The River Riders

Book One in the Trilogy
Miriam's Seed

A fantasy novel

by

K.P. White

Old Zeke is crazy; everyone in Apple Grove knows this. But it's Zeke who knows that the young girl Miriam is not at all what she seems to be… and it's Zeke who knows the incredible danger she is in.

2012 Readers Favorite Awards
Bronze Medal Winner

"5 out of 5 stars. *River Riders* quickly captured my attention and held it to the very last page."

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THE RIVER RIDERS

KP White

Note: This book is a work of fiction. Any similarities to actual people or places are unintentional.

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I dedicate this book to my children -
Ashley, Adam, Samuel and Patrick -
whose passion for books
has driven my passion for writing.

CHAPTER 1: ZEKE

"He will be a shepherd to the beasts and fields, gathering each lamb and stone to his breast."

Zeke was crazy; everyone in Apple Grove knew that. Some thought he'd gone senile. Some thought he'd rotted his brain on too much tainted wine, or that he must have banged his head. There was a rumor that he'd been kicked by one of old Mr. Underwood's horses. Of course, no one could say for sure. Zeke had been as crazy as a jackal for as long as anyone could remember. Some said it was a shame. Some said he must have deserved it. Many wished he'd just go away.

He was a bum. He looked and dressed and smelled like a bum. His long grey hair was always tangled and dirty. Half the time, there were small twigs or leaves hanging out of it from when he had slept on the ground. His beard was long and coarse. Only God would know what things lurked in there. His face and hands were as filthy as the muddy bottom of the Sandywyne River. His nails were long and thick, almost like claws. For all intents and purposes, he looked like he'd never taken a bath or groomed himself in his life.

His clothes were rags. His trousers and tunic were far too large for him, the former staying up only because of a frayed piece of rope tied around his waist. Even in warm weather, he insisted on wearing the same dirty, tattered cloak that was filled with moth holes. And around each foot, he had wrapped old cloth; he had no shoes.

No one really knew how old he was. But no one, not even the oldest residents of Apple Grove, could ever remember Zeke as having been anything but ancient. His hair and beard had always been grey. The skin of his face had always been dark and lined like leather that had burnt and cracked in the hot summer sun. And he'd always been crazy. Totally crazy, with dark eyes that always seemed to be watching... something. As he passed through town, he walked slowly, always looking around him, side to side, up and down, as if he was looking for something; perhaps something he'd lost. He hobbled along the main street, seemingly oblivious to the fact that people were around him. Instead, he suddenly would stop, right in the middle of the road. Horses would have to be steered around him, as he kneeled down onto the muddy ground to pick up a rock. Then he'd listen to it. He'd hold it right up to his ear and listen to it. This would go on for several minutes. Finally he'd place it back, always in exactly, exactly the same spot. Then he'd continue on down the road, until another rock or clump of dirt interested him, and again he'd pick it up and listen.

Sometimes he'd stop to look up into a tree where a bird was singing. Admittedly, other people would do this too. But a normal person would move on

within a minute. Not Zeke. He'd stand there, looking right at the bird. He'd watch it, as if all the rest of the world didn't exist. And he wouldn't move away until the bird had completely stopped singing or had flown away. Sometimes this would take half an hour or more. He'd just stand there, nodding his head at the bird. When the bird paused, Zeke would whistle at it, as if talking back. Then the bird would resume its song, and again the old man would listen.

For some reason (some people said it was because of his smell) the village animals would flock to him. Dogs, cats, squirrels, goats; you name it. He would always pull out some tidbits from his baggy pockets to feed them. Where he got these tidbits, no one knew. They didn't know how he fed himself. And, of course, he seemed to talk to these dogs and cats and whatever; further evidence, some said, that he was completely mad. He would meow at the cats, and bark, howl and yip at the dogs. He would chortle at the squirrels, baa at the goats. If you didn't know better, you'd swear that they answered back. An old rumor had it that when Zeke returned to the forest (and he always left town through the forest, not along the road), there always would be a party of animals waiting for him: deer, raccoons, squirrels, an occasional bear; like loyal subjects awaiting their king.

Rumors are just rumors. Still, the kids called old Zeke `the king of the forest'. They meant to be cruel by this. Many would laugh at him and throw stones as he walked through town. None of them was brave enough to actually hit him with a rock.

"Hey! There goes the king of the forest," taunted some of the older boys.

He seemed to pay no attention.

"Where's your queen? Is she hibernating?" they'd squeal.

Sometimes he'd acknowledge their presence, but he'd only nod his head or smile.

"Or is she just scratching her fleas?"

Very rarely he'd look right at them and bark like an angry dog. Usually, this was all he needed to do to make these boys scream and run away.

Most people in town had come to realize that this senile old man was pretty harmless. Still, he made many folks quite uncomfortable. At times he'd seemingly look right through people, as if he could see into their inner soul. His intense stare made almost everyone wince. Most people avoided him as much as possible. As he passed, parents would gather up their children and move to the other side of the road. Children were instructed to keep their distance from him. I mean, you never know what critters lived in his beard and clothes. And you just never know what a crazy man might do.

Now, every town had a priest. And, over the years, several attempts had been made by the people of Apple Grove to convince their priest that Zeke should be reported to the higher authorities and locked up or sent away. Nothing had ever come of this. Zeke was, after all, just a senile old man, the priests had said. He usually wasn't around more than a day or two at a time (a week at the most). Mostly, he just disappeared into the forest for months at a time. No one

ever knew where he went. Few cared. "What possible harm can he cause?" each priest had said.

Over the years, many priests had come and gone in the little village. One interesting thing that they all had in common was a profound tolerance of the strange old man. In turn, Zeke, for all he seemed to be totally oblivious to most people around him, always had been amazingly attentive and respectful of the priests. As he passed them along the road, he always would stop and bow deeply. They would bow in return. And then each would continue on his way, usually without words. Father John, now semi-retired and living at the monastery in Woodbridge, had even made it quite clear that he actually liked the old man.

"Come now, Mrs. Fuzzlewup," he'd say calmly. "I'm quite sure old Zeke isn't the devil."

"But he barks like a dog!" she'd plead. "And he talks to rocks!"

"Maybe he's just... confused."

"But he smells like a..."

"Come, come, Mrs. Fuzzlewup."

The old priest would even sometimes visit Zeke in the evening where he slept under Cutter's Bridge. He'd bring food. But Zeke, to anyone's knowledge, had never been inside any home in Apple Grove, not even Father John's. Some thought he might not have been in any home anywhere.

