



Mind Mirrors

Chronicles of Zo'th

By Erica A. Briggs

CHAPTER 1: The Crossover

Talia and Javier were inseparable—their friendship a bright thread weaving through the dense, noisy tapestry of their urban neighborhood. Best friends and neighbors since preschool, they had shared countless adventures and secrets. Now, as they neared the end of fifth grade and prepared for middle school, their bond had only grown stronger, an unbreakable lifeline in their chaotic world.

The upcoming summer promised new adventures, especially in their favorite place: The Wondering Quill. Nestled in a quiet alley off the main thoroughfare, the bookstore was a hidden gem. Its sign, painted with swirling letters, hinted at the mysteries waiting within. The shop was owned by Miss Rosaline Lightheart, a woman as wondrous as her store. With her wild silver curls, her penchant for quoting scripture, and a wardrobe seemingly pulled from a fairy tale, Miss Rosaline was more than just a shopkeeper. She was a storyteller who sprinkled light and wisdom into the lives of her visitors.

For Javier, The Wondering Quill was more than a bookstore; it was a sanctuary. He was only six when his mother disappeared. Javier had struggled with the void her absence left behind, burying his head in books to fill it. His father's long work hours made the loss feel even greater. While his family cared for him as best they could, he missed the nurturing presence of his mother. Talia, with her fiery spirit and boundless imagination, became his anchor, pulling him out of his quiet shell and reminding him how to laugh again.

Talia, on the other hand, was the eldest of four siblings in a bustling household. Her parents juggled full-time jobs while caring for her ailing grandmother, leaving much of the responsibility to Talia. She loved her family deeply but longed for escape. She dreamed of distant places where she could soar above her worries and be free of endless obligations. Javier,

who often let her take the lead in their imaginative escapades, understood her yearning and never judged her for it. Instead, he became her co-pilot in every adventure.

The bookstore itself was a labyrinth of towering bookshelves crammed with treasures, from dusty tomes of forgotten lore to modern bestsellers. The air was rich with the scent of old paper, lavender, and faint traces of cinnamon. Quiet alcoves invited exploration: the poetry nook, bathed in sunlight streaming through stained glass; the fantasy corner, where books with titles like *Chronicles of the Lost Sea* and *The Clockwork Mice* shimmered enticingly; and their favorite spot—a cozy reading nook hidden behind royal blue velvet curtains, its armchair and chaise beckoning like old friends.

Here, Talia and Javier were safe to be themselves. Talia's boldness and quick wit complemented Javier's quieter, more reflective nature, creating a perfect balance: her courage blending seamlessly with his thoughtfulness. Miss Roseline and her store felt like home—a safe haven that grounded them before returning to the hectic world outside. Each visit was sealed with Miss Rosaline's warm, affirming words that made them feel truly seen and valued: "Be well, love. Do good out there!"

But now, the bookstore's future was in jeopardy. Rising rent threatened to shut its doors forever. Miss Rosaline's quiet determination to stay open had turned to sorrowful acceptance. For her, The Wondering Quill wasn't just a business; it was her life's work, a beacon of connection and hope for the community. The weight of losing such a special place loomed over her like a dark cloud, and that heaviness seeped into Talia and Javier's hearts.

"Places like this just don't exist anymore," Javier whispered one day, running his fingers over the spine of a worn book. "I can't imagine it just... gone."

Talia's fists clenched. "We can't let it happen. There has to be something we can do."

One sunny afternoon, as they flipped through books in their secret nook, Miss Rosaline approached them with uncharacteristic sadness in her eyes. “I have some difficult news, my loves,” she said, her voice soft. “The Wondering Quill must close. The rent is too high, and I can no longer keep it open.”

“No!” Javier exclaimed, leaping to his feet. “You have to keep it open!”

Miss Rosaline offered a sad smile to soothe his anger. “It’s done, beloved.”

Javier’s heart sank, a deep ache settling in his chest. “This place can’t just disappear. It’s not fair!” he charged, frustration boiling over as he slammed his hand against a nearby shelf.

As if in response, a leather-bound book with an ornate keyhole fell from the top shelf, striking Talia on the head. She crumpled to the floor as a shimmering golden dust erupted from its pages.

“Talia!” Javier cried, kneeling beside her. His hands shook as he gently shook her shoulder. She didn’t stir.

