

Wesley's Stories:
Afterschool Adventures
By
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For my brother...always willing to step into an adventure with me.

—Michael Stagliano

Thanks, Dad

*“Somewhere off the green coast,
where leaves blaze tangerine-red:*

*Dragon scales cut the sky
and magic whispers songs, like
fireflies under a moonlit elm.*

*There you'll find my heart.
—The child in me, running, flying,
with eyes as big as worlds.”*

—MFS

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Story 1

The Forest Witch

“Wesley, why don’t you just go talk to her,” David said, leaning over his friends shoulder. “What if she likes you too...just go say ‘hi’.” Wesley breathed deep and looked around the hallway to make sure the coast was clear of anything that would ruin the tense moment and make him look foolish. A green light. As he took his first step towards Steph’s locker only a few feet away, he began to feel his heart pumping harder and harder under his faded blue t-shirt. Inside the young boy’s head, thoughts of doubt, nervousness, anxiousness, and just plain fright seemed to be attacking different parts of his body. His chest was first. It became hard to breathe, like somebody had filled the hallway with smoke. As soon as he had left David’s side, he had stepped into the fumes, and it was now compressing his airway. Had he suddenly developed asthma?

His stomach was an intense mass of feathers and trapped helium, swirling and tickling the insides of his once-calm tummy. He let out a slight fart with his next step, a popping whistle-like sensation escaping from the seat of his pants. He paused for a moment with curious, darting eyes to see if anyone had noticed the small tremor, especially Steph. Again he got the green light. There were now only a few feet between him and his love of the past 11 years. She had matured perfectly since she and Wesley were toddlers. Wesley remembered Steph’s deep blue eyes the first day of pre-school. It seemed like only more light and color and beauty had seeped into them today. Her short blonde hair fell lightly on the sides of her face, and bounced just a little bit as she walked.

She was almost the same height as Wesley. Her nose scrunched up just a little as she laughed at something her classmate said in the doorway. This is where the third body part became infected: his sweat glands. Wesley's pre-pubescent body could go through enough physical activity to kill a bull and still not sweat a drop. But, as soon as "his girl" came around, his hands became unmistakably clammy. Remembering how he had dreamt of one day taking Steph's hand in his, dropping to a knee and setting a tender kiss on her soft skin—It looked like that was now out of the question.

The second-to-last step towards her gave him a glimmer of hope, and set those intense bodily feelings to rest. He got a smile. She had turned towards him and, although she didn't seem to be looking right at him for some reason, he saw her lips part and her cheeks spread. With his heart stopping temporarily, he froze, but it was jolted back to life when she floated in his direction with her arms stretched out for a hug. He panicked, stumbling over his feet with excitement, and looked down at the floor to catch his balance. Recovered, he looked back up and readied himself for the best hug of his life. The hopeful situation had changed. Steph was just over his left shoulder. It was now clear that the embrace was not meant for him. Turning around, he followed her passing body as though a string were attached from his shoulders to hers. He spun around 180 degrees and saw her hugging her best friend Jenna. His heart sank as he continued to spin and made his way past the two girls in the opposite direction. It was a crushing blow. A water fountain caught his attention and he quickly bent down to get a drink. The jet of water smacked his lips and then dropped to the metal bowl without being consumed. Rising up from the fountain slowly, his eyes fixed on Steph, who was now

talking and smiling with her friend, and wished with all his heart that he could be the one she was talking to.

Behind her he saw David approaching, so he gathered himself and prepared for the coming criticism.

“Hey,” David said casually, as he passed by Stephanie and Jenna.

“Hey David,” they both replied as he walked by. The two girls went back to their conversation, and when David caught up to the defeated Wesley, his head was shaking with frustration.

“Another failed mission, huh?” David said with a sympathetic-but-flat voice.

“Ya,” Wesley sighed, still looking at his Steph.

“That’s alright, buddy, you will get her next time.” David put his hand on Wesley’s shoulder and they turned down the hall.

School was over and the boys planned to go to Wesley’s house. The buses were lined up outside the door down the hall and, they made their way toward the distant buzz of rumbling engines, and the sounds of hundreds of chattering students at Wilson Junior High.

It was early October in the old town of Trumbull, Connecticut, and school had now been in session for about a month and a half. The familiar smell of the season changing from summer to fall was beginning to take over the quaint town. Although summer vacation was still only a month or two in the past, the town was beginning to brace itself down for the long winter ahead. Streets were less active now in the afternoon and the familiar sounds of kickball, waffle-ball, and street hockey echoing from every neighborhood in the area, had vanished. The vast forested area was beginning to take on

its seasonal colors. Acres upon acres of trees were shedding their green skins, and spots of oranges, reds, and yellows were blooming all around town. It would be a breathtaking sight in the coming weeks.

Change was on its way.

“So what do you want to do today?” David asked as they stepped onto the bus.

“I don’t know... play basketball, or play with my dog, or do a puzzle?” David was not intrigued.

“Why don’t we build a tree fort, in the woods behind your house?”

“All right.” Wesley agreed. David always had good ideas. The week before, they’d gone to the creek across the street from David’s and caught minnows. And the week before that they went and played hide and seek in the hayfield near school.

Wesley and David had been best friends for six years, ever since first grade when they were made cubby buddies. They shared a space for their jackets and lunch boxes the whole year and became inseparable. Over the years, Wesley noticed David had become very witty and developed a good sense of humor that people liked. He knew that David was probably more popular than he was—and even seemed to have a few girls after him. He was athletic and outgoing, and great to hang out with, and he was over at Wesley’s house enough to be his brother.

“So how was your day, other than the slight bomb that I got to witness at the end?” David asked.

“It was good. We are reading this awesome book in English, and today we read this chapter where there was fighting and swords and goblins and a princess, all battling over a castle. Uhhhh! It was just awesome!”

“OK, let’s try that again,” David replied sarcastically. “Outside of actual school how was your day?”

“Like what? Like in between periods, and lunch and stuff?”

“Ya...”

“Oh it was good,” he lied. David and he had different lunch periods and, because Wesley didn’t really know anyone else, he had eaten alone and read his book for the entire 45 minutes. Before junior high, they had eaten lunch together in their classroom. But now the boys barely saw each other during the school day.

“In lunch today, this kid, Chris, across the table was drinking a carton of chocolate milk, and I was just finishing up that joke that I told you with the pool table and the tree, remember?”

“Oh yeah, kind of, I don’t think I got it though. Say it again.”

“OK. What is big, green, fuzzy, has four legs, and, if it fell out of a tree and hit you, it would kill you?”

“What?,” Wesley shrugged, equally as puzzled as the first time he heard it.

“A pool table,” David said with a hopeful expression. Wesley didn’t reply. He was thinking. David sat staring, still hoping for a positive response. It didn’t come.

Rolling his eyes, he continued.

“...OK... So, I finished the joke and, just as I said the word “table” Chris began to laugh. His eyes bulged up real big, and his head fell back and then, like somebody had flushed a toilet, the chocolate milk came pouring out of his nose, all over his shirt and all over the table. It was awesome! It just poured right out of his nose. Oh, man, you should have seen it!”

“Hahaha...that’s funny,” Wesley said, half-heartedly. He looked out the window.

“It sucks we don’t have lunch together, man.”

“It’s all right; I know a bunch of people in my lunch period that I can talk to,” he lied again. The rest of the bus ride was pretty quiet and, when they came to their stop, they got up in silence.

“Hey, boys,” Wesley’s mom said as they walked in the front door of their old New England home. “How was your day?,” she asked as they sauntered into the kitchen.

“Good...OK, listen to this one,” David tested his luck. “What is green, fuzzy, has four legs, and, if it fell out of a tree and hit you, it would kill you?”

“What?,” Mrs. Terrell replied with a similar expression that her son had made moments before.

“A pool table,” David answered with a confident smile on his face.

“Hahaa...haa...ha,” she laughed, mimicking her son’s reaction.

“OK Well, I made at least one person laugh today with that joke, and—you know what?—That is good enough for me.” David took a seat at the kitchen table frustrated, arms crossed.

“And how was your day, sunshine?,” Mrs Terrell asked Wesley, who was sitting at the table quietly.

“Good Mom...how was your day?,”

David looked up at Mrs. Terrell with a frown. Wesley’s mom knew her son was not the most outgoing person in the world and that, outside of David, he didn’t have very many friends.

“My day was wonderful,” there was a brief pause before Mrs. Terrell smiled and changed the subject.

“What’s on the agenda for the afternoon? Nintendo, basketball, Barbie Dolls?”

“We’re gonna build a tree fort,” Wesley announced, a chocolate chip cookie half crammed in his mouth. “Way back in the woods with booby traps, secret passages, ladders, and a zip-line.”

“Were you guys planning on going to school tomorrow, or just working round the clock on your fort?,” Mrs. Terrell teased.

“We will be back before dinner,” Wesley said as he grabbed David and headed for the garage. Wesley motioned to David to grab his backpack. When they got to his father’s workbench in the back of the garage, he and David emptied their bags and started packing for the project. A box of nails, two hammers, yards and yards of string, a tape measure, and a small hatchet: They headed for the woods behind the house.

It was still pretty early in the afternoon when they reached the tree line, and they paused for a moment to mark down their location and to gaze at the forest before them. Wesley figured they had about two or three hours of sunlight left and, as he took the first step into the woods, his heart was racing. But it was a different kind of racing than he had experienced earlier in the day when standing next to Steph. He was psyched to get free from the whole world of junior high school. Anticipation caught in his throat, he looked at the trees like an obstacle course.

He was ready for adventure.

“C’mon,” Wesley shouted as he ran ahead of David. He hopped over small sticks and branches and left David in his dust. But David was an athlete and was soon by his

side. The two boys raced along the forest floor like Indians hunting down a deer. They leaped high over large rocks that were sticking out along the ground, swung off of low hanging tree branches, and threw in a few unnecessary spin moves. They didn't say a word to each other as their backpacks bounced off their backs, like toddlers getting piggy back rides. It seemed the only thing that mattered was to run and be free. Wesley looked back over his shoulder and could no longer see his house. It was a good feeling. He could see nothing but trees and leaves; nothing that would ask him questions, make him nervous, or embarrassed. Alone in nature, he and David reveled in their freedom. Nothing looked familiar. After running for what seemed like an hour, he heard David stop and call to him from a few yards back.

“Wesley, we better stop. We have to run this whole way back. Besides, we came out here to build a fort and, unless the trees get better and better the further in we go, I think we have gone far enough.” David had his hands on his knees and was gasping for air. Wesley, on the other hand, was not. He felt fine even though he had clearly run just as far and just as fast as David. While David choked on his breath, Wesley began to survey the surroundings for a good place to build their hideout. He surveyed the canopy above and found the changing autumn leaves were thick all around him. Very little sunlight made it through from above. There were patches here and there behind where David stood but, deeper in towards Wesley, the rays were becoming scarce. It seemed as though the light behind him was being pulled away, or pushed.

His eyes drifted until he couldn't look any further. Shuffling his feet around 180 degrees, his glance arrived back at eye level, and ahead he saw a completely different forest floor.

Starting two feet in front of him, the ground was completely covered in thick moss. Caked on the forest floor like a carpet, it extended for several hundred yards into the darkness. Surrounding the moss like a cage, were enormous birch trees, so tall their tops were not visible from where Wesley stood. The white trunks stood lean guarding the patch of soft green moss below them, like soldiers. Surrounding the entire base of the trees and rising two feet off the ground was a bluish-gray fog. Like a freezing cold cloud that decided to take a nap in the middle of the forest.

50 yards away stood a single house in the midst of this strange environment. The house (shack would be more appropriate) appeared to be completely water-logged and ruined. It seemed, like it was tired, ready to collapse from all the water weight. The roof was a dark, faded-grey covering, comprised of tiny shingles, warped and out of place. Made of dirt-brown boards, the walls formed a simple box shape. Aside from the roof and the walls, the only other visible structures were the two beams on the front porch that held up a crooked overhang, and a small woodpile to the left of the door. An axe rested against its edge. The house looked like it was plucked from the Outback of Australia.

Wesley turned his head to get David's attention and to make sure that he had not moved. He was reassured that all he had done was stop and turn around to wait for David to catch his breath, and then turn right back around. But why had he not seen the house while he was running?

He thought all of this at the same time that he realized that David was standing right beside him, with his jaw dropped.

“So this is why you were running so fast,” David said. “Looks like we won't have to build a fort after all, someone beat us to it.”

He took a step onto the moss—and, as soon as his foot put pressure on the green substance, an orange-red juice came up from beneath the surface. David immediately took a step back and when his foot left the area it had been on, the liquid vanished back into the ground. Wesley was speechless.

“What do you think, Wes?” David said nervous and excited. Wesley didn’t respond and, instead, took a daring first step onto the moss. The reaction was the same. Walking slowly and cautiously towards the curious house before them, the liquid bubbled from the ground, then vanished, then bubbled and vanished again. Their eyes were fixed on their footing, so they didn’t notice the ten-plank walkway they were fast approaching. Stopping at the first board, they saw that each successive board got smaller. The first board was the largest at five feet wide, and the last one before the house, two feet wide. They crossed the planks easily and found themselves at the front door. A strange feeling enveloped them. Blood pulsed through their bodies as they nervously stared at the door handle, then at each other.

“You do the honors,” David said, motioning for his companion to open the door. Wesley stepped forward and pushed on the old oak slab. It creaked open with surprising ease, as they had expected a lock of some kind. Wesley led the way and, for the second time that day, he felt his jaw drop at finding something else in the forest that wasn’t what it seemed.

They entered a huge room, twice the size it appeared to be from the outside. They stood in the doorway looking in and noticed that their eyes hadn’t needed to adjust to the light. It had been so dark outside already that there wasn’t a change in brightness from outside to in. Briefly Wesley recalled that when they had entered the woods they had

about two hours of good day light left, but they had only been gone for a half an hour at most, why was it so dark?

Their eyes carried them deep into the room and they began to explore. David veered left; Wesley went straight ahead. Both directions proved to be gratifying. David's hands passed over countless books on the far wall. He read a few of the titles in their vertical position in front of him: *Book of Spells*, *Sorceress's Scripture*, *Book of Life*, *Book of Death*. Numerous unlit candles were scattered between the books, as David passed them they felt like eyes.

Wesley explored a huge black cauldron in the center of the room complete with logs underneath it—a large spoon resting on the side. A simple wooden table with two chairs looked like it hadn't been used for a hundred years. Wesley set his backpack on top of it.

"Pretty weird," David proclaimed from across the room. He looked up to find Wesley's eyes and was surprised at how far away they really were.

"Ya," he replied, still examining the room. David was done looking at the library and began to make his way across the room to Wesley, noticing how thick and smoggy the air felt, almost stale. The boys felt cold inside, like they had aged 50 years in just a few minutes. David passed the cauldron and once close enough he began examining the far wall.

"Take a look at this, Wes." David was hunched over focused on a cage hanging from the ceiling. Inside was a raven, one of his claws missing, lying on its side, head down, eyes shut.

"Is it dead?," Wesley asked.

David took a pencil out of his pocket. “Let’s find out.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I am going to ask him if he can write my name.”

“What!!!”

“What do you think I am going to do?! I am going to poke him to see if moves.”

Before David even got the pencil up to the cage, the raven’s one good eye opened and stared intently at the intruders. The all-white eye shocked the boys and they stepped back in surprise. The bird remained perfectly still.

The boys heard a distant whisper cut through the fog outside and blow through the open door, like a ghost, sending the oak slab against the wall.

Wood under the cauldron exploded in flames, lighting up the dark room. The boys went stiff. Their eyes darted back and forth from the bird to the fire, to the open door, to Wesley’s backpack, and then back to each other.

“What was that?,” David whispered.

“I dunno.” Wesley replied.

“What do we do?”

“I dunno, I dunno.” Wesley stuttered. David hesitated for a moment, biting his lip. Fear in his voice, he wondered aloud, “Who lives this far away from everyone?”

“Just calm down,” Wesley assured David. He looked around and spotted his bag on the table where he had left it. “I have to get my bag,” Wesley whispered, making his move. Slipping behind the cauldron, he slowly reached for the backpack, pulling it off cautiously, so the contents wouldn’t shift and make noise. As he glanced at the door he saw something that made his breath halt: an old woman standing at the edge of the

mossy patch. The moss had changed. Now the orange-red liquid had come back to the surface and their foot prints were clearly visible. The old woman stood hunched over, studying the tracks like a hound dog. She violently jerked her head up towards the door and Wesley felt his knees go numb. Had she had put a spell on him or was his own fear paralyzing him? He couldn't seem to move, but was fortunately hidden well behind the cauldron.

"She's coming," Wesley said to David who stared at him from the side of the house, by the raven and its unsettling eye.

"A girl? What does she look like? Is she pretty?," he asked, not understanding.

"God no! Look out that window over there," Wesley commanded, pointing frantically at the glass. David scooted over to the tiny window a feet from the cage. The sight of the frail old lady moving across the moss, making her way toward the house, destroyed his hope of a possible young female for him to pursue. And worse, she wasn't walking. She was *floating*. Her pale grey cloak dragged behind her as she glided above the footprints.

"That was a booby trap!! Holy Crap, that's awesome!!!" David stared in amazement.

"David! Get down! Find a place to hide!," Wesley ordered from his hiding place under the table. He watched David looking back and forth from left to right, and he saw his friend's eyes settle on an open cabinet in the corner. He crawled over to it and opened the door. It was empty and he easily crawled in and shut the door almost all the way, leaving just a small crack that he could peek out of.

The old woman entered the house with the gracefulness of a cat and the silence of a whisper. The grey hood of her cloak hung well over her eyes, which were like the raven's: completely devoid of color. Getting a good look at her, Wesley realized the significance of the one-footed bird.

She instantly darted over to the cabinet where David was hidden pulling open the door. Why had she gone to him first? Wesley was clearly closer to the door than David. Had he not been noticed by the bird or the woman? He took a deep breath and watched carefully. The heat from the fire was so intense he felt like he was being *cooked*.

The old woman grabbed David's left ear and pulled him over to the raven's cage. She pressed his head firmly against the rusty metal rungs and brought her face down right next to his. David started nervously sputtering out anything and everything he could think to say.

“Hi, yea, this is a great place you got here. We were just walking, well running, through the forest, and this place looked deserted so we thought we'd check it out, and we're actually just about to leave, but I must say the Kool-Aid-colored moss garden is a nice touch. How did you get it done?” The old woman wasn't listening, but — surprisingly—the bird seemed somewhat interested in what David was saying. The black creature was no more than an inch away from David, its horrific albino eye running up his face and down again. He saw his reflection in the cloudy eye and noticed that the Woman's eyes were closed.

Wesley rose up from beneath the table and positioned himself behind the black pot a few feet away. The steam rising up from the unknown liquid inside was clouding the room more and more. It was already incredibly dim and thick inside the walls, so

Wesley struggled to see his friend. He unzipped his backpack and took out the thin rope and a nail. Quickly tying a knot on the back of the nail, just in front of the head, he, then, slowly placed the nail over the rim, and lowered it into the scorching hot liquid until it was submerged. Meanwhile, David seemed to be in the same panicked state.

“So, do you have any kids? I wonder if I go to school with any of them? Wilson Junior High? It’s just down the road from Wesley’s house... I mean Leslie’s house, this girl you don’t know, who lives far away from here. In fact, there aren’t any houses around here for miles, I’d say ten, at least, in every direction...So, do you like the woods out here? The trees and leaves and dirt and trees and stuff?” His voice was really trembling now. “Must be nice to not hear cars and stuff and just get away from it all, which is all we were doing really, just getting away for a little while. And ya know what? It’s been great. This was fun and nice. And tell you what. I’m about ready to go. This is a lovely bird here, and you seem like a kind old lady, so I think I will just go and leave you to your big pot of soup.”

“You will not return,” she commanded from behind the cloak with a deep raspy voice.

“Quoth the raven nevermore,” David said with a laugh and a nervous smile. Suddenly Wesley let out a small grunt, pulled the steaming hot nail out and hollered to David.

“Catch!”

He launched the scalding-hot nail towards the others. His shout turned them both around. David first, then the bird and the woman in unison. She had been caught off-guard. The nail left a streak of steam across the room.

David quickly grabbed the rope and plunged the nail into the bird's eye, piercing the soft white jelly. The old woman fell back with her hand over her face, a line of steam rising from her black hood. David staggered over to Wesley as they watched the frail old woman silently shake with pain. She was bent over at her hips and backed up into the corner gradually, until she suddenly stopped. Her hands slowly lowered from her face and hung like grey curtains from her sides.

They paused, didn't breathe, or even dare to move. A drop of sweat slowly ran down Wesley's nose and hung at the tip. Both boys were rigid with fear. Nothing moved. Even the fire beneath the cauldron seemed to die down.

Wesley began to open his mouth to point out to David that the bird was on its side, seemingly dead, when the woman sat up in the corner and stared at them: A black figure, faceless, long grey hair cascading out the sides of her hood. The heat from the fire went fleeing from their bodies, as a cold chill descended on the boys,

"Run!!," David screamed as he bolted for the door, Wesley just a few feet behind. As they made their way out of the house, the old woman lunged forward like a cat. Her arms were drawn up as if armed with fierce claws. She began to maneuver around the cauldron towards Wesley, who began to move much faster. He bolted out the door, caught up with David, and—powered by pure adrenaline—took the lead in the sprint towards home. Raising the orange fluid from the moss, with much more impact than before, it was strange that the liquid only bubbled to the surface—instead of splashing.

Made sure that David was OK, he turned his eyes back towards the house and the old woman. He blinked twice in disbelief. Just as the forest witch approached the doorway, she raised her hands up above her head, and tilted her head back. She spread

her fingers out as far as they could go, and then brought them in slightly, like she was holding a ball. The fog behind the house seemed to turn its attention to the woman, like an orchestra to its conductor. It became significantly denser and swarmed together like a pack of bees. She threw her head and her hands forward and, with astonishing speed, the blue/grey mist advanced towards the boys. It passed by Wesley as he turned his attention ahead of him, and watched it pass by David as well. Within a matter of seconds, they were engulfed in the fog. Wesley couldn't see David. He looked to the trees for reference, but only found more fog. All he could make out were the orange-red footprints in the mossy ground below. That was it until he turned around again and saw the old woman had left the porch and she was advancing towards him, cutting through the mist which swirled behind her flailing cloak. Her hands were outstretched again and her long, menacing nails sent Wesley a very clear message: RUN!!

He took off; running faster than his legs could carry him, arms pumping, feet beating into the ground like a drum, over and over, faster and faster, a machine powered by fear. Looking straight ahead, he tried desperately to block out the image of the witch chasing him.

His breath became heavy, both from fatigue and from the lack of oxygen in the frigid fog. His heart raced—and his blood surged through his body like oil burst into flames. He felt his legs start to turn to rubber, to give out and break down. A large cramp began to develop at his side, and he grabbed at it as he ran. It was like he had been stabbed. He focused, hoping to find David soon.

Faintly through the fog ahead he saw David's back pack, bouncing up and down giving him a new found hope—if only it remedied the pain... Taking an exhausted

breath, he attempted a full sprint. From up close, Wesley could see that David's shirt was cut and there was a rather deep scratch just above his pant line. He hadn't seen the old witch grab at David's back, so he wondered how the cut came to be.

"The hatchet," Wesley thought to himself. He looked at the bag and saw the outline of the hand ax flopping up and down. A sudden rush of adrenaline rushed through his body. Glancing over his right shoulder he found the ghost-like woman 10 yards behind him. Her posture had not changed, and her shredding clothing hung off her nimble body like a torn sheet blowing in the wind. She was gaining on them.

He gathered up the last bit of strength remaining in his tired bones and lunged towards David's backpack. The zipper gave him some trouble, until he was able to grab it with both hands and fling it open with a screeching "zziiiiipp." Thinking it was the forest witch grabbing hold; David felt the pressure on his back and increased his speed dramatically. Wesley didn't have enough wind to keep pace and desperately reached for the handle of the small ax inside. His fingertips brushed the base of the handle before he fell back a few steps. Pushing harder still, he managed to pull the small ax out as David went racing forward in the mist.

Wesley was overcome with fatigue, his head pounding, his mouth dry, his muscles aching. He wanted nothing more than to be done with it all. Gripping onto the handle, he slowed his pace down and began to turn, his right arm at his side, with the hatchet resting limply in his fingers. His eyes squinted, peering through the cold mist like a hawk searching for its prey. Only he was searching for the hideous shape of the old witch. There she was, slicing through the icy air with ease. He brought the hatchet back behind his head and hurled the weapon at her. It soared through the air becoming

less and less visible as it traveled head over handle towards the target. Wesley stopped breathing for a moment, praying for a good strike. He was not disappointed. The throw was perfect. Its edge came around just at the right moment where it would have slit the woman's chest right in half. But this was not the case. On impact, her arms shot forward as her body was pounded back. For a second it looked as though the hand ax had gone right through her body but, through the mist he saw a red cloudburst where she'd been floating. It expanded outward like the hatchet had pierced a gas can, then instantly sucked back in. As if drawn in by a vacuum cleaner the blue fog rolled back from behind, and from above and below, and all around. The fog vanished just as quickly as it had come to be.

Wesley looked down at his feet and the moss was gone; he looked out in the distance and the house was gone! Looking to the trees he found the tall, thin birch trees were also missing. All that remained was the woman's smoke-colored cloak, lying on the floor beneath where she had been struck down.

He turned to find his friend facing him but not making eye contact. David was observing the surroundings, in shock at the sudden change of scenery. Wesley ran up to him and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Hey...you OK? I thought you were right with me when we ran from the house but, when I looked back, all I saw was that fog."

"It's OK, We're fine now," Wesley assured him turning towards home.

When the boys spotted Wesley's house less than 40 yards away, they locked onto the structure like getting there was the only thing that mattered in the world. The two

battle-hardened boys walked in silence as they made their way through the garage into the house. But Wesley paused before opening the door.

“We better not tell my mom about this,” he said looking back at David. “First of all, I don’t think she will believe us; and, second, if she does, I don’t think she will ever let me leave the house again.”

“All right,” David agreed.

The next day at school went surprisingly well, considering the previous afternoons events. Wesley really didn’t see much of David until they met later in the hallway, same place as before. Wesley was altogether inactive the entire day and even though they were reading the same book in English class, Wesley could not pay attention. It seemed like years ago that he had been reading the story. He felt like he had aged so much since yesterday, like he had grown up. Walking around the halls with his head down all day, he tried to comprehend the events in the woods. His lunch had the appeal of a maggot sandwich and he spent the whole 45 minutes of that period alone in the corner. A group of boys by his table had thrown a grape or a carrot, something small from no more than ten feet away. It struck him right where the hatchet had hit the forest witch in the woods. He put his head down, not from embarrassment or anger, but from weariness. It all seemed like a dream now. The only thing that ensured him it was not was when his best friend was standing beside him in the hallway with the same weary expression.

They were both looking down the hallway at Steph’s locker...

“Wesley, why don’t you just go talk to her?,” David said, leaning over his shoulder with a smile. “What if she likes you too? Just go say hi.”

Wesley took a deep breath and looked around the hallway to make sure that the coast was clear of anything that would ruin the moment. He got the green light and took the first step towards the locker with a rush of excitement and nervousness flooding his mind—but his body remained cool. Pausing for a moment, he collected himself and got a really good look at Steph’s delicate figure gathering books from her locker. He proceeded forward and arrived at her locker just as she was shutting it. She looked over at him and smiled making his heart sink, and his knees begin to buckle, but he stood firm in front of her, silently jumping for joy.

“Hi,” he mumbled, with a humble smile.

“Hey Wes,” she said, standing calmly before him. “She knows my name”, he thought to himself. “She knows my name”, he repeated in his head, as the smile on his face grew to a beaming grin.

“What?,” She asked as a smile developed on her own face. She bent her head down slightly to look at his eyes. “What?,” She said, as her face became bright red from a combination of embarrassment and flattery. Wesley looked up from the floor and, for the first time in his life, stared right into Steph’s beautiful blue eyes. He noticed her light blonde hair, her soft perfect lips, her cute, slightly pointy nose, and her flawless skin. He had never been this close to her in his life and the sight of her beauty up close caught him off-guard. Melting inside, he wanted to tell her while he was smiling. He wanted to tell her that he had been trying to do this every day since he moved here in the first grade. To tell her about all the times that he had imagined this very moment. He wanted to explain how amazing he felt inside, just because she had graced him with one her smiles.

But all he could do was smile...

“We better get going,” David said, coming to the rescue and grabbing Wesley’s shoulder. “Places to go, buses to catch, axes to throw at witches, right buddy?”

“Axes to through at witches?,” Steph inquired.

“That’s guy code...for...a video game that just came out.”

“Well you boys have fun.” Steph raised her eyebrows and closed her locker.

Turning him down the hallway, David skipped into the air and ducked his head in front of their bodies.

“That’s what I’m talking about, Wes! Man, I thought what happened yesterday in the forest wasn’t real. I mean I know it was, but waking up this morning it felt like a dream, ya know? But I guess talking to Steph is a cake-walk compared to dealing with creepy raven-loving witches with bad taste in landscape, right!?”

“Ya I know. That felt like a dream too.”

“Well next time we will work on you actually saying something,” David teased.

“Oh Yea,” Wesley grinned. “You’re a real wordsmith under pressure too.”

Arms around each other, they exited the hallway and made their way to bus number 21. Wesley climbed the steps first, followed by David, and after sitting down in a seat towards the back, they shrugged off their backpacks and felt the bus pull forward. Outside, lurking in a tree near the parking lot, a strange black bird with an injured eye waited patiently. Poking its head up then to the side, it turned its mangled eye and watched the boys make their way home...

Story 2

The Blue Light

It was another busy week at school for Wesley, filled with homework assignments and quizzes, very typical for the fourth week of school. The grace period of post-summer “blow off” days were long over. It seemed like these grace periods were getting shorter and shorter each year. Wesley was in 7th grade and he had remembered that, last year, class had been filled with “get to know you” circle games, and very little homework for the first couple weeks. He had been shocked by the abrupt end to this year’s grace period when Mr. Barnaby assigned a reading assignment on the third day of class. This, of course, was followed by a clever, “Make sure you read the text, cause there is a chance that there will be a quiz on the material tomorrow.” It was actually bothering Wesley that his teacher was a man. This was the first male teacher that he had ever had, and it just didn’t seem right for a man to be teaching. All of his other teachers were so easy to talk to, and always smiled and had endless amounts of patience. Mr. Barnaby, on the other hand, was dry and stale. His large pointy nose, sunken eyes and yellow teeth, made his previous teachers seem like saints. Wesley pictured him as a principal, or maybe the warden of a jail.

Inevitably, class ended and, as always, the halls were filled with students rushing in every direction. Wesley’s best friend, David, was approaching. David’s class was

right across the hall from his own, and they met right outside the two classrooms every day since school began.

“What’s up, Wes?,” David said, whipping his backpack up over his shoulder.

“Nothing much. I’m ready to be done for the day, that’s for sure.” They turned down the hallway and walked towards the busses. It was still rather warm outside in the small town of Trumbull, Connecticut. The month of September was almost as warm as August- just not as much fun.

“I swear this is the third Wednesday this week,” David whined as they weaved in and out of the flow of rushing students, all of whom seemed to be traveling towards them.

“I’m just glad it’s Friday,” Wesley replied. David was right. This had been a particularly long week and the fact that it was Friday seemed more a hope than a reality.

The two were about to finally make it outside when a young boy in front of them was tripped from behind and took a spill on the tile floor. Wesley couldn’t tell whether he had been tripped on purpose or whether it was an accidental fall, but he knelt beside him and helped him back up.

The year earlier as a sixth grader, Wesley had been at the bottom of the junior high food chain, so to speak. An eighth grader named Gary Carsen had been on Wesley and David’s bus that year, and he took pleasure in giving them a hard time. He sat in the back of the bus with the older boys and would often throw small remnants of lunch at the rest of the riders. Nothing serious, carrots or chunks of fruit that their moms had packed were common, since no adolescent boy would ever be caught dead eating a well-balanced meal in front of his friends. They would yell things at the bus driver and out the window and one time threw a lock out the window, shattering a car window. Wesley had feared

and avoided Gary since the day he'd laid eyes on him. As he helped up the young boy, he recognized him as Gary's younger brother but couldn't remember his name.

Some contents of the boy's bag had also spilled onto the floor and David quickly gathered them up and stuffed them back into the L.L. Bean bag. A name tag hung from the bag that said:

Mark Carsen

67 Salem Rd

Trumbull, Connecticut 85002

"Thanks," Mark mumbled quietly. He lowered his head and made his way out the door, disappearing into the crowd.

"Do you know who that was?," Wesley whispered as he and David continued on their way out to the busses.

"I don't think so, but he looked kind of familiar."

"That is Mark Carsen, Gary Carsen's younger brother."

"Are you kidding me?" David's eyebrows squished in disbelief.

"Nope."

On the bus, they saw Mark sitting by himself up against the window with his hand on his chin, looking outside. As the bus left the parking lot, Wesley wondered what it was like being the younger brother of a kid like Gary. He was glad that he had helped Mark in the hallway and he could tell that David felt the same way.

When they finally came to their stop, David and Wesley bounced up, and bumped their hands on each seat they passed by. Mark had gotten off a few stops earlier.

“You wanna come over today?,” Wesley asked as he started down the street.

“I can’t today man, sorry. My parents are taking me and my sister back to school shopping,” David said regretfully.

“But you’ve been in school for a month already,” Wesley said confused.

“Yea...those are my parents for you. But I have an excuse if I get bad grades. I can just say I was unprepared. Anyways, what am I gonna be missing?”

“Not much. I am in the mood to explore a little bit, maybe head to the back of the neighborhood,” Wesley said. He was disappointed that David would not be joining him this time, but he was also excited to go off on his own.

“All right man. Well have fun and don’t do anything I wouldn’t do. And remember a man is only as brave as his ability to see through his fears.”

“What?,” Wesley said with an eyebrow raised.

“I don’t know. Just something I heard in class today that I kinda liked.” David said, impressed with himself for remembering the quote.

“You’re weird,” Wesley watched David turn around and head back towards his home. Smiling, Wesley spun around and made his way down the sidewalk. He closed his eyes for a moment and felt the sun warming his face. With his nose in the air he took in a large helping of the neighborhoods afternoon smells. He hooked his thumbs in the bottom of his backpack straps and chugged along noticing the treetops and the way the leaves broke the sky up into hundreds of pieces. Wesley always enjoyed, this time of the day. And walking home after he got off the bus today was no exception.

“Hey Mom,” Wesley said as he entered the house.

“Hey there, good looking. How was your day?,” his mom called out from the kitchen. She leaned back, and he got a glimpse of her head as he made his way up the stairs to his room.

“How was your day Wes?,” she asked again as Wesley reached the top of the stairs.

“It was good,” he replied, just loud enough so that she could hear. He threw his backpack on the floor in the center of his room and then threw himself onto his bed. His eyes were closed before he hit the pillow. He tucked his mind and his thoughts inside themselves for a few seconds, before they were interrupted by his mom’s footsteps. They got louder, closer and closer until they were overrun by her voice.

“You must be tired from working so hard in your classes today, is that it?” His mom joked as she sat down beside him on the bed. Wesley didn’t answer. He kept his eyes closed and enjoyed the feeling of his cheek pressed up against the pillowcase beneath it.

“What do you have planned for the afternoon?” This time, his mom insisted on a response.

“I don’t know. David can’t come over, so I was probably just going to go outside and explore.”

“Well, after you discover Atlantis in our neighborhood, will you be doing any homework?”

“Of course, of course,” Wesley assured her.

“Well I expect you home by no later than five, dinner is at 5:30pm, and Dad will be home a little after that, knowing him.” She gave him a kiss on his forehead and went

down the stairs. It took Wesley a few minutes to get up, mostly because he had thought about coming home and taking a nap several times in class. But, the day was still young—and there was adventure to be had. So he emptied the contents of his backpack and restocked it with essentials for the day’s exploration. He put in: a lighter that his dad had given him a few years ago, a flashlight, a small length of rope, and a sweat shirt in case it got cold. He zipped up the bag and left for parts unknown.

