



The
Sword
of the Wormling

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The Wormling II: The Sword of the Wormling

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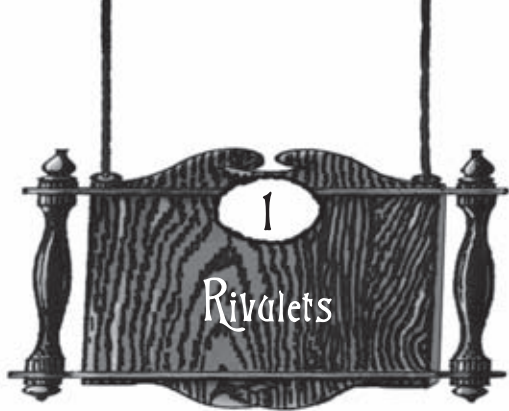
“You can observe a lot just by watching.”

YOGI BERRA



“Your heart is free. Have the courage to follow it.”

MALCOLM WALLACE, *Braveheart*



Sediment and silt trickled down the sides of Mountain Lake, carried by tiny water rivulets, channels cut into the soft mud—"rain tracks," as Owen Reeder had called them when he was a child. Days of rain turned the crystal clear lake muddy. Ever since the Wormling had come, gray clouds hovered, angry at the earth.

Such surrounded the gigantic lake at the mountaintop, resulting in a cone of darkness that spread over the land. But that is not to say it rained only there. The Valley of Shoam got its share. In fact, most of the inhabitants of the valley huddled inside their humble dwellings even now as the

relentless rain beat on their thatched roofs, invading their cupboards and living rooms, seeping into the walls. Small animals moved on the dense forest floor, looking for some dry place, curling up by the base of a tree or under bushes.

Two droplets fell in tandem, twin tears from a grieving sky, and descended on the valley. If you were inside these droplets—well, you would have to be very tiny—you would pass the tip of the mountain that rises beyond the lake into a sharp, rocky point, then travel down the side to the hole the Mucker had dug to allow the Wormling passage from the Highlands to the Lowlands.

You might land on a pine needle, exploding into several droplets before reaching the ground, or you might fall on a scumhouse, the small building behind each home known as an outhouse to those in Owen's world. He had never seen one until he happened on this valley.

Call it fate or happenstance, but these two raindrops that hurtled toward the ground at a frightening rate (and didn't seem the least bit bothered by the speed) separated and remained an arm's length apart until one landed on the boy we know as Owen and the other on his new friend Watcher.

The former was a young teenager out of his element, out of his comfort zone, with piercing brown eyes and a shock of light brown hair. He was of average height and slight build—which is to say that Owen did not look like the full-

armed football players back home but more like a chess-club type. He wore clothes from his world—jeans, a T-shirt, and a backpack—under a cloak the Lowlanders called a tunic, made from the skins of forest animals. He had accepted it as a gift from the woman inside the cottage behind him after her husband, Bardig, had died, a victim of an otherworldly being named Dreadwart, a being Owen could have never even imagined only a few short days before.

The latter was a smaller being, Watcher, whose face looked much like a Yorkshire terrier's. Let us be clear that Watcher would have been infuriated to know we had compared her to a dog from the Highlands, a dog that, unlike her, can't speak and walks on four legs. Her eyes were soft and delicate, and when she blinked the water away from her brown-and-blond matted fur, it made her look sad, as if tears pooled there. But do not be fooled by her cute, gentle appearance, for, as you will see, inside Watcher beats a ferocious heart.

Watcher's ears made perfect sentinels, listening for anything out of the ordinary: the flap of a wing, the call of some strange animal, or a cry for help. She had been trained since a youngling to be alert to everything around her, and that training had paid off when she had heard the arrival of the Wormling and paved the way for him. But he was not as welcome to the rest in the valley as she wished.

Owen, the Wormling, and Watcher had been together

since the passing of Bardig. Owen had wanted to immediately search for the King's Son, who, it was said, would unite Owen's world with the Lowlands and everyone would be saved and happy and blah, blah, blah. But with the time of mourning for Bardig and the heavy rains (which had coincidentally come at the same time), Owen had relented and stayed in the small dwelling, sleeping on the back porch while Bardig's wife and a few townspeople sat inside crying and moaning and trying their best to sing comforting songs.

