

Adigana

A Hidden Tale

LOIS AMARI

PRISCILLA MAZAHREH

JOSEPH MAZAHREH

SIG MEDIA

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Written by Priscilla Mazahreh, Joseph Mazahreh and Lois Amari.

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*To my amazing nieces and nephews: Priscilla, Joseph, Rebecca,
Aletheia, Joelle, Abigail, and David,*

Your boundless imagination and curiosity have been the true inspiration behind this story, turning its creation into a joyous journey. We began crafting this tale in July 2019 during our unforgettable vacation to California. Little did we know that those initial storytelling moments would grow into a seven-year adventure, taking us from the sun-soaked shores of California to the heartwarming landscapes of Illinois.

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*With love and gratitude,
Auntie Louise*

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THE BOILING POT

The story was boiling. It wanted to get out. Wanted to be told. Wanted to be read. The story was boiling. It was boiling in a pot, and it was about to overflow, so that everyone could see it.

But he stood there, fighting the story. He did not want the story to be told. He wanted it to be quiet. To be silenced forever. If the story were told, he would lose power. Right now, he was the most powerful person in Manland, and he intended to keep it that way. He was the emperor—the most powerful emperor of all time. His name was Emperor Dinamo.

He clasped the lid of the pot, trying to keep it closed, making sure the story would not get out. Suddenly, a drop of liquid escaped from the pot. The drop expanded into a large bubble and crystalized into a transparent, glowing sphere. He tried to grab the crystal with one hand, while scrabbling to keep the lid on the pot with his other hand. But the crystal began moving away from him.

The story started boiling more vigorously—bubbling and steaming inside the pot. He returned his full attention to it, straining to prevent more liquid from escaping. A few moments later, the boiling pot suddenly quieted down. He looked up and saw the crystal flying toward the window. He quickly ran after it, but before he could reach the window, the crystal soared away into the skies of Manland.

Emperor Dinamo panicked for a moment, then calmed himself, reasoning that no one would notice the escaped drop of liquid, and

if anyone did, he would make sure to deceive them by distorting the story. The truth could never be told. If people heard the story, they would know the truth, and the truth would set them free.

One-Hundred Years Earlier

King Virtos, the ruler of Adigana, was a righteous king. He was mighty and powerful, but at the same time, good and upright. Stern, but kind. Just, yet compassionate. The king was beloved by all his subjects.

However, within the king's army, General Enos was envious of the king's popularity. Consumed by his jealousy, he devised a treacherous plan to overthrow the king and seize control of the kingdom. But there was a problem for the general: the king's standing among the people and the unwavering loyalty of the soldiers made it difficult to get anyone to betray the king and follow the general.

The general grew more and more miserable until, finally, there was no joy left in him. He was filled with so much grief that it reflected on his countenance and demeanor. Unable to smile any longer, he withdrew from the kingdom's celebrations.

The king noticed this.

One day, while the king was strolling through his castle, he observed the general in his grief and decided to question him.

"My dear Enos, you do not seem yourself these days," said King Virtos as he studied Enos, noting the new lines that had appeared on his careworn face. "Is something troubling you?"

"It is nothing, Your Majesty," the General replied, trying to keep his expression reserved. "I have simply been fatigued as of late. I am sure it is just that."

The king contemplated the general's response for a moment. Finally, he said, "Well, my trusted General Enos, take some time off to rest."

The general thanked King Virtos and sought his permission to embark on a voyage.

The king nodded approvingly and offered his blessing: "A change in scenery might do you good!"

Enos decided to take to the sea in search of a place where he could establish his reign. *I must find a land where I can be king. Never again will I be subject to another ruler*, he thought.

The general set sail across the Origeana Sea, sailing for weeks without knowing where he was going or what awaited him. As time passed, the crew grew increasingly nervous and weary, their minds filling with questions about Enos's intentions. However, fear kept them from approaching him to seek answers.

Finally, the captain mustered enough courage to privately ask Enos about his plans.

"You shall know in due time," Enos responded, while standing at the door of his cabin.

"The crew is exhausted," the captain continued. "Can we make a stop at an island to rest for a while?"

"No!" Enos cried, glaring at the captain. He then abruptly slammed the door in an attempt to shut it.

"You are being unreasonable, General," the captain retorted, wedging his boot in the door to prevent it from fully closing. "You must understand our predicament. We cannot continue sailing without a clear destination in mind."

Enos retreated into the cabin, settling into a chair. "I've told you—you shall know in due time."

Undeterred, the captain persisted: "We have already passed the last known island marked on the map. We are now venturing into uncharted waters, unaware of what lies ahead."

Enos rose from his seat, grabbed the map, and briskly exited the cabin. The captain followed him. As they reached the deck, the crew were talking loudly among themselves, pointing toward a far-off fog. Enos grabbed the telescope and, scanning the horizon, discovered that the fog emanated from an island in the distance. Through the intermittent gaps, he could see the hills covered with dark forests. Intrigued, Enos and the captain closely inspected the map, their eyes scanning its details in search of any trace of this mysterious land, but none was found. The island clearly existed beyond the realm of navigational knowledge. Curious, Enos commanded the crew to sail toward it.

Upon reaching the island, Enos instructed the crew to remain aboard the ship and used a rowboat to reach the land. As soon as he set foot on the shore, he sensed the presence of others, which sent a shiver up his spine, though he could not see anyone. He unsheathed his sword and ventured inland. As he advanced deeper into the heart of the island, Enos did not encounter anyone, but the pervasive sensation of being watched by others persisted.

