

The image is a book cover for 'The Winter Wolves' by V.A. Jeffrey. It features a young girl with light-colored eyes, wearing a blue knit hat and a blue winter coat, looking slightly to the right. Next to her is a grey wolf with light-colored eyes, looking forward. The background is a snowy, blue-toned landscape with falling snow. The title 'the winter wolves' is written in a white, serif font, with 'the' on the top line and 'winter wolves' on the bottom line. The author's name 'V.A. JEFFREY' is at the bottom in a white, serif font.

the
winter wolves

V.A. JEFFREY

THE WINTER WOLVES

A Secret Doorway Tale: Book Three

By V. A. Jeffrey

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Winter came early in the year. It was nearly the middle of December and stormy winter weather was everywhere, from the Atlantic shore to the Pacific shore. As swift as a spinning dervish the snow storms came and laid a suffocating cloak of ice upon the small city where Anne Greene lived. The ice storm had encased everything: utility poles, houses, cars and trees. Being that the city received snow and ice perhaps only once every three years, whenever it was dressed in full winter garb the city shut down. Which meant that school was out! A delight to all children everywhere and none of them more delighted than Anne! She gazed out of her bedroom window, wondering what her friends were doing; whether she should build another snowman and how many maple candies she could make – and eat, before mama said enough was enough!

Maple candies were something mama had learned to make when she was a girl. You gathered a big pan of snow or ice, poured a dollop of maple syrup on top of the snow and let it sit for a while outside in the cold or in the freezer until it became hard. Then you just popped them in your mouth! Anne could smell the savory scent of beef broth simmering in the big pot in the kitchen. It was early morning and dad was out shoveling snow from the driveway again. Anne hopped from her chair and flew downstairs. She suddenly remembered that a special package had arrived for her before dinner and it was high time she found out what it was! She went rummaging around in the coat closet, throwing out all and sundry that *didn't* look like a new package.

“Anne? I can hear you in the closet. What are you doing?”

“Looking for something!”

“The package is in the kitchen!” Mama said. Anne stuffed everything haphazardly back into the closet and bounded into the kitchen.

“Where is it, mama?”

“Right here on the counter. It's from grandma Barbara.”

“Goody!” She cried with glee. A long, brown box sat on the counter near the refrigerator. She glanced at the label, trying to guess where it came from.

“Your grandma is in Scotland right now.”

“Scotland?”

“It's near England and Ireland. Here, I'll open the box for you.”

“But *I* want to open it!” Anne protested.

“Alright.” Mama said patiently. Anne tried ripping the thick tape off but the box was held fast by it. Try as she might, she could not get it open.

“OK. You can open it.” Anne pouted. Mama gave her an expectant look, raising a brow.

“Can you please open it for me, mama?” Mama wiped flour from her hands on a towel and with a pairing knife, cut at the tape slowly, opening the box. Anne eagerly took the box and pulled out her new gift. It was a royal blue cloak made of velvet with tiny silver stars stitched into the bottom hem and it had a plush, fur trim of midnight blue with a fur trimmed hood! The inside was light blue dyed wool. It was so beautiful! Anne had never owned a cloak before and especially one so wonderful as this! Mama exclaimed in wonder and delight and she helped her put it on. Anne twirled and swirled this way and that. She felt like a royal princess!

“When can I wear it? Can I wear it to school?”

“Well I suppose. . .”

“Please, mama? I want to wear it to school!” She said excitedly, flouncing around the kitchen.

“You can wear it to school then. After all, it's cold outside and that looks like a very warm cloak. I just wonder though, sweetie. I don't want it to get soiled or dirty.”

“Oh, I won't mess it up!”

“Now remember, you'll need to thank grandma when she calls next time.”

“I will!” Anne tried on her hood, running her hands along the soft fur. Mama laughed.

“If you plan to wear it to school, then I want you to put it away in the coat closet. You can either wear it today or you can wear it when you go back to school.” Anne screwed up her face in a frown. She didn't much care for those choices but mama didn't leave her much room to negotiate and she *did* want to show it off at school. She skipped from the kitchen and down the hall. Grandma Barbara knew her favorite color! *I wonder where grandma will go next? What will she send next?* Anne reluctantly took her cloak off and laid it carefully on an occasional table by the coat closet. She went to the living room and gazed outside. It had begun to snow lightly again. *More snow.* She thought. The trees looked like white spires, heavy with ice and snow. She heard the front door open and in blew a giant snowman! Or, rather, it was just dad.

“Well! Old Man Winter really laid a number on the whole country this month!” He said, wiping fat snow flakes from his face. The walk was partially clear but as it had begun snowing again, dad gave up the fight for the day in frustration.

“Got anything planned today, little one?”

“I'm going to make another snowman.”

“Another one! Soon we'll have an army of them out there. Did you find your gift?”

“Yes! I love it!” She said. Dad winked. Anne thought he looked quite comical and a rather dramatic looking snowman, all covered in bright white crusts of snow framing his dark brown face.

“One of your friends is coming to visit.” He said, pointing towards the window. There, waving and bundled up in her pink snowsuit and scarf was Emma. *Yay!* Anne ran to the door, pulling Emma inside. They hugged each other, both chanting: 'School is out! School is out!'

“I hear company!” Mama called from the kitchen.

“It's Emma! Can she stay for dinner?”

“Of course!” Both Anne and Emma melted into a gale of giggles and then ran upstairs to play. If only Tanya could be here, but she lived across the river, clear across town. At least they would see her at school. That is, if school ever opened again.

All that day Anne and Emma made snowmen, ate maple candies, collected frozen pine cones and made snow angels as big, fat snowflakes fell lightly in their hair and on their cheeks. They simply did as children will do; play and bask in the fun and beauty of winter. After all, they would go inside when their hands became too cold and when it became too dark to see. But deep in her mind Anne knew that behind the wonder and sparkle, the dark hand of an evil winter was rising.

Snow day play time extended itself until Thursday when it was then decided by the school district that school was in session again. Until that day, Anne helped with the baking and cooking, as usual. Thursday morning was the day she got to wear her blue cloak. Putting on her white snowsuit and matching moon boots, she waited outside on the back porch, twirling around in her cloak and making wispy angels with her breath in the air. The air was sharp and freezing and she could feel her cheeks becoming numb. Early though it was, the sky threatened more snow still. It was light gray with swift, slate gray clouds pouring across the horizon like wild horses. It even had that odd smell of snow and ice in the air that she found hard to describe. Then mama appeared on the porch and they were off to school.

As they approached the front entrance of John Adams Grade School there was a giant snowman that had been built in front of the doors to greet them. Everyone was dressed in their best winter jackets or coats and boots but no one had a blue hooded cloak! She felt giddy as she wondered what Emma and Tanya would say.

“OK sweetie, I'll come pick you up later.”

“I want to walk home with my friends.”

“You don't want me to come for you?”

“No, that's OK mama.” After all, they didn't live far from school.

“Alright then.” Mama sounded disappointed which made Anne feel slightly guilty but she was 8 years old! She didn't need her parents to walk her home in the snow! They hugged each other and Anne plowed through the snow and up the steps, dragging her backpack along. Usually her friends were waiting for her at the front steps but not today. The school halls looked sparse – many kids stayed at home. Unfortunately she happened to run into the last person in school that she wanted to see or talk to. Lauren Noble. The most popular, richest girl in school. She was also the meanest girl in school. Lauren had all of the Fairy Princess dolls in her collection, and their fairy pets and all of their accessories. She flaunted this, among many other things, and she took particular delight in ridiculing Anne. She stood with her gaggle of friends around her, watching with contempt as Anne came down the hall towards homeroom.

“Well, if it isn't stupid Anny Fanny!” They all exploded in laughter. She looked Anne up and down, noting the cloak.

“That coat is sooo ugly. Why would you wear that to school?” Lauren wrinkled her nose.

“It's not a coat. It's a cloak!” Anne snapped, frowning.

“A *what?*” Lauren cupped her ear as if she couldn't hear.

“Never mind.”

“Whatever it is, it's ugly. Why would you wear something like that anyway?”

“Her mom probably made her wear it.” Chimed one of Lauren's friends.

“Her mom is dumb. Mine would never make me wear something like that.” Sneered Lauren.

“Awww. Little Anny Fanny's mama made her wear something from their dusty attic!” They all laughed. Loudest was Lauren, in her brand new, chocolate suede and wool coat and fur boots to match. Some of the boys, the ones that were always up to bad mischief, were coming down the hall and joined in.

“Hey, you look like that fairy godmother in *Cinderella!*”

“Bibbity-bobbity, BOO!” Yelled another one. Whether the boys were really making fun of her or just making a clumsy observation Anne couldn't tell but she sorely wished her friends were here now. Especially Tanya, who could think of what to say and say it better than any of them. But they were not here. She was by herself. She fought back angry, hot tears and ignored them and hurried to her homeroom class, her blue cloak dragging behind her. What was once her wonderful, blue princess cloak suddenly felt as burdensome as an ugly old drape.

Finally, the last bell rang after a miserable eternity of feeling like a blue bulls' eye all day. She could finally go home. Anne waited in the girls' bathroom until most of the kids had already left. Then she started for home. The wind bit at her fingers, her nose and lips. The tears froze on her cheeks. She dragged her backpack behind her. Trudging down towards the trail that led to the little old shed she could hear the sound of laughter and jeering from the group of 5th grade boys from school that teased her about her cloak and were always up to some mischief around the shed. She slowed her pace and hid behind a clump of bushes. There were four of them and they were throwing snowballs at a small child. *Zing!* A snowball flew and thwacked him right square on the head. Laughter.

"Here's another one!" *Thwack!* On the head again, then the snowball went falling and landed with a soft thud on the ground.

"Hit him harder! Harder! Whoop!"

"Hey, where did he go?"

"Where did who go? Who cares?"

"That boy! Or whatever."

"I don't know. He just jumped behind some bushes and disappeared or something."

"Yeah but where? That's weird. He couldn't have gotten away that quickly!"

"Who cares? It's getting cold anyway. Let's go." The boys scrambled off, throwing snowballs at each other and screaming and yelling all the way home. As soon as they disappeared Anne plowed as quickly as she could through the snow. She ran up to the clump of bushes where the boy fell.

"Hello? Little boy?" She looked around. *Is he hurt?* She wiped the tears from her face, forgetting her own troubles. There could be a little boy lost in the woods because of those bullies.

"Hello?" She called out again. It was getting colder and the sky was quickly becoming dark.

"Would you be speakin' to me, little girl?" Said a merry voice behind her. Anne whipped around in surprise. The little boy was standing behind her, smiling and covered in snow.

"Oh. I thought you. . ."

"No need to be worryin'. The snow won't bother me a bit."

"So you aren't hurt?" Anne asked in curiosity. On closer inspection, he wasn't a little boy at all. He was little but looked like a full grown gnome, except he didn't have a beard. She thought that she recognized him even though his face was unknown to her. There was something in his eyes that looked familiar, though she wasn't sure why that was so.

"Oh no! Snowballs are no matter. It is a far, graver thing I come here for, child. That's a mighty fine cloak you have there. What a color!"

"My grandma gave it to me."

"Well you look like a princess!" This made her beam.

"So why did you come?"

"Well, winter has come early and many of my kin fear it will never leave. I thank you for your care and concern after my person, Anne but I came to see about you! They were naughty boys, weren't they?" He smiled and winked at her. Anne nodded. They were always naughty and they always seemed to get away with all sorts of things. The gnome pulled out a handmade cigar.

"Those boys can be mean. I don't really like them. I'm just glad you didn't get hurt." Anne said.

"So am I. Now, about my business here, when you get home, you will find a friend has left you a gift."

"A gift? From Zi?"

"Now, who is that? I wonder! I best be goin'. You have a secret about you I think, one that only you and Great Grandfather Whitestone can see. I'll be off now and don't you be worryin' about those boys! When they get home they will each receive a boil for every snowball they flung at me." With that, the little man vanished in a cloud of frost and icy mist and standing in front of her was a small snowman. She wasn't sure if the little man was being truthful or teasing. And boils! She almost felt sorry for those boys. Almost. *Did Zi come to see me?* She wondered. She hadn't seen him in nearly a month. If he had come for a visit he must have a fat, orange winter coat by now. Her spirits lifted a little and she trotted off home and all along the way, snowflakes fell harder and swifter.

Anne dropped her cloak on the floor and took off her boots, shaking off the snow and went straight to her room. If something had arrived from fairy hands it had to be there. She looked on the windowsill but saw nothing but flying snow. There was nothing on her chair or on the bed. Anne went to the bed and threw off her pillow; nothing under the pillows. Footsteps sounded up the stairs and towards her room. Anne looked under the bed, swiping her dragon slippers aside impatiently. Nothing. *Where is it?* She thought, confused. The door opened and mama came in with the blue cloak draped over her arm and a concerned look on her face.

"Anne, I found this on the floor downstairs. That's no way to treat grandma's gift."

"Sorry. I'll hang it up." Anne said. She got up and sat on the bed. Mama opened the closet door and hung it up for her and

then sat on the bed by Anne.

“What happened at school today? I can tell you're upset about something.” Anne frowned and folded her arms. Mama put her arm around her shoulder.

“No one liked my cloak! They said it was ugly!”

“You mean Lauren and her friends?”

“Yes.”

“I'm sure there was *someone* who liked your cloak.”

“Well Sandy, my homeroom teacher, liked it. But they made fun of me all day! I don't want to wear it to school anymore!”

“You know, Anne, sometimes we encounter people who don't like us because we're different from them. Your blue cloak is unique, just like you are. The color is deep and beautiful with glittery silver stars and soft fur. Everyone else just has old ordinary jackets.”

“But why does she always pick on me?”

“Because she doesn't understand you. Some people don't like anything different or anyone that isn't exactly like them. Things that are different frighten people like her but they hide their fear by becoming bullies. They want everything to be the same and they want everyone to follow them. She can't control you like she controls her friends. If people like that can't force you to be like them, they attack you.”

“That's wrong!”

“Yes, it is. You know what? You don't have to let her make you feel bad. She wants you to run and cry or to change yourself and be like her friends. You don't have to listen to her or her boring friends. The next time she has something mean to say to you, look her straight in the eye and don't blink and tell her you enjoy whatever it is that she doesn't like, that you don't care what she thinks and further more, you'll do it again tomorrow just to irritate her and the next day too so she'd better get used to it. Don't let bullies stop you from being *you*.” Anne grinned, the little gray cloud lifting from her heart.

“I will! Um, but, I think I still just want to wear one of my normal jackets tomorrow!” Mama laughed.

“That's fine. How about next week, sweetie? The snow is picking up something terrible out there. We're keeping you home again tomorrow!”

“Hooray!” Anne shouted. She hugged mama.

“Now, I need some help with dinner tonight, Anne. Just remember – don't let boring, mean kids tell you what to do. Don't be afraid to be yourself.” They went downstairs and put on their aprons and started dinner.

That night she lay in bed listening to the wailing wind outside. Although it was night, the sky had that strange, pinkish gray color of a snow night. Thick drapes of flurries flew down in a fury. Anne's mind wandered from the strange little man, whom she suspected was a relative of the Whitestone family, and the gift she hadn't found. She also thought of winter. Queen Faye had said she would grant her a wish, likely thinking that she would never guess the answer. Queen Titian was being held prisoner at the castle on the Ice Sea. So, how would this help her and her friends in Other Land? There had to be some way that these things fit together. Unless, there was a missing piece. Or missing *pieces*.

She had the answer! She would tell Queen Faye that she owed her a wish for the question she posed. She would just tell her to release the Summer Queen. Looking at it that way, it seemed quite simple. If only she could find that gift! She wondered what it could be. Some special weapon even better than her hammer? Then she had a thought. Anne got up from her bed, turned on the lamp light and went to her toy chest. She carefully took out all of her toys, looking for her leather bag. Careful to make as little noise as possible she finally got to the bottom of the chest and pulled out the bag. With her many toys spread out about her she rummaged around in the bag and then finally dumped its contents on the ground. She saw something new sitting under the tiny tin of salve Zi had given her months ago. Amongst her arsenal was a miniature helmet that fit in the palm of her hand. A helmet of gold and silver and strong braided leather. The top of the helmet gleamed with a soft, golden light and she saw, etched in the silver band around it familiar characters that were on her leather armor. It looked exactly like one of the helmets she had admired at the Great Whitestone Lodge. Her own helmet! *But wait! I can't use it! It's too small! Maybe it'll grow overnight, like the pumpkin did.* She felt a sudden, icy chill wash over her toes and feet. A draft was seeping in from somewhere. She looked towards the window but the icy air was coming from under the closet door. She got up and slowly opened the closet door, peeking in. Just beyond her clothes and shoes stood a wintry night with the full, twin moons glowing brightly like silver eyes, hanging over a snow capped mountain, just barely visible in the night. Far off in the distance she heard baleful howls. A dark speck, like a black pupil on one of the moons drew closer. It grew and grew until Anne could discern the flapping of wide, dark wings of a creature high in the sky, swiftly covering the distance! Her heart knocked in her chest and she shut the door quickly! An unlocked doorway in her room! Anne, trembling, snatched a pillow and the comforter from her bed and raced downstairs to the living room and slept on the couch for the night, listening for and jumping at any and all sounds she heard, real or imagined.