“Bye Mom. Love you,” he called stepping outside. His mom replied but he was already out of ear shot when she said it. Wesley breathed easy, with a bounce in his step and calm in his chest. The air had lowered a few degrees in temperature, and the horizon was golden yellow—a cascading warmth of orange fused with honey. He squashed acorns as he went. A squirrel on his left scampered along the ground searching for an acorn and hadn’t noticed Wesley was walking behind him. The squirrel kept on along a seemingly calculated route, until he pounced onto an acorn a few feet away from a tree. Wesley bent down to watch, when all of a sudden the animal noticed the much larger creature behind him. He scampered towards the nearest tree and, within seconds, was on the opposite side, out of Wesley’s view. Wesley had always felt a relation with squirrels and the way that they hid themselves from passersby. With little difficulty, they could disappear from sight, like they knew exactly where you were going to be, and know where to be on a tree so that you had no way of seeing of them. He had always admired that.

After a short walk Wesley found himself at a part of the neighborhood that was still under construction. There was a new house being built at the base of a large hill and, by looks of it, the house was going to be rather isolated from the rest of the subdivision.

A bulldozer was stationed in the front yard, which had no grass, and a smaller vehicle was on the opposite side with a red tool box on its roof. Wesley scanned the area for any signs of workers and, when he saw that no one was there, he made his way down the hill. Behind the unfinished house was a densely forested area and it gave the bare house a sort of “lost” feeling to it, as though it was going to be sucked back into the forest and forgotten. Once Wesley reached the front of the property; it became apparent that, if he was going to do any exploring on the grounds, it was going to require a heavy trek through the overturned earth. A slightly cool breeze came upon his face, as he zoned in on the new terrain. He plotted a path that seemed to have the most amount of dry space possible and then began making his way towards the front of the house. A few challenging leaps lay before him and a few one-footed landings had kept his eyes off the road so, when he picked up the sound of a truck making its way down the hill, his feet reacted with clumsiness. Panic swept over him and he was sent scurrying along the yard like his young squirrel friend moments before. Luckily, the mammoth bulldozer was between the truck and the boy, so he was confident he had not yet been seen. The truck backed up towards the house, buying Wesley a few seconds to make his move. As the truck came to a stop, he darted to his right and found cover in the woods surrounding the house. He kept a steady pace until he spotted a pile of fallen logs a short distance ahead. Holding onto this backpack, he lunged for the other side of the pile, and waited. His heart was beating hard and, though he was reasonably worried about being caught, he couldn't deny the excitement. A few moments crept by, then he cautiously poked his head above the top branch of his small hiding place, and stayed silent.

He saw a man get out of the driver's side of the truck, close the door, and head to the work site. Another gentleman remained in the passenger seat. The first man kept his head down and he looked a little upset. From where he was crouched Wesley got the sense that the man wasn't the friendliest person on the planet. He wore a thick flannel shirt, worn denim jeans, and heavy workman boots. His hair was a dark brown and caked with sweat and dirt.

"Here it is, Bob," the man said, turning his head back towards the truck. The man in the car gave a slight nod of approval as his partner made his way toward the red toolbox on top of the machine. He checked that the lock was fastened tight then picked it up and headed back to his friend. "They must have just left it", Wesley thought as the man reached the truck door. He got back in and they drove off.

Wesley let out a small sigh of relief as he got up from his hiding spot and began to move back towards the house. He was startled by a loud metallic bang from behind him, and he dove on the other side of the pile, hiding once again. It sounded like a door slamming on a porta-john. He held his breath expecting another construction worker to yell. A few seconds passed by, and then a few more, and Wesley tried to remember if he had seen a porta-potty as he was running. He could only recall a blur of images, but was puzzled that he did not hear any footsteps approaching. As these concerns raced through his head, he heard the loud bang again...

Maybe the man had a bad case of diarrhea and needed round number two. A chuckle escaped his lungs at the thought of the workman running back into the toilet and he popped his head up over the logs again. He scanned the woods for the brown porta-john that had so cleverly avoided his eye sight before. There was nothing. He heard the

loud bang again, and his eyes focused in on a spot about twenty yards ahead of him. Like a snake fixed on a scavenging mouse he made his way towards the sound.

Wesley kept his eyes fixed ahead. He noticed a metal fence blocking off a large portion of the forest to his left. Dark brown ivy covered the chain-links, keeping it camouflaged with the natural colors of the forest. It looked as though it had been there for quite some time, but Wesley still could not see what was making the noise. A final loud bang helped Wesley pinpoint the location of the mysterious sounds. A large metal sign was pinned up against the gate of the fence and the wind had been picking up the bottom half of the sign and slamming it into the fence. Another strong gust hit Wesley's face and the air seemed to penetrate into his body and exit out his back.

The wind was unseasonably cold, much cooler than the air back at his house or even at the worksite. Strange.

He went up to the sign and held down its bottom and read the words on its face. At the top was a warning:

NO TRESSPASSING
FAILED CONSTRUCTION SITE
ALL TRESPASSERS WILL BE FINED
\$250.00 AND SUBJECT TO
IMPRISONMENT

When he was done reading it Wesley looked directly past the sign, and spotted an enormous hole in the ground! His face twisted, amazed, as he took in the size of the great void in front of him.

“You would be able to fit a whole bus in that hole,” he thought. He backed up a few feet to get a better look at the incredible sight, but the thick brown ivy blocked him from doing so. He ducked and jumped but had no other angle to look at the strange phenomenon. And so Wesley began to climb the fence. He could barely grab the metal rungs so he struggled to get a good grip, but managed to work his way up to the top. Once his head was over the wall, he paused to make sure no one was there. He gazed over the abandoned area, and something looked very strange about the dirt on the ground. It was grey. Unlike the forest floor behind him, this was a smoke color. His breath came out of his mouth and was visible in the wintery air.

He threw his foot over the top of the fence and began to climb down the other side when he realized that there was no ivy on this side. It appeared the green-brown weed was only growing on the outside face of the gate, as though it was guarding this empty space. Wesley hopped down and, as soon as his beat-up tennis shoes hit the ground, a small rise of grey dust puffed up around his ankles. He took off towards the enormous hole and, upon reaching the lip of the great gap, he spotted a natural staircase leading down along the side of the wall. The air all around the surface was unmistakably cooler than the surrounding air, and he even felt a chilly breeze coming from the chasm itself. With that, he put down his backpack and pulled out his grey hooded sweatshirt and put it on. He whipped the backpack over his shoulder and made his way around to where the staircase began.

The first step down the side of the hole revealed a coned-shaped rock on the inner edge roughly the size of a baseball. Each following step had a stone as well, all the way down until the stairs were out of sight. Wesley took one more look around while he was

still outside the hole. He looked up at the sky and at the surrounding trees and after taking in a breath of air, he made his way down the steps.

As he walked, each step kicked up a small pocket of dust. He kept his left hand outstretched to the wall to keep his balance and kept his eyes focused on his feet. Though the air was quite cool, he felt sweat forming at his brow and felt a chill of nervousness creep through his body as the dark surroundings eventually swallowed him. It wasn't long before Wesley came to a point where he could not see the small stones at the sides of the step. When he looked up, it seemed as though the mouth of the hole, and the sky above that, was only half its original size. He became uncomfortable, wishing that David was there with him, so he would not have to make the descent alone. Doubt began to take over and he found himself questioning what he was doing. The area was zoned off and isolated for a reason, and perhaps he did not have any business being here. Cold and alone, he turned around to make his way back up the steps. His first step brought disaster; his feet kicked the top of the next step and he fell forward. His hands shot out quickly, preventing his face from hitting the grey steps. His right hand cushioned the fall, and his left hand hit the rock resting on the step. The small grey stone fell down into the darkness, and Wesley stuck his head out over the stairs just in time to see it disappear from sight. He closed his eyes with disappointment at his own clumsiness and then checked his body to make sure everything was all right. As his eyes were closed, he heard the stone hit something and continue crashing down along the adjacent wall. He picked himself up and attempted to brush off the dust that was now caked all over his body. He patted it off and coughed as the airborne grey dirt surrounded his head. After positioning his backpack securely on his shoulders, he made his way back up.

After only going a few steps, his eyes fell over the side of the staircase, and he noticed a small-but-intense blue light jetting out of the face of the wall. Pausing for a moment, he made sure his eyes were not being deceived. He lowered his eyebrows and got down on his hands and knees. It appeared as though the stone had made a small puncture to the wall; and that there was more than just a wall further down the hole. He gathered himself up and made his way back down the flight of stairs, keeping his eyes glued to that blue light. Though he could not see the steps in front of him, his pace quickened. With his left hand stretched out to guide him along the wall, and prevent him from falling into the chasm. When he felt that he was eye-level with the blue light, he also noticed that there was a rather large structure jutting out from the wall, a few feet directly above. The blue glow only gave the object a slight outline and Wesley could not make out what it was. He shook off his backpack, felt around for the zipper and opened the bag. At the bottom he felt the metal face of his Zippo. Pulling out the lighter, he popped the lid, and gave it a flick. A small flame sang into the darkness, and Wesley held it out from his face. It was incredible how much the small blaze lit up his surroundings. It took him a minute to take it all in. The large structure turned out to be an old tree that was sticking out over the light. From where he stood, he could see that the ancient tree was embedded deeply into the wall. He examined the branch closely and found it to be quite thick. Bringing the lighter down to his backpack he pulled out the rope he'd brought along. With his right hand, he placed the lighter a few steps above him and prepared to throw the rope around the branch. He backed up, curled the rope into a lasso, and aimed at a small stump on the opposite side of the branch. He placed the rope above his head gave it a whirl and then gently tossed it over at the stump. The rope

bounced off and fell down the hole without reaching the bottom. As he pulled it back up, his eyes measure the distance to the ground—to fall would not turn out very well. He looped the rope again and tossed it at the stump. This time he was successful. Pulling slowly, he tightened the knot at the end of the loop until it was secure around the stump. After a few deep breaths and a quick look around, he picked up the lighter, and made his way down a few steps so that the rope was pulled tight. He flicked the lighter off and sat for a moment to let his eyes adjust to the darkness. From this new angle, Wesley saw that the source of the blue light was just a few inches away from the exposed branch. He gave the rope one more good tug, and then sat his weight back on his heels. The rope felt secure so, with one swift motion, he swung himself out into the darkness. His hands held fast as his feet wrapped around the remaining rope dangling below his feet. Despite the fact that he was dangling in the darkness, on a rope, hanging from a branch that must be ancient, he felt oddly comfortable...though, now that he was out there, he realized how stupid the idea really was.

Still, he began to climb. He made it to the top fairly quickly and with ease, but struggled for a moment trying to pull his body atop the enormous log. He had a perfect view of the blue light that had caught his fancy from across the cave. Cautiously, Wesley inched his way to the grey wall and rested his hands above the tiny crevice. His eyes surveyed the lip of the hole, hoping to spot the cause for the strange light. And then something strange happened. The light seemed to move, or maybe flicker, and he flinched. Then the light source moved from the left side of the small opening to the right side, sending a small cloud of grey dust up out of the chamber.

“Ah...AHH...ACHOOO,” came a petite voice from inside. Wesley’s eyebrows shot up, his jaw dropped, and he sat back on his heels stunned as a small fairy rose from the crevice. As the little creature flew, the blue light radiating from her grew stronger and clearer, so that now the walls around Wesley lit up.

“Hello. Can you understand me?,” Wesley asked. He thought it was a good question since “achoo” wasn’t exactly a good sign that the creature could speak English.

“Timen Wind-ow Ah,” the fairy responded.

“I don’t know what that means,” Wesley said, disappointed that he couldn’t talk to her. They looked at each other awkwardly for a moment. Wesley deemed; he couldn’t really make out emotion on the small being’s face because it was lit up too much– but he could sense the language barrier between them. Suddenly, with a quickness of a hummingbird, she was on him. He felt a small hand on his throat just above his Adam’s apple. A warm sensation crept up his neck and he felt a strange connection grow between them.

She let go and gracefully sat down on his knee and Wesley saw fairy biting her lips, fretting. He opened up his mouth to ask her what that feeling was and out came:

“Rileen tow flooreen ta.” His face squished together at the sound of the strange words he spoke and, before he could ask what *that* was, he heard the fairy speak up.

“You can speak my language now,” she said, only she said it in her language, which Wesley was also speaking. He paused, hesitating to speak again, but then said:

“Cool,” only it came out “Baam.” He started to laugh. “*Baam*” he thought to himself. He howled with laughter because it somehow seemed appropriate, and also because he was speaking a new language!

“So what is this place?,” Wesley asked in fairy tongue.

“This is the door to Candlewood Forest,” she smiled.

“Ummm...But I don’t see any doors, and there are no trees,” Wesley pointed out, not meaning to sound rude, just curious.

“Oh yes, that would seem strange. Down there, at the bottom of the stairs, there is a hidden door that only I have the key to,” the small fairy declared, holding up a key around her neck. Wesley got a good look at the small being standing atop his knee. She was probably as tall as a baseball, maybe a little bigger, and that seemed a bit tall for fairies. As he could recall, he thought that Tinkerbell and Thumbelina were much smaller. In addition to her “bigger than normal fairy size,” she wore a simple one piece, strapless blue dress that went down to her knees. She had a necklace with two small keys, sharp blue eyes and her hair—short and spiked, a vibrant blue—rested stiffly above her pointy ears. Wesley noticed the little being’s toenails were painted blue. “Wow,” he thought to himself “Even fairies paint their toenails.” He had always thought that odd with human girls and, to see it on fairies, puzzled him even more. He just didn’t get it. Paint. On toes. He refrained from commenting on it and, instead, said:

“I am sorry about your home there, that I seemed to have ruined with that rock,” Wesley murmured apologetically.

“That’s all right. I don’t suppose you would mind lifting the stone out though?”

“Oh certainly.” he said as he moved towards her punctured home. He reached in, found the rock, and pulled it out.

“Thanks,” she said.

“So what’s your name?,” Wesley asked, still surprised that he was speaking this new language.

“My name is Flin.” She put her hand on her chest and slightly ducked her chin. “And what’s yours?”

“Wesley,” he said humbly.

“Well, Wesley, I don’t suppose you would like to come and see the Forest that is hidden from the eyes of humans.”

“I sure would! I do have to be home before 5 though, my mom is expecting me for dinner.”

“5?” She looked puzzled. Wesley contemplated a moment. Maybe the fairy language didn’t have numbers in its inventory of words?

“Yes, 5,” he said again, and held up five fingers.

“Yes, 5 what?” she asked again.

“I have to be home at 1, 2, 3, 4...5.” Wesley responded, counting out the numbers on his hand. “For dinner...before dark.”

“You’re funny,” Flin smiled from his knee and, with that, took off towards the bottom of the hole. “Come on,” she said, as her tiny voice faded away.

Wesley was still a little bit confused about the conversation that they had just had. Even more confusing—how was he going to get down to Flin from here? Flin had been swallowed by the black abyss below. He was just opening his mouth to speak when Flin's voice called up from below. He strained to hear the faint voice, and from what he could make out it sounded like:

“Plithem,” or “jump.”

“Ummm,” Wesley stammered as he peered over the side of the log at the small voice lost in the great black void. “I can’t exactly...I don’t think that would be such a good idea,” Wesley asserted from above.

“Trust me. Just jump,” Flin shouted again. Wesley felt a sense of security in those words and, despite his better judgment, he rolled off the side. His hands immediately flew up above his head, and he felt completely free, falling through the darkness. The shadows of the steps circled around him as he fell. Searching past his flailing feet for the light from Flin, the wind rushed up his body and sent his blonde hair flying. Following the wind, his eyes moved up to see the mouth of the hole getting smaller and smaller and, before he could look down again. He looked around for a second, a little bit confused at the sudden stop, and how he hadn’t really felt any pain—just a sudden stop.

After scanning the soft dusty ground around him, he glanced worriedly at the blue light under his left sneaker.

“Oh no!!! OH MY GOD!! OH NO! Flin!!! FLIN are you there?! I am so sorry I was looking up and—”

“You’re pretty light,” Flin’s voice started from beneath his feet. An acute warmth crept over his body, and seemingly at the exact moment the heat hit his feet, he fell three inches and hit the floor. Flin appeared by his left foot, wiping of her hands and shrugging her shoulders.

“I was going to tell you to jump, and that I would catch you...but I thought that would make it a little bit less convincing,” Flin said proudly.

“Wait. You caught me?,” Wesley said standing above her.

“Yes,” she said with a little fairy chuckle.

“You could be a superhero!!” Wesley squealed, and bent down to look at Flin with a new fascination. He looked her up and down for the hidden bulging biceps that she must have possessed. Flin blushed from the attention.

“Gotta eat those veggies,” she said, embarrassed. She flew up above his head, and over to the wall and, as she approached, Wesley saw a small keyhole appear that seemed to react to the light that Flin gave off. It began to glow more and more until she finally hovered right next to it. Lifting the key to the glowing light jetting out of the slither in the wall, she began to put it in.

“Get ready, young Wesley. You are about to see something that no human has seen in 1000 years. Wesley felt his heart drop. His eyes widened in anticipation and his chin raised, he was ready.

“Wait, sorry, hahaha—wrong key,” Flin said from the light. Wesley sat in awkward silence for a moment.

“That one was for my house,” she said clumsily. He felt a bit stupid for getting all excited the moment before, and he kicked some dirt around at his feet to pass the tension.

“OK, here we go. This, Wesley, is Candlewood Forest.” The wall in front of Wesley radiated a gorgeous white light in the shape of large double doors. The light shined fiercely for a few seconds and then dissolved into nothingness, like it had eaten away at the wall. And there, before Wesley, stood something that only his dreams could have possessed until then:

A vast number of trees stood before him in a clearing that looked infinite. A landscape, thick with mystery and surpassing beauty held the young boy's lungs in a vice. Wesley found himself at the beginning of a dirt path that extended a few yards into the forest. The trees had almost no branches extending from them except for all the way up at the top. There, the skyscraper-like structures created an immense canopy covering the whole forest. He noticed that there was no sun or light coming in due to the fact that the sky wasn't a sky at all. Instead of clouds and a blue atmosphere above, there was a long stretch of dirt, roots poking in and out of the brown surface, threading over and under each other like river otters playing in a stream. Maybe this was why Flin didn't understand the concept of time in their conversation a few minutes ago. Because there was no sun—there were several lights hanging from the dirt ceiling instead. The lights were white transparent spheres, glowing gently onto nearby trees. They were beautiful to look at, swaying and glowing up above them. They would flicker ever so slightly, like the flame of a candle in a mild wind.

He also noticed that, embedded in the leaves of the great canopy, were hundreds of orange, football-shaped fruits. Wesley marveled at the strange sight of the objects, and then turned to ask Flin exactly what they were.

“What are those orange things?,” he asked, sending a finger up to the top of the trees.

“Frople silly,” Flin said flying through the door. “You do not have frople in your world?”

“Not that I am aware of,” Wesley said, changing his focus from the fruit to the path in front of him. He took a deep breath and was about to ask Flin where exactly they were going, when the small fairy moved ahead and beckoned him to follow.

“C’mon Wes. I’ll take you to the inhabitants of the forest.” They began to make their way down the path and Wesley felt a sudden pang of separation from his surroundings, like a stranger. Images of the squirrel he saw earlier popped into his mind, and, at that moment, he wished he could hide. He saw small sets of eyes beaming at him from the trees. He heard whispers rising up around him, and it became clear that the creatures of this forest had probably never seen a boy before. Walking with his head down, he kept his eyes only high enough so that he could see where the path was leading him, and so he could be assured that the “Mighty-Mouse” fairy he had befriended was close to him for protection. It is unfair to say that he felt threatened, just alienated. His stature remained the same until he spotted several tree ladders, and forts carved in and out of the treetops above him. Wesley loved tree-forts. A fascination glossed his eyes as he went from only looking down, to only looking up. As they walked on, he noticed zip lines and pulley systems set up to move things from level to level. He saw wooden huts and rope ladders all arranged in a network fit for a community of beings that could live comfortably above the ground. It fascinated him to say the least. Now the only question was where that community might be.

After a few more minutes of walking along the path, Wesley began to hear a wave of voices rising and falling in the distance, like the ocean crashing to the shore. It sounded similar to a sporting event or a concert. He felt his heart thump a little louder in

his chest, his breath quickened. They turned around a bend in the dirt path and, there before Wesley, stood a huge wooden structure.

The path led right up to its gigantic doors, which were opened at the top of a long flight of stairs. The whole building was made of a dark brown wood that gave it an ancient, special feel. In front of the doors were four great columns that could have been trees themselves they were so thick. Though the building wasn't spectacularly high, no more than a regular human house, the width of the building was remarkable. The roof was made of hundreds of dark shingles that were strikingly similar to the pictures Wesley had seen of Chinese temples. Through the doors, he saw several small green heads were facing forward in the middle and, on the opposite side, a great many more were looking toward the center of an arena. He gulped loudly and followed his tiny friend into the presence of the tree elves.

They climbed the stairs at a brisk pace and, as they ascended, Wesley asked Flin if there was another way into the arena. She shot him a curious grin and pressed on towards the strange green beings. As they stepped in through the doors, Wesley decided to creep along the back walls and slide as much of his body as possible behind the hefty doors they had just passed through. He forgot about Flin for a moment and ducked into the shadows. "It is quite all right young lad," a voice suddenly appeared in Wesley's head. It was a man's voice, very wise, and very old. Wesley didn't quite know what do with himself. He decided it was best to remain quiet and hidden, until, just as suddenly, the voice spoke again. "We have seen your arrival coming for many moons, my boy, and your presence here is neither a threat to us, or you...in this forest, to be in shadow is to be in danger. I assure you no harm will come to you if you chose to come out from behind

that door,” Wesley felt completely helpless. Not to mention that, on the other side of the door, he heard loud explosions and splashes, like fireworks were bursting underwater. He poked his head out of the shadow of the door, half expecting to find an old man standing beside it. To his surprise, he only found Flin, and she was standing on the handle of the door with her arms across her chest, a smile across her face suggesting she heard the one-sided conversation Wesley just had.

“So he found you?,” she said, pointing across the arena to an overhang resting in the center. Wesley saw an old elf sitting on top of what appeared to be a throne. He had his hand by his face and a few fingers stretched out onto his temple. His eyes were squinting until he noticed Wesley looking at him, and then he smiled a sly smile that Wesley interpreted as: “Yep, it was me,” and motioned for Wesley to come towards him. Flin led the way.

As the two made their way along the outside, Wesley’s attention was drawn to the action in the center; fortunately, the audiences cheering and shouting drew the elves attention away from him. An occasional eye drifted over to him and was generally followed by a curious and slightly scared expression, but never a hostile one. Wesley could barely believe what he saw in the center.

At the two ends of the oval-shaped field were two simple wooden buckets. They were resting on top of a wooden stand and, from where he was walking, it seemed like they were filled with water. But, with what was going on, this could not be the case. The floor of the playing field was all very lightly colored sand, whiter than Wesley could ever remember seeing. There were two elves in the middle and they seemed to be partaking in a duel. It was a battle where the weapons and the maneuvers were comprised entirely of

vibrant and sporadic swirls of color. It is hard to explain, as there has never really ever been something that could compare to it in the human world. But Wesley was overjoyed at the show he and his fellow spectators were getting. The two combatants would dip their hands into the liquid inside the buckets and then assume a sort of fighting stance in front of the stands. An elf wearing a white tunic, who Wesley could only assume was the referee, walked into the middle, dropped a white flag, and then the two warriors began their duel. With a sudden explosion of color, the warriors' hands seemed to light on fire. In this particular battle, one of the elves hands burst into blue flames. The other elf held his hands open, palms up, with his fingers bent at the joints. He had a small green orb suddenly appear above both his hands at the drop of the flag, and Wesley noticed one was wearing a green band around his brown pants. His opponent was wearing a blue belt around his.

Once the two warriors had their weapons "prepared," several incantations were recited by each elf, and they shot their hands forward, sending spiraling balls of blue and green flame across the arena at each other. They were forced to dodge and flip and perform spectacular aerial maneuvers in order to evade the incoming balls of energy. Wesley could not believe how high and how skillfully these warriors moved through the air. They did back-flips and somersaults as they flew gracefully above the ground, all the while launching attacks at each other. But now it seemed the elf with the green band had launched a stray energy ball directly at a section of the crowd, with great speed and, as it neared the border of the field, Wesley was tempted to shout out a warning to the section below. Just as he opened his mouth, the ball appeared to strike an invisible force-field that seemed to be surrounding the arena. The ball splattered all over the side and was

then quickly absorbed into nothingness. Green ripples fanned out from the point of impact and, in a matter of seconds, the great threat was no more than a gust of air inside the stuffy arena. The blue elf veered to the left, and cleverly anticipated his opponent's next move. He shouted something in the fairy tongue of magic that Wesley could not understand and then shot a jet of blue flame at his foe, first pinning him against the wall and then dropping him down to the sand across the field. Wesley felt fear creep up his face; and a sincere sorrow for the green elf. He watched anxiously as the blue elf walked across the sand, his blue-flame hand at the ready. The green elf sat up a bit confused, looked across at his oncoming challenger, and dropped his head down in defeat. He got up to his feet, moved his hand down around his waist, and untied the belt from his pants. With a certain respect and dignity that Wesley found very honorable, he handed the blue elf the belt, and dropped to one knee before him. The crowd erupted in cheers, the blue elf helped up his fallen opponent, and they exited the field as friends. Wesley stopped along the back and leaned in as close as he could to get a better look. "What a sight!!," he thought to himself. Oh how he wished that David were here to witness this with him. Or, better yet, for them to get to compete in the games—spitting fire and lightning from their hands!!

Feeling a slight tug at his shirt by his shoulder, he looked over to find Flin was pulling him towards the old elf in the overhang. He had almost totally forgotten about his surroundings and his condition and, though it was almost impossible to turn away, he was quite certain that upsetting a creature who can put voices in your head was not in his best interest. So they made for the overhang, and the throne of the Candlewood Elves.

“And how are you liking the tournament so far, young man?,” the wise elvin king asked as Wesley and Flin approached his throne. “I am under the impression that this is the first magical tournament you have seen?”

“Yes,” Wesley replied. “And I think it is the most amazing thing I have ever seen.”

“Magic, my boy, magic is certainly the most amazing thing that I have ever seen as well.” The king had turned over the arm of his wooden chair in front of them, and motioned for the boy to come forward. Flin fluttered over to the railing looking over the arena and elegantly sat on the corner, facing sideways.

“Do you know what makes magic possible young lad?”

“I’m afraid I don’t,” Wesley admitted. “I do believe it has something to do with whatever liquid was in those buckets.”

“Ah yes, quite right, quite right.” The old king nodded and stroked his beard as Wesley went to the edge of the railing and leaned over.

“I wonder what you thought was in those buckets when you first saw them?”

“I don’t know, something magical, a potion, I suppose.”

“Would it surprise you if I told you that you have that very same liquid up in your world?,” the king beckoned the boy.

“Well, yes. There is no magic where I come from,” Wesley answered as he turned from the balcony. For the first time, he got a good look at the small creature sitting on his throne. Wesley was struck at how old and wise the king seemed. The many wrinkles around his eyes and on his forehead softened his every expression. He couldn’t have been more than three-and-a-half feet tall and sitting on his throne reminded Wesley

of a toddler on a pew in church: his legs dangling freely over the edge of the seat; his arms resting uncomfortably at his side. Even his crown seemed to slump over his large green ears and push the white hair on his head down over his eyes. The long goatee on his chin was braided and decorated with a few scattered beads and an arrowhead. Wisdom seemed to rest in his eyes and, though he looked like an old decaying creature Wesley couldn't help but respect him.

“Water, my boy. Water is the secret to magic,” the feeble voice of the king sounded again from his throne. “You have so cleverly labeled the elements of water in your world as hydrogen and oxygen. You have understood what it's made of, but you have not yet understood what it is. What it contains. Why it is what it is. Water is the most basic element of life. It is the most abundant thing you know of. Because of this abundance, it seems you have cast it aside, and thus its potential to create magic.” Wesley didn't seem to be catching on; he was still struggling with the fact that the king had said water. Before he could ask to clarify exactly what was in the buckets, the king continued. “Held within the every drop of water is a life force, a will, and a way to create a power and an energy that any creature can harness if he chooses. If a person can look inside himself and connect to this force within the water, then—through that connection of faith—a great host of powers and magic will be at their fingertips. It is hard to explain, to describe. The real potential lies inside you. Your ability to believe, to accept, and to harness the magical force that water can bring... It has to do with the kind of person you are. Are you someone that would choose to do good, to do bad, to gain from this power, or to serve with it? Whatever lies within your heart will determine the kind of magic you possess. A brave heart tends to be blue; a true heart tends to be green. The

two warriors you saw fighting earlier had these characteristics. But there is more. A person with a heart of passion will find purple. A heart with a drive for wealth and greed will be grey. A person that is jealous, orange. A heart that is pure and good, will be white, and an evil heart is often red, or worst, black. I understand how this is hard to recognize. How such an everyday thing, something you have come into contact with every day of your life can have such power. But I'm sure you will see, when your days are as numbered as mine that all things are not as they seem." With that, the king paused and waited for the boy to react.

"Have you ever seen anyone with black magic?," Wesley delved.

"There is one. He is a great menace to the Candlewood Elves; a creature void of anything good. It lives in the darkest parts of our forest, this creature named Dragor. Inside him is a black heart, ill thoughts and the foul motive to use his dark magic."

"Then there must be someone who has white magic inside him." Wesley was concerned at hearing the troubling news that the elves had such a horrible threat within their borders.

"There's a legend of an elf who lived long ago. He wielded a powerful white magic that turned all evil things into good, into things of light. Within his heart was a will to create, rather than destroy, a hope to prosper and not to decay. Our elders tell of a time when Dragor was not at large; when he was second best and living among the elves."

"What happened?," inquired Wesley.

"He was lost," Flin chimed in from her corner on the railing with her head down.

"It is said that Dragor tempted the white warrior, spoke to him of the power they could

share if their forces combined. And, though the white elf refused at first, the lingering words of the deceitful Dragor were quick to poison the mind of the warrior. He found his powers beginning to fade, and he went to Dragor to find counsel and comfort; and, at night while the white warrior slept, Dragor took his life, thus consuming the power of his victim.” Flin put her face in her hands finishing the sad history.

“That is awful,” Wesley concluded. “And what is done now to keep the elves of your kingdom safe from Dragor?”

“We have the ability to keep him at bay. There are a great many students of magic within our borders, and Dragor knows it would be folly to attack us with our advantage in numbers. However, the black warrior is gathering his flock. He has been tempting weaker elves and, in the shadows of the night, he has been recruiting his minions and forming his ranks. The time is drawing near when Dragor will look to overrun the elves, and disrupt our way of life. I fear he will take sight of the human world as well and attempt to rise above the ground and conquer as far as his greed will take him.”

“I’m sorry to hear of your burden,” Wesley said. He turned back around saw that the tournament had dismantled during their conversation. The seats were empty except for a few scattered groups who remained discussing the match.

“But enough of the darker tales that we have in our world. There are a great many things that are still good and wonderful in our kingdom, and we will show you them tonight.” With that, Wesley, the king, and Flin headed out of the great hall and prepared for the night ahead.

Wesley was shown to his own tiny hut above the ground. Through a series of rope ladders and zip lines, he was lead by two elves to a room that had obviously been prepared for a being of much greater size than the small elves of the forest. He opened the door and found two tiny beds pushed together to form a larger one. Two chairs were moved side-by-side to form a bench at a table raised by several books under each of the four legs on the ground. Wesley smiled at the work and thanked the elves, who then went their separate ways.

Wesley took a seat on the bench and reflected on all the wonderful happenings of the day. He got up and looked out the window. Below him he saw dozens and dozens of fires lit in the bases of the huge trees below. It looked like the trunks were solid teepees, hollowed out for a living space. The fires inside lit up the whole base and gave the tree a very distinct image. It looked like a large candle had been flipped upside down and stuck into the ground. The young boy now understood why it was called Candlewood Forest. He smiled at the world below his hut, but was interrupted by a blue light approaching his window with incredible speed. Backing up, he sat on the bed, and waited for Flin to enter. He had been hoping she would come up soon.

“Are you ready for the celebration?,” She asked as she flew in and stood on his knee before he could blink.

“I sure am. I am actually getting pretty hungry, so I’ve been meaning to ask if there is going to be food at this party.”

“Well, of course, silly Elves and fairies have to eat dinner too,” the small fairy explained with her hands on her hips.

“DINNER!!! Oh no, Flin, I can’t go to the party. I completely forgot about dinner! My mom said I had to be home by 5pm!! Remember! I told you back out in the hole. How long have I been here?! I have to go. My mom is going to kill me.” He was panicking. He made for the door, sending Flin into the air. “I am in serious trouble, I know it,” Wesley worried aloud as he reached for the door. His hand was about to grab the handle when Flin appeared on top of it with stunning quickness. It stopped Wesley.

“Time has stopped in your world,” she said matter-of-factly. “I asked the king about what you said earlier, what 5pm was; and he told me about the sun rising and setting. You live based on time.

“”TIME”, yes “time.” It’s something my mom told me to pay attention to, she told me to be on “time,” and I guess I blew it, huh?”

“No, Wes. Calm down. You are not listening. Time is not happening right now. Once you entered our world, time stopped for you and for you alone. You will go back and it will still be the same time, the same day, the same moment as you left it. Our rules of night and day are different from yours. We only have the glow lights above, and they are controlled by the king, and by his magic. We do not have night and day. It is dark when we are tired, so we can sleep, and it is light when we want to be up.” Wesley had calmed down now, and was listening closely. It seemed a strange way to live, without time to hold you down. He thought of the freedom it might give to the elves of the Candlewood Forest, and also of the way his own life was run in the opposite manner. At school he moved, worked, and ate, and ultimately lived by a bell. He woke up at a certain time not because he wasn’t tired anymore but because he was subject to time. It

had never exactly occurred to Wesley the power that lies in a clock, and he was both distressed and relieved to hear of the “time-less” existence of Flin and her friends.

Flin changed the subject. “We better get you down to the Forest Table. We can’t have you be late to your own party. I hope you noticed that, on the stand beside your bed, there is something for you. A gift from the fairies and the elves, it is a symbol of the friendship we have, given to you in hopes you will remember us.” Flin pointed over to a small wooden table across the room. Wesley looked over and saw a necklace resting on its surface. He instantly loved the small token of friendship. A single, thin piece of brown rope with a knot tied in the back served as a simple band for an attached medallion. A smaller metal ring connected the rope to a piece of dark metal. The metal pendant is what made Wesley so fond of the necklace. It looked as though the number one had been attached to a “W,” only the sides of the “W,” were a bit more fanned out than a regular letter. It was simple. Just like the properties of water, and it held in its simple structure a sense of knowledge and strength.

“Oh, I really like it, Flin. I like it very much, and I would be honored to wear it to the party,” Wesley said beaming. With that, the duo left the hut and climbed down to the floor, which was alive with the beat of drums, the crackle of fires, and the laughter of new friends.

Wesley found himself among the most delightful, friendly beings he had ever known. It seemed to matter not that he was a good foot taller than everyone, that his skin was not green, his ears were not large and pointy, and that a human had not been seen in these woods for over a thousand years. The night was merry, and it was full of many things that Wesley would not ever forget. He was sat at the middle of a large wooden

table big enough for 200 elves and several dozen fairies of all different colors. The table was covered with an incredible amount of food, most of which Wesley had never seen before. The fruit Wesley had noticed on the way into the forest seemed to have been the only source of food available to the elves. Every dish in front of him was orange. There were soups and breads and cakes and biscuits—they all appeared to be made from fropple. It was a curious meal but there was no denying how anxious he was to try it.

At the head of the table was the wise Elvin king sitting on a regular old chair. The sides of the table were complemented by three or four long benches, and it seemed odd, or unexpected rather, that the king would not be sat on a throne. One of the elves sitting next to Wesley explained that the king was a ruler who put his people above all things. When he sat with them to eat, he insisted on being at the same level, to drink and be happy among friends, rather than his subjects. Across the table, a young Elvin boy asked Wesley a question when he saw Wesley was acting strange towards the food in front of him.

