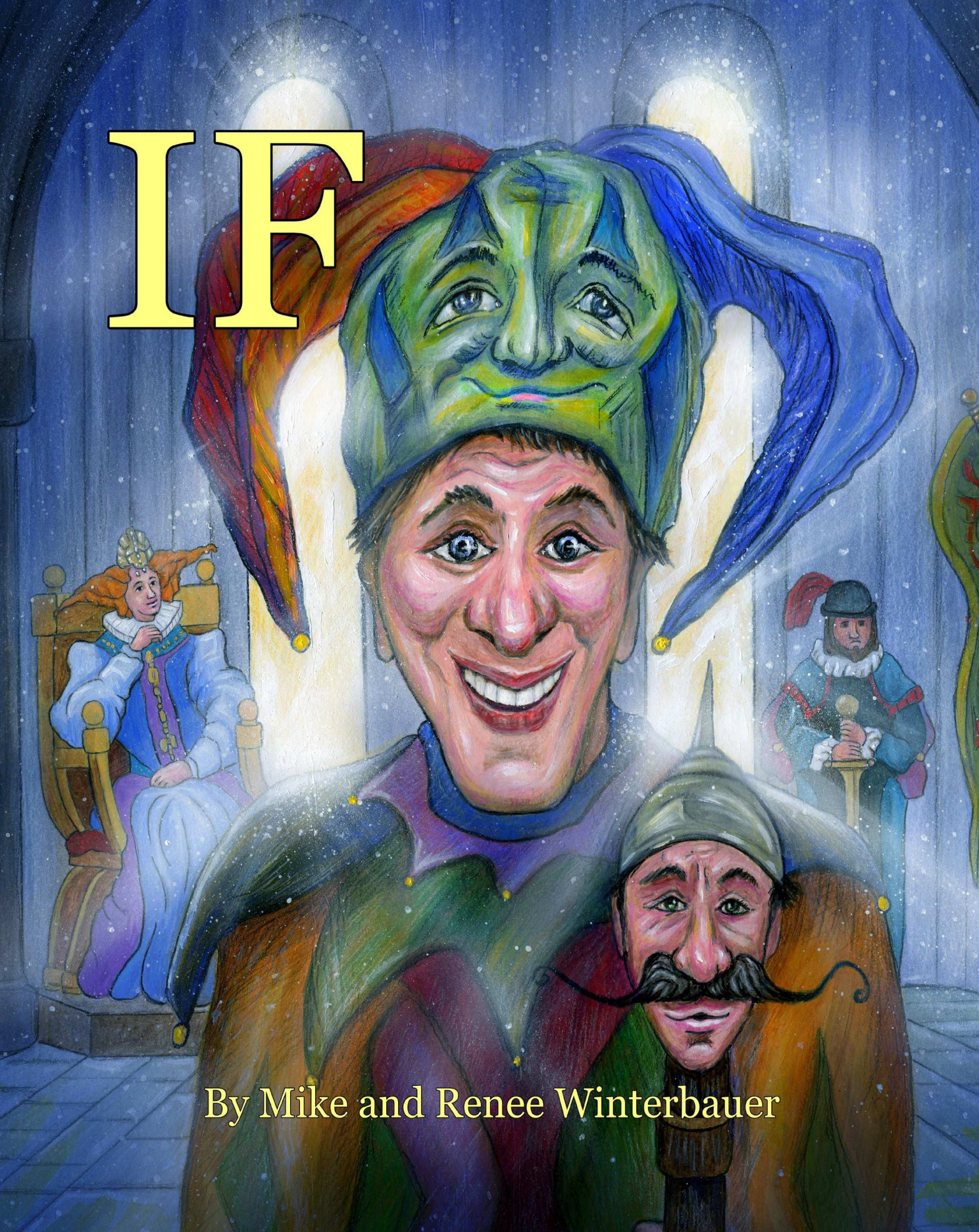


IF

By Mike and Renee Winterbauer



Renee Winterbauer is the author of IF and Mike Winterbauer is the illustrator of IF.



My wife Renee and I have come together to create this beautiful and engaging book that appeals to both kids and adults. This positive and uplifting story is a unique and beautiful reading experience for audiences young and old. Renee and I have worked tirelessly together to make a special and memorable book that has widespread appeal. Renee's clever and imaginative storytelling lends itself perfectly to my bold and fantastical illustration style. We have teamed up to create a truly beautiful book that future generations will appreciate and collect for years to come. It is with great pleasure we are able to share IF with you.

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IF

IF is a story about an unsung hero named **IF**. He is a court jester in a magical kingdom in the clouds on the planet Thera. It is up to **IF** to find a way to save his beloved kingdom and queen from a sinister fate. Through his journey he makes unlikely alliances with a courageous and driven boy named Chance, the enigmatic and beautiful girl named Whisper, and the magical stallion named Bolt of Lightning. Through their undying courage and special talents, these three heroes answer the calling of, what if?

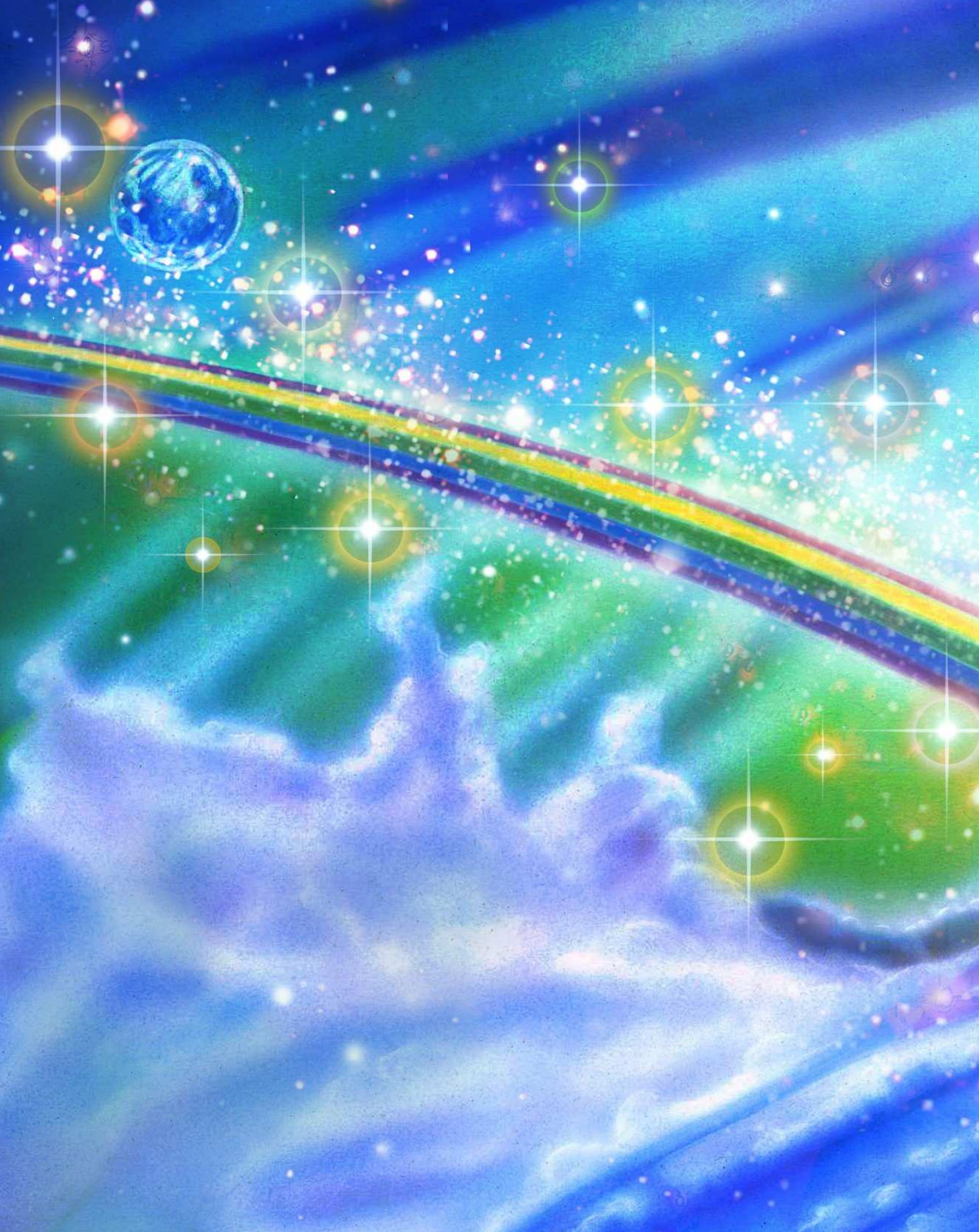


Thank you friends and family who
helped make this book a reality!

First edition printing of **IF**, April 2018



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CHAPTER ONE



BROKEN STAIRS

“I have summoned everyone here to solve a problem within our kingdom; it’s a formidable one,” the Queen said to her Court of Knights. Each knight was looking intently at the Queen. Each man was searching her face for any clue of what the matter may be? These men served the Queen effortlessly for what seemed a millennium, but now she was feeling anxious about their abilities. This was not a battle between man and beast, but a battle with the unknown. She felt queasy and nerves shot up from her stomach into her mouth. The words became short, curt, and stressed.

The Queen shouted, “You are to report back to me as to why the connection between the upper and lower kingdom is breaking apart? There is a report that the stairs at Cloud Castle are literally disappearing.” Initially, the knights looked straight at the Queen but then some started to break from formation. They started to make sideways glances at each other to see which knight appeared lost and anxious.

The Queen read the report that the main energy source that runs planet Thera was faltering. The Rainbow of Stars was starting to disappear. The multiple stairways in the clouds that led from the Queen’s Cloud Kingdom down to the ground below were falling apart! The nightmare she pictured in her head was that her kingdom in the clouds would break free from the planet and fly off into space. She would end up lost in space forever with no one left to rule! Not to mention, all the citizens falling helplessly to the ground below! She read further and noted that the townsfolk were using makeshift ladders that replaced the missing cloud stairs. She was devastated and embarrassed because this has never happened before.



The stairs to the upper kingdom were made of clouds that connected to the ground below. The stone ramparts also connected upwards to the cloud stairs. Down below was the town of Shadowville. The cloud stairs floated like majestic pillows! The stairs were solid but also very soft to walk on. The stairs were also very steamy to the nose. The condensation that rose up to her castle meant that everyone arrived to the castle a bit damp but on the upside, very clean. The Queen liked it since she was a clean freak! The Rainbow of Stars not only connected and supported these stairs but also supplied all the energy and magic to the planet of Thera. Citizens that were true to heart and one hundred percent loyal to the Queen also possessed special talents and magical abilities.

“Your orders are to report back to me as to why this is happening?” said the Queen. Her lower lip started to quiver. Then, she immediately ran from the Court of Knights straight up to her office chambers. The Queen was totally losing it! Whenever this happened, she needed just one friend! That one friend was her court jester named Ifan (or **IF** for short).

IF tried to work his magic on the Queen. **IF** thought, “Why is this is not working? Why is she not laughing? The balloon trick always worked with a one-hundred percent guarantee.” He then released a second balloon full of air and watched it fly haphazardly around the Queen’s head. She just sat there totally dazed and confused as she stared into a sea of oblivion.

IF overheard the conversation she had moments ago with the knights and knew he had to help her. When anything really bad happened at the castle, the Queen would completely shut down. Next, he danced, jiggled, and pulled out a huge two foot, red feather he used to tickle himself. His infectious laugh would always make everyone in a room break out into laughter. The room was silent.





IF started to drink a spot of tea with the Queen while she tried to pull herself together. The Queen remarked that **IF**'s laugh truly earned him the position as her lifelong court jester. She felt she could not go a day without hearing him laugh. She said she was grateful for all of his efforts to cheer her up.

IF's full name is Ifan Trulaugh of Shadowville. **IF** was born into a small family of peasants from the village of Shadowville. One of **IF**'s special gifts was that he was literally born with a laugh in his heart and smile on his face. **IF** recalled his first climb up to the castle at the tender age of twelve. It was a magical place to him and he was honored to be given a profession of entertaining the Queen. Even so, **IF** always secretly desired to be a knight, a true hero. He just loved the equipment: jousting lances, armor, shields, and weapons! Unfortunately, **IF** found out at an early age that he was considered to be a complete joke to all of his peers. No one took him seriously. He was also laughed at by many of the older knights when he inquired on how to become a knight. Everyone in Shadowville thought of **IF** as the clown. He was the person that made everyone laugh and be merry, including the Queen.

Now, at the ripe age of fifty-five, **IF** was starting to feel his big dream of knighthood quietly slip away between his wrinkles and receding hairline. He kept his knighthood dream hidden safely in his heart.

The Queen looked over at his pensive and sullen face. They read each other like a book. They often nitpicked each other to death. This often led to only more and more button pushing. This war of words ironically made their relationship a strong bond like that of a brother and sister.





Teasingly, the Queen said, “I can see your pouty face!” For a moment, she felt better by being distracted by her friend and confidante. **IF**'s face immediately turned a beet red. This was a great insult. Especially, after the epic feather and balloon fail! The Queen let out a laugh that rang out like a huge burp of exploding gas after a big meal. **IF** couldn't help but laugh and enjoyed the moment.

Meanwhile, in the lowest chamber of Cloud Castle was the guard's quarters. This is where the knights lived and practiced their knighthood careers. Ivan the Brute, leader of the knights, sat on a small wooden stool, sharpening his sword with a large piece of broken flint. The other knights always looked up to Ivan for his great wisdom and leadership. He was the eldest of the knights and everyone in this motley crew was well past their knighthood prime. Aches and pains were a daily occurrence. The knights sat at a table and ate ginger root for flatulence and drank hot tea for their aches and pains.

“This was a strange task indeed,” Ivan thought. “Can't see the enemy and can't fight the enemy,” as he mumbled quietly. Then he thought of **IF**, and a laugh bolted out of his big potbelly. “**IF** the clown wants to be a knight! Now is the time since there is no enemy to be seen!” As Ivan softly spoke, he suddenly bellowed out another huge laugh for all his men to hear.



The brigade of men broke into a rip roar of laughter without any knowledge of what they were laughing about? They always laughed with Ivan no matter what. If Ivan thinks something is funny it's best to join in the merriment.

Ivan put his flint and sword down on the ground. He stood up like a tall mountain over his men and said, "Now men, we must have a good laugh from time-to-time, but we also must get on with our castle business. Best we go check out the stairs and see what we can muster for a good repair." The men gathered their handmade ropes and ladders and set out to repair a new hole forming in cloud staircase. Ivan fixed the hole by attaching a ladder with ropes directly onto the cloud. Next, the knights rechecked all the ropes and ladders that the townsfolk had made as repairs. As the men worked, Ivan began planning a trip in his mind with his men. It would be the greatest quest ever to find out why this was happening!



CHAPTER TWO



CHANCE MEETING

He spent the day wandering fields and lying down in the grass by the pond. At fourteen years old, Chance looked up at the sky and started to reflect upon his young life of fourteen years. He was at that age where he really needed to get serious about life. He also needed to focus on becoming a knight. He thought, "I really need a horse." He quieted his thoughts so that his mind could rest. His thoughts began to wander through the puffy clouds. The fresh breeze was rustling the grass against his skin. This exact moment in time was now a perfect calm. His eye lids slowly began to droop and his mind drifted off to a light slumber.

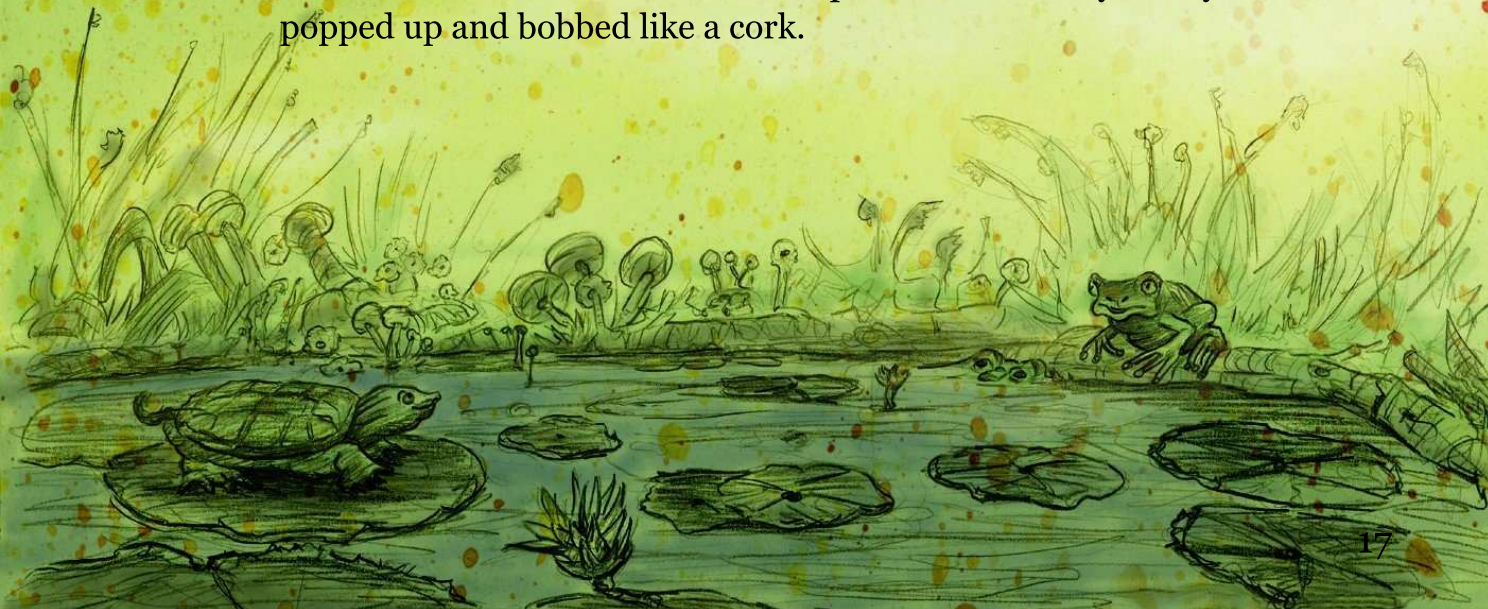
Chancellor Truehero of Shadowville, or Chance for short, wanted to finally live up to his surname. His family lineage was once part of the original knighthood. The Truehero family was once greatly admired. After a few black sheep in the family, their reputation was now at an all time low.



Chance's Uncle Dunkin and Cousin Leopold stole things like sheep and mead (Medieval beer). They ruined the Truehero's family honor, name, and reputation. This was a family that could no longer be trusted to serve her majesty. Their ranking was reduced to peasants. It was Chance's greatest dream to change all that.

A faint distant scream woke Chance out of a peaceful dream into a reality nightmare. Chance looked up. Just above his head, a tiny spec of a man with flaying arms and legs was falling like a rock from the sky. He was falling from a broken staircase at Cloud Castle. Chance winced his eyes and noticed that some of the stairs were missing. Scratching his head, Chance immediately jumped up and tried to figure out exactly where the poor wretch would land!

Splash! The pond's seaweed flew in all directions. The pond was very deep which allowed the opportunity for a safe landing. Gravity forced the knight's body to submerge a few meters deep. Chance did not hesitate to jump in fully dressed including his shoes. He swam to the center of the pond and the body finally popped up and bobbed like a cork.





Chance first grabbed a shoe and a leg, then a belt and an arm. Finally, he grabbed a shoulder and pulled the man's face out of the water. It was awkward because the knight was dressed in full body armor.

