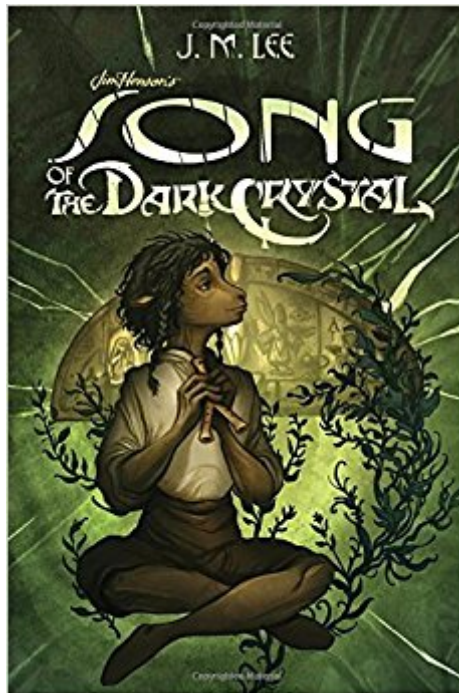




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Song Of The Dark Crystal #2 (Jim Henson's The Dark Crystal)



Synopsis

The second original companion novel to Jim Henson's *The Dark Crystal* follows Naia and Kylan as they seek help from the Gelfling clans to prevent the Skeksis from implementing the next stage of their sinister plan. Kylan of Sami Thicket is a skilled song teller, but singing the tales of long-gone heroes won't help his friends as they journey into dangerous, unknown lands. After uncovering the betrayal of the Skeksis Lords, he and his friend Naia are on the run, pursued by the Skeksis underlings and outcast even among their fellow Gelfling. But Kylan knows the truth must be told, no matter how difficult the telling. Maybe there's use for a song teller after all . . . Jim Henson's *The Dark Crystal* is one of the most beloved and enduring fantasy stories of the past thirty years. This series of young adult novels will both please the diehard fans and bring new fans in to the world of *The Dark Crystal*.

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Customer Reviews

J. M. (Joseph) Lee is a novelist, writing mentor, illustrator, and graphic designer with a background in linguistics and film. As a writer, he finds the most rewarding stories in fusion genre, from nostalgic historical fantasies to gritty sci-fi westerns. On the side, he enjoys dabbling in experimental short fiction and drinking a lot of coffee. He is represented by Erzsi Deak/Hen&ink Literary Studio.

Chapter 1 "This way. Almost there." Kylan pointed to where the path

forked. One way led back to the village behind them while the other twisted down and away, under arched branches and beyond. He followed the latter, trusting Naia to keep up. All around them, the air was full of morning song. ã ã The Stonewood girl was waiting for them at the very edge of the village, where the trail changed from a row of flat stones to dirt and moss. She was young, still without her wings, and perched atop one of the many gray rocks that populated the wood. Hopping down when they arrived, she grabbed Naia's hand. ã ã "Naia, you're awake! I'm Mythra. We met when you were asleep. Did you rest well? Is it true you fought skekMal? Kylan told me you did. And escaped from the Castle of the Crystal! That's so amazing and brave!" Naia rubbed her cheek. She said nothing, but Kylan could tell that they shared thought. Their flight from the Skeksis in the Dark Wood had hardly felt amazing or brave. Really, they were just lucky to be alive, but there was no point in frightening the youngling. ã ã "We nearly trampled Mythra on the Landstrider when we found Stone-in-the-Wood last night," Kylan explained. "She brought us to her home for you to recover."