“Excuse me mister human,” a small, high-pitched voice squeaked. “Does your mom know how to make fropple cakes? Because my favorite fropple food has to be fropple cakes. And my mom can make fropple cakes pretty good, and does fropple grow on the trees in human world? And how do you get them, because I don’t think humans can climb good, because your hands and feet are small, and your skin is funny, and my ears are bigger than yours, and can you hear me or do I have to talk loud—IS THIS BETTER?!” The tiny elf screamed at the end of his questioning. Wesley could not help but chuckle at the onslaught of questions. His mother jabbed an elbow gently into his

side towards the end of his blabbering. The elf reminded him of his friend David in a way, and Wesley smiled before he replied.

“Well, little guy, fropple is something I have never seen before.” Wesley started, picking up fropple bread and dipping it into a bowl of soup. “In my world, we have all different kinds of food that grows on trees and on the ground, and even underground! And my mom cannot make fropple cakes, but she makes a great chocolate cake. As for climbing trees, we can actually manage pretty well with our small hands and feet. I’m sure we are much slower than elves are though.” Wesley thought he had answered the young elf sufficiently, and he had a question of his own.

“What is your name?”

“You can hear me. Just fine. But I don’t get why because my ears are so big, and yours are so small, and you’re far away from my mouth. My name is Hoto.” Wesley chuckled again at the creature’s inability to transition his thoughts.

“I am Wesley,” he said, his voice rising above the quieted table. Most of the big yellow eyes and floppy green ears of the elves were pointed at him and Hoto. The orange food on his plate served as a wonderful distraction, flavors dancing in his mouth—like fruit filled with electricity. The textures and smells overcame his senses but, he felt a bit awkward with so many eyes on him, and he was glad when the attention was interrupted.

“Wesley, my boy, might I have a word with you down at this end of the table?,” the king’s familiar voice bounced down the table. Without speaking, Wesley swung his legs out from under the table and headed down to the king. Once he was by the king’s side, he stood patiently and leant a hand to help as the old elf managed to slowly stand on his chair in order to better address his people at the table. Standing upright the king’s

eye's locked with Wesley's. Holding there for a second, appreciation swelled up behind the king's stare and lifted the boy's spirits up and out of the forest.

“My people. Tonight is a night that will stand out in our memories. It is not only rare that a human has found his way to Candlewood Forest, but to have a person such as Wesley in our presence is a treasure I hope you all can appreciate. Though my time with the boy has been brief, it was not long before it was clear Wesley is not only rare in our world, but rare in his as well. He has a good heart and that is a quality to hold above all others.” The king paused for a moment to let the words settle in. “Our physical appearance is not a true reflection of who is inside of us. We are a different, elves and humans. And much better looking I might add without offense, I hope to Wesley, haha, my boy, haha.” He turned to Wesley with a joking smile on his face, as a light laughter broke out at the table. “No offense.”

“None taken,” Wesley smiled. It was hard to tell if a joke had been made, or if it was an acknowledgement of how unsightly the elves really were. In reality, the enormous glassy yellow eyes, the disproportionate hands and feet, the green skin, and wire thin frames, it seemed that humans must be much more pleasant to look at. Either way, Wesley comfortably laughed along. The king got in an extra chuckle at his own witty remark. The laughter subsided quickly, and the speaker proceeded.

“Creatures of Candlewood Forest, Wesley recently learned the secrets of the magic all beings possess through the life force contained in one of the earth's simplest elements. He has been told of these things in hopes that he will find the person he is, that he can be, and that he was meant to be within this marvelous world of magic we hold so dear.” Again he paused. “Tonight I have decided to show Wesley a glimpse of the

awesome power of magic, and to have this be a very real reminder to all of us, the great responsibility that comes with it.” The king reached down to a small wooden bowl at the side of his plate, and touched a finger into its center. The liquid in the bowl stirred at his touch, and a small vibrant green light began to form under the surface. Wesley’s face went blank.

The king closed his eyes and lifted his finger slowly out of the bowl. A tiny ball of light hovered above his outstretched finger.

“A drop of water,” the king announced, eyes still closed. “Simple. So simple in its appearance. Hardly worth a second glance.” He concentrated now. All was quiet in the forest, and at the table. The single ball of light began to gain potential. Though it did not yet grow in size, the pea-shaped illumination began to quiver. “But within,” the king continued” beneath its deceiving appearance; is life, creation, and all the beautiful wonders of the world.” The ball expanded, but it was barely noticeable. “Fire, earth, and wind, all pale in comparison to the overpowering source of life contained within every drop of water. Though it is only the tiniest part of a greater and much more potent mass...the smallest of all things...can change the course of tomorrow.” And with that, the ball of light exploded into a colossal mass of swirling green mist. It seemed as though a cloud had been sucked into a blender above the table, and the king had hit “puree”. A host of darting and flashing green and blue energy streaks went flying above their heads; violent gusts of wind blew Wesley’s hair back, and shook the leaves in the trees above them. The dark forest was vibrantly lit by the dancing creation the king controlled. All eyes sparkled with the ever changing glow. Wesley felt as though all the fireworks in the world had been shrunk, dyed green, and launched in a chaotic blaze

above him. It was hard to believe a small green elf could unleash such a thing. The great spectacle lasted only seconds before, with a gesture of the king's hands, the chaotic light was thrown into a huge pit in the ground, and a woodless orange fire burned high into the night.

“Let the celebration of friendship BEGIN!!!,” the king shouted, bringing everyone back to reality. At that, the loud drums of the forest came alive from all around. The dinner was suddenly over and all the creatures began to dance and howl and stomp their feet around the magical fire. Wesley was swept away. He found it easy to forget the things of his world. It was easy to laugh. He felt the rhythm and the bass of the drums in his blood. He flailed his arms and nodded his head and jumped with the elves around him. It reminded him of a bedtime story his mom had read to him long ago. He felt far from home, but he wasn't afraid. He felt wild, and new, and the heat of the night became alive in his steps circling the fire. The elves and the fairies seemed to forget about the worries of their world as well. The usual fear of Dragor that lingered behind the breath of every woodland inhabitant was not a part of the night, not this night.

The celebration raged for what must have been hours. The great fire in the hole before them did not show any signs weakening. There was life in the woods that night. There was heat, and youth, and some would say that magic was a part as well, only in ways that are hidden to most. At the conclusion of the dance, Wesley found himself to be a little bit of a celebrity. The creatures seemed to look at him with eyes of expectation, even eyes that suggested he had already done something great. It was a strange feeling. He felt slightly out of place, but also a sense of responsibility. After many pats on the back and handshakes, Wesley finally found himself at the foot of his bed in his own

private hut, exhaling for an eternity he fell towards his pillow. Letting time, and space, and even his thoughts slip away, the next few moments blurred together and dropped Wesley off somewhere in his dreams.

Though he could not remember hitting the pillow the night before, he woke up late the next morning feeling well rested. For no particular reason, he opened his eyes and didn't quite feel the need to close them again, unlike the mornings he had to wake up for school. It was still dark outside, but Wesley thought it appropriate, after a good stretch, to walk out to the balcony and take a look at the rest of the forest below and above. His hands hit the rail, which triggered a large yawn that sent his cheeks in collision with his eyes. He looked around and saw many of the huts above him were without movement. The fires in the base of the trees below were now out, and the table they had sat at was also nowhere to be seen. It was an interesting feeling to be in a foreign place and be the only person up. It felt like he was going to get caught for doing something wrong.

He noticed the delicate work in the rope ladders, and the vast community of bridges, crosswalks, and zip lines that made up the elves' home. Directly on his left was an incredible castle. Towering up into the tallest parts of the trees, the home of the King was both simple and spectacular. There were large balconies, and over hangs, ladders, and into the face of the trees making up the castle, intricate carvings were worked into the face. "Now that is a tree fort." He looked down at the soft dirt floor and the scattered torches, coughing smoke into the night, lining the walkway out of the forest. It carved itself in and out of the trees. His eyes followed the path in the direction of home, as far as

he could see. His mind drifted to thoughts of his mom, of his house, of his room.

Though the time that Wesley was here was not relevant to any of those things, he felt like they were worrying about him, and missing him. With a sigh, he decided that he would go back later that day.

Just about to turn back to go inside, he caught a glimpse of a distant shadow that seemed to move a few feet inward from the path. He squinted to get a better look at the figure. It moved again. In between the trees, this dark being was intent on being hidden. Wesley was about to call for help when he saw two red eyes appear from behind the large tree sheltering him. It was a dark shade of red. The eyes seemed to pierce into the night. They cut through the distance separating them and found their way to Wesley's heart. It beat hard in his chest, as if it had grown three times its normal size. He was getting faint. He felt the blood in his veins grow weak. His fingertips lost their sense of touch. His vision began to blur around the dark stranger's eyes. A sickness crept up his back, and attacked his throat and his mouth. Suddenly, a familiar voice spoke in Wesley's head: "Let go, Wesley. Find your heart, find the boy inside you, and remember you are a person of light. Come back, Wesley, Come back...come back." Wesley blinked hard and, when he opened his eyes, he found himself on the balcony a few feet back from the railing. Looking down at his hands he brought them up to his face, brushed his cheek and looked to the tree again. The eyes were gone. He searched desperately for the powerful red eyes. No sooner than he had given up, the lights in the forest turned on. It took no less than ten seconds for a sudden rise to take place in the amount of light in the forest. It was like watching a sunrise in fast forward.

With that, the huts above and below him gradually bubbled with chatter, with yawns, and an early morning stir. Turning to go back inside, he still felt a little bit sick from those dark red eyes. He lifted his eyes up to find that, on the table, his breakfast was awaiting him. He paused for a moment, questioning where the meal had come from. He certainly hadn't heard of, or expected room service of any kind, though he didn't think it was out of the question for how kind these elves had already been. He looked at the supply of fropple juice, fropple cakes, and a mushy jelly-like material that sat next to a loaf of fropple bread. "A fropple breakfast," he nodded. Moving forward he was startled by the sensation of heat on his right cheek. He moved his eyes to the right and found a delicate blue light hovering above his shoulder.

"When did you get here?," he said relieved, glad for Flin's company.

"I came in just as you turned around," she replied.

"Well then, who made the breakfast?," Wesley wondered.

"I did," she answered.

"I suppose you used your super fairy biceps to carry it all over here, and balance it all as you cleverly snuck it past my head and set it nicely on the table—all in the split second it took me to turn around?, Did I pretty much nail it on the head there, Flin?"

Wesley said semi-sarcastically.

"You didn't think elves were the only ones who knew magic, did you now, Wes?"

She held her hand out and a small blue flame danced above her palm.

"Right, yea. Should have...got that I guess," Wesley said feeling humbled.

"Well come on and eat up," she said, motioning him to the table. "You must be hungry after all that dancing last night." The two of them sat down together and shared a

surprisingly delicious meal together. Wesley was surprised how each orange item on the table was packed with the same delicious strawberry, orange flavor but all in varying degrees. The bread was a much lighter and airier taste. The juice was a smack in the face of fruity wonderfulness, and the cakes were thick on his tongue like pancakes. He enjoyed every bite.

“I’m going to leave today, and go back to my world,” Wesley informed Flin. The tiny fairy was sad to hear the news, but knew it was a good decision, and an inevitable one.

After breakfast, he made his way out of the hut and down the rope ladder at its side. He climbed down, hopped off and found the Elf King standing beside him.

“And it is time for you to go, my boy,” the king said below him.

“I miss being home, and it feels like they miss me too,” Wesley said, though he was sad to leave this new place and his new friends.

“I would like to let you know that your time here has been enjoyable for me and for the elves of this forest; and your return here would be most gratifying.” The king seemed to be deeply saddened that Wesley was leaving, and it touched him in a way that made him feel like he had known the king for longer than just one day.

“I feel like I am undeserving to even have seen this place, and meet you all, and learn of the magic you all have...I...I am so small in my world. I am nobody in nobody-ville, and it feels like someone else should have walked in through that gate and down that path. It feels like an older stronger person should learn of the magic in water, and the colors, and the fire...”

“The smallest of all things...can change the course of tomorrow,” The king said and pointed to the medallion hanging from Wesley’s neck. Wesley smiled and reached his hand out to the small king. The tiny green elf reached out his large hand above his crown, and grasped the boys hand with surprising strength.

“I will never forget you,” Wesley promised.

“That is because we will meet again,” the king replied and made his way past Wesley wearing a grin.

“Wesley walked across the giant dirt floor below the fortress of huts above. There were several families out on their balconies waving down at him. Flin trailed no more than a foot behind, and above Wesley’s head. Sadness was in the air as the pair made their way out of the realm of the Candlewood Elves.

Walking through the forest, Wesley could not help but think about the strange sickness he had felt earlier in the morning. The vision of those evil eyes was ever-present in his mind. It felt as though that terrible shade of red against a background of hopeless darkness had been stained into his memory. What was it that he saw out there? Could it have it been Dragor, the evil wielder of black magic?

They reached the end of the path much sooner than Wesley had hoped, and it pained him deeply to stop and wait for Flin to put her key into the wall above him. A brilliant white door appeared in front of him, just like it had before. But, unlike last time, Wesley did not feel a rush of excitement to step to the other side.

“It seems like months ago I was coming through this door the other way.”

Wesley said with his head down, avoiding Flin’s eyes.

“And it seems like years ago that a rock fell through and broke my lookout.”

Wesley smiled, remembering the happenstance of their meeting.

“I am going to miss you, Flin.”

“I will miss you too, Wesley.” Flin flew down and gave him the tiniest kiss on his cheek. It sent an incredible rush of warmth all over his body, a distinct heat that traveled from his head to his feet, and practically shot out his toes. He let the warmth linger as long as it would. “Just one more thing,” Flin said, moving from his cheek to his neck. She placed her hand over Wesley’s throat and a familiar but strange feeling made its way across his Adams Apple. He felt a sudden loss of connection between him and Flin and, when she let go and backed away, he looked at her in a different manner than before.

“Fenlee,” Flin said waving to Wesley.

“Bye,” he said, taking a deep breath and then turned to step through the door. He closed his eyes, bit his teeth, stepped forward, and was left in the cold dark basement of the large hole. A cold gray wall met his eyes as he turned around. The vibrant glowing door was gone. With his hand on the wall he raced through the images of the place behind it: the tournament, his talk with the king, the dinner, the fire, his time with Flin. It seemed more of a dream than an actual experience. The light from above caught his eye as he looked up, and he made his way over to the stairs.

About half way up, he spotted the backpack that he left behind when he leapt for the enormous tree laying across the hole. He picked it up and raced up the spiraling gray staircase to the light above.

When he finally got home; he was only half-amazed to find himself early for dinner and, after giving his mom a hug, he headed upstairs. Throwing his backpack onto the floor, he sat down on his bed, hands on his knees. He ran his fingers through his hair and felt mutual feelings of sadness and thankfulness to be home mixed together in his chest. Looking around his room he enjoyed seeing familiar things. His bookcase full of half-read books, his closet, even the posters on the wall made him feel at home. When he looked at the desk, however, he noticed something unfamiliar to him. A small pot was resting itself in the middle of the wooden surface, just to the left of his globe, and he took a seat to examine it. He pulled out the desk chair and saw a yellow flower was resting in the wet soil within the flower pot. The flower seemed to be fairly new because its pedals had not yet extended out of the bud and the green pedals of the stem were still keeping the yellow buds inside from fanning out.

Wesley looked to the bottom of the stem and found a small puddle of water close to the rim of the pot. His mom must have just watered it before he came in and, apparently, given the young flower a bit too much drink. Wesley sat back in his chair with his arms across his chest and stared at the puddle. He pictured the Elf King's finger dipping into the bowl of water at the table and the colossal green firestorm that followed. He thought of the warriors in the tournament and their duel.

With a deep breath he sat up and slowly reached out, extended a finger, and concentrated hard on the feelings inside his heart. He thought of Steph at first, and it usually happened that way. Thought of what she looked like in the first grade when they first met: her hair in a ponytail, her blue eyes so vivid and sharp. He thought of David and their friendship. About his jokes and about his support through thick and thin. Then

he thought of his mom. Thought of her smile, her chocolate cookies, and found that with that came an endless amount of love.

His eyes opened. Dipping his pointer finger into the liquid, he waited for something to happen. Nothing. He pulled his finger out and studied the clear, simple drop at the tip. He brought it up to his face and marveled at what potential he knew rested in its being. Behind it he saw the yellow flower. His head nodded slightly to the side, and he quickly pointed his finger at the flower before him. A stream of fire and lightning shot out of his fingertip and caused the budding flower to instantly blossom. The stream from his finger stopped as suddenly as it started, and Wesley sat back in awe.

“Dinner is ready, Wes,” his mom’s voice called up from the kitchen. Wesley turned his head a little acknowledging the call, and then brought his finger up to his eyes. The jet of light had sent a thrill of disbelief down the boy’s spine emptying him out of any clear thoughts, or reactions. He was stunned. The fire/lightning was distinct, vibrant, and powerful. And above all things...it was white...

Story 3

The Water Game

“I guess so,” David shrugged. “I mean, that doesn’t sound like the best thing we could do to start off the weekend. But, uh, swamps can be pretty cool for adventures.”

The young boy was referring to a suggestion Wesley had made descending the steps of the bus as it came to their stop. “I was thinking we could check out the swamp at the North side of the neighborhood,” Wesley had said. Usually David was the one with the bright ideas, the creative adventures, and the guide to mischief, but Wesley had long been hoping to explore the hidden swamp.

“So when I think ‘swamp’,” David began, “I think of things like moss and mud and frogs and broken logs and trees and stuff, right?” He looked for a nod of agreement. Wesley shook his head.

“Yes.”

“...and probably a lot of marshy terrain, like in the jungle or something?,” he added.

“Yes,” Wesley replied, “I don’t get why you’re asking?”

“Well, I have shorts and flip-flops on,” he concluded pointing down to his bare legs and toes. They made their way towards Wesley’s house.

“Well you can borrow some stuff, I guess. I only have one pair of boots, though, but you might be able to wear the old tennis shoes I cut the grass with.”

“That’ll do,” David said appreciatively.

The boys marched into the front door and up the stairs, where they began to shed their school clothes. Levis and shirts were thrown on the ground, as camouflage and black cargo pants redefined them. A sense of a “coming battle” filled Wesley’s room as they hopped out of one uniform, and into another; like the calm before a storm. Once they were fully dressed with game faces on, they made their way out of the room sliding down the hallway, their white socks playing slip-and-slide with the wooden floor. They raced down the stairs and into the mud room, where a pair of thick brown boots awaited Wesley and an old beat-up, grass-stained pair of Nike sneakers awaited David.

“Great,” said David, who was clearly disappointed that his outfit would be severely less cool as a result of the sneakers. Though he had not had that high of an expectation about what his feet were doomed to wear. He slipped on the left shoe and the points of remnant blades of grass poking his socks killed the combat mode he was in.

“You can wear the boots,” Wesley said noticing David’s face.

“Really?,” asked David looking up a little stunned.

“Yea,” Wesley said. “They fit me pretty well ‘cause they are formed to my feet. Ehhhhh. I’ve put a lot of miles on those babies.” Wesley joked, holding his pants at his waist, and puffing out his stomach. Seeing that Wesley would really not be that upset in the shoes, David felt another swift rush of excitement and thankfulness, as he popped up and traded shoes with his friend.

“Thank you,” David said.

After a quick holler to the kitchen, telling his mom their whereabouts and the usual “be back before dark” sign-off, the boys leapt out of the mud room door and raced across the lawn in the direction of adventure.

It was a brilliantly sunny Friday evening. The boys found it easy and comforting to travel the half mile to the swamp at the back of the neighborhood. It felt unusual to Wesley, because, as in most of the books he had read in class, there always seemed to be a great struggle, or journey, before arriving to the significant plot points. It always made Wesley curious as to why there must always be a journey. They could never just walk across a bridge or go to the next town. These heroes he would read about would have to venture half across the world to defeat a dragon, or scale a host of mountains and climb to the tallest tower of the tallest castle in the tallest part of the world to overcome the opposing evil. Wesley thought himself fortunate to only have to walk a few yards in any direction for him and David to find adventure. David seemed to be in the same spirit as well.

“It is really nice out today,” he said, as he hopped on the curb, balancing himself on the narrow walk. The boots made it a bit difficult with their large soles and heavy weight, but he managed. “I don’t want it to get cold this year. I hate the winter,” he

added, hands out to the side to stay stable. Wesley agreed. He sincerely disliked the winter months as it tended to kill any hopes of the sunny adventures he was so passionate about. Though fond of snowball fights, and hot chocolate, and Christmas, the list quickly ran thin on “pros” about winter.

“Hey, are you going to ask anyone to the winter dance this year?,” Wesley asked, hopping up on the curb across the road from David.

“I don’t know. There is this girl Lauren in my science class that’s really nice. I haven’t really talked to her that much, but I might ask her.”

“What’s her last name?,” Wesley pried.

“Deipe...deppy...deipeveneennen. I don’t know something with a “D.”

“No way!! She’s in my English class. You should definitely ask her. She is really cool. She likes the books we read just about as much as I do, and I think she is a good writer too. For Show and Tell she brought her dog, and he is so cool. And—“

“OK, OK. Jeese, why don’t you ask her?,” David offered.

“Well I’m just saying she is really cool,” Wesley said toning it down a little bit.

“What about you, bud. Are you going to ask Steph?”

“I don’t know. I heard she is going to ask this other guy. So probably not.”

“Well you better find someone to go with, ‘cause you’re not going to want to miss the moves of David Hudson, no, no, no. I will be on the dance floor, ripping it up. Just to let you know what is happening before you get in there, and why all the ladies are crowded around someone...now you’ll know who,” David teased, Wesley was pretty sure David was just as nervous about dancing in front of everyone as he was.

The boys climbed over a few more hills, cut through some backyards, and hopped a few fences before they finally came to a stretch of road that led deep into the forest and, eventually, to the swamp.

As they walked up to the point where Wesley thought it would be, he noticed David looking at him over his shoulder, a bit confused.

“There’s a swamp here?,” David squinted his eyes and furled his brow.

“Yea, it should be right back through there, about 50 yards or so.” Wesley answered confidently

“And you know this how?”

“Because all of the land around this area is raised up around this one point and it will act like a bowl when it rains. And we had that terrible rainstorm for all those days last week, so I figured there must be a swamp back here somewhere,” Wesley explained. David was impressed.

“And when, might I ask, did you become a weather, geology, know-it-all sixth grade genius kid?,” David mocked in a friendly sort of way.

“Well I just figured. I have never really seen rain like that before, you know? The sky was so dark and black,” he said remembering the vicious storm. “My mom and I drove past here a few days ago. That’s how I found it.”

“Well all right. Let’s go then.” David took a step into the thicket. There were several low-hanging vines and tree branches uncharacteristic of the woods closer to the Wesley’s house. Sharp unwelcoming splinters stuck out from many of the tree limbs, and fungus infected leaves twisted under the boy’s boots. The sickly bark on the trees oozed sap from his center, a flesh wound that left the swamp bleeding auburn goo. As they

made their way through the brush, they kept their eyes forward in hope of finding this supposed swamp. They were forced to duck, and twist and bend over and under all the obstacles of the forest, as they blazed further and further into the unknown. It suddenly came upon the boys that a series of stealth and combat maneuvers were required. David, in the lead, was clearly being as silent as possible. Staying low to the ground, his knees bent, hands out to the side. Wesley was turned sideways crouched low, mimicking David's movements. He imagined them approaching the enemy camp. Every sound in the woods became alive. They were swallowed by the moment. Sweat stuck to their necks. Their senses were finely tuned to any sound or movement. Wesley looked up ahead and noticed David was pretending to hold a machine gun. He had both of his hands wrapped around the imaginary object and was pressing it up against his chest, his back against a thick old oak tree, sap oozing towards his head. He motioned for Wesley to fall ahead of him quickly and secure the next position. Wesley joined the game. Barrel-rolling past David's heels, he came up holding imaginary pistols in each hand. With cunning speed, he dashed between the trees and branches obstructing his path. He spotted a safe point clear from enemy fire and dove into a small structure of logs. Popping his head up he signaled for David to take the next mark, gesturing with his fingers and drawing a circle in the air.

David went into action in a similar style. He performed some of the same evasive maneuvers Wesley had only he paused a few times at the sight of the enemy patrolmen up ahead watching his desired path before turning away. He jumped over Wesley's log base and ran ahead until he found himself at the beginning of a marshy patch of land. The ground beneath him had suddenly become a thick, sticky mud. He shoved his

shoulder up against a large tree and whistled for Wesley to join his location. Within seconds, Wesley had made it to him, slightly out of breath. Both boys sat up against the tree, making sure to keep their whole bodies in hiding.

“Looks like we found the swamp,” Wesley said, smiling both from the excitement of their descent on the “enemy hideout,” and because of the discovery of the swamp. He poked his head around the tree and marveled at the perfect marshland that lay on the other side.

Algae covered water stretched over a spot of land no bigger than a basketball court. On the far side of the swamp, there was a small wooden hut made entirely of sticks. Something of a presentable doorway was hinged together at the front; a barely adequate chimney in the rear of the shelter; and the entire house seemed like it had been fused to the swamp itself, as though it had been welded into the very make-up of the trees and mud. A small fire-pit lay outside, a few feet from the doorway. A small black pot resting over it, three sticks hold it up. No more than ten feet from the wooden hut, the bank of the swamp started and it seemed impossible to reach the small fortress without crossing the body of water. Along the outside were several old sunken trees that seemed to have faded from brown to a sort of blue-grey color. The whole swamp looked ancient and, felt like an illusion. It was hard to find distinct shapes or clear lines, or to tell where one thing began and another ended. In addition, everything was covered by this dry blue-green fungus, like paper mashe` had been tossed over the whole landscape. Wesley looked over the swamp for a few more seconds and, before turning back to his friend, he spotted a sign to the left of the fire-pit, right up against the shore of the tiny lake. On an

old wooden plank made of no more than a horizontal piece of wood nailed to a thinner vertical one, was some writing Wesley couldn't make out from his vantage point.

“Hey what does it say on that piece of wood out there?,” Wesley said, spinning back around. Once his head was turned, he noticed David had turned around the other side of the large tree trunk and was staring at the swamp from the other side. Realizing he couldn't see David's face, Wesley turned back to his side of the tree, and his view of the swamp.

“What does that sign say?,” Wesley repeated.

“I heard you,” David said, sounding faintly frustrated. “I can't make out exactly what it says...I think...it says...'Jenny Humble.'”

“What??!,” Wesley said not sure if he had misunderstood him.

“No, no wait...'Jamie Bumble,’” David tried to correct himself.

“What??!,” Wesley demanded.

“It's someone's name. That's what's on the sign. I can't read it from here but I think it is someone's name!!” David brought his head back from around the tree, saw Wesley was looking over the other side, and went back to staring.

“Johnny Rumble,” a third voice came.

“Oh yeah—Rumble, you're right, Wes. How come you asked me what it says if you can read it better than I can?” David squinted at the sign.

“I can't,” Wesley said, surprised.

“Then how did you know it says 'Johnny Rumble'?”

“I didn't,” Wesley said, suddenly realizing the situation.

“Johnny knew that sign said ‘Johnny Rumble,’” the raspy old voice chimed in a second time. This time, the boys recognized that it had come from the front end of the tree, on the other side of the trunk. They looked at each other and huddled close.

“Who said that?,” David asked looking into his friend’s nervous eyes.

“I don’t know,” Wesley looked up waiting to hear more.

“Johnny did.”

“Who is Johnny?,” David asked again.

“I don’t know, I don’t know.”

“Johnny is Johnny Rumble,” the old voice spoke again.

“I’m not talking to you right now,” David blurted.

“Oh, OK, sorry,” the old voice sounded friendly. There was an awkward silence for a few seconds where neither Wesley nor David really had any idea what to say or ask each other, in fear of just being answered by this strange man. They also couldn’t seem to come up with a question to ask him directly. Instead, they sat together looking into each other’s eyes confused and surprised. They were also a bit defeated at the fact that *they* had been the ones hoping to sneak up on the swamp, and here they were being the ones who were snuck up on.

“Excuse me,” came the voice, breaking the silence. “I don’t suppose you would like to hear a poem that I wrote about Johnny, even though you don’t know him. It will make you laugh; it is a joke poem that I wrote for laughing. Johnny can tell it to you boys for a laugh and that is all I ask.” The boys couldn’t help but sit with jaws open at the sudden request by the new-comer they hadn’t even seen. They questioned each other for a moment with facial gestures and shoulder shrugs, until finally Wesley said,

“Sure.”

“Great,” came the voice one last time, until in a flash, and—then a stumble—there stood a tiny old man no more than a foot away from them. The boys leaped at the swift movement of the aged man. They couldn’t believe that such a person could possibly move that fast. The old man was no more than three feet tall. He was wearing a gray towel that looked as though a hole had been cut out for his head, and that was it. It draped down to his ankles but, on the sides, a pair of beat-up dirty brown shorts dangled on his waist. They were held up by a piece of rope tied around his hips that must have been retied at least a dozen times a day. His feet were bare like his head. And his arms were as skinny as the twigs that made up his house. His teeth, or lack of teeth, were grey and the boys could only spot a few in his mouth at that. His bright blue eyes stood out brilliantly against his filthy face, and the long white-grey beard was the only thing on his entire body that showed any signs of cleanliness. It struck the boys as odd to see such a well-kept beard on such an otherwise grimy body.

“Shall I begin when are you ready?,” The old man asked.

“Was that a question?,” David said with his face slanted to the side in confusion.

“NO,” the old man snapped and he began his poem with the next breath. He spoke fast, and directly, staring at both of the boys the whole time he spoke the poem. Line after line he would look back and forth between the them and the poem went like this:

*It seemed that often Johnny Rumble
found his steps were prone to stumble.
Following suit, his words did mumble*

and kept him humble,

Mr. Johnny Rumble.

And years went by, the minutes crumbled,

and Johnny found that being humbled

wasn't a way to live.

And, when push came to shove, and shove to tumble

Johnny Rumble found that a humble Rumble

that tends to mumble, and even stumble

is not who Johnny Rumble wanted to be...

The tiny man's eyes became quite large as he held his breath and tucked his lips into his mouth...

...So he changed his name to Bob.

The old man stood with his mouth wide open, his breath smelling like tree bark. His eyes darted back and forth looking for a response. He got nothing.

"To Bobbb," he repeated, hoping to enhance the humor of the situation. The boys sat back silently with their heads against the tree. They hadn't noticed it, but they were leaning back a great deal further than they were at the start of the poem, because now it seemed that the man was standing right up against them, his face only inches away from theirs. Though the boys were looking down at him, despite the fact that they were sitting, they were still a little intimidated by the clearly unstable character before them.

“That is...very funny,” David said, trying to sound as sincere as possible.

“Laugh you did not, eve...eveee, even a little,” Johnny mumbled.

“It’s a good joke, Mr. Rumble. We are just tired from our walk out here, so it is hard to laugh ‘cause we are out of breath.” Wesley started breathing hard. He looked over at David, who grabbed his chest and began panting as well.

“Oh, I see, I see, I see. No breath to laugh with. This I understand. Breath is a very e-ea-ee-easy thing to overlook, it is, breath is.” Johnny Rumble backed up a little bit as he said this, scooting his small rear over to a large root that was conveniently sticking out of the ground across from the boys.

“How do you mean?,” Wesley asked.

“Breath. Think about breathing, we do not. In and out and out and in it goes and goes and goes, and we do not think about it going and going and going and going and going and going....” As he was saying this, he was alternating his hands, moving them in and out from his chest. His head was bobbing side to side with the rhythm of the words. “...going and going and going. Until STOP, we need another breath because the last ran out. This is what I am talking about.” The boys looked at each other a little confused, but intrigued.

“But everyone knows that breathing is natural, our bodies are in charge of it. Why is that so important to not over-look? It’s just how we are made,” David added.

“A place where breath is paid attention to, where is this?,” Johnny asked.

“Paid attention to? What do you mean?,” Wesley crossed his arms.

“When are we are aware that our breath is running out?,” Johnny simplified.

“When we are under water,” David answered.

“Eggs...ee....exactly right,” Johnny smiled. “Water is a danger for humans that are in it, they cannot stay in long for their breath is at limit.” Johnny spoke wisely. He sat back with his arms crossed, followed by his feet in front of him. The boys, on the other hand, sat against the tree perplexed. They felt as though they were hearing something very obvious, but missing something very significant.

“Is this another joke?,” David said, getting frustrated and suddenly starting to feel disappointed again.

“No joke, no joke, no joke, no joke...” Johnny began to move his hands in and out again, followed by his head bouncing from side to side, like he had a few moments before. As he did this, for the umpteenth time that day, the boys looked at each other baffled. “...No joke, no joke, no joke...but a secret? Yes.” Johnny looked up with a clever grin on his face.

“A secret? What do you mean?,” Wesley asked.

“Always, what do you mean, what do you mean, what does Johnny mean? This time no more, saying what Johnny means, Johnny show what Johnny mean this time to show what Johnny means, when he says something that gets asked what does this mean?” The boys couldn’t understand most of Mr. Rumble’s last sentence, but when the fragile old man got up and started walking in the direction of his hut, they assumed they were meant to follow.

After rounding the large tree that they had been talking near, they quickly noticed that, if they were going to get to the hut across the body of water in front them, they were going to have to get wet. This made it even more of a mystery as to how Johnny Rumble made it over to the boys, as quietly and quickly as he did, without a drop of water on him.

So it was needless to say that, when they reached the bank of the swamp, David could not help but ask:

“What now?”

“Ahhhh...you see...I see things that are not all things are as they s-seeeeeee-sem-seem. You see?” He bent down and put his face up against the surface of the water. The boys were standing a few feet back from the small man, so they couldn’t see exactly what was happening. It looked at first like he was getting ready to take a drink of water. But, after a few seconds, they realized he was actually whispering something. It sounded like a chant, or a rhyme, or maybe even a spell. But whatever he said caused the most unexpected reaction the boys could have imagined. He whispered his last word to the water, then sat back, and joined the boys as they watched the water begin to ripple and stir. It wasn’t long before tiny waves began to form. The water came alive and began to work with the massive amounts of algae on the surface. The green substance was being cut, and moved, and reshaped, until before the three land-bound humans, there was suddenly a path of round green stepping circles. They formed a clear path all the way across the swamp. The boys couldn’t move. Johnny Rumble let out a slight sigh of approval.

“The water for you, has made a bridge,” he said, motioning for them to go first across the algae path. David hesitated to step forward onto the first green circle, so Wesley took the first step. His heart dropped as the bottom of his beat-up tennis shoes hit the soft green circle, as he was half-expecting to drop into the water.

“This is incredible,” Wesley commented, turning back to David to give him reassurance that it was safe to come. Wesley kept hopping from patch to patch until he

was a good distance away from the bank. David was a few patches behind him, and Johnny was following in David's steps. It was a rather comical sight watching Johnny scoot to the end of the green circles, put both of his arms bent down at his side, rock for a moment, and then, with a great amount of effort, leap to the other edge of the next circle. The boys were able to make effortless leaps across each gap of water.

While Wesley had a moment to sit and stare at the beautiful nature of the swamp, he found himself inspecting the makings of Johnny Rumble. He looked around at the swamp, at Johnny's hut, at the decrepit-but-mysterious presence of the trees around him. He was taking it all in when, suddenly, a swirl in the water caught his eye. He turned to the left and saw the water splashing at the surface like something had just ducked under seconds ago. He looked back and found that Johnny had noticed this as well. He had a small look of concern on his face, but seemed mostly unaffected by the strange movement. Wesley decided to make it to other end as quickly as possible, and once the three of them had reached the opposite bank in front of Johnny's house, the path of algae had dismantled and the strange stir in the water was forgotten.

"I saw something move in the water while we were crossing the bridge," Wesley said to Johnny. "Do things actually live in there?"

"Yes," Johnny replied. "There are many things that live in the swamp, and I intend on having you me-mee-meeeeeeeeee-meet them."

"What do you mean, meet them?," David asked, as they approached the doorway to the hut.

"You will soon learn what I meant, when I was talking of breath before, and when I said it has limits, and humans run out of it, and it is ee-eass-eeeeee-easy to overlook,

when I was talking about it and you didn't know what I was talking about before, when we were talking about breath and you two were confused," Johnny spat out.