Since the elder priest's retirement, the new village pastor had been Brother Thomas, on his first assignment from monastery. Brother Thomas was young. He was not nearly as unflappable as Father John had been. He often forgot his place when reading prayers from the pulpit. One time, he stood before the congregation with his robe on backwards. When finally he realized why people were snickering, he became as flustered as a butterfly in a box. By the time the service was over, he'd knocked over two plants and broken one holy cup.

But, like his elder, Brother Thomas seemed sincere and well-meaning. The village people liked him. But apparently, he too had been seen visiting Zeke at Cutter's Bridge. As Father John's visits had, this caused a lot of discontented chatter in the town. Many dropped hints about the wisdom of the young priest with regards to the old man. To them, it seemed like encouraging the wrong element. Some thought it scandalous that any priest would have anything to do with such a tramp. But, beyond hints and whispers, none of the village folk ever openly questioned anything any priest would do. People just kept waiting. Waiting and hoping for Zeke to disappear into the forest and never return.

A few people (a very few people) felt sorry for the old man. How could he live like that? How did he possibly survive the winters, what with holes in his clothes, and mere rags on his feet? Living outside through the snow season, it was a wonder he never got buried alive. Where did he go? How did he find shelter in the winter? What did he eat? Some wondered what tragic turn of events had ever happened in his life to leave Zeke so alone and so crazy. Maybe he'd been beaten as a child. Maybe his wife had died, and his grief had reduced him to this. Maybe God was punishing him for some terrible deed he'd committed. Many speculated. No one knew.

One who had put her sense of pity to action was the widow woman who lived near Green Meadow. As long as the girl could remember, Miriam, her adopted daughter, had watched Nanna put a hot bowl of soup or stew and some bread out by the shed each evening for this strange vagabond. Some mornings the contents would have disappeared. Nanna knew it had been Zeke who'd come, rather than some animal, because he always left a small pile of beautiful stones on the tree stump next to the empty bowl, and because there always would be a few leftover bread crumbs scattered nearby for the birds.

But most days, and sometimes for months on end, the bowl would remain untouched. Nanna would merely feed the uneaten meal to her dogs for their breakfast, and would be sure to leave another bowl out that next evening. Miriam often had been amazed that no other animal ever came in the night to feast on Zeke's meal. It was if they all knew and respected that it had been left for Zeke.

Miriam also wondered what it was that made Nanna so concerned about this total stranger. When the weather was bad, especially cold, rainy or snowy, the widow would stand by the window, silently staring out into the night as if standing vigil. Her two dogs would sit attentively by her side. They also seemed to be watching and waiting.

"What are you watching for, Nanna?" Miriam sometimes asked her.

"Oh... nothing," the older woman would sigh, responding to the young girl's question. "I just hope the old man has found some shelter for the night."

Nanna would look at Miriam with a deep sadness in her eyes. It was a haunting sadness, made ever more so by a quiet beauty that shimmered in her face, like lace curtains on a frosty winter window. Miriam did not know how old Nanna was, but she often thought that she was younger than her weary eyes made her out to be. She had never wanted to ask, perhaps not wanting to know the answer. In her mind, Nanna would be young forever. She dreaded the thought that she might ever grow old and die. Miriam had no one else in the world.

"Why do you do that?" Miriam had asked her, on more than one occasion, after Nanna had come inside from having left Zeke a meal.

“Do what?” Nanna had responded as she returned to the kitchen.

“Leave the old man food every night,” Miriam said.

"Oh, I don't know," Nanna said. "I guess we all need someone to look after us."

Miriam herself had been taken in by Nanna and her husband as a baby. Nanna's husband had since died, leaving the widow alone to raise the child. She and Ben had never had children of their own, though they had wanted them.

"Not everything happens as you planned it," she would say. "What's important is that you don't lose hope. Sometimes, even when you least expect it, things work out."

Miriam wondered if Nanna had started to lose hope that Zeke would ever return from his most recent disappearance. More than four months ago, he had vanished into the forest. Though he had been gone for as long as 4 months on a few prior occasions, never had this occurred during the winter. In colder months,

the old man tended to stay closer to home. But not this year. He hadn't been seen since before Harvest Day, and now the new year was almost three months old. Many in the village had speculated that he must be dead. Maybe a bear had eaten him.

Miriam had started to fear the worst. Though she too had once been afraid of him, she had come to realize that he really was harmless. Nanna had assured her that many times.

"Just because you're different doesn't make you evil," she had said.

Miriam knew that, in the past, Zeke occasionally had spent his mornings in the small woods just behind their cottage. Sometimes, she knew he was watching her when she went to the stream to fetch water for breakfast. If she looked straight at him, he just nodded his head and smiled. She no longer felt threatened. Any concern she'd had about him evaporated that day three years ago, when she stumbled and broke her ankle. Without a word, Zeke appeared from the woods and carried her back to Nanna. Even as she shivered with pain, she marveled at how gently this disheveled old man had carried her, and with what ease. His face seemed as calm as if he was carrying a baby in his arms. And the look in his eyes was strangely of love and concern. Miriam would never forget that day, that look.

Now that she hadn't seen him in four months, she had come to miss his presence in their back woods. One day, she spoke to Nanna about her fears. The widow woman assured her that he'd be back. And still Nanna put out a bowl of stew and some bread every evening. But Miriam could see that even Nanna was starting to doubt that the old man ever was coming back. A few times, Miriam had slipped out of bed late at night to find her aunt standing at the kitchen window looking out at the shed.

Miriam could barely remember her adopted father; she was but six years old when Ben died suddenly. She remembered how Nanna and she had found him, lying on the cold ground in the back yard.

"Run inside, Child," Nanna had told her. Miriam could still remember the worried look in Nanna's face, as she kneeled at her husband's lifeless body. Miriam remembered how strong a man Ben had seemed to be, even lying there motionless. She could never understand how someone with so much strength could die.

Nanna was a small woman, some would say frail. But she had an inner strength that Miriam would always admire. She always seemed so calm, even when everyone else was in a panic. And though she spoke little, what she said always was worth remembering.

Miriam truly loved Nanna, and often felt so fortunate that she'd been found and brought here.

"How did you find me?" she asked Nanna one evening, as the two women cleared dishes from the supper table. Though now sixteen, Miriam had never had the courage to ask this question before.

"What makes you ask that now?" Nanna returned, not looking up from her work.

"I've wondered for so long," Miriam replied. "Please, won't you tell me how you and Ben found me."

Nanna paused a moment, and then looked up at Miriam.

"We didn't," she answered.

"Then how'd I get here?" Miriam persisted. Suddenly, this had become very important to the young girl.

Nanna smiled sadly. "The truth is… Zeke brought you here."

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CHAPTER 2: MIRIAM

'She will be lost to her homeland,
but grown anew in a distant place.'

