

Riverlilly

Second Edition

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Table of Contents:

[A Beginning](#)

I – The Open Sea

[Chapter the First](#)

[Chapter the Second](#)

[Chapter the Third](#)

[Chapter the Fourth](#)

[Chapter the Fifth](#)

[Chapter the Sixth](#)

[Chapter the Seventh](#)

[Chapter the Eighth](#)

[Chapter the Ninth](#)

II – The River

[Chapter the Tenth](#)

[Chapter the Eleventh](#)

[Chapter the Twelfth](#)

[Chapter the Thirteenth](#)

[Chapter the Fourteenth](#)

[Chapter the Fifteenth](#)

[Chapter the Sixteenth](#)

[Chapter the Seventeenth](#)

[Chapter the Eighteenth](#)

[Chapter the Last](#)

[An Ending](#)

*What law can there be in the Land of Lin
If three days of magic rule all herein?*

~the Fisherman

A Beginning,
The Year Nine Hundred & Ninety-Nine,
The Third to Last Night,
In which no wheel has an end.

Night fell at last where the mountains met the sea. The moon shone like a lanternfish's heart twisted inside-out, hovering between clouds the black of ancient depth. Two children crouched in the darkness halfway up the mountainside, spellbound, watching the sea roll east, endless wave upon wave without end.

"Ready?" Jai whispered.

"Ready," Ceder whispered back.

Their wheelbarrow had no wheel—it had long since rusted, bent, and broken off, but Jai thought they would be quicker away without it. The mountain was too steep to go by foot in the dark and this was their only chance, wheel or no.

Straining every fiber in his body, Jai grudging the makeshift sled to a building pace over the shale and loose rocks. *This is too loud!* He turned to check over his shoulder but there was no one there.

The mountainside declined quickly. Jai sprang into the wheelbarrow behind Ceder and they were immediately sledding downhill at an uncontainable speed. He braced his legs against the sides of the cart for stability and tried to steer left or right but he had as little control as a captain whose sinking ship is already halfway below.

From the Dawn of Time to Dusk of the Last Day in the Land of Lin there has been, there is, and there will always be a boy named Lion and a girl named Lilly, each as beautiful as summerset, sage as time unwound, more magic in their smallest fingers than all the spells of wry old warlocks, wizards wise, or wishing wells.

They made their home in a forest where the sky was forever cast in silver twilight, but the frozen sunset was a curiosity they both ignored and forgot. They stayed in their forest a thousand years and a single night beset them not. In the enchanted evening they passed their time without a care, inseparable but for the running and the hiding of their play, and only once would they succumb to sleep and in so doing lose their never-ending day.

Down the haggard mountainside the wheelbarrow hurtled breakneck into rocks the size of whales' bones, recklessly off course up rising crests and peaks they sped, cascading over dips and crisscross fractures in the stone. Disturbed for the first time in a thousand years, knocked-loose sand and pebbles zipped past the children's heads like swarming bees.

Jai held his breath and squeezed Ceder. Her back was clammy against his cheek. He closed his eyes and prayed, but the mountainside was mammoth and their ride down lasted longer than a dream disquiet.

Lion and Lilly slowly spun in circles in a moonlit pond and shared a kiss as if it was their first. Then Lion carried Lilly up to the grassy shore and lay beside her, gazing at the stars in the water. She smelled of rainy flowers, close against his droplet-freckled cheek. He smiled as he wrapped his arms around her waist. No sooner than that but they fell asleep.

When Lion woke up, Lilly was gone. The twilight that had graced their forest for a thousand years had given way to Dusk, and Dusk to Dawn. A strand of her hair was all that remained where she had slept—one golden thread, strung through a handful of heart-shaped flower petals, all colors of the rainbow.

He had never been apart from her before. Whether they played tag or ran and hid from one another for uncounted hours, he had always sensed her vividly—a warm spot, like the sun behind closed eyes—but he had never known this deep abyss that was suddenly inside his mind. His thinking plummeted and disappeared.

She was gone.

He knew nothing, now. *But how can she be gone, when I have never wished it so?*

He pawed at the ground beside him with unthinking fingers and, finding her abandoned flower necklace, scooped it up. As he stared at the glowing petals he felt his own light fade.

Water crystallized in his eyes. Numb, he pulled the necklace on. It circled gently around his neck, his first teardrop in a thousand years fell from his cheek, the forest disappeared, and Lion crashed into a hard world of dark water, headfirst.

