

## One

The gull's misfortune  
A truth lost and found  
A companion found and lost

As far as sunsets went, it was about the most beautiful you could imagine, which meant Katine was about *this* close to gagging. She sat at the cliff's edge (*not* the wisest of seats perhaps, but then, who really cared if the ledge gave way and she went tumbling to the beach far below?). The ocean glowed red where the sun contentedly dipped its feet after a long day. Those few fishing boats large enough to risk the open water were hauling in their nets and returning to the crag-enclosed bay. Carelessly riding the warm drafts, gulls called to one another in their grating cries. Upon the narrow strip of sand below, the tide loudly advanced and withdrew in endless indecision.

How many people would have taken in that splendid scene and found themselves utterly, pointlessly happy? Probably most everybody. All the more shame it was wasted on Katine.

Her hands rooted about the rocky, wind-swept precipice until they fell upon a suitable stone and winged it into space. It was an angry, bitter gesture. You could just tell, watching her. She needn't speak a word.

She was young (maybe eleven, possibly twelve) and actually quite pretty, but there was a strangeness to her—a peculiarity so small you might have found it hard to name. It may have been her stark green eyes. Or maybe it was that the tips of her ears were finely pointed. Possibly it was her long, night-black hair, which glittered strangely as if stars moved through it. But to know the truth, none of these made Katine particularly odd.

No, it pretty much came down to her mouth. To put it plainly, Katine had a mouth that didn't smile. In fact, it so obviously *didn't* smile, you couldn't even *imagine* it smiling. No potential there whatsoever. And that, indeed, was odd.

For her kind, it was positively indecent.

The long slender spiders of her hands roamed the earth until they alighted on another stone. From behind, a gull flew past, screeching in her ear and giving her a start. The stone left her hand scarcely a moment later. Wheeling over the reddened expanse, the bird disappeared in a puff of feathers. With a squawk, it plummeted to the gray sands below, leaving a leisurely trail of spiraling down.

Katine leaned back. *You know, it really is quite a lovely evening.*

Her immediate area swept clean of missiles, she began digging. Whatever surface her fingers unearthed was cast to the wind as though she was determined on whittling the cliff down to the sea one handful at a time. And so the stones flew until she happened upon one whose touch made her hesitate. She brought it close, brushing at the clinging dirt. About the size of her palm, the smooth, flat rock was largely unremarkable, save for the perfectly round hole in its center. Two of her fingers easily fit inside, feeling along the polished edge. Surely it wasn't natural. Perhaps it was the wayward part of some titanic statue hidden beneath her—something like the partly-buried sculpture near the village—the one converted into a lighthouse.

*Not that it matters.* She twirled the stone about a finger. *Just junk now.*

Whipping back her hand, she—

“Here now! Dunna ye be tossin’ me ta the wet n’ wide!”

Katine gave a shriek very similar to the one the gull had greeted her with earlier, dropping the stone as if . . . well, as if it had just spoken to her. Which clearly it had, for it continued scolding her from her lap.

“I dinna spend the past age driftin’ along the sea floor, fin’lly lodgin’ inna this here dirt pile only ta have some potsherd plunk me right back in!”

Katine slowly lowered her hands from her mouth, leaning over the stone. Aside from the hole punched through its middle, it looked like any other rock. It *was* an ordinary rock, plain and simple, simple and plain.

A rock that talked.

Katine tried to muster some type of response. “Uhh . . .”

“No, no, dunna ye mind me rough. Jussa little startled, is all.”

The voice wasn’t heard so much as felt—a tight vibration prickling through her, like a hand or foot stirring from sleep.

With only the slightest hesitation, Katine picked up the stone.

“Well, well,” it continued. “One o’ the Little Folk—or so ye seem. Only ye’re not so little, and just passing ugly.”

Direct contact was definitely worse. Her hand closed reflexively over the vibrating stone while it spoke. She shivered, feeling all her hair stand on end. It was terribly distracting (a happy coincidence for the stone, indeed).

“Uh, what?”

“An elf.”

“Oh . . . yeah, I guess.” She squinted, searching for some sort of mouth, or eyes, or something. But she found nothing. *Did it speak from the hole?*

“Heh, ye know, yer great, great, great—well, too many greats fer a dewdrop as yerself ta count—gran’ sires were quite the mischief makers. While set up over the stables, I kept more than one of ‘em from stealin’ a horse fer a wild, moonlit ride ta the Grove.”

