

Return to the Kingdom of The Nutcracker

by J. K. Auberg

CHAPTER 1

When I was eleven years old and just a hurt, scared, little girl something incredible happened to me that would change the course of my life. My father had disappeared a couple years ago. Before that, I was a happy, bright, young girl with big dreams and ambitions. I was always getting straight A's at school and involved in all sorts of extra curricular activities. I especially loved helping out at my dad's toy factory. All of that changed the night my dad disappeared. I fell into despair. I needed my dad. I wanted my dad with me. I missed him terribly. So, I withdrew into myself and my circle of friends dropped to just a couple, and those I barely paid much attention to. I guess I was blessed to have some friends who held onto me despite myself. I couldn't concentrate in school anymore, and my grades dropped to D's and F's. I was lost, and I didn't know how I could ever be found.

The night before my eleventh birthday, I found myself standing in the midst of a rainbow, candy cane paradise. It was the only place I ever knew any happiness, my escape from reality. My long, dark, wavy hair stood out sharply from the bright, almost nauseating, colors around me. I looked around in utter delight at the wonderland before me. I reached out and broke off a limb from a candy candy tree and put in my mouth. Delicious! This was an eleven year old girl's fantasy world with candy cane trees, rainbow waterfalls, delightfully fluffy clouds, and, of course, unicorns! A proud looking unicorn with a rainbow colored horn flew down and landed next to me. This was my unicorn. My five foot three body was dwarfed by the massive strength of the animal. The unicorn turned and smiled at me.

“Welcome back, Lucy!” it exclaimed with glee.

“Hello Lavender!” I replied.

“We haven't seen you here for quite awhile, Lucy.”

“Yeah,” I responded in my cute, light, little girl voice, “I just haven't been sleeping well lately.” It was true. There was too much going on in my life for a little girl to deal with.

“Well, I'm glad you're dreaming strong tonight! Climb aboard!”

I joyfully climbed onto the unicorn's back and we flew into the sunny blue sky while a rainbow shined brightly behind us. Together we did a loop da loop and passed through the puffy, white clouds. I reached out and grabbed a piece of the cloud, putting it in my

mouth. It made me smile; something I didn't do much of these days. It was cotton candy!

I was in a special place and yet, at the same time, I was asleep in my bed. I was in the place where children go in their dreams. It had been created a long, long, very long time ago by an angel who was assigned to protect children while they are dreaming. Nobody really knew what had happened to the angel, but there had been wars before. The nightmares were always banging just outside the realm, trying to spoil the beauty and innocence of the children's fantasies. I had heard the story about a time when the nightmare got in and took the form of a Rat King. An army of nutcrackers had to be made to stop them. You've probably heard about that one! Clara, from the Nutcracker tales, was my great, great grandmother, though I didn't know that at that time. She and the Nutcracker were legends here.

As my unicorn, Lavender, and I soared across the sickeningly colorful land I started to notice that the colors were fading. Then my unicorn started to feel weak and had to set down on the ground, which was now almost completely gray.

"What's happening?" spoke the unicorn raspily as she faded from the imagination and disappeared. I suddenly found myself laying on the cold, hard ground!

"No!" I yelled in frustration. "This is my dream! Stop!"

It was no use, I no longer had control over my dream. Gradually, all the colors faded into blacks and grays. Just then, giant rats came running across the land in huge numbers. They had sharp teeth and growled low, lion like roars. One jumped right on to my face! I screamed!

"Ahhh!" I awoke suddenly, staring wide eyed at the ceiling, and then sat up in bed. I was now wide awake and covered in sweat.

The door to my room burst open and my mom came charging in.

"Lucy! You okay?"

"Just a bad dream, I guess," I whined. "I want my dad!" I didn't mean to say it, it just came out. I know it hurt mom just a little every time I brought him up.

"You're drenched in sweat and you're shaking," my mom pulled me into a hug. "I would call that more than just a bad dream."

"I don't know what happened," I whined. "I was having a wonderful dream with my unicorn, Lavender, when suddenly everything faded to gray and I was attacked by giant viscous rats!"

"Okay. Everything's fine now. Let's get you cleaned up and back to bed." Her voice quivered a little.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to."

"I know honey," she replied. "I know. It's hard, but we will get through this."

After a quick bath I returned to my bed and went back to sleep. For the rest of the night I slept restlessly, without returning to my dream world. In the morning I awoke feeling groggy and dazed. At first I thought maybe I would just stay in bed for awhile, but I could hear my mom yelling for me to get up. I stumbled out of my bed and into the bathroom. Then I struggled out of my night clothes, barely managing to get my blue and

white sun dress on. It would have been one of my favorite outfits if I had cared to have a favorite anything.

I stumbled down the stairs where my mom was waiting for me at the breakfast table. The news was playing on the TV sitting on the counter across from the table. The table was an old wooden square that had several cracks in it. As I approached it, I noticed all too well how well it seemed to fit in with the crumbling dry wall in the kitchen. In fact, the entire house was in a general state of disrepair. I sat down with my mother at the table and stared at the small bowl of dry cereal.

“Sorry sweetie,” spoke my mother, “that’s all there is. We used up the last of the milk at dinner last night.”

“Are we going to be okay, mom?” I asked.

“Don’t you worry about such things,” my mother replied. “I’m starting at the new grocery store tomorrow. It won’t bring much, but it’ll help us keep food on the table. Now, forget such things; it’s your birthday. Let’s make the most of it.”

“Okay,” I whined.

Just then a report came on the news that caught my mom’s attention. She turned up the volume.

“Nightmares are on the rise,” said the reporter on the TV. “There has been an unusual number of kids having the same nightmares again and again. These nightmares seem to involve the kids being attacked by large, viscous rats. Doctors and psychiatrists are at a complete loss to explain the occurrences of such consistent nightmares by so many different children...”

“That sounds just like the nightmare you had last night,” my mom suggested.

“It does,” I mumbled. “How strange.”

The two of us ate our dry cereal and drank our glasses of water (we didn’t have any orange juice left, either). I sat, hunched over with the bangs of my hair hanging over my eyes a little, and then I sighed. When breakfast was finished, my mom went into the other room in search of a small gift-wrapped box.

“Mom, what’s going to happen to our toy factory?” I asked as she came back into the room.

“Oh sweetie!” she exclaimed. “Try not to think about such things. It’s your birthday. Enjoy it. There will be plenty of other days for us to worry about the future of your dad’s business.”

The toy factory, which included a toy store, had been my dad’s pride and joy. He had been one of the best toy makers in the whole country. In fact, his toys had been sought after worldwide, but now he was just a legend. Nobody knew where he was or what happened to him. A few years ago, he had started acting paranoid and then just down right crazy. He kept telling my mom that someone or something was after him. Then he began talking about a Rat King that was out for revenge. Mom tried to get him help, but he wouldn’t go to the doctors. Then one day he just disappeared, never to be seen again. Mom and I tried to keep the factory running, but the new toys we made just weren’t the same. Even though we had followed all the designs he had made, there was just

something different about them. They didn't sell. When all the old stock was sold out people stopped coming to the Toy Store and businesses stopped ordering from the factory. Nobody wanted the new toys, and so now everything was falling apart. There was no more money and slowly age had taken its toll on the house, the store, and the factory. Peeling paint, cracked walls, and stained floors were now the prominent features of the buildings. It looked on the outside like I felt on the inside; falling apart.

My mom came back into the room carrying the small package. "Happy 11th Birthday baby girl!" She handed me the tiny, wrapped box. "Of course, you'll get most of your presents tonight at your birthday party, but this one is special..." She choked up a little. "It's from your dad... he had it for a long time... he always said that he wanted you to have it when you turned 11. I don't know why or even what it is."

"Well, let's find out," I exclaimed, a little teary eyed. It was the first time in a long time that I actually felt a little excited. After all, my dad hadn't been in my life for several years.

Gently I tore the wrapping paper off of the package to reveal a small wooden box with intricate carvings of flowers on it. With a little force I managed to get the lid off. I reached my little hand into it and pulled out a key.

Mother's eyes lit up. This wasn't just any key; it was a very special key of indescribable beauty. No doubt my father had made it himself a long time ago. It had a rather intricate set of key teeth that led up to a detailed carved handle. The handle took the shape of a beautiful carousel complete with tiny little horses, elephants, and giraffes on it. Above all, it was a gorgeous, one of a kind work of art.

After inspecting it with awe, I looked to mother and asked, "What's it go to?"

"I'm sorry honey," she replied, "I have no idea. I've actually never seen it before."

"Oh," I replied, disappointed. "Well, it's very pretty."

"That it is."

Just then the phone rang. It was an old wall phone that almost fell off the wall from the vibrations of the ring. My mom picked it up.

"Hello," she said into the phone. "Yes, this is Mrs. Licordia... Oh... uh... well, it's my daughter's birthday... okay... very well."

She hung up the phone looking quite discontent. "I'm sorry Lucy. Somebody called out sick at the new grocery store and I have to start the new job today."

"That's okay, mom," I replied with an air of disappointment in my voice. I tried to hide it, but it came through anyways. "We'll celebrate when you get home tonight."

"Thanks sweetie. Let me see if Joan can come over and watch you."

"Mom, I'm eleven now! I don't need a sitter."

"Well, I don't know about that," replied my mother, "but I've got to go, so we'll try it for today. The number to the store is on the fridge; call me if there are any problems. I'll be back at 7pm. Your birthday guests should be arriving around that time... I'm so sorry to leave you on your birth..."

"It's okay mom. I'll be alright." Kind of a lie. I didn't think I would ever be alright ever again, but whether or not I had a babysitter wasn't going to change any of that.

Mom soon left to go to her new job, still rather concerned that she had to leave her daughter alone on her birthday. She was still trying to run the toy factory and store, but it wasn't making any money. If we were going to keep eating she was going to have to work a part time job.

CHAPTER 2

Now I was alone in my dilapidated, old house. For a moment my usual sulking self sat lifeless slouched over on the couch watching TV, but suddenly I sat up. All of a sudden I felt a need... a purpose. I sent myself out on a mission. With the key in my hand, the very special key that held a link to my missing father, I began checking doors. I went to the kitchen first and tried the lock on the pantry door. It didn't fit. Then I went to the china cabinet in the dining room. The key didn't work on that either. Next I tried the back door, front door, and garage door. Nothing.

I sat on the floor and cried for a minute, and then I pulled myself back up. Determined, I climbed the creaky stairs of my home and began checking every door on the second floor. I became anxious and eager. I went from bedroom to bedroom and tried the key in every door and lock I could find. Still nothing. Frustrated, I sat down and cried again. A couple minutes passed. Wait! Were there any other locks in the house? No, there wasn't. What could the key go to? What about the factory?

My house was connected to the factory and I could get there through the garage. Excited about my new idea, I ran down the steps, nearly falling, and bolted into the garage. I was an emotional wreck as I bounced up the steps to the factory door. It was locked. I pulled out my special key and stuck in the lock. It fit! Unfortunately it wouldn't turn. I yanked it back out and headed back into the house. Tears streamed down my eyes as I went into the kitchen. In the kitchen pantry I desperately went through the keys that hung on the back of the door and found the one to the factory. With the factory key in my one hand, I wiped away my tears with the other and galloped back into the garage to unlock the factory door. In the factory there were hundreds of doors to try my special key on. With almost obsessive determination, I planned out my action. Systematically I began going from door to door, inspecting each lock. Hour after hour I went from door to door. I cried, wiped away tears, and moved on. Door after door I rattled the key, but none of them opened. Exhausted, I collapsed on the floor in a heap. Broken and frustrated I just wailed.

Suddenly I was startled by a knocking on the factory's main door. I looked up slowly, wiped the tears out of my eyes, and pushed my hair back. There was another knock. Cautiously I walked over to the door and looked out. There was a boy about my age outside. I decided to open the door.

"Uh, can I help you?" I asked the young boy, my voice still kind of cracking from the crying I'd been doing.

"Hi," replied the boy. "I saw you going from door to door through the window. What are you doing?"

"I'm trying to figure out what this key my father gave me goes to." I showed him the key.

"Wow!" he exclaimed. "That key is an incredible piece of art."

"I know! Have you ever seen anything like it?"

"Actually," replied the boy. "I have, but it's still an awesome key."

I was rather surprised that he said he'd seen something like it before. "I just can't figure out what it goes to!" I exclaimed in frustration.

"Why don't you just ask your dad?"

"I haven't seen my dad for several years." I choked back my tears. "Actually, nobody has."

"Oh," the boy paused. "I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"It's okay." It really wasn't.

"My name's Henry. My father and I just moved in down the street."

"Hi Henry. I'm Lucy."

"You know, Lucy, my dad is a skilled craftsman. He has made keys very similar to yours. He might be able tell something about it."

"Cool!" I perked up a little. "What time is it?"

"It's five thirty."

"Okay. Let's go! I have to be back before seven."

I made sure to lock up the factory, and then I followed Henry to his dad's house down the street. Excitement bubbled up inside me once again. Just maybe I would find out what the key was for. Really, this is the moment it all started; little did I know that this single point in the infinite vastness of time was going to be the beginning of a great adventure, an adventure that would change everything.

Henry's home was more of a small workshop than a house. As I entered I was enthralled by the shelves and shelves of high quality hand made toys. Blocks of wood, sheet metal, gears, pulleys, and more gears covered the work benches. In the far corner of the room, working carefully on engraving the wood of a particularly beautiful mini toy carousel, sat Drosselmeyer. He looked up from his work and stared at the two kids approaching him. I was shocked when I saw his face. My heart nearly leapt out of my body. At one point he had been like a second father to me.

"Drosselmeyer!" I exclaimed excitedly and ran over to him. Once again tears streaked my eyes. I guess I cried a lot in those days.

"Well, well, well, what do we have here?" spoke Drosselmeyer as he took me into his embrace. "I'll be! If it isn't Lucy Licordia!"

"You two already know each other?" said a surprised Henry.

"Yes, Henry," replied Drosselmeyer. "Before I moved back to Russia, I used to be Lucy's father's business partner. Oh, Lucy, sweetie, I'm so sorry to hear about your dad's disappearance."

"Thank you Mr. Drosselmeyer," I replied with tired, cracked voice. "Um, well.. you see... I..."

