

## THE GATEWAY

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Faith stood at the entrance of her new home. The village was old, beyond years of counting. She brushed her boots along the cobblestone path and took in a long, sweet breath of the numerous flowers coloring the length of the path as far as she could see. She glanced over her shoulder and was pleased to see that the flowers extended beyond the nearby hill, looking as though they went on forever like a great starry night.

Birds sang spring, love-songs from nearby trees and Faith smiled. Her gaze fell upon the entrance posts and one hand brushed the rough stones as she passed. Her boots made clicking sounds along the pathway and she decided to remove them, tying them together and hanging them over one shoulder. The hard stone beneath her feet gave her a sense of reality and she stepped cautiously into this ancient world.

The trees and flowers thickened as she made her way down the winding path and sunlight danced in shadows on the ground. As she pressed forward, the birdcalls became fewer until quietness met her ears. A warm breeze touched her face and she jumped, silently chiding herself for the childish reaction.

The clearing was just ahead and her eyes made out the old, tree stump in the center. She paused and listened with her mind. Somewhere deep inside her memory, she grasped a song, an ancient song with words so old they'd been long forgotten. Still, she knew the words and her clear voice rang out with the forgotten melody.

As she sang, she stepped slowly and steadily to the old stump. Here, she sat, bringing her legs up and hooking her pale arms around her knees. Once silent birds joined in to sing a melody with her and a faint rustle from the nearby trees caught her ears. But she didn't stop singing. She knew it would frighten the beast if she stopped. How did she know this? She did not remember. She just knew.

At first, she saw only a ripple, a distortion of the air nearby, then her eyes focused as the song continued from her lips. Another ripple preceded a faint outline of the ancient beast.

The image became solid and Faith watched, afraid to blink for fear it would disappear. Her song continued, and a tiny man with wings on his back and crown upon his fair head appeared atop a great white unicorn.

Faith sang, afraid to stop, afraid of what she saw.

The tiny man's wings fluttered quietly and he flew near her, landing on a nearby rock. His tiny mouth curled into a smile as he studied her face. Then, he bowed.

He motioned to her and somewhere in her mind, buried for many seasons, the meaning came. He wanted her to stop singing. She held her last note and let it fade, fearing the tiny man would leave. But he didn't. His body shimmered and grew until he was taller than Faith. Tall, handsome and young, a king. She recognized him. Had it been in a dream that she'd seen his face? Yes, she decided.

The man held an open palm out to her. He smiled and his silvery eyes sparkled in the sunlight.

Faith stood and placed her hand in his.

"Welcome, love," the winged man said.

As his words reached Faith's ears, the memories flooded her mind. As a babe, she'd been hunted by the trolls of the forest. They had tried to kill her, stop her from growing up. She was changed, made to look human, and sent to live among them in safety.

"Do you know me?" the man said.

She nodded. She knew him. Her betrothed. They had been merely babes at their last meeting, yet she remembered.

"You're the King of the Fairies," she told him softly.

"Yes," he agreed and smiled warmly. "And you are my queen." He squeezed her hand and kissed her gently on the lips.

She relished his touch and closed her eyes. When she dared to look again, she was but a tiny woman with wings on her back, sitting astride a great white unicorn.

The ancient beast turned toward the forest and, with almost no movement at all, ran toward the trees, carrying Faith home.

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