

CHAPTER 3: A BEAUTIFUL PRINCESS



Jacob opened his eyes but could not see anything. He rubbed them several times and slowly his vision returned. He felt the ground beneath him. It was soft and wet. It was difficult to make out the shapes around him. They were tall and brown, and there were large green spots all around. Nothing would come into focus, no matter how hard he tried to adjust his eyes. Then he remembered. He needed to hit the button.

“Where is it?” he asked himself, fumbling around.

He felt something hard and round. Picking it up, he pushed what felt like a button several times just to make sure it worked. A few hundred thousand miles away, a message was received by nothing but a lonely space station, empty and dark. Jacob was sure that his mission was done, so he discarded the small contraption and began wandering around even before his eyesight restored to full functionality. As soon as he was able to see clearly, he realized he was in the middle of a large forest filled with the oddest sorts of trees and

shrubs. The grass grew as tall as he was, and everything else looked bigger than average as well. The trees curved over as if someone very heavy had gone around climbing each of them in pursuit of dates or coconuts or something else that often grows at the tops of trees. Except for the fact that he was in the middle of a forest, and that the trees leaned this way and that, the style of plant life would have ordinarily caused him to assume that he was in close proximity to a beach.

“Which way now?” he thought, taking a long look around and seeing nothing but forest in every direction.

“Hello!” he yelled, hoping that someone would hear him and reply.

After a few seconds, a rustling began in the grass in front of him. Out from behind a layer of tall brush flittered a pale yellow butterfly that seemingly cast powder as it flew. The strange thing about it was that it also seemed to change in size. At first he thought it was getting smaller, but then he realized that such a thought was a fairly ridiculous notion. Making up his mind, Jacob followed it for a handful of minutes until he came to the edge of a cliff. Several hundred feet below, a river raged at the bottom of a thin gorge. The walls on either side dripped with the same shrubbery and vines that filled the whole forest.

“Hercules!” shouted Jacob into the gorge.

‘Hercules’ echoed back several times over until it faded away.

“That was sick!” exclaimed Jacob. “I wish we had one of these in our back yard.”

You may be questioning Jacob’s use of the word ‘sick,’ so I should inform you that in this instance he meant it to describe a feeling of immersive excitement. You could almost use it as a synonym for the word ‘awesome.’

You may also be wondering why Jacob shouted the word ‘Hercules,’ and not the words ‘echo’ or ‘district attorney’ or simply ‘hey.’ I regret to say that I have no satisfactory answer for you. I can only guess that no one really understands what goes through the mind of a young boy

Jacob's age. Oh, that's right. I have not previously mentioned his age, so you could really be sort of confused at the moment. Well, let's just say that he is at the age where a young boy begins to like girls but he doesn't yet admit it to himself. This may be important to the rest of the story, so don't forget it.

Anyhow, Jacob followed the princess until she led him to a rather large city. Goodness, now I've somehow skipped ahead of myself. This is what happens when I have to stop to explain things to you. From now on, I'm just going to assume that you know what the heck is going on. And if you don't, you really aren't very imaginative are you? But in order to be civil I will back up to where we were.

Jacob continued to stare down the gorge until his eyes could stare no longer. This was fine with him because his attentions were suddenly drawn elsewhere by a girlish giggling from the bushes behind him. He spun around to just catch sight of a small human figure dashing off into the forest. He obeyed his first instinct, which was to run after the figure. It was hard going at first and he soon realized that whomever it was that he was pursuing was faster than him. Eventually he stopped to catch his breath.

"What are you doing?" came a voice from out of the brush.

"Breathing," answered Jacob. "You just about wore me out."

"How come?" asked the voice. "I wasn't really running very fast at all. I think you just don't run enough."

"Well that might be the case," said Jacob. "Either way, I don't think you should be too hard on me. I'm a middle class, suburban-dwelling, video-game-enthusiast. I don't think you should expect someone like me to be quite so quick as someone like you."

"What do you mean someone like me?" asked the voice.

"Well, you obviously live out here in the middle of nowhere. You're used to the exercise. I bet you have to fend for yourself, catch wild animals, and run from danger. I mean,

you ran from me well enough.”

“Well, you didn’t look very dangerous,” said the voice. “I only wanted to have a little fun.”

A young girl who appeared to be about Jacob’s age stepped out from behind a leaf her own size. Her head tilted down a bit, but Jacob could still see the kindness in her gaze. The line of her face was solid yet beautiful and her golden brown hair complimented her wide brown eyes. She had a slender body adorned by a ruffled purple dress fit for a princess.

“How on earth were you running so fast in high heels?” asked Jacob in astonishment.

