

Sterling's Journey

There was once a woman named Jaelyn who owned a small farm on the edge of a woods with her two sons. The elder son was named Brannon and the younger son was named Sterling who greatly admired Brannon. Their father had died when Sterling was only two so Brannon was the closest thing to a father that he could remember. They were not wealthy, but they managed to grow enough food to feed their small family and a little more to sell at a nearby village for what they could not grow. When Brannon turned twenty, he decided to set out for a city and work for a couple of months to be able to buy a cow. He told the then twelve-year-old Sterling right before he left, "You take care of mother and you'll see in one year I'll be back with a nice healthy cow and we can make cheese to sell and make more money."

One year passed and to Sterling's dismay, his brother did not return home. "I wouldn't worry," Jaelyn said, "I'm sure he was delayed by the late snow this spring. By this time next year, he will be home safe." Another year passed with the same result. This time, she told him, "Maybe he found some prosperous trade and is busy setting up a home for us in some far-off city. In one more year he should be back." But again, a year passed and there was no sign of Brannon's return. Eventually, five years passed all together and each year Jaelyn tried to push it off, but the fear in both of their hearts that he was never coming home grew steadily.

Soon after the five years marking Brannon's departure, Sterling, who was now seventeen, was gathering fire-wood in the forest. He had long ago mastered the tasks he had to do when Brannon left. Suddenly, he heard the crack of thunder

and rain started pouring through the leaves. Picking up the bundle of sticks he had already gathered, he hurried back to the house. He wanted to save what he had collected from getting soaked and, although he would never admit it, thunderstorms still scared him. The house wasn't far and he soon made it home. He rushed inside, but just as he was about to shut the door, a large black dog bounded in after him.

The dog had come in soaking wet and had planted himself in front of the hearth. For the rest of that day, he watched Sterling as he moved throughout the house. He refused the food Jaelyn offered him, but went out in the evening and hunted on his own, bringing back a cleanly-killed squirrel for the family. In the days following would follow Sterling around everywhere he went. Sterling couldn't stand the dog's constant presence and wanted him gone. He told his mother, "I must take him back to his owner. He must have gotten away during the storm and they may be worried about him." She consented and he set off with some food she prepared. At first, the dog whined and did not want to leave the farm, but after Sterling made it clear that he was leaving, the dog followed. They walked for days, but none of the farms Sterling stopped at recognized the dog. Each night, Sterling would eat a little of the food and the dog would hunt for his meal. He offered some of his kill to Sterling, but the boy refused to take anything from the dog.

After a week, Sterling was running low on food and decided to see if there was anyone on the other side of a patch of woods and then give up. When he stepped through the last of the trees he couldn't believe what he saw. A huge castle stood tall ahead of him. It seemed to sparkle in the early morning sun.

Curiously, he walked towards the castle with the dog following behind. When he reached the large front doors, it seemed like they slid open without any help to reveal a bright hall. Tapestries depicting battles long ago hung on the walls and on the floor was a thick rug both made with vibrant colors. At the end of the hall sat a lady sitting on a throne, wearing a pale blue gown and a crown on top of her flaxen hair. He made his way to the throne and knelt before the queen. “Welcome young man.” the queen said to him, “I am the Queen of the Sunrise. Rise and tell me what brings you here?”

Sterling rose and replied, “I have been trying to find the owner of this dog here and stumbled across your castle. Would your highness grant me a night’s stay and some food here?”

The queen nodded, “You may stay. However, I would like to ask of you to do something for me. My sister, the Queen of the Forest has been struck ill by a curse. I have a vial of dewdrops that should cure her, but I need someone to bring them to her.” The journey sounded exciting and Sterling agreed to bring the vial to her sister, who was only a few days away.

Sterling dined with the queen that night and told her his story. It was the most lavish meal he had ever had and he slept well through the night. The next morning, the queen gave him a loaf of bread. “This bread is made with rays of sunlight.” she told him, “One small bite will give you enough energy as a full meal and it will never go stale.” He thanked her and set off with the dog following as always. The third night of the journey, there was a huge thunderstorm. This time, Sterling had no house to run back to and the fires he tried to start just fizzled out. He curled up under a tree shivering not as much from the cold as from his

fear of the storm. The memories flooded back of the times when he was younger when Brannon would comfort him during a storm by telling him stories of knights and battles. All of a sudden, he felt like a warm, heavy blanket had been draped over him, covering him from the rain and he drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, he woke up to find the dog curled up next to him. “Don’t you do that again.” he angrily told the dog and stormed off. The dog followed a distance behind with his head down. They travelled for a couple more days and entered into another large forest. The path continued on until it opened into a clearing in which stood another large castle. It seemed to be made out of one huge tree with many other trees that had twisted together to form a strong, beautiful structure. The entrance was formed out of a large root arching out of the ground. Sterling walked to the entrance and, not seeing anyone around, was about to knock on the door when two guards in armor that looked like tree bark stepped towards him. “What is your business here?” one of the guards asked. “I am here to deliver medicine for the Queen of the Forest from her sister, the Queen of the Sunrise.” Sterling replied. The guards nodded and suddenly the heavy oak doors creaked open. The other guard motioned for Sterling to follow him.

The guard led Sterling through the winding hallways and up the many staircases of the palace to a room where the queen was. She sat in a chair wearing a dark green gown unable to move or speak. Sterling took the flask out of his pouch and gave the queen a few drops. The Queen of the Forest slowly stood up and smiled. “Thank you, young man.” she said to Sterling. She invited him to dine with her as he had with her sister and during the meal (which was just as delicious, if not more, than the previous one) she said, “I ask another favor of you.