A strange glimmer in the air caught his eye, and he realized he was inhaling the golden dust too. The world tilted, and everything went black.

When Javier opened his eyes, he found himself lying on a carpet of soft, glowing moss. Towering trees stretched toward a kaleidoscopic sky, their leaves shimmering like jewels. The air carried the scent of pine and wildflowers, and distant calls of unfamiliar creatures added to the dreamlike atmosphere.

Disoriented, he sat up slowly, his hands sinking into the spongy moss. “Talia?” he called, his voice trembling and echoing faintly through the forest. Only silence answered.

His pulse quickened. *Where am I? What happened?*

A rustling in the bushes made him spin around, his heart pounding. From behind a tree stepped a small, sprightly figure. It wore a pointed hat and carried a staff that pulsed with faint light. Its beard seemed to be woven from moss, and its eyes sparkled with a mix of wisdom and mischief.

“Lost, are you?” the creature asked in a melodic voice.

Javier blinked, trying to process what he was seeing. “I—I think so. Where am I?”

The creature chuckled, the sound light but oddly grounding. “You’ve been brought to Zo’th, a land where imagination becomes reality. Your thoughts and feelings shape this world, so tread carefully.”

The words hit Javier like a splash of cold water. *Brought? By who? Imagination made real?* He struggled to form a coherent question, but only one truly mattered. “Have you seen a girl? My friend, Talia—she was with me.”

The creature, who introduced itself as Snick, shook its head. “Not here. But if you seek answers, your journey must begin at the Village of Lumora. There, you may find guidance from our elder. Come, I will take you.”

Never would Javier just go with a stranger, especially one that looked like a character out of a fantasy series. But there was something familiar about Snick. Javier couldn’t put his finger on what it was, and didn’t care to wonder about it further. Snick offered help to find Talia. That’s all that mattered.

As they walked, the wonders of Zo’th unfolded before Javier’s eyes. Rivers of liquid light wound through fields of luminescent flowers, and winged foxes soared overhead, their cries like

tinkling laughter. Yet, as enchanting as the world was, Javier couldn't shake the heavy knot of worry in his chest. Talia was out there somewhere—alone.

Snick glanced at him as they walked, his expression unreadable. "Be mindful of your thoughts," he said softly. "Here in Zo'th, emotions ripple outward like stones in a pond. The world listens, and it responds."

To demonstrate, Snick paused and lifted his staff. The air shimmered around them. A tiny burst of golden light bloomed, transforming into a fluttering bird made entirely of glowing threads. It chirped once before dissolving into the air.

Javier stared, awestruck. "You mean... I could do that?"

Snick nodded. "Yes—but be careful. Not all emotions bring beauty. "Here, beauty is as beauty does. Don't let your thoughts turn ugly."

Javier mulled over Snick's words as they pressed deeper into the forest. The thought of Talia missing gnawed at him, tightening his chest. As the worry grew, the forest seemed to shift. The faint whispers of the trees turned into a sinister symphony of creaks and groans. Shadows stretched longer, writhing as though alive, and the once-bright colors dulled.

Javier shivered trying to shake off the alarm as the world grew colder.

A guttural growl shattered the silence, freezing Javier in place. The air felt heavy, thick with an unseen dread. From the gloom emerged a monstrous shape, its red eyes glowing like embers. Its claws glinted like forged steel, and its massive form writhed and twisted unnaturally, as though it was both solid and liquid.

Javier's breath hitched, and fear gripped him. His heart pounded loud in his ears. His skin tingled, his legs felt heavy, and his chest tightened like a vise. He clenched his fists, trying to hold himself together.

The creature grew bigger, its twisted body swelling with each wave of fear Javier felt. Its breath came in ragged bursts, steaming in the cold air. Its claws scraped the ground, leaving deep marks as it crept closer.

“What is that?” Javier whispered, his voice barely audible.

“Fear,” Snick answered, ignoring the beast as if it wasn’t there. He stared at Javier, waiting patiently.

“Well, aren’t you going to help me?” Javier questioned. “Use your staff magic and get rid of it! Turn it into a pretty bird or something!”

“What is mine cannot be given to change your own creation. This is your fear. Not mine.”

“I didn’t ask for this! This is not my wish!” Javier complained, his voice strained.

Snick’s voice echoed in his mind. “Your feelings shape Zo’th. Only you have the power to change how you feel!”

