know, sit down and think about it until you figure it out. I will tell you a secret. Neither silver nor gold nor magic seeds do I have but I am honest and loyal to my friends."

"Never shrink from the dangers you face, Anne. Danger and fear is an opportunity to use courage!" Anne knew that she and Antigone would be good friends. They bid each other farewell and good night until the next time. Anne fished for her key. She put the key in the lock and turned it three times and opened the door. Having watched Anne get home safely, Antigone flew off into the storm.

Closing and locking the door from inside the basement, Anne was, once again, bone tired. She dropped the key in her bag, which was bulging with many things: her ring, the chocolate coins, the salve, her hammer, the new time shifting pocket watch, some left over food in the knapsack, the whistle, the key and also the small pumpkin from princess Tryssa. Her bag was getting very heavy. She dragged herself upstairs one step at a time. The house was nearly black as night but her eyes had long since adjusted to the dark. When she reached the top of the stairs she pulled out the pumpkin that the princess had given her, crept into the kitchen and set it down on the counter and then as quietly as she could, went to bed, putting her bag away in her toy chest and taking her boots and coat off. Stripping off her gauntlets and vest, these too, she put in her toy chest. It was an hour before dawn. When Anne finally lay down and closed her eyes she slept all day. Mama and dad had thought her under the weather again, unaware of Anne's eventful night.

That Sunday evening Anne was laying on the couch near the living room window in a freshly washed nightgown. It was very windy outside and she watched as the wind threw the falling leaves up in the air in great swirling bunches. Mama was fixing dinner while Anne and her dad were listening to one of his favorite audio books. The narrator was explaining the part of the story about a big party and hobbits gathered under the Party Tree. She tapped around on dad's old mobile phone looking for some games to play.

Anne was allowed to relax and convalesce on the couch that day instead of helping with dinner because she was so tuckered out. They were thinking she had caught the flu. Anne said nothing because she really was very tired and out of energy that day.

Dad was in and out of the kitchen, up to his kitchen alchemy again. This time he was making his pumpkin soup with big chunks of beef! The wonderful smell wafted through the whole house, reminding Anne of the supper she had at the Whitestone Lodge. She almost wanted to nibble on a fried caterpillar and brown leaf buttered tart again. Her mind drifted in and out of attention, from the phone to the windy fall scene outside. Then something from the story roused her attention: *Sting*. The sword both Bilbo and Frodo wielded. She wielded a small sledge hammer made from iron nails. She knew that important swords in stories always had their own names. Dad was reading a story a few days ago and a little girl in it had a sword named *Needle*. Anne didn't have a sword but she had a hammer and her hammer was very important when she went on adventures and it needed a name. She thought back and forth, forth and back and after some time, settled on either *Star* or *Ribbon*. First of all, they were girl names. Also because of the satin ribbon grandma Veronica gave her. She liked *Star* because when she thwacked villainous creatures with her hammer they more than likely *did* see stars. Grendo and the black dog that had nipped her. Stars. That was it then. *Star*. She would tie the brown satin ribbon to it so when she raised it she would remember grandma's strong, warm spirit. It might give her more courage if she had to fight in a battle.

As to the curious matter of the pumpkin. . .

Earlier that day Anne was sipping warm apple cider while the pumpkin set her parents to a great amount of wondering and confusion. First, Mama had come in to find it sitting on the counter. She asked dad if he had found it and brought it in. He was equally perplexed over the matter.

"No," he said, "I have no idea where it came from."

"Huh." Mama said, scratching her head. They both looked at her.

"I found it outside in the woods, under a tree." Anne said. She wondered what Antigone would think of that answer. It was as close to the truth as she could get without sounding like she had a high fever.

"Perhaps one or two gardeners in the neighborhood had no problems growing a few pumpkins," Mama reasoned, "but why it would be sitting out in the woods by itself is odd." Indeed, it was strange, *to them*, but they seemed to think her answer plausible enough. After that bit of business, dad merrily set about getting the stock pot out and gathering up carrots and onions for pumpkin soup. Mama made a new batch of fresh yogurt. Anne beamed with pleasure and drank her cider.

