

The Keeper of Songs

Heard melodies are sweet,
But those unheard are sweeter.

-John Keats

Once there was a King who betrayed all his people for love, and once there was a boy who never forgot. The King was Ulysses; the boy had no name, for he was not meant to ever need one.

It was whispered that the King wept bitterly for twelve days and twelve nights when his first child was born, for even the servants could see what a strong and laughing youth he would be, the fairest there ever had been in all the land of Colmar.

The Queen his mother had begged not to see or touch him, and the King took pity on his wife, and took the child away the moment he was born. They had spent many sad months preparing for this day, and the King fed and cared for the baby with his own hands. He dared not allow anyone else.

When the first fair day arrived (for it was in the rainy autumn-time when the child was born), the King mounted a donkey with his baby son held in a sling across his heart, and bid his Queen and his palace farewell. The Queen would rule Colmar until his return, and that would be many years away. In the meantime the babe was his only concern.

The King rode away to the cottage prepared for him, deep in the Wilds where none other dared go, on pain of death. And there they remained always. The young King turned his strength to growing food and he put away thoughts of sorrow, for they were forbidden here.

The child grew, and was as fair and merry as his midwives had thought, and in him the King found much joy. And each day the King took the boy by the hand, and led him through fields where the red clover grew, by a silvery stream that played over rocks, and under the leaves of the old oak trees that danced in the wind and the sun. And the little one smiled at these things that he saw, and hid them away in his heart.

Then at last, every day, they came to a hill, where the sweet grass flowed in a cool green wave whenever the breeze came along. There at the top stood a cabin of wood, and inside it the Stone of Possibilities. So said the King, and the little one believed him, though never, not *once*, did they open the door.

"Someday you will enter that door, little child, and that day will break my heart," the King said to him once, one fine summer's day. (for the days were all fine, in that time.)

"Oh, no, Papa, never!" the little boy cried, for he couldn't have borne to cause such a sorrow, and he loved his Papa most dearly. He promised with childish conviction, but after a moment the King looked down, fingering the necklace of silver he wore.

"No, child, that is a promise you mustn't ever make, for this is the thing you were born for. Promise me only this much; remember!"

And the little boy never forgot.

Each day the King would tell stories, there on the hill in the woods, of wisdom and truth and love long ago, and he filled his child's head with dreams. And all of these were sweet as mint, for all of them were true. And each day also the man would sing (and no two Songs were ever alike), while the little one listened in wonder. When twilight came, just one word was spoken, and that was the word "Remember."

And the little boy never forgot.

Then at last a day came, after many golden years, when all the world changed. It was a crisp and whispering day in the fall when the boy was twelve years old, and the brown oak leaves fluttered and danced on the path in the sun as they walked. The boy smiled at these things, as he always did, and remembered, and squeezed his Papa's hand.

They came to the hill where the sweet grass flowed in a soft green wave in the breeze, and here the King stopped, and turned to the boy, and took both his hands in his own.

"Today I must leave you," the King said softly.

"But Papa, where are you going?" the little one asked. He couldn't imagine such a thing, for his Papa had *never* been away.

"In there," his father told him, and nodded his head at the cabin. The cabin with only the Stone inside. The boy thought about this and finally smiled, for that was his way in those days.

"Then I will wait for you here, even if it takes all day," he said. But his father looked sad, which astonished the boy. . . he had seldom known sorrow, either.

"You misunderstand, child. I can never come back to you, ever again. Listen closely to every word I say," the King said urgently, gripping the boy's hands tight enough to hurt. He dropped to his knees and looked not only sad but fearful, and the boy began to be uneasy. But he listened all the same, and never forgot.

"Child, you must run from this place as fast as you can. Don't dare to slow down or look back. Never tell anyone where you came from, or how you were raised, or mention my name. If they knew who you were, they would kill you at once. We were forbidden to give you a name, but you will need one now. So, I name you Nathan, for you have been a gift to me, and I pray you will be so to many others." At this point he

reached in his pocket and took out a rough black stone, which he pressed into Nathan's palm.