Having walked through the jungle for over an hour, surrounded by the untouched wilderness, in the distance, a mysterious structure caught his eye. Curious, he made his way toward it. As he approached, he discovered an ancient tower constructed from weathered stones, its walls adorned with creeping vines. Cautiously, he circled the tower until he discovered an old wooden door. He jiggled the handle, and the door swung open on rusty hinges. He went right on in and found himself in a small room that led to a spiral staircase, both of which were covered in a thick blanket of dust. Enos climbed the stairs, ascending higher

and higher until he finally reached the top, where he found himself in a small room. The room was empty, except for a wooden table positioned in its center. He approached the table and noticed a clay pot resting upon it. He lifted the lid of the pot and found a dark, murky liquid within. Taking it for nothing more than dirty water, Enos turned his attention to the nearby window.

From the window, he beheld a breathtaking view of the entire island, along with a portion of the Origeana Sea. His ship, a mere speck just off the shoreline, was visible in the distance. Intrigued, he moved to another window, this one on the opposite side of the room. Here, the view had shifted, revealing an expanse of endless green vegetation. No signs of human habitation were in sight.

For the first time, Enos felt truly alone and safe enough to express himself freely. Exalted, he screamed at the top of his lungs, "I shall become a king! I shall rule the world!"

"Indeed, you will, if you submit to me," a cold male voice whispered from behind.

Enos froze for a moment, his heart pounding in his chest. He then quickly turned around but could not see anyone. "Who are you? Who goes there?" he asked, his voice trembling with fear.

It was quiet for a moment before the voice spoke again with a sinister tone: "If you submit to me, I will make you king."

Enos's eyes widened. He scanned the room but still could not see anyone. He quickly grabbed his knapsack and bottle, and cautiously went down the stairs while gripping the hilt of his sword tightly. Looking down, he noticed that only his footsteps were on the dusty staircase. When he reached the bottom of the stairs, he found no one. The tower's entrance door remained as he had left it. He opened it and surveyed the surroundings, but there was no sign of anyone. He returned inside the tower and climbed the stairs once

more. Convinced that he was alone, he shouted defiantly, "I shall not submit to anyone. Never again!"

"Then you shall not be a king," said the voice, coming from the center of the room.

"Show yourself, you... you coward. I demand that you show yourself!" Enos shouted, as he spun in a full circle, his eyes darting rapidly in every direction.

Suddenly, a dense vapor flooded the room, obscuring all visibility. "You do not know to whom you speak, or else, if you do, you are both foolish and daring," said the voice through the thick mist.

"Who are you?" Enos shouted, as he strained to adjust his eyes to the hazy surroundings.

"I am the ruler of the invisible world," the voice declared. "My dominion is one you cannot rule. While you may rule the physical world as a mere mortal, the invisible world is where you shall submit to me. In return, I shall grant you great power and make you a king in the physical world."

"A king?" asked Enos. "A king of an empty island?"

"I shall make you king of the entire world," replied the voice.

Enos's eyes gleamed with ambition. "King over Adigana, as well?" he inquired.

"King Virtos shall submit to you," declared the voice.

"No, I want him dead," Enos murmured in a low voice after the sinister thought crossed his mind. *King Virtos is too beloved by all; no one will submit to me if King Virtos is alive.* He raised his voice, "Did you hear? I want King Virtos dead."

"Kneel down!" the voice demanded.

The vapor transformed into a powerful vortex of wind that swirled around Enos, spinning and twirling with immense force. The wind ripped his sword from his grip, tossing it to a distant

corner of the room. Enos felt his heart race as he fought to retain his footing. Unable to maintain his balance, his knapsack dropped and the water bottle slipped from his hands, spilling its contents on the floor.

“Do you submit to me?” said the voice.

Helpless and overwhelmed, Enos fell to the ground and knelt with his face pressed against the floor. Through trembling lips, he cried out, “I submit!”

Immediately, the whirlwind dissipated, leaving the room once again filled with thick vapor. Enos slowly sat up on the floor, unsure of what would transpire next. He remained there for a few minutes, awaiting a response from the vapor, but the vapor remained silent. Relieved, Enos retrieved his belongings and stood up. Suddenly, the thick vapor gathered itself and moved into the bottle that was in Enos’s hand. It condensed and became a liquid. Enos held the bottle tightly, his body frozen in place. “What do you want me to do?”

“Take me with you to Adigana,” the voice replied.

“For what purpose?” Enos hesitated, wary of sailing across the ocean with the invisible creatures.

The voice proceeded to explain his plans to Enos, who listened carefully and posed numerous questions. Satisfied with the answers, Enos gradually grew more comfortable with the voice and his plans. After hours of conversation, he carefully sealed the bottle, resolving to bring it back to Adigana to unleash the power of the invisible creatures.

Enos sailed back to Adigana. During his absence, the kingdom had continued to thrive, its streets bustling with joyous citizens. Yet amidst the vibrant atmosphere, Enos remained miserable. He desired to unleash the full power of the invisible creatures and immediately start a civil war, but he knew he needed to first

convince a few people to be on his side. He began pouring drops of the liquid here and there. As the drops touched the air, they evaporated, releasing the invisible creatures into the kingdom. The invisible creatures began committing acts of mischief and malice. Not knowing who truly was behind the crimes, people pointed their fingers at one another. Mistrust of others spread far and wide within the kingdom. Neighbors accused neighbors, friends turned against friends, and even families found themselves torn apart by doubt and mistrust.

King Virtos was taken aback by the upheaval unfolding within his kingdom. Seeking counsel, he summoned his general and advisors to unravel the mystery that had plunged Adigana into chaos.

