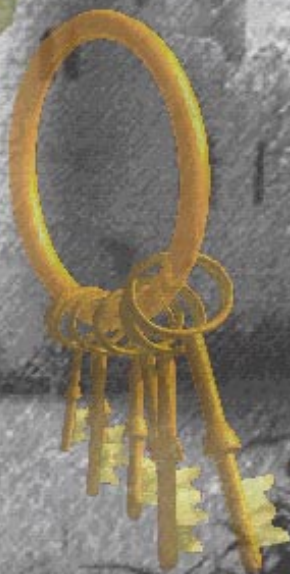
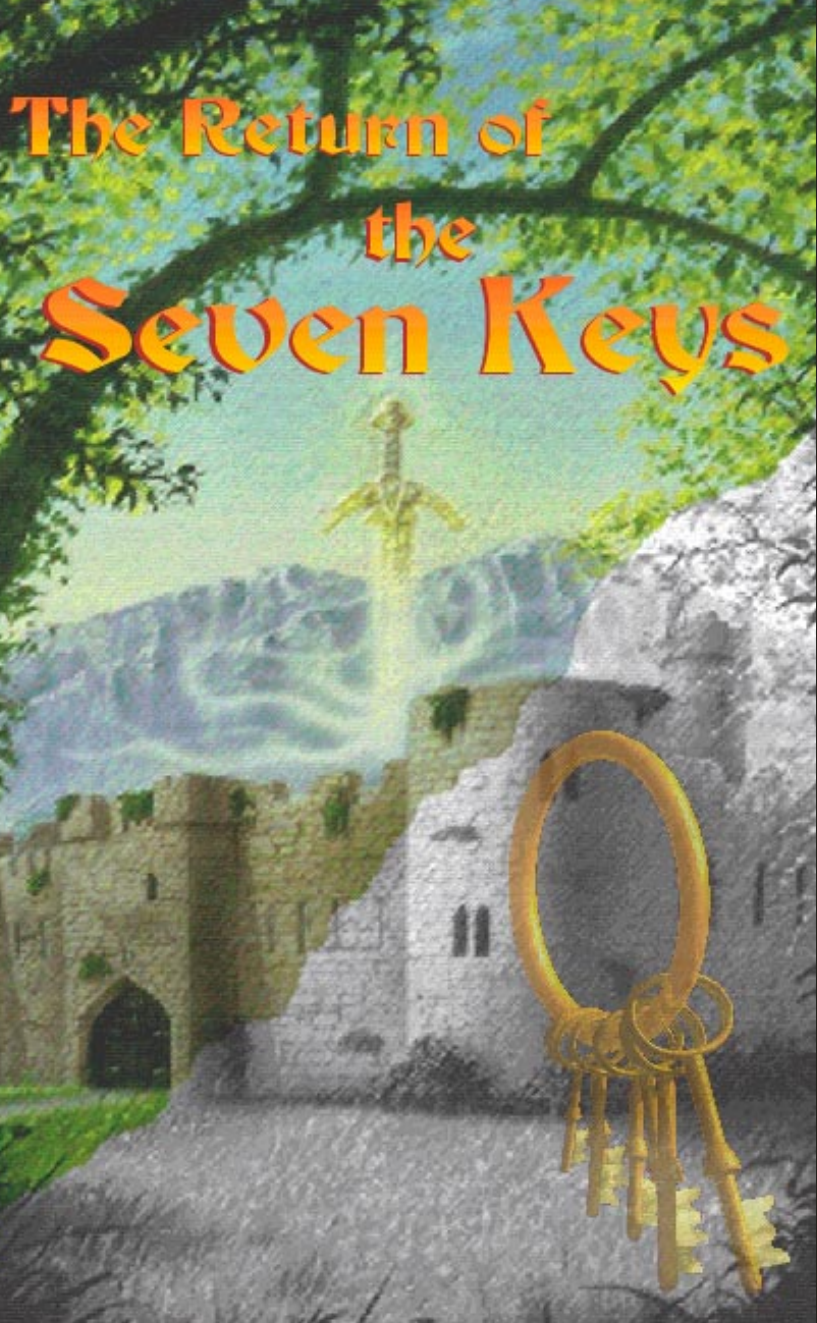


The Return of the Seven Keys



The Return of the Seven Keys

As told by C.S. Lewis

Contents

GABE	1
THE KEEPER OF THE KEYS	13
THE JOURNEY	23
FAETHÉ	35
THE AWAITED SIGN	49
DIRECTION	55
DISCOVERED	69
CITAR	79
THE DRIFTERS	97
THE DAYS OF PREPARATION	109
THE LANDS OF DARKNESS	115
THE SUBVERTERS	127
THE STRANGER	137
THE SECRET PASSAGES	145
BATTLE PLANS	157
JENNY	165
THE BARONS	173
THE CONFRONTATION	187
TRANSLATED	201
THE GREAT BATTLE	211
GLOSSARY	217
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	220

Recommended age: 12 years and up.
(May be read by younger children at parents' discretion.)

GABE

PREFACE

An introduction from the Master Publisher:

The Return of the Seven Keys is a story about a young man named Gabe, a man much like any other man, yet different; a man who is searching—searching for something more than his seemingly empty existence in a drab world where the perception of color does not exist.

His life is suddenly changed upon discovering a set of golden keys—keys to what? He doesn't know. Thus his journey begins—his journey to discover the meaning behind these keys, to explore the secrets they unfold, to fulfill the purpose for which they were created.

Is it a parable, or is it truth? Is it a fable, or is it a myth? Is it imagination, or is it real, somewhere, sometime, somehow?

The answer is for you to decide as you delve into this story, written from beyond by C.S. Lewis, dedicated to all the Warriors of the End who find themselves struggling to discover their identity during these final Days of Preparation.

The air was oppressive and heavy. The boys sat slumped around a table outside a small cottage. They didn't have much to do. There was never really that much to do. They rolled the dice back and forth, casually chitchatting.

"Hey, what do you think about this 'other world'? Do you really believe it exists?" It was Tom, one of the more outspoken members of this little circle of friends.

Gabe thought for a moment, startled that some depth had entered into their conversation. Feeling obliged to respond in like manner, he replied, "Yes, in concept I believe that it exists—but I've never seen it, so I can't be sure." He cocked his head to the side, and gazed off into the gray mist of nothingness that was slowly rolling in with the dusk. "I suppose there has to be something more than this—but what, I wouldn't know."

"I've thought about it a lot," Greg piped up. "But in the end I think my life will be like my dad's life, and my brother's life. It will just go on. I'll have kids, I'll work, and then one day I'll die. As far as what, if anything, comes after that, I don't want to think about it—at least not now. What do you think?"

Tom's response was flat. "I haven't really thought about it at all. It's just that Jenny came by the other night and she kept talking about the old man." He chuckled. "You know—that crazy old man who lives up on the mountain? She said that he's been getting excited about something that's going to happen soon, but I didn't exactly get what she was talking about.—Just that it had something to do with this 'other world.' But, you know, he's been getting these feelings and premonitions* for years." Tom hesitated for a moment, as if he were wishing that perhaps there could be some truth in the old man's words. Then, snapping himself

*"Christianity is the story of how the rightful King has landed, you might say landed in disguise, and is calling us all to take part in a great campaign of sabotage."—C.S. Lewis

out of his reverie, he slapped his hand on the table and stood up. "Well, enough talk about that! Let's go!" The boys laughed and jumped up from their chairs to leave.

Gabe watched Tom stride rather purposefully down the road towards the brook. Gabe meandered into the house, shut the door behind him, and looked around at the gray walls, the gray bed, the gray curtains, the gray photographs that made up the empty place he had called home for a few too many years. For a moment he wished there *was* more. If only he could have some sign to help him believe in this "other world," it would at least offer some reprieve from the drab gray world he lived in.

Boy, I'm getting quite melancholy here, he thought. *What's wrong with me? Enough of this!* He let out a sigh, running up the stairs of his snug cottage two at a time.



Some said there had been color in the world once upon a time, and indeed the pink tinge of a newborn's skin gave credence to that. There was little else that gave any hint of color, though. For the most part, the world was gray. Granted, there were many different shades of gray, but they all served only to add to the dullness around them.

Those who had stopped long enough to listen said that the old man remembered a time when the world was filled with color—though no one knew if he spoke the truth, or if these words were just the fanciful dreamings of a senile old man. But this old man had been around as long as anyone could remember—longer than anyone else, or so it seemed.

No one knew for sure how old he was, or where he had come from. He'd always just "been there," telling his mysterious stories, weaving facts they could understand with stories that they could not, until no one

knew which were true and which were just the illusions of the old man's mind. Some took him seriously—old men and women who thought they could almost remember their mothers and fathers telling them such stories about a different world. But no one was sure what they believed, except the old man and Jenny.



Curious to know exactly what the old man had been saying, Gabe set off late the following morning to find Jenny. He had always been fascinated by the old man and his stories, though from a distance. Jenny was different. She couldn't help but be drawn to the old man—his words fascinated her. As he'd tell his stories she'd close her eyes and somehow they would come alive before her—color flooded the world again! Babies laughed, children played, maidens danced—mankind had a purpose. It was always so hard for her to come back to the world around her. And so it was that, as time passed, she had begun to spend more and more time talking with this old man.

As Gabe began the rugged climb up the hill towards the old man's cottage—or his "lair" as they all called it—he couldn't help but feel an excitement in the air. Perhaps it was just his own sense of anticipation, not knowing what he was going to find when he got up there, or perhaps it was just the invigorating feeling of leaving the valley. Whatever it was, he could feel his heart pounding and his mind racing with questions even deeper than those he had left behind that morning.

The mountain air was clear and cool; the grayness had a sharpness about it that was missing down in the valley. Gabe had walked this path before, but this time it was different. He didn't know what it was, but it was almost as though someone was traveling along with him. Every now and then he'd quickly turn his head, trying to catch a glimpse of whatever or whoever

it was he sensed was walking beside him, but he could see no one.

“What’s going on here?” he muttered to himself. “I’ve never been this nervous or jumpy—why am I like this? This is ridiculous! Come on, Gabe, take a deep breath. Get ahold of yourself, you can do this!”

It took him about twenty minutes to get to the lair. He wandered around outside, walking up and down the pathway, kicking stones with his feet, his hands in his pockets, his shoulders slouched. Every now and then he glanced up and down the pathway, hoping to see Jenny walking along. But he knew that she was probably already inside, as she went up to the cottage almost every day to help take care of the old man and to run errands for him.



Suddenly the door opened, and Jenny stuck her head out with a big cheery smile. “Oh, hi Gabe! What’s up?”

“Ohhh, nothing much,” Gabe answered, though somewhat unconvincingly. “I was just ... I just happened to be strolling by,” he said with a smile. “You know, there’s not too much happening down there and I thought I’d come by to see what’s going on up here! I’ve, uh, well ... I’ve heard there were a few things going on and, you know me, I love to hear a good tale.”

Gabe looked over at her to see how she was responding. Her warm smile encouraged him, and he continued. “I haven’t seen much of you lately, have I? Hey, why don’t you come on out for a while and tell me what you’ve been up to.”

“Well, I suppose I have been kind of busy,” she responded. “Things are sort of popping up here.”

“So, the old man thinks something’s up, huh?” he questioned.

“There is!” she answered, and smiled again.

Gabe laughed. “You really believe in this old man’s tales, don’t you? Jenny, sometimes I really worry about you. I mean, what’s going to happen to you when he goes?”

“When he goes?” she laughed. “He’s been here longer than anyone else. What makes you think he’s going to go?”

“The time comes for all of us, Jenny.”

“I suppose it does,” she sighed. Then, as if she was struck by a sudden thought, she added, “Why don’t you come in and meet the old man yourself, Gabe? You’ve never been inside, have you?”

“Hey, wait—slow down a minute. I didn’t come up here to meet the old man. I just came up to see what’s going on.”

“And what’s wrong with meeting him? You’ve never talked to him. No one ever talks with him. People say he doesn’t make any sense, but maybe if they’d take the time to listen a little more carefully, they’d understand what he is trying to say. Come on, Gabe, come on in! I think you want to!” she said with a winsome smile.

Not really knowing how he got from the gate to the door, Gabe stepped inside the cottage. It was like stepping into another world. *Perhaps it is*, he mused. *Perhaps this is his “other world.”*

Somehow the gray didn’t look as gray, and there was a certain shine and warmth that seemed to emanate from every corner of the room. Everything seemed vibrant; even the furnishings seemed, at first glance, to pulsate with a life of their own. The air itself felt alive.

“I didn’t imagine it would be like this,” he said, turning in wonderment to look at Jenny.

Her eyes sparkled. “I know! I’ve tried to explain it, but I guess you have to experience it to really understand what I’m talking about. Anyway, come.” She

pulled him by the hand towards a table and some chairs cozily placed near a fireplace in one of the corners of the room.

“So, where is he? Where is this old man?” Gabe cautiously whispered to Jenny.

“Well hello, son.”

Gabe jumped, and turned to see the old man entering the room from a side door.

“Glad you could make it. What took you so long?”

“Uhh ...” Gabe was floored. He didn’t know what to say. It almost sounded like the old man had been expecting him.

“I *have* been expecting you,” the old man said, as if answering his unspoken thoughts. “I knew you had to come, Gabe. There is a lot to do, you know. I’m so glad you could make it.”

“I—I—I don’t know what to say ... sir,” Gabe spluttered, feeling most awkward.

“There’s no need to say anything. Here, sit down by the fire, warm your hands. It’s a little cold out still, but it will get nicer when summer finally arrives.”

The old man tried to put him at ease, and as Gabe sat down, Jenny hustled off to get some warm drinks. Not knowing where else to look, Gabe sat staring into the fire. Every now and then he’d take his eyes off the flames to look up at the old man, who was staring intently at him. Their eyes would lock for a brief moment, making Gabe feel as if there was nothing more important for him to do than to be right there—with the old man. He didn’t know why, but the longer he sat there, the stronger his conviction grew that this was where he was meant to be. Yet he was puzzled, since he had no idea why he felt this way.

He finally mustered up the courage to say, “I’m sorry, sir, I don’t really know what it is that I’m supposed to say, or what I’m supposed to do, or even why I came in here!”

“Did you follow the voices, boy?” the old man asked.

“Voices? No!” Gabe looked at the old man suspiciously.

I knew it! his thoughts told him. *So it is true, he’s really not all there. Here he is talking about voices! What am I doing here anyway?*

The old man chuckled, again as if reading his thoughts. “You tell me,” the old man answered. “Why did you come?”

Gabe shifted in his seat. “Oh, there was talk, you know, down in the town, that you think something’s going to happen soon.” Surprised at his own honesty, he continued, “I just came up to find Jenny because sometimes I ask her what’s going on. It’s sort of interesting—especially if these things you talk about are supposed to be true.” He stopped, wondering if maybe he’d said too much.

It didn’t seem to bother the old man at all, however. He only smiled and shook his head. “And what do *you* think?”

“Well, sir, to be honest, I don’t really know what to think a lot of the time.”

“Do you think there could be another world?” the old man asked.

“Sometimes I hope so, because this world doesn’t have much to offer me. But, if there is another world, I really don’t know what it is, or where it is, or anything about it. I try not to think about it too much, because when I do, I can’t come up with any answers, and I just get confused, and it disturbs me. So I can’t say that I’ve given it much thought.”

The old man nodded as if he understood exactly what Gabe was trying to say. A long silence followed. Finally the old man took his eyes off Gabe and gazed into the fire, “There is another world, son.” Again, there was a moment of long silence—so long, in fact, that Gabe wondered if that was all, if the only reason he

came was to hear this assurance that this “other world” did indeed exist.

Without taking his eyes off the flames, the old man finally said, “Do you want me to tell you about it, son?”

Gabe’s heart started pounding. He wanted to hear more about the other world, yet something inside him hesitated for a moment.

Again the old man asked, “Do you want to hear? Do you want me to tell you about the other world?”

Gabe swallowed hard. He was desperately curious, yet somehow hesitant. He finally answered, “Yes, I want to know. Tell me about the other world.”

The old man smiled, and his eyes shifted their gaze from the fire to Gabe. “Let’s see. Where do I begin?”

Time seemed to stand still as the old man told him story after story about the other world. Gabe found them fascinating, just as Jenny had said. As he listened, he felt as if a whole new dimension was opening up all around him. There was so much to learn, so much to listen to, so much to believe. As the old man talked, things began to make sense.

Fascinated by the old man’s tales, Gabe began visiting his cottage every day, returning to the village at night. As the days went by, he became more and more convinced of the truth in this old man’s words about the other world and the beings that inhabited it. At times he even wondered if this old man himself was one of those beings; his words seemed so alive, his eyes so magical.

Yet, of all that he said, this old man’s first mysterious greeting was what kept haunting Gabe’s consciousness: “*I have been expecting you!*” Gabe couldn’t help but wonder if, with all the knowledge that this old man was so readily imparting to him, perhaps his time would soon be coming to an end.



One day, as summer was drawing to a close, the old man took Gabe aside. “Son, there is a reason why I have been telling you all these things.” He looked deeply into Gabe’s eyes, as if he was trying to impress upon him the somberness of what he was about to say. “There is a mission to be carried out. It is something that I cannot do, but you can.”

Gabe was nervous. He had sensed that a time of decision was approaching, where he would have to choose whether to go on or to turn his back on all that he had heard. Now it seemed the time had come, and as he wondered what this mission would entail, he closed his eyes and searched his heart.

It was then, out of nowhere, that he suddenly heard a faint voice calling him.

“Come. Come follow! Follow the whispers.”

Startled, he opened his eyes and blinked—there was no one around except the old man, who remained quietly seated in his chair. But this voice had come from right next to him—or was it from within him? Gabe shifted uneasily in his seat, wondering whether he was just imagining things, or whether he *had* in fact heard a voice speaking to him. He was almost too scared to close his eyes again; yet, curious at the same time, he finally closed them once more. This time, faint strains of music filled the air, a sweet melody that seemed to proclaim its own words, although Gabe had no idea how he comprehended them:

“Come. Come follow the whispers. Follow the whispers from the other world.”

He opened his eyes once again. *Is this real?* he questioned within himself as he looked at the old man.

The old man smiled, and although he didn’t say a word, Gabe could read the answer to his unspoken question in the old man’s eyes: “It is real.”

Gabe sat silently for a moment, absorbing all that he had just experienced, and trying to make some sense

of it all. Suddenly he stood up and walked towards the door. *No*, he said to himself. *This goes beyond me!*

He turned apologetically to the old man, who was watching him intently, yet almost amusedly, a little smile dancing on his lips. He knew the inward struggle that Gabe was facing, and he realized that this youth was probably not yet ready to face all that lay before him.

"I don't know what to do. I'm afraid. If I say yes ... what's going to happen to me?"

"Your life will change," the old man stated matter-of-factly. "But what have you got to lose?"

"I don't know—that's just it. I don't know what I've got to lose. If I close my eyes and ... and listen to these voices ...what if I don't like where they take me?"

The old man looked at him, but didn't say a word.

"So what should I do?" Gabe implored.

The old man's gaze didn't waver. He looked deeply into Gabe's searching eyes. "You have to make that decision, son. It's up to you alone. No one else can decide this for you."

Gabe swallowed, then licked his parched lips, "But what? What do I have to decide?"

The old man laughed. "You will know, son. The answers are in your heart—you will find them."

Gabe froze; he didn't know what to do. Sensing the struggle that was taking place in the young man's heart, the old man stood up, walked over to Gabe, and put his arm around him. "Son, it's not meant to be so hard. You don't have to make the decision right now if you don't feel ready to."

Gabe, somewhat relieved, sighed. "I'm sorry."

"Maybe your time has not yet come," the old man said reassuringly. A long silence followed. Gabe felt he had disappointed the old man by not meeting up to what he felt was expected of him. "I'm sorry," Gabe said again.

"No, my son, it is all right. Don't worry about it."

There wasn't much more to say after that. The day seemed to abruptly have come to a close. Gabe, suddenly anxious to leave, bade him a quick farewell. "I'll see you tomorrow."

The old man looked at him but didn't say a word. As Gabe walked home that night he felt sad and alone, wondering about all that had happened and what it had meant—or perhaps would still come to mean.

Back in the village, life went on as usual. Children played in the street, though without much mirth, pleasure or joy in their voices. Women attended to their duties, while the men worked in the fields. The days passed, and Gabe suddenly found himself busy with no time to visit the old man anymore. The brightness that had so recently illumined his life slowly began to fade.

Gabe somehow knew he could not go back to the old man as long as he remained in this state of indecision. Sometimes at night as he lay in his bed, he could hear the faint whispers again. Though somewhat frightened at first, as time went by, he became more used to hearing them. He strained his ears to try to listen to what they were saying, but they were mostly too faint to understand. He would sometimes catch a word or two here or there—words that both haunted and eluded him: "*Come*," or "*us*" or "*please*." But slowly even these faded, and finally they left him altogether.

THE KEEPER OF THE KEYS

One morning as Gabe was eating breakfast, he heard a faint knocking at his door. Surprised that anyone would come to see him so early, and curious as to who it could be, he instantly went to answer, straightening his hair as he walked down the hall. He opened the door to see Jenny standing there, her soft gray eyes wide and teary.

“Jenny, how are ... What’s the matter? Come on in, come!” He led her by the hand. “Sit down quickly. Tell me—is it the old man?”

“Yes!” she sobbed. “Gabe, you’ve got to come and see him, please. I think he may be dying.”

“How long has he been like this?” Gabe queried.

“Well, it’s happened before; he comes, he goes, but this time I think he’s really slipping away! I don’t think he’s going to be with us much longer. And Gabe, he was calling for you. Please come,” she implored. “You’ve got to come. You’ve got to listen to what he’s saying. It’s about the keys, Gabe! The keys!”

“Keys?” Gabe looked at her with a rather puzzled expression. “What keys?”

“Didn’t he ever tell you about the keys?”

Gabe thought for a moment, searching his mind to see if he could recall any mention of keys. “No, no. He never told me about any keys.”

“Yes, the keys! He is the keeper of the keys, Gabe. I don’t know why he never told you, but he’s been saying strange things about the keys, and speaking of what to do when he goes. Won’t you come and see him? Please?” Jenny begged.

Gabe sighed. As apprehensive as he felt, he did not want to disappoint Jenny. “Yes, of course. I’ll come and see him.”

Soon Gabe had locked up his little cottage, and the

two were on their way up the mountain, towards the old man's house.

Things looked the same as they always had: the little wooden door, the lace curtains hanging in the windows, the calmness in the air, the light and warmth of the clear sun glistening through the trees.

But Gabe took little note of the surroundings. He followed Jenny into the house, where he saw the old man sitting, silently rocking back and forth in his chair.

"Hello ... sir," Gabe stammered.

The old man didn't stir. He kept on rocking as he stared into the fire.

Gabe, wondering if maybe the old man hadn't heard him, moved closer and rested his hand on the old man's arm.

"Hello, sir." Gabe hesitated as he spoke, "I'm here. I'm back. It's me—Gabe."

The old man stirred, and suddenly seemed to come to life again. "I'm glad to see you've come back, son. You see, I don't have much longer now."

They stared into each other's eyes. Everything the old man had taught him suddenly came flooding back. Gabe felt ashamed when he realized how far he had drifted away from the light and truth that the old man had imparted to him. Somehow he felt as if everything he had been taught had been stolen away by some unseen and unnoticed force. But now it was all coming back to him, so vividly, so quickly, so much all at once. Gabe closed his eyes.

"Gabe!"

The whispers were back! This time he wasn't afraid of them.

He opened his eyes to see the old man still staring at him.

"The whispers? Are you hearing them now?"

"Yes," Gabe replied, almost inaudibly.

"What are they saying?"

"They're calling my name."

"They're calling you?" the old man queried.

"Yes!" Gabe closed his eyes again.

"Gabe! We need you!" This time Gabe didn't open his eyes—he felt inside of him a hunger to hear more; he wanted to know what they were going to tell him—these mysterious whispers from beyond.

"Gabe, follow the whispers. Follow the Whisperers from the other world, for the time is at hand. We will guide you. We will lead you. We will show you the way. We will show you everything you need to know. Whatever you ask, we will answer. All you have to do is follow."

Suddenly Gabe was struck with a sense of impending urgency: Something was indeed happening—even if it was in another realm.

"Something *is* about to happen, isn't it?" he asked the old man.

The old man just nodded.

"But what?"

"I'm not sure myself," the old man said, and then hesitated before he continued. "I can only guess that this dark age in which we now live may be coming to a close, and that the new age of the Whisperers is about to begin. But there are still many who are not ready. There are those who would oppose the Whisperers, and seek to destroy those who hear and follow them. Those who rule over this Kingdom of Darkness, the followers of the netherworld, wish to keep the people in ignorance. But someone has to help defeat them. Someone has to tune into the whispers. I cannot do this thing, son, for I am old and will soon be gone. But there are others, you know, others who also hear the whispers, and you have to find them. Will you do that for me, son?"

Gabe fell silent. He had heard about these things before, in the stories that the old man had told about

the other world, but this time, the impending reality of the old man's words burned deeply in Gabe's mind. He turned for a moment to look at Jenny, and then back at the old man, whose intense gaze made him uneasy.

"Yes," Gabe said almost inaudibly, "I'll do it. I don't know what it is that I must do, but I'll do it. I want to know. I want to understand."

Abruptly the old man stood up and, with halting steps, walked over to a chest of drawers in the corner of the room. He pulled open the first drawer and gently took out a beautiful velvet jewelry box. Gabe was deeply immersed in his own thoughts and hardly aware of what was going on around him, until his eyes focused on the old man who was now shuffling towards him with the jewelry box in hand.

Curious about what could be inside, he cast a quick glance over at Jenny. Her eyes caught his, and she gave him a knowing smile.

"Sit down, son," the old man said, with a twinge of excitement in his voice. The old man sat back down in the rocking chair next to the fireplace, carefully holding the velvet box in his hand.

"Son, I have something for you. I don't know how much longer I'm going to be here." He paused as his eyes took on a faraway look, but then his attention returned swiftly to Gabe. "These were given to me ..." he hesitated, "... many, many years ago. They come from the Whisperers, and when they were given into my care, the whispers told me to wait—and so I did. For many years now I have waited." The old man halted in his speech, and Gabe suddenly became aware of the total stillness that seemed to have fallen over the entire world.

Just as suddenly, that silence was broken by the old man's next words, which echoed through Gabe's mind: "And now, the time has come to give these keys to you, son, for the whispers have spoken it."

With trembling hands, he slowly opened the jewelry box and held it out for Gabe to see. Inside the velvet-lined box lay a set of seven golden keys on a golden key ring.

Gabe blinked. He looked at Jenny, he looked at the old man, he looked down at the keys. Yes! They were *golden!* His eyes widened. *Golden!* He looked around the room. The room had suddenly been transformed! No longer did everything look gray! It was as though the world around him had suddenly sprung to life with many different colors.

"It's beautiful!" he whispered in awe.

"You're seeing it for the first time, aren't you?" the old man whispered with a smile. "You're seeing the colors?"

Gabe nodded, but remained silent as he was overwhelmed with emotion at this sudden transformation, that, for all its newness, somehow seemed strangely familiar.

Once he had regained his composure, he looked back at the old man, and Jenny, who was now standing behind him. "So ... you mean ... you can see colors all the time?"

"Oh yes—and Jenny too! But we don't talk about the colors because no one understands. It's part of the other world, son. These colors that you're seeing are a glimpse of the other world."

Gabe's gaze suddenly returned to the box. "The keys?"

"Take them," the old man said.

Gabe reached down and picked up the keys. Each was a different size, the largest about the length of his palm, and the smallest no larger than the top half of his thumb. He touched each one gently. The pulsating metal gave off a warmth, almost as if it were alive.

"They are alive," the old man affirmed. "They are very much alive!"

As Gabe sat there caressing the keys, he realized that he had somehow been transported into a new and different world, a world he'd only heard about. Here it was! It was beautiful—the colors, the warmth, the old man with his white hair and twinkling, deep blue eyes! Jenny, with her soft golden hair, dainty pink cherub lips, white teeth, and gorgeous brown eyes.

He sat in awe. Never had he imagined a world as beautiful as this, “Color! Color!” he whispered over and over in ecstatic wonder. “Color!”

“There’s more,” Jenny eagerly added. “There’s so much more!”

“I’ve heard so much about it,” Gabe continued, as he burst out into a big smile, “but to see that it actually exists is overwhelming!”

Turning to the old man he asked, “What do I do now?”

“Listen to the whispers,” he answered softly. “The only way I ever got anywhere was through listening to the whispers. I know nothing of myself, and there is not much I can tell you, except ...” He hesitated, not knowing whether to go on. “There are others who know more about these keys, and also of the other world. I have been too old to search for them. So now it will be up to you, my son, to take these keys, to discover their purpose, and to explore the mysterious link they provide to the other world. But I believe that somewhere there is a book that speaks more of all these things.”



As Gabe left the old man’s cottage late that afternoon, carrying the golden keys that the old man had bequeathed him, his eyes feasted upon the beauty around him—the green trees, blue sky, yellow butterflies, sparkling water; flowers of bright orange and deep purple now illumined the same world where all he had known before were shades of gray.

Not wanting to return to the valley, or to his home, with his world now so suddenly different, he sat down next to a brook and curled up under a tree to spend the night. The whole mountainside seemed to be warmer now, as the rich display of colors continued to flood his soul with their vivacity and clarity. He soon drifted off into a sound sleep, almost certain that he’d hear the whispers in the night, telling him what they wanted him to do.

The following morning Gabe awoke by the brook where he had fallen asleep, trying to recollect his thoughts, and wondering if he had just woken up from a dream. But no, the colors were still there. He stood up, a few loose blades of the soft grass on which he had slept still stuck on his clothes. His eyes searched the horizon, as if they were trying to penetrate beyond the hills that rose up on the other side of the village in the valley below.

Occasionally he’d sigh. Whenever he’d think about the keys, which he had placed in a small satchel that hung from his right shoulder under his cloak, he would sense an air of excitement and anticipation, as if his life was about to dramatically change—or perhaps it already had. He mentally recounted all that he had been told by the old man the day before, and wondered what lay ahead for him. The whispers hadn’t come in the night, or if they had, he didn’t remember. But the old man’s instruction remained in his mind: to search for those who would be able to tell him more about these mystical keys.

Gabe had never traveled outside of his hometown, mainly because people said that there was nothing to see and nothing to do out there. When he was younger, he and his friends often wondered if this was just a ploy of the older folks to keep the young ones at home. It was almost an unspoken rule that no one should ever leave; it was simply not done.

They never heard much about other lands or regions either, except from the occasional traveler. But these were few and far between, and often viewed with suspicion. For that reason, Gabe had never seriously thought about leaving. So, to be suddenly struck with the idea was a little disconcerting.

Yet he had heard nothing, and still didn't know what he was to do or where he was to go. Impatiently he stood up and began walking along the edge of the brook, scuffing his feet as he walked along with his hands in his pockets, as was his manner. It was the gait of a defeated young man, a man without a purpose, a man without a vision. Gabe's new perspective on life had not yet seeped through his whole being.

He stopped again to look over the hills. "Oh, what to do? What to do?" For a good many hours he wrestled with the thought of leaving, closing his eyes to listen for the whispers, and opening them again when nothing came. Finally, when the midday sun stood high in the sky, he decided that he should just go.

After all, he told himself, I was given the keys and told to go find those who could tell me more. Maybe it is they who will be able to tell me what I am to do. I can't think of anyone here who knows about the other world—except Jenny, but she only knows as much about the keys as I do. Yes, I think I should go.

This decision having been made, Gabe started off for his cottage, whistling and walking with a little more spring in his step, as if his body had finally caught up with his spirit.

When he reached his cottage, it somehow seemed old and musty and damp. Outside, the sun shone brightly, but inside it was dark and foreboding. He almost felt that he shouldn't have come back here—his home belonged to the past.

He packed a few belongings into an old backpack, and gathered enough food to see him through the next

few days, which was how long it would take to reach the neighboring town.

THE JOURNEY

It was early afternoon when he stepped outside, locked the door to his cottage, closed the shutters and walked off. No one saw him leave.

Hmm, that's unusual, he mused. No one seems to be around. Well, that's good. I can quietly slip off without having to answer to anyone.

Gabe walked as far as he could, and by sundown had found a suitable spot to camp out for the night. He lay down under a tree, unrolled his large blanket, ate some bread and cheese, and was soon curled up to fall asleep. Quickly dozing off, he wondered again if he would hear the whispers that night in his dreams.

The next morning he awoke as soon as the sun made its presence known in the morning sky. Again, Gabe couldn't remember if he'd heard the whispers or not. He didn't recall having any dreams of direction, though he felt lighter and lighter in spirit the more distance he put between himself and the village.

After three days, he came to the outskirts of a town. He entered with anticipation, certain that once he had arrived he would discover what he was to do next. But as he approached the town center, an uncertainty began to grow within him—perhaps it was a fear of the unknown, or perhaps a worry that he wouldn't learn what he was supposed to do next. He had left everything, but what if there was nothing waiting for him here?

Gabe settled into a little room he found for rent, and wondered what would happen next. To his concern, nothing happened! No one approached him—and he didn't have the courage to initiate any conversations about the other world without first getting a sign or hearing something that could lead into that subject. The days passed, and autumn came—but still, nothing. He had to take on work to support

himself. Having previously learned the trade of carpentry, he was soon able to find work, enough at least to keep him busy—nothing he had to commit himself to, but enough to bring in some money for his food and lodgings.

Often in the evening, as he sat in front of the fire, he would pull out the keys and look at them. The golden color was still there, and they were still warm to the touch.

“But what am I to do with you?” he’d ask. “I left everything, and now what am I supposed to do?”

Still, the keys gave him a certain hope and courage, a belief that something else besides this world existed, that there was a mission for him—though, try as he might to understand, he did not yet know what it was.

Gradually he found himself seeking out the company of others each evening, as he wasn’t used to being alone, and he soon began making new friends. They were just like his old friends—friendly, young, vibrant, excited about their own lives, full of plans and ideals, and philosophies—but nothing was ever said about the other world. Occasionally Gabe would try to bring the topic up, but people would shrug it off. In fact, it seemed as if people here were even less interested in the notion of another world than they had been in his hometown. Sometimes he’d look back with longing, wistfully thinking about Jenny and the old man.

After a good many months of waiting and listening, there were still no whispers. Gabe began to wonder if it was all a mistake, and that perhaps his time was not quite yet. Slowly the world around him became more prominent in his life—his friends, his work, his pleasure. He no longer kept the keys constantly with him. Instead, they made their way to the bottom of a drawer, lost underneath some other belongings that Gabe had accumulated in his new home.

Gabe soon found himself particularly drawn to Shanti, a bright and bubbly girl who lived next door to him. Whenever he was with her, he felt he could relax and forget the things that weighed heavily on his heart. Although he had opted to forget about the keys for now, still, deep inside, he was earnestly searching for someone who would understand his quest and his vision; for a soul mate who thought the same way he did, who held to the same ideals as he, and who might be able to help him find out what to do next.

