



of Inklings and Willowpillars

BRENT K. NEWCOMB



**OF INKLINGS AND
WILLOWPILLARS**

BOOK ONE

By: Brent K. Newcomb

**The Chronicles of Ber'Ebrin:
Of Inklings and Willowpillars
Book One**

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PROLOGUE

*"It is no great feat to ruin a wicked man.
He does half the work himself.
Give me a good one, and a little time."*

— Ahniella, Crone of Corruption, to her sisters over tea

Once upon a time, perhaps 148 or 149 years or so ago, in this very world in which we live, a truly remarkable thing occurred. In the back lots of a soot-soaked city, from the depths of pungent garbage and foul refuse, there arose a malevolence of ancient power, so wicked that even its shadow did not like to follow it round. This creature was known simply as the Beast—and it was nasty. It was grumpy and grouchy, stinky and sticky, bumpy and lumpy. Altogether, it was full of vinegar and sour moods.

The Beast was an old-world spirit, a despicable thing, an abomination. Its original name was Gurgle, but it had not used it for so long that it had almost forgotten it. It thrived on evil and dastardly deeds. You see, long, long ago, it was not uncommon for such spirits to walk freely and untamed among the land of men. In fact, many of these heartless spirits were responsible for much of the mischief in the world. They were invisible in their natural form and had the talent of touching a person's mind in such a manner as to nudge him toward his partiality to do evil or sometimes, though rarely, good.

Many of these ghastly beings, although not all, were exceptionally cunning and employed elaborate devices and schemes to taint the weak minds of mortals. These methods involved things like creating obsessions with power or wealth, placing temptations for infidelity or envy, or, every now and then, making lopsided deals with folks just for spite. And it was not unheard of for these spirits, if they faced a really stubborn chap, simply to possess his body outright. Although among the other spirits, this was seen as a kind of cheating, totally frowned upon.

Now, some of the spirits were clean, happy-go-lucky, and mischievous, while others were dreadfully brutal and bloody. Some worked in groups, and some worked alone. Some liked to hide things, and some liked to find things. But all possessed the gift to tempt the insatiable lusts in our fragile minds to fit their ultimate ends. In fact, these spirits were responsible for some of the most dastardly deeds in history: Napoleon's conquering of Europe; John Wilkes Booth's assassination of President Lincoln; the invention of the powdered wig—a crime against both dignity and weather; the mustache wax empire—which convinced men their faces were horticultural projects; the publication of *The Origin of Species*—after which dinner parties were never again safe from amateur science and the all-too-cheerful phrase “Every cloud has a silver lining.” For who among us has not grimaced when he's heard that phrase repeated once too often?

But now the Beast had a visitor. Before it stood a goddess of the Old World, Ahniella, who was as exceptionally beautiful as she was wicked. She wore a black Victorian dress with a matching flowered hat and carried a small lace umbrella. “Ahhh, so nice to see you again,” Ahniella greeted. It was snowing and windy, but her dainty umbrella kept the elements at bay.

The multi-armed Beast bowed low, snow falling from its shoulders. “*It's not often I get to hold court before Your Majesty. To what do I owe the displeasure?*” it asked.

Ahniella smiled at the joke. “I've been talking with my sisters, and we have a task for you.”

The Beast looked up at the goddess, its interest piqued at once.

“Your task is not too difficult,” she continued, touching a finger under the Beast's chin, “and I believe it is one you will relish—a real lip-licker. I charge you with corrupting a beautiful, chaste young girl. I want you to bring out the Devil in her.”

The Beast laughed and said, “*That is child's play, old crone. I could do it in my sleep. Give me something worthy of my immense talents.*”

Ahniella replied, “Don't interrupt me, Beast, for I am not finished. The task must be done—by her own free will. She must choose to accept evil into her heart.”

The Beast thought for a while. Such a task was one of the most difficult ever given to a spirit. In those times, young girls were harder to corrupt.

But Ahniella, the crone goddess, knew that the Beast was equal to the challenge. Because the task was so tricky, she made a deal with the Beast. “If you can accomplish this assignment, you shall be given dominion over all the other spirits in the known realms—a real promotion from...” the goddess looked round at the garbage, gesturing, “...*this*.”

The Beast smiled.

“Does that get your kettle a’boiling?” she asked.

“*Who’s the mark?*” queried the Beast.

“Her name is Mary Winchester Doyle.”

“*Why this girl?*” the Beast wondered.

“There’s something about her that’s just ... *too* goody-goody.”

“*Nobody’s perfect,*” the Beast replied.

“Very well,” the goddess said, looking up at the snow falling all round. “What do you say? Let me know quickly, as I am dreadfully unused to this weather.”

The Beast cracked its fingers on four different hands. “*I readily accept!*”

“Good show,” she said. “So be it!” With that, a clap of thunder shook Vanover, and the goddess was gone in a puff of smoke that smelt of paving tar and perfume.

The Beast smiled. At last, it had a purpose, a goal, a task to accomplish: to corrupt a young lass named Mary Doyle, aged fifteen and one-quarter, into betraying her own innocent conscience.

Despite its bravado, the Beast knew that the task was not going to be easy, or the goddess would not have promised it such a reward. For one thing, Mary was one of the most upright and chaste souls in all Victorian Vanover in those days. For another, she was continually surrounded by her young friends, who kept her stalwart; they were all members of a little adventuring club known as the Inklings. For a third, the Beast was getting a sore throat and knew that falling ill would only make it all the grumpier. And, to make matters worse, it had even forgotten its handkerchief.

“O, dearest me,” the Beast said to itself in a growl, *“of all the days to go a’questing. I should never have gotten out of bed. I just knew to-day would be bad the moment I awoke and saw that it was snowing again.”* Bad weather only added to the Beast’s ire, even as clumps of snowflakes landed on its wet, slobbery nose.

So, the Beast trudged ahead in the snow toward the part of the city in which Mary Doyle lived. It would likely need some sort of disguise, for it really did not want to attract attention. Commotion always gave the Beast a headache, and it surely did not want a migraine to add to its troubles.

Fortunately for the Beast, the snow kept people from noticing it, although one small girl walking with her parents pointed at it briefly. It started to sneer at her, but she was mercifully distracted by a storefront window. *Just as well,* the Beast thought; *why ever waste a perfectly good sneer?*

Along the way, the Beast noticed a slovenly booze-bum sitting on the street corner, shivering in his long coat, with little piles of fluffy snow already building on his shoulders and his wool cap. The Beast approached, shielding its own hideous face and red, glowing eyes so as not to cause alarm. The bum looked up through drunken lids and asked, in a creaky voice like an old door, “Spare some change?”

If there was one thing the Beast could not stomach, it was beggars. Intolerable fellows they were, thinking only of themselves and forever asking for handouts. The Beast had half a mind to gobble him up and be done with the trouble. But something held it back—and it was not just the horrendous smell the bum gave off.