“We have enjoyed years of peace and prosperity,” the king began. “But lately, we find ourselves facing a disheartening rise in theft and larceny. These acts of dishonesty and wrongdoing have left me perplexed and deeply troubled. I cannot fathom why such acts would occur in Adigana!” His gaze swept across the gathered council members, eager to hear from them.

General Enos stepped forward before anyone else could speak. “Your Majesty, it is evident that someone is deliberately sowing seeds of malice and disorder among the people,” he said in a resolute tone.

“Why would anyone do such a thing?” The king was not convinced.

“Well, there are those who seek to overthrow your rule,” replied Enos, remaining firm and unwavering.

At the suggestion of treason, the air in the grand chamber became heavy with a sense of unease, and everyone awaited the King’s response.

King Virtos stood up, and began pacing back and forth, staring at each of his advisors as he passed them by. Though he held them in high regard, they all, except for Enos, appeared uncomfortable under his stare.

“Your Majesty, you need to quell this treason and rebellion. You must immediately declare war on those who dare to challenge your authority,” said General Enos.

The king stopped pacing and turned toward the general. “Declare war against my own people? No, never!”

“If you fail to control the rebellion, you will be perceived as a weak king, and others will seize power from you,” said Enos.

“There must be another way,” said the king.

Sensing the king’s hesitancy, General Enos raised his voice, his tone firm, “If you truly love Adigana, you must confront anyone that threatens its stability.”

“I love Adigana. I love the people of Adigana,” the king affirmed to the general. He then returned to his throne and sat.

After a moment of silence, Enos addressed the room once more, “Your Majesty, give me your leave to do what must be rightly done.” The general could see the king remained unswayed. “Gentlemen, do you agree?” Enos added, appealing to the advisors present.

Fearing to be accused of treason, the remaining advisors had no choice but to agree with the general’s plan.

The king said reluctantly, “General Enos, you have my permission to take whatever measures you deem necessary. I, though, do not think the problem is with the people, but with something else. You are dismissed.”

General Enos left the King’s presence with a sly grin etched across his face. His plans to sow seeds of discord and ignite a civil war were falling into place seamlessly. He intended to implicate as

many innocent individuals as possible in crimes they had not committed. His devious plan relied on exploiting the trust and vulnerability of the accused, convincing them of the injustice and cruelty of King Virtos.

One such incident occurred when a man inculpated another of stealing a valuable diamond. "He was the only person present at the scene," the man claimed.

"I didn't steal anything!" protested the accused, his voice laced with desperation.

Enos, privy to the invisible creatures' involvement, understood the truth behind the crime. He ordered the accused to accompany him privately, away from prying eyes and the King's court. "I believe in your innocence," he whispered with false empathy. "The king's court, however, will condemn you unjustly. Fear not, for I shall set you free, but it is imperative that, for now, we proceed to prison together. Rest assured, in a month's time, you will be released."

Enos imprisoned countless individuals—men, women, and even innocent children. He made sure to imprison his ship's captain, his crew, and many able-bodied men from the army and their families, but also individuals from various professions such as blacksmiths, carpenters, physicians, and countless others. He promised each of them that he would set them free in a month's time.

Enos visited the prisons daily, pretending to work tirelessly on their cases. He assured them of his efforts to secure their freedom, while simultaneously poisoning their minds with lies about King Virtos. His words were carefully crafted to sow seeds of discontent and to breed resentment toward the king.

As time passed, the prisons became overcrowded and unbearable. The prisoners grew restless, their patience waning, and

their anger boiling over toward the king. When the prisons reached their breaking point and could no longer accommodate any more people, Enos opened the bottle and poured out all the liquid, except for one drop. "Go forth and bring destruction upon the kingdom," he commanded, "but do not touch the prisoners."

The liquid vaporized, diffusing through the air, spreading like a sinister fog, casting the kingdom into darkness. The invisible creatures wreaked havoc upon the land. They killed all the people and destroyed their properties. All that once held beautiful was reduced to ruins. The only people unharmed were the prisoners and those within the walls of the king's castle.

After everything had been destroyed, Enos fixed his gaze on the royal castle and shouted triumphantly, "The last battle!" He brought the bottle with him, planning to pour the remaining drop of liquid inside the castle, but as he approached the gate, the bottle in his hand started shaking. Agitated, Enos held the bottle tightly with both hands. "Calm down!" he ordered the invisible creatures. "King Virtos is nothing more than a mere human." Enos, however, did not know that there was another invisible army, and that the last battle would not be against flesh and blood.

When he arrived at the palace, he felt a strange sensation unlike anything he had ever experienced. A mysterious vapor, distinct from the previous vapor he had encountered, was surrounding the castle. Unhindered, he forged ahead, determined to pass through it and enter the castle. As he stepped into the vapor, the bottle in his hand again shook vigorously. Enos tightened his grip once more, holding on to the last drop of liquid needed to complete his mission.

The mist thickened around him, obscuring his vision, and disorienting his senses. Pushed and buffeted from all sides, Enos struggled against the forceful currents, battling to enter the castle,

all the while still holding the bottle tightly. But the vapor knocked the bottle out of his hand, sending it tumbling down toward a nearby cliff. Despite the setback, Enos pressed forward, his resolve undeterred, intending to confront the king directly and engage in a battle with his sword.

However, the mysterious mist stood as a barrier, blocking his way at every turn. It pushed him back with an invisible strength, keeping him outside its realm. No matter how hard he pushed, the vapor resisted his efforts, denying him entry into the castle and, in turn, access to King Virtos.

