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The jar of light and gold

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The jar of light and gold

by

Alexandria Nicole Werner

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Creative Writing)

Program of Study Committee:
    Debra Marquart
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Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2008

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For NeeNee, Papaw, and Aunt Dee Dee who gave me so many wonderful memories, that the real world without them often seems unbearable. I couldn’t have found these words or worlds without you.
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Prologue: Before Norwegian History

Once upon a time long before the Danes ruled, long long before it was combined with Sweden and Denmark, and even longer before it was free again, Norway was a different place entirely. The creatures living in Norway, before its history began, knew one ruling class: the Trolls.

Trolls were like humans, only they were bred of the love of men and the gods and goddesses of the Norwegian forests. Half human and half tree god, trolls towered above people. On their limbs they grew moss and their fingers sprouted leaves instead of nails. Their skins were thicker than human, and would peel away in thick, bark-like pieces. Like the Norwegian people, they had glittering blue eyes and long, thick hair. Unlike the people, their hair was the color of leaves. In the summers, every shade of green could be seen flowing from their heads, and as the seasons changed, their hair color would change to fiery reds, yellows, and oranges. Finally, as the snow began to fall in the winters, their hair was white. With the spring thaw, their icy locks would melt, returning to the many greens, and the cycle began again.

For many years, the ruling trolls and the lesser humans lived together in the forests peacefully, but peace is not something that can last where people are involved. The humans died with few years. They became jealous of the trolls and their kinsmen, the trees, who lived for centuries, but in spite of this, the people still loved the trees and the trolls. Their desire was only that they might be given some of the older trees that swayed and bent towards the earth to build shelters. The hope was that, not living in constant exposure to the cold and rain, their lives would span more decades. The trolls refused to allow the people even the smallest or oldest of the trees for shelter. The trolls and trees had believed they
were more important than the humans for so long that the people believed in their inferiority without question, though they died too soon and many watched their children succumb to the cold winters as infants.

After many hundreds of years, there came a man who did not hold more love for the forests of Norway than he had for his own people. He united the people who wanted to chop down the trees and make houses and space for the Norwegians. This man was called Svengred, and he decided they would fight for a freer humanity.

When Svengred started his rebellion, Refola was the queen of the Trolls. As the lifespan of trolls is much longer than that of humans, she had justly ruled Norway for nearly one hundred years. Refola kept a level head and a level hand as ruler, and Svengred’s antics could not shake her. She called him to meet with the board of elders. This meeting is where their story begins, but it is only one half of the story.
Ch. 1 Heart’s Blood

In a hospital, at a time that I don’t remember, I was born, or so the story goes. It was on my third birthday that I asked my mother to see the pictures of my bloody birthday. I wanted to see the weird, crying, red baby she said was me. I was covered in a film of blood, and I asked, “Did I get shot?”

My mother laughed and said, “No, that’s what all babies look like when they’re born.”

“Oh.” I stared as she turned the page and my Aunt Mary was holding the bloody thing that was me three years ago. “Babies are gross.”

Bored, I left the room to find something better to pass the time. Mom’s stories were okay, but she usually told me the truth. Papaw’s stories were better because he lied. If I asked my grandfather why I was covered in blood on my bloody birthday, he might tell me I was covered in the blood of the animals I had to kill to make it into the world.

Unable to find him, I sat on the floor in front of the television, turned to the public broadcast station, and pushed the button that turned on the captions. Without watching the British murder mystery on the screen, I read the small white text out loud. Eventually, my grandfather walked inside the sliding glass door from the backyard. “What are you doing?” He asked sitting down at the kitchen table.

“I’m reading this t.v. show.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. This is the only channel I can read. The other ones don’t have words.”

“Is that right?”

“Yes.” I continued to read the words aloud.
“Are you having a good birthday?”

“Yes.” I looked away from the television, and ran to my grandfather. Settling in his lap, I asked, “What really happened on my bloody birthday? Mom says that all babies come out with blood on them, but I don’t believe her. Did I get shot?”

“Oh no, but you’re right, you are very special and your bloody birthday was much different than everyone else’s.”

“Why, Papaw?”

“Because you were born covered in heart blood. Do you know what that means?”

“No.”

“It means that you can fix broken hearts. You fixed mine.”

“I did?”

“Sure. Don’t you remember?” I shook my head no, and settled in for the story. Sitting on Papaw’s lap, I pressed my head against his chest, and the story began, “Not long after your bloody birthday, my heart was broken, and the doctors didn’t know if they could fix it, but they were going to try. I asked your mom to bring you to the hospital because I knew you were born covered in the heart’s blood. Before I went into the place where the doctors were going to try to help me, she put you on my chest, and you fixed me before the doctors ever got a chance to try. Listen, do you hear my heart beating?”

We sat quietly as I listened, holding my breath, to the beat in his chest. “Yes, I can hear it.”

“That’s because you fixed it. You fixed my heart.”

“Wow. Can I fix other people’s hearts too?”
“Sometimes. If you believe enough, you can do anything, even fix a broken heart.

Don’t tell anyone about it. This is a secret. If other people know, you might not be able to
do it anymore.”

“I won’t tell anyone.”

“Not even NeeNee or your mom or your brother?”

“No one.”

“Good girl, it’s our secret.”
Ch. 2 Svengred and Refola

The meeting between Svengred, Queen Refola, and the board of elders was not going well. Svengred had made demand after demand, and refused to make any compromises. Refola had continued to refuse all of Svengred’s commands. The board sat silently trying not to incur the wrath of their queen.

“Svengred, none of the people can possibly feel this way,” Refola shouted unmoved.

“But they do, Refola. As the years have passed, more and more people have lost interest in your gods and goddesses. Haven’t you noticed the decrease in the half-ling like you and the increase in the real people? The whole people? We’re slowly gaining ground, and there is a resistance. Even if you can’t see it, Refola, it’s there. We’re sick of living in the trees. Our people are cold and wet and they get sick and die too young because they are exposed to the elements. We won’t continue this way. We want permission to cut down the trees to make shelter, and we’ll do whatever we must to get them.”

“What are you suggesting, Svengred?”

“A compromise. You give the people permission to use some of the trees for homes, and we’ll continue our peaceful relationship.”

“And if I don’t allow this? If I can’t allow murder?”

“Then, we do this the hard way. Refola, my people will get what they need to survive.”

“For thousands of years, the Trolls and the gods and goddesses have given the people everything they need. We provide them with reindeer to eat and clothe themselves. The streams provide cool water. The trees provide shade from the sun. The branches of our trees are given each year for fishing rods. We have given and given and given to your people.
How dare you come here and tell your Queen that you demand more? That your people have been mistreated? That I am not a just ruler? Everyone knows that it is the lot of man to live a shorter life than the trees or the trolls. No amount of destruction to my family can change this. Your demands are absurd. The Elders and I will not stand for this.” As if on cue, the panel of men and trolls began to mumble nearly inaudible no’s and shook their heads never looking up at the enraged queen or the unshaken revolutionary.

“If you will not agree to our demands, you bring war, and you will not be victorious.”

“I will take my chances in favor of the old ways. The ways that have served us for millennia.”

“We bring war at dawn.” Svengred walked away. Refola turned to face the Elders paying them heed for the first time since Svengred’s arrival. The trolls looked angry and the men and women would not meet her gaze.

“What say you, men? Are Svengred’s demands just? Does he serve the true desires of your people?”

For many minutes none stirred. Finally, Milona, the representative of the children, stood up from the forest floor. Her blonde curls framed her young face, and the child said, “In the winters we are very cold, even with the reindeer pelts. We sleep in large numbers among the unclean animals to keep warm in the dirt and the mud. In the spring, when the glaciers move, the land shakes and crumbles and many of our fathers and mothers and children are lost. We are not like you. Our skins have no bark or moss to keep out the harsh and harmful parts of nature. No leaves or roots to absorb the moisture of the rains and snows. I fear that we are becoming weakened, but I do not wish for war, Your Highness. I would never want anything that would bring harm to Your Majesty or the other Trolls. We
know that you love us. Would it truly be so bad to use a few of the trees to build stronger shelters, so we would not have to sleep in the mud?”

“What you are asking for, Milona, is that I sacrifice my family for yours. How can you ask that the children of the gods and goddesses be used to make roofs for the children of man? It’s unthinkable. The gods would never agree to it, and I cannot ask it of them. Do you all feel this way? Do you agree with Svegred and Milona?”

After a few seconds of silence, a man on the opposite side of the circle by the name of Bostuk stood. He was the highest-ranking human on the board. “Refola, we love and have sworn allegiance to you, but yes, after years of watching our families die so much sooner than your own, we ask that your people be willing to die for us too. This is meant to be equality, but my people have been treated like deer and other herd animals for too long. We are all in agreement with Svegred, and if you will not waver in your steadfastness, we will join his movement.”

Refola straightened her trunk-like spine and raised her head high. At her full height she was intimidating. “Then, you will all leave, and we war at dawn. Gods speed you.”

The humans stood and walked away slowly. Bostuk stopped before he exited and said, “Refola, please reconsider this. We don’t want war.” Refola shook her head and he continued out.

Last to leave was tiny Milona. She had always been Refola’s favorite. Milona walked up to her Queen, bowed and kissed Refola’s ring. “They will not fight Refola. It is much worse than war.”

“What do you mean, child.”
“They will bind you to the trees. They found an ancient ritual that will allow them to harness the gods and goddesses of the wind. They will use the power of the North Wind to trap you in the trees. Not all of us want this. There are men and women who would not engage in such cruelty. For love of them, Refola, please reconsider this.” The child clutched the troll’s left hand with all her power, eyes pleading.

“The gods and goddesses of the trees will not allow this, so there is nothing to fear.” Refola ran a hand over the child’s cheek, and Milona walked away, tears streaming.
Ch. 3 A Gift

Every afternoon, I took my naps in my grandparents’ bed. In the very middle, I curled up with my special pillow. A tiny toddler-sized imitation of a fetus. I didn’t have a pillow in my own bed because my mother was scared I would suffocate, so I enjoyed the soft comfort of this special pillow each day. My naps were more restful than a full night’s sleep.

Today, the pillows were in piles. New ones cased and stacked on the beds. I felt like I was in the middle of the scene from *Annie* where the little orphan girl watches as the maids dance, sing, and lavish her with linens. The house was being re-pillowed, and everyone piled the old ones on chairs, fluffing the sheets, and pulling old cases onto soft, new pillows. I was more intrigued with the old. The heaps of feather and cotton on the chairs. I walked into my grandparents’ room. The wooden rocking chair by their bed embraced the discarded pillows.

“What will we do with the old pillows?”

“Well, we’ll keep some for guests. Some we’ll throw out, and some we’ll give away or donate,” Grandma said fluffing a pillow case.

“When will I get my own pillow?”

“We’ll have to ask your mother, but it’s probably about time you had a pillow.” Neenee didn’t know about my mother’s irrational fear of suffocating me.

I stood with my hands behind my back and my toes pigeoned into each other. I watched the growing stack on the rocking chair. I walked over and touched each pillow with the tips of my fingers. I squeezed, caressed, sniffed. I was looking for my pillow. I found it and clutched a corner of the blue and white striped cotton as I turned back to my Neenee.

“Can I have one of these pillows?”

She turned from casing one of the new ones and raised a brow at me.
“Wouldn’t you rather have a new pillow?”

“No. I don’t like new things. Can I have this one?” I held up what was quite possibly the oldest pillow in the stack. It appeared to be military issue cotton. My Papaw was in the Air Force and it was doubtless he had obtained it there, but no one seemed to know where it came from.

“Why don’t we go ask your mom?”

“Okay.” I clutched the pillow to my chest and walked down the hall already deciding that I would fight wolves to keep my beloved naptime pillow. I was unsure where the resolve came from, but I would not move from it. No matter what.

“Jean, your daughter has decided she wants to keep Dad’s old pillow.”

“For what?”

“Well, she said she wanted a pillow. I said we’d talk to you about it, and she said she wanted that one.” Neenee pointed, and my mother turned from her pillow changing and saw the one in my arms. Her nose scrunched in disdain, her eyes rolled, and she knelt down beside me.

“Why don’t we pick out one of the new pillows for you?” I shook my head from side to side without speaking. “Why do you want that pillow?” I glared at her and shrugged concentrating on gripping my prize. She stood up and turned to my grandmother. “There’s no use talking to her when she gets these ideas in her head. She’ll outgrow this stubborn streak, and we’ll replace the pillow.”
Ch. 4 The Binding of Souls

Refola turned from Milona’s receding back, and addressed the board, “You may go to your families now. Hide the children, and prepare the adults for battle. I will call upon the gods and goddesses. They will tell me how to win this war.”

The others left with no hesitation. They were afraid, but they believed their queen would do what was best for them. Refola wondered if they all knew the truth that she fretted with now. The gods and goddesses of the winds were much more ancient than the powers she was calling on. The winds had blown the trees into life when they were naught but seeds. Still, Refola knew she must try.

“I call upon you, Betula. I call upon you Picea. Heads of the goddesses and gods. Come to me, and direct my actions.” The trees began to sway. Green light shone from the forest floor up to the heavens, and the smell of saplings and bark filled the air. In a matter of seconds Betula, the goddess of the Birch trees, and Picea, the god of the Spruce trees, stood before Refola. The great queen fell to her knees before the two tiny figures, barely the size of leaves. “Please my Lords tell me what I must do to return my people to peace. Must I allow the death of my brothers and sisters? Your sons and daughters?”

“Dear Refola,” Betula stepped forward placing a miniature hand on Refola’s face, “There is nothing to be done now. At dawn, the trolls will face the humans, and the men will bind your souls to those of the trees. They will hunt down every one of your children, hidden though they are, and bind them as well.”

“That is only half of the truth, Betula,” said Picea stepping forward. “Tell her what must be done.”

“It doesn’t have to be that way.”
“You know the truth, Betula.”

“Tell me, please,” Refola touched the hem of the goddess’s robe.

“The humans are not very strong, and not all of them will be part of the binding. Many of them will come to your aid. When they do, the humans harnessing North will blow them far away. Their bodies will fall among the trees in the far reaches near the Circle of Ice. These men and women will live forever among the deer, and will not harm our family. Then, the humans will use North to bind the souls to the trees. They will bind you last, Refola, but there will be an accident.” Betula stopped and stared at the forest floor. “I can’t go on, Picea. It’s too terrible.”

“Refola, your soul and Milona’s will be bound together,” Picea said, placing hand on Betula’s shuddering shoulder.

“Milona will die?”

“Yes.”

“Her family will be distraught. How can I protect her? I must stop this from happening.”

“You can’t protect her, dear one. If you do, the turmoil between their people and our own will never be corrected. You must allow this to happen. I did not want to tell you. I wanted you to be blind to the pain to come. It would have been easier,” Betula sighed deeply placing a doll-sized hand on Refola’s larger one.

“Why should I allow this?”

“Because if you do not, the quarrel between the humans and the trolls will become much worse. The years will go on and there will be much conflict. Many will be lost on both sides, but if you allow the bindings, your children will not suffer for long. The humans
plan to cut down the very trees they bind the souls in, to build their homes. When the trees are cut down, the souls will be released. The spirits will haunt the people for centuries. Only your soul will remain, bound with Milona’s.” Picea hoped that knowing the others would be freed would ease Refola’s pain.

“There is nothing I can do to spare the child from this fate?”

“I’m sorry, Refola,” Betula said, “we would give anything that it might be different.”

“Then, they will bind my soul and Milona’s into the same tree?”

“A tree cannot contain the combined souls of a human and a troll. The burden would be too much. Your combined spirits will form a ring of silver. A lemming will carry this ring to her family in the north, and they will pass it down for millennia. You will live a very long time with this child. The other trolls will perish as the humans use the trees to build their homes, but you will not die, Refola. You will hear the cries of pain, and live to see the death of all of your kindred.” Picea could barely hold his head up.

“And this has to be?”

“Yes. In many millennia, there will be a girl who, without knowing, will set you both free, and the years of pain and suffering will be undone. There will be peace again between the humans and the trolls. A restoration of the natural order. It is the only way.”

“Then, I will do as you command.”
Ch. 5 Of Magic Fruit and Trolls in Trees

“Beans, beans the magical fruit the more you…” His voice was cut short by the shrill one from the kitchen five or six feet away.

“WALT! Don’t sing her that song!” My grandmother shouted. My grandfather leaned his forehead against mine. We shook our heads back and forth pressed together, gazes locked laughing and whispering.

“The more you eat the more you toot! The more you toot the better you feel! So, let’s eat beans for every meal!” We couldn’t help getting a little louder at the end. We heard my grandmother’s sigh of disapproval.

“Walt, can’t you teach her a nice song? I’m the one who has to listen to beans beans the magical fruit all day when you’re at work.” My grandmother appeared holding a plate filled with freshly baked cookies. She sat them on the table, and returned to the kitchen.

My three-year-old brother, Hansen, sat on the living room floor playing with a row of stuffed animals ordered from biggest to smallest and seemingly, paying us no mind at all. My grandmother returned with two glasses of milk, and Hansen started to giggle, picked up a teddy bear, and said to it, “Beans, beans, beans, beans, beans, beans.” That was my not-quite-verbal brother’s equivalent to singing with us. My grandmother rolled her eyes, and walked out of the room.

“Dad, tell her a story so I can put her to bed,” my mother yelled from down the hall as she walked into the living room, took a cookie from the plate, and collected my brother and his toys. “She’ll be up all night if you keep her laughing.”

“Do you want a story?” Papaw asked. I nodded. “Okay, once upon a time.”

“Why do stories have to start with that?”
“They don’t. It just sounds better. Now, once upon a time.”

“What time?”

“What?”

“Once upon what time?” I asked.

“Once upon the time when there were still trolls instead of police officers.”

“Oh, when was that?”

“Are you gonna ask questions or listen to the troll story?”

I thought about it for a minute. Then replied, “Troll story, but I get to ask ten more
questions if I have to.”

“Two more questions,” Grandpa negotiated.

“Papaw, that will never be enough questions. Seven more.”

“Three.”

“Six.”

“Four.”

“Five.”

“Four.”

“Papaw, you’re not knee-goat-she-ate-shun-ing right!” I said sounding out the word
that was new to my tongue.

He laughed, “Okay three more questions and that’s my final offer.”

“Papaw! You’re going backwards!”

“Walt, stop it! You know better than to get her shrieking and giggling this close to
bed.” My grandmother wandered through the dining room gathering up dishes from the day
including the plate of cookies she had just brought to us. Papaw swiped one as Neenee
picked it up. “Do you have a deli in the bedroom?” She asked my grandfather. He shook his head no. She kept walking.

“Neenee! There are three cups and two plates in the deli in my room!”

“Now, why on earth do you have so many dishes in your deli?” She turned back around.

I giggled.

“You’re teasing me?” She said.

I nodded.

“The two of you…” she returned to collecting the ‘delis’ as she called them. I’m not sure where the term came from, but that was what my grandmother asked when she was collecting dishes to wash each night.

“Alright, girly, I believe we had settled on two more questions for you during the story.”

“Grandpa!”

“Oh no, you’re calling me grandpa!” he said in mock fear. “Okay, you can have five questions, but you better make them good.” I nodded my approval and he started the story.

“Once upon,” he paused, “Once upon the time that trolls were still the law keepers—because there were not any police officers yet—because no one had come up with the idea—because they had trolls so there was no need for anyone else to keep the peace—and they needed the trolls to do it—because if they didn’t have someone to keep the peace, hooligans like Alex and Hansen Werner would have ruled the world,” I giggled. “So, once upon that time, there was a troll named Steven who lived under a bridge. He liked it under his bridge because he couldn’t see very well in the light. It was dark and dank under the bridge, but he
could see better there and he had everything he needed. The river gave him water and food and a place to bathe. He liked it though others might consider it sub par. Steven never had to come out from under the bridge until someone somewhere did something wrong.”

“Did the troll like it under the bridge all the time?”

“Yes, I just told you he had everything he needed.”

“Yes, but he was under a bridge all the time.”

“Lots of people are under a bridge all the time and they are perfectly happy waiting there until they can come out. Now, listen. This troll, Larry,”

“Steven.”

“Right, this troll, Steven, liked living under the bridge.”

“I don’t think he would like to live under the bridge.”

“Well, you’re wrong because he did. Now, Steven loved living under his bridge.”

“I know he didn’t love living under the bridge.”

