

# CHAPTER 1

## Uncle Olaf's Farm

Nicolas lay down in the long grass by the bank of the fast-flowing stream with not a care in the world. His warm, fur-lined hat covered the end of his nose, and his fishing pole was hooked onto the end of his toes. He looked up from underneath the peak of his hat when he saw the sun peering through the cloud cover who wondered if the break of day would deliver him from the cold. It was cold, even for the mountains surrounding Oslo.

*Will you look at that! The ice is melting. It won't be long now when the lower drifts of snow on the mountain's ridges shall melt away too, and then it will be a real winter wonderland. It's really beautiful here. Somehow, it makes me feel free, so free that I can breathe. Nature truly is amazing. Oh, I just can't wait, and when it thaws in the spring, I'm going fishing and hunting with Uncle Olaf like he promised me.*

They were lovely, dreamy thoughts as the sun appeared over the horizon.

He breathed in the frosty air who expanded his lungs with the fruitful goodness of country purity before he sighed at the inevitability of his cause. Not one to shirk from his responsibilities, Nicolas fished for the salmon that frequented the rivers and streams here who handled it with good grace and cheer. After all, Nicolas loved his uncle who had treated him well in his time of need. Despite having a rough exterior, Uncle Olaf really was a gentle fellow, for he had willingly cared for Nicolas since his mother had died as much from cancer as from the stress of loving an alcoholic husband. Disappointingly, his vagrant father, Jakob, disappeared years ago leaving Nicolas in his aunt's and uncle's capable care. Uncle Olaf, Aunt Sigrid and their two children were his family now who unconditionally extended their love to Nicolas in his time of need.

Suddenly, his toe wiggled whilst the salmon took hold which awakened him from his daydream. With the dawning realization of an impending catch, he bolted upright who proceeded to reel it in. It was a fine-looking fish, with a beautiful streamlined body and black flecking. Slowly, he pulled it in through the shallows, over the rocks and onto the embankment.



*Uncle Olaf's Farm*

*My, my, what a beautiful looking fish. I almost don't want to eat you, but I must look after my family. I'm sorry. Two more salmon, and we'll have our fill though. That'll make Uncle Olaf feel really proud of me.*

What a gentle fellow Nicolas was. Now, feeling somewhat satisfied, he removed the fish from the hook before he threaded on another squirming worm and tossed it back in.

Life was wonderful at his uncle's farm. Nicolas was accepted unconditionally as a member of the family now, but he was expected to earn his keep. There were so many chores to attend to, and, at times, it felt overwhelming. However, he didn't want to feel the lash of Aunt Sigrid's scornful tongue again when he thought a fine catch would ease her mood and soothe her heart.

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Back at the farm, Aunt Sigrid surveyed her husband with rising scorn when, feeling thoroughly fed up with his laziness, she scowled at him

asleep as usual on his favourite rocking chair. Feeling a rising anger within, she bellowed her frustration.

“Come on, Olaf. Get up, you, lazy loaf. There’s work to be done, and Nicolas will be back soon.”

*Can’t a man ever get any peace and quiet? Do this! Do that! It’s a wonder I can work at all.*

Slowly, he awakened when he blinked his eyes fleetingly before he yawned before he mumbled a strained reply.

“There’s always tomorrow, Sigrid.”

With one eye opening and another closing, he was barely cognizant of her presence when Aunt Sigrid snapped back.

“With you, tomorrow never comes.”

Slowly, Uncle Olaf responded who moved his feet out of the way of the rampaging strokes of Aunt Sigrid’s straw broom. So it went on, moment after moment, hour after hour, and day after day that Aunt Sigrid complained who did most of the chores while Uncle Olaf evaded them who waited for *tomorrow*. It was the perfect dysfunctional relationship, but it had its rewards.

Uncle Olaf was a kind man, a generous man and giving of spirit. He possessed a paunchy disposition, greying sideburns and rosy, red cheeks that glowed in the winter’s cold. Life had been good to Uncle Olaf, for the farm had provided him and his family with all that was needed – a loyal wife, beautiful children and a clean, fresh environment with wonderful, crisp air to breathe. What more could a man possibly desire?

Yet, for all of his good nature and good fortune, something was amiss in his life, something that burned in his soul every time his eyes gazed upon them. Deep down inside himself, he felt the nagging burden of failure.

*It’s been so cold. Ha! Well, not as cold as the icy stares that you gave me, father. Oh, yes, I remember. Where did we go wrong? We tried so hard to please you, but nothing we did ever seemed to be enough. Poor Jakob. He didn’t deserve what you did to him, and now I’m left to clean up the mess. Why you were so hard on us? Were you feeling so unhappy that you abandoned us to seek happiness in a bottle? And all for what? For peace? For some distant illusion of happiness? We were just boys after all, but now that I’m getting older, I suppose I can appreciate that you simply felt unhappy about life. Father, I don’t want to judge you anymore. I just feel an emptiness inside.*

They were sombre thoughts, thoughts that drifted through his mind like the gentle breezes that caressed this wonderful valley in Oslo. He

dragged the emotional scarring around with him wherever he went; a ball and chain shackled to the heavy strings of his heart and feet.

Thank God for his wife Sigrid. She was his rock and his salvation. She showed her love through her hard work, devotion, and commitment to her family who bore the mental scars of an unaffectionate mother and father in the bygone days when physical affection was not displayed publicly. Yet, for all of this dysfunction, their matrimonial relationship and their family managed well enough. A woman of fastidious efficiency, she wore her hair in a tight-fitting bun while her fingers bore the aging evidence of a lifetime's hard work on the farm. Thoroughly loyal to her husband's convictions, she still clung precariously to dreams of her own – all these years later.

Sensitive, wise, efficient and worldly, she accepted the circumstances of her marriage and rural existence with good grace, but her youthful experience in the bustling, thriving city of Oslo pulled at her heartstrings when she thought of the boutique shops, galleries and theatres that she had once so enthusiastically visited.

