THE WIZARD'S GIFTS

Transcribed by The Robinaugh Children

CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE
ON THE WAY HOME • 1

CHAPTER TWO
OLIWREN'S CHARGE • 4

CHAPTER THREE
THE BOOK OF KNOWLEDGE • 10

CHAPTER FOUR
A WARRIOR'S SWORD • 15

CHAPTER FIVE
THE SECRET OF MAGIC • 19

CHAPTER SIX
A LESSON IN LEADERSHIP • 24

CHAPTER SEVEN
A YOUNG GIRLS VOICE • 32

CHAPTER EIGHT
THE DUEL OF WITS • 35

CHAPTER NINE
THE BATTLE OF COURAGE • 41

CHAPTER TEN
THE GIFT OF COMPASSION • 45

CHAPTER ELEVEN
THE STAND FOR TRUTH • 50

CHAPTER TWELVE
A WOMAN'S SONG • 55

CHAPTER THIRTEEN
THE KINGDOM OF LORD STYRON • 58

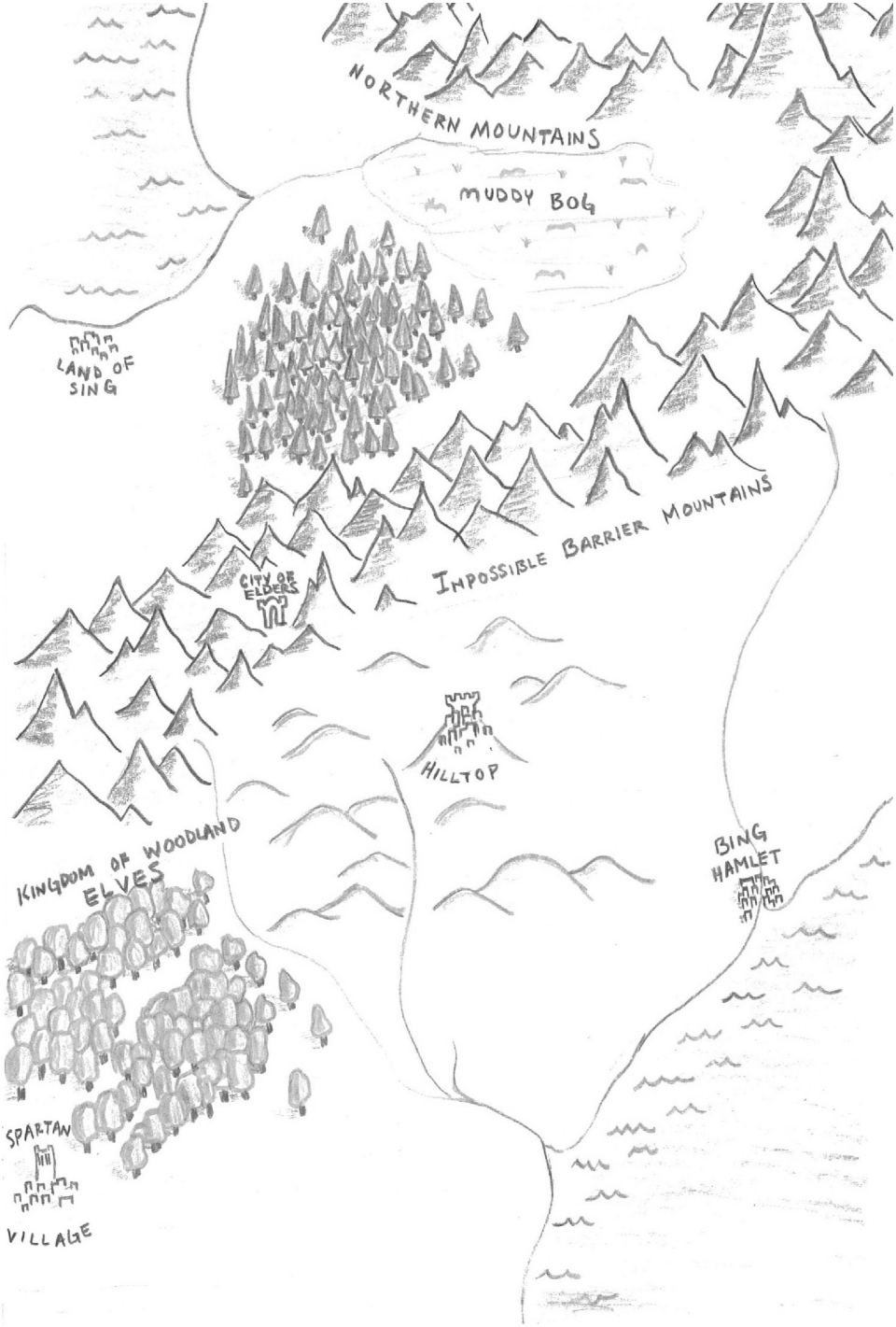
CHAPTER FOURTEEN
THE WIZARD'S GIFT • 63

FOR MICHAEL ROBINAUGH

BECAUSE FATHERHOOD IS TRULY AN ADVENTURE

Donald David Gary Daniel Laurie

MAP


NORTHERN MOUNTAINS
MUDDY BOG
LAND OF SING
CITY OF ELDERS
IMPOSSIBLE BARRIER MOUNTAINS
HILLTOP
KINGDOM OF WOODLAND ELVES
BING HAMLET
SPARTAN VILLAGE

This is a story of wizards and elves, dragons, and ebullient Irishmen.

It is a story passed through the ages in lingering glances and solemn nods, never before committed to words, as words of appropriate weight and composition had never before been found to convey its gravity.

It is story of danger and peril; a story of wisdom, determination, compassion, courage, and beauty.

Above all, it is the story of a man,
the gifts he possessed, and the gifts he gave.

CHAPTER ONE

ON THE WAY HOME

Our story begins on an unremarkable day, along an unremarkable path that led along the southern edge of forests and hills to a home remarkable only in that it was home to the young man with whom this story is concerned. On that day, the day in which our story begins, the young man walked hand in hand along the path with his young bride. They had been married seemingly moments earlier and remained awash in the freshness of their love for one another as they traveled to their new home outside the safety of the village in which they had met and fallen in love. Their love shone in the quickness of their steps and the glint of their oversized glasses and buoyed their voices as they talked of love, and family, and home.

I said before that it was an unremarkable day, and to any casual observer it was nothing more. To the young man, however, it was an entirely remarkable day; it was the birthday of his young bride. For months he had pondered what to give her and

for months he had turned away every idea that presented itself. Only weeks ago he had nearly given up his search when he found himself in a small bookstore amidst the shops and cafes along the left bank of the Red Cedar. The store had been overcrowded with old books, undusted and stacked in every corner and cranny of the shop. As he was twisting and turning to negotiate the byzantine aisles, he had abruptly found himself only inches from the probing spectacles of the shop keeper. Running his hand along his brittle white beard, the shop keeper had asked what he was looking to purchase and, with a moment's hesitation, the young man told him of his quest to find the perfect gift for his young bride, a gift that would provide her support and love and happiness until the end of time.

Without a word the aged shop keeper had eyed him closely, his head rising and falling slowly as he looked over every angle of the young man's face. With some hesitation he had walked to his counter, pulled out a small card and sketched the faintest outline of a name at the bottom: Oliwren. The shop keeper had then solemnly handed him the note and said simply "Take the path through the wood. Find him, and he will show you where your gift can be found."

Over the succeeding weeks the young man had not thought much of the strange encounter, much less the peculiar name that he had been given. However, as he walked slowly to his new home with his young bride, the old man's words seemed to echo quietly all around him. Then, with little notice, they came across a fork in the trail. To the right, the trail led down through sloping hills and a smattering of trees to the small hamlet they were to call home. To the left, the path ran north through the woods and to the mountains beyond. Surprising himself as much as her, he turned to his wife and told her there was something very important he needed to do before they arrived at their new home.

"You go on ahead," he said with a smile, "I'm going to take this trail. I should only be a minute, and will be home in plenty of time for dinner."

For a moment his young wife seemed confused, but she smiled with trust, gave him a kiss, and wished him well.

He waved back as he walked down the path into the woods, still a little surprised by his decision. As cogent and pressing as the faint sound of the old shop keeper's voice had seemed only moments before, it was now lost amidst an unsettling silence in the woods. At the beginning it had seemed like any other forest yet, as he walked, the trees seemed to grow with each passing step, pulling up deep greens and browns from the undergrowth of the forest. Massive trees grew from even larger, decaying trunks, and vines hung overhead, weighed down with thick strings of gossamer moss. Increasingly, the sun struggled to find its way through the ever larger limbs and leaves until only an exhausted and faint light managed its way to the forest floor, casting a strange sense of unreality throughout the woods. He walked for what felt like days, and was beginning to regret his spontaneity.

"Be careful where you walk, my friend," a voice called quietly from somewhere in the forest. The young man spun around, casting his eyes about in hopes of findings its source.

"Men larger than you have found themselves lost and afraid on this road."

"Who is that? Where are you?" the young man called out.

"Who...are you?" the voice replied.

CHAPTER TWO

OLIWREN'S CHARGE

The forest floor suddenly shuffled beneath the young man's feet and he found himself not inches from the face of a gaunt elderly man. His hair, unkempt, strung, yellowed, and matted like the moss overhead. His face worn and rough as the trees around them. His eyes burned a strange grayish blue that almost appeared to glow against his skin and betrayed his distinction from the forest that surrounded them.

"Who are you?" the strange old man repeated.

"I'm uhh... my name is Mike...uhh...Michael," the young man managed to stutter despite the fear throttled in his throat.

"Micah Michael," the elderly man repeated slowly, "Peculiar." He stepped backwards slowly, in a strange and stilted fashion, his feet jutting backwards in search of land, only to abruptly halt as he shifted his weight to the other foot. From a greater distance, his gaunt and haunted face was lent a greater humanity, his burning eyes troubled and saddened. Yet, it was

not altogether clear he was entirely human at all. He appeared older than anyone the young man had ever seen, his bones appeared stagnant and breakable from years of disuse, but beneath his skin protruded the long, toned musculature of a man a fraction of his apparent age.

"Why are you here Micah Michael?" he asked with dull formality.

"I'm... well, I don't know really. I think this was a mistake. I'm looking for a man named Oliwren." Micah Michael replied emptily with his eyes on the ground. His decision to take the path through the wood seemed somewhat nonsensical from this vantage point. He did not even know that this was the right woods, or who this Oliwren was. For that matter, he did not even know what gift it was that this man could provide. As he looked up, however, he saw that the old man appeared interested in his presence for the first time.

"What do you want with Oliwren?" he asked hesitantly.

"I... I don't know really. I was told he would have a gift for me... or... a gift I could buy... I don't know really."

"A gift?!" the old man replied with a deep and rising anger. "There are no gifts to be found in these woods. These woods are empty. They are bare of happiness, of joy, and of gifts." His arms and head moved in infrequent spasms of anger and moss and dirt fell from his clothes as he spoke. He was taller now, his legs beginning to straighten, and he towered over the young man.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know," Michael stammered. "I must be in the wrong place, I just..."