Friday morning found Anne softly snoring in fits, tossing and turning. She woke up suddenly to the sounds of the radio and smells of breakfast. Snow was still falling outside.

“What’s wrong, little one? Why are you sleeping out here?” Dad looked up from his book, lying back in his easy chair.

“It’s warmer down here dad.” She said, tired and yawning. “It’s still snowing. Wow.” She noted softly. Snowflakes drifted against the windows. All she could see outside was white upon white. They’d never had this much snow before.

“Yes.” Was all dad said. He looked very worried at the merciless snowfall outside, which worried her because dad rarely worried about anything. He sighed deeply and went back to his book. Anne looked outside again. The amount of snow for this time of year where they lived was very rare indeed. If they were getting an onslaught of snow and ice here, what was happening in Other Land? What about her friends? She sighed and rubbed her eyes. It was time to go back but this time she knew things would be more difficult, more dangerous. She took a deep breath and savored the scents of the hearty breakfast mama was making. She would eat as much as she could because she would need all of her strength and wits about her in this third journey.

It was late evening and Anne was in her room making an inventory of all of her special objects. The tiny helmet had grown, like she suspected it would, it’s metal gleaming and shining as if newly polished. She placed it on her head. It fit as if it had been tailored just for her. Then she examined her other things. On the silver pocket watch she was especially focused. She wondered if she would need it. *What did Zi say to do? Oh! Note the time before you leave home. If you stay longer than one day and one night then right before you cross the doorway to go home again, turn the clock back to the time it was before you left home.* She could spend six or seven days there without using it but if she was forced to stay longer for some reason. . . Anne ran her fingers over the etched tree and then placed it in her bag. She then went to the bottom of the chest and pulled out her leather armor. She had *Star*, her gauntlets and her vest. All she needed were boots. She got out her favorite blue moon boots and her blue snowsuit. She put all of her objects back in the bag. It was settled then!

Her closet door rattled slightly from an icy draft that was seeping into her room. Anne could see a faint light slipping out underneath the doorway and felt the draft with it as she put her hands on the bottom of the door. She would call Antigone as soon as she went through the doorway. She didn’t want to go through this particular doorway but she didn’t see any other choice nor did she have time to wait. Was it random or did this unlocked doorway come here on purpose? Her parents had just gone to bed and the only sound besides the rattling door was the soft slapping of snowflakes against her window. She quietly dressed in her armor, then the snowsuit, socks, boots and mittens. She grabbed her bag and slung it over her shoulder. She had her hammer in hand. She opened her closet door, staring at the wintry scene beyond her clothing rack. She grabbed her new cloak and put it on. Lastly, she put on her brand new helmet, put on her ring, closed the door and stepped out into Other Land once again.

It was a clear and starry night sky with the twin moons full and fat, shining like bright silver eyes. The forested mountain stood before her once again and the deep snow crunched beneath her feet. It appeared that no one had crossed this way recently, for her footprints were the only ones visible. At least no one had *walked* this way. Anne called Antigone, saying her name three times. Her voice rang and echoed through the trees and against the mountain rock. As the echoes died down she could hear the wind rustle through the trees and clumps of snow drifting to the ground in soft thuds. She could not see her ring for her mitten but she felt it growing warm. Danger was coming! She hoped Antigone would come soon and wondered fearfully if she would come at all in the dead of night. Anne pulled her cloak close about her and went to hide behind the trunk of a fir tree. She watched to see if anyone came creeping out into the clearing. Her footprints she couldn’t hide so she kept *Star* close to her chest, ready to strike. She watched silently, listening to every sound. The only sounds besides the wind and snow was the soft rise and fall of her own breathing, her tiny clouds of breath dissipating as quickly as they had formed. Behind her, deeper in the forest, tiny iridescent lights of blue, green and silver rose from the ground and fluttered towards her. Anne glanced behind her and saw them, dancing like glowing multicolored fireflies just a short distance from her. As they grew closer the ring on her finger grew warmer. Far in the distance she heard the familiar cry of a Gryp. The dancing lights turned into a thick curtain of light that moved forward, swift as a river current and soon they were all around her. At first Anne did not realize what was happening. Tiny, cold hands, many hands, tugged on her cloak pulling her away from her hiding place and lifting her up. They were pixies and they became more insistent, moving and pulling her, dragging her off. With colorful iridescent wings, silvery pale bodies, little black eyes and sharp teeth and fingers they had awed her and then surrounded her so fast she had little time to act. Her boots, not yet firmly rooted in the snow went sliding as they pulled her away. They began squealing and screaming as she tried to bat them away, hitting a handful but there were so many that they held her fast. Then, a shrilly, fierce screech filled the air as Antigone swooped down through the trees. She started snapping up pixies and swallowing them whole and the rest fled as quickly as they had come.

“Just in time for both of us! You should have run and hid yourself as soon as you saw them Anne!”

“I didn’t know. They looked like pretty lights.”

“They are pretty, aren’t they? Deadly too. They would have carried you off and either taken you to the Queen or eaten

you. Awful little things.”

“What do they taste like?” Anne asked. Antigone shivered in distaste.

“Sweet at first, then bitter and more bitter. Food is scarce now, so we make do, I suppose. Are you hurt?” Antigone asked looking around warily, her sharp green eyes scanning the woods. Anne dusted herself off.

“No, I'm OK. I'm glad you came quickly. What's happened since I've been gone?” Antigone wagged her great head.

“Many things. None of them good. Battles are being fought everywhere and a big war is brewing up north. Most of the larger free holdouts remain strong, for now. Many smaller homes have been destroyed, the inhabitants run off or worse. It is very dangerous to roam even the southern forests alone. Even traveling in troupes is dangerous these days. The winter folk have made many inroads into the south. Not much to eat unless you know someone with a large cellar or keep a large stash well hidden yourself. Another thing! Something has gotten across, something wicked and powerful.” It was all that Anne had feared, a dark dream come to life.

“What?”

“As of now, I'm not sure. I must go back, Anne! The call to battle will sound again and I dare not take you with me into battle. It would be too dangerous. Is there a safe place I can take you to?” Anne thought hard for a moment.

“I must find Hunter.”

“Why Hunter?”

“Hunter told me something important about the Summer Queen. He might know more. I have to talk to him.”

“I see. There is a rumor. . .”

“That she is being held prisoner at the Winter Queen's castle. I know. I have to see if he has more information since he last told me.” Antigone cocked her head in curiosity.

“Then hop on and let us fly fast! Any news about the Summer Queen is desperately needed.” Anne climbed on to her back and away they flew, off into the starry, cold night. Anne wasn't sure what her plan was. It was forming slowly as she was borne along on Antigone's back, but she was sure of one thing – that everyone's fortunes rested on rescuing Queen Titian from the castle on the sea.

High above in the sky by the bright light of the moons Anne saw the land spread out like a patchwork quilt; the snowy mountain tops, the forests swaddled in fog farther north. The night was clear as crystal and the air sharp. Soon noises grew louder and fiercer as they neared a valley. The noises of battle.

“Trouble up ahead Anne! I see your wolf. He is with his pack and many others, besides.”

“What’s going on?”

“Trolls! Lots of them. They’ve overrun the forest like rodents after cheese!”

“Yuck!” Anne shivered in disgust, remembering her encounter with Grendo and Grunkor.

“I don’t know, Anne. I can’t let you stay here!”

“Are they winning? Hunter and his pack?”

“Hard to tell. I’ll set you up in a tree nearby and join the fray. Do not stir from this hiding place!” Antigone’s voice brooked no discussion on the matter. She settled Anne down in a tree with monstrously large branches and flew down into the fray. With Antigone in the fray it didn’t last long. Anne couldn’t see well from her vantage point but she heard the screams of terror and much snarling and howling along with Antigone’s bone-chilling screeches and then she heard the sound of many footsteps running in the snow. Afterward there was a cacophony of triumphant howling and short barks and then she heard Antigone’s giant wings flapping up, drawing close.

“Anne, come!” She called, her eyes gleaming in the night.

“I heard running below!”

“We chased some of them off. The rest are nothing but smoking ruins in the snow.” Antigone said in triumph. Anne jumped onto her back and they flew down to the valley floor and Antigone lighted right in amongst a great congregation of wolf packs. Anne looked around in surprise. There must have been at least a hundred of them! All with eyes shining in the night. Ferocious, big wolves freshly excited by the recent victory of a small battle. Many bodies of trolls lay lifeless in the snow. Anne slid from Antigone’s back. The wolves stared suspiciously at her, some mumbling or growling in low tones until a booming voice cut through the air.

“Anne! You came back!” It was Hunter. He bounded up to her.

“Hunter!”

“It would seem my work here is done for the time being. Hunter, will Anne be safe here?” Antigone asked. Hunter yelped and lifted his head towards a few wolves behind him.

“As safe as can be, considering the times we live in. She will travel with us. Is there anywhere else for her to go?”

“I cannot take her with me and the hour grows late. I must fly. I will see you all again!” She said.

“You are a great warrior. Thank you for all your help these many weeks.”

“Always. I thank you for yours as well, aye! I see my brother, a ways off.” With that, she flew away. Up above Anne could see the silhouettes of three other Gryps and Antigone flying away to meet them. The wolves began to howl and broke off into their own packs. Out of the din, four wolves moved towards Hunter, all of them watching Anne intently.

“This is the girl?” Asked a female wolf. She was snow white.

“This is Anne, my friend. She has a purpose here and she will travel with us for the time being.”

“Travel? With us? Why?” Asked another. He was black with an iron gray stripe running down his head and back. His tail twitched.

“Because the Whitestone says she has a purpose in connection with the Winter Queen. Something that will stop her rampage.”

“Well if he says so, I have no argument.” Another wolf said mildly, another female. She was shorter and fatter than the others and her fur a soft gray color.

“So, she’s your new friend?” A little wolf pup appeared, jumping up and down excitedly and wagging his tail.

“Shh, Pup! Anne, this is my pack. The big gray and black one is Dragon. The white one is Nys. Edda is the light gray wolf and this little one, of course, is Pup.” Pup was jet black. Anne smiled and nodded at each of his pack mates, happy to meet his friends. Edda and Pup seemed friendly but the other two simply nodded, keeping their distance. Nys and Dragon were cool and unenthusiastic about Anne’s presence but since she was Hunter’s friend and as he now saw it, his charge, he would suffer no argument from them. That they knew and wisely kept silent.

“I’ve come back because I remembered something from the summer at the Great Hall.”

“What is that?” Hunter asked. The others listened intently.

“But Hunter, you were there.”

“I was. I was preoccupied at the time. Refresh my memory.”

“Remember when the Queen asked me a riddle?” She asked. He nodded.

“She promised me a wish. Any wish. She didn’t put any rules on it.”

“True, but . . .” Hunter’s black eyes seemed to gleam bright with the slow dawn of realization.

“She *did* make you a promise of a wish. With no strings. I remember now – and you didn’t answer!”

“Right. But I *know* the answer.”

"Which means she is owing." The others seemed to realize it too.

"A wish! It is owing to Anne and she will have it!" Said Edda excitedly.

"But how does this change anything?" Asked Nys.

"I will ask her to free the Summer Queen."

"Oh, ho! A daring bet!" said Dragon. The others moved in closer.

"But how will you get there? You plan to simply go to the castle and ask her? Just like that?" Asked Nys skeptically.

"Well, no. I'm not sure yet which is why I need help. What other way is there to stop her? You can't run away or fight forever." Anne said. The other wolves fell silent except for Pup who wagged his tail and sniffed her. Hunter gazed out into the night quietly, his eyes shining like lantern lights.

"Hmm. It is true. We cannot run, hide and fight forever."

"We can too fight!" growled Dragon. Nys nodded.

"Perhaps for a time. But not forever. Balance must be restored, Dragon. Nys, you know this is true as well. Anne has a chance of helping us set things right. The problem is how to get Anne into the Queen's presence safely."

"The gnome Grandfathers will know. Especially the Whitestone." Said Edda. She gazed serenely at Anne.

"What say you, Hunter?" Asked Dragon.

"I say we set off towards the Whitestone Lodge."

"But Hunter! We've just fought a battle! Many battles! This girl has us going on a wild chase back north? What if we encounter more trolls?" Cried Nys.

"What if we do? Are you afraid? Anne has fought a battle before. She has an iron hammer that protects her. Besides, I'm tired of constant skirmishes, same as you. The Queen must be stopped. Anne can force her hand because she has broken the Ancient Laws. The Queen gave her word to grant her a wish. If we can get Anne to the castle, therein lies a chance to free the Summer Queen."

"But what is the Summer Queen to us?" Asked Dragon.

"Life! Do not be foolish, Dragon. We are condemned as traitors now. Do you want to see an unending winter? It will go hard for us if that happens. It is in our best interests to rescue her." Said Hunter, growing impatient.

"Hmm. I wonder, Hunter. The Queen is nothing if not devious." Said Nys.

"Which is why we need the Great Grandfather Whitestone and his council on this matter. Our mission as of now is to get Anne to the lodge. They will know what to do next. We've stood around too long already. Anyone who prefers not to follow me can go his or her own way but I will take Anne to the Whitestone Lodge." Hunter announced sternly. There was a low growl from Nys but other than that, they remained silent, willing to follow even if not all agreed that this was the right course. Hunter knelt down and Anne climbed onto his back.

"We go north." The others fell in step behind. Pup frolicked and jumped up and down at Hunter's side, happy to see a new face. The other wolf packs were all each going their own way.

"I didn't know there were so many wolves." Said Anne.

"Yes, there are many." They began walking up hill. Everywhere the snow was knee deep. Clouds were crawling in on the horizon, heavy gray clouds tinted with pink, the color that told of more snow. They all hovered close together as the wind picked up.

"Where do we go next before we get to the Lodge?" Asked Pup.

"Our nearest hiding place where we can sleep."

"Hollow Tree Vale?"

"Hollow Tree Vale."

"Anne, your name is Anne, isn't it?" Asked Pup.

"Yes?"

"I'm Pup." Pup said proudly. Anne giggled.

"When did you run away from the Queen, Pup?"

"A few months ago. It was the best when we ran away! She can't make us do things we don't want to do anymore." He said, skipping and sidling playfully.

"Freedom. It's a wonderful thing isn't it, Pup?" said Edda.

"Yes!"

"But we have to hold on to that freedom or it can be taken away." Said Edda.

"I smell snow." Anne said, taking a deep breath.

"You can smell it too?" Dragon asked in surprise.

"Yes. It sort of smells like laundry washing without soap." That was the best description she could come up with.

"Interesting."

"I smell it too. It isn't natural snow on the air though." Nys said. The others turned and looked at her. "It's the blade snow." She said worriedly.

"What's that?" Asked Anne.

"An evil invention of the Queen. It is snow that can stab and bleed you as it falls. When it falls, it falls sharp and hard,

cutting and shredding you to pieces. You do not want to be caught out in it!" Anne blanched at hearing that.

"It is one of the Winter Queen's most recent machinations since the poison frosts. Especially after so many wolves tired of her cruelties and left the north. It keeps many in fear and hampers our movements. We need to move fast. We have some time before it comes but we do not have all night!" Hunter warned. They quickened their pace, trotting under tall snow covered trees under a starry sky that was quickly being smothered by deadly storm clouds.

"What does blade snow smell like?" Asked Anne.

"You know that odd description you gave?" Said Nys.

"Uh-huh."

"Well that and fresh blood."

"Stay close, Pup! You're veering too far off in the dark." Warned Hunter. Pup sidled in closer to Hunter. Hunter picked up an invisible path through tangled, snowbound bushes, as far as Anne could tell, after a long trek on a wider footpath, to a group of old, dead hollowed out trees intertwined together.

"Here we are. Just in time." Hunter said and they all sighed in relief.

"Her machinations only get worse, don't they?" Dragon said, shaking his head. Anne looked up at the sky once more before they settled deep into the hollowed trees for the night. She could still see the moons but instead of a serene silver light they cast a milky, filmy light across the night like two blind eyes. Much like the white eyes of the Winter Queen.

Just as they had gotten settled in, the deadly snow began. It fell like normal snow and looked just as beautiful to Anne. It was hard to believe it could cut and make her bleed but the wolves feared it. They were all packed in and snuggled against each other for warmth. The night was very cold but Anne and the wolves hardly felt it, sequestered in the tree. Anne used her bag as a pillow, lying down between Hunter and Pup.

"Anne," Pup asked, his eyes shining in the dark, "where is your real home? Where do you come from?"

"From outside this place. I live with my parents."

"I don't remember where my mother and father are anymore." Said Pup. "I remember what they look like but not where they live."

"I'm sorry."

"These are my new family. Maybe if you stay, you can be a wolf too! Like us." Pup said and laid his head on her chest. Soon after, he went to sleep. Anne slept fitfully throughout the night, through snatches of dark dreams that were difficult to remember. She woke to the lonely howl of a wolf far away. The snow had stopped. She could hear Hunter breathing lightly.

