

Fantasy Short Story Collection

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Searching For Dragons

Note: Although this is an original fic, I have used the dragon characters, Xing Long and Xiao Xing, in my Forever Knight fan fiction. They are also my own original characters. This story does **not** take place in the FK universe.

* * * * *

Diana Price glanced around as she walked down the blacked-out streets of London, passing through Piccadilly Circus. A gas-mask carrying case hung over her shoulder like a purse. Everyone had to keep their windows completely covered up, lest the faintest flicker of a candle provide enough light for a German bomber to see his target. The result was an eerily dark abyss of a city. Just a few days ago, some poor soul had wandered into the river and drowned because he hadn't been able to see where he was going. Excellent vision was required to walk outside at night without bumping into anything.

The faint strains of swing music floated into the night from a dance club that Diana passed on her left. But that wasn't her destination. Instead, the petite brunette entered a bookstore painted on the outside in bright red with gold trim. The sign on the front door read "Xing Long's Books." The Mandarin Chinese character symbol used for Long was the same as the one used for dragon. The symbol for Xing meant star. Diana's knowledge of Mandarin consisted of a smattering of phrases and symbols, but it was enough for her purposes.

Various watercolor and oil paintings featuring scenes from Chinese mythology hung on the walls inside the bookstore. Dragons appeared frequently in the art. Behind the counter was a middle-aged Chinese man who appeared relatively harmless in a light blue cotton shirt and khaki pants. He also wore silver wire-framed eyeglasses.

"Hello," Xing said as she approached. "How may I help you?"

The British woman smiled. "I'm looking for information on dragons. Perhaps you could help me."

The Asian man raised an eyebrow. "Yes, I do have various accounts of dragons appearing in ancient mythology. What specifically are you looking for, madam?"

"I'm not looking for mythical dragons. I am searching for information on real ones."

Xing gave a quiet laugh. As he did, a black cat with sparkling peridot-green eyes suddenly made her presence known. Meowing loudly, she leapt from the cozy, dark corner onto the counter and regarded the customer with a suspicious gaze. *I don't trust her. This human is too curious,* the fairy dragon in feline form telepathically stated.

Relax, Xiao Xing. I will take care of this, Xing Long replied. Aloud, he said, "I am afraid that dragons do not exist, except in fairy tales."

Reaching into her purse, Diana brought out several photographs. The stark black-and-white images clearly depicted a man transforming into a dragon. In one photograph, scales covered half of his body. In another, wings protruded from his back.

In the final photograph, there was quite clearly a dragon complete with scales, wings, and a tail. A bombed-out apartment building in the background with one wall remaining showed that the dragon was larger than the building. She'd followed him to this bookstore a night ago. He'd walked out with several rare occult books. Diana had stayed hidden in the shadows, biding her time.

"I took these pictures myself. You cannot deny what they show," she said.

"I'm sorry, but I cannot answer your questions," he replied.

As Xing crossed his arms defiantly, the black cat hissed, stretching out a paw with sharp claws towards the photographs. The reporter quickly snatched them up.

"I have undeniable proof. The world will know about your kind one day," she declared.

He nodded. "That is why I cannot allow you to leave with the evidence."

He began to chant in an unintelligible language. A bluish haze slowly surrounded Diana. She grabbed her gas mask and strapped it on, but the spell permeated the material. In less than a minute she was asleep, though still standing up. Then he reached for the photographs. Nearby, a candle burst into flame, sending the earthy scent of sandalwood and pine wafting through the air. He held the photographs over the flame, letting them burn into ashes. With another spell, the air was cleansed of the scent.

"What shall I do with her now?" he mused.

Allow her to think it was all a dream, Xiao Xing replied. *But she must not believe that we are real.*

He nodded and wove the threads of the spell. The blue haze surrounding the reporter rippled like water in the dim light. "Awaken," he finished.

Diana blinked. Realizing that she was wearing her mask, she asked, "What happened? Was there an air raid?"

"The sirens sounded a while ago," he lied, "but we are fine. I think you fell asleep."

She removed the mask, blushing. "Oh. I feel dumb. I can't remember why I came in here now. Are you sure there wasn't any gas?"

"Yes," Xing replied. "Can I interest you in a book?"

"No thank you," the reporter said. "I should be going."

The Asian nodded, watching her leave into the night. "That was close," he sighed after the door had closed.

Diana walked out onto the dark street as jazz music floated into the black sky. For one fleeting moment, she could pretend that everything was normal. Night eclipsed a city ravaged by the dragons of war and battle, dragons that were far scarier than the ones in fairy tales. Life in wartime London went on.