Oh, if only time would allow me to visit Mrs Haugen's Fashion boutique store. Oh, just the thought of the silk and the smell of those beautiful scented candles. *That scent is still fresh in my memory*, but it seems that all my time is spent here looking after Olaf. I don't know how he'd survive without me quite frankly. Well, boys will be boys I suppose, but I do miss the night life. Perhaps it's time I treated myself.

She dreamed away as her broom swished from side to side. However, her life was fulfilled and full of happy moments, for the rural couple had two children, Henry, eight years old and Elise, his older sister who was fourteen. Nicolas, her nephew, was aged in between at thirteen years of age, and he liked his cousins very much.

Suddenly, the door slammed shut when Uncle Olaf welcomed Nicolas home with the catch.

"Fine looking catch, lad. Now, go and wash up, and I'll get them ready for supper."

Uncle Olaf seemed to be more excited by filling his stomach than by cleaning and filleting the fish, but at least it gave him some sense of responsibility.

Nicolas didn't mind the chores. In fact, he felt obligated to help as did the other children who had been busy picking the wild berries that thrived in these parts. Aunt Sigrid had been diligently preparing the pot for fish stew and potatoes while Nicolas could smell the delicious broth boiling away as it meandered over and wafted fragrantly into the outside laundry. Every day he would scrub the fishy smell from his hands with

soap and water in the old laundry sink behind the kitchen wall until the standard of cleanliness satisfied Aunt Sigrid's inspection. Whingeing as usual, Henry flung the back door open.

"Fish for supper again? Please, tell me it's not true, pappa."

Rolling up his sleeves, Uncle Olaf dreamt of warmer weather. "Won't be long now, and the snows will melt, Hen. Then we can hunt for elk and deer and have a real feast."

"Oh, I can't wait, pappa. I've had enough of those *stupid* fish."

"And just *where* is your sister, Henry?"

"Reading her books, as usual, pappa."

"That girl! Her mind is always in the clouds."

Nicolas and Henry headed back inside to the table who sat down at their usual places as they waited patiently for Aunt Sigrid to bring the pot over.

"Where is that girl?"

She then proceeded to serve the stew into the carved, wooden bowls when Nicolas offered to find her.

"I'll fetch her, Aunt Sigrid."

Immediately, Nicolas marched up the rickety stairs who ran to her room. Not wanting her to miss out on supper, he thumped on her door loudly when he shouted for her to come to supper. "Supper time, Elise."

Elise was at that tender girl's age when she had noticed the wandering eyes of Kristian in her direction. A beautiful, sensitive, sweet child, she had been forced to grow up prematurely before her years to accept the responsibility of nurturing the boys in her mother's unintended absence of affection. However, Elise had dreams of her own; wonderful, beautiful dreams that would one day see her teaching children the beauty and imagination of the written word at educational facilities throughout Oslo.

She twirled in front of her full-length mirror as she looked longingly at her long, golden-brown hair falling gently over her shoulders when she became completely dissatisfied by what she saw. She sighed at both the frustration of her appearance and the inability to beautify herself without her mother's assistance. It was something she genuinely searched for in her mother's abiding care, but sadly, it was amiss in her life. Possessing beautiful, soft, porcelain skin and a developing physique of her teenage years, the natural doubts and vulnerabilities she felt surfaced regularly. However, Elise was determined to impress the young man when she desperately tried on her favourite dress to see if it still fitted and if it required any cosmetic attention before she cast her bright, blue eyes into

the mirror who scanned for any perceptible deficiencies. Indecision, it seems, was not a girl's best friend as her thoughts indicated.

*Who knows if Kristian will notice me in this dress. I hope he does. Oh, maybe the pink dress is a better choice. And look at my hair. It's such a mess. What's he going to think of me?*

Kristian was a shy boy at school who felt too afraid to approach her when she felt that she must be the one to make the first move. In a mild panic, she thrust the dress back into her wardrobe before she hurriedly dressed into the dreary costume that mamma had sewn with a mother's love and care for her. Fearing her father's aggravation, she scurried down the stairs where waiting infinitely patiently were all of the family with their hands pressed together into a pointed triangle. Uncle Olaf was preparing to say the evening blessing when Elise took her place silently as the prayer began.

"Thank you, Lord, for this supper of fish and bread. Thank you, Lord, for our home and peace in our time, but mostly, thank you, Lord, for my daughter's willingness to eat with us," said Uncle Olaf.

Having said the evening blessing, Uncle Olaf rolled his eyes while amen was said by all present before the feast began.

With maternal care, Aunt Sigrid scooped the fishy broth into the bowls as spoons flashed and mouths were filled. The bread was passed around while the potato dumplings that Aunt Sigrid had cooked as a staple to fill the children's aching stomachs were consumed with a thankful indulgence. During the course of the conversations flowing around the table, Uncle Olaf's curiosity surfaced when he asked his daughter a probing question.

"Elise, why do you read so much?"

Elise drifted off in thought.

*The answer is obvious, pappa. It's my internal world of escapism, a place where I can feel free to explore my dreams unimpeded from the world. And what would you know, pappa? You never show me the time of day anyway. You're always too busy sleeping and fiddling with those stupid, broken-down machines.*

Elise ignored the question knowing that any reaction would arouse the suspicions and juvenile behaviour of Henry. She was a sensitive girl, with all the emotional nuances and attachments that her tender years demanded. So feeling oblivious to the intrusion, she just consumed her dumplings with a minimum of fuss who remained silent before her troublemaking brother piped up.

"She wasn't *reading*, pappa."

Henry then started giggling which immediately aroused the suspicions of his father.

“Then *what* were you doing all day in your room, young lady?”

Still, Elise remained silent when she became quietly agitated who felt that her father’s intrusive question was invading her personal space. Seeing her reaction, Henry started to snigger.

“Trying on that new dress for Kristian’s eyes, I bet.”

And there it was – Henry’s inevitable, boyish meddling.

But it was not to be tolerated when Aunt Sigrid spoke authoritatively. “Now, keep a civil tongue in my house, Henry Christensen, or you’ll feel the back of my spoon, young man.”

Henry immediately bowed his head in obedience and the taunting stopped while they all consumed their supper in high spirits before Uncle Olaf spoke once more.