“I said, sir, spare some change?” The man repeated his question, this time with more impatience and an outstretched hand.

The Beast’s eyes grew fiery red, like a blazing hearth. But the bum did not notice, for his drunken stupor clouded his sight. Neither of them moved. Only the fall of snow kept the scene from becoming a frozen picture.

“Well, I mustn’t complain,” the bum mumbled to himself after what seemed like an eternity. “Nobody’s got no change nohow.” He slunk back into his coat as a sudden cold wind blew.

“Listen, chap,” the Beast began in a voice echoing as if from a deep well, “Can I ask you something?”

The bum did not respond except with a snore.

The Beast continued, pondering, “*However would one go about tempting a girl to betray her own soul? I mean, if you were a lucifugous devil or a scheming meadow gremlin, you couldn’t just come right out and poke her with a stick until she invited corruption into her heart, now could you? Pray tell, what do you think? What, if anything, would bring out the hidden demon from a righteous child?*”

The man did not react but fell deeper into his slumber. Only the whistling winter wind and the gentle snoring of the bum answered the philosophical question. The Beast grew uncomfortable at the silence and nudged the sleeping drunk with a long, bony finger. The bum rolled over and muttered, half asleep, “...I don’t see you anymore, sir...”

But wait. That was it. That was it! Something the bum had said—not being seen. The Beast must disappear. How clever! In disguise, it could present the innocent Mary Doyle with irresistible temptation, enough to draw out her own beast from within. Yes, it would masquerade in the guise of those she trusted most, gain her confidence, and lay the trap. It was brilliant—and to think, the inspiration came from this snoring, besotted man on the street.

It is neither entirely proper nor even necessary to write exactly what the Beast did to the bum after that. Remember, the Beast was, after all, a most displeasing monster and had committed many abominable acts in its day. Suffice it to say that, after the monster was through, the bum would never again have to worry about being in the cold on the streets of Vanover.

The Beast was unquestionably inspired. It knew just the person it could inhabit—nay, *possess*—to pull off its detestable scheme: a benevolent professor, the very man who hosted Mary Doyle’s adventuring group in his own mansion, Professor Augustus E. Peabody!

And so, the Beast transformed itself into a fog-like mist, blending into its snowy surroundings. In this form, it could only be definitively detected by the occasional red glow of its eyes or the ever-

present, distinct smell of peppermint and cloves, nothing more. With a satisfied huff and a swallow (to test whether it really was coming down with a sore throat), the amorphous shape drifted toward the professor's house. Perhaps, after all, this day might yet turn out to be a good one.

CHAPTER ONE

*"One who sleeps in his chair with the window open, sir,
is asking for it. My mother always said so."*

— Eva, housemaid to Professor Peabody

The year was 1877. It was the middle of a cold, snowy November in the bustling metropolis of Vanover. "Grrrrr!" exclaimed eight-year-old Edgar, making claws like a bear and stomping toward his older sister, Charlotte. "I am mean and hungry, and I have decided to eat you up!"

Edgar Precious was playing his favorite game in his father's drawing-room, pretending to be a wild grizzly. He was a cute little boy with a mop of curly, dark brown hair and the most oddly bulging brown eyes one could ever see. He was ever curious and loved to read about cowboys, buccaneers, knights, and—most especially—wild bears. "Grrrrr!"

"Oh, Edgar. I wish you would stop all this make-believe. You can certainly give a girl a headache!" replied his ten-year-old sister, Charlotte, as she sat on the floor in her father's drawing-room, admiring an exotic butterfly collection he kept in a glass-paned box. "And be careful. Bears can be quite hazardous indoors."

Charlotte Precious looked only fleetingly like her brother. She had honey-blond, wavy hair, now kept in braids. Instead of Edgar's bulging eyes, her eyes were catlike and oval and of the brightest blue. Generally, one might say she was cute, but on the tomboyish side. She always seemed to get her dresses splattered in mud or caught in thickets from her exploits. She was, though, well-read for her age, voraciously attacking her father's collection of classics. She could read simple Latin and Greek and even a smattering of German. Like her brother, she was immensely inquisitive, a fact that had sometimes led them into trouble.

Edgar smiled. "But I'm a most polite bear. I always say 'please' and 'thank you' and 'My, are these cucumber sandwiches not delightful,' even when I hate them."

Charlotte shook her head. "Bears cannot afford to be polite. That is what makes them bears, Edgar."

"Well, I shall be different when I become a bear."

"You're silly. When would you ever become a bear? You cannot very well crawl into a cocoon, as these butterflies do, and pop out in spring as a woolly grizzly."

"Grrrrr!" Edgar growled again and jumped on his sister, tickling her.

"Oh, do stop!" Charlotte laughed, tickling Edgar back. "Mary! Make him stop!"

Mary, who had been quiet up until now, shook her head and rolled her eyes as she lay on an overstuffed chaise longue. In front of her was a small book, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, a bit of Gothic romance, a genre Mary had been quite keen on ever since she had turned fifteen three months before. "Edgar, Charlotte, don't you think you're getting a little old for rolling round on the rug?"

Mary Doyle was a mature girl for her age. She was as tall as a river reed and had a comely face and long, straight, raven-dark hair that she kept styled with pins. She loved to dress in the height of fashion, although, for practical reasons, this really meant dressing in her mother's clothes. This sometimes had a comical result, as many of the fancy dresses and hats were ill-fitting for her body. Nonetheless, she carried herself with style and purpose well beyond her years.

"Mary! We aren't children!" exclaimed Charlotte indignantly, sitting upright and fixing her hair.

Edgar added, "Charlotte may be a child, but I'm a bear! Grrrrr!" He growled and flashed his teeth and "claws" back at Mary.

Mary ignored the two, licked her index finger, and used it to flip to the next page of her book. "When should we be off to see the professor?" she asked without looking up.

"He said for us to be there promptly after supper," Edgar answered, now crawling on all fours, bear-like. "He's just returned from his trip and has something to show us."

Charlotte got up from the floor and put the butterfly box gently back on the shelf. "We can go as soon as those two brothers of yours get here, Mary. They're always mucking about somewhere."

“They’re in-courage-able,” said Edgar, trying out a new, big word.

“That’s incorrigible,” corrected Charlotte.

Mary closed her book and sat up. “I think I hear the house rattle. That must be them.”

“May I still pretend to be a bear?” asked Edgar.

Mary only sighed and shook her head.

In his mansion a few houses down the block, Professor Augustus E. Peabody sat in his high-backed, felt armchair, reading from volume thirteen of his father’s fantastic and wholly unbelievable travel journals. These books were self-penned, lavishly illustrated, full of clipped articles, and entirely unpublished. The professor was perusing the unusual set of books for some clue to help him comprehend and even decipher a difficult map. The map was stretched out not far from him on his cluttered library table, next to a stale glass of wine. “Hmmp,” the professor snorted, completely puzzled. “I say again—hmmp!”