The man was gasping and spitting up water. Chance wrapped his forearm around the man's neck and pulled him back to shore. Chance crawled out of the water dragging the limp body behind him. Both men were covered in a coating of thick green pond scum, some nettles, and a few random flies. Chance guided the man down to the muddy embankment. With the man lying on his stomach, Chance managed to remove the armor plate off of his back. He pressed with his hands onto his back several times, but the man did not breathe. Chance stood up and then jumped with both feet onto the man's back. Water blasted through the skinny man's nose and mouth. He began to cough. Chance rolled him onto his back. The man was hacking and coughing up water. The man's bulging eyes opened as he looked up towards the heavens. He was not sure whether he died or not? "Are you my savior?" he asked. Chance's very serious face now cracked a smile and he said, "I can if you want me to be?" Chance waited a few moments and said, "Well, I cannot lie. I am Chancelor Truehero of Shadowville. You can call me Chance. You fell from the sky and I pulled you out from the drink. Do you know your name?"

The man was weak and limp, but slowly sat up and wiped the pond scum off of his face. With the help from Chance, he proceeded to remove the rest of his suit of armor so that he could drain all the water out.



Underneath, he was dressed in a knight's daytime casual, which consisted of a hooded shirt (made from small weaved chain called chainmail), knickers, stockings, and leather shoes. He said, "I am Sir Landon Knight from Cloud Castle. I serve and protect the Queen of Thera. Young lad, Chance, you saved my life!" Chance did not feel particularly heroic at this moment; further, he did not like being thought of as a young lad. On a positive note, he was grateful to the pond for saving this man's life.

Chance spoke, "We have to get you back to Cloud Castle as soon as possible so the other knights will not worry about your condition. I have some food that we can share. We can walk to the south rampart that leads back to the kingdom. Before we do, I have to ask, Sir Landon, what happened to the stairs and why are parts missing?"

As both men removed some nettles from their clothes and swatted flies, Sir Landon discussed the unusual dilemma of the Rainbow of Stars. As Sir Landon drained out his armor, he explained that it was a mystery that the stairs were disappearing and that the Queen wanted the knights to find out why it was happening? Sir Landon then said, "I usually don't do this sort of thing you know. I joust, play cards, and joke around most of the day. I am not even a great carpenter! The Queen wants her army of knights to solve this great mystery before it's too late! Today, we were fussing over many repairs! That's when I slipped on a broken stair and fell into the pond."

Chance's mouth opened slightly but he said nothing. He decided not to ask any more questions since this was a very serious matter. He started to daydream again. This time, he pictured himself as a great knight that saves the Queen and the village of Shadowville.

Sir Landon looked at Chance's blank expression. Sir Landon thought, "Good grief, this lad is spacing out. I must have shocked him!" Sir Landon cleared his throat and said, "Best be getting a move on now don't you say ol' Chance? When we reach the castle, the knights will give you an honorary commendation for saving me!"

We will have a celebratory dinner at the roundtable. Most importantly, you can have a hot bath in the castle tub!" Chance's blank stare washed from his face as he took heed to the conversation and both men laughed.

Sir Landon put his armor back on with the help from Chance. Full body armor dressing always took the help of more than one person to put on. They began their journey back to Cloud Castle. Chance did not give an answer concerning the honorary commendation; he had other plans. He just wanted to get Sir Landon safely back to the castle. Chance pulled a cloth out of his small sack to wipe off the last of the remaining pond scum. Then, he offered the cloth to Sir Landon to do the same. Both men were now a little less green and a little less scummy. Chance grabbed a chewy meat pie out of his small sack, ripped it in half, and tossed Sir Landon his fair share. Chance tied the empty sack to his belt. Both men chewed on their chewy meat pies as they marched in the direction of the south rampart.





CHAPTER THREE

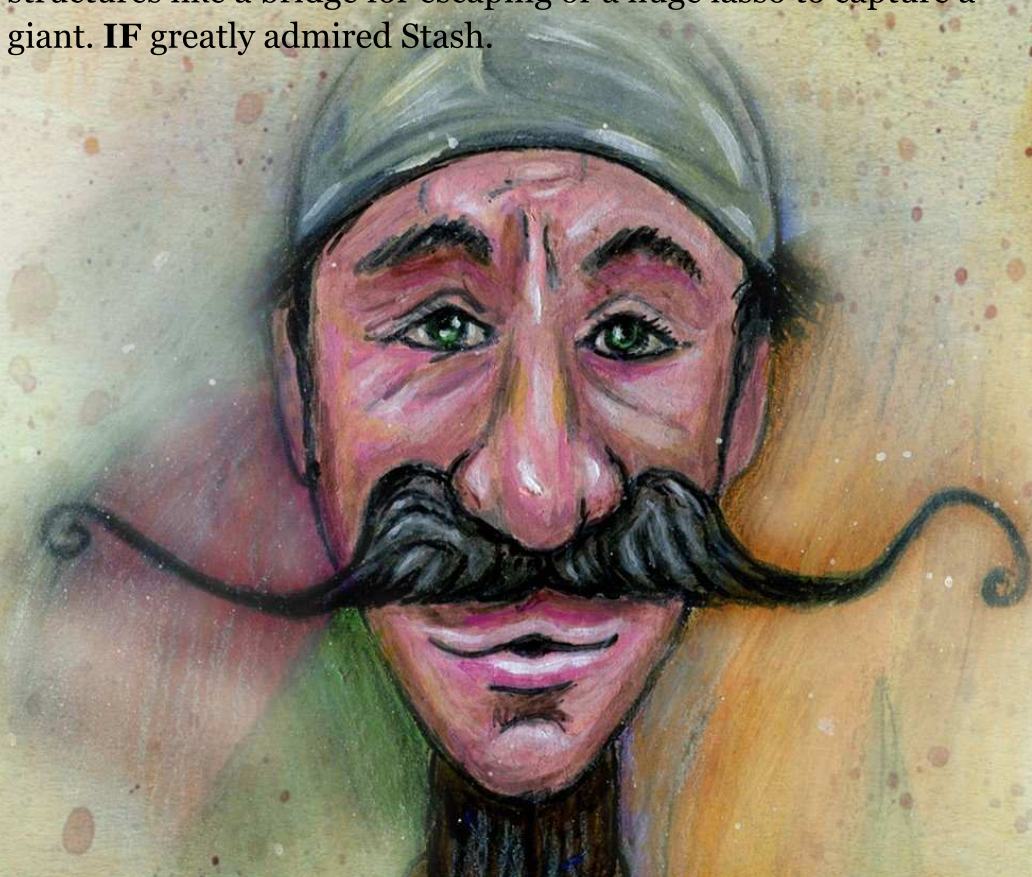
A TRIP AND A VISIT

The Queen was very worried, but she had to be strong because everyone looked up to her at Cloud Castle. She needed to keep her kingdom safe and cozy. Another town called Darkville was growing larger every day. More and more young people were drawn to Darkville. Like its name, Darkville was dark and evil. It had dark colors, dark lighting, and dark creatures. Bad characters lived there like, beggars, liars, and thieves. It was a place where evil dominated the landscape. It was now becoming very popular, that even good people were moving to Darkville. She couldn't wrap her head around to why this was happening? Darkville used to be a tiny town with a few bad apples and now it was growing larger than Shadowville.

While in her study, she went to her desk to write out her great queen-like plan. She also took a break to doodle some pictures of rainbows and stars that helped calm her jittery nerves. After some intense doodling, she wrote a list: (1) Have the Court of Knights fix Rainbow of Stars. (2) Have Court of Knights find out why young people were moving to Darkville. (3) Have a backup plan.

“No backup plan!” the Queen yelled and threw her crown on the floor. She bawled like a baby! She was mortified!

During bad times, **IF** turned to his two equally best friends for help. First best friend was Hatimiss. He was a happy soul who lived upon **IF**’s head as a jester’s hat. Hatimiss was a true source of inspiration, a real thinker, and power a napper. Hatimiss was always sleeping on top of **IF**’s head during performances, but came to life in times of trouble or danger. Hatimiss was part of **IF**’s alter ego ready to take on a dragon, slugwort, or any dervish creature that showed up for the show down. Another best friend was the Great and Almighty Stash! Stash was short for Mustache. He was the scepter that **IF** carried in his hand to every performance. He was a mini-me of **IF**. Stash was wickedly funny and had a big heart! **IF** was not allowed to have facial hair due to his job description. The Queen hated facial hair of any sort on court jesters. Stash had a powerful and magical mustache that could grow to incredible lengths and do unbelievable feats. Often, his mustache would grow and weave huge hair like structures like a bridge for escaping or a huge lasso to capture a giant. **IF** greatly admired Stash.



He would imagine himself with that beautiful coiffure of facial hair attached to his lips. **IF** was lucky to have his two equally best friends with him at all times. The three of them together were like the three amigos or the three musketeers; all for one and one for all.

Early evening, the Queen left her study to go to dinner. Normally, she ate dinner in her expansive dining hall with guests, but tonight she ate alone. **IF** anxiously waited for her in the receiving hall. He wanted to give her some good advice and ask permission to take a trip. As he waited, he jiggled his feet in place so that he could ring the bells at the end of his curly toed shoes. Hatimiss and Stash giggled. Hatimiss said, "Twinkle toes is at it again!" Hatimiss and Stash laughed out loud with a roar. "Shhh, play possum you two, the Queen is on her way now!" scolded **IF**. "Good evening my Queeny Bee," said **IF** in his most upbeat voice. **IF** liked his nickname for the Queen. They always had good nicknames for each other. The Queen sullenly said, "Good evening **IF**," as if her blood was completely drained out of her body.

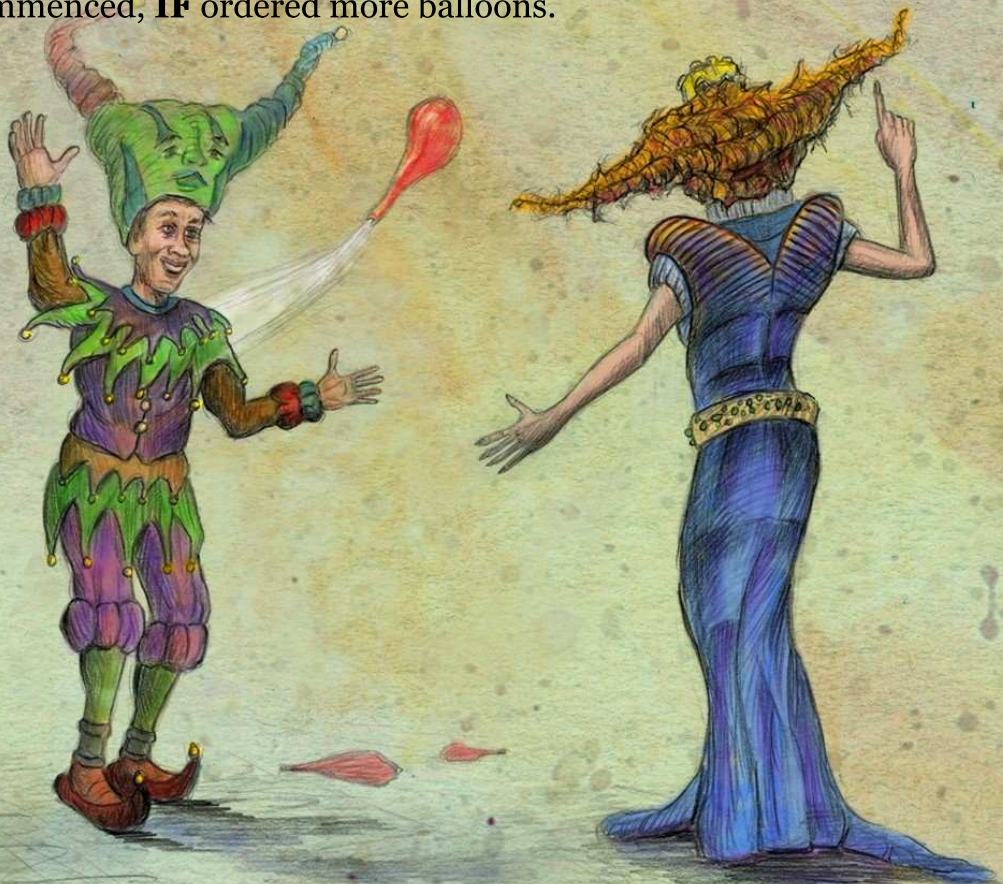
IF stated, "I was planning to take a trip to find new material for my jester routine. My balloon routine is getting so passé." **IF** reasoned with her as he attempted setting off a red balloon to which the Queen completely ignored. **IF** asserted, "I plan to travel the countryside to find some good laughs. While I am away, you should go visit your sister, Sister Earth of Pastoral Forest. She can give you good advice and lift your spirits!"

The Queen needed to hear these words from her number one confidante. He always knew what to say, even though he was just a court jester. The Queen declared, "Perhaps you are right my Court Jester **IF**-fy!" The Queen's eyes began to twinkle with delight as she used her pet name for **IF**. The Queen smiled and continued, "I will go visit my sister. I received her letter yesterday stating she is sick. I will plan a visit to go see her and make her feel better. It will lift both of our spirits."

She always has good advice. I will wait until my Court of Knights finish working on the cloud stairs. Once Ivan and his crew are done, we will leave for Pastoral Forest.”

The Queen left **IF** very abruptly. This was always her routine. She was the Queen with important queen-like things to accomplish. The Queen lifted her skirts so that her feet could scurry away like a mouse on a mission. **IF** also left in a hasty manner to go to his chambers. Often, they both did this type of departure and no one ever took offense to the rudeness of it all. The Queen yelled, “Good night **IF**-fy! Have a safe trip!”

IF yelled, “Good-bye Queeny Bee,” but the Queen had already disappeared into a secret staircase for queens. **IF** went back to climb a regular stone staircase that led to his living quarters. He now felt totally relieved that the Queen had other plans to keep herself occupied. He could now focus on his true mission, to solve the problems of the Rainbow of Stars and Darkville. He will have the Queen laughing again in no time! Before any packing commenced, **IF** ordered more balloons.





CHAPTER FOUR

LEAVING THE NEST

The Galaxy of Stars shined brightly upon Shadowville at dusk. Sadly, directly to the east, Darkville had already become black as night with no stars in sight. Chance and Sir Landon had finally made it to the old rampart steps that led to the Cloud Castle. Sir Landon gave Chance knightly advice and rules for traveling on his own, especially if he goes to Darkville. Chance knew there was a greater problem that was far worse than just broken stairs and fading stars. As Chance looked up he saw Sir Landon starting to cautiously climb up the ladder back to Cloud Castle. Chance waved good-bye from the rampart steps below.

Sir Landon yelled as he clung for his life onto a ladder high up in the clouds, "Chance, I wish you could join me but I know you have other plans. Your becoming a knight is your true path! I will put in a good word for you with the Ivan the Brute! We will send a courier pigeon to your home inviting you to a special dinner that honors you for saving my life." Chance just waved good-bye again and sighed heavily. He knew that becoming a knight probably would not happen through traditional means. There were a few other young squires in town ready to sign up and join the knights. They came from wealthy homes, good education, and with all the tools of the trade: armor, weapons, and a horse. None of which, Chance experienced or owned. An honorary dinner was a promising lead, but it was not a guarantee towards becoming a knight. He had to find a special path to knighthood.

At the age of four, Chance went to live with a retired, middle-aged knight named Laf. He was a bit overweight and shaped like a pear, but he also was a very strong man. Chance's parents died when he was young, leaving him as an orphan.

He lived with his Uncle Dunkin and Cousin Leopold. Uncle Dunkin and Cousin Leopold went on a stealing spree then escaped to Darkville. They left the little orphaned blond haired boy on Laf's doorstep. They knew that Laf was a lonely man and would cherish having a sweet, young boy to call his own.

Duke Laf Haggard of Shadowville was a retired, mead drinking, and napping-all-day kind of man. Chance called him Uncle Laf. He taught Chance everything he knew about becoming a knight. Chance was now a young man of fourteen years. He was a tall and lean young man with golden brown hair. He had a stern face with blue eyes. Blue like the color of blue quartz rock found in the pasturelands outside of Shadowville. He was very handsome, but also a very approachable, sweet-natured, and honest young man with unbreakable loyalty.

As Chance arrived at the doorstep of his home, Uncle Laf beckoned him to a duel with swords. "You were gone all day! We have to finish your daily schooling of sword fighting! See here is my worn and tattered sword, dull from my many battles of chopping firewood! You were gone so long leaving me poor mind to fret and worry that you've left me fer good!" Laf stammered between sips from his tankard of alcoholic brew and air slapping his arms at invisible flies.

Chance stood there staring at his best friend and father figure. Chance sometimes called him Uncle Laf, and other times he just called him Laf. Chance loved Laf with all of his heart. Laf was a dear old sole that had gone astray. Chance knew that at this point there was not much he could do for Laf, except to stockpile wood for him to keep warm while he set out to become a knight. He did not have the heart to tell Laf all of his plans. Laf was such a kind soul and did not have a mean bone in his body. Where Laf lacked in abilities as a knight, that void was replaced with a huge heart. It was never discussed how Laf became a knight. Chance eventually figured out that he probably held a less prominent position for the Court of Knights and did more housekeeping and cooking for the knights than winning battles.

Laf stood for a moment and was either going to laugh or cry, perhaps both. He drank more mead and bellowed, "I've made you some stew with turnips, parsnips and potatoes. Let's eat then feud our swords afterwards, what ye say ol'dear lad o' mine?" Chance nodded yes, then took Laf's arm as he slowly guided him up to their home built into a side of a hill.





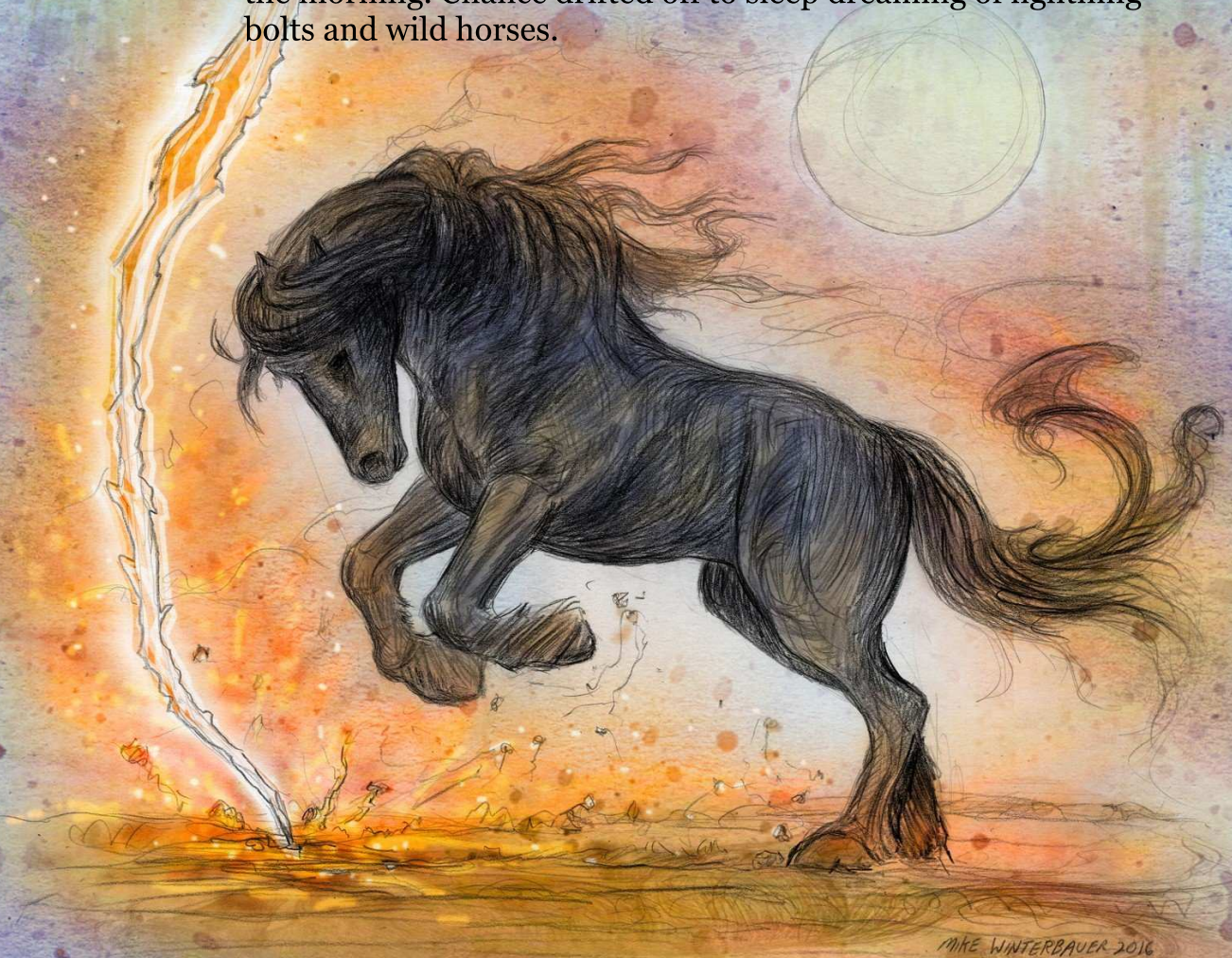


There was an arched doorway, two large arched windows, and a roof made out of earthen grass. There was also a metal chimney on top of the roof. One could literally walk on top of their home from the ground. Their home was dug into a hill and fortified inside with log walls. It was a really safe, warm, and sheltered space.

