
SHAWN SPEAKMAN

THE GREEN LAKE WITCH

Shawn Speakman

Merle watched white clouds over Seattle, divining the future from their movement.

Right from the outset of his existence, clouds and the power they carried had always been there, as different as the names he'd carried. Lightning-filled dark skies had been there at his birth on the shores of northern Wales when he'd been named Myrddin Emrys, a baby with the ability to talk from the outset of leaving the womb and who watched those around him with a bemused gaze. The name Mithranlyn had been given beneath Scotland's low-trailing brume by the Picts as he taught them tattoo magic. Beneath a wet rainbow, the leprechaun Darbok thought his name Maerlyn, which came from a drunken misunderstanding. And then there was the title He Who Cannot Die, bestowed by Merle's apprentice Nimue in jest beneath stars filmed by thin mist before her betrayal at Stonehenge—though he would in fact die one day. The clouds had always been there like these names, aiding Merle in his pursuit to save the world from itself.

Most people knew him best as Merlin of the Lake. Wizard. Meddler. Prophet. Bard. Counselor to a long line of kings that had

begun with Uther Pendragon and his son Arthur and continued to the present.

Those walking by had no idea of this fact. All they saw was a thin old man wearing khaki pants, a white dress shirt, and a light coat, a thin old man with a close-cropped white beard and thinning hair, a thin old man with penetrating blue eyes, a thin old man with a teacup and an ancient pipe on the table before him.

Merle liked that's all they knew.

They wouldn't have dealt with the truth well.

He took a sip of tea. Now that he had viewed the patterns of clouds, he would read the leaves soon, the second of three acts of divination required every morning.

For the shapes and speeds and mingling of the clouds above foretold a darkness not of nature's making brewing north of Seattle.

Divination took time though. It could not be rushed. He'd discovered that early in life when quickening the process resulted in false foresight.

And dead friends.

Instead, he watched bustling people outside Old World Tales, his bookstore near the sports stadiums of Seattle. It was a city he'd fallen for like his first love—fast and sure. The city's foundation had come on the shores of Puget Sound, the smell of salt and hills of green not unlike his humble beginnings in Wales. It was also a book city with a well-read public, a fact Merle respected. Books were life and Seattle brimmed with it. It had been his home for several decades, a blip for someone as old as he but telling all the same.

He pulled two pouches from his pockets then, one with contents that clinked and one with aromantic softness. The former would aid his third divination; the latter would help settle his anxiety of the situation.

Merle knew one thing already though. He was going to need help with what was to come. He sent his thoughts out into the

world to request a meeting, one of his first abilities that did not require actual use of magic.

And waited.

After about ten minutes, he felt the presence of the one he'd called.

"What do you want, codger?"

The annoyed words were spoken in Merle's ear where only air appeared to be.

"Good morn, Snedeker."

No one around them could see the winged Oakwell fairy. He had the ability to turn invisible, a useful attribute in a world that ignored—no, denied—the reality of magic and the Fae. People would only see an old man muttering to himself.

"I need your help," Merle said, sipping again at his tea.

"What is in it for me, wizard?"

Merle grinned. He knew how irascible the fairy could be. Richard McCallister had shared as much. Snedeker annoyed the Knight of the Yn Saith.

But Merle just found it endearing. "I suppose saving this city isn't enough of an incentive?"

Snedeker grunted. Merle felt the fairy settle upon his shoulder. "I care little for this world. It is ugly. Filled with a miserable people. And it reeks."

Merle couldn't argue with some of that. Snedeker had come from Annwn—the world known as Avalon in Arthurian legend—and it was quite lovely there.

"Well, I have been trying to help with that." Merle opened the first pouch and emptied its contents onto the table—silver coins glowing in the sunshine. He then opened the other pouch containing his tobacco smelling of vanilla and cherry and picked up his pipe.

"What are you doing?" Snedeker sniffed.

"Smoking. To relax."

"No," Snedeker growled. "What's with the coins?"

"Ahh, the silver dollars," Merle said, nodding. He tamped tobacco into his pipe. "They are glamoured. They are actually four dragon bones carved with runes. They have helped me see the future for at least six centuries." He paused, considering the tea-cup. "But first, faithful fairy of the Oakwell clan, I need to conduct my second foretelling."

The fairy remained quiet as Merle took a final sip and then viewed the tea leaves. He noted their colors. And the shapes they made as they clumped together. And where they had settled within the cup. After so many centuries, reading them had become as easy as breathing.

But the results were even more worrisome.

"Not good, huh?" the fairy asked.

"No. Not at all." Merle picked the coins up then and dropped them to the table. One spun like a top, another landed flat. The other two hit one another and rolled apart to eventually fall over. Every throw was different, just like future outcomes. Like the other divinations of the day, this one did not bode well.

"It is as I feared," Merle said, sighing. "There is a witch in north of the city."

"Well, not my problem."

Merle suddenly realized what Richard disliked about the fairy, well, at least one aspect of the winged flyer that could be irksome. Snedeker only looked out for himself, not for others.

There was only one way to deal with such a Fae.

"You *will* help me, Snedeker. Or I'll use this here pipe and blast you to ash."

Lighting the cherry-vanilla tobacco with a match and a few inhales, Merle let the threat settle and waited as the fairy thought about it.

"Shove that pipe up your arse, old man."

Merle stifled a laugh. He had to give the fairy credit. If most people knew Merle's true identity and the important historical personages and events he'd met and witnessed—been a part of—they would have groveled at his feet, mewling like fearful kittens. Instead, this fairy had the mettle to suggest a rather uncomfortable proposition for the old man.

Richard needed such a friend in his life like this annoying fairy. No matter the winged Fae's selfish tendencies.

"I take that as a no then, dear Snedeker," Merle said.

The fairy grunted. "Take it for what you want. I'm leaving."

The wizard clucked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. "That's a shame. I guess no more sugar cubes for you then." He couldn't see the fairy stop in mid-air, but he sensed it. "Or we can talk further," Merle suggested.

"I love the sugar cubes of this world," the fairy said.

"I know.

Snedeker had gotten quiet. "It would be a shame for you to take them from me."

"I know that too."

"Are we haggling then, wizard?"

"We are." Merle put pipe to lips. He was enjoying this. "Right now, you get one cube a day, is that right?"

"That is right, the craftiest wizard who has ever lived, Myrddin Emrys," Snedeker said with a bit more respect.

