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Changeling[™]
STORYTELLERS
GUIDE

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THE TELLER'S TALE

BY NICKY REA

*Dark is yonder town,
Dark are those within,
You are the brown swan,
Going within fearlessly
Their hearts beneath your hand,
Their tongues beneath your foot,
No word will they utter
To do you ill.*
— Caitlin Matthews, compiler,
“Blessing on a Young Person’s Leaving Home”

“Hey, what you got in the sack?” The high-pitched voice pierced the sound of traffic, startling the slender young man who clutched the “sack” — actually a long, thin parcel wrapped to protect it from the rain.

Seif momentarily glanced across the street at a thin woman acting as lookout for the crack dealers who frequented the fire-gutted structure. She scattered ashes from her cigarette and paced up and down, keeping vigil under an old, torn awning that deflected the worst of the downpour. Faded letters spelling out “Empori” could just be discerned on the part of the awning still remaining. *Johnson’s Emporium. I remember when I stole a candy bar from the store once and ate it on the way home. Dad was so mad when he found out. I must have polished cars and scrubbed sidewalks for two weeks to pay old man Johnson back for that. Now it’s just another crack house. Somehow, I’ve got to convince Dad to take Mom out of this neighborhood before it’s too late.*

Seif felt a twinge somewhere inside his head and glanced down at the bundle that was covered with a garbage can liner — cradled in his arms like a baby. *I hear your call. Because of you, I have left my job and friends. Now I must leave my home and parents, too. Don’t worry, I won’t fail you, no matter what the cost.*

Seif drew himself away from the thoughts that threatened to overwhelm him. Finally, he noticed the gaggle of neighborhood kids huddled in the doorway of one of the abandoned buildings on the street. He counted six of them, not one over 12, most of them in pseudo-gang attire: baggy pants, T-shirts, cheap imitations of the latest footgear and a smattering of hats, bandannas and tattoos. Seif frowned at the children gathered belligerently around him as if they awaited a toll for his passage.



The largest boy, obviously the leader from the respect given to him by the others, stepped forward. “Hey, man. You deaf? I’m talking to you.” Seif looked over the leader’s head and saw a face he recognized from his apartment building.

“Tom? Thomas Lincoln, I know you. Your parents live downstairs from us,” Seif said, “Why aren’t you in school?”

The boy flinched, black face almost glowing with embarrassment at being recognized. Tom’s clothes, loose like those of the others in the group, hung on his thin frame as though on a coat hanger. Tight, dark curls, half-hidden beneath the bandanna he wore, jutted out over his prominent ears. His brown eyes begged Seif not to make any more of it than he already had.

“We don’t go to school anymore. We’re a gang,” the leader informed Seif. He was the oldest, Seif decided, and took pains to make himself appear older — and tougher — than his years. “That looks like a gun you’re carrying in that sack,” the leader stated, flicking an unlit cigarette from one side of his mouth to the other. “We could use a gun.”

“Well, my young friends, sirs and madams, I’ll tell you what I have in the sack, but we must find somewhere out of the rain,” Seif said and smiled as the children turned to enter what was undoubtedly their gang “headquarters” — once a store specializing in rental furniture. Seif’s parents had once patronized the store, as had most of the neighborhood, because the weekly payments were affordable.

Tom Lincoln led the way back into the dusky interior of the building. *At least they’re not right in front of the crack house anymore*, Seif thought.

When they were settled on a mishmash of old crates and pieces of carpet and ready to see what the man had to show, Seif placed the parcel on a three-legged table behind him and turned to face them. *I wonder...do I tell them this story in hopes of changing their lives or to justify to myself what I must do? Allah will show me the way.*

“The sky weeps today for the loss of a king,” he began. “It is his story I must tell. Many of the best stories — the ones few people believe are true — begin with the words ‘Once upon a time,’ so I shall do that to begin this tale.

“Once upon a time, in a great land known as America, there lived a king. He was not the king of America. He wasn’t even an advisor to the President, but he ruled over some very special people who lived in that land — let’s call them “the Dreamkin.” Some of the Dreamkin were poor, like a lot of our neighbors here. Others were rich, but most were just getting by. Still, they all had one thing in common: Each one of these special people was really a story that someone had once told or that someone dreamed. Perhaps one of them was even a dream *you* dreamed.

“Now, the Dreamkin didn’t always get along together very well. They had differences of opinion; some of them didn’t like others because of the color of their skin or maybe because the other always got the better house or job. The richer ones lorded it over the poorer ones, too. The underdogs just wanted equality, but the ones on top thought they had the right to rule. The two sides went to war.