"This is the place. This is the path through the woods. Yet you come in greed. We do not need men in search of gifts. We need men who will help. Men who will fight." As he spoke, the anger slowly drained from his voice. He sat unsteadily against the tree, his chest heaving at the unexpected outburst. Only moments before, Michael had been ready to turn and run. Yet, as

he looked at the strange man, he could not help but feel his frustration, his exhaustion.

"I'm Michael," he said, with more confidence than before. "Who are you? Are you Oliwren?"

"I am. I was," he replied cryptically. "That was what they called me when there was life in these forests. Those days have been gone for many years."

"Why? What happened?" Michael asked. Oliwren turned and looked up at him, surprised that he did not know.

"Styron... Lord of the Northern Elves."

"Sorry... what? Of the who?"

"Styron." Oliwren said frankly, his surprise overtaking his fatigue. "Lord Styron, bane of the Woodland Elves."

"The what?!" Michael asked. Realization crept over Oliwren's face. He took a deep breath, and righted himself against the tree, managing a greater mastery of his limbs.

"I'm sorry. I did not realize," he said with more patience in his voice, and began to tell his story to Michael.

He told him of the Woodland Elves who made their home amidst the trees that lie to the south of the Impossible Barrier Mountains, the very trees they found themselves in now. He told him of their traditions and songs. He told him the story of the Elders, a counsel of wise and courageous dwarves who had fathered an age of peace and prosperity among all the dwarf and elfin clans that lasted more than a thousand years. He told him of the elfin queen, who was loved above all others, and gave life and safety to all manner of creatures who lived in the woods. As he spoke of the elfin queen, his gaze fell to the horizon and his voice came out with warmth and longing. For a moment he paused, lost in an unseen moment from the past, and when he began again his word had become cold and hardened.

It was then that he told him of Styron, an elf who felt no love for the woods, for the great peaks of the Impossible Barrier

Mountains, or for anything at all. Over many years, Styron had moved from one elfin clan to the next, searching for something, anything, to stir a single feeling in his desiccated heart. After centuries of yearning and searching, Styron had come to the Woodland Elves in search of the elfin queen. At long last he found her, she who was loved above all others, but when she spoke his heart remained as dead and dry as the day he was born. Enraged, Styron stormed from the great tree of the elfin queen and retreated to the clutches of the great Northern Plains, a barren stretch of frigid emptiness nestled amidst the Northern Mountains where nothing but blinding whiteness stretches for as far as eyes can see. From his wretched home at the foot of the Northern Mountains, Styron's anger grew and spoiled. He took long sojourns in surrounding lands, piquing the anger of the creatures of the pale bogs, fomenting fear amongst the elves who lived at the outskirts of the Impossible Barrier Mountains, and drawing hordes of the angered and bereft to his kingdom in the North. He rallied the worst in all those to whom he spoke and gathered an army who craved and consumed without thought or regard for any but themselves.

As his army grew, Styron's emptiness deepened. They named him Lord Styron, King of the Northern Elves, causing his contempt for all those who surrounded him to congeal deep within him. His ambitions to damage and harm exploded on the ill-prepared elves of the woods. He pillaged and harangued, drawing more to his cause and disposing of the remainder.

Finally, as his despair reached to the greatest depths of his mind, he kidnapped the elfin queen. For years after Styron ransomed and threatened, growing his fortune at the cost of the Woodland Elves. After years of struggle and broken promises, the elves mounted an assault to rescue their queen, but they were no match for the depravity of Styron's army and suffered innumerable deaths at the foot of the cruel and unforgiving

mountains of the north. Depleted of life and treasure, the Woodland Elves retreated. Their homes now empty of the light of the elfin queen; they slowly faded into the forest, unseen and joyless.

"Only I held to the hope of saving my queen and my people," Oliwren spoke with a heavy voice. "For centuries I have called out to all corners of the world for aid and support. I sent messages through the last remaining birds and woodland creatures who survived the treachery of Lord Styron. I pled with them to meet me here, on the path through the woods, but no one came. No one for longer than I can remember. No one. Not until now."

Michael sat stunned. The shock at hearing of elves and lords and queens had long since faded, seeming to him now a long known truth; an inevitability that he had only forgotten and now remembered clearly. Instead, he sat in shock at the horror of what he had been told, at the heartbreak of the aging elf who sat before him.

"I will help you," Michael heard himself say. "I... well, I don't know how, but I will do whatever I can." Oliwren looked up, with the faintest sign of hope in his eyes.

"I knew you would. Of course you will. I could see it in you. I knew that is why you were here," he said with hope and a lingering desperation. "To save our people, you must save our queen. She is being held in the highest room of the highest tower in the strongest fortress of the Northern Mountains. I'm afraid I have little to offer you to support you on your journey, but you will need this." Oliwren pulled a large cloak and hat from the satchel at his side.

"These will keep you shielded from the cold and emptiness of the Northern Mountains. They do not seem like much, but they will always provide you with what you need." Oliwren spoke slowly now. He seemed less present; less tangible.

"I only wish I could go with you, but I'm afraid I have long since lost the strength for such a journey." The words came out with a struggle now, only his eyes retained the intensity he had held as he told the story of Styron and the elfin queen.

"I won't let you down," Michael said, surprising himself with the confidence in his voice. He turned and looked forward down the trail, and when he looked back, Oliwren was gone. He looked around for a moment but he could find no trace of the elf save for the cloak and hat he held in his hands. Alone in the faint light of the empty woods Michael had no choice but to press forwards. He donned the heavy cloak, tucked the strange looking hat under his arm (lest anyone see him) and began his journey to save a queen for a people who seemed to have passed from memory long ago and an aged elf who he was only somewhat sure had actually existed.

CHAPTER THREE

THE BOOK OF KNOWLEDGE

The forest had grown colder and the man pulled his cloak close around him. No longer concerned about appearances, he pulled the strange hat snuggly over his head and ducked into the headstrong wind. All around him, the trees groaned and shuttered as leaves whispered across the forest floor. The air carried the faint sound of an animal's cry throughout the woods. In the distance, a rush of crows broke loudly against the quiet night, unfolding through the knotted branches of the forest. The man could not help but feel as though they were fleeing some unseen danger in the distance, a danger he was fast approaching.

As he turned down a bend in the narrow path, alert to every rustle and snap in the underbrush of the forest, he noticed the soft glow of a candle ahead. His caution pulled against his curiosity as he crept warily towards the candle which he now saw was sitting atop an awkward looking table in a small lean-to shelter that looked like it was on the verge of collapsing. At the awk-

ward looking table was an awkward looking young man wearing a hat much too big for his head and a beard much too long for his age. To the young man's left was a small chicken; to his right, a small egg. As the quiet intruder in the strangely shaped hat carefully approached, the young man's head turned slowly and deliberately between the chicken and the egg, his face growing more concerned with each oscillation. Deciding he should make his presence known, Michael leaned forward to introduce himself. He uttered no more than a syllable when the young man leapt in alarm, sending the chicken in flight and the egg toppling to the ground. With a yelp, the young man dove to the ground and caught the egg before it broke against a protruding root.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you," the apologetic intruder said very apologetically.

"No, no. No startling, merely.... who are you?" the awkward young man asked with little tact. The creases in the young man's face washed slowly away as he looked from the cradled egg in his hands to the patient face of the man in front of him.

"My name is Michael... son of Donald..." the man replied in the parlance of his environs.

At that the young man's face was alit with interest. "Michael! Son of Donald! Why, my name is Donald. What fantastic happenchance." Then, abruptly, the young man's face was extinguished of any excitement. He bent slowly and picked up the chicken, placed the egg in his pocket and began trying to right the table that had spilled over during his abrupt introduction to Michael, son of Donald.

"Here let me help you with your table," Michael offered.

"Writing desk," Donald corrected.

"Right...writing desk," Michael confirmed with some hesitation. "Is everything ok?"

CHAPTER THREE

The young man hesitated as he righted his writing desk, pulled over a chair for his visitor, placed the egg and the chicken back on the desk, and fell with frustration into his seat. "Well, you see, my name... my full name... is actually Donald the Wise."

"That's wonderful!" Michael said supportively. "That must be quite an honor."

"I suppose," Donald replied, unconvinced. "The problem is I'm not really wise at all. What's more, I'm not even sure how to become wise. I have done everything I can think of. I bought a big funny hat. I grew a long beard. But I still can't figure out which of these things came first." The young man stared for a moment at the chicken that was clucking anxiously on the writing desk, then he turned and looked up slowly with a glint of hope in his eyes. "You're a wizard. You must be wise... can you teach me?"

Michael was somewhat taken aback. He had never considered himself to be wise, much less a wizard, though he had always been a good student. He was unsure what made the young man think such a thing, perhaps it was the hat and cloak. He was beginning to tell the young man that he was no wizard when their eyes met and he saw, for the first time, how desperate the young man was for help, any help at all. He decided he had to try. With a smile of determination on his face, he swept the chicken off the writing desk, put the egg in his cloak, and began to teach.

He taught the young man about ancient civilizations that stood on mountains against impossible odds and modern wars that tore countries apart. He taught him about the paths of planets as they tore through the darkened sky and the movement of animals across the face of the earth. He taught him how to bend numbers to his will and paint vast unmarked canvasses with his words. As he listened, the young man began to sit straighter, to

laugh louder, and the troubled young creases in his face began to ease away into a look of excitement and curiosity.

"You mean you can just float there?! In the water! Without anything to support you!" the young man exclaimed with disbelief while the man smiled and nodded. "Curiouser and curiouser," the young man whispered with a grin. While Donald contemplated the possibilities of floating atop the water, Michael leaned back and put his hand in the pocket of his cloak to retrieve the egg. To his surprise, instead of the egg he felt something hard and square in his pocket. Confused, he pulled the object out and found himself staring at a book. Across its well-worn cover it read simply "The Book of All Things." How fortunate! A book filled with the answers to everything he had ever wanted to know! He was surprised he hadn't noticed the book in his pocket until now. The book would surely help him in his mission. He had no sooner considered the wonderful possibilities the book would have for him than he looked across the writing desk to see the young man, still enthralled, tossing the ideas in his head back and forth and, occasionally, colliding them into one another with great satisfaction. Without a second thought, he held the book out to his new friend.

"This is for you. When you have a question, you need only to read to find the answer," he said with a quiet smile. The young man sat, straighter now than ever, with his mouth agape.

"Thank you. I don't know how I can repay you."

"Your appreciation is more than enough."

"Well then, at least let me provide you with a meal. You must be starving." Michael realized that he was, in fact, extremely hungry, and so he agreed. The young man, with one hand grasping his new book, pulled two plates from behind the tree and began setting the writing desk.

"You eat at your desk?" Michael asked with amusement.

"Table," the young man corrected, his hat seeming to fit better than it had only hours earlier.

CHAPTER THREE

As they ate at the table, they talked about what they had learned. They discussed the courage of the men and women on the mountain and the morality of a war that pits brothers against one another. They questioned the vastness of space and the role of animals on earth. They discussed the tremendous amount of work required to build the strength to bend the largest and the smallest of numbers and the patience to build a landscape from an empty page. At times they agreed and at times they did not, but, as they sat at the table and discussed the world around them, the knowledge the young man had learned at the writing desk began to take root and grow into the first seeds of wisdom. The young man's beard had never looked more appropriate. As they finished their meal, Michael told the young man the story of Oliwren, Lord Styron, the elfin queen, and the mission with which he had been charged. To Michael's surprise, the young man insisted that he come along.

