

# The Ivory Tower

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Yes, yes, that's it. Gather 'round. You want a story from old Mira, eh? That's fine, fine. I have plenty of tales rattling around in this old head of mine. There may be snow on the roof, but the furnace is still hot, if you get my meaning. How old are all of you, anyway? You there, Ti'en, you come of age this planting season, don't you? I thought so. And you're the youngest. Don't you think you're all too old to be crowding around a Teller? No? Well, then, I suppose I shall have to tell you a more grown up tale, one that you have probably never heard before, for you haven't been in the world long enough to understand how rich it is, or how much you've missed out on by living such safe lives.

Now, now, don't fret. You've got plenty of time to live out your own adventures. Sit on the floor, get comfortable, and keep quiet, for today old Mira is going to tell you a story of the old days and of the lands to the north. A tale of a young woman whose wandering feet led her to a discovery so wonderful that it reshaped her life, and could reshape yours if you let it. I will tell you of Karina.

You may have heard of the Windsong Valley and of the forbidden White City. But what you will not have heard, for I am only now telling you and have told few listeners before, is just why those who judge themselves your betters warn you against the City, against seeing the impossibly tall Ivory Tower.

The Windsong Valley is a beautiful place. The trees are so tall they seem to hold up the sky, and flowers of many colors bloom all year long. It is a place of deep magic, surrounded by high mountains thick with ice and snow, yet the touch of winter is never felt by those who dwell there. Sometimes it rains, but always gently, and each day the sun rises like molten gold into the cerulean sky to chase away the dew that dapples the land with sweet moist kisses.

Karina lived at the edge of her village, the only village in the Valley. Her people had come over the mountains from the west seeking to escape the threat of war that loomed in the Far Kingdoms, what we call Westron today. They were a simple people, farming the land they found already cleared instead of trying to cut away the forest. Their houses were made of mortared stone taken from the slopes of the mountains, with roofs of thatch. They maintained a narrow road over the mountain, so that they could trade with their old neighbors, which they seldom did. Those who settled the village were the only ones for a very long time who came over the mountain and stayed.

Eventually, of course, the villagers had children. And such beautiful children they were! Fair of hair and strong, they were born with the magic of the valley singing in their veins. Yet they were less than they could have been, for the villagers had brought with them the fear of unseen things, the suspicion that there was a price to pay for all which came easily. They loved the valley, but they feared it, too, and they passed this fear to their children.

Karina, though, was different. She was considered by most to be the most lovely young woman in the village. Many a man was drawn to her honey-colored hair and her amber-tinted skin, or were dazzled by the sparkle deep within her emerald green eyes. Yet she turned away all suitors, preferring instead the solitude of the forest in which she loved to roam. She even built her house against the solid rock of the mountain's foot just inside the first stretch of the wood beneath the spreading arms of a chestnut tree. A stream of cold water cascaded from the heights and flowed swiftly past her doorway. She still went to the village often enough to trade for supplies.

She kept the sheep in a pen next to her house, feeding them from the bounty she gathered from the forest. On that diet, the sheep produced fleece like no other. Visitors could find Karina at her spinning wheel, singing gentle spells as she turned the fleece into fine thread that was light as a cloud yet as strong as thick rope.

More often than not, she would not be found at all, for she spent much of her time exploring the forest, despite the warnings from those who thought they knew better. People said she was a fool to venture into the trackless wild of the north wood, but it was the calling of her heart that led her thus. And so each time she went forth, she pushed farther and farther, ever northward, ever seeking the source of the music in her soul.

“Why should I be afraid?” she said to others. “There is no evil in this place. No wolves howl at our doors. No elves plague us they did people over the mountains. I will not fear that which I can only imagine.”

So she continued to explore, content in her belief that the only thing haunting the forest was the ignorant fear of her elders. Then, one day as she walked down a moss covered path far from her home, she encountered something that challenged her fearlessness. At first, she wasn't sure what she was seeing, for though it was man-shaped it was impossibly tall. *Giant* was the word that sprang to mind.

Standing in the shadows, half-hidden by leaf and limb, the giant was nearly as tall as the trees surrounding him. Karina could only stare, frozen between footsteps as the cold touch of fear crept up her spine. There were many tales of giants, and all of them involved some person or another being eaten. The giant's legs were longer than Karina was tall, so she knew she could never outrun him. He seemed to be taking no notice of her, which she was thankful for, yet it also made her bolder. Perhaps, she reasoned, I am too small for him to see.

She realized right away, of course, that it was silly to think so. There was no reason to believe the giant could not see her, just as we can see ants upon the ground. There had to be a better explanation why the giant was just standing there, doing nothing. Without thinking, Karina took a step forward, hoping to get a better view. A twig snapped loudly beneath her foot. Karina became rooted to the spot, knowing for certain the giant had heard it and would then turn on her, rush forward, and do something horrible to her.

But still the giant did not move. Feeling braver, Karina took another step. She could see then that the giant was all of one color, a grayish bronze, his skin, his hair, and clothes. It was so strange that she felt she had to get an even closer look. Slowly, she crept forward until the sunlight filtering through the green canopy dazzled her eyes for a moment. When she looked up again, she was shocked to find herself out in the open. The giant remained motionless, his position unchanged. He had one hand on his hip, she could see, and the other hand was upraised, pointing into the forest.

Karina sighed with relief. It was only a statue, she realized. But what was a statue doing in a forest that no one had supposedly ever visited before? “Hello!” she called out, laughing. “You gave me quite a fright. How did you get here, anyway?”

The statue did not answer. Karina looked around, seeing nothing that might provide an explanation. The statue itself was strange, but only a little. It was a man, she could tell, or thought she could. The clothing was baggy, a style unfamiliar to Karina, and the figure had long hair reaching in twin braids to the waist. She touched the smooth stone and drew back her hand in surprise, for it was very warm.

“Stone should be cool,” she admonished. “Are you really a statue, I wonder? Or a real giant frozen by some spell?” The statue wasn’t telling. Karina found a fallen branch and swung it against the giant’s leg. The wood splintered, leaving no mark on the stone. It was not the way to break a spell, if there was one, but it gave her some satisfaction. She touched the warm surface again and studied the details of the figure more closely as she slowly circled it. She had to step over the thick roots and brambles hemming in the giant, but just below the statue’s feet the ground was clear of any plant. Using the stub of her broken stick, Karina dug into the room beneath a layer of dry leaves, and discovered a square of white stone going down into the earth a little ways. Judging by the thickness of the covering, the statue had been there a very long time.

Coming around to the front, Karina was able to see the pointing hand. Then she looked into the forest where it pointed. She parted the foliage ahead of her and gasped, for stretching away from the base of the statue was a road. That was all it could be. It was like a river of dark red bricks fitted neatly together, with grass growing in some of the cracks. The trees along the sides formed an arch overhead so that Karina felt she was looking down the length of a very long cathedral. Gingerly, she stepped from the statue’s perch onto the even surface of the road.