"Dad," Henry took over for me as I was tongue tied, "Lucy has a special key her father gave to her."

I handed the key over to Drosselmeyer. He took in his hand and studied.

"I've tried every door in the house and the factory," I whined to him through my tears. "It doesn't fit anything."

"Interesting," replied Drosselmeyer. He studied the key carefully for a few

moments. "Yes. I know this key."

"You do!" exclaimed both Henry and I in unison.

"Yes," Drosselmeyer laughed. "In fact I made this key."

"You did?" I felt new life enter me. Anticipation filled my senses. Finally I was getting answers. "Please tell me. What door does it go to?"

"Well you see, Lucy," began Drosselmeyer, "not all keys go to doors."

"A car?" asked Henry.

Drosselmeyer laughed again. "No. This key goes to a toy. A toy, that like you Lucy, is lost. When you find it you will find yourself."

"What?" I asked. How did Drosselmeyer even know I was lost?

"It goes to a very special wind-up carousel. A masterpiece unlike any other toy I've ever made. Your dad ordered it years ago. Said he was going to give it to you on your eleventh birthday..."

"Yep," I replied. "That's today. Mom gave me the key this morning."

"But where's the toy carousel?" added Henry.

"Oh," I became exceedingly sad. I choked out the words, "Everything that dad ever made was sold to keep the business going." I sighed. I would not be finding out where the key goes. "It's gone."

"Cheer up baby girl," replied Drosselmeyer. "It's not gone. I told you, it's just missing. You see, your dad had a secret room where he kept his most precious toys. The creations that were so great that he couldn't sell them. The carousel would be in that room."

"But where is this secret room?" I whined. I was now totally and completely emotionally exhausted.

"Don't worry, sweetie," replied Drosselmeyer. "Your mom will know."

"Really?"

"Yes. She knows."

"Thank you Mr. Drosselmeyer." I hugged the old family friend and then Henry and I headed back to my home. I invited Henry to join me at my birthday party.

We arrived at my house just minutes before the first guests arrived. The doorbell rang and I answered it.

"Hi Jenny!" I said to my first guest and her mother. "Hello, Mrs. Holly."

"Hi Lucy," replied Jenny. Jenny was my best friend. Despite everything she was always there for me.

"Lucy," began Mrs. Holly, "listen, I hope you don't mind. We brought a couple of trays of boneless chicken wings for the party."

"That's so sweet!" I exclaimed. "Of course I don't mind. Come on in. My mom had to work, but she should be home any minute now."

One by one each of the kids in my class arrived at the party with their mothers, or occasionally, their father. Even though they weren't asked to, each family brought food. There was way more than would ever be eaten at the party. They knew things were tough for mom and I and they wanted to make sure there would be plenty of left overs to

last for several days. Shortly after the last guest arrived, the phone rang. I looked over at the clock. It was three minutes after seven. My heart sank. It had to be mom. I picked up the phone.

“Hello.”

“Hi Luce.” As I suspected, it was my mother. She sounded frazzled. “Listen Luce... I'm so sorry... Mr. Stevenson needs me to stay at the store a couple more hours. I told him I had to get to your birthday, but he said if I want to keep this job I had to stay.”

“Okay,” I replied, trying not to sound disappointed. My eyes teared again.

“Ask Jennifer's mom to chaperon,” continued my mom. “I'm sure she won't mind. Again I'm...” another voice was heard in the background, “hey, I don't pay you to talk on the phone!” and the phone hung up.

“Listen up everyone!” I shouted over all the talking, my voice cracking with my tears.. The room became quiet pretty quickly. “My mom has to work late so she won't be able to make it. She's asked you, Mrs. Holly, to chaperon if you would...”

“Of course, honey. No problem,” replied Jennifer's mom.

“Now hold on just a minute!” Thomas' father raised his voice. “Your mom is working that new grocery store, right?”

“Yes,” I replied, choking back my sadness.

“That jerk!” said Thomas' father, quickly followed by, “sorry.” He picked up his cell phone and dialed a number. “Hello,” pause. “Can I speak to Ted Lolta?” pause. “Hi Ted, it's John Handyson from the bank,” pause. “You want that loan you asked for, right?” pause. “Yea, well, I'm at birthday party for Mrs. Licordia's daughter and she's not,” pause. “I don't care. You should have scheduled accordingly. She was supposed to get off before 7pm,” pause. “Again, I don't care. You're taking advantage of that poor lady. If she's not at this party in ten minutes, you can kiss that loan goodbye,” pause. “Good day.”

John Handyson ended the call and turned to face me, “your mom will be home in ten minutes.”

“Thank you Mr Handyson,” I replied. “You didn't have to do that.”

“Yes, I did,” replied John. “Ted knew your mom needed to be home for your birthday and he kept her there anyways. It just wasn't right.”

John Handyson wasn't what you would have expected the president of a bank to be. Some might say he was kind, but I thought the word “kind” seemed to be quite inadequate. John had a heart of gold and had managed to get himself into a position where he could really use that heart of gold to do some good in this world. I knew that he was the reason that we still had the factory. The bank would have foreclosed on it years ago if it weren't for John.

Eight minutes later my mom finally walked in the door and greeted everyone. I rushed into her arms.

“Oh sweetie!” she exclaimed and held me tight.

After she released me, I immediately brought Henry over to her.

“Hey mom,” I said, “this is Henry. He and his dad just moved in down the street.”

“Well, hello there Henry. Welcome to the neighborhood.”

“Oh,” I continued, “and his dad is Drosselmeyer.”

Mom paused for a moment. “Really? Drosselmeyer is here?”

“Yes,” replied Henry. “He’ll be wanting to meet with you when it’s convenient.”

“Of course!” responded my mom. “I would be honored to meet with him again.”

Then the party started and for a short moment I forgot that I was sad, I forgot that I was lost, and I was just a little girl enjoying her birthday party. We all played games, ate tons of food, opened gifts, had cake, and watched a movie. It was a wonderful birthday party. Of course, time flies when you’re having fun, and soon it was time for everyone to go home.

“Thank you for all the food and gifts!” exclaimed my mom and I as the guests left.

“Think nothing of it,” replied Mrs. Holly. “If you need anything, please don’t hesitate to ask us. We’re not just your neighbors, we’re your friends.”

When all the guests were out of the house, I walked eagerly up to my mom.

“What is it, honey?” my mom asked. “I haven’t seen you eager to do anything in a long time.”

“Is there a secret room?”

“A secret room?” she repeated.

“Yes,” I replied insistently. “A room where dad kept his most favorite toys.”

“Why?” Now mom seemed a little suspicious.

I pulled out the special key that she had given me earlier that morning. “Drosselmeyer said that it goes to a special carousel that dad had him make for me a long time ago. He said it would be in dad’s secret room.”

“After your dad disappeared,” my mom started, “well, I was concerned. I knew that finances were going to get tough... I was afraid...”

“You were afraid?”

“I was afraid that I would sell those special toys if things got too desperate... so I had the door plastered over so that I would forget about it.”

“Did you?” I asked.

Pause. “No. Not a day has gone by where I haven’t thought about your father and his wonderful creations.”

“Is there a way in?”

“Tomorrow we’ll get someone to come and break out the plaster, but for tonight it’s time you got to bed. Hope you had a good birthday. Sorry I had to work through most of it.”

“It’s okay mom. I know you’re doing what you have to keep us going. And mom...”

“Yes sweetie?”

“I did. I did have a wonderful birthday.” I teared a little, but this time they were happy tears. “Thank you.”

My mom tucked me in and kissed me on the forehead.

“Good night, Luce.”

“Good night mom.”

She turned out the light and I shut my eyes. All the emotions I felt that day and all the searching had left me utterly exhausted and so I very quickly fell asleep.

CHAPTER 3

Soon I found myself back in the dream realm, except now the colors seemed dull and faded. Then a loud pounding of feet startled me as a regiment of nutcrackers came charging past.

"You can't stay here, lass," said one of the nutcrackers with a Scottish accent. "We're on retreat and the rats will be coming up the hill any moment."

"What?" I was confused.

He put his hand out. "Get on my stead. You can ride with me." I grabbed hold of his hand and he hoisted me up, almost effortlessly, onto the back of his horse. Then we galloped off to join the rest of the retreating nutcrackers.

As I sat behind the nutcracker, I couldn't help but notice that he had cracks in his wood and the paint was scratched all over his body, his left leg was badly splintered, and there was a hole in his side.

"You're hurt," I said.

"Don't worry, lass," replied the Nutcracker. "I'll be okay. The fortress is just over the next hill. We'll all be safe there."

It was then that I made the mistake of turning my head and looking behind. Thousands of large rats covered the landscape behind us. They were the largest, ugliest, most ferocious rats I had ever seen, and despite the speed of the nutcracker's horse, the rats were gaining on us.

"They're getting close!" I yelled out.

"Just hang on!" replied the nutcracker. "We're almost there!"

We reached the top of the hill and a large fort came into view. The nutcracker urged the horse to go faster. The rats were right behind us, practically biting the heels of the horse. The nutcracker and I charged forward through the fortress doors, which were promptly slammed shut after us. The rats crashed into the door in piles. Several nutcrackers took up positions on the wall and began firing down at the rodents, who quickly realized that they were sitting ducks outside the fortress and retreated.

"Enemy is on the retreat," announced one of the nutcrackers. Cheers broke out from around the fort.

The nutcracker whose horse I was on gently lowered me to the ground. "What's your name?" he asked me.

"My name's Lucy."

"I am Nutcracker Jonathan. Who is your dream guide?" continued the nutcracker.

"My what?" I replied.

"A dream guide is usually an animal, but could be something else. The dream guide greets you when you enter the Kingdom of the Nutcracker and guides you through your dream."

"Kingdom of the Nutcracker?" I asked.

"The Kingdom of the Nutcracker is where we are right now, though it wasn't always called that. It is the special place that exists in the dreams of children like you; a place

that is as real as it is imaginary.”

“Huh?”

“You may wonder if this place actually exists or if it is just a place in your dreams...”

“Oh, I'm dreaming,” I realized.

“There is no clear answer,” he continued. “This place exists as equally as much as it does not exist. Children visit here often in their dreams, but adults, adults never visit. Well, except for that one... It is here that toys come to life through the imagination of children and they take on the personalities of those children, but not all children play nice. A long time ago the imaginations of mean and rotten kids had taken over and ravaged the beauty of this world. The evil imaginings had primarily taken the form of large human-like rats, led by a malicious Rat King. For the good kids of the world this wonderful world of dreams became a terror of nightmares. During this time, it was common for kids in the real world to wake up screaming, sometimes with mysterious bruises, scratches, and bites on them!”

“That's happening now!” I exclaimed.

“Yes,” continued the nutcracker, “history is repeating itself. No doubt, they are out for revenge.”

“How did you stop them last time?”

“There was an adult named Drosselmeyer...”

“Drosselmeyer?” I interrupted. “I know him.”

“You do?” said the nutcracker. “Well, you are a special one, aren't you. Drosselmeyer was the only adult to ever enter this dream realm. How? Nobody seems to know. He was a very caring and loving man who loved all the children of the world... and not in a creepy way as he is sometimes depicted...”

“Huh?” I interrupted again, not having an clue what he was talking about.

“Never mind that,” continued the nutcracker. “Drosselmeyer knew the naughty children in the dream world needed discipline, so he built an army of nutcrackers - that would be us - in the real world and gave them to kids that he knew would use them properly in the dream world. In those days, Drosselmeyer, himself, often fought side by side with us. Although we nutcrackers made some progress in fighting back the rats, we lacked cooperation and organization. Drosselmeyer realized that we needed leadership, so he made a very special nutcracker, The Nutcracker, to be a captain to lead us to victory. The Nutcracker was unlike any other toy Drosselmeyer or anyone else had ever made! Somehow Drosselmeyer had given it its own life. It didn't need a child's imagination to exist in the dream world; it had a personality and existence all of its own! With The Nutcracker's leadership the evil rats were contained and the Rat King was largely subdued...”

“Wait!” I exclaimed, “this sounds like the plot to the ballet.”

“Yes, of course it does,” replied the nutcracker. “Though not entirely accurate, the ballet 'The Nutcracker' does tell the story of that great war. After the war was over, we, the nutcrackers, maintained the security of the dream world, keeping the evil imaginations at bay. Ever since then, this world between imagination and reality has

been known as the Kingdom of the Nutcracker.”

“Okay,” I said as I tried to take in all the information. “So, what happened? Why are the rats back?”

“Well, as I said, The Nutcracker was different. He didn't need a child's imagination to exist. The girl from 'The Nutcracker' ballet, Clara, captured the heart of The Nutcracker causing something miraculous to happen. After defeating the Rat King, The Nutcracker crossed over to the real world and became a living boy. He and Clara grew up together and were eventually married. They had a couple of children, who married and had children of their own. One of those children married a beautiful American girl and traveled with her to the United States where they produced one child of their own, a girl who never knew that her great, great grandfather had started out life as a toy.”

“Wow!” I exclaimed. “I wonder who she is?”

“Anyhow,” continued the nutcracker, “without the leadership of our captain we nutcrackers eventually became disorganized. Even with a new leader, we failed to stop the evil kids and their imaginations. Our only hope is to find the great, great, granddaughter of Clara. Once The Nutcracker saved the girl. Now, it is time for the girl to save The Nutcracker.”

“Oh,” I didn't know how to respond.

“So, who is your dream guide?” asked the Nutcracker again. “Who usually meets you when you come here?”

“That would be my unicorn, Lavender.”

The nutcracker turned his attention to another nutcracker, “Nutcracker Richard.”

“Yes sir,” replied the other nutcracker.

“Get me a location and status on a unicorn named Lavender. She's this child's dream guide.”

Nutcracker Richard disappeared for about two minutes and then returned.

“Dream Guide Lavender located,” reported Nutcracker Richard. “She is reported to be in good health and is only a short distance from here.”

“Send for her at once,” ordered Nutcracker Jonathan.

“Yes sir.”

“In the meantime you can have a seat here, Lucy,” the nutcracker pointed to a bench that was up against the wall. “I have to report in. I will be back shortly.”