* * * * *

The End

The White Eagle

His teacher was lecturing the class on algebraic equations, but Jamie wasn't paying attention. The twelve-year old boy was gazing out the window at the clear blue sky and imagining what it would be like to fly. The sound of Ms. Brighton calling his name brought Jamie back to reality. He glanced first at her, and then at the equation on the board. It was very simple: $x^2 + 5 = 9$.

"The answer is 2, Ms. Brighton."

She nodded. "Very good, Jamie. How did you get that?"

I looked at it and I knew the answer, he thought, but Jamie knew that wasn't what she wanted to hear. "I subtracted five from nine and got four, and I took the square root of four and got two for x."

"Very good." Ms. Brighton smiled at him and turned to the rest of the class. "When solving linear equations, you should always do what Jamie did. He worked backward. If you just try plugging in numbers for x until you get the answer, you'll eventually get it right, but if you did all the problems on a test that way, you'd never finish in time. Working through equations backwards is much faster, and also a whole lot easier. Let's try another problem."

Jamie's thoughts began to drift again. Somehow, he had thought that the advanced math class would be more exciting. This was the most advanced math class that the elementary school had to offer, and it was still boring. Ms. Brighton would make up more complicated homework problems for Jamie to do. He only had to complete a few of the regular homework problems, ten of his choosing. She usually assigned the class forty, but they were so easy that he could do them in ten or fifteen minutes. The rest of the class got their homework done in twice that time. So, Mrs. Brighton assigned him thirty difficult problems, which Jamie almost always got done in half an hour.

The bell rang, signifying the end of the school day. As usual, Jamie walked up to Ms. Brighton's desk. She turned to him, but instead of a smile, she had a worried look on her face. That bothered Jamie. Ms. Brighton was a pretty lady with blonde hair styled like that actress who played the female lead on the X-Files. Her eyes were turquoise blue, like the sky that Jamie had been daydreaming about. She was short, or at least, short for an adult, and she was very slender. Jamie wondered what he had done wrong. Was she that upset about his daydreaming?

The words were out of his mouth before the thought was over. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to daydream like that, Ms. Brighton. Really. I'll try not to do it anymore."

She shook her head. "Something's bugging you, isn't it? You know, Jamie, you can always tell me anything."

He gaped at her for a few moments, and then nodded. "I guess I'm pretty transparent, huh? Like those things you put our notes on."

She smiled. "Not quite that transparent. I can just tell when one of my students isn't as happy as they should be. What's wrong, Jamie?"

"I'm just..." he paused to search for the right words. "I'm tired of not fitting in. Nothing I do seems to work. Before I came to your class, I tried playing dumb. It worked for a while, but then my parents wanted to put me in a remedial class because my grades were so bad, so I had to tell them everything. None of my old friends want to talk to me anymore, except for Jerry, and we've been best friends since we were little. None of the kids in this class talk to me, because I'm new. I just wish I could find someplace special, someplace where people understand me and I understand them, someplace where I could be myself..." He sighed. "I can't explain it, but I just want to be somewhere else. This doesn't feel *right* anymore."

Now, Ms. Brighton was smart enough to realize that Jamie wasn't just talking about her class. Besides that, she also had a degree in child psychology, and she knew what Jamie was experiencing. Many other kids felt the same way.

"I think," Ms. Brighton said slowly and with a smile, "that you are very special, and that you'll find your niche, someday. You just have to keep looking, that's all. You have to try new things, and meet new people, and then you'll find what you're looking for. Want to know a secret?"

"Sure," Jamie said.

"I wasn't always a teacher."

"Really?"

Ms. Brighton nodded. "I was a child psychologist. One day, six years ago, an old friend of mine stopped by to visit. We had lunch, and while we were having lunch, she reminded me that I had once wanted to be a teacher. My friend convinced me, after a long talk, that I should go back to college and be a teacher. I haven't regretted that decision yet. The point is, I wasn't completely happy with my old job, but it was my friend who showed me that I should move on. Don't give up yet, Jamie. You've got your whole life ahead of you."

Ms. Brighton winked, and Jamie smiled.

"All right," his teacher said, "now let's find some math problems."

His mom was there when Jamie got home, working on her latest book on her computer. She wrote stories for children. This book would be the second one in a series about a

gopher and a rabbit who were next-door neighbors. The books were based on bedtime stories that she had told to Jamie and his sister Megan when they were younger.

"Hi, Mom."

She was tall and slender with long, chestnut-brown hair and brown eyes. She wore blue jeans and a gray sweater. "Hi, kiddo. How was school?"

"Okay. Can I go to the video arcade for a while?"

"How much homework do you have?"

"Not a lot. Just math, and a short story I have to read for English class. It's only fourteen pages, and I don't have to write anything about it."

"All right. We're going to eat at seven tonight. Your sister is coming home."

