

KATHRYN BUTLER

The
Dreamkeeper
~ SAGA ~



LOST *in the* CAVERNS

“I want to know Pax. With each book he becomes more compelling, and with him, the whole saga. Some series begin with their best tale, then try to muster up sequels. The Dream Keeper Saga gets better with each book. Kathryn Butler wins our trust with her characters, engaging turns, and deeply Christian themes. I’m excited to add the Dream Keeper Saga to our family canon.”

David Mathis, Senior Teacher and Executive Editor, desiringGod.org;
Pastor, Cities Church, Saint Paul, Minnesota; author, *Habits of Grace*

“Two of my favorite things about the Dream Keeper Saga are the character Pax and the almost Mad-Libs-esque imaginative flow, appropriate (even necessary) to a world redeemed from humanity’s collective dreams.”

James D. Witmer, author, *A Year in the Big Old Garden*, *Beside the Pond*; and *The Strange New Dog*

“When was the last time you got lost in a good story? The last time you felt yourself throw off the day’s troubles and sink into a tale for the ages? The wait is over. Kathryn Butler’s beautiful book *Lost in the Caverns* will draw you in and hold you close. The best news is that it will point your young reader to the greatest story ever told, the redemption story. Prepare to be captivated!”

Erin Davis, author; podcaster; mother of four

“Faith, purpose, friendship, and hope. These themes and more draw young readers into a world where dreams come to life. *Lost in the Caverns* adds detail and depth as it carries the saga along with its readers.”

Gloria Furman, author, *Labor with Hope* and *A Tale of Two Kings*

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LOST in the CAVERNS

Kathryn Butler

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To Jack and Christie.
When you find yourselves lost,
follow the Light.

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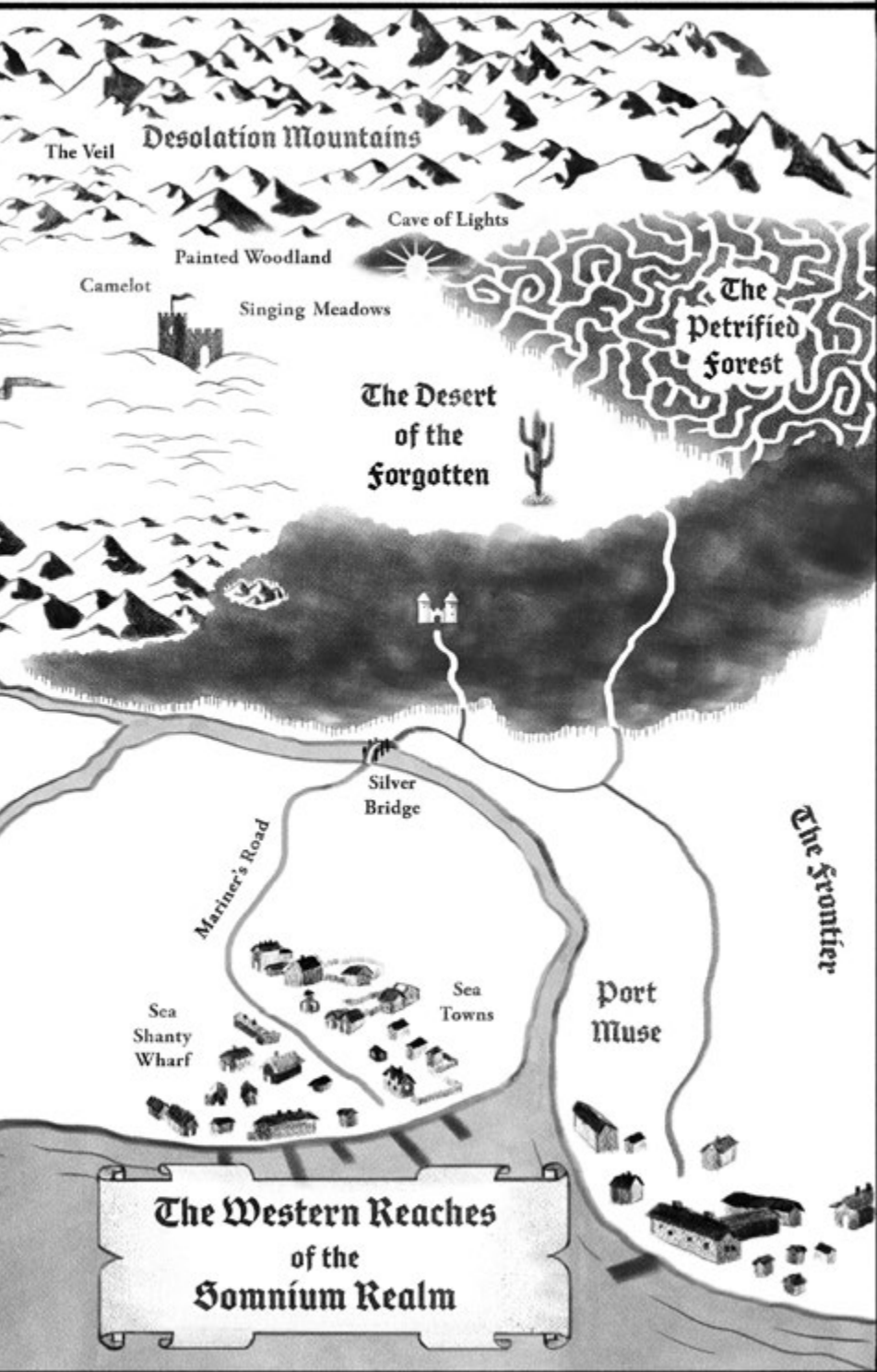
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CHAPTER 1