ã ã "So?" .ã ã . you know about the Skeksis?" Naia asked. "And you believe Rian's stories, even though the Skeksis have told everyone he's a lying traitor?" ã ã Mythra was already skipping down the path, disappearing into the curtains of hanging foliage. Her voice echoed back as they followed her. ã ã "Of course I believe Rian. He's my brother!" ã ã Kylan followed the girl through the Dark Wood, losing track of the path after one too many twists. Was this where they had come through on their flight from the castle? He probably wouldn't even know the place if he saw it. Mythra stopped when they reached a small clearing overgrown with shrubs. ã ã "Rian!" she called. "It's me! I've brought the others I told you about. Gurjin's sister, and her friend!" ã ã There was no one in sight, and Mythra tried Rian's name again. Naia stepped forward when no one answered, ears twisting about and eyes sharp. When Mythra went to call a third time, Naia covered the younger girl's mouth. ã ã "Shh," she hissed. "Listen." ã ã Kylan perked up his ears. Naia's instincts in the wild were strong, crafted and honed from growing up in the Swamp of Sog, where everything from the trees to the mud could be a danger. Sure enough, when he held his breath and listened, he heard a far-off snap and crash! followed by curses in a Gelfling tongue. ã ã "Rian," Mythra gasped. ã ã "This way!" ã ã Kylan and Mythra followed Naia as she darted into the wood, hand on the hilt of the knife that was sheathed on her belt. Kylan lost track of the clearing as they hurried through the trees, bounding over rocks and thorned shrubs. ã ã Another loud crash sent birds into flight as they mounted an outcrop of rocks.

Below them, a green-furred beast with whorled horns and a clubbed tail grappled with something much smaller. When the horned creature reared and let out a broken roar, Kylan saw massive flat teeth and under its hooved front legs, a Gelfling boy armed with a stick. Lying uselessly on the other side of the glade sat a spear, likely his usual weapon. "Rian! Mythra cried. The boy rolled away, out from under the beast, looking for the one who had called him. "Mythra! Stay back! This horner has seen the Crystal!" A darkened creature? Kylan asked, heart still pounding from their flight. "Like the ruffnaw?" "And the Nebrie," Naia agreed. "But." The last time they had come across darkened creatures, Naia had been able to heal them with dreamfasting, pushing the darkness from their hearts. It was something Kylan had never seen before. But despite her remarkable ability, dreamfasting with beasts still meant connecting with the mind and the heart. After all she'd suffered through so recently, Kylan worried. It might be dangerous for Naia to try healing a darkened creature if she was not yet healed herself. The horner bucked, uprooting a sapling in warning. It would not be long before it tried to do the same to Rian. Kylan caught Naia's sleeve as she readied for a fight. "Don't push yourself," he said. "Please. I know you want to fix it, but you shouldn't hurt yourself in the process." She grimaced and hopped up onto a rock and drew her dagger. "At least I can help get him out of there." Before Kylan could stop her, she leaped, wings unfolding just enough to slow her fall as she landed between Rian and the green horner. The creature plowed its hooves into the earth again, swinging its head and narrowly missing the two Gelfling that stood before it. "I don't need your help!" Rian shouted. Then he saw her clothing, her green skin and dark locs. "Wait, are you?" "Introductions later!" Naia and Rian dove to either side when the horner charged. Unlike the thrashing, maddened beasts Kylan had seen before, it did not seem wholly out of control. When the creature saw Naia, it paused before lowering its horns, almost as though it recognized her. It snorted, pawing the ground and unearthing rocks and roots. "Get out of here," Naia ordered. "While I have its attention!" "I said I don't need your help!" Rian spat back, though he took the opportunity to move closer to his spear. "This one's different than the others. I don't know how, but it's different!" Kylan's fingertips hurt where he gripped the stone in front of him. Naia stepped steadily, drawing the horner's red gaze away from Rian. If he went down to try to help, he would only get in the way. His fingers found the rope of his bola, and he