Defeated and disheartened, Enos was forced to retreat. He ran toward the cliff, and there, he called out to the invisible dark army, "Where are you? Speak to me!"

"We are with you," said the voice of the invisible army.

"Who are they?" asked Enos.

"They are the invisible Army of Light," the voice revealed. "The king is under their protection. Our attempts to destroy him will not succeed."

Realizing that his plans had failed, Enos decided to leave Adigana and return to the island. He sent a message to all the prisoners that the king had become evil and had ordered the country's destruction. He told them that he would help move them out of the country safely.

When the prisoners got out, they saw that, indeed, everything had been destroyed—their homes, workplaces, meeting spots all lay in ruins. Shrouded in darkness, Adigana had lost its allure, and people no longer desired to remain living in it.

The prisoners turned to Enos, their newfound leader. Desperate to flee the destruction of Adigana, they decided to follow Enos and sail with him to wherever he led them.

As the people gathered at the harbor to depart, their eyes caught sight of the vapor surrounding the palace, witnessing its aura of strength and beauty.

"We should check on the king," a voice said, rising amidst the crowd.

"Perhaps he needs our help," another suggested.

"He has always been a just and noble ruler," others chimed in.

Moved by a sense of loyalty and compassion, a group of young men volunteered to venture toward the palace. As they approached the castle, they heard a faint noise behind them.

"Someone is following us," one of the men noted.

A young woman, holding an infant in her arms, was running toward them. "Wait for me. Please wait for me!" she begged, breathing heavily.

The men halted to allow the woman to catch up. "Lady, it's not safe for you and your child here. Please return to the harbor," they urged her.

"I must enter the castle," the woman insisted.

As the men and the woman approached the palace, they encountered the mysterious thick vapor. It enveloped them, creating a unique sensation, but barring their way.

"There is no use in trying to enter," one of the men shouted. "We must return to the harbor before the ships depart."

As they retraced their steps, the vapor condensed into solid crystals within their hands. Some of the men carefully stowed the crystals inside their pockets, while the woman put them inside the baby's bottle.

As the group rejoined the others at the coast, the dark invisible army grew increasingly agitated by the presence of the Army of Light. It gathered itself and began departing Adigana.

"Where are you going?" demanded Enos.

“We shall be back!” the Dark Army replied.

“No! Wait!” Enos cried out as he watched the black smoke dissipating into the air, leaving his ship behind.

The Dark Army flew over the sea. Some people witnessing them thought they had seen a massive murder of crows flocking. Others believed it to be the smoke of Adigana’s destruction carried away by the fierce winds of the Origeana Sea. Only Enos knew the truth—the Invisible Army of Darkness was retreating.

Enos shifted his focus to the evacuation and addressed his former crew. “We will be sailing to the island we visited in our last voyage,” declared Enos.

“To the desolate island in the middle of nowhere?” objected the captain.

“Where else can we go?”

“We cannot possibly sail across the Origeana with thousands of people, including women, and children,” the captain reasoned.

“Then let them remain in a destroyed island, under the rule of a king who has lost his mind and sold his soul to darkness.”

“King Virtos has always been a good ruler,” the captain protested, his voice filled with sorrow. “I do not understand what has happened.”

“The Shadows have overtaken him,” whispered Enos.

“The Shadows?” the captain echoed, his eyes widening.

“Did you not see the vapor surrounding the palace?” said Enos.

Word of The Shadows overtaking King Virtos swiftly spread among the people. Fear gripped them, especially those who had brought the crystals from the castle. Enos learned of it and asked anyone who had taken anything from the vapor to bring the items to him for placement inside a pot.

Every man who possessed the crystals obediently brought them to Enos, depositing them inside a pot. However, the woman with

the infant wished to hold on to hers, refusing to surrender them until some men reported her to Enos. Reluctantly, she handed over the bottle she had used to conceal them, but not before she had removed a few crystals and stashed them in the baby's blanket.

Enos accepted the bottle and poured its contents into the pot, sealing it tightly. He intended to destroy it later. However, some people could not shake off the profound sense of peace brought about by the vapor encompassing the king's castle. They named it Lithimyos—a name derived from the words Lithyos and Timyos, meaning 'Precious Liquid.'

The prisoners arrived on the new island, and Enos claimed the tower and the surrounding area as his residence. He declared himself Emperor and named the island Manland. The people felt a profound sadness, having left behind a once-beautiful country for a deserted island.

Emperor Enos worked tirelessly to build and develop Manland, transforming it into a beautiful place. He urged the people to leave behind their past and demanded that all traces of Adigana be wiped from maps, books, and conversations. "We cannot find happiness if we keep dwelling on the past. We must forge ahead and remove Adigana from our lives. Long live Manland!"

And yet, the people found it difficult to forget Adigana. Some even created secret maps that still depicted Adigana at the center. Yet, as generations passed, the knowledge of Adigana faded away. The new generations only knew of Manland and considered it the grandest island of all, with Emperor Enos as their mighty ruler. The emperor was so powerful. His only fear was the liquid in the pot.

Enos tried to burn the liquid, but it would not ignite even with the aid of fuel. He tried casting it into the sea but then the liquid would vaporize, separating itself from the brine, only to recondense back in the pot. He tried to bury it underground, but

the liquid would find its way back to the surface. Enos dreaded the thought of leaving the pot somewhere, concerned that someone might discover it and harness the power of the invisible Army of Light to overthrow his rule. Unable to destroy it, he resolved to keep it a closely guarded secret. So, he placed the pot in the upper room of the tower, forbidding entry to anyone. He affixed a large sign on the door of the tower, warning that trespassers would face immediate death. Enos built himself a large palace around the tower, carefully hiding the tower within its large structure.