"After all," he said, "how else will I have the opportunity to repay you for the gift you have given me?"

Although concerned for the young man's safety, Michael knew he could use all the help he could get to achieve his mission so he accepted the young man's offer. And so, they each donned their cloaks and hats, put out the candle that had kept them warm these many hours, and began on their way.

After only a few steps, Michael stopped and turned once more to the young man. "I almost forgot," he said slowly, "always remember that, sometimes, the most important part of being wise is being aware of what you don't know. If you can do that, you will always be wise." The young man, all too aware of how much he didn't know, did his best to hide his skepticism and simply nodded his agreement. With that, they both turned and walked down the path towards the river and the rolling grassy hills beyond that rose to the foot of the Impossible Barrier Mountains.

CHAPTER FOUR

A WARRIOR'S SWORD

Michael, Son of Donald and Donald had not tread more than a hundred yards beyond the river when they stumbled upon what appeared to be a battle. That is to say, the scene had all the makings of a battle - combatants, weapons, screams of fury, and the clash of armor – but the longer the two travelers watched, the less there appeared to be any battling going on at all. In fact, it seemed as though they were witnessing a practical joke.

In the clearing just in front of them, a young man was continually running head-on into a group of three goblins of peculiar stature and attire. Each time the young man neared the goblins, they would scatter to the side, let the would be attacker plunge head long into whatever lay behind them, and then collapse into fits of nasally chortles and guffaws. Michael and Donald watched the young man run, dagger swinging in front of him, into a tree, then into a briar patch, and then straight into a

stream. With each failed attack, the goblins would laugh all the more.

The travelers might have laughed too, if it hadn't been for the determination the young man was showing. In an effort to end the embarrassing situation, Michael stepped forward and let out a loud yell.

"Be gone!" he bellowed and the goblins scattered, running into each other as they sought to flee the clearing. When the goblins had dispersed Michael walked forward and picked up a small bag of coins that had fallen to the ground where the goblins had been.

"Dirty goblins," huffed the young man as he picked himself up from the stream and poured the water out of his helmet. "They wouldn't steal my things if I could just defend myself, but they know I can't. I think they just enjoy watching me make a fool of myself."

"That may be, but you aren't failing for a lack of determination," replied Michael.

"Well it doesn't seem to do me any good," said the young man, looking even gloomier.

"All you need is a little more focus and discipline," said Michael. "If you can focus your determination and energy on specific goals, you will be able to do almost anything."

"Much like starting a fire by using a magnifying glass to focus the rays of the sun," said Donald, trying to contribute to the conversation.

"A wise observation Donald."

The young man looked back and forth between the two, "I don't think I get it," he said. "You want me to find a magnifying glass?"

"Not exactly," laughed Michael. "Let me explain. Determination and drive are just the first steps to accomplishing great things. You must also have the discipline to train and school

yourself. If you wish to be a great warrior and be able to defend yourself and others, you must focus your energy on preparation and training. I think it might be better if I showed you what I mean. You could join us on our journey to rescue the elfin queen. I have no doubt that we may need the skills of a warrior. You can train on the way."

The young man walked from the stream and stood facing Michael and Donald. "My name is David," he said and he thrust his hand forward. Michael took his hand and shook it heartily.

"I am Michael and this is Donald. Shall we?"

"I suppose."

The three set off on their journey and each day Michael taught David more. He and David wake up as the sun rose each morning to train. He taught David that the first step in becoming a warrior is discipline and discipline begins with getting up in the morning, even when you want to stay in bed. From there every other choice becomes easier. Michael had David perform many difficult tasks; climbing mountains, running great distances and sitting silently for hours.

On the final day of training, Michael reached into his cloak, and, much to his surprise found his hand around an object that he did not recall being there. He pulled the large object from his cloak. Despite it being wrapped in thick cloth, he realized what it was and, without hesitation, held it out for David to take.

"If you are disciplined enough to prepare yourself for battle," he said, "your preparation will not fail you in your greatest time of need." Cautiously David took the gift, and unwrapped it to find a beautiful sword.

"This is a magic sword whose power is equal to that of the preparation and discipline of the warrior that wields it. If you continue to train hard, this sword will not fail to bring you vic-

tory, but if you are lazy, the sword will become so heavy that you will not be able to use it."

"By the power of Grayskull!" gasped David, as he stared at the blade with wide eyes. When he finally opened his mouth to say "thank you," Michael had already turned and started down the trail with Donald close behind him. David ran after them and the three travelers continued their quest to rescue the elfin queen.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE SECRET OF MAGIC

The wise man in the cloak and his two young followers continued on their journey northward toward the Impossible Barrier Mountains and, much further north, the desolate mountains of Lord Styron and the Northern Elves. They had been walking for days on a small trail leading them through miles of hills and grassland. The need for a constant night post to watch for the bandits that frequently attacked travelers along the path made for very little sleep for the small group. Just as they thought they could not go on much further without a hot meal and a bed to sleep in, David spotted a path towards a small town on a hill far off in the east. Without a word, all three took an immediate turn down the path. As they walked towards the city, the tops of red brick houses slowly began to appear until they numbered in the hundreds. A small sign just outside the city gate read *Hilltop: a pretty nice place.*

CHAPTER FIVE

Donald pulled out the book that Michael had given him and looked for a reference to Hilltop. He read aloud, "Hilltop: A pretty nice place; the nicest place, in fact, for miles around. Though it is not advised to stay for too long, Hilltop is a great place for weary travelers to find a hot meal and a bed to sleep on." Seeming satisfied, they nodded to one another and continued.

The trail led them to a large wooden gate with a large tower on one side. Michael cupped his hands and yelled, "Ho there! We wish to enter!" A stout bearded guard appeared in the tower looking like he had just awoken from his afternoon nap.

"Who goes there?!" he yelled down, rubbing his eyes to get a better look at them.

"I am David, the Great Warrior."

"And I am Donald." said Donald. "Some call me wise," he added modestly.

"I am Michael, son of Donald."

The guard seemed confused by this last introduction but did not ask any more questions. He scurried down the tower ladder and disappeared behind the city wall. A moment later they heard the clicking of a lock and the doors swung open, revealing a bustling market place running through the middle of the town.

The street was full of activity. Several elegantly dressed merchants spotted Michael with his funny hat, assumed he must be a wizard, and tried to sell him small trinkets they claimed to have magic properties: lamps with magic genies, love potions, magic wands. Michael dismissed all but one. For some reason, Michael felt drawn towards the cart of an old, crippled man in ragged clothes. His cart was full of silver cloaks. No one seemed to want to buy the cloaks, being more interested in the bright silk outfits at the surrounding shops. As Michael approached the cart, the old man looked up and gave him a big toothy grin.

"For you good sir, I will not charge for one of these amazing cloaks. This one keeps you warm in the coldest of winters and cool in the hottest of deserts. I see that you will need one soon, and I trust you will know what to do with it when the time comes." Michael accepted the cloak cautiously. Strangely enough, he had become accustomed to strangers recognizing him. He packed the cloak into his bag, thanked the old man, and returned to the group.

Further down the road the group found a sign that read, "The Cobbleton Inn" and decided to get some much needed sleep. As they walked toward the Inn, they heard a shout from the town center.

"Come one, come all! Come see Gary, the greatest magician of Hilltop!"

Michael turned around to see a quickly gathering crowd. A young man, presumably Gary, the self-proclaimed greatest magician of Hilltop, stood perched upon a wooden stool. From the whispering crowd around him, Michael gathered that this must be the public debut of Gary's magic show. The whispers faded into a silence of anxious anticipation.

"Now for my first trick," he shouted, "I will make a pigeon disappear!" He promptly attempted to make a pigeon disappear magically in his hand. Much to his dismay, one of the pigeon's talons caught on Gary's sleeve, squawking loudly. When he finally freed the bird, an embarrassed Gary turned to the crowd.

"A pigeon... disappear!" he repeated, with noticeably less gusto.

The crowd hummed with disapproval, but decided to give the boy a chance to redeem himself. He placed a piece of silky red cloth over the pigeon, said a few magic words, and dramatically pulled the red cloth off his hand.

"Walla!" he cried as he revealed his trick, looking quite triumphant.

CHAPTER FIVE

"The dang pigeon is still there!" cried a towns person.

"Its Voila! Not Walla!" cried another.

Gary turned and looked at his hand. There stood the pigeon, still cooing away, apparently unaware of its failure to disappear. The crowd wasted no time in showing their dissatisfaction. Tomatoes, lettuce, and berries of various sizes were suddenly flying through the air and quickly covered Gary in every kind of food sold that day in the market right along with the boos and insults.

Michael stepped forward, pushing through the angry crowd until he reached the young street performer. "Come with me," he said above the outcry of the crowd, "and I'll teach you the secret of magic." The aspiring magician gladly took Michael's outstretched hand and ducked through the mass of Hilltopians.

"Over here!" David called from a cart in an alleyway where he and Donald stood with arms outstretched. Michael and Gary hopped on.

"Get us out of here!" Donald called to the cart driver, who immediately pulled the cart at breakneck speed through the bumpy roads of Hilltop until they reached the safety of the Inn.

As Michael negotiated a reservation at the inn, his fellow travelers waited patiently in the cart. Donald and David wasted no time telling their new friend about Michael and his quest to rescue the elfin queen. By the time Michael returned to the cart, Gary had decided to do whatever he could to help Michael on his quest.

That night Gary made arrangements to leave behind Hilltop, the town of his childhood. He desperately wanted to be a real magician and though he barely knew him, he trusted Michael with his life. After a much appreciated comfortable night's sleep, Michael, Donald, David, and Gary left Hilltop behind, and continued along the trail to the Northern Mountains. In the following weeks of traveling with the Michael, Gary often be-

came frustrated with the progress he had made. Michael taught him much about many things; still, he knew he was not yet a real magician. Gary would often ask, "When will you share with me the secret of doing magic?"

Michael would smile softly and say, "Watch me, and you will learn."

So he did. He watched his mentor as closely as he could. He saw how kind he was and how he was constantly occupied with the safety of the group. He was committed to providing for the group and meeting their various needs, even when it required him to sacrifice his own. He admired Michael's dedication and discipline. He saw that, despite the urgency to reach the elfin queen, Michael would often go out of his way to help the many strangers encountered along the road. He did so without complaint and asked for neither recompense nor recognition. Gary tried to do the things he saw Michael do, but didn't understand what it had to do with magic.

One day, after the young man had been traveling with the group for some time, Michael put his arm around him and said, "I've been watching you. I believe you are finally ready to be a real magician." Then he pulled a large silver cloak out of his bag.

"This cloak is magical," he said with a smile. "Whoever wears it is protected from the most extreme heat and the most bitter cold. I have a feeling that you will be needing it before long."

"But..." said Gary, "how can I be a real magician when you still haven't told me the secret of real magic."

Michael just smiled and the band continued north.