“Okay,” I answered as I sat down on the cold, hard bench. While I was waiting I pondered all the things that I'd just been told and tried to make sense of it all.

A short time later Lavender, my unicorn, came marching down the hall. When she saw me she went ecstatic.

“She sitting on a hard bench?” Lavender exclaimed. “Don't you know who she is? You can do better than this!”

“She's Lucy?” replied Nutcracker Jonathan. A truer statement could not be said. I was Lucy.

“Yes, she's Lucy!” yelled the unicorn. “Princess Lucy, the great, great, granddaughter of Clara.”

“Clara!” the nutcrackers all exclaimed.

“Sorry,” replied Nutcracker Jonathan. “I didn't know.”

“Clara?” I asked, “like from the ballet?”

“Yes Lucy,” answered Lavender. “You are the decedent of the original princess of The Kingdom of the Nutcracker.”

“You can help us,” added Nutcracker Jonathan.

“I can,” I replied. “How?”

“There is a special key,” answered Lavender. “You must find it.”

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the key given to me by my father. “This key?”

The nutcrackers responded with oohs and aahs and general amazement as if they were shown the most valuable thing in the universe.

“She has the key!” exclaimed one of them.

“We're saved!” shouted another.

“Hold on now!” yelled Lavender, the unicorn. “The key is not really here.”

The nutcrackers became silent with disappointment.

“It's not?” I responded with confusion.

“No,” answered Lavender. “Just as you are not really here. Remember, for you, this is a dream, and the key is just part of that dream.”

“What must we do?” asked Nutcracker Jonathan.

“You and the rest of the nutcrackers can do nothing right now,” replied Lavender.

“Lucy must find the portal and bring the key here without dreaming.”

“I can come here without dreaming?” I asked.

“Yes,” continued Lavender. “Drosselmeyer created a special portal that allows people to enter the dreamland outside of their dreams.”

“Where is it?” I inquired.

“A word of caution first,” Lavender paused. “Understand that this is dangerous. When you are here in your dreams there is very little harm that can actually come to you, but if you enter outside of your dream, you will actually be here. That means that you can be hurt and even killed just like in the real world. We need you, but you must not enter without understanding the threat. The Rat King and his followers will hunt you down and try to stop you. You will be vulnerable. In fact, I fear that we can not allow you to take this risk...”

“I must,” I interrupted. “You said I was your only hope.” It was very uncharacteristic of me to say such things in those days, but this was a dream and I was feeling brave in that dream.

“We will do all we can to protect you,” added Nutcracker Jonathan, “but still, the choice, and the risk, is yours. We do need you, but we do not want harm to come to you.”

“And now,” said Lavender, “it's time for you to wake up.”

“Wait!” I screamed. “Where is the portal?”

“The portal is the toy that...”

I awoke, disappointed that I didn't get the full answer. Sitting up, I pondered for a moment, but it all quickly faded away as dreams do. A moment later my mom walked into my room.

"Hey sleepy head," she said. "You overslept. Breakfast is waiting for you."

"Oh," I replied as I stretched.

"Drosselmeyer and Henry will be over in an hour. They're going to help us get into your dad's secret room."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. I'm glad to hear you sound excited. It's been too long since you've got excited about anything."

"Sorry."

"Don't be sorry, honey," she replied. "I've just been worried about you."

Knowing that I would soon get into my dad's secret room cheered me up greatly. I would soon have the special thing that the key went to; the special thing that my dad had wanted me to have. I quickly threw off my pajamas and slipped on some dark blue leggings and a light blue dress. I hurried down the steps and ate my breakfast. There was lots of food left over from last night's party. Then I anxiously awaited the arrival of my friends.

After what seemed an eternity, but was actually ten minutes, the doorbell rang. I jumped up and rushed over to answer it.

"Well, someone's excited," my mother commented.

I opened the door and invited Drosselmeyer and Henry in.

"Hello Lucy," said Drosselmeyer. "It's good to see you again and sounding so cheerful too."

"Hello," I replied. "Hi Henry."

"Hi Lucy," said Henry.

"Welcome Drosselmeyer," said my mom.

"Oh, Mrs. Licordia," responded Drosselmeyer. "It's good to see you again."

"Please, call me Stephanie," mom replied.

"Well, Stephanie," continued Drosselmeyer, "I think I can help with the toys; you know, get the factory running again with toys that will actually sell."

"That would be great, Drosselmeyer," replied my mother.

"But first, I believe there's a certain young lady who is eager to get into her dad's secret room."

"That there is!" I exclaimed.

"Come on," said Drosselmeyer as they went up the steps to reach the spot where the door to the room had been plastered over.

He led us up the stairs and down the left hall and stopped at a large painting. The painting took up the entire wall from floor to ceiling; it had an exquisite frame with detailed carvings of horses set in gold or possibly bronze. The painting itself was of a carousel in the middle of a city park. It had tremendous detail and beauty. I could see every animal that a child sat upon on the carousel, and I could almost feel it turning

around and around. Of course, it did not, as it was just a painting. I pulled out my key and held up before the painting.

“It's the same carousel!” I exclaimed.

“Of course it is,” replied Drosselmeyer. “Of course it is.”

He helped my mother lift the painting off the wall and set it down a short ways away in the hallway. Drosselmeyer then pulled out of his tool bag an odd shaped contraption, the likes of which I'd never seen before.

“Stand back,” he commanded us and so we did.

With the press of a button a light came forth from the contraption and shined in red upon the wall. Drosselmeyer fiddled with a couple dials and buttons on the machine and the light adjusted to a rectangular shape. The contraption hummed and the light changed to blue. Just then I could swear that I could see the hidden door through the wall. Suddenly the light became incredibly bright, so much so that I had to cover my eyes. When it dissipated I opened my eyes and to my amazement the dry wall was now gone. Before us stood a very handsome, carved, wooden door.

“What was that machine?” asked my mother.

“Nothing you need bother yourself thinking about,” replied Drosselmeyer. “Just a little invention of mine. Now, I know the kids are eager to explore your husband's special room, so let's leave them to it. You and I should go downstairs and discuss how to revitalize the toy factory.”

“Very well,” replied my mother. She then looked at me, “let me know what you find.”

“Now Lucy,” added Drosselmeyer, “listen carefully. When you wind the carousel, you must be certain you immediately put the key back into your pocket. Henry, be sure to stay close to her.”

“Why?” I asked. His directions were strange and seemed pointless.

“No,” he reply. “No 'why,' just do as I say. Just make sure the key is on you when the carousel starts spinning.”

“Okay,” I replied, still rather confused about why that would matter.

Then my mother and Drosselmeyer headed downstairs to discuss business. During that time Drosselmeyer would examine the toys we had made with my dad's blueprints and tell my mother why they didn't sell. It turns out the difference between our toys and dad's was personality. Dad's toys apparently all had their own slight differences, differences that gave each toy its own personality. We had followed everything exact and so our toys were all exactly the same, and apparently, lacked personality. Drosselmeyer offered to work in the factory for a period time and teach my mother how to give the toys personality. It really was the turning point for the business, but that's not really what this story is about.

So, in the meantime, Henry and I opened the large wooden door. The door was heavy and had all sorts of wonderful characters carved into it. One scene particularly delighted me. It was a carving of a wonderfully vibrant unicorn with a young girl sitting upon its back. I swear the girl looked just like me. Slowly it opened and revealed a room of untold wonders. Rows and rows of shelves and workbenches full of the most amazing

looking toys. I felt emotions overtake me. These were my dads. Most everything in this room had been made by him.

“Lucy! Look at this!” yelled out Henry, holding a wooden train with the most amazing details carved and painted in it.

The train also had gears and other mechanics and the track it sat on had some sort of pulley system on it. Clearly the train could move around the track on its own. We could have easily forgotten what we were here for and never found the carousel among all these wonders of play.

“Focus!” I said, not just talking to Henry, but to myself as well. “We are on a mission here. Let's find the Carousel.”

“Right.” replied Henry.

We went deeper into the room, inspecting every shelf and workspace. There were indescribable works of craftsmanship in every toy we encountered, but no carousel. We reached the back wall and looked at each other with a shrug.

“It has to be here!” I whined in disappointment.

Henry paused. “It is,” he said. “I can feel it.”

“Where?” I replied.

“Let's just sit back and take a moment. It's probably right under our eyes.”

So we both sat down on the floor and just rested for a moment. Henry put his hands behind his head and laid back with his head on the floor. No sooner than he finished laying down, he gasped, “Uh, Lucy. I think you should look up.”

“What?” I replied.

“Just look up.”

So I put my hands behind my head and laid down on the floor next to him. Amazement overwhelmed my senses. Tears once again filled my eyes. There it was, glorious. An amazing toy carousel, a good fifteen feet in diameter, was hanging from the ceiling. Large, thick ropes swung under the great toy and held it aloft above us.

“So how do we get it down?” asked Henry.

I wiped the tears out of my eyes and followed the ropes across the ceiling. They all seemed to gather together at one point and then climb down the wall.

“There!” I exclaimed. “There's a lever on the wall over there!”

Excited, we ran over to the section of the wall where the lever was.

“Well, here goes!” I said as I pulled the lever.

To our surprise, the carousel did not begin moving down! Rather, we began moving up. I screamed. Henry almost fell out of the platform as it began climbing, but I grabbed a hold of him and pulled him back on. Slowly we ascended into the air, higher and higher, until we were at the same level as the carousel. So many feelings were gathering inside me I didn't know what to do with them. I was excited, I was proud of my dad for building it, I could feel his love in it, then I was sad because he was not there. As the lift stopped, next to us was a large platform that was connected to the carousel, so we both stepped onto it.

“Look!” said Henry excitedly.

He was pointing at a key hole on what appeared to be the carousel's control panel. Of course, the control panel was just a carving. This was a toy. Never-the-less, it did have a real key hole in it and appeared to have many gears and springs. I quickly pulled out my key and was overcome with joy. An uncontrollable smile filled my face.

"This is it!" I exclaimed ecstatically, lifting the key up towards the hole.

"Don't forget to pull it back out after you wind it," Henry added, reminding me of Drosselmeyer's directions.

I slid the key down into the key hole on the carved control panel. It slowly sank in, and I could hear the tumbler pins falling into place. Then I carefully turned it. There was resistance, but it turned. With each turn there was a winding sound. I turned and turned and turned and turned it. Finally, it would turn no more. I withdrew the key and stuck in my pocket. We stood there exhausted with anticipation, waiting... waiting... waiting... Nothing happened.

"Now what?" I sighed.

"There must be a start button," replied Henry. "These type of wind up toys always have a start button."

I looked around the carefully crafted toy carousel. There were no real buttons on the control panel carving. There were no buttons anywhere around the platform we sat on. I drew my attention over to the center of the carousel, where the beautifully crafted animals were waiting to spin around. There, against the curved center wall was a large red button.

"Over there," I pointed to Henry.

"Oh!," he replied. "Be careful."

There was a three foot gap between the platform and the carousel. We very cautiously left the platform and climbed across the open spaces onto the carousel itself. A quick glance down was all that was needed to remind me how dangerously high up we were. As we left the platform, it swung out a little, causing me to shriek as I nearly slipped over the edge. Gravity quickly took hold of me as I felt it urge me downward. A quick reflex reaction brought my hands to a solid hold upon the carousel's edge.

I screamed and shrieked. "I'm going to die!" It was amazing that neither my mom nor Drosselmeyer heard the screams.

"You're going to be okay, Lucy," yelled back Henry. "I've got you."

Henry reached down and grabbed my hands. With Henry's help, I climbed back up and stood upon the carousel. We navigated around the intricately carved animals and walked up to the button.

"Ready?" asked Henry.

"Let's do it!" I replied and pressed the button.

A fog horn sounded, followed by a series of clicking noises. Music, like that of a music box, began playing, and then a loud announcer voice came over the speakers. "All riders must mount a character immediately. All riders must mount a character immediately."

Henry and I looked at each other and shrugged. Okay, why not. I climbed onto a

wondrously designed unicorn that looked very much like Lavender from my dreams. Henry climbed onto a humorously posed sea lion that was right next to me.

The announcer came on again. "All riders are secure. Stand by for portal activation."

"What's it mean by 'portal activation?'" I asked.

"It'll be okay, Lucy," replied Henry. He seemed to know a lot more about what was happening than I did.

Suddenly the carousel began to turn.

"It's working!" I shrieked, unaware of what was about to happen.

It started off slow. The animals lifted up and down on their poles as carousel animals do. Then faster and faster it began to pick up speed; too much speed. My muscles tightened as fear began to creep in.

"This is it!" yelled Henry over the noise that the speed of the carousel was now making. "Don't panic! Everything will be fine! Trust me!"

Faster and faster it went until we were nothing but a blur on the ceiling. How I was ever able to hold onto my unicorn, I do not know. It was as if the carousel had its own center of gravity. We spun and spun, around and around and around. I think I may have even heard a sonic boom, indicating we broke the sound barrier! Then there was light everywhere. Light was all I could see, bright and blurry. Then, suddenly it was dark. There was no more movement. There was no more noise. It was just silent and dark, and I felt as if I were laying in grass. How odd.

CHAPTER 4

I don't know quite how long we were out, but I awoke in a field of brown, dead, rotting grass. Next to me was a large wooden Nutcracker. Henry was nowhere to be seen. I sat up slowly; still dizzy from the crazy carousel ride. As I glanced around the area I saw nothing but death. The fields were rotting, the trees were bare, and the air was filled with the stench of decomposing carcasses.

"Henry!" I called out. "Where are you Henry?"

"I'm right here," the nutcracker replied.

"Henry?" I stared at the nutcracker which suddenly seemed alive.

"Yes," he replied. "I am Henry."

"You're the Nutcracker?"

"I'm a Nutcracker," he replied, "but not The Nutcracker."

"Oh," I responded. After a short pause to take everything in, I continued, "we're really here, aren't we?"

"Yes, Lucy. We are here, in the Kingdom of the Nutcracker."

"But, why does it look so awful and dreary?"

"The nightmares have been ravaging the place."

"And you, Henry?" I asked.

"Yes, I am a toy."

"But you were a boy outside of the realm of dreams. How?" I exclaimed.