One day, as Shanti was helping to clean his room, she found the keys.

“Hey, Gabe, what are these keys for? Do you own a mansion, or have some secret treasures hidden away somewhere?” she said with an impish gleam.

Gabe froze for a second, not quite sure what to say. “No, Shanti, no mansion.”

“Then what are the keys for? They’re quite impressive.”

Gabe looked away, as if he was ashamed, and said nothing.

“Are you hiding something from me, Gabe?” she asked, a note of interest rising in her voice. “Gabe, the tall dark stranger that came into town with no past; the mysterious man from nowhere!” she mocked, and then laughed, flicking her hair out of her eyes. “What are they for?” she asked again, with a flutter of her eyelids.

Gabe didn’t know what to do. He wasn’t sure whether to tell her the truth or to keep up the lie he’d been living. He sighed and looked out the window, as if looking for a way to escape this awkward confrontation. *I can’t tell her the truth; she’d never believe me anyway!* he thought, and let out another sigh.

“What is it, Gabe?” Shanti queried, realizing that there was something about these keys that Gabe was not willing to confide in her.

After a moment of silence, she insisted, “Gabe, tell me! You really shouldn’t keep any secrets from me!” Her voice rose slightly in obvious frustration. “Why do you have to be so secretive all the time? I don’t know where you came from, or what you’re doing here. You never talk about your past, your parents, or if you have any brothers and sisters. And now you have to be so secretive about a simple set of keys! We’ve known each other for so long, Gabe. Don’t you think you should be able to tell me about some of these things?”

Gabe’s silence continued. “Look,” he finally blurted out, “you wouldn’t believe me even if I told you.”

“Oh?” she answered. “Try me!”

Gabe fell silent again, and began pacing pensively. He walked over to Shanti and took the keys out of her hands. As he held them, memories of the old man started flooding back into his mind. Almost without thinking, he began to tell the story from the beginning. Within moments, Gabe was completely immersed in his account of the old man, the keys, and the other world, until a sigh suddenly brought him back to reality.

He stopped to look at Shanti, and her eyes dropped. Not sure whether she believed what he was telling her or not, he asked, “Do you want me to go on?”

“Sure, why not?” she laughed.

Gabe desperately tried to explain things in a way that would punch through the wall that seemed to have suddenly sprung up between them. If only she could believe, and come to see the other world as he could see it. As he continued with his story, he realized how much he had lost in choosing to live the life he now lived—his belief, his conviction, his ideals all seemed so far away. But now he had to try to convince someone, a complete stranger to these truths, of the same things that he himself believed in his heart, but had chosen to ignore for many months. Yet it seemed that she could not be convinced.

His story lamely faltered to a stop. “You don’t believe me, do you? You don’t believe anything I’m saying.”

“No!” she replied with a downcast look and an icy voice. “I’m sorry, Gabe. It just doesn’t make any sense.”

Not wanting to make things worse, Gabe said, “I’m sorry. I can understand that it’s difficult for you to believe. Why don’t we just forget about it. Let’s just put the keys back and pretend this never happened.”

Shanti looked somewhat shaken, and proceeded cautiously. “I don’t know, Gabe. To be honest, I’m glad this came up. I’ve been wanting to talk to you about something for quite a while, and maybe now is the right time.”

Gabe looked puzzled. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, Shanti.”

“It’s about you and me, Gabe. I’m not sure that I can go on with things as they are. For a while it was okay, but there’s just too much about you that I can’t understand—you’re different. Sometimes you’re so distant. You’re so secretive about everything. You have no past, and for all I know, you probably have no future either. And now when I think I’m finally going to find out who you are, you tell me this story that is totally outrageous! I’m sorry, Gabe, but I can’t go on as we have been. I need some time away—I need a break. I’m not prepared to commit myself to someone I know nothing about.”

Gabe was floored! He realized that she had been more serious about their relationship than he had ever meant it to be. All he had wanted was friendship, some relief from the burdens he’d been carrying, and companionship through the lonely evening hours. In that moment of truth he suddenly understood that they could never be together—they were different. She was trying to build a life with him that he could never be a part of.

That night, after Shanti left, Gabe again took out the keys. Gazing upon them, he questioned himself. "Keys. Keys to what—a palace? Some hidden door? Maybe, who knows?"

Overwhelmed with a feeling of hopelessness, he sank down into a comfortable armchair. "What am I doing? Where are the voices? Where are the whispers? Here are the keys, but what am I to do with them? Please, please, please! I need some direction and help," he sobbed with his head resting in his hands. "I have to go on," he concluded after a moment of quiet contemplation. "I can't stay here. It's too complicated. I don't belong here." He sighed, but felt relieved at his renewed conviction.



The following morning, as he had once done many months before, he packed his few belongings, and set off, still not knowing where he was going, but determined that this time he would find someone who knew about the other world. He decided to venture into a dark area of town. He normally steered clear of this area, having heard many stories of the dangers that lurked there. As he approached that part of town, he could see why! The air was different, the atmosphere was oppressive and heavy. He began to feel things he hadn't felt for a long time. Occasionally he would catch a glimpse of something from the corner of his eye, but as quickly as he turned to see what it was, there was never anything there.

Surely someone must know something, he thought to himself. *Even if they don't know the whole truth, at least I may be able to find some clue, some hint ...*

Hearing loud laughter coming from a nearby tavern, he wandered inside.

The portly bartender came up to him. "What would you like, stranger?"

"Oh, I'll drink anything—whatever you've got."

"Right then," the bartender said, as he pulled out a glass and filled it with a foaming drink.

Gabe sat at the bar, sipping his drink and letting his eyes wander over the people that sat around the room, trying to see if he could notice anything that would lead him to believe that one of them might know something about the other world. As he was looking around, he caught the eye of a beautiful woman dressed in a deep red dress, sitting in the corner.

As she returned Gabe's gaze, a chill went up his spine.

She knows something! This is it! he thought, with a sudden sensation of excitement. Somehow he thought he could tell that she also had a connection with the other world.

Sensing his interest, she glided across the floor until she stood right next to him. "Mind if I join you?" she said in a soft voice.

"Uh, please ... be my guest."

"What are you doing here, stranger?"

"I'm looking for something."

"Something," she paused, "or someone?" She smiled coyly, and lifted an eyebrow. "Maybe I can help?"

"Maybe you can," Gabe responded a little reticently, uneasy about the direction their conversation was headed.

They sat for a while with a thick silence between them. Gabe didn't quite know how to continue.

She gazed emptily into her glass. Finally she broke the silence and, without raising her eyes from her glass, asked, "What are you looking for?"

Gabe hesitated; he didn't know whether to tell her everything, or something—or nothing. However, he decided to take the chance. At least he could see if there was any point in continuing this conversation. "I'm looking for a door ..." he said, and then paused.

“A door?” she laughed. “Well, I know where there are lots of doors.”

“I don’t mean normal doors,” he said, carefully watching her reaction. “I mean doors to the other world.”

She didn’t flinch. “Yes, I know where there are doors to the other world! Do you want me to take you to one?”

Gabe was shocked to so quickly receive the answer that he had been seeking for all this time, but in vain. “Oh yes, yes, please! Let’s go. Let’s go now!”

“Whoa,” she said. “Not so fast now! What will you give me if I take you to this door?”

“What do you want?” Gabe asked. “I don’t have very much!”

“A night with you!” she whispered, looking seductively into his eyes.

A chill went down his spine as he felt her eyes trying to reach down into the very depths of his soul. Still, he was desperate to find out all he could about the other world, so he agreed. “Sure, I don’t have anything else to give at this point anyway.”

“Very well, then!” she laughed. “Let’s go!”

The lady led Gabe through many winding alleyways and dark streets.

I can’t imagine, Gabe thought to himself, how doors to the other world could exist in a place like this. I guess life is full of contradictions; maybe this is where they are hidden.

The air was still. He felt uneasy. He could sense the other world peeking through at him, yet it still felt strangely distant.

Determined to press on, Gabe continued following the woman. She didn’t look back, knowing that his fascination was drawing him after her. Finally, they came to the far edge of the town, where a densely wooded forest of towering trees loomed darkly over-

head. Ferns and vines twisted around the trees, and a chilling wind drifted through the woods. An eerie silence shrouded them in stillness. There were no singing birds, no babbling brooks—just an occasional indistinguishable shriek, such as Gabe had never heard before. He hesitated, not sure if he wanted to go on.

Sensing his hesitation, the woman looked back at him over her shoulder. “Come on. You wanted to see the door, didn’t you?”

As Gabe looked into her face, he was shocked. He was sure that she had just aged ten years in the time they’d been walking through the streets. Wondering if it was just the shadows playing across her face, he closed and rubbed his eyes, and then looked again.

No, she hasn’t aged, he thought as he heaved a sigh of relief. *She looks the same. It was just the shadows playing tricks on me.*

Feeling a little better, he thought he’d continue the conversation to break through the eerie stillness that surrounded them. “So, what sort of door are you taking me to?”

“A door to the other world,” she said. “That’s what you are looking for, isn’t it?”

“Yes. I believe I may have the key to this door.”

“Keys? You don’t need a key for this door,” she whispered, her husky voice suddenly sounding sinister.

Another chill went down Gabe’s spine. Suddenly the thought crossed his mind that perhaps this wasn’t the right direction to go.

“Almost there,” she said. “It’s just a little further along this path. See, at the end, there’s a big boulder. We just have to pass between the boulder and the side of the hill—there’s a small pathway—then you’ll come to the door. Maybe it’s not the door you’re looking for—but it does lead to the other world.”

Gabe didn’t know what to do. Though he wondered if this was a mistake, at the same time he was

desperate to see anything belonging to the other world, just to know that his quest was not in vain. *Well, I guess I have nothing to lose*, he thought, and so he walked on.

Suddenly he heard something landing with a thud behind him. He jumped, and turned around. But when he looked back, he couldn't see anything unusual. The darkness that was settling over the forest only served to accentuate the already gloomy atmosphere. Gabe followed the woman past the boulder, and sure enough, there was a door—an old wooden door. The green paint was peeling off, the hinges were rusted, and cobwebs grew across the stone doorway. It was easy to see that no one had been here for a long time.

"Here's the door. Are you going to open it and go in?" She looked at Gabe and laughed. Again the thought crossed his mind that she had aged, but as he tried to look more closely, she stepped back into the shadows, where he couldn't see her.

"Are you going to wait for me?" he called out. There was no reply, only a deathly silence. His eyes searched for her in the shadows, but she had melted into the forest.

"She can't be that far," he muttered, keeping his wits together. He studied the door, which although it had no visible lock, still looked as if it might take some tugging to get open.

"Well, here goes!" He put his hand on the doorknob, but quickly jerked it away. It was warm! He hesitated momentarily. *Was that the whispers?* He stopped and listened. *No, nothing*, he told himself, as he gathered his courage. He grabbed ahold of the doorknob and held on, only to hear strange noises once again. This wasn't the sound of the wind in the trees; this wasn't the sweet melodic whisper that had spoken to him before—these were sounds of groaning and screeches.

Gabe's eyes suddenly widened in horror, as the stark realization of where this door led to finally dawned on him.

"A door to the netherworld!" he gasped as he snatched his hand away. At that point he clearly heard the screeching sound of laughter behind him.

"Oh no!" he shouted. "What am I doing? How did I get here? What have I gotten myself into?" Gabe instantly turned and ran blindly through the forest, not stopping to look where he was going. He felt as if someone was following him, but he dared not turn around to look. He ran as fast as he could, trying to shake off the noises he had heard—the shrieking, mad laughter, the moaning and groaning. They were haunting him, following him, at times running alongside him. He could hear them in the wind whistling eerily through the trees. He could hear them in the rustling of the leaves on the forest floor. He could hear them in the shrieking sounds of the forest night.

Finally he came to the edge of the forest. The area was not as thickly wooded, and from here he could clearly see what had now turned into the night sky. The stars twinkling down on him tried to reassure him that everything would be all right. A lazy moon was starting to peep over the dense branches of the forest trees to shed her light on the stillness. A silvery glow fell on the ground as the moon bestowed her benevolence upon the earth.

Feeling safe, Gabe collapsed on a nearby bench. Shaking and sobbing, he drifted off to a troubled sleep—tossing and turning, he felt that surely this was the end. He'd come to the end of himself; he had no more resources left. He'd tried all he could, but to no avail. His quest had only led him further away from what he had been searching for, and to the threshold of the netherworld itself.

FAETHÉ¹

“Gabe, Gabe.”

It was still dark when Gabe awoke with a start, sensing that someone was calling his name. He opened his eyes only to have the memory of the night flash before him.

“No, it can’t be,” he cried, fearing that the voices that had been haunting him had returned.

“Gabe!” came the voice again.

“No, but ... oh, what a melodious voice. It’s the whispers!” he exclaimed.

“Gabe?”

His eyes strained to focus on something that was moving at the edge of the forest.

“Gabe, my name is Faethé. I’ve come to help you!”

A most glorious apparition suddenly became visible, surrounded by a silver light, as if the moon itself shone from within her—she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

“Faethé?” Gabe repeated the name that she had spoken.

“Yes. I’ve spoken to you before ... and I’ve been with you all this time.”

Still dazed, and wondering if maybe he was still asleep, he sat up and rubbed his eyes.

“I have come to help you, Gabe,” she continued. “I tried to help you before, but I couldn’t. You had so many thoughts, desires and ideas of your own that I couldn’t get through to you. Your own mind was so busy.”

His mouth fell open in shock as he realized that this vision of beauty was indeed from the other world.

“You’re ... you’re,” he could hardly get the words out, “you’re from the other world?” She laughed—and what a beautiful sound it was. Each peal of laughter was a tune, complete in itself, from beginning to end—short, yet complete.

"I ... I'm from the real world," he hesitantly introduced himself.

"When we talk about your world, we usually call it the other world," she replied, amused at his bewilderment. "But I know that you say our world is the other world, so yes, I guess you can say I'm from the other world. I want to help you, Gabe."

"I need help," he eagerly responded, still not sure if she was real or just a dream.

"I can't stay long," Faethé continued. "It takes a lot of my power to appear like this. I'm only allowed to do so when it's absolutely necessary. I have an important message for you: You have to go back, Gabe. Go back to your little village, and there wait ... wait for the whispers. Wait until we tell you what to do next. You can't fulfill this mission on your own. You can't unlock all the doors, you can't solve all the mysteries. You thought you could; you thought you were invincible* ..."

"I didn't think I was invincible," he argued.

"You wouldn't have left if you had believed you needed help. Why didn't you go back to the old man? Why didn't you talk to Jenny? Why did you take off by yourself as if all of a sudden you had become the master of the keys, and you knew where you were going? You were so sure of yourself that you didn't think twice about just going off on your own. It's dangerous to be out here alone."

Gabe was disquieted* by her words that spoke directly to his heart. But Faethé was imparting much more to him than what she was saying with words, for at the same time Gabe felt his soul being flooded with visions, feelings, impressions and intuitions.

"I have to go, Gabe," she whispered, as her form began to fade into the early morning mist. "I can't stay. I just came to tell you that you need to go back to your village."

"No, don't go!" Gabe implored. "Please don't go!—I need you!" he cried out, as her image slowly vanished from sight.

"I'm not gone, Gabe. I never left you. I am always with you, leading and guiding, as long as you listen to the whispers."

"Can you talk to me all the time?" Gabe asked.

"I can't talk to you all the time," her whisper answered. "But I am with you all the time." Her voice became fainter, until it was almost indiscernible, and then the vision vanished.

Gabe sat in stunned silence. Daybreak was nearing, and the birds were beginning to sound their wake-up calls. While waiting for the sun to break through the dim half-light, Gabe went over all that Faethé had told him in his mind again. He couldn't quite comprehend it, though he tried to. He wanted to understand what he had done wrong, and he thought about it for a good while.

"I must be so dense," he muttered to himself. "I still can't really understand what she was saying. I thought I was invincible? Me, invincible?" But he finally acquiesced*, "I suppose it is true. I really wanted to do it myself."

With Faethé's words still resounding in his mind, he determined that his next course of action would be to begin the trip back to his village, and back to where he had begun.



His journey back was without incident. Everything went so smoothly and quickly that before he knew it, he could already see the familiar landmarks of his humble hometown. The Whisperers seemed to be guiding him every step of the way, showing him the shortest routes, and even helping his feet to walk a little faster.

"The first thing I'm going to do," he told himself, "is go straight up to the old man's cottage. I'm going to sit

down with him and Jenny, just like I used to, and ask them what I should do.”

As soon as he entered the little town, a wave of relief washed over him. He almost cried when he saw the old well in the town square, and the children playing in the street.

He shook his head. “I used to think they had no joy in their lives,” he said, speaking of the children to the Whisperers that he knew were listening. “But they certainly have more than some others I have seen in my travels.” There was a warmth about the village and the people that he hadn’t noticed before.

It seemed to take an age to get up to the old man’s cottage. Most of the familiar landmarks along the way were still there, but as he approached the cottage, he could see that there was something different about it. The shutters were drawn, the gate was closed, and no smoke came from the chimney. Something had obviously happened.

What is it? he asked himself. *The old man? Could it be that he’s ... gone?*

His heart sank, and he sat down on the old bench by the side of the road in front of the old man’s house. *What now?* he asked himself.

“Why, if it isn’t young Gabe,” a voice suddenly rang out from behind him.

He turned around to see a short but stout older man coming down the pathway that led to the village.

“Yes, I’m Gabe,” he answered hesitantly. “I’m sorry, but I don’t think I know you, sir.”

“I’m Shebo, Jenny’s uncle,” he introduced himself, holding out his hand.

“Jenny’s uncle?” Gabe gasped! “Oh, where’s Jenny? How is she? I must speak to her!” he said, as he grabbed hold of Shebo’s hand.

“Glad to meet you, too,” he answered, with a good-natured twinkle in his eye. “Yes, Jenny’s fine. She’s

told me all about you—that’s how I recognized you. And how are you, young man? You’ve been gone a good while.”

“I’m very happy to be back, sir.”

“Ahh, to be sure,” he replied, with a knowing nod.

“Do you think I could see Jenny?” Gabe asked.

“Why, of course. She’d be delighted to see you. She’s been waiting for you. She never stopped talking about you, saying that one day you would surely be coming back. Come with me. I’ll take you to her. She doesn’t live far from here now, you know.”

Jenny lived about five minutes away from the old man’s house, in a quaint little cottage set off from a few other houses that formed a small compound. Shebo whistled cheerfully the entire way.

A cheery and jolly man, to be sure, thought Gabe.

“Jenny! Guess who’s come to town? It’s Gabe!” Shebo bellowed at the top of his voice as they walked up the steps to her cottage.

“Gabe?” Jenny’s voice rang out from inside. “Gabe, you’re here! I’ve been waiting for you.” Jenny flung open the door and rushed out, throwing her arms around him and hugging him with such warmth and enthusiasm that she almost bowled him over.

Shebo stood back, chuckling. “Well, somebody’s sure glad to see you.”

“Please come in, Gabe,” Jenny said. “Tell us, what have you been doing? Where have you been?”

Gabe proceeded to give them a generalized account of where he had been, and what he had been doing.

“By the way, how is the old man?” Gabe questioned in a sudden impulse of curiosity at remembering him.

“Oh!” Jenny said, her enthusiastic voice suddenly taking on a more somber note. “He’s gone, Gabe. Just a few days after he heard you left, he went peacefully in his sleep.”

Gabe fell silent for a moment as he grappled with this dreaded news.

"Did he say anything?" he finally asked.

"Well ... not much," she replied hesitantly.

"What?" Gabe implored.

"I'll tell you later. It's not so important. But Gabe, guess what?" Jenny's voice suddenly came alive with excitement.

"Uh ... what?"

"While you were gone—in fact, I don't think it was too long after you had left—Uncle Shebo was hunting up in the mountains when he saw something. It was a vision!" She suddenly stopped and turned to Shebo. "Oh, I should let *you* tell the story."

"No, go on," Shebo encouraged her. "I couldn't tell it as richly as you do anyway!"

"Well, he saw a vision," Jenny began, "... a girl, and she led him up to a cave ..."

"Did you see who the girl was?" Gabe interrupted curiously.

"I had never seen her before, but she was the loveliest thing," Shebo said.

"And do you know what he found in the cave?" Jenny continued excitedly. "He found a trunk."

"What sort of trunk?"

"Oh, it was just an old dusty trunk, not much to look at," Shebo interjected. "But she told me ..."

"Who told you? I mean, what did she look like?" Gabe asked, anxious to find out more about this mysterious visitor.

"Just a wisp of a lass," Shebo answered. "She never told me her name, but she did say that you had the keys to the trunk, and that I was to bring it to Jenny to keep until you returned."

Gabe's heart was pounding. "I ... I ... I'm supposed to have the keys to the trunk?"

"That's what she told me," Shebo confirmed.

Jenny jumped in. "Do you, Gabe? You still have the keys, don't you? Please say you do! I've prayed that no matter what, you would keep those keys. Gabe, tell me you still have the keys."

"Yes, I do, Jenny," Gabe assured her.

"Oh, that's such a relief," Jenny said, as she let out a sigh. She took Gabe by the hand and led him through the back door of the little cottage and over to a small wooden shack.

Gabe ducked his head as he entered the door. While Gabe's eyes were getting accustomed to the dimly lit room, Shebo busied himself by clearing away some tools and old scraps of wood that cleverly hid the trunk from view. Then he removed a large blanket that covered the small rectangular trunk. It was fairly heavy, but with a heave, Shebo quickly lifted it onto the old makeshift table in the center of the room. Jenny quickly cleared the table so that all that was left on it was the trunk.

"That's a very unimposing piece of metal," Gabe commented. The trunk was small and obviously handmade. Its metal rims were rough, and the hinges had begun to rust. Gabe held the padlock that secured the trunk and fondled it. He placed the keys he now held in his hand on the table and stared silently, first at the trunk, then at Shebo, and then at Jenny.

"I'm a little nervous," he confessed.

"Me too," Jenny quickly responded.

Shebo remained silent, though his wrinkled brow and the occasional twitching of his left eye indicated that he was not quite as calm as he would have liked them to think.

"So what should I do?" Gabe asked, hesitating as he fixed his eyes on the aging and cumbersome padlock that guarded this mystery. "Do I just ... open it?"

"That's what you have the keys for!" Shebo affirmed.

Jenny, eager to see what was inside the trunk, implored Gabe. “Yes, Gabe, go ahead—please, open it. We’ve been waiting for you to come and open the trunk for so long.”

Gabe anxiously selected the key that looked the most likely to fit. He inserted the key, which seemed to glide into the old lock with an unusual smoothness. Gabe turned the key to the right, and then to the left, and the padlock gently opened.

“What’s in there?” Jenny whispered, trying to look over Gabe’s shoulder as he and Shebo lifted the lid.

“I can’t really see, it’s a little dim in here. Could we have more light?”

Jenny looked around the room and found an oil lamp, which she quickly lit. A warm glow filled the little hut, and as the shadows danced behind them, Gabe, Shebo and Jenny gingerly peered into the trunk, wondering what they would find.

“Books!” Jenny exclaimed.

“And it looks like a pile of letters,” Gabe added as he picked up a bundle of papers loosely tied together with twine.

Shebo was the first to open up one of the books. “Hmm,” he mused aloud. “Stories from the Other World.”

Jenny quickly opened another book. “These are the same sort of things that the old man used to talk with us about!”

Gabe, in the meantime, had loosened the twine around the bundle of letters, and began scanning through them. He strained to read the faded handwriting on the first letter. “It looks like it’s addressed to someone called Howard.”

“Oh, read it!” Jenny said excitedly.

“Dear Howard,

Friend and brother! We hope all is well with you, as it is with us. Thank you for your last communication,

which we received with great joy. It was wonderful to hear from you again.

Do not worry about us! We are continuing to prosper, watching and waiting for the fulfillment of the promise of the whispers. It has been a long wait, but we are certain that it will come soon. Never give up hope! That is what you always told us ...”

The letter continued with news from what appeared to be a small town. Gabe skimmed this section of the letter quickly.

“Oh, just news—probably about people this man knew. ... Wait! Here’s something interesting, ... *‘manifestations from the other world.’*” Gabe looked through the letter. “It starts here,” he said, as he again began reading aloud.

“...The other night while I was sleeping I had a dream, a most startling and vivid dream. It was so vivid that I thought it was real. I was sitting in a small cottage talking to an old man. The old man reminded me a lot of you, Howard; he had much to say about the whispers and the manifestations from the other world. There was a young girl tending to the old man.

“Then, while I was there, a young man came in to the room. The old man handed him the keys—and that was the end of my dream. I somehow had the impression that these keys had been missing—that they hadn’t been seen or heard of in a long, long time. But now, here they were again, and I was so happy—the keys were still around, and they had been passed on to another keeper.

“Somehow I knew that the passing on of these keys heralded the end of the Age of Darkness, that the time of fulfillment was at hand, and that, when the keeper of the keys would again stand before our gate, this time would finally come.”

Jenny, filled with all surprise and wonder, exclaimed, "Gabe, that's amazing! Do you think this is talking about ..." She hesitated momentarily. "I mean, this sounds like it's talking about what happened here."

"I wonder who this man, Howard, was?" Gabe said curiously. "And how could a letter written so long ago describe something that has only just happened?"

"There is much about the other world that we do not yet understand," Shebo answered wisely. "We may just have to accept that fact for now."

"I can't be sure, Jenny," Gabe said. "But if this is talking about us, then it seems as though there would be someone waiting for these keys somewhere. Maybe this is a clue as to what should be done next."

The room fell silent, as Jenny and Shebo waited to see what else Gabe would have to say. He himself was deep in thought. "I just have to be sure," he finally said softly, almost in a whisper. "I certainly don't want to rush off again. I have to be sure."

With that, he continued shuffling through the papers. "Let's see what else is here."

There were other letters—though most seemed fairly nondescript, containing news, apparently, of different loved ones, their children and lives and deaths.

Shebo continued turning the pages of the books. "You were right, Jenny. These books seem to be full of instruction and teaching about the other world. What a wealth! What a find! It's almost as if these words are alive."

"Remember the old man, and how his words seemed to dance in our hearts as though they lived a life of their own?" Gabe pondered aloud.

"Yes," Jenny laughed. "It must be the same—these words must be one and the same!"

As Shebo was leafing through one of the books, a folded piece of paper fell to the ground from between its pages.

"Oh, what's that?" Jenny asked, as she stooped to pick up the paper and unfolded it. "It looks like some sort of map!"

"Let me see," said Shebo, as Jenny smoothed the paper out on the table.

With a puzzled expression on his face, Shebo took the paper and turned it in different directions, till finally he recognized some landmarks.

"Look! Here's the forest—our forest—and these are the mountains that we see from here—the Golden Ridges. This must be the town you just returned from, Gabe, and here is ours ...!"

"I wonder what it's for?" Gabe pondered aloud, as he came up to get a closer look. Maps were not very common, as few people ever traveled, most living their lives within their own hometown.

"Here, look!" Shebo pointed at a marking on the map. "This arrow seems to be pointing to a city—quite a long way away, it seems—beyond the mountains."

"How many days' journey?" Gabe asked.

"Well, I've done some traveling," Shebo said, then shook his head, "but I've never used maps much, and certainly not ones this old, so I really wouldn't know. But I would estimate that it is perhaps a month's journey by foot."

"Maybe that is where we need to go ..."

"Well, at least we could make preparations," Shebo answered. "The weather being what it is, and with winter so nigh at hand, now might not be the best time to attempt such a journey."



As the days passed, Jenny and Gabe devoured the books contained in the trunk. They found much instruction and wisdom contained within their faded covers. Although they had heard many of these same stories from the old man, the many words he had spoken had by now faded into memories that seemed

to all blend together into a certain concept of the other world. Yet here, before their eyes, lay a wealth of detail that brought the words of the old man vividly back to life, almost as if he was still alive himself, and speaking these words to them right there.

The books spoke of the Evil One, the ruler of the Dark Kingdom, and how he took it upon himself to rid the world of its sense of wonder, its perception* of the hidden realm of the other world. And so it had happened, by the dark powers of the Evil One, that the people gradually lost their sense of color. They were slowly blinded to these beauties around them by the teachings of his emissaries*, who spread abroad his dark sayings and thoughts. Yet so gradual was this loss that few even came to realize it.

Once man had lost his sense of color, then the manifestations of the other world, which could only be discerned in the forms of color, were lost to them as well. In time, the reality of this other world became shrouded in myth and legend, regarded as no more than fanciful dreamings of primitive and aging people, whose strange beliefs in unseen forces would soon die with them.

Yet, the world itself was not colorless. It was only that this spell of the Evil One had blinded men to the sight of what was all around them, to where anyone who claimed to see color, who even claimed there was such a thing as color in the world, was regarded as strange, and avoided by the silent majority who had grown smugly content in their colorless world.

As Gabe read, he mysteriously found himself strengthened and his senses sharpened. The colors seemed to shine brighter than ever before, and his awareness of the other world became more finely tuned, to where he could sometimes sense it peeking through the thin veil that separated this unseen realm from his tactile* world.

Shebo read too—whenever his work was done. He was more practical by nature. One could say his feet were more solidly on the ground. In fact, sometimes Gabe wondered with amazement that Shebo even believed in the other world. But in his quiet and unassuming way, Shebo's love for the other world and quest for knowledge about it was as strong as Gabe and Jenny's.

THE AWAITED SIGN

Winter came and left, but Jenny and Gabe scarcely noticed this passage of time, so deeply immersed were they in the tales from the other world. But at the first sign of spring, Shebo broached the subject of the map once more.

Clearing his throat, he said, "I wonder, now that the weather is clearing, if we should try to make this journey to the other city?"

Jenny looked up, surprised. Brought back to reality from the distant world she had just been living in. "What a good idea!" she assented.

A troubled look, however, came across Gabe's countenance. "I don't know," he said, and shook his head. "I made a journey once without listening, without receiving definite instructions to go."

Shebo nodded. "I understand how you feel. I've been out there, too, you know. I know it's not easy and there are a lot of strange things and people out there that you wouldn't want to run into."

Gabe was surprised at Shebo's insight. "Yes, that's how it is."

After a few moments of silence Jenny thoughtfully concluded, "I agree that it's important to wait until we've heard something definite from the Whisperers. Why don't you ask Faethé for some direction, some instructions? Maybe she's just waiting for you to ask, Gabe."

He had told Jenny all about Faethé, but the thought of asking for direction was new to Gabe. He had always figured he would just wait until she contacted him again.

That night, in the solitude of darkness, Gabe closed his eyes and whispered, "Faethé, Faethé, are you there? You said you were always with me, that you were by my side and that you would whisper to me. I did as

you asked: I brought the keys back and waited. We found a map and a letter that tells us there are others who are waiting for someone to bring them the keys. But is this person me? Am I supposed to journey to this city? I don't want to go without knowing for sure. Please show me a sign. I need something specific. Please, I'm waiting for you."

His mind drifted, thinking over all that had happened since he had met the old man. He remembered how he had come to see Faathé, and how beautiful she was. With these pleasant thoughts wafting through his mind, he soon drifted off to sleep.

Early the next morning, Shebo came running excitedly to the door. "Gabe!" he called over and over, as he rapidly knocked at the door.

Surprised to see Shebo in such a state, Gabe invited him in.

"Shebo, come in, sit down. What happened?"

"I saw her again."

Jenny came and sat on the floor next to Shebo's chair, "Saw who?"

"That lovely vision of a girl who led me to the trunk."

"And?" Gabe and Jenny chorused eagerly.

"She took my hand, and gazed into my eyes and said, 'The darkness is approaching. Tell Gabe that the time has come.' I was speechless! Then, before I had a chance to say anything, she vanished into the forest. I wanted to ask her more questions, but it was too late—she had gone."

There was a stunned silence. Gabe, though wanting to believe, was skeptical. He looked off into the distance, his staring silence saying more than words ever could.

Shebo finally spoke again. "I can understand if you can't find it in your heart to believe all that I have just told you." He gazed long and hard into Gabe's eyes. "But, when you have decided it's time, let me know. I'll

be here, and I am ready to go with you."

Ashamed at his hesitation, Gabe returned his gaze. "Thank you, Shebo. I'm sorry."

After Shebo left, Jenny came and sat next to Gabe. She bit her lower lip, until finally she blurted out, "There's something I have to tell you. I too saw something. Last night in a dream I saw a place I've never seen before. It was a town surrounded by a huge wall, and it had a big arched gateway. The townspeople who came in and out all carried their own key to this gate, so that they could freely come and go. But another key was kept in a case outside the gate. The case was locked, and I saw you unlock the case and take out the key to open the gate."

Jenny hesitated, and stopped there.

"Was that all?" Gabe asked, wondering if she would say more.

"I ... I believe that this is the town the map leads to, and that these people are the ones waiting for you, Gabe, to come with the keys. I believe it *is* time for you to go."

Gabe was taken aback, as Jenny was not normally so forthright, nor was she usually so assertive. He shook his head, still not convinced. "I'm sorry, it's not that I don't believe you. It's just that I need to be sure in my own heart that the time is right before I go ahead."

"It's not easy for you to go on the word of others, is it?" Jenny asked.



Days passed. Shebo and Jenny waited patiently. Gabe could feel an air of expectancy around them. It was almost as though they were journeying on ahead of him already, while he stayed behind, trapped in his own uncertainty. Yet he was determined not to make the same mistake again.

Strolling through the marketplace soon afterwards, Gabe almost stumbled over an old beggar woman sit-

ting by the side of the road. Barely catching himself from falling, he stopped and pulled a few coins out of his pocket to drop into her cup.

“Thank you, sir,” the old lady whispered as the sound of the coins tinkled in the bottom of the cup.

Normally Gabe would have passed on with a shrug and a smile, but there was something in the old lady’s voice that sounded strangely familiar. He stopped and gazed into her eyes for a moment. *Why do I think that I know her?*

The old woman’s eyes smiled back at him, and it was then that Gabe suddenly realized who she was. His mouth dropped open.

“Shhh!” she warned Gabe in her own melodic whisper. “Don’t be surprised. You asked for a sign; you wanted me to speak to you, so here I am. It’s time to go, Gabe.”

“Faethé?”

She smiled as Gabe recognized her. He was obviously puzzled at her appearance, yet knew that she was the same Whisperer who had appeared to him before.

“I know you’ve been uncertain, and I’m glad you’ve been cautious this time around, but you also need to learn to trust those we have placed around you. These, your good friends, also listen to the whispers, so you can trust them. Remember you don’t have all of the answers, nor do you have all the strength. The journey ahead will be long and dangerous, and you will not be able to make it on your own. Take Shebo with you—he will be a good counselor for you. Jenny has a mission of her own to fulfill. The time is now, and you must depart quickly.”

“I’m sorry,” Gabe whispered.

“Don’t worry, Gabe. These are lessons we all must learn. Now ...” by this time Faethé was standing. “Go in peace. Go in trust. I am always with you, and I will

be seeing you again ... sometime.” With that, she shuffled off, and quickly disappeared into the crowd.