CHAPTER SIX

A LESSON IN LEADERSHIP

After days of travel, they came to the base of the aptly named, Impossible Barrier Mountains, with ancient roots that sunk deep into the earth. Looming ahead was the tallest mountain in the entire range. It stood proud and wise, as if the snow upon its peak were the white hairs of a long lived life. They followed the winding path along the base of the mountain and soon the path turned skyward in ever steeper switch backs. After some time, the path turned dramatically out along the cliff side, no wider than the width of two boots. They climbed higher and higher for hours on end but the stretch of mountain trail in front of them was much greater than the stretch they had climbed. Then, suddenly, the trail turned away from the cliffs and led them into a tight rock corridor. They walked and walked, and at points they had to turn sideways just to squeeze past, but they kept going in hopes finding the way through.

"Let's turn back, I know of another way around the mountain," said Donald.

Michael shook his head, "No, that would take days, this trail is the right way, I can feel it."

So they pushed on, and soon it became dark.

"There is no end!" exclaimed David as he stopped. He leaned beaten against the cliff wall for there was no room to sit.

"Shhh, do you hear that?" Everyone turned to look at Gary as he stared intently ahead, deeper into the mountain.

"What?" Donald asked, concerned.

"There is a great noise up ahead, deep in the mountain." He started to push David forward, urging them all on. They had only gone a little ways when suddenly the path opened up into a small clearing and they found themselves at a dead end.

"Great," Donald grumbled under his breath as he leaned against the wall.

"Let us camp here for tonight and then go back out in the morning," said Michael, feeling discouraged but doing his best to stay focused. Donald and David agreed and went about unpacking, but Gary was still staring intently at the rock wall in front of them. He walked forward slowly and placed his hand upon a small crack on the great wall.

They heard a distant rumble and the sound of grinding gears. And then the great rock wall cracked straight down the middle. The rumbling continued as the wall slowly drew apart, revealing a lighted cave path that led down deep into the darkness.

"By Merlin's beard, an ancient dwarven gate," cried out Donald as he jumped to his feet and rushed to the new corridor to examine the rocks. "This must be the rear entrance to a great dwarf city. We will find hot food and a good bed here." He started to walk into the mountain when Gary grabbed his shoulder.

CHAPTER SIX

"Shhh, do you hear it now?" They all strained to listen. From deep within they heard the distant clash of metal on metal, the screams of war, and the bellowing of a great beast. The three younger travelers stepped back from the lighted cave; Michael fixed his eyes on them.

"Where are you going? There is a great battle ahead and it sounds as if our hot meal and good beds are in trouble." And with that he turned and started to run down the corridor deep into the mountain. The three companions looked at each other, and quickly followed their leader into the violent scene awaiting them.

They ran and ran until the path opened into a great cavern of unspeakable size at the heart of the mountain. The roof of the cavern seemed as immense as the sky itself, and glowed a ghastly orange from a thousand fires below. As they looked down, they saw the source of the horrible sounds they had heard from atop the mountain. A great dragon flew with thundering strength through the cavern, waging a loud and terrible war against a small army of dwarves. Though they fought with courage and skill, the dragon was too powerful and his supporters too many. With his silver tongue and great intelligence he had led many of the dwarves to his side. He promised them wealth and riches and power, and they had turned, one by one, on their own city.

Those who loved freedom more than gold and had stood against the dragon were now forced to fight their own brothers to protect their beloved city, known to the dwarves as ород старейшиней, *The City of Elders*. The City of Elders was the greatest of all dwarven cities, home to the great knowledge and vast wealth of a thousand years. The dwarves had been fighting to protect it from the dragon for nearly as long. The battle had started amidst the mountaintops, but over time the dragon had

gained ground and fought his way into the city itself. The once great and powerful city was now engulfed in flames.

"Halt! Who goes there?" boomed a loud young voice.

"We are allies; here to fight whatever ails the protectors of this city," declared Michael, speaking with a dramatic tone that he hoped sounded convincing.

Suddenly five war clad dwarves and one young man appeared from holes in the wall, their spears trained on the travelers. "And what can you do against Wisp, the Black Dragon?" asked the young man.

"We can do much to help. What is your name?"

"Daniel. Captain of the City of Guard."

"You don't look like a dwarf," said Donald.

"He fights with the strength of ten," yelled one of the war-clad dwarf.

"These are my people. I will fight and die with them," Daniel replied.

"Well then, Daniel, what is so great about this Wisp?" asked Michael.

"He twists the minds of men and dwarves to fight for him and to destroy all that is great about their people. He is large and powerful, and his great fire reaches far." The other dwarves shivered at the mention of the dragon's fire.

Michael thought for a while. "Well Daniel, take me to your General, and I will show you what I will do."

Daniel hesitated, and then reluctantly agreed to do so. "We have few options remaining; your ideas can do no harm," he said with some resignation as he looked across to the city in flames.

Daniel turned to his men and ordered them to hold their ground as he guided Michael and his companions. He led them through the area of the city still controlled by the protectors. Great fires lit the whole city as they ran. "Wisp's battle tac-

tic is to fly over us, burning everything; then his armies follow behind sacking and killing," he yelled as they ran.

In little time, Daniel had led them right to the General's tent, and ushered them in. "What is this? Why have you abandoned your post Daniel?" the General asked.

"Sir, here is a wise man and his companions. They wish to help us."

"Fool! How can they help us now? It is these stupid decisions of yours that cause you to be in charge of the rear guard and not out on the battlefield like a real leader."

Daniel cast his eyes down at the ground, unable to look at the General anymore. "Sir," Michael stepped forward, "I have a plan to defeat Wisp and his armies, but you must listen to me."

The General stared at him in disbelief, "The enemy needs but to strike us once more and we are defeated. I will hear your plan, but if it fails, know that you will die along side us tonight." Michael took a deep breath, and shared his plan. With little sign of hope, the General agreed.

However, as Michael called down commands to the Order of Protectors, the strongest of the dwarf warriors, to make preparations, the army did not move. They had forsaken all hope and had begun to fall back in retreat. Alarmed, Daniel ran to the front of the Order. Although he was merely captain of the rear guard, he believed in Michael and his plan and was determined to give it every chance to succeed. There was a strength he saw in Michael that calmed his heart despite the chaos and brutality around them and instilled in him a self-confidence he could not have mustered alone. Armed with this confidence, he called out to the Protectors shouting to them that they must stand tall for this one last great battle. They must give this man a chance to save their great city.

The Order responded and followed Michael's instructions with haste. Just as preparations were complete, the great dragon

took flight at the head of his armies. He flew straight at the Protectors fortifications, blowing a great pillar of fire that spread flames over all that remained of the city. Wisp then turned back to watch and revel as his armies prepared to lay waste to what little remained of the once proud city.

Yet, as his armies rushed in to fight the last of the city's protectors, what they found was a battle-ready army. Michael had protected the soldiers from Wisp's fire with a strange foul smelling fire-repellent liquid, a recipe from Donald's book. Daniel, Michael, and his companions had coated the entire city and every remaining Protector with the retardant and the dragon's fire had not so much as singed a single building or lay waste to a single dwarf. The Protectors charged, gaining ground on the enemy. Wisp's golden eyes tightened with disbelief. No matter how much fire he threw down on the approaching band of dwarves, they were never touched. He watched in futility from above as the resurgent Protectors destroyed his army. As they charged, pressing forward into the enemy ranks, Daniel and Michael worked together, shouting orders to the Protectors and pushing them onward.

The surge against Wisp and his armies lasted for days. The smoke and ash from a thousand fires mixed with condensing moisture on the roof of the massive cave, and a dark and dusty rain began to fall over the army. As the fighting waged on, Daniel stepped behind the wreckage of a large building and looked towards Michael. Over the past several days he had watched Michael intently as he led the Protectors in battle. He seemed to know the army's strengths and weaknesses; always one step ahead of Wisp and his desperate plans. Michael recognized when to give ground; and when working relentlessly was needed, he was the first to take action. He had a keen instinct of when to show support and when to push on. He had shown Daniel how to speak to many with clarity and force, and also

how to sit with only one listening with care and empathy. He advised Daniel to always keep his options open, to never commit to a move that limited what he could do next. Daniel had watched and learned these lessons intently. Standing strong and tall, he stepped out from behind the building, ready to lead a final surge through the rain and muddied ground beneath the city.

Yet as he prepared to call out to his fellow soldiers, the cries of war had settled to a din of rustling armor. The rain from above had extinguished the raging fires throughout the city, and there was little light by which to see what lie ahead. As Daniel ran forward to see what was going on, an anguished cry came from overhead. He turned and looked up to see Wisp fly out of the cave and over the city, his wails of defeat echoing throughout the enormous cavern. Wisp had been defeated; the few soldiers that remained in his defense had surrendered. A great cry went up amongst the Protectors, cheering for their victory and for the men that had led them in their fight.

That night there was a great celebration, hot meals, and warm beds. The next day, Michael and his fellow travelers were refreshed and ready to continue. As they approached the great gate that led out of the cave, Daniel ran to catch them.

"Wait, wait! I wish to join you on your journey. You have taught me how to lead, how to persevere even when all is lost, and I wish to learn more from you." Michael looked down at the young man who had fought so bravely alongside the dwarves.

"Do you have a proper weapon for what lies ahead?" he asked the young man.

"I do not, for I am not truly of the Order of Protectors and have not earned an axe," Daniel confessed with shame in his eyes.

Michael paused, slowly reached into his cloak, felt the hilt of a heavy object, and pulled out an axe of such power and beauty that it would have shamed even highest ranking member of the Order of the Protectors.

"Then you will need this," Michael said as he offered Daniel the axe. "We would be honored to have you. Although you have much to learn, you have already learned the most important thing about fighting for your beliefs: to always persevere, even in the darkest of hours." Michael smiled at him, and somehow knew that armed with this knowledge (and his axe) Daniel would be ready to defend even the most forsaken of cities.

"Come on," Michael said to his fellow travelers. "We must continue on our journey now."

Over the next several days, they made their way down the steep sides of the Impossible Barrier Mountains and away from the City of Elders. Their legs and minds were worn from the battle, days of travel, and the thought of what may lie ahead. As they finally found their way to flat ground, their spirits lifted and they began to make their way north along the western edge of the forest. From the western horizon, as the sun began to set on another day, they heard the soft and beautiful sound of singing voices drift over the hills, already telling the story of Daniel, Captain of the Guard, and his bravery in defending the City of Elders.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A YOUNG GIRL'S VOICE

As they walked onward the next day, they began to bear east through the dense forest that would lead them to the Northern Mountains. They had not gone far when they were startled by the soft patter of small feet and the quiet sound of a hoarse voice calling through the thick tangle of trees. Michael cupped his hand to his ear and struggled to pinpoint the origin of the tired noise. He walked a few feet, turned, and there before him was a young girl. Her auburn hair tangled with leaves and twigs, her face creased with anxiety.

"What's the matter, young one?" he called softly to the girl.

She looked up, startled, then continued to say softly, "I've lost my voice sir." She frowned. "I can't seem to find it anywhere." A tear threatened to fall from the corner of her eye.

Sympathetic, Michael strode towards her, and took her hand. "Crying won't help anything," he said kindly. "I can help you find your voice, if you like." He motioned to his fellow trav-

elers to rest their legs, which they did, gratefully. "But first things first. Where did you come from? What's your name? And how did you lose your voice? Please, tell us your whole story."