Jamie had a twenty-year old sister, Megan, who was in the Air Force and lived on the base in Minot, North Dakota, which was located about four and a half hours northwest of Minneapolis. She rarely got a chance to come home. Jamie nodded.

The video arcade was five blocks from his house. Halfway there, he stopped at a crosswalk and waited for the light to change. Jamie wished again that he could fly. *I would give anything*, he thought, *to be able to fly like Superman. Clark Kent definitely has it made.*

Suddenly, Jamie felt a peculiar tingling sensation, like the feeling he had gotten after sitting on his foot one time, only the tingling was much more pronounced and he felt it all over. The signal changed, and Jamie hurried across the street. As the tingling feeling turned into dizziness, Jamie felt as if he was going to throw up. He ducked into a nearby alley because he didn't want anyone to see him vomit.

The buildings around him began to stretch. Jamie wondered if he was hallucinating. Then he looked down. Instead of the T-shirt, blue jeans, and sneakers he had been wearing, Jamie saw feathers. White feathers. He tried to scream, but all that came out was a terrified squawk.

Great, he thought sarcastically, *I've turned into a chicken.*

But then he saw his reflection in a nearby metal object, and Jamie discovered that he had not turned into a chicken, but an eagle. That made him feel a little better.

I thought eagles were mostly brown, he thought next.

Jamie glanced around to make sure that nobody was watching him. The alley was devoid of any human presence, save himself, but Jamie could not think of himself as human any

longer. He'd read about werewolves and seen a movie in which Michael J. Fox portrayed a teenager who became a werewolf, but Jamie had never heard of anyone turning into a bird, let alone a solid white eagle. Did that make him the first *werebird*? Jamie didn't know, but he did know one thing: He had gotten his wish, and he was not going to spend one more unnecessary moment on the ground.

Experimentally, he flapped his wings. Jamie realized that he was going to have to run in order to get off the ground. Then he backed up all the way to the end of the alley. He took one step forward, then another, and another until he was running. At the last moment, he leapt into the air and flexed his wings. He gained enough momentum to overcome Earth's gravity.

He was flying! Jamie couldn't believe it. It didn't take him very long to rise above the buildings and even the skyscrapers. He could see some of the people below looking at him and pointing, but it didn't matter. He was flying! He was free!

Jamie flew higher and higher until he could no longer see the people, and the buildings looked like miniatures. He let out a whoop of delight as he soared through the sky, startling a few other birds as he rushed past.

Time lost its meaning as Jamie tested his wings, gliding for miles until he had to flex his wings again. Suddenly, out of the corner of one eye, he saw that the sun was beginning to set. Remembering what his mother said and realizing that it must be about seven-thirty, Jamie turned back.

He swooped down and circled the city until he saw his father's bright red car in the driveway, along with his sister's pickup truck. Jamie landed in the backyard and was struck by panic as he tried to think of a way to change back to his old self. Finally, he just wished it, and it worked. Jamie ran into the house, only to find his parents and his sister seated at the table with the remains of food on their plates.

"Where have you been?" His father demanded.

"I..." Jamie gulped, knowing that his parents would never believe the truth. "I went to the video arcade."

"We looked for you there," his dad replied. "We didn't see you."

"We were getting worried," his mother added. "You could have at least called."

"I'm sorry," he answered. "I guess I was having so much fun, I forgot about the time. I didn't remember until I saw the sun starting to set. I came right home then."

"You still haven't answered our question," his dad reminded them all. "Where were you?"

Jamie was saved by the TV. The local news anchor came on. A picture appeared behind him. There was a white eagle, and its feathers were a stark contrast against the deep azure sky. Jamie recognized the bird as himself.

"This bird was seen late this afternoon flying over the Twin Cities. Birdwatchers from all across the Metropolitan area have reported it, and our Skycam got a few good pictures of it. At first, we thought it might be an albino, but then a close-up (the picture changed accordingly) showed that the eagle's eyes were brown, not pink. Some Native Americans say that the white eagle is a good omen. Superstition aside, the local experts that we talked to agreed that this could be a new species. We have contacted the National Wildlife Foundation, but have not yet received a reply. As soon as we hear from them, we will let you know."

The reporter checked his briefing. "In other news..."

"Amazing!" Jamie's dad exclaimed. "A new species of eagle. I can't wait to see it up close." He was a biologist, and taught at the University of Minnesota.

"You don't think they're really going to try and capture it, do you?" Jamie heard himself inquire.

"Of course, they will! Everyone's going to want to get their hands on this bird, especially poachers. We have to make sure that the scientists get to it first."

Jamie felt nauseous. He didn't like the idea of being poked and prodded by well-meaning but over-enthusiastic scientists. Nor did he like the idea of being hunted by poachers, whose intentions were far less noble than the scientists'.