"What if I agreed to giving you three sugar cubes every day for a month." Merle leaned forward where he knew the fairy to be flying. "That would make you happy, yes? Though you may become a rather fat, flying fairy from that amount."

"Ticktribble, wizard. Two cubes every day for six months." Merle could hear the avarice in the other's voice.

"Three months and you have a deal, fairy of the Oakwell clan."

The air in front of him thought it over. "Just so you know, from what Richard has said, I do not trust you."

Merle nodded. "I know. Perhaps he yet has reason to trust me though. As you do."

"It is agreed then. I will help you."

Everyone had their price. Including the Fae. "Agreed then. You were the only one I could call upon for this situation and it pleases me that you will aid the city." He paused, glancing at the clouds again. The portents hadn't changed. "Now we should not dally. This witch grows in power and her reach could encompass the world if we are not careful and willing to do what needs doing."

"Where is she?" Snedeker asked.

Merle puffed what he knew to be the pipe's final smoke into the air. If it swirled about the fairy by accident and caused him a bit of consternation, so be it. He deserved some humility after the quibbling over his help's price. "Where is not the first question you should ask. I don't know the answer to that. *How* will we find her is the better one. For that, we will need to stop by the University of Washington and its Suzzallo Library. I am hoping a friend there possesses an item to help us. One that will guide us to this creature we seek."

"Why are you not including Richard in this?" Snedeker settled upon the wizard's bony shoulder once more. The smoke must not have touched him because he hadn't said a word about it. "Seems having a Knight of the Yn Saith with us would be a boon against such a woman."

Merle considered his words carefully. "This witch... she's different from others. At least that's what the runes shared. She'd be a danger to him." He placed the coins back within their pouch and into his pocket once more. "We will talk more on that once we discover her lair."

"You aren't much of a wizard, you know."

Merle stood, knocking the dead ash from his pipe to the pavement and then placing the coins back into their pouch. "I am not. Not anymore, anyway."

"Why is that, Myrddin Emrys?"

Merle took a deep breath. The centuries came flooding back as they did from time to time, almost paralyzing in their weight, a reminder of his heritage. "Let's head toward the campus and the library. I will tell you on the way."

The fairy invisible, Merle strode toward the Link light rail station that was nearby. Though he appeared elderly, he was made of sterner stuff, bones strong, ligaments tight, and muscles like iron. It didn't take him long to cover the distance and, within minutes, he entered Pioneer Square Station. Once the light rail arrived and opened its doors, the wizard made his way through several cars to find one mostly empty and took a seat as far as he could from two people who were clearly tourists.

"You want my story then?" he asked Snedeker.

The fairy flexed his wings, the movement of air brushing Merle's ear. "You know mine. I think it only fair."

"Our stories are not that dissimilar, on the surface at least," Merle shared as the light rail moved smoothly along its tunnel beneath Seattle. "Born into a proud clan. To eventually be excommunicated from family and friends. Though you were kicked out of the Oakwell clan for thievery, as I understand it. While I was stoned from my village out of ignorance and hatred for simply existing. Still our pains are the same, right? Loss is loss, no matter how you cut it."

"I suppose," the fairy said. "I do not dwell on my Oakwell family. They live their existence and I serve a power greater than they will ever know."

"The Lady," Merle said, nodding. "I hear the pride in your voice. It is justified. I am proud to know your story continues in a way that helps shape the world in a positive way." He paused, thinking how much to share. "My story is not so simple. I was born in Wales, its shape, rivers, and mountains the basis for Annwn's creation. But that is a story for another time. For now, all you need know is this:

my mother was seduced by an incubus, a demon. Such unions are rare. Rarer still are progeny. My mother did nothing to tempt the incubus. And in all my centuries of existence, I've never discovered why the incubus chose her.

"That is neither here nor there though. What matters is I was born as a demon's spawn. Due to my incubus heritage, I was aware the moment I left the womb and entered the sunlight beside the ocean. And I abhorred that light. Three priests were there behind my grandmother as I was pulled into the world; they had been told my mother had not lain with a man and to this day I bet they were there to witness a miracle like the birth of Jesus. But all I wanted to do in that moment was kill them in their fanciful idiocy." He shivered, remembering that feeling of hellish rage within. "Despite being just a babe, I had a bloodlust that rivaled any battling knight. I couldn't kill them though, too small and unlearned to do so. Instead, I cursed the priests in all languages, able to fully speak. And that sunlight. Ahh, that sunlight on my pink skin was as a hot iron placed to flesh. It burned. Burned in a way no one can fathom.

"My grandmother and two of the priests fled in horror, at my words, at my vehemence. They thought me Lucifer the Fallen, I have no doubt. But one priest remained." He shook his head, remembering as if it had just happened. "As my exhausted mother sobbed and I spit and fought the world I'd been born into, that priest took me, blessed me, baptized me in the ocean waters of my home, and just as quickly the rage of my demon side was supplanted by the peace of my humanity.

"So, I am half human and half demon."

"The magic comes from your incubus father then?" Snedeker asked.

"It does. And it is powerful. It has never waned in all my centuries," Merle shared. "I suspect my longevity is due to him as well."

"You haven't lost your magic then."

"No, I haven't," he said. "It is there. At the ready."

Snedeker grumbled. "Wizard, you aren't making sense. You said you have no magic."

"That is not what I said. I agreed with you that I wasn't much of a wizard anymore. There is a difference," Merle said, stroking his short beard in thought. "I will say this though. There have been many tellings featuring my story. Geoffrey of Monmouth. Wace. Sir Thomas Malory. T. H. White. Lady Mary Stewart, to name a few. I wish I was the Merlin in any of them. The truth is boring in comparison, to be honest. I think you'll agree."

"When it comes to my ability to use magic, as I age, my physical body grows weaker even as the strength of my magic remains the same," he said, shaking his head. "I can no longer use such magic because I lack the youthful physical integrity to do so. I fear even the simplest spell now might grow beyond my control to deadly effect. Like a ceramic pitcher no longer able to hold water once it is cracked, so too is my body when it comes to magic. The last time I used magic it almost destroyed London, a large city in this world. Never again can I use it."

"I see. Now you rely on others," the fairy deduced.

"I created the Knights of the Yn Saith and the Heliwr to have an order of magic users that would replace my own lack of use. It was one of my last acts of magic, but a necessary one. They have become an extension of my magic, of my will, and now are my family after a fashion, even if some in my family dislike or even hate me. Such are families."