"Well," the girl started with sniffle, "my name is Laurelin. I was adopted by a group of traveling wood elves after my village was attacked by Lord Styron when I was only a baby. They raised me as one of their own and taught me their songs. They have songs for everything you know. Songs for the trees. Songs for the flowers. Songs for every woodland creature. I used to know them all. But one by one the wood elves have either turned to the cause of Lord Styron and given up the songs, or retreated deep into the woods to mourn in solitude. Now I am all alone and without the wood elves to help me with my songs and I have lost my voice. Now I'm left to search among the trees and flowers of this forest to find it."

"That is a sad tale indeed young Laurelin," said Michael and the others nodded in agreement. At Michael's beckoning the group of travelers began moving through the forest in search of the little girl's lost voice.

Smiling hesitantly, Laurelin turned and followed as he led her through the deep forest. As they searched, Michael taught the girl to be strong and independent. He showed her that she didn't need to follow the crowd, and could shine all on her own. She listened as he explained that she could do anything she wanted to do. She just had to practice and be willing to learn.

After hours of tireless searching, the two sat down on a large rock. Michael was weary from his long journey, but content. As he looked at the young girl next to him, he noticed she was the former, but not the latter.

"What is it?" he asked gently.

"I still haven't found my voice, sir. I don't think I ever will." She let her head fall into her hands.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Michael turned to her and put his hand on her shoulder. "Let me tell you something," he began. "You can't find your voice by searching through forests for hours. You're not going to find it by scavenging oceans. The only place you can find your voice is within yourself."

Michael could see that she was still unsure. With some confidence now, he reached into his cloak, and pulled out a small bottle. He handed it to the young girl. She held the crystal container of liquid in her hand, and studied it. Finally she looked up at him questioningly.

"Whenever you feel like you've lost your voice," he explained with a smile, "just drink this, and you'll find it."

"Thank you!"

"You're very welcome, but I'm afraid it is time for me to go," he said with great regret. "There are people who need me, and I have to push onward."

"Where? What people?" she asked with some alarm, not wanting him to go. Michael told her the story of Oliwren, Lord Styron, and the elfin queen trapped high on the tallest peak of the great Northern Mountains.

"Well then, I will go with you!" she cried. More than with any of the other travelers, Michael hesitated, not wanting to put the young girl in any danger. As he looked into her eyes, however, he saw her strength and knew that she, as well as anyone, would be ready for what lie ahead.

"Alright," Michael finally said. "Well let's get going. There is much to be done." He called out to Donald, David, Gary, and Daniel, and they all began walking east through the tangled limbs of the forest that grew ever thicker around them.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE DUEL OF WITS

The wayward travelers that Michael had collected along the path now appeared to be a fledgling band as they walked through the woods, sharing what they had learned with one another. They talked excitedly about their new skills and their plans for the future. Michael walked a step or two behind his fellow travelers, beginning to feel the weight of the challenges that lie beyond the woods. A chill wind came stiffly through the trees from the west, carrying time quickly with it in a rush of leaves and urging the young band of travelers further toward the eastern edge of the forest. Then, somewhat abruptly, the trees began to thin and the edge of the forest became visible only a stone's throw ahead. One by one, the band of travelers fell silent as they looked to the dark glen ahead. Dusk had crept over the sky in front of them, and the sun remained unseen through the trees at their backs, casting the land in an uncomfortable light. The pace of the five young travelers slacked until they fell even

with Michael, who stepped in front of the group to face whatever dangers may come.

And, indeed, danger did come, not a moment later, in the form of a diminutive balding Irishman. He did not address himself as such, nor did he have the usual trappings that betray such an ethnic background. It was told in the way he walked, the way his herringbone hat hung on his head, and the way his stout pipe sat in his mouth. It required no conversation for all to be aware, and aware of the other's awareness, that they now stood at the table of an Irishman who sat at the edge of an unsettling path that disappeared through the hills.

"Well hello," Michael said, with all the kindness he had greeted the others he had stumbled upon while on the trail. "What finds you here on the edge of this unsettling path through the hills?"

"Indeed," the Irishman said, pulling the air through his pipe and letting the smoke curl across his lips and into the dimmed air.

"Yes... indeed," Michael offered, somewhat puzzled. "Well, we're heading down this path as the passage to the north is blocked by a river too wide for men to cross, so we're heading east. You're welcome to..."

"I'm afraid not," the Irishman said, his eyes moving slowly across the members of the small party in front of him.

"I see," Michael said, finding no wit in the terse remarks. "Perhaps you could explain yourself."

"You are but a stone's throw from the rolling green hills that are my home. To the west of my land lies the forest, and all the unfortunate miscreants who stumble from its knotted limbs. Beyond my land to the east lies the Pale Marsh, the Muddy Bog, the unholiest of wetlands, lands that belong to far worse than mere miscreants. I, myself, have no time for either miscre-

ants or worse, nor inclination to have them traipsing around my land. So turn back, your journey ends here."

"Who are you to stop us?" David challenged with a step forward, his confidence stoked by the unjust denial.

"You're a brave little knacker, aren't ya," the stout Irishman said with a grin. "I, my friend, am the only one who knows the way across this land. Do not be fooled. These hills are treacherous. They do not appear on any map made by man, dwarf, elf, or beast, for no such creature who dared to chart them has found his way out. Only a man with the wits of an Irishman can hope to navigate these hills, for the path is tortuous and tangled. A man of lesser intellect than I would find himself lost in the hills in only moments, and, as every man is of lesser intellect than I, I'm afraid no one but me has ever found his way through alive."

"I... am... no... man," Laurelin offered with much gravity.

"Aye, I'll clarify, but only because you remind me of a Leprechaun I once knew. No man *or lass,* can match my intellect save they are as Irish as I."

"Well then," Michael said, "we challenge you to a match of intellect."

"Blarney!" the Irishman howled. "And which one of you thinks he can sit at a table of knowledge and match sticks with me. Without a word, the five young travelers stepped behind Michael and pushed him forward. With a confident smile, he began to roll up his sleeves, but then he stopped. He thought for a moment, turned, and knelt down beside Donald.

"I think it's time you show us what you know," Michael said with a warm smile that weakened the protest in Donald's eyes. Donald took a deep breath, held his book close, and stepped toward the table.

"Him? This culchie little Englishman. Well... it'll be a soft old day in Dublin before I lose to an English boy. Take the

weight off your legs boy. A riddle for you, and one after your own tongue I'd say, just to give you a sporting chance," the Irishman said, bursting with hubris. "After your own tongue, perhaps, but told in mine for there never was a riddle worth hearing that wasn't begun with a Limerick."

"A limerick," Donald thought to himself as he sat down, "I've heard of those.... I'm off to a good start." He watched as the Irishman drew on his pipe, and then began.

"There once was a man from the coast,
who wouldn't chew chewier than toast.
Father Chaucer would scold,
while the food grew mold,
when he heard the man's stubborn boast."

"The question to you, my tawdry little friend: what was the man's stubborn boast?" With that the Irishman leaned back in his chair with satisfaction.

Donald sat dazed for a moment, but regained his thoughts, took a deep breath, and got to work. He pulled out his book and began poring over its pages. He pulled out a pen and began taking notes at a furious pace. Shards of assorted facts and figures poured off the table while he worked, intent on repaying Michael for everything he had given by helping him on his journey. Dates and obscure literary figures stumbled by and numbers of all manner and sizes were worked and reworked, crunched and uncrunched. This hectic scene continued for an hour, and then four. The night had long since cast its darkness over the group, lulling them to sleep at the base of the few trees that stood nearby. Even the Irishman dozed in his chair, taking care to leave a smile of confidence on his face as he slept. And then, after more than eight hours had gone by and the sun stood fully above the horizon, Donald let out a sigh. He took a deep breath, looked at the smug Irishman who was slowly eating away at an inedible looking breakfast, and put down his book.

"I don't know," Donald said, and said with a face less troubled than it had been in days. It had taken all night for his thoughts to slow enough for Michael's words to come back to him. Watching the Irishman eat his tepid meal, he remembered that sometimes the wisest thing to do, was recognize what you don't know.

Yet, for every bit as comfortable as Donald appeared as he uttered those words, the Irishman looked equally dismayed. "I don't gnow!" he stammered. "I... don't GNOW! Jeanie Mac! How could you possibly have figured that out! You don't even look the least bit Irish! I don't gnow... by gads, I tell you."

The Irishman stopped. "Well sir, like all Irishman, I am a man of my word. You and your silly bunch of vagrants may cross my land, but you better hope your wits don't find their end at this table. It is an unkind path, you'll need every good thought in your head to find your way through and that is just where your troubles begin. The pale marsh holds all manner of creatures, many worse than the cruelest of banshees. Beyond the pale are dangers I dare not utter here."

With that, he turned, and walked to the south along the edge of the woods. For a moment, the band of travelers watched him walk but then decided there was no time to waste. They began down the path, with Donald out in front performing elaborate equations involving the angles of sunlight every few dozen yards to keep them on course.

As he navigated the group through the hills, he turned to Michael and said, "I didn't know the answer. I'm still not very sure what happened. What if it was just a fluke? What if I'm not wise enough to get us through these hills?"

"You worked as hard as you could to learn, and then, when you couldn't find the answer, you had the courage to admit that you didn't know. I can't imagine anything wiser," Michael said with a smile.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Donald looked up and smiled, and for the first time, his hat seemed to fit just right. For the first time, he felt a little bit wise, if only just a little. After many hours of strenuous hiking and unwieldy trails, they had navigated the treacherous hills. However, there was no opportunity for excitement or respite. As they walked over the final hill, they found themselves staring at the edge of a cruel and gnarled forest that gave way to the bogs at the southern foot of the Northern Mountains.

CHAPTER NINE

THE BATTLE OF COURAGE

Night had come quickly and almost all remaining light was shut out by the long branches of enormous yellowed trees that now towered above them, gaunt and sickly in their dominance of the sky. A sky soaked in the dark and matted orange light reflected up from the forsaken bogs beneath their feat. Michael pulled a torch from his rucksack and lit the end before proceeding. As the group moved deeper into the trees the ground became softer underneath their feet. Soon they could hear the slurp of mud with each step they took. Then, no more than ten feet later, Michael's foot landed with a splash in a swamp. Laurelin let out a squeak at the sudden break in silence and the rest of the group groaned.

"We have no choice," said Michael resolutely. "We must continue to move forward."

The travelers moved forward more slowly now, picking their steps carefully to avoid wading through the knee-deep water. They jumped from one patch of earth to another and

walked along fallen trees whenever possible. Soon they came to a large dry spot and sat down to rest. As Gary moved forward to make a fire, Daniel began to wander at the edge of the torch light in search of any partially dry wood that he could find. He reached down to pick up a nearby branch, but just as his fingers touched the firewood, he heard a twig snap a few feet in front of him. He stood up again slowly looking into the darkness, but couldn't see more than a couple feet ahead. He was staring into a black fog. Then, as if they had materialized in mid air, two large eyes appeared directly in front of him. The eyes flickered like torch lights, drawing Daniel towards them.

