

Chapter Ten: Quest At Last!

By Sherrie Theriault

I know the Queen said first light, but I can see no light at all. I can see nothing at all. We are moving. I can feel Shrigley turning on her heels, revolving, staggering a bit, and now I hear the pull of her chain extending and feel the charge of the magic as she stirs the glass with her fingertip. There is a small *click* and she and I are through the looking glass, and I am trying to spy cat-shaped grins in the mist, but there is an antiseptic smell to the air, and dim lights down a hall with a ballet bar running waist level on both sides. I want to ask where we might be, but how would Shrigley know any better than I would? Not like she's seen this movie before. She is a stranger here herself.

"Where do you think we are?" she asks me. I gasp and burst out in song; I must be tense.

"I don't know, I just arrived, like you," I whisper.

"Right," she giggles. "Sorry."

Oh, land sakes; she's gone all girly on me. I hear shuffling and see torchlight heading our way, and there's muttering, too. Shrigley stops and presses herself against the corridor wall. We are the only things in the corridor. I don't believe this is going to hide us in any way, but I'm sure neither of us is in the mood to hear my mouth so I don't mention this.

The torchbearer is a shaggy little guy and, as he approaches, I see his scruff is blondish and his eyes bulge.

"It's a bit early for visitors, Miss," he says to Shrigley, "and is your toad tame?"

"No, no, not at all," says Shrigley. "I have it on his own authority that he is in fact a wild animal. Plus I myself saw him slay a six inch centipede."

"Then you'll need to cage him for the duration of your stay. Some of our patients are quite frail and can not reliably subdue a wild toad of the ferocity you are reporting," explains the shaggy torchbearer.

Writing Raw

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“What are you telling him?” I screech at Shrigley. “Are you trying to get me locked up?”

“No,” she says, “but, Jeff, you must understand that there is a price to be paid in polite society for being a ruthless hunter.”

“Polite society? You don’t even know where we are. How is it that you are sure the society here is polite?” I ask her and turn to the torchbearer. “Torch Bearer, what is this place?”

“This is The Sorcerer’s Sanitarium, a rest home for witches,” he says, motioning us to follow him. “I’ll tell you what. I know the perfect place for you two and I don’t think your toad will have to be confined.”

“I’m all for that,” I chime. We turn the corner and seated in a circle around a table are a group of elderly witches.

“This is our group of insomniacs,” says the shaggy torchbearer.

“I like to think of myself as an early riser,” says one of the witches as she raises her pince-nez to get a sharp look at us.

“Yes, Glory Ann, but you get up at a quarter past midnight,” says an old gent.

“But, Humphrey, I sleep until a quarter past noon,” counters Glory Ann.

“Which in point of fact makes you nocturnal and not an insomniac as Cedric would have everyone believe,” pipes another witch.

“But I didn’t say a thing, I don’t even know you,” I gibber, and point a finger toward the torchbearer. “He was the one who called you a group of insomniacs, not me!” and I sing a little, having filled my vocal sac a bit because of my anxious state.

“Yes, yes,” chirps the second witch, “his name is Cedric, too.”

“You’re a toad?” I ask in confused shock.

“Am not,” snaps the torchbearer.

“He was named after the family toad,” volunteers Glory Ann. “That toad saved the whole family, so Cedric’s mother named all her children after him.”

“All her children?” asks Shrigley.

“All the toad’s children are named Cedric. My mother thought it would be a slight not to do the same,” explains Cedric the Torchbearer.

“Luckily she had only the two children or it could have been quite confusing,” chimes a tiny crumpled hat in the corner that turned out to be concealing an old man.

“True is that, Mr. Jennings,” Cedric says to the crumpled hat. “Though my sister still takes an awful lot of teasing.”

“How did your toad save your family?” I ask Cedric.

“Of course this was before I was born, you understand, but as my mum tells it, we were starving and our toad hunted every day and fed the family. I don’t know how he done it, he wasn’t as big as you, but he kept the four of them, my mum and dad and mum’s mum and dad fed for a year or more when they all had come down with some mind flu and couldn’t charm a thing nor cast a spell. They couldn’t even call for help, but Cedric kept them fed body and soul, nursed them back to health to boot. He was a hell of a toad,” says Cedric with a nod.

“You knew him?” I ask.

“Sure did. When I was a boy he used to hunt for me, bring me home crickets, slugs, big old centipedes,” Cedric tells me.

