

InnerLand: The Door
By Tomsdattar
From chapter 1

Tentatively, Marc reached a finger toward the door knob. Actually, the object was much larger the modern ones he and his father had recently installed downstairs. Marc grinned, he well remembered what a job THAT had been. It was during the first two days of Marc's college spring break when Marc and his father toiled all those hard long hours removing the fixtures from every single one of the first floor portals. The two first sanded, then hand painted each of the eleven doors. Finally, they mounted in all new hardware. 'Don't want to do that again anytime real soon.' Marc knelt in order to see the door knob better. This specific device was especially heavily embellished with a profusion of flowers, birds and animals.

Remembering back upon it, Marc realized the one on his nursery room door had not been quite so large, still though, it nearly matched this one. Also, the nursery room handle had not had an owl as did this present one. In the very center of this larger, heavier version, Marc found himself gazing at a most serious, bespectacled owl. He chuckled aloud at the sight of it. The bright eyes of a squirrel peeked over one edge of the disc. Just the tip of a tail was visible as a skunk disappeared over another. A winged horse stood beside a bewhiskered hare. Perched on the dainty equine's back was a plump, sleepy eyed gopher. A perky chipmunk draped rakishly over HIS shoulder.

Below the knob itself was a large, old fashioned key hole. This opening was complete with an ornate, oversized key. "Intriguing." Marc quickly removed the instrument from it's slot. Examining the gadget closely, Marc found that it also had a similar owl depicted on it. "Or maybe this is the same owl," the young man muttered half aloud as he turned the surprisingly heavy key over and over in his hand. "Why on earth would anyone put a doorway here on the outer wall side?" he pondered. "Good Grief." Marc's quiet mutterings went unheard. He stared hard at the door, the wall and especially at the key.

"I don't understand this at all. There is no balcony on this side of the house. This doorway simply cannot possibly open into anything at all." He said quietly at last. Marc replaced the key within it's slot. He turned it slowly. "Wha...?" Marc gasped, "why, this can't be!" Hinges creaking from disuse, the door swung slowly open revealing a smallish, dimly lit, rather dusty landing. Marc was surprised to find there were stairs angling down and away from the platform. Their descent disappeared into obscurity. Completely puzzled now, Marc leaned forward to peer intently into the

gloom. Staring into the murk he tried to see to the bottom of the stairwell and found he could not. "I really don't believe this. Where on earth can these steps possibly lead? I never heard grandpa or dad talk about such a stairwell up here." Baffled, Marc stepped back, away from the yawning doorway. He soon stood peering through the small paned window situated just there in the wall beside the door. Carefully the puzzled young man unlatched the sash and leaned far out the opening. "I was right. There is absolutely nothing out here at all but a straight, flat wall. WHEREVER do those stairs tread, that passageway, fit then?"

Determination and curiosity jostled for dominance with Marc's puzzlement. Picking up the flashlight the family kept in the attic for 'emergencies', Marc turned. The fact the instrument had long lain on the old chest of drawers was readily evident. A shiny clean space surrounded by a thick layer of dust appeared when the curious youth removed the gadget. Marc flicked the switch, grinned in satisfaction when he found the batteries were still strong, and stuck the instrument into the waistband of his pants. With a last puzzled glance round the attic itself, Marc stepped firmly on to the rough wooden landing. He pulled the door closed behind him.

Carefully he locked it and put the key into his wallet. Gaining his bearings, the young man stood motionless on the musty landing for a few moments. He listened intently, hearing little else than the sounds of his own breathing, he strained to see through the murk. The far off rumbling of trucks and cars on the busy highway a scant half mile from the house echoed faintly. Marc soon realized he really did not need to use the flashlight. As his eyes adjusted to the dimness, the teen found that, although the dusty passageway was pretty gloomy, there was actually more than enough light for him to see where he was going. The flashlight did little to penetrate the gloom beyond a step or two. As Marc began descending along the dusty corridor he found his heart pounding a little from excitement and anticipation.

The perplexed teenager quickly discovered the air in the stair well was more than a bit musty. Still though, it was not really too unpleasant. He detected a heavy layer of fine dust was covering over all of the smooth, finely carved, old balustrade. The railing appeared as though no one had used, or cleaned it, in a very long time. Continuing his descent steadily for several minutes Marc finally paused to glance upward. He found that he could no longer see either the landing or the door leading into the attic. The inquisitive youth realized he could actually see only a few treads above and below himself. He could not actually see the barrier of the passageway at all. Marc's curiosity was now thoroughly piqued. He felt intrigued and more than a little baffled. He was definitely puzzled, but, was not truly worried.

