

THE GREEN DOOR

A Secret Doorway Tale: Book One

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There was a little gray shed in the woods, near a small neighborhood. A lonely little thing it was, sitting by itself in a clearing, not very far from a yellow house with white shutters. The shed was overrun with winding, withered vines and it sat in a sea of wildflowers. It had a green door and it had been standing there for as long as anyone who lived in the area could remember. If anyone actually remembered that it was there. Few did.

Not far away, in the yellow house with the white shutters lived a little girl with long, brown corkscrew curls named Anne Greene. Anne loved trees, flowers, ladybugs and old, found things. She also loved stories about fairies, imps and other fairytale creatures. In fact, she was something of an imp herself and she always remembered things. *You have the memory of an elephant!* Mama would always tell her. The shed was there when her family first moved in to the yellow house, lonely and hugged round with ivy. With the green door. Green was her favorite color because trees and grass and plants were green. She would pass it by on her way to and back from school, always wondering what was inside. Of course, the door was locked. She had already tried it. Once, she even tried to peep through the keyhole. Her eye spied nothing but dusty darkness. A few boys from school had thrown rocks through its one window which was too high for Anne to climb up and see through. Dad said to stay away from it since it wasn't their shed and that what the boys did was wrong. It was very old and forlorn, and after the broken window, Anne thought it now looked abused.

One night mama and dad had a big barbecue. The sun was beginning to sink down so dad lit the torches. The mosquito coils smoked. Smoke tendrils lifted themselves lazily around the torches and their burnt, sweet scent mingled with the scents of the roasted meats and the roasted corn they had all eaten. The sky was layered in violet, bright pink and gold swatches of color. Earlier, Anne and some of her friends next door picked blackberries and then climbed trees, especially their favorite one, the great walnut tree next door, but that was short-lived as the old walnut tree was full of webs and worms from leaf to root. In fact, until the barbecue it had been a year since they had climbed it because all the walnuts were now infested with tiny, white squiggling worms in the shells and gobs of cobwebs enveloped the tree. The neighbors didn't quite know why or what to do about it as nothing they did seemed to make the worms and webs go away. Anne hated cobwebs and worms and so did her friends. So they wiped the webs off, climbed down and contented themselves with picking dandelions, eating more blackberries, playing chase, eating ribs, hotdogs corn-on-the-cob and drinking bubblegum sodas. By late evening most of the guests, along with their children had left. Only a few remained and they had no children. Every now and then she could hear the relaxed twitter of laughter coming from the adults on the other side of the backyard. They sat with her parents talking about the woods. Anne was busy with something new she had found; new and wonderful, so she only heard snatches of conversation.

"The trees. Something's very wrong. They aren't healthy like they used to be."

"Too much ivy.choking out the native plants and killing the trees...."

"Forests in trouble...have you seen lightening bugs? I've seen them around lately. I've never seen them on the west coast, though. Strange."

Anne was playing with these very bugs. She didn't find them strange in the least. They were new to her. *Fireflies*, dad called them. Their tiny bodies winked on and off like flashbulbs and they would light upon her hand or arm and fly off again. Anne loved it. She had never seen anything like them. She only knew them from what her mama had explained when mama lived in New York long ago. One thing everyone agreed on was that they weren't normally seen out west and it might be an odd sign, but of what, no one knew. In any case, Anne was delighted and hoped they would stay around. Such wonderful little bugs couldn't possibly be a bad thing. She was fascinated with their little winking, blinking lights. The voices faded into the background. A little ginger cat came sauntering out of the tangled mass of blackberry bushes that separated their backyard from the rest of the woods. It waved its tail lazily, purring gently and pawed at her.

"Where did you come from!" Anne asked, surprised. The cat rubbed up against her leg and allowed her to pet its back. Suddenly, it ran and leapt into the bushes and mewled. Anne followed, first glancing back to see if her parents were watching. Many times they had warned her not to leave the yard. *But just this once! It won't matter! Maybe I can keep the kitty! Besides, I AM seven years old! I'm big enough!* she thought indignantly. *I'll be back in a short while.* Anne shifted her

weight on to her tip toes and slid through the vines and bushes and through a hole in the hidden, blackberry entangled fence. The cat mewed softly and pattered on to a trail in back of the fence and looked back at her as if to say: *Hurry!*

She followed, stumbling out on to the wide trail. Anne trailed the ginger cat down the main path and then on to a tiny, off shoot dirt path through tall grasses, sticky, prickly bushes and under the great fir and oak trees; their coats of green darkening under the shades of setting sunlight. The cat quickened its pace, approaching the clearing in the wood where the shed stood. Anne sneezed and brushed off twigs, crusty leaves and dandelion puffs from her shirt and arms. To her surprise there was a light coming from the shed, shining through it's broken window. The cat ran to the shed and then padded around to the back. Anne crept forward, staring at the light within. *Who's in there?* she thought. Anne gingerly pressed her hand against the door. It felt rough and tiny chips of faded paint flaked off and fell to the ground. She bent down and peeked through the keyhole. In the past she saw nothing but darkness but now there was light! Bright and yellow like sunlight but she could see nothing else. Only bright, yellow light. Nothing that indicated what the shed looked like on the inside. Surely, someone had to be in there! She knocked softly, her heart thumping heavily.

“Hello? Anybody in there? Hello?” She called out. No answer.

“Kitty? Kitty! Where are you?” Anne looked around for the ginger cat. She went around to the back of the shed but it had disappeared. Besides the soft, twittering calls of a few birds and a slight wind rustling the tree leaves, it was quiet. Anne pushed, then pulled at the rusty door handle but still it remained locked. She decided to hurry back home before her parents found out that she had gone. She would come out tomorrow and explore the shed and look for the cat. After all, it was summer vacation. As long as she did her chores she would have plenty of time for exploring and this was a mystery to be solved! Anne ran back home, wondering who had managed to get inside the shed and what, or who, was in there.

2

Anne was helping mama make blackberry jam. She hadn't been able to go back to the shed the next day or even the day after that. Nor did she see the little ginger cat again, but her mind was still on the shed with the green door. This morning they had gone on a day trip to a huge field near Marine Drive with a vast horde of blackberry bushes, picked enough to fill two large baskets and came home and put them to good use. Mama had tried to make her wear one of her many wide- brimmed straw hats but Anne loved to feel the sun on her cheeks and she never burned. So mama settled for sunscreen for Anne. After all, her skin was light copper, not ivory fair like mama's.

Anne loved cooking with mama. It always felt like something dad called alchemy. Or magic. Or both. You took one thing in one form, mixed other things with it and it turned into something else. And usually it tasted good! Mama was also going to make a blackberry cobbler for dessert that evening. Anne, in between tasting jam, wondered what happened to the cat. She helped with the canning and then mama fixed her a peanut butter and blackberry jam sandwich and raw milk. Afterward, Anne had to clean her room. She glanced outside her window towards the backyard nearly every five minutes. The sun was bright as butter and the sky a clear blue. A cool breeze blew in from the window. Anne opened her bedroom window even wider. She thought she saw something on the window sill. Little paw prints in the film of dust. An orange ladybug trailed through one of the prints. *But the cat couldn't be in the room because the window had barely been open.* Just so, she got excited all over again. After cleaning her room she tried to read but she felt restless. So she went outside and blew bubbles until dinner time. The weather was hot but the many trees surrounding the house made the evening tolerable. Amongst the trees that were still full of thick, summer green foliage some looked withered and even skeletal. A few trees that were living just a year ago were clearly dead. It made her sad. Some people said that more and more trees might end up that way one day. Anne heard an odd sound that woke her from her sad thoughts on dying trees. She thought someone had called her name. It wasn't her mother. She looked around and saw nothing out of the ordinary. In fact, she wasn't sure what she had heard. She thought that it might have been a chorus of crickets that sounded like they were chirping: “Anne! Anne!” But it was still too early in the evening for crickets. There was a soft rustling in the bushes at the back fence but she couldn't see the source of it. Then mama called her inside. Frowning and looking around one last time, she went in for dinner.