"And look, it happened again," David whispered, nudging Wesley, a smile on his face.

"Come on into my home, and I will teach you the secrets of where the water people roam." Johnny was quite proud of the rhyme he made. He opened the door and the three of them walked in together. Johnny quickly made his way to a closet across the one-room hut, but Wesley and David found it a bit more difficult to maneuver around the small home. They had to bend their necks sideways, and could only really be comfortable if they were seated at the chairs around the kitchen table. Though they wanted to look around, this is where they ended up quickly after entering. They let their eyes wonder around the house and Johnny mumbled several things to himself in the closet. It seemed strange to the boys that there were so many aquatic, "harbor-like" items around the house. There were old fishing nets, and sea shells, and many other ocean-like decorations on the walls. An odd sort of sculpture lined the entire interior of the house—a sort of twisting coral-colored shell stretched like a fungus over and under the furniture. Several dozen hooks, and bobbers, and fishing line, all fused to the strange pink mass. Looking further around them, Wesley and David saw jars of little critters and insects all trapped inside the clear container. The small house hummed to life with crickets, chirps and whistles from the small bugs. Not to mention the creaks and cracks the floor made Johnny stepped over it.

"Are we here?," Johnny said, setting a small box on the table in front of the boys.

“Yes. Wait huh. What do you mean?,” David asked getting more and more frustrated with Johnny’s weird phrases and backwards manner of speaking.

“Here we are,” Johnny said, resting his hand on the box and looking a little confused.

“That’s not what you said the first time,” David accused.

“What?”

“The first time you said, ‘Are we here,’” David said calmly. Johnny was still confused.

“Here we are?,” Johnny asked.

“Wait. What are you asking?,” David turned red.

“I am saying ‘here we are.’”

“Yea, but the first time you said “Are we here”?”

“This is the same thing,” Johnny said, shrugging his shoulders.

“No, you meant to say, ‘Here we are’, when you brought out the box, as if to say to us ‘Look, I found what I was looking for’. But, instead, you said ‘Are we here?’, which is different because it’s like you are asking us where we are right now?” David’s face steamed with annoyance; He hadn’t meant to insult the old man, but Johnny’s jaw was now hanging out in uncertainty, his eyes set on Wesley looking for reassurance. Wesley wasn’t any help. Finally, feeling a little bit defeated, Johnny asked David:

“A dummy head says what?”

“What?” David was not in the mood for another riddle. Johnny began to smile.

“A dummy head, says...what?,” Johnny asked again, this time a little more excited.

“What?!” David answered starting to lose it a little bit. Now Johnny was beside himself with amusement. He even looked at Wesley with sheer excitement at the fact that David wasn’t getting the joke.

“A dummy head says what?,” he asked David one last time. And this time, right before David was about scream “WHAT” at the top of his lungs, he realized what was happening and stopped and rested his back against his chair, arms crossed and steaming.

“That’s very clever there, Mr. Rumble,” he said to Johnny. Feeling content, the old man gave one last tiny chuckle and then turned his attention back to the box.

“Do you know what is inside this tiny box?,” Johnny asked with a great sense of pride.

“Your tiny IQ,” David whispered under his breath.

“What was that?,” Johnny asked.

“A diamond or two.” David covered up his remark.

“No this is not a jewelry box, dummy head,” Johnny established. David just took that one.

“Inside this box is the key to making breath not a factor, eee...eee....even after a human has entered the water.” The boys felt tingles of anticipation creep up their backs. Johnny rotated the box around and pushed it in front of Wesley. David got up from his seat across from Johnny and knelt down next to his friend. After taking a moment to fiddle with its tiny latch, Wesley slowly lifted the top. Inside the simple wooden space was a bottle that contained within its glass walls what appeared to be nothing more than air. It looked empty.

“This is empty,” David said to Johnny, his anticipation stomped to the ground.

“Dummy Head thinks he knows eee..eee...exactly what is going on with Johnny Rumble’s magic bottle, doesn’t he, think he knows, the bottle has nothing he thinks of Johnny Rumble’s bottle.”

“Yes, that is what I think, because it is empty,” David said again. Johnny turned his attention to Wesley.

“Open it up then, boy, seee...eeeeeee, what is empty, and what is not, and who is wrong and who is not.” Wesley reached into the box for the bottle and picked it up. He was shocked at the weight of the object, and was even more confused that it felt as though a liquid was inside. He brought his hand up to the round cork stopper at the top of the bottle and carefully popped it off. David looked beside him curiously, and watched as his friend investigated the substance.

“O2H, is what that is called. Upside down water. It is backwards from air but still the same. It is made from the moon, at night when it rains. The white glow of its face changes the water as it falls from the sky to the earth. It is very rare, you seee...eee...eee. That a full moon comes along, when the night is dark, and the rain is long. If you drink it, if it is something you wish. Then I must warn of your life becoming like that of a fish. Water becomes air, and air becomes water. Breath becomes not-breath, and lungs become not lungs. Instantly working this air-liquid does. So I must warn you boys before you take a sip, beware of the O2H that falls past your lip.”

“If we drink this stuff, we will be able to breath underwater?,” Wesley asked.

“Only underwater, you will be able to breath,” Johnny replied smartly.

“For how long?,” Wesley asked again.

“For how long you want.”

“Well how do we turn it off then?,” David asked.

“Hold your breath and count to four, and the magic of O2H will be no more,”

Johnny cleverly replied. The boys still felt a little confused.

“Well, why are you giving it to us?,” Wesley wondered.

“Mr. Rumble has a question for you, a mission, a task. It is of great importance this thing that I ask. In the swamp outside in front of this house is a kingdom of people that is secret to the world of humans. I need you two to go and retrieve something for meeeeeee...eee, you see...eeeeeee. If you do this, I will give to you something not all the money in the world could buy for you two.”

“Well what is it?,” David interrupted.

“When you get back is when I will tell you what it is when you get back,” Johnny answered.

“What is it you want us to get?,” Wesley asked, getting interested.

“The Earth Medallion,” Johnny said with a great amount of respect.

“What in the world is that?,” David asked.

“It is...the Earth Medallion,” Johnny answered with an even greater amount of respect.

“What does it do, is what I meant?,” David asked again.

“I will show you when you get back, and let you share in its power if you succeed in getting it.”

“Why can’t you just go and get yourself?,” Wesley wanted to know.

“Tried I have tried,” Johnny put his head down. “Two people it needs to get it free...I have not a friend to do this with, see?” Johnny lowered his head even more.

David and Wesley looked at each other.

“What do you think?,” Wesley asked David.

“Just another adventure,” David replied with a smile.

“We will do it, Johnny,” They said together. The old man looked up at them from across the table with a grateful smile on his face, and tear in his eye.

“Let’s go then.” Johnny led the way outside. The boys followed him outside with the bottle of O2H in Wesley’s hand.

“Remember once you drink the O2H, air is no good to the lungs in your chest, and water is needed unlike before. To get it off, hold your breath and count to four.”

“Why not three?” David asked sarcastically

“Why not three what?,” Johnny was the one confused for a change.

“Well three. It’s usually count to 3. You know 1...2...3. Why is it four instead of three?” Johnny took a long moment to think. He brought his hand up to his beard and stroked it. His eyes roamed around as he studied David up and down. David could only stare back with his hands on his hips. Deep breaths rose in and out of Johnny’s lungs.

“Because three is a stupid number,” Johnny finally said. “The number is four to count to four to break the magic of O2H.” David rolled his eyes and shook his head.

“Where do we find the medallion?,” said Wesley

“It will be glowing. You will find it. Though I must warn you. The obstacles are not easy to overcome, the obstacles to get there. Clever and protective are the people of

the Water Kingdom. They will be watching you and you should know that you will not be welcome.”

Though the boys had many questions still unanswered, the desire to get started on Johnny’s quest had taken over any doubts of the unknown. They came to the water’s edge and began to take off their shoes and shirts Johnny stood behind them holding the magical bottle. They turned back to face him and he smiled at his two new heroes. He handed Wesley a simple rope to fasten around his shoulder with a small metal clip protruding from it.

“Clip the Earth Medallion here when you find it; clip it here,” Johnny explained. Wesley took the rope and put it over his head onto his left shoulder, and let it fall comfortably across his chest. They were ready. They backed up into the surprisingly warm water until they were up to their waists. Johnny tossed the O2H bottle to David.

“Good luck, my two young friends. Thank you for your courage I am thankful for.”

“You ready, Wes?,” David turned to his friend.

“After you, my man.” David took the bottle, popped the cork off, and brought it up to his lips. Slowly lifting the bottom, he let the strange liquid enter his mouth. The feeling was indescribable. It felt like he was holding a cloud in his mouth. He swished around the cool air, and moved his tongue around in the odd liquid. Shooting a smile over to Wesley, he swallowed and instantly found himself short of air. Feelings of panic and desperation shot through his body as he choked on the air. His head jolted back, and his arms flailed out for Wesley’s help.

“Go underwater,” Wesley said calmly. David closed his eyes and sank below the surface of the brownish water around them. The flat of his back bobbed effortlessly at the surface in front of Wesley and, for a moment, he was concerned his friend didn’t make it. David sank underwater, took a deep breath in, held it, and then rose out of the water smiling! Wesley laughed. His friend had an ear to ear smile. David pointed down to the water and gave a thumbs up, then dove back down, disappearing into the swamp.

“Likes the O2H; your friend likes the O2H, mee...eeeeee...thinks,” Johnny said from the shore. Wesley confidently reached for the bottle floating next to him. He picked it up, took a deep breath of air, and then drank the rest of the magical liquid. The result was incredible. Wesley felt his lungs expand inside his chest and then relax. A soft, warm sensation boiled in his chest, as though the O2H explored his lungs with a life of its own. Feeling completely comfortable, he sank down into the swamp. Johnny shot him a wink and a wave just before he closed his eyes.

When he opened them back up, what he saw was simply remarkable. The water was crystal clear and vibrantly blue. It was completely different than the swamp they had been deceived by above. The other remarkable surprise was that he and David had waded out onto the only shallow part of the entire swamp. In fact, they had been only inches away from an underwater cliff that jetted down into nothingness. The incredible depth of the swamp scared Wesley for a moment. But his fear subsided when he looked over and found his friend doing back-flip after back-flip next to him. He took a few seconds to get used to the feeling of breathing in water, but was surprised at how natural it all felt. There wasn’t any struggle or awkwardness at all. The water came in smoothly and went back out. It almost felt like he was just breathing in thick hot air.

He swam over to his friend and, when he approached, David stopped, got his bearings back, and then flashed the number 67 with his fingers. David smiled like he had just set a new world record for underwater back-flips. Wesley couldn't help but shake his head and laugh.

The two boys suspended themselves for a moment above the great abyss and wondered how in the world they were going to get down there. It would take hours to swim down that far. Suddenly David was pulling at Wesley's shirt and pointing to their right. About 10 feet down were a suspended ring of bubbles. They swam over to investigate. Once they got closer; they looked through and saw another tiny ring 100 feet below. The circle was roughly three feet in diameter and was made of all kinds of bubbles, big and small. Wesley looked at his friend and shrugged his shoulders. Cautiously, David reached his hand out through the ring. The second his fingertips passed through the hoop, a violent vacuum seemed to be turned on and a tunnel leading down to the next ring formed around the edges of the rings. David pulled his hand back quickly and then looked at Wesley with a questioning grin. Excitement was plastered all over his face. Wesley felt his heart start racing inside of his chest. He bowed his head and presented his arms towards the ring, suggesting that David go first. David shrugged again and then darted towards with his arms extended. He was sent soaring through the water at an incredible speed. A trail of bubbles followed behind him that Wesley assumed were there because he was screaming with joy. It wasn't long before David was approaching the second ring further down the underwater canyon. Wesley decided it was best for him to get moving along so David didn't get too far ahead.

The halo of bubbles really was a fascinating thing to look at in and of itself, and Wesley wished for a moment that he could have spent a little more time looking at such a strange find. He took in a deep breath of water, secured the rope around his chest, and then made a movement towards the ring. The vacuum sensation was instant. An incredible rush jetted him ahead like he was being pulled forward by a mighty current around him. His head shot back, and his arms and legs flailed aimlessly at the sudden start of the moving tunnel. He quickly found it was most comfortable to lay back like he was on a waterslide. He crossed his feet at his ankles and folded his hands behind his head. A smile was glued onto his face as he rocked and moved with the current. As he was approaching the second ring, he felt the current around him slow, almost as if to give him a chance to exit. Not moving much at all, the current quickly picked him back up, carrying him off to his friend in the lead. The brown canyon walls on the sides of him blurred together as he rushed by. Though it wasn't crystal clear, Wesley thought he saw strands of the coral-like rock in Johnny's hut, winding its way around parts of the canyon wall. Then, after a few hundred feet the ground stopped at a sharp end, and the boys were left floating through open water, down and down into the abyss. Passing several more rings, and a number of hills, dips, and twists, Wesley saw that David was up ahead treading water outside of a final ring.

Wesley was spat out of the circle and found that he and David were stuck with the same washed-up, thrill-ride-look about them. They were a mess, their clothes were all twisted and their eyes were glazed over with amazement. And they hadn't even turned around yet. David swam over and grabbed Wesley by the shoulders and shook him with

excitement. The two boys laughed and bounced around together sharing the experience even after it had ended.

After a few celebratory screams and high fives, they looked around at the bottom of the great canyon. Several underwater caves latched onto the sandy bottom that was formed by large boulders lying next to each other to form a unique community. Tall strands of green grass surrounded the camp, and it was here that Wesley and David decided should be their next point of destination.

It was clear that they had found the home of the Water People, but any doubt disappeared when a being appeared at the mouth of the cave on the other side of the grass. He must have been a guard. The boys stayed low in the grass. Through the blades, Wesley noticed that the guard and, thus, all the Water People, must have at one time been humans. The man at the mouth of the cave was holding a long steel axe, with rust covering some of the handle and most of the blade. He was completely normal looking, like a regular man, until right below his knees, where things became a little strange. It seemed as though his feet were fused together. A few inches above his ankle, there was a thick layer of skin that connected his legs as one. Below his ankle looked even more profound. The bones in this toes looked like they had become part of one foot. The whole structure of his single foot was very similar to a regular human, in that there were clearly 10 toes, and two separate bones leading out of the foot to be legs. But bizarre webbing surrounded the toes and connected both of the ankles, which served as a fin. His hair was a blondish blue and, even from their hiding spot, the boys were struck with the incredible silver color of his eyes. The features of the aquatic creature were certainly dissimilar than those of humans. Clearly they would stand out if noticed.

Wesley turned to look at David who seemed a little nervous and apprehensive. David took a deep breath in and shrugged his shoulders. He pointed down to Wesley's hip, to the medallion holder at the end of the rope, and then shrugged again as if to say "Where is it"? Wesley shrugged back.

They decided it would be best to venture to the left and away from the guard at the entrance. They swam as low as they could to the bottom and paid close attention to the danger that lurked ahead. The warm water felt nice as the boys pushed through it, and they were surprised that they weren't getting as fatigued as they should have. It must have been something to do with the O2H. They swam on looking for something that would clue them in to the location of the Earth Medallion.

Suddenly, out of the corner of his eye, David spotted a strange orange stick poking out of the lime green grass to their right. It was odd looking, and its vibrant orange surface screamed out at the young passerby. Without thinking, David reached out and grabbed it in hopes of using it as a swimming stick. Well, a walking stick, but they weren't really walking. Maybe that was why he grabbed it, because it was funny thinking of a walking stick for swimming.

The second he grabbed hold of the orange protrusion, the stick pulled back. There was a great swirl in the grass and out popped the head of a creature that was very similar to a lizard. The thing had red dragon-like eyes that pierced right through to the boys' hearts as they jolted back in surprise. Its body was covered in scales and, though it seemed upset at being tugged by the tail, once it saw the two boys, it looked calm and curious. It slowly crept out of the grass revealing the rest of its body. From head to toe the lizard-like being was almost four feet long. Four legs came out from its body that

seemed to act as fins. A rubbery webbing came out from the front and back of every leg and connected back to the body. Large green spots ran down the back, all the way to the tail.

Within seconds, the lizard-fish was on top of the boys, who were huddled together expecting to be eaten. It licked around, poked its head under their feet, and jabbed at them with its nose, almost like a dog. After finishing the investigation, it let out a small cry that sounded like an eagle, and, in a flash, another one arose from the grass. The second one pulled up right next to its friend, and this one had a sort of harness attached to its back.

Because there seemed to be no real danger in the situation anymore, Wesley reached his hand out to pet one of the newly discovered creatures. The one with the harness ducked a little just as Wesley was about to touch his head, but then let Wesley's fingers rub over his scaly nose. With that, the creature jettied forward into Wesley, burying his head into the boy's chest. It almost knocked the wind out of him. Wesley was unsure how to pet his new friend except how he would a dog. He patted the creature's side as it lay nestled against him and closed his eyes. Wesley looked up at David and suddenly realized an awkward relationship had formed between him and the first creature. They were both staring blankly at each other, not really sure what to do. David reached out with both hands to grab the underwater lizard by the head and pull him in and, instead, in one swift motion the lizard shot its head forward and bopped David right on the forehead. David backed off immediately, putting his hands up and mouthing "OK, OK...sorry."

Though David didn't seem to think it was the best idea, Wesley decided that they should use the water lizards for transportation. It was safe to assume, after all, that the two of them would be much slower swimmers, as humans, in comparison to the Water People they might encounter. Wesley swung himself onto the back of his new friend, and David haphazardly attempted to get on the back of his still-distant companion. But his lizard kept snapping at his hands. As soon as any attempt to gain control, or grab hold of the lizard was made, David found himself dodging a set of teeth. Fortunately, the lizard had a very short attention span, so David held up a hand on the right side of the lizard's face, waved it, caught the lizard's attention, quickly made a move to its back and then they headed on their way. Wesley gave a slight snap on the harness, taking the lead, and David followed sluggishly behind holding on for dear life.

The ride was absolutely incredible. They passed by underwater flowers that were more vibrant and beautiful than anything Wesley or David had ever seen. The brilliant petals swam in the warm water with their heads leading out, swaying. They looked as though they were rocking to a sweet lullaby. A chorus of blues, and pinks, and magentas. There were hundreds of them all around and, for the briefest of moments; the boys forgot that they were certainly in harm's way. This was quickly brought to their attention when a great horn sounded to their right. The caved community seemed to come alive with horns calling to the realm of the Water People.

Wesley jerked back on the harness and came to a stop. Several yards back, David came barreling in on his lizard, clearly out of control of the situation. Wesley looked back and saw that David was trying to command it to stop by hitting him on top of the head over and over. He held one hand around its throat and the other was striking the

lizard for obedience. It was counterproductive. The lizard gained speed heading right for the halted pair in front of him. It was squinting its eyes, and ducking its head, completely ignoring the constant hits David was delivering. At the last second, the lizard dug its heels into the ground and threw its head down. This caused David to lurch forward off of his seat, and go hurtling through the air, head over heels. It was quite a shock how far he traveled, considering he was underwater. Unfortunately, the distance he traveled landed him at the feet of one of the guard who was standing post on the other side of the grass wall in front of Wesley. David stopped with a thud, and a cloud of sand rose off the floor from the impact of the boy's rear. The guard, towering over David, was confused at the sight of the strange human at its feet. David looked with terror as he saw the guard turn his massive body around and raise his ax. With a lightning fast motion, the blade was at David's throat. It sat poised only centimeters away from his neck, keeping him at bay. With the other hand, the guard brought his hand down to his belt and removed a coral horn. He brought it up to his lips and made three quick bursts of sound through the amplifier. A high-pitched noise echoed from the horn. Another set of three calls came back from inside the community and, with that response, the guard sounded a long deafening call that roared for the entire kingdom to hear. David had been caught.

Unsure of what to do, Wesley found a place to hide in the tall grass a few yards away from David. Though he couldn't see any of the action taking place with David and the guard, he knew that trouble had arrived. He tucked his lizard into the grass with him and kept him quiet, as his ill-tempered friend left. Seconds after the call ended five or six more guards joined the first guard and something strange happened.

Wesley began to hear talking. He was too stunned at first to actually acknowledge the sound he was hearing as talking, because it's difficult (if not impossible) to hear any kind of voiced words clearly underwater. Let alone the fact that humans cannot speak any clear words underwater. Strange.

David was now in the middle of a situation that had gone from bad to worse. The six guards had formed a circle around him and, though there was certainly fear in his heart, he could not help but look up at the guards with an incredible sense of confusion. *How were they talking?!* After a closer look, it seemed like the Water People had developed extra strong vocal chords. The sides of their necks had two small pouches on each side that stuck out whenever one of them talked. Three small flaps of skin fluttered like gills. The sound pierced through the water at its own frequency. Though their conversation did sound muffled, and bubbly, David was stunned at how well he could hear what they were saying.

“How do you suppose such a small boy managed to get all the way down here?,” one guard inquired.

David began to answer the question by describing with his hands the great ride he had had through the series of rings above. He waved his hand up and down in a rollercoaster type fashion and drew rings in the water.

“What is he doing?,” One of the guards' asked, squinting curiously at the strange boy.

“He is trying to communicate,” an overweight guard replied.

“He must have been sent by the old man up above,” answered another. David began another attempt to answer the questions. He nodded several times, made the shape

of a beard on his face, pointed to his teeth, and acted like he was drinking the bottle of O2H that Johnny had given them. The guards remained baffled.

“What a strange little thing,” the first guard added.

“What should we do with him, Teeleen?,” the guard standing closest to David asked the one with a small silver shield over his shoulder, who was looking hard into David’s eyes.

“Take him to the arena,” the head guard answered. With that, two guards came from behind him and fastened a rope around his hands and feet. Once they were secured, the guard holding the ax dropped his weapon from David’s throat and followed behind the pack. David was being dragged along, a captive of the Water People

Wesley was in a panic. He felt very alone and even his pet lizard seemed to be more tense. The boy sat and gathered his thoughts for a moment and tried to come up with some kind of plan. His thoughts were scattered and desperate and it was almost impossible to come up with an idea that could lead to a solution. It didn’t help that, as the guards were walking away, the two guards in the back were ordered to search the grounds for a possible travel companion.

“No one this young travels alone,” Teeleen said. The two ax-men made their way back to where they found David, and were sweeping the remaining area with their eyes and axes. It became clear to Wesley that his options had run out. He was in an environment he was not used to, had no weapon, he was not a warrior, and he had no method of distraction. *WAIT!! The lizard!!*

Wesley looked around quickly for anything he could throw and found a small piece of coral nearby. He lunged for it, grabbed hold, waved it in front of the lizard, and

then threw it out of their hiding spot towards the grass, praying that the guards didn't see it. The lizard jetted out of the grass and grabbed the coral with its mouth. Wesley realized his blunder. Underwater, he wasn't able to throw the object very far at all. Had he been on land the attempt at distraction might have been a success. Instead, the Lizard grabbed two things: The coral and, to Wesley's dismay, the guards' attention as well.

"Raylin, come this way! I think I found something," shouted the guard from behind Wesley, who tried to stay as low as he could. But it wasn't long before the blades of grass behind him were being moved by two great axes. Wesley felt a sudden rush of courage swell in his chest. His heart pumped flaming hot blood all over his body, and his fingers clenched together in tight fists. He was like a snake, hidden in the brush and coiled up, ready to strike the suspecting prey. The one guard's waist appeared before him and, just as Wesley was about to tackle him; a voice came from behind him.

"Your friend came rather easily, so I'm sure we won't be having a problem with you, now will we."

Wesley had been caught, and the two boys were now at the mercy of the Water People.

The arena was a simple structure. Stone bleachers formed a circle around a patch of sand that was no bigger than a basketball court. Large stone statues in the shape of various water people marked the four corners of the sand pit. One was of a woman; the two at the south end were of older men; and the one at the upper right was a great warrior. David and Wesley were brought into the center of the arena, where a restless crowd of spectators watched the two young strangers. Two guards stood by their side as the boys were left on their knees, hands and feet bound behind them. It looked like an

execution. The boys were trembling, lost in a strange world, unable to speak, unable to escape, and not able to decide what the next minute would hold.

A giant door opened and out walked a creature that was clearly the leader of the Water Kingdom. He had several tattoos all over his body. A tribal design went down his entire right arm. He even had one around his right eye. But what was most shocking was his size. With an enormous arms and chest he towered over the others. Even the statues seemed to pale in comparison. His dark silver hair made his silvery blue eyes stand out like jewels. In his hand he carried a double-sided ax. Both blades were razor-sharp and it must have weighed a ton. A belt ran over his shoulder and across his chest and, on and his back, strapped to the belt, was a small dagger. As he swam up to the boys with a host of servants at his side, Wesley felt a sense of defeat fill his lungs.

“Can you speak?,” boomed the voice of the great leader.

The boys shook their heads “no” in response.

“Bring the vocoral,” the leader called over his shoulder. A servant came from behind him with his head bowed and held up two seashell-like objects with an odd blue growth sprouting from the front of them.

“Here you are Commander Krol.” The servant bowed.

“These will enable to you to talk,” the leader explained. He handed them to the guards who began to place them over the boy’s mouths. Though extremely hesitant to allow it, they watched as the sea shell advance to thier lips. The electric blue grass shot out and wrapped itself around Wesley’s neck and the back of his head. It formed a solid band that connected all the way around and he felt an opening form in the shell. The boy’s arms flailed behind him and, had he not been restrained, he would have flung the

shell away instantly. But he had no choice. Sure that he had been tricked, he closed his eyes and waited for some awful moment to come when the shell snapped his neck, or choked him, or something else even more terrible. David was a mess. He was kicking and screaming in fear. The guards, the leader, and the servants all remained perfectly still until Wesley finally choked out his first word.

“AHHRGHGHHAHHAAA.” The boy was stunned and confused at what was happening. Though he still felt like he was breathing in the water around him, the hollow of the shell seemed to have been flushed out and his voice was audible inside its walls. The strange blue grass had formed a kind of webbing that kept water in, and let the sound of his voice carry through into the shell. The result was that, although it sounded like he was stuck in a closet, his voice was much clearer like that of the Water People.

“David, it’s OK,” Wesley announced. David calmed down for and the second he felt like he could talk; he did.

“What in the world are you people thinking, just handing us something like that, when we don’t even know how it works, or what it does, or if it will KILL US. I can’t believe you did that. I was about to tear these bindings off and strangle all of you with my bear hands, if I could have....just...got them untied.” David was flustered and furious, a combination that usually left him ranting and raving. He was pushing on his hands and feet, moving them back and forth trying to get free. A small cloud of dust had formed around his hysteric movement.

“You have intruded into our Kingdom!,” the leader fired back. “What is your purpose here?!”

“Well, we did have one purpose; and now we have another one—and that is kicking all of your butts! Let me out so I can fight you like a man, you wimps! I am a black belt! I’m not afraid of one of you, or all of you. *You* are kind of big though.” David said looking at the leader and still squirming. “I’ll save you for last, you silver-haired, tattooed monkey. You think you’re all big and bad with your little water slide entrance, rock fort hideout, way down in the deep dark swamp, with your pissed of water lizards, and your silly flipper fins—”

“Take his away,” commander Krol instructed one of the servants, rolling his eyes

“No, no, no, no. I’m fine. I’ll be quiet now. I’m good. I’m calm. No, no, no.” David made an attempt to keep his vocal on, but to no avail. It was plucked from his mouth and he was left in silence once again. As he settled back down, David shrugged his shoulders at Wesley as if to say: “I couldn’t help it”

“Now, I have some questions and I am looking for answers to those questions. That is simple enough, don’t you think?,” he said, addressing Wesley.

“Simple enough,” Wesley agreed, trying not to further frustrate the massive leader. Wesley was ready to tell the leader everything that had taken place in the last few hours.

“Why are you here?,” the leader demanded to know.

“We have been sent on a mission by a man from the swamp up above.”

“I see. You are conspiring with the enemy of the Water Kingdom. Johnny Rumble looks to steal the prize of our realm, and all who ally with that thief commit a major crime against our people, our way of life, and our law.”

Wesley swallowed then explained. “We were told that you have something belonging to Johnny and humans. The Earth Medallion was taken from him and he looks to reclaim what was taken.” He tried to sound confident.

“You are a great fool to speak of something as ancient and as powerful as the Earth Medallion when you are only a small boy. You are a great fool to think that you and this chatterbox friend could have escaped with the Medallion, and you are both great fools to think that you will leave this place with your lives.” The commander bent down so his face was right in front of Wesley. There was fire in his eyes and he stared at Wesley just long enough to send a hollowing quake plummeting through the young boy’s body. He stood back up, pushed the servants aside, and raised his ax above his head.

“Let it be known that all who trespass in the realm of the Water Kingdom commit an act punishable by death. Here kneel two humans who came to steal our precious Medallion and the consequence of their action is their lives.” He finished addressing the arena of people who were cheering and hollering at the declaration. Wesley looked over at David, who seemed confused and worried. Looking back up at the powerful water creature, Wesley played back the series events that had lead to this moment. He pictured Johnny Rumble, and the O2H, the water tunnel, and lizards. It had been a good adventure thus far. There was no doubt about that. With his eyes looking up at the furious, powerful stare of commander Krol, he felt his insides twist and his breath escaping him. He did not want to die. A tight bubble formed in his throat and his heart thumped hard in his chest. Then it thumped even harder. And harder still as the ax was raised, gliding through the water. This was it. Shutting his eyes tight, he felt his heart thump even harder. Then something unmistakably strange happened. He felt a small-

but-distinct tremor in his chest and his legs. Was it his heart again, thumping even louder? His body began to shake as a tremor hit the arena. The leader looked around confused, and Wesley looked around at the rest of the crowd, which also appeared baffled by the sudden quake.

In the next moment an enormous explosion erupted from behind the arena. Boulders were sent swimming into the depths over their heads. All eyes were turned to the side, just in time to see a violent trail of bubbles begin to form and a tiny man speeding towards them, a glowing circular rock in his out-stretched hands. Wesley and David looked at each other and, in a flash, lunged at the axes behind them and cut the bindings on their hands. Two small spears darted into the ground at their feet, attached to ropes. The boys moved for the ropes and held on tight, as they were rapidly pulled from the arena and sent rocketing upwards.

Johnny Rumble had conveniently come across some kind of jet powered object that was pulling them to safety and away from the harsh domain below. He had dark-lens goggles fastened around his head and his nose pointed straight up. His hands were clasped around a plate-sized item that had two handles on each side to which the ropes that David and Wesley were holding onto were fastened. The bottom of the object was glowing red hot and because it was here that the path of bubbles started, the boys could only assume that that was what was propelling them so quickly.

Down below, the desperate situation was quickly turning into a massive stir of angry creatures. Wesley saw that a posse of the guards were chasing after them. At the front of the party, the giant leader looked even more furious than before. They were gaining on them. Off to the right, a few guards were making their way to the ring tunnel

that the boys had descended through. Several of the guards had mounted water lizards and the rest were swimming through the water as fast as dolphins. The boys held on for dear life. Infinitely relieved at dodging the swing of an ax, only seconds before, they were not out of trouble yet. It was going to be close.

Wesley popped off the vocoral in hopes of diminishing the amount of drag that he and David made. It helplessly trailed down the rope, and caught in the current of bubbles. It was quickly in the face of the guards below and Wesley got an unpleasant feel for how close behind them they really were. Johnny Rumble was their only hope in escaping a certain doom. The screams and hollers of the commander and his guards were getting closer and closer. Several guards were beginning to come into range of the humans. A pair of them exited at one of the tunnel stops a few yards away, and launched spears up at the boys with the momentum of the tunnel still behind them. The first spear sailed past the boys and between the two ropes. The second spear struck David's rope a few feet above his head and sliced it in half. David immediately began to slow down and get left behind. Johnny and Wesley almost rocketed past him, but—at the last second—he grabbed the very bottom of Wesley's rope. A slight tug on rope caused Johnny to look down. He saw the two nearby guards and brought one of his hands off the glowing relic. Bubbles came out from his mouth as his hand swirled in a circular motion and his fingers came together in a ball. He moved his hand in the direction of the guards and a large ball of light blazed through the water. Small flashes of a vibrant energy were jetting out of the sides of the ball and, when it got in range, two of these flashes turned into streams that grabbed hold of the bodies and brought them into its path. On impact with the bodies

the balls absorbed into their skin, leaving them stunned and floating back down into the abyss. Wesley and David smiled at the small victory.

Johnny turned his attention back to the escape, as Wesley looked up and saw the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. Past the fast approaching surface was land, and air, and no more Water People.

“You will not escape!!,” thundered Krol, who was almost at David’s feet. Spears flew by the boys, and their teeth were clenched at the mounting fear. Wesley didn’t know whether to look up or down. If he looked up, he was energized by the thought of land. If he looked down, he saw his enemies getting closer.

The ring tunnel came back into play when two more guards shot out of the final stop. It didn’t look good. The two guards were approaching Johnny much too quickly for him to summon up the great ball of light that he had used on the first two guards. Though unarmed, these two guards were certainly going to be in the way of their escape. They got closer and closer, and the guards positioned themselves to stop the rocketing fugitives, one on each side. Just as he was about to come between the two creatures, Johnny cleverly corkscrewed his body and avoided them. David had managed to climb up to Wesley’s feet, but the commander was right on top of him.

Instinctively, David reared his legs up to his chest and kicked the leader hard in the face, did a back-flip, and kicked the other guard approaching from above. Wesley spun around and let his legs fly through the water, and at the same time, both boys landed effective blows to the chests and faces of their pursuers leaving them behind in the trail of bubbles, while Wesley, David, and Johnny Rumble made their way towards home.

As Johnny broke the surface of the water, the boys quickly began counting to four, to release the magic of the O2H. A powerful feeling of relief came over them as they held their breath for the last few seconds of the ride. They popped up out of the water and collapsed onto the marshy grass in front of Johnny's house. They flopped over onto their backs and gasped for air. Johnny untied the rope from the handle of the large medallion and then placed it out in front of his chest.

“Block this door to the shore of my home, turn this surface into stone,” he commanded and, with that a brilliant gold light burst out of the medallion's face. Johnny shone it down at the water and, wherever it touched the brown surface, it turned to stone. It left the boys gaping in the mud.

The loud screams from under the water were fizzled out under the rock-solid surface that had moments before been swamp. The exhausted old man turned to face the equally exhausted boys.

“All right, Mr. Rumble, we have some talking to do, and you have a lot of explaining to do. I don't know what you thought was going to happen to us down there, but my guess is you had a pretty good idea that we didn't stand a chance against those Water People. Even if I was a gold medalist in the 400 meters, I still wouldn't be able to out-swim those guys. You sent us down there with no weapons, no maps, no pictures of the medallion, and barely even a warning as to what was going to happen if we got caught. Thank you for the rescue, by the way, but what in the heck did you think was going to happen down there?!”

“Johnny played a game,” he stated simply.

“Mr. Rumble, no offense, but we were almost killed, that was not a very fun game for us,” Wesley said, barely maintaining his cool.

“Under control I had, everything under control.”

“What about the big tattooed commander Krol about to behead us, was he under your control Johnny, huh? HUH? Was he?” David snapped.

“Needed a distraction I needed. Something to take the eyes off the Medallion, while Johnny sneaks back and back and back into the cave where the Medallion was kept.”

“Noooooo, you needed bait, is what you needed,” snarled David.

“Bait, distraction, bait, distraction...yes, yes both of these things. Two teams were needed to do this task. One to get caught and one to get not caught and take back the Medallion that was stolen from us.”

“Why didn’t you tell is that in the first place?,” Wesley asked.

“Didn’t think you would go, would you go if you knew that was the plan?”

“Was that a question?,” David asked, confused just like when they first met.

“I don’t know,” Johnny said sheepishly. “A great thing you have done today, a great thing. Great things should be rewarded with great rewards and that is something I have promised you both; it is something I have promised.” The old man gathered himself up and sat down in front of the boys, closed his eyes, took in a deep breath, and began to speak slowly, on a much more serious level.

“Seen a great many things, have the eyes of Johnny Rumble: winter to spring and back again, summer to fall and back again. People born and gone, and always has Johnny been and will be. Time etching on, while the stars in the heavens Johnny has

counted, like grains of sugar on a gumdrop. The trees I have befriended....and..." the old man had gradually closed his eyes as he spoke. A second of silence passed. The boys sank down to look more closely at the old man.