"It is Dannig." Anne heard one of the female wolves say softly. It was Nys.

"I've just awakened. What does he say?" Hunter asked quietly. Nys turned towards Anne. Her dark eyes gleaming like tiny points of cold fire. She lowered her voice so that only Hunter might hear. Anne strained to listen.

"It's about the girl. He says the Queen knows she is somewhere in the land. She escaped a large troupe of ice pixies. The Queen has commanded that she be found and brought to the castle. And to kill anyone found with her."

The morning greeted them with a sky of pale gray. Snow fall had stopped but the wind had grown from a breeze into whirling gales that whipped and whistled through the trees like banshees. The wolves had sniffed the air and found it safe to travel. They yawned and shook the sleep from themselves and started traveling north again.

"Hunter, what were you talking about last night?" Anne asked.

"You heard? The Queen knows that you've come back. She plans to kidnap you."

"How does she even know I'm here?"

"She has eyes and ears in many places. Ice pixies in this case. Nasty things."

"We hate ice pixies! They are evil! They even *taste* evil." Growled Pup.

"Antigone doesn't like the way they taste either."

"Hungry things. They love flesh. Fortunately for you they were on orders from the Queen." Said Nys dryly. Anne was glad for that. She shuddered to think what might have happened had Antigone come too late or had not come at all. Or if they were simply out passing the time and not on orders from Queen Faye. *The next time I come back, it'll be through a locked doorway!*

"I hope your plan works Hunter. Otherwise, we've got great trouble that will come down on us."

"We are rebels. Must I keep reminding you, Dragon? For that alone, she will give no quarter. We are already in great trouble. I am past the point of caring." They traveled in silence for a time but Anne had many curious questions rolling around in her mind.

"Hunter, how did you know what the message said?"

"You heard the howling last night?" He asked.

"Yes."

"We wolves have our own language. To outsiders, it is howling. Which it is, but there are ways, inflections and intonations that can tell you different things."

"We can talk to other wolves or to each other from long distances." Said Edda.

"Can you teach me how to howl?" Anne asked.

"You? Howl? In Wolf tongue?" Dragon cried and they all laughed.

"What's so funny? I like wolves. I was just wondering, that's all." Anne pouted, insulted.

"It's just that you don't have the ability to speak our language. You are human. Besides, it's only for us." Said Nys.

"Oh." Anne was very disappointed and a little irritated but she still had more questions.

"Do you ever howl at the moon? Why do wolves and dogs howl at the moon?" At this a hush came over the wolves. They stared at Anne with wide eyes.

"The moon! We do but only on rare occasions. The Lady Moons, as they are known, they are our guides in the night and guides in dreams, good and bad. I suppose wolves and dogs in your world echo this, distantly, but do they receive answers, I wonder? Do you know the Lady Moons, Anne?" Asked Edda in awed tones.

"No. Why do you call them that?" Anne thought she remembered hearing about the Lady Moons before, if only briefly. At the mention of the moons she became very excited.

"Because they rule the tribes of dreams and visions. Dreams that come to tell you something and also those that mean nothing but clear the mind for the next sunrise." Said Edda.

"The Lady Moons are the fairy queens of Sleep and they appear to us as moons. They speak in dreams." Said Hunter.

"They're fairy queens too?"

"Well, not like Winter and Summer. They are called Lady instead of Queen. Once, you could reach them through the Mirrored Lake but it is poisoned now and frozen over, besides. Only we wolves and dogs can speak to them when we howl and they answer us, when the mood takes them. They say that both of the Ladies were born from a she-wolf. Whether it is true or merely wolf-legend, I do not know. When they speak to us wolves, we can hear them but *you* cannot hear them unless you dream. They speak in visions, sounds and images." Said Hunter.

"To reach them you have to go through the lake. Even when it was pristine and calm, it could be a mysterious place. Some have entered the lake seeking answers and have never returned."

"Never returned? Where do they go?"

"No one knows."

"If the lake stays poisoned, will it poison people's dreams?"

"It has already begun, or so I hear. One day it will affect everyone. It's nearly completely frozen now and if we cannot stop the Winter Queen's plans, that solves the problem of the Mirrored Lake. If we defeat her, the imbalance she has caused by poisoning the lake will destroy good dreams forever. Nightmares will prevail."

"So, if the Queen wins, the poisoned lake stays frozen forever and no one will have dreams. If the Queen is defeated then nightmares will rule and we will have no good dreams."

"So far as anyone can see, yes."

"Both of those things sound like nightmares to me." Anne said miserably.

"I know, but one thing at a time, Anne. If we try to think of all of the problems in the world we face, we might as well give up and lie down. One thing at a time." Hunter said. Anne, riding on top his back, bit her lip in deep thought, pondering this unpleasant surprise. She heard the wind howling through the trees and in her mind it was as if the Queen was screeching in triumph. No matter what she did to make things better, something new and bad always seemed to pop up in an unexpected place and in unexpected ways. She pulled her cloak close about her and pulled up her hood. Snowflakes fluttered down from the trees above, brushing her cheeks.

"I'm hungry." She said.

"Me too." Said Pup.

"We won't eat until nightfall, about the time we will reach our next resting place." Said Hunter.

They came to the edge of a cliff and began a steep climb down a narrow foot path. Below was a small, frozen river. They crossed it without incident and continued north. At noon, when Hunter perceived that the sun was high in the sky, they came upon something that gave all of them a fright. The wolves smelled it on the air first and the first to catch the scent out of all of them was Pup.

"What is it Pup?" Asked Edda.

"It's one of those horrible things!" Pup cried.

"What horrible things?" Asked Anne, alarmed.

"It's been a long time since you've been here, Anne. Rumors of ogres rising from the far north or coming down from the mountain kingdom in the west and passing through the southern forests have been everywhere."

"Ogres? Maybe *that's* what Antigone meant." She had never seen an ogre up close or alive. Nor was she eager to see a live one, if the tales she'd read about them were true.

"Are the bad stories about ogres true, Hunter?"

"True and truer." He said as-a-matter-of-factly. However, his eyes and ears were now sharp and alert to any strange noise or thing that might cross their path. They had come to a half frozen creek where the horrible thing was there for them all to see. A battle had been fought only a few days ago from the looks of it. An ogre, as big as the giant walnut tree in her neighbor's yard lay sprawled across and lifeless, its blue skin turning black and pierced with many arrows. Its blue lips were cracked and crusted with snow and ice. Many trolls and a few wolves lay dead around it and three dead Gryps, besides, with torn wings and tails. One of the Gryps was the color of snow. The creek ran gray and black with the blood of the creatures, seeping away and curdling up into large, frozen puddles. Anne imagined it as red as her own blood. She wanted to look away but found it impossible. The ogre lay with its one black eye, wide and sightless, staring at the sky. The wolves, satisfied that all were dead and would not rise up to cause some mischief ran towards the dead wolves. They carefully crossed the fallen tree that bridged both sides of the creek and padded through the snow down near the creek's edge. They began to howl mournfully. Some of the trees around the creek had been uprooted and thrown about, great roots splayed grotesquely.

"Jarno! Leaf! Redtail! All our brothers and sisters who joined with us against the Queen! They escaped across the Ice Sea only to die so soon!" Cried Dragon in anger.

"Oh, the Lady Moons! At least they died in battle!" Cried Hunter fiercely. Nys fixed Anne with an intense stare after she had stopped howling in grief.

"I don't know you Anne, but if your aim is to defeat the Queen, may the Lady Moons watch over you in your quest! I don't understand your plan but I hope it works!"

"So do I." Anne said miserably. The wolves continued their din of distress and grief filled howling. Anne resolved to keep her hammer at the ready. After an hour of mourning to the sky, Hunter barked a short command and they moved on with renewed vigor and anger.

"Where do ogres come from?" Anne asked quietly.

"Most from the far north and some from the western mountains." Said Hunter.

"They are the children of the Ice Sea, deep below the sea and under the earth and they have slept for ages underneath the Ice Sea. When we left the north, the Queen had begun to wake them. They are detestable things, as they wreak havoc on everything they see. We wanted no part of her after that business!" Said Edda. "Your plan must work Anne. It simply must!"

"I think it will." After all, every foray of hers into Other Land had worked out so far, had it not?

"She's building an army in the north to descend upon the entire land. The ogres will play a key role." Dragon said.

"Which means we dare not tarry! We need to get Anne to the Whitestone Lodge. You see Anne, the shortest day of the year is coming soon. The Winter Queen plans to destroy the Summer Queen on that day. Once that happens, all hope will be lost. No one will escape her reign."

"But why then? Why on that day?"

"She possesses the Summer Queen's circlet and her signet ring. Each queen has a circlet and a signet ring that signifies her royal power and rulership over the season. Those things are the source of their power neither can destroy the other by Ancient Law but if they possess the others crown and ring and then only on a solstice day, they can destroy that one, the day that the opposite queen is at her weakest." Said Edda.

"This is getting worse and worse!" Ann asked. "What's Ancient Law?"

“There are four Ancient Laws of our land. One: If a promise is made, you must keep it. Two: You must pay back a life debt, for it is owing. Three: What evil you do will come back upon you threefold if your enemies remain to repay the insult. Likewise, for the good. Four: No great power shall destroy another great power, nor should it reach for another's source of power. Those are the laws. However, the Winter Queen has no regard for any law but her own. Because of her, everything has been thrown out of balance.” Said Hunter.

They remained silent and subdued for the rest of the day, the only sounds were the padding of their feet in the snow and the rumblings of Anne's stomach. Even Pup was subdued for the day. Finally, they reached a small cave. The trees were so tall they nearly blotted out the sky but as it was swaddled in thick snow clouds it didn't matter. It was growing dark.

“We have a stash of dried meat here to eat that we keep buried. There should be plenty for all of us.” Said Hunter. Anne slid from his back and sat in a corner as Hunter went towards the back to dig up the meat.

“I'll go do a bit of hunting. See if I can find something fresh.” Said Dragon. Hunter grunted in approval. “Nys, go with him. Two is better than one.” Nys followed after Dragon and they bounded off together. Pup lay down near Anne, curled up and went to sleep. Edda sat on her haunches watching the entrance, her ears pricked for any unusual sound. Anne sat on the ground, huddling near Pup. After some time, Hunter appeared holding a large leg of something in his mouth, dropping it in front of them. Pup opened his eyes, yawned and sat up. He sniffed the meat.

“Mmmmm. Leg of sheep.”

“Eat some, Anne. There is only meat to eat. You will need your strength.” Said Hunter. Anne looked at it skeptically. It was covered in dirt but there was nothing else to eat and she was very hungry. She had no idea when they would make it to the Whitestone Lodge. Her stomach growled loudly. Edda's ears twitched slightly at the sound. Hunter had gone to the back of the cave again to dig up more meat. Anne took off her mittens and after much digging at the leg, tore off a piece of the meat and ate it. It was nearly frozen, very tough, unseasoned and tasted strong like lamb but her rumbling stomach approved, even if her taste buds did not. Her jaws became tired, trying to chew the chunks into morsels that would allow her to swallow. Soon she was tearing off small pieces steadily and eating along with Pup. Pup began to growl while eating off the leg.

“Stop it Pup, or you will get a cuff on the ear!” Warned Edda.

“Sorry, but she's eating it all!”

“I am not!”

“Are too!”

“Stop it, both of you! Hunter is coming out with more. I know both of you are hungry but it is no excuse for a fight. We'll have more of that soon enough from our enemies.”

“Who's fighting?” Asked Hunter, dropping another leg of meat from his mouth where Edda was sitting.

“Oh, nothing really. They're just hungry is all.” Said Edda. She looked at Anne and Pup, her eyes twinkling. Anne and Pup made an uneasy and unspoken truce around the leg of mutton; one would take a hunk of meat first, then the other one would. Edda and Hunter shared the other leg. Between them both they cleaned a third of it nearly to the bone. After having their fill, Pup no longer felt territorial and Anne no longer felt insulted and they were fast friends.

“Do not go far from the cave!” Called Hunter as they went outside to play in the snow. It was nearly night but the snow brightened the evening, casting a pinkish pall throughout the woods.

“We can't go too far. They're looking for you.” Said Pup.

“I know. Pup, why don't you have a regular name? Why do they call you Pup?” She asked as they dug into the snow.

“Hunter says that I have to earn my name in the pack. When I get older I get to choose my name. It won't be too long before I can.”

“What will you name yourself?”

“I like Claw. Sometimes, I like Dorga.”

“Those are interesting. Especially Dorga. Sounds different. I like that name.”

“Well, I haven't decided yet.”

“I named my hammer. It's named *Star*.”

“That's a good name. I like stars. They tell you how to get to places.”

“I've heard of people on ships using stars to find out where they are or where to go.”

“Right. That was always in my dreams too, the ships, I mean. My father sailed the seas, I think, and would always look to the stars. If you know how to read the stars they can help you find your way if you are lost. You can even tell the time by them.”

“Ah. That's like my hammer. I've learned how to use it and once that happened, when I'm scared it helps me become brave again. Not exactly like what you meant but. . .” She said. Pup nodded in approval.

“I get what you meant. Once you've studied something, it can help you feel better about using it.”

“How long have you lived here?”

“As long as I can remember. Almost. Hunter says I was taken by fairies when I was very little. I don't remember my parents very well so I suppose it's true. I see them in dreams sometimes. Or used to. It was only a few weeks ago that I understood that the people in my dreams were my parents.”

"The Winter Queen tried to steal me but she couldn't."

"Everyone knows about that. You are a hero to many people here."

"I am?"

"Sure."

"Dragon and Nys don't seem to think so."

"Awww! Many wolves are just naturally suspicious and cautious around anything new. We also have our place in the pack and you seemed to jump right from outsider to Hunter's right hand wolf pup! Wolves like order and we don't always take to something new right away. Some are more like that than others. Don't take it personally. They'll come around soon. They're part of the good folk."

"Hmm. I didn't think of it like that. I guess you're right. They'll accept me when they're ready. You know what I think about all of the time now, Pup? If I meet the Queen again, will I escape?" Pup looked at her and shrugged.

"I sure hope you do! Keep your hammer close. I love winter, all winter wolves do, but Hunter says that what she is doing is wrong!" He said angrily. "Everything is suppose to happen when it does and not before. That's what Edda and Hunter say. She brings things into chaos just because she can and it hurts a lot of people and she doesn't even care."

"My parents say things like that too. Like mama says if you are doing something but it harms someone then stop doing it and don't stand by and let others do bad things if you can stop it. My dad says that good eventually triumphs over evil when it doesn't give up the fight."

"Sometimes it seems like a mighty long fight." Said Pup, kicking up a great ball of snow with his back legs.

"Yeah." Anne used a twig to pick a string of meat from her teeth as she thought on it and many other perplexing things, especially the Winter Queen's plans. They frolicked in the snow as quietly as they could but when they both began squealing in excitement over a game of tag Hunter broke it up and bade them come inside. Reluctantly they both did. As they sat resting against each other for warmth, waiting for Dragon and Nys to come back, Anne taught Pup how to play Rock, Paper, Scissors. After a time of fun and laughter Anne was winning most of the rounds and pointed out to Pup that he needed to play the game smarter. This advice did not sit well with Pup and they argued about it and then Edda broke them up. Pup growled and Anne scowled and sat down by Hunter. As far as she was concerned, Pup could growl all he wanted. He wouldn't dare do anything with Hunter there. Soon, Hunter decided he'd had enough of them both.

"That's enough of you, Pup. Your growling over a game has gone on for too long. Calm yourself. Your anger is misplaced. You will need it for the coming war. And you, Anne, enough with the teasing and mocking. It is out of place among friends. I am sure your parents would not approve. That is enough of both of you." He said sternly and they both knew he was right and they kept silent. After some hours of silence, Anne turned to Hunter.

"Hunter? Why would the Queen want to destroy summer? Don't we all need both seasons? I don't understand."

"We do need all of the seasons. She believes she does not. She does not worry about the needs of others. Only her own needs. She has always been that way. In some ways it would seem like a strength to only care for yourself but in many ways it is a weakness. You eventually destroy yourself when you destroy others in order to feed your own desires."

"That's the Ancient Law, right?"

"Yes."

"That's like the Golden Rule." She said. Hunter nodded.

"I hate her!" Said Anne vehemently. "She destroys everything! I hate winter!"

"Anne, do not think of winter as entirely evil. Whatever may happen, winter is necessary and we wolves are beings of winter. I will always be so. Winter is beautiful, Anne. That first day when you look out at the first snow that blankets the world; it's not summer or spring, not fall, but it is its own wonder. Each snowflake is the needlework of winter and not even one of them is the same! The snow tipped trees like white pillars, every snow capped mountain, the subtle colors one can see when looking at the sky lights of the north reflected in the icicles. The purity and starkness of it is beautiful. The freshness of the cold makes a land, though frozen, washed and pristine, ready to be resurrected again in the spring. All of nature must die to be reborn, all things must sleep in order to be renewed in the morning, so winter must come for the land to renew itself again in the spring."

"Hmm." Anne said quietly. It was true but lately her joy in winter had soured. She wished that it would stop snowing and that winter would go away.

