

*Out from the*  
**EMERALD  
WOODS**



*Out from the*  
EMERALD  
WOODS

C L H U G H E Y



*Out from the Emerald Woods*

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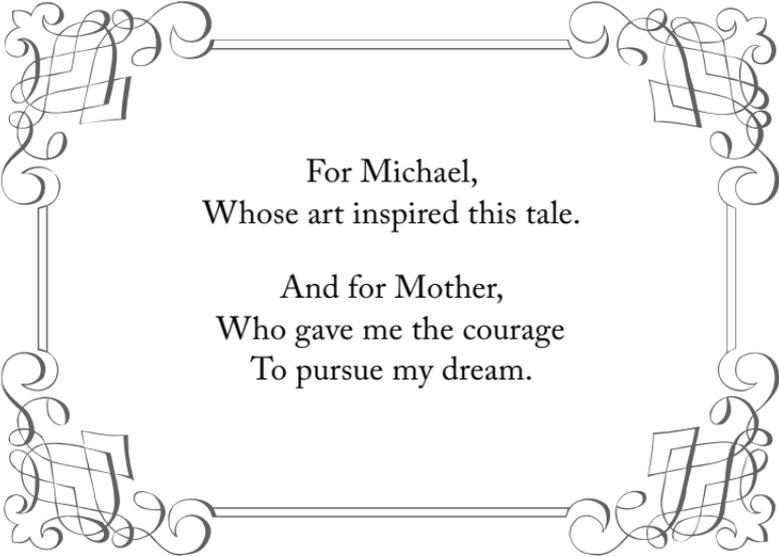
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For Michael,  
Whose art inspired this tale.

And for Mother,  
Who gave me the courage  
To pursue my dream.



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# PROLOGUE

IT WAS A warm and sunny day. The green fields and meadows of the countryside spoke of spring and the renewal of life. The long gray days of a damp and drab winter had at last passed. Flocks of sheep and frolicking lambs dotted the hillsides. The small villages of the land had shed the cold discomfort of a few months earlier and were dressed now in the warm fragrance of a whole new world.

On a country lane, near one of these country hamlets, plodded a single ox pulling a two-wheeled cart. In the cart were a young man and woman with their infant son. The couple's hair was the color of the golden wheat growing in the fields, which they passed. The baby's hair shimmered in the sun like spun gold. The man stopped the cart by a quiet hillside meadow just a few miles from the town. He climbed out of the cart, turned to help his wife and child down from the seat, and then took a quilt and a food basket out of the back of the cart. The young family walked up the side of the hill to the center of the meadow and spread out the quilt, settling down on it to begin their picnic lunch.

Farther up the hill on which the young family dined was the beginning of a heavily wooded forest. Deep within the trees, secluded from all human contact, was an isolated clearing where a small thatch-roofed house sat. The sun's

warm rays beat down on the cottage, brightening its otherwise colorless appearance.

The hut's resident was a wizened old man with a mane of pure white hair and a full white beard. He had filled his home with artifacts taken during the first crusade to the Holy Land. It seemed cluttered with furniture and bric-a-brac. In the middle of the main room stood a small round table and two homemade chairs. A crystal ball on a brass pedestal sat in the center of the table.

The old man walked to the fireplace and picked up a metal teapot out of the burning coals with a thick rag. He poured its steaming liquid into a crockery pot, which was sitting by the hearth, and then returned the metal pot back to the coals. The man then picked up the crockery teapot and carried it back to the table where he had been working. As he sat down in one of the chairs, he poured some of the liquid into a large cup and sat the pot to one side of the table, out of the way. He sipped at the tea and began to study the ancient scroll lying open in front of him. He sat the cup down and began to write scientific formulas on a piece of parchment. He didn't notice that the light shining through his window had begun to dim a little.

In the sky outside, the outline of a dark ball appeared on the edge of the sun as the moon inched its way between the earth and its star, beginning its total eclipse.

The common people of the country village were puzzled by the darkening day and came out of their dwellings and businesses to look up toward the sun. Many of them had

never heard of nor had seen an eclipse, and the phenomena caused them to panic. The first thought in their minds was that God was punishing them, and they flooded to the local church. Prayers were sent heavenward to the Almighty to have mercy on them.

The couple in the meadow had walked quite a distance away from where their infant son lay napping. The growing darkness made them stop to look up to the sky. Upon seeing the black moon crawling across the face of the sun, they turned to hurry to where the child slept.

Something flashed in the old man's crystal ball and drew his attention away from his study. A scowl wrinkled his brow, and he looked up from his papers to the shadowy room. He rose from his chair and walked to the only window in the room. The old man peered out of the window and looked up to the sky. After a moment, he drew his head back into the room and walked to the door where his walking stick leaned against the door jam. Leaving his work unfinished and scattered on the table, he left the house.

The young couple had reached the ox cart when a bright flash suddenly appeared in the sky overhead and caused them to pause again. They looked up to the heavens, and the whole atmosphere around them seemed to light up in fire. They were blinded as an unbearable heat reached out and engulfed them and the cart.

By the time the old man walked out of the woods at the top of the hill, the moon was already moving from its

position in front of the sun. He stopped and surveyed the scene in front of him, and it made him grimace. Where the ox cart and young couple had once been was nothing but a burned-out crater and smoldering ashes. The old man walked down the hill and stood at the crater's rim, peering down on the small meteorite that rested in the center of it. The ash and debris around it gave no clue to what once might have stood in the spot.

The sound of a baby crying captured the man's attention, and he slowly turned toward its source. The man followed the sound to its origin behind a boulder halfway up the hill, less than a meter away from the crater. As he stepped behind the boulder, he found an infant who had rolled away from its quilt and lay against the back side of the large rock, protected from the blast of the meteor. The old man leaned his staff against the boulder and bent down to pick up the squalling child. As he held the little boy up, the rays of the returning sun touched the child's golden hair and caused it to shine like precious metal. The infant stopped crying and studied the white-haired man holding him, his crystal blue eyes shimmering in the sunlight. He was an amazingly beautiful child.

The old man looked from the child to the crater and back to the child. *He appeared with the star*, the old man thought, *so he must be a gift from heaven.*

The man cradled the infant in his arm and picked up his staff with his free hand. Without bothering to try and find

the child's parents, the old man retraced his steps back up the hillside to his woods. In his mind, the child was given to him by God, and it was his responsibility to raise and nurture the little boy.