She had seen paved roads before, when her mother had taken her as a child over the mountain once to visit and trade. None were like this. The roads of the village followed the curve of the land, and to some degree did the roads of the Far Kingdom. But the road of the forest was flat, as though the builders had taken great pains to alter the land to fit the road. And there was another mystery puzzling her. How was it that the road was not buried as the base of the statue was? She could see a few leaves on the surface here and there, but no fallen branches, no drift, no overgrowth of bracken. There was definitely magic at work here, some powerful ancient spell that worked to keep the road passably clear.

More curious still, she wondered where the road led to. “All roads go somewhere,” she mused aloud. “If it ends here at the statue, then where does it begin?”

The sun was well past its peak by then. Karina had only brought with her what she needed for a day’s worth of exploration, not enough to keep going past nightfall or to spend the night within the forest. It was with great reluctance that she turned away from the road, whispering a promise to return, and headed back to her home. She had no doubt she could return to that spot. Karina had a very good sense of direction. Besides, even when she was again inside her home, she still felt the statue’s warmth on her hand, felt it pulling at her, tugging her spirit.

She was so excited she barely slept that night. The next morning, before the sun had risen high enough to creep through her window and paint the walls with light, Karina had shouldered her carefully prepared pack and was on her way deep into the forest. By mid-morning she had reached the statue, having traveled directly to it instead of going the roundabout way she had come before.

The road led Karina north through several twists and turns. It was still flat and level, but the builders had chosen to go around small rain gullies and outcrops of rock, though Karina was sure they could have kept the road straight had they wished. The effect was charming, because around each new bend there was always something interesting to see. At some points the forest opened up into meadows filled with tall, fragrant flowers. The road skirted the edges of these glens, perhaps because the builders understood what a shame it would have been to impose any order upon such wild beauty.

It was nearing noon when Karina came upon a bench beside the road. At least, it was once a bench, long ago, but the wood had long since rotted away leaving only a rusty iron frame. It was a relief to see that, for it meant she was unlikely to meet a traveler coming from the north. The road had not been used in a very long time.

A bit farther down there was another bench, then another. Shortly, the road became wider until it spread out to form a huge plaza open to the sky above. The other side looked very far away, as did the edges to left and right. She wondered, for a moment, if

she had come to the end of her journey. The area covered by the dark bricks was larger than her entire village, but it was empty. No houses, no temples, no monuments or markers. There was only the bricks, and what purpose it served was a mystery to Karina.

Beyond the plaza, Karina found the road continued. An hour passed since leaving the plaza, and Karina began to hear what sounded like a waterfall. The noise grew louder and louder until she rounded another bend and came upon a huge fountain. The road split there and went around on both sides. Karina stopped where she was and stared in wonder. The bottom of the fountain was a huge basin, and the fountain rose as high as the giant statue away behind her. Water sprayed from the top high into the sky before crashing down, cascading over ledges and higher pools, eventually thundering into the basin at the bottom. The air was filled with misty wetness. There were many statues standing beneath the spray, their features worn down by the passage of time and much water, but Karina could still make out the forms of men and women, children and animals, all posed as though playing beneath the torrent.

Something had happened to the fountain on the left side. The top of the basin was broken there. The water spilled out in a torrent, flooding that part of the road before rushing away into the forest. Karina made her way around on the right, stepping carefully over the spray-moistened brickwork, marveling at what skill it must have taken to build such a hauntingly lovely waterwork. She really didn't want to leave it, but the road beckoned her with the promise of even greater wonders to come.

The sound of the fountain's thunder faded behind her as she pushed on down the road, her feet making barely any sound on the bricks. Before long she came to a low wall of the same brick enclosing an area almost as large as the plaza, only this space was filled with growing things on either side of the road. It had been a long time since this garden was tended, and many of the plants were strange to Karina. Here and there, she saw more of the statues made in the likeness of men and women, all dressed like the giant at the head of the road, and with the same double-braid hairstyle. These, however, were more normal sized, barely taller than Karina.

She could not see the sun, it having dropped so low that it was then behind the trees. The sky overhead was fading into dark blue. Soon the first stars would be coming out, and Karina decided the garden was as good a spot as any to make camp. One of the statues had toppled over near the roadside and lay with its face buried in the soft soil. Karina removed her pack and sat down next to it, resting her back against the stone.

Having walked all day, and having had too little sleep the night before, Karina found herself yawning as she ate a supper of nuts and fruit. She had not brought along anything which needed cooking, and the night promised to be warm, so she decided to forego a fire. She took from her pack a small lantern and sang into it. Inside were dozens of tiny glowbugs, gathered from the meadow near the village as her mother had taught her. The gentle spell she cast enticed the glowbugs to do what they did best, and do it well, so that

very shortly the lantern was shining brightly. Karina set it on the ground next to her unrolled blankets and snuggled in to sleep.

She awoke the next morning feeling wonderful, with no ache in her limbs at all. In fact, she felt positively bursting with energy. To her surprise, her lantern was still glowing. The glowbugs inside should have dimmed after only an hour, yet there they were as bright as ever.

“Well, little fellows,” she said to them. “I suppose this garden is more than it appears. I don’t know what kind of magic this is, but I’m thankful for it.” She ate breakfast as she refilled her pack and was soon on her way again.

The road beyond the garden went on straight for several miles before reaching another bend. The forest was different here. The hardwoods were gone, replaced by rows of tall pines whose trunks rose limbless to great heights before bursting into thick shanks of green boughs. The floor was a blanket of brown needles with very little undergrowth. Karina could see far into the distance between the trees, but there was nothing to see. The road just went on and on, and she was beginning to wonder if it even had an end when she rounded the bend and found herself facing a high wall.

There, there road split again, as it had at the fountain, following the wall to left and right. The wall was made of white stone blocks fitted together so well that Karina could barely see the seams between them. It was smooth to the touch and cold despite the warmth of the sun above. She decided to go to the left and began following the wall to the west. The road curved gently, staying close to the wall. She had no idea what could be inside or how big the wall might be. It could well end up that the wall was an unbroken circle, the road leading her back to where she had started.

It didn’t happen that way, though. She guessed she had come halfway around the enormous circle of the wall when she arrived at what must once have been the only gate. There was a wide gap in the wall, and inside she saw a city. The red bricks of the road did not go inside. The city streets were paved with white tiles, and all the buildings were made of the same white stone as the walls. Down the length of every avenue grew slender trees in tiny plots of black soil with leaves and boles ivory in color.