3

Dad had read her a fairy story, one of her favorites, and then kissed her goodnight. He turned out the lamp light and closed the door but the broad slice of light from the hallway spreading out under the door made Anne feel comforted. Besides, even though it was nine o'clock, it wasn't completely black night outside. She could still see the deep embers of sunset burning down out her window. Dad had gone downstairs to watch TV. She heard the soft buzz of the program he and mama were watching. The familiar sounds of the same program they watched every weeknight. Anne closed her eyes and drifted. When she opened them again the silver orb of the moon was shining its soft light into her room. It spilled over the window sill and onto the floor, illuminating the spot of carpet under it. The window was open and the curtains fluttered lazily in the night breeze. But a noise startled her. A scratching sound outside her window. Suddenly, there appeared two shining orbs. The orbs blinked and she heard a loud purring sound. In the moonlight she saw a creature steal through the

window. It jumped quietly over the sill and hopped down to the floor. She sat up in bed to get a better look. It had a small shadow with a long, bushy tail. *It must be the cat!* It had something in its mouth that it deposited on the floor.

“Hello. What are you doing here? How did you get in?” She whispered. The cat shaped shadow, looking ink black in the dark, cocked its head to one side, staring at her.

“Are you hungry? I don't know if mama will let me keep you. Dad might!” She whispered. She slipped soundlessly from her covers and out of bed. It simply stared, its eyes glowing like two fat fireflies. They seemed to brighten as she tiptoed closer to it. Then it leaped out the window and bounded away.

“Wait, kitty! Awww!” Anne pouted. She went to the window. It had left a little scroll on the floor. Anne picked it up and unrolled it. By the bright moon light she read it :

*to unlock the green door in the woods
you must gather four things: a bone,
a bag made of animal skin,
something made of iron and a silver ring. you must
find these things in three day's time. put all of them
in the bag and leave them by the window. leave
the window open.*

Anne was terribly excited. *So, there IS a way to open the green door!* She was suddenly going to have an adventure! She rolled the scroll up and crept back into her bed and then slipped it under her pillow. It took a long time to get back to sleep again as her imagination buzzed with ideas about what might lie behind the green door, and afterward, *what* the ginger cat that came to her window *really was*.

4

Anne rose very early that morning to collect the things on her list. She was so excited that her hands trembled as she pulled off her gown and put on her clothes. Mama and dad were still asleep down the hall. The house was silent except for her muffled movements. She tried to be as quiet as a ladybug. She was sure she would find most of the things on the list – except one. Where was she going to find a bone?

She padded down the hall, downstairs towards the basement. Dad kept a lot of old treasures and odd knickknacks down there. She unlatched the chain and slowly opened the door. The hinges squealed like an injured animal. She stopped and listened to hear for her parents waking. Silence. She slid between the narrow opening and descended downstairs. Where it was warm in her room she could feel the cool breath of air down in the basement. It was dark. Anne ran her hands along the wall, feeling for the light switch. She found it and turned it on and saw all of the treasures - junk mama called it - in boxes and shelves. Somewhere in here there had to be a leather bag. She knew that leather was cow skin and it was usually black or brown. She waded through huge boxes, dust filled curio cabinets and suitcases. The basement air smelled of dust, musk and mothballs. By the wall near the furnace was the box she was looking for. She waded over to the box which was spilling over with old, forgotten bags and purses. She flipped through bags full of holes, some she found with dead moths inside, some with broken straps and some that were simply too big. She finally came upon a black leather handbag as big and wide as her stomach with a good leather strap. It had the look and feel of a good, worn leather coat and it had only one compartment. She slung it over her shoulder, satisfied with her find and went back upstairs. The heat was already beginning to press in. Through the living room windows Anne saw that the sun was just beginning to crown and the sky was awash in soft pink and gold. Anne tiptoed back to her room and went straight to her jewelry box with the dancing ballerina wind-up doll on it. She fished out a small, silver ring given to her by her grandma when she was a baby. It had her name engraved on the inside. It was so tiny that she could only fit it on her pinky finger and even then, she couldn't get it past the first section of her pinky. She carefully placed it in the bag. She now needed a piece of iron. She thought of dad's tools in the garage. She was going to have to be careful. Dad didn't like her messing with his tools but this time it was important! Down the hall she could hear them stirring. Mama would be rising and getting ready to make breakfast soon. She hid her bag under the bed and went to take a bath. She didn't want anything to spoil her adventure, least of all mama and dad asking questions! She would have a busy day ahead and she still had two more things to collect.

Later that afternoon Anne finally made her way to the garage. She had been outside playing all day and decided to finish her treasure hunt. A little purple dragonfly with shimmering purple and copper rings across its long body glided gracefully by over head. It lowered itself and lighted on the rim of her glass. She was sipping on a glass of homemade lemonade full of ice cubes. *What pretty colors!* She reached out her hand to touch the dragonfly and it flew off as quickly as it had come. Earlier in her dad's study after breakfast, she brought up Google Search and found out that nails were often made of iron. Dad had millions of nails in the garage! She sneaked into the garage, thankful for the shade from the heat, and looked around for the shelves behind the old washing machine beside the old pickup. Once behind the machine, she wondered where to start looking. There were too many rows of steel shelves full of tools and other odds and ends too numerous to count. She made her way over to the other end to investigate. She found old toys she no longer played with and

a big box of bottled sodas, but beside those she found a large box of nails, some of them very rusty. *Nails!*

“Anne! Where are you?” Mama called out from somewhere in the house.

“Nowhere!” She called, trying to figure out where to hide her latest find.

“What are you doing?”

“Nothing!” She heard footsteps approaching the garage door that led into the house. She took the box with her, slipped around the washing machine and the pickup and ran from the garage to the backyard and into the house. She went upstairs and hid the box of nails under her bed.

“Coming mama!”

“What were you up to in the garage?”

“I was looking at my old toys.”

“I thought you were in the yard!”

“I was!”

“Child, I swear! It seems like you are always in two places at once! Come, I need to you to help me with dinner. Wash your hands first!” Mama called from downstairs. Anne dutifully washed up, got her apron from her bottom dresser drawer, put it on and went to the kitchen to help fix dinner. Anne examined the foods on the cutting board on the counter near the oven. That was where mama gathered all her ingredients she would need to cook dinner. It just so happened that they were having beef ribs cooked in the oven. And beef ribs had great, big bones! Anne smiled to herself. The last thing on her list had been handed to her by mama!

5

That night the moon was full and it was the color of lemonade. It cast a wide swath of light down over the window and spread itself on the floor like a curtain. The house was still. In the far distance she heard a dog barking. Anne couldn't sleep. She had managed to hide one of the long beef bones under the table and when it was safe to retrieve it, she put that also in her bag. She stared at the bag across the room. It sat in a wooden chair by the window. The curtains fluttered quietly. She could feel the breeze against her skin. She propped herself up with one of the pillows and got one of her favorite books from the night stand to read. When the cat came she would be ready and waiting for it to see what it would do. The moonlight was so bright that she could read some of the words and see the pictures. Anne's eyes began to droop and she drifted off into dreams of delicate fairy wings carrying her off and tiny motes of dust and light surrounding her. . . . and the little ginger cat came in with light feet. It's eyes shined like lights as it sniffed at her while she slept. It stole over to the chair and grabbed the leather bag handle in its mouth and bounded up upon the window sill again and out the window to get on with its business.

When Anne woke up it was late, or at least late for her. It was already nine o'clock. She looked around and then looked for the bag in the chair. She went to the chair and peered inside the bag. She found a key as long as her hand, slim, creamy colored, made of the beef bone. It had three prongs on the end and a loop at the other end and it was ribbed with tiny slivers of copper that gleamed. Anne marveled at it. Then she found a small object, made of the nails she put in the bag. The nails were glued together and wound up with thin, strong wire in to the shape of a small hammer. Anne turned it around in her hands. She wondered why she would need to use such a thing.

“Oww!” She cried. It was very sharp with the pointy ends of the nail poking out here and there. She saw bright specks of blood welling up and pooling on her palms. The blood ran down the handle and soaked into the nails like water into a sponge and the hammer shined softly with a scarlet light every place the blood soaked in. Her hands started to sting from the little wounds. Gingerly she set the hammer back into the bag, worrying over how or why she would use it. She wiped away the blood with a tissue. The last thing in the bag she pulled out was her beloved silver ring. It had been enlarged to fit her forefinger! Her heart leapt in wonder at her new finds. She put the ring back into the bag and found last of all, another scroll:

*tomorrow you must go through the door.
use the key of bone, for only bones can unlock
the doorway. The door will unlock only
when you turn the key three times. wear the silver ring, for it
can give you safe passage to this land. bring all the things
with you inside the bag when you cross over for they will
disappear if they are not protected by the animal skin.
there is something in Other Land that your forests need
and we have heard your silent call. tell no one.*

6

It was tomorrow already and Anne was washed, dressed with breakfast in her belly and her leather purse hanging over her shoulder. It was noticeably cooler than it had been the day before so Anne donned a sweater.