For a moment Gabe stood staring after her. Then, realizing the commission he’d been given, he turned and ran home as quickly as he could.



Gathering Jenny and Shebo together he apologized, “I’m so sorry that I’ve taken so long to be convinced that it’s time to go.” He proceeded to tell them about his meeting in the marketplace, and what Faethé had told him there. Jenny and Shebo smiled, happy that he had finally received the sign he had been so desperately seeking.

“I’m so sorry I didn’t believe you. I wanted to, but I just needed a confirmation for myself—I couldn’t act on your belief alone. I’m sorry.”

Both being very forgiving in nature, they found it easy to accept his apology.

“I probably would have done the same,” Shebo laughed. “I’m not eager to go rushing off on a mere impulse either.”

“Oh, and there was one more thing, Jenny,” Gabe began hesitantly.

“I know, Gabe,” she stopped him. “I will not be going with you. I have been prepared for this. My mission is different from yours; the old man told me this himself before he passed on. Don’t worry about me, I will be all right.”



So it was that they began to make plans and preparations for Gabe and Shebo’s departure.

Jenny would stay behind to watch over the contents of the trunk. Before passing away, the old man had told her to keep the words alive and continue to pass on the stories she had heard of the other world. Already, some of the villagers had shown an interest in the books that had been found, and some were slowly

beginning to believe in and accept what the old man had been saying all along.

One by one, as they accepted the reality of the other world, they too began to see the colors. Jenny would stay with these new believers, and wait for Gabe and Shebo's return—though they didn't know for sure if they would ever see each other again.

When the day finally came that all was ready, Gabe and Shebo said their good-byes, and set off over the hills. As they set their eyes upon the horizon, they both silently pondered the future in their hearts, hoping that they would be prepared to face whatever it was that lay ahead of them.

DIRECTION

Beyond the Golden Ridges—the huge mountain range that formed a natural boundary for the people of the lowlands, and beyond which few had ever traveled—in the city of Danar, the very heart of the regions of darkness, plans were being made. Pacing up and down with his hands behind his back, Lord Bazal was waiting impatiently for his men. Hearing a commotion outside, he glanced out the window and saw his grooms tending to the beautiful black stallion that his under-officer had apparently just ridden up on.

Within seconds, the door burst open and Sir Bradcliff stormed into the room, where he immediately stood at attention in the presence of his lord, collecting his composure and formally greeting his superior, who only grunted in reply.

"I hear the keys have resurfaced somewhere?" Bazal asked, his eyebrows raised.

"Yes, it is rumored that they have. It may be time for us to make our move!"

"Is everything ready, then?"

"We've been prepared and waiting for this moment a long time. We have sent out spies who should be returning this evening with news from across the Ridges, where the keys have reportedly been seen."

"Reportedly? What do you mean?"

"Well, sir," Bradcliff continued cautiously, "though we've heard that someone has been seen with the keys, we don't have anything definite yet. There have been numerous dreams and visions, and we have news from the Toilers that one of their girls spoke of meeting a boy who had keys which he said were to the other world, though she's the only one who actually saw anything."

"Dreams and visions ... dreams and visions," Bazal whispered to himself. Clearly agitated, he shook his

head before catching Sir Bradcliff's eye. "So, it's a time of dreams and visions again?"

"I'm afraid so," Bradcliff confessed, "but they are not to be ignored, my lord! We're always up against more than we bargain for with these dreams and visions, and all that they bring with them."



Gabe and Shebo journeyed on, unaware of the adventure that was soon to unfold before them. To them, life remained benign. A surrealistic air surrounded them as they traveled. For some reason the colors seemed even sharper than they had been.

"Sometimes I forget about the magnificence of these colors," Gabe said, making conversation.

Shebo nodded as he looked around. "I know. They're always there. Sometimes they appear to fade, and other times they seem brighter and more visible. But I don't think I've ever seen them any clearer than they are here."

"Have you ever told anyone about the colors?"

Shebo, chuckling at the thought, confided, "Not I! I'm not one to get myself into trouble. Besides, I figured the colors are there for everyone to see, if they'd only open their eyes to the real world around them!"

"That may well be."

As they continued their travels, they followed the map that they had found in the trunk. It gave enough detail for them to make good headway along the creek's bank, up over the hills and down the other side. The route they followed would lead them around the mountains, and from all they could tell, would take them a few weeks to complete. They had planned their journey so that they could stop to rest at different marked towns along the way.

It was not common at all for people to travel far, and few knew anything about towns that were as close as a day's journey away. Maps were not common, so

neither Gabe nor Shebo could be sure of what sort of places they would find along the way.

They passed by the road to the town that Gabe had visited before, but they only hurried on. Gabe would not travel that road again.

The more distance they put between themselves and their hometown, the more the landmarks on the map, which initially had been very easy to recognize and follow, became harder to detect. Often they could not be exactly sure what a certain marking on the map meant. After all, no one knew how old this map was, and what changes may have occurred in the landscape since the time that it was first created. The map in itself also seemed to be incomplete, with some sections left blank. Still, this didn't seem to pose such a problem, as there were not that many roads to lead anywhere else, and whenever they would come to a turn where they were unsure of where to head, they would stop and wait for the whispers to guide them.

After passing through the densely forested hills that led them past the Ridges, they came upon the pastoral setting of a region of great plains. Although they passed an occasional dwelling, they saw few people along the way.

Coming upon a small lake at the edge of a forest, they decided to stop, rest and eat.

"Well," Gabe said, his body sore from their long journey, but still trying to sound optimistic, "it looks like we're probably halfway to our destination."

"It would be nice to know for sure," Shebo muttered half under his breath. "That map isn't exactly easy to follow."

"I guess we won't really know until we get there," Gabe surmised. "I think I'll slip down to the lake and take a dip. Care to join me?"

"No, go ahead. I'll prepare us a bite to eat."

Gabe quietly made his way to the lakeside. Pushing away some low-hanging branches, he slowly approached the edge of the water. Suddenly he froze, hearing the voice of strangers coming from the other side of a hedge of shrubbery. He was unsure whether to continue his planned dip.

He decided to try and get a closer look at whoever was there, yet at the same time, stay out of their sight. Cautiously he proceeded, until he could see the strangers more clearly. A man stood with a half-empty bottle in his hand and a large dagger strapped around his waist. A heavily sunburnt old lady sat next to him, crying. A little further away stood a young girl with her hands apparently tied behind her back, propped up against a tree trunk.

Gabe couldn't understand what the man was drawling about, and the old lady seemed to be pleading with him, but she spoke a strange tongue that Gabe had never heard before. Realizing what he'd stumbled across, he quietly made his way back to Shebo.

"Shebo, there's something happening down by the lakeside. A man has a young girl tied up, and there's an old woman there with him. I couldn't tell what she was saying, but the man has a knife."

"What's he wearing?"

"A sleeveless jacket with a bright sash," Gabe answered, wondering what the man's clothes would have to do with anything.

"Mmmm, probably a Trader."

"A Trader?"

"Yes, a Trader. Was he saying anything?"

"I couldn't understand him. He appears to be drunk."

"Well, I suppose we should leave well enough alone."

Gabe, however, was of a different opinion. "It didn't look like a very good situation to me. I didn't like what I saw—I mean, a drunk man berating an old lady, a

young girl tied up ... it looks very unpleasant, to say the least."

"So what do you suggest we do?" Shebo asked, realizing that Gabe would not let the matter drop that easily.

"Well," he stammered, "shouldn't we try to help them or something?"

"Gabe, that man is a Trader!" Shebo exclaimed. "You don't interfere with Traders!"

"But why? Besides, there's only one of them, and there's two of us. Shouldn't we at least see if there's something we can do to help?"

"I tell you, you'd do best to leave them alone."

Gabe shook his head. "I can't. That poor old lady—she looked so helpless, and that girl, she looked so young. We can't stand by and do nothing."

"Just one Trader?" Shebo asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I only saw one."

"Oh, well," Shebo sighed. "I suppose we could take a look and see if there's anything we can do."

Quietly they stalked toward the lakeside again, keeping themselves well hidden. After surveying the situation, Shebo and Gabe returned to their previous position. Once they were out of earshot Shebo reaffirmed his earlier counsel. "I don't think it would be wise for us to get involved in this situation. It doesn't look like these ladies are in any danger of being harmed right now, and I wouldn't be able to say the same if we were to suddenly intervene. These Traders are mean men at best, and highly unpredictable."

"Why don't we wait here till nightfall?" Gabe asked, unwilling to give up so easily. "Then, if they are still here, we can creep into the camp and rescue them while the man is sleeping."

Shebo, seeing that Gabe would not be dissuaded, eventually relented.

Nightfall soon arrived—almost too soon for Shebo, who was feeling very uneasy. Gabe and Shebo gathered their belongings and prepared for a quick escape. Stealing back through the woods, and being careful not to make too much noise, they made their way to the Trader's campsite.

"They're all asleep," Gabe was quick to observe. The Trader lay on a pile of blankets close to a small, glowing campfire. The young girl had slumped down against the tree, her hands still tied behind her back. The old woman lay curled up at her feet, as if to protect her from any harm. Carefully Gabe edged into the dim circle of light thrown by the campfire, and over to the old lady.

He gently took hold of the old lady's arm, and shook it. The old woman awoke with a start. Gabe swiftly held his hand over the lady's mouth to stop her from screaming.

"Shhh!" he whispered, holding a finger in front of his mouth, and hoping that the old lady would understand that he was there to help.

She could see by his garb* that he was not a Trader, and to Gabe's relief she seemed to sense that she was not in danger from him. She nodded, and Gabe slowly removed his hand from her mouth. She remained still and motionless. Shebo now also moved into plain view of the old lady, cautiously edging around the circumference of the campsite.

Not wanting to startle the young girl, Gabe beckoned the old lady to rouse her from her sleep. Gently the old lady patted the girl's face, and as she started to open her eyes, the old lady gestured to be quiet—that help had come.

Gabe slipped around behind the girl and cut the ropes. As the ropes fell to the ground the man stirred. Frozen, and with bated breath, they waited to see if he was going to wake. He tossed and turned, but what-

ever had been in that bottle had done its job well, and the Trader soon returned to a deep sleep.

Together, Gabe and Shebo and their rescued companions silently slipped out of the camp. Gabe's heart was pounding as they cautiously made their way back to the road. He wondered what would happen when the Trader awoke to find that his captives had vanished during the night.

"We're going to have to keep moving, even though it's night," Shebo told the women, hoping they would understand.

Gabe nodded in agreement. The women seemed to understand what was happening, and also indicated their consent.

With daybreak still a few hours away, they made haste, thankful for the clear night sky and the full moon that shed light on their path. In spite of the old woman's age and the young girl having been tied up, they both seemed fit and were able to keep up a good pace.

When they were well on their way, and out of any immediate danger, Shebo tried to strike up a conversation with the older lady.

"Hello," was his hesitant attempt at starting their communication.

She looked at him and nodded. "Hello," she responded simply.

"You understand?"

"Yes."

He soon found that the old woman understood some of their language, though she was not particularly fluent or articulate in speaking it. What she could speak was shrouded in a thick accent, which made it difficult to understand much of what she did try to say. The young girl remained silent, in spite of Gabe's attempts to communicate with her. Seeing that he wasn't having any success, Gabe walked over to Shebo to see what he could find out about them.

"Where do they come from?" he asked.

"They're Drifters. I've met some of their menfolk before. They're free, wild, and they have no homeland. They travel all over these parts. Their women are famed for their beauty, as well as their dexterity'. They're often sold as slaves to rich households."

"Ah, Drifters. I've heard about them, but I've never seen one before," Gabe said, as he cast a glance at the young girl, who was still silently following behind them.

"There's a lot you've never seen, boy," Shebo responded.

By the first light of day, and with no sign that they were being followed by the Trader, or anyone else for that matter, they stopped for a rest and to get their bearings. Sasha, the old woman, knew this part of the country well, and once she had seen the map she was able to point them in the direction that they were seeking to go.

"So what are we going to do with these women?" Gabe asked.

"I don't know. They've been separated from their kinsfolk, and it would be dangerous to leave them to travel alone in these parts. Perhaps they should travel with us—they seem to know the area, and if anyone could help us to get where we're going, it would be them."

Gabe was a little startled at Shebo's suggestion.

"Well," Shebo continued, noting his young friend's surprise, "we can't just leave them out here on their own. Who knows what might become of them? I mean, look at this young girl—she's beautiful!"

Gabe did not need convincing of that fact, for indeed she was!

The two women appeared nervous, however, apparently sensing that Gabe and Shebo were discussing their fate.

After a few moments of further discussion, Gabe stood up and waved at Sasha and Diana, as the young

girl had been introduced to them. "Come on, it's time to go. We have a long way ahead of us still."

The old woman, obviously relieved that they were not going to be left behind, translated the welcome news to the young girl. With nary a glance behind them, they journeyed on, hoping that the Trader was not on their trail. "They're wily characters," Shebo warned, "and though we may not see him, we could well be in his plain view."

Sasha noticed their nervousness, but didn't seem particularly afraid. She kept trying to tell them something, but neither Gabe nor Shebo could understand what it was, although they knew from her expressions and gesticulations that it had something to do with the Trader.

Throughout their travels thus far, there had always been the occasional inn along the way, where weary travelers could take their rest. Gabe and Shebo did not usually rent a room, though they had been in the habit of stepping in from time to time to bathe, change their clothes, and eat a hearty meal. So as had been their custom, and with an inn visible in the distance, Shebo went on ahead to survey the scene. After a short time, Shebo returned to the three who were now seated on the ground a little way down the road.

"All seems to be clear. There's just the innkeeper and his wife and a couple of other menfolk sitting in the corner. There don't appear to be any Traders. Shall we go?"

"Yes, I'm looking forward to a good meal," Gabe heartily agreed.

They entered the inn cautiously, with Sasha and Diana following hesitantly behind. As they approached the bar, the innkeeper's wife whispered something in her husband's ear, and then cast a mean glance at Gabe and Shebo before disappearing into the kitchen.

The innkeeper approached Shebo, careful to maintain a polite demeanor. "Listen, we can't have these women in here. We don't allow their sort to come in."

Shebo quickly sized up the situation. Not wanting to cause a disturbance, he apologized, turned and quietly shuffled the women back out the door. He led them to sit down on a nearby bench as he went back inside the inn. The two women were happy, nonetheless, for the opportunity to sit and rest.

"Well, I guess we've learned something for next time," Gabe said after Shebo re-entered the inn.

"To be sure!" Shebo agreed, as he glanced over to the innkeeper, who looked at them with an apologetic and almost embarrassed smile.

"I'm sorry about that, sirs. But I'm sure you'll understand that we cannot allow women like that in here. They cause too much trouble, and we have to try to keep a clean house."

"I understand," Shebo nodded.

"How did you come by those women anyway?" the innkeeper asked, unable to contain his curiosity. "You don't look like Traders! Are they your girls?"

"We ... uh ... no. They are simply traveling with us, and are under our protection. You can never be too careful these days, you know," Shebo responded, careful to be truthful, but at the same time not reveal more than he had to.

"I see. Well then, what can I do for you?"

The men ordered a meal, and asked if some food could also be brought to the women outside.

The innkeeper readily agreed.

"Thank you, we appreciate that."

"No problem, no problem," said the innkeeper, who appeared friendlier by the minute. "I'm sorry for the trouble this is causing you."

After eating their fill, Gabe and Shebo leisurely strolled back outside, forgetting for a moment all their

cares and worries. The women contentedly sat on the bench, their empty dishes indicating that they, too, had eaten well. There was a tall, swarthy young lad sitting at the farthest end of the bench. The three were engrossed in conversation, which abruptly halted as Gabe and Shebo drew near. The lad stood up and nodded at the two men, gathered the empty dishes and prepared to leave.

Interested in what this lad could have been talking about, Gabe asked, "Oh, you work for the innkeeper?"

The lad answered with a simple nod.

"Thank you for bringing the food," Gabe continued, eager to strike up further conversation.

The lad nodded again. "My pleasure, sir."

"I heard you talking to the women. Are you able to understand them?"

"Yes, I am. We're of the same kin."

"Oh," Gabe said, suddenly noticing his olive-colored skin. "Maybe you could help us," and then he hesitated, wondering how much the women had told the lad.

The lad intuitively discerned Gabe's questioning look. "I want to thank you, sirs, for rescuing these two friends of mine. There are not many who would stand up for the likes of us. Your kindness is greatly appreciated. You can be sure that if you're ever in trouble, help will come your way. We'll see to it!" The intensity with which he spoke struck at Gabe's heart. He searched the lad's eyes, looking, perhaps, for a deeper meaning to his words.

Not wanting to respond with the same intensity, however, Gabe nonchalantly replied, "It was the right thing to do. We couldn't stand by and watch the rights of others being violated."

A moment of silence ensued. There was a connection as their eyes locked, seeming to join them together in a bond of true brotherhood.

Shebo sat down beside the women, and broke the silence with a direct question. "Perhaps this lad could help us understand what Sasha was trying to tell us. And he could help us explain to them what we're planning on doing."

"Do you mind helping us?" Gabe asked. "We have not had much success communicating with your ... um ... friends."

"I'd be happy to help," said the lad.

"The older woman was trying to tell us something. I think it had something to do with the Trader, but neither of us could make any sense out of what she was saying."

The lad spoke to Sasha, and after a few moments turned back to Gabe and Shebo. "It seems she was trying to tell you that you wouldn't be in any immediate danger from the Trader. He was carrying something very precious that he had been commissioned to take to another man. He couldn't deviate from his course, so he wouldn't have taken any time to follow you to get the women back. She wanted to assure you that there was no reason to worry about this man. You have to understand—these women are not worth very much to anyone. The Trader picked them up along the way, and he was planning on selling them before he reached his destination. He was hoping to earn a little extra money that way, but he's not going to go out of his way to chase after them."

Gabe was relieved. "I'm glad to hear that!"

"Is there anything you would like me to tell the women?"

"Let them know that we are making our way towards the nearby town ..."

"I know," the lad interrupted. "They told me you have a map, and that you're heading towards the city of Citar."

"A city? You've heard of it?"

"Yes. My family has traveled this region a lot. We are all familiar with this land."

"Okay, well, you can tell them that we would be happy to take them with us to this city—Citar, did you say it was called? Once we get there, they should be able to try to get in contact with their kinsfolk."

"I'll pass on the word," the lad said. "I have friends, and we can see if we can find their family. From the sounds of it, they have traveled far from their tribe, and have no idea where they might be. But we'll do our best to get word to their family that they're alive. I have to go now. Thank you again for your gracious kindness to my people." He walked towards the side entrance of the inn, and slipped quietly through the door, closing it behind him.

"Well, what do you make of that, Shebo?"

"I don't know what to think. I've heard that these Drifters are a close-knit lot. I think we can rest assured that at least they won't do us any harm. They have been known to rob and plunder, but I think we'll be safe."

"I wish I had asked more questions," Gabe said wistfully. "He seemed to know so much about these parts."

They still had a ways to go before they would near the city they were headed to. For the most part they journeyed in silence; the traveling was beginning to take its toll on them. The women lagged a little behind the men. A sense of complacency had settled over the small group, caused in part by their tiredness, and also by the assurance that the Trader was not likely to follow after them. So complacent were they that they didn't sense the presence watching them from afar.

DISCOVERED

The lone eeghaw circled high above the wayworn travelers. Eeghaws were mysterious birds—if one could call them birds. They were half of this world and half of the netherworld, and were seldom seen or noticed by man. Their mission—and the only reason they made forays into this world—was to aid those of the Dark Kingdom. Silently these beings circled the earth from one mountain range to the other, keeping watch over all inhabitants and seeking out anything different, anything that was out of the ordinary.

By chance this particular eeghaw had stumbled upon Gabe and Shebo as they had left their camp with the two rescued women. With a keen discernment, the eeghaw sensed that this unlikely combination was more than just a product of chance. Attempting to discover more about these unusual travelers before reporting back to his master, the eeghaw had continued to circle above them or hide behind the foliage as they sat and talked, all the while hoping to hear something.

And so it was that, while they had conversed with the lad at the inn, the eeghaw had heard all that was said. Though the conversation had not revealed much of their plans, again, with its uncanny perception, the eeghaw had sensed the bond that had formed between the men and the Drifters, which gave it some cause for alarm.

When they were about four days away from their final destination, the eeghaw abruptly left, speeding back towards its master.



Bradcliff was preparing to retire when one of his men approached him. “Permission to speak, sir?”

“Permission granted,” Bradcliff responded curtly.

“There’s a Toiler here, sir, who says he has to see you.”

"Mmmm," Bradcliff grunted, barely acknowledging what had been said.

"He says that one of his eeghaws has just come in with news."

"News?" Bradcliff questioned, suddenly interested. "News of the keys?"

"I don't know, sir. He didn't want to tell us anything, but insisted on seeing you. But he says it's important, that they all seem to sense something."

"Hmph, Toilers. You can't trust them. They sense this and they sense that. All right, send him in."

The Toiler shuffled up to Bradcliff.

Bradcliff turned his head at the peculiar odor that the Toiler brought with him. Without lifting his head from his papers, he asked curtly, "Toiler, you have news?"

"I do," the Toiler growled in his low, guttural voice. "I think I have something that may be of interest to you."

"News of the keys?"

"Maybe."

Bradcliff looked up at the Toiler, barely hiding his repulsion. "What news then, man? Tell me quickly!"

"One of my eeghaws came in just yesterday to tell me that there are two men and two women Drifters heading towards the city of Citar."

"And what's so unusual about a couple of Traders and their women?" Bradcliff asked impatiently.

"No, they're not Traders. It appears that the women were rescued from a Trader by the two men they're now journeying with."

"And what does any of this have to do with the keys?" Bradcliff was anxious to get to the point so that he could be rid of the Toiler.

The Toiler sniffed, and then drawled. "You might remember many months back when I told you there

was a young man who, according to one of my girls, had said he had the keys."

"Ah, yes, I remember that story well. And tell me again, did your girl actually see the keys?"

"No, but he told her they were the keys to the other world."

"Yes, yes. I have heard all this before. It's just too bad that your girl didn't do a better job at getting ahold of them."

"She tried, sir. She led him to our world, but he never entered the door. There was a power surrounding this boy that was stronger than hers, and there was nothing further she could do."

Bradcliff was becoming increasingly impatient. "Get on with your story, man," he snapped.

"From what the eeghaw told me, one of these travelers may very well be the same boy. He fits the description perfectly. And you know that it's very unusual for anyone who is not a Trader to be traveling so far afield."

Bradcliff thought for a moment, then shook his head a little disappointedly. "All of this is speculation only. You don't know for sure. Has this boy brought out any keys, or has he mentioned anything about keys?"

"No, they don't talk much. But I think it's the same boy," the Toiler asserted.

"Well, I'm not going to Bazal with any reports of hearsay," Bradcliff said. "Why don't you send some of your people out there to try to get ahold of him? Find out for sure if he has the keys or not, or if he knows anything about them. Although, if he does have the keys, I doubt that your people will be able to do much."

"We have powers," the Toiler snarled.

"I know your powers." Bradcliff's eyes narrowed as he peered into the Toiler's hooded face. "But your power has never been any match for the keys! Now go, and

let me know when you have something a little more concrete.”

Bradcliff turned and walked away, eager to be rid of the Toiler’s presence.

The Toiler, used to such rude behavior, shrugged, turned and shuffled out of the room in the same way he’d shuffled in.

After the Toiler had left, Bradcliff called in one of his officers. “Keep an eye on the Toilers. They think they’ve sighted a young man who may have the keys, and who is on his way towards Citar. See if you can discover anything. These Toilers are so untrustworthy—they have their own plans and it’s hard to know if they’re speaking the truth. So the best we can do is to keep our eyes open. Just keep an eye on them—but do it discreetly; we don’t want them suspecting that we have them under surveillance.”

“Yes sir, right away. The city of Citar?”

“That’s right! Have your men there, and on the lookout for any Toiler movement. They are most likely going to try to ambush this young man—see what becomes of it, as I am uncertain that they will give us an honest report themselves.”



Still oblivious to the impending danger, Gabe and Shebo journeyed on, moving increasingly faster as they drew closer to their destination. Something seemed to be unsettling the women.

“What’s wrong with Sasha?” Gabe asked Shebo.

“I don’t know. She’s been acting a little strange—I wish I could understand what they have been chattering about.”

“It’s probably nothing more than some old woman’s fanciful fretting!” Gabe chuckled.

As time went on, and as they drew closer to the city, the walls of which were now partly visible in the distance, Sasha was becoming increasingly uncomfort-

able. The danger she felt skirting around the outer edge of their charmed circle was becoming more apparent to her. She had also seen the eeghaw, which had returned to its watch, circling high above them, confirming her eerie suspicions. She tried to point the eeghaw out to Shebo, but his eyesight was not as sharp as hers, and he was not able to see anything other than a black speck flying high above them.

“She’s beginning to make me feel a little edgy,” Gabe muttered uncomfortably as a chilly wind suddenly sprang up, seemingly out of nowhere. “I haven’t felt like this for a long time,” Gabe mused, as his mind wandered back to the time when the strange woman had led him through the forest to the doors of the netherworld. He shook his head, trying to rid himself of the eerie feeling that was starting to settle over him. “I remember feeling like this before,” he confessed to Shebo. “You feel as though there are a million eyes watching you, and everywhere you turn you think you can almost see something—but not quite.”

“I know,” Shebo agreed. “I’ve been feeling the same, but I didn’t want to say anything. I thought it was just my imagination, but now I’m wondering if there is something out there.”

“Ohhh, this is not what we need right now,” Gabe muttered. “We’re so close; how can this be happening now?”

“Perhaps that is why it is happening.—Because we are so close. We’ve journeyed with so little incident thus far, that even I thought it almost too good to be true.”

Then, after a moment’s hesitation Shebo said, “There’s something else, too. There’s a smell. The air around us used to be so clean and fresh, but now whenever I feel there’s something watching me and I try to catch sight of it, I smell this faint and unpleasant odor tainting the air.”

"I know. I think there's something out there."

The closer they drew to the city, the more they could feel this dark, invisible presence surrounding them. The women nervously huddled together, barely straying more than one or two feet from Shebo and Gabe.

"Perhaps we should not camp out here tonight," Gabe suggested. "Somehow I feel we should try to make our way towards the town, even though dusk is approaching."

"It will be dusk before we get there," Shebo stated. "Finding our way will not be any easier."

"I know, but I just don't think it would be safe to stop anywhere right now," Gabe said, his voice dropping to a whisper as he motioned for the others to keep silent. For all they knew, anybody could be listening.

"If there's ever a time we need your help, Faethé," Gabe whispered to himself, "we need it now."



Dusk was falling as the city walls loomed into sight.

"It's better not to look," Shebo said, seeing Gabe spin around trying to catch sight of something. "If I did that every time I felt something, I'd be a nervous wreck by now."

"I'm already a nervous wreck!" Gabe retorted. "There's something out there."

"I know. And we're unarmed. All we can do is to keep up a steady pace, and try not to look alarmed."

As they came closer to the city gates, whose silent and closed forms rose ominously above them, they found themselves standing in what appeared to be a deserted marketplace outside the city.

Suddenly Sasha let out a gasp. Gabe turned to look. From out of the deepening shadows stepped a dark, cloaked figure, then another, and yet another. As these creatures made their presence known, the stench that began to permeate the air around them was almost

unbearable. Glancing around, they suddenly realized that they were surrounded.

All fear unexplainably drained from Gabe, and in that moment of pending danger, he had more clarity of thought than he had ever had. Surprised, though not able to take the time to dwell on it, Gabe felt suddenly emboldened by the sharpness of wit he now possessed.

"We're going to have to make a move, Shebo. And we're going to have to make it fast."

Silently the circle tightened around them.

Shebo, too, appeared unafraid. "I don't know what these creatures are. You can barely see them. But they're not like anything I have seen before."

"I know," Gabe whispered, all the while keeping his eyes on the ever-tightening circle of hooded creatures. "I just get this same strange feeling that I got with that girl who took me to that door. If that's the case, and these creatures are from the netherworld, then even though they have powers, I believe the power and force we have with us is greater. As long as we do not allow ourselves to be frightened by them, I don't know how much harm they can do."

"Well," Shebo said, as the circle of creatures tightened even more, "I guess we'll soon find out."

Gabe carefully surveyed the scene. At the far left, and not too far away from the gate, he spied a wooden box wrapped in chains and secured with a padlock. Gabe motioned to Shebo with his eyes. Shebo strained to follow Gabe's glance and nodded. Could this be the box that Jenny had seen in her dream—the box that held the key to the city?

"But," Gabe asked as he looked around, "How are we going to get to it?"

With his eyes fixed beyond the circle of hooded figures and on the faint outline of the locked box, Gabe spoke to his companions, his voice taking on

an authoritative tone. "I'm going to try and break through this circle. When I do, I'm going to run for the box. I want you all to use the commotion that follows to head straight for the gates and wait there. I'll come with the key."

Shebo nodded and grabbed ahold of the two women's forearms. He motioned towards the gate, trying to tell them that they would have to make a run for it.

Sasha's eyes widened in fear. Seeing the look of panic on her face, Gabe wondered if she would be able to make it. By contrast, Diana seemed to display a majesty of spirit that Gabe had not seen in her previously.

As Gabe stood, silently watching the movement of their adversaries and looking for an opportunity to break through the circle, he suddenly noticed another movement in the trees behind the creatures that were surrounding them. Shebo had noticed it, too. They both looked on apprehensively as a single torch was suddenly lit above one of the hooded heads. The creatures started shifting uneasily. Slowly, a circle of torches lit up, completely enclosing the circle that these dark creatures had formed around their captives. Although Gabe did not know what was happening, it was easy to see that their besiegers were now the ones becoming increasingly uneasy. He continued to watch this strange spectacle unfold around them, as the creatures, apparently afraid of fire, began hastily recoiling from whoever it was that was carrying the torches. A broad pathway then opened up, lined with torches on either side, effectively blocking the Toilers who were now trapped outside the path of torches, and frozen with fear.

Gabe seized the opportunity and ran towards the locked box, while Shebo ushered Sasha and Diana towards the gate.

Gabe quickly reached under his jacket to where the keys hung around the strap he had made for them. As his fingers curled around the keys, he felt an overwhelming warmth envelop him. He instantly pulled the keys out, in plain view of all who were watching. Gasps of wonder and sighs of awe arose from all around. Gabe was momentarily struck with awe as well, seeing the pulsating golden glow emanating from the keys, as if a strange, mystical power and light from beyond had begun to shine through them.

"Quickly, Gabe!"

Gabe was startled back into reality by Shebo's sudden cry. Fumbling through the seven keys, he found one that looked as though it would fit the padlock. Quickly slipping it into the lock, he turned the key to the right and then to the left, till the padlock opened. He loosed the chains and opened the latches on the box, not stopping at the wonder that all was happening exactly as in Jenny's dream.

Inside the box sat a simple, gray key—bigger than any of the keys he had with him. He gingerly took it out of the box with both hands, and walked towards the gate where the others were waiting. With a heave, Shebo and Gabe managed to turn the key, and the gate swung open.

Eagerly, the party of four rushed into the safety of the walls. Once they were all inside the gate, Gabe and Shebo paused to survey the scene they had just left behind. The path that had been made for them was still there, and they could now see the men holding the blazing torches high as if in a salute, in acknowledgement of their safety. Those closest to the gate then lowered their torches so that their faces were lit by the glow of the flames. It was then that Gabe realized that it was the Drifters who had come to their rescue! He remembered the words of the lad

at the inn, *“You can be sure that if you’re ever in trouble, help will come your way. We’ll see to it!”*

Not knowing how he could ever thank them for their help, Gabe bowed his head respectfully in their direction. They responded in like manner, nodding slightly, as if to say farewell. Then the gate was closed.

CITAR

Hearing the commotion outside the walls, several guards positioned in one of the turrets overlooking the deserted marketplace had watched the entire spectacle take place. It was difficult for them to see what was happening, and the cover of darkness made it nearly impossible to distinguish clearly who was outside the walls—although the unmistakable smell of the Toilers quickly wafted up to where they were.

“There are Toilers out there,” one of the men commented.

“Yes. But what are they doing so close to our city? They know they’re not welcome here, and they have not been seen in these parts for a long time. I’m sure they’re up to no good,” another guard said.

They continued observing as the crowd of Drifters slipped into the marketplace, and watched as their shadowy figures slowly encircled the Toilers, before lighting their torches. It was only then that the guards noticed the four people standing in the middle of the circle.

They could only watch silently as the drama unfolded, though they were unable to keep the gasps from escaping their lips as they saw the golden light that emanated from the keys.

It was with some surprise, however, that Gabe and his party now found themselves surrounded again, this time by a number of curious onlookers inside the city. A tall, burly man now stepped up to Gabe, his arm outstretched and a warm welcoming look dancing in his eyes.

“Welcome, son. Welcome!”

Gabe shook the man’s outstretched hand, and then responded, “Thank you, kind sir. We are happy to finally be here. We have traveled a long way.”

“Yes, that I can see.”

The two stood in silence for a moment, not knowing what else to say to one another.

"You must be tired. My name is Peter Keep. My brother runs an inn not far from here. Follow me and I'll take you there. I'm sure you could all do with some well-deserved rest."

Gabe was happy for the offer, and very thankful for the man's warm and hospitable spirit. Feeling tired from their long journey and its climactic conclusion, Gabe looked forward to being able to stop and rest. "Thank you, sir. We are much obliged that you would help us in this way. We are very tired, and we appreciate your generosity."

Sasha, overcome with emotion, was sobbing uncontrollably in Shebo's arms.

Peter glanced at the two women. "Drifters?"

"Yes," Gabe answered hesitantly, remembering the incident at the last inn.

"Do not be alarmed," Peter assured him, sensing his apprehension. "They're welcome here. It was the Drifters that saved you."

"I know," Gabe answered.

"Well, that's enough for now. We can talk more in the morning. I'm sure you have quite a story to tell." Peter put his arm around Gabe's shoulder as another man who had been standing nearby led the way. It seemed that news of their arrival had preceded them throughout the city, and when they reached the inn, John, Peter's brother, was standing by the door, his wife beside him. John was as burly a fellow as Peter, and looked every bit as jolly and welcoming.

"Come on in," he invited the motley group of strangers. "The beds are turned down, and the lamps are lit. Hot water and basins are ready for you to wash. We also took the liberty of laying out some clean clothing for you, as we thought you would appreciate a fresh change of garments."

Overwhelmed by their hospitality, Gabe and Shebo thanked them over and over.

John's wife led the women to their separate rooms. She was a gentle soul, and the warmth that surrounded her put Sasha and Diana at ease straightaway. After they'd left, Peter and John led Gabe and Shebo to their room.

The room was simply furnished, homey, warm, and clean.

"We'll leave you. Please eat, wash and rest—we will see you again tomorrow."

Gabe grabbed Peter's hand again and shook it. "Thank you so much, sir."

"You're welcome, son," Peter said with a reassuring tone, and then turned and left the room. As soon as he had closed the door, Gabe sank into an armchair. "Oh, Shebo. We made it!"