The buildings all appeared stout, although plain and without adornment. The street from the gate led into the heart of the city, crossing other streets set like rings within rings. And at the very center, rising like a spear towards heaven, was a tower. All the buildings were angled so that either their face or their backs were aligned with the tower. The city looked very clean, very orderly, and completely empty of people.

The tower rose majestically above everything. It looked as though it weren’t really part of the city, for it was ivory in color rather than white, but Karina felt her skin tingle as she looked at it. The very air seemed alive with the feel of magic, and the tower was the

source. Each way Karina turned her body, she could feel the tingle of magical energy subside, but when she faced the tower it was like turning her face to an invisible sun, a vibration rang through her body. She felt drawn to the tower. She imagined she could hear a whispery voice in her soul telling her to come closer, closer. Tentatively, she stepped past the gate's threshold into the city.

She felt right away that something was wrong. A moment before, a cool breeze had been rustling through the trees. She had heard birdsong, had smelled the heady aroma of the pines. Within the city walls, all was silent. The air was still and moved aside sluggishly as she walked, as though resisting her passage. All around her was the scent of woodsmoke, though the air was clear. It stung her eyes and throat, making her think twice about continuing on. But the tower continued to beckon to her, and she did not turn aside.

She passed into the first circle of buildings. She guessed it was a house, but not like those she was used to. It was larger than any two houses back in her village, with very tall sides and a flat roof. The house next to it was identical, as were all the others along the length of the outer circle. It had a doorless entrance and a row of narrow windows along the front. One of the white trees was growing in front of it as well as beside it, boxing it in with woody growth. She had a thought to maybe look inside of one, to see if anything remained to tell her about the people who once lived here, but as she moved toward the nearest house something stirred inside. She saw the shadows within moving, and then a tiny form stepped into the daylight.

Karina froze and choked back a gasp. Although she had never seen one before, there could be no mistaking what it was. "Goblin!" she said in a hiss of released breath.

The creature was no higher than her knee, skeletal thin with an enormous head. Its skin was a pale green where it was exposed, being clothed in some type of white uniform, like a tiny soldier or servant. Large black eyes stared at her from beneath bushy yellow eyebrows. Its nose was very long, narrow and pointed, curving out from its face like a crescent moon, and its ears were wide flaps of sky wiggling on the side of its head like sheets in a wind. When it opened its lipless mouth, Karina saw double rows of small, sharp teeth. The goblin's feet looked the same as its hands, like a monkey, and it took a tottering step toward Karina with an odd swagger, hissing at her.

"Hello," Karina said cautiously, raising her hand in greeting. She was very afraid, for she had never heard anything good said about goblins. Then too, she had never expected to encounter one so far from home, where there was no one whom she could call to for help. The goblin stopped moving at the sound of her voice. Its eyes grew larger as it stared at her with an icy gaze.

"Hey low," it answered in a shrill voice, mocking her.

Karina clapped her hands, delighted. “You talk!” she exclaimed. “How wonderful!” The goblin didn’t seem to agree. It was startled when Karina clapped, taking a half-step backward. When she tried to speak again, the goblin snarled and rushed at her. Karina did the only thing she could think of.

She ran.

The goblin was fast for something so small. She glanced over her shoulder as she fled. It was closing to gap between them quickly, then it suddenly stopped. Karina slowed when she realized the brief pursuit was over, then turned. The goblin had halted at the edge of the next cross street, the next ring in the city layout. It hopped up and down, spitting and hissing, but came no closer.

“So,” Karina said aloud, her heart pounding. The sound of her voice seemed to drive the goblin mad. “I guess you must be a servant after all.” She imagined it might also be some kind of bizarre pet, one that was prevented by magic from wandering too far from home. That was very lucky for her, she realized.

“I had hoped we could talk,” she said to it kindly. “Go home, little goblin. I won’t bother you again.” The goblin stopped its maddened fidgeting. It stared at Karina for a moment before rearing back and thrusting out its chest. It screamed at the sky, a sound so shrill and loud that Karina’s ears rung for a while afterward. She could not tell what it was saying, something in its nasty goblin language that sounded harsh and altogether unkind. Answering calls rose up from other parts of the city, and suddenly goblins began appearing in all the doorways along the ring Karina was in.

The goblins of the first circle ran to their screaming companion. The ones of the circle Karina was inside of were dressed in light blue uniforms and stood blinking in the bright light of day, not yet roused to the same level of frenzy that had seized the white-clad goblins. Karina backed away as a crowd of the goblins gathering at the border of the circle jumped about and shouted at her, crawling over each other in their excitement and rage.

She turned away from them, not willing to trust whatever magic it was that held the angry gang of goblins at bay to last. She nearly fell over another goblin, one who had emerged from a nearby house on the second street. This one had yellow skin with green eyebrows, but otherwise it looked just the same as the others. More of the yellow goblins were already appearing in the doorways of all the buildings she could see. They looked at her with frank curiosity, no sign of the rage that consumed the first set of goblins.

She wondered what the different colors meant, and whether all the buildings had their own goblins. She forced a smile as she pointed back at the raving crowd behind her. “I’m sure glad you aren’t like those guys,” she said.

The effect was instant. The goblin's face twisted into a mask of rage, and it began huffing and puffing, a growl building deep in its throat. Karina did not wait to see more. She could hear the patter of tiny feet running behind her as she fled toward the next cross street, hoping the same magic would stop the yellow goblins. She didn't pause to see, but kept running toward the ivory tower. She only stopped when she was out of breath. The yellow goblins had indeed stopped at the limit of their own circle. She could see them when she looked back, dozens of the small creatures clamoring and yelling at her.

She leaned against one of the buildings, panting. "What in the world is going on?" she gasped aloud, then clamped a hand over her mouth. It was too late, of course. She heard growls coming from within the closest doorways. For some reason, it was the sound of her voice that made the goblins crazy, and the effect increased with suddenness and intensity the closer she got to the tower. Perhaps, she reasoned, as she ran away again, it was why there were no more people in the city. They got tired of having to be quiet all the time.

"They should have gotten rid of you stupid goblins!" she screamed, then had to run again. Finally, she had reached the last circle. The ivory tower loomed over her head, as high as the clouds. Karina sat down in its shadow and lowered her pack to the pavement.

"I wish I'd never come to this stupid city," she said, covering her face with her hands and beginning to weep. A high pitched growl floated to her ears, and she looked up in sudden alarm. The innermost circle of the city had no houses or buildings on it, so she didn't see goblins advancing on her as she had feared. Instead, the street enclosing the tower was lined with pillars, slender columns of stone just taller than Karina. On top of each was a statue, or what used to be a statue, for each was broken or in some way damaged. It was the only part of the city Karina had seen which was not perfect. Except for the goblins, of course.