"This is a piece of the Stone of Possibilities. Keep it safe, and never tell anyone you have it. It will give you great power, for I have sung to you the dreams of everyone in Colmar. Remember them all, and be wise, child. You were born to be a gift for the people; be a greater one now than they ever expected. Save them from Jòkai, and the Curse of Blood."

Now Nathan was frightened and clung to his father, and there on the hill he whispered "Don't go."

"Child, I must," his father said.

"But *why*?" Nathan cried.

"If I stayed, the cost would be too much to bear. I cannot tell you more than that. Now let me go, my Nathan. You are all I ever loved or wanted. . . Run now, and God keep you safe!" the King said. He brushed away the hair from the boy's brow and kissed him just once, very tenderly, then without another word he turned and walked away. Nathan stood frozen to the spot as the King approached the cabin and opened the door. Then he was gone.

"I promise, Papa. . . I'll try," Nathan whispered.

A minute later the piece of rock in his hand grew hot as blood, and a hard gust of wind almost sent him sprawling. He scrambled to his feet and caught sight of black clouds rushing down from the north beyond the mountains, and with no more hesitation he ran off the hill and away. He passed the forest of oaks where the branches groaned and snapped in the rising wind, and the silvery stream that played over rocks, and the meadow that once had been full of red clover. Then the rain came, heavy and blinding, and Nathan could see no more. He was soaked through in an instant. He dared not stop at the little cottage where he had spent his whole life, for just then the lightning began. He heard thunder and knew the bolt had struck somewhere behind him in the forest. Then the crash came again, and again, till the sound overlapped in a long rolling roar so loud it seemed his very ears would bleed. He covered them with his hands while he ran.

He ran for what felt like hours, not knowing where he was going or why; just running because he must. At last the storm grew less, and the lightning and wind died away. The rain became a drizzle, then even that stopped. The woods were quiet except for the crunch of his footsteps on wet leaves and bracken, and the drip of soaked bark. Nathan shivered, for it had turned cold in the wake of the storm, and he was not dry yet. He trudged on in silence, lonely and afraid and beginning to feel hungry. Already he missed his Papa.

All day long he walked without seeing any hint of people. He drank water from clear pools where it had collected after the rain, but there was nothing to eat except a few stray nuts the squirrels had missed. Near dusk he came upon a fallen log, and used his bare hands to tear away fistfuls of rotten wood till he reached the dry interior. He snuggled into the depression he had made and buried himself in the torn up pieces. They picked up a little of the heat from his body and kept him warm. It was still early, but Nathan closed his eyes and slept, too tired to think.

When he opened them he was cold as the kiss of the frost, but early morning sunlight streamed down through the branches to wash him with pale warmth. He rose from his bed and drank more water, then set off at once, ignoring his hunger. At midmorning he came to a road.

It was nothing but a muddy country lane, but to Nathan it seemed salvation. He fell to his knees and let out a cry of joy, the red clay sticking to the cloth of his breeches.

With fresh hope he followed the little road east; not because it would take him to any real end, but just that it allowed him to face the warm sun. Beyond that his thoughts were still vague.

By and by the trees thinned, and he began to pass fields golden yellow and ripe with the harvest, and pretty old farm houses scattered about. And these things were marvelous, amazing to behold.

"Ho, boy," a voice called, and Nathan was startled. It was the first voice he'd ever heard except his Papa's and his own. He looked all around.

There on the ground by a moss-covered apple tree sat a girl. She was older than he was, maybe sixteen or so. Nathan stared at her, lost in curiosity. He was conscious of rudeness, but couldn't seem to help it. He didn't know quite what to say.

"What's your name?" the girl asked, when the silence had grown too long.

"I'm . . . Nathan," he told her, the name sounding strange on his lips. It was the first time he had ever yet uttered it.

"Just Nathan, that's all?" she smiled. He couldn't reply; only yesterday he'd lacked even that much. He shrugged.

"Well, Nathan, I'm Cynthia, and if you're not in a hurry I hope you'll sit down and have lunch with me. You're the first one I've seen on this road all day long," she said. Nathan was happy to take up her offer. She reached in her pack and brought out bread and cheese, which she cut into slices for both of them. At first they said little. "Where are you from?" she'd ask. (That way.) "Then where are you headed?" (Don't know.) Cynthia finally became exasperated.