As Enos's rule came to an end, the people of Manland gradually forgot about the tower, referring to its general location as merely the emperor's palace. One generation later, the tower became forgotten. The no-trespassing sign at its entrance remained as an added precaution to prevent any curious explorers from venturing further.

Emperor Enos reigned over Manland until the age of eighty, and upon his passing, his son, Fallous, ascended the throne. Enos had prepared his son well and had told him about the Invisible Army of Darkness, although Fallous never had a direct encounter with it himself. Emperor Fallous was determined to continue his father's work in transforming Manland into a modern and prosperous country. Under his rule, significant advancements were made, but his policies took a toll on the people, especially the imposition of heavy taxes to support his ambitious projects.

As oppression grew during Emperor Fallous's reign, a prevailing belief in the Precious Liquid Lithimyos took hold among the people of Manland, spreading throughout the island. The people believed that one day Lithimyos would manifest itself and bring about liberation and deliverance from their sufferings. During the oppressive regime, the belief in Lithimyos served as a

beacon of hope, motivating them to endure and persevere and to dream of a brighter tomorrow.

Emperor Fallous's reign came to an end after fifty years, and his son, Dinamo, ascended the throne at the age of forty. Unlike his father, Enos, Fallous had chosen not to disclose the existence of the Invisible Army of Darkness to his son. However, he did introduce him to the pot hidden within the tower. He warned him that the liquid inside the pot was evil and was trying to tell a story that would incite rebellion and threaten his rule. He tasked him to keep the liquid contained within the pot to prevent its dangerous story from spreading.

Emperor Dinamo followed in the footsteps of his father and grandfather, ruling with a harsh and callous hand. However, he was more cunning and shrewd than they had been. He embarked on grandiose public projects, surpassing the scale and expense of his father's endeavors. He masterfully manipulated the people, convincing them that these costly projects were for the betterment of Manland, while his true motive was power. He built many public amenities, such as parks, recreation centers, libraries, museums, public squares, and roads, but ensured that each bore his name. He instituted numerous public holidays and parades—all designed to celebrate him. He tripled the size of his palace, adorning it with lavish and extravagant items, including those crafted from gold and precious gemstones. All of this extravagance was sustained by the heavy taxation imposed upon his citizens.

The people of Manland toiled tirelessly to fund Emperor Dinamo's never-ending expensive projects and his extravagant lifestyle. As the Emperor grew richer and even more powerful, the people of Manland languished in poverty and exhaustion, burdened by the weight of oppressive taxation. But while they

endured the weight of oppression, they silently longed for a time when justice would prevail, and their burdens would be lifted.

It was during the tenth year of Emperor Dinamo's rule that a remarkable event occurred. On a tranquil day in the garden of the palace, Dinamo was strolling amidst the vibrant blooms. As he walked, a peculiar sound reached his ears, originating from the ancient tower that had long been sealed shut. Worried, he decided to investigate its cause. He pushed open the creaking door and ascended the spiraling staircase, his footsteps echoing through the silent chamber. With each step, his fear grew, and his mind filled with many questions and anxious thoughts. As he reached the tower's uppermost room, the once-familiar sight of the pot greeted him, its contents now stirring with an unsettling energy. The story had awakened after being dormant for all these years! Emperor Dinamo dashed toward the pot and reached for the lid, attempting to contain the secrets held within. Yet, despite his efforts, a single drop managed to escape.

And so, dear readers, with the escape of one drop of the Precious Liquid, our story begins...

THE GIFT

Present time

“Fifty pounds of oatmeal!” said Mr. Parker, the owner of the food market store, struggling to carry the heavy bag with his frail arms.

Histan Wordson waited patiently for his goods to be brought to him. To bide the time, he looked out of the window into the marketplace. It was a beautiful spring morning in the town square of Manland, and the marketplace was already bustling with activity. People were everywhere, some purchasing items, others selling their wares, along with a few of Emperor Dinamo’s guards walking around.

I can’t wait to see Proffa’s reaction when she sees the bag, Histan thought as he focused his attention on Mr. Parker once more.

Mr. Parker placed the bag on the counter. “Anything else?” he inquired, panting slightly.

“Could you please add a ribbon around it?”

“A ribbon?” Mr. Parker seemed puzzled.

“It’s a gift. It’s Proffa’s twenty-seventh birthday,” Histan explained.

Mr. Parker fell silent for a few seconds, staring at the bag. “Oatmeal as a birthday gift!” he muttered to himself. Then aloud he said, “May I suggest roses?”

“You don’t know my wife,” Histan responded, grabbing the bag with one hand. Although of average height, he was a well-built thirty-year-old man.

“Wait, I thought you wanted a ribbon?” Mr. Parker grabbed a basket containing decorative items from a corner of his store. “Will a red one do?”

Histan nodded.

Mr. Parker began to wrap the bag carefully. “I have been married for fifty-three years, son. Women appreciate well-stocked kitchen pantries, but they also love roses and jewelry, especially on their birthdays.”

Histan did not reply. *He doesn’t know Proffa*, he thought. Histan and Proffa had been married for nine years but had no children. Despite their longing for children, they found solace in the joy of caring for others. Proffa, with her heart overflowing with warmth, expressed her love through the delightful art of baking. Her eyes sparkled with happiness as she whipped up batches of delicious oatmeal cookies, imagining the smiles they would bring to children’s faces. Histan, deeply devoted to his wife, cherished her nurturing spirit and encouraged her culinary passion. And so, on Proffa’s special day, Histan was certain that his wife would be delighted with the fifty pounds of oatmeal, and he eagerly anticipated seeing her reaction when she received her birthday gift.

