

# CHANDLER

BY

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*sixteen Stories by John Howard Ladd:*

*Complied by Byron Mettler*

*Out of Darkness*

*Things my Mother Taught Me*

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# **DEFINITION OF CATATONIC**

- 1. Characterized by marked motor abnormalities including immobility (catalepsy or stupor),**
  - ▶ **excessive motor activity (purposeless agitation),**
  - ▶ **extreme negativism,**
  - ▶ **mutism, posturing or**
  - ▶ **stereotyped movements,**
  - ▶ **echolalia,**
  - ▶ **and/or echopraxia.**
- 2. A person with catatonia or catatonic schizophrenia.**

## **POSSIBLE PRESENTATIONS**

- ▶ **Stupor - lack of response to external stimuli- e.g., no response to being spoken to or prodded**
- ▶ **Catalepsy - muscular rigidity, so that the limbs remain in whatever position they are placed.**
- ▶ **Extreme negativism - resistance to movement or instruction**



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# CHAPTER 1

“I wish that boy would stop drooling. I declare, Chandler should be put in an institution or board and care- or someplace- so you won’t be burdened with taking care of him.”

“Chandler is not going to an institution,” his mother said. “He’s my boy and he’s going to live right here on the farm with me. You’re my sister. I love you, and I know you mean well, but you just don’t understand how important Chandler is to me.”

“But just look at him.” Aunt Rose pointed a bony finger at him. “He’s twenty-two years old and all he does is sit there in that wheelchair, doing nobody no good. I know it sounds cruel of me to talk like this, but I’m thinking of your health. You’re not getting younger you know.”

Chandler’s mother stood over the kitchen counter slowly kneading a lump of bread dough on a piece of pastry cloth. The warm yeast gave off a rich, warm, healthy odor as she gently rolled and prodded the dough. Bread was something stable in her life. It was real and

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tangible and never let her down. Each day she performed the bread making ritual and each day she was rewarded with a perfect loaf of bread that would give life to her family. She was pleased with the praise and thanks of those who tasted the clean, rich flavor of a warm loaf of bread.

Chandler slouched in his black wheelchair on the far side of a well-worn kitchen table. He looked too tall for the chair. If he could stand, he would be over six-feet, tall. But he hadn't stood for over ten years so no one was exactly sure how tall he was.

The morning sunlight streamed in through the window over the sink painting the tidy kitchen with a warm yellow hue.

“So, Rachel, do you plan to take care of him the rest of your life?” Aunt Rose asked as she sorted through a bowl of strawberries.

“Of course I will. I'll care for him as long as I need to. And I hope that someday he'll come out of it.”

“Out of what?” Aunt Rose asked. “The doctors in Bismarck don't even know what he's in. You've had every test in the world done on that boy. His heart works okay. His brain is fine. He doesn't have cancer. He doesn't even have a virus. According to all the doctors, he's healthy and should be up and walking like the rest of us.”

Chandler sat in the chair, leaning to one side, oblivious to the conversation going on around him. He had ears that could hear, but there was no sound. He had eyes that could see, but there was no sight. His skin had

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nerves, but he felt nothing.

But the warm fresh smell of the morning loaf of bread always managed to breach the wall of defense blocking his mind and the odor would seep into his sense organs and slide into his brain giving him a warm, secure feeling. At times like this, he would get faint images of the real world. Images of the world he left so long ago. He would have to be careful though. If he dwelled too long on the images, he might return to the real world and be thrown back into the stress and fear and anguish of life.

“And another thing,” Aunt Rose continued.” They have some real good doctors at that mental institution who could help Chandler. Maybe by keeping him here you are keeping him from getting better.”

Rachel threw the dough on the counter and turned to look at her sister.

“Now look here, Rosie. I know you love me and care about me but sometimes you go too far. This is my life and that is my child sitting there. Just because he has a few problems doesn’t mean I’m going to send him away to live with strangers in a cold, white hospital room.”

She picked up the dough and feverishly pounded and folded it.

“I’ve seen that hospital. I’ve seen those poor souls walking around in white smocks looking like some zombies from a monster movie. I ain’t never seen none of them acting normal and none of them ever get better.”

She stopped talking, threw the dough on the towel and put her wrist to her forehead. The day was getting hot. She sighed heavily as she looked across the yard watching

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the chickens pick at the bugs in the grass. The kitchen was silent as all motion stopped.

Chandler sat in his chair with the same expression he always had. Blank. Sad. Lonely. His eyes were open, staring at the table, but he saw nothing. Occasionally shadows would creep in, but not this morning. The tension in the air came tumbling in on him like muddy fog, so he defended against it by putting up more barriers in his mind. He could not sense the bread anymore. That made him sad because he liked the feel of fresh bread baking in the oven. His world became dark.

“Hi Mom!”

The wooden screen door burst open and Sarah came striding in carrying a brown paper sack full of fresh picked corn.

“Well, I’ll be,” Aunt Rose sang out. “Don’t you look chipper today.”

“Hello Aunt Rose. Looks like you got some good strawberries there.”

Sarah dropped the bag on the table, reached across and picked up a bright, red strawberry. She put it in her mouth and closed her eyes as she took a long, slow bite of the sweet berry.

“Mmmmm,” she hummed. “Nothing can taste as good as a fresh picked strawberry on a clear summer day.”

“I am amazed at you child,” Aunt Rose said. “You are the only person I know who can make a rainy day feel like sunshine. Are you happy all the time?”

“It’s not happiness.” Sarah walked to Chandler. “God made so many good things in life and I want to enjoy

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them all. Who knows. Maybe someday I'll be old and feeble like you."

Aunt Rose catapulted a strawberry across the room at Sarah who ducked and the berry hit the far wall.

"You missed me! You missed me!" Sarah chided.

"Now you two knock that off," Rachel called out. A smile bullied its way to her lips and she was forced to laugh

"Aunt Rose couldn't hit the broad side of a barn." Sarah picked up a towel and wiped the drool from Chandler's chin. "How is Chandler today?"

"I don't know, "Aunt Rose spoke up. "Why don't you ask him?"

Sarah detected the sarcasm in her voice and saw sadness in her mother's eyes.

"Okay I will. I trust him more than some people in this family."

She sat down facing Chandler in a straight back oak chair in front of the wheelchair.

"How are ya doin' today Chandler. You look well. Did you have a good sleep?"

She was one of the few people who spoke to him as if he could respond. Most people spoke about him, or spoke around him, or spoke of him, but very few spoke to him.

"Mom, did you feed Chandler yet?"

"Not yet. I was going to do it as soon as I got this bread in the oven." She deftly buttered the metal baking pans.

"Never mind. I'll feed him. I like to do it. It reminds me of when he was a baby and I used to feed him at the

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table. Maybe my maternity clock is kicking in.”

“That’s the most sensible thing you’ve said in a long time Sarah,” Aunt Rose said. “When are you and Robert going to have a baby?”

Sarah ignored the question and walked to the sink to prepare Chandler’s breakfast.

“Would you like oatmeal this morning Chandler? I think you want oatmeal. And I’ll put brown sugar in it because I know how much you like brown sugar.”

Chandler sat motionless in the chair. Blank thoughts filled his mind but a warm feeling of security fell over him. He anticipated something good was about to happen to him.

Sarah heated the oatmeal in the microwave and put the bowl on the counter to cool. The bread was in the pans and covered with a cloth so it would rise. Aunt Rose finished cleaning the strawberries and put them in the refrigerator.

“I have to stop by my place and pick up eggs to take to town. Do you want anything?” Aunt Rose walked toward the door.

“You could pick up some butter for me,” Rachel said. “That last batch from Martha Brandt was real good. See if you can get more of that from the store.”

“I’ll look for it,” Aunt Rose said as she walked out letting the screen slam behind her.

“I’m going upstairs to take a bath,” her mother sighed. “Are you going to look after Chandler?”

“I’ll be here for a while. I don’t have to be back home till dinner. Robert went to Camberville to pick up a part

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for the tractor.”

Rachel put the dishes in the sink and walked upstairs for a bath. The steps creaked with age as she slowly made her way the second floor. The still morning air amplified the sound of each dull footstep. Upstairs the floor creaked and popped as she walked about the room. Outside a mockingbird sat on the porch rail calling to an unseen mate. The cows bayed in the field and a distant dog anxiously barked at something of importance.

“So Chandler, it’s just you and me.” Sarah carefully scooped up a spoonful of oatmeal.

“Now I made this special for you, so don’t give me any trouble. Mom said that sometimes you don’t want to eat. You have to eat so you can get better.”

Chandler sat motionless in his chair. No reaction could be detected from his unseeing eyes. Catatonic, the doctors called it. For some reason Chandler just checked himself out of life. They didn’t know why or how it happened and they didn’t have a cure.

When he was twelve years old, he was found lying on the grass, not moving and barely breathing. At first, the doctors expected a brain concussion so they did X-Rays and CAT Scans but found nothing. Then they thought it was a virus so did a series of blood tests and again found nothing. Finally, he was sent to a psychologist who concluded Chandler has sunk into a catatonic condition. Chandler was given medication, physical therapy and electronic stimulation treatments but his condition remained unchanged.

His mother soon ran out of money for treatment, so

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Chandler was sent home to live with her and Sarah. Sarah took the responsibility of caring for him. She accepted him for what he was and always treated him as if he could hear and speak.

“Robert said he was going to Camberville to get a tractor part,” Sarah said sadly. “He said it would take all day. I offered to go with him to keep him company but he said it would be too much of a bother for me.”

She lifted the spoon to Chandler’s mouth and touched his lips. Instinctively the mouth opened and accepted the warm meal. The tongue rolled in the mouth pushing food down the throat. No flavor was detected. It was merely and automatic reaction necessary for survival.

“I don’t think the tractor was broken. Or if it was broken, I think he could have got the part someplace close. Robert said it was cheaper in Camberville and we needed to save all the money we can.”

She fed him another spoonful and wiped his chin with the empty spoon. She started to cry.

“I swear, Chandler, I think he has a girlfriend.”

Full tears gushed out as her whole body heaved in despair and anguish by the thought of rejection. A thought of Robert with another woman, at that very moment, sent another wave of grief and rejection that consumed her whole person. Gloom and sadness fell on her like a heavy dark veil, shutting off the sunlight, shutting out the clear sounds of the morning.

She laid her head in her arms on the table and sobbed uncontrollably as her shoulders jerked in spasms and her nose began to run. Salty moisture streamed from her eyes

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to her cheeks and set off a bitter taste in her mouth. From the depth of her soul, a lump of sadness crept up and erupted like a volcano filling her mind with dark thoughts of loneliness and despair. Loneliness, fear, rejection and pain stepped on her soul and crushed it like a shoe on a bug. The well of tears drained to the bottom and slowly lessened the last tears dribbled out through reddened eyes.

The darkness ran its course through her body and slowly dissipated into the space around her. A final tear dropped to the table and light began to return to the room. Sounds from the outside resumed bringing life to the kitchen.

She took a tissue from her jeans pocket and wiped her eyes and nose. She sniffed and tilted her head back taking in a deep breath of fresh air. Upstairs the bath water was running. She looked at Chandler through cloudy eyes. Chandler had not moved but sadness filled in his eyes.

“Oh Chandler.” She reached across the table, taking his hand in hers. “You seem to be the only person who understands. You always listen to me and you never questions or condemn. I love you so much.”

She finished wiping her eyes, walked to the sink, and dampened a dishcloth to wipe her face. She stood in front of the window and looked over the farmyard. The fading red barn stood as a monument to the labor of her long dead father. He built the barn before he built the house. The animals would be the life-stay of the family and they needed to survive the first long, cold winter, he used to say.

The white two-story house came next, and then the

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assortment of outbuildings needed to house equipment and supplies. The last thing he built was the wooden swing set that stood under the large elm tree at the side of the house. Sarah and Chandler used to play on the swings on many bright spring days during their early childhood. She was six years older than he, so she was the designated baby sitter and provider for him when he was young.

Very few children came to visit so they became best friends and developed a bond for life. Sarah remembered running barefoot through the cool green grass of spring and Chandler would stop to look at yellow dandelion flowers growing in the grass. He loved life so much.

She turned and looked at him.

“Oh, Chandler, what happened to you? You loved so many things. Your brown eyes used to sparkle with life and joy when you discovered a new kind of insect you hadn’t seen before. Your joy gave so much happiness to others - why did you leave us?”

Chandler sat in the chair, as always, not moving. The eyes had no spark. There was no joy in his face. Nothing could reach him. Nothing could hurt him anymore.

Sarah didn’t expect an answer. She had given up on answers a long time ago and accepted Chandler as he was. He was still her best friend in life and she vowed she would be there for him through all his trials.

“Have you had enough breakfast yet?” She removed the empty bowl from the table. “How about some juice. I think I saw some cheery juice in the fridge, how does that sound?”

She opened the refrigerator and poured the juice in a

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baby cup with a spill-proof lid and a spout. She put the spout to Chandler's mouth and he eagerly sucked the spout, drinking in the liquid.

"My, you are thirsty today. I'll have to remind mom to give you more water. Summer is coming and I suppose you need lots of water just like the rest of us."

He finished the first cup so she refilled it and gave him another. He drank half of it and quit, letting the red juice run down his chin to his shirt. Sarah patiently wiped it up without scolding Chandler for making a mess.

"It's time for you to get some sunshine," she said pulling the wheelchair away from the table. "I'm going to put you in the sunroom for a while so you can look outside at all the beautiful things God has made. Then you can think, or whatever it is you do, and watch things go by."

She pushed him into the sunroom just off the kitchen. The room originally was a porch, with a painted wooden floor that was screened in, and later windows were added. It was too much work to carry Chandler up and down the stairs every night, so the sunroom was converted into a bedroom for him. A small bed and a table with a lamp were placed at one end of the narrow room.

During the day, he was put in his wheelchair and would sit in the room facing the wide farmyard just outside of the windows. In summer, they opened the windows to allow the warm breeze to flow into the house. During winter, a small propane heater was brought into the room and Chandler would sit in the same place, facing the snow.

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Every year was the same from summer to winter, and winter to summer. The seasons passed, but Chandler remained the same. For ten years, since his twelfth birthday, nothing had changed except he had grown from a boy into a man. Now he was again experiencing his summer months sitting in his chair in the sunroom overlooking the quiet farmyard.

“I’ll leave you here to look outside.” Sarah wheeled him to his usual spot close to the window.

“I’m going to go to the kitchen to clean up for mom. If you need anything, give me a call.”

She knew, of course, he would not call but she choose to treat him like a normal person. She had faith that one day he would return and she wanted to give him every reason to come back to the real world. She left him alone and returned to the kitchen to do the dishes.

Chandler sat content and motionless. If it were not for the steady shallow breathing which made his chest rise and fall, he would appear dead or as a statue. But deep within the recesses of his closed and fettered mind, a spark of thought began to glow. Many years had passed since even a glint of imagination had occurred, but on this warm friendly summer day, a dream was stirring.

A day dream as it were. An imaginary place where his brain could be activated safely, without any threat of attack. He began to create a world of his own where he could experience a life free and safe from the cruel world of reality.

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His dream world was a simple one. In the distant past, there was a small village nestled in a green valley near a river of fresh clean water, which emptied into a lake abundant with fish. Tall, ancient oak trees hung over the river creating a living canopy providing life to the birds and small creatures living in the branches.

The village was a series of small, round huts with brown thatched roofs with one door opening to the main square where all business was conducted. The town was sufficient in size to support those who lived there, but not so large that one felt crowded. They were able to grow enough grain to feed themselves and even a little extra to sell to neighboring villages.

The village had a carpenter, a blacksmith, a horseman, a baker, an artisan, many farmers, a mayor, and a board of wise elders who overlooked things. The town was named, Stillcreek.

\* \* \*

“Look at this,” young Simeon said as he looked at a parchment posted on a tree in the square. “There’s going to be a contest in the main square on the day of the summer equinox.”

“What kind of contest?” asked Erindel.

“The sign says, ‘All Healthy Boys Beyond the Age of Ability, Are Asked to Attend a Contest of Great Importance, to Be Held In The Main Market Square in the Fine and Peaceful Town Of Stillcreek, at High Sun Time, on The Day of The Great Summer Equinox, Ten Days Hence’.”

“What kind of contest could it be?” Erindel asked

again.

“I don’t know. But it must be important. The notice was posted by Gestalt of the Wise Council.”

“Do you think there will be a prize?” Erindel asked as he hoisted his leather pack that contained freshly caught fish.

“There’s bound to be some sort of prize. I’ve never heard of a secret contest in all my lifetime. Since I reached my Age of Ability I’ve entered every contest and the rules were always announced ahead of time.”

“This one certainly is different,” Erindel agreed. “I think I’m going to try it anyway. There’s nothing like a good competition make better friends, hey Simeon?”

“Or make bitter enemies,” Simeon said laughing as he put out his foot to trip Erindel.

The talk of the town for days after was of the mystery contest soon to take place. All of the inhabitants of Stillcreek loved to engage in contests. There were contests to see who could grow the most grain in one acre, and to see who could grow the tallest wheat stalk, and who could grow the most tasty grain, and who could bake the best bread with the best wheat, and who could eat the most bread at one sitting, and who could do just about anything the fastest, or the most, or the best.

The days passed and it was time for the competition. All the villagers got up early to complete their morning chores so they could attend the festivities. A challenge meant there would be a feast in the main square and everyone would bring their best foodstuff to be shared and judged by others. Aside from the primary contest,

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spontaneous competitions were always set up. The villager loved to judge everything, from the sweetest pie to the longest beard.

The Mayor, who was also the blacksmith, stood on a wooden table at one end of the square and tapped with his heavy, wooden staff held proudly in his right hand.

“Attention everyone!” the mayor shouted to the crowd from atop the table.

The crowd continued to talk and conduct business causing a rumbling murmur.

“Attention everyone! May I please have your attention!”

He tapped loudly three times.

“Attention, please!”

The crowd began to quiet as all turned to look at the stately mayor wearing his long black mayor’s robe.

“Thank you all for coming to this unusual, and unprecedented mystery contest.” A roar of cheers exploded from the crowd in anticipation of the start of the game.

“Here, here,” someone yelled.

“On with it,” another urged.

“What’s this all about,” a third voice shouted.

“Why the secret?” a lady asked.

The mayor held his arms up, waving his hands in a downward motion to quiet the crowd.

“Now, now, my dear friends. Be patient for a few moments and I will tell you of the contest.”

The crowd was curious so they quieted down to listen. Some sat down but many stood, uneasily rocking from

foot to foot.

“This unprecedented contest was called by the great Wise Elder, Gestalt of the Wise Council. It was kept a secret, so no one would have an advantage over another by preparing ahead of time. It is designed to test the raw wit and skill of the participants - and may the best one win.”

Again, a roar erupted from the crowd. The continuing mystery made the whole situation even more interesting and all were anxious to get on with it.

The young men, or boys as some chose to call them, walked to the table where the mayor was standing and stood defiantly in front of him.

“Oh wise and ancient mayor,” they said in unison. “We are young men beyond the Age of Ability who wish to compete in this contest, to show to all in Stillcreek, who is the best and most able in this endeavor.”

The crowd stood proudly as their finest sons spoke the ritual words in bold fashion. Five young men stood before the mayor. All had with them their best weapons and tools of cunning they choose to bring. Since the contest was a mystery, they did not know what would be proper so they each brought their favorite weapons and tools.

Boron stood tall and proud, holding a thick staff of oak with a large knot on one end. A long willow bow hung over his shoulder and a quiver of arrows was strapped to his back. He clearly thought this would be a hunt.

Fairbred was clothed in soft deerskin that went down to his thighs. He wore on his feet a new pair of moccasins

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made from the tough hide of the valley bison. He believed it to be a race.

Simeon carried a pack full of provisions for a long journey and had a small sturdy sword slung at his waist. Simeon thought it would be an endurance contest requiring a long journey.

Moorfield, who was heavy, carried a large wooden shield and many weapons of war strapped and slung over all parts of his body. He envisioned himself to be a great warrior and believed this contest to be a trial of strength and might.

Erindel came dressed the same as he normally dressed. He had on a weathered, dark, leather coat that hung to his knees. His backpack was drooped over one shoulder and contained items he felt he would need for survival in the wild. He had string for fishing, snares for catching small game, a length of rope, dried fruit and venison, and a blanket made of wool. At his waist, he had a sturdy sword and a small ax tucked tightly in his belt.

“My, this is a fine lot of contestants.” The mayor looked down at them. The five young men with shining faces beamed bright smiles back at him.

“Hrmm, hrmm.” He cleared his throat. “I accept these five contestants, who have passed The Age of Ability, to compete in these fair games of Stillcreek,” the mayor said with eloquence.

“You are worthy opponents, but only one will be the winner. The ancient rules of fairness and dignity apply, and all will abide by them. The end will prove the best.”

The crowd cheered again as the mayor repeated the

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customary words signaling the beginning of the contest. Many stamped their feet and others shouted loudly encouraging their favorite son to win the contest.

A slow procession of hooded men wound through the back of the crowd and walked toward the mayor. The crowd gasped and stepped back to open path for the honored guests.

“Fair ladies and fine gentlemen of Stillcreek. We are honored to have those of the Wise Council with us to moderate this unusual contest. Gestalt is approaching and will soon give you answers to your many questions.”

The crowd became silent and stood in awe as the bent figures passed. The Wise Elders lived on a distant mountain rarely making the journey to the town. Only the mayor and the village leaders were allowed to talk with them, so their appearance was an event in itself. The dark-robed men walked with great age and each took a seat in a row of heavy chairs behind the table. The mayor stepped down from the table and one of the elders handed him a rolled up parchment. He read it silently and climbed back up on the table.

“The Great Wise Gestalt has given me instructions for the contest,” he said clearly.

The villagers stood silent, waiting breathless.

“The instructions say, ‘The Great Council of the Wise Elders has called this special contest to determine who is the wisest and the best, and to be chosen for a great journey that is soon to begin.’”

The major cleared his throat and read on.

“This contest, though unusual, will in our judgment,

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determine who is the best candidate for this Journey of Great Importance and who will most likely succeed. If any contestants desires to bow out, they may do so now and will suffer no ill feelings from the village.’”

The mayor stopped to look at the young men, but all were planted firmly on the ground, waiting for instructions.

“Very well,” the mayor said. “I will continue. The rules of the contest are thus:

1- The contestants will travel to the nearby hills and valleys, in a direction of their own accord.

2- The contestants will seek out in all hidden places and secret nooks for a treasure of importance.

3- Each contestant will determine the value of the treasure, using their own skill and ability, and will select that treasure and return it by the evening of the day.

4- The treasure must be a growing thing, that contains color, and is temporary in nature.”

The mayor finished and stood quietly in front of the crowd. All of the villagers were stunned and confused by the order.

“A growing thing?” one said.

“That contains color?” another said.

“And is temporary in nature?” yet another said.

“They are asking for a bloomin’ flower!” one yelled.

The crowd became angry, as each shouted their opinion at the silliness of such a contest. All of the other contests of young boys, were to determine strength, and cunning, and character. This contest was a child’s contest which should be for reserved for little girls during the

Spring Festival.

The mayor tapped his staff loudly on the table. The Wise Council sat motionless.

“Here, here!” the mayor chided.

“My good friends, listen up.”

He tapped a few more times and the crowd quieted.

“In quite an unprecedented action, the Wise Council came down from the mountain to officiate this contest. We trusted in their council when the drought took our crops. We now have a store of water that will last through years of famine. We trusted them when the blue sickness came. We now have a cure for the sickness, and have not been plagued with it since. Now we must trust their wisdom in this contest. I believe they have an unseen end to this and they will soon reveal their wise purposes to all of us.”

The villagers soon nodded in agreement and some of the boldest protesters hung their heads and concurred that perhaps they were too hasty.

“Very well,” the mayor continued as he looked at the contestants. “You have all heard the rules to the contest. You must use your own judgment in this matter in deciding which flower you will select. You will return at evening, and the Wise Council will decide on the winner.”

The young men looked back and forth at each other, not sure of how to proceed.

“Go now,” the mayor yelled. “Go to the contest.”

The young men turned about, choosing their direction and each ran out of the village a different way.

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“And may the best man win!” the mayor shouted at their back as small clouds of dust followed each of them.

The villagers joined in and a chorus of cheers went up urging the contestants on to victory. The excitement was contagious and as soon as the boys had left the village, booths and tables were set up with many sorts of food items and clothing and works of art. Soon everyone was engaged in comparing values and judging who was the best or the greatest or the smartest.

The day wore on and the sun was waning in the west. Villagers began to look to the forest edge in anticipation of the boys returning. The first to return was Boron. He was covered in perspiration and appeared to have traveled a long distance to get his flower. He carefully carried a flower cupped in both hands that was lightly wrapped in a thin cloth. All were anxious to see what he carried, and watched as he stopped and carefully unwrapped the treasure. In his large hands, he displayed an unusual multicolored, waterflower he retrieved from the distant marshes of Waterford.

Everyone gasped in amazement at the distance he had traveled to obtain the flower.

The next to return was Fairbred. He was scratched and bruised and it was clear he had traveled through brambles and bushes to obtain his flower. He displayed a bright yellow broadleaf flower he picked from the top of the giant magnolia tree that only grows in the west side of the great mountain.

Simeon returned chilled and wet from head to foot. His teeth chattered and he displayed a pale delicate flower

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he extricated from the icy pools of water in the deep caves of Ecknell.

Moorfield came stumbling into the village out of breath and exhausted. Large scratch marks covered his back and shoulder but he still tightly clutched a bundle of green vines in his left hand. Some of the villagers stepped forward and examined his wounds as others carefully pried the bundle from his hands to look at it. He had entered the cave of the great mountain lion and plucked the fragrant flower of Leonor that only grows on a small vine in the deep recess of the lion's lair. They sighed in amazement at his valor and praised him for his courage.

The sun had set, and darkness covered the village and surrounding forest. Torches were lit and lamps set about on the tables, but Erindel had not yet returned. A group of men stood in a circle to discuss the need for a search party to go look for him, when Erindel walked out of the forest into the village square.

"Where have you been," they scolded. "All the other contestants have returned already."

They were not as worried as they sounded but were upset he had delayed the contest. Their anxiety was soon relieved when he walked to the edge of the square near the table and stood with the rest of the contestants. They each held their prize tightly to themselves, looking warily at their opponents. After all, this was a contest and each one desired to be the winner.

Erindel held his flower, wrapped in a large green leaf, in his hands. The Wise Council came out of a hut near the square and slowly walked to the row of chairs and seated

themselves. They would be the judges and all in the village would be able to view the event. All contests were public and all aspects of them could be witnessed by everyone in attendance. Bright flaming torches surrounded the square sending out flickering orange light over the waiting crowd.

“Now come forward young man,” Gestalt commanded as he gestured to Boron with his heavy staff. “You were the first to return so you will be the first to be judged.”

Boron respectfully stepped forward and held out the bundle to Gestalt. Gestalt was a commanding figure in his day, and at one time, was a great warrior. Even when seated he portrayed an air of power and valor. Old age had turned his thick beard and long hair from gold to gray, but his deep blue eyes still retained youthful awareness.

“Show me your treasure,” he spoke to him in a low, gentle voice.

Boron nervously unwrapped the bundle and held the glorious, multicolored flower out in front of him. He recounted his journey for the prize and told of scaling steep cliffs and crawling through deep ravines to travel to the distant hills to get the flower. Gestalt patiently waited for him to finish his story, and listened intently to all the details. When the tale of the journey was finished, Gestalt leaned close to Boron and asked a question.

“Describe your flower to me.”

Boron breathed in a deep breath and spoke in halting words.

“This is the waterflower from the distant marshes of

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Waterford. It floats on the marshy bogs and comes to bloom in the early summer. It contains three bright white petals that are roundish and symmetrical in shape and grow from the stem in three equal directions. In late spring, a yellow crown of pollen will rise from the center to attract bees for pollination.”

Boron continued on with the description, doing his best to express the beauty of the flower. When he had run out of words, he thanked the Wise Council for allowing him to participate and stepped backward to his place in line.

The next to speak was Fairbred. He spoke of climbing great trees in his quest for the perfect flower and spoke with zeal about his near death, when a limb broke and he fell thirty feet before coming to rest in a thicket of thorns. He then went on to describe his bright yellow flower using an enormous amount of words relating to sunshine and sunlight.

When he was finished, he thanked the council and stepped backward to his place in line.

Simeon spoke next and recounted his tale of journeying to the depth of the earth to the icy, cold pools of Ecknell. He told of swimming underwater to reach the isolated pool at the deepest part of the cave where he retrieved the Flower of Ice, as it is known to all. The crowd gasped at his tale because for many years the flower was thought to be extinct. They praised him exceedingly for his cunning and it took some urging by the mayor before they would calm and allow him to continue.

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He described the fragile white flower in great detail, using cold, icy words. He then thanked the Wise Council and stepped back in line.

Moorfield was next and gave a tingling account of crawling into the lion's lair to search for the illusive Flower of Leonor.

He told of being discovered by the lion and how he fought for his life to escape. He reminded all who listened, that even as he fought the raging lion he retained the leafy vine and the flower tightly in his grip, and managed to escape alive.

When asked by Gestalt to describe the flower, he composed a song on the spot, and sang of its beauty and grace in many wonderful words.

After that, the audience was in awe and needed to hear no more. It would be impossible for any to do better, but they were silenced by Gestalt who raised his hand to quiet them.

Erindel was next.

He too was amazed by the grace and charm of Moorfield and felt inadequate to continue. But at the urging of Gestalt, he stepped forward to present his flower. It was a simple flower. A yellow daisy from the nearby fields of Sunvale, only an hour's walk from the village.

When the crowd saw the flower, they guffawed and chided Erindel for his simplicity. They wanted to end the contest right then and get on with the victory celebration for the winner who would obviously be one of the other contestants.

Gestalt examined the flower and spoke in a kind voice.

“Tell me son, why did you choose this flower. All of the others have done great deeds of heroism and traveled many miles to collect rare specimens.”

Erindel answered. “The rules of the contest were clear. I was to ‘travel to the nearby hills and valleys’. That I did. The valley of Sunvale is just over the ridge.”

“I was to ‘seek out a hidden place for a treasure of importance.’ The valley is in the open and visible to all, yet I was the only one to find it. It was clearly hidden to the others.

“The rules say I was to ‘determine the value of the treasure’. To me, this simple flower is as great as any flower found at the top of the highest mountain or at the bottom of the deepest valley.”

“And the last instruction was to find ‘a growing thing, that contains color, and is temporary in nature.’ My flower fits all that and is very temporary in nature.”

Erindel stood silent as Gestalt turned the flower in his hands examining it.

“And tell me son,” he asked. “What color is this flower?”

The crowd gasped in disapproval at the simplicity of the question.

One blurted out, “Why... it’s yellow, of course. Any idiot can see that.”

The villagers agreed in a low murmur but were silenced as Gestalt raised his mighty hand in the air.

“What color is it,” he repeated as he handed the daisy

back to Erindel.

Erindel turned the flower in his fingers, searching for the right words. An expression of understanding crossed his face and he looked up at Gestalt.

“The flower has no color, and yet it has all.”

The crowd gasped.

Erindel continued, “I see here, in this flower, not just a flower of one color, but of many colors. The petal alone does not make up the flower. There is plant, stem and leaf, and soil and rock, and wind and water, and heat and cold, and unseen powers that give life and growth.”

“I see in the air around it all the colors of heaven, that are invisible, until some are reflected on the petals for us to see. This flower has no color, and yet all.”

Some of the villagers laughed at the silliness of the statement while others stood silent, attempting to comprehend the meaning. Erindel bowed his head and stepped back into line with the others.

Gestalt leaned toward the other elders and a conference of whispers ensued. After a time, the conference ended and Gestalt stood up to face the villagers. He pulled back his hood and revealed a long, gray mane of hair that flowed down his back. He unclasped his robe, let it drop to the ground, and stood in front of them in kingly raiment that included a bright gold breastplate, over a scarlet waistcoat with a row of blue jewels at the helm. His right hand grasped the hilt of a large, glittering sword that hung from his waist. His white beard flowed down the gold breastplate and gently waved in the warm summer breeze.

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He stepped forward and spoke in a clear strong voice.

“Many years ago our land was besieged with wicked enemies who sought to enslave us. We took up arms against the enemy and used all the might and cunning we had to defeat the evil ones and sent them back to their black caves in the distant hills.

“We are now besieged with a new unseen enemy, but it is just as deadly as the last.”

Gestalt stopped speaking and looked over the villagers carefully. Most stood silent with open mouths.

“Our new enemy has no substance, no life, no shape or form but will destroy us all if it is not stopped. For many centuries, we have been blessed with fair sunshine and good rain that has caused our crops to grow. But in recent years the Wise Council has noticed the winters are getting longer and the summers cooler.”

A low rumble of agreement rolled through the villagers.

“We have studied this problem carefully and have discovered why the weather has changed. And that is the reason for the contest. In the far valley of Glassmarsh, there is a small field where a special flower grew. The flower is known as The Flower of Light.”

“We have heard of such a flower,” some said in agreement.

Gestalt continued, “For many years we believed this flower to be a myth from a children’s fable. In the fable, the Flower of Light disbursed the darkness and brought sunlight and fair weather. But when we saw the change in the seasons, we read the old books and found that this

flower actually exists.”

A gasp came from the crowd.

“The Wise Council took many journeys in recent years to search for the flower. We found none alive and learned the last one grew in the valley Glassmarsh, but died four years ago. Since that time, the sunlight has darkened and our land is getting colder.

“We have learned there is a field in a distant land that still bears the Flower of Light. It is a treacherous journey with unseen dangers and only the wisest should go. And at the end of the journey the Flower of Light must be found so it can be brought back here to restore our sunlight to us.”

He paused, then said distinctly, “We have chosen Erindel to go on the journey.”

A roar of protests shot up from the crowd.

“Why not Moorfield? He is the boldest?”

“But Boron is the strongest. He should go.”

“Surely send anyone except Erindel. He encountered no dangers and brought back just a simple flower.”

“We have chosen!” Gestalt said loudly. The crowd quieted and listened.

“We have chosen him because of his wisdom and his cunning observation. No one alive has actually seen the Flower of Light. We have a few dried petals found where the last one grew, but we do not know its color, or its size or its shape. It will take an eye that will see beyond color to find this flower. Erindel will go. That is final. You may help him by giving him your soundest advice, or you can be rebellious and hinder his journey through your

foolishness.”

“Of course we will help him,” one said. “This is new to us. We don’t understand.”

Another said, “It does seem the winters are longer. Last year the lake didn’t thaw until April.”

“We will help the boy,” one shouted. “What shall we do?”

Gestalt gave a pleasing look to the crowd.

“The first thing you should do, is give these fine dedicated young men a celebration that will be noted in our history. I am afraid for the one who has won the contest though. The journey will be dangerous and he may not be return.”