“And you ate them?” asks Shrigley with horror.

“The slugs for sure, they’re tart, chewy, a bit like gumdrops. The crickets we would share, but the centipedes...” He shakes his head, “They taste like jet fuel. I would discreetly dispose of those.”

“I swear I will never hunt for you,” I sooth in Shrigley’s ear. “I can see you’d rather die.” I tease. I can feel her shake with laughter.

“Yes, I would,” she mumbles to me.

“So what brings you to us at this unusual hour?” asks Mr. Jennings crumpled hat.

“Hmm, well,” says Shrigley, shifting from foot to foot.

“We are questing,” I volunteer to all assembled.

“Are you?” asks Glory Ann, who doesn’t care too deeply for a response and continues

on. “I remember when I left for my quest. It was so exciting, it certainly was, but I was not as thoughtful a child as you are, dear. I didn’t think to stop and visit my grandmother. What a lovely young woman you are growing up to be. I am sure your grandmother is so proud. Which witch is your grandmother, dear?”

“Hmm, well,” Shrigley repeats. This time I leave it to her to explain. I am out of my explanatory depth. “I was having trouble starting.”

“Oh, I had the worst time starting,” offered the witch next to Glory Ann. “I like to never figure it out until I saw an advert for an eight week witch hazel course and I knew that was where I needed to be.”

“Interesting,” I hear Shrigley mumble.

“I followed my brothers. It flattered them and saved me from having to reinvent the cauldron as it were,” piped in Humphrey.

“So what did you follow your brothers into doing?” Shrigley pursued.

“We went in search of Leviathan,” answers Humphrey.

“Did you find any?” I gasp in spite of myself.

“Oh, no, no, we weren’t looking too hard either. It was just an excuse to spend a few weeks diving off the coast of Israel.”

“No!” shrieks Shrigley. “You really did that, you just went and played?”

“Oh, look, Imogene, I’ve scandalized the child,” Humphrey says to the witch who quested after witch hazel, and Imogene in turn winks and grins a crooked grin at Humphrey.

“I’m not scandalized. I’m surprised is all. I thought quest was life-altering, life-directing—I don’t know, life-forming,” says Shrigley.

“And so it is,” says Humphrey. “I was changed entirely when I realized I didn’t have to take everything so seriously—and that life is what you make of it.”

“You always learn something,” adds Glory Ann.

“Don’t forget that all knowledge is valuable,” continues Imogene, “no matter how it is gathered.”

"How was your quest, Mr. Jennings?" Shrigley asks in the direction of the hat.

Slender fingers reach out from under the brim and push it back, revealing a narrow face with a long straight nose and the brightest pair of twinkling eyes I have ever seen. A definite magic man if ever I saw one.

"I could not decide. I thought and searched, asked and prayed, but the answer eluded me, so, finally one morning my mother took me from my bed, said 'you're my baby bird, learn to fly' opened the nearest mirror and threw me through it," Mr. Jennings disclosed.

"She didn't," gasps Glory Ann.

"She did," nods Mr. Jennings.

"But you landed on your feet," encourages Cedric.

"No, no, I didn't," says Mr. Jennings. "What I did was suffer. I landed up in a pit of vipers. I might have died, but I was only half awake and dozed a bit. By the time I woke fully the snakes had grown accustomed to me, and I was able to extricate myself without being struck."

"You see things are going very well for us," I mention into Shrigley's ear.

"What did you do after that, Mr. Jennings?" Shrigley says while still holding her breath.

"I found the nearest town. Bought myself some supplies and returned to the pit," continues Mr. Jennings.

"You didn't," gasp all the females in the room.

"You were mad," laughed all the men.

"Supplies for what?" I asked.

"Supplies for milking cobras. I didn't believe the snakes I had left to be cobras, but I figured milking one snake is pretty much like milking any other, and it turns out I was right," chuckles Mr. Jennings.

"You milked the snakes in the pit?" asks Shrigley, who has lost all the color in her face.

"Yes, I did, and I went back every fortnight to give a repeat performance," grins Mr. Jennings.

"Why?" Shrigley wails.

“I wanted to make my fortune—and so I did,” explains Mr. Jennings.

“I don’t understand,” I step in, asking for Shrigley who is now clearly beyond words.

“Who really wants to buy snake venom? Wouldn’t they go get a snake?”