“Here you go,” said Mr. Parker, handing over the wrapped bag. “Happy Birthday to Proffa.”

Histan grabbed the bag and carried it over one shoulder as he left the market. Though he was convinced that a fifty-pound bag of oatmeal was the perfect gift for Proffa, he could not shake Mr. Parker’s words from his head. Unfazed by the weight he carried, he decided to take a longer route through the Emperor’s Gardens on his way home to gather a few flowers as an additional surprise for

Proffa. The Emperor's Gardens, a public park named after the emperor, lay to the north of the market square, just outside the palace grounds. Many people simply referred to it as 'The Gardens.' From a distance, Histan spotted a cluster of red tulips blooming near the base of a large tree. As he approached the tulips, a flying object hit his forehead, causing him to lose his balance. Histan fell backward, but fortunately, his head landed on the oatmeal bag. As he sat up, he saw a small, round, shiny object hover in front of him before swiftly flying away. As Histan watched it leave, he experienced a peculiar sensation he had never felt before. *What did I just see?* he wondered.

Histan rose to his feet and, to his dismay, some of the oatmeal spilled onto the ground. *Never mind, I must find the object,* he thought. Convinced that the object must have fallen into the oatmeal, he immediately bent down and began meticulously searching for it, grabbing a handful of grain and sifting out the soil, before returning the oats to the bag. Determined to find the object while salvaging as many of the oats as he could, he repeated the process time and time again. Once he salvaged all the oats he could and having also thoroughly searched the surrounding ground, he still had not found the shiny object that hit his forehead. Realizing the futility of his search, Histan decided to abandon it and instead gather some tulips for Proffa. As he was cutting the flowers, he noticed that one tulip had a strange glow. Intrigued, he knelt and gently moved aside the petals to uncover a spherical crystallized liquid drop. As his hazel-brown eyes concentrated on the bright crystal inside the flower, a profound sense of peace washed over him. *Could this be a drop of Lithimyos, the one our ancestors spoke of?* he wondered. Histan carefully cut the stem of the tulip and placed it inside the oatmeal bag, securing it with the red ribbon. He placed the bag behind the large tree and covered it with flowers and soil, so no one could see

it. Satisfied that his secret was safe, Histan hastened back to the market square, his mind filled with questions and anticipation.

“Mr. Parker, Mr. Parker!” Histan called out as he hurried into the store.

Sitting on a rocking chair by the door, Mr. Parker looked up with a knowing smile. “I knew you would be back, son,” he said in a calm tone. “How did the oatmeal gift go with your wife?”

“Mr. Parker, you need to come with me right away!” Histan cried out.

“I am a seventy-three-year-old man, and I know better than to get in the middle of an argument between a man and his wife.” He slowly got up from his chair and began to make his way toward the counter. “May I suggest roses?”

“Mr. Parker, I found Lithimyos—the Precious Liquid,” Histan pleaded.

Mr. Parker stopped in his track, turning toward Histan. “No, son! No one has ever found it before. No one.”

“You must believe me!” Histan insisted. “Come and see for yourself!”

“Why don’t you go and celebrate your wife’s birthday?” Mr. Parker said, sighing and shaking his head sadly at Histan. He reached for the roses on the counter. “Son, may I suggest some roses?”

Histan left the food market. *I’m wasting my time here*, he thought. Determined to find someone to share his experience with, he ran to the quilt shop next door.

“I found it. It is here!” Histan cried out, his voice echoing through the cozy store.

Mariam, the old lady who owned the shop, looked up from her needlework. “What is it?” she asked.

“Lithimyos,” Histan replied.

Mariam shrugged dismissively. "I hear it is Proffa's birthday today," she said, her attention already shifting to the stock on display. "This beautiful quilt would make a great gift for her."

Histan let out a sigh of frustration. "Thank you. I already bought her fifty pounds of oatmeal." Without another word, he turned to leave the shop.

Mariam followed him to the door. "Oatmeal?!" she asked.

As Histan stepped back onto the street, he caught sight of Mr. Parker in the process of closing his store for the day.

"Wrapping up early, I see!" Histan called out with a friendly tone.

Mr. Parker looked up. "Son, I thought I would come with you to check the Precious Liquid," he said.

Histan's eyes widened. "So, you believe—"

"No. I don't," Mr. Parker interjected, shaking his head. "I can't help my lack of faith."

Mariam, who had been eavesdropping on their conversation, couldn't resist chiming in: "Then why close your store and go with him?" she asked.

A solemn smile crossed Mr. Parker's face. "I've lived long enough to know that sometimes you need to check things out, even if you don't believe them," he replied.

"In that case, wait for me. I would like to join you," she declared, quickly locking the door to her shop.

Others witnessing the exchange became interested in the unfolding events and also decided to join Histan. Along the way to the garden, Histan explained in detail what had transpired, recounting the strange encounter with the shiny object and the discovery of the Precious Liquid. The group listened intently. Some were filled with genuine curiosity, eager to uncover the truth behind Histan's tale, whereas others couldn't resist the allure of the

unfolding drama, despite their skepticism. And there were a few, a precious few, who approached the situation with open minds, ready to embrace the possibilities. Regardless of their initial perspectives, one thing was certain: everyone was eager to see it for themselves.