“Where did you find that purse, little one?” Mama asked, eyeing it with interest.

“I found it in my closet. I'm going to collect flowers and rocks again.”

“Ahh. Well, see that you don't track in too much dirt into the house on your excursion, little one.”

“I won't mama!” As soon as that, Anne was out the door and on her adventure. She felt a little guilty about not telling mama what she was really up to but this was important business and mama wouldn't understand. She would just tell her that there was no such thing as Other Land and that she needed to stay put in the yard and play. So Anne pretended to play in the yard and as soon as her mother's figure could no longer be seen in the kitchen window she was off to the shed. As soon as she stepped onto the trail beyond the hidden back fence the cat appeared, underfoot. She and the cat climbed up the small offshoot dirt path towards the clearing. Anne fished for her bone key and drew it out. She looked at it again. It was so beautiful with its ribs of copper. She put it into the lock and turned it three times, her heart racing. There was a click and the door opened. Anne jumped back and the little cat slipped in and disappeared through the doorway. She pushed the door open slowly and on the other end she saw another open doorway! Beyond that was a vast field of tall green and purple grasses and beyond that, a dark forest, far in the distance. It almost seemed as if it were simply the forest on her side of the door, except there were no purple grasses on *her* side, so the doorway was not simply the back door to the other side of the shed. It actually *was* another place!

“Other Land.” Anne said quietly. She stepped into the shed. Inside it was musty and dim and shards of glass littered the floor. The walls were made of wood but it was bare and empty of any tools or anything at all. She put her key away, put on her silver ring and drew out her hammer – she had wrapped part of the handle carefully in thick cloth to protect her hands. She walked through the shed and stepped out into Other Land. The cat had disappeared in the tall grasses and flowers ahead. The meadow on the other side was vast and a forest fringed all around it. The flowers here sprouted up by the thousands, maybe more and the colors more vivid than any she had ever seen. Behind her she heard the door shut and lock. She looked back and the green door was no longer there. The hammer seemed to take on its own life with all the gray and rust with scarlet spots that shimmered here and there. She could feel the warmth flowing from it into her hand. She tucked it and her bag underneath her sweater. A light mist hovered over the field, cool and crisp. Even so, the flowers in their bright colors could be seen faintly through the mists, poking out like myriads of tiny points of light through frosted glass. The cat had gone but suddenly standing in front of her, smiling was a little boy around her height and who looked to be her age. He had large amber colored eyes with dark brown skin like her dad and bright, orange, woolly hair. He wore a coat and breeches of leaves.

“Who are you?”

“My name is Zi. When I am on the other side in your world, I'm a cat. It is the only way I can cross the doorway and be seen.”

“So you're the little cat? Why are you a cat in my world?” Anne asked, delighted. Zi frowned. His amber eyes darkened.

“The Queen made it so. Queen Faye, she is called, the Winter Queen. She did this to me long ago so that I could not leave Other Land. I wasn't always one of the fairy folk. I used to be like you. Until I found a doorway into this world.”

“There are other doors?”

“Yes. When I came here for the first time, I didn't know that there are certain things you need to protect yourself and certain things you should know before you meet the fairy folk. It is dangerous to not know.”

“Fairies aren't dangerous!” Anne laughed. Zi gave her a solemn look, his eyes darkened to nearly black, like buckwheat honey.

“Yes, Anne many of them are. Very dangerous. Especially the Winter Queen and those who follow her. There are two fairy Queens in Other Land. The summer and the winter. Faye is Winter and we don't know where the summer queen is or what has happened to her. But all of that is not your problem. I brought you here because you need something to heal the forests of your own land. Follow me.” Zi started off across the field, with Anne following on his heels.

“How do you know my name?”

“I have heard your mother and father call you that name. I notice and hear many things as a cat.” Anne thought that it must be wonderful to change into a cat, but then she remembered that Zi could not go home. She hoped she never saw or met this Winter Queen. Still, Anne was curious. She had never heard of a Winter Queen before.

“Who is Queen Faye?” She asked.

“The one who rules this land now. Because she is Winter and not summer, her powers are not strong, but she is still dangerous. My folk and I must find the Summer Queen for *she* is our Queen.”

“But it's still summer. It's not winter yet. How can the Summer Queen be gone when it's still summer?”

“Because she is still alive. For now.”

“This Winter Queen sounds horrible! I hope you find your summer Queen, Zi. These things you gave me, what do these things in my bag mean?”

“They each have a purpose to help you. Most fairies hate iron and can be hurt by iron. So, the iron hammer. Silver is

something that can be used as a gift and it can help protect you once you enter inside a fairy ring or come to Other Land. Sometimes it can cloak you from unfriendly eyes, make you harder to find. Not from all, though. Like plants, animal and human life is sacred to many fairy folk and so the bones of such beings can open such doors like the green door and objects from here going there or from there coming here can only pass the doorway carried in skins. Thus, your key fashioned from the bone and your leather bag. The Queen cursed me so that I could not leave this place. I entered her realm in winter, thinking I had found a wondrous place full of merriment and beauty. I had forgotten the old stories about who and what fairies were and how they treated humans who did not know their ways. Most people no longer believe we exist and so they do not teach their children fairy lore anymore. When children today find doorways that are not locked and they cross, most never come back. Terrible things befall them, for some fairies are cruel. The Summer Queen, Titian is her name, she took pity on me and lessened the cruelty of the spell Faye put upon me. But even she would not change me back into a human child. I had nothing to offer her as a gift. So I am able to cross into the world I used to live in, but only as a cat.”

“Like the fairies in Sleeping Beauty helped soften the witch's curse on her by making her sleep instead of die?” Anne asked. Zi nodded.

“I didn't know there were two fairy Queens and I didn't know one was bad.” Anne murmured.

“Yes. There are many things you should know, Anne. Many things. I will teach you so you do not make the mistakes I made. One more thing I shall tell you. There are two kinds of doorways here. Locked, like the green door, and unlocked. Locked doors are always safer.” Zi and Anne traveled through the grasses of many colors. Green that faded to purple then to blue and yellow; grasses as high as their waists. The sky was blue like back home and the sun was just past sunrise, the light was cool and crisp. Along the edge of the field forest looked black and forbidding.

“Can you heal the wormy walnut tree in my neighbor's yard?”

“Yes, all of them. My friends and I love trees and they are our special care. It makes us sad to see them die. There are magic seeds that are kept in the Great Hall. They were made by our Queen, Titian. All you need is one seed. Once you take it home, plant it in your backyard or somewhere in the woods, one inch deep. The seed will do the rest. It will sprout underground and the unseen roots will spread like fire and heal the soil and plants all around for many miles. We must hurry!” As they had traveled along, getting closer to the forest, the trees reached up like a mass of wide, dark, crooked hands. Anne wasn't so sure she wanted to enter the forest but she had already come this far. *I must be brave, like Alice!* she thought. It was then that she remembered that Alice's adventures were dreams. At least she thought they were. It was hard to tell. The grasses brushed gently against Anne's arms as she followed. Zi's footsteps were silent and he walked quickly and with purpose as if chasing some invisible arrow. They finally reached the edge of the forest. It was full of terribly tall, gnarled trees. Trees so old they seemed twisted and bent like deformed giants with branches and foliage so thick and wide they nearly blocked out the sky. Some had trunks dark as chocolate and others with trunks red as blood. To Anne, the red trees looked like massive arteries. Their branches took on the look of veins. The trunks were as big around as houses. One tree further back was so tall that its tops reached through the sky. Clouds rested in its boughs. Once she had been to the Redwood forests in California and she was amazed at the size of the redwoods. That tree towered over any and all of those. It was like the Great Tree in the book of Daniel. She had never seen anything so scary or so majestic.

“What kind of tree is that? The one in the sky?” She whispered.

“Ahh. That is the Old Tree. It's roots connect with all other trees. It is even older than time. It can even speak. When it has a notion to.”

“It can talk?”

“Yes, though I've never seen or heard it speak. Most trees here can speak and those of us who care for them can speak to them. But as for the Old Tree, I've only heard tales.”

“Wow.” Anne wondered if the tree had branches that spanned out into space.”

“Do you know anyone who has spoken to it?”

“Only the oldest fairy folk. And they do not reveal their conversations.”