The growl continued without pause for breath, drifting over the air without source. Karina could see hundreds of the goblins now, all the colors of the rainbow lined up on the borders of each street along the path she had taken from the gate. They were no longer screaming at her or jumping about, but they continued to stare at her, the intruder. She was trapped, with no way back, unless the goblins tired and went back into their houses.

It occurred to her that maybe the city was theirs, that humans had never lived here. It didn't explain why all the statues outside the city were of people, and she imagined that the goblins, after driving away the city's real inhabitants, had been the ones to destroy the statues encircling the tower. But if they could get to the statues, why couldn't they get to her?

The growl she had been hearing deepened into a rumble, like the sound of stone grating over stone. From her left, Karina saw a great white block come into view, sliding over

the tiles toward her. Another block appeared from the right, boxing her in. Panic seized her, for she could see that it was a trap of some sorts. If she stayed where she was, the blocks would close on her and crush her. Yet where else could she go? Beyond the line of pillars, the street was empty, but beyond that was a line of blue clad goblins staring at her silently. She didn't know what to do.

The ranks of the blue goblins swelled suddenly, drawing her attention. Goblins in red had joined them. Then, behind the reds, she saw yellows and greens. The barriers holding back the goblins were coming down, and the creatures were coming for her. Now, true panic seized her. She snatched up her pack and ran forward to the street, looking to left and right with desperation. The goblins began to scream at her again, seeing her come close to them. The street led away with the promise of escape, but she knew it was an illusion. She could run around and around the circle, maybe staying ahead of the goblins, maybe not, but sooner or later she would be able to run no more. It was not escape, just another trap.

The screams of the goblins drowned out the grating of the stone and crowded thought from her head. She backed away from it, trying to cover her ears, sobbing buried beneath the din of the bloodthirsty cries of the little monsters. The last magical barrier gave way, and the crowd surged forward. Karina screamed and stumbled backward, flinging an arm across her face to shield her eyes from the horror she saw coming down on her. Her feet tangled together and she fell back, sprawling.

Karina curled into a ball, pulling her arms and legs in as though she could escape into herself, and she waited for the touch of goblin claws on her skin. It took a moment for her to realize that she no longer heard their shrill screams. All around her was silent. She waited, not daring to move or open her eyes, afraid of what she would see looming over her. At last, though, the pressure to know became greater than her fear, and she pried one eyelid up slowly.

The sun had vanished, taking its light with it. The dark gray of a stone wall rose up in front of her, where the hordes of goblins should have been. Hardly daring to believe she had escaped, Karina opened her other eye and slowly sat up. The wall curved gently, forming a circle all around her. The city could not be seen. She followed the wall upward, but there was no top. It rose endlessly upward, disappearing into a great height.

She realized, with a start, that she was inside the tower. "That's impossible," she said aloud, feeling the need to hear her own voice in spite of the trouble it had caused her so far that day. "There was no door. How could I have come through?" She touched the wall, expecting to find it was an illusion, and that her hand would pass through it like air. It was solid and warm, like the stone of the first statue she had encountered far away in the forest closer to home.

Home seemed like a distant dream to her then. Her longing for adventure had been nearly used up. Had it been only two days since she had first encountered that giant in the trees? She leaned against the wall, letting its heat soak into her, wishing with all her might that she could just turn around and find herself again in her little house by the stream. Could she only get out of this tower, get past the goblins and out of this city, she felt she might never go into the forest again.

Presently, she found that she had dozed off sitting beside the wall. She had not thought she would be able to sleep, not after having just narrowly escaped what might have been a horrible fate, but her body had run out of strength to resist. She pushed herself to her feet rubbing her eyes. The darkness had grown less. There was a light coming from somewhere high overhead, she could see it like a single star in a midnight sky directly above her. The walls of the tower took in the light and gave back a soft glow.

Being able to see more clearly helped to calm Karina, and she felt the last of her terror drain away. There was no sense worrying over what she could not change. She was safe from the goblins, at least, for if they could get into the tower as she had then they would have gotten her already. The walls were solid enough now, assuming she had somehow fallen right through the stone. She would have to find another way out.

She dug into her pack and brought out her lantern. “One more time, fellows,” she whispered to the sluggishly moving glowbugs inside. The spell leaped readily to her lips, sliding off her tongue smoothly. Magic had always come easy to her, but this time it was as if it took no effort at all to entice the bugs into a brilliant light again. Shouldering her pack, she put her left hand on the wall and began to walk.

It turned out to be just the right thing to do. In the dim light, she had no way of judging how far around the curve of the tower walls she had gone before she encountered the stairs. They were no more than flat risers jutting out from the wall with no other support, climbing up the wall in a spiral. They were the same color as the wall, so they were very hard to see if she wasn’t right beside them. That meant they might not go up very far, but it was better than just sitting in the dark waiting for what she could not guess.

“Well,” she said, risking her voice, “here I go.” She lifted her foot and placed it on the first stair. Slowly, she shifted her weight, testing the strength of the step, until she left the floor and began to climb. The stairs were sturdy, not moving in the slightest, which helped to boost Karina’s confidence in what she was doing. At least until she looked down. The floor of the tower was lost in shadow, so to her it looked as if she stood at the brink of a bottomless pit. She tore her gaze away from the sight with a shudder and made herself keep climbing.

She didn’t climb long, however, before she felt a need to rest. She sat on stairs since there was no other place to sit and opened her pack. It made her a little nervous. Anything she dropped would be gone forever, because she had no desire to retrace her

path down the stairs to retrieve it. She ate sparingly and took only a few sips of her water. Her food might have to last her a long time.

It was the first time she actually thought about what she was doing. Just how tall was the tower, anyway? It had seemed to stretch upward to the very stars when she had stood at the base. She couldn't even guess what she should expect should she ever reach the top.

She climbed again for a few more hours, measured by the number of times she had to stop and rekindle her lantern. The third time her lantern began to fade, she allowed it to extinguish completely. The glowbugs were her only light, and she could not afford to overtire them. Sleeping on the stairs was going to be dangerous. Luckily, she was not the type to roll around in bed, so she hoped she would not awake in the middle of a long fall to the bottom of the tower.

Sleep came quickly. Without sun or clock, there was no way for her to tell how long she had slept, but she awoke feeling refreshed. There was a certain amount of satisfaction in being freed from the schedule of the daylight. She climbed the stairs until she felt like stopping, ate sparingly of her food, and slept when she was tired. When she woke from her fifth sleep, she discovered that her food was almost gone. She made a feast of it, draining the last of her water as well.

"No sense trying to stretch this little bit," she told herself. The pack was lighter, at least. She decided to give the glowbugs a rest as well. It was easy to climb the stairs in the near darkness. She kept one hand on the wall, guiding herself around the curve of the tower. She stumbled only a few times. The walls continued to glow softly, but the stairs reflected no light at all. It was almost as if she was climbing through a dark cloud into the heights of the sky.