The youth knew he must be standing somewhere deep in the stairwell, deep within the house. 'But, a stairwell to where? And, where exactly IS this stairwell?' Marc reached a tentative hand toward the wall. He found the passageway to be quite narrow. Marc could easily touch both sides of the hidden route when he held his arms straight out on either side of himself. "Well, its either up or down. I know what's up, so, I'm gonna' find out just what is down!"

Quite soon Marc happily discovered the air had become not quite so fetid. He noticed the light too was beginning to be a little brighter as he continued his downward trek. "Ah, I must be nearing the bottom of the passageway. Wonder where it will come out then. Maybe the basement?" The youth realized that while he was no longer able to hear the noises of traffic, he could now hear a faint rustling and soft sounds of running water and now and again a quiet, melodious warble of birds. "Intriguing. Must open to the outside then, I reckon. But where?" The expectant young man quickened his pace.

An ominous 'crack' resounded loudly as Marc trod upon the next tread. Marc was dismayed to find himself suddenly hurtling speedily downward. Several pieces of broken wood flew along beside and below the tumbling youth as they all journeyed along the route. The chagrined Marc could hear the pieces of wood banging loudly against the passageway walls. Noisy 'whumps' followed those clatterings as the scraps of broken stair case landed with loud thumps somewhere below.

The dismayed teenager clutched unsuccessfully at the smooth walls. There was just nothing to grab onto to slow, or stop, his downward sweeping journey. Grim faced, the young man clutched his flashlight protectively to his chest, took a deep breath, and drew up his knees. Marc lowered his head as he resolutely prepared for the inevitable. Marc was not positive exactly how long he must have been laying on the floor amid the pieces of broken stair treads. He awoke quite abruptly to a nearby sound of voices and a loud, absolutely incessant banging.

Somewhat unsteadily, the adolescent rolled over, sat up and surveyed the scene. Marc found he was now in an unfamiliar, dusty room. Furniture the teenager did not recognize at all filled the chamber where he presently sat dazed and somewhat the worse for it. Looking upward the shaken youth saw the lower remnants of the stair case. The last few treads of IT lay in broken disarray all around him on the floor. 'Good Grief, now what?' Blue sky and sunlight were visible through several small windows set high in the walls. Marc shook his head as if trying to clear it. The walls themselves were strangely solid from floor all the way up to those high windows.

"Odd," said Marc as he sat confused, unsure, in the midst of the broken treads. Dazedly Marc surveyed the room. There was quite simply NOTHING that looked in the least familiar. "Haloo, haloo! Open up!", cried a loudly insistent, husky voice. The battering on the door continued noisily.

"I don't hear anything now, Tvek, perhaps it was nothing," a softer, feminine voice exclaimed.

"We heard what we heard, Julia," the husky voice snapped peevishly. "No one has lived in this house for a long time, so t'was no reason to hear anything a'tall. Now hush up with y then, whilst we try to discover just what all that loud clatterin' and thumpin' t'were all about."

With that, the halooing and door banging resumed loudly, and if possible, even more vigorously. Marc cautiously touched his forehead. Wincing, he found a large painful lump had appeared. He discovered another seemed to be forming just below his right eye. Gingerly the youth got to his feet. He took a tentative step.

Happily, the teenager found that he must not have broken `his arms or legs. Marc walked somewhat shakily toward the door where all the raucous banging and calling continued. "Curious," he muttered. This particular panel seemed to be a replica of the one there in the attic. Marc even found a similar ornate knob and key hole. However, the slot was quite empty. The key was missing. "Hold on a minute," Marc exclaimed. He looked on the floor, took in the empty peg near the door panel. "I can't locate the key."

"Did y'put it in yr pocket?" came the fast rejoinder from the gravelly first voice.

"I didn't take it out of the key hole," Marc shouted through the door.

"If y didn't take it out, it would still be there." The gentle, feminine voice quietly replied. "Look in yr pocket then, dear."

'Sounds almost like Nanny Rose when she was nearly exasperated with my duncey kid ways', chuckled an amused Marc. 'Hmm.., wonder if this might work?' Marc finally took the attic door key from his wallet and slipped it into the open slot. Slowly Marc turned the key, and grinned when he heard the reassuring 'click' as the mechanism unlocked. The bolt slid slowly as the latch moved into place. Marc turned the knob as he opened the door to greet whomever it was that sounded so much like his beloved Nanny.

