

**PRINCESS ETHERIA
and the Battling Bucks**

A fairy tale that anyone can realize.

**PART 1
in the Princess Etheria Chronicles**

Written and Illustrated
by
DWAYNE R. JAMES

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The Princess Etheria Chronicles

A five part series from Dwayne R. James

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DEDICATION

*For my daughter Violet,
who fills my waking world with wonder.*

*The whole thing's for you Peep,
especially Chapter 24.*

*May your dreams always be happy,
May they all come true.
May they live inside your memory in daylight too.
And if you start to lose your faith in what dreams can do.
Just remember my best dreams came to life with you.*

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PROLOGUE

The Homewood Institute for Mental Health
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
From the Journal of **Cyan Daniels**, patient
Female, age 14.

July 22, 2011

My Mother came to visit me today.

I wasn't expecting her, but she apparently wants to come with me to my appointment with Dr. Stevens later this afternoon. I immediately begin to wonder if this is a good thing.

Mother greets me warmly at the security desk, and I have to admit it's good to see her in spite of the obvious tension between us. I usher her into the visitor's lounge. As she sweeps into the busy room, all the eyes there swivel and lock onto her, and it's like I'm noticing her for the first time too. She looks out of place here, I realize. She's dressed way too colourfully. Not that I'm judging mind you, because it's how I would be dressing too if I had the choice. It's just that her outfit stands out in explosive contrast against the institution's soft whites and muted pastels.

We sit down across from each other at a table by the window, and engage in banal small talk. She's clutching her oversized purse to her knees, and is perched densely on the bench like she doesn't want to touch any more of it than she has to. She's coiled and wound tighter than a spring. She doesn't want to be here. For once I'm in agreement with her about something.

We exchange a few pleasantries. Mother is perfectly civil, at least until she starts in on me again with the guilt. Apparently, her life is hard without me at home, and she's having to do all of my chores for me. What's more, friends and neighbours are asking awkward questions to the point where she doesn't want to even check her e-mail, or answer the phone anymore.

Funny how she can make my being in an institution all about her. Why is it that her odd behaviour is acceptable, but mine gets me locked up? Oh yeah, I'm the minor here.

Finally, she sees fit to include me in our conversation. By this point, the warmth I had for her earlier has evaporated, and I'm starting to feel a little edgy. I can sense the argument coming the same way you can smell an approaching storm sweeping down the river valley.

"So, how are you Cyan?" Mother asks stiffly.

"Well, it's not the RestEddy cabin," I respond calmly while gesturing around us. "But the food is actually pretty good. Better than Dad's is," I add jokingly. I look at Mother. She's not laughing. In fact, her whole body seems to be folding in on itself. I imagine that this is what the Big Bang was like: everything being sucked into a central point, in anticipation of being blown wildly out across the Universe.

"The grounds here are nice too," I continue carefully. "And there are a lot of humans to talk to as well, which I'm not used to. So that's something."

I swear that I'm not trying to pick a fight with her. I'm just fed up with being told what to believe, and that I should doubt my own perceptions. I'm trying to reject my Mother's attempts at control as gracefully and as kindly as I can, given the circumstances.

Across the table, Mother swallows heavily. She's clutching her purse so tightly now that her knuckles are white. When she speaks, her words are measured and drawn out. "I see you're still holding on to that fairy tale."

“Thenken’s real Mom,” I respond immediately. “It’s as real as this chair that I’m sitting in. You should know—you’ve been there yourself. You were even the...”

“CYAN!” she screeches harshly at me. Then, realizing how loudly she’d spoken, and that people were now turning to look at her, she reigns herself in. It’s like watching a bolt of lightning getting pulled back into a cloud. She continues to bristle with unreleased rage though and, when she speaks, her voice comes out like water being forced through a hose with a thumb blocking its nozzle.

“What you claim to dream is one thing,” she hisses as she crosses herself furiously, “but then to insist that it’s all real!” Her voice drops to a raspy whisper, “A dreamworld where animals can speak,” she scoffs. “It’s simply ridiculous. It’s insane!” She emphasizes her last word by gesturing with her eyes at the pyjama-clad residents at the other tables, and the clinical white panelled walls that surround us all.

I sigh deeply, and drop the subject. As usual, she takes my refusal to argue as an indication that she’s won, and continues, more to herself now than before.

“It’s just another one of your father’s legacies I suppose. I’d hoped that, with him gone, you’d have come to your senses by now.”

I stare blankly at my Mother, and she looks at me expectantly. What she just said should upset me, but I know that she’s just lashing out so that she can provoke a response from me. She’s hoping that, if she can get me to yell at her in public—especially here in the institution—then suddenly she’ll be the victim, and she’ll get justification for putting me here.

Still, I’m surprised that she tried to bait me using Dad’s death. That’s a first, even for her. She must be running out of ideas on how to pull me into an argument, which is understandable with what I discovered about conflict resolution that time in the glade.

“I knew things were starting to go just a little too well last year,” she continues. “It had to come to an end somehow, and it certainly did, what with your father dying, and you going off the deep end. I can’t wait to see what happens to me next!” She says more than a little sarcastically. “You know what they say: Bad things always happen in threes!”

I chuckle inwardly and struggle not to crack a smile at her turn of phrase. GOOD things happen in threes as well Mother, I think to myself.

I look calmly at my Mother. To be fair, I don’t think she’s really trying to be mean. Self centered? Absolutely. Spiteful? Perhaps. But not mean.

Sure, she and Dad had been divorced for years, but his death last year still hit her pretty hard, and she was obviously worried about my feelings at the time too. I saw how upset she was after the funeral, so I tried to reassure her that Dad wasn’t really dead, and that I still saw him every night when I dreamed of the Thenken forest.

That was my first mistake.

The second one was writing about the forest in my journal, and then leaving the journal someplace where she could find it (like locked in my bed-side table for instance).

My final mistake was not renouncing the whole thing as fantasy to the legion of child psychology professionals my Mother subjected me to over the next six months. It would have been easier to lie I suppose, but I couldn’t. Something deep down told me that I had to stay true to Thenken, and not falsely deny it, even to protect myself. Dad agreed. So did our Royal advisors, even though they all warned that the path I was headed down was a difficult one.

“It is rarely a good thing to lie about what you know to be true,” said Oberon, one of Dad’s closest friends and advisors. “You risk learning to deny it to yourself. Just look at what happened to Ephemora.”

And, so that brings me here: A private mental health facility where my Mother's stubbornly held signature is the only key that can open the door to the outside world for me.

I smile at my Mother, and it unnerves her even as it seems to help her realize that she crossed a line. She changes the topic.

"I was at the bookstore the other day and saw your friend Christine..."

"Catherine," I say before I can stop myself.

"I'm pretty sure that's what I said," she retorts.

I should know better than to correct Mother; she doesn't like to be shown to be wrong, even when she is. She stares at me icily for a time, sighs heavily, and finally speaks.

"Dr. Stevens says that you're not coming along as well as she'd hoped," she says, a healthy hint of I-told-you-so in her voice.

"Good ol' Dr. S." I reply as I look out the window towards the glass and steel of the tall buildings beyond. The sky over the city is a dirty blue, and the sun seems to be fighting with the clouds to brighten up the skyline. In spite of myself, I'm imagining that I can transform into a bird, and shoot out through the window, past the skyscrapers, and escape into the forest beyond the city.

"We've agreed to try drug therapy on you," Mother says, shifting uncomfortably on the bench.

This gets my attention, I look back at her sceptically.

"We?" I question her with an obvious doubt in my voice. I'm pretty sure I know whose idea it really was.

"It's a new drug I read about on the internet," she replies as she looks down at her purse. "It suppresses dreams."

And there it is. Now I know whose idea it was.

"Lovely," I say.

Mother continues to talk, but I'm not really listening anymore. I'm staring past her at the dust particles in the room that are dancing in the beams of sunlight and, for a moment, I'm floating in a vast cavernous room amongst the stars.

An attendant approaches the table, and tells us that the doctor is ready to see us now. We follow him down a long hallway with its calming Plexiglas covered artwork, all of it fastened securely to the wall.

We turn a corner, walk through a set of doors, and finally come to a stop in front of a half-open door with a brass plaque on it that reads 'Dr. D. Stevens'. Inside the office, the occupant is whistling something bright and happy, something that is totally out of synch with my mood.

The attendant knocks lightly, and Dr. Stevens welcomes us into a small office that is understated and, above all, comforting. Overflowing bookcases choke the room from floor to ceiling, and a couple of framed pictures and diplomas compete for the wall space that remains.

I settle heavily into the arm chair by the window, and stare up at the large painting that hangs behind the doctor's desk. It's an image of two young, obviously twin, boys playing in the water on the shore of a river, and already the forest behind the boys is drawing my eyes, and distracting me. It's pretty much the same forest that I was imagining myself in as a bird earlier.

The two adults in the room chat politely. It's Mother's first visit to this office, although I've been here loads of times.

"Are those your boys?" Mother asks gesturing to the painting. I'm presuming that this is just a power trip for her, and that she's trying to form a maternal bond with the doctor in order to create a clique that I couldn't possibly be a member of.

“Yes they are,” answers Dr. Stevens proudly. “That’s Kirk on the left, and Mason on the right. They’re almost two years old now, and so much like their father.”

I can’t hold it in any longer, and snort out a derisive laugh in spite of myself. They both look at me. Mom’s glare is disapproving, but Dr. Stevens is staring at me like she knows better, and so should I. There is admonishment in her gaze, but it’s reassuringly gentle.

Mother assumes that my reaction had been because of the word ‘father’, so she quickly apologizes, and tells the doctor that my Dad’s death has been particularly hard on me. “They were very close,” she explains by way of an excuse, but the resentment in her voice makes it sound dirty somehow.

“Yes, that would certainly explain why she continues to dream so intensely about him,” offers Dr. Stevens kindly.

“But she’s been here a whole month,” counters Mother loudly, “and she still insists that the dreams are real! And that he’s still alive! Shouldn’t she have accepted his death by now?”

Calmly, Dr. Stevens answers, “People do grieve in their own way Mrs. Daniels, but I understand your concern, which is why I agreed to this new therapy.” She turns to me. Finally, they seem to realize that I’m still in the room. “Do you understand what we’re going to do today Cyan?”

I look up at the doctor, but can’t form any words. The enormity of what my Mother is doing to me is just finally sinking in. She’s trying to sever the last connection I have with Dad. My bottom lip quivers, so I shore it up by clenching my jaw, and I nod quickly.

Dr. Stevens smiles, and I begin to feel better almost immediately. Then, she explains the plan to me. The drug they want to give me has some complicated name that would be worth a fortune on a Scrabble board, and it’s supposed to interfere with REM sleep in some way to keep a person from dreaming. It’s usually used on people who suffer from debilitating nightmares, and is not supposed to have any side effects.

It’s obvious that Dr. Stevens is simply deferring to my Mother here, and trying to keep her happy which, as I well know, can often be a full-time job. Today’s appointment is clearly not a debate, the decision has been made for me. This fact is all the more clear when Dr. Stevens draws the conversation to a close by using the intercom on her desk to call somebody into her office.

A young nurse enters and hands me a little paper cup with pills in it, along with another cup full of water. Everyone stands there and watches me put the pills in my mouth, and then wash them down with water. I’m then asked to open my mouth and stick out my tongue to prove that I’ve swallowed them.

“Thank you Kimberly,” says Dr. Stevens to the nurse, who nods her head and quickly steps out.

I settle heavily into my seat, wishing that my pyjamas had pockets so that I could bury my hands in them. Dr. Stevens gets up, walks around her desk and holds something out towards me. It’s a thick book with a black cover. I take it, mumble a thank you, and flip through it. All the pages are blank.

“It’s a journal,” she says. “It’s part of your new therapy. I want you to use it to record what you’re feeling without worrying that anybody will read it.”

I look up at her surprised. So does Mother.

“This is PRIVATE Cyan,” emphasized Dr. Stevens. “It is yours. You have my word that nobody will read this book unless you want them to.”

I look down at the book on my lap. Suddenly, it seems a lot more valuable to me. My imagination is immediately engaged. Off in the distance I can hear Mother protesting the privacy condition, and claiming that it was only through reading my journal at home that she was able to discover the depth of my 'disorder'.

Dr. Stevens raises her hand to silence my Mother. "This is important," the doctor says. "If you want me to continue supporting the drug therapy, then you have to respect this."