“I have heard that it only rouses itself every few years to speak, it is so old. Older than anything. Once, it was said that it did not speak for over a thousand years. That is the way with ancient things. They drift away from young things until we cannot see or understand them when they speak to us across time. Or they cease to speak to us at all. So it is with the Old Tree. Or so I have heard.”

“That's too bad.” Anne said, mystified and sorely disappointed. A talking tree would be the most wonderful thing! *Maybe one day I can learn to speak to the other trees!* she thought. But looking at them, they seemed so scary that she thought better of it. Such bent, massive, angry looking trees might not have anything good to say. They began their trek through the forest.

Anne was curious about her hammer and seeing the darkness of the forest, she thought she would ask more about it.

“Zi, how come the iron didn't hurt you when you made the nails into a hammer?”

“I am a changeling, one who used to be human changed into one of the fairy folk. Iron cannot harm me because of what I used to be. Somewhere in the world, there is a changeling that looks like me. I hope it has treated my parents kindly.” Zi sounded very sad. Anne thought better of asking about that and concentrated her thoughts on the journey ahead. She pulled out her hammer and held it in her hand, feeling slightly more safe. Ahead were more flowers of bright colors,

butterflies with unusually large wings. Their colors seemed all the more brilliant in the dimness of the wood. Zi's eyes lightened almost to the color of clover honey.

"Hold my hand. There is a secret path we must take." Anne grabbed his hand. It was hard and callused but his clasp was gentle. Zi took out a small wooden pipe from a pouch tied to his waist and whistled. Small pebbles lit the way like tiny glowing white moons along the soft forest floor. Through bushes that twisted and opened before them, through hollowed out dead tree trunks and under odd shaped stone bridges over brook and stream they traveled. Anne could hear birds far away with sweet songs and every now and then she saw something rustle in the underbrush. The air in the woods smelled sharply of pine and other musky earth smells that Anne couldn't name. Mushrooms of odd colors she couldn't name seemed to be rooted everywhere. She wondered if they were edible. One thing Anne noticed in Other Land was that the colors were brighter and deeper; light was lighter and dark was darker. Everything was more! They were approaching another tree that was so huge she could barely see around its trunk. It was scarlet colored wood and the tree was so tall that she could barely see its branches from the forest floor. The Old Tree, however, was still far more massive. She could barely keep up with Zi.

"How big is Other Land?"

"As big as your mind makes it."

"But this can't be my imagination. It's real! I opened the green door!"

"Who said it wasn't real, Anne? Your imagination makes it real. Never lose it or you become blind to the unseen places. There are many unseen places and doors that open them. They don't disappear just because you grow up. Your imagination just dims and then it becomes completely blind to them." Zi looked around, suddenly, alarmed. He blew on his tiny wooden pipe again that didn't make any noise she could hear and some bushes sprang up to cover them and swath them in leaves and dirt.

"Shhh! Quiet. Something is coming. Something unfriendly!" They crouched down and stood still as rabbits hiding in the bush. Anne could feel the butterflies in her stomach turning to rolling stones as a shadow grew closer overhead. Her finger with the ring felt very warm. She looked down and saw that it gleamed a faint blue light. As the seconds passed it glowed brighter still. The creature was drawing nearer. She shoved it in her pocket. The shadow of wide wings darkened the already dim shafts of sunlight that made it to the forest floor. It was a birdlike creature with huge wings that were red as blood and a beak and head like an eagle. Its body was black and scaly like a snake. It had huge red eyes. The creature glided through the trees, nearly sweeping down to the ground. The forest had grown deathly still and quiet. It quorked strangely like a crow and glided off back up towards the sky. They watched it in silence as it disappeared on the horizon. Anne felt herself trembling.

"What was that?"

"A Gryp. Like a gryphon, smaller but just as vicious."

"I've heard of gryphons before. They tell riddles and you have to answer them truthfully."

"Yes. Gryps love riddles as well. And if you do not answer correctly they tear you apart and eat you. But, if you answer truthfully, they may help you. Most don't know that about Gryps. Usually no one is able to answer their riddles so it ends badly. Gryps do what they will and answer to no one. Some of them are spies for the Winter Queen. Her eyes and ears increase each day."

"How did you know it was coming?"

"I have an extra sense. Your ring also told. It shines when danger is near. We are lucky that it is summer. Queen Faye and her minions are not that strong in the spring and summer. Come winter, she will be unstoppable. Her power grows when the weather cools."

"Which means you must find Queen Titian before winter." Anne finished for him. He nodded.

"Come, we are almost there!" Pixies as small as humming birds crawled out from under flowers, bushes and mushrooms and followed them, their little translucent wings fluttering so fast they seemed to create their own light. It looked as if they were being followed by a long trail of flower petals and bees.

"My friends. They are wood fairies and butterfly fairies. They won't make mischief as long as you love the wood and everything in it like they do. They will lead us to safe passage the rest of the way." Zi motioned to the pixies and they swirled to the front and led the way. They were so beautiful and ethereal. Anne reached out a hand gingerly to touch one. A small gaggle of them had gathered round her head, twittering and whispering amongst themselves in some strange language. Their voices sounded like tiny bells. They flitted quickly away from her hand, just out of reach, except for one, a little pixie with blue wings and brown hair. He was green and he landed lightly on the palm of her hand and then flew to her shoulder and sat there. It tickled and made Anne giggle. The flurry of color and light stopped at a giant ring of dead tree stumps. From all of them sprouted brightly colored mushrooms that looked like candies growing from the ground. Anne wondered if they were poisonous. Inside the ring was empty from what Anne could see but Zi pointed and said, "There. The Great Hall!" His voice full of wonderment and a little fear. Anne frowned. There was nothing there.

"You'll have to enter the ring in order to see it. Make sure you keep your silver ring on and pay attention to it. It will help you detect danger and it can help draw help to you if you need it." They moved inside the ring of stumps and as if appearing out of smoke there was the Great Hall of the Fairy Queens. It was a massive, fallen, hollowed out tree with bark as white as snow. White stone steps covered in ferns and moss lead to a round, cavernous entrance. It looked like a great

wooden ruin, massive, empty; a skeleton tree. The hall had no roof. It was hugged all over with red and green vines and leaves. Mushrooms sprouted and wildflowers bloomed, peeking and pushing up through its cracked bark walls. The red leaves reminded Anne of little bloody hands. She looked at her hammer. It felt lighter in her hand. Energy and heat coursed through it. It seemed almost like a magic sword. Wildflowers grew in riotous profusion all around and a few even pushed up through cracks in the stone steps. Zi softly whistled a strange song and held out his hand. A small mass of fireflies drifted to his hand. Zi made a fist and the fireflies massed around it like a small globe of light. He dropped his hand and took hers.

“How did you do that?”

“I’m a steward of the wood. One of many. I listen and talk to the animals and plants that will answer. When I need their help I can call upon them. If you come back, there are things I can teach you. For now, keep your hammer close. Inside is dark and we need their light.” They crept inside, the little globe of firefly light leading ahead. The hall was dim. The open roof was so high up that barely any light could filter down save for a few weak rays. It was one round, great room and the wall was carved with scenes of animals and fairy folk; creatures with animal heads and human bodies and creatures with human heads and animal bodies. It reminded her of paintings she saw in old, grand museums full of nymphs, fauns and satyrs. The carvings showed scenes of spring and summer, fall and winter.

“Why do you call this the Queens’ Hall?”

“Depending on the season the Queen holds court here; the revelries and feasts are held in here. There is another room beneath this one that the Winter Queen uses to hold court and the Summer Queen would hold court just outside in the field of flowers within the ring. The Queen rules from this place, with all her fairies who serve her day and night. Usually in the spring and summer it looks friendlier and brighter. No more.” Anne looked around. There were great cobwebs nearly everywhere making the hall appear even more ghostly. A shiver went up Anne’s spine. In the middle the floor was a sunken floor of moss and soft grass. There was a great, long table that could seat a hundred people and all around sat white wooden chairs choked with vines. Zi pointed towards the table. There, in the middle of the table sat a white stone bowl.