Javier flinched. “How? I can’t stop seeing it!” His voice cracked. “How am I supposed to feel different when it’s staring me down?”

“Close your eyes,” Snick urged.

Javier squeezed his eyes shut, but the ground still trembled under the creature’s steps.

He peeked, only to see it lurching closer. “It’s still coming!” He turned to run, but Snick’s voice stopped him.

“You can’t run from fear. It will only chase you—and grow stronger.”

Javier froze in place, trembling. “Then what do I do?” His voice shook, his legs flexed to flee.

“Breathe,” Snick said. “Slow and steady. The forest breathes with you.” Javier shut his eyes again, his whole body trembling. He could feel the fear closing in, so close it made his skin crawl. He forced a deep breath, then let it out slowly. In. Out. In. Out.

The creature’s growls softened. Its footsteps slowed. The realization sparked something inside him—a small flicker of hope. He glanced over his shoulder. The monster was smaller now, less terrifying, but still there.

“It’s not gone,” Javier muttered, his voice laced with panic.

“Think of something safe,” Snick said. “Something that makes you feel strong.”

Javier’s mind raced, landing on Miss Rosaline and her soothing voice. He remembered how she hummed hymns while tidying the bookshelves. The melody of one song came back to him. He hummed it softly, letting the tune steady him.

The words followed. “The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear?” he whispered. His voice trembled but grew stronger with each word.

“That’s it!” Snick said. “Keep going!”

Javier kept singing, louder this time. “The Lord is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid?” Warmth spread through his chest, filling him with courage.

The forest began to change. The darkness lifted. Shadows pulled back, and the air felt lighter. The creature shrank with every word, its body unraveling like mist under the morning sun.

Javier’s voice rang through the trees, now strong and steady. The fear was gone—within him and in the forest around him.

“Well done,” Snick commended. Javier took another slow, deep breath just to be sure. “I have to stay calm,” he told himself. “Talia’s counting on me.”

With renewed determination, he followed Snick along the path, now illuminated once again by the soft glow of Zo'th's wonders.

When Talia woke up, confusion clouded her thoughts. Her body felt strange, as though it had been folded into itself and then carefully unfurled. Why was she lying down? Why did her head ache, the dull throb pulsing with every heartbeat? Beneath her, the ground felt soft—impossibly so, like resting on a bed of cotton balls. For a moment, she let herself sink into the sensation, her body dissolving into the pillowy surface. She felt like she could stay there forever. Wherever *here* was.

Slowly, she opened her eyes, greeted by a dazzling explosion of green. Every shade and hue shimmered and sparkled, as if the world around her had been painted with liquid gemstones. Her vision was blurry at first, the outlines of trees and leaves melding into one another like an impressionist painting. Then a scent reached her—a sweetness, soft and inviting, carrying a faint hint of something familiar, though she couldn't quite place it.

She tried to piece together what had happened before this moment, but her memories were fragments scattered on the wind. All she could recall was Javier. His face, his voice, his presence—so vivid it made her chest ache. And the one thing she knew for certain was that he wasn't here with her. That wasn't good. It wasn't right. She needed to find him. She pushed herself upright, her determination propelling her forward even as the forest whispered and sighed around her.

The forest was alive in ways she had never seen before. Flowers with petals like liquid crystal swayed gently in an unseen breeze, refracting light in rainbows across the forest floor. Many of the trees were growing upside down, their roots sprawling up and stretching out across

the forest to create a woven web above the canopy. Above this web, Talia caught a glimpse of a winged creature. Its sleek, birdlike body shimmered with golden feathers, and its tail trailed behind like a comet. Its song—a haunting melody of pure notes—filled her with a strange mix of wonder and longing.

As the bird sang, drops of diamonds poured out of its mouth like rain. The roots of the upside-down trees rose up to meet the sparkling downfall, catching each precious gem. The collection was then shared with all the life below. Talia was delighted when a root reached down and presented her with a songdrop of her own, so large she had to hold it with both hands. She could see her reflection in its surface and giggled when it jiggled and popped like a water balloon spraying a light mist of joy on her skin.

As Talia moved deeper into the forest, the leaves above her began to hum. The sound was soft at first, barely perceptible, but as she paused to listen, the melody swelled into a gentle, harmonious chorus, as though the forest itself was singing. Talia stopped in her tracks, overwhelmed by the beauty. For a moment, she forgot about being lost or alone. She reached out to touch a low-hanging branch, its leaves quivering slightly under her fingers.