There is a third of us sisters the Queen of the Moon; she is the eldest. I recently had something made for her that I need delivered and I believe you would be strong enough for the journey. Of course, I would pay you handsomely when you return.” Sterling readily agreed to her request.

When they had finished dining, she brought him to a locked cupboard. She took the key from around her neck and unlocked it revealing a shelf of goblets that seemed to be made out of different kinds of shimmering stones. Sterling marveled at how intricate the designs on the goblets were and was surprised when the queen handed him a goblet made of plain wood with a sole, small opal set in it. “She is giving this one out of all the others?” he thought, but he did not question her.

Then, she handed him a flask. “The water in this flask was taken from a spring hidden deep in the heart of these woods.” she explained, “It will never run out. You will need it on your journey ahead.” He thanked her and was led to a room by one of the palace attendants to a room for him to sleep.

After a good night’s rest, Sterling set off once again with the dog at his heels and the goblet safely stored in his pouch. The path soon turned steep and started making its way narrowly up the sheer side of a mountain. Sterling cautiously made his way up the mountain not stopping to sleep, but only to take a quick bite of the magical bread and some of the never-ending water. There were barely any plants along the way and he had to give some of his food and water to the dog. “I don’t know why I’m letting you stay around, but you are the reason I’m on this journey,” he said.

One afternoon, the midday sun was shining straight down on them and without seeing, Sterling tripped over one of the few tree roots along the path. He tumbled off the side of the path and just barely grabbed on to a rock jutting out of the side of the cliff. As he was hanging on for his life, his pouch slipped off his shoulder and he quickly reached one arm to grab it. Now he only had one hand keeping him from plummeting down to his certain death. His fingers started slipping off the rock. "HELP!" he cried. Out of the corner of his eye, the dog bounded up from farther down the path and, grabbing the back of his shirt in his teeth, pulled Sterling back up to the path. At that moment, Sterling realized how the dog had helped him throughout his journey even when he treated him badly. Sterling realized that he had come to enjoy the dog's company and told him, "I'm so sorry for the way I've acted. I'll keep you if you'd like. How about I name you Brannon? That was my brother's name. He was strong just like you." The dog wagged his tail enthusiastically. "Brannon it will be then." concluded Sterling and they continued on their way.

It took what seemed like forever, but on the eighth day of climbing, they could finally see where the top of the cliff was. At evening, they reached the top to look down on a sandy beach leading to a body of water larger than Sterling had ever seen before. They had reached the ocean. Sterling sat down in his amazement, but Brannon nudged him to look to the right where he saw the castle of the third queen. It was built out of obsidian as black as the night sky and towered as high as the mountain-side; it seemed almost built into the mountainside and it was hard to see where the mountain ended and the castle started. At Brannon's urging, Sterling got up and walked toward the castle

until he found a bridge connecting the mountain to one of the towers. A soldier guarding the tower led them into a hall lit through the ceiling by moonlight. The moonlight shone down on what looked to be a spring, next to which the Queen of the Moon sat. Her long raven black hair draped to the side revealing her glimmering, pale gown.

When she noticed her company, she gracefully stood and asked Sterling why he had come. Sterling explained and handed her the goblet. She smiled and thanked him, “Delightful! I needed this. The same witch that put that curse on my sister has been changing some of my servants into animals.” She set the goblet beside the spring, which she explained to her guests was the mountain’s streams being turned into saltwater to go into the ocean by the light of the moon.

“Now,” she said to him, “You have been so kind to my sisters and me. I will grant you anything you desire.” Sterling did not even hesitate.

“My brother.” he requested, “I would have done anything to get my brother back.”

“I can bring him back, but it will not be easy.” she explained, “I can not do such a thing without something from you. If you would like your brother back, you must give up your dog.”

Sterling looked at the dog and looked away. He wanted his brother, but he now loved the dog. Who knows what the queen might do to him?

“I cannot do that,” he said to her after a couple minutes. “This dog means too much to me.”

“I’m glad you said that.” she said, smiling, “Because of that, I will be able to bring your brother back to you.” She dipped the goblet into the spring and

beckoned the dog forward to drink and Brannon obeyed. “You see,” she continued, “everything looks different in the moonlight.” Before Sterling’s eyes, what had once looked like the dog that had led him into this adventure now took the form of his strong brother.

The now human Brannon came forward and shook his brother’s hand heartily saying, “Thank you, dear brother. I know by your face that you are confused so I will explain. When I left, I traveled in this direction and the same witch that cursed the Queen of the Forest and the servants here put that same animal spell on me. I wandered around as a dog for years until I was able to find my way back to our home that stormy night. Then you seemed to hate me at first and tried to take me back to my owner.” Brannon saw Sterling frown and nod his head in shame and continued, “But it’s a good thing you did. If you hadn’t, there never would have been a way to break this spell.”

As Brannon had been telling his story, the Queen of the Moon transported their mother from the farm to come and see her son. She then offered them all jobs at her castle where they could live comfortably by the seaside and there they lived. Jaelyn was given a job in the kitchen and Brannon became a knight. Sterling, who had fallen in love with traveling and sleeping under the stars, was made the official “delivery boy” between the three sisters and the neighboring kingdom. And they all lived happily ever after.