Chance was really proud of Laf's house building skills. It was atypical for a retired knight to be able to have such great carpentry skills. Once inside, Chance poured Laf another half pint of mead. He knew that after their heavy meal of vegetable stew and bread, Laf would eventually drift off to sleep by the fire. The dueling of swords would only occur in Laf's dreams. Chance looked out the window to the east at the darkening haze that engulfed Darkville. He then looked at the beautiful sunset in the west and the Rainbow of Stars. He did not have a solid plan yet, but just a simple mission to find a horse and armor.

Chance did not have a horse since Laf sold their last horse for brewing equipment and a bee hive to make mead. Initially, Chance was very mad at Laf for selling their horse. After a lot of family discussions, it made common sense to have a family business together. They brewed the mead with the honey and sold it in the town market. It was back breaking work to carry and roll the barrels to town. Chance's plan was to go to the countryside and find a wild horse, capture and train it. Many times when he left Shadowville, he saw wild horses far off in the distance. They were charging their hooves while chasing lightning bolts in the fields and beyond. It was crazy for horses to do that but Chance thought it was very magical.

Today, he went to the pond to look for the horses but he had no luck. Instead, he found a knight falling from the sky into the pond. He thought he would go back tomorrow for another try. Many of the townsfolk said the horses were evil and possessed by the electrical storms. Chance thought, "I need a horse, even if the horse is ruined by the storms. I need to find one special stallion to help me become a knight! When I wasn't using the horse to save the Kingdom, Laf could use the horse to carry the mead to market. Problem solved!" Chance climbed up the ladder to the loft and went to bed. He changed out of his dirty, pond scummed clothes and put on a clean night shirt. He fluffed the bale of hay for his bed. He crawled into bed and covered himself with a big woolen blanket. Closing his eyes, Chance thought of his plans of obtaining a horse and carefully telling Laf his other plans for knighthood in the morning. Chance drifted off to sleep dreaming of lightning bolts and wild horses.



MIKE WINTERBAUER 2016

CHAPTER FIVE
YOU ARE HERE



IF stood on the edge of his trundle bed and peered out of the window of his bed chamber. His residence at Cloud Castle was in the highest tower. It was fortunate that **IF** did not have to share his privacy with anyone else, unless of course, you included his bunkmates Hatimiss and Stash. Standing on the edge of his bed, **IF** pulled off his jester's hat and flung it across the bed, aiming for the hook on the wall. It was always a dead ringer as Hatimiss spun freely around the wall hook. "Whee! Perfect aim, like an arrow!" said Hatimiss. **IF** smiled at Hatimiss and then placed Stash on the mattress.

Staring up at the ceiling, Stash knew the daily drill of where he gets locked up in an old monk's trunk of useless junk at the foot of **IF**'s bed. "Not again! Why can't I just hang out on your bed? Better yet, I can tickle Hatimiss when he starts to snore!" Stash said, as he looked up at the golden sunlight beaming across the room. He softly mumbled a prayer not to be locked up again. **IF** rolled his eyes and reminded Stash that the trunk was his special place of conformity, compliance, and comfort. "Remember what happens when I let you out of the trunk while I am asleep?" said **IF**.

IF knew that leaving Stash alone for even just a split second of freedom often led to utter chaos. Stash loved to grow legs and run with total abandon throughout the castle. This did not sit well with **IF** since no one else was supposed to know of Stash's magical powers! One time, Stash grew legs from his scepter body and ran amok chasing a chamber maid. He scared her beyond the point of no return. His mustache grew like two huge tentacles wrapping each end around the maiden's small waist. She screamed and finally passed out from sheer terror!



IF ran after Stash and caught him. He then locked him inside the trunk. Later that day, **IF** convinced the young maiden that it was just a bad dream of evil spirits! This led her to become Sister Insaneita and she joined the nuns cloister at Cloud Castle. After recalling this dreadful story, **IF** slammed the trunk shut with Stash inside. He wrapped a heavy chain around the chest and bolted and locked the pad lock with a large iron key. "It stinks in here like old socks!" said Stash. **IF** chuckled and said, "It serves you right," as he pushed the old, smelly trunk across the room. **IF** decided to take a nap before his trip. Hatimiss was already snoring and Stash was trapped inside the trunk. Stash was deep in thought of complaint and had neither compliance, conformity, or comfort in his thoughts.

A few hours later, the monks rang the large church bell for their evening prayer. Every time they prayed they rang the bell. This happened more often as more problems occurred with the broken stairways and the mysterious darkness creeping over Darkville. The ringing of the bells made **IF** spring to action as he jumped out of his bed from a deep sleep. He unlocked another trunk from his closet and gathered some of his retired knight's belongings. He had a very sharp dagger which he had sharpened on a stone, a knight's helmet which he could disguise and hide under Hatimiss, and a magical sword that could shrink to the size of a toothpick.

IF was a true knight in disguise. His disguise was necessary since he served his Majesty the Queen as a jester. No one knew of his double identity, but throughout all these years it served him well. He packed food of dried fruit, cheese, mutton, and hard boiled eggs that he wrapped into a linen cloth and put them into a leather pouch. He then unlocked the old, smelly trunk and pulled Stash out as Hatimiss flew off the wall hook and landed upon **IF**'s head. **IF** set out into the darkness of night in search of answers that no one else could answer.

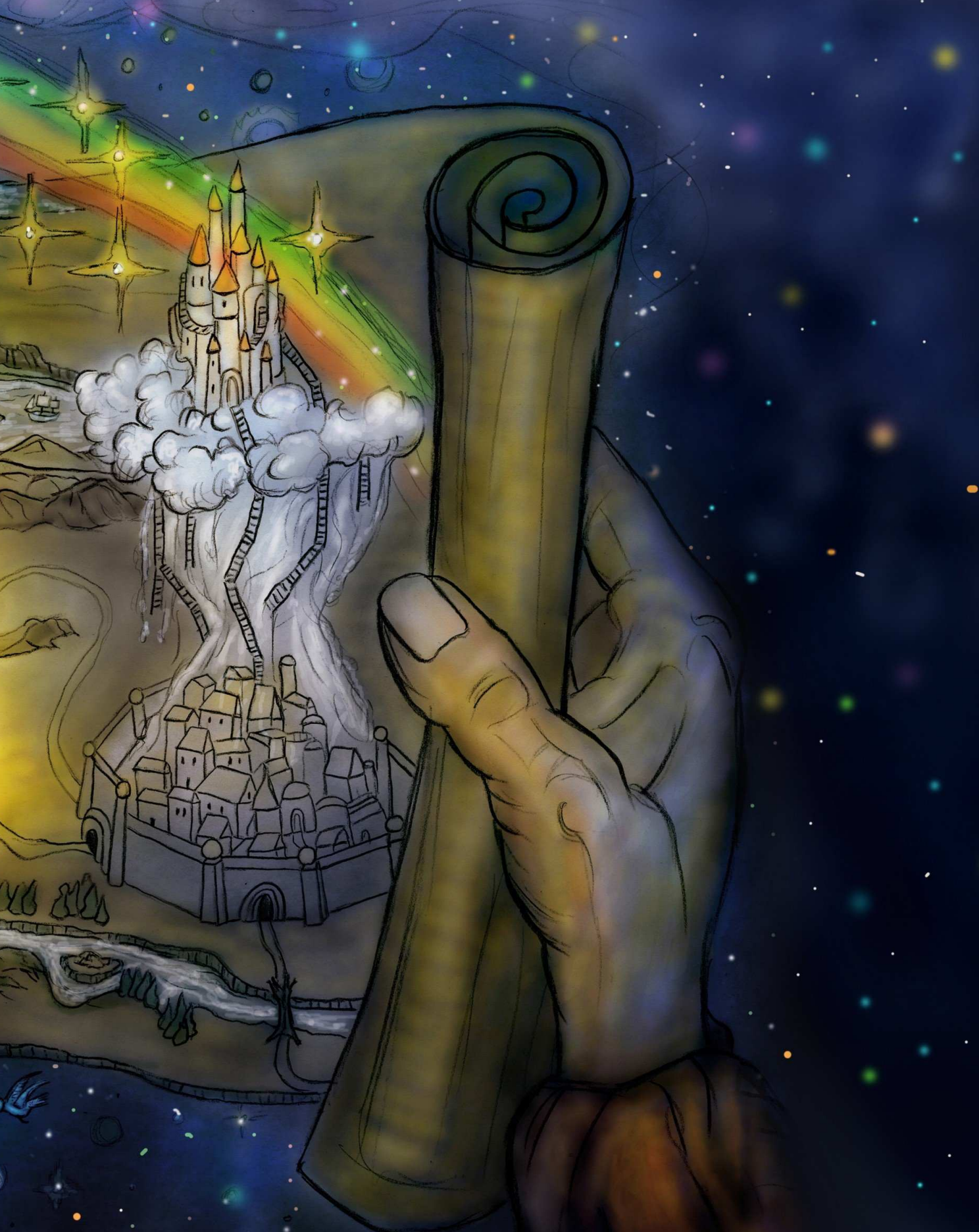


The trio of Hatimiss, Stash, and **IF** knew they had greatness and power together, greater than that of any knight or army of knights. **IF** locked the heavy door to his private chamber and set out into the unknown. Time was not theirs to waste; for time belonged to the Rainbow of Stars according to the Monks of Thera.

Quiet and alone except for an occasional sleeping guard, **IF** climbed down a hundred tower stairs and walked through the great halls of the castle. The castle had always been very safe from occasional attacks. This was especially true since the access to Cloud Castle seemed pointless to the lesser creatures that inhabited Thera below. In the past, a few random small enemies like the mini dragons, the tiny tree trolls, the knife throwing pigmy giants, and of course, the dog sized slugworts, attempted to attack the castle. The Court of Knights always won the battle. **IF**, Hatimiss, and Stash left Cloud Castle as they started to descend down the flight of stairs that led to ground below. The stairs were cushy and soft to the feet; walking on cloud stairs had their benefits.

IF reached a set of missing stairs. He found the ropes set up by the knights a bit more confusing than necessary. Hatimiss was sleeping on **IF**'s head but Stash was wide awake. "I can handle this," he said. Within a minute, Stash grew and wove a giant bridge out of his mustache that attached the stairs and the ground below together like a soft rug. **IF** crossed the hairy bridge to reach the ground. Stash then used his long mustache like a giant rubberband, and flung his body across the missing stairs. His moustache then shrunk like a giant snake going into a small basket. Effortlessly, he bounced back into **IF**'s right hand. Hatimiss woke up, "Did I miss something?" Stash just laughed out loud and felt quite proud of his constructive contribution to their quest.





Once on the ground, IF took off the helmet that was underneath Hatimiss. The large steel helmet was very uncomfortable. He decided to find a better solution. IF asked Hatimiss for assistance since Stash had already helped. IF loved his counterparts, but they often acted like spoiled siblings and needed to take turns in the limelight. Hatimiss then cast a spell and shrunk IF's helmet to fit on Stash's head. The mini helmet flew onto Stash's head and fit over his old helmet perfectly. Stash was proud of his new armored hat and gave Hatimiss a huge grin. Hatimiss considered making the hat too small to give Stash a headache, but then decided against starting another family feud. IF then hooked the dagger onto his belt. IF proudly stated, "Thank you gentlemen, for your fine work indeed! We will have an excellent quest!"

IF then reached into his belt bag and pulled out the *You are Here Map*. IF always carried this magical map. It was always ready to use for any quest and guaranteed the user from getting lost inside the kingdom. "We are in Shadowville, on the very edge of town, walking toward the intersection of Fog Road and Haze Court," IF stated loudly for all to hear, especially the map. IF unrolled the map as he placed it on the ground. Hatimiss and Stash then jumped to the ground to get a better view of the map. All three were standing together side-by-side. The map then started to glow. The old parchment paper began to illuminate and the ink drawn landscapes started to come to life. IF picked the map back up and it illuminated the darkness of the night just outside the town of Shadowville. Three tiny figures started to appear on the map. IF said, "Wave hello to the map." Hatimiss wiggled a hand out of one of the points of his hat body and Stash unraveled an arm and hand from his scepter body to wave hello.

They all looked down at the map and saw miniature versions of themselves waving back. It was so exciting! The *You are Here Map* was fully operational and they saw exactly where they were on the map! Each of them was in a miniature animated form and waving back at themselves! “Just testing the map to see if it still works,” **IF** reminded them. He then carefully rolled the map back into a neat tube as the map began to fade like a blown out candle. **IF** placed it back into his pouch.

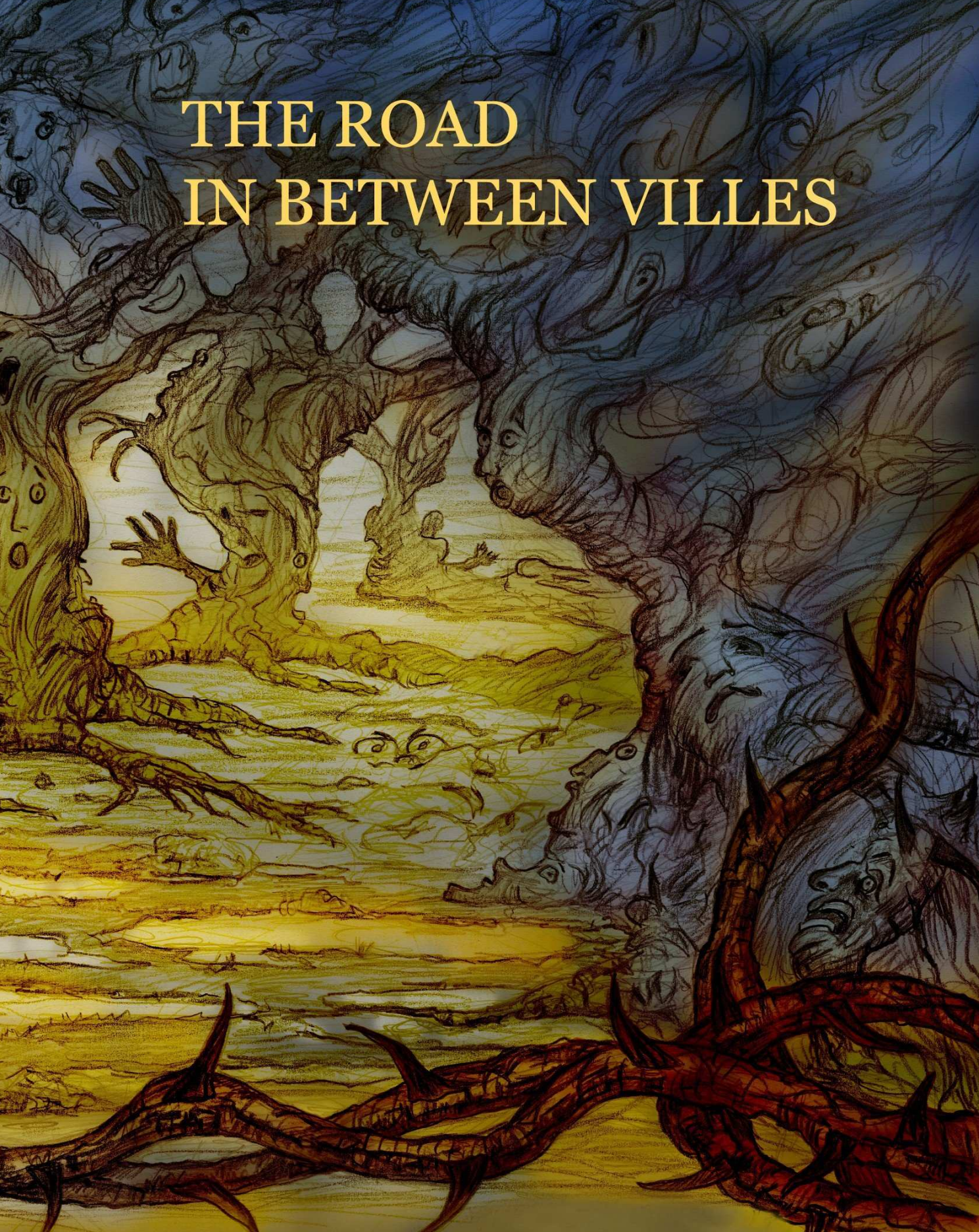
IF was already planning to head in the direction of Darkville. He looked solemnly up at the majestic clouds and castle. He thought of the Queen and how upset and nervous she was feeling. She was not her confident queen-like self but instead, she worried about the plight of her kingdom. The Rainbow of Stars looked as if it had caught a disease and was slowly fading with its dimly lit and fraying stars. He knew it would only be a matter of time before everything on the planet turned pitch black. It would be silent and sad, without life or a shining star for miles.