"Jamie, are you okay? You look a little green," Megan observed.

"Actually, I'm not feeling well," he admitted. He looked at his parents, one at a time. "May I go to my room? I have homework to do, anyway."

"Sure," his dad responded.

It took Jamie an hour to do his homework. There was a knock on the door as he read the last sentence of the story. "Come in," he said, closing the book.

Megan walked in. "Hi," she said. She had changed out of her uniform into jeans and a navy blue sweatshirt with the Air Force logo on it.

"Hi," Jamie answered.

"Mind if I sit down?" His sister asked.

"Go ahead."

Megan sat in the yellow beanbag in the corner by the bookcase. "So, what's up?" She asked.

"A lot," Jamie responded with a smile. "Did you know that I'm in an advanced math class now?"

His sister nodded. "How do you like it?"

"It's still boring, but Ms. Brighton gives me interesting homework problems to do. She's nice. I like her."

"Good. I'm glad things are working out."

"Megan?"

"Yeah?"

"Have you ever wished for something and gotten it, but not in the way you thought you would?"

She thought for a moment. "When I was your age," she replied, "All I ever wanted to do was fly. Now, I fly planes. I guess you could say I got my wish." She looked at him quizzically with deep blue eyes. "Is that what you meant?"

Jamie nodded, feeling somewhat relieved that she knew how he felt. He wanted to tell her, but he couldn't. So, he said, "How do you like flying planes?"

"Oh, it's fun, but there are times when I wish I could be flying without a plane. You know what I mean?"

Jamie nodded. "Yeah."

On an impulse, he hugged his sister. Normally, he wasn't given to spontaneous displays of affection, but he hadn't seen Megan since the Christmas holiday. She looked slightly nonplussed, but returned his hug and tousled his hair.

"I have to go downstairs and tell our parents about how much I like being in the Air Force." She made a face, and Jamie laughed. "See you later, little brother."

"See you." He answered.

The next day at school was a blur. Jamie tried hard to concentrate, but he felt detached, as if transforming into the white eagle had made him an alien like E.T. He couldn't stop daydreaming, either. He wanted nothing more than for the school day to end so he could fly again. Unfortunately, his teachers noticed that he'd been daydreaming even more than usual. Each teacher kept him after class and asked Jamie if something was bothering him.

Each time, he told them that he was fine. They all let him go after that, except for Ms. Brighton. She sensed that Jamie was holding something back, and said so.

"You're right," Jamie replied. "I have a secret, but it's a good secret. You know, the kind you want to tell everybody, but you can't."

"Because it is someone else's secret?"

"No, it's my secret."

Ms. Brighton looked intrigued. "What kind of a secret is it, Jamie?"

"I made a wish, and it came true -- not exactly like I thought it would, but it came true." He grinned.

"What kind of wish did you make?"

"A good wish." Jamie waited until his teacher gave him the homework problems. "Thanks, Ms. Brighton! I gotta fly!" He had meant to say *run*, but the words were out of his mouth.

He ran home as fast as he could. Jamie didn't see his mother, so he scribbled a note promising that he would be back in time for supper and apologizing for his behavior the day before. Jamie left it on the kitchen counter, dropped his backpack in his room, checked to make sure that the front door was locked, and ran out to the backyard.

The transformation was much easier the second time. As he ascended into the sky, Jamie saw a few clouds. They were puffy and white and looked like cotton. Jamie knew that clouds were made of water droplets, but he wondered what it would be like to fly through one. It didn't take him very long to find out.

Jamie soared higher until he reached a cloud. Then he flew inside it. The cloud was so thick that he could not see. He felt chilling dampness all around him. When Jamie left the cloud, he swooped down, hoping that the sudden movement would shake some of the water from his feathers. It did.

Jamie flew until his wings got tired. He landed in an alley that was next to the video arcade after checking to make sure that no one was watching. As he looked at his watch, the boy saw that it was time to go home.

He smelled tomatoes, herbs, and pasta cooking as he entered the house. His mother was making spaghetti. It smelled so good that his stomach growled.

"Hi, Mom." He said. Jamie took off his jacket and hung it in the closet.

"Hi, Jamie. Your father's not coming home tonight. He and some friends of his are going to look for that bird." She shook her head in... was it disappointment or disbelief? Jamie didn't know. "He'll be gone all weekend."

The boy looked crestfallen and slightly ill. "Oh," he replied. He knew how much his mother had wanted the whole family to spend time together. It was his fault she was sad. It was his fault that he had made that stupid wish in the first place.

"Jamie," she said, "what's the matter? You don't look so good."

"I'm sorry," he said. "So sorry. I made you sad."

"Oh, honey, it isn't your fault. Not at all. And I'm not sad, I'm just disappointed in your father. But it's not your fault at all."