“You’ll need to clean out the coop tomorrow, Nicolas. I’m sure that’s why that damned rooster keeps crowing, and be sure it’s done by ten in the morning, or I’ll have your hide.”

Knowing better than to argue with him, Nicolas quietly acquiesced to his uncle’s will. “Yes, Uncle Olaf.”

Well, if that wasn’t the pot calling the kettle black – Uncle Olaf giving instruction for work to be done. It infuriated Aunt Sigrid to no end who quietly processed her internal frustrations.

*Oh, what did I do to deserve such a lazy sod? Every day I nag at him to chop the wood and fix the fence, and do you think that it’s ever done? Not now, Sigrid, he says. Tomorrow, Sigrid. Well, tomorrow never comes, and the chores have to be done. Oooowww! You test my patience, Olaf Christensen. You really do.*

Returning her thoughts to the present, Uncle Olaf felt the electricity of Aunt Sigrid’s sharp tongue.

“At least the boy earns his keep, and doesn’t spend the winter months sleeping like a bear in a cave like *someone* I know.”

“Well, *someone* has to man the fort,” retorted Uncle Olaf. “And what better animal than a bear?”

Imitating a bear, he bared his teeth who started making growling noises before he contracted his pointed fingers into claws. Everyone laughed at his antics while Aunt Sigrid tried to suppress it, but she still managed a forced smile. After the fish stew was consumed, Aunt Sigrid fetched the large bowl of mixed fruit and berries before she distributed them into five equal portions. She also added some fresh yoghurt which she had mixed the night before. Rubbing his hands together in anticipation, Uncle Olaf seized the moment when he played the fool.

“Fruit of the gods, for the fruit of my loins,” he said.

The children reacted with giggles at his lewd inference. Taking the bait, Henry decided to join in the fun as he held up two plump plums for everyone to see.

“What are these, pappa?”

Humourously, Uncle Olaf responded. “Well, blow me down, if you haven’t got old Saint Nic’s plums.”

Everyone giggled incessantly, for the howling hilarity was even too much for Aunt Sigrid’s strict sense of decorum. Eventually, after enduring the frowns from Aunt Sigrid, they all settled down to eat their dessert. The berries and fruit tasted so sweet that they all gobbled them down quickly before Uncle Olaf arose from the table to attend to the dwindling fire in the fireplace. It was late in the winter, but it was still very cold at night. In preserving the radiant heat, he stoked the fire with fresh oak wood logs they had split in the summer. Soon enough, the rising flames had quelled any rising objections.

Finding his favourite crusty, old lounge chair, Uncle Olaf seated himself down with a glass of wine before he gazed across at his youthful family. The boys especially reminded him of his long-lost brother, Marius, who had disappeared mysteriously years ago at Christmas time when they were just mere boys themselves. Quietly, he reflected upon things.

*Where are you Marius? It’s hard to believe that you disappeared without a trace all those years ago. Poor mamma. It was the very death of her. How she wailed into the late hours of the night. Her thoughts were only for your welfare. It was so unfair. I just hope that you found some happiness wherever you are.*

He sighed at the painful memory of his loss before he drank his wine who fell fast asleep when he left the parental duties as usual to Aunt Sigrid. In her usual, instructive manner, she barked her instructions before she sent the children off to have their nightly bath.

“Now, be off with you, and wash behind your ears.”

As usual, Henry complained vigorously. “Oh, do we have to?”

Aunt Sigrid remained stern with her response. “Stop your whingeing, Henry, or you’ll feel the back of my spoon, young man.”

So off they went to have their nightly bath. Elise bathed first – being the only girl, she insisted. Henry followed after her and finally Nicolas bathed with renewed hot water added to the bathtub to complete the job. In the morning, it was Nicolas’ job to empty the bath and fetch new kindling to place under the large, copper urn which he would fill with fresh water. This would be heated up all over again for tomorrow’s bath.



It was a never-ending cycle, but Nicolas didn't mind. He liked to feel the warmth of the bath water cleanse his skin and to lie quietly whilst he daydreamed and felt his body floating in the water. And daydream, he did. He dreamt of all sorts of things as his mind travelled to places of infinite imagination and story-telling wonder in his endless search for a place of love – his most prized location.

*Can you hear me mamma? Wherever you are I know that you're sorry that you left me, but I'm okay, I suppose. Uncle Olaf and Aunt Sigrid are wonderful really, but I do miss our hugs and conversations. You know mamma, I've got a secret to tell you. I have three hairs now on my chin. I might be shaving soon. Well, it's not so bad here, but not a day goes by when I don't think of you. I love you, mamma.*

Would he ever truly find happiness? Such dreamy, personal thoughts occupied his thinking. However, it was a sad and lonely location which seemed devoid of the obligation for displays of parental affection from his uncle and aunt. Nicolas breathed a heavy sigh at the memory of his mother and the golden recollections of her pure, porcelain face that were etched so irrepressibly into his psyche.

*I wonder if God really has taken care of her?* He dreamed on....

Standing outside the bathroom curtain, Aunt Sigrid shrieked her displeasure at Nicolas' daydreaming habit whilst he soaked for an eternity in the bath when he incurred her considerable wrath.

"Nicolas, you'll have no skin left since you have been soaking for so long."

Still in a daydream, he answered. "Yes, Aunt Sigrid. I'm getting out now."

Nicolas dried himself who put on his pajamas, combed his hair and brushed his teeth before he duly presented himself for bed.

"Goodnight, Aunt Sigrid. Goodnight, Uncle Olaf."

It was a sad time for Nicolas, for he expected a kiss from his Uncle and Aunt. With longing showing in his eyes, he awaited their response. Yet it was the same response every night.

*Why they don't kiss me goodnight? Mamma always did. I do everything they ask of me. It's not fair.*

His uncle and aunt were good people, but not affectionate people. Their own children rarely received the occasional, affectionate peck on the cheek. Nicolas missed that who pined for a maternal, mothering spirit that would affectionately embrace him. But it was not to be. He marched off to bed who pulled the heavy cotton sheets up over his shoulders. This was his favourite time of the day, a time when he could dream unimpeded and let his mind run free like the flowing streams from the

mountain. Every night was a new dream, a new adventure, a new location. So he closed his eyes and dreamt of his favourite safe place locked away in the far recesses of his mind.