The professor, it seems, had just arrived the day before yesterday, along with only half of his possessions, from a doomed trip to South America, where, fortunately (or perhaps unfortunately), he had acquired the mysterious map. The servants recalled him as panicked yet elated when a hansom cab dropped him at the front door of his residence. He had gone inside at once, neither taking his lunch nor stopping for tea, and had locked himself in his study for the last two days. The servants did not worry too seriously about him, as this seemed the normal course of events for the unconventional man with enormous mutton chops and a protruding lower lip. The professor was on sabbatical from the university at which he taught, you see. The servants believed this eccentricity would pass and that he would be his normal self again in no time. Only the grumpy maid, Eva, complained that it was difficult to keep things clean with his unpredictable behavior.

The professor smoothed the parchment for the dozenth time. "Look here, what are you trying to tell me?" he mumbled to himself.

The map itself had been a most difficult find in South America. It had required the intense negotiation of a dense rain forest, the crossing of two giant rivers filled with unsightly beasts with long teeth, a battle with an indigenous tribe hawking souvenirs, the loss of two good servants imported directly from Mozambique (they deserted the professor when he yelled at them for forgetting his butterfly net), and the total destruction of his favorite travel wardrobe, the heavy one with filigreed latches and a hand-sewn angel-tapestry lining. But in the end, he had found what he had traveled many miles to obtain: *the map*.

And so, for many hours (marked by the annoying clucks of the cuckoo in the clock), the professor remained in his study, locked away from all civilization, reading and thinking. Would this be a clue to locating Ber'Ebrin, that fabled paradise his father had sought his whole life?

Mary's mother, Mrs. Franklin Doyle, or Adelaide for short, was having coffee and breakfast pastries with Mrs. James R. Precious, or Clara, while the three children played in the drawing-room.

"I tell you, Clara, I do not know what to do with Mary," Adelaide said, blowing to cool her drink. "That girl has one foot in a book and the other on a banana peel. She simply cannot get her priorities straight. No respectable gentleman is ever going to call on her like that."

Clara smiled and patted Adelaide's hand. "She's still a child, Addie. Let her grow up naturally."

"She's already fifteen, proper courting age. I don't see one eligible boy out there looking for a wife with a head full of nonsense. Right time she grew up proper."

"I wouldn't be too worried. She has a good head on her shoulders. And she has been such a wonderful influence on the others."

“Why, did I tell you I heard her say she dreamt of becoming a princess? I mean, my lands, what drivell!”

“That’s the game the children play, Addie. They go off on fantastic adventures in Africa or South America. It is all quite harmless, so long as they stay in the neighborhood.”

“Mother?” The two ladies looked up as Mary entered the dining room, followed by Edgar and Charlotte. “We’re going to the professor’s, just as soon as Charles and Jules get here.”

Adelaide frowned. “Mary, perhaps you had better come back home this time. I am sure you have some things to do more appropriate for a girl your age.” As she spoke, her mother dusted off Mary’s dress and straightened the front bow of her lace belt. “We’ve talked about this. And why do you keep getting into my dresses? They don’t fit properly.”

“But Mother, I promised the professor.”

Adelaide looked at her daughter for a few seconds, wanting to scold her. However, this was neither the time nor the place, while they were guests in another person’s home. Mary pleaded with her eyes.

“Very well, but we need to have a long talk about your future, young lady.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Mary said with a small curtsy.

“Come on!” exclaimed little Edgar, pointing out of the window. “Your brothers are here!”

Clara smiled to herself as she took a sip of her coffee.

The professor’s study was a fascinating place. The small room in which he sat was a cross between a dusty, mildewed library and a menagerie of stuffed trophy animals. Every wall was lined with hundreds of books on shelves, some inserted the wrong way round or upside down, including such titles as *Barnaby’s Plant Species of Northern Scandinavia, second edition*, the *Complete Works of Aristotle as Retold by the Farmers’ Home Journal*, *Collections of Monastic Prayers of the Zimbabwe Coptic Priests*, and a pop-up picture

book, *The Fantastic and Terrible Book of Naughty Dryads and Nymphs*.

Mixed in among the shelves and stacks of discarded books were dozens of stuffed birds without feathers, other wild animals, and the heads of lions, antelope, bears, and deer, and even a rhinoceros horn on the wall. None of these was the result of the professor's own hunting prowess; all had been inherited from his father, a certain Arthur Peabody by name.

The place smelt of mildew, mold, and old fabric, with a large dose of smoking pipe-tobacco mixed in. The carpets were always damp from rainwater seeping in through the window on the east wall. Overall, the study was tremendously dusty and cramped. The professor rarely—meaning almost never—let his servants in to clean, only to bring him tea on a platter or a plate of food if he was engrossed in a book.

On the oaken library table, cluttered with magnifying glasses and volumes of writings, lay *the map*. The large parchment artifact was wrinkled and browned with age and covered in numerous scripts and scribbles, most of which were unreadable and unintelligible, even if the professor had known Latin, Persian, Ancient Caellynd, Sumerian, or—Heaven help him—Sanskrit. There were symbols throughout and depictions of lands that no mortal had ever seen; no mortal, that is, except his own father. Or at least that is what his father had written in his quaint, half-mad journals.

The professor, like his father before him, was in search of a most mystical and revered place, a veritable paradise, a land extending through several overlapping realms, a land where fortune and eternal life possibly waited. The place had many names, but the professor preferred the name “Ber'Ebrin,” or “the Beautiful Place.” Apparently, this map showed one how to get there if one could just read it and follow its instructions.

The professor harrumphed again, shaking his head. Would this confounded map ever make sense?

But here was the rub: Professor Peabody could not simply ask his father anything. His father, you see, had disappeared many years before while the young man was away at university. No one knew

where he had gone, but his departure had been sudden and without so much as a zephyr of a clue. Servants would later recall that he had been raving and distraught in the few hours before he vanished, as though talking nonsense with someone they could not see, about crones, pirate lords, forest imps, and other such esoteric subjects.

The professor himself returned soon thereafter to run the estate in place of his father, taking up teaching at the local institute, as his mother had long since passed away. He kept the staff employed to quiet their rumors and gossip, although this did not prevent the growth of a reputation in the city as the son of a crackpot—or perhaps even a cracked pot himself.

The moniker of “cracked pot” was perhaps not far from the truth. Intellectually, the professor was a scientist in the classic sense, a real science-sharp. He was a great student of philosophy and history, although he was terrible at remembering facts. He devoted his life to experimentation and to the pursuit of knowledge that was of interest to him; the key part of that phrase was “to him,” which led down many tangents. Thus, legitimate scientists would probably have called what he did pseudoscience or alchemy. But the professor wholeheartedly believed in his studies.