“The war raged on for years. Dreamkin on both sides died terribly. Their stories died with them.

“But then hope came. A king arose who was very different, even though he was one of the wealthier Dreamkin. While still just a young boy, he put a stop to the fighting between the different sides and ruled as a king for all the people, not just the rich ones. To help him in ruling, he had a magical sword — a blade of light that was both a symbol and a guarantee of freedom and peace.

“Now, some of the Dreamkin came from a faraway land called Ireland, and they had once had a High King there, too. They called him Ard Ri. Here the king was called by his first name, David. I’m sure you’ve heard the story of David and Goliath. David became king when he was just a young boy, too — probably not much older than any of you. Eleven? Twelve? He accepted his responsibilities to the people and ruled as best he could.”

The boy leader shifted around uncomfortably, as he was annoyed that the storyteller had so aptly pegged his age. He had hoped to be thought slightly older. The others sat in various stages of attention, wondering when the drugs, guns and fast cars that marked most of the stories they heard would show up in the narrative. The youngest, a girl of perhaps 10 years, had almost fallen asleep, lulled by the soft sounds of the rain and Seif’s velvety tones. Tom, however, sat with his elbows on his knees, lost in the tale.

“So, David became ruler at a time when Dreamkin fought Dreamkin. He stopped the war and built a grand castle, where all Dreamkin could come to tell him their troubles or petition him for favors. He was happy in his castle, but lonely. What he needed was—”

“I know,” one of the smaller kids jumped up, “he needed a bitch.” The other children laughed as Seif shook his head. Tom, disturbed by the interruption, frowned at the boy who had spoken.

Seif continued as though there had been no break in his narrative. “I was going to say ‘a queen.’ He needed a wife to help him rule and keep him company. And he found one, a beautiful young woman with long black hair and sky-blue eyes. They fell in love and got married.

“And because David wanted everyone in his kingdom to meet his beautiful wife, they decided to travel all over and see how the other Dreamkin were getting on. They started that journey here in Atlanta. Last night, the local ruler of the Dreamkin hosted a grand masquerade ball, kind of like a costume party, and the Dreamkin came to dance and enjoy the company of the king and his new queen.

“But something terrible happened during the ball. David disappeared. His new wife was frantic, his knights rushed around searching for him, but no one could find the king. He had vanished without a trace. Only one thing was left behind: his wondrous blade, the king’s sword. Rather than disappear with David, it appeared in the hands of a local storyteller.





“You may not know it, but many magical swords can speak when they choose to do so. This one let the storyteller know that David had not only disappeared, but that he was in terrible danger. The sword wanted the teller of tales to take part in a tale himself and go in search of the missing king.

“Even though the storyteller didn’t believe he was worthy to undertake such an important quest, he could not refuse. The king of the Dreamkin is bonded with the land and the people of his kingdom. Without the king, the land and the people will suffer. Who knows what might happen if the king is not found? Already the land is responding to the loss of him. The skies send down torrents of rain when it should be clear and sunny. The king must be found!”

The leader was clearly impatient. A few of the others looked out through the broken windowpanes at the gray sky and drizzling rain, suddenly uneasy.

“For this reason,” Seif resumed his narrative, “and because the storyteller admires both the king and queen, he accepted the quest. The adventure promises to be a wonderful, shining story, just waiting to unfold — I’m sure you’ve all read adventure stories in school...oh, that’s right, you don’t go to school. I guess you’ll miss out on the adventures then.”

Seif smiled to himself as each child looked at the others, unsure whether or not this was a taunt. The leader squinted his eyes, daring Seif to begin the expected lecture all the children had heard so many times before. He brazenly flicked his lighter and lit the cigarette he’d been playing with, waiting for Seif to say anything. The storyteller ignored the gesture, though he waved the smoke away lazily. *Bad for the voice.*

“As you may have guessed by now,” Seif continued, “the storyteller has started his search. He has already quit his job and said good-bye to old friends. Now he’s on his way home to tell his parents he has to leave. He can’t even tell them where he’s going because he doesn’t know and they wouldn’t understand even if he did. It may take many months — or even years — for the teller of tales and the abandoned sword to find the missing king and return him to the kingdom. Meanwhile, the storyteller must be away from all he knows and loves.”

No matter how gently I try to tell them, my parents will never understand why I’m leaving. I cannot spin them a tale of heroes and quests, even if the tale is a true one. For them, I will have to cushion my story in lies and evasions — knowing that they will take more comfort in believing that their son goes away in search of opportunities and wealth than that he travels on a journey of honor and sacrifice.