“Do you see the seeds there? You must take one and only one seed. Touch nothing else and take nothing else. No matter how tempting it may be! All but the seeds are enchanted with an evil enchantment! My powers are very weak in here. Be careful! *You* must get the seed. If I touch them they turn to ash and dust. The Winter Queen could not destroy them but she has made them useless to those of us who would use them to heal the lands beyond the doorways. That is why I brought you here.” Zi spoke with such urgency Anne looked at him strangely. *What does he mean? I don’t see anything there but a bowl.* she thought. But as she approached the table more things appeared on it. Every step closer revealed more. Silver and gold bowls, glittering crystal glasses that danced with rainbow colors even in the dim light of the hall and platters and plates full of cupcakes, layer cakes and delicious cookies. Mounds of lollipops, toffees and taffies. Anne’s mouth began to water as she climbed onto the table to get one of the seeds. She could now see the seeds in the bowl. She tucked her hammer away. The seeds were as big as peach stones and shaped like them too. They were golden yellow and smooth. Carefully she climbed on to the chair nearest the bowl and reached over to grab one. Cobwebs floated lazily above attached to nothing but thin air they hovered like delicate drapes. Each time she thought she felt a cob web caress her skin she shivered. Anne wondered how big the spiders that weaved them were. Anne looked back and saw Zi peering out at her at the edge of the step, his eyes shining like lights. She took a seed. It was warm to the touch. She pulled out her bag and dropped it in and tucked her bag back under her clothes. She felt a feathery brush against her face suddenly and she jumped and yelped. She fell over the table, crashing down on the silverware and the sweets. Anne got up to run but the cobwebs that had seemed so harmless before now moved quickly in long sweeping waves through the air over her, tangling her and trapping her, rolling her in a tight cocoon. They moved towards Zi as well but quick as lightning Zi disappeared! The ball of fireflies had gone too. She was wrapped so tightly she could not move or even reach her hand down to get her weapon. Anne was afraid. She just knew that she would be eaten and discarded by some monstrous spider!

“Help! Help me! Please help! Zi, where are you?” She tried to kick her way out, to no avail. There was a soft flutter of what looked like a moth in the dim day light with blue wings. Anne began to cry. Floating in front of her was the tiny green skinned pixie that sat on her shoulder before they came to the Great Hall. He twittered something she couldn’t understand but she stopped crying.

“Help! I have to get out of here. You have to find Zi for me.” The pixie cocked his head to one side and then with a flick of his blue wings he was off. Then she heard hopping footsteps. She saw out of the corner of her eye a shadow lurking along the walls. Goosebumps peeled over her skin. She heard cackling and then, singing.

“The Queen is coming, the Queen is coming and oh, how she’ll delight! We have a girl so sweet to eat for feasting dinner tonight!” Anne stared in terror as a little horrid creature came dancing into focus out of his own shadow. His voice sounded like the growls of a rabid, snarling dog. Out of the faint shadows a little goblin creature, Anne couldn’t tell from her tangled position hobbled out into the hall and towards the table, cackling.

“Delight! Delight! Dinner tonight!” He was short, fat and hairy with little webbed feet and long black claws at the end of his fat, stubby fingers. He had a flat, pushed in face and a hole for a nose and little black eyes that glittered. He had pointy ears like a bat. He also stank like ten day old garbage! Anne nearly gagged and wanted to hold her nose but her hands were tied down to her sides by the webs.

“Who are you?” She asked as sweetly as she could after recovering from the sudden assault of his body odor. The

creature smiled, revealing sharp brown teeth.

“Who am I! Who am I? Wouldn't you like to know? I'm the Queen's pet, yes I am!” He giggled, licking his lips with a little black tongue. She shivered.

“I mean, what is your name?”

“As if I'd tell the likes of you! We're going to eat you! No need for names! No need!” He sang.

“You don't want to eat me. I'm too small. Just a snack!”

“Oh no! You look quite right and tasty to me and I've caught you! I've caught my Queen a wonderful surprise!” He sang. *The Queen eats children? Fairy Queens eat children?* she thought in panic. *How will I get out of here?* she glanced down at her right hand. Her ring was glowing brightly. She curled it up in a fist to hide it away. The ugly little thing was busy dancing up and down, cackling and talking to himself. Anne felt a cold wind against her skin that raised the gooseflesh on her arms again and she heard a stiff, rushing breeze in the hall and then the sound of a hundred glasses breaking and in a violent whirlwind of dust and leaves that nearly shook her out of the cocoon, a large train of fairies, and Queen Faye herself, appeared.

7

“Hah! I see my pet has caught us a new, sweet little thing. Quiet Grendo!” The Queen's voice was smooth and deep like molasses. Until she yelled at Grendo. Then her voice instantly became like sharp nails scratching down glass. The creature became immediately silent but he fixed Anne with a hungry look, as if she were a giant cupcake. The Queen then drew her full attention to Anne, regarding her with a long, appraising look. The Queen was very tall and slender like a blade of grass. She wore a gown of deep green moss flecked with gold and red leaves. She had long, flowing, snow white hair with thin, bright blue streaks. The ends of her long hair dissolved into what looked like steaming mists of dry ice. Her skin was pale as milk, her eyes, white within white. The fairies around her tittered and giggled. Some were tiny pixies, others as tall as her. Some taller still. Many of them possessed long talons or claws and none had irises. Only black within black eyes.

“I *do* hate this dress. All dirty moss and leaves! When winter comes I will wear my gowns of snow and ice and my cloaks trimmed with frost! Winter is best, wouldn't you agree, pretty one?” She smiled at Anne with that odd, white gaze. Anne didn't think disagreeing with her while she was all tied up would be wise.

“Yes! I love winter! Especially when it snows!” Anne said eagerly. This wasn't untrue, as she *did* like winter. Especially ice storms and snow. She just didn't like it as much as summer. The Queen laughed and all her retinue laughed along with her. It was as pleasant sounding as screeching bats and howling hyenas.

“Good then. I will make you a dress of ice and snow as well, and a circlet of snowflakes for your pretty brown hair. What is your name?” She asked, approaching the cocoon. She wound through her retinue of servants with the fluid movements of a snake slithering in the grass.

“A Anne.”

“Anne.” The Queen mouthed slowly, cocking her head to one side. Her lips were white with the barest tinge of blue.

“Anne, how come you here?” Anne knew this question would be asked, and here it was. She had to find a reason that didn't involve telling on Zi. *Or maybe I should tell her. After all, Zi left me!* she thought. Or maybe not. She fervently hoped Zi was getting help. She decided not to mention Zi.

“I don't remember. I was at home and then I dreamed and wished that I was in a far away land. I have dreams that come true all of the time. When I woke up, I was here.” *That sounded pretty good!* Queen Faye gazed at her through narrowed eyes.

“Oh? Powerful magic you must have. And what secret words brought you here so easily? It has been an impossibly long count of years since any human has been able to do that.”

“I don't remember the words.” Anne whispered. The Queen smiled.

“You are lying. Who brought you here?” The Queen demanded. Anne's mind grasped at another answer.

“No one! It was my imagination! Anyone with an imagination can find it!” Anne said indignantly. She was afraid but a little angry too. After all, it was true. She was always seeing things her parents didn't. She remembered her grandma telling her stories about when her own mama used to dream wonderful dreams and how mama now forgot about them.

“Aye, the girl speaks true.” Said one of the winter folk. He was tall and thin with pale blond hair and skin pale as snow and his eyes were bright yellow. He was very hairy and wore a white tunic and breeches.

“Maybe. I like liars. But not when they lie to me! But perhaps you do speak true, as the wolf boy says. You shall be a part of my court. It will be grand when I come into my full power! I will show you delights and things you have never dreamt of! I am Queen Faye, Queen of the Night, The Fall and The Winter! Be my guest this day and feast with us,” she glanced at Grendo, “but not as our meal. Unless you displease me.” She smiled. Anne thought that it might be very easy to displease her and wondered if she would ever get away. Grendo looked angry and began to pout. The Queen ignored his sulking. Queen Faye said a word, in a tongue Anne didn't understand and the cobwebs melted away and released her gently to the ground. Where the ground had been soft and mossy when she first came in with Zi, it was now covered in frost and it

felt so cold it burned her fingers. Quickly she pulled her sleeve over her ring which was shining brightly in blue. She looked around at the winter folk, some of them peering down at her. She noted that along with their black eyes they also had sharp teeth. She decided that she did not like the winter fairies at all. Anne knew that if she ever got out of here alive she would have bad dreams full of these creatures! Anne took a deep breath and stood up. She didn't think trying to make a run for it would work, yet. There were too many of them and the hall entrance was too far away. The Summer Queen *had* to be found! *If winter came this would be a horrible place! For me and others who might come. And for the summer fairies. But that will have to wait.* The table was brimming with a flick of Queen Faye's hand with roasted meats, vegetables and sugared fruits along with the sweet delicacies that were already there from one end of the table to the other. Glowing balls of cold light appeared overhead to light the Great Hall, drowning out the pale fingers of sunlight above. The vines that crawled and climbed up the walls were covered in a light frost. Anne could see thin wisps of her breath rise and dissipate into the air. Two sprites with wide arthropod eyes grabbed her and set her upon a chair at one end of the table. Anne stared at the Queen now that she was out of her webbed prison. She was beautiful, like the Queens in fairy tales, but in a strange and frightening way. The Hall became cold and chilled because of her presence. She had wings, immense and translucent. They picked up colors of every sort whenever she moved. She had long talons at the ends of her slim, graceful fingers. But Queen Faye's snow white eyes when she settled a gaze on Anne made her feel chilled down to the marrow in her bones, almost frostbitten. Long ago she almost got frostbite when she and her parents had taken a winter trip to Alaska. It was a terrible feeling and she remembered crying from the pain for a long time. This Queen certainly didn't remind her of Tinkerbell or the Blue Fairy in Pinocchio.

