

*If you would stay, if you would fight,  
If to my side you'd cleave,  
Then great adventures, wisdom, truth  
Will your ways never leave.*

*—Adon, King of Uwd*



## One

Thomas Gaines couldn't go to his room like an ordinary boy. He couldn't run up the stairs and down the hallway and leap on his bed and bounce.

Someone had to carry him upstairs.

It worked like this. Whoever did it, whether it was his mom or dad or somebody else, first they would lift him out of his wheelchair downstairs and set him in the seat in the entryway. Then they would carry the wheelchair upstairs. Then they would come back down for him and carry him up and put him back in the wheelchair, and wheel him down the hallway to his room.

Right now, Thomas sat in the seat in the entryway watching his mom. She was humming as she folded the wheelchair, some tune from an old movie. His mom loved old movies. She took the wheelchair to the stairs backwards, and hauled it up step by step until she climbed out of view. He could hear her upstairs setting it up, humming the whole time.

She trotted back down, and caught his eye and gave him a smile.

It wasn't her best smile, because it hadn't been their best morning. But Thomas tried to give her one back.

She lifted him from the seat and began carrying him up. Soon her humming began breaking up because of the effort of carrying him.

"Where'd Dad go?" Thomas said.

"Surprise," she said, and took a few more steps. "I think...we're going to have to...install an elevator."

When she reached the top of the stairs, she put him in the wheelchair and ruffled his hair. "My boy's getting big," she said.

Coming around behind him, she released the brakes on the wheels and began pushing him down the hallway. His wheelchair bounced a little because the carpet was the lumpy kind.

His room was dim. Not dark enough to be scary, just dim. "You forgot the drapes," he said.

"Oh!" His mom stopped pushing and came around his wheelchair. She didn't bother with the light switch, but went straight for the window.

When she drew the drapes back, sunlight beamed down onto the table where Thomas kept his collection of rocks and gems.

It was the most precious thing he owned.

He always wanted the drapes open during the day, not just because he didn't like the dark, but also because the afternoon sunlight made the gems glow and reflect their whites and reds and blues and golds onto his ceiling. His visitors would always say something about them, about the way they shone. Sure, the gems were all fake—what his mom called costume jewelry—but that didn't matter. Not much, anyway.

No, he couldn't walk, but his collection of colorful gems was something that none of his visitors had. And even when he didn't have visitors, his collection always gave him something to look forward to.

His mom smiled at him. "Look," she said, pointing to the ceiling, where globs of reflected light of red and blue and gold colored the whiteness.

"Cool," he said.

She came around behind his wheelchair and wheeled him to his bed. "Your Uncle Frankie's coming over," she said. "He said he has something for you."

"You already told me."

"Did I?" She locked the wheels of the chair and turned back the covers on his bed. Then she came to him and gathered him up, lifting him out of the wheelchair to put him on the bed.

As she undressed him and replaced his outdoor clothes with his PJs, she talked about Uncle Frank.

He'd been the one to start Thomas on the hobby of collecting rocks and gems. Actually, because Thomas couldn't go outside on his own to look for them, Uncle Frank had given him most of them.

He was mom's brother, and both she and his wife, Aunt Emily, still called him Frankie—at least, most of the time. Unless Aunt Emily especially wanted to get his attention, or when he spilled something or got a little too much of what she called enthusiastic. Then she called him Franklin. Or Franklin Higgenbotham Fields—all three of his names. As if that would make him behave himself.

"When Frankie was a boy," Thomas's mom was saying, "nobody could stop him or slow him down. If they could've bottled the energy he had, they could've stopped worrying about power plants and electricity." She smiled when she talked about him. "Unfortunately, he had a habit of getting into trouble. I think he was just bored. The pranks he pulled...." She gave Thomas a look that made him think she'd forgotten it was him she was talking to. "Never mind."

She buttoned the last button on his PJs.

"Covers on or off?" she said.

"Off."

A cloud passed over the sun outside, and the lights from his collection disappeared from the ceiling. With the glowing colors gone, he had to look around the room for something else to keep from being sad. One of his hands went to the nearest of the four wooden posts coming up at each corner of his bed frame. The posts were smooth, dark wood that he stroked sometimes when he felt sad or scared.

Next to his wheelchair, on top of the dresser, he still had the card his cousin Gracie had made for him a month ago for his 11<sup>th</sup> birthday. Thinking of Gracie helped.

His mom said, “Does it still hurt?”

Thomas could tell she was trying to keep her face from showing how bad she felt about what the doctor had to do. They’d told him he had to hold very still. Then the doctor had stuck the needle in his back.

“Only a little,” he said.

Thomas hated needles. The only thing he hated more than needles was the dark. That was why he always slept with a night light, and why he wanted the drapes closed when the sun went down so he couldn’t see how dark things got outside.