“Yes, he did. You are sitting at four questions.”

“Huh uhh. One!”

“Four, Did he like living under the bridge, was he under there all the time, did he really like it, did he love it. That’s four. You have one more question.”

“Huh uhh. I have four more. I only said one with a question mark.”

“What?”

“I only asked one question with a question mark. The other ones don’t count.”

He stared, thought, realized I was right, and laughed. “For a five-year-old, I think you could probably outwit a troll any day of the week.”

“Papaw, trolls are stupid and blind.”
“Right, but they’re smarter than most five-year-olds.”

“I guess that’s true. What about Steven? Was Steven stupid and blind?”

“Hah! That’s two more questions, with question marks.”

“Okay, answer.”

“Well, we already know he didn’t see very well in the light. Let’s find out if Steven was smart. Steven the troll was living under this bridge. He was on the truancy squad of trolls. He had to go gobble up,” Grandpa tickled my stomach, “all the children who didn’t go to school like they should.”

“How’d he know if they didn’t go to school?”

“I’m getting there. That’s four by the way.” I glowered. My grandmother laughed from the kitchen, “Everyday, all the children had to cross his bridge to get to school. If Steven didn’t hear the right number of children go by in the morning, he would go out and look for the missing ones.”

“So, the troll counts all morning?”

“Yes, and that’s five questions. Now, you have to sit quietly and listen to the end of the story.” I nodded my concession.

“One Thursday morning, Steven did not hear Little Billy pass by overhead.”

“How?”

Grandpa spoke over the question, “He knew it was Little Billy because he knew what each child’s walk sounded like on the bridge.” I nodded and grandpa continued. “So, Steven went looking for Little Billy. First, Steven went to Billy’s house. Billy was not there. Billy’s mother was very upset and said to Steven, ‘Please, Steven the Truancy Troll, find my son and bring him to school so he can learn to be a good, smart boy,’” I laughed at grandpa’s
shrill woman’s voice. He rubbed the beard stubble that he called his whiskers on my cheeks to keep me laughing.

“Walt, finish the story!” Grandma’s voice said from the kitchen.

“Okay, so Steven said,” out came the troll voice. It was low and growly. I always pretended, when he told troll stories, that it didn’t scare me, but it did. “‘Mrs. Billysmom, I will find your son and take him to school, but if he refuses to go, I will have to gobble him all up.’ Mrs. Billysmom agreed to these terms, and Steven stomped away with his thick, troll legs to find Little Billy. Now, Little Billy was in the woods gathering up pockets full of toads to torture. If there was one thing that Steven the Truancy Troll hated more than truancy it was toad torture.

“Steven found Little Billy pretty fast because he could hear the RIIIIIBBBBIIIIITTS! of terrified, tortured toads. When he found Little Billy, Billy was scared and cowered because Steven was nine feet tall and made of mud and he smelled like the dank river. Steven’s voice was very loud and he said, ‘Little Billy! Put down those terrified, tortured toads and go to school! If you don’t, I will have to gobble you up, and your mother said that I could!’ Billy started to cry and emptied out his pockets. The terrified, tortured toads thanked Steven the Truancy Troll as they hopped away. Steven took Billy back to school, and Billy said, ‘Thank you, Steven the Truancy Troll for helping me to be a big boy. I know now that I should never skip school or torture terrified toads.’

“‘That’s okay, Billy, just don’t let it happen again or I will have to gobble you all up. You have had your warning.’ From that day on, Billy was a nice boy who always went to school and never tortured toads or frogs for that matter. The End.” I was sitting quietly and staring at my hands.
“I didn’t mean to torture the toads. I just like them.”

“I know you didn’t. That was just a story.”

“Do you think the toads hate me?”

“No, I don’t. I think the toads like you, but they also like to be looked at but not touched. Sometimes, when we touch toads, they get hurt even if we don’t mean to do it.”

“Okay, I’ll be nicer to the toads. I’ll just watch them in the garden from the porch.”

“That sounds like a good idea.” My grandpa kissed my cheek and pulled me against him. I rested my head on his shoulder and closed my eyes as he rocked me back and forth. When I had fallen asleep, he carried me into my room. As he placed me in my bed, I reached out toward him, but when my head found my pillow, who now was named Mickey because of his Mickey Mouse Club pillow case, I dropped my arms and slept.
Ch. 6 The North Wind

When the sun peeked above the ridge of the earth, the wind began to blow. Refola gathered the trolls, and was silent. She didn’t breathe a word of what Betula and Picea had told her because she knew it would cause the other trolls distress. Knowing there was nothing they could do to change their destinies, she would rather they not know. Refola and the trolls gathered on the edge of the forest, overlooking the cliffs where the land met the sea. The humans were gathered there along the rocks. Svengred stepped forward, and began an incantation. As he spoke the mystic words, wind began to swirl out of the trees around the trolls.

The other people began to chant with Svengred. Finally, the chanting stopped. The humans raised their arms in unison, and Refola closed her eyes, preparing for what was to come. Picea had assured her it would all end quickly. The other trolls were pacing. They had not come to this place prepared to face chanting. They wore mail and stood ready to take on human weapons, not godly words. As the hands began to descend, the trolls turned to Refola. “What do we do?” Shouted one of the older males. “What is happening? What are they doing?” Asked another.

Before Refola was able to respond, the humans shouted again. As their arms surged forward harnessing the power of North, another band of humans charged from the trees and surrounded the trolls. This group of people received the full force of the North wind, and flew, as the gods had foretold, far away. To the very northern part of the country. So far north that they would be unable to find their way back to the other people for many centuries, but then again, they would not want to return to the others for many centuries more.
Refola and the trolls watched as the humans flew away, and Svengred began to chant again, calling North back to his control. The others joined him. Thinking they would get blown away, physically, like the humans, the trolls began to run. Svengred laughed, as the chant came to an end. The arms surged forward again. The sound of chanting was replaced by screams as the trolls were forced into trees.

Refola watched as the body of the troll nearest her hit the tree, and appeared to be drilled into the wood. His limbs became branches, eyes and nose and mouth knotholes. As the tree absorbed the bark-like flesh, the insides of the troll began to twist and turn. He screamed as every part of his body was crushed into the trunk, or stretched into vines. Refola could barely stand to watch as the eyes were covered in wood, and the life of the troll seemed to go out. Refola realized that the last of the trolls had been bound, and her time was coming. She looked around for support, but none of her family could be seen at all, except by those who knew where to look.

Refola turned to face her fate. Svengred smiled as she met his gaze. “Queen Refola, do you regret your decision now?”

“I regret nothing. Do what you must.”

Svengred laughed. “As you wish, Queen Refola.” The humans’ arms reached forward again. As the gods had foretold, Milona ran from the trees as North’s final surge hit the queen.

“I’m sorry, child,” Refola whispered as a tearing pain wrapped their hearts and souls together. The wind whipped around and around. Spinning and twining them. A white-hot light filled both from the inside out. The fire burned so hot that their flesh and bone and hair were incinerated in barely an instant. All that remained was the iron from their bodies, their
blood hardened and turned blue in the fire. Their souls were the great fire that had erupted from within when the wind wrapped around them. These pieces of the two creatures wound together creating the foretold silver ring, and fell to the earth. The silver was filled with swirling colors that were their souls. North continued, after binding their souls, to the very northern part of the country where he would live for the rest of his days with the people who had rebelled.

Svengred stepped forward, trying to catch a glimpse of what had become of Refola and the child, Milona. The other humans stood in shock, unable to move. Svengred barely caught a glimpse of something shiny in the grass before a lemming emerged from a nearby hole. The animal clamped the ring in his mouth, and ran away as quickly as he could. The lemming’s name was Osterd and he had watched the happenings between the trolls and the humans for years. He knew that the people of the cliffs would try to harm the troll queen, but the people who had flown away on the North wind, would help her. They would hide Refola and the girl. Somehow, Osterd believed this needed to be done.

Osterd dug below the earth in case the humans were after him, and traveled swiftly through tunnels. After many days of travel, Osterd reemerged, and found himself in a new land, that was very cold. He felt the chill of the wind even beneath his thick layer of dark fur. He sat on his back paws, and listened for the sounds of humans. Hearing a stirring to the east, Osterd ran as swiftly as he could. Finally, he found the humans. Many of them were wounded, and none of them paid the lemming any mind.

Osterd walked quietly among them looking for the child’s family. He found them sitting together with a herd of reindeer. The lemming climbed into Milona’s brother’s lap. He dropped the ring into Michan’s hand. “What’s this?”
“It is what became of your sister, Milona.”

“What do you mean?”

“She tried to protect Refola, the queen. The other humans bound their souls together, and they formed this ring. You must protect it.” Osterd jumped out of Michan’s lap.

“Wait, lemming. Won’t you stay with us? If you return, the others might harm you.” Osterd sat, with his back to Milona’s family who were all studying him now.

He turned to face them. “I have a family of my own, and I must return to them. If we can, we will come back to be with you.”

“Be careful, lemming.” Milona’s mother said.

“Osterd, my name is Osterd, and I will take great care on my journey. In time, I will return to you.” With those last words, Osterd began the travel back to his family, and the fight that awaited them.
“Today, we’re going to play Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles!” I announced with my posse behind me. My cousin Rebecca was here to play with Hansen and me today. We three stood on the front steps and looked out at the rolling, green hills. We were the masters of all we surveyed. We had no understanding of fences or safety. “I will be Donatello, Hansen is Raphael, Rebecca you can be Michelangelo, and” I looked around for a leader. “Let’s go get Wesley. He can be Leonardo.”

Wesley was the neighbor boy. The beautiful, blonde neighbor boy. Even at six I knew I would be in love with him some day. Wesley lived a quarter of a mile up the road. The three turtles took off on a journey across vast wastelands. We weren’t allowed to walk near the road. Instead, we had to cross the field between Wesley’s front yard and our own.

The three of us jumped onto the rails of the wooden fence and continued over the top doing handsprings and somersaults through the air. In my head this is what happened. In actuality, we ducked between the planks. Turtles flew kicking and tumbling through the tall grass. Humans ambled across the yard and around the pond. In order to avoid Wesley’s cautious parents, we stuck to the tree line as we rounded the corner to his back yard. Our weapons drawn at all times. We never knew when a member of the foot-clan would appear.

“Wesley,” we whispered up at his window. His blonde hair appeared in the windowpane. He always heard us somehow. A brilliant smile followed by scampering, and Wesley clomped out the back door.

“Hey guys!”

“We’re playing ninja turtles and we need a Leonardo,” I announced.
“Cool. Let me ask my mom,” Wesley turned and shouted to his mother, “Mom, can I play at Alex and Hansen’s house?”

Mrs. Tunnel appeared at the back door. The three Werner children stood up straight and attempted to look like we were okay playmates for her son. She smiled. “Okay, be back by three,” she kissed Wesley’s cheek and nodded to the rest of us as she returned to the house.

“Yes!” Wesley shouted as we began to ninja punch and kick across the yard. “What do the ninjas have to destroy today?” Wesley punched a tree and quickly regretted it.

“The way I see it, an evil otter is trying to take over the sewer systems. There’s nothing for the turtles to do, but track him down and confront him.”

“An evil otter? That’s crazy!” Rebecca objected from behind me.

“No, it’s not,” Wesley said, stopping next to the pond. “Look here,” he pointed to a set of tracks through the mud.

“OH NO! An evil otter!” Hansen screamed. “What are we going to do?!?”

“First of all,” Wesley said, “No screaming. We have to keep a level head. Second, we have to get to the sewers.”

“There aren’t any sewers here. We have septic tanks.” Rebecca wasn’t one to follow along on our flights of fancy.

“Michelangelo, cowabunga! You’re right! How did we get so far from the city? There’s no way to get back without the sewer lines, but we’ll have to deal with that another day. Today, there’s a giant, evil otter to take care of,” I said, “I am not going to allow an evil otter to terrify the citizens of this land for one day longer! Who’s with me?!” I thrust my left fist into the air.
“I’m wiff you!” My brother grabbed my right hand.

“I’m already working on a plan of action,” Wesley said.

We all turned to look at Rebecca. She rolled her eyes and said, “Cowabunga, dudes!”

“What do we do, Leo?” I asked.

“First, we find his lair. Then, we go in with smoke bombs and our ninja powers and annihilate him!”

“We don’t have smoke bombs,” My brother said as if we had ninja powers.

“Yes we do,” Wesley reached into his pockets and handed each of us a marble. When the time comes, we’ll throw them on the ground to confuse the otter so we can save the people!”

“Genius!” I shouted. “Let’s get to it. Where do you think the otter’s keeping the people?”

“Probably on the other side of the dike,” Wesley said.

“Do you really think they’re that close to us?” Hansen asked. We all turned to stare at the dike that was about six feet away. We could not see what lay on the other side of the mound of earth.

“We better go to it then. They probably already know we’re here, if they really are that close.”

“Good point, Rebecca. We should get to it. Are we all ready?” Wesley held his marble in the air, and we all followed suit. Then, we started off toward the hill. When we got near the peak where we could see over, the turtles fell to their stomachs and army crawled to the top. Looking down the slope, we saw the otter. He was twelve feet tall, and
he had a bazooka. Still, he was no challenge for the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. There were three people tied up, waiting to be rescued, and we would not disappoint.

Turtles charged down the hill, and spiked the smoke bombs to the ground. Rebecca, Hansen, and I each tossed one of the people over our shoulder and carried them away. Wesley knocked the bazooka out of the otter’s hand, kicked him in the face three times, and tied him up.

“Come on, guys,” Wesley yelled running up the hill. We have to get the people to safety. We all ran behind him to his back yard. Collapsing to the grass, we laughed until Wesley’s mom yelled for him to come back inside.

Trailing back across the field, we watched the real otter slip into the water and splash below the surface. “He didn’t look evil,” Hansen said. “I’m glad Wesley didn’t kill him.”

“Yeah, he just needed to learn a lesson,” I replied. Rebecca and I smiled at each other over his head.
Ch. 8 Komsa

The people in the north found there was a plentiful harvest of giant fish to eat, and they kept warm in the furs of reindeer. The North wind had come to dwell in this land with them, away from the other humans who had abused his power. The people welcomed North, though his presence drastically decreased the temperature. They would dwell with him and his gods and protect the trees, living among them as they always had.

During an exploration, several men discovered that they had landed in the Alta Mountains. Near one that the people called Komsa, and this is the name that they chose for themselves. The name Komsa was created by combining the names of the surrounding mountains, but the meaning of the combined words was scarce or rare. The people knew that life would be difficult, and there were many dangers in the north. Wolves, glaciers, freezing temperatures, and weeks where the sun would not rise. They took the name Komsa knowing that comforts would be scarce, and those who could survive in these extremities would be rare. They were Komsa.

“This is a hard place,” said Michan, “but we will do well. We were blown here not by Svengred’s people, but by the wind who will now be forever at our backs.” At this, the wind swept gently around the people. Michan had taken it upon himself to address them, and begin settling a plan for the future. “We should be grateful to have escaped from men and women who would so cruelly treat the trolls who have been kind to us for millennia, but we have to set a plan in motion for our survival. Who can foresee a way of life?”

An elderly man, stood slowly off the forest floor. His name was Lustrom and he was the oldest man. “I believe, in this place, we can continue the old way of life in peace. The trees will protect us. The deer herds have followed us. There is not as much vegetation here,
but if the trees will still allow us a branch from time to time for fishing, we’ll break holes in the ice and eat fish plentifully. Despite the cold, we must not give in to the new ways. We will not build homes from trees.”

“What if the others follow us?” A woman from the back said. She sounded frightened.

“We should keep moving.” Vilmer, Milona’s father, said. “We will stay warmer, if we travel, and there will be less chance that the others will find us. Movement will protect us. We’ll stick to the coasts and fish for our meals. We should not build homes like the others or take root like the trees. We are not like the southerners or like the trolls. We have to be something else.”

“We are Komsa.” Michan said, clapping his father on the back.

“We are Komsa,” the crowd responded with a cheer. Suddenly, out of the trees, hundreds of lemmings began to emerge.

Michan spotted Osterd, and scooped him off the ground, “What’s wrong?”

“We have been running for a very long time. There was a horrible fight, and I lost most of my family. I have led many of the women and children here, but I have to go back to fight. Those who survive will dwell among your people, in the North.” Osterd ran back into the trees, and the other lemmings began to settle among the humans.
There are four main types of poisonous snake in Texas, and three of them flourished in East Texas when I was a child. Rattlers, “You won’t hear ‘em unless it’s too late.” That’s what Grandpa taught us. “You gotta watch for ‘em. Never under any circumstances get close to a baby rattler. You’ll have a momma on you faster than you can spit a brick and babies have more potent venom.” We learned our lessons and kept an eye out for rattlers and didn’t go where Grandpa taught us they kept their nests: in cool, dark, damp places. Three kinds of rattlesnakes inhabited the area: western massasauga, western diamond back, and the more common, timber. They all look vaguely different, but even having seen them in their natural habitats, I don’t think I would know the difference.

“I haven’t seen a copperhead in awhile, but I think they’re still out there. They just got smarter’s all. They’re kind of orangey snakes with dark red strips in ‘em. Not as vicious as rattlers or territorial as moccasins.” Southern copperheads were, in fact, growing less common in that part of Texas. I never saw one.

“They’re a little souther than us usually, but if you see a red and yellow striped snake just remember ‘Red on yellow, dead fellow. Red on black, venom lack.’ They have copy catters around here, but I’ve never seen a real coral.” Coral snakes are found in the wooded areas of south central Texas and the coastal areas of the state, but one could easily find its way to damp, wooded Wills Point.

“Now, listen close about this one. As much time as you two spend around the water, you have the biggest chance to run in with a cottonmouth. That’s a water moccasin. The moccasin is dark colored. From far away it’ll look black. If you’re close enough to see the blues and greens and browns in its color, you’re too close.” Grandpa was looking my brother
and me in the eyes back and forth as he spoke. “If you see one, you stand very still. It might not see you and just go on about its business. Then, you run. If one sees you, there aren’t a lot of options. You never know what the mind of a moccasin is. It could bite, but it might not. Stand still, and watch what it does. If it bites at you and you can see the white in its mouth, you run. Never run until after it attacks or you’ll incite it.” The Western Cottonmouth is only about three feet long, and wouldn’t be nearly as scary if it weren’t for the dark color and the large, white mouth. Our house was surrounded on all four sides by ponds.

I looked over at my brother as we walked out the front door, “How many tadpoles do you think you can catch before Wesley’s dad yells at us for playing on his property?” The summer I was seven and my brother was five, we’d taken to playing on the untamed land across the street from us which was owned by Forest Tunnel, Wesley’s dad. The big game was to catch tadpoles in the wet strip of land connecting the lake to the pump system that the Tunnels used to keep their stock pond full during the hot, dry summer months by siphoning water out of the pond across the street. The summer was exceptionally warm and damp. Both ponds were high and the canal leading into the pump that ran under the street was full enough to support proper ecosystems for small fish, tadpoles, and turtles.

“I’ll get eight tadpoles!” Hansen yelled. I smiled down at him.

“I’ll race you to the water.” We were still at the head of our driveway with several acres to cross in the heat before we were at the water’s edge. The only way to do this and not feel useless and miserable from the heat was to run. We did that almost everyday. I would let Hansen think he was going to win and then break ahead of him.
We were running stride for stride almost to the water. I looked at my brother, laughed, and turned my attention back to the pond intending to kick it into high gear in time to sweep past him. That’s when I saw her. My brother was looking at me, and laughing. I applied my brakes as quickly as I could grabbing Hansen by the shirt collar to stop him too. He was trying to squirm out of my grip. “Stop holding me back. I’m goin to win this time.”

“Hansen, don’t move.” I tried a calm, serious voice. I wanted him to understand that I wasn’t trying to keep him from winning a race.

“Don’t trick me. I’ll tell grandma if you trick me.” He strained at my grip on his shirt.

“Hansen, please don’t move. Look by the water.” His body went limp as his eyes landed on what I had been watching.

Coiled in the tall grass around the bank of the canal about five feet away was a black mass of writhing bodies. Tears were pouring down my cheeks. My brother folded his hand in mine, and edged closer to me. As he did this, a head appeared out of the mass of snake and a mouth opened wide to reveal a cottony, white colored interior.

I realized that the other bodies were smaller. Babies. A nest. I needed to get Hansen out of there. We’d already been spotted. I knew that if you were seen you were supposed to stand still until the snake lost interest or lunged. Now, there was nothing to do, but wait for the strike.