I – The Open Sea

Chapter the First,
The Third to Last Night,
In which runaways flee to the sea.

I. The Ghostly Coast

The dented wheelbarrow skidded to a toppling-over halt three fms shy of the shoreline. The children tumbled out onto slick, mossy rocks. Jai caught Ceder around her waist as they fell, cradling her and slanting his shoulder into the ground to soften the impact of her landing.

He turned to inspect the mountainside behind them for any sign of pursuit from their master—a miserly slave-driver who called himself Sorid the Synclaw—but there was no one there. *His sight is focused elsewhere this night*, Jai reminded himself, although it was inevitable the old magician would see their escape tracks as soon as the sun rose, for all the rocks along their reckless sled-path had avalanched in turn beside them, tilling a long streak in the top layer of gravel like a finger traced through sand. The rocks settled and the mountainside was deceitfully quiet again, but the telltale streak remained.

Jai found himself staring at a dim cluster of stars over the coast. They looked like a ship with no sails. He imagined another pair of twinkling lights to be passengers aboard the constellation. *If only Ceder and I were so lucky. All we have to sail on is my wheelbarrow!*

To Jai's tunnel-trained eyes the heavens looked no more than arm's reach high. He rose on his toes to pluck

the moon down as if picking a white apple off a low tree. Realizing his mistake, he cast an embarrassed look to Ceder, but she was still curled up within the protective shell of the upturned cart.

The night was silent but for the low, roaring draw and pull of dark waves. Something that Sorid had often said tolled inside Jai's head:

*The sea itself, it bites.
Its kisses—salt and sting.
To burn your tongue and burn your lung,
Its bite will all Syn's burning bring.*

Jai shook himself, amazed at how entrancing the black waves were as they nestled into the ghostly coast. He crawled back to the wheelbarrow to ask Ceder what they should do next but stopped cold when he saw her face. Her forehead was gushing blood from a gruesome cut. She had not moved from where Jai unhanded her after their tumble to the shore. An unlucky stone which the wheelbarrow had barged out of its headlong way must have hit her, Jai reasoned as he watched her blood leak away in thin, globing rivulets.

His shoulders shook with frustration at the unfairness of it all. *What can I do? Take her back? But Sorid will kill us both if we return, and I couldn't carry her back up the mountain all by myself even if I wanted to!* He knelt beside her and pressed his hand firmly onto the cut to slow the blood flow—it bubbled against his fingers like a stifled burp—and looked east, out to the slowly rolling sea.

Something in the water was watching them. What had hitherto been a lone, lurking shadow broached the surface and revealed itself to be a creature that looked dimly like a man, but the moonlight was too pallid to see any detail except his one raised arm, beckoning the children to come closer. “You there! Persons! *Shhhh!*” the creature rasped just loud enough to carry to Jai’s ears. “Greetings! I have a boat! Do you have the... *never mind!* Here! Out here! Come! It’s safer here!” The something dipped back underneath the surface.

“Wait!” Jai called in a timid whisper. The creature did not reappear. Jai could not wile away even a moment—Ceder was losing blood too fast. *I have to carry her out there*, he quickly decided. *She can rest and heal in this stranger’s boat, while I find out how he knew we would be here in the first place.* The dark waves lapped against the shore, ushering him to try a thing so brave as swimming into the water at night leaving fresh blood in his wake.

Jai stood up and patted down his tunic—an old habit—checking the few meager things they had stolen away with from Sorid’s lair: two ruby red eggs that seemed almost to glow with an inchoate luminosity, as if each housed a candle flame instead of an embryo. In addition to the eggs, he had an apple with the wriggling rear end of a glowworm sticking out of a tiny hole. It was Ceder who had nicked the eggs and the apple from Sorid during her own escape, but she had given all three to Jai to stow in his satchel, which he wore slung around his shoulder. The satchel was no more than a torn and tied scrap from an older, worn-out tunic. The last item in the tattered scrip was a rope that had formerly been

used to mark Jai's route through the labyrinthine tunnels in which he worked.

He also carried a crude knife, no more than a twisted piece of iron salvaged from the rigging of his wheelbarrow's former wheel. The knife was still tied securely to the tunic-strings at his waist, dangling unsheathed beside his knee. It was dripping blood. Warm blood.

