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The Upside Down River: Tomek's Journey
Jefferson

For my mother

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A Reminder of Tomek's Journey . . .

Tomek's story began when Hannah came into his little village shop, which stocked everything you could ever want or need. Well, not quite everything . . . Hannah asked him if he sold water from the River Qjar, the magical river that flows back to front and upside down and whose water can stop people from ever dying. Tomek had never heard of such a thing, and so Hannah slipped away. Tomek couldn't stop thinking about her, and decided to set out on an incredible adventure, following in her footsteps.

Tomek travelled through the Forest of Oblivion, which causes everyone who ever knew you to forget your very existence. In that dangerous forest, where giant bears roamed, Tomek heard a spine-chilling scream, which he later realised must be Hannah. He came to a meadow, where the scent of the beautiful flowers sent him into a deep sleep. Rescued and awakened by the kindly perfume makers in the town beyond, Tomek learned that Hannah had come this way too, but had gone on ahead while he slept. She left him a letter, telling him her tale and explaining that she needed to find the River Qjar to help her ailing songbird. In the spring, Tomek sailed with the perfume makers, only to be drawn to the Island-That-Isn't, where he was trapped with all the sailers and islanders by an ancient witch's curse. Only when Tomek solved her riddle, would everyone be free.

Tomek finally found the River Qjar in a mysterious forest filled with bizarre creatures. At last he caught up with Hannah and her new panda-like friend, Glupot. Together, they climbed the Sacred Mountain to the end of the river. Now they faced a choice of whether to drink the eternal life-giving waters at the top of the mountain . . . They decided against it, and instead took only a single drop, just for Hannah's songbird.

Now read on to hear Hannah's side of the tale, before and after she first met Tomek . . .

PROLOGUE

I once told you, Tomek, that before I pushed open the door of your little grocery shop, I'd had some extraordinary adventures. And some even more amazing things happened to me during the long period when you were fast sleep in the perfume-makers' village, and then while you were crossing the ocean. You've often asked me where I was and what I was doing throughout that time, and now the moment has come for me to tell you. But before I start the story of my incredible journey, I want to let you know that not a single soul has ever heard it from my lips, and no one ever will. There'd be no point. People wouldn't believe me. They'd say I'm making it up, that it was all a dream, that perhaps I'm mad.

Only you would believe me, Tomek, after everything we've been through together.

This story is the most beautiful thing I can offer you. There are a thousand other presents I could give you, of course, and they are all very special: for instance, have you come across those tiny horses that gallop on your hand? Or the flute that sometimes plays all by itself at night? Or the flower that never fades? Or the talking stone? I'll try to give you all of those, if I can. But you

have to know that none of those gifts is as wonderful as the story that I'm about to tell you, and you alone, because you are the thing that is most precious to me. Please don't ask any questions but just listen, the way you'd listen to music. Don't worry, I shan't leave anything out. Not the slightest detail. Once I've finished, my lips will be sealed and I will never speak of it again.

And now, I'll begin.

CHAPTER ONE

The Bird Market

Do you remember, Tomek, the letter I wrote for you in the perfume-makers' village? I told you how my father had bought me that songbird, a long time ago, in our big city in the north.

It was a spring morning. I can picture myself perched on his shoulders, surrounded by the crush of the bird market, prouder than a queen. Every known winged and beaked creature in the world was gathered there – the delicate lyrebird that the seller brandished on his clenched fist, thousands of lovebirds in their colourful aviary, an ostrich being pulled on a lead behind its seller like a bear tamer would his bear, brilliantly coloured parrots, doves as white as snow, weaver birds, strawberry finches . . . There was whistling, rustling, cooing, chirping, singing. People often say that children don't know how lucky they are. But I did. I was aware of it. To be six years old, sitting on my father's shoulders, holding his head in my hands and watching the town

below me, all giddy with colours and noise, and, above all, being allowed to choose from among all the birds in the world the one I wanted to take home.

'*Which bird would you like, Hannah? Which one would make you happy?*'

That was the question my father had asked me every year since I was tiny. And every year, I would point and say: 'I'd like this one, I'd like that one . . .' He would buy it straight away, without looking at the price, and I would add it to the others in my pretty aviary.

Why did I find it so difficult to choose, that year? I don't remember. At any rate, it was almost midday, and I still hadn't made up my mind. The weather was very hot and my father had turned into a shady side street, away from the hubbub, where we sat down on the stone steps of a house.

'Let's stay here for a while and rest,' he said.