"Crackthistle, that is a strange tale." The fairy patted Merle's shoulder with a tiny hand. It was a gesture quite out of character for the fairy but one Merle appreciated all the same. "Perhaps it is a story with a leprechaun's silver lining. I think you were lucky to find a new family."

"I think that very thing too, Snedeker." He stood up. "This is our stop."

A small weight lifted from him by the telling of his story, Merle

exited the light rail and walked several blocks, passing one of his favorite spots, University Book Store. He found it hard not to venture inside. Founded in 1900, it was one of the oldest college bookstores still operating. It was a great deal larger than his Old World Tales, but Merle visited there often to listen to touring authors or lecturing guests or just to peruse new or used books. For him, books replaced the magic he could no longer use. And knowledge was the only way to counter the world's darker elements.

Instead, he crossed into the University of Washington's campus, strolling by the new law building toward Red Square, so named for the red brick that students walked over every day on their way to classes. Multiple buildings surrounded the square, the most grandiose being Suzzallo Library, built with a gothic look in mind, tall and forbidding with leaded and stained glass and sharp angles. To its right, Merle glimpsed the majesty of Mount Rainier rising into the azure sky beyond a large fountain to the south, Tahoma lording over them all at great distance.

"Interesting," Snedeker said from his perch as Merle's shoulder.

"What is it?"

"A grotesque watches us."

Merle stopped and glanced at the front of the library. He saw more than a dozen terra-cotta gargoyles representing different historical figures in niches atop buttresses—ranging from Moses to Shakespeare to Adam Smith.

"I sense it too," Merle said. "Dante watches us."

"Should I go talk with him?" Snedeker asked.

"Yes. Find out what he wants."

Merle sensed the fairy leave his shoulder, flying upward toward the statue that possessed the likeness of Dante Alighieri, the man responsible for writing what was arguably the most important Italian literary work, *The Divine Comedy*. While the gargoyle wasn't the notable Middle Ages poet, the curiosity of what the grotesque wanted was worth stopping for a moment. Not every gargoyle had

been imbued with life on campus, but those that had witnessed students, professors, tourists, and of course magical beings.

The wizard waited on the wide steps leading to the front of Suzzallo Library as the day moved toward lunch time. Merle realized he was becoming hungry.

After about fifteen minutes, Snedeker returned. "Dante would *not* stop talking," the fairy growled, frustration permeating the space between the fairy and the wizard. "Heaven. Hell. Things that an Oakwell fairy such as myself cares not for."

"What did the gargoyle want?"

"He was merely curious why you were here and if it involved a woman named Glennys Robin? Said he has seen you come and go over the years. Said she likes you quite a bit. Said she knows your secrets."

Merle shook his head. "Well, Dante is a grotesque. Gargoyles tend to be lonely creatures, just based on their existence, and are therefore chatty. He doesn't know everything though. And neither does Glennys."

"Who is she?"

"You'll see. Follow me."

Merle took the steps and entered Suzzallo Library, its doors heavy but yielding to him. Eyes adjusting to the gloom, he took the grand staircase upward, passing those who were coming and going as they worked for the university, were there to study, or merely visited to view the artful architecture that had been in existence for almost a hundred years. It had been a while since he had spoken to Glennys, but he knew UW's collection of rare and exotic books had several volumes that could aid him in his quest for the witch. And she oversaw them all, privy in a way few were to such frail—and possibly dangerous—items. They'd known one another for several decades and it was his lack of perceptibly aging that caught her attention and outed his secret.

"Before we enter, you should know what secrets Dante meant,"

Merle said, speaking to the fairy who hovered invisibly somewhere nearby. "Glennys knows my identity. She knows of the Knights of the Yn Saith. She knows of Annwn. And knows of the Fae, the Seelie and Unseelie Courts, and that magic is real." He paused as a student walked by them down the hallway, giving Merle a frown before leaving out of sight. "To my knowledge, she has never seen a member of the Fae. Or a fairy such as yourself. But she knows of your existence. I know your magic takes a small toll on you to stay invisible, and I'd rather you be as strong as possible before we confront the witch. I am simply sharing that you may let your guard down with her if you so choose. Might be quite fun, actually."

"Richard has shared that you are not a man prone to folly, that every word you speak should be scrutinized but also trusted to a point." The fairy sighed. "I could use a break from magic's use if you feel she would not be frightened."

Merle shrugged. "Perhaps that time is now then. There are some aspects of the future that I can see, like a ripe apple hanging from a limb. Obvious with only one way for it to fall. Other aspects, it's like feeling a wind, uncertain where it blows next but knowing the general direction." He paused, grabbing the door's handle. "I think Glennys would handle your company with curiosity rather than fear. May we enter now?"

Merle didn't wait for a response before he opened the office's door.

Glennys looked up from a new hardcover on her desk, a serious mien brightening considerably. She was remarkably similar in appearance to when he'd first met her—thin like a long knife and pinched mouth with hair pulled back away from her face. Only her hair had changed from the dark brown of her youth to mostly silver, and where smooth skin had once been wrinkles now had taken up residence. In her youth, she'd worked with the former curator of the collection as his assistant, a part time job as she pursued other

interests. Eventually, she'd fallen in love with the rare books she helped oversee, becoming their guardian and protector.

"Myrddin!" She stood, clearly delighted.

"Hello, Glynnys," Merle said, smiling and closing the door. "Hard at work, I see."

She glanced down and gestured at the manuscript. "Not working too hard. It's a recent translation of *The Secret History of Mongols*. Received a request this morning from the Department of History to offer a viewing of our much older text that's in our collection. I'm using this version of the title to decide which exciting parts I should gather and share with the department." She grinned at him. "I'm surprised to see you, though I'm sure you merely need something."

Merle nodded, glancing about. He liked being in her office. Stacks of books, maps, and even tubes containing scrolls from centuries past—organized as only she could know—were littered about the room. A bank of tall windows gave her a view of Red Square and some of the tall trees that lined it. He sometimes wished he'd chosen to work at the library rather than open Old World Tales downtown, though he couldn't imagine life without the store. If it hadn't been for the portal and its location near the stadiums, he probably would have done it.

"I'm not here socially, though it is lovely to see you, as usual," Merle said. "No, there is a worrisome situation, one that requires grave care in how it is handled. I thought I would start here and with you."