"Drosselmeyer managed, after years of trying, to create a second living nutcracker, one that could exist outside the dream world."

"But..." I started to respond.

"But," he interrupted, "I am, in essence, a backwards toy. I am a real boy in your world, but a toy in the dream world."

Just then the horizon turned black, swarming with rodents. A sickly feeling filled my stomach as the rats crawled toward us like a plague. A cloud of thick, muddy dust filled the air around them.

"Looks like we've got trouble," exclaimed Henry as he pulled out his nutcracker sword.

Very quickly we were surrounded by large, human-like rats. Henry's sword fought them off as he swirled it around. Very quickly his battle seemed to become a dance, and the more he danced the more magical things seem to be. Each time his foot struck the ground the dried, brown grass turned lush and green; just for a second before returning to its rotted state. Flashes of color filled the ground as he spun around and around fighting the dark nightmares, but there were too many of them! It didn't take long for the rats to overtake him. They swarmed over the nutcracker and the glimpses of magical colors ended as he came crashing to the ground. I tried batting at them with my arms, but I was just a child and pretty much worthless in this battle. I shrieked as the rats climbed on top of me! It seemed that this was the end. I had failed already. "What a way to die!"

Of course, this wasn't the end. If it had been I wouldn't be here to tell you the tale, would I? It was at that moment a legion of brown, dirty snowflakes appeared. As they fluttered down from the sky, they grew. They grew and they grew and they grew until they were the size of full grown women and men. Then arms and legs appeared and they landed on the ground, drew swords and charged into the piles of nightmarish rats. They too fought in the style of a dance, a waltz, I believe. Yes, they seemed to step in 3 beats; one, two, three; one, two, three. Their swords struck the rats on two and three every time, filling the air with a percussive clang on beats two and three.

Then the snowflakes shed their brown, dirty look and turned white. The air around them became clean and under their feet the meadow bloomed! The awful rats gnawed and bit at the snowflakes, but they could not overcome them. Before long, the nightmares fled across the field and disappeared over the horizon. The dance stopped. Almost as quickly as they had appeared, the colors faded away and the snowflakes once again became brown and dingy. They gathered around the fallen nutcracker.

"He's hurt bad," one of them announced.

"Can you help him?" I pleaded.

Henry, the nutcracker, lay broken in the rotted grass with his body partially into the mud. Wood fragments littered the ground around him. My heart sank in despair at seeing the poor, broken state of my newest friend.

"We can not," replied one of the snowflakes, "but don't give up yet. You must find the Sugar Plum Fairy. She will know what to do."

"How do I find her," I whined.

"Be brave, child," spoke another of the snowflakes. "You are our hero. We will go with you and guide you on the journey to the Kingdom of the Sugar Plum Fairy." She reached out her dirty snowflake hand and I took a hold of it.

Just then something extraordinary happened! The moment I touched her hand a bright spark of light burst from my fingers and consumed her body. As the light coursed its way through her tender snowflake body, the dirt and the mud broke apart and fell to the ground. Then she stood before me as a beautiful, bright and shiny snowflake; well, a snowflake with arms, legs, and a head. She looked somewhat like a ballet dancer with a snowflake costume on!

"What just happened?" I exclaimed.

"You healed me," the snowflake replied. "Somehow you broke the nightmare curse that consumes us."

Excited by this event, I went to each snowflake, one by one, and touched their hands. Brilliant flashes of light filled and colored the bare empty field until each and every one of them shone with the brilliant crystallization of a proper snowflake. They all became excited and began to dance and spin. Their dance once again brought the field to life, full of the colors of spring grass and flowers.

"Focus!" yelled their leader. The dance stopped and the field once again faded to rotting muck. "We must get them to the Sugar Plum Fairy as soon as possible."

Several of the snowflakes surrounded the damaged nutcracker that was Henry. He

remained unconscious as they lifted him into their arms and carried him ahead. Some of the other snowflakes picked up the splinters of wood that were littered on the ground and then followed the others.

“This way!” one of the snowflakes yelled to me. “Hurry! We need to make it before night fall.”

We marched through the muddy field, mud splattering across my leg with every step. After about sixty minutes we reached the edge of a dying forest. As the sun began to hang low in the gray skies we entered the pathetic excuse for a forest by way of a clearly marked trail.

“It's not far now,” announced the leader of the snowflakes as we began following the trail.

The forest trees were mostly bare, dry, brittle, and drooping. As we walked down the trail the dried, crumbling leaves made crackling noises under our feet. The shadows became long and the forest became spooky and dark.

“We must hurry!” exclaimed the snowflake leader, “The sun will be set soon. We do not want to be caught here in the dark.”

The pace of our journey increased as we rushed down the trail, racing against the sunset. Then suddenly, we stopped.

“Oh no!” I heard some of the snowflakes shout.

“What is it?” I asked as I made my way up to the front of the line where the leader was. As I approached her the problem came into view. In front of us was a raging river full of rapids and sewage. There was a bridge, but it had been torn to shreds. All in all, it was uncrossable. We were stuck.

“Is there another bridge?” I asked.

“Yes,” answer the leader, “but it's another forty miles down stream. We'll never make it by dark.”

That was an understatement as the dark of night was already overtaking us. Very quickly the last rays of the light of day faded away and the black of night filled the scene. Then the noises began, creepy and evil sounds filled the night, and we began to cower in fear.

“What do we do now?” I pleaded.

“I'm afraid you are on your own now,” the leader of the snowflakes replied.

“What? Why?”

“I'm sorry,” she continued. “you may not have noticed, but the temperature has been getting warmer. If my snowflakes and I don't leave, we will melt. There's nothing more we can do for you.”

He waved his arms at the other snowflakes. They set Henry and his splinters on the ground and then they dissipated into tiny snow drops that drifted up into the sky. It was now just going to be him and I standing in front of the totaled bridge.

“May you make it through the night,” the Snowflake prayed for me. “At first light go that way,” she pointed. “In about forty miles, cross the bridge, and follow the trail that goes to the right. It will lead you to the Sugar Plum Fairy's castle.” Her breath was

getting shallow as she spoke. "I must go now. My time here is up."

"Thank you for all you've done," I replied.

She jumped into the sky and became a tiny flake that floated up into the heavens. Now it was just me and the broken form of Henry alone in the dark, creepy, scary woods. My imagination began to stir. It seemed as if creatures were creeping around the dry, cracked branches. I swear I heard crackles and roars in the dry night air. I kept telling myself it was just my imagination getting the best of me, that is, until I realized it wasn't! There really were dark creatures circling around me, roaring deeply with evil sounds.

Once again, I began thinking this was it. I was going to die, again. The creatures slowly and cautiously circled closer and closer to me as I shook in fear. I knelt down and picked up Henry and held him in my arms as I awaited my doom.

Then Henry's eyes opened and he looked at me. Wearily, with a cracking voice he spoke, "you have to dance, Lucy."

"What?"

"You have the power Lucy. You are the chosen. You have to dance."

The growling grew louder as the creatures were almost upon us.

"I don't understand," I replied.

"Just dance!" insisted Henry.

Slowly I stood up, confused, but willing to try. I began to move my body and dance as best as my fearful mind could allow. A little bit of light formed around me. It was not much, but it did keep the creatures from coming any closer. Fearfully, I stumbled around trying to maintain my dance, but my body was shaking in terror.

"Waltz!" yelled Henry through his painfully hoarse voice.

My dad used to waltz with me before he disappeared. My brain searched the old memories in my mind and I began to waltz awkwardly in the silence of the night. Well, the night was not silent, it was filled with the growls of the dark creatures of the nightmare. What it was not filled with was music. I waltzed in silence, but then the music began to fill my head. Before long, I could hear the music clearly, even though there was no music there. My brain was filled with the rhythms of Tchaikovsky's "Waltz of the Flowers." Soon I forgot my fear and I waltzed with an imaginary partner across the barren woods. The light around me grew brighter and stronger. The forest floor under my feet began to come alive and grow. The dark creatures stepped back and put distance between them and I, but they did not fully retreat. Surely they realized that I couldn't keep the waltz up forever. After several minutes I could feel my legs failing. After all, we'd been hiking for hours. I pushed and pushed but I just couldn't keep going. My legs gave out and I collapsed to the ground. The light faded away and the creatures once again began moving towards us.

"I tried," I whispered through my gasps for air.

"You did good," replied Henry and then passed out again.

"Not good enough," I said to myself as the dark creatures approached.

Although the light and life had faded as my dance has ended, I noticed there were

still a handful of green, grassy patches where I had danced. As the nightmare creatures approached, those spots began to glow and then they began to grow. The nightmares cowered back as if they were afraid of those growing spots. Very quickly those spots sprouted stems that shot up six feet above the ground. In a matter of seconds those stems bloomed into beautiful flowers that then grew a head, arms, and legs. They stepped out of the ground, turned to face the monsters, and drew swords. There were at least twenty of them that formed an arch around Henry and I.

“This child and her nutcracker are now under the official protection of the Sugar Plum Fairy Flower Army,” one of the flowers announced into the darkness. “You are ordered to flee immediately or face the consequences.”

Clearly the dark forces had tangled with the Flower Army before as they quickly fled and disappeared into the forest. For a moment silence fell upon the forest, but it was quickly interrupted by the loud fanfare of the sounding of royal trumpets. Then light filled the trail from the other side of the broken bridge as flower soldiers marched towards us carrying bright lanterns and boards. As they reached the shore on the opposite of the river several of the flower soldiers knelt down and grew branches across the river, attaching to the remains of the old bridge. Other soldiers came behind them and placed boards on the branches that were now growing across the river. Soon there was a solid bridge.

“Come,” spoke a flower soldier. “The Sugar Plum Fairy is expecting you.”

CHAPTER 5

The morning greeted me with a bright ray of sunshine upon my face. I opened my eyes and took in the view. Around me were the most exquisite furniture, the most incredible carpet, and the fanciest curtains. The bed I awoke in was huge and clearly meant for a princess. The entire room was grand beyond my greatest imaginings. I'd never seen anything like it.

I sat up in the bed and exclaimed, "Where am I?"

I did not expect an answer, but I got one anyhow.

"Ah, you're awake," replied a Gum Drop Princess, who must have been waiting just outside my room. She opened the door and entered. "Welcome Lucy," she said.

"Welcome to the Palace of the Sugar Plum Fairy!"

"I made it!" I exclaimed.

"Yes, you have," she replied. "Let's get you dressed. We should not keep the Sugar Plum Fairy waiting."

"Of course," I said as I pulled myself out of the luxurious bed.

The Gum Drop Princess pulled open a large closet door. I could have sworn that everything inside was brown and drably for about two seconds before they filled with color and glory. They were all exquisite outfits suitable only for a princess or maybe a prom queen. The Gum Drop Princess pulled out a glorious, sparkling purple dress and handed it to me.

"This should do nicely," she told me. "Put it on."

With her help, I navigated my way into the masterpiece of clothing.

"You look amazing!" she exclaimed.

"Thank you," I replied. "I've never, ever worn anything so magnificent. This dress is fit for a queen."

"Well," she responded, "you need to realize that you are royalty here."

"I don't know how to reply to that. It just doesn't compute in my brain."

"Nevertheless, as the great, great granddaughter of The Nutcracker, you are a princess, and the only one who can help us."

"I don't understand" I replied.

"Just come with me," motioned the Gum Drop Princess. "The Sugar Plum Fairy is waiting."

I followed her out of the room into a gray, drab hallway that seemed as if it went on for miles. As I set foot on the dark gray carpet in the hallway, color appeared around me. The carpet transformed into a deep purple and walls became pink and full of flowers. But it was not all of the hallway that changed; it only changed within about ten feet of where I walked. The rest of the hallway remained gray and dull. As I moved down the hallway the colors moved with me. As I continued down the passage, the colors bloomed before me and faded out behind me.

"What is going on!" I exclaimed.

"The Sugar Plum Fairy will explain everything," the Gum Drop Princess assured me.

We turned a corner and then another. With every step I took the colors moved with me, expanding out before me and disappearing behind me. Finally we made it to the last turn, which left us facing the entrance to the Throne Room. About fifty feet in front of us were the guards, gray, melting snowflake soldiers who protected the Sugar Plum Fairy. As we approached them, the gray melted into the vibrant colors of their uniform and the watery snowflakes became solid ice.

“Come,” spoke one of them, “the Sugar Plum Fairy is waiting.” He and another soldier opened the two doors simultaneously revealing the majestic throne room. Only, it wasn't majestic; not at first. It was gray and drab and wet, but then, like everything else the colors came alive as I entered. The carpet shined in glorious purple and gold designs. The walls sparkled with dazzling ice crystals of every color imaginable. Before me, on a white, sparkling, crystal throne sat a majestic queen.

“Welcome Princess Lucy!” announced the Sugar Plum Fairy. “We are honored to have you with us.”

I was kind of speechless, taken aback by the excessive majesty of it all.

“It's okay,” continued the Sugar Plum Fairy. “Just relax. You are among friends.”

I hesitated and sighed, collecting my courage. “May I ask, where is Henry?”

“Henry?” she replied. Then one of the soldiers ran up to her throne and whispered into her ear. “Oh,” she continued, “the Nutcracker you were with... He is being tended to.”

“Will he be okay?”

“He will be fine; I'm sure. He is being tended to by the best doctors and toy makers in the kingdom. He will join us when he is ready.”

“Thank you...” I paused, “uh, your majesty?”

The Sugar Plum Fairy laughed. “You are a Princess of the Nutcracker; if anything, I should be calling you 'your majesty.' You can call me Anne.”

“Anne?”

“Yes. My full name is Queen Annabelle Plum; though most in these parts just call me The Sugar Plum Fairy, but please, you just call me Anne.”

“Okay, Anne,” I replied sheepishly.

“You must have questions, Lucy. Many questions, I suppose.”

“The colors...” I began asking.

“Ah, yes; the colors,” she interrupted. “The entire Kingdom of the Nutcracker is under a curse; as is everything and everyone in it, except you.”

“Why me?”

“Simple, my dear child, you are a child. In the real world and in this world, you are an actual child and not a toy. Everything else here is a toy; we are all the product of children's fantasies; bright, beautiful, fantastic fantasies. But the curse has taken away our colors and brilliance and threatens to take away our very existence.”