"I guess if winter never came, summer would take over."

"Yes. That would be a different sort of tyranny. It would be no better than what we face now. Everything has its place and reason for being. Things must be in balance. It is not winter itself but the Queen of Winter who has gone too far. She has misused her power and we work to heal that violence." And it had to happen before the first day of winter, which was fast approaching. Suddenly, Dragon and Nys came running into the cave.

"We've found nothing." Said Dragon.

"Not surprising. There is quite a bit of food left, though." Said Hunter, pointing his paw towards the half eaten mutton legs. Both Dragon and Nys sat down to eat.

Anne's eyes had long adjusted to the darkness and she looked around the walls of the cave for the first time. Petroglyphs glowed softly all around the cave walls. Glyphs of pale, round circles and drawings of howling wolves. She understood

them to be drawings of the wolves talking to the Lady Moons. A sudden thought came back to her.

“Hunter, teach me how to howl.”

“Howl?” He asked in surprise. The rest of the pack stopped and stared at her.

“Again with this? Why?” Asked Nys. Anne stared at her.

“If I'm going to travel with a wolf pack I want to know how to howl like a wolf. Why not? What's wrong with that?”

“Yes, what's wrong with it? Makes sense to me!” Chimed Pup. Anne grinned at Pup and he grinned back. At least one of them was on her side in this.

“I suppose learning some basic things is possible. What if we encounter more enemies? She'll need a battle cry to go along with that hammer.” Said Dragon.

“It isn't *if*, it's *when* we encounter them again. It is settled, then. You will not be able to truly speak the way we do, but you can learn the battle cry, a few warnings, the announcement that you have arrived at a place and the call to the Lady Moons.” Said Hunter getting up to lead Anne towards the mouth of the cave. Anne took her helmet off and followed him.

“I feel I must warn you about the call to the moons.” Said Edda worriedly.

“Why?” Asked Hunter.

“Lately, only one of them answers. It is not the one who bestows pleasant dreams, either. Calling upon the Lady Grey will only barrage the girl with nightmares.” Said Edda.

“It would seem that nightmares are in great supply these days, waking and sleeping. I had forgotten about that, Anne.” Said Hunter apologetically.

“Perhaps we can just talk her through the Lady Moon call, if it is needed.” Said Nys.

“I agree. Come, Anne. Your first lesson in Wolftongue begins.”

It was about the midnight hour when the lesson was finished. They had all joined in teaching Anne the different intonations and timber in their voices for the different calls. They taught her the way to breathe while howling an extended message, how to hold in or let out the chest and the different notes of sound for each kind of call. It all ended in a wave of joyful calls to establish their presence at the cave. They even taught her a short lesson on how to smell the air and how to see. After the cacophony of wolf noises had subsided the forest seemed even more silent than before. The silence gave the forest an emptiness that Anne had never noticed in her previous journeys. So many had fled the dread winter.

“Won't bad creatures know where we are?” She asked, a little worried after the fun of the lesson.

“Possibly. But many wolves joined the rebellion, as you saw in the valley. They are out there, like us, keeping watch. When bad creatures slip over into the forests this far south they don't go unnoticed for long. Some wolf will pick up the scent or sense their presence.”

“I have heard reports of strange, white Gryps. They can hide in plain sight in the snow, like white wolves and you don't see them until you come upon them.” Said Dragon.

“Snow white Gryps?” Asked Anne.

“Snow white.”

“Gryps change color in the winter?”

“No. Not naturally. The white Gryps are servants of the Winter Queen. She turns them that color. Her personal stamp upon them, you could say.”

“That's too bad. Why give up your freedom?” Said Pup. “You won't catch me doing that!”

“Me either!” Said Anne. The older wolves laughed. Then they all turned their noses high into the air, Anne along with them, and howled again in unison until it became a wild, joyful song. In fact, it was not only a song but a warning to enemies and a call to arms for any rebel wolf who could hear. Far off in the distance Anne thought she detected other wolf packs answering in chorus. Anne could taste the mutton in her mouth, felt the sharp, cold air rushing through her nostrils and through her hair. She felt fierce like the rest of the pack. Her pack. Then they fell silent after a time, listening to the silence of the forest. Then from far off they heard the howl of a lone wolf voice. Anne could not make out the message but she could tell from its tone and the way the pack sat up immediately and became very still that this was no extra verse to the song or a simple announcement. Nys turned to face them.

“What?” Asked Anne.

“The Queen has sent another, larger wave of warriors. They have crossed into this area of the forest with her Gryps! Beware!” Then more howls of warning from the rest of the distant pack.

“We will have a brotherhood meeting tomorrow at Crooked Tree Valley. There will be another battle. A real one.” Said Nys. Tension rose in the pack. *What will happen tomorrow? Will we survive?* Anne thought nervously. Hunter answered in his own powerful voice.

“We will have to move now. At night. It will be morning before we reach the valley.” He said.

“How far is the Whitestone Lodge?” Asked Anne.

“One day from here.” He then conveyed a message to send for the Whitestones to meet them at the valley.

“The faster we get you out of the open, the safer you will be. Once you get to the lodge, the Grandfathers will know what to do. Let us head out!” He called. Anne got her bag and put on her helmet and kept her hammer close to her. She suspected she would need it very soon. She felt for the brown ribbon she had tied on it, to remind her of grandma Veronica's warm spirit. She pulled her blue cloak tighter about her shoulders that grandma Barbara gave her, who reminded her to never be afraid of the unknown. She would need every bit of courage she could muster. She walked behind Hunter in the center of the pack along with Pup and wondered what the dawn would bring.

They had reached the valley by daybreak and once again Anne saw the great congregation of wolf packs, relentlessly roaming about, talking amongst each other and readying for battle. More were still streaming into the valley and when Hunter and his pack reached the valley many wolves sat up and took notice. Hunter was a great leader among even the wolf leaders and now that Anne was traveling with his pack hope for the future – and fear for it, buzzed in the air along with the tensions of the looming war. There were also Gryps. The Gryps, busy surveying the valley or flying above the valley floor, watching for movement in the distance paid no heed to her, to her relief. Then she saw Antigone standing by a slightly smaller Gryp with similar coloring but with eyes the color of fiery suns.

“Antigone!” Anne shouted.

“Anne. We meet again. It is good to see you again, still healthy and hale!” Antigone said heartily.

“And you too! I heard that a lot of bad fairies are on their way.”

“You heard correctly. This here is my brother, Aes. Aes, this is my friend, Anne.” Aes bowed his head slightly. Behind her she heard Hunter give a short, clipped call.

“How do you do?” Aes greeted her.

“Hello, Aes.” The other Gryps standing there bowed to her slightly but remained silent and stern.

“I see you have your hammer of iron. Wield it bravely!” Aes said, his voice was deep and rumby, like the small tremors of an earthquake.

“I will!” Said Anne proudly.

“Where is your pack?” Antigone asked, her eyes scanning the valley. Anne pointed to the southern edge where they had come down. Hunter was sitting on his haunches, his pack and many others standing around him.

“Hmm. Looks like a meeting. Let’s see what the big wolf has to say.” Said Aes. They made their way to Hunter. His gaze rested on Anne.

“There you are. We were just saying that we need to get you out of here. A company of gnomes are on their way here to find you. They are not far. Dragon, while I am gone, you take command of the pack and take council with the other leaders. Anne, come with me. . .” A sharp, warning call went up from a number of wolves and at the same time a piercing cry from above. A Gryp descended quickly to the ground.

“What is it?” Antigone called to him.

“Queen’s vermin! Headed this way! Less than half a league away! Many hundreds of them and the traitors are with them!”

“Traitors?” Anne asked.

“Gryps who have gone in with the Winter Queen!” Said Antigone with disgust.

“Anne, get on my back! We’ve no time to lose!” Said Hunter. Anne climbed on. Most of the wolves were snarling and howling their battle cries and running north up the valley and towards the forest to meet the coming army.

“Hunter, we will all go ahead of you while you take Anne and. . .” Dragon started but it was too late! Winter fairies, pixies, trolls, goblins all swarmed down the valley along with wolves loyal to the Queen. And Gryps! Snow white Gryps with white within white eyes. All around her Anne heard the deafening sounds of fear and rage and it was white! White hot and white like snow! She raised *Star* and howled, just like the pack taught her. Hunter laughed.

“That’s it, girl! Sound the battle cry and hold on!” He leapt into the fray with Anne riding on his back. Hunter was a massive wolf and one of the fiercest fighters. Those that stumbled upon his path that day did not live to tell the tale. Anne’s hammer grew bright with silver and copper light and she swung it wildly at anything that snarled and moved towards her. Her helmet top blared like a star in the bright day light. Hungry pixies flew against it, burning themselves upon it or destroying themselves against her swinging hammer. When she wasn’t swinging the hammer she was holding on to Hunter’s neck for dear life! Hunter reared up to face two snarling wolves from the Queen’s army. Anne fell from his back and found herself looking up at the gray sky. Gryps were engaged in furious battle high above. She saw Antigone with her claws and her long tail around the neck of one of the Queen’s Gryps, tearing chunks from his side. The Gryp screeched pitifully and fell from the sky, his shadow growing wider and darkening the ground around Anne. Torn scales fell like rain as his body fell. Anne gathered up her cloak and struggled to get up, jumping away just in time to avoid the carcass hitting the ground. The Gryp landed with a terrible thump, its dead eyes wide, grayish black blood oozing from its many wounds. She heard Antigone scream in pain. She looked up to see two white Gryps attacking her.

“No! No, no, no! Someone, help her!” Anne cried but her voice disappeared in the din of the battle. A troll tried to snatch her up. She lashed out with *Star*, smashing his chest then hitting him square on the head. A large wound opened there and it hissed and bubbled and burned as he howled and fell over. She heard more battle cries far off, but from whom, she could not tell. Someone grabbed her from behind. A fairy dressed in what looked like armor made of icicles with large wings and black eyes. He grinned.

“What a pretty prize! The Queen is looking for you and I will be the one to bring you to her!” He gloated and made to fly off with her. Anne screamed and struggled, swinging her hammer around to hit him but she missed. Hunter and Nys dashed through the melee and brought him down with terrible ferocity. Anne struggled free and swung her hammer down on his

head. He went down, never to get up again.

“Gnomes are coming! Stay close Anne! Stay between us! We're getting you out!” Hunter yelled. Anne ran and stationed herself between them and the three of them cut a snarling swath through the battle. Antigone injured, one of her wings broken, had been rescued from immediate death by her brother. She fluttered clumsily towards them.

“Antigone, if you can, give cover to Anne. We are trying to make it to the gnomes headed this way!” Hunter said. Antigone nodded, her green eyes blazing. Together they barreled through the battlefield and up the hill and through the forest, tearing and snapping at anything or anyone that came near Anne. Not a hundred feet away they saw a company of gnomes in full battle gear running towards them.

“The girl! There she is!” One of them cried. They all had their golden and silver hammers raised in the air. An enemy Gryp flew upon Antigone, tearing at her wings and burying her sharp beak into Antigone's neck. Antigone screeched in pain, unable to shake her off. Anne, without thinking jumped upon the Gryp's foot and beat it with her hammer. The White Gryp screeched in rage, withdrawing her foot and tried to snatch Anne up in her beak. A flurry of silver arrows flew through the air right into the Gryp's chest and turning to deadly fire, burning deep holes in her flesh. As she fell, Hunter and Nys fell upon her and Anne bashed in her beak, making a loud crack.

All around them the rebel wolves and the gnomes beat back the small winter army until they fled north, back into the forest, but many of the rebel wolves were hurt and some were dead.

“Anne! Come! Hunter, where is your pack? Call to them! The blade snow is coming again! We all need to take cover!” It was Glumgorg Whitestone. His brother Golmarg stood beside him. Hunter raised himself on his hind quarters and howled. Other wolves answered.

“Mourn your dead! Hide the wounded as best you can and run for cover! The blade snows come again!” He said. “Can you smell it?” He asked Anne. She nodded. It smelled to her like hot metal mixed with the scent of normal snow. Sort of like what Nys described. Blood had a strange, metallic scent to her. She hated it.

Zi, to her delight, was with the company with a quiver full of silver arrows on his back, holding an ornately carved wooden bow, dressed in furs and standing with a small troupe of sprites and gnome archers with him. He smiled at her.

“Who would have guessed that we two would become warriors?” He said. Anne laughed.

“You are fearsome with a hammer, child! But come. We don't want to be out here much longer. A hammer won't help you against the evil snows!” Glumgorg said. Hunter called to his pack mates. Dragon came bounding up, a torn tail between his teeth. He spit it out and looked around.

“Where is Edda and Pup?” He asked. *Pup. Where is he?* Anne looked around worriedly. Just then, appearing over the hill was Edda and she was dragging Pup in her mouth, who hung limply, bleeding.

Anne had insisted that Antigone be taken with them and as quickly as that, they built a makeshift hammock for her. Aes helped carry it and followed after the company. The wolves had all separated into their own packs and fled for cover from the coming storm while Hunter and his pack, Anne, Edda carrying Pup and the company of gnomes all made for the Great Whitestone Lodge. The sky was filled with ugly storm clouds that were now moving with speed, boiling in cold fury and becoming darker by the hour. Up ahead even through the massive trees the sky seemed to deepen into night though it was still day. If there were winter fairies loyal to the Queen who saw them they did not bother the long train of warriors, the wolves and the Gryp but the company could feel hostile eyes upon them, most of all, Anne. Her ring finger was warm from the heat and she had felt it throughout the battle and it had not cooled under her mitten. She kept *Star* in one hand and took turns with Edda carrying Pup. Evil surrounded them but Anne felt safe and extra courageous after the battle. After marching for nearly four hours they reached a familiar sight. Even in the snow the expansive, squat log and stone lodge of the Whitestone family stood out like a beacon, shouting: warmth, food and safety.

Zi came up beside her.

"Here, let me see about Pup." He told her. Anne carefully placed him in Zi's arms. Pup whimpered in pain. Two of his legs were broken and he had a terrible wound in his side that had been packed with snow to staunch the bleeding.

"Do you think he will be OK?" She whispered.

"I don't know yet, Anne." Zi's face furrowed in worry. The clouds rolled in, oppressive and dark, strong like furious fists churning the sky. They all passed underneath the giant, snow covered dahlias, over the stone path. Anne saw hundreds of tiny flashes of light pop and flare silently in the freezing air. *Shields*. The great wooden door opened as soon as Glumgorg reached the porch. Anne and Zi were right behind him, the long train of warriors behind them.

"We've found the child!" He said.

"Thank the Builder!" Cried Rhiora and she grabbed Anne and hugged her. Anne dropped her hammer, hugging her back.

"Another terrible storm is coming. Worst than the last one!" Said Glumgorg.

"We have new guests. Two Gryps that Anne insists fight for her." Said Golmarg.

"Yes! Antigone and Aes, her brother. You can't leave them outside!"

"We will not leave them unprotected." Said Rhiora. "We know they fight for you."

"Take the wolf pup to one of the hospitaller rooms. Bring the female Gryp inside and take her to one of those rooms as well. She is badly hurt." Commanded Glumgorg. The other gnomes gave him odd looks but did as they were bid.

"Perhaps I can heal her. I have some healing arts." Said Zi to Rhiora. She conducted him to the hospitaller rooms. Anne ran outside.

"Antigone, they are going to help you!" Antigone said nothing but in her great green eyes a light shined. Her breathing was labored. Aes turned to Anne, setting the hammock down while the gnomes gathered to lift it up and carry his sister away.

"I sense protection all about this place. I will stay outside on the porch and keep watch from here."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Watch over my sister, Anne."

"I will." Aes bowed to her and she followed the gnomes inside. The front hall was a massive flurry of hectic activity.

"Things have certainly changed when gnomes, summer fairies, Gryps and wolves work together!" Said Rhiora, her eyes wide with wonder at seeing Antigone and the fairy archers that had come in with Zi. In fact, all the gnomes who were not warriors stared in fear and wonder, especially the little ones.

"And especially when all our fates are bound up together in the hand of a human child." Anne recognized the voice. It was Great Grandfather Whitestone. He nodded respectfully at Hunter and his pack mates. Hunter bowed slightly. Edda, Dragon and Nys did likewise.

"You have been a great protector to this child, Hunter. For that, I thank you. You and yours have risked your lives. Let us hope this will end well for us all. Anne, we must talk. I have seen you in a dream; a recurring dream. We two have important matters to discuss."

"What is it about?" She asked curiously.

"How to defeat the Winter Woman. You have an answer. I have a plan."

The Great Grandfather Whitestone, or Grandfather Aldy, as his many grandchildren called him, was a very old gnome, slightly stooped with a long, snow white beard that reached just past his knees. His beard was braided with many gold, silver and copper rings wound and tied through it and also tiny bells that tinkled when he moved. He was called Great Grandfather Whitestone, or the Whitestone, because he was known as a great sage among gnomes all throughout the land. He was also so-called because he had managed to marry off all of his sons and daughters into every great gnome family in Other Land. He was regarded as the grandfather of the land, at least among gnome kind in any case.