It was when she stopped to rest that she realized the light was growing brighter. Her eyes had adjusted to the dimness somewhat, but it wasn't that. She was certain the light was brighter. "At least I can tell I'm getting higher," she said. Her voice fell without echo into the well of darkness at her feet. She continued to glance up at the light as she ascended. It was definitely getting brighter.

The texture of the wall changed suddenly. It roughened, as though the builders had not had time to finish this section. It worsened as she got closer to the light. She couldn't be sure, but it seemed to her that the tower was beginning to narrow.

"Maybe I'm near the top," she said in a whisper. A whisper was all she could manage with her dry throat. Her stomach growled angrily at her, but there was nothing she could do for it. She was tired, so tired, exhausted by the climb and the lack of food and the irregular sleep. The abyss yawned below her feet, and it was so tempting to surrender herself to it. "How peaceful it looks," she said. "How cool and wonderful it might be."

She shook her head. “Not yet,” she muttered, and continued to climb.

The end of the stairs came unexpectedly. She nearly did fall, then, stretching her foot out into the empty air. Gasping, she pulled herself back and sat heavily. The light was very close now, like a swirling mist above her head so close she felt she could almost reach up and touch it. The walls were glowing strongly. The steps were still just as dark, maybe even darker. She could see nothing above the swirling mist of light. It seemed as though she had reached the end of her climb, and all her effort had been a waste of time.

She was too tired to feel bad for herself. As light as the pack was, it still felt heavy to her as she let it slip from her shoulders. It nearly dropped off the steps, and it was only luck that she was able to catch it in time. She laughed as she leaned back against the rough wall. “What’s the use?” she said. For a moment, despair overcame her. She lay down on the steps, cradled her head on her arms, and drifted into sleep.

She dreamed of her home lower in the valley, of the icy stream that fell from the mountains to her feet. She dreamed of the fields of wheat and the orchards of the village she loved so much. People came and went through the curtains of her mind, most of whom she knew very well, and some not so well, for it was not a very large village and everyone knew everyone else at least a little. It seemed as though the chilly winds that blew down from the mountains now twirled around her soul, like a cleansing wash that lifted away her weariness and her despair. She drifted from dreaming to wakefulness seamlessly.

At first, she thought she was still dreaming. The glowing mist had descended to her and now swirled around her. Tendrils of light streamed slowly by, like tiny rivers through an airy landscape. Karina stared around in wonder. The darkness had been banished. Below her, the mist filled the well of the tower, and above her she could then see that she had indeed almost reached the very top of the tower. There was a flat ceiling not far away.

Karina waved her hand through the mist and laughed as it scattered briefly. Like a living thing, it gathered its parts together in clusters and began to stretch out into new tendrils. It was all around her, brushing against her skin and clothes without sensation, but she could still breathe. It did not seem to enter her at all, and yet she felt the mist imparting energy to her, nourishing her. It felt divine.

On impulse, she drew her lantern from her pack. As she began to sing the lighting spell, she felt thirst fade away. Her voice grew stronger. The glowbugs responded immediately, brightening into brilliant incandescence. The mist responded to her song, as well. The tendrils entwined about each other as though dancing, spinning to the rhythm of the magic Karina wove. She pulled the top off the lantern and held it out to the air. Tentatively at first, the glowbugs emerged, the humming of their tiny wings barely discernable, yet clearly audible in the profound silence of the tower. They rose above the

lantern in a cloud before filtering away, darting into the mists like miniature comets. The air of the tower became as an evening sky, shot through with the last glow of sunset as the bright sparks of stars shown through a hazy sky.

Karina laughed at the beauty of it. "I guess the trip was worth it after all," she said. She leaned against the wall, which no longer seemed so rough as it had before. She looked back at the way she had come, at the spiraling staircase that wound its way around the curve of the tower wall down into the depths of the mist. Was there really any reason to go back down? She thought not. Yet she couldn't go higher, either.

She glanced upward, to where the last gray step jutted from the glowing wall. She stood erect quickly, excited. The mist swirled all through the air, propelled by a ghostly wind that Karina could not feel, and it swirled around the forms of steps rising higher, leading right to the ceiling. She was certain they had not been there before, or at the very least had not been visible. It was the mist that revealed them to her now. With a deep sigh, Karina hoisted her pack and began to climb again.

The new steps felt spongy under her tread, as if they were not wholly real. As long as they continued to support her weight, Karina did not care if it was stair or dream that she moved over, so long as she could move. She reached the ceiling after completing a half circle of the tower's diameter. It was incredibly smooth to the touch. Karina's fingers slid over it and made her doubt that she had touched it at all.

There were markings on the wall here, as well. Strange writing that Karina could not read. She couldn't even hazard a guess. Her slender fingers traced the lines of the words, sensing a great power hidden inside the ink, inside the wall, inside the very air she breathed. Like a curtain, the wall rippled then pulled back, hard stone temporarily becoming as pliant as a sheet of cotton. There was nothing to keep her inside the tower's center any longer. So, taking a deep breath and forcing her hands to relax, Karina stepped through the doorway.

Right away, she had to turn sharply to the left. She found herself in a narrow passageway that curved to follow the contour of the tower. The light faded behind her. Darkness closed in around her like a smothering blanket. She reached out with both hands to touch the walls, expecting any moment to step into some great abyss and fall forever. As exhausted as she was, any ending would be welcome. The walls were as smooth as polished glass, a sharp contrast to the rough walls inside the tower well. The passage began to narrow a short distance from the entrance, making Karina to stoop more and more as she pressed ahead.

Just when she thought she would be forced to crawl, her feet encountered a barrier in the darkness. Feeling with her toes, Karina discovered another staircase, solid this time with no danger of a fall, unless it was backwards as she climbed. Sighing heavily, she lifted her tired legs and started her ascent.

Gradually, she began to see a light ahead of her. It grew swiftly, becoming bright enough to make her squint her eyes. She had become accustomed to the dimness of the interior, and the light of the full moon, for that was what that silvery light must be, seemed more like the light of day. The passage opened up overhead revealing a starry sky, and she emerged onto a wide, flat area aglow with light. She stood blinking for a few moments, trying to get used to the feeling of no longer being confined by the tower. A cool breeze stirred her hair, making her shiver.

She hadn't realized until then how strange she had felt inside the tower. It was as if the outside world had ceased to exist, and she was very glad to discover it had not. The top of the tower was not what she had expected. It was very flat with no adornment, nothing really worth climbing so high to see. When she had emerged from the stairs, she was facing the edge of the roof. She shuffled toward it, afraid to get too close lest some errant wind sweep her of.

For as far as Karina could see, the tower was surrounded by clouds. Thick, fluffy clouds piled upon one another like huge tufts of cotton. The light of the full moon illuminated a strange landscape of blues and grays that shifted slowly as she watched. Mountains rose and fell, crags and peaks of foaming mist colliding against one another with stately grace.