"...zzzZZZzzzzZZZ..." Johnny had fallen asleep.

"Excuse me, Mr. Rumble." Wesley tapped him on the shoulder. "Mr. Rumble? Hello?"

"Hmmm...What? Who? What?...hmmm?" The fragile man bobbed his head back up and rolled his eyes. "Tired from our adventure I am tired," Johnny admitted.

"You were telling us about the Medallion," Wesley reminded him.

"Ahhhh, yes, the Medallion, ahhh, yes. Entrusted to protect and keep safe the Earth Medallion, have been entrusted to protect I have, has Johnny Rumble. For years, and more years, and then more years I have done this, and held onto this prize. Great power and magic rest in the walls of the Medallion of Earth. Magic of water, magic of fire, magic of wind, of stone, and life. These forces belong to the soil beneath your feet, the wind that runs in your hair, and the heat you feel from the summer sun. The Medallion was made to keep balance in nature the Medallion was made. Rain, and snow, and wind, and flood take place when the Medallion is contested. For many years and more years and more years it has been sought after by those greedy for its power. Only few people who know about it are there only a few people who even know about it." Wesley and David were caught in the terrific story and were inching closer and closer to the tiny man as he spoke. Their eyes were glued to Johnny.

"Johnny Rumble has seen many things, many things I have seen. Many days have I lived, many mornings I have awakened, and many nights I have slept—all spent

guarding this Medallion.” Johnny picked it up from behind him and held it close to his chest like a child. “My days as its protector have come to an end. Your prize is this Medallion, its power, and its magic held within is your prize. I give this to you because your character I have judged, and your heart I have seen.” He said acknowledging Wesley.

“I am honored,” Wesley said humbly.

“And you talk too much,” Johnny admonished David. “For you to take over responsibility is what I would like for you two to take over responsibility of the Medallion. Johnny has not had a friend to have to watch over it with him.”

“You have made two friends today,” Wesley said reaching out his hand. Johnny could do nothing but smile, as he placed his hand in Wesley’s.

With that, the three of them stood up, and the two young boys examined the precious new Medallion they had acquired. They thanked the old man known as Johnny Rumble several times, and swore to protect the Medallion for as long as they both would live. Johnny seemed to be completely relieved to be rid of the valuable stone—and the immense responsibilities that came with it—and went hopping and skipping back to his hut. The two boys were turning around to head back home, when Johnny’s voice addressed them.

“Another poem you would like to hear another poem?” The two boys laughed a little, not knowing what to expect and made their way back to the door of the old hut.

*It seemed that in the days of Rumble,
The man whose words did tend to stumble,
Lived two boys, who happened to tumble,*

*Into the swamp of Johnny Rumble.
Laughs were shared, and a game was played,
That sent the boys to find,
That they were bait, and that the great
Johnny Rumble was close behind.
An adventure had, a friendship made
Two boys, became two men.
A burden passed and for Rumble, at last,
His days have come to an end.*

“The end?,” the boys asked in unison.

“THE END!!,” Johnny said and slammed the door in their face.

They shared a quick laugh at the final odd remark from their tiny new friend and then turned to go home.

Wesley hooked the Medallion on the holster that Johnny had given him. And, for a moment, he wondered if the strange old man had, in fact, planned everything from the start.

“Look at that,” David pointed out as they got onto the other side of the stone swamp.

The home of Johnny Rumble had faded away and was no longer a part of the swamp. A swift breeze moved through the old water-rotted trees around the swamp, as if to say “goodbye” to the old man. All that remained was the wooden sign with “Johnny Rumble” etched into its face.

The boys sighed, put their arms around each other's back and headed out into what was becoming a beautiful night.

Story 4

The Night Door

Saturday nights tend to be an interesting part of the weekend for young adolescents like Wesley and David: acting as both a high point to the weekend, and the last night where there are no worries about homework or waking up early the next day.

It was a warm-weather tradition in Wesley's neighborhood that, every Saturday night, a large group of kids around his age would gather to play a series of "night games" that consistently proved to thrill the bones of those in play. The games included contests such as: "Kick the can," "Ghost in the Graveyard," "Capture the Flag," and Wesley's personal favorite "Hunter." "Hunter" was a game that required nothing more than a flashlight and it was always the last game that the kids played, because it was the hardest to win and it lasted the longest.

This particular night, the kids met up at Richie Goodman's house and the regular crowd was gathered. There was Richie, Eric Toy and his older brother Matthew, the three Franzego brothers, Stacey Ponzio and her best friend Jennifer, the Deyoung twins, Ryan Warkins, Jack O'Connor, the three triplets—Ricky, Tommy, and Larry—and, of course, Wesley and David. It was an experienced bunch of players. And, this night, would be an adventure that would remain with Wesley and David forever.

Little did they know that there was another party being gathered, formed inside a nearby secret tree, behind a secret door, that only came to exist once every 101 years...

"So who wants to be the Hunter?," Stacey Ponzio asked from the left side of the circle. Stacey was usually the one to take charge and organize the games. Always standing with her hands on her hips and her neck jutting side to side if anyone opposed something she said. She was not the oldest and, in Wesley's opinion, not the nicest girl either.

Being the hunter meant two things. First it meant that you were going to be in control of the game, but it also meant that you were the most likely to get the eyes scared

right out of your head if someone won the game. The object of the game was simple if you are the Hunter. It was your goal to aim the light from the flashlight on someone that you found and, while it was still on them, call out their name to get them out. By doing so, you would send that person to “prison,” but that also made you a prison guard. If one of the people in the game ever snuck up to the prison and tagged the members inside, they were all free, with a 10-second grace period to go run and hide. The other members of the game, besides freeing their captured allies, were all against the Hunter. In order to win the game, they would have to sneak up on the Hunter and tag the person before being noticed, and, upon doing so, scream “Hunter!!!” at the top of their lungs. This was an incredibly hard thing to do. It required stealth, strategy, patience, and—above all—guts.

“Seeing as to how I have never been the Hunter, and I am not very good at tagging the Hunter, I would like to be so this time,” Matthew announced across from Stacey. He was a strange boy. Though he was much older than all the other kids in the neighborhood, he always seemed to talk to everyone like they were older than he was. His hands were always locked with each other behind his back. His chin was always raised an inch or two too high, and he blinked longer than normal after everything thing he said.

“Fine. Matthew is going to be the Hunter in this game; and, Matthew, I would like to remind you that in order to actually like get someone out, the light from the flashlight totally needs to be on the person. And please everyone, we are all mature here, so let’s be honest. If we can see the light is on us, and Matthew calls our names, go to jail OK? I don’t want to have to babysit and, besides cheaters never prosper,” Stacy warned with striking conviction.

“No one is asking you to babysit,” Nick Franzego blurted out at Stacey. “We are just playing night games.”

“Oh my god Nick, like oh my god. You of all people would be someone I would be referring to with things like honesty and stuff. God!!” Stacey shook her head and whispered something to Jennifer.

Wesley and David looked at each other with rolling eyes, but didn’t let the conflicting moment interrupt the pure excitement that was just around the corner. Matthew was instructed to count down from 60, and to count the last 10 seconds out loud so that everyone could hear, and know he was almost ready. Stacey handed him the flashlight, Matthew made his way towards a nearby tree, and the group scattered across the neighborhood. The boundaries they had made up for all night games were: Wesley’s house, which was five houses down from Richie’s, was the southern border. Richie’s was the northern one. The Petersons’ wooden fence was the western boundary, and the old sycamore tree just before the entrance to the neighborhood was the eastern boundary. Anywhere else between those four corners was fair game, but you couldn’t go in houses.

Wesley and David always remained together and, as soon as their backs were to the group, they began running towards the old fence in the Petersons’ backyard. The fence was a barrier between Wesley’s backyard and the woods behind it.

“What do you think, David? Where should we go?” Wesley asked as they went running across driveways and front lawns.

“I don’t know. But, I can’t believe Matthew volunteered to be the Hunter! He is going to get the pee scared out of him, literally!” Wesley agreed that it was a rather bold move by the timid older boy. “A few weeks ago, when you couldn’t play, I ran out with

Matthew during Kick the Can, and we walked right past a really good hiding spot, behind the wood logs at the Peterson's." David suggested.

"Well why haven't you used it since then?," Wesley asked.

"I have been saving it for just the right time, my friend, and tonight I think we have discovered that very moment," David tried to sound inspiring. It had worked.

The boys raced along to the old couple's house and, once they approached the home, they were sure to be very quiet and crouch down low to get past the house without making too much noise and waking the old couple. They had probably been sleeping for a good two hours even though it was only 9 o'clock.

They turned the corner of the house and, just as David had predicted, a large wood pile was resting against the fence. There were two separate sections, or stacks, to the wood mound that allowed a perfect vantage point for the two boys. A good hiding place in Hunter, after all, is one that allows for a player to escape quickly with little noise. The woodpile would allow exactly that.

"This is awesome," Wesley whispered to David as they ducked between the two masses.

"This is going to be perfect. Oh man, I can already see the look on his face," David said, inching up on his heels, and popping his eyes over the top layer of logs.

"Do you think the 60 seconds is up?," Wesley wondered.

"Yeah I bet so."

An icy breeze swept into the gap between the wood and sent a chill up the boys sweating bodies. The branches of the trees behind them rustled, a stick cracked in the distance, and the very breath of the night seemed to be responding to the suspense. They

said nothing. Only their eyes spoke to each other. The tiniest sound forced a jerk of tension at their hearts. With their visibility very low, the boys were victim to their imagination and all the things that it created with any single sound that they heard outside their shelter.

—FLASH, a streak of light darted over the top of the wood logs. The boys flung their backs to the pile on the right side. David looked hard into Wesley’s eyes. *No way he snuck up on us?* They seemed to say. Wesley found a spark of courage and slowly reached his eyes up to the top layer of logs. In an instant, he popped his eyes over the firewood and saw across the street, to the right of the Peterson’s house, the Deyoung’s parents had pulled into the driveway. When the car had circled the corner that their house was on, it sent a beam of light exploring into the backyard where David and Wesley were. Headlights had often been a distraction in this way, and this was not the first time that the boys had been stunned by a “false alarm.” The quick flash of light had not been from Matthew’s flashlight, and they once again felt safe, but much more on-edge.

“I knew it couldn’t have been him,” David said after hearing Wesley’s report.

“Yeah, that would have been pretty quick,” Wesley agreed.

So the boys found themselves back to the suspenseful silence that could drive a member of Night Games completely mad with excitement. David scooted back over to the other side of the woodpile across from Wesley and was able to sit rather comfortably with a few feet to spare above his head. They realized that they had a few moments to talk, in safety.

“So how was your week?,” David asked, easing the tension a little bit.

“It was pretty good, I guess. Yours?,” Wesley replied.

“Oh, I don’t know. It was OK too. I mean school is school. Even if it’s a good week of school, it’s still not a good week. You know? A bad week during the summer is better than a good week at school,” David concluded, looking around for things to occupy his hands with.

“Are you worried at all about high school?,” Wesley asked, hoping not to have changed the subject too quickly.

“No man, it’s going to be a piece of cake. Lots more girls, more time between classes. Nothing to worry about.” It made Wesley curious to hear David speak with such confidence.

“Do you think the work will be harder?” Wesley asked.

“Are you kidding me? It just gets easier from here. Even college is easier than junior high. Eventually, we will start getting free periods, and study halls, and hour lunch breaks. Then, once we are in college, you don’t even have to go to class, cause the teachers don’t care, and they don’t want to be there either. You have a paper every two weeks, and grades don’t even count because you just have to graduate with a degree in something.” Again Wesley was curious, and mostly sure that David did not exactly have the best grasp of their future academic careers.

“Why don’t the teachers want to be in class?,” Wesley asked, puzzled.

“Because they know that the students don’t want to be there either.”

“But nobody wants to be in class now, and the teachers still come to class every day.”

“No, no it’s different because, when you get older, as a student, not as many people tell you what to do, so you don’t have to go; and the teachers know that because they were in college, and they know that not having someone tell you to do something all day is a nice break, and they don’t want to ruin that because they know that the class will revolt and complain to the boss and get the teacher fired.”

“Yea, I don’t think—“

“All right, well it gets easier. I know that.”

As David was finishing his sentence, a strange conversation began nearby.

“Fingel litzen fly-doll ting.” The words were spoken in a kind of sing-songy tune. They instantly recognized the difference in the pitch and tone of the strange voice, and what was even more curious was that it came from the other side of the fence, outside of the boundaries.

“I-men tael floo tow ring.” Another chorus had answered the first voice, in a responding melody. It seemed to complement the first set of words, as a sort of end-rhyme.

“Who in the world would go outside of the boundaries?” Wesley looked over at David, barely speaking above his breath.

“Ricky, Tommy, and Larry could be stupid enough, and young enough,” David said, leaning towards the fence.

“They did sound like children’s voices,” Wesley agreed. He moved over to the fence carefully and quietly and found himself next to David, peering into a clearing of tall grass. The boys were crouched on their knees, both hands on the second post of the

fence. From where they hid, they could see the grass moving and spreading apart like a ghost was walking through it.

“You see that, Wes?!” David asked nervously.

“None of the triplets would be shorter than that grass,” Wesley said, perplexed.

The next wave of lyrics came floating out of the clearing in front of the forest.

“Diamon dough-rund, le-kind right tore.”

“The moon is right, let’s find the Night Door,” came a scratchy third voice. The boys really had no idea exactly how many members of this party there were, but they thought that at least one of them was human.

“Maybe the triplets made up a weird language thing. I think twins do that a lot,” David remarked. At that moment another streak of light flashed over the tall grass and startled the members of both parties.

“Crap! Matthew is here,” Wesley said shoving his body back against the woodpile. David flopped across the gap and laid his body out so that his head peeked from behind the last log. He jolted back up in an instant.

“Matthew is coming down this way,” he blurted out. The next moment found Jack O’Connor stumbling into the woodpile, diving into it for shelter.

“Oh man, he is coming guys!”

“Footen stooten shoooben now,” The strange voices came from the other side of the fence.

“What in the world was that?,” Jack whispered, completely forgetting about Matthew.

“We don’t know. Would the triplets be back there for any reason? Have you ever played with them and seen them go back there?,” Wesley questioned Jack.

“No—that’s out of bounds. Why would any one of us go back there? Stacey would kill us!,” Jack replied, poking his head around to see into the clearing. Curiosity had captured the boy so much so he had not even realized that his clumsy entrance left him sprawled over David’s knees.

“Would you get off?,” David said, pushing Jack’s pudgy body off of his legs. As he pushed the body, a flashlight fell out of Jack’s pants and rolled onto the ground behind him.

“Ooooghffff,” Jack said in response to the jolt.

“Hey, why do you have a flashlight? You’re not the hunter! Are you cheating?,” David demanded to know.

“Easy Stacey!,” Jack mocked. “I get scared sometimes when I am hiding alone. I only flick it on for a few seconds, honest.” The boys shook their heads.

“But never mind that. What in the world were those voices? I don’t think that was English,” Jack said biting his lower lip.

“Yeah, we know. Just forget about it. It’s out of bounds and Matthew is coming over here anyway, so we gotta MOVE, NOW,” David said, lunging towards the mouth of the hideout.

“Well no. What was that?,” Jack whined, like a child being pulled away from a candy store.

“Filling spilling, rolling POW,” the voices came again. It became clear to the boys at that point that Jack’s curiosity was unwavering. They watched as he slowly crept

forward towards the fence. The light from the moon shined above them and put a deathly glow on the grass, trees and backs of the boys. Jack was helpless. He popped up and darted into the tall grass clearing sending the creatures ranting and raving away.

“Finto!!”

“Faileeen”

“Ramidius felindow,” grunted a human voice, followed by a blast of smoky green light. An intangible misty green ball burst from inside the meadow. Two tiny hands popped up at the surface of the tall grass and then threw the ball directly at Jack’s body. It hit the boy’s chest and he went down instantly.

Wesley and David were so surprised by all of the sudden movements, they had barely jumped the fence when they saw the flash of green light and heard the thump of Jack’s body hitting the ground just a few yards away. What was even more surprising was that, when they reached Jack’s body they saw a small green face floating above it. It looked like Jack’s. The misty figure was hovering inches above the chest of the fallen boy and, as they approached, they noticed that the eyes on the face were closed.

Further into the woods, they heard a faint voice shout a command that sliced through the night air.

“Taleen follow fold reen soul,” came the voice. The eyes on the face shot open, it expressed a look of sheer terror, and then made its way into the woods, following the creature that willed him to it.

Wesley and David sat speechless. The smoky face had looked back at them the whole way, not speaking, just expressing an awful look of horror. David reached his

hand down and felt Jack's forehead. It was freezing cold. Wesley put his hand on his chest and found it was burning hot.

"What was that!?" Wesley whispered, seriously scared.

"That was trouble," David answered.

"Do you think he is dead?!"

"I think he is in trouble!" David answered again.

"We have to help him. Should we go get someone?"

"By the time we go and get anyone, those creatures and Jack's face, or whatever that was, will have vanished!"

"You're right. I guess it is up to us then, huh?"

"Yeah," David said, momentarily putting his head down. He brought his hand up to his mouth in a tightly clenched fist. Wesley could see that his friend was nervous.

"I guess we don't really know what we are up against, huh?"

"And neither do they," David replied reaching his hand out to Wesley.

Wesley took in a deep breath and realized he found courage in knowing that David would be by his side. He locked hands with his companion and they stood up, united and newly confident.

"Let's go," Wesley said, and he made his way towards the woods. He only got a few feet before he realized David had not followed. He saw that David was placing his sweatshirt over Jack's chest. Wesley couldn't help but feel determined to win back his friend's soul. Jack had been attacked without warning and without cause. He had made no threatening gestures or actions towards the creatures. Injustice had been done and,

though they didn't know what was ahead, something inside the boys told them that they were not going to fail.

David caught up quickly and it was only moments until they found themselves deep inside the belly of the woods. The moon was unusually full and directly above the treetops. It seemed impossible that it was actually hundreds of thousands of miles away. The pale glow of the branches and the forest floor caused everything to look double-sided. Instead of shadows being cast on the ground, it seemed like they had been absorbed.

The air was unusually warm and thick with humidity. Even stranger was the feeling that hundreds of tiny air currents were moving just around the boys' bodies. Like areas of high and low pressure were colliding all around.

“Do you feel that, David?”

“Yeah, but I don't know what I'm feeling.”

“It's like an oven.”

“Yeah, but the heat feels like it's moving.”

“Timendee.” A voice came from the distance and then trailed away. The boys froze, nervous that another green bolt was going to break towards them.

“We need to find wherever it is that they went,” David looked around.

“Well that voice seemed to come from over there,” Wesley said, pointing in front of the boys and to the right.

“Yea, I think so too. Let's head that way; but we should try and be quiet. I think it would be a bad idea to rush up on these guys like Jack did, ya know?”

“Agreed.” They crouched down and began creeping towards the distant voices in the woods. Wesley was a few steps ahead of David and was being absolutely sure to avoid stepping on any sticks or twigs that would snap under the pressure of a clumsy step. David’s eyes were jumping from side to side; his breath was equally as desperate, in anticipation of the great threat that lay ahead. Though it was clear that the boys would most likely be out-skilled and out-numbered, they found comfort in the element of surprise and pressed forward through the dark night.

The situation became electrified with tension as they came upon the party members that had struck Jack down moments before. After only a few minutes of scouting along the forest floor, the boys came to a section of trees that was arranged in an odd pattern. Wesley had been over to this part of the woods several times before, and had always noticed that something seemed odd about the trees here. They were of a much larger size than the other trees in the forest and a set of ten encircled one much larger one. The curious arrangement had often been used as a “base” for games in the woods that David and Wesley would play with their friends. Under the intense glow of the moon and amid the bizarre warmth, the familiar location was everything but comforting.

The three members of the party were in front of the large tree in the middle of the circle and, for the first time that night, the boys got a good look at their mysterious foes.

They were right about assuming that one of the creatures was in fact, a human. He was much larger than the other two strangers and had a distinguishable scar that ran from above his left eye all the way down to the right side of his chin. His hair was snow white and two long strands from his bangs fell out from behind a dark green cloak that

covered his back and hooded his head. He wore a robe that fell down to his ankles. Across his chest, a thick leather belt with several pale brown bones dangled from it. In his right hand, was a wooden staff with a claw holding an orb.

“Someone ran away from the Renaissance Fair,” David joked nervously.

The other two creatures were dressed identically to each other. They too had small hooded cloaks, only theirs were a dark blood red. They wore simple white wool shirts, and brown rough-stitched pants. Visible on their faces and hands was a sickly grey skin. Though only their hands and face were exposed to the young boys, their insipid ash-colored skin made them look like rats. Even more, they had long pointy noses that shot out from behind the cloak. Out of the top of the hood were two pointy ears with several piercings along the edges. They could not have been more than three feet tall and the human stood three feet taller.

The diminutive stature of the warlocks made them a little less scary to the boys, until they saw what happened next.

After shouting several phrases in the same foreign language, the three sorcerers began looking down at the ground and softly chanting a spell, keeping their hands in front of them with one arm above the other. Their fingers were all locked in the same position with a six-inch gap resting between their flexed hands. Rocking back and forth, shifting their weight from one foot to the other, they kept their heads down. As the chant continued, the three began to rotate their hands in a circle, the top hand rotating around the bottom. Their heads began to twitch and their backs began to spasm. Wesley and David crouched lower and lower behind the tree, but their eyes remained glued to the ritual before of them.

A beautiful noise began to arise from the depths of the forest, a soft female soprano singing one beautiful note. It started as nothing more than a whisper but, as the words of the warlocks began to grow louder, and their spasms increased in ferocity, the volume of the voice grew in intensity. Though he didn't know why, a tear began to form in Wesley's eye. The sweet voice was calming to the boy. It reminded him of his mother. The heavenly tune tickled the boys and warmed them inside like a drink of hot cocoa. Rushing into every open space from head to toe, the heavenly sound filled them up sending their souls flying. Their eyes began to close and their limbs began to numb when, suddenly, the wonderful voice turned into a terrible shrill scream that shook the bones in their ears. The piercing wail forced their hands to their ears and their eyes to shut. They quickly became disoriented and confused, until—just as suddenly—all was quiet again.

The two boys looked up and saw that the ritual had ended and the large tree now had a large door in its face. The human sighed with relief and made his way into the opening. The two small grey creatures followed and the boys were left with only seconds to react. At first it seemed ridiculous to try anything or even think about following the trio into the tree, but—when they saw the warlock had Jack's soul in a jar hanging from his belt—they knew that there was no turning back.

The last creature entered through the opening and the boys waited only seconds before they left the cover of the tree. David kept his eye on the door and Wesley found his eyes searching, aching for the woman who was singing moments before. Coming around from the side of the tree, they kept their bodies out of sight from the opening.

David cautiously placed a hand on the edge of the hole, poked his head in, and then quickly brought it back out.

“There is a staircase spiraling down,” he reported to his friend.

“What’s our plan once we get inside?”

“Sneak up on them and take Jack back before being noticed.”

“I doubt it will come that easily for us,” Wesley said calmly.

“It never does,” David said with a smile. After checking once more that the coast was clear, they dipped inside and made a quick slide onto the top of the staircase. The air instantly became much cooler and there was a strong smell of perfume caught in the air.

“It smells like the old people at church,” David said.

The narrow staircase descended quickly and it wasn’t long before the boys heard voices from down below. It sounded as though a host of beings was gathered in a large room. Wesley felt his heart drop as the light from outside was replaced by darkness. After going down a few rotations of stairs, he found himself in complete and under blackness.

“Well this makes things interesting,” David said, covering up the uneasy tremors in his legs.

“We gotta save Jack,” Wesley said remembering the boy’s body lying on the ground cold and lifeless. “I don’t care if we have to spend hours down here in the dark—we are not leaving without Jack!”

“Well I am going to go ahead and volunteer you to lead the way down, because I can’t see a thing, and I’m actually a little scared this time.”

“All right, let’s just stick to the wall and make our way down,” Wesley took a step down and reached his hands out to feel for his friend.

“I’m right here,” David said, getting poked in the face. They continued walking down with Wesley in front and David trailing behind in the darkness. The sound of voices got closer and closer, and the darkness around them somehow became deeper and deeper. It felt like they were being swallowed. They could feel the walls on each side bend around and around. It seemed like the turns would never end. David was about to suggest that they turn back, when a faint blush of orange glow flickered on the wall in front of them. Slowly, they descended the last few steps and then stopped before the end of the shadowy passage. They poked their heads around the corner to determine what awaited them, and prayed that enemy eyes would not be glaring back.

In the center of a large vaulted room was a gathering of creatures—some were similar to those the boys had encountered out in the woods and others looked entirely different. Though all were cloaked in the same kind of hooded shroud, there were beings in that room that no human eye would ever choose to look upon. There were bat-like beings with claws sticking out of their fingers, and heads. Peeking out under the hoods, the boys saw hideous faces with red eyes and warped features. On the ground were dozens of hooves and paws. Small puddles of slime and ooze were forming under the feet of creatures that seemed to release the gooey substance from their faces. Several of them were covered in a clear gelatin that ran down their nose and cheeks and spoiled their clothing. It saddened the boys in a way. They seemed tortured by the strange excretion. There were goblin-like creatures and terrible gargoyles perched on the sides of the underground room. All eyes were turned and giving attention to a magnificent beast in

the back of the room. He was stationed on a raised section of earth that jutted out of the ground, though, with his enormous size, the stage seemed unnecessary.

The boys stared at the beast, mouths gaping. His head was like that of a demon. Two large horns split out of his forehead followed by several other smaller horns that wrapped around his head. His teeth were jagged and black and his skin was fire red. A sharp point of a nose sliced down at his teeth. Enormous muscles were bursting out from his arms, legs, and back, like at any moment one of them would break the surface of the skin. Black veins on his arms and legs seemed to sit above the skin, wrapping and twisting around his muscle. He stood on the platform and began to silence the community of servants gathered in his lair.

“Vile workers of the world above, your presence have been requested this night to report the mishaps, chaos, and torment that you have visited upon those who dwell above.” His words were spoken as if his breath were fire and smoke. The opening statement sent grunts and sneers through the crowd at his feet.

“We are in Hell,” David surmised.

“Goblins, bats, warlocks, and hogs, you foul and wretched beings deserve death and pain but have been given life so that you may serve a cause greater than your own. Condemned souls with malice-filled-hearts, recognize your place below the ground. Acknowledge your lowly existence is nothing more than a breath of dying air escaping time. Your meaning is fragile, your actions are cumbersome, and the very ground on which you walk should be cast into fire and suffer long days—“

“There, there, Morgato... You shouldn't be so harsh on the workers tonight. After all, this is a cause for celebration.” The new voice sounded as if it were forged from all

that is evil, like a serpent's tongue spitting venom. The great beast stepped aside and revealed a hooded character whose eyes could not be seen. From across the room in the doorway, the boys saw that this black figure was sitting down rather calmly. Its legs were crossed and its fingers were up close to its mouth slightly interlocked.

“And look, how appropriate, Satan has decided to join the party,” David whispered.

“The opening of the Night Door has brought you here for one reason and one reason only. While, yes, your lives are meager and weak and are subject to removal, this night proves to me that your existence shall continue. You are the Council of Souls. It is your duty to deliver to me spirits of the living so I can wield their breath into working for something greater than itself; and, tonight, we will see who will deliver—and who will not. Need I remind you that your existence is at stake and your lives are forfeit to your own short-comings? You have had 101 years to pursue the damned...let the Council of Souls, at this hour and on this night be rewarded for your labor.” The shadowy leader stood up from the throne and lifted its hands in a glorious rage.

“Bring forth your collection and deliver the damned!” The creatures of the council began shuffling their feet and howling and grunting at the beginning of the ceremony. The torches blazed with magic and the air ignited with intensity. A line was formed and the ceremony began.

One by one, the servants brought forth containers with small green orbs floating inside. They looked like the one that Jack's face had been spotted in.

“Jack is going to be offered up!!!,” Wesley said to David.

“We have to figure out a way to distract them.” Before David finished the sentence, the boys heard a grunt from behind them and a faint orange light flickered on the walls. They had to act quickly.

Wesley spotted a series of large rocks to the left of the doorway and they quietly made their way behind the pile. Once there, they looked back and saw a patrol of five was making its way down the corridor carrying something above their heads. They walked into the center of the room stopped in front of the leader and bowed.

“I am sorry we are late my Lord,” said a deep raspy voice that sounded like a human voice had been stuck inside a pig. “We was on our ways when we found dis’ body coming through the clearin’ at the southern edge uff the woods.”

A sudden chatter rose from the council, voices of concern and suspicion. The boys looked at each other and realized that they must have been talking about Jack.

“It looks like he was a victim of this council,” one of the other grunt minions explained.

“An ill start to the ceremony,” The voice of their leader spoke calmly but with distinct disappointment. “Let me see the body,” the voice came again. The two grunts in front moved aside and, though it was difficult to see, the boys saw the mysterious leader’s face twist with disgust.

“This boy was left in the open? He was not at all covered or concealed?,” the powerful voice beckoned the servants.

“Yes, me Lord, we found ‘im lying out in the field. There was a bit of brush around, but the body would’ve been spotted clear as clouds during the day. Unless of course it was a cloudy day, and fog was around, you know, then—“

“Enough, you insolent fool! Your words are like a drought to desert—purposeless and thick with insignificance.” Though still veiled by the hood on top of its head, sheer anger and frustration caused shaking inside the leader’s chest. In a flash, the hood was flung back revealing a woman so terrible and frightening, David and Wesley felt their stomach squirm at the sight of her awful face. Like worms started crawling in their bowels. She had not blue eyes, or green eyes, or brown eyes...but a distinct shade of hopeless grey outlined her black pupils, and made the whites of her eyes stand out like chalk. Her hair was black and shaved almost bald. An awful collection of dark saliva coated her serrated teeth. She was the color of grey snow on the side of the road, and her face looked cracked and worn: like she had been young the day before, but had aged much too fast in a short amount of time, as though she was a kid trapped inside a decrepit, wasting woman. The skin around her neck was loose and wrinkly and it hung off her throat like it was three sizes too big. Her fingernails were pointy and brownish yellow and she held them over the crowd as she addressed them.

“Who among this council has been afforded a mistake as costly as this? Who risked the discovery of our army, the continuation of our cause, and the survival of our kind? It has always been that after their souls have been taken the bodies are burned or drowned or disposed of in a way that is untraceable. I shall seek you out if it takes 101 more years when the Great War is here, so help me, I will. Perpetrator among the faithful, your identity will be no mystery to these eyes. I can feel the guilt at work in your bones, the desire to flee, the hope to undo the wrong you have done. But hear me now, your retribution is at hand and your punishment will be delivered.” She paused for a moment scanning the hushed audience.

“Halathem,” she cried and twisted her fist up towards the ceiling. An awkward choking sound came from the back of the line and a tiny blood red hood popped out from the top of the crowd. The creature was gasping for air.

“That’s what/who took Jack’s soul; I remember its face from outside,” Wesley said from behind the rock. The rat-faced being made its way toward the sinister female, writhing at her will.

“It was you, who committed this crime against the council, was it not Thalin?”

“A thousand apologies your grace, I have not an excuse.”

“Forgiveness is for those for whom I have respect and there are none here who can make that claim. Toss him in the dungeon; we shall deal with him after the ceremony.”

“What shall we do with the body, great one?,” asked the guard in back of the pack.

“Toss him in with Thalin,” she ordered. Two guards seized the tiny warlock out of the air and carried him off to a passage left of the boys. Two of the other guards grabbed Jack by the hands and dragged his limp body across the chamber, following the pair in front of them.

“Let the ritual continue,” she said, throwing herself onto her throne, crossing her legs and huffing in disappointment. The creatures below began to grunt and moan once more. They would scurry up to the Queen at her throne and present her with containers of all sorts and kinds. Every urn housed the same smoky green substance and the woman would accept every one of them with a slight nod. Occasionally she would be unsatisfied by the number of souls that a minion delivered and she would whisper into their ear a

song of death. Their clothes and skin would turn to ash and fall at her feet as dust. She stacked the containers delicately beside her but never seemed anything close to satisfied. Wesley and David became curious as to what exactly was going to happen to the souls within the containers, but the curiosity was lost in the hope that Jack and his soul were now in a place that was much more accessible.

“Let’s make our way back there,” David said, moving towards the edge of the rocks.

“Not just yet, David. We need some kind of a plan first. We don’t know how many guards are protecting the dungeon or if we will even be able to reach Jack and that warlock—Thalin. Let’s just think for a minute and try and come up with something,” Wesley said.

“Well what can we do?”

“We need a disguise or something, or weapons, or something. I don’t know.”

“Wes, I don’t really see any way out of this one except for just plain guts. I am just as scared as you are, bud, but we both know that Jack is much worse off than we are. I want to get this over with and get home—and maybe even tag Matthew on the way out and get Hunter—but I don’t want to be here any longer than we have to. I say we get back there and handle this like men.” Wesley was completely surprised by the soldier-like mentality of his friend. He had seemed frightened to death back in the hallway. Perhaps the sight of Jack’s body made him realize their purpose for being down here; Wesley found strength in thinking of that again as well.

“Let’s do it,” Wesley said, and they bolted out of the hiding space and down the passage after the guards.

The corridor was lit by several torches along the side, and above and below the torches were dozens of small cages built into the wall. They housed all kind of animals from dogs to rats, and bats and pigs. They made all kinds of fuss as the boys passed by, which was good because it hid the sounds of their footsteps as they ran down the hall.

They quickly came to the end of the tunnel and saw that, up ahead, there was another room that must have been the dungeon. Screams and moans came from within and, as they approached, they saw that the room was cluttered with prisoners, some dead and some close to death.

“What do ya fink we should do wif ‘im,” a gruff voice asked.

“We are going back into the ceremony. You stay ‘ere and deal wif ‘im,” a much stronger voice commanded. The boys suddenly panicked and realized that the guard patrol was coming back out. They shot a glance at each other and then darted into two empty cages low to the ground. The doors squeaked shut just as the minions walked past. They had not been detected.

Only seconds passed before they re-entered the dim hallway, crouched down, and prepared to deliver a blow to the one remaining guard. They were poised to jump in when, all of a sudden, they began to hear the prisoner and the guard start to speak.

“Why’d you leave that body behine’, runt?,” the guard barked. A much squeakier voice responded.

“I needed to reach my quota and it was my last one to get. I could not show up with only nine souls to the ceremony or I’d have been put to death.”

“That is not what I asked,” the guard drooled behind a snarl. An awkward silence passed between the guard and the prisoner.

“There were two more boys that were his friends only a short distance away. I could not cast the spell of fire on this one’s body knowing that they would see it. I am tired of doing the Black Witch’s collecting. I want to be at rest with the world and sleep the long sleep. This is why my actions have led me to this cell, and to my imminent death. I care not what she does with me afterwards; I care not for the Great War to come next century or the gatherings that will take place before then. This is no life that we live, young one. I pity your days hereafter, wallowing in the service of the dark one.”

Another moment of silence followed. The boys were stunned at the sad tale of the old beast.

“You gonna die,” came the voice of the guard unsympathetically. David shot up into the room after hearing the guard’s words. He bolted across at the hog-like guard and caught him looking away. In a flash, David was on top of him and he brought his foot back to kick at his unsuspecting foe. In one swift motion, David brought his right leg up to the face of the seated guard, and clocked him right in the jaw, bashing his head against the wall, knocking him unconscious.

Wesley was stunned. He had just entered the room in time to see the guard’s head hanging down loosely.

“Well that worked,” Wesley said, making his way to the cell that Thalín was being kept in.

“No spells, no tricks. We’ll help you if you’ll help us,” David offered, remaining on guard.

“I thought I might be running into you two again,” The rat-like warlock said from behind his red cloak. He pushed it off of his head, revealing an aged creature that looked both tired and weak.

“You killed our friend,” Wesley said sadly looking over at Jack’s bruised body. “We should be strangling you and leaving you to rot!” He said aggressively.

“And I would not blame you,” Thalín lowered his head. Wesley became quiet. He ached in a way for the helplessness of the prisoner. It truly seemed like he did not care if he lived or died.

