

Shelf

Book 1: Byrne

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Book 1: Byrne

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Byrne

Byrne Waters was 8 years old when she first started spending a month of her summer vacation with her grandparents on their farm on Sweetwater Isle. It wasn't really worked as a farm any more, but Grandpa still kept the fields tidy and they still grew enough of--well, pretty much everything--to keep their own table bountifully stocked, as well as supplying the local food bank with several bags a week of extra produce.

Four years later, Byrne's visits had a comfortable routine, with the pink guest ("girls") room next door to the blue ("boys") one. She had never seen the blue room actually used, but sometimes she liked to lay on its bed and imagine who might live--or visit?--in the room.

Byrne at age 12 had reached most of her adult height--5 feet and 3 inches. Her hair is straight, shoulder length, and "off-blond" (she hated both "dishwater" and "dirty" as descriptions). She'd often been told she looked beautiful in a dress, but by preference she wore jeans and long-sleeve flannel shirts. (And that's indeed what she's wearing during this story.)

Her hair framed a fine-featured face with thoughtful, grey eyes. It could be a little disconcerting to be studied coolly by those eyes, but Byrne smiled more often than not, exposing her inner intelligence and humor.

Most days started with a trip out to the bird yard to let out the chickens and ducks for the day; back inside to wash hands and grab a bowl, then back out to pick whatever fruit was ready and would taste good with breakfast. All the chickens and ducks would still be busily occupied with the pressing matters of the bird yard--scratching the dirt for bugs (chickens) or turning the water dirty (ducks). But one old hen, named Turtle, would fly up, up, and over the fence around the chicken yard, and follow Byrne out as she headed to the garden. Although she was an old bird, her feathers still held their original golden-red luster, and her eyes were sharp and bright, peering out of a head which was ringed by lovely diamond-patterned neck feathers.

As a rule, chickens in gardens will result in a terrible loss of the very nicest items, victim to a chicken's sharp eyesight and sharper beak. But somehow Turtle knew about humans and their gardens, and would politely follow Byrne along the rows of the garden, pecking only the insects she spotted while waiting for Byrne to choose morsels of fruit and vegetables for Turtle's eager enjoyment. (Given Byrne's generous consideration for Turtle's appetite, it's an open question whether Turtle would have done any better for herself.)

But if both man (or, in this case, girl) and beast are happy, then we can consider the garden visit a success.

From the viewpoint of an outsider, fallow farmland may seem a simple proposition; gently rolling fields of green grass. Byrne had learned enough to appreciate that the fields are, to mother nature, a blank slate--and nature *always* has plans for blank slates. Grandpa would mow the fields, and periodically plow portions and sow seeds of plants which would protect and even improve the soil. But the real health of a field could only be partially protected from the seat of a tractor, and then it was time to walk the field and find the small problems before they became large ones.

Today Byrne was walking the westmost field looking for Scotch Broom, a tall, woody weed which bloomed with an explosion of beautiful yellow blossoms. But, left to itself, Broom had the unfortunate habit of quickly taking over entire fields. With seeds that could wait up to ten years to start a new onslaught. It was a weed which was much better to be caught before it could take hold.

Byrne lugged the Puller Bear along to the latest Broom invader. The Puller Bear was a clever tool made of strong steel, with a clamp on one end and a big

lever bar on the other end. As you pulled down on the bar, the clamp on the other end would both tighten its grip on the Broom's stem just as it strongly lifted; the result was usually that the entire Broom plant, right down to its roots, would be pulled from the soil. Grandpa said "like pulling a tooth", but Byrne thought this was gross. Such weeds, once pulled, rarely came back.

The northwest corner of the farm was a stand of forest which supplied the winter heating firewood for the house. While Byrne was pulling up a Broom plant, Turtle had wandered from the field right up to the edge of the forest. Byrne looked up from the latest extracted weed to just spy Turtle as she disappeared into the dimness beneath the trees. "Hey!" Byrne called, "Come Back!" Raccoons mostly hunted at night, but they often climbed trees and slept overhead within the forest. It was easy to imagine one waking up and coming down to snap up a tasty treat like a chicken.

Byrne hurried after Turtle, but paused as she entered the forest gloom to let her eyes adjust. When any large animal--including humans--enters a forest, the nearest birds will give out a warning call so all the smaller creatures can know about the new danger on the forest floor. This is certainly what Byrne expected, which made it doubly strange to feel as if the entire forest had just taken a deep breath and now listened and waited in silence.

The dim details of the forest became clearer as her eyes adjusted, but there still was no sign of Turtle. Suppressing a sigh, Byrne eased into the forest along the path she had seen Turtle use in entering the forest. It had always been a game to try and walk in the forest with a minimum of noise, and Byrne carefully avoided placing her feet on the path's supply of dried leaves and brittle sticks as she tried to catch sight of Turtle.

It seemed as if she was just catching a glimpse of Turtle's tail ahead, and Byrne wondered whether she should go ask Grandma for help as she reached the center of the forest. At the forest's center was the oldest tree in the forest (and likely the oldest tree on the island), and there was no mistaking that singular, giant cedar tree. There was Turtle, at the other edge of the clearing scratching at the base of a gnarled old tree stump.

"Turtle! You naughty bird. Do you want to get eaten?" Byrne scolded as she edged forward around the cedar to try and catch the hen (those who have never tried catching a hen won't appreciate why it's a process which demands patience, craft, followed by a touch of dexterity). Byrne came to a stop as she realized that she didn't recognize this tree stump; it had a most remarkable appearance, and almost seemed to be carved like a totem pole. Looking more closely, she realized that it *was* indeed a carved figure, for she could make out its arms, legs, helmet, and even a sword at its side. She had just decided that its face suggested someone kind yet strong when the eyes opened and looked back at her with a suggestion of a twinkle. She jumped back with a squeak.

"My Lady, I hope I have not startled you? Your guide has prepared you? It has been a long wait." The wooden trunk-knight (for that's exactly what it looked

like) was covered all over in moss and lichen, and should have seemed ancient. And yet his face was younger and kinder for all that it was covered in old plant growth, and his voice was steady and vibrant.

Byrne wrinkled her brow in confusion. "Wait? What wait? I was in the forest last week and *you* were certainly not here. And I wasn't guided; I was chasing a naughty chicken," and she glared at Turtle, who calmly ignored her.

"Respectfully, I have been here a year and a day. You were in *a* forest, but not this one. It is hard to reach here without a guide. Judge her not harshly, for she serves your interest. And the interest of your family."

Turtle, apparently bored with what could be found near this strange figure's feet, had wandered a little closer to Byrne, who deftly stooped and caught up the chicken in her arms. "Well, just as respectfully, I'm a girl, not a Lady. And I certainly can recognize this old cedar tree behind me by sight, no matter what you might think of my sense of direction. Since you found your way *in* to my grandparents' forest, why don't you find your way back out again? Grandpa can be quite fierce with trespassers." As she chastised the knight, Byrne had been backing away from him, retreating back the way she had come as best she could tell without turning around to look.

The knight, remaining in his position on the other side of the cedar, was quickly lost from sight, though his voice was still audible. "Lady' is the correct honorific for one of your station. Sometimes more than one forest grows around a tree--it depends on the tree. I do not trespass, but stand the watch which is my duty. There is no intention to antagonize your hosts." The voice was nearly lost as Byrne reached the field again. "The first anniversary is the only chance to fill in the void which hides in plain sight. Be brave."

Suddenly the sun was bright on her head, and a bird chirped in the forest, answered by another. The silence lifted as Turtle squirmed from Byrne's arms, landed on her feet, and calmly turned towards the house. Byrne stooped to pick up the Puller Bear--it seemed like she'd dropped it days ago--and followed Turtle, a puzzled expression on her face.

The Orchard

Byrne didn't sleep well that night. When awake, she kept hearing stirrings out in the blackberry choked gully which started across the front yard, becoming nearly 75 feet wide where it passed underneath the county road. From up on the county road, you could look down on the other side of the road into a vast, impenetrable valley of blackberry thicket. Grandpa said it was too steep for tractors, or even little girls; the blackberry held it and probably always would.

A year ago--, she thought. What happened a year ago?

She finally fell back asleep, and in her dreams followed paths through a maze

of blackberry. A multitude of blackberries wove back and forth through each other, the stalks dark and grey like steel cables, with cruel barbs like shark's teeth running all along the length of the vines.

The more she followed the paths looking for an exit, the more the wall of vines closed in, now meeting overhead to make a narrowing tunnel. Sharp barbs caught at her clothes and scraped at her hands, making it harder and harder to move forward. She thought that soon she wouldn't be able to move at all, held pinned in place by the horrible blackberry.

She heard a *cluck!* behind her, and was barely able to turn around and behold Turtle, who fluttered back a bit to a side path Byrne hadn't noticed. Byrne carefully followed, with Turtle always a little ahead, leading the way. The path opened wider and finally Byrne left the thicket to stand in the golden sun, looking down a slope to--

Byrne woke in her bed, the morning sun shining through her window and onto her face. *How did that curtain get opened overnight?* she wondered. Grandpa was calling her to breakfast, and Byrne hopped from bed and dressed quickly--blue jeans, plaid shirt, heavy denim jacket, and even leather gloves in the jacket's pockets. *Adventuring clothes*, she thought as she hurried down the hall to breakfast.

One of the most unpleasant weeds to find in the field was Tansy Ragwort--not because it was ugly or prickly, but because it was apt to spread, and the plant was poisonous. And it was the sort of poison that, once ingested, gave permanent harm. Not that a *human* was likely to eat it, and no animal would eat it while green; the taste would serve as a warning. But when dried out, the taste faded away, and an animal could unwittingly poison itself.

Byrne had no intention of eating it! And she wore her gloves because she didn't even like the idea of its juices getting on her skin. As she pulled it up--often digging a shovel in beside the plant to help lever its wide root system out of the ground--she thought of the deer which might visit here. She was protecting the farm's guests, and it made her happy to help them. Because it spread beyond field boundaries, she was even helping the neighboring fields.

Byrne was in the south field of the farm, looking for the characteristic blushes of small, yellow, daisy-shaped flowers. Tansy Ragwort grew well even here, under the shade of the rows of apple trees. Only actual forest slowed it down.

She had worked her way in under the apple trees nearest the neighbor's driveway when she noticed she had company--Turtle had wandered over and was pecking at the remains of apples which had already fallen from the trees. Byrne hoped Turtle was just eating apple, but also knew that for chickens, *worms* were the real treat in an apple (ew).

Setting aside her garbage bag full of pulled Tansy, Byrne took off her gloves and looked up into the tree she and Turtle were beneath. About half way up the tree was the biggest, most gorgeous red apple she could have imagined. Casting a

careful eye at a possible path up the tree and over to the branch, Byrne decided she could do this, and started climbing up the trunk.

The first part was easy; nubs from long-gone branches gave her easy steps, and the trunk was small enough that she could hold herself to it by wrapping her arms around it. She climbed up to reach the first real branches, and squeezed between two of them to get up to the next part of the trunk. Now she was using branches as steps, with a branch above as a handhold.

When she reached a high enough branch, she carefully edged outward on the branch, holding on to the branch above to keep herself balanced. But the branch sagged as she went further out, and she had to come back to the trunk and go up one more branch to try again. She glanced downward and her breath caught in her throat, nearly freezing. Apple trees are not large as trees go, but from up here in the tree, it looked *much* higher than she would have expected.

She was back to the trunk, up a branch, and about to head out to the apple when she heard a loud, unpleasant voice, "What are you doing up in my tree, you young wretch?" The suddenness and volume made her very nearly miss grabbing for a branch to steady herself.

Looking down, she could see an angry, pinch-faced old woman glowering up at her. Mrs. Acerbee! Byrne knew that she lived next door, and she also knew she was to stay well away from her-- Grandpa said there had been legal trouble which had gone all the way to court. But what was this woman doing over here in her grandparents' orchard?

Byrne held her temper in check, though anger made her heart beat faster and her arms felt rubbery. "Mrs. Acerbee, you know very well that this orchard is my grandparent's! Do you want to come with me and speak to Grandpa? He's just over in his workshop in the barn."

Mrs. Acerbee's eyes were bright and intent behind her old-fashioned spectacles; the pupils were tiny but so black they stood out like pinpricks. Her pointy pink tongue darted out and moistened her lips in one quick circle. "Oh no, *Byrne*, I think we will handle this here and now."

Her hand came up, holding a pale stick of polished wood. Strangely, Byrne felt she could see herself, Mrs. Acerbee, and the orchard reflected off its surface, although it was far too thin for this to be possible. Silence closed around them, as if they were in a bubble together.

Muttering a short word, Mrs. Acerbee pointed the wand at the base of the tree, and something stirred in the dirt. A vine of blackberry whipped up and wrapped itself around the trunk of Byrne's tree. It rasped horribly downward as a second vine whipped upward, reaching a few feet higher than the first. It wrapped itself around the trunk, too, but now the first vine came whipping by it, to reach higher yet. The pair of vines were somehow working together like prickly arms to climb up the tree to where Byrne was perched, their long thorns scraping at the trunk as it progressed.

Mrs. Acerbee, keeping the wand pointed at the climbing blackberry creature, raised her eyes to direct a terrible, feral smile at Byrne. "A great honor, Lady Waters. It it's *quite* convenient, could you describe what it feels like when my pets reach y--"

A large, red orb dropped from the tree, hitting Mrs. Acerbee squarely between the eyes, knocking her spectacles off as it splattered across her face. Byrne blinked in surprise and looked upward into the tree's branches. Somehow an apple had come loose just at the right time to hit the old woman and ruin her concentration. Byrne could see that it must have shaken loose because the tree was shivering, even though there really wasn't any wind.

Mrs. Acerbee, panting in rage, wiped apple debris from her face. With the wand no longer pointing at them, the blackberry vines had relaxed, dropping off the tree to lay inert on the ground. Byrne scrambled down the tree, hoping to make a hasty exit while this horrible old woman was distracted. In her haste she slipped as she dropped from the tree, falling flat on her back. With the wind knocked out of her, Byrne could only stare up helplessly as Mrs. Acerbee loomed over her, the wand pointed directly at her heart.