Amid the rolling hills of Northern Banbryglia, there were two main rivers, the Greater and the Lesser Sandywyne. The Greater Sandywyne, named so because of its impressive size and current, originated amid the foothills of the North Bryndle Mountains, hundreds of leagues to the south; hundreds of tiny streams trickling down mountain crevices to form the one large river, then winding north, back and forth amid the rolling hills of the Banbryge countryside, until finally it reached its mouth at Sauble Bay. It was perhaps 160 leagues, or almost 500 miles, in total length. The Greater Brandywyne truly was a great river, perhaps not the longest, but certainly the widest and most powerful river for a thousand leagues.

In contrast, the Lesser Sandywyne River was not a large river, as rivers go. It never was very wide. In fact, in a few places it seemed little more than a stream. And only at its origin and at its mouth was it too wide for a simple foot bridge. But its apparent calm and limited size were deceptive, for it was not the Greater but the Lesser Brandywyne, from the point where it branched off from its greater sister all the way to the sea, which unquestionably was the heart and soul of Banbryglia. For the Greater River largely traveled through dense forest, causing it to be no more than an afterthought to most of the people of Banbryglia. The Lesser Sandywyne, on the other hand, wound for over one hundred leagues east to west through prime farm land, sending hundreds of small branches out to irrigate the fertile soil.

Nowhere was this more apparent than in Apple Grove, nestled approximately half way along the Lesser Sandywyne. It truly was here where thick forest met prime farm land. This land had been farmed for as far back as history had been recorded. Greengate's farm, for example, had been in the family for eleven generations; Tethering's farm for fifteen; and old man Annette's farm, it is believed, for more than twenty-five.

The people of Apple Grove understood and loved their farms about as much as they misunderstood and feared the forest around them. The rolling farmland was dotted with small stone farm cottages amid two and three acre plots, teaming mostly with oats, corn, beans, and rice, most of which would be sold in the farmer's market either in Apple Grove itself, or as far away as Greenmarket. Smaller gardens were present, usually adjacent to the cottages themselves, that hosted a much larger array of vegetables, including spinach and rhubarb, as well as assorted berries, especially salmon berries. Connecting neighbor to neighbor was a lacy quilt of dirt horse trails, lined on either side with plum and apple trees. The elders told their grandchildren of how "the roads once

were so full of pot holes that a horse could disappear." But most of the roads were nicely graveled now. And traveling, either on horseback or in a wagon, generally was not unpleasant… at least, as long as you stayed away from the forest.

Almost without exception, all roads stopped at or bypassed the forest. Even the Western Road detoured south of it on its way to Woodbrydge, before following the coast to Hamstead. There were, apparently, some trails that cut through the forest; but most people avoided even thinking about them. The forest, with its dark silence, was not to be trusted.

The people of Banbryglia, and perhaps especially those of Apple Grove, were a superstitious lot. Despite the reassurances of the Mother Church, they believed in assorted ghosts and goblins, witches and sorcerers. And the Grey Forest was the likeliest spot to find them.

Father John had said: "All evil comes from within. You need not go looking for it."

But still they believed. The stories they'd been told had been told for generations, probably even before there was a priest in Apple Grove. They reconciled the apparent contradiction between their devout religious beliefs and their deep-seated superstitions, by rationalizing that the demons and such belonged to a different world, one that just happened to be in the same place as their own. The *Book of Teachings* spoke the Truth, but only about the one world. It could not tell about the other. And the priests, despite being learned in their own teachings, couldn't know that which they had never been taught. One place; two worlds… and Apple Grove was in the middle of it all.

The young girl, Miriam, didn't know whether she believed in witches, ghosts, or whatever. She had read a lot about them, but she had read a lot about many things. Apple Grove being a good two leagues east, she had never attended school there. Rather, her education had come from books, and from Nanna.

It was Nanna who had made Miriam so interested in books and learning. She read stories to Miriam every night up until the time when Miriam insisted on reading them for herself. Nanna and Ben always had believed in reading.

"Even the priests can't tell you everything," they said.

And so, although their cottage was small, indeed no more than five small rooms, one room had been entirely devoted to books: book shelves on three walls; a tall eastward window on the fourth. Miriam loved the smell and feel of that room, and often would go there herself, especially early in the morning when the sunlight streamed through to fall on the dark wood floor, and the room was toasty warm even in winter. Sometimes, she would sit there for hours at a time. Oftentimes Miriam would read. But other times she would just stare about the room and out the large window. In fall, winter and early spring, this was Miriam's favorite place, and she would sit and marvel at the beauty outside, the rolling hills of Ben and Nanna's farm.

Once late spring arrived, Miriam brought her books outside. Her favorite spot was a clearing in the five acre woods behind her home. There, she would sit on the moist grass, where there was just enough light to read, just enough

shade to curl up and sleep. Nanna's two dogs, Henrietta and Sofie, always would come along and lie beside her, often placing their heads on her knees. They were whippets, extremely slim and fragile-appearing dogs with long noses and soft eyes. Henrietta, the mother, was seven years old and light brown. Sofie, her daughter, was three and a beautiful mixture of white and black.

"What would you girls like to read about today?" she would ask them, as she scratched their ears. Smiling (as dogs smile) and eyes still closed, they would each push their head into her hand for a deeper, more satisfying scratch.

"Why don't we read about boats? I've never been on a boat," she'd explain. "Have you?" she'd ask them.

With that, she'd open her book. The dogs would lay their heads back down upon her knees, disappointed that the ear scratching had ceased.

"Now let's see. The first boats were built in the land of Aramis, in the fishing villages south of Camaarit..."

Miriam loved to read about faraway places. Since she had been brought as a baby by Zeke, she had never been farther than Greenmarket, 20 leagues and about two day's wagon ride south of Apple Grove. She used to go to Greenmarket with Ben several times each fall when he went to sell corn in the large open market. Since he had died, even those trips had stopped. And she had no idea where she had been before coming to live with Nanna and Ben.

"Where did Zeke find me?" she asked Nanna one day.

"Well, dear," Nanna smiled, and continued to wash vegetables. "Zeke really couldn't tell us. At least, not in any way we understood. All we know is that he came from the Forest south of our home."

"How long had Zeke had me?"

"Again, we don't know. You were pretty dirty, but otherwise in pretty good shape. You weren't starved or anything. On the other hand, we asked all around, and the priest at the time did too. No one around here knew anything about it. We figured he must have found you some distance away. You were maybe six months old. We have no idea how Zeke fed you."

Then she took Miriam in her arms and kissed her forehead. "You were our mystery child, and Ben and I were very glad to have you. After awhile, we stopped asking questions."

Another day, when Miriam and Nanna were walking in the small woods behind their home, Miriam asked:

"Why didn't you and Ben have children of your own?"

Nanna sighed. "Oh, we wanted to. We wanted it very much. But it just never happened."