The boys walked to the front and held up their right arms in a victory salute to Erindel. The villagers shouted in unison cheering praises for all the boys. They demanded Moorfield sing his song again and many tried to learn the tune.

Gestalt called Erindel to the side and ushered him to a vacant hut to speak with him alone.

“Erindel,” Gestalt began. “Are you aware of the dangers of your journey?”

“I am not afraid of danger. But I do agree with the others that there are some who are greater than I and should be allowed to go in my place.”

“Strength and boldness will often fail a traveler in times of trouble. It’s better to be wise and avoid trouble, than to be foolish and run into trouble head on. You are wise my son. Much wiser than you know. And you have the gift of sight. If any one can find the flower, it is you.”

“How will I find it?”

Gestalt took a leather map from inside his breastplate and laid it on the table.

“This map was used by me during the great war against evil. It has not been updated since then and some places may have changed. It will have to do.”

He pointed to the map.

“This is the valley of Oakridge where we dwell. You must go beyond the mountain through the forest of Glendale, and come to the Mystic Sea. There the map ends. None of us has crossed the sea, but I’ve spoken to some who have. They say that across the sea is an ancient land where the Flower of Light still grows.”

“But why can’t you go? You are still an imposing warrior.”

Gestalt leaned on his staff. “I am much older than you know. I would not fare well on such a journey.”

He reached into his waistband, took out a small leather satchel, and handed it to Erindel.

“These are the dried petals from the last Flower of Light that grew in our land. It is said they contain great power of wisdom and healing. I do not know how they may help, but I give them to you to use in your hour of need. But use them sparingly. These are the last. I hope they will be your light in times of darkness.”

Erindel took the satchel and tucked it inside his shirt.

“What if I don’t succeed?”

“You will succeed,” Gestalt said reassuringly. “You must succeed.”

Erindel took the charge given to him with dignity and

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determination. Moorfield offered him his large wooden shield and Boron tried to persuade Erindel to take the long bow with him. Erindel thanked them graciously but chose to take only his knapsack and a small sword. The journey would be long and he felt he should travel light.

Four days later he was ready to begin the journey and rose before sunrise to get a start on the day. The entire village met at the town square to see him off with tears of sadness, and cheers of goodwill. He gave his mother a special hug and assured her he would return safely, but she cried anyway. His sister handed him a gift of dried strawberries coated with fine sugar. Their father died years before, and her loneliness was increased as Erindel walked away from the village. His journey had begun.

## CHAPTER 2

“Good morning, Rachel,” Mrs. Baker said to Rachel as she walked through the sunroom. Chandler was sitting in his chair by the sunroom window, but she gave him no notice.

“You look fine this morning, Rachel,” Mrs. Baker said as she handed her two fresh rhubarb pies. “Have the other ladies arrived for the prayer meeting yet, or am I the first one?”

“No,” she answered taking the pies. “You’re the first one here this morning.”

“Well I hope the other ladies get here on time. God made the world in six days, and as I say, he got His work done on time, so should we,” she said with a high pitch laugh.

She made her way to the living room and plopped down in the large recliner. Chandler’s mother busied herself in the kitchen, preparing coffee and setting out dishes for the Ladies Prayer Meeting. Soon other ladies arrived and each took a chair in the living room. The room consisted of a gray sagging sofa and matching love seat, a large overstuffed chair now occupied by Mrs.

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Baker, a small padded bench by the window, and an assortment of odd chairs that were gathered up from around the house for the meeting. The curtain to the only window was pulled open, bringing clear morning sunlight into the room. The ladies were engaged in their usual Friday morning ritual of discussing events in their community and each giving expert analysis.

Chandler's mom walked in with a large family Bible in hand, and sat down in a straight back chair next to the doorway leading to the kitchen. Since the meeting was at her home, she was the designated leader and chose the topic of discussion.

She opened the Bible to the Book of First Peter. The ladies adjusted themselves in their respective chairs and turned toward Chandler's mother to listen.

"This morning I'm going to read a short verse." She looked at the Bible. "It's found in I Peter 5:7, and reads, 'Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you'."

She put down the book and looked quietly at the carpet, studying the pattern.

"Now...I've been thinking a lot about this verse lately."

She paused.

"Probably because it's been almost twelve years since my dear husband Walter passed on. It just so happens that today would have been our thirtieth wedding anniversary."

The gold ring shone brightly on her finger as she gently rubbed it with the other hand.

"So today... we are going to talk about what it means

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to cast our care on God. And let me tell you," she said looking up, "there have been times when I thought it meant I should give up and meet my Walter in heaven."

A small tear came to her eye as she tried to smile.

"Well I think it's a wonderful verse to discuss," Mrs. Crawford said. She was the youngest of the group and her husband was an apprentice engineer for the water company.

"All of us have cares from time to time, and they will tend to get us down," Rachel continued. "What should we do when we worry too much and just can't take it anymore?"

The question was rhetorical but Mrs. Baker volunteered to answer it.

"I'll tell you what I do," she said boldly. "I just look around at all the other poor souls on earth, with all their problems, and I thank God he gave me what I have. Look at Chandler, for example. We could be like him, if not for the grace of God."

"Now Mrs. Baker," Phyllis who ran the store interrupted. "That's not fair. Poor Rachel is telling us she's having a difficult time right now and you bring up her poor son Chandler."

"Well I was just saying..."

"You don't know what you're saying," Mrs. Brandt from the dairy said. "Rachel needs our help. I don't think it'll do any good to remind Rachel of her problems."

Mrs. Baker clamped her mouth shut and exhaled a considerable, "Humph," as she sat back in her chair. Chandler's mother sat silently in the living room with her

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eyes cast down toward the floor.

“So tell us Rachel,” Mrs. Brandt said. “You no doubt have thought about this verse a lot. What does it mean to you?”

She read the verse aloud again and looked at each of the ladies.

“I believe God has a plan for our lives. And if he has a plan, it has to be a real good one. He doesn’t do things half way and he doesn’t make mistakes. When he finishes, it’s done right. The problem we have is, we don’t understand just exactly what that plan is. And sometimes, His plan will cause hardship for us on this earth.”

“God decided to take Walter from me twelve years ago. But before he took him, he gave us eighteen wonderful years together. Walter was a real good man. The best that any could find. We had the two children and we built this farm together. Just him and me working together, side by side, digging ditches and mixing concrete.”

She paused and looked out the window at the fading red barn.

“We thought those were the hard times. Lookin’ back on them, it seems that those were the best times of my life. I suppose at the time I worried a lot, and complained to God for giving us such a hard life, but when I look back, I see that it wasn’t so bad.”

“So I reckon the verse is telling us to quit complaining and get on with life. God knows just what he’s doing and he’s doing it right. Just because we don’t understand,

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doesn't mean it isn't good for us. The hard part is taking this verse to heart and not fretting about every little problem that comes along."

She smiled when she finished and looked lighter as if a weight was taken off of her.

"I agree with you," Mrs. Crawford said. "Life can get pretty hard at times and it's easy for us to get down-and-out and focus on the worst of things. I'm glad you read that verse this morning. Why, just last night Bob and I were talking about money and we stayed up past midnight worrying about it. I should just leave it up to God and stop worrying."

All the other ladies pitched in telling of their experiences with their worries, and all agreed that it's best to trust in God's plan. Even Mrs. Baker chipped in, telling a lengthy story of her medical condition, and conceded that she too should stop worrying.

When the Bible study was over, they began a round of prayer and each lady took a topic. All of them added a line or two asking for comfort for Rachel during her time of stress. After the prayer, Rachel felt better and she was smiling when she went to the kitchen to prepare the coffee and pie. As she passed through the kitchen, she glanced at the sunroom and saw Chandler sitting in his chair, gazing out at the yard looking at nothing at all. She wondered what blessing would come from this trial.

She carried the tray of refreshments to the living room and served pie and coffee to each guest. The conversation centered on the quality of the pie Mrs. Baker brought and she went on to describe exactly how she cleaned the

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rhubarb and took great effort to make the pie shell and the sweet sauce that covered the red stems. All were in agreement that the pie was delicious and most asked for a second piece.

“So tell me Rachel,” Mrs. Crawford said as she stirred her coffee. “How is Chandler doing? Have you heard anything new from the doctor about his condition.”

“Chandler is about the same. I can’t see any change from one day to the next. Sarah talks as if he will come out of it any day, but I’m not so sure.”

“Dr. Jacobs just came back from a meeting in Chicago about new treatments,” Mrs. Brandt said hopefully. “Maybe he can find a cure.”

“The doctor stops by once in a while. I’ll ask him about it the next time he gets out here.”

She tried to sound positive but her somber tone gave away her true feelings. Many years ago, she had given up on his recovery and decided to accept him the way he was. It was a trial she had to bear and she often blamed herself for his condition. Perhaps if she had spent more time with him after his father died this wouldn’t have happened.

The meeting was soon over and the ladies left the house. Chandler’s mother went to the kitchen to wash the plates and cups and enjoyed the quiet time to think about the events of the meeting. She reminded herself that she should trust God and not spend time worrying about the future or feeling sorry for the past. She was lost in thought when she heard a knock at the sunroom door.

She leaned toward the window over the sink and

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looked outside to see Pastor Willard standing on the back porch holding his black hat in one hand and a well-worn Bible in the other. He always had a hat with him to avoid sunburn on his thinning scalp. He had lost weight, so his clothing hung limply on his stooped frame. For over fifty-years he had been preaching to the fair folk of Riverville, but his health was starting to fail as the years caught up with him.

He was there, as he was every Friday, to visit with Chandler and his mother and to give a few words of comfort.

“Pastor Willard,” she called out wiping her hands on her flowered apron. “Come in. The door is open.”

The aging pastor reached out with a weathered hand and opened the creaking screen door to let himself in. The door lead to the sunroom at the side of the house.

“Hello Chandler,” he politely said as he closed the door behind him and stepped close to Chandler. “It’s a fine day today, isn’t it? You’re looking well.”

The pastor stooped over and gently squeezed Chandler’s leg in a friendly manner. Chandler sat with mouth open and eyes fixed on the green lawn but gave no indication he was aware of the pastor’s presence.

“So Rachel,” Pastor Willard said as he turned and walked into the kitchen. “How are you today? Did the prayer meeting go well?”

“Yes it went quite well,” she answered as she pulled out a chair from the table. “We had a good discussion about casting our care on God. It was a good reminder to me, not to feel sorry for myself.”

“All of us can get bogged down from time to time. But it’s always good to look to God during times of trouble.”

The pastor sat down at the table and placed his hat and Bible in front of him.

“Would you like some rhubarb pie?” She scooped a piece from the pie pan on the counter.

“That sounds delicious,” he answered.

The back door whacked opened and loud footsteps crossed the wooden floor of the sunroom.

“Boy, it’s hot out there today,” a booming voice followed the footsteps. Eric Randolph, Rachel’s nephew, had been working the farm for the past year in exchange for a portion of the crops. Eric’s father had lost his farm four years ago, and Eric was trying to prove he was a better man than his father by trying to make a go of it on Rachel’s farm. He worked hard and long but carried a chip on his shoulder that always seemed to hold him back.

“Well, Eric, it’s good to see you.” Pastor Willard stood up and offered his hand.

“Hello pastor.” Eric reached out and shook his hand. “Rachel, do you have any fencing laying around here? That bull I’ve been keeping in the north quarter knocked the fence down again and I had to chase him all the way to the Taylor place before I caught him.”

“I think I saw some out in the shed behind the barn,” she answered. “Did you look in there?”

“I looked everywhere,” Eric answered as he gulped down a glass of water. “Can you help me find it? I want

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to get that fence fixed before he gets loose again.”

“I’ll get to it as soon as I can.” She looked at the pastor. “Pastor Willard just got here...”

“You go about your business as if I wasn’t here,” he said standing up. “If I were a younger man I’d offer to help, but I’m afraid that right now I would just slow you down. I want to spend some time with Chandler anyway.”

“Why do you waste your time talking to him? He can’t hear ya,” Eric said.

“Eric, don’t talk that way,” Rachel scolded.

The pastor smiled.

“Well maybe I like to talk to him because he listens so well. And he has yet to criticize my preaching.”

“Whatever,” Eric said as he stomped out as loudly as he came in.

“I really should get out to help him,” Chandler’s mother said apologetically. “And I need to tend my garden before it gets too hot. Will you excuse me?”

“Certainly.” The pastor carried his empty plate to the sink. “You don’t need to apologize. And I really meant what I said about talking to Chandler. It’s sort of therapy for me to talk to someone who won’t talk back.”

“Stay as long as you like,” she said taking off her flowered apron. “And there’s more coffee in the pot if you want it.”

She hung the apron on a hook by the doorway and quickly went out the back door to catch up with Eric. Pastor Willard walked from the kitchen to the sunroom and sat down heavily in a chair next to Chandler.

“So Chandler, my friend, how are you today?”

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Chandler sat quietly staring out at the yard as a warm breeze gently blew in through the open window. The leaves in the nearby trees softly rustled in hushed tones. Pastor Willard looked out at the yard trying to figure out what Chandler was seeing. Chandler gave no indication he saw or heard anything.

“Chandler, my boy. I’m glad to see you today,” the pastor continued. “I meant what I said in the kitchen about how much I enjoy talking to you. You have an air of understanding about you that I can’t quite explain. You seem to take everything in and render an unspoken opinion that things will work out okay.”

He turned Chandler’s chair to face him and carefully lifted Chandler’s limp left leg and gently massaged it.

“I read in a book that it’s bad for you to sit in one spot for too long. Pretty soon all the blood settles in one place and you get all stiff and sore. The book says that if you rub the legs and arms a bit, it helps the circulation and keeps things working okay.”

He tenderly massaged the leg with his slender fingers.

“I hope you don’t mind if I try to help you. I wonder sometimes if you’ve built your own world inside of your mind. But you know, the rest of us would like to hear from you again. It’s been a long time since I saw you running and jumping out there on the lawn and I sure would like to see that again before I die.”

He put the left leg down and started massaging the other one.

“I talked to the doctor last week,” he continued weakly. “Not Dr, Jacobs from around here, but I talked to

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a doctor in Bismarck. Not that there's anything wrong with Dr. Jacobs, no sir, don't you tell anyone I said that. It's just that this doctor in Bismarck is sort of an expert."

He finished the massage and leaned back in his chair.

"That Bismarck doctor is an expert in cancer."

He paused and turned Chandler's chair so they could both look out the window.

"The doctor says I have cancer, and at my age, there's not much they can do about it. He thinks I'll be around for a few more years so don't you start making no special arrangements for my funeral. There will be time enough for that when I'm gone."

Chandler's world was dark but he sensed a comforting voice. He'd felt it before and found he looked forward to it, and was pleased each time he sensed it. He didn't hear the sounds or understand the words, but could feel the meaning behind them and sensed both sadness and comfort. For a few moments, he smelled the sweet odor of cottonwood trees on a warm summer breeze.

"I told the doctor I have too much to do and I'm just too busy to die right now. The doctor laughed in an understanding way but I could tell what he meant. He meant that no matter how I felt about it, I was going to die anyway.

"But that's not the most important thing I have to tell ya'. I'm going to tell you about heaven. I read a lot about heaven in my day and I must have preached a hundred sermons on it, but I never thought I would be this close."

Chandler pictured an image of a gentle old man sitting nearby on a summer day telling a beautiful story of a

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wonderful place.

“Heaven is a place where we will see God in all his wonderful glory. There won’t be a sun because God will be the sunshine for us all. We won’t get sick and we’ll never be sad. And we won’t have to fight with that old enemy called sin anymore.”

“It’ll be a glorious place where all day long we can sit around and think about how good and wonderful God is. We’ll be able to see much clearer up there and we’ll have a better understanding of His wisdom and glory. I hope we will be able to talk to some of the Bible prophets and apostles. I have a few things I’d like to talk to Moses about.”

Chandler sat patiently as the kind pastor went on about the glories and wonders of heaven. The good words were pleasing to Chandler and he allowed some of the images to creep through his wall of defense into his subconscious. For a brief moment, he considered waking but the thought of facing reality frightened him. He pushed away the thought and went deeper inside to find refuge in the alternate world of his creation. The pastor continued with gentle speech for over an hour, but Chandler heard none of it.

\* \* \*

Erindel set out on his journey alone, with a pack full of provisions, and an aging leather map to guide him through his journey. He considered the words of the Wise Council about the darkness setting in on his world and firmly determined he would succeed in his journey and find the mysterious Flower of Light.

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The summer day was bright and clear with a warm breeze softly blowing through the cottonwood trees. The sweet smell of the white fluffy blossoms filled him with joy and buoyant hope for a successful journey. The final instructions of Gestalt ran through his mind as he set off northeast to find the Great Forest of Glendale.

The dusty road widened and became smooth as it wound through the farmland. He strolled past thatched roof cottages and gaily painted livestock sheds. Farmers working in their field would stop as Erindel passed and wave a friendly hand in salute. They too had noticed a change in the weather and were satisfied with the reasoning given by Gestalt and had hope that Erindel would soon return with the Flower of Light. After he passed by, the farmers stooped back to their tasks and Erindel was again alone on his journey.

After a time, the road narrowed and became rocky and rutted. By late afternoon, he was nearing the outer border of his country and came upon a raft-house at the edge of the Sage River.

“Ahoy there,” Erindel called out to the raftkeeper.

A sleepy voice came from the depth of the old wooden raft-house.

“Hmm? What? Who goes there?”

“It is I,” Erindel spoke boldly. “Erindel of Stillcreek. I am on a journey of great importance and I need an escort across the Sage River. Are you for hire?”

A wrinkled, bent, old man peered out of the open window, blinking in the late afternoon sunlight.

“What?” he said holding a hand to his ear.

“I said,” Erindel began. “Oh, never mind.”

He cupped his hands and yelled, “I need a ride across the river!”

“Oh, you need a ride. Well why didn’t you say so.” The old man disappeared into the building. A moment later, he hobbled out the front door and made his way to the river, motioning over his shoulder for Erindel to follow. Erindel thought everyone had heard of his journey by now and felt humbled that he was not as important as he thought.

The raftkeeper said nothing as he labored to untie the ropes that held the wide wooden raft to the shore. Erindel stepped on the flat log raft, and the raftkeeper grabbed the rope tightly and with a powerful heave pulled the raft into the wide river. The current immediately caught the raft and the guide rope tightened, holding the raft on course. With each pull of the rope, the raft slid inches closer to the far side of the river banked with a thick forest of dark green trees consisting of oak, pines, fir, cedar, and mysterious ancient trees found only to the deep forest.

The waning sun was to Erindel’s back and cast deep shadows into the forest. He studied the bank looking for a trail into the thick woodland.

“Tell me sir,” he asked the raftkeeper. “What is the best way through the forest?”

The raftkeeper spat into the water.

“There ain’t no good ways into the forest. Only bad. The only ones that goes in there are the woodsmen who cut trees along the bank and then return by nightfall. But some of them don’t get back.”

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Erindel eyed the foreboding forest.

“I must get through. I am on a mission of great importance.”

“On a mission, hey?” the raftkeeper said looking Erindel up and down. “Are you that kid I heard about that’s gonna save our land?”

Erindel beamed proudly, “Aye, that is me. And with your help, I will find a way through the mighty forest of Glendale.”

“Don’t stand so proud,” the raftkeeper said spitting again. “The proud fall mighty hard in the forest.”

He neared the far edge and pulled the raft to shore.

“I’ve been told, there’s a path that leads to the left and up the bank,” he said pointing. “You can follow that all the way to the top of this ridge. Then you walk due east, until you come to a narrow river that gives off a sound like tinkling glass. Keep the river to your right, and it will take you to the far side of the forest. There, you will see the Stony Mountains.” The raftkeeper looked toward the forest with fear in his eyes. “That is all I can help you with. You will have to find your own way.”

He cinched the rope tight on the worn post and turned back to Erindel.

“Be watchful. Things are not as they seem in the trees. I’ve heard strange sounds coming from the undergrowth that weren’t of human origin.”

He stopped talking and opened the gate to allow Erindel off the raft. The old man held out his hand for a token. Erindel was surprised because he was on a mission of great importance and did not think he should have to

pay. He reached into his pocket and gave the man a silver token anyway.

The raftkeeper looked at it warily, then at Erindel and said, "You must always pay your way on your journey. Gifts from strangers will make you a debtor and a slave."

After Erindel passed, he shut the gate and turned to grasp the rope to pull the raft back to the other side. Erindel stood silent on the shore and felt quite alone. He watched the stooped raftman silently inch the raft back toward the far side of the river. With each pull of the rope, Erindel's secure home with a warm friendly fire inched farther away.

"Oh well," he turned and said to himself cheerily. "Let's get on with it then."

He hoisted his pack, tightened his belt and trudged up the hillside into the shadowy forest. Things were much darker amongst the trees and Erindel wished he had camped for the night near the river. The old raft keeper was an odd sort, but it would have been better than spending the first night of his journey alone in a foreboding strange land. He had gone too far to turn back, so he set about looking for a friendly place to camp for the night.

The air cooled as darkness closed in around him. Trees transformed into dark shadows looming up in front of him. The pathway was now narrow and encumbered with roots as it wound deeper and deeper into the forest. A small clearing came into view to his right, so he left the path and walked over to it. It seemed level enough for a camp, and above him, he had a clear view of the evening

sky with a few faint stars beginning to appear.

With relief and a sigh, he dropped his pack and rolled his wool blanket out on the ground. A branch cracked on the ground behind a nearby tree and Erindel jumped and turned to face the sound. Reflexively, he grasped the hilt of his sword with his right hand.

“Who goes there,” he said with a tremble in his voice.

The forest was silent. No answer came. Erindel remained motionless. He strained to hear another sound. He studied the still darkness. Erindel heard only the rustle of leaves in the breeze, so he relaxed a bit and returned to the task of setting up camp. He kept one eye trained on the forest around him which had darkened to near blackness as night overtook the dusk. Another snap came from behind a tree in front of him.

“Who goes there,” he said with greater authority. “Come and show yourself!”

A low raspy snicker came from behind the great oak tree at the edge of the clearing. A cold chill came over Erindel. Behind him, from under a tall cedar came a wheezing, guttural chuckle.

“Show yourself,” he ordered as he drew his sturdy sword from the sheath and held it in front of him like a weapon of power and might.

All around him, eerie low laughter erupted from beneath the great overhanging trees surrounding him. One sound of laughter came from behind an oak in front of him and another from behind the fir to his back. A third and forth came from a stand of pines nearby and a fifth from under a fallen oak to his right. The muffled laughter

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varied from creature to creature, but each voice imparted the feeling he was caught in a trap with no escape.

Erindel did not plan to give up without a fight. He could stand his ground and wait for them, or take the offense and attack while seeking a way of escape. So far, they made no threat but he sensed they were up to evil deeds.

He stooped down, shoved his meager belongings into his pack, and quickly hoisted it to his shoulders. The voices found his sense of urgency entertaining and they broke out in a sickly chorus of sharp, evil laughter. The sound echoed through the forest making a noise much greater than only the few voices he heard.

Erindel charged. He swung the sword in front of him and dashed out of the clearing toward the path. At the last moment, a crooked hand reached out from behind a fir tree and caught his leg.

“Gotcha,” a gravelly voice yelled out.

Erindel tripped and rolled into a ball to break his fall. He did a complete somersault, righting himself and landing firmly on the ground. He turned and swung at the gray arm that pulled back behind a tree just before the blade struck. Erindel charged the tree to meet his foe face to face, but found no one there. He quickly circled the tree looking for signs of his unseen enemy, but found only dry leaves. Confused, he thought it best to resume his escape. He turned to start for the pathway.

“Run little rabbit,” a voice to his left called. He looked and saw no one.

“Go back to your mama,” another voice taunted.

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Erindel whirled around. “Show yourself, you cowards. Show yourself and I will give you a fight you won’t soon forget.”

He stepped backwards a few steps and backed against a tall pine tree. Two stumpy arms reached around from behind the tree and each hand tightly grasped Erindel’s ankles. They drew backwards to pull Erindel off balance.

“Let go of me,” Erindel shouted and swung his sword down hard against one of the arms. The steel struck the wrinkled, gray arm and sent out a high pitch tone like metal hitting metal. A voice behind the tree cursed at Erindel but the creature continued to drag his feet backward.

“I said, let me go!” Erindel demanded as he raised his sword high and swung again at the arm causing a sharp metallic ring. Several more times he raised his sword and struck hard at the arm. Chips of gray flaked off the thin weathered arm and the grip lessened.

“Aiiyee!” a voice wailed.

The creature let go and pulled his arms behind the tree. Erindel twisted around the tree to face the foe and saw a craggy, wrinkled face with yellow eyes disappear in a small crevice at the base of the tree. He jammed his sword into the crevice, but struck empty air.

“What sort of creature is this,” he asked himself as he withdrew the sword. Behind him and around him, a dozen hoarse, crackly voices taunted him with laughter as they mimicked his question.

“What is the creature? The rabbit wants to know.”

Erindel sought to escape the strange foe. He withdrew

the sword from the crevice and ran for the pathway. Short stubby arms reached out from behind trees grabbing for him but he avoided their grasp by jumping over them or dodging out of the way. He stumbled to the pathway and ran down it seeking to leave the vile creatures behind him. His right foot caught an aged root and sent him falling headlong off the path down a steep bank. He tumbled forward and slid down a leafy embankment, landing at the bottom of a deep ravine.

The dark forest growth was thick in the ravine and for a moment, Erindel thought he had eluded his foe. Then from a nearby bush came the familiar harsh voice saying, “What kind of creatures is we, the boy wonders?”

Erindel jumped to his feet and staggered blindly down the dark ravine through brambles that tore at his clothing and skin. Blind fear urged him on and at every turn another wicked voice taunted him by repeating the rhetorical question. He felt hands grasping for him from every tree. He twisted and turned as he ran to ward off the steel grip of the enemy.

Exhaustion overwhelmed him. His steps slowed as he stumbled through the thick brush. The voices saw his weakened state and ridiculed him.

“Is the little boy tired? Come over here and rest for a bit. I will take care of you.” The voice then broke out in fit of insane laughter.

Erindel stumbled out of the ravine and fell headlong into a small grassy clearing. A half-moon shone in the sky above giving him hope. He lay on his chest collecting his wits and took a deep breath, clenching his sword tightly.

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It was time to fight. He readied himself and just as he was to jump up to face the foe, a gentle woman's voice spoke out of the darkness in a song.

“Go away, go away,  
Go away home,  
Don't you bother us,  
You old Tree Gnome,  
Back to you crevice,  
Back to your cave,  
There is no one here  
Who will be your slave.”

A wailing shriek of anger and fear spewed from a multitude of raspy voices and then there was silence. Erindel lay in the grass, grasping his sword and panting loudly. He peered into the darkness looking for the voice, but saw only shadows. A dark, illusive glimmer wavered near the bough of a large oak tree. He fixed his eyes on it expecting a Tree Gnome to pounce on him.

The shadow moved and he saw a girl approaching dressed in green-gray clothing.

“There is no need to fear,” she said in a pleasing voice. “The Tree Gnomes hate singing and run for cover whenever they hear a gentle voice.”

Erindel pulled himself up and sat on the ground. “Who are you Where am I? What were those evil creatures...”

“So many questions,” she interrupted with a joyful laugh. “You must be a traveler from a strange land. We

don't get many travelers anymore. The Tree Gnomes see to that."

She cast a wary eye into the forest and approached Erindel. She was young, about Erindel's age he presumed, and beautiful in an earthy sort of way. In the dim moonlight, her cascading hair took on a silver-gray color that matched the color of the moon. She wore a plain smock that matched the color of the trees in the forest around her. She had slender features and her long thin hands seemed to dance as she spoke.

"I am Willow Glen," she said reaching out to help Erindel stand. "You are in the forest of Glendale, as the outsiders call it. We call it, Fairhaven. And those awful creatures are Tree Gnomes, but you've learned about them already."

She pulled Erindel to his feet. He stood silent, captivated by her beauty and still in shock by his strange escape from death.

"The Tree Gnomes are vile forest creatures living in the crevices and roots at the base of trees. Some say they have underground tunnels that connect to other trees but no one has ever journeyed into one to find out. When a Tree Gnome picks a tree to live under, they stay near that tree for the rest of their life and can never leave it. They hate sunlight, and moonlight, and even starlight. If any light strikes them, they start to shrivel and give out a sad and lonely cry of pain. Legend tells us that if they catch you, they will drag you into their dark tunnels and make you a slave."

"Thank you Willow Glen for saving me from a life of

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slavery, “Erindel said with a weak bow.

“You are most welcome. And tell me traveler, who are you and where do you come from?”

Erindel stepped forward with a limp, discovering he had twisted his ankle.

“Answers to questions will have to wait,” Willow Glen said. “You are injured and I will guide you to a safe place and give you aid. Come, lean on me. I will help you walk.”

Erindel had no choice but to accept her help, so he leaned heavily on her slender shoulders for support and let her lead him. She was surprisingly strong and surefooted and nearly carried him most of the way. Erindel told her of his journey as they walked.

“My village is experiencing colder winters and shorter summers. I was sent to seek out a remedy restore favorable seasons.”

“I have sensed a change also. Do not talk about this here. The Gnomes may be silent, but they have keen ears. We must leave for a safer place.”

Several hours later Erindel detected a faint sound of trickling water that seemed to sing. He said nothing at first, but when they drew nearer, he asked about it. “The raft keeper told me to look for a river that made a sound like tinkling glass. He said I should keep the river to my right and follow it out of the forest. Are we near that river?”

“Your raft keeper is familiar with forest lore,” she answered. “The river you speak of is called the Crystal River. You will know why it is called that when you see

it. It gives the purest water in the known world and has strong healing powers. You will soon see for yourself.”

They climbed up a steep bank and when they reached the top, the sound of the Crystal River grew and filled the air with a pleasing tinkling sound. Below them, in a shallow ravine, the flowing liquid glittered in the moonlight. Willow Glen helped Erindel down the rocky path to the water’s edge and made him sit on a flat rock near the bank. He saw why it was called the Crystal River. The riverbed wasn’t made up of round gray rocks like an ordinary river, but the bed consisted of thousands of clear glasslike crystals of many sizes and colors. The edge of each crystal was sharp and clear, showing no sign of age or wear.

“Sit here for a moment.” Willow Glen loosened the tie on his shoe. His ankle was swollen and painful and he grimaced when she pulled off his shoe.

“Be patient,” she said sweetly. “The pain will be gone soon.”

Erindel felt depressed and angry with himself for getting injured on the first day of his journey. He anticipated several days of recovery, but then thought it would not be so bad if he had the company of Willow Glen. He watched her stoop down to the stream and scoop up a handful of water in her hands. Each movement was filled with grace and fluid motion. She knelt in front of Erindel, poured the water on his injured ankle and gently rubbed it with her soft hands.

The water felt cool and refreshing on his foot. Then he noticed astonishing warmth as she massaged his ankle

and felt increased circulation in his body as new health entered his weakened limb. The warmth flowed up his calf to his leg and through his whole body, giving him renewed energy and hope.

“This is wonderful,” he said smiling.

“I told you it has strong healing powers. You did not believe me?”

“We have nothing like this in my land. If I could take some water or a few crystals back to my village, I could help many people.”

Willow Glen stopped the massage and looked into the water.

“You cannot take the water from the river. When it leaves the banks, it loses its strength and becomes as natural water again. It’s the crystals that give it the healing power.”

She sounded sad when she spoke the words.

“Have others tried to take the crystals?” Erindel asked.

“Many years ago, strong men came and tried to steal the crystals away. The people of the forest told them they could not take them and a war broke out that took many lives from both sides. The men who escaped, were either lost in the forest or taken captive by the Tree Gnomes.”

She turned to Erindel. “That is why you must tell no one of the healing powers of the river. I sensed in you a wisdom above other men, so I allowed you to gain strength from the river. I also sense you are on an important mission and you will need help through the forest.”

Erindel looked down at Willow Glen and said, “Your

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secret is safe. I will tell no one of the Crystal River except that it is a dangerous and mysterious part of the forest that is best left alone.”

She breathed a sigh of relief, “Thank you my friend. Now we will go to a dwelling where you can rest.”

## CHAPTER 3

Sarah walked into the sunroom carrying a brown paper bag filled with fresh yellow summer squash.

“Good morning Chandler,” she said cheerfully to Chandler who was seated in his usual spot by the window.

“How are you today? Pastor Willard said you and he had quite a talk last week. I don’t know what happened, but last Sunday at church he sure was fired up about doing good while we still can. It was as if he were planning to die or something.”

She walked into the kitchen and dumped the squash on the table. A pleasing feeling came to Chandler as a familiar voice tickled his ears. A sense of caring and friendship came to him. Chandler sat by the window overlooking the yard and said nothing.

“I’m going to take you outside today,” she called from the kitchen. “The fresh air will do you good. Mom wants some help in the garden so I thought we could go out there and do a little work. You can help if you want to.”

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Chandler said nothing.

“It’s a wonderful day outside.” She walked back into the sunroom carrying a blue baseball cap. “You can wear this today.” She put the cap on Chandler’s head adjusting it to sit evenly. “I don’t want you to get a sunburn. You’re getting so pale you would burn in minutes if we don’t take care.”

Sarah pushed open the screen door and rolled Chandler’s wheelchair down the plywood ramp to the yard. The lawn was uneven and bumpy so she had to push hard to get him to the far side of the yard near to the garden. Every year for the past fifteen years mother had planted a garden in the same square of earth next to the barn. Over the years, she had built up the soil with compost and made it into a rich bed of dark earth.

“Hello Mom,” Sarah called out as she and Chandler approached.

“My, my,” her mother said looking up from the radish bed, “look at what we have here. My two little darlings came out to help their dear, aged old mother.”

“Oh Mom, you’re not old.”

“I’m not hey? What do you call all these wrinkles on my face then?”

“Those are just love lines that show us that you care.” Sarah gave her a pinch on the cheek. “And I can see that you care a lot.”

“I would have washed you mouth out with soap if you’d said that when you were younger.”

“You did that often enough.”

“Not often enough, it appears,” she answered picking

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up the hoe.

“Why did you bring Chandler out today?”

“I thought he could use some sunshine. He looks so pale and lonely, sitting there all day staring out the window like he does. Maybe if he experiences some real life for a change, he might start to get better.” Sarah turned on the water hose.

“You act as if one day he will just get up out of that chair and become normal again.”

“One day he will. The doctors say there’s physically nothing wrong with him. I think one day he’ll decide he’s had enough will start talking again. He always was a strong willed boy.”

“Strong willed or thick headed,” she answered chopping at the weeds with the hoe. “Just like his father was.”

“But you loved daddy, didn’t you?”

She put the hoe down and rubbed her forehead with a cloth.

“I loved him more than you could imagine. That’s why I kept the farm after he died. So much of him is here. Everywhere I look, I see a part of him I didn’t know existed. Why, did you know he carved our names in that old black oak tree by the river? One day I was out there for a walk, and I saw a big heart carved in the side of the tree with our initials in it. It had grown over some, but I could tell it was his handiwork. He never told me about it. He just did it and left it there for me to find later. I wish I had found it before he died.”