“Well,” begins Mr. Jennings, lifting off his hat altogether and rubbing his hands gently palm to palm. “Anti-venom is a useful thing but in order to get it you have to milk some snakes first. I had an uncle who was an apothecary and he had told me stories of all the brave folk who gathered and procured the raw materials he needed to help those who suffered. I felt like I lucked into a way to help, and I wasn’t going to falter in accepting this opportunity.”

“But, Mr. Jennings, I thought you made your fortune on horses,” exclaims Cedric, looking stunned and more than a bit perplexed.

“I did, my boy, I did. You see, to make the anti-venom they use Percherons—the big horses. Do you know what they are?” he asked. We all nod with awe and Mr. Jennings continues. “I’m impressed. I didn’t think Percherons meant anything to folks in this century or any century, since there were armored knights who needed such big horses to carry their metal clad weight. So, as surprised as you might be, I did not fall in love with the vipers, but I did fall in love with the horses. They are so large and I had not yet grown to my full height so the size disparity was quite something.”

Looking at Mr. Jennings I can’t imagine him smaller than he is now. I mean a man easily hidden under a hat couldn’t have grown much. He had to start somewhere not too far off from where he’s ended up!

“I made enough with the anti-venom to take one or two of the folds from that project and begin another project,” says Mr. Jennings.

“What did you do with the horses?” asks Shrigley.

“Ah, well—that’s a story for another time,” says Mr. Jennings. “I think we would all like to hear a bit about your story, and what brings you here today.”

“Oh, it’s not much of a story,” says Shrigley, “I don’t know what to do for my quest so we got up early and stepped through the first mirror.”

"You don't tell it very well," I correct Shrigley. "How can you just skip to the end like that? Nothing about how you searched for me. Nothing about how you warned me not to go with that old gargoyle into the moldering swamp, how you saved me. Nothing about my bloody puss-filled boils, and nothing about the centipede!" I exclaim a full vocal sac helping me project loud enough to wake everyone on the coma wing of this nursing home.

"I was leaving that for you to tell," grins Shrigley. "You're the better story teller and I can't sing at all."

"And I think you told it very well, Toad," compliments Glory Ann, "very well indeed."

"Yes, I do love a good moldering swamp story," says Cedric.

"So you began your quest much as I did," says Mr. Jennings. "I think that's splendid."

"Where are you off to next?" asks Imogene.

"Yes, where?" asks Humphrey.

"I don't know," answers Shrigley. "I simply have no clue."

"I think we should go through the laundry room mirror. I believe I can still get it to open to the Andes," says Humphrey.

"We?" asks Shrigley.

"The Andes?" I shriek.

"Why yes, I think we should all go," says Imogene.

"Yes, and the mountains are a grand choice this time of year," continues Mr. Jennings.

"Oh, no, I couldn't impose," stammers Shrigley.

"We could use the help," I whisper to her.

"It's not right," she whispers back.

"Maybe we could talk them out of the Andes. Would that be better?" I prod.

"It's not a quest if I take them," she explains in twisted whisper.

"You're taking me," I pursue. "Don't I count?"

"Yes you count, but not the same way," she hisses.

"Not all of us are deaf," says Humphrey.

"I'm terribly sorry, we are being horribly rude," says Shrigley. "I was trying to express to my toad, here, that this is a quest—not a trip to Oz. Though I would love the company, it defeats the purpose of this journey if we collect friends. Quest is a solitary endeavor. I know you all understand this, though he doesn't."

"I think quests are over-rated," says Mr. Jennings.

"So says the man who landed in a pit of vipers! I am inclined to take his word, Dear Watson. Why don't we take a group tour," I ask her.

"We could certainly use a trip out," says Glory Ann in her winning way.

"We never get to go anywhere," says Imogene.

"How can you say that?" asks Cedric with his face in a bunch. "I took you away last week."

"You took us shell-shucking in western Hibernia! That's hardly an adventure," counters Glory Ann.

"Though the brown bread was quite fine, quite fine indeed," intercedes Mr. Jennings.

"Well, yes, there was that," agrees Imogene.

"We are digressing," says Humphrey. "The topic at hand is mountain travel and adventure, rendering great service as guides to this lovely young witch. I'm sorry dear I don't think I caught your name."

"Shrigley, my name is Shrigley Watson," she says nodding to each person around the table.

"Lovely. Yes, I think we should escort Shrigley on her quest down the Andes," continues Humphrey.