"Happy to help as I can," she said, sitting and offering him the chair across from her.

Right then, Snedeker materialized, hovering next to the wizard.

Merle doubted Glynnys was ever truly surprised, her life quite structured on campus as well as off. But the wonder on her face made her look eight years old again. Snedeker was an Oakwell fairy. And like all Oakwell fairies, he was only about six or seven inches

tall and composed mostly of bits and pieces of the forest. Dark, fine bark for skin. Moss for a short beard. Arms and legs looking like disjointed twigs. One would have thought Snedeker was some leftover gathering of different plants on a forest floor except for the intelligence staring from black eyes, a perpetual scowl on his face, and the flexing of rainbow-hued wings on his back.

"Well now, this truly must be important," Glynnys said, observing the fairy.

"I knew you might think so," Merle said. "Do you have any sugar?"

Glynnys opened several of her desk drawers, looking. She could barely take her eyes off the fairy. After a bit of time, she produced white packets and handed them over to Merle. The wizard tore them open carefully and placed them on the desktop. Snedeker landed and reached his tiny hands inside one of the packets and began to eat the treat.

He nodded to Glynnys. "Thank you, my Lady."

She laughed, eyes alive with the wonder of seeing one of the Fae. "My Lady. My Lady, you say. Haven't been called that in a long time." She grinned at him. "How extraordinary."

Merle couldn't help but smile. "You seem to be taking this well, Glynnys. Most people would run screaming from Snedeker's appearance."

"Snedeker, huh? Lovely name. Well, I work on a campus filled with kids who are free of their parents and just now discovering the mischief they are allowed to fall into it," she said. "This probably isn't the most unusual thing I've seen, even this week." She leaned back in her chair. "Tell me, Merle, why are you here?"

"I seek a witch." Merle remained standing, hands crossed before him. "One living somewhere north of the city."

"And what concerns you about this witch?"

"The portents say she is a danger to Seattle. That is all I know. Once I find her, I will be better able to assess the reason—and prevent it if I can."

Glynnys took her glasses off to clean them.

"A witch, huh?"

"I know nothing beyond that. I don't know how old she is. Or if her origins are here or the Misty Isles or somewhere else. Or what power she's capable of wielding. I just know I need to find her and fast. Are you aware of any book or item in the archives here at the university that could help me locate her whereabouts?"

"You can't find her with magic?"

Merle shook his head. "I am limited in what I can do with my own magic, I'm afraid."

Glasses returned the bifocals to her face. Then, she rose and grabbed her keys from a hook by the door. "Follow me to Allen Library South."

Snedeker pouted having to leave the sugar. Merle gave him a dark glance that spoke what would happen to him if he didn't, and the wizard followed his friend as he knew the Oakwell fairy would cloaked in invisibility. Glynnys did not look back but instead took several staircases downward into the bowels of the library, the stone of the walls and floor less hewn and darker in color the farther they ventured. Students with backpacks and faces in phones paid her no mind even as fellow Suzzallo staff gave her deferential greetings. She had been there a long time and those who knew that showed respect. It was one achieved from a lifetime caring for the library, its contents, and the knowledge preserved in those items.

Merle sensed when they passed below ground. The stairs ended and a passageway began. It was well lit and free of moisture and was neither warm nor cold. Merle thought they'd walked far enough that they were no longer within the boundary of Suzzallo Library. Soon Glynnys came to a locked door requiring a passcode and a card she produced from her pocket. Merle knew such rooms existed all over the world. It would be temperature controlled and its humidity kept at an optimum range to preserve the leather,

paper, parchment, vellum, leather, and other materials used over the centuries to create books.

No one was within the room when Glynnys entered. She gave Merle a smile that hid secrets as she gathered gloves designed specifically for handling the treasures around them. Rows of low shelves spread into the distance with an entire area devoted to glass cases containing all manner of items. Glynnys left them for a few minutes, going into the stacks that were well lit.

"There is magic here," Snedeker whispered, materializing.

Merle nodded. "I feel it too."

When Glynnys returned, she carried a hardcover, oversized by current publishing standards, bound in reddish and faded leather with chipped gold designs on the front and spine. A brass clasp kept it closed. She placed the tome carefully on a viewing table. No title graced it.

"As curator, I am given full access to this room," Glynnys said, her voice lowered. "This has been part of the collection from before my time. It is a copy of *Malleus Maleficarum*, translated as the *Hammer of Witches*. This is a fourth printing, though still from the fourteenth century. It has been rebound since that time, but its pages are intact." She undid the clasp and opened it. The pages featured flowery script, large drop caps at the start of sections, and even had strange writing in the margins by a different hand and source of ink. "As you can see, some witch-crazed reader placed notes in the margins throughout, notes written in some code that no one has been able to decipher. It is the one book here that may aid you, though I don't know for certain."

Merle took a closer look at it. Snedeker flew to his shoulder, also observing. The script in the margins did look strange, though he felt like he'd seen it somewhere before.

"That is no code," the Oakwell fairy said. "That is a language of the Fae, of my kin in fact, the fairies."

The wizard saw that Snedeker was correct. Given what he knew of the fairy and his expelling from his clan, it surprised him that such a creature could know and read something the wizard could not. It just went to show that aid could come from the strangest of places.

"What does it say, Snedeker?"

The fairy flew above the tome as Glynnys turned pages slowly, giving the reader time. "It is a spell. A location spell, if I'm not misreading it. The language is quite old. But I think it helps the caster find witches."

"That makes sense, actually," Merle said, considering the information. "Centuries ago, in the Misty Isles, the fairy clans helped the Morrigan ferret out three covens that were attempting to subvert the Tuatha de Danann. As they make excellent guides, the fairies would have been using magic to locate those witches." He looked to Glynnys, fearing the answer. "May I take the book off campus? It seems we need this spell."

Glynnys looked at him as if a squirrel had just run across his face. Then she laughed. "Are you serious? No. No, of course not. If anything happened to it, it'd be my expulsion. I like you, Myrddin, but not that much."

He thought on that. "I knew that'd be your answer. Can you gently open to all pages that feature the Fae writings in the margin. So that Snedeker may memorize the spell?"

She did so. To his credit, the fairy focused on the book, mumbling under his breath as he read and read again and yet read again the words. Minutes passed. Merle and Glynnys both watched him, never interrupting.

"I know it," he said at last.

"You're sure?" Merle questioned.

Snedeker snorted. "Want my help or not, wizard?"