"That's very sad."

"Not so sad. Ben and I realized that God must have a reason for everything that happens, or doesn't happen. Our having a baby just wasn't meant to be. And maybe that's why God, and Zeke, meant for us to adopt you."

"I'm very glad you adopted me."

"So am I, Dear," Nanna said.

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Miriam didn't really have any friends her own age. This was mostly because she lived so far out of town, and because she didn't go to school there. And, because they had their own garden, and Nanna made all their clothes, they seldom had any reason to go into town. The exception, of course, was once a week for Church. The two of them never missed a service. They both were very sad when Father John retired and moved to Woodbrydge, because he had always been so kind to them. He always would seek them out after mass, just to talk.

"Your daughter is getting to be the most beautiful young woman in Apple Grove," he told Nanna as Miriam blushed. "And such thoughtful eyes," he added.

And several times a year, he dropped in for a visit at their home.

"Just passing through," he said.

But Miriam knew otherwise, since there really was nothing to be passing this way to.

Nanna would bring out tea and a plate of fresh muffins and home-made jam. They would sit and talk for hours.

"Such an inquisitive and intelligent child," he would say of Miriam. "I'm sure God has special plans for you."

The visits always were joyful. Father John loved to laugh and tell jokes. Nanna, normally very quiet and reserved, would laugh too. Miriam vaguely remembered that Nanna had seemed much less quiet when Ben was alive.

Invariably, the conversation would turn towards Zeke.

"Have you seen him much lately? It's been particularly cold this spring. I wonder how he is making out."

And then, as if Zeke was a springboard to the world outside, they would start to talk about some of the troubles outside Apple Grove.

"There are some things the Church just should leave well enough alone," the old priest said, speaking of the Church soldiers venture into Raspitria the autumn past. "Some people just don't buy everything that the Mother Church tells them, and that's okay with me."

"What were they trying to do there?" asked Miriam.

"Well, Child," he sighed. "I guess the Church Scholars feel that any deviations in Church teachings should not be tolerated. And, in Dainar, one of the smaller towns in Raspitria, a young priest, now excommunicated, was trying to teach some things that are not officially condoned by The Church. Now, I don't know exactly what he was preaching, but from what I understand, it wasn't all that far afield. Nonetheless, the Church sent soldiers into Raspitria, just to quiet things down by their presence. The young priest, Deacon Pat, was (he thought a moment for the proper choice of words) detained and taken to Camaarit."

Miriam was shocked. "Was he hanged?"

The old priest laughed. "I'm sure not, Child. The Church is somewhat intolerant, I'll admit. But I do not think it is barbaric. I expect the young man will

be released far away from Dainar, probably closer to Camaarit where they can keep a closer watch on him, with firm warnings not to continue his `mis-representations', as they've called them, of The Teachings. He might be sent back to deacon school. He might be relegated to one of the print shops… but hanging… certainly not."

Then he sighed. "It's still a shame about it all, though; because I knew this young man when he went through his Profession. Very bright. Honest and well intentioned. Well read. Thoughtful. I'm sure he had a lot to offer. It's just such a shame."

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It had been over a year since Father John had moved away, and Miriam and Nanna both dearly missed his visits. Once in awhile, a letter from him would arrive, and reading it was a cherished event.

His replacement, Brother Thomas, also was very nice. Much younger. More conservative and less at ease than the elder priest. But he also had reached out to Nanna and Miriam. Nanna was sure that Father John must have mentioned them to him, because the young priest sought them out that first day after service, just to introduce himself.

"Welcome to the parish," he said. Then he corrected himself. "I guess I'm the new one here. I guess I should welcome myself... or you should welcome me… or"

"Welcome to the parish, Brother Thomas," Nanna said with a smile.

Like his predecessor, he also made visits to Nanna's home, though less frequently and for shorter periods. He was much more formal than Father John.

"Please have a seat," Nanna would say.

"Oh, thank you. Thank you. Thank you very much." Then he would blindly grope for a chair behind him, and stumble and almost knock it over as he sat down.

"Would you like some tea and muffins?"

"Oh, thank you. Thank you. Thank you very much."

His clumsiness made Miriam laugh, though never in front of him. Not even in front of Nanna.

"He's a very nice fellow," she'd tell Henrietta and Sofie as they sat in the meadow. "And I'm sure he's a very good priest. But sometimes it's a wonder he doesn't put his church robe on backwards every other week."

Nanna would refer to him as 'less polished' than Father John. "But his heart is good. I can see that."

Miriam agreed. He also always asked about old Zeke when he visited. And one time when she caught sight of the old man in the back woods, Miriam recognized the young priest's winter hat on Zeke's head.

But apart from Nanna, whoever the priest might be, and her two dogs, Miriam's only other regular contacts were the assorted other family pets. This

included the three chickens who gave them eggs, the rooster, the goat named Harriet, and Nanna's old parrot, Percy (the one who wouldn't talk).

"Why won't you talk?" Miriam often asked the colorful green bird.

Percy just stared at her and squawked.

"Maybe if I give you some more seed, you'll talk to me."

But the bird never did.

And so it was that the day that Nanna had designated to be Miriam's fifteenth birthday (exactly fourteen years and six months from the day she had been brought to them) came and went quietly, as had all her previous birthdays. Nanna made a small rhubarb cake. They each had a half cup of salmonberry wine.

"To you, my dear," Nanna said. "And may your life be filled with wonder and fulfillment."

In bed that night, the young woman wondered about her future. Would she always live here with Nanna? Would she always live here in Apple Grove? And then she wondered about her past, as she often did when the lights were out and Nanna was asleep. Where had she been born? Who had her parents been? What happened to them? How did Zeke find her? Why did he bring her here?

And who was Zeke, really? Was he just a crazy old man? If so, how had he taken care of her for whatever time he had her?

“We figure at least a week,” Nanna had said.“No one anywhere near Apple Grove or Greenmarket, or even the Priest House in Woodbrydge knew anything about a baby having been born and lost, or young parents having been killed or having left,” she explained.

So he had to have found her some ways away from Apple Grove… near Hamstead, perhaps. Or maybe on one of the small farms that are near the coast. Or maybe further away than that.

“And Zeke’s big, dirty hands held you so gently,” Nanna said. “Ben especially was amazed. Zeke handed you to Ben. Then Ben handed you clumsily to me. You were so small. So light. A gift from God.” She smiled.

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CHAPTER 3: ESCAPE FROM FIRE

"On that day, riders will come with fire in hand and heart."

The harvest was over. The days were getting shorter; the nights longer and colder. The first frost had come and gone. Others would follow. But there should not be snow for at least two months yet.