An apple to the face does little to improve *anybody's* disposition, and it had left Mrs. Acerbee's face white and pinched in fury. But it had knocked her spectacles to the ground, exposing her eyes to direct inspection. They were even larger and paler than they had seemed behind the spectacles, and the pupils seemed like pure black dots of paint. *Dead eyes from a statue* Byrne thought frantically.

Mrs. Acerbee's mouth formed a thin smile. "Well, my dear, thank you for coming down here for me. But I think that will be *quite* enough exercise, you horrible child." Her wand flicked to point above Byrne's head, and the blackberry at the base of the tree scabbled towards Byrne with a scratching, rustling sound.

The apple tree above them exploded in a wild shaking of branches, as if a terrific storm of wind had hit it. A branch fell with a crack!, landing on Mrs. Acerbee's arm to knock it aside, and sending her wand flying. Another branch whipped by, sweeping her away from Byrne. Apples, almost as if thrown, bounced off Mrs. Acerbee's head, and then her leg.

Byrne looked around wildly from where she lay--all the trees around them were whipping their branches angrily, and apple after apple flew towards Mrs. Acerbee, as if the apple trees were an enraged army. As Mrs. Acerbee regained her feet, the next apple tree over leaned far back, its roots coming up out of the ground like a dark, feathery foot. The foot came down near Mrs. Acerbee with a *clump*, and then a second tree foot pulled out of the ground, reaching towards the old lady.

With a terrified shriek, Mrs. Acerbee fled towards her house, shielding her head with both of her arms. Byrne jumped to her feet, and on a whim, snatched up the wand from where it had fallen. The branches were already quieting, but as Byrne turned to run towards her house, a final apple dropped to land right

in front of her. It was that beautiful apple she had climbed to reach! Without knowing exactly why, Byrne picked it up and placed it in a pocket, and, realizing that the orchard had fully quieted, walked watchfully but gratefully towards home.

At the edge of the orchard, she came upon Turtle, whose head was up with alert concern. "Some help *you* were, Turtle!" But Turtle simply ruffled her feathers and cocked her head sideways as if to say "Do I *look* like a knight with a sword?" Bird and girl walked back to the house to see about a snack. Byrne had a lot to think about.

A Visit in the Night

Into Town

Byrne heard her name being called as she neared the house. Lunch! She hurried inside, washing her hands before heading to her bedroom to hang up her jacket. She felt the stiff wand on one side of the jacket, and the apple in the other pocket bumped against her.

So many adventures! Byrne thought. She drew the wand out of the pocket, and looked about her room for a suitable place to put it. Another call to lunch came, and she quickly opened the bottom drawer of her desk and put the wand away.

Lunch was followed by a flurry of chores. Out to the garden to pick peas and salad mix, back to the house to wash and package in preparation for the local farmer's market tomorrow. Back out to dig some potatoes to fill a bag for the Food Bank. And then it was time for a walk into town with Grandma to pick up some groceries.

This took them up onto the county road. They crossed the deep gully which drained under the road, and Byrne looked down into the blackberry-blanketed terrain with suspicion, stopping to listen for any movement. There were no cars coming by, and all was still.

She was above the upper side of the gully, on the side of her grandparents' property. Looking straight down, Byrne could see a suggestion of a tunnel mouth where water would drain under the road and on down the hill to the Puget Sound. Her Grandmother, in no rush, gave Byrne an understanding smile before bringing out the shopping list to double check something.

Byrne looked both ways, then crossed the county road to look down at the steeper downhill side of the gully. It was even more deeply overgrown with blackberry, and if anything, even more silent than the home side. She looked straight down, but still couldn't spot the mouth of the tunnel on this side of the road.

"Maybe you'll be a civil engineer?" Grandma called, then continued "I'm ready for town when you are."

Byrne shrugged, and crossed back to Grandma. "I can't find the outlet side of the tunnel under the road, Grandma."

Grandma nodded. "But since the water doesn't back up, you know it has to be there. I remember the stories about when they built this part of the road--they used a technique called 'cut and fill', where they take dirt from the high parts and fill in the low."

She pondered, "Two different companies built this part, and two times it slid down the hill the next winter. Then one of the regional tribes bid on the job, and whatever they did, it's held ever since."

Gardening

When they got back, Byrne headed back towards the garden with Grandpa, planning on some weeding. As they crossed the field, an unfamiliar blush of color caught their eyes, right near the initial slope which formed the gully. With a quizzical grunt, Grandpa veered towards it.

Byrne was sure that this had been clear field just a day or two ago. Now it was a solid stand of Canadian Thistle, a horrible weed which stung like a bee if you touched any part of it--it even stung through leather gloves! And here was a thicket of it; maybe a knight in armor might get through, but nobody in mere clothing.

Grandpa shook his head with displeasure. "How'd this slip in here? I'll have to use the mower on the tractor to clear this out. It's too late in the day to bother getting it going, but I'll take care of it first thing tomorrow."

"Look, Grandpa, there's a stretch of it with a different color?"

And so there was. In a line roughly tracing the low leading towards the gully, the flowers of the thistle were white rather than the reddish-purple of the rest of the thistle.

"Huh, must have to do with the soil composition; maybe richer nutrients in the soil following that low."

Byrne felt like the thistle was staring at her, defying and daring her at the same time, and pointing their horrible flowers right at her. She shuddered, and gratefully followed her grandfather to the garden. The thought of the 6-foot-wide mower on her grandfather's tractor grinding the flowers into pulp was appealing.

She realized that she needed to revisit the places which were keys to a puzzle--the forest, the orchard, the ravine, and finally here, at these thistles. She looked past the thistles to the start of the slope down into the ravine with its thick covering of blackberry. *Even a deer would avoid that place* she thought.

Sweet Dreams

Byrne nestled deeper under the covers of her bed, in bed after dinner and a game. It seemed like there were so many secrets, just outside her field of view. And yet, she had nothing concrete to point at, to take to her grandparents for help. Oddly, the one concrete item--the wand--never occurred to her. Byrne slept.

Byrne opened her eyes, unsure what had awakened her. She listened, but heard only the usual creaks of the house, and the sounds outside of crickets and tree frogs. A glance at the clock by the bed showed her it was exactly midnight. And the clock... it was white? Glowing? No, it was almost translucent. How odd it looked in the silver moonlight!

She glanced quickly towards the window, suddenly realizing there *was* no moon out. She sat up in bed, looking for the source of the illumination, and remembered the wand just as she turned her eyes upon the desk.

There was the wand, still in the drawer, glowing with a pale light which turned the desk nearly transparent. In fact, the light seemed to render *everything* translucent; when Byrne held her shaking hand up in front of her face, she could still see the wand through her ghostly seeming hand.

Byrne jumped out of bed, quite sure that she did not care at all for the wand, nor for its supernatural light. Even as she stepped to the desk, its light grew, and she felt herself fading before the cruel light. With clumsy, ghostly fingers, she slid the drawer open. There lay the wand, but a wave of coldness washed over her, and she realized that she had no idea what to do with the wand, even if she dared to grab it.

She glanced wildly about, and realized that there was a single object on the desk which was as solid as ever--Grandma's old cast iron kettle. It was prone to rust and was no longer used to hold or heat water, but had been an ornament on the desk for as long as Byrne could remember. It stood out as almost a black outline, completely indifferent to the wand's light. With a gasp of hope, Byrne lifted the lid off the kettle, then grabbed the wand--it felt like icy pins and needles--and clumsily lifted the wand and dropped it into the kettle.

It fell into the kettle with a bright green flash and a crack! which nearly made the wand jump back out of the kettle. But Byrne had already grabbed the kettle's lid, and the wand bounced off the lid with another flash and crack! as Byrne tried to drop it into place. And then the lid was down, and Byrne held it firmly in place as cracks and hisses came from inside the kettle, with green flashes lighting up the kettle's spout. It was like holding a small, vicious animal inside.

But each crack and flash was a little weaker, and presently they stopped altogether.

Byrne was panting as if she had run a race. Still holding the lid down with

frightened strength, she realized that the room was darker, and its contents had resumed their usual solidity. With some misgiving, she used one hand to open the top drawer of her desk and bring out a roll of duct tape.

It was awkward to get the tape started, but she finally managed to get a strip applied from one side of the kettle, over the top of the lid, and down the other side. With the lid held down, she looped the tape around and around the pot; the kettle itself would probably break before the lid managed to lift against the many layers of the strong, grey tape.

She would have liked to lock the kettle somewhere, but only the drawers of her desk had any locks at all, and the kettle would never fit in any of them. The locks weren't that strong, in any case. She finally settled on wrapping the kettle in a spare blanket, and putting it in the back of her closet.

She sat on her bed, feeling like the whole house should be in an uproar. But aside from the wand sparking against the kettle, it had all happened in silence. She listened for any sound from the "blue" room next door, but it was terribly quiet. She stopped her thoughts in puzzlement. Why would the empty room be anything *except* silent?

Ready, set, ...

Gardening

At breakfast next morning, Byrne had almost forgotten the night's strange experiences. Instead, she was puzzling at the feeling that there was a memory she had lost. It was one of those elusive thoughts, and the more she tried for it, the less she thought there was anything to remember.

"Grandma, when was the last time somebody stayed in the Blue Room?"

Grandma thought for a moment, and answered "I really couldn't say! It certainly has been a while."

Grandpa nodded, "I'm pretty sure it was before you started coming here."

Byrne also nodded; she had searched the room this morning, and certainly hadn't *seen* anything to suggest otherwise.

She was trying to think of another question when Grandpa interrupted, "Let's take care of the garden, then you can watch me mow that patch of thistle. It's nasty stuff, but *my* money's on the tractor!"

Byrne hopped up and got her jacket.

When walking the fields with Grandpa, the starting point was always the fence surrounding the garden; wire fences are like magnets for every sort of weed--grass growing up for the first foot, then losing the race to blackberry and the beautiful

(but poisonous) Morning Glory. They pulled (with hands) and cut (with shears) all the growth which was trying to use the fence like a trellis.

Next stop was the orchard. Byrne had not been back to the orchard since her brush with Mrs. Acerbee, and was a little afraid at what she might find. But when they reached the orchard, all the trees were standing quietly in their places, although Grandpa was puzzled by the patches of churned ground around some of the trees. The ground also had quantities of leaves and apples, which Grandpa said usually followed a wind storm, not the quiet weather they'd been having.

The weeds up against the trunks of trees was more of the same work as the fences, but less intense--the tree shaded the weeds, slowing them down. And each trunk had only its small coterie of weeds, instead of the hundreds and hundreds of feet of fenceline. Further from the tree trunks, Grandpa could just mow with the tractor.

After cleaning up the orchard, it was time to mow that thistle invasion. They walked by the patch, which was even denser and taller than yesterday. Grandpa shook his head and glared as they walked past, lengthening his stride as if to get mowing before the patch grew even more.

In the big barn, Byrne and Grandpa prepared the tractor, removing its external float charger, checking the oil levels, then putting on ear muffs before Grandpa cranked the big red machine to life. As it warmed up, Grandpa jumped back off the seat and adjusted the three point hitch control to raise the big mowing deck which was attached to the back of the tractor. This mower was a "flail mower", a 7-foot wide metal box containing a horizontal cylinder to which many small V-shaped cutters were attached, each by a short piece of chain. The cylinder would spin very quickly, and each V would in its turn take a chop into the grass or weeds as it whirled around to slash. Because there were so many V's chopping one after the other, grass and weeds turned into a chopped up mulch as the tractor rolled along.

They weren't whirling yet, and with the mower raised up, she and Grandpa could look into the underside of the mower's box to check that all the parts were intact. Once, long ago, Byrne had offered to scramble under the mower to get a closer look, and Grandpa had gravely warned her to *never* get beneath something which might drop because of a mechanical failure. So they peered from the side, and everything looked ready for action.

Grandpa pulled the tractor out of the barn, and Byrne followed behind at a fast walk to keep up. She was very familiar with tractors, and as they got closer to the thistle patch, she stopped so that she wouldn't be too close when the tractor started mowing (mowers can kick up rocks and other debris, sometimes throwing it a surprising distance). Grandpa geared the tractor down to a slow speed, turned around, and backed into the thistle with the mower still held high.

He engaged power to the PTO (Power Take Off), a shaft which fed power from the tractor to the mower. The tractor's engine lugged lower, then came back up

to speed as Byrne heard the whirling sound of the mower's V blades spinning round and round. Finally, he lowered the mower to the ground, and she heard the grrrrunch of the blades turning the thistle into a pulpy stew. Now Grandpa engaged the tractor's transmission, and the tractor started to move forward, back out of the thistle patch.

Usually, the tractor would roll along, the mower at its back chewing up grass and weeds, leaving a nice wide clear patch behind it as it advanced. This is what happened for a few feet, and suddenly there was a clang! and screeching of metal. The tractor engine whined down, and then stopped. Grandpa, sitting up on the tractor, said something--Byrne wasn't sure, but it was probably a Bad Word. Grandpa hopped down, then yelped another Bad Word as he scrambled back up on the tractor--the thistle alongside had stung him fiercely right through his shoes, pants, and shirt.

He switched a couple levers, then started the tractor again--but the mower was silent. He raised the still-silent mowing deck, then rolled the tractor forward clear of the thistle patch. There seemed to be some sort of mat up in the mower, and dragging along as it stretched for four or five feet behind the tractor. Once completely clear of the thistle, he idled the machine and climbed down for a look.

It was a piece of wire fence, apparently laying on the ground, with the thistles growing around and through it.

Mowers are designed to chop vegetable matter. As the cutters caught at this piece of fence, it was metal versus metal, and rather than cutting it, they had grabbed a piece of the fence and pulled it along with the cutter, winding it around the horizontal shaft of the mower. Each cutter had done this in turn, winding the fence around and around the mower's horizontal shaft until it dragged on the mower so inexorably that it had stalled the tractor's engine itself.