She walked to the side of the garden and peeled off

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her gardening boots.

“I have to get inside to bake my bread now. You and Chandler can stay out here and finish up if you want. The carrots and radishes need weedin’ and waterin’. That summer sun is drying everything out.”

“You go ahead,” Sarah said. “We’ll finish up. I have a few things to talk to him about anyway.”

Their mother walked back to the house and left Sarah and her brother to tend the garden. Chandler sat in his chair, as always, not hearing or seeing. He had slid to one side so Sarah pulled him up and propped a pillow under his shoulder to hold him upright. Sarah left the water running in the potato bed in front of Chandler and proceeded to finish weeding the radish patch.

“Remember last week I was telling you about Robert going to Camberville,” she said to Chandler. “Well I was right about him not going there to buy tractor parts. When I got home, I started the tractor up and it ran just fine. When I told him about it, he said he meant that he needed to get a part for the truck. He had some engine parts with him but it wasn’t anything he couldn’t have gotten here.”

Weeds flew left and right as she vigorously chopped at the garden.

“I can’t prove it yet, but I think he’s seeing someone. If I ever catch him he’ll be sorry.” She was swinging the hoe high into the air, coming down hard on clumps of crabgrass.

Chandler sat in the chair as the sounds and flavors of summer flowed around him. A red robin sat on a fencepost by the barn and called out a song. Warm fresh

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summer air blew through the open barn loft, making a low howl like air going through an oversized wind-flute. The stand of trees surrounding the yard, rustled as the wind blew through the tender leaves. The smell of freshness, and life, and growing things filled each breath of air.

Chandler felt content and relaxed. He sensed good clean air, and someone nearby who cared for him. He saw shadows of the real world and briefly heard a melody floating on the wind. The sweet song of the robin was broken by a shout.

“Sarah!” a distant voice called from the house.

“What Mom!” She called back, dropping the hoe.

“Telephone! It’s Robert!”

“Be right there!”

“Well Chandler, I have to get the phone. You’ll be okay here for a few minutes. I’ll be right back.” She set the brake on the wheelchair and walked out of the garden.

Shaking the mud from her shoes, she hurried toward the house to answer the call. Chandler remained in his chair at the edge of the garden as the garden hose steadily trickled water into the soft, dark soil. The world was again calm and peaceful as the slow minutes of summer gently rolled on. The water soaked into the soil, saturating the ground and began to puddle up next to the left wheel of Chandler’s chair.

If he had been aware of the reality around him, he could have easily rolled the chair backward away from the water. But Chandler had left the real world and was at the mercy of whatever events would happen to him.

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Water soaked into the ground under the wheel softening the dirt making the soil unstable. The rubber tire slowly sank into the ground, imperceptibly at first, then faster, as it went deeper into the wet mud. The chair leaned to the left, causing Chandler's weight to shift and the momentum tipped the chair into the mud and Chandler along with it.

He fell limply into the black mud, his left shoulder sinking deep into the ooze as his face slapped the mud. The ball cap twisted sideways on his head as he slowly started to sink in the saturated soil.

The shock of the impact caused his eyes to spring open. In front of him was the corner of the garden consisting of a row of beets and carrots and a tall stand of peas. Beyond that was a broad area of green grass that went to the edge of the large red barn standing at the far side of the yard. A wooden fence was connected to the edge of the barn and weaved around the yard to keep the livestock out of the yard area.

Chandler lay in the mud, assessing the situation. For so long he had been inactive and he did not know how to revive himself. Water steadily trickled out of the garden hose and filled the depressions around Chandler's body.

His gaze fixed on the grassy lawn and he saw a small patch of dandelions with bright yellow flowers in full bloom. He remembered many years ago, walking across that same lawn as a small child, enjoying the bright sun on a clear summer day. Golden flowers dotted a carpet of lush green grass making for an inviting playground for a young boy. All the world was new and everything was

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fresh and exciting. His father had told him the dandelion name came from an old French word meaning the tooth of the lion. Chandler did not think they looked anything like a scary lion, but he liked the flowers anyway.

Young Chandler spotted the dandelion patch and ran toward them as fast as he could jaunt with his short stubby legs. Gleefully, he arrived at the yellow patch of flowers and gazed at his found treasure with wide-eyed anticipation. This is surely something his mother must see.

With one cherub hand, he reached down to the ground and plucked two big, bright yellow flowers from the plant. Screaming with joy, he ran to the house to give his mother the prize he found in the yard. Mother received the gift with grace, placed them in an empty jelly jar and put it in a prominent place on the kitchen windowsill - just as she had done with all the other flowers he had brought her. Young Chandler joyously ran to the yard in search of more prizes.

\* \* \*

Still in the mud, Chandler was unable or unwilling to move. Water continued to flow from the hose forming a large puddle around his limp body. The fading red barn caught his eye, and for the first time in years, he thought of his father.

He remembered a strong cool wind blowing across the plains on a clear fall day. It was early in the season, but it was coat weather. Late in the afternoon, when the sun was dropping into the haze on the western horizon, Chandler's father drove into the farmyard in his old blue

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pick-up truck. Chandler and Sarah had not seen him since breakfast so they ran out to meet him and tell of the events of the day.

Father stepped out of the truck holding both hands tightly behind his back as if he were hiding something. The children were aware of that game so they ran around behind him trying to grab at the gift. They discovered that father was holding two large round helium balloons. One yellow, and one red. Young Chandler had never seen such a thing in his life. A ball that floats.

Sarah quickly grabbed the red one and ran around the truck, watching it blow in the wind. Chandler took the yellow one by the string and stood there admiring his new found toy. Father gave him instructions on how to care for a helium balloon but he was too engrossed in the moment to hear the words.

Chandler chased Sarah around the truck trying to copy her antics as she bounced the balloon with one hand while holding the string tightly in the other. Soon he tired of the game and stopped to admire the wonder of the toy. High above him, or so it seemed, the bright yellow balloon floated stiffly in the breeze trying to pull the balloon away. The string slipped from his hand and the wind stole the balloon, carrying it away to the sky. He cried out loudly and ran across the yard chasing the balloon that floated higher and higher in the air. Father pretended to help by chasing it and ran all the way to the fence before he stopped. Chandler stood in the center of the yard with tears streaming from his eyes as the balloon turned to a yellow speck in the distant sky, and then disappeared.

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Chandler realized for the first time that some things in life will leave forever, and it saddened him greatly.

Water continued to cover the saturated mud and several inches of water pooled around a depression made by the wheelchair. Chandler didn't move. Golden hay falling from the open loft in the barn caught his attention.

It was summer again. A time when he liked to play in the hayloft because the air was cooler and a breeze always flowed through the doors that were open at both ends. Leftover hay was scattered around the loft making a soft carpet to roll around on. Chickens often chose this as their nesting place and here and there, collections of white eggs dappled the hay.

Chandler usually played in the loft alone, but today, his cousin Eric was visiting and had come to the loft with him. Eric was older and stronger than Chandler and often bullied him. There were very few visitors at the farm so Chandler took the abuse because he needed the company.

They were playing in the hay, tossing large clumps back and forth pretending they were hand grenades. Eric grabbed a large clump of hay and charged across the barn tackling Chandler, pinning him to the wooden floor. Eric straddled his chest and knelt on both arms so Chandler could not escape.

“Say you surrender,” Eric demanded.

“No!” Chandler answered.

“Surrender or die.”

“Never,” Chandler said. “Now get off of me. You're hurting my arms.”

“Not until you give up,” Eric yelled.

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“I don’t have to. It’s only a game.”

“I’ll show you what kind of game it is,” Eric said as he shoved the straw in Chandler’s face. “Now say you surrender.”

“No,” Chandler said in a muffled voice as he struggled to escape.

Anger and rage filled Eric at his loss of power. Chandler began to scream so Eric shoved a lump of hay into Chandler’s mouth to shut him up. Air stopped going into Chandler’s lungs. He struggled with wide-eyed fear as he felt a burning pain spread through his chest.

“Say you surrender,” Eric again demanded.

Chandler could not speak, but sharply shook his head back and forth as tears streamed from his eyes. In a final rage, Eric stuffed the straw deeper into Chandler’s throat cutting off all oxygen. Chandler became light headed and saw spots in front of him as he jerked frantically trying to escape.

Eric realized he would not win and gave up the battle.

\* \* \*

Chandler sputtered as the water reached his nose and mouth. His body convulsed, causing his head to twist which gave him a few more minutes of breathing room. He still chose not to move.

As a child of ten, he returned home from school one autumn afternoon and discovered the farmyard strangely silent. A shiny black station wagon with the tailgate open was parked near the house in front of the walkway. A man wearing a white shirt and black tie walked backward out of the front door of the house pulling a white-sheeted

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stretcher. At the back of the stretcher walked another man, also wearing a white shirt and black tie. The white sheet was pulled tight on the stretcher and covered a long lump that was the length of a man. Chandler studied the shape and noticed it was the shape of a body. It reminded him of a man sleeping under a blanket. It reminded him of his father.

Then he remembered where he had seen the white shirt and tie people who drove a shiny black station wagon. It was last year at the funeral of his great uncle Gideon.

Tears began to flow as he ran to the side of the house to enter through the back door to avoid contact with the funeral ghouls. He ran through the sunroom, into the kitchen and found his mother and Aunt Rose sitting at the kitchen table, crying in each other's arms.

"Where's daddy?" Chandler asked.

"He's gone," was the simple answer from his mother.

Chandler had never seen death this close before and did not know how to handle it. The only world he had ever known was violently shaken as the father foundation was pulled out from under his feet. Father had always been there, and as far as he knew, always would be. Now he was gone forever. How was a ten year old to deal with this? Chandler had to search within himself for the answer.

Father was buried and mother got sick, or so he was told. Mother kindly asked him to stay with his Aunt Betty in Chicago for a while. She promised it would "only be for a few weeks" and he would be home again.

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Chandler's world had crumbled and he became numb. When he was able to feel, only sadness came to him. Soon, he chose to feel nothing.

He went to Chicago without protest and found it to be a strange, cold, vicious world. Buildings were made of stark gray concrete that was either too cold or too hot. Blue sky was replaced with thick brown haze that made his eyes sting and his throat hurt. People spoke strange languages, and what he could understand, was harsh and full of anger. He learned to clench his fist and shake it at those who angered him. He learned to watch his back for marauding gangsters. He learned to recoil in fear when he was caught by the gangs and forced to give up his lunch money. He learned to take the abuse and the beatings, and say nothing.

Weeks turned into months as the seasons passed in that gray cold world. It was a nightmare that would not end. Chandler spoke very little when he arrived in Chicago and he spoke less and less as time went by. He learned that quieter was better and hoped that one day, he could become so still and quiet that no one would see him anymore. Then he would be invisible and no one would be able to hurt him again.

\* \* \*

“Chandler!” Sarah screamed as she ran toward the wheelchair.

“Mom, come quick. Chandler's fallen,” she called.

The water had risen above his nose and mouth causing him to sputter and gag as the muddy liquid flowed into his lungs. He felt deep pain for a moment, but chose to

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shut it out and went back inside himself. Sarah struggled to free his limp body from the sucking mud and used her fingers to pull black muck from his mouth. Instinctively he coughed and took fresh air into his lungs, but gave no other signs of awareness.

“Oh Chandler, I’m so sorry I left you.” Sarah sat in the muck cradling him in her arms.

“Why didn’t you call out? Why don’t you come back to me? I miss you so much. You are the only friend I have in the whole world. Don’t ever leave me.”

Mother ran to the garden and helped Sarah lift Chandler to the wheelchair and they both pushed him to the house. They bathed him and cleaned him, wiping mud from his ears and hair. Chandler was tired from the ordeal so they lifted him into his sunroom bed and put a cool white sheet over him. The warm breeze, smelling of an approaching summer rain, flowed across his limp figure and he drifted off into a deep sleep.

\* \* \*

Erindel leaned heavily against Willow Glen as she guided him down the rocky path beside the Crystal River. His ankle felt better but he was exhausted and needed someone to lean on for support. Her tender arms felt pleasant wrapped around his waist. In this strange land, he felt far from home and the familiar surroundings he was accustomed to.

“Our camp is just a short distance away,” Willow Glen said pointing forward.

The path by the river ran along the steep bank making their progress difficult and slow.

## CHANDLER

“Have you lived in the forest all your life?”

“I was born not far from here. My people- we call ourselves the Forest Keepers- have lived in this forest for thousands of years. We care for the plants and trees in the forest and try to keep the evil out of it.”

“Why do you let the Tree Gnomes stay here?”

“The Tree Gnomes were here when my ancestors arrived. The Gnomes were never friendly, but they did not hurt people back then. Over the years, they became hard and mean. Now they hate everything that lives. Two generations ago, there was war between us and the Tree Gnomes. After years of fighting, we agreed to a truce. The Tree Gnomes were allowed to live in the forest in the area south of the Crystal River and we live in the forest north of the river.”

Loud thunder rumbled through the trees as heavy clouds blocked out the moon.

“Since that time, that part of the forest has become lethal to all who dare to travel into it. The Tree Gnomes lie in wait for lost wanderers and steal them away in the dead of night. They are never seen again.”

“I’m glad you were there to help me. Thank you.”

Willow Glen paused and smelled the air. “A storm is coming. We must hurry.”

Erindel was feeling better so he let go of Willow Glen and walked on his own. The pain was gone but he was still weak so he picked up a fallen tree limb to use as a staff to help him on his way. Single file, they walked along the narrow path following the widening river deep into the forest.

## CHANDLER

Bright lightening streaked across the sky, immediately followed by a deafening clap of thunder. A strong, cold wind from the towering thunderheads blew down to the treetops, spinning the dried leaves into a swirling vortex. Icy raindrops fell from the saturated clouds pelting all that lived and moved. Small rivers of mud and debris instantly sprung out of the steep bank and crossed the path in front of them turning the trail into slippery mud, making their journey difficult.

“The storm is too strong for us to travel in,” Willow Glen yelled to Erindel above the sound of the wind. “We must seek shelter soon.”

“I have never seen such a storm,” Erindel screamed as the wind whipped his hair.

“This is one of the mighty storms from the north that have plagued our forest in recent years. Each year, the wind and rain become more intense and many hillsides have been washed away into the raging rivers.”

She pointed ahead into the darkness.

“A short distance away is a rocky outcrop which will shelter us for the night. Come, we must go.”

Willow Glen trudged forward leaning into the heavy wind. Erindel followed close behind using his staff for support. Her hair had now turned dark as the thunderclouds churning in the black sky above. A powerful arc of lightening bolted down from the sky at the speed of light and crashed into a pine tree near the path, shattering it into a shower of flaming splinters.

The energy from the blast shook the ground and sent charged electricity through the rain into the bodies of

## CHANDLER

Willow Glen and Erindel. The shock lifted Willow Glen and threw her down a steep bank at the edge of the river. The once placid stream was now a torrent of curling, frigid water waiting to swallow Willow Glen who was sliding unconscious down the muddy bank.

The blast sent Erindel to the far side of the trail slamming him to the ground. The shock caused his muscles to convulse, and for a time he was unable to move but remained awake. He looked up and saw Willow Glen fall toward the river. Timeless moments passed before he was able to rise to his feet, which took a great struggle. He pulled himself up using the wooden staff for support.

“Willow Glen!” he called against the wind and rain. He waited, but received no response.

“Willow Glen where are you,” he called again as the thunder rumbled loudly to hide his plea.

“Willow Glen,” he called a third time but the lashing wind picked up the words and carried them away.

Erindel hobbled to the side of the path and looked over the steep edge toward the river below. Through sheets of rain he saw a stand of dark tree trunks, and beyond that, a boiling river of white foamy water. The sound of the wind, and rain, and water filled the air and covered his cries for Willow Glen. He stepped off the trail where he had last seen Willow Glen and slid down the muddy bank using his staff for support and balance. As he neared the bottom, he saw a limp figure lying at the base of the bank at the waters edge. It was Willow Glen.

She lay on her back with her head dangerously close

## CHANDLER

to the water. The bubbling, violent flow pulled at her long hair, tossing her long locks in the current. Her hair had changed to the color of the river, which was a blend of foamy white mixed with the black color of the icy, cold depth. Erindel was still fifteen feet away when the force of the river ripped away the bank below him pulling a large oak tree out by the roots.

Erindel reached out for a nearby pine tree and hugged the trunk as the ground beneath his feet pulled away. The oak crashed into the river and was forced downstream by the lethal torrent. Erindel was left behind grasping the sturdy pine with both his feet dangling in the open air above the foaming water. He turned to look for Willow Glen, but she was gone.

“God, help me now,” he prayed aloud and let go of the tree trunk to plunged into the cold dark water to save Willow Glen. The storm snatched his words away as the river received him gladly pulling him under, tossing and turning him in the liquid gloom.



## CHAPTER 4

“Chandler has been acting different for the past few months,” Sarah said to her mother as they cleaned pickling cucumbers on the kitchen table.

“How can you see anything different? It seems to me he hasn’t moved or flinched in years.”

Sarah dumped another bag of cucumbers on the table.

“It’s hard to describe. He just feels...different. I’ve always been close to him and sometimes I can feel what he’s thinking. Now, I don’t feel anything coming from him. It’s as if he stepped a little farther back into his own world.”

Her mother got up from the table, lifted the large white pickling crock from the floor and placed it on the sink counter. Just as baking bread was a morning ritual for her, so was making pickles in the fall. She grew her own pickling cucumbers, dill, and onions, and even made her own vinegar in the basement. Farmers and tourists came from all directions to buy her pickles. One time, a

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man came all the way from Chicago and bought a whole case from her. He wanted to use her recipe for his canning company but decided it would cost too much money to make pickles the same way she did it.

“You always did seem to favor him,” her mother said. “Maybe if I had been a better mother things would have turned out different.”

“Don’t go blaming yourself again. When daddy died, we all went through hard times. We both healed up and went on with our lives. Except Chandler. He just couldn’t take it, that’s all. It doesn’t mean you did anything wrong.”

They worked in silence, rubbing the spines off the pickles and throwing them in a big pot of water to clean the dirt off. Outside, a cold autumn wind whipped across the plains signaling winter would soon arrive. The cold afternoon sun had lost the golden warmth of summer and lay in despair near the horizon as it fought against the wind to push a bit of warmth into the earth. The battle would soon be lost and winter would reign over the land.

A tractor growled in the distance turning the soil in preparation of next years crop.

“Do you think Eric is doing good job keeping up the farm?” her mother asked.

“He works hard and he does okay, but I don’t think his heart is in it. When the bank took his daddy’s farm, Eric changed and became angry and bitter. I think he blames his father for losing the farm. He still carries a big chip on his shoulder.”

“He does work hard though. Last year’s crops were

## CHANDLER

better than ever,” She laid the green dill on the counter and peeled away the unwanted stems.

“Eric said a factory owner wanted to buy the land,” she quietly said.

“What?” Sarah blurted. “Sell our land?”

“Now, now child,” she said holding up her hand. “Don’t get all huffy. And don’t pretend you’ve never thought about it. You know how much work it is to keep things up, and I’m not getting any younger. If Eric wasn’t helping us I don’t know what I would do.”

“But selling it to a factory? Daddy would turn in his grave. He built this place with his bare hands. It just wouldn’t be right to let them come in here with bulldozers and tear down everything he built.”

“You have to remember I had something to do with makin’ this farm what it is today. Your daddy is gone and it’s up to me to make the decisions.”

She threw the dill into the sink and turned the cold water on it.

“And I didn’t say I was gonna sell it. I just said a man was lookin’ at it. It seems we have the best water well in the entire county and they need lots of water for their business. He offered a pretty penny for it too. I could buy a nice house in Minot and live a good life. There would be money in it for you and Robert too, so you could invest in your own farm.”

“I don’t want your money,” Sarah shouted and pushed away from the counter. “This farm is all that is left of daddy,” Sarah cried.

“Everywhere I look I see a part of him. I remember

## CHANDLER

watching him in the work shed making the windmill that's on top of the barn. He wrote 'Daddy Loves Sarah' on the side of the rooster in gold paint. Every time I see it spinning in the wind, I think of him and I feel happy inside because I know he put that up there for me, so I would always remember that he loves me."

She folded her arms tightly and wiped her eyes with a dishtowel. A low, hacking cough came from the sunroom.

"Is Chandler still coughing?"

"He's had that cough ever since he fell over in the garden. The doctor says to give him cough medicine if it gets too bad, but there's not much else he can do about it."

"I'm going to check on him." Sarah got up and walked to the sunroom.

Chandler was in his chair facing the windows that framed the cold, gray farmyard. The once green cottonwood trees had lost their foliage and stood as skeletal statues reaching out for the distant sun with bony arms. An occasional gust picked up the remaining leaves from the ground and tossed them across the yard forming a small golden wave that rolled to the fence and was scattered.

"How are you doing Chandler? It sounds like you still have a cough," Sarah said as she wiped his nose.

"We're making pickles today. Remember how you used to like to help? It was always your job to cut the onions because you liked the ways it made your eyes water."

She adjusted his pillow and sat him upright in the

## CHANDLER

chair.

“You always were kind of weird. I wish you could help us today. I think you could if you wanted to.”

She sat down in the wicker chair next to Chandler and stared out the window.

“What do you see out there Chandler? Do you see the trees? Do you see the wind blowing across the yard? Do you see the squirrels collecting seeds?”

She paused and turned to Chandler.

“Look at me.”

Chandler sat motionless.

“Look at me Chandler, and listen. Listen very carefully.”

She got close to him and looked directly in his unseeing eyes.

“Boy it’s hard talking to you.” She turned her head and looked at the yard again.

“Okay, I’m going to try it one more time.” Sarah turned her chair to face him and sat in front of him staring at his face.

“Listen to me Chandler. Listen carefully. I am sitting in front of you looking directly at you. Just in case you don’t remember, I am Sarah. Your sister. I have brown hair that I always wear pulled back in a ponytail. When you were young, you would chase me around the yard and try to grab the ribbon out of my hair. Do you remember?”

She reached out and took his hand in hers.

“Can you feel that? I’m touching your hand now. I want you to concentrate very hard and try to feel my hand.”

## CHANDLER

She massaged his hand and raised it to her cheek.

“I am Sarah. You are Chandler. You are twenty-two years old and you are sitting in a wheelchair facing the yard. You’ve been in this wheelchair for ten years, but the doctor says there’s nothing wrong with you.”

Sarah dropped her gaze and said to herself, “Nothing physically wrong anyway. Some people think you’re nuts.”

She looked back at him.

“But I don’t think your crazy. I think you are in there somewhere, waiting to come back to us. Maybe you can’t hear me but I know you can feel me. I sense it. Remember the time you got stuck in the drainpipe that runs under the road? When the whole town was out looking for you? No one could hear you crying for help, but I could sense you were in trouble. I found you in that pipe, stuck as tight as Winnie The Pooh in the honey tree.”

Sarah smiled.

“You were crying when I pulled you out but you were laughing at the same time because you were so happy to see me. You swore you would never do anything like that again. You said that if you did, you would tell me about it before you got stuck so I could pull you out”

She wiped her tears on his hand.

“Well you’re stuck now, Chandler. And I’m trying to pull you out, but you are just too far away. I can’t reach you when you’re like this so I’m asking you to meet me half way. Come back to me, Chandler. Come back to me. The world is not that bad anymore. I know you can make it on your own if you just wake up and ask for help.”

## CHANDLER

She put his hand back in his lap, stood up, and looked over the yard. Fall was her favorite time of year. It was a time for cozy fires with baked red apples and fresh cider. A time when families were supposed to be together making memories that will last a lifetime.

Sarah took a deep breath and wiped her eyes.

“That’s the end of my lecture for the day. I hope I didn’t bore you but I meant every word I said. I will be here when you are ready to talk, and I promise, I will never let you down.”

Knelling down in front of him, she gently began massaging his left calf.

“I have some news about Robert. You’re the only one I trust enough to tell the whole story to.”

She took a deep breath and continued the story.

“Do you remember a couple of months ago I told you that Robert went to Camberville to get a tractor part? And I told you I thought there wasn’t anything wrong with the tractor? Well I was right. The tractor was just fine and the only thing broken was his marriage vow he made to me.”

She put down the leg and started on the other.

“Robert has been lying to me for over a year now. He’s been seeing some bimbo in Camberville but says he still loves me. He swore to me that it was over and he would never do it again. I asked him how many times he did ‘what he would never do again’ and he got all sheepish looking. I was shocked. So I asked him straight out, ‘how many times have you been with somebody else’. He answered, ‘You mean since we’ve been married?’”

## CHANDLER

“That was enough for me. I told him to pack his bags and get out and I never wanted to see him again. He got all sorry lookin’ and begged me to let him stay, but I wouldn’t. Sometimes I think I should be more broken up but I suppose I halfway expected it to come to this. I did all my crying when I was alone at night waiting for him to return from one of his business trips.”

Gently, she massaged the leg, bringing circulation into the useless limb.

“It just isn’t fair. I did everything I could to make him happy. I cooked and cleaned and washed his dirty clothes for him. When he got sick I stayed up nights to care for him. Once I drove over seventy miles in a blizzard to get him medicine. Why did God do this to me?”

Tears welled up and she tried hard to hold them back.

“It must be some sort of trial I’m supposed to go through. I shouldn’t blame God for my problems. Maybe I shouldn’t have married him in the first place. Robert never seemed to care much about church and I never saw him reading the Bible. I think he became a member just to marry me. I should have been more careful who I picked.”

“But Chandler, what he did is not my fault.” A spark of anger flashed in her eye. “Even if he wasn’t a Christian he still should’ve been faithful to me. He had no right to go catin’ around all over the state chasing skirts. Sometimes I feel real mad like I want to kill him and other times I feel so humiliated I want to crawl under a rock and hide forever. What should I do Chandler? Should I kill him or hide under a rock.”

## CHANDLER

She smiled.

“I know what I’ll do. First I’ll kill him, then I’ll hide under a rock.”

Sarah looked at Chandler expecting him to laugh but he sat motionless.

She put down the other leg and stood up to stretch. She walked across the room to the far wall where an old upright piano stood. She lifted the dusty key lid, fingered the keys and punched out “Mary Had A Little Lamb”.

“Mom always wanted us to take piano lessons. When daddy brought this old piano home on his pick-up truck, she had such high hopes for us. She always said that ‘civilization is based on a cultured society’. She tried real hard to give us culture when we were young. Mom was doing a good job of it until daddy died. Then she just kind of gave up.”

Chop-sticks rang from the piano as Sarah plucked away at the notes.

“I’ll tell you what I’m going to do Chandler.”

Chandler sat unmoving in his chair facing the yard. The pillow had slipped and he was leaning to one side.

“Chandler, I am going to learn to play the piano.”

An un-easy melody was forced out of the soundboard as Sarah punched the keys.

“I sort of remember this one. Can you recognize it? I think it is called *Bill Grogan’s Goat*. It’s an old song that goes something like this,

Bill Grogan’s goat was feeling fine.  
Ate three red shirts from off the line,

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Bill took a stick, gave him a whack,  
And tied him to the railroad track.  
The whistle blew, the train was nigh,  
Bill Grogan's goat was doomed to die,  
He gave three groans of awful pain,  
Coughed up the shirts  
And flagged the train."

She stopped and turned to Chandler. "Well what do you think? It's not Beethoven or anything like that, but it's not bad, is it? Not that good either, but hey, what do you expect, I haven't touched a piano in over a decade."

Her fingers ran up and down the keyboard playing out the scale.

"This old piano is still okay. Most of the keys work. I'll call out the piano tuner next week and see if he can fix it up. I wonder if Gertrude Steinmann is still giving lessons?"

Chandler still sat by the window, leaning to the side. A gentle melody flew into his ears and struck a memory locked away in his brain. The memory brought back a warm, peaceful feeling. He would have smiled if he were able.

"I'll make a deal with you Chandler. When I get good enough to play *Moonlight Sonata* without any mistakes, I want you to show me you like it by clapping for me. You're the only audience I'll have, so I need you to give me some encouragement."

She hit a few chords out of key.

"Is that a deal? The way I'm playing it'll take a long

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time so you don't have too much to worry about."

Chandler coughed up spittle, which caught on his lip and began to trickle down his chin. Sarah sat at the piano plucking out a dusty tune. Chandler's mind stirred and his fantasy journey came to life.

\* \* \*

Cold icy water swirled around Erindel, siphoning his life from him. He tumbled under the weight of the tumult with his only thought, that he must reach Willow Glen to save her. The sweet sound of her voice singing the Tree Gnome song rang in his memory. The hope that he would hear her lovely voice sing to him again spurred him on to survive.

His head popped above the boiling water and he gulped in fresh air. The sky was black as coal.

"Willow Glen," he called against the loud rumble of the raging river.

Grabbing at him, the river again sucked him under and threw him against the rocks. Had he not had a mission, he would have succumbed to the power of the water and given up the quest for the Flower of Light. Water surged around his aching limbs, pulling him in every direction. In a daze, he thought of family and friends back at Stillcreek who were waiting for his return.

He remembered the contest and how he was chosen for the quest because he was the wisest. He remembered the going away celebration and how his mother cried when he left, but let him go anyway because she believed in his mission. He remembered the farmers silently watching at him with hope and anticipation as he passed

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their fields. He remembered the Wise Council and how Gestalt took him aside to tell him of the coming doom if the Flower of Light was not found and returned to the village. He remembered his promise to complete the quest and to return with the prize that would restore good weather to the village. He remembered the beautiful face of Willow Glen.

New determination filled his soul. It gave him strength to fight the awesome power of the river. His foot found a flat boulder on the bottom so he seized the opportunity and pushed himself to the surface. He broke through and took in as much air as he was able and used his arms to struggle against the current to stay righted in the water. A tree stump floated along with him a few feet away. He swam hard through the foamy water, grabbed a crooked root, and held tightly to it.

He was in dire distress, being swept away by a wicked river in a foreign land to parts unknown. Shivering from cold, he felt his energy rapidly waning. He braided the root around his right arm and held on firmly. Water lapped around him, reaching out for his head, trying to pull him under. The darkness around him was sprayed with white light by a blast of lightening that struck a tree on the far bank. In that instant, he looked around and found he was dead center of a wide strong river speeding into the heart of the forest.

Soon after, another streak of lightening swept across the sky casting deep shadows along the riverbank. Erindel strained his eyes in that brief moment to look for Willow Glen, but saw only the raging white-capped river, filled

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with limbs and trees ripped from the tortured banks. He could do nothing more.

He remembered the words of the village preacher, “Then had the waters overwhelmed us, the stream had gone over our soul. Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.”

“God it’s up to you now,” Erindel said aloud. “give me strength to succeed.”

The words were stolen away by the noise of the water and thunder, but he knew God heard him.

Cold crept into Erindel’s body, numbing hands and feet and causing a pleasant drowsy feeling to fill his mind. As the river widened, it became less angry and had taken on a peaceful but determined attitude.

*It is good to rest*, he thought to himself. *Perhaps a little sleep will do me good.* His grip slipped from the tree root but the thin strands he had wrapped around his arm held him tight. His head fell back against the root ball and rhythmically bobbed back and forth as the river pulled him along. Sleep overcame him. He drifted with the river, and fell into a mindless rest, unable to do anything to save himself. Hours passed as the river swept him into the dark forest.

The tree stump he was tethered to came to rest on a sand bank near the center of the river. During the night, the rain subsided and the river shrunk to its accustomed width and became peaceful. Remnants of the storm’s fury were strewn along the sandy banks, now covered with broken skeletons of dead trees plucked from their earthly homes and torn to pieces by the force of the water.

## CHANDLER

He was startled by the sound of a crow cawing at him. Blinking his eyes, he looked toward the sound and saw a large, shiny black crow perched on the root-ball a few feet above his head. The cold water lapped around his body, but the river had calmed. The dim light of dawn penetrated the broken storm clouds. Erindel blinked and surveyed his cold-numbered body.

His left arm hung limp in the water but he could move it from the shoulder. His right arm was held above him - numb and lifeless - securely tied to the tree. Both legs were numb from the hips to the feet. The water was about two feet deep and gradually became shallower until it reached the sand bar ten feet away.

The sand bar was in the center of the slow moving river and his only hope for life. If he were able to crawl to the exposed sand, the sun would soon warm his body and restore circulation. Then he would concern himself with searching for Willow Glen again. He hoped the river had cast her upon the shore just as it did to him.

Erindel twisted his torso back and forth until his right arm was freed from the knot of roots it was tied to. With a splash, he fell into the water and sunk to the sandy bottom. Using his upper body and his shoulders for momentum, he wiggled like a fish and propelled himself toward the sandbar. It was only ten feet away, but his progress was slow and soon his lungs were empty of oxygen.

The struggling movement pumped blood into his tingling right arm. With a final effort, he reached forward and grabbed a tree branch on the shore of the sandbar.

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Pulling himself forward, he rose out of the water and gasped in fresh, clean, rain-washed air. He lay there for a moment restoring oxygen to his system, and inched his way out of the water by pulling on the beached tree limb. When fully out of the water, he collapsed on the sand. The sun broke through the remaining clouds and bathed him in the soft glow of the early morning sunrise. In exhaustion, he slept and dreamed of Willow Glen.

Hours later, a gentle voice flowed to him on the warm late morning breeze.

“The storm is gone,  
The sun is high,  
The forest breathes,  
Like a sigh,  
Lifelong friends,  
Have gone away,  
And on the shore,  
They do lay,  
A birch, an elm,  
An oak so grand,  
And a wandering boy,  
From a distant land.”

Erindel blinked at the sun and stirred himself to life. He made a fist with his right hand and found it sore, but functional. With his left hand, he did the same and discovered that the left arm had recovered its strength and mobility. He pushed himself up and sat on the sandy berm studying his surroundings.

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It was clear to him he was on a sandbar in the middle of the river which was about one hundred feet wide at that point. With no raft or boat, he felt stranded and quite alone. On the far shore, he saw a sandy beach littered with tree debris. Beyond the shore was an incline blanketed in green grasses and colored flowers rising up to a thick wall of tall pine trees covering the hillside.

Erindel shivered and felt hunger pains deep inside. Then he remembered the voice he heard. He jumped to his feet and surveyed the far bank looking for signs of life. Nothing moved. Turning around, he placed his hand to his eyebrows and looked hard into the thick forest that rose up to the top of the hill. Nothing moved. In despair, he dropped his gaze to his feet and his shoulders slumped in like response.

“It was only a dream,” he said to himself.

“If you are dreaming you must be asleep,” a voice said. “And if you sleep, then you can dream anything you want.”

Erindel looked up. He recognized the voice. It was Willow Glen.

“Willow Glen. Where are you? I hear your voice but I cannot see you. If this is a dream then I dream that you appear. If you are a spirit, I wish to die so I can join you.”

Willow Glen walked out of the forest carrying a small bundle of sticks.