“Practice,” she answered. “How on earth did you get way out here?”

“I don’t even know where we are,” said Jacob. “If you can believe it, I was on the dark side of the moon only a few minutes ago.”

“No, I don’t believe that,” said the girl. “My dad is not going to like you being here. He doesn’t like anyone trespassing.”

“Where are we?” asked Jacob.

“The Secret Forest,” said the girl.

“That’s original,” said Jacob.

The sarcastic nature of the remark was lost on the young girl, so after a few seconds of unsuccessful reasoning in her head, she moved on.

“We don’t allow visitors here,” she said, her face suddenly serious. “The adults say that the outside world is a terrible awful place.”

“So is it terrible or awful?” asked Jacob.

“Well, both I suppose. I don’t really know for myself”

“You mean that you’ve never been out of this forest?”

“Nope. I’m not allowed. If I left, I would be committing treason. And my father is the king so that wouldn’t be such a smart move on my part.”

“So you’re a princess,” smiled Jacob. “I thought you might be.”

“How could you have thought that?” she asked.

“Well, maybe it was just the lighting,” Jacob said, tilting his head to the side and squinting as if it was going to somehow convince her that he really had thought that.

“Well I *am* a princess and it doesn’t matter what you think either way,” she said, with confident finality.

She started to walk away, but Jacob wasn’t about to let her leave him alone in the forest.

“It’s a shame really,” he said, with a step toward her. “At first I thought you were going to help me, but seeing as how you are a princess, I guess I can assume you are also rich and spoiled and accustomed to having everything done for you.”

“I am not!” she declared. “I’m actually very nice. Just to prove it to you, I’m going to leave you in this forest all by yourself.”

This was not what Jacob had wanted. He in fact was hoping for the opposite reaction.

“That is not a bit nice,” he argued.

“Sure it is,” she replied. “You obviously enjoy making young sensitive women feel bad about themselves for your own gratification. My mother warned me about boys that do that. So by leaving you out here and letting the harsh jungle night teach you a lesson or two, I will be saving you from your own insensitivity, and curing the population of another rude, thoughtless boy.”

Jacob saw her point. He resented it when girls were smarter than him, but apart from apologizing he was out of options. He stood there looking sad for a few moments, and tried to will himself to say he was sorry. Unfortunately, Jacob had yet to learn that the terrible feeling that comes with admitting the other person is right and you are wrong is all part of the process and should be expected. As he stood there with his eyebrows tightly knit together and his hands sweating, the Princess’ resolve melted at his effort.

“Well, I guess that’s good enough,” she said. “I can’t expect all boys to be as straightforward in their feelings as a girl. Mother mentioned that as well. Come on, I’ll take you to

the city.”

Together, they ventured into the forest, and Jacob followed the princess until she led him to a rather large city. The towers reminded Jacob of a drawing of an ancient Aztec city he saw once in a museum. The great stone structures broke forth from the thick jungle surroundings, and the stone shown in the sun as if it were plated with gold and silver. They snuck in through a small breach in the stone between two great trees that grew up over the wall. They came to a busy marketplace, all aflutter with the haggling of trade and pungent with the aroma of exotic spices and fruits. Jacob felt somehow more alive as he followed the Princess, weaving through tents dyed a deep crimson and brushing past huge swaths of fine silk hung to display their intricate patterns. Jacob almost lost the purple-ruffled dress that he was following when it disappeared up a steep staircase. The staircase led to an impossibly huge royal hall, and the Princess instructed Jacob to wait there while she went to see her father. After she had ascended another staircase up to the highest level of the palace, he had a look around.

Though from the outside, the architecture resembled that of an ancient Roman ruin come back to life, the inside of the palace was far more grandeur in nature. The spotless white marble staircase issued forth as the predominant structure in the spacious chamber. The ceiling-high columns that flanked the wide first step were embellished with birds and plants that Jacob had never seen in his life. The stunning artistry was alive with the shimmer of gold and the glint of precious gems. Jacob was so awestruck by the beauty of the structure that he failed to notice several voices nearby.

“I see that and raise you a year’s worth of my best livestock!” yelled a voice from around the marble banister.

Jacob ventured over to find from whom the voice had come.

“I take that bet and raise you two of my best slaves!” another voice returned.

Jacob was surprised to discover a large poker table

covered in cards and cigars. Around it sat five or six large oddly, yet ornamentally dressed older gentlemen laughing and blowing smoke here and there. Next to each of them stood five or six smaller individuals holding cards and moving chips and tokens on and off the table.

“What are you all playing?” asked Jacob.