Grandpa glared at the mess of wire wound around his mower. "There was no f--", he looked at Byrne, "*darned* piece of fence out there. I'd surely like to know who put it there." He looked angrily around the field, as if hoping to spot the culprit. "Well, I guess I know what *I'll* be doing for the rest of the day." With that, he jumped back up on the idling tractor, and headed back to the barn, stray strands of the wire fence dragging behind.

The stand of thistle remained, defying Byrne.

Farm Tour

Byrne could always tell when Grandpa had a dirty job ahead of him, and would prefer to work on it alone (she figured it let him say things about the job which he wouldn't feel free to say while she was present). So she told Grandpa she'd be out in the field doing some weeding, and--receiving a distracted "Ok, thanks"--off she went. He didn't even notice that she didn't bring along clippers, or the puller, or even a bag to gather weeds which were ready to go to seed.

She felt like something was approaching rapidly, but she really couldn't tell what it might be. So she decided to visit each place which had behaved oddly, and see if any clues presented themselves. With a feeling of poetic harmony, she decided to visit places in the order each oddity had occurred.

The horrible thistle patch was on the way to the forest, and Byrne mostly tried not to look at them (they were *last* on her list, horrid things). But when she glanced towards them she saw every head of thistle flower was pointing straight at her. She looked away as she walked more quickly towards the forest, but one last glance showed each flower had rotated to point squarely at her as she entered the forest.

The forest was not at all quiet or creepy, and Byrne had a feeling of relief as it seemed to close in around her, protecting her back from the thistle patch's attentions. She walked towards the forest's center, wondering which central tree she would find. But when she reached the center, it was the regular tree--old, but without a companion knight tree. None of the trees showed any inclination to talk.

And yet... she was certain something was moving along with her as she walked into the forest. It might have seemed scary, but for some reason it was just--comforting. Byrne turned towards her best guess at her hidden watcher's location, "Hello! Mr. Knight? Can you tell me what is going on?"

She felt a little foolish talking to trees, but held her breath when the forest hushed. Then, as if each tree was whispering the same thing, she heard "Go tonight. Win the fight. What is wrong can be made right."

The forest resumed its noise. And although Byrne tried more questions (and, truth be told, a few threats), the forest remained just a forest. Wondering if there might be more clues, she wandered back out of the forest towards the orchard.

Once again she had a peek of the thistles in the distance, which once again were pointing at her. Byrne stuck her tongue out at them and walked onward to the orchard.

The orchard looked normal as she reached it, but when she stood in front of the tree she'd climbed yesterday, a branch slowly bent downward, until it stopped right in front of her. Byrne had stepped back as the branch bent down, down, down, but realizing there was no danger, stepped forward again to look at the branch in puzzlement. It was a branch--just a branch. And then she realized its significance.

"Oh! You're the tree and the branch which gave me that big, beautiful apple. I still have it--thank you. Should I eat it?"

The branch shook side to side vigorously. No!

"Ok... I'll just keep it for now. Thank you?"

The branch slowly un-bent itself, lifting back up to its normal position. After a pause, the branch bent back down a bit, pointing at... the thistle patch back at the field? Byrne's breath caught as she realized that *every* tree in the orchard was pointing one big branch in the same direction. After a pause, every branch unbent back to its normal position.

Byrne stood in amazement, surrounded by an orchard which now looked as normal as any. With an abashed "Thank You" again, she walked towards the thistle patch.

The Blocked Road

Byrne reached the thistle patch; every flower head was pointing straight at her. She never saw them move, but whenever she wasn't watching them, they'd adjust to point at her again. She stared back at them, "You can't always have a piece of wire fence in there, and *then* Grandpa will take care of you" she told the flowers. They didn't care.

She paced back and forth, following the outside perimeter of the thistle patch. It filled the whole area which sloped to start the ravine towards the county road, and she doubted it would be safe to try and reach the ravine from its sides beyond the thistles--it was steep and choked with blackberry. They were like a gate to the ravine.

She stopped again at the very front of the patch where the white thistle flowers grew on top of what had been the path down to the ravine. Yes, if the white flowers weren't there, she'd be looking at a nice straight path down into the ravine. As she stared at the white flowered thistle, she wondered how to make them go away. They weren't *pure* white; more of a slightly golden tinge. Byrne was reminded of the pale wood of the wand.

She was suddenly certain that the wand was the key to this path. How? She had no idea. But Byrne decided to come back with the wand and see what might happen.

When she reached the house, though, Grandma asked her to peel some carrots, then set the table, then sweep up around the dining table. Grandpa came in--in a bad mood, cutting wire fence when it's tightly wrapped around and around your mower is a beastly job--and Byrne found herself out in the barn holding chunks of what used to be wire fence out of the way while Grandpa clipped out sections.

And then dinner. Then cleanup. Then a family game-- Carcosonne. And bed time.

Byrne went to sleep with a firm resolve to continue with the thistles in the morning.

Go

The Path

Byrne had expected to continue her wand project in the morning, but she awakened at one in the morning with the feeling that somebody had just called her name. She listened, but the house was entirely silent. But she became more, not less, certain that she *had* heard her named called. By a... boy?

She listened carefully to the Blue Room next door. It was quiet. It was *always* quiet. Why was she listening with such expectation?

She slipped out of bed and padded to her closet. The kettle was still sitting in the back of the closet, wrapped in its blanket. Byrne unwrapped it and carried the kettle back to her bed. Shivering a bit, she got her blankets settled on her shoulders, then listened to the kettle for any sign of mischief.

Nothing happened. And then... nothing continued to happen. After a few minutes, Byrne was bored enough to take the chance of removing the tape and lifting the lid off. Inside, the wand was curled to fit within the kettle's curve. It was still, and not glowing at all.

Of its own accord, Byrne's hand reached in and drew out the wand. It sprang straight as it came out of the kettle, and immediately started to glow. She felt a surge of anger at this malicious stick of wood, and rapped it against the iron kettle. A bright green spark and a sharp crack! resulted, and the wand's light went out.

"You *stop* that! I know what iron does to you now, and if you don't behave, I'll break you to bits and bury your parts inside this kettle."

She stared at the wand in the dim light coming in through her bedroom window. The wand really *was* beautiful, with a light, straight grain. It was unblemished except for a dark mark where Byrne had rapped it against the kettle, and as she watched, the mark faded away. But aside from this, the wand was quiet. The threat of iron--whether it understood her words or not--appeared to have quieted the wand.

On a whim, she pointed the wand at a book on her shelf (not one of her favorites, just to be safe) and used the ancient spell "Accio book!". But nothing happened.

"What kind of wand *are* you, anyway?" Byrne muttered. The wand wasn't glowing, yet she felt an underlying tension, maybe even a humming that was so subtle--yet powerful--that she couldn't hear it with her ears. It was like the wand was a lightning bolt, stretched out and pretending to look like wood.

It was quiet outside, and Byrne realized that the moon had come out, bathing the yard and fields beyond with its pale, silvery light. *It was time* she somehow knew. She got out of bed again, shivering some more until she put on her clothes--outdoor clothes, adventuring clothes. The wand had rested on the desk

as she dressed, and now she picked it up, eventually finding that it would rest comfortably enough in an inside pocket of her heavy jacket, alongside her body.

Without really knowing why, Byrne climbed out her bedroom window, as quietly as she could manage. She stepped away from the house, and stopped with her heart in her throat at a movement to her left. *Turtle!* This was beyond odd; when the sun goes down, chickens become terribly drowsy, and find a perch and sleep through the night.

"Turtle!" Byrne hissed desperately, "What are you doing up? A raccoon is going to eat you. Or something even worse!"

Turtle just looked at her with an alert expression, then walked a bit down the path from the house towards the field. After a few more steps, she stopped and looked back at Byrne. When Byrne stepped towards her, Turtle turned and continued walking along the path.

The Ravine

Byrne had little doubt about where they were going, and presently girl and hen reached the thistle patch at the head of the ravine. Turtle lead Byrne to the front of white-flowered thistles (in the moonlight, most color was washed out, but it was still obvious which flowers were the white ones). The stand of thistle looked as threatening and impassable as ever, but the glow of the moon on the white flowers gave Byrne an idea.

She drew the wand from out of her inner jacket pocket, and held it up high in front of her face. The wand began to glow, but its radiation seemed to be pouring out upon the thistle path in front of her, not back upon her and Turtle. In the same way that things had faded in the face of the wand's light, the white flowers became whiter, and whiter, and then Byrne started to see the ground through them. A few seconds later, the white flowers were entirely gone, and a path lead through the thistle stand into the ravine beyond. The wand dimmed and went out.

XXX

Byrne put the wand back in her jacket pocket, and carefully stepped forward, ready to jump back if the magically removed flowers returned. But the path was real enough, and she and Turtle proceeded past the thistles and downward into the ravine.

The top part of the ravine was visible from her grandparents' house, and had been completely dark. Byrne was surprised to see colorful lights ahead as the path sloped downward into the head of the ravine. The further and deeper she went, the more a heavy growth of trees, brush, and blackberry grew up around her, blanketing the ravine from its sides all the way down to just short of the path.

The further Byrne and Turtle ventured down into the ravine, the deeper the ravine sank, and the more the brush and trees grew up to the path, rearing up high to meet over their heads. The lights were still ahead, and she could see that the mass of vegetation acted like a blackout shade, completely hiding them from anyone outside. Runners of blackberry hung out into the path to snag at her as she tried to slip past. Even with her heavy jacket, the thorns of the blackberry stalks sometimes scraped at her all the way through her clothing.

And now the clearance overhead was lowering, as the trees and their brush met lower and lower, turning the path into an ever-shrinking tunnel. Byrne could still see some sort of colored lights--just winks of them through the blockage of all the heavy growth. She was almost ready to give up and try to back out when the path opened again, and suddenly she and Turtle stepped out into a clearing.

They were still in the ravine, but for some reason the vegetation had drawn back from this area. And here was the explanation for the lights she had seen--flowers which looked like Morning Glory had twined up the branches and stalks of the vegetation all around this clearing. Morning Glory is a white flower, but these were all the colors of the rainbow, and glowed brighter and dimmer in cycle, each at its own tempo. The result was a shimmering, shifting illumination which was both beautiful and a little bit unnerving.

Byrne and Turtle stood for a while in the center of the clearing, slowly turning to take in the beauty of these unearthly flowers. The clearing was a widening of a path; they had entered on one side, and Byrne could see an exit heading onward and deeper. As best she could guess, they were still heading towards the county road, but it seemed like they had moved to some other world.

Byrne squatted down to face Turtle. The hen looked back at Byrne questioningly. "Gosh, Turtle, I have no idea how all of this has managed to show up on the farm! But it feels like we're a *part* of it. We need to keep going."

She stood back up, and then walked onward to the other end of the clearing and continued down the path. It was dimmer than the clearing, but one of those colored flowers grew here and there along the path, which never became too dark to see.

The Path to...

Turtle followed closely in Byrne's footsteps as the path led away from the clearing. She received the vague impression that the brush and trees were raising higher and higher in front of her, and realized they they were at the bottom of the fill which supported the county road, which must be forty or more feet above their heads. Indeed, even as she peered up the steep slope, she saw a glow of headlights and a rising whine and then WHOOSH as a vehicle drove by on the road above.

Her eyes, raised to see the glow of headlights above, came back down to look at the base of the highway in front of her. It was made of a concrete retaining

wall, with dirt and rock sloping against the wall. Right in front of her, the wall framed an opening, presumably a drainage tunnel to let water pass under the highway during heavy rains. It was wide and tall enough for her to walk right into, but she hesitated at the mouth of the dark tunnel.

And saw that the outside face of the tunnel, framing the opening, was an arch of tiles around the tunnel opening. As Byrne looked at one, it would seem to be a plain tile, but as she watched, an image would faintly glow into existence on the face of the tile, showing a scene. The first was of a farmhouse set in a field, except the house was made up of rounded parts. The next was of a fox-like creature on a forest path, caught standing still and looking at the artist. Each was a different image, slowly fading into visibility, and gone as soon as Byrne looked somewhere else.

She brought out her small LED flashlight, and turned it upon the tiles, hoping to see more clearly. Instead, the tiles looked like simple, blank grey rectangles. However she was seeing their contents, it wasn't helped by shining light on it.

With flashlight in hand, her eyes turned back to the open tunnel mouth. She turned the light on again, pointing into the tunnel, and saw that the floor was smooth and level. When she took a few tentative steps forward, she found the surface dry and firm. She was standing still, undecided, when a small figure brushed by her legs and proceeded down the tunnel.

Turtle! Byrne pointed the flashlight down the tunnel, catching sight of Turtle's tail feathers as she hurried along the tunnel, back out of the reach of the flashlight's beam. Without even thinking, Byrne chased down the tunnel after her hen. Her footsteps echoed hollowly in the tunnel, and she thought should could hear the tick-tick of Turtle's steps ahead of her.

She had gone at least a couple hundred feet in, and Byrne was surprised that she hadn't caught sight of Turtle yet. But now that she thought of it, her flashlight wasn't as bright as it had been. *Weak battery?* she thought. And she hadn't gone much farther when the light dimmed and went out completely.

This brought her to a stop, and Byrne called "Turtle! Come back!" futilely. As she looked down the tunnel, she didn't see her hen, but... there was a dimly lit opening ahead. Byrne put the useless flashlight back in her pocket, and walked cautiously along the rest of the tunnel and stopped as she left the tunnel, stumbling slightly as she stepped from the tunnel's hard floor to soft sand.

It was still night, and quite dark. Byrne brought out the flashlight and tried it again, with no luck. There was just the faintest nighttime illumination, enough to give her an impression of perhaps a stand of trees ahead. And then from behind her she heard a *snick*.

Byrne spun, useless flashlight in her hand, and peered desperately around to find the source of the sound. She saw nothing, and then did a double take. There was *nothing*--she was looking at a smooth face of rock with no opening!