But the matter of the pumpkin surprised Anne just as much as it did her parents, for different reasons. When Anne had left the pumpkin on the counter it was a very small pumpkin, about as big around as her two fists. When she had finally awakened and came downstairs early that Sunday evening, it was nearly as large as a foot stool!

Later that night, after mama had tucked her in, Anne had been making her way through the newest books dad bought her - her favorite being the *Grimms' Fairy Tales*. There was a new moon about and it was very windy. She could hear the wind sighing and whispering through the trees. While she was reading a tale called *The Elves*, a memory had come creeping out of the corners of her mind. It was triggered by a thing Zi had told her that summer. He had told her that he was a changeling. Not the traditional sort of changeling like a fairy changeling, but a less common sort; a human changed into a fairy creature. She remembered him telling her that there was a fairy changeling that looked like him somewhere in this world. It began to occur to her after having read quite a bit of fairy lore with her dad, that in many stories, fairies often stole children and left a changeling in their place. Anne also remembered that she had nearly met that fate at the Great Hall. And it was then that the answer to the Winter Queen's riddle, which had eluded her for a long time, had now become as clear as ice.

It was then that Anne remembered that the Queen owed her a wish.

The End

Note from the author:

This is the end of book two of the series. I hope you enjoy reading them as much as I enjoy writing them! Book three is coming soon, (I'm planning for a December release) so if you have decided to stay along for the ride then stay tuned!

About The Author:

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

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

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

<http://www.epistlepublishing.com/>

And coming soon

The Winter Wolves

By V. A. Jeffrey

from book three in the series

Secret Doorway Tales

Here's a special preview:

It was hours since they had left the safety of the tunnels. They were traveling out in the open again, this time through the dreaded black forests of the north and it was nightfall. Fortunately for Anne and her companions, Great Grandfather Whitestone had opened up a pathway for them within the tunnels right in the middle of the forest which greatly shortened their trip. It was also fortunate that they were traveling under Cloak, though it made the going slow. She and Hunter could feel the bitter cold even through their thick furs. They had been traveling for half a day and only had a few more hours left before they reached their destination.

Queen Faye had granted Anne safe passage to the Ice Sea. The gnome Grandfathers had seen through that trick. She did not guarantee safe passage to Anne's companions at any point, nor did she guarantee safe passage to Anne at any point before the Ice Sea. The Queen had neglected to make that clear on purpose, planning for them to perish while traveling through her realm, never making it within sight of the sea.

At this point they had met with no more threats from winter folk loyal to the Queen. They were traveling by night again. It was a well lit night, lit by the light of the twin moons. The tall, towering fir trees looked like spectral skeletons, sheathed in ice and snow. The ice sparkled and reflected the cool tints of the northern lights above. Hunter was right. Even in the heart of winter, there was great beauty. Lights of violet, blue, green and scarlet silently danced across the black sky and the stars shined like polished diamonds. It was quiet with the exception of their own muffled footfalls in the snow. Anne sorely wished that Antigone could be with them now and then immediately felt a twinge of guilt for such a thought. Antigone as well as everyone in the company had risked their lives in many battles and had risked their lives again to bring her this far. She said a silent prayer for Antigone, for Pup, for the others and for Hunter. She felt better already.

After some hours, they could finally see beyond the edge of the forest. It was the Snowy Beach. It glowed in pristine whiteness, a great glittering slice of snow and ice. A stretch of land where the line of trees abruptly stopped and the flat, short, snowy stretch of beach merged into the sea just beyond it. The last person of the company that was left, Hunter, stopped here. Anne had made it all the way to the Ice Sea and since she had, courtesies had to be followed. Anne took a deep breath and prepared her herself with sharp concentration and then lifted her head towards the moons and let out a triumphant howl that sliced through the silence like a rocket. The Queen herself would now know that she had failed to foil their plan and she had to allow Anne an audience. Even she held to certain formal courtesies, however loosely she interpreted them. Or what grandma Veronica called, good manners. Anne thought her grandmothers could teach her a thing or two about *true* good manners.