“Hansen,” I whispered, “when I count to three, I want you to turn and run back to the house and tell grandma to call 911.” I stared at the snake.

“No,” he whispered back. “I won’t go without you. Papaw said you’re not supposed to move until they try to bite you.”
“Hansen, you’re going to go back to the house when I say.”

“If I run, the snake will get mad and bite you. I’m staying.”

I realized he was determined and I stopped arguing. We waited for what felt like three or four hours, but must have only been, three or four minutes, an extraordinary amount of time for two children to look into the white mouth of a moccasin.

Slowly, the snake closed her mouth. She still stared at us there holding each other’s hands. Then, the snake slipped from the water’s edge and under the surface leaving a twisted pile of tiny replicas. In that instant, I realized that they weren’t moving. That was all there was time for before I felt Hansen tug at my hands. “Let’s go before she comes back.” We ran.

“She won’t come back,” I shouted as our feet pounded the gravel up our driveway. We collapsed on the front lawn, and regained our composure before going in to tell grandma what we’d seen. No need to scare her more than we had to.

Two days later, my brother and I made our way cautiously, across the street to the pond. We approached the place where we had seen it. A story that had been told and told again over the past several days. As we drew close enough to see the spot where she had been, Hansen pulled in a loud breath and clutched my arm. There was still a black pile. I looked at him and shook my head, “No, it’s okay. They’re dead. They weren’t moving when she was here either. They’re all dead. All of her babies.” We inched close enough to see that I was right.

“If something eats them, do you think they’ll get sick because of the venom?” Hansen asked.
“I don’t know.” I shrugged. Then, I said, “Let’s bury them. We can bury them as a thank you to the mother for not hurting us.” My brother nodded his acceptance and we knelt there and scooped soft dirt out of the ground by the water’s edge. When we had a fairly good-sized hole, we pushed the petrified snakes into it with a stick and covered them up the same way. We could come close, but still feared to touch.
Ch. 10 Reindeer

The Komsa believed that the reindeer had followed them. They were unaware of how far they had traveled on the wind. The reindeer that they found near the Circle of Ice were different than the ones they had known in the south. Reindeer had always been their food, clothing, and shelter. They were not seen as cognizant like many of the other animals. It was inhumane to kill lemmings because they could speak and had the power to reason, but deer were like plants and fish existing to be harvested by man.

Out of vengeance for their lost sons and daughters, Betula and Picea imbued the reindeer in the south with knowledge, spirit, and voice, but left the northern deer untouched. Thus, they destroyed the only means of warmth and shelter the humans could obtain naturally. These southern people had no choice but to take what did not belong to them, and murder to survive. They were quickly becoming hardened to their crimes, but in less than a year’s time, these killings had taken their toll on many. The will to power was not yet an inborn trait. The people wanted to live more comfortably, but they longed for the days when the trolls told them the difference between right and wrong. Making these choices for themselves was difficult.

The southern people had seen so much death, and the aftermath was a world where the very ground below them seemed to rebel. The earth no longer held up the grass, and mud ran through their camps. The woods were haunted by the spirits of the lemmings they had slaughtered after binding the trolls to the trees, and now, they could not kill the deer without feeling guilt because the animals had human thought. The people became fearful of cutting down the trees to make their homes. The spirits of the lemmings tormented their dreams at night, and the spirits of deer they killed for food and warmth followed them for weeks before
they could find rest. If such small souls could bring such horrors upon their people, the souls of the trolls, the ruling class, part divine, would surely bring much more pain and suffering.

“The trees contain souls now, and we can barely sleep without the spirits of the lemmings attacking us, or enter the woods with the spirits of the deer surrounding us. How much more should we fear the souls that will be unleashed when we dispose of the forests?” Sorbo was a beautiful woman, and as such, the men listened to her opinion more readily than they did that of the less attractive. “And now, the deer have begun to speak and wear clothes made from things of the forest. How can we kill, how can we eat that which knows our language, and shares our shames?”

The others were nodding their agreement, gathered along the coast at sunset for the daily meeting. Many were tired and hungry. The fish had become more difficult to catch, and the hunters were too afraid to kill the sentient deer. Svengred was beginning to lose his power over the people. He had felt his grasp loosening for some time. He must speak to Sorbo’s concerns, but knew not what to say. Finally, he stood wearily from the ground, and addressed his people.

“We have fought the trolls, and we have won. We have vanquished the lemmings who would have pushed us into the sea. Instead, they fell to the ocean, and we have power over them. Why should we falter for fear of spirits? This world and the next have been linked with spirits for all of time. Why is our time any different? Why should we fear something that is part of nature? As for the deer, they are new to their ability to reason. They are young in their thoughts, and too trusting that we will not bring them harm because they are like us. It will be very easy to do away with them, and their souls rarely linger for long. So, cease your worrying. We will begin the harvest of the trees, in two weeks’ time.
Now, we will further discuss the matter of the deer. What say you? How can we trap some for food and clothing without causing all to desert us? Speak your peace.” Svengred returned to his place on the ground and prepared to listen to voice of his people.

“We could dig a hole, cover it with branches and leaves, and lure some of the deer to step on it. It might seem like an accident.”

“Good,” Svengred said, “What else?”

“Sir, couldn’t we just talk to them? Trick them into eating the berries that poison them? Lure them away from the herd one by one and deal with them that way?”

“Good. If they think like humans, they may be tricked like us. What else?”

“Sir, why not kill them all at once? Defeat the problem quickly?”

Svengred looked at the younger man who had spoken and laughed. Others did the same, “Because, Winliv, come winter, what do you suggest we eat? If we kill them all at once, how do you suggest we survive?” Winliv did not respond, but returned to sitting on the ground, and stared at his hands. “Does anyone else have a more,” he paused to guffaw at Winliv again, “discerning idea?” No one spoke. “Then, in two week’s time we will begin building shelters from the trees, and until then, we will live on deer meat and fish. Go on, now. I need time to think.”

Svengred paced, hands behind his back, staring at the trees. They would be his undoing yet. From behind him he heard barely a whisper of a voice, “Sir, some of the people are talking of mutiny. I wanted you to know.”

Svengred turned to see Winliv standing behind him. “My people speak of mutiny?”

“Yes, Sir.”
“You are wise to tell me.” Winliv’s face glowed with pride. Only moments ago he had been but a dullard in the King’s eyes, and now, he was wise. Winliv should have been more cautious with such a fickle ruler, but instead, he trusted. “What do they say of me? Of mutiny?” The king barely glanced at Winliv as he continued his pacing.

“The others say the people we destroyed were right to protect the trolls. That we should not have bound them to the trees. That we will only release them when we cut the trees down, and they will seek vengeance.”

“That’s all very interesting, but people will always question their leadership. It is their way. I need something. Something to unite us, or at least provide the semblance of union.” Svengred reached forward and touched the trunk of a tree. A grin spread across his handsome face. He turned to Winliv, and said, “I will give our people a name. In naming a people, we become bound to one another. Family. If I convince them that we are a tribe, we are united, I can buy more time to convince them I am right.”

“That is very wise, Master. The people need to feel part of something, and like they are empowered.”

“I will tell you a secret Winliv. The people, the ones blown away on the North Wind, they aren’t dead.”

“The people will be very relieved to hear this.”

“Will they? Well, they will feel more relieved to hear that they are in the far north, and will not be able to escape, if they try to spread word of what happened. Completely cut off. The only way to them is through our land. Norge. The North way. That is what we will call ourselves. We hold the land that leads the way north. We will call this place, Norway, and we, Winliv, will be called Norwegians.”
Ch. 11 Tree Tops and Empty Spaces

I looked up through the intertwining tree branches. The sun burned my eyes as it dappled its way through the leaves. The notebook in my lap was filling up with words and phrases that signified next to nothing.

At eight years old, I was just beginning to write. I wrote poems to the tune of:

“O yuck! I saw a duck. There was muck. I got stuck. O yuck!”

A haiku for the ages. My favorite pencil was dull and needed sharpening, but if I came in from outside with a pencil, questions might be asked. I couldn’t risk my fortress. I was trying to think of a way to sneak the pencil to be sharpened, unharmed. I decided to hide it in the tree in our front yard, take it to school with me the next day, sharpen it, put it back in the front tree, and then sneak it into this tree. My tree.

I liked making missions for myself. I wrote this one down on the paper in my lap. I smiled up at the tree limbs again. “What kind of story should I write?” I asked the emptiness.

“Write one about me!” I looked up to see my six-year-old brother, standing at our back gate with his hands through the links in the chain. His nose and mouth were pressed into another hole allowing his eyes to look through two more links.

“Hansen, be careful, that fence has a delayed electric current. If you hold on for more than fifteen seconds, you’ll be electrocuted!”

“I asked Papaw. He said you’re a liar.”

“Oh, poo on Papaw for ratting me out.”

“What are you doing in the tree?”

“I’m writing my stories.”
“Why?”

“Because I like to.”

“Why?”

“Because. Leave me alone, question asker, or I’m going to sic my monsters on you.”

“You don’t have monsters.”

“What if I do? You’d never know what is and is not over here because you’ve never been on this side of the fence.”

“I want to come play with you.”

“I’m not playing. I’m writing.”

“Yeah, you’re making up stories. That’s how we play.”

“Go home, we’ll play later.” Instead, Hansen plopped down in the mud on the other side of the fence, crossed his arms and stared through the gate at me.

“Write a story about me.” He said.

I shrugged.

Once upon a time, I scribbled in my notebook. No, Alex, that will not do. If children like you read this story, they will want to know what time, I thought. So, I started once more.

Once upon the time that trolls roamed the earth looking for their place and humans showed them respect out of fear and admiration, there was a little boy named Hansen and a girl named Alex. No, still not right. Sounds a little goofy.

Once upon the time that trolls, like me, roamed the earth looking for their place and humans, like my brother, showed them respect out of fear and admiration, because they were bigger and smarter, the tables started to turn. Once content to live in a world where they would never belong, trolls have ceased to accept sub par and subterranean living conditions.
I’m witty, I thought. I’d just watched a PBS special about subterranean fault lines.

Now, I, Alex, was going to be a troll some day, but I didn’t know about that yet. I
spent most of my days sitting inside the fallen arms of an oak tree. The downed branches
created a six-foot dome on the left side of the tree trunk with a split between limbs just wide
enough for me to duck through. Inside the arms of the oak tree, into a world where it was
okay to be a troll.

My brother, Hansen, was not a troll. He was a real boy, and some day, he would
learn to tame the trolls. He was a kind boy who did not speak. He smiled and nodded and he
could write a little. Sometimes, Hansen would follow me into the back field, the land of
trolls. I allowed him all the way to the fence, but no farther. Non-trolls could not enter.

He smiled, and sat staring through the links in the fence. He couldn’t see me inside
the globe of the trees, but he waited.

We two very different children have one thing in common. Our mother. Jean is
trapped in a stock brokerage firm with her hands glued to her desk. My father is a troll. He
has to sit under his bridge all day and cannot possibly be bothered to deal with me.
Hansen’s father is a knight. He would love to stay and play with Hansen, but so many
conquests and so little time leaves Hansen unattended as well.

So, we live with our old, wise protectors. Neenee is a Witch who spends her days
brewing potions. Papaw is a Wiseman who spends his days thinking of what smart things he
should teach the children. School learning does not hold much esteem with him. Everything
we ever needed to know we could learn from him or a book, but he sent us to school, just in
case.
The school was old and moldy. We never got to see each other there because I was a troll and Hansen was not. One day, I went to visit Hansen during his recess. He and all of his friends had climbed to the very top of the monkey bars. I stood below them. The sun was coming through the metal bars and making strips of darkness. I liked this. The boys laughed at me. “Look! There’s a troll under our bridge!”

“She’s not a troll! That’s my sister!” My silent brother spoke. There was quiet on the playground. Everyone froze solid in their places, and was unable to move until Hansen spoke again releasing them from their spell. I ran away.

I spent my afternoons inside my tree. In the trunk, I kept secret books that I borrowed from the bookshelf in the hallway, a spiral bound notebook, a pencil that was forever sharp, and a few cans of Pepsi. The tree was on the other side of the fence in the empty field. Sanctuary.

Some afternoons, especially in the summers, there would be families winding their way through the trees gathering berries or eating honeysuckle. I would quietly stand and watch them. Making sure to blend in with my tree, and not to be caught trespassing unattended. One afternoon, I was reading my favorite book, *Wait ‘Til Helen Comes* when I saw a little boy playing with a dog.

In my best troll voice, I said, “Stay out of the woods, little boy, or you will incur the wrath of Alex, the angry troll.” I laughed as he ran away crying with a dachshund at his heels. My place was mine again.

At night, we slept in bunk beds. One day, Hansen was clomping around on the top bunk and throwing toys at me while I was reading a book on the bed below him. “Who’s that clippity clomping on my bridge?!” I shouted.
He stopped throwing toys, looking startled. Hansen squinted down at me.

“What did you say?”

I looked around me, and did not understand why I would have said such a thing. “I don’t know why I said that.”

“Are you a troll?”

“I guess I could be.”

“Neenee’s yellin for us,” Hansen said standing face in fence.

“Okay,” I closed my notebook and crawled out to the real world.

“What did you write about?”

“None of your business.”

“Come on, tell me,” Hansen wined.

“I wrote about how you’re a freak.”

“Oh,” he accepted this and we walked through the field.
Ch. 12 The Wedding Foretold

After the Trees had been harvested to create shelters for the people now calling
themselves Norwegians, their souls were released, and disaster ensued. The nights were
filled with screams of the trolls. The animals were frightened, and they acted abnormally.
The wolves were killing the rabbits and lemmings, any that remained that far south after the
rift, and leaving their bodies strewn about uneaten. It was a terrible way to live, streets
swimming with blood.

Each time the humans would build a house, an angered soul would call upon one of
the winds to knock it down, or a glacier would move against the coast where it stood and
house and family would plummet to the waves. Angered, the people rebelled, and Svengred
was deposed. The people elected Sorbo to be their queen because she wanted to find a way
to restore the old order, but Svengred refused to relent. He believed he could win back his
throne.

“How can I call down the oldest of the gods and goddesses of the trees?” Svengred
held an ax to the branch of one of the trees with the soul of a troll within. “Tell me, or I will
tear you limb from limb.” With the ax Svengred began to slowly split the wood in half.

The soul within the tree moaned. “Stop. Please. I’ll tell you.”

Svengred lowered his ax.

“A circle must be created from the trees, but their roots must still be intact. If you
sever the soul from the tree, our gods will not come. If you create a circle with the souls
intact, Betula and Picea will come forward, and they will be trapped until the ring is broken.”

“Why should I trust you? Perhaps this will set your souls free?”
“It will not, but you do not have to trust me. I tell you only what I know from experience before we were trees. In order for those of us, who were not ruling, to call upon the gods and goddesses, we had to be united. We had to form a circle. When we did, our souls would call to them. I only suppose the souls will do the same now that they are in the trees, but I do not know for certain. Thus, believe me or do not, but I speak the truth.”

At that, Svengred dropped his ax, and began the business of discovering a way to fell trees with the roots in tact. He thought through all the magics that his family had passed down through the ages. Finally, Svengred arrived at a plan. Calling the deer to him, Svengred said, “Please, friends, I need your help. The other humans have cast me out. They plan to kill all of you, and me as well. If you help me to fell these trees, I will call Betula and Picea to earth, and they will protect us all.”

A large buck stepped from the herd. “I am Fedwur. The deer have made me their leader. Why should we trust you, one they call Svengred? You were their king, and now you are not. Why have they cast you out?”

“I realized I was wrong. I understood that I should allow the trees to stand, and work to find the people who were banished north on the wind. I still wish to do this, but I need the help of Betula and Picea to convince the others. A troll in one of these very trees told me himself that they would wish to aid with this pursuit. Will you help?”

The deer spoke briefly among themselves. Then, Fedwur said, “We are at your service, Svengred, for the good of the natural world. We will aid in the restoration of order. What must we do?”

“Many thanks to all of you.” Svengred bowed. “We will harness the powers of the sea to wash away the earth from the roots of these five trees. As I call upon the ancient
magics of my family to do this, you will pull at the trees causing them to fall in a circle, end
touching end.” Svengred pointed at each of the trees, and showed which direction the deer
would need to pull to make them fall laying end to end. “Can you do this?”

“We will be honored.” Fedwur bowed to Svengred who returned the gesture.

Immediately, Svengred began to pull vines from the surrounding trees and braid
ropes. The deer helped to gather these. When he was through, he harnessed five deer to each
of the five trees. Then, he called upon the goddess of the North Sea, Saiwaz.

“Come free the roots of these trees from the tremulous earth. Come upon the earth,
and tear them from the ground.” There was a great crashing as the sea began to churn below
the cliffs. Svengred watched as a wave the size of three cliffs stacked upon each other
swelled above his head. The water crashed down around Svengred, leaving him dry on the
edge of the woods. The forest was enveloped in water, but only the five trees that Svengred
had marked with his own blood were uprooted. The water washed away across the land
creating a bog, and the deer pulled as they were told.

As the deer felled the trees, there was a loud crash all at once as their trunks found the
forest floor. The deer realized too late that they were attached to the sides of the trees that
would hit the ground. They were all destroyed as the trees fell. A twitching hoof or bloody
antler could be seen sticking out of the circle. Svengred was a truly evil man.

The green glint of light and the smell of leaves and earth filled the circle. When it
dissipated, the tiny god and goddess stood, looking at a snout sticking out from under a trunk.
They hardly believed anyone was capable of such cruelty. “We’ll not help you,” Picea said.

“If you thought the fates of your children were unfortunate, wait and see what I will
do to you.” The two gods were trapped within the circle. Not only called forth, but bound.
They could not leave until the circle was broken by an outsider. Svengred paced making hollow threats. He needed to know the future. He needed to know, so he could win back his crown. Svengred was too close to the Komsa. At night, when it was cool and quiet, he heard them singing, and he feared their vengeance.

“He can do nothing, but I see something else, Betula. We should tell him.” Picea smiled. At the moment that he said this, Betula understood completely. The trees rustled a report to their gods. Many of Picea’s children were standing along the path to Norway. They had reported another human in the woods, heading in this direction from the south. The gods had hoped that this human would help them, but had their doubts. Picea knew now that the human was someone who would come to their aid. “I think you should tell him the truth, now, Betula. If he still wants to hear it, he doesn’t have long. His journey is almost at an end.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean nothing.”

“There will be a wedding. A Komsa daughter, and the daughter of one of your people, Norwegians they call themselves now, will meet in the clearing you have made here by felling these trees. The ones surrounding will lower their branches creating a shelter that lets very little light through. It will seem magical to them both, and for a time, they will come here to escape their lives, one unseen by the other. One day, they will meet here among these trees, and become inseparable. When the Komsa daughter’s family must continue behind the herds, they will not want to be apart, but she will go with her family. The Norwegian daughter will be heart broken, but one thing will keep them together for all
time. The Komsa daughter will give the Norwegian daughter a simple, silver ring. I think you can guess where she might have gotten such a thing.”

“No, it can’t be true. The lemming…”

“The lemming brought the ring to Milona’s brother, Michan. The girl who will deliver it into the hands of those who were once her enemies so long before her that no one will remember this great struggle, only that they are a separate people, will be one of Michan’s descendants. The Norwegian daughter will be one of your own kinsmen.”

“What does it matter? Refola will still be trapped in the ring. Who cares who has it? You think you’re so wise, but you tree gods have barely been alive one hundred thousand years. Among the youngest and most naïve of the gods, you think you have the upper hand here? What have you done except trap your queen for all eternity?”

Picea smiled and said, “We are young for gods, but you are old for man. Coming into your thirtieth year, and now, your time is come.”

Before Svengred could reply, Queen Sorbo emerged from the woods with her axe. She had not come to cut down a tree, as she told her countrymen, but to cut down Svengred and secure her throne. His head rolled a few feet away, and Sorbo approached the tree gods.

“What is the answer to the question? How will the giving of this ring make things better between our people?”

“Young one, it is not for you to know the ways of gods.”