“My brave boy,” she said.

But when Thomas thought about his illness, about how people always had to wheel him around and how he couldn’t do anything for himself, it made his heart feel soggy. He didn’t feel brave at all.

Deep down he felt like he must have done something bad to be sick all the time. His mom and dad said he was good and brave, and so did Uncle Frank. But they couldn’t know that he sometimes had bad thoughts about the doctors and nurses. And he sometimes lied about how he felt, to keep them from doing things to him.

He really didn’t want to think about that. Not now. Not with Uncle Frank coming over.

His mom wheeled his chair against the wall. “Do you think you can eat anything?” she said.

She was always trying to get him to eat. But he never seemed to be hungry.

“Ice cream?” he said.

She smiled at him and smoothed his hair. “It’s only eleven o’clock in the morning,” she said. “But okay. I’ll give away the surprise. Your dad’s on his way home from the store with a whole gallon of Cookies & Cream. He thought you might want some.”

“Perfect,” Thomas said. “How about a Coke while I wait?”

His mom crossed her arms and gave him a pretend look of disapproval. “That *and* the ice cream?”

“Sure,” he said.

She held up a finger. “Just a small one,” she said, and kissed his forehead. He smelled the fragrance of her, sweet like flowers, and rich like coffee and warmth.

Then she was gone, and he could hear her footsteps on the stairs quickly beating down to get him a Coke.

The clouds outside parted, and the sunshine returned. He looked at his collection, glowing, and at the colors on the ceiling.

And he desperately wished that something good would happen.

## Two

“Hello, young man,” Uncle Frank said. He stood in the doorway across the room from where Thomas lay in bed. Stepping into the room, he seemed to grow larger, his beard covering his face from high on his cheekbones to hide half his neck but revealing the smile he always had for Thomas.

He pulled up a chair next to Thomas’s bed, and sat.

There was a book in his hand, a book unlike any Thomas had seen before.

He touched Thomas’s shoulder. “How are you, Tommy?” he said.

“Fine. What’s that?” He indicated the book with a glance.

“This?” Uncle Frank held it up and tilted it. The leather cover looked as old as time, worn dark and smooth. A small key dangled from a woven cord clasped to the top of the book’s binding. The key wasn’t made of metal. It was white stone with faint red lines through it. He turned his eyes to Thomas. “It’s a book.”

“I can see that, Uncle *Fred*.” Thomas liked to call Uncle Frank all the names that started with the *F* sound. It made Uncle Frank smile. “I mean, why do you have it?”

“Why does anybody have a book? To read it, of course.”

Thomas squinted at him. Uncle Frank always talked to him in riddles like this. “Well, go ahead and read it, then.”

Uncle Frank smiled. He crossed his legs to rest an ankle on the other knee and licked a finger. Opening the cover, he said, “There’s an inscription.” He turned the book around to show Thomas for only a second, and then turned it back. Teasing him.

“So read it,” Thomas said.

Uncle Frank stared at the page for a few seconds.

“Out loud,” Thomas said.

“Oh, out *loud*.” He made a show of clearing his throat. He read,

*“This book not be a ordinary book. This book be crafted by King Adon of the land of Uwd...”*

Uncle Frank paused and glanced at Thomas. That last word sounded like *OOD*. He read on,

*“...crafted by King Adon of the land of Uwd, special for the boy Thomas. It come with one enchanted key carved by Uwdian miners what write this piece. The boy Thomas got to take care not to lose the key, for its holder be the only one what can free the master’s treasures. That be all we know about that.*

*With the key and the book, the boy Thomas can pass to the forests of Uwd. What happens next, we can’t tell!”*

Uncle Frank turned the page, and the next one. And the one after that. “That’s all it says. The rest of it’s just blank pages.”

Uncle Frank brought his elbow up onto the arm of his chair and scratched his beard. When he scrunched up the left side of his face, the wrinkles around his eyes got deeper.

Thomas tried to understand what Uncle Frank had read. What kind of king made books? And what kinds of books had nothing but inscriptions in them? And what was that about passing into a forest?

He was about to start asking questions when Uncle Frank said, “When I was a boy about your age, one day my pastor came to see me...” He looked up toward the ceiling. “Let’s just say I was in a little trouble.” He waved a hand in the air and his eyes lowered back to Thomas. “Anyhow! He gave me a present a lot like this one, and it set me off on an adventure.”

Thomas had heard some of this story from Uncle Frank before. But what was written in this book was a little too mysterious. It made Thomas want to change the subject.

“That was when everybody called you Franklin,” he said. “Or Frankie.”

Uncle Frank nodded. “Thomas, you’ve read lots of stories about adventure.” Uncle Frank leaned forward. “That’s okay as far as it goes. But how would you feel about going on a real adventure yourself?”