“How can you talk of death on such a glorious day. God has saved you from the depths of the river and you now talk of dying?” She laughed sweetly.

“I only speak such things because I wish to join you in

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whatever state you are in. If this is a dream, then I will dream forever. If we are spirits, then we will walk the earth as phantoms until the Lord returns. If I only imagine you, then I will sit in this spot and ponder you until the river rises to swallow me up.”

“You may sit in that spot as long as you like, but if you want warmth and food, you will have to join me on my side of the river,” she said dropping the bundle on the sandy shore.

“But how can I join you,” Erindel asked as he looked around. “The river is swift and at least fifty feet across on either side? I don’t have a boat or a raft, and surely you don’t expect to build a boat out of those few sticks you have.”

“I have no intentions of building a boat for a foolish boy like you. I will build a fire and bake my forest nuts and you can walk over here if you have a mind to.”

“I would walk to the ends of the earth for you Willow Glen, for I have thought of nothing else since I saw you fall into the river. I plunged in after you but was sucked into the raging current and cast on this desert island alone and in despair. But if you command me to walk on water to come to you, I will attempt to do so until the river sweeps me away.”

Willow Glen chuckled and bit her lip.

“I command you to do so.”

“What?”

“I command you to walk on the water and come to me.”

“But... I...I mean,” he stammered.

## CHANDLER

“You promised to walk on water for me and I am asking you to keep your promise. Or do people from your part of the world, place no more value in their word than the passing wind.”

She sat down on a log and arranged the kindling for a fire.

“If I could do it, I certainly would. But it is not possible to walk on water. I would surely sink and be swept away.”

Willow Glen ignored him.

“I mean...I would do it if I could, but it’s just not possible.”

Willow Glen struck a flint and a small fire ignited. She looked up and glanced around.

“Do I hear the wind? I guess it was just a passing breeze which means nothing.”

She looked back at the fire and carefully placed more kindling on the embers. Erindel paced back and forth on the island beach unsure of what to do.

“Very well. I will prove my love for you by walking on the water - or attempting to do so. It was not enough for you that I was struck by lightning and willingly plunged into an icy river to try to save you. I wasn’t enough that I was numbed with cold and almost drowned trying to reach shore. Now you want me to foolishly plunge myself back into the same river that tried to take my very life.”

He gazed at the swift flowing water. Willow Glen stood up and watched him. Erindel paced back and forth on the sand, then turned, and plunged one foot into the water and sunk to his ankle. He stopped and looked at

her. She looked back but said nothing.

With a determined scowl, he stepped farther into the water which now rose to his thigh. He stopped and looked at Willow Glen hoping he had proved himself enough and she would tell him to stop. She stood watching silently on the shore.

“Very well,” Erindel said. “You look like an angel from heaven, but you may be a demon in disguise, or I am dreaming and I will soon awake. In any event, if you are the true Willow Glen who I love, and if you ask me to prove my love in this way, I will do it, and ignore the dire consequences.”

Erindel looked at the rapid current in front of him, took a deep breath, and stepped deeper into the cold water. His foot set firm on the rocky bottom as the current tugged on him, but the depth still only reached his hips. He took another step and found the depth to be the same. Several more times he pressed forward into the water and discovered that it reached a depth no higher than his hips.

He looked up at Willow Glen and scowled.

“You knew this river was shallow all the time, didn’t you?”

She laughed.

“I knew that a young boy promised his devotion to me and swore that he would walk on water to come to my side. Such a promise should not be made lightly, or taken lightly, so I took you at your solemn word, that what you say is just and right. Do you fault me for believing your spoken word?”

Erindel laughed.

## CHANDLER

“Of course I don’t, sweet Willow Glen. I fault myself once for making vows I cannot keep and fault myself again for failing to trust you. If you love me, as I love you, then you surely would not allow me to plunge to my death in this cold, unforgiving river.”

“The only harm you will receive is a deathly cold if you don’t get out of the water. Come. The fire is hot. Warm yourself and I will broil some fresh forest nuts for you. They will give you strength and warm your soul.”

Erindel trudged through the water, embarrassed, but happy, because he was again with Willow Glen. The fire was burning briskly so he warmed himself in the pleasing flame. Willow Glen placed a collection of nuts on a flat stone in the fire and roasted them until the shells cracked.

“How did you survive the river?” Erindel rubbed his hands together in front of the flickering flame.

“Just as you did. The lightening strike caused me to sleep for a time but when I fell into the cold river, I instantly awakened and struggled just as you to find safety. I held on to a floating tree trunk and pushed to shore not far from here. When morning came, I went to look for you and saw you beached on the sand like a wet river rat. I saw you were unharmed so I let you sleep and went to the forest to find food and kindling for the fire.”

“And I thought you needed to be rescued from the river.”

Willow Glen looked at him.

“If I had needed rescue, you are the only one I would want to save me. You are very noble indeed and you risked your life with no thought for your own safety to

protect me. I have only known you for a short time, but I too, feel a bond of love growing between us.”

She plucked some of the nuts from the fire and handed them to Erindel. Their hands met, and they embraced in the morning light and vowed eternal love to one another. Erindel told her all the details of his journey and showed her the faded map he carried. She picked up a piece of charcoal and added some detail to the area north of the mountains which were at the edge of the forest.

“Come with me,” Erindel pleaded. “We will travel together to the ends of the world. I will never feel hunger or fatigue if you are at my side. I will fly on the wind and jump over mountains if you are with me.”

“You have a poetic tongue but you again make promises that you cannot keep. If you fly on the wind, I might lose you to the eagles. If you jump over mountains, I will be left behind and will be saddened because I am but mortal.”

“Then come with me and we will walk side-by-side on my journey and we will look for the Flower of Light together.”

Willow Glen looked at the rocky ground.

“Your quest is not mine. But I now know we also need the flower returned to our lovely forest. If I went with you I would slow you down because we would be waylaid by many wonderful days enjoying each other in quiet meadows and splashing in slow flowing streams.”

“Your presence with me will not slow me down but will give me great speed because of the joy you will give.”

## CHANDLER

“If it is speed you need, then you must go alone. I am a forest dweller. I do not know of the ways of stony mountains or of the desolate deserts. I will be a burden each step of the way beyond the forest. If you need a reason for haste, then listen to this. I will wait for you in my home in the forest by the Golden Lake. Each day I will awake and say a prayer for your safe journey and will pray for your swift return. Each morning when you wake you will think of me, and feel my love for you and remember my sadness. Each night you will find a safe haven and will think of me, sad and alone in my forest loft. You will be hastened on by this vision and you will return to me safe and unharmed.”

Erindel embraced her again.

“I will miss you every step of the journey. But I will be spurred on to success by your prayers and will be hastened to return by your tears.”

The gentle breeze flowed through the trees in a whispered hush. Lost to time, they spent the day in each other's arms making promises of love and pledging devotion for a lifetime.

## CHAPTER 5

A clear, blue, cold sky sat in the distance, beyond the deep carpet of white snow that had settled on the farmyard during the night. One set of tire tracks lead from the main road to the house. Sarah stepped out of her red pick-up truck and pulled her collar up against the cold. Each breath flowed out like smoky dragons breath and hung behind her in the frigid air as she carefully climbed four icy steps to the rear door of the sunroom.

“Good morning Chandler,” she said to Chandler who was propped up in his chair by the window.

“Brrrr it’s cold this morning. Looks like we had quite a snow last night.”

She walked to Chandler’s wheelchair and pulled the blanket up around his chest. The propane space heater hissed in the corner chasing most of the cold from the room. Sarah went across the room and adjusted the temperature controls.

“Is Mom ready yet?” she asked.

## CHANDLER

Chandler sat as always, not moving, not speaking.

“If we don’t get going we are going to be late for the Women’s Prayer meeting,” she yelled into the kitchen. “It’s at Mrs. Baker’s house and you know how she hates for anyone to be late.”

She picked up a pair of red mittens from the end table.

“I think you need mittens on today Chandler. That cough is not getting any better and I would hate to see you catch pneumonia.”

Sarah walked back to the wheelchair and took Chandler’s right hand from under the blanket.

“You’re cold as ice. Let me put these on for you.”

She rubbed his hand to bring circulation into it, pushed on the mitten and put his hand back under the blanket. She put the other mitten on the other hand, tucked both hands under the blanket and then adjusted his chair to face the yard. A small design in the dust on the window ledge caught her eye.

“What is that Chandler?” She stepped forward for a closer look. Leaning over the back of the wheelchair, she studied the design, cocking her head to get a better look. Her eyes widened, she raised her hand to her mouth and stepped back in astonishment. A small design in the shape of a daisy was drawn in the dust on the sill.

“Did you make this?” she said to Chandler.

Chandler said nothing.

“Chandler look at me.” She leaned close to him. “Did you make this drawing of a flower?”

Chandler stared forward, seeing nothing, hearing nothing.

## CHANDLER

Sarah knelt down in front of his chair and looked deep into Chandler's blank eyes. She wanted to detect some glimmer of life. Some understanding. Some indication he was finally coming out of his stupor. She saw nothing. Unseeing eyes looked forward into the yard beyond the snow and past the buildings to a world Sarah could not touch. Old moisture caked the corners of his dark eyes.

"Chandler," she said purposely. "Did you make this design on the windowsill? Did you draw this flower?"

Chandler said nothing.

"Boy are you ever stubborn. I sometimes think you know exactly what's happening around you but you don't want to be a part of it."

She put his mittened hands in hers.

"And at other times I think you are beyond hope. That you are too far gone to return, and I'm just wasting my time talking to you. Maybe Aunt Rose was right. Maybe you are beyond help."

The flower in the dust caught her eye. It was a simple finger drawing of a plain daisy on a curved stem with two leaves attached to it. The flower had a round center with five equal petals surrounding it. It was a cartoonish picture that could have been drawn by a child. A ten year old could have made it.

She looked at Chandler in the eyes.

"You did draw this didn't you. Somehow you were able to come out of your world just long enough to make this simple picture."

She again looked at the flower. It seemed familiar to her.

## CHANDLER

“I remember that flower. It’s the kind of flower we used to draw with crayons. Don’t you remember? We created the ‘Happy Daisy Family’. You made it up one afternoon when we were snowed in and we spent all winter working on a comic book of the daisy family and all their adventures. This flower on the windowsill is exactly like the cartoon daisy you drew when you were young.”

Mother hurriedly walked through the kitchen - her high heels echoing against the floor.

“Sarah, are you ready to go. Mrs. Baker doesn’t like it if we’re late.”

Sarah stood up and ran across the room.

“Mom, come over here. Look at what Chandler did.”

She took her mother by the hand and pulled her to the windowsill.

“Look at that.” Sarah pointed at the flower. “Chandler drew a flower in the dust.”

“What?” Her mother bent forward to look at it.

“That does look like a flower doesn’t it. I would say it might be a daisy.”

She turned to Sarah.

“You think Chandler drew this?”

“It had to be him. He’s the only one who ever uses this room.”

“But Chandler can’t move. He can’t feed himself, he can’t clothe himself. He would starve to death if we didn’t feed him. Why do you think he can draw a flower?”

“I don’t know how he did it. But he did it. Some time,

## CHANDLER

since I was last here, he moved enough to draw a flower on this windowsill. It looks just like the flowers we used to draw when we were children.”

She leaned over and looked at it again.

“It does look like a child drew it.”

She stood up and slapped her brow.

“Of course a child drew it. Aunt Rose was here yesterday with her two grandchildren. During the day they must have snuck in her and made a picture on the windowsill. They’re always getting into something.”

“But it looks just like the flowers we drew when we were children...”

“All children draw flowers like that,” her mother interrupted. “It’s a universal picture that children draw. Children draw people with big heads and little stick arms and they draw flowers that look like that.”

She patted Sarah on the arm.

“I know you want to believe Chandler will get better, and I respect you for that. If more of us had your faith, maybe he would be healed. But there’s no way Chandler could have drawn this picture. His arms are so weak he wouldn’t even be able to reach the windowsill. I talked to the doctor last week, and I didn’t want to tell you, but he said Chandler is going downhill.”

“Going downhill? What do you mean!”

“There’s no easy way to say it so I’ll just tell you outright. Chandler is getting weaker. He’s barely eating anything and sleeps almost twenty hours a day. His cough is getting worse and the doctor has put him on some strong medicine to try to keep it under control.”

## CHANDLER

“It might be better for him if he went to the hospital,” Sarah said.

“I already talked to the doctor about putting Chandler in the hospital. He said there may be a need for that in the future, but for now, Chandler is better off at home. The added stress of moving could make him worse. Chandler doesn’t seem to know what’s going on, but the doctor thinks he’s somehow unconsciously aware of major changes that occur.”

“Like a plant or a piece of mold reacting to the sunlight,” Sarah said wiping her eyes.

“Now I didn’t say it like that. What the doctor meant was... oh, never mind.”

She put on her overcoat and pulled the gloves from the pocket.

“We’d better get going. We can do more for Chandler by praying for him at the prayer meeting than by standing here talking about him.”

“Do you think someone should stay with him? I mean, he’s sick and all, maybe he might need something.”

“I gave him his cough medicine this morning. He sleeps most of the time anyway - I’m sure he will be okay. Besides, Eric is working in the barn and I asked him to check up on Chandler once in a while. I made some fresh cinnamon rolls and a hot pot of coffee so I’m sure Eric will be in as soon as we leave.”

Sarah bent over and pulled the blanket up to Chandler’s chin.

“Good bye Chandler. We’ll be back soon.”

She leaned closer and whispered gently into his ear, “I

## CHANDLER

like your flower.”

Cold air filled the room as Rachel opened the door and stepped outside. Sarah turned to follow and they hurried across the crackling snow to her pick-up. Heavy frost covered the windshield. They climbed in and Sarah started the engine. The defroster worked hard to cut a small hole in the mist and they slowly drove away towards the gate that lead to the road.

Eric swung open the barn door and rubbed his hands together hunching his shoulders against the chill. He closed the door behind him and trudged stiff legged through the snow to the house. He opened the rear door, bringing with him a cloud of cold air, and hurried past Chandler to the kitchen where the coffee brewed on the stove, filling the air with a rich aroma.

Eric poured a full cup of coffee and grabbed a golden brown cinnamon roll from the metal baking pan on the counter. He sat down at the table and bit into the warm roll - washing it down with a gulp of hot coffee. He consumed the roll in four bites and grabbed another. He ate that one just as fast. The still winter air was only broken by the sound of slurping and munching as Eric devoured the tasty rich cinnamon rolls.

Chandler softly coughed in the other room.

Eric ate three quarters of his fifth roll and pushed the plate away. He leaned back in his chair patting his belly. He wasn't fat, but he was a big man and the years were putting a thick tire around his waist. Grunting, he got up from the table and refilled his coffee cup. He then sauntered into the sunroom and stood looking out the

## CHANDLER

window at the snow-covered yard. Chandler sat silent and ignored.

Eric surveyed the land as if it belonged to him. He sucked his teeth to get the last bit of cinnamon roll and reached into his pocket for a pack of cigarettes. With an experienced hand he shook the pack just enough to allow one cigarette to slide half way out of the pack. He raised it to his mouth and firmly grasped the filtered end in his lips and quickly returned the pack to his pocket and pulled out a small lighter. With great pleasure, he lit the cigarette and inhaled a deep draft of warm smoke.

He exhaled loudly and turned to Chandler and for the first time acknowledged his presence.

“Well Chandler, my cousin,” he said through the smoke. “Here we are, together again.”

There was no pleasure in his tone.

“How long are you going to sit there in that chair just rotting away, waiting to die?”

He sucked down a deep drag and the tip of the cigarette glowed red. Squinting, he blew out the smoke adding mass to the cloud surrounding him.

Chandler coughed.

“So what kind of cough is that kid? You got pneumonia or something?”

Chandler said nothing.

“That’s right. Just sit there like a frozen toad in an ice pack, waiting for the thaw to come.”

Eric stepped closer to Chandler.

“Maybe that’s what you are. A toad. That’s it; you’re a toad who’s in hibernation, waiting for the summer thaw.

## CHANDLER

But the summer don't come for you, does it? You sit there frozen in time letting everyone else do your bidding for you."

He slapped the arm of the chair.

"Well I'm getting tired of it and so is everyone else. If it weren't for you, your mother would sell this place and we could make some real money. And if Sarah wasn't so taken up with you and your problems, she might have time to look my direction once in a while. That no good husband of her's is gone now so that means she needs a new man in her life. I know about women. They have a needin' in their life for a man to take care of them."

Blue veins pulsed in his neck as he inhaled violently on the glowing cigarette. He pulled a second one from the pack and lit it with the embers of the first. Quickly he opened the door and threw the used up cigarette into the yard. His eyes squinted and a painful scowl filled his face as he sucked in the smoke.

Chandler coughed hoarsely. Eric turned to Chandler and walked to the chair.

"If you weren't here, Sarah wouldn't have no one to take care of. That means she might think of me and give me a chance at taking care of her. If she married me, I could get her mother to sell this place to the factory. We could buy a big ranch and start a new life together. I would let Rachel stay with us until she died or got real sick or something. That's the least I could do. I can give Sarah a better life than this. We could get away from this two-bit town and live on the high side of life for a change."

## CHANDLER

He turned to Chandler and scowled.

“But your still here, toad.”

Eric chuckled to himself and leaned over Chandler.

“That’s what you are. Just a toad. You don’t do no one no good. You just sit there waiting to die, but you won’t even do that. Do us all a favor toad, and just die will you?”

Chandler coughed.

“That cough don’t sound too good,” Eric said with a smile. He placed the cigarette to his lips and took in a long drag.

“Wanna smoke?” He said as he blew a cloud of smoke into Chandler’s face. Instinctively Chandler’s eyes watered and his cough resumed.

“That’s what you need,” Eric taunted. “A little smoke to help you along.”

He blew another thick cloud at Chandler and laughed as Chandler coughed against the irritating particles filling his lungs.

Silently, he slipped away from the world.

\* \* \*

Erindel and Willow Glen were walking hand and hand by the river enjoying the peaceful sounds of the forest. A soft breeze rustled against the tree leaves bringing out an orchestra of gentle tones rising and falling with the wind. Above them loomed a deep, blue sky reaching upward to the warm yellow sun traveling effortlessly across the sky, giving depth and meaning to the vast emptiness of space.

The day was peaceful. But it was not perfect. Willow Glen was the first to sense something was wrong.

“Do you sense something?”

“I sense that I love you dearly and I never want to be apart from you.”

“No, I mean do you sense anything different?”

Erindel stopped and surveyed the hillside. He sniffed the air.

“It smells like smoke. Has someone lit a cooking fire nearby?”

“No I don’t think so. We are too far from our village to smell a fire, and besides, the wind is traveling in the other direction.”

“Do you think something is wrong?” Erindel asked.

“I am not sure yet. But I do know that the greatest enemy of the mighty forest is fire. It’s the only power great enough to kill the aged trees living in the deep forest. It’s the only enemy my people fear.”

“Look over there!” Erindel pointed to the top of the ridge. “That looks like smoke.”

Willow Glen’s gaze followed his hand as he pointed to the ridge and pale fear swept over her face.

“Come. We must seek shelter,” she said grabbing his hand.

She pulled him forward along the riverbank as the wind grew in strength pushing the fire towards them. They breathed heavily as they trudged down the rocky path. Black, flaky ashes and small glowing embers rained around them. The air became a thick cloud of smoking ash. Death followed close behind in the form of flaming, uncompassionate, raw energy consuming all in its path.

They ran faster as they stumbled along the narrow

rocky trail.

“It’s no use,” Willow Glen said. “We will never be able to outrun the fire.”

“We need to seek refuge. Is there a cave nearby we can hide in?”

Willow Glen stopped and breathed heavily to catch her breath. Her auburn hair turned the gray color of the smoke encircling them. The scorching smoke threatened to steal their precious oxygen.

“There is...” she coughed, “a...cave... a cave on the side of the cliff around the bend.”

“Let’s hurry,” Erindel coughed. “The fire is getting near.”

With Willow Glen in the lead, they resumed their flight along the bank of the rolling river. The river continued, as always, on its usual trek and ignored the fire because flames did not pose a threat to the water. The river also ignored Willow Glen and Erindel who were fleeing for their lives in an attempt to avoid the ever-nearing flames.

They rounded the bend and saw a gray rocky outcrop jutting up from the river’s edge. A small rocky beach had formed at the base of the granite face and an assortment of rocks made a steep pile against the rock wall. Thick brush had grown up in the pile. The dry brush would be prime fuel for the nearing fire. A bright red ember fell on the ground near Erindel’s feet and started a flame in the brown grass. Erindel stopped briefly and quickly stomped it out. Willow Glen continued on ahead and started up the rocky precipice.

## CHANDLER

“Hurry, Erindel, we must hurry!” She pleaded.

“I’m coming,” Erindel answered crushing the last of the embers. He ran to the base of the cliff with the fire close behind. Willow Glen started the ascent climbed as swift as a green forest gazelle. By the time Erindel crawled through the thick underbrush to the cliff edge, Willow Glen was far above him.

“Hurry up,” Willow Glen pleaded. “I can see the fire clearly and it will be here shortly. We only have a few minutes.”

Erindel was irritated by the cries to hurry because he was scurrying as fast as he was able through the stiff shrubs. The sharp woody branches tore at his skin and clothing. Erindel looked up and saw the lovely face of Willow Glen high above, looking down at him with fearful eyes. He resolved to climb harder and wanted to scale the cliff like the blue wall-climber lizard he had seen so many times in his own country.

He pictured himself with suction-cup hands, digging into the rock with his fingernails as he pulled himself up the cold hard stone. Willow Glen’s calls became fainter as she reached a small plateau far above, near a deserted cave.

She tore through the bushes with naked fingers to find the cave entrance while calling for Erindel to hurry. Erindel did not have to look behind to see how close the fire was. The tone of desperate fear and terror in Willow Glen’s voice told him all he needed to know about the approaching death.

Erindel had scaled halfway up the face and reached

upward to grab a rocky outcrop to pull himself forward. His fingers felt the rough texture of the handhold and he clenched the rock tightly in his right hand. He lifted his left hand forward and felt the right handhold give way. He clawed at the flat rock, seeking a crevice to clench on to.

He lost a foothold and became weightless as his body leaned away from the safety of the granite face. Instinctively, he continued to clutch the useless rock in his hand and began the terrifying descent through the air to the ground below. He looked up and saw the tender face of Willow Glen looking over the cliff edge as she reached out in a futile gesture to try to help him.

As he fell, the fire overtook them both. Flames leapt up in the bushes behind Willow Glen. Hot gaseous air surrounded Erindel. As he freefell, red flames from the bushes below licked at his clothing. He crashed heavily into the burning bushes and landed hard on the rocks below, knocking the breath out of him. Gasping for life and fighting the flames, he rolled to the shore and splashed into the cold water.

The river gladly sucked him in a second time, dragging him downward away from the flames. Fire, water, and earth. The three elements he had more than enough of but did not desire. Now, he needed air.

Erindel fought against the current that threw him against the mossy, rocky bottom, tossing him about like a pinecone. The light from the sun rolled past his eyes as he twirled in the raging water. Frantically he grasped for the surface, his lungs aching for lack of oxygen. He was

## CHANDLER

twirled around in the murky water being tossed against rocks and twisted tree roots. His lungs burned. Cold spots of light flickered in front of his eyes. He fell through the rapids and dropped into a deep cold pool of water.

The water calmed and he rose to the surface gasping loudly, taking in the life giving air. He quickly surveyed his surroundings and a few yards ahead was a foaming ravine sucking the water into a perilous waterfall. A small eddy had formed above the falls but the current was still too swift for him to swim upstream. With his last bit of strength, he shoved against an underwater boulder to propel himself to shore. Splashing vigorously, he made headway against the river and pulled himself up on a small bit of rock on the shoreline.

For a brief moment, he lay on the shore to regain his strength, but his thoughts quickly went to his last image of Willow Glen as she desperately peered over the cliff as he descended. In the air, above her amber flowing hair, red smoky flames erupted into a whirlwind of deadly heat.

“Willow Glen my love,” he moaned to himself. “I must find you.”

Bruised, blistered, and beaten he crawled up the stony bank to the forest edge. He could no longer see the flames behind the cliff, but thick bluish smoke filled the air around him. It still was not safe to journey back to the where he last saw Willow Glen. Erindel left the waters edge and stepped a short distance into the forest to survey his surroundings. If the fire neared, he would run back to the river and hide in the water until it passed.

## CHANDLER

He walked about twenty yards into the evergreen forest and found a rock outcropping covered with green and gray lichen. Dark trees overshadowed the rocks cutting out the sunlight making it dark as a moonlit night. Erindel was intrigued at the unique design of the rocks which appeared to have been deliberately set in place, although it was apparent from the crumbling and deteriorating rock that no one had been here in many eons. A small crevice, about the width of a narrow doorway, was in the center of the outcrop and was framed on both sides by two ancient crooked cedar trees. At one time, the trees were planted and tended for but now they were bent and deformed from many years of neglect.

The smoke and ash thickened around him so he turned to go back to the river for safety. A storm of fire swept through the trees in front of him blocking his departure. Intense heat walled up before him singeing his hair and choking out the remaining oxygen. A tornado of hot wind swirled around him trying to pull him into the fire.

He turned quickly and dove toward the rocky doorway falling on the dusty ground in front of the opening. The cedar trees on both sides of the doorway burst into flames. Erindel covered his face with his hands and scurried into the cool darkness of the cave.

When he was just inside, an aged cedar fell in the doorway spitting sparks and flames into the narrow passage, threatening to suffocate Erindel. He fled from the thick gas and stumbled forward down a crooked passageway, ducking to avoid colliding with the low ceiling above. Shuffling his feet to find the path, he felt

his way by placing either hand on both walls of the cave. His eyes burned with the smoke and his lungs ached for fresh, clean air.

He continued further and came upon a thick slab of wood standing against the wall to the left of him. Stopping briefly, he felt the splintered wood and discovered it was an ancient open door attached to rusty hinges bolted into the cold granite wall. He placed one foot on the wall and pulled on the door to block away the smoke. The hinges creaked with a tortured moan as the door began to move. Erindel struggled against the rusty metal but prevailed and pulled the door closed with a soft thud.

The air on that side of the door was damp and musty but at least he was freed from the toxic smoke. Outside the fire raged wildly, consuming all that it touched.

Around him was darkness.

He paused for a moment and fell loosely against the cool rocky wall. The smell of singed hair stung his nose and caused him to think about how close he came to death.

“Thank you Lord,” he softly said, “and protect Willow Glen from this awful beast of a fire.”

Erindel hoped she made it safely to the cave. The bitter memory of his last look at her as he fell away brought sad thoughts. He wondered if he would ever see her again. She no doubt thought he died in the fall and his broken body consumed by the flames. He pledged to return to her forest land to find her again.

After a few moments, he regained his strength and

## CHANDLER

stood up to survey the cave by feel. It was blacker than the darkest night so he felt his way with his hands, touching both walls as he shuffled his feet along the path. A trickle of water echoed through the still air and he realized his throat was parched and dry and his arms burned where the fire had touched him. Inching forward, he slid a few paces into the darkness to find the refreshing water.

He had moved about ten yards into the cave and the sound of the subterranean creek steadily grew. His thirst grew at every step in anticipation of a sweet, cool drink of clean cave water. He swallowed hard but tasted only ash and dust. Using only his sense of touch and hearing, he continued to walk towards the stream.

Without warning, his foot fell upon a slick, moss covered rock at the edge of the stream and he fell backward and landed hard on the wet rocks. Frantically he dug at the rock with both feet but found only a slippery, wet slope that went downward into the mountain. There was no place for a firm foothold and he slid forward - his feet touching only air - as he slipped on his back, flailed his hands above him in a vain attempt to grab any secure object. Gravity sucked him forward and downward into the belly of the great, cold, granite heart of the mountain.

Faster and faster he slid with water splashing about him propelling him forward and providing a frictionless surface to glide on. The further down he slid the farther he got from Willow Glen and the more helpless his situation appeared. He only hoped he would land in a

## CHANDLER

pool of water instead of crashing helplessly onto solid rock. His foot caught a protruding boulder which turned him around and sent him headlong into the unknown darkness of the earth.

Out of control, Erindel slid deeper and deeper into the unseen depths where only darkness and the most ancient creatures of the earth reside. He became airborne and fell helplessly down until he splashed into an icy pool of black water at the heart of the mountain. Cold water engulfed him as he sunk deep in the pit struggling to slow his descent and swim to the surface. At long last, his feet struck the muddy bottom and he pushed against the ooze to propel himself to the surface. He broke free and gasped again for air.

His splashing echoed against the walls of a vast cavern formed long ago when the earth was new. Erindel chose a direction, any direction would do because he had no idea where he was, and swam for the shoreline. After minutes of swimming, he made it to the rock edge and drug himself out of the cold, black water. Trembling and cold he crawled up the damp slope and fell down in despair a few feet from the edge of the subterranean lake. All appeared hopeless.

A low gentle voice spoke from the darkness.

“What have we here,” the voice slowly spoke to itself. “It looks like an earth-child who has lost its way.”

Erindel stood up, startled and afraid, and faced where he thought the voice was coming from.

“Who goes there! What do you want? Where is this place?”

The voice paused and a deep sigh blew through the cavern.

“The earth-child speaks,” the voice said to itself. “I wonder what purpose this child has in my mountain?”

“Who are you! What do you want?”

“So many questions it asks and it is in such a hurry. It doesn’t know that the measurement of time is of no importance here.”

“Speak to me directly, if you dare. I am Erindel from the village of Stillcreek and I am on a mission to find the Flower of Light. If you propose to help me on my quest then speak to me. If not, then show me the way and I will be gone.”

A deep, rolling laugh thundered through the cavern causing stalactites to fall from the high ceiling and land with a loud splash in the cold water.

“Ho...Ho...Ho...” The voice boomed. “It demands of me to help it on its quest to find a little flower. It is such an obstinate creature, just like all the others.”

The voice became silent and there was a long pause. Erindel could here the sound of his own breathing and the rippling of a nearby creek, but no other sound was heard.

Then a gentle sigh came from the voice.

“Perhaps I have been too hasty. This one appears to have a purpose.”

“Of course I do,” Erindel interrupted. “I am on a mission of great importance for the world above and I will welcome help. Perhaps you have no need of light, but my race needs it for our survival.”

Another pause.

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“What light is this you speak of?” the voice asked directly.

“I speak of the Flower of Light that grows only in a distant land. I have a map..., but it’s not complete.” Erindel said.

“A lowly earth-child on a long journey to a distant place that he knows not of? He knows not where it is, or how to get there, and he seeks my help in the matter,” the voice said thoughtfully.

“Then tell me earth-child, why should I help you? I have no need of light or of the living creatures above. I am quite content as I am.”

“Then out of kindness and compassion you must help me.”

“I need neither kindness nor compassion.”

“Then do it for a just and right cause.”

“Justice is such a difficult word. What does it really mean?”

Another pause.

“It is just for you to raise grain in the spring season?” the voice asked.

“Yes that is just,” Erindel answered confidently.

“Is it just for you to feed that grain to your cow?”

“Yes that is a very just cause. And an task I have done many times.”

“Is it just to take the milk from the cow?”

“If it is my cow, and I have fed it with my grain, then I would say it is also just to take the milk.”

“Very good,” said the voice thoughtfully. “And tell me earth-child, is it just for you to kill the cow if it no

longer gives milk and you have need of food in the cold winter months?"

"It is my cow," Erindel answered. "I fed it, cared for it, and housed it. I would say that it would be just for me to take that cow as food in time of need."

"Then I ask you child," the voice slowly said, "if you were the cow, would you also think it just?"

Erindel paused. He had not expected the conversation to come to this end. If he said he thought the cow would consider it just, he would be lying because he never considered what a cow might think. If he said it was an injustice, he would show himself an unjust person and not unworthy of help.

"I know not if the cow would consider it just or not," Erindel finally answered. "But tell me good and wise sir, what is your thought on the matter? You appear to be born of many years and must have accumulated great wisdom and understanding of such issues of justice and injustice."

Low laughter came from the voice that resided near a rock wall nearby.

"Very good, earth-child. You may not understand justice, but you have the gift of wisdom and have turned the question back upon myself. I should desire more conversations of you, but first, I will tell you of myself."

The voice paused in reflection.

"I was born in a time long ago, from a source that even I no longer remember. When the beginning was new, I was there. For a time I lived in the light and traveled through high mountains and deep valleys. I saw

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all there was to see on the earth and learned of every bird and beast and water creature. My great age was known to all and I outlived all of the other creatures that were created at the beginning. From all nations around the earth, people came to me to seek council. I saw all their grief, all their struggles, all their deceitfulness and shame. I saw the best of mankind and witnessed the worst that man had done to one another. In time, I realized that man at his worst far exceeded all that was good.”

“I saw the mountains melt into swamps and saw the distant stars of heaven turn into vacant black holes in space. I began to realize all that is, all that ever will be, all that has ever been, will one day fade away.”

The voice stopped speaking and an uncomfortable silence filled the cave.

Erindel spoke.

“Tell me sir. What name do you go by?”

The stalactites steady drip answered. For many moments, no response was returned.

“I was given a name once, by those who knew me. They called me Father Earth. To them I represented the ages of the earth and held the wisdom of generations.”

“Then tell me of your wisdom. Tell me what you have learned.”

The voice responded in a pleasing tone.

“I have learned, dear earth-child, that all have come from the earth, and one day all will return to the earth. I have seen a mighty oak grow from a tiny seedling and live for century upon century, crushing rock with its powerful roots and face fire and frost with uninterested

disregard. On day, devastation came, swept the impressive oak away in a tumultuous torrent of mud and water, and covered the oak beneath a mountain of soil. In time, the bark and the wood were replaced with minerals and eventually became stone. The stone tree waited inside the mountain of earth until the mountain was swept away by years of blowing wind and rain, leaving the stony oak standing upright on the new land.”

“The stony oak again rose majestically above the plane, and appeared stronger and more lasting than before. Natural wood had been replaced with solid rock. But just as the wind and rain beat against the mountain, so it beat against the oak, and piece by piece, took away the stony oak until nothing remained.”

“So, I have learned that nothing remains, except the earth. All that lives and breaths will one day be swallowed up by the earth and become part of the rock that fills the depths. All things came from rock, and all things will return to rock.”

The voice slowed and became fatherly and compassionate.

“So tell me, earth-child, why do you struggle so in your quest. The little things you feel are important now, will soon be swept away and will be remembered by none. You and all that you know will become rock.”

Erindel was swayed by the voice and came to realize his quest truly was hopeless. He was just a young boy from a small village in a distant forest. His role in the history of the world was miniature indeed and all he was familiar with would soon be gone and forgotten.

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He realized he was only a short distance on his journey but had already lost the fight. Water, fire, wind, and earth had assaulted him from all sides. The battle was lost. Now he was trapped in the deepest depths of the earth and there was no reason for him to travel on. He had tried his best to succeed, but had failed.