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Early, the next morning, crowing his annoying, rousing call, Roland, the rooster awakened the farm.

‘Cock-a-doodle-doo....cock-a-doodle-doo.’

Nicolas rubbed his eyes and squinted. Light beams streamed in through the gap between the curtains which gently illuminated his face. He didn’t need further prompting, for he knew that it was time to rise. Quietly, he moved over to Henry’s bed who gave it a shake which stirred Henry from his sleep.

Henry was a typical young boy for his age. Small, thin and wiry, he possessed baby-blue eyes and a thick crop of unkempt, brown hair that curled at the fringes. Curious, mischievous and energetic, his thought processes often followed his premature actions. That’s why he often found himself in trouble, and he could never figure out why. Such is the innocence of youth. Despite his annoying behaviours, he loved his family very much and they loved him.

“Get up, Henry. Get up. Time to rise and shine,” said Nicolas.

There was a slight grunting noise followed by a frustrated grumble and finally, an animated rolling over of his limbs before he voiced his objections, with a high-pitched yelp as his eyes opened up.

“It’s not fair. Why do I have to clean the goat pens? It’s always me. Why can’t you do it for once, Nic?”

*Stop whining, Henry. Everyday it’s the same routine that we go through. Just grow up a bit, and do your job.*

Defiantly, Henry yawned before he rolled over who planted his head under the pillow as Nicolas urged him to rise.

“Come on, Henry. Wake up! It’s time for breakfast.”

There were some more animated objections, with a series of accompanying yawns before Henry finally arose to face the day. Having dressed himself into his wintry clothes, Henry ventured downstairs while Nicolas trailed behind with his clothes bundled up in his arms.

Uncle Olaf and Aunt Sigrid didn’t play favourites, and they were *all* expected to help out at the farm. Uncle Olaf milked the cows, Henry fed the goats and cleaned the pens, Elise helped her mother prepare breakfast and Nicolas cleaned the chicken coop. It was all entirely fair thought Nicolas as he dressed into his oilskin trousers and fur coat. Greeting him

at the breakfast table, Aunt Sigrid was meticulous when, in her own inimitable way, she checked his hands for cleanliness before she poured him a glass of his favourite orange and lime juice.

“Now, drink up, Nicolas. You’ll need all your energy today for cleaning up that mess in the coop.”

Feeling ambivalent to the cause, Nicolas answered almost robotically. “Yes, Aunt Sigrid.”

Pikelets, bread and bacon filled his stomach while he gorged in unrestrained deliberation until he felt his seams burst.

“Thank you, Aunt Sigrid. I’m going to clean the coop now.”

“Make sure you bring me back the eggs, young man. I’m making pannekakers for your lunch, so be careful and don’t break any!”

“Yes, Aunt Sigrid.”

Nicolas scurried up to his room who pulled on a thick, woollen sweater before he scurried back down to put on his overcoat, his favourite purple scarf and hand-knitted, woollen ear-flap hat that his aunt had meticulously crafted before he made for the door. Pausing, he opened it, and then moved outside quickly before he closed it again as he shouted his departing call.

“I’m going to clean the coop now, Aunt Sigrid.”

It was a clear day and the morning’s cold was biting at his heels. Surveying the horizon, he ventured over to the ramshackle shed where Uncle Olaf kept all of his contraptions and tools. Uncle Olaf liked to fiddle with machinery, but he never quite fixed things properly, like the boiler that kept breaking down every winter much to his aunt’s protestations.

Nicolas observed the array of garden tools piled up against the shed’s wall under the cover of an old pergola when he picked up a rake and an old coal shovel before he placed them into the wheelbarrow. Slowly, with the wheelbarrow squeaking and wobbling, he wheeled it outside – another one of Uncle Olaf’s projects that was never quite finished. He wheeled the wheelbarrow down the pot-holed path through the rutted ditch that led to the rambling pathway down to the chicken coop, one hundred yards or so away. He didn’t mind the isolation. In fact, he quite enjoyed it, for it gave him the chance to get away from Henry for a while. Wobble, squeak, wobble, sounded the wobbly wheel before he eventually arrived at the coop. Sitting there unobtrusively waiting patiently was Roland the rooster perched upon a crusty plank of an old, gnarled fence post.

“Morning, Roland,” said Nicolas. “Sorry, my friend – no visitors allowed.”



Roland somehow understood his words who objected with a flap of his wings. After that response, there was just an observation of the rooster's presence whilst Nicolas opened the latched gate who closed it behind before he moved inside with his garden tools.

*Boy! What a mess. Oh, well, I may as well get started.*

Feeling somewhat ambivalent to the cause, he began to rake the old straw up into piles and place it into the wheelbarrow.

He toiled and laboured before he meticulously raked out the cages as he checked the nesting boxes in the process. Much to his delight, they were full of eggs, but fouled and dirty. So he laid new straw down to complete the job. There were thirteen eggs in total.

*That will make some delicious pannekakers, and Aunt Sigrid will be so happy. Oh, I can't wait. Mmmm, I can smell them now.*

Now, with a growing enthusiasm, he scooped them up into his hands who placed them into the basket. At the conclusion of his tasks, he diligently filled the water-trough with fresh water before he closed the gate behind and departed. Job done and fresh eggs into the bargain. *Oh, Aunt Sigrid will be so pleased* he mused before he placed the basket carefully into the wheelbarrow when he affectionately bade the rooster goodbye.

"Bye, Roland. See you in a few days."

Feeling better about things, Nicolas departed the henhouse with the wheelbarrow squeaking and wobbling annoyingly down the path. Up by the grove of birch trees through the rutted ditch, he travelled, and then –

crash! The old wheel finally gave way as the wheelbarrow crashed to the ground which sent the basket of eggs flying into a broken, scrambled mess.