"As I was saying," Shrigley interrupts, "I appreciate your willingness to help me, but honestly I believe Jeff and I need to find our way unescorted. Though the Andes do sound like a lovely idea, I think we must go on this journey alone."

"Jeff, who's Jeff?" asks Cedric.

"My toad. I call him Jeff," answers Shrigley.

“Wow, how unfair is that? I would much rather be called Jeff than Cedric,” grumbles Cedric.

“And I would much rather be called Roderick than Jeff, so there you have it,” I pronounce to the disgruntled night watchman.

“If you insist on traveling alone with only your trusty toad, Jeff, for company there is something I would like you to have,” says Mr. Jennings.

“Oh, thanks, but I’m okay. Please don’t feel obligated,” says Shrigley.

“Maybe it’s food,” I mention into her ear.

“We’re all right,” she whispers back.

“Nonsense,” says Mr. Jennings, “I won’t be but a minute. I want you to take this with you. It may prove vitally important.”

“Let him help us,” I whisper to Shrigley.

“Fine,” she mumbles back.

“What was that?” asks Mr. Jennings.

“She said, fine,” repeats Humphrey, “but I think she was talking to her toad.”

“Very well, then,” says Mr. Jennings as he leaves the room.

“Come to think of it,” says Glory Ann, “I have something to retrieve from my room as well. I will be right back.”

“Be back directly, myself,” adds Humphrey as he goes.

“I had better make sure they all get where they are going,” says Cedric as he heads out turning his flashlight in the direction of the others.

“Isn’t this cozy?” says Imogene.

“Why yes it is,” I reply. “So what good things did you learn about witch hazel?”

“Well it’s quite helpful if things go wrong with your bottom, but I don’t want to talk about that. While we have this time alone I want to give you something,” says Imogene and she pulls from her pocket what at first glance looks like a marble.

“That’s not a marble,” I say.

“Good eye, Toad, good eye. This is no marble, this is a painted pebble,” Imogene holds her palm open and in the center lays a round white stone with a design covering it, wavy lines, dots even a triangle on one side.

“Very pretty,” says Shrigley. “Did you make it?”

“Ah, you are so young,” says Imogene.

These are fighting words to me, an insult to be sure, but Shrigley only nods her agreement.

“Yes, it is time I quest and get some experience of the world. I wish I felt a bit braver about it, is all,” says my sweet little witchlet.

“Never you mind about that. Take this pebble with you. If there comes a time when you need to help someone; drop this in some water. Let me tell you a little secret. Bravery that comes before experience is bravado lying about its name,” nods Imogene and she hands over the painted pebble to Shrigley.

Shrigley takes it and holds it tightly in her hand, bowing to the old witch.

“Does it turn into food when you put it in the water?” I ask.

“Toad’s hungry,” chimes Imogene.

“What a shock,” taunts Shrigley.

“Oh, I know! I used to tell my son that his toad was simply a stomach with legs,” she says.

“Quite right,” I say, “and my stomach is empty.”

“Here you go then,” the old witch says to me, handing over something she pulls from her other pocket.

My tongue flashes to her palm without a thought. Only now that I have it in my mouth do I realize I should have asked, but it is too late. I am no longer a stomach with legs I am now all pucker. Shrigley turns to look at me.

“That shut him up. What is it?” she asks Imogene.

“My last lemon drop. Lucky there were any left. I go through a fistful of a night. It’s hell

when you can't sleep. I used to be able to sleep anywhere, but now that I'm old I find if everything isn't just so, I can't turn off my mind and pretty soon I am wandering the halls. If I run afoul of Cedric he herds me in here with the others."

This is an instructive experience. A puckering tongue will not release. I cannot swallow the thing and I cannot spit it out. I am stuck. I am squelched. Though the sour of the lemon drop has nearly blinded me, I can hear the others approaching. I can see the bobbing hat which neatly conceals Mr. Jennings, followed by the candy-floss hair of Glory Ann, and Humphrey bringing up the rear, his nightshirt billowing.

"Cedric got held up on his rounds, old Mr. Patchogue turned blue again so Cedric is moving his fish bowl to the other side of the room," says Humphrey.

"What does moving his fish bowl have to do with Mr. Patchogue turning blue?" Shrigley asks. How proud I am that she is such a good mouthpiece when my mouth is out of order.

"Oh, he can't seem to keep his head out of it at night," says Glory Ann.

"I told him to drain the water and get a turtle instead, but he won't listen to me," says Imogene. "He's just crazy for that fish."