She managed to tear her gaze away from the dance of the clouds after awhile and turned to survey the rest of the tower roof. The surface shimmered beneath the moonlight like a desert mirage, and though she had looked it over when she had first emerged and found it empty, there now stood a small cottage not far away. It looked very much like her own house, away down the valley, with its thatch roof and wide door. A tendril of smoke rose slowly from the stone chimney. The soft yellow glow of an oil lamp could be seen through the window.

Allowing her curiosity to lead her, Karina walked slowly toward the house. It looked quite out of place there in the middle of that emptiness. She began to smell woodsmoke, an altogether different odor than that she had smelled in the city far below, carrying with it the scent of something cooking. Her stomach growled in protest, wanting to be filled with anything. The closer she got to the house, the more it looked like her own. In fact, she was quickly becoming convinced it *was* her own. There was a wicker chair by the door just like the one she sat in to watch the sunsets. The door had many scratches near the bottom, where Karina usually banged into it carrying in firewood.

She halted a few paces short, trying to decide what to do next. The decision was made for her as the door opened, creaking loudly on its hinges. An old woman appeared, wrapped in a yellow shawl. Her hair was long and curly, white with streaks of light gray. Her face was lined with great age, a patchwork record of many smiles. Her gray eyes were as bright and inviting as the light spilling through the doorway.

“Hello,” she said. “I’ve been expecting you.”

Karina looked around, startled. “Yes, you,” the woman said, laughing. “You’ve been climbing the tower stairs for seven days. Don’t you want to come in for a rest and some warm food?”

Karina smiled broadly. “I must admit I do,” she said, her voice cracking. “Very much. But I can’t help wondering if I should.”

“No harm will come to you, dear,” the woman’s voice was gentle and soothing. “You have many questions. I have a few answers. I will leave it up to you.” With that the old woman turned away and went back into the house, leaving the door open.

Karina wavered for a moment as her caution struggled with her desire for comfort. Her stomach growled again. That seemed to decide her. She went to the door and peeked in. The old woman stood with her back to the door, bent over a large pot. The aroma of meaty stew filled Karina’s nostrils and pulled her through the door. She eagerly took the bowl the woman pushed into her hands and sat heavily in the first chair she came to.

The woman took a bowl for herself and sat across from Karina, sipping the broth delicately. When Karina was done eating, the old woman offered her own bowl to her, which Karina took gratefully. Finally, feeling pleasantly full and satisfied, Karina set the bowls aside and leaned back in the chair. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t mean to eat like that.”

“It’s all right, dear,” the woman replied, smiling radiantly. “You were very hungry.”

“It was delicious,” Karina told her, not wanting her host to get the wrong impression. She had been ravenous and might have enjoyed eating almost anything, but the stew had actually been very good. “I really enjoyed it. Thank you.”

“I’m sure you did. And you’re quite welcome. Tell me, what did you think of the tower, Karina?”

“You know my name?” Karina asked, startled. “Who are you?”

The old woman managed to smile even more. “My name is unimportant in this place, but if you must call me something then let it be Kaylee.”

“That was my mother’s name,” Karina said softly.

“I know.”

“You seem to know an awful lot,” Karina said, an unsettling feeling in her stomach.

“Yet I do not know what you thought of your experience within the tower. Won’t you tell me? Consider it the price for the meal.”

Karina felt a frown turn down the corners of her mouth. “I’m not sure what to make of it,” she replied. “I was thankful to have escaped the goblins, though I’m not sure how that happened. The stairs were...very lonely.”

“Were you frightened?”

“Yes,” Karina said. “It’s all very strange. I don’t see how it could have been built, or why. Unless it’s magic.”

“Of course it’s magic, dear,” the woman said. Her voice was soft, filled with a kindness that felt nothing like pity. “The purest kind. I now how sensitive you are to it. It was only a matter of time before you found the City.”

“Who built it?” Karina asked, leaning forward eagerly. “The City, I mean? And the tower? They must have been powerful wizards. Where did they all go?”

The woman laughed. “What makes you think they went anywhere?”

“Because the City is empty.”

“Is it?”

Karina gasped. “You mean the *goblins* are the builders?”

“For the most part, yes,” the woman agreed. “In another sense, it was people who did it. They made the goblins as servants and commanded them to the labor. As for where they’ve gone...” The woman shrugged. “Perhaps they remain, only you haven’t yet learned to see them.”

Karina shook her head. “I’m confused,” she said. “I don’t understand any of this, and I thought that I would.”

“You will in time.”

“How can you be so sure?” Karina asked, looking up. “Are you one of the wizards? Why are you here on top of the tower, anyway?”

“Don’t you know?” was the woman’s reply. “The people who built the city also built this tower. They sailed to this land from very far away, hoping to find something they had

lost. The tower has but one purpose, to reveal to the seeker that which he, or she, most wants to find.”

Karina looked around at the contents of the house. Well used furniture, shelves laden with odds and ends, so many things that seemed familiar. And there, in the corner, a spinning wheel. “I found you,” she said, the truth dawning on her.

“You found yourself,” the woman replied.

Karina looked at her sharply. “Are you me?” she asked, awed. “I mean, am I you? How can that be?”

“I am a possibility,” Kaylee said, her voice carrying an edge of laughter, an echo of youth reflected in her shining eyes. “You have wandered the forest, ever seeking that which you could not define. The tower draws the lost, the searchers, those who need to learn the truth of their innermost selves. And once it is revealed, once you know the name of the object most absent from your heart, you can never be the same again. That’s what the people of the city learned. At the top of the tower they reached the end of their long quest and could at last rest.”

“If you’re me, how do you know all this?”

“I did not say I was you, Karina,” the woman responded. “I am a possibility. I am the ghost of what you could become.”

Karina was silent for a moment. “Are you... This possibility, is it a good one?”

Kaylee shrugged again. “Who can say?” she said. “The truth is, most people do not find such revelations all that revealing. All you will ever see in this place is the person you are. Of what you will really become, only your heart can lead you there.”

“Then the tower was for nothing,” Karina declared. “This is no ending to any quest. It’s only another step along the way. I bet that’s what the builders realized too, and they left the city because they figured out what they’d really been looking for was with them all along.”

The woman leaned back in her seat smiling at Karina and folded her hands in her lap. Karina waited for her to respond, and when she didn’t Karina became angry. “Well?” she demanded. “Aren’t you going to tell me if I’m right or not?”

“No,” the woman said. “It doesn’t really matter. Those people are gone, and their troubles went with them. You and your people are the legacy they left behind. It is inevitable that many of you will be drawn to the tower. Many more will turn their curiosity to other things. But you are not who they were, so don’t fret over what their

motivations might have been. The best anyone can do is live his or her own life to the fullest and hope that the world is made a better place simply for having been a part of it.”