When he finally found the strength to break free of the gaze he began to back away from the eyes and toward the group. He continued to walk backward until he stumbled and fell over the wood that Gary was piling up for a fire. Gary was about to give him a sharp kick for knocking over his kindling when he noticed the look of fear in Daniel's eyes. He turned to look in the same direction as Daniel, but could see only darkness.

By now everyone was staring hard at the spot where Daniel had been standing before making his strange retreat. Then, as if waiting for the most dramatic moment to enter, two hairy legs came into the torchlight. Then two more emerged, followed by a head with large pincers, then four more legs and a large round body. It was the largest spider any of them had ever seen. Donald, David, Daniel, Gary, and Laurelin all crowded behind Michael.

"I think," said Michael, "that it is time for our warrior to show us how much he has trained and prepared himself for battle."

David was not so sure of this, but stepped out from behind Michael and took one shaky step forward. The spider was looking directly at him and David found it hard to think of anything but those pincers.

"Just think of what that could do to my arm...or my head!" he thought.

Then the warrior thought of the sword he had been given and all the time he had spent training. He pulled his sword from its sheath and moved forward trusting in his hard work and determination to protect his companions. The sword was light and rested easily in his hands. David approached the spider with confidence, knowing that the magic of the sword would lead him to victory.

The spider charged, but David side-stepped the attack and swung. The blade hit one of the spider's legs and left a deep gash. Staggering in pain, the spider wheeled about and then reared itself up on its back four legs. It rose almost ten feet above David, but he stood his ground. After what seemed like a full minute, the spider came crashing back to the ground towards him. David didn't move and raised his sword as the spider lowered onto him. The metal narrowly missed the spider's head, but sliced cleanly through one of the large pincers rendering it useless.

Feeling confident, David made his move, but as he tried to roll out from underneath the spider, one of the many legs knocked him sideways into a nearby tree. He struck the tree hard and fell into the swamp at the edge of the mound of earth where they had been building their fire. David stood up quickly to meet his foe, but when he went to raise his sword he realized it had been knocked from his hand. He searched the water frantically as the spider approached, but grasped only mud.

David's mind was racing. He could not defeat the spider without his magic sword. Suddenly his mind was filled with the laughter of goblins and feelings of helplessness crept into his heart. His confidence began to ebb as the spider approached. Then, just as the spider lunged forward to strike, David's hand grasped something. He raised his arm straight toward the spi-

der's mouth. The object he had grabbed sunk deep into the roof of the spider's mouth and the one good pincer stopped just short of David's face. The spider let out a sound that none of the travelers had ever heard as it staggered backward. With a great splash, the creature fell sideways into the swamp.

David stared at the tree branch sticking out of the spider's mouth. He couldn't believe it. He had slain the spider without his magic sword. He had done it with nothing more than a piece of wood. Lost in his thoughts and general amazement, David didn't even notice the others approaching him. A hand on David's shoulder brought him back to reality.

"Branch...spider...sword..." stammered David, unable to put his thoughts into words.

"There was never anything magic about the sword I gave you," said Michael. "All you needed to kill that spider was your determination and training. You did it on your own." Michael squeezed David's shoulder, smiled down at him, and then turned back toward the Northern Mountains.

As David turned to follow, his mouth remained agape with shock at this revelation.

"Have I really come so far since those days of being tormented by bully goblins?" David wondered aloud.

"Bully goblins!" Laurelin interjected with urgency. "I hate bully goblins. Let me tell you a story about bully goblins..." As they continued down the path David half-listened as Laurelin walked along side him telling one story after another about bully goblins, green goblins, green bulls, bullish merchants, and many other things. He looked up ahead at Michael, as he forged the trail through the bog, and thought about the sword, and about the real gift he had been given. Slowly, he began to walk a little taller and, with each step, steeled himself in preparation for the challenges that lie ahead.

CHAPTER TEN

THE GIFT OF COMPASSION

The six travelers trudged on through the murky swamplands. Low hanging clouds and high reaching trees covered them in a sickly yellow light and the mud only seemed to grow deeper beneath their feet. At times one of them would fall through a tenuous foothold, and the others would have to dive forward to prevent them from sinking into the murk. All around them, the cries of death and dying carried through the air. Finally, they reached the northern edge of the muddy bogs and saw the sun for the first time in weeks, glimmering blindingly off the snow-peaked Northern Mountains. They had finally reached the border of the Lord Styron's wretched kingdom, in the very mountains where the elfin queen was being held captive. They were nearing the end of their journey, though the group could sense many more dangers in their future.

Happy to be out of the dark, damp swamp, Donald led the travelers up to a narrow pass through mountains, the only path

that could lead them to the fortress where the elfin queen remained a prisoner. As they walked through the pass, the walls narrowed and grew taller. Snow and wind howled against them, as it whipped between the sheer mountain cliffs. From high above, they could see the faint orange glow from the eyes of the Northern Elves piercing through. They marched on, their hands growing stiff and raw with each passing hour. They drew their cloaks and hoods tighter and tighter around them, but the wind and snow only grew stronger. Every few moments, cascades of ice and snow would crash down around them, pushed down the slopes by the wind, and by violent movements within the mountain, and by the Northern Elves, eager to please their master.

They had not gone even a fraction of the way through the mountain when each traveler began to wonder, in the quietness of their own thoughts, whether any of them would return from this journey. Then, suddenly, an old man appeared in front of them, hunched over and grinning wildly. His clothes hung off his body like a crow molting its feathers. Michael thought he recognized the man, but could not remember from where.

"I am the keeper of this pass," he cackled. "I guard the way to the great mountains of the north at the charge of the King of the Northern Elves. Do not let yourselves believe that your quest has gone unnoticed. Only the most valiant of men can make it out of these wretched mountains alive. If you wish to pass through here, you must first pass my test!"

"And what pass would that be, my good sir?" asked Michael calmly, more surprised at how accustomed he had become to such events than the actual appearance of the old man.

"You must choose one member of your group. He must climb this path to my right, up the mountain, to the highest peak and the coldest place in all of the land, and retrieve from the top a blue stone of incomparable value and beauty. If he

fails, this path through the mountains will be closed to you forever. Be warned, only one who knows true magic can accomplish such a deadly task." At this, the man's face twisted into shrieking laughter.

Gary, who had been quietly listening from the back of the group, reached into his bag and felt the cloak Michael had given him. Even as the winds and snow had burned and blackened his skin in the bitter cold of the mountain pass, he had not donned the cloak, convinced that he was not worth the gift he had been given, for he had not yet learned the secret of real magic. As he heard the challenge from the old man, however, something stirred inside him. He stepped forward to the front of the group.

"I will go," he said to Michael and to the old man.

Michael nodded grimly. He looked into the eyes of the determined young man whom he had mentored for this long journey. Though he wanted more than anything to spare the young man and take on the task himself, Michael knew that he must let Gary make this journey alone.

The path up the mountain was steep and grew steeper as he climbed ever higher. After several hours, Michael and the rest of the travelers had all but disappeared from sight, only specks in the frozen distance. Gary was alone, moving up the tortured incline, gripped by fear for his life as he edged along cliff sides and leapt across large gorges of such depth that the bottom could not be seen. The temperature dropped rapidly as he climbed so that only the cloak kept the young magician from certain death. It was too cold for trees, for life, for snow. Even the Northern Elves, their hearts hardened by years of misery amidst the peaks of the Northern Mountains, did not dare approach the heights Gary found himself at as he climbed through the night. As he neared the top of the mountain, climbing as

fast as he could, Gary heard something along the side of the path.

"Help," came a soft cry from the side of the trail. Curled up in the snow shivering was an old man, his eyes pleading. "Please sir, I am so cold. I do not think I will last much longer."

Gary looked towards the summit. It was not more than an hour's climb and he would be at the top. He took a step forward towards the top, towards his goal, towards the success of the journey he had committed himself to for the sake of the man who had taught him about magic. Then he paused. He thought of the lessons he had learned. Slowly, his eyes fell from the peak of mountain and rested on the old man at the side of the trail. He took off his cloak, wrapped the man in its warmth, and carried him down the mountain. It was night now, but the moon shone brightly off the endless snow, dimly lighting the narrow path. He struggled under the weight of the old man, but found strength in the memory of Michael and his fellow travelers and the example they had set. As the sun rose, he arrived at the bottom where his comrades awaited, huddled against the side of the mountain, anxiously awaiting his return. He did not look up as he approached his fellow travelers.

"I am sorry Michael," he said, still holding the old man in his arms. "I have failed the test. I did not reach the top. Even with the magic cloak you gave me, I did not succeed."

Michael only smiled.

"What do you have there?" he asked pointing to Gary's outstretched arms.

"This man was huddled near the top of the..." he began, but as he spoke he realized that he only held the magic cloak in his arms. Confused, he raised the cloak up with his right hand and a small blue stone fell to the ground from the empty cloak. Laurelin bent down and picked up the stone.

"This is the most beautiful and precious stone I have ever seen," she said in awe.

Behind him, the old man who guarded the pass appeared again, as if from nowhere, cackling and carrying on to the bemusement of the travelers.

"You've passed the test," he said. "You may pass! And send my greetings to that man who holds me captive here in this pass, Lord Styron!" He winked dramatically at Michael and promptly vanished into the night.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE STAND FOR TRUTH

Michael and his companions continued through the hills. David led the group through the pass, head held high while Donald, Daniel and Laurelin followed closely behind. At the rear of the group, Michael walked with his arm around Gary's shoulder, never more proud. Though he was still a little confused, Gary had now donned the magic cloak that Michael had given him and he wore it comfortably and without any doubt.

"I can see the Plains of Desolation!" David shouted from the front of the group. "We have conquered the pass through the Northern Mountains! The Kingdom of Lord Styron is not far ahead!"

One by one they emerged from the mountain pass into the great frost-bitten plain that sat ominously in the middle of the Northern Mountains. To the north and east, flat plains of ice and snow stretched endlessly, before rising in the unseen distance into a new stretch of mountains. To the west, lie the

mountains that held the fortress where the elfin queen was imprisoned. They needed only to move north across the western edge of the barren plain and they would arrive to confront the fallen elves that called the fortress their home, and the master of these lands, Lord Styron.

"What was that?!" Laurelin asked with alarm from the middle of the group as they opened out into the plain. She stood paralyzed with fear, pointing to the open air where she had seen something only moments earlier. Then it returned, black and repugnant against the icy northern sky, its golden eyes bearing down on them.

"The beast Wisp has followed us!" Daniel yelled. He quickly drew his axe in preparation to face the beast.

"Daniel! Wait! You can't hope to defeat him by courage alone," counseled Michael, "you must think this through. You must use what I have taught you."

Daniel nodded in agreement. Then he started to take in his surroundings. The plains were flat but at the edge of the mountains were great rocks that could be used for cover. He saw what he must do. He quickly shouted out commands to his companions. Trusting Daniel's judgment, they ran back and forth, pulling materials from their sacks and shouting to one another while a terrible rumbling grew louder overhead and the thumping of the beast's powerful wings could be heard all around them.

Abruptly, the dragon was above them. Michael was standing out in the open, awaiting the great beast. The dragon shot a pillar of flame directly towards him. Laurelin and Donald screamed in fright. Yet, as before in the City of Elders, the fire did no harm to Michael. Wisp, who had mulled over his defeat day and night since Daniel's victory, had expected this and was unalarmed. The great dragon observed the land and, seeing that the flat land gave him the freedom to move his great body in

close combat, he landed loudly between Michael and the mountains.