*Oh, no! What will Aunt Sigrid think? It's not my fault. It's that stupid wheel.*

No pannekakers! It was a sorry sight. Egg shells and yolks lay broken on the ground whose oozing contents resulted in a liquid catastrophe.

*Well, I'll just tell her that there were no eggs and that should be that!*

So with practical application, he proceeded to diligently rake away the mess who refitted the wobbly wheel. It squeaked and wobbled all the way back to the farmhouse where Uncle Olaf was sitting in his rocking chair as usual on the porch. Seeing the boy approach, the cagey, old man then proceeded to ask Nicolas a probing question.

“How many eggs were there today, Nicolas?”

Nicolas searched his conscience for an answer when, not wanting to face the music, he responded. “Ah. Oh, none, Uncle Olaf.”

Well, Uncle Olaf was no fool who had seen the eggs for himself when he checked on the coop the day before. So he thought that he would check again when he pulled his tobacco out from his pocket and stuffed it into his pipe before he lit up. Eminently satisfied with its smoky emission, he asserted his presence when, with great posturing effort, he made the supreme sacrifice of rising out of his rocking chair. Begrudgingly, he offered Nicolas an alternative when he gave further instruction.

“Well, go and help Henry in the goat pens then, Nicolas.”

“Yes, Uncle Olaf.”

With his mind full of doubt and mistrust, Uncle Olaf decided to stroll down to the chicken coop as he puffed away on his pipe whilst the gentle caress of the sun filtered down through the mountains. Down the trail, through the rutted depression, and there, spread out on the ground, were small pieces of eggshell that Nicolas had missed cleaning up.

*None – my foot! I'll scold that boy. It's about time he learned his place.*

After marching back to the farmhouse, Uncle Olaf was typically insensitive.

“Nicolas! Nicolas! I saw the eggshells, my boy. Now, don't lie to me. What happened?”

Nicolas thought quickly for a plausible explanation who conceded that he should just come clean and tell his uncle the truth. However, when trying to protect himself, he thoughtfully suggested that perhaps other factors were at play.

“Well, Uncle Olaf, the wheel, well, it just fell off, and the basket crashed to the ground. You know, *that* wheel Aunt Sigrid is always telling *you* to fix.”

Uncle Olaf brought his hand to his pipe in a thoughtful contemplation when, not wanting to admit his fault, he grumbled and mumbled a defiant response.

“Well, you should be more careful, Nicolas. You can clean out the back of the garden shed after your chores as punishment. We need to eat, you know.”

So, grizzling and griping, Uncle Olaf departed in a huff who left Nicolas muttering his usual response.

“Yes, Uncle Olaf.”

*If you had only fixed the wheel that Aunt Sigrid had asked of you a thousand times, none of this would ever have happened. It's always my fault – never his.*

Now, feeling somewhat remorseful, Nicolas ventured down to the goat pens where he found Henry hard at work when he delivered the bad news.

“What?! No pannekakers, Nic.” said Henry.

“I’m sorry, Hen, but I’ll collect some more tomorrow. I promise.”

The two boys completed their chores who cleaned out the goat pens before they strolled back to the farmhouse to have a warm glass of milk and chocolate cookies that Elise had especially baked.

In covering his tracks, Uncle Olaf informed Aunt Sigrid that there were no eggs today, that Nicolas would be helping him clean out the back of the shed. Nicholas understood what that actually meant who asked if Hen could help, so that Uncle Olaf could fall asleep on his rocking chair and leave the boys unattended.

Meanwhile, Aunt Sigrid was authoritatively waving her pointed index finger at the boys as she gave her instruction.

“Well, off with you boys. And don’t come back until that shed is sparkling clean.”

*Hmmf! Well, they'll probably do a better job than that lazy loaf of a husband of mine.*

They gulped down the last of their milk who grabbed a handful of cookies before they hurried out the door. Down by the barn was Uncle Olaf’s shed, full of his old garden tools, machinery and contraptions that he occasionally fiddled with. He didn’t frequent it anymore, for Aunt Sigrid had grand plans to convert it to a storage shed for more grain and wood. With trepidation, they opened the old, creaking, rusty tin door when they were confronted with piles of tools and machinery left in a

state of chronic disrepair and neglect. Feeling overwhelmed, Nicolas asked his anxious question.

“What will we do with all of this junk?”

Thinking clearly, Henry offered his opinion. “Pappa won’t throw it out, so I guess we’ll just have to move it all. I think that will make mamma happy.”

Having lived with his uncle for a few years, Nicolas understood the family dynamics.

*What a waste of time. Uncle Olaf gets us to do all the work while he sleeps. It just doesn’t seem right. Maybe Aunt Sigrid is right about him.*



Despite Henry’s mischievous nature, he really was a good boy at heart and Nicolas, the ever-obedient child. So they set about cleaning, moving and reorganizing the junk in the shed whilst Uncle Olaf snored on the porch. Bottles, cans, twisted pieces of metal, tins, cooking utensils, old car parts – you name it, and it was in the shed. Forty years of junk that had been stored for no real purpose, and they were assigned to its care. They toiled all day who only stopped for lunch when Aunt Sigrid summoned them inside for some pickled herring. Finally, when you could actually see the floor free from layers of dirt and grime, did they claim the completion of their duty. Brushing his hands together, Nicolas was confident that they had done a good job.

“Well, that’s done, Hen. I’ll just put this old candlestick in the corner, and we can tell Uncle Olaf that we’ve finished.”

Feeling happy with their completed chores, Nicolas picked up the old, silver-encrusted candlestick who walked over to the corner of the shed before he plonked it down on the weathered, creased canvas covering full of dust and spider webs. Clunk!

Nicolas felt quite curious.

*That was odd. It sounded wooden, yet metallic at the same time. I wonder what it is.*

Immediately, curiosity got the better of him when he reached down who pulled up the flap of the old canvas covering the piece of furniture when he spotted what looked like a rolled furniture leg.

“Hey, Hen. Come here! Look at this!”

“What is it?”

“I don’t know, but help me uncover it.”