"Did you just fall out of the sky then, boy?" she asked. He could tell she expected no answer to that, and he wisely didn't offer her one. They sat there in the quiet for a while, and the girl absentmindedly began to hum a little tune. Something clicked in Nathan's mind, and he knew this girl instantly for who she was. The sudden knowledge made him gasp.

"What is it, Nathan?" she asked, concerned. She half rose, to put out a hand to his cheek.

"You're the great singer!" he exclaimed with delight, for he remembered his Papa telling him about her, long ago. He almost went on to say something more, but he noticed the way she was staring.

"I'm headed for the City to study my music," she said to him slowly, "All of my life I've dreamed of the day when I'd sing at the court of the Queen, but how did *you* know that?"

Nathan was speechless again, but knew she wouldn't simply let it drop. She was much too determined for that. He knew more about her than she knew about herself, and realized he would have to say *something*. He muttered a word or two under his breath.

"What's that?" she prodded, leaning toward him expectantly. He held back another minute, then told her a bit of the truth.

"I know a Song about you," he confessed.

"A song about *me*?" she asked, amused.

"Yes. It's a very beautiful Song," Nathan told her. And this was certainly true, for all the Songs were beautiful.

The girl smiled prettily, and because he wished to please her he opened his mouth to sing. He sang her own Song, which his Papa had taught him on the hill in the woods where the sweet grass flowed in a soft green wave in the breeze. He sang of all that was true and good inside her, of her deepest hopes and dreams, and everything she had ever loved. He captured her soul in his Song, and never saw her tears till the music was done. Then he noticed.

"What-" he began, but she cut him off sharply.

"Why did you tell me!" she screamed in rage and grief, and he pulled back from her hastily, scared. What had he done to her? She tore at her hair and her clothes, and her body shrank as he watched until nothing was left but a bright blue pebble that sat upon the ground by the tree.

A pale sparrow alighted nearby and looked up at Nathan with steady black eyes, full of death and unspeakable cold. With a dart of its head it swallowed the stone, then departed as quickly as it came.

Here was Nathan's first sorrow, and the beginning of wisdom. No one could bear to know his own soul too well.

And Nathan never forgot.

For days he wandered the old country roads. He took Cynthia's pack rather than leave it by the road, but the food was soon gone. Then he starved. Sometimes he passed people who would give him a crust or even a meal, but more often not. It was lonely country, so near to the Wilds. He became very weak, as time went on. At first he didn't know what was wrong when the coughing and fever came over him. He'd never been sick before. He was frightened again and searched through his memories till he found one of a man who might help.

He came to a place where the land fell away in high cliffs to the sea, and many bright birds called and soared in the sere blue sky. And here on the close cropped grass stood an ancient old man, weathered and cracked as the stones down below. His name was Timias, and he was a hermit, a seeker after wisdom and knowledge. He was a kindly soul, and would understand what to do. All this Nathan knew, and he knew also that no other healer lived in this desolate region. The hermit was his only chance. He stumbled out of the forest and fell at the side of the path, and for many days he knew no more.

When he woke he was lying in a bed, and the old man Timias stood close beside him, with something that steamed in a bowl.

"I thought you would wake soon," the man whispered in a papery voice, "You've been very ill, child. . . you must eat something now."

Nathan had no strength to reply, but he opened his mouth just a little. The old man fed him with a carved wooden spoon, as if he were a baby, till all the broth was gone. Then he slept again. Many more days passed in this way.

At last a morning came when the chill winds of November rattled like ghosts around the eaves of the house, and Nathan sat up in bed and knew he was well. Timias' care had saved him. He was still not too strong, but he knew that would pass in time.