When they arrived at the large tree, the bag still lay undisturbed on the ground. Histan carefully untied the red ribbon and retrieved the shining tulip. He gently parted its petals, and to his relief, the Precious Liquid still rested on the core of the tulip. He cupped the flower tenderly in his palm and turned to Mr. Parker.

“Mr. Parker, take a look!”

Mr. Parker peered inside the tulip, his eyes fixed on the crystal. For a few moments, he remained silent, his emotions overwhelming him. And then, tears streamed down his face as he whispered, “Lithyos Timyos!”

Mariam couldn’t contain her curiosity any longer and asked, “What do you see, Mr. Parker?”

“It is beautiful and peaceful, just as they said,” Mr. Parker replied, his voice choked with tears.

Intrigued but still uncertain, Mariam questioned, “How do you know it is Lithimyos?”

“Nothing else can make you feel this way,” Mr. Parker said. “Look at it!”

“But—”

“Stop arguing! Just look at it!”

Histan brought the tulip close to Mariam, urging her to see for herself. As she gazed at the radiant crystal inside the flower, her eyes brightened, and a profound sense of peace washed over her. Overwhelmed by the moment, she instinctively placed her hands on her chest and exclaimed, “It is truly beautiful!”

Word quickly spread throughout the market about the discovery of Lithimyos, and many people flocked to the garden, eager to witness it firsthand. A long line formed as people patiently waited for their turn to see the tulip. As each person encountered the precious liquid, a wave of excitement permeated the air, and a long-forgotten sense of joy filled their hearts. Jubilant celebrations erupted in the garden. People began singing together, performing lively folk dances, and rejoicing in the newfound glimmer of hope.

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From a distance, Emperor Dinamo stood by the window of the tower, his gaze fixed upon the bustling scene unfolding in the Emperor's Gardens. The sound of joyful voices reached his ears, stirring a mixture of negative emotions within him. *What was the cause of this celebration?* he wondered. Not knowing what was going on made him upset and nervous. He prided himself on being aware of everything, and it surprised him that something was happening in Manland without his knowledge. Determined to find out, he swiftly departed from the tower, making his way back to the castle through hidden paths in the garden that few were privy to.

Inside the castle, Emperor Dinamo entered a secret room circular in shape. The room was adorned with large black glass mirrors that covered every wall. This remarkable mirror ensemble was known as 'The Master Mirror.' Positioned at the center of the room, there stood a comfortable red reclining chair, where the emperor would sit while observing the reflections. You see, the emperor had established an elaborate spying network that allowed him to instantly gather information. He had discreetly installed spying mirrors throughout Manland, capable of capturing and

transmitting sounds, images, and even scents to his Master Mirror. Immersed in his surveillance, he would spend countless hours in front of the mirror, secretly observing the lives of the citizens. The people lived without any semblance of privacy, completely oblivious to the emperor's watchful gaze.

Emperor Dinamo reclined on his chair and started watching and listening to the people at The Gardens. It did not take long for him to realize that the drop of liquid that had escaped from the pot in the tower had made its way to the people. They had not only discovered its significance but were also joyfully celebrating its presence. Anger simmered within the emperor, threatening to consume him. "Calm down, Dinamo," he muttered under his breath, striving to regain his composure. "You are far superior to them. You have deceived them for so long, you can deceive them once again."

With a flick of his hand, Emperor Dinamo turned off the mirrors, cutting the flow of information from The Gardens. He could no longer bear witness to their celebrations. Rising from his chair, he paced restlessly across the room, his mind consumed with thoughts of crushing the story. He decided to send his assistant, Devor, to the gathering in the garden.

"Go, now, and put an end to their celebration," ordered the emperor.

"Certainly, Your Excellency," Devor replied. With a bow, he departed from the presence of his master.

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As Devor entered the garden, the joyous atmosphere was interrupted by his presence. The people turned their attention toward him, curious about his purpose.

“What is going on?” Devor inquired, feigning ignorance.

“You won’t believe it,” one of the people exclaimed. “We have found Lithimyos.”

“Lee-thim-yas?” Devor said, deliberately mispronouncing it as though hearing the word for the first time. His lips curled into a sly smile. “What is that?”

“The Precious Liquid,” the people replied.

Devor chuckled dismissively. “Oh, a fairy tale our ancestors used to tell their children as bedtime story!”

“Come and see for yourself,” they insisted, leading Devor to Histan, who was guarding the glowing tulip and its precious drop of Lithimyos.

Histan carefully revealed the drop of Lithimyos to Devor, capturing his undivided attention. Devor’s expression shifted momentarily, a mix of astonishment and unease crossing his face. The crystal seemed undeniably real, stirring a range of emotions within him. However, instead of experiencing the peace and joy that others felt, Devor was consumed by overwhelming fear, awe, and guilt. He knew that the drop before him was authentic, but he had to keep the truth hidden from the people for he had orders from the emperor and a duty to fulfill.

“Oh, that crystal,” Devor exclaimed, attempting to downplay its significance. “I know exactly what it is.”

“What is it?” asked Histan.

“A rare gemstone,” Devor stated confidently. “A gift sent by the ruler of Carvaland to our great emperor. We thought it was lost, but fortunately, it has been found.”

“A gemstone! How do you explain the overwhelming sense of peace and joy we experience when we look at it?” Mr. Parker questioned, his voice filled with sincerity.

“What peace? I didn’t feel anything,” Devor claimed, attempting to deceive those gathered.

“Look again,” Histan insisted, bringing the tulip closer to Devor. “Take a closer look.”