"Oh, Turtle!" she cried in dismay. Hoping it was just an illusion, Byrne ran her hands over the rock face. But, no, it was just plain old rock--no tunnel. An idea occurred to her, and stepping back, she pulled the wand back out and pointed it at where the tunnel should be:

"Apporto!" she intoned solemnly. But, alas, this ancient charm had no effect. "I wish I was Hermione..." she said in a quiet voice. The wand hadn't even glowed.

Byrne then turned to look at where they had been stranded. Turtle appeared to be done running, and stood right beside her as she peered into the gloom. Aside from the vague impression of trees, she just couldn't see enough to make any decision of which direction to go. They'd have to wait for some daylight. She hoped her grandparents wouldn't be *too* worried before she could return.

Resigned, Byrne used her hands to heap some sand up against the rock, which still radiated heat it had probably absorbed during the day. Laying back against her sand bed, she felt Turtle kick sand as if to make a small dust bath. When Turtle settled down into the indentation she had made, Byrne relaxed her head back, looking upward to the sky.

She fell asleep thinking that the stars were very clear, but she still couldn't spot the Big Dipper.

There

Morning Where?

Her sand bed must have been comfortable, for Byrne slept until the sun rose enough to shoot a beam into her face. She squinched her eyes for a moment, then opened them to finally see where she had slept. The vague impressions she had received last night were accurate enough, for there was a meadow sloping downward from where she sat, reaching a tree line about a hundred yards away. She was up against a rock face, with about ten feet of gravel and sand before the meadow took over. The air smelled nice and sweet, and it was comfortably warm for early morning.

"Oh, Turtle!" Byrne said. "Grandma and Grandpa are going to be terribly concerned. Let's get back now that we can see."

She looked again at the rock wall, and it was as seamless as it had seemed last night. "I don't know how I got so far away from the tunnel, but I guess we can climb up to the county road." She looked upward for a sign of the county road, and then blinked in astonishment; the tunnel had gone *into* an embankment with a county road on top. But it had come *out* from the face of a mountain, which towered far up towards the sky.

Byrne backed up several steps to try and spot her tunnel, and nearly fell over. The mountain went straight up towards the sky, and trying to spot the top made

her dizzy. She looked in vain for any place where this improbably enormous mountain could possibly let her reach the road which should be up on top.

But as she looked to her right and left, it became certain that she was looking at a mountain barrier which never existed near her Grandparents' farm; It stretched as far as she could see both right and left. The distance she had covered in that disappearing tunnel could not be counted in the steps she had taken.

With a sigh, she turned back to survey the tree line. It was a mature forest, with a suggestion of a path which started nearby and lead down to a dim gap in the trees. She reasoned that she could either pick a direction and walk along the mountain in the hopes of finding a path over. But she had no idea if she should start to the right or the left, and also no idea if there *was* a path, or where it led.

Or she could follow the forest path, and when she came across somebody, get directions, or make a call. The path was walkable, and the mountains were truly daunting. Decided, she started to call Turtle, only to see her well down the path, methodically scratching and pecking as she proceeded.

"Travel *and* breakfast, you lucky bird!" Byrne called, and hurried to catch up with her hen.

Choosing a Path

Byrne and Turtle had proceeded a couple hundred yards into the forest, and had found it to be one of those pleasant, wholesome forests with a fresh smell and enough sunlight filtering through to let them see a good distance in all directions. The trees were evergreens of some sort--pine, perhaps--and growing far enough apart that they could easily head out in any direction. For now, they followed the path--Byrne thought she saw something ahead.

After another several hundred yards, they arrived in a clearing. It was quite large, with their path entering it on one side, and three distinct paths available once they crossed to the other side. Byrne led them across and to the leftmost of the paths onward. She craned her neck to see as much as she could, but felt a strange reluctance to take even one step onto the path.

She couldn't be sure, but this path seemed to lead towards a much more mountainous terrain. The trees lining it became larger, older, and more forbidding the further along the path she looked. There was nothing threatening her, and yet she stepped back with her heart beating hard.

"Good, heavens, Turtle! I hope that isn't the path we need to take, because I'm not sure I'm ready for whatever it is those trees want of me."

She caught sight of Turtle also peering with interest down that path, but the hen quickly turned to follow Byrne as she went to the middle of the paths. This one was quite different; the trees were richer, there was a tantalizing scent in the air, and the sunlight was tinted a rosy gold. Byrne found herself blushing, and stepped back again.

"I'm sure that's not the right path, either. What an odd forest!"

Byrne walked to the rightmost of the paths, and saw that it curved gently to the right as it sloped downward. The path was clear and nicely leveled, and the trees looked--reassuringly--like plain, normal trees. Byrne had almost taken an involuntary step onto it when she glanced even further to her right, and realized there was a *fourth* path. She stepped to it, and saw that it was more a *memory* of a path, for it was heavily overgrown, with trees growing right in the path, and brush filling in all around the trunks of the trees.

She shrugged, "Somebody maybe walked this sometime, but nobody's walking it today!" And with that, Byrne--Turtle in tow--returned to the rightmost walkable path and headed into the forest.

The Inn

The trail remained clear and smooth for about a mile as they walked through the forest. Byrne was certain they were slowly descending as the trail led further and further from the mountain they'd started beside, but the forest was thick enough that she couldn't catch any sight of the skyline.

Now the trees were starting to thin, growing just as large, but with more space between each. Then she caught sight of a few stumps, and realized that some of the trees had been cut down. Since this meant people in the area, she wasn't surprised when after another quarter mile they came out of the tree line in view of a cluster of buildings, with their path gaining cobblestones to become a road past the settlement.

She looked back across the trees behind them and caught her breath. The mountain they had come through was even larger than she had thought; even at this distance it was a large portion of the skyline--and the rocky wall continued as far as she could see over the trees to both the right and left.

They turned back around to study the nearby buildings, which were on the left hand side of the road. They were a bit like the adobe buildings she had seen when visiting California, with tan, earth-toned walls and gently curved edges with rounded openings for the windows. The nearest building was set well back from the road, in the middle of a tidy yard. There was a picket fence along the road's side of the yard. As Byrne and Turtle neared the fence, Byrne spied a pair of posts with a gate. But the gate was tied open, and they stepped between the posts to enter the yard.

They had been able to see the yard through the picket fence, but she still stopped in admiration as she passed the gateway. The adobe building had trellises against it, and up these had grown scarlet runner beans, sheathing the building in a riot of red flowers. The beans grew up out of raised beds which were built right up against the adobe walls. Because the beans stretched up high, there was also room for flowers in each bed. And such flowers! Gold and purple, and while

some grew low to the bed's soil, others stood up on stalks, with their flowers turning to face the sun.

Nearer to her, most of the yard was devoted to a kitchen garden, and she saw several rows of tall corn plants, with scarlet runner beans again, this time climbing the stalk of the corn. All the base of the corn was covered in big pumpkin plant leaves, with peeks of golden-orange pumpkins here and there.

"The three sisters." a voice was suddenly at her side. Byrne jumped, and turned to see who had spoken.

"I'm sorry, I think I made you jump! I saw you looking at the way that corn, beans, and squash work together--the corn gives the beans a place to climb, and the big squash leaves shade out most of the weeds. It's sometimes called 'The Three Sisters'."

The speaker was a short man, a little shorter than Byrne herself, but his face was lined with wrinkles. Mostly *smile* wrinkles, she thought. He was clean-shaven with blue eyes, and he was dressed all in dirty work-clothes. With the dirt on his hands, she had obviously interrupted him in his gardening.

And what a garden! As he had spoken, they had naturally stepped further into the yard towards the Three Sisters. Byrne saw that the yard was mostly garden, including herbs, flowers, and towards the corner she spied potatoes along with a number of salad greens. Her own Grandpa was quite a gardener, but *this* garden was like the garden a fairy queen might maintain. Well, *have* maintained.

What caught the eye wasn't just the variety, but the tidiness and the vibrant green of the leaves. Where she could see the dirt, it was rich and crumbly, and although Byrne *knew* what dirt tasted like, the look and smell made the garden beds seem like another kind of food. The man had turned naturally to walk beside her as they proceeded through the garden toward the building.

In the Inn

They stopped short at the entrance to the adobe building. A sign above the arched doorway read "Gold Inn", and Byrne suddenly realized that she didn't know the man's name--and that Turtle might be wreaking havoc in his garden! She turned quickly, but saw that Turtle had just quietly followed along behind them.

Turning back, she apologized "I'm sorry, my name is Byrne. Byrne Waters. This is my hen and traveling companion, Turtle."

The man nodded politely to Byrne, then Turtle. "You come from a lovely family, and I welcome you. I'm Gran, Gran Gold-Inn."

"Oh! So you named the Inn after yourself?"

He smiled, "The Inn and my family have co-existed for so long, nobody's sure which came first. Have you had breakfast?"

Byrne suddenly realized that in all the excitement, she had held off thinking about food. A pang of hunger nearly made her dizzy. "Oh, I don't want to be a bother?"

The man laughed. "It hurt you to say that, but please let me provide some food for you--and your companion." With that, he turned and led the way into the Inn. Byrne hesitated, then followed.

"Um, Mr. Inn? We went on this journey without much warning. I'm afraid we don't have any money."

"Sudden journeys are the best! I can help you with breakfast, but I'm not sure about money. What is it? What does it look like? Do you see any around here? I'm sure I can help. Oh, and do call me Gran."

Byrne giggled. "It's a very particular kind of paper, with numbers on it. You give it to people, and they give you what you need. Food, clothes, things like that."

Gran pondered. "I can find paper, and write numbers on it. And I'd be happy to give it to you. But why you would bother handing it back to me? I'm going to give you breakfast anyway."

Byrne shrugged. "I think we're even farther from home than I thought!"

Gran nodded distractedly. They had stepped into a large, dimly lit room. The center of the room was a circular fire pit with a funnel-shaped hood over the pit to capture the smoke and direct it up and out through the roof. The pit was ringed with river stones as large as basket balls, set in concrete and describing a circle around the pit. The pit was just dark ashes, for the weather was warm enough to make a fire unnecessary.

Most of the room was taken by tables, some long with benches on both sides, but many were square with a chair on each side. They were all made of dark wood, clean and in good shape, although Byrne could see the marks of many years of use on the table tops.

By the far wall was a long bar, also made of dark wood. Gran went around behind it to draw a glass of something dark-gold in color which he brought to Byrne. "Apple cider" he announced. She took a sip, and felt like she was sipping the glow of sunshine. "Ooh!" she exclaimed.

Gran grinned approvingly. "A very typical reaction!"

A door on the wall behind the bar swung open, and Byrne caught sight of an old-fashioned kitchen beyond the doorway as an older woman, her hair tied in a bun, swept into the room with a plate of food. "I thought you looked a little hungry, so I didn't wait for Gran to *get around* to fetching you some food." She put the plate down on the nearest square table, then laid down a napkin and silverware. "Breakfast potatoes, sausage, bread, and...", she placed an earthen pot beside Byrne, "butter."

"I'm Gren, give me just a moment?" She continued past Byrne to crouch down and address Turtle, who had followed along as a matter of course when they entered the Inn. "How are you, mistress? Come with me, and we'll give you something for your own breakfast, along with a safe place to lay your egg." The two stepped out the door, Turtle clearly eager for breakfast.

Byrne turned back to see that Gran had gone behind the bar to draw a stein of something for himself. "When you're older, perhaps you can try some of my ale. As delicious as my cider, in its own way!" And he took a sip as he walked back to join Byrne at the table as she ate.

Gren returned, announcing that Turtle had enjoyed her breakfast, and was now nestled in a safe corner of the garden, enjoying the sun. She also sat down, took a sip from Gran's ale, and talked with Gran about some garden repairs while Byrne finished her breakfast. Byrne tried to keep from being rude, but she was really hungry at this point, and the delicious food on the plate disappeared quickly.

As Byrne finished, Gran turned back to Byrne. "You have the feel of a traveler. There isn't much up the path you used except for The Wall. You're only the second person we've seen use the path in ages--and the first to have such a companion! What brings you to Shelf, and how can we help?"

Byrne looked into his clear, blue eyes, and realized that she wanted to tell him the *whole* story. So she described her life, and her grandparents, and all the strange occurrences leading up to her breakfast this morning. Gran and Gren listened closely, never interrupting, and giving every indication of believing her story entirely. When she finally finished, she felt a sense of relief which made her tear up a little bit. Gren patted her hand gently.

"I need a pipe." Gran announced. Gren tsk'ed, but set about gathering the plates. Byrne made to help Gren, but Gren nodded her head towards Gran as he headed for the door. "Thank you, but when he smokes, he thinks hard. You might hear something helpful."

Thinking in the Garden

Gran had his pipe drawing, and smoke puffed periodically from his lips as he walked alongside the tomatoes.

"Um, sir, I thought the tobacco mosaic virus needed to be kept away from the tomatoes?"

Gran looked at his pipe, then at Byrne, then at the plants. Then back at his pipe. "Would you say you're near to home, or far from it?"

"Very far, I think."

"I think that must be some wisdom which doesn't travel well, since I've been gardening and smoking this pipe for, well, a *long* time." He changed the subject,

"That wall you came through, or under? I know that wall, and there are a few stories from over the years of people arriving in a similar fashion. Each of them arrived here for a reason, something that went wrong, and their being here was a way to fix it."

Byrne was puzzled. "I was visiting my grandparents just like always. And these strange things happened *to* me. My grandparents are nice, Turtle is a wonderful hen. What would I fix?"

Gran looked at her thoughtfully. "You've talked to a guardian of the forest. You've defeated a witch and taken her wand. You've passed through the defenses and walked an enchanted path." Gran nodded. "Your grandparents, are they wizards?"

"No! They're just nice, and live on a small farm."

He nodded. "Go through their house in your mind, describe it to me one room at a time."

Byrne obediently described the house, its kitchen, dining room, hall, bathroom, her bedroom.