"Why do they sing so softly?" Owen had said.

"Singing is forbidden," Watcher said, "along with the reading of books." She nodded at *The Book of the King*, Owen's huge, animal-skinned tome that weighed as much as an old dictionary. "As far as I know, you carry the only book in the entire kingdom."

The book contained prophecies and stories, most of which Owen did not yet understand. But those weren't the parts that bothered him. It was the parts he *could* understand. The book invigorated and unnerved him. It caused his heart to soar at one moment, imbuing him with great courage and mettle, and in the next, it frightened him. It called him higher, gave him purpose, and with its stories made him realize he was not alone, that the world was much bigger than his tiny slice of it. Most chilling to Owen was that *he* had been given the responsibility of keeping the book and delivering it safely to

the King's Son, who was out there somewhere, even now, in this rain-drenched world.

You might ask why Owen and Watcher were standing outside in the cold, pelting rain. Why would they not gravitate inside near the fire like the others? Well, that's where they had been, but at the perking of Watcher's ears they had hurried outside, peering first at the forest, then toward the mountain, then down at the valley.

"Invisibles?" Owen said through chattering teeth.

Watcher shook her head. "A stirring. From the valley."

Ever since Owen had arrived, he had not moved from this mountainside retreat. He asked about the Lowlands, its regions, what the people did to stay alive, whether they ever went on vacation (to which Watcher had responded with a blank stare), and whether there were other valleys or rivers or even oceans.

"I've lived here all my life," Watcher had said, pointing. "Up there. Waiting for you. I've heard of all the different places, of course. And, yes, we do have an ocean, and there are islands and a huge river that way. But passage is difficult and dangerous. The town council forbade us long ago from sending a runner, even when there was a death of a family member."

Owen wiped water from his forehead and turned toward the valley where Watcher looked, sniffing, ears twitching, head cocked.

“Visitors,” she said.

Three hooded figures slogged up the mountain, their boots covered with mud, walking right where only days before Dreadwart had flattened a schoolhouse and trees. Owen had to look away, the fear of that day threatening to return.

“Let’s leave,” Owen said. “Let’s take what Bardig’s wife packed and find the King’s Son.”

“You can’t, Wormling. The initiation—”

“No one here can read the scroll you showed me. I can’t even read it. How are we supposed to go through some ceremony where no one knows what to say?”

“It is required.”

“It’s a ceremony. It means nothing compared to finding the King’s Son so I can—”

“Anger,” Watcher said, nodding toward the three who marched with even more determination up the muddy hillside. “There is rage among these.”

“I don’t care—”

“Perhaps you should.”

“—if someone is mad. I don’t care if people expect me to go through some ritual that proves I’m a real Wormling. It’s not even in the book.”

Watcher narrowed her eyes at him, and the fur beside her mouth drew itself into a knot. “Bardig gave his life to protect you, to keep you from the enemy. He was the one taught in

the ways of the Wormling, the only one who still believed you would come.”

“Other than you,” Owen said, calming.

Watcher seemed resolute. “He was clear that when you came—not *if* but *when*—the initiation must take place. It is more than just words. It is required. Period. I would think you would be more respectful of the dead and abide by his wishes.”

Owen followed Watcher up the hill to another tree ripped out by its roots. Fresh worms crawled in the moist earth as if even they were looking for a dry place. Small animals scurried, obviously sensing something.

“I can’t be expected to live up to the expectations of people I don’t even know,” Owen said. “They didn’t send me here.”

Watcher turned on him. “Can’t you trust in people who want you to succeed but who know there is more to your quest than simply finding someone and handing him a book?” Her ears twitched again, and her eyes widened. “The animals are telling us something. Danger is near.”

“Another attack?”

“Worse. Much worse.” Watcher loped up the hill as fast as any creature Owen had ever seen. She stopped and turned.

“Wait here. Try to stay out of trouble.”

Owen rolled his eyes. He was wet, cold, and eager to be on his way.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Jerry B. Jenkins (jerryjenkins.com) is the writer of the Left Behind series. He owns the Jerry B. Jenkins Christian Writers Guild, an organization dedicated to mentoring aspiring authors. Former vice president for publishing for the Moody Bible Institute of Chicago, he also served many years as editor of *Moody* magazine and is now Moody's writer-at-large.

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