His eyes smiled kindly as he gazed at her hammer.

“Does your hammer have a name?”

“Yes! I named it *Star!*”

“Ah! Now I like that! A true warrior you are, Anne! Hunter, now that I think on it, we need your presence as well. Will you come?”

“Certainly.” Said Hunter. Anne put her hammer in her bag and followed them into the dining hall.

Sitting around the table were the other gnome Grandfathers, wise men of their family clans. They all wore long robes, like the Whitestone but of different colors. Only the Whitestone wore white robes. They all had long, thick beards but none so thick or long or as decorated as the Whitestone's beard and none had as many rings and bells in his beard as he did.

He introduced each Grandfather: there was Grandfather Greenvine, Brownwood, Bloodwood, Redleaf, Manyflower, Blackroot, Rootwart, Pebbleriver, Hightrail, Creekrock and Bluehill. Of course, there were many lesser families of gnomes but these were the family names of the great families and these Grandfathers were the leaders of those families.

“Hello, Grandfathers.” Said Anne. They smiled and some nodded at her. The Whitestone sat himself at the head of the table, right in Glumgorg's chair and motioned for Anne to sit at his right hand. They were all nursing their favorite fizzy homemade ale. A fire roared in the hearth behind them. All of the windows were covered with drapes and the room was lit with many candles and a few lanterns, casting small, flickering shadows along the walls. Hunter sat himself by the fire.

“My dreams have been unpleasant, lately. I wonder, how have yours been, Anne?” Grandfather Whitestone asked.

“After the one about princess Tryssa, I don't remember having any dreams. Oh! Well, there was one where I was being chased by black shapes with starry eyes.” She didn't like recalling that one.

“No doubt it means something. I am sure it is connected to what we face now. I have dreamt of them too, these dark shapes. The one about the princess was a cry for help from someone reaching out to you. This other one may be prophetic.”

“What does that mean?”

“That it foretells what may happen in the future.” Said Grandfather Brownwood.

“Lately, only one of the Lady Moons bestirs herself to speak. The other has fallen silent. Even so, even in nightmares things can be discovered. You, Anne have figured prominently in my dreams. In them, you confront the Winter Woman. She stands before you and then she sits down on her throne and dissipates into smoke!”

“What does it mean?” She asked.

“Who can tell? It could mean many things. That is always the case with dreams. But one thing is certain. My dream tells me you will confront her, but this makes no sense unless you have a good reason for doing so. I think you do. You have a secret weapon against her?”

“Secret weapon? Well, I don't know if it's a weapon but she made me a promise. When I came here in the summer I went to the Great Hall to get a magic seed. She appeared there and told me a riddle. She said she would grant me a wish if I told her the correct answer.”

“Did you answer her?” Asked Grandfather Blackroot. They all listened intently.

“No, I didn't.” A collective sigh of relief rose from the old gnomes.

“But you know the answer?” Probed Grandfather Aldy gently. “Which riddle did she pose? She has a number of them, I would think.”

“This was the riddle: What eats like a pig but is a child as sweet as yourself. Or myself, actually.” Anne recalled the incident clearly. The gnomes looked at each other with pride and glee.

“The answer is a changeling.” Anne said. They all smiled at her.

“Clever child!” Said Grandfather Brownwood.

“That, is indeed, the answer.” Said Grandfather Aldy. “If we can formulate the plan around this answer, we have her!”

“How?” Asked Anne.

“Well, we cannot simply walk into the castle but we can get you safely through a secret passage, at least until we get to the northernmost forest. At that point, we will devise a Cloaking, something to make you invisible to allow you and a few others to travel to the Ice Sea, unseen. The Cloak won't work once you get to the castle. You will come to a place called the Snowy Beach just beyond the forest. Beyond that is the Ice Sea, which is, naturally, frozen. Her castle, an iceberg stronghold, sits in the sea. There, the Summer Queen is being held captive and her circlet and ring are in the Winter Woman's possession. She plans to destroy these things on the first day of winter, breaking the Summer Queen's power forever so that she may rule uninterrupted. We have only one chance at this.”

“What will the castle look like once I get inside?”

“Ice and more ice, I would suppose. That won't matter. What matters is her treachery. She will try to trick you by using treats, sweets, some desire of the eyes. Many things she will show you, to try to entice you to her side. You must not touch anything of hers, accept a gift, libation or dish or gesture of any kindness, whatever that may look like. It will be just like in the Great Hall, except in the iceberg castle her power will be stronger. You may feel or see strange things. You must keep your mind on good things, on the task. Your mind and your heart will be your weapons there.” Said Grandfather Aldy. Hunter cleared his throat. The Grandfathers turned their attention to him.

“What do you have to say, Hunter? You know her better than anyone here.” Said Grandfather Aldy. Hunter gazed at Anne.

“Anne, she will try to frighten you. She is good at creating illusions. Whatever you may see, it will be an illusion.

Remember that, whatever may happen. If you keep your wits and your principles the illusions will not become real. Know that it is trickery!”

“Let us discuss all details of the plan. The hour grows late.” Said Grandfather Aldy. “Rhiora, my dear, tell my sons Glumgorg and Golmarg to ready the men for tomorrow, early. We shall set out then. Tell Golmarg to send a call for more warriors to come to the Whitestone Lodge. Also, porridge and a bit of stewed pork, if you please. Feed Anne well and us too. We have much to do before the company heads out!” Grandfather Aldy told her. “Oh, and my dear, bring more ale!”

After a simple meal of porridge, stewed pork, carrots and some ale, Anne's belly was as full as her mind. She had many things to think about. Hunter and his pack had been given thick marrow bones to eat. She went to find them. Hunter, Nys and Dragon were settled in front of the fire in the front hall, gnawing quietly on their meal. Tired, she sat down by Hunter. The snow storm was raging outside. She saw the fat snowflakes flying through the air, though they did not reach the stone and wooden walls of the lodge. It seemed as if the lodge would always be safe but she knew this was not so. Even the gnomes, doughty as they were, could not hold out against Queen Faye forever. She wondered what the other great gnome lodges looked like and whether they were as well protected as this one.

“Aes is out there.” She said quietly.

“Yes.” Said Hunter gravely. “He will be fine as long this plan works.” He looked back at Anne, his eyes filled with concern. The other wolves gazed at her silently, thoughtful, waiting for whatever would await them all next.

“How is Pup?”

“It is bad. As well as Antigone. Zi is with them both. I will say no more until I know. The Lady of the lodge and her sister and Zi bid us wait out here until things change.”

“Until they get better? They *will* get better, right?”

“We can only hope.” Hunter said. Dragon nodded.

“I don't like it either. However, we may have to brace ourselves for the worse, Anne.” Said Dragon. Anne nodded, feeling hot tears creeping up at the corners of her eyes. Edda was gone by Pup's side, having a few healing skills of her own. Anne sighed and wiped her eyes. Pup was like having a little brother. You fought with him and he irritated you but you had a terrible lump in your chest when something bad happened to him. Anne supposed that in a way, Pup was *her* little brother here in Other Land. She did her best to buck up her courage. Crying would not do them any good. She put her mind back on the task at hand.

“So, I shouldn't eat anything or accept any gift from her. I remember that from the last time.”

“That is well, but not all. She is full of treachery. Whatever may happen, in order for her to control you, you have to give her permission. Do not follow her, make any new deals with her and always think of something good when in her stronghold that will keep your mind sharp, from being easily tricked. Your mother or father, a sister or brother. Keep their memory in your mind while you are there to give you strength. The gnomes have gathered a small army here and we leave tomorrow by a secret way. Anne, remember when you meet the Winter Queen, keep something of yourself, something important to you when things become strange. That is most important.”

“Strange?”

“Scary. Never give your word to her. Keep your own thoughts and counsel and she cannot defeat you. I have learned this in *hindsight*.” Hunter said this last with special emphasis. Nys and Dragon looked on, nodding in agreement.

Other gnomes, relatives and friends of the Whitestone family and many warriors, besides, were steadily streaming into the lodge from somewhere beneath the ground floor as far as Anne could tell to fill up the army ranks and to help with the plans. They sat sharpening weapons, packing bags and readying supplies. And talking worriedly. She caught snatches of conversation from the warriors. Mostly about the usual thing – the coming army of Winter but there were other things she gleaned from eavesdropping. Something especially worrisome about the other side of the world.

“I don't see how all this helps us, brave though it may be. It is foolish, I say!”

“Well unless you have a better idea, Galern, this is the only plan we have, besides waging war.”

“I hear that it goes ill with those who have fled to the other side of the world,” said a third warrior and he lowered his voice to a near whisper so that Anne had to strain to hear, “and that it isn't really summer there.”

“I heard it too! They say that over there the sun don't truly shine, nor do it rise or set! The sky is some strange, grayish

color. There's light but no sun, neither true day or night exists. Just a murky gray light!" Said the fourth one in the group.

"Aye! And I heard that the plants are all withering away and turning brown and that things have stopped growing!" Said Galern.

"Is it cold there, do you know, Galern?"

"Not that I heard, but who knows? And what do it matter? The Summer Queen is the sun Queen. She brings the light and heat of the sun. Running away over there solves naught if she isn't found!"

"Well she's *been* found. The problem now is rescuing her before it's too late." They glanced at Anne.

"May your plan work little girl. If it don't, we're all lost!" Said Galern.

"We have to have hope." She said.

"Our hope is you. You have the power to bring balance back to the land, however fleeting your power over the cursed Winter Woman be!" He said and went back to oiling his leathers. Anne sighed. She hoped her "power" or the plan worked out just as much as they did. It had to. To think otherwise was too awful a thought.

"All the more that this plan must work. But I wonder. A child they will send? I don't know." Said the third warrior.

"Well then, if you don't know, pray to the Builder and stop whispering like a bunch of old gossips and get on with the preparations for tomorrow!" Snapped Glumgorg. He and his brother had come striding into the front hall looking for Anne.

"Yes, Lord Whitestone!" They all chimed and hurried off to busy themselves for the journey.

"Hunter, Anne, the Whitestone has called you both back. There is another meeting." Golmarg said with urgency in his voice.

"Evil is afoot up north!" Said Grandfather Blackroot. "The skirmishes we've seen so far are nothing compared to what is coming. She is waking the children of the Ice Sea and gathering all fighters of the north to herself."

"She would dare to wake the ogres?" Asked Grandfather Greenvine in disbelief.

"Should it surprise you? She dares to disregard Ancient Law by trying to destroy Summer, the worst of her crimes. What *doesn't* she dare do now? That is the real question." Said the Whitestone.

"Ogres." Anne said quietly and with dismay.

"She dares much and more. If she can get away with it, she will do it. She has always been that way." Said Hunter.

"Give the child the weapon." Said Grandfather Greenvine.

"Ah, yes. Here is a small but potent weapon we will give you." Said Grandfather Aldy. He produced a tiny silver bell from the folds of his robe.

"A bell? But it's so small!"

"Yes, small enough to be hidden on your person. Many fairies do not like the sound of bells. Especially bad ones."

"What do I do? Just ring it once I get to the castle?"

"There's more to it than that. Once you are inside the castle you will be brought to the Queen. Exactly what will transpire between you both I cannot say but you must have this with you and you must be ready to use it at the right moment! She loves posing riddles, much like Gryps do. She also loves playing games. Beware and listen carefully. It would be wise to keep silent once you are brought before her. Wait until she poses a riddle or tries some other trick. If it is not the same riddle as before, do not answer it! She may try to put you under bonds or trick you. At this time, ring your bell loud and clear. They will shrink from you as they hate the sound. Any time they come too close to you, ring it. The bell itself will not frighten her as it frightens lesser fairies but it will signal the power of the Ancient Law that she has broken, into her presence. At that time, demand your due. Once you do, Ancient Law will take care of the matter." Said Grandfather Aldy.

"She cannot deny you since she made you a promise." Said Grandfather Greenvine.

"Aye and a rash promise it was!"

"If we can succeed at this we won't have a war after all. If this doesn't work, there will be war. This is our best hope." Said Grandfather Redleaf.

"Throwing this child into the Winter Woman's den – it does not sit right with me. I suppose it is our best gamble in the end. I do not like it though." Said Grandfather Bluehill.

"Neither do I and if I could go in Anne's place, I would, but the Winter Woman has struck a bargain with the child, not me or anyone else. Thus, Ancient Law will only heed Anne's voice and request in this matter. We all know it to be true." Said Grandfather Aldy.

"Rashness and unthinking, unbridled arrogance is the key to her undoing. Anne is the one who can turn that key. Unwittingly, she has given the child the power to stop her. The Summer Queen must live, balance must be restored or none who oppose her will survive. Only her supporters and her servants will remain." Said Hunter. A low murmur of agreement rose from the council. Then Grandfather Aldy handed Anne the little bell. She turned it carefully in her hands. It looked like an ordinary bell to her. Plain, silver, slightly heavier than she had expected, but nothing special. She frowned at Grandfather Aldy.

"Are you sure about this?" She asked, skeptically. "I'd rather have my hammer."

"I am as sure as the sun, child. The bell will work. However, I fear you may not be allowed to bring your hammer into her

castle, for obvious reasons. Pity. I have heard of your growing prowess in wielding it! However, this will be a battle of wills and the mind for you, not of ax and sword and hammer. The Ancient Laws of the land are on your side. That is also certain. Trust in the rightness of things and fair forces we cannot see and in the goodness in yourself.” Said Grandfather Aldy.

“As for the hammer, bring it with you when we travel north but when you reach the heart of the forest, wrap it up safely and give it to me for safe keeping. You will not be able to surprise her with your hammer this time but with the bell you can stop her.”

“After we eat our supper it will be time for us to convene, just us old men. We will send a message to the Queen that we have you and are sending you her way in exchange for leaving our strongholds and our people alone. Are you ready and willing to take this on?” He asked.

“Yes. I don't want winter to last forever! But won't she try some trick to stop your army from coming?” Said Anne.

“We are counting on it, little one! We are counting on it! She has been searching for you since she found out from her spies that you have come back, thinking to snatch you up. She is devious but we gnomes have our own tricks!” Grandfather Aldy said. “Rhiora, call the family and the men at arms and ready the evening meal. It is time to eat in Anne's honor and in hopes of her triumph and ours!”

They had finished a simple but hearty supper and afterward, the Grandfathers convened together in Grandfather Aldy's private drawing room to send off messages to the Queen. How they would manage that, Anne wondered, for they would not say, but she trusted that they knew what they were doing. By now she understood that fairy folk had their own ways of getting things done even if she didn't fully understand them.

The plan was now well laid out. The atmosphere of the Great Whitestone Lodge was a far cry from the last time she was here. It was prickly with tenseness, excitement and fear – and something else that Anne wasn't sure of but she felt it. Not against her, but rather a great hope that the plan would work. Something had stirred up much fear recently in the gnomes. She had noticed that even Grandfather Aldy's daughters-in-law, Rhiora and Danila and his sons were visibly disturbed and it wasn't just the obvious coming danger of the northern armies. She sat, resting with the wolves again in the front hall on thick furry skins and rugs. It was night and she worried over Antigone and Pup and even Aes, standing vigil just outside. It was Nys who enlightened her.

“My ears have picked up disturbing news.” She whispered to them. They all leaned in closer.

“What is it?” Asked Anne.

“I overheard the women in the kitchen talking over a recent thing, something terrible. Many gnomes moved up north many years ago, away from the bigger lodges in the south but as we all know, those families have been fleeing their homes recently. Well, a few days ago a number of gnome families were massacred just on the border of the southern woods and the black forest! They were not of the greater families; some minor branches, I think. But as you know, the Whitestones are related to almost every gnome in the land. I heard that some of the dead were cousins to the Lord of the Whitestone Lodge and his brothers.” Nys said.

“That's awful!” Whispered Anne. So that was the reason!

“Your ears are sharp indeed. A direct attack was made on the family at last. This is terrible news. She has no respect for decency or anything but her own law!” Said Hunter angrily.

“And her “law” is eat or be eaten. Excluding her own skin of course!” Growled Dragon. Anne frowned. The sooner she could get up there and ring that silver bell in the Queen's horrible face the better!

The plan would very soon be in motion. The gnomes had dug a complex network of secret tunnels deep underground many ages ago that they mainly used in the winter. Or for when they did not want to be seen by other creatures. The main tunnels were all connected to all of the Great Lodges in Other Land and to many other places, besides. One could travel from one Great Lodge to the next without ever coming above ground, if they chose. The large company of gnome warriors, Anne and the wolves and the Grandfathers would travel through these tunnels to get to the black forest by the Ice Sea. Great Grandfather Whitestone had a beautifully carved Way Wanderer that would become key during this phase of the plan, but his was special. His Way Wanderer could open up doorways within Other Land to other places in Other Land! Great Grandfather Aldy would open a doorway at a certain location within the black forest. It was agreed that Hunter would escort her the rest of the way to the Snowy Beach. A Cloak would be cast upon them; such things were very hard for gnomes to do. Only some of the Grandfathers and grandmothers knew how to make them and even then, Cloaks were used sparingly as they slowed down the users.

Rhiora found Anne and brought her to the master bedroom to fit her for a fur suit.