“We heard you talking about a Great War and about being in the service of that woman out there. What was that about?” Wesley inquired

“There is little time to tell you of such a legend. There are few who know of its coming, and those who do often find their souls in one of these.” He pulled a container from his robe. “The sorceress you saw back there is Sheera. She is leader and master of a vast army bent on ruling the world above. She uses us as shepherds to herd her flock of captured souls. Once she obtains a soul, she forces it into the body of an animal using her black magic. She kills humans and transforms them into her slaves. I was captured over 60 years ago. I was just a young boy when I was taken by a pack of warlocks in the night. I had a home and brothers and sisters, a mother and father, and—since then—I’ve been alone.” The old creature began to sob. He buried his snout in his hands and wept at what his life had become. Choking back his tears, he continued:

“The Great War is prophesized to come 101 years from tonight. It will be the moment when the moon is at its brightest, and Sheera’s powers will be at full strength. Tonight you have witnessed one of our ceremonies, where we deliver the souls we’ve

gathered and earn our right to live. I am sorry to make your acquaintance at such a time as this, and I am afraid you shall be the last people I meet. I am glad that it was two human boys that my eyes saw last. I am ready for death.” The elderly creature got up from the wall and made his way over to Jack. The two boys remained on the outside of the cell and looked in through the bars. “You must stop it tonight,” he said, getting closer to Jack.

“But how? We are only kids. We don’t have weapons or know any spells or anything like that,” Wesley admitted.

“I could only kick two or three of those creatures before they’d take me out,” David added. The aged prisoner chuckled.

“Your friend just so happens to be carrying a weapon that you will find most useful in your escape.”

“What are you talking about?,” David laughed. “Jack doesn’t have any weapons, he is afraid of his own shadow!”

“A light sword,” the warlock explained. “I spotted it on him as he joined the two of you in your hiding spot.”

The boys’ brows tightened in confusion.

“A light sword?,” David said, as he looked over at Jack’s body.

“Oh that! No, Mr. Thalin that is just a flashlight, not a sword.”

“It is a weapon against all whose souls have been forced into a body not of their own and who are awaiting the light.”

“You mean to tell me that, if I shine this flashlight on something down here, it will kill them?,” David questioned.

“It will release them,” Thalin sighed. “Sheera does not allow us to walk under the sun or be exposed to any kind of light, except that of flame. I suspect that even she is susceptible to the light from that sword and will crumble under its power.”

“It’s like another game of Hunter,” David laughed. “Who knew?”

“What about you?,” Wesley asked. “And what about our friend?”

“I think I have something that belongs to him,” Thalin replied and reached down to his belt. He unlatched the jar that Jack’s soul was in and the boys saw the familiar light green smoky face appear before them. Thalin opened the top of the jar and the glowing orb came out.

“Back to your body you go,” He whispered softly at the floating soul. The glowing face made its way over to Jack’s body and hovered above his chest. It smiled back at the boys and then got slowly absorbed into the sternum below. Jack came to almost instantly. He blinked and his hands shook down by his side.

“Jack!,” Wesley exclaimed through the bars. “Jack wake up, buddy!” Their friend did not respond.

“Come on, man, get up,” David echoed.

“Hummeepphh.” Jack sputtered.

“He is going to be just fine now,” Thalin assured them, as he sat back down against the wall. Jack sat up suddenly and looked around.

“I’m really hungry,” he blurted out, looking directly at Wesley and David. They started howling with laughter.

“Oh no...,” came Jack’s voice again. “Eeeeeennnnnttt.” Jack let out an involuntary moaning sound that caused his chin to fall against his right shoulder. Wesley and David did not laugh this time, but instead felt confused.

“Get up,” David urged Jack. “We gotta boogey.” Jack gathered himself, but was still clearly disoriented and distraught about having woken up in a prison cell with a creature that looked like a giant rat. All considering, he was still relatively calm.

David reached over and grabbed the keys to the cell off of the still-unconscious bat-like guard behind them and unlocked Jack and Thalin.

“Hand us your flashlight,” Wesley directed Jack, who reached behind him and presented the flashlight to his friend as though it were a wedding ring.

“Ahh...what are you doing, Jack?,” Wesley asked, baffled.

“I hereby present this to you now for my life to you in service forever...thank you.” Jack lowered his head and bowed, holding the flashlight out with two hands.

“What is wrong with him?,” David asked Thalin.

“Just a bit of resurrection sickness. He will be fine, back to normal in a few moments. Hand me that sword quickly. I will put a spell on it that will magnify its luminosity several times over.” Wesley handed the light to Thalin who waved his hand back and forth over it, closed his eyes, and whispered an incantation. When finished, he handed it back to the boy.

“Do you want me to release you?,” Wesley asked humbly. “Will it hurt?”

“Thank you, young man, but I don’t think I will take you up on your offer just yet. There are few more things I have to attend to.”

“Wish us luck then, and thank you,” David said, putting his hand on the old warlock’s shoulder. Thalin looked disappointed he could not go with them. It saddened them all deeply.

“Go!,” He implored, and the boys raced down the hall.

Wesley led the trio with little fear or delays and, kept the light off for a surprise attack on the evil council ahead.

“You two make your way towards the door as soon as we get in the chamber, I will hold them off with the flashlight to make sure they stay back long enough for us to escape.”

“Check.” David confirmed.

“Roger and over...out,” Jack mumbled saluting Wesley. The animals in the hall cages began whooping and growling at the escaping intruders. It soon became obvious that their presence was not going to go unnoticed.

Wesley saw the backs of the council members up ahead and began to get scared. He was not sure whether or not he could even trust the old man back in the cell or that his “lightsword” theory was going to hold up. He did not know if it—being exposed to the light—was going to hurt the members of the council, or how long it was going to take to free the souls from their bodies. But there was only one way to find out.

Wesley leapt out of the corridor like a lion from his cage. He flicked the flashlight on and aimed the magnified beam around the room. The light was blinding, and even Wesley was forced to cover his eyes at first. The minions’ reaction was not at all what Wesley had expected.

The mass of servants turned slowly around and stared at the boy like he was a powerful king, their faces blank with awe and wonder. Some of them closed their eyes and let the light soak into their faces. Some of them pushed their hoods back and off of their heads and took in deep breaths that they let go of slowly. Wesley did not know how to react. He bounced the beam around rapidly, aiming it at first like a gun, but quickly found that the creatures seemed to enjoy the light. He was glad to deliver such satisfying warmth to the hideous faces of the crowd. This feeling was completely destroyed when the evil Black Witch shot up from her seat, threw her cloak back from her face and hissed at the boys like a snake. Her eyes burned with hate, and her cheeks shook with anger.

“It must be death that you wish, if you dare interrupt the council of souls and the lair of Sheera, you impertinent fools. She pounced down from her throne and began advancing towards Wesley, knocking her servants out of the way like weightless debris. Wesley quickly turned the light on her face and felt his heart quiver in his chest when he saw no effect. He shone it on her chest and her neck and then realized he was doomed. She was on top of him in a matter of seconds and her icy cold fingers found his neck with ease. She lifted him up with one hand and brought the other hand up to strike at him.

“Now you die, bearer of the light.” She finished her sentence just as a brilliant blue ball struck her in the chest and flung her back against the wall. Wesley dropped to the floor.

“Sheera, you old hag, I have been waiting to do that for 50 years.” Thalin was propped up against the edge of the rocks that Wesley and David had used to hide.

“Your efforts will serve like pebbles in the path of a raging river, Thalin, you decrepit filth.”

“Continue to shine the light on the council, Wesley! Do not let them stray from it, or we will be greatly out-numbered in a matter of seconds.”

“How long do I have to keep it on them for their souls to be let go?,” Wesley asked, retreating back to the hallway that led up to the woods.

“Just shine it on them as long as you can.”

“Stop your useless talk of hope, you’re damned, all of you...these are the last things that you shall see,” Sheera screeched

A purple gust of energy formed in her hands, as she brought them together and then cast a magnificent blazing sphere over at Thalin. Just before impact, the old warlock cast a shield around himself and the purple ball exploded without harming him.

“A few tricks you have forgotten,” Thalin said with a clever smile on his face.

“They are nothing more than that,” she cried. “You are no match for the Dark Lady of the Night, Keeper of Souls, and Ruler of the Damned. You will fall servant. You and your little friends will suffer my wrath.” She sprang onto the old man like a cat would a mouse. Wesley was stuck keeping the minions at bay and slowly saw that a green mist was beginning to form around the creatures in front of him. Their faces were starting to turn smiles and their souls were being freed.

Sheera was on top of Thalin and choking him, cutting off his air supply. She was gnawing at his face. David and Jack were frozen against the wall. Wesley began to panic. He watched as Thalin’s eyes slowly began to roll to the back of his head. His tiny little feet were squirming under the pressure of the Dark Witch. It seemed like their friend was going to be lost until, suddenly, a burst of blue light sent Sheera flying back once more.

This time, Wesley knew what had to be done. He bore the light away from the members of the council and shined it on Thalin.

“Nooo!!,” cried the witch from across the room. Wesley watched as a large portion of the Council of Souls began to let go of the light they had seen. Their eyes seemed to unglaze, their bodies swayed, and their heads rolled around on their shoulders. Terrible cries began to arise from the crowd.

“You must go,” Thalin shouted at Wesley from across the room.

“Not yet! Not until you are free!,” Wesley screamed back.

The witch did something very peculiar. She slowly crept towards Wesley, who was against the wall, whispering something and staring directly at him. Her empty grey eyes fixed on him as her hands and feet crawled on the floor.

“Don’t listen to her!!,” Thalin cried. “She is whispering the Song of Death. If you hear its verse, you will be killed instantly! YOU MUST GO NOW!!” Wesley realized the time had come.

“Go!!,” he shouted to David and Jack. “Get out of here now!,” he repeated. The boys started to make their way up the stairs.

“Where am I?,” Jack said, as he stumbled along with David.

“Just keep running up these steps, Jack. Don’t look back and just keep going!,” David said, pushing him ahead. Wesley looked over at Sheera with complete terror. He could see her mouth moving and knew it would only be seconds till the powerful words reached his ears and ended his life.

He crouched down and steadied the flashlight on the ground, keeping its beam fixed on Thalin. The old creature's body began to dissolve, a cloud caught in the wind, but a distinct smile was left on his face.

"Thank you," he said, as the green mist rose up and carried his soul away. Wesley took no time to race away from the chamber. He bounded up the stairs through the pitch black hallway. The screams and shouts of the warlocks and Sheera were racing after him.

"Find them, catch them, and bring them to me NOW,!!" he heard as he climbed. It was extremely difficult climbing in the dark. The stairs seemed to be leading to nothing except more blackness. Wesley began to lose his breath. Fear was nipping at his heels and striking his heart. It felt like hands were at the back of his neck, ready to snatch him back and pull him to the Dark Witch below.

"I smell your fear, boy," Sheera screamed up the staircase. A soft set of words that Wesley could not understand seemed to be attached to the scream. Wesley felt his senses start to dull and his blood run weak through his veins. His legs burned and his chest heaved. He reached down for the steps with his hands and began to bound up them on all fours. His progress slowed until a small blush of light could be seen up ahead. In some far off distance, he heard that same beautiful voice cry to him. A single beautiful note, like the resonance of an angel, called to him from a place in another world. Things slowed down. His insides became black. He could hear his heart thump like a base in his ears, giving the sweet song a rhythm that lulled his soul in peace. The lids of his eyes pushed over his pupils. Sleep was upon him.

All was fading to black, when a brilliant light came soaring past his left side. He felt a set of hands pick him up and carry him up the stairs. The next few moments were hazy until, miraculously, a cold breath of fresh air filled his lungs and his senses came screaming back. He was lying on the ground outside of the tunnel and, when he looked back, he saw David running towards him, and Jack standing at the Night Door shining a light down below.

“What happened?,” Wesley said, getting up to his feet.

“Turns out Jack had another flashlight,” David explained, helping Wesley to his feet and then running back to Jack’s side. Wesley followed, still confused.

“We got to the top of the stairs and Jack suddenly came to. He asked why it was so dark and then flicked on this pocket-light that he got for Christmas or something. I about hit him on the head when he told me, but figured you could use the help first.”

“Where is my other flashlight?,” Jack asked as they joined him.

“Down there,” David replied.

“And why am I standing here shining this light down a staircase that leads into the ground?” He did not need an answer because, at that moment, a group of hideous creatures turned the corner down below and Jack’s jaw dropped at the horrific sight.

“What in the, oh my god,” Jack shuttered and lowered the light down.

“Keep it on them!,” David ordered. The servants of the Dark Witch began to vanish from her control. They smiled and had tears in their eyes, as their souls were released into the heavens.

“Is this hurting or helping them?,” Jack asked, shaking at his knees and elbows.

“You don’t need to be shaking, Jack, it’s OK,” Wesley said.

“Yeah, I just do that sometimes,” Jack said, clearly nervous and afraid. One set of creatures would vanish and another set would replace them, left staring into the light from above.

“How long am I going to have to stay here?,” Jack worried, looking over his shoulder to Wesley.

“Until it is finished,” Wesley directed, still recovering.

“My army!!,” came a voice from the depths of the tunnel.

“Who was that?,” Jack cried looking over his shoulder at David.

“That was bad news,” David replied.

“What’s bad news?,” Jack asked Wesley looking over his other shoulder.

“We could be in trouble,” Wesley stated, recognizing that Sheera was going to be upon them shortly.

“I don’t want to be in trouble,” Jack said, looking back over the other shoulder at David. He began bouncing at the knees, holding the flashlight steady, but quivering with fear and confusion.

“What are we doing to do?,” David said to Wesley.

“I don’t know, I don’t know,” Wesley said, as Sheera’s screams began crashing up the hall.

“We can’t even listen to her or we will die,” David announced.

“WHAT?!” Jack screamed. “Are you kidding?...I’m OUTTA HERE!!,” he said, dropping the flashlight and bolting away through the woods. David picked the flashlight back up and shined it down at the begging minions.

“I’ll be right back. I have to go find him,” Wesley said, and took off after Jack.

“Oh, greeaaat!,” David whined and took in a deep breath. Wesley ran after Jack and caught up with him after only a few feet.

“Wait, Jack! Just wait! We can’t leave David back there alone,” he said, turning the boy around.

“I don’t even know what happened. One minute we were playing Hunter and all of a sudden it was green, and I got cold, and then I woke up, and you were there, and David was there, and now I’m going to die, and now I’m running through the woods...ehhh ahhh uhhh...” Jack was losing it.

“All right look, Jack. Calm down. Over that way is home. If you want to go home, you will be fine there. Just run in that direction and you will reach our neighborhood, OK?” Wesley comforted him, his hands on Jack’s shoulders.

“OK,” Jack said, and took out yet another flashlight from his sock. “Ha...ha...it’s a pen light...see?,” Jack chuckled and shined it at Wesley.

“Go!,” Wesley replied, and the boy took off running. Wesley turned to join David, and when he spun around, he saw that an enormous amount of green mist was escaping the tree and making its way up into the sky. It swirled and gusted atop the trees, spilling out of the Night Door like smoke from a pipe. Wesley jogged back to the tree with his eyes up to the sky and then came across a patch of sky where the moon became visible. He couldn’t believe what he saw.

Thousands of miles above him, a large cloudy green circle was formed around the moon. The mist traveling up from the tree was joining the ring and, for some reason, Wesley felt a sense of trust creep over his body. He ran back over to David and watched as the last remaining servants were released, their souls let go...

“Wretched little worms,” came Sheera’s voice from down below. She stepped over the soulless bodies of the minions below, and smashed the head of one of the remaining creature against the wall as she passed. David flicked off the flashlight. “You have taken my army!” Her long fingers twisted, rising up the steps towards the boys. “You shall die a slow and terrible death as a result of your actions; you will bend and twist with pain, your bones will beg for me to whisper death into your ears.”

“Back up,” Wesley whispered to David.

“Yeah, that seems appropriate,” David said shortly.

“Just keep backing up,” Wesley said again.

“What?,” David said.

“Just trust me. I think we are going to be OK.” Wesley said, as the two boys backed up against one of the far trees at the edge of the circle.

“Though my spells will not yet be at their fullest on this night, the glow of the moon will deliver me power enough to slay your bodies in hellish ways. Prepare to suffer, young ones,” Sheera said, lifting her hands to the sky. “Meeliath ree feen dow haleem,” she silently sang into the night.

A great wind rushed through the trees. The ground shook and the air ignited with heat. The trees above Sheera began to bend in accordance with her spell. A vast swirl of clouds circled the moon and the whole sky came alive.

A breathy laugh escaped her chest, at the summoning of her power. Her chest heaved with an evil cackle. Her arms extended to the heavens and her fingers were aimed towards to the sky. She opened her eyes and gasped at the sight from above.

The large green ring was beginning to shine and spin around the moon with incredible speed. The wind instantly died, and the trees stood still for a split second until, with a heavenly “BANG,” a blast of green light came down from the moon and struck Sheera. Her arms and legs snapped back towards the ground and her body lifted up off the forest floor. Her head and her eyes were fixed up towards the sky.

Wesley and David stood with their mouths gaping at the incredible demise of the Ruler of Souls. She slowly twisted, ascending slowly off the ground. Small cracks of a strange black light began to shine from her body. They multiplied and multiplied until an intense black-grey light poured out of her center. Sheera looked down at the boys and gnashed her teeth. She moaned with pain and hissed at them. A great scream escaped her mouth that forced Wesley and David to cover their ears and, in an explosion of bright light the Dark Witch was no more.

The forest became calm again and the leaves settled down. The wind hushed, and the trees stood straight back up.

“Hunter,” David said with a giggle and the two boys sighed with relief at the conclusion of the chaos.

“I hope Jack is all right,” Wesley said to his friend.

“He had a rough night, huh, being killed, having his soul stolen, being brought back to life—and losing two of his three precious flashlights and all,” David said laughing.

“He must really not like the dark,” Wesley answered.

David put his arm around Wesley. Well, he did save our butt, that’s for sure. I thought we were going to lose you there for a second, bud.”

Wesley looked over at his friend and smiled. “Yeah, I thought that for a minute too.”

They headed back home and quickly found themselves in the backyard of the Peterson’s. They ducked through the fence and made their way past the woodpile. David raced ahead and saw that Matthew was up at the top of the hill, the light from his flashlight scanning the bushes of the houses around him. Across the street was the jail and it seemed that every other person playing had been caught since the boys had been gone.

“They are still playing!!,” David said to Wesley. “I think we are the only ones left!!”

“Want to set another group of people free tonight?,” Wesley said, joining David.

“Let’s do it!!,” David whispered, and they bolted across the lawn.

They ran up to the group and tagged Stacey, who was obviously at the front of the pack, then at the top of their lungs screamed,

“PRISON BREAK!!”

The game continued on into the night until the parents began to holler out into the streets that it was getting late. The game never exactly ended for the neighborhood kids that night in Trumbull, Connecticut; but—for David and Wesley—the night gave them an unmistakable sense of victory.

They said “goodnight” to all of their friends and then stood in front of Wesley’s house before David headed home.

“Good job tonight,” David said admiringly to Wesley, punching him gently in the arm.

“You too. Thanks for coming to get me down there,” Wesley mumbled, dropping his head down.

“You think we will ever have a normal day like other kids?.” David wondered, putting his hands in his pocket and looking up to the sky.

“I hope not,” Wesley retorted smiling. David smiled back and was about to say something, but stopped himself. He looked around for a moment, then looked into Wesley’s eyes.

“Sleep well, bud,” he said, turning around towards his home.

Wesley smiled and watched as his friend make his way across the lawn. He looked up at the moon and thought of Thalin and the hundreds of other souls that they freed that night.

“Sleep well,” he said and turned to go inside.

Story 5

Return to Candlewood Forest

“Congratulations, Matthew!!,” the Vice Principal, Mrs. O’Brien, said, leaning over to a small boy in front of her. “Are you enjoying your ice cream Sundae?”

The second-grader nodded.

“How much longer do you think your mom is going to be?” Wesley whispered over to David. The boys were sitting in the principal’s office of the elementary school in their town. David’s younger brother, Michael, had gotten in a pretty serious fight during school and the principal asked to see a parent. David’s mom had picked Wesley and David up from their school and brought them along for the meeting.

“I don’t know, hopefully not long. I can’t stand being back in another school after being in ours all day.”

“And are you excited to be the Student of the Month?!” the woman’s cooed, like she was talking to a baby.

The young boy smiled again and continued eating his ice cream. The Vice Principal made her way around to her desk and smiled at Wesley and David sitting across from her.

“Lucky kid,” David snorted, “I was never student of the month.”

“You know he gets his name in the paper, and gets a plaque that says when he got it, right?”

“Wow. That’s a pretty big award for a second-grader,” David replied.

“Congratulations, buddy.” Wesley smiled, waving to the boy.

Completely occupied by his treat, Matthew just turned and smiled with an interesting little grin on his face. The Vice Principal was humming at her desk and pounding away at the keyboard. She bobbed her head side to side as she typed and, like Matthew, appeared to be extremely content with her life.

Just then, a small-but-distinct commotion came from the hall. Mrs. O’Brien’s eyes lifted from her reading glasses and she halted her fingers above the keys. The door

to the office crashed open and in walked five younger kids. At the front of the pack was a boy who looked strikingly similar to Matthew.

“He won! He won!!,” The bantering crowd cheered.

“Well, what in the world...what are you kids doing here?!” Mrs. O’Brien got up from her desk.

“Matthew is Student of the Month! He won!! He gets ice cream!!,” The voices cheered.

“Yes, yes he does. He is enjoying it right now!” A hush came over the small mob and their mouths dropped as they looked over at the young boy finishing the last bite of his Sundae.

“That’s Kevin!,” The boy at the front of the pack said bluntly. It didn’t take long for the Vice Principal’s face to freeze at the realization of the crime that had been committed. Apparently, Kevin and Matthew were brothers. The Vice Principal looked from Kevin to Matthew, from Matthew, to Kevin again and stood with her hands on her hips shaking her head.

Kevin’s face turned a harsh shade of red, awkwardly accented by the vanilla ice cream and whipped cream that had stuck to his face around his mouth.

“My...My ice cream...,” Mathew began to cry. The poor kid looked over at his brother sitting on the chair.

“You guys really screwed up this time,” a pudgy little child relayed walking up to the stunned secretary with his arms bouncing at his side. “You know they’re twins,” he added.

“Well, how could this—In all my days—I never.” She was clearly shaken up. She bent down to Matthew, who had his chin down and a big frown hanging on his face.

“Haha, oh man!,” chuckled David, leaning over to Wesley. “That stinks!” The boys watched as Mrs. O’Brien went back into the little faculty refrigerator and began preparing a second Sundae.

“You kids get back to class,” she said as she handed Matthew the bowl. “Now, Kevin, you should be very ashamed of what you did to your brother. Pretending to be him in order to get goodies is just not right, and you need to know that. I’m afraid we are going to have to call your mom and tell her all about this,” she said as she made her way back around the desk.

The door to the principal’s office opened up and out walked David’s mom, and his brother, Michael, who had a black eye and some dried-up blood on his elbow and knuckles.

“Let’s go, boys,” David’s mom said abruptly. They got up from their chairs and made their way out of the office.

“Tough break, kid,” David said to Matthew, who, still holding back tears, could barely swallow his ice cream.

“Thank you and sorry again,” David’s mom said, shaking hands with the principal as the boys walked past.

“Quite all right. Michael is a good boy, just got caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. He’ll be all right.” She smiled and turned down the hall. The kids raced out to the mini-van in the parking lot.

“Can I sleep over Wesley’s tonight, Ma?”

“I’m your mother, not your ma, and only if it’s OK with Mrs. Terrell.”

“I’m sure it will be fine, Mrs. Kresser. I’ll run in and ask when we get to my house,” Wesley promised.

“Okey dokey,” she replied lightly.

The minivan pulled up to Wesley’s house and he shot out of the car and into the front door in seconds.

“Mom, can David—“

“It’s fine with me, sweetie,” A voice came from the kitchen.

“But, Mom, I didn’t even ask—“

“David can sleep over, that’s fine,” She said again, this time poking her head into the hallway with a smile. Wesley felt a smile form on his face, a smile that only his mom could produce.

“Thanks,” he said genuinely and then bounced back outside. He gave a thumbs-up to the car and saw David shuffle out from the back seat and head over to the driver’s window. After a brief talk and a kiss from his mom, he made his way to the porch with Wesley. The boys turned and headed inside to the kitchen, like always.

“Hey, Mrs. Terrell,” David said taking a seat at the kitchen table.

“Hey, cutie.”

“What’s for dinner, Mom?,” Wesley asked, making his way over to the counter-top to sit down.

“I’m thinking Italian tonight, some meatball subs? You guys game?,” she asked, continuing her way around the kitchen. “Your father will be home in about an hour so, and I want the table set before then, OK?”

“We canna do it now, how’s aboutta thata,” David said, trying to throw on an Italian accent.

“Oh, mi amore,” Mrs. Terrell said smiling. David and Wesley got out the plates, cups, silverware, and napkins and were done within minutes.

“Free to go?,” Wesley said as they finished.

“Free to go,” Mrs. Terrell nodded.

The rest of the evening didn’t hold much excitement. The meatball subs were a huge hit, and then the boys watched the White Sox game with Wesley’s dad in the family room. The game ended late and, after some ice cream, the house quieted down. The boys were fast asleep a little past eleven 11pm, and they fell asleep with the familiar sounds of Mr. Terrell snoring into the night.

Dreams came quickly to the boys. The cool fall air was kept at bay by the blankets that warmed their bodies. The neighborhood was quiet, the moon was shining, but not all things were right in the world; at least not in the way that most people can see. Though it can rarely be identified, the language of the earth has a strange way of communicating what events come to pass on her surface. On this night, the trees whispered of magic, the leaves rustled and spoke of a legend, and the very air that the young boys breathed in as they slept was alive with the spirit of a great adventure.

The electrified night air did not stir the young boys sleep in Wesley’s room, but something else did. A familiar blue light dashed into the perfectly still room. It darted in through the doorway and quickly descended onto the sleeping boys. A small hand came out of Flin’s glowing body and rested on the throat of the sleeping boy. David felt a strange warmth spread through his body, and he lazily opened his eyes. The blue light

didn't alarm the young boy at first, but it was only another instant that had David sitting straight up with his eyes wide open.

“Feeindorf malieen meel tal track, sheemin drackar, attacka too,” The boy sputtered. The strange language coming out of his mouth sent David scooting back towards the wall in disbelief. Panic flashed on his face as his mouth motored on.

“Talindee ma, talindee ma,” Flin said sending a stream of vibrant blue energy over to David's mouth. Her action seemed to mute David's words and, for a brief second, the room was back to being silent. David remained frozen in the corner of the bed, his body, eyes, and chest all frozen in awe. His mouth was—of course—still running, but nothing audible was coming out.

Flin looked around and quickly spotted Wesley asleep on a pile of comforters and pillows next to the bed. She gently glided down the few feet to his throat and placed her tiny hand on it. Unlike David, Wesley smiled calmly and opened his eyes, as if waking from a peaceful dream.

“Flin,” he said, without waking. Sure enough, he saw her beautiful blue glow hovering above his head. The cool breeze from her wings moved the hair at his brow mildly.

“Hey there, little lady,” Wesley said in the language of Candlewood.

“Hello, Wesley,” she replied, as the glow around her body grew brighter, and a smile formed on her tiny face.

“I was hoping I would see you again soon,” he said, sitting up a little bit.

“I wish I was coming to you at a better time, to tell you of things that do not involve the hardship at the forest, but I am afraid my errand here serves as a call for help,

that asks for your immediate presence,” She floated down to Wesley’s knee and stood in front of him with her head down.

“You know I will do anything I can to help,” Wesley said above her. Flin’s eyes filled with light and the wings on her back fluttered in approval.

“You are a gift to this world, Wesley, and a gift to ours as well. I can explain more on the way, but I think it is best that we tell your friend what is going on before anything else. I thought he was you, and I can imagine how scared he must be right now.” In a quick flash she was atop the bed facing David, who was still huddled in the corner, stammering away. “I am terribly sorry, friend of Wesley,” She gave a quick wink and the silent spell that seemed to be on David was gone immediately.

“...because you just don’t sneak up on people, and I thought I died and you were an angel, but really small, which I thought was weird, but you had wings, and I thought I was going to child heaven where everything was smaller, which makes sense, but you were really small, and I was talking funny, so I thought it was a dream of dying to go to child heaven...”

“Is he OK?,” Flin said, looking back at Wesley.

“Ya know, he does this sometimes,” he said, looking over at David, amazed.

David saw his friend’s familiar face and took a deep breath.

“Why am I talking like this?,” he asked in the tongue of the forest.

“I did it,” Flin acknowledged.

“Is it permanent?,” David quickly responded, looking a little pale and disoriented.

“No, and I am terribly sorry for the intrusion and the mix-up. I thought you were Wesley,” Flin said humbly.

“I think I obviously missed something, some time ago, before when, because you guys know each other I think, or even well, everything seems normal that you are a fairy and here, at night, and my mom doesn’t let me have sleepovers with girls and Wesley yours doesn’t either.”

“David, I have been meaning to tell you about my trip to the back of the neighborhood and the world that I discovered there.”

“Yeah, that would be something to tell,” David groaned.

“I can tell you everything once we are on the way, but we need to leave now.”

“An adventure, huh? Well, we can’t call it a night after only meatball subs and a baseball game,” David said returning to normal, and getting excited.

“This is not an adventure to be taken lightly, young David. I do not wish to speak of the time ahead in a manner that should frighten you, but, in truth, your lives are at stake if you follow me back home to Candlewood. Dragor has summoned an army that he wishes to use to overthrow our noble king and our way of life. The air smells of his greed and the forest speaks of battle. I do not know if those of light and those that are good at heart will be victorious in this combat that looms ahead, but I am certain that an entire host of allies will be overjoyed to have Wesley, and all humans that are friend to him, by their side as the war begins.” She paused. “It is with a humble heart that I ask for your company and your support on this night. It is not your fight, and it is not your world. I would not think poorly of you should you decide to stay away from this battle. The same applies to you, Wesley.” She finished and stared at the boys, fear danced in her eyes.

Wesley was about to speak up when, suddenly, from beside him, David addressed Flin first.

“If it is important to Wesley, then it is important to me. I fight where he fights, and put my loyalty, and my allegiance wherever his lies. I don’t assume to be much good, little fairy, but I will fight for you.” Flin rose up slowly off of the bed with a smile and a new found confidence.

“Then let us go now to Candlewood and to battle,” she said vigorously. It surprised Wesley to see Flin so wound up, as she was usually calm and sweet; but, on this night, she lead them to the back of the neighborhood with speed.

The boys had only managed to grab the clothing that they had worn the day before and two extra sweatshirts from Wesley’s dresser. They moved quickly behind Flin, and David could tell that Wesley was lost in nervous thought. His eyes were fixed on the ground and he was constantly biting his lip. What was even more disconcerting was the fact that Flin, too, seemed utterly struck with worry. The trio carried on behind the house that had been under construction months ago when Wesley made his first trip to Candlewood.

“Hey, how did you know where to find us, Flin?” David asked.

“I can’t be certain that you will understand this, but fairies are born with an ability to see all the things in someone’s past. When I touched your throat, you felt a certain connection between us, am I right?”

“It felt like I had known you my whole life,” David replied.

“It comes as a montage of images,” she explained to him. “I saw your parents, your classes at school, the day when you got your head stuck in a plastic chair as a little boy...”

“Oh that’s great!,” David shouted throwing his hands up.

“And, Wesley, I certainly learned something valuable about you too.”

“What’s that?,” Wesley asked.

“Let’s just say I know what Dragor is up against,” she said winking back at him. Wesley gave a humble little smile and David was left puzzled as to exactly what Flin meant.

They reached the ivy-covered fence a few moments later, and, after a quick climb, found themselves at the mouth of the great hole that Wesley descended alone the time before.

David scratched at his head. “This looks welcoming,” David said, unenthusiased. “You live in a hole?”

“Some things are not always as they seem,” Flin advised, as she led them to the staircase at the top of the hole. The same strange cold air was bellowing from the opening at their feet. Wesley shivered, remembering the last time he had found himself at the great gorge, uncertain and alone. It felt only slightly better having Flin and David at his side, for he was constantly aware of the great threat that lay at the bottom.

“I guess there’s no turning back after this,” David said, increasing Wesley’s discomfort.

“David, wait,” Wesley said, turning back around and stopping him. “Look, I haven’t been completely honest about all this. I know Flin told you that there were

people in trouble, and even that your life was at stake—but David, I have looked into the eyes of Dragor. I have felt his power and heard of his dark ways. The world we are going to, Candlewood, it is a place of magic. Water is used there as a weapon. It contains a force of its own, a will of its own, and a deep, unexplained magic that the inhabitants of the forest use for good, and some for bad. The king told me this on my last visit. I am sure he will tell you what he has told me, and show you what he showed me. But David, I need to be sure that you understand what’s down there, and that Dragor is a powerful, hateful enemy.”

“I hear you Wes. I guess I don’t know exactly what lies ahead. I don’t know the real power of this Dragor guy, and I didn’t know water could be used for magic, and I don’t even know these people we are helping.” He stepped to the side quickly. “No offense Flin.” She just put a hand up and shook her head, saying it’s OK. “But I do know that you are my best friend. I am not going to let you go anywhere dangerous without me, and it looks like you already managed to do that the last time. We are family. Not by blood, but might as well be.” David paused and cracked a smile. “I don’t know what good I will be. You always seem to be the one that gets us home in the end. Hahaha. But maybe, if anything, I’ll make you laugh along the way.”

“I will be glad to have you along this time, that’s for sure,” Wesley said smiling and scratching his head. “It’s settled then. Dragor will face up to us both,” he finished and turned to face Flin.

“Oh, don’t be so sure to count me out,” Flin said jetting her hands out to the side, as they burst into blue flames. David jumped back.

“Jeese-God, my god,” he blurted.

“You didn’t think fairies were just translators, did you David?,” she mocked.

“Cool,” he whispered in awe.

“Let’s get going, boys,” she said, and floated her way over to the first set of stairs.

Wesley and David took a deep breath, let it out, and followed behind her. As they walked, Flin began to tell them the recent events of the forest.

“A while ago, we sent a few of our spies out into the dark parts of the forest to monitor the actions of Dragors—an extremely dangerous task. They were gone for three days before returning.” She paused for a moment and had trouble finding words as they continued down the steps.

“What did they see, Flin?,” Wesley asked.

“The last things they will ever see. Dragor found them. He found them and brought them into his lair in the dark wood.”

“Oh well, that was nice that he let them go,” David concluded.

“He melted their eyes. He used his magic and melted their eyes. The poor elves, they made their way back home blind, and carried with them a message from the Dark One.”

“What did it say?,” David asked.

“It said: You sent your spies to see me. It was the last thing they saw. War is upon you, and so, then, is your demise.” Flin fell silent after that. David and Wesley felt their hearts thump in their chest. Wesley swallowed hard and David shrugged his shoulders around awkwardly.

“Not exactly Mr. Congeniality is he, Wes?”

“No,” Wesley said softly, and appreciating David’s attempt to make them smile. The bottom of the hole came shortly thereafter and the morale of the group seemed to mirror the surroundings.

“David, behind this door is the realm of the Candlewood forest. Humans have not stepped through this door in over one thousand years. You would be the first boy to do so, if it had not been for Wesley’s journey. I welcome you to my home, and wish the reason for your visit was a happier one,” Flin said, and she made her way up to the key-hole. A small slither of white light began to react to the glow of Flin’s body as she hovered next to the wall.

“Thank you, Flin,” David replied. Flin grabbed the key from around her neck and put it in the lock. The boys turned to the wall and saw it ignite with a white light. Two large double doors appeared for a brief second and then vanished slowly into nothing. A large gap stood between the dank hole the boys were standing in and the home of the Candlewood elves.

It was night time in the great forest and, along the path leading into the trees, there were dozens of torches lighting the way. The same familiar sense of mystery was held in the branches before the boys. It was as if every tree, every leaf, every inch of bark had a story to tell of years come and gone. A slight warm wind spiraled through the forest, weaving between limbs and whispering to the leaves. The hundreds and hundreds of trees on either side created layers and layers of shadows. Wesley looked over at David and could tell that his friend was enchanted by the sheer visual splendor that lay before them.