Mother backs down immediately, and the doctor turns her attention back to me. "There are two key aspects to my therapy. Journaling is the first one, and is the only way that we can hope to get honesty from your daughter. This will allow her to speak her mind, especially when she's used to not having a say."

I'm beginning to like the way the Doctor speaks to my Mother. "What's the second aspect?" I ask.

"Lots of sleep," she answers.

Fascinating.

Later, standing at the door by the security desk, my Mother and I exchange uncomfortable good-byes. She's still staring at the empty journal that I'm cradling against my chest as if it's going to jump right up and bite her.

Finally, she turns to leave, and I say, "Mi'raute, Mother."

"What?" she replies, clearly alarmed.

"Nothing," I respond with a heavy sigh. "See you next week."

I watch her until she's left the building, and then walk back to the lounge, where I find Cedric and Nigel playing chess at a table by the window.

Nigel looks up as I approach, and asks, "How'd it go Princess?" We all freeze at his choice of words. I look over my shoulder nervously and spot Nurse Kimberly standing over by the computers. I'm pretty sure that she heard what Nigel said. The look on her face is obviously disapproving.

"Nigel," I say quietly, "It's dangerous for you to call me that here."

This is a real concern for me. I don't want anyone believing that I've polluted Cedric and Nigel's minds somehow. It would just make their stay in the institution more complicated than it has to be. "And besides, in the waking world, I'm just Cyan."

"We talked about this Nigel," says Cedric who finally sets the chess piece down that he'd been holding in the air above the board.

"Sorry," replies Nigel clearly embarrassed. "Force of habit."

I reach over and rustle his thick black hair. "No harm done."

They go back to their chess game, and I settle into a comfortable easy chair. I'm looking at the empty journal again while I ponder the events of the last hour.

Mother was certainly her classic self today, but I've grown used to her. She rarely upsets me anymore. Yes, I'm still trapped here in this institution, but Dad always says that every negative has a little positive in it. This place may not be the greatest, but at least it's better than being at home right now with Mother the way she is.

I smile internally. My trepidation at this situation is suddenly mixed with hope. Mother might be trying to stop me from dreaming, but I've got memories of dreams that would fill a whole book—this book—and I now have a lot of time on my hands in which to do it.

Yep, I've got me a heckuva story to write...

Wait, now that I think about it, I'm actually going to have to agree with Mother on this one: this isn't just a story, it really is more of a fairy tale isn't it?

And, as I look down at the thick empty journal in my hands, I can feel most of the words begin to flow.

But, where, and how, to start?

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INTRODUCTION

I want to tell you a fairy tale but, to be honest, I'm not entirely sure how to begin.

"Once upon a time" is such a cliché, and not entirely accurate anyhow. It seems to me that the "when" of my fairy tale isn't nearly as important as the "where". You see, I want to tell you about something that happened in an enchanted forest called Thenken.

The concept of an enchanted forest certainly isn't a new one. In fact I'm pretty sure that, by now, you've read about so many such forests, that you might think that you know what to expect from one. Still, I doubt that you've heard of another place quite like Thenken, and I'm pretty sure that this is the only enchanted forest that you've actually visited yourself.

Does this surprise you?

The thing is, we've all been to Thenken before, in one form or another, as we are all connected to it through our thoughts. A part of us goes there every time we have an idea, or zone out in a daydream, or use our imagination, or close our eyes to dream.

Yes, that's right. You read that correctly.

Thenken is a dream world. This means that anything you can possibly conceive of in your mind can also appear in Thenken. So, this forest can seem pretty normal, yet pretty extraordinary and weird all at the same time. More importantly, because the forest exists in an astral plane where our dreams are made manifest, each and any one of us can visit it any time we want to.

In essence, Thenken is like every sense of déjà-vu that you've ever had rolled into one, and stretched out to span the horizons. When you're in Thenken, you know that you've been there before, and you know that you'll be back.

Is it coming back to you yet?

If not, then just sit back and relax, think very carefully, and try to remember your dreams. Don't worry if you can't think of any right away, because that's perfectly normal. A lot of our dreams don't come back to us immediately but, rest assured, they all leave an impression.

In fact, I'm pretty sure that, if I were to tell you to close your eyes while I described the Thenken forest, chances are you'd begin to remember what it feels like to be there.

If I described the smell of pine trees on a warm summer breeze, you'd remember that dream where you were standing in a pine glade looking up through the branches at the blue morning sky. Or perhaps you'd be able to recall the dry warmth of the bright sunlight on your face as you sat on a rock on the edge of a sparkling lake or river. Or what it felt like to float in that warm water without a canoe or a boat, or how you could swim underwater without having to hold your breath.

You might faintly recall walking along a forest path with the branches brushing by you, tiny twigs crunching underfoot, and wildflowers of every colour imaginable springing up all around you. You might even have a fuzzy memory of running along those same paths using all four of your legs to propel you.

It's starting to sound vaguely familiar isn't it?

Perhaps you might even recall that, on your last visit, you had a long conversation with one of the forest's many resident animals, and it didn't seem at all unusual to you that you were talking to an animal who was returning the favour. It was a dream after all, and an enchanted forest to boot, so animals chatting over a cup of tea was perfectly acceptable, under the circumstances.

Yes, the animals of Thenken are a very civilized lot. Nobody gets preyed upon or eaten, and each species has its own particular role to play in the Kingdom.

Oh, did I mention that Thenken was a Kingdom as well?

Thenken's Royal family, are also coincidentally the only human residents of the forest: King Rowan, and his daughter, Princess Etheria.

You'll meet the King as we go along, but I want to tell you a bit about Etheria, since this fairy tale is mostly all about her. At only twelve years old, Princess Etheria was wise well beyond her years, and already very powerful in the many forms of Thenken magic. In the forest, she could manifest whatever she wished from thin air, and she could assume whatever form she wanted as well. Indeed, the Princess was like a force of nature in the Thenken forest. She could even command the rain to fall and the sun to shine, but usually didn't, because she liked to be surprised when she woke up in the morning.

Etheria was like most other girls her age. She was bright and full of energy and was always asking questions, and breaking rules. Her face was framed by a thick mane of dark red hair, and her eyes were completely black, and glowed in a way that blackness shouldn't be able to.

I'd wager that Rowan and Etheria weren't a thing like any of the Royalty that you've heard about in the waking world. For one, they didn't live in a grand castle, and didn't have an army of servants at their beck and call. Instead, they lived in a modest log cabin called the RestEddy on the rocky shores of the Sweetwater River. They cooked their own meals, washed their own clothes and cleaned up their own messes—sometimes, right away.

Under King Rowan, Thenken was a Kingdom of peace, for Rowan knew that the moment you amassed an army to protect yourself from conflict, you created the very conflict that you were trying to avoid. So, Thenken was without a military, without massively destructive weapons and, most importantly, entirely without war. To be sure, it still had knights, as well as its squires (knights in training), but, instead of fighting, it was their job to serve the residents of the forest with as much chivalry and gallantry as their title implied.

I'd like to tell you that danger did not exist in Thenken either, but that would be lying. Rowan did not sugar coat things for Etheria, and he warned her about the hazards in the forest that lived side by side with the wonders. He didn't do it to scare her (he certainly didn't want her to live in a state of constant fear) but simply to help improve her awareness. He never discouraged her daily explorations of Thenken, because he knew that she had her magic to protect her, but he did assign two Royal squires to her, more for company than for anything else.

The squires were two wily and talkative squirrels named Cedric and Nigel. Affectionately, they were known in the Kingdom as the "Squirrel Squires", but Etheria found this to be too much of a tongue twister, so she simply called them her squire-els.

The three of them quickly became the best of friends, and their explorations of the forest became the stuff of legends.

In Thenken, that's saying a lot.



There is so much more to say about this enchanted forest, but this is just supposed to be a simple introduction, so I'll fill you in as we go along. Besides, I've still got to figure out where to begin my story.

Well, perhaps it would be appropriate to start this particular fairy tale as such:

Once upon a dream...

Princess Etheria was walking through the Thenken forest with her squire-els Cedric and Nigel...

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CHAPTER 1

The Bucks in the Glade

It was early summer in the Thenken forest, and the morning was bright and comfortably cool. The earthen path along which Princess Etheria and her squire-els Cedric and Nigel travelled was slightly overgrown, but well-packed even though it had clearly not seen regular foot, hoof, or paw traffic in some time.

As the Princess walked and whistled, she took in the scenery all around her while her squire-els scampered about up ahead, chasing the occasional bird (who were quick to loudly chastise the energetic rodents).

Despite the clear sky and bright sun, yesterday's rain storm was still stubbornly insisting to the forest—and to anyone else that would listen—that it wasn't actually finished yet, but had simply been interrupted. All around Etheria, countless rain drops, having spent a restless night's sleep clinging to branches, leaves, and blades of grass, took advantage of the slightest provocation to triumphantly resume their journey towards the earth. Upon arrival on the ground,

some of these rain drops sunk into the wet soil with a self-satisfied sigh, while others were herded into puddles along the path, where they stubbornly resisted the efforts of the young morning sun to pull them back up into the sky.

It was quiet in the forest. I'm not talking absolute silence here, because the birds were still singing, various animals were calling, and the wind played a persistent rustling song as it breathed through the dancing leaves on the trees. I'm talking the kind of quiet that most of us raised in the city rarely experience. In the city, you're constantly bombarded with the loud cacophony produced by the love affair between machines and people. In the forest, you are instead treated uniquely and solely to the sounds of life.

Today was not a particularly unusual day in Thenken; there were no indications ahead of time that this would be a day worth heralding. There were no omens, no warnings, and no omnipotent invisible guiding hand. There were no visitors from the future watching in secret to see if their history books were accurate. Indeed, it had started out just like any other morning, and none of the three friends woke up with a feeling that this day would, above all others, be in need of my chronicling.

In fact, the morning had begun with Etheria, Cedric, and Nigel sitting with King Rowan in the screened porch of the RestEddy cottage drinking their morning tea, and watching the mist dance frenetically on an unusually turbulent Sweetwater River.

"What are you three planning today?" asked the King as he blew across the top of his mug, causing the golden steam to swirl as it rose.

The Princess answered simply: "A hike." Her attention was focused on her own mug, and the steam that hovered within it as if it were somehow more than just simple mist.

"Oh? Where?" asked the King.

Cedric and Nigel looked at the Princess who simply shrugged her shoulders in response to her father. They turned to the King and repeated the gesture.

Etheria took a sip of her tea, and looked over at her father. "What're you doing today Dad? Painting?"

"No, not today," the King answered despondent. "Earlier this morning, Fiddlestix informed me that part of the Bristlecone dam was washed away in yesterday's storm. I'm going to check it out."

"Need my help?" Etheria was understandably concerned. The Bristlecone was the largest of the many beaver dams built and maintained by the Beaver Lodge Collective to moderate the flow of the Sweetwater River. Low-lying areas of the forest could very easily be flooded if any of these dams were to fail.

"Nah," answered Rowan with a slight shake of his head. "The mudders have already stabilized the damage. Pater Achelon is convening the executive branch at the dam today to begin discussions on how to 'effect a comprehensive repair'." He took a quick sip of his tea to test its temperature. "You know how much those beavers like to administrate things, especially their leader Pater! At the very least, they'll be debating all day long." The King rolled his eyes playfully as he blew across his mug again. "I'll paddle down to look it over today, and if I need your help tomorrow, we can head over together."

"You're paddling down?" continued the Princess. "Wouldn't it be faster to use the cave system?"

In response, the King took a measured sip of his tea, and smiled mischievously.

Etheria clued in almost immediately. "You're paddling down because the water's so high aren't you?"

The King nodded. “Well, if I’m going to be in meetings all day, I’ve got to at least have some fun ahead of time.”

After breakfast, the trio stood on the beach and watched as a clearly delighted King paddled his birchbark canoe out of the eddy in front of the RestEddy cabin, and into the rapids beyond. It wasn’t long before he had disappeared around the bend of the fast moving Sweetwater River, yet they could still hear his energetic whoops of delight echoing through the trees for quite some time.

The Princess turned, and began to climb the wooden staircase that led to the closest of the cave portals that was directly beside the RestEddy waterfall. The three of them had finally decided that today, they were going to explore the Bitterroot ridge. It was one of the Princess’ favourite places in the Kingdom, and they had often spent hours clambering over the rocks at the base of the cliff, and swimming in the numerous waterfall-fed pools.