“Those northern black forests are frigid! Fur and fat is what you need up there, my dear.” She worried over Anne, laying out a thick, dark brown fur suit for her. It looked rugged but the fur felt softer to the touch than Anne had expected. It was bear fur. Danila was looking through the massive wardrobe for a pair of fur boots.

“Oh, I don't know, Danila. Her boots look to be of solid make to me.”

“You think so?”

“Yes. Here now, Anne. Leave your cloak with us. It's torn and soiled, such a beautiful thing.” She tsked. “We'll have it cleaned and mended when you return.” Rhiora folded it up gently in her round arms. They helped Anne get into her new suit, putting it over her armor. When they were done Anne turned to Rhiora's wide, full length mirror. She looked like a little bear cub. She smiled. In fact, the suit was too warm as the master bedroom was very toasty. Anne thought about laying down and sleeping in the wide, sturdy poster bed. It looked very comfortable. She thought of her own bedroom and comfortable bed, looking at the sturdy wooden furniture, embellished with inlaid pearl, gold or copper. The knitted blankets and quilts and the copper and glass oil lamps, the gilded stone mirror and the licking tongues of flame in the fireplace. Danila put another small log in the fire and gazed at Anne with concern lining her plump face.

“You are only a child. And to face her!” She said. Anne shrugged, trying to muster up a bit of bravery.

“My mama says that good always triumphs. Eventually. I think it's true.” Anne said.

“Danila! Always look to the light. Nothing is gained over worrying and thinking dark thoughts. Anne needs good thoughts to go with her. Now more than ever!” She smiled at Anne. “Now, child, are you sure you'll sleep with the wolves out front? You don't want your bed?”

“No. We have to leave tomorrow and I've traveled with them for days already. I'll just sleep where they sleep.” Speaking of sleep, she thought of her injured friends.

“Rhiora, how are Pup and Antigone?” Rhiora frowned.

“I don't know yet. They are being ministered to as we speak. That is all I can say.” Rhiora's face fell and Anne realized that she was struggling to be cheerful and see the light, just like her sister, but Rhiora was better at hiding her worries. Terrible things would occur more and more the longer the bad winter lasted. She didn't want to dwell on anything bad now that she was embarking on the greatest and most dangerous task in her short life. Nevertheless, there it was. Bad things happening, everywhere and getting worse. Anne pushed them from her mind. She went back to the front hall, amidst the shuffle and activity of the gnomes preparing for departure and possible war – shining and cleaning armor, sharpening weapons and packing food and supplies. She found Hunter and the other wolves. Edda had finally rejoined the pack by the fire. She smiled at Anne, tired from the days' work. The others slumbered peacefully. Anne lay down by Edda and went right to sleep.

The message had gone out to the north that the girl had been caught by the gnomes and that a party was traveling north to deliver up the girl to the castle on the sea. The Queen sent word to allow passage through the northern forests, or *her* forests, as she liked to put it, to have the child brought to her. All the while she sent word to others in her employ to watch for the free folk party traveling with her and once they set eyes on them, kill them and bring the child to her.

The Grandfathers led the company down beneath the lodge, deep into the bowels of the earth. There were three hundred with them, including Anne and the wolves. The injured and most of the women and girls were left behind to protect the lodge, yet there were a few women warriors dressed in their battle armor and traveling with the men. Everyone was dressed in their heaviest fur cloaks and fur boots over their armor, their helmet tops shining as brightly as Anne's. Great Grandfather Whitestone rode in a small carriage pulled by two ponies from a stable kept underneath the Lodge. The other Grandfathers rode in a larger carriage behind his. Once they had all filed in down to the secret passages, and this took a fair amount of time, the company was off. How long these tunnels had been here Anne did not know but the walls, at least, underneath and nearest to the Lodge, were smooth. Echoes from many excited and worried voices bounced and flew back and forth against the walls like trapped birds. Lit torches cast a warm light and added warmth to the icy coldness of the earth and rock around them. Puffs of frosty breath from hundreds folk and creatures rose and fell. A call to halt sounded near the front of the train. It was the Whitestone.

"Anne, come and sit with me." Called Great Grandfather Aldy. Anne climbed inside his carriage. Hunter, Edda, Nys and Dragon came up beside the carriage to walk by it.

"Let us be on our way!" Commanded Glumgorg and in answer the company began to move again.

"So, is she going to meet with us?" Anne asked.

"Oh, no. She would not deign to do such a thing, proud as she is. Besides, I would never trust her word unless she is forced to keep it. Neither should you!"

"How will we get there again?" She asked. Aldy pulled out his long, beautiful, richly carved whistle of dark brown wood. It had golden ridges and swirls, much like her own, but looked older and fancier.

"You have a Way Wanderer? That's a big one!"

"Indeed it is. This is a special sort of Way Wanderer. Not only does it open up a doorway to your world but most importantly, it opens doors from one place to another within this one. That is harder to do, my dear and it is taxing. It is also necessary so that we can avoid being ambushed."

"So you'll just open a doorway right to the castle?"

"Oh, ho! I cannot open up a doorway right within the Queen's stronghold. What we will do is open a doorway within the woods close enough to the castle so that you don't have to travel too far."

"Oh." She said, disappointed.

"But don't you worry. Ancient Law still counts for something in the world and she, as sure as the sun, has broken it! Once you get into her court, you can spring your trap. She will think she has caught you but it is she who will be caught!"

"Yeah!" Said Anne triumphantly.

The gnomes began singing a rousing song. She didn't know the words but she tried her best to sing along. Grandfather Aldy hummed the song and after two verses Anne was humming it as well. As they traveled the walls grew rougher, the terrain more natural, wild and cave-like instead of the smooth walls of halls built with hands. The tunnel ceiling and ground beyond the broad pathway was full of glowing, iridescent stalagmites and stalactites. Beyond those were many glistening pools, half frozen, that shined faintly in the light of the many passing torches. The walls shimmered softly with strange colors and the firelight of the torches cast the travelers and ponies as shadow puppets slithering along the walls. They came to a crossroads and there, standing at the crossroads were twenty gnomes all with the Greenvine family symbols etched into their armor.

"Come!" Commanded the Whitestone, leaning out of a window from his carriage. They fell in step with the company.

"We go to defeat the Winter Woman!" A shout rose up from them. The company answered with a big "hurrah!" On they traveled, through twisting tunnels, down further into the earth, then up hills, singing and filling their hearts with courage. Even the wolves howled with joy. Every so often they came to a crossroads and more warriors would be waiting there to join with them. By the end of the day the company's ranks had swelled to over five hundred! They were coming along because if Anne failed there would be war and as the Grandfathers said, better to start a fire on the enemy's doorstep than wait for it to come to their doorstep again. How they would manage that Anne didn't know but she trusted that the gnomes knew what they were about. Perhaps they had some secret weapon they would lose in the forest if Anne didn't make it back? It made Anne ponder the grave task she had before her and whether she would succeed. Swinging a hammer was easy but a battle of wills was something entirely different. However, she was roused from her grave thoughts as they broke for camp. Camp fires bloomed out far down the main tunnel like flowers of fire.

The gnomes used the tunnels mainly for winter travel, which is why so many believed that they hibernated in the winter. A gnome could get nearly anywhere he or she wanted through the tunnels. Anne could see many, tiny spidery trails that led from the main road to who knows where? Gnomes kept their tunnels secret and cloaked for many reasons and they did not take kindly to trespassers. Especially those with malicious intentions to their folk. Woe betide the creature found wandering around the tunnels without their leave for they were never seen or heard from again! Gnomes knew when unfriendly intruders trespassed and did not deal mercifully with such ones. Anne had the word from Grandfather Aldy that she had a very good reason for being here and all the gnomes agreed with this and wished her well and shared their rations with her as

she made her way through the campfires, exploring the edges just beyond the main path. They ate dried fruits, baked potatoes and dried, cured meats; what sort of meat, Anne didn't know and didn't ask; she was too hungry to turn her nose up and complain. She drank ice cold ale and ate cold potatoes and a bit of meat. The wolves gnawed on old bones and gristle. They all rested at camp for some hours, then the call went throughout the camp to move again and they all rose, packed away their things and began the trek once again. As they traveled it became significantly colder and even deep underground the ground was covered in frost. After a few hours they came to a place thick with long, tough roots covered in ice that grew from beneath the ground of the cavernous tunnel to the surface above. They looked like monstrously fat, long, white pythons to Anne.

"Here. We come to it. The Ice Root marks the place. We have reached the beginning edges of the black forest. Accursed place!" Spat Grandfather Aldy.

"They used to be a thing of beauty, the black forests. Still are, but the evil creatures that live here mar it!" Growled Hunter. The other wolves growled in agreement.

"Well Anne, the time has come for you and I to finish the journey. We go to the Winter Queen, or rather, you will go to her. Are you ready?" Asked Hunter.

"I'm ready!" Said Anne with a thousand thoughts roiling through her mind.

"I wish it were someone else. Someone older." Said Edda worriedly.

"Don't worry, Edda. My parents say that good always triumphs over bad. You have to be brave. Even when it's hard." Said Anne, hoping her courage would hold up on this last leg of the journey. Edda licked her hand.

"Aye! They have it right!" Said Hunter.

"Indeed." Said Grandfather Aldy.

"Let us build a Cloak for you two. We can't have you roaming these evil woods without something to hide you!" Grandfather Blackroot said, climbing out of his carriage. He had several white quilts with tiny black trees and tangled roots sewn into them. Grandfather Aldy pulled out his Way Wanderer and began to play a strange little tune. The air around the Ice Root started to buzz and ripple like water, a stiff breeze twisted and roared and a doorway opened right in the middle of the woods! Grandfather Blackroot then ordered groups of warriors to take some of the smaller paths out into the open to stand watch near the root. He handed cloaks to them.

At this point she longed for her hammer but as part of the plan, it had to stay behind. At this time, Grandfather Blackroot shook out another long, white and black quilt. He shook it vigorously over Hunter and Anne who were standing at the foot of the Ice Root.

"These cloaks will hide you from the evil eyes seeking you. It will make your movements slower and less mobile. You will be able to see each other while you both are under Cloak. Once one of you moves away from under it, you will not be able to see the one who remains Cloaked" He said.

"Hunter, I charge you with getting Anne safely there. The Queen's spies are looking for a party of gnomes."

"I will. My life will depend on it." Hunter said solemnly. Anne felt so happy at that moment. She had an army behind her and now a winter champion. Then he added, "We'll give the Winter Queen a good surprise!"

"Come back safe, both of you." Said Edda. She licked both Hunter and Anne affectionately.

"We promise!" Said Anne.

"We'll hold you to it!" Said Dragon grinning. Nys smiled too. Anne put her hand in her pocket feeling for the bell. Just when was the right time for it, again? She had to trust that the moment would present itself easily enough!

"Pray for us." Anne told Dragon. Then she looked at Grandfather Aldy. "Pray for us, Great Grandfather Aldy."

He smiled kindly at her.

"I have been praying for your safe return before we left home, my child." He said.

"We will sing to the Lady Moons for your safe return." Said Nys. Anne felt much joy at that moment. With a short, silent prayer on her own lips spoken, she and Hunter stepped together under the Cloak and vanished from sight.

"Get on my back, Anne. It will make our going a little faster. We should reach the sea by early nightfall." Anne climbed on to his back and he stepped through the doorway into the frigid air and deep snow, their eyes given some shade from the tall, intimidating evergreens reaching up to blot out the sky.

"What if blade snow falls?" She asked nervously.

"I know these forests well. There are many hiding places from here to the beach. Besides, I doubt she would send it again until you have reached the castle."

With that, they were finally on the last leg of the journey so that Anne could finish her business with the Winter Queen.

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 Anne's companions 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. It was a well lit night, lit by the light of the twin moons. The tall, towering fir and pine 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 one 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 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. In my fairy form I feel, too, elemental. Too air-like."

"Oh. 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 think. Here 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 and I 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 around 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 and could see very faint rays of light even through the fur. She knew the ring must have been blazing as bright as a star, hidden under her 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, mitten covered 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!

The dogs rounded her, circling and snapping viciously and stopping just short of biting her. Anne kept her arms strapped to her sides. She wondered frantically if Hunter could hear them. But then she quickly put away that thought and mouthed another silent prayer. If he interfered he would be outnumbered and ferocious as he was, she didn't want anyone else getting hurt on her account. A calmness settled over her immediately like cool water over her mind and heart. Finally, and to her great surprise, one of them spoke. It was the one with the ruined face.

"You are more fortunate than you realize, girl! Now that you have arrived the Queen is expecting you, unharmed, so calm yourself! Otherwise you would meet your doom here on the sea rather than in the castle." He snarled.

"I will pay you back, yet. Do not think that I have forgotten." Anne thought of many things she could say in her defense, considering the fact that he'd deserved the hard smack she had given him at the Great Hall. However, she had a purpose to accomplish and it didn't include arguing with angry hounds so she kept silent. Another of the hounds came in very close, sniffing at her furs. Then he let out a deep growl, barely audible, but she could feel it rumbling through her bones. He then leapt and snarled viciously and barked in her face, making her jump. Her heart knocked and flailed. The dogs began laughing cruelly. *What are they going to do?*

"What is it?" Said the ugly one.

"Too bad, really. I smell no iron on her." Said the one who had frightened her.

"Good. Curse the element of iron! The Queen demanded she bring no iron, else she'd meet trouble *right here!*" The ugly one said with special emphasis, staring at her. This was the very first time Anne was glad she *didn't* have her hammer. She was glad she followed Great Grandfather Aldy's advice! The leader, the one with the ruined face, made a wide circle around her on the ice while the other five sat outside of the invisible circle and watched. He circled three times and then tapped the ice three times with his paw. Then he sat down with the others. The ice began to crack and pop and break beneath her and form itself in swirls and swishes of ice, frost and steam. As soon as she began to understand what was happening she was standing inside a gleaming ice chariot, frost rising up in large clouds around her. It glittered in the night like the stars above. Then the dogs all stood up and turned around, their backs to her. They then began barking in unison, harshly and extraordinarily loud. It rang in her ears until it became as one voice. Frost rolled up and billowed out from their mouths into an animate, organism of ice and frosty mists and then, before her were two palfreys formed with a harness of frost to pull the chariot. The horses, white and gleaming like pristine snow and made of voluminous mists and frosts reared up. Anne held on to the frame of the chariot with a near death grip as they dashed away to the castle, the hounds running wildly beside the chariot, barking in a gloating triumph, it seemed to her.

As they approached, swift as eagles, two snow white Gryps stood at the entrance of the great doors of the iceberg castle. Their blue eyes gleamed in the night as they peered coldly at her but they said nothing, letting her and her chariot pass with the hounds. The great doors swung open and inside Anne saw two massive beings holding the doors. *Ogres. Children of the Ice Sea.* Bright light from the castle spilled out into the darkness, a cold light. The eerie, cold light bathing the castle made it seem like a dream to her. A dark dream. She remembered the dream of the dogs chasing her and now she was in the lair of the heart of winter. The great, one-eyed, blue skinned giants each carried a spear and were wrapped in thick furs. Anne could only stare at them in fear and fascination. They made no sounds but only glanced at her and let her pass on her chariot, undisturbed. *Are all ogres bad?* She felt like an insect in their presence. Their black-eyed stares, while they did not touch her, were just as cold and unfeeling as the Gryps guarding the castle entrance. She recalled what Antigone said about them and her disgust at what they had given up. *Those Gryps sold their freedom for power and now they are stuck outside opening doors for an evil Queen! That's not freedom!* She thought. Even if she did lose this battle, she thought those Gryps the biggest fools she had ever seen! Scary, but fools, nonetheless.

Inside, the halls were bright with ice that shined brilliantly with its own light. Columns, walls and graceful arched doorways of dazzling ice crystals dancing in light and furniture of ice, stone and silver graced the halls and the many rooms she glimpsed as they passed by. The horses slowed to a canter. Anne thought it a wondrous place and beautiful but nothing about it was inviting. Distant and far off she thought, she detected voices; roaring, shouting voices from somewhere in the castle but she was not sure. Through the wide halls she passed by many grand rooms. Far down the hall was an arched doorway of blue fire and they were headed straight towards it. The palfreys picked up their speed again. Faster and faster they ran. Anne wanted to scream, thinking she would be burned. Indeed, as the horses passed through the doorway of fire they disappeared in dazzling sprays of water and wisps of smoke. Anne squealed and held her hands to her face as she was pulled through the doorway. Her chariot melted beneath her in the blink of an eye. The hounds, unharmed and even more raucous than before raced towards a dais at the far end of the room. Anne tumbled to the ground. A chorus of mocking laughter and twittering sprang up and filled the room. When she opened her eyes she was surrounded by the winter court in all their beautiful splendor. At the end of the room on the dais, sitting on a great throne of crystal and ice, smiling coldly at her and staring with snow white eyes was the Winter Queen.