"Amazing! Here we are. Well, I don't know about you, but I'm too tired to even think. I'm going to wash up, have a bite to eat and I'll see you in the morning."

Gabe only nodded, feeling much the same. He sat a little longer, however, his mind racing as he thought over all the events of the day.

The keys? He reached inside his jacket and pulled out the keys again. As they lay in his palm, he gazed on them with wonder. *The glow! It's not there anymore! What mystical keys! He* clutched them tightly. *What is this power that these keys seem to possess?* he pondered. Finally, too tired to think any further, he lumbered over to his bed and fell asleep. His sleep was sweet—though busy—filled with dreams of wonders and golden keys, and maiden Drifters dancing by a campfire. Faéthé sat watching over him, smiling as she saw the Drifters dance through his dreams. Occasionally she would lift his hand to her lips and softly kiss it.



Gabe awoke the next morning to find Shebo sitting by the window. It took him a few moments to remember where he was. Hearing Gabe stir, Shebo greeted him. "Good morning, young man!"

"Shebo!" Gabe exclaimed, rubbing his eyes. "I forgot where we were for a moment. Did you sleep well?"

"Ahhh yes," the sigh of contentment slipped through Shebo's lips. "It was the sweetest sleep I've had for weeks!"

"Mine too! But the dreams—I had so many dreams."

Shebo chuckled in agreement. "I sense this place is rich in dreams. There's an air about it, isn't there?"

"I guess there is!"

A knock at the door suddenly captured both the men's attention. Shebo answered the door.

"Good morning!" the cheery voice of a young child rang out. She smiled broadly, holding a large tray of food.

"Good morning!" Shebo responded as he motioned for the girl to enter. "That's a big tray! Are you sure you can carry it?"

"Oh yes," was the little girl's confident reply. "My mommy asked that I bring this up for you. There's nice warm milk and bread—a good hearty breakfast for you gentlemen! Your companions are already up, and would be pleased to join you for breakfast," she smiled, referring to Sasha and Diana.

"Oh, by all means, please send them along."

The girl was barely gone more than a few moments when Sasha and Diana appeared at the door. Shebo welcomed them in with open arms. Sasha looked well rested and at peace. Diana looked more beautiful than ever, with her long silky hair done up in a single braid.

"It's amazing," Gabe said, looking around the room after the party had eaten their fill of the delicious breakfast. "Everything looks so perfect here."

Shebo wrinkled his brow, and tried to understand what he was saying.

"Look at the colors! Everything blends so well. The gold, the browns, the creams." There was indeed a certain perfection to the colors within the walls of the city, with each color complementing another.

"Even the pictures on the wall match!" Gabe explained further.

"Yes, it somehow feels good, doesn't it!"

As they ate, they discussed the events of the night before. "Boy, am I ever glad that those Drifters showed up last night," Gabe said. "That was pretty close timing!"

"I don't think we can ascribe all the credit to the Drifters, though!" Shebo thoughtfully replied.

Gabe was somewhat puzzled at Shebo's response. "What do you mean?"

"Well, it may have been the Drifters who came to our aid, but surely you must realize that there has been a power and force, a guiding hand that has kept us all along our journey thus far. And there was a presence with us last night as well, a power much greater than any force the Drifters could ever muster."

Gabe quietly pondered all that Shebo had said. "I am afraid, Shebo, that I have been thrown into a world that I barely knew existed before. Sometimes it all seems a little too vast for me to fathom. I feel that I'm in the midst of something that's much bigger than I can handle."

Shebo, as agreeable as ever, responded, "Yes, it's as if all we really are is just pawns in a chess game." He paused for a moment, then softly continued, almost more to himself, "Let's hope we can continue making the right moves!"

Their conversation was suddenly interrupted by another knock at the door.

"Please, come in," Gabe called out.

The door opened to reveal their burly host and his brother. "May we come in?"

"By all means, yes!" Gabe answered.

After asking if they had slept well and enjoyed their breakfast, Peter gingerly continued, "I do hope that I'm not moving too fast, but there are a few people who are very eager to talk with you—who would be honored to talk with you."

"But of course," Gabe agreed, casting a quick glance at Shebo, who nodded his approval. "We'd be happy to answer any questions you may have, and we hope to have a few of our own answered as well."

"Yes, well, that's just it. You see ..." his voice trailed off, not sure whether to proceed or not. He looked intently at Gabe, and then at Shebo. "We've been waiting for the keys a long time! Now that they have returned, well, it's a long story. I don't know how much you know about the keys or what they are for, but ..."

"Nothing," Gabe interrupted. "I have to confess that I know nothing—though we do know a little about the other world." Peter nodded his head, as Gabe continued, "We've studied and learned all we could. The keys were given to me by an old man."

"I see." Peter answered. "And where is this old man now?"

"He's no longer with us. But he passed the keys on to me, and in time, we came to learn of this city, and that we were to come here with the keys. That is about all that we really know."

"We've been waiting," Peter wistfully said, "for so long. And there is much to be done." He stood up. "But come, if you are ready. The city council has gathered, and is eagerly waiting to meet you. I do hope all this is not too sudden for you."

"No, no. We're pretty eager to find out for ourselves what this is all about."

"Very well, then. Let's be on our way."



Gabe was astonished at the beauty and order in the city—the richness and perfect blend of colors. In the colorless world that Gabe used to be a part of, there had been little coordination or thought given to how things were placed. Everything looked gray to the majority of people, and when one could suddenly see color, although the colors themselves had a splendid beauty, there was little rhyme or reason to the way they were mixed together—vibrant reds mingled with pale purples and bright greens. By comparison, nature had blended its colors beautifully, and somehow it seemed that this same perfect blend had been transposed into every corner of this city.

Thoroughly enjoying the colorful displays around them, Gabe and Shebo remained silent as they walked through the streets. The morning air was rich with the sounds and smells of a city about to awaken to a new and bustling day.

Soon they approached a tall stone building. Peter hesitated for a moment at the steps leading up to the door. "Well, we're here," he announced.

Gabe nodded a little nervously.

Proceeding on up the steps, Gabe couldn't help but feel apprehensive about what they would discover behind the closed doors that loomed above them. As they neared the top of the steps, the double doors slowly swung open, moving with ease as if mystically empowered by a will of their own. The temperature dropped sharply as they walked through the doors and into a large room. At the far end of the room stood a large, oval stone table, around which ten or so men were seated.

"Welcome," one of the men said in a deep and rumbling voice, as he stood up from the head of the table and began walking towards them. At this, each of the

men stood up and came forward to offer their greetings. The warmth in their eyes and their firm handshakes communicated a silent assurance that all was well, and Gabe and Shebo soon felt a little more at ease.

After several minutes of introduction, one of the older men, Sir Laurent, who appeared to be the senior member of the council, spoke up. "Let's be seated, shall we? Then we can begin."

At that, everyone resumed their seats, and Peter led Gabe and Shebo to their places near the head of the table, close to Sir Laurent. "So, where should we start?" Sir Laurent asked, a friendly note of cheerfulness ringing in his voice. "Perhaps you two would like to start by telling us your story, and how it was that you came to hold the keys?"

"Well, I don't know where to start either," Gabe said, turning to Shebo with a questioning look.

"Why don't you start at the beginning, son. I'm sure once you begin you'll soon forget you're even talking to us!" Sir Laurent encouraged him.

After taking a deep breath, Gabe launched out, beginning with tales of the old man, then about Jenny, the keys, and the colors. Time flew. His captivated audience listened to all he had to tell with rapt attention, and the interjection of an occasional question.

"And the rest of the story, you know," Gabe finally said, relieved that he had come to the end of his tale.

Sir Laurent was the first to respond. "Fascinating, most fascinating. Now," he said, after a short hesitation, "do you understand why you were led here?"

"No sir, I'm afraid I do not," Gabe confessed, feeling a little nervous. "I feel that I only came here by impulse, knowing very little about what I was doing—and hoping that I would find more answers here."

"Hmmm," Sir Laurent pensively rubbed his small goatee between his fingers. "I see. Well then, let us tell you what we know of the keys."

Gabe and Shebo leaned forward in eager anticipation of what was to follow. Their surroundings seemed to recede as all eyes were fixed upon the slight and charismatic figure before them. Sir Laurent took a deep breath and glanced upward for a moment as if summoning help from beyond, and then began ...

"There was once a Warrior Lord, a mighty man who was waging war against the prince of the Dark Kingdom, the stronghold of the Evil One. He had two sons, both of whom were also warriors. But the Evil One, always on the lookout for pawns to use in his deadly game of conquering this world, and knowing the weaknesses of the elder son, had done all in his power to corrupt this man's heart from an early age. As he grew older, he fell prey to the thoughts and temptations of the Evil One. His mind became muddled and indifferent to the dangers of the powers of the Evil One, so that he did not share his father's hatred for the realms of darkness.

"Now, the Warrior Lord always had by his side a set of keys—keys to what?" Sir Laurent hesitated for a moment, caught up in the drama of the story himself, and looked around at his captive audience. "No one knew! But he was the keeper of the keys. Only the Warrior Lord knew what these keys were for, but everyone knew that they were magical, and that they had given him great power in his struggle against the prince of the Evil One. According to the legend, the keys had been entrusted into his care by beings from the other world, and whatsoever one would lock with them could nevermore be opened except by that same key. He was only a young man at the time he received these keys, but they gave him the power to see color in a world where few even believed it existed.

"It was the power of these keys that the Evil One was most eager to capture, for through them, others

were beginning to see the colors again, and thus slipping out of his established domains.

“The Warrior Lord defeated the Dark Prince in battle after battle, in scheme after scheme to capture the keys, until he finally defeated the prince of the Evil One, and their kingdom was left alone.—Or so it seemed, and only seemed. For the Evil One now sought to corrupt the soul of the elder son, who would one day inherit this power from his father, and become the next keeper of the keys.

“And so it was that as the Warrior Lord grew older, and his health began to wane, a mysterious stranger appeared one day to the elder son, promising him that a great kingdom, and even greater powers were his for the taking. Yet there was one condition: To have these powers and this kingdom, it was not enough for him to simply inherit the keys from his father; he would have to kill him, and quickly, or else his father’s powers would wane with his failing health. The Evil One said this knowing that the elder son would be surrendering his soul to the powers of evil by this deed.

“Now the younger son was in tune with the whispers, and was thus made aware of his older brother’s dark plans. At first he was sure that his father also knew of the evil plans afoot, being that his father was so close to the other world, and had been daily in communion with these beings of light and color. The father, however, loved his eldest son above all others and it was this love that blinded him to the evil path his eldest son was intent on taking. Nor would he heed the warnings of others.

“As the Warrior Lord resisted the warnings of his younger son, and even the warnings echoed in the whispers, he closed himself off to the help from the other world. He couldn’t see that his powers were slipping away from him. Soon he became weakened in

heart and spirit, and carelessly began to let the keys out of his sight.

“And so it was that while the elder son rode out with his father one day, the younger son stole into his father’s quarters and took the keys. While in the sanctity of this hallowed room, he instantly sensed that his father was in danger. He rode out to search for his father, only to find him dead, slain by his evil elder brother. His heart sorely pained, he buried the body of his father.

“While he was doing so, a strange old man is said to have appeared to him, almost as if in a vision. Turning around, he saw a glass case built into a nearby rock, and the stranger commanded him to take his father’s sword and to place it within the case. He was then to lock the case with the golden keys, so that from that time forward, no man, save he who held the power of the keys, would be able to obtain the power of the Warrior Lord.

“Returning to the city to seek for and confront his elder brother, the whispers instead told him to take the keys to a place of safety. And so it was that he departed, under cover of night, together with his only daughter, and carrying with them a single trunk, to eventually reach the safe haven of our beloved city of Citar.”

Sir Laurent paused in his discourse, looking deep into the eyes of Gabe and Shebo, who sat speechless, almost holding their breath as they listened to his captivating tale.

“So what did the elder brother do then?” Gabe asked curiously.

Sir Laurent cracked a slight smile, and continued the story with as much mien and poise as he could muster.

“The younger brother was still as eager to stop his elder brother as the elder brother was to kill the

younger, once he discovered that the keys were missing. And so it happened that, after the younger brother had brought his daughter and the keys to safety, he rode out of the city again, to find and do battle with his elder brother. But he never returned, and it was only much later that we heard news of what had happened.

“The two brothers quickly found each other, and a fierce struggle ensued. The elder brother called upon all the powers of darkness, while the younger brother was full of righteous anger and the power of light. Swords gleamed and clashed in the moonlight—with first one brother advancing, then the other. They fought long and hard in the same streets where they had once played as boys, the clashing of their swords slicing through the city’s silence until the sun began to rise. Both were tired, yet neither dared to ease up—knowing that this battle would mean certain death for one of them.

“Hearing a girl’s shriek behind him, and for a moment deceived into believing that it had come from his daughter, the younger brother turned to look over his shoulder. In that same fateful moment, the elder brother seized the opportunity to bury his sword deep within his younger brother’s heart. It was said that the shriek had come from a washerwoman who had lifted her pails—only to discover a rat inside.

“But the secret of the keys died with the younger brother, and the older brother was furious when he discovered that the keys were not on his body. And so it was that a search was carried out throughout all the land, to find the keys, and the younger son’s missing daughter.

“Meanwhile, the daughter lived in safety within the walls of our city, and eventually married a fine young man. After some time, however—and how is still not known—her presence was discovered, and our city was

besieged. Only a few days into the siege, the woman and her husband vanished from the city, and no one knew what had happened to them. Some said that the Whisperers had translated them, and others said that they had escaped through secret passages beneath the city. But the only thing we knew for sure was that the keys were no longer with us.

“Our city stood strong against the besieging force, who eventually, and for no apparent reason, disbanded and left the city alone. Some said it was because the elder brother needed his forces to establish his stronghold on other regions.

“No one ever heard from the daughter or her husband again. How the old man you speak of came across the keys is a mystery to us, which I would be most eager to learn. But for now, all that matters is that the keys have returned. For many, many years now they have been feared lost, or worse, that they had fallen into the hands of the Evil One. So that is why we are happy, you see, that they have been found.”

Gabe, who was listening in awe, at that point suddenly interjected, “And now I am supposed to be the keeper of the keys?”

“We do not know,” was the solemn reply. “But I am sure it will be revealed to us soon. The forces of darkness are growing and grouping together, preparing to take over every city and land in this world. And then what—what is the Evil One’s plan? He has no plan. He is a devourer, a destroyer; he only wants to conquer, to overcome. And when at last he has all of the kingdoms of this world under his dominion, he will destroy them utterly. That is how he feeds his power, and that is his motivation—to destroy, to garner kingdoms and peoples and then destroy them. The city of the Warrior Lord has since become a stronghold of the Evil One, and the elder brother, now called by the name Bazal, has become the next Prince of Darkness.

“Our only hope is to win the hearts of the people, to release those who are under the spell of darkness, to warn them of the Wicked One and enlighten them with the knowledge of the other world. Only in this will we be able to defeat the workings of the Evil One, and it is a great task. We have been waiting for the keys to come to us, as without them we do not stand much of a chance against the powers of the Evil One.”

Eager to hear more about what lay in store for them and for the keys next, Gabe and Shebo leaned forward with expectancy as Sir Laurent continued.

“The other world has a plan for the keys, one that has not been revealed to us. It remains a mystery, and even now it seems that it is being unveiled key by key, step by step. We have been trying to encourage other cities to join with us in our struggle against the evil forces. One complicating factor is that not only are we fighting against the dark forces of the netherworld, but we are now also up against great kingdoms of man, who are under the dominion of the Prince of Darkness, and in the service of the Evil One. They have armies and great power, whole cities and lands under their command. We have but a few scattered forces, a few loose strongholds and cities such as this one, and the sympathies of perhaps a few others.

“To defeat the Evil One is a massive undertaking, one which we are ill prepared for, and would never even contemplate without the encouragement of the Whisperers. But they have told us that something mighty and grand is about to happen. Step by step, as we proceed, I know we will be shown further truth, and our plans will be more clearly outlined for us. And now that the keys are with us once again, we have nothing to lose, and everything to gain. Even if we die trying, at least we will never succumb to the seducing powers of darkness. It is our quest to live

and die in truth and light. And now you, too, have become a part of this grand struggle.”

Gabe and Shebo sat in stunned silence. “You have told us much, yet you have told us little,” Gabe finally said. “I see the plan is greater than we ever imagined, but what part do we play?”

“That,” Sir Laurent answered, “remains a mystery. All we know is that you have arrived with the keys, and that we are preparing for battle. Are you warriors?”

“No,” Gabe was quick to reply. “We are not men of war. We have lived peaceable lives and barely ever held a weapon.”

“Then perhaps it is time for you to learn,” Sir Laurent quickly responded. “For a warrior you will surely need to be. I believe I know just where you could go for this.”

“The Drifters?” Peter Keep interjected.

“Precisely what I was thinking, Peter,” Sir Laurent affirmed. He turned and looked at Gabe and Shebo. “These Drifters are fine warriors when they need to be. They could teach you much faster than we could, and I fear there is not much peacetime left. If we were able to arrange it, would you be willing to spend some time learning from them?”

Gabe’s mind was spinning. So much was happening so fast that he didn’t know what to think.

Shebo, seeing Gabe’s hesitation, and himself having some difficulty keeping up with the pace of the events that were so suddenly unfolding around them, spoke up. “Well, you must understand it’s all a little fast for us, and we’re not at all used to this type of thing. But if you think it’s best ...”

The men nodded.

Shebo continued, thinking aloud, “Well, if these keys are as sought after as you say they are, now that they have been seen by whatever those creatures were out

there last night, it may not be so wise for us—and them—to remain here.”

Again, the men nodded, agreeing with Shebo and encouraging him in his line of reasoning.

“Now, if the Drifters are willing to take us in,” Shebo reasoned, half to the other men, and half to Gabe, “and teach us the ways of warriors, why then, I don’t see why we shouldn’t do so.”

Gabe was thankful that at least Shebo seemed to understand what was happening. “I suppose so,” he agreed.

Seizing the opportunity, Sir Laurent decided to seal the decision. “So, it’s agreed then? Perfect! We can get something worked out right away—we should be able to have you safely out of here in a few days. The news shouldn’t catch up with us that quickly!”

The meeting broke up. A few men now grouped around Sir Laurent to discuss further plans. Shortly thereafter a small team set off out the door. Gabe and Shebo looked on, feeling out of place and somewhat intimidated by the scurry of activity around them. As soon as the team had left the building, Sir Laurent made his way back over to Gabe and Shebo.

“I’m sorry, this all must seem a bit overwhelming for you.”

Gabe, who was sitting with his head resting on his hands, looked up at Sir Laurent. “Yes, it does.”

“It will take a couple of days to get word to the Drifters. In the meantime, please feel at home here in our city. I am sorry we have had to jump into things so quickly, and that we didn’t have time to slowly introduce you to all these intricate politics—but now that the keys have resurfaced, there isn’t much time.”

With that said and settled, Sir Laurent seemed eager to move on to a more pleasant subject, hoping to put them at ease. “Tell me a little about your town—I have heard of it, but have never been that way.”

He asked them questions, and gently led the conversation, trying to learn what he could. Before long, they felt like old friends.

THE DRIFTERS

The next few days of rest passed peacefully for Gabe and Shebo. They were soon won over by the warmth, compassion, friendliness and respect of the townspeople, and felt very much at home.

Sasha and Diana, while waiting to hear word on the search for their relatives, busied themselves helping out at the inn.

Day by day, Gabe and Shebo's strength was renewed, and their understanding grew of the greater battle that was at this very moment being waged for the hearts of mankind. Though they had read of this in the books, seeing how much it was manifested in the city around them made the greater picture much clearer to them.

"Why, hello there, Sir Laurent!" Gabe cheerfully called, seeing him enter the door of the inn.

"Hello, Gabe! How are you?" he responded.

"Just fine, thank you."

"I have someone here to meet you." Sir Laurent turned toward the two men who had just followed him inside.

Looking them over, Gabe quickly recognized that they were of the Drifters.

"These are to be your hosts for the next while, Gabe. They're good friends of ours, and you can trust them." Sir Laurent carefully watched Gabe's reaction, still not certain how enthusiastically Gabe had embraced the idea of living with the Drifters.

Gabe hesitated for a moment, and then walked over to greet the two men. "My name is Gabe," he cordially began his introduction. "I believe we have a lot to learn from you."

"I'm happy to meet you," the taller of the two men said as he grasped Gabe's outstretched hand. "I am called Rahim and this," he said, motioning to the other man, "is Craile."

At this point Sir Laurent interrupted. "We only had a few minutes to drop by and see you. These men will be back here early tomorrow morning to escort you to their home. You'll be ready?"

"Yes, we've been expecting this." Gabe smiled reassuringly at Sir Laurent. "We'll be ready."

"Good then. I shall see you again soon enough, I suppose, and fine warriors you'll make too. Oh, yes, which reminds me—I'll send someone over tonight with some swords and armors for you to take with you. I don't suppose you brought any, did you?" he asked, not really waiting for an answer. "Well, until we meet again—and have fun!" he added, with a twinkle in his eye.

After this short exchange, Sir Laurent, busy as always, hurried out the door of the inn, with the two Drifters strolling leisurely behind him—somehow giving the illusion that they didn't have a care in the world.



Sure enough, as soon as the first light of day began to make itself known, Gabe, looking outside, saw that Rahim and Craile were already waiting for them.

"Shebo, they're here," Gabe called. They were both already up and ready, and eager to move on.

With one quick glance back at what had become their new home, Gabe and Shebo limbered down the steps and walked over to greet the two men.

"I see you are ready to go," Rahim noted, with a broad smile dancing across his face. "Let us be off, then. We have a good ways to travel!"



The sun was fast setting as they came upon the Drifter encampment, tucked away in a small clearing between some hills. As they approached the camp, men, women and children came running out to offer warm greetings. The children's spontaneity and apparent zest

for living delighted the two weary men. They were also pleased to discover that at least a few of these Drifters, including Rahim, spoke their language, so they were able to freely communicate with them.

"What a wonderful place," Gabe shouted to Shebo, clamoring to be heard above the joyous din as they made their way through the camp.

Rahim smiled, and shouted back, "We thought you'd like it!" The men had developed a certain camaraderie during their brief journey. Without having to exchange much in the way of conversation, they soon realized that they were traveling along the same spiritual road together.

They were led to their new dwellingplace, a large tent, comfortably fitted for living. Indeed, once inside it was difficult for them to tell that they were in a tent. Rugs were scattered around the floor. Their beds, ready made, were close to the side of the tent, carefully placed so as not to touch the actual wall. Lamps gave off a warm glow. Large pillows were strewn around the room, apparently to be used in place of armchairs. Dividers had been set in one corner of the tent, shielding a wooden stand, washbasin and pitcher from plain view.

After Gabe and Shebo had settled in, their guides asked, "Would you like to join us for our evening meal? We have something prepared for you—we hope you will enjoy it!"

Gabe, although tired, was always ready for a surprise, and so eagerly agreed. They followed Rahim through the now-deserted camp to the central tent where it seemed everyone had gathered to eat. The two men were escorted towards the front. The Drifters were seated around the edges of the tent, leaving an exposed circle of ground in the middle, which looked as though it had been cleared to form some type of stage. A small campfire was lit in its center, spreading its humble warmth throughout the tent.

While they sat, some womenfolk walked around and served food. Gabe and Shebo gratefully accepted the plates offered to them, and as they began their meal, cheerful sounds of music began drifting through the large tent. What followed was a night of wild, carefree dancing and gaiety such as Gabe and Shebo had never seen. Girls danced with wild abandon. Young men jumped up and danced along with them. Clapping and singing broke forth from time to time, and their free spirits seemed to be twirling and dancing and spinning around as giddily as their long flowing skirts. Gabe looked on with pleased wonderment as these folks danced and pranced before him, laughing and singing and kicking their legs high!

Wow, he thought. They're so happy, so free, so wild—so beautiful! I wish I could reach out and touch this happiness, and carry it with me as freely as they seem to be enjoying it.

Shebo was also enjoying the dancing, but soon found himself occupied with other womenfolk, who came and sat near him. A circle of them had now gathered around him, and happy to be the center of attention, Shebo found himself chatting away, entertaining and being entertained with story after story.

Gabe looked over at Shebo and smiled, but his gaze quickly returned to a certain young girl who was dancing freely around the campfire in the center of the tent.

As Gabe's eyes feasted on the beautiful girl, who didn't seem too much older than himself, Rahim came over and sat next to him.

"She is my wife," Rahim said with a broad smile.

"Oh, she's your wife? She's very beautiful."

"Yes, she is, and she is with child too!" Rahim said, his voice full of merriment.

"She's with child?" Gabe asked, his eyes widening a little.

"Yes, I'm hoping for another son. But then, I have to admit, I'm happy for my little girls too!" he laughed. "And you, you don't have children?"

"No, I'm not married."

"Come," he suddenly said, and stood up. "Let me introduce you to the rest of my family. They're all sitting over here."

Gabe stood up and followed the young man. "So you have a lot of children?" Gabe asked.

"I have twelve," he said with a bright smile.

"Twelve!" Gabe exclaimed, trying to hide his obvious surprise that such a young-looking man could boast such a large family. "That's quite a number!"

"I can see you have much to learn about us!" Rahim chuckled.

"Yes, it seems I do."

"Then I hope you will like what you see."

"I think I will," Gabe said, his smile now as broad as Rahim's.

One by one Rahim introduced Gabe to the rest of his wives and children.

"So this is why you have so many children!"

Rahim smiled. They were a happy bunch, warm, friendly, and full of life. "This is Helena," he said as he introduced Gabe to the girl who had now ceased her dancing, and came walking over to where they stood.

"Hello, Helena!" Gabe stammered, somewhat awkwardly.

"Hello, Gabe," she replied warmly, holding out her hand to him.

"Helena is quite proficient in your tongue as well," Rahim explained. "She's beautiful, isn't she?" he asked, not really seeking a confirmation, as he put his arms around her and hugged her.

"Indeed!" Gabe responded, not knowing what sort of answer was expected from him.

Gabe began to feel a little uncomfortable. It was not because anyone was deliberately making him feel uncomfortable, but because everything was so new to him—the ease with which they talked about their love and their lives. Rahim sensed that Gabe was feeling a little awkward, and realized that he was not at all used to this type of lifestyle.

Leading him back to his seat, Rahim asked, “You are a little surprised to learn of our extended family arrangements?”

“I may have heard of such things, but I have to confess I have never seen this done before.”

“We want you to feel very welcome!” Rahim confided in Gabe. “I have a special surprise for you this evening! I want you to feel a part of my family!” He raised his eyebrows, as if challenging Gabe to try to guess what he was about to say. “Tonight I will give you a gift—I will be most honored if you accept it.”

Gabe had no idea what Rahim was trying to say, and a twinge of uneasiness passed over him. However, with so much activity, he decided to let it pass. He smiled and nodded. “Of course!”

The festivities went on into the wee hours of the night. As the evening drew to a close, the tempo of the dancing slowed while the Drifters sang beautiful folk songs. He couldn’t understand the language they were singing in. He was told that it was a language of the past, an old language once used by Drifters to sing and tell stories. It was a beautiful melodic language. Sometimes, when the lasses sang, their sweet voices reminded Gabe of Faethé.

When the festivities had ended, Gabe returned to his tent alone. He did not know where Shebo had slipped off to, but he figured he was in good hands, so he did not worry. “Hmm, I suppose he’ll find his way back soon enough,” he chuckled to himself.

Gabe washed, and turned the lamp down. Just as

he lay himself down, a shadowy figure appeared at the door.

Startled, and not recognizing the form of the silhouette that played outside his tent door, he sharply called out, “Who is it?”

There was no response. Slowly a shrouded but beautiful feminine form entered his tent, with such lightness of feet that it was almost as if she wasn’t touching the ground.

Gabe’s imagination was instantly captivated at the very thought of such a vision of grace and beauty coming towards him. But quickly regaining control of his thoughts, he warned, “I think you’re in the wrong tent!”

“It’s me, Gabe. Helena,” a voice responded warmly, as the form approached him. “Rahim sent me. He said that I was to be his gift for you, and that I was to welcome you into our family.”

Gabe’s heart started pounding, and he sat bolt upright in bed. *Oh no! What am I going to do?* He couldn’t tear his gaze away from the lightly clad form now easily distinguishable in the dim light that filled the room.

Helena smiled. “Don’t be startled, Gabe!”

A warmth stole over Gabe as Helena came close and knelt beside him. He had nothing to say. Putting her arms around him, she nestled her head on his shoulder and whispered, “Don’t worry. It’s okay. We want to welcome you. We want you to be a part of us. We need you to be a part of us. We need you to be one with us, and this is our way of saying ‘welcome.’ Please, accept this gift. Accept this gift from Rahim, and ...” Helena hesitated and lifted her head to look at Gabe. “Please accept this gift from me. It’s the least I can do. I want to share with you the love and the warmth that I have to give, for you will need it. You will need much love, much warmth, and much comfort in the days ahead. This is the best gift we can give you.”

Unable to resist—not wanting to resist—and pushing all thoughts and questions from his mind, Gabe put his arms around Helena and began stroking her beautiful long black hair.



While it was still dark, Gabe roused from his sleep, forgetting for a moment the recent events that had transpired. He sat up, and felt a strange presence in the tent. It was not Shebo. His thoughts quickly turned to Helena, and he smiled briefly. But no, it wasn't Helena either; she had already left the tent hours ago. He turned and looked toward the door. Then he saw her. Faethé was leaning against a pillow, her legs tucked up with her arms around them, and her chin resting on her knees. She looked up to see Gabe, and smiled.

"Faethé!" Gabe exclaimed, somewhat startled to see her. "What are you doing here?"

She smiled. "I'm always here, Gabe! Remember?" was her simple reply. There was a moment of silence.

"But I don't always see you," Gabe responded.

"I didn't expect you would see me now. I don't know why you can. I don't have anything to tell you ..." her voice trailed off, as she thought for a moment.

Breaking the silence she wondered aloud, "Maybe it's just to encourage you that you're walking in the right direction."

Gabe, catching her pensive mood, was quick to agree. "Maybe! There's so much happening, and everything is so new and different! I've never experienced these things before and then I wonder ..."

She interrupted, "You wonder how you will know what is right, and if what you're doing is right, and whether you're on the right path."

Gabe blinked.

"I'm here," she said simply. "You wouldn't be able to see me so easily if you weren't on the right track. So, don't worry or fear."

Gazing up, and at something that seemed much further away than the roof of the tent, Faethé was silent for a moment, as if listening to an unheard voice.

"There is one thing I can tell you!" she suddenly broke her own silence. "Things are going to begin moving very quickly. A lot is going to happen in a short time and you have to be prepared."

"How can I be prepared?"

"Just keep following the whispers. Keep going! Don't waver, and don't think too much about what you are asked, unless you are sure that what you are thinking is what you are supposed to be thinking," she somewhat cryptically instructed him. "Go back to sleep, Gabe; you've had a long night—you're going to need a good rest." She smiled, stood up and drifted through the wall of the tent, vanishing from sight.

Gabe, too tired to marvel at her appearance or her disappearance, shook his head, sank back onto his pillow, rolled over, and was soon fast asleep again.



With a start, Gabe shot out of bed, suddenly realizing that morning had long been upon him. Indeed, the day was already in full bloom, *And I*, he thought, looking at himself with slight contempt, *am still lazing around in bed!*

"No sign of Shebo," he said out loud, looking at Shebo's bed, which was still neatly made. The events of the night before suddenly began tumbling through his mind. *Oh, what did I do! ... And the vision of Faethé, was that real? It must have been! Oh Helena! Oh no!* Gabe started to worry at the thought of having to face Rahim again. "What a mess I've gotten myself into. Shebo, where were you when I needed you!" he berated himself, as he hastily dressed. He then set off for the nearby woods, looking forward to the solitude of the forest and a chance to reflect on

all that had transpired in the short amount of time since he'd come to the Drifters' camp. But perhaps more truthfully, he was seeking to avoid meeting Rahim, feeling uncertain as to how to respond to the fine man's gesture of welcome—if indeed it had been *his* gesture of welcome.

Rahim, in the meantime, realizing that Helena's visit may have been difficult for Gabe to understand, had been watching out for him, and from his own vantage point had seen Gabe head off into the woods. Eager to put his mind at rest, it was not long before Rahim came upon Gabe, who was sitting on a fallen tree trunk and gazing wistfully off into the distance.

"Hey, Gabe!"

Gabe jumped, startled to see Rahim so close by, when he had not heard anyone approaching. "Oh!"

Rahim smiled, and was soon sitting next to Gabe. "Good morning! Did you sleep well? Was my sweet Helena's visit as wonderful as I hoped it would be?" he asked.

Gabe was startled at Rahim's directness. Not quite knowing what to say, he stammered out an awkward, "Ahh, yes ... er ... thank you."

"You're welcome!" Rahim responded. After a moment's silence, he asked, "You were surprised at my gift?"

Gabe chuckled, starting to warm up to this natural and kind-mannered man. "Well, surprised would be a very mild description of my reaction."

"There's a lot that I could teach you about such things, Gabe. But for now, let me assure you that you have nothing to be worried about. We have these freedoms; we've had them for as long as we have existed. You'll come to learn more about them as you stay longer with us. The freedom of love, if used wisely, is one of the most beautiful gifts that has been imparted to us from the other world."

Gabe remained silent, pondering the meaning of Rahim's words. Finally, Rahim changed the tone and direction of their conversation. "We have a big day ahead. Why don't you come back to the camp and have breakfast. Then we can get started. I believe Shebo has returned to the tent, so I'll send someone over with a bite to eat for the both of you."



Shebo greeted Gabe as he entered the tent. "And how was your night?" he asked with an amused smile.

"Fine," Gabe replied rather lamely.

"Ahhh, mine was very fine too! Fine women they have here! Fine women! I think I'll like it here."

"I'm sure you will," Gabe chuckled, a smile starting to curl around the corners of his lips.

Careful not to ask one another too much about the events of the night before, they suddenly heard a soft cough outside the door of their tent.

"Come in!" Shebo called out.

The door was pulled aside, and Helena, who looked every bit as graceful in the morning as she had in the night, came into their tent. "Your breakfast," she said, as she set the tray on the floor.

"Why, thank you, my dear," Shebo was quick to respond.

Not knowing what to say, Gabe said nothing.

Shebo, with his usual uncanny intuition, suddenly declared, "I'll be off to fetch some water. Be back shortly." He promptly departed, leaving the two alone.

Helena smiled and busied herself adjusting the various items on the tray.

"Ah, Helena?" Gabe cleared his throat. "I am sorry, but I don't quite know what to say."

Helena laughed. "Don't worry, Gabe. You don't have to say anything. Thank you for a wonderful evening."

"Thank you too, Helena," Gabe responded hesitantly. "I appreciated it very much!"

“There. Now that’s been said,” she laughed coyly, “so let’s not have any more of this awkwardness, please. I’m sure we can be great friends. Well, I’d best be off now. Rahim asked me to tell you that you should meet him by the Grand Oak when you are done eating. I will send one of the boys over to lead you there.”