Gran had started to shrug when Byrne remembered, "Oh! And the extra bedroom. But it's empty."

"Describe it, please?"

Byrne described its blue color, bed, dresser, closet, whatever she could recollect. Gran's eyes seemed to be looking downward, deep into the earth. They strolled further into the garden, Gran still thinking, with Byrne following and trying to guess what ideas he might have. Finally he stopped.

"Well, Byrne, I'm not sure about this business, and I don't like to see someone so young taking on a quest. But I think this one landed with you for a reason, and the best thing is to help you on your way."

They had rounded the corner of the Inn, and found Turtle, who had dug a dust bath at the base of some peas on a trellis.

"Oh, Turtle!" She turned to Gran, "I hope she hasn't hurt your garden."

"No, no, your familiar's welcome to her little comforts."

"Familiar?"

Turtle gave Gran a glare, and he quickly amended "Well, traveling companion, then." He considered the hen for a few moments, then added, "Hens have many excellent qualities, but it's best to keep them away from physical rigors. Perhaps she should stay here, and we'll keep her safe while you journey a little further down the road to settle the question of why you're here."

Byrne first inclination was to argue, but she then considered some close calls she'd in the past between chickens and dogs--never mind eagles! Byrne knelt

down to look Turtle in the eye, "What do you think, dear? Would it be best to stay here and wait for me?" She gently stroked her back (a familiarity never permitted by any of her other hens), and Turtle gave her a "buck".

Byrne stood back up, and looked at Gran. "Ok, but if I travel further, what am I trying to DO?"

Gran nodded. "Some adventures have a very fixed goal right from the start. Pull the sword from the stone, find the Grail, kill the witch. I think you're having the kind of quest where figuring out the 'why' is a big part of the challenge. The *path* seems pretty clear--" he gestured to the road, "--and my advice to you is to follow it, look for clues, trust your instincts, and treat it like a puzzle which will come together when you look at enough pieces."

Gren came out of the Inn as they walked back around the corner, and Turtle stirred from her bed to follow them. Gren held a solid leather pack by its straps, and offered it to Byrne. "You started on your journey with scarce few supplies--as well you should! The best journeys sneak up on you! I've packed you a change of clothes, some food, and a few other things which I found useful back when I was an adventurer."

Byrne took the pack, and hung it over her shoulder. "You were an adventurer?!? Where did you go? What did you do?"

But Gren chuckled. "If I hold you here, telling my old stories, you'll never have stories of your own. I think a day will come when we can sit down and enjoy all of our stories. But today, I think, is right for you to work on some new stories."

Gran nodded. "We'll keep an eye on the road, and will also send word to a few people we know out there. I'm afraid not every face will be friendly, but with luck you'll have help when you need it."

Byrne was suddenly aware that it was time to leave. It was so sudden! But there was the road, and-- "Turtle!" Byrne knelt down, and Turtle hopped up on her knee. "I'll miss you. You be good here, and don't make a mess of their garden." Turtle looked her in the eye for a moment, then hopped back down, and wandered back towards her chosen spot in the garden, pecking at this and that.

Byrne stood up, bowed to Gren and then Gran, said "Thank you!", and went back out the gate. She turned left and continued her journey down the road. She almost turned back when she heard Turtle call, but realized it was just her ba-gacking the announcement of her morning egg.

Onward to the Gate

The Path

Past the Inn, the path widened and changed to cobblestone. On both sides off the road were empty fields dotted with small patches of tree, the forest slowly

taking back the land. There was a long uphill stretch of the road, and when she reached the top, she could see ocean in the distance. Turning back, she was finally able to see the overall lay of the land.

Gran had mentioned the name "Shelf", and now Byrne saw why. The mountain face where she had started was absolutely enormous, stretching wide side to side, and towering up into the sky as an almost vertical face. It reminded her a bit of standing near the base of the famous Half Dome monument in Yosemite Valley. The land came out away from the face of the cliff in a pretty flat table of land, and then ended in a curve at the ocean. It was indeed a "shelf" of land.

Looking forward down the road, there was a mix of fields with trees continuing on both sides of the road until way out in the distance it reached the ocean. There were shapes on some of the most distant hills she could see, perhaps buildings. While she enjoyed Turtle's company, it was going to be a long walk, and she was glad to take it at a quick pace.

Several hours later, she came to the latest hilltop, and saw the ocean was much nearer now. Looking down the hill, a few miles onward she saw a fence which came across the road and stretched off on both sides for as far as she could see. Where the road passed the fence, something blocked it. A gate, or perhaps even a small building?

Byrne wondered what would be at the gate, and hurried along. As she neared, she could see the gate was metal, very tall, and crossed the road at a right angle. Where the road met this fence, a stone guard house was built right over the road. It had an oval opening which would let you pass through, except that a metal grille door was mounted in it, currently closed.

She came right up to the grille, but it looked like it was locked tightly, with no sign of a latch. She grabbed it and tried to give it a shake, but could not budge it in the slightest. Byrne wondered how you called to ask for it to be opened, and was about to give a shout when a figure stepped out of an alcove on the other side of the gate, and stepped up to study her through the bars.

The figure was a soldier, with a sword in his hand held with the tip pointing at the ground, but angled towards Byrne. He wore a plain, off-white tunic, and peeks of woven metal showed around the edges--chain mail. He had on a helmet, but it only covered his head, and she could see his face. He had bright brown eyes, and an enormous brown mustache.

"Hold, stranger! State your business." He barked.

Byrne stepped back in surprise. The man was really rather short--taller than Byrne herself, but shorter than most men she knew. His voice was deep, but a little raspy, and she felt like there was no need for him to talk to her this way.

"Hello. My name is Byrne Waters, and I need to travel down this road because I've accidentally started on an adventure."

He snorted a short "Hah" and did something to the gate, which swung open. With a firm stamp, he took a step towards Byrne to fill the opening, who jumped back as the tip of his blade came closer. "And why do you think we would welcome an adventure over here, tell me THAT?" He finished his question on another almost-shout.

Byrne considered turning and running, but it didn't seem right to go back to Gran and Gren (even though, really, it would certainly be nicer than this!). "Please, maybe it's more of a quest. Gran and Gren both seemed to think this was the path to take..."

The knight (really, he seemed to be one, considering the sword and helmet and armor) narrowed his eyes. "Going to use names, are we? You think I'll fall for THAT?" He stamped forward another step.

(He seemed to like shouting "THAT", Byrne thought frantically.)

"I've stood watch over this land, and *I* have never heard such a story in my life!" he growled. His body seemed to vibrate with tension.

But Byrne noticed a woman in a cloak had quietly passed through the gate at his back. She walked with a stout staff held in her right hand, and as she came up behind the knight, she swung the bottom of the staff down low, then gave a mighty upward sweep and connected directly with the back of the knight's helmet.

The helmet gave a loud "tonk" sound, and the knight's next words--whatever they were going to be--became the word "gah" instead. The sword dropped from his hand, and he raised both hands, as if to find out if he still had a head.

Through the Gate

The helmet had snapped forward, covering his eyes, and it took him a moment to gather himself and force the helmet back straight on his head. Byrne was afraid for the woman, but she next rapped him on the shin with her staff, and its *crack* was accompanied by an "ow!" from the knight. He looked at the woman with a hurt expression. "Mara! Stop that. I'm guarding the gate."

"OH! 'Guarding the gate'? Is that what we call bullying innocent travelers who any *fool* can see mean no harm?" She jabbed the tip of the staff at his stomach, and he jumped back a step to avoid it.

The woman glared at him for another moment, then held out the staff. "Hold this." The knight, who Byrne was realizing was really not quite as terrifying as she had thought, meekly took the staff. "Hand it back to me when I need to hit you."

The woman now turned to Byrne with a smile. "I'm Mara, and that lout is Erec. You have to pardon him, he's wonderful when it's time to defend the realm, but young woman adventurers are just a bit outside his imagination. Are you OK?"

Byrne was feeling overwhelmed, but nodded yes. Now she could see the woman was maybe in her thirties, fine featured with long, shoulder length, black hair which hung in ringlets. Mara's eyes were grey, and while they had been a little scary when she was cross with Erec, were now kindly and a little concerned.

Mara watched her for a moment, then turned back to Erec. "Give me my staff."

Erec handed her the staff, holding it by his fingertips and standing as far back as he could. Mara grabbed it, then set it to the ground as a walking stick and turned back to Byrne. "Why don't you walk with us? Our house is on the path, and if we can help you in any way, I think it's the right thing to do."

With that, the two women continued through the gate and onward. Erec stopped to pick up his sword, lock the gate again, then followed along at just about a staff's distance behind them.

Plans and Onward

The path curved a bit to the right, crested a small hill, then curved back down to the left. In the distance, Byrne could see the ocean was now quite close, although the rise and fall of the ground towards the ocean still kept her from seeing the coast itself. Their path came down between two slightly steeper hills, and they passed through a plain wooden gate which stood open.

The path turned from earth with gravel into flag stones which led to a simple structure. Byrne had been expecting a house of some sort--maybe along the lines of Gren and Gran's--but this was something entirely different. The "house" was no house at all, but a flat roof about 30 feet wide and 20 feet deep, supported at its four corners by stone pillars. The large slab of roof appeared to be one single, enormous rectangle of stone. She couldn't see the top of it--it was raised up eight feet or more in the air--but a peek of tufts of grass up there suggested that the roof was covered with plants.

As they stepped under the roof (Byrne briefly wondering what would happen if the whole roof collapsed!) she looked past a stone table with wooden chairs drawn up to it. And stopped in wonder. For beyond the table was a downward slope of grassy field, and Byrne could finally see the coast. The land was called "Shelf", and here she could see what was at the edge of the shelf as it reached the ocean.

Beyond the slope of grass, the land of Shelf turned into a sequence of terraces, a profusion of them. The width and depth of each terrace step varied widely, and upon each terrace was a different structure, or pool, or garden. None was bigger than 10 feet or so, and most were made of stone, although many, many different kinds of stone of all tints and colors had been used here and there. They proceeded in steps, downward and downward, until they reached the actual ocean.

Looking to her right, she saw that a creek passed the hill they were standing

upon, and trickled down in among all the terraces. It filled tiny moats in front of miniature castles. It turned small water wheels in others. It passed under toylike bridges, or was carried in small aqueducts to route the water to a neighboring terrace. Byrne had once gone miniature golfing, and that was the closest thing she had ever seen to these marvelous structures, but where the miniature golf place had a few structures among golfing lanes--and you could see from one end to the other--this was a busy and densely connected, spreading beyond her sight to her right and left.

"That is remarkable! Who built it?"

Mara nodded with a smile. "It was built, and is still maintained, by gnomes. I've never seen one, though sometimes I'll hear them move about behind my back. Erec thinks each part is the home of one gnome, whereas I think they work in groups, moving about as needed."

They stood quietly, looking down into the terraces. Aside from a slight sound of wind rustling through plants, the entire area was still. Mara said, "Now close your eyes and listen."

Byrne closed her eyes. Even the wind was still, and she heard nothing for a moment. Then there was a rustle down below, and Byrne popped her eyes back open. Nothing.

Mara beside her still had her eyes closed. "You'll never see them, but if you close your eyes, you can still hear that they're nearby."

Byrne closed her eyes again, and soon the noises come again. There was a scurrying to the left, and down below what was certainly a stone being dragged. Feet pop-pop-pop jumped up some steps a little bit closer. Before long, it was as if a whole village was busily at work. She finally said "Gnomes! I'm going to open my eyes now." After a moment, she did--and saw the still and empty terraces as before.

Byrne had been ready to sit and rest, but the sight of this fairy garden gave her new energy. "Is it OK if I walk down into it?"

Erec grunted at this, but it was Mara who answered. "Oh yes, in fact I think it's the obvious path for you. But let's have lunch and talk first."

Byrne had had her back to the table, and turned around to find covered silver serving trays upon the table. "Oh! How did they appear?"

"The usual way," Mara answered obliquely, and handed out plates once she had loaded them with slices of meat, a pile of various leafy greens, and chunks of bread.

They ate in friendly quiet for a few minutes, and presently Mara lifted her head to look at Byrne. "I'm sure you've told it more than once, but I would like to hear your story, if you please?"

Byrne now alternated between telling her story, and taking bites of her meal. Mara, no longer eating, listened with a focused attention which made Byrne a little uncomfortable. Erec was also thoughtful, and took off his helmet to scratch his head quizzically.

Byrne had just finishing her story, and stopped to stare at Erec. "You! You talked to me out of the tree in my own world!"

Erec shook his head. "No, not me." He turned to Mara, "Mara, did you cast my likeness somewhere?"

"No, certainly not. But you come from a long line of knights, perhaps one of them still has a Presence." Mara turned back to Byrne, "The second bedroom, and the fourth overgrown path. Whatever you're seeking, I'm sure it is something you've lost."

Byrne seemed puzzled. "Lost? I can't think of anything I've lost. Oh! And what should I do with this wand?" And she drew it out of her pocket, holding it towards Mara.

Mara shrank back quickly, hands held outward. "Have a care! Wands are not handed about--nor even touched--lightly." When Byrne drew it back sheepishly, she leaned forward to peer at it carefully. "You didn't describe it as made of crystal."

Byrne looked at it again with surprise. "It *was* wood." She wiggled it a bit. "It still bends like wood. Why would it change color? Or rather, lose color?"

Byrne was looking to Mara to answer, but instead it's Erec who spoke, "That's easy. You won it, fair and square. It'll empty out of what that bad old witch was like, and then it'll fill in with what *you're* like." He grinned. "I bet it'll be beautiful."

Byrne blushed, and after looking at the wand one more time, (it was still clear) put it away. "Can you help me get home? Gren and Gran thought I was on a journey, but all I do is go from one place to the next. I don't see how this helps."

Erec got up. "We'll need an axe. I'll get one and sharpen it." He paused, "I'll sharpen my sword, too." And strode off.