“I still don't understand,” I replied. “How? Why? Who?”

“What, Where, When!” exclaimed Anne, the Sugar Plum Fairy. “Yes, there are many questions. Some I can answer. How? Someone has removed the Golden Music Discs

from the Kingdom's Center Calliope. The music, the dance, is the life blood of this kingdom. Without it we will eventually all fade away.”

“Which is why colors appeared when there was dancing?”

“Yes. You, as a real child, have the ability to make your own music; your own dance. We do not. The dance breaks the curse, if only temporarily.”

“Okay,” I responded, “but I've not been dancing here. Why are the colors around me here?”

“This palace is an amplifier. It stores and amplifies music and dance energy. It has not been fully drained yet, and your dancing the other day helped recharge it some. Your essence, your imagination, your very being acts as a receiver, broadcasting that energy out around you.”

“Wow!” I exclaimed.

“Wow indeed,” Anne replied. Now, as far as the 'Why?' I cannot be sure, but I suspect a child with a hurting heart is responsible.”

“An actual child, like me?”

“Yes, an actual child, but not like you. This child isn't really here. This child is here in his or her dreams, visiting like most children do, but with a wounded heart so deep that it poisons everything around it.”

“And the Golden Music Discs?” I asked. “They have to be here?”

“Yes. Because this child is not really here, he could not remove the discs. He has them somewhere. I suspect in the Central part of the kingdom, which he has surrounded by his rat army.”

“Excuse me your majesty,” interrupted one of the Snowflake soldiers.

“Yes?” replied Anne.

“I present to you the second Nutcracker of Drosselmeyer, Sir Henry.”

Then Henry walked into the room, but not as a nutcracker. He walked into the room as a boy, looking just like he did in the real world. I was overcome with joy to see that he was well. I could not help myself, I rushed to him and threw my arm around him.

“It is an honor to meet you,” proclaimed Anne. “I am the Sugar Plum Fairy. Welcome to...”

She was interrupted by a flurry of chaos and noise from just outside the Throne Room. A soldier rushed in and up to the Sugar Plum Fairy.

“Forgive the interruption, your majesty,” he rambled off quickly. “but we are under attack!”

Anne stood up. “Under attack!”

“It's the Rat Army,” continued the soldier. “More than I've ever seen before. They've broken the perimeter. It won't be long until they breach the castle. We must go.”

“I will not flee from this enemy!” announced the Sugar Plum Fairy. “Queen Annabelle Plum does not retreat!”

“Our armies will stand with you, of course,” replied Soldiers. “But without the Nutcracker to lead us, I fear we do not stand a chance.”

“Then fear not!” proclaimed Henry as he transformed back into a Nutcracker. “For a

Nutcracker is here, and I will lead you to victory!”

Henry gave me a kiss on the cheek and then disappeared out of the room with the soldier.

“Come, Lucy,” instructed Anne, “we must help them.”

Anne led me out of the Throne Room to where the soldiers were gathering together. From a distance, Henry, who was full of bright colors, stood in great contrast to the gray, drabness of the rest of the army. But, as before, the closer I got the more colorful the army became.

“You must stay near them,” Anne told me, “you will provide them with strength.”

Henry was busy barking out orders to the soldiers, who then began to organize into groups. Soon a full army was ready to take on the enemy. They opened the doors and charged out with a loud cry, “for the Kingdom of the Nutcracker!”

After that, everything became a blur. Swords flew through the air, screams filled the ears, and rats scurried every inch of the ground. They were everywhere; so many rats. There were just too many of them! Eventually the army began to be beat back. Many of the soldiers fell and disappeared under piles of rats.

“Fall back!” yelled Henry to the troops.

They regrouped where Anne and I stood watching, near the door.

“Lucy,” Henry said to me. “You are our only hope.”

“I don't understand,” I replied frantically.

“Dance Lucy,” commanded the Sugar Plum Fairy. “Dance! Dance like you've never danced before!”

It was too much pressure. I tried to move but I just couldn't seem to find the rhythm. I stumbled about and fell over. Henry reach out his hand and helped me up.

“Relax,” he commanded. “Feel the music inside you. Tune out the chaos around you, and dance. Dance for the nutcrackers, dance for the flowers, and dance for the snowflakes. You can do it.”

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. Then it came to me; a faint rhythm of music. I began to dance. I danced and marched for the nutcrackers, I waltzed for the flowers, and I spun around for the snowflakes. As I danced the music in my head grew louder. It swelled into a full symphony of sound until it wasn't just in my head! Somehow the music was outside my head, a joyous sound that seemed to have no source. The palace worked as it was intended to, as a great amplifier. It collected all the musical and dance energy and magnified it, empowering the armies of the Sugar Plum Fairy.

From under the piles of rats the overtaken soldiers stood up, casting the horrid rodents off of them. With new found strength and energy they fought back the massive swarm of rats as I spun and pranced around in my dance. There were loud shrieks of pain and terror as the soldiers pushed back the horrible vermin. Soon the rats fled. Utterly exhausted from my incessant dancing, I collapsed and the music stopped. However, the colors did not fade. The palace was fully charged and held back the curse that had been upon it.

Henry and Anne rushed over to where I lay in a heap on the grass.

“Lucy!” Henry exclaimed, “are you okay?” At that moment he faded from looking like a toy nutcracker back into a human boy.

“I think so,” I muttered out, too tired to talk.

“She'll be fine,” said Anne, the Sugar Plum Fairy, “she's just exhausted. Come, take her inside. She needs to rest.”

Henry knelt down and picked me up in his arms and carried me back in to the palace. I was placed back in the bed I had woken up in that morning, and I quickly passed out.

“Rest well, Lucy,” was the last thing I heard, spoken by Anne. She then said to Henry, “We must prepare. They will be back.”

CHAPTER 6

I faded into my dreams and found myself, once again, back with Lavender, my unicorn with the rainbow horn. But everything was dark and it was very hard to see beyond where Lavender lay on the floor near me.

“Lavender,” I called out.

“Yes, Lucy,” the creature replied weakly. “It is I.”

It was then that I realized that there was a chain connected to her paw. We were in a prison.

“What's going on?” I asked in concern.

“You are dreaming,” replied Lavender. “You are now here in the Kingdom of the Nutcracker in your dreams.”

“But I was in the Kingdom of the Nutcracker for real!”

“And you still are.”

I shook my head in confusion. “I don't understand.”

“It is a confusing and unusual situation,” replied Lavender. “Because you are of the real world, you come here in your dreams, just like any child would. But you are not any child; you actually, physically came here. Yet, you are still of the real world, so even though you are physically here, you still come here in your imagination when you dream. This may be an advantage to us. Technically you are here in two places at once.”

“Where specifically is 'here?’” I pondered, “and why are you chained.”

“We are in the heart of the Kingdom of the Nutcracker, in a prison cell at the very center of the kingdom.”

“Okay,” I thought, “well, if I am dreaming, then I can control the narrative some. Lavender, I free you.”

I wasn't completely sure that would work, but it did. The shackles around Lavender's leg immediately clicked open and fell off.

“Very good,” I heard someone say from somewhere in the darkness. “You are learning.”

“Hello,” I called out, “who's there.”

“Let there be light!” I commanded, and though the darkness fought it, the lights penetrated and lit up the prison corridor. It wasn't very bright, but it was bright enough to see.

“You are becoming more powerful in your imagination,” the voice spoke again, “learning to control your dreams.”

The voice sounded familiar. “Who are you?” I demanded.

“Come to me and I will tell you, my dear Lucy. I have missed you.”

Lavender and I both stood to our feet. I walked to the jail cell door and willed it to open. It made no resistance, but opened easily without any effort. With my unicorn at my side I made my way to where the voice seemed to come from. As I approached his cell the form of a nutcracker came into view. He was larger than Henry and seemed

more majestic. I paused.

“Wait...” I hesitated, figuring things out. “Dad?”

Just then, as if it were activated by my calling out, “dad,” the nutcracker transformed into a human, my dad.

“I’ve been stuck here a long time, Lucy,” he replied. “I’ve missed you greatly.”

Just then I woke up.

“No!” I screamed in frustration.

Henry, Anne, and several soldiers rushed into the room in response to my scream.

“What’s happening!” they exclaimed.

“It’s okay,” I replied. “I was just frustrated that I woke up. In my dreams I was with my dad in a prison in the center of the kingdom.”

“Of course!” exclaimed Anne, “Because you are ‘real,’ you still come here when you dream. You saw your dad? You saw The Nutcracker?”

“Yes,” I replied. “He said he’s been imprisoned here for a long time.”

“Excellent,” Anne replied, “I mean, not that he’s imprisoned, but that you can communicate with him. We need to know what he knows.”

“You have to get back to sleep,” added Henry. “You must dream again.”

I laid back down in the bed and closed my eyes, but it was no use. “I don’t feel tired anymore. Something startled me awake, but I don’t know what it was.”

“It was him,” answered Anne.

“Who?” I asked.

“The boy,” she replied.

“The boy?”

“The boy who caused all this. The boy who controls the rat army.”

“A real boy,” added Henry. “A real boy who is here in his dreams; his very sick dreams.”

“A hurt boy,” I added, beginning to realize some things.

“What,” replied Henry.

“Thing about it,” I continued. “All of this darkness, these rats, and the lack of the colors; it’s the imaginings of a very sad, hurting little boy. He needs help.”

“Help?” asked Anne.

“Yes, like you said earlier, but not here. He needs help in the real world. Don’t you see, this all ends when he stops dreaming. He needs to be shown kindness. He needs to know that life isn’t all darkness.”

“Very noble, Lucy,” responded Anne. “Then you must return to the real world and find him.”

“But how are you going to find him?” added Henry. “He could be anywhere. The real world is huge!”

“I’ll ask him!” I announced. “Once I can get back to sleep.”

“Soldiers, go to the kitchen and tell the chef to make sleeping candies,” commanded Anne, the Sugar Plum Fairy.

“Yes, your majesty,” replied the lead soldier as they left the room.

"Sleeping candies?" I asked.

"A special concoction of the Sugar Plum Fairy..."

"You," I interrupted.

"Yes, it is a special concoction I made up. It will help you sleep. Don't worry, it is completely safe. It is made from the stuff that dreams are made of... don't ask; I don't really know what that is. I only know that it is incredibly relaxing if you eat it, and it will put you right to sleep."

"Sounds good," I replied.

A short time later the soldiers returned with the Sleeping Candy. It was in the shape of a candy cane with red, green, pink, and purple stripes. Anne handed it to me and I stuck it in my mouth. It was delicious. It tasted like peppermint mixed with... well, I don't know... mixed with dreams, I guess. It didn't take long to work. A couple licks and I was out.

Suddenly I was back in the prison cell with Lavender.

"You're back!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, I'm back."

"You must leave. You can't stay. You have to wake back up," Lavender insisted.

"No!" I whined back. "I need to be here. I need to help you and help my dad."

"You must leave!" insisted Lavender. "This is a trap! The Rat King is waiting for you. You must go be..."

"Too late!" exclaimed a raspy male voice. "Now you are mine, Princess Lucy, and with you out of the way nothing will be able to stop me."

"I'm not afraid of you," I barked back.

"You should be," said the big Rat as it stepped out of the shadows to reveal its form.

The Rat King was a massive pile of rat. He stood nearly 7 feet tall, muscular and strong. Sharp sabers of claws proceeded out of his paws.

"This is one dream you won't be waking up from," he laughed a sinister crackle. "I have invented a device that will keep you from waking up. There is no escape."

"Nonsense!" I screamed back. "You hide behind that facade, but I know what you really are. You are nothing to fear." I was surprised, myself, at my courage. I knew at this moment I was no longer the scared, broken girl that had climbed on that carousel.

The Rat King bared his claws and sharp teeth threateningly at me. "And just what am I, pathetic little girl. He raised his claw with the intend of bringing it down on me, but I felt no fear. Without much thought as to why, I danced. As I danced the music once again began to play, seemingly out of nowhere. The claw that headed for my face suddenly transformed into a little hand that pathetically slapped across my cheek. As I danced the facade of the Rat King faded away and in its place stood a scared, hungry, hurting little boy.

"No! You're ruining everything!" the boy shrieked in a tantrum. "You can't do that. It's not fair! You ruining all my fun."

"Well, what do you know?" responded The Nutcracker, who was in the next cell over. "He's just a little boy."

"I'm not little!" he yelled and then paused. "I was just having a little fun," he whined.

"Release The Nutcracker," I commanded the boy.

"Yes Ma'am," he replied sheepishly as he unlocked the prison cell.

I rushed into The Nutcracker's arms, and once again he transformed into a real person, my father. I wanted to hold him forever and never let go. Tears pooled down my eyes.

"It's okay, honey," said my father. "It's been a long time apart, but we are together now."

The boy, who had been the Rat King, sat down and pouted in a corner.

"I've missed you so much, daddy," I cried.

"I know; I know. I've missed you too."

A few moments went by as we just soaked in the glory of this reunion, but then I loosened my muscles and released from his embrace. There were still things to be done, but first I had questions.

"Dad, I don't understand," I began. "I thought my great, great, great grandfather was The Nutcracker, but now it looks like you are The Nutcracker?"

"Difficult to explain," replied my dad. "Your great, great, great grandfather was The Nutcracker, as was your great great grandfather and your great grandfather and your grandfather after him. We were all The Nutcracker. All the first born on my side of the family inherited the ability to become The Nutcracker when here in the dream world."

"Wait," I paused. "You're not really here? I mean, your dreaming?"

"Yes, sweetie," I am in a coma somewhere. "The Rat King's device trapped me here and made it so I could never wake up."

"Then where are you?"

"It's been so long," he paused, "I don't remember anymore..."

"He's with me," the little boy interrupted.

"Yes," my dad began remembering, "I remember now. There's was a little boy all alone, hiding in a large pipe. I went in after him; I wanted to help..."

"I didn't need your help," the boy interrupted. "I didn't ask for your help."

"When I got near him," my father continued, "something weird happened and I passed out and woke up here in the dream world."

"What did you do to him," I demanded of the boy.

"You should have let me be," the boy replied, speaking to my father.