pulled it from his belt. "I know you're full of darkness now," Naia said to the beast, holding out her empty hand. "But please, remember! Remember what you were before!" Rian reached his spear and with only a moment's pause to aim, he threw it toward the beast. It sank into the horner's exposed flank, but the beast barely reacted. It was fixed on Naia, and with thundering hooves, it charged. The breadth of its horns was so wide, there was no way she could escape in time and at such close range. Rian shouted after the horner in dismay, and Kylan let his bola loose. It nearly missed, bouncing off the horner's back like a pebble. Naia didn't need saving. As the horner neared, she sprang, grabbing one of the beast's horns as it swung toward her. There she clung, stubborn eyes bright with determination while the horner wailed in anger. Kylan's breath rushed out in relief just in time to be caught again. The horner was clever, even in its rage, and instead of being lost in confusion, it changed its attack. It sighted a tree and headed for it, angling its head to strike as soon as it was in range. If Naia dropped to the ground, she would be trampled, but if she didn't get out of the way, she would soon be crushed between the horn and bark. "Naia," Kylan shouted, because it was the only thing left he could do. "Naia, hurry!" She scrambled along the beast's horn as the others watched. She had almost made it along the horn to the beast's head when she slipped, her shoes sliding against the rough bone. She nearly lost her grip, dangling from the spiraled horn as it swung through the air and brambles toward the tree that would be the end of her. Something dark and serpentine shot out from under Naia's hair, diving into the thick green mane at the nape of the horner's neck. Startled, the horner jerked. Instead of striking the tree full-on, only the tip of its horn glanced off the trunk, throwing the beast off balance. Naia yelped and let go, flying through the air and tumbling into the brush. Kylan watched with her as the horner stumbled, nearly toppling, then screeched and thrashed. "A muski?" Mythra asked, eyes wide. The black eel that had come to Naia's rescue darted in and out of the horner's fur like a water serpent leaping through ocean waves. The horner threw itself against the tree, trying to squash the little flying eel, but Neech was too agile. Naia and Rian regrouped, readying their weapons, knowing it was only a matter of time before Neech's distraction wore off. There was no way the little eel's teeth, as sharp as they might be, could penetrate the horner's thick hide. Just as Naia and Rian were about to renew their attack, the horner's thrashing stopped. Its cries and bellowing ceased, and the glade was quiet as the great creature's knees buckled and bowed. Then it fell, bloodshot eyes closing. At first Kylan thought it had passed on, but as Neech surfaced from its mane, he saw the

beast's side rise and fall. It was unconscious. He and Mythra climbed the rocky hill to meet the other two below. "What happened?" Kylan asked. Naia wiped her forehead and tossed her locs behind her shoulder. "I don't know. Maybe it heard my plea without dreamfasting and let go of the darkness. I can only hope. Oh, Neech. To the rescue again. Did you find a snack in there?" The flying eel drifted through the air and alighted on Naia's shoulder. A black, arthropodic leg stuck out of the eel's weasel-like mouth, still twitching. Kylan didn't want to know how many other bugs lived within the horner's dense coat. With a last few crunches, Neech finished his victory treat with an audible gulp. "You're Naia. Gurjin's twin." The hardened voice was Rian's. He was tall for a Gelfling, with olive skin and dark eyes. His thick dark brown hair was tousled and wild, broken by a single streak of blue above his right eye. His face was young and kind, though his eyes were weary and his lips were pressed in a tired line. "And you're Rian," Naia said. They had heard his name so often since they had begun their journey. In fact, at many times, his name was almost all they had for guidance. To finally meet him in person had seemed impossible, yet here they were. "Another darkened horner!" he said. "They dig where the Crystal's veins are buried, and they're too dim-witted to look away when they uncover it." "It was certainly darkened, but something felt different," Kylan said. Naia agreed. "It was focused. Like it recognized Rian and me." Rian watched the sleeping horner, brow drawn tight. "If you've seen the darkened creatures, then the darkness is spreading. Maybe it's changing, too. Just last season we saw our first glimpse of it in the wood. At this rate it won't be long before all of Thra is gazing into the shadows and turning on itself." Rian shook the thought off and pulled his spear from the poor horner's hide. Mythra climbed up with a bundle of forest moss and pressed it against the bleeding wound as Rian hopped down. "You look just like Gurjin." "Is he with you?" "He didn't make it," Naia said flatly, as if to deliver the sad news as quickly as possible and be done with it. Maybe it was for the best. Kylan had no idea what to say to her about it, and he imagined Rian would feel even more at a loss if they dwelled on it too long. "This is Kylan, a song teller of the Spriton clan. We're here to No one wanted to say what needed to be said next, though it was the reason they were meeting here so secretly. The reason neither Gurjin nor the Vapran princess who had also helped them was here with them. Kylan chewed on his lip, pushing back the feelings