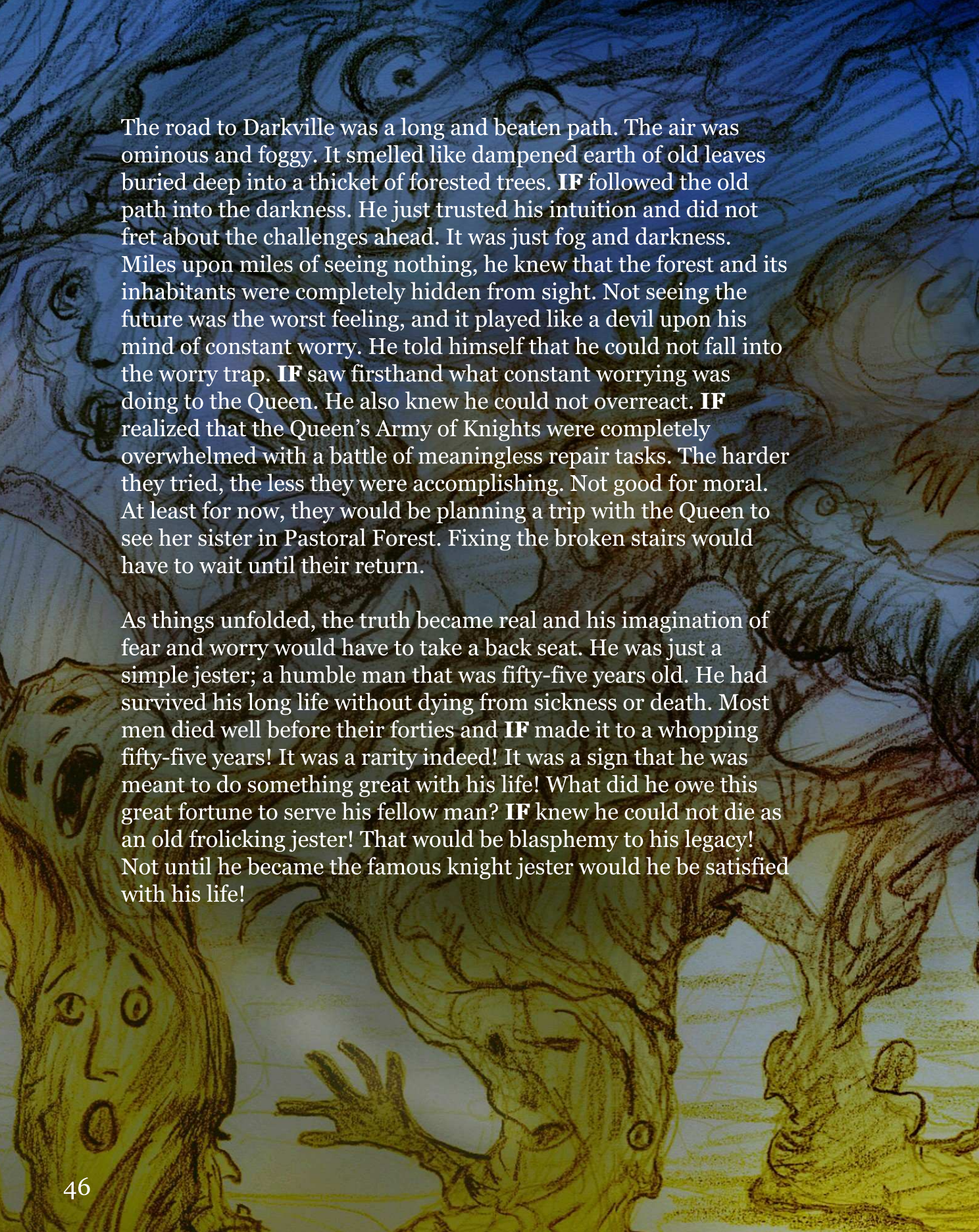
IF looked up at the broken staircase leading up to Cloud Castle. He thought that when bad things start to happen, it was best to go to see two of the shadiest characters he knew, Peg and Pudge in Darkville. These two pint sized men built their lazy and slovenly careers on petty crime and gossip. **IF** turned right, and headed out of town into the dark fog towards Darkville. His curly toed shoes jingling as he walked. All three figures walked side-by-side with their eyes wide open, peering blindly into the dark fog. They were ready for any battle that might spring upon them along the way.

CHAPTER SIX



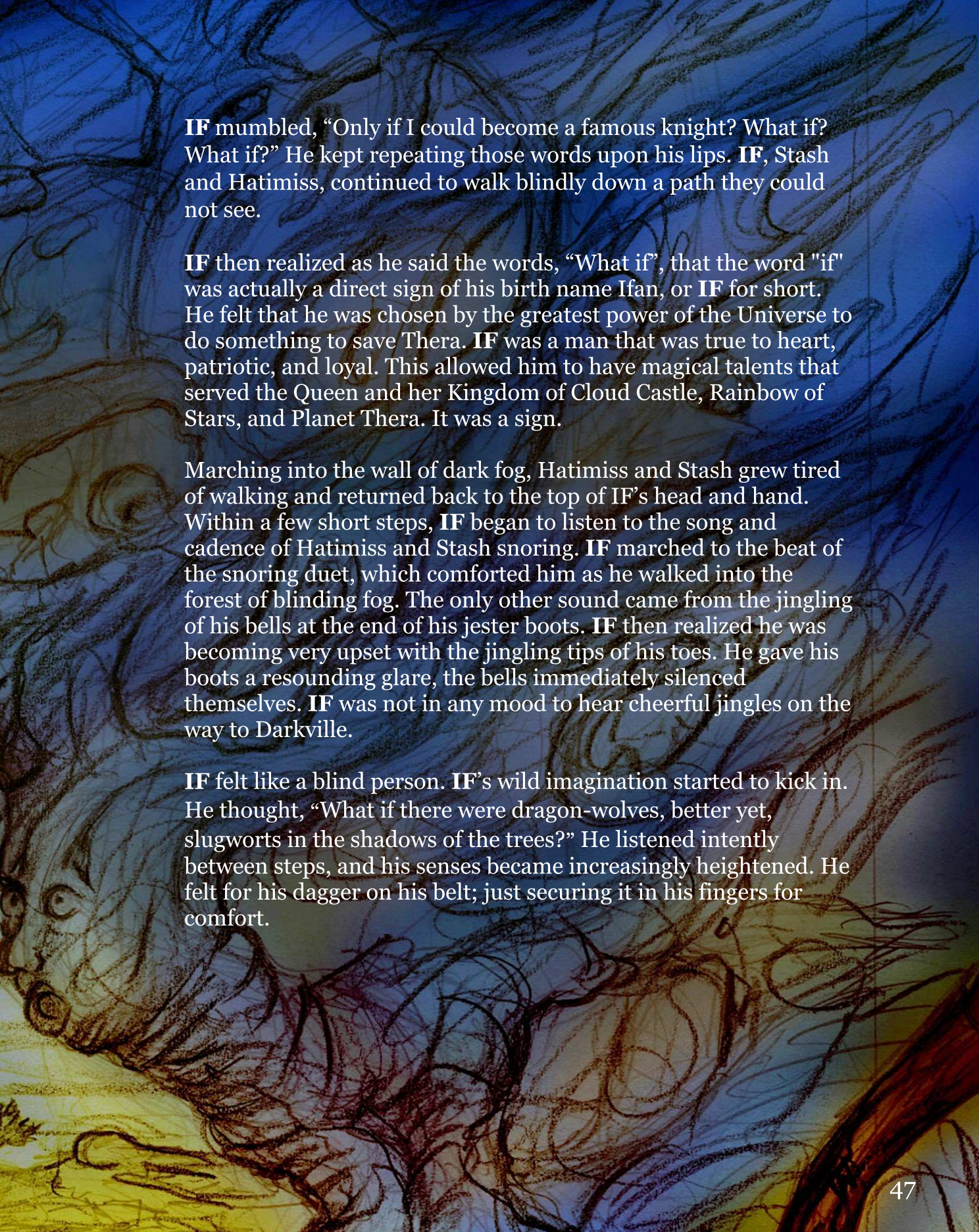
THE ROAD IN BETWEEN VILLES





The road to Darkville was a long and beaten path. The air was ominous and foggy. It smelled like dampened earth of old leaves buried deep into a thicket of forested trees. **IF** followed the old path into the darkness. He just trusted his intuition and did not fret about the challenges ahead. It was just fog and darkness. Miles upon miles of seeing nothing, he knew that the forest and its inhabitants were completely hidden from sight. Not seeing the future was the worst feeling, and it played like a devil upon his mind of constant worry. He told himself that he could not fall into the worry trap. **IF** saw firsthand what constant worrying was doing to the Queen. He also knew he could not overreact. **IF** realized that the Queen's Army of Knights were completely overwhelmed with a battle of meaningless repair tasks. The harder they tried, the less they were accomplishing. Not good for moral. At least for now, they would be planning a trip with the Queen to see her sister in Pastoral Forest. Fixing the broken stairs would have to wait until their return.

As things unfolded, the truth became real and his imagination of fear and worry would have to take a back seat. He was just a simple jester; a humble man that was fifty-five years old. He had survived his long life without dying from sickness or death. Most men died well before their forties and **IF** made it to a whopping fifty-five years! It was a rarity indeed! It was a sign that he was meant to do something great with his life! What did he owe this great fortune to serve his fellow man? **IF** knew he could not die as an old frolicking jester! That would be blasphemy to his legacy! Not until he became the famous knight jester would he be satisfied with his life!

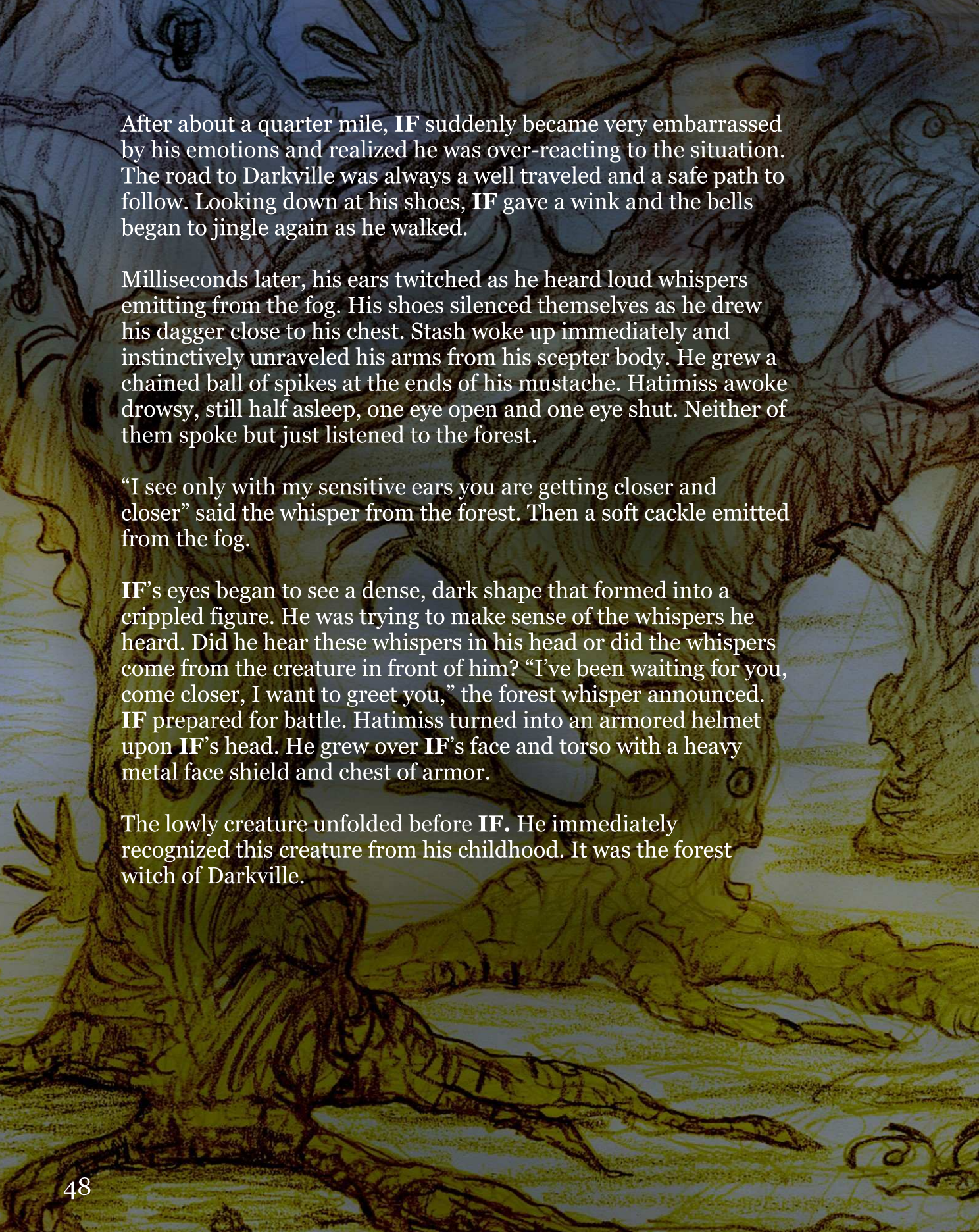


IF mumbled, “Only if I could become a famous knight? What if? What if?” He kept repeating those words upon his lips. **IF**, Stash and Hatimiss, continued to walk blindly down a path they could not see.

IF then realized as he said the words, “What if”, that the word “if” was actually a direct sign of his birth name Ifan, or **IF** for short. He felt that he was chosen by the greatest power of the Universe to do something to save Thera. **IF** was a man that was true to heart, patriotic, and loyal. This allowed him to have magical talents that served the Queen and her Kingdom of Cloud Castle, Rainbow of Stars, and Planet Thera. It was a sign.

Marching into the wall of dark fog, Hatimiss and Stash grew tired of walking and returned back to the top of **IF**’s head and hand. Within a few short steps, **IF** began to listen to the song and cadence of Hatimiss and Stash snoring. **IF** marched to the beat of the snoring duet, which comforted him as he walked into the forest of blinding fog. The only other sound came from the jingling of his bells at the end of his jester boots. **IF** then realized he was becoming very upset with the jingling tips of his toes. He gave his boots a resounding glare, the bells immediately silenced themselves. **IF** was not in any mood to hear cheerful jingles on the way to Darkville.

IF felt like a blind person. **IF**’s wild imagination started to kick in. He thought, “What if there were dragon-wolves, better yet, slugworts in the shadows of the trees?” He listened intently between steps, and his senses became increasingly heightened. He felt for his dagger on his belt; just securing it in his fingers for comfort.



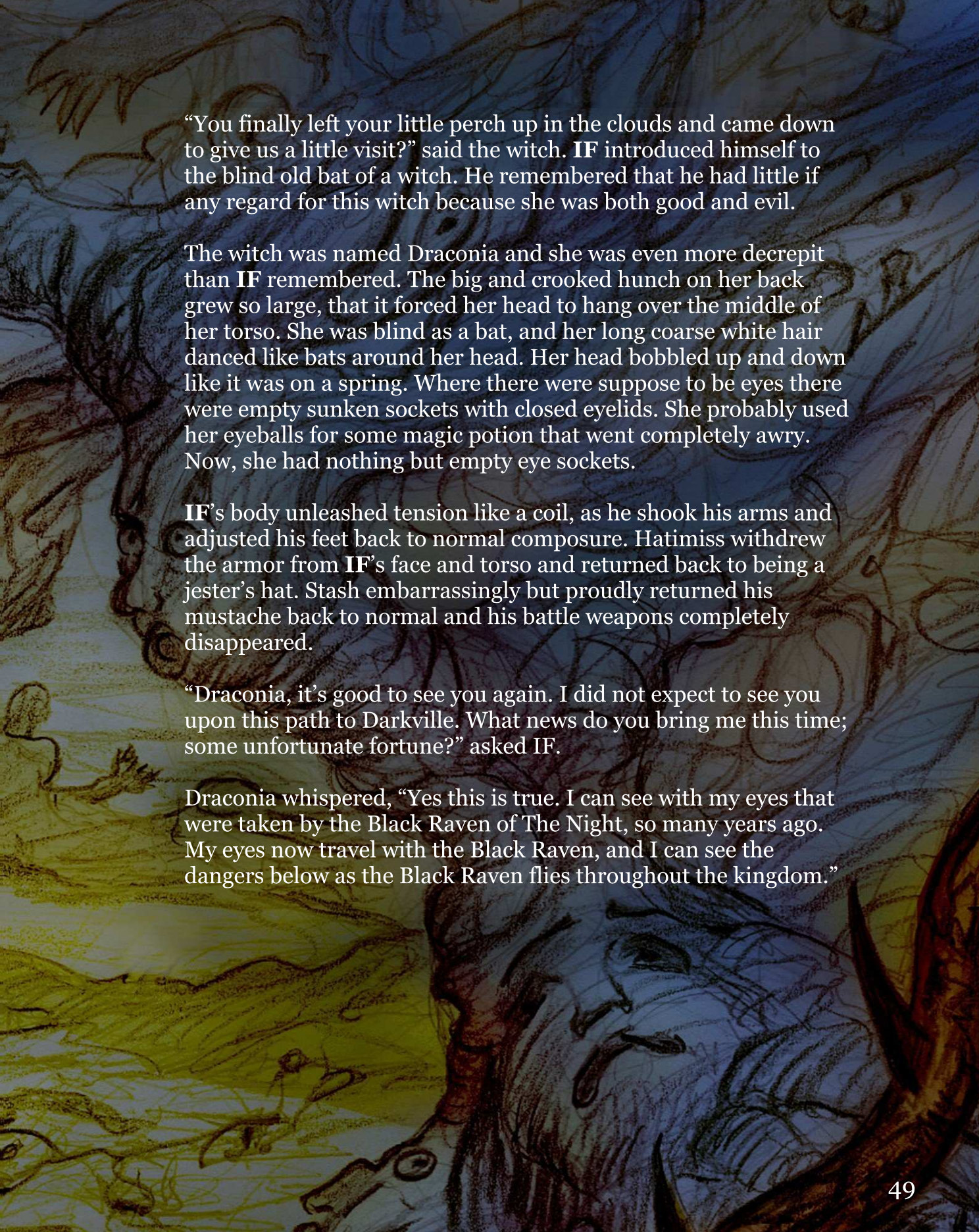
After about a quarter mile, **IF** suddenly became very embarrassed by his emotions and realized he was over-reacting to the situation. The road to Darkville was always a well traveled and a safe path to follow. Looking down at his shoes, **IF** gave a wink and the bells began to jingle again as he walked.

Milliseconds later, his ears twitched as he heard loud whispers emitting from the fog. His shoes silenced themselves as he drew his dagger close to his chest. Stash woke up immediately and instinctively unraveled his arms from his scepter body. He grew a chained ball of spikes at the ends of his mustache. Hatimiss awoke drowsy, still half asleep, one eye open and one eye shut. Neither of them spoke but just listened to the forest.

“I see only with my sensitive ears you are getting closer and closer” said the whisper from the forest. Then a soft cackle emitted from the fog.

IF’s eyes began to see a dense, dark shape that formed into a crippled figure. He was trying to make sense of the whispers he heard. Did he hear these whispers in his head or did the whispers come from the creature in front of him? “I’ve been waiting for you, come closer, I want to greet you,” the forest whisper announced. **IF** prepared for battle. Hatimiss turned into an armored helmet upon **IF**’s head. He grew over **IF**’s face and torso with a heavy metal face shield and chest of armor.

The lowly creature unfolded before **IF**. He immediately recognized this creature from his childhood. It was the forest witch of Darkville.



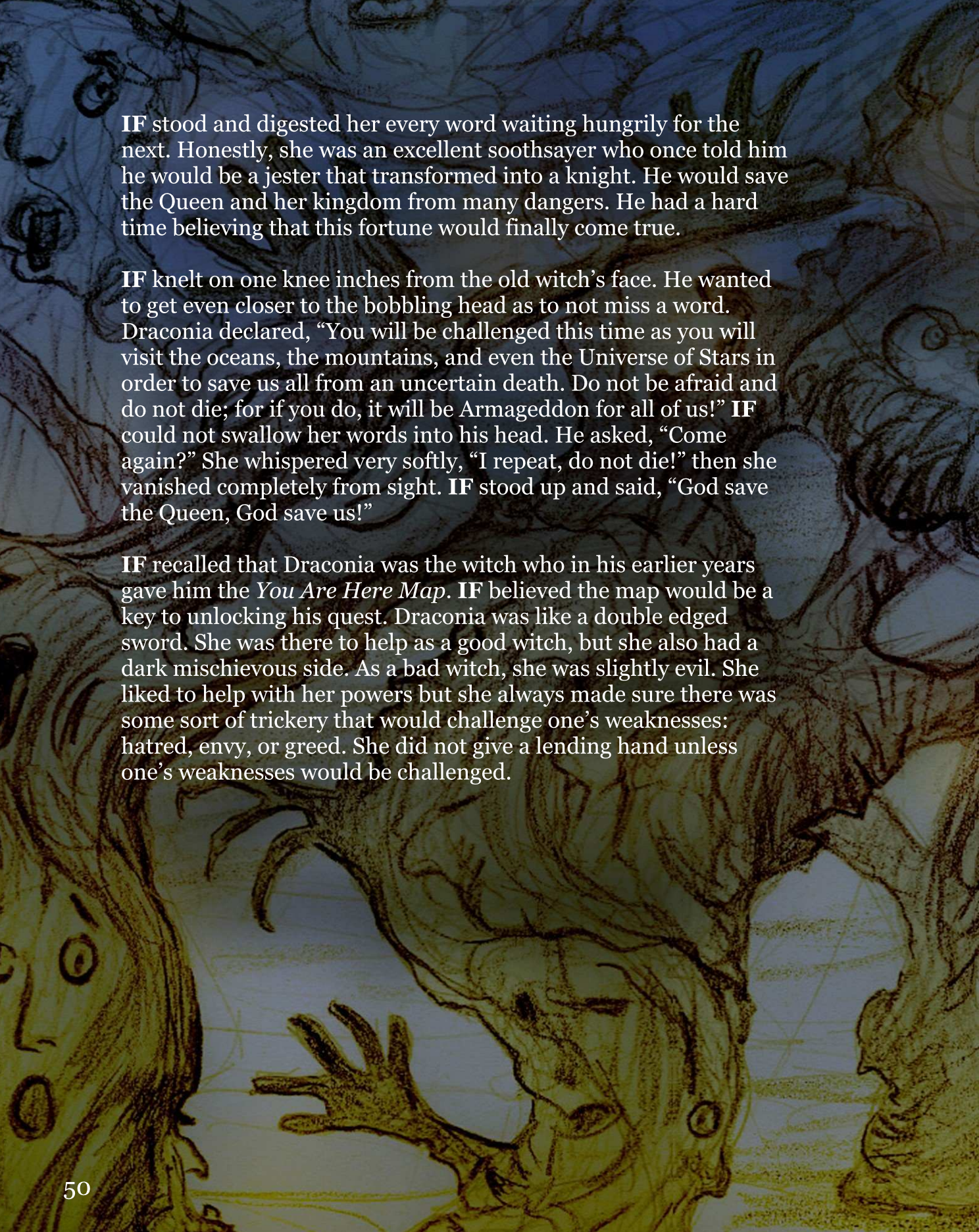
“You finally left your little perch up in the clouds and came down to give us a little visit?” said the witch. **IF** introduced himself to the blind old bat of a witch. He remembered that he had little if any regard for this witch because she was both good and evil.

The witch was named Draconia and she was even more decrepit than **IF** remembered. The big and crooked hunch on her back grew so large, that it forced her head to hang over the middle of her torso. She was blind as a bat, and her long coarse white hair danced like bats around her head. Her head bobbed up and down like it was on a spring. Where there were suppose to be eyes there were empty sunken sockets with closed eyelids. She probably used her eyeballs for some magic potion that went completely awry. Now, she had nothing but empty eye sockets.

IF's body unleashed tension like a coil, as he shook his arms and adjusted his feet back to normal composure. Hatimiss withdrew the armor from **IF**'s face and torso and returned back to being a jester's hat. Stash embarrassingly but proudly returned his mustache back to normal and his battle weapons completely disappeared.

“Draconia, it's good to see you again. I did not expect to see you upon this path to Darkville. What news do you bring me this time; some unfortunate fortune?” asked **IF**.

Draconia whispered, “Yes this is true. I can see with my eyes that were taken by the Black Raven of The Night, so many years ago. My eyes now travel with the Black Raven, and I can see the dangers below as the Black Raven flies throughout the kingdom.”



IF stood and digested her every word waiting hungrily for the next. Honestly, she was an excellent soothsayer who once told him he would be a jester that transformed into a knight. He would save the Queen and her kingdom from many dangers. He had a hard time believing that this fortune would finally come true.

IF knelt on one knee inches from the old witch's face. He wanted to get even closer to the bobbling head as to not miss a word. Draconia declared, "You will be challenged this time as you will visit the oceans, the mountains, and even the Universe of Stars in order to save us all from an uncertain death. Do not be afraid and do not die; for if you do, it will be Armageddon for all of us!" **IF** could not swallow her words into his head. He asked, "Come again?" She whispered very softly, "I repeat, do not die!" then she vanished completely from sight. **IF** stood up and said, "God save the Queen, God save us!"

IF recalled that Draconia was the witch who in his earlier years gave him the *You Are Here Map*. **IF** believed the map would be a key to unlocking his quest. Draconia was like a double edged sword. She was there to help as a good witch, but she also had a dark mischievous side. As a bad witch, she was slightly evil. She liked to help with her powers but she always made sure there was some sort of trickery that would challenge one's weaknesses: hatred, envy, or greed. She did not give a lending hand unless one's weaknesses would be challenged.

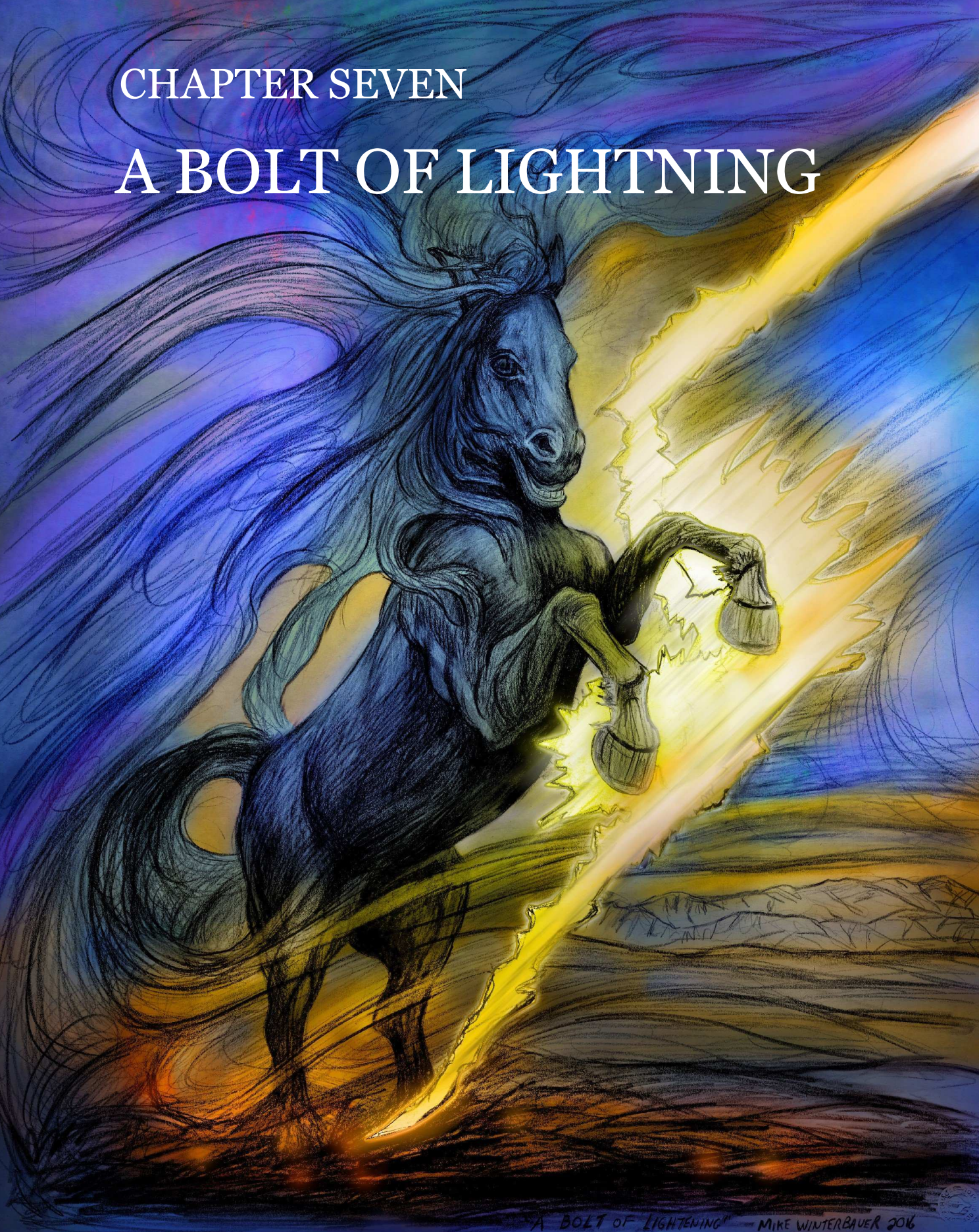
IF rolled the map back up and put it into his belt bag. He then felt for his dagger for reassurance as they proceeded onward towards Darkville.

All were dead silent as **IF**, Stash, and Hatimiss went into the night and disappeared into the fog.



CHAPTER SEVEN

A BOLT OF LIGHTNING



Standing and surveying the green pastures, the black stallion reluctantly drew himself closer and closer to the pond. He was always hesitant of the tingling shock and sensation of the tiny sparks upon his lips as he bent down to drink the cool and refreshing water. The horse slowly bent down and pursed his lips in an amusing way, while miniature flashes of electricity bounced off of his teeth and tongue as he drank. The horse was wet with sweat and rain from head to tail after the many hours of galloping in between the lightning bolts. Lightning came down from the heavens to pinprick the planet like a pin cushion. The electrical currents bathed the atmosphere with a new sense of energy to the planet that was slowly becoming extinct from Thera. The air smelled fresh, clean, and pure and created an earthly perfume. The horse's nostrils drew in the clean, pure air after the storm's last few drops of rain that hit the ground.

This particular stallion benefited from being struck by lightning just minutes after birth. The colt ended up oversized and grew into a gigantic beast. After each lightning bolt hit the ground, he loved to dig his hooves into the newly burnt soil to expose the glowing embers of fulgurites. Fulgurites were the remains of lightning bolts that formed into clear crystals that looked like icicles. The horse bucked and reared around the lightning bolts in a theatrical dance. He dug for the glowing fulgurites that tattooed his hooves. These horses that ran in the rain and lightning were thought to be possessed and cursed. Many years ago, the villagers gave up training and harnessing these great stallions. They were to remain wild and unbridled. They chased lightning and thunder bolts and basked in green pastures under the Rainbow of Stars.



Very few people knew that there was a special girl who tamed these wild stallions. In fact, all creatures of the forest adored her. All creatures both great and small were cast under her magical spell. She was the daughter of Sister Earth. Sister Earth was the Queen's younger sister. This meant that Sister Earth's daughter was actually the Queen's niece. All the living creatures instinctively knew that this girl was a friend and meant no harm. They came to her for help, nurturing, and understanding. The black horse instinctively knew hours before that she would pay him a visit. He waited for her by the pond where the two would always meet. She would bring the horse a basket of baked oats and turnips. It was a treat that this horse could not refuse! In return, the horse would let the girl climb onto his bare back and they would chase lightning bolts together.

Chance woke early and set out in the morning to find his horse. Scouting the distant fields around the pond, Chance finally laid his eyes upon the largest, biggest, and grandest black stallion his eyes had ever seen! His heart started to pound as he saw his future. His visualization was an epiphany! Beads of sweat began to form at his temples. His muscles ached with the desire to grab the black stallion's mane, jump on his back, and go for a ride, but it was too far away. It was a vision to behold. "That's my horse, the greatest horse that ever existed!" said Chance. He knew with the conviction of a saint and a hero's heart, that without a doubt, he was looking at destiny. Chance said aloud to his doubting confidence, "That's my bully of a stead. That's my future that I am destined to ride upon this planet. For surely as this horse sees me, he too knows we are of the same kindred mind and spirit? I can see beyond any doubt, that this creature was placed upon Thera by the power of God, upon this day, to bring down the evil bestowed upon our innocent planet." For the first time in Chance's life, he felt like a man.

The dark horse glared at this young being across the pond. He felt it was strange that the young man was making weird noises that no one else could hear. The horse wanted to run away, but he also was a bit curious. The sense of fight or flight made the horse's coat twitch with excitement. He started to whinny and then stomped his hooves. His ears twitched back and forth and his lips tightened. The horse stood his ground as the new visitor was fast approaching.

Chance saw the great horse staring in his direction as if the horse was waiting to greet him. Chance couldn't walk fast enough and started to run wildly towards the horse. As Chance got closer, the horse jumped up and reared his hind legs and ran in the opposite direction. Dust flew everywhere and the beautiful stallion disappeared from sight. Chance stopped abruptly. He sank to the ground and collapsed like sack of flour in defeat. Chance said, "That's my knight's horse. Why does he turn away from me? Why can't I set my path as a knight true and just?" Just then, from behind a thicket of bushes, a young girl with golden red hair appeared in a purple cloak. She was carrying a small basket of oats and turnips. The girl yelled, "You're a green twig of a buffoon! You just scared Bolt!" The girl placed her basket down on the ground and ran after the horse. Chance never got a chance to say a word. He just sat in the grass completely dumbfounded as he watched his future stallion disappear into thin air. Giving up, he decided to lie down in the grass and stare at the clouds above.

Moments later, the horse's wet muzzle came down to sniff the crazy being lying on the grass. The horse was thinking that it must be sick or dead, and a simple sniff or lick would confirm it.

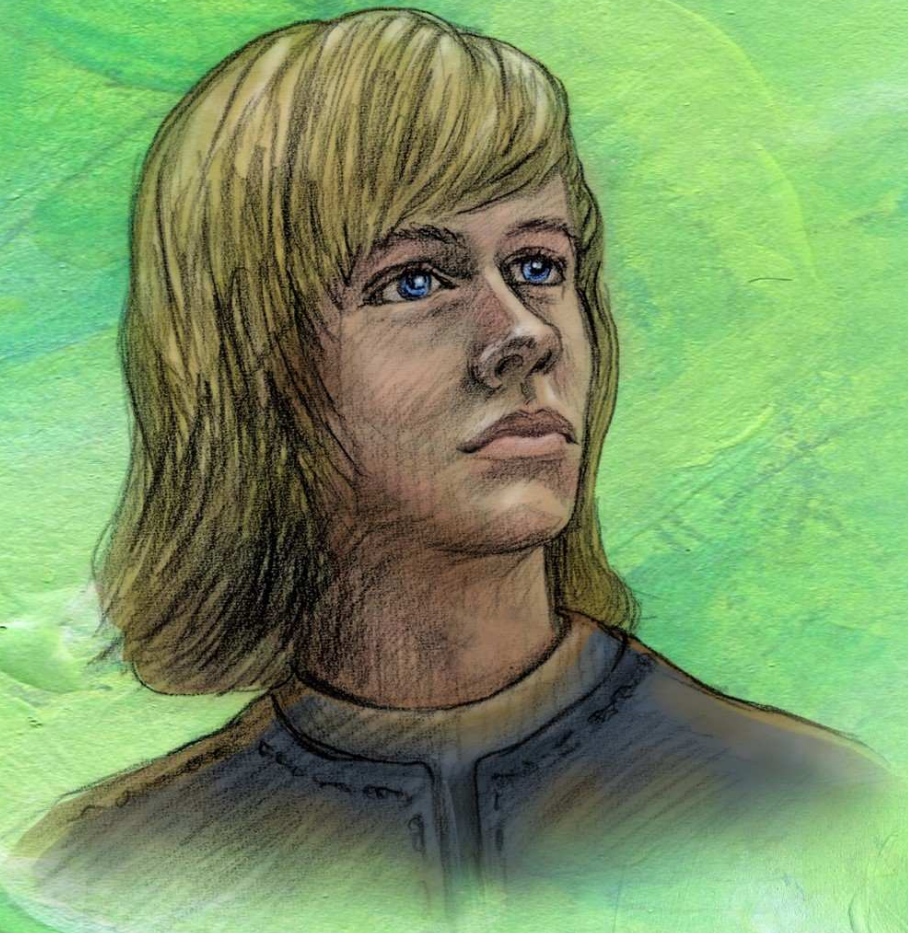
The girl stood next to the horse. She quickly unveiled her hood from the purple cloak to reveal her beautiful complexion, green eyes, and golden red hair. She spread the cloak evenly across the ground to make a place for her to sit next to Chance. The horse licked Chance across his face. Feeling completely humiliated, Chance wiped his face off with his sleeve. He stared upwards at this beautiful girl who was dressed in squire's clothing. Chance just stared at her, tight lipped without saying a word. He was having a really, really, bad day!

For a time that seemed like eternity, the girl just stared down at the young lad lying in the grass. It was just an awkward introduction for all concerned; it was absolute dead silence. The girl finally said, "I am Whisper, daughter of Sister Earth and niece to the Queen of Thera. This is my horse. He is a lightning breed of stallion that I am training for the Court of Knights. His strength and magic will make a fine horse for any knight. I welcome you to Bolt...Bolt of Lightning."

Chance said nothing at first, but instead he stared blankly up at the clouds in the direction of Cloud Castle. "What are you so bemused at staring up at the skies just after you tried to steal my horse?" Whisper asked. "I am waiting for yet another knight to fall from the sky, like the one that fell yesterday. I saved Sir Landon from drowning in this pond. He deemed me an honorary knight to the Queen. I am seeking the best steed to secure my destiny as a true knight. You interrupted my exercises in capturing my horse!" Chance exclaimed as he stared up at the horse. Chance then stood up. He realized it was not a good idea to let a giant horse tower over him.

Chance said, "I am Chancellor Truehero of Shadowville, but you can call me Chance. I have served as a squire to Duke Laf Haggard of Shadowville. It is under his tutelage that I desire to become a great knight." He extended his hand to Whisper in order to kiss her hand, but she just ignored his gesture. Whisper found this handsome young man completely amusing and played along. She stood up and shook his hand like a male counterpart. This baffled Chance even more since he was suppose to kiss her hand instead. To make matters worse, he went on and on about his family lineage of heroes. Finally a bit over winded, Chance asked, "May I ask you a question?"

Whisper intuitively let Chance talk as she just coyly smiled at him while pretending to listen. She thought that he was handsome, in a boyish way. She visualized that in a few years from now, he would be strikingly handsome! She envisioned him as a knight galloping on Bolt.



“Can I have my horse now? You just admitted he’s being trained for a knight. Well, I am that knight!” Chance said with authority. With wisdom beyond her years, Whisper just stared directly into his beautiful blue eyes. For a long time, they just stared at each other. Whisper had the gift of intuition to see beyond one’s face and look into their soul. Her mind was going deeper and deeper into his eyes, until she saw the bright light that was his soul. She saw that he was a very kind and true being of the highest order. She saw his innocence and bravery. She knew Chance would answer to the call of bravery and even possibly die! As her heart melted, she realized Chance was a special gift just like Bolt. They were all meant to be together.



Not knowing exactly how to answer Chance, Whisper bit her lip and held her breath. Then suddenly she blurted out, “Bolt is ours...*together!*” Chance did not reply back. Instead, he held his breath to stop from blurting out... *why?* His instincts were telling him to agree with Whisper. He knew he was the knight for Bolt but he also knew for some unknown reason, he needed Whisper too. He just stared back at her and thought she was a beautiful vision. He imagined her in a beautiful blue dress and was intrigued by how long she stared at him. He wondered, “Does she like me? Was she meant to be part of my quest?”

Whisper spoke up, “You’re *not* a green twig of a buffoon; I take those words back from your ears.” Chance said, “Come again?” “I called you a green twig of a buffoon before, and now I am taking it back!” Whisper repeated. Chance just stood frozen and looked at her. He realized that he didn’t actually hear her say green twig of a buffoon the first time. He trained his mind to be impervious to any negative comments from others. He considered it to be part of his knight training to be confident in all situations. He also realized and admitted to himself that he was still working on the confidence issue.

While standing face-to-face, they both shifted their weight from one leg to another. Bolt nudged the small basket of goodies. Whisper picked up the basket and gave Bolt the treats he so eagerly and patiently waited for. Then for safe keeping, she placed the empty basket inside a hollow of a tree. Chance said, “Apology accepted as long as you accept my apology. I should not have tried to take a horse from a beautiful and gifted maiden-warrior.”

Whisper loved his reply, especially the warrior part. Whisper said, "Apology accepted. Sir Knight Chance where are your legs and plans taking you now?" Chance didn't quite think past getting a horse. He realized he needed some armor and weapons. Chance replied, "I need to go to Darkville to get supplies. There are two brothers named Peg and Pudge. They sell armor at a fair price." Sir Landon told him about getting affordable armor from a shop in Darkville owned by the two scoundrels. He warned Chance that Darkville is a trap. You cannot leave if you aren't careful! A lot of young and noble knights enter Darkville never to return!

"Will go with me to Darkville?" asked Chance. "Yes I will," she replied. Whisper typically did not go anywhere near Darkville but she felt safe with Chance and Bolt. Chance climbed upon the horse and then gently lifted Whisper onto Bolt. She grabbed Bolt's mane as Chance put his arms around her waist. She thought how strong Chance was as he effortlessly lifted her up. He was actually as strong as a man. Bolt's hooves sparked with the first few steps. The horse initially hesitated and wanted to go back to chasing lightning. Instead, he relaxed because now he was with his two favorite companions. He breathed slowly from his nostrils as his muscles relaxed. The first few steps from the horse's hooves were met with sparks and soon dissipated as the horse broke into a relaxed trot.

Then, Bolt galloped effortlessly into the blanket of darkness. In a very short time they were on the edge of Darkville's city limits. Bolt came to a halt at the ancient elder tree. It was the last safe refuge in the forest before crossing into Darkville. Chance jumped off Bolt and guided Whisper to the ground. The three of them stared at the gnarled forest of thorns and roots that led down a dark path to Darkville.



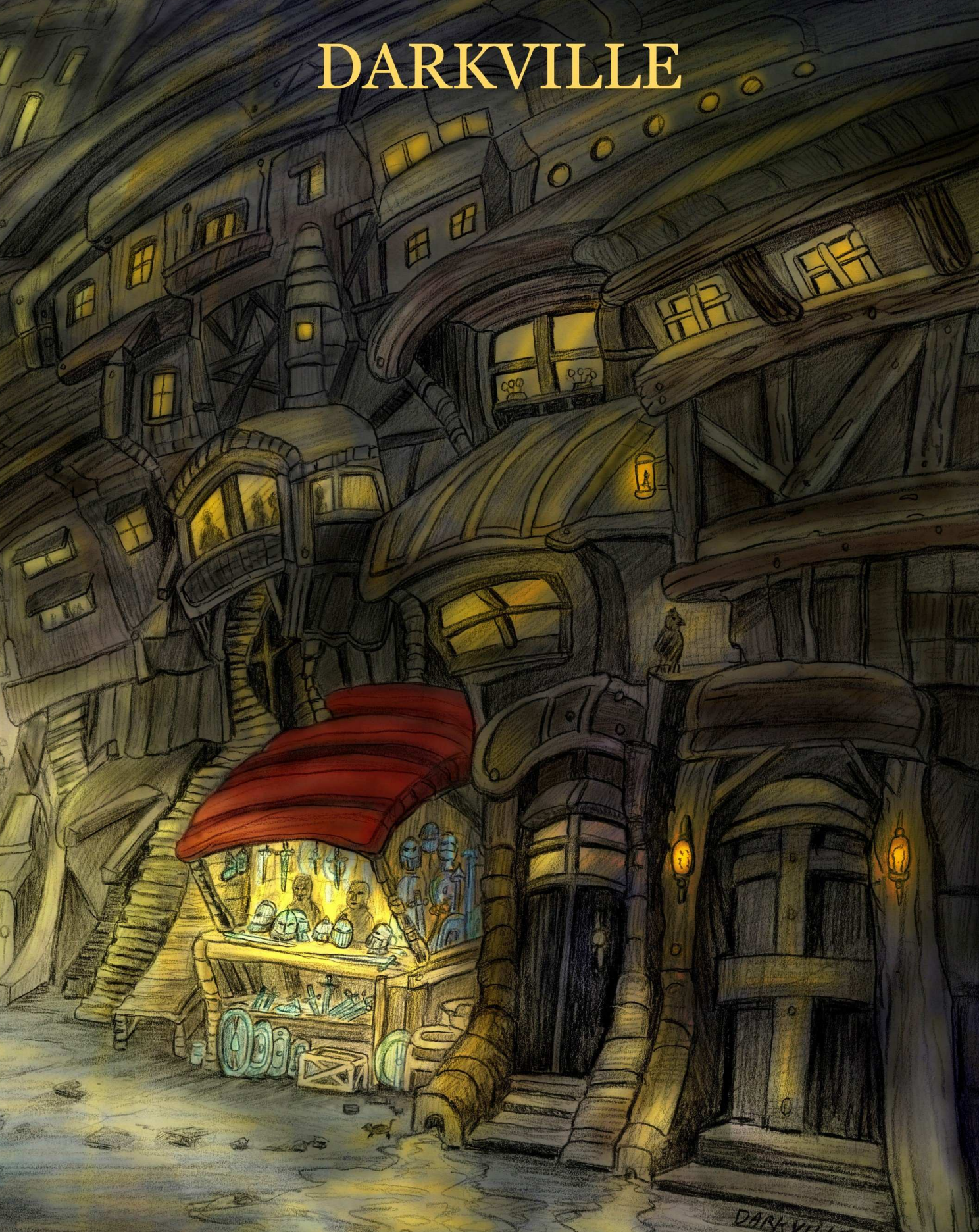
Chance instinctively decided to go alone, leaving Bolt to protect Whisper. Chance stared trustingly into Whisper's green eyes. Before saying anything, Whisper said, "I agree! Bolt and I will wait here for your return. This is your mission." Chance now knew that Whisper could read his thoughts. Whisper briefly stepped away and disappeared behind a tree. When Whisper returned, Chance turned around to see a beautiful vision of a red headed maiden in a blue dress accented by her purple cape. Whisper was not just a girl in squire's clothing anymore. The blue dress matched the vision he had of her just a few hours earlier.

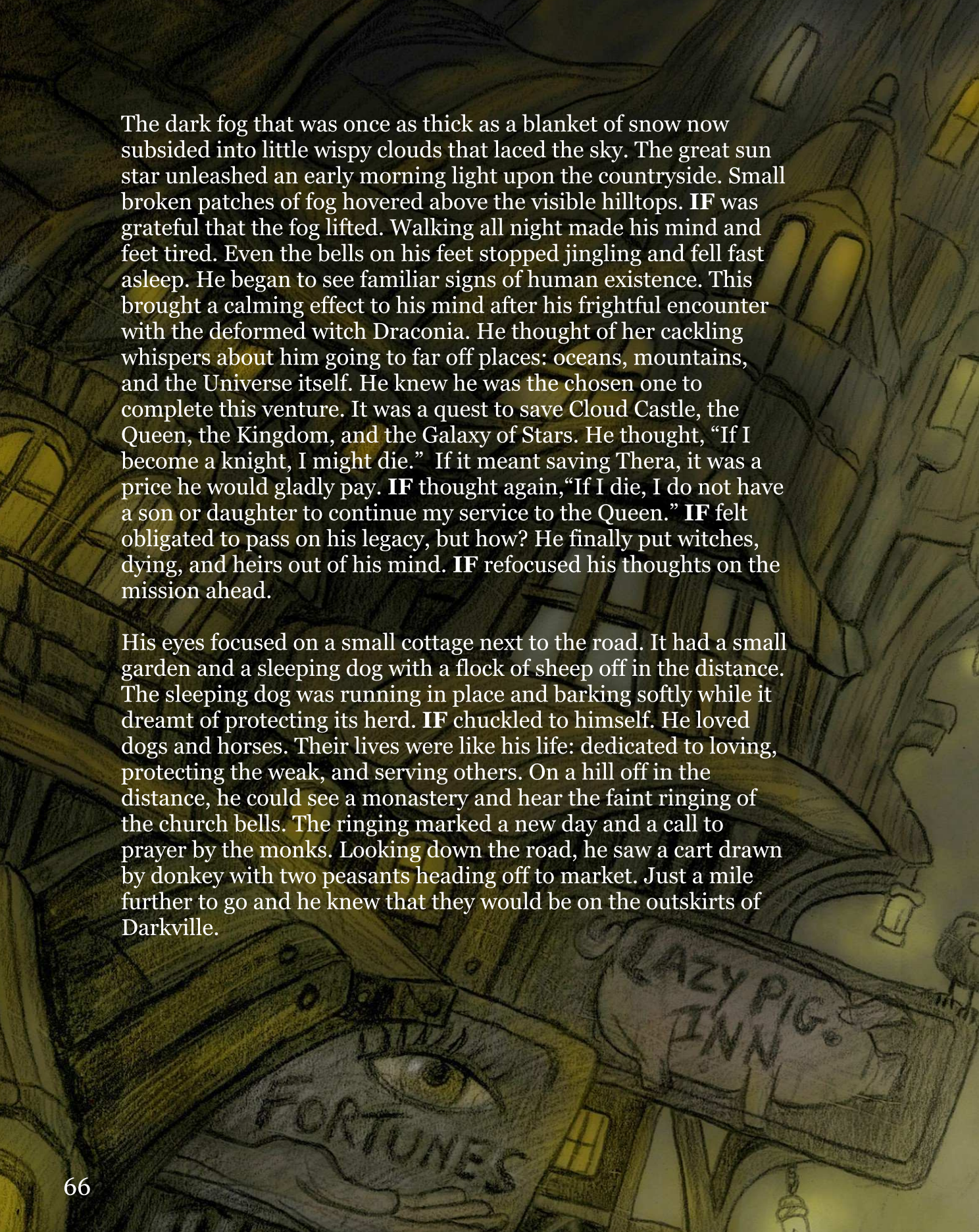
Whisper felt that she needed to give Chance some good luck, so she changed into her maidens dress to remind him of the beauty of Thera. This also gave him courage and strength. Chance felt protective of Whisper but also knew Bolt would protect her. With a quiet determination, Chance marched towards Darkville. Whisper and Bolt looked on longingly as they watched Chance disappear into the black mist. Whisper put her squire's clothing into a bundle and tied them onto Bolt. The sparrows gathered around her and dropped white flowers at her feet. Whisper picked up the flowers and weaved them into a crown that she put on top of her head. As she thought of Chance, her heart grew. She began to dance as the forest creatures of sparrows and rabbits became her audience. She was very happy that she met Chance.

CHAPTER EIGHT



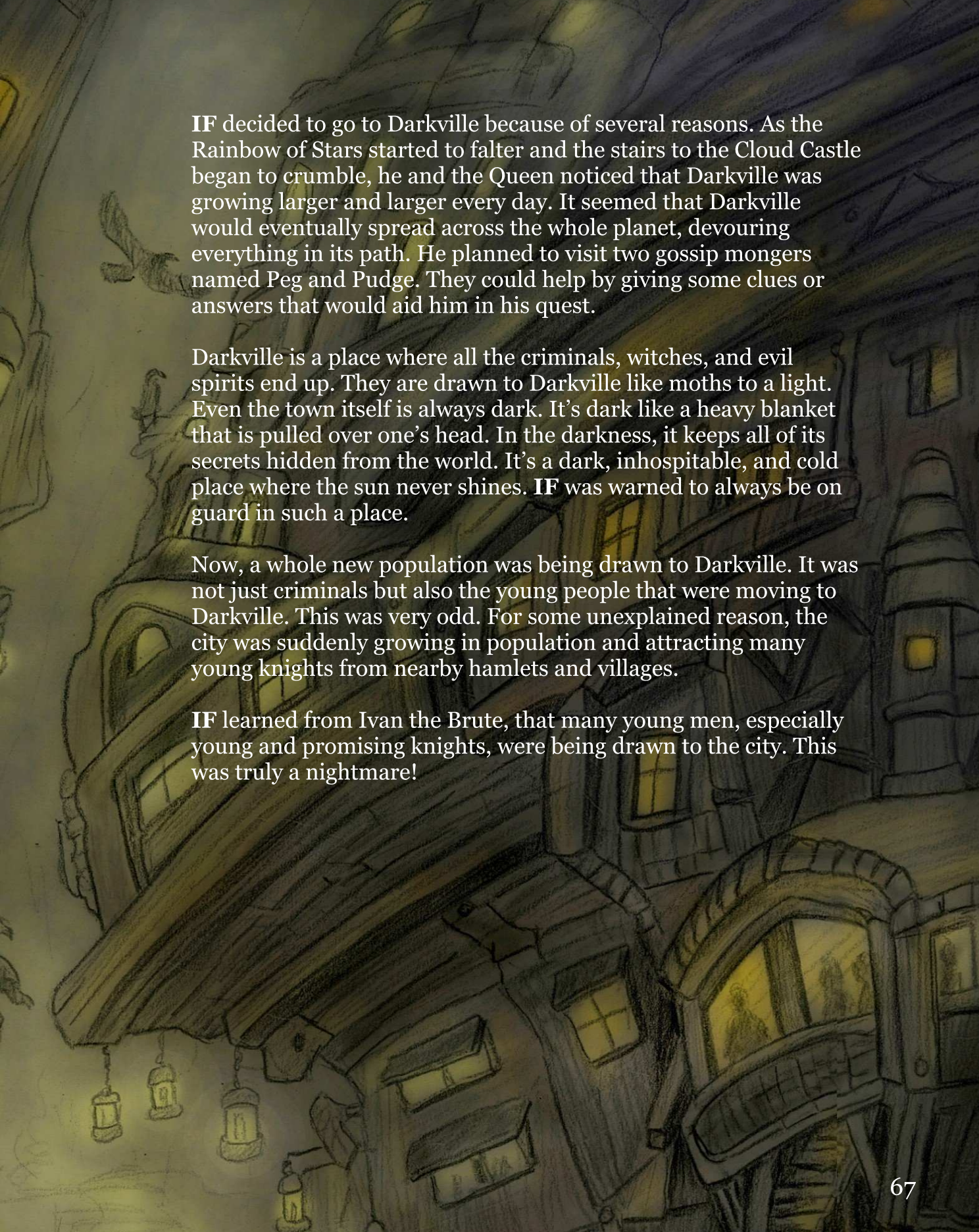
DARKVILLE





The dark fog that was once as thick as a blanket of snow now subsided into little wispy clouds that laced the sky. The great sun star unleashed an early morning light upon the countryside. Small broken patches of fog hovered above the visible hilltops. IF was grateful that the fog lifted. Walking all night made his mind and feet tired. Even the bells on his feet stopped jingling and fell fast asleep. He began to see familiar signs of human existence. This brought a calming effect to his mind after his frightful encounter with the deformed witch Draconia. He thought of her cackling whispers about him going to far off places: oceans, mountains, and the Universe itself. He knew he was the chosen one to complete this venture. It was a quest to save Cloud Castle, the Queen, the Kingdom, and the Galaxy of Stars. He thought, "If I become a knight, I might die." If it meant saving Thera, it was a price he would gladly pay. IF thought again, "If I die, I do not have a son or daughter to continue my service to the Queen." IF felt obligated to pass on his legacy, but how? He finally put witches, dying, and heirs out of his mind. IF refocused his thoughts on the mission ahead.

His eyes focused on a small cottage next to the road. It had a small garden and a sleeping dog with a flock of sheep off in the distance. The sleeping dog was running in place and barking softly while it dreamt of protecting its herd. IF chuckled to himself. He loved dogs and horses. Their lives were like his life: dedicated to loving, protecting the weak, and serving others. On a hill off in the distance, he could see a monastery and hear the faint ringing of the church bells. The ringing marked a new day and a call to prayer by the monks. Looking down the road, he saw a cart drawn by donkey with two peasants heading off to market. Just a mile further to go and he knew that they would be on the outskirts of Darkville.

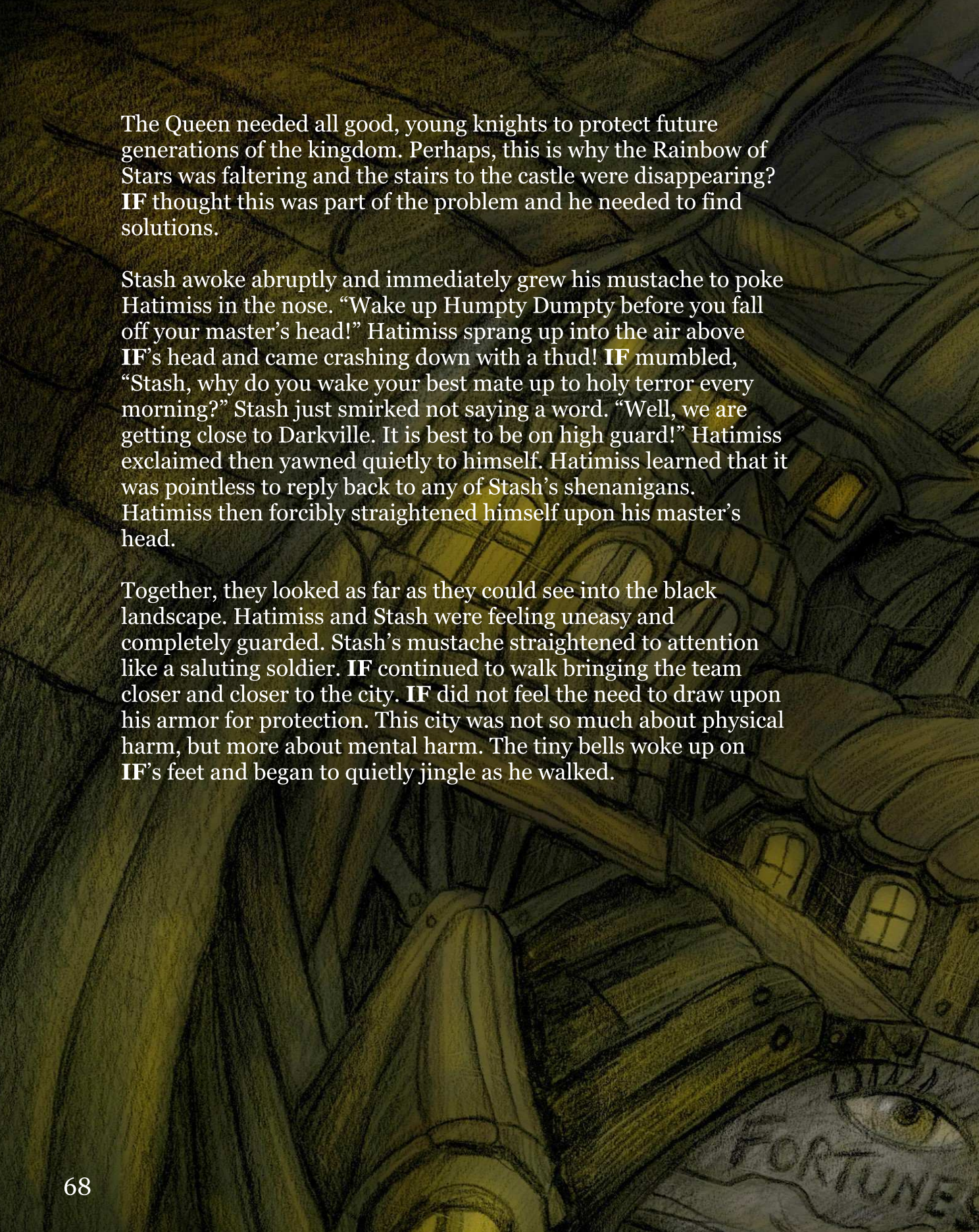


IF decided to go to Darkville because of several reasons. As the Rainbow of Stars started to falter and the stairs to the Cloud Castle began to crumble, he and the Queen noticed that Darkville was growing larger and larger every day. It seemed that Darkville would eventually spread across the whole planet, devouring everything in its path. He planned to visit two gossip mongers named Peg and Pudge. They could help by giving some clues or answers that would aid him in his quest.

Darkville is a place where all the criminals, witches, and evil spirits end up. They are drawn to Darkville like moths to a light. Even the town itself is always dark. It's dark like a heavy blanket that is pulled over one's head. In the darkness, it keeps all of its secrets hidden from the world. It's a dark, inhospitable, and cold place where the sun never shines. **IF** was warned to always be on guard in such a place.

Now, a whole new population was being drawn to Darkville. It was not just criminals but also the young people that were moving to Darkville. This was very odd. For some unexplained reason, the city was suddenly growing in population and attracting many young knights from nearby hamlets and villages.

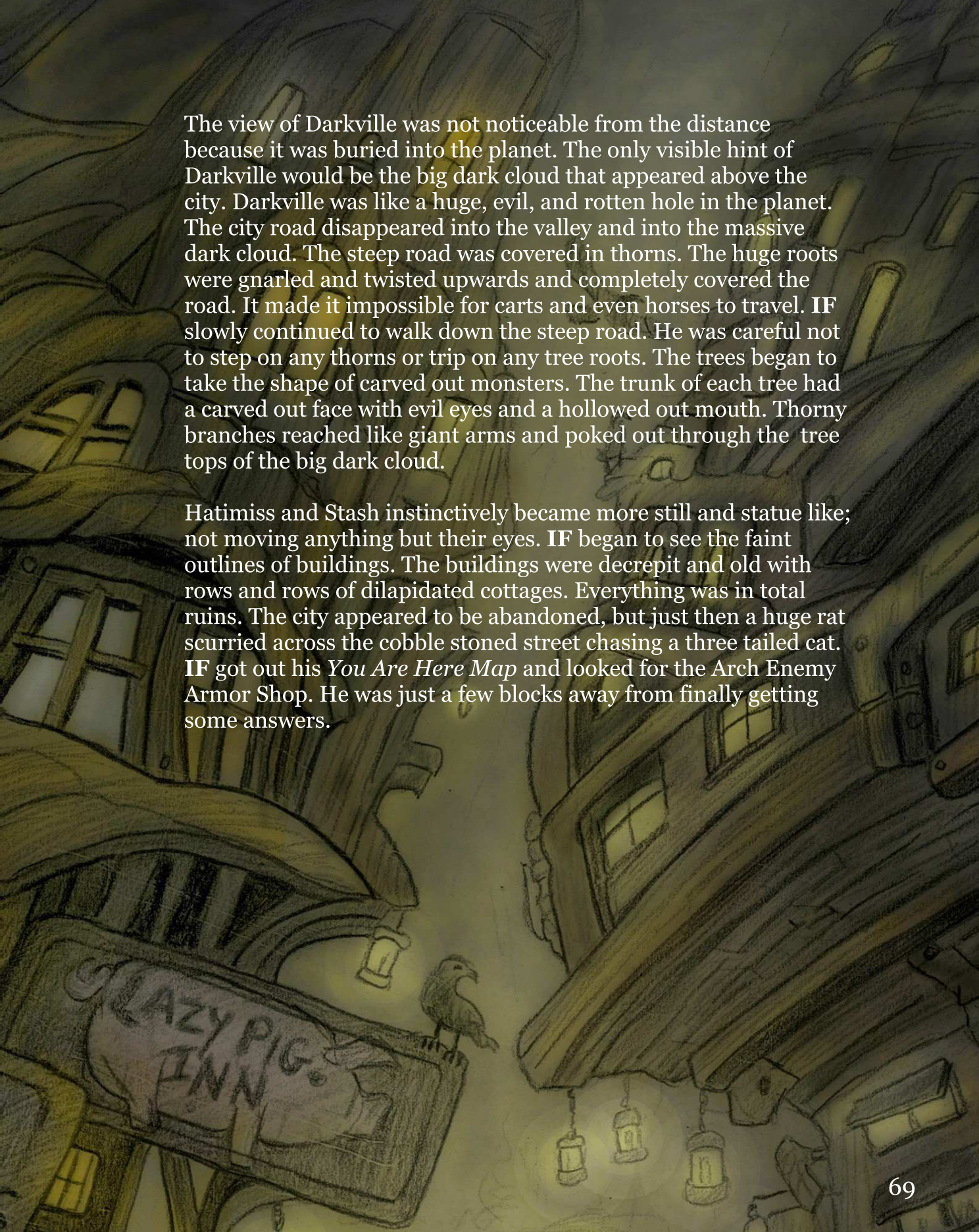
IF learned from Ivan the Brute, that many young men, especially young and promising knights, were being drawn to the city. This was truly a nightmare!



The Queen needed all good, young knights to protect future generations of the kingdom. Perhaps, this is why the Rainbow of Stars was faltering and the stairs to the castle were disappearing? **IF** thought this was part of the problem and he needed to find solutions.

Stash awoke abruptly and immediately grew his mustache to poke Hatimiss in the nose. “Wake up Humpty Dumpty before you fall off your master’s head!” Hatimiss sprang up into the air above **IF**’s head and came crashing down with a thud! **IF** mumbled, “Stash, why do you wake your best mate up to holy terror every morning?” Stash just smirked not saying a word. “Well, we are getting close to Darkville. It is best to be on high guard!” Hatimiss exclaimed then yawned quietly to himself. Hatimiss learned that it was pointless to reply back to any of Stash’s shenanigans. Hatimiss then forcibly straightened himself upon his master’s head.

Together, they looked as far as they could see into the black landscape. Hatimiss and Stash were feeling uneasy and completely guarded. Stash’s mustache straightened to attention like a saluting soldier. **IF** continued to walk bringing the team closer and closer to the city. **IF** did not feel the need to draw upon his armor for protection. This city was not so much about physical harm, but more about mental harm. The tiny bells woke up on **IF**’s feet and began to quietly jingle as he walked.



The view of Darkville was not noticeable from the distance because it was buried into the planet. The only visible hint of Darkville would be the big dark cloud that appeared above the city. Darkville was like a huge, evil, and rotten hole in the planet. The city road disappeared into the valley and into the massive dark cloud. The steep road was covered in thorns. The huge roots were gnarled and twisted upwards and completely covered the road. It made it impossible for carts and even horses to travel. IF slowly continued to walk down the steep road. He was careful not to step on any thorns or trip on any tree roots. The trees began to take the shape of carved out monsters. The trunk of each tree had a carved out face with evil eyes and a hollowed out mouth. Thorny branches reached like giant arms and poked out through the tree tops of the big dark cloud.

Hatimiss and Stash instinctively became more still and statue like; not moving anything but their eyes. IF began to see the faint outlines of buildings. The buildings were decrepit and old with rows and rows of dilapidated cottages. Everything was in total ruins. The city appeared to be abandoned, but just then a huge rat scurried across the cobble stoned street chasing a three tailed cat. IF got out his *You Are Here Map* and looked for the Arch Enemy Armor Shop. He was just a few blocks away from finally getting some answers.



CHAPTER NINE



STARING CONTEST

IF carefully put his map back into his belt bag. The town was eerily quiet. He tiptoed passed a young man that was snoring in a hay cart. The young man had one arm wrapped around an empty bottle like a prized trophy. **IF** looked up at the street sign and noted that he was on the main street named Brutal Way. He then passed each cross street: Misfortune Avenue, Low Blow Row, and Trickery Street. Finally, he reached the cross street, Swindler's Way. Here was the shop, Arch Enemy Armor. The shop had a large open window and a large red canopy that was supported by two bamboo poles staked into the ground. Candles were placed on the huge counter to give light while two short men, Peg and Pudge set up shop. **IF** watched from a short distance as a huge ox driven cart arrived. A huge muscled man climbed out of the cart and stacked the used armor consisting of helmets, shields, gauntlets, and gloves on the counter. There was no shortage of goods that were stacked and stuffed everywhere in the shop. Peg and Pudge could be heard bickering prices and negotiating a final price as the strong man took the coins and left.

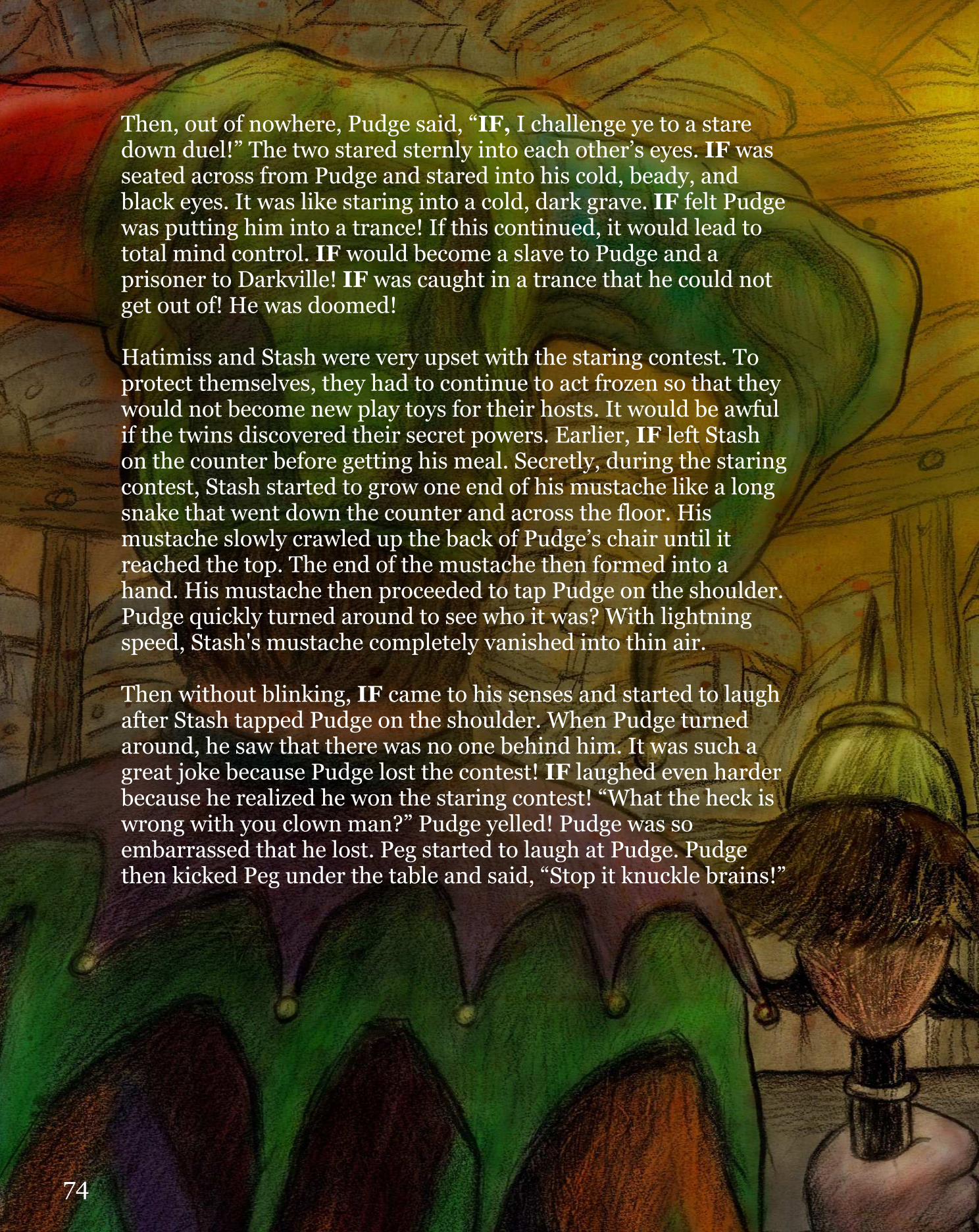
Peg and Pudge were a very odd lot. They were considered to be fraternal twin brothers. They did not look the least bit like one another except that they were both very short. While Peg was thin as a rail, Pudge was round like a huge ball. Clearly, the brain of this outfit was Pudge, but that was not saying much. **IF** walked over and said, "Hello, good morning my name is **IF**!" Pudge interrupted and said, "Hey, the shop is not open yet! No one wakes up here until noon anyway!" Peg was the nervous type. He was behind the counter and dropped a huge stack of helmets that went flying everywhere. Thinking quickly, **IF** put Stash on the counter and proceeded to jump over the counter like an acrobat. He picked up the helmets before anyone could tell him to stop.

Pudge exclaimed, "Aye, you're the helpful sort! If you pick up and straighten the rest we might do business with ye!" **IF** scooped up the shields, gauntlets, spears, and swords, then stacked each of them into separate piles.

Pudge then examined the clean shop and said, "Good work for a fool! Follow us for a bite to eat!" **IF** and the twins went into the back alley through a back door to an inn called the Black Sheep. A large table was set with wooden spoons, bowls full of mash and mugs full of cider. **IF** and the twins each grabbed a bowl of mash and a mug of cider and carefully carried it back to the shop. They all sat down at a small table and ate.

"Did ye meet up with the old witch?" Pudge said with a smirk. **IF** was shocked at the twin's knowledge of his meeting with Draconia in the woods. **IF** then nonchalantly shrugged his shoulders and said, "Perhaps, she is just a witch! Merchants like you and Peg are more important than that old witch. I come to seek your great knowledge and wisdom of the underworld."

Peg started to snicker and snivel while scraping his bowl. He finished his last morsel of mash and said, "We saw you in our crystal ball talking to Draconia!" "Shut up ding-dong!" Pudge said fervently. **IF** knew they were up to no good! He would just have to play along with the twins into believing that he was just a gullible jester! Everyone at the table finished eating and **IF** thanked them for the wonderful meal. Pudge stared at **IF** and **IF** began to wonder what would happen next?

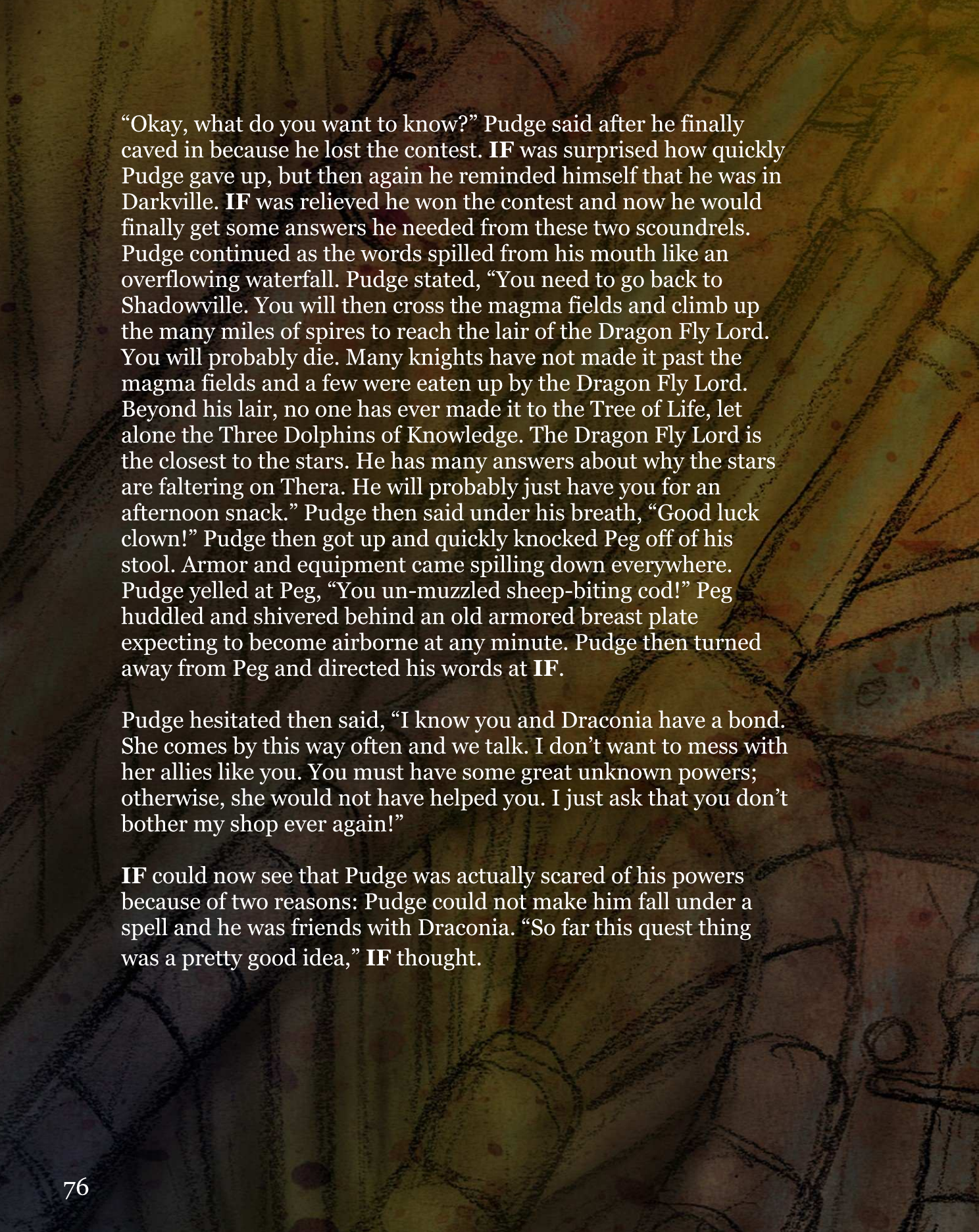


Then, out of nowhere, Pudge said, “**IF**, I challenge ye to a stare down duel!” The two stared sternly into each other’s eyes. **IF** was seated across from Pudge and stared into his cold, beady, and black eyes. It was like staring into a cold, dark grave. **IF** felt Pudge was putting him into a trance! If this continued, it would lead to total mind control. **IF** would become a slave to Pudge and a prisoner to Darkville! **IF** was caught in a trance that he could not get out of! He was doomed!

Hatimiss and Stash were very upset with the staring contest. To protect themselves, they had to continue to act frozen so that they would not become new play toys for their hosts. It would be awful if the twins discovered their secret powers. Earlier, **IF** left Stash on the counter before getting his meal. Secretly, during the staring contest, Stash started to grow one end of his mustache like a long snake that went down the counter and across the floor. His mustache slowly crawled up the back of Pudge’s chair until it reached the top. The end of the mustache then formed into a hand. His mustache then proceeded to tap Pudge on the shoulder. Pudge quickly turned around to see who it was? With lightning speed, Stash’s mustache completely vanished into thin air.

Then without blinking, **IF** came to his senses and started to laugh after Stash tapped Pudge on the shoulder. When Pudge turned around, he saw that there was no one behind him. It was such a great joke because Pudge lost the contest! **IF** laughed even harder because he realized he won the staring contest! “What the heck is wrong with you clown man?” Pudge yelled! Pudge was so embarrassed that he lost. Peg started to laugh at Pudge. Pudge then kicked Peg under the table and said, “Stop it knuckle brains!”



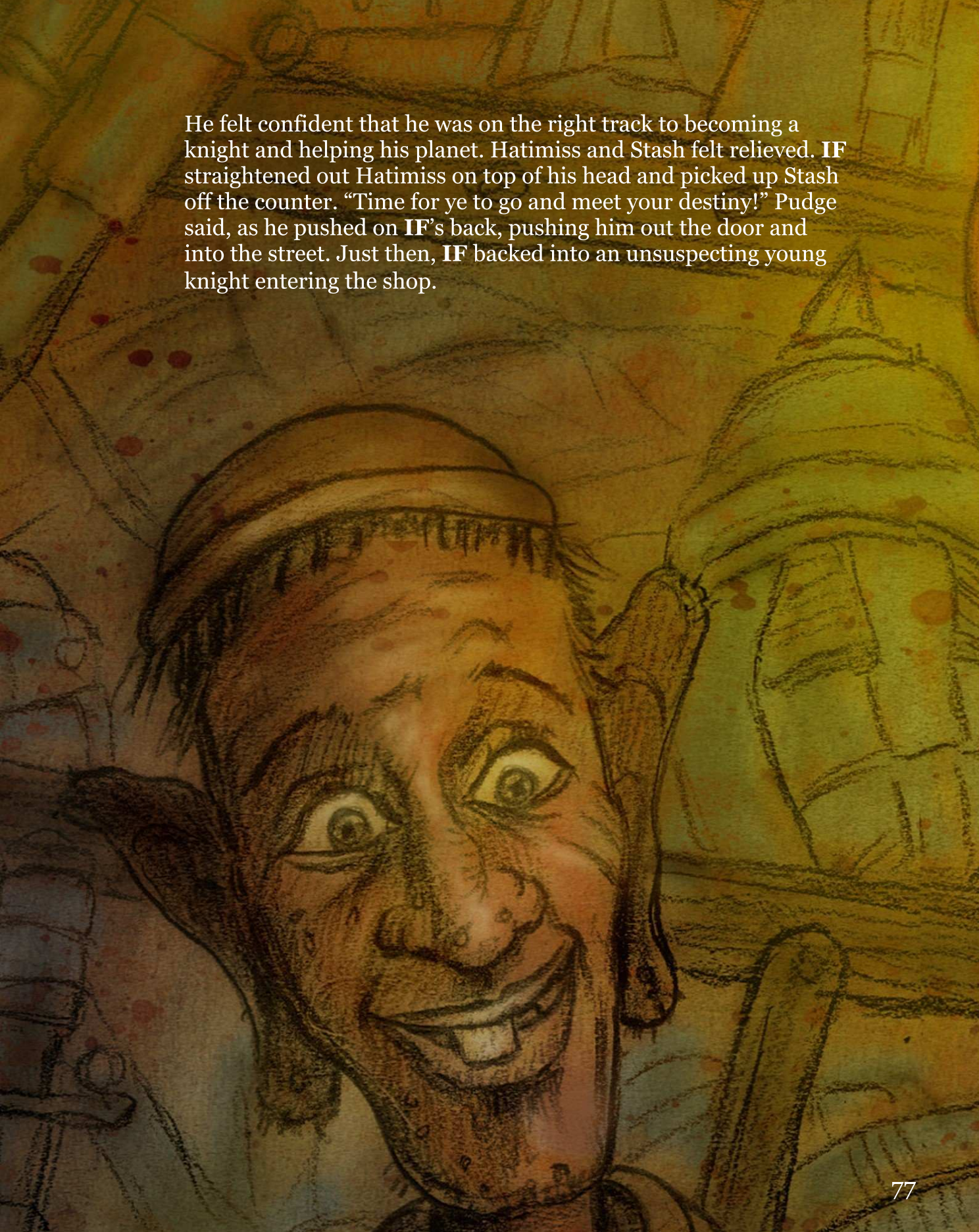


“Okay, what do you want to know?” Pudge said after he finally caved in because he lost the contest. **IF** was surprised how quickly Pudge gave up, but then again he reminded himself that he was in Darkville. **IF** was relieved he won the contest and now he would finally get some answers he needed from these two scoundrels. Pudge continued as the words spilled from his mouth like an overflowing waterfall. Pudge stated, “You need to go back to Shadowville. You will then cross the magma fields and climb up the many miles of spires to reach the lair of the Dragon Fly Lord. You will probably die. Many knights have not made it past the magma fields and a few were eaten up by the Dragon Fly Lord. Beyond his lair, no one has ever made it to the Tree of Life, let alone the Three Dolphins of Knowledge. The Dragon Fly Lord is the closest to the stars. He has many answers about why the stars are faltering on Thera. He will probably just have you for an afternoon snack.” Pudge then said under his breath, “Good luck clown!” Pudge then got up and quickly knocked Peg off of his stool. Armor and equipment came spilling down everywhere. Pudge yelled at Peg, “You un-muzzled sheep-biting cod!” Peg huddled and shivered behind an old armored breast plate expecting to become airborne at any minute. Pudge then turned away from Peg and directed his words at **IF**.

Pudge hesitated then said, “I know you and Draconia have a bond. She comes by this way often and we talk. I don’t want to mess with her allies like you. You must have some great unknown powers; otherwise, she would not have helped you. I just ask that you don’t bother my shop ever again!”

IF could now see that Pudge was actually scared of his powers because of two reasons: Pudge could not make him fall under a spell and he was friends with Draconia. “So far this quest thing was a pretty good idea,” **IF** thought.

He felt confident that he was on the right track to becoming a knight and helping his planet. Hatimiss and Stash felt relieved. **IF** straightened out Hatimiss on top of his head and picked up Stash off the counter. "Time for ye to go and meet your destiny!" Pudge said, as he pushed on **IF**'s back, pushing him out the door and into the street. Just then, **IF** backed into an unsuspecting young knight entering the shop.



CHAPTER TEN





THE FORTUNATE FORTUNE

Chance finally entered Darkville. He felt a cold chill go through his body. The town was very dark and hauntingly quiet. He thought, "Where is everyone?" Walking quietly, he looked down at the ground only glancing up occasionally at the street signs to see where he was going. Walking through the dismal town truly tested Chance's bravery. He started to feel anxious but then recalled what Sir Landon told him. Sir Landon gave explicit directions and rules to get to the shop. While he recalled the directions he also recited the rules. "Do not stop at any other shop. Do not make any deals or contests with anyone. Get your armor and leave town before nightfall," Chance whispered. Chance was told by Sir Landon about how many young knights went to Darkville that never returned back home. Chance knew that Darkville was a trap.

Finally, Chance reached the Arch Enemy Armor shop. "No stops, no duels, no deals," he muttered. Then suddenly, he collided into someone. "Whoa, I am sorry sir to have bumped into you!" Chance exclaimed. IF said, "Hey, no problem I was just leaving." Pudge hollered, "What a good fortune! I got rid of a clown and now I get a young naive knight entering my shop! How can I help you?" IF said nothing more as he moved aside and decided to wait in front of the counter. He was immediately drawn to the innocent aura of this young lad. Peg and Pudge continued to ignore IF as they focused their attention on the boy.





Pudge asked, "What brings you to our wee little shop? Do you need armor or weapons? What are ye measurements?" They simultaneously and feverishly circled around the boy like two wolves circling its prey. Peg grabbed helmets, swords, and shields and put the armor on Chance like he was going to battle within the next hour. Chance smiled and felt like a knight. He thought, "Horse check, girl check, and armor, check!" Pudge rushed back to his accounting ledger in order to write in the price they charged. "That will be twelve shillings," Pudge stated and then rubbed his hands together in a festive manner. Chance just stood there dumbfounded as he took the armor off and put it on the counter. He had earned just nine shillings, equal to a year's pay as an apprentice for Sir Laf. He was still three shillings short.

Chance pleaded, "I have nine shillings. I promise that I will deliver the rest in a month or two." Pudge blurted out laughing like a hyena, "Ha, ha, ha! We have heard that one before! You seem to think you're the first lad to walk into our shop to buy armor on empty promises? It's time to show you to our crystal ball!" Pudge demanded as he guided Chance over to his crystal ball on the counter.

IF stood in the background while Chance and Pudge gathered around the old crystal ball. Pudge repeatedly rubbed his pudgy hands and swirled them around the dirty and cracked crystal ball. The crystal ball started to glow.





Pudge said, "I see a young girl with red hair on a black horse in a storm yelling out the name Chance. I think she is being chased! Wait, I can't make it out, it's getting foggy." Pudge relaxed his hands on his round belly and started twiddling his thumbs as the crystal ball dimmed and returned to black. "Well lad, I can tell you that you are not a good risk so I will make you a special deal. You need to go see Fortuna the Great Fortune Teller. Her shop is on Blind Alley. She will tell you more about your fortune, then I will give you all the armor you need for nine shillings."

Chance felt his luck cave into defeat. Moments ago, he thought he had the world by the tail and now he panicked as thoughts of Whisper and Bolt may be in trouble! He could not think straight. He felt complete panic and just wanted to protect Whisper. "I have to go now. I don't have time for a fortune!" Chance said as he started to leave the shop. "Not so fast, not so fast. You need the armor. Go see Fortuna. She can help you!" Pudge said with a huge grin!

"Where's this shop?" Chance asked. Pudge insisted, "My trustworthy brother and business associate Peg, will show you the way." **IF** stepped boldly into the conversation and said, "I know where Fortuna's shop is and I will take this young man to see her." **IF** and Chance then shook hands and made the proper introductions as they walked out of the shop and headed down the street towards Fortuna's.

IF knew that this was a sign and that their meeting was serendipitous. The boy reminded himself of when he was his age. His gut was telling him to follow this boy and help him through his quest. **IF** knew that Chance would have no chance of escaping the shady dealings in the town of Darkville. He needed **IF**'s help.

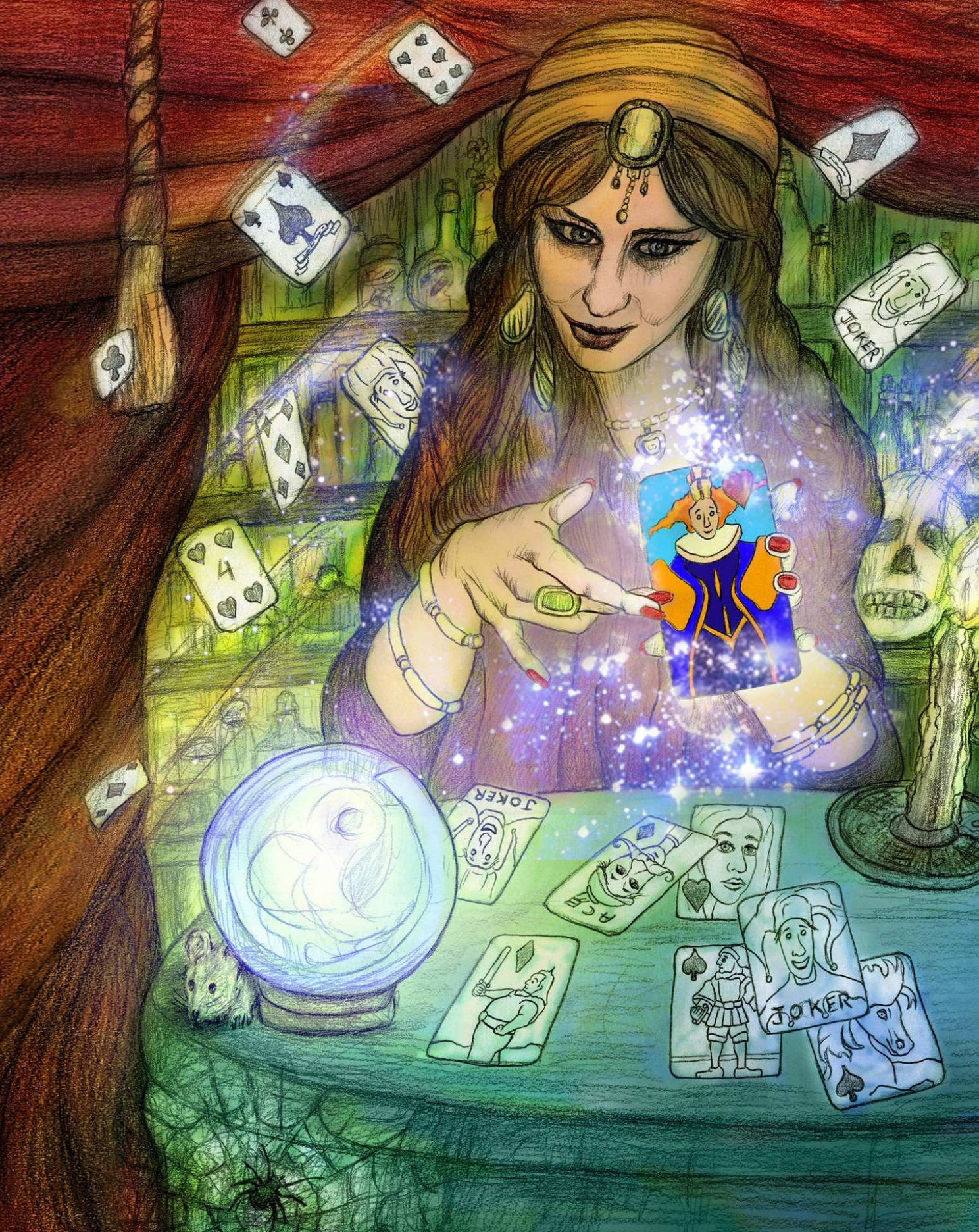


“I truly appreciate your help,” Chance said solemnly looking at **IF** as they walked. “I fear great danger if I do not get my armor to help Whisper and Bolt,” said Chance. **IF** already knew the girl’s name since the Queen often spoke about her beautiful niece, Whisper. He also knew Whisper was very gifted with animals and **IF** felt the horse would protect her. **IF** told Chance, “I can give you the three shillings to get your armor and avoid all the trouble of going to see Fortuna. I am a humble servant of the Queen and her niece, Whisper. I want to help you on your quest to become a knight!”

Chance contemplated **IF**’s offer, but felt deep inside that he had to go see Fortuna. He knew he was breaking the rules of no deals and do not stop in other shops, but he had to prove himself. He did feel safer in the company of **IF** since he learned **IF** was from Cloud Kingdom and served the Queen. He knew that as a team they had better odds of escaping Darkville. The two marched down the pebbled street then turned the corner onto Blind Alley. It was a dead end street and Fortuna’s shop was at the very end. It was decorated with broken tiles and illuminated inside the door and windows with an eerie green, luminous glow.

IF decided to wait outside Fortuna’s shop so Chance could meet Fortuna on his own. Chance hesitated before entering through the heavy curtain door. Upon entering the room, it was filled with shelves and shelves of glass jars and old books. The shop was glowing in a beautiful green light. A beautiful older woman came into the room. She had very long dark hair and captivating black eyes. Chance thought she looked like a very familiar person from Shadowville, but then he realized she was Fortuna, the Great Fortune Teller. He also thought she was a witch.







The woman proclaimed, "I was expecting your visit. I am the Great Fortuna! I know your past, present and future. You are Squire Chancellor Truehero of Shadowville. Welcome to my shop. Please take a seat at the table."

Chance sat down on a wooden stool next to a small round table. On top of the table there were three items: a candle, a crystal ball, and a deck of playing cards. As Fortuna sat down, she gently touched the cards and the crystal ball. A warm green mist started to swirl around the table creating a foggy atmosphere. Darkness set in all around them as if it were nightfall. Chance remained brave and recalled Laf's training about the ins and outs of witches. Laf's voice in Chance's head said, "Stay true and stay steadfast. A witch will play upon your heart strings and your fears with her spells. Do not fall prey to her visions, for they are but a mere trap for mortal men who will die an early death."

Fortuna was once a beautiful young maiden with dark black hair. She had black eyes and a pale complexion that glowed in the moonlight. Chance instinctively liked her, but kept his distance. In her presence, he began to trust her and started to feel an overwhelming sense of calm. He also believed she was going to help him save Whisper and Bolt. He felt hopeful.

Fortuna placed her hands upon the crystal ball. It started pulsating light like a heartbeat. She then dealt the playing cards and turned over several of them onto the table. As she turned over the cards she said, "I see **IF**, Whisper, and Bolt as your new family along with Laf. They will be your friends and protectors." Then she picked up the card of the Queen and said, "You will be the greatest protector of the Queen." As Fortuna held up the card of the Queen, many of the cards began to magically lift up from the table, and began to floating in circles around the room.



Chance was not afraid of the magic. He listened to Fortuna's voice become very absolute as if she were giving orders to men in battle. Fortuna declared, "Whisper is safe for now, but in your journey you will save her. You will go to the Tree of Life and cross many lands of fire and ice. You will fight with a dragon in a spire castle and continue to cross oceans, where you will find yourself at the end of our civilization at the Tree of Life. The Three Dolphins of Knowledge will grant you access to enter the celestial heavens. It's the same place that gave birth to the Galaxy of Stars. You will be the greatest knight that will wage war against the galaxies and the heavens. If you do not, then our planet will die and we will all die with it. You have to ask yourself, if you can take the oath as a knight to save us all?" Chance took her words as orders and said, "It is my greatest honor to become a knight and save Thera." The airborne cards that were encircling the room came back down to the table one-by-one. Chance then looked at the crystal ball and saw Fortuna as a young girl. A girl he knew from Shadowville!

Chance jumped up from his stool and yelled, "I know you! I know you from Shadowville. You are Raven! I thought I recognized you! I can trust you Raven. I will do what you say. You are not a fortune telling witch! Why are you here? Please explain!" Chance's eyes were wide with excitement. Raven was at least two years younger than him and now she appeared as a middle-aged fortune teller in a shabby shop in Darkville."

A tear started to roll down Fortuna's face. She looked down at the floor in grief as if she were looking into her own grave. Fortuna gravely spoke, "I am trapped in Darkville forever. Every time I try to escape I age another ten years. If I keep trying to escape I will eventually die an old woman."





I am just twelve, but now I look like I am forty years old. I was given the powers of fortune telling and witchcraft to cast a spell on you and force you to stay in Darkville forever! You would be trapped in this prison of a town just like me! We are the young and gullible trapped in Darkville forever. There are many young squires and maidens trapped here and they cannot leave. We are doomed to a life of cheating, stealing, and evil. I cannot tell you more as I risk my life. Please go now, Chance. Please save Thera and save our Kingdom. You are our greatest hope! Please go now, before it's too late!"

Fortuna then vanished into thin air. For a few brief seconds Chance saw her as the young Raven. She was the beautiful young childhood friend from his village and now she was gone. The cards, the candle, and the crystal ball disappeared from the table. Chance stood up, and walked outside recalling the vision of her as a child. Chance was in complete shock as he slowly stumbled out of the shop.

IF grabbed Chance by the shoulder as he staggered out and said, "Are you all right Chance? Let's go back to the Arch Enemy Armor shop. Let me pay for the rest of the armor. We need to work together. Please trust me." **IF** said these words with conviction. Chance stopped and stared into his newly found friend's eyes and said, "My fortune is that I will be a knight that saves Thera with the great help and support of my friends: You, Whisper, and Bolt. What if I take the chance and I become a great knight that saves Thera? What if I take that chance? You are **IF** and I am Chance. That is my fortune! We are a team! Let's go back to the Arch Enemy Armor shop; I will explain the rest on the way."



Peg and Pudge turned around and saw Chance and **IF** standing at their counter. They both looked like they had seen a ghost and started shaking in their boots because Chance was not suppose to come back to their shop! Fortuna was supposed to trap him. For some unknown reason, she couldn't stop Chance from leaving! They were already deathly afraid of **IF** and without saying a word, Peg and Pudge nervously handed over the armor to Chance. **IF** put the twelve shillings on the counter and Pudge's fat pudgy fingers grabbed the coins then slammed the window shut. **IF** and Chance accomplished their mission and now it was time to leave Darkville!

The two headed out of town and up the steep terrain of knotted tree roots and thorns. The armor Chance bought was difficult to carry. **IF** stopped and asked Chance for his armor. **IF** said, "I have something to show you that I have never shown anyone else. Chance, I trust you as I have never trusted anyone. I can see in you, your good virtue and that you will become a great knight." **IF** winked at Stash and looked up at Hatimiss. Just then, Hatimiss and Stash came to life. "Oh great, now we have to deal with him!" Stash said in a doubtful pout.

Hatimiss gave a deep sigh at Stash and said, "You are always a doubtful one. Just do your mustache magic and let's get out of here before we have an early retirement!" Immediately, Stash's mustache wrapped around the bundle of armor in **IF**'s arms. As Stash's mustache wrapped around the armor, the armor shrunk smaller and smaller until it was the size of a small tea cup. **IF** then placed the miniature bundle of armor under Hatimiss for safe keeping. "No more comment's from the peanut gallery," said **IF** with authority.



The two men, Hatimiss, and Stash then headed out. Chance felt a bit of a shock since he did not realize that **IF**'s hat and scepter actually talked. He then decided it was the magic bestowed upon **IF** by the Queen. Those who were dedicated to the Kingdom and Thera had magical powers. On the way, Chance told **IF** more about the beautiful maiden named Whisper and the amazing stallion named Bolt. **IF**'s bells on his shoes began to jingle, and a warm smile came across his face as he listened to the boy.

As they climbed out of the darkness of Darkville, **IF** felt the joy in knowing that things were falling into place. The further and further they got away from Darkville, the happier he felt. The evilness and darkness that rotted the town and its inhabitants would not claim them today. He was on the right track to helping the Queen and the Kingdom of Thera. This was something greater than himself. It was greater than him just being a jester to the Queen or wanting to be a famous knight. This was about the destiny in life and about taking chances to make that destiny come true. Seeing the big picture and not giving into the evils of doubt. It's about making important life connections with friends amongst the stars, and a go-for-it attitude by believing, "What if?"









More great adventures to come in part two of IF!



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