

The Portal

Fairy played hooky from school so that she and Frog could go on another grand adventure in the Dark Forest. What she discovered there changed her, and the real world, forever .

“Well, here we are. Ready?”

The forest stood menacingly in front of them, thick with mystery and danger, the creatures within becoming restless, sensing the presence of the nearby intruders.

Fairy looked at Frog. “I sense that you aren’t ready!”

“It looks dark.”

Frog turned around, clumsily. He was grateful for the wings that Fairy gave him, but he just hung from them like a wet cloth, with little control over where they took him.

Looking over the peaceful meadow to the castle and village, barely visible in the distance, he was comforted. He hoped he'd see another unicorn on the green, but perhaps he wouldn't be lucky today.

“This is much better.”

Fairy flitted around and held him by the cheeks to keep him steady.

“I agree. Much better, but not very exciting, and we’ve explored all that already. Many, many times. The Dark Forest is the only place left for grand adventures. Don’t you want grand adventures?”

Frog scowled. “I was almost eaten the last time.”

“Oh, Frog. You were not in any peril. I saved you, didn’t I. Besides, I know more magic, and, and, your flying is much better, I think. You should be able to just zip out of danger’s way.”

Frog held Fairy’s gaze, saying nothing, then he slowly turned around, batting her in the face with one of his wings.

“Lord Bertram will fly into one of his fits if you miss another lesson.” He said.

“I know. But it’s funny watching him randomly transform into all these weird creatures. Snakes is the funniest, though, especially when he’s on the ceiling and, poof, down he comes, bouncing off the slate.”

“But don’t you want to be the next Keeper of the Portal?”

Fairy laughed. “The Portal? That old fairy tale? No way. Nobody believes in that anymore, and the Keeper is just ceremonial. It doesn’t even have any ceremony to go along with the role. As far as I can tell, the Keeper just locks himself away in the castle, and assumes a look of deep, deep, very deep worry. Like this!”

Fairy contorts her face trying in an imitation of deep, deep, very deep worry, as best as a young Blue Fairy can. They burst out laughing at her efforts, and at the thought of old Lord Bertram's fits that were definitely a laughing matter. Not that they'd ever laugh in front of him, even though it was sometimes hard to keep a straight face.

“What do you think is in there, waiting for us?” Said Frog, at last.

“There's nothing waiting for US! They’re waiting for fresh meat!” Fairy snarled ferociously, snapping in Frog’s face, which brought on more fits of laughter because they both knew that Blue Fairies could not make a convincing, angry, snarly face if their lives depended on it.

“Seriously, Fairy, what’s in there?”

"I don't know. That's why it's a grand adventure. This is the Forest, so there will be Ents, but they're harmless, mostly, unless you hurt one of the trees."

"Trees. That's funny. Half the time I don't know where I'm going and the place is full of trees. Very funny indeed!"

"You worry too much. I'll protect us. I have this new thing that I can do."

Concentrating, she furrowed her brow. "There. See?"

"See what?" Said Frog.

"Hmmm, I guess only I can see it. It's a Bubble of Protection. You're inside of it. If you just move a little bit forward, and reach out, you'll touch it. I think. Yes. Try that. Just fly forward and see what happens."

Of course, not having much control over where his wings took him, or how they got him there, Frog took off at full speed and flattened his nose against the inside of the Bubble, crashing down in a heap on the bottom. Fairy laughed out loud, losing her concentration and causing the Bubble to disappear. Frog fell head over wings over gangly legs all the way down to the soft grass.

Fairy was still laughing as she helped him untangle his wings and get into the air again.

"Well," said Frog, "that didn't work as expected!"

"It mostly works. I just need a bit more practice. You better not make me laugh though."

They hovered in quiet anticipation of the adventure at hand, watching the Dark Forest breathe, listening to the snap and growl of the forest creatures. "We should go now!" said Fairy, and away she went, zipping into the forest. Frog didn't move. In a flash, Fairy was back in front of him.

"What happened? We should go. What are you waiting for? Come on, Frog!"