Sorbo, angered, raised the axe above her head, and chopped the branch from a tree above her. “Tell me. Can’t you see I want to help you? I want to mend what Svengred has destroyed. I want the world back the way it was. My people are unhappy. I will do what I must to put them at ease.”
Betula stood as close to Sorbo as she could with the ring of tree trunks between them, and said, “It is not for you to put to right. You will be a great leader, Sorbo, and you will struggle to make Norway a peaceful place. For that, you will receive great reward in the worlds to come. Your effort will reap many benefits in later times. They will lead directly to the restoration of peace, but your efforts will fail, Sorbo. I’m sorry, it’s not for you to know, and it’s not for you to restore the equilibrium. Please, set us free that we may be with our lost children who wander the woods searching for us.”

Sorbo thought for many moments. Finally, she hacked one of the tree trunks into pieces breaking the circle and freeing the gods who disappeared immediately. Sorbo took a piece of the wood, and began her return journey. As she walked, she carved the piece of wood with a knife made from the bone of a whale. From the wood she made a figure. A troll. Sorbo vowed to tell the stories of the trolls, and how they had ruled the earth with a kind and just hand. It was her own people who had taken the peace they were seeking. Sorbo would try to restore it and fail.

In spite of Queen Sorbo’s best efforts to learn from the past, to tell the stories of the trolls, eventually, the truth of Queen Refola and the child Milona and all the other Komsa and trolls were lost. Norwegians told the half-true stories that had been muddled with years to their children at bedtime. These tales were about trolls who would punish the children, if they did not behave at school, or they did not come home from school and do their housework in a timely fashion. These were very different trolls, but the trolls were still with them, their spirits hiding among the trees, and under bridges waiting for the return of their queen. Through Sorbo’s stories, the people never lost the trolls, but as often happens in the telling of a story, thousands of years came and went and many details were changed.
My brother liked to play with toy guns. He pretended he was in *Gunsmoke* or one of the John Wayne movies my grandfather loved so much. He had a mini gun holster and an imitation Colt Classic revolver. That year, we had taken up playing cowboy-and-annoyed-older-sister-trying-to-read-her-book. I spent the bulk of my time reading *Zoo Books*. This is a misnomer because they were actually magazines. My favorite was the one about alligators. I recited facts about habitat, size, land and water speeds, and mating rituals verbatim from the glossy pages. My brother was not interested. He wanted to shoot things with his imaginary bullets.

“Why don’t you go shoot an alligator? I’ll help you hunt it. I know all about where they hide.”

“Cowboys don’t shoot alligators. Cowboys rob banks and shoot bad guys and sometimes horses.”

“I think a cowboy would shoot an alligator if there was one around.”

“Well, there’s not one around. So, I’ll shoot you.”

I rolled my eyes. “Whatever,” I said and opened my magazine back up to my favorite page: eating habits. There was a large, fully illustrated diagram of the alligator’s open mouth. I heard the hammer of my brother’s Colt click back, the trigger slipped it shut, and then, my brother started screaming. I looked up to see Hansen standing three feet away with the gun hanging from his eyelid.

My grandmother ran into the room. “What’s going on?” She saw the Colt on my brother’s eyelid. “Okay, hold still. Hold still.” Hansen continued to cry and wave his arms.
“It hurts. It hurts.” He screamed. Grandma gently raised the gun so that it no longer sagged on his eyelid. She pulled the hammer back, and the puckered skin returned to Hansen’s face.

Grandma hugged my crying brother, and said, “How did you manage that?” I giggled a little from where I was sitting, since the immediate threat had passed.


“Well, it’s off now. It’s off now.”

That night, my brother and I were curled in our beds, and Mom was telling us a great story about alligators and cowboys. “So, the alligator was chasing the little cowboy, and the cowboy was so scared he was running away. Finally, the little cowboy stopped, turned to the alligator and said, ‘Look, Mr. Alligator, if you don’t stop chasing me, I’ll take this gun off my eye and shoot you with it.’” Instantly, I erupted into a fit of giggles.

“Alex, shut up! Alex, shut up!”

“Hansen, it’s okay, she’s not laughing at you,” my mother ran interference assuming Hansen realized he was the butt of the joke.

“I know she’s not.”

I continued laughing.

“Alex, shut up! Mom, then what happened?”

“What happened when?” Mom asked.

“When the cowboy took the gun off his eye?” Mom and I were both laughing now, and Hansen looked confused.

As my grandfather’s troll stories and my mother’s bedtime stories were nothing but a lot of stuff my brother and I did that day retold as if it had happened to some other children, I
decided this was insincere, and asked my mother to read us real stories. Mom obliged. I brought home books from the library or book fair, and Mom read them to us before bed.

We had been reading My Girl for the past several weeks. I’d chosen it because I wanted to see the movie, but Mom hadn’t taken us to see it. So, Mom read it to us. I didn’t realize, until it was too late, that it was a sad book. Mom flipped from page to page and moved from word to word explaining how the heroine, Veda’s, best friend, Thomas Jay, had died. Just like Veda’s mom. Just like we were all going to die. I looked at my mom, then, my brother. Lying on the floor, I sat up to hear better, bumped my head on the bunk bed ladder, and started to cry. I realized it didn’t have a lot to do with the ladder.

“I know, it’s sad.” Mom comforted.

“No, it’s not. I hit my head. That’s all.” I refused to discuss the matter further, and was relieved when we finished the horrible book later that week. Death, I decided, was not to be mentioned again for a long, long time.

That night, I lay in bed telling myself stories of people who lived forever because I would keep them with me. I was a troll, and I had the power to fix broken hearts.

As a troll, one of my duties was to read souls. I should see the people around me, and know their truest desires. This was how trolls were able to, for so many years, patrol the land making sure that all was well, and the citizens did the things that would make them the best they could be. Like Steven the Truancy Troll who knew that children would be best, if they were in school, I had to find my place by reading the souls of those around me.

I knew everyone’s darkest secrets, and I wasn’t always quiet about them. At times, I would want to scream because of how loud the secrets sounded in my tiny ears. It seemed
that everyone was hiding something, and they wished for nothing more than to let it go. To be free of the hiding. That’s when I knew what I had to do as a troll. I would find a bridge, and wait below it. When people crossed above me, I would hear their deepest desire or darkest secret, and I would write it down. Then, I would tell these stories as if they had happened to someone else the next time I saw the person.

When people heard my stories, that were, truly, about them, they would feel better. They would feel as if they were part of something bigger. No one wanted to feel like they were the only one with fears or pain. If they knew they were not alone, they could speak their secrets aloud and be freed from their burdens.

So, I tried to tell these stories. “There are ghosts all around us,” I said one day on the playground with my friends surrounding me. One of them, Sarah, was scared of ghosts. “They are walking through us as I speak. They want us to feel their presence so they are not forgotten. Ghosts don’t mean humans any harm. A ghost is what’s left when someone dies. What has to stay on earth until Jesus comes to take all of our body to heaven and reunite it with our souls. That’s what my grandma says.”

“I thought ghosts were bad,” Sarah said without raising her eyes.

“Some of them are, but not all. They’re no worse or better than they were when they were alive, but they’re pretty harmless.”

“So, they’re not going to try to kill us?”

“Of course not. We’re all going to be ghosts someday, and when we are, we’ll have more fun watching the people to see what they’ll do than we will hurting them. Even most of the bad ghosts are satisfied to clang some pots, and laugh because people are jumping out of their skins.”
At those words, I watched Sarah’s fear drift in a pink puff into the clouds. It disappeared forever, and ghost stories never frightened Sarah again. Well, at least not for a very long time. I knew that I must continue to tell the stories, and watch the clouds of anger or sadness or shame go away. No one should have to live with these things inside of them, all alone.
Ch. 14 The New Generation

As people are wont to do, the Komsa began to dispute amongst themselves. Thousands of years had passed in their part of the place called Norway. In that time, many things had changed. The weather had gotten increasingly harsh, as the North wind rarely left them at peace, but instead, blew chilled air upon their children all year.

There were weeks in the summer season when the sun never left the land, and there were weeks in the winter season when he would never return. The Komsas pleaded with the sun god, Fripnod, to come at regular intervals as sleep was difficult during the midnight sun, and work was impossible in the darkness. Fripnod did not heed their pleas, and continued on his course in this manner each year.

Many of the families split away from the group. There was not enough food or shelter for all of them to stay in one place. The Komsa became known as the Lapps to the Southern Norwegians, but they called themselves Sami, after their great leader Samuli who died protecting his people from a pale monster from the far reaches. The years passed and the days turned to nights and the nights to days. The ring was passed from generation to generation in Milona’s family, until one day, no one remembered where the ring had come from.

Walburta wore the ring on a chain around her neck. Everyday, Walburta would wander through the trees singing songs that she invented about the North wind, and dreaming about a life lived in one place. She tired of moving, but it was in the nature of her people. Vilmer, her brother, told her of a place in the south where people did not move, but lived in homes made from trees. He also told Walburta that their people didn’t believe in cutting down trees.
“Why not?”

“Because we never have before. It’s not our way.”

“But why not? Wouldn’t it be easier?”

“Not necessarily. If you are rooted to the ground like a tree, you cannot as easily follow the herds. If you cannot follow the herds, you cannot follow the food. It is different in the South. Fishing is more prosperous and vegetation grows more plentifully. They do not need to move to find food. We do.”

“Then, I wish to live in the South.”

“Oh, Walburta, don’t be strange. The Norwegians would not accept you. They call us Lapps. It means simpleton. They think we are ignorant because we do not build our homes into the ground. They also say we are witches who have a special power over the North wind. It’s all nonsense, but they are different than we are. They choose to believe we are simpletons rather than accept our ways.”

This did not deter Walburta from her dreams. She was fourteen, and that was an age of dreaming and desire for girls. If she were a different kind of girl, she would dream of finding a handsome man who she could follow and whose clothes she could mend, but Walburta did not dream of this man. Walburta dreamed of a place where she could stand still.

One unseasonably warm fall, Walburta’s family stayed longer than usual in the forest closest to the Southern people. She had never seen such small trees. Vilmer told her that these were young trees. The older ones had been cut down to build homes and replaced with the saplings. Walburta found this very sad. She spent hours wandering through the trees, and thinking about life in a house made from them.
One day, Walburta saw a dome of tree limbs close to the ground. She thought it might be good fun to climb through the limbs that grew so close to the ground. There was a place in the trees shaped almost like a door. When she walked through, Walburta found herself not in the midst of many more branches, as she had assumed, but in a clearing. A circle of trees had bent down to cover a ring of tree trunks, like a roof. Walburta imagined this must be what houses were like.

Every afternoon, Waltburta returned to the house of trees, and her family stayed for a very long time due to the weather. Walburta began to imagine that she was living life like a Norwegian girl. She decorated the trees with paintings made from wild berries and reindeer pelts. Gathering and pilfering, she made a bed of furs and leaves. Then, one day, there was a book on her bed. Walburta had heard of books before, but had never seen one, as the Sami had no use for them. They were a burden that could not be carried lightly in the packs.

This book had golden figures on the front, and inside were pictures of creatures made from trees and mud that looked vaguely human. Walburta found it fascinating, and wished she could read the inscriptions or find the person who had left it. Then, she began to believe it might have been left there by some sort of magic, and not by another person, at all. They were very far south, and Walburta did not know what kind of magics were in these young woods. Wherever it may have come from, Walburta looked at the book each day, and told herself stories to go along with the pictures. At night, she would tell these stories to all the Sami children as they prepared for bed. They loved Walburta’s tales, and would listen to them endlessly.

One afternoon, Walburta heard singing as she approached her house in the trees. Standing as far off as she could, Walburta watched as another girl read from the book, and
hummed a song. The girl did not wear reindeer furs, but clothes made from some other material. It was very thin, and Walburta wondered how she did not freeze to death, but supposed it was very warm here, and often, Walburta sweated. This all seemed very fascinating. Walburta envied the girl, and wished she would explain the stories, but feared to come to close because she did not know what Norwegians were like.

Walburta would return to the clearing as soon as she could get away in the mornings, hide, and wait for the other girl. When the girl left, Walburta would enter the tree house and continue to study the book.

Then, she was discovered. The girl forgot the comb that she wore in her hair, and found Walburta looking at her book. Walburta seemed very strange to the Norwegian girl. Why would she be wearing reindeer fur though it was very warm out? She didn’t appear to be reading the book, but simply, leafing through the pages and mumbling.

“Hello, my name is Dorinia.” At these words, Walburta sprang to her feet with a screech. “I’m sorry, don’t be frightened.” Dorinia said. “I won’t hurt you.” Her voice was soft, and to Walburta it sounded like a caressing hand felt upon her shoulder.

“I’m sorry. You startled me, and some of these pictures are frightening. When I heard you, I thought you were one of these creatures come to kill me.”

Dorinia laughed. “A troll? Me? Oh no, I’m not a troll. I’m a Norwegian, and you must be a Lapp.”

“Don’t call me that, it’s an insult.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I just thought that…”

“Well, don’t think it again, because we are not like you doesn’t mean we are simpletons.”
“But I didn’t think that you were.”

“Why else would you call me a Lapp?”

“Oh, I see. I suppose you’re right, but we do not use the word for that meaning anymore. I meant no disrespect to you.” The two girls looked each other over. Finally Dorinia spoke again, “What do your people call themselves? I would have called you something else, only I didn’t know what else I should call you.”

“You can call me Walburta, that’s my name.”

“Oh, what a beautiful thing to be called. Walburta. It sounds like a bird, or lithe fish.” Dorinia let out a giggle and clapped her hands. “Walburta. Dear, I do like that very much.”

Walburta smiled. “My people are called Sami.”

“Sami. Well, that is much better than Lapp. What does it mean?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, in any case, it doesn’t mean simpleton, and as you are not one, I should refrain from calling you such.”

Again the two girls found themselves silent. Unsure of what to say, Walburta directed the conversation back to the book, “Did you say these creatures were called tralls?”

“Oh, trolls.”

“Trolls?”

“Yes, trolls. They’re a creature created when the gods of the trees and the souls of men come together. They’re half tree and half human. There are none of them left in Norway, but legend has it that they used to rule the country, until a wise man rose up to
defeat them. Some say that they will return to the land once again at the end of the world, and return order and peace to the land.”

“That sounds very interesting. When will they return?”

“Oh, it’s only a story. Trolls aren’t real.”

“What if they are, Dorinia? What if very soon the world is cast asunder, and they come back from some other place and set it to right again? I think it must happen soon. When it does, perhaps our people will be returned to friendship, and we could all live in houses made from trees.”

“But why would you want to? Your life must be so much better. You get to see all the beautiful places, and creatures. You aren’t trapped as I am day in and day out in the same place. All day I work. Making dinner, repairing clothes, and washing and cleaning. I do not get to travel any farther than these trees because that’s our way. You should be happy to get to roam as you please.”

“As I please? Never. We follow the herds. I will travel with my family until, very soon, they sell me to another family for marriage. It will never be my choice where I go, and I have seen all of the country there is to see in the north. I would like to go to the south. I want to see these houses I’ve heard of, and the great cliffs. You are the lucky one.”

Dorinia smiled, “How happy that we have found each other. We must be the only two girls in our worlds who would wish to trade places. Everyone has always found me very strange for wanting to travel like your people.”

“The Sami think that I am traitorous for wanting a home.” Both girls smiled, and clasped hands. There was another silence, but this one was not uncomfortable. This was a
contented silence. “Dorinia, could you teach me to read this book? I want to know about the
trolls.”

“Of course, Walburta. You’ll love the stories. They’re very fanciful. My
grandfather gave this book to me, and I treasure it so.”

From somewhere far above them in a place between worlds, Piecea and Betula
watched as the marriage of these two souls unfolded. The girls were young, even younger
than the gods had believed they would be, but their love bloomed so quickly. Each day, they
met in secret to read from the book of the trolls. Piecea and Betula laughed at the unfortunate
misrepresentation of so much of their history, but knew that it would all be set to right again.
There would be much more sadness before that time, and the gods drank in the joy of these
two girls for as long as they could. Knowing that with the sweetness of their love would
come the pain of the separation.

The day came when Walburta’s family would have to move. She entered the clearing
beneath the tree branches, and tears glistened on her cheeks. When Dorinia saw her, she
stood up happy at first, but then, seeing Walburta’s tears, her joy darkened. “What’s wrong,
Walburta?”

“Oh, Dorinia, we are moving on today. I will probably not see you again. At least,
not for a very long time.” The two women embraced to lessen their great sadness.

“I won’t forget you. You are my one love. My other soul.”

“And you are mine,” Walburta pulled the chain from around her neck. At the end of
it, was a simple, silver ring. “Here,” she placed it around Dorinia’s neck, “We’ll be together
always. Every time you see this ring, you’ll know that I’m with you.”
“And you’ll take the book. The stories. We are all becoming the bedtime stories that will be told to our grandchildren. The stories of this country bind us together.” Their lips pressed firmly to each other and tears ran into their mouths. The final kisses tasted of sadness, and pain. “Oh, Walburta, it feels like my heart is being ripped away from me.”

“It is. I have to take it with me, and you’ll take mine.”

“There should be a war. There should be men with guns dragging us away from each other kicking and screaming. We shouldn’t surrender so much joy silently.” Walburta hugged Dorninia to her one last time, and then ran into the woods without looking back. The lovers never saw one another again.
Ch. 15 Jar of Gold

My mother was crying. She told my brother and me that we were moving away. That we wouldn’t live with grandma and grandpa anymore. We were going to go live with Jay, her boyfriend. Then, she asked, tears still on her face, “Do you think I should marry him?” She was looking at me. I was eight and horrified that an adult might not know the answer to a question.

“We can’t make that decision for you. Even if we don’t like Jay and we want to stay here with Neenee and Papaw, we can’t tell you what to do. This can’t be our fault.” I walked away from her. I curled in a ball on the bottom bunk of the bed with Mickey, and pulled my notebook and pencil out from under the corner of the mattress.

The years go on, Hansen discovers that his suspicions were right, and I am a troll.

The mother unglues her hands from her desk just long enough to fall in love with a Deliverer, Jay. He works all day taking goods from village to village. Jean takes us away from our protectors, and we are unhappy. Our mother moves us to a new kingdom where everything is different and frightening.

There is not a tree. We still have our bunk beds and our toys, but we are in a town house in a town. Our room has a balcony and a bathroom and two closets, but the backyard does not have a tree. If I stand on the balcony and lean out, I can see a cemetery. There are trees there, but mother says I should never leave the house because the troll hunters might get me.

Jay says that he is a deliverer, but I think that he might be lying. He is really a troll hunter in disguise, but he has to wait to kill me until I am fully grown. Fully grown trolls are
worth more. Anyone can kill a young troll, but slaying an adult troll is difficult, and if you can do this, people will show you respect. It seems that everything Jay does is to secretly torture me. He laughs at my singing. He cooks all the foods I hate, and he makes us watch the history channel.

There is only one thing to do. I have to escape from this place before it is too late. I sit on the balcony and watch the people walk by below me. I am not supposed to watch people cross below. It is not in my nature, I am supposed to sit beneath the humans. I take the sheets off of my bed, tie them together, put some books and toothpaste in my backpack, and I escape. Off of the balcony, into the bushes and away.

I run to the cemetery where there are trees, and I keep running. The cemetery is very big. I want to be farther away from my prison. I keep running and running. I come to a lake and a bridge and trees are all around me and I spin in circles with my arms outstretched. I cannot tell where I came from or where I should go. I'm dirty now and cold and it is starting to get dark and I hear voices all around and there are loud noises and sirens. This place is not really a sanctuary, but I cannot go home. It isn’t safe for me there.

I crawl below the bridge. I sit so still that maybe I'm not even breathing. I don’t know if fully grown trolls have to breathe anymore. I am only half troll. My mother always hoped I wouldn’t have to be one, but she was wrong. I am a troll.

The water below the bridge is shallow, but I’m still sitting in it, and it is October and cold. I realize there is nowhere for me, and I scream. A deep, guttural cry. I am not human anymore. I cannot go home, but I do.

Hansen is happy in this place. He likes his classes. He likes the bigger room. He likes the back yard that doesn’t have any trees and is too small. He even likes Jay. Trying to
comfort me, Hansen begins to build me bridges. He builds one out of blocks, and it tumbles when I walk by. He builds me one out of legos, but it is too small to sit under. He builds me a bridge out of pillows, but it has no foundation and I knock it over.

Then, he hangs sheets around my bed. It is dark in there, but he brings me a light that is made out of fireflies in honey and it makes the darkness look like gold. He draws me pictures of trees and giants and skulls and horses. He hangs them on the walls. The honeyed light shines forever on the pictures and the pillows and the blankets and he brings me books and Pepsi and I never have to leave my place anymore because I have everything I need.