A man crouched down just beside us with a wicker cage between his knees. I glanced at it just once.

'I'd like that one.'

'Which one?' muttered my father, who hadn't noticed the man or the cage.

'That's the one I want, that bird there.'

It was a little turquoise songbird with a dazzling, bright yellow bib. I had never seen a more beautiful bird. I fell in love with it on the spot.

The bird-catcher, a scrawny old man, picked up the

cage and placed it in front of me so I could see the bird better. He didn't seem very talkative.

'How much is it?' asked my father.

'Five hundred thousand guineas and a bottle of rum,' replied the man without batting an eyelid.

Since we were astonished by the price, he went on: 'Five hundred thousand guineas is the price of the bird. And the bottle of rum will be to console me for having lost it. Because this songbird isn't really a bird. She's a princess who was bewitched and turned into a bird more than a thousand years ago. Look at her beak, look at her eyes! She wishes she could speak and tell us her story. But she can't. All she can do is sing.'

I put my face very close to the cage and the songbird seemed to be imploring me, 'It's true! It's true! You must believe him!'

My father said nothing. His gaze went from the bird-catcher to the cage and from the cage to the bird-catcher. He was about to open his mouth, perhaps to bargain, when the bird-catcher added, 'I'm an old man and I can no longer work. She is my only possession. That's why I am asking five hundred thousand guineas for her and not a farthing less. Plus the bottle of rum . . .'

Then my father, who went mad the day I was born, as I've already told you, Tomek – mad with joy – my father went mad a second time. He simply asked the seller to keep the bird for us because it would take a

while for him to find the money. Within a week, he'd sold everything he owned – his houses, his herds, his land, his furniture and his clothes as well as those of my brothers and my mother. He even sold our bedsheets . . . Then, because he still didn't have enough, he borrowed from moneylenders. And we bought the bird.

My mother couldn't cope with this madness and she walked out with my brothers, taking what little remained with her. She only left the songbird. My father and I moved into a humble shack. He hired himself out as a human carthorse and, for three years, he pulled carts through the streets of our town, which are very steep.

One morning, he didn't wake up. He'd died of exhaustion. I was only nine. That morning, my childhood ended.

Distant relatives came to fetch me. They took me to their town, all white and peaceful. And their house was like the town: white and peaceful. I was in need of that, because within a very short time, living in our shack had turned me into a little animal. I had to learn table manners again, to wash myself every day, to sheathe my claws . . . They were very patient with me.

Hoda, their little girl, was three years old when I arrived. She became the little sister I'd never had. I was happy with them. They showered me with affection, but, even so, from time to time, before falling asleep, I'd think of my father and I'd be overcome with grief.

Then I'd go and see my little songbird and she would comfort me.

Until that terrible day, when I found her under her perch, trembling and sick. I picked her up and cupped her in the palm of my hand, and begged, 'Don't leave me . . . If you die, I'll have nothing left from before . . .'

From the depths of her dark eyes, the tiny thousand-year-old princess appealed to me: 'Don't let me die . . . You're the only one who knows who I really am. Help me . . .'

I spent the next few days living in dread. Each morning, I expected to find her lying still and cold. She survived on that occasion, but I had begun to live in fear. I couldn't bear the thought of losing her. If I did, I'd be losing both the bewitched princess and the little girl I had been, as well as the only memento I had of my father.

And then there was the storyteller in the town square. He spoke of the River Qjar, which flows backwards and upside down, and whose water stops people from ever dying.

'It is located somewhere in the south,' he explained, 'beyond the sands and the waters . . . You simply need enough courage and persistence to find it.'

I made up my mind that same day . . . I know that sounds crazy, but I am a little crazy. Because of my father, probably.

I set off at the beginning of the summer when the nights are very short. I slipped out of bed, in my nightdress, then I silently gathered up the few things I'd prepared: a woollen blanket, my meagre savings tied in a handkerchief, a waterskin and a bag filled with some bits and pieces: my hairbrush, a small mirror, a school exercise book, a pencil . . . I added some warm clothing and provisions for two days.

Lastly, I got dressed. I tiptoed to my adoptive parents' bedroom. The door was closed. I pressed my forehead to it and whispered, 'Goodbye.'

I had written more than ten letters to them, but I'd torn them all up. How could I explain to grown-ups that I was going off on my own in the middle of the night, at the age of twelve, and that it was a perfectly reasonable thing to do?

Then I went into Hoda's room.