Mara watched him until he was out of view, then turned back to Byrne. "Have you ever explored a new trail? One piece of advice as you follow a new trail is to look back--where you've gone looks very different when you look back, and it's good to be familiar with your path, forwards and backwards. For an adventure, I think something similar is true. You're looking forward, into the adventure, and nothing makes sense. When you can look back, you'll likely see that it all makes a great deal of sense."

"So you can't just help me return home?"

"I am certain that we'll see you onward on the path which leads you home as soon as possible." Mara got up, and Byrne followed her to some steps which

lead downward onto the first of the terraces which followed one another down to the water. She looked off to her right, where the headland curved away sharply around the curve of their hill. "Look out across the water there. What do you see?"

Byrne followed Mara's finger, and saw what had been hidden from where they shared lunch. There was another rise of land separated by a narrow strait of water from their own land. Where their own land was clean, and pretty, and--now that she was used to it--it was even comforting to hear the secretive gnomes going about their work. But the land across the strait was... colder. Grey. There were no friendly steps of terraces, just grass with plants dotted here and there. Up the slope on that side, some sort of tree became more frequent.

"I like your side better."

Mara smiled. "As do I. But I've thought carefully, and I think your path lies over there."

"I don't have a boat, and wouldn't know how to use one if I did!"

"Erec's ahead of you there. Go down these steps, enjoy the company of the gnomes; follow their paths. You'll be in my thoughts." And Mara bent to kiss Byrne on the top of her head, after which she stepped back.

Byrne looked at Mara, and realized that the woman had become a little formal, a little distant, and a little--respectful? Byrne realized that she didn't want to disappoint her, nor Erec. So she turned, and started down the steps into the terraces.

The Work of the Gnomes

If Byrne was a bit sad to be sent off once again, she was quickly distracted by the endless variations and rich details which made up the sequence of terraces. Water trickled under a small curved bridge--no higher than her knees--and she walked around a wonderfully detailed castle which was only a little higher than herself! Peering in an upstairs window of the castle, she saw furniture and even a rumpled bed.

On the other side of the castle, she hopped over a foot-wide moat holding water which bubbled merrily as it passed by. And then she carefully walked through a garden of colorful glass flowers, on a path of green, smooth chipped stones. After this the path curved to the right, and became lined by lavender plants, the air fragrant with their scent.

At the end of this path was a simple wooden square on the ground. But as she stopped upon it, it slowly sank like an elevator to bring her down to the next terrace level. All these terraces together were like a garden, plus a museum, plus a clockwork. In each direction, her glance fell on other inventions and features and gardens which she realized she wouldn't be able to visit for now.

All while she traversed this creation, she had been hearing little rustlings nearby. Whenever she turned towards a sound, nothing met her eyes. And yet sometimes she'd see a branch still shivering, or a dash of water apparently caught by a foot. Byrne was curious how many gnomes lived here.

She had just crossed a sheet of "water" which was made of metal, yet somehow rippled slowly even though it supported her weight. Beyond it, there was a table directly in the path, and Byrne stepped up to it to find a ball of bright yellow wax, about the size of a softball. And a thin brass cylinder, resembling one of her mother's lipsticks. Like a lipstick case, it had a seam going around it, but something kept Byrne from opening it. The ball and case were sitting on a piece of paper, on which were written letters in an unfamiliar script.

Even as she stared at the letters, they crawled around and rejoined into English:

"Light when sore beset"

Byrne hesitantly laid a hand on the ball, and waited to see if there was any complaint. When none came, she also picked up the metal case, and carefully stored both of them in her pack.

"Thank you for your help. Although I hope I won't be 'sore beset'!"

There was a rustling *above* her, but when she looked up, there was only a golden feather floating down toward her. Byrne caught it, and it felt so soft and warm that she held it under her nose. It smelled like sunshine.

Bridge to Badness

The Base of the Terraces

Byrne had been steadily descending the levels of terraces, and now ended at a "T", having reached a bulkhead with a path leading to the right and left. She leaned over the bulkhead to look down into the ocean, its waves lapping against the wall ten feet below her. She looked to the right past the water to the forbidding terrain across the water, and reluctantly turned right to curve around the terraced land and see if there was any way across.

The path was paved, with the stone balustrade on her left and a drop to the ocean beyond. On the right was a low-railed fence with openings periodically to permit one to head back upward into the terraces, which all appeared as varied and wonderful as the ones she had passed on her way down.

Every twenty feet or so, a pair of stone posts bracketed the path. They looked like fancy, skinny vases about three feet in height. As she approached each pair along the path, a short cylinder with a face painted upon it would pop up on each side, with an accompanying whistled "toot". She walked the path, to be greeted with the cylinder popping up in tandem, one just a little after the other. Each cylinder had its own unique sound, thus greeting her with a "beep-boop"

or "whoot-waaah" as the painted faces popped up whistling. It became amusing to approach the next pair of posts to find out what sounds she would get next, from an almost-foghorn to a brief "bip" of a very high pitched steam whistle.

And the faces painted on the pop up cylinders! Each was also unique, and they were all friendly, and often funny, faces. Some were smiling, some had comically surprised expressions. But each popped up for only a few seconds, so she could never get quite close enough for a detailed look. A few times she also tried going back up the path, just to come to them a second time. But they would never pop up again--each one apparently gave one performance.

Erec

Byrne was so absorbed with the posts along the path, trying to guess what they would sound like next, that she came around a final bend to be surprised by Erec sitting beside the path.

"Hi! I was just enjoying those posts with their pop up faces."

"Ah, they give you faces, did they? I get jewelry. Mara won't tell me what she sees, so I think it might be something magical."

"Who paints them?"

"And when? I don't know, but it's surely gnome magic of some sort." Erec looked a little further down the path, where the row of balustrades has an opening. "Go take a look at that, but be careful."

Byrne stepped past Erec, and carefully walked up to the opening beyond the break in the nearest balustrade. She saw that it must once have been a bridge; on her side it jutted out a bit before reaching a crumbled edge. On the other side, she could see an arch beneath a piece of bridge which also ended at a place where the rest of the bridge must have broken off and fallen down. She gingerly stepped forward a bit more, to see what was down below.

And realized that a low rumbling has been in the background, getting louder as she came around to this broken bridge. Beneath was a steep drop into a wide, dark river at least 50 feet across. The river was deep, and poured past with such a velocity that it made the dull, rushing sound she'd been hearing. She had wondered if bits of the broken bridge were down there, but this mighty flow of water would have carried the pieces far out to sea in the blink of an eye.

Byrne stepped back from the precipitous fall, and looked back at Erec. "How long ago did this bridge fall? How do you get across now?"

Erec had come quietly up beside her to look across the river-filled gap to the other side. "Nobody knows. I hope nobody was on it when it happened! And I somehow knew you'd want to go across, so I've been working on that."

"Wait, I don't want to go over there!" But even as Byrne argued, her eyes were drawn to the other side with its half of the broken bridge remnants.

"Maybe not, but go ahead and tell me it isn't where you need to be next?"

Byrne walked past the balustrade opening, to see if there was anything better to pursue further along the path. Then she came back, and looked for something to see up the terraces. She looked again at the bleakness across the river. "Well, I can't go across even if I wanted to."

Erec nodded, and undid his belt to take off his sword in its scabbard. "It swings around a bit," he explained.

And then Byrne saw he had been sitting beside the path sharpening an axe. Sitting beside the path... and beside a large tree. She looked up, up, up--and then over at the width of the gap to the other side. "Oh no."

"Oh yes." And Erec shooed her back, and chopped the tree with his axe. It went *thunk*, and then he chopped again. And again. Big triangular chips of wood flew as he worked.

Make Your Own Bridge

Byrne could see there was an art to his chopping; he carefully opened up a "V" into the tree, and when it reached some size he liked, he went around to the other side and put a "V" just a bit higher. Byrne was so busy watching his powerful yet artful axe work, that she was surprised when he stopped. "Byrne, can you go down the path a bit?"

"How far?"

"As far as the top of the tree if it toppled towards you. And then a bit more?"

"Right!" And Byrne walked back the way she had come a good long way, and then looked at the top of the tree, and walked a good bit more. She walked so far back that she couldn't even see Erec, so she shouted "Ok!".

And heard back "Timber!", followed by a whack, and another, and a third. There was a pause, and a roaring cracking sound, and then a rushing sound, and finally a *boom*.

Byrne came timidly back up the path, to see the tree laying straight across the gap over the river, exactly where the part of the bridge had fallen in. Erec had a handkerchief out, and was mopping his face. "That was fun! Wait a bit for me to catch my breath, and I'll cut off the branches in the way."

And after a few minutes and a sip from a water bottle he'd brought along, he stepped out on the fallen tree, and carefully cut off the branches sticking up into the way, each with a precise chop of his axe. He came back across the tree (it bounced up and down more than Byrne liked to see) and bowed with a flourish to indicate the path was ready for her.

Byrne stepped up onto the tree and started forward. It was OK until she got out far enough that there was nothing beneath the tree but a terrifying drop to

the river below. She felt a moment of dizziness. "What if I fall in?"

"That would be bad. Same as if you *jumped* in. So don't do either." He now set aside the axe, and sat down with his sharpening stone. Picking his belt with sword back up, he pulled out the sword and began sharpening it.

With this extremely helpful advice, Byrne took the scariest 50 foot walk she had ever had in her life.

The Barren Steppes

Among the Trees

Byrne tried to walk precisely down the center of the tree across the river. She had read in a book that it's much worse to look down, so she tried hard to only look ahead at where she was going to step. The sound of Erec behind her rasping his sharpening stone on his sword's edge was somehow comforting, and she finally reached the other side without mishap.

Turning, Byrne waved to Erec one last time, receiving a casual wave in return, as if this was all terribly normal. Maybe it was for him? Turning back, she saw that she was at the bottom of a rising slope, covered with grass of a grayish-yellow color, of the sort a horse would no doubt refuse to eat. There were holly trees dotted here and there, with green prickly leaves with yellow edges. The way straight up the hill was clear enough, so Byrne started to ascend, hoping to get enough elevation to see what was around.

It was odd, but after only a dozen steps or so, the sound of Erec's work from across the way faded off, and looking back she could no longer see him, the view being blocked by a few trees. Byrne hesitated, but figured that the way had curved a bit, and the trees were absorbing the sound. She could go back and check, but then she'd just have to walk up the slope all over again.

The way ahead was still straight and open, and she went a ways further up the slope before she looked back. She was surprised to see that not ten steps behind her, the holly trees made an impassable wall. Where was her path? But even as she stared at the trees where her path had been, she heard a rustling to her left. She quickly looked, and saw that a tree was certainly closer than it had been a moment ago! A tree on the other side rustled, and now she realized that the trees were closing in on her.

As she turned back to look up the hill--the path was still open--the branch of a holly tree dragged across her back, feeling like the prickling of pins. She sprang up the path, not daring to look back at the rustlings she heard behind her.

Up ahead it seemed like the trees were closing in as well, her path ascending the hill getting narrower and narrower. The slope was just leveling, and she could see a clearing ahead, when a branch full of wickedly sharp leaves swung right

out at her face. She ducked, scrambled forward, and emerged into a clearing. The trees behind her suddenly fell silent.

A Horrible House

The horrible holly trees surrounded this clearing on all sides, describing a circle a hundred or more feet in diameter. In the center of the circle at the top of this hill was a weathered, small one-storey house. It had a door on one side, but strangely high up on the face of the house, as if a porch had once been attached, but then disappeared. Byrne walked slowly towards the house, and saw that the front of the house had a few windows, again up higher on the walls than normal. The house up close was even less pleasant, not shabby like an old building, but more like a sick animal. Byrne imagined being in front the house, and things looking out at her from the front windows. With a shudder, she instead turned to follow along the back of the house.

Here there were four windows in a row, looking very much like what a motel looks like from a rear alley. They were all up higher than her head, all opaque, small and grimy, and in a uniform row. Byrne took a little comfort from the opacity of the windows, and started to walk alongside the house. She kept an eye up at the first window as she passed it, but it stayed dark and featureless. When she looked back down alongside the house, she gasped, for the last window in the row was a little bit *lower* than the other three!

She stopped, her heart beating hard. Then with a start she looked back up at the first window, now a little behind her, but it had stayed the same. But when she looked back down the house, that last window was perhaps even a bit lower than when she looked away. She backed away from the house while trying to watch all the windows, and was prickled. With a shriek, she turned to see that the holly trees had crowded into the clearing, forcing her back near the house.

She passed the second window, and couldn't keep herself from looking at it as she passed, even though the last window was now low enough that she could look into it if she stood on tiptoe. She was afraid that the holly would force itself right up against the house, but it left enough room to walk alongside the house. She passed the third window, and the fourth and final window was now low enough that she would be looking right into it as she passed.

A Witch's House

Byrne even braved some scratches on her back as she tried to edge by this window. But when she was right in front of it--even though she tried to hurry--she stopped as a figure appeared inside the window to look at her. The window popped like a soap bubble, and was suddenly missing, letting Byrne look right into the house's occupant. Mrs. Acerbee! Except now she had no resemblance to an old lady, but was pale and glaring, her hair wild and her eyes had a terrible red tint to them. Byrne stopped, frozen, as the witch raised a hand--long fingernails

making it more like a claw--and pointed one finger right at Byrne's chest. No, right *through* her chest, at her heart!

Byrne wanted to run, but couldn't even make herself blink her eyes. And Mrs. Acerbee closed her hand with a terrible, cruel smile, and made a pulling motion. Inside Byrne's chest, she felt her insides wrenched forward. This horrible woman was going to *kill* her!

Byrne could not think of a thing to do, when she heard Gran's words: "You've defeated a witch and taken her wand." And it was *this* witch! With an intuition born of desperation, Byrne reached into her pocket and drew out the wand.

It was clear, and Byrne realized why. A wand wasn't good or bad; it was filled with whoever used it. Mrs. Acerbee had filled it with bad, and that badness had tried to hurt Byrne. But that was drained out now. And Byrne looked through the clear wand, at Mrs. Acerbee, and she felt... gladness. And Mrs. Acerbee stopped moving her nasty fist, and raised her red eyes to look at Byrne.