"I can't go that fast, and I'll never find you if you take off on your own. We should go together."

"Right!" Fairy went behind Frog and gave him a mighty Blue Fairy push off, and away they went. Side-by-side into the Dark Forest. The brilliant colours of the meadows gave way to black wells of darkness. The trees seemed to consume any light that made its way through the canopy, and would groan threateningly when the explorers brushed up against them. The vines that wound around the branches constricted and reached out their tentacles hoping to snatch a passing meal. They moved slowly now, with only fairy light to show them the way.

Frog said, "You should maybe do that bubble thing again."

Fairy stopped. "Maybe." She furrowed her brow and Frog could sense the presence of the shield, even if he couldn't see it. "There's something behind us." She said. They turned around just as a giant winged viper attacked, breaking its fangs on the Bubble. The impact sent them flying and Fairy lost control of the Bubble for a heartbeat but managed to pick up Frog before he crashed into the forest floor. The serpent retreated to escape the Ents. Fairy and Frog moved deeper into the forest.

"I saw Wargs down there!" Said Frog. "Lots of them! I've heard of them, but I haven't seen them before."

Fairy smiled. "I promised you adventure, and the forest obliged. Don't you think?"

Frog was silent. There was no path or guiding light, but Fairy had a feeling that this was the right direction, if there was such a thing as a right direction when you're on a grand adventure.

"They're following us. What do you think they want?"

"To eat us." Fairy gave a playful snarl and a claw-like swipe at Frog.

"That's not funny."

Fairy stopped and said, "I think they're curious about where we're going. I don't know why. Do you think we're heading to their lair where the king of the Wargs waits for his afternoon tea?"

Frog glared. They moved on in silence, the Wargs trailing behind. The forest was almost becoming impassable when the trees parted and they were in a small clearing. Except that where you'd expect to see grass, a bubbling brook, a blue sky and brilliant sunshine, they saw obsidian, glassy and smooth and so black that it seemed to absorb all the light around it, all the while shedding light in much the same way.

"They're leaving." Said Frog.

Fairy was silent. Spellbound. Transfixed by something that Frog couldn't see.

"Fairy? They're leaving. What does that mean?" He asked.

Minutes passed. At last, Fairy turned to Frog. "Don't you see it?"

"See what? I don't see anything. Everything's black. Blacker than the forest. What do you see?"

Fairy whispered, "I think I see the Portal!"

"Portal? You don't believe in the Portal! 'That old fairy tale', you said. I still don't see anything. Maybe you've addled your brain from all that concentrating you've been doing."

There was no response. Finally Frog asked, "Tell me what you see?"

"I see life, and motion, and turmoil, and anger, and love. I see it, and I feel it too. If that's the Portal, then the real world is full of exciting things!"

"It is!" Said Lord Bertram. He was standing in the middle of the clearing, leaning on his staff. Frog blinked. There was nothing there a moment ago.

"Where did you come from?" He asked.

"He stepped out of the Portal." Answered Fairy.

"That's right, Joanna. Not everyone can see the portal, Frog. There are a few that can see, but to them it's just a closed door. For others it's like a window and they can see into the real world. Fewer still can feel the vast energy that flows through into our world, the life, anger and love that you said you felt, Joanna. Of those few, there is only one that is also brave and compassionate, and skillful in all the magics. That is the one that will inherit the role of Keeper."

Deep down, Frog knew that Lord Bertram was talking about his Fairy.

"What's it like?" Asked Joanna.

"Why don't you see for yourself? It's very different from our world and you'll see that will be the grandest of all your grand adventures. A word of caution, though. You must not expose yourself and you must have your wits about you all the time. The real world does not understand

magic. It is not even capable of understanding. We were persecuted and enslaved before we created our own world and escaped through this Portal. You will see that nothing has changed. Are you ready?"

Without hesitation, Joanna stepped into the portal and disappeared. Frog blinked. In the same instant, she was there again, but before he could say "Well, that was quick!", she collapsed at Lord Bertram's feet.

"She'll be fine. She's just a little disoriented. I was too on my first trip to the other side, but the poor dear is so earnest that the experience was probably overwhelming."

Soon enough Joanna regained her wings. She hugged Frog tightly. "Oh how I missed you, Frog. I wish you could have been with me. What an adventure."

Turning to Lord Bertram, she continued. "But I don't understand. I was a lifetime in the real world, but you are still the same. I was afraid that you'd both be gone by the time I made my way back to the Portal. Was I imagining all of that, or was I really there?"

Lord Bertram explained. "The two worlds are connected at the Portal. An hour, a day, a year all pass the same in our world as in the real world. When you cross from one world to the other, you leave and come back at exactly the same time. When you're in the real world, though, what you will see in your lifetime is decided by what is known when you enter that world. If you go back in, even a minute later, your experiences and all the real world history will be different, sometimes drastically so."

"If that's true then the destruction and evil that I saw was only one possible outcome and that it doesn't have to be that way! It can be changed."

"It can be changed. Since the very beginning, we've interceded in the affairs of the real world, trying to change things. Alas, all our efforts still end in destruction. Nothing seems to deflect them from their path of self annihilation, and often our meddling seems to be unhelpful. Lady Hester, my predecessor as Keeper, was well meaning but most of what she did ended in war or famine, or other disasters."

"But, how are you, how are we meddling? You said that we have to be invisible to them. That we can't expose ourselves. How can then can we interfere?"

"You can be invisible and still influence. Suggestion, hints, exposing the right people to the right ideas, whispering in their ears, as long as they think it's their own doing. Sometimes it works but often with unintended consequences. I'm sure it's because we just don't understand how they think in the real world. Maybe you'll find out."

"I'm not sure I understand." Said Joanna.

Frog did not understand any of this. He'd fly back home if he wasn't afraid of the Dark Forest, and if he even knew which way home was. Joanna flew in tiny circles, deep in thought. Lord Bertram waited patiently. His head bobbed from time to time. It was late.

"Can I go in again?" Asked Joanna.

"Of course. A Keeper can come and go as they please."

With that, Joanna flew into the Portal. To Frog it was as if she just disappeared into thin air. Then she appeared again. Then she disappeared, and reappeared. And again, and again, and

again. For a long time, Joanna went back and forth through the Portal. Lord Bertram, tired from his own travels was fast asleep. Frog, too, weary of watching Joanna pop in and out of existence, put his head down for a short nap.

Much later, Joanna gently shook Frog and Lord Bertram awake. She said, "I think we should all head back to the castle and have some afternoon tea. I'm famished and all of these adventures are exhausting."

"You have discovered something interesting. Haven't you Joanna? No more grand adventures today, then?"

"Wonderful and interesting. I will tell you all about it over tea."

Frog groaned. "Not through the forest again."

"No need." Said Joanna, and with a small gesture of her hand, they were all back at the Castle doors. Tea and sandwiches were waiting for them when they entered the great hall. As Joanna poured, Lord Bertram asked, "Tell us about your adventures, and about your wonderful and interesting discovery."

Joanna sipped her tea and nibbled on her sandwich.

"What I discovered is that we must stop our incessant meddling. The real world has to find out how to keep themselves from self destructing, and they have to do it all on their very own. Everything we try just seems to end in disaster. They don't need us to help them do the right thing because we don't seem to know what that right thing is. When I realized that I wasn't helping, that everything I gave them and all the whispering that I did, that those things only made it worse, I decided to stop and do nothing. I just watched. What we've done in the past still reverberates. Climate change is a nearing crisis proportions and, Lord Bertram, I'm certain that it was some of your work that sent them down that path. There is hope, though, and it's solely of their own making. I'm especially moved by this young girl who's having quite the impact. She has done much to raise awareness of this crisis, and to mobilize the young people, especially, to action. Perhaps it will go nowhere, but the conversations will continue and there will be others. We need to step back. As the new Keeper, I will only observe because I have hope. Although some would argue otherwise, sometimes hope is enough."

"Well done, Lady Joanna, Keeper of the Portal"