I shake my head in disbelief at the obsessions of others totally, having forgotten my sugar-bound mouth.

"Speaking of water, someone should rehydrate this toad. He seems to have gone all shriveled about the mouth," says Glory Ann. Mr. Jennings slides me his water glass and Shrigley drops me in it. Lucky for me I am not watertight. The water does the trick and I of course gulp down the lemon drop, not wanting to waste good candy, no matter what it's done to me in the recent 'ast. I grasp the edge of the glass; Shrigley bends down. "Do you want out or are you just resting?" she asks.

"Not a frog," is all I say and she helps me out of the glass.

"Now that your toad is fixed," says Mr. Jennings, "here." He pushes an object "ut from under his hat. It looks like some complicated metal puzzle, the kind they sell at the fair or those high-end book stores; wrought iron, hinged in the middle with arched rings on the opposite

ends.

“For me?” Shrigley asks.

“Of course,” says Mr. Jennings. “It might come in handy. You never know when questing, strange things come in handy, plus it’s a thokcha so it will bring you luck—or is that keep-you-from-harm.”

“Ward off the evil eye?” asks Imogene trying to be helpful.

“No, no, you’re thinking of hamsa, they ward off the evil eye,” corrects Mr. Jennings. “This is Tibetan; made from ‘sky metal.’ You know, meteoric iron. Tibetans believe that the meteors are sent from God. Personally I don’t know who sent them, but they made a wonderful snaffle out of it and it’s sweet to boot.”

“This is very kind of you, Mr. Jennings. I am overcome with your generosity,” says Shrigley.

“You are more than welcome young lady. We don’t want you out there without a few tricks up your sleeve or luck to spare,” says Mr. Jennings tilting his hat up to look Shrigley in the eye. “You may need this you may not, but there you have it either way.”

“Yes, this is the same sort of thing,” says Humphrey as he hands Shrigley a small engraved silver cylinder.

“What’s this?” Shrigley asks as she takes the tube and tries to open it.

“Oh, good. She’s the curious type,” Glory Ann says to Mr. Jennings.

“Good thing, that,” says Imogene. “I’m sure curiosity will serve her well on this trip.”

“And everywhere else,” adds Humphrey.

With that Shrigley manages to open the silver cylinder and tips the contents into her palm. Seven off white little orbs settle there.

“What are these?” she asks.

“Job’s tears,” says Humphrey. “Seeds, they’re seeds.”

“Ah,” I say, “We’re only going for a week you know.”

“Yes, but you never know when you might need to cast a spell,” explains Glory Ann.

“You just never know.”

“And you can do that with seeds?” I ask.

“Yes of course,” says Imogene. “Making magic with seeds is the easiest way. Seeds are magic already you see. We’ve just learned how to stand under the umbrella of their power.”

I take a jump from the tabletop and try to grab hold of Shrigley’s clothes, but no dice. I catch a fold of fabric to be sure, but my grip is not sufficient to hold on and I fall back to the table.

“That was interesting,” says Shrigley. “Do you want up?”

“I do,” I mumble, embarrassed having failed so obviously. “I couldn’t make the distance.”

“Not built for that now were you,” says Cedric. It’s not a question. “Frogs ar’ distance jumpers, toads not so much. You toads have other skills.”

I hadn’t realized he had returned. “Thanks,” is all I get out, as Shrigley picks me up and puts me back in my shoulder-mounted toad bed.

“Is Mr. Patchogue all right?” Glory Ann asks Cedric.

“He’s half-drowned, but since it is only half I think he’ll be fine in the end. I moved the fish bowl out into the parlor. Then I ran down to the kitchen and borrowed the spaghetti strainer to put over it,” says Cedric with a semi-grin.

“What’s the strainer for?” I can’t help but ask.

“Keep the cats out, don’t ya know.” He answers.

“Can the fish even see out?” asks Shrigley.

“Don’t think he can, but last time I tried this I used plastic wrap and the fish turned blue, so for right now the strainer will do until I can get some screening or a porous lid.”

“Ask a foolish question,” I whisper to Shrigley and she nods and stifles a laugh and pours the seven seeds back into the silver cylinder.

To be continued...

Writing Raw

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Sherrie Theriault bio: I do not believe that I became an autodidact because I was raised by wolves, but surely it was a contributing factor. The years I spent in the waters of the Outer Banks, afforded me a mainline infusion of chaos and tranquility. The simultane