“What we are playing is none of your concern unless you are royalty young man, and you do not much resemble royalty, I am sorry to say,” said one of the large gentlemen.

“Well, I’m friends with royalty,” replied Jacob. “I met the princess just today.”

“The king finally produced an heir?” asked one of the men. “That’s news to my ears. Good for him. I’m glad someone around here is doing his job.”

“Yes, tell him congratulations when you see him,” said another.

“You must understand,” began another. “We cannot really be bothered with keeping up to date with every event that occurs round here. We keep much too busy playing Hearts and Spades and Diamonds and Clubs.”

“You mean poker?” asked Jacob, unable to discontinue staring at the men’s obtrusive outfits.

“If I had meant poker, I would have said so,” came the reply. “But since I have no idea what you are talking about, I will repeat myself so that I am completely clear.”

The gentleman snapped his fingers and the man standing next him began to address Jacob in a boisterously annoying fashion.

“Let it be heard that my lord is in fact playing Hearts and Spades and Diamonds and Clubs,” said the servant.

“We like to keep servants close by in case any menial tasks need to be done,” said the gentleman.

The servants seemed to be busier than the gentlemen they were serving. In fact, it appeared to Jacob that they were dealing, holding the cards, taking and placing bets, and even making the crucial decisions themselves.

After a moment of attempting to follow the action on

the table Jacob made a pervasive remark. “They’re just playing the game for you,” he said. “You aren’t even paying attention.”

“It may seem that way,” said one of the gentlemen, “But you should know that we are in fact performing the most important task of the game.”

“What is that?” asked Jacob.

“Smoking,” replied all the gentlemen in concurrence.

They each took a drink of something strong, and relit a new round of cigars.

“Don’t forget that we are also doing the drinking,” said another. “Also, at the end of the game, we are ones who have to pay for it all. I mean, I could lose a fortune this round and my servant couldn’t care less. I’m the one who has to hand it over at the end of the day.”

“Very true,” said another. “We are the beneficiaries to the sport after all. All these men have to do is wait on us hand and foot while every once in a while pulling off a four of a kind or straight flush to keep us happy.”

“That sounds a lot like poker to me,” Jacob muttered under his breath.

“Well, it isn’t,” said one of the gentlemen, now taking a harsher tone toward the boy. “Who are you, anyhow?”

Jacob swallowed his tongue, yielding lest he utter another brash remark. He could see that these men would be easily upset by any perceived incivilities.

“Darnish,” he politely replied.

“Perhaps this kid is royalty after all,” said one of the gentlemen. “His name certainly sounds royal enough. Of course I haven’t seen him around here before. Perhaps he’s from the neighboring village.”

“Oh! Perhaps he is,” said another, joining in with overly genial looks around the table.

It seemed as if a joke had been told that Jacob somehow failed to understand. “The neighboring village?” he asked, curious to see if these gentlemen would deliver any sort of useful information on the subject. “Is it as beautiful as this place?”

“Certainly not,” was the answer. “It’s a dreadful ugly place.”

The nods around the table seemed to confirm the tainted surmise.

“Well couldn’t you do something about that?” asked Jacob. “You seem to have plenty of beauty around here to share.”

“Help them!” shouted one of the gentlemen, furiously distressed with Jacob’s question. “Why on earth would we do that? You obviously are not from around here if you would ever think about helping them. You see, the neighboring village is a cruel, vicious place. They don’t care about anyone at all, and they show it by often attacking our beautiful city with their hoards of arrows, marching men, and battering rams.”

“He’s right,” another affirmed. “They are terrible, terrible people. We tried to set them straight by bringing some of them over here and putting them to good work, but they are just not very reasonable. We gave them so many wonderful jobs to do, such as these fine chaps are performing right now.”

He motioned to the forced servants standing around the table playing cards for their masters.

“Of course their countrymen have no sense of appreciation for our kind acts of service. They seem to fight us day and night over the issue. We don’t pay much attention though, they will never be able to take a city as strong as ours.”

“Well we thought as much until last week,” said another. “It was a very close call.”

“Ah yes a very close call indeed,” was the reaction from around the table.

“But we’ve outsmarted them this time,” said another. “You see, we were so overwhelmed with leading our armies and making battle plans that we decided to pass the job on to our servants. Ha! Imagine that! Now their own countrymen will be defending our borders against them. The neighboring village will be so outplayed.”

“It was a clever move, if I say so myself,” another piped in. “And now we have all the time in the world to play game after game of Hearts and Spades and Diamonds and Clubs. Don’t mention it to the king though if you run into him. He’s always going on about our laziness and utter lack of intelligence. Of course, he was never keen on the idea of bringing them here anyhow. It’s not like he does much to help out in our efforts though. Ever since the incident, he has been so distracted.”