"Lumos." Byrne suddenly felt happy, for light was obviously the opposite of the hurt and darkness around her. And the thinnest hair of light came into being right down the middle of the wand, then grew glowing threads outward from the central strand like veins of a leaf, reaching the outside surface of the wand, and coating the wand in beautiful, shining, golden light.

"Lumos!" she shouted, and the golden light exploded outward like a giant puffball of light. The window between her and Mrs. Acerbee was already missing, and the light played in a wonderful golden glare directly on Mrs. Acerbee's features. Byrne had expected some sort of violent reaction, but instead Mrs. Acerbee just seemed to be less and less present, much like a dark shadow goes away as a light comes on. It isn't hurt, it isn't destroyed--it just stops being there.

The room was empty.

The light from the wand was beautiful and golden, but getting too bright for her eyes, and Byrne held the wand over her head as she looked wildly around. The house hadn't disappeared, but was saturated in the light. And all the holly trees behind her were almost translucent, the light shining right through the whole stand of them.

The wand suddenly felt soft, and then wispy, and she looked up to see it turn into a yellow mist, to float away as its light faded away. Byrne lowered her hand, and looked in the window. It was just an old house, not scary, it didn't even seem to smell any more. And as she watched, it creaked, and settled on its framing, and slowly fell in on itself. She backed away before she thought about it, but wasn't prickled by any trees. She turned around, and saw that all the holly trees as far as she could see were just vertical trunks with some skinny sticks coming out here and there down the tree. No leaves, nothing prickly.

She heard a *whumpf* and saw that the house was now just a pile of rotting boards. Even as she watched, some of the boards disintegrated entirely into

dust, which the wind was slowly spreading across the ground.

Among the Tree Stumps

With the prickly leaves gone from the holly trees--which barely had any branches left at all--Byrne could see that the path she had taken up to the house continued onward. She had taken the path up to the top of this hill, and the path swept downward on the other side. With the now-spindly trees, she could even see that the path reached a small stream in several hundred yards.

She proceeded with some trepidation, but the tree skeletons were motionless; without Mrs. Acerbee and her house, their source of animation had fled. Even as she came down the hill, she heard periodic crunches. At first, she'd been afraid that it was some new mischief, but then saw that the trees, like the house, were simply collapsing on themselves. She guessed that in a few hours, this hill would be bare. "And good riddance!" she said out loud.

When she reached the foot of the hill, there was indeed a small stream which burbled by. With all the horrible trees hunching around, it would probably have turned into some terrible danger. But now it was just a stream, with water, flowing over small rocks. It looked shallow, and Byrne was about to just step into it when she stopped to look across at the other side.

It looked a little bit like the buildings of the gnomes which she'd left behind on the other side of the big river. But every structure was a dim shade of grey or dull green. And instead of any other plants, grey and dull reddish lichen and moss clung to surfaces, sometimes with water dripping to create slimy puddles. Byrne decided that just like there were wholesome stands of trees and unwholesome ones, so there were nice gnomes and not-so-nice gnomes. She didn't think she'd like the gnomes over there.

And that brought her eyes back to the stream and its bed. Rather than put her foot in, she stepped back to the nearest tree and snapped off a branch. When she jabbed it into the gravel beneath the water, it went in about an inch, and was suddenly grabbed and pulled! She tried to pull back, and with a terrible strength it was pulled deeper, and then deeper. She finally had to let go, and the branch went jerk, jerk, jerk, and then disappeared into the bed of the stream, slurping as the last few inches disappeared, pulled into the gravel by whatever lived beneath.

Byrne, shaken, looked into the water. "That could have been *me!*"

She now picked up a number of long, thin branches, and proceeded to probe the shore all up and down the banks of this suddenly threatening stream. In each case, the stick was grabbed and slurped downward to disappear into the dirt. The shallow stream had become an insurmountable barrier.

As Byrne stood thinking, a blinking light floated into view about a hundred feet upstream of where she stood. She walked toward it, curious, and saw that the

light was floating in the air, swooping in lazy circles a little bit higher than she could reach with her hands, even if she jumped. As she got closer, the light resolved itself into a dragonfly, but quite a remarkable specimen. It was a little bigger than her hand, wonderfully streaked with bright colors--red, blue, green, gold, with black borders to emphasize each patch of color. As Byrne drew near, the dragonfly drifted further up river, and after they had proceeded another hundred feet, the dragonfly flew out to the middle of the stream, and stopped flying.

Its wings stilled, Byrne expected the dragonfly to drop into the water, but it instead gently flexed its wings, acting as if it was standing on something, even though there was nothing to be seen of what it was standing upon! Presently it lifted into the air, flew a little bit nearer Byrne, then alighted again. Still in the middle of the air.

Byrne picked up some sand from the ground, and gently threw it in the dragonfly's direction, being careful to get none near the creature itself. The sand splattered against something, and its residue showed the outline of a bit of... wall? Byrne now had an idea, and began gathering and tossing sand and dirt. The dragonfly, apparently satisfied, flew away, letting Byrne throw dirt with abandon.

After ten minutes, a bridge made of an invisible stone was outlined with the dirt which had streaked its side and now rested upon the path across it. It described a ramp on her side, and she gingerly stepped onto the invisible stone, bringing more sand to spread across the rest of the bridge over to the other side.

Another Kind of Gnome

From the highest point of the bridge, in the middle, Byrne could see a fair distance on both sides of this stream. Whatever she had done with the wand, its effect had hit the holly trees as far as she could see all along the stream on one side. On the other, she saw that the dark and mottled structures were intact, from which she guessed that magic--at least the wand kind--did not cross water. The whole lot of buildings had an unwholesome feel, which Byrne felt would be greatly improved by the wand's scorching light.

She continued down the other side of the bridge's arch, spreading some more dirt and sand ahead of her, and arrived at the foot of a hill made up of these structures she thought of as "Bad Gnome". As in the "Good Gnome" version, there were paths and steps leading up the hill in terraces, and there were even places where water flowed. But the steps were mostly slimy and slippery, and the water had a sickly red tint and smelled like rot and chemicals. She went upward as quickly as she dared, but the slippery surfaces, sometimes with pieces of stone which fell loose as she stepped on them, slowed her considerably.

When she was halfway up the hill, she started to hear movements around her. As with the other Gnomes, she saw nothing of the them, no matter which way she looked. But among the Good Gnomes, the hidden movements had seemed

friendly and industrious. Here, the feeling was one of predators closing in.

If the gnomes behaved like the kindly ones, their habitat would peter out at the crest of the hill, which was closer than turning back. Byrne hurried, sometimes slipping and nearly falling. She finally reached the top, gasping for breath from her exertion, and turned to look back. Behind many of the stone structures below, she finally saw the gnomes. They had long, drawn features, grey with long, stringy beards and moustaches trailing down to neck length. Their eyes were yellow, with pupils like a cat's except horizontal instead of vertical. She couldn't see their bodies, each one of them crouching behind a rock or building. They stared at her with an unsettling intensity, then slowly sank down out of view.

Byrne looked right and left, but there was no sign of a gnome, nor any sound of motion. They were waiting. She turned her back--not without some misgiving--and examined the top of this rise.

It roughly mirrored the rise on the other side, except where Mara and Erec had their stone structure with a table at the hilltop, here there was just an egg-shaped stone standing narrow part down, stuck in the ground. It was a little taller than Byrne as she walked up to it, and she slowly reached out to touch it. It was rock, and sounded solid when she rapped on it with a knuckle.

She walked around it, and looked down the other side of the hill. It sloped down to increasingly yellow grass, and the bottom of the slope was hidden by a ground-hugging thick green fog. There was no suggestion of a path, and Byrne immediately decided to not go down there unless absolutely necessary.

Turning back to the egg-rock, she brought out her small metal flashlight, and tapped it on the rock. It still sounded solid, and she was sure her flashlight would break long before it did anything to the big hunk of stone. She gave the egg a push, then a hard shove with her foot. It was solidly stuck in the ground.

On a whim, she turned on her flashlight, and was surprised when it now worked (apparently something in the tunnel had suppressed it, but not broken it). She held it right up to the rock so she could examine the rock's surface closely. As she played it across the rock face at various angles, she kept seeing deeper glimmers within the rock, as if the light was shining through something transparent and deeper into the rock. The effect was elusive, and Byrne could never line up the light, the rock, and her viewpoint to determine if there was something to be seen within.

She stood up, and looked over to see the sun was lower in the sky than she expected--it was already late afternoon. She admired the glow of the sun, even as she worried that it would be night soon. But the glow brought to mind something... and she suddenly remembered the feather she had received over with the good gnomes. Its colors *were* very similar to the glow of the afternoon sun. She brought out the feather, and gasped as multiple shafts of sunlight were drawn to the feather, almost as if it was a magnet for light beams!

The feather now glowed, shedding hues of yellow and orange and red. She looked between the egg-rock and her feather, and then brought the feather over and held it right against the side of the stone.

The effect was immediate. The sun's beams joined in a brilliant shaft of light, focused on the feather, its colors becoming brilliant. The glow from the feather spread outward across the face of the stone, which faded in color, and then the egg became entirely transparent. Within a handful of seconds, the rock was either gone--or at least invisible--and she finally saw what was inside the rock.

Bryan

Out of the Rock

As the rock faded away under the light, Byrne's hand suddenly passed through to land on the shoulder of a boy, his figure having been nestled within the now fading rock. Byrne drew back her hand in surprise, then more tentatively reached forward to gently tap the boy's shoulder. He stirred, and raised his head to look at her.

"Byrne!" He looked around. "Where are we?"

And it was as if a cloud dropped from her mind. "Bryan!"

"C'mon, Byrne. What's going on?"

And it all fell back, as if chunks of her memory--no, chunks of her reality--had been clipped out and the gap stitched together. She had a brother! Had always had a brother. The memories came flooding back.

"Bryan, if I told you, I don't think you'd believe me. We need to get OUT of here!"

Bryan stood up, and looked around again. "Ok. Which way?"

Byrne lowered her hand with the glowing feather, and as it darkened, the egg-rock started to reappear around Bryan.

"Oh." She hastily raised the feather, and its glow drove away the hint of rock which had been forming. "I have to keep this light going, or I'll lose you again. Hold my arm, and let's see if we can get by the bad gnomes."

"Gnomes? Um, OK." He linked arms with her, and they started down the hill towards the grey gnome hill.

Past the Gnome Hill

As they approached, they could hear rustlings. A gnome with a hateful grimace popped up from a stone right in front of them. But when the feather's light fell on his face, he screamed in dismay and turned to run far down the hill before

disappearing behind another rock. So Byrne and Bryan carefully walked down the hill among the grey, ugly dwellings, and although they could hear gnomes all around them, the light kept them at bay.

Their progress continued until they were right near the bottom of the hill. Byrne looked desperately right and left, trying to spot the invisible bridge, since she had left very visible debris upon it--it should have been easy to spot. And then she saw a gnome seeming to float in mid-air, trying to hunch down as he swept dirt with his hands. He was on the bridge, and trying to re-hide it! "Hey!" Byrne shouted, and ran at the gnome.

The gnome was in a quandary. The feather's light was dazzling him, and as they got closer his skin seemed to even smoke a little bit. He could not run nearer to them, and yet it seemed that he was not able to cross over to the other side. He danced on little, pointy feet for a few seconds, then jumped over the side of the bridge. He fell with a splash, and his feet sank into the sand, only a few inches beneath the surface. But then he was yanked down to his waist by the sand trap, and he got out one more screech before his body disappeared entirely with one colossal jerk.

Byrne and Brian stopped at the horrible suddenness of it, but Byrne realized that the sun had lowered even more, setting behind the hill with the witch's now-destroyed house. One of the dead holly trees cast a shadow across them, and the glow of the feather faltered. Byrne felt a cold grey surround Bryan, and behind them she heard a scrabbling of feet onto the bridge. But she dragged Bryan up onto the rising hump of the bridge to get back into the last beams of the sun, and the feather glowed enough to shed the greyness, while behind them there was a hiss of pain and a mad scramble back off the bridge.

Past the Witch's Hill

Byrne realized that it was going to be a very close call. "Bryan, we must run up this hill as quickly as we can. We'll be in the shadow of the hill until we reach the top." Bryan nodded, looking tired but game. And the race was on.

She felt the grey drag coming on again, but it faded as they passed the halfway point across the water. *Magic doesn't like to cross water.* she thought, with some relief. A single gnome hadn't seemed willing to cross the bridge, but now she looked back to see more and more gnomes massing on their side of the bridge. Though reluctant, it appeared that as a group they were pushing themselves forward, intent on catching Byrne and Bryan.

Byrne looked at the feather, almost entirely faded, then back at the gnomes. "Run!" And they were off.

Only once on their sprint up the hill did Byrne dare to look back, only to see gnomes at the bridge push themselves forward slowly and with great effort, only to sprint at full speed once they'd crossed the bridge. They spread out on both

sides of Byrne and Bryan, while some gnomes came straight up the path in pursuit. Byrne and Bryan ran even faster.

They reached the top of the hill, and the feather picked up the last beams of sunlight to send a glow all around them. But there were only moments of sunlight left before the sun went behind Mara and Erec's hill. So close!

The sun set, and the feather, itself apparently exhausted of whatever magic powered it, faded to grey, then fell apart into dust. All around them, they could hear the scratching feet of the gnomes. They were in a grey circle of gnomes, and the gnomes, apparently enjoying Byrne and Bryan's dilemma, closed in slowly from all sides.

Sore beset, Byrne thought. With a gulp of hope, she desperate reached into her pack to pull out the good gnomes' gift--the yellow waxy ball and the metal case. She juggled the ball under her arm as she grabbed the ends of the metal case and pulled. It slid open smoothly into two parts, and a yellow flame licked outward from the heavier half.