Miriam was six weeks into her sixteenth year. She was spending less of her mornings in the meadow, and more time snuggling with a warm blanket in the library. But still she spent a large part of her afternoons outside, helping Nanna with chores, feeding the animals, and taking Henrietta and Sofie for walks in the back woods. She loved the changing colors of the trees, and the snap and crackle of dead leaves underfoot. She loved how she could see further into the woods as she walked, much further than when the trees were full. How she could see the moss on the branches, the sky through crooked bare limbs.

The dogs were friskier in the cold; perhaps they had to be to stay warm. The squirrels seemed to sense this, and teased them unceasingly, dashing down one tree and up the next, while poor Henrietta and Sofie ran in circles. Miriam just laughed.

"You silly girls," she'd say. "You'll never catch them." And though they never did, their zeal never diminished.

They would return from their walk in time for Miriam to gather wood for the stove, then go inside to help Nanna prepare the table for supper. At this time of year, the kitchen always seemed to smell of hot soup and fresh baked bread. It was a smell that she would remember all of her days.

Nanna would ask Miriam what she had seen on her walk. A few squirrels. Some crows. A female cardinal; no sign of the male today.

"It is really getting darker sooner now."

"No sign of Zeke?" the older woman would ask.

"No, Nanna."

They would say no more about it, but Miriam sensed growing concern in Nanna's face. It had been almost a year since Zeke had been seen in Apple Grove. Quietly, Miriam prayed that the old man was all right somewhere, and that one day he would come home.

A few times, Miriam had had the feeling that Zeke, or at least someone, was nearby watching her. She'd hear a branch snap as if stepped on. She'd catch a glimpse of movement off somewhere in the distance. She'd stop. Even hold her breath. But then… nothing. She would tell Nanna, and they both would hope that Zeke had returned. But then there would be no further sign for weeks. And Zeke's food always remained untouched. It was all probably just some animal... a fox or something.

After supper, Miriam would help with the dishes. Then the two women would read a few passages from the Good Book by candlelight, before retiring. The past few weeks, Miriam had felt more tired than usual in the evenings, which gave Nanna some concern.

"I'm fine," the girl would say.

But she slept restlessly, and still was tired when the morning came.

"We'll have to have you see the doctor," Nanna said.

"No, Nanna. I'm fine."

And, after a cup of tea and a bit of breakfast, Miriam seemed herself again.

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It was the afternoon after the third frost. Miriam was gathering firewood for the stove. As she walked back towards the house, she saw what appeared to be a horse and rider some distance up the road. Not moving, just standing in one place. It was too far to see who it was. Could it be Brother Thomas? Or Father John? If it was either of them, why would they stop? What were they waiting for? But who else could it be? There was very little past their home for anyone to go to.

She told Nanna, who then came to the door to look. The horse and rider still were there.

"Never mind, Child," Nanna said. "You finish bringing in logs."

The rider stayed for almost a half hour. Eventually, another horse and rider came up the road. The two riders appeared to talk for a moment. Then turned their horses and galloped away.

"Wasn't that strange?" Miriam said at supper.

"Not all that strange, Child," Nanna shook her head. "They might be new to these parts. Maybe they took the wrong road. Maybe they just wanted to know where the road leads." She smiled. But her eyes betrayed her concern.

And, for the next three nights, Miriam awoke to find Nanna peering out the kitchen window, watching the road.

"Are you concerned about those riders?" Miriam asked her on the third night.

"No, Child. I'm just watching the moon."

The next night, the moon would be full.

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At first, it seemed to her that it was a dream. She tried to fight it, but it would not go away... the pound, pound, pounding. Then Henrietta and Sofie barking madly. Gradually, Miriam came to realize that it was not a dream. She opened her eyes. The room was dark, except for the light of the full moon reaching through the window. She looked around. Nanna still was asleep in her bed, though she too was stirring. Pound, pound. Bark, bark. Then a high pitched howl like a wolf, that sounded as if just outside their door.

"Arroooooo!"

"Nanna!" Miriam whispered loudly.

The old woman stirred again.

The pounding, barking and howling continued.

"Nanna!"

Nanna opened her eyes, and then sat up in bed with a start. The two continued to listen. Another moment passed. Nanna and Miriam quietly slipped out of bed and into the kitchen. The dogs were standing at the door, rigid. Nanna peered out of the window into the darkness. There she saw him, standing back from the door and howling. There was no mistake.

"It is Zeke," Nanna said.

"What is he doing?"

"He's howling like a wolf and trying to get us to open the door."

And so the old woman quickly lit a candle, unbolted the door, and opened it. Zeke rushed inside and motioned for her to quickly close the door behind him. Henrietta and Sofie, as if commanded by the old man (though he had said nothing, had just looked at them), lay on the floor and watched the old man's every gesture. Then Zeke looked right into Nanna's face and started howling again.

His appearance was as always. Dirty. Unkempt. Wearing a ragged cloak with numerous holes and an entire corner half torn and dragging on the floor. But his eyes and his gestures were wild. Miriam could not help being afraid. But Nanna reassured her:

"He would never hurt us," she said. "He's just trying to tell us something." She calmly looked back into the face of the disheveled old man.

He kept howling, trying one pitch, then another.

"Arrooooo! A-a-a-arroooo!"

The dogs became increasingly irritated, and soon were howling too. Zeke turned to them with his howls. Soon they were up on all fours again, their feet restless as they stood in one place. Suddenly, the two of them disappeared into the bedroom. In a moment, they re-emerged carrying some of the women's clothes, Henrietta for Nanna, Sofie for Miriam.

"What's going on, Zeke?" Nanna asked. "You want us to get dressed?"

Zeke nodded vigorously, and then started pointing outside, up the hill along the road. Nanna looked out the window again, but there was nothing.

"There's nothing there, Zeke."

Zeke was jumping and bounding all over the room now, flailing his arms and shaking his head. Miriam watched in wonder. And now everything was awake. The chickens were squawking, the rooster was crowing, Percy was cawing. Even Harriet was baying outside.

"Maaaaah!"

Zeke appeared frantic. His eyes were wide and wild. He grabbed the clothes from Henrietta and Sofie, and handed them to the two women.

"But it is the middle of the night Zeke," Nanna explained. "What has gotten into you? I've never seen you like this."

He pointed outside wildly. He went to the door and opened it.

"Is there something outside? Is someone hurt?"

Nanna followed him outside, but again he just pointed up the road. And again, nothing was there.

Then Zeke ran back inside, right up to Percy the parrot, still cawing inside his cage. He cawed back. And the bird stopped and listened, tilting his head this way and that as the wild man seemingly spoke to him.

Then he pointed at Nanna and Miriam and Nanna, then at the door. He flapped his wings like a bird. He got down on all fours and neighed like a horse. Nanna and Miriam just watched. Henrietta and Sofie watched. Percy watched and listened.