"NOW!" Daniel yelled, as he saw Wisp touch the ground right where he had expected. Suddenly, ropes flew over Wisp from one side to the other. As quickly as they could, the travelers tied the ropes to spikes they had fashioned from shards of nearby boulders and drove them into the ice, pinning the dragon. Furious, Wisp sent great blasts of flames anywhere he could, but the travelers stayed safely behind the great dragon, whose roped down head could not turn back far enough to threaten them.

After some time the fire ceased. Wisp could not make any more fire deep within his depleted body. He lay defeated, his enormous head resting in the snow. The companions emerged from their hiding places, congratulating each other. And then Wisp spoke.

"Well done, my brave enemies. You have captured the great and powerful Wisp. Truly you are as cunning as you are strong."

David and Donald turned to each other, nodding in agreement, and started to think such a magnanimous dragon could not be all bad. Gary and Laurelin let go with a small self-congratulatory dance. Daniel began to notice that his fellow companions were beginning to let down their guard. He could even feel himself growing weaker.

"I am your humble servant," the dragon continued with great sincerity. "Kill me and be done with me or let me live and I will fight for you."

"He is right," Donald called out.

"Yes, let us free him," Laurelin offered. The others started to nod their heads in agreement. Daniel even felt himself nodding at first, but no, he knew what Wisp was.

"No! Do not free him! He is using his silver tongue to misguide you." All eyes turned to Daniel. Gary and David shook their heads quickly back and forth, as if coming out of a trance.

Wisp could tell that he was losing his prey, "No, do not listen to that man. He only wishes to have me for himself, so that he may rule over you."

"Yeah... I think you're right," Laurelin said, starting to move towards Daniel. David looked menacingly towards Daniel and drew his sword while Donald held his book threateningly by his side, ready to swing. Gary stood glaring, murmuring about selfishness and greed.

"No! Don't you see what he is doing?" Daniel cried. But it was too late; they were under his influence. Daniel looked anxiously around, wondering what he could do. He watched as his fellow travelers walked slowly towards him, the snow crunching menacingly with each step. He began to wonder whether he was mistaken. Perhaps they were right. Maybe he did want the power for himself. His head began to flood with self-doubt and second-guessing. He staggered backwards, dizzied and confused. As he cast his head about, trying to regain his balance, he saw Michael in the distance who stood watching with concern. He remembered how Michael stood strong in the battle even when all others had given up hope and when the solace of defeat had tempted and lulled the Protectors into retreat. Daniel found his footing and faced his fellow travelers.

"Wait... You're right Laurelin," Daniel said. "Oh great Wisp, you are right as well. I thought that you would not want to serve six weak masters when you could have one powerful master. I know now that you are a born servant, given to submission and servitude. Of course you will be happy to do the bidding of all six of your new masters."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"You fool!" Wisp cried, his face rising from the snow. "I don't want to serve them. They will serve me. When I am free, I will kill them all, starting with HER!"

Wisp reared his head back to release a gust of fire towards Laurelin, who had been drawn towards the dragon. Daniel leapt forward and plunged his axe in the chest of the beast as he reared up to attack. Donald and David, having shaken themselves of Wisp's influence, attacked as well. David swung his sword at the heart of the beast, and Donald hit him square in the jaw with his oversized book.

Wisp let out great bellows of pain, but no words. "You cost my people much pain, and turned my own friends against me. No more shall you cloud the judgments of any man or beast." With that Daniel put the great dragon out of his misery, cutting the dragons head clean from his body.

The travelers cheered and breathed a deep sigh of relief. "Well done, Daniel," Michael said. "Through your leadership, intelligence, and ability to discern your own truths from the words of beast and man alike, you have saved us from an awful end."

"I could not have done anything, were it not for you," Daniel replied humbly. "Thank you."

Daniel and Michael embraced and the travelers cheered, but their celebration was short lived. As they lifted their heads and looked north across the plain, they saw the fortress, menacing and impenetrable as it rose into the western ride of the Northern Mountains. They stepped forward through the snow, and continued on their journey.

CHAPTER TWELVE

A WOMAN'S SONG

For the first time on their journey, time and travel moved too fast. It was seemingly only moments before they had crossed the plain and found themselves on the grounds of the great fortress. The fortress that had seemed foreboding from a distance was now immense and dreadful. It rose high against the mountain, consuming one's entire field of vision. Laurelin burst into tears, overwhelmed by even the sight of this horrible edifice. Daniel felt fear grip his heart and a tear move down his cheek. Michael came behind them, and urged them on, but even he felt his stomach sink at the miserable sight.

Suddenly, from across the empty whiteness of the plain, the travelers could hear an eerie, bittersweet sound echoing from the mountains to their west. It lingered in their minds, and reached deep into their hearts, fixing their attention on its sorrowful song. It grew louder and nearer, filling their ears and distracting them from their journey. Then, out of the boulders at

the foot of the mountain, came an army of sirens, their voices ringing with exquisite beauty across the emptiness of the plain.

Donald and Gary were overcome by the beautiful sound, and wandered away from the path, toward the tempting, dangerous sirens. Daniel and David, followed shortly behind, their eyes unfocused and dreamlike. Even Michael stood, transfixed by the alluring sound. The only one that was not distracted was the young girl. She looked around and stood tall against the moving and beautiful army of sirens and their heartbreaking song. As she looked around at her fellow travelers, who were being increasingly drawn away from their journey, she yelled out to get their attention. She ran in front of David and then Gary, yelling, trying to break the spell they seemed to be under. But they only moved forward, closer and closer to the sirens, whose song was growing stronger. As she screamed, harder and longer, desperately trying to shake them, any of them, from their spell, she felt something move in her pack. Realizing what it was, she pulled out the crystal flask of liquid that Michael had given her, and took a small sip.

She stepped forward to the front of the group and began to sing. It was a song more beautiful than any she had ever heard.

"Golden fields
and ember light
Sapphire skies
and deep blue night
As spring awakens
Winter sleeps
The warmth takes over
buries cold deep
The green of trees
is here to stay
gone is the empty
black and gray"

She did not know how she knew such a beautiful song, but she saw that Donald, and then David, stopped in their tracks and turned toward Laurelin in amazement.

She began to sing louder, her beautiful song overwhelming the song of the sirens and enveloping the plain in a wonderful uplifting beauty it had never known. Snapping out of the trance that held them, the group behind her stumbled and looked around, taken back by the scene around them. They watched in awe as the young girl's song forced the sirens back into the depths of the mountain. They watched as the snow in the plain began to melt, and drain away to the eastern horizon. They watched as a small flower, stretched slowly, achingly, from the cold winter of a thousand years, and blossomed at the young girl's feet. It was the first living thing that anyone had ever seen grow in the empty plain of the Northern Mountains.

"I think she found her voice," Michael said with a smile as Laurelin continued to sing.

"I thought it was the magic water from the crystal vile," Daniel said, surprised.

"It was only everyday water in a fancy bottle," Michael said. "This is Laurelin's voice; a voice of strength, confidence, intelligence, charity, and beauty."

Laurelin continued to sing, and her voice echoed throughout the mountains. As they listened happily, the travelers began to notice the eyes of a thousand Northern Elves sneaking out across the Northern Mountains, stretching to hear the sound from the plain. The ice continued to melt. The flowers continued to grow.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE KINGDOM OF LORD STYRON

"ENOUGH!" called an angry voice from the tallest tower of the fortress. Laurelin's voice halted mid-meter.

"You're likely to cause a flood, and we certainly can't stand for such a risk to public safety," the voice called out. "It's not to say we didn't all enjoy the lovely music, but please don't be so selfish as to risk the safety of millions for the enjoyment of a few." Laurelin shrank back, feeling guilty, and the melting ice at her feet began to harden. The murmurs and shouts of a thousand elves called out in agreement, filling the valley with contempt and anger. The group began to huddle together, squinting to discern the voice that called down to them from such great heights.

"Let me introduce myself," the voice called out, as if reading their minds. "My name is Lord Styron." Cheers rang out from the mountains all around them. Michael stepped forward.

"Styron! I am Michael, son of Donald! I am here to take the elfin queen and return her to her rightful home in the woods south of the Barrier Mountains!" Michael shouted with confidence. His declaration was greeted with a flood of jeers and boos that echoed loudly throughout the plain from a thousand unseen elves.

"Enough! Enough!" Styron called out, silencing the elves. "That is wonderful news! It has been so long since someone cared enough to try. I nearly gave up hope that anyone still cared at all about the poor queen. Please, please, come right up. We'll prepare a marvelous feast, you must be starved."

The travelers stood confused by the hospitality. Daniel reminded them not to be drawn by the quick tongue of those whose behavior bespeaks wrongful intent. They nodded in agreement, remembering all too well the quick tongue of the dragon. Donald reminded them all to keep their wits about them, and David reminded them to stay strong and hold to what they learned. Gary reminded them that they must remain caring towards others, even those who did not seem deserving, and Laurelin reminded them to believe in the strength of their own words. Michael looked at them proudly, and they pressed forward, moving towards the open gate of the fortress.

Lord Styron had not spared any expense for the feast that awaited them. Enormous spreads of every food from all corners of the world sat in heaps and dishes across the table, with ornate candles and fine chandeliers lighting the beautiful oak room that held the feast.

"My friends, it's so good to have company," Lord Styron welcomed them.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"What do we have here? A wizard, judging by your funny hat," he said as he walked past Michael. "A wise man, a warrior, a magician, a captain, and an artist. What a motley band of heroes. Please, please, sit and eat. I assure you it is as safe as it is delicious." From this distance Styron's charms and niceties felt different than they had from the across the plain. His eyes were as empty as his words kind, unsettling the travelers. The room was chilled despite the hospitality, warm food, and a roaring fire on each side of the room.

"We are not here for your food. We are here for the queen," Michael said.

"A man of action. I like that. We'll get to business then. Do tell me, why do you come to save the queen?"

"I come in service of Oliwren, an elf of loyalty and diligence who needed my help."

"A do-gooder I see. Not good enough, I'm afraid. I have no interest in empty acts of kindness. How about you, young sirs and lady? Why risk your lives for this queen whom you are too young to have ever known?" Michael's young companions looked back and forth to one another, asking themselves that very question. Finally, David stepped forward.

"We stand with Michael and we will support him to the end of his journey, for he has supported us when we faltered, when we succeeded, and every step in between. We will stand by him until the end."

"The end you say," Styron mused. "Well I suppose we shall find that out soon enough." Without warning a score of guards moved forward, grabbed Michael, and began dragging him to the top of the tower.

"Take your hands off him!" David cried, drawing his sword. But the guards had grabbed him as well and shook the sword from his hands. David turned to see each of his companions being bound with chains.

"To the top of the tower," Styron called. "Let us throw this Michael from the highest heights of this great fortress and see if these impetuous little beasts are true to their word. I can't help but think, the end will seem just a mite too far down."