"But it is," he exclaimed. "It is! I made that stupid wish, and it came true, and now Dad's gone looking for me..." Suddenly his face turned white as he realized what he'd said.

His mother stopped stirring the tomato sauce and looked at her son. "What on Earth are you talking about?"

"Nothing," Jamie stammered. "Nothing at all. Really. Forget what I said." His eyes darted about wildly as he looked for a way to escape. Certainly his mother would be angry with him, if she knew his secret.

"Jamie, what wish did you make? Jamie?"

Panic swelled up within him, and there was nothing he could do to keep from bolting out the door. His mother followed him, shouting his name, but he kept running. Swiftly, Jamie became the eagle, and launched himself into the air. He caught a glimpse of his mother's face. She was shocked, and angry, and there was another emotion he could not name. Jamie thought it might be fear, but he had never seen that expression on his mother's face before, so he didn't know for certain.

He flew as far as he could before darkness came, and when it did, Jamie settled onto a large tree branch in the middle of a snow-covered, wooded area. He fell asleep almost immediately.

Jamie's father came home after a frantic phone call from his wife. Apparently, his son had run away. She wouldn't tell him why over the phone, only that he had to come home. When he did, he saw his wife and daughter sitting at the table, talking softly.

"What happened?" He asked.

"Sit down," Elizabeth said softly. "You're not going to believe this."

He sat down, noticing the worry lines in his wife's forehead. Normally, she was not a worrier, but this was obviously an extreme circumstance. "What is it?"

"I don't know how it's possible, but Jamie *is* the white eagle."

"What do you mean?" He asked, his eyes narrowing. Surely that was impossible.

"Haven't you noticed him acting strangely lately?"

"Just a little. I thought it was nothing."

Elizabeth paused to take a sip of coffee. "Well, it's more than that, Richard. I saw him turn into the bird. Don't ask me how, or why, but I know what I saw."

"All right. Let's say this really happened. Where do you think Jamie is?"

"He's been gone for hours. How far can a bird that size fly?"

"He could have made it to Duluth or Fargo by now."

"Great." Elizabeth sighed.

"Tell you what, Mom," Megan said. "I can take the plane out tomorrow, and have a good look around. If I find Jamie, I'll bring him back."

"I'll call my hunting buddies up north and have them watch for him. We can call the police and file a missing person's report," Richard added.

"I've done that already."

"Good." Richard squeezed his wife's hand. "We'll find him, dear."

* * * * *

Jamie awoke the next day, in human form. His muscles were cramped from sitting in the tree all night, and he was cold. The boy had no idea of his location, only that it was in the middle of nowhere. He turned into the eagle and flew down, then turned into a boy again. If only he could find something to eat. Jamie felt into his pocket, he still had a few dollars, enough to grab a bite at a fast food place. But where was the nearest town?

The forest was eerily silent. A few crickets chirped. Listening carefully, Jamie determined the direction of the nearest road. He turned into the eagle again and flew off, following the road until it branched off. One way led to Fargo and the other led back to Minneapolis. Well, Jamie didn't want to go home. He could only imagine how much trouble he would be in. So he followed the road to Fargo.

There were several restaurants close to a highway exit. Jamie landed behind one of them and turned back into a boy. Clutching the change in his pocket, he went inside. Truck drivers and the locals gave him a few curious glances, but nothing more. Jamie sat down and asked the waitress for a bowl of cereal and a glass of orange juice.

The Sheriff, Bill Johnson, and his deputy, a tall woman named Lena Swenson, came in for breakfast as usual. Now, both of them recognized Jamie from an APB that had just been filed. They exchanged glances, and Lena approached the boy cautiously.

“Jamie Anderson?”

The boy glanced up, startled. His eyes had that deer-caught-in-headlights look. “How do you know my name?”

“That looks good,” she replied, ignoring his first question. “Mind if I join you?”

“Do I have a choice?”

Lena chuckled. “You always have a choice. Whether you make the right one or not is up to you.”

The boy sighed. “I haven’t committed any crimes.”

“Let’s talk, okay?” She sat down. Bill stayed at a discrete distance, keeping an eye on them. “Your parents are very worried. They want you to come home,” Lena said.

Jamie shook his head. “I can’t go home.”

“Why not?”

“Because I can’t. Okay?”

“Jamie, listen to me. Your parents would like you to come home.”

He shook his head.

“Why not?” Lena asked gently. This boy was so frightened, but he was right, he wasn’t in serious trouble... yet. She had to help Jamie get home, before the boy got into danger. Life on the street was not easy. She had seen too many runaways killed by guns, or drugs. Lena vowed silently to not let that happen to this kid. “You haven’t done anything wrong.”