At the top of the stairs, Etheria picked up one of the several spherical, fist-sized stones from a recess in the rock wall beside the cave entrance, and led the way into the cave. When it was dark enough, she tossed the stone into the air in front of her where it hovered obligingly and began to spin. After a few rotations, the stone began to glow lightly, before suddenly bursting into a bright, slightly bluish light that softly illuminated the walls and floor of the cave.

The trio could now see that they were standing in a large tunnel with a broad ceiling, smooth stone walls, and a polished floor that was flat and even. Directly ahead, the tunnel branched in two. To the left was a short set of steps chiselled into the stone, with a thin channel of water that streamed out of an opening in the wall beside them. Emanating from this tunnel was the deep rumble of the waterfall that thundered overhead just a few feet above its ceiling. To the right, the tunnel curved gently, and angled down slightly. Not more than a few hundred yards down this tunnel, a bright opening was visible with blue sky and sunlight streaming in.

The Princess came to a stop beside a thin pillar of rock that seemed to grow up out of the floor of the cave. She removed something from an inner pocket of her cloak, touched it to the flat top of the pillar, and lightly squinted her eyes in concentration. In response, the opening up ahead seemed to shimmer for a moment and then abruptly darkened. The blue sky was no longer visible through the opening, which now showed a thick green forest beyond instead.

Etheria returned the object to her cloak, and followed the floating glow stone (that was always obediently hovering just a few feet out in front of her) through the tunnel. It was a short walk, and, as she and the squire-els approached the cave opening, the glow stone began to dim. The Princess reached out and pulled it from the air, depositing it in another recess in the rock wall just outside of the exit that they passed through.

The Princess of Thenken paused a moment to adjust her cloak as her squire-els scampered on ahead. She glanced over her shoulder at the dark cavity in the rock behind her where she could still see the bright opening that she knew led to the RestEddy waterfall portal. From where she stood, the other entrance didn’t appear to be more than a few hundred yards away, but she knew that she had actually travelled much farther than that in her short walk through the cave. Geographically, the Bitterroot ridge was some three hundred kilometres due north of the RestEddy cabin.

Such was the wonder of the Thenken cave portal system, one of a handful of remaining constructs of the mysterious Ancients who had populated this dream world untold Millennia ago. There were dozens of portals such as this one scattered throughout the Thenken forest, making it possible to travel vast distances across the Kingdom in a matter of seconds. The only limitation being that you had to know where you wanted to go, and what portal you wanted to exit from

ahead of time. Naturally, this had led to speculation that there were portals out there that had yet to be found, and that they linked to sections of the forest that had yet to be explored.

The King's closest advisor and good friend Fowler the beaver was the resident expert on the Ancients, and was currently on an expedition to the uncharted watershed to the West. He'd been gone for months, but could potentially return at any moment should he find another portal.

Etheria looked around to get her bearings while she swatted at a swarm of tiny black flies that had just found her head, and were taking great delight in exploring her eyes, ears, and nose. The sun felt warmer on her face than it had on the beach at the RestEddy, almost like it was later in the day here in this part of the forest.

The rock wall behind her marked the western edge of the great Bitterroot ridge that she and the squire-els were here to explore. The wall was a dark granite with deep angular striations, and was covered in cracks, crevices, and ledges where clung tiny communities of plants, young trees, and, of course, wildflowers. Indeed, this was the defining characteristic of Thenken, because everywhere the Princess looked, she could see brightly coloured wildflowers swaying back and forth gently in the non-existent breeze.

There were also dozens of honeybees circulating amongst the flowers, and a hummingbird appeared suddenly in the air over Etheria's left shoulder, sipped from a purple violet, and was gone just as suddenly. In the space vacated by the tiny bird, a movement caught Etheria's eye and, as she watched, a tiny green sprout uncurled from a thin crevice, reached out towards the sun and promptly erupted into a proud red flower.

Somebody in the waking world just had an idea, Etheria thought to herself as she admired the bright wildflower that had already begun to sway back and forth in time with its brethren on the rocky ledge. The Princess breathed in deeply through her nose in an attempt to sample the bud's sweet aroma, but it was abruptly cut short when she inhaled a number of wiggling black flies instead.

Infernal blood-sucking insects! she cursed inwardly as she pulled a handkerchief from a pocket of her cloak, and softly blew her nose. Then she looked down the forest path ahead of her to see where Cedric and Nigel had gotten to. The path branched in three separate directions, and the squire-els were already bounding away down the path on the left, and were just now realizing that their Princess wasn't with them.

Etheria smiled to herself as she folded the handkerchief and tucked it into her cloak pocket. *These are my bodyguards?*

Cedric had just now stopped in the middle of the walkway, and was looking back at her, his head tilted. "Princess?" he queried.

Nigel meanwhile was dramatically flailing about, wand in hand, looking for danger in all directions, an obvious over-compensation for his having forgotten about the Princess. He finally concluded that the most imminent threat in the area was the apple tree whose branches hung out over the cave entrance above Etheria, so he pulled out his magic wand, and scurried over to confront it.

"I'm coming," responded Etheria as she moved down the path towards Cedric, the sound of apples exploding softly into sauce behind and above her.

Cedric and the Princess walked down the forest path on their own for a while before Nigel finally caught up. Even then, as the trio carried on together, he would stop occasionally, either to lick apple sauce off of his fur, or to look back towards the cave entrance and berate the now distant apple tree. Cedric looked up wearily at the Princess and rolled his eyes. Etheria smiled, and took a bite out of large apple that she'd managed to snag before Nigel got to it.

Eventually both squire-els fell into step beside their Princess, and the trio walked in relative silence for a time as Etheria looked at her environment in wonder. It was her third time here, and yet she was still struck by how the forest in this area of the Kingdom was unique. The trees here were mostly deciduous, tightly spaced and very, very tall. They also had bushy tops, and long, spindly, sparsely branched trunks. It was funny, but the trees just seemed more fragile here, like they were under-nourished somehow. They grew at odd angles, and several of them had fallen out of the forest and over the path since they had last been this way. The trio moved those that they could, and clamoured over or under those that they couldn't.

Not much sun made it through the thick canopy overhead, and a dank, earthy smell permeated the air. It was, the Princess realized with a wrinkle of her nose, the smell of death and decay. The large flies that zipped around them, and landed heavily on her cheeks and forehead, only added to the experience. She stared out into the dripping underbrush at fallen trees that were dark with rot, and mottled white with mould, and at the faded leaves from last Autumn that seemed to be melting into the forest floor. Yesterday's rain made everything seem softer, more yielding. Tiny splintered pieces of dead trees were smudging off onto her cloak as she brushed by them, and spindly birch trees, long fallen along the side of the path and covered in large knots of fungus, were now little more than spongy mush encased in cylinders of white bark.

Just as her unease began to manifest itself physically in the form of a cold shiver running up her spine, the Princess became acutely aware of something else, something that completely altered her perception: it wasn't all death and decay.

It was only when she really began to look at the forest that she realized that what she had mistaken for dead branches were actually young saplings. They were growing everywhere she looked, even out of nooks and recesses in the rotting carcasses of their fallen predecessors. What's more, all around the saplings, young ferns were slowly uncurling themselves from out of the mossy ground, and tall thick-bladed grass had sprung up sporadically at the base of the larger trees. The occasional patches of sunlight that dappled the forest floor were refuges for tiny communities of colourful wildflowers, and honey bees and butterflies flitted about from patch to patch. To Etheria's great delight, she also spotted a diminutive figure gliding between the trees that she immediately recognized as a flying squirrel.

Indeed, throughout the underbrush, the Princess could see evidence of life that didn't care about the fetid feel of the place. Life that wasn't just thriving *in spite* of the environment, but instead as a *direct result* of the environment.

And then there was the potential for life as well. All around her on the path, strewn amongst the dead leaves, were tiny green seed pods that had obviously spiralled there from above along with the leaves. She could see how many of them, especially those that landed close to the edge of the path, had begun to root and sprout.

The Princess stopped walking abruptly when she suddenly realized that she was surrounded by one of the very paradoxes her father so loved to point out to her. There were two opposite states, that normally would have been at odds with each other, living in concert all around her.

Here in the forest, the cliché that death is a part of life actually made sense. She'd heard the words offered as solace so many times as a way to explain why people die, but until now had never understood it.

Here, in the forest, the living existed side by side with the dead. In fact, the living thrived on it. What was the fertile earth if not years and years worth of decayed plant material?

Here, in the forest, the two opposites of life and death actually lived in a balance so tightly woven together that one literally could not survive without the other. Perhaps, the Princess

realized, it was the kind of paradox that would have been difficult to recognize in an urban environment where all things dead were trimmed off, whisked away, or entirely hidden from view.

Etheria smiled to herself. It was a profound way to start her day, and she was sure that her father would be proud that she had spotted one of his paradoxes on her own.

The Princess looked over at the squire-els who, this time, had stopped walking when she had, and were now excitedly conversing. Cedric had just explained to Nigel how their squirrel cousins were able to “fly”, and Nigel was impulsively scrabbling up a tree to give it a try. Cedric’s increasingly louder caveats were ignored by Nigel as he leapt off the trunk of the tree about a dozen feet in the air, spread his arms and legs and promptly plummeted heavily to the forest floor.

The squirrel landed awkwardly on a large patch of thick moss, bounced once, and finally came to rest on his back so that he was looking up at the tree tops and the sky beyond.

The Princess and Cedric rushed to Nigel’s side in time to hear the tiny squirrel sigh bodily.

“Are you OK Nigel,” asked Cedric with obvious concern.

“Denied the sky,” answered the prostate rodent hyperbolically, the back of his tiny paw pressed against his forehead. “Once again, I find myself at the losing end of evolution.”

Cedric didn’t seem to be paying attention to Nigel anymore, and he cocked his head suddenly and looked over at the path. “Wait,” he said. “Did you hear that?”

Nigel lifted his head off his mossy pillow, and began to rise while he answered, “Well yes. Mostly because I said it.”

Cedric made a clicking noise with his mouth that sounded like an annoyed “tsk”, and jumped over his friend towards the path, knocking him back onto the ground in the process.

Cedric landed in the middle of the path in a stance and turned his ears to the breeze. “I thought I heard...” He paused and twitched his ears. “Yes, I do hear it. Voices!”

Etheria’s human ears could hear nothing but the typical sounds of the forest: the wind in the leaves, the slight buzz of the honeybees, and the birds composing their symphonies.

Nigel, his fall completely forgotten now, jumped up onto a low hanging branch, cocked his head, and closed his eyes. “Yes,” he said suddenly serious. “I can hear them too.” He turned his head slightly and furrowed his brow. “They’re arguing I think,” he added.

It could have just been her imagination, but the Princess thought she could also hear whispers of loud angry voices on the wind as well.

“C’mon,” she said to Cedric and Nigel. “Let’s go check it out.” She began to walk down the path. Nigel leapt off the branch, landed on the ground ahead of the Princess, and took the point. Cedric looked around nervously as he fingered the handle of his wand. “I’ve got a bad feeling about this,” he muttered as he fell in behind the Princess.

It didn’t take long for them to discover that it wasn’t just a trick of the wind, or their collective imagination. As they walked out the far side of a long bend in the path, the voices, and the argument they were engaged in, became exceedingly clear. The once fragile peace of the forest had been shattered.

The trio walked quietly and carefully up a slope, and around a tight bend until finally coming to a rather unnatural thick wall of tightly knit trees and branches. The angry voices continued unabated (if anything, they had gotten more intense), and they were joined by other noises now as well. There were loud thumps that shook the ground, heavy scraping sounds, as well as laboured breathing. It was clear that the arguers were right there on the far side of this wall of branches, and were doing more than just yelling at each other.

“Where did this wall come from?” asked Cedric. “It wasn’t here last time we came this way.”

“Did we come this way last time?” asked Nigel. Both squire-els were now standing between the wall and the Princess, their wands drawn. The argument continued on the far side of the wall, and Etheria could just make out movement through the entwined branches.

“I’m pretty sure we did,” answered the Princess. She moved forward slowly stepping around Cedric and Nigel. “I’m sure that this whole wall is new even though I’ve never known the forest to fluctuate quite like this. Although I suppose that anything’s possible, especially in Thenken.” she added quietly, her voice trailing off as she tried to peer through the branches. She still couldn’t see clearly though, so she finally stepped up to the wall, crouched down, and pulled a few branches out of the way. Her two squire-els jumped up on either side of her to peer through the opening that Etheria had just made.