Jacob had heard enough. He slowly backed away from the table and tiptoed to the staircase that eventually led up to the king’s chamber. It was a long walk to the split in the staircase. Jacob went left only to reach the balcony and find out that he could have gotten to it going either way. Another smaller staircase led up to a long hall, and he eventually came to a pair of brass doors that were cracked open a pinch, so he quietly looked in. A deep, concerned voice issued from within.

“I just want what’s best for you,” said the voice. “Your mother had so many things in mind for your future. I know that sometimes I don’t make the best decisions as king, but I hope that at least I can be a good father. Please don’t be upset if I don’t live up to your expectations as I once thought that I would. It’s just not the same without the Queen around. I wish I had lost all this, and kept her instead.”

“I know father,” said the princess. “If mother were here, she would be proud of you. I’m not even grown up yet and I am already proud.”

“You always know how to brighten me up,” said the voice, now a bit more cheerful than at first.

Suddenly, the door that Jacob had been listening at flung open and a sturdy old man stood before him, dressed in robes of the same color and design as what the princess wore. He wore a wide grin, but his eyes were glistening with tears. The propinquity between father and daughter was evident, though his short gray beard and big bushy gray eyebrows that sat under a large forehead were certainly distinct. His eyes

were big and brown like hers.

“I thought I heard something,” said the regal man.

“Who is this, Sylvia?”

“That’s the boy I told you about,” the princess answered. “I don’t know his name though. I forgot to ask. I know that’s bad manners.”

“What is your name, son?” asked the man.

“D-d-darnish,” gulped Jacob, guiltily. It seemed strange to Jacob that the first name that came to his mind was not his own.

“Curious name,” said the man. “I am King Fredrick.”

“It’s good to meet you,” said Jacob, his voice trembling.

“What brings you to The Secret Forest?” asked the king. “I hope you are not from the neighboring village, because you won’t find very many friendly people here. Of course, you really don’t look it. I do wonder how you found your way into our woods though.” The king eyed Jacob curiously, yet delicately.

It’s a long story,” said Jacob.

At first the king had severely frightened him, but now Jacob felt quite comfortable. King Fredrick’s kind voice and gentle movements even caused Jacob to forget about the formalities that should have been addressed while meeting someone of such high stature.

“Well, I would be glad to hear it over dinner,” said King Fredrick, exiting the room and gesturing that Jacob and Sylvia follow him. As he strode steadily down the hall, they each walked on one side. “...If you would care to stay and join us. Sylvia is always telling me how she wishes she had more friends her age to talk to.”

“I would be delighted,” said Jacob, suddenly remembering to speak as formally as possible.

He was beginning to feel the hunger of not eating for half a day. Then he thought back to how good the chalky oatmeal had tasted. Then he thought about Levi and Darla being left alone in the darkness.

“Great!” said Princess Sylvia, desiring to flail her arms

in excitement yet steadfastly restraining herself. “We shall make a grand ball about it, and every kind of food is to be prepared.”

“Every kind of food?” asked King Fredrick.

“Well, we don’t know what Darnish likes,” said the princess, tactfully.

The king laughed heartily.

“Alright, we shall have a grand meal then,” he conceded.

At this moment in time, Jacob was beginning to feel that everything in life was satisfactory. He was about to share in a grand meal with a beautiful young princess and a kind and generous king. They would even ask him to stay for a while and learn about the enchanting city. He was to be treated as a guest of the highest esteem, and that sounded so delightful that he could see no way that the evening could go wrong. Of course, because I know what is going to happen, I understand that things would not turn out the way he had hoped, and if you have any sort of narrative aptitude, you should have guessed that as well. And seeing as we have both managed to reach this point, I would assume that it is safe to say that you do. So, since we both know that things cannot go as planned, we should might as well just get it over with and allow the terrible events that were to unfold happen sooner instead of later. With that being said, there came a terrified cry from the city down below.

King Fredrick strode hastily back to his chambers. Sylvia, with a look of foreboding hidden within her gentle features, turned and ran after her father. Jacob followed. The king tore open the balcony doors and searched the cityscape for the origin of the cry, spying a regiment of soldiers emerging from the forest.

“The neighbors are here!” echoed an announcement from the palace hall.

“Those blasted neighbors just don’t know when to stop,” said the king, stepping back inside, with a weary shake of his graying head.

Suddenly, a wayward arrow found its way over the palace walls and through the balcony window where the king stood. It pierced his shoulder from behind. Collapsing onto the bed railing, he called for his personal aid. Sylvia and Jacob ran to his side.