“Wesley, do you remember the way?,” Flin asked from behind them.

“It’s a straight shot to the arena, right?”

“It sure is,” she affirmed, “I was told to take you to the king as soon as you arrived. He is looking forward to seeing you again and I am sure he will be equally as pleased to find David has come to defend the kingdom as well.” With that, the trio started along the dirt path and headed into the trees a few yards ahead. They walked with a slight sense of urgency and Wesley was surprised to find that he felt the same kind of discomfort and danger that he had the first time he walked along this path. Though he now knew the eyes that gazed at him all those months ago, it felt like a different set of eyes were watching from behind the trees and among the shadows. He walked at the front of the group aware of every leaf, stick, and branch that moved at his sides.

“This reminds me of this nature walk that I had to do my first day in Cub Scouts. The pack leader took us to this forest and we found walking sticks, and we went on a hike through the woods. I was new to the pack so I didn’t really talk to anyone,” David turned to whisper back at Flin; “Because Wesley’s parents are cool and didn’t make him join!” He turned forward and continued. “And we were walking for like three hours, stopped to eat trail mix, and I didn’t know I was allergic to peanuts back then. So I was starving and I must have had about seven or eight handfuls before I started to realize that I wasn’t feeling well, and I was swelling up around my ankles. Then this kid, Billy, who was sitting next to me told me I didn’t look too good, and I told him he was ugly too, and then the pack leader saw me and freaked out. And then I freaked out and saw that I was swelling up and my face got really big and puffed up, and I couldn’t breathe or walk, and we were in the middle of the woods. So they ended up having to pick me up and carry me back in, and give me an insulin shot,” David walked for a second without saying

anything. “I didn’t go back to the pack after that. I think I was only a Cub Scout for about six hours.”

“That is an interesting story, David,” Flin said. Wesley didn’t seem to react to the story. He was walking ahead seemingly unaware that David had even been talking.

“You OK, Wes?,” David asked his friend.

“I feel like someone is watching us,” Wesley said honestly.

“I have felt that as well,” Flin said, and made her way up to Wesley’s shoulder. He stopped and David quickly huddled together with them.

“Is there seriously something wrong?,” David asked, a little caught off-guard.

“There could be,” Flin said. “Wesley, I should tell you that your presence here has had a strange affect on the elves. While the vast majority of them enjoyed your visit and admired your respect of the king, others have not taken it so kindly. Feelings of jealousy and pride have turned some of our numbers to the side of Dragor. I do not doubt that his own power has had something to do with the turn of their allegiance, but your fame brings both ally and foe.” A stick snapped in the forest behind Wesley’s back. A gust of wind stirred the leaves. The forest seemed to go dark. The air chilled and a whisper teased the leaves on the ground. It took only seconds for the group to realize that they were not alone.

“Get under me,” Flin said urgently. David was about to ask “why”, when a flaming orange ball was hurling through the trees and advancing at the boys with deadly speed. Strange cries erupted from the forest around them. Shrieks and wails of anger suffocated the small spell that the boys heard from Flin above them. Just as the boys were closing their eyes and readying for the impact of the swirling orange sphere, a

sudden puff of air kicked up the dirt at their feet and a blue shield flashed around them deflecting the threat back into the forest.

“It is an ambush, Wesley, run!!,” she shouted down to them.

“We are not going to leave you,” Wesley screamed back, as two more orange balls of light came forth from the darkness around them. Flin shot an equally large blue swirl of light at the first one and, on impact, the two orbs exploded in a mass of light. The explosion acted as a powerful flare and Wesley got a good look at one of the creatures in the woods. His look was cut off by the second ball of orange energy heading right for David. David ducked and Wesley realized he was now in the flight path of the ball. He jumped in the air and turned sideways, spinning over and around the ball as it floated beneath him.

“Wesley, your powers are not ready yet. You need to speak to the king or all is lost!! Go now!! David, take him and run!!,” she hollered down at them.

“I think that’s our cue to leave, Wes. Come on!,” David made a move to leave when, the forest abruptly illuminated around them with purple, green and blue globes of light. Streams of orange lightening raced through the trees. A small battle had begun.

The boys didn’t know what do. The presence of the Candlewood elves lit up the area around the group a little bit more, but everything was still a blur of shouts, screams, and spells. David looked up just in time to see Flin in action. She violently thrust her hands out to the side of her waist and David could see every muscle in her body was straining as she shouted, “Ellipse teen ra,” and then shot her hands forward in the direction of one of her foes. An intense blue light jettisoned out of her fingertips and struck one of the dark minions that were advancing on the boys. Wesley and David were

crouched down, ducking and flinching constantly. The battle lasted only moments, and it felt like it was only seconds. Three elves came from out of the forest and one of them was dragging the corpse of the fallen enemy that Flin had bested.

“It is OK now,” the elf who was holding the corpse said. He approached Wesley and David and dropped the leg of the minion behind him. “Well done, Flin. Are you OK?,” he asked her.

“I’m fine. It was an ambush, I must have been followed when I went out to get the boys.” She replied.

“It would have been a much larger more powerful group of minions if Dragor was aware of the boy’s return. I think they were only a scouting party that was lucky to find Wesley unguarded,” one of the other elves replied.

“Well I wouldn’t say I was unguarded,” Wesley said, winking at Flin.

“I am Fredock,” the elf who was closest to the boys said, reaching his hand out to shake Wesley’s. “And just who might this be?”

“This is David. He has come to help as well,” Wesley offered.

“Well, any friend of Wesley’s is certainly a friend of ours. You have indeed become quite the popular boy around our forest. It is said that the king sees something special in you. Your return and your friend’s arrival will be a cause to celebrate.

Welcome, the both of you, and thank you for your allegiance,” Fredock said, shaking the boy’s hands.

“We better get to the king as soon as possible,” Flin interrupted. “I was told to bring Wesley to him as soon as he got into the forest.”

“Let us make our way then; but first, Wesley, David, I believe it would be best for you to see what and who it is you will be up against,” Fredock moved aside. There before the boys was an elf that looked like it had been infected with some kind of plague. While the three elves around them and all the elves in the forest that Wesley had met, had a light green skin, and large yellow eyes, this elf looked strikingly different. Its skin was turned an awful grayish-white. The fingernails on the body were brown and yellow. The creature was wearing a black sleeveless tunic and his skin looked wrinkly and rotted. Fredock bent down by the minions face.

“Look here,” he said, and lifted up the elf’s eyelid. From where the boys were standing, they saw that the eyes had been turned completely black. The veins on the creature’s body were also black, and rose on the skin like vines snaked down a tree. The body looked disgusting compared to Fredock.

“Their mind *and* their bodies are consumed by the evil inside them,” Fredock said. “Make no mistake about it, boys. It is evil that we are up against. It is evil that threatens our borders, and it is evil that challenged your lives here moments ago.” The boys were a little taken back by Fredock’s direct manner of speaking.

“On our way then,” Flin said trying to lift the mood, and began to head down the path. The boys got up and followed her.

“You two, dispose of the body, then get back to the arena quickly. I’ll go with them to the king. Good job tonight, my brothers,” Fredock praised the other two elves. He turned and followed Wesley and David, keeping a close eye on the surrounding woods, in case of another attack.

“What did Flin mean when she said you weren’t ready yet? She was treating you like you were special cargo and like we are some great fighters,” David whispered to Wesley. “They definitely seem to be the ones who are the fighters with all those lightning ball-things shooting out from their fingers.”

“I will have the king explain everything to you, David. I am really looking forward to seeing him again. He is very wise and I learned a lot from him on my last visit.”

“Hey that was a good dodge over that second orange ball that was coming at us. I thought it was going to hit you there for a second,” David said, giving Wesley a little shove. They walked on through the forest and David went on talking about the show down in the woods and praising Flin for her display of fighting abilities.

They reached the base of a large tree and looked up in its branches, which held an impressive tree-fort castle of sorts. Wesley distinctly remembered seeing it when he was on the deck of his hut last time he was in the forest. A pair of large double wooden doors that were a darker shade than the actual bark of the tree halted Flin and the boys. Fredock stayed a distance away and talked with some fellow elves about the ambush. The doors to the king’s tree-fort finally opened and it puzzled David a great deal to see an aged elf pushing them open. What was of even more concern was the fact that there was a crown above his head. It didn’t surprise Wesley a bit.

“It sure is good to see you again,” Wesley said coming over to the wise king.

“Ahh, my boy. Wesley my boy, it fills me with delight to see you as well,” he said, reaching up to shake his hand. Wesley reached down and they shook firmly. “And so I must meet David now.” The king made his way over to David.

“How did you know who I was?,” David wondered.

“Oh, I don’t know who you are just yet, but I do know what you are called,” the king cleverly replied.

“How do you know my name?,” David asked again.

“Well, the trees have a voice and I have ears. It’s as that simple. But never mind that for now. I would like to welcome you, truly welcome you, and thank you for your involvement in our struggle.”

“Thank you, Mr. King sir, and you are welcome. And just curious—I don’t want to be rude—but why did you open the doors? Don’t kings have servants and stuff?,” David asked shyly.

“Some kings have servants, yes. Some have friends instead of servants. My people have me, not the other way around,” the king explained. David could do nothing but smile.

“We were attacked on the path,” Flin said from above David’s shoulder.

“I sent those guards to help as soon as I felt something was wrong. I apologize if they were not there on time and if your security was breached. I trust Flin came in rather handy and, ah, Wesley, may I be so bold as to ask if you joined in the fray?,” the king asked.

“I wasn’t sure what to do, and I didn’t have any water, and there seemed to be so many,” Wesley said feeling a little embarrassed.

“I think it is best that we get started right away to make sure that doesn’t happen again, what do you think my boy?” The king’s proposed.

“Get started with what?,” David asked.

“He doesn’t know about the magic and the colors and stuff,” Wesley clarified.

“Well we better start with him then,” the king said, motioning for the boys to follow him inside. Before following the king, Wesley looked back to see if Flin was coming in.

“Have your time with the King now, Wesley. I will be waiting out here when you are done,” she said before he spoke up.

“I just wanted to thank you,” Wesley told her.

“You’re welcome, Wes. Listen well to everything he has to say. He will help you out tremendously,” she added.

“I will,” Wesley answered, as he turned towards the King’s chamber.

“And, Wesley,” Flin stopped him, “Good luck.” Wesley gave her a nod and continued on to his training lesson with David and the king. At the back of the tree he found a large spiral staircase leading up into the higher parts of the trunk, and further into the king’s castle. He trailed behind his two friends just enough so that he was walking up the stairs alone. His separation from David and the king made him feel a little uneasy and he hurried up the stairs as fast as he could. After getting to the top, Wesley found himself at the entrance to a room that numbed his knees. A beautiful dome-shaped ceiling was high above their heads. The inside of the tree trunk had been hollowed out except for a long central shaft in the center of the room that reached from the ground to the top of the ceiling. Carved out in the center of the shaft was a simple half oval-shape that provided a chair of sorts. Above the small seat and wrapped around the tree were the words, “Ta leen treeth”. Translated from Candlewood, it meant, “I am third.” The chair served as the throne for the ruler of the Candlewood elves. It suited the wise,

undemanding, king perfectly. The rest of the room glowed with streaks of pale light that broke in through the ceiling windows. There seemed to be a kind of intangible mist or gentle smoke present in the room. It was a magnificent place to be in, and it warmed Wesley and David's hearts like they were coming home after being gone for a long time.

"Wesley, I will be with you in just a moment, my boy. I think it is best that I speak with David first," the king spoke up from in front of the throne.

"That's fine. I'll just wait over here," Wesley replied.

"Have a seat here boy," the king said to David.

"Here?," David pointed to the throne.

"It is the only seat in this room," the king hinted.

"But it is your throne?," David said respectfully.

"It is also just a chair. And I will be a while talking, so it is best you sit down for it," the king answered, motioning for his guest to sit. David complied. The king stood in front of David and went on to tell him about the history of Candlewood Forest, Dragor's brutality and, most importantly, about the magic Wesley had witnessed on his first visit. Though David did not receive the same spectacular show, the feast, or the raging dance afterwards, he certainly felt moved by the king's speech; and he was anxious to discover the real magic of something as simple as water.

The king's voice came over to Wesley across the room, and Wesley looked to find his old friend motioning him to join them. Starting across the room, a slight movement from the ceiling forced him to look up. He wasn't sure exactly what he saw, or if he had seen any kind of movement at all. Perhaps it was just the uneasiness of the

ambush before that had played tricks on his eyes. He continued over to David and the king and was met with smiles from both of them.

“This is incredible,” David said, approaching Wesley and putting an arm over his shoulder.

“And you haven’t even seen anything yet!” Wesley said back to him.

“What color are you? Have you tried it yet? Can you do that stuff that Flin and the people in the woods can do, huh, Wes?,” David was clearly excited. Wesley took the question with some hesitancy. He was unsure of his power and how it would be perceived.

“The time before us will serve as a training period where you, David, and you, Wesley, will learn to harness and utilize your powers to their utmost potential. Consider this time carefully, absorb everything you see and hear, and, most importantly...feel. I have asked two of our warriors to help in this training. Listen to them and learn from them,” the king said seated on the throne.

An elfin warrior came from behind the throne. Clad in armor intricately engraved with leaves and trees, Naydeen looked several inches taller than the tallest elf Wesley had seen in the forest.

“This is Naydeen,” the king said. There was a moment of silence and then David asked:

“But then, well, where is other one?”

“He is behind you,” the king said. The boys turned around just in time to see a creature jump down from the ceiling, close to where Wesley had thought he saw something move.

“How long has he been there?,” David asked.

“I have been with you the whole time,” the Elfin master answered.

“Dante is a Sire,” the king divulged.

“What is that?,” Wesley asked, admiring his display of stealth.

“A sire’s art form is that of concealment. We are chased by shadows, and move as the wind blows.”

“Where do I sign up for *that* class?,” David said amazed.

“There will be many classes all put into one. For the next few hours, we shall begin to unveil the great power that you two hold in your hearts. Do not be afraid to lose yourself, do not be afraid to let go, or of the unknown. The battle that lies ahead require much of you boys,” the king said, a look of determination on his face. “Are you ready?,” he asked. The boys nodded.

“Then we begin.” Without any sign of warning, the king threw his hand out towards the ground and a soft blast of green energy exploded from under his feet. It knocked the boys back several feet, but didn’t seem to disturb Naydeen or Dante. Instead, Naydeen took a step towards the King’s side and unsheathed a sword from his back. Dante somersaulted through the air and joined the king’s other side.

David had landed on his feet while Wesley had been knocked down, but was unharmed.

“Our first lesson of the day will be defense,” the king announced from his chair. He rose to his feet and motioned for the boys to come closer. Wesley and David obeyed, though they were still stunned by the quickness of the Elfin king.

“An attack can come from anywhere at any time. The most important thing for a good defense is to always be ready.” Naydeen explained.

“No offense here, Mr. Naydeen; but, even if I knew something like that was coming, I would not have a way to block it like you guys did,” David retorted.

“The counter to a spell is simple. It involves recognizing the attack coming and seeing through it. In other words, it does not have to be a physical deflection, or dodging an attack. A true master of defense has many ways of avoiding harm. One is absorption. If we can identify an attack coming and estimate the amount of force it is projecting, we can use our own force to overcome that energy level and absorb the attack,” the king answered. Dante had moved across the room and stood ready.

“For example, watch how Dante absorbs this spherical attack.” The king tucked his hands to the side by his hips and a shard of green power appeared between his hands. He clenched his fingers and the shard burst into a flaming ball. He launched it at Dante, who waited and watched the ball coming at him with incredible speed. It hurtled through the air spitting green flames behind it. Dante raised his hand and a small purple glow appeared at the end of it. The king’s attack looked as though it was going to send Dante through the wall but, instead, it met Dante’s hand and, in a flash, there was nothing but a patch of purple smoke coming from his hand.

“Wow!!! Wooow. Holy C-jeeese!!”

“That was awesome!!,” David roared from across the throne.

“Haha, thank you,” Dante said humbly. “It is something that the two of you are more than capable of.”

“Before we have you try, boys, there is something you both need to understand,” the king stepped in.

“Does it have to do with the fact that there isn’t any water around?,” Wesley asked.

“Hahaha, I am surprised this wasn’t asked earlier after the ambush!,” the king said. “Our bodies, just like human bodies, are made up of 80% water. This simple quality is, of course, an incredibly important aspect of our training, and of your ability to use the magic inside. Just like intense physical activity during sports, when using this magic, you will become fatigued, dehydrated, and thirsty. This is something you must always be aware of. Endurance is a vital part of battle, and the one that lies ahead will not be an exception.”

“You are saying we don’t need water to use this magic?,” David beckoned.

“Correct. If you use water that is outside of your body, you will obviously not use up your own supply, and will then not be as fatigued.”

“This is the coolest thing in the whole world!,” David said. “You mean right now I can shoot attacks at those dark elves if they were here?”

“Let us get back to defense; offensive maneuvers will come later,” Naydeen said.

“Wesley and David, go join Dante over there.” The boys walked over to where Dante was standing and placed themselves directly behind the powerful sire.

“Hahaha, come out from behind him. Don’t be frightened boys. We are not going to give you anything that you can’t handle. Dante will be right there to help if anything goes wrong,” the king said.

“David, why don’t you go first,” Naydeen suggested.

“Oh, right. Sure, yeah I can go.”

“Step out here in front of me. I want you to watch Naydeen’s attack coming at you. The only thing you need to do is picture the threat disappearing into your hand. Rely on your heart, and the magic that is stored inside you, my tall friend. Do not fear what is about to happen. Accept the danger coming and defeat it.”

“Does this mean I will figure out what color I am?,” David said nervous but excited.

“It sure does,” the King assured.

“Are you ready, boy?,” Naydeen asked from across the room.

“Ohh, yeah.” David said, unsure. He watched as Naydeen slowly moved his sword around his head. The warrior brought his blade smoothly in front of his chest, then circled it back across the right side of his body. He quickly stabbed the sword through the air at the completion of the circular movement and a current of blue energy surged at David. David’s eyes widened and he raised his hand towards the oncoming beam. He thought about the attack, about what Naydeen had done to send it over, and, before he knew it, it was on top of him. A flash of purple pulsed in front of him and the threat was extinguished.

“Ha!! Hahaha! I did it! I can’t believe it! I didn’t even feel anything or even try really, it just happened,” David announced to the group.

“That is because Dante stopped it,” Wesley told his friend.

“Oh...Oh right. Wait I didn’t do anything?,” David asked looking over at Dante. The sire was just putting his hand down to his side, a patch of purple smoke rising from it.

“I am afraid not, friend. But you stood your ground and that counts for something. Be proud.”

“Ah, pooooop. Why don’t you give it a try, Wesley?,” David said. Wesley gathered up some courage and stepped in front of Dante. He saw how Dante had saved David and realized that there was no real danger in what was happening. His fear was only about his own ability.

Naydeen sheathed his sword this time and, instead, stood with his feet spread apart. His left hand was extended out towards Wesley and his right hand was turned up, and cupped in the shape of a “U.” It rested down by his hip.

“Are you ready?,” he said to Wesley. Wesley only nodded in reply. A flicker of blue light appeared on top of Naydeen’s cupped hand. It quickly burst into a flame and, just as that happened; he sent it whirling towards Wesley. The same stream of blue energy approached Wesley as it had David. Wesley stood firm and felt no real fear. He saw the attack coming towards him and clenched his fists at his side. He raised one of them back above his head and spread his feet. Before he could react, the blue bolt was on top of him. It struck him in the chest and sent him to the ground. He went numb all over for a few seconds.

“What was that!?!,” David said to Dante, confused as to why he didn’t save his friend.

“I sensed no fear in him, so I was certain he was going to react. I felt an incredible potential in him. I am sorry, Wesley. I truly thought you were going to do just fine,” Dante apologized bending down and helping him up.

“It’s OK. I’m fine, really. I just went numb all over for a seconds. It didn’t hurt at all,” Wesley said as he rose to his feet. “Thank you for not making those attacks painful, Naydeen.”

“Of course,” Naydeen replied.

“Let me try it again,” David said, surprising the members of the room. He stood in front of Dante and Wesley and motioned for Naydeen to go ahead. “Give me the same thing you gave him.” Naydeen readied himself in the exact same way he had on the previous attack.

“Faleen tear,” Naydeen whispered and launched the stream of blue lightening at David. This time, the stream got only half the distance. David quickly brought his hands together and then shot them towards the approaching current. A brilliant purple energy blast shot forth from his hands and struck Naydeen’s blue stream head-on. The two forces didn’t disappear though; instead, David’s blast continued past the collision point and moved on towards the king and Naydeen. The king quickly raised a hand and silenced the purple mass.

“OHHHHH!!! YEA!!! HAHAHAHA!” David jumped in the air and raised his hands above his head. “You didn’t do that, this time, did you, Dante?!!”

“I certainly did not. Well done!”

“Most impressive, young David,” Naydeen applauded from the king’s side.

“I’m purple just like you, Dante. I can even be a sire. Oh, can’t you train me to be like that too?,” David proposed to Dante.

“The art of a sire requires years of training. I am pleased to see you are a creature of passion though, my friend. I am glad to share that with you,” Dante replied.

“Wesley, it is your turn again,” The king declared.

“OK.”

“What made you hold back last time?,” the king asked.

“Oh...um. I don’t know,” Wesley said, his head down. The king stared hard at the young boy across from him.

“It is time, my boy,” Wesley gave David a high five and smiled at him. He was thrilled and excited for his friend. He stood away from Dante and David and readied himself.

“Are you ready?,” Naydeen said from across the room.

“Yes.” Wesley stared at the ground and waited as Naydeen began to cast his spell. He thought hard of the white lightning he had seen come from his finger months ago. He tried to remember what it felt like in his body to produce such a reaction. He thought of his hands and his arms and how they would move and, then, for some strange reason that he was not expecting, he thought of his mom laughing. Inside his chest, he could almost hear the faint laugh. Naydeen’s attack was on its way while Wesley quieted any other noise except that sweet sound inside his heart. His fists curled tightly at his side. He looked up, took a deep breath, and then thrust his hands down at his side. A magnificent white fire engulfed his hands! It lit up his entire body and several feet around him. He saw the blue lightning and focused on its power. In an instant, he pushed his hands forward in front of his chest and collided them with the blue energy. His hands went numb for a split second and then it was over.

The rest of the room remained completely still. Wesley was a little bit out of breath and he stood there panting, as smoke settled around his body.

“My king,” Naydeen said. “Is this real? Is this human child the one who contains the white magic capable of destroying Dragor?”

“It has seemed that way since the moment I met him,” the great king replied with a little smile on his face.

“HAHAHAHAHA. WOOOOOHOOO!!!,” David screamed. He jumped over towards Wesley and then ran the last few steps to his side. “I... that was incredible. You are a hero!!!,” David praised.

“I’m just thirsty,” Wesley said back to him.

“So the legend is true.” Dante began walking towards the King and Naydeen. The white magic does exist. It will be a true honor to fight by your side, young Wesley. And yours as well, David.”

“Dragor isn’t going to know what hit him. Literally,” Naydeen added. The king didn’t say anything else; he only smiled at Wesley like he had known all along the great power he held within.

“We must now teach you how to harness your powers into weapons, not just a means of defense,” Dante said.

“Before we do that, Dante, Naydeen I would like to ask the four of you to keep this discovery secret. It would be wise to keep this knowledge to ourselves. Dragor’s spies are ever-deceptive, and I would hate for word of this advantage to reach Dragor too soon.”

“Ah, yes, very well, my king,” Dante said, as Naydeen nodded in agreement.

“I don’t even know anyone here your majesty, so I couldn’t tell anyone even if I wanted too,” David said.

“I was hoping that I could share this with Flin,” said Wesley. She is my friend and I think she deserves to know.”

“Oh, I don’t think you will find too much surprise in her,” said the king with a smile.

“Truly remarkable,” Naydeen added one last time.

“Let us continue. I thank you for your secrecy my friends.”

The next five or six hours was spent entirely on learning, subtle-but-powerful attacks that could be used effectively in the battle ahead. The boys learned the ways of Candlewood magic. They listened with a sharp ear, watched with attentive eyes, and learned with open minds. Their hearts beat strongly in their chest as they saw their abilities grow. A whole arsenal of attacks and defensive maneuvers were passed from the warriors and the king to the boys. But, without a doubt, the most incredible realization of the day was the knowledge of the great white magic present in Candlewood Forest once again...

The day had proven to be something far more special and more wonderful than anything Wesley or David could have hoped for. They felt like men as they exited the king’s castle. The very pulse in their body seemed to beat harder, and even their hands and feet felt more capable. Though there were aches and pains all over, Wesley and David were far from being exhausted. The new skills and talents that they had acquired over the previous hours settled well into their minds and, when they entered the forest floor, they couldn’t wait to tell Flin what had happened.

“How did it go boys?,” Flin said as she flew over to meet them.

“Oh my gosh, it was so cool! We learned how to shoot fireballs, and block them, and how to see an attack coming!,” David explained.

“How did you like it, Wes. Did you learn much?”

“It was incredible. Naydeen and Dante and the King are really good teachers,” he said back to Flin.

“Well, I will be excited to see what you have learned put to use,” she said to both of them.

“What are we doing now?,” David asked. “Is there any more training?”

“I am afraid the time for training is at end David. I trust that you have learned a great deal and the only thing that is required of you tonight is rest. The king will give a speech tonight in the arena to all those in the forest that are loyal to Candlewood. I am sure Dragor will summon his army under one roof tonight as well.” She turned and guided the boys to a set of tree stumps that were used as benches. Once they took a seat, she continued.

“The ambush earlier today is a good sign that Dragor is aware of your presence in the forest. Tomorrow there will be a battle that decides the fate of our home. I know that this has already been explained to you, but perhaps there is still something you do not know.” Flin hovered for a second and then smiled at the boys. “As you know, no human has ever set foot inside this forest for over a thousand years before Wesley came. The fact that two of you have come to help us means a great deal to our people. You are heroes boys. Whether victorious tomorrow or not, you both will be remembered here forever. This also means that Dragor will be bent on attacking you both. I know I need

not remind you of his capabilities and his power. But I should warn you that your presence in this fight will not go unnoticed by our foes.”

“Are you scared?,” Wesley asked his fairy friend.

“I am anxious to know what the outcome will be. All of what I love and cherish is at risk in this battle. I am scared that those may be taken from me.”

“I am scared,” David said. “I am not a warrior.” Flin gently glided down to his David’s face. Her warm glow felt like a candle burning close.

“A warrior is not decided by the amount of battles he or she has been a part of. A warrior is born from within. You are just as much a warrior as I, or Naydeen, or Dante. Have faith in yourself, David.”

“I am afraid of Dragor,” Wesley said taking in a deep breath.

“And he is afraid of you,” Flin replied. She said it in a way made Wesley believe it. David looked over at him and Wesley’s eyes fell to the ground.

“The meeting will begin in just a few minutes time. Why don’t you two go up to your rooms and rest a bit beforehand? I will meet you at the king’s balcony. Wesley knows where it is.

The boys nodded and made their way over to the tree house that Wesley had stayed in last time. At the base of the tree, two elves that looked familiar to Wesley were waiting.

“Good to see you again,” one of them said as the boys got closer.

“We have prepared the room for two this time. I am sorry if it is a bit snug in there. You humans are just so big,” the other one said.

“Oh that will be more than all right,” Wesley replied. “What are your names. I didn’t get a chance to thank you last time.”

“I am Toby and this is Maxy,” Toby said.

“Will you guys be fighting in the battle tomorrow?,” David asked.

“We all will be fighting,” Maxy said. “Though not all of us are capable in the ways of magic, there are other ways to fight,” he said as he raised his fists in front of his hands. Wesley and David smiled at the small creature’s determination.

“We are grateful to have you humans down here with us. Dragor will surely be wary of your participation against him. You are both very brave for doing such a thing,” Toby added.

“Thanks,” they replied in unison.

“Well you had best get cleaned up before the meeting tonight. It is only a short time away and I am sure you are tired from your training,” Maxy offered.

“Thank you again for your hospitality,” Wesley said to the elves. The boys hopped on the rope ladder behind Maxy and Toby and climbed to the hut at the top. They entered the room and, there before them, was an almost comical arrangement of furniture. Just as last time, two chairs had been pushed together to form a bench, only now there was another set. The table was raised by several books under each leg, and four beds were pushed together in pairs to form two bigger beds. The simple work was all that was necessary and it greatly reflected the elves’ mentality and respect for simplicity.

David went and hopped on the bed and Wesley walked over to the table and took a seat.

“Pretty incredible, huh?,” Wesley said to his friend.

“This is the coolest place I have ever been to in my life. I think it’s the coolest place I will *ever* be actually.” He let his eyes wander around the room until he spotted a small token on the stand beside his bed. “What is this?” Wesley had noticed it on the way in, but hadn’t said anything.

“It is a gift from the fairies and the elves,” Wesley answered as he pulled out the necklace from his pocket. “They gave me one last time I was here.”

“It’s so perfect for some reason. I don’t know why, but I like it so much.” David held up the necklace and then looked over at Wesley’s. They were identical. The boys strapped them on around their necks and fidgeted with the trinkets.

“How did you never tell me of this place?,” David asked.

“I knew I would return. And I knew that if I did you would be coming also. I wanted everything to be as fresh and new to you as it was for me. There is nothing worse than going somewhere and having someone already spoil it by telling you what they saw. You know?,” Wesley replied.

“Well I appreciate it. But, I mean, how did you just not explode inside to tell me?,” David shrugged.

“It was pretty hard,” Wesley said, laughing a little. He turned and brought his attention to the small meal that was waiting for the boys on the table. There was a simple pitcher of water and a small bowl full of fropple cakes. “Come over here, David. You have to try these cakes.” David popped off the bed and sat across from Wesley.

“What are they?”

“They are fropple cakes.”

“What the heck is a bobble cake?”

“No, haha, no no. A *F-R-O-P-P-L-E* cake.”

“OK well, what is that?,” David pleaded.

“It’s this kind of fruit that grows here; it is the most delicious food ever. You have to try it. They have whole feasts made just from this stuff.” The boys poured some water, which was much needed after the intense training, and tore through the delectable snacks. When the small meal was finished, Wesley got up and walked out to the balcony. David joined him a moment later.

“I saw Dragor over there,” Wesley said, pointing over to the path leading out of the forest. “Last time I was here. It was in the morning and I saw his eyes.” David was silent, and then Wesley fell silent as well. “David I think I blacked out just by looking at him. I looked into his eyes and felt this helpless feeling of despair, and just darkness, I don’t know.” Wesley stopped talking again and shook his head. “I’m scared of him.”

“I don’t think I know much about any of this magic stuff yet. But, Wes—you want to know something? Some of the things you did while we were training today, I mean, you even had me scared. I could tell by the looks on their faces you have something that none of them have ever seen. I think Dragor is going to be even more scared of you than you are of him. I think you are here for a reason,” David replied. Wesley took a deep breath in and looked over at his friend.

“Are you scared?,” he asked.

“Well, you know me. When I get scared I just babble. And I’m not babbling, am I?” Wesley laughed at the comment. David smiled as well.

“Let’s head down there since it would be rude to be late,” Wesley suggested.

They turned to head back through the tree hut when David stopped them.

“Wes, we are going to be OK tomorrow. I don’t know why I feel that way, and I mean, I am scared, but only because of what is going to happen not because of the outcome.”

“Let’s just look out for each other, OK?” Wesley said back.

“OK,” David said, and they made their way to the king’s balcony.

The arena was filled with more elves than Wesley remembered seeing last time at the tournament. He and David entered through the main doors, and among a stir of whispers and glares, they found their way to the overhang that looked over the floor. The ceremony started, as though it had been waiting for their arrival. The king was seated on his throne and, when the boys entered at the back of the balcony, a small head and crown popped out of the left side from the chair.

“Hello, boys!,” the king shouted. Wesley smiled and David said hello. “Come right this way, right up to me, each of you on either side, if you will,” he put in. The boys followed his request and looked out over the hundreds of creatures below. Their deep yellow eyes were a bit overwhelming.

“Wow,” David blurted. The king smiled over at him.

“They are saying the same thing, my boy,” the king whispered to him. He leaned back in his seat, took a deep breath, stood up, and walked over to the railing of the overhang. “My friends,” the king began, waiting for the crowd to quiet. It took only seconds, reflecting the deep love and respect that the creatures of the forest had for their leader.

“We have known of this meeting and of this battle for quite some time. The great threat

of Dragor is not a mystery to any one of us. The time is upon on us when we must make a stand for our forest, for our home, and for our way of life. Dragor is a creature of greed, of hate, and of power. He is devoid of value. A being that pursues destruction. A being that desires conquest and domination. His eyes are fixed are Candlewood. His fists are clenched for battle, and his minions are armed for war.” The audience buzzed with fear. The king put his hand up and steered the focus back to his words. “These are things you already know. Do not fear them more now just because they have been said out loud.” This seemed to quell the noise almost instantly and it made a great deal of sense to the boys. The king’s speech, thus far, had gotten them nervous as well. “For many nights before this one, I have thought about what to say to you now. I have come to realize that it matters very little what I say here tonight, and perhaps it does not matter at all. Tomorrow during the battle, these words will not be running through your mind: instinct, reaction, and courage will be the strongest influences in your head. So I must say something that will remain in your hearts.” The king stopped for a moment and lowered his head. Tears pooled in his eyes, and his old hands trembled on the railing. “I want to tell you all...that...I love you. That you are my friends. You are my children, my flock. I cannot promise that you will all live through tomorrow’s battle.” A tear rolled down his wrinkly cheek. Wesley felt like consoling him, but he stayed back with a heaviness on his chest. “But...I...can promise that I will fight. His head rose up from his chest. His hands gripped the rail. “I will fight,” he said again. “I will fight!!!,” he screamed this time. “I WILL FIGHT!!!,” he cheered and his hands ignited in green flame. The audience roared with life.

“I will fight!,” came a voice from below.

“I WILL FIGHT!!!,” the king screamed again.

“I will fight!!,” Wesley shouted. The arena erupted with shouting and screaming. The members of the forest hollered into the night sky pledging their allegiance to defend their home. Men, women, and children alike exploded in a chorus of prideful cheers. Behind the boys, Naydeen, Dante and several other decorated warriors shouted their allegiance as well. Their hands ignited in blue, green, and purple. Below they saw several of the elves float green, blue, and purple orbs above their hands. Some were punching their flame-engulfed hands in the air. Wesley looked over and saw David smiling, his hands bursting into purple flames. Behind him, Dante saw that Wesley was not displaying his colors. He nudged Naydeen and then flicked a finger in Wesley’s direction. A small purple and white flame advanced towards Wesley’s back. Without turning around, the boy raised his right hand behind him and caught the small flame in his hand with a burst of white light. Naydeen and Dante smiled in approval.

“LET US FIGHT!!” The king continued his inspiring speech. For a few moments, it seemed a reasonable concern that the ground of the human world might be vibrating from the noise. Perhaps even some of Dragor’s spies were keen to the rally and to the great noise erupting from the forest. The King raised his hand up after awhile and the roar died down.

“I want to close tonight’s meeting by thanking you all for your support and for your friendship. You are all very brave and I am proud of you no matter the outcome. I am sure that Dragor will be tested, and, hopefully bested, tomorrow in the forest. My hope is that we make a stand worthy of our history. I have real confidence in all of our abilities.” He paused. “And, finally, there are two other people here tonight that I would

like for all of you to join me in thanking. With us now and fighting beside us tomorrow are two boys—young men, really—whose fight this is not. They have trained well and are risking much in an effort to defend a home that is not theirs. There is no way to thank them enough for this help. But please join me now in applauding young Wesley and his friend David! Heroes from the human world!!” The crowd erupted once more. A scattered bunch of the elves below set off small green, blue, and purple flares in the arena in honor of the boys. David and Wesley took a step forward and waved at the crowd with humility. When the applause died down eventually, the king turned back to address his people one last time.