Dog-like creatures as big as wolfhounds prowled around the Great Hall under the table and around the edge near the walls. They snapped and growled at each other. Their coats were so black they looked like great black pits moving around the hall. It wasn't so much that their coats were black like coal or tar or even like ink. Looking at their coats was like staring into a vast, starless night; great voids of darkness. They had black eyes as well, with tiny lights within that glittered like ice. Staring at them made Anne feel dizzy. Two of them came over and sniffed at her, growling and baring their long fangs. Anne pulled her feet up into her chair in case one of them decided to take a bite. They looked hungry and wicked. The Queen laughed and smiled at Anne again. It was not a smile that made Anne feel warm or safe.

"To me!" The wolf boy said. He was sitting to her right. The dogs left off Anne and ran to him. He grabbed up several roast chickens and meaty, bloody rib bones and threw them to the hounds and they instantly forgot about Anne, fighting, snatching and snarling for scraps of bloody meat. Anne sighed in relief. The pale boy gave her a long look then turned to feasting. Anne felt grateful.

"I didn't know fairies ate anything." She said quietly.

"Fairies have no need to eat flesh. We winter fairies just like the taste of it." He said gruffly. Everyone seated themselves and began to eat. Someone started playing a lute. Anne dare not touch the food.

"Do you love riddles, Anne?" The Queen asked. She was seated at the other end of the great table. *Uh-oh.* Anne thought.

"Sort of."

"How do you mean, sort of?"

"Well, I mean, it depends on the riddle."

"And what sort of riddles do you prefer?" The Queen tore off red meat from a bone and chewed it, staring expectantly at her. A thin stream of blood ran down her chin. Anne felt squeamish.

"The ones I know the answers to."

"Well, child, what other riddles would anyone like? I see the stone bowl is missing a seed. Tell me, Anne, how many seeds are in the bowl?"

"As many as the bowl can hold. Plus one?" Anne was trembling inside. She didn't like where this was leading. The fairies laughed their terrible laughter.

"Clever girl. I like that! And who said you could have my seeds?"

"They belong to the other Queen. She said I could have them."

"She is gone and she will never come back. Everything that was hers is now mine and when winter comes this time, it will never be followed by spring. Soon the snows of winter will come and never leave. And neither will you."

"Why didn't you destroy the seeds?"

"But I will. Soon enough, child. I cannot destroy her work now, only hinder it, but when winter comes, nothing of hers will remain. Including those who serve her." Queen Faye smiled sweetly, showing teeth as clear and sharp as tiny icicles.

"Have a sweet, my child, for you are such a sweet child." The long table overflowed with both savory and sweet delicacies along with a tall crystal pitcher of what looked like blue punch with blue sherbert. Anne remembered what Zi told her of the Winter Queen's delectable table. It was some cruel trick, Anne was quite sure. But her mouth watered at the sweet treats just the same.

"I'm not hungry, thank you."

"Our guest is not hungry! Never have I been so insulted!" The Queen said stamping her foot under the table. She frowned and the Great Hall seemed to darken. The others in her court tittered and giggled, giving Anne menacing looks.

“Is that the way of it then? Refuse my meat and drink? You shall not refuse me my amusement. Anne, my child, tell me a riddle. I command you. If you answer it true I will grant you a wish. If you answer false, I will take your clever tongue since you have lied to my face! Or perhaps I will let Grendo eat you after all.”

“She'll be something sweet to eat, sweet to eat!” Crowed Grendo. The others laughed, raucous and harsh. All except the one Queen Faye called wolf boy.

“Tell me, Anne, what eats like a pig and looks like a sweet child such as yourself, but isn't?” Anne had no idea but thought this was a good a time as any to run. She had almost forgotten about her iron hammer under her sweater. Anne stared out at the Queen and everyone in the Great Hall for what seemed like an eternity. She had no answer for the Queen and feared that if she answered wrong she would be cursed or torn apart by hundreds of long, sharp claws. She didn't know which would be worse. She jumped from her seat and pulled her hammer out of her sweater and dashed from the sunken floor to the step. The Queen's skirts swirled around her, her eyes glowing electric white; she began laughing wildly.

“After her, Grendo!” She shouted. Grendo, for his short height, leaped surprisingly far. Quick as lightning he was right behind her. Anne screamed and swung her iron hammer with all her might. It made her swing much stronger than normal and Grendo got a nasty smack square on his head! There was a vicious crack! He screamed in agony and scarlet tongues of fire raced down his bald head and down his face and neck, burning his fur and flesh. He fell over screaming. Smoke rose from his burning flesh and fur. The iron was like dangerous poison to him; Zi was right! One of the hounds leapt at her and met the same painful fate but not before he slashed her arm with one of his frosty teeth. His nip was ice cold and it felt almost like being kissed by dry ice. Anne cried out in pain. She hit it right in its jaw and its teeth fell out and melted like icicles in a thaw and the hound's nose shriveled up. One of Grendo's clawed hands turned white and withered like an old leaf as he tried to cover and soothe his ruined face and head. Thanks to Anne's hammer he was even uglier than before. Anne didn't think such a thing was possible. Enraged, the Queen demanded she lay aside the hammer.

“Foul! You little fiend! Deception! Lay aside the hammer!” The Queen screeched. The others around her yelled in anger and surprise. The din of outraged voices was growing louder. Anne's courage grew along with it.

“No! And you can't have my tongue either!” She held her hammer like a shield, backing away. One of the tiny pixies flew at her. She hit it as if she were slapping a softball. It fell to the ground and wisps of smoke flew up from where it dropped and burned. The hammer shimmered with scarlet and copper streaks of light.

“Deception! Deception! You won't escape!” The Queen cried. A ball of white fire formed in her hand and she threw it at Anne. Anne screamed and held her hands up to hide her face. The hammer absorbed the fire but it singed her finger tips. It was then that a great cloud mass of light came down the Great Hall from the open air ceiling. A great veil of fireflies and summer pixies! So many of them descended on to the Great Hall that Anne couldn't see anything near the long table in the confusion. On her shoulder settled the tiny, green pixie she had seen before. She felt someone grab her hand. It was Zi. He pulled her away and they raced outside. She could hear the Queen cursing and screaming and the noise of what sounded like a million bees. Outside on the steps was a dragonfly the size of an elephant.

“Come! Sog will get us away from here! Quickly, climb on!” They both climbed onto its back and the dragon fly lifted itself deftly into the air and flew away from the Great Hall, faster than Anne could say: Riddle.

8

It was nearly dusk when they neared Zi's home. They flew high over the fields and between the twisting, gnarled branches of the brownwoods and redwoods. The sky was a fading blue. The sun in Other Land was sinking beneath the horizon in brilliant colors of red, blue and purple; a sea of deep color. On the other side of the horizon she thought she saw two pale moons rising. Anne held on tightly with tears streaming down her face. She was shaking and didn't realize she had been crying. But the beautiful sunrise and the delicate cream colored moons rising in the sky calmed her and made her feel happy. Sog slowed nearly to a complete stop, his delicate, multifaceted wings moving so fast they caused a wind that tangled her hair. Zi gave a command and Sog lowered them down alongside one of the monstrous trees and on to a branch so fat and wide it managed as a runway for Sog and other flying creatures. Sog lay down on his hairy legs while Zi slid off of its back and then helped Anne slide down.

“Will she follow us?”

“She would have but she and her folk have been subdued, for now.” The great green and gold dragonfly lifted itself then dove down into the thick foliage below. Anne could see wisps of cloud floating by and beneath those, valleys and cliffs far below. It made her a little dizzy. At the end of the branch, at the trunk of the tree was a doorway curtained off with leaves.