“Oh father!” shouted Sylvia, clutching his side.

“King Fredrick!” shouted Jacob, shocked by the horribly unexpected occurrence.

Jacob offered his shoulder for the king to lean on as he sat up against the bed. The king’s personal servant and fellow countryman flew into the room, calling for the doctor.

“No!” answered the king. “There’s no time. I must rally my troops.”

“But sir,” said the servant, “The neighbors form a middling army, I wouldn’t be surprised if the guards on duty could handle the uprising themselves.”

“No,” said the king. “Their armies have never worked together like this before. I saw myself. They are massing too quickly at the edge of the forest. I am afraid that we are not prepared for an attack such as this. I must have time to issue a defensive strategy.”

“I’m afraid there is no time for that now,” came a voice from the hall.

The head of palace security leaned against the door, panting.

“The city is taken. We have a few minutes at the most before they come parading up these stairs. It is over, my lord. We just weren’t ready for this. I’m... sorry,” and with this he fell to his knees, his head hung in disgrace.

The king lifted himself and hobbled over to the balcony once more. Witnessing the dismantling of his beautiful city’s walls and the grouping of relentless soldiers at his own doorstep, he conceded.

“Sylvia, I need you to listen to me,” he began, sitting back down on the bed with a wince.

“Yes, father. What is it?”

“I need you to leave the Secret Forest.”

To Sylvia, these words were devastating. Her eyes searched her father's face, wanting desperately for him to recant the words she hoped she would never hear. In her mind, it was utterly forbidden.

"No, father! I would never do such a thing! It is unforgivable."

"Sylvia, do not be stubborn. I am the King and I tell you now that you must leave. Also, I am your father and I know what's best for you. Now you must listen to me. It is the only way to keep you safe. Otherwise they may take you away from me, and I could *never* let that happen."

Sylvia crossed her arms in defiance and turned away from the king. Her face scrunched up as if she was about to throw a fit, but her father ignored it.

"Go with Darnish. He will take you away from here. But you cannot stop. You must keep going until you are completely out."

Jacob felt a sudden weight of expectation fall on his shoulders. He did not want to lead away a princess, especially with the charge of keeping her safe. Sure, in his daydreams the thought of rescuing a princess would have been 'all in a day's work,' as they say. But now, when he was faced with the real danger of a pursuing army of angry soldiers, he had no courage left to comply with the request.

"Sir," he began, trying to sound as diplomatic as possible. "I don't know the way out of the forest. I am not even exactly positive how I arrived here in the first place."

"You must take her," said King Fredrick, sternly. "I am counting on you to bring my daughter to safety. Here."

Reaching for a lever along the wall, King Fredrick revealed a passageway into a dark tunnel that opened next to his bed. There was an ever-widening dark circle around his wound, and beads of sweat were forming on his princely brow.

"Take this tunnel until you come out into a clearing. You must cross a shallow river, and then directly in front of you will be an entrance to The Caves of Remembrance."

"You cannot send them in there!" gasped the king's

servant.

“I know what I’m doing,” answered the king, compellingly. “They will be fine. Sylvia, listen to me. Forget everything you have heard about those caves. All you need to remember is that you must keep running. Never stop running.”

Sylvia felt horrible inside. She could not believe that her father was telling her to leave the forest or enter The Caves of Remembrance, but she trusted her father. So she attempted to show as much courage as she could bear to express.

“I will go,” she said, and with a glance at his shoulder, “You will be fine without me, right father?”

“Yes, child,” he said, reverting once more to a gentler, kind-hearted tone. “Remember that my love for you is always.”

“My love for you is forever,” she said, wrapping her arms around him tightly, sobbing deeply into his embrace.

Footsteps pounded up the great staircase down the hall from the king’s quarters. The neighbors had found their way in and were storming the palace. The king’s servant woke the palace guard from his stupor and exited the room, attempting to give the king as much time as they could before the soldiers would arrive.

“Go, now,” the king said with finality, holding Sylvia by the shoulders, then pointing to the tunnel. “Don’t hesitate, and don’t turn back, no matter what you hear.”

Sylvia went first, and Jacob followed her. She turned around to get one last glance at her father as he sat there. He smiled at her.

“Come on,” said Jacob, turning around.

As he turned to face the long dark tunnel, all of a sudden he felt an obstructively eerie presence. His heartbeat was like a stampede of elephants. It was as if someone who should not have been there had just arrived. At first he just thought it was the emotion of witnessing such a solemn departure mixing with the adrenaline that made him sick, but then he remembered where he had last encountered the same

feeling. He looked past the king, and there at the entrance to the room he saw it. Standing under the frame of the door was the black figure that he had seen in the space station. Its shadowy garments floated into the room as it eyed the king.