The two boys pulled out some heavy boxes, an old violin case, some old bicycle parts, books, and other pieces of junk until the canvas covering was laid bare. Becoming more curious, Henry urged Nicolas to further uncover the mysterious furniture.

“Well, go on, Nic. See what it is.”

Nicolas pulled off the covering when a plume of dust puffed into the air causing them both to cough. Then his eyes lit up. “Wow! Look, Hen. It’s a piano.”

“Oh! It’s just an old piece of junk, Nic.” Henry then gave it a closer inspection. “I bet it doesn’t work.”

Nicolas’ eyes were the size of dinner plates when his enthusiasm took hold.

“Of course, it will work. Just look at it, Henry. It’s so beautiful.”

Immediately, Nicolas’ mind started to dream of the piano’s infinite possibilities.

*If I clean it up maybe Uncle Olaf will let me play it and who knows? Maybe I can learn to play again.*

Nicolas grabbed a nearby rag who started to wipe away the years of accumulated dust and debris from the piano’s surfaces. With some strenuous effort, he revealed a residue of some strange and ornate carvings on the piano’s scrolled legs and top. With growing curiosity, he pulled up the keyboard cover to reveal the ivory keys on which he tapped a few notes. Tap, tap. Surprisingly, the piano twanged two very unpalatable and discordant notes in response. He had learned piano from his mother when she was caring enough to teach it, and the thought of re-engaging his learning was tempting. Seeing the infinite possibilities for the old piano’s use, Nicolas cleaned and cleaned as his enthusiasm grew.



“Hen, I think I’ll ask Uncle Olaf if I can play for us once it’s properly cleaned,” he said.

Henry then thought of his father when a growing enthusiasm surfaced.

“Pappa played the violin years ago, Nic. Maybe you can play together.”

“We’ll see. Now, help me move it out from the corner, so I can clean it down properly”.

The two young boys struggled to move the old piano, but its roller wheels still worked which allowed them to push it into the center of the shed’s floor. Nicolas went to work again immediately as he wiped away all the years of dust that had encapsulated it. He cleaned and cleaned until the dark brown and rich red hues of the maple and spruce timbers shone through. He then pulled out the old piano stool who dusted it down before he opened the keyboard cover fully and began to play.

Miraculously, the keys still worked, but it was way out of tune. While his fingers danced over the keys he recalled a piece his mother had once taught him as he began to play from memory when, standing at the shed door entrance, Uncle Olaf bellowed his objection.

“What’s all this racket?”

“We found this old piano in the corner, Uncle Olaf, and I was just trying it out,” said Nicolas.

“Well, stop making so much noise and pack it away.”

“Yes, Uncle Olaf.”

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It was late in the afternoon and supper time was upon them, for Aunt Sigrid and Elise had prepared a special feast of roast pork and vegetable greens. They scrubbed their hands to perfection knowing that Aunt Sigrid would inspect them before they sat down at the table to eat their meal after the evening prayer. The pork was delicious, and they savoured every moist mouthful when Nicolas piped up about his new-found discovery.

“Aunt Sigrid, Uncle Olaf, I should like to learn the piano again. I really miss it, and you have an old piano in the shed. Could I please play it? I’ll be no trouble with it. I promise you,” asked Nicolas.

Aunt Sigrid and Uncle Olaf looked at one another as they searched for an answer. They ummed and aahed, for a few moments, but after finding no objection to Nicolas’ request, Uncle Olaf responded as he pointedly wiggled his index finger.

“Well, all right, Nicolas, but only after all your chores and schoolwork are done. Is that understood, young man?”

Excited by the infinite possibilities of the old piano, Nicolas understood his Uncle’s instruction.

“Yes, of course, Uncle Olaf.”

A huge smile spread across his face. He couldn’t get the thought of that old piano out of his head when he went to bed happily dreaming of its musical possibilities.

*Tomorrow, I’m going to play and play to my heart’s desire. It’s going to be great. What could possibly go wrong?*

Ha! Famous last words.

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At first light, the rooster’s crowing awakened them from their slumber when Nicolas’ first thoughts were immediately for the piano.

*It’s going to be wonderful to have music in the house again. Perhaps Uncle Olaf could even bring out his old violin and we could play together. Wouldn’t that be something?*

After dressing and emptying the bathwater, he raced down to the henhouse when he collected half a dozen eggs that were laid overnight before he presented them cheerfully to a delighted Aunt Sigrid.

“Well, I suppose you’ll want eggs for your breakfast, my boy. Now just sit down, and I’ll fry them up.”

“Aunt Sigrid, could we have pannekakers for lunch?”

It was a fair enough question; one which Aunt Sigrid chose to answer considerately.

“You can check on the chickens tomorrow, Nicolas, and we’ll have them then – all right?”

Everyone was up and about now when Uncle Olaf returned from the milking shed with a bucket of cow’s milk while Henry was happily munching on some bread. All the while, Elise was beautifying herself in her room in a display of unashamed vanity in front of her full-length mirror.

Placing the bucket of milk on the table, Uncle Olaf grumbled loudly as he sat down.

“We have some fences to mend, Sigrid, and those damned foxes are at it again.”

“Take the boys with you, Olaf, and be sure you come home for lunch.”

A plate full of bacon, eggs and potato appeared before them when they tucked into their breakfast with great eagerness in preparation for the

trials of the day. After a satisfying meal, they donned their overcoats and jackets who proceeded outside. Uncle Olaf found an old shovel, some wire and pliers, and when he wasn't looking, Nicolas slipped an old pocketknife and cigarette lighter into his pocket.

“What do you want that for, Nic?” asked Henry.

“Shhh! Be quiet, Hen. We can let the crackers off down by the barn when Uncle Olaf goes into town tomorrow,” whispered Nicolas.

Henry's mind spun at a thousand miles per hour.

*Oh, Boy! This is going to be so much fun. Maybe we can put some in Elise's wardrobe. Yeh! That would be really funny. Oh, I can't wait to see the look on her face.*

Well, boys will be boys, and despite Nicolas' penchant for clean living, occasionally the urge for mischief surged in his veins. After Uncle Olaf closed and locked the door, they marched off to fix the fence that the foxes had destroyed down by the end of the path near the henhouse. Unfortunately, it took most of the morning to complete the job, for Henry and Nicolas did all of the work whilst Uncle Olaf found a comfortable tree stump to sit down on who offered his supervisory experience. Soon enough, he was fast asleep snoring loudly.