The he spoke: "Must leave. Must leave. Must leave," the bird said.

Miriam looked at Nanna.

"Horses coming. Must leave."

The two women looked at each other, and saw each other's fear. Zeke looked at them; then back at Percy, and starting cawing again.

"Must leave. Horses coming. Must leave. No time to lose. Horses coming."

"Right now?" Nanna asked the bird, then Zeke.

"No time to lose. Danger. Danger coming. Must leave."

"I think we had better listen to him," Nanna said.

Miriam remembered the cold sensation she had had through her entire body, as she had watched the one, then the two riders on the road. Now, that sensation had returned.

Nanna and Miriam quickly disappeared into the bedroom, and then returned each wearing a full length dress and a warm shawl.

"Where do we go? Do we need to bring anything?" Nanna asked.

"The animals?" asked Miriam.

Zeke nodded and grabbed Percy's cage. The two women and two dogs followed Zeke to the door and out, just in time to see a row of lights moving along the road in the distance. Drawing closer. It soon became clear that there were several men on horseback, at least five of them galloping down the hill.

"Caw caw, caw caaaw," said Zeke.

"Hurry. Hurry," said Percy.

They rounded the corner of the cottage to where they could not be seen, then past the hen house towards the woods. Zeke chased the hens and rooster out of their enclosure, flapping his wings to drive them away. Nanna told Miriam to quickly untie Harriett. Then the three humans, two dogs, one goat and one parrot scurried across the yard. Several times, Miriam almost lost her footing on the uneven ground. Breathless, she and Nanna tried to keep up with the old man. They both, especially Miriam, were amazed by his speed and agility. It was only about 100 meters, but he arrived at the woods at least a minute ahead of them. There he waited, behind a giant fallen oak.

It was not until they all were hidden behind the fallen log that they turned to look again at the road. The horses still were coming. Far off yet, but quickly

drawing closer. Torches flaming above them. Five men on horseback. Men wearing long black robes. Too far off to see their faces. They seemed to Miriam much like the riders she had seen four days before.

Soon the horses had circled the cottage. One of the men, whose face still couldn't be seen, dismounted and entered it. In a moment, he returned, this time obviously agitated and waving wildly at the others. One other man dismounted, and a discussion ensued. The two re-entered the cottage. After five minutes, the two men returned and remounted their horses. The one waved at the others.

Suddenly, there was a frenzy of activity, as the riders circled the cottage, breaking windows, and lighting curtains and anything else sure to alight with their torches.

Finally, the riders turned and fled up the road, but not before the whole cottage was engulfed in flames.

Miriam and Nanna watched in horror as the five black riders disappeared into the darkness. It seemed like forever that they watched their entire lives burning, but it was only a few moments. Miriam was crying, even as she petted the goat Harriett, and tried desperately not to let anyone see her tear-streamed face. Nanna silently placed her arm around her. She could say nothing.

Zeke broke the silence. "Caw caw, caw caw", he said to Percy.

"Must go. Must go," said the parrot. "They'll be back. They'll be back."

"But where can we go?" cried Miriam.

"Caw caw."

"Follow me," said the bird, as Zeke turned and plunged deeper into the woods.

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CHAPTER 4: BROTHER THOMAS

"The grass and the stones and the beasts shall be their ally, as shall be those whose hearts are true."

Brother Thomas' cottage contained only one room. In it were his bed, a table and stool, a few straight back wooden chairs, and a tall bookshelf. The bookshelf was messy, with no order, no system. Books were piled atop books atop loose leaf papers. Books were on the floor, upon his table, upon his unmade bed. The young priest seldom had visitors. It was he who visited. And the Church had never thought it wise to give its young priests too many comforts, less they become unfocussed. Indeed, it was only upon retirement, as with Father John, that the village priest was likely to find any real comforts in life.

Brother Thomas never would complain. He had accepted his life in the Church from the moment he had been selected out of his class at Brandywich School for Boys when he was just thirteen. He remembered being called out of the study room by the school Master.

"Come with me, Thomas. The rest of you continue with your lessons," were his words.

He followed Mr. Ripley down the long wide hall of the Main Building, past several offices, past the Dining Room. Then a right turn. Then a left turn. He would never forget these details.

There were two robed Seniors in the room that they finally entered, the Master's office. They were standing.

"Please sit down," he was told.

And then he knew. He knew that he would not be returning to his old class, except briefly to say goodbye. Knew that he would be transferred to another school. Would leave with the two Seniors for Hamstead that same day. Would be there for at least four years wardship, followed by six or seven years deaconship. Hamstead would become his home. The Church would become his life.

He was 26 now. All this had happened almost thirteen years ago. And yet still he recalled the glassy-eyed look on his best friend's face, peering out the study room window, as the carriage took him away. Still he remembered the long slow ride through the hills to Hamstead. It was raining when finally they arrived, well after the sun had gone down. Normally, by this time, the candles in his dormitory would have burned down, and he would be asleep. But he was awake as they pulled up to the Abbey. He was frightened. He was alone.

To this day, he did not know why he had been selected. His letters had been average. His interest had been less in books than in athletics. Tall and lanky, but quite muscular for his age, he had been most gifted with ball and bat. He was a good runner. And an excellent swimmer. When the school had held its yearly swimming race in the fall, he led the Ripley's junior house to first overall;

and only those in the forms two above his own could better his times from dock to dock. His form master had once wondered aloud where the boy had gotten his athletic talents. But, of course, he would never know.

All of the boys at Vincents College were orphans. A few had known their parents. But most, like young Thomas, had not. Most had never been told why they were orphans. Even where they had come from. Vincents College had been their home for as long as their memory extended. Two hundred fifty boys under one roof. Sixteen Masters. The only women were those few who worked behind doors in the kitchen. And, of course, Nurse Helen; for most of the boys, hers were the only women's hands ever to have touched them. She was at least fifty. And no beauty. But hers was a lovely smile. And, as she bathed their wounds and held cool cloths on their foreheads to quell their fevers, hers were gentle hands. Vincents College was a hard place. Its Masters were stern and cross. Nurse Helen was the one softness that there was.

She was not young. Nor pretty. But to Thomas, she was beautiful, mostly her eyes, which were kind, and caring, and full of life. As a deacon-intern, he visited her in Erindale, just before her death. Two weeks later, he received the news while at supper. That night he wept. That was five years ago. On his night table, he still kept the prayer book she had given him when he passed his pastoral examinations.

'Be of good heart,' she had written on the insert. 'And the Word will guide you.'