Devor reluctantly peered at the tulip once more, his eyes focused on the petals, deliberately avoiding the drop of liquid. “I feel nothing. Absolutely nothing,” he asserted firmly.

Mr. Parker motioned to Histan to let him examine the tulip again. As Mr. Parker gazed at the drop of liquid, his eyes once more filled with wonder. “Oh, the peace, the beauty, the joy,” he exclaimed. Then, he looked up at Devor and asked, “How can you possibly explain the emotions I’m experiencing?”

“The power of expectation, old man,” Devor replied, chuckling callously.

“Power of expectation?!” Mr. Parker murmured, slowly shaking his head.

“Did someone ask you to come to The Gardens to see this... lee-tim-yas?” Devor asked.

Mr. Parker remained silent.

“Answer, old man,” demanded Devor.

“Yes,” Mr. Parker finally said.

“Old man, sorry to put it this way to you, but have been misled and deceived,” Devor asserted, snatching the glowing tulip from Histan’s hand and placing it inside a bag. “This is the property of the emperor.”

The crowd grew silent as a sense of disappointment washed over them. Their once radiant smiles turned into expressions of

sadness. The belief that they had finally discovered Lithimyos crumbled before their eyes.

“Let me leave you on a cheerful note,” said Devor, attempting to soften the blow and manipulate the people further. “Our magnificent Emperor Dinamo is pleased to share this gift with his beloved people. We shall take it and place it in the Emperor’s Museum, so you can forever remember the greatness of Emperor Dinamo, the recipient of the most precious gifts of all.”

As the people were leaving The Gardens, Histan went to retrieve the oatmeal bag from the base of the large tree. He leaned his head against its trunk, a heavy weight of disappointment burdening his soul. But in that moment, a comforting hand rested on his shoulder, and he turned to find Mr. Parker standing beside him.

“Son, are you alright?” Mr. Parker asked softly.

“I misled the people,” Histan replied, turning his head toward Mr. Parker. “I raised their hopes up so high, only to have them shattered in an instant.”

“Don’t be too hard on yourself, son. Let us get out of here. Why don’t you walk me home? Today has been quite an eventful day for a seventy-three-year-old man like me.”

Histan and Mr. Parker left the park in silence, each one lost in his own thoughts.

After several minutes, Mr. Parker spoke up. “You know, son, in all my seventy-three years, I have never felt such profound peace as I did today.”

“But, Mr. Parker, didn’t you hear what Devor said,” responded Histan. “It was all a fake, just the power of expectation.”

“I heard what Devor said.” Mr. Parker paused, contemplating his response. “Let me ask you this: Did you feel that peace when you first laid eyes on the drop of liquid?”

Histan nodded. "Yes, I did."

"Were you expecting to see Lithimyos today?"

Histan shook his head. "No, not at all."

A faint smile appeared on Mr. Parker's face. "You see, son, it was not the power of expectation for you."

Histan fell into a thoughtful silence, grappling with the implications of Mr. Parker's words.

"This drop of liquid, regardless of its true nature, brought me an immense amount of joy and peace today," Mr. Parker continued. "Whatever it may be, it deserves to be celebrated."

"But it lost its effect once we learned it was a gift from the ruler of Carvaland," Histan responded, still wrestling with his conflicting thoughts.

"Son, we lost those feelings when we stopped gazing at it," Mr. Parker explained.

"Everyone stopped believing in it, Mr. Parker."

"What if Devor used the power of suggestion to manipulate our minds?" Mr. Parker pondered aloud.

"I don't know, Mr. Parker," Histan admitted, a tinge of sadness still lingering. "I don't know what to think."

"Cheer up, son. You don't want to be grumpy on your wife's birthday." Mr. Parker's eyes twinkled with mirth. "And may I suggest some roses?"

Histan held up the bouquet of tulips he had gathered. "Thank you, Mr. Parker, but tulips will do for today."

With that, Histan and Mr. Parker bade each other farewell and went their separate ways.

In the meantime, Devor had returned to the emperor, entering the room with a sense of pride at successfully quashing the celebration.

“What have you done?!” The emperor’s voice thundered through the room.

“Your Excellency, I have found a clever way to divert the people from the liquid,” said Devor.

“A clever way? A clever way, you say?” The emperor’s anger intensified. “How clever is it that we must now have it displayed in a museum for everyone to see?” His face flushed with fury. “We needed to destroy the story, not showcase it in a museum.”

“But I have changed the narrative, Your Excellency. I told them it was a gift from the ruler of Carvaland,” Devor explained.

“Stupid man! Keep quiet!” the emperor’s voice thundered. “Lithimyos is too powerful, and anyone with a brain can tell that it comes from the deepest places of all.”

“Well—” said Devor.

“Silence!” the emperor commanded. “What we need now is the suppression of the story.” He rose from his chair and began pacing the room restlessly. “We must restrict access to the museum.”

“How?” asked Devor.

“Money, you fool. Make it impossible for anyone to afford it.”

“Genius!” Devor exclaimed.

“Is that all? Sing!” The emperor demanded, his mood shifting.

“The genius mind, a mastermind, prodigy in kind, an emperor wise, with intellect refined,” Devor trilled, beginning one of the emperor’s praise songs.

“Louder,” the emperor declared, motioned with hands.

“Behold the emperor, wise and intelligent, a ruler unparalleled, with wisdom eminent,” Devor sang at full volume.

The emperor's face softened, and a faint smile playing on his lips as he reclined back in his chair. "Yes, yes, yes," he murmured. "The story is done with."