of remorse over their friends who hadn't escaped. "We're here to figure out what to do about the Skeksis!" The bright voice came from above. Mythra finished dressing the horner's wound and climbed down. She pushed Rian and Naia together, close enough that they could clasp hands. "You two should dreamfast. Then we can make a plan." Rian's ears flattened a little, though he wiped his palm off on his tunic in preparation. He held it out in offer, neither eager nor reluctant. "She's right. It is the fastest way." Kyran watched Naia, feeling a pinch of protectiveness. If she had not felt well enough to dreamfast with the horner, was she really in a safe place to open her heart to another Gelfling, to share what had broken it? They had heard Rian's name many times, and sought him for days, but he was still a stranger. An ally, but not a friend. When Naia glanced at Kyran in hesitation, that was all he needed to know. He stepped forward and offered his own hand. "Naia's heart is broken now," he said. "But I was there, and she told me what she saw. I can't give you her memories, but I can give you mine and my memory of her tale." "Very well," Rian said. He didn't seem to care either way, all action and little emotion. Kyran reminded himself that Rian had gone through his own trials since his escape from the Skeksis's trials. Kyran was likely about to be witness to himself. He braced himself. They grasped hands, and the dreamfast began.

Chapter 2

Dreamfasting was like diving into a pool of water without knowing its depth or what might wait below. Kyran remained at the surface at first, sensing Rian's memories and knowing at the same time Rian could peek into his. It was often disorienting in the beginning, to dreamfast with someone for the first time. Even when they had agreed to dreamfast, there were still so many thoughts and visions, protective barriers and waves of wariness. After a moment the waves calmed, and Rian began. His mental voice sounded far away and inside Kyran's mind all at once. I was a soldier, like my father. The vivid image that came first was of the Castle of the Crystal, obsidian and magnificent, towering over the Dark Wood like a claw and crown. Rian's memory of the castle was powerful and detailed. He knew every spacious hall and stately room, had traveled and patrolled every spiraling passageway. The only chamber he had not seen was the center pavilion, forbidden to the Gelfling guards and servants. Only the Skeksis Lords, the raptorial velvet-cloaked keepers of the castle, were allowed to enter that place. There, they and they alone communed with the Heart of Thra—the heart of the world. After they heard Thra's song, they entered its words in tomes and sent out orders to the maudra of each of the Gelfling clans. So the will of Thra was passed on. Or so it seemed. Kyran already knew the terrible