Erindel felt himself sinking lower in the ground and sensed the cool and quiet of the stone around. It would be so peaceful to rest in the earth. Father Earth was right. All had come from the earth, and all would one day return. Perhaps now was his time.

His feet were the first to sink into the rock he stood on. The solid granite became as wet sand and he slowly but deliberately sank into the ground. As he sank, he came to understand the wisdom Father Earth has spoken of. It all made perfect sense. All was from the earth, and one day all would return. Now, was his time.

The thoughts and memories of his life slipped away and were absorbed into the ground to become a part of all the countless lives that had also drifted into earth.

Then the desperate, fearful face of Willow Glen thrust itself into his mind and he was reminded of his quest. With great strength of mind, he pulled his consciousness back to the present and became aware of his surroundings.

He had in fact, began to sink into the ground. Solid cold rock encased both feet and held him fast. He pulled hard against the rock but his efforts were frustrated by the unrelenting strength of ancient granite.

“What have you done to me,” he shouted. “Show

yourself!”

“I have done nothing, “ the voice answered pleasantly. “You asked me of wisdom and I have told you what I know. All is from the earth and all....”

“Yes, yes I know.” He was angry with himself for listening to the old creature. If only he could see what was around him, he might be able to find a way out. Then he remembered the small satchel he carried containing the last remaining petals of the Flower of Light. He was told that in times of darkness, the petals would be his deliverance.

Erindel reached into his shirt and took out the small leather bag. Quickly he untied the leather strap and felt inside for the petals. His fingers came to rest on a soft rounded petal and he carefully pulled it from the bag and held it up.

Nothing happened at first, but in a few moments the petal began to glow faintly. The glow increased and then burst into brilliant white light.

“Put it out! Put it out!” The voice screeched in horror.

“Let me go and I will take away the light.”

The ground encircling his feet became soft and pliable. He tugged hard, pulled out both feet and stepped up to a higher ledge.

“Now tell me how to get out of here,” Erindel demanded.

“You promised you would put out the light, “ the voice said painfully.

“I said I would take it away. I can only do that if I leave this place. The sooner you tell me how to get out of

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here the sooner I will be gone.”

“Very well,” the defeated voice answered.

Erindel saw movement at the base of the wall. He held the light higher and looked towards the movement. He saw a gray withered up creature that stood no higher than his waist. It was in a human form but had skin and hair that looked like gray granite. It had thick legs and arms and held one craggy arm in front of its face to ward off the light.

“You are a vile creature,” it said. “You promised you would take away the light but now you torture me with it.”

“I do not seek to torture or harm you in any way. As I see your figure in the full light, I realize you can have no power over me. Now quickly, tell me the way out and I will be on my way. How do I get back to the entrance where I came in?”

“There is no way out that direction unless you can fly up the waterfall. The only way out from here is through an underground passage that leads to the great plains on the other side.”

“But I must get back,” Erindel insisted.

“You claimed to be on a great and important journey. Is what you left behind more important than what is to come before you?”

Erindel understood his folly.

“You are indeed very wise Father Earth. My journey lies ahead of me, not in what I have already seen. Point out the way and I will be gone.”

Father Earth raised his arm weakly and pointed to a

low passage in the rock wall on the far side of the underground lake.

“There is only one passage. I have not used it in hundreds of years but it was well constructed and should still be sound. If nothing has fallen in the way, it will lead you safely to the other side. It is the only way out.”

Erindel strode to the passage and stopped briefly to look back. The creature was very aged and pathetic looking, but in an unusual way showed great wisdom.

“I was intrigued by our brief conversation,” Erindel said. “Perhaps one day we will talk again.”

“The day will come,” answered Father Earth knowingly. “The day will come for all of us.”

Erindel stepped into the passage and darkness filled the cavern behind him. Father Earth was left alone with the cold granite, waiting for his day to come.

## CHAPTER 6

“I’m afraid it doesn’t look good for Chandler,” Dr. Jacobs said as he put the stethoscope in his bag.

“I can’t control the fever and he’s developing the first signs of bronchitis. He could die within weeks.”

Rachel placed a hand on her cheek and walked to the window overlooking the yard. She remembered a young boy of ten playing happily in the yard with a world of opportunity ahead of him. She saw young Chandler rolling a small white snowball across the yard - around and around in circles - until it was almost as large as he was, and then he stopped. Standing back to survey his success, he looked proudly at the first stage of his mighty snowman he hoped would last through the winter.

With solemn determination, he began the second stage of the snowman and rolled the next frozen ball to a size half as large as the first. Struggling, he lifted it and placed it on top of the first. The third stage was much smaller. He was anxious to finish so it ended up lopsided with

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sprigs of brown grass sticking out to one side. He lifted it to the top of his snowy creation with the grassy part pointed upward to form an uneven crown of something that resembled hair.

A sparkle filled his deep brown eyes that saw the snowman as a marvelous magical creature who would stand sentry in the yard to ward off the advances of an imaginary evil empire. This was a soldier snowman. Last year it was a knight in tin foil armor and the year before that, a traditional snowman with a weathered brown hat and a carrot nose. Each year the snowman had to be new and different.

Rachel longed for that child to return and turned to look back at the thin, emancipated young man that lay lifelessly in the small bed near the heater. The Chandler of today bore little resemblance to the lively child of years gone by. It was as if the child had died and left behind a spent casing that refused to die.

“What will happen if we leave him here?”

Doctor Jacobs rubbed his hands through his hair and spoke in a whisper, pretending Chandler could hear and understand.

“If he stays here,” he said slowly. “He will become weaker, his fever will rise, his cough and lung congestion will increase, and except a miracle occurs, he will die. I have seen cases similar to this in some of the old folks around here. Winter is a hard time to be sick, and frankly, I think that some of them just give up.”

She looked at the thin figure lying on the bed. The covers slowly rose and fell with each raspy breath that

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entered his weak lungs. *Everyone has there time. Perhaps this was it for Chandler.*

The door burst open and a cold draft swept through the room.

“Pastor Willard called me to say the doctor was coming out to look at Chandler,” Sarah said as she barged into the room. “He sounded real worried. Mom why didn’t you tell me you called the doctor?”

Sarah walked to the bed and gently placed a hand on Chandler’s cheek.

“He’s burning up with fever.”

“Now, now child. I didn’t call you, because I knew you would get all upset and drive over here like a wild banshee on those ice covered roads. It’s no kind of day to be on the roads unless you have to.”

“But mom, this is important.”

“There’s not much you can do for him,” she said. “The good doctor has given him the best medication, and is doing all he can to help.”

“But the medicine isn’t working. Chandler should be in the hospital.”

Rachel looked at the doctor and was about to speak, but hesitated.

Sarah saw the action.

“What is it mom? What are you trying to hide from me?”

“There’s nothing anyone can do. The doctor said Chandler has a real bad fever and probably won’t last for more than a few weeks. Perhaps it is just his time. All of us have to go sometime.”

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A look of shock fell over Sarah.

“You mean that you are goin’ to just leave him here? You are just going to let him wither away and die?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“But that’s what you meant, isn’t it. You think it’s just time to let him slip away so the rest of us can get on with our lives.”

“Now calm down. I never said that I was gonna let him just lie here until he dies. I just told you what the doctor said so you would know what’s goin’ on.”

Rachel turned to Dr. Jacobs.

“Call the hospital and get a bed ready.” She looked at Sarah. “We’ll take him down right now. Sarah, get that extra blanket from the closet and wrap Chandler up real tight so he don’t get cold.”

Sarah forgot her anger and went into the main part of the house to do as she was told. When she left the room, the doctor looked at Rachel with sadness in his eyes.

“You are doing the right thing. There’s no guarantee the hospital can cure Chandler, but you would never forgive yourself if you didn’t at least try.”

She looked at Chandler.

“I know I have to do all that can be done. When I look at Chandler I still see a young child who is just waiting to wake up.” She rubbed her hands together and looked out into the yard.

“It’s just that sometimes I get so tired. I’m glad I have Sarah here to help out. If it wasn’t for her, I’d probably sell this place and move to an old folks home to live out my days sewing quilts.”

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She laughed.

“I guess I need Chandler here to give me purpose as much as he needs me to care for him.”

The doctor looked pleased at her response and went into the kitchen to use the phone to call the hospital to inform them of their arrival. Twenty minutes later, Chandler was loaded into the car and they were off.

Rachel drove the white Cadillac to the hospital with Chandler tightly wrapped in a blanket in the back seat. Sarah sat quietly in the front. The heater ran full blast but they still needed to wear thick coats to keep away the cold. Frozen mist wafted across the rolling white plains in ghostly fashion. The temperature was well below zero with the icy silence of the plains lying in watch over the dead earth. Winter had won the battle and captured the joy of life that once reigned in springtime. But the final war had not yet been waged.

The hospital in Minot was a three story red brick building. It was built shortly after the war and recently renovated to accommodate new technology. Rachel drove to the rear of the building and parked under a high carport near the emergency room door. The last time she parked there, was when Chandler was born. In her wildest imagination, she could never have anticipated returning with him in such a helpless condition.

Dr. Jacobs drove up behind them and parked his Jeep in the doctor's parking space. He quickly got out of the car and shuffled across the icy parking lot to meet them at the door.

“Get him inside,” he said to one of the male nurses at

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the back door. “And get an I.V. started to replenish his fluids.”

He turned to Rachel and Sarah.

“Did you have any problems with him on the way?”

“No,” Rachel answered. “He slept quiet as a baby.”

She looked at the nurses scurrying outside pushing a gurney towards the car and remembered her rush to the hospital to give birth to Chandler. This old building gave him life the first time she was here. She silently prayed it would give him another chance at living.

Within minutes, Chandler was moved to a two patient room with old man suffering from emphysema in the second bed. A clear, plastic oxygen tent was loosely draped over him and connected to a tube leading to an oxygen outlet on the wall. He breathed heavily as he slept unaware of the new tenant in the room.

Rachel and Sarah were in the lobby filling out the necessary forms to admit Chandler. They could not get an insurance company to give Chandler a health coverage policy, so they had pay the bill out of their own pocket. Rachel reluctantly gave the admittance nurse her Visa card and the nurse stamped the card on a billing form with an open-ended total. She always said she would spend any amount of money to care for her children, but now the realization of how much that would be, caused her to wonder if the cost was worth it.

Sarah saw the lines of anxiety on her mother’s face.

“Don’t worry mom. I have some money in savings and I’ll be glad to help out. And if it gets to the point where we have to sell anything, I’ll sell my place. Robert

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filed for a divorce and he'll probably want half the money anyway."

"Thank you dear. If you weren't with me I don't know what I would do. Since your daddy died, life has been very rough for me. Many times I just felt like giving up."

"You can't give up. Both Chandler and I need you now more than we ever have. Your inner strength is the only thing that keeps me going at times. I know that each morning a new fresh loaf of bread will be bakeing in your oven, and that alone gives me hope. 'Cause I know that no matter what happens, you will still be there for me."

"I guess we need each other then."

"And Chandler needs us both," Sarah added.

They finished the forms and signed Chandler's admittance papers. The nurse handed them some handouts explaining how to get government aid for the handicapped. Rachel didn't feel good about taking things for free, but she folded the papers and stowed them in her purse.

They took the elevator to the third floor to visit Chandler. The door opened with a whoosh and the smell of sterile hospital alcohol permeated their senses. Silently they walked down the hall to room number 310. They walked inside and saw the two beds lined up on either side of the room. Sarah rubbed her eyes.

"I'm going outside to use the cell phone and call Pastor Willard to tell him what's happening. I am sure he'll want to know. I think Chandler could use some hard praying right now"

She turned to leave but stopped in the doorway.

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“He will be alright, won’t he?”

“Of course he will,” her mother answered as she looked sadly at Chandler who was now hooked up to an assortment of hoses and monitoring devices. In spite of his age and condition, he was still her sweet baby boy whom she loved dearly.

\* \* \*

Erindel emerged from the tunnel and stepped out into the waning afternoon sunlight. He was high up on a cliff looking over a broad flat valley covered with grasses and dotted with an occasional tree. To his right, a noisy waterfall fell heavily to the rocks below to form a deep pool. The pool of water fed a wide shallow stream snaking across the plain to the sea at the eastern edge.

The map Erindel carried showed the mountain range he just crossed through. The map also detailed the plains he now looked at, and the edge of the sea on the far side of the plain, but showed nothing beyond that. Perhaps this is where the Flower of Light grew and his journey would be soon over. His hope was buoyed at the thought of finishing the journey soon. But he had faced many perilous events this day and needed rest before continuing.

A narrow path crossed downward from the mouth of the cave and zigzagged across the rocky face to the pool of water below. Tall green trees stood at the edge of the pool that would provide firewood and shelter for the night. He remembered the admonishment of Willow Glen about the nature of trees and reminded himself that he would only select the broken limbs lying on the ground

for his fire.

Carefully, he made his way down the rocky path which had not been traveled in many years. He wondered who made it and what purpose it served when it was new. He wondered if he would meet more strange creatures during his journey. His musing went back to Willow Glen and he remembered the last image he had of her. Erindel vowed to continue his journey with great haste and to return to her as soon as possible. The stone, cold mountain separating them mocked his grief and filled the pit of his heart with icy granite. The sadness and pain would be with him always and could only be relieved by a joyful reunion with his one love, Willow Glen.

The path leveled out at the base of the cliff and a trail lead directly to the pool of water. He walked under the overhanging trees and found a large flat rock at the edge of the pond. He saw a shallow dip in the center of the rock where the stone had been stained black by campfires of long ago. Erindel chose this place to set up camp and rolled out his bedroll to soften the rock.

He gathered a few sticks and lit a small fire to put some warmth into his tired, aching bones. Opening his pack, he found a handful of dry biscuits wrapped in oilcloth that had survived the journey and eagerly ate the meager meal. Most of his supplies had been soaked with water so he laid them out in front of the fire to dry. The sun was slowly setting beyond the plain and the first stars of night began to appear. They were the same stars he had seen many times at his own village, which now seemed to be far, far away.

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Erindel lay back on his blanket and let the sounds of the crackling fire and the rhythm of chirping crickets fill his mind. He slept and dreamed he was lost in a dense forest looking for something of great importance that he had lost. The dream ended without resolve and he slept soundly the rest of the night.

“What are you doing out here in the morn-light?” an anxious, round fellow called to Erindel.

Erindel thought it was a dream. He opened one eye and saw a small round man standing in front of him. The man had curly brown hair that stuck out of his head in an awkward fashion under a pointed blue hat that was too small for head. His clothing was made of course brown fibers stitched into a tunic that hung to his knees. On his feet, he had high brown leather boots, with a broad cuff at the top.

Erindel would have laughed at the strange man if weren't for the stout, sharp spear he held pointed at Erindel's neck. He thought it was best to be polite until he could determine the man's intentions.

“I am Erindel, of the fine village of Stillcreek that stands near the great and mysterious forest of Glendale. I have crossed through the Stony Mountain because I am on a mission of great importance to find the Flower of Light and return it to my village.”

“How do I know that you aren't a sorcerer who has come here to destroy us?”

“My good man, if I were a sorcerer do you think I would be caught out in the open like this with a wild man pointing a spear at my neck? If I had mystical powers I

would zap you into a toad,” - he snapped his fingers - “just like that and you would disappear.”

The short round man stepped back at the snap of the fingers and shook the spear at Erindel.

“If you were to try such a thing I would make short order of you,” he said still shaking the spear.

“But I assure you I am not a sorcerer. I am on a journey to a distant place but I’m not sure of the way to go. Would you be pleased to help me with my map? I’ll get it from my pack if you will allow me.”

The little man relaxed a bit and looked at Erindel with a discerning eye. He lowered the spear and held the point to the ground.

“Flower of Light, eh? Well you certainly are well spoken and you appear to be of good breeding. We don’t usually allow strangers to visit our burrow but you are a curious fellow and if you stay out here during the day, the wild beasts that roam the open land will surly devour you before noon.”

He placed the spear at his side and motioned for Erindel to follow.

“Come. We must hurry. The sun is rising and the beasts will wake soon. When we are safe at our burrow I will look at your map. It’s not safe to stay in the open.”

Erindel sensed the tension in his voice and decided to follow the strange man. This was a new land and could very well be a place where vicious creatures lived. Quickly he stowed his belongings in his leather pack as he looked into the trees waiting to see a wild beast approach with hungry eyes. The short man paced back

and forth by the edge of the pond, anxiously waiting for Erindel to finish packing.

He lifted his pack to his shoulders and followed the man along the edge of the pond to the brown grassy plain beyond. The trail was not clearly marked and the man seemed to be zigzagging in a random pattern as he walked. At times, they seemed to be going in circles and Erindel saw his own footprints several times. The sun had nearly broken through the fog on the horizon and the man hastened his steps. They walked into the tall grass that grew above the little man's head and then he suddenly stopped.

"We are here."

Erindel looked around and saw nothing but tall brown grass that extended across the plain in all directions.

"We are where?"

Without responding, the man stooped over and lifted a small hatch that was carefully concealed under a clump of brush rooted into the hatch cover. The round hatch lead to a narrow passageway with steep steps that went underground. The man stepped onto the staircase and squeezed his round frame into the hole.

"Come. We must hurry. The sun has risen."

Erindel looked over his shoulder expecting to see wild animals stalking about. He saw only tall grass standing silently on the flat plain.

Following the advice of his guide, he stepped into the dark hole, feeling his way into the tunnel.

"Close the door behind you," the man said.

Erindel saw a small handle on the inside of the hatch

so he pulled on it and the lid closed with a distinct snap as it latched into place. The tunnel was very narrow with steps leading almost straight down. His shoulders bumped the walls during the descent and he often had to reach out to hold the soil for support to avoid falling.

The air was cool and damp with the distinct smell of freshly turned earth. He felt a soft breeze on his cheeks as air blew past him being moved an efficient ventilation system. Erindel heard the man stomping and wheezing in front of him guiding him down with an occasional grunt as he bumped the walls. Erindel asked himself why he trusted this man. He could stop at any time and return to the world above, but the nagging fear of wild animals roaming about convinced him to follow. Below him, he saw a dim light coming from a passageway they were approaching. A hundred steps later they were at the bottom and standing on firm flat ground. Erindel could stand upright in the tunnel softly illuminated by glass-covered lamps that hung on the walls at regular intervals.

“We will be there shortly,” the man said.

“Wait a minute. I think it’s time you tell me exactly where we’re going. A far as I know, you could be a sorcerer sent to keep me from my journey.”

The man stood firmly on the ground with his shoulders back and his round belly sticking out in front of him.

“Very well. I suppose you do have a right to know where we are going. After all, we are safe now and there will be opportunity to exchange stories. We do not have many visitors in these parts. Most people either live on

the far side of the Stony Mountain or near the Mystic Sea to the east of here.”

He motioned for Erindel to follow.

“Come. We still have a distance to go. We can talk on the way.”

Erindel was satisfied with the response and walked beside the man as they leisurely walked down the passage with flowery yellow lamps casting flickering shadows when they passed.

“My name is Bobbin,” the man said tipping his hat. “My folks have taught me better manners, and I would have made a formal hello earlier, but the day was getting on. If we had stayed above much longer, we would have been in a lion’s stomach for sure.”

“We are going to the village called Obsidian, which is where I live. It is a very beautiful place that was carved from a quarry of solid black Obsidian. The walls glisten with lights placed in pockets behind the translucent stone. You will find it quite remarkable. My ancestors began digging three centuries ago and we are still improving on their work. We have many master craftsmen that form cunning works with their hands.”

“Why do you choose to live underground?”

“We do not live underground by choice, my dear friend,” Bobbin said sharply. “We have been forced into this lifestyle by the savage beasts that roam the plains to pillage and destroy all that lives and is good. Many generations ago my ancestors lived above the earth in villages made of wood and grass. One day at sunrise, the evil beasts came, destroyed everything and they killed and

ate most of the people.

“They rebuilt the village, but a short time later the beasts returned and destroyed it again, killing more people. The survivors went to the mountains and lived in the rocks and caves but the beasts found their hiding places and set a vigilant watch to lay wait for them. If they left the safety of the caves they were soon tracked down and killed to be eaten by the creatures.”

“It was a terrible and frightening time for those who survived. They were forced to find a place of safety so they dug underground shelters to hide themselves from the wild animals. The population grew and there was a need for larger and better living places. My forefathers dug this very passageway almost two hundred years ago. And a mighty fine job they did of it too.”

Bobbin patted the wall, feeling the smooth stone with keen appreciation for the builder. A bright light shone in the passageway ahead of them.

“Here we are,” Bobbin said with anticipation.

Erindel was intrigued with the new adventure and was anxious to see this beautiful city that Bobbin boasted about. He was the only person from Stillcreek who dared travel across the plain and an air of importance filled him. They walked into a wide brightly lit passageway, which opened into a large hall with dark walls, speckled with yellow lights.

The ceiling rose eighty feet above them and was covered with intricate carvings depicting great battles, complete with snorting horses and ranks of short round men adorned in armor. The enemy consisted of vicious

lions and bears and all sorts of evil looking animals.

Erindel stood in awe as the beauty of the place filled his mind.

“Quite a place, isn’t it,” Bobbin said. “Each time I see it, I am amazed at the unparalleled grandeur of this hall.”

Erindel would have been pleased to stand there for hours admiring the amazing contrast of darkness and light that gave the hall great depth and brought realism into the sculptures lining the walls. The flickering lights cast a shadowy glow on the carvings, giving life to the wild beasts fleeing from the riders on the charging horses. Far above in one corner of the ceiling a lone workman delicately carved a new scene into the black, translucent stone.

“It is time for the feast,” Bobbin said.

To the people of the burrow, every meal was called a feast. They had a great appreciation for tasty foods and much of their time was spent preparing and eating new recipes.

Erindel felt the pain in his own stomach and realized that he hadn’t ate a good meal in what seemed to be a long time. His attention moved away from the carvings and he followed Bobbin across the hall and down a passageway to a wide room with a low arched ceiling. Stone tables carved out of solid rock lined the walls and at each table, four little round men sat with eating utensils in front of them. The low murmur of hushed voices filled the air.

“This is the men’s hall. Each day the men eat one feast together in the men’s hall. The women and children

eat together in the women's hall on the far side of the city.”

Bobbin and Erindel entered the room and all discussions ceased. Erindel felt a chill of discomfort run up his back as all eyes sternly watched him as he followed Bobbin to the front of the room. They weaved their way through the tables and stopped near a large carving of a stone tree etched from gray granite.

Bobbin faced the crowd with an inborn sense of dignity and paused for a long moment. For the first time Erindel became aware of the silent authority that Bobbin projected to others. He supposed that his authority is what lead him to trust Bobbin with little reservation. Among his own people, he held a position of great importance.

“Today is a day to remember in our history,” he began. “On this day I traveled to the edge of the plain and came to the shadow of the Great Stony Mountain. While there I came upon a stranger who was asleep above ground in the open air.”

A hushed sound of surprise and awe rolled through the crowd.

Bobbin continued.

“The sun was on the rise, but this great warrior calmly slept with no concern for the savage above-ground-beasts that were about to awake.”

Another awe filled the room.

“At first, I thought he was a sorcerer so I awakened him with my spear at his throat, ready to kill him in an instant.”

Bobbin swung his spear around and stabbed at the air

in a gesture that brought great pleasure to the crowd.

“I demanded to know his purpose and I was ready to fight him to the death if he challenged me.”

He put his spear at his side and continued in a voice of authority.

“The stranger spoke truthfully and told me his name is Erindel from the great village of Stillcreek which lies on the far side of the Stony Mountain at the edge of the enchanted forest of Glendale.”

All voices erupted into a surprised murmur. Bobbin proudly stood as tall as he could, with arms folded, enjoying the moment. He raised his hand slowly and the murmur ceased.

“Erindel told me he’s on a mission of utmost importance to travel to an unknown land to seek for the legendary Flower of Light.”

Another awe.

“The flower has vanished from his land and the darkness is slowly taking over. He has asked for help from our chartmakers to complete his map.”

Bobbin stood back proudly reveling in the growing respect for his character.

To the left of him a large man (that is large for the Burrow People but considerable small if compared to most above-grounders) stood up and cleared his throat loudly to take the attention from Bobbin. A look of disdain and jealousy covered him as he peered at Bobbin through narrow eye slits.

The crowd looked at him. He spoke.

“Tell me..er..ummm..ahhh... Bobbin, my dear friend,”

he began slowly to create a dramatic effect. "What...er...ah.... proof, or...er... evidence can you present to...ah...er... show that this strange traveler is telling you the truth?"

The crowd was silent as the favor shifted to the rival who had raised a very good question. Bobbin was taken back by the comment. It had never occurred to him to ask for proof.

He stood his ground.

"I do not need proof of a man's character! I did not come out of the nursery hall yesterday. I have traveled the farthest of all our people and done many great deeds that are now permanently carved into the walls of the great Obsidian Hall."

The man waved his hand in a condescending gesture.

"Yes, yes, I know of your *past* exploits, but...er...ah...we must be ready to judge each case on its own...er....its own merit."

He slowly repeated the earlier question.

"Tell me....ah....Bobbin, what proof do you have that this stranger is telling the truth?"

The crowd mumbled in agreement and shook their heads as a sign of assent to the question. Bobbin had not anticipated this reaction and was feeling uncomfortable with the whole situation. He was in such a hurry to return before daybreak, the thought never came to him.

He was about to speak in his defense when Erindel stepped forward and raised a hand to pause the crowd. The room turned silent as all eyes looked to him. He stood four heads taller than Bobbin and appeared as a

giant to the little round race of people.

“You are a prudent and wise people,” he began. “And it is wise of such a one to demand proof of a stranger who makes wild claims about a desperate journey.”

He directed his comment to the dissenter who cleared his throat uncomfortable and sat down.

“I can give you proof of my journey, but it will come at a great cost to me. I am on a perilous trek with few provisions, and even fewer weapons.”

He paused.

“But I was given a gift when I set out that was only to be used in times of great need. I have great need of your mapmakers skill, so I will risk the loss of this gift to show you proof.”

All eyes were on him in breathless anticipation. Erindel scanned the crowd making eye contact with each of the seated men.

Then he slowly and deliberately reached into his shirt and took out the small leather satchel that was closed with a plain brown leather strap.

Erindel unloosened the strap with purposeful motion and reached in to take one of the precious petals of the last Flower of Light that had bloomed in his land. He raised it high above him and held it firmly, but nothing happened.

The dark withered petal was his only hope so he continued to hold it high above him and slowly moved it from one side to the next so all could see it. Still nothing happened and the crowd murmured again.

Erindel held his pose and a faint glow started to

emanate from the dried petal. At first, it was imperceptible, but it was noticed by a man sitting nearby who stood up and shouted.

“Look! It is starting to give out light!”

Hushed silence filled the room and all leaned forward in surprise as the dried petal glowed brighter and brighter until the hall was lit up with its glory. All that were present were astonished by the event and would later spend many nights repeating the story to eager listeners who would be just as astonished by the telling.

Bobbin stood tall and proud at the victory, reveling in the fact that he was the one who found the one who possessed the wonderful Flower of Light.

After several minutes, the petal dimmed as the stored sunlight expired and it again became a small withered, dead flower petal. Bobbin was the first to speak.

“If there are no other objections,” he said looking at his rival, “we will commence with the feast. It has been delayed too long and I and my fellow traveler are famished.”

All spoke in unanimous agreement and the cooks immediately set about bringing the prepared dishes that had been waiting behind closed doors in the kitchen. The only discussion during the meal was of the strange traveler and the Flower of Light. Erindel was given a seat of prominence at the head table with Bobbin sitting proudly beside him.

The remainder of the day was declared a holiday, which pleased the children greatly, as news of the visitor with the strange power spread through the city. The Order

of the Council invited Erindel to attend a special session to discuss his journey and the road that lay ahead. The most knowledgeable chartmakers in the city were called to attend and brought ancient maps that showed the land that was beyond the great Mystic Ocean.

They helped Erindel complete his map by adding a page that showed the Mystic Ocean to the east. Across the ocean was a mountain range named the Fiery Mountains, because of the red color of the rock, and beyond that, the Windy Desert.

The old legends said the Windy Desert was once a thriving tropical forest where life began when the world was new. No one from the Burrow had ever crossed the ocean, but the maps were very ancient and trusted to be accurate.

The Order of the Council convened in the Glorious Obsidian Hall with Erindel seated in a prominent place next to the Grand Master. Next to Erindel sat Bobbin who had gained high esteem among his people. Some even talked of him one day being the Grand Master but that day would not come to pass for many years.

“So tell me, Erindel,” the Grand Master asked, “have you encountered many strange creatures on your journey?”

Erindel did not want to disappoint the Grand Master who was no doubt expecting an entertaining story, so he set about to describe, in great detail, his experience with Father Earth and how he was able to escape by using the Flower of Light. The Grand Master and those around listened in wonder as he described the events. The

artisans were most concerned about the structure of the path that lead through the Stony Mountain and were sure their forefathers constructed the passageway. There was some debate about this for a time, with no clear resolution in sight, so the Grand Master turned the course of conversation to more practical matters.

“We have often heard of wild beasts that roam the land above, devouring all life traversing the plains during the daylight. Have you encountered such beasts, and if you did, did you again use the Flower of Light to defeat them?”

The question expected only one answer but Erindel was unable to appease them because - he had in fact - never seen such monsters that they spoke of. He turned the conversation back to the Grand Master by asking about the history of the wild beasts. He asked such questions as, “What do they look like? Where do they live? Where were they last seen? What is the best defense against them?” and other general question about the best way to defeat a wild beast if one is encountered in the open plain.

The Grand Master proudly gave the same history that Bobbin gave about how their great-great-great grandfathers were forced underground by the unrelenting attack of the beasts. He proudly pointed out the hand-carved reliefs on the ceiling depicting a great battle between beasts and men. He gave no recent accounts of beast attacks, and could give little information of their current whereabouts. The only men who dared to journey out of the Burrow were bold men, such as Bobbin, who

would occasionally make a nighttime dash to the edge of the Stony Mountain, where the waterfall fell over the cliff, to gather a few precious quartz crystals for their lamps.

Other than that, they knew little of the world above them.

“So, you have never seen the beasts?” Erindel asked.

“No I haven’t,” the Grand Master said with confidence, “and it is a good thing too. If I had seen a beast in the field I would now be on the inside of it looking out.”

The hall echoed with laughter at the witty comment. The Grand Master was very popular with the people because he was always able to make them laugh.

Erindel was curious about the information he received and even more concerned because if he were to travel across the plain, he wanted to know where the enemy would be hiding.

He pursued his line of questioning.

“Can you tell me the last location where a beast was seen?”

The Grand Master turned to his aged advisors and consulted them with the question.

“The historians say the last time a beast was seen was in the Year of The Groundshake. A huge, hairy beast was lying in wait by the falls and attacked a scouting party gathering supplies. Only one man escaped, but he was sorely injured and only lived long enough to tell us the evil tale.”

“And how long ago was that?”

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The Grand Master consulted the historians again.

“In years, I would estimate about one hundred and fifty years ago.”

“Have you seen the beasts in recent days? Do you know where their dens might be?”

The Grand Master again consulted the historians.

“After that horrible attack we set about to make rules against anyone going above ground in the daylight. The only men allowed to travel above ground are the scouts who are well trained in stealth and weaponry, and I am glad to say, there have been no deaths or injuries from the beasts since that fateful day during the Year of The Groundshake.”

He added, “if there were any beast sightings since then, they certainly wouldn’t be here to tell us about it.”

He stepped up on a bench and sang out a rhyme.

“Poor Robin, bless his poor soul,  
He set out for the falls with a goal,  
He came on a beast  
Who made him his feast,  
And gobbled him up head to toe.”

The gathering broke out in uncontrolled laughter and the Grand Master was so pleased with his rhyme he laughed until tears were running down both cheeks. He was very popular with his people.

Erindel chuckled at the rhyme but was still troubled about the lack of knowledge on the whereabouts of these wicked beasts that were spoken of. When the laughter

died down, he ventured to ask the question in a different way.

“When I resume my journey, how do I avoid attack?”

“Travel only at night,” the Grand Master advised, “and during the day, dig a safe concealed shelter to hide in. And sleep with one eye open and your spear ready.”

“How many beasts are roaming the plain? Are their numbers great?”

“Oh, very great,” answered the Grand Master assuredly. “The old stories tell us of great prides of mighty lions relentlessly hunting for fresh meat along the river. The stories tell of wild bears standing as tall as a tree and will kill a man with one swipe of the paw. The beasts rule the land above and we rule the ground beneath. That is the way it has been and that is the way it will always be.”

Erindel dared another question.

“If no one has seen a beast in one hundred and fifty years, how do you know they are still there?”

The Grand Master stood up abruptly and a scowl crossed his face.

“How dare you question my word. We have taken you in and given you our best hospitality. You repay us with insults and speak the same rebellious rhetoric our young people speak of. The fact that no one has seen a beast adds merit to the strict rules we have put in place to protect the people.”

He turned and stormed out of the hall with his advisors following puppy-dog style behind him. Scowls filled the faces of the others in attendance as the hall

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emptied at the prompting of the Grand Master. Soon, only two people were left. Erindel and Bobbin. Bobbin had a look of shame on him, but stayed behind because he felt he was responsible for his guest.

Erindel looked at Bobbin blankly.

“What did I say?”

Bobbin turned to him.

“You made an unforgivable error among my people. You dared to question the Rules of Order which have kept our people safe for so many years. You fail to see that the rules are working, as they should. Our people are safe and content.”

“I was not questioning the rules. I simply wanted to know where the beasts are so I can avoid them. If no one has seen a beast in one hundred and fifty years, maybe they’re gone. Maybe hunters from other above ground villages have killed them all.”

“That would be impossible.”

“Why?”

“Because the beasts have always been there and they will always be there.”

“How do you know? You travel above ground more than anyone. Have you ever seen one?”

“No.”

“Have you seen signs of any.”

“No,”

“How do you know they are they are still there?”

Bobbin sat silent.

“I am not sure,” he whispered. “But such talk is in direct contradiction to the Rules of Order and I can be

subject to severe punishment. Speak of this no more, my friend, but I will think on this matter. Perhaps the day will come when we can once again live in the sunlight.”

They did not discuss the issue any more that night nor the next day. Erindel was provided a place to rest and given food and a hot bath. The following evening, it was time for him to leave and he was given fresh provisions for his journey. He studied the map carefully, then stowed it securely in his pack. The outcome of the journey was unknown but he at least had a direction to go.

Erindel left the city in the same manner as he arrived, alone with only Bobbin as his guide. At evening, they climbed up the final steps to an entrance on the western side of the city and stepped out into the waning sunlight.

“It is time for us to part,” Bobbin said, “but one day we may meet again.”

“I will have to pass through this land on my way back. How do I find you?”