"I wish you luck in your hunt." Glynnys grinned at the fairy as

she closed the book and then its clasp once more. "But may I give a word of caution, Myrddin?"

"Certainly."

"Women have been persecuted for centuries," she said, holding the book in front of her. "This is a testament to that. It helped men kill thousands of women in Europe who were not actually witches at all. While I understand that witches are real and some carry ill intentions, I can't help but wonder what the story is for the one you seek. Make sure her intentions are truly evil and not simply misunderstood. It'd be a shame that this book would cause more harm than it already has."

"I will keep that in mind, Glynnys. You have my word," Merle said. He understood her worry more than most. He'd see witches take the brunt of willful ignorance before. "And just so you know, I have always thought you have a bit of witch in you, you know that?"

"If a witch is a woman who makes up her own mind, then yes," she said, winking at him even as she moved to return the copy of *Malleus Maleficarum* to its rightly place in the stacks. "Now, let's get you both out of here and on your way. Before you get me fired."

The three of them left the same way they'd entered. Once back inside Suzzallo Library, Glynnys walked Merle and his invisible fairy to the building's entrance. There, she gave Merle a warm hug, the two nodding to one another before parting. Sometimes words were not necessary among friends.

Merle left without looking back, exiting the library into bright sunshine. He ventured out of Red Square, seeking a quiet place on the northern campus with no one about where the fairy could enact his new memorized spell.

Merle located a bench beneath trees that were hundreds of years old and sat.

"Well, Snedeker, let's see if that spell actually works."

"I did not sign up for this."

"No, you didn't," Merle said. "Life is strange though. You'll have to focus on what I've told you about this witch, where she might be, as you work the magic. I cannot enact the spell, and you are the only one here who can."

"What if it harms me?"

"I doubt it will."

"But what if—"

"There are a great many ifs in this world, Snedeker. My entire life entertains ifs, but I tell you now that this is not an if situation," Merle said, deciding on a different tactic. "Perhaps you are saying you can't do it. I mean, *if* you are too afraid to try."

Merle could hear Snedeker grinding teeth, the barb having struck deep.

"The pukupstle you say, wizard. I am not afraid of anything."

Before Merle could even stop the fairy, Snedeker was reciting the spell's words. The Oakwell's voice was true, never quavering as so many spell wielders did when using magic. The wizard had to admit he was impressed. Given time and education, the guide to Richard McAllister could be a formidable practitioner of the arts.

The final words trailed into the afternoon. Merle felt the magic of the spell come alive. It remained part of the world about them and then spread outward in a circle.

"It worked," Snedeker whispered.

"And?"

"Impossible."

Merle didn't like the sound of that. "What is it? Where is she?"

"Everywhere."

Merle's heart sank deep into his chest. "What do you mean? Explain in detail."

"The magic worked. I felt it as I'm suddenly quite tired," Snedeker said, settled upon Merle's shoulder again. "And in my mind, I can feel where she is. But..."

"But what?"

"It's like she's everywhere. Or she's become thousands of witches, and *they* are everywhere."

Merle sat there, puzzling over what Snedeker had revealed, the warmth of the day gone as cold settled into him. It was possible the witch had used her arts to prevent others from seeking her out, creating an illusion that she was everywhere for any magic wielder attempting to find witches in the Seattle area.

Then a thought came to him. "Snedeker, are the pinpoints centralized?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, did the spell show you any area of the city that had a higher concentration of where this woman is?" Merle tried to find a better way to explain it. "Like, are there more of her in one spot than all of the rest?"

"Hmm, yes, I would say so. The spell felt brighter at a large lake just to the north of us. Especially around the northern edge of the lake. Yes, I think that's right."

"Green Lake." The wizard stood, smoothing his light coat back into its proper place and withdrawing his pipe. It was a start, what the fairy had found. "Then that is where we will go. If the witch used an illusion spell to cloak her whereabouts, it would have been uniform all over the city. It'd be the best way to hide. That is not what you shared when you activated the spell, right?"

"No." Excitement filled the fairy's voice as he began to understand what the bookseller meant. "You think whatever magic she is using, she uses it more in the area where she lives."

"Precisely. You see, you aren't as daft as Richard makes you out to be."

Snedeker snorted. "And you not so incompetent. The spell finds her magic usage, not her specifically."

"Correct."

"Now what?"

"To another bus. And Green Lake."

The fairy still hidden and affixed to the wizard's shoulder, they walked to the street bordering the western side of campus. After only a few minutes, a bus heading toward the lake pulled up, the doors opening to reveal a driver who watched people leave and then paying people enter. Merle found a seat up front where he could keep an eye on what stop to exit. Various students mingled with adults, and Merle even spied someone reading the newly published Arthurian novel, *The Bright Sword*. Given his history with the Round Table, that made the wizard smile. The trip didn't take long and, after thirty minutes, they were on the north side of Green Lake.

"This doesn't seem like a lake to my eyes," Snedeker said, noting ancient cedar trees and the sun's shimmer upon the water across the street.

"Green Lake has been here a long time. Since the last Ice Age. A glacier pushed its way into the ground here tens of thousands of years ago, carving it out. Eventually the people of Seattle would dredge to deepen it, built a dike to keep the water in, and created these grassy parks you see about it. It is home to hundreds of different plants and animals. In the summer, parking is almost impossible to find around here."

"It is a fake lake then?"

Merle shrugged. "As fake as you see. Does it appear fake?"

"Yes. To my eyes, at least. It seems a lot of humans like fake things."

The wizard couldn't argue with that. Though he thought Green Lake quite lovely in the middle of a major city like Seattle. "Now that we are here, can you use the spell again. Perhaps find where this witch has used her power recently and nearby."

The fairy did as requested—with no snarky retort forthcoming oddly enough.

"That building there," Snedeker said, pointing. "The magic has been used there and quite recently!"

THE GREEN LAKE WITCH

That was unexpected. Merle paused, considering. It was no mere building. It was a restaurant, Duke's Seafood. The wizard knew of the businesses—Duke's had multiple locations around the Puget Sound—and he'd even had their award-winning chowder at Lake Union during the cold winter months. The location before him had a large deck overlooking the lake and its main road around it. On such a nice day, most of the tables were taken, lunch and happy hour goers enjoying the restaurant's menu items. Servers bustled like swallows, swooping in to take orders, deliver food, or whisk away used plates, utensils, and glasses. And laughter intermingled with the buzz of discussion. Merle had never been to the Green Lake Duke's, but he could see it was the perfect restaurant for the area.