Jai knew at once what had happened: there had been no stray stone to strike Ceder, there had only been his carelessly unsheathed blade. He swallowed a nauseous upheaval in his throat and forced himself to continue the task at hand, if only to atone for what he had allowed to happen to her. *If she dies, it will be my fault! How could I be so careless?*

He checked behind for pursuit one last time—empty mountainside. A tremendous fear spontaneously cleared his mind of courage like a shark scatters a school of fish, but he clenched his teeth, picked Ceder up, and without hesitation walked her into the open sea.

II. Slipping Away

Under Jai's bare feet the stones on the seafloor were slimy, smooth, and warm. They squabbled out of the way of each of his sinking steps. To his surprise, the water did not burn, as Sorid had so often promised. He waded out thirty steps, holding Ceder's head a cautious distance above the water. The stranger who claimed to own a boat suddenly popped up next to them, breaking no water and making no sound.

“*Ghazahg!*” swore the creature softly as he stared at the children, and at first Jai could only stare unabashedly back because this was the first intelligent being he had ever seen other than his master and the girl in his arms, and it was not at all what he was expecting.

The stranger’s eyes were shrewd, squinting yellow bulbs. His nose was narrow, his ears thinner and more translucent than a glowfish tail. “By the Holy Sight of Silver, I truly thought this all a trap, a ruse,” he said with a shrill voice that was surely meant to be heard underwater, muffled, instead of in open air. “I was told you would have an apple for me, but ‘*No*,’ I thought, ‘*the Magician guards his store too greedily!*’ And where else would an apple come from? As if I don’t know! Yet I was compelled by a very fine point, to say the least—”

“Where’s our boat?” Jai cut in, though he had found the creature’s rant eerily absorbing.

“The boat? The *boat!* Yesss,” the creature cooed, fretting with one finger in his mouth. His skin was ever so finely scaled and he had long, dark hair that was surreptitiously woven through with seashells, rusted talismans, and the teeth of great beasts. He looked vaguely human in the dark: head, arms, eyes, and nose. His lower half, however, was underwater, left to the realm of imagination, where Sorid’s grisly tales still ruled Jai’s mind. The creature winked at Jai and grinned, “Your boat is safely anchored out undersea. My name is—”

“*What?*” Jai hissed.

The creature squished up his orbicular lips at the interruption and tapped his fingertips together. “My *name* is—”

“Where’s the boat, *serpent*?”

“My boy, I could not sneak an El fish—let alone a boat—within a hundred tails of this accursed bay—above the surface of the sea, mind you—without that bone-dry, crackpot, tunnel-dwelling *trickster* up there bringing the fires of Syn raining down like I was Saerin Silvermoon himself come back to call!”

The stranger’s eyes went wide as he spoke of Sorid and Jai could see the truth in his words by the fear on his face. Evidently the creature was familiar with their old master and Jai was intrigued to hear more, but time was slipping away so he pressed on, “What do you mean it’s anchored ‘out undersea?’ Does it *float*? Where is it? We need it—*now*. She’s *hurt*.” Jai hefted Ceder’s sagging body. The creature eyeballed her like he was inspecting rotten meat; Jai’s patience bottomed out when he saw the look of disgust in those shrewd yellow eyes. “*Go get it!*”

“As to that, *yesss*, have you my reward, boy?” The yellow eyes darted to the satchel bobbing on the surface of the water at Jai’s side—the bulges from the apple and the eggs were distinct. The creature’s grin widened. He licked his lips. His tongue was the color of slime, a lustrous green. He had sharp teeth, too. Jai saw them all.

“I’ve got one apple for you if you get the boat right now, and one rusty knife to gut you if you don’t. So hurry up, *serpent!*”

The creature’s stare was frigid. “My dear young friend, my *name*, if you please, is not *Serpent*. My name

is Seaweed. And I am not, as it were, some lowly, turn-tail, treasureless *goldfish!*” His fat lips curled in and he snorted a spoonful of clear bile out his nostrils. “Now, if you would be so kind as to follow me three tails east of here,” and with that he lowered into a patronizing bow. His head and torso dipped below the water, returning to the unnerving realm of Jai’s imagination, where teeth were long and sharp and mouths were opened wide and closing fast.

For a long minute Jai stood holding Ceder. She was still bleeding freely and her breath was slower, it seemed to Jai, than the draw and pull of the waves.

He could not believe his own stupidity. *I just threatened to disembowel our only hope—a stranger with a boat—and why? Because he was hungry? Because he was rude? What have I done? If anyone dies tonight, it should be me.*

Jai stood up straight with Ceder in his arms and trudged slowly east until the water rose to his chest, then his chin, and then his toes lifted off the squabbling stones and he found himself swimming.