The Queen, in her full splendor lounged on her great throne of crystal, ice and snowflake lattice work. Her gown, full and

luxurious, spread out beyond the throne like a drape of blue and white snow and it was decorated in a lacework of tiny, glittering snowflakes. Over it she wore a robe of midnight blue with silver stars shining in it. Looking at it gave Anne the same feeling of dizziness she had when staring at the Queen's hounds for too long; as if she would fall into it and into space among the stars. Her robe was trimmed in white frost and her hair, longer than ever, lay in snow white waves shot through with streaks of blue and her ends were of smoking frosts. She wore a circlet of silver and sapphires and a large silver ring with a brilliant sapphire stone that glinted with many facets on her slender finger. She arched a thin brow and laughed. Her voice sounded like the peal silver bells but only she could make such a laugh sound so cruel. The court laughed with her.

"Silence." She commanded with a wave of her hand.

"Do you hear, child? The roars beneath us?" She asked. Anne heard the faint sounds as she had been brought in. She nodded.

"It is the sound of my army. Far below in the castle, my army grows and wakes. They ready themselves for the war. They will descend upon the land after the first day of winter. And now you have finally been brought to me. Though I wonder how you got here? Some trick perhaps?" The Queen narrowed her eyes. Anne shrugged under her hard gaze.

"I . . . I don't know any tricks."

"Hmm, I wonder. I sent a troupe to retrieve you. Yet, you managed to evade them. No small feat, but no matter. Those tiresome gnomes will be brought to heel soon enough. I know they helped you get here. I suppose, *how* is no longer so important, although later you *will* tell me. Now, we have business, Anne. You've destroyed my pet, Grendo, and now I need another. Grendo stank and he was a fool. He deserved to die, I know, but he had his uses. You shall do nicely in his place. You smell better." Mocking laughter rang through the court. Anne wondered if it was just the right time to use the bell and what would happen if she did.

"Whether I shall turn you into a moth or simply leave you be, or make for you beautiful wings fit for a fairy princess, I have not yet decided. I long for a little one, a daughter. Such a daughter you will be, if you please me. I shall give you much power! Princess of the castle and the Ice Sea, you shall be, if you please me. Anne, how like you that? Princess Anne?"

"Um, well, I like princesses. I wanted to be a prince when I was little."

"And so you shall be, for you are still a little one!" The Queen said gaily. Being a princess didn't sound so bad. Princess of the Ice Sea. That sounded nice. *But wait!* Anne knew better. She knew that she should not be surprised or delighted by this. She was not completely sure if the Queen meant to make her a princess or was just mocking her. The gnomes and her wolf friends knew Queen Faye rarely kept her word. Great Grandfather Aldy said this would be the Queen's downfall. It was hard to fathom how, now that Anne was trapped in the castle before the entire court and the Queen.

"Come closer, child." The Queen held out a pale arm, flicking her slender hand, her long white nails fanning forward as she motioned for Anne to come. The hounds sat around the throne, still as stone gargoyles, glaring. Anne refused to meet their glares and instead, gazed at the Queen but Queen Faye's white gaze was cold and sent a chill screaming down her spine. She struggled to get up under that cold gaze but finally made it on to her feet and walked slowly towards the throne. Anne remembered dragging her feet to dinner when mama served liver and onions, dragging her feet when she had to go to the dentist and once to the front of the class to write: 'I will not talk in class.' But no walk or dragging of feet felt as slow and painful as this. She stood by the first step of the dais and the Queen looked down at her as a spider would look at an insect it was about to eat. But perhaps even this spider had some weak thread in her trap. Anne would have to be patient and remain alert to find it.

"Now, such unbecoming clothing will never be suffered here. Especially that. . . dreadful thing on your head." Queen Faye shook her head and waved her hand and Anne was suddenly wearing a beautiful dress of white and blue snowflake lace. A kind of Cloak but of a different sort. *It's just an illusion, just pretend!* She thought struggling with what she saw and felt and what really was there.

"Now! That's far better! Don't you think so?"

"It's pretty. But I like my helmet too. . ."

"Of course. However, you are at my court. There is no need for such ugly, gnome detritus and I will not suffer it. You came just in time, child. We were about to have a great feast and now it can be in your honor! What do you all think?" The Queen said with a flourish of her arm, smiling and revealing her sharp teeth. "Doesn't she look delicious?" The hundreds of other fairies there paying court mirrored her smile and cold mirth.

"D. . . delicious?"

"Oh quiet your spirit, child! I don't mean you any harm! Unless you anger me." She laughed, her voice now smooth and merry.

"To the feast!" She commanded and the hall was aflutter with movement. The Winter Queen rose and Anne saw her great, delicate looking faceted wings spread out, catching the colors of the lights in the throne room.

"My wings," the Queen noticed her gazing at them, "oh, they are quite lovely, are they not? I shall give you a pair just as lovely. You would make a very pretty fairy girl, Anne." She glided down, her great, frost-trimmed robe flowing behind her like a spreading event horizon. She took Anne's hand in her own and smiled again, once again revealing her sharp teeth. Her touch was dreadfully cold and Anne almost yelped aloud in pain at the instant she touched her but fought to keep silent. Her eyes teared up instead, an involuntary response.

Through this struggle, she, for the first time saw the hall. The ceiling seemed as high as the sky itself and was bathed in globes of white light hanging in the air. In the walls of ice were carved reliefs of stars, the moons, animals, trolls, dragons and other strange creatures she did not recognize. Spires of ice and archways graced the throne room and a grand spiral staircase lead to rooms near the impossibly high ceiling and even below the sea's surface. They passed from the throne room to an adjoining one with a long stone table set with dishes for hundreds of guests. As the Queen floated past her courtiers and ladies-in-waiting they bowed respectfully but stared hungrily at Anne. She felt their stares bore into her as she was seated next to the Queen at the head of the table. By the table a large fire pit of blue fire roared. She tried not to look but each dish was more mouth watering than the last and far tastier than the dried fare she had eaten since she had come to Other Land. Queen Faye seemed to guess this.

"Certainly you will have something *good* to eat. Here the larders are stocked with delicacies of all sorts. I cannot say much for any place else." The Queen gazed at her expectantly. It was a statement rather than a question. The other fairies were being seated. Beautifully arrayed in white, gray, blue or silver with wings that caught the light the winter fairies were beautiful and handsome to look at, at least most of those of her inner circle. There were many others; trolls, dogs or hounds and other pixies and sprites that crowded in near the periphery of the feast hall or flitted here and there on the fringes of the table. Anne smiled and said nothing.

There were huge layer cakes, roast ribs, hams, mounds of turkey legs, roast chickens, pies of every sort and fruits and candies, especially chocolate toffees and mints, some of her favorite candies. They looked so colorful and delectable that she wondered if they were even real. Anne knew she didn't have much time and she had to act soon! Trying to trick the Queen would do no good and she dare not touch anything. Another fairy lady offered her a generous piece of chocolate pie, her black eyes shining with wicked delight.

"Come now, you are the Queen's honored guest. Surely you will have something to eat this time?" She smiled.

"Now, Flagella. Let the child alone. Let her decide on her own what she will have." The Queen waved the pie away and bade her lady-in-waiting sit down. She smiled wickedly at Anne.

"Or perhaps not! I have been waiting to see you for quite some time and you made me wait! Will you make your Queen wait even this time? What will you have first?" The Queen was particularly full of caprice this night. It was now or never.

"I'll have the same thing I had the last time." Anne, although she saw herself wearing the dress, she could feel the cold silver in her hands deep in her pocket. It was just as well. Her answer, once again did not satisfy the Queen. She still smiled but there was a dangerous glint in her eyes. She narrowed them and leaned in very close so that her breath burned like dry ice on Anne's cheek. Anne winced.

"See this here? What does it look like to you?" Queen Faye asked extending her hand out, her sapphire glittering like a star.

"A ring." Anne whispered, shrinking down in her chair.

"Not *just*. It is the source of my power. Allow me to show you. By doing so, I will teach you the meaning of courtesy in my hall!" Her voice was now frosty with menace. She snapped her fingers and Anne felt herself moving and changing oddly, sprouting limbs in strange places. She had been changed into a skunk!

"This is what I think of those who do not accept my hospitality. What say all of you? Shall we play a game? We shall! Guess the creature we see before us! Anne, my new pet, shall play the creature!" A roar of laughter rose up from all around. From a skunk she then became a snake, then a nanny goat, an ewe, a mouse, then a moth. All the while they poked and jabbed at her with forks and knives and the pixies harried her, trying to bite her. She became a parrot and in her fright nearly flew into the fire pit. Then she became a lioness and she roared and snarled wildly as some of the smaller fairies jumped back in terror. Her mind raced, not quite comprehending each change until after it happened and then another change came upon her! *Hold on to who you are!* She remembered and repeated it in her mind. *I am Anne Greene and I live in a yellow house with my mama and dad and I have friends and I like trees and flowers and I like to help people,* as she was transformed into a fish and flopped around the cold hall gasping for breath! She nearly forgot herself, so panicked was she to catch her breath. Finally she gained the presence of mind to act as the Queen transformed her into a cat. The hounds let loose and chased her around the feasting hall. The Queen, highly amused, sat laughing along with her courtiers. Anne, in her mind, as she barely escaped the jaws of the hounds, reached into her pocket and pulled out the bell and rang it wildly. Suddenly her mind was no longer confused. It became crystal clear. The ringing sounded in her heart and broke apart the fear and confusion. Anne found herself growing indignant and with her anger the bell responded and it rang louder and louder until it clanged and boomed like a giant church bell. The other fairies of the court laughing with malice just moments before screeched and screamed in fear and fled to the perimeter of the hall. The hounds whined and turned in a hurry and bounded away from the sound in dismay. All hid their faces and ears from it, unable to stand the sound but unable to flee. All except Queen Faye. She stared blankly and then she slowly held her hand out. It trembled slightly.

"Enough." She said staring at Anne, her voice raspy and strained.

"Yes! Enough of your bullying everyone in Other Land! You gave me a riddle the last time I came here. At the Great Hall. You promised me a wish if I gave you the answer!"

"Are you demanding favors?"

"By Ancient Law you have to abide by your promise. That isn't a favor. It is paying back what you owe! You said I could

have a wish! You promised!” Anne stood her ground now sure of it and threw up her complaint in the most demanding voice she could muster. A power came over her that she had not felt before, a power of confidence and righteous anger. This seemed to cause a surprising change over the Queen. As if forced by unseen hands, she walked from the feasting hall back to the throne room. Anne lifted the bell high in the air in a threatening gesture as she saw some of the courtiers creeping and sidling back towards her. They drew back as if burned, remaining at a far distance. Anne trotted after the Queen, ringing her bell mercilessly.

“What would you have of me?” The Queen demanded.

“The riddle you asked me in the summer and only that one! The one you asked me at the Great Hall. I want that wish you promised me!”

“That is enough of you, Anne Greene. What is the answer? If you answer wrongly I will bury you beneath the castle floor far below the sea.” She said in quiet rage. Anne stopped for a moment. Her heart skipped a beat. She was sure she had the right answer. *Right?* The Grandfathers all said so and her fairy tale book told her so. It was too late to doubt it now. Anne felt Ancient Law, an unseen force, seeking correction of the imbalance of nature, was on her side. It was hard to describe but it felt like a fire in her veins and bones that warmed her and made her feel safe. And ferocious!

“The answer is a changeling!” She said resolutely. They both stood gazing at each other for what seemed like ages.

“That is the answer. What is your wish?” The Queen’s voice grated as if forced to pull the words out. “I shall, by the Ancient Law of the land, grant it.” The Queen said through clenched teeth. It was as if an unseen power used her as a puppet, forcing her to do Anne’s bidding.

“I ask that you release Queen Titian and let her go free and give her back her circlet and her signet ring!” Anne did not think the Queen could become any paler but she blanched and balked wordlessly at the request but in the end Anne had caught her in her own carelessness and she knew it. The power of Ancient Law was upon her and she could do nothing but obey until she granted the wish. Once it was invoked it would not be deceived by trickery. Like a puppet on strings she went to her throne and with effort lifted up the seat. She produced a shining, golden circlet encrusted with emeralds and golden quartz and a gold ring with a large emerald stone. Then in the middle of the floor she said a word Anne could not understand but it made a hole in the ice floor appear and in thick curls and wisps of fog and frost the Summer Queen appeared! Queen Faye threw down the crown and ring at the Summer Queen’s feet in a rage. Her eyes gleaming with a dangerous blue light. Her lips curled in an ugly, soundless snarl. Anne picked up the crown and ring and gave it to the fairy standing before her. Queen Titian was covered in ice and frost, her hair straggly and frozen, freezing mists rising from her skin. She looked tired, dark circles hung about her eyes but even so, she was tall and beautiful to gaze upon. Queen Faye was beside herself with rage, humiliated before her court, her plans thwarted. Anne placed the ring on the Summer Queen’s finger carefully. Then Queen Titian opened her eyes. She knelt down slowly and picked up her circlet, placing it upon her head. Then she seemed to draw herself up even taller than she already was and she became a fiery fury.

“You have broken the most ancient laws laid down long ago!”

“What of it?”

“Even now you have no shame after you are shamed in front of your own court?”

“You are still in my castle last time I saw. What is my shame to you? I will soon repay the insult.” She glanced at Anne.

“Beware, Faye, before you cause yourself further trouble! It may well be that I am in your stronghold but I demand the courtesies due me as a Queen!”

“You will have your *courtesies*,” Queen Faye spat out the word in contempt, “but we are in the very heart of winter! If you or that insolent imp dare leave, I can and *will* destroy you both! I will rage a winter storm so terrible both this world and the next will drown in ice and snow! No one will escape! I will destroy any and all living things near and far who do not belong to me! I will bring a raging storm of cold and ice that will destroy the whole world! Even with your crown and ring you cannot stop me! You can do nothing! And as for her,” she nodded towards Anne, “I will have her buried beneath my castle for her treachery!”

“You, most treacherous creature of all, cry treachery? How is it that the vilest of beings always decry the wrongs done to them when justice lights on their doorstep? Hear me! You may have the power to do all that you say. I do not deny it. But as I am a witness to the Laws of long ago I say this now – as you do, may it all come true upon you threefold! Now that I am loosed from your bonds summer will come again! All that you do here to rage in your power beyond the first day of spring will come back upon your own head threefold! Even now you will pay for the many evils you have loosed upon the land! Next year for you it will be a poor winter, indeed! Any and all people and creatures I deem as mine own or my friends that you harm you will be repaid in your own flesh! So, when you build your storms from your icy castle on the sea and your terrible armies come to swarm down on the south and eastern lands be warned that you will no longer escape punishment! Overstep your mark after this night and you will spend an eternity making up for your wickedness!” Queen Titian’s skin buzzed with a faint light as her anger took shape and she issued her deadly warning. It was the same power that buoyed Anne just moments ago against the Winter Queen.

“All this will happen to you should you continue in your evil ways against the laws of the land, upon my crown and my ring, that is my promise and my word!” Queen Titian’s voice rang out loud and clear and there was no voice that made a sound except hers. Her eyes blazed like red flames.

“I have something to say too!” Said Anne, feeling emboldened. The Winter Queen narrowed her eyes.

“Take care, girl.” She threatened.

“Let her speak! What is it you would say?”

“The Question you’ve been putting people to. Stop it! I am neither a summer child or a winter child! People have a right to choose what they want, not what *you* want. We need all of the seasons, not just one!”

“The child is right. What say you? Shall I make more demands or will you accept these terms?” Asked Queen Titian pointedly.

“Be content!” snapped Queen Faye.

“DO YOU ACCEPT THE TERMS?”

“I accept them.” Queen Faye said coldly.

“It is well. It is done.” Said Queen Titian curtly. “Remember my words for you know them to be true, by the law. When spring comes you will pay yet and even more, should you overstep your mark again.” Queen Faye, stifled her rage and also something else, something Anne saw in her for the first time. Fear. Fear of being cursed by her own wickedness. She waved her hand and said a word and the ice chariot appeared again. Both Queen Titian and Anne stepped in it and Queen Titian blew her breath gently. From her breath a lone horse, a stallion of fire and smoke formed with a yoke and thin reins of fire with it.

”Let me drive our chariot home, child.” The Summer Queen said. She created a shield of heat waves around them to protect them from the rolling blue flames in the doorway. Away they raced, hearing Queen Faye's fearsome, raging screams behind them. The ogres saw them coming and stood aside in silence as the Queen of Summer rode past. The great doors opened silently, of their own accord.

“Ogres. She has even awakened them again. I foresee much trouble from this. Oh, how I wish I had not been so careless that fine evening!” The Queen seemed to be talking to herself. Anne wondered what she meant but said nothing. As they passed through the grand entrance the Gryps caught sight of the Summer Queen and both of them let out such anguished wails and bone rattling screeching that it rattled Anne's already jangled nerves.

“Wail! Wail loud and long, fools! Once you were free folk and proud, then you sold your freedom to Queen Faye, seeking to reap the benefits of my coming destruction! I say this now – if you ever break free from her, you will become my slaves! Never shall you be free again! Let your slavery remind you of your treachery to me and to your own kind and what you gave up! Wail loud and long, for it will be your only consolation for as long as you live!” The Summer Queen said mercilessly. With that, they left the cold halls of the Winter Queen.