He understands that I am not happy even here under the blankets. I write letters to our protectors telling them that we are not happy here. I need a potion to make the others understand. My Papaw tells me that I do not need any potions. I need to keep going to school, and reading. I need to remember what he has taught me. Still, I beg for a potion to make it all disappear, but none ever comes.

Sitting in my bed before it was ever moved to the unhappy city, I look around at the pictures under the bed. I drew a few of them. My brother drew the others. There is a metal street sign above the door that says: Welcome to Elm Street. Freddy Krueger waves a knived hand down at me. My cat walks through the door. He does not know how to meow because he was raised with dogs. He jumps onto the bed next to me.

"Burrr rah." He barks. His bark is a purr with a ‘b.’ I pet his fluffy white hair.

"Tramp, we have to move away, and there aren’t any trees where we’re going. You won’t like it there because you can’t go outside."
Hansen came into the room carrying two popsicles. One was grape and one was cherry. I could tell by his purple mouth, which was for me. “I got you a pop-pickle.”

“Popsicle,” I growled from my spot in the corner of the bed. Hansen frowned and handed me the frozen, flavored ice.

“It’s your favorite.”

“Thank you.” Tramp tramped off down the hall. I looked at my grape colored brother, and knew he would not build me a fortress of solitude.

When we moved later that summer, I spent most of my first weeks in Jay’s Dallas townhouse sitting on the balcony. My bruised knees peeked through the metal rails, and my forehead pressed to the bars. I stared at the gravestones and trees visible beyond the fence that locked us into the cement landscape that I hated. I never actually tried to escape off the balcony, though I wanted to many many times.

I heard the glass door behind me slide open, and looked up hoping it was my mom coming to tell me we could leave this place for good. Instead, Jay stood behind me looking out at the cemetery. He closed the door, but did not come any closer to me. To Jay, I was an unstable element that should be handled cautiously. “You know, Clyde Barrow and his brother are buried in that cemetery.” I didn’t respond. “Do you know who Clyde Barrow was?” Without looking up at Jay, I sighed and shook my head no. “Clyde was a bandit. He and his girlfriend, Bonnie, and some of their friends robbed banks all over the country. Finally, they were shot and killed, and Clyde is buried right through those trees.”

I didn’t tell Jay how cool I thought this story was. I didn’t tell Jay anything. I kept staring out at the rows of dead people. I wanted to run to the safety of that place. I didn’t
belong here surrounded by strangers, and houses that were connected to each other. I needed space to run. Later that year, we moved to Forney, Texas. It was closer to my grandparents, and the yard was a little bigger. I still didn’t like Jay, and I wanted to go home.
Ch. 16 Refola Lost

For all the years of her life, Dorinia wore the necklace. Never once did she remove it. Before her death, she gave the ring to her great granddaughter, but the girl was young and fickle. She lost it in the woods while playing with her friends, and never told anyone. The necklace made her skin itch, and she left it on the ground because she didn’t want anyone to make her wear it.

For many centuries, Refola and Milona were lost. Until, one day, there was a lemming in the woods. Unlike the humans, the lemmings had not forgotten the great tragedy. The story of the binding of Queen Refola’s soul into a silver ring with that of a child was passed down for generations. The way the great King Osterd had delivered the ring to Milona’s kindred, and how their race had been nearly destroyed because of this act, would not be forgotten.

Wilnor found the ring by mistake. He was digging out of a newly made tunnel and it fell onto his head. At first, he disregarded it as human trash, but there was something in the way that it gleamed that gave him an unsettled feeling. Wilnor took the ring with him, and went directly to see King Luthax. “Your majesty,” Wilnor bowed.

“Wilnor, my friend, what brings you to see me?”

Wilnor rose from the bow, proud to be addressed as a friend by the king. “I found something that may be of interest.”

Wilnor handed Luthax the ring. The King looked up startled, “Where did you find this.”

“It fell on my head when I dug out of the new tunnel. Is it…?”

“I had heard it was lost. I’m very glad one of us has found it.”
“What will be done with the ring?”

“The Queen and the child will be properly cared for. I think I know just the man. Thank you for bringing this to me, Wilnor. You have done a service to us all.”

“It was a pleasure, Your Highness. I’m only glad I realized what it was.”

“We are all very glad.” Wilnor bowed his way out of the king’s presence. Luthax waited for a few moments, then called one of his servants to him. “Do you know the location of the hermit who lives among the trees not far from here?”

“Yes, Majesty.”

“Take this to him. Tell him it is what he was seeking. If he delivers this ring into the hands of the young prince, Magnus, he will be returned to a place of honor. He will become the patron of his country. He will no longer need to wander the woods. Magnus does not yet know he is a prince, but when he seeks to be king, Canute will be deposed posthaste. Run swiftly, and do not forget any of the things that I have said.”

“Of course, Majesty.” The lemming ran as quickly as he could to carry out his master’s wishes.
Ch. 17 Beautiful Hands, Broken Hearts

Not long after I was born, as my grandfather told me on my third birthday, he had open-heart surgery. He’d waited until he was nearly dead to actually drag himself to the hospital. He didn’t believe in doctors. So, the odds didn’t look good. On the way into the operating room, Walter Wallace Werner was lying on his gurney, and I was laughing because I thought he was God, even back then. Then, Mom started to leave the room and I couldn’t see my grandpa anymore and I cried, screamed, wailed, gnashed my teeth.

Papaw asked Mom to give me to him. She placed me on his chest and I curled quietly and lay my head down. I smiled an infant’s toothless grin listening to the strained murmuring of his heart. I cried again when it was time for my mother to take me away, and they wheeled him into the next room. He said from that point on he knew he had to come back through those doors because he was the only person who knew how to make me laugh. He had told and retold the story of how I fixed his broken heart, for as long as I could remember.

“Let me see your hands.” Papaw had one too many Coors Lights and was getting sentimental. “Beautiful hands. Look at my hands.” He held his before my blue eyes as I sat curled into his lap. I was starting to get too big for this, but I clung to it because I was safe with Grandpa. His hands were huge and gray and wrinkled with years of Ohio snow and rust and Texas sun and rain. Too many veins seemed to jump emphatically from his dark skin.

“They’re so old. So ugly. Never let your hands look like this. Put lotion on, wear gloves, you’ve got beautiful hands.” He wrapped his big arms around me. One around my
back, the other across my knees and pulled me to his chest. I listened, head pressed to his undershirt to the muffled, erratic beats of a truly broken heart.

Mom told Hansen and me that night. We were staying with our cousin, Trischa, at our Aunt Esther’s house. We had been playing a game when I heard the car pull into the driveway. For the past few days, Mom had not been there to pick us up before we were already in bed, if at all. I knew something was wrong. “Let’s hide.” I grabbed my brother’s hand, and dragged him into the pantry with the dirty clothes in it. We sat there on a pile of towels, barely breathing.

They found us quickly because that was where we always hid. Tears running down her face, Mom grabbed our hands leading us into the living room. “It’s okay if you’re upset, but I have to tell you something.” She looked at us both. Then said, “Grandpa died today.” I immediately dissolved into tears. My brother barely moved. “Do you want to say anything, or ask any questions?”

I continued to cry. Hansen said, “Can we go to Six Flaggs?”

I stopped my wails and stared at him, “Grandpa’s dead! He’s not coming home, and you want to go to Six Flaggs!”

“Yes.”

I hated Hansen.

That night, we drove to Wills Point. Back home. My sanctuary. It was dark in the house. The pale kitchen light was the only one on. Aunt Dee Dee, Aunt Mary, Jesse, and Rebecca were sitting in the living room. Grandpa’s chair at the kitchen table was empty.
Grandma sat on the edge of her bed, it was only hers now, in the dark. The room smelled of him even though he hadn’t been home in several days. Mom wasn’t crying anymore. Hansen had stayed in the living room.

My mother stood in the doorway and said, “Mom.”

Grandma looked up at us. “I was just…I should get back to the kitchen. Everyone must be starving.” She stood up.

I collapsed into her arms. “I miss, Papaw.”

“Me too,” she said.

I didn’t sleep for days. I kept thinking of him. When I slept, I had terrible dreams. There were spiders crawling into and out of my eyes. I would wake up screeching as nine-year-old girls do and clawing fiercely at my eyes. Ripping, shredding skin. I’d tried watching Fantasia, reading stories, and finally, my mom started giving me a good dose of Benadryl each night before bed. Still, the nightmares persisted and I hadn’t slept more than three or four hours a night for months. This was a vast improvement over the three weeks that I didn’t sleep at all apart from a few blackouts, which lead to delusional ramblings and wanderings.

_When Papaw had heart surgery in 1985, they gave him five years to live. Papaw, the wizard and my greatest protector, almost made it ten. Halfway though year nine, he started to get sick again, and none of NeeNee’s potions helped him. I remembered I was not scared when Jean told us he was in the hospital. He’d been there before. He always came out fine in a few days._
Hansen and I hadn’t seen Papaw the last few days because children weren’t allowed in the ICU unit. I was worried because I knew that, if they would only let me get closer to him, I could fix it. I could fix his broken heart. I believed the way Papaw told me I had to, but the doctors wouldn’t let me touch him. I knew what they were up to. They were troll hunters. They hoped that without my protector, they would be able to get to me. I was beginning to grow. Soon, I would be full grown, and they wanted every advantage in hunting me.

Papaw had been too weak to talk, but Neenee, Jean and all of her brothers and sisters had been wandering through the hospital. Waiting. My mom had turned the TV on for Papaw and flipped to the football game, but he took the remote and began trying to turn back to a different channel. Mom took it and started to slowly go through them. He grabbed her arm when they got to Saved by the Bell, the television show he watched with me every day after school. Papaw stared at the screen, still holding onto her, fell asleep, and died later that night. It was the last thing he ever watched.

There must have been some magic in it. I’ve been watching Saved by the Bell ever since. I hope to someday find the message he needed me to have, so I would be safe without him. Maybe there was no message on Saved by the Bell, but he’d been thinking of me and that hospital visit years ago, wishing we could save each other one last time. Maybe he wished I could be small enough to ride on his chest across pale linoleum into a place where he wasn’t dying anymore, but just learning to live again.
Ch. 18 Saint Olaf

“I am hardly a man. Forced from my throne, cast from my country, returned only to be banished once more. I am unwelcome at every door. There is no one and nothing for me. I will soon die, and my people will never know the great love that I bear for them. Canute will win. Canute will ruin them. What can I do? Who can I call for?”

“Sir,” the tiny squeaks of the lemming were barely audible over Olaf’s cries for understanding. When Olaf finally heard the voice, he was startled.

“Yes, friend. What can I do for you?”

The lemming’s name was Xander. He said as loudly as he could so that Olaf might hear him, “Sir, I have come on the order of King Luthax of the lemmings. He has sent this ring to you.”

“Thank you, and who are you?”

“I am Xander sir, the king’s chief counsellor.”

“Thank you, Xander. What is this?” Olaf turned it back and forth watching the smooth silver catching the glints of sunlight streaming through the trees.

“That is the ring of Refola and Milona, Sir.”

“No,” Olaf looked down surprised. “The legendary ring that binds the soul of the last troll, and the bravest child of Norway. The ring that will restore peace to our people?”

“The very same one, Sir. He says that it is the thing that you seek. This ring will restore your standing, and make you patron of the country.”

“Impossible that something so small could make such a big difference.”
“Forgive me for saying sir, but our people believe that, though we are small, we have often been part of great changes to our world and yours. Sometimes things of seemingly little significance or power can hold great strength.”

“Well spoken my small friend. Well spoken. Tell me, how will this ring restore my standing?”

“You are to take it to the young prince, Magnus. Though he is scarcely of maturity, he will guard the ring well, and it will lead him to become king. Canute will be overthrown, and you will become the patron of the country.”

“Me. A patron. A saint. What unbelievable good will come from this. Where will I find this prince?”

“He lives on the edge of the wood in a cabin, and the world does not yet know that he is a prince. You must tell him to seek his throne.”

“Thank you, dear friend, Xander. Tell your King Luthax that I will do as he says, and the will of Picea and Betula are always of utmost import to me and to all true sons of Norway. May they speed you on your hasty return.”

“Thank you, Sir, and that they will speed your delivery of the ring to Prince Magnus and protect you from the enemies who will seek your destruction.” Both went their separate ways.

Olaf sat at the edge of the wood overlooking the palace. He wondered how to proceed. Having the ring almost seemed like enough, at first, but now that his task was before him, Olaf feared his death was at hand and he should seek out the prince. There was something strange about this Magnus. Olaf assumed he was prince because he was son of
the conquering Canute, but Olaf had never heard that Canute had an heir. So, he sat with the ring resting on his palm, too scared to move forward, and too determined to turn back.

Then, a young man of barely nineteen appeared before him, singing a song, and carrying a basket. The boy looked so familiar to Olaf that he could not help but cry out, “Excuse me, son, have we met before?”

Startled, the young man dropped his basket. Upon seeing Olaf, a smile crossed his face. “You are King Olaf!”

“I am Olaf, but I am not your king.”

“You are Olaf, and you will always be my king. I am Magnus, son of Sylvania. I am your son, Father. I thought I would never know you.” At this the boy kneeled before him, in an act of allegiance. “Father, you must help us. Canute destroys our people. Surely you can help to restore the peace.”

Olaf wanted to be the man for the job, but he knew that this boy must be the one. “Magnus, I will not return to the people. I am too old to rule. I go instead to a different place, but you will be king. As my heir, yours is the seat of power in this country. You will seize the throne, and restore the peace. You will rule with the authority of a great leader.”

Olaf held the silver ring in the sunlight. It shined on Magnus who did not know what response to give. “This is the ring of Queen Refola who ruled all of Norway before the people divided into two halves. It was in a war for her protection that the Sami of the North were banished from the folds. Yours will be a reign that leads us all closer to the day when that war is ended.” Olaf placed the ring in Magnus’ hand. “Go and do your will, for destiny has chosen you to do what I could not. Bring peace my son.”
The two men embraced. Father and son for the first and only time. “Father, I will win the throne, and I will make you patron of all Norway. This could not be without you, and if I am to bring peace, it is only because you first gave me life and second gave me direction. Go, Father, to whatever task awaits you knowing that yours is a life that will be remembered much longer than the brief flicker of this man’s candle.”

The father and son parted. Olaf returned to the woods, and there was a green flash of light. The leaves rustled in the trees, and there was a shrill noise as the wind whistled through. “Olaf,” Picea stood before him.

“Who are you? What are you?” Olaf fell to his knees on the forest floor.

“Olaf, I am Picea, God of the Spruce Tree.”

“Hello, Picea. What brings you here on this day?”

“Olaf, I have come to set your soul at rest.” Picea placed a hand on Olaf’s forehead.

“I’m going to die?”

“Your purpose has been served. You were meant to make your son a king, and place my daughter, Refola, into the hands of the man who will deliver her. Now, you will rest, and your life and spirit will live on in Norway.”

“I will take my rest, if it must be so.” At this, Olaf closed his eyes, and fell to the earth. Picea returned to his world where he would wait for the day that Refola was free, and the beautiful Betula might return to him. She had left all those years ago when they had watched the two lovers being seperated. It had all been too much for her, and though she knew it was the way things had to be, but could no longer stand watching the pain of the people. She chose to leave until the world found its peace and order again.
Picea knew that the years would pass slowly, and did all that he could to speed the process. His heart burst with loneliness for Betula. In Norway, Magnus claimed the throne, sped Olaf’s canonization, and made his father the country’s patron saint within a year. They had found Olaf’s body on the edge of the woods. His eyes were open, and he smiled even in death.
A few months after my grandfather’s death. As my days began to separate one from the other again with rivers of dreams running between them, my family got sick. A debilitating case of the influenza. My stepfather had it first. My mother and my brother were both sick together. They had been ill for a little more than a week, but they had kept down food the past two days. The angel of death, seemingly, passed over my door. I hadn’t gotten sick.

One night, Jay went out of town. I had a nightmare and crawled into bed beside Mom and our mutt dog, Caleb. Because Hansen had kept food down, he hadn’t thought to mention the diarrhea. At 3 in the morning, he crawled into the bed next to me and said he was hurting. I looked at him and clutched my mom. There was enough light streaming between the blinds from the street lamp in the alley for me to see he looked skeletal.

“Oh my God! Oh my God!” Mom screamed and scooped Hansen out of bed and into the bathroom. His skin was shriveled and pale. He was barely breathing. “Get dressed,” she shouted to me from the bathroom. By the time I wandered still half asleep into the kitchen, my mom had Hansen wrapped in a blanket and held her car keys.

We drove to the Terrell emergency room. Terrell was ten minutes from Forney and Wills Point. I was halfway home. When we arrived at the hospital, the doctors took Hansen and my grandma took me. My mother had called her while I was getting dressed.

The next day, we went back because his body was rejecting the nutrients they were giving him, and I was supposed to say goodbye. It had taken thirteen tries to find a vein to put the IV in and his body rejected it. I overheard Neenee telling this to Aunt Dee Dee, and
Jesse. They weren’t going to tell me. No one wanted to upset me any more. I’d been so fragile.

I watched the fluid dripping from the bag because I didn’t want to see how it hurt my brother’s tiny, shrunken chest to pull in the air. I didn’t want to look at his arm blackened and cut from the failed IV incisions. I didn’t want to see the blood mixing in his brown eyes, and I didn’t want to watch him die. I watched the liquid drip instead as it dripped from my cheeks to the floor. I hated the smell of saline and sterility and I hated God for trying to take Hansen too.

I roared mentally, “Good kids don’t die! Mom said good kids don’t die! I’m the bad kid! I’m the bad kid! Make me die! I’ll die for him! It’s not fair! I’ll die! Mom won’t be as sad if I die because I’m bad and loud. Just don’t make Hansen die! Please God, don’t make Hansen die. Grandpa, if you can hear me, I know Hansen was your favorite, and you probably miss him, but take me instead. God, if you make him die, I’ll hate you forever! I hate you for hurting him. He doesn’t deserve it! Make my arm hurt! Make me die instead!”

I stared at the cotton poking out from under the piece of tape adhering the IV to his skin.

I stepped forward, grabbed Hansen’s tiny, shrunken hand. The adults were talking to each other at the foot of his bed. I leaned in to my unconscious brother and said, “Don’t run home without me. I’m not brave enough unless I’m with you. I love you.” I kissed his cheek and started crying more loudly. My grandmother took my hand and led me out of the room.

Hansen was released from the hospital a few days later, and I, finally, caught the flu. I told all my friends which toys they could have when I died, but God must have decided Heaven wasn’t ready for such a mighty roar. We both got to live.
Somehow, the troll hunters were not able to capture me. To save my dying brother, I returned to their den. I made a promise to their God that I would take my brother’s place, but they relented. I wondered what could have weakened their resolve. The hunters must have decided to wait until I was older. To kill a fully matured troll would earn them fame the world over. Killing a troll of my young age and small stature would doubtless be frowned upon even amongst scoundrels like troll hunters.

I was on my guard now against the attack that was sure to come. The age of maturity was different for all trolls, and I didn’t know what my age would be. Papaw had told me once that being considered an adult was not about age at all. There would be a moment in my life when I would realize that things were not in my control, and that life was not a happy fairy tale.

“Life is a real fairy tale. One that serves to teach you lessons regardless of whether or not they are pleasant lessons with happy endings. The children in these stories don’t always outsmart the old women in the cookie dough houses, and the trolls aren’t always left to live peacefully beneath their bridges. Once that moment of realization arrives,” Papaw told me, “scales will fall from your eyes. These scales protected you, like a snake’s scales do, from all the bad things in the world. Without them over your eyes, you will see the way things truly are. To survive in this world, you have to change what you see back to something beautiful. That’s how you’ll know you’re a grown up.”
Ch. 20 Magnus’ Death

Upon the occasion of his death, Magnus did not have children or grandchildren to pass the ring of Queen Refola to. His heart had never been possessed by a woman. Instead, he gave the ring to the daughter of his favored servant, Bufternon. Bufternon’s daughter, Isabella, had loved the ring from the first moment she had seen it, when she met King Magnus at a picnic.

“Hello, Your Majesty. That is a beautiful ring you wear about your neck. Where is it from?” Isabella was nine years old.