“Wow,” she said in awe, her voice barely audible over the forest’s symphony. “It’s like something out of my dreams— but it’s so real.” A spark of excitement bubbled in her chest, momentarily lifting the weight of responsibility and fear. It was clear this world wasn’t bound by rules or expectations—here, she could be anything, do anything.

But reality pulled her back. Javier was still missing, and she couldn’t enjoy the wonder without him. Pressing forward, Talia tried to focus on finding her friend with more urgency. Her anxiety built as the forest’s paths twisted unpredictably, folding back on themselves. Her frustration reached its peak when she realized she’d been walking in circles. She kicked a stone

into the underbrush, her voice rising in irritation. “Why does everything have to be so complicated?”

The forest reacted to her rising anger. Leaves shriveled, their once-vibrant glow fading to ash-gray, and the singing trees fell silent. Flowers drooped as though wilting under an invisible weight. Talia’s frustration seeped into the world around her, transforming it. She noticed the change and paused, guilt settling over her. “This place is so fragile,” she whispered. “I need to keep my cool.”

She stepped more carefully, her eyes darting around the strange, shimmering landscape of Zo’th. The trees here had bark like polished glass, and the grass beneath her feet whispered softly in languages she couldn’t understand. She turned sharply at the sound of a rustling bush, her body tense. She listened intently but heard nothing.

She dared to continue until she came to a clearing. She surveyed the scene, and out from behind a tree popped a creature that could only be described as a walking patchwork of contradictions. It had the tail of a bird, the body of a squirrel, ears of a rabbit, and the face of a grinning, wrinkled old man. It wore a hat made out of a button and carried an oversized silver spoon as if it were a staff. The creature shimmered faintly as though it wasn’t quite sure it wanted to be all the way there.

“Well, well, what have we here?” the creature said, twirling the spoon. “A dipper-dapper dallop, lookin like a fish lost in water.”

“A dallo-what?” Talia was confused by the words and the speaker, none of it matched.

“Let’s get you movin-on down the right bumpity-bum-bum so you don’t end up turning into a turnip in a tomato tornado.” The mixed up creature motioned for Talia to follow and

started down into the clearing. Talia's confusion deepened, thinking it might be best to go in the opposite direction of wherever that thing was headed.

"I'm not going anywhere with you," Talia said warily, narrowing her eyes. "I don't even know what you are!" she sneered.

The creature fell out on the ground in laughter, its form rippling like water. Talia shook her head as she took a few steps back. *It's completely crazy*, she thought. With a startling gasp, it jumped back up to stand on its hindlegs. "Call me Miffle," it said, bowing theatrically. "And you, fiery one, look like someone who could use some help. Or are you too stubborn to ask?"

Talia crossed her arms. "I'm not stubborn. I just don't need your help."

Miffle's grin widened, and with a flash, its body transformed into a squat, toad-like figure with stubby arms. "Oh, you're one of those," it turned its nose up in the air. "Always so sure your way is the right way, always in control. Tell me, why do trees grow?"

Talia's brow furrowed. "What?"

"Exactly!" Miffle cackled. "Irrelevant questions are the spice of life, don't you think? Or are you too serious for such things?"

Talia's patience snapped. "I don't need your questions or spicy life and I most definitely do not need your help!"

"I agree!" Miffle crowed. "Stubborn people don't need help. Only snow globes need help eating cocoa puffs in the bathtub on Christmas. Unless the Easter Bunny lost its sheep. Then even a rock-headed trudgeon like you would need help, believe you me. Especially if all the squirrels and the toads and the apple-bottom bums stomp their feet on the first Tuesday after spring. Unless, of course, Tuesday falls on a Wednesday, which is exactly what happens every time you eat a fig with a lampshade."

Talia blinked. “What are you even talking about?”

Miffle ignored her, continuing with gusto. “The lamp throws shade at the fig every time. And then what do you have? A complete howdy doody, that’s what. Hootie-hoo you do! Say, quick question—do you have any yogurt between your toes? That might help.”

Before Talia could respond, Miffle leaped toward her feet. She squeaked and jumped back. “Hey! Get away from me!”

“Good googly-woogly! What’s your problem? I’m just trying to help you with your pickled pepper problem.”