Finally, they could see what was going on. On the far side of the wall was a large, bright clearing in the forest. In the middle of this glade stood two massive buck deer, heads bowed, their huge antlers locked, arguing loudly, and violently shaking their heads from side to side. The ground rumbled when they pawed at it; the air vibrated with their rage.

Nigel and Cedric exchanged worried glances, their raised wands in a defensive position.

“Is it really them do you think?” whispered Nigel towards his fellow squire-el.

“Who else could it be?” answered Cedric.

“Them who?” asked a befuddled Etheria who looked back and forth between the two.

“I thought it was only a fairy tale,” continued Nigel without so much as acknowledging the Princess.

“Me too,” said Cedric. The squire-el stopped talking as if suddenly aware of the cold stare being directed his way. The Princess had given up on trying to get their attention with words, and was now staring fixedly at them with a look of obvious irritation. Cedric figured things out immediately, and turned to look at the young girl.

“My apologies Princess,” he said. “Of course you, being from the waking world, wouldn’t know what’s going on. You see, there is a legend in Thenken...”

“It’s more or a fairy tale actually,” interrupted Nigel.

Cedric’s right eye quivered for a moment, and his face betrayed the effort it took for him not to respond to the interruption in frustration. He assumed a conciliatory posture, and spoke through gritted teeth, “Either way,” he said in an even voice. “It’s a story that we are all told as children here in Thenken. The story is called...”

“*The Battling Bucks.*” It was Nigel interrupting again.

Cedric’s smile stretched to be even more forced, and Etheria was sure she could hear his teeth begin to grind.

The Princess repeated Nigel’s words “The Battling Bucks?”

“Yes.” The word that issued slowly from Cedric’s clenched jaw was more like a hiss.

“Cute title. Very alliterative,” added Etheria as she continued to stare through the branches at the sight of the struggling deer before her. “So, what’s the story?”

Cedric took a deep breath and held it to see if Nigel would offer up a response on his own accord instead of continuing to interrupt Cedric’s narration, and when none was forthcoming, Cedric began to speak. “Well, in a nutshell (Nigel began to snicker at this because, for a squirrel like Nigel who loved nuts, there is something inherently funny about putting a story inside a nutshell), the two bucks had a bit of a falling out.”

“A bit of a falling out?” repeated Nigel incredulously while gesturing at the deer. “That’s a lot more than a bit...”

Cedric had finally had enough, and responded to Nigel's latest interruption with hushed anger. "Who's telling this story?" he spit out at Nigel.

"Well," answered Nigel, "You're trying to, but I daresay..."

"Fine," said Cedric haughtily turning from the other squirrel. "You tell it then."

"Well, not if you're going to get all bent out of shape..."

"Would one of you please tell me the story!!" whispered Etheria sharply and as loudly as she dared.

Both the squire-els fell immediately silent and remained that way until Etheria finally figured out that the best way to break the deadlock was to assign the task directly herself.

"Cedric," she said with authority. "Why don't you continue please." Cedric responded with a look of resignation, and lifted an eyebrow in Nigel's direction. Etheria understood the implication immediately. "And please let him speak without interruption Nigel."

Nigel shrugged his shoulders, rolled his eyes and turned silently towards the battling bucks.

Cedric cleared his throat and began to speak. "Well, it's quite simple really. As the legend tells," he looked icily at Nigel. "One day, the two deer began to argue quite violently. And, as buck deer are wont to do when they argue, they began to butt heads. Unfortunately, this resulted in their antlers becoming hopelessly entangled."

"I can see that," responded Etheria.

Ahead of them, bathed in sunlight in the middle of the earthy glade, the buck deer continued to hurl insults even while they pushed and pulled at each other with their fused antlers.

"I don't understand though," pondered Etheria. "I've heard of this kind of entangling happening before. It isn't all that unusual in the waking world. Why is this story worthy of legendary status in Thenken?"

"I suspect that it's due to the length of the argument," answered Cedric.

"Oh?" said Etheria. "How long have they been like this?"

"Nobody knows for sure," answered Cedric. "Centuries at least."

"Centuries???" responded the Princess with incredulity.

"At least," piped in Nigel, finally breaking his silence, unable to resist the opportunity to be glib.

Etheria ignored the comment. "What could they possibly have been fighting about?"

Cedric stared at the Princess with a look of shock. "What were they fighting about?" he repeated. "Does it matter? The legend is nothing more than an old morality tale used to teach children the dangers of quarrelling."

"I'd say it was a little more than simply an old story Cedric," responded Etheria while gesturing towards the open glade. "And besides, even if it were just a old morality tale for kids, it's not a very good one is it? I mean, what's the morale beyond 'don't fight'?" The squire-els looked at each other before both looking at the Princess. "If I'd been told the story, I'd have wanted to know more. I'd have wanted to know what they were fighting about. I'd also have wanted to know how they ultimately resolved their argument."

Nigel spoke softly. "I don't think they've got that last part figured out yet."

"You're right Nigel," said the Princess. "And since there are only two people present who know the answer to the first of those questions, I'm going to ask them." With that, Etheria pulled her cloak tightly around herself, squeezed through the gap in the brush, and walked out into the bright light of the glade. The squire-els responded quickly to the Princess' sudden movement, and moved to flank her with their wands in-hand.

The bucks were so engrossed in their argument that they didn't even notice the new arrivals to the glade. The Princess walked slowly and obviously towards the deer, approaching them from the side so that they could see her coming, and motioned for the squire-els to hang back. They reluctantly acquiesced, and assumed a forcibly casual stance so as not to further provoke the obviously angry animals up ahead.

It was hard to imagine that the deer could be aware of anything that went on around them. Notwithstanding the din of their arguing, there was the fact that both of their heads were bent towards the ground, and they could only see things peripherally, and only then by severely straining their eyes.

Apparently the deer had, over several centuries, grown accustomed to seeing the world on this angle though, for they very quickly recognized that the young girl approaching them was none other than the Princess of Thenken. The battling bucks immediately stopped arguing and, as Etheria got closer, they did their best to kneel respectfully before her, bickering under their breath as they did so. It took some effort, but eventually they were able to each bend one of their front legs while kneeling on the other, and bow their heads as much as their tangled antlers would allow so that their noses were very close to the ground. Both of the massive animals quivered from the effort it took to hold this position.

All was quiet for a moment as Princess Etheria looked upon the bucks. The deer held their position awkwardly, their large ears twitching occasionally, their heavy breath blowing up swirls of dust off the dry ground, and their eyes straining to see what was going on around them.

Etheria well knew that a Princess was a position of some importance no matter where you were, whether a waking world, or one of dreams, yet it was always a difficult thing for her to handle. Etheria saw the large deer struggling to kneel before her in recognition of her Royal standing but, truth be told, she didn't feel all that important. At least not important enough to deserve this kind of an effort. Instead, it just made her feel genuinely uncomfortable.

Still, she thought to herself, there might be something that I can do for them, and it might help things if they respect my authority.

This was still a new experience for Etheria. Her father had not taught her any of the protocols associated with Royalty, and had instead impressed upon her the importance of being equal to all, and superior to none. She knew for a fact that her father had taken the title of King reluctantly, confident that, if he respected the title as much as others did, he might be able to do some good with it. She had long ago decided that she would do the same with her title as well.

So, the young girl stood as tall as she could, and squared her shoulders in what she thought was a stately pose. Then, she cleared her throat and tried to speak normally, but a formal tone crept into her voice nonetheless.

"You can get up," she said simply.

The two deer appeared confused; their eyes darted around anxiously. Then, as one, without speaking a word, they rose from their kneeling position. Etheria couldn't help but notice that they actually worked together without complaint to do it, and that she supposed there were many things that they were forced to cooperate on, undoubtedly grudgingly. She wondered if they actually realized this fact. *Would it help to point it out?*

Once the bucks were standing again, they shuffled their feet a little, shook their heads and antlers as one, and then fell silent while they looked fixedly upon the tiny girl at their side.

All was quiet.

It didn't take long for Etheria to realize that the bucks were waiting for her to speak first. They obviously believed that a person should not speak to Royalty unless Royalty spoke first to them.

Etheria already understood what she wanted to know from them. In fact, she had been aware of it from the moment that she had decided to enter the glade, but didn't know how to ask it.

What to say? she wondered.

She took a few steps to her right as she thought about it. The silence around them grew even more silent, as if that were possible.

Well, she thought, *when in doubt, go with the obvious*. So she opened her mouth, and went with the first words that came to her mind.

"Oh great bucks," she bade them in a regal voice, "Why do you argue?"

The question was an obvious one, but unfortunately not an easy one to answer. The bucks could not agree on a reply, and after a moment's silence, they instead began to talk over each other in response to the Princess. It seemed that they had waited so long to talk, that neither could decide where to begin, or even who should go first.

Etheria couldn't understand everything that was said, but it didn't much matter. The most important parts soon became more than obvious. It was clear to her that, in a conflict that spanned centuries, details had been forgotten or exaggerated. Their argument was now a series of vaguely remembered insults and actions in which each blamed the other. The Princess quickly realized that the origins were inconsequential, because the bucks were perpetuating the conflict by arguing about the argument itself. It was the most vicious of circles, and physically manifested itself in the mess of twisted antlers holding both of the deer tightly to their angry past.

She walked around the bucks, who had begun to push and pull against each other anew. She was dwarfed by the massive animals. Even on tip toes, she was barely as tall as their upper thighs. Etheria could see that the legend of the battling bucks had become larger than life in Thenken, and wondered if perhaps the magic of this forest had somehow grown them physically to match.

As the Princess walked, she looked around the tiny glade. Everywhere, the ground had been trampled, and the branches and leaves in the bordering trees were decimated. There was a stream running along the base of the rock wall that bordered the far end of the glade (it was a part of the Bitterroot ridge), and a large pile of excrement was scattered along its sandy banks, tainting the water that flowed downstream. No wild flowers grew in the glade, no small animals scurried about. Even the birds seemed to avoid this area.

This patch of forest had been scarred by this violent conflict, but Etheria noted that it seemed that the forest was defending itself. As the trio had discovered when first approaching the glade, the trees that surrounded it had grown so close together that the bucks could not fit through while their antlers were so entwined. The forest had isolated the bucks in this tiny area. They were as much a prisoner of the trees as they were of their own argument.

The deer raged. Etheria paced, and the squire-els were, as always, close at hand.

As he watched the bucks, Nigel spoke quietly to the Princess.

"We should leave m'lady," he said in a voice much more serious than his usual happy tone. "They argue with such contempt and vigour. I don't think they're even aware that we're still here."

"I agree," spoke Cedric immediately. "It's not safe here Princess."

Etheria looked intently at the bucks. She knew her protectors were serious, for they were using formal titles in addressing her. The squire-els knew that Etheria did not flaunt her Royalty,

but there were times that they were forced to remind her that Thenken was more than simply a forest, it was her Kingdom, and her well-being within it was vital.

The girl smiled warmly at both of them to acknowledge their concerns. The squire-els sighed, and grasped their wands a little tighter. They knew by the look on her face that they weren't going to be leaving the glade any time soon. If there was one constant in their explorations in Thenken with the young Princess, it was that she always stopped to help when somebody else was in need. Whether it was as simple as returning a too-young-to-fly bird to a nest that it had fallen out of, or assisting the beavers in maintaining the massive dams along the Sweetwater river, Etheria was always willing to lend a hand, even should that hand get dirty or muddy as a result. She may not like to think of herself as Royalty, but she cared deeply for the residents of the forest, and she considered nothing to be beneath her.

This situation was a little different though. This one was potentially dangerous, and the little hairs that bristled on the back of both of the squire-els necks agreed. They flanked the Princess on both sides, ever alert.

Etheria walked closer to the bucks. The dust that had been kicked up by their hooves somewhat obscured the young girl's view. She wanted to look more closely at the locked antlers, and it was not an easy task with the bucks shuffling about as they were. Yet, as she neared, they sensed her presence again, and seemed calmed by it. They slowed their struggle, stopped their shaking, snorted a few times, and then at last they were silent.

The Princess reached up brazenly, and touched the antlers. She ran her tiny fingers along the dimpled surfaces. She wrapped both hands around them at their base to judge their girth, and she found that they were so thick that her fingers could not touch on the other side. She was amazed how much the antlers looked like trees with strong thick trunks, yet felt like exactly like solid stone.