"Release him," I ordered, "and then go with him. He can help you; make a better life for you."

"I think I can get your father to wake up," the boy replied, "but I can't go with him."

"Why not?"

"I'm not here willingly," spoke the boy. "I'm trapped too; I've been asleep for a long time. I can't wake up. I've tried everything. I'm stuck here."

"Wait," I said, "what about food and water? How are you guys surviving in the real world?"

"I don't know," replied my father.

"There is someone else," added the boy. "Some adult who must be taking care of our bodies. Somebody mean and cruel who wanted a way into the dream world."

"What are you talking about, boy," I asked and then paused, "What is your name?"

"My name is Tom. A man, I think a military scientist, did this to me. He will only release me when I have fully conquered the Kingdom of the Nutcracker."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because," he replied, "they want to control the dreams..."

"Who?"

"They," he answered, "I don't know who 'they' are; maybe the military? They want to influence what kids dream about. Make them think the way they want them to think. I'm just their way in; I don't know anything more."

"Well, this changes everything," announced my dad. "Send me back and I will see what I can find out. Lucy, do you have the key?"

"The key?"

"Yes, the key."

"Oh! The Key!" I replied. "I forgot about the key. It's right here."

"Good," continued my dad, "you must find the Golden Discs and restart the Calliope. It is nearby, in the very center of the kingdom. Once the Golden Discs are returned, the key will wind and activate the Calliope, returning music and dance to the kingdom."

"And break the curse!" I exclaimed.

"Yes," replied my dad. "Now, Tom, how about waking me up?"

Tom walked over to my dad with some sort of bucket of liquid.

"I never meant for you to get involved in this, you know," said Tom. "It was entirely an accident."

"But was it?" asked my father. "It seems I remember the rats hunting me."

"If they were, it wasn't my doing; it was 'theirs.'"

Tom lifted the bucket and dumped the strange liquid onto my father. He dematerialized almost instantly.

"He should be awake now," Tom announced. "Perhaps you should wake up now, too."

"Wait, why?"

"Because you need the key to actually be here. You need to come here in person, not in dreaming."

"But what about you?" I asked.

"They will probably reset me back into the Rat King before you get here," he paused. "I'm sorry, but it is likely that I will forget all of this and be determined to stop you. They will see to that."

"Well, we won't forget you," I said. "There is hope."

"Yes," he replied, "now there is hope, but you mustn't concern yourself with me. You must defeat me and stop this plan."

I intended to respond, but just then I woke up. Back in the bedroom, Anne, Henry,

and a couple soldiers stared at me in the bed.

“She's awake,” announced one of the soldiers.

“Ah, welcome back,” said Anne.

“I must journey to the center of the Kingdom,” I announced.

“We will go with you,” replied Henry and Anne.

“We will leave at first light,” I added. “Our quest is to find the Golden Discs and restart the Calliope.”

“How do we restart the Calliope?” asked Henry.

“You need a special key to do that,” replied Anne.

“I have the key,” I added. “Henry, it is the same key that started the Carousel.”

“But that would mean that my dad made the Calliope.”

“Yes, Henry,” spoke the Sugar Plum Fairy (Anne), “Drosselmeyer is no stranger among these parts. He created the entire Kingdom of the Nutcracker.

Suddenly I felt an extreme weight upon my being. I collapse back on to the bed in tears, overcome with emotion. I missed my mom, and I couldn't know for sure that my dad was okay or that he even actually woke up. Everything and everyone here was depending on me.

“...but what am I?” the thought made its way out of my mouth.

“What?” asked Anne.

“I'm just a poor, broken child. Before I came here, I could barely come up with a reason to keep living. How can my pathetic being be responsible for saving the entire dream realm? I'm nothing. It's just too much. I don't think I can do it.”

I suppose I had been holding back the fragile emotional state of my former life. I'd been suppressing it, hiding it; pretending it wasn't there. Now the flood gates had opened and all the old feelings of worthlessness, of being lost, came pouring back at me.

Henry took my hand, lifted my head, and looked into my eyes. “Listen to me, Lucy. You are not that girl; you never were. Who you are is so much more than those feelings. I see a bold, courageous, and goodhearted young lady who is the essence of awesomeness.”

“I'm not,” I whined. “I'm not awesome. I'm broken. I'm just broken.”

“You are awesome,” added the Sugar Plum Fairy. “Look at all you've done since you've arrived here.”

“No, that wasn't me,” I cried. “That's just a dream.”

“Not a dream,” insisted Henry. “This is not a dream...”

“And yet, at the same time, it is,” added Anne. “It both is and isn't, and you are both broken and not broken, but it is the true you; the unbroken you, who will prevail for you are now a warrior.”

“And you have proven yourself as such,” spoke one of the soldiers standing nearby.

“Thank you,” I said, “just give me a little time to recompose myself.”

“Very well,” replied Anne. “Let's give her some space.”

They all left the room, and I laid on the bed and pondered all these things: the past, the present, the future; my parents, my friends, my childhood; so many things. It just

seemed like it was too much.

Just then the door opened and Anne reappeared.

“I've got just what the doctor ordered,” she announced.

Then from behind her, my unicorn, Lavender, entered my room.

“Lavender!” I yelled and threw my arms around her. Anne was right; this was what I needed. Lavender was my guide; my rock. I had dreamed her up; she was everything I wanted to be. She was me. She was the me that I longed to be. Now, with her by my side, I felt like I was ready to be the warrior that the kingdom needed me to be.

I looked Anne boldly in the eye and said, “We ride at first light, and victory will be ours.”

“There she is!” exclaimed Anne. “I knew she was in there somewhere.”

CHAPTER 7

The next morning when the first rays of light touched the cursed land of the kingdom, we set out on our quest. I marched in the front of the procession, boldly and eagerly heading for the center of the Kingdom of the Nutcracker. By my side marched Lavender, Henry, and Anne with legions of soldiers behind us. Nobody spoke a word; we were determined. We trudged on across the barren land with remarkable speed. Surprisingly, nothing tried to stop us.

When we were nearly at the center of the kingdom we stopped. A gigantic fortress of a fence had been erected around it. The great wall seemed to stretch into the sky for as far as the eye could see.

“Now what?” exclaimed the Sugar Plum Fairy (Anne).

“A door!” replied Henry, pointing to an apparent opening in the wall.

We quickly made our way over to it. Even the door seemed massive and unforgiving, stretching up above for an unreasonable distance.

“How do we open it?” asked Anne.

“I got this!” I exclaimed and stepped forward, standing directly in front of the door.

“Door!” I commanded, “Open!”

“Lucy,” said Henry. “You’re not dreaming...”

“No,” I replied, “but this is the land of dreams, and, as a dreamer, I am telling this door to open. Door! Open!”

“I don’t think that...” Anne started to say but was interrupted by loud clicking and clanking noises.

There was a poof of dirt and dust flung into the air as the door lifted off the ground and revealed an entrance.

“I can’t believe that worked,” exclaimed Henry.

“Come on!” I insisted, “Let’s go!”

“Wait Lucy,” replied Lavender. “It could be a trap.”

“Of course it’s a trap!” I replied.

Before they could respond, I plowed forward into the opening. At this point, I’m not sure I really knew what I was doing, but I was doing it and no one was going to stop me from doing it. The others rushed in behind me, trying to catch up.

“Slow down, Lucy!” yelled out Lavender, “it could be dangerous!”

She caught up to me just as I stopped in the middle of an extremely large room. Soon after, the other caught up to me as well.

“Why did you stop?” asked Anne.

“He’s here,” I replied.

“Who?” asked Henry.

“Me!” yelled out a large, booming voice from above us. “The Rat King! Well, look what you have brought me. It must be my birthday for me to be given so many presents. Let’s see, we have Queen Annabelle Plum, the ever so famous Sugar Plum Fairy, we have Princess Lucy, the daughter of the Nutcracker, and you’ve even brought me the

backup Nutcracker. I guess it's time for the party to begin.”

Then he jumped and he came flying down from somewhere above, landing on his massive feet, making a tornado of dust as he struck the ground. Everyone, except for me, backed away.

“Do you not fear me, little girl?” asked the Rat King with a cruel twisted voice. “I’ll make you fear me!”

“I’m not afraid of you,” I replied softly and calmly. “I know who you are.”

The Rat King raised his twisted, sharp claws up in the air, readying to pounce on me. “Oh yeah, and what am I? It would seem that I’m what’s about to kill you.”

“Not what?” I replied boldly.

“Huh?” My statement confused the Rat King.

“I didn’t say that I knew what you were; I said I knew who you are.”

He began to move his claws, about to strike upon me. “And just who am I?” he barked sarcastically.

“You’re Tom.”

He stopped, his claws still up on the air. “What?”

“You are Tom.”

He seemed frozen in place; unable to move.

I repeated myself louder, “You are Tom!”

The Rat King remained frozen in place, his claws hovering above me.

“I am Tom?” he repeated softly and sheepishly.

“You are Tom!” I yelled back at him with all my might.

“I am Tom,” he said, with slightly more confidence.

“Yes,” I continued, “you are Tom. You are not the Rat King. You are Tom.”

“I am Tom,” he repeated again with more strength in his voice. “Yes, I am Tom. I am Tom. I am Tom!” Each time he spoke it was louder and more sure.

“Show yourself Tom!” I commanded.

In that instant the Rat King dissolved into dissipating light, leaving the little boy I met in my earlier dream standing before me.

“Hello Tom,” I said gently to him.

“You released me,” he replied. “Thank you. How?”

“I’m a dreamer,” I answered, “in the land of dreams.”

“What?”

“Don’t worry about it Tom,” I replied. “This isn’t over yet. We still have to shut your dreams down. You have to wake up.”

“I can’t. I don’t know how. They have control over me.”

“First of all,” I continued, “we need the discs.”

“The discs?”

“The discs!” added Henry with more urgency in his voice. It made Tom cower a little bit.

I turned to Henry and motioned for him to stand down, “It’s okay Henry. The Rat King is gone. He can’t hurt us anymore. Tom, is just a poor, scared child.”

Tom shook his head, "I don't know what these discs are."

Anne stepped forward. "Hello Tom,"

"Hello Sugar Plum Fairy," replied Tom sheepishly.

"You can call me Anne," she continued. "We need two round golden circles. They go to the Calliope in the very center of the kingdom. Please, if you've seen them at all..."

"You mean the golden records!" replied Tom.

"Yes!" I replied. "The golden records!"

Any build up of hope that we felt at that moment was quickly dissipated with Tom's next words, "They're not here," replied Tom sadly, "I'm sorry."

"What do you mean they're not here?" asked Anne.

"They took them," he replied.

"Took them?" I asked. "Took them where?"

"They took them with them," he answered. "They took them back with them when they left here."

"Who?" asked Henry.

"Whoever trapped Tom here," I replied and then paused. "Oh no," I sighed. "They took the discs to the real world."

"Now what?" asked Anne.

"Wait! Wait, wait, wait," replied Lavender. "How is that even possible. You can't take something out of the dream world."

"They can," replied Tom. "They've been working on it for a long time."

Just then a record size wooden box suddenly appeared in the middle of the floor.

We all stood there silent for a few minutes, deciding what it was and what to do with it. Then suddenly a small wooden nutcracker appeared on top of it, standing up right.

"It's a message from my dad!" I exclaimed. I ran toward the box, picked it up, and opened it. Inside was a golden disc. "Yes!" I exclaimed in joy. I lifted it up for all to see.

"We have one of the discs!" announced Anne triumphantly.

But our joy was very short lived. As I held the disc it crumbled into dust. That dust started to spin around us faster and faster.

"What's going on?" I yelled.

A sort-of whirlpool appeared in the sky before us, spinning and spinning around. Gradually it picked up more and more speed until it started sucking stuff into it. I felt it tug at me.

"I think that broke the barrier between the dream world and the real world!" yelled Lavender.

Everybody began to run away from the whirlpool, but I was too close! My feet were moving, but they weren't touching the ground! Now suspended in the air, I tried to swim away from the massive swirling hole, but it was no use. The others all made it out, but I did not. It was not long before I had no choice but to give up trying to resist. With a "whoosh!" I was sucked into the whirlpool and disappeared from the dream world.

CHAPTER 8

I suppose that could have been the end. After all, not all tales have happy endings. However, if it had been the end, how could I be telling you the story now?

No, I did not die the day I was sucked into a portal. Rather, I was flung out onto the floor of a large, sterile room with beds in it. All sorts of strange machines and computers were scattered throughout the room. I was sore. My bones ached from being tossed onto the floor so violently, but I fought the pain and stood up and looked around. First thing I noticed was that the hole I had fallen through was still there sucking stuff from the dream world into the real world. This interaction of the two worlds seemed to be causing severe damage to both worlds, and the hole was growing larger.

As I looked around I could see that the room was full of beds with large computer-based machines hooked to them. A “top secret” sign hung from the room's doorway.

The door to the room flew open hard; so hard that it slammed against the wall next to it. Several people in white lab coats charged in. They looked at the growing hole in the middle of the air and started to panic.

“Command!” yelled one of the men into a cell phone. “Command, this is Dr. Jamson!”

“Command here,” replied a voice through the phone's receiver. “How may I direct your call.”

“Get me Captain Roberras,” commanded Dr. Jamson.

“I'm sorry,” the voice replied through the phone, “Captain Roberras is in a meeting right now. Can I take a message?”

“Code 42!” yelled Dr. Jamson. “Code 42!”

A short moment later another voice came through the receiver. “This is Captain Roberras. Report.”

“Captain,” began Dr. Jamson, “we have a serious breach in Sector 11.”

“What kind of breach?”

“Interdimensional.”

“What? Explain.”

“The barrier between the Dream World and the Real World has been punctured. Elements of the Dream World are being sucked into the Real World.”

Before the doctor had even finished the last word, alarms began to sound and light began to flash. Suddenly people were everywhere! Most of them were running down the hall next to the room. A small few entered the room.

“Evacuate! Evacuate!” started to echo across the complex, being played on a loop.

“Doctor!” screamed one of the men who had just entered the room, “what to we do?”

“We have to stop it,” replied Dr. Jamson.

“How?”

“Somebody has to go to the dream world and find the...”