“Hmm,” Katine murmured noncommittally, already losing interest in this unusual, but ultimately unwelcome invasion of her privacy. “Never heard of it.”

“Neveh heard—” The stone pulsed strongly, indignant, surprising her into nearly dropping it. “An’ how exactly doesa world get along wi’ a brownie who’s forgotten the Grove?” The stone went suddenly silent as though something worse had occurred to it. “Say, what o’ the Floatin’ Lakes?” It rumbled. “What o’ the Two Accursed Echoes an’ the One Blessed? An’ the Unopened Door? What about that, now? An’ the White Lady? Dunna say ye’ve neveh heard o’ her.”

Well, of course Katine knew of the Lady. What child hadn’t heard *that* story? But she wasn’t about to let the rock know it. As for the rest of its rubbish, she hadn’t the

faintest notion. The smile she turned on the stone had nothing authentic about it, and therefore, didn't count. "No, not really," she answered. "Why? Was she important or something?"

The vibration grew such that the elf could feel her teeth loosen. "But . . . but, what's happened?" It buzzed, an anxious hive of bees. "What's happened ta the world where such grand an' precious stones've been buried? What's the world been about while I was tucked away?"

"It's changed, obviously." Katine shrugged. "What do you expect? Not everyone can live to be a gajillion years old like some silly rock. Just how long have you been up here anyway?"

Unhearing, the rock continued. "T'was yer lot who were the memory o' the land. What wi' yer songs, an' dances, an' rades, an', an' . . ." It broke off and stayed quiet for a long, thoughtful moment. Katine was about to simply drop it and leave, when suddenly it spoke again. "Say, ye're sure ye're one o' the Wee People—a brownie? Ye dunna seem much fer sweepin' hearths an' makin' shoes, if'n ye take me meanin'. Ye've gotta sense o' it, down inna yer bedrock—'long wit' the pointy-sharp ears, an' the twinklies in yer moss—but ye're not quite the solid, reliable stone I recollect. Is this jus' another mountain that's gone an' worn down ta a nubbin? Are y'all so big, an' grim, an' sour-tempered now?"

Katine frowned (an expression that came naturally). "Look, I'm *not* brownie—whatever that is—I'm *elven*. And as far as being so, I'm all I have to go on; I'm the only elf around here. And if they're all even remotely like what you're describing, then I'm glad of it." She brought the rock close to her lips as if she thought to kiss it. "And what's more, I've managed just fine without all the other ridiculous stuff you've been babbling on about."

"Oh, so it's jus' ye then?" The rock seemed only to hear the first. "Well, that's a bit o' cloud inna desert, innit? A lone crack here an' there dunna mean the whole

bedding's gone wobbly-like." The vibration lost some of its force. "So how is it ye got so many faults?"

Katine went still. "Excuse me?"

"I. Said," the stone spoke as if it thought poorly of Katine's intelligence. "'How. Is. It. Ye. Got. So. Many. Faults?' Go on, ye can tell me. There's no shame ta it. Even the best stone can crack inna right conditions. After all, it is'na right fer a brownie ta be so dour. T'ain't natural. Like the ol' rhyme says. Ye know, the one that goes—"

*Elfin cheer at night,  
Merriment fer light  
Drop ye in the pot,  
Glee that ye have brought*

"No, I *don't* know," she lied through gritted teeth. "That's been lost along with everything else you remember." She continued before it could interrupt. "Look, you little dirt clod, I'm perfectly fine the way I am. If you don't like it, then there's the sea." She thrust her arm in that direction. "Picture the next thousand years trying to get out again." Without realizing, she'd tightened her grip until her whole arm shook.

"Now, now, no need fer names an' threats, and squeezin's." The rock consoled. 'Sides, it's obvious what split ye so wide an' oft. Dunna know why I dinna think o' it first. T'was all the water, wasn't it? Right as rock, t'was. Brownies dunna belong onna coast. The forest be more ta yer likin', among the trees, an' woodfolk, an' such. Least-ways somewhere away from here. Believe me, water ain't a proper neighbor fer anyone.

"Yes, ye jus' head inland an' ye'll be whistlin' merrily along in no time. Mebbe even find a lazy milkmaid ta pinch an' a grateful master fer yer service. The woods'll make a respectable elf smile, plain as quartz. Why, the cheer'll burble up quick as magma once yer back where ye belong!"

“Sounds great,” Katine snarled. “Let me know what it’s like.” And with all her strength she flung the stone over the cliff’s edge.