Much of what he discovered or invented seemed impractical to the practical eye. He was the inventor of a spinning top that needed no string, a sun-powered candle, a large steaming device that turned pure gold into lead, a mechanism that dehydrated drinking water, a contraption that helped a person tip his hat without using his hands, a nose wipe that was sewn onto one’s jacket sleeve, and even spectacles for nearsighted cats. The professor was always at work, when he was not traveling or lecturing, virtually living in the basement laboratory of his creaky, dull-black Victorian mansion in Vanover. Bizarre sounds, weird smells, and noxious fumes poured out of the laboratory when he worked at all hours of the day, prompting his servants to speculate about his practicing witchcraft, sorcery, or even worse ... gambling!

The professor picked up the map and sniffed at it with his too-thin nose. Nothing. Wait—nutmeg? That couldn’t be. Whyever would the map smell like nutmeg? Maybe he would walk down to the

laboratory, and that would clear his head. Yes, a quick jaunt to the lab should do it.

Fwap! A snowball exploded on the side of the Victorian home of the Precious family. Charles Doyle and his twin brother Jules were outside in full winter coats and hats, fighting the most stupendous war since Napoleon had fought the Duke of Wellington at Waterloo.

“And here’s another!” yelled Charles as he hurled an especially large snowball toward Jules.

Fwap! Jules dodged the oncoming barrage, yelling back, “We shall never surrender, no matter the lives lost! Prepare for counterattack!”

Charles and Jules Doyle were exactly twelve years and thirty-four days old. They were rowdy and enjoyed the ruggedness of adventures most of all when they weren’t playing war. There was almost nothing the boys would not dare try. As such, both proudly sported numerous scars and scrapes from various minor mishaps, tumbles, and wrestling matches. Their mother, Adelaide, had often scolded them to curb this wild behavior, but it did nothing to deter their natural inclination toward sports and outdoor running. If a sport caused one to lose one’s breath, then they were already masters at it, from hiking to rowing and from tennis to archery.

Charles was the more outgoing of the two, having been born nearly fifteen minutes before his brother. He was a bit more raucous, silly, and extroverted. As such, fortune just seemed to shine brighter on him. Jules, on the other hand, was slightly envious of his twin. One could say he was a bit more reserved or contemplative. But more accurately, he was always looking for a way to come out of his brother’s long shadow. He was his own person and was tired of hearing everyone conflate them, especially when only Charles had been naughty. No one but Jules noticed, and he’d be darned if he ever spoke a word to anyone. But it was fine. One day, things would change. Charles just had better luck, that’s all.

“Aye, but you’re outgunned!” countered Charles as he patted several snowballs he had prepared. “Ne’er have you seen the likes of this arsenal. Surrender now, and your loved ones will be spared!”

“Then we shall die this day!” yelled Jules as he rushed his brother through the snow.

The two toppled backward in a giant snowdrift with a Fwumph! Jules did his best to rub snow in Charles’s face, but his efforts were thwarted as Charles rolled his brother to one side and took the advantageous position. Charles raised his hands in victory. “Triumph!” he yelled.

Jules smiled, admiring his brother. Yup, Charles always seemed to come out on top. This was no exception.

But Charles’s victory was short-lived as Mary, the twins’ older sister, chided them from the door. She was dressed in her thick, long wool jacket with beautiful beadwork and fur collar over her ankle-length dress. “Boys! It’s time we headed to the professor’s. He expects us any minute.”

Jules threw a snowball at Mary. “Take that, you heady vixen! The battle’s yet on!”

Fortunately, the snowball missed Mary but nearly hit little Edgar, who had just appeared from behind Mary along with his sister Charlotte.

Edgar raised his ‘claws’ and snarled, “Grrrr!”

Charles yelled, “Oh, my. We’d better not make the squirrel angry!”

“I’m not a squirrel! I’m a polar bear!” Edgar exclaimed.

Charles laughed, standing up and brushing off the snow that covered his clothes. “You could’ve fooled me! Polar bears are white, and your coat’s as black as a dog’s nose at night.”

“Now!” reminded Mary, trying to keep her brothers in line. She was keenly aware that her mother was just inside and no doubt listening. “We shouldn’t keep the dear professor waiting. I hear he’s got something especially exciting to show us this time.”

“No, indeed!” Jules and Charles put their arms round each other’s necks and cheerfully said, “We be ready, Inklings. Lead on to adventure!”

“And I get to be a bear this time,” added Edgar.

“You’re always a bear, Edgar. Maybe one time you’ll be something different, like a giraffe,” said Charles tauntingly.

“A giraffe!” said Edgar. “Who ever heard of a giraffe going on a journey?”

And so, laughing, the intrepid band of five children headed toward the professor’s snow-covered mansion down the street. What the professor had in store for them after his latest wild adventure, they could only guess.

To-day, the professor’s laboratory was even shoddier for wear than the study. Located in the basement, it was home to fetid rats, spiders, and other damp creatures that prefer those wretched places. Instruments were piled on instruments, vials in dusty vials. Electrical wire was wrapped round metal prongs. Spices and herbs and old vegetables hung from the ceiling. If one could walk round without stepping on mouse droppings, one would find charred remnants of explosions, strange colors baked in the furniture and floor, curious dried splatterings of wax, metal, sawdust, and nails. But this was the professor’s lair and favorite room. He would have it no other way. And no, despite the rumors, the professor did not gamble in the basement. Games of chance were reserved for his social club only.

Inside the laboratory, the professor adjusted his crimson-and-black smoking jacket. He slipped his familiar thin pipe into the breast pocket and removed the monocle from his bloodshot right eye. “Most intriguing,” he said to himself as he ran his hand through his balding, gray, greased hair. Would he ever understand this enigma of a map? The change of scenery had not helped. Perhaps what he needed was a break, a proper distraction.

The professor paced to and fro, stepping on books and papers and kicking test tubes out of his way. He muttered to himself, “I wonder whether it is a map at all. I should hope it is.” He quickly tired of pacing and returned to his creaky laboratory chair, letting out another harrumph.

With his father gone, the professor had been too glad to take leave of the university, as he had been well behind in most of his non-interesting subjects. He was simply too intrigued by experimenting on his own, dismissing current scientific knowledge as a fad that would fade away soon enough. But this map had consumed him, occupied his every thought. It must have been written by someone without his own homespun knowledge of the universe, or worse—it might have been written by a disgruntled attorney with a headache. Its existence had surely plagued his missing father. *This blasted map!*

To get his mind off the preoccupying parchment, the professor picked up one of his most recent inventions: his infamous potion belt. This curiosity was a wide leather belt with an enormous brass buckle, encircled by many small pockets. Within each pocket rested a glass vial or ampoule, corked and containing a liquid. Each vial's contents were of a different consistency, weight, color, opacity, and even texture. Some were red and flecked with metallic sparkles. Some were luminous green, ochre, or purple with layered oils. Some looked like clear water. Regrettably, he was not wholly sure what each liquid was good for, as he had only just invented the machine that produced them and had not yet quite discovered how it worked.