Thomas loved to read stories or watch movies about faraway places and heroes and pirates, about the ocean and forests and wild things. He always wondered what he would do if he was the hero of the story.

But with his illness, he knew he could never do such things.

To keep from thinking about it, he said, “What kind of place would be called Uwd? It sounds like something an owl would say. *Oood. Oood.* And what do they mean about ‘pass to the forests of Uwd’?”

Thomas shifted and pulled the covers up to hide the quiver of his pajamas over his thumping heart. He didn’t want Uncle Frank to see that his hands had started shaking because of all this talk about going someplace he couldn’t go. He slid them under the covers of his bed. “I mean...I’ve always wanted to have a real adventure, not just read about one. But I can’t do it.”

“Can’t do what?”

“Come on, Uncle *Philbert*. You know what I mean. I’ve never been able to do anything. I’ve been...like this, ever since I was a baby...”

Uncle Frank’s eye glittered as he turned the stone key over in his fingers. “Things are different in Uwd.” It was hard to see his smile with all that beard, but his cheeks got rounder. “Could be *you’ll* be different there.”

The thought of being different sounded good and scary at the same time.

Thomas looked back to the book Uncle Frank was holding. He said, “But, ‘Freeing the master’s treasures...’ I don’t know what any of it means. How can I do something if I don’t know what it means?”

Uncle Frank leaned forward again. “Tommy, a smart guy once told me, ‘You’re looking for all the answers before you even know the right questions.’”

“But—”

“You know how I always say someone’s watching over you?” Uncle Frank said.

Thomas nodded. He’d said it so many times, Thomas had begun to believe it. Sometimes, when he was alone, he even thought someone was nearby—not in a creepy way, but in a way that was ready to help him if he needed it. To protect him. He’d felt that way today when the doctor told him to hold very still. But if someone was nearby, they sure didn’t keep the needle from hurting.

“I wish they’d do more than just watch,” he said.

Uncle Frank nodded. “Trust me, he is. And maybe in Uwd you’ll get to meet him.”

Thomas looked away from Uncle Frank. He didn’t want him to know all this was scaring him. But he didn’t want to lie to him either. He looked back into Uncle Frank’s eyes, and saw no disappointment, only the smile his uncle always had for him.

Thomas said, “You probably never get scared when you go on adventures.”

Uncle Frank laughed. “If you’re never scared, it’s not an adventure! Hoo boy. There’ve been lots of nights where I’ve laid awake and I couldn’t sleep for all the weird sounds out there in the dark. I’ve been scared plenty, believe me. But Tommy?” He patted Thomas’s arm, and that smile turned serious. He said, “It’s not whether or not you’re scared that matters. What matters is what you *do* when you’re scared. That’s how you know what kind of person you are.” His smile came back and he tilted his head toward Thomas. “Besides, the way you handle your doctors and all those operations you’ve had, I think you’re a lot braver than I am.”

Thomas let himself imagine what kind of place Uwd might be. He still felt fear making his chest feathery inside, but the thought of Uwd-owls making Uwd-hoots in Uwd-trees seemed to be firming up the soggiess in his heart.

The book said he’d go to Uwdian forests.

Wheelchairs are no good for forests.

Uncle Frank unclasped the cord with the key on it, and separated it from the book. He held the key in his fingertips and the leather cord swayed beneath his hands. Turning the key in the light from the window, he said, “Look at the colors in it. It was carved by Uwdian miners.”



Thomas reached out for the key. He felt a little braver now. His hand didn't tremble when Uncle Frank put the key into it. "What do I do with it?" Thomas said.

Uncle Frank held the two ends of the cord together, and then released them. "It goes around your neck," he said. "Like the book says, 'With the key and the book, the boy Thomas can pass to the forests of Uwd. What happens next, we can't tell!'"

He held the book out.

"It's up to you, Tommy. If you want, I can put this book up on the shelf with your other books. And the key will make a nice addition to your rock collection." He winked at him. "It's okay if that's what you want to do."

Uncle Frank was right. That stone key would look good in his collection. He wondered where he could place the white stone so it could reflect best with the other gems.

He turned back. Uncle Frank was watching him carefully. A crease had appeared between Uncle Frank's eyebrows, as if he was worried about something.

Thomas turned back to his collection. The sun was making them reflect their colors right over his bed now. He could ask Uncle Frank to put the stone key next to his fake rubies or sapphires.

But a real adventure! In a real forest, a place where everything would be different.

Where *he* might be different.

He turned back to Uncle Frank and took the book from him and slipped it into the shirt of his PJs for safekeeping. Then he took the cord in both hands. It was hard for him to lift his head because of his illness, but he made enough room over his pillow to draw the cord around his neck to wear it like a necklace.

He released his hand from the cord.

The key dropped to his chest, directly over his heart.

And very quickly, everything began to change.