The guards led them roughly up the stairs, higher and higher, to the top of the tower where a large open balcony gave way to a precipitous fall, a hundred times further than it would take to kill even the strongest of men. As they were taken ever higher, Michael began to wonder how he found himself in this unfortunate position. He had only wanted to find a gift for his young bride. He imagined her sitting at home, days and weeks having passed on his journey, she having no idea where he had gone, and if he would ever return. As he climbed the tower he missed her intensely, his heart ached at the thought of her in pain, and tears began to form at the edge of his eyes.

As they entered the balcony at the top of the tower, Styron stopped and turned toward Michael. He saw the tears in Michael's eyes and cruel laughter began to form at the edge of his lips. Then he stopped. He saw that the tears were not of fear or sorrow for the fate that awaited him. In Michael's eyes, he saw something different. He saw a young man leaning over a book, and another working until beads of sweat ran down his face, another bent over helping a cold and broken man at the side of a trail, and another holding to what he knew to be true. He saw a young woman, standing with pride as her beautiful voice poured over the empty plain of his kingdom, and he saw Michael's young wife, smiling happily along a trail that led to her new home. He saw the love he had for her, and she for him. He stared and stared at Michael, unaware of his surroundings.

As the last of the guards came up the stairs with the last of the Michael's five companions, Styron's cheeks were filled with a quiet warmth, his body sank from its rigidity, and a tear crept into the corner of his eye. For the first time in his long and un-

happy life, the smallest of feelings had stirred deep in Styron's heart. He did not speak. He simply stood with a faint, almost imperceptible smile, and held out his hand. Michael held his out in return, and in it Styron placed a single key. The guards, confused, stood back against the wall, releasing the five weary travelers who had followed Michael up the stairs without resistance. One by one the guards turned to a quiet corner of the room opposite the balcony where a dark room was guarded by thick steel bars. Michael handed the key to Gary, who walked over to the small room.

For a moment Gary stood in front of the small room, and then smiled widely. He turned the key and swung open the steel bars. The elfin queen, old but strong, stepped confidently out from her small prison and into the room where the Northern Elves stood with shame. She looked calmly at each of them, and then walked towards Styron. He had not moved from his spot near the top of the stairs and could not bear to look at the queen. Quietly, the queen put her hand on his shoulder. Styron turned, looked toward the queen, and tears began to flow down his face. The queen turned toward Michael and the rest of his companions who had gathered behind him.

"Thank you," she said simply, gratitude in her eyes. "You have all done a greet deed for me and my people. Even now, the Woodland Elves are emerging from the shadows of the woods and light is returning to the forest. I thank you all from the bottom of my heart. Now, after all you have done for us, I have a gift for you. I think it is time now for you to return home."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE WIZARD'S GIFT

She had hardly finished her sentence when Michael awoke with a start in the comfort of his living room, a book resting against his chest as he reclined in the comfort of a lounging blue chair. He jumped up, put on his glasses, and looked around for his fellow travelers. Slowly he began to realize that it had all been a dream. He had never come across an Oliwren, or battled a dragon, or climbed through the Impossible Barrier Mountains. He remembered now that the path he had taken through the woods had been surprisingly short and he found himself at home in almost no time at all. In fact, he arrived even before his young bride and had decided to read his newest fantasy novel to pass the time until she arrived.

His young bride! It seemed like months since he had seen her. She must be getting close to home! He hadn't found the perfect gift along the trail to their new home as he had hoped he would, but he knew that together they would always have

enough. He stepped into the kitchen, hoping he would be able to find something to put a candle in to celebrate her birthday.

"Happy Birthday!" cried what seemed like a dozen voices.

Michael nearly leapt out of his skin. Standing in front of him in the kitchen were the companions from his dream. Daniel stepped forward and gave him an enormous hug, nearly picking him off the ground. Michael could barely speak.

"How? But, how did you get here?" Michael managed to get out.

"Magic," Gary said with a smile.

"And a little determination," David offered as he came forward for a hug of his own. "Besides, you didn't think we'd miss your birthday did you?"

"My birthday? No it's not my...it's...it's so good to see you! I thought... ," Michael stammered as Laurelin stepped in and offered a warm embrace.

"You just woke up! Don't think so hard," she joked. As he held the young girl in his arms he looked out through the window to the backyard and saw children of all ages and sizes playing soccer against an outmanned handful of adults. They laughed and smiled as the ball moved quickly across the grass. Somehow he felt like he knew them, but he couldn't say from where.

"Who? Who are they?" he asked as one child celebrated a goal by running across the yard, her hands outstretched as if her jubilance might cause her to take flight.

"That's your family," Donald said, as he stepped forward and hugged him tightly. "Some you know. Some you haven't met just yet. They are all your family, though, and they love you for the gift you've given them."

"Gift? What gift?" he asked, his head spinning.

"Many gifts," said Gary, the last to hug the man who had taught him so much. "Far too many to list and many of which

we are probably not even aware. Above everything else though, you have provided us, all of us, with a loving family and a happy home. We couldn't ask for anything more."

Over the next several hours, Michael met some wonderful people, young and old, some had come to join them from far away, and others from very nearby. They had all manner of personalities, skills, beliefs, and abilities and everyone was as distinct and unique as the next. In each of them though, he saw wisdom and determination, compassion and courage, beauty, and, above all else, love. With each new person that he met, his love for his family grew in ways he could not have imagined along the trail that he and his wife had taken to get to their new home.

"I think I see her coming down the path!" a young woman named Robin yelled with excitement from the living room that looked out across the front lawn.

"I'll get the cake," a young woman named Tiffany said with excitement.

"Robin, let's go get everybody from the backyard!" called Anneli.

An enormous smile came across Michael's face as he stepped outside the door and walked towards the crest of the hill. He had never before been so happy to see someone. When his young bride saw him from across the long yard and, for the first time, saw the beautiful home they had together, she couldn't help but run all the way to the front porch. As she arrived, he told her how much he had missed her and how much he loved her and gave her a hug. He might never have let her go if he wasn't so excited to bring her inside to meet everyone. However, as they stepped through the front door, he was surprised to see that she already seemed to know his five young companions.

"Honey, these are...," she said, excitedly.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"Oh... we've met," he assured her with a warm smile. The five young men and woman in the small kitchen simply smiled. Just as the excitement of their reunion calmed, Tiffany came forward with a cake and everyone sang Happy Birthday. When the song was finished, wishes were made, and the candles were blown out.

"What did you wish for?" Michael asked his bride with a grin.

"I can't say or it won't come true," she chided with a smile. As she leaned over to kiss her young husband, she saw the door to the backyard slide open. First, came two young women, and then a beautiful little girl, followed by many others. Some she already knew and others she had yet to meet, but she knew, as only mothers can, that they were her family and she was immediately filled with enough support, love, and happiness to last her until the end of time.

"Happy Birthday, Shorty," the young husband said.

"Happy Birthday, Honey," his young wife replied.

THE END

SELECTIONS FROM THE BOOK OF ALL THINGS

Compiled by Oliwren of the Ancient Council of Elves

City of Elders– Greatest of all dwarven cities, home to the great knowledge and vast wealth of a thousand years of dwarven civilization

Confidence- Be like the bird who, halting in his flight on a limb too slight, yet sings, knowing he has wings. - Victor Hugo

Consternate– To dismay, confuse, or terrify

Cogent– To the point, relevant, or pertinent

Culchie- In Irish-English culchie is a term sometimes used to describe a person from rural Ireland. It usually has the pejorative sense of "country bumpkin". Warning: If an ebullient Irishman happens to call you a culchie, beware; there be an ensuing challenge to a duel of wits.

Discipline– There is little that can withstand a man who can conquer himself. –King Luis XIV

Ebullient– Overflowing with fervor, enthusiasm; high spirited

Environs– Surrounding objects; surroundings; environment

Foment– To instigate or foster

Guardian of the Pass– Formerly known as Japeth the Jolly. In his youth Japeth was appointed Lord Styron's chief minstrel and charged with the impossible task of making him laugh. After many long years of failure, Japeth was condemned to guard the barren and frigid pass through the Northern Mountains. The Guardian of the Pass, as he is now known, is but a shell of the cheerful and loving man he once was, driven half-mad by his cruel punishment.

Gnow– Gnawed; used by Geoffrey Chaucer, father of English literature, son of Italian cooking. An obsolete term hardly worth gnowing.

Guffaw– A loud, unrestrained burst of laughter

Harangue– A long pompous speech, especially one delivered before a gathering

Hilltop- A pretty nice place; the nicest place, in fact, for miles around. Though it is not advised to stay for too long, Hilltop is a great place for weary travelers to find a hot meal and a bed to sleep on.

Impossible Barrier Mountains– These very impressive peaks are home to many dwarven cities. Only the most industrious, hard-working, and intelligent of men are allowed to join this powerful and noble community.

Knacker– *British, Dialect*;; an old, sick, or useless farm animal

Leadership- Becoming a leader is synonymous with becoming yourself. It is precisely that simple, and it is also that difficult.

–Warren Bennis

Lord Styron– King of the Northern Elves. A pitiful creature, incapable of love or happiness or even sorrow. He is cold and barren and so he lives in the cold and barren mountains of the north. His only company are his armies, minions, and captives.

Love– Love the giver more than the gift. –Brigham Young

Muddy Bog– The Pale Marsh, the unholiest of wetlands, lands that belong to far worse than mere miscreants. Home of the dreaded Zoraxoloth.

Northern Hills– Mostly harmless

Northern Mountains– Once teeming with life and beauty, the Northern Mountains have seen neither since the arrival of Lord Styron and his armies. They are devoid of love and happiness and goodness. Hope is all that remains, and precious little of it.

Oliwren– An elf of loyalty and diligence. Defender of all that is good. Member of the Ancient Council of Elves. Responsible for the compilation of the Book of All Things.

Order of Protectors– The ruling military power of ород старейшиней, or City of Elders, the greatest of all dwarven cities.

Parlance– A way or manner of speaking; vernacular

Pidgin– A rather homely bird bred for the express purpose of transmitting messages between people's of different languages. They have the unique ability of memorizing simple codes and repeating those codes by tapping their beaks on special "pidgin blocks." Also known for the ability to recognize one-word commands in every language in the world except for French.

Plains of Desolation– Location of Lord Styron's fortress. These plains are as cold, empty, and lifeless as Styron's own heart.

Service– The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others. - Mahatma Gandhi

Sirens– Half bird, half woman, and half evil. The sirens lure men in with their sweet songs, but be not fooled. They will feast upon your hopes and dreams and leave you empty.

Tawdry– Showy, but cheap and of poor quality

Wisdom- I am the wisest man alive, for I know one thing, and that is that I know nothing. -Socrates

Wisp– A very dangerous foe. Beware this dragon's fiery breath, but more especially his silver tongue. His sly speech has led many a man, dwarf, and elf to an untimely doom.

Woodland Elves– Once part of a great kingdom located primarily in the Southern Forests, the Woodland Elves were a happy and productive people. Since the fear and destruction caused by Lord Styron's armies, the Woodland Elves have retreated into hiding, awaiting someone, anyone, who might help.

Zoraxoloth– A mammoth of a spider, eight feet tall and fast as a zappich. Its glowing eyes lure in prey and its foot long, razor-sharp pincers finish the job. The Zoraxoloth makes its home deep in the Muddy Bog and feeds on unsuspecting travelers.