“You are quite precocious.” The aging king smiled down at her. “This ring is very important to our nation. One day, it will usher in a reign of eternal peace in this country. The Lapps of the North and the Norwegians of the South will, once again, live in harmony. Until that day, it must be protected, and cherished. So, I wear it around my neck. Near my heart, which beats only for my people.”

“I knew that it must be important, if the King could wear it. It shines so beautifully. There are all the colors in the world in that metal. Do you see the way that they whirl around?”

“Oh, my dear, those are not colors you can see moving. It takes a keen eye, but they who are worthy can see the souls of Queen Refola and her most devoted servant, the child, Milona. Do you see the way they move together? Their souls united create much strength and love. You can see how the colors get brighter when they come together. Imagine the power that will be released.”

“Who will have it when you die, King Magnus? God forbid the day.”
Magnus laughed. “That day is very fast approaching, Isabella, and you are right to ask. It is a very important decision, one that, until now, I was not sure how to make.”

“Where do you think it will go now?”

“Isabella, you are a very special child. You are fearless, so much that you dare to talk to the king, though your father will be angry, will he not?”

“Yes, he will not be happy that I have bothered you, Majesty.”

“Hmmm. Indeed, you do not mind any pain, so long as you have done what you feel is right. You are forever seeking the answers to questions that others believe are beyond you. This is a great gift.”

“Thank you, Majesty.”

“After my death, there will be a great uprising in the land. The world around you will be thrown into turmoil. I have left no heir to the throne. Do you understand why there will be complications?”

“You’ll have to pick someone, and those you don’t pick will be mad. Like when we pick friends for games. The children who are chosen first are pleased. Those who are chosen last are sad. The man you choose to rule will be pleased but those left unchosen, will be angry.”

“You are more intelligent than even I imagined you to be.”

“Thank you, King Magnus.”

“So, you see, I cannot leave it to any man that I may choose to be king because he will be facing great opposition and danger. The person who possesses the ring must be most devoted to the country and the people no matter who rules.”
“Who will have the ring during this time of trouble? Who can possibly have no side in the conflict?”

“I can only think of one person with the courage to see the good of the nation above the good herself, her family, or her ties to the outside world.”

“A woman can have such strength?”

“Oh my, yes, child. The world around you has taught you things about your nature that are corrupt and untrue. Many of Norway’s greatest warriors of the past have been women. It is you who hold the key to our future. Do not ever believe that you are weak.”

“I won’t, Majesty.”

“Isabella, before I die, I will send for you. No matter where your life leads you in the times to come, I will call for you. I hope you will come. I entrust the ring to you.” Isabella opened her mouth to protest the King’s decision. Being only a girl and a commoner, she could not foresee a world where she could have the strength to protect the hope of her people. Magnus placed his hand on her shoulder, shook his head to quiet her, and continued, “You can see the light of the souls. Not just these souls, am I correct?” Isabella considered denying her blessing, but knew that Magnus would see through the lie. She nodded her approval of the truth of Magnus’ statement. “I thought so. So, you know that no matter what argument you make about your rank or weakness, I will still want you to have this ring.”

“Yes, King Magnus, I see that this is the truth.”

“Good. Then, there will be no more discussion of the subject. When the time comes, the ring will be yours. You must tell no one of this agreement. Do you understand?” The girl nodded, and walked away from her king, heart heavy with the weight of her responsibility.
Not so many years later, Magnus became ill. He called his two most trusted advisors to his side.

“Swyen, to you my great commander, I leave the rule of the kingdom of Denmark. To you, Harald, I leave the rule of Norway. Govern them well, and justly. They do not belong to just one man. The countries are divided in spirit.” The two men, knelt before the king and swore their allegiances to him and to their individual countries and duties, but they left the room adversaries.

“Bufternon.”

His servant stepped forward. “Yes, Majesty.”

“I need you to bring Isabella to me.”

“My daughter, Majesty? But why?”

“Do not question my command, simply call the child to my chamber. She will understand.”

“Yes, King.” Bufternon left the room.

“You can come out now. I do not know your name to call, King of the Lemmings, but I have sensed your presence for some time.”

From the shadows beneath the wardrobe the creature emerged. “Your Majesty,” he bowed, “I am Humtra, King of the Lemmings of Norway.”

“What brings you to my chambers, Humtra? Your people do not approve of such habitations as these.”

“We do not, but I came to learn the fate of Refola. We knew you were in possession of the queen.”
“Indeed I am, and I have sent for Isabella, daughter of Bufternon. She had long ago vowed to protect the ring with her life.”

“Isabella, the soul reader?”

“The very same.”

“So the stories are true?”

“What stories, Humtra?”

“The spirits of the trolls are still uneasy. They wander the woods, though unobserved by your people. Further angered by the loss of their goddess, Betula, they have talked of war. Picea, her companion, has dissuaded them with tales of the return of Betula, and also, the restoration of their land. The release of their spirits was foretold. At the hands of a reader of souls, says Picea. Has the time come so soon?”

“I fear it has not, good Humtra. Isabella, will not be the one to free the kingdom. A great war is coming. Many years of unrest will follow my death, and no one will be safe in that time. Go, Humtra, tell your people, they must suffer more years, but peace will come in the end. Go to the North, warn the Lapps that what will happen between the kingdoms of the South will affect their lives as well. No man is safe in the years to come.”

“I will go now, King Magnus, and you, too, will be going soon. May your soul find more rest than those of my ancestors.”

“Aye, and your soul more than those of mine.” The lemming king returned to his people. Shortly after, Isabella and Bufternon presented themselves in Magnus’ chamber.

“My dear King, I hardly believed that our contract was binding,” Isabella said kneeling at his bedside.

“Isabella, you know better than that.”
The girl looked at her hands. “King, are you sure that I have the strength? I am barely of womanly age.”

“You are the only living creature who can light the way for our freedom. We are all counting on you.” Magnus removed the chain from his neck. “Come closer, and bow your head, child.”

Isabella stepped forward, hands trembling, and leaned towards her king.

“Upon the neck of Isabella, will Refola find her rest. The girl who sees both strength and weakness of those around her, knows her own heart less. Give her the courage she will need, Refola and dear Milona.”

Releasing the ring, Magnus kissed Isabella lightly on the cheek. Within seconds, his eyes were closed, and never again did the lids so much as flutter.
Ch. 21 The Fighter

Six a.m. rolled in slowly as the heat soaked through the window panes. I slept on the top bunk in the “toy room,” where my brother and I stayed when we came back to visit Neenee and Aunt Dee Dee on the weekends. Back to our home that was no longer ours. Everything had changed. My grandma got a new bedroom suite, the cherry wood sleigh bed that she always wanted. Aunt Dee Dee had converted the garage into an apartment. Her king-sized canopy bed almost filled the entire room. The living room furniture was different. It seemed that Papaw and all his things had been nearly phased out, but he was still there. The kitchen table hadn’t changed. His chair still straddled the line between the living and dining rooms, the toy box was still the wooden one he had made us, and some of his shirts still hung in the closet. He was fading from the house, and from my memory.

As I lay on my bed considering these things, sweat formed puddles on my back. The air conditioner had been broken since last week, and Grandma hadn’t gotten around to having it fixed yet. I still preferred this house and this family to anything we had in Forney, including air conditioning. There was a yard and trees, but it wasn’t the same. There still wasn’t enough room to breathe. At least it was closer to Neenee than Dallas was. In only twenty minutes, or about six songs on the radio, we could be home.

Aunt Dee Dee, a big woman with a booming voice, charged into the room shouting, “Rise and shine, it’s fishing time!” one of her catchphrases. At that sweltering moment, I could think of nothing I would like to do less than go out into the scorching heat of the rising sun. I heard my brother groan on the bunk below me, and I peered through the crack between the wall and the mattress just in time to see him roll over, pulling his covers up over his head and clamping his hands over his hears.
“Come on, you lazy bones, breakfast’s ready and the mornin’s wastin.” I rolled my eyes thinking that the morning had barely begun. “If we don’t hurry, it’ll get too hot and all the fish will be hidin at the bottom.” Hansen and I stumbled to the kitchen. We had a little spat over who had to sit next to my Uncle Jesse. He was a gloomy teenager. Forever wearing black, sneaking cigarettes to smoke in his room, and smelling strange and moldy. My grandparents had adopted him “in their old age” as people say, so he was only five years older than I. I didn’t even call him Uncle. He was just Jesse.

I ended up next to him, as usual. Hansen was such a little twerp. We played “two for flinchin,” a game we learned from the movie Stand By Me, until Neenee brought out the French toast. The object of the game was to make your opponent flinch, so that you could punch them twice on the shoulder. The entire thing was a vicious circle. Jesse would make me flinch, punch me so hard that my arm felt numb, and knowing I would not conquer Jesse, I would turn my rage onto my brother’s punier arm. Survival of the fittest playing out at the dining room table.

After breakfast, we took care of pre-fishing business. Hansen and I got dressed while Aunt Dee Dee ran to town to pick up the bait. We loaded the pickup with poles, tackle boxes, and two white, Styrofoam buckets of live minnows, and headed to the lake. At seven, the thermometer mounted at the end of the driveway was waxing toward 105 as we pulled away. That summer was abnormally hot, even for East Texas. It would eventually become known as the drought of ’95, to some. Mostly, just to me. There was no rain for a record-breaking-ly-insane number of days, near sixty-five by the end. For more than half of those days, the temperature rose beyond one hundred degrees. It was more than any of us bargained for, even in East Texas.
Nevertheless, there was no way of convincing Hansen or Aunty Dee Dee to cancel the much-awaited day of fishing. I preferred the thought of a nice long day of swimming or reading or general immobility, but what did I know? Standing, in the sun, in the heat, for hours, was just as good.

“Well, kids, the water’s got low, so we have to go around to the other side to get to the fish.” Aunt Dee Dee yelled even though we were standing two feet away from her looking at the almost nonexistent lake. There were now strips of dry land separated by muddy remains of lake water, turtles and frogs. The shoreline had receded into itself at least the length of a football field, leaving dead water plants exposed and baking in the sun. Aunt Dee Dee headed for the strips of land that should be under the water, and I knew what she was intending to do and was not thrilled. I watched as she and my brother jumped over the foot-wide gully between two strips of land.

Hansen loved it. He saw it as a game. I saw myself falling into the channels of stagnant water between clumps of crumbling land. The whole thing was unnatural, but I followed my aunt and brother as carefully as I could, taking many precautions to jump carefully from island to island between the streams. We made it out to what was left of the body of the lake, and Aunt Dee Dee started making trips back and forth from the truck with the gear. Hansen and I started to play with the minnows. Aunt Dee Dee told us to leave them in the shade with the lid closed so they wouldn’t get too hot, but we weren’t the best with directions.

“You know, if you touch them, they die.”

“You’re such a liar, Alex.”
“I’m not lying, the chemicals in our hands take their scales off, so if we set them free, they’d still die because their scales would fall off.”

“I don’t like fishing with minnows. I think we should use fake ones.”

“Oh, it’s just a minnow. It’s not like we’re fishing with babies as bait. Maybe we should. I think the catfish would prefer babies to minnows. Fresh babies still covered with blood and gore from their mothers.”

“You’re gross.”

“You know what’s grosser than gross?”

“No.”

“Ten dead puppies in a barrel.”

“That’s sick, I’m telling.”

“You’re such a baby. That’s not even the gross part.”

“Oh yeah, then what’s the gross part?”

“I’m not telling you, you’d just cry.”

“Tell me, or I’m telling Aunt Dee Dee that you told me another grosser than gross joke.”

“No, I don’t want to.”

“Tell me.”

“You’re such a spaz,” I said, and then, I punched in his direction and he flinched.

“What a baby,” punching him twice in the arm I said, “Two for flinchin,” in my best Corey Feldman voice. Corey Feldman was my hero.

“Owww, you better tell me what’s grosser than ten puppies in a barrel, or I’m telling about you punching me again.”
“One dead puppy in ten barrels,” I said, and Hansen started wailing. I knew he would cry. He was such a brat. “Oh, shut up baby, it’s just a joke. No one killed any puppies.”

Just then, Aunt Dee Dee reappeared with the last of the fishing supplies. “Aunt Dee Dee, Alex told about the puppy in the barrel again.”

“Alex, ya know that makes him cry. Why do ya keep sayin it?”

“He keeps askin me to. Besides, he was cryin about the minnows again, so I was tryin to take his mind off of it. I was helping.” Aunt Dee Dee, who had been the one to let me watch *The Willies* where I gleaned all my knowledge about what was grosser than gross in the first place, smiled at me.

“Well, kiddo, when I need your help takin his mind off the minnows, I’ll let you know. Until then, lay off the grosser than gross jokes, or you’re going to get me in trouble for letting you watch that movie.”

Aunt Dee Dee handed me a fishing pole, and I happily squished the hook through one of the wriggling minnows. She cast it, and I sat down with my pole in hand. That was it for a while. Just sit with the minnow in the water. Watch the bobber drift. I loved fishing with minnows.

My plan of action had worked, in the end. Hansen was so busy crying over the puppies that by the time my aunt baited his pole, cast it, and handed it to him, he had forgotten all about killing the minnows. I really was a genius. After two hours, of sitting on dry, dead grass being attacked by grasshoppers, we still hadn’t caught a single fish and we were sweating to death. We had caught three alligator snapping turtles and a snake.

Aunt Dee Dee decided we needed to find a new spot. I agreed. I had caught the snake, and had almost had an aneurysm. I’d been ready to leave since then. Jumping back
toward the truck across the strips of land, I slipped and fell in the swampy water between. My ankle was pretty badly twisted, and being a very paranoid child, I was positive that the red mark that appeared on my calf after the fall was a moccasin bite. I’d seen the fall coming from the moment we headed out there that morning, and I was not a happy fisher. I just knew I’d be dead within the hour, and I wanted to go home.

Eventually, I calmed down and discovered that the red mark was a scratch and that my leg was fine. Since I had made a miraculous recovery, I agreed to stick around, and we ate lunch. Bologna Sandwiches and Pepsi. Sitting on the ground, below a Texas-sized globe willow, the wind began to pick up. The hot air blew around us and waves rolled off the water and beat against the shore. Looked like rain, but the heat wouldn’t break for another ten or more days.

“If we want to get any fishing in before we leave, we better do it. If those clouds break now, the rain may never stop until next summer.” Being that we were a very democratic family, we put it to a vote. The outcome was a decision to make two more casts each, and then leave. We didn’t bother going back across the islands. Instead, we fished from the shoreline that was considerably farther away from the lake’s drive than it should have been. I wanted it all to be done, so on my first cast, I “accidentally” lost my minnow in the weeds. Throwing out my second cast, I let it hit the water with every intention to reel it in quickly and go sit under the tree and read The Babysitter’s Club. Unfortunately, as soon as the minnow hit the water, it was taken under.

“I got one!” I shrieked and jumped up and down squeaking like a Chihuahua.

“Goodness, child, you don’t have it yet. You gotta reel it in. Now, be careful. Start by giving the line a little jerk to get the hook sunk in deep. Then, start reeling it in.” My
brother had deserted his fishing pole on the ground, minnow still attached and flopping sadly as it suffocated. They were watching me now, staring at with impatient eyes as I began to struggle with the fish.

“Help me, Aunt Dee Dee, I can’t do it by myself. It’s too hard.”

“Now, you listen to me, there’s nothing in this world you can’t do. You hear me? Not one damn thing, now you stay with that fish, and don’t stop until it’s on the bank. Besides, if I help you, you’ll only be mad later that I didn’t let you do it on your own. Now, reel!”

“I can’t do it. I can’t, my arms hurt.” The fish strained more of the line out. With every reel, I was losing line, and I could see that the spool was almost empty. The minutes swam away before my vision on the heat-blurred horizon.

“I’m not going to help you. It won’t be your fish, if I help you.”

“I’ll help her, Aunt Dee Dee, let me do it.”

“No, now, Hansen, you stay back. She’s gonna reel this fish in if it’s the last thing she does.” I began to cry as I strained to pull the fish a little closer to the bank, sighing with relief every time I gained even a millimeter and wailing when the fish would take back an inch. The fight went on and on like this for nearly half an hour.

I called out again, “I can’t do it. It’s too big.”

“It’s not too big. It’s just a fighter. You’re one too. You gotta prove to the fish that you’re the better fighter. You gotta prove it to yourself too. Do you believe it? Reel!”

Screaming, I began to pull him in. About twenty feet from the bank, he came up. His back arched as he tried using the forces of gravity to gain some line. I looked over at my aunt after I’d seen him. She looked horrified. “Do you want me to help you?” she asked.
“No, I want to do it on my own.”

“Alex, it’s huge.”

“He’s a fighter, but I’m bigger than he is.” I worked at it another ten minutes. My head pounded under the rising sun and my face was so sheeted with sweat that the look of determination in my eyes could barely be seen. Forty-five minutes after he bit, I had him on the bank. Aunt Dee Dee pulled him up, and unhooked him. As soon as I was sure he hadn’t gotten away or been a dream, I collapsed.

7:45 was blinking on the clock when I woke up in Neenee’s bed with a wet washcloth on my face, and ice on my legs. “Where is he?” I screamed from the pool of cold in the furnace of a house. “Where’s my fish? He’s mine, I caught him by myself! I did it all by myself!”

Aunt Dee Dee thundered into the room. “Lay down, Alex, you have to relax. Lay back down. Don’t get yourself all worked up. You’re going to make yourself sick.” As soon as she said this, I felt the pounding in my head. The bologna made its way up my throat. Looking at my bulging eyes, she grabbed a trashcan from the corner and brought it over just in time to catch my lunch. “Calm down,” she whispered and rubbed my back as my shoulders heaved with tears and vomit and strain.


“I know, Sweety. I know. Lay down, and relax.” I lowered myself back onto the ice soaked sheets and my chest slowed its heaving. The next morning, I felt a movement on the mattress next to me. My eyes fluttered open and closed.
“Junior died out there last night,” she said. I didn’t understand what she meant at first. Then, I sat upright. Aunt Dee Dee was in the habit of calling any sort of non-human thing Junior: dogs, cats, birds. My fish was dead.

“I killed him?”

“What else did you want to do with him?” She said as I cried. “Calm down, you didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I didn’t want to kill him. He was fighter, like me.” I hoped I could keep him in the wading pool overnight, let my mom and Jay see him the next day, and then, I was going to put him back in the pond. I liked the idea that he would be out there waiting for a rematch, but now, he was dead. I had killed something strong and real.

“I know you didn’t want him to die, but these things happen. Come on, we’ll take your picture with him, and then, we’ll throw him back for the other fish to eat. Circle of life, Sweety.”

One day, I killed a fish. He was as big as I had been once, not so long before. He was almost stronger than I was. The weight of his body was nearly enough to prevent me from reeling him in. I didn’t mean to kill him. I wasn’t like the troll hunters who killed for glory. I was noble. I wanted to be challenged to prove that I could rise to the occasion. Once my opponent surrendered, I would show mercy by releasing him to the water where we might meet again. I did not believe in killing that which I did not eat.

At school, I told my friends about the fish that I had caught. I showed them the picture that Aunt Dee Dee had taken of me holding him. I didn’t tell my friends that the fish in the picture was dead. I didn’t tell them he had died at all. I was ashamed of my behavior.
When my teacher asked if we had a catfish fry, I thought I was caught. Then, barely missing a beat, I said, “No, we threw him back.” This was the first story I told that seemed like a lie. There would be more in the years to come, but there was something about the thrill of belief that was intoxicating. The others believed me, and I hadn’t told them the whole truth.

I wondered if only telling half of the truth to make a story seem less bad counted as changing the way things truly are into something beautiful. I was scared. I almost told the truth just to make sure I hadn’t grown up. I didn’t need to change the way things were.

“Things are still beautiful the way they are!” I wanted to yell this at my teacher. “I don’t have to leave out that the fish died. I can tell y’all that because there’s nothing not beautiful about that. It’s just what happened.” I could tell my friends, and maybe they would agree with me. The fear of what would happen, if they didn’t agree, kept me quiet. I didn’t want to lose the way that people looked at me when I told them stories. People had to trust me when I told the stories. I needed to tell them because it was what I was born to do. It was how I fixed people’s hearts. If that meant that I had to grow up, I would grow up.
Ch. 22 Isabella and the Rift

Shortly after Magnus’ death Denmark and Norway split into two separate countries. The turmoil that Magnus foretold had come to be. The countries feuded, and war stripped the land. Innocent people died daily on both sides of the North Sea, in Denmark and Norway. Isabella’s father, Bufternon, died during the first days of the war. He had left the house only momentarily to find food for the family. A Denmark supporter emerged from the trees, slit his throat, took his food, and returned to hiding.