secret the Skeksis kept. He had seen its evidence himself and in dreamfast with Naia after the nightmare they had survived. Now he waited to see it as Rian had. "Our friends went missing, one by one. When we asked the Skeksis, they paid no heed. Then they called for Mira." Kylan saw a flash of a Gelfling girl, all winks and tall tales. Rian walked with her, back to the castle after an evening patrolling the wood that bordered the grounds. In Rian's hand, hidden in his uniform cloak, was a glowing bellflower. He would give it to Mira when they said good night. He would tell her that even though they had been on duty, he had enjoyed their time together, and perhaps they could enjoy time together some other evening. Two Skeksis were waiting at the castle, the decorated Chamberlain and the Scientist, Lord skekTek, a shrewd, tendony beast with a metal-and-glass eye. They crowded around Mira, the Chamberlain beckoning her for official business. "Vapra, are you? Oh yes, lovely Silverling." "Come for orders." "The Skeksis with the mechanical eye jabbed a talon-like finger at Rian. "Retire for the evening, guard." Kylan felt Rian's memory more than he saw it: anger, fear, anxiety. He knew he should trust the lords, or at least obey them, but his gut was telling him that something was wrong. Then impulsiveness as Rian followed, knowing if he were caught, he might be discharged, but if his instinct was right, Mira could be in danger. She was. The memory was a rush of disorganized fragments of sounds and images: Rian's path through the castle, the jarring echoes of the Skeksis' harsh laughter. Mira's questions that started calm but escalated into alarm. Over it all, Kylan heard the memory of a grating crank, as if an enormous piece of architecture was in motion on a hundred gears and cogs. Here the vision was sharp and painful. Rian found his way to where the Skeksis had taken Mira. The Skeksis Scientist's lab, deep in the gut of the castle. The door was open a hair, just a sliver of fiery red in the dark hall. Mira's voice was quiet now, just whimpers, and Rian peered through the crack in the door. He saw her bound to a chair, facing a panel in the stone wall. skekTek, the Scientist, stood near the panel with his claws on a lever. The cranking and shuddering of machinery intensified, and then the panel opened and flooded the room with brilliant red. "Look into the light, yes, Gelfling," skekTek said. He reached to another lever and maneuvered it, bringing a second piece of the contraption into view—a reflector, suspended in the cavern of fire beyond the wall. Mira began to cry out for help, struggling against the bonds. Rian almost burst in then, but skekTek rotated the reflector, placing a blinding dagger of light on Mira's face. The instant she looked into the light, she went still. Kylan felt the memory weaken as Rian's focus lapsed. "It's all right, he said. You don't need to show

any more. IÃÂ understandÃÂ .ÃÂ .ÃÂ .ÃÂ No, Rian replied. No, itÃÂs important. You should see it. You should see just how terrible the Skeksis really are. ÃÂ Kylan watched through RianÃÂs eyes as MiraÃÂs limbs went limp. Her skin paled and dried, her hair turning withered and brittle, as if her life force was being drained from her body. As she slowly died, her eyes turning milky and unseeing, another machine went into motion. A series of tubes shuddered to life, slowly filling with a glowing liquid. The substance was pristine, blue tinted, almost like liquid crystal, and it passed slowly through the conduits until it finally filled a glass vial, drop by drop. ÃÂ The worst came next. The Skeksis Scientist plucked the vial once it was full. He sniffed it and gave a pleased sigh, and then, to KylanÃÂs horror, tipped the vial into his mouth for a tiny, sickening sip. As the drops touched his tongue, light flashed in his eyes, clearing them of their aging haze. The wrinkles and distortions in his withered face and beak smoothed, the hairs on his scalp growing thicker and filling with a glimmer of shine. MiraÃÂs life force was now his, her youth flowing into his old and deteriorating veins. ÃÂ Her vliya, Rian said. As if itÃÂs wine. ÃÂ Kylan shuddered. Naia had told him as much, but seeing it so clearly in RianÃÂs memory was horribly different. He was relieved when the vision dissipated. ÃÂ IÃÂm sorry about Mira, he said. ÃÂ Me too, Rian replied. Yet the grief had given birth to courage and purpose, it seemed, Now tell me the tale you and Naia share. Tell me how you came to join me in the fight against the Skeksis, whoÃÂve sent the rest of our people after me as a traitor and a liar. ÃÂ Kylan took hold of the dreamfast, remembering what he knew of NaiaÃÂs journey. He had to speak for her as well as himself. Although they had dreamfasted together during their travels, and she had shared with him the story of how sheÃÂd left her home and traveled north, it was impossible to dreamfast anotherÃÂs dreamfasted memories. Instead, he had to speak it, so he kept it short and to the point. ÃÂ Tavra, one of the All-MaudraÃÂs daughters, came to NaiaÃÂs village searching for you and Gurjin. When Tavra didnÃÂt find Gurjin there, Naia left for HaÃÂrar to defend GurjinÃÂs honor. I met her north of Sog, when she passed through the Spriton plains. ÃÂ Kylan remembered the day Naia had come to his village, knowing that as he called up the memory, Rian would see it, too. He remembered NaiaÃÂs aloof appeal, and how reluctant she had been to make friends, but Kylan had liked that about her. He had seen his own outsidersness reflected in her. It might not have meant much to her, but for Kylan, it had been the beginning of the journey that had eventually brought him here, to share in this dreamfast with Rian, and to fight against the Skeksis. ÃÂ The lands were filling with darkness, he told Rian. We saw the darkened creatures, mad with a sickness from looking into the earth. Even the trees in the Dark Wood were ill. ÃÂ He showed Rian the night they had been lost in the woods.