“King Fredrick!” shouted Jacob. “Wait!”

The figure’s dark eyes (or better yet, the depression where a pair of eyes should have been) suddenly directed their attention to Jacob. Then the door to the tunnel was shut. Jacob slammed himself against the door, but it did not budge.

“Wait! We have to go back!” shouted Jacob.

“He said not to turn back,” said Sylvia, wiping her tears. “We must do as he requested. We have to make it to the caves.”

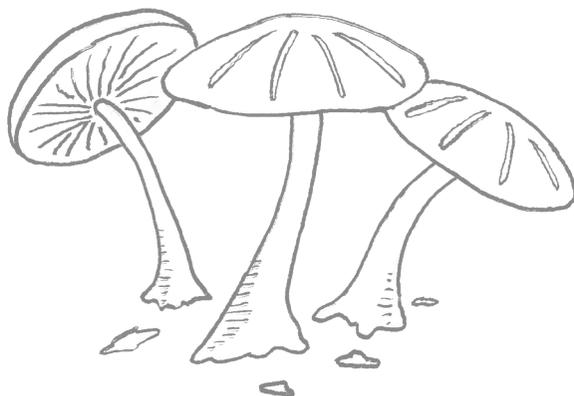
She took Jacob’s hand and pulled him away from the door.

“You have to take me there,” she said.

Jacob flushed with shame. He felt less than qualified to lead her, but the excitement of the moment was beginning to stir inside him. He looked into her wet struggling eyes and he shared a propelling grief. His chest lifted with determination.

“Okay,” he said, nodding his head and gripping her hand tighter.





CHAPTER 4: THE CAVES OF REMEMBRANCE



Jacob and Sylvia hurried through the tunnel until they found themselves on a dark staircase. They descended slowly so they wouldn't lose their footings, but their steps still faltered once or twice. Eventually arriving at a stone barricade, they dug their way through and surfaced at the foot of a small glen.

"The Caves of Remembrance," said Sylvia, stretching her view across the glen.

"I see them," replied Jacob, peering in all directions for fear of being caught along the way.

He grabbed her hand once more and they dashed through the tall grass. It was only a hundred yards distance to the caves, but a small barrier of trees made them lose their way a bit. They were almost to the mouth of the cave when an arrow struck the tree in front of them.

"Get down!" whispered Jacob.

Falling into a cover of brush, Jacob and Sylvia attempted to hide themselves. A soldier from the neighboring village appeared out of the woods. Another followed closely behind.

“Blasted!” said the first soldier, removing his arrow from the tree, which stood only a leap away from where Jacob and Sylvia lay motionless.

“What sort of games are you playing now?” asked the second soldier. “We need to reroute and join with the battalion or else we are certainly going to have a deal of explaining to do about where we ran off to. What have you been shooting at?”

“I thought I saw a deer,” said the first soldier suspiciously as he eyed the opening in the rock.

“We are in the middle of an invasion and you fancy chasing deer through the woods? I say you are mad. I’d be more afraid for your own hide and skin now, what with us being gone so long.”

He glanced up and around. Jacob caught a quick look at his face and it was a simple guess to say the man was deeply anxious about something.

“Besides, there isn’t any way the poor creature went into there, at least not if he had any sense.” He spoke with the tone that one only acquires when about to tell of legend, “That place is marked with a dreadful curse. I heard of a lad who ventured in there when I was a boy. His father went in after him with a rope tied round his waist and a group of comrades waiting to pull him out. Eventually the rope just went loose and neither were ever heard from again.”

“Wait,” the first soldier whispered suddenly, turning his back to the cave. “I heard something.”

Jacob looked over at Sylvia uncomfortably. He didn’t know how much longer he could go without moving. Then, the soldiers were gone.

“Let’s go,” he murmured.

They leapt up and dashed as quietly as possible to the entrance of the cave. Jacob paused at the entrance.

Sylvia motioned for him to follow her as she stepped inside.

“W-wait,” said Jacob, struggling to form his thoughts into words without sounding less than courageous. “What did that soldier mean when he said this place was cursed?”

Sylvia was trying to avoid the thought herself, because she had been raised hearing the terrible tales about the caves. However, she swallowed her fear and explained as briefly as she could manage.

“The Caves of Remembrance should rather be called The Caves of Forgetfulness because of their ability to make one forget everything he has ever known.”

“You mean that’s it?” asked Jacob, reassured. “You just forget everything?”

“It’s a terrible thing,” said Sylvia. “Countless people have tried to forge a way through the caves and have never returned. The ones that do return are said to have gone mad with the loss of their own memories.”