The year was growing late, and winter could be cruel to those unprepared. When Timias heard that Nathan was alone, he refused to let him leave until spring. Nathan was grateful, and spent the long winter in the old hermit's house. It became a pleasant habit to sit before the fire in the long nights together, for Timias was wise and had many tales to tell which Nathan had never heard. He spoke of wytches and ghosts, and evil things that walked the moors by night and drank the blood of babes asleep; such things as terrified a boy who had never heard a falsehood in his life. But he kept his fear inside, for he noticed that in all the stories Timias told, the good and the right overcame the dark and the evil in the end, terrible as the monsters might be. That gave him courage.

The most terrible stories were of Jökai the Dark One, who dwelt in the cold north beyond the mountains. Even Timias' voice betrayed a tremble when he spoke of the Dark One, for this story was real.

"He is the spiritual vampire, child. He feeds upon pain and terror, and especially does he love to drink the blood of the innocent. Once he came often into Colmar by night and filled all our land with horror and death. But we made a pact with him long ago, little Nathan. He cannot hurt us now," Timias promised. Nathan's curiosity was aroused, but Timias would say no more about the Dark One then.

Sometimes Timias did speak of nobler things, or read from his books, and there were memories, memories, always memories. In this way Timias reminded Nathan of his Papa, and he grew to love the old man. So it was that just before the first pale buds of spring appeared on the trees by the path, Nathan confessed to him all that had happened and all that he knew, in spite of his father's warning. Timias was silent for a long while. When he spoke again his voice was cold.

"If I had known, I would have taken your Stone and cut your throat where you fell upon the path," Timias said, staring into the depths of the fire. At Nathan's sudden look of horror the old man waved a weary hand.

"No, sit down, boy; I won't harm you. It wouldn't do any good *now*. The time is past, and you have learned too much. Your father has destroyed the world, and nothing can undo it. You might as well live. Much good may it do you," Timias said bitterly, and then cursed King Ulysses in the foulest terms possible. Nathan trembled on the verge of tears.

"But Timias, *why*? Papa wouldn't tell me; I don't understand!" he begged. Timias sighed.

"Your father had a silver necklace he always wore, did he not?"

Nathan agreed that he had.

"That was his Scepter; a gift of Jökai to the kings of our land. With it, your father looked deep into the hearts of all his subjects, and then taught you all the good things he found there. And this he did, so that when the autumn of your twelfth year came, he might spill your blood upon the Stone of Possibilities and cause all that you remembered to come true. There is great power in the blood, boy. That was our pact with the Dark One. One pure and innocent life as a sacrifice for him to devour; in return he would grant the heart's desire of all others in Colmar. Just one sacrifice in each generation, but if ever we fail to give it then Jökai will come ravaging as a wolf from the north to devour us all and utterly destroy our land forever. Why do you think Ulysses taught you so many

joyful things, and showed you only goodness? And now he has let you go, and turned all our hopes into ashes." The vicious hatred in the old man's voice was unmistakable.

"Get out!" Timias screamed harshly, raising a clenched fist as he jumped to his feet. Nathan leaped from his chair and fled the house in tears, for even by that time he had never dreamed that such hatred could exist.

But all this too, Nathan never forgot.

He walked alone and shivering in the cold light of late winter, and the wind cut cruelly through his thin indoor clothing. He wept for a time at the evil of the world, but soon gave that up. It did him no good. And as he walked he pondered. At first he refused to believe his Papa had ever meant to kill him, but he couldn't deceive himself for long. Self deception was not easy, for one who remembered every word his father had ever spoken. He recalled his Papa talking of the day when Nathan would enter the cabin, and how it would break the King's heart when it happened. Now Nathan knew why. He wept afresh at that, to think his Papa had so coldly planned his death on the Stone. . . but he also knew that in the end his Papa hadn't done it. What did that mean? And why, without a sacrifice, had not Jökai already destroyed all Colmar?

Nathan froze in place, for he suddenly had a terrible suspicion. Only one other person besides Nathan could be the sacrifice, for only one other person knew the Songs. And *someone* must have died, or Jökai would have long since put an end to all stories.

"Oh, Papa. . . no," Nathan whispered. But even as he denied it, he knew it must be so. That was a grief he couldn't yet face. Then a new thought crossed his mind. His Papa had known not only the good things in his people (which was all he had ever taught Nathan), but also the horrible and selfish and evil things. Not only what they hoped for, but also what they feared. And if that were true, then Timias' frightening stories might now be something more than just stories. Nathan shivered again, not entirely from the cold.