This is not so hard, he thought at first. Until it became a challenge to keep Ceder’s wound clear of the water, holding her head up at the cost of his own, wrestling with the smallest currents like a butterfly in a full wind. With only his legs free, his wild kicking drove them forward, his advance slow and desperate.

Seeing nothing of Seaweed, gulping for air at every chance, Jai swam for what seemed like an hour and he nearly covered the three tails in a more or less unwinding line. However, one ‘tail’ is as long as ten tall men standing on each others’ heads; *three* tails is as

long as three tall trees performing the same stunt. Jai had never swum before this night and try but for the life of him and the girl to whom he owed it, he could not make the distance full.

Doubts that had been roiling in his mind seized one sinking moment to make him wonder whether or not he was indeed traveling east, or if he had veered too far off course. Uncertainty hit him like swallowing air from the oldest, foulest tunnel below the earth. He fought to hold Ceder up higher but she fell altogether from his hands. This is when he realized that believing they could escape from their master had far outstripped the order of mere naivety.

He smelled her blood in the warm water that filled up his nose. Holding her cold hand, they dwindled down tranquilly. Being enveloped in water did not wake her, not even when her mouth opened and the sea gullied down her throat and she choked out the ten-thousand bubbles of her last breath.

Jai's puny, syrupy kicks were too weak to move even his own wet weight anymore, so he gave them up. His mind dissolved, unhindered by fear, now that he knew he was going to die. It was suddenly very easy to abandon his pointless struggling.

He could see Ceder's body darkly by the final, frail grace of one deep-diving beam of moonlight, then he gave up his air like a man stepping off a cliff. The sea gushed down his throat, but neither did it bite nor burn. The water was sweet as honey, pure as rain.

III. Master of Them All

‘Tunnel-minnows,’ as Sorid called his slaves, Jai included, existed locked away below the ground to never know the truth about the sea or the wild lands beyond. The magician claimed they were born in the lava caverns from the drippings of dirty stalactites. Imprisoned in the dark, they did nothing but haul wheelbarrows full of liquid magma along unchanging routes day in, day out. Jai’s path had led him from a subterranean lake of fire, where he filled his cart with lava, to a brooding iron furnace, where he dumped it out. This was the only task Sorid set him to.

Jai had not been allowed to meet another tunnel-minnow in all his life beneath the mountain. Sorid told him there had been countless tunnel-minnows once, wretched and crowding everywhere one looked and that he—Sorid—was master of them all, but they had shriveled up long ago. To discourage their daring to escape, Sorid told the slaves that if they ran away to the open water, ever-waiting swarms of sea monsters would make a meal of their flesh. The magician’s words echoed like a phantom whisper in the deepest chasms of the labyrinth:

*Once upon a time, a tunnel-minnow ventured east.
He swam away from me to flee into the open sea,
And there he was invited to a very fancy feast
Where his flesh was feasted on by great beasts
From out the deep.*

Jai knew there was a way out of the tunnels years before he left. He lost count of the times he promised to

do it tomorrow, to take his cart and rope and knife and run. All that changed in one night.

Sorid told him a story he had heard many times, the legend of Syn and of the death of the Land of Lin, but he changed the ending. The magician had always said the last three days would begin with the appearance of a comet over the sea, but no one knew for sure when it would arrive. That was the end of the story for years: uncertainty. Fog. A legend with no end. Until Sorid claimed he had seen it from the top of his tower, that *this* was the night, at long last. The foretold comet had no color but nevertheless he had witnessed it rise into the sky, casting a small shadow over the stars it surpassed. Sorid said it would gain intensity as it circled the world, filling the sky with light before the fires of Syn consumed it. The fires would consume all, Sorid said. Flesh, bone, sky, and stone.

Three more days to tend the furnace, he told Jai. Three more days, he said with a cruel twist, until Jai himself would be flung into the very flames that he spent his life stoking—one final sacrifice to get the fire hot enough for Syn to burn the world down.

After countless years, that night Jai found the courage to finally undertake his long-dreamt-of escape.

IV. A Curiously Quiet Splash

Water plunged into pores deep within Jai's flesh that had dried up long ago but never died. He saw a flash of how much he had overcome already and a burning desire to live throughout the night heated the blood in his veins. Kicking like a titan with a lifetime's worth of

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