Talia stomps her foot in frustration. “You’re not making any sense! Speak English!”

“Nonsense!” Miffle said with mock offense, flipping into the simple, single form of a squatting old man. He stood but only reached as high as Talia’s knees. He squinted up at her.

“My words are English. *You’re* the brick in the salad bowl, not me. Now, do you want my help or not?”

Talia crossed her arms, her frustration bubbling over. “You’re the last person—or whatever you are— that I’d want help from. You’re impossible to understand, you’re just wasting my time!”

Miffle’s form flickered, becoming a shadowy wisp. “Very well,” it said. “I guess you don’t want help finding your mate. I’ll be on my way, then. Ease on down the grapevine!”

Before Talia could respond, it vanished. Her heart sank. *Mate?* Did he mean Javier? “Wait!” she shouted, but the creature was gone.

She sat on a mossy rock, burying her face in her hands. Her head hurt from trying to figure out Miffle’s muck. She thought she wanted to be alone, but now, she wasn’t so sure. The regret gnawed at her. She forced herself to breathe deeply and tried to calm her growing sense of

dread. Slowly, she stood and scanned the horizon. A faint glow caught her eye, and without hesitation, she moved toward it.

As she walked, the glow revealed a cluster of phosphorescent mushrooms circling the base of a twisted tree. Disappointed, she realized she was deeper in the woods than before, even more lost. Fear began to creep in, tightening her chest. The air grew colder, and the ground felt less solid beneath her feet. A soft mist rolled in, carrying with it unsettling shapes that slithered and crawled.

Her breath quickened as the forest's eerie silence pressed in. She was too scared to yell for help, so her plea came out as a whisper. "God, help me."

A faint warmth bloomed in her chest. She heard a quiet whisper, like wind through the trees around her. Talia remained still, straining to listen until she finally recognized the voice of Miss Rosaline. "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help." The words brought a sense of calm and hope.

Talia repeated them, grounding herself. She lifted her head and saw it—a mountain in the distance, its peak glowing faintly in the sunlight. She climbed a nearby tree, using her strong arms to pull herself upward until she broke through the canopy. The sight was breathtaking. A vast, vibrant forest stretched from east to west, interspersed with diverse landscapes—some barren, others dense with shadows. Rivers and streams meandered through hills and grasslands, painting the land with life. At the heart of it all rose a mountain.

Even from a distance, it loomed massive, its powerful presence pulling Talia like a magnet. She found herself leaning toward it, a strange longing blooming in her chest—an ache that seemed to extend across the forest, reaching for the mountain in search of solace.

"That's it," she whispered, her voice barely audible. "That's where I need to go."

There was no evidence to support this feeling, no clear paths leading to its base. Yet, she sensed its call, resonant and undeniable, as if it spoke in an audible voice: *"Come to me."*

Descending the tree, Talia followed the path with renewed focus. The forest seemed to respond to her fierce will. Flowers bloomed with radiant colors, and the trees straightened their branches, allowing sunlight to filter through. The air was lighter, carrying the faint, joyful hum of the singing leaves.

As she walked, she came across a bubbling stream, its water sparkled with light. Kneeling by its edge, she drank deeply and caught her reflection. She saw a girl with fierce, determined eyes, but also the faint traces of worry etched on her face. "Do I really have what it takes to get through this?" she wondered aloud. How could she find her best friend Javi in a world she didn't understand?

The water shimmered—and then she saw it: a flash of silver at the bottom, nestled between smooth stones. A whisper brushed her thoughts like wind through the trees: *"Have I not commanded you?"* Without thinking, she plunged her hand into the cold current and drew out a small, ornate key. As her fingers closed around the metal, the whisper came again—clearer this time. *"Be strong and courageous."* She stared at the key in her hand, feeling it warm in her hand. Then—rustling in the bushes. She turned quickly. Someone... or something... was coming. Every muscle in her body tensed as she slowly turned toward the sound, her heart pounding in her chest.

This ends the first chapter in Mind Mirrors: Chronicles of Zo'th. To continue the chronicle, visit www.bewell.love/shop. You can purchase each individually for \$1.99 or the complete story for \$7.99 including quests.

The author has offered the first quest for free. You may choose to embark in person at the [Seek & Find](#) portal or online through the [WhisperNet](#). Additional quests are included with purchase.