Byrne didn't know why the case didn't get hot; the flame was quite bright and vigorous. *Magic flame?* she thought. But she grabbed the waxy ball from under her arm, and held it over the flame, which she pointed straight up as if to heat the ball from underneath.

The ball sizzled! The flame licked into it, over it, through it, and she could see that the ball was made up hundreds and hundreds of tiny parts, each maybe half the size of a pea. The flame had ignited them, but also freed all the parts which made up the ball. Glowing and yellow, all the tiny fragments shot upward, leaving streaking tails of fire on their way up. The ball was gone, and a cloud of the little glowing fragments whirled in a circle above Byrne and Bryan's heads.

One gnome, bolder than his neighbors, took a step toward Bryan. A yellow fragment from overhead shot at the gnome with a *crack!* like a lightning bolt, striking the gnome squarely in the chest. The gnome flipped over backwards, and fell out of view.

They were still breathing hard, but Byrne felt certain that they had better be across the log-bridge before this magic ran out. They started down the hill towards the tree Erec had dropped to improvise her crossing, and the cloud floated along overhead, like a small friendly light. The gnomes paced them, and bits of the cloud would strike down here and there, apparently whenever a gnome strayed too close to them. But each strike took a bit of the cloud, and it was quickly running out of the flying yellow fragments.

And then their feet were on the tree, and they started to cross when they saw a figure blocking the path. Erec! Byrne gasped in relief. "It's OK! Come on." And they carefully walked across the log, the last of the yellow cloud above them fading away. She could hear many, many gnome feet behind them, the sound changing as they set foot on the tree also.

Erec nodded at Byrne, then at Bryan, then gestured for them to pass him. "Go on up the hill, they're waiting for you."

"But--"

"No, go on. I'll be with you in a little bit."

And Byrne, both relieved to see Erec, but ashamed to have brought a menace along, passed him. Erec was looking out across the log, and she saw his sword (sharpened, she remembered) was in his hand. Erec gave a grunt, and pulled down the face guard of his helmet, and suddenly he looked remote and threatening.

Byrne and Bryan had started up the hill when they heard his heavy steps out onto the log. They stopped and turned; they couldn't help themselves.

The log was wide enough for the gnomes to come two across. Each of them had a different appearance, some tall and scraggly, others much wider with thick arms. They didn't seem to have weapons, until Byrne realized that their fingers ended in dreadful looking claws. And they capered onto the log, jeering at Erec, and darting at him to threaten him with those claws. The first one, especially tall, came to the front of his pack, and opened his mouth to hiss at Erec, fangs gleaming in the light of dusk.

Erec walked out to meet them at the halfway point, his sword in front of him and perfectly steady. He stopped, one foot a little forward of the other, with the sword held forward, point upward. The lead gnome stopped three feet short of Erec, hissing again something insulting in its strange language. And then the gnome became still, and for a moment they were like a pair of statues.

It happened in the blink of an eye. The gnome sprang forward, an arm outreached with claws pointed straight at Erec's eyes, a screech of triumph in its voice. Erec suddenly ducked low so fast that Byrne's eyes didn't even follow his move, the vicious claws sweeping just over his head. The sword flashed sideways, and the gnome's arm was suddenly separated from his body, spinning as it fell to the river below.

Before the gnome could even react, Erec's other hand, bunched in a fist, smashed the gnome directly on its chest. The gnome folded *around* the fist, the force was so great, and then the sword came back around. Byrne closed her eyes, and when she reopened them, the gnome was falling into the river.

The next gnome was the heavy, thick one, and it had brought out a black metal rod while Erec had been fighting the first gnome. It tried to get a blow at Erec's head while the sword was out of position from cutting down the first gnome, with a mighty swing overhead and right down square on Erec's helmet.

Erec could never have gotten the sword back up in time to parry such a blow, but he didn't even try. He raised his arm to form a sort of triangle, sword point downward, even as he shifted to one side. Byrne could see it worked a bit like a roof, and the rod clanged and deflected off the sword sideways rather than hitting straight on.

The blow would no doubt have crushed most people anyway, but Byrne could see that Erec had a strength greater than anything she had imagined, and the *crack* of their weapons meeting merely made his body lurch to one side before he recovered.

And as Byrne watched this combat, she felt both wonder and sadness. For she realized that Erec's silly behavior, and bluster, and the bullying he accepted from Mara, were just a way for him to keep his true nature hidden. Because she could see that he was not only good, but a force beyond her experience, a Hero. And she knew she would always be a little shy near him in the future.

On the log, Erec had not even hesitated a moment as he deflected that terrible blow, but cocked back on one leg, the other one shooting forward like a piston. BANG went the gnome, flying backwards as if struck by a cannon ball, his rod flying from his hand to also fall down into the river. The force was so great that the large gnome's body smashed the next three gnomes right off the log, the large gnome barely managing to keep from falling himself.

But Erec was in no mind to let the gnome recover for another attack, and Erec was already on the gnome even as it tried to rise back to its feet. The sword flashed at its head, and another gnome body fell to the river below.

The next two gnomes stood side by side, and Erec recovered to his original stillness, sword back to ready, staring at the remaining gnomes from within his helmet. The gnomes, arms up and claws out, looked at Erec. Then at each other. And then turned and ran. All the rest of the gnomes behind them melted away as well, and Erec stood on the log, almost at their end of it, alone.

He turned and strode back to their own side, and then turned again. His sword came up, and he chopped at the log with a powerful stroke. Then another, and one more. Byrne wasn't sure how many axe strokes he had needed to fell this tree, but the tree was cut almost half through after only three chops from his sword. Erec stepped back a bit more, and made a final, powerful strike. He then sprang off the log back onto the path, as the tree groaned, split, and tumbled down into the river. The bridge was gone.

Homeward Bound

After the Battle

The sun had set, and twilight was deepening. Byrne could see Erec, panting hard, sword still in his hand. She felt a little shy, and a little afraid. But he had, really, fought for *her*. She had just decided to walk back down the hill and talk with him, when a slight figure glided out of the gloom--Mara. Erec turned toward her, head down, and she gently touched his arm. She took his sword out of his hand, and cleaned it with a cloth. Byrne could hear a quiet undercurrent of Mara's voice, though the actual words didn't reach her. Then Mara took Erec's

arm, linked it under hers, and they slowly walked away, eventually disappearing beyond the gnome terraces.

Byrne turned to Bryan to see what he thought they should do, when two more figures approached, with some sort of circular shape, glowing slightly, following. Gren and Gran! Byrne ran to Gran, and his arms closed around him. She finally felt safe, and she held on to him for a moment before stepping back.

"Gren and Gran, this is my brother, Bryan. I don't know how, but he was somehow pulled right out of my world. I didn't just forget him, it was like he had never existed."

Gren nodded. "Mara told us a bit while we were waiting and worrying. She seemed to be expecting something, and then suddenly her face lit up and she asked us who we were waiting for. And--I don't know how--we knew we were waiting for *two* of you!"

Gran added, "It's apparently a terribly powerful bit of magic, to not just pull someone out of the world, but leave no trace behind. She felt the spell snap when you crossed some water?"

Byrne nodded eagerly, "Yes! We crossed an invisible bridge. That's when the rock-egg stopped trying to capture Bryan."

Gran gestured to the disc which floated in the air behind them. "Mara left this, since she thought you'd be tired. Climb on, and it'll follow us while we walk back to the Inn."

Back to the Inn

And so they journeyed back, Byrne and Bryan reclined on a magical disc which was quite wide enough to let them both lean back. As they traveled through the night, Byrne told about her own adventures, and then looked to Bryan.

Bryan's voice was puzzled. "I was at home, and I remember going to bed. Then it was like a dream, being pulled through the air, past bushes, through a tunnel. And then I was going faster and faster until I was in a still, silent black space for a bit. And then it lit up, and there was Byrne."

Gren's voice floated back to them from up front. "I wonder why she picked you for the spell?"

Bryan was puzzled, "Who picked me, ma'am?"

"The witch. Apparently in *your* world calling herself 'Acerbee'. Mara led me to believe that pulling you out like that is the sort of spell which a witch could never cast more than once in her life. Byrne has the magic, I can't imagine why she wasn't the target."

And presently they reached the Inn. It was quite late, but they all headed inside, and Gren brought out some food--they were starved--including a small cup each

of hard cider. They ate and drank gratefully, and then felt even sleepier. Gren and Gran gently led them back outside, and tucked them under some blankets on the disc, which had waited patiently by the door. Gren went in and came back out again with a bundle for Byrne, and handed her Turtle. Chickens get very sleepy at night, so all Turtle managed was a murmur as Byrne snuggled her against her chest. They pulled out of the Inn's yard, and continued on the road back towards the cliff.

The Chosen Paths

Byrne and Bryan were deep asleep when they were awoken by a bright light. At first Byrne thought it was something magic, but squinted and saw that it was Gran with a lantern which he was holding up. Byrne nudged Bryan, and then lifted her head to peer around. They were back at that clearing with the paths, and she could see that they had arrived by way of that one path which was almost totally overgrown--except now as she looked back up that path, she could see it was not overgrown at all.

Byrne climbed off the disk, and craned her head to look at the path. "When I arrived, this was just a very old hint of a path. Did you open it up somehow?"

Gran shook his head. "It's the way Bryan was dragged into the witch's trap, and it closed up in a similar way to how your memories disappeared. When the magic broke--here it was."

Gren, standing beside Gran, added "The wand is used up, and that will be a problem in time. You're going back with fewer magical trinkets than you brought. But, Byrne, I think you will find the trade worth it."

"Yes! I'm amazed at how Bryan is back."

"That too. But I think your magic is awake, and I wonder how that will work out there in your own world." She knelt to address Turtle. "You're her familiar, guide her for as long as you can." Turtle's eyes were open and clear as she looked back at Gren.

Then Gren straightened. "We can't go any further, so you need to walk from here." She pointed back towards the path to the cliff face.

Byrne was doubtful. "But there was no opening anywhere to be found back there. That's why I came out into your world. Is it going to be open now, just like that path?"

Gren shook her head. "Mara explained it to me a bit. The path was closed by bad witch magic. But the path through the cliff opens and closes based on your own magic. I really think it's time for you to be home, and so my guess is you'll find a way." She paused. "If not, you know where to find us."

With that and a wave, Gren and Gran started back down the path Byrne had taken on that first day of her visit to Shelf. The disc stayed behind, but faded

away as Gran's lantern was lost in the distance.

Byrne and Bryan waited a few minutes for their night vision to come back a bit, and then--Turtle in Byrne's arms--started up the path to the cliff.

The Cliff

It was still dark when they reached the cliff, but the stars were very bright up in the sky (they didn't look like the stars from our own sky--there were many more of them, and brilliant). As they reached the cliff, a dark opening was immediately apparent.

Byrne turned to Bryan, "It's going to be pitch black in there, I guess we'll go slow and try not to bump into anything."

Bryan nodded back, and in they went.

With slow, careful steps, and their arms in front of them, they didn't hit their heads on anything, nor trip on any uneven parts of the tunnel. When they'd stray to the right or left too much, one of their hands would touch the tunnel wall, and they'd turn back onto the path.

After proceeding for a while, Byrne remembered her flashlight, and brought it out for a try. It glowed dimly, but even its small amount of light helped. They went more quickly with it, and it grew brighter as they proceeded.

It seemed endless, but eventually the sound of their steps changed, and they realized they were not in a tunnel any more. Byrne turned the flashlight back off, and they waited for their eyes to adjust. The sky wasn't as bright as on the other side of the tunnel, but they could see that they were in a narrow path of brush and blackberry. White flowers were faintly luminous around them, and ahead they could see a glow of colors.

"Oh!" Byrne gasped. "I know where we are. Come on!"

They proceeded out into the clearing in the brush, and then onward through the continuing tunnel until they came out in... their grandparents' field. It was night, and everything was still except for the usual nighttime insect noises.

Byrne whispered to Bryan, "If it's been many days, then we need to wake them up and let them know we're OK. But if my window's still open, then maybe where we were has its own time. It might be the same night I left! Let's look."

They walked, quietly as they could, across the field back to their grandparents' house. Byrne's window was indeed still open.

"Sneak through here, then around into your own room. Be quiet as you can. I'll put Turtle to bed, then let's see what happens in the morning."

Bryan climbed in, and Byrne undertook the tricky task of getting Turtle into one of the coop's nesting boxes (stuffing her onto an actual perch would have stirred up the other hens, possibly raising a true racket). She closed the side

door to the nesting box, then hurried back into her room. She quietly changed into her night gown, and--feeling very sleepy indeed--closed her eyes and slept.

There and Back Again

Byrne woke to sunlight shining against her window, and the sound of voices down the hall in the kitchen. She jumped up, dressed as quickly as she could, and walked down the hall with a little bit of nervousness. Bryan was at the table with Grandpa, and Grandma was making pancakes on the stovetop.

"Well, good morning, sleepy!" Grandpa greeted her. Bryan gave her a quick grin as she sat at the table. Grandma came over with a plate of pancakes, and sat down too. Byrne was about to pick up her utensils when she had a thought.

"I have something for our breakfast!" And Byrne ran down the hall to find her jacket. There was still a bulge in one pocket, and she came back with an apple which looked miraculously delicious--absolutely none the worse for having been stored in a pocket.

Grandma's eyes widened with appreciation, then went to get a cutting board and knife. "I'll cut it in quarters, it'll go nicely with the pancakes." But as she sliced down the middle of the apple, the knife stopped with a grating sound. Grandma worked around the obstruction, and when she opened the apple's halves, a deep red *stone* was nestled where the core would be!

Grandpa whistled. "Hidden treasure in an apple. Well, if it was going to be in any apple, this would be the one! It's your apple, so your treasure." and handed the stone to Byrne.

Grandma continued cutting up the apple, and after a cautious sniff and taste, announced the apple itself fine.

They said Grace, and got busy with the breakfast.

Grandpa finished first, and took up his plate. "That patch of thistle is *gone*, how about that? This place is just full of mysteries." With that, he headed out the door.