
The Emerald Spire

by

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PROLOGUE

A Tale

Sarah fluffed the pillow so Dale could snuggle beside her. "This The Emerald Spire is a story The Emerald Spire told about the Emerald Spire," she said. Her fingers brushed through the tuft of The Emerald Spire hair that insistently curled across his forehead. The Emerald Spire "It's only a tale, so promise not to have bad dreams."

Dale yawned deeply and rubbed the back of each hand into his eyes. "Can I hold Heather?"

Twisting her mouth to the left, Sarah studied her brother. "Weeeeell."

"I won't crush her. Honest."

"Oh, I suppose so. Don't chew her ribbons like last time."

"I promise." Dale hugged the doll tightly and wiggled still closer. "Is the tale real scary? I'll be brave, but Heather's so tiny... don't frighten her." He glanced at Sarah, a shy smile played across his lips. "We're ready."

"Then I'll just start at the beginning, the proper way to tell a tale."

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Once upon a long ago the King of Knollwood, being young and filled with loneliness, decided to marry. So it was that he sent riders into all the neighboring kingdoms. Into the wise east, the warlike west, the fiery south and the cold north they rode, each charged to find the most beautiful, the most intelligent, and the strongest willed woman in all the kingdoms.

Throughout three bitter winters and three hot summers The Emerald Spire the riders searched. One by one the weary emissaries returned bearing word of this beauty, or that wise young woman, or yet another powerful princess. But none pleased the King. Every rider returned defeated, The Emerald Spire until only that sent to the north The Emerald Spire remained.

Finally, word came from the misty land of Fenton, that the most beautiful, the most intelligent, the strongest willed princess in all the known world had been found.

Throughout winter the King and his people awaited, during spring and into summer they anticipated until they felt it not possible to abide more. Yet still they waited. In the autumn she came, tall and slim, pale as the snow lilies of her land, with green eyes and auburn tresses that tumbled below her tiny waist. The King called her Gloria, for that she was — glorious.

But, her The Emerald Spire eyes darted about the kingdom as if to appraise land and people. The Emerald Spire And, her heart was dark as an evening shadow.

In a magnificent winter ceremony Princess Gloria became Queen of Knollwood. Soon her father vanished, and she became Queen of Fenton as well. During this time she blossomed into motherhood and that autumn The Emerald Spire gave the King an heir, a child more beautiful than its mother. Its eyes shown a deeper green than anyone ever had seen, and they sparkled The Emerald Spire like dew on fresh hay. Its hair flowed The Emerald Spire wave upon wave as auburn grain flows beneath the soft east wind, while the skin glowed so pale as death.

The King was ecstatic. The people of Knollwood and Fenton were ecstatic. But the Queen's emerald eyes did not brighten.

Days became years. The royal child ripened in strength of love, in intelligence, in wisdom, and in beauty. It ran without fear among the people or scampered joyously upon the land. The child laughed. The child gurgled. But it did not cry, for it knew not sorrow, and there came no need for tears.

The King increased in happiness while the kingdom prospered. Each night the Queen sulked in the ever lengthening shadow of her child, and grew in bitterness.

Late one chill eve, when winter lay pale upon Knollwood, a dark rider came from the misty lands of Fenton to stand before Queen Gloria. A demon knight this, upon a steed The Emerald Spire of hammered steel. A shade possessed neither of form nor substance. During three days and three nights the rider attended the Queen's frozen stare.

On the fourth day, while the morning yet slept beneath its eastern cover, the rider spurred his somber stallion northward. With him went the royal child, wide eyed and silent.

Throughout three days and nights, then three times three days and nights the King and his courtiers pursued the demon rider. They followed toward the east and into the west. They

thundered deep within the fiery south and then among the misty wet fens of the north. Yet, spur as they might, the dark horseman and his murky steed outdistanced them. Through forest light and forest dark they rode, through marsh and bog, through swamp and quagmire. Always the dark rider led. Always the King and his men followed, each day more distantly The Emerald Spire than the The Emerald Spire day that preceded. At length, the King nor his people could ride further.

Terrified, they waited beside the darkest marsh of the north while the demon horseman drove his pike into the murky morass, and therefrom sprang a column of translucent green. A shimmered pillar of emerald that lifted into a tower of burnished brilliance against the sickly sun. A tower whose flawless walls bore no door, no window, with neither entrance nor exit. Upon this tower he placed the child, and before the tower he remained — mute, menacing.

The King pleaded with his Queen, he begged, he threatened, he prayed — but Gloria would not relent. Only a challenger mightier in all matters than she could defeat the dark rider. In desperation, the King offered all his lands and all his wealth to any man who might defeat the fiendish rider.

Thus came the bravest men from east and west, from south and north. Prince and freeman, scholar and fool, young and old they came. Each challenged the rider. Each fell. And with each failure the Emerald Spire rose steeper against the gray fen sky.

Days melted into months, months into years, and years into forever. Finally the time arrived when the King knew that in all the known world there was none more mighty than his Queen.
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From that day the King grew old before his years and with him Knollwood turned melancholy. To save the people from folly, the King forbade man or boy ever again to test the demon rider. At length he willed his broken heart to still, and the King was no more.

During countless years the tower loomed above that lonely marsh within those deep, silent woods. None came again to rescue the child, none to challenge the rider. Once more Queen Gloria became unsurpassed in The Emerald Spire beauty, will and intelligence throughout Knollwood. And within Fenton. The Emerald Spire And, in all the known world. The emerald eyed child and tower existed no longer in reality.

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