Etheria had seen some large racks in her time in the forest, but they didn't come anywhere close to being as impressive as the two that were entwined before her now. It was obvious that, over hundreds of years, they had never stopped growing—and snarling together. Their tangled points were a mess, and she could barely see where one set of antlers ended, and the other began. Large “branches” from one side were wedged so tightly between branches from the other, that it appeared as if they were completely fused together. Tiny processes had grown out, and then coiled around larger sections, much like the feelers on climbing vines that curl themselves around whatever they can find for support.

The Princess pulled at the antlers. Gently at first, and then a little harder. There was no give at all. It was as if the deer were no longer individuals: they had grown together into a single organism.

Could she do anything to help? she wondered. *Should she even try?* After all, this conflict had absolutely nothing to do with her. She could leave here now, knowing that the bucks, trapped here forever in the glade, would never be a danger to her. She could post warning signs along the path and around the glade, so that they would never be a danger to anyone else either. *But what about them? The deer. What kind of a life was that for them?*

“Princess?”

“Just a moment please Nigel,” she answered kindly.

She walked under the antlers, looked at them from below, and then from the other side. There was nothing different there, just the same tangled, fused mess.

“Please Princess.” It was Nigel again, much more urgently this time. “I know that you want to help, but please consider the danger.”

Etheria looked at Nigel, and smiled. “Thank you Nigel. Trust me, I’m aware of it.” She gestured enigmatically to her cloak to show that it was fully clasped.

She stepped back from the bucks, and looked one of them in the face, and then the other. With their heads bent forward, the bucks had to strain their eyes to see the young girl and her squirrel friends.

Etheria touched the shoulder of the buck on the right, and asked “What is your name?”

“Pahweeter.” The answer was short and brusque, and delivered in a low growl. In another voice, the name could have been musical. In this voice, it was full of contempt.

Etheria then looked over at the buck on her left and noticed that a large tear was welling up in his eye. She moved forward, and placed a hand on his neck.

“And your name?” she asked tenderly while she stroked his tawny fur.

“Thé-B’doh,” he answered quietly. His voice cracked with emotion, and his foe immediately picked up on this vulnerability.

“Aw not again,” he growled with derision, his voice mocking. “Are you going to bawl again, you big wimp?”

The reaction was swift and immediate. Thé-B’doh shook off Etheria’s hand, and lunged at his foe anew.

“I AM NOT A WIMP!!” he screamed.

Etheria was knocked to the ground in the sudden fury, and heavy hooves rained down around her as the bucks moved against each other in anger.

Immediately Cedric and Nigel sprung forward, but it was too late for them to do anything. They could only watch in horror as one of Thé-B’doh’s massive hooves came straight down heavily onto Etheria’s tiny chest.

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CHAPTER 2

Thinking and Knowing

Thé-B’doh’s hoof had barely touched Etheria’s body, when it was abruptly, and unapologetically, stopped short.

Although the Princess’ travelling cloak was light enough for her to comfortably wear on even the hottest of Thenken days, its delicate appearance concealed a hidden power: it was also her very own protective shield.

Within micro-seconds of sensing the deer’s heavy foot, the magical cloak abruptly inflated, pushing the hoof aside so brusquely that both bucks were knocked off balance, and thrown awkwardly to the dusty ground. Then, the cloak continued to expand so explosively that, moments later, it had completely enveloped the Princess, and taken the form of a large purple sphere with her safe inside of it.

Even as the squire-els were rushing forward to restrain the fallen bucks with their wands, Etheria’s protective sphere was already rolling slowly away from them before bouncing once, and then lifting gently up into the air. For a time, it floated gracefully several meters above the bucks, spinning slowly in place, as if observing the signs of destruction below it.

Etheria was no stranger to the inside of this sphere, having benefited from its protection a number of times in her exploration of Thenken, either when she had capsized her canoe in white water, or when she had slipped off a rock wall while climbing. She was actually quite

comfortable inside the expanded cloak, as it was as soft as cotton against her body, and translucent enough for her to see what was going on outside.

The cloak always reacted to danger immediately, but not so quickly that Etheria didn't sometimes get cut or bruised, and she was reminded of this fact as she rubbed the tender area on her upper chest. It would smart for a few days, and likely develop a purple hoof-shaped bruise. Still, it was better than the alternative.

The Princess looked at the bucks below her as they struggled against each other to get back on their feet. She had to admit that she felt perversely satisfied that they had been knocked so roughly to the ground by the sphere. Although part of her wondered if they had perhaps been hurt in the fall, another part of her found itself ambivalent about it.

Cedric and Nigel were slowly backing away from the deer with their wands raised defensively. Solid golden light was shooting out of the tip of both of their wands, pushing against the bucks to move them back every time they appeared to be moving in the direction of the protective sphere. Nigel looked up at the cocooned Princess, and gestured to an area well on the other side of the glade, and closer to the stream. It was, she realized, where the two of them were withdrawing, and where he expected her to join them.

The Princess willed the sphere first to move, and then to descend, and after a moment it was settling softly to the ground in the area of the glade that Nigel had indicated. The bucks, now safely corralled on the distant end of the glade were, not surprisingly, fighting again.

Apparently satisfied that the danger had passed, the protective sphere instantly reverted back to the form of a cloak. Etheria emerged, not with shock or anger on her face, but with a look of fierce determination. She was taking a step back towards the bucks when the squire-els ran up to her, and blocked her path. She could see the resolve in their tiny coal-black eyes, and understood that they would not let her get that close to the bucks again so soon, even with the protective ability of her cloak.

The Princess sighed, looked at the bickering bucks, and saw that she and the squire-els had once again been forgotten about.

"I'm OK," Etheria said, before her friends had a chance to ask. "They didn't hurt me." She wasn't about to tell them how close the hoof had come, and she hoped that they wouldn't ask to see if she had been bruised.

As one, the squire-els narrowed their eyes. Etheria knew that this was the closest that they would come to giving her a lecture. Still, at times, their expressions could be harsher than words, and a lot more articulate too. She held up her hands apologetically and simply said, "I know. I know. That was stupid. It won't happen again."

"Some day Princess," admonished Cedric, "you're going to come across something that your cloak can't protect you against." He was pointing at her accusingly now, his tiny finger wagging up and down.

"Have you any idea how much paperwork is involved when we have to file an incident report?" asked Nigel in what was clearly a good-natured tone intended to lighten the mood. "Oberon would not be at all pleased with us!"

Nigel emphasized his point with a quick exclamatory snort, while Cedric clicked his upper teeth with his tongue. Then they both sheathed their wands. It was clear that they considered the matter closed.

Etheria looked up from her squire-els, took one last glance at the battling bucks, turned away from them, and then led her tiny friends along the shore of the stream until they were well upstream of the pile of excrement. They jumped out onto a large flat rock that split the stream in

two. As they sat down, Etheria pulled several drinking cups from a pocket in her cloak, filled them with fresh sweetwater from the stream, handed one to each of her companions, and lifted the third one to her lips. For several minutes they sat quietly, sipping the golden liquid from their cups, and staring at the mist that danced within them. Every once in a while, the wind would blow snippets of the buck's argument over to them, and remind them that not everything within the glade was so peaceful.

"It looks hopeless," Cedric said finally. He was sitting on the Princess' right side as she dangled her feet in the cool water. His tiny legs couldn't reach the stream, so they hung out into empty space beyond the rock's ledge. "I can't see what you can possibly do to help them Princess, or even why you insist on trying."

"It's...it's hard to explain," she answered, her voice trailing off. How could she explain it to Cedric, when she couldn't even understand it herself?

They stopped speaking altogether for a time as they drank their water. At first, the silence that settled upon them was uncomfortable but, as it endured, it eventually made itself at home. Their cups now empty, Etheria returned them to the hidden pocket of her cloak.

The Princess looked up at the sun to judge how much time had passed since they had entered the glade, and then back down at the bubbling stream. As she wondered about how best to answer Nigel, she watched as the water flowed in the current past the rock that they were sitting on, and how it circled in behind the rock to create an eddy of calm water. There were several such eddies in this stream, and she could see numerous tiny water spiders skimming across their surfaces. These spiders would undoubtedly not have been able to survive in the fast moving water outside the eddies, yet within them, they thrived. And so too did the tiny minnows that she could see just beneath the surface of the water, and the crayfish that darted from one underwater shadow to another.

It was the same, she realized, in much larger rivers too. In fact, she frequently marvelled at how there could be pockets of safety and tranquility in even the wildest of rivers. When her father, King Rowan, slipped into such an eddy while paddling his canoe in white water, he called it a *resteddy*. It was a chance to rest and take a break in the middle of a set of rapids, scout out what was ahead of him down river, and admire the kinetic movement of the fast flowing water all around him.

Her father, it seemed, loved eddies so much, that he had practically built their house in one! The cabin that the King and Princess called home was constructed on top of an immense rock on the shore of a turbulent, fast flowing section of the Sweetwater river, and its porch hung out over the eddy that pooled behind this rock. The eddy created a large calm area of water that was about half the size of a football field (which is apparently a universal unit of measurement even in Thenken). In summer, the King anchored a raft in the middle of the eddy, and in winter kept a portion of it clear for skating. Appropriately, Rowan had named their cabin, and the grounds around it, the *RestEddy*.

As Etheria dipped her hand out into the stream to feel the strength of its current, she stared thoughtfully at the tiny restedties all around her. There were a number of rocks splitting the surface of the waterway, and behind each of them was a area of relative calm. The eddies were monopolizing her attention, and she could not quite figure out why.

Restedties, Princess Etheria thought to herself. *What would restedties have to do with Cedric's question?*

The Princess had just asked herself this question because she well knew that, often, while we're in the middle of pondering some deep question, our eyes or ears are frequently pulled

away, and attracted to something, and it's like we're just noticing it—or some tiny detail about it—for the very first time. She was aware that, most of the time, this was the Universe trying to get our attention by giving us a nudge towards the very answer that we're seeking. In this case, Etheria's eyes were repeatedly being drawn towards the resteddies in the stream, and experience had shown her that this meant that they were somehow relevant to what Cedric was asking her. Still, she didn't exactly know why, or how. So, she thought about it some more, and let her mind drift a little.

Etheria looked at the water spiders in the eddy downstream from her, and found herself imagining that this stream was a large river, and that the spiders were actually tiny canoes. It was this observation that finally opened her mind's eye. When the answer finally came to her, she wondered why it had taken so long. It was, after all, exceedingly obvious.

Not long ago, while she and her father were in a much larger restedly, she had asked him virtually the same question that Cedric had just tendered to her.

Etheria and her father King Rowan had been out paddling a remote section of the Sweetwater River, he in his large birch bark canoe, and she in a smaller version that the river otters had presented to her on her eighth birthday. They had named it for her in honour of the *Riverie*, the King's three-masted schooner that sailed the deeper, wider sections of the Sweetwater. Etheria's small birch bark canoe was called the *Tiny Riverie*.

Earlier that day, her father had stopped to help a young fox cross the river. In Etheria's opinion, it had taken too much time out of a day that she had expected to spend alone with her father. She didn't understand why it was necessary to help, when the fox could have simply walked downstream for another hour, and then climbed across a beaver dam to the other shore of the Sweetwater herself.

Later, long after the fox had been dropped off, and significantly behind schedule as far as Etheria was concerned, she and her father pulled their canoes into a restedly behind a large rock in the middle of the river. They were part of the way down a challenging set of rapids which had proven difficult to run because the sun was very low in the sky, and was reflecting off the water and into their eyes. They couldn't see their way nearly as well as they should have been able to, and Etheria was frustrated because she had already bounced off a number of rocks that she normally would have been able to see.

She had been looking forward to these rapids for weeks, and hadn't really enjoyed running them because of the sun in her eyes, and the awkwardness of her descent. So, soon after pulling into the restedly beside her father, Etheria told him what she was feeling. She explained that they wouldn't have been forced to run the rapids so late in the day, if he hadn't insisted that they stop and help the fox.

"This isn't the first time this kind of thing has happened Dad," she said to him. "It seems like you're always putting other people first; ahead of yourself...ahead of me," she added almost as an afterthought. "It's not like you ever get anything out of it anyhow."

She looked away from her father, speaking into thin air and grateful that he was just letting her speak. Her frustration was dissipating with every word she delivered, so she finished by saying, almost apologetically, "I just don't understand Dad—this was supposed to be our trip."