The weight of a childhood belief hung on Sylvia’s mind. She would never have dared to enter the caves except that her father had persuaded her to do so. She was set in her heart to please him, even if it meant losing her mind.

“That doesn’t sound all that bad really,” said Jacob, entering the cave. “I wonder if it effects children the same way.”

“What makes you say that?” asked Sylvia.

“Well, we haven’t been alive as long as adults, so we shouldn’t have as many memories to lose. Therefore, we must lose memories at a slower rate. So as long as we can just remember one thing, we should be fine.”

“And what is that?” asked Sylvia, trying to understand his reasoning.

“Twice a man did understand, but never by plan, oh never by plan,” said Jacob.

“What?” Sylvia asked, now duly confused.

“It’s a poem that my mom used to read to me,” Jacob explained. “Its means that above all else you need to

remember one thing, but in this case that one thing is that we need to remember to not stop walking no matter what.”

“Do you actually think that will work?” asked Sylvia, letting hope begin to cultivate.

“I know it will. We just need to remember to keep walking,” replied Jacob, reassuringly. “If we can hold onto that thought, we should be able to find a way out.”

Sylvia agreed and together they ventured forward. The Caves of Remembrance were not grand and open. They were instead more like a series of tunnels and small chambers that were lit solely by the light of incandescent worms that lived along the damp ceilings and walls. The air was dense with moisture, and the worms grew scant, which made it hard to see the path at times. After a few minutes of walking, neither of them felt any different, except that Sylvia began to grow a little bored.

“Hey, you’re kind of smart for a boy your age,” she said, trying to make conversation.

“Why do you say that?” asked Jacob.

“Well, you had the idea that we just need to remember to keep walking. That’s a pretty clever thing to come up with,” she said encouragingly. “And even if I forget everything else, I’m fairly certain I can remember that one simple thing.”

“I hope so,” said Jacob, beginning to doubt his own plan. “I guess it does seem to be working though. So far I haven’t forgotten anything that I can remember.”

Sylvia laughed a high, silvery laugh that sent a pleasant shiver up Jacob’s spine.

“What?” Jacob asked, fraught with curiosity.

“It just sounded funny is all,” she laughed. “So, where are you from, Darnish?”

Jacob had yet to inform Sylvia of his real name.

“I’m from a city, but it isn’t like your city at all.”

“How is it different?”

“We don’t have a king, for one thing. Instead we have things like mayors and councilmen and stuff like that.”

“What do they do?”

“I don’t know. What does your father do?”

“He tells people what to do and how to live all day. I think everyone looks up to him because I’ve never heard anyone talk bad about him.”

“You really seem to love him.”

“Who?” asked Sylvia.

“Your father,” replied Jacob.

“Oh, yes I do indeed. I wish he was here right now.”

“Well, where is he?”

“I don’t know. If I did, I would tell you.”

“I’m sure I wouldn’t mind if you did. Where is your mother then?”

Sylvia looked puzzled at Jacob.

“Well?” she asked.

“Well, what?” asked Jacob.

“I just asked you where your mother was. Aren’t you going to answer me?”

“I thought I asked you that,” he replied. “Either way, my mother is at work. Sometimes she works all day and doesn’t come home until it is dark outside.”

“Does that bother you?”

“Does what bother me?”

Sylvia paused to think about what she had said.

“When its dark outside,” she decided at last.

“Oh the darkness? No, that doesn’t work all day. The light does that. The darkness comes out at night.”

“That’s what I thought,” said Sylvia.

“Of course, the rainy days are the worst,” Jacob continued. “It’s like I said, the rainy days are my favorite. Do you like the rain?”

“What?” asked Sylvia.

“I asked, did you hike to Spain?” replied Jacob.

Now this sounded somewhat odd to Sylvia. She had not thought that they were speaking about Spain. In fact, she did not even know what Spain was because she had never heard of it before. Jacob happened to be thinking the same thing at that very moment. He had not thought that they

were speaking about Spain, and though he had heard of Spain before, he could not think of what it was either.

“Strange girl,” said Jacob.

“Yes?” Sylvia answered.

“I think it has happened.”

“What has happened?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he replied. “I just can’t help but think that there is something I should be doing right now. Do you suppose you know what it is?”

“No, I can’t say that I do,” said Sylvia.

Jacob and Sylvia stopped walking and stood still for a few moments in silence. They had journeyed no short distance and were now in the very heart of the cave. If they could remember what the rest of the cave had looked like, they would have realized that the room they were now in was much wider and brighter than the previous caverns. Though both of them expressed no desire to do anything but continue standing where they were, Jacob had a slight inclination that he ought to be doing something more. He looked down the tunnel that they had come from and then down another leading out of the cavern. Then he noticed that someone else was in the cave with him. It was a young girl with beautiful big brown eyes and an excessively frilly purple dress.

