

The old man meditated cozily in his cottage on the top of a small, forested mountain called Resinstone. Smoke puffed gently out his gray-brick chimney, mixing with the wondrous spray of the waterfall. His cottage was nestled next to a tall and magnificent waterfall. Dark-green vines and roots and moss grew up the cottage, entangling it. A hunky oak tree sat on the rocks near the edge of the waterfall, looming over the long drop. At the bottom of the water's drop was the small village of Nemmly, whose people were as grateful and caring as can be.

The village's history was a troubled one, for years of drought had dried the lips of strong men and beauteous women. The nearest source of water had been miles away for years, until the old man repaired the cottage and created a waterfall out of his magical spells. The old man never gave the villagers his name, so the enlightened villagers regarded him as Walter the Watergiver. Walter meditated eight hours a day in order to keep the waterfall spell flowing down the mountain, so that the villagers had fresh water to drink. He was a humble wizard, never asking the villagers of Nemmly for anything in return.

Before the old man arrived, the villagers of Nemmly depended on a dark and spidery man to deliver them water. The man of shadows visited sparsely, only supplying enough water to keep the villagers alive. The torment of thirst haunted Nemmly for years, until Walter the Watergiver heard of their suffering and traveled far from his home to save them.

Walter heard a gentle knock at his door. He could sense a good presence behind it, so he opened it up quickly with a smile. A young boy, shiny brown hair still wet from a recent swim in the river, shyly held out a wrapped gift to the old man.

"Hello, sir," said the boy, "I brought you a gift."

"Oh?" the old man said with a voice of soothing gravel. He lifted a bushy gray eyebrow, which wrinkled his forehead. "What for?"

"Wh--*what for*? For your kindness, of course! When I was eleven, my father dug wells for any drop of water; my mother travelled miles with a basin on her shoulder to fetch water for me. My friends and I spent days in our shaded homes, bored to death, and when we went out to play in the dried mud of the ditches under the baking sun, we would come home with nasty sunburns and bruises."

"And now?" the wizard curiously asked.

"Now my mother can stay home and make delicious pies or go to the market in the afternoons. Now my father can spend time with his passions: blacksmithing armor and swords for the young soldiers. Now my friends and I swim and play and splash in the river your magic gave to us. I was never able to give back to my mother, but now I pick colorful flowers at the riverside to bring home to show her my love. Nemmly has been reborn. Nemmly has flourished... because of you."

The old man chuckled at the boy and then nodded sincerely. "So you're here to return the favor with a gift for an old wizard."

"Yes," the boy nodded, "please take it." He reached out his skinny arms. Walter grasped it and delicately pulled away the wool wrappings.

“Ah,” the wizard said, tapping on the glass jar. “Lemongrass nectar? I believe.”

“Yes, it’s quite troubling to collect, as rare as it is. Hopefully it enhances your spells, or is a tasty treat at the very least.”

“Why, thank you. I don’t believe I’ve ever received such a wonderful gift from someone as young as you. The energy from the nectar will fuel the waterfall for a good time. Would you like to come in?”

“Oh, no thank you. I’m helping the Nemmy builders with the construction of new houses. I’ll see you around!”

“Goodbye young lad.” The boy took off down the steep path back to the village.

The old wizard locked the door and placed the jar on a shelf, which jiggled the yellow nectar inside. The old man smiled and sat back down on his floor to meditate.

Another knock at the door. The old man kept his eyes shut, for the presence behind the door was not of a grateful young boy, but of darkness.

The knocking got louder.

“Open up, old man!” yelled a deep, hissing voice.

“I will not,” the wizard said firmly.

A black tendril slapped against the window. “Open up the door or you will suffer greater pains than what I already have planned. Old man!” Black tendrils crept along the windows.

“You are of terrible darkness. I do not let corrupted hearts inside my home.”

“Truly, you are of corruption, pathetic man. I was the overseer of this village. You robbed me of my home--of which you have now defiled with your magic--while I was on a perilous trek to fetch water for the villagers.”

“I’ve heard truth from the villagers. You made them your toy and joyfully feasted upon the suffering and moribund folk. You care not for them.” The wizard’s eyes remained shut.

“This is still my house!” the darkness echoed angrily. The many tendrils pounded on the windows. “Look, the sun is setting,” he hissed, “and when the skies are dark, my powers grow. Your silly magic won’t be able to stop me.”

Walter opened his eyes. The skies were red and purple. A cold, dark blue ate away at the last light of the day. The wooden walls and roof creaked as the shadow man’s tentacles grew around the house. The wizard stood up as the last bit of sunlight died away. Walter’s heart beat faster. He peered around the house as the tendrils made a slithering sound.

The shadow man yelled, its voice resonating through the rafters, “If you do not come out, you will be crushed by the wood and stone of this cottage!”

“But it is your home!” The wizard responded, “You said it yourself.”

“You’ve *ruined it!*” he hissed. His tendrils roared and tightened around. “My patience has been tested. You are too late to come out; goodbye wizard!”

The inky tendrils flexed; their shadowy veins swelled enormously. The cottage’s roof and walls squealed and moaned. A wooden beam cracked and crashed to the wizard’s feet. The wizard lifted his arms quickly and bore a light out of his own palms. It shone brightly, and the

light pushed back against the tentacles' crushing force. The moment before the cottage caved in, the wizard fought back with powerful light.

"You annoying old man!" the darkness screeched. The tendrils squirmed about the roof and walls and squeezed harder. "Let me crush you!"

Walter's hands grew as bright as a star and burst out through the home. The tentacles squealed and withdrew. Walter peered out the glass window and saw the shadowy man's tendrils retract into his pitch-black body.

Walter said, "There is no place for darkness here. Now go and never return."

The shadowy man had his head down as he tried to catch his breath. Once his breath returned, it looked up and through the window at Walter with a wide, menacing grin.

"Fine, you stay here in your safe little cottage. You can protect your own home, clearly, but can you protect your precious Nemmy?" The shadow man vanished.

The old man hesitated. "No..."