“I’m different,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

Jamie swallowed a lump in his throat. "I can't tell you here. There are too many people."

"All right. Let's go outside."

The boy gaped at her. "No way. You'd never believe me."

"Oh, you'd be surprised at what I'd believe," Lena said with a smile. "Why don't you leave your money here, for the food?"

Jamie dug into his pocket and put a couple of dollars on the table. Bill followed them to the parking lot.

"Now you can tell me," Lena said.

"You have to promise not to tell anyone." The boy glanced at the sheriff. "Him, too."

"I can't promise that."

"Then I'm not telling," he said, and started to walk away.

Lena grabbed his arm. "Jamie, don't do this. You know better."

"Let go of me!" Panic filled him. He wasn't going home, and there was only one way to escape.

The deputy lost her grasp as the boy's arm shifted. Suddenly the air around him shimmered and he started to change. Impossibly, inexplicably, the boy was transforming into a large bird. Lena heard Bill gasp in astonishment.

"What the..." The sheriff exclaimed. "What's happening?"

"I don't know!"

A heartbeat later, in Jamie's place stood the white eagle. The bird ruffled its feathers and glared at the deputy, as if to say I-told-you-so. She reached out and touched the soft feathers, to make certain that what she saw was real.

"Well, you were right about one thing, Jamie," Lena remarked. "Nobody will ever believe this."

"No, they won't," the sheriff agreed. "Which is why we're not going to say anything to anyone about it."

"Can you understand me?" she asked.

The eagle stared up at her, then slowly nodded.

“Okay. You’re scared right now, but I’ll bet your parents are even more frightened. They don’t have any idea where you are, not to mention they probably don’t know why you left in the first place. All your parents know is that you’re gone, and you could be lost or hurt.” Lena brushed her hand against the eagle’s soft feathers. “I don’t think this will matter to them. They want to know you’re safe, more than anything.”

Suddenly, the air began to shimmer again as the bird transformed back into a boy. “Do you really think so?”

“Yes.”

“Then I want to go home.”

“You made the right choice, Jamie. Come on, we’ll take you to the airport. Your family should be here soon.”

* * * * *

Jamie gazed out the airport’s window as the plane landed. Its wheels touched the concrete runway. An announcement came over the loudspeakers that boarding for the next flight would start soon. Would his parents be angry? Jamie tensed as everyone got off the plane. He searched the passengers’ faces for his mom and dad. Finally, he saw them.

“Jamie!” His mom exclaimed, and brushed past several startled people to hug him. “Oh, I’m glad you’re all right.”

“I’m fine.”

“Good.” She tousled his hair.

Jamie’s dad looked at him. “You’re not hurt?”

“No,” he replied.

“We’ll talk later.” To Lena and Bill, Jamie’s dad said, “Thank you for everything.”

“Just doing our job,” Bill replied.

“You have one lucky kid,” Lena added. “Take care.”

Jamie and his family headed to the hotel in a rental car. It was early April and there was still a little snow in splotches, as if it had splattered from a paintbrush. The snow had an off-white color from car exhaust, and recent rain had mixed it with mud. People walking outside still wore coats or sweaters. It wasn’t freezing, but it was too cold for T-shirts. Jamie mostly gazed out the window, wanting to soar among the wispy clouds in the clear blue sky.

“Penny for your thoughts,” Elizabeth said softly, seeing the wistful look on her son’s face.

“It’s nothing, Mom.”

“Come on, you can tell me.”

“I was just thinking that this would be a perfect day to go flying.”

“Can you really do that?” Jamie’s dad asked.

“Yeah.”

Richard pulled the car over at the next rest stop. They were in the only vehicle in the parking lot. A large sign read: Under construction inside, please come back next month.

“I think we all need some fresh air,” he said. “Jamie, want to get out and stretch?”

“Yes.”

The boy’s parents exchanged glances. Jamie hated it, because it usually meant that he was going to get a lecture. He got out of the car and glanced up instinctively. The temptation to turn into the eagle and fly away that instant was strong.

“Why don’t we give him five minutes?” Elizabeth said suddenly. “He obviously needs it.”

Richard looked at his son. “Promise me you won’t run away again.”

“Only if you promise not to treat me like a guinea pig.”

“Of course, I won’t. Whatever gave you that idea?”

Jamie looked at his shoes, not wanting to say more.

“Well, you did mention wanting to study the eagle rather closely,” Elizabeth remarked.

“Son, listen. We love you very much. We’re not going to treat you any differently, okay? I promise.”

“Okay,” the boy replied. “I promise not to run away again.”

Richard took a couple of steps back as the air shimmered with rainbow colors. A few moments later, there was a white eagle where Jamie had been standing.

“Incredible,” Jamie’s mother said.

“I’d say that’s the understatement of the year,” Richard replied, staring at the white eagle with awe.