After completing the repairs, they wandered back to the farmhouse when the shed came into view. Nicolas was desperate to try his new-found instrument when he piped up who asked Uncle Olaf if he could play the piano once more. Well, the chores were done and he had promised. So they ventured to the rickety, old front door when Uncle Olaf opened it up. With great enthusiasm, the boys pushed the piano back into the middle of the floor who removed the canvas covering. In a wide, scanning arc of his immediate surroundings, Uncle Olaf gave the shed his thorough inspection who was suitably impressed with what he saw. Everything seemed clean and organized. Satisfied with the boys' good work, he urged Nicolas to play.

*Hmmm. Well, I'll be damned. Those boys have done a mighty fine job indeed. It might make a good storage shed yet.*

“Well, go on then. Play me a tune, Nicolas.”

“But I don't have any music, Uncle Olaf.”

In response, Nicolas' eyes searched the shed when he found nothing except an old piano stool. Placing it in front of the piano, he flipped the lid when he found inside a crusty, thick, worn manuscript covered in dust. Cautiously, Nicolas brought the manuscript to his face who blew softly when great plumes of choking dust blew off which caused him to sneeze uncontrollably. Everyone laughed at his antics, but Nicolas wasn't impressed. Feeling annoyed, he grasped the rag on the piano

before he cleaned the manuscript down. When the dust settled, he tried to make out the words – ‘Spatium Temporis Continui Copernicus.’

He had no idea what that meant, but feeling impatient and excited, he placed the manuscript on the piano stand. At that moment, Elise arrived with a tray of glasses full of refreshing lime and orange juice. She had seen them walking up the trail from the kitchen window who wanted to please her father with a morning offering when Uncle Olaf announced the impending performance.

“Ah, thank you, my dear. Please sit down. Nicolas is going to entertain us with an impromptu recital.”

So everyone found something to perch on while Nicolas prepared to play them a tune as he flipped the first page.

“De Partu Caelum.” (The Birth of the Heavens).

Feeling somewhat apprehensive, he sat down on the piano stool who scanned his eyes over the very odd-looking manuscript before he brought his fingers to the keys. The staves and notes were all written in gold, and the manuscript was tightly bound. It appeared to be a simple enough piece to play being in common time and in the key of C major when he stroked the first four solitary notes whilst everyone waited in bated breath for a virtuosic performance. Nicolas then followed the notes of the music before he struck the F, D sharp, A and B flat note combination abruptly. However, they were mistaken notes – *when it happened*. The shed door shut tight before a bright sprinkling of gold dust swirled magically from the pages of the manuscript that grew into swirling twirls of bright light which comprehensively intertwined and engulfed them. They were trapped in a bubble of light and dust when the shed started to twirl and rotate. Suddenly, they felt their bodies leave the ground as they floated towards the sky. They were paralyzed with both fear and wonder before the golden glitter of the light surpassed their senses when they were catapulted instantaneously into an unknown dimension where time and space had no meaning. Quite miraculously, they floated in the air as they were propelled towards an unknown destination in an unknown time when they stared out into the jet blackness that surrounded them. Uncle Olaf felt utterly dismayed as he groaned with discontent.

“What’s happening?”

Suddenly, the moon appeared over the horizon like a huge, cratered saucer when Elise’s eyes filled with tears.

“Oh! It’s so beautiful.”

“The moon, the moon,” cried Henry as he pointed his finger.

They could see the whole satellite, even the Sea of Tranquility when it passed so close by that they felt they could touch it. Suddenly, it was



gone and they were back floating in a sea of darkness when, in a moment of pure viewing joy, a celestial awakening occurred before all of the stars lit up the sky. Every corner of their universe was filled with the splendour of twinkling stars as they shone all around them in a brilliant planetary display. Needless to say that Henry felt terrified as he tried to reason with the journey.

“I’m frightened, pappa. I don’t understand what’s happening. Are we dead? Is this heaven?”

Uncle Olaf looked at Henry as he tried desperately to alleviate his son’s fears. “I don’t think that we’re dead, Henry, and I’m not sure if this is heaven, but it has something to do with *that* piano. I’m sure of it.”

Nicolas was still seated at the piano as they flew through space who was now feeling too terrified to strike another note. All the while, the

atmosphere around them spiralled and changed into a kaleidoscope of majestic, bright colour.

On the far horizon, Mars loomed into view. It was, indeed, an ancient planet that appeared utterly inhospitable. Gazing down at its cratered desolation, they viewed in wonder, the huge canyons, gorges and wide-open spaces of its rocky plateaus and mountain ranges – a very fearful looking place indeed. Gaining momentum, the bubble swished down to the surface when they viewed the hostile, rocky plains. They gasped in awe at its raw beauty before they swished up again who re-entered the space-time continuum, back into an oblique, all-consuming darkness.

Finally, the cosmos opened up into an all-encompassing, broad canvas of brilliant, illuminating colour while the stars of distant galaxies twinkled on their approach to Venus. Swirling plumes of gases filled the atmosphere as they flew by protected in the bubble of the time warp. Swishing and swirling, they orbited the planet when they were once again encapsulated into total darkness. During their cosmic tour of the solar system, each planet became more distant than the last. It was incredibly beautiful; a vast sea of space where the twinkling stars reached new and unexplored horizons.