"Good Grief, lad, y'be bleedin."

Marc's happy, welcoming smile vanished as he leaped backward. The astonished young man surveyed both his guests. Marc stared in complete amazement at the two creatures presently standing before him. The one who had just spoken and was now peering at him intently through thick, round, wire rimmed eyeglasses was nearly as tall as Marc. The startled youth found himself facing a being covered completely over in feathers.

"Why. You. You're an owl." sputtered Marc. "But. How can? Good Grief, you are THIS owl." sputtered Marc. The bemused fellow thrust the key at the being.

"A course I'm an owl." The being said tartly as he glared at Marc. "Jula is a Kiwi. And, y'be a human." He paused for a moment before resuming his tirade. "AND y'be a human what is bleedin'! Y'blame fool, what was it y'were trying to do then?" The owl, shaking his head, looked first at the scraps of wood laying on the floor, then at Marc and finally peered up at the broken stair case.

"Hush, Tvek." The other being said gently. Fluttering and fussing, she motioned toward a small wooden stool. "Here dear. Pay him no mind. You just sit down here on this stool and let Jula look at that cut. There we are then. Yes."

Marc stared in amazement as both birds moved quickly into the chamber. They did not seem to be at all out of sorts with him. The duo quite behaved as though all birds talked, dressed in jerkins and acted as they did. "Good Grief. I must have ..."

Tvek, shaking his head and muttering softly to himself, began picking up the broken pieces of the staircase. Jula clucked and fluttered as she began rummaging in a cupboard. "Ah, just the ticket then," she came up with some soft cloths and scurried to the table near where the dazed Marc was now sitting and staring in confusion.

"Jono, come here," called the Kiwi toward the open doorway to someone, or most probably, a something, as yet unseen. Marc felt only the very mildest surprise when a cheerful, bright eyed squirrel darted into the room. This latest wore a natty, bright blue jerkin, soft black leather boots and a darker blue tam. The squirrel cheerfully nodded his greetings. He grinned amiably at Marc, picked up the bucket Jula indicated and darted back out the door.

"I must have hit my head a lot harder than I thought." Marc spoke in a voice that was hardly more than a whisper.

"Oh no, dear, it's really just a scratch," said Jula cheerfully. "Hardly even that dear, hardly that." Deftly she tore one of the cloths into smaller pieces. The bustling Kiwi poured a little water from the bucket into a smallish metal bowl Jono had found in a cupboard. Jula proceeded to carefully wash Marc's cheek gently before she kindly patted it dry. Tvek finished picking up the pieces of broken stair case. The owl stomped, muttering, grumbling all the while, to put the bits and pieces into the wood bin near the fireplace.

Marc watched in amazement as the owl reached into a pocket and extracted a rather large, carved stone crucible and roundish leather pouch. Tvek peered long and intently at Marc before reaching into the pouch with the tips of his wing feathers. He took out a bit of yellow something, muttered to himself before returning that clot to the pouch. He then took out a scrap of something blue. This he used for filling his censer before he hopped onto a low stool. Again reaching into his pouch Tvek removed a small, lidded stone container.

Marc stared fascinated as the owl, using a small metal device remarkably resembling any pair of tweezers, carefully extracted a tiny glowing coal which he added to the censer. He snapped the lid in place, returned the box to his pouch and turned his attention to the censer. The old bird sat silently blowing gently now and again into the bowl of the vessel. All the while he gazed raptly at Marc. The ember glowed red in the container. Tvek pensively watched the smoke begin to swirl and waft. In the waning light of deepening day the smoke became a fluttering haze enveloping both Marc and Jula. In that haze Tvek discerned both Marc's fall and his confusion.

"Ah lad, lad." said the ancient owl gently. "Tis that y'be from the outer world then." He nodded his head as he continued to look deep into the pulsating smoke. His voice held a much kinder tone as he continued, "And we been thinkin' y'was come from a far inner land, arrived to study or to holiday. Tis clear now! Indeed, tis clear. We have much to discuss then, lad. Much to discuss."

"Clear!", Marc exclaimed, his own voice filled with excitement, almost hysteria. "Why of course it's clear. It's perfectly clear that I'm quite unconscious. Or imagining all of this." The teen looked desperately from one to the other. His voice rose, "Or, it's absolutely clear that I've lost my mind. Or you might even say, it's totally clear that ..." With a near sob, Marc's voice trailed off into silence as he looked slowly in anxious confusion at each of the three creatures before him.