“Stop at the large oak tree by the river edge at evening. I will look for you there each day until you return. We can talk outside at night, but you will not be allowed to enter our city again. The elders fear you will influence the people to disobey them.”

“Then it is time to part.”

“Yes, it is time.”

Erindel turned to walk away and Bobbin took his arm and stopped him.

“I hope you are right. I hope the beasts have left. I will be watching for you and await to hear of your success.”

Erindel thanked Bobbin again for his help and walked

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alone toward the Mystic Ocean. One day he would return and spend many long sunny days visiting with Bobbin by the waterfall where they first met.



## CHAPTER 7

It was after dark when Pastor Willard finally arrived at the hospital. Pastor Willard brought a wool blanket and a small overnight kit because there was a good chance the roads would be closed before long. A cold storm had blown in from the north bringing icy snow and a strong wind that soon turned into a wicked blizzard. The storm had settled in and would be blowing wind and snow throughout the night.

“You shouldn’t have came out in this weather Pastor Willard,” Rachel said. The pastor pulled off his gloves and plaid neck wrap.

“Nonsense. I remember the time your late husband drove his tractor five miles through three feet of snow to find my car in the ditch and pulled me out. If he hadn’t have gone out to look for me, I wouldn’t be here today to get yelled at for trying to comfort an old friend.”

“I didn’t mean it that way. It’s just that I’m worried about you and if you get stuck in a snow drift again there

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might not be anyone fool enough to wade through the snow and pull you out.”

“Now, now, I know you didn’t mean that, so I am going to forgive ya. But if you keep it up much longer I’m going to prepare a special sermon for you about the tongue being a little thing but able to stir up a lot of trouble for a tired old pastor who left his warm home to comfort a troubled soul in time of need.”

“I’d be willing to walk through ten miles of snow to avoid that.” She gave him a warm hug.

“I am glad you’re here pastor,” she said still holding him by the shoulders. “Chandler is not doing very well and there’s a good chance he might die.”

Pastor Willard looked her directly in the eye with his pastor stare.

“I don’t believe in chance. The good Lord knows of everything that happens - good or bad - and He has a mighty hand in the outcome. We don’t know what’s going to be so it’s best for us to have faith that things will go the way we want them to. And I want Chandler to keep on living and I am going to hope that he’ll come out of his catatonic state soon and start life anew.”

Rachel wiped her eyes. “I need all the strength I can get right now.”

“Our strength comes from the Lord. If He has given me any gifts that can help you, then praise Him. Now let me get over to Chandler so I can see for myself how he’s doing. I still don’t trust all those new fangled doctoring machines they have today. I can tell a lot about an ailment with just a touch on the forehead and a careful listen to

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the lungs.”

He gently pushed past Rachel and walked to the left side of the bed. A small table was next to the bed and a swing-arm lamp attached to the wall. On the other side of the bed was a monitor displaying a graphic image of Chandler’s heartbeat, temperature, and respiration count. Above the monitor was a metal stand holding a plastic bag of clear liquid slowly dripping into Chandler’s arm through a tube inserted into the back of his right wrist. A bigger tube brought oxygen to a plastic mask strapped on his face. With each breath, a small cloud of moisture condensed on the inside of the mask and then immediately evaporated.

“I just keep watching that mask fog up and then go clear again and each time I see it, it tells me Chandler is still breathing,” Rachel said in a halting voice.

“God gave Adam the breath of life. Let’s hope he keeps giving some to Chandler.”

The old pastor gently placed a hand on Chandler’s forehead, gazed thoughtfully up at the white acoustic ceiling, and seemed to be studying the dotted pattern. He kept his hand there for a good minute then softly closed his eyes and whispered a prayer. He removed his hand from Chandler’s head and placed it on his chest to feel the gentle rising and falling as the oxygen flowed in and out of his lungs.

“You were right. Chandler is not doing very well. He has a hot dry fever and his lungs are filling with liquid. I suggest that the doctor start treating him for pneumonia soon or it will be too late.”

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“But doctor Jacobs was here just a few hours ago and said Chandler didn’t have pneumonia. He was worried about it coming on but thought he would get better once he was in the hospital.”

“I’m not a doctor and I can’t see inside the lungs, but I’ve visited a lot of sick people in my day and I’ve seen pneumonia too many times. And I say this boy has pneumonia.”

She saw the concern in the pastor’s face and let the thought of pneumonia slither into her mind. It sounded like a death sentence but she didn’t want to face the reality of the situation. In his weakened condition, it could mean certain death to Chandler.

“I’ll call the doctor,” Rachel said.

She looked sadly at Chandler and left the room in a hurry to tell the desk nurse to summon the doctor. At first, the nurse was reluctant to do so, but Rachel insisted and the nurse had no choice but to give in. She put out a call to Doctor Jacobs. She then notified a staff doctor who arrived at the room within minutes to examine Chandler.

Sarah walked into the room and saw the concerned look on the faces of everyone in the room.

“Pastor Willard, when did you get here?” She turned to her mother. “Mom what’s wrong? Why does everyone look so serious?”

“The pastor thinks Chandler might have pneumonia. He says he’s seen it lots of times before...so I took his advice and called a doctor to have a look.”

She paused and attempted a smile.

“They cure this kind of thing all the time, why, I

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remember the days when we didn't have penicillin and people were dying left and right from the simplest things. Now they can cure just about everything, can't they doctor?"

The young doctor was busy listening to Chandler's chest with a stethoscope and didn't hear her comment. He had the same dark look of concern that Pastor Willard had when he was touching Chandler's chest. He moved the stethoscope from place to place and then wrote hasty notes on the clipboard next to the bed.

"Well doctor?"

"I am afraid you were right. Chandler has pneumonia. It's only in one lung but I want to treat it vigorously at the start to get a handle on it."

He looked at the small group that had assembled.

"Who are all these people?"

"I'm Chandler's mother. And this is my daughter Sarah, and this is our preacher, Pastor Willard of the First Christian Church."

Then doctor looked at them carefully.

"Normally, we don't let anyone stay past visiting hours. But since you are family, I'll let you stay in the room if you promise to stay quiet and let the other patient sleep."

He took out a small notebook, scribbled a prescription on it and handed it to the nurse.

"All I can do is give him medicine. I think it would be a good idea if the pastor stayed and prayed for Chandler. He's going to need all the help he can get."

The nurse returned and gave Chandler an antibiotic IV

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and checked the monitoring instruments. Chandler lay on the bed unaware of what was happening in the real world. Many years ago, he decided to leave the world of the senses and went far inside himself where no one could touch him or hurt him. His body had served him well over the years to preserve his life after his mind had given up. Now the body had weakened and was on the verge of allowing Chandler to take the final exit from life.

The pastor sat down in one of the old, yellow, padded chairs lined up along the wall and settled in for a long night. The roads were snowed over and wouldn't be clear until the snowplow arrived in morning. Rachel sat down next to the pastor and sank into the chair with a tired sigh.

"Does anyone want coffee?" Sarah asked.

"Some hot cocoa would be nice," Pastor Willard said.

"Nothing for me," her mother answered.

"I'll go downstairs and bring up some cocoa," Sarah said and left the room.

The nurse turned down the hall lights and the 3rd floor settled down. The patients fell asleep one by one to rest for the night. An occasional cough broke the quiet as a patient down the hall struggled to clear his throat. Then there was silence.

The room was unadorned, as most hospital rooms are, with only the bare necessities required for the task at hand. This room had housed hundreds, if not thousands of patients over the years, bringing some to recovery and others into death. The room gave no premonition how the current patients would fare and held no emotion for the patients who had gone before. It was just a room.

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“How long will it take to find out if the medicine is working,” Rachel asked Pastor Willard.

“You should have asked the doctor that.”

“You’ve proven yourself out to be a pretty good doctor. What’ve you seen in other cases?”

The pastor rubbed the back of his neck and stretched his back.

“If it’s going to work, we should see a difference by morning. Pneumonia is a strange virus. Sometimes people have it for months and never know their sick. Other times they catch it in the morning and die by the evening. Chandler is still young. I think he will be okay.” The pastor patted her hand.

“Cocoa’s here,” Sarah whispered as she walked into the room with a tray. She handed a Styrofoam cup and a napkin to the pastor.

“And I got some for you too mom. I’ll put it on the table and you can have it later if you want.”

They thanked Sarah and soon all were engaged in the business of stirring and sipping cocoa that was too hot to drink. Chandler quietly lay on the bed closest to them. The old man with emphysema was alone on the other side of the room struggling for breath at every rise of his chest. Time slowed down to a near stop and all thoughts of the outside world left them.

“Do you think praying really helps?” Rachel asked.

“Of course it does,” Sarah said. “Jesus wouldn’t tell us to pray if it wasn’t gonna help.”

“But how do we know it actually makes a difference? Maybe things would turn out the same if we didn’t do

anything.”

Pastor Willard sipped his cup thinking of a proper response.

“Do remember the verse in the Bible that says if we have faith that is only as small as a seed of mustard, we can move a whole mountain?”

“Of course I remember that one,” Rachel answered. “Every time I think of it I’m reminded of how weak my faith really is. Maybe if I just had more...”

The pastor interrupted her.

“Maybe God isn’t talking about how big our faith has to be, but how we go about things.”

“What do you mean,” Sarah asked.

“Let’s suppose you have a mountain in front of you,” the pastor began, “and you want that mountain moved,” he continued, “how would you go about moving that mountain?”

Rachel thought for a minute.

“Well I suppose, if I had enough faith I could just pray about it and it would be moved. But I’m sure God would have to have a good reason to move it. If I was going to make a road or something, it probably wouldn’t be a very holy thing to pray for, but if it was to help people who were trapped in a mine, then he just might move the mountain for me.”

“I think God put that verse in the Bible to show us how short of faith we are,” Sarah said. “Look at Peter. He was walking on water until he became afraid and lost his faith.”

The pastor stirred his cocoa.

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“So you think if our faith was great enough we could heal Chandler by ourselves.”

“If we had the faith of the apostles we could heal him,” Sarah said.

Pastor Willard pointed to the old man in the other bed.

“And what about that man. He doesn’t seem to have anyone here to pray for him. Does that mean there’s no hope for him?”

“He’s part of God’s plan too,” Sarah said. “If God wants him to live another hundred years, he will. If it’s his time to go, then God will take him. Either way it’s all part of God’s plan.”

“Then praying doesn’t do any good then?” The pastor asked.

“Of course praying does good,” Rachel said. “But sometimes we just don’t understand how to go about it the right way. When things go wrong, we tend to blame ourselves because we weren’t good enough people.”

She turned to the pastor.

“What are you getting at Pastor Willard? Are you saying there’s no hope for Chandler? If God wants to take him, He will?”

“No I didn’t say that. You were wondering if prayer does any good. I was just trying to help you understand what faith is all about.”

“So what do you think Pastor? Do we have enough faith?” Sarah asked.

The pastor tipped back his cup and drank the last of the cocoa.

“I think there’s a lot more to helping people than

praying. And there's more to faith than just kneeling down and asking God to do things for us."

He stood up to stretch.

"If you have a pile of dirt on your farm, and you want it moved, what do you do?"

"I'd start up the tractor and drag it away," Rachel answered.

"What if you don't have a tractor?"

"Then I'll use a shovel and start digging."

"And what if you have a mountain on your land and you want it moved?"

"If I had a whole mountain, I would find a contractor with a bulldozer to start to work on it to tear it down. If I didn't have the money, I guess it would have to stay where it was."

"And what if you really, really wanted that mountain moved. What if it became the most important thing in your life?"

Rachel and Sarah looked at each other. It seemed to be a senseless conversation going nowhere.

"If I 'really, really' wanted it moved," Sarah said. "I would get a shovel and start digging. It may take a long time but if I wanted it moved bad enough I had better start to work on it."

"And how much faith would that take?"

"I suppose it would only take as much faith as it takes to pick up a shovel and start digging," Sarah answered.

"Would you say, oh perhaps, faith the size of a mustard seed?" Pastor Willard asked.

A look of understanding came to her.

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“You mean there’s more to faith than just believing hard enough that something is going to happen? Part of the faith is to use the tools God has given us and get to work.”

“That is exactly what I’m saying. If you want to move a mountain, then you had better start digging. And if you want to get Chandler better, you need to put him in the hospital and get him the best medical care you can find.”

“He’s already in the hospital,” Sarah said. “What else can we do?”

“There’s nothing you can do. You have already done it. Now it’s time to ask God to bless that work and ask for Him to heal Chandler.”

“And that is what prayer is all about,” Rachel said. “Even though we did all we could, we still need to trust God to do the rest. That means we give God the honor for healing rather than patting ourselves on the back for doing such a good job.”

“That’s what prayer is all about,” the pastor repeated. “You have done all you can. If you blame yourself, then your pride is showing through because you believed you were powerful enough to give life. If you had done nothing, it would have shown you did not have any faith and didn’t believe God would help you. It’s not up to you to decide what happens. It’s up to God.”

He sat down in the chair again.

“Now it is time to ask God to help Chandler.”

Pastor Willard bowed his head, took Rachel by the hand and began to pray. It was a simple prayer of a God-fearing man who believed God had the power to do

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anything. It seemed to Rachel and Sarah that the pastor was talking to an old friend whom he had met with many times before.

Chandler lay in his bed unaware of his surroundings. His fever was slowly rising and his lungs continued to fill with fluid. He sank deeper into his own world than ever before.

\* \* \*

The night was cool when Erindel left the Burrow and the dark sky was clear and bright with stars. A full moon had risen above the horizon behind him giving light to guide him on his way down the narrow path. On both sides, tall grass stood, filling the air with the sweet aroma of ripe grasses on a summer evening. Hidden crickets chirped in the distance, stopping for a moment as Erindel approached and then resumed their song when he passed by.

He would have enjoyed the pleasant night, but was plagued by a sense of urgency and a nagging fear there could be wild beasts roaming the plains. The last thing he wanted was to end up like poor Robin who was eaten head to toe by the beast. He shook the thought from his mind and set a steady pace to the ocean, keeping the moon at his back. He slept uneasily and stayed alert but spotted no lions, or bears, or wild boars. Night became day and day turned to night as he steadily trudged forward toward his goal.

Two days later, he had completed his trek across the great plain and arrived at the shore of the Mystic Ocean. He was tired from his long journey but felt the need

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continue on. Stopping at the top of a high sand dune, he looked out over the endless ocean to the hazy horizon curving away from him in both directions.

Often, he'd been told tales of the Mystic Ocean but the descriptions he had heard were of no comparison to the real thing. Slow, rolling waves crashed on the sandy shore as seagulls dove into the water searching for small fish. Cobalt blue water spread out before him and changed to a sweeping arc of pale blue sky in the far distance. Warm, sweet scented breezes softly swirled across the water and flowed around him as he gazed oceanward.

He needed to find a way to cross the ocean and he hoped to hire a ferry to get to the other side. The beach went on endlessly to his left with no dwellings in sight. With a sigh, he looked up the shoreline to his right which went on just as far, with the blue ocean stretching to infinity, bordered by a pale strip of sand bordered by high cliffs with a plateau above.

Squinting hard to focus, he looked deep into the haze along the shore and some distance away noticed a small pier jutting out into the water. New hope filled him as he trudged down the sand dune to the beach below. He felt he was at a turning point in his journey and started up the coastline towards the small wooden pier with the unbalanced, faded wood boathouse.

At mid-morning he arrived at the boathouse at base of the pier and slowly trudged up the weathered wooden steps to a small landing. He knocked on the door loudly.

“Come in,” a friendly voice said.

Erindel opened the door and stepped inside. The walls were lined with dried stuffed fish of all sizes, shapes and colors. A rotting net hung on the back wall as a decoration. A wrinkled white haired man sat in a rickety wooden chair behind a small table.

“Well sir,” the man said cheerfully. “What can I do for you?”

He paused and studied Erindel.

“It looks to me like you’ve been on a long journey. We don’t get many travelers these days. You crossed the great plain, did ya?”

“Yes,” Erindel answered hesitantly.

“The plain was a wild place in the old days. Full of wild beasts and other ferocious brutes. But now, it’s just a grassland with only deer and elk living on it.”

“Have you lived here long?”

“Oh my...yes,” he answered. “I’ve been here a long time. Many years ago this was a busy landing dock for people from all the countries in the world. They docked their ships here in the spring and summer to hunt the great wild things roaming the plains. Yes indeed, those were good days for me.”

He leaned forward in his chair and peered at Erindel.

“But the wild things are gone now, so the hunters have stopped coming.”

He stopped in mid-thought.

“But you don’t look like a hunter. You don’t look like anyone I’ve seen before. Your clothes are of a strange color, and your speech...your speech is of a foreign dialect. Tell me son, where do you come from.”

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“I am Erindel of the village of Stillcreek that lies near the mysterious forest of Glendale.”

“Ah yes,” the man said. “I’ve heard of that place. But your people don’t ever travel this far.”

He leaned forward a little more and whispered,

“You are on a mission of great importance, are ya?”

Erindel was startled.

“How did you know?”

“Only a mission of great importance would drive one of the Stillcreek villagers this far to the west. You must be searching for something important? Can you tell me what it is? I like to hear of dangerous and cunning journeys. Tell me your story and perhaps I can help you on your way.”

Erindel had no choice but to oblige the old man. He placed his pack on the floor and sat down in front of the man in an equally rickety chair and told of his journey. The man was most intrigued with the Burrow people because he had heard tales of them but had never seen one. He hoped one day they would need his landing dock to trade goods and services to people of other lands. Very few ships tied up to his dock anymore but he kept things in working condition, waiting for the day when ocean commerce would resume.

The tales Erindel told, gave the man new hope and put him in good cheer. At the end of the day, he insisted Erindel stay in the guest room, free of charge of course, if he agreed to tell those met about the landing dock at the edge of the Mystic Ocean by the Grassy Plains. Erindel agreed to do so, and turned the conversation to

information of the passage across the sea.

“So tell me, dear sir,” Erindel inquired. “How do I get across the Mystic Ocean to the lands beyond. Will a ferry be by here soon?”

The man politely cleared his throat in an embarrassing sort of way.

“A ferry?”

“Yes,” Erindel repeated. “A ferry. Or a ship to carry me to the other shore. I have heard the Flower of Light once grew near the Windy Desert. I must go there to look for it.”

“It is late,” the dock keeper said weakly. “I am tired and I must rest. A bed is made for you, I think you’ll find it comfortable.”

“But what about the ferry?”

“We will talk no more of it tonight. I am tired and I must rest.”

His firm tone of voice left no room for debate, so Erindel was compelled to obey his host. He ended the conversation and went off to ready himself for bed.

“Goodnight,” he said to the man who had fallen asleep in the chair.

The only response was a gravelly snore.

Erindel felt fatigue overtake him as the many miles he had traveled weighed on him. His legs were stiff and his feet sore and nothing sounded better than a soft bed and clean sheets. Five minutes later, he lay under the cool covers and was immediately lulled into a deep sleep by the steady, soft breaking of the waves on the shore. He dreamed of a large field of flowers of all colors and

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shapes. He dreamed of home. He dreamed of Willow Glen.

\* \* \*

“Good morning, my boy,” the dockkeeper said. “It’s time to rise. The cold moon of night has set and the warm sun of day is risen. Come. Wake before the day is gone.”

Erindel blinked against the yellow shaft of light from the rising sun splayed across the room. His muscles pained him with every move. It would have suited him just fine to forget the journey and spend the day in bed, but he knew he must push on. The question he had asked the night before still needed an answer and he was anxious to get the journey over with.

“What time is it?” He asked.

“Time? What time it is, is not important. It is time to rise. That’s what time it is. Now get up you lazy boy, you must be off.”

Erindel was curious at the sudden haste and managed to stiffly crawl out of bed and put his traveling clothes on. A warm basin of water was on the table by the bed so he washed his face to clear the fog from his mind. He stepped out of the room and was greeted by the savory smell of fresh biscuits and fried potatoes. A plate was set for him on a splintery gray table, next to a steaming pan of potatoes, but the dockmaster was nowhere in sight. Outside, he heard the distinct sounds of hammering and sawing.

Seizing the opportunity for a hot meal, he quickly filled the plate and eagerly ate the tasty food. When he had his fill, he picked up his pack and went outside to see

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what the old man was up to. At the end of the pier, the man had busied himself repairing a small wooden boat with a stained white sail flapping loosely in the wind. Erindel walked to the boat and found the man stooping over in the boat, replacing a damaged board that was meant to be a seat.

“Good morning - good morning,” he said cheerfully. “I hope you found the food satisfactory?”

“Yes. It was very fine, thank you. Can you tell me when the ferry arrives?”

“Ferry, smerry. I have something even better for you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that there ain’t no ferry. There hasn’t been a ferry by here in twenty years. The last party to arrive came from the far side of the ocean in this sturdy boat here. They never returned, so I guess it belongs to whoever cares for it. That be me, so it’s mine, and now I am giving it to you.”

Erindel surveyed the boat weakly. It was only twenty feet long with a small cloth covered cabin in the front and a stout mast with a single tattered sail attached to it. At the rear was a small bench, the dockmaster was repairing, and an ornate carved wooden handle connected to wide flat rudder.

“Is that thing big enough to cross the ocean?” Erindel asked.

“It came here didn’t it? Now you can take it back and return it to whomever owns it.”

“But I don’t know anything about sailing.”

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“It’s quite easy really. Just hold the sail so it catches the wind from behind, and steer with the rudder. The prevailing winds always blow from offshore, so I figure you should reach the other shore in... oh... two or three days at the most. The Ocean isn’t as wide as it looks - or so I’ve been told.”

“You mean, you’ve never been to the other side?”

“I never had a reason to. My job is to stay here to wait for people coming from the other side. But don’t you worry, I’ve spoken to many sailors about the journey and they all assure me it’s easy as corncake.”

“But I’ve never been on the ocean.”

“You’ll learn.”

“But I don’t know how to sail.”

“You’ll learn.”

“But I ...”

Erindel could think of better excuses, but he knew the dockmaster wouldn’t listen. He’d never been in anything bigger than a rowboat and never on any body of water larger than a small pond. Now, he was expected to sail across an ocean with no idea of where he would end up.

The man stopped his work and looked up at Erindel.

“Are ya goin’ ta stand there all day or are ya goin’ ta help. There ain’t no other way across but this here boat. It is seaworthy, I assure you. You can either use this boat to sail to the other side or you can go back home the way you came. The choice is up to you.”

He stared at Erindel waiting for an answer. The only sound was the gentle swish of the waves and a distant seagull calling for a mate.

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“Are you sure it is the only way?”

“The only way.”

“Are you sure it is seaworthy?”

“As seaworthy as Noah’s ark.”

“Do you think I can sail it?”

“I’m sure you can. I’ll take you out for a little spin and show you how it works. In a few days, if the wind keeps up, you will be on the other shore.”

Erindel knew better but he heard himself say, “Okay, I’ll do it. When do we start?”

“Right now. I set water and food aboard, so as soon as you get the hang of it you can be on your way.”

Erindel stepped uneasily into the boat that rocked back and forth as he clambered aboard. The old dockmaster unloosed the rope and the boat slid away from the dock into the open sea. They sailed back and forth in front of the pier, jibbing and jiving, hoisting sail and de-hoisting sail, and generally learning how to maneuver in all directions.

Erindel enjoyed the peaceful shore, and spent the morning learning how to sail along the gentle coastline. After much trial and error he was skilled enough to sail on his own and was elated with the experience. The adrenalin flowed in his veins and he was eager to get on with the journey. He deftly turned the boat around and safely glided the little craft back to the pier where the dockmaster hopped out of the boat.

“It is time for you to continue your quest,” he said knowingly.

“Do you think I’m ready?”

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“It is time,” he repeated.

He gave Erindel a few last minute instructions and wished him well on his journey. The last thing he did was hand Erindel a faded parchment map left behind by one of the sailors.

“The map shows the far coastline, complete with eddies and bays, and also shows a passage through the mountains to the east and a trail through the great desert beyond.”

Erindel thanked the man for his hospitality and joyfully set sail into the unknown void of the distant horizon.

The water lapped at the sides of the hull as the boat pleasantly jumped across the clear blue water. The sun had risen high in the sky and made the air hot and dry. Two porpoises found the boat and were playfully jumping in the water near the bow.

It was a peaceful time for Erindel because he felt he was nearing the end of his journey. The silence of the ocean breeze gave him time to reflect on his adventurous travels. He missed the small village he grew up in and he missed his family. But most of all, he felt an ache in his heart for Willow Glen. To pass the time he composed a rhyme of her that matched the steady rocking of the little boat.

Willow Glen, Willow Glen,  
Fair maiden of the glen.  
I dream of the day that  
I will see you again.

## CHANDLER

I pray you are well,  
Please pray for me too.  
I hasten on my journey,  
I will return to you soon.

The first day went well for Erindel. The craft was sturdy and the wind constant. By evening, he could no longer see land and was surrounded on all sides by an endless expanse of blue water that curved to the horizon in all directions. The night sky was clear and warm with a host of stars above which Erindel used for navigation. The moon rose brightly, casting a strange luminescence that reflected in ghostly patterns on the rising and falling swells. He tied off the rudder and fell into a deep, gentle sleep.

Nothing in particular woke him the next morning. Perhaps it was the bright sunlight, or it could have been a nagging thirst that dried his throat. The bright sun was barely over the horizon but the salty ocean air was already hot. It wasn't the sun or the thirst that woke him. It was the silence.

The stained sail hung limp above him without a ripple of motion. The sea spread out in all directions, flat and lifeless. Nothing moved. No breeze came to push the craft forward. The porpoises had left him alone. Erindel's spirit was still high so he saw this as only a temporary setback.

"Surely the wind will pick up soon," he said aloud to no one.

The sun rose high in the sky, but no wind came. Erindel occupied his time checking and storing his

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provisions. The boat had a little water seepage so he bailed from time to time to keep it afloat. He found a loose board in the side and stuffed it with a cloth to stop the leak.

The afternoon came, but still there was no wind. He floated helplessly in the midst of the open ocean and tried to fight concern by studying the map he was given, and carefully planned how he would proceed once he reached the other side. Night came, warm and silent, and Erindel slept restlessly.

On the third day, the sun rose as before, but no wind came. Erindel had a constant nagging thirst and rationed the water to make it last as long as possible. The sun was hotter and the air was drier. He and his little boat were held captive in the silent doldrums that have plagued sailors since time began.

The fourth day came hot and dry, but no wind came. The steaming sun sucked the moisture from his body leaving his lips swollen and cracked and his tongue parched. Most of his water was gone, so he allowed himself only one cup per day.

The days passed and soon he lost all track of time. His fresh water was exhausted and he drifted in an out of a mindless sleep. Each time he awoke, he did not know if he had slept for hours or days. Depression overwhelmed him. He regretted the day he agreed to take the journey and berated himself for believing he was up to the task. The temperature continued to rise beyond the point a body could endure.

The bright sunlight reflected on the water sending out

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stabbing shafts of light that stung his eyes. He lay back in the boat in the narrow shadow of the sail and waited for death to overtake him.

\* \* \*

Chandler lay in the hospital bed with sweat pouring from his forehead. White sheets were pulled up to his neck like a death shroud. Pastor Willard was propped uncomfortably in the chair against the wall, fast asleep. Rachel and Sarah had gone to the lounge to watch through foggy windows as the cold blizzard blew outside.

Chandler opened his eyes and saw the perforated acoustic ceiling above his bed. His gaze fixed on small black hole. The hole brightened to a pinpoint of light growing in size and intensity until it filled his whole realm of vision. Bright white light surrounded him and soon filled the entire room. Chandler sensed his soul rising and looked deep into the light where he saw mysterious bright figures moving about as if in flight. He sensed peace and tranquility, and a powerful gentle and kind presence.

The light became a white tunnel extending far above him into another world. He longed to go into the tunnel to feel the peace and security that was there. At last, he found the peace he had longed for. Ultimate peace. Perfect contentment. Pure joy. It reminded him of the stories of heaven Pastor Willard had told him about.

He felt light and free. Free from gravity. Free from pain. Free from trouble and distress. He found himself floating in the space above the bed, freed from the prison of his sickly, weakened body. He looked down at himself

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and for the first time in years became aware of who he was and why he was there. The pale, lifeless body lay on the bed without a sign of movement. On the table next to the bed was a simple bouquet of daisies, which reminded him of his journey.

Looking up, he saw the end of the tunnel and a bright warm light that was purer than any light he had seen before. He desired to go to the light and bent his mind toward it and was soon traveling at unknown speed through the peaceful tunnel to the joy waiting beyond. A low voice filled his mind, stopping him in mid-flight. The voice was slow and deep and held great authority. A friendly warm voice he knew he must listen to. The voice told him he had a journey to finish.

Chandler was reminded of the Flower of Light and knew he must complete his task. He turned away from the light, lost his capacity to fly and fell backward, twirling through the tunnel to the weakened, pale body reclining on a hospital bed far below. He fell out of the tunnel and slid back into his body which took in a spastic breath of air. The bells on the monitors sounded loudly signaling his heart had stopped. Pastor Willard jumped out of the chair as an army of doctors and nurses swarmed the room surrounding the bed with lifesaving equipment.

Quickly they looked at the monitor, which showed Chandler's heart had stopped momentarily, but for some unknown reason, had started itself and was now beating normally. Chandler opened his eyes briefly and looked out at the shadowy figures of the nurses and doctors standing over him. His eyes then closed and he slid back

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into his cocoon of silence. The fever had left him. The crisis had passed. He would survive.

\* \* \*

Erindel was wakened by the gentle slap of water against the bow. The sail ruffled above him as a cool breeze pushed the little craft forward. He blinked several times and looked ahead in the distance to see a brown rocky cliff rising out of the ocean signaling the end of his ocean trek. He smiled weakly as he loosened the rudder and summoned up the last of his strength to steer the craft to a small cove surrounded on both sides by the rocky cliff.

The boat came to a stop on a white sandy shoreline near a clear creek flowing into the bay. Erindel crawled from the boat and fell headlong into the cool fresh water and thanked God for the sudden deliverance. Once again, he felt he could complete his journey.

## CHAPTER 8

Springtime had broken through the frozen death-grip of winter. New life abounded on the North Dakota plains. Tall, barren trees put forth fresh green shoots and flowers blossomed into cheerful bouquets. Birds sang loudly in the tops of the waving cottonwood trees lining the driveway to the farmhouse the white Cadillac was nearing.

As before, Chandler was tightly wrapped in a blanket in the back seat. His mother was driving. Sarah was sitting to her right. The hospital stay had worn hard on everyone, and all were glad it was over. Springtime always brought new hope to weary travelers on the road of life. It is a gift from God to all mankind.

“Chandler’s birthday is in two months,” Sarah said. “I want to give him a big party and invite everyone.”

“I really don’t think Chandler would know the difference, but if you want to do it for yourself, that’s fine with me.”

It was the same conversation as always.

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“Chandler knows what’s going on, don’t you Chandler?” Sarah asked.

Chandler said nothing.

“Well sometimes he knows anyway,” Sarah said under her breath.

The car crunched across the gravel path and stopped near the rear door leading to the sunroom. Sarah went into the house to get the wheelchair and brought it to the car. Rachel and Sarah struggled to get Chandler out of the car and into the chair. He had gained twenty pounds while in the hospital and looked better than he had in years. Together they pushed him into the sunroom and propped him up in his chair facing the window. Now that he was home, all was as it had been.

“I’ll make some coffee. Will you be here for dinner?”

Sarah tucked a red plaid blanket around Chandler’s knees.

“I have to go to town for a while to sign some papers. Robert wants his half of the farm money so he’s bugging me to get the escrow papers finished.”

“Do you miss him?”

“I miss the good days. But the last year has been a real nightmare. I’ll be glad when it’s over.”

“Well, I’ll be glad to have you home again.” She poured two cups of instant coffee. “I’m sorry it had to work out this way, but you can start over. Maybe you can get that college degree you were hoping for and become a teacher.”

“That would be a long way off but it certainly is something to work for. Right now, I need to set some

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goals in my life. I need a purpose to keep on going.”

She set a cup of coffee on the table in front of Sarah and sat down.

“There’s something else I have to tell you,” she said. “I just found out about it last night.”

“What is it?” Sarah asked with concern.

She put two scoops of sugar in the black coffee and stirred it.

“Eric said he’s leaving. He got a job in Minneapolis at the John Deer factory. They’re going to put him in the engine shop because he knows so much about tractor motors.”

“So who’s going to work the farm?”

“I’m not sure yet. I could rent out some acreage to my cousin Ralph for a while. I’ll have to sell the equipment to pay off last years loan. I couldn’t bear to get another loan on top of everything else I owe.”

“I’ll help you mom. I’ll have some money left over from the sale of our farm, and I want to use it to keep daddy’s place going. You don’t plan to sell it do you?”

“No, not just yet. I still have faith God will see us through. He has a strange way of making things work out okay. We just have to keep believing.”

\* \* \*

Outside of the sunroom, a sunflower silently sprouted through the warm damp soil. No one - other than Chandler - was there to see it. Each day the flower grew another inch.

Silently. Quietly. Imperceptibly.

A bit of new life had sprung from the dead earth and

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would soon bloom forth with the magnificent yellow brilliance only a sunflower could display.

For a few moments each day, in the early morning hours, Chandler was vaguely aware of the sunflower and watched it grow. First, it was a small pale green tender sprout. Then it darkened and pushed out deep green leaves to catch the rays of the sun. Unseen roots wound their way deep underground to soak up the water stored in the rich loamy soil. It was a foggy, time-lapse motion picture series of events that transformed weeks into only a few seconds of time. Inside of Chandler, a seed of understanding also began to grow.

\* \* \*

Erindel camped on the shore for a few days to regain his strength. The land was rich with berries and roots he could easily pick and eat. He had plenty of fresh water from a flowing spring and the weather remained warm and balmy.

When his strength returned and his body was healed, he stocked up on provisions, filled his water skins and set out on his journey. His map showed a high rocky mountain range ahead that he had to cross to get to the windy desert beyond.

Erindel climbed a narrow path winding up the mountain; past tall stands of cedar and pine trees. Higher and higher he climbed until bent sturdy shrubs beaten and twisted by violent storms and icy cold weather replaced the tall stands of trees.

By evening, he had climbed higher and came to a rocky pass at the top of the ridge. The pass was covered

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with shattered granite and broken chunks of quartz. The only life at this elevation were a few hardy rodents that survived by nibbling on the tough ground-hugging greenery.

Darkness came swift and cold. Black clouds loomed over the high stony peaks in the distance. Biting wind whipped around him cutting through his clothing chilling him to the bone.

As soon as the sun dropped below the horizon, a violent storm crossed over the peaks and rained cold, heavy raindrops down on Erindel. There were no trees large enough to build a shelter and not enough wood available to make a hasty fire. He clawed his way to the top of the ridge hoping to find a cave to shelter in. A vicious wind turned the raindrops into sharp knives cutting into his face, hurting his eyes. A large rock to his left, jutted out of the granite wall making a canopy to protect him from above. Erindel staggered under the rock and hugged the wall tightly for safety. This was of little help because the parallel wind drove shafts of stinging rain directly at him.