'Hoda, Hoda, wake up!' I whispered, stroking her plump, warm cheek.

She opened one eye and smiled at me sleepily.

'Hoda, I'm leaving. I'll be away for a while, but I'll come back soon, I promise. Tomorrow, I want you to tell our parents and give them a kiss from me, will you?'

She nodded to say yes, she would, but to make sure, I asked her, 'What are you going to do tomorrow morning?'

'I'm going to give Papa and Mama a kiss from you,' she repeated dutifully.

'Yes, good. And what are you going to tell them?'

'That you'll come back soon . . .'

She yawned and rolled over.

'That's good. Now go back to sleep.'

She was already fast asleep when I kissed her. I went to my little songbird's cage. I didn't raise the velvet cover for fear she'd start singing. I simply kneeled down and murmured, 'Goodbye, my little bird. I'm going in search of that water that stops you from ever dying. I'll bring it back for you and I'll put a drop in your beak. Will you wait for me? Promise?'

Because I didn't hear a sound, not even the faintest brushing of wings, I couldn't stop myself from poking my finger under the cover. At once I felt little pecks on my nail.

'Are you saying goodbye? Did you know I was going to leave?'

She kept still while I stroked her breast.

'Does that mean that you'll wait? That you'll *try* to wait?'

Finally, I strapped the rolled-up blanket onto my shoulders, picked up my bag and clambered out of my open bedroom window.

The sky was luminous, the night very mild. I hurried to the town square where the stagecoaches stood waiting to depart. As I drew closer, the sounds of the horses snorting, the voices of the coachmen calling to one

another and the luggage being thrown onto the roof racks grew louder and louder. It would make anyone want to go travelling, even someone who has nowhere to go.

'And where are you off to, pretty miss?'

I blushed. I hadn't been gone fifteen minutes and already I was being spoken to like a young woman! At first, I could only see the boy's laughing eyes and his thatch of ginger hair.

'I'm going . . . towards the south,' I replied.

'Far?'

'Yes . . .'

'As far as Ban Baitan, perhaps?'

It was more of a joke than a real question. And the young man seemed to find it very funny. He was standing next to a stagecoach hitched to two quiet black horses.

Ban Baitan . . . I'd heard that name several times from the lips of my adoptive father. He used it to mean 'a very long way away', or 'the place where no one goes' . . . So I wasn't sure whether it truly existed. I wonder what got into me. Or rather, I know very well: I don't like being laughed at and I wanted to shut that boy up.

'That's right. I'm going to Ban Baitan.'

He was speechless for a moment, then he leaped up beside the driver, who was waiting on the stagecoach, muffled up in a voluminous black cape. They exchanged

a few words, and the coach driver turned around to get a better look at me. He was a very old man. His face was furrowed with deep wrinkles like gullies. They continued parleying for a while. I wondered what all the whispering meant. What could there be to argue about? And why was the old man eyeing me with such curiosity? In the end, the lad clambered down from the coach. 'Are you really going to Ban Baitan?'

I didn't even answer. I merely gave a little shrug. 'Is it so surprising to want to go to Ban Baitan? Stop looking so shocked and do your job.'

The boy hesitated a little longer, but faced with my determination, he finally admitted defeat. 'Very well, miss. Shall I put your bag up on the roof rack or would you rather keep it with you?'

'I'll keep it with me.'

'As you wish, miss.'

I was pleased at his change in tone, but it didn't make me lose my head and, as he grabbed my bag to put it inside the stagecoach, I asked, 'How much is the fare?'

'Nothing at all. Definitely nothing at all. Lean on my shoulder to climb up, the step on this ancient coach is quite high.'

Nothing at all? I should have been wary. *Watch out, Hannah, it might be dangerous. Be careful.* I tried to feel afraid, but I couldn't. There was nothing bad about this ginger-haired boy. I can tell these things.

I'd barely taken my seat in the stagecoach and realised that I was the only passenger, when it was already setting off. The horses, walking at first because the square was so crowded, started to trot through the emptier streets. Shortly afterwards, we passed my house. Perhaps my adoptive mother turned over in bed at that moment saying, 'Ah, there goes the stagecoach for the south . . .'

I almost banged my fist and shouted: 'Wait! *Wait* . . . It's a mistake . . . I don't want to leave . . . let me out!'

But I did nothing of the sort.

We drove through the outskirts, leaving the last lights of the town behind us. Then the stagecoach headed into the clear night, on the straight road leading to the south.