He came to a farmstead, lips blue and toes numb, and was given his supper and a place by the stove to sleep. It was the home of a yeoman and his wife, who lived all alone and had enough to spare. He would not be a hardship on anyone. In the morning they fed him again and gave him a cloak, then sent him gently on his way. But before he had gone too far, he stopped for a moment to think. He knew their Songs, and and knew that what they both wanted most was a baby. They had been married for years, and almost given up hope. Nathan fingered the piece of Stone in his pocket and wondered if Timias had told him the truth. Power in the blood, but only his, since no other knew the Songs. He took out the Stone and speculatively removed the pin of his cloak. If it took *all* his blood to satisfy everyone's wishes, might just a drop of it suffice for one couple?

Let Jøkai have a taste of what he thirsted for; perhaps it would make the Dark One greedy for more, and thus easier to destroy when the time came. Nathan wasn't sure where that coldly logical thought had come from, or even when he had firmly decided he must destroy Jøkai, but he had not forgotten his promise.

With the pin from his cloak he pricked his left thumb, and bled two drops of blood upon the stone. They vanished at once and the Stone grew warm in his hand. Then, quietly lest someone hear, he sang the two Songs of the farmer and his wife. When he finished the Stone was cold. Had it worked? He might never know.

Thoughtfully he replaced the Stone in his pocket, and refastened the cloak about his throat. His left thumb hurt and he put it in his mouth till the wind slicing in through the slit in his cloak grew too cold to endure, then he pulled his hand inside and clasped it fully shut. With a smile that was almost sad, he set off again through the snowy woods.

For months Nathan wandered alone, and he saw many things that grieved him, and much that was hateful and cruel. Things that contradicted the Songs in his memory, and so he knew they would never have come to be if he had been the one to die on the Stone. He didn't need to know the dark side of his people anymore; he was seeing it in real life. And if ever he dared to utter his Papa's name he was invariably met with a curse or a blow. He learned quickly to keep what he knew to himself. Sometimes as he travelled he took out the Stone, and spilled a few drops of his blood upon it to make someone's dreams come true, or at least to wash away some terrible hurt. He kept this most stringently secret, never saying a word to the ones he helped, and quickly moving on before anyone could notice him.

But among those he touched, some did see, and remembered. Not many, or often, but these spread the tale. A story grew up wherever he went. People murmured that it was luck to catch sight of him, a blessing to touch his cloak. Those who had given up hope when they heard what Ulysses had done now dared to imagine that Nathan might find them. How they came to know his name Nathan never could guess, but he smiled to himself all the same.

And the Queen in her citadel heard all these tales, and wondered how much was true. She thought of the husband she had not seen for twelve years, and knew who the boy must be. Her son. She quietly ordered her folk not to harm him, with a bittersweet taste in her mouth, though fear was wrapped close around her heart. The Dark One was not to be cheated so lightly.

And deep in the Wilds, on a day in late summer when the cold and the dark seemed farthest away, Nathan decided that the time had come when Jøkai must be destroyed. He knew only that the Dark One dwelt far in the north, in the ice and the

stone where nothing could live. How to seek out and conquer him, the boy did not know, but neither did any other in Colmar. He would learn nothing by waiting any longer. Though far from unafraid, Nathan gathered his courage and took the northern road.

For days he walked and saw no one. Few people cared to live in the shadow of the northern mountains. But the road went on, climbing steeply upward, and then passed into a narrow gorge between two high cliffs. A chill breeze blew out and wafted the fringe of Nathan's hair. Inside was dusky twilight, never touched by the sun. Nathan stopped to pull his cloak around his shoulders, and prayed for the strength to do whatever he must. Then, his courage renewed, he plunged into the dark. It closed about him eagerly, and when he turned the first corner the bright summer world was lost.