With that said, she hurried out the door, just as Shebo was returning. “Oh, and one more thing,” she called out as she glanced back. “Make sure you bring your swords. Your training is starting in earnest!”

THE DAYS OF PREPARATION

The days at the camp were very full. They were days of wonder, days of joy, days of love, days of all good things. They were also days of training and preparation, and knowing that there was little time to spare, Rahim and his fellow Drifters taught Gabe all they knew about the art of hand-to-hand combat, of wielding a sword with precision and grace.

“You’re good!” Rahim commented to Gabe. “You’ve never done this before?”

“You can tell I’ve never done this before,” Gabe retorted, humbled by the praise. “I didn’t even know how to hold the sword properly when we started,” he chuckled at himself.

“But you’re learning so fast! You’re a natural. Some people are naturals, you know, but with others, no matter how hard they try or how long they practice, they never quite make it.”

Shebo, panting and wiping the sweat from his brow while he stopped to listen to their conversation, at this point interjected, “Well, that’s me! I’d be better off with a club.”

Rahim smiled. “Ah, Shebo, but you are improving. Don’t worry. You’re doing fine!” Rahim put his sword down, and the two men listened eagerly as he continued the conversation. “There are other qualities that can’t be learned, qualities that go into the making of a good man, a good fighter. He has to be loyal. He has to be willing to fight to the end, and above all he has to be willing to fight for the cause of the right and to fight for the truth without being afraid of the consequences. He has to be willing to lay his own life on the line! That,” Rahim said triumphantly, with his arm outstretched, and his sword pointing at Gabe, “is what makes a good warrior!”

And so Gabe’s days were filled with instruction—

learning not only how to wield a sword and throw a knife, but also of the finer qualities of being a warrior.

The evenings were filled with tales of many battles—those of the past, and those to come, battles their forefathers had fought, battles they themselves had fought. Through this Gabe learned not only tactical planning, but he also learned of heroes—men who refused to quit, who refused to give up, those who fought to the end whether they won or whether they lost, and all that these warriors had gone through in their making of a man. Other times they would tell tales of love, dedication and sacrifice, and tales of a world filled with innocence and beauty.

Shebo already knew how to wield a sword, though he was far from being an experienced fighter. What Shebo lacked in fighting manner, he more than made up for in his wisdom and common sense, which often provided the support and steadiness that Gabe needed. Together they grew and changed, each growing into the warrior that was hidden within them, strengthened both in body and spirit.

Gabe enjoyed the evenings the most—the campfires and talking, and all the stories there were to be heard and told after their long and rigorous days of training and mock battles. Though there were many times of instruction, a lot of the knowledge that Gabe and Shebo gained came through these times of casual conversation.

“What about your freedoms?” Gabe asked. “I don’t understand why you are able to have such freedom, and yet the people of Citar, who believe much as you believe, do not seem to have the same freedom of spirit.”

Rahim thought for a while. “We have enjoyed these freedoms since the beginning, from the time of our founding fathers. We have learned how to enjoy them. The people of Citar also believe in freedom. They know we have these freedoms, and are certainly not

against anyone embracing our freedoms, though they themselves decided not to. Freedom is a wonderful thing—you can use it to bring love, life and happiness into the lives of many. But many people do not know how to channel such freedom. Freedom is powerful. If it is misused it can turn upon you, and bring sadness and grief. The freedom of love is one of the most blessed gifts we have ever received. But,” Rahim continued somberly, “many people do not know how to use this gift wisely, and so they prefer not to use it at all. It is not essential. In fact, unless one is able to use such a gift wisely, it is often best that it is not played with at all.

“Our freedoms have seen us through many hard times, times when we felt like giving up and we didn’t know where we were going. We had one another, we had love, we had fellowship, we had freedom and it kept us going. For others, this type of freedom has been a hindrance and it has gotten in the way of what they were trying to do. But this is because they simply did not have the time or will to adapt to such freedoms. Perhaps someday we will all have this freedom, but until then, those who decide that they aren’t ready for this type of freedom simply put that gift aside.”



All too soon their time of preparation was coming to a close, and Gabe realized that their days at the camp were numbered. He had learned much about the art of fighting, and had become an excellent swordsman. His skin had bronzed from the many hours he’d spent outside, and even his appearance now resembled that of the Drifters.

“I wonder how I will settle back into the fine city of Citar again,” Gabe pondered aloud.

“I wonder too. You’ve become almost more of a Drifter than the Drifters themselves are,” Shebo laughed, looking over Gabe’s garb.

"These have been days of pure happiness, Shebo. It's going to be very hard to leave this place."

"Ahh, that it surely will be!"



Lord Bazal listened intently while Sir Bradcliff told his tale of the keys, the Toilers and the Drifters. A long silence followed, only broken by the hushed and raspy whisper of Lord Bazal's deep voice. "Finally ... the keys have returned ..." The whisper trailed off as Bazal became lost, deep in his memories.

Then he snapped out of his reverie, as if some new inspiration had suddenly struck him. "So, the Drifters intervened on behalf of this boy. Let us finally give them their reward. Their belligerent ways have been a thorn in our side long enough. Round up as many as you can, and slaughter them." Triumphantly Bazal turned to Bradcliff. "Go on, man! What are you waiting for?"

"I beg your pardon, sir, but what about Citar and the keys?"

"We will have them soon enough. Post spies at every entrance. As soon as that boy leaves the city, he will be ours—and the keys with him."



Even as this evil sentence was being passed, a certain uneasiness had settled over Gabe. He felt as though he had been taken out of the picture of reality, and was standing back watching things from afar. It was as if he had become an onlooker, watching the lives of others unfold before his eyes, seeing their joy, hearing their laughter, sympathizing with their heartaches—but all from a distance. Yet he was still right there, among them. He tried to convey his feeling of uneasiness to Shebo.

"Shebo, I don't know what's happening, but I can't help but think that there's something different about everything around us."

Shebo stopped what he was doing. "Mmm, you feel it too?"

"Yes, I can't explain it so well, but I feel as if we've been catapulted* from this place to another, yet somehow our mortal bodies haven't made the transition yet."

After a moment of silence, Gabe continued, "I can't help but worry for my friends. I feel overcome with an air of sadness that I can't make any sense of."

"I know," Shebo confessed, staring sadly off into nowhere. "I feel it too, and what is more, I think that we should be leaving sooner rather than later."

Gabe agreed, and went to find Rahim to inform him of their soon departure.

Not knowing how Rahim would react, Gabe broached the subject carefully. "Rahim, I think we'll have to be moving on soon."

"Oh, you have heard something?" Rahim asked.

"No. I have not heard anything yet, but I feel that the time is approaching. What's more, I fear that even now the dark forces are gathering, and that you may be in danger. I cannot say I have seen anything—it's more of a perception."

Rahim nodded. "I know, I have felt the same. It is hard to put such perceptions into words, but I too feel that a day of sadness and sorrow awaits us. It was bound to come."



Already being prepared in his heart, that night the whispers spoke clearly to Gabe, telling him that, indeed, it was time for them to move on. Gabe was not surprised at this, but he wasn't expecting the message that followed. "*You must go back to the city of Citar, but first you must make a detour. You must go into the lands of the Wicked One, to the city of Danar, and there you will be told what you must do. The Dark Prince will not be expecting you. You must walk into their presence and be gone before they even realize you were there.*"

You must take what is rightfully yours.” As suddenly as they had appeared, the whispers left.

Gabe had become used to the sometimes cryptic and often incomplete messages passed on by the Whisperers, but he had full confidence that he could always go ahead, even blindly, on their instruction. In fact, the less he mulled* over what they said and tried to imagine what they meant, the easier it was to follow through with their instructions.

Rahim took Gabe and Shebo’s departure well. “We both knew this would happen. May all that is good be with you as you journey on. Our thoughts are with you, our hearts are with you.”

And so, taking their leave from their friends, Gabe and Shebo set off on their mysterious journey.

THE LANDS OF DARKNESS

Shebo, dressed in the garb of a Trader, led the way while Gabe, effortlessly playing the part of a Drifter slave, followed closely behind, carrying their bags. Indeed, their disguise was such that none would have suspected that they were anything other than a Trader and his slave on a mission. Rahim and his friends had given them instructions on which direction they were to go—though not without many warnings that their journey would not be very pleasant.

Still, Traders had a certain immunity. They were known for their fickleness. They had no particular allegiance to any power, whether of light or darkness. Thus their journeys into these lands were usually without incident and they were able to travel these parts freely.

Many days passed, and with each step deeper into the lands of darkness, and nearer to the city of Danar, Gabe’s heart grew heavier, and his spirit was troubled.

“The gloom is almost too much to bear!” he murmured at last.

Shebo was quick to agree. “It is a heavy gloom, that’s true, and the further we travel, the heavier and darker it seems to get. Surely these lands must be held tightly in the clutches of the Evil One.”

Though they tried to rest, their nights were filled with dreams which became progressively more unsettling.

By chance they came upon some fellow travelers, three Traders who were traveling along the same road that they had taken, and who were also headed deep into the heart of the lands of the Evil One. Acutely aware of the danger that might come to them should their ruse* be discovered, Shebo played the role of a Trader with ease, and was as uncouth* as the rest of them.

Gabe, hiding his surprise, soon concluded that his older friend must have had a colorful past to be able to so easily play this role. Gabe, ever mindful of his own forthrightness, decided that he would feign dumbness.

So the two journeyed on, together with the Traders. Shebo quickly concocted a plan and a reason for their traveling that direction which was good enough to satisfy the curiosity of the Traders. Yet Gabe still attracted some attention to himself. "Where did you get this Drifter boy?" one of them asked, casting a dirty look in his direction.

Shebo, somewhat truthfully, answered, "I picked him up in one of the villages I happened to be passing through."

"Doesn't he seem a little odd to you?"

"Odd?"

"There's something about him I don't like. Something I don't trust. You know, you have to be careful with these Drifter folk, they're liable to slit your throat in the middle of the night and take off with all of your money. I don't like this one—you'd do good to get rid of him." Shebo knew he couldn't outright deny the fact that Gabe was different, as Gabe's spirit was strong. "Yes, well, I keep a good eye on him. He's always been a little shifty," Shebo said with a twinkle in his eye, "but it takes a lot more than that to outsmart me, and I've not had any trouble so far."



The closer they came to Danar, the darker it became. Although there was no wind, a chill hung in the air. Eeghaws circled everywhere; their presence felt when it was not seen, always watching for something different, something strange, something that they perceived not to be as it appeared. Their keen sense of hearing picked up most conversations, and, unbeknownst to Gabe and Shebo, it was by teaming up

with the small group of Traders that they had successfully managed to evade discovery. Had they traveled alone, they would have soon given themselves away by their conversation and their actions.

Now that they had ventured deeper still into these dark lands, they could clearly sense the eyes and ears of the Evil One all around them. Even after parting from the Traders they agreed to keep up the pretence of the uncouth, curt Trader with the dumb Drifter slave.

The strain of having to be what they were not, and the evil forces they felt constantly pressing upon them, began to take its toll. The whispers were getting fainter and fainter. At times it was even a struggle to remember the reason for their journey. The common people they met along the way were dark in spirit, without purpose in their lives, and there was very little light, even in the children. Occasionally they would come across someone whose spirit was so tainted with darkness that they could barely conceal the revulsion they felt. It was a struggle to continue and at times even a struggle to keep their sanity. Yet, there was something that kept them going.

Momentarily shaking off the continual fog that clouded their minds, Shebo shouted out to a young boy who was playing with his friends by the side of the road, "How close are we to the city?"

The boy eyed them suspiciously. "Not far," he reluctantly drawled. "Keep going till you come to the forked road at Denith's Sword. If you *really* want to go into the city, take the turn to the right."

Not wishing to appear any more ignorant than he had to, Shebo nodded in thanks. Before long they came to a fork in the road. One road led off to the right, down through a valley. The other headed off over the hills. The place at first glance seemed deserted and strangely still. Unable to hear even the faintest whispers any longer, so weakened were they from the con-

tinued oppression of their souls by the dark forces, they hesitated momentarily, wondering whether they were indeed supposed to go right and continue heading towards the city.

“You two look lost.”

They turned quickly. A wizened old man, who seemed to have appeared from nowhere, stood in the middle of the road. Shebo, not knowing what to say, wisely didn't say anything. As the man approached, he seemed to bring with him a healing balm for their sagging spirits. Though their senses remained dulled, they perceived that the man was not what he appeared to be—but neither was he from the dark kingdom. With great effort he slowly walked up to them.

“I can't stay for long,” he smiled. “I'm too well known in these parts. As soon as the eeghaws spot me talking to you, your ruse will be up. Now, listen up, in that dip,” he gestured across the fields, “just over that small hill, you'll find a glass casket. Inside the casket there is a sword, the sword of the Warrior Lord, awaiting its rightful owner. Go, seize it.”

Gabe and Shebo instantly looked at each other, and then back at the old man—but he was gone! Just then, an eeghaw swooped down and sat on the fence beside them. It cocked its head to one side, wondering why the men had stopped in the middle of the road. There was a well-worn path leading up and over the small hill. Without so much as a glance at the eeghaw, Shebo and Gabe set off resolutely along the path. Their eyes soon beheld the glass casket. Off to the right a small group of Traders had set up camp outside the city, and were sitting around a small fire, eating, drinking, and talking.

“Hello there, fellow stranger. What brings you to these parts?”

“We're on our way to the city. Thought we'd take a look at this.” Shebo motioned towards the casket.

“Never been this way before?”

“No, my first time. What is this?” Shebo asked, trying to feign more ignorance than he really had about this glass case.

The Traders were tired, and not very perceptive themselves. “It's Denith's Sword. The sword of the old Warrior Lord! Many a man has wanted to get his hands on it, for it is said to possess power unlike any other sword.”

“Humph,” Shebo grunted. “Why don't you just break the glass and take it?”

The Traders elbowed one another, and broke out into laughter. Mockingly, one of them repeated Shebo's last words, “Why don't you just break the glass and take it?” Too lazy to explain why not, one of the Traders stood up, picked up his club and ambled over to the casket. Lifting the club high above his head, he let it crash down with a mighty heave.

“Oww!” he cried, as the blow jarred his hands, and the club fell harmlessly to the ground. He walked back over to the circle of Traders, cursing with each step in his own uncouth manner.

Shebo resumed his conversation with the Traders, drawing their interest and attention away from Gabe, who remained standing silently next to the casket.

As Gabe looked at the casket, and the glistening sword resting within it, he saw why the club had been so ineffective. The casket was shielded with a glowing golden light, similar to the light that surrounded the keys whenever they were being used. As he inspected the casket more closely, he was not surprised to see a lock on the side of the casket. No sooner had his eyes fixed on it, than he felt a warmth in his pocket, as if the very presence of the golden glow around the casket had activated the power of the mystical keys.

“Hey, what does that little Drifter boy think he's

doing over there? Hoping to open up the casket?” Gabe was startled out of his reverie as the camp of Traders again broke out into raucous laughter.

Gabe realized that he simply had to do what he had to do, and he had to do it quickly at that! He pulled the keys out from under his vest, selecting the most likely one to fit the lock, and with one swift turn, the casket lid sprang open.

The Traders stood transfixed, their eyes wide in wonderment, their feet frozen in fear at the scene that was unfolding before them. Shebo seemed to be the only one keeping his senses. He quickly walked over to stand beside Gabe. Carefully, Gabe reached his hands into the warm glow of the casket, and clasped them around the hilt of the sword. As he curled both his hands around it, he felt a warm tremor pass through his body. With it, all the doubts, confusion and darkness that had been overpowering his mind suddenly vanished. Lifting the sword from its resting place, he turned to face the Traders, fully prepared to use it. However, there was no resistance from these men, who remained dumbfounded.

Perhaps more disconcerting were the shrieks escaping from the eeghaws, who had gathered and were now circling around this scene—uttering shrieks of hatred and fear. They were unable to swoop down and penetrate the invisible field of protection that now surrounded Gabe and Shebo, who were still standing next to the opened casket.

“What are we going to do?” Gabe asked. “It has taken us days to get this far. We’re not going to be able to get out of here any faster.”

“I hadn’t thought about that,” Shebo responded. “No doubt people are going to be up here pretty fast—these eeghaws are making such a racket, that I fear it won’t be long before the Traders come to their senses.”

“And what then?”

“I don’t know.”

As they stood talking and wondering what to do, they heard the sound of galloping horses coming closer.

“This must be it,” Shebo warned. “I sure hope this sword can do all it’s been said to do, because it looks like we’re going to need it!”

Gabe grabbed the sheath that lay in the casket, and deftly tied it around his waist. Then they turned and ran back up to the top of the hill, wanting to at least get back on the level road. No sooner had they turned their backs to flee the scene of the open casket than the Traders awoke from their trance, and erupted in a fit of fury over what had just transpired. The eeghaws continued screeching as they turned and headed off in the direction of the dark city, no doubt to pass on news of what they had just seen.

When Gabe and Shebo reached the top of the hill, they were startled to find a big white stallion blocking the road in front of them. A tall blond-haired stranger sat astride the fine horse. Behind him were two other horses, saddled, but without riders.

“Quick,” the stranger warned them. “Get up on these horses. You’ve got to get out of here quickly.”

Gabe and Shebo looked at each other, and nodded. They could both tell this stranger was not a follower of darkness. They quickly mounted the two horses, and the stranger warned them to hold on tight.

Seeming to follow the white stallion of their own accord, the horses dashed off together. Gabe and Shebo gasped and held on tightly, as the horses galloped down the road and then darted off onto a side path that led directly into a forest. The path became less defined the further they traveled, and the horses’ pace soon settled down to a fast walk, or a canter, depending on the denseness of the forest around them.

The forest was thick, dark, damp, and became even

more so as night fell over the land, enveloping the men in near total darkness as they continued their journey with only the silver light of the moon to light their way along the nearly indiscernible path.

"I think we're out of danger now," the man said, as he affectionately patted the stallion's neck.

Gabe was no longer able to hide his curiosity, and feeling that it was safe enough to speak again, asked, "Where did you come from? Why are you helping us?"

The stranger laughed. "I live very close by Denith's Sword." Though the stranger could not see their faces, he could sense their surprise by their silence. "Not everyone who lives in these parts has sworn their allegiance to Bazal, the Prince of Darkness. But we keep a very low profile around here."

"We felt your presence in the area," the man continued, as they trudged onward in the darkness. "We knew that one day someone would come to reclaim the sword. Then, when we heard that the keys had appeared, I knew it would only be a matter of time. Today, I was mounting my horse when I saw the eeghaws circling. I knew I had to come and take a look, and," he laughed, "I'm certainly glad I did! I don't know where you would be now if I hadn't."

"Do you know your way around these parts well?" Shebo asked.

"Very well. But I cannot lead you to my home. It would be too dangerous. I will lead you to a place where you'll be safe, and from where you'll be able to expedite your own escape from these territories. The only problem is ..." he hesitated momentarily, "we will have to somehow get by the prison."

Sensing the uneasiness in his voice, Gabe and Shebo waited to see if he would tell them more.

"This path leads past the prison. We cannot avoid it, or go off the path, for these woods are full of traps and snares, so we will have to proceed silently and

carefully, and try to make our way past the courtyard and the gates undetected. Nobody roams these woods at this time of night, and after what happened today, anything unusual will arouse immediate suspicion."

Gabe's interest was sparked. "What kind of prison is it?"

"Not a very pleasant place. It's a women's prison. Whenever Bazal and his crew round up any dissenters, they ship the men far away, and bring the women and children here. God only knows what happens to them once they get inside."

They traveled on in silence for a while longer. Gabe saw the lights of the prison torches flickering in the distance as the man pulled his horse to a halt. The man dismounted from his horse, and motioned for Gabe and Shebo to do the same.

"The noise of the horses will be easier to detect than our footsteps. We will have to continue on foot from here. The horses will find their own way back home."

"We will have to walk, and slowly," he told them. He gave his horse an affectionate pat on his rump, and commanded him, "Home, boy! Go on home." The horse hesitated but a moment, nudged his master, and then turned and glided off in the direction they'd just come; the other two horses, as they always had done, followed the stallion, and soon the horses had disappeared into the darkness of the forest.

The three men walked on, following the path as they came ever nearer to the flickering lights in the distance. The night air was refreshing, and if it wasn't for the heaviness that constantly threatened to stifle them, they would have almost enjoyed the walk.

As the prison walls loomed ahead, and they approached the stone courtyard that extended across their path and in front of the prison, their pace slowed. The night was still and all was quiet behind the prison walls, their foreboding forms standing as a silent tes-

timony of the ever present danger that surrounded them.

Proceeding as quietly as they could, they were able to cross the length of the courtyard without incident. With the prison locked up as tightly as a fortress under siege, there were no guards in plain sight. They were obviously not too concerned that anyone would pass this way.

They carefully continued their way down the rocky path that now led further and deeper into the woods in front of them. They had not traveled far past the prison when a faint whimper reached their ears. It appeared to come from in front of them. Their guide, without looking back, held his hand over his shoulder and beckoned Gabe and Shebo to stop. After a moment's wait, they proceeded cautiously, unsure of what they would find.

They did not wonder long. What they saw made their hearts grow heavy. Only a short distance off the road, in a little clearing, they saw a young woman, naked except for a flimsy cloth draped around her loins, lying on her side whimpering. A heavy chain was wrapped around her ankle, and the other end was attached to an iron stake that had been driven deep into the hard earth. They could make out the faint outline of something laying snug beside her.

As they came a little closer, they realized that the small form was probably a baby. The woman was sobbing softly, and hadn't yet heard or noticed them. The babe lying beside her was motionless.

"She must be a prisoner," the guide whispered. "They've left her out here with her young child to die. If exposure to the cold and this chilly night air doesn't kill her, some ravenous beast surely will."

Gabe was appalled. Never before had he seen such a pitiful sight. "If she was a prisoner, then she must be a believer in the other world," he whispered.

"If not a believer, at the very least she must be rebelling from the rule of the Dark Prince."

"Is there anything we can do to help her?"

"No," said the guide, and shook his head. "The chains are too well-set. There's no way we could force them off her. And besides, as soon as they discover she's missing, they'll be onto us."

"And what about the baby?" Gabe pleaded.

Seeming to be oblivious to the conversation that was taking place, Shebo cautiously made his way towards the woman who, upon seeing him, drew back in fear. With hands outstretched, he whispered softly, "There, there, it's all right. I won't hurt you. I don't wish you any harm."

He bent down and picked up the small bundle that was nestled up against her. Peering inside the cloth he kindly whispered, "He's so tiny. Is he yours?"

The girl nodded.

Shebo turned to look at the others, who had by this time ended their conversation and were gazing in his direction. "What a sorry sight. How pitiful. The baby is still alive. There must be something we can do!" he pleaded.

"Yes! We have to do something," Gabe said. "I could never in good conscience go on and leave these ones lying here like this."

Their guide agreed with their sentiments, yet he could not offer any solutions. "You can see the girl, she's chained. There's no way we can get those chains off. We don't have any way to free her."

Shebo slowly walked back over to the girl, and put his hands on her fettered ankles. "Perhaps there is something we can do. Gabe, the keys!"

Gabe looked up, startled. "The keys?"

"Yes, Gabe," Shebo repeated. "The keys! Why don't you try and unlock these fetters with the keys, and then we can take the girl and her baby with us."

Gabe quickly pulled the keys out, and, as in times past, whenever there had been a need for them, they began glowing warmly as if welcoming the opportunity to be of use.

"It's a funny thing," Gabe said, as he knelt beside the girl, choosing the very tiniest key which amazingly fit snugly into the lock. "I think there's something quite ..." he corrected himself. "No ... I *know* there's something mystical with these keys. It's as though they can fit into any lock where they are needed. How strange!" he said, as the fetters fell from the woman's feet.

"Do we have much further to travel?" Shebo asked their guide.

The guide, overwhelmed by the stunning sight of the keys, only managed to mumble, "It's a few more hours' walk. But I don't know if we'll make it with this girl."

"I don't think they will be coming back for her anytime soon," Gabe conjectured. "By the time they realize she's escaped, we should be well out of their reach." Gabe picked the girl up in his arms, and found her almost unbelievably light. Shebo cradled the young babe, and so they continued their journey, making it to their destination in good time, and without further incident.

THE SUBVERTERS

"Damn them! Damn them! Damn them!" Bazal shouted angrily, upon hearing all that had transpired. "First they got the keys, and now they've got the sword, which was supposed to be locked in that casket forever. We have to move fast. Why are we always one step behind? We're supposed to be one step ahead! Where have they gone?"

"According to the reports of the Traders, one of the local settlers came and picked up the men, and journeyed off with them."

"Why didn't anyone follow them?" he said, shouting angrily again.

"No one was there!" Bradcliff argued defensively.

"So we have absolutely no idea where they have gone?"

"Well," Bradcliff said, trying his best to remain calm. "Another report came in this morning. A girl ... there was a woman left chained outside the prison in the forest—it was meant to be the end of her. However, when the guards went to collect her body, they found no trace of her. Though we can't be sure, it seems to be the handiwork of these two. If that is the case, then we at least have an idea of what direction they are headed."

"An idea?" Bazal bellowed. "Can't anyone track them down?"

"We are trying. We have search parties out—but so far we have not been able to find any trace of them—neither the settler, the woman, or the two men. They seem to have vanished into thin air, my lord. The only other explanation I can offer is that they have been hidden by the Subverters, who are so well organized that it's been near impossible for us to find them."

"Damn!" Bazal exclaimed again. "If that is the case, there is no way of knowing where they could

have spirited them off to!" Bazal grew silent for a moment, and then sighed. "Well, chasing them will be futile now. But there is yet one more thing we can do."

Bradcliff looked at him with a puzzled expression. "The city, Bradcliff," Bazal continued in his low and raspy voice. "The city of Citar. We know that he is not within the city, and that he has the keys with him. We must stop him from getting back into Citar."

"And how does my lord suggest we do that?" Bradcliff asked as reverently as he could, not wishing to push Bazal over the precipice* of anger, which he always seemed to be standing very close to.

"Put the city under siege—and do it *now!* If that doesn't draw the keys out, nothing will!"



Gabe was a little puzzled by what he saw. He could tell at a moment's glance that these people the stranger had led them to did not have as much knowledge about the other world as he and Shebo had; there was too much that was not as it should have been with them. Though they claimed that they, too, could see the colors, the odd palette* that surrounded their homes reminded Gabe all too clearly of the strange blends of color he had come across in his own hometown when he at first became aware of them. And yet, they seemed to have some truth. They were at least passionately aware of what was going on around them.

George was a friendly, blustery* fellow, who quickly busied himself with making Gabe, Shebo and their guide feel as comfortable as possible. The woman was quickly whisked away, along with her baby, and Gabe and Shebo were assured that they would be well cared for.

"It seems she came from a city not too far from here," George informed them. "Her husband was apparently a little too outspoken!" George raised his eyebrows, and continued with a sigh, "Those kinds of things don't

go down too well here. Unfortunately, she refused to keep quiet herself, and began causing no small stir amongst the other women prisoners, so her captors decided to, in their own cruel and heartless manner, get rid of her altogether. She won't be able to return to her city, as they will no doubt be looking for her, but we will try to resettle her elsewhere."

Shebo and Gabe thanked him, relieved that the girl was in good hands.

Then George turned the conversation around to his guests. "So then, what are you escaping from? Were you also prisoners? What brings you to these parts?"

"That's a long story," Gabe said wearily, not looking forward to having to recount it again.

At this point, their guide, who had up till now remained largely silent, stepped into the conversation. "I don't really know all that has transpired before, but you know the Sword of Denith ..."

George looked up, startled. "Yes?"

The guide nodded in Gabe's direction. "The boy has it."

George swung around and looked at Gabe. Gabe opened up his cloak and revealed the sword. It was a marvelous sight to behold, even when at rest in its sheath.

"So this ... this is the long-awaited sign—the one we thought would never come!" George gasped.

"And it is but one," the guide responded. "There's more."

George was silent for a moment. "So, it's beginning!" "Indeed, it seems that it is!"

Shebo, not quite understanding what they were speaking of, interrupted their dialogue. "I know that it seems that something is beginning, and that this is something that you have been awaiting for some time. But what exactly is happening, or supposed to happen here?"

The guide turned to Shebo with a puzzled look on his face. "You've not been waiting for this too? Truly, this is the beginning of the end for these days of darkness and oppression. It has been foretold many, many years ago, that when Denith's Sword would be taken up again, it would be used in the great struggle against the Prince of Darkness."

"And this struggle," George interjected, "would be the last struggle, that would bring an end to the days of evil in our land."

"Yes," the guide went on. "But all this will not happen without a price, for the Prince of Darkness, too, will know that his time is short, and he will do all in his power to destroy those who rebel against his wicked and evil ways. I am sure that you must know about these things," the guide said, looking directly at Gabe.

Gabe, who had so far been silent during the exchange, answered, "I am not sure that I understand everything. All I know is that there is a plan, and that good must surely triumph over evil, and that we," he turned to look at Shebo, "are merely players in this game—just as it seems you are. I am not yet sure of what my part will be, but with each new step that I take, it is told me by the Whisperers what to do and where to go. So I take no thought, nor fear, nor worry, in what they ask me to do, but I only follow, as I have been instructed. More than this I cannot tell you. I suppose the most important thing for all of us is that we play our part, and discover what it is that we are destined to do."

George nodded. "Indeed. Well, lad, you have spoken of the whispers. I will have you know that we don't necessarily believe in all these things, but one thing we know—these forces of darkness are our enemies, and we can never live peaceably while they remain powerful. We are prepared to do what needs to be done to see that their power diminishes."

"So what is it that you are going to do?" Gabe asked. George looked a little surprised. "You mean you have not heard of us?"

"No."

"I think we are in a great position to help you, and you to help us. We, often called the Subverters, have at our disposal a moderate hoard of wealth, which we use solely in our attempts to undermine the power of the Prince of Darkness. If you are also working towards undermining this man's power, or even planning to do battle against him, then no doubt our support could be of help to you."

Shebo raised an eyebrow, and looked thoughtful.

Gabe was quiet for a moment, and cast another glance at their guide, who nodded his assent. "And you? You're with these people?"

The guide nodded, adding, "Yes. We've been waiting for this moment, not knowing if it would ever come. But now that we have seen the signs, we can rally our forces and be ready to join in the fight, and do whatever is needed. We may not all be warriors, but we are all gifted in one area or another. We Subverters have been scattered abroad throughout these lands just waiting for this time. We've remained very quiet, and have for the most part been successful in keeping ourselves out of danger and harm's way. Just tell us what to do, and we can do it. There aren't many of us, but we'd rather die for what's right than live in darkness."

Gabe, struck once again with a sense of the immensity of this plan, smiled. "I think," he said, looking around at his newfound friends, "that together we shall be a serious force that's worthy to contend with!"

"We have other things we can do," George said. "There are many people who are not convinced one way or the other. There are some, like us, who know

the evil power of Bazal, and want to rebel against him—indeed, already are rebelling against him. Then there are others, many others, who are neither for nor against. They simply flow with whatever is happening around them, frightfully unaware of the greater forces ruling their complacent lives.

“No doubt, now that the time of the great struggle has come, the forces of darkness will do all they can to gather their troops from among these people. Unless they are told otherwise, they will become hapless followers of the darkness. We must now, in all earnestness, try to dissuade those who otherwise would choose to follow the darkness to look towards the light, and to warn those who perhaps have heard of the light, but who do not know of the great struggle that is about to befall us all.”

“Then indeed,” Gabe said, “there is still much to be done!”

“What are your immediate plans?” George asked. “Where would you like us to spirit you off to—for it seems you will have to be spirited off,” he laughed.

“The city of Citar,” Gabe answered resolutely. “You’ve heard of it?”

“Oh yes,” George smiled, “the City of Light—I should have known. Such fine men could have come from no other place. I think that can be arranged. You’ll have to travel under cover of darkness. It will take us a few days to set up our different contact points along the way—but you’re welcome to rest here for now. We can at least get you safely out of these lands of darkness. Unfortunately, we will not be able to guide you much further than that. Once you reach the Edges you’ll be on your own. But I don’t think that should be a problem, as you’ll be walking much more in the lands of light then.”

“That should be fine. We have friends who will come to our aid—the Drifters.”

“Oh yes, the Drifters—good people! They abound in those lands, do they not?”

“Indeed, they do,” Gabe answered with a smile.

Thus they rested that night, and spent the next few days with George and his people, while George did as he said he would, and made arrangements for their journey.

“What do you make of these people, Shebo?”

Shebo shook his head from side to side. “They’re a strange crowd. I don’t know! They have their own philosophy, and, to be sure, it’s different from ours. But I figure that they know where we stand, and I think we’ve discovered where they stand. I don’t know that we can ever change them, but I think they know they can’t change us either!”

The two men laughed.



Thankfully, the time for their departure soon came, and as George had promised, they were indeed spirited off into the night, traveling under cover of darkness by wagon, then by horse, first in one disguise and then another. For the most part they avoided the cities, but stopped in small towns, handed from friend to friend as if they were batons being passed on in a relay race. Their journey was not altogether pleasant. They often found their companions less than uplifting, their thoughts and conversations were muddy and confused, and the different truths each one held to were in some respects harder to contend with than the outright villainy of the Traders. In spite of this, Gabe and Shebo were thankful for their smooth passage, and learned to take the good with the unpleasant, and be thankful that at least they were safe.

After many days’ journey they finally came out from under the heaviness that pervaded the dark lands. They once again saw the light in the people around them,

and a warmth and friendliness reflected in the eyes of the different ones they met.

Having arrived at the Edges, a small ridge of forested hills, their traveling companions bade them goodbye. "You're on your own from here. You probably know your way around these parts much better than ..."

"To be sure," Gabe interrupted, not waiting for the man to finish his sentence, and eager to be on their way. They bade goodbye and carried on with their journey, thankful to once again be alone, with only the whispers—which now only seemed clearer than ever—to speak to them.



As swiftly as they could, Gabe and Shebo made their way towards Citar, which remained yet a few days' journey off.

All along the way, and in the various towns and inns where they would stop for rest, they heard snatches of conversation here and there—rumors of armies, of battles, and fearful talk of impending invasion.

When they were but two days' journey from the city of Citar, they were startled upon entering a town to see the somberness of the people.

"Something's up, Shebo!" Gabe commented, noting the uneasiness of a man who hurried by them on the street.

"It certainly seems so. But what?"

No sooner had Shebo asked, than a young lad whose job it was to proclaim the news rang his bell and shouted for all to hear, "Citar under siege! Citar under siege! The city of Citar is under siege!"

Gabe and Shebo were stunned to hear this news, and soon found themselves mingled in a crowd that was gathering around the lad, who then began to relate the story. Apparently a great force had flown

upon the city, as if appearing from nowhere, and completely encircled the city of Citar. Well prepared for such an event, the city gates were immediately sealed, as the residents braced themselves for the long wait ahead. It was told that Citar could hold out for many months, but it was likewise rumored that the armies were well prepared to continue the siege for as long as was needed. Until that time, not a soul could venture out of the city, and not a soul could make their way in.