She leaned forward, eyes shining. “Your time here is ending. Yet your seeking has only begun. There are many paths left for you to explore. Some of them must lead you back among your own people, and you should not be afraid to tell them of the city and of the tower. But you must never return here again.” Kaylee fell silent and looked up, a cold pale light falling on her face. Karina followed the woman’s gaze. The roof of the house was gone. She could see the last vestiges of it fading to nothingness at the edges. The moon, larger than she had ever seen it before, hung overhead, filling the sky.

There was so much she wanted to say, so many questions she was certain this apparition of a woman could answer, but her voice caught in her throat leaving her silent. “How?” she finally choked out. “How am I supposed to get home? Do I go down the stairs? How do I get out of the tower?”

Kaylee, or whatever she was, rose from her seat as the wall behind her dissolved into gray mist. “You don’t,” she said. “There can be no going back. I thought you understood.” The entire house was vanishing, falling away into formless vapor. Karina felt herself sinking and was abruptly pitched onto her backside as her chair disappeared.

“Now wait a minute,” she said angrily, rising to her feet. “You just told me I had to leave and never return. How can I leave if I can’t get out of the tower?”

The woman continued to smile as even she began to transform into mist. “Going back won’t solve the riddle you’ve given yourself, Karina. You roam the forest alone, and people think you have no fear. Yet you remain alone because you *are* afraid. You are afraid to let anyone see your true self. It’s a fear everyone has, and you can’t be rid of it. But a person who let’s fear rule doesn’t really live at all. You have to trust, Karina. Sometimes, living means taking a leap of faith.”

Karina started to protest, but the woman vanished completely, leaving behind only a swirling dark cloud that spilled over the edges of the tower, running off like water.

“Great,” Karina muttered. “What am I supposed to do now?” She waited until the glowing roof was exposed again then sat down. She hugged her knees to her chest, shivering as the breeze turned cooler.

She had never thought of herself as being afraid of anything before. And she had always been comfortable with all sorts of magic. Now, she was feeling her first touch of terror creeping through her mind, and she hated the magic that had drawn her here. She wished she had never set foot inside the city.

She believed now that the goblins would not have hurt her. They had only one purpose since their masters were gone, and that was to drive intruders to the tower. They bided their time, maintaining the houses and buildings while neglecting things like the fountains and the statues, allowing time to wear them away. It was a wicked trap. She had been wrong to think of the vanished builders as anything other than shallow and vain. In fact, she told herself, even the apparition should be doubted.

It was definitely getting colder, too cold to remain exposed to the weather. Karina pulled herself to her feet and made her way back to the edge, intending to locate the stairs and go back inside the tower. At least it would be warm in there. After she had slept, she would see how everything looked beneath the light of day.

The stairwell wasn't where she expected. She remembered emerging close to the edge of the roof, so she walked along the rim, thinking she had probably gotten turned around by the illusion and that she'd come upon it at any moment. With no landmarks save the moon, it was difficult to tell if she had made a complete circuit, but she thought she had. The stairs were gone.

"I should have expected it," she said bitterly. "No going back, she said. I see why, now." She wasn't ready to give up. Starting at the edge, she began criss-crossing the roof, methodically covering every square inch. The wind began to blow harder, stirring the cloudscape into new, fascinating configurations.

Very soon, Karina realized it was useless. She kept getting distracted by the clouds, and she had lost track of the search pattern she was trying to follow. She moved back near the center and sat down again. The wind seemed lesser there. She buried her face in her arms and tried not to weep.

After awhile, the moon had dropped to the horizon and lay half-buried in the clouds. The sky was crystal clear. The stars twinkled brightly, reminding Karina of the glowbugs she had released inside the tower. She regretted it now, wondering how the little insects would survive with nothing but glowing mist to sustain them. Everything here seemed to be made of mist. She half expected the moon to dissolve as well.

The shivering became uncontrollable. Karina knew she was dying. The wind was leeching the heat from her body, slowly freezing her. It began to affect her mind. She kept waiting for daylight, wanting to see the sun one last time, but the dawn never came. The huge moon slid around the horizon, like a great ship plying the cloud sea, until it began to rise again. She knew that just wasn't possible. Still, she saw it happening and could only conclude that she was losing her mind. Probably, it had been leaving her all along.

The stars seemed to make way for the moon, moving aside as it rose. Karina stared at them, hardly blinking as more began moving. The tiny sparks started racing across the

sky, twirling around one another and diving earthward. Karina was too tired, too frozen to evade them as the stars raced toward her. They turned at the last instant, banking sharply to encircle her in a ring of spinning light.

They weren't stars, she saw them. They were pixies. Tiny human-looking forms no bigger than her thumb, dressed in gossamer cloth with shimmering wings and encased in a halo of golden light. They whirled around her, dancing on the air. She watched as they would clasp hands, whirl around, then fling each other apart, only to swoop in and repeat the act with a new partner.

The air around Karina began to grow warm. Feeling returned to her limbs. She could hear the pixies laughing, like children giggling far away. Their small voices began to sing. Karina could not make out the words, but she felt the power behind them. It filled her, chasing the cobwebs from her mind and lifting away her fatigue. She felt it lifting her and was not surprised when she rose to her feet without effort. The pixies took turns hovering in front of her, dazzling her with their inhuman beauty. She laughed with them, caught up momentarily in their fairy joy.

The pixies began to move faster, flying around her until they blurred into a stream of light. With startling speed, they peeled away and streaked over the rim of the tower roof. Karina ran after them, still laughing, but stopped short as the pixies dove over the edge and plunged down. She watched as the tiny lights became even smaller, dwindling into the distance below her.

The clouds began to light up, leaping with flashes of color as the pixies soared through them. More lights appeared, as though the clouds had been filled with sleeping fairies who were only now awakening. The sky below became a riot of color and light for as far as could be seen.

Karina found herself longing to join them. How easy it would be, she thought, to step off this edge, to fly with the fey. She wavered a moment, then withdrew from the rim, stepping back to more solid footing.

And yet, why not? There certainly seemed to be no other way to escape the tower. Suppose, she offered to herself, the apparition had not been false. A possibility, Kaylee had called herself, using the name of Karina's own grandmother, the name she had always hoped to call her own daughter one day. Well, if there was no way off the tower, then there would be *no* possibility of a future. So, there had to be a way. If not down the stairs and through a door...

A leap of faith. That's what the woman had said. The pixies had shown her the way, she had but to follow. But could she? Karina wasn't sure she had that much faith in anything.

She was getting chilled again. The breeze turned into a wind, moist and icy cold. As she reasoned it, she had only two options. Either she could sit down and wait until she froze, for it was obvious there would be no dawn for her, or she could go see the fairies in their hidden world within the clouds. She was shaking with more than fear as she slowly crept back to the tower's rim and looked down.