The crack twisted and turned unpredictably with no rhyme or reason, but it was much shorter than Nathan had expected. Abruptly the walls fell away on both sides, and he stood at the top of a slope strewn with ice. It glittered pale blue in the weak sun that filtered from the heavy gray clouds above. There was no wind, no blade of grass, not a single living thing that Nathan could see. Just the empty, cold landscape that stretched on forever, and the dreary mountains at his back. He had come into the place of the Dark One.

The road faded out on the rock-littered plain, not far from the foot of the hill. Nathan hesitated briefly, then followed it down. He crept on past where the road left off, picking his way among the fragments of stone. The sound of his breathing seemed loud in the silence.

The boulders blocked his sight, and he stopped to climb up and look around from the top of one. It was cold enough to freeze the light moisture on his fingertips, causing them to stick to the surface. He reached the flat top and saw that the road had nearly vanished behind him. If he ever once lost it, he was not at all sure he could find it again. He dared not go farther.

"Jökai, I am here!" he cried at the top of his voice. Weird echoes rebounded from the mountains behind before dying very slowly away, and Nathan sat down on the rock to wait for the Dark One to find him.

And the Dark One came.

A glimmer of motion at the northern horizon soon caught Nathan's eye and swiftly drew closer. In the blink of an eye an old man stood before him. His garb was of purest white, with long hair and beard the color of mist, and eyes as black as night. In his right hand he held a small pebble of blue.

"You have sent me a soul out of turn, King of Colmar," the white figure said, in a voice as quiet and cold as the snow. He held up the pebble and dropped it into Nathan's palm.

"She cannot live in My realm. Take her to the mouth of the cleft and she will then be restored," Jøkai told him. He did not seem to care at all that Nathan had once been his chosen prey not very long before. He reached into a fold of his robe and withdrew a silver necklace. Nathan recognized it at once, for it was the one his Papa had worn.

"Your Scepter, King," the Dark One murmured, and made as if to place the chain around Nathan's neck.

"I do not accept it; I reject the treaty of my ancestors," Nathan said, hoping that his voice sounded firm. Jøkai was silent for a very long while, and never blinked.

"You have not the authority to do this. Our pact is signed in blood, eternal. You may refuse the Scepter if you choose, but without it you cannot prepare My sacrifice. And if you do not, then when the time comes I will drink the blood of all Colmar. Many great kings have thought to refuse our treaty, in the unthinking days of youth. All of them accepted in the end. For the sake of the people they took up the burden of the King, to provide My sacrifice. Do you likewise."

"You lie," said Nathan coldly, "My father hated the Curse every day of his life, and in the end he turned his back on you."

"Nay. . . he merely substituted one sacrifice for another. That is all one to Me, little King. If it pleases you, do the same when your own time comes. You dare not refuse Me." With that, Jøkai slipped the Scepter over Nathan's head before the boy could prevent it. The touch of his fingers as they brushed Nathan's cheek was cold enough to burn.

Nathan gasped, for it seemed that now he saw deep into the soul of every man and woman in Colmar, all at once. It was like ten thousand Songs pouring into his mind; a waterfall, an avalanche of music. But these were not all like the beautiful ones his Papa had sung to him. There were some of those, but there were evil strains in these Songs as well. Unworthy desires, cold cruelties, terrible fears and hatreds. Nathan clutched his head in pain, and tears slipped down his cheeks to freeze on the black rock. Through it all came the cold voice of the Dark One, sharp as a stiletto, piercing the confusion.

"You see, Boy? See them for what they really are. You grieved for the pain and hurt you saw in the land. Know then, foolish one, every bit of it they inflicted upon each other, because of the evil desires of their hearts. Your father set that evil free when he took your place, and nothing will change it until the next sacrifice is made. Go back to Colmar, King. Give your firstborn to Me as all your forefathers did, and bring happiness

back to your people. It is not such a great price to pay, unless your heart is too weak to bear it. Great Kings are not broken by sentiment when the fate of their country is at stake, and this you well know. In times past, Colmar has been the fairest and most joyful land in all the world. It can be so again," Jòkai urged.