“Is this the Old Tree?” She asked in a whisper.

“Oh no. It is big but the Old Tree is bigger still. You are hurt. We have to heal that cut or it will become much worse!” Zi worried at her arm. Anne only just remembered; she had been nipped by one of Queen Faye's hounds. Her arm was oozing dark blood and pus.

“Night hounds! Ugly, vicious creatures! It would seem they didn't get a chance to take a real bite. A good thing for you. Their bite festers and poisons slowly. It deforms the body and then the mind. Wounds from them can drive the victim

mad with nightmares, but this small wound can be quickly healed.” Anne was glad of that. They hurried inside. The tree trunk inside was a wide room, lit brightly with candles. And there were many other fairies and creatures there like Zi. And many unlike him. They were busy with different tasks and most did not bother to even look up. Others saw her and smiled. Still a few looked on with curiosity.

“My friends and folk, Anne, and others who have come to help us in our fight. Mera, come see about Anne's arm and her hands. She fought a battle with the Winter Queen!” Zi said. A hushed atmosphere overcame the room once they heard that. Everyone stared at Anne.

“Oh, go back to your work! No time for tales, yet!” Zi said. Mera was a child fairy just like Zi, with slanted purple eyes and fair skin. She had jet black hair - and she had wings! Purple ones with thin, copper colored streaks, like delicate paper, like a moth's wings. She looked at Anne's wound and formed an “oh” with her mouth.

“Come, come this way!” She ushered Anne into an adjoining room that looked a bit like a clinic. She gathered dried plants and herbs together in to a little pot.

“They seemed surprised that I met Queen Faye.”

“Oh yes! Before you leave for home, most everyone will be talking about it. It is already becoming known on the forest floor! You are the first child not to fall under her spell and escape her!”

“Thanks to Zi, of course! A lot of pixies and insects and other creatures helped me escape at the last minute, too.” Anne said and smiled gratefully at him. Zi beamed back and left the room.

“I hope they're OK? I wonder if any of them were hurt?”

“Some of them, probably. We will see them here if so. We'll patch them up and send them back out on duty. Don't worry about them, Anne. We have been fighting the Winter Queen for many moons. Summer reigns now and so our powers are stronger than hers. For now.” Mera said, stirring the pot. Zi had come back to the room.

“When did your Queen disappear?” Anne asked him.

“We noticed near the start of spring. We have had to create and care for the spring and summer flora and fauna ourselves without her. It's much harder than we all knew. But we knew who was behind it when plants and trees began dying again in the summer! We have been working hard, looking for different ways to fight her. Arming you with silver and iron helped a lot but there is more you must know. Things you will need. You faced the Queen and survived. Your hammer is stronger for it and so are you. But she knows about you now and her reach stretches beyond Other Land. One day, we will all have to face her in her full strength and that time will come soon. We fear what will happen then.” He said.

“How exactly *did* you escape the Queen?” Mera asked.

“I refuse to eat her food for one thing. She tried to get me to eat. She had all sorts of goodies, but I wouldn't touch them. It was very hard to resist. Then there was my hammer. She tried to get me to answer a riddle and I had no idea what the answer was. That was when I decided to use my hammer.” She pulled it out and showed Mera her iron hammer. She thought about wolf boy but decided not to mention him. Mera took the hammer into her hands.

“Be careful, Mera! It's made of iron. Zi said iron hurts fairies, but I don't want it to hurt the wrong ones!” Anne warned.

“Oh, indeed, iron is deadly to fairies. To most, anyway. It won't hurt me to touch it though. I'm like Zi. A changeling. I used to be human, but the evil Queen changed me into this so that I could never leave.” She said sadly. Mera put the hammer down and poured a hot, viscous liquid from a kettle into the pot and mixed it with the herbs. It smelled like very strong vinegar. Anne could also smell mint, pine and dirt and other scents she could not recognize. Zi had left and come back to the room with a large tulip. He handed it to Anne. It was filled with a clear liquid.

“A healing drought. Drink it. It's evening dew. It will help Mera's potion heal you faster and give you some rest.” Anne took the flower cup from him and drank it down. It was very cold and refreshing, tasting like rosewater with lemon and dahlias. Zi took her hammer.

“Your hammer has become a special part of you now. It is more than a hammer. It's stronger. I will make a leather handle for you to make this easier to wield.” Anne nodded as she drank her draught.

“Do you remember the riddle the Queen asked you?” Zi asked. Anne thought for a moment and frowned. It was right on the edge of her memory but she could not recall. She shook her head. Zi looked thoughtful for a moment, then he left with the hammer.

“Mera,” Anne asked, “can you turn into an animal too?”

“Yes. A dragonfly.”

“Are there many of you? Changelings, I mean?”

“Yes. Many. Not all came to the side of Summer. And some never wanted to. Many like being Winter folk.” Her face darkened.

“I wonder how it happened. How was she able to capture the Summer Queen?”

“No one knows. We have been trying to find this out for many moons. But it is very strange, everyone agrees. When Winter comes she will have the power to kill our Summer Queen and rule forever. The whole of Other Land will become a cold, snowy, barren waste.” Mera said.

“We are fighting her now. She turns a glade or a meadow into a snowy drift or freezes trees until their leaves wither

and die and we come behind her and undo her work. Usually we are successful, but lately our healing powers are waning and her destruction is growing. A few trees have died and we have not been able to resurrect them. Combat powers are still strong but even so, we know our powers against her will not work for very long, even combined. She has some secret weapon, some power that she has used to keep Queen Titian hidden from us. We need our Summer Queen. From her flows most of our strength and hope. We can fight because she is still alive, but if winter comes before we find her. . . “ Mera’s voice trailed off. Anne could feel her heart fall. She loved winter when it came but she couldn’t imagine an endless winter where nothing could grow or flourish and there were no warm sunny days to enjoy. Something had to be done.

“Did you get your seed?” Mera asked.

“Yes, I did.” She took it out of her purse and turned it over in her hand. It felt warm and smooth. Zi had come back with the hammer, newly wrapped with a soft red leather handle. He handed it to her and the cloth she had wrapped it with earlier, now specked with blood. Anne admired the handle work. She could see tiny designs of leaves and flowers of gold. They didn’t look engraved or painted on but somehow looked to be a natural part of the leather.

“Thank you!” She said. She put the tulip cup down. A disquieting thought came to her.

“Do you think Queen Faye has something to do with the forests dying in my world too?” Mera and Zi both looked at each other.

“We don’t know surely, but we think she is behind a lot of dark mischief in both worlds these days. We do know she has minions in your world. She hates plants, animals and humans unless she can bend and twist them to her will. Most of all she loves to destroy. Most of the trouble is here in our world, but the mischief is spreading. She takes great joy in poisoning living things. Forests, jungles, rivers, humans, animals, crops – even other fairy folk. It makes no matter to her.”

“Then I must get back to my world to plant this seed!”

“Yes, but first you must rest! Tomorrow at first light I will return you home.” Zi said. Mera took wide leaves and dipped it in the potion and cleaned her wounds. She then cleansed the wounds on her hand where her hammer of nails bit into the flesh and made her bleed. It stung but as soon as the medicine touched her wound it began to knit itself back together. Mera put a soothing salve on Anne’s fingertips.

“You were lucky and brave, Anne. Facing her the way you did. Zi, you really must give her more protection next time! It could have gone ill for her!” She scolded him. Anne began to feel very sleepy, quite against her own wishes. They lifted her on to a bed of soft moss and laid her down. Outside the little room she could hear the other fairies singing as they worked. Anne took off her bag, lay it down beside her and curled up on her mossy bed and fell asleep to their sweet singing. All the while she slept, the fairies in the tree city from the bottom to the top of the tree sang their little magic for a new path for Anne to get back home. A twisty, tricky path, hidden from unfriendly eyes.

9

Early, right before sunrise the next morning Zi woke her. Tiny pixies, the little green one included, brought her food to eat. There were almonds, berries Zi called starberries that were purple with cream colored starbursts in the center and tasted like all her favorite berries rolled into one and mixed with cream, morning dew in a tulip which would give her energy for the journey and honeycomb. Her arm and hands were completely healed. Even her fingertips were no longer burning. She ate quickly, sucking the honey from her fingers and then packed her things and slung her bag over her shoulder. Zi led her out to the doorway. They stood on the branch runway looking over the forest around them. Thin wisps of cloud floated above and under them.