The youth shook his head again as though he were trying to shake the sight right out of it. Jono eyed him genially. Tvek continued to peer intently into the smoke. Jula fluttered and clucked. "Why, I'm talking to an owl who is staring into the smoke produced from burning something I don't recognize in the bowl of an ornate carved crucible. My face has just been washed by a kindly Kiwi using water a well dressed, cheerful squirrel carried within a rather large heavy wooden bucket. I can tell you, it is certainly 'clear' alright!"

"Now dear, y've had quite a fall and are a mite overwrought." Jula said firmly then, turning she continued, "Jono, y get a fire started in that fireplace now. We all need ourselves a nice cup of tea, we do. Tvek, as for y." Jula's no nonsense tone quieted even the irascible owl. "Y put out that smelly censer and leave the lad alone." The kiwi fluttered briskly around the room. Fussing and clucking she searched in cupboards situated along the far wall beyond the site of the now ruined stair case. "There we are," Jula soon located a small green enameled metal pot, filled it with water and hung it on the crane over a now brightly flickering fire.

Jono whistled cheerily as he busied himself in wiping down the table and setting out cups, saucers and plates. Still fluttering and bustling, Jula hurried to the door way where a small silver bell hung. She jiggled the bell and waited expectantly. A few short moments later a perky quail scampered to stand importantly in the open portal.

"How do then mam?" The teenaged quail said breathlessly as he bobbed his head. "I am 'dain, may I take your request?"

The quail stood quietly as Jula continued writing on the note pad hanging just below the bell. Marc felt only the smallest fraction of amazement to see the quail wore a small jacket and tam that must constitute some kind of uniform.

'Why not?' pondered the bemused youth. 'Smoke peering owls, Kiwis who act like nursemaids, a squirrel in knee boots, anything is possible, and most likely is probable.'

'dain, the young quail, wore the bright yellow short jacket of a novice Val. It was adorned with rows of pale apple green braid. There were a number of shiny, brass buttons on either side of the front placket. Slung around the young bird's neck was the strap of a large pouch. His tam was that same apple green. The suddenly anxious quail bobbed next in the direction where Tvek, Jono and Marc were sitting. "Sorry Sir." He said stiffly, "I didn't

realize YOU were here." The intent quail hurriedly snapped to attention. He stood stiffly as he waited for Julia to finish her list.

"Hey 'dain. So how's it goin'?" Jono grinned cheerfully at the small discomfited bird. "Good to see y Kid." Jono eyed the uneasy youngster critically for a long moment, "Hey, lookin' sharp. The uniform fits y good." Motioning toward the stool where the bemused Marc was sitting, he continued, "This here is, say, what IS your name Kid?" The genial squirrel turned the question toward Marc.

Marc sat quietly, all eyes turned toward him. "This CAN'T be happening!" Marc muttered quietly. His voice filled with desperation, "I tell you, this absolutely cannot be happening. It simply ... can't."

"Odd name, guy," said Jono brightly. "Folks don't call you all of that do they?"

Julia completed her list. She darted to hand it to 'dain, and hurried him back out the doorway. Clucking and fussing the Kiwi scurried about the room. "Jono, make yrself useful and leave the lad alone." She motioned toward the kettle. Turning to Marc, Julia's tone softened, "Now Dear, the water is hot. A nice little cup will help y feel that much better then. Indeed. Here we are then."

The Kiwi fluttered about filling cups and handing them around. A thoroughly confused Marc sat at the table and sipped his tea. He found his head had begun to throb where it had hit the floor at the end of his fall. The young man glanced up and noticed the sky now visible through the windows was quite dark, even a star or two twinkled. He realized night must have fallen.

Outside Marc could hear a creak and rumble of wheels. He realized it wasn't exactly the usual sounds of traffic on the highway. However, here in this strange room with it's peculiar furniture and oddly acting birds and animals, the sound had a quality both familiar and comforting.

The sharp jingle of the bell signaled 'dain's hurried reappearance. Marc noticed a knotted leather thong attached to the small silvery apparatus. The thong extended through a small opening in the wall and disappeared outside.

The anxious bird stepped quickly into the room, bobbed his salute to them all and stood stiffly. Whistling cheerfully Jono hurried to remove items from the now bulging pouch. The squirrel put several packets and a largish stone

crook on the table. Other packets and crocks he placed inside the cupboards.