They sped swiftly across the sea behind the great, flaming stallion. Thick clouds of gloom quickly boiled in, obscuring the starlit sky. Anne smelled trouble.

"It's blade snow!"

"Do not worry. Being entombed in ice for many moons has left me faint of power and yet, I can ward off the forces of winter even here, for a time. Until I get to the other side of the world."

"I thought she wouldn't be able to do things like this anymore!"

"Child, it is still winter time and she is in her stronghold. Further south beyond the northern forests and beyond spring is when she oversteps her boundary."

"But you should save your strength! My friend is waiting near the Snowy Beach. He's a wolf that ran away from Queen Faye and he helped me get here unharmed. He has a Cloak on him. If we can get to him once we get to the beach he can spread the Cloak over all of us. . ."

"Child, a Cloak such as that can protect you from being seen but it will not shield you from the evil storms she throws out. Let us find this friend of yours and then I will work a shield of heat for the three of us!" Said the Queen. As they approached the shore, steam flew up from beneath the horse's hooves. Anne called out to Hunter as they rode up the beach.

"Halt!" Commanded the Queen.

"Hunter! Where are you? Hunter! It's me, Anne! The Queen is here!" Soon after, she heard a short howl in response. She couldn't see him but she heard him crashing through the snow.

"I see him. What a powerful wolf! A fairy wolf of winter! He protects you and has not eaten you? You know how to make friends. That is clear to me." The Queen said in surprise.

"Anne! You escaped and you released the Summer Queen! What wondrous news!" Hunter was ecstatic.

"I am deeply in the girl's debt, but hurry now, wolf. The evil snows are coming. My spirit tires so soon after my imprisonment and we have little time to lose! Get in the chariot!" Hunter leapt in, the Cloak falling away. The white and black quilt pooled around his great paws. Anne hugged him and they sped off as quickly as lightening, the chariot and horse fleeing away just above the ground. A thin path of fire and flame snaked out before the stallion.

"Where do you go, Anne?" The Queen asked.

"A place called the Ice Root?"

"Ice Root. I do not know of it."

"The Whitestone Lodge, then." Said Anne.

"I know of the Great Whitestone Lodge." Following the fiery path through the night, they were carried along by excitement and jubilation even in the darkness and the cold. Queen Titian raised a long, thin arm in the air. From her fingers she threw out thin, web-like strands of fire and waves of heat that covered the chariot and the horse. The falling snow nearly gained on them as they flew through the dark wood. It became all a blur to Anne's eyes as they rode through the night. After a time, they could hear shouts and the call of horns. They managed to stay just ahead of the storm clouds.

"The gnomes! They have spotted us! They will spread the news!" Said Hunter excitedly.

"Let it spread all around! I have come back from the heart of the Ice Sea!" Said the Queen. Hunter howled a call of answer and triumph. They reached the place right above the Ice Root, where she and Hunter had left the company. A small party was waiting, torches and oil lamps aglow. When they caught sight of the flaming horse they were in a great stir as to what it was and what it meant. The Queen called out, tired but in good spirits.

"Halt!" She commanded the horse and it stopped immediately, tossing its long, flaming mane.

"It is I, Titian of Summer. Queen of light, Lady of the sun, the Queen of Summer. I bring two of your company with me, Anne, a girl and a fairy wolf, Hunter. I believe your scouts will be here shortly as they are not far behind." With that news they could barely contain themselves of their joy.

"We heard the news you were riding this way not an hour ago but it was so hard to believe! Now we see you with our own eyes, Lady!" Said Glumgorg.

"You have been released! The war is over before it began!" Cried Golmarg.

"The Queen! The Queen!" They all shouted. A doorway from the tunnel underground was opened and many gnomes poured out to see the proof. Among the hundreds that came rushing out was Great Grandfather Whitestone, his eyes filled with tears.

"Great Queen! You have no idea what it means to see your beauty again!"

"No doubt, it means light and life to all. If I did not know better, I would mistake the free folk as mine own people. Still, it warms my heart to see such joy and my own joy in being released knows no bounds!" She turned to Anne and for the first time Anne could focus on Queen Titian rather than on her own safety or the mission. The Queen, though ragged and tired was extraordinarily beautiful like Queen Faye, but her beauty was warm and inviting. Her long hair was as red as fire. Her dress of leaves and moss was rotted but even in such a state she looked regal. She was tall with deep, golden skin and she had golden eyes, bright and shining like suns, as if fires burned behind them. Her wings, full, faceted and delicate as a dragonfly's wings shimmered faintly with a green light. She smiled graciously at the gathered gnomes and to Anne's relief

she did not have sharp teeth! She turned her broad smile upon Anne.

“Were it not for your wisdom in regards to the Question, Anne, I would take you for mine own and give your mother and father a changeling in your place! As it is, you did not declare yourself a summer child and now that you have saved me from death, I owe you much. I must leave and go to the other side of the world but before I go, I must give you something.” She said, her circlet of gold shining in her red hair like a celestial band of stars. She plucked one of the yellow jewels from it and took Anne's furry mitten and found her hand. She placed it upon Anne's silver ring where it glittered like a sun set in silver.

“That jewel is a token of my gratitude to you, Anne. Summer is my domain. When you come and go from Other Land you have free and safe passage to come and go as you will, come summer. This I promise, and unlike someone else we know, I keep my word once it is given.”

“Thank you, Queen Titian.”

“You have saved us all, Anne. For that, we are all in your debt.” Said Great Grandfather Whitestone. “You were much wronged, Lady, much wronged.” He said to the Queen.

“Aye, it is true. Through my pains the whole of Other Land was wronged even more so.”

“But how did she capture you?” Asked Anne.

“My own carelessness. We Queens can be carefree and careless. I stole away, alone and went bathing one fine evening and set my crown and ring down without care and they were stolen while I sang and bathed. Her own carelessness was with her tongue and mine with my things, but enough of that. I must take my leave of this place.” She glanced at the fast approaching storm clouds and then turned to Anne again.

“I would know more of you, Anne! You are a brave and curious child. Do not hesitate to come to my court when I am in my full glory and power!”

“I won't! I want to come and see Other Land when it's summertime again! I'm sure it will be the best time ever!”

“The balance of nature will be restored and perhaps all will finally be as it should be.” The Queen's eyes twinkled.

“Good Queen Titian! Good Queen Titian!” Everyone shouted. Such joy and happiness had never been seen or heard in such a dark place. Even the coming storm did not quench their happiness. In the middle of the black forest there was the light of joy, right there as they all saw the Summer Queen off. She rode in her chariot of ice pulled by her steed of fire led by a thin path of flames. A bright figure of light she was, cutting through the darkness as she rode away, the flames of the stallion receding into the night as she made her way to the other side of the world to put the season of Summer right again.

And if there were unfriendly eyes watching this spectacle of joy they dared not molest the Queen of Summer nor reveal themselves to the jubilant free folk. They remained silent and hidden. The war of winter was over.

It seemed that it had taken them only half the time to travel back through the tunnels to the Whitestone Lodge than when they first traveled. Once they had reached the lodge it was clear that the news had flown well ahead of them. Anne rode on top of Hunter's back surrounded by his pack at the very front of the company column while they all sang songs in her honor and shouted her name. If she didn't know better, she would have thought that she was the Queen. As it was, she was something of royalty if only for that night and after what she had been through, it was well deserved. 'Good Queen Titian' and 'our redoubtable Anne' or 'hurrah' mingled joyously with the songs through the traveling company in a swell of voices that rang through the tunnels and eventually into the great lodge's underground chambers. Once they had reached the lodge she was carried with much fanfare through the bowels of the lodge, up through the cellars and right into the front hall while her praises had been sung before her arrival. So when she entered the hall, flanked by the wolves and many other warriors, besides, she was greeted by gales of laughter and tears and shouts of “hurrah” from all those who stayed behind to tend the lodge. First in among them were Rhiora, Danila and all of their daughters and little sons too young to join the warriors. Aes, who had spotted the Summer Queen riding through hours earlier had flown off, racing ahead of the storm to broadcast the news of the rescue and arrival of the Summer Queen throughout the land.

Anne had come back to find both Antigone and Pup convalescing on thick quilts in a large hospitaller room at the end of one of the main hallways. Danila had administered a sleepy-time draught but they both had insisted upon staying awake when they heard news of Anne's imminent arrival. She did not disappoint. Antigone and Pup were in good spirits, healing slowly from their wounds and they were very happy to see her. Pup licked her face and wagged his tail weakly.

“You did it!” He whispered. Anne nodded, smiling.

“You know what?”

“What, Pup?”

“My name isn't Pup anymore. I've chosen my name. It's Dorga.”

“Dorga. Yup! I like that name. Does it mean anything special?”

“I made it up. It's mine alone. That's what makes it special. Dorga.”

“Well, you've earned it at the last battle. Get lots of rest, Dorga. There will be lots to eat later for all of us!” She said

excitedly. Anne then turned to Antigone. Even through her great fatigue and injuries, the Gryp's eyes shined brilliantly.

"Well done, Anne. Well done." She said quietly. Anne gave her the biggest hug she could muster and then Antigone finally closed her eyes and went to sleep.

Amidst the bustle and activity of the hundreds ascending into the lodge Anne was given a hot bath and her hair was washed, oiled and braided up in an elaborate style like the other gnome girls by Dora, Cora and Nora and she was given bright blue ribbons for her hair. She was dressed in her freshly cleaned blue snowsuit and Rhiora gave her back her blue cloak, cleaned and freshly pressed. Along with that she was given another gift. Rhiora handed her a small, polished wooden box. Her daughters stood around watching happily along with Danila, who was smiling warmly at her.

"This is a special gift. We don't give these to just anyone. They are hard to come by. It is a pendant for your beautiful cloak." Rhiora said. Anne opened the box. In it lay a small pendant of silver. A wide, pearly, opalescent stone sat in the middle. It seemed to glow with its own internal light. The silver gleamed and reflected the firelight and the lit oil lamps in Rhiora's bedroom.

"Thanks, Lady Whitestone. I love it! It's perfect for my cloak!" It glistened like a fresh, wet pearl.

"It was mine long ago. It was given to me by Lord Whitestone. He has since given me a larger one. It is a moonstone. Moonstones are rare in our land. It is also the emblem of our lodge and our family. When you are seen with it, those that see it will know you have our friendship wherever you go, my child!" Rhiora said. Anne turned it over in her hands. On the back was engraved a simple "W" for Whitestone. Danila helped her pin it to her cloak. They all hugged her and then went off for the kitchens. She gazed at her newly set ring, its small golden quartz gleaming softly. She touched her new pendant clasped at her throat and gazed at her reflection in a grand, gilded mirror in the long hallway, with her pinned up braids and ribbons. She felt every bit the princess! Indeed, that night, she *was* a princess to the gnomes and the wolves.

There was a feast just a few hours afterward, as wonderful as the first one she had at the Great Whitestone Lodge. Instead of the one long table there were many long tables in the feasting hall filled with the many warriors and their families, who were either relations or friends of the Whitestone family. There was an added benefit – the gnomes *did* eat dessert after all! Besides the spicy and bubbly kombucha ale and the many mouthwatering savory dishes, there were pine cone cream pies, apple cakes, pear pies, apple tarts, browned milk and sugar tarts and cinnamon cream cakes, honey muffins and black root tea with sugared milk. Anne of course was given the seat of honor beside Glumgorg once again and had her fill of all she could eat. They made sure when she was ready to leave for home that she was given a knapsack loaded with extra treats!

During the feast something nearly forgotten came to her mind. She was sitting in between Lord Whitestone and Great Grandfather Whitestone. She turned to Great Grandfather Whitestone.

"Great Grandfather Aldy, was that you I saw back home when those boys were throwing those snowballs?" His eyes twinkled mischievously.

"Well, what do you think, Anne?" Anne laughed. She knew the answer right away.

Beneath the celebrations and warm fires and laughter many things had to be put right: some gnomes would mourn their dead privately, some would wonder and worry about those still missing and all would have to ration their food stores and wait out the winter. Winter, after all, was still afoot! But for now, everyone filled their bellies with good food and their hearts with happiness.

And the wonderful thing about the Whitestone family table, unlike that other feast, was that the meal was delicious, delectable and cooked with love and light and there was no pain or poison that came with it.

When Anne had finally returned home it was still a few hours before full sunrise. She had time to undress – in which she carefully hung her cloak in the closet, took off her snowsuit, set aside the hammer and bag and carefully laid them in her toy chest. She gazed at the cloudy night just beyond her closet door, no longer afraid of anything creeping in to snatch her away or do her harm. By now, those with evil intentions knew that Queen Titian was riding forth and that their plans for an unending winter had come to an end. Summer would come. If anyone touched her then they would have to deal with the Summer Queen and even now, Anne was fully prepared to do battle. She had battled and had seen battle. She was no longer fearful. She closed the door and as soon as that, the doorway to Other Land disappeared. She glanced down at her newly jeweled ring one last time in happy wonder and then at her new pendent. Then she put them away. She hid her snacks under the bed, took the ribbons from her hair, took off her armor and put on a clean night gown and finally, she went to bed. There, she fell into dreamless sleep.

It was the last day of school before winter break and once again, Anne had worn her cloak to school. She had worn it all week long, actually and all week there were jeers and smirks from Lauren and her friends. These were met with anger and irritation from Tanya and Emma but Anne just shook her head patiently, held her peace and stayed her friends' tongues in her defense.

Until the last day of school.

The snow drifts were still piled high and the large, main streets were still icy. The week before winter break many kids did not show up for school. Thankfully, it had not snowed all week but Tanya and Emma were kept home that day. Sandy, her homeroom teacher liked and approved of the cloak, as always. But when the 2:30 bell rang, signaling that school was out, Anne had gone to the girls' bathroom and sure enough, there was Lauren and her gang, sitting in a corner by the row of sinks, chattering over her latest Fairy Princess doll. When they saw her they began laughing.

“Oh look! If it isn't little miss blue riding hood! Don't you realize by now that you look stupid in that thing?” Said Lauren in annoyance. *Boy, she really doesn't have much imagination. Can't she find something new to say?* Anne thought. She raised a brow and instead of shying away like she normally did, she walked right up to Lauren. They all gazed at her warily.

“Don't you know by now that I don't care?”

“You should.”

“If it annoys you so much, maybe you should stop talking so much and do something about it.” Anne stared her down without blinking. Lauren glanced nervously at her friends and then smirked.

“Maybe I will.” She stood up. Lauren was a half inch taller than Anne and thought to use this to her advantage. Anne just shrugged. A low rumble rolled from her, which grew louder until it made her teeth rattle and it made the other girls tremble. The bathroom had fallen to dead silence. Anne was not smiling and the menacing growl which Hunter had taught her sounded every part the ferocious wolf. The other girls started backing away, their eyes as wide around as dinner plates. They looked from her over to the exit. Anne ignored them. Perhaps her eyes flashed or darkened. Or perhaps a light shined in them. Whatever it was, something in her eyes and the feral growl frightened them.

“I guess you aren't so bad after all, Lauren. Maybe you should hurry up and go home.”

“I . . . I . . . I'm going to tell the . . .” She sputtered. Anne pointed a finger right in her face.

“Tell the teacher what? That I growled at you? Now that would make YOU look stupid. It's also a bad idea. After all, everyone at school knows you're a bully. No one will believe I did anything to you. Even if they did, you *won't* get away with it!” Lauren's eyes grew wide with fear. Anne allowed her words to work their charm. Whatever Lauren thought she meant, she got the feeling that this would be the end of the nonsense from Lauren and her silly friends.

“I've never bothered you or picked on you. Treat me the same way I treat you. I'm warning you Lauren! Leave me alone!” Anne said sternly. Lauren sidled out of the corner and ran from the bathroom, following the rest of her friends. *So, she really isn't so big after all.* Even if she were, she was certainly no Queen Faye! With that, Anne sighed deeply in satisfaction, her work done for the year. She looked in the mirror, adjusted her cloak and pulled up her hood. Mama and Rhiora were right. It was a fine cloak, with silver stars on the bottom hem and a plush, fur trim. *Thank you, grandma Barbara.* She thought. She couldn't imagine why she'd ever felt embarrassed about wearing it to school. It was truly fit for a princess. A winter princess! She knew grandma would agree. Anne picked up her backpack, left the bathroom and skipped down the hall, ready to enjoy her two week winter vacation. She couldn't hold back the big smile on her face and to her delight, the sun was finally out, shining in a crystal blue sky like a bright, golden jewel. It looked to be a normal winter after all.

THE END

Note from the author:

This is the end of book three of the series.

I hope you enjoy reading
them as much as I enjoy writing them!
Book four is coming early next year, in February
(or at least that's the plan!)
so if you have decided to stay
along for the ride then stay tuned!

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

Dedications:

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

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

About The Author:

Victoria A. Jeffrey grew up in Portland Oregon, attended Portland Community College and studied graphic design. She is 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>

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

The Green Door
The Pumpkin Princess

And coming soon:

The Lady Moons

By V. A. Jeffrey

from book four in the series

Secret Doorway Tales

Here's a special preview:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