The family waited for him. Isabella didn’t know what to do. Eventually, she did the only thing she could think of. She told the truth. “King Magnus entrusted the future of Norway to me, and I’m worried about what will happen, if I stay here.”

“What do you mean?” Fromena, her mother, asked. “Are you with child?”

Isabella couldn’t help but laugh at the idea of a dying man impregnating her. “No, of course not. He gave me this,” she pulled the chain with the ring on the end out from under her dress. “It’s the ring of Queen Refola. Legend states that, one day, this ring will restore the peace and glory of Norway.”

“I’ve heard of this ring, Isabella. Why did King Magnus choose you to protect it?”

“When I was a child, I talked to him at the picnic on the Feast of Saint Olaf. I saw colors in the silver. He thought that it meant I was called to protect the ring. King Magnus vowed to give me the ring on his deathbed. He promised he would call for me. Father brought me to him moments before he passed, and he gave me the ring as he promised. He told me there would be unrest, but I didn’t realize it would be this severe. I’m frightened.”

“We have to get you to the city on the western coast. It is safer there. The war has not reached them. They will protect you. I have a brother there. I’ll write you a letter of
introduction.” Fromena hurried into the next room to write the letter. Isabella stared out the window, keeping watch for Danes. As a child, she loved living near the woods, but now, it was not safe for her. They were hiding here. Near her home.

“Here, child. You should pack and leave immediately. Follow the trail for four days. Sleep in the daytime, and walk at night. Try to stay close to the water and away from the trees. When you reach the town of Bergen, ask for Dremin. He is your uncle. Give him the letter, and my apologies. If I thought it was safe, we would all go with you. Isabella, I fear this is the last time I will see you in this life, but that ring will make it possible for us to be together. Again. And forever.”

“I understand, Mamma.” Isabella took the letter, and hugged her mother and siblings before setting out.

Her feet were aching before the end of the first night, but she did as she was told. After the third night of walking, she was exhausted. Isabella found a place that was hidden in the trees. There was a circle of felled trunks that still had their roots, topped with a globe of branches. Isabella wondered how the trees had possibly been lowered with the roots still intact. She walked into the center. There, Isabella found a bed of deer skins, and an old book. Walburta had returned to this place before her death, and left the book for those who might need it in the future. Something about that place made Isabella feel safe. She lay down on the bed, and fell soundly asleep.

The next night, she awoke. In the dark, she felt along the leafy ground for the book. Carrying it with her, she made her way toward the coast. Before the sun began to rise above the tree line behind her, she had found the township of Bergen. As the sun began to rise, Isabella came to a cottage. She waited for a light to come on inside. Huddling in the trees on
the outside of town and hoping the person who owned the cabin would help her, Isabella had never been so scared, and she started to believe that King Magnus had been wrong. Perhaps, she wasn’t strong enough to protect Refola and Milona.

Finally, Isabella saw movement through the front window of the cabin. She hurried to the door. “Hello,” she said quietly and tapped. A man opened it and stared at her.

“Hello, dear. Are you okay?” The man had a funny white mustache, and round cheeks like a child.

“Yes, sir. I’m looking for my uncle, Dremin. I’ve fled my homeland because of the war.”

The man looked behind him, and then stepped out into the street, shutting the door.

“I will take you to Dremin. Follow me.” The two walked swiftly through the pre-dawn light to the coast of Norway. A small house stood on the edge of a fjord, and the morning light gleaming off the water made it appear to be on fire.

“It’s beautiful here.”

“We appreciate it. This is Dremin’s home.” The man motioned to the cabin. “Be careful with him, Lovely. He’s quite old, and has been alone for a very long time.”

“Thank you, I will. What is your name?”

“I’m Sewmil, the carver.”

“I’m Isabella.”

“It’s been nice to meet you. Good luck with Dremin.”

“Thank you.” Isabella turned to face the house, and the carver walked away. She had not been prepared to live alone with an elderly uncle. Her mother was never one to share details. Taking a deep breath, Isabella made her legs move, one in front of the other. She
found herself at the door, exhausted. Isabella lifted her hand to knock, but before she could, the door was opened. Standing before her was a man of less than six feet tall. His face was shriveled into a near skeletal mask of agedness.

“Isabella, come in. I’ve heard reports of the bad things happening in your parts. I hoped you all would come,” Dremin stepped out of the door and Isabella entered the house. They sat by his fire in two wooden chairs. It was a simple place. “Tell me, what of the rest of the family?”

“Uncle Dremin, how did you know me?”

“Your mother has described you each to me so many times, in letters, over the past years, I would know you all anywhere. How is my sister?”

“She was well when I left her. I still hope that the family will be able to join us, here.”

“Me too, child.”

“This is probably not necessary any longer, but maybe it has more news for you, of mamma.” Isabella handed him the letter. As he read it, she leafed through the book she had found in the trees. It had pictures of horrible beasts that appeared to be made of mud.

“She sounds sad to see you leave.”

“Does she explain why I had to come?”

“No, she tells me to ask you, and wishes that we would get on well together. That we would take care of each other as she worries about us both.”

Isabella smiled, and then frowned at her hands. She didn’t know where to begin her story. “I’m afraid I’m in danger. Before King Magnus died, he entrusted something to me. He believed that it would bring an end to all the unrest in Norway, forever.”
“That is a very nice story.”

“I think it was more than a story.” Isabella pulled the necklace from beneath her dress, and showed the ring to Dremin.

“I think that it’s true. There is something about this necklace that feels too heavy.” Dremin leaned forward examining the ring. He turned it over and over in his hands.

“It does feel heavy, and look, do you see those colors in the metal?” Isabella smiled.

“You can see them too?”

“Of course, they’re very bright.”

Isabella felt greatly relieved. Though Dremin was her uncle, she had hesitated to involve him in her struggle, but if King Magnus was right, only those who were meant to could see the souls of the great Queen and Milona. She felt that Dremin’s was a kindred nature to her own.

“I was afraid I was the only one who could see them. Do you know what those colors are said to be?”

“No.” Dremin let go of the ring, and Isabella tucked it back inside her collar, close to her heart.

“The great Queen Refola of Norway, and the child, Milona, her protector.”

“You believe in the trolls?”

“No. Was one of them a troll?”

“Of course. Queen Refola was the last Troll leader of Norway. At least that’s what the legends tell of her. It’s all in the book, in your lap. Legend has it that a queen, before the history of Norway, told those stories, and as the years passed and scribes began to write, they were taken down.”
“This book? I just found this in the trees while I was sleeping, yesterday.”

“How odd. Well, it does seem you have a higher purpose, Dear. All of the elements are coming together around you. I had never believed those stories. Had not believed in anything beautiful or kind in a very long time. You see, I watched my whole family die. My son fell from the cliff. My wife was never the same. She died of a broken heart. Our daughter got sick from the drafts off the ocean. Then, I was all alone. It’s hard to believe in anything true or connecting, when you’re alone.”

“I didn’t know about your family. I’m very sorry.”

“You’re here now, and you’re my family. I will protect you and the ring for the remainder of my days.”

“Thank you, Uncle Dremin.”

There was a silence between them for a time as they each thought of the ways that their worlds were going to change. Isabella tried not to think about her own family members who would probably be killed in the coming days as the Danes attacked their village. Dremin wanted to concentrate on the ring and the possibility that the troll legends were true, but all he could see were the eyes of his wife and beautiful children. It was a hard day, and one both felt they might not be able to survive. Finally, the sun began to make its descent, and the two were carried off into a deep sleep, in the chairs before the fire.

Not so many years after Isabella’s arrival in Bergen, Dremin died. Isabella was distraught, but determined to be strong in her uncle’s absence. She worked for Sewmill, the carver, to earn money to buy food. Within just a few years, the war ended, and the people of Norway and Denmark found a way to exist peacefully with such a small ocean between
them. Though, they were by no means allies, both countries tired quickly of the loss of
innocent lives.

Isabella helped Sewmill by staining the creatures he would carve with the juice of
different kinds of berries. Day by day, she and the carver became the closest of friends.
Though he was much older than Isabella, Sewmill loved her deeply. On the occasion of her
eighteenth birthday, much more advanced in age than most wedded women, Sewmill asked
Isabella for her hand. Unsure of what to do, Isabella did not respond right away.

Before work one morning nearly a month later, Isabella knocked on the door of
Sewmill’s home. He opened the door surprised to see Isabella there, as he had only seen her
in the shop at the back of his home, since the first morning that they met. “Hello, Isabella.”

“I have to explain something to you that might seem strange, and maybe you will not
love me anymore because of it, but if you still find love in your heart, I will accept your
proposal.”

“There’s nothing you could say that would end my love for you. Please, come in, sit
by the fire, and tell me everything.” Sewmill opened his door, and Isabella walked into her
future home for the first of many times.

“Sewmill, I am already wearing a ring. I am not wed, but this ring will be with me
for always.”

“You are cloistered?”

“No. It is a very different sort of ring. You know the book of trolls that I read
sometimes?”

“Of course.”
“A long time ago, before anything, those stories were real somehow. I do not believe
they were real the way the book tells them, but some of the things truly happened. In this
country. On this shore.”

“You believe this?”

“Yes. When, I was a young girl, I met King Magnus.”

“You met Magnus, the Good?”

“My father was his servant. The King hosted a picnic for all the people of my village.
I saw a ring around his neck, and I asked him why he wore it. I do not know why I presumed
to address the great king, but I did. He thought this was wonderful, and told me a very sad
story about a great queen, Refola of the trolls. I did not find out she was a troll until my
Uncle Dremin told me much later. It is written in the books, that she tormented her people,
and they bound her in a ring. King Magnus believed that the ring around his neck was that
very one, and that, somehow, it held the key to peace in Norway. I will not be the one to
bring about the peace, but I will guard it until I cannot find the strength. When the time
comes, I will pass it on to one who will be presented to me. So, you understand that my heart
and life are already bound to something greater than this world. I do not want to disappoint
you.”

Sewmill sat for a bit of time, deep in concentration. Finally, he said, “I cannot be
disappointed in one as brave as you. I would be honored to stand at your side, and aid you in
your duty, for as long as I have left in this world.”

“And I would be honored to have you there.”
Ch. 23 Forney

I don’t remember a lot of what happened the first few years that we lived in Forney. I remember that there was a backyard, and my brother and I were allowed to ride our bikes around the block. I spent most days circling round and round like a shark. Anything was better than the balcony and the fences, but it still didn’t feel like home.

The neighborhood was filled with, mostly, old people. There were a few kids near my age around, but most were older or much younger. We had lived in the neighborhood for a few months when we got new neighbors. The old lady who lived next door before them called 911 for no good reason about once a week. They put her in a nursing home, and some of her family members moved into her house. There were two kids: Bailey and Madison, both girls. Bailey was three and Madison was my brother’s age. This is what my mom told me after meeting the new family. One afternoon, I was sitting in the garage reading the latest Goosebumps book. I’d been able to read them in two hours for a while, but I wasn’t willing to move on to more challenging reading material.

Madison rode by on her bike every few minutes. When she passed the garage, she would slow down to barely moving and stare at me. I found this a bit odd, but decided that maybe she was trying to get my attention. I kept pretending I didn’t notice her, and read my book. Eventually, I couldn’t take it anymore. I stopped paying attention to what was happening on the pages I kept turning, and started trying to think of what I could say next time Madison biked by.

“You’re my brother’s age right?” I stood below the open garage door. The words seemed mildly crazy, even to me, and I said them.

“I don’t know. How old is your brother?”
“No, you are, my mom told us. I’m Alex. My brother’s Hansen, but he’s inside right now.”

“Oh.” We stared at each other. Neither of us knew how to proceed at this juncture.

“Do you like to read?” I asked.

“Yeah. Babysitter’s Club is my favorite.”

“I love Babysitter’s Club too, but Goosebumps are my favorite.”

“The Goosebumps books are so good. Have you read Say Cheese and Die yet?”

“I’m reading it right now.”

“I love that one. It’s my favorite.”

“I like it a lot too. I like the werewolf one a little better.”

“The werewolf one was so scary.” Madison deserted her bike, and joined me in the garage. Again, we found ourselves at a verbal impasse.

“So, was our old neighbor your grandma?”

“She was my great grandma.”

“Where’d she go?”

“They put her in a nursing home.”

“Is she going to die? My grandpa died.”

“Probably, but everyone’s going to die eventually.”

“That’s true.” I opted for a subject change. “Do you like animals?”

“I love them. We have Persian cats. You know, with the flat faces. My mom raises them.”
“Cool. I have a Himalayan. That’s half Persian and half Siamese. His name’s Moomoo. It used to be Tramp, but then we saw the *Lion King* and thought he was like Mufasa. That’s a really long name, though, so we call him Moomoo.”

“That’s kind of funny.”

“Yeah, we’re kind of weird.”

“I don’t think it’s weird. My mom’s always giving our cats crazy names. We’ve got a black cat that she named Darden. Like garden with a D. Isn’t that crazy?”

“I like that name. It sounds very sophisticated.” We laughed as I mimed drinking tea with my pinky out. “So, what grade are you in?”

“Oh, I go to a Montessori school, so we don’t really have grades. We get to learn at our own pace.”

“That sounds awesome. I’m always bored in school. I wish I could learn at my own pace.”

“I like it a lot. Hey, maybe you can go to Montessori school with me. I don’t really get to make friends with many of the people I go to school with because we live so far away from them. It would be nice to have a friend at school.”

“We’re friends, now?”

“Of course. We’re neighbors and we both like to read and we both know what sophisticated means. We have to be friends.”

From that day forward we were inseparable. We rode our bikes together, we read together, Madison helped me with my Science project, and I helped her with her English papers. We started a society of people dedicated to helping animals and forced Hansen and Bailey to become members too. We didn’t save any animals, but we did accidentally kill a
few birds and lizards that we found. We didn’t actually know what to feed birds or lizards or what sort of habitat they could survive in.

Even after I grew accustomed to the town, I didn’t learn to love the Forney schools. The kids didn’t like me much. I was too different. I only had three friends, and they were all different too. As long as I had them, I felt okay, but I didn’t like going to school anymore. I constantly begged to be transferred to Madison’s Montessori school. I didn’t know what it was, but I knew that, if Madison was there, it would be better than what I had.

I wrote my grandma letters everyday that I never mailed because I knew my mom would read them, and I didn’t want her to. After grandpa died, Aunt Dee Dee moved in to help out. I wanted to help too. I asked if I could move back to Wills Point, and help my grandma. Mom always said no. Madison always said she would miss me. Hansen never said much of anything.

The worst thing about Forney was the bus. Hansen and I rode the bus to school each day. It was always overcrowded, and we didn’t know any of the other kids. Most of them were much older or much younger. Hansen and I sat together, when there were seats open, in the middle of the bus. Otherwise, we stood in the aisle, and tried not to make eye contact with any of the other older kids.

One Friday, an older boy said to me, “Hey, you’re hot. Want to go out sometime?” Then, he ran his hand down my back. I looked at him, terrified, and ran from the bus, dragging my brother behind me without responding. The whole weekend I worked myself into a frenzy worrying about what would happen Monday morning. I didn’t say anything to Mom or Jay. I didn’t say much of anything at all that weekend. I avoided Madison. I stayed
hidden behind my bedroom door. I read my books in my canopy bed with my music blaring, and I didn’t answer the phone.

Monday morning, Mom walked to the end of the driveway to see Hansen and me off. I thought I would be okay, and started to walk towards the bus stop. Then, I lost it. Bursting into tears, I turned to my mother, and screamed, “I can’t ride the bus anymore. Please don’t make me go. Please.” I clutched her arm, as I heard the rumble of the bus from the next block. “Please, Mom, please don’t make me go.” My shirt collar was damp with tears.

“What’s wrong?”

“One of the older boys. He said I was pretty, and he wanted to date me. And he touched my back.” My mother paused. She didn’t know what to say, how to react. I was only ten. My brother stood a few feet closer to the bus stop unsure of what he should do. He wasn’t scared of the bus, and it was coming.

“How much older?”

“He’s the oldest boy on the bus. He’s in high school.”

“Well, he’s riding the bus. Maybe he thought only an intermediate school girl would date him. You are tall for your age. Maybe he didn’t know how old you were.”

“Mom! He touched my back.”

“Like your bottom, or your back?”

“What does it matter? I didn’t want him to touch me. It wasn’t right.”

“What are you scared of? Do you think he’ll hurt you?”

“I don’t know.” It wasn’t true. I did know what I was afraid of. I wasn’t afraid that he would try to molest me. I didn’t think that he really wanted a date. I was afraid that he
was going to make fun of me. Tell me how he was just kidding. No way he would ever want a girl like me.

“Why don’t you try to ride the bus this morning. If anything happens, you call me from school. Okay?”

“Okay.” The walk down the block seemed very long. Hansen and I arrived just in time as the bus pulled up. The older boy wasn’t on the bus yet. His stop was a few blocks away. Hansen and I sat in the middle of the bus, and I dreaded the moment we would arrive at his stop. His was one of the last, and my heart was beating too quickly as the streets passed by.

Chris, a boy in my class, sat down in front of us. “Hi, Alex.” I looked up at him, and smiled. I couldn’t muster any response but that. A few streets later, the older boy got on the bus. He saw me in my seat with Hansen, and smiled. He sat down behind us, and put his hand on my arm through the crack between the seat and the window. I pulled away from him, and turned to look at him angrily.

“What? Do you really think I want to be with you?” he said. “How old are you anyway? Get over yourself, I’m just playing around. Besides, no one would want you.”

“Leave her alone. She’s always nice to everyone, and she hasn’t done anything to you, or your stupid friends. Leave her alone.” I looked up at Chris who was standing on his seat, finger pointed in the older boy’s face. My brother seemed very small, and stared at his hands.

“Well, little man, looks like you’ve got a crush on Rootbeer.”

“Don’t call her that. She doesn’t like it. It’s not her fault her initials are ANW.”

“What are you going to do, if I don’t leave her alone?”
“I’m going to tell the bus driver, the principal, and my dad.”

“Alright, little man, I’ll leave your girlfriend alone.” The older boy moved to the back of the bus, and Chris looked down at me. His cheeks were as red as his hair.

“Are you okay?”

I nodded.

“Good,” he said, “It’s my fault. The ANW thing. He’s friends with my older sister. He heard me telling my mom that you were a girl. We were filling out the Valentines and she was going to give you a boy one, but I had to tell her you were a girl. I call you Rootbeer sometimes, in my head, but not out loud. I told my mom, and he heard me. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.” I could barely breathe, and my voice shook. Chris sat back down in his seat, and I looked at Hansen.

He stared back. “Sorry I didn’t say anything. I didn’t know what to do.”

“That’s alright.” I stared out the window hoping no one would see me cry. I didn’t even know why I was. I didn’t want the boy to like me. He was mean, and Chris took care of me. It had less to do with the boy who touched my arm, and more to do with the change in everything else around me. My brother felt guilty for not taking care of me, but I was supposed to take care of him. He was little. He needed protection. I was supposed to be brave.
Ch. 24 Industrialization

Isabella and Sewmill lived together happily during the reign of King Olaf the peaceful. Neither lived to see any more war. The remainder of Isabella’s time as protector of the ring of Refola proved to be much less challenging. Sewmill and Isabella had three children, and they all grew old in the reign of kings who gained the throne without a fight.

When the time came for Isabella to bid goodbye to this world and join her beloved Sewmill in the next, she passed the ring to her youngest daughter, Meyla. Meyla passed the ring to her youngest daughter, who passed the ring to her youngest daughter, and so the tradition continued for many many centuries.

During the time the ring was passed down through Isabella’s family, Norway became a very different place. Through many wars and treaties, it became part of Denmark and Sweden. The political lines were drawn and erased between the three countries for nearly one thousand years. By the year 1905, none of the three countries could remember what they were fighting over, and they peacefully returned to being individually ruled kingdoms. From that time, they shared a peaceful alliance, and close friendship, but other things began to go wrong in Norway.