A Light in the Darkness

Lily lingered beside Pax's tomb as the moon rose. She could still feel the hot, foul breath of the shrouds in the air around her, a reminder of how they had encircled her and mocked the fallen prince. She shivered and remembered how the gloom of the Blight had rolled back and the Realm bloomed with life again, scattering the shrouds like scraps of burnt paper. Barth was restored to human form. Scallywag was healed. Keisha and Adam had gone home, but Lily had decided that her place, for a time, was in the Realm. She was an artisan, and she would rebuild what the Blight had broken.

She placed a hand on the cool glass of the tomb. The moonlight cast a pearly sheen over the valley, lighting up the new

flowers and trees as if they were fireflies. The beauty of it crashed against her pain like waves against the shore. *I know you're still with us*, Lily thought, pushing back tears. *Although I wish I could see you.*

Suddenly a great crack like thunder split the air, and the ground shook. Lily stumbled backward and shielded her eyes as the tomb glowed, its glass branches sprawling like white lightning against the night sky. A fracture split the tomb from top to bottom, and light pierced through and flooded the valley, bathing every petal and blade of grass in daylight.

The glare stung Lily's eyes, as if she'd gazed for too long at the sun, and she hid her face in the crook of her elbow. The warmth of a spring morning suddenly chased away the chill. Music drifted on the wind, and Lily strained to hear. *Are the winds singing?* As if in answer, a breeze tousled her hair, and the voices sang barely above a whisper. *They are! The winds are singing!* Though she didn't recognize their language, their song played in time with the deepest strummings of her heart.

As the light softened, Lily raised her head. The radiance had ebbed from the reaches of the valley, and night again crowded around her. A cold glitter of stars shone above. Then the source of the light snapped into form.

"Pax!"

The great unicorn reared skyward, his horn slicing the night like a new blade drawn from its sheath. As his hooves struck the ground, Lily fought to steady herself against the tremors

that rattled the earth. His light stung her eyes, like the glare of daybreak reflected off a lake. With tears streaming down her face she rushed toward him, threw her arms around him, and buried her face in his neck.

“Don’t cling to me, young artisan,” Pax said with a laugh.

She fumbled to untangle her fingers from his mane. “I thought you’d died,” she whispered. “I thought you were gone forever.”

“I did die, dear one. But forever is under my authority.”

“But how—”

A clatter interrupted her, and they turned to see Isla standing at the entrance to her home, her eyes wide with shock and a clay bowl of blackberries broken at her feet. At the sight of Pax she dropped to her knees. “Forgive me, lord,” she said.

Pax strode toward her. “Rise, Isla.”

“I am unworthy. You died because of my wickedness. The draught, the Blight, I had a hand in all of it.”

“I took the Sovran Merrow’s draught willingly, Isla, for you and for all the Realm. I paid the penalty.” He nuzzled her. “You are forgiven, Princess Isla.”

Isla stood, her eyes shimmering, and wiped the tears from her face. A smile broke through, and she gazed at the unicorn in wonder.

“Shall we dine now?” Pax said.

Isla’s face fell. “Oh, of course, my lord. But we only have what my brother and I could gather from the forest, and it’s not much.”

“It’s more than you think. Go and see.”

Pax guided them through the laurel-trimmed doorway of the cottage. They entered a kitchen, where roots and dried herbs hung in clusters from a ceiling of latticed willow boughs. A row of terra-cotta bowls filled with nuts and berries awaited them on a bench, and a fire crackling in the hearth bathed the room in a golden glow. Lily’s gaze flitted over these delights for a moment, before a heavy oaken table in the center of the room drew her eye. There, heaped atop silver platters, sprawled the most magnificent feast she had ever seen. Pyramids of fruit rose toward the ceiling, roasted meats and vegetables perfumed the room with rosemary and sage, and a basket overflowed with fresh bread from which tendrils of steam still coiled. In one corner a cake decorated with strawberries nestled among pastries, cookies, and the most beautiful blackberry pie, with a crust carved in the shapes of doves and stars. In another corner, Lily spotted a plate overflowing with spaghetti and meatballs and a glass dish filled exclusively with purple jelly beans. Her favorite.