For a moment Nathan was almost swayed by the Dark One's logic and the power of his voice. Was one life worth more than ten thousand? Was it right to condemn a whole nation for the sake of one person, who would then die anyway when Jòkai destroyed them all? Nathan could hardly think for the haze of pain in his head. Yet he knew that he held the future of his people in his hands. He must act with all Colmar in mind, not simply himself, nor even his possible firstborn child. Only the kingdom, and its flawed and unhappy people. Nathan felt for the first time the loneliness of power.

With an effort he shut out the wailing of the Songs and composed himself. Without the music pouring in, his mind cleared. He took a deep breath of the cold air and looked Jòkai in the eye.

"You are right, Dark One. My people are weak and evil, and cause themselves much sorrow by it. I could indeed go back to rule them wisely, and make your sacrifice upon the Stone of Possibilities. Perhaps it would be worth it. I could make them happy, and save them from death. Many have made that choice before me. . . but still I will not do it," Nathan said. A smile had begun to creep across the Dark One's thin lips, but at Nathan's final word it vanished at once.

"Why not, then?" he asked.

"Because you lie!" Nathan cried, "Indeed, your gifts are more bitter than dying. By your curse every good and noble dream my people imagine is twisted into a bitter and empty husk, tainted with blood-guilt. You offer happiness, but in fact you rob them of all pure joy. Perhaps they had very little of that before, but now they have none at all. That has ended today, Dark One. You may come and destroy us, but you will never corrupt us again."

And Jòkai was filled with anger and hate for the boy-King of Colmar who dared to defy him.

"You will not break our treaty if you are not there to lead, Boy. Another may wear the Scepter as easily as you." And Jòkai curled his fingers into claws as sharp as serpents' teeth, and reached out his long arm for Nathan's throat. He would have his blood after all.

Nathan felt a sharp bolt of terror, but then did the only thing he could think of. He snatched the Stone of Possibilities from his pocket and swiftly raked it across his palm. A thin line of bright red welled up. Nathan gripped the Stone with that hand, ignoring the

stinging pain from the cut. Then, for the last time in his life, he used the power of the Scepter.

He looked straight into the heart of the Thing standing before him. He saw only a black emptiness, a pit that could never be filled, a hunger that nothing exist at all. Nathan gagged as if he'd tasted something vile, but he opened his mouth and forced his lips to sing the terrible Song of Jøkai. The stone grew blood-warm in his hand, and a coldness began to creep up his arm. The Stone was still drinking from him; even now, the Dark One thirsted. The flesh of the boy's forearm became the color of bleached bone, and his head grew light and fuzzy, but somehow he kept up the Song. He must not fail, even if it killed him.

When the last note was finished, Jøkai's shrieks cut off sharply, and there on the dirt lay a bright black pebble. The Stone of Possibilities slipped from Nathan's hand and fell to the ground with a soft thud, where it crumbled into dust. Nathan smiled faintly and whispered, "It is done, Papa." Then he slumped forward.

When he woke, many hours later, he could barely move and felt only half alive. His skin was cool and pale as milk, and he hurt all over. He reached down to pick up the black pebble that was the soul of Jøkai the Dark One, and began to make his slow and painful way back toward the cleft in the mountains.

A thin ray of light broke through the clouds to splash the cold ground, startling him. He looked up, and saw patches of summer blue through the dull grayness. He wondered at this, and then noticed the light breeze tickling his ears. A warm breeze. Jøkai's power was broken. Slowly, the ghost of his old warm smile began to spread over Nathan's face, and his step was lighter for the rest of the way. As light as it had ever been on the path in the oak woods long ago, where the green leaves danced in the wind and the sun, and he held the hand of one who loved him more than life.

When he emerged from the mountain gorge and looked down into Colmar it seemed as if a great shadow had fallen away from the land, a shadow he had never known was there until it lifted. Every rock and tree looked bright and new; looked *free*.

Nathan laughed aloud and clapped his hands for joy. There would be much work to do; many, many years before the people could cast off completely the sickness Jøkai had woven about them. But in time, Colmar would be a richer and kinder land than it had ever been in the days of the Curse, if only the people would choose it. Nathan lifted his eyes to Heaven and thanked God for leading them aright, for he had faith that it would be so.

Then, smiling, he went down to join his people.