“Rest tonight, my friends. Dream of far away places with fropple cakes and fropple juice. Hold your children close as you tuck them into their beds, and remember well the courageous friends you saw here tonight. Your combined courage will serve you all tomorrow and it will deal to Dragor a swift blow of defeat! Thank you for your attention, your loyalty, and your love. Good night.” The king stepped back from the balcony and dismissed the crowd. He turned back to face the boys and they noticed youth and excitement on his face. “That went well,” he said, as he hobbled towards his throne with a gentle smile on his face. He took a seat and then addressed the boys and the council of warriors and sires behind him. Wesley, David, and the others put their backs to the railing the king had delivered his speech from and listened intently to the king speak.

“What I have said to them tonight I echo to all of you now. Only I ask something more of you twelve. I would ask that you look after those who are less capable than yourselves. Battles are not only about attacking and striking down your foe. They are

also very much about strategy and protecting those around you to conserve your numbers. Your talents and your abilities are great. We will be strong tomorrow in the forest and I believe Dragor's time here is at an end. Concentrate on what's in your hearts, the strengths of your individual spirits, and on each other. When you are not on watch, sleep well my friends, and good luck." The group began to disband when the king added one more thing: "Oh and please...drink lots of water tonight!," he said with a laugh, joining the group in exiting the arena.

David and Wesley had one final word with the king and then headed up to their room. It had been a long night and, after being woken up by Flin, it felt like they had been up for days. The strange time system of the elves had them disoriented. Sleep was on their eyes, and their bodies begged for rest. They each hit their pillows with a thump and a sigh, and drifted to dream within seconds.

Outside their window and across the forest a fire blazed in the night. Set back in the swampy area of the woods, the sound of stone scraping metal hummed through the trees. Dark creatures sharpened daggers, axes and blades and lent their ears to the black Demon of the swamp. Dragor's words vomited from his mouth, like flames, "Chalem sent prontos."

Kill them all...

This morning did not feel like any morning the boys could remember. A simple breakfast had been placed on the table, which David was exceedingly excited to find. He hopped out of bed and made his way over to the fropple juice, fropple pancakes, and fropple bread. Separate from the orange delicacies on the table were two full pitchers of

water. Wesley was without his normal appetite. It hadn't taken long at all for his mind to begin to worry. In fact, almost the minute his dreams ended, and his eyes had opened, the coming fray crowded his thoughts.

"C'mon, Wes, you gotta eat or you are going to be tired during the fight," David warned.

"I just can't eat right now."

"Just have some of this bread, at least something, OK?" Wesley sat down across from him and began nibbling on the top piece of bread. With his mouth full of pancakes, David tried to explain how glad he was that there was more for him.

"Oh, imf you downt mind. I'm gomma eat up," He mumbled. Wesley smiled and raised his eyebrows. He reached over for the pitcher of water. It seemed like the only thing on the table that he actually desired. He tipped the huge pitcher up to his lips and gulped down almost three-quarters of the water.

"I guess you're just thirsty," David said, his mouth finally clear of food.

"You better drink up too," Wesley replied. David nodded and drank a large quantity of the water as well. He was just stopping to breath for air when a great horn sounded in the forest. A second later, another blast came from a higher-pitched instrument, and, in the next second, Flin dashed in from the balcony and fluttered above the boys' heads.

"Boys! Boys! The battle, it has begun! Dragor's minions have taken out our perimeter scouts. You need to hurry! Quick! Our guards spotted them forming ranks at the field." Flin seemed rather hysterical and it made the boys nervous. They jumped up from their chairs and got dressed quickly, as Flin darted out the balcony to summon more

troops. In only seconds, the boys were descending the rope ladder and running alongside hundreds of others on the path leading away from the village center. Several more green and purple fairies were floating above the elves heads, and Flin was by the boys' side once more.

“Where are we going?,” Wesley shouted up to her.

“The clearing up ahead. It is the patch of forest that separates Candlewood from Dragor’s realm. They darted along the path and through the trees until, after several moments of running at a hurried pace, they found themselves joined together with the same group of elves from the night before. The ranks were being formed, and the elves were getting ready for battle.

Looking out over the heads of the small elves, the boys saw an almost perfectly square clearing that was at least 100 square yards. Bordered by thick trees was a light green grass field. In the center was a large flat stone resting up against a smaller boulder. Above them the ceiling was covered with a beautiful kind of Ivy that held within its tangles several of the glowing spheres that lit up the forest around Candlewood, these seemed to grow more and more rare the closer it got to Dragor’s domain. Looking across the field, Wesley and David could see black shadows in the spaces between the trees. It was curiously dark and looked icy cold.

“Come this way,” Flin beckoned the boys, and they made their way around the gathering of elves at the edge of the forest. Two guard towers were positioned on each side of the small army, and two elves watched the actions of the enemy across from them closely. Two horns were attached to the side of the towers, and it was those horns that Wesley and David had heard earlier.

Flin lead them underneath the tower on the left side, where they were met by the king and the ten members of the council. It could be seen on the faces of the others that the time to defend—and take—lives was at hand. Even the king looked serious and combat-ready. It shocked the boys to see that look change to calm once they arrived. It gave them the impression that a great deal of importance was going to be based on their actions.

“Good to see you, boys,” the king said with a smile. “I am also pleased to see you wearing the symbol of Candlewood around your necks. Unity is quite simply one of the most important requirements of a well-fought battle. With that symbol around your neck, I am sure you will inspire those around you. It certainly inspires me.” The other members of the council nodded and seemed very proud to be wearing identical pendants. Wesley and David looked down at the noble creatures before them and were overwhelmed with determination. “Boys, I would like to thank you both one last time for your help,” the king said sincerely.

“We will do our best,” Wesley said, followed by a nod, of agreement from David.

“As I said last night,” the king began to address them all, “protecting those around you is as important as killing the enemy. We fight together for each other, not separate and for ourselves. Make no mistake about it—you are the most important weapons Candlewood has! Let your ferocity be felt!” the king proclaimed to his council of warriors. He gave one hard look around at all twelve of the warriors before him, when a shrill horn sounded across the clearing. All fell silent.

The battle was upon them.

The king made his way out to the front of his people and stood on a small stump that served as a perfect natural podium. In front of the base was a curious box with a handle coming out of the top. Just as the king was about to speak, the edge of the clearing across from the elves began to ignite with small fires. Some were grey; some were orange and red. A strange blackness crept out from the trees. It hushed the lights above them and spread towards the peaceful Candlewood elves. The power of Dragor was prepared.

“Friends, do not fear what is about to happen. I am here with you. And so is a great source of magic that can silence the most terrible of things. This magic is in you,” the king announced loudly over the quieted crowd, and looked deeply into Wesley’s eyes.

The beloved king closed his eyes for a moment when, suddenly, two small shadow-like darts flashed through the air, barely noticeable. There was a slight thud on the tower floor above them and, when Wesley looked over, he saw the guard in the other tower sitting down, his chin slumped against his chest.

“Here they come,” Wesley whispered to himself and David. At that, a swarm of dark elves rushed out of the forest and into the clearing opposite them. They maneuvered through the grass like gorillas. Dirt and blades of grass tossed up behind them as their hands and feet slashed into the ground at a dead sprint. Their hands ignited in orange, red, and grey flames. They shot attacks at the elves and in back of the king, all of which were disarmed by blue, green, and purple bolts of fire. The chaos momentarily calmed when, from the front of the army the king’s voice came one last time.

“Though we are only the tiniest part of a greater and much more powerful life force...the smallest of all things...can change the course of tomorrow.” And, with that,

he jumped onto the ground and slammed the handle of the box down onto its base. In an instant, dozens of small bursts of water shot up from the ground ahead of the front line. The elves standing behind it shot their hands forward and ignited the swirls of water in colored fire and sent them racing through the air at the charging enemy. A few of the elves' electric balls were dodged, but a good many hit their intended targets, and some enemy combatants began to fall.

Next, a swarm of fairies advanced out into the clearing and, in pairs, began attacking Dragor's army. David and Wesley saw some of the small lights fall under the blow of an orange and red blast of fire that struck them.

"Let us fight for Candlewood!" Naydeen said, as the council members ran into the clearing and struck down several enemies. This prompted the remaining elves to charge, and soon the grass field was engulfed in a spectacle that all the books Wesley had read up to that day, could not compare with. Everywhere balls of light, and colored fire—blue, orange, purple, green, red, and grey—were sailing through the air. Some ricocheted into the forest and exploded on trees, others were striking the ceiling. Wesley looked anxiously for Flin, and for the King. He saw Dante and his sires performing incredible acrobatic stunts, flipping and twisting through the air, then vanishing in the grass. Dragor's minions were falling left and right with only few casualties for Candlewood. Directly in front of the guard tower they were under, the boys flinched as a horrid looking grey elf jumped on a body in front of him, and used the shoulders to vault on the face of a smaller elf. The unsuspecting green elf tried to get his pitchfork up to stab at him, but was too late. A throaty cry escaped his lungs as his opponent's nails gouged four crevices up his back. A kindling fire exploded to life in the pit of Wesley's

stomach, and when he turned to look at David, a subtle madness was swimming in his eyes.

“Let’s go!!” David said, and the boys rushed out onto the field. The small black and grey minions were agile and quick and their skin looked like it was rotting on their bones. David ran ahead of Wesley and shot an attack with his right hand at a minion who was still clawing the back of the small elf. A shimmering purple disc sliced through the air and with a loud “THUNK” sank into the elf’s chest. Wesley took no more than a few steps when he spotted a small ax coming towards his head, the blade flaming red. He blasted the ax down with a small shard of white lightning, located the foe that threw it, and aimed his hand out towards him with his fingers spread. A small white orb shot out of his palm, in a split second; smashed into the rotting elf’s chest. He fell instantly and shook, wildly on the ground for a few seconds before dying. Wesley watched as the creature exhaled its last breath, then jumped in the air and spun over an orange orb flying towards his back. He landed on his hands and knees, and then placed both of his hands before his chest. A spray of electrified white orbs shot from his hands and struck down four charging minions around him. As the creatures fell, the elves that they were fighting against looked over at Wesley with their jaws dropped, completely stunned. Wesley shouted, “Keep fighting!”

A few feet away, David saw one of Dragor’s soldiers jump onto his friend Toby’s back. The creature sunk his teeth deep into Toby’s neck and Toby let out a howl of pain. David made a fast sprint towards them, ignited his hand in a purple-and-white flame, and punched the minion directly in the face. He was catapulted off of Toby’s back through

the air towards the large stone in the center. He bashed against the side of the stone and dropped to the grass, dead.

“Thank you, human!” Toby shouted to his rescuer.

“You’re welcome,” David hollered, out of breath. “Stay close to me,” he said to his small friend.

“David, sir, take some water,” Toby replied, jumping a little bit out of nervous excitement. He reached down to his belt and brought up a pouch of water. David took it and was about to take a drink when a minion jumped at him from the side.

“Look out!” Toby cried. David took the water pouch and swung it behind his head. He brought it around and it struck the minion between his cheek and nose and winced at an explosion of purple fire. It acted like a small grenade and launched David, Toby, and a few others around him to the ground. The creature that had leapt at David was obliterated.

David and Toby exchanged looks of disbelief.

“Holy whoopsie moly,” Toby whimpered.

“I guess that says it,” David said, equally surprised.

“Maxy, bring David some water,” Toby said to one of the elves a few feet from them, who had also been knocked down by the blast. Maxy rolled onto this stomach, stood up, and quickly brought the pouch to David, who took a long drink of the cool refreshing water.

It gradually occurred to the boys and to the defenders of Candlewood that the battle was coming to a close. There were dozens of corpses around the field, most of which were the quickly decaying bodies of the minions. Wesley looked around and saw

that the fighting had almost completely stopped, and the last few dark creatures were running back to the forest from which they came. The elves let out a magnificent cheer. They hollered and shouted around the boys, and Wesley and David celebrated along with them. The Candlewood elves hadn't sustained any serious losses, and it was a great relief to have the battle concluded. The cheering roared even louder until a strange laugh crept from inside the dark forest. The sinister whisper chilled their bones.

"It's Dragor," came a voice from the field.

"He is coming," announced another. The king appeared on top of the large stone with his arms raised.

"Prepare yourselves, defenders of Candlewood Forest. Now is when your true character will shine, and your courage will be tested. Whatever comes out of those trees, stand up to it, and drive it away from our homes." The king turned back around and faced the loathsome woods. The lights on the ceiling above burned low, and then sputtered out. The forest sank in darkness. Silence took over the field.

"Ignite your colors," Naydeen commanded to those who could. The word spread to the whole field, which was pitch black except for the flaming hands and fists. Like purple, green and blue torches had been lit all over the ground. The king shouted, "Tilliem orithas," and raised his hands to the ceiling. A green-and-white light blast forth from his arms and lit the glow lights above.

They could see large terrible creatures slowly emerging from the woods. Massive compared to the three foot elves, the new beasts managed to tower over Wesley and David as well. They were mud-covered demons born from the swamp, with bodies bulging from muscles covered in black goop. Like moray eels, their grey tongues

squirmed from their mouths, writhing about like an animal in a cage. Long bony fingers, like blades, swayed from their sides. They calmly exited the forest and onto the field.

The creatures had once been elves, from Candlewood, but they had been transformed and demented into the dreadful living thing that they were now. From the black soil around the swamps of Dragor's lair, his evil magic spoiled the earth and ate up the once green elves. Working into their bodies like a disease, Dragor's will transformed them underground. Sprouting up through the mud, the elves birthed like trees; spawned from the dark. The foul creatures lunged forward from the swamp, not recognizing the green species that they once were.

“Shadowwalkers!!!,” the elves bellowed. The boys felt a hollow pit grow in their stomach, swallowing hope. Fear crept over them as they were facing enemies who were no longer smaller than themselves. Now the enemy was larger and stronger!

The massive shadowwalkers spat red magic out of their hands and, their mouths projected an awful crimson blaze. Fifteen of the demons pressed forward through the defending elves, slinging bodies in every direction.

“Work together!,” Dante bellowed from a distance. Wesley and David watched as a group of the elves shot flaming balls of fire up at the creature's head. Two fairies hovered above a shadowwalker and blasted it with purple-and-blue beams of light. One of the shadowwalkers behind it shot a red bolt of fire at the purple fairy and its light went out as it fell to the ground.

Wesley and David ran up to the new battle, as the first demon fell to the ground and died. The remaining beasts had quickly spread all over the clearing and individual battles broke out around them. Elves without magic were stabbing pitchforks and blades

into the feet of the great black figures. Wesley saw a small elf throw a knife at the head of one of the shadowwalkers to the right of him. He watched as Dante sent a purple blast at the knife and ignited it in a fierce purple fire as it continued on its path towards the demon. The flaming blade struck the shadowy creature in its forehead and it fell to the ground instantly still.

David went to help a group of elves attack a demon, while Wesley went towards the black forest. The last of the shadowwalkers was stepping out of the forest, as Wesley realized he was at the part of the battle that had been the worst for the Candlewood elves. The tiny bodies of a great host of elves were scattered, lifeless around him. He slowed down his run. It was a dark moment for the boy and he felt a deep sorrow in his heart for his fallen friends. He looked up at the shadowwalker coming towards him and channeled his grief into courage. A deep burning inside his chest made his hands clench into fists. His eyes squinted and his heart pounded when he felt a cool breeze on the back of his neck and saw a blue glow out of the corner of his eye.

“Think I can help you take this one down?” Flin said, hovering above his left shoulder. Wesley was overjoyed to see her. He sprinted towards the massive demon. Flin darted at the being’s head, dodging a blast of red flame as she advanced on top of him. She buzzed around its face, distracting it from Wesley’s actions below. Wesley managed to sneak up under its legs using some maneuvers that Dante had taught him the night before. He used the magic inside him to make himself invisible for a split second, and then somersaulted on the ground undetected. Flin saw that Wesley was underneath her and the monster, and she quickly dashed out—ten feet in front of the beast. The evil being looked over at her, puzzled, as Flin lifted a hand and waved good-bye.

Underneath its belly, Wesley curled both of his arms into his chest, bent down at the waist, and then shot his arms and his chest out into the air. An incredible white light blasted around him and destroyed the creature above him. Wesley turned and quickly shot another bolt of blazing white lightning over at another shadowwalker and struck it down as well. He winked at Flin, and saw her blue glow illuminate even more. Wesley turned a little more and saw David jump in the air and plunge both of his fists into the back of another shadow creature and, with an explosion of purple light, knocked the great beast to the ground.

Wesley looked back at the dark forest and saw something for which he was not prepared. Two deep red eyes burned from within the forest. His eyes squinted and he saw red-and-black flames engulfing two large hands. He could not make out the shape of the body or the outline of the face. It was Dragor and Wesley's real battle had not yet begun. He turned to face him directly when, like a bullet, a small black shadow passed above his head. Wesley's heart sank. He turned and everything slowed down. His body spun around, as his eyes followed the flaming black orb. In the background, blasts of green, purple, and red lights melted together. But no light showed brighter than Flin. Wesley looked over at her beautiful glowing body and saw her face. He saw her eyes, her tiny blue spiked hair, and small facial features. She was smiling at the young boy and, before Wesley could do anything, she was falling to the ground. Dragor's attack had extinguished her beautiful blue light and taken her life.

“AHHHH!!!! NOOOOOO!!!!,” Wesley screamed at the top of his lungs. His face and his body shook with anger. His blood felt like sewage, and his bones seemed to go hollow in his ribs. He raced over to Flin's body and prayed for one more second with

her. “Flin, NO, noo. You can’t be dead, you can’t die,” he said, kneeling down beside her body.

“I...jus—....,” her body was shaking and the light in her eyes was fading. Wesley picked her up in his hands.

“Flin,” Wesley whispered.

“I...I will miss you, Wes.” she said and her head fell to the side.

Wesley felt something rupture at the back his neck, like a well of nauseating slime released itself into his body. He rested her body back down on the ground and felt hot tears well up in his eyes. Looking up he saw David fighting alongside Dante and Naydeen. Several more shadowwalkers remained in the clearing and the battle was geared towards them. Wesley wanted nothing to do with them. His battle was elsewhere. He stood and clenched his fists at his side. He let out a deep breath through his teeth and took a step towards the Dark usurper in the forest. Taking a second step, he was suddenly halted when a familiar hand pulled at his right arm. He looked down and saw the king standing beside him.

“It is time,” the king said, with a gentle smile and a warm nod of approval. “We will hold the rest of the shadowwalkers off of you. Fight Dragor with the power in your heart, Wesley. You are a wonderful young man. It is time for you to realize it for yourself!” The king patted Wesley’s hand and turned to go back to battle the shadowwalkers.

For a moment Wesley felt calm, and, at the same time a deep determination. There was fear, anger, and a powerful hurt in his heart, as he thought of the loss of his

friend. In the same moment, he remembered the words the king spoke the night before, and listened to his heart.

“I will fight,” he whispered to himself and walked towards the Dark Lord Dragor. He got only a few steps when, unexpectedly, the ground beneath him began to rumble. It shook softly at first, but then quickly grew to a violent earthquake. Wesley crouched down to his knees and watched as the world around him shook. He looked back and saw the fighting continuing, but the same quaking was going on throughout the clearing. In a moment, the ground around him began to split open. The earth roared beneath his feet and steam shot up from the ground. A burning hot lava cracked through the earth and changed the clearing entirely. It now burned with hotness and swallowed up some of the corpses around the field. Wesley looked up after the quake and saw Dragor standing there out of the trees.

He was an awful creature. His eyes burned a deep red inside his skull. At the side of his head two large horns bent out of his temple and arched towards his eyes. Another set of smaller horns extended out from the upper part of his neck and jutted out towards his mouth. His skin was a dark, dark red and it almost seemed to be a shade of black around his eyes and his mouth. The ears on top of his head made him look like he was once an elf. They flowed with the fire that was ignited on top of his head, almost as though they were part of it. His back was also on fire, while his hands and forearms were engulfed in a blackish red flame. The skin on his body seemed to have two layers. The top layer was a smooth firm skin and, underneath, it looked as though large dragon scales were formed. Black bat-like wings arched above his back making his massive body all

the more daunting. His legs were covered in a dull black flame that rested closely on his body; it made it hard to make out whether or not he had feet, or hooves, or claws.

Wesley watched as the great monster rose up to his fullest potential and stared at the young boy. He towered over Wesley by at least five feet and it seemed like Wesley only rose up his waist. It was a small matter in Wesley's mind.

"This field will serve as your grave, little human," Dragor said to Wesley in a breath of flame.

"I am your match, Dragor. Your time of terror against the Candlewood elves is at an end. This field will be your final resting place. It has already been turned into a grave for your entire army and—I am here to make sure you join them," Wesley yelled up at him.

"Don't you want to join your little fairy friend?," He said, twisting Wesley's insides with grief. Wesley had had enough. He screamed at Dragor and brought his hands forward. A brilliant, incredible stream of white light poured from his hands and struck Dragor in his hands—but he had brought them up across his chest and managed to absorb the attack with a black shield.

Dragor launched a large flaming black ball at Wesley. He dove quickly out of the way, avoiding a stream of lava, and landing on a small patch of grass. The ball passed by him and crackled into the forest across the clearing. Wesley rolled onto his knees and spun around, shooting his arm out across his chest. A completely flat white circle zipped through the air, bursting into white flames as it got closer to Dragor's body. Dragor leaned to the side but not enough to completely dodge the spinning sphere. The side of

the white flaming blade cut into his shoulder and sent a gush of thick dark red blood out of his arm. He didn't even wince at the wound. It only seemed to make him angrier.

Dragor jumped at Wesley and brought his hands together above his head. Just before his feet were going to land on the ground he brought his hands down on top of Wesley. A great black light shot out of his fists as they swung down through the air. Wesley shouted a spell that put a white shield around him. Dragor's blow came down on top of him, crushing the spell-shield. A blast of light came from under Dragor's fist, and Wesley fell to the ground stunned and severely weakened. Dragor also seemed disoriented, but quickly brought his foot up to stomp the life out of the human below him. Just as his foot was getting raised in the air, the boy disappeared. Dragor halted his foot and brought it back down where it had been. His face twisted in confusion and he bent down to examine the ground. He saw the small outline, but couldn't make out an actual body. He moved a step closer when a disembodied fist burst into white flame. Then Wesley revealed himself and lunged up at Dragor's face. He flung his fist as hard as he could at Dragor's eyes and punched him directly in the nose. The great demon's head shot back, with white flame burning on his face as he retreated. Wesley got up and turned to back away from the Dark Lord. He was unbelievably thirsty. He stumbled towards the large stone in the center of the clearing and fell back against the large rock, exhausted. Stones seemed to have formed in his temples, rendering a stifling headache. His tongue felt like a cactus in the desert, his lips cracked and dry like a snake's shed skin. Despite his best efforts he couldn't keep his mouth closed and struggled with ragged breaths to cool his body. Dragor quickly recovered from the blow, disheartening Wesley even more.

“Wesley,” a voice said from the ground behind him. Wesley turned and saw Naydeen lying up against the rock. His small body had been crushed by one of the large shadowwalkers. “Wesley, take...take my sword. You can...you can use it to defeat Dragor. Put your power inside of it. And run it into his body,” Naydeen said, gasping for air and struggling to move the sword towards Wesley.

“Naydeen!” Wesley shouted. He jumped over a streak of lava that separated them and bent down by his side. “Naydeen, what do I do?! You didn’t train me with a sword,” he said to the fallen member of the council.

“Let your heart do the fighting, Wesley. It is the greatest weapon on this field today.” He closed his eyes and brought his hand to his chest barely breathing.

“Thank...Thank...Thank you for your help,” he said, and those were his last words.

Wesley set Naydeen’s head down to the side, at rest, and then picked up the sword and turned to face Dragor one last time.

Behind him only five more of the terrible shadowwalkers remained, and David, the king, and the other surviving inhabitants of Candlewood were fighting hard to slay them. Wesley looked up as Dragor approached, vaulting himself off the forest floor with his great black wings, then, like a bull, crashed onto the surface of the stone, cracking the rock under the weight of his hooves.

“A nice little toy you have acquired,” Dragor said, as he brought his hands together and spread them apart, revealing a large sword of his own. The handle was buried in his massive fingers and, at the top of it, a large skull covered his hand. The colossal blade stabbed through the top of the skull and continued a whole four feet from

its base. The tip had two grooves curved towards one another near the top, fanned back out, and ended in a razor-sharp point.

“This is the skull of the only other being in the world who had the white light you possess.” Dragor sneered. “It is the skull of an elf, but I’m looking forward to replacing it with the skull of a human,” The dark creature spat at Wesley.

“This ends now!,” Wesley said, concentrating all his energy into the blade of the sword. He felt the magic move through him like a current. Starting at his chest it swam up through his arms and jettisoned into the hilt and up into the metal. It glowed with an intense white light that seemed to re-construct the blade. Wesley jumped in the air and brought the sword down on top of Dragor. It was quickly met by Dragor’s own blade and they clashed in an immense eruption of light. Wesley swung the blade back around and aimed for Dragor’s belly. The demon dodged it effortlessly. They swung attacks at each other over and over. Blocking then attacking; attacking then blocking. The swords clanged and spat white and black fire at each other.

Dragor tried to thrust Wesley off the side of the boulder and into the lava that covered the ground around them. Wesley jabbed the sword up Dragor's blade, causing the creature’s hands to fly up in the air. Dashing under his legs, he rolled to the opposite side. He got to his knees, put his feet underneath him, and then darted towards Dragor’s back with his blade. Without turning around, Dragor swung the blade behind his back and deflected Wesley’s blow. He continued the swing, brought the blade above his horns, and turned to strike down at the young boy’s head. Wesley ducked his head down and laid the blade of his sword flat across his head and back, still on his knees. He felt Dragor’s blow crash onto the steel; a sharp vibration rang through his back and neck.

Bells rang in his ears. While Wesley tried to recuperate, Dragor brought his foot back and kicked the kneeling boy in the stomach sending him sprawling across the stone.

Wesley stopped himself and looked over at the great monster of the black forest. Steam was rising up all around him and the lights on the mud-ceiling had all burned out. He saw his friends continuing to fight. His breath burned his throat, and his mouth was parched for water. Wesley paused for a moment, breathing heavily over his sword. He got to his knees and sucked in air as best he could. The strike from Dragor seemed to clamp his diaphragm, prohibiting breath from getting in . He thought of Flin and how much he would miss her. He thought of Naydeen, and all the others lying dead in the grass. Dragor towered over him across the stone and victory seemed impossible. But Wesley fought on getting to his feet, despite the tears rolling down his face, he carried himself towards his foe. He saw Dragor smirk at his signs of defeat. The air around him felt like it was on fire. The smell of burning flesh came into his lungs as a hot steam—more than he could take. Wesley clutched onto his sword and wearily stumbled forward. His eyes closed he found his mom smiling at him. He thought of her laugh and of the way she never seemed to spend time focusing on the bad things in life. Something in him, switched on and, like a dam breaking, he felt his body rush with energy.

He looked up and saw Dragor coming towards him across the rock, swinging his sword around to his right shoulder, both hands gripped tightly around the handle, ready to deliver Wesley a finishing blow. Empowered by thoughts of Flin, his mother, and the king, Wesley braced the sword in against his hip with both hands, bent his knees, and pointed the tip at Dragor's chest. When the demon of the black forest began to bring his hands up to strike, Wesley planted his back foot against the rock. A small white

explosion burst under his foot and flung him forward in a blaze of white flame. Speeding forward Wesley gripped the handle firm in his hands, and thrust the white flaming sword deep into Dragor's heart.

The beast, roared in pain, dropped his sword, and looked down at the young human that had bested him. Wesley pushed the sword deeper into his chest, and twisted. Bone snapped, and Dragor's face grimaced in pain.

"A light can always push back the darkness Dragor, but darkness can never extinguish a light. Your reign here is finished," Wesley said and pushed the handle of the sword so that it knocked the dark fiend onto his back. Dragor struggled for a moment spitting up black blood. He gnashed out at Wesley biting his fangs and clawing at the rock with his nails. Life was escaping his body. His chest trembled for a second longer, then the dark ruler of the black forest let out his last breath.

Wesley dropped his hands down to his side and looked up as the glowing lights above him lit up to their fullest. At the moment of Dragor's death, the earth closed back up and silenced the lava that had flowed from its cracks. The remaining shadowwalkers lost all their power, and they were easily vanquished.

Wesley dropped to his knees before his enemy's body and looked around at the carnage that the battle for Candlewood Forest had caused. Elves, fairies, minions, and shadowwalkers lay dead or dying across the field. Their bodies now plagued the ground around the stone, though some had been lost in the earth when it split. It was a terrible sight. His heart hollowed out, as he thought of those who were dead. Those that fought. All who were his friends.

He gradually found himself among the survivors. Though a significant amount of elves had lost their lives in the battle, hundreds joined Wesley now at the rock. They huddled around to get a look at the great threat that was no more. Dragor's body was at least four times their size, and to see something that big, even though it was dead, held them back a few feet, hesitating. The king made his way over to Wesley, with David following closely behind.

"You're OK!," David said to his friend, bending down beside him to pat him on the back. "You're OK, *and* you defeated Dragor!," David added.

"My boy!," the king said, sensing a great sorrow in Wesley's heart. "You have saved our Kingdom, this forest, and our way of life! Dragor is no more, and we owe you everything!," the king said, taking off his crown. "Today I offer you my most profound gratitude," the king said bowing his head.

"I...I couldn't save her," Wesley cried with his head lowered to the ground. "I saw his black spell moving towards her and I couldn't... I couldn't do anything...to stop it...I froze up," Wesley said, his shoulders shaking. The king nodded his head and understood what was troubling the boy so much.

"Perhaps," he said, reaching into his pocket, "you can save her now." He placed Flin's tiny body before him at his knees. Wesley felt a deep stab in his heart upon seeing her body again.

"I'll need some water," Wesley asked the king.

"I do not think this is a matter of water, but rather a matter of the heart," the king offered, taking a step back. Wesley looked a little bit confused at first, but felt his body shutter with hope, to try and save Flin. The human brought his hands out from his side

and took a deep breath in. He felt unsure of what to do, but knew that something had to be done. He cupped his hands over Flin's body and closed his eyes. His mind focused on what her smile looked like the last moment that he had seen her. He remembered looking down at her when he had jumped down the black hole and been surprised to see that she had caught him. The image of them saying good-bye after his first visit to Candlewood popped into his head. He thought hard of her glow, and of her tiny voice. With all of his might, he concentrated on the tiny heart inside of Flin's still body. He squinted his eyes and felt a tiny flutter under his hands. Wesley opened his eyes and saw a faint blue light shining back against the white light under his hands.

"You're alive!" Wesley whispered in excitement.

"She's alive!," David said amazed. Whispers broke out among the crowd and a round of applause thundered around the young boy and his friend. Flin fluttered the wings behind her back and rose up to her feet. She looked around, a little confused, and rubbed her hands over her eyes. Wesley smiled down at his tiny friend. Flin looked up and saw Wesley—and her blue glow shined brighter than ever.

"I'm alive," she sniffled. "You saved me."

"I missed you too much to let you go," Wesley whispered to her.

"Well done, my boy," the king said to Wesley and smiled proudly at him.

"You did it, Wes," David said to his friend. "You saved them."

"We all did it," Wesley said looking around at everyone.

"This is the greatest gift anyone could have ever given us. To live without fear...I have hoped to give that to my people since I was a boy." Wesley looked deeply into the king's eyes and saw true appreciation. "And, David, your courage on the field today

saved many of our lives; you looked out for us like we were your own brothers and sisters. I cannot commend you enough for defending our home,” the king praised.

“What now?,” David said. “What do we do next?”

“It is probably time to get you boys home. A chapter has come to an end here in Candlewood, and a new one has begun. Wesley’s first visit to our forest began the conclusion of one, and I am glad to see that David, you have joined him in writing the beginning of this much better one. You are both certainly welcome back to our forest any time that you wish, and I would ask that you not be strangers to these woods. You will always be welcome here with a roaring fire, a fropple feast, and a king that owes you his crown. I do believe that it is time for you to get back to your own world now, and fight your own battles which we hope will be few and far between. Remember the triumph you had here today and let it shine as a light through the dark times that you see up above. There are always going to be Dragor’s, of all different shapes and sizes in the world. Listen to your heart and quiet your minds and the voices of other, and this will not be the last victory that you both shall see.” Wesley and David listened intently to the words of the king and said good-bye to Candlewood. “I assume that many of the elves would like to thank you on your way out, but I think we will let Flin guide you to the door, just like last time.”

After a number of hugs and “thanks,” that they lost count of, Wesley and David found themselves in front of the king one last time.

“It will never be too many times for me to thank you, boys. I hope you always understand whether it is five days from or now or five years, that you are heroes of an entire kingdom of people. You are my personal heroes as well,” the king said humbly.

“We will see you again. Thank you for your training,” David said to the king and bent to shake his hand.

“I will miss you,” Wesley said to his dear friend.

“You will be missed, my boy,” the king replied, reaching up to shake Wesley’s hand. Wesley looked at his hand for a moment, and then bent down and hugged the king. Crown slumped over his brow, the elvin leader smiled and laughed. They embraced each other firmly and then Wesley turned down the path towards David and Flin. The king waved at the humans with all of Candlewood Forest waving behind him, wishing the boys farewell.

They walked down the path feeling drained, emotionally and physically. They were both happy and sad to be leaving, and anxious to get home. The path led them to the door of Candlewood, and Flin, hovering above the door with tears in her eyes.

“It seems like so long ago that we came through this door. But it was only yesterday.” Flin and Wesley laughed and cried.

“That is exactly what Wesley said last time he was here,” Flin reminisced.

“Well I sure am going to miss you, little lady,” David said up to Flin.

“I will miss you too, David. You are a very brave man and it was a pleasure to get to know you,” she said and kissed him on the cheek. She flew down from his cheek and touched her hand to his throat. A warm glow came from her body and David was back to speaking English rather than Candlewood.

“I’ll wait outside,” David said to Wesley. In the tongue of the forest Wesley told Flin to open the door and she did, understanding that David would let them say their goodbyes in private. Flin put the key in the tiny hole above the door and David waved good-bye to Flin one last time. In a few seconds, the door was shut, and Wesley and Flin were alone in the forest.

“It is always hard to say good-bye,” Wesley said to his fairy friend.

“It is hard to say good-bye to friends.” She replied.

“I was so worried that you were gone forever.”

“I was,” Flin replied. “You are a keeper of the great white magic, Wesley, you have a heart that is so pure and so powerful it can reverse the grip of death. Always be true to yourself, and kind to others, and your power could grow to do even more magical things.” Flin put her head down for a moment. “The great elf that once had the white magic in this forest, was my best friend, Wesley. He was a good, kind, hard-working elf that everyone admired and loved. I see some of him in you. I would hate to lose you, as I lost my friend, because of the dark things in this world, and your world, ruining what is good. For some reason, I do not fear that that will happen with you, but I know that it can. So just be mindful of your heart and of your actions. You...you are someone I am so thankful for,” Flin said to the young boy, as tears began to roll down her face.

“I will come back and visit you soon,” Wesley said to the tiny blue fairy. It was all he could think to say, because the sorrow in his heart was so extreme. “Come find me if you need anything before then, OK?” Wesley laughed.

“I will, and maybe I will even if I don’t,” Flin said, smiling and glowing a little bit brighter through the tears. She floated down in front of him and gave him a kiss on the

forehead, then descended down to his throat and placed her hand on it. Wesley closed his eyes and didn't feel the same loss of connection with Flin that he had felt last time. He smiled at her as she backed away.

"Fenlee," Wesley said this time to Flin.

"Bye," Flin said and waved up at him. They both smiled as she put the key into the lock and the great wall of the forest dissolved in a white flash before them. Wesley saw David on the other side and he stepped through to join him. Flin flew down to the center of the opening, still inside the forest, and smiled at the boys as the wall closed up and left David and Wesley at the bottom of the dark hole alone and back in the human world.

"Well this sucks," David said, not able to see a thing.

"Hahaha, yeah reality comes back to bite you pretty quickly after you leave Candlewood," Wesley replied.

"Well you know what?," David offered, trying to find the wall and the staircase.

"What?," Wesley replied.

"There is always next time."

"There is always next time," Wesley echoed, as the boys walked up the stairs and into the light.