Her father took a long time to think about what she had said, and seemed to stare forever at the tall pine trees along the shore as they moved against the clouds in the sky.

As was usual whenever he was in a state of deep contemplation, the King was habitually fingering the amber pendant that hung on an invisible cord around his neck. About the size of hockey puck, the pendant's golden amber held a number of objects captive, most notably the

perfectly preserved body of an ancient honey bee. The amulet had deep sentimental significance for the King, and he often found himself either holding, or closely examining it, especially when formulating a response to a difficult question.

When Rowan finally responded to his daughter, his voice was calm, and without a hint of retribution. "I know this may not make a lot of sense to you Etheria," he said finally, "but the reason that I do it has everything to do with what I believe about my place in the world, and in the Universe."

He looked at his young daughter in the canoe beside his as if to warn her that a long speech was on the horizon. She recognized the signal immediately, and moved out of the kneeling position in her canoe to sit more comfortably on the thatched-twig seat.

"You see Etheria," King Rowan continued, "I believe that, in this Universe, we are each smaller pieces of a much larger whole."

As he spoke this, he leaned back in his canoe, and spread his arms wide. He looked first at the trees above them, and then at the water around and below them. The King and Princess had attracted the attention of a number of animals along the river. On one side, a bear stopped lumbering along the shore briefly to look their way and grunt. On the other shore, a family of river otters paused at the top of a mud slide to cock their ears in Rowan and Etheria's direction before slipping down the river bank, and splashing into the water and out of sight.

"It may not seem obvious that we are connected, and it is admittedly a difficult concept to grasp." He was now looking directly at her. "But the distinction between each of us is a lot less solid than you might imagine. Our physical bodies may be distinct Etheria (to illustrate this point, Rowan reached over, and gently tweaked Etheria's nose) but our minds and our consciousnesses know no such boundaries. Especially here in Thenken."

Rowan stopped for a moment to let his words sink in. He looked up at the sky, and then pointed to a cloud. "Look," he said, "that cloud looks just like you."

Etheria gazed skyward, and sure enough there was a majestic white cloud that did in fact look just like her. She quickly realized however that the effect was more than coincidental. Not only did the cloud look like it been carved by a master sculptor, but it was in fact smiling broadly and waving at them.

"Dad," Etheria said as if she were peering at him over a pair of glasses. "You did that."

Rowan grinned toothily.

"Guilty as charged," he answered. "You see, you and I can share thoughts and ideas with our words, and even our perceptions through what we see. The bear that just walked by on the other side of the river wouldn't be able to see that cloud in the same way. To the bear, it wouldn't have looked a thing like you." He pointed at a bird high above them. "It'd be the same with that eagle. From a different perspective, a person might see something completely different in that cloud, but you and I see pretty much the same thing. That's because we're connected, and sharing aspects of the same perspective.

"And it's not just the two of us. As a community, we are all connected, and are often unaware of the impact that our actions have on others."

The bow of Rowan's canoe had drifted slightly out of the restddy and into the current, and his craft began to swivel slowly away from Etheria. Rowan raised his hand in front of him, and gestured towards the bow, slowly moving his hand through the air back in the direction of the restddy. Obediently, the bow of the birch bark vessel followed, until the canoe had returned to the calm eddy water. However, the wave that was created by his return pushed Etheria away from her father, and closer to the other side of the eddy. To avoid being pulled out into the fast

moving water, the Princess pulled out her paddle, and used it to draw herself back beside her father's larger canoe.

Rowan smiled pleasantly and lifted his eyebrows expectantly, as if this experience somehow illustrated his point. Then he reached out and took hold of the *Tiny Riverie*'s gunnels to hold her in place beside him.

Etheria put her paddle back into her canoe, and looked back at her father who continued to speak.

"I have found a bizarre serendipity when it comes to doing things for other people," he said. "More often than not, in helping them, I am presented with new and timely opportunities as well as challenges, and there is *always* a reward."

Etheria cocked her head, and without her having to actually form the words, Rowan understood the question that was brewing in her mind.

"Not like any reward that you're thinking of. I believe that to truly benefit from such an experience, you must be able to completely divest yourself of any expectation of reciprocity."

As he spoke, Rowan pulled a small wooden cup out of a pocket of his robe, and dipped it into the river beside his canoe. It brimmed with sparkling golden liquid as he pulled it up to his mouth, and he stared at it as he spoke.

"I don't do it because I want to be rewarded with money, praise, or even gratitude for that matter. I do it because I always receive something much more valuable than any of that." He took a brief sip from his cup, swirled the liquid around in his mouth and swallowed before finishing his sentence. "I am rewarded with the experience."

Rowan paused long enough for his daughter's attempt at disguising her dismissive scoff with a clearing of her throat, and continued.

"I am daily amazed at how these challenges have served to develop some skill in me that was lacking, or to fill a gap in my knowledge, or my understanding of something." He gestured into the air with the hand that held the cup. "For example, I had never been to that area of the forest where we just helped the young fox. Now as a result of helping her, we've had a personal tour, and even made a new friend."

The King took a long drink of water from his cup as Etheria thought for a moment.

"OK," she said tentatively, "I get that last part, but I don't understand what it has to do with looking at the world holistically."

Rowan smiled at his young daughter's proper use of the term, and reached out and rubbed the top of her hair in exactly the way that made her squirm. As he pushed her bangs up on her forehead—it was something that he kept insisting on doing even though she didn't like her bangs that way—she swatted his hand away playfully.

"Good question. I was just about to get to that, as it is the most important point." He gently knocked his empty cup upside down against the gunnels of his canoe to shake the final drops out of it, and slipped it back inside his cloak. There was a noticeable bulge in the fabric when he first put the cup in, but moments after he had pulled his hand away, the lump had completely disappeared.

"I don't just provide assistance to other people to help them, I also do it because it helps me."

Etheria paused in the middle of fixing her bangs, and looked at him suddenly, her eyes narrowed in disbelief.

"If that seems selfish," Rowan continued, "consider this. With each person I help, and every challenge I accept, I become a stronger, more knowledgeable—and more complete—person, and

my abilities are bolstered and enhanced. As a result, I am able to help even more people, with even more challenging problems.”

The King reached forward and grasped the handle of his paddle, and rested it across the gunnels so that the blade hung out over the water beside his canoe.

“You’re familiar with the ancient Thenken blessing *Mi’raute*?”

“Of course,” answered Etheria. “It’s a greeting that you use when you want to express deep respect for somebody.”

“Yes, but what is lesser known is that the word also represents a core philosophical truth for the Thenken Ancients, and it is related to the idea that I am trying to express to you now.” The King cleared his throat. “Like many concepts from the Ancients, the meaning of *Mi’raute* is a balance of three individual aspects that are each of equal importance. These aspects are: gratitude, humility and service.” The King held his hand up and flipped up a finger as he listed each aspect.

“The relationship between three separate aspects of the human experience is actually a fairly common concept,” continued the King. “Many people consider ‘three’ to be a number full of significance and of deep magic. It is primarily why you will often hear people say that ‘things happen in threes’, and it’s a good indication of whether a person is an optimist or a pessimist as to whether they expect good or bad things to happen in threes.

“Still, they’re not wrong. The number does have a mystical relationship with reality, and you see symbols for it everywhere, even here in Thenken. Most notably in a design that you see pretty much every day Etheria.”

Etheria was initially surprised by this revelation, but not for long. She grinned slyly as she immediately intuited what symbol her father meant, it was, after all, on the bow of her canoe.

“The Royal Seal,” she said proudly.

“Exactly.” As he spoke, the King used his finger to paint a shape in the air in front of him, and a glowing golden symbol of the Thenken Royal Seal appeared and floated between them. “I’ve told you about this seal before. How it is reminiscent of a Celtic Knot, and is comprised of a classic triquetra intertwined with a five-petaled flower.”

The Princess nodded.

“The triquetra is a unique ancient symbol both here and in the waking world,” continued the King. “Simply defined, a triquetra is ‘three cornered’,” he pointed to each of the corners of the floating golden symbol, “and it has been used over the years by both Pagans and Christians alike to symbolize the integration of three important aspects of their core beliefs. For Pagans, the three aspects are usually Mind, Body, and Spirit. For Christians, it is the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. However, you could also look at it as the mergence of Past, Present, and Future, or the relationship between Land, Sky, and Sea...”



The Princess whistled.

“...and I could go on and on. In the Thenken Royal Seal though, the triquetra obviously represents the *Mi'raute* concept with its integration of ...”

“Gratitude, Humility, and Service,” interrupted the Princess.

“Precisely.”

“What about the flower?” asked Etheria. “Does it represent anything beyond the fact that the Kingdom is covered in wildflowers?”

“As a matter of fact, yes it does,” answered Rowan. “Simply put, the five-petaled flower represents *awareness*. It is symbolic of the union of our five senses, and how they can be used in concert to keep us fully aware in the moment, and in such a way that the sum becomes an entity in and of itself when it is complete.” The King flicked at one of the corners of the floating Seal, and it began to spin in the air. “And before you get a chance to ask, the circle that surrounds the entire design is symbolic of the whole of which we are all a part. It is eternal and, like a circle, has no beginning and no end.”

With that, the King snatched the symbol from the air, and held it flat in his hand. Then he swung his arm wide, and launched the Royal Seal into the air like a Frisbee. It soared out beyond the eddy and, as Etheria and Rowan watched, it traced a wide arc around them before finally colliding with a tall rock face on the far side of the river and exploding in a shower of gold and red sparks. When the shower had cleared a little, the Royal Seal was clearly visible on the rock wall as if it had been etched there in dark charcoal.

“So, when you address somebody with *Mi'raute* Etheria, you are telling them three things. That you are grateful for what you have—or are about to—learn from them, that you are bowing humbly before the inherent goodness in their spirit, and that you pledge your service to that spirit.”

Etheria was still watching the sparks fizzle and fade as they fell from the rock wall as her father continued, “The belief behind the *Mi'raute* greeting, as well as the point that I’m belabouring here, is that, through mutual gratitude, respect, and service, you and the person that you are blessing are *both* ultimately evolved in some way. In the end, this philosophy makes the whole, of which you are both a part, more complete because you have made yourself better, and have helped others within it to be better too.”

Rowan looked at his young daughter, and saw the intense look of concentration on her face. He waited a moment for his words to sink in and then said, “Does that make sense to you?”

Etheria shifted her weight in the seat a little, and felt her canoe rock gently in the resteddy. Then she looked back at her father and lied.

“Yes, I think it does.”

Rowan smiled knowingly and added, “There is one last thing. The choice to help is yours alone to make. Do not do it out of guilt or coercion.”

Rowan emphasized his point by taking Etheria’s hand firmly in his own.

“Sometimes helping other people will put you in danger, and you have to consider those risks. If somebody is panicking or irrational, it is best to step back and wait for them to come to their senses. If you put yourself at risk, you will not be able to help them, or anybody else for that matter.”

“But how will I know when I think I can help?”

“In a way, you have just answered your own question Etheria. There is a difference between thinking and knowing. When we *think* that we can do something, we fail more often than not. When we *know* that we can do something, we always succeed. The human soul has an innate capacity for knowing its own truth, that is, if you’re paying attention enough to listen,” continued the King on a seeming non-sequitur. “That’s why I’ve always tried to expose you to as many different ideas as possible—even the controversial ones—and have never minded when others spoke out in front of you as well.”

The Princess smiled knowingly. “You’re talking about Fowler aren’t you?”

The King chuckled. “Well yes, he certainly has his share of radical conspiracy theories doesn’t he? Especially when it comes to his views on organized religions!” The King arched his eyebrows dramatically. “I’m sure you’re aware that I don’t agree with everything he says Etheria, but I don’t mind him challenging me, or you for that matter, because I know that you and I are both of us smart enough to make up our own minds at the end of the day. I’m also confident that you’re intuitive enough to know what works for you when we’re exposed to new ideas. Similarly, let your intuition guide you when you’re presented with an opportunity to help somebody. If, ultimately, you decide to help, do it with your full attention.”

Etheria wasn’t completely convinced by her father’s words. Sure, they sounded nice, but she was not her father. He always seemed to know what to do in tough situations, and he always looked so calm doing it too.

“But how do you...” she started, stumbling on the wording. “How do you do it when you ... don’t know what to do?”