Kylan stood watch while Naia dreamfasted with the Cradle-Tree, trying to calm its madness. She had healed the tree, but it hadn't soothed the darkness. Those shadows had been born somewhere else. In the end, we went to the castle. That was where he learned that the Skeksis Lords had betrayed them. That they had captured Tavra, the All-Maudra's noble daughter, and put her in front of the reflector in the Scientist's laboratory. That the Crystal itself was the source of the darkness, and the Skeksis were responsible. And Gurjin? Rian asked. The solemn question brought only one memory to mind: the terrifying Lord skekMal hunting them in the wood, chasing them like a shadow storm with glowing, fiery eyes. That was all Kylan had seen, and so that was where the dreamfast ended. Kylan folded his arms around himself. His senses returned to reality, but it wasn't immediate, just as one couldn't be instantly dry after emerging from a swim. Naia sat on a patch of moss, waiting attentively beside the sleeping horner, while Mythra ate a fat peach-berry plucked from her traveling pouch. "He sacrificed himself so that we could meet you and warn the rest of our people," Kylan said. "As did Tavra." Kylan watched Rian's face, trying to guess what was going through the soldier's mind. Seeing Rian's memory had been difficult, and he couldn't imagine what it was like to relive it. Rian shook his head, thick brows eternally furrowed. "Gurjin died proud as ever," Rian said. "We won't waste his effort. Nor Tavra's, nor Mira's. The Skeksis will pay for what they've done. I'll see to it single-handedly if I have to." "You won't. Gurjin is •was• my brother," Naia said. "If anyone will teach the Skeksis what Gurjin's sacrifice meant, it will be me." "You? Who haven't seen a day of duty in the castle?" "I've seen plenty of days in other places." "The Skeksis would crush you a second time! I will do it alone." "Stop it!" Mythra scolded, so forcefully that a bit of fruit flew out of her mouth. "Rian always tries to go it alone. Look how that's worked out for you so far, big brother!" Rian scoffed, blowing his shaggy bangs away from his face. "I do it for you. And for Timtri, and Mother. I always have, and I'll continue to do things on my own if it saves the Gelfling people. I don't need anyone else's help." Naia rolled her eyes so hard, her whole head moved. Kylan couldn't decide what to think of the Stonewood soldier. He was certainly brave and willing to act, but he had a streak of nerve that had nearly been the end of him at least once. Following the Skeksis scientist into the depths of the castle could have been the last thing he had ever done, but instead he had escaped and lived to tell the tale. Either his courage was