He stopped mid sentence, having just notice my presence in the room. “Who are you?”

"I..." he cut me off before I could answer.

"You came through the portal. You came from the dream world?"

"Yes," I answered.

"Impossible," replied the doctor. "There's no way that someone who was dreaming could have been sucked through."

"I wasn't dreaming," I replied.

"Impossible! You're saying that you were physically in the Dream World?"

"Yes."

"Impossible!"

"Stop saying that!" I yelled. "Obviously it's not impossible."

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"My name is Lucy, Lucy Licordia."

He gasped. "Princess! Daughter of the Nutcracker!"

"You know?" I replied.

"Of course I know! It's my job to know," replied the doctor. "I am Doctor Jamson. I am the foremost authority on imaginary physics. I created the way for Dream World things to enter the real world."

As we talked, the wind coming out of the portal blew violently around us and pieces of the Dream World crashed against the floor on all sides of us. We yelled at each other because it was the only way to be heard over all the noise.

"You stole the Golden Discs!" I exclaimed accusingly.

"No, no. No," he replied adamantly, "I did not steal anything, but I did make it possible for them to exist here; well, sort of."

"What do you mean 'sort of'?"

"Your father, the Nutcracker, he sent the discs to the Dream World; probably for you to find. Right?"

"Yes, my father sent them back, but..."

"Not 'back,' interrupted Dr. Jamson. "No, not 'back.' In reality they never left the Dream World."

"I don't understand."

"Lucy, the Golden Discs cannot exist here in the real world. Nothing can."

"But what about all the stuff coming through the hole?"

"It's not. None of it, including you, is actually here."

"Okay, you've lost me," I said, very confused. "What do you mean I'm not actually here?"

"I call it Reverse Dreaming," replied the doctor. "Normally when a child dreams in the real world he visits the Dream World in his dream. With Reverse Dreaming an object in the Dream World is sent to the real world in a dream state."

"Wait," I responded, "you're saying that I am dreaming right now."

"Yes. You and everything else that's come through that hole are stuck at the border between the two dimensions. It's like you were going down a drain, but there was a screen over it. All the water went through, but you didn't."

“And what happens if the hole doesn't get fixed?”

“Then, Lucy, you and eventually everything in the Dream World will be stuck against the border, piling up and piling up, until the border cracks.”

“Cracks?” I asked with concern.

“Yes,” he replied. “Cracks. Then both worlds will be destroyed. The Dream World and the real world cannot interact in the same space for long. Everything that is and ever was will be wiped out.”

“Okay. Well, that's bad,” I stated. “Do you have a plan for fixing it?”

“The Golden Records need to be put on the Calliope and played. That will fix everything.”

“Uh,” I said with concern. “The Golden Discs dissolved in my hand!”

“No, they didn't,” Dr. Jamson replied. “Those discs were in a dream state. They were Reverse Dreaming. They were not the real discs. When they were brought into the Dream World they created a paradox.”

“So you're saying that the discs were always in the Dream World. They never left?”

“Precisely. You have to go back and get them. You will find them in a hidden chamber directly under the Calliope.”

“But I'm stuck between the dimensions! How do I get out?”

“Tom is still dreaming. He can help you.”

“But won't he get sucked into the hole too?”

“No, Tom is there in his dreams. Only things that are actually in the Dream World can be sucked through,” explained the doctor. “I'll give Tom some added strength and agility so that he can go in and pull you out of the hole.”

“Okay,” I replied. “Then you have to release Tom.”

“My bosses aren't going to agree to that!”

“Well, then you're going to have to go against them. You have to let Tom go!”

“Very well, princess. Once the hole is fixed I will wake Tom.”

“Thank you,” I replied with relief.

“Now, I have to go program Tom to rescue you. Oh, and you will have to wake up. He picked up what appeared to be the same liquid Tom had thrown on my dad. “Be prepared, you are going to wake up in a bad place. Look for Tom. You are currently our only hope of stopping this.”

He dumped the liquid over my head. I felt it run down my hair and across my shoulders, and then I was awake.

It was dark, with only a faint hint of light glowing around me. I was pressed up against a barrier, and I could feel a force still trying to push me through it. I found it hard to move against all the pressure. Debris was constantly flying into me and piling up around me.

I used every ounce of my strength to move my arm away from the barrier, but the more I tried to climb away the more it sucked me back to it. It seemed that I'd awoken in a nightmare. My body was bruised from the constant impacts of the debris. I began to feel myself drifting off. Maybe this was it; maybe this was the end. I tried. I really

did try, but I guess I failed. “No! I can't fail!” I screamed to myself. “So many people are counting on me. I have to keep going.”

I crawled away from the border, against the force pulling me back. Every muscle in my body screamed in agony as I made it one foot away. I pulled and yanked, clawing at whatever I could get traction on. I made it two feet away, then three. Eventually there was six feet between me and the portal. My body burned in agony; my muscles were stretched to their limit. I continued to crawl forward but the pain was becoming unbearable.

“Lucy!” I heard a voice cry out, and then a hand appeared. I reached for it and tried grasp it, but my hand slipped through it and I was thrown back and slammed against the border.

Exasperated, I tried to pull myself backup, but it had become too much for me. I was going in and out of consciousness. I may have hit my head, but I wasn't sure. All I knew was that everything was going dark and I could feel my body going limp. As I heard the faint melody of the Nutcracker March play in my head I knew this had to be the end.

CHAPTER 9

Wait! The music wasn't in my head. It was playing outside my head. My consciousness returned as I felt two hands grasp around me and begin pulling me up. I saw my father, the Nutcracker, smile at me as I passed out.

I awoke on the floor away from the spinning hole. Tom, Anne, my father, Lavender and all the soldiers stood above me.

"She's awake!" announced Anne.

"Welcome back, sweetie," spoke my father. "You had a rough journey."

"The discs!" I said as my mind immediately set itself to the task at hand.

"I sent you the discs," replied my father.

"But they dissolved!" added Lavender.

"No," I continued, "those were not the real discs."

"What?" asked my father.

"Those discs were a dream state of the real discs. The doctor called it Reverse Dreaming. The real discs are here and always have been."

"But where?" asked Tom.

"The Calliope," I replied. "They are in a hidden chamber directly under the Calliope."

"Okay, let's go!" exclaimed Anne. "This way."

Anne, the Sugar Plum Fairy, led us through a labyrinth of hallways and rooms until we arrived at a golden door. She tugged on it, but it did not budge.

"It's locked!" she exclaimed.

"The key!" I yelled.

"What?" replied everybody in unison.

I pulled out the key from the Carousel and held up in the air.

"But there's no key hole," stated Lavender.

"Uh?" I replied.

We could hear the rush of wind from the vortex between the dimensions, still spinning violently in circles, picking up whatever came near it.

My father and Henry both charged their bodies against the door together. Nothing, except the exclamations of pain from the both of them. Once they recovered, they thought they would try again. A couple of the other soldiers gathered with them as they prepared to ram the golden door.

"Stop," yelled Anne, the Sugar Plum Fairy. "That door is six inches thick. You are not going to bring it down with brute force. You are just go injure yourselves."

"Well," replied Henry, "we have to do something."

"No," continued Anne. "Perhaps the time for doing is over."

We all shrugged our shoulders in confusion.

"Now is the time for dreaming," she proclaimed.

"What does that even mean?" whined Lavender.

I stared at Lavender for a moment; my mighty little unicorn with the rainbow swirled

horn; my dream companion. She was totally the product of my imagination! I made her; I dreamed her up. She existed solely because of me.

"She's right!" I exclaimed. "This is the dream world. If I want to get through a golden door then I need to dream my way through a golden door!"

I marched up to the golden door and stood before tall and strong.

"Door!" I proclaimed. "Open!" Nothing happened. "Now!" I commanded. Still nothing. I stared down the door with all my strength.

"Uhm, Lucy?" interrupted Anne. "Look down."

I stepped back one step and brought my gaze down. What I hadn't seen was that a key hole had appeared on the door.

"Oh," I responded, talking to the door. "Uh, thank you."

I took the Carousel's Key and gently placed it into the key hold that had appeared. It fit perfectly. I twisted it to turn the lock, but it would not move. I sighed.

"Key!" I commanded. "Turn."

Click! A loud series of clicks, like the winding of a huge clock filled our ears. The key turned on its own and the six inch thick door slid into the wall.

"Where's my key?" I asked after the door had slid away.

A faint, "sorry," echoed across the room and the key dropped from the sky into my hand. Odd, I know, but remember, this is the land of dreams. I pocketed the key and we all entered the room. This was the room that was the very dead center of the dream world; the center of the Kingdom of the Nutcracker.

Before us, in all its majesty, stood the Calliope. It was massive, towering several stories high with an impressive network of gears and pulleys, and... well... things. A gigantic boiler stood in the center of it, full of water, but no steam. Large musical pipes strutted from the floor up to beyond where we could see. We could feel it. It ached. It was made to play. It wanted to play. It longed to play! Alas, it could not play. In front of us stood a panel, stretched out from the machine with a two large turn tables with nothing on them. It needed the golden discs, but they were nowhere in sight.

"Fear not, mighty Calliope!" I exclaimed. "You will play music again! I know where the discs are."

The whole contraption seemed to sigh a huge breath of relief after I spoke.

"So, where are the discs?" asked my father.

I squatted down to the floor and felt my hand across its dustiness. Though disgusted by the filth of the floor I continued sliding my hand across its surface until I found what I was looking for, a seam.

"They're right here," I replied, pushing on the seam with both of my hands.

As I pushed, the floor gave way to reveal a hidden room that went underneath the Calliope. I twisted myself around and let my feet slide into the hold. Gravity did the rest. I dropped into the secret room. It was not but a three foot drop. Crouching, I made my way into the secret room and found a box in the center. I lifted the lid off the box to reveal two large, glowing, shimmering golden discs.

"I've got them!" I yelled up to the rest of them. Cheers erupted above me.

I made my way back to the opening and handed the discs up to my father, who carefully took them from my hand and handed them to Anne. It seemed fitting for the discs to be in the hands of the Sugar Plum Fairy. My dad then turned around and held his hands down to me. I grabbed a hold of them, and then he pulled me up. With his help I soon stood back on the proper floor.

“Okay,” I exclaimed, “let's get those discs installed and get this kingdom back in function.

BOOM! A gun shot fired up into the heights of the room. The bullet disappeared into the darkness above.

“I'm afraid I can't let you do that!” yelled a voice from behind me.

“Who are you?” I demanded.

“Allow me to introduce myself, Princess Lucy,” the man, dressed in formal military clothes, replied. “I am Captain Roberras. I am in command of Project Dream Control.

“You have to let me put the discs in the calliope,” I insisted, “or the rift between our worlds will destroy both of us!”

He chuckled. “Already solved that problem, honey. The vortex has been stabilized, and so we now have a doorway to walk between the real world and the dream world whenever we wish.”

“Not acceptable!” I screamed, grabbed the discs from Anne and charged towards the turn tables of the Calliope, determined to place the discs and start the machine.

“BOOM! Another gun shot. Pain. My sight went dark. I reached out for the calliope, but fell to floor instead. The discs crashed upon the floor. One of them shattered!

“Lucy!” screamed out my father, Henry, Lavender, and Anne all at once. I had been shot. He had shot me straight into my back and the bullet had gone out my stomach. I lay on the floor, my head swirling in circles with darkness closing in all around me. Despite it all, I remained conscious, at least a little. I could hear the battle beginning around me.

“Attend-hut!” yelled my father, The Nutcracker, and Henry, the other nutcracker, in unison. “Charge!”

I heard the stomping of hundreds of feet of Nutcrackers and snowflake soldiers as they filled the room, echoing across the chamber. They surrounded Captain Roberras. Then there was the sound of a mad rush of thousands of military soldiers screaming into the room and engaging in battle with the nutcrackers. Men screamed in pain as the spears of the Dream World soldiers pierced their bodies, and nutcrackers yelled in terror as the bite of real bullets tore through their beings. The noise was unbearable. Not just deafening, but down right horrible and horrendous. My sight came to just long enough for me to see my Henry fall to the floor with a bullet wound. Then the light faded fully to black. I closed my eyes, knowing I had failed to save the Kingdom of the Nutcracker. I prepared to die. Yet, despite the agony of pain and the despair of failure, my body just would not quit. My ears continued to take in the screams and horrors of the battle.

“Captain! Sir!” I heard an officer exclaim. “This has gone too far!”

Then I heard the screech of a weapon as the captain shot his own man.

"If you're not with us..." replied the captain as the officer fell to the ground in shock.

I lay there on the floor, in a puddle of my own fluids with pain grabbing at every molecule of my body and horrors upon horrors tearing at my ears, wondering why I couldn't die. I just wanted to be gone; away from all this. Peace, perhaps, lay elsewhere.

"ENOUGH!" The voice was booming and loud and filled the whole building. Everything and everyone stopped. I heard someone's footstep trod across the battlefield towards Captain Roberras.

"Ah!" spoke Captain Roberras, "the infamous Drosselmeyer! We finally meet. Now you die."

"Where's your gun, captain?" replied Drosselmeyer.

"What? How!" exclaimed the captain in utter surprise. All the human weapons were gone.

"I let this go on for way to long. It ends now."

"No!" yelled Captain Roberras. "This is my domain now!" He grabbed a spear from a nutcracker who was out on the ground and thrust it toward Drosselmeyer, but I heard no penetration. "Impossible!" yelled the captain. It seems that the spear had just evaporated. "What are you!"

Drosselmeyer laughed and then reached his hand above me and motioned it upward. I felt the pain dissipate and then completely disappear. The fluids I had laid in were gone and there was no longer a hole my body. I thought surely I had died, but then I was still there.

"Rise, Princess Lucy, daughter of the Nutcracker," Drosselmeyer commanded me gently.

I stood up on my feet. I felt strong and solid as if none of this battle had ever happened. The captain looked terrified.

"Impossible!" he yelled again.

"Still, you do not understand," Drosselmeyer replied to him.

Then Drosselmeyer stood above Henry, waved his hand, and commanded him to stand. He, too, stood up on his feet as if he were never wounded. He picked up his spear and pointed it at Captain Roberras, but Drosselmeyer pushed it down with his own hand.