The bird looked up at him and Elizabeth, then took a few steps forward.

“Five minutes,” Jamie’s father said.

The white eagle flapped his wings and took off. Flying was always exhilarating, and he felt completely free.

“I still don’t understand how this happened. Do you?” Richard said.

“Jamie said he made a wish.”

Richard gazed up at the sky. “So wishes can come true.”

“Looks that way,” Elizabeth replied.

The End

Sorcerer's Bane

Seven-year old Katrina glanced up at her mother, who was pulling weeds from her garden. They had been outside since breakfast. Da and Katrina's older brothers were milking the cows. "What's that plant called?"

"Silver leaf."

"What about this flower?" Katrina pointed at a bright red plant that her mother seemed to prize above all the rest. Her cat, Goldentail, had gotten a loud scolding after digging up one of the red flowers.

Kara wiped sweat from her brow. "That one is called Sorcerer's Bane."

"Why?"

"There's an old poem that tells the story. Do you want to hear it?"

"Yes, please."

"All right." Katrina's mother sat in the grass, still damp with morning dew, and began the poem.

*The dark tower rises above pale gray clouds,
casting long shadows over the earth like shrouds.
A knight rides through the mist on a black war horse
to rid the land of the tower's evil force.*

*With his magical blade and a silver shield,
the knight is prepared, whatever his foes wield.
Across the main drawbridge, through an iron gate,
stands his enemy glaring at him with hate.*

*The knight readies his sword; his foe casts a spell,
but the blade absorbs it and the knight fights well.
Their battle continues until dawn's golden rays
break through the clouds to greet the day.*

*Now dying from his wounds, the sorcerer gasps,
but his last curse fades as his bones turn to ash.
With a thunderous crash, the tower falls down.
There in its place, a bright red flower is found.*

"From that day onward," Katrina's mother finished, "the red flower was known as Sorcerer's Bane."

“Oh.” The child frowned. “But what happened to the knight?”

Kara glanced out into the fields, to where her husband was plowing, and smiled a secret smile. “The king gave him a great reward.”

“What was it?”

“A diamond for a wedding ring, and fifty acres of land.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Who did he marry?”

“You’re full of questions, aren’t you?” Kara kissed the red-haired child. “No one knows. Now, are you going to help me pull weeds, or not?”

“Yes, Ma.” Katrina got on her hands and knees. Her fingers dug into the fresh black soil as she pulled weeds out by their roots.

Kara glanced at her husband’s sword. It still shone like it had so long ago. The blade didn’t get much use now, but her husband insisted that one day, it might be needed again. So his sword stayed by the fireplace, where it could be seen through the window from Kara’s garden, amidst the Sorcerer’s Bane.

The End

How the Night Stole the Sun

The notorious thief Night, dressed in the deepest shades of indigo and black, gazed upon the ultimate prize: a golden orb, gleaming on a marble pedestal in the Sky Lord's palace. Unfortunately, it was guarded by the Lady of Storms, whose temper was unpredictable at best. To face her wrath would be to risk certain death, and so Night contented himself by stealing baubles that no one would miss, anyway.

One day, the Sky Lord had a feast. Everyone was invited, including Night, for nobody suspected him of being a thief. Night was very handsome, and he noticed the Lady of Storms appeared lonely and bored. A plan began to form in his devious mind, which might give him what he wanted the most. Seating himself next to the Lady of Storms, Night whispered flatteries into her ears. She responded with a smile and friendly conversation.

Finally, when the feast drew to an end, the Lady of Storms invited Night to her abode. They danced for hours, until exhausted, she retired to bed. Night nearly leapt for joy – here was his chance! As softly as a shadow, he crept across the chamber to the pedestal. Slowly, Night lifted the sun and hid it under his black satin cape. Then, he slipped away and retreated to his abode.

The Lady of Storms awoke the next morning, furious to find her treasure missing. Knowing that Night had taken it, she pleaded with the Sky Lord to let her search for the thief. The sun would be returned to its rightful place, she promised. The Sky Lord agreed, so the Lady of Storms sought Night at his home.

She was surprised to find him gazing sadly at the sun. "What is wrong? Are you overcome with guilt?" the Lady of Storms demanded.

"Now that I've gotten what I most desire, there are no more challenges," Night replied. "What will I do?" he asked.

"Give me back the sun," she demanded.

"Never!"

"Then prepare to face my wrath!"

The Lady of Storms threw lightning bolts and hurricanes at him, but Night countered with darkness, so that she could not see him. Suddenly, the Lady of Storms stopped when she heard him weeping, of all things.

"What now?" she asked.

"You can have your precious sun back, for I've just realized something. As important to me as this jewel is, if it's in my possession, I'll be unhappy forever," the thief answered.