Brother Thomas had tried to be true to her words. He studied the Prophesies every night. Regularly, he reviewed the ancient languages. But it seemed to him that there were so many interpretations of the prophesy, and so many words, and so many languages. And, though sincere in effort, he was not one who carried either the gift of analysis nor that of original thought. In school, he always had required being told what each passage meant. Interpreting the Word was as foreign to him as weaving a fine tapestry, he who had needled himself seemingly a hundred times repairing a simple tear in his vestment.

He was not stupid. He had a good memory. He remembered faces and names in a most extraordinary way. And details of places where he'd been. And old football scores. And verse. His favorite poem was one that had been written long ago by an anonymous writer. It was a long poem, at least fifty verses, of which he remembered every word. It was a sad story of a young man who traveled far and wide in search of the woman he loved, only to discover that she did not love him, but another. Thomas' favorite lines were those of the final verse:

He tried to take the smile she shone
To save it in a jar,
That he might have it there always
For warmth where whirl winds are.
But, cramped, restricted by the glass,
Her lips had buckled down.
And, as he watched with saddened eyes,

Her smile turned to a frown.

Besides the love that he always had for Nurse Helen, and because he had never known either of his parents, Thomas had truly loved only once. And that had mostly been from a distance.

It happened when he was in his third year at Deacon House. By this time, all of the priests had come to recognize his tremendous potential at cricket, a sport in which the school masters always had taken great pride. This fact became apparent the first time any would enter the Great Hall. It was there, proudly displayed along both walls of the long corridor, were paintings and memorabilia from the school's 200 plus years. Portraits of prior Head Masters; sketches of the buildings as they had grown in number and size over the years; and, displayed closest to the grand window such that the light shone directly upon them at midday, the many trophies of teams that had worn the black and white. Several for football. A few each for swimming and running. And then an entire section for cricket. Thirty-seven times the batsmen had prevailed over their kindred schools at Wortley, Shannon, Oakton and Branderton. And young Thomas' name was on five of those trophies.

The team master had noticed his fluid swing the first time he had seen him bat. Even at thirteen. His final three years, he would captain the Senior team, each year leading them to the championship. At sixteen, he was not yet the captain. But his skill caught the eye of the girl who would be his love. Now, ordinarily, the boys played only in front of the other students and the Masters. But she was one of the Master's daughters, herself age 15. Light brown hair. Pale skin. Deep brown eyes. Tall next to her peers, and slim. The day he noticed her watching him, he was smitten. He felt that he could have played much better, but for his being so distracted by her steady gaze, and her lovely face.

He found out her name only several weeks later, though she had come out to see him play almost every game, and at one or two practices. Lauren. And so it was that he always would look for her every day along the sidelines. His heart would sink when she was not there. His pulse would quicken when she was.

He spoke to her only a few times, and each time only for a few minutes. Never did he say what he wanted. And he could say nothing the day that she told him, with tears in her eyes, that her father had decided to send her away to attend school and live with an aunt in Brackridge.

"Good bye," she said. And kissed him on his cheek.

He did not play the next game, for he was ill. At least, that is what he wrote in a letter to Nurse Helen. A letter he never sent. He did go on to Captain the team to three championships. Other girls would see him play and cheer for him. But he would look into their faces and see another. And, otherwise, he would never see his dear Lauren again. In his twentieth year, he heard that she had married. That night, he prayed that she was happy, and would always be so. He would never forget her.

He often prayed for guidance, though no voice ever spoke to him. And he never really felt guided other than by the basic doctrines of the Church. Occasionally he, like us all, asked: "Why me?" Or, "What is my purpose?" Such questions had been abundant in his first days in Apple Grove. For it had been the first time in his life that he had lived anywhere other than in some institution. From an orphanage to a boarding school to the Deacon House. To a small one room cottage, forty leagues from the nearest priest at Greenmarket. Twenty from the nearest peer deacon. On the edge of a forest just north of a small village called Apple Grove.

It had been the first time in his life he had had to think about eating. Previously, he had eaten when told. A bell would toll. He would join a line, standing silent. Then would file into a dining hall and stand silent again. Then would pray. Then sit. Then eat. He had been in Apple Grove two full days, weak from hunger, before this had dawned on him and he'd made any attempt to procure food. His first meal had been stale crusty bread and some cheese that he'd found in a box of supplies that had been given to him by the Deacon House when he had set out.

Now that he had been in the cottage for more than a year, his eating habits had improved. His cooking was unspectacular, but adequate. He liked it, and that was all that mattered, since he had never invited anyone over for a meal. Quite often, he ate out, since the people of Apple Grove had always taken kindly to their priests, and Brother Thomas had no inclination ever to refuse. Still, at least twice a week he stoked up the wood stove and made a pot of vegetable stew. The vegetables came from his own small garden, or from an elderly neighbour who had taken it upon herself to leave an occasional sack of potatoes, carrots or parsnips on his doorstep. The soup stock he bought weekly at the market. He had decided to exclude meat when it became apparent that Zeke did not eat it. And Zeke really was the only one who ate Brother Thomas' cooking. On days when he suspected Zeke was around, the young deacon would ladle about half of his pot into a smaller pot, then venture down to find him by the river. There he would share his meal with the strange vagabond. They never spoke. But Thomas would watch the old man as he ate, watching his eyes as he looked out at the river, the trees, and the sky. Ever watching. Ever listening. Zeke would stand and bow when he had finished his meal, handing his bowl back to Thomas. Then he would sit and watch and listen again, now even more intently. The priest seemed drawn to the old man, for reasons he did not understand.

"I don't think he is crazy," he had told his God one evening at prayer. "I don't know why, but I don't think he is crazy."

Thomas had not seen Zeke in four months, and had started to worry about the old man. Father John had warned him that Zeke often would disappear for months at a time.

"Heaven knows what becomes of him," he said. "And then, suddenly, there he is again walking through town."

Thomas had been thinking about Zeke a fair amount the past month. He'd even taken a few walks down to Cutter's Bridge to make sure that Zeke wasn't

there. He wasn't. And so the young priest was sitting alone in his cottage eating his evening meal, the second day of his latest batch of stew, when he suddenly heard a wolf howling in the distance. He listened a moment, then continued his meal.

Some time later, as he was reading scripture by candle light, he heard the howl again. This time it was not so far off. The howling continued. And soon the one soulful voice was joined by another. Brother Thomas put down his book and went to the front door to look outside. He stood there for some time, listening to the distant howls. There were more than two wolves now. At least three, if not four or five. He could tell by the pitch of their voices. And somewhere in the darkness he heard a bob cat cry. And an owl. And Thomas smiled.

"Zeke must be coming home."

He thought about it a moment, then returned to his book. By now he was tired, and so he only finished the page he was on before preparing for bed. The howling had stopped by the time he blew out the candle by his bedside, and turned to go to sleep.