being rewarded or he was just plain lucky. "Mythra finished the peach-berry and threw the pit at her brother, who deftly avoided it. "Speaking of Mother. She wants to invite you all to supper like we used to do, before Rian left to serve at the castle. "I should stay here in the wood," Rian said. "I am a traitor, remember?" "Mother says it's important for you to come home. She left early this morning to go digging for your favorite merkeeps. She wants to thank Naia and Kylan for believing in you. Joining us is the least you could do to show some gratitude, since you don't seem very interested in thanking them yourself." Rian flinched. "I am not ungrateful. I just don't want anyone else to get hurt. After what you've done and seen, you might want to consider keeping out of sight, too." The warning was all too practical. It didn't matter if they were innocent. The Skeksis' accusations were more important than the truth. "Mythra snorted. She hopped down from her perch and headed up the path, back toward Stone-in-the-Wood. "Just be home in time for supper." Chapter 3 After Mythra left the three of them alone, the glade was silent save for the sounds of birds chirping beyond the tree line. Kylan didn't know what to do or say next. The problem at hand was immense, almost too big to think about. How could they take on the Skeksis, those who were lords among the Gelfling and held the Castle of the Crystal? The Gelfling were peaceful and spread in seven clans across a great land. Some clans were so far afield, Kylan had only heard of them in song. On the other hand, the Skeksis were few and focused. They controlled the Heart of Thra, and because of that, their word was law. Kylan hoped that Naia or Rian might initiate the conversation that needed to be had, but both were too stubborn and lost in their own thoughts. It fell to Kylan, then, so he broached the topic as gently as possible. "What do you think we should do?" "We need to tell the All-Maudra," Rian replied immediately, as if the answer were so obvious, the question had been unnecessary. "I am leaving for Ha'rar soon. I have a vial of the horrible essence. If I can just get to Ha'rar and show the All-Maudra and her court, they'll know that I am telling the truth." "Have you tried telling your own maudra first?" Kylan asked. "The journey to Ha'rar is long, and you don't know that the All-Maudra will believe you. But it's your maudra's duty to care for her clan. Maybe she would surprise you." The soldier shook his head and lowered his voice, almost talking to himself. "I used to think telling everyone, as many as I could, was the answer. I tried it after I left the castle. To reach people I knew before. but the Skeksis have turned

everyone against me. They even sent my own father after me. If I tell Maudra Fara and she sides with the Skeksis, my family will be at risk. At least if the All-Maudra fails me, I'll know I did all that I could.

Naia struck the earth beside her with a fist. "Not everyone is against you! We're here. And we're going with you. No matter how much you want to go alone. I've seen the darkened Heart of Thra, and what happened to Tavra after they put her in front of the crystal mirror.

"Naia's right," Kylan agreed. "We're in this together."

Kylan could see that Rian was calculating the benefit they would bring if he took them along. Perhaps Rian would have preferred Gurjin as his travel-mate, but that was no longer an option. Three Gelfling who sang the same song was better than one who sang alone. Rian tossed his hair and huffed. "You'll only slow me down. I'm leaving in two days."

"Are you going to see your mother tonight?" Naia interrupted. Rian's cheeks turned pink. He crossed his arms and muttered, "Of course I'm going to see her. That's the only reason I'm here."

"Then you can tell us the details of our departure tonight. In the meantime, we'll leave you alone with your glorious troubles right now."

Naia sheathed her dagger to punctuate the sentiment and left the way Mythra had gone. She was not one to soften her feelings with words, and Rian was not being particularly inviting. Kylan waved an awkward goodbye to Rian and trotted after his friend.

"He's quite a charm, isn't he?" Naia said when he caught up.

"I'm sure he's been changed by the things he's seen."

"So have we."

She sighed. "At least we'll have someone who knows the way to Ha'rar with us when we go. Tavra showed me in dreamfast, long ago, but it was a direct route. I don't think she expected any of this to happen. Now we've got to get there without the Skeksis finding us."

Kylan agreed, though he envied that Naia had the gift of the dreamfasted memory. All he had were ancient songs telling the path to the fabled Gelfling capital.

Stone-in-the-Wood emerged from the lush wood ahead of them, a crescent-shaped rise of rocks and boulders of every proportion. It looked as if a giant had stacked pieces of mountaintops there and left them to grow together over time. Nestled within the rocks and trees were dozens, if not hundreds, of Gelfling huts, all connected by narrow pathways and steps. Some of the huts were stone, others built of wood in the arms and trunks of the huge trees that grew in the spaces between the rocks.

At the bottom of the hilly formation was a clear lake, whose calm surface reflected the stone obelisk that stood watch from the very top of the rise. It was that impressive centerpiece that gave the village its name.