Isla appeared from behind and gasped, then reprimanded her younger brother, Rowan, who had already drawn a chair up to the table and was tucking into a bowl of raspberry custard. The young lad froze when he saw Pax, a spoon with a blob of pink custard suspended in air.

“Good evening, Prince Rowan,” Pax said. “May I dine with you?”
Rowan gaped at him.

“Rowan, answer!” Isla whispered.

Before he could reply, something scuffled by Rowan's feet under the table. He sprang back, his spoon clanged to the floor, and the dish followed, splattering pink custard all over the lace tablecloth.

"Get out, you grubby beast!" Rowan yelled, swiping at something with his foot.

Philippe the rabbit bounded out from beneath the table, his top hat clutched in his front paws. "*Pardon, monsieur!* I am sorry to intrude! It is just that when I saw the carrots I could not resist. They are candied in syrup, no?"

"Get out!"

"Rowan!" Isla said.

"He's stealing our food!"

"He's our guest!"

"Our *guest*? He's a filthy rodent!"

"Prince Rowan, do not deny the rabbit his place." Pax stepped into the room, his radiance drowning out even the glow of the firelight.

"I didn't invite him," Rowan said between clenched teeth.

Pax's gaze hardened. "Yet I did invite him. And whomever I call always has a place at the table." With these words a chill wind swept through the cottage as if churned up from a gale over the sea. Rowan's cheeks flushed, and without a word he rushed from the room.

"Espy, please," Isla called after him, but he ignored her and tromped out.

Lily slouched toward her jelly beans during the argument. She wanted to ask what the nickname “Espy” meant, but decided to keep mum. She felt the sting of Keisha’s absence; the right words always seemed to come more quickly to her newfound friend with the notebook at her hip.

Pax nuzzled Isla’s cheek. “Do not despair,” he said. “Your brother is astray, but he is not lost.”

“I don’t know how I’m going to help him through this. Our mother was always the only one who could ever reach him,” Isla said.

“Your brother awoke to find everyone and everything dear to him suddenly gone. Such wounds don’t heal easily. But be at peace—they *will* heal.”

Isla sank deep into thought, and a silence fell upon the room, with only the crackle of the fire and the song of crickets breaking the quiet. As Lily watched Isla, her eyes downcast in sorrow, the last shreds of anger and bitterness she’d once harbored against the princess withered away. She’d hated Isla for betraying her father, but Pax had forgiven the princess for far worse offenses. How could Lily not forgive her, too?

Philippe, a quivering puffball of fur, finally ventured from behind the table. “*Merci beaucoup, mon prince,*” he said tentatively, his paws trembling and his ears skimming the floor as he bowed before Pax. “*Enchanté—*”

“No need for formalities, Philippe,” Pax said. “You are most welcome here, as are your friends.”

“Friends?” Lily asked.

Pax nodded, and suddenly Glorf rolled out from under the table. Mortimer the fuzzy turtle joined him, as did Sheila the pterodactyl, who swept upward to roost on a willow bough.

Pax laughed at Lily’s surprise, then invited them to give thanks and eat. They dined in the glow of the firelight as lightning bugs spun streamers outside the windows, and Pax told them old stories of things long forgotten, when the Realm first hatched from the minds of men, and even before, when the waking world had yet to spin on its axis. Lily would pause between bites of pasta to stare at Pax in awe as the images he wove unfurled like banners in her mind. In his presence, the loneliness that always stalked her like a shadow had gone, and for a delicious moment she reveled in a quiet joy. The moment reminded her of the times she’d hunched over a cup of hot cocoa after sledding outside, or when twinkling lights dazzled her on Christmas Eve. At long last, she felt *home*.

After a while, when the clink of spoons and the chatter of conversation hushed, Lily mustered the courage to ask the question burning in all their minds. “Pax, are you back for good now?”

All eyes turned to the prince. Isla leaned forward, and even Philippe, who hadn’t stopped chewing since Pax invited him to the table, paused his crunching to listen.

“I will always be with you, Lily, but you’ll not see me for a while. I leave tonight.”

Lily's heart sank. How could he leave already? She opened and closed her fists beneath the table, as if somehow she could clutch the moment in her hands and stop time from tumbling forward.

"My lord, you've just arrived," Isla said, mirroring Lily's thoughts. "We've waited forty years for your return! Must you leave so soon?"

"There are others I must see, others like you who will know me for who I am. Thereafter, I must continue the work given me by our King."

"The King of the Realm?" Lily asked.

"The King of us all. I laid my life down to save the Realm, but he gave me the power to take it up again. And now I must carry on with his work, to prepare a new place and a new way. To prepare a kingdom where humans and dreams can live together again."

Lily swallowed a lump in her throat and struggled to sort the thousand questions that jostled through her head. There was so much she longed to ask him, so much she longed to know. Most of all, she desperately wanted him to stay.

"But what about the Realm?" she said, finding no other words. "The Blight destroyed so much. Doesn't it need to be rebuilt?"

Pax offered a gentle smile. "Everything has its proper time and place. The Realm will be rebuilt, