

# Tale Weaver

your storytelling adventure



by  
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# Tale Weaver

an Adventure in Storytelling

*2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*



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# T A L E W E A V E R



*Dedicated to Chris and Dan.*

*Their story is mine. And all of mine are theirs.*

*- an/b*

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*[www.TinkerX.com](http://www.TinkerX.com)*





# quickStart

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TaleWeaver is a set of cards, suggestions and guidelines to help you create and tell stories. Whether for your own enjoyment, as a group exercise or game, for children to hear and illustrate, or as a learning and creativity-enhancing activity—that’s really what it’s about. TaleWeaver is a fun, easy way to begin a storytelling adventure, or improve your creative skills.

You can read this whole book, which is an introduction to how TaleWeaver came to be, some suggestions for how to play, and a story that kinda goes with the whole schemer. Or you can dig right in. Digging right in might go a little somethin’ like... a little somethin’ like... a little somethin’ like this:

1. Print a TaleWeaver deck from a PDF file. I suggest light card stock. If you want to have a “front” design for your cards, print the pattern from the last page. You’ll need to photocopy or print the “front” on each page of four cards before cutting the cards apart.
2. Cut the cards out. If you have a paper cutter, that’s much easier. You can also take the sheets to many copier shops (e.g., Kinko’s) and have them cut them very nicely and quickly for about \$5.
3. Shuffle the cards.
4. Deal until you find an “Eye,” which is a character card. There are four suits; Eyes (characters), Hands (objects/props), Winds (events) and Lands (environments/settings). Four “Jesters” add a touch of chaos. You can leave them out if you want. The first “Eye” you come to will be your main character.

## A HAVENS

5. Deal out one more card after you get your main character. This will be his/her goal. Either to find the person or object, travel to the place or survive/conquer/understand the event.
6. Deal out at least 3 more cards. These stand between your hero and his/her goal. Your story is simply the steps by which your hero interacts with these cards to get to the goal.
7. That's it! You've told a story. A simple (probably short) one, but that's the basic idea.
8. Read Chapters 2 & 3 to get a better feel for the deck and to find ideas for more types of stories.
9. Review Chapter 4 for strategies on how to add depth and personality to your stories.
10. Chapter 5 has ways to play TaleWeaver alone or with others.
11. Later, read Chapter 1 (yeah, Chapter 1 goes last in "Quick Start" mode. So sue me) to learn how/why TaleWeaver came about.
12. Chapter Eggplant contains erroneous details.
13. The short story, "The Middle of Katherine's Tale," is about a young girl for whom storytelling plays a very important role.

# Motive, History & Introduction

## Mr. Art Man

For about ten summers during high-school and college, I was the Director of Arts & Crafts at a day camp in suburban Boston. My official title (as given to me by some of the kids) was “Mr. Art Man.” For the last five years of my tenure there, I worked (if you can call it work) exclusively with the youngest groups of children; three year-olds, who were there only half-a-day, up through five year olds, who went home early on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The time I spent with these young children was some of the happiest of my life. Although there are vast developmental differences between three and five year olds, they all (with almost no exception) have one thing in common—tremendous imaginations.

There are challenges to working with any age group, and having gone from doing crafts with older kids to working with just the youngest, I found that my repertoire of activities did not entirely convert. Pottery was out; many small children just don’t have the hand strength and get frustrated; there went 10% of my curriculum. Most three-year-olds can’t cut with scissors; that eliminates a good fifth of craft projects, unless you want to spend all your free time cutting up bits of chenille bumps and colored felt ahead of time. That’s not the point of crafts, in my philosophy. Other than planning and getting together materials, kids should do at least 95% of the “stuff.” Otherwise, it’s not crafts but connect-the-dots with fuzz. Not the best way to stimulate young creativity. Many of my other classic projects involved a level of hand-eye coordination not

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available to most preschoolers. Even gluing together popsicle sticks was a challenge not readily met by many four year olds.

## Giant Hamsters

So, I still had just as many classes, but only about a quarter the project plans to meet the demand. How to fill in the gap? I decided to increase the frequency of a favorite activity—coloring. Some days with crayons, some with markers, some with chalk. On paper, poster board, the driveway, bed sheets, etc. Kids, especially young ones, love to color.

What I discovered, though, is that many kids don't know what to color. If you give them a topic, they'll go nuts. But just hand them some crayons and paper, and many of them are at a loss. It's as if their imagination needs a jump-start. Once it gets going, though, watch out – they'll come up with some crazy, funny, smart stuff beyond your ability to fathom.

I needed kernels for coloring, then. Seeds. OK... So... On the sunny days when coloring was scheduled, we went outside and I led the kids on mini-adventures. We would mime riding giant hamsters over the Grand Canyon, climb lemon vines to get to the Land of Snack, get stuck in pools of strawberry jam... you get the picture. Fun, physical, non-violent, imaginative romps to give their creativity a quick goose. Which leads to one of the funniest stories of my career as an Art Guy. Skip the indented section below if you want to just get on with the history of TaleWeaver.

Once, on one of our adventures, we were searching for the magic keys that would let us into the Castle of Clouds, where our friend Sparkus, the Ever Tardy Dragon, was trapped in a deep nap. We ran around the camp's soccer field, looking under fences and around goal-posts and finally "found" the keys under a giant statue of a duck. Please keep in mind that all the props are completely imaginary, and thus invisible and incorporeal. Except for the fences, goal-posts, steps, snack cart, etc. You get it. Anyway...

We found the magic keys between the webbed toes of the giant duck statue. I began to hand them out to the kids, taking them out one-at-a-

time from a bag (not really there, remember) under my left arm and passing them to each camper. When I'd finished (or so I thought...), I asked, "OK! Does everyone have a magic key?" Expecting a chorus of, "Yes." Which I got. Except for Doug. Who said, "I didn't get one."

OK. So I forgot to hand one to Doug. I was about to take one out from under my arm (being non-existent, I had plenty), and hand it to Doug, but he pointed at Adam next to him and said, "He took two."

I looked at the other boy and asked, "Did you take two keys, Adam?" He nodded, a bit sullenly. "Could you please give one to Doug?" He nodded again, and handed a key (a handful of air) to Doug, who snatched it (nothing) away and held it (his still empty hand) behind his back so that Adam couldn't grab it (nothing) back.

Observe the power of imagination! Not only had Adam actually pretended to take two keys, but Doug had caught him at it. And when confronted, Adam confessed and returned one! It was as real to them as if I were handing out actual, physical keys. There's a whole philosophical discussion waiting to happen around whether or not as adults we lose the ability to hold that strongly onto our illusions, but I'll leave it to you.

You can come back to the main narrative here, if you'd like.

## A Beautiful, Unacceptable Canoe

So sunny days were spent outside, running around, boiling off some steam, using up twenty minutes or so of a forty-five minute period, garnering ideas for pictures. But, this being New England, a good quarter of those days it was raining. Or hailing. Or snowing—only once, in late August, and it didn't stick. But it did snow once. Seriously. Don't look at me like that. I wouldn't lie to you. On inside days, everybody was inside, and there was not enough room to safely indulge in fantasy romps. You can get killed jumping giant hamsters over the Grand Canyon inside...

So I tried reading. It's an easy out, and I'm as lazy as the next summer camp counselor. Each of the kids' rooms had a good collection of children's books, and they all had favorites that their group leaders read to them on a regular basis. Fine. We'll read the book and use the story as a basis for our coloring.

Books are just as good as the adventures, right?

Had it not been for a little boy named Josh, I might thought so for the rest of my crafty career.

I don't remember the book we were reading, but it had lovely pictures. One of them showed the main character and his family in a canoe. After we were done reading, I handed out the paper and markers, and the kids went at it.

About ten minutes later, as I cycled from table to table giving words of encouragement, I heard one of the boys crying softly. I went over to his table, assuming that someone had stolen the purple marker (always in great demand), or that the boy was just overtired or homesick; there is always some crying in a group of twenty or so preschoolers. What I found, though, changed forever how I think about creativity.

I squatted down near the crying boy, Josh, to see what was wrong. He was a five-year-old with super art skills, and had drawn a wonderful canoe. The shape was right (you could tell what it was, which is a trick sometimes), it was on some blue, wavy water, and a spiky-sun shone overhead. Perfect! What was the problem here?

I put a hand on Josh's shoulder and asked him, "What's wrong, Josh. You're doing such a good job on your picture!"

"No I'm not!" he cried.

"What do you mean?" I asked. "That's a great canoe!" All children's drawings are wonderful (by definition), but his actually looked pretty cool. The canoe was filled with lots of colorful stripes and shapes. It looked like a drawing from the Beatle's animated "Yellow Submarine" movie. Kind of psychedelic, in a neat, pre-school sort of way.

“No it’s not!” he cried again. “It doesn’t look like the one in the book!” And with that, he crumpled up one of the nicest drawings I’d ever seen, and stuffed it in the trash.

That was the last day we used illustrated story books for coloring ideas.

## Jumping While Sitting Down

Don’t get me wrong. I love illustrated children’s books. Long before my son, Daniel, was born my wife and I bought them. Heck, we had a collection before we were married. Everything by Graham Baese. The “Good Dog, Carl,” stories, which are mostly illustrations. Chris van Alsberg’s wonderful books. And many more. I enjoy them, and plan on sharing them with many children and adults over the years. But not when it’s time for coloring.

That simple statement by Josh, “It doesn’t look like the one in the book,” nearly broke my heart. How sad, that a five-year-old should somehow feel that he needs to match crayons with a professional artist. I don’t think it’s learned behavior; I don’t think Josh’s parents somehow forced an unreasonable level of competitiveness down his throat. All of us, though, want to measure up. It’s part of human nature. And while there’s an appropriate time for being tested against standards, it’s definitely not when children are first learning to express their creativity. That leads to the helpless, inadequate feeling I sensed from Josh. And that’s just wrong.

So. There are plenty of stories without pictures. Or you can just not show the pictures to kids as you read the book – if you dare. As anyone who works with kids can tell you, they’ll rip you to shreds if you don’t show them the pictures. Even in a book with no pictures, they’ll demand to be shown the words... just to be sure.

Or, you can do what I did. Switch from active, running-and-jumping-around stories, to ones in which even the action is imagined. Sitting with the kids in a circle on the floor, I’d pretend to jump (swing the arms, stretch a bit, make a face, etc.), and they’d pretend, too. We used many of the same stories I’d relied on for outside adventures, just toned down a bit. It was still great rainy-day fun, and gave the kids’ imaginations that little push. When they participated in the

story, they'd even go above and beyond my descriptions, and draw characters I had never mentioned. Ones that they felt were implied or necessary to the narrative. That's the best feeling – when a child goes beyond imagining the fantasy world you've created for them, and begins to participate in his or her own creation.

Once again, that would have been it. But (once again) a simple sentence changed my mind.

## **My Brain Doesn't Work Like That**

Twice a summer, we had an open-house picnic in the evening for the campers' families. Basic cook-out foods were provided, and people were encouraged to bring and share side dishes, desserts, etc. The staff was required to attend, as this was our chance to meet the adults who shelled out major dough for their kids' summer fun. I mingled with the families, passed out stuff that kids had forgotten to take home, chatted with counselors I didn't see often. It was fun, but weird to see so many adults in that setting.

At one picnic I met Heather's family. Heather was five, and introduced me to her dad as "Our Art Guy." Dad and I shook hands, and he commented that Heather really enjoyed arts and crafts. She especially like our little adventures, both inside and outside, he said.

"It's an easy way to give the kids some ideas for coloring," I told him. "Good for stimulating the imagination centers of small brains."

"Yeah," he replied. "She seems to love it. Retells the stories at night to us. I only wish her mom or I were able to make up stories like that."

"You can," I told him. "It's just... well... you think of characters, something for them to do and a place to do it. Maybe some weird props. Anything to hang a bit of narrative on. That's all."

He looked at me as if I was completely mad. Bonkers. Like I'd just suggested he take up rain-dancing. "My brain doesn't work like that," he said.

## TALE WEAVER

I spent a few more minutes talking with him, and tried to goad him into making up a story on the spot. He was a nice guy, and seemed quite smart. But, try as we might, all I'd get out of him was, "I don't know." Example:

**Mr. Art Man:** What kind of character would be a fun hero in a story?

**Heather's Dad:** I don't know.

**Mr. Art Man:** Just make something up.

**Heather's Dad:** OK. A bunny?

**Mr. Art Man:** A bunny is good! Now. What does the bunny do?

**Heather's Dad:** Hop? I don't know.

**Mr. Art Man:** OK. Bunnies hop. Where does he hop to?

**Heather's Dad:** I don't know.

**Mr. Art Man:** Where could a bunny hop to?

**Heather's Dad:** I don't know. A hole in the ground?

**Mr. Art Man:** That's a standard bunny haunt, sure. What does he do when he gets there?

**Heather's Dad:** I don't know. Sleep?

So. After five minutes of prodding, we had a heroic bunny who hops to a hole and sleeps. Not the best fodder for creative growth. Or coloring. Bunny, hop, sleep, hole. No offense to Heather's dad, but that show would not be renewed for a second season. Now, there's no such thing as a bad story, but there are better stories, when the purpose is to create and share a tapestry of imagination. How do you get past a sleepy bunny and into a... er... better story?

## All You Need is a Hammer

And not even a real hammer. An imaginary one. A hammer of metaphor.

What I came to realize after talking with Heather's dad (and dozens of other smart, willing adults) is that we have a creativity myth in our culture. Many people believe that; a) You need to be an artist to be creative, b) Creativity is something you're born with, and, c) You are either creative or not—there are no “kinda” creative people.

That is hooey. Nonsense. Bunkum. It is untruthitude and falsity of the worst sort. Compartmentalization is very big in America. You go to a math class and study math. You play at recess and study during study hall. You work at work and relax at home. And while this may be OK in a general sense (I'm becoming more and more convinced it's not, but that's a whole 'nother book), it's a killer in the long run. If you separate studying from fun, you will always associate learning with work; it's hard, it's stressful, it's... well... work. If you can only ever relax at home, you'll clench your way through three sets of teeth at the office. And we've done the same thing with creativity. If you weren't “artistic,” if you didn't have an immediate ability to create representational art, sing on key or write decent poetry off the top of your head, you weren't a “creative” child. You therefore can't be a creative adult. Because you never took a class. And you never had an instruction book on how to be creative. Because it's inherent. And you didn't get that gene. So when it comes to creative activities, you run away or put down the crayons or shrivel up in fright or hand the microphone to the next person in line or shrug and say, “Pass.”

Because you're “not a creative person.”

Hooey. Hooey. Hooey.

I'm going to share the secret of creativity with you now. It's simple to say, but requires practice, like any other skill. Ready? Turn the page and read the following sentence three times before going on:

**Creativity comes from making connections  
where none existed before.**

Back up. Twice more. I saw you try to skip two and three...

And that's it. Especially when it comes to making up stories. A painter needs years of study just to learn how to make the proper use of his tools and supplies. As a daily speaker and (probably) writer of language, you have the tools pretty well mastered. I'm not saying it's easy to be a great novelist or poet; that takes years of practice, too. But if what you want to do is make up some neat stories with your kids (or for yourself), you've got the tools. You're just used to using them correctly.

Hunh? What? "I'm just used to using them... correctly?"

Yep. And that's where the hammer comes in. No, that wasn't a typo at the end of the last paragraph. I said, "You're just using them correctly." Language is a set of symbols intended to convey an accurate representation of ideas. Stories are inaccurate, from a reality-based point of view. They are, strictly speaking, lies. They don't represent structured, formal reality. They are broken.

Heather's father is a good example of how our brains are trained by the language we use. We set up our own "word association" responses even when there's no psychologist prompting us. I say, "Bunny." Heather's dad says, "Hop." Accurate, logical, realistic – not much fun.

Now. Take your imaginary hammer.

Take the bunny...

and smash it with the hammer.

## Don't Feel Guilty – I Made You Do It

If you are left with the image a dead, gory mess of bunny, you have just completed the first, most literal use of this method. Excellent. You have no story, but an active, unusual, violent image in your head. Now put the bunny back together. You can use the other end of the hammer to do that.

Now take the physical bunny or the word “hop,” which is what Heather’s dad said the bunny does. Imagine that they aren’t being actually smashed with a hammer, but that the hammer is breaking some part of what makes the bunny a bunny from the bunny, or some part of what is required to hop from a hop.

“What is this moron talking about,” you ask. “This is too complicated already. Too philosophical. Too...”

Shut up. It’s not hard. You’re learning a new skill. This is a very small book and mostly filled with me trying to be marginally funny. This is the important stuff.

So...

What makes a bunny a bunny? It’s an easy question. I’ll get you started.

**Bunny:** small, fuzzy mammal. Has long ears and a cotton-ball tail.  
Likes to eat carrots. Lives in a burrow under the ground. Twitches its whiskers. Can be grey, brown, black, white or spotted.

Sound about right? Add some more if you want. Now:

**Hop:** Jumping up and down, usually with some forward motion.

Great. Now take the hammer and remove one of those parts from each of those definitions. Again, I’ll give you an example. Take the typical white, fluffy tail off the bunny. Ouch! More violence to our poor bunny friend. But you’re

left with an animal who's missing one of his most important, definitive parts. And "jump?" What if in jumping you only moved up, but not forward? That's a jump without part of what makes it a jump.

So you've got a bunny with no tail who can only jump straight up. And you've just graduated to the next part of the program.

## Weaving for Fun and Tension

Once you've got pieces broken up, you've created tension. Tension exists when you've disturbed "the normal." It's an essential part of stories. And the only way to resolve the tension is to answer the questions that immediately come to mind when you examine the disturbance.

- Why does the bunny have no tail?
- Where did the tail go?
- How can he get it back if he can only jump straight up?
- Did he lose his tail because of this jumping malfunction?
- Will he get his tail and his regular jumping ability back? How?
- Why do bunnies like carrots so much?

Answering those questions, weaving the broken parts back together, is what storytelling is all about. Your end-state may be very similar to the boring, unbroken beginning. You'll end up with a whole, standard, functioning bunny sleeping in his hole. But because he went through some adventures to get his tail back and regain his jumping skills, his final state is the end of an exciting quest. Not a static and tedious existence, bereft of adventure and floating in an existential sea of choking, Sargasso-like malaise and vague, creeping ennui.

Which is why TaleWeaver is called TaleWeaver. The process of weaving takes strips of material and binds them together in a stronger and more interesting way. You get patterns and pictures where before you had only monochromatic bits of cloth.

## But What's Up with All Those Poems?

Why are there poems on the backs of every card (assuming you're playing TaleWeaver with the "Poetry Deck")? Poetry breaks images and language down at their most basic levels. Why does poetry rhyme? Why does it have rhythm? The sound and pace of words doesn't have anything to do with their intrinsic meaning. The words "flood" and "deluge" are close synonyms that don't sound anything like each other. By involving the rhythm and rhyme of words, poets are forced to choose words based on something other than their pure definitions.

In order to do that, poets have to examine their subject from many angles. They also usually have a particular facet of a subject that interests them. The combination of looking at something from a weird angle (sound), and having to manipulate language in two ways at once (meaning and sound) gives poetry an intrinsic tension. Good poems are like very condensed stories in that way.

The poems that accompany every card's title are meant to provide a lever to help you break down the subject and begin creating tension. Please don't take the subject matter of the poems as a limitation on what can be done with that subject. For example, the poem on the card for "Duchess" describes a good, kind woman. There's no reason why you shouldn't have an evil duchess in your story. See "Chapter 4. TaleWeaving Tips" for more details on how to use the cards in different ways.

Poetry also calls attention to the potential magic and importance of everyday subjects. Stories do this, too.

But poems are like microscopes, helping you see a small detail of something in a new way. Read the poems, if you want. You don't have to. But I hope you like reading them as much as I enjoyed writing them.

## And You Lived Happily Ever After

Spend some time working with the cards. Make notes of what works. If you're doing this with children and they're coloring pictures of the stories, keep the notes and the pictures together. Draw some pictures yourself. Don't be judgmental of your own coloring; remember Josh – and don't think you need to do anything but have fun. Fun is the single most important word in storytelling.

Why do we feel the need to tell and hear stories? Our minds are complex places. Stories provide paths through the tangle. And the more you work with your stories – with or without the TaleWeaver cards – the more you will find yourself breaking apart and reassembling creative pieces in other areas of your life.

Storytelling is magic. You start with nothing more than the air in your lungs and a spark in your mind. You sit. You speak. And children are taken to another place. A place where images are born and imagination grows. A place where they discover new roads to old, familiar places. And marvelous new places along old, worn-out roads.

If you feel as if you need permission, here – I give it. You are now a licensed TaleWeaver. You are a story teller. A breaker of the mundane into pieces that can be repuzzled into the extraordinary.

We'll be quiet. We promise. Just tell us one more.

Then we'll go to sleep.



# Meet the TaleWeaver Deck

These are not rules. If you and the people with whom you are sharing stories are having fun and exercising your creative functions – you win. If you are feeling challenged and a little frustrated – you win. If you eventually don’t need the cards and launch into an epic series of tales that become a private mythology known only to your circle of tellers and listeners – gosh, you really win more than I could ever hope for.

Simply put, the deck is a set of four suits of cards (and four Jesters). Each card has a title and an accompanying poem. The titles of the cards are the seeds from which you can grow stories. The poems are... well... a little bit of fertilizer. If you like, you can read the “Chapter 1. Motive, History and Introduction,” for more details about the “why” of the poems. The four suits are:

- **Eyes – characters**
- **Hands – props**
- **Winds – events**
- **Lands – settings**

The four Jesters are weird, out-of-control makers of mischief... Sons of Chaos.

## How to Weave a Tale

Every story ever written requires two ingredients; the pieces and the fit. The TaleWeaver deck provides you with a few possible pieces and a few descriptions. How they fit together is up to you. What follows are some ideas on how to start fitting pieces together into stories.

The basics of any TaleWeaver session involve pulling a bunch of cards from the deck, reading the titles and poems (or skipping the poetry once you're tired of it), and fitting them together into a story.

That's it. Which is sort of like saying, "All that's required to win a championship football game is to score more points than the other team." Telling stories is hard work. Fun and rewarding, but not easy. Which you should take to heart from the beginning; this is not a game of Crazy Eights or Go Fish. This is a serious creative learning session disguised as entertainment.

If you are doing this with children, let them help as much as possible. I guarantee you'll have more fun and hear some of the craziest stuff ever. Kids are much better at loosening the ties of reality; they haven't tied them up as tight as we have yet.

That's it. This is a really short chapter, isn't it? If you feel ripped off by it, look at it this way... no... that doesn't work. What about...

No...

Nope. No way around it. This is just a really short chapter. Sorry. The next one provides a bit more value. If you're into "dollars per chapter" sort of calculations. Which is, frankly, kinda esoteric. Don't dwell so much on that kind of thing. It's only going to make you nuts. And try to eat more fiber.

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# TaleWeaver

## “Game” Types

I call them “games” because it sounds more fun that way, and because we use cards. There are no rules. And the first rule is that the rules never matter more than you having fun and getting the most value and interesting material out of a session. After this chapter, there’s a “Fundamentals of TaleWeaving” section that gives suggestions that work in any type of session; in fact, most of the “Fundamentals” work pretty well for storytelling even outside the TaleWeaving environment. They even work in other creative situations, too. Frankly, I should expand on the “Fundamentals” section and sell that as an entirely stand-alone work. It’s just that good. So if you still feel bad about how short ChapterTwo was, read the “Fundamentals” section as if you’re getting it as an entirely **“FREE! ADDED BONUS!!!!”** and you’ll feel much better.

And eat more fiber.

So... Types of “games” you might try to play with TaleWeaver...



**the Quest** ~ Pick cards until you come to an “Eye” (a character). This is your hero. Pick another card. This is the goal of the quest – to find a “Hand” (prop), discover a “Land” (environment), survive a “Wind” (event) or link up with another “Eye.” Keep those two cards face-up, and separate them by about a foot or so. Now pick 3-5 other cards and lay them out face-down on the table between the hero and the goal; these are your “obstacle” cards. Talk a bit about

why the hero wants to make it to the goal. Come up with at least one (but ideally more) reasons why the goal is important to her. Now turn up the first of the face-down “obstacle” cards. This is the first thing/place/person/issue the hero encounters and struggles with on the way to the goal. How does this card “block” the hero? What could this do to keep the hero from the goal? And then, how does the hero overcome the obstacle? If you’d like, pick another random card – and let that card help the hero triumph over the obstacle. When all the obstacles have been overcome – your hero is at the goal!

***Tip:** If you come up with interesting heroes/villains, make a note of them and use them in future tales. The more you build up a history of elements, the more special they will become and the easier it will be to work them into future tales.*



**Triumph** ~ Pick two “Eyes.” One is your hero, one is the villain. Pick another card. This is what the villain wants to ruin/kill/have for himself. Deal out at least 3 face-down cards. These are the environments or people that will influence the battle. Make sure that the battle is not one-sided; if the hero always wins, his victory is not as rewarding. As in “The Quest,” if you’d like to pick additional cards with which to “arm” the hero or villain, go right ahead.

***Tip:** An additional victory condition can be the “winning over” of the villain rather than his defeat. Straight defeat is fun, but sometimes converting the villain over to the good-guy’s side will provide for future stories of conflict (the villain strays from the path of right), or will give you a darker, more complex hero for later stories.*



**the Locus** ~ This is a story about a place or happening that’s fun, scary, educational, mysterious, hilarious, etc. to visit. Pick a mood before you begin. Find a “Land” card. That’s your location, or a “Wind” for an event. Now keep drawing cards, and every time you come to an “Eye,” describe how that character reacts to the location/event. After four or five folks go through the process, have the last one discover a secret about the place that explains its charm/horror/etc. Use a “Hand” (prop) if you’d like as part of the crux at the center of the mystery.

***Tip:** These can be very funny stories. Children love to hear about how different characters react to the same weird circumstance, especially if all the participants start out behaving differently, but end up falling for the same gag or being ejected in a humorous way.*



**the Puzzle** ~ A little harder tale to weave. Puzzle stories frequently involve hidden connections between apparently unrelated people, places or events. If you're weaving a tale interactively, puzzle stories are even harder. If you're making one up ahead of time for a later bedtime story, go for it. Find an "Eye" for a hero. Pick any other card as his goal. Now pick three random cards and decide how they fit together to provide a key to the goal. Make a note of how they finally fit together. When you tell the story, only reveal a little bit of the "solution" as each part is discovered by the hero

***Tip:** Puzzle stories require planning. If you can't seem to fit your three chosen cards into a puzzle – tough it out! I told you it wouldn't be easy. Rapunzel let people climb her hair, for Pete's sake. The Grimm brother what came up with that was clearly thinking outside the box.*



**Bought Low, Raised Up** ~ Pick your hero. Have her burdened by either a place ("Land"), one or more people ("Eyes"), or a number of things ("Hands"). Whatever the burden, make sure that other characters either mock, look down on or generally disparage the hero. If you're in the mood for romance, have another "Eye" come along and begin to help the hero out of her dilemma, and guide them toward a relationship. If you want the hero to persevere on her own, have her discover an object ("Hand") or experience an event ("Wind") and thereby gain power of what kept her down.

***Tip:** It can be funny if the characters who originally mocked the hero are brought low themselves at the end, but be careful. You risk tarnishing the hero if she is too involved in turn-about cruelty.*

**Chase** ~ A fun, action-oriented motif. Find your hero. Find two “Lands.” Your hero needs to get from the first to the second. But wait! Will she make it before the chaser (another “Eye”) catches up to her? Pick other (any suit) cards. The hero must run “around” these obstacles as she is chased. Do the obstacles hinder her more or less than the chaser? Can she use them to help elude her pursuer? What is the prize when she reaches the goal? Pick another “Hand” if you’d like.

***Tip:** Turn the tables once you get your hero “home” and have her chase the pursuer, empowered by the earlier action and the item (“Hand”) that she found at her goal.*



**Redemption** ~ This time you start with a villainous “Eye.” Pick a “Land,” and make him lord of that place in a bad way. Give him one or more objects (“Hands”) with which he can control the environment. Now find three other characters (“Eyes”). Show how they fit into the “Land,” and how the villain is cruel to them. Now pick three events (“Winds”). Each of these events should present our villain with a nearly catastrophic or almost deadly challenge. Show how each of the three other characters, despite having been treated badly by the villain, help him survive these events. In the end, the villain will realize his error and befriend the others, perhaps even sharing control of the “Land” or “Hands” of which he was sole master.

***Tip:** The journey of redemption can be guided by a single character, who shows the villain the error of his ways. Or the villain can experience the devastating events (“Winds”) alone, and realize that he needs the help of others, and see the value of his formerly mistreated underlings. This type of tale is rich in moral possibilities.*



**Capture & Escape** ~ Can be kind of creepy. Good for low-stress spooky stories. Pick your hero (“Eye”). Pick your villain. Your villain captures your hero (using a “Hand” if you like) and takes him to a “Land.” Now – either various different characters (“Eyes”) can try to help the hero escape, or the hero can find various different props (“Hands”) within his prison (not literal – he could be held on top of a boulder, guarded by... you decide) and use them to escape. Or the props can be used to fool the villain into eventually entering

the prison and changing places with the hero. Either way, when it's time to escape, choose a "Wind" (event) card and make that the trigger or final step of the escape.

***Tip:** This is a good story type for kids to help with. How would you use a staff to get out of a theater? How would winter affect your chances of escaping a castle by boat? Kids are great at making up ways to manipulate reality towards an end. If their methods are impossible – so much the better.*



**Growing Up ~** Can be funny. Can also be combined with other story motifs. Pick a hero ("Eye") and make him young. Pick at least three random cards, any type. As you turn them over, describe how the youth and inexperience of your hero makes him react in an inappropriate or immature way to these people/places/ things/events. Have him be distraught or embarrassed by his failure. Now pick a mentor ("Eye") who will teach the hero a more mature or effective way to deal with these things. Pick one or more random cards and have the hero and his mentor share the experience(s), with the hero becoming more accomplished each time. In the end, pick one more card. This one the mentor can't deal with, and the hero needs to come to his aid.

***Tip:** Give the mentor an object ("Hand") that seems to always help (maybe it's magic) during the process of discovery or adventure. Have him lose it before the last challenge, and have the hero find it and use it to help out the mentor. Or have the hero discover that the object isn't special or magic; that the magic or knowledge is in himself.*



**Total Mess ~** My favorite. Basically, random goofiness a la TaleWeaver meets "Mad Libs". Deal cards until you get to your hero ("Eye"). Now make a declarative statement: "The [hero] loves..." and turn over a card. It doesn't have to be "loves." It can be, "The [hero] wakes up in bed with..." and turn over a card. Or, "The [hero] is allergic to..." and... card. You go with the story until you get to another point where you stumble or pause or slow down or where it's clearly the next person's turn or people are getting bored, and then you make another declarative statement and... bang. And you gotsta, gotsta fit the card into the story. Rock on with your bad, TaleWeaving self.

***Tip:** An alternative way of doing this in a group session is to “steal” the story. The person whose turn it is gets to talk and tell the tale until the next person has the guts – the guts, I say! – to reach in and take a card, blindly, interrupting the story and inserting his/her idea of how to keep it going with the new card. This method can easily be adapted to a point system for those Alpha Types in the crowd who must keep score. It can also be a drinking game. I’ll leave you to figure that out.*



**Romance** ~ Although a romance story can blossom in any of the other settings, I’ve been asked a number of times to specify, specifically, and redundantly, how to build a romance using TaleWeaver. Although there are countless ways to go about weaving a romance, here’s a starter smoocher. Find two characters (“Eyes”) that could be attracted to each other. Now, a romance must involve separation and (if it’s a comedy) eventual reuniting, or (if it’s a tragedy) permanent estrangement or death. So... what separates the couple? Pick one card randomly; this is their “fate.” The thing that ties them together, and separates them. How so? That’s up to you... and the cards. Choose another card to describe how they are brought “to” their “fate card.” This is how they meet. Choose again to develop an attraction related to the “fate card.” Now introduce the separation; choose one or more cards that come between them. Again, it should somehow still relate to their “fate.” Everything does, you know. Then choose cards that help bring them back together, bridging the gap. In a comedy, which must end in a happy ending (traditionally, a wedding), they must essentially “beat” their fate, either coming to terms with it, conquering it, ignoring it, or deciding to do without whatever it is. In a tragedy... the couple’s fate, in the end, is too much for them. The very last card that is chosen to bring them back together will, instead, be played by their “fate” as a way to separate them, eternally.

***Tip.** Romances are usually character studies as well as stories... but not for the couple. Most great romances have funny, fun and interesting characters as sidekicks, villains, family members, fat nurses (what’s up with that?) of the couple, etc. But other than being gorgeous and in love, you shouldn’t distract from the couple’s “fate” with too many details. Their shared love and, possibly, doom is the big deal.*

# TaleWeaver Strategies

## **The Answer is the Questions.**

In Chapter 1 (or was it Chapter 3?) we said that every story has two ingredients; the pieces and the fit. Chapter 3 is mostly about how to put the pieces down on the board. This chapter is about the fit. And the way to make the characters, props, places and events fit is to ask questions. Every time you ask a question, you provide yourself with the opportunity to answer it. How you answer – that's the story.

## **The Two Best (i.e., Hardest) Questions in the World**

- Why?
- How?

When telling a story, all other questions can be answered linearly, or by (in most cases) pulling out more cards of the appropriate suit:

- Need to know “What?” Pick a “Hand.”
- Need to know “Who?” Pick an “Eye.”
- Need to know “Where?” Pick a “Land.”

But “Why?” and “How?” require you to think. Here’s an example. Suppose you’re doing a “Quest” story with (who?) the Minstrel as the hero. For his destination (where?), you draw the Forest. Why does he want to get back to the forest? This is your chance to use that hammer from Chapter 1 and break apart "Forest" and "Minstrel," and find a way to mix their pieces up as you put them back together.

Let’s break apart the Minstrel first. What comes to mind? Read the poem. Think a bit. Here we go.

**Minstrel:** makes music, travels, sings, carries an instrument (harp, guitar, flute, harmonica, electronic keyboard, mandolin, accordion, violin, tuba, xylophone, etc.), tries to make money by playing concerts, carries stories with him, usually friendly, kind of a loner, good story teller himself.

And now, the Forest.

**Forest:** Woods, trees, animals, paths, bushes, fruit, berries, logs, bogs, frogs, brambles, owls, bears. Can be scary if big creatures hide there. Can be a nice place to hide for yourself.

Now start matching individual parts, until something rings a bell. Let’s take the first word from each list; “music” and “woods.” OK. How can they be related? Remember – use the hammer! Force it! You can always find a relationship, even between the two most seemingly diverse subjects. The wind in the trees makes music sometimes. And some instruments are made out of wood. What if the Minstrel needed to get to this special forest because the magic trees that sing in the wind can be used to make a wonderful harp or other instrument?

See. You've now got a "why" for this story; why does the Minstrel want to get to the Forest? To get the magic wood to make a great harp. All the rest of the story can be "how." Use the objects ("Hands") and other people to make obstacles and tools for the Minstrel to overcome. Break them apart, too, to see how their pieces might fit to make a "how," until your hero has accomplished his "why."

## The Harder the Better: An Example

One of the strengths of TaleWeaver is that it is random. Pure linear thinking leads to non-fiction (history) or boring fiction (*Star Wars Episode 1*). Remember Heather's dad from Chapter 1? A story of a bunny who hops into his hole and falls asleep is plausible, but not much fun. Tragically (from the point of view of someone who wants to learn how to tell stories), our culture mostly teaches linear thinking.

There is always a link between your random card draws. Always. Always. Usually many. The more you force yourself to think of links, the more likely you'll come up with an unusual and entertaining "why" or "how" for your tale.

**BONUS indented weirdness exercise:** take two words that you think are fundamentally unrelated. Go to your favorite Internet search engine. Type in the two words, each preceded by a "plus" sign (+). That forces the engine to find a page that must have both of the words. I will bet it takes you a long time to find a pair of words that gets no match. I recently tried "+harpsichord +pee wee +herman" and came up with 744 matches. This just proves the above point that there is always a link between everything. Welcome to synchronicity.

As an exercise for this chapter, I've picked two incredibly non-related, non-traditional "Eyes" as the hero and villain for a "Triumph" style story. The hero is the "General" and the villain is the "Baby."

Ain't that a pisser? A hero general is OK. Sure. But a baby as the villain? Let's see what happens when we get out that hammer again.

**General:** Leads troops into battle. A good tactician. Strong, fierce, somewhat solitary, good motivational speaker, gives orders, reports to a king or other ruler, can probably fight pretty well on his own, doesn't like being talked back to, wears a uniform, carries a sword.

**Baby:** Small, innocent, harmless. Cries, wets, laughs, nurses, likes bright, shiny mobiles. Requires constant attention. Sleeps a lot. Burps. Spits up. Crawls, pulls on things, rolls, gets food on face.

So how could a baby thwart or challenge a general? Well, in a "Triumph" story, the hero and villain both strive for control of the same thing. Let's pick another card as the object of their struggle: a "Spyglass."

**Spyglass:** Used to see things far away. Made of metal and glass, or leather and glass.

The general clearly needs his spyglass to better see and understand the battlefield during conflict. But the baby has it. Why? Babies like shiny things. Baby has found the spyglass and likes to play with it.

What we have here is a non-traditional or unintentional villain. You could make the baby a horrible, monstrous, bug-eyed, four-armed, poison spitting alien baby from the Pits of Pandemonium and have him duke it out in a traditional battle with the general. That could be fun, too (and has the added benefit of obvious merchandising possibilities). But non-traditional roles also make for good story fodder. Maybe the baby doesn't do anything at all. Maybe the baby's nurse, mother, father, baby-sitter, sister, etc. all keep giving the spyglass back to the baby because it's the only thing that keeps baby quiet. And the general needs the spyglass by tomorrow morning for a battle. How does this general, who is used to being obeyed, interact with a baby, who can't understand his commands? What does the general do to get the spyglass back? Let's pick one more card and see how it fits in: Autumn.

**Autumn:** Cooler, leaves changing color and falling, allergies, breezes blowing, harvest time, pumpkins, cider, hay-rides, longer nights/shorter days, back to school time.

“Well,” thinks the general. “The baby wants something colorful. I’ll tie a bunch of red and orange leaves in a bunch, slip them in the crib and take the spyglass while he’s distracted with the leaves.” He does this, and almost makes it out of the room, but the leaves make the baby sneeze, and that brings the nurse from down the hall. Quickly, the general puts the spyglass back and scrambles out the window.

## Methods of Madness

I know. It’s hard. It’s work. But it’s fun and I promise it gets easier. Remember – you have permission to break up the subjects of your story in any way you want. Here are some ways of doing that. Think of these as types of hammers you can use to break apart any card in the TaleWeaver deck:



**Hyperbole** ~ A hyperbole is an exaggeration; usually a huge, enormous, unbelievably insane, over-the-top, monstrous exaggeration. Stretching the common characteristics of a subject to an extreme can be entertaining. What describes a “Wagon?” It’s faster than walking and carries things. OK. How about a wagon that can go incredibly fast and carry an unlimited amount of stuff? That could be a fun part of a story.



**Litotes** ~ This is a word you should know, if only because nobody else does. I guarantee you know nobody who knows what litotes is. It’s the opposite of hyperbole. The singular and plural are both spelled “litotes,” and Webster defines it as: understatement in which an affirmative is expressed by the negative of the contrary (as in “not a bad singer” or “not unhappy”). Often used as an ironic understatement, e.g. “Spilling red wine all over the host’s white rug didn’t make him very popular at the party.” As a narrative device, though, litotes can be a deliberate understatement of a subject’s characteristic. What if the wagon from the example above could not move at all? Or what if anything you put into it immediately jumped out? Not much of a wagon, eh? But when characters interact with an object/place/person/event that has the opposite characteristic of what they’re expecting, that can lead to interesting or funny tension.



**Personification** ~ Also known as “anthropomorphism.” Take any non-character (any “Hand,” “Land” or “Wind”) and make it into a character. Embody the characteristics of that thing into a person. A living tower the strides across the land, the Lord of Winter, a sword that fences on its own, the Mountain King, a fireplace that breathes smoke, etc.



**Combination** ~ Take any two of the same suit and combine them into one. The duke who is a cook. The staff that is a bow. The mountain that is a market. The “how” of merging two dissimilar subjects can be a major part of any story.



**Repetition** ~ Many great stories take essentially the same situation and repeat it with slight changes to make a point. “The Three Pigs,” “A Christmas Carol,” “Robin Hood,” – they all have very similar, repetitive scenes. These repetitions help emphasize the key characteristics of a hero or situation. And they include repetition. And they include repetition.



**Paradox** ~ The cat chases the dog. The hot, hot winter. A staff made of rubber. Similar to litotes, but rather than an understatement, an opposite or impossibility. Can be used with two subjects to good effect; the cook that commanded the duke; a giant that lives in a thimble; the market that leads to a road; the silly teacher and the serious student.



**Comparison** ~ How do two subjects compare when applied to the same task? How would a guard compare to a spy when trying to climb a mountain? How would a boat compare to a horn, if you had to try using both/either to cover a naked character? How would a parade in a cellar compare to one in a kitchen?



**Contrast** ~ The cheap alternative to comparison. Jack Sprat and his wife. Goofus and Gallant. Joe Cool and Charlie Brown. Playing off the obvious differences of two characters/objects/places/events can point out interesting story possibilities.



**Tip:** Create “strategy” cards to help apply some randomness to the “bow” of your stories. Put the above methods (“Hyperbole,” “Contrast,” etc.) on some cards. As part of the TaleWeaving process, deal them out and force yourself to use that particular “hammer” at that point in the tale. Again... any time you require yourself to make a connection where none existed before, you will be strengthening your creative muscles.

**Tip Two:** Combine the above strategies in new and frightening ways. “Repetitive Personification,” for example, might end up being a thing (“Sword”) that takes on the characteristics of multiple characters in a story or a series of human personality traits. “Hyperbolic Combination” could be any way in which the extreme of one card (“Winter”) is forced to combine or “live inside” the hyperbole of another card (“Mirror”). In the example of those two cards, perhaps, anyone who sees themselves in the “Winter Mirror” turns into an ice sculpture character that becomes a mirror him/herself, reflecting back only the “coldness” of anyone in his/her presence.

**Tip Three:** Don’t just do these things to your story, let your characters do them in your story. Allow the characters to be repetitive, to engage in hyperbole and to create situations of contrast and comparison. One of the greatest storytelling techniques is “framing” – the story-within-a-story. If your characters are storytellers, guess what? Your readers and listeners will be doubly entranced; both by the story your characters tell, and by how it relates to your broader tale.



# Ways to Play

## All Together Now

If you read Chapter 1, then you'll know that one good reason to play TaleWeaver is to create stories that children can use as jumping off points for coloring and drawing. If you're doing that, or getting help from the kids just because they enjoy it, you're playing interactively. Which is a hoot. It's not particularly how professional writers put together stories. But then again, they tend to smoke too much, drink lots of cheap coffee and shout at their editors. None of which is (hopefully) part of your personal story time.

Interactive TaleWeaving can be done in a round-robin fashion with everyone getting a turn. Or you can have one chief narrator (a teacher, parent, older sibling, stoat, ibex, etc.) who takes suggestions from the peanut gallery. Either way, make sure everyone who wants to participate gets a turn.

Creating stories in a group – whether its all grown-ups, all kids, or a mix – is fun and exciting, but has its own challenges. You have to be careful not to tromp on someone else's ideas and suggestions. Here are a few suggestions for making interactive sessions fun and workable.



**Notes for later** ~ If you come up with a great story idea, but it doesn't work with the one being drummed up by the group, jot down a note and use it later. There's no rule that says you need to use every good idea right away. Come to think of it, always take notes. If you need a fun, quick story with a different group and don't have time to TaleWeave, just whip out an "oldie."



**Egg timer** ~ Some people (this author included) have big, fat mouths that never shut. That's not necessarily bad (Seriously. It's not. Lots of people like me. They do. No, my dad didn't pay them just to say that. Shut up. No, you shut up. Whoops. Sorry. Apparently some therapy has wandered into the text). But my big mouth sometimes means that other people don't get a turn. And that's not good. Use an egg timer, a stopwatch, etc. so that everyone gets a chance.



**Mulligans** ~ In golf (I hear), if you botch your first drive off the first tee, you can have what we as kids called a "do-over," but which golfers call a "mulligan." What a great thing. When adults are coming up with stories on their own, I highly encourage the "forcing it" method. You'll never get more creative if you always wait for pairs of subjects that immediately and easily line up in your brain. But kids have softer and more brittle egos. If a child is having a real hard time coming up with an idea for a card, let her have another. If, after two or three, she's still stuck, have her hold onto those cards and think about them while you move on. That way she'll feel like she can still participate later. If there's time next time around, let her take two turns in a row.



**You must be "this tall" to be wrong** ~ If it's all adults playing, feel free to be a bit critical if someone pulls out an easy, less-than-best-effort chunk of tale. If you and your friends (like me and mine) interact via playful mocking, have at it. Not with little ones. My rule of thumb: if they can't drive, they're always right. Again – if you have a "better" idea, write it down. But, hey, teacher – leave them kids alone.



**Random vs. Planned ‘em** ~ Random group playing can be more fun for an all grown-up group. You don’t get to see your card before it’s your turn. You have a certain amount of time to come up with something. For kids, try letting them all take a card or two at the beginning. Then start the story yourself, put some background into it, and give the kids a few minutes to think about their cards.



**Story Maps** ~ If you want to TaleWeave often, try taking a large piece of cardboard or oak-tag and drawing card-sized rectangles across it. Label each as “hero,” “villain,” “home,” “magic items,” etc. Tell the players what the order will be, and which “blank” they’ll be responsible for. Again, this can help people begin to stretch strengthen the part of their mind they’ll need to make a connection with their card.

## Me and My Shadow

Maybe you’re making up bedtime stories for your kids, or lunch time stories for your kindergarten class. Or working on a story for your creative writing master’s thesis. Whatever – TaleWeaver is a great way to exercise and expand your creative functions on your own.

Most of what works in groups will work when you’re alone. But, in some ways, you have more freedom – and more responsibility – when you’re crafting a story on your own. You can’t rely on the creativity (or lack thereof) of other group members. You need to push yourself. And that’s not easy. Here are a few tips on ways to get the most out of solo TaleWeaving sessions.



**Value the Process** ~ This is not a contest. This is not a job. Quit looking at the clock. Quit throwing away note paper with “bad” ideas. Stop judging your stories. TaleWeaving is more about learning how to be creative than about coming up with great new stories every night. Learning is an action verb that

happens over time. Not at once. You don't cross some line and suddenly know everything there is to know. There is no goal weight, no perfect score, no trophy. If you're truly smart, you'll never stop learning. And creating stories is a challenging, fun way to learn the creative process. Be a friend to yourself. You wouldn't treat a friend to the same levels of criticism that you do yourself, would you? And stop poking your little brother. And don't eat all the raisins.



**Re-re-re** ~ The hardest lesson I ever learned about my writing is that my own words are not golden drops of greatness dancing unbidden from my pen. Just because you write something down doesn't mean it's holy, precious or valuable. It just means you cared enough to take notes. Does this contradict what I just said above about having fun? Not at all. But – and this is a good thing to remember in almost every area of your life – your first idea is almost never your best one. If you want a truly great TaleWeaving experience some time, take a tale you've just finished and replace one card with a new, random one. Make the new one fit. Do that again. Keep doing it until you've replaced every original card with new ones. Is it the same story? Of course not. But what does the final story have in common with the original? Hoooo.... Kind of gives me a creepy shiver just thinking about it. All different subjects, but there will be similarities. How funky. I know for a fact that this is exactly how they write every single "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" script.



**Not While Driving** ~ Do your TaleWeaving in different environments. Our brains are part of our bodies. When you're at the kitchen table, your brain is thinking "Cap'n Crunch." In your La-Z-Boy, it's thinking "Cheers reruns." That's OK. And your creative functions will be tweaked differently in different places. Go to the library for awhile sometime and write in a cubby. TaleWeave in the car (not while driving). Go down in the basement or up in the attic (kids, get your parents' permission). In a boat, on a plane, at the coffee shop. You get it. Try it. You'll be surprised at the difference it makes. When you join the "Mile High" club of TaleWeavers give me a call and I'll send you \$5.



**You're a Hunter, Not a Waiter** ~ You are a TaleWeaver. The story comes out of you. Treat the process like a hunt or a sport. You will find the connections you need to make a good story. You will break apart the meanings of subjects until they yield good fruit. You are in charge. Many people feel like they have to wait for the creativity fairy to spank them with a wand or something. Or wait for "the right moment," or for the muse to descend. Bosh and hog waller. Hooey. It's your brain. Show it who's boss. Go ahead... poke your cerebellum. Man-handle your medulla. Thrash your... sorry. My bad.



**Share, but Don't Compare** ~ Stories are meant to be shared. Please, please, please find someone you trust who can help you on this journey. Or, even better, someone who wants to go there, too. But don't make it a competition – unless you can both have more fun that way. And especially don't ever, ever, ever put down someone else's work. Constructive criticism can be very helpful – if it's been asked for. But careless scorn can kill forever a newly awakening creative spirit. There are few crimes more heinous.



# TaleWeaver as a Lightweight RPG

## OK... What's an RPG?

That's a good question. If you've picked up TaleWeaver as a creativity building tool or storytelling guide or something to do with kids or a way to pass time while on long train trips, you may never have heard of RPGs. So here's a quick explanation.

"RPG" is short for "Role Playing Game." The most famous "pen and paper" RPG of all time is probably Dungeons & Dragons (D&D). Now before you go get all "I'm not into demons or hobbits or elves or sorcery and stuff," take a deep breath and learn something new. If you are familiar with RPGs, you can clearly skip this section.

The basic idea behind RPGs has nothing to do, intrinsically, with the fantasy genres that made D&D and other similar games very popular. Although there are many "high fantasy" (read: elves, orcs, dwarves, trolls, magic, knights, etc.) RPGs out there, we also see RPGs devoted to sci-fi, superheroes, Victoriana, vampires, post-apocalyptica, mysteries, pre-history, psionics, crime and just about any other genre you can think of.

The whole point of an RPG is that a number of players get together and, basically, create a joint story together. Which sounds suspiciously like a group

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version of TaleWeaver, don't it? One person usually takes on the role of Game Master (GM), sometimes called Dungeon Master (DM). The GM is essentially the narrator. The person who "knows" what's going on behind the story that's about to unfold. The other players are... well... players. They will each control one character, commonly referred to as PCs (Player Characters). The players decide what their characters will do within the bounds of the story as it is described to them by the GM, and as they interact with the other players' PCs. That is the definition of "role playing." Group storytelling with game rules.

The GM will often control a number of characters in the adventure/story, too, referred to as NPCs – Non-Player Characters. Many GMs also create elaborate histories, back-stories, treasures and other items, traps, monsters, even entire maps of entire worlds for the other players to discover and adventure in.

In most RPGs, players will create PCs that start out as fairly low-level characters (i.e., adventurers just starting out; young people; novices), and, over time, these characters will gain experience, improve in abilities, learn new skills, gain knowledge in various areas, acquire new equipment and riches and generally become better, stronger, faster, richer, etc. They will also develop a shared history with their fellow players. The development of PCs and the creation of rich, shared stories are two of the great joys of playing RPGs.

## Why Use TaleWeaver as an RPG?

There are literally dozens of mainstream RPG systems/games on the market and probably hundreds of lesser-known variants. Some are characterized by rulebooks as thick as a dictionary. These games try, as much as possible, to model various worlds based on complex equations, tables and charts. Which is fine. But that's not what TaleWeaver is about. Telling a story should never require a spreadsheet.

So why try to use TaleWeaver as an RPG at all? Why enter that fray? Well, I got a nice email from a TaleWeaver (First Edition) customer awhile ago who said that his wife was already using it as a lightweight RPG. Having designed other RPG systems (of the more complex variety), it hit me on the head that the TaleWeaver storytelling system was already about 2/3 of the way towards being

just that, and that folks might get a kick out of some explicit ideas on how to use it as such.

Now, we ain't gonna try to turn this into something it ain't. If you want lots of rules and tables and sheets and algebra, go get D&D or GURPS or Warhammer or... you get the picture.

The point of using TaleWeaver as an RPG is to push the “storytelling” aspect of RPGs to the fore. This is not an RPG experience about hexes and turns-per-second. It is an RPG about story. In many ways, a group TaleWeaver game as explained in ChapterFive is, essentially, an RPG. The line is blurry. I spilled tea on it, I think and left it out overnight.

So, with all that being said, here's one way to use TaleWeaver as a very, very minimalist RPG.

## What's the point? StoryPoints.

Since you can basically just pull cards from the TaleWeaver deck and create a story/game anyway, the two main differences between doing that and playing the RPG version of TaleWeaver are to:

- Create and develop characters for use in multiple stories
- Decide between actions when there is tension between what the GM and a player wants to do, or between two players/characters

To keep things astoundingly simple, since we don't want this to turn into even a “middle-weight” RPG, there is only one measure, ever, of anything, in the TWRPG (TaleWeaver RPG) and that is: **StoryPoints (SP)**.

StoryPoints are assigned to two things in the game: **plot events** and **characters**. For a plot event, the number of StoryPoints assigned basically describes how tough, challenging, interesting, troubling, exasperating, etc. a particular situation in the story is. For characters, StoryPoints describe how experienced, skilled, qualified, knowledgeable, etc. a character is.

As in most RPGs, the desire is to make harder things more complicated and difficult for more untested characters to do, and easier for more skilled and experienced characters. A character – even a young one – who has gone through six adventures involving mountains should find it much easier to quickly and safely traverse a dangerous mountain range than a veteran warrior who has never seen a mountain before. That’s what makes playing a specific character in an RPG fun – role-playing his/her strengths and weaknesses as accurately as possible within the events provided by the GM.

## Quantifying plot events

So, when matching wits in an RPG, the point (the fun) is often to get to the end of the adventure. To find the ring. Or destroy it. And along the way, experience the various trials and tribulations that the GM has in store for the characters. But the players want to show off how cool their characters are. They want to take something the GM has said is hard, and make it look easy. Remember the scene in “Indiana Jones” where the guy whips out a sword and gets all fancy, spinning it around, showing off his style? And then... Indy just shoots him. Hah! Great stuff. That’s totally an RPG moment. The player in me said, “Oh, yeah, big bad NPC? Well, I’ve got a pistol.”

Whereas a group story session of TaleWeaver should be almost totally collaborative, an RPG is a little competitive. Usually between players and GM, sometimes even between the players. So you need two things – some kind of tension to set up the competition, and a way to resolve it.

In a TWRPG story, every major plot event – not brushing your teeth in the morning or walking down the road, but the actual “Ooh! Something’s happening!” stuff – needs to be defined by StoryPoints. Simply put, take any card from the TaleWeaver deck (and remember, you are encouraged to make your own), and give it a number of StoryPoints (SP) between one and six.

The number of SP assigned to the plot event is the number of “things” that the players characters need to do at that juncture in the story in order to successfully make it past the challenge, event, bad-guy, obstruction, etc. It is up to the GM to describe the plot event sufficiently to the players – that’s his/her

role in the game/storytelling process. It is then up to players to adequately describe to the GM how their characters survive, prosper, succeed, etc.

Things to keep in mind:

- The SP of the plot event can be a straight multiplier of the original card. “Mountain 4” would be a very tall, very steep, very craggy mountain. The players would then need to describe four ways that their characters deal with mountainous challenges.
- Alternatively, the SP of a plot event can be modified by other TaleWeaver cards. So “Mountain 4” could describe the card “Mountain” with three different cards backing it up. For example, “Mountain 4” might be modified by “Bear,” “Wolf” and “Ice.” The players would then need to describe how they navigate a relatively low peak (as the mountain itself now has only 1 SP), but one that is covered in ice and populated by bears and wolves.
- The GM can “pre-load” the SP for a plot event, planning (to use the example above) for the bears, wolves and ice. Or he/she can pull some random cards at the time of play. Or any combo you like.
- The GM decides when the players have adequately “passed each challenge.” The players need to use details about the characters’ skills and past (we’ll get to that in a minute), and work together (if there are more than one), to create a compelling story. That’s the point of TaleWeaver after all.

Simply saying, “We fight the bears,” doesn’t cut it. Then again, as the GM, you may need to provide some prodding. Simply saying, “There’s bears on the mountain,” isn’t giving the players much to go on, either. Work together, back and forth, until you have that nice, “A-ha!” moment when everyone knows... yup. Them bears are history.

## Character points

As players' characters (PCs) progress, they'll get better at things they have experience with. When this happens, they get to keep track of that with StoryPoints assigned to their characters.

Every character begins with zero StoryPoints for any given subject. If he/she has never climbed a mountain, your SP for "Mountain" for him/her is "zero." When you play a character for the first time – called "character creation" in most RPGs – your GM may give you a number of StoryPoints to assign to your PC to start things out. This would represent any skills or experience attained while growing up, before the current story, in school, etc. I'd personally recommend that starting characters be given between 3 and 10 SP to monkey around with.

Let's imagine you're playing a game and your GM says you need to create a youngish character, just starting out in life for a fantasy story setting, and you've got 6 SP to assign to his/her initial development. You come up with "Warryn," a nice lad who grew up on a mountain farm, surrounded by woods. His father taught him some basic sword skills, and how to hunt. Warryn's starting "character sheet" might look something like this:

Warryn	
Mountain	2
Sword	1
Hunter	1
Forest	1
Bow & Arrows	1

Each skill (attribute, characteristic, trait... call it what you like) for your characters is based on the same set of TaleWeaver cards being used by the GM to create StoryPoints for plot events. If the GM adds a new card for plot purposes, you will (should...) be able to (eventually...) use it for your characters.

When dealing with any event in the game, the GM should be much more inclined to accept storytelling from players that is based, in some way, on StoryPoints registered in their characters' history.

For example, if the story places your group in a situation where they are hungry, any character could say, "We go hunting for food." The GM, though, might ask you to get a bit more specific and funky, or may simply not allow you to do so, saying something like, "Game is mighty scarce in these parts." If, however, Warryn were to try his hand at hunting up some grub... the GM would probably be more agreeable. After all, Warryn has some experience in that area.

Characters' SPs also top out at five for each item.

## Plot vs. player: the challenge!

This is where the "game" aspect of the RPG comes in. Not a big deal. Not very complicated. But it will keep things interesting.

Let's say you've got a character, like Warryn, with an SP of "Mountain 2." The GM brings Warryn to a part of the story with a "Mountain 1" plot event to overcome, meaning you've now got to "story your way through" a mountainous chapter of narrative in order to pass through to the next plot event. That's fine. Warryn can do just that, or...

Any time a character has at least one StoryPoint (above zero) in common with that in a plot event, you can "challenge." This is basically the character saying, "Climbing a level 1 mountain is like brushing my teeth. No big deal."

Well? Is it a big deal? That's where the fun comes in.

Lots of times in books and movies, we love to see the hero do just that – go up against incredible odds as if they were a daily occurrence, and beat ‘em without a hint of sweat. Other times, though... the hero ends up getting a face full of reality, and needs to deal with more trouble than he’d originally been dealt. Which happens in a game of TWRPG? Well...

Here’s how a challenge works.

1. The player and the GM each roll one standard, six-sided die.
2. The difference between the StoryPoint level for the character and the plot event will be added to the roll of the side that is higher to begin with. That is, in this case, Warryn has a skill of “Mountain 2,” and he has come up against a “Mountain 1” plot event. So he gets to add +1 to his die roll. If he was challenging a “Mountain 4,” he’d have to subtract -2 from his roll.
3. If the player’s roll is a higher (or a tie)... the character breezes through that plot event as if it weren’t there. Frustrating for the GM who planned it oh-so-nicely? Perhaps. But that’s part of the fun for the player. The character simply waltzes over the mountain like it was a stroll down Main Street.
4. If the GM’s roll is higher, though... the GM adds the difference of the two rolls to the number of SPs used in that particular plot event. The GM can then either add those SP to the original TaleWeaver card, pull out cards by design, or pull cards at random to make up the difference.

**Example:** Let’s imagine that Warryn challenges that “Mountain 1.” He’s got “Mountain 2,” so he’ll add +1 to his die roll, and he wins in a tie, so he’s feeling good. But the dice are against him today. He rolls a “2” and the GM rolls a “5.” As we know, “ $2 + 1 = 3$ ,” and “ $3 < 5$ .” So Warryn does not simply waltz over the mountain... and his attempt at doing so only makes things worse.

The GM will now get to add two new StoryPoints to this section of the game. So the GM decides to pull two random cards from the TaleWeaver deck in

order to describe the kind of chaotic, troublesome fun that Warryn got himself into when he tried to take the mountain on so casually.

The motivation of this system is, of course, to get players to try to get out of doing stuff that their characters already have done lots of. And to get GMs to give them different things to do. Either way, it shakes things up a bit.

Note that because the maximum StoryPoints that can be assigned to a character for any skill is “5,” there’s always a chance that even a hero with “Cave 5” could try to challenge the lowliest “Cave 1” and still blow the roll. The GM rolls a “6.” The player rolls a “1” adds “+4” (the difference between the two SP levels) and still ends up with only a final roll of “5,” losing to the GM and having to do an additional “cave thing” in order to make up for his/her mistake.

Also note that even a lowly neophyte with “Cave 1” could challenge a situation with a “Cave 6” and beat it, if the roll was reversed. The StoryPoint difference is “5,” added to the GM’s roll. If the GM rolls “1” with a “+5” for a final score of “6” and the player rolls a “6,” that’s a tie and goes to the player. Now, if the player had rolled a “1” to a GM “6?” Youch! That would turn this “Cave 6” situation into a “Cave 16.” How? Difference in SP is “+5” for the GM, who rolled a “6.” That gives the GM a final roll-score of “11.” Player rolled a “1.” The difference is “10.” You add that, in SP, to the original SP of the event.

Which goes to show... big risks sometimes pay off. Usually? You end up slinking through a cave for sixteen chapters...

## Experience & Items

At the end of any story-game (or, really, in the middle, if you like), the GM should award successful players with “fun stuff.” In most RPGs, this amounts to experience and items.

**Experience** is how you keep track of the ways in which your characters’ skills improve. In the TaleWeaver RPG, that’s done by giving them more StoryPoints in skills that match plot events they came across dealt with well.

A GM can decide to assign SP experience directly – “Everyone gets +1 SP to “Mountain” – or can let players choose for themselves. For example, at the end of a long quest, a GM might say, “You get to add three new SP either to any area for which you already have experience, or for any of the following cards...” Sometimes a balance is good, too; a couple assigned SP, a couple to be decided upon by the players.

**Items** are objects, armor, weapons, dwellings, clothing, pets, etc. that confer upon their owners “SP bonuses.” That simply means that if my character is carrying the “Very Fine Sword of King Raymond [Sword +2],” it is as if he/she has a “Sword Level 2” added to his/her levels. Unlike regular levels, though, items can be lost or traded, broken or sold during the course of future stories.

## PC-on-PC violence

Well, it need not be violence. But it’s player-on-player StoryPoints. Sometimes what happens isn’t between the narrator (GM) and the characters. It’s between one character and another. In which case, let the dice settle the issue.

If you have a real argument between characters (or players, which is a different thing, but similar, but not), roll the two character SP levels that make the most sense against each other just like you would a character’s level against the StoryPoints at a plot event . Higher roll wins; for a tie, roll again.

**Example:** Warryn with his “Mountain 2” comes to that “Mountain 1” in a story-game along with his friend Dannyl, who has “Mountain 4.” Warryn wants to bust on through and challenge. Dannyl would rather just play the plot event as given, as a “2.” They won’t compromise, and so they roll Warryn’s “Mountain” SP (“2”) against Dannyl’s (“4”). Warryn rolls a “5.” Dannyl rolls a “4” but gets to add “+2” because his “Mountain” level is two higher than Warryn’s. So his final, adjusted roll is “6.” Dannyl wins, and, frustrated but convinced, Warryn plays through the two StoryPoints of the mountain.

In less clear-cut cases, it will be up to the characters and the GM to decide what character SP levels make sense to use for rolling purposes. If it comes to blows, you can always whip out any given weapon level against another... but that will probably change the temper of the story quite a bit. Brothers who come to

blows over every decision... that's an interesting story, but one that may take awhile to play out.

If no character levels make sense... just roll one die for each character to see who gets to choose. The GM has the right to assign modifiers as he/she sees fit

These situations shouldn't come up too often. The point of most RPGs really is to move the story forward, not pick fights between PCs. But it does come up from time to time. Just make sure to play the results in the story, and to keep it friendly. Whomever "wins," the point is to have fun and create a great tale.

### **Maps, sheets, charts, pictures, etc.**

All you really need is a piece of paper to keep track of your characters' SP levels and, if you use them, items. Over time, as your characters advance, you may want to keep notes about various stories and important events, too.

If you, as GM, want to create maps and charts... go for it. I can't really stop you, anyway, eh? But remember that TWRPG is meant to be about storytelling, not mapmaking. If building the world helps you and your crew to create compelling stories... go for it. If you're spending more time on crafting intricate shorelines and mountain ranges than on sitting down with the players and letting them get goofy and scary and stupid with their characters... well, you should probably be using a different system.

I also know how strong the temptation can be to assign pictures to characters and places. Resist this temptation. Everyone in the game will have his/her own idea of what Warryn looks like and how scary the mountain pass was. If you print out neat looking photos you find on the Internet that go oh-so-well with the story in your head... it will only limit the story in theirs. Much better to let the words do the talking.

A picture may be worth a thousand words. But what's your hurry?

## TWRPG summary...

- A TaleWeaver RPG story is defined by the GM (Game Master) as a series of plot events with StoryPoints (SPs), each of which has a level from one to six. When the players encounter an SP, they must describe, in a manner satisfactory to the GM, how their characters use their skills and experience to navigate the event and its levels successfully. The GM and the players cooperatively build the story until the GM (and, hopefully, the players) are satisfied that all SPs have been passed.
- Stuff that “just happens” and that doesn’t need an adventurous reaction from your characters doesn’t require any SP. That’s background, narrative, history or color commentary. Important to the story, but not to the “game” part of the game, per se.
- Each plot event is defined by a card from the TaleWeaver deck. And please, please remember that you are allowed — nay, encouraged... nay, exhorted! — to create new cards at need.
- Player characters (PCs) are described by StoryPoint levels that they achieve as they gain experience in dealing with plot events. A PC may start with a few levels, or with none, depending on how the GM sets up a story-game. PC levels default to zero (no experience) and may go as high as five.
- When PCs encounter a plot event in which they have a matching level higher than zero, they may challenge it! The PC and GM each roll a single six-sided die, for the character’s level vs. the SP, respectively. The difference between the two SP levels is also added to the higher of them. If the PC wins or ties, the event is passed without incident (i.e., very quickly). If the GM wins, the difference in the rolls is added to the level of the event, making it that much harder to traverse.

# chapterEggplant

Other possible names considered for this chapter were:

- Chapter Spelunking with Dinsdale
- Chapter Nasal Fortitude
- Chapter “Ninja, Ahoy!”
- Chapter Cork Diorama, and
- Chapter Twisted Arrangement of Childhood Memories in a Plain, Black, Plastic Frame that You Probably Bought at K-Mart

“Chapter Eggplant” seemed the least insane. Just so you have some context.

I wanted to take a moment to say, “Thanks,” for participating in the TaleWeaving story. If you have some fun and create some neat yarns, that’s great. If some of the TaleWeaving principles help you be more creative in other parts of your life, that’s even better.

If you would like to share comments on TaleWeaver, stories you have created, questions you have, ideas for future cards, etc., please feel free to email me. I’d put down a permanent email address, but they tend to change because of spam. Your best bet if you really want to find me is to go to **[www.andyhavens.com](http://www.andyhavens.com)**. That’ll usually have a current email address.

If you want to send me canvas sacks filled with cash, mention this fact in an email and I’ll shoot you my snail-mail address. Then feel free to cross out “Chapter Eggplant” and replace it with “Chapter Shameless Huckstering.”

Good luck, God bless, and happy weaving.

- A



# The Middle of Catherine's Tale

A woven story

*by Andy Havens*



# Song of the Cards

They that run and jump and fly  
Are bounded by the House of Eye.  
Their entrance made, they fall or stand  
By what is placed into your Hand.

The House of Hands may unearth gold  
For Eyes to see and purses hold.  
But Hands may cloak a poison cruel  
Found by a Land's dark, hidden pool.

Where do Eyes seek to find their fame?  
Where do Hands play their secret games?  
The House of Lands is their host, all.  
Naught but Wind outside Land's hall.

Adventures Eyes would like to find  
Are first born in the House of Wind.  
Hands to Lands by Wind are bound,  
'Till Jester turns the sky to ground.

For though your path may seem well laid,  
And Eyes find Hands in Land's bright glade,  
Your road will turn from gold to brick  
When Jester turns his clever trick.

Open Eyes, hold out your Hands,  
Good luck, when Winds blows through your Lands.  
And do not fret when Jesters play –  
You'll sooner scowl the dark to day.



All stories have been told before. You have heard them all before.

Sitting on your father's lap you heard some. Elbows up on your grandmother's table you listened to others. The teachers and old men have told you. You have been given over to them in libraries, to the dusty breath of a thousand, thousand, thousand words rising up from silent pages. Rising up to remind you of what you already knew.

We are listeners, you and I. Eyes to watch the dance. Ears to hear the song. There is nothing you have not heard before, not seen before. You've known all these tales since you were small and fine, short and new.

You knew the tales before they were told. You knew the cadence of the old voices, the rhythm of lines passed down a hundred generations. Even new voices were familiar to you. The clear, first tolling of a fresh-forged bell was known to you before its birth echo died on the hills.

Every time you sat, transfixed by the words, waiting to hear how it would end, you knew. Before the teller took his first breath, you knew. Just as you know how this tale will end.

For this is the final truth of stories:

The only tale you have not heard is the one that you will tell.



Only Fat Cook remembered the night when Katherine came to the Duke's keep, the one they called "Winterhold." It had been a dusk like any other, maybe a bit warmer than usual for that late in the autumn. Dry leaves danced on

the stone path outside the guard house as she brought bowls of soup for the men who watched the night.

“Trust Fat Cook to remember the third watch,” said one of the guards. “She’d not forget a hungry, tired man were the Duke himself to call for his roast.”

Fat Cook smiled, handing out the last of the soup. “What good is a hungry guard?” she asked. “He’ll be dreaming of mutton instead of keeping my old bones from harm.”

The guards all laughed, for they knew Fat Cook loved them. As she loved all the folk of the keep. Her heart was as warm as the fire that burned day and night in her kitchen.

She waited until they were done, asking one about his new wife, another about his old dog. When they were finished eating, she balanced the bowls in the crook of her elbow and headed out into a night grown dark since she’d entered the guard house.

As she turned the path towards the rear of the keep, towards the kitchen where she spent most of her days, something caught her eye. A wall as high as two men ran around the keep, and at the base of the wall, near a tree that leaned over the top, stood a small girl.

Fat Cook was a bit startled, and almost dropped her bowls, but regained them with a juggler’s composure. She squinted – for her sight was not so good anymore – and saw that the girl was pale, dirty and too thin.

“Where’s your mum?” Fat Cook asked.

The girl looked at her as if she’d never heard someone speak before.

“Your mum, hon,” Fat Cook repeated. “She’ll be looking for you, now it’s dark.”

Still nothing. The little girl looked right into Fat Cook’s eyes, as if she wanted to ask for something, but didn’t know how.

Fat Cook stepped closer and saw that the girl was barefoot. Not yet winter it wasn't, but not by much. And Fat Cook's own big feet were cold even inside her thick, wool socks.

"Come here, love," she said, beckoning with her free hand. The girl came a bit closer and Fat Cook motioned her to follow down the path. The girl did, letting herself be led into the kitchen.

After she put the bowls in the sink, Fat Cook turned and took a closer look at the girl. She was about ten or eleven years old. Pretty enough, though dirty and mussed. And Fat Cook didn't recognize her. Which was odd, since she knew every face of the three-hundred or so that lived year-round in Winterhold.

"Are you lost, hon?" she asked, kneeling down so that her eyes were on a level with the girl's.

Still no answer. And she was so thin.

"Just a tick, hon. You stay right here," Fat Cook said, and turned to the larder. She pulled out a half-loaf of bread left over from the lunch bake and cut two thick slices from it. She spread them both with fresh butter and put a piece of sharp, yellow cheese between them. Then she turned back to the little girl.

She hadn't moved an inch. So Fat Cook pulled up two chairs, sat in one, and motioned the girl to take the other, which she did.

Handing her the bread and cheese, Fat Cook asked, "Where are you from, dear?"

And still no answer. The girl ate the food as if she'd been without a meal for days. As she chewed, she looked right into Fat Cook's eyes.

"Well, you can stay hear in the kitchen tonight, but tomorrow we find out whose you are," Fat Cook said, leaning on her knees and studying the girl's torn clothes, matted hair and ragged fingernails. She thought to herself – no matter whose you are, I'll be having a right talk with them about how to keep a girl.



The girl did stay in the kitchen that night, curled up on a cot in the corner, near the heat of the stove. It was kept warm all night in case the guards needed a hot drink or some more soup. But she did not leave the next day, for Fat Cook could find no family to claim her.

After five days, Fat Cook began calling the girl “Katherine,” after her own mother. For though she loved the people she served, and young ones most of all, Fat Cook had never had any children of her own. But she’d always thought that if she’d had a daughter, she would have named her Katherine.

After ten days, everyone else in the kitchen – for Fat Cook oversaw a staff of twelve cooks, scullery maids and serving boys – was calling the girl “Kat.” Because she was silent, had big green eyes – and because “Katherine” is too long a name for a tiny little girl.

By the time five weeks had passed, Kat had begun helping around the kitchen as much as a young girl could. But she still had spoken no word. Not one. So Fat Cook took her to see Varrod, the Duke’s ancient advisor and physician.

“She seems in good health, if a bit thin,” pronounced Varrod after having given Kat a good prodding. He pulled her jaw open gently with one hand and peered down her throat.

“She’s got everything she needs to talk that I can see,” he said, putting both hands under her chin and gently massaging her neck. “No bumps or scars, no evidence of fever. There’s plenty of things I can’t tell of, though, that might cause a person to keep silent.”

He sat back on his low stool and looked Kat up and down from beneath huge, spidery, white eyebrows.

“You say she just appeared by the wall one night?” Varrod asked.

“Yes, sir,” answered Fat Cook. Being an honest, good woman, she feared no man. But Varrod made her a bit nervous. Maybe.

“Hmmp.” Varrod stared at Kat, and Kat stared back. The perpetual look of slightly sad puzzlement had never left her face in the weeks since she’d been in the keep. Varrod turned his head and looked at her out of the corners of his eyes. She did not flinch. He gave her his best “I’m a scary, old man who can look into your soul and tell what you’re thinking” look. She did not falter, blink or look away.

So he pulled a mouse out of his long, white beard.

And Kat laughed.

Fat Cook was so startled she dropped the bonnet she’d been wringing between her hands. The mouse hadn’t surprised her, for Varrod was always doing things like that for the children. But the laugh – it was the first noise she’d heard the young girl make.

Varrod smiled and handed the little mouse to Kat, who held it in one hand and petted it gently with the other, stroking its fur from the top of its tiny, grey head all the way to the base of its pink, naked tail.

“Well,” said Varrod, “she gets along better with mice than any other ‘Kat’ I’ve known.”

Fat Cook looked down at Varrod and saw that he, too, was smiling. Which didn’t happen often. And so she smiled. Which – had she thought about it – she hadn’t done much of since the silent girl had appeared in the dusk by the keep wall.



Winter took the keep that bore its name in a white embrace that kept travelers out – and the Duke’s household in. During the spring and summer and late into the autumn, the Duke traveled his lands with his retainers and soldiers, seeing to the care and justice of his duchy. He returned to Winterhold just before the first snow. To his keep that guarded the mountain pass and watched his northern border. And his arrival was always met with a storm of activity that would be echoed by winds and ice in just a few short weeks.

He was a good man, Fat Cook knew, and a fair, wise ruler. But Winterhold was not meant to be the ducal seat. It was a good sight full during the fair months, when only the staff and permanent guard were there. Come the snows, when the Duke and his advisors, retainers and personal staff, officers and clerks all descended, it was downright crowded.

Skywatch, the castle in the Duke's capitol city of Harvestmoor, could hold two thousand. The city itself was home to a little more than ten thousand souls. But Skywatch was almost empty. A skeleton staff kept it cleaned and in repair for the month or so the Duke spent in the capitol each summer.

Given her choice, Fat Cook certainly preferred a crowded, busy keep to an empty shell of a place. But she remembered fondly the days when the Duke's annual progress had been the mirror image of its present cycle. When she'd spent her winters in the warm, sheltered valley of Harvestmoor. And the Duke merely visited Winterhold once a year to check on its readiness.

Harvestmoor and stories by the hearth. That had all changed, of course, when the Duke's wife, the young Duchess Ellyenna, had gone mad.



The two boys who "helped" Fat Cook in the kitchen always seemed to be directly under the feet of every guard who came to fetch food for the Duke's officers. No matter how often they were stepped on, they just didn't seem to learn.

Kat, however, could walk through the Great Hall at its most frenzied, with a plate full of eggs held up high, and not drop a one. She could stitch her way through the halls and stairways of the keep with a bucket of water and not spill a drop. She would sit, quiet and attentive, while Fat Cook showed her how to prepare the meals for the Duke's household. First the simple dishes, then the complicated ones, finally the delicate baking for special days – Kat learned it all in a very short time.

Soon Fat Cook was relying on her to do a good share of the cooking. There was always something else that needed to be done – shopping for meat and vegetables in the small market down the road, checking on the stores to make

sure rats hadn't gotten in, mending napkins and tablecloths. And for the first time in years, Fat Cook was able to catch up on her other chores. She even got a chance, once every-other day or so, to put her big, old feet up by the fire and write her favorite recipes down in a book she'd been meaning to start for a long time. Someday the Duke would need a new cook. And Fat Cook hoped that her book would help her to do a good job.

One day while she was jotting down the ingredients necessary for "Hunters' Hash," Kat came and stood at her side, looking down at the book Fat Cook held in her lap. Kat glanced at the words, up into Fat Cook's eyes, and back down at the page.

Fat Cook realized that Kat didn't understand what she was doing. So she explained it to her. For though she could not talk, there was nothing wrong with Kat's hearing, and Fat Cook knew she understood everything that was said to her.

Pulling Kat into the chair beside her, Fat Cook told Kat about how different letters stood for different sounds. And how, when you put them together, the sounds made words on the page, just like sounds made words when you spoke.

And Kat smiled. That was a rare thing, and enough to make Fat Cook forget the shopping. Instead, she went to her room and got out the little book that her mother had used to teach her to read. And the two of them spent all the rest of the day, and part of the night, bent over the words and pictures in that old, small book.



The Feast of the Solstice, celebrating the half-way point of winter, was almost upon the keep. And though the Duke was a dour man, not given to levity, he understood that people cooped up for months at a time in a small place needed something to lift their spirits. So Fat Cook was very busy preparing for the feast.

Kat was a great help. She kept the ordinary, daily meals flowing so Fat Cook could fuss and fret over the details of the upcoming event. The level of activity seemed to double every day. Those not directly involved in the planning and preparation were clearly excited by the anticipation. Everyone was busy and

happy. Maids bustled about the keep with decorations and candles. The schoolmaster was rehearsing a song his students would sing for the Duke at the feast, and the children's voices could be heard throughout the day.

The night before the feast, Kat found Fat Cook in the very back of the keep's storehouse, looking for a possible substitution for a spice that had gone bad.

Fat Cook heard a step behind her and turned to see Kat standing in the door. The young girl looked agitated. Which was odd. Kat always seemed to be very calm.

"What is it, hon?" she asked, a little worried. "Did you need something more for the pies?"

Kat shook her head and handed Fat Cook a small piece of paper.

The old woman looked down and saw that it said, simply, Duke look for you.

"Is that all, dear?" she asked. "I'm sure he just needs another barrel of ale for the men or some more butter for the high table. Nothing for you to worry over."

Kat smiled, relieved, and turned to go.

But Fat Cook put a hand on her arm and held her back. Kat looked back at the other woman, clearly puzzled as to why she'd stopped her.

"You spoke," Fat Cook said simply.

Kat was still puzzled. For a ten, maybe eleven year old girl, she looked surprisingly old, Fat Cook thought. Especially when lines of trouble crossed her forehead. Like she was a mother, and Fat Cook the young, lost girl.

"You spoke," she repeated, and pointed at the paper Kat still held. For Fat Cook realized that in the four months or so since Kat had come to the keep, she'd never once been able to do more than nod or shake her head. If what Kat wanted to say could not be read upon her face, it remained unspoken.

Kat looked at the paper and back up at Fat Cook and smiled a bright, happy smile. Fat Cook smiled back and gave the girl a little hug. Hooking her elbow with the young girl's, she made her way back to the Great Hall to find the Duke. Who, of course, only wanted some more ale for the guards who were trying to stay warm by the fire.

Late that night, when all but the night watch slept, Fat Cook woke from a deep sleep and sat up straight in her bed. For she had abruptly realized that Kat, after only about two weeks exposure to reading, had taught herself to write.



The feast went well, as it usually did. And winter turned the corner into spring. As it always does. And when the time came for the first planting, the Duke left Winterhold for his other lands. For he was a good ruler, and did not neglect the health of his people.

And in autumn, after the harvest had been taken in, the Duke returned to Winterhold, as he had done for years. And did not notice the happy, silent girl who now did most of the daily kitchen work. For Fat Cook had slipped and fallen while fetching berries for jam. And though her broken leg had healed nicely, she could not stand all day by the ovens and stove, nor travel from kitchen to hall without some pain.

She had been cantankerous for a week or so. Frustrated not to be at the center of her beloved kitchen. But she soon realized that she was mostly glad for the chance to write in her book of recipes, her leg up on a stool. And she was glad Kat took to the task so well. And she was glad that the other cooks – and the boys who fetched and washed, and the farm girl who brought the milk, and the butcher and the brewer – all liked Kat very much. They seemed to know what she needed even before she wrote it out for them on one of the scraps of paper she kept tucked into her apron.

Again and again, Fat Cook was struck by how mature for her age Kat seemed. All the other cooks were much older than the girl, but none seemed to resent Kat's leadership in the kitchen. They treated her with a mixture of respect and protectiveness. And they all knew that, just like Fat Cook, Kat loved them all.



The only thing Kat seemed to enjoy more than the chores of the kitchen was reading. Fat Cook let her borrow the four books she owned, but Kat had gone through them in a month. By the time the Duke returned for Kat's second winter at the keep, the girl had read every book in the castle. Which wasn't very hard, since not many people owned books. Fat Cook's mother had been a teacher, and that was why she had even those four. But, at one time or another, Fat Cook saw Kat reading Mother Jenny's herbal; a book about the healing uses of roots, berries and plants. And Derek, Winterhold's chief steward, loaned the girl his three volumes on the history of the Duke's family. The set had been written by the steward's grandfather, and, although Fat Cook thought them very dry, they seemed to entrance Kat. She even found a book on falconry, though Fat Cook had no idea where that came from.

And after the Duke returned, in the second autumn of Kat's life at the keep, Fat Cook went to Varrod and asked if he had any books the girl could borrow.

"I know it's an imposition, sir," she said, looking down at her feet, "but it gives the girl so much pleasure. And it seems she's had a sore time of it. No family and all."

Varrod scratched his long, spidery eyebrows. "Fat Cook," he said, "anyone who wants to read as much as you say this girl does should be allowed to do so at every chance. Not everyone has the knack or even the desire. Have her come see me and I'll find her something to read."

Fat Cook blushed red to the roots of her salt-and-pepper hair. "Thank you, sir. Thank you so much. Thank you."

Varrod waved his hand dismissively, a little uncomfortable himself at Fat Cook's display of gratitude. The old woman would have never believed it, but Varrod loved to watch her when she was at her aggressive best. He'd look out from behind his pipe as she bullied the guards into helping her move the trestles before a meal. He'd once seen her scold the smith into making a new pair of tongs for her right way, even though he had other, more important work waiting.

He had no idea what made her turn all shy and polite around him. He was, after all, just a scrawny old doctor. The smith could hold a twenty pound sledge on a two foot handle out in front of him for minutes on end, smiling and sweating all the while. Varrod could barely make it up the stairs to his study without wheezing. Fat Cook could chide the big, burly smith, poking him in the chest with every other word. Yet here, in front of him, she stood in the doorway like a little girl asking for a sweet.

Puzzling.



Fat Cook didn't tell Kat why she was to go see Varrod. "Just to go up there right away."

She appeared in his doorway like... well.. like a cat. Varrod only knew she was there because she cast a shadow across the rug at his feet.

"Well," he said, patting the chair next to his, "come sit down. Fat Cook tells me you have developed a love of books, eh?"

Kat came and sat on the very edge of the chair, turning to face Varrod across a small table that held a few candles, a pipe and a glass of purplish liquid.

She nodded, and Varrod went on.

"I know that during the winter, when the Duke's retinue is here at Winterhold, you will have very little time to read," he said. Kat tilted her head to one side and smiled a wise, little smile. The Duke's old advisor could almost hear her say, 'The kitchen is the kitchen. It needs me more in winter.'

"So," he continued, "I will give you this." And he held up a key. Kat looked puzzled.

"This is the key to my library. I will show it to you now, and you may come and read there whenever you wish. But you must never, never bring the books out of the library. Do you understand?"

She nodded, clearly excited by the prospect.

Varrod stood and took her small, smooth hand in his papery, wrinkled grip and led her part-way down the stairs from his study. The stairway took a turn at a landing, and Varrod stopped in front of a seemingly blank section of the wall near the corner of the turn.

“Do you see it?” he asked the small girl. She shook her head.

“Look closer,” he said, and she stepped forward to examine the wall from a hand’s-breadth away. She scanned the wall from the corner all the way to where it turned to go back up the stairs. She looked closely at each brick and felt the mortar between them. After ten or fifteen minutes, and clearly agitated with herself, Kat turned back to Varrod and shook her head again.

“You don’t see anything unusual?” he asked for a final time.

With an exasperated sigh, she shook her head again.

“Good,” the old man said, taking her hand again. “Because there’s nothing unusual there. Now come along.”

They walked down the stairs to the next turn, and Varrod gestured to a similar section of wall. With a slightly peeved glance at the old man first, she took to examining the bricks and mortar again.

She found the outline of the door in less than a minute.

It took her another four minutes to find the trigger – a brick that, if pressed just-so along one edge, caused the hidden door to sigh open a fraction of an inch. You still couldn’t even really see it, but a new, knife-edge shadow appeared where she knew the doorway would appear.

Grinning, she turned to Varrod with a question in her eyes.

“Of course we can go in, my dear,” he replied. “That’s why I brought you up here.” He pressed on the door and it opened just wide enough for his thin frame to pass. After he was through, his hand appeared and gestured for Kat to follow him.

She did so, and found herself in a tiny, tall room that seemed to go up and up to the very roof of the tower that held Varrod's study at its top. Only about twelve feet wide on a side, it made her feel as if she were at the bottom of a well, or inside the base of a church steeple. Yellow light fell from twelve thin window slots along the outside walls of the room. She realized that they were arrow slits. All the towers in the keep had them. Archers could fire from these windows without exposing themselves to danger from an outside enemy.

She also realized that unless you counted the hundreds of slits that ran around any given tower, you'd never notice that twelve of them didn't have a place inside for an archer. Kat was so impressed with the secret of the room and its windows that she smiled right up at Varrod.

And as she turned to look up at him, she saw the books. The wall through which the door led, and the one on its right, were filled, floor to high ceiling, with books. Hundreds of them. Fat and thin, small and wide. Some had leather covers that almost looked slick and oily in the sunset light. Some were bound in fabric. Others had lost their covers and were tied shut with ribbon or string. Three thin ladders, one at each but the outside corner, ran the height of the room, and Kat could see that all the upper shelves had narrow walk-ways and railings.

The floor was covered with an old, faded carpet that looked like a mouse had stolen one corner for a nest. Against the outside wall was a short table on which sat an oil lamp and a box of matches. Two chairs, one on each side of the table, sat empty. Waiting.

Kat's smile only grew wider as she took in the sheer number of books in the secret library. For a moment she forgot that she wasn't alone and just stared and stared, turning slowly around and around.

Finally, Varrod's hand on her shoulder made her realize she'd been lost in the enormity of the gift. She looked up at him, still smiling, as if to ask for permission.

"I have only shared this room with one other person," Varrod said. He was smiling, too, but in a sad way. As she realized this, Kat's smile faded, and she regarded the old man with concern.

“Many years ago I brought my son, Brandon, here. He was a little younger than you, maybe.”

Varrod paused and gestured around the room absently. “He read a few books. Mostly ones about the great battles of our history. And, when he was old enough, he joined the Duke’s father in the war to protect our coast from pirates.”

Varrod paused and gestured to the chairs. Kat sat in one, but Varrod seemed to change his mind and remained standing.

He wasn’t looking at her as he spoke, but up at the windows. “Both of them died in that war. The Old Duke and Brandon. Though we won the war, the Duke lost his father and I a son. And so, from the day we learned the news, I have tried to help him as a father would. As the Old Duke would have guided my son, had I been taken from him.”

Varrod turned to look at Kat. The look of sympathy in her eyes was one he did not see from the people of the Duke’s land very often. He was usually regarded with a mixture of awe and fear, respect and reverence. Many people, he knew, thought he could do magic. But he simply knew many things. Which can seem like magic to people who have not studied the world very carefully.

He smiled a small, sad smile and said, “It has been a long time, my dear. Do not worry yourself for the sake of a gnarled old tree such as myself.”

She grinned a little at him and raised an eyebrow. Again, he could almost hear her words in his head: You can’t fool me, old man. He chuckled and pointed at the books.

“You may come here whenever the kitchen does not need you,” he said. “Do not let anyone see you enter or leave. The layout of the stairs is such that if anyone moves upon them you can hear it in here. Wait until they’ve left and you’ve heard the door at the bottom swing closed. Then come out. Understand?”

She nodded and he continued. “Do not take any books out of this room. It would be a great shame if any of them were lost or spoiled. Understand?”

Kat nodded again. Clearly she could tell how important these rules were.

“Lastly, do not ever – ever – take down or read any of the books from the very top shelf.”

Kat’s wrinkled brow and pursed lips asked the question as well as any voice. Why not?

Varrod sat down in the other chair. He turned toward the small, young girl and took her hands into his own. “Just promise me, in return for having shown you this place, that you will not read the books on the top shelf.”

Still confused, Kat nodded and gave his hands a squeeze. Varrod nodded in turn, and, patting her hands a final time, rose to go.

He heard a faint scratching behind him, and turned in time to see Kat putting a pencil stub back in the pocket of her apron. With her other hand, she held out a small scrap of paper to him.

He took it and looked down.

Thank you, was all it said.



Later that night, Kat found Varrod by the fire in the Great Hall. She handed him another piece of paper. It said, What is the key for?

Varrod laughed until he choked. Kat patted him on the back as he said, “I’m surprised it only took you two hours to realize that I’d given you a key when the door needs none.”

Kat grinned, but pointed at the note again. What is the key for?

“It’s to remind you.”

Of what, her eyes seemed to ask.

He shook his head. “Just a reminder. That’s all.”

She shook her head, took the paper from him, crumpled it into a ball and tossed it into the fire. She turned to go, but at the last moment, looked back – and stuck out her tongue at him.

One of the guards finally had to get Varrod a drink of water. He'd laughed so hard he'd started coughing.



Because Kat had come to the keep as a girl and had not grown up with a proper family, she had had to learn the rules of the Duke's household almost by chance. Most of them made logical sense: do not leave shutters open after you air out a room; if you take the last drink from a pitcher, fill it from the well. Most were like that. Some she only found out by overhearing the Duke's men at table: no more than two cups of ale for any guard who would be on watch later that night; no archery after sunset; guards are responsible for buying new laces for their boots, but the keep cobbler would repair them for free. But there was one rule she did not find out about until her fourth winter at the keep.

By now everyone knew that Kat was in fact the new chief cook for all the everyday meals and most of the feasts. Fat Cook still helped with the fancy pastries and comfits, but Kat did all the work, still without speaking a word. Most times she could make a wish known with a glance or a nod, a wink or a snap of her fingers. If necessary, she could write out a note faster than most folks could put together their thoughts to speak a word or two.

Depending on the light, Kat now looked about twelve years old, or about nineteen. In reality, thought Fat Cook, she was somewhere in-between. When she caught the two dish-boys throwing handfuls of mashed potatoes at each other one night, she tried to be angry for a moment – and then just joined in. For the brief second when Fat Cook saw her looking upset, she seemed much older than she could possibly be. But as she flung gobs of buttery spuds at her charges, she looked just like a child.

That was the harshest winter any had ever endured at Winterhold. The snows gripped the pass a mere day after the Duke's progression into the keep, and did not let up for weeks. Many of the animals had to be brought in from the stables to stay in the Great Hall, or they would have frozen to death. Guards tied ropes

around each other's belts and shimmied out on the roof to sweep away the man-high drifts of snow that threatened to break the strong oak support beams below.

So it was a tremendous, incredible surprise when a stranger began pounding on the door to the guard house that stood watch over the only drawbridge to the keep.

Kat was bringing soup and hot bricks to the guards and heard the muffled beating on the wooden door.

"Open up!" a ragged, yet hearty voice shouted. "In the name of the four Known Winds an' the Two Unknown, open yer door for a frozed-en, weary, ice-block of a man!"

The guard officer on duty looked at his men and shrugged. There were five of them, all armed, all warm and well fed. If they couldn't handle one stranger out on a horrible, freezing night, well... then they shouldn't be guards. Signaling his men to be wary, and Kat to stand well back, he opened the door.

A gust of icy wind and a swirl of snow shot through the door in the moment it took the stranger to hop inside. At first, all Kat could see was a huge, red, furry coat, all crusted with ice and snow. And then the man – if he was a man, and not a bear or some other forest animal – shook himself all over like a dog, causing a shower of cold water, snow and ice to fly off himself in all directions. He then reached up and pulled off an equally red and furry hat, and showed himself to be a man indeed. With an equally red and furry face.

"Allain Copperwright, if I may introduce myself," he said. "Mender of all things metal and mechanical, and bringer of news and tidings to all the good folk the length of the Kingdom of Tembralla." He stuck out a pink, bony hand to the guard officer and waited to be greeted in turn. When the officer did not return the gesture, Allain simply waved at them all and rocked back on his heels, grinning.

The officer spoke. "You are not in Tembralla, friend. But at the keep of Winterhold in the lands of Duke William Greymont, Lord of Wellynbroke."

That surprised the newcomer. “Gads,” he exclaimed, looking around himself. “I’ve been snow-lost and ice-mad before, but never so’s to lose a whole country!” Allain looked down at an empty chair and looked up at the officer, raising one eyebrow as he did. The officer nodded, and the red-bearded stranger sat in the chair and began to strip off what Kat now saw were layers of fur, not just one coat.

“I left the Baron of Tembralla’s court more than three weeks ago,” he said as he laid his garments out in front of the stove to dry. “I was charged with taking a message to the Baron’s brother in the valley town of Cropett. My guess is that when this storm brewed up, I missed the town, blundered through the worst of it, and mistook your keep’s lights for the lights of Cropett.”

“Cropett,” the officer said, “Is a five day journey from here in fair weather. How could you not know you’d gone that far out of your way?”

Allain sat up straight with a look of disbelief clearly painted on his rosy, hairy face. “Are you daft, man? Look outside! The wind is coming straight up out of the ground! The snow whips the air with a spinster’s broom and it’s cold enough to freeze the words in front of your face! I didn’t think, I didn’t ponder, I didn’t sit down and scratch my head and wonder, ‘Allain, my boy, just where exactly do you think you are tonight?’ I just kept walking!” By this time he’d stood up and was clearly somewhat agitated.

“Don’t get upset,” the officer said. “We’re not accusing you of lying. Anyone who comes down Northroad to this gatehouse had to have come through the valley. Cropett is at the other end of the valley. I believe what you’re saying. I’m simply amazed you’re alive.”

That made the stranger laugh. A sound that startled Kat, so loud it was. “And amazed am I as well!” He then spotted the pot of soup on the fire and shot an easily-read look at the officer, who again nodded.

Allain pulled his chair over by the fire, grabbed a bowl and spoon from the shelf above the hearth and dug right in. The moment the spoon entered his mouth, he moaned in ecstasy. “Ohhh. I haven’t had hot food in a month, and none this good in many more. What angel stole this concoction from the table of Heaven?”

All heads turned to look at Kat, who was regarding the stranger with a mixture of curiosity and amusement.

“Kat is our cook,” said one of the guards. “And a good one,” echoed another.

“Oh, aye,” said Allain. “Except ‘good’ is not a.. well... good enough word.” And he laughed again.

The officer shook his head and asked the man, “What do you do? With a name like ‘Copperwright...’”

Allain interrupted, gulping his current mouthful of soup, “As I said at my entrance. Fixer of things. Teller of tales, sharpener of...”

But he got no further. The officer held up a hand and glared at the traveler. “Tell no tales at Winterhold, my man. Nor anywhere in the Duke’s demesne. A messenger is always welcome, as is news. But stories and fables will earn you a month in the dungeon and an escort to the border.”

For the first time, Allain seemed to Kat to be perturbed. Though almost frozen when he came in, he’d still been merry. Now, however, his face fell.

“No stories?” he asked quietly. “No tales of adventure or faery yarns or...”

“None,” said the officer. And the other guards shook their heads in agreement. Very seriously.

“But why?” asked the stranger.

“That is not my business to tell, nor yours to hear,” said the officer. “Now,” he continued, reaching down to gather Allain’s furs and handing them back to him. “You seem harmless enough, and we’ve had no real odd-jobber to Winterhold in a season or so. Kat here will take you back to the keep and get you a place in the Guest Hall.”

Allain shook off his surprise and concern from before and said sincerely, “I do thank you, honorable sir.”

The officer of the guard shook his head a bit. “I’d not send a dog that bit my mother out in that,” he said, jerking his thumb at the door.

“Now remember what I said,” he went on, holding the door open. “News of Tremballa would be welcome, even up to the Duke himself. But, on your word as a guest, tell no tales of fancy.”

Allain merely nodded, bundled his furs around himself, and held the door politely for Kat.



“I hope it’s not too much trouble to show me a cot by the fire,” the red-haired traveler remarked to Kat as they made their way through the front gate of the keep and into the Welcome Hall.

Kate simply shook her head.

“I know it must be odd,” Allain continued, “to have a stranger – and a strange stranger, at that – show up unexpectedly in the middle of the worst winter since Kevin Stonethrall took his magic...” but he stopped, catching himself.

“Oops,” he said. “Almost told a story, there. Do you know why it’s against the law to tell tales in Wellynbroke?”

Kat shook her head again, and raised her shoulders as if to say, I didn’t even know it was.

“Hmm,” grunted Allain.

Kat led him further into the keep, past the Great Hall, past the kitchens, and into the Guesting Hall. Almost as large as the Great Hall, this room housed any visitors of the keep not important enough to rate their own room. Many cots lined the walls, and portable, cloth-covered screens separated some areas from the main room.

Kat led Allain to a cot in the corner nearest the fire. There weren’t so many guests at Winterhold right now that anyone had to sleep in the colder bunks by the windows.

“Thank you, lass,” said Allain as he peeled his furs off onto the narrow bed. “A belly full of hot food and a bed by a fire seem better to me than all the crystal in the halls of ...” His teetch clicked as he stopped himself again.

“You sure you don’t know why stories are forbidden?” He asked, hands on hips.

Kat just looked at him. It was the same look she gave her kitchen boys when they wanted to linger by the stove rather than get back to work.

Allain chuckled. “All right, all right. I’ll not ask you again. But maybe someone else in the keep knows the reason, eh?”

Again, Kat shrugged. But then she remembered – Fat Cook had been around for years and years. Decades, even. And she seemed to know everything about the keep.

The tall stranger saw the spark in Kat’s eye. “You know of someone? Then take me to him! I swear I’ve not been so curious to pick apart a riddle in many a year.”

Kat motioned for Allain to follow her, and he did so. She went back past the kitchens, and up the back stairs to the little room where Fat Cook spent her nights. Kat could tell from the bit of candle light peeking out from under the door that her mentor was still awake – probably working on her cook book. She knocked quietly on the door.

“Come in, Kitten,” Fat Cook called softly. She could always tell Kat’s knock. And just about anyone else’s for that matter.

“Kitten?” whispered Allain, raising an eyebrow and looking at Kat as she raised the latch on the door. Once again, as clear as if she’d spoken, Kat’s look said, Call me Kitten, stranger, and you’ll find a spider in your soup.

Allain raised his hands in mock surrender and followed her in.

“Now what do you need from...” started Fat Cook, but paused upon seeing a large, furry, red man in her room.

“And who is this?” she finally asked, after looking him up and down in a way that made Allain feel distinctly like a goose hanging by its feet in a market stall.

“I, Madame, am Allain Copperwright. Mender of tools and teller of... news. A stranger caught in yon storm and offered the kind hospitality of your keep by its strong and loyal guards. This fine young lass has brought me here to have a question answered for us both.”

Fat Cook nodded, still looking at Allain half-suspiciously. “Aye. You talk pretty enough to be a town crier or messenger, that’s for certain. What do you need to be knowing?”

Allain glanced at the two chairs against the wall by the door. Fat Cook nodded, and her two visitors sat. “Why is it, kind lady, that none may tell a tale in your Duke’s domain?” Fat Cook looked puzzled. “You may tell a tale, young man. We teach our children history and the law. Tales are needed for both.” Allain shook his head. “Not history, dear hostess. Tales. Stories. Fables. Fantasies of glamour and intrigue. Adventures of the gods and fae folk. Heroes who stride across... Ouch!” He stopped talking as Fat Cook’s pen, pitched with deadly accuracy, hit him square on the nose. “Speak no further, stranger,” she said, her eyes dark and serious. “With a winter like that outside, telling faery stories will earn you a month in the dungeon on skeleton rations and then an escort to the unfriendly side of the moat.” Allain nodded, rubbing his nose where the sharp quill had poked him. “So said the officer of the guard. Though not as... pointedly. But why?”

Fat Cook looked around, as if checking to see who might be watching, and then motioned for Kat to close the door all the way. Kat did so, and Cook propped herself up a bit straighter in her bed. “I’ll tell you, but only so’s you know it’s not a thing to take lightly. Do you understand? Both of you?” Kat and Allain both nodded, and leaned forward to hear Fat Cook’s whisper a bit better. “Years and years ago,” she began, “the Duke was a merry, joyful man. When cooking for his festivals... ah! My mother and I had such fun. You couldn’t make a dish too outrageous for the Duke in those days. Pies a yard across... breads with stripes of jam baked in... elegant creations made to look like animals, fish, wagons... it was a joy to see. And to eat! “You see, in those days, he was married to the Duchess Ellyenna, whom everyone called Ella. She’d come to him from a far-off duchy, part of a pact made between the Old Duke

and the ruler of that land. They were strangers on the day they wed. Both very young. But, unlikely as it seems, they grew to love each other as few sweethearts I've seen. "They kept a happy home together, and kept Skywatch a glad place year round. This old icebox," she gestured with a wave all around her head, "only saw the Duke's procession for two weeks a year. And them in the middle of summer when the cool of these stones was welcome.

"They were made even happier when Ella announced she was with child. The entire duchy rejoiced! The Duke, and the Old Duke, lavished her with gifts and attention, and all the court helped her prepare for the new child.

"But while she was in her fourth month, news came from the coast that pirates were plundering the shipping lanes and even coming ashore to steal from the harbor towns. The Old Duke and William, his son, went together to stop the pirates. That was the war in which the Old Duke was killed."

And when Varrod's son died, too, thought Kat.

"It was two months before the Duke came back. His hair was shot through with early grey, and he took up the burden of rule that he was still too young to bear. And he returned to find Ella had lost the baby."

Allain winced and sucked in his breath. "That's a horrid fate. To lose your father and your unborn all in the same season."

"Indeed," agreed Fat Cook. "And Ella was crushed. Some say she secretly blamed the Duke for leaving her alone, and that her worry for him was what caused her to miscarry. I say not. I took her her meals every day during her recuperation and not one bad word did she have for her husband.

"Nonetheless, Skywatch was a gloomy place that winter.

"Then, that next summer, Ellyenna announced that she was again with child. Not only did the Duke cease his mourning for his father and lost babe, but was happier than ever. That is, until Varrod called on him."

Allain looked confused. "Varrod?" he asked.

“The Duke’s chief councilor and physician. A good friend to the Old Duke and all but a father to Duke William after his da died.

“Varrod came in secret to the Duke. Now, I only know this because I was wiping up a nasty spill on the other side of the Duke’s study door, mind you.”

Kat raised an eyebrow, but didn’t make a move toward her notepad. Many in the keep knew Fat Cook’s propensity to be cleaning “accidental” spills up near closed doors. Fat Cook saw the eyebrow, but looked so innocent that Kat merely grinned.

“Anyway. I overheard Varrod telling the Duke that Ella could not be with child. He’d been her physician during her first pregnancy and through her... loss. He told the Duke that she’d been injured when she lost the baby, and that there was no way she could have another.

“You must be mistaken,” the Duke said. ‘She would not lie about something like this.’

“I do not say she lies, my friend,’ Varrod said. ‘But that she is mistaken.’

“Why did you not tell me of this before?’ the Duke demanded. And a good question, too, I say.

“Ella told me she wanted to tell you. I thought she had. Months ago.’

“And at that, the Duke flew into a rage like I’d never seen before. Obviously, either his trusted advisor or his wife was lying. He said as much to Varrod.

“I never lied to your father,’ the old doctor said, ‘even when it would have been more pleasant. And I swore to him, before he died, that I’d be the same obstinate, prickly burr in your side as I’d been in his.’

“The Duke swore loudly, which is something he rarely did. He called for his steward to fetch the Duchess, and in a few minutes, I heard her enter his study.

“My dear,’ he said, in a very tender voice. ‘Varrod told me that you were... hurt... after our loss this past winter.’

“Of course I was hurt, husband,” Ella said. “You do not recover in a day or even a week from a lost child.”

“The Duke coughed. Even from the other side of the door, I could tell that this was very hard for him.

“But Varrod says that you are... still... ill.”

“That is what he thinks, my love. But my current state proves him wrong, does it not?”

“What say you to that, my old friend?” asked the Duke.

“Stranger things have happened. That's true, my lord,” Varrod replied. “I will not deny it. But I would not be the advisor your father wanted me to be if I say that I believe this.”

“You call me a liar?” asked Ellyenna. “In front of the Duke my husband?”

“No my lady,” answered Varrod. “I just believe you are... incorrect in your belief.”

“And I heard, for the first and only time, Ella use a swear-word. ‘If that is what you believe, old man, then you are no longer my physician, and I will get another. And I’ll thank you to remove yourself from my presence.’

“Now, Varrod and Ella had been friends since she first came as a young girl to the keep. And so I know it hurt him terribly to hear her say this. The Duke must have known this, too, because he said to his wife, in a cajoling voice, ‘My dear... there’s no need for harsh language. Varrod has indeed been wrong once or twice in his illustrious career, and he may be now. You don’t need to...’

“But the Duchess became even more inflamed. ‘I will not have his doubts endanger this child as they did the last one!’ she shouted.

“What are you saying,” the Duke almost whispered. “There is none in this realm who better loves you, or me or the hope of our family than Varrod.

“No! No!” she shouted again. “Even one doubter can turn aside the blessing of Yillia!”

“I’d never heard quiet like I heard after that. But in a moment, the Duke asked, ‘What do you mean, my love, the blessing of Yillia? Is that a way of saying you’re with child? A way of speech from your home duchy?’

“No, no, no.” And now Ella was talking to them as if they were children. “Yillia was a princess who could not have a baby. And so she asked the great god Pontifon to give her one. But he would not. And so she became angry and called upon the enemy of Pontifon, the Fae Lord, and he gave her a son of the Woodsfolk for her own. And for caring so well for the Woodsfolk babe, the Fae Lord also blessed her spirit with the power to help other women conceive.”

“She told this story as if it were a history lesson. Something that should have made perfect sense to the Duke and his counselor.

“Do you understand this, Varrod?” the Duke asked.

“I believe these are children’s tales, sir. Not from these parts. Nor from the duchy of Eddar, where your lady wife was born. But from the far land of Rivernin.”

“Not children’s tales, no” the Duchess chided. “True tales of wonders and power.”

“Ella was becoming a bit upset, and clearly believed these faery stories. The Duke rang for his steward, who came and took the Duchess back to her suite. But before she left I heard her say one more thing. ‘My lord,’ she said, ‘Yillia will bless us with a child. This I know.’ And then she left.

“There was silence in the Duke’s study for a moment or two. Then the Duke asked Varrod, ‘Where can she have heard these tales. And why would she believe them?’

“As to where, there could be any number of folk who have traveled from or have family in Rivernin. Why she believes them? That is obvious. She wishes to bear you a child. And she will grasp at any hope for that.”

“So there is no chance that she is...’

“Varrod sighed so heavily I could hear him through the door. ‘My lord. I wish it were not so. And, ‘tis true, I have been wrong before. But I would wager the little hair I have left that there is no way your good wife could bear a child. Not after what she went through the first time.’

“I believe you, my old friend. We must find out who is telling her these tales and make them stop. And then we must make Ellyenna believe that she is still Duchess, and still my wife. Child or no.’

“Yes, my Duke.’ And with that, Varrod left.”

Allain stood to stretch his back, and fetched another drink for Fat Cook. “So the Duke forbids stories because they caused his wife false hope?”

“You have a sharp mind, tinkerer,” scolded Fat Cook, “but you jump ahead. The Duke would not lay down a law for as little a reason as that.”

“Please tell us, then, what happened,” Allain asked, and took his seat again.

“Well, Varrod could not find who was telling these faery stories to the Duchess. They asked after everyone who could have visited or been to Rivernin. But still Ella insisted, ever more strongly, that these make-believe creatures could give her a child. But she showed no sign of her condition. Even when she insisted she was four months along. When any woman should have begun showing.

“It was an early frost that year,” Fat Cook continued. “All the old timers said it would be a cold winter, too, and right they were. And as the weather turned, so did the Duchess’ mind. She told more and more people about the Fae Lord, Yillia and her gift. She became ever more convinced that it was the disbelief of Varrod that kept her from growing large with the child she believed she held within her. She would leave whenever he entered a room.

“Finally, one night when the first snow was beginning to fall, she stood and accused him of treachery in front of the entire Great Hall. Varrod could not confront her, for all now believed, though none would say, that she was sick in her mind. But as she stood and shouted at him, the Duke finally could take no more and ordered her to stop.

“‘This is not good for you, nor for the realm,’ he said to her quietly. Although all in the Great Hall at Skywatch knew that something was amiss, the Duke kept his voice quiet. Only those seated near him and Varrod... and those, like myself, serving them... could hear.

“‘Do you doubt me, my lord?’ Ellyenna was close to tears, but her noble upbringing shone through both her madness and anger. ‘If you doubt my word, then I will take my leave of you, as well.’ And with that, she left the table.

“All who heard assumed that she only meant that she was leaving the Great Hall. Her maid, Cecily, told me later that she’d seen the Duchess on the stair. Ella told her she was going to her room and did not want to be disturbed. When I tried to bring her a cup of soup later that night, the door was locked, and no light shone beneath the door.

“It was the next morning before anyone realized she was gone.

“One of the guards in the North Tower saw the rope hanging from the Ella’s window. Her room had been on the second floor, partly because she loved the view of the sunset it gave her over the orchard. Trackers were sent out immediately to find her. But it had snowed all night, and her trail was covered.

“The Duke himself began to scour the countryside. Even as the snow returned and a great storm ripped through the countryside, tearing up trees and heaping snow high against the keep. He and a picked band rode and rode all night. One of them died, even. Fell from a horse who slipped on an icy hill.

“They fought through the storm, which broke the next dawn. And the Duke himself found his wife’s blanket caught up in a tree branch beside the Charmoor River. The Charmoor is swift, even in winter, and none could have... even in summer it is a mighty...”

Fat Cook could not go on for a moment. Kat sat next to her on the bed and patted her hand. Allain sat quietly, leaning his elbows on his knees and staring down at his feet. After a moment’s pause, Fat Cook blew her nose loudly into her handkerchief and went on.

“When the Duke returned, he went first to Ella’s room and turned it upside-down. Partly in a great rage of grief that needed an outlet. And partly to find any clue as to what could have driven his wife to do such a foolhardy thing.

“He found it beneath her bed. A small book of children’s stories. Nothing that would have caused you or me a second glance. But I was with Varrod, trying to bring the Duke some food, checking to see if he’d been injured in the long night’s search.

“He sat on the edge of her bed, which was much too small for his large body. He looked like a father in a child’s room. He was reading the book when we entered.

“‘My lord,’ said Varrod, ‘I assume that is where she discovered the stories from Rivernin?’

“The Duke merely nodded.

“‘She truly longed to give you a child and heir, sir,’ I said to him, trying to be a comfort. ‘I think she was just... grieved... that she could not.’

“He finally looked up at us. ‘Grief and madness are two different ills, Cook. Grief can be healed by love and time, or can grow if its causes have no cure. Madness is a sickness that needs must be fed.’

“And with that he stood, and handed the book to Varrod. ‘Find all books of nonsense, counselor,’ he said quietly. But we could hear the anger, choked back in his voice. It was the same tone he used when talking about the pirates that for so long troubled our land.

“‘Find all faery stories, all untrue tales, all fictions and frivolous books and confiscate them. Put them somewhere safe. Somewhere with a lock. Somewhere where they will not poison the minds of gentlefolk who should rely on the truth of their friends and families.’

“‘My lord...’ Varrod began. I could tell he was going to try to speak some sense to the Duke, who was clearly bereaved.

“No, Varrod,” the Duke stopped him, holding up one hand. “No argument. And after you have hidden all these... lies.... away, make it known that in the lands of Wellynbroke that there will be no telling of untrue tales, no spinning of fictitious lies, no singing of fancy songs. History there will be. Of the deeds men and women have done. So that we may learn from what is real alone. Songs will be instructional, or will have no words at all. Do your hear and heed me, counselor?”

“Varrod nodded. For there was no arguing with the Duke when his will was clear. We both thought that perhaps, in time, he would recant this strange, harsh rule. But he has not. Varrod collected all fictions, just as the Duke ordered, and hid them well. Only he and the Duke know where.”

Kat did not move, nor did she even twitch a muscle. But she realized, at that moment, exactly what those books on the top shelf of Varrod’s secret library were. Every faery story, ever yarn, every fiction in the duchy – all on that one shelf. And she knew now that Varrod had trusted her with much more than just the location of his special place. He had trusted her to keep one of the Duke’s own laws.

And she knew she would. Fat Cook’s tale of Emma saddened Kat. She had come to this place as an outsider, and had been befriended and given a place to live and work. But before then, she had vague memories of being very alone. Of walking a great distance in the cold, in the dark.

She sympathized deeply with the Duchess – and with Duke William – for their loss. And Kat, although she had never heard nor read a fictional story, promised herself in her heart that she never would. She agreed with the Duke – nothing but trouble could come from tales untrue.

With a sigh and a shake of his head, Allain stood up and thanked Fat Cook for her story.

“I’ve heard stranger,” he commented, “but not by much.”

“And you’ll heed the law, won’t you Red?” asked Fat Cook, piercing Allain with a glance that could have put a button-hole in a piece of leather.

“Oh, aye,” he agreed. “But don’t call me Red, please,” he asked, grinning at Fat Cook. “Or I might have need to call you something... daft.”

Fat Cook grinned back, and then shooed them both away with her hands. “Make sure he gets another bowl of soup before bed, Kat,” Fat Cook said as they went out. “He’ll sleep the better with something warmer than that story in his stomach.”

Kat took Allain by the kitchen on their way back to the Guest Hall. She ladled him another, smaller bowl of soup and sat with him as he ate with only the light of the fire to see by.

Between spoonfuls, Allain said, “Yon Cook. She seems a good woman.”

Kat nodded.

“Is she your mother?” he asked, looking sideways at Kat over the rim of his bowl.

She shook her head.

“How long have you known her?”

Kat shrugged, tipped her head and rolled her eyes a bit, as if to say, A good long time.

“Hmmm.” Allain went back to eating. When he finished, he put his bowl in the sink where other dirty dishes already awaited the kitchen boys’ morning attentions.

As they headed out the door, Allain asked, “What time do they start serving breakfast in the main hall?”

Kat held up six fingers for him to see.

“Oh. Well, then, I’d better get at least a few hours sleep. Thank you my dear. Both for the delicious soup and for the company, the tour, and the story.”

She nodded her head elegantly. You’re welcome.

As she went back up the hall to the stairs that led to her room, Allain watched her go and murmured to himself, “She really doesn’t say much, does she?”



Of course it only took Allain about one minute the next morning to realize that Kat didn’t talk at all. As he was sitting at the guest table in the Great Hall, waiting for the tray of breakfast bread to reach him, he saw Kat scribble messages to one of the kitchen boys, one of the serving maids, and share what was apparently a very good joke with one of the Duke’s servants.

As it was so cold, and the weather outside so brutal, most of the Duke’s household spent a good part of every day right there in the Great Hall. There were games and lessons with the children in a corner near one of the six fireplaces. The ministers of court held their sessions in another corner, in hushed tones, as their underlings brought them paper and pens, ink and ribbon for their work. Many of the off-duty guards lounged and played at dice, cards or chess around the great, long serving tables. And Allain spent his first morning introducing himself, and beginning to sharpen, repair and shine just about anything laying about.

Kat saw him joking merrily with the ladies of the court and their maids. He was more serious and thoughtful with the ministers and officers of the guard. With the soldiers themselves, he was jovial, and with the children downright playful.

Just after lunch, she found him laying on the floor, fixing the wheel of a young boy’s toy cart. The boy had been crying, but Allain made funny noises while fixing the wheel, and now the child was laughing and waiting eagerly for the return of his toy.

Kat scribbled a note and showed it to Allain. You’re good with all these people.

He handed the repaired truck to the boy, who went running off with it. “You need to get along with everyone if you want their business,” he replied, fixing Kat with a slightly playful look.

She looked back, raised an eyebrow and clucked her tongue as if to say, That’s not all of it.

He nodded. "No. I also do it because I like people. They're all so different, and yet so much of what we are is the same. I enjoy meeting new folk, helping them a little, hearing their stories, finding out what makes them happy or sad. It's why I picked a job that needs travel."

She nodded, touched him on the arm, and went back to her preparations for the evening meal.

What a strange, nice girl, Allain thought to himself.



The storms that winter lasted longer and were fiercer than any in memory. And although Allain confided to Kat and Fat Cook that he rarely stayed in any town or keep longer than two weeks, it seemed as though he'd have to make an exception this winter, for though the drawbridge was frozen open, the winds and ice made travel an impossibility. So Allain settled in for a nice, long visit.

Not that he really minded. The Duke was an hospitable ruler, and did not turn away any in need of shelter or comfort. After he'd fixed everything that he knew how, helped the soldiers get a finer edge on their swords than they'd ever seen, and polished every bit of brass and copper in the keep, Allain took to helping Kat with the cooking and serving. He was not asked to, but he felt he should pay back the Duke for his food and shelter.

Duke William, actually, would have felt recompensed just for the news of other lands that Allain brought. After Allain's first few nights at the Guest Table, the Duke heard that the new man was a messenger of sorts, and called him up to the Head Table, where he was asked about the goings-on in other duchies. Allain told what he knew. And, night after night, the Duke had him back to give greater and greater detail about the people and habits of other lands he'd visited. For no wise ruler ever lets slip a chance to learn more about his neighbors.

And so Allain blended in with Winterhold.



During the afternoons, when lunch had been cleared but before preparations for dinner began, Kat had a few hours to herself. And, about the middle of

Allain's third week at the keep, the two began playing cards together for an hour or so every day. It was a pleasant, relaxing way to warm oneself by the fire. Sometimes Fat Cook joined them, but she was not so good at cards. Often as not, she'd just sit with her feet up by the fire and nap or work in her book while the two new friends played for awhile.

One day, as they were sitting down to play, Allain took a new deck of cards out of his pack and began to deal a hand. Kat picked up her cards, and raised an eyebrow in surprise. She turned a questioning glance to Allain and gestured at the new deck.

"This," said Allain, "is called a 'Weaver's Deck.'"

Why? the corner of Kat's mouth seemed to ask.

"I don't know," Allain replied, looking at her merrily over the tops of his cards. "It's a deck I picked up in my travels in a little town called Ambermoor. I also learned several games that go with this deck."

Kat looked more closely at the surprising cards. The numbers and suits were the same as most cards she'd seen. But each card was also decorated with a picture of a person, place, object or event. If you looked hard, you could see that the name of the card was worked, in scrolling, curvy letters, right into the design of the picture. For example, in her hand she held a card with a picture of a basket. The word "basket" was twined right into the strands of willow that made up the basket's handle. The "Teacher" card had its name written on the spine of the book that the title character held in her lap. Kat was delighted. Not only would it be more fun to play with a deck like this, she thought, but each card held its own little game – trying to find the hidden name of the subject.

Allain caught Kat smiling and said, "Yes. It's a wonderful deck. Let's play a few hands of our usual game, and later I'll teach you a special 'Weaver' game."

Kat nodded, and they played for twice as long as usual. In fact, dinner was a little bit late because she'd lost track of time.

The next afternoon when they sat down beside the fire, Kat wrote a note for Allain as they got comfortable.

New game, was all it said.

“Certainly,” he replied. “But the most interesting part about a Weaver game, is that you will need to discover the rules yourself as we play.”

Kat looked very surprised. But then shrugged, nodded, and gestured for Allain to deal.

He gave them each four cards. “Choose one, and lay it down.”

Kat held in her hand the following cards: “Guard,” “Boat,” “Kitchen” and “Storm.” She lay down “Kitchen.”

“Excellent,” said Allain. “A very good starter card.”

Kat shook her head and Allain laughed. “I know,” he said. “It takes longer this way. But trust me. You’ll enjoy it more.”

Allain took a card from his hand and laid it on top of the “Kitchen” card. “Basket,” it was.

Kat wasn't looking at the pictures, but at the numbers and suits. Pictures had not mattered when they were playing their usual games. Her first card had been a three of cups, and Allain's a nine of wands. But what did the pictures have to do with anything?

“Lay your next card beside the first two,” he said.

She shrugged and put the “Guard” (a four of cups) next to her first card.

“Ha!” cried Allain, and immediately put the “Lies” card (a Duke of gems) on top of the “Guard.”

Kat could make no sense of this game.

“Your next one must go on top of these,” Allain said, and pointed to the second stack.

Again, Kat shrugged and placed her “Boat” (an eight of wands) on top of the “Lies” card.

“Hmmm.” Allain studied his two remaining cards. He carefully put both of them down and said, “I meet.”

Kat had no idea what he meant.

“Oh,” he said. “Right. You haven’t played before. When I ‘meet,’ I grant you the right of last card. Be careful though – with this hand, where you put it could mean winning or losing.”

Kat looked at the two piles of cards. “Basket” on “Kitchen.” “Boat” on “Lies” on “Guard.” She was still looking at the numbers and suits. Not really knowing (or caring much) whether she won or lost, she put “Storm,” a five of wands, on top of “Boat.” She half noticed that “Storm” on “Boat” could make a sort of strange sense.

Which it must have. For Allain threw up his hands and said, “You win!”

Kat shook her head again, pointed at the cards and then tilted her head to one side. Why?

“That’s for you to figure out. But – and I guess I should have told you this before,” Allain said as he tapped each card in turn, “the subjects of each card matter as much, or more, than the value and suit. And that’s your homework for tonight. Tell me why you think that hand was a winner for you.”

Kat scribbled the names of the cards onto a piece of paper as Allain scooped up the deck. “We’ll play again tomorrow,” he said. And it was time for Kat to begin work on the evening meal.



Kitchen. Basket. Guard. Lies. Boat. Storm.

The words spun around in Kat’s head that night as she lay in bed. She had never seen a boat, but knew what they were. Wellynbroke had a long coastline, and

Varrod's library contained books about seafaring, the pirate wars, ships, maritime law and the history of sea craft.

Kitchen. Basket.

Kat fell asleep. And she dreamed a very deep, very real dream. It was more vivid and specific than any other she'd ever had. It was so real, in fact, that it woke her up in the middle of the night. She almost went right back to sleep, but remembered her "homework." Maybe it would be a good joke, she thought, if she wrote down her dream for Allain and used it as an explanation of why she'd won her first hand of Weaver. After all, she'd fallen asleep thinking about the cards, and they had found their way into her dream.

This is what she wrote:

*The cook knows that a guard will be coming to take lunch to his comrades at the dock. She cannot go herself, as her leg is hurt. So, in her kitchen, she makes a meal of cold meat, cheese, fruit and bread and puts it in a basket. She falls asleep while waiting.*

*Another guard, not the one the meal is meant for, pokes his head in the kitchen. He sees the basket, and takes it back to his boat. When the right guard comes by and asks for his lunch, the cook is upset that it is gone. She cannot make another, as she used the last of the food for the first.*

*The rightful guard goes back to his boat and sees the guard who stole the basket eating with his comrades. He asks him where he got the food. The guard with the food lies and says that his wife made it for him. The other guard doesn't quite believe him, but can't prove anything.*

*The thieving guard gets on his boat with his comrades. They go out to sea to guard the coast, but there is a storm. Because they are full of food, they are not as quick and cannot save their boat and it sinks. The other guards, though hungry, are able to bring their boat home safely.*



"That is very good, Kat," said Allain the next day. "And though the details change from hand to hand of Weaver, the fact that you put "Storm" on "Boat"

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clearly ended the game. It's more intuitive than other card games. More about being perceptive, and less about exact numbers. It teaches you to think, rather than to simply guess or react based on odds."

Kat nodded. It had been sort of fun, thinking up a reason why she'd won. She determined to do it again. And as the snow and wind had not let up in the least, she and Allain had quite a bit of time to play over the next two weeks.

Every time they played, whether she or Allain won, Kat would write down why she thought a particular hand should be a winning one. Allain never argued, but did always insist she defend her own winning hands, as he did his.



One morning at dawn, though, Kat saw Allain standing on the keep's lawn as she took breakfast to the early guard. The sky was clear for the first time in days, and Allain seemed to be sniffing the air.

What? She asked him with her eyes.

"I'll be going tomorrow," he said. "The clear weather will hold for at least six days. I can tell. And that's enough time for me to get to Killbourne from here."

Kat was surprised, a bit sad, but understood. His was a traveler's profession. She wrote, I'll miss you. Will you come back? on a scrap of paper and handed it to him.

"Oh, someday, I suspect," he answered. "I'll be heading south for a bit, and then east along the coast. I could swing by here on my way back home next autumn. Would you like that?"

She smiled and nodded. He put a hand on her shoulder and said, "I'm glad I had such good company while stuck out here. You're one of the best Weaver players I've met. A real natural."

"I'm going to leave you with this Weaver deck," he continued, taking the cards from his pocket and putting them in her basket next to the plates and bowls. "And I've given you one more winning hand to decipher. It's the highest

scoring hand in any Weaver game. There are five cards on the top of the deck, followed by another five. Do your best, and we'll talk about it when I return."



Sure enough, after a night of final farewells, feasting and toasting, Allain Copperwright went on his way the next morning. Everyone in the keep was sad to see him go, since, as Kat had noticed right off, he was good with people. But he left Winterhold a shinier, sharper, better working keep than he'd found it. And his nose had been right, too. For six days the weather was cold but clear, and folks got a chance to dig out, see some sunshine and enjoy a week of respite from the fierce storms.

On the seventh day after Allain's departure, though, winter decided to have a last lash at the people of the keep. The winds howled fiercely around the battlements, snow piled up high again against the windows, and everyone stayed inside, waiting and hoping for an early spring.

After lunch, Kat went back to her room to have a quick nap. She hadn't seen the Duke all day. Which wasn't unusual, except when the weather was so bad that everyone seemed to be in the Great Hall all the time. When she got to her room, though, there was a surprise waiting for her. A small piece of paper on her bed said simply, Come to my tower immediately. She recognized the writing as Varrod's.

Expecting a request for a special dinner item – sometimes his old stomach needed something soft and easy to digest – Kat went directly up the high tower to Varrod's study. When she knocked, though, it was the Duke's voice who answered, "Come in."

Kat went in and saw that both the Duke and his physician looked very serious and troubled. She frowned, looking from one to the next, wondering what was wrong.

"Come sit by me, Katherine," Varrod said. Katherine? He hadn't called her that in years. But she sat in the offered chair, facing both Varrod and the Duke.

“Is this,” asked the Duke, handing her a sheet of paper, “yours?” She took it. It was indeed. It was some of the notes on winning Weaver hands from her games with Allain. She nodded, handing it back to the Duke.

“And these?” he asked, pointing to a rather thick pile of paper on Varrod’s writing desk. Again she nodded. How – and why – had the Duke taken these from her room?

He seemed to read her mind and said, “I came up to your room to ask you a favor, Katherine. It’s been such a harsh winter that I didn’t want to wait for spring before our next scheduled holiday. I wanted to check with you and see if the keep could afford to spare the stores necessary for a mid-winter feast.”

Kat smiled broadly and nodded, Yes! There was plenty put away. It had been a wonderful harvest, and there was more than enough to carry them through to spring. But the Duke did not seem pleased with her answer. It hadn’t even seemed to register with him, actually.

“When I knocked on your door,” the Duke continued, “it opened. I looked inside to see if you were there and saw these,” he pointed at the pile of paper. “The door swinging open caused some of them to fall to the floor. As I went to pick them up and return them to your desk, I read one. And then another. And then several more.”

Kat was puzzled. So the Duke had read her Weaver notes? Did he consider it a waste of paper? She bought the paper herself with her wages. What was the problem?

“Kat,” Varrod now spoke. “When did you begin reading the forbidden books on the top shelf of the library?”

Kat recoiled as if the old man had struck her across the face. She shook her head violently – never! She would never have broken his rule. He had given her such a great gift. To defy him would have been worse than wrong. It would have been... a betrayal.

“Dear girl,” he said. “I have read through several of these... writings... of yours. They are almost identical to... writings... found in some of the

forbidden books.” He glanced behind him at his desk. “With the Duke’s permission?” he asked.

The Duke nodded, and Varrod took a book from the bottom shelf of his desk. He had marked a page with a piece of cloth, and opened it as he handed it to Kat. She read, and to her dismay, the events in the marked passage were almost exactly the same as one of her descriptions of a winning Weaver hand.

Varrod took the book back, turned a handful of pages, and pointed out another chapter.

Again, the words in the book told a tale very similar to what Kat had written that winter as part of learning the game with Allain.

Then she understood. This book must be about how to play Weaver! It had all the winning hands, and Kat had just figured some of them out. She sighed and turned to look at the cover, expecting to see “How to Win at Weaver,” or “How to Play Cards with a Weaver Deck,” or something similar.

The cover read, “Children’s Tales for Bedtime.”

Tales. Children’s stories. The forbidden shelf and the Duke’s law.

Kat was a very bright girl and now knew exactly what the Duke and his councilor thought she’d been up to. She took out a piece of paper immediately and began trying to write down what had actually happened, but she was so frightened and surprised that the tip broke. She looked at Varrod as if to say, Help. It’s a mistake. It’s not what you think! But the old man would not look at her.

The Duke, stern and a little sad, said simply, “Katherine. You are a valued member of this keep. But you know the law. And you were given a privilege none has had here in many a year.” He glanced at Varrod, who would not look at the Duke, either. He just stared at the floor, looking more like a tired, old man than ever before.

“Perhaps,” continued the Duke, “the mistake was begun by my old friend, here.” He placed a hand on Varrod’s shoulder. “Since his son died, he has pined for a student who loved to read as much as did Brandon. Apparently he thought

you were such a student.”

Kat’s eyes filled with tears. How could she make them understand? She began to rummage through her apron, looking for another pencil, but could not find one.

The Duke continued. “You knew the law, and were given leave to study in Varrod’s library on one condition. That you not read the forbidden books on the top shelf. This you have obviously done. And, just as obvious to me, you have begun copying them out. I can only surmise that you have done this in order to provide copies of the unlawful stories to others either in this keep or elsewhere in my lands.”

At this, Kat was not just shocked but a little angry. She stared with bright eyes directly at the Duke, who stared right back. He had judged many a man and woman in his day, and was not about to be disobeyed and challenged by this young girl.

“The law is clear,” he said, standing as he finished his statement. “One month in the dungeon, and then exile from my duchy. You may collect your things from your room and then report to the head of the Household Guard outside my chambers.”

The Duke patted Varrod’s shoulder one last time and left.

Kat had never been so frightened, so confused or so angry in her life. She stood, looked about, and finally found a pencil on Varrod’s desk. She picked it up and began to write out an explanation on a piece of her note paper.

She only managed to write, Allain Copperwright was teaching me the Weaver... before Varrod reached over and held her wrist in his cool, dry hand and said, “Go. Please. I will try to come and talk to you in the dungeon. And then we can discuss... this.”

They had spent so much time together. He had taught her much. She could not believe he would think her capable of such betrayal.



Even though the Duke was a fair and kind ruler, his dungeon was not a nice place. It was very cold in winter, damp, and smelled of rot and decay. The straw on the floor was dirty and mildewed. The only light came from a smoky torch in the corner of her cell. And there was nothing in the cell to do but sit on an old, smelly cot and wait. Wait for a month. Wait to leave. Leave Fat Cook, and the kitchen staff, and the library, and the cooking and the people. Leave... home. The only home she remembered.

Kat leaned against the door and tried to look out into the hallway. There was no guard. No need. One small girl in the dungeon did not rate a grown man to guard her.

As the night passed, she stood there, still leaning on the door. Too frightened and angry to sleep. She had no idea what the world was like outside Winterhold. She'd been to the market down the valley road four or five times. But that was less than an hour's walk. She had vague memories of sitting on a rock near a river, though she couldn't positively remember ever having seen a river. She remembered looking out a small window at a pink and orange sky. And that was all. Nothing more about her time before coming to the keep.

The more she thought about her plight, the less scared and the more angry she became. If she could talk properly, with her mouth, none of this would have happened. She could have told Allain her reasons behind the winning Weaver hands. Or, had she written them down, could have easily explained them to the Duke and Varrod. But they hadn't even taken the time to listen.

As she turned to lean on her other shoulder, she saw what looked like scribbling on the door frame. She couldn't make it out in the feeble light, so she fetched the torch from its sconce on the wall and brought it nearer the door. Someone had carved the name "Geno," on the doorframe in blocky, childish letters. And, on the door itself, someone had scratched the word, "Twenty." She wondered what that meant.

But as she was looking at these scratchings, she noticed something strange about the stones that lined the doorframe. They reminded her of...

She leaned the torch against the cell wall and began to feel her way around the door. The blocks of stone fit together perfectly. No mortar was needed to hold them together. But time had worn a few cracks and gaps between some of them, and... wait a moment... no, not quite... there!

The stone was levered just like the one that hid the secret entrance to Varrod's library. When she rocked it towards the door, she heard a "click," and the entire door frame swung open a few inches. She pushed at it with her shoulder, and it creaked open just enough to let her through. She heaved the frame back into place, and it closed with another "click."

Just as it shut, she realized she'd left her things on the other side of the door, in the cell. Well, she wouldn't need them anyway. Just her notes and pencils, a few small books and a shawl.

Kat crept to the end of the hallway and peeked around the corner at the guard station. No guard. Just as she'd thought. One girl didn't rate a whole guard to herself. She crept to the dungeon door and opened it quietly. She climbed the stairs to the main level of the keep and listened for any noise. None. She crept through the hallways, staying to the ones she knew would be deserted, and found her way to the kitchen. She took a shoulder-basket and filled it with travel bread, cheese, some meat, dried fruit and a few skins of clean water. Then she went to the coat room and put on two of the sweaters she left there for when she had to make trips outside the keep. One of the guards had left a heavy leather overcoat there, and she took that, too.

She had spent the better part of four years bringing food to all the guards at every station every night. She knew their schedules better than they did. And as the guards who watched the back gate shuffled back to the keep to sleep, and stopped to exchange news with the next shift, she slipped out and onto the ledge of land that surrounded the moat on the inside.

Making very little noise on the frozen ground, Kat made her way along the edge of the moat to the drawbridge that was the only way out of the keep. She waited in the shadows near the large winch that raised and lowered the bridge until one of the kitchen boys walked across, bringing the guards their late-night supper. Normally the enormous iron and wood bridge would have been raised, and the guards would have had to lower it, even to get their soup. Kat had waited many

a night while the creaking, clanking, bridge was let down so that she could cross. But this winter, the bridge had been frozen down for weeks. Ice made it too heavy to lift and froze the gears.

So while the guards were busy getting their soup, banging their bowls while sluicing it out of the large tureen the boy had lugged from the kitchen, Kat slipped silently across the drawbridge and into the night. She did not know where she was going. But if she was going to be banished from Wellynbroke, she might as well leave on her own time – and with a full pack – than wait a month in the dungeon before going.

The night sky was cold, but clear, and she headed south. For she remembered that that was the direction Allain had said he'd be going first. She knew from the stars what direction was south. She did not know how she knew this, nor that it was strange that she did.

Her pack was heavy, but she was strong for such a small girl. She'd spent the last years hauling pots and dishes, bowls and buckets up and down stairs and halls every day.

The forest smelled clean to her, and she was almost glad to be out and on her way.

Almost.



When Varrod went to the dungeon the next morning to visit Kat he found, of course, that she was not there. Varrod ordered the guard who had unlocked the cell to go at once and fetch the Duke. As the guard ran to do so, Varrod took a torch from the hall and began to search the cell. Kat's things were still there. Her books and papers, a shawl, some pencil stubs. He didn't notice that the torch from the wall sconce had burned itself out while leaning against the wall near the door.

When the Duke appeared in the doorway, Varrod said simply, "She's vanished."

"What do you mean," asked the Duke. "Nobody vanishes."

“Her things are still here,” Varrod pointed out. “And the door was locked and barred from the outside when the guard let me in.”

“She could have locked it again after getting out,” said the Duke. Who didn’t really believe that, but had to say something. People didn’t just vanish after all.

Varrod shook his head. “Even had she been able to pick the lock, that bar across the door weighs fifty pounds and can’t be reached from the tiny food slot down below. Unless someone helped her, I can’t fathom a reasonable explanation for her exit. And nobody but you, the guard on duty and I knew she was here. I haven’t had the heart to tell Fat Cook yet.”

The Duke rubbed his chin, squeezed his eyes tight shut and tried to think. After a moment he said, “I’ll look through those papers of hers. Maybe she mentions a friend or comrade that could have helped her escape.”

Varrod nodded. “I suppose. Although I still feel that there’s something not quite right about those stories you found. Kat is not a rule-breaker.”

The Duke sighed. “Maybe not. But sometimes folks decide to break the one rule they think is unjust or unfair. I’ve seen it time and time again. The righteous man who thinks that taxes don’t apply to him. The thief who would only steal from rich men. The landlord who cheated his tenants – but not those who paid in advance. The world is full of people who justify their own wrongdoing.”

Varrod shook his head and brought another torch from the hall to help the Duke as he read.

Duke William sat on the cot and began to leaf through the pages of Kat’s notes. “More of the same,” he said, dropping the pages on the damp straw as he glanced at each.

Varrod sat, too, and simply waited. The Duke would mutter to himself occasionally, shaking his head. A little angry, a little confused. And Varrod knew that his Duke was a man driven to understand all things, even human foibles.

“Why?” the Duke asked, dropping another page on the floor and beginning to read the next, “would a young girl, no matter how...” but he stopped mid thought, bringing the page closer to his face.

“How’ what?” asked Varrod, not seeing that the Duke was more absorbed in this piece of paper than in any of the others that had come before. When he didn’t receive an answer, the old physician turned and saw that the Duke was clearly disturbed by what he was reading. His eyes were wide and haunted. His lips pale and drawn tight.”

“What is it, my lord? Is there something about...” but the Duke held up his hand for silence. And so Varrod waited until the Duke had finished reading. He may have even read it twice, so long did he spend staring at that page.

Finally, he lowered the paper. Without looking at Varrod, he handed the sheet over and said simply, “Read this.”

Varrod recognized Kat’s handwriting from the many notes she had written to him over the years. At the top of the page were two groups of five words:

Lass, Mountains, Cave, Surprise, Horn.

Gardner, Escape, Friendship, Blanket, Guard.

And beneath those words, again in Kat’s writing, the following story:

*A young lass who watches her father’s sheep goes to find one who became lost in the mountains. She loves the mountains, and is not afraid to go there alone. She follows the trail of the sheep to a cave she has never seen before. She goes inside to find her lost ewe, but is surprised by a wolf who has made the cave its home. She is trapped inside the cave, with no weapon and no way out. The wolf does not menace her, but will neither let her leave. So, from her basket, she takes the horn that she usually uses to call her sheep back from pasture, and blows it as hard as she can.*

*The wolf is not afraid of the horn, and so the lass despairs, thinking she will surely die of hunger in the cave. But down the mountain, in a lonely cottage, lives a gardener who raises herbs and spices to sell in the market. He hears the horn and wonders what it can be. He climbs up close enough to the cave to see that there is a wolf keeping a young lass at bay therein. He runs back to his hut and takes a joint of meat from where it hangs by the fire. He goes back up the hill and places the meat upwind, yet well away from the cave. After a few minutes, the wolf leaves to investigate the tempting smell. While the wolf is gone, the gardener runs up and*

*beckons the lass to leave the cave. She runs with him back to his hut, remembering to take the lamb with her, and thanks that gardener for his help.*

*The two form a great friendship and she visits his hut often. For her birthday, the gardener weaves the lass a colorful blanket with pictures of the herbs and flowers he knows so well. It is so beautiful that she cries, and asks her friend what she can do to repay him. He tells her that years ago he broke a small rule and so was drummed out of his guard troop. He asks her to go to the local officer of the guard and see if maybe, now that he is older and wiser, he could be reinstated. She does so. And the officer (who is sweet on the lass) reinstates the gardener immediately upon hearing about how he rescued her from the wolf.*

Varrod finished reading and put down the paper. "I do not see how this differs from any of the other tales, my lord. A 'moral story,' they are called. That is all."

The Duke, who looked as if he had seen a ghost, shook his head. "That is not all, old friend. This story. It is a true one. And one that this young girl could never have known."

"What do you mean?" Varrod leaned closer to his Duke. He'd never seen William so seemingly afraid. Not even in the heart of battle, when his very life was threatened.

"When Ellyenna first came to this land, a young girl, frightened yet brave, determined to do her duty, she brought with her only one soldier. An older fellow, both her personal guard and her valet. At the banquet before our marriage, this guard asked permission to speak with me alone. He told me to be gentle with Ella, that she had only just begun to understand the feelings that men and women have for each other. I told him I would certainly be gentle with her, as all goodly men are with their wives.

"He shook his head and asked permission to speak frankly. I gave it.

"He said, 'My lord, she had just begun a romance with the captain of her father's guard. A good man, the officer and a friend to Ella's father and to me.'

"I told him I understood. I, too, had been infatuated with a local girl before the Duke my father betrothed me to Ellyenna. This guard nodded, and said that he was glad she was betrothed to a man that all said was fair, kind and just. I took

this as a great compliment, coming from a man who so obviously cared for the lady his mistress. I told him he would have an honored place in our house, and could stay if he wished, or go back to serving his old lord. He chose to stay.

“Over the next few weeks, this fellow helped me much. He told me of Ella’s likes and dislikes. He clued me to her moods. Helped me understand the differences in speech and manner between our two duchies. Ella did not like others to know much of her childhood, and was shy even to talk to me about her life before coming to Wellynbroke. Her guard, though, knew I would love her more the more I knew her. He was right. And so, though he told no others, he shared many tales of the Duchess’ youth with me. So that I might be closer to her, and therefore more kind. Which was his only wish.”

Varrod was amazed that he had not heard of this before. “My lord,” he said. “I am glad to hear of this guard, Ella’s valet. But what bearing does it have to this... writing... of Katherine’s?”

The Duke laughed. It was not a sound full of humor, but a low, ironic chuckle. “My old friend,” he said. “Can you not guess? Before he was a guard for Ellyenna’s father, her valet, a man named Ethric, had been a gardener for many years.”

Understanding began to creep into Varrod’s mind. His eyes widened as he asked the Duke, “Ethric.. was he not the guard who...”

The Duke nodded, cutting off the question. “Yes. The night that Ella fled Skywatch. Ethric would not turn back from the search. He was too old to be out on a night such as that, and when his horse began to slip, could not jump quickly enough from the saddle and was killed beneath the beast.”

“So,” filled in Varrod, “Ethric could not have told this story to Kat.”

The Duke shook his head. “No. And the blanket I found by the river that night...” but he could not complete his thought before Varrod finished it for him.

“That blanket with the pictures of herbs and flowers. I remember her wrapped in it by the fire many a night. Beautiful it was. Woven by...”

“Yes.” It was the Duke’s turn to finish the other’s thought. “Woven as a gift by a gardener for the lass who eventually got her father to return him to his place among the guard.”

The two sat silently, pondering this mystery.

Finally, Varrod spoke. “There is more here than we can puzzle out alone,” he said.

“Indeed,” the Duke agreed. “And I will not rest until I find out how that young girl came to know this story.”



While Varrod and the Duke had been in the dungeon, the sky outside had turned from clear to grey, and from grey to stormy black. Though early in the afternoon, there was barley enough light to see from the keep to the stables. The Duke called a dozen guardsmen to follow him, and ordered Varrod to head a search of the keep’s grounds. He, the Duke, would lead a search outside the keep, across the moat.

The Duke and his men had no trouble picking up Kat’s trail. He sent a man back to Varrod to tell him to call off the search of the keep, and headed into the woods with eleven men behind him. But as the afternoon sky darkened, first with storm clouds and then with the deeper darkness of evening, the wind and newly falling snow began to obscure the girl’s trail.

At one point, it seemed she had backtracked, and then gone on again. But it was impossible to tell which of two ways she’d finally headed. The Duke ordered six of his men to go to the right, while he and the others headed left, to the south.

The sky began to spit snow and ice. The wind went from a whisper to a whistle to a howl within minutes. Lightning and thunder cracked in the sky, providing a momentary, frozen image of a world gone white, bent with wind. Once again, the trail seemed to split. The Duke went south again with two men, sending the other three angling off to the west.

An explosion of thunder caused one of the guard’s horses to rear and throw its rider to the ground. The horse sped off in terror, into the night and into the

storm. The unhorsed guard jumped up behind the other, but the Duke knew they could not keep up with him like that. He ordered them back to the keep and, despite their protests, drove on, alone, in the direction he thought best. For he could no longer see any trail on the snow covered ground.

Many storms the Duke had seen and ridden through, and worse than this one, too. He was not afraid, only driven to find answers to his questions. And driven by guilt, as well. For he was a fair man, and as kind as a ruler can afford to let himself be. And until he found out how Kat had known the story of a young lass, a sheep and a gardener, there was a chance she might not be guilty of what she'd been accused.



Hours later, the snow stopped falling and the wind died down. The moon shone through the thinning clouds, and the Duke could see that he was very near the Charmoor. Near the very spot where he believed his Duchess had lost her life.

As he got closer, he could hear the river. It made the same sound, winter or summer. Half gurgling, half rushing like the wind. And as he crested a hill and looked down at a curve of the river, he saw a dark, huddled shape by the bank.

He cantered down the hill and threw himself off his horse's back. Rushing towards the figure sprawled beneath a leafless bush, he saw that it was a young girl. And as he gently turned her over, he could see that it was, indeed, Kat. She'd found her way to the river, but had been half buried by snow and unable to cross. There was a bridge more than two miles upstream, the Duke knew. But even without the storm, how would a young girl know that? He took off one of his thick, leather riding gloves and felt for her pulse at her throat. Her skin was like ice, but there was a faint throb. She lived yet.

Gently, the Duke raised her up from the ground and brushed the remaining snow from her clothes. He placed her across his saddle, then swung up behind her. Cradling her across his chest, he made as best time as he could back to the keep.



“Do you think she will be all right?” the Duke asked Varrod, who had laid the girl on his own bed up in the tower.

“That I do not yet know,” the physician answered. “I’ve asked Fat Cook to make a broth with some medicine I gave her. I’ve warmed her as well as I can. Now we’ll just have to wait.”

The Duke nodded.

Varrod handed him a small package. “I found these in her shoulder basket.”

The Duke unwrapped the parcel and looked inside. “A deck of cards?” he asked. “So?”

“Look at them carefully,” instructed Varrod.

The Duke did so. “Interesting,” he commented. “I’ve never seen a deck like this before. With different pictures on every card. But what does it signify?”

Varrod sighed and motioned for the Duke to sit. “You’ve read some history, my lord. You know of the land called Calmyllyn?”

“Yes,” said the Duke. “At least, I’ve heard the name. Well to the north of here. I don’t believe I’ve ever met anyone from there.”

“I’m not surprised,” explained the old counselor, “The last lord of Calmyllyn died without leaving an heir. He was said to have been a wise and good king. It was also said that he had the gift of prophecy. That he could tell the future. That he could know what was happening in all the far corners of his kingdom.”

“Bah,” scoffed the Duke. “More faery tales and fantasy.”

“So I would have said, my lord. But the histories of Calmyllyn I’ve read are very clear. I only barely remembered them, and so,” he patted a book on the edge of his desk, “I’ve just reviewed them. They say that he used a special deck of cards, a ‘Weaver’ deck it was called, to cast and read fortunes. A deck of cards with beautiful pictures on them, this history says.”

“Like this deck?” the Duke hefted the cards in his hand.

“Yes, my lord. Like the deck Kat had. And look again at what she was writing when we’d just accused her of the crime of storying.”

Varrod handed the scrap of paper to the Duke who read, Allain Copperwright was teaching me the Weaver...

“That was what she was writing,” continued Varrod. “You remember the odd-jobber?”

“Yes. Good memory for detail, he had. All kinds of news from far parts. Allain was his name, correct? I did see him playing cards with the lass a few times by the fire. This deck came from him? And he was teaching her something about...”

Varrod interrupted the Duke by handing him the history book he’d been tapping earlier. The book fell open at a page marked by a thick piece of felt, and the Duke’s eye was immediately caught by a passage that Varrod had underlined earlier that night:

Bright red of hair and beard was King Allain, and a wiser ruler never could be found. His gift for divining the truth of men’s hearts made of him a peerless judge. His prophecies often fouled the plans of the kingdom’s enemies, and provided wealth and prosperity for all her people.

Died he did without heir or get. So fierce was fighting among the clans over who would succeed him, that all the land split and sundered and Calmyllyn was no more. Her neighbors gathered in this part and that, until none was left who called himself Calmyllynish.

The Duke finished reading the highlighted section and said, “I am very confused, old friend.”

“As am I,” Varrod agreed. “Remember – I told you I wasn’t surprised you’d never met someone who claimed to be from Calmyllyn?”

“Aye,” said the Duke.

“The end of the reign of King Allain... the sundering of his lands... My lord, Calmyllyn fell more than four hundred years ago.”



Days became weeks. Winter's hold upon the land began to ease, and the first shoots began to poke up from beneath the melting snow. The folks of Winterhold had never been gladder to see spring come than this year, after such a hard and punishing winter.

Kat, however, did not awaken. The Duke came to see her in Varrod's tower every day, for the old man would not let her be taken to the infirmary or back to her own room. And though it troubled her bad leg, Fat Cook made the climb every day as well. She spooned soup into Kat's mouth, which the girl swallowed automatically. But nothing she or Varrod did seemed to make any difference. Kat's eyes did not open, nor did she appear changed from the day she'd been brought back to the keep.

The Duke became more and more distraught about her fate. And, every day, he spent more and more time sitting by her bed, reading the stories she'd written, looking through the Weaver deck and staring at her motionless face.

Finally, on a day when spring was well and truly upon the land, the Duke decided to try something odd. Varrod was out gathering plants from his garden and Fat Cook was supervising the kitchen from a chair in the corner. The Duke went to his private quarters and opened an old cedar chest in the back of his closet. Underneath many old articles of clothing, he found what he was looking for; a blanket with pictures of herbs and flowers woven into the fabric. He took the blanket, climbed back to Varrod's tower, and lifted Kat into his arms, wrapping her in the blanket at the same time.

He climbed down the long flight of stairs and opened the secret door that led to Varrod's library. He placed Kat in one of the two chairs, still wrapped in the blanket, and built up the fire in the fireplace. Then he climbed one of the iron ladders and took down a dusty, creaking leather volume from the top shelf. He sat down in the second chair and began to read stories to Kat. It was a book he remembered from his childhood. One that his mother had read to him. It was about a magic mouse who made friends with all the creatures in the barnyard, and who saved the old goose from being cooked at feast time.

Duke William became so engrossed in the tale, that he did not notice Kat's eyes open slowly. He kept reading and reading, chapter after chapter, until he came to the end of the book. He stood, intending to get another book from the top shelf, when he noticed that Kat was awake and watching him.

The Duke was about to say something, when he noticed her hands. She was gesturing, making a motion like writing in the air. And he understood. She needed to say something, and needed a pencil and paper to do so. He looked through the little desk Varrod kept in the corner of the library and found both. He gave them to Kat, kneeling down at her feet as he did so.

Bring the cards, was all she wrote.



It took the Duke less than a minute to run up the steps to Varrod's room, get the Weaver deck and run back down to the library. As he returned, he felt mildly ashamed that he'd forgotten to close the secret door in his haste. But nobody had come up the lower stairs, so he simply closed it as he rushed back in.

Kat was now on the floor near the fire, hugging the blanket to herself and leaning very close to the warming flames. The Duke sat near her on the hearth rug and handed her the deck.

Looking into his eyes the entire time, Kat shuffled the deck several times. Then she dealt out the following cards:

Duchess. Surprise. Winter. Betrayal. Escape. River.

The Duke hung his head. He knew that story. The story of his wife, Ella. The story of her death. He did not look up until he heard Kat picking the cards up off the hearth. He watched as she slid them back into the deck. She shuffled them, and then began to lay them down, slowly, one-at-a-time. First she dealt:

River.

Again? That was odd, thought the Duke. She'd seemed to shuffle that card back into the deck. Strange that it showed up a second time, first card of this new hand. She dealt another card:

Blanket.

Still familiar to the Duke. But this time he did not look away, and nodded for Kat to continue. She did, laying down the following two cards:

Woodsman. Boat.

This made no sense to the Duke. “Woodsman?” “Boat?” What could that have to do with the story of Ellyenna’s death? Kat waited for his look of confusion to soften a bit, then dealt out:

Forest. Hut. Fireplace.

Now a strange hope kindled in the Duke. Before the events of this past winter, he’d never believe anything like what was now passing through his mind. But before he could say anything, Kat lay down:

Summer.

Then, quickly:

Baby.

The Duke could not believe what he was seeing. Again, he dared not trust his instincts but gestured for Kat to continue.

She lay down three more cards:

Lass. Autumn. Snake.

This made no sense at all to the Duke. Was the “Lass” Ella? That didn’t make sense. A married woman was a lass no more. He started to say something, to ask what it meant, but Kat hushed him with one finger to her lips. Then she reached down and pulled the blanket up from around her feet, showing him a pale, thin ankle.

There, on her calf, were two small, white dots, about an inch apart. They looked like two little birthmarks, but were the wrong color and too symmetrical. Duke

William had seen their like before, and knew where one would come by scars like those.

“I still don’t...” he began to say, but Kat smiled a bit and held up her hand again. He quieted, and she dealt five more cards, face up, on the warm heath between them:

Ignorance. Castle. Cook. Friendship. Kitchen.

The Duke was motionless, waiting for what would come next. His heart seemed to beat harder, but the pauses between each pulse seemed to last forever.

Finally, looking him directly in the eyes, Kat turned over one more card, and held it up, facing away from her but so that he could read it. He took his eyes from hers long enough to read:

Restoration.

He looked back up. Kat’s eyes were moist, her lower lip trembling. William found that he, too, was shaking as he reached up and took the card from her hand and showed it to her. Kat nodded, not even looking at the card. Looking only at the Duke.

Kat leaned forward. With the hand that had held the card, she reached out, touched his cheek and said aloud, “Let us go, together, and find the lady my mother.”

The Duke nodded.



When Varrod returned from his gardening, he saw that someone had left the secret door open. It had to have been the Duke. Only William, Varrod and Kat knew of the library. He stuck his head inside to find out if William was still there. He was not. Only a blanket and the Weaver deck lay on the hearthstone, in front of a fire that had burned down to embers.

He went to find the Duke, to scold him for having left the secret door open. But none had seen the Duke since early that morning.

When Varrod went up into his tower, he discovered that Kat was missing, too. He set the household guard, the kitchen staff, the Duke's ministers and anyone else he could find to searching for the girl.

But she could not be found. Nor could the Duke.

Not until two days later. When, at dawn, they walked back across the now-thawed drawbridge. The Duke's right arm around Kat's shoulder, the other leading his horse by the reins. The third person with them rode the Duke's great, black war-steed. Rode home, over the moat and into the keep.

The End

of

The Middle



# TaleWeaver

Play it as a game.

Use it as a teaching tool.

Learn your own hidden, creative strengths.

Too many people think they're not creative. They've bought into a culture-wide myth that some people —the creative few— can just sit down, without training, and paint a masterpiece or write a novel or carve a sculpture out of frozen orange juice. Well, that's just a bunch of hooley.

Not only can everyone be creative, but everyone is creative to start with. You have all the tools you need, you just have to un-learn how to be reasonable. You have to put away some of your rational, linear thought... and break the universe apart in ways that don't quite make sense. And then, when you put them back together again... Whamo! You've just been creative.

That's what TaleWeaver is all about. Giving you a few easy tools for making storytelling fun. A very game-like process that will un-scarify the idea of coming up with original stories. That will help you take any ordinary object, action, place or person and put them at the center of a compelling tale. Fun alone or in a group. This 2nd edition of TaleWeaver also includes a set of "roleplaying game" (RPG) rules to make the experience even more fun.

*Andy Havens is a writer and marketing dude who has variously taught arts & crafts, creative writing, marketing, the history of advertising and general creativity principles for more than twenty years. He loves to tell stories, to write them, to play games with them and to incorporate them into his excuses for various bad behavior.*