“Sorry,” said Jacob. “I did not see you there. I hope I didn’t startle you.”

“Oh heavens no,” Sylvia replied. “I just hope I didn’t startle you.”

“No, you didn’t,” said Jacob.

They stood there staring at one another for a few seconds until Jacob finally had the idea that he should say something else.

“Do you have the time?” he asked.

“Time for what?” she asked in return.

“I don’t know,” he replied. “But I can’t help but think that it’s something. If only I could remember.”

Just then, a chill began at the back of Jacob’s neck and flittered its way down his spine until it had disappeared.

“Did you feel that?” he asked.

“Feel what?” asked Sylvia.

“I’m not sure,” said Jacob, “But I feel like I’ve felt it somewhere before.”

In saying this, Jacob turned his head back toward the direction they had come. At the entrance to the narrow tunnel from which they had entered the cavernous room stood the black figure that he had last seen in King Fredrick’s chambers. In the darkness, it was difficult for Jacob to witness its full shape and form.

“What is that?” he asked the girl next to him, pointing into the darkness.

Upon looking at it, she at once stepped back in fright.

“Good heavens!” she exclaimed. “What is that?”

“I don’t know,” answered Jacob, “But I have a feeling that I’ve seen it somewhere before.”

Suddenly, an eerie feeling enveloped both Jacob and Sylvia. Then the creature opened its mouth, forming words that melted the air like fire on ice. It spoke slowly, laughing out a hoarse and creepy whisper.

“You know me, Jacob,” it said, floating toward the two children.

“Who is Jacob?” asked Sylvia, taking a step away from the creature.

“I don’t know,” said Jacob, “But I don’t feel very good inside right now.”

“Me neither,” said Sylvia.

Neither of them could keep their eyes off of the black figure as it glided toward them. It seemed as if it propelled itself along the walls and through the air with its flowing misty robes.

“You will remember me,” it whispered as it neared Jacob and began to float up over him.

“Remember,” said Jacob. “That is what I was trying to do. What was I trying to remember?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” said Sylvia, staring frightfully at the blackness that was presently surrounding them.

“I was supposed to remember to keep something, but what was it?”

“I’m not sure,” said Sylvia.

“No. We were supposed to remember to do something,” said Jacob.

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” said Sylvia.

“You must know!” shouted Jacob and he began to lose sight of Sylvia. “Because we were supposed to remember. You and I. Think, Sylvia!”

Sylvia looked into Jacob’s eyes.

“What did you say?” she asked, trembling because of the cold air rushing into her lungs and stinging her eyes.

“Twice a man did understand, but never by plan, oh never by plan,” he said.

“What?” she asked.

“Sylvia,” Jacob repeated. “Why have we stopped walking? We need to keep walking.”

Grabbing her hand, Jacob unwittingly pulled Sylvia from the clutches of the icy figure and led her out of the darkness. They walked steadily through the halls of the cave, not stopping to look left or right. Unknowingly, the darkness trailed behind them, now furious that they had left so quickly. It grasped its shadowy fingers along the rocky surfaces of the tunnel, growing closer and closer to the children with every step. After a few minutes, Jacob was able to see light splitting through a crack in the distance. The exit was near, but the darkness closed in too quickly. It latched its heartless grip around Sylvia’s ankle, pulling her down. She screamed and let go of Jacob’s hand.

“Please!” she yelled. “Help me!”

Jacob peered down at Sylvia. He could see her laying there, being dragged slowly into the darkness, but he could not bring himself to understand the situation. It was as if he wanted to do something for her but it would have to wait until he had accomplished the most present task in his mind.

“I’m sorry, Sylvia, but we have to remember to keep walking,” said Jacob.

Turning around, he followed the light until a grassy meadow was just beginning to make itself visible. Just before he stepped out of the cave, a whiff of clean, cool air rushed in and filled his lungs. He was suddenly caught up in a memory of King Fredrick staring him deeply in the face.

“I am counting on you to bring my daughter to safety,” were the words which filled Jacob’s mind.

A solemn dread ached in Jacob’s heart and he ran back into the cave faster than his feet would carry him. He leapt into the darkness and wrapped both his arms around Sylvia. He pulled and pulled but she would not be let free. Then Jacob found himself surrounded by icy hands and the terrible touch of death. He cried out.

“Help! Anyone, please help us!”

Then the darkness was too much and he collapsed.



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