He slept restlessly that night. When he was asleep, his mind was filled with dreams. Of his days in boarding school. Of his days at Deacon House. Of Nurse Helen. Of Lauren. Of old Zeke. He dreamed that he was face to face with a wolf. A large silver wolf with big red eyes. He and the wolf stood silent. He had no fear. He merely watched the wolf as the wolf watched him. And then the wolf spoke.

"You will lead them," it said.

And immediately Thomas thought of one of his old Masters, Father Hugh, who had stood so tall and yet had had such a quiet way. Thomas was but twenty-one, preparing to go out for his first apprenticeship with a priest from Wortley.

"I'm not sure I can do it, Father," Thomas had said. "I don't really know what the Scripture means. How can I teach others?"The kindly old priest had put his hand on Thomas' shoulder.

"You will lead them," the silver wolf said again. "You will learn to lead them."

Several times during the night, Thomas awoke to the sound of wolves in the distance. And then he would sleep again. And again the wolf would stand before him.

"You will lead them," it said.

"But how, Father?" said the young deacon-apprentice.

"You will learn to lead them."

And then the wolf howled. A loud piercing howl that shook Thomas' soul. His eyes opened. The howl repeated. Thomas realized that the sound came from outside, not far away. He listened for a moment, and then climbed out of bed to look out of his window. The wood stove still burned, but the floor was cold. The sun had not quite come up. The window pane was thick with frost, and Thomas could see little. The howling continued.

And then a small rock struck the window. Thomas was puzzled. Then another small stone struck the glass. He used the sleeve of his house coat to wipe at the frost on the glass, that he might see outside. He saw nothing but the darkness and his own reflection. He waited. A moment passed. And then he heard a knock at his door.

He almost did not recognize Nanna or Miriam, shrunken by the cold, wearing nightgowns under their coats. Shivering. An old blanket wrapped around the younger. Pale faces. Dirty faces. Scratched. In their eyes a look of fear. Of desperation.

Two dogs were with them. The older woman carried a parrot. The younger carried a small goat.

"I'm so sorry to disturb you in the night," the older woman said. "But Zeke led us to you, and we have nowhere else to go."

And then Thomas saw that Zeke was with them, standing in the shadows.

“Come in, come in.” The priest ushered the two women in near the wood stove. It only was then, in the light of the moon reaching through the doorway, that he recognized them.

“Nanna? Is that you?” he said, incredulously. “Miriam?”

He glanced out the door at the swirling wind. Then back to them. They looked exhausted.

“Please. Sit down. Sit down.” He pushed two wooden chairs facing the wood stove, and helped them each to sit. Miriam still shivered inside her blanket.

“Let me get you another blanket.” He hesitated a moment, as if unsure where he might find a blanket, now that he had offered one. Then he remembered his bed. He retrieved two blankets, one for Nanna, one for Miriam, and wrapped them around the two who huddled on their chairs.

Then he returned to the door, which still was open. A brisk wind howling in. He closed the door, and helped the dogs and goat lie just inside the door. Then he remembered Zeke. He opened the door again and looked out. Zeke stood alone in the shadows. Despite the wind and the cold, the old man did not shiver. He stood motionless. Brother Thomas motioned for Zeke to come inside as well. The old man stood firm, standing silent at the tree line just ten feet away. Shook his head.

"I have to close the door, Zeke," Thomas said. "You can come in as you like. Wouldn’t you like to come in?"

Again, Zeke shook his head, then stepped back, further into the shadows. Thomas watched a moment, then guiltily closed the door. He turned and came to sit with Nanna and Miriam.

"You still are shivering," he said. "Let me get you some tea."

"I'm really so sorry," Nanna said again.

"No, no," he assured her. “No, no, no, no, no.” He shook his head as he busied himself with water and pot. He was so stunned by what was happening that he had no idea what to say. But he felt this tremendous urge to say something. Anything. He was a deacon. He was supposed to know what to do when others came to him for help. He was supposed to know what to say. And

so he spoke, his voice rambling nervously. “No trouble at all. It’s fine. No inconvenience. No, no, no.” And all the while he hid the panic on his face by facing the stove, watching the water, waiting for it to boil.

“It’s no problem,” he said. “I’m glad you could stop in.” A ridiculous comment, he realized immediately.

By the time he turned with a steaming cup for each of them, they both had stopped shivering. He saw that Nanna was holding the young girl's hand. And there was fear in both their eyes. He grabbed a chair for himself and sat down, facing them. And then he watched them. For a long while, no words were spoken. Nanna and Miriam sipped their hot tea, both still wrapped in their blankets. Thomas watched them. Finally, he spoke…

“So…” he said, and breathed deep.

Nanna was not one for many words, even less since her husband had died. But, still holding her steaming cup, she quietly told the young deacon everything that had happened that night. About Zeke. About the riders. The fire. Their escape.

"Zeke told us to come here," she said.

And suddenly it dawned on Thomas.

"Zeke can talk?" he asked in disbelief.

"No," Nanna said. "It's rather peculiar. He talks to the parrot, and the parrot speaks to us.

"He has a parrot with him?"

"It is our parrot," Nanna explained, glancing at the parrot now perched, sleeping, on the back of Miriam’s chair. "It was the only way Zeke could get us to understand. But he was right. The riders came. I don't know what would have become of us if it hadn't been for Zeke."

"There must have been some mistake," Thomas assured them.

"I don't think so," Nanna replied, calmly.

Brother Thomas obviously was flustered. Why would anyone want to hurt a widow and her daughter?

"Perhaps they were bandits," he suggested.

Nanna shook her head.

"Why would they set fire to our house?" Miriam asked. It was the first time she had spoken. There were tears in her voice. "And why were there so many of them?"

"It doesn't make sense," the young deacon scratched his head. "But you'll be safe here. And after you've rested up, we'll all go into town."

"But Zeke says we must leave,” Miriam protested.

"No, no," Thomas assured her. "Stay here until you are rested up. Then we can go into town and find a more permanent place for you. I think I know of two or more families with rooms to spare."

Nanna interrupted him. "I am sure you mean well, Father. But Zeke has told us we are not safe. He says we must leave Apple Grove. Tonight. He said we must hide here and he'll come for us.”

“He said all that?” he asked in disbelief.

The older woman nodded. “More or less.”

"Where will you go?" Thomas asked her, his voice full of concern.

"I don't know," the widow answered. "But after tonight, I feel we need to listen to what he tells us. He's not what he seems, you know. I'm sure of it."

Brother Thomas nodded slowly, his eyes wide. Then he stood up and walked back to the door of his cabin, opened it, and looked out. The wind still howled through the trees. The first rays of the sun were just starting to appear. But the old man was gone.

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