Gabe looked at Shebo, who shook his head as if to say, "I don't know what we're going to do."

"There must be a way," Gabe whispered. "There's got to be a way in! We have got to find some way to help them."

For the first time in a very, very long while, Gabe felt lost and utterly hopeless. He did not know what to do. Though he was not totally foreign to these parts, he knew few other people aside from the Drifters, and his friends in Citar. The Drifters, or so he had heard, fearing for their lives and the safety of their families, had vanished without a trace. Many people said they had fled deep into the countryside, as far out of the reach of the forces of darkness as any man could go. They had traveled into the untouched lands that were without any dominion, and where most mortals were either afraid to go or possessed no desire to go. The few Drifters who had been found roaming these lands of light had been slaughtered without mercy by the invading army.

In the days that followed, Gabe and Shebo tried to learn more of what was going on around them, and of the forces besieging the city. But the oppressive presence that seemed to permeate the city soon caused Gabe's spirit to droop as well. With the stronghold of Citar now cut off from the regions around it, the people felt entirely leaderless.

Faethé, Gabe's constant spiritual companion through his ups and downs, his high points and low points, tried her best to console and comfort him—but to no avail. Gabe had quickly fallen into such a state of despair that he was not able to receive the comfort or even direction she was trying to give. Feeling alienated from the joy and wisdom of the other world only served to send Gabe spinning into deeper sadness.

Shebo, not being one to reach such great heights of ecstasy, nor to plummet to such great depths of despair, tried to encourage Gabe. Yet if even the sweetness of the other world could not reach and lift Gabe's spirit, how could a mortal man ever hope to do so?

THE STRANGER

Gabe began spending more time alone. He didn't want to be faced with the people's stricken looks, or to have to hear their heartcries, or even respond to Shebo's repeated attempts to cheer him up and cheer him on.

Aimlessly, Gabe wandered the paths through the nearby forest, often not even remembering what he spent his days doing. It was while on one of these journeys by himself, and into himself, that he encountered the stranger.

As if from nowhere, a pleasant, yet curiously unfeeling voice startled Gabe from his silent contemplation. "What brings you into these parts? Don't you know it's dangerous to be out here alone, wandering around? You never know who you might come across."

There was a silence, but before Gabe could respond, the stranger continued. "Bazal's forces are everywhere, the place is riddled with them—they're killing all the Drifters they come across, and you look like a Drifter to me. What would you do if you were to run into his men?"

Not really listening, or caring to listen, Gabe only muttered glumly, "It wouldn't matter! What do I care?"

The stranger laughed. "Well, that's certainly a change! I may be mistaken, but aren't you the lad with the keys?"

Gabe was startled, and suddenly became aware that there was more to this stranger than would seem obvious. "What do you mean?" he asked suspiciously.

"Don't worry, Gabe!" the man laughed kindly. "You see, I am from the other world. I know all about you and the keys. I know everything that has happened to you—I've been watching." His eyes narrowed as he looked into Gabe's soul. "Now the time has finally come for me to meet you, and talk with you, and tell you what these keys are really all about."

Gabe was immediately interested, but cautious. He wondered for a moment whether this man came from the dark kingdom, for he had a way about him that was distinctly different from those of the regions of light. Yet, at the same time, he did not feel at all threatened by his presence. He didn't feel the uneasiness, the darkness or the oppression that he usually felt when near to those of the dark kingdom, or even that he had been feeling over these past few days.

"That's right," the stranger said, as if reading his thoughts. "You have nothing to worry about or fear. I know you feel lost and aimless and unsure of everything right now, so I don't blame you for feeling unsure about me. But if you'll take the chance to listen to what I have to tell you, then maybe I could be of some help."

Not seeing any immediate reason to protest, Gabe nonchalantly nodded his agreement. They walked on together, while the stranger mainly chatted, and Gabe mainly listened. The stranger filled him with tales—tales such as those that Gabe had heard before, of honor and valor, of good against evil, tales of heroes—but this time they came with a different twist or slant than those told by the Drifters or the people of Citar.

Still, he thought to himself, there doesn't seem to be anything wrong with what I'm hearing. After all, they're basically the same stories, the same principles—just explained in a different way. As he continued to listen to the stranger, and mull over these things in his mind, he began to feel a bit lighter of heart. Perhaps I've just been too narrow-minded, too closed in the way I've approached life. Maybe it wouldn't hurt to look at things from a different perspective. I can no longer return to Citar. The Drifters have gone, and I have no idea where to go from here. Perhaps this man has some solutions, or he may at least offer some direction.

Seeing that Gabe was becoming more open to all that he shared with him, the stranger smiled, only this time there seemed to be a subtle and sinister coldness to his smile.



And so the days went by. Gabe would slip off early each morning and search out the stranger, who was easy to find—who, in fact, always seemed to find him.

Shebo was worried at the strange turn of events, and the changes that were coming over Gabe. Gabe was now so uncertain of the future, so wavering in his convictions, and even doubting the very path they had already traveled so far together. Not knowing how to help—for Gabe would no longer listen to him—Shebo earnestly cried out to the Whisperers, asking them to help, and to somehow cause Gabe's spirit to be revived, his purposes to be established once again.

Still the mystical stranger continued to fill Gabe with his words of wisdom. Gradually, and ever so subtly, the conversation turned, the stories changed; the truth that Gabe had known to be absolute now no longer meant what it used to. The stranger, gleeful at the ease with which he had captivated Gabe's heart and mind, continued to speak his words of deceit, each time going further, introducing some new twist of truth, some new facet of logic. The poisonous inroads he was making into Gabe's soul went largely unheeded, until one day the stranger began to speak of the city of Citar.

Gabe looked up, surprised. This was the first time the stranger had mentioned anything about the city of Citar. Up until that point, all talk had been of events of the past, philosophies or ideas. But so confident was the stranger that he had captured Gabe's heart entirely, and so enrapt was he with his own stories, that he went on without hesitation. "Yes, those poor deluded souls in the city of Citar. Once they are out of the way, life would be a lot easier for us, you know?"

That was all, and the stranger soon went back to his words of logic and philosophy. But those words burned themselves into Gabe's mind, completely overshadowing all else that the stranger had been, and still was, telling him. *Poor deluded souls?* he thought. *From the city of Citar?* He could not reconcile those words with what he knew to be true. Even in his confused state, he could not bring himself to think of his friends in Citar as deluded. It was from this small but blatant lie that a seed of light shone down into Gabe's heart and began to expose all the words that the stranger had spoken.

At the end of their conversation, the stranger noticed that Gabe was not embracing all he said quite as enthusiastically as he had before. But in his own assured confidence, he ascribed this lack of receptivity to familiarity. *At first there's always so much excitement with new doctrines and new philosophies, new words and new stories,* he consoled himself. *But it's to be expected that eventually the enthusiasm and the joy of being so enlightened wears off.*

They parted amicably, the stranger not even giving Gabe's now apparent lack of enthusiasm a second thought.



After Gabe parted ways with the stranger that evening and slowly trudged home, his mind was racing furiously. He hadn't felt this unsettled for quite some time. For some reason the walk home appeared to take much longer than it normally did. Shebo was not home when he arrived. The small room they shared was deserted, and seemed cold, empty and strangely lacking in warmth.

Not caring whether he ate or not, Gabe despondently* dropped himself down on his bed. He closed his eyes, with his right arm resting across his forehead. He quickly dozed off into an uneasy sleep, his

weariness brought on more by his depressed state of mind than by any strenuous exertion on his part. But, try as he might, even his short fits of sleep could not chase away the feeling that something was wrong.

The muddled thoughts that raced through his mind, almost with a will of their own, were beginning to bother him. Not knowing why, he sat up and buried his head in his hands, wondering if perhaps a change of position might shake off the confusion that was pestering him. Anxiously, he longed that he might once again feel the comforting presence of Faéthé.

As he gazed into the darkness of his own hands, he was startled by the sudden appearance of a face before him. He jerked his head out of his hands, startled by the strange illusion. Night had already fallen outside, and the room was dark. Gabe quickly tried to light a nearby lamp, hoping that the light would chase away the frightful vision he had just seen. But the lamp would not light.

Hearing a noise behind him, he jumped up and turned around, only to find himself standing face to face with the stranger whom he had so recently met. Only this time the stranger looked different! He had shed his usual earthly countenance, and instead his dark face and fierce countenance glowed ominously in the darkness, making it evident where he had truly come from.

Scared, Gabe shouted, "What are you doing here? Where did you come from?"

The stranger smiled—only the smile was not a smile, but rather a sneer curling the corners of his mouth. "Did you think it would be that easy to return to the path of light?"

Shaken, and sorely distressed in spirit, Gabe, in a fit of frustration more than of anger, lunged towards him, only to find that the stranger had vanished, and was once again standing behind him. The stranger was

tall, much taller than Gabe remembered. All of a sudden the realization of who this being really was struck Gabe. He stumbled over to the dresser and grabbed the warrior's sword, which rested on top of it, and instantly unsheathed it. Holding the sword high above his head, Gabe again lunged at the stranger, only to find that he had once again disappeared and was standing behind him, smirking and snarling, poised as if ready to strike back.

The stranger had no sword or weapons. Instead, he was wringing his hands and reaching out for Gabe, as if he was going to crush him and twist him with his bare hands—which he looked well able to do. The fierceness of his countenance and the bloodcurdling shrieks that escaped his lips filled Gabe with terror. Shaking with fear, Gabe once again held his sword high, and screamed, "Noooooooooooo! Faethé, I'm sorry! Please, help me!"

The sword instantly began to glow. He felt the warmth, like an elixir, run from the tip of the sword, down his arm and through his body. He glanced back at the stranger, only to see him diminish in size, and then fade back into the black nothingness that he had sprung from.

Very shaken by all that had transpired in those few moments, Gabe sat down, trembling, on the bed. Never had he felt more alone or more frightened. Disgusted with himself, he felt like a traitor—and that he had betrayed all that was right and good and pure. Instantly he realized that he had wasted days being entertained by the lies of this stranger when he could have been continuing his quest.

As he sat gazing off into the distance, he suddenly felt another presence in the room—a presence of warmth and comfort. He looked around, but saw no one—still, it was almost as if he could feel the comforting hand of a father resting upon his shoulders. He closed his eyes again, this time to find himself gaz-

ing into the most beautiful, peaceful and comforting eyes he had ever seen. Another Man, another Stranger, but One with a countenance so warm and so pure, that Gabe could only bask in His light, as one who has come out of a dark room lets the warmth of the sun caress his tired face. There was no exchange of words, but the warmth, comfort and reassurance that passed over Gabe began to mend his broken heart and his confused, distressed mind. For a moment Gabe seemed lost in a trance, totally under the spell of this kind and gentle presence. Then gradually he became more aware of his surroundings. The vision began to fade—but the warmth it left in his soul lingered on long after the stranger had departed.

It was not long afterwards that Shebo returned to the room. The change that had come over Gabe in this hour of darkness was apparent to Shebo, who was glad to see that Gabe had returned to his own self, only somehow seeming much stronger and more resolute of character. Shebo looked squarely into Gabe's eyes and placed a firm hand on his shoulder. "Come, we have plans to make."

Gabe smiled. "Indeed, we do."

THE SECRET PASSAGES

The following day they discussed all the information that Shebo had been able to gather. It seemed that the only chance they had was to search out the Drifters, and somehow try to get word back to the Subverters that an army needed to be gathered, and quickly, so that Citar could be relieved. "I've been trying to get ahold of Rahim; it's tough, you know. These Drifters have just about vanished from the face of the earth. Still, hopefully sooner or later we will find them—or they'll find us."

Gabe, for a moment, was tempted to despair. "Oh, Shebo, if only there was a way back into the city. We don't know enough about these things to orchestrate anything; certainly nothing that would be very effective. If only we could get news to Sir Laurent about the Subverters, surely he would know how to proceed. He is such a wise man."

"Yes, but for now it appears as if that option is not available. We're going to have to do whatever we can on our own—with only the whispers as our guide!"

They did their best to keep busy and abreast of the developments that were unfolding around the siege of Citar, all the time waiting—though as had often been the case, not knowing exactly what it was they were waiting for. News of skirmishes between the besieging forces and small clans of rebels from around the city frequently came to their ears, and though the town they were staying in was relatively small and unaffected, there were often clashes in the outlying areas. Unfortunately the dark forces were far superior to the few who dared to challenge them, and the casualties were high. As defeat hung in the air, spirits plummeted, till even the most courageous of souls were despairing.

So it was with much apprehension that Shebo answered a heavy knocking at their door one night. "Who's there?" Shebo gruffly asked, a knife ready in his hand.

The response was a very muffled, "It's me!"

Not satisfied with this rather ambiguous answer, Shebo, again in his gruffest voice, asked, "Who's there? Tell me your name."

Again, the muffled voice barely reached their ear. "It's Rahim."

Shebo looked over at Gabe, not sure whether he should believe this or not. Gabe only shrugged his shoulders.

"Helena sends her greetings, Gabe," the voice said.

Gabe smiled and looked at Shebo. "It sounds like it might indeed be Rahim." Cautiously, Shebo unlocked the door and began to open it. There were no sudden movements from the other side, but rather, two shadowy figures stepped into the light. Rahim was the first to pull back his heavy hood and take off his thick cloak, and as soon as Shebo recognized him, the door was wide open. With a broad smile Rahim embraced his old friends. For a moment the second shadowy figure was forgotten, as Gabe, Shebo and Rahim joyously held one another. They smiled and cried tears of joy.

"And who is your companion?" Gabe asked, noticing the second figure still waiting at the door.

He gasped with surprise as Rahim drew his partner's hood back. "Diana?"

Gabe was at a loss for words. The slender girl he'd rescued what seemed to be so long ago was now standing in front of him once again. Yet somehow she seemed to have grown. Her features showed a depth of character that had not been present before, and to Gabe it appeared that she had blossomed into a beautiful woman almost overnight.

"Gabe," she said, and he was pleased to hear her

speak in his own tongue. "I had to come." She smiled warmly and held out her hands, "When Rahim told me he had heard news that you were in the area, and that he was going to search you out, I begged and pleaded for him to take me along." She smiled broadly.

Rahim was obviously amused and satisfied at Gabe's surprise, and gave a hearty laugh.

"But how ... why ... what are you doing here?" Gabe finally spluttered.

"It's a long story. Rahim told me that they had located my relatives, and so I was to be taken to their camp. But when we got there, the camp had been deserted; it looked as if it had been ransacked by Bazal's men. So there was no other choice but to return. It was then that we heard that the city of Citar was under siege, and so there was no way I could return to the city. I've been staying with Rahim and his family ever since, fleeing with them wherever they went, trying to stay out of Bazal's reach."

"And Sasha??" Shebo asked.

"Sasha is still in Citar."

There was much to talk about. The two Drifters had come at great personal risk, and they told many tales of narrowly escaping Bazal's soldiers. They also told how some of the other Drifters had been massacred, but that most of them had been able to flee and were even now banding together, believing that there was safety in numbers.

Rahim, in turn, listened with great interest to all that had become of Gabe and Shebo. He smiled with delight when he heard about Denith's Sword.

"You'll be a wonderful warrior now! Have you ever used it?"

"Only once," he said, not wishing to elaborate any further on his encounter with the evil stranger.

"Rahim," Gabe continued after a moment of silence,

“we must find a way to contact Sir Laurent. He would be the best one to make some sense out of our disorganization.”

Rahim pondered for a while, and then thoughtfully said, “I think there may be a way into the city—through secret underground passageways! There is a catch, however. These passageways only exist in stories that have been passed down from long ago, and even if they are true, the entrances to these tunnels would be long forgotten. The only thing we know about these passageways is what has been handed down through the old tales of the Drifters, many of which are now only considered myths or legends.”

The room fell silent, and Rahim looked down at the ground with a hopeless look on his face. But for Gabe and Shebo, the silence only served to heighten their sense of anticipation, rather than of despondency. They looked eagerly at Rahim, who seemed to find a courage from the expectancy in their eyes, and he continued. “You know, it has been said that before the time of the final struggle, the other world would become much closer to those of us who can see the colors. If anyone would know and be able to tell us more about these passageways, if they indeed exist, it would be Faethé,” Rahim said hopefully, looking eagerly at Gabe. “Surely the whispers would be able to guide you there!”

Gabe looked interested, but Shebo was quick to interject the fact that the hour was now late, and that they would probably all be able to think better after a night of sleep. And so the group retired for the night.



Try as he wanted, Gabe was not able to sleep. He was restless. He was eager to see if Faethé was closer now than she had been before, or if the fact that he had been able to see Faethé at all meant that the presence of the other world was already being manifested more than it had been in times past. He closed

his eyes and tried to reach out and make deliberate contact with the other world. This was all very new to him, but instinctively, as a babe knows to reach for its mother’s breast, Gabe found his spirit searching out the divine presence in regions beyond the boundaries of his mortal soul. It was not long before he felt the comforting presence that always accompanied Faethé’s appearance, and as he opened his eyes, he could again see her.

“Faethé,” he said, “I didn’t know I could reach out for you like this!”

She smiled, and it was a smile that radiated every quality of her presence. It was youthful, lovely, sweet, innocent, glowing, warm.

Before he even asked, she responded, “Yes, Gabe. There is a way into the city, and I can show you where it is. But I have to tell you that it will not be easy. You will have to use all that you have learned, and your training, your days of preparation as a warrior will be put to the test. But this you will have to endure, and only then will you be able to go on.”

“So where are these passageways? How will we know where to go?”

“I will continue to lead you as I have led you before,” she replied cryptically, and smiled. “You have to take it one step at a time, one lead at a time. Go with what you know, and more will be shown to you. Only continue to seek for our guidance, and do not think that you can go on your natural reasoning alone.”



The next morning Gabe informed the party of all that Faethé had said and promised.

“So what does that mean, that we have to go with what we know? We don’t know anything about these passageways at all!” Shebo lamented.

“Well, we do know something,” Rahim interjected

pensively'. "Last night the words of one of our old ballads came back to my mind, and it spoke of the tunnels under the walls of the City of Light, and of the enchanted woods."

"The enchanted woods?" Diana asked, a puzzled look on her face. "I don't know of any enchanted woods."

"I could be wrong," Rahim continued hesitantly, "but the 'enchanted woods' might have been referring to the dark forest beyond the south side of the city. It is a forest that even the Drifters usually choose to avoid because it is vast, and the dense foliage is largely impenetrable."

"So can you get us to this forest?" Gabe asked.

"It will not be easy. We will have to plan a route around the city, so that we can stay clear of the besieging forces, and we will have to travel largely by night, as it is dangerous for us Drifters to be out during the day, especially around here."

"Then we really shouldn't waste any more time. Let's get packed; we head out tonight!" Gabe announced.



Gabe nervously glanced over his shoulder as he closed the door to his room, once again not knowing what lay before him. Under the cover of darkness, they left the village and began the long trek towards the dark forest, and the city of Citar.

Their journey was uneventful, and they made good headway. A few days passed before they reached the edges of the dark forest. They were still about a night's journey away from the city, for the whispers had led them to enter the forest at a distant point, so that they could avoid all contact with enemy forces during their journey. They made their way through the dark forest, being led by the whispers step by step and turn by turn. They were quick to agree that this place was indeed worthy to be called the enchanted woods. The ominous forces that abounded

within the dark silvan' tapestries made the four travelers uncomfortable. Though they saw nothing out of the ordinary, they felt many an unseen presence watching them. They were not all evil, but neither did they seem to be from the light. But whatever they were and wherever they were from, one thing was certain—they were there.

As the dark blanket of night began to roll up its covers, and knowing that they were now nearer to Citar than they had been so far, the four travelers became increasingly nervous. They did not want to run into any of Bazal's men who might be patrolling the forest this close to the city.

"This place would be beautiful if it weren't so dark!" Gabe said.

No sooner had these words escaped his lips than the four suddenly found themselves confronted by a small group of enemy soldiers clad in battle garments, and obviously ready to fight.

The soldiers were as shocked to see the small group of stragglers as Gabe and the others were to see them. Diana, as small as she was, and having remained behind the others, quickly backed into the woods and vanished before the men realized she was there. The soldiers quickly took up their positions to fight. No questions were asked, for none were needed—who else would be walking through the enchanted woods at this time?

Rahim, used to fighting, quickly drew his sword. Shebo was not slow to respond. Gabe hesitated for a moment. He had been trained, yes, and he could feel the awesome power of the sword, as it began to warm up even as his hand rested upon the hilt. Yet he was also uncertain. However, he did not have much time to think. Before he knew it, the fighting was upon him.

The clanging of swords and the realization of the

peril that surrounded them suddenly spurred Gabe to action. Without a further thought, the magnificent sword was unsheathed and Gabe stepped into the middle of the fray, not stopping to think of his own fear or uncertainty, which seemed to have vanished as magically as the sword had suddenly come to life. It seemed to almost have a mind of its own; it would dance and move, deflecting blow after blow and swing after swing with the greatest of ease. Gabe felt a power and skill that he'd never felt before. It was like someone had stepped into his body, taken ahold of the sword for him, and was moving and parrying with an agility that he had not possessed during his times of practice.

The three men sustained some cuts and bruises, but after a short while all six soldiers were left dead or dying on the ground. There was no time to marvel, however, at what had just transpired. The men quickly put their swords back in their sheaths and, as soon as Diana had rejoined them, they pressed on.

Their troubles were not yet over. There were other bands of soldiers to fight as they continued their trek deeper into the woods, following the whispers all along. The men grew wearier after each battle, and with each new struggle the fighting seemed all the more intense, so much so that they began to wonder how much longer they would hold out. Gabe's magical sword, however, didn't seem to tire. Although Gabe grew weary and the sword became heavy in his hand, they were still able to fight through to victory each time.

They continued to follow the whispers, until finally they came upon an old stone wall that was almost unrecognizable from the thick layers of moss that grew upon the stones, and looked as if it had been undiscovered—and undisturbed—for untold years.

"Where to now, Gabe?" Shebo asked curiously.

"I think this is it!" Gabe triumphantly proclaimed.

"The whispers have stopped. This has to be the place!"

"But I see no passageway! What are we going to do?" Diana exclaimed.

"Whatever we do," Rahim answered, "we'd best do it quickly. It won't do us any good if others follow us and find the tunnel. When they discover that their patrols haven't returned, the woods will soon be crawling with Bazal's men."

They walked along the expanse of the wall that had been built between two rock formations, searching. But Diana was right—there was no door.

"It's got to be here," Gabe said. "I can feel it. Oh, Faethé, please show us!"

They continued searching along the wall, but still found nothing. Gabe was puzzled. He paced back and forth in front of the wall, kicking the leaves that formed a thick carpet over the forest floor. Suddenly, his foot struck something that lay buried just beneath the leaves. He looked down at the ground and quickly began clearing away the leaves.

"Shebo! Rahim! Come quick! I think I may have found something!"

The men ran over to Gabe, and began digging feverishly with their hands, eagerly pulling back the roots that had grown over what appeared to be a cover of some sort. Within a short time, a small, square metallic cover was clearly visible. It was securely fastened all around, and there was no lock, no door, no handle, and apparently no way to lift the cover up.

"It looks as if it's been made to only open from the inside," Shebo noted.

"But this is where the whispers led us. There's got to be a way for us to get in!" Gabe maintained. In a moment of desperation, he pounded his sword onto the cover, hoping to pierce the metal. A hollow sound echoed underneath, but the sword barely made a dent. Fearing that the noise would attract too much atten-

tion, Gabe did not try it again. But it was too late. A lone soldier suddenly came across their path. Rahim was the first to react, and before the soldier realized what was happening, Rahim had already silenced him, and dragged his body away to hide it underneath some nearby bushes.

Gabe spun around at the sudden sound of the commotion, and in so doing, stumbled and fell. In a sudden impulse, he reached for the wall to catch himself, but the rock under his hand gave way and fell to the ground.

Gabe brushed the leaves from his clothes as he stood up to take a closer look at the hole in the wall.

"Thank you, Faethé, thank you, Faethé," he whispered, as he realized what had been exposed. With much excitement, and whispers of thanks to Faethé, they all gathered around to see a large keyhole set in the hole left by the loose rock. Feeling the power surging through the keys, Gabe triumphantly held them up to the light. The largest key looked like it would fit. Moments later, the key turned effortlessly in the lock. They heard a noise behind them and wheeled around to find the metal cover standing open, and a ladder leading down into an underground chamber.

"Quickly, we must go! We must hurry!" Rahim said, fearful that other soldiers would soon stumble upon them. Gabe took the key out of the lock and placed the fallen stone back into its original position. As they hurried down the steps, the metal cover mysteriously closed above them, and just as mysteriously, although they didn't know it, the leaves were blown back over the cover by a sudden gust of wind, and the area looked as undisturbed as it had before.

When they reached the bottom of the ladder, Shebo lit a torch, illuminating the pathway in front of them. Cautiously they made their way, they knew not where, following the narrow passageway that stretched out

before them.

After some time Gabe broke the silence. "I guess we should have passed underneath the city walls by now. This passage has not taken too many twists or turns.

"Yes," Rahim said, "there's a good chance that we are already underneath the city somewhere."

Their judgment appeared to be confirmed when they came to the end of the tunnel, which opened up into a wide, but roughly hewn, underground chamber. The light of their torches danced on the face of the rock walls around them. The chamber had other tunnels leading off from it, and there were two smaller chambers set off of the main room.

"We could easily get lost traveling through this maze of tunnels," Shebo announced upon his return from a quick journey down one of the other passageways. "There's no way to know where they might lead."

"Let's look around and see if there are any indications or markings anywhere," Gabe suggested. They searched around the main chamber, and then split up to search the two small rooms.

"I think I may have found something," Diana squealed with delight. "Come, look!" The men rushed to her side. Moving back a dusty curtain, she exposed a large and ornate wooden door that looked strangely out of place in these surroundings. The men quickly took to task and tried to force the old, swollen door open.

"Let's all pull on three! One, two, three!" Gabe shouted. The men exerted all their strength, and the door flung open, sending the men sprawling across the stone floor behind them.

The open door revealed a steep and narrow staircase leading upwards, which they eagerly ascended. To their dismay, however, the staircase was a dead end, leading only to a stone wall.

Rahim took his knife and dug it into the hard sur-

face, flaking off a thin layer of the hardened mortar. "It looks like this passageway has been sealed up for years. How are we ever going to make our way through?" he moaned.

Tired and dejected, the three men sat down on the steps to rest, and if they could, ponder how to proceed.

As they sat in silence, Diana put her ear to the wall. "I think I hear something. I do! I hear something! There's someone on the other side of the wall!"

She grabbed Shebo's club and started rhythmically banging it against the wall. One, two, three, four, five. She waited. One, two, three, four, five. She waited again, and then repeated her rhythmic banging several times. She stopped to listen, but was only answered by silence.

Not willing to give up, she resumed her knocking, this time more forcefully, in the same rhythm. Then she stopped, and waited again. Suddenly they all heard a muffled but distinct knocking sound coming from the other side of the wall.

"They're answering us!" Diana exclaimed. Excitedly, she repeated the five knocks and waited. Again, the response came in the exact same number of knocks. "They've heard us! They know we're here!"

After a wait of several hours, those on the other side of the wall had successfully chiseled through and made an opening wide enough for the four to crawl through. Before long, the weary travelers found themselves emerging from a small fireplace embedded in the wall of the main city hall, next to the room where they had first met Sir Laurent and the council of elders.

BATTLE PLANS

There were tears and cries of rejoicing as old friends were reunited one with another. Sir Laurent and the elders were among the first to crowd around. Then there was another voice.

"Hello, Gabe!"

Gabe spun around at the sound of the familiar voice, but one that he didn't immediately recognize.

"Jenny? Jenny!" he burst out. "What are you doing here! You look so ... so different!"

"You look different too, Gabe," she chuckled at the sight of the tanned and slightly unkempt young man. She walked over and offered him a warm embrace.

"Hello, Uncle Shebo," Jenny said warmly, as she then turned to hug her uncle.

"Oh, Jenny!" Shebo responded warmly. "I can't believe it's you! The last I saw of you, you were just a little girl."

"Oh, Uncle Shebo! You're exaggerating. It still seems like yesterday to me when you and Gabe set off for lands unknown. But how much has changed since that day!"

"So ... what are you doing here? Where have you been? What have you been doing?" The questions blurted out of Gabe's mind as fast as they came into it, and in the excitement of the moment he forgot all about Sir Laurent and the others standing around.

"Come, my friends," Sir Laurent interrupted. "Sit down and make yourselves comfortable. You look like you've been on your feet long enough!" He led them to a side room where they all sat down, as Jenny proceeded to tell them all that had happened since they parted.

"After you two left I felt lost for a while. I didn't have anyone that I could talk with about the other world. Because I'd been so involved, first of all with

the old man, and then with the preparations for you and Uncle Shebo, it took me a while to find my own footing and to get started on the mission that the old man had entrusted *me* with." She laughed. "I spent many more nights reading over the books and the things that we'd taken from the trunk. I was supposed to try to share it with others, so I knew that I had to be as knowledgeable as I could be about it all. I knew some would scoff at what I would tell them, but there were plenty of people who did believe, and who eventually also learned to see the colors. It was wonderful."

"And?" Gabe asked, excitedly wanting to hear more of her story.

"Well, slowly but surely, step by step, day by day, more people began to see the colors and understand more about the other world. We worked together, and soon traveled to other cities and towns, sharing what we knew about the other world. Eventually, I found myself here in Citar, at the gate that I recognized from my dream. When I heard that you had indeed come here with the keys, I decided to stay and wait for your return. But then we nearly lost all hope when the city was besieged!"

"But there is no need to worry," Sir Laurent assured Gabe. "Thanks to Jenny, there are now many more believers who will fight against the forces of the Evil One, and pledge their allegiance and support in the battles that lie ahead. She has done a wonderful job—just as you have." Sir Laurent patted Gabe's shoulder and put his arm around Shebo. "Now, why don't you tell us what you've been doing since we last saw you!"

Gabe had much to tell, and the stories went on well into the night. At the end, when all that needed to be said had been said, Sir Laurent looked up and smiled. "This is what we've been waiting to hear! The

time has come to make our alliances sure, and to do battle against the Evil One. And now that we have discovered the entrance to the secret passages," he nodded at Gabe and Shebo, "we have a way to get our forces in and out of the city. The plans for these passages were only known to a few select people, and their secrecy was so well guarded that, in time, no man knew the truth about them. But now that this door has been opened, we will be able to send out our spies and messengers, to rally the forces, so that together we can defeat this Dark Prince and his minions* once and for all!"



After a day of much needed and welcomed rest, Gabe, Shebo and Rahim spent several days in meetings with Sir Laurent and the council of elders. Together they devised plans and decided who should be sent where, how to enlist the help of the Subverters, and how to organize their counteroffensive.

Gabe was anxious to also be involved in the action. Rahim, naturally, was eager to get back to his loved ones and to begin rallying the forces among the Drifters. Still, he would remain in the city awhile longer, until their plans had taken shape.

Jenny observed Gabe with great interest, and marveled at how much he had changed. Not only did his rugged appearance seem burlier, but his manners showed a certain maturity that had been absent before. She carefully noted his companionship with Diana, looking on almost wistfully, desiring that same camaraderie. But, not wanting to impose herself—the gentle soul that she was—she merely watched and waited.

Gabe was also taken by Jenny. Her calmness and assurance, as well as her simple but pleasant features, gave her an air of beauty that was striking in its own silent manner. But with his mind fully

occupied with the matters at hand, he gave her little thought for the time being.

Diana, who was delightfully playful, always kept Gabe busy, laughing and joking, and seldom left his side.

Sir Laurent, not one to be undone by anything he saw, watched with interest—wondering how this private drama would eventually play itself out.

Shebo seemed oblivious to the fact that anything was happening. Though, again, one never really knew if he was, or if he was just pretending not to notice.

“Well, Rahim,” Sir Laurent spoke up at the end of one of their council sessions. “It looks like you can start preparing to return to your people, so that you can find and establish contact with the Subverters. Once your people are all in place, and the Subverters have provided all the assistance and arms that we need, we should have a formidable array of warriors. But even then, there is yet one more group of people that we will have to approach.” Sir Laurent turned to look at Gabe, who was sitting at the far end of the table.

Gabe looked up, his attention riveted to the conversation at hand by Sir Laurent’s intense gaze. “Hmm? And who would they be?” he was quick to ask.

“The Barons,” Sir Laurent replied, still without taking his eyes off Gabe.

“Oh, the Barons!” Gabe was silent for a moment. “Who are the Barons?”

“The Barons! Yes, the Barons,” Sir Laurent answered slowly, almost as if he wanted to keep Gabe in suspense and heighten his curiosity at the same time. “They are a people who live across the sea. We here in Citar have very little contact with them, although the people of the coastal areas are involved in trade with them from time to time. They’re a congenial race. They’re willing to live and let live, but rarely venture out to contact other peoples.”

Gabe remained silent for a while. “So why should we need to make contact with the Barons?”

“When the great Warrior Lord was alive, he and the king of the Barons were great friends. They respected one another, and their kingdoms were allied. But when the Warrior Lord died, in the disarray and confusion that followed, all formal ties were severed. They are one of the most powerful kingdoms on earth. They have large armies, great wealth, and,” he said, pausing for a moment as if to place further emphasis on what he was about to say, “perhaps the most important of all is that they, too, are aware of the Evil One and his wicked plans. They know of him and his evil powers, and that he has had it in his mind to bring about their downfall as well—though that would be more difficult, because they remain largely isolated from anyone else.”

“And so we need to send somebody to tell them of our plight,” Shebo guessed, looking smartly at Sir Laurent. “Let us send Jenny, seeing that she has gained much experience in speaking with people, and can tell them of the powers of the other world as well.”

“No, no, no. They have little regard for women,” Sir Laurent was quick to interject. “Actually, Shebo, I was thinking that perhaps you and Gabe would accept the mission of being our ambassadors to the lands of the Barons.”

This was not exactly what Gabe had been expecting, but at the lack of any reply, Sir Laurent continued. “You will have to cast off the garb of the Drifters—at least for the time being. You’ll have to look like ambassadors!” Realizing that Sir Laurent was obviously not expecting them to make any other choice but to accept, both Gabe and Shebo agreed to go—though it was with some reluctance on the part of Gabe, who didn’t relish having to forsake his comfortable apparel.



In the days that followed, while preparations were

being made to send Gabe and Shebo, as well as Rahim and other messengers, on their way, Gabe and Shebo busied themselves helping to explore the vast network of tunnels and caverns below the city. They discovered that the maze of tunnels led further than they had imagined, and many of them opened up into further underground caverns.

The labyrinth of tunnels that branched out in myriad directions surfaced in a variety of locations; they were designed so that large groups of men could gather, and then emerge from the tunnels in rapid succession. Each of the exits was placed so that it was strategically hidden from view, and many were in remote locations so that troops could disperse and scatter without leaving any clue as to where they had emerged from.