A strong hand reached out from behind a small boulder and pulled him into the mountain. Erindel tried to pull away, but tripped on a stone and fell headlong into the blackness, cutting his hands on the jagged stones covering the floor. Regaining himself, he jumped to his feet, unsheathed his sword, and waved it in front of him at the unseen host.

“Who goes there?” Why have you attacked me?”

He slashed wildly at the gloom as he struggled to

climb back up the crumbling slope to the entrance. The sword hit a granite rock with a loud clang, sending vibrations down his arm. He lost his grip and dropped the sword. The sword clattered away across the stony ground. In fearful panic, he fell to the ground and dug around with his hands in an attempt to reclaim his only means of defense.

“Be of peace, be of peace,” a squeaky voice said.

“Who’s there,” yelled Erindel against the gloom.

“Be of peace, be of peace. No harm will come to you here.”

A torch came to life throwing yellow light throughout the cave. At the base of the torch was a wooden handle and the end of that a small bent hand that was attached to a crooked stubby arm that was connected to a tiny man who was deformed and bent. He leaned heavily on a wooden crutch supporting his right side because the foot at the end of his short leg was turned under and of no use for standing or walking.

“Who are you?” Erindel asked in shock.

“Who are you?” said the man kindly.

“I am Erindel from the village of Stillcreek. I am on a journey of great importance to find the Flower of Light to save my village from darkness.”

Erindel briefly told the man of his journey and explained his reason for being there. When he had finished, the man responded by tipping his broad rimmed leather hat and bowed deeply.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Erindel of Stillcreek.”

Pain filled his face as he bent over and seemed to get

stuck in the bent over position.

“Do you need help?” Erindel asked apprehensively.

“The help that I need, you cannot give,” the man answered with a grunt. “But if you would be pleased to straighten me out a bit, I would be ever so grateful.”

Erindel stepped forward and awkwardly took the man by his shoulders and waist to straighten him up. His hands felt the crooked bones of his bent shoulder and back- that seemed to all be in the wrong places. With a moan the man stood as upright as he was able and thanked Erindel for his help.

“Follow me to a dry portion of this cold rocky den and I will give you food and warm drink.”

Erindel shivered against the cold.

The torch sent odd shadows across the rocks as the man staggered down a narrow trail into the mountain. Erindel saw no other reasonable course of action so he followed close behind, stooping low to avoid bumping his head on the hard granite outcroppings suspended from the ceiling. After walking a short distance, they entered a thin passage opening into a small but cozy room. Red embers of fire sent a stream of smoke upward to the ceiling, then out through a narrow crack in the rock.

The walls and floor were covered with furry animal hides of bear, lion, deer and antelope. It looked like the home of a mighty hunter rather than the haven of a bent and broken little man. Erindel was curious but at the same time thankful for the hospitality. He still shivered in his wet clothing and hunched over the fire with his open hands almost touching the coals.

“What is your name,” Erindel asked.

“I am Knoll Degre,” the man said as he carefully place two precious logs on the fire. He busied himself with filling a blackened iron pot with water from a barrel and hung the pot on a spit over the fire. Each movement brought pain. Grunting and groaning, he went about his business of heating the water. Finally, he sat down on a pile of soft hides near the fire and breathed a sigh of relief.

“I am Knoll Degre. Of the great hunting tribe of the Boarmen who live on the western slope of the mountain.” He pulled a bear hide tightly over his shoulders.

“I thank you for your help. I would have frozen to death in the open. I never knew it could get so cold so fast.”

“There are many things in life we do not know - until we know them. You would not be able to experience what a fish feels when caught in a net, until you yourself are caught in a net. Then, and only then, would you be able to experience what the captured fish is feeling.”

“You mean to say you don’t really understand how a trial feels until it happens to you.”

“Exactly. Many people think they have all the answers, but in fact, they don’t even know what the question is. Yet they preach with pomp and piety about their wisdom and understanding, but lack a rudimentary knowledge of what they are speaking.”

Erindel looked at Knoll Degre’s bent body and pained expression.

“You are speaking from experience, aren’t you.”

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Knoll Degre sighed deeply.

“Yes, I suppose I am.”

He poured Erindel a hot drink and gave him a piece of dried venison. He told Erindel of his life.

“I was born of a mighty clan, in the village of Beartooth near the great waterfall pouring down from the mountain. The Boarmen are all strong, tall, mighty men of valor. When I was born I was crooked and bent, as I am today, and many of the clan wanted to cast me into the snow to die alone.”

“But the love of my mother saved me. She argued against the elders and pleaded for my life in a way that only a mother can do. I was her first and only son. In our culture, the eldest son is expected to be the strongest, and will one day rule over the family when the father dies. I was of no use to her. I could not hunt, or fish or cut trees for firewood. She knew I would be a burden throughout her life but in spite of my frailty, she pleaded my case and was able to get the elders to spare my life.”

“She told them that because I was a Boarman, I had a right to live. She said the Boarmen are the mightiest men of the earth and even a broken child, such as I was, is greater than the best the other tribes had to offer. The elders considered this carefully, and in their pride, decided to agree with my mother. Even though I would be a burden to the tribe, I was given a place of honor and a promise that as long as I lived with my tribe near the Fiery Mountains, I would be cared for.”

He reached forward and tossed a small log on the fire.

“That was many years ago. My mother, bless her soul,

died in the great flood and since that time all but one of the old elders had died. That elder kept true to his promise and made certain my needs were taken care of. When my mother died, I was left to hobble around the camp on my own. I was ignored and ridiculed by the hunters, and the woodsman had no good thing to say to me. Soon I was left to live among the old women, but even they would ridicule and taunt me.”

“The wise elder feared for my safety so he etched a proclamation in the Stone of Promise that rises out of the Black Lake next to the Great Falls. In the stone he wrote, ‘Let It Ever Be Known To All The Great And Powerful Men Of The Mighty Tribe Of The Boar, That Knoll Degre, Even In His Weakened State, Is Still A Male Of The Boarmen And Is Greater In His Weakness Than The Mightiest Of All Our Enemies. Let It Be Known That From This Day Forward That Knoll Degre Will Be Cared For Until The End Of His Days Of Breath And In His Old Age He Will Be Revered As An Elder Of Our People’.”

“This did not set well with much of the tribe but they were forced to obey the command because it was etched in stone by an elder. A short time later, the wise elder died and I was left without an advocate. The tribe was compelled to obey his command but there was much strife caused by the order, and the Boarmen were about to take up arms against one another. In the entire history of our people there is no record of any Boarman ever killing another.”

“I did not want to be the cause of bloodshed among my kin so I asked for a meeting to work out a

compromise. My enemies were reluctant at first, because of their pride, but the meeting was set in their camp, so they complied. The meeting lasted through the night, there was much debate, and many angry words were spoken. Many thought if I were allowed to stay it would cause others to become weak and avoid their duties when they became injured or sick. There is no room for weakness among the Boarmen and they feared I would cause of the ruin of our people.”

“Some spoke out on my behalf and offered to take me into their own home. If I were to agree to live in another’s house, I would be seen as weak of soul and would be given less respect than the family dog.”

Knoll Degre stoked the fire with a stick sending fiery sparks up to the ceiling.

“What happened next?” Erindel asked.

Knoll Degre leaned back on the skins and continued.

“I offered a compromise I felt all parties would agree to. I said I would be willing to leave the village and live alone in the Fiery Mountains under two conditions. First that my needs would be cared for by the hunters by providing me all that would be necessary for my survival. And second, that I be given the title of Elder and would be consulted in matters of great importance as the need arose.”

“This caused a long and tiring debate, but it was eventually agreed upon. I was given the title of Elder, and on the same day, I was escorted from the village and taken to this stony hovel inside of the mountain. No one has yet called upon my services as Elder, but I feel that

soon they will. The world has changed in many ways and the wisdom of the mighty is failing.”

Erindel felt the chill start to leave him as he sat on the warm furs near the fire. Outside a ghostly wind howled as the storm beat against the mountaintop.

“You must be miserable. You’ve lived a hard and lonely life.”

Knoll Degre ignored the statement and poured a second cup of broth adding two spoonfuls of sweet spices.

“What would you have done if I had not found you?” Knoll Degre asked.

“I probably would have died.”

“And what is it that saved you? Was it I? Or was it the fire that I made?”

Erindel thought about the question.

“I suppose both had a part in it. If you had not found me, I would not have come to the fire. And if you had not made the fire, bringing me inside would have been of no use.”

“Is the fire warm?”

“Oh, yes. It’s very warm.”

“Does the fire bring warmth and strength to your bones?”

“Yes the fire brings warm and strength and gives me hope to continue on.”

“So there is more to the fire than just the heat?”

“Yes,” Erindel said thoughtfully. “The fire brings light and heat to the physical world around it, but it also sends hope and energy into the soul.”

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“What part of the fire is the greatest? Is it the warmth it gives? Or is it the strength it brings?”

Erindel stared into the glowing embers and watched the flames dance above the red coals.

“It would depend on what I’m in need of. If I am cold on a winter night, then the warmth would be the greatest part. If I’m alone on the grassy plains where wild beasts roam, then the strength from the light would be the greatest part. The greatest part would depend on what my greatest need is.”

“And what part is the greatest now?”

“It is the warmth. For without it, I could not survive.”

“Is the warmth the greatest part because of what is, or because of what you lack?”

Erindel was confused by this line of questions.

“What do you mean?”

“When you were lost and alone in the icy storm, what did you need the most?”

“Warmth I suppose.”

“When you were warmed by the fire, were you grateful for it?”

“Very grateful. Without it I would have died.”

“When you were lost on the Mystic Ocean did you crave such a fire?”

“No, of course not. A fire would have done me no good. What I needed then was a cool drink of clean water.”

“And today,” Knoll Degre continued, “you were given a torrent of icy water. Did it please you?”

“Of course not. What I need now is a warm fire in a

dry cave.”

“So you are best pleased by the things that you do not have?”

“Yes.”

“And you are most thankful for the things that you crave the most?”

“Yes.”

“Than it is not what you have that makes life pleasing, but it is the thing that you need that bring pleasure.”

“I suppose.”

“Than let me ask you my friend, who is the most thankful. The one that has, or the one that has great need?”

“The one with great need of course. Because he is the one who is able to appreciate the gift when it finally arrives.”

“And if the gift does not arrive, is that one still thankful?”

Erindel gazed into the fire.

“I do not know.”

Knoll Degre answered.

“The one in need will know the difference between good and evil. Only through tears will we ever know happiness. Only when it is cold do we really know what warmth is. Only through hunger do we know what it is to be full. We are blessed in this life not by what we have, but by what we have need of. Only when we have need can we know the difference.”

Erindel was astonished at the wisdom of the little man. He was also humbled because he had considered

himself wise from his travels. Now he realized he was only at the beginning of his journey and knew nothing.

“I have been foolish to think myself wise,” he said weakly.

“Do not think yourself foolish. For by your lack of wisdom, you become wise. Solomon asked for wisdom because he knew it was what he did not have. If you do not see the void, it could not be filled.”

Knoll Degre threw another log on the fire and pulled the furry skins around him.

“It is time to sleep,” he said.

Erindel lay back on the soft hides near the fire and watched the red light dance on the rocks above him forming fiery shapes chasing each other across the rocks to the shadows. He felt alone, yet in the presence of a friend. He felt weak, yet strong. He felt lost, yet found.

His last waking thoughts were of Willow Glen. The memories brought sadness and joy to his aching heart as he remembered the love they shared and the promises they made to one another. He dreamed of a mighty ship that had set sail from the far side of the Mystic Sea to search for him. Willow Glen stood on the prow of the powerful ship cutting through great foaming breakers striving to push the ship back to shore. A forest king, with a gray sweeping beard, pulled at the rudder with mighty arms to hold the course fast. Willow Glen’s streaming hair turned cold gray as the raging salt air flowed around her.

“Erindel, Erindel, my lost lover of my soul. We must join together again to satisfy the aching void in my breast

with your love.”

The vision paled and he dreamed of a rainbow of flowers spreading before him to the ends of the earth. A mountain of flowers spread out in front of him filling his vision with red, yellow, orange, green and purple. Sweet, flowery aromas surrounded him, begging him to come forward. He dreamed he had found the gift lost so long ago.

The morning came, the dream faded, and the storm passed. Once again, the mighty Fiery Mountains weathered the worst nature had to offer and survived triumphant. By evening, the storm would return, but now the mountain stood wet, but shining victoriously above the desert below.

Erindel heard a sweet melody echo softly through the cave. At first, it seemed like part of a dream. Gentle notes of a lute floated carelessly on the air and touched his ears in a way that caressed his soul and gave him peace within. For a moment, he felt he was back at his village just waking up on his straw mat. He expected his mother to be busily working over the fire to prepare the morning meal.

Opening his eyes, he looked above and saw the fractured gray rocks far above him. A single shaft of light broke through a crevice on the ceiling and sprayed bright sunlight across the far wall. He blinked twice to clear his mind and remembered where he was.

Knoll Degre was warming himself in the morning sun at the mouth of the cave while he skillfully strummed on a colorfully decorated stringed lute. His bent fingers raced over the strings in perfect motion releasing the captive

music from the instrument with ease. Erindel had never heard notes so pure and clean. Each drop of music was of perfect pitch.

He heard no words, but the music told a story. Erindel let the notes fill his soul and they brought images of a tale of a mighty warrior who had ruled over his land for many years with truth and justice. The villagers loved and praised the king and came from miles around to give him homage and to hear his wisdom. The king was wise and gentle and freely gave to all who had need. It was a peaceful time for the kingdom and all who lived within the borders prospered.

In a distant inconsequential village at the edge of the kingdom grew a cruel man who lived for power. He hid his wickedness by pretending to be gentle and praised the wisdom of the king to all who were around him. But inside he hated the king and secretly plotted to one day overtake him. He gained the favor of the people by giving them gifts and dispensing counsel to all who would ask.

He told the people he had wisdom equal to the king so they did not need to travel to the far side of the kingdom to seek out the King's Counsel. The people thought this was a good thing, and if it were to save them many days journey, then it was a reasonable course of action. Soon the villagers on his side of the kingdom came to trust the wisdom of the wicked ruler more the wisdom of the good king. Many vile men liked what he had to say because he dispensed light punishment for crimes, tolerated evil, and promised great wealth to everyone.

The good people who also lived there were unhappy

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with the wicked ruler and moved their lodgings to the far side of the land where the good king still ruled. Likewise, many of the bad men living near the good king left their land and moved to the other side of the kingdom where their evil deeds were tolerated.

Thus, the kingdom was divided into good and evil, with the evil portion taking much of the land and controlling many of the wares that were needed for trade. A day came when the evil king decided he had the strength to win, so he waged war on the good king and his people. The war was long and cruel and pit brother against brother and sister against sister and father against son.

For many years, the war raged on destroying ancient forests and mighty fortresses. Hate filled the land on both sides.

But the wisdom of the good king proved to be mighty even in war, and in time, he was able to secure the victory but at a great cost. The good king did not want the evil ruler killed but the soldiers caught the evil king as he fled and they cut him in pieces. The good king cried when he heard the news because he believed the wisdom of the evil would one day be turned to a good purpose.

When peace came to the land, the good king, wiser and nobler from the experience, sat down and wrote of the war in song and verse.

The land God gave was good and pure  
All lived in peace-there was no fear,  
From the east came a vile wicked lord,

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He produced a loathsome sinful hoard,  
The wicked cried against the just,  
And screamed "I'll kill you, this I must."  
A bloody war raged on the land,  
But the good against the evil did stand,  
The vanquished foes returned dust,  
Blood-spattered swords fell to rust,  
But good and evil both have their place,  
And wicked would rule, despite God's grace.

The song of Knoll Degre gently floated through the cave, painting a picture in Erindel's mind. The simple, clean notes from that broken, little man gave Erindel hope and strength to go on with his journey. His trials were truly few in the light of all that others had to bare. It was not for him to choose his lot or to complain about the life God had given him. It was enough to carry on as best as he could and strive to do what was right.

Knoll Degre finished his song and Erindel realized there were eggs boiling on the fire and a hot pot of herb broth on a spit over the coals. Hunger took over his thoughts and he wholeheartedly gave himself to enjoy the meal prepared for him.

The music stopped and Knoll Degre limped back into the cave leaning heavily on his crutch.

"I see you have found the morning meal."

"Yes. Thank you very much. I enjoyed your song so much I did not want to disturb your playing."

"It is a sad song, of a time long ago when wise kings still ruled the land."

“Perhaps one day the wise kings will rule again.”

“Perhaps,” Knoll Degre simply said and went about the business of putting up the bedrolls. A strange sense of certainty was in his voice. For a brief moment, Erindel pictured Knoll Degre as a noble king seated in a golden chair in a large, ornate hall, wearing a scarlet robe. He blinked, and the image vanished.

When he had finished breakfast, Knoll Degre called him outside and led him to a high point on the mountain. Cold dry wind whistled past them on its way to the pale desert below.

“This is the peak dividing east from west. From here, you can see the next stage of your journey. You are approaching the end, but you still have to journey through great trials before your quest is complete. Little did you know you carry the hopes of all who dwell in the land and depend of the Flower of Light for peaceful spring rains and warm summers. I know that each year the mountain grows colder and the winters longer. Many have gone to search for the Flower of Light but they did not have the wisdom and vision to see it apart from all the others. The elders of your village were wise to choose you for the journey for you have a wisdom beyond your years.”

“I’m glad for your confidence in me. But I am still not sure of the way.”

Knoll Degre reached out a bent hand and pointed to a dark spot of land on the far side of the desert. A distant circle of green revealed the only life in the midst of hundreds of miles of empty, brown wasteland.

“That green fragment of life is the Oasis of The Ages.

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Its waters have refreshed many a traveler and seduced countless others by its beauty who came to a sudden end. I have heard it is a beautiful place indeed but it is also a place of death.”

“What do you mean? Is the water poison?”

“Just the opposite is true. The water is as sweet as nectar and the trees are always in bloom with tasty fruit.”

“Then what could be the danger?”

“The danger lies in the beauty of it. Travelers who pass through the Oasis of The Ages are seduced by the beauty and forget their quest. Whatever you do, do not fall asleep under the cool palm trees.”

“I will be careful,” Erindel answered. “And what is beyond the oasis?”

“One day’s journey beyond the oasis will bring you to the edge of the desert and you will arrived at the Valley of Fog. The valley is frequently bathed in dense, white fog so you must pick your path with great care. If you slip, you will fall to the rocky valley and will be forever lost.”

“A short distance away, you will smell the sweet perfume of many flowers and you will be lead by their fragrant odor to the valley below. When you reach the base of the valley you will find the Field of Many Flowers and you will embark on the final portion of your journey.”

“Will it be easy to pick put out the flower?”

“Not as easy as you think. The flowers are protected by an ancient spell and you are allowed only one choice. A beast lives veiled in the fog and only allows travelers to select a single flower. Be absolutely sure you make the right choice the first time.”

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Erindel had many questions to ask, but Knoll Degre urged him to continue on his journey.

“There’s no shelter on the rocky downward path so you must arrive at the desert floor by dark to avoid the nightly thunderstorms,” were his final instructions.

Erindel thanked his host for his wisdom and kindness and proceeded alone on his journey. As he made his way down the mountain, he heard a gentle tune from the lute sliding on the wind to warm his spirits. The tune brought images of a weary traveler nearing the end of a dangerous trek.

## CHAPTER 9

The bright, yellow sunflower stood tall in front of the window. Locked inside on the far side of the window sat Chandler in his wheelchair with a green cushion propped up next to him to hold him upright. Blank eyes stared out through the glass as a drop of saliva hung to his chin in anticipation.

If one looked at sunroom from the yard, the reflection of the flower on the outside of the glass glowed brightly in contrast to the ghostly figure of Chandler held captive behind.

Outside, new life abounded everywhere.

Beyond the green grass of the yard, on the far side of the barn, lay a thousand acres of rich green stalks of wheat that had broken through the soil and were inching towards the clean bright sun of spring. A nest of robins chattered loudly high up in the cottonwood tree next to the driveway. A tribe of ground squirrels happily played near the haystack to the right of the barn.

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Life had resumed again on the plains of the Dakotas, just as it had done each year for eons of time. Each year everything was new, just as the year before, and as the year before that. Subtle changes took place here and there, but they were barely perceptible to the human eye. The dead night of winter had held life captive; now it was time for renewal.

A small sprig of a tree had poked out through the dead carpet of leaves next to the mighty oak tree by the river. No one was there to see. Sprouting, it silently pushed through the decaying brown leaves. It stood in minuscule proportion next to the aged oak, but had, in its own way, established a foothold in the soil. Years would pass, as the small tree struggled to survive against cold, heat, drought and floods. In time, the mighty oak would pass away to become dust and the little oak would take its place and grow into a mightier oak because its root went deep in the soil in its quest to survive.

The drop fell from Chandler's chin, splashing on his robe. A light flashed in his gray eyes as a small spark of understanding gave his placid face a flush of red. The sunflower stood outside the window staring back at Chandler challenging him to fight for life. In unison, all of the vibrant new life stopped for a brief moment and looked to Chandler with new hope. They had endured the long icy grip of winter and had conquered death. In that brief moment, all of life had declared the victory and beckoned to Chandler to enter the battle for life.

The spark of understanding in Chandler's mind heard the call to arms and strove for the challenge. Then, just as

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quickly, it reared back in fear of the battle and hid behind the black wall of silence surrounding Chandler's conscience mind. It took with it the bright yellow image of the sunflower standing boldly in front of Chandler, declaring to him that his final battle was soon to be fought.

Chandler's eyes grayed again. Another drop of saliva rolled from his mouth and stopped defiantly on his chin.

"I almost have everything ready for Chandler's birthday party," Sarah said as she piled an armload of grocery bags on the kitchen table.

"I don't think Pastor Willard will be able to come. He came down with a fever last week that just won't let up. I so wanted him to be here. He has a way of communicating with Chandler like no one else."

The smell of chocolate birthday cake seeped from the oven and rolled around the house filling each corner and crack with anticipation. A breeze pushed the sweet aroma into the sunroom where the odor enveloped Chandler, begging for a response. Instinctively his mouth began to water and a sound from the distant past shattered his chosen silence.

Chocolate cake. Children's laughter. Vanilla ice cream. Brightly wrapped presents with blue ribbons and red bows.

Chandler was eight years old. His father - grinning from ear to ear - pushed a shiny red bicycle to the porch and Chandler's mouth dropped open and his eyes widened. A squeal of joy rang out as young Chandler left the unfinished chocolate cake and ran to take possession

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of the valued gift.

“What was that noise?” Sarah asked.

“What noise?”

“That noise from the sunroom. It sounded like Chandler.”

Sarah and her mother ran to the sunroom expecting to see Chandler in trauma, but instead, saw Chandler with eyes closed and a wide grin on his face.

His mother was shocked.

Sarah smiled and cried with joy.

She ran to Chandler and hugged his neck expecting him to respond in kind. But the spell had been broken. The smile fell from Chandler’s face and was replaced by the lifeless slack expression he was accustomed to. His neck muscles relaxed and he slumped to one side as always.

“Oh, mom! Did you see it?”

“I saw something but I’m not sure what it was.”

“Chandler smiled.”

“Probably just a spasm.”

“It was a smile. Chandler is starting to come back.”

Rachel wiped her hands on her apron and walked back to the kitchen.

“Probably just a spasm. Good thing he didn’t fall out of the chair and hurt himself. I’ll have to tell the doctor about it next time I see him.”

She walked back to the kitchen and silently resumed the preparations as if nothing happened. Sarah sat next to Chandler still hugging his neck. Her tears of joy had turned to sadness and confusion.

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“Oh Chandler, when will you come back to us,” she said to no one. “I know you can do it. I know you can come back if you want to. Try Chandler. Try.”

Chandler said nothing.

He sat motionless, as always, with a thick line of drool running from his chin to his shirt. A wet circle had formed next to his pocket. Sarah wiped her tears with the dishrag she held and then wiped the saliva from Chandler’s chin.

“I know you can do it,” she softly said as she wiped his chin. “Just try a little harder next time, will you?”

Chandler said nothing.

“I’d better get back to the kitchen. We have a big party planned for you and all of our friends will be there. I want you to feel free to have fun and say whatever comes to your mind...”

Chandler’s gray eyes stared at nothing.

“I’ll be in the kitchen if you need me.”

Sarah went back to the kitchen and continued the preparation. She said nothing more of the incident because she knew it would lead to a discussion about Chandler’s hopeless disposition which would eventually lead to an argument that would cause both of them to cry and feel bad about arguing. What they really felt sad about was Chandler. All their tears and all their prayers had done nothing to help him. Only Sarah held a waning hope he would recover.

The cake was baked and carefully frosted with white icing and decorated with yellow and red roses. Rachel had cooked a ham in the oven and sliced it up for sandwiches

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in a help-yourself sort of meal. A large bowl of her famous pickles sat prominently on the picnic table positioned on the grass under a tall elm tree. The table was covered with a white tablecloth decorated with black and white cow figures in a barnyard with a large red barn in the background. She always liked this tablecloth because it reminded her of their dreams of a perfect farm so many years ago. The farm turned out much like the picture - except for the cows - and she still missed her loving husband.

Sarah and Rachel put out the potato salad and fresh rolls and mayonnaise and mustard and all the things required for a great picnic lunch.

Aunt Rose was the first to arrive and brought a big bowl of pink Jell-O type desert known as “pink stuff”. She placed the bowl on center of the table and walked past Chandler who was in his wheelchair at the end of the table, and greeted Rachel.

“Well glory be,” she said, “it is a fine spread you have set out. How nice of you to remember Chandler’s birthday. How old is he now. Is it twenty? Or is it twenty-one?”

“Twenty-three,” Sarah said coldly.

“Well how about that. Who would have expected him to ...”

She caught herself in mid-sentence realizing what she was about to say.

“What I mean is,” she stammered, “well I just want to say that I am glad for all of you.”

Aunt Rose changed the conversation and told Rachel

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about the trouble she was having with her heart and went into great detail about all the intrusive tests she had to undergo.

Sarah bit her tongue hard and mumbled to herself. She loved Aunt Rose but hated her insensitivity toward Chandler. Sarah felt that Aunt Rose would be more pleased if Chandler would just go away somewhere and disappear forever. She pushed the thoughts from her mind and greeted other guests as they arrived.

Uncle Ralph and his wife Gertie and their three young daughters arrived. He had married late in life to a young German girl straight from Germany. She still spoke with a thick accent but was a lovely girl with high standards and she was a great mother. Sarah got along good with Gertie and decided to spend time visiting with her.

Dr. Jacobs arrived, alone, and brought a large store-bought pecan pie. A black beeper was clipped to his belt and he appeared ill-at-ease as if he were worried about a patient.

Several church ladies came bearing brightly wrapped gifts for Chandler and one brought a steaming pot of barbeque beans.

The table was set and Rachel called everyone over to start the meal. She looked down the driveway and saw a familiar green Buick turn into the driveway. She stopped talking as the car approached and soon all heads turned to the driveway watching the car as it drove through the open gate.

“It’s Pastor Willard!” Sarah said. “What’s he doing here? I thought he was too sick to go out.”

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Dr. Jacobs looked concerned and said affectionately, "I told that stubborn old coot to stay in bed."

The green Buick pulled into the yard and Sarah ran to greet him.

"Pastor Willard? Why did you come out? I thought you were supposed to be resting."

"I've been in bed long enough," he said as he pulled himself out of the car. "Besides, I haven't missed Chandler's birthday in twenty-two years. How can I miss it now?"

He coughed a deep gurgling cough and wiped his mouth on a handkerchief.

"You should be home in bed," Sarah admonished.

"You sound just like that Dr. Jacobs fella." He looked sideways at the doctor. "If I hav'ta be sick and miserable, I might as well be miserable with friends. At least this way I can keep my mind off my troubles."

He was pale and weak. Sarah held his arm and walked him over to a lawn chair next to Chandler. He sat down hard in the chair and coughed again. He took a bottle of cough syrup from his coat pocket and drank a swallow.

"You shouldn't be up you know," Dr. Jacobs scolded.

"I shouldn't be sick either, but I am. Don't worry doctor. I'll just stay a short while and then get on home to bed. I feel better today than I have in weeks."

He gave a weak, reassuring smile to the doctor and then turned his attention to Chandler.

"Well Chandler, how are you doing today?"

Chandler said nothing.

"Got nothin' to say, huh? Well I don't blame you.

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Sometimes I just like to sit quiet and think too.”

“Everybody,” Rachel shouted. “It’s time to start. Pastor Willard would you say grace?”

He put his hand on the chair rail and began to pull himself up.

“You just sit right there and say grace. God can hear you just as well if you are sittin’ or standin’. It don’t make no difference to Him.”

Pastor Willard was too tired to argue, he slumped back in the chair and coughed again before giving thanks for the food.

“Dear Lord. We thank you for the bounties you have given to all of us. We thank you for food and shelter and raiment. But most of all we thank you for your dear Son who came to live and die for us”

He coughed again.

“And I ask that you would bless this food to our bodies, and watch over us...”

He coughed coarsely ending the prayer abruptly with a wheezing “Amen”.

“Okay everybody. This is a help-yourself meal. The plates and forks are on this end. If you can’t find anything, just ask for it.”

The guests busied themselves loading up their plates and pouring drinks. The pastor sat next to Chandler and graciously took a plate of food from Rachel even though he wasn’t hungry. When she walked away, he put the plate on the grass under his chair and turned his attention to Chandler. The rest of the visitors were engaged in idle conversation about the current weather changes and of

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how the crop harvest would be in the fall.

“Chandler my friend,” the pastor said leaning close to Chandler. “Of all the people in my congregation, I think I have enjoyed your company the best.”

He paused, breathing deeply.

“I suppose that’s because you don’t ask for anything and you don’t expect to have to return a favor with a favor. You live life simply. Even as a young child you didn’t expect too much. You took life as it came, and made the best out of every situation.”

The pastor coughed.

Chandler stared forward. Motionless. Saying nothing.

“Sometimes when life gets too tough, we all want to escape into our own world. But Chandler,” the pastor said in a whisper, “if you can hear me, listen to this. Life is more than trouble and toil. There is the bright morning sunshine that reminds us of the first day of creation and there is the dark summer night that displays the wonder of the heavens that God made. God is in the cold winter snow and in the hot dry days of summer. He put us here to see all of the wonderful animals and plants he made. He created us, so we would enjoy His beautiful creation.”

Pastor Willard breathed deeply with great effort and went into a coughing fit. Sarah approached with a plate of food for Chandler.

“Are you sure you’re okay Pastor Willard?”

“Yes, I’ll be fine,” he managed to say between coughs. “I just need to rest for a moment.”

“You just sit back and relax for a while and I’ll feed Chandler some dinner. He always likes barbequed beans.”

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Sarah tucked an adult bib under his chin and shoveled small bits of food on a plastic spoon into Chandler's mouth. Automatically he responded with a chewing motion swallowing at least half of what was given to him. The rest fell out of his mouth and landed on the bib forming splotches of color. The pastor leaned back in the lawn chair with closed eyes, enjoying the warm sunlight.

Five minutes later Chandler stopped chewing, indicating he had enough. Sarah wiped his face with a napkin and gave him a drink of water. She then called everyone over to him so they could sing happy birthday. Aunt Rose and some of the others hated this part of the yearly ritual. To them it seemed foolish to sing a birthday song to a man who had the emotions of a rock. They sang anyway to please Sarah and gave it their best effort to make the song sound happy.

Sarah lit the candles and placed the cake in front of Chandler asking him to blow them out. Aunt Rose looked at Sarah with a sad expression and turned away. As always, Chandler did not attempt to blow out the candles or make any gesture that he understood what was happening. Sarah helped him by blowing out the candles and praised him as if he did it himself. She then placed the cake on the table and served slices for everyone. She left one piece in front of Chandler to give to him later. Pastor Willard was quietly asleep in the chair, so the group moved under the shade of the elm tree to avoid disturbing him.

The conversation drifted from topic to topic as the events occurring around the quiet midwestern town were

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discussed and evaluated in great detail.

Sarah heard a squeal and turned to see Chandler sitting in his chair with eyes closed and a silly grin on his face which was covered with chocolate cake. He smacked his lips together and squealed with child-like joy.

“Look at Chandler,” someone said.

All eyes turned to him in astonishment.

His face looked as if someone had smashed the cake against his mouth and swirled it around to make the biggest mess possible.

Next to Chandler reclined the pastor who was slumped over in his chair with an expression far too placid and pale. No raspy breathing could be heard. No cough sounded out. Chandler squealed foolishly as the lifeless body of his friend the pastor, sprawled in the chair at his side. Shock filled all the guests.

Dr. Jacobs was the first to act by running to the pastor in an effort to revive him. He placed him on the ground and started CPR. Soon others arrived to help, and Chandler was wheeled out of the way in disregard to allow room for the lifesaving attempt. Chandler was oblivious to the events and chewed his cake silently until the smile fell from his face and his eyes again stared forward with the same blank expression.

He drifted back to his own world where Erindel continued on his journey.

\* \* \*

It was late morning when he started down the side of the Fiery Mountains to the Windy Desert below. The rocks on this side of the mountain were a deep red color.

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They were burned red from a thousand years of burning white sunlight streaming down on them with scorching hot beams. The trail steepened as he descended, until footing was almost impossible. He did more sliding than walking down the trail, which was covered with fine sharp gravel.

It took two long hours to reach the loose desert sand below. Erindel was covered in fine, red dust with scratches on his legs and arms from the falls he took on the way down. The temperature had gone from a cold heart-chilling, blustery torrent at the top - to a seething, hot, dry desert wind at the bottom. The wind blows continually in the Windy Desert, moving sand piles from east to west and back to east again. Today a blast of wind had blown the yellow sand dunes to the edge of the mountain.

Erindel stood ankle deep in the loose sand and uncorked the leather flask that hung from a strap around his neck. He drank in a long cool drink and thought about the journey ahead. Hot, steady wind assaulted his unprotected face leaching moisture from his skin. While on the peak behind him, he had a clear view of the desert and the land that lay beyond. Now that he was at the desert floor he could only see a few miles in any direction. Squinting his eyes, he took his bearings from the sun and began the slow steady trek across the hot sand. He needed to find shelter soon or the mid-day sun would scorch him just like it scorched the red rocks on the mountainside.

He waded through the dunes for an hour before

reaching solid ground. Sweat poured from him and immediately evaporated in the dry, hot air. If he didn't find shelter quickly, he would faint from the heat. A short distance ahead he saw a brown object that looked like a small house. His spirits lifted at the sight and he stepped up his pace to seek the solace of shade. The closer he approached the object, the less it looked like a house. It was made out of wood but the wood was now gray from the scorching heat. As he came closer, he realized it was a wooden wagon turned on its side. One wheel slowly spun in the hot breeze making a sad creaking noise.