In case you were wondering, the professor's unpatented "liquid-processing machine" was a contraption to behold. It stood about three feet tall and was made mostly of brass, copper, and wrought iron. There were levers and metal bits, dials and gauges, tubes and funnels. To operate the device, the professor would simply pour two or three random liquids—such as soured milk, black greasing oil, and runny tree sap, or perhaps rheumatoid tonic, liquid buffalo fat, and rainwater—into the machine, pull several levers, and stand back. The steam-powered device would rattle and sputter along, sending its bizarre mixture through various internal processes until, at last, with a puff of smoke, just enough mysterious liquid would pour out into one of the little vials. At this, the professor would sniff the vial, sometimes label it, cork it, and store it away in his belt to be tested later.

The professor simply hoped the practicality of his invention would become evident once he experimented further. This was how he worked: inventing the horse-cart before discovering the horse. If he

ever went on another adventure, he would certainly take the potion belt, giving himself ample time to experiment with the mysterious liquids in the field.

He was interrupted by a knock at the door. He put down the belt as his grumpy, pasty maidservant, in a white bonnet, long black homespun dress, and plain white apron, poked her head into his chamber and announced the arrival of guests in the study, then quickly disappeared.

“Ah, Eva,” he mumbled, “the children are here. I’d almost forgotten.”

The professor knew the neighborhood children well. He would entertain them when they visited with wild, imaginative stories from his books, or ones he made up himself. He would thrill them with examples of his experimental crafts, making them laugh, gasp, or stare in awe. He would amuse them with trips to the woods or into the city, or with lavish banquets. The professor was always kind to them, treating them like his own children, for he was a bachelor and would probably remain so. The children even considered him an honorary member of their group, the Inklings.

The children were five in number in their little adventuring club, all now standing properly before the professor in his study. “Hullo, sir,” little Edgar greeted. “How *do you do*?” The boy bowed politely. He simply loved the phrase as he believed it made him appear much older than he was.

Charlotte, his sister, curtsied upon seeing the professor and said, “Good morning, sir.”

Twins Jules and Charles smiled and greeted, “Hullo to you, sir.”

Mary, the twins’ older sister, curtsied as well.

Jules picked up a book by its corner that was lying in a damp spot. “Maid’s day off, I see?” he said with a smile.

What brought the five children and the professor together was that they had created a secret club specifically for the task of adventuring, whether it be perambulating through the park, taking horses to the country, finding a way into the city’s sewage tunnels for a look-round, or simply imagining a far-away adventure while

camping in the attic. They called themselves the “Inklings.” The name Inklings was chosen in reference to the children’s love of books—hence the “ink”—and their love of imagination. Incidentally, a study group of important literary figures at Oxford would choose this same name many years later for its own, and in time, they would even write some of their adventures down for publication, although that is not important to this story.

The professor greeted them as he attempted to fold his map on the table.

The five children were immediately drawn to the curious parchment like flies to honey. Edgar could not help himself and ran directly up to the table. “Hullo! What’s this?” he asked, tipping over a pedestal with a stuffed parrot and knocking over several books on astrology and numerology. This made the professor snarl, nervous that Edgar might damage the map or, at the very least, knock a candle onto it. But before he could scold the youth, Charlotte was already perusing the sprawling document intently with her finger and a large magnifying glass.

The professor’s thin, sharp jaw dropped when he realized Charlotte was making sense of the map. “Girl, what do you see?” he demanded. “Can you understand these mad scribbles?”

Charlotte smiled and answered, “Of course,” as though the map were written in the simplest English, giving directions to the local bakery.

Mary peered over her shoulder. “You can’t possibly make sense out of that old thing,” she scoffed.

“But I do, Mare,” Charlotte replied with another smile. “It’s so easy.”

The professor remained utterly baffled. “Child, do you know how long I’ve been studying these mysterious writings? Why, ever since my voyage home by ship and then by train from South America, that’s how long! I simply cannot make heads or tails of the script myself.”

Charlotte said, “Well, sir, I’m not really reading the words on the map, Professor, but more like ... reading the sounds and hearing the pictures.”

Reading sounds and hearing pictures? thought Charles. “Do let’s hope no one tries to taste the map!” he said aloud.

Charlotte went on, entirely unruffled. “One symbol, for example, smells of sharp spices, and this one of old leather. I can hear chains and other metal clanging, like pots hanging from a kitchen ceiling in the wind. And this one smells, well ... dragon-y.”

Everyone stared at her in disbelief, knowing her imagination was matched only by Edgar’s. But Charlotte seemed perfectly serious. “The map says that the gate may be entered by those who possess the ‘klesnomis’—or key-coins—and that the Colorless Kingdoms lie beyond,” she declared matter-of-factly. She added an apology for understanding little else, for the map was truly worn and badly stained.

This excited the professor tremendously; his harrumph softened and lengthened into a steady, resonant “hmmm.”

From that moment forward, the energized children talked of nothing else but adventuring in the land. Each was certain he knew what the Colorless Kingdoms must be.

Young Edgar proffered, “The word ‘Colorless’ must be a place quite strict and dull, where governesses carry switches and make children do ’rithmetic and eat stale carrots.”

“That’s pure sausage-cakes, Edgar,” said Jules. He pointed to a picture of a coiled dragon-snake sitting on a black, smudged hill in the center of the map. “This could only mean that creatures without the ability to see colors would reside there, such as lizards and bugs and snakes and such.”

“Not on your life,” Charles said. “I, for one, think it’s a sort of purgatory—a waiting place or stepping-stone to paradise. For how could a land be absent of color? That’s the most harebrained thing I’ve ever heard!”

This nearly set the brothers to blows on the spot, as each gave the other a hearty shove in turn.

Mary was intrigued by the smells she was now sensing from the map. “I could swear I smell coal and the sweat of horses,” she said.

“Why, you smell it, too?” Charlotte asked.

Mary’s nose wrinkled. “Yes, and I don’t think it’s a place for a lady like myself.”

“Lady?” snorted Charles. “Since when did *you* become a lady? You’re an adventurer, like the rest of us—always were, always will be.”

Mary frowned. Yes, in her heart, she was still the young girl with a wonderful imagination. But she was fifteen now and felt like she should act her age—at least a little.

“Well, now, those are all good ideas,” the professor said approvingly. He himself, alas, had noticed none of the strange odors, having lost most of his sense of smell and taste while experimenting in search of a cure for varicose veins. Thus, a major clue had gone quite undetected, and right under his nose, if one pardoned the expression.

It was Charlotte who observed that the picture of the dragon was moving ever so slightly, as if it were faintly animated. The motion was so subtle that she needed a large magnifying glass (or “spyglass,” as Edgar styled it). “It just winked at me,” she cried. “It has a very thin crown on its head that keeps falling over its eyes!” No one truly believed she had seen the picture stirring—no one save Edgar, who was always ready to entertain such notions—but Charlotte remained resolute.

“The only thing left to do, children, after we finish studying the map, is to go there ourselves,” the professor announced matter-of-factly.

The group accepted this as calmly as if he had suggested an outing to the local park.

Jules spoke up, “The Inklings will never let you down, sir, and we shall jolly well sleep on this until we get to the bottom of your mystery!” Jules was full of bravado, but truth be told, he would almost certainly forget the assignment once he was distracted by wrestling with Charles later that afternoon.

Knowing precisely what was on his brother’s mind, Charles gave a harrumph in imitation of the professor.

Mary’s stern look put him back in his place. “We should think on it, boys. You’re so impulsive. In the meantime, do let’s hear about the professor’s trip.”

“Yes, Mother dear,” Charles mocked.

Edgar, thinking it another game, echoed with a giggle, “Yes, Mother dear.”

And so, the professor regaled them with all the most interesting particulars of his latest adventure. Three full hours passed before the children finally took their leave, having had their fill of tea, pies, apple butter, and astonishing tales. In each child’s mind, he resolved to set off at once, just as soon as he had packed and enjoyed a proper night’s sleep. Only Mary remained hesitant. She knew the land was fanciful and that the Inklings would almost certainly pretend to go there—just as they had done before with the professor’s help. Yet something deep within her still longed to believe, and this small inner voice argued continually with her mother’s voice in her head.

However, unbeknownst to the excited children, it was one of the first times the professor was truly glad to see them go. He believed he had just remembered something important about the land of Ber’Ebrin and felt he needed privacy to conduct more serious, grown-up experiments on the subject to confirm his suspicions.

“Whatcha’ got them kids all riled up about this time, sir?” asked Eva, trying to dust round the professor as he sat in his armchair, trying to read his father’s journals. “You’re always havin’ ’em over and then sending ’em off to their parents like they’ve eaten only sugar. Their mums sure ain’t gonna tolerate that for much longer, that I can assure ya.”

The professor smoked his pipe and smiled as he lifted his legs for Eva to sweep under. “They’ll be fine. They’re good kids with a healthy imagination.” He pointed with his pipe for emphasis. “Specially the young ones.”

“And put that foul pipe away,” scolded Eva, taking his pipe from his hand. “Never could stand the smell of such things. It’s not ’ealthy havin’ yer house full o’ smoke all the time, Lord knows.”

The professor smiled as he leaned forward for her to dust the back of his chair. “Eva, did I ever tell you about my father?”

“I knew ’im, sir. I was ’ere when he left for the last time.”

“Oh, yes, that’s right. That you were.” The professor blew his nose in his pocket handkerchief as the dust was thick in the air.

“Yes, toward the last few days he’d be mumblin’ for ’ours and no one could understand a bloomin’ word ’ee said,” Eva related as she focused on the professor’s desk with her feather duster.

The professor stood to give Eva more room. “He was a good man, that much I recall. But yes, toward the end, he had slipped a gear, I think. I never did get to tell him good-bye, either.”

“Don’t remember ’im really bein’ the sentimental type, sir.” Eva was now trying to dust the shelves where the professor was standing. He moved.

“No, he was a strict and distant man. That much is sure,” reflected the professor. “But there were times that he would take me on a walk or have me with him in his laboratory, and it was the most wonderful thing I can remember in my life.”

“Do tell, sir, if it’s not too pers’nal,” prodded the maid.

“Funny thing, he was a man of hard facts, cold stone facts.”

“Aye, that ’ee was,” Eva added, following the professor as he tried to get out of her way.

“And yet he encouraged imagination. I never quite understood the balance between the two. But such was his character.”

“I don’t right understan’ what you mean, sir.”

“He told me how sad it made him that children’s imaginations were put to waste. Almost as if the pressures of the world, the long hours on a farm, or working as an apprentice in a shop, or working in a factory, gobbled up children’s imaginations. He thought the world was a far poorer place in which to live because of it.”

“Is that why you encourage the children, Professor?”

“I guess that’s why I do, Eva. I guess that’s why I do.”

“Well, you go on doin’ it, sir, and you’ll ’ave four angry parents a’ knockin’ at yer door before you can say fiddlesticks.”

The maid eventually left. The professor spent several more hours poring over his father’s journal until he heard the clock strike

midnight. The sound triggered an epiphany. He hurried to his laboratory as fast as he could and began rummaging through wooden boxes furred with dust and cobwebs. Trinkets, odd garments, letters, rusty pins, a disabled bell-pull, ten bent wax candles, and all manner of sundry objects went flying as he searched frantically for something he knew he had once put away. At last, in the final box, buried beneath the last scrap of moth-eaten cloth, he found it: a hardened leather satchel bound up with twine and no larger than his own thin, clenched fist.

The professor sniggered with joy. At last, he had something! His gaunt fingers worried the twine loose, and he upended the satchel onto the wooden floor. Six coins of hard-baked clay, glazed with enamel, tumbled out, spinning and clinking until they came to rest. Each coin bore a tiny hole at the top and a Cyrillic stamp, *ключ*—*klyuch*, the Russian word for ‘key.’”

It was fortunate that the professor had remembered anything about the coins at all. He had not rummaged through any of this rusty, musty junk since his father had so inexplicably disappeared, for the old man had been one of the worst pack rats imaginable and simply could not bring himself to throw anything away.

A curious passage in his father’s journal about the coins had jolted the professor’s overactive mind, reminding him of those once-useless trinkets. According to the account, his father had acquired them in Constantinople during one of his journeys through Europe and Asia. He had never discovered their true significance but had bought them from a Tzigane—a local gypsy—after hearing her utter a word that sounded remarkably like the mystical land “Ber’Ebrin.” The Tzigane herself knew nothing of the place and only repeated a fireside tale she had heard from a trader out of Siberia. For the professor’s father, the trail of the coins ended there, and he had cast them aside into these boxes many years before, consigning them to rest with dozens of other discarded adventurous leads, abandoned and unpursued.

The professor stared at the coins, thinking back many years when his father had spoken to him as a boy about utopias and paradise. It was a strange topic for his father to bring up, but Augustus had been

spellbound. He was fourteen or fifteen at the time, helping his father with some obscure research in the mansion's library.

"Son," said his father. "Have you ever heard of a land called 'Ber'Ebrin?'"

"Sure, father," said the boy. "I think it's some sort of paradise, like the Garden of Eden, or Elysium, or Zion."

"Something like that. But better. Here, have a look at this," his father said, turning a large, thick book round toward the boy. He pointed a knobby finger at a woodcut of a beautiful land, filled with nymphs and fairies, fauns and maidens. Several of the figures were nude, chasing one another through the trees; others reclined at their ease, plucking grapes straight from the vine and eating them. In the background rose an enormous Gothic castle.

The boy's curiosity was piqued, for never had he seen such a mystical place. "And where is this land, Father?"

His father sat back and smiled. "That's the rub, my boy. No one knows."

The child's curiosity was now aflame. "But Papa, surely someone knows, or he wouldn't have been able to draw the place."

His father leaned forward and patted his son on the head. "Exactly, my boy," he said. "And I believe in my heart of hearts that this place exists."

"What's Ber'Ebrin supposed to be like?"

His father wet his index finger and flipped a few pages in the tome. "Well, my son, it is written here that the place grants everlasting life, eternal bliss, and the most wonderful banquets served by young maidens."

"But what about Mother?" the boy asked when he heard the word "maidens."

"What *about* Mother?" the father replied, his left eyebrow arching upward.

"Wouldn't she be jealous if you found it?"

"Son, your mother's already there and waiting for us."

The boy's face grew pale. "But Mama passed away two years ago, Papa."

"I know," his father said, his expression falling. He walked over to a paper silhouette of his wife displayed in a frame on a nearby shelf. He gazed at it for several moments, a small tear gathering in one eye. "That is where she went when her spirit left her body."

The boy was suddenly filled with joy and hope. He had missed his mother terribly since she had died of consumption, wasting away in bloody coughs until her spirit could cling to life no longer. He had been young. Until that moment in the library, he had been certain he would never see her again, and now, to think there might be a chance that her spirit still lived on.

"How ever do you know, Papa? How do you know she's there?"

"Because she believed in the land herself with all her sweet soul. With her last breath, she promised me we would be reunited there. I've searched for clues ever since that very day."

The professor shook his head, trying to put the sad memory behind him. He had lost his mother, and then his father had vanished in his mad, desperate attempt to find the land. In time, after long years, he had given up all hope of seeing either of them again; one simply learns to live with the pain.

But now he had the coins. There was something in those coins—a clue. He felt so close he could almost smell it.

The professor's heart sang. He ran back to his study with the coins and deftly spread them out on the table beside the map. Now he needed to determine how they were to be used. He experimented with them, having absolutely no notion of their true potential. He slipped them into his pockets, flipped them into the air, tossed them into a hat, spoke to them, spun them, stood upon them, even tried boiling them in water—all to no avail. At last, the professor, quite stymied, collapsed back into his chair, broken-hearted. "Hmmm," he sighed. He was at a dead end, like his father before him.

Outside, in the cold Vanover snow late that evening, when all were snug in their beds, a low-lying, almost effervescent fog drifted and

searched. Just outside the Precious home, the fog paused and hovered, then slowly began to creep up the front steps, wrapping itself round the house as it probed for a way in. This was no ordinary fog, mind you, but that contemptible Beast in effluvial form, a malevolent vapor, a disdainful brume. It slid up the side of the house, peering through each window in turn, and, finding none of them open so much as a crack, oozed higher onto the snow-covered red slate roof toward the small black chimney pipe that jutted out, puffing hearth smoke into the crisp night air.

The vaporous form coalesced round the pipe and began to pour itself down, heedless of the black smoke struggling upward in the opposite direction. When it reached the fireplace, the small fire that had been burning gave a feeble sputter and went out. The fog then drifted into the living room, which lay deserted and hushed at this late hour, save for the ticking of the grandfather clock, its hands marking 1:45 in the morning. The mist quietly filled the room, curling about the furniture, brushing the wallpaper, and creeping over the cushions of the love seat.

The transparent, wispy gloom was not satisfied with merely befouling everything with its vile touch. It began to flow up the staircase, slowly and deliberately. Soon it reached the children's door, left open a crack by the family nanny, and slipped inside, hanging low. Within, the flame of a small candle wavered—a nightlight for little Edgar, who lay upon his bed beneath a thick down comforter, dressed in his nightgown. The candle went out at once, the moment the fog entered the room.

Not far away lay Charlotte in her own bed, also fast asleep, her blonde curls spilling across the pillow. Beside her on the nightstand rested a small stack of books, each marked and waiting to be continued. The fog brushed against the volumes as it drifted through the room, pausing before each child in turn, lurking, contemplating, scheming.

Little Edgar shifted in bed, still asleep but turning to face the fog. A slender tendril of mist reached out to touch his cheek and slowly stroked his forehead. Edgar's nose twitched, and his mouth quivered; a nightmare had claimed him now, and he might wake at any

moment. Quickly, the mist recoiled, slipping back down the stairs and into the fireplace, and within seconds it had vanished entirely from the house.

This procedure repeated itself just a few houses away at the Doyle residence. There, the fog found it easier to slip inside, for a narrow crack had been left in the twins' upstairs window for ventilation. It seeped through the opening and soon filled their room, lingering long enough to gaze upon the boys, weighing whether to claim one of them for its naughty business, before at last deciding against it.

But where was Mary—that one girl who was the Beast's true objective? The Beast was forbidden to possess her in any way, yet it longed to gaze upon its chosen prey, nonetheless. The fog glided out of the boys' room and down the hallway toward Mary's. When it reached her door, it slipped through the black metal keyhole and oozed into the room beyond. There she lay: the one appointed for it to corrupt.

The haze coalesced again, rising until it assumed its own shape: a multi-armed old man with a deformed, warped face and a twinkle of fire in his eyes. In this guise, it remained ethereal, a ghost, an apparition not unlike the specter of Jacob Marley from the book *A Christmas Carol*, which, by no small coincidence, lay upon her nightstand beside the bed. The creature glided closer and bent over her, silently watching her sleep.

Mary lay in bed in an austere nightgown and a cinched nightcap, a spill of black hair trailing down her back. The Beast reached out and stroked a lock between its fingers as it contemplated and schemed. "Yes," it whispered. "*This will be satisfying.*"

When she, too, began to stir as nightmares filled her dreams, the image of the Beast dissolved back into fog and gently retreated from the room. Before it slipped once more through the keyhole, it whispered, "*Sleep tight, little one,*" and then it was gone.

Back in Charlotte and Edgar's room, Edgar was awake, rubbing his eyes and trying to rouse his sister. "Charlotte, Charlotte," he whispered. "Can I get into bed with you?"

Charlotte smiled and opened her covers for Edgar to crawl in. "What's wrong? Having a nightmare?"

Edgar snuggled next to his sister.

“You’re shaking, Edgar. What’s wrong?”

“I saw an old man, and he asked me about Mary,” Edgar softly answered.

“What did you tell him?”

“I was scared. I ran away.”

“That’s not like you, Edgar. You’re so brave.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are. I can’t imagine you’d ever run from danger. That proves it was a dream.”

“Really?” asked Edgar.

“I’m positive,” she said and kissed his forehead. “Remember,” she added. “We have an adventure ahead.”

“Oh, correct! I’d nearly forgotten.”

With that, both children fell asleep, leaving the nightmare behind.

It was not long before the professor was sound asleep, slumped in his favorite chair, deep into the night. A most mysterious thing happened in his home as well. From the latticed window, a strange wind began to howl; glass panes and shutters banged and rattled themselves open, yet the professor did not stir. When at last the panes stood wide, the wind fell silent, and everything grew deathly still save for the feeble tick of the old cuckoo clock in the corner, now badly in need of winding. Had the professor been awake—and blessed with a keener sense of smell—he might have noticed a peculiar odor, something like peppermint mixed with cloves. But alas, he slept on, and so he did not see the tacky, soupy fog that had begun to seep into his study from the night outside.

The fog seemed alive, thrumming with its own quiet malice as it oozed through the open window and sank toward the floor. It slipped across the study, and one by one the candles guttered and went out. Slowly, it slid over the thick Persian carpet without so much as a pause to admire the intricate hand-woven silk patterns. It flowed across a

stack of papers and parchments, each crowded with scribbles and figures in the professor's shaky hand, then curled round the stuffed parrot Edgar had knocked over earlier. Ever advancing, it crept nearer and nearer to the slumbering, gently snoring professor.

It made its way round the professor's feet, slowly climbed his striped trousers, circled his waist, and rose to his neck before beginning to pour itself into his nostrils, which were badly in need of a trim. Within a few minutes, the entire fog had vanished into the hapless professor's nose.

In the professor's dream, he was standing in a garden behind a white picket fence with a small gate. An old man in baggy clothes approached, and they shook hands over the fence. To the professor, the man seemed to have several arms.

"Pleasant day," said the old man.

"Do I know you, good sir?" questioned the professor.

"You will, soon enough. I'm here to show you the way to your father."

The professor smiled, *"Do you know where my father is?"*

"Yes," whispered the old man, *"I can guide you. But you must let me in."*

The professor smiled, opened the gate, and invited the old man into the garden. The old man gave a nod and said, *"Thank you, my good sir. Together we shall open the portals to paradise."*

"What should I do?" the professor asked.

The old man grinned, *"Just bring that little girl, Mary, along with you."*

"Mary? Why ever do you need her?!"

The old man's face suddenly changed into the Beast's face, a horrible visage. *"Just do it!"* the Beast commanded.

Back in his chair, poor Professor Augustus E. Peabody was still deep in sleep. He had no idea he had been possessed by the malevolent spirit known as "the Beast," nor that he had so willingly invited it into his very soul.

The professor woke the next morning as the sun beat down upon his face through the window. Motes of dust floated in the sunbeams, many of them settling delicately upon the coins. He had a

splitting headache, a condition he did not often suffer. He rubbed at his temple and resolved to take a dose of Gowers' mixture to ease the pain. For a minute, he sat quite still, struggling to recall the dream he had just passed through. Then a slight sneer curled one corner of his mouth. He now knew how to activate the portal with the coins.

But he could not do it alone...

A SMALL REQUEST BEFORE THE NEXT DOOR OPENS...

If you have reached this page, then you have survived the Colorless Kingdoms, Farilinia, kept company with the Inklings, and returned—more or less intact—to your own realm.

Before you go, might I ask one small favor?

If *Of Inklings and Willowpillars* gave you a few hours of wonder, amusement, unease, or the irresistible desire to avoid suspicious doors, please consider leaving an honest review.

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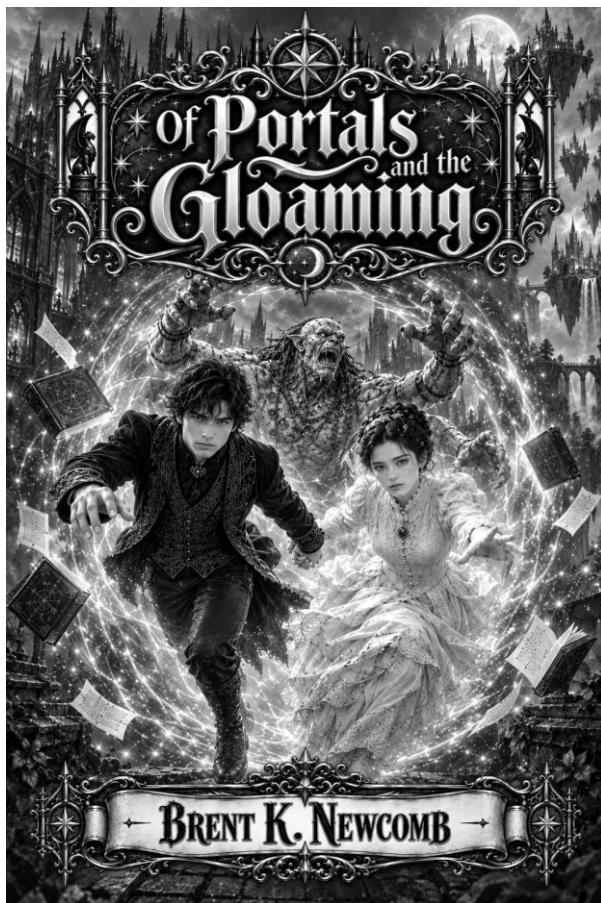
And do be wary.

The doors open only to those who are ready—or those who are in need.

Brent K. Newcomb,

Polycosmos Nomad and Etherodrome Chronicler #509

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Brent K. Newcomb writes cross-generational fantasy adventures for curious children and for adults who never stopped looking for another door between worlds.

His *Chronicles of Ber'Ebrin* blend wonder, danger, humor, folklore, historical texture, and philosophical imagination. Influenced by the marvelous worlds of Baum, Carroll, Lewis, Tolkien, Grimm, Dahl, Adams, and Moorcock, he writes the kind of adventures he would have wanted to discover as a child—rich enough to reward a return visit.

As both a writer and an artist, Newcomb illustrates worlds with a pen and with words; the two forms of invention remain closely intertwined in his work. His fiction draws on mythology, folklore, historical research, and patient world-building to give its settings depth, texture, and period character.

A Midwest immigration attorney, Newcomb writes about friendship, family, sacrifice, courage, moral choice, madness, corruption, power, and the complicated struggle between good and evil.

Connect with Brent online at <https://www.berebrin.com>
Instagram @chroniclesofberebrin