“Will Sog come to get us?” Anne asked, hopeful. Riding on Sog’s back was even better than flying in an airplane.

“Not this day. He has other business. We must walk the rest of the way back. The way back is different so that you cannot be followed.” Zi took her hand and pointed back towards the door. Mera was standing there, waiting for them. Her wings were sprouted and fluttered slightly.

“Mera will take you down.”

“You’ll have to climb on my back, Anne.” Anne climbed onto her back and held on tightly. Mera stepped off the side of the branch into the air. Anne closed her eyes waiting for that feeling she got when she rode a roller coaster. But surprisingly, the ride down was far slower than that. They floated down gently. It wasn’t much like the ride on Sog’s back at all. Anne opened her eyes and watched as the ground slowly rose to meet them and the forest became darker and darker as they floated away from the sunlight and sky near the tops of the giant tree and towards the dimness of the forest floor underneath. When they reached the ground Zi was there to meet them.

“Take care, Anne. We hope to see you again!” Mera waved and smiled. Anne smiled back. Mera flew away.

“Other land is so different from what I imagined. It’s scary!”

“Yes. There are dangers here. But wonders too. There is so much you haven’t seen yet. So much! Come, we must get you home.” Before them was a tiny foot path and along the path as far as Anne could see were bright, white pebbles.

“We follow the white stones and they will lead back to the door.” They set off down the path.

“You said that there was a changeling left with your family. What’s a changeling?”

“A changeling is a creature the fairy folk will leave in place of a human child they’ve stolen. I have been here so long that I could not go back even if I wanted to. So long that my birth family is gone.”

“How many years is that?”

“The seasons come and go, moons come and go. I have lost count.”

“What do you mean by moon?”

“What you would call a month.”

“Zi, are changelings dangerous?”

“Sometimes. Some of them.”

“You said before that you hoped it treated your family well. You think it would do something bad to them?”

“Depends on the changeling. My family is long dead now so it does not matter.” *But of course it matters!* Anne thought. She wasn't sure how she felt about fairy folk in disguise living in the real world. Especially if they were anything like Queen Faye.

“This is now my only home and I want to help your world as well as my own. Both are in peril. We are keepers of the natural world, but the natural world is fading away. Once fairies lived in both worlds and you could not tell the difference between Other Land and your world. Once, there was no difference. It was all the same world. But people forget.” He said sadly.

“I won't forget! I will come back! If something is wrong with both our worlds, we have to save them. But next time I want to be prepared!”

“Yes. Next time she will be looking for you. You are stronger now but in time she will be also. We will give you more powerful weapons the next time you come. And remember, your silver ring can warn you of danger and call help to aid you, should anyone so inclined to help you be nearby. Always remember that!”

They traveled down the winding path, through bush, through thicket, over tiny streams and over mushroom infested fallen trees, planning what they would do next time. Finally, they came upon a tree with a doorway in the middle of its trunk. Beyond the doorway inside sat the green door and the small window sitting high beside it. Anne looked back. The pebbles that had led the way were gone. The only ones left were the ones leading up to the green door sitting in the tree trunk.

“So. This is the end. For now,” Anne said. “But how will I be able to come back?”

“You will see the doorways to Other Land. You will see them in your mind. The doorways between the worlds can be moved and be changed when the need arises.” Zi said.

“What does that mean?”

“When the time comes you will know.”

“Will you come back as a little cat and visit me?”

“Surely!”

“I promise I won't let any dogs hurt you!” Zi smiled and his amber eyes danced with light. Anne hugged him.

“Remember what I told you, Anne. Plant the seed in good dirt, at least an inch thick in any place you choose. You need only water it once. The seed will work its magic underground.”

“Thank you, Zi.” She said. She turned and walked down the rest of the path into the doorway. She pulled out her bone key from her bag and immediately wondered how long she had been gone and whether mama and dad were angry with her for being gone so long. *I'll have to think of something to say!* she thought. *They may never let me go anywhere again!* Which meant she couldn't come back here! She heaved a sigh, put the key into the lock and turned it three times. She looked back for Zi but he was gone and so were the white pebbles and the path. What remained was a dense wood. It was hard to imagine that she had just traveled that way. She pushed open the door and she was back into the clearing and just outside the little shed, not far from home. She looked around cautiously and then closed the door. She heard it click and lock. Once again it was an old, dusty locked shed. To her surprise and delight, it was still morning. She could see the brilliant, burning golden sun. Anne dropped the key in her bag and ran home. Once she got to her backyard she dug a small hole with her hands near the mass of blackberry bushes that engulfed the back fence, about two fingers deep. Then she took the seed and dropped it in. She covered it up and turned on the water hose and watered it well. When she was done, she went inside. It was another fine summer day a few weeks later when she was playing outside and she noticed that the sick and dying trees that ringed her neighborhood were no longer dying. The neighbor's massive walnut tree was no longer full of gross webs and white worms. Even the blackberries were unusually large and sweet. Every last one. Some grew as big as dad's thumb! Mama was joyful that the ivy that seemed to creep everywhere, choking the forest had been put back into submission. In fact, Anne hardly saw ivy vines anymore. She smiled to herself because she knew the seed was healing green things. All these things delighted her parents and everyone who lived in the wood but since no one knew how it had happened so fast or why, they had all decided that it was very mysterious, indeed. Except Anne. What Anne found mysterious was that the green door that lead to the healing of the forest no longer led to Other Land. She had opened it one day, sometime after her adventure and found that behind the door simply lay a little, lonely old shed that sat in a sea of wildflowers. At least it was no longer covered in vines. Zi had told her that there were other doorways, though. She wondered when she would find another one.

After dinner one evening Anne asked dad about getting more books to read.

“More books? Alright, little one. We'll pay a visit to the library or the bookstore tomorrow. How about that?” He

pinched her cheek.

“That's great! Can I ask you a question, dad?”

“Sure.”

“What are real fairy tales? You know, like the ones that came before the ones we have now? What where they like?”

Her dad gave her a quizzical look.

“You mean the original ones? I don't know. Interesting stuff, I'd say. There are many books on the Fair Folk. How about we start with this: when we get to the bookstore I'll get you a book your grandma gave me when I was a little boy. I lost it long ago. It was called *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. If you want to hear real children's fairy tales, that's the book.”

“Then that's the one I want to read!” She said. Anne had a strange feeling rolling in her belly. It was excitement and fear. She wondered what those tales told and feared what she might find but she would have to be brave. Brave like Alice who went to Wonderland; a little girl in a strange land. Even if it had only been a dream, Alice was brave. She knew that the next time she entered Other Land she wouldn't meet Tinkerbell or Strawberry Shortcake. She would meet Queen Faye and the Winter folk again. She wanted to know what summer and winter fairies were like. She wanted to know what *ALL* fairytale creatures were really like. She wanted the real story.

THE END

Well, that's the end of book one! I truly hope you've enjoyed reading it as much as I've enjoyed writing it! Stay tuned because more books in this series will be coming in the future!

About The Author:

Victoria A. Jeffrey grew up in Portland Oregon, attended Portland Community College and studied graphic design. She is also an author and an avid reader of science fiction, fantasy, historical fiction and non-fiction. She has written two collections of poetry, some short stories and a novelette. She is currently working on the *Secret Doorway Tales* fantasy series.

Discover other titles by Victoria A. Jeffrey at her blog:

[Pencil + Word](#)

And coming soon

The Pumpkin Princess

By V. A. Jeffrey

from the next book in the series

Secret Doorway Tales

Here's a special preview:

Later that night, after mama had tucked her in, Anne had been making her way through the newest books dad bought her - her favorite being the *Grimms' Fairy Tales*. There was a new moon about and it was very windy. She could hear the wind sighing and whispering through the trees. While she was reading a tale called *The Elves*, a memory had come creeping out of the corners of her mind. It was triggered by a thing Zi had told her that summer. He had told her that he was a changeling. Not the traditional sort of changeling like a fairy changeling, but a less common sort; a human changed into a fairy creature. She remembered him telling her that there was a fairy changeling that looked like him somewhere in this world. It began to occur to her after having read quite a bit of fairy lore with her dad, that in many stories, fairies often stole children and left a changeling in their place. Anne also remembered that she had nearly met that fate at the Great Hall. And it was then that the answer to the Winter Queen's riddle, which had eluded her for a long time, had now become as clear as ice.

It was then that Anne remembered that the Queen owed her a wish.