"Let us go in then," Merle said. "Be wary. Even a witch doesn't want to out herself to the world. If she is there, she will not jeopardize her identity unless necessary. But when that happens, it can be very dangerous for all involved."

Snedeker sighed. "What of you? You have no power to stop her if that happens, right?"

"I do not," Merle said. "But that's why I have you, faithful Snedeker."

The fairy cursed, grumbling about how if he'd known more about the situation, the inadequacies of the wizard, and the power of the witch, he never would have agreed to the deal.

Merle paid him no mind. Instead, he took a few steps up to the front entrance of Duke's. Just inside the doorway, a young woman waiting at a host stand welcomed him with a smile.

"I'll sit at the bar please," he said.

She nodded politely and delivered him to a stool along with the normal menu and the fresh sheet of the day. When the bartender had taken his order and returned with a lemonade, Merle scanned the interior of the restaurant looking for the witch.

There were a few women sprinkled about the open room, all with friends or work cohorts. At the bar, it was mostly men, drinking

beer or cocktails while they watched a baseball game shown on two televisions in the corners of the room.

"Do it again."

"What? The spell?" Snedeker whispered.

The wizard nodded as he took a sip of his lemonade, viewing one of the televisions as if he cared. "You should be able to pinpoint her now if she is here."

"You will not like this. There are two people with the magic on them. Neither women."

"Interesting. Who?"

Snedeker shared in the quietest voice he could muster. Both men were sitting at the bar with Merle. Both men were in their late twenties or early thirties. And both men lacked wedding rings. The closest to Merle sat two stools down from him with no one sitting between.

"Excuse me," the wizard asked the man. "Do you know that gentleman at the end of the bar? The one with the black hair?"

The other frowned at the question but did look.

"No. Should I?"

Merle laughed, trying to set the other at ease. "No, no. Just curious." He paused, thinking. "Have you been out with a woman lately, one that might be . . . I don't know . . . exotic in some way?"

A flicker of recognition crossed his mien. "Not sure why I should even answer that."

"You don't have to," Merle said, shrugging. He had to be delicate and had to set the man at ease to get what he needed. "I just thought I saw you with someone the other day is all. I come to Green Lake often. She had a look about her."

The bar patron smiled a bit. "No doubt. She's a former Miss Washington."

The other man sitting in the last stool who also had witch magic tied to him looked up at this and stared down the way at them. He had a hard look about him and was tall and handsome.

The interest he showed spoke volumes; he had also likely met a Miss Washington recently. The same woman.

Clearly, the witch used her feminine wiles to enact her magic.

"That's incredible," the wizard said. "What was her name? I'll look her up."

"Ichelle Wells."

Merle nodded. "Well, good luck with her. You two looked good together."

The man went back to ignoring him. So did the other guy. It didn't matter. Merle had what he wanted. He placed money on the bar for his lemonade and, smiling politely to the bartender and then host, left Duke's Seafood and returned to the lovely day.

"What happened back there?" Snedeker said at the wizard's ear.

"She's a wily one, this witch."

"What do you mean?"

"It is as I surmised. The spell we found in the *Malleus Maleficarum* is for locating her magic. Not her specifically. The Fae who wrote the spell could easily enact it to find a witch—at the time it was used. Way back then, dozens or perhaps only a hundred people would have been in proximity to a witch. There'd only be one such woman or small coven in such a small community. One seeking a witch would only need to track their magic to find them. But now, centuries later, the population has grown, and she's apparently used her magic everywhere, creating thousands of trails that the spell picks up on. The spell is a good one, just not as useful as I'd hoped."

"This witch, she's had contact with those two men at the bar," the fairy surmised.

"Yes, and they didn't know one another. She's using her magic on people, likely only men," Merle said, thinking through what that could mean.

"But why?"

The wizard shrugged. He walked across the street from the restaurant to the green grass of the park about the edge of the lake.

"That's what worries me. Can you use the spell one more time. Focus in on the most concentration of magic."

Snedeker did so. Merle felt the spell rise out of the fairy and spread out, seeking. The fairy tapped the wizard on the shoulder "The highest concentration is close, just around the bend of the lake," the Fae creature said. "Just over that way. Though it seems to be in the lake, which is strange."

"Let's go for a walk then."

Merle walked beneath the boughs of cedar trees hundreds of years old, hands behind his back and pipe in one of them. By all appearances, he was merely an elderly man going for a stroll on a beautiful day's late afternoon, finding relaxation in the peace. It was a façade. He kept alert for danger from any quarter. Witches were cunning, this one perhaps more so than others. But nothing of her presented itself. Joggers, walkers, and people pushing strollers or running with leashed dogs used the concrete path about the lake's edge, all going at different speeds and directions. Families and friends picnicked, and squirrels ran down to the ground to investigate what those people ate, only to return to the safety of the tree canopies. Merle enjoyed the day about him. Life slowed down at Green Lake when compared to the bustling city outside its borders. All parks possessed that kind of magic. Merle took satisfaction from it despite Snedeker's condemnation of the park's origins.

After a short walk, he found what he was looking for long before Snedeker confirmed the obvious. The witch spent time on the lake's single island, named Duck Island, one not in the middle of the waters but instead close to shore. He asked Snedeker to warily scout the island.

It didn't take long.

"She is not there," the fairy said. "It's her home though, no doubt about it."

"What did you find?"

"A simple one-room home built from the nature about the lake,"

he said. "It was also cloaked in illusion, but I could see beyond the glamor. A comfortable bed, a chair, a small desk with a tree stump for a chair, several books, various bottles and pouches filled with ingredients of all sorts, stacks of firewood, and a small worn cauldron that appears to be older than even you."

"We wait until she returns," Merle decided. He did not care for the island in and of itself. Only the witch mattered and to confront her in her home could yield some nasty surprises he'd just assume not bumble into. "And hope we can talk to her without causing a ruckus."

Merle retreated from the lake's edge into the shadows among the cedar trees. He leaned against one of them and waited. Snedeker ventured high into the tree's boughs, keeping a watch out for the witch. The afternoon waned. The sun sank below the hill to the west of the lake. And the amount of people enjoying the park dwindled as dinner time came and went. Still, as the day darkened toward the purples of twilight, the witch did not return home.