“You mean how do I figure out *how* to help?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s actually a very easy question to answer. When you can’t find a solution on the outside, you just look on the inside.”

The King smiled as Etheria tilted her head in obvious confusion.

“Well, put it this way: I’ve heard it said (and it’s something I deeply believe) that you will never encounter a problem or a challenge that you don’t already possess the skills to solve. So when you’re trying to solve this problem, don’t try and invent the solution, try to *remember* it instead.”

Her father had said some nutty things in her lifetime, but this one seemed to be in contention for the top prize. *Remember the solution to a problem she probably had never heard of before? What was he talking about?*

“I don’t understand,” she said. She figured that this would be more polite than what she really wanted to say to him. She assumed that it was a breach of protocol in the Thenken Kingdom to question a King’s mental state, even if you were related to him.

“One of the benefits of living a linear life,” Rowan continued, “is that we have the power of reflection at our disposal. Experience, is often the best teacher, and subtlety among the best lessons to learn. We all have experiences from our past that have bearing on things that are happening now. As I just said, each challenge we solve gives us the tools we need to tackle tougher challenges, so it’s important for us to keep track of what we’ve already learned. That’s why it will serve you to reflect upon your past experiences when you are searching for a solution to a present problem.”

“Haven’t you always told me to seize the present moment? If I’m always looking back, wouldn’t that put me at risk of living in the past?”

“Not quite. You’re simply being reflective, and thinking about a number of different things—experiences in this case—that have happened to you. It is like scanning the jumbled pieces of a jigsaw puzzle in order to assemble it. You pick up one piece, look at it. Think about it, compare it to others that are like it, and finally put it where it fits. In some ways, life is a puzzle, one that actually grows bigger with every day. And, even more amazingly,” he added almost as an afterthought. “As you assemble your life’s puzzle, you’ll find that pieces that you’ve already fit into place, will fit perfect well in other parts of the puzzle too, and make a completely different kind of sense in their new context.”

The Princess raised her eyebrows as her father’s words settled into her brain and made themselves comfortable.

“You made a good point though,” continued the King, “If you are attached to your past, then you expect every day of your future to be just like every day has already been in your past. You close yourself off to new possibilities; you stop evolving. I’m not advocating this. Instead, I’m saying that you can look for inspiration from your past experiences to guide you into the uncertainty of your future without expecting that things will be exactly the same. It will make it easier for you when you’re stepping into the unknown.”

Rowan stopped talking, and squeezed his daughter’s hand. “Now, before you get a chance to ask another question, I’m going to end this discussion with a final thought. When you’re stuck, think about what you’ve *done* Etheria, and it will help you with what you *do*. Now, what say we find a place to set up a camp site, and we can return to these rapids tomorrow when the light’s a little better. Then, we can run them from the top as many times as you’d like.”

Etheria smiled broadly as her father let go of her hand and, slowly, his canoe slipped backwards in the restddy. He reached out with his paddle beyond the eddy line, caught the current on the tip of its blade, spun his craft around so that his bow was pointing downstream, and once more, he was out in the fast moving water. Etheria moved back to a kneeling position, picked up her paddle, performed a similar move, and followed her father down the river.

Etheria had lied to her father that day in the eddy, and now, watching the bucks struggling against each other at the far end of the glade, she thought that she was finally beginning to understand what he was trying to tell her.

Sitting there by the stream in the glade, she told this story to squire-els. When she was done, they nodded in understanding.

“I’ve used Mi’raute all my life,” said Nigel. “But I had no idea that it had such a deep meaning.”

Notwithstanding Nigel's words, Etheria suspected that the two squire-els were humouring her in much the same way as she did her father that day on the river.

"So Cedric," she said, finally responding to his earlier question. "I don't yet know what I will do, but I *know* that I can do something, as surely as I know that I *must* do something."

"But," spoke Nigel. "Do they even *want* you to do something?"

Etheria chewed lightly at her bottom lip as she considered this. "Good question." She smiled at Nigel. "I guess that's the first step isn't it? That'll be the first thing I find out once they calm down a little."

"*If* they calm down a little," muttered Cedric almost too quietly to be heard.

So, with that the trio waited patiently for the bucks to settle down, and continued to watch the sun move across the morning sky. In time, they noticed that the argument began to abate, and the bucks eventually stopped arguing long enough to amble sideways over to the stream for a drink. They approached the water slightly upstream from the rock on which the trio was perched (with the squire-els watching warily), and had to step into the water up to their ankles in order for them both to be able to dip their snouts deep enough to drink. As the golden mist over the stream swirled and formed images around the locked heads of the massive deer, Etheria stood up on the rock and addressed them.

"Would you like me to help you?" she asked proudly. "If you agree, I know that I can find a way to release you."

Truth be told, Etheria didn't exactly understand how she emphatically knew that she could succeed in freeing the conjoined bucks, it was just something that her heart and her head were telling her to say.

The two deer were silent. They had stopped drinking, and had pulled their heads up away from the water, but avoided looking directly at the young girl.

"It only takes one to answer," Etheria said, looking directly at Thé-B'doh's great eye. Slowly, the eye swivelled up to meet her gaze briefly, and then moved quickly away.

Quietly Thé-B'doh answered, "Yes." His voice quivered.

Immediately, Pahweetor snorted in disgust. "Fine." he said, and then added quietly "You never could fight your own battles..."

Thé-B'doh was about to respond angrily to this last comment when a noise the likes of which they'd never heard split the air in the glade, and it stopped them both short.

They looked over to see Etheria brandishing what looked like a gnarled stick above her head. The stick appeared to be the source of the awesome din (It was a sound that was very foreign to the bucks. It was actually the sound of an entire brass section of an orchestra playing a single sustained note with fortissimo).

The sound stopped abruptly, and Etheria lowered her magic wand.

"I'll need the two of you to stop bickering while I'm helping you," she said sternly. "Or I will quite literally put a cork in it."

Then the Princess rubbed her chin thoughtfully, and narrowed her eyes thoughtfully at the mess of antlers before her. She scratched her head with the end of her wand, looked at each of her squire-els in turn, and said "Well, here goes something..."

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CHAPTER 3

Magical Theory: Part One

Do you know what the purest form of magic is?

I'll delay a bit now in order to give you a moment to think about this question. That is, unless you've already scanned the next few lines with your peripheral vision to read the italicized answer.

OK, that's long enough, here's the answer:

The purest form of magic is a *thought*.

Yes, it really is that simple.

All of those tiny thoughts that are ricocheting around inside your head right now are little tiny bits of magic.

Each one of them has power.

Each one of them has potential.

Find it hard to believe? Well, you're not alone.

No doubt you find it easy to suspend disbelief long enough to accept that the inhabitants of a fairy tale's enchanted forest can not only speak, but can also perform magic. But did you know that you can do magic in your own world as well? Right now, you're in the world that the King and Princess would call the 'waking world', because, when you're in it, you're not—strictly speaking—dreaming.

It is the world in which this book is now open before you.

It is the world in which this book is simply a solid mass of symbolically enhanced paper and cardboard.

Consider this for a moment: You perform magic each and every time you take one of those thoughts from your head and turn it into an invention, or a speech, or a story, or a drawing, or a painting, or a dance, or a song.

Every time you release a thought, you are creating something beautiful, and several new thoughts rush to replace the old one. It's like turning on a water faucet. The first few drops of water rush out, and enthusiastically pull out all of those that are behind them.

When you are creating something, the ideas that used to live only in your mind are given a vibrant life outside of it in the physical world.

When you are creating something, you make your imagination manifest.

That's magic.

Still don't believe me? Well then think about the story that you're reading right now. My words have created images in your mind that are unique from those of anyone else who has read this story. You're sitting there in your chair, or at your table, or in your bed, and your imagination has been in another place the whole time you've been reading this. This kind of thing happens every time you read a book or a story.

That's magic.

Still think that your thoughts can't make things happen in this world?

Have you ever been so excited the night before a major event that you've thrown up? The big event hasn't even happened, yet you were reacting, and feeling nervous about it simply by thinking about it. You *thought* yourself nervous while lying in bed unable to sleep. You *thought* yourself sick.

That's magic.

Did you also know that you can learn how to do something complicated just by thinking about it?

Researchers have recently proven that people can learn to play a piano simply by thinking about playing the piano? What's more, they can do it just as quickly as those who use the real thing.

That's magic.

You see, magic in this or in any other world or reality begins with a thought. This thought is cultivated by imagination, tempered with knowledge, and made manifest through strength of will.

Any one of us can do magic and, contrary to what you may have heard, it is not necessary to remember incantations in some strange language, or recite a rhyming verse, or utter an arcane word, although you still can if you like. Etheria, for instance, likes to speak the same word whenever she's casting magic that requires a level of concentration. The word is *Ava Cado*.

No, it's not about what you say; it's about what you think.

While they're doing magic, practiced conjurers like to gesture dramatically with their hands, or blink their eyes or twitch their nose. Many like to think that they do this in order to help them focus their concentration, and sharpen their timing, but the secret is they do it mostly because it attracts attention and gives fair warning to observers that magic is about to happen. Now, having said this, Etheria's father, King Rowan, rarely makes any outward signal at all, and magical events are always springing up around him in exactly the opposite way that rain falls to the ground. Some people, especially those who are still learning magic like Etheria, find it useful to use a magic wand to channel their will.



As the bucks suspected, Etheria's wand was indeed a gnarled stick. What they didn't know was that it was a very special stick, taken directly from *Pneumena*, the Great Maple Tree in the center of the Thenken forest.

There were legends in Thenken that, in times too ancient to calculate, and when the still primeval forest had been home to as many people as animals, this maple tree had once grown in the middle of a grand courtyard in the center of **Marmoras**, the large city of stone, and capital city of the Ancients.

In Thenken, trees are nurtured by the knowledge that they glean from the collective consciousness of all those who are linked to Thenken. This particular maple tree knew no limits, and it soaked up any and all knowledge it could find within its root system. It did not discriminate or judge. For it, knowledge was simply fact, not truth.

As the maple tree grew taller and wider, it eventually filled its courtyard. And still it grew. Over the centuries, it swelled out over the courtyard walls, swallowing the adjacent huts and houses in the process. Eventually, it spanned the surrounding streets, and eventually overcame entire buildings. In time, the whole city, and the river that ran through it, was engulfed within a tree that had grown to the size of a mountain.

So, to this day, the tree continues to grow, and it continues to collect and store knowledge. That is why twigs from the Great Tree make such perfect magic wands because they each contain some of the collective knowledge from the tree, and the user can sense this when they are holding it, and it assists them in casting their spells.

It's important to point out that the magic wands from the Great Tree aren't magic in and of themselves. They don't create magic. Instead, they help the user channel and focus their thoughts and make manifest whatever it is they imagine. The magic isn't limited by the power of the wand, but instead by the imagination and strength of will of its wielder.

As the squire-els well knew, Etheria had more of this than most adults, and in her hands, the wand was a powerful tool indeed.

Still, there are some things that even the most powerful magic cannot do, and Etheria was about to find that out for herself.

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CHAPTER 4

RealiTea

The loud music that Etheria had used to silence the bucks was still echoing faintly off the rock wall of the Bitterroot ridge when Etheria finally got down to work.

To begin, she bade the bucks to move to the center of the glade, and they reluctantly acquiesced. Once there, they stood uncharacteristically silent as she walked around them in a wide circle while holding her wand out in front of her like a conductor holding a baton. She had begun to hum a tune out loud, and was bouncing her wand in time with her music. Each time the music would reach a crescendo, her humming would get louder, she would gesture with her wand, and something amazing would happen.

This was all part of Etheria's warm-up, and she started it by making silly hats appear out of nowhere on Cedric and Nigel. When the squire-els finally noticed the hats, Cedric tore his off immediately, while Nigel admired the profile that his shadow was now casting.

Then, Etheria turned the entire pile of excrement by the stream into a patch of colourful wildflowers. Within seconds, an unfamiliar pleasant smell was wafting through the tiny glade and, almost immediately, bees, butterflies, and humming birds appeared seemingly from nowhere to sip from the new flowers. It was unclear whether they had been summoned by the Princess' magic, or whether they had simply been enticed by the flowers on their own.

The squire-els discovered another pair of ridiculous looking hats on their heads, and watched the Princess with admiration. They could see that she was enjoying herself.