The welcome shade beckoned him onward as his feet began to stumble on loose stones littering the desert floor. The sun had risen to the apex and threw javelins of burning heat at Erindel's back. He stumbled forward and collapsed in the shade at the base of the weathered wooden wagon. Breathing hard, he closed his eyes and leaned back on the splintered wood in exhaustion.

After a few moments, he opened his eyes and surveyed his humble protection. To his right lay a deteriorated brown leather water flask left by a previous traveler. He looked to his left and saw a portion of a bleached white bone sticking out of the sand. He reeled back in disgust and found himself crawling backward away from the shade of the wagon into the noonday sun. The sun beat on him forcing him to return to the ancient graveyard.

Erindel did not want to know what kind of creature died in the shade of the broken wagon. He pushed loose sand over the exposed bones and cowered in the shade at

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the far end of the wagon as far away from the bones as he could. Taking a measured sip of precious water, he swallowed carefully and then rested his head against the dry wood. Closing his eyes, he drifted off into an uneasy sleep.

He awoke to the sound of a high pitch squeal that sounded like the voice of a child. Jumping to his feet he looked around and saw the wind had increased, causing the dry wheel to spin wildly as it echoed out a whining wail across the desert. The sun was falling over the high mountain peak to the west of him and the dry desert air immediately began to cool. Erindel took his bearings again and stood up to resume his journey to the far side of the desert. A sharp, pointed peak stood in the distance above the flat basin so Erindel used it as a point to travel to. When he reached the peak, he could climb to the top and survey the land he had to cross to reach the last leg of his journey.

Steadily, he trudged forward as the sun set behind him and the first stars of night came out to greet him. Sighting a bright red star in the night sky above the peak, he set his direction and plodded on toward the star. There was no way to judge distance in the darkness but he chose to travel in the cool of the night rather than wait for the bright daylight.

In a stupor of fatigue he stumbled forward through the night with his head empty of all thoughts other than the red star guiding him on. When the first glint of morning arrived on the horizon, he noticed he was now walking up a gradual incline. As the sun rose to meet the horizon, it

cast a black silhouette of a sharp peak jutting out of the desert floor ahead him. Dark red sunlight hugged the horizon beyond peak and streamed off in a steady arch in both directions.

Erindel plodded forward and finally reached the base of the black rock that had been shoved up through the desert floor by an ancient mighty force. He rested briefly at the base, ate a bit of food and finished the water in the first of two flasks he carried. His mind was numb from lack of sleep but he felt the need to survey the route he would take the following night.

Using hands and feet, he clawed his way up the steep crumbling rock often sliding back as far as he advanced. By the time he reached the top, the sun had risen high above the horizon. Triumphantly he stood at the very peak and looked across the miles of plains he had yet to cross. In the distance, he saw the green circle of the Oasis that stood out against the brown desert floor like a beacon of hope.

Erindel smiled and rasped a hoot of joy through his parched lips. Hot wind pushed up from the desert floor whipping past his ears sucking the remaining moisture from his flaky skin. He crawled a short distance down the side of the mountain and found a shallow crevice to shelter himself in during the daylight hours. He felt like a fearful reptile flattening out its body to sneak into a tiny hovel for safety. He was thankful for the shelter and immediately fell into a deep sleep.

On the evening of the second day of the journey he again set out for what he hoped to be the last leg of the

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journey. Carefully he looked across the desert and again set his direction by the bright red star appearing at sunset. There was no way to properly gauge the distance, but he hoped to arrive at the Oasis by sunrise. His second water flask had only a few sips left and there was no place to refill it along the way.

Just as he did the night before, he trudged on thoughtlessly, with the only sound coming from the steady shuffling of his own tired feet as he moved forward at an imperceptibly slow pace in the direction of the bright red star. His head nodded briefly and he found himself standing motionless facing east as the sun broke through the night.

Looking behind, he saw the black mountain peak in the distance looking larger than it should have been. He had fallen asleep while walking and lost several hours of easy travel. Now he was forced to continue on in the hot sun of day, longing to reach the Oasis before he died of exhaustion. Erindel remembered the warning given by Knoll Degre about the enchantment of the Oasis and promised himself he would only stop at the outskirts of it and would only stay for the time it would take to get a few hours of rest before continuing on.

The sun beat down hard on him and the wind picked up handfuls of sand and threw it in his face. He pulled his cape up over his face leaving only a small slit to see through. Now he regretted he had fallen asleep but knew he had no choice but to travel on. The land was as flat as the bottom of the huge cast iron pot his mother cooked the meals in, and it was just as hot. The flat, rock-hard

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ground spread out in all directions without any sign of tree, hill or dwelling. A few tired bushes dotted the landscape but they were mostly thorns and couldn't be used to make a shelter.

He stopped once to try digging a hole for refuge but the ground was baked hard as rock and his sword would only scratch a few inches below the surface. The effort needed to excavate a shelter large enough for protection would exhaust him more rapidly than the heat of the sun. He decided to continue onward with hope of reaching the Oasis before the sun defeated him.

His head swam in confusion and his breath rasped out of his mouth in hot, short gasps like dragons fire. Only the thought of Willow Glen was able to pierce his consciousness as he imagined her walking in front of him, calling to him to continue on. Hours passed without notice until he stumbled on a clump of green grass and fell forward into a shallow pool of clear water bubbling out of the ground.

# CHAPTER 10

“There’s nothing good about dying,” Sarah said as she pinned her black hat to her hair.

“All of us have to go sometime.” Her mother carried the cups from the table to the sink. “Are you about ready? We shouldn’t be late to Pastor Willard’s funeral. He hated for anyone to be late for church. If we’re late to his funeral, he’ll come back and haunt us for sure.”

Sarah attempted a smile and adjusted the hat in the mirror.

“I wonder if Chandler knows he will never see the pastor again?”

“Only the Lord knows what that boy is thinking. He’s been acting mighty strange lately.”

“Maybe a shock like this can bring him out of it,” Sarah said hopefully.

“Or maybe send him deeper.”

They finished getting ready and Rachel took a plate of cold cuts out of the refrigerator. Pastor Willard didn’t have any living family, so the ladies were going to hold a memorial service at the church building. Afterward, Pastor Willard would be laid to rest in the small cemetery behind the sanctuary. The elders of the church hired a

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stonemason from Bismarck to make a large upright plaque with an open bible carved on it to place at the grave-sight. The verse on the stone Bible read, “Remember now thy creator in the days of thy youth.”

Chandler sat in the sunroom, facing the yellow sunflower blooming brightly under a translucent sky. His eyes dimly focused on the flower. This humble flower was important in some way but he couldn't remember why. Back in his younger days, when life was simple, he would race across the green lawn from dandelion to dandelion, smelling each one. Dandelion flowers smell like fresh air and green weeds and summer sun all mixed up together to form an earthy scent.

There were other flowers in the garden that smelled better but young Chandler liked the dandelions the best. When he was young, he often leaned over to pluck a large yellow flower from the deep green stalk and held it close to his eyes to examine it.

It was plain. Simple. Yellow. Alluring. And displayed its beauty; asking nothing in return.

Chandler loved dandelions. They represented the pure naivety of youth he had lost so long ago. His unconscious mind craved for that childlike feeling to return. The safety of sitting on his mothers lap. The warmth of a wood fire on a snowy night. The quiet of the early morning just before sunrise. The lone beautiful song of the mockingbird in the misty hours of morning. Star gazing on a peaceful, moonless, summer night.

A part of Chandler wanted to experience those feelings again. A larger part of him was afraid of the

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unknown evils that roamed the earth, seeking to destroy all in their path. The fear of evil was still stronger than the desire for joy. The foggy impressions of the hazy sunflower melted away and he crawled back inside his mind to hide behind the dark veil of silence.

\* \* \*

Erindel rested in the cool water letting it flow over his tired body. Just a short distance away, beyond a sandy knoll, he saw tall palm trees at the edge of the Oasis of the Ages. It truly was beautiful.

The lush, green palm fronds waved in the gentle breeze calling for him to come to the oasis. Luxuriant green vegetation, ripe with red fruit, grew everyway under the palms. Above the trees rose a craggy cliff with a gentle waterfall cascading over the precipice to a pool of sparkling, blue water below. Erindel heard the music of the water and craved to enter the Oasis and taste of the sweet ripe fruit. The splashing water summoned him, begging him to come and take freely of all the bounties that grew there. In the sounds of the waterfall, he heard the gentle call of Willow Glen asking him to join her in eternal peace and tranquility - away from the evil world that surrounded them.

Erindel found himself enamored by the beauty of it all

“I am tired,” he said to himself. “It has been a long journey and I do deserve a rest.”

He made up his mind to go into the oasis to take of the free abundant bounties. He climbed out of the small pool of water and started up the last sand dune before the oasis. When he arrived at the top of the dune, the true

beauty of the place overwhelmed his senses.

Flowers of every color, size and shape grew everywhere. Their sweet scent surrounded Erindel, pulling him toward them. He was enchanted by their beauty. Everything he saw reminded him of peace, of tranquility, of joy, of paradise. The weariness of the journey fell away as he hastened down the dune toward the delight that awaited him.

All thoughts of the journey left him. He could remain in this Garden of Eden forever with all his needs cared for. There was no need to continue on. Erindel was hypnotized by the Oasis and thought of nothing but the joyful peace awaiting him there.

Then a gentle tune wound its way to the forefront of his mind. The pure sound of the lute invaded his peace and reminded him of his true journey. The playful notes told him of a pilgrim on a long journey to complete a most important task. The whole world waited with anticipation as the traveler neared his destination to find a prize of great worth.

“Pilgrim, pilgrim, travel on,  
Soon your struggles will be gone,  
Travel on to your destined way,  
Be ever fearful of where you lay,  
Moments of bliss may fill your soul.  
Keeping you from your stated goal.  
Shun unfitting pleasures, easy to take,  
And ever your goal your purpose make.”

Erindel stopped at the edge of the Oasis of the Ages

and struggled to clear his mind of the tempting desires. The words of Knoll Degre warning him to stay out of the Oasis echoed in his mind. Erindel stood at the edge of the lush green oasis as a battle of wills raged inside of him. A part of him wanted to enter the oasis and live out his days void of trouble and stress. Another part knew he was on a mission of great importance and must resume the journey to find the Flower of Light.

His eyes fell on an unusually lovely pink flower blooming on a high bush just a few feet inside the oasis. Erindel had never seen a Flower of Light in bloom.

*“Perhaps this is it?”* He thought to himself. *Why do I need to journey any further?*

He stood motionless and studied the bright pink flower waving to and fro in the peaceful cool breeze flowing through the palms. A large orange and black spotted butterfly landed on the flower and happily drank the sweet nectar from the flower. Erindel waited for it to finish feeding before advancing any further.

The butterfly finished the meal, walked to the edge of the flower and gently stretched its delicate wings in the sunlight. It sat motionless for a second, shuddered once and fell dead to the ground.

Erindel stepped back in fear realizing this seeming paradise was a deathtrap for him. If he ventured in and tasted the fruit, he too would end up like the pretty butterfly which now lay helplessly on the ground. The butterfly had tasted of the sweetness the oasis and paid for the pleasant nectar with its life.

Shaking his head to clear his mind, Erindel stepped

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back into the desert and looked away from the Oasis. A hot blast of dry desert heat hit him flat in the face as he looked at the barren, lifeless land before him. From behind, the oasis again called for him to return but he held his hands to his head and shut his ears against the pleas as he staggered into the desert away from the tempting, peaceful, cool shade.

In sharp contrast to the lush greenery of the oasis, the desert looked even more inhospitable and contemptuous. Erindel hated to leave the tranquility of the oasis, but he knew he must get on with his journey if his village were to survive.

Blindly, he set out northward to make a wide arch around the oasis to the Valley of Fog waiting on the other side. Knoll Degre gave very specific instructions about this leg of the journey. Erindel felt he would soon be near the end.

\* \* \*

Sarah dressed Chandler in a black suit that was stored in the closet for years. His mother bought it for him to wear to his high school graduation where they gave him an honorary diploma. The principal didn't want to go through with it, but Sarah insisted and managed to convince him it would be a good political move. At the graduation hall, she proudly wheeled him up the ramp to the school stage and graciously accepted the diploma for him. After the ceremony, many people came up to congratulate Chandler and promised Sarah they would visit often. No one came.

Now, Sarah carefully dressed him and tied the black

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tie as well as she could.

“Chandler it’s a sad day for all of us,” she softly spoke through a tear. “Pastor Willard was a good man who will be missed. He was one of the few people who seemed to really care about you. He always believed you would come out of it one day. He was a good friend to you. I wonder if you realize he won’t be coming back?”

Chandler said nothing.

“Mom doesn’t think I should take you to the funeral but I insisted. Some people are blaming you for Pastor Willard’s death. They say that if you hadn’t of had that silly birthday party, he wouldn’t have come and he would have recovered. I suppose they’re really mad at me because I’m the one who gave you the party, but they don’t dare say it to my face. Dr. Jacobs said nothing more could be done for Pastor Willard and he would’ve died soon anyhow.”

She propped him up in the chair and wheeled him outside to the Cadillac.

“I still blame myself though. Now every time I look across the yard to the elm tree, I will remember that is where he died.”

Sarah parked the wheelchair next to the open rear car door and lifted him into the back seat. Chandler had lost weight since he returned home making him easier to lift. She strapped him securely in and closed the door.

“Are you ready to go?” Rachel asked as she walked out of the sunroom door carrying the plate of cold cuts.

“Chandler is dressed and in the car. Did you remember to bring the card we bought?”

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“I have it right here in my purse. We had better hurry or we’ll be late.”

She started the car and drove down the dusty road to drive the fifteen miles to town where the old white church building stood. The parking lot was almost full when they arrived with a shiny black hearse parked in front of the church by the steps. Pastor Willard’s casket had already been wheeled into the building and displayed in front of the pulpit. The funeral attendants, attired in cheap charcoal black suits, stood outside smoking cigarettes and joking. For them, it was just another job.

Sarah and her mother struggled to push Chandler up the steps and took a seat at the rear of the church building. The pianist slowly played “The Old Rugged Cross” on a tired organ in a funeral dirge fashion. The steps surrounding the pulpit were dotted with short stands containing colorful flower arrangements. Two waist-high sprays of white roses, carnations and lilies framed each end of the casket. The combined flowery fragrances filled the small aging church with sweet memories of their departed pastor and friend. A circuit pastor from Minot went to the pulpit and began the sermon.

\* \* \*

Erindel was tired and weak by the time he reached the far side of the Oasis. Just as Knoll Degre had told him, he found a fog-shrouded valley at the edge of the desert. He could not see the base of the valley but heard the pleasant sound of a river rushing across the rocks far below. Erindel tightened his pack and started to walk downward on the only trail into the canyon. The narrow rocky path

hugged a steep cliff to his left. To his right, he could see a few feet into the thick fog and saw the upper portion of a steep cliff that extended to the valley floor.

Carefully, he judged his steps as he descended deeper and deeper into the Valley of Fog. The cool moist air was a pleasant change from the hot dry desert he just left. He wondered about the strange phenomena that allowed such a place to exist at the edge of a barren desert.

As he walked, he thought of what lie ahead of him. Soon it would be time for him to fulfill his mission by selecting the right flower to bring back to his people.

*What color might it be? Will it be big or small? Will I pick the right one?*

Lost in thought, he was not watching his footing and his right foot stepped on a loose stone that slipped beneath his foot. Erindel fell off the trail and twisted wildly to grasp anything that would support him. He clasped both hands on a sharp rock jutting out from the trail but the rock came away and Erindel went sliding helplessly down the side of the rocky cliff.

Anticipating the worst, he kept his feet in front to slow his fall and reached out to grab small bushes growing out of the steep bank. His pack fell off and rolled to one side and his sword fell out of its sheath and clattered noisily in another direction. The cliff tapered outward and Erindel felt soft cool grass sliding under him. The thick fog shrouded the valley concealing what lay ahead of him. The slope gradually tapered off to a gentle arch slowing his progress until he came to a complete stop.

Shaken and afraid, he lay back on the cool grass to catch his breath. A few loose stones clattered down the slope behind him until the last stone found a resting place and the silence of the still, foggy valley muffled the air. He looked to his left and noticed a thinning of the fog allowing the sunlight to shine through. Standing up, he shook off the dirt and limped toward the light, hoping to see the end of his journey. He walked out of the wall of fog into a broad flat meadow sparkling with flowers of every color, size and shape. The sweet scent of ten thousand flowers filled his nostrils and boosted his spirits.

Bright sunlight streamed softly down giving life and strength to the teeming growth. Everywhere he looked, he saw butterflies of every hue, dancing from flower to flower in search of nectar. Blue, green and red humming birds buzzed from blossom to blossom drinking in the sugar-rich liquid.

This nectar was sweeter and more wholesome than that of the Oasis and all the creatures thrived on its life-giving power. Colorful ground feeding birds chirped gleefully as they pecked away at seed that lay on the valley floor. He had arrived at the end of his mission of great importance and stood tired and alone at the edge of the Field of Many Flowers.

Erindel had only one task left to do. He must select the correct flower to bring back to his people. Erindel felt the weight of the task heavy on his shoulders. Knoll Degre told him he had to select the correct flower the first time and would not get a second chance. He also warned him of a large winged creature living in the fog bank at

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the edge of the meadow to guard the flowers from pilferers. The creature would allow each traveler to pick one flower, and one flower only, or be faced with a cruel and certain death.

Erindel had seen many strange things on his journey and did not want to test Knoll Degre's accuracy in this matter. Slowly and carefully he ventured into the meadow searching out the correct flower. To his left was a large bush containing tiny red flowers with chartreuse pollen stems. To his right, a plant with thick, green leaves and an array of bright orange and purple flowers releasing a strong, sweet coconut scent. In front of him stood a low growing plant with long thorns and leafy rust colored flowers that gave out the scent of cinnamon.

The varied assortment of flowers stunned and confused Erindel. *How will I be able to determine which flower is the correct one?*

The sound of falling rocks echoed behind him where the trail from cliff spilled into the valley. Quickly he turned and reached for his sword which was not there. Ducking down behind the large bush, he suspiciously eyed the trail and saw several dark figures appear in the fog. As they neared, he could make out five figures. One was small and slender and reminded him of Willow Glen.

When the group walked out of the fog into the clear sunlight, Erindel immediately recognized them as the forest people of the Forest of Glendale. The slender figure was in fact, Willow Glen.

Erindel jumped for joy and ran through the meadow toward his one and only love. Of all things he had

expected to see, Willow Glen was the last.

“Willow Glen,” he yelled. “Willow Glen my love.”

“Erindel my sweet,” she answered.

He fell into her arms and held her tightly.

“Why are you here?” he asked in astonishment. “How did you cross the desert? Why did you leave the forest? I thought the fire consumed you.”

She touched his lips with two fingers and answered briefly.

“When I saw you fall from the cliff into the fire, I thought you died for sure. But word came from our forest neighbors that you were seen going into the cave of the ages. A search party was immediately sent out to find you, and against my father’s wishes, I insisted to come along.”

“But how did you find me?”

“Your trail was not hard to follow. Everywhere you traveled, you became the topic of discussion and all we met were willing to help us find you.”

“Now that you are here, you can help me find the Flower of Light. There are so many wonderful flowers to choose from. How will I know which it is?”

Willow Glen gazed across the thousands of flowers and turned to Erindel.

“It is not our task to find the flower. You have been given an honored mission and it is for you to finish it. No one can select the flower, but you.”

With slumped shoulders, Erindel looked across the field in bewilderment.

\* \* \*

## CHANDLER

The funeral service for Pastor Willard was plain and simple, befitting of his character. The sermon was about the beauty of heaven, and all present at the church were happy for the old pastor because he was in a better place. He spoke of Jesus, who is the light of the world to bring lost souls from the dark path of loneliness into the sunlight of His love. He spoke of loss and of finding comfort from God's loving Spirit in times of deepest sorrow. He talked of the joy we gain from loving others. He talked of the Son of God who lay down his life so others would live.

Kind words of comfort and joy, and of finding peace, floated through the air into the listening ears of those in attendance. The visiting pastor finished the short sermon and stepped back as the local school choir began a rendition of "The Halleluiah Chorus".

Rachel cried as they sang. Sarah held back tears and attempted to smile when she thought about the glory of heaven and imagined Pastor Willard in paradise, standing straight and healthy with a broad smile on his face.

When the song was finished, the visiting pastor walked away from the pulpit and an uneven line formed in front of the casket so the friends of Pastor Willard could say their final farewell.

One by one, the church members viewed their pastor for the last time and exchanged hushed, reassuring words. Sarah was at the end of the line, pushing Chandler's wheelchair. Rachel did not like this part of the service, so she left the building to help with the preparations in the fellowship hall.

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Sarah and Chandler finally had their turn to see their pastor and friend for the last time. Sarah cried softly to herself as Chandler sat silently in his chair in front of the open casket.

A vision came to Chandler as if it were a picture at the end of a long tunnel. He saw the hazy face of Pastor Willard as he lay on the soft, white satin cushion in the brown wooden casket. Even in death, his face showed the compassion he felt for others while he lived. A solemn peace rested on his visage that not even the cold grip of death could steal from him.

Chandler saw the face, and for the first time in many years, a distant, cloudy picture of who he was and all that had happened to him seeped into his placid mind.

\* \* \*

Erindel gazed across the field looking left and then right seeking for the correct flower. He could make only one choice. It had to be correct. He must have the strength and faith necessary to make that selection. No one could do it for him.

He walked through the field, carefully examining each flower as the anxious contingent of forest people silently followed. Stopping at a purple flower that reminded him of a river orchid, he turned to look at Willow Glen, hoping to find the answer in her eyes. Her flowing hair took on all the colors of the field and swayed in the breeze in a rainbow of ever changing color. Willow Glen tenderly returned his gaze, but no answer followed. The choice had to be his.

He continued on, reviewing all the flora, and returned

a third time to a striking bush that instantly caught his eye on his first pass. The chest-high bush oozed life and charisma, as it stood flawless above the other foliage. He stopped, and with a quivering hand reached out for a single large translucent, bright red flower on the lively, healthy, green plant. Sweet scents of honey and strawberries wafted up from the radiant pollen stems. Erindel hesitated and looked around. Of all the plants in the field, this stood out as the most life giving. The plant gleamed brightly in the sun as shards of sunlight reflected off the sticky droplets dripping from the stem like shining diamonds.

*Surely, this must to be the Flower of Light.*

Cautiously, he reached for the blossom and grasped the stem just below the flower. Tightening his fingers, he pulled on the stem, but stopped when his eye caught a little yellow flower blooming on a flat jade green plant on the ground in the shadow of the bush.

Erindel released his grasp and looked at the flower on the ground. On it, he saw several small, bright, yellow blooms hugging the petite, unassuming, alluring green plant. Next to the blossoms, resting on the older stems, where several puffy white orbs of glistening seeds.

“Of course. That’s the answer,” he whispered. “It’s not the flower I need. It’s the seeds. With these seeds we will cultivate the whole countryside with flowers.”

Confidently, Erindel leaned over and reached for the plant, plucking a single stem containing a delicate cluster of white, puffy seeds. Some of the seeds escaped and floated away in the breeze. Each floating seed gave out a

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faultless, white light that shone brightly in the mid-day sun. He had made the right selection. Erindel held the seedpod high above his head and Willow Glen and the others shouted for joy at the victory. Willow Glen's hair sparked like fireworks reflecting the pure, bright rays from the Flower of Light.

\* \* \*

Chandler blinked several times clearing the stars from in front of his eyes and straightened himself in the chair. His limbs were weak from lack of use, but he felt the warm strength of new life returning to his body.

He looked sadly at the face of his friend the pastor and softly said, "Out of the death of one, comes the life of the another."

Sarah turned to him in shock.

"What did you say?"

Chandler turned his head to look at her, and gazed into her eyes with clear vision. He simply said, "Sarah. I'm back."

End





# ERINDEL AND WILLOW GLEN

By

Chandler

*Written as narrated to his friend, Byron*

Erindel safely tucked the seedpod in the satchel being careful to preserve the delicate seeds. The fog lifted to reveal the entire breadth and beauty of the Field of Many Flowers. Bright, new sunlight burst across the valley illuminating a glorious rainbow of vibrant colors.

Willow Glen ran to him and jumped in his arms hugging him tightly around his neck. “I knew you possessed the wisdom to select the correct flower.”

Erindel returned the hug and twirled her around while standing in the center of the field. Above them, a dark winged creature sailed across the sky with wings swishing against the air. The sentry circled high above the field keeping watch over the new visitors.

“Don’t touch anything!” He forewarned the small contingent of forest people. As the words left his mouth, a young man leaned over and reached for a feathery pink flower growing on a dark green bush close to the ground.

“Stop!” the forest king ordered. The young man stopped all movement and stood as a statue.

“The winged creature you see above will swoop down and tear us to pieces if we pick another flower,” Erindel said.

“This is a beautiful but dangerous place,” the king said admiring the wide assortment of flowers. “I too felt the desire to take some seedlings back to our forest. But we must be content with the Flower of Light. It alone is of more value than a thousand bouquets.” He stepped forward in regal fashion as his dark green traveling cloak flowed around him in silky swirls.

He approached Erindel and smiled.

“I have heard much of you from my daughter.”

She smiled and looked at Erindel.

“And I agree that you possess wisdom beyond your years.”

“I’m happy you came,” Erindel replied. “It was an arduous journey and I welcome your company on the return passage.”

\* \* \*

### **CHANDLER’S STORY: *As told by Chandler***

Erindel helped me find the light I desperately lacked. The pain of my father’s death crushed my spirit to a dry, withered empty skin. The gangs of Chicago and my cousin Eric stomped out any signs of life and left me empty, lonely and afraid. I remember on many occasion sitting alone in the corner of my room hoping to become invisible.

In those days, school psychiatrists and family counseling was a new science and help was not easy to

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find. At that time, I lived in dark Chicago, walking in a cloudy haze of depression. I was briefly joyful at my return to the farm, but once there I was reminded of the loss of my father at every turn.

The swing set he built for us. The handmade cane pole I used for catching catfish. The wooden chest of drawers he made that stood at the end of my bed. The house, the barn, the sheds, the fences, the cleared fields—everywhere I saw remembrances of my departed father.

I could never make myself climb out of the car when we went to visit him at the cemetery. Mom was doing the best she could, and now I understand she was hurting worse than me.

Being a quiet and obedient child, I was left on my own as dark thoughts festered in my growing mind. The mind has a way of focusing on whatever it is you are thinking of, and in its own marvelous way, will channel all its energy to that purpose. It works great when painting a masterpiece, designing a bridge or creating a new way of building skyscrapers. But when the mind turns inward, focused on a destructive path, it is equally as proficient.

The day in the loft was only one of many. There was also the dunk in the river, the arm twisting, the hair rubbing, the Charlie horses, the match burns, the shoe stealing, as well as an assault of hurtful words. Dumb, Stupid, Ugly... with a few foul expletives added.

This story is supposed to be a joyful story about a beautiful journey of two lovers who travel back to their home carrying a glorious prize that will make the world

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happy again. But as Knoll Degre said, “we will never understand happiness unless we know sorrow.”

The day they found me catatonic on the grass was a particularly brutal day for me. My mind had decided there was no way out except to fight back and win, or die trying. I faced Eric alone and told him I was not going to take his bullying anymore. He laughed and stuck his cigarette in his mouth, wrapped me in a headlock and blew smoke in my face until I could barely breathe. Trapped and defeated, I quit.

I had had enough. The world darkened like a camera lens closing shut. First, my peripheral vision went and I saw the house turn to black and the barn dissolve into empty darkness. Next the tall trees, then the garden, the grass, the blue sky, Eric’s face, the hurtful smoke- then nothing. I don’t know where I went. I just wasn’t there anymore, which was exactly what I wanted.

The journey back started with fresh bread, baking in the oven. A picture of Jesus, the Bread of Life. Occasional pleasing sounds filtered through. Music. The pastor’s voice. Good thoughts and feelings from others. But I still feared the real world, until I met Erindel.

Joyful, naive, harmless, bold, optimistic Erindel. His journey for the Flower of Light lead me on my journey to find the True Light. Jesus, The Light of the World who heals broken hearts and sets prisoners free from their self-made chains.

\* \* \*

Erindel and Willow Glen walked hand in hand as they journeyed home, keeping each other on a safe path

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and helping one another when they fell. Along the way, they planted Flower of Light seeds to bring fair springs and gentle winters throughout the land.

Knoll Degre warmly welcomed them to his furry cave. When word got to the Boarmen village that he possesses a seed from the Flower of Light, he was restored as the Grand Wise Elder and lived out his days in the village.

The old dockmaster was pleased the Flower of Light was found and hoped for better days of prosperity when many travelers would visit his weathered dock.

Bobbin leapt for joy when he saw them approach silhouetted by the evening dusk. The one seed he was given, gave him the authority to convince his tribe to move back into the light. Most of them did, but a stubborn contingent of die-hard obsidian cutters refused to believe wild beasts were no longer devouring villagers on the plains. They remain buried in their dark but beautiful underground caverns to this day, still fearful of nonexistent beasts.

Erindel avoided Father Earth. The thought of him always made him feel weary and afraid. Father Earth was right, one day they would meet again. And that is why, at all times, Erindel carried with him a single seed from the Flower of Light.

He steered clear of the Tree Gnomes. Their dark souls were beyond restoration and they had no desire for the Flower of Light.

As the old raft keeper silently ushered them off on the far side of the Sage River he held out his wrinkled

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hand for a token. Smiling, Erindel dropped a delicate seed into the man's outstretched hand. The seed burst to light, sparkling brightly in center of his palm. For the first time in many decades, the raft keeper's eyebrows lifted and his face moved into a wide smile as a moist tear filled the corner of his eye.

Willow Glen accompanied him to Stillcreek where they received a victor's celebration and a noisy festival that lasted two weeks. Boron, Simeon, Fairbred and Moorfield recited the "Humble Promise of Lifetime Service" to Erindel, promising to be his servants forever. To this day, he has never asked anything of them.

Great ceremony was made of planting the remaining seeds throughout the land. All the villagers prayed and waited until they saw the first tiny sprouts emerge from the soil in spring. The joy bells rang and the village erupted into raucous joy and they danced until they could no longer stand.

The Flower of light still grows in the land, dispelling foreboding thoughts and chasing away cold dark winters of the soul.

Erindel and Willow Glen lived happily ever after.

End

## WRITERS NOTES:

### *Why I Wrote Chandler.*

Chandler's journey started as a dark day on a cold fall evening. Life had thrown painful arrows at my soul; with emotional anguish brought on by physical pain day and night. I wanted to give up.

Sleepless nights were broken by stabbing pains and horrible nightmares. Sleep deprived nights, lead to restless days filled with dark thoughts and foreboding images of a failed future. Months and years of incessant anguish sucked all the good endorphins and healthy, friendly chemicals from my brain.

I felt as Chandler felt. Alone. Afraid. Uncertain. Fearful. All the while, loving family members willing to support me, and patient enough to put up with me in my weakened state surrounded me. All the goodness in the world was not enough to deter the dark thoughts filling my mind.

Silently, I suffered the onslaught of black emotions as I lay back in my bed wishing to escape the pain and the sad feelings. I wished to fade away into an emotionless existence to protect myself from the world.

Thus, Chandler was born. In a flash of time, I saw Chandler propped in his tattered wheelchair facing the farmyard; with the world quietly waiting outside. Unable to move or think, Chandler was insulated from the pain, but also shackled away from the good things in life.

He needed a way out. I needed a way out. His

journey began as my journey began. Together we traveled, experiencing harrowing, narrow escapes and meeting strange wonderful characters who imparted words of wisdom to us.

Within an hour, I had outlined the book from start to finish - including the last scene with the last line. For the next six months, I pecked away at my word processor, living the journey of Chandler's quest for the Flower of Light. He found the flower, and I have found peace.

### ***The Scenes And Characters:***

The little boy chasing dandelions on the broad green lawn, was I. It was my mother who graciously accepted my simple gift of yellow flowers and promptly displayed them on the windowsill.

My father gave us the helium balloons, and I remember watching mine sail away to unknown distant places. I cried, just as Chandler did.

Mom and Dad live nearby and we visit often.

Knoll Degre is a loose variation of the word "knowledge". Knoll Degre reminded Chandler of the difference between what we need and what we want.

Father Earth, is the grim reaper in disguise. I realize now that Father Earth is a distant relative of the Tree Gnomes since they share common characteristics and both live underground.

Willow Glen is pure love. When I first met my loving wife, she appeared in the crowd with long flowing hair and beautiful sparkling eyes, radiating

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uncommon natural love, with simple grace surrounding her. Jeannie is Willow Glen.

My dear sister is six years older than I and has been supportive and helpful in untold ways. If I had not known my sister, I would never have met Sarah.

Other characters are a culmination of people I have met and books I have read. I wish I had put more depth into Chandler's mom but she was such a sad person that I had little to work with. I hope you don't find her too shallow.

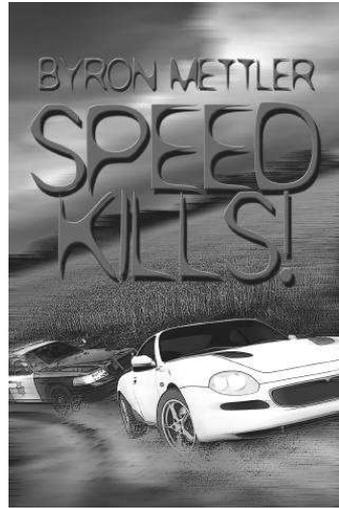
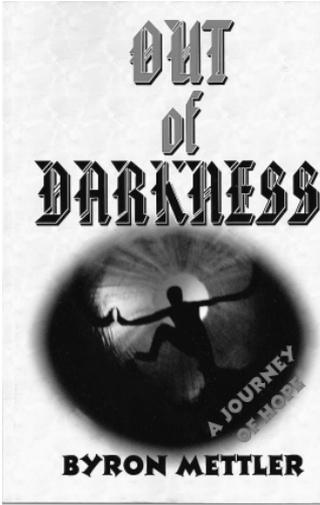
I'm glad you had the opportunity to meet Bobbin, - (round Bobbin), the mighty Gestalt - named after the famous psychiatrist, Pastor Willard – everyone's pastor, Aunt Rose- we all have one of those, and Eric the bully – who pushed Chandler over the edge with his ruthless taunting.

We've all been tempted to fall into the Oasis of the Ages and drown our fears in sensual pleasures that will one day destroy our soul and take our life.

The Flower of Light is the Light of the World -Jesus. Always loving, always shining, always giving life and help to weary travelers who seek him. We choose our journey, and our chosen journey will lead us to our desired destination. As for me, I chose life and desire to live surrounded by the wonderful life-giving light of Jesus. Who loves me despite my failings.

I thank you - and Chandler thanks you.





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