

CHAPTER 2

Perfect contentment and total relaxation permeated Rory's being, and he opened his eyes to find purple mists surrounding him. They cleared now and then to reveal some incredible changes in the landscape.

"Cool dream," he said to no one in particular. He sounded drunk, which made him laugh. A bird sang nearby, and he began to sing with it. Why, he could make bird sounds! He laughed again. "Can I fly like a bird too?" he asked, and suddenly he was flying! Music filled the air and joy welled up in his heart, and he laughed in delight.

He flew into a clearing and found a banquet table spread with white linen and gold dishes. Food crowded the serving platters up and down the table. Pitchers of gold, silver, and cut crystal brimmed with a bewildering variety of drink. A young man rose as Rory approached and extended his hands in welcome.

"Welcome to Zed! Come, let's eat. I'm hungry."

"You've been waiting for me?" Rory asked.

"Of course. Otherwise nothing would be left." The man threw back his head and laughed.

Joy hung in the air so tangibly that Rory tried to reach out and touch it. It eluded him, but he and his companion laughed at his attempts.

"Do you like it here?" asked the stranger. "We could eat here instead." With a wave of his hand, the clearing dissolved into a mountainside blooming with wildflowers. A foaming stream sang as it rushed past them. Cool, fresh air filled Rory's lungs.

"It's all good," he said.

"Well then, come and eat. We've got a long way to go."

When they finally pushed back their chairs, there was no food or drink left on the table.

"Wow! How'd we do that?" Rory asked.

"Anything is possible here."

Rory studied his companion. He was tall, a little older than Rory, and had dark hair and laughing gray eyes. An air of competence and assurance surrounded him; he was completely at home with himself.

He waved his arms, and they found themselves in a formal garden. Comfortable benches sat under the sheltering arms of huge trees, and vines flowered overhead. A fountain splashed nearby, surrounded by a kaleidoscope of flowers whose colors shifted and changed. Rory recognized it as the fountain he'd seen through the hoop at the museum.

"Rory, we've got to go soon, and there's more we have to do." His companion led the way to a bench under an oak. "We're going to a world a long way from Earth. The people there need your help."

"Who are you?"

"I'm Adam."

"OK, Adam, where did you say we are?"

“In Zed.”

“Zed? The sign in the museum said ‘Zed.’ Where is that?”

“Hmm. Well, it’s nowhere and everywhere and on the way to somewhere.” Adam laughed. “It’s another dimension, and it belongs to the king.”

Rory tried to think, but joy flowed over his heart and worrisome thought was impossible.

“You’re going with me?”

“Yes. You need my help.”

“I can handle that. Where are we going?”

“To Petla. It’s on Kamlo, a world like yours.”

“Oh,” Rory said. Nothing was making sense, but he didn’t really care. “Why?”

“They have a problem with a portal, and you’ve got to fix it.”

“Oh.” Rory sat down on the bench and looked up into the oak branches overhead. The tree’s solidness and strength comforted him. He felt its life flowing within its veins and reaching out to flow through him. He sensed the roots deep in the soil, drawing life from the ground, and he flowed with the sap to the top of the tree, felt the fullness of the leaves and rejoiced in the sun.

After a time, Adam said quietly, “Come on, you have to drink from the fountain too.”

Rory moved stiffly, expecting to find leaves growing out of his fingers. He heard the tree murmur, and he flung his arms as far around the trunk as he could reach.

“I will always love you,” he said to the tree.

Adam smiled in an understanding sort of way, and they made their way through the changing flowers to the fountain. The water, as clear and beautiful as water ever could be, had flecks of light in it.

“Drink,” Adam said.

Rory’s hands tingled as he plunged them into the fountain. A million colors flashed as he bent to drink, but it ripped through him like an explosion. Both fiery hot and freezing cold, it sparkled and sang and broke his heart, and he grabbed the edge of the fountain to steady himself.

“What is this stuff?”

“The water of life. Drink it slowly, a little at a time.”

The water of life? Rory stared at him, but Adam was kissing a pansy. Rory turned back to the water and found that he was thirsty. The water drew him down, and he drank deeply. His senses reeled and exploded, and a wave of darkness washed him into oblivion.

“Can’t you do anything right?” Adam demanded. He smacked Rory’s face and splashed him with water. “I told you to take it slowly, but no, you have to chug the stuff. You can’t do that when you aren’t used to it!”

“What happened?” Rory asked.

“You chugged the water. Bad idea! Ha! No wonder I’m being sent along. Next time listen to me!”

Adam got Rory into a sitting position and handed him a small glass shaped like a rose. “Here, drink it slowly.”

Rory sipped the water, and it burned his throat and made his heart ache, hurting and exhilarating him at the same time. His head began to clear.

“More,” Adam said when Rory finished, and he handed him a slightly larger cup shaped like a poppy. “But not so fast!”

“I’m gonna float away,” Rory said when Adam shoved a third glass in his hands.

“No worries, man. No worries.”

Rory lost track of how many glasses of water he drank. Each glass looked like one of the flowers around the fountain. Rory couldn’t see where Adam got them or what he did with them when they were empty. The water burned and burnished him inside, cleaning and washing away all the pain and hurt he’d ever known, and it brought into crystalline focus all of the wrong things he had ever done or thought. He wept from the guilt and the pain and the joy, and still Adam handed him glass after glass.

Suddenly Rory saw a man standing in the fountain. Light flashed through his clothes, as if they covered the sun, and love flowed from him in colored waves of light. This man was the essence of perfection, and Rory’s guilt and shame choked him. He cried out and clutched his chest in pain.

He felt a gentle touch, and a voice that held all the music of the universe said, “This water of mine will become a spring inside you, welling up with life. You’ll be like that oak tree, Rory, planted by streams of water and yielding fruit. Your leaves won’t ever wither, and I’ll make you prosper. Will you go and be my ambassador?”

Rory, on his knees and gripping the side of the fountain for support, dared to look up. “Me? How can I do anything for you?”

“Because I’m sending you, and I’ll be with you.”

“I-I want to, more than I’ve ever wanted anything, but I-I’m not very good.”

The king smiled at him and offered him a cup shaped like a lily. “Drink this.”

Rory took the cup with shaking hands and drank, never taking his eyes off the king’s face. Warmth and strength flowed through his body, and life, full and singing with joy, flowed over him and in him.

“You’re clean now, for you’ve drunk from my fountain,” said the king. “I’m sending Adam with you, and I’ll be with you, though you won’t see me.” He lifted his hands in blessing, and Rory saw that they bore horrible scars, and a pain pierced his heart. A ring of swirling water formed above the fountain, spinning off multi-colored light. The king smiled again, and his smile erased Rory’s pain. “Don’t be afraid. Go, and remember me.”

Adam gently lifted Rory to his feet and led him like a child to the ring of water. Rory twisted around, but the water swirled around them, and the king and the fountain were gone.