The time had come. Anne had no idea whether she would ever return home, whether she would be turned into some creature and trapped here for the Queen's infinite amusement. Or worse. She did not want to think of what could be worse. She suddenly felt very small and very foolish for daring to demand anything from Queen Faye. She thought of all the ways the Queen might try to trick her. Anne turned to the big blue and white wolf.

"Hunter, why do you stay in your wolf form?"

"Why? I am better able to fight and protect myself. The wolf is faster, stronger. I can see, taste and hear better. In these times, the wolf serves me best."

"Do you ever miss your family? Do you ever want to go back home?" Hunter pondered this.

"It has been many years since I have even thought of home. I once missed and mourned them. I am sure they mourned me but I prefer not to dwell in the past. My life as a boy is in the deep past. They have long since died. I prefer my life as I am now. I have no wish to go back and even if I did, I could never be a boy in your world. I will forever be a wolf outside of this land. The wolf is hated in your world. There is no place for wolves there anymore. I can roam free with my pack and we go where we please. I revel in the wolf! Would that all wolves could come here!" He said proudly. There was no hint of sadness or regret in his voice nor in his eyes. It wasn't the answer Anne was expecting, but there it was. Hunter was as straight forward as Antigone. Anne couldn't imagine not seeing her family again but she stood on an edge right now. Once she got to the castle she would either be able to free the Summer Queen or she would be doomed to wander Other Land forever as a creature of Queen Faye. Everyone was counting on her. Hunter and Zi and others had been kidnapped and turned into fairy beings and they had accepted their fate. They made new lives for themselves. Would she? How would she fare?

"Anne, we come to it! Make sure your armor and helmet are on tight and be mindful of her tricks! She will try all sorts of skulduggery but if you hold to what Great Grandfather Whitestone told you, you can win. Remember, do not eat anything she offers you nor accept any gift from her or from anyone else at the court!" He said. Anne had felt full of bravery at the lodge, full of bravery when traveling with Hunter and his pack and later with the company of warriors but now she had to face the Winter Queen alone. Again.

"Do not be afraid. As you say, good triumphs in the end when it doesn't give up the fight. You do believe that, don't you?" He asked pointedly. She nodded.

"Good. I'll be waiting here until you get back. Remember to keep your wits about you." He believed in her. That lifted her spirits.

"Thank you, Hunter." Hunter gave her a rough lick on the face and she hugged his great, furry neck and then started on the last stretch of the trek. The Snowy Beach was a wondrous sight. The northern lights in their full color, unobscured by trees, danced and streaked across a sky studded with millions of stars and the great Ice Sea stood frozen and still before her, light mists furling up from its surface. The trees stood at the edge like giant, white pillars. She looked back but had moved out of the Cloak and she could no longer see the wolf. She could once again feel the warmth from her ring, hidden under a thick, furry mitten. She knew Hunter stayed behind, still under Cloak, watching to make sure she safely made it past the short stretch of beach to the sea. She trudged off across the beach and then started across the frozen sea. She could see in the distance the great carved iceberg looming up like a mountain. Six sharp spires stood high around its summit like the sharp points of a crown and the castle was illuminated by a cold, luminescent light.

It was strange to her that she was at the shore of a sea and she couldn't see the waves, hear the sea roar and feel sand between her toes. There was dead silence except the sound of her feet padding across the ice and the soft sounds of her breathing as she blew out thick puffs of steam. The sea and the castle were beautiful in an alien way. It was as if she were traveling on Pluto. Or Charon. Or Antarctica. She stared at the wide, starry sky. The stars were infinite and so far away, yet seemed so close. She raised her furry mittened hand up in the air as if to touch one. Ahead of her the stars shined weirdly and moved swiftly in the night. The night seemed blacker than night, blacker than ink, drawing her gaze in as if to put her into a trance, as if she were staring into holes in space. The night was moving in shapes and stars, moving quickly towards her with piercing, starry eyes. Then she heard them. Baleful baying pierced the air in answer to her howl. It was the Queen's black dogs running across the sea. They were running straight towards her!