Careful not to use any of the larger exits, which seemed to be designed for the deployment of greater numbers, but would be harder to keep hidden, they began to use the smaller exits to send out spies who could assess the positions of the enemy and determine his strength before any further planning was done. It was the perfect opportunity for some of the noblemen of Citar to meet with the Subverters and to consolidate their new alliance. The Subverters had by this time heard that the city of Citar was under siege, and they had been very busy making plans and gathering their forces to join in the final struggle against the Evil One.

In the evenings, Gabe studied all he could about the Barons as he began to take his assignment as ambassador seriously. He was amazed, as he read about their beliefs and practices, to see that although they were quite different in their ways, they, too, were believers in the other world. They had much more light and truth than the Subverters; there was a clarity about them, and the distinction between good and evil

was succinctly defined. But at the same time they were quite different from any of the peoples Gabe had met up to this point. The more he read about them, the less confident he felt. "Oh, if only the Warrior Lord could come to my aid," he mused. Unbeknownst to him, his wish had already been granted!

JENNY

After a fond evening together with Diana, Gabe bade her a warm farewell and thanked her for her sweet friendship. He whistled as he walked home, oblivious to the multitude of thoughts that had troubled his mind earlier that day. *Truly*, he told himself, *I am richly blessed!*

As he was approaching his house, he was startled to see a figure move out of the shadows. "Jenny! What are you doing here? It's so late!"

Jenny barely lifted her eyes to look at Gabe. "I couldn't sleep, so I thought perhaps a little walk in the night air would help me to wind down."

"Aha," Gabe said, and looked at her. "So, umm ..."

"Can I come in?" she asked.

"Uh ... sure," he responded after a moment's hesitation. He opened the door and motioned for Jenny to enter ahead of him. "Would you like something to eat, or a drink?"

"No," she responded, sounding rather troubled. It was not until Gabe turned up the lamps that he could tell that she had been crying.

"Jenny, is everything okay?"

After a moment of abject silence, she quietly responded, "Gabe, I just don't know what to do!" Her lips quivered as she spoke.

"What's wrong?" Gabe asked immediately, a concerned look on his face.

"I ..." she hesitated as she buried her face in her gentle little hands. "I just can't go on pretending, Gabe. I have to speak the truth ... I love you!" She fearfully looked up at him.

Gabe was momentarily stunned at her declaration. He had not even suspected that she felt this way about him.

"Jenny! I ... uh ... don't know what to say!"

“Oh, I just had to tell you, Gabe,” she sobbed. “Even though I know you love Diana, and she loves you, and you two seem so happy together—I just couldn’t keep these feelings to myself any longer. I had to tell you.”

“Oh, Jenny!” Gabe said, his voice filled with compassion. He walked over and put his strong arms around her as she buried her face in his shoulder and held him tight.

Gabe smiled and stroked her hair. “I don’t know what to say, Jenny. I didn’t know that you felt this way.”

She lifted her head from his shoulder, and looked into his face.

All at once, Gabe was struck with her beauty, her sweetness, her gentle purity. He continued stroking her hair. “I love you too, Jenny. In fact, I always have. I just never thought you would feel the same about me.” He smiled, “You’re such a sweet, warm, loving, gentle soul. I don’t see how anyone could *not* love you.”

Jenny lowered her eyes. “I want you, Gabe!” she demurely said, and then quickly bit her bottom lip.

Gabe was silent for a moment, not quite sure how to react to her latest statement. Jenny again looked up into Gabe’s eyes.

Bending down, he began gently kissing her cheeks till her lips eagerly and passionately met his, and his arms tightened their grip around her. *How could anyone resist such love, such warmth, such gentleness, such passion?* he thought to himself.

They loved into the night, till daybreak threatened to come upon them. Jenny, realizing that morning was not far away, dressed and quietly slipped out of the house, leaving Gabe to meet the morning on his own.



Gabe awoke with an uncomfortable feeling in his stomach. He felt disturbed about what had transpired the night before, and wasn’t quite sure what to make of what had happened. He sighed as he thought of Diana—sweet, bubbly, happy, friendly Diana, and the beautiful, gentle Jenny—both of whom he loved dearly.

“Oh, what have I gotten myself into?” he moaned as he rose sleepily from his bed, shaking his head.

Still deep in thought, he strode off towards the nearby tavern where they usually gathered for breakfast. The room was crowded when he arrived. Normally he sat with Diana, but this morning he hesitated. As he walked through the door, two heads turned and eagerly sought his attention. First he saw Diana, then, turning his head, he also saw Jenny. Realizing that both girls expected him to sit with them, but also realizing that he could not in all fairness sit with either one to the hurt of the other, he kept his eyes lowered as he walked towards the back corner, where Shebo was seated at a table with Sir Laurent and a few others.

“Oh!” Shebo exclaimed as he saw Gabe approaching. “Why, this is a surprise! You’re joining us for breakfast, young man?”

Sir Laurent’s eyes hadn’t missed much, and after casting a quick glance in Diana’s direction, and then Jenny’s, he quietly pulled out a chair for Gabe.

Shebo soon caught on. “Ahhhh!” he smiled, with a twinkle in his eye. Gabe barely noticed, however. His eyes seemed glued to the tablecloth.

“So, what are you having for breakfast?” Shebo asked cheerily.

Gabe muttered something under his breath as Shebo beckoned a waiter over.

Not much of any importance was discussed over breakfast, but each instead enjoyed one another’s company. Gabe, however, remained unusually quiet

throughout the meal. Occasionally Shebo would look at him and try to catch his eye. Sir Laurent acted oblivious to all that was happening, and continued on with his hearty description of a certain humorous event that had taken place the day before.

After finishing their breakfast, they prepared to part ways and go about the business of the day.

Upon standing up to depart, Sir Laurent bent over and patted Gabe on the shoulder. "A word of advice, son," he whispered in his ear. "Maybe you should go and have a chat with Rahim. I think he could help you—he's had some experience along these lines, you know."

Gabe was too shocked to say anything. He looked up at Sir Laurent, who resumed his innocent expression of ignorance as he patted Gabe's shoulder again, nodded farewell and then left the room.

Shebo chuckled, and now that they were the only two left at the table, couldn't refrain from speaking any longer. "Well, we all saw it coming, Gabe—except for you, it seems."

Gabe's mouth dropped, and he gave an exasperated sigh. "I wasn't aware that it was such public knowledge."

"You're as easy to read as a book, son," Shebo spoke kindly. "You would do well to follow Sir Laurent's advice."

As soon as the room had emptied, Gabe set off to find Rahim, who was busy preparing himself for his journey.

"Gabe!" Rahim called, obviously pleased to see him.

"Rahim," Gabe acknowledged rather somberly.

Rahim narrowed his eyes and looked at Gabe. "What's the matter, friend?"

"A bit of trouble, Rahim. I think I could use your help."

Rahim nodded. "Very well. Let's go somewhere where we can talk."

The two men went and sat beneath a tree in a quiet corner of a nearby garden. "So, what is it?"

"Well ..." Gabe began hesitantly, "it has to do with Diana...."

"Ohh," Rahim said, as a look of understanding flashed across his face. He instantly seemed aware of the predicament Gabe was facing.

"Then ... well ... now ..." Gabe stuttered, "now there's Jenny too."

"Oh, I see. And how do you feel about this?"

"That's what is so strange," Gabe responded. "I think I'm in love with both of them. And they both seem to be in love with me. But it's a very complicated situation for me."

Rahim chuckled. He knew all too well what Gabe was thinking about. "Yes, it can get a little complicated, but some of us think it's worth it."

Rahim proved to be a wealth of knowledge as he proceeded to tell Gabe of his own wives, and how despite the difficulties and sacrifices, with a lot of love, understanding, patience and communication they had all learned to live together and get along. He had perfected the art of handling more than one woman at a time, and he candidly shared much of his experience.

Gabe lightened up as he spoke.

Finally Rahim concluded, "I'll tell you what. I can talk to Diana. She's a Drifter, after all," he said with a smile, "and she knows of these things. I'm sure she'll understand. But, Jenny—that's different. I don't know how she'll take to this concept, Gabe. You may have to be the one to talk to her. I don't think there will be any problems with Diana. Sure, she's a fiery little thing and it won't always be easy, but as long as you're wise and you're careful, and you continually assure her of your love, she'll be able to live with the knowledge that you love both her and Jenny."

"You, you don't think you could talk to Jenny, too?" Gabe somewhat hopefully asked.

"No. No, I think that is something better left to you, Gabe. You know Jenny and the way she thinks. So that's something you'll have to do on your own. I can help where I can, but if you want to make this thing work, you're going to have to face your part as well."

Gabe nodded, realizing all too well that Rahim was probably right, although that didn't make him feel any more comfortable or prepared to confront Jenny.

With Rahim promising to find and talk with Diana, Gabe set off to find Jenny.

"Jenny."

"Gabe, I didn't know if you'd ever come to see me. I didn't realize this was all so difficult for you until I saw you in the tavern this morning."

"Yes," Gabe admitted. "It was difficult. I really didn't know what to do."

In general, it was not hard for Gabe to talk to Jenny; ever since they had come together with the old man, there had been a closeness between them that made it easy for them to understand one another. But still, this was a subject that had never come up before, and Gabe felt a little uneasy. To his surprise, he found Jenny pleasantly open to and understanding of his feelings for Diana.

"I just don't know how it could ever work, Gabe," she said. "I have never experienced anything like this before," she laughed, "but I love you. I love you dearly. You have become the most precious friend in all the world to me. All I know is that I would far rather be with you, even if it means sharing you with someone else, than to not have you at all." Tears began welling up in her eyes.

Gabe was moved by her sweetness and her selflessness. "Well, then, I guess we'll just have to take it a step at a time."

"Yes, that sounds good. Besides," she said, looking up with light shining in her eyes, "there's so much happening right now that we really don't have time to get too involved in this type of thing. There are battles to be fought, battles to be won, loads of work to do. Yes," Jenny laughed, "let's just take it one step at a time!"

And so, for the time being at least, it seemed that it was settled in everyone's heart and mind. Jenny was right—there was a lot to do, and they were all very, very busy.



"So, how's everything working out?" Sir Laurent asked.

Gabe hesitated, not sure what Sir Laurent was referring to, and then answered, "Fine, fine. Everything's fine."

"Good!" Sir Laurent responded. "Then let's get to the business at hand. The arrangements have all been made, and the time has come for you to embark on your mission as ambassador."

Gabe fell silent.

"Is that acceptable with you?"

"Yes, I guess I'm just a little bit nervous."

"Rightly so. Rightly so. I trust that you have been studying?"

"Yes sir. I've studied all I can on these people. If you deem that the time is right, I am ready to go."

"Yes, it appears that it is. A ship is sailing in a few days. You must depart quickly. The Drifters will have horses ready for you, and will accompany you as far as the berth*. Here, you are also to take these documents with you. You'll want to familiarize yourself with them as well. They include information on where things stand at the moment, who is with us, and reports from the Subverters about their progress and what they've been able to ascertain* about the

Dark Prince's plans. You understand that this is all very sensitive and important information?"

"Yes sir. We shall guard it diligently."

"Very well. Be prepared to leave by the going down of the sun."

"We shall!" Gabe answered resolutely.

"Right then. Well," he said, as he extended his hand, "I'm not sure I'll see you before you go. May the Whisperers be with you!"

"Thank you."

Sir Laurent patted Gabe on the arm. "You're a good man, Sir Gabe!" and then, he was gone.

THE BARONS

The ship set sail midmorning. It was a beautiful ship, and seemed well able to make the three-day journey. Gabe and Shebo were already settled into their quarters and, not really having much else to do, they decided to tour the ship. There was not much to see, however, as the ship was used mostly to transport goods. There were a few other passengers, though, taking advantage of this voyage just as Gabe and Shebo were.

The evening meal was the first time that all of the passengers were together. They ate separate from the crew, in one big room. To their surprise, it appeared that most of the other passengers were Barons. Gabe and Shebo were happy for this, as it gave them the opportunity to observe the Barons firsthand. The Barons kept to themselves. They would cordially nod at the two men, as if to acknowledge their presence, but did not make any attempts to communicate with them. Amongst themselves they were a cheerful and jolly crowd, full of merriment and laughter. Gabe had expected to find them somber and serious, but although he could tell that they had a serious side to their nature, their conversation was light and jovial.

Gabe watched them closely, and was impressed to see their obvious reverence for the other world. No matter what they were doing, they would stop and call upon the beings of light at regular intervals during the day. They did not, however, seem to possess any kind of close personal link with the other world, such as Gabe had with Faéthé.

Gabe suspiciously eyed the plate of food that was set before him. "Well, I'm happy it's only three days, Shebo. I don't know how much longer I could eat this!" He laughed.

Shebo, who had already started eating, grunted and

nodded.

The meal was very bland, and even though Gabe smothered it with as many condiments and sauces as were on the table, the taste hardly changed. Just then another man walked by carrying a tray of food.

"Hmmm, get a whiff of that, Shebo! It looks good." Gabe looked at his own plate despondently, and swung around in his chair to see the waiter placing the plates in front of the Barons.

"I'm going to ask if I can have some of that food instead," Gabe resolved, and he beckoned the waiter over. "Can I have some of that, please, instead of this?" He looked expectantly up at the waiter.

The waiter looked a little surprised. "You want to eat like them? But it's very different from what you're used to."

"I'd like to try it. It smells so good," Gabe maintained.

The waiter nodded. He turned to Shebo to see if he would also like another plate of food.

Shebo held up his hand. "No, I'm fine, thank you."

A short while later Gabe found himself staring down at a new plate of food. It smelt good, looked good, and after one bite he concluded contentedly that it tasted good. "Delicious! Thank you," Gabe told the waiter who had brought him the food, and remained beside him as if waiting to find out if the food was satisfactory.

The Barons looked on with great interest. They started talking amongst each other, looking over towards Gabe and nodding. Gabe looked over towards them, smiled and nodded. They amusedly smiled back, obviously pleased that Gabe found their food to his liking.



A day and a half into the journey, Gabe began to get restless. He was not used to being in such close quarters, and it was difficult for him to have to be con-

finied. Having already broken the ice somewhat with the Barons on board, he attempted to seek out their company and make conversation. At first they were quite reticent* and they eyed Gabe with some suspicion. But Gabe's warm and friendly spirit soon won them over and they eventually accepted him and Shebo into their circle. He found them very warm and friendly, though also a little hot-tempered. They listened respectfully to the tales Gabe told, and he listened intently to all they had to say.

The camaraderie that developed between them made the trip seem to pass more quickly, and before they knew it, the ship had berthed in a very busy harbor. There were lots of sights and sounds and smells, and lots of color. The marketplace was vibrant with deep reds and purples, deep blues and greens, and all sorts of other fine rich colors. The few women he could see milling around were dressed very modestly, and they quickly lowered their eyes as they walked past the two foreigners. The reactions of the people towards Gabe and Shebo were mixed. Some pretended not to notice them, while others would turn around and stare, unabashed*, watching them long after they'd walked past—but all with an air of suspicion and mistrust.

"It's an eerie feeling," Gabe said. "I'm quite nervous. I almost feel as though someone is waiting to jump out from behind me and throw me to the ground."

Shebo agreed. "Yes, I don't exactly feel very welcome myself here. Still, we have come on a mission, and I'm sure we are well protected."

They headed for an inn to bide the night, as per the instructions that they had been given before they left. A messenger was dispatched to the palace with their formal letter of request for an audience. Gabe and Shebo waited earnestly and impatiently for any news. There were others at the inn who it appeared had also come for business at the palace, or to seek an audi-

ence with someone there. They soon discovered that some had been left waiting for weeks.

This news disheartened Gabe and Shebo a little, but they tried to stay optimistic, and to keep themselves occupied while they waited. Gabe was naturally inquisitive, and was eager to learn all he could about people. He soon made friends amongst the shy and at first mistrusting Barons. He mingled freely with them, ate their food, danced to their music (which reminded him a little of the music of the Drifters) and he was mindful not to pay overt attention to their women.

Little did Gabe and Shebo realize that they were being carefully watched in all that they did. But they need not have worried, for as a result of their wise behavior and friendliness towards the Barons, good reports were forthcoming, and in only a matter of days they received their official invitation to the palace. They were instructed that they would be met early the following morning.

Gabe and Shebo spent the evening carefully reviewing all the documents they had brought with them and had gone over during their voyage. Neither of them felt very confident, but they did their best to be as prepared as they could for the following day.



Neither Gabe nor Shebo was interested in breakfast that morning. By the time the sun peeked through their windows, the two men were dressed in their finest attire, and they anxiously headed downstairs to wait for their escort.

Finally, after waiting for what seemed like an eternity to them, two men walked into the inn. After speaking with the bartender for a few moments, they turned and slowly approached Gabe and Shebo. Realizing that these men were probably their escorts, Gabe and Shebo stood up to greet them.

The two men nodded their heads slightly and ex-

tended their hands. "We have come to escort you to the palace. Please, if you will follow us." They turned and, without even looking behind to see if Gabe and Shebo were following, walked towards the door. The men didn't say a word the entire way there. Gabe and Shebo followed, always staying a couple of steps behind them.

Soon they caught sight of the palace, and were overwhelmed by the beauty of both the majestic palace itself and the splendorous gardens. They were led around the side of the main building, and into another building that looked as though it had been built fairly recently.

They climbed several flights of stairs, and finally entered a large lobby area.

"Please, sit down," one of their escorts said cordially, though without any real warmth.

Gabe and Shebo sat on the edge of a white couch. No words were spoken as the two "ambassadors" nervously looked around them. There seemed to be quite a few others waiting as well.

But they did not have long to wait. Another man soon approached them. He was well dressed, though a little more casually, and he beamed a smile at them.

"Welcome, we're very happy to have you in our country. We trust that you have been well taken care of."

"Yes, very well," Gabe affirmed, standing up to greet the man in return. "Thank you so much for your hospitality. Your people are wonderful, they're so warm and friendly." Gabe did not hide his enthusiasm nor his fondness for these people.

The man smiled. "I am glad to hear you think so. So, you must be Sir Gabriel, and your name is?" he asked, looking at Shebo.

"I am Shebo, Your Excellency," Shebo responded, uncertain of how to address the man they spoke to.

"Well, Sir Gabriel and Sir Shebo, would you mind

accompanying me to the room at the far end of this foyer? King Beldanah will see you now.”

“Certainly,” Gabe responded, as they turned to follow him.

“I’m so happy that you found our people pleasant and that our country is to your liking. It is quite different from your country,” the man said, casually making conversation as they walked.

“Oh, you’ve been there?” Gabe asked.

“Yes, I have traveled there, though the past couple of years it has been a little too dangerous for me to do so. I hear that there has been quite a lot of trouble?”

“Indeed there has,” Gabe answered.

The man knocked on a beautifully carved wooden door. Immediately the door swung open and the three men walked through.

An elderly man, who had been standing at the far end of the room gazing out of the window, now turned and slowly started to walk towards them. Gabe was surprised at the great age of the gentleman, but he successfully concealed this. When the elderly man was only a short distance away from them, he stood still and stared at Gabe. He looked him up and down, from head to toe, not saying a word. Then he turned and looked at Shebo, and nodded.

“Welcome,” the man said, turning back to face Gabe. “It is not often that we have the pleasure of welcoming ambassadors from the city of Citar.” He motioned for them to sit down.

“I am King Beldanah. This is my son, Prince Habaka.” The king pointed to the man that had led them into the room. “I have read the documents you sent along with your request for an audience, and am aware of what you have come to see me for.” The old man paused a moment, and then continued. “I appreciate the fact that your people acknowledge your need for our help, but,” he said, looking straight into Gabe’s

eyes, “on what grounds should we have cause to assist you? If you can tell me, then perhaps we may consider your request more diligently.”

Gabe was shocked; he had not expected such a response. He had come prepared to discuss politics, not to convince someone of why they should help. He took a deep breath, realizing that this would most likely be his only opportunity to present the needs of his people. He waited for a moment, sending up a silent plea for help. He knew that the Whisperers were surrounding him, and if he ever needed their wisdom or their help, it was now!

A feeling of comfort soon stole over Gabe, and with it, a reassurance that if he would just open his mouth and speak, the right words would flow. And so he began his plea.

“Your Excellency, we thank you for your gracious kindness in granting us this audience. Truly, you did not have to receive us as quickly as you did, and we are most thankful that our request has been granted this speedily.

“We know that in times past, your nation had an alliance with the great Warrior Lord, a man of honor, and greatly respected by the seekers of light. We also know that after his death, the close ties between our countries were unfortunately severed. However,” Gabe looked into the king’s eyes, “the tides of time have changed, and the spirit of the Warrior Lord has returned to fight against the Evil One.

“The Evil One knows this, and has already marshaled his forces and garnered a strength and power from beyond, from the nether kingdom of darkness. We alone are not able to combat his forces, nor do we have the sufficiency to defeat them.

“We further know that the Evil One seeks to destroy your lands and territories as well. We respectfully acknowledge, however, that you would be well

able to withstand him, and you would have no need of an alliance with us. But we are not able to withstand him without your help. We have very little to offer you, for we are but a weak people, and we are scattered. But what we can offer is an unswerving loyalty towards the cause of the right.

“While we have our differences, there is much that we have in common. I have come to feel a great affinity for your people, and have felt very much among my own here. We may hold to different customs and beliefs, but we all stand on the side of the light, and we all wish to overcome and defeat the forces of darkness, who are even now attacking my people.”

As he spoke, Gabe couldn't help thinking of his friends back home, the Drifters, the people of Citar, and even the common folk in the towns and villages he had come from. He dared not think what could become of them if they did not receive any help, and his eyes grew misty with tears. He looked down, momentarily overcome by his emotion. He did not know why he was thinking of these people, nor did he know why, at a time when he thought he had to show such strength, he was showing such weakness.

Gabe shook his head, and with tears in his eyes he continued, “I'm sorry, Your Excellency. I'm just thinking of all the fine people I know, the good people, the honest people. Please, will you help us? We need your help. We can in no wise be successful without it. If we do not receive your help, thousands of people will die at the hands of the Evil One—women and children, innocent folk who have the right to live and die in freedom, and not under the bondage of darkness. We will fight to the death to protect our lands and our people, Your Excellency, but in all humility we beg for your help.”

With that, Gabe ended his plea, and was silent.

The king looked for a moment at Gabe, and then at

Shebo. His son stood behind him, his head bowed. Finally the old king stirred, and gazed upwards as if looking through the ceiling at some unseen vision beyond. He extended his hand towards Gabe in a kind and almost fatherly manner. “Son, you may consider yourself to be nothing, no one. You may feel weak because you were moved for your people. But I see your tears as a sign of strength and true nobility. I know your mind is probably full of plans and detailed petitions, but because you were willing to put all of that aside and speak from your heart, I have seen your sincerity and honesty. And now, because of your love for the way of light and truth, I give you my word that we will do all we can to help, and fight beside you.”

This was all rather unexpected for Gabe. He bowed his head with great relief, and looked up at the king. “Thank you, Your Excellency! Thank you on behalf of all of my people—the women, the children, the poor, the sick, the elderly. I thank you for all those who can't fight for themselves.”

The old king smiled generously. “Now then, for your plans and papers and your proposals, please feel free to discuss them with my son. I leave all of that up to him these days, for I am much too old to be involved in intricate affairs such as these.”



News that attacks on the towns and cities surrounding Citar were escalating gave a sense of even greater urgency to the three men's discussions. Detailed plans were made for an immediate counter-attack. The Baronial forces were to be gathered from across their regions, and transported in full across the sea that separated their lands from the coastal regions not far from the city of Citar. An immediate task force would be able to land within five days. It would take somewhat longer for further troops to be marshaled. But as soon as they were ready, they would

cross the waters in full force.

Gabe and Shebo immediately set sail back to Citar to convey the news that the Barons were coming.

A small contingent of highly trained royal guards accompanied Gabe and Shebo on their voyage home, both to provide a protective force to the men, and to familiarize themselves with the area and send back detailed appraisals of the situation to the prince before the large influx of their troops would arrive.

On the last night before their ship was to arrive at port, Gabe was standing on board the deck, looking out over the railing of the ship. He was startled out of his deep thoughts by a gentle touch on his arm. He spun around, and in the dim light could vaguely make out the form of a person.

“Gabe ...”

“Oh, it’s you!” he responded at the familiar sound of the melodic voice.

“Yes!” Faethé responded. “I can’t stay long.”

Gabe braced himself for whatever she would have to say, assuming it would have to be something important for Faethé to appear to him in person like this.

“So?” he smiled.

“There *is* one thing you still need to do, Gabe. You will not return to the city of Citar just yet.”

“Oh?”

“Shebo must return with the others, but you need to go back to the lands of Darkness, to the very city of Danar, where Bazal lives.”

Gabe sighed, as memories of his last journey into those dismal lands flashed through his mind. “That’s not a very pleasant prospect.”

“I know. You will be walking right into the enemy’s den; in fact, into the very palace of the Prince of Darkness.”

“What? That’s impossible,” Gabe gasped. “I’ll never

make it there alive!”

“No, it’s not impossible. I have already seen it,” she smiled. “It will happen, and they will not—they cannot—stop you.”

“But why would I need to go there?” he asked earnestly.

“I cannot reveal it all to you yet, but the forces of evil are raging across the face of these lands, capturing not only hearts and minds, but the very souls of those who give themselves over to them. These people have become the embodiment of all that is evil, all that is bad, all that is wicked. You will need all the help and all the power you can get to defeat these dark forces, both the dark forces of man and the forces of the netherworld. This power must be released from the old room of the Warrior Lord, which has been sealed from the time that the keys were taken from the city—and that, Gabe, is why you must go.”

“But why me? Why do I have to go? Can’t you send someone else?”

“Gabe,” Faethé sighed, “it must be you, for no one else has the power that you have. Fighting by your side is a force greater than any other on earth—those who are helping you from beyond the veil.” She smiled. “This strength has not come from yourself. You have confronted the Evil One before, and you alone possess the power to resist and fight him. That is why it must be you, and why it cannot be another. You have been given the strength for this mission. We will be with you. We will help you, but you must be the one to go. Things are moving very quickly, Gabe, and within a short time this world will be embroiled in a war, the likes of which men have never seen before. Time is running out.”

Gabe hung his head and didn’t say a word. Faethé reached out and held his hand. At her touch, Gabe’s courage, which had been faltering at the mere thought

of having to travel through those lands again, was suddenly renewed.

“He’s going to know that you’re coming,” Faethé continued softly. “He will be waiting for you, as he also wants the keys.” There was a moment of silence, and Faethé hesitated. “You do not have to go, the decision is yours—but I couldn’t even begin to tell you all that is hinging upon your decision.”

There was no need for Faethé to say more. Even as she stood, holding his hand, in a moment of revelation Gabe understood what she was saying. He could not put it into words, nor even quite grasp the thought in his mind, but somewhere, in the depths of his soul, he understood.



The next morning, Gabe’s somberness did not escape Shebo. “Gabe, aren’t you excited? You’re going to be home soon!”

Gabe didn’t say anything.

“Hmmm, is there perhaps something I should know?” Shebo asked.

Gabe sighed. “Shebo, last night ... while I was standing on deck, Faethé came to me ...”

“Ohhh,” Shebo said, alerted that he was probably about to hear something new.

“I won’t be returning to Citar with you, Shebo,” he answered with a faraway look in his eyes. “I have been sent on another mission, and it’s going to be dangerous. I don’t know if I’ll ever be returning to Citar. But I must do what I must do.”

“And I don’t suppose I’m going with you this time?” Shebo asked, and Gabe shook his head. “So, that leaves me to escort our guests to Citar?”

“It looks that way, Shebo,” Gabe said, without much change of countenance.

“And once I get there, what should I tell Jenny, and

Diana, and Sir Laurent?”

“Tell them I’ll see them again ... as soon as I can.”

THE CONFRONTATION

Gabe braced himself for the journey back into the dark regions, and to the city of Danar. He dressed modestly, though this time not as a Drifter, as that would put him in greater danger, but rather as one of the common townspeople of that region. He traveled on horseback as quickly as he could, rarely stopping, and only for brief moments. As unpleasant as his first journey into these lands had been, this journey was even more unpleasant, as the spirit of the Evil One had grown so much stronger. Yet this time, Gabe's mind was not muddled, and his purposes not confused as they had been before. It seemed that the stronger the forces of the Evil One became, the more clarity of mind he had, to where his heart was almost overwhelmed with disgust and righteous hatred of the Evil One.



"What is it now?" Bazal thundered at Bradcliff, who had just entered the council chamber.

Bradcliff faltered for a moment. "We have news, my lord."

"And what is it?" Bazal asked as he lifted his head to look at the man.

"The Toilers have reported that there are rumors in the coastal regions that the Barons are assembling their forces and preparing to set sail."

"Hmmm, this *is* news," Bazal said as he looked down, "if it is true, that is!"

"If it is, my lord, and they were to invade from the coast while the city of Citar opened its gates, we would be caught in the middle."

"That's probably what they're hoping, but we can easily prepare for that by fanning out our forces so that there's no way we can be caught in any middle. Dismantle some of the besieging force, and spread them abroad throughout the nearby countryside. But be

careful to keep a sizeable force around the city, so that they don't get any brave ideas. These Barons are a force to be reckoned with, and if they are on their way, we shall be in for quite a fight."

"Indeed," Bradcliff sighed. "The troops are already beginning to get edgy around there. Some patrols go out and never come back. Contingents are attacked, but then the attackers seem to vanish into thin air, and no one knows where they came from, or where they went. Our forces are still superior, but strange happenings such as these occur every day, and some are beginning to lose heart."

Bazal looked off into the distance. "You know, it has long been rumored that a maze of underground tunnels exists beneath that city."

Bradcliff nodded. "Yes, many things have been rumored."

But Bazal's voice took on a more confident tone, as if he had been suddenly enlightened by some thought or inspiration. "I think this is more than a rumor. There are tunnels; we just have to discover where, and I think I know how to do just that."

Bradcliff leaned his head to the side, questioningly.

"There are plans for the city in the Warrior Lord's room, are there not? And not only that, but the secrets of his power, and who knows what untold treasures remain there!"

"But, my lord, you know that this room was locked with your father's strange keys. It's impenetrable. How are you planning to get in there?"

"The keys will come to me!" he replied in a dark and husky voice that sent shivers down Bradcliff's spine.

Dusk was settling outside, and the council chamber suddenly grew eerily dim. Bradcliff was startled at what he saw, or thought he saw. Bazal, who had been sitting at his desk, had raised his head when chal-

lenged by Bradcliff's words. Perhaps it was the setting sun playing with the shadows as it came through the window—but it appeared to Bradcliff that Bazal's eyes were reflecting a strange glow. Behind him stood the shadowy form of a tall stranger, someone he had never seen before, or even noticed until just now. As Bradcliff took a curious step closer, the figure dimmed from his sight, yet as he blinked and looked again, the form reappeared.

Bazal crouched over the table and drew back his shoulders. With a calmness and authority such as Bradcliff had not seen Bazal display before, he said again, "I may not have the keys, but they will come to me."

Shaken by this experience, Bradcliff quickly excused himself, turned and left the room. He was unable to reconcile what he'd just seen, whether it had just been a figment of his imagination or it had been something real.



As Gabe sped along his way, it was obvious to all who saw him long enough to get any decent look that he was different, yet no one laid a hand on him. Eeghaws were his constant companions. He knew he was being watched, but he was not surprised that he was never intercepted.

News of his journey, which took him on as direct a route to Danar as was clearly obvious to all, was quick to reach Bazal's ears, and he listened intently to every report that came in.

Bazal was gleeful, and his malicious laugh echoed loud and far throughout the stone building. "I can't believe it! It is all working so perfectly. This boy is walking those keys right into my hands." Bradcliff was not as confident as Bazal, and even though he had seen the power that Bazal was now embracing, he felt very uneasy about Gabe walking so blatantly into their

lands. “I don’t think we should underestimate the power of this boy, my lord. It seems all too simple that he would just walk into our hands.”

“But my power is so much stronger!” Bazal growled, and then broke out into his evil laugh again. “No one can resist it. They think they have the greater power, but it is not true. Just wait and see—we’ll show them.”



The armies of Citar had long been preparing for battle, and ever since the tunnels had been found and explored, the troops were poised, ready to attack, and could swiftly filter out into the countryside, remaining hidden till everyone was in position. The first Baronial forces were to wait just beyond the horizon until night fell over the land. Then they would sail closer and wait for the signal light to disembark under the cover of darkness. It had been decided that they would begin with a full-scale attack, to do as much damage to the enemy forces as possible, and also so that the enemy would not suspect that further troops were on the way. This way, they would hopefully expend their full strength to defeat the first force, and be too weary to resist the even greater army that was now gathering across the seas.

Spirits were high amongst the men of Citar, and the knowledge that the Barons were coming to aid them greatly lifted the morale of these eager soldiers. They had been preparing for this moment a long time and they were as ready as they would ever be.

Small pockets of troops, including those that had stolen out of the city, the forces gathered by the Subverters, and the warrior Drifters, were now hidden throughout the forest and the surrounding countryside, ready to strike at any given moment. Indeed, they had already been striking at the patrols and loose bands of enemy soldiers, seizing whatever opportunity

they could to downsize the enemy forces while remaining largely undiscovered, and therefore unattacked, themselves.

The forces of the wicked one had also prepared, though many were uneasy. While they were all skilled and trained fighters, they were a young army who had heard many tales of the ferocity of the Barons and the agility of the soldiers of Citar. They knew it would be no easy victory, and they took no comfort in the greatness of their numbers alone.



At the break of dawn, the sound of distant drums reached Citar—and a welcome sound it was. The Barons had arrived, and were taking up their positions.

Fully prepared for the Barons, the besieging enemy forces had set themselves in a defensive position, with some troops guarding all entrances to the city, but the greater sum drawn to face an outside assault from the Barons. Not having much else to do but hold their position until either the gates were opened or the Barons attacked, they anxiously watched and waited.

They did not have long to wait, for the banners of the Baronial forces could soon be seen rising from the horizon in front of the city. It was a truly awesome and impressive sight, as well-dressed warriors marched in rank, flanked on either side by a great number of Drifters and other forces who had joined the procession along the way. It did not appear as if they had any intentions of stopping until they reached the gates of the city, and they were well prepared to absorb attacks from the front as well as the side, moving in a single body that seemed, in the sight of the besieging armies, to grow wider with each step they took.

As the rising sun looked on, the two great armies met, and engaged in battle. The fighting was fierce, and sounds of war filled the countryside. They fought long into the day, and casualties were high. Both sides

knew that their future was being held in the balances. As the men tired, fresh waves of troops were infused into the ranks; the forces of darkness being recalled from their scattered positions, and the forces of Citar sending out reinforcements from the tunnels. But even with the seemingly endless waves of soldiers, the brave and the fearful, the heroes and the martyrs, the battle remained undecided. The besieging forces held their ground, though they did not make any progress. With the approach of dusk, the weary Baronial forces retreated for the night to regroup and prepare for a renewed attack the following morning.