A restless stirring in his audience brought Seif back to his story. He looked at the expectant faces and saw the promise of beauty in the younger girl as she listened, her mouth half-open, to his tale of kings and swords. He noted the near-belief in the eyes of the smaller boy and the edgy disdain of the leader. *Some will remember the story at least. They may even pass it on to their friends, if they ever go back to school.*

“Though he did not know it until just a few moments ago,” Seif said as he realized why he had felt compelled to

tell the children his story, “the storyteller now thinks he knows why he was chosen for this search. He will travel throughout the kingdom and tell this tale to any who will listen. He will ask them to tell their friends the story so that it can be passed on to as many people as possible. And when the story is on everyone’s lips, someone who hears it may know where the king can be found, or the king may hear of it and find his way home.”

Seif stood, stretched his muscles and tried to judge the effect his tale had on the “gang.” He glanced at his watch and saw that he had only an hour or so before his parents left for the day. He’d have to hurry. Luckily, they lived just two blocks away.

“I see the rain is letting up a little. Now is the time to run between the raindrops if any of you want to go to school and learn of the adventures waiting for you there. I must be on my way. There is much for me to do and I must see my parents before they leave for work.”

“You still didn’t tell us what’s in the sack!” The leader stood and looked at Seif threateningly.

“Didn’t I? Then I must beg your pardon for not being the storyteller I thought myself to be. What is in the sack? Just a sword, my young friends, only a blade in search of a lost companion.”

Some of the kids laughed. A few muttered “Wacko” or “Loon” under their breaths. The leader looked for support but found most of the others drifting away. “Still looks like a gun to me,” he finally stated and swaggered from the room.

Seif looked after him and said sadly, “And so it shall probably always be a gun to you. I am sorry I could not change that for you.”

“I believe you.” The voice that said that was so quiet that Seif wasn’t certain he had heard it at first. Turning, he saw Thomas Lincoln huddled on the crate he’d occupied throughout the story. “Could I see it?” Tom smiled.

Seif walked to the table and unwrapped the blade. Lifting it from the concealing folds of the garbage bag, he held it out for Tom’s inspection. The boy extended a hand toward the sword and saw a rusty, pitted thing hardly worth keeping. “I believe,” Tom mumbled to himself and closed his eyes, letting his hand feel the silky metal of the blade. Startled by its smoothness, he opened his eyes —

— and fell into a dream. Clashing images crawled across his vision; shouts and screams echoed together with poetry and the sounds of birdsong and harps. He saw himself clothed

in silks and velvets, standing tall and handsome amid a roomful of beautiful men and women. Bowing to him, they called him “chronicler” and “noble one.” Other images raged through his mind, too — things he would work out later. For now, he knew his true name was Ogomotana, which means Truth. He was one of the Dreamkin known as eshu, just as the storyteller. The young boy opened his eyes and stared up at his kithmate.

“It’s all true,” he laughed.

“Yes, even the unhappy parts,” Seif extended a hand to the newborn childling. *He won’t be a childling long, though, from the look of him.* “You’ve just gone through your Chrysalis, courtesy of Caliburn. I would normally be glad to be your mentor in your new life, but I must leave before the day is out. I would be glad to introduce you to Myrtle, who helped me when I first became aware of my true self.” *How did he have such an easy Chrysalis? Was it because of the sword?*

Inside his head, Seif felt Caliburn respond. *He is the one who will take your place as a teller of tales for the dreamers here. Ogomotana will remember the story you’ve told him and he’ll tell it to whomever will listen.*

“Will she teach me what I need to know?” Ogomotana seemed very small to the older eshu as the boy shifted from one foot to the other.

“Of course she will, and you will become the greatest storyteller of us all.” Seif clapped a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “Just don’t forget. Remember I won’t be here after today. I wish I could stay and guide you, but my quest comes first. I always thought I’d be a teller of tales, I never thought I’d be the story.” *But I am the story now, and it’s time to pass on the mantle of tale-teller to someone else. My job is to find David, and who better to locate the king than an eshu? Whatever road the quest takes me on, if I follow my heart, I’ll find him.*

The childling’s eyes gleamed with sudden self-knowledge. Dignity surrounded him like a cloak as he gazed at Seif and drew himself up to his full height. Seif admired the dark raiment of the childling’s *voile*, his chimerical clothing, with its intricate folds and sparkling decorations looking like the night sky. The elder eshu accorded the childling a bow, as between equals.

“I won’t forget, Seif,” Ogomotana assured him. “You can go on your quest without worries. I heard every word of your story and I’ll remember it all.” Though his words were serious, the childling’s eyes hinted at mischief, “In fact, I may even make it better!”