'dain bobbed one last anxious salute. Jula instructed him to return early on the morrow. The little Val departed hastily.

"Lighten up kid," Jono smilingly called to the hurriedly retreating bird. "Lighten up."

The happy go lucky squirrel busily pushed three stools and a weighty wooden chair closer to the table as Jula hurried to open packets. She sliced a round loaf of crusty bread and a pale creamy round of cheese, poured what appeared to be a thick, hearty soup from the stone container, before adding a small bowl of sweet yellow butter and lifting the steaming tea pot from the crane. With clucks and flutters the effervescent Kiwi hurried them all to the table. Marc eyed the food set out before him. He sat in the massive seat Jono had placed at the one end of the table.

Tvek sat gazing at him from the opposite position at the far end of the board. The weary teen suddenly realized he felt absolutely famished. The aroma coming from the steaming bowl was delicious. The young man had skipped breakfast and had spent most of the day filling, then carrying all those many boxes from the library. He had ferried each and every carton up all three flights of steps, and into the attic. He knew it had been afternoon before he had discovered 'the door'.

Marc glanced at his watch. He was shocked to discover the time was nearly 8 o'clock. Much to the enormous amusement of Jono, Marc ate ravenously. He downed two helpings of the savory soup, several pieces of cheese and nearly half the bread before stopping to catch his breath. Jula beamed as she once again passed another thick slice of bread and the bowl of steaming vegetables and broth. Marc saw carrots, potatoes and celery in the savory mix which also included several chunks that he did NOT recognize at all.

"At least something is familiar. Maybe I'm not really and completely looney," Marc said hopefully as he cast a bewildered glance around the table. He found himself feeling much better, far less apprehensive than he had before filling his stomach with the just finished delicious meal.

Tvek gravely wiped his beak on a napkin, sipped his tea and regarded Marc with a long, steady gaze. "No lad, y'not be looney." He spoke in a low husky tone that was surprisingly gentle. "It is y'be confused. Confused, that is all. Morrow will be time for some detailed explanation and plans makin' and all. Jono lad, do the tidy."

The owl peered at Marc, nodded, before hopping down from his stool. He motioned for Jula and Marc to follow as he made his way across the large open chamber to a comfortable sitting area. Marc felt his eyes were growing heavy. He could hardly keep them open at all. He realized just how tired he really was. The sounds of cupboards opening and closing, a swish of water, and stools being rearranged all indicated Jono was nearly finished with 'the tidy'.

"Morrow Tvek." Marc scarcely heard Jula's soft voice. "Morrow." His head nodded, he fought to stay awake. "The lad is weary and has suffered quite a fall. Morrow is soon enough for talk and all. Y and Jono go on to home wi'y now." The fussy Kiwi fluttered behind, hurrying Jono and the old owl to the entry door. "I'll jingle if I should have need of y. See y both on morrow then, bye." She fluttered and fussed as the two made ready to leave.

Once more Jono flashed his irrepressible, merry wink in Marc's direction. Silently the teenager followed the impatient, grumbling Tvek out through the entry door and quietly closed the panel behind them. Marc could hear the cheery sound of the jaunty squirrel's whistle fading as the two walked away from the house.

"Now dear," said Jula gently. "Come along then wi'y. Let's us just turn back the cover and pop y right into bed then, shall we? There we are then." She spoke soothingly, as to a small child. "Yes, there we are." Marc gazed around the room wondering where exactly he might find a chair or settee long enough to accommodate his long legs. He felt so tired he was positive he could simply lay down on the floor itself and sleep quite soundly.

The plump animated bird hastened to cross the broad room where she stopped before what appeared to be a large closet, a closet Marc had not noticed before. Marc felt delighted surprise to find the opened cupboard housed what appeared to be a most comfortable bed.

Jula fussed and fluttered while an exhausted Marc slowly, dragging with weariness, made his way across the room, and took off his sneakers. He sank gratefully into the pillowy softness. His eyes were already closed, his mind filling with sleep as the spent young man pulled up the soft green woolen cover. The plump, clucking Kiwi bustled about turning down lamps. Filling his last moments of wakefulness, as Marc drifted off to sleep, was the sight of a round, pleasant Kiwi. A smallish Kiwi sitting nearby, rocking, humming softly as she quietly sipped her tea.

Hazily Marc realized Jula was a Kiwi who absolutely sounded and acted amazingly like Nanny Rose. Marc smiled, again closed his eyes, and was soon snoring softly.