The young girl continued to walk, hum and bob her wand. Then without warning, and without missing a note of her song, Etheria turned suddenly on the bucks, pointed her wand at the antlers as if she were trying to sneak up on them, and willed them to disappear altogether.

"Ava Cado," she said purposefully while flicking the tip of her wand.

The effort had absolutely no effect.

For a moment, Etheria stood and stared in puzzlement. It was unusual for her magic to be so completely impotent. Her wand trembled slightly in her hand, as she narrowed her eyes, and frowned for a moment. But, no sooner had the frown appeared, than it was quickly transformed into a satisfied smile. She immediately began to hum again, resumed the light flicking motion of her wand, and continued her circuitous path around the bucks.

While she was in motion, and without slowing her stride in the least, she continued to make changes to the forest glade. She re-filled the deep ruts, and transformed large patches of the dusty ground into thick, deep-green grass. She called forth leaves and new growth from the trees that bordered the glade, and she entreated the undergrowth to produce large ferns as well as flowered thistles.

All the while, her wand bobbed lightly, and although she was now openly singing her song, it was still one that nobody could recognize (although Cedric was sure that he could hear Etheria asking somebody why they had to be so complicated).

Once again Etheria spun unexpectedly on the bucks, and once again angled her wand at their antlers. She had assumed from her failed first attempt that she could not simply make them go away, so she had decided to see if she could change them into something less formidable. Something less solid. Something easier to work with.

“Ava Cado,” she announced with a look of deep concentration, while she willed the antlers to turn into water. When this had no effect, she pirouetted gracefully in place, dropped to one knee, levelled her wand, and tried to turn them into jelly. When this failed as well, she leapt to her feet, took two steps along the path, jumped into the air, spun completely around, aimed her wand, and thought of soft flexible rubber.

I don’t think it will come as much of a surprise to the reader— who can look at the thickness of this book and see that there is still quite a lot this story left—that these attempts failed as well.

Princess Etheria lowered her wand dejectedly, but continued to circle the deer who had, almost imperceptibly, begun to hurl whispered insults at each other. She could feel the residual magical energy that hung in the air between the massive animals. A warm mist had begun to rise from the ground beneath their heads, and a heavy golden dew-like liquid was dripping thickly from the antlers. The hairs on the heads of both of the bucks was clearly standing on end as if electrified, yet they seemed completely unaware of how much power had been cast their way, with so little apparent effect.

The squire-els sat quietly on the rock on the edge of the stream, their eyes wide in shock. They didn’t want to speak, and they tried to hide their discomfort when the Princess looked their way. They didn’t want to let Etheria see how shaken they were that her powerful magic was having absolutely no effect, so they pasted unnatural smiles on their faces and gave the Princess exaggerated “thumbs up” signals. They meant it to be encouraging, so that is how the Princess interpreted the gesture.

If Etheria was upset, she didn’t show it. With each failure she continued to walk, sing and draw fancy shapes in the air with her wand (in fact, a few of the shapes still hung lightly in space, and eventually floated up into the sky out of the glade). It was obvious that she was still experimenting, and it was clear to everyone that she was also very deep in thought.

With every minute, more flowers were appearing all around her (many apparently of their own accord), and more honey bees were flitting about. In addition, several birds had begun to chirp their return from the newly restored branches in the trees along the edge of the glade, and small forest animals were now occasionally peering out from beneath the newly re-grown ferns and underbrush.

To be honest, Etheria wasn’t at all surprised that the antlers hadn’t simply disappeared on her first magical attempt. She didn’t exactly know how the antlers had persisted, but when she had realized that they were still there, it made perfect sense to her instinctively, even if she wasn’t consciously aware of the reasons why.

She wondered what to do next, even as she convinced some nervous seeds that had been hiding in fear along the shore of the stream that it was now safe to sprout. As the seedlings leapt enthusiastically up into the sun, and flowered into animated beds of violets, Etheria noticed that larger fish had begun to splash about in the water, and that fresh cat-tails had already grown up out of the shallows and were swaying lightly in the soft Thenken breeze. Many of this miraculous re-growth wasn't her doing she realized, and she knew that if she didn't succeed here today, all of this new life would be once at risk of being destroyed by the buck's senseless ancient conflict.

Looking back at the antlers, Etheria continued to hum lightly. She was about to reach another crescendo when she had a thought. *Perhaps if I turn the antlers into glass, I can smash them with a rock?* So, in time with the music, she spun on the antlers again, willed this to happen, and stared flummoxed when it too failed.

All at once, the Princess stopped walking, ceased her humming, and lowered her wand again. She looked dejectedly at her shoes, waved her wand and turned them both into pumpkins.

Obviously, there was nothing wrong with her magic, she thought as she returned her shoes to their proper form. *So what was it?*

The glade had fallen mostly silent when she had come to her sudden halt. The only sound, not surprisingly, came from the bucks who were now bickering a little louder than before. Pahweeter was going on about how he told them all that it wouldn't work, and Thé-B'doh was telling him to shut up and hold still.

The Princess looked over at the squire-els, to silently request suggestions, and they immediately struck awkward, casual poses that were obviously forced. When it was clear by Etheria's raised eyebrow that she saw right through their charade, they stood up straight, assumed a natural look of concern on their faces, and shrugged their shoulders in response.

She looked back over at the bucks and sighed deeply. *Why wasn't her magic working on these antlers?*

"Princess?" spoke Nigel to get her attention. "Perhaps some tea?"

Etheria glanced over, and saw that Nigel and Cedric were now standing over a small earthen teapot that floated in the air between them, and whose bottom crawled with orange flames. Cedric had just tossed a pawful of wildflower petals into the teapot, and was now adding an amount of sweetwater that should really have been much too generous for the tiny pot. Almost immediately, steam began to shoot out of the spout, and Etheria could hear the soft feminine voice of the pot announcing "I'm ready!"

The Princess smiled at the thoughtfulness of the squire-els, as she hadn't realized how thirsty she had become from her efforts. After a quick glance over her shoulder to confirm that the bucks weren't even paying attention to her anymore, she walked over to the tiny squirrels, sat down on a low rock beside them, and reached out to take the steaming mug that Nigel had just poured for her.

"Thank you Nigel," Etheria offered kindly as she pulled the mug up in front of her face. She didn't sip from it right away though, instead, she stared intently at the surface of the liquid. There were several colourful wildflower petals floating in the tea that had tinted it a deep golden purple

This drink was what the King had dubbed *realiTea* (pronounced like the word reality). It infused wildflower petals and sweetwater—two of the most amazing substances in the forest—into a potent brew that not only served to quench both thirst and hunger, but amazingly also provided suggestions, solace, and insight to those in need of answers.

Etheria only partly understood how the tea worked. She knew for instance that, because Thenken was a dream world, it was uniquely connected to the collective consciousness formed by the billions and billions of souls in the universe. She also knew that each flower that appeared in the forest represented a single individual idea from somebody within that collective consciousness. As a result, the petals in the tea acted as a direct link to those ideas. But, this was only part of the equation. The sweetwater was the real wonder, and had a history that was, quite appropriately, steeped in legend.

First you have to understand that there are countless honey bees in the Thenken forest, and they toil endlessly gathering nectar from the wildflowers. Then the bees fly the nectar to the Great Hive that is nestled deep within the heart of the Great Maple Tree *Pneumena*, where they transform it into honey. If you recall, *Pneumena* is a tree the size of a mountain, so it stands to reason that the Great Hive would also grow to preternatural size. The Great Hive is as big as a large city, and it continues to grow to this very day.

What's more, since the bees had been instinctively gathering wildflower nectar for untold millennia, the Great Hive had long ago become so full of honey that it had begun to overflow. Slowly, persistently, the sweet amber liquid leaked steadily out of the endless maze of honeycombs, and seeped deep into the marrow of the Great Tree. Here, it mixed with the tree's sap, and built up such a powerful internal pressure that a single stream eventually burst violently out of an ancient knot hole in the side of the tree. Then the stream tumbled in silent free-fall until it splashed down into the river below (if you'll recall, this was the river that once ran through the lost city of Marmaros, and since that city was now trapped within the Great Tree, the river ran through the tree as well), instantly creating a waterfall so high that you couldn't see the top of it while standing down below.

Over time, the stream mixed with the natural water of the river, and flowed out into the furthest reaches of the forest. The river became known as the *Sweetwater*, and began its long history of nourishing every living organism that lived in the forest. The inhabitants of Thenken drank from the river, the trees soaked up the water through their roots, and all were very well fed as a result.

When Rowan had first arrived in Thenken, he was taught how to stir up the mist on the surface of the Sweetwater to release visions. These visions took the form of tiny holographic images that flitted and danced across the surface of the water after it had been disturbed. The images might be indistinguishable from golden mist at first, but once you looked closely enough, you could see forms and shapes of people, places and things. The residents of Thenken had been stirring up the golden mist for years, but it was more for entertainment than anything else. That is, until Rowan came along, and found a way to unlock the secrets that were trapped within the sweetwater.

Rowan discovered that, if you mix some sweetwater with a handful of petals and boil it all together, it becomes, not surprisingly, even more magical, and more responsive than ever to the needs and thoughts of the drinker. It has now become common practice in the forest to consult a cup of tea when an answer to a particularly tough question is being sought.

In fact, the King had several different rituals and blends of tea for many different occasions. There was *synchroniciTea*, where you switch cups with another person halfway through drinking them so that images from the stories that you were sharing appear in the golden mist in your cups. There was *serendipiTea* that you shared with somebody you hadn't seen in a long time, and had just coincidentally run into. There was *virtualiTea* that you shared with somebody who was at a great distance so that an image of that person would appear in your mug, and you in theirs.

There was *simpliciTea* that you enjoyed by yourself when you wanted a quiet meditative moment, and *complexiTea* when you wanted to be reminded of how everything is interconnected.

The Princess was convinced that, most of the time, her father was making up the names and rituals for his teas on the spot. One morning for example, he served her a cup of what he called *eterniTea*, which he claimed would impress upon her the fact that we each truly do live on forever.

“You just made that up Dad!” she accused him good-naturedly. Yet, as she looked at her cup, she saw a solid image of herself rise up out of the swirling waters, while other objects like buildings, trees, clouds, and mountains circled around her briefly, only to be immediately swallowed again into the spinning vortex. Her own image remained, and was so solid looking that she was sure that she could have reached right into the mug to pluck it out.

Etheria knew of course that the ingredients of *realiTea* were exactly the same in each of her father’s “brews” (it was always wildflower petals and boiling hot sweetwater), it was just the ritual that was unique to each one that differentiated it.

She also well knew that the images that danced on the surface of your tea were so open to individual interpretation, that the Princess was not holding out much hope for a solution to the problem facing her today. Sure enough, as she stared into the steam in her cup, and saw that the mists that formed there weren’t assuming any distinct discernable shapes, she felt that her apprehension was vindicated. So, she surrendered to her thirst, and sipped deeply from her cup. The hot liquid was heavenly, and she felt better immediately.

As Etheria lowered her mug, and stared reflexively into its bottom at the shallow layer of tea that remained, the tiny golden image of a woman appeared. The form shimmered lightly, but quickly took a seemingly solid form. Then the woman appeared to look right up into Etheria’s eyes for a moment, and then turned abruptly away from her, melting into the liquid below, and fading from view.

“Mom?” said Etheria through a mouth hanging open in shock. For once, the message from her *realiTea* was an obvious one. She knew exactly what her tea was trying to tell her.

Is that the answer? Could that really be possible? She wondered, not realizing that she’d physically mouthed the words.

Although it wasn’t a memory that she particularly enjoyed revisiting, her mind was nonetheless immediately spirited away to a warm sunny afternoon last summer, when her father had told her something that had changed her world forever.

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***PRINCESS ETHERIA
and the Lost Queen***

About the Author

Watercolour artist and author **Dwayne James** lives in Peterborough, Ontario where he writes and paints as often as he can, that is when he's not spending time with his young daughter, toddler twin boys, and his very forgiving wife.

Dwayne has a Masters Degree in archaeology, something he claims is definitive proof that he knows how to write creatively. "Indeed, the most important skill I learned in university," he posits, "is the ability to pretentiously write about myself in the third person."

After spending close to a decade as a technical writer at a large multi-national computer company, Dwayne opted to look at their Jan 2009 decision to downsize him as an opportunity to become a stay@home Dad for his newborn twins, and pursue his painting and writing whenever the boys allow him to do so.

It is a decision that continues to make him giggle with wild abandon to this very day.

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