In this new century, the people of Norway found themselves behind the rest of the world. They had very little to offer, and they wanted, more than anything, something to provide them with a world currency. Because of their great forests, they quickly became known for the beautiful wood craftsmanship. Through the money made from the sale of Norwegian wood, they opened factories. These factories produced many goods that were sold, and gained even more wealth and respect for the country in the global economy.
In one of these factories a young woman by the name of Hilda Lee, who would one day be called Werner, was making pillows. It had been many many years since anyone had heard the stories of Refola the great troll queen and her lost ring. No one even remembered poor Milona, who was bound with her.

This young woman sewed pillows shut. One day, she discovered a ring at the side of the road on her way to work. There was a great war in the world, and anything valuable was immediately taken from people of her rank. Hilda looked around her, and hid the ring within the folds of her dress. That day, Hilda asked Hortense, her overseer, how much it would cost to purchase one of the pillows for her family.

Hortense said, “You are a good worker. Never late. You always close more pillows than anyone else, and I regret to say that you do not get paid nearly enough for your labors. I would be very pleased, if you would have one of the pillows for your family, free of charge.” Hortense left Hilda alone in the room with the sewing machine and the stacks of unclosed pillows. After the door was shut, she picked up her next pillow. It was of a simple blue and white striped canvas. Hilda Lee placed the ring inside, sewed the pillow shut, and put it aside to take home with her.

Hilda intended to keep the ring hidden until an opportunity would arise to trade it for money, or some other necessity that her family needed. She did not tell anyone. Eventually, she had almost forgotten the hidden ring. The opportunity to sell it never arose, but she carried the pillow with her throughout her life. That is how the pillow with the ring inside came to America. Though no one remembers it well. It traveled across a very great expanse of ocean to the shores of this new place. It had seen two World Wars, and was always protected by Hilda.
On the day of his wedding, Hilda placed the pillow in the new home of her son, Walter. Walt never questioned the appearance of the pillow, assuming it belonged to his new wife, and Ellen, his wife, assumed the same. The years came and went with the pillow between them, but neither knew of or questioned its origin. No one would ever know where the pillow came from again.
Ch. 25 Canopy Beds

I was angry at my mother. Hansen and I were supposed to go to Grandma’s house that night. We were supposed to go home. Instead, my mother was lazy, and didn’t want to drive us to meet Grandma and Aunt Dee Dee on their way home from work, so we talked to them on the phone and we would all go tomorrow. I lay staring up at the green canopy above my bed. I loved it and the matching dresser and nightstand. It was the first bed I’d had of my own, in the first room of my own. My pillow, Mickey, and I snuggled under the green dome. Pillow and girl angry at the world for no good reason, a tear-filled storm of moody pre-teen angst.

If it were up to me, which it was not, nothing ever was, I’d move the bed to the toy room, and live there with Grandma and Aunt Dee Dee. I’d even sit next to Jesse at breakfast everyday, if it would mean that I could stay there. Even in the new house with the bigger backyard, and streets to ride my bike down, this was not my home.

I decided that I would present the idea that weekend. I would explain to Mom that I was nearly twelve years old, and I wanted to live in Wills Point. She could go on living in Forney, but I was going to move home. I knew Grandma and Aunt Dee Dee would understand. They would let me move back, and bring my canopy bed. Then, the three of us could have our beautiful beds. The ones we’d always wanted, and live together. We could be happy. At least, I would be happier there than I was here. I fell asleep with only the thought of home.

“Wake up,” Mom said. “We have to go to your Aunt Mary’s. She and Uncle Mark are going out tonight for his birthday, and she wants me to help her fix her hair.”

I groaned and rolled over. “I want to go to Grandma’s.”
“We will. Don’t worry. We just have to go there for a little while. Besides, I already called Grandma and she didn’t even answer the phone. They probably went garage sale-ing. So, quit complaining and let’s go.” I shuffled into the bathroom, threw on some clothes, and grabbed my backpack and pillow.

Secretly, I was excited about going to Aunt Mary’s. My cousin Rebecca was a year older than I, and she was popular. I had a total of five friends in the entire world, but Rebecca had five friends on her street alone. She was going to be a cheerleader. I was envious, and wanted to be just like her. I stared out the window as we drove, at the trees and grass and the decreasing number of houses. The country. I belonged here, not in the city with all the people. I could not wait to see Grandma and convince her to let me live there again. I smiled. Rebecca would introduce me to all her friends, and I could be popular too.

When we arrived at Aunt Mary’s Rebecca wasn’t there. She had slept over at a friend’s house because she had friends. I was allowed to go play in her room even though she wasn’t here, and Aunt Mary let Hansen play with our Cousin Blake’s legos. Upon being let into Rebecca’s room, I dropped to her bed, a futon which was both a couch and a bed and fabulous and grown up, and started reading her Bop magazines. I wasn’t sure, but I thought that Jonathan Taylor Thomas was maybe less attractive than Brad Renfro, but no matter which was more attractive, I liked seeing them together in Tom and Huck. The movie had come out recently, and there were pictures of the two of them in all of the magazines.

The phone was ringing, but Mom and Aunt Mary were enthralled with curling irons and hairspray and black dresses, and took their sweet time answering it. It was driving me crazy. Finally, the ringing stopped, and Aunt Mary said, “Hello,” and that was it. Then, “Okay,” then there were whispers.
A few seconds later, my mother burst into the room, and said, “Let’s go. Let’s go right now!”

“Mom, I’m reading, what’s going on?” She had my brother by the arm and was dragging him.

“Bring that with you, just get in the car, now!” She screamed as she walked out the front door. I did as I was told. Sitting in the car with the magazine, I knew something wasn’t right. I assumed my mom and Aunt Mary had fought about something. They fought sometimes. My aunt had called my mother back to the house and was talking to her.

The only words I heard before the Blazer door was shut were, “Jean, don’t do this. Stay here. We should be together. They’re going to bring Rebecca home.” I thought she meant Grandma and Aunt Dee Dee by “they.” I wondered if Jesse had done something else stupid. He was always in trouble. Maybe that’s why Mom was mad. Then, they both started to cry. I dropped my magazine into my lap, and looked at my brother behind me.

Before I could say anything, the door was open, and Aunt Mary said, “Come inside guys.”

“Is Mom mad at us?” Hansen asked.

“No, she’s just upset.”

“What’s wrong?” He looked scared.

“Both of you come inside, and we’ll talk about it.” The walk across the lawn was the longest I’d ever taken. When we got inside, Mom was crying on the couch.

She looked up at us, and said, “Go to Rebecca’s room. I can’t do this yet.”

“Jean, I think,” Aunt Mary started.
“No, not right now, just go. I’ll come get you in a minute.” I took my brother’s hand, and we walked down the hall. In Rebecca’s room, we sat on the futon still holding hands, the *Bop* magazine I’d been reading, in my other hand.

“What’s going on?” He asked me.

“Something’s wrong with Grandma.”

“How do you know?”

“It’s just like with Grandpa. Do you remember when he got sick again, and they put him in the hospital before he died?” My brother shook his head. “You were too little. She did the same thing. She wouldn’t tell us what happened, and then, she got mad and sent us out of the room and then.” I didn’t finish because the door slammed open.

“Come out here please.” Mom walked away. She looked like she was barely able to stand. I left the magazine, and followed, still holding Hansen’s hand. We sat on the couch. I remembered the last time we’d been sitting on an Aunt’s couch with Mom looking the way she did now, and I knew for sure. Aunt Mary sat at the kitchen table, and watched as my world fell apart.

The judge was there. One of her responsibilities was to deliver the news to the families, when car accidents were fatal. I didn’t know who she was yet, but years later I would see her at church. She would try to talk to me, to be kind. To find out how I was doing, but I would hate her too much to respond. Even though she had only been the one to deliver the news of my Grandmother and my Aunt’s death, in my mind, she always murdered them.

“No!” I screamed. “Not both of them! How?”
“I’m sorry,” Judge Wilcoxon said. “It happened in an instant. They didn’t feel any pain.” Even at eleven, I knew this was something that people said to make you feel better after someone died, whether or not it was true. Even if it was true, that didn’t feel any better to me. In fact, it felt worse. In one instant, my grandmother and Aunt Dee Dee were sitting at a stop sign. They were probably laughing because my Aunt Dee Dee was saying something funny. She was always saying something funny. Then, they never smiled again. Maybe she ran through the stop sign, but the crash indicated that the man who hit them was speeding. Possibly, she thought there was time enough to make it through, and never looked to her right again before pulling out.

The truck went flipping into a field, and later, I saw the pictures. There was a hole in the back window. A circle with blood around it where my grandmother’s head went through. Their seatbelts snapped their spines. The front seats were forced into the back seats because of the impact. All I could think as I sat, cried, and listened to all of these things was that I should have been in that back seat. I should have been laughing at my Aunt Dee Dee’s joke in one instant, and in the next, I should have been gone. I didn’t belong there, with everyone else, on my Aunt Mary’s couch. Listening to a judge tell my family that they didn’t feel any pain.

What about me? I wanted to scream. I feel pain. I feel plenty of pain. I want to not feel it. I want to be gone in an instant. I want to be gone. It was January 4, 1996, and I was.

At the end of the month, we moved back to Wills Point. I got rid of my bed, and dresser, and nightstand. My magical princess world where things were okay. I said goodbye
to my only friends. I hadn’t been at school for a long time. My first day back, I was sad and
tired. I hadn’t slept or eaten much.

A football player named Joe stood in front of my desk before lunch. The bell rang,
and I didn’t move. “Hi Alex, how are you?” Joe asked.

“I’m okay.” I was surprised he was talking to me, but I didn’t look up from desk. I
felt like I might start crying again, and I didn’t like to cry. No one saw me cry. I was strong,
and funny. I made people laugh.

“You haven’t been at school.”

“My Grandma and my Aunt died.” I looked up to see pain in his eyes, and maybe a
touch of guilt for making me tell him.

“I figured it was something like that. I’m sorry.” I stood up, and walked out of the
room. Given the chance to d
o it again, I’d stay. I’d cry. I’d let myself feel the pain. I’d let
someone help me. That was the moment that I stopped letting people see me. I put on mask
after mask, and Joe was the last person to see my real face.

For years it hurt too much to even think of them. I would leave the room when their
names were mentioned. When we went through my grandmother’s things, I got the ones I
wanted most of all. Her nightgown, a bottle of her perfume, and her bedroom suite.

I lived in my grandmother’s house, in her room, with her furniture, her perfume, and
her nightgown, and I would not let myself think about her. At night, I would place my hands
under my pillow, clutch the nightdress, and breathe in the smell of her that still lingered. At
first, my goal was to keep everything as she left it. I put my things behind hers. I didn’t
want to be in the way, in case she came back. I wanted her to know there was still room for
her here. I still needed her here.
In November, I cried. My grandmother had been dead for nearly a year. “I saw her. I saw her in the mirror by the kitchen. She was standing by the sink in her sweater with all the weird pieces on it and her blue sweat pants. She was standing right there. When I turned around to hug her she left me. She left me again. Why doesn’t she want to stay?” I was hysterical. Standing in my mother’s room screaming, crying, stomping.

“Honey. She is here. She is here.” My mother hugged me, and I pulled away. This wasn’t what I wanted. I didn’t want her to comfort me. I didn’t want her to tell me my grandmother was in my heart. I didn’t want her. I never really stopped resenting her for not being her mother.

“No she’s not.” I stopped crying and walked calmly from the room. Later, she tried to bring up what happened, and I wouldn’t talk about it. Up to my usual tricks, I left the room. I kept walking out on everything that reminded me of her, and into my room, which had become an empty tomb. All the symbols were there, but I refused to let myself think of what they meant.

I got my wish to move back home, and blamed myself for a time. If I hadn’t wanted this, maybe they would still be alive. Maybe my very wishing for this made God decide that, if I wanted to come home, He would make it so, but not my way. We had to do this His way. I hated Him for taking them from me. My mother seemed to find some sort of blessing in all of it because Hansen and I weren’t in the truck. She thanked God while I hated Him for not letting me go with them. He’d brought me back to my house and my town, and He took away everything that made it home. I quit talking to Him.
I remembered having good friends when I left Wills Point, but upon my return, I only knew two people: Rebecca and Sumer Barnet, a girl my grandmother used to baby-sit. I hoped that because my cousin knew people, I would know people, but I didn’t. I never saw Rebecca or her friends while I was at school. They were the grade ahead of me, and their classes were in a different building. She probably wouldn’t have wanted to hang out with me anyway. Sumer was nice enough at times, but just trying to fit in, too. She often turned me away when I was the most in need of a friend. She only really talked to me when no one else was around.

My classes were fine. I was smart, and teachers liked me well enough, but everyday at lunch I was terrified. I would walk into the cafeteria and have nowhere to sit. I would find an empty seat. Sit in it, and try to stay quiet. As soon as I could, I would go outside, and sit by myself until lunch ended. I didn’t remember how to make friends. I used to be good at it. At the other two schools I’d attended, I made friends almost immediately, but this was a different time. I wasn’t automatically expected to be friends with everyone in my class because I had more than one. Mostly, people in my classes ignored me. Besides, I’d changed. I didn’t smile much, and I cried in the bathroom some days. No one wanted to be my friend.

There was band. I figured maybe I would make friends there. Mr. Williams, the band director, was very nice, and he seemed to like me well enough. He sat me last chair because he hadn’t heard me play, and said we’d have a chair test soon. I didn’t really care. I sat, unspeaking, at the end of the row playing the easiest parts in all the songs. It was better that way. I wouldn’t have to practice, or try. The other people at the end of the row, I soon discovered, were trying very hard and failing miserably.
I thought of my best friend from the Forney trumpet section, Last Chair Brant. More than anything, I wished he was at the end of the row with me. He would make jokes, and sing Alanis Morrisett. He wasn’t there. Instead, there were Drew and Gabe. Two of, possibly, the nerdiest boys I had ever met. Both of them were exceedingly terrible trumpet players, and they were constantly bickering about who was worse and other stupid things. I sat quietly, and tried not to interrupt. Sometimes, they tried to make eye contact, but I didn’t.

Two months after I moved back to Wills Point, I was still sitting last chair, and Gabe and Drew still hadn’t said anything to me. Then, one day, “You know how they say your whole life flashes before your eyes when you die?”

“What?” I look up from my seat in the band room to see Gabe, the gawky kid with glasses, staring at me.

“You know how they say your whole life flashes before your eyes when you die?”

“Yes, but what?”

“Well, if you were dying, what do you think you’d see?”

“I don’t know.”

“No really, I have to give you a test to decide if you’re cool enough to hang out with me. I’m thinking you pass, but I just don’t know. I mean, you don’t even know what would pass before your eyes when you die.”

“Well, how am I going to die?”

“Drowning.”

“I would never drown. I’m an excellent swimmer,” I said too earnestly for the ludicrous situation.

“Heart attack.”
“Well, then I’d think, ouch, that hurts. Is my left arm going numb or is that just me?”

“No, but what parts of your life would you see in the instant of death. Nothing hurts anymore, but you’re not quite dead yet. There’s still a little piece of consciousness there. What do you see?”

“Nothing. I haven’t done anything yet. What is there to see?”

Undeterred by my utter lack of creativity, he said, “What’s your favorite color?”

“You just went from the moment of my death to my favorite color?”

“Yeah, what is it?”

“Green.”

“What’s your favorite band?”

“The Beatles.”

“What’s your favorite band that has all living members and are still together?”

“Bush.”

“What’s your favorite song?”

“‘Dock of the Bay.’”

“Otis Reding, good choice.”

In the front of the room, Mr. Williams gave up his fruitless teaching efforts and released us to the world. As we wandered outside to return to the main campus, Gabe said, “You’re pretty much the coolest girl I’ve ever met. We’re best friends. Later.”

After that, Gabe and Drew talked to me everyday. Everyone loved Gabe and everyone knew Drew, so I got accepted. I blended. Sometimes, I even managed to feel a little happy, or a little normal. Whatever that was worth, but mostly, I was content not to worry about where to sit at lunch. Life, as they say, will go on, and so it did.
When I finally grew up, the scales fell from my eyes. I began to see things the way they truly were. At first, it was very painful. I didn’t want to see the things the world had to show me. I didn’t like the stories I was being told, and that I was being made to tell. I remembered what Papaw said about making these things beautiful, and I tried. It all seemed impossible. Everywhere I turned, there was something ugly, cruel, or sad.

I tried to keep my eyes closed. If I was blind, I could never see these new, grown up stories. I didn’t have to believe what I couldn’t see. Then, I realized that not seeing the world didn’t make it stop existing. Not seeing the world, made me stop existing, and I opened my eyes again.

“I am not a troll,” I told my brother. He was old enough to understand these sorts of things now. He wasn’t quite an adult, but he would be soon. I didn’t want him to think I was a liar.

“I’ve always known you weren’t a troll. Trolls are bad and ugly and mean. Trolls kill people. You’re not like that.”

“That’s not true. Some trolls are probably very kind, but I’m still not one. I don’t think there are any of them left. I don’t think the world needs them anymore.”

“Why not?”

“Because the world grew up and the scales fell off its eyes. The world saw things the way they truly are, and it doesn’t need trolls to tell it anymore.”

“How are things?”

“You’ll know when you grow up. The scales will fall off your eyes and you’ll see it too. At first things seem too ugly to stand, but you have to make them beautiful again.”
“How do I do that?”

“How do I do that?”

“By loving it, and loving the people who love you. And you have to love the people who don’t love you.”

“This all sounds crazy. Maybe you are a troll.” My brother took my hand. We were both staring at something far away, but we were staring together. I wondered what he was thinking. I was thinking that I didn’t really know how to make the world beautiful with the scales gone. I was lying again, but the answer seemed right. Even if I wasn’t a troll, maybe I could still fix people’s hearts. More than anything, I wanted that one thing to be true, even if it meant that everything else had to be a kind of lie.
Epilogue: Dust to Dust

I made my way to the tree where my story telling began. I hadn’t been there in many years, and as I crawled under the thin strip of barbed wire the neighbors had attached across the gate, I cried out. The globe of branches was gone. My troll world had been destroyed. I stood by the tree with half of the trunk running parallel to the ground, and there were no branches or twigs in my hair. No dappled light. There were muddy ruts dug into the ground by truck tires, and a few freshly chopped blocks of wood that used to be my hiding place.

I collapsed to the tree, notebook in hand, and looked into the hollow to see if any of my treasures remained. There was a recorder, a pencil, and the swiss army knife I stole from Jesse. Staring at the ground, I wanted to become part of this detritus too. Tearing bits of myself off day by day. Leaving them here with my tree where I would be safe.

Though it seemed nothing about my home remained, I began to think that some change would be nice. I opened the notebook to the place I had been writing the night before. I had finally come to the end of my story, and the story of those who had come before. Today, the beginning and the end would meet, at my end.

The years came and went. The days turned to nights and the nights to days. Until, under the midnight sun that was shining far away in Norway, the same time that I entered the world, I would leave it all behind. Placed in a simple casket with my pillow. The thing in life that brought me comfort and safety in my darkest times would follow me into these last pieces of darkness.

There, beneath the cold dirt, in a coffin made from the wood of trees that once belonged to Betula and Picea, their children, things began to change. Together, we
dissolved into the ground. We became food for the bugs and the worms. First the coffin disintegrated. Then, the cloth and my skin. As the years and years passed, my bones and the cotton, inside my pillow, began to crumble. Until, all that remained was a silver ring.

Refola and Milona waited. I stayed to protect them, until the last of the ring had broken down to its elements, and the two souls trapped inside were free. The three of us would become a part of everything again. As our earthly form returned to the world to make things grow, so too would our spirits.

With Refola no longer trapped, Norway would be at peace once more. Upon the North wind, Refola’s spirit would fly across the miles and miles until she reached her homeland. From that day forward, Refola’s spirit would reunite the men of the coast with the men of the North because even the children of gods should be willing to sacrifice for the sake of life, or so Refola had come to believe after so many years. Death can only bring life again. They would, once again, live as one people. The trolls would finally be released. They could all come out from beneath their bridges, and be a part of the world.

Tiny Milona, who never grew old, understood for the first time that, even if she had not intervened for Refola, they still would have become part of the same circle. The ring that bound them represented the circle that binds us all. As my Aunt Dee Dee would have said, “Circle of life, Sweety.”

Though I no longer lived in the world or the home that I had understood, I would be happy because I had discovered that loving the things that are ugly and the people who are cruel was the way to make the world beautiful again. I found a way to fix broken hearts, or at least, my own.

We would all live happily ever after.