Sir Laurent gazed out upon the battleground from a high lookout tower. The thick early morning mist had just rolled back, and the carnage of the previous day was now clearly visible. Broken wagons, discarded armor, helmets, swords and spears were scattered amongst the dead bodies that covered the earth beyond the besieging encampment. Eeghaws were screeching above the bloodied fields, swooping down to feast upon the bodies, racing against the men from both sides who were struggling to gather their dead. Toilers also lurked on the outskirts of the battleground, scavenging amongst the dead.

Without turning his gaze from the bloody scene, Sir Laurent sounded despondent. "It looks like we're in for a long struggle. How are your men holding out, Prince Habaka?"

Prince Habaka, who had come across the waters with the first wave of Baron warriors and had secretly been led to the safety of the city through the tunnels, replied somberly, "They are tiring. The battle has been long, and the fiercest they have ever fought, but their spirits are strong. They are willing to fight to the death, every last man, if that is what is asked of them."

"I sincerely hope it will not come to that. They are fine soldiers." Sir Laurent turned and rested a weary arm on the prince's shoulder. "Come, I have seen enough, let us go."

As they climbed down the stairs, Prince Habaka asked, "Have we heard any further news of Bazal's plans?"

"As far as we can tell, the main body of his forces is here. There are other troops scattered across the nearby regions, but so far they have not proven to be any immediate threat, except perhaps to the smaller villages they raid for food and horses. Bazal himself is apparently still in Danar. Gabe has departed without leaving word of his destination or mission, but I fear ..." Sir Laurent hesitated only a second, "I fear that he will soon be meeting Bazal—and who knows what consequences that may have." Sir Laurent shook his head and tugged pensively on his goatee.

Though tired, both sides prepared for what they seemed to instinctively know would be the end of the battle. A strange and uneasy quietness hung over the two camps. As the mist had rolled away, the forces again took up position and, as the signal sounded, resumed their relentless struggle against one another.



Gabe awoke with a jolt to the sound of distant drums. Their steady beat was barely audible and Gabe was not really sure whether he could actually hear them, or if in some mystical way his senses had been so attuned as to hear them resounding through the unseen realm. His heart was both glad and heavy at the same time—glad that at last it had begun, but heavy with uncertainty as to what the day would hold, both for him and for his friends on the battlefield.

After many days of traveling, Gabe had once again reached the crossing point where Denith's Sword had

once lain. The entire landscape seemed deserted, and he had hardly seen a soul during his swift journey here—other than the distant, yet ever-present eeghaws. He slid off his horse and walked over to the now empty casket in which his sword had once been encased. A strange sense of solemnity and foreboding stole over him, and his hand tightly gripped the hilt of the sword. The sword suddenly began to feel warm, as the keys always did at the moment when they were needed. Somehow he knew that this mission would be about more than stealing into the Warrior Lord's locked room.

Gabe was soon back on his horse, and speeding down the road that would lead him to Danar, and into the hands of the Dark Prince. It was early dusk before he finally approached the city gates. He entered the city, which, strangely enough, was easy to do. The gates were wide open, and not a guard was in sight. Gabe's mind was suddenly flooded with thoughts about what he was about to do. But he knew he would not be able to continue if he allowed these reasoning thoughts to come into his mind.

Seeing the palace in the distance, he resolutely set off for it. The few guards that were scattered around the streets near the palace silently watched as he dismounted his horse and walked up the steps that led into the palace. They had been instructed not to give him any resistance. They shook their heads; they could not understand how anyone could be so foolish as to walk—alone—into the very hand of such a powerful enemy.

Gabe easily walked through the palace gates. Looking around, it seemed that everything had been deserted, though he could feel a thousand eyes upon him, watching. The gate opened up into a courtyard filled with lawns, across from which another building rose. Without any hesitation, Gabe walked straight across

the lawns, not even bothering to take the path. For some reason, the city and the palace grounds seemed familiar to him. It was as if he'd traveled these paths before—though he hadn't! He strode over to the smaller building, pushed open the door, and looked around. All was silent. It was obviously not in use, though it was well kept.

Instinctively, without thinking about what he was doing, or whether he even knew where he was going, he ascended a flight of stairs that curled graciously upward and around to a balcony, till he could go no further. In front of him was an impressive door. Somehow, he knew this was the Warrior Lord's room. He reached into his cloak, and once again felt the now familiar warmth pulsating through the keys.

"So," he whispered to himself, "I have the key to the door! Of course!"

He gently slid the key into the lock. It turned with ease, and the old door creaked as it swung open. Gabe hesitated for a moment—not wanting to enter, and not sure what he was going to find in this dark and musty room.

But, taking a deep breath, he mustered all his courage and stepped across the threshold into the room. He slipped the keys out of the lock, and hid them back under his cloak. Cautiously he entered the room, looked around, and spotted what appeared to be curtains. He walked towards them and gently pulled them back, not knowing if they would fall apart in his hands or remain whole. As they opened, the late afternoon sun burst triumphantly into the room. When he had walked into the room, a thin cloud of dust had been stirred up, which now seemed to sparkle as the rays of sunlight shone upon it. He glanced around, spying large bookshelves on one hand, and a large trunk that surely possessed many treasures.

Hearing a noise behind him, he instinctively reached for his sword, unsheathed it and swung around in one quick movement. Silhouetted in the shadows of the open door, Gabe could make out the form of a man.

"Who are you?" Gabe asked authoritatively.

"So, you have finally come," the man snarled, and then entered the room. "Let me see your face, boy!" the man demanded. The light that shone in the windows had cast a shadow over Gabe's face, to where the man could not see him. He walked closer to Gabe, until he was standing practically right in front of him. Suddenly he stopped, and backed away in horror as if he'd seen a ghost. "My God! It's you!"

Gabe's grip tightened on his sword. Their eyes locked as the door behind them creaked, and shut. "You're Bazal, aren't you?" Gabe said, his eyes narrowing in righteous anger.

The man didn't respond, but suddenly broke out into a heinous laugh, snapping out of his shocked stupor. Finally, he hurled out, "You fool. You fool! I can't believe what a fool you are. You walk straight into my city, into my house, into my trap! Now I have you where I want you."

Gabe was startled to suddenly see a familiar figure walk out of the shadows of the closed door and stand beside Bazal. Bazal didn't flinch; indeed, he did not even acknowledge the presence of the tall stranger.

The stranger spoke, yet his lips did not move, "So, we meet again?"

Gabe felt no need to respond, instead he turned towards Bazal and ignored the stranger.

"You don't know how long I've waited to inherit the power of those keys," Bazal confided. "And now you ... you walk right into my hands with them! Now I can not only find the plans that hold the secret to the city of Citar, but I will be able to get the keys—and of course all the wisdom and wealth that is laid up in the chest."

He laughed. "Now I—now we," he said, nodding towards his companion, "will truly be most powerful—and all thanks to you!"

Up until this point Gabe had been apprehensive about coming face to face with Bazal. However, upon hearing Bazal's tirade, he took heart.

"You're nothing but an old fool," Gabe said out loud.

"I'm a fool? You're the one that walked into my trap! You are the fool! The powers you possess were not even able to keep you out of my grasp."

"You're a fool for listening to him," Gabe said, glancing towards the stranger who was glowering with glee. "Do you think he's going to let you keep all this power, wealth and treasure? He's going to use you. You're just a puppet—a lifeless, useless puppet. Once your usefulness is over, he will cast you aside, and all life, all spirit and any goodness that you have, and certainly all the evil you possess, will be sucked out of you. There will be nothing left. You're the fool, Bazal!"

Enraged at Gabe's disdain for him, Bazal commanded, "Give me the keys."

Gabe tightened his grip on his sword. "Over my dead body."

The tall stranger, who was really no stranger to Gabe, laughed menacingly as Bazal rose to the challenge. "Well then, so be it."

Bazal drew his sword, and pointed it towards Gabe. "Let's see what you're really made of." Suddenly the shadowy form of evil stepped forward, merging itself into Bazal's body. Bazal's face contorted and changed to suddenly reflect the gaze of the icy stranger, with dark pits of nothingness where his eyes had been.

And so, the fighting began. Though Bazal was nearly old enough to be Gabe's grandfather, he was still strong and fit—and he remained a master swordsman. The struggle was long and hard, with Bazal being empowered by the evil spiritual power. Though Gabe

did not know it, he had also been empowered by a fine warrior who had stepped into his body. Where Gabe was looking into the eyes of nothingness, Bazal was once again staring into the face of his father, the Warrior Lord, who had come to Gabe's aid.

The shock was almost too much for Bazal to bear—but he could do nothing, for his body was no longer his own. It was being manipulated by the evil stranger, who had now taken possession of not only his body, but also his life and his soul.

To the onlookers—and yes, there were onlookers, beings from the other worlds, both the world of light and the world of darkness—the fight was not a physical fight, nor were the weapons carnal weapons. Their swords were beams of light—a white light held by Gabe, and a dark red, glowing ember held in the hands of Bazal. Searing rays of light flashed across the room as the swords clashed against each other, and impulses of pure energy rippled through both bodies. They fought until dusk settled in the room, which was now only lit by the glowing swords and flashing beams of light.

Even though Gabe was supernaturally empowered, his long journey had taken its toll on his body, and he began to tire. To the contrary, the rage of the Evil One seemed to be driving Bazal and fueling his strength and stamina. Gabe vigilantly kept his guard up, and waited for the moment when Bazal—perhaps out of confidence, perhaps by mishap—would let down his. Finally, Bazal swung hard and furious at Gabe. Gabe deftly ducked to the side, the force of Bazal's blow burying his sword deep into the wood of an old table. Bazal struggled to retrieve his embedded sword with both of his hands, and when it was released, it swung high up in the air, leaving his front unguarded.

Seizing the moment, Gabe leapt forward and instantly plunged his sword deep into Bazal's heart.

Bazal looked down in shock as he took a step backward. His hands remained fastened around the hilt of his sword as it swung down and hit the ground in front of him. He lifted up his head to look at Gabe, as the black pits of nothingness suddenly began to glow like embers with a deep red.

Gabe faltered for a moment, and stepped back to watch the old man collapse. But he didn't. Instead, Bazal raised himself up, suddenly appearing much taller than he had before, and cackling with glee at the sight of Gabe's surprise.

"You were right, Gabe," Bazal answered, only the voice was no longer Bazal's, but that of the tall and evil stranger. "Bazal was useless; nothing but a wasted, foaming-mouthed old madman. But now that he is out of the way, I can take on the permanent physical form of a man. Now the time has come for my presence to be revealed, and for the real battle to begin. That despicable creature has gotten what he deserved, and you ... now it is your turn!" The tall stranger lifted his sword high to strike at Gabe, who stood frozen in stunned disbelief.

Too late, Gabe realized what was happening, and as if in slow motion, he watched the sword come down towards him. Unable to lift his sword in defense, Gabe held his breath and waited for the final blow.

But all in the same instant, Gabe felt a sudden surge of power roll down through his body. He began to hear faint snatches of music, the likes of which he'd never heard before. Without making any deliberate movements, Gabe's right hand, of its own accord, rose above his head, holding his sword high, pointing upward. The evil stranger paused as ripples of energy began pulsating through Gabe's body, beginning at the tip of his hand, passing through his head, and slowly making their way down through his entire body. At first the ripples were faint and barely discernible, but in a

matter of seconds, as each one came and went, they became stronger and stronger till they no longer felt like ripples of energy, but like sensations of pure joy and ecstasy.

The icy stranger now stood frozen in terror at the very bright light that had suddenly flooded the room. Gabe opened his hand and his sword clanged on the cold stone floor. His second hand also rose above his head, and then he vanished from the stranger's view.

Gabe felt his entire body begin to rise. Although it was barely noticeable at first, he slowly picked up speed till finally he was soaring through the air, his arms outstretched, his eyes closed, a look of sheer joy on his face. He didn't know what was happening. He didn't care what was happening—all he knew was that it was good. He opened his eyes for a moment, and thought he glimpsed the warm eyes of the Presence that had visited him, but, unable to focus on anything for any length of time, he quickly closed them again.

TRANSLATED

Time no longer had any meaning. Gabe was not able to comprehend the concept any longer—nor did he want to. After an undeterminable amount of time, Gabe found that his journey upward had come to an end. Finally he opened his eyes, lowered his hands and began to look around. Never had he seen such beauty! Beautiful fields full of colorful flowers stretched as far as the eye could see, only interrupted by majestic trees reaching up to a crystal blue sky with puffs of scattered fleecy white clouds. There was a haze all around, and though he could distinguish the flowers, trees and the grass, things still seemed to be slightly out of focus. He closed his eyes, rubbed them, and then opened them again. Still, the haze remained, adding an entrancing and mystical air to the beauty that surrounded him.

By this time he realized that he had been transformed into a being of light. He was not sure whether it was because the evil stranger had put an end to his life, or if it was because the age of the Whisperers had finally come, when all those who believed would be translated into the other world, and the reign of the Evil One brought to an end.

Gabe glanced over to the right, where he began to see someone walking towards him. Soon he could make out the features of a man. Gabe's eyes began to stream with tears when he realized it was the old man who had first told him the truth about the other world, and who Jenny had so patiently taken care of.

"Gabe! My child, welcome," the man greeted him with outstretched arms. "I'm so happy to see you! Well done, son, well done! You made it, you fought a good fight and you've won!" He smiled warmly as he hugged Gabe. The old man, who looked much younger and robust, but was still recognizable, pulled back to look

at Gabe again. "We have been waiting for you. It's wonderful to have you here. It's so wonderful to have *everyone* here!"

Gabe looked into his eyes. "Everyone?"

The man smiled and nodded. "Yes, yes. All of your friends are here too, Gabe!"

Then something strange began to happen. No sooner had the old man said this than the mist began to dissipate. Where Gabe had at first only seen expanses of fields, rolling hills, and trees, he now began to make out the shapes and forms of others around him. Bemused by the sudden appearance of so many people, where before he had not seen anyone, Gabe once again closed his eyes, rubbed them, and opened them.

The old man looked on with an amused smile. "Your eyes are only beginning to get adjusted."

Gabe looked at the old man. His features were much more sharp and clear than those of the faint shapes he was beginning to see around him.

"Don't worry," the old man reassured him. "You'll get used to it. It just takes a little while to adjust to some of these things."

As Gabe continued gazing around, the forms slowly became more defined and sharp. He could see many people. Soon he realized that as far as his eye could see there were people. It seemed as if everyone had been met by someone they knew. He watched in awe as the people milled about before his eyes. In some instances he could see people who were still only able to see the one who had first met them. They were either hugging them or talking with them, totally oblivious to everything else taking place around them. Others were, however, beginning to see the bigger picture and were focusing on those around them.

"Shebo?"

"Yes, Shebo's here," the old man said. "So are Rahim, Sir Laurent, Jenny and Diana—they're all here.

All of your friends are here, Gabe. They're actually all around here, and probably not too far away. Look around, maybe you'll see them."

Gabe looked around again, searching for a familiar face. He smiled as he saw Shebo off in the distance, his arm linked with Sasha, the old Drifter woman, as they began to come towards him.

"Shebo," Gabe pealed out excitedly.

"Gabe!"

They walked up to each other and hugged.

"Isn't this ..."

"It's more than I ever thought it would be," Shebo smiled.

"But what happened? How did you all get up Here?"

"Oh, Gabe, it was the most thrilling moment of my life!" Shebo exclaimed, as he went on to give a description of the battle for Citar, and what had become of the forces. "We fought ferociously, with neither side wanting to admit defeat. The losses were great for everyone, and soon we could hardly fight without stumbling over the dead. As the day began to draw to a close, there was still no victor, but no one wanted another day to come and go without a decisive victory. So we fought on, with whatever strength we could muster.

"Then, as the day was yielding to dusk, our forces greatly battered and outnumbered, a strange light shone down upon us. All the fighting ceased as we turned to face the light. Apparently it was too bright for the enemy, as many of them covered their eyes and fell to the ground. I lost all consciousness of anyone else at that point, and the next thing I knew, I found myself here, in this wonderful place. Oh, Gabe, did you ever imagine that the colors could be this beautiful?"

The crowd began thinning as people started moving around, grouping together with their friends and

relatives. It was not long before Gabe and Shebo met up with the others; Rahim, and his whole family, including Helena, along with Sir Laurent and others from Citar were soon gathered together, excitedly talking about what they had been through, and what was still to come. Jenny and Diana stood alongside, arm in arm. Gabe embraced each of them tenderly, teary-eyed with the emotion he felt at this joyful reunion with his loved ones. In the perfection that surrounded them, all that had once been uncertain was now understood.

After a while the old man turned and placed his hand on Gabe's arm and smiled. "Gabe, there's something we need to attend to. I'm sorry to have to ask you this, but would you mind if we left your friends for a while?"

Gabe could not even think of not complying with his request. "Certainly, whatever you say." Gabe bade his loved ones a quick farewell. Then the old man took Gabe by the arm and they began to glide off above the different groups of people. Gabe closed his eyes as he fully imbibed the joy and the total freedom of being able to so easily move about from place to place.

When Gabe opened his eyes, they had landed in front of a large building, the walls of which seemed to be made of pearl. It was beautiful and majestic. Gabe had never seen anything like it before, and his wonder and amazement was clearly visible on his face.

"It's overwhelming, isn't it, son? You'll probably get to come here quite often. But right now I have some people I would like you to meet." He smiled and, taking him by the hand, they half-walked, half-glided—Gabe was not sure which—up the steps, through a door, down a passageway and into a room. The room could be compared to an earthly library, yet it was different. Gabe looked in awe at the high walls and the

rows and rows of books. There were study desks scattered around the room, and beautiful paintings on the walls.

Gabe looked at the paintings of the heavenly pastoral scenes. As he stared into one of the paintings he was amazed at how it suddenly came alive. Indeed, each painting was a window into its own world. As he watched, the scene would play out before his eyes. The more he tuned into the scene, the further he traveled into it. His eyes were fixed on some children who were running and playing outside of a house. Suddenly, he was down there with them—hearing what they were saying, and watching what they were doing. The door of the house opened, and someone came out. "Children, come, it's time to go inside." He followed the children inside, into a beautiful room.

"Gabe, Gabe." Someone was tapping his shoulder. He turned his head, and suddenly found himself standing back in the room, in front of the picture.

"The paintings ... fascinating, aren't they? Each one tells a story. But I don't think we have time for that right now. There is someone here to meet you."

The old man stepped aside, and Gabe gasped as he saw Faethé standing behind him. She looked beautiful, and smiled broadly. It was only then that Gabe realized that there were four others standing behind her.

Faethé stepped aside as the figures glided closer to Gabe. He felt like he knew them, yet he didn't. Tears were streaming down the face of the woman. She held out her arms. "Gabriel, my son!"

Tears now began to fill Gabe's eyes, though he didn't quite know why. He slowly approached her outstretched arms, and was soon clasped in the woman's firm embrace. "Gabe, my beloved Gabe!" she sobbed. "Finally I can hold you in my arms. I've waited so long for this moment."

Gabe pulled back and looked at her. "Mother?"

The woman only nodded, unable to say anything more through her tears. Sobbing, they held each other for what seemed like an eternity. When his mother stepped back, she turned to introduce the other men.

"Gabe, this is your father, Sir Theodor of Citar, and this is your grandfather, Gabriel, whom you were named after. And this is your great grandfather, Denith, the Warrior Lord."

His father, a tall man, stood quietly behind his mother, and was lovingly holding her shoulders. He said nothing, but only nodded at Gabe, and smiled.

His grandfather was the first to speak. "I'm happy to meet you, son," he said as he put his arms around Gabe. "I'm so proud of you."

All at once, Gabe was overwhelmed with emotion as he realized that these great men, of whose mighty exploits he had only so recently come to learn, were his family. He couldn't help but stare, first at one, and then at the other in wonderment and awe, all the while not saying a word.

"You've carried on the family tradition well," Denith, the Warrior Lord, said, "and have been an excellent keeper of the keys."

"The keys!" Gabe was suddenly shocked out of his own surprise. He hadn't thought about the keys since he had arrived in this strange new world. He looked down and saw that his sword had not come with him, neither had any of his other earthly belongings. Even the garments he had worn had changed, as he had only just now noticed, and he was arrayed in a shimmering garment of colorful light. Yet he felt, as he reached under his cloak, the familiar warmth of the keys. They had made the journey with him.

"Yes, I still have the keys," he said triumphantly, as he pulled them out. And what a glorious sight they were to behold.

As all stood looking at them, the Warrior Lord said, his voice filled with emotion, "Congratulations, son. You have fulfilled the purpose of the keys, and completed that which we were entrusted to do. And now the keys are safely back where they belong." Tears of joy rolled down his face.

Gabe was puzzled. "The keys? They belong here?"

The old man spoke up, "Yes, for such has been the tale of the keys. Let me tell you what happened. You have heard the tale of the Warrior Lord, and of how his elder son, Bazal, tried to obtain the keys that had been given to him by beings from the other world. But he was foiled in his attempts by his younger brother—Gabriel, your grandfather—who rescued them and gave them to his daughter." The old man looked at Gabe's mother, who smiled, wiped away a tear, and nodded. Then the old man continued.

"After she fled the city with Sir Theodor—your father—taking with them the trunk of books and the keys that had been rescued from the Warrior Lord's room, they journeyed long and far, until one day your father fell ill and died. She was not able to carry the trunk much further, for she discovered that she was with child. She locked the trunk and buried it in a cave. She was already great with child when she found me, being led to me by the whispers—and she delivered the keys into my hands. Her journey had been long, tiring and stressful. She gave birth to you, Gabe, but in so doing, she died.

"I was not to tell you about the keys, nor were you to know anything about them, lest the Evil One find you and tempt your heart as he had done with Bazal. Thus it was that you were brought up by kind folks in the valley, who did so as a favor to me. You never knew who I was, though I think deep inside perhaps you did." The old man smiled as he concluded the story. "So, that's how you finally came

to hold the keys, and here you are. And now they are here, too!”

A new voice suddenly spoke up from behind. “And how happy this has made Me!”

Gabe swung around, and once again found himself gazing into the kindest eyes he had ever seen. Gabe smiled as he recognized the presence of the gentle Stranger who had come to comfort him after his struggle with the Evil One. Overwhelmed by love and feelings that he had no name for, Gabe fell to his knees and bowed his head, realizing he was in the presence of the great Lord of the Light. Once again those warm hands caressed his head, stroked his cheek, and helped him rise to his feet. Instinctively, Gabe reached out and handed over the keys.

“Thank you, My child,” the great Presence spoke, as His words could be felt deep within Gabe’s soul. “You have stayed true to the cause, and have been a faithful warrior. Thank you.”

Gabe could say nothing, for it seemed to him that any words he could utter would never be enough.

“Yes, truly, the mysteries up Here are too deep to even begin to comprehend or explain. But let Me tell you why it was necessary for you to have the keys, and what is about to happen now! We here are still engaged in a battle between good and evil. There have always been the forces of good fighting against the forces of evil, the colors of light against the shades of darkness.

“As we hold the power of the colors of light, so the Evil One holds the power of the shades of darkness—the world of gray. By not resisting his powers, men became lost in these shadows of darkness, to where they were no longer able to see the colors of light, and therefore they were no longer able to see the manifestations of the power of light—the colors.

“And so it was that I made the keys, as a gift to

the beings of man, that if they would accept and believe, they would see them, and the power of the keys would help to open their eyes to the colors of light around them. The beings of man had been so blinded to the colors of light that they needed a sign, a symbol, to help them to once again make that contact with the beings of light, who were invisible in the shades of darkness.

“When he learned of them, the Evil One sought above all else to acquire these keys for himself, that he might find a way to use them to influence the perception of man against the colors. And now, in the time of this great and final struggle, the Evil One thinks that he has won. He thinks that he has killed you, and that, in killing you, he has conquered the power of the keys and captured the power of the Warrior Lord, whose sword he has now taken up. And with all his evil power embodied in Bazal’s flesh, he now seeks to establish his domains in all the lands of man—and to destroy the forces of light once and for all.

“But this is all part of the great plan. It was his knowledge that the time was short that tempted the Evil One to enter Bazal’s body, so that he himself could take possession of the keys, and the powers that they contained, by killing you. The moment the Evil One stepped into Bazal’s body, and Bazal’s body was killed, the Evil One himself could supernaturally empower all the forces of darkness to fight against the City of Light, and to attempt to bring the rest of the peoples of the earth under his domination. Thus, the mission was completed, and once all these things had been brought to pass, preparing the way for the great confrontation to come, the purpose for these keys had been fulfilled.

“And now, My faithful warriors, the time has come to return to the realm of the beings of man and do battle once again—that we may defeat this Lord of the

Shadows and all that he stands for. Even now, the kings of the east have set sail to do battle with the forces of darkness, who have regrouped under the direct leadership of the Evil One himself. He has come to lead them in his final quest to stamp out all who oppose him. But we shall come to their aid, and speedily. And these," He said, lifting the ring of keys in His hand with a smile, "will no longer be needed!"

THE GREAT BATTLE

As the sun began its ascent over a very weary world, all that was left was despair, dismay, death and fear. All hope had left the world when those who belonged to the forces of light had so mysteriously vanished, translated into the other world and rescued from the clutches of the dark forces they had so bravely fought.

Battles were still being fought by the allies of Citar, those who had not accepted all that the people of Citar believed in, yet who were like-minded in their hatred for the Evil One. Many of the Barons had also remained, though they pulled back from the battle and retreated to the coastal regions to await their reinforcements—especially now that the stranger had appeared and taken command of the enemy's forces. The troops were infused with new strength and courage by the stirring words that this evil stranger spoke.

Yet at the same time, strange tales that incited fear in the hearts of man were told of all that was happening in the lands of darkness. Many were afflicted with sores and disease, while others had been killed by mysterious showers of rocks. It was as if the Evil One had indeed brought hell on earth.

As the scattered forces of the Evil One regrouped, they prepared to abandon their siege of the city, and instead to seek out and destroy all the allies who had come crawling out of their crevices in support of the city of Citar, including the Baronial forces.

The allies of Citar soon also regrouped, gathering themselves to the Baronial forces, and taking courage that a great army was coming from across the waters, and was soon to join them.

News of the coming armada* of Baronial forces had also reached the evil stranger, and struck fear into the hearts of his forces of darkness. But the Evil One

remained undaunted, and relentlessly urged his army on to battle, seeming to delight in the carnage and destruction that he was creating.

The swift arrival of the remainder of the Baronial forces infused fresh strength and spirit into the ailing allied forces. But with their arrival, the battles only intensified until it seemed as if all the world, what was left of it, was engaged in battle. Death, destruction, and heartbreak overtook all the regions round about, even those who had not involved themselves in the fighting.

By midday, the searing heat of the sun was almost too much for the soldiers on both sides to bear. The endless clashing of swords and sounds of war filled the air. Some of the more perceptive souls hesitated for a moment, as the sounds of battle began to echo in a strange stillness that was settling upon the battlefield. It was a strange contrast—a stillness so still that it could almost be seen, a quietness so quiet that it could almost be heard. The empty sounds of war struggled as if trying to fight against it, yet they were swallowed up by the strength of the stillness. Men began to lower their swords and look up, searching the stillness. As they did, even those who were too uncouth to perceive the difference also lowered their swords till soon a stillness had covered the entire battlefield and all movement had halted.

The faint sound of a trumpet resonated in the distance, breaking through the awesome stillness. But the sound was not really a sound, just as the stillness was not really stillness. Again, though not perceived by all men, there was a subtle change in the world around them. So subtle that one could not see anything change, yet when they turned, the changes could be seen. It was almost as though the entire world was being transformed. As the silent noise grew louder, all eyes turned to the shapes that were beginning to ap-

pear in the sky above, and on the earth around them. A ripple went through the crowd as they began to distinguish the shapes of men on horses approaching them from all sides, and from above. A golden glow, now seen by all, was surrounding and backlighting this mysterious army.

The icy stranger stood with the others and watched the approaching army, knowing full well who was coming.

Shaken, but not defeated, he shouted orders to his men. “Regroup! Draw your swords, and prepare to fight!”

Even though they were used to immediately obeying the words of the tall stranger, this time they hesitated, wondering how they would ever be able to fight such an army. Reluctantly they tightened their grips upon their swords and lifted them in a challenging manner, high above their heads.

The beings on horseback were soon upon them, and with a vigor, a fervor, a skill and power that had never before been seen, they began to systematically destroy all the forces of evil that had held the world in their grip of darkness for so long. They fought relentlessly, cheered on by the remaining allied forces, for it was obvious that these warriors needed no help. No weapon that was raised against them was able to harm them, for they were untouchable beings of light who could not be touched by the weapons of man.

Gabe triumphantly rode alongside Rahim and Shebo. His heart was bursting with passion and joy at the chance to finally set the world right, to take possession of all the regions where the gift of the colors had been stolen from the beings of man. The day had come that the forces of light would once again reign supreme and the colors would once again cover the world—shedding their beauty upon everything and everyone that remained.

At the head of the forces, the Lord of the Light, the Master of the Colors and Maker of the Keys, rode majestically on a white horse. At His side rode the Warrior Lord and the Warrior Son. Without hesitation, they headed straight for the Evil One. Just the majesty of their presence, and especially the Presence of the Lord of the Light, was powerful enough to vanquish all the minions of darkness who beheld them.

The Evil One looked up at them, not able to turn away his gaze from the approaching Lord of Light, knowing that his end had come. With His horse rising up on its hind legs, the powerful and majestically colorful figure brandished His sword of light and then plunged it deep into the heart of darkness.

With that, the Evil One fell from his horse, his body hitting the ground with a dull thud that reverberated across the fields. As the forces of light looked on, the spirit of the Evil One sank into the depths of the earth, leaving behind an empty shell of nothingness. At the same moment, all forces of the shadows and creatures of the netherworld vanished, following the Evil One into his timeless grave.

And thus the great battle was waged, and won by the forces of the light. The battle for the hearts and lives and minds of men had come to an end. Color once again flooded the world and washed over the lands from shore to shore, cleansing all who remained. The time of restoration, the Age of the Whisperers had come, and the keys rested safely in the hands of their Maker.

“And I saw Heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and He that sat upon him was called Faithful and True.”

GLOSSARY

- abject:** downcast, disheartened
- acquiesce:** to passively agree
- affirm:** to declare solemnly or firmly
- amicably:** with goodwill and friendliness
- armada:** a fleet of warships
- ascertain:** make sure, be certain
- ascribe:** attribute to a certain source
- assertive:** boldly assured that something is true
- bemused:** bewildered
- benevolence:** a generous gift; a kind deed
- berate:** to angrily rebuke or scold for a lengthy amount of time
- berth:** a place for a ship to dock and moor
- blustery:** loud, bragging
- burly:** heavy and strong, muscular
- camaraderie:** goodwill and light-hearted rapport between friends
- catapulted:** to be hurled or launched, as from a catapult
- charismatic:** magnetically fervent or enthusiastic
- clamor:** to express noisily
- concoct:** make up
- congenial:** friendly, agreeable
- conjecture:** to assume from inconclusive evidence
- coyly:** acting flirtatiously shy or modest
- demeanor:** one's behavior or attitude
- demurely:** shyly, modestly, in a reserved manner
- despicable:** deserving of contempt or scorn
- despondent:** discouraged, dejected, without hope
- dexterity:** skill and grace in physical movement, and especially in the use of the hands
- disconcerting:** unexpected, upsetting one's established frame of reference
- disquieted:** made uneasy, troubled
- dissuaded:** deterred from a certain course of action by persuasion
- drawl:** to speak unclearly, with drawn-out vowels
- ecstatic:** in a state of intense and joyful emotion
- elude:** escape by cleverness and skill
- emanate:** to come from a given source

emissary: an agent sent on a mission to represent or advance the interests of another
evade: to cleverly escape or avoid
expedite: to hasten, perform swiftly
fathom: comprehend
fettered: shackled, chained
foreboding: ominous, giving a sense of impending evil
formidable: challenging, difficult to confront or defeat
garb: a distinctive style or form of clothing
hapless: unfortunate
heinous: grossly wicked, reprehensible or repulsive
illumine: to light up
impending: something that is about to happen
implore: to appeal desperately
inaudible: impossible to hear
intently: firmly fixed
invincible: impossible to defeat, unconquerable
jovial: merry, cheerful
labyrinth: an intricate structure of interconnecting passageways, through which it is difficult to find one's way
lamely: poorly
limbered: a grammatical variation of the adjective "limber", meaning to be supple or flexible
lumber: to walk or move with heavy clumsiness
meander: to move indirectly
melancholy: a state of sadness and depression; pensive contemplation
mien: bearing and manner
minions: submissive and slaving assistants
mull: to think about, or ponder extensively
muster: gather together
myriad: innumerable; a vast number
nary: not one
orchestrate: to arrange, plan, coordinate
overt: obvious, open
palette: a range and set of colors used in a certain environment
parched: very dry
parrying: deflecting or warding off oncoming thrusts or blows
pastoral: related to country life, charmingly simple and serene

pensive: in deep, or often wistful, thought
pensively: in a deeply thoughtful way
perception: recognition, insight; an intuition or feeling
perceptive: keen or discerning
plunder: to take items by force
portly: of a round figure
precipice: edge or brink, often before a steep drop
premonition: a sense that something is about to happen; a warning in advance
query: ask
rapt: deeply absorbed, engrossed
raucous: rough-sounding, boisterous
recede: to move back or away
relieved: rescued from siege
reprieve: temporary relief
resolutely: in a determined or unwavering manner
reticent: quiet, prone to keep personal affairs to one's self
reticently: Reluctant to share one's personal feelings or thoughts
reverie: a state of abstract thought, daydreaming
ruse: a clever and deceptive plan
silvan: pertaining to trees and forests
somberness: seriousness, importance
splutter: to speak in a rapid, but halting and confused manner
subverter: one who seeks to destroy or overthrow
succinctly: clearly, precisely
surmise: to make a guess, or come to an assumed conclusion
surrealistic: having an oddly dreamlike quality
tactile: tangible, something that can be touched
unabashed: obviously, without embarrassment
uncouth: crude, unrefined
vast: large, extensive, immense
vivacity: being full of life and spirit
wily: cunning, sly
winsome: charming
wizened: old and wrinkled, withered

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Clive Staples (C.S.) Lewis (1898-1963), British scholar and author, born in Belfast, Northern Ireland. After years of experiencing religious doubt, he converted to Christianity in the 1930s. Lewis then became a leading defender of Christianity. Lewis was best known for his books on religion. The most popular of these books was “The Screwtape Letters” (1942), a satirical set of directions from one demon to another on how to lead men to Hell. He also wrote a series of books for children, called the “Chronicles of Narnia” (containing, among many others, the story of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*). His stories combined myth and fantasy with moral principles.

“He was definitely into spiritism. C.S. Lewis was smart, he wrote these stories, these tales like *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and stuff like that, and he knew a lot about the spirit world and especially the Devil’s work, etc. There’s a lot of theology and doctrine in C.S. Lewis’ works. At least they got people to read about God and the Devil and how they work! ... By his story, his fanciful tale, he’s bringing out tremendous truths.”—Dad.