"No," he told Henry gently. "The time for violence is over."

"Nutcrackers, rise!" commanded Drosselmeyer.

Throughout the huge room, injured Nutcrackers became healed and stood on their feet. Then he commanded the Snowflake Soldiers who also stood up strong and well. The captain just looked on in disbelief.

"So you may know that you are under the presence of the Almighty..." Drosselmeyer spoke directly to the captain and then yelled with a booming voice, "Humans! Arise!"

All the human bodies that littered the floor, including the officer that the captain had shot, stood to their feet with their wounds healed.

"What on earth are you!" shrieked Captain Roberras.

"Not 'on earth," replied Drosselmeyer. "Not of earth either."

The captain stared at him.

"I am an angel of the most high God," began Drosselmeyer. "I was assigned to protect this place, the place where kids go in their dreams... to keep them safe here... to let their imaginations be pure and true."

"An angel?" Captain Roberras was still processing the information as Drosselmeyer's tone changed and became more firm.

"You have violated this sacred land." Anger crept into his voice. "You, Captain Roberras, have brought death and destruction into a holy place. Do you know, even at this moment, the flames of the Lake of Fire call out to scorch your soul for all eternity. They pant and crave with all longings that they should be satisfied with your torment!"

Captain Roberras stood frozen with fear and terror.

Then Drosselmeyer toned lightened and his voice softened, "but this is the Age of Grace, so, for now at least, their flames shall not be satisfied. There is still time to change."

Drosselmeyer waved his hand and all the human soldiers vanished, sent back to where they belong in the real world.

"But I..." Captain Roberras started to speak, but Drosselmeyer cut him off.

"If you ever step foot in the Kingdom of the Nutcracker, this realm of children's dreams, again, the Lake of Fire will get its satisfaction as your soul burns in its flames for eons upon eons for all eternity and there will be no relief."

"Yes, sir," replied the captain sheepishly.

"Now, be gone!"

The captain disappeared, transferred back to the real world. I don't know what became of him after that, but I suspect he's had a bit of a change of heart.

"Ah," sighed Drosselmeyer, "it's a relief that all that unpleasantness is finally dealt with." He then looked around and noticed that the Sugar Plum Fairy, the Nutcrackers, and all the soldiers were on their knees bowing before him. "Rise!" he commanded. "I am not to be worshiped; I am but a servant of the Almighty. Only He deserves your worship. Now, I think it's about time we put some color back in this place!"

"Uh, Drosselmeyer..." spoke the Sugar Plum Fairy.

"What is it Anne?"

"The Golden Discs," she continued sadly, "they're broken."

The legions of soldiers and inhabitants of the Kingdom of the Nutcracker let out a horrid sigh of despair.

Drosselmeyer couldn't help himself; he laughed.

"Sir!" I cried out.

"Have you learn so much and yet understand so little?" he spoke to me. "You are a dreamer, Lucy, so dream."

I was still for a moment and it seemed that everyone's eyes focused on me. It was a bit unnerving. Then I felt it; I felt the dream... you can't really feel a dream, but I felt the

dream. I can't describe it any other way. And, yet, I wasn't dreaming. I was here in the dream land, but I wasn't dreaming. I was awake in the dream.

To the concern of all the inhabitants of the land who had their attention focused solely on me, I also laughed. I laughed big and heartily. I felt full of joy and happiness, and I just got it. I understood.

“Uh, Lucy?” asked Henry.

“It's okay,” I answered back. “I understand now. I may be awake, but this is the world of dreams. Awake or not, I am the dreamer, and I control the dreams.”

I lifted my right hand up in the air and flicked my wrist. The pieces of the Golden Discs leaped off the ground and glided toward my hand. Everyone watched in astonishment as they came together and reformed back into two perfect circles. I reached out and caught them.

“Who's up for a little music!” I yelled. I don't know why; it just felt right.

The inhabitants of the Kingdom of the Nutcracker screamed in joy, making a beautiful noise of celebration. Never before had I ever heard such a triumphant sound!

CHAPTER 10

I approached the mighty Calliope. I could feel it's longing; it's anticipation. It knew I had the discs. It knew that it would soon be back to fulfilling its purpose. I walked up to the two turn tables and gently placed the Golden Discs on them. Silence. We waited. Still silence. Then disappointment.

“Calliope!” I commanded. “Play!”

I felt it scream. There was no sound, but it wanted to play. Something was wrong.

“Uhm, Lucy,” spoke Drosselmeyer, “I think you've forgotten something.” He then pointed to a little key hole in the panel near where the discs sat.

“Oh!” I exclaimed and pulled out the key my father had left for me so long ago. Except, it wasn't long ago. It was only a few days ago, and yet it felt like I had lived an entire lifetime here. I shook my head to clear my thoughts and focus back on what I was doing. I took the key and brought towards the key hole.

The machine's anticipation was growing exponentially. The Calliope was shrieking out in unbridled desire. Again, there was no sound, just a feeling. This time, I think, everybody could feel it. The closer I got, the stronger it felt. Then finally, the key slid into the key hole and I turned it. The sensation was indescribable, but I will try. I don't know how a machine like this Calliope could have feelings, but it did, and we could all sense it. At the moment I turned the key there was this utter complete sense of joy and pleasure, relief and contentment, and freedom like I've never felt before and may never feel again. The feelings came from the Calliope but were somehow projected to us. It was so utterly in ecstasy to be brought back into function.

The key started to turn and there was a series of clicking noises. Then the panel with the Golden Discs pulled into the machine and disappeared from site.

“Okay!” yelled Drosselmeyer. “Everyone has to leave. Now!”

“What?” I screamed.

“This room is about to be filled with music a thousand times louder than our ears can handle!”

Suddenly everybody began running toward the door in a panic, but not me. I could still feel the Calliope. It didn't want to hurt us; it would wait. After everybody else tore their way through the door, I calmly walked through it. I knew the Calliope did not audibly speak, but I swear I heard it say “thank you.” Then the giant door came down with a loud thud and sealed.

“The room contains the sound,” explained Drosselmeyer, “and distributes it throughout the kingdom.”

And then, there it was. The music played. It played joyfully and triumphantly, filling the land. As it spread through the air, the grays faded into beautiful and brilliant colors. The Kingdom of the Nutcracker, the land of dreams, once again became a vibrant, joyful place. Everyone cheered! It didn't matter if it was a dream or if it really happened, in essence, it was both. I knew I would never forget the emotion, the utter celebration of joy, I felt and shared with my friends that day.

As the celebration died down and the people and such of the Kingdom of the Nutcracker returned to their homes, there remained a question on my heart. Something I didn't yet understand.

"Drosselmeyer," I asked, "if you could have stopped this at any time, why didn't you."

"Easy solutions offer no lessons," he replied. "How is a scared, timid little girl ever to become a brave and pure princess, heir to the Kingdom of the Nutcracker, if she never gets to go on her adventure? How is a poor homeless boy, tortured by a rogue military, supposed to find a home? Look around you, princess. A few days ago you had very few friends, and you tried to push those ones away. Today you are surrounded by friends, and I am confident you now have the skills to restore old friends and make new friends in the real world. I could have waved my hand and fixed the Dream World, but by not doing so, so much more has been fixed and will be fixed by you in the future in the real world."

I was tongue-tied and speechless. I didn't know how to respond. "Thank you," is all I could manage.

"No, princess," replied Drosselmeyer, "Thank you. I only set things in motion for you; it is you, yourself, who accomplished all this. And now we know, when it's your turn to take your rightful place as the Nutcracker – like your father before you – you will be so much more than ready."

Richard grabbed my hand and placed it in his. I had a feeling we were destined to become more than friends in the years to come.

"It's time to go home, Lucy," he spoke to me.

"Yes," I replied. "I suppose it is. Mom will be worried."

"And how do we do that?" asked Henry.

Drosselmeyer smiled as I said, "Like this," and waved my hand in the air in circle. The air began to spin around faster and faster. Then there was a pop of light and a portal formed. In the portal we could see the carousel that had brought us here spinning around in merriment.

"The carousel is still spinning?" I asked Drosselmeyer.

"Lucy," he replied, "the thing about the Dream World you haven't yet realized is that time means nothing here. This world exists outside the realm of time."

I looked at him with confusion on my face.

"The carousel is still running because it's holding your spot in time. When you enter the portal you will return home at the exact time you left. Your mom will not be worried because she will not be aware that you were ever gone."

"Ingenious!" I exclaimed as Henry and I jumped into the portal, hand in hand.

Lights and flashes of color swirled around us as we phased back into the real world. Then there was an incredibly bright splash of light and a rush of wind, and then we found ourselves spinning around on the carousel at ridiculous speeds. Then, slowly, poco a poco (little by little – *sorry, it's a music term; I can't help myself*) the speed decreased and the energy dropped away until it finally came to a stop. A whistle

sounded and platforms folded down over the open spaces.

“Where were those platforms when we were trying to get on?” complained Henry as we stepped on to them and made our way to the rope-based elevator that would bring back to the floor.

“Wait!” I yelled in concern, “what about my Dad?”

“It's okay, Lucy,” replied Henry. “Drosselmeyer told me that your dad and him had some work to do, but to tell you that your dad would join you shortly.”

“Okay,” I sighed in relief and then turned my attention down the hallway towards the kitchen. “Mom!”

Henry let go of my hand, looked me in the eyes, and said, “go to her!”

I ran! It felt like I hadn't seen my mom in decades. I had so much to tell her, but really I just wanted to feel her arms around me again. I'd forgotten that, from her point of view, I'd only been away from her a couple minutes. My feet were loudly stomping as I carelessly flew down the steps (*side note: you should never run down the steps; safety first*) causing my mother to turn around and look toward me. I raced into the kitchen and flew into her arms, tears forming in my eyes.

“What is it, honey,” my mom asked.

“I missed you!” I exclaimed. “I missed you so much!”

“You missed me?” My mom was confused, “in the last five minutes?”

“Not for me,” I replied. “Not five minutes. It's been days, but it feels like forever. I'm a different person now.”

“Oh?” My mom reacted. “You're a different person? You've changed in the last five minutes?” She held me and looked at me. “You do seem different. I feel a confidence in you; even a joy. Where did that come from?”

“I'm trying to tell you, Mom, I've not been gone five minutes. I can't explain. It's been so much longer for me.”

“Perhaps one day she'll understand, Lucy. Give her time.” spoke Drosselmeyer, who had been sitting at the table with my mom the whole time.

“Wait!” I proclaimed. “How can you be here? I just saw you... there.”

“Now you're really going to confuse your mom,” replied Drosselmeyer. “It's as I said, time is irrelevant in the Kingdom of the Nutcracker. I'm here at a particular moment in time, but I am there outside of time. It can make it seem as if I am in two places as once.”

“What in all that is good are you two talking about?” asked my mom.

“A discussion, perhaps, for another time,” replied Drosselmeyer. “Right now, you have other things to focus on. Everything's about to change for you.”

“What?” Mom didn't have any idea what he was talking about. I suppose I did know, but I didn't know that I knew. Drosselmeyer, however, was right, our world was about to change and change for the better.

“I found dad,” I blurted out. I didn't mean to. I knew she wouldn't understand. Maybe if he were here...

“What do you mean, you found dad? When? Where? How? I don't understand;

weren't you just upstairs?"

Just then there were footsteps on the stairs. I didn't think anything of it because I was sure it was Henry finally coming down to join us. It wasn't Henry. The look on my mother's face as my dad walked down the stairs and into the kitchen was a look I will always treasure. First, her eyes welled up in tears, but at the same time I could feel the joy in her heart. Then the emotion of the whole situation over took her and she wailed and ran into his arms. He held her as she cried and cried and cried. Finally she got enough control over self to talk.

"Where have you been?" she asked through her tears.

"I was trapped," is all he answered, "but our wonderful daughter freed me."

"How?" There was no answer. Then she looked over to Drosselmeyer, "You knew. You knew he was coming?"

"Difficult to explain right now," was Drosselmeyer's answer.

"Everything is going to be better now," my dad reassured her, and he was right.

A short time later there was a knock at the door. My mom answered it. There stood before us, just outside the door, the scientist, Dr. Jamson, and the young boy, Tom, who had been the Rat King.

"Hello ma'am," spoke Dr. Jamson. "I was instructed to bring this child – his name is Tom – here to be adopted."

"Adopted?" asked my mother inquisitively.

"Oh!" exclaimed my dad as he rushed to the door. "Hello, Dr. Jamson. Hello, Tom."

"Hello Mr. Licordia," they both replied.

"You know them?" my mother asked my dad.

"Yes," responded my dad, "and, if you're willing, I would like for us to take in Tom as our adopted son."

Mom paused for a moment then shrugged, "why not!" She opened her arms and Tom ran into them.

"Welcome to my family," I said to him.

"Well," spoke Dr. Jameson, "my work here is done. But, so that you know, the whole 'Dream' program has been shut down. It turns out Captain Roberras did not have authorization to do the things he was doing. The entire complex was raided by the FBI and anything to do with creating a portal to the Dream World has been destroyed."

"Excellent," my dad replied. "Take care."

With that, Dr. Jameson left. I never saw him again, but heard that he went on to do much greater things... much better things.

As for my family, things turned around quickly with my father back. The factory was soon back to full operation with kids and toy companies begging to have our toys. Drosselmeyer left, no doubt to do other angelic stuff. I suspected I would see him again some day.

With my sullen attitude gone, I quickly rekindled old friendships and began to reach out to new ones. Before long, I was surrounded by loving and caring companions. Speaking of such, Henry and I did eventually get married, and we will soon be having

our first child. Life is full of up and downs, but these days I have learned to find the joy in both the hard times and the good times. As good as the real world has become to me, there still is a special place, a special joy, in my heart for laying down, closing my eyes, and drifting into the Dream World and visiting my old friends. Of course, adults don't usually go to the Kingdom of the Nutcracker in their dreams, that Dream World is reserved for children, but then, I'm not just any ordinary adult. I am Princess Lucy, heir to the Kingdom of the Nutcracker, and one day, when my dad retires, it will be my job to defend it. I will do so triumphantly, and I also know that one day I will pass the job of Nutcracker over to my first born child.

THE END