They paused to rest,

even though the climb had not been particularly difficult. They'd had plenty of difficult days in the past, so any chance to enjoy the breeze was a gift, no matter how brief. Kylan took a seat on the rock beside his friend and looked down on the village. It looked so peaceful—so unaware. These people had no idea what was going on outside their corner of the Dark Wood. The inevitable truth-telling would be difficult. Wind blew through the forest, and the sound of the leaves rustling was like a thousand voices singing.

Naia rested her chin on her fists. "Thank you, by the way. For dreamfasting with Rian in my place. I would have done it if I'd had to, but—"

She didn't finish, and Kylan shivered, though the wind wasn't chill at all. Rian's dream was enough to make him cold. No wonder the soldier was so standoffish, after all he'd been through. Kylan considered telling Naia the story Rian had shared, but he decided against it for now. She had enough to worry about, and they would have time to go over everything on their coming journey. For now, he wanted her to rest.

"Of course," he said. "That's what friends are for."

"You know, Kylan—"

—you offered to go on without me so I could go back to Sog to see my family. What kind of friend would I be if I didn't offer you the same? You could stay in Stone-in-the-Wood. In the legendary home of Jarra-Jen. Isn't that what you left Sami Thicket to do?"

It was, but it seemed silly now. Kylan had failed at every part of being a Spriton, except for his studies in dream-etching under Maudra Mera. He had thought when he'd run away that he might find purpose in Stone-in-the-Wood—but now that he was here, he didn't feel like anything had changed. Jarra-Jen had lived hundreds of trine ago, maybe even before the Skeksis had assumed control of the Heart of Thra. Had Jarra-Jen discovered what the Skeksis had done to the land of Thra and his fellow Gelflings, Kylan wondered whether even he would have known what to do.

"When I met you, back home, I didn't have anything but those stories to tell," Kylan said, standing. "Their wisdom might help us once in a while, but now we have our own villains to defeat. The Hunter—"

—skekMal. He's still out there, and he knows our faces. They all do, and they'll be coming for both of us. It would be irresponsible to hide in tales now, and I certainly won't leave you to fight them alone."

"I wouldn't be alone," Naia chirped. "I'd be with Rian!"

Kylan glanced at his friend and saw the grin, and they both laughed quietly at the thought. Naia followed his gaze toward the center-top of the village rise and elbowed him gently. "Do you want to go look?"

Kylan did, more than almost anything, but it felt like a luxury he couldn't afford. The rock on the rise was where the stories of Jarra-Jen—and

countless other tales were inscribed. "I don't know. We have more important things to worry about. Once we figure out this business with the Skeksis, and once the All-Maudra takes over, then I'll come back and do all the exploring and reading I like." "Come on, let's go take a look. We have all the rest of the day." Naia swung to her feet and stretched, nearly dislodging Neech, and pulled her traveling pack over one shoulder. The sack had been her father's, worn on one back, but since her wings had blossomed, she'd taken to carrying it over one shoulder. It was a man's pack and would soon need to be traded for something that accommodated her new wings, especially if they meant to travel any farther than Stone-in-the-Wood. "Just because we're hunted by the Skeksis and the world is falling apart, it doesn't mean you can't treat yourself a little." It was a wry comment, but she smiled, and Kylan knew she meant well. The rock on the rise beckoned him from above, and when he gazed at it, he could almost hear the whispers of the songs that were etched into it. So, albeit with caution, he found an ascending path through the wood and followed it, Naia at his back.

The resurgence of the Dark Crystal and Labyrinth worlds has been very exciting for those of us who are children of the '80s. Mr. Lee writes his books alongside a small variety of comic book series, all of which work to deepen the world, culture, and mythology of The Dark Crystal. This book and its predecessor (Shadow of the Dark Crystal, published in 2016) explore the events in the years before the film. Mr. Lee richly develops Henson and Froud's world of Thra with an array of story elements that provide a fantastic sense of what Gelfling culture was like before the time of the film and how that culture was being undermined by the cunning of the Skeksis. If you loved the film, then you'll enjoy stepping back into that world through these books.

These tales from before the time of the movie are so addicting I loved them both so much and I am just dying for more

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