“Why is that?” she inquired.

“Because I won’t have anything left to strive for,” he said.

The Lady of Storms looked surprised. Then, an idea hit her. “If I guard the sun from now until its light dims, and you try to steal it again, will that make you happy?”

“Only if I’m not successful.”

“Fear not,” the Lady of Storms replied, “for I will be ten times as vigilant as before. You will not trick me so easily again.”

A smile spread across Night’s dusky face. “My Lady, you are wise.” He bowed, and placed the sun into her hands.

Every evening thereafter, Night tried to steal the sun, but the Lady of Storms always caught him.

The End

Fantasy Winter Landscape

A silver dawn slowly rose over new-fallen snow, casting light across the northern plains. Frigid wind scraped the steel sky like a dragon's talons. Then the wind stopped suddenly, as if the Gods had taken a deep breath. Nothing stirred for a long moment. Then a shadow spread like water across the snow, growing larger and darker until a great beast could be seen in the sky. The dragon's magnificent wings glittered like diamonds in the sunlight as it soared over the plains. The wild air beneath its wings swept the snow below, blowing it across the plains. The dragon soared higher, disappearing into web-like clouds. All was silent and still once more.

* * * * *

Dragon at Dawn

The sky is a sea filled with golden foam as a warm wind gently blows. Ears of corn and stalks of wheat cascade across emerald fields below. A purple shadow sweeps over the land, and the fields whisper in reply as the wind gusts. In the sky above, a dragon with scarlet wings sails gracefully. The sun rises, showering the land with brilliant light. Dragon scales sparkle like rubies while the creature swoops and soars through amber clouds, dancing on the breeze. Finally, the dragon vanishes. The fields relax, becoming still and silent.

* * * * *

Dragon at Twilight

Twilight unfurled like a banner across the heavens as indigo shadows swept over the valley below. Stars began to appear. A cool breeze carried the scent of pine and chestnuts roasting. Suddenly a darker shadow enveloped the others, melting across the dry grass. A defiant, thunderous roar rumbled through the evening sky as the dragon appeared. Her scales glittered and sparkled as they reflected starlight and the last rosy hues of the setting sun. Dusk mingled with night while the dragon soared across the sky. Two bright moons slowly ascended - one waxing, one waning, both jewels of the night. Then the dragon drifted into the distance, shimmering like a star in the moonlit sky.

* * * * *

The Singing Pool

Silver mist rose from a still, black pool so smooth it resembled a slab of onyx as two full moons shone brightly overhead. Suddenly an ethereal voice broke the silence, singing a children's song, but the voice was that of a grown woman. Slowly the mist coalesced into the form of a slender woman with flowing hair, shimmering in the moonlight. A mortal horse and rider stopped at the edge of the pool. Both were transfixed by the sight.

The rider, a tall man with dusky skin, thick black hair, and a flowing crimson cloak, recalled the pool's story. A wizard and his wife often rode out to that very spot at night. Unbeknownst to them, a witch who wanted the wizard for herself watched from a distance and grew more jealous each evening. Finally on a night such as this, the witch had taken an opportunity to drown the wizard's wife when he had gone home briefly. Upon returning, the wizard was furious at discovering his wife's body in the pool. The witch had disappeared by then, but it was obvious who the culprit had been. No one else would have dared do such a thing. The wizard had left the region centuries ago, disappearing into history. However, his wife's ghost lingered.

The apparition and the mist soon faded, but the mournful melody echoed through the night. It seemed as if the song rose from the very depths of the pool and floated on the night air. Then the horse and rider departed, leaving the singing pool behind.

* * * * *

The Unicorn and the Flame

A golden flame flickers brightly in the wooded clearing surrounded by evergreens, and the wizard who cast the spell watches from a distance. She has studied hard for this moment, pouring over ancient scrolls and carefully-bound books for long hours in her ivory tower. She is tall, thin, and slightly pale from many months spent indoors. Wavy auburn hair cascades over emerald-hued robes. The wizard observes from her hiding place with deep green eyes, intently waiting.

Silence falls over the forest. A blur of shimmering white can be seen through the trees, and then a whinny is heard as the unicorn steps out of the foliage, drawn by the magical flame. The mare is magnificent. Her horn is pure silver and sparkles like a thousand stars, reflecting the firelight. Her hooves are also silver and gleam like jewels. The unicorn's eyes are as black as onyx, glittering in the light as she is mesmerized by the wizard's spell.

There is a sharp intake of breath and the wizard's hand flies to her lips. The flame vanishes. The mare turns her head. As black and green eyes meet, the wizard's mind is filled with thoughts of peace that are not her own. Then the unicorn retreats into the thick forest, leaving the wizard with more to contemplate than she had expected.