Less patient men would have given up by this point. Not Merle. He had learned the art of patience over centuries. Even with Snedeker grumping at his ear from time to time about the witch not returning because she had better things to do, the wizard kept focused on the park around him. The moment one let their guard down was the moment evil deeds happened.

Eventually the sky darkened enough for a few stars to shine through the city's light pollution, and the day's warmth cooled but comfortably so.

Merle was wondering if Snedeker was right when a voice wove through the gloom.

"Did you get lost on a night stroll, Sir?"

Merle stepped forth onto the concrete path even as the shadow did a mere twenty feet away. She walked from under the very trees he'd hid within, a woman whose beauty came into view the moment the faint city illumination from around the lake touched

her. She stood tall, thick dark hair down to her mid-back, and she wore jeans and a shirt that hugged her curves. Her movements were graceful like a cat, languid and certain. Even in the faint light, Merle could see she possessed large light-green and yellow eyes, her stare like lanterns in the dark that men would never find true safety within.

No one was about. Even the night creatures had stilled. It was as if the city had been put to sleep and the wizard and the woman were the only two awake.

The power in her voice and bearing marked her as the witch he sought.

"I seek all manner of night creatures," he said with a grin. "Are you one of them?"

"Well, maybe," she purred, her words hot, passionate sex in shape and sound. "One more man, one more who is mine. And mine alone."

The part of Merle that remained human felt a stirring in his loins he had not experienced in a long time. It surprised him. This witch had real power. He knew not to bring Richard along for this hunt. "Lady, I am a wizard," he said, shrugging off her wanton words. He knew a great many others had not been able to do so. He kept his hands where she could see them, one still holding his pipe. "I know where you live. What you are. And I mean you no harm. That I promise."

"I see," she said, all lurid offerings stripped from her voice. "I doubt you mean no harm. And long ago, I left behind the promises of men."

Before Merle could say more, she crooked her fingers at different angles and with a hiss magic erupted about her, a torrent of blinding white light with rainbows at its edges. The wizard shielded his eyes even as Snedeker screamed from above.

When his blindness dissipated, Merle found he faced a beast from nightmare. An orange and red dragon had replaced her to

tower over him, head almost touching the tree canopy above and tail thrashing the lake below. She roared then—a sound that could stun lesser men—and shot fire at the wizard so hot its fringe was purple. Merle raised his hands up, the mystical pipe his shield of protection, even as his mind raced at what to do in his powerlessness.

That's when Snedeker attacked. A blur in the darkness, he swooped down and gathered dust from the ground and, yelling words of fairy conjuring, let loose the magic.

The grit now laced with silver magic fell on the changed witch.

But it was like the dragon wasn't there. The fairy magic flared to life when it hit the concrete and gravel walkway below and winked out.

That's when Merle realized no heat struck his shield.

The dragon was an illusion.

"Come now, miss," Merle said, adjusting his jacket once more. "It was a lovely illusion. Very well crafted. Like the glamour you have placed upon your home island. But I am no mere man. And my fairy companion tires of the tricks."

"Who are you?" the witch growled, returned to her original form.

"You may call me Merle. I own a bookstore in south Seattle. A quaint little shop that I love." He took his pipe out and began to pack it with tobacco. Doing so settled his nerves and hoped it did the same for her. "You likely know me by a different name. Merlin of the Lake. He Who Cannot Die. Mithranlyn. Maerlyn. A few others. But Merle suits me well right now."

"I see. Myrddin Emrys. Friend to the Pendragons." She spat at this. "Long-lived wizard and friend to one of the world's earliest long-running patriarchies."

Merle shook his head. "Yes, I am old. No, I do not wish men in control of all lives. Life is about balance. Men and women are two halves of the whole. And only darkness comes when half is missing or reduced. Arthur learned this. All too clearly." He paused,

considering her. "Now, I have been kind in answering your question. What name do you go by?"

She eyed him cautiously. He knew she weighed how much she should trust him. "I am Ichelle. With various surnames I'd rather not dwell upon. I'm not as known as you," she said finally with a hint of disdain. "From Spain. Arrived in this land by way of Europeans when it was peopled by the Duwamish. Green Lake has been my home for over a century, though its surroundings have changed greatly during that time." She pointed at him with her chin. "You have one of the Fae with you. Be seen, fairy. I will not harm you."

Snedeker materialized then, hovering near Merle. He sat at his customary place on the wizard's shoulder. "I will not let you harm Myrddin Emrys. Not while I yet live, witch."

"My, my. Strong words from one so small." The witch laughed. The sound mocked the fairy but, to Snedeker's credit, he did not rise to the bait. "I thought all the fairies had been relegated to Annwn. How marvelous."

"Snedeker is of the Oakwell clan. And guide to the Heliwr."

"I've felt the knight's magic on the Seattle breeze." She walked to the edge of the lake, looking south toward the glow of skyscrapers. "I even tried to call his wiles to me here at the lake but failed. He is strong, for being one so broken. Wish you'd brought him along."

"He is unique. And I knew better than to include him in this. But let us not discuss him." Merle joined her by the water. Trees growing from the shore added to the gloom, but he could still make out her island. "I came to find you for a reason."

"Ahh, you divined portents. And they told you to find me."

"Yes."

"Well, I cannot say I am surprised." With sure hands, she began to place her thick hair in a braid that soon trailed over her shoulder. "I have been hard at work. I was bound to garner attention from someone. A wizard like you. That fat Archbishop Glenallen.

Another witch. Or similar." She sighed when she finished with her hair. "Yes, I knew someone would find me. But I prepared."

She looked behind them. Merle and Snedeker did the same. Shadows in the darkness approached. They were clearly men and coming from different directions—some from the west, north, and east, and between. They were not running but were quickly striding, all at a similar pace. Merle wouldn't have worried except their eyes glowed green in the darkness. The witch had them under her control.

"I do not think time is on your side, Merle of Old World Tales."

He hadn't mentioned the name of the bookstore. Ichelle knew of the wizard, had planned for him. He realized in that moment that the dragon illusion had been a diversion. She'd stolen time to summon those under her thrall. Merle understood the danger the portents had alluded to. The witch had spread her influence over the entire city, tethering people to her wiles and whim. The men answering were not a serious threat to him—Snedeker would be more than capable of handling those who approached—no, it was the army she'd created. Thousands if Snedeker's use of the spell was correct, all at her beck and call.

With such an army, she could take over the city with a thought.