"I wonder how far down it is?" she said aloud. The lights below were brightening, as if in anticipation. They beckoned her with an unspoken promise of comfort and safety. That, too, she knew, would be just an illusion, a dream formed of mist like all her encounters with the tower magic. She closed her eyes, and she wondered what the goblins would think when she arrived quite messily below. Her body swayed as she allowed gravity to take her. Silently, she tumbled.

Terror like any other seized her as she fell away from the tower's roof. It vanished as quickly as it had come. What was done could not be undone, and a strange calm settled over her as she resigned herself to her demise.

The wind whistled past her ears. Her hair streamed away behind her, fluttering like her clothing was doing. She held her arms out and spread her legs to catch more air, hoping it would somehow slow her enough to save her life. She had to squint her eyes against the force of the wind in her face. A motion to her left caught her eye. Turning her head, she found the side of the tower speeding past, as if it was the tower moving instead of her. The last of her regret faded, replaced by unreasoning joy. She felt almost as if she was flying. Moving her arms and legs pushed her closer to the tower or swept her farther from it. With a cry of delight, she swooped in a great arc, flashing past the curve of the tower before turning back toward it.

The clouds rose to meet her. Slowly at first, the puffy landscape took on more detail. The lights of the fairies flashed and danced, filling her vision. There was a great heat welling up from below. The hot air pushed against her, and she felt the wind lessening in force against her body, meaning she was somehow slowing. This was fairy magic she could appreciate. The clouds seemed distant one moment, then suddenly she was inside them. The colorful mist engulfed her like thick cotton. She was momentarily blinded by the lights, then she was dropping below them.

Karina found herself emerging from the cloud into a great hollow space. Great walls of cloud rose up on all sides, boxing in a tiny landscape of rolling green hills and miniature mountains. Fairy light was everywhere around her, illuminating the scene brightly. Pixies filled the air like birds and rose up in swarms to surround her. Karina laughed with delight.

"Hello!" she said, then clamped her mouth shut as air rushed in and made her ears pop.

“Hello!” the pixies echoed in chorus, followed by gales of tittering laughter. “Where are you going?”

“I don’t know,” Karina answered, gasping.

“We know!” the pixies laughed. “We know!”

“Where?” she asked, watching the fairy landscape rushing toward her.

“Down!”

The pixies scattered as though blown by a strong wind, and Karina covered her face just before she hit the tiny green hills. It was only a cloud, she discovered as she passed right through without resistance. And it was thick. Gloom closed about her, thickening quickly to darkness. The air below the fairy land was thin and cold, and she fell without sight for a long time. The woman had said it took her seven days to climb the tower. How long would it take to fall that same distance?

She emerged from the cloud with a suddenness that surprised her. The land she spied below her looked very real this time. The only surprising thing was that there was no sign of the city, or of the tower any longer either. There was a vast forest spreading over ranging hills, a land enclosed by the high peaks of icy mountains. She had never imagined her valley would look so beautiful seen from above. Of the tower and the white city, there was no sign. It was as if, for her, the magic city had ceased to exist. The woman had told her she would never be able to return. She was right in more ways than one. The green earth was rushing at her all too fast for comfort.

The forest began to take on detail. She could identify the trees by type, and see the lush growth between them. There was a tiny clearing almost directly below, a circle of bright color amidst a sea of dark green. It was rising to meet her too fast. There was no time to think, no time to regret her decision. She wanted to be afraid, to feel something more than the strange numbness that had overtaken her. The woman had been wrong. Quests did come to an end, even the unresolved ones. Everything ended at the threshold between life and death.

Karin spread her arms to fly. She twisted in the air, letting it ripple through her clothes and caress her skin. The forest filled her vision. She closed her eyes.

The impact was not what she had expected.

One moment she was falling, and the next she was pressing against something soft, her nostrils filled with the scent of grass. She blinked her eyes open. She sat up. All around her, trees stretched their bodies toward the sky, spreading their arms to surround the circle of grass where Karina found she had landed.

“This is impossible,” she said. She felt the grass under her hands, she smelled the pines, heard the call of birds and the titter of squirrels. She was alive when she should not be. A blue shadow passed over her, causing her to look up. She gasped and covered her mouth, shrinking back a little from the colorful cloud hovering over her.

“Hello!” the chorus of pixie voices floated down to her. Karina laughed, filled with a sudden joy.

“Leap of faith,” she said, falling back. “Hello, pixies!” The cloud vibrated happily at the sound of her voice. The fairies spun dizzily around one another and swooped at her, skimming the air just above her. She held up her arms, letting the pixies brush her fingertips before they rushed skyward again. “Thank you!” she called to them, not really knowing how they had saved her, only sure that they had.

“No, thank you!” they chorused at her. “You gave us such wonderful playmates, we could not allow you to pass over the dark waters so young. So we saved you.”

“Playmates?” she asked, puzzled. The pixies laughed at her, and as the cloud of fairies parted Karina spied a more familiar light amongst them. “Glowbugs!” she cried out. The pixies laughed even harder as they buzzed around the glowbugs Karina had released inside the tower. It seemed she was not the only prisoner to have escaped the magic of the Ivory Tower. The pixies began to ascend, rapidly putting distance between themselves and the mortal woman laying on the grass.

“Farewell, pixies,” Karina called to them. The pixies didn’t respond. Not in words, at least. The cloud writhed, twisting in on itself, for a few minutes then rocketed away. Karina watched until the fairy lights had disappeared into the clouds, back home.

Karina eventually went home as well, but she was never the same after her adventure. It made the forest seem all the more frightening to those of the village, and to all who later heard Karina’s story. The young woman who went into the forest was gone. Instead, Karina had grown in ways that could not be measured. Life forevermore was less a mystery to her, and it could be seen in her eyes, felt in the sound of her voice, experienced in the actions she performed.

That is why the woods of northern valley are forbidden, and that is why your fathers and your mothers tell you to stay close to home. That is why your elders speak ill of the White City, saying that those who go there never return. That is true. For if you yield to the call of your heart, it may lead you to all sorts of places that you would not have gone to otherwise. There is merit in the warnings you hear, but sometimes truth is not the truth. Karina discovered her own truth at the top of the Ivory Tower. Someday, perhaps you will discover yours in the places you let your feet take you when you follow your unfettered heart.

And before you ask, yes, I have been to the White City myself. I have climbed the Tower and came away changed. I can see in some of your eyes that you already feel the call, the tug on your soul. The Tower is not for all of you, but for some...

My time with you is over now. My tale is ended. Yours, though, is just beginning. Every tale, after all, is only a part of a larger story, and there are no true endings.

May it ever be so, to the end of days.

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