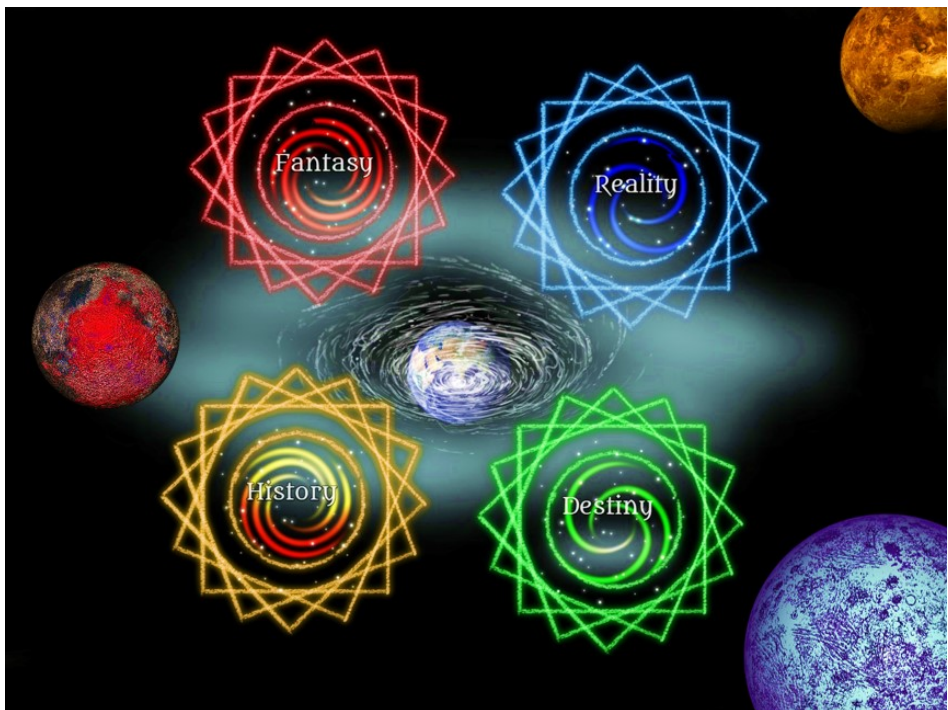
Here, on the edge of space's endless frontiers, it became increasingly difficult to separate reality from fantasy. It mesmerized their thoughts and heightened their emotions such was the astonishing beauty of this timeless world. Now, travelling at tremendous speed, they headed for the outreaches of space where, with absolute clarity, the intense beauty of the nebulae filtered through the heavens in different shades of red, violet, and blue.

It seemed a timeless journey before they left the intense beauty of the solar system when they began to speed up. Moving faster and faster, the wormhole approached the four portal doors of time: fantasy, reality,



history and destiny. Here, these glowing, cosmic gateways each shone like a luminescent star in the sky. This was the most bedazzling of locations where the universal explanations of time and planetary existence made sense. These four magical portals were intertwined around one another, inextricably interwoven within the cosmic fabric of time, yet remained ostensibly free. Which portal would they enter and why?

***Which of the portal doors should open?  
To show the time and place.  
Where the monsters roam, and the dinosaurs rule,  
For the glory of the race.***



The Four Portal Doors Of Time

Suddenly, all of the light streamed into a single, defined focus as they headed towards fantasy's portal. With fear showing across his face, Nicolas screamed his concerns to Uncle Olaf.

"I don't know what to do, Uncle Olaf. What should I do? What should I do?"

Uncle Olaf felt terrified. "Play, Nicolas. Just play the piano and maybe we'll all go home."

Nicolas examined the music intensely who began playing the piece again as the bubble moved faster and faster and spun around quicker and quicker as the light became brighter and brighter, and then...boom! Crash! An explosion of white light spread out across the sky when an all-encompassing silence fell upon them.

So it was that they stumbled into the wormhole of time who headed towards earth in a distant time and place, now the innocent victims of the piano's wondrous magic.....

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Meanwhile, as they tumbled through time's endless corridors, the Grand Wizard's eyes gazed upon the reawakening of the wormhole's magic. He was the undisputed ruler of this new world, an evil wizard who controlled the portals' direction when he chose to use it. Thoroughly obsessed with controlling all of time in the universe, his eyes were glazed with a concentrated focus of hate as he watched the images of the children and Uncle Olaf tumbling through the heavens to this miraculous world, lost in time. He sniggered to himself at the memory of Marius, that devilish human, who dared to steal the precious vials from Omniach's temple, for at last he had his eyes on the prize – those incredible vials of pure essence, the world's most powerful and magical time-travelling fuel. With hateful eyes, he stared into his witch's cauldron. All the while, spiralling, conflicting thoughts of menace occupied his tempestuous mind.

*Ah, the time has come. I can feel the energy, the power and the glory sweep into the blood of my veins. Heh, heh, heh. Yes, my fiendish, Shakrelian lords, you shall have your precious vials, and I shall be an all-conquering wizard. That you pretend to supercede me shall be your undoing. Nevermind, I shall play your game, and we shall see who is victorious.*

The Grand Wizard then examined the images more closely when his mind filled with terror.



*So it is you that the chronicles have revealed that shall challenge me. Fall to earth my sweet, innocent, sickly delinquents. I have been waiting for you, and don't think for a moment that I shan't dispose of you once I find that thieving menace, and I have the vials in my possession. Heh, heh, heh. This shall be like taking candy from a baby. Oh, my precious lords, are you hearing me?*

Looking skyward, he was, of course, acknowledging his Shakrelian lord masters that temporarily ruled over him, or so they thought. With vengeance brewing in his blood, he summoned his trusty necromancer, warlock Sarkhoum, to whom he gave his command.

“Warlock Sarkhoum, I have a task of great importance for you. Go to the Jurassic Valley in the early fourth eon and find those missing vials. Do this for me, and I shall reward you beyond your dreams.”

Warlock Sarkhoum nodded his understanding when he vanished in a puff of black dust before his body flew through the sky as it headed towards the cosmic wormhole. Lightning flashed and the rolling clouds clashed as he entered the spinning vortex where he spun and tumbled around in the whirring hole of terror. Floating, spinning, rotating, and tumbling, he finally descended to the ground when he looked up to see the monstrous shape of some huge Sequoia trees towering over him.



***Thrust into the timeless wonder of space,  
The wormhole spun at an amazing pace.  
To the frontiers of a new fantasy world unfurled,  
The time-travellers fell into a Jurassic world,  
Where dinosaurs roamed and all time was lost,  
The threshold of time had now been crossed.***