"Snedeker will hurt them."

The witch laughed. "Like I care. They are but patches in a much larger quilt and can be replaced. The one thing about witches, we know how to sew."

"I am here to talk. Not fight. What are you planning to do with these men you've gathered?" Merle asked, keeping calm. He hoped to prevent the need for the fairy to harm any of them.

"How can it not be obvious?" Ichelle hissed like a snake about to strike. Only a few feet separated the two, but it felt like miles. "Have you seen what is happening in our world today, wizard? To this country we now call home?"

"More than you know."

"Then you know a great shift has happened. The murder of my kind has already begun. And by my kind, I don't mean witches. I mean women. Men in this country passing laws to take away our rights. Women are already dying. It is murder done by politicians—not with a knife or pistol or bomb but with a pen. A woman goes to her doctor for medical care and is rejected. Due to laws written by the patriarchy. By misogynists. These people wish to control us. I will not let it happen. *Cannot* let it happen. Like you, I am old. Centuries have come and gone and come again since my birth. I have seen what happens when men couple their religion with a quest for power. It never ends well for the *women*. Once, they'd be burnt at the stake. Now, the fire and stake have been replaced by law. And it will only worsen as time goes on. This is not something I shall be silent about; this is not something I will choose to ignore and let happen."

"I agree with every word you say, Ichelle," Merle said. He had seen it before, firsthand at times. He remembered then what Glynys had asked of him, to look at it from her point of view. The witch was not evil, not yet at least. Her words and feelings had merit. "The anger you feel is valid. A great many men feel it as well. But controlling people with your magic for your own ends is just as terrible. Just as damaging to the fabric of our society. There must be another way."

"There is no other way!" she thundered back. Rage twisted her beauty into a dark visage. "I've heard this before. Always from a man. 'Keep calm, woman. Remain silent.' No, I will not. Not for you. And not for anyone else."

"No one is saying for you to stay silent." As the men under the witch's thrall grew closer, Merle nodded to Snedeker. The fairy left him, preparing new dust to keep the wizard safe. "I am over a thousand years old and have seen governments, regimes, and

organizations rise and fall. The change we seek cannot come through strength of magic and taking over the minds of thousands. It is just as intrusive as what these men want to do to women."

She snorted. "What's your answer then, great and powerful wizard?"

"Work with me. Together, we will find that solution."

"Heard that before. Not good enough," Ichelle countered.

Merle took a deep breath and looked out over the lake toward where the University of Washington and its Suzzallo Library existed. He thought of Glynnys again. In her lifetime, she'd seen change for her gender in ways no century had previously witnessed. The ability to vote. To possess a credit card in her name. To even own a home without a husband. To have autonomy over her body. Really, it needed to be Glynnys at Merle's side in this moment, talking to the witch, with the encouragement and wisdom of a life spent fighting to overturn the status quo of man's creation.

Instead, the wizard had to rely on what he thought his friend would say.

"I offer you the most powerful magic. The magic of your personal story. And having others then listen to that magic. The best magic is in stories. Stories are the best way to convey what is needed and how to confront what comes. A story can change an opinion. A story can invigorate those who have lost hope. A story can break chains. And a story can move nations." He finally lit his pipe, its smoke wafting on the air. "And while I am a great many things, I have ever been one of the world's best storytellers."

The witch said nothing. He could tell she mulled over what he said. As she did so, Snedeker threw some of his dust along the concrete pathway, creating a wall of flame between the two speakers and the approaching men. Not to fight them but to dissuade.

Merle hoped the fairy wouldn't have to fight to protect him.

"I will listen to you, first and foremost," he continued, seeing

his words soften her hatred. "Learn your stories. What makes you who you are due to what you've seen and how you've lived. We will distill your anger and fear into stories. Together. And in that way, bring your message to the masses. With a megaphone at your lips. The ranks following you will swell. We will orchestrate marches and peaceful protests that will spread to other cities, other lives, and connect with other stories. Those stories will weave together into the tapestry you crave. Not due to magic or controlling minds. But because of the power of *your* story."

He could see the witch's age and anger behind her striking eyes. Ichelle had seen much. Those with the darkest pasts usually gave rise to the most promising futures.

Merle knew she was not beyond saving. Because he could see that light ahead.

The greater good that could come from her story.

Ichelle took a deep breath.

"I trust no one."

"I understand why. But you can trust me. These men you have magicked, they can be persuaded. Through peaceful discussion. By way of logic and reason. Not all of them, but most of them. Many are likely as angry as you are by the misogynistic politicians who have recently taken root in this country. Convincing the others will be hard work but it is doable. I know it can be done. But it must be done together. Not separate. And not through violence."

Ichelle listened to him. He saw her mind churning with his words. "What say you, fairy? You are far from home and seen much in Annwn. Can this wizard be trusted?"

Snedeker flew before her. "Myrddin Emrys speaks truly. Ever has since I have known him. The Heliwr believes this also."

If Merle could have given the fairy thousands of sugar packets right then and there, he would have.

"Send these men from us. And untether them," he said simply.

Ichelle did so faster than Merle realized. Those called by her magic turned from the lake and shambled back the way they'd come.

If the witch had done as asked, they'd only think it a dream.

And the others around the city would be freed as well.

"With no condescension implied, I am proud of you, Ichelle," Merle said, puffing on his pipe and letting his sigh vacate the smoke from his lungs. "Visit Old World Tales tomorrow. I will be there. And there, I will listen to your story, as long as it takes, and we will decide the course of the future."

She nodded. "Tomorrow, wizard."

"Tomorrow, witch."

Before more could be said, she wove her hands and vanished. Another illusion but one Merle would not try to undo. She deserved her privacy after such a night. Instead, he looked out over Green Lake. A bird called out a twill to a mate. Light from the moon danced upon the waters like Lightbringer fairies at play. Frogs croaked cordially to one another. The island seemed quite dark amid the night. The flames at his back died to nothing. And the fragranciness emitted by his pipe gave him hope for what was to come. For the present was as malleable as smoke on the air.

"Do you think she will come to the store?" Snedeker asked.

Merle began walking to Aurora Avenue, one of the main thoroughfares leading to Seattle from the north. They'd be able to ride a late-night bus back downtown. To make the walk back to Old World Tales a bit shorter one, at least.

"She will, my dear Snedeker," Merle said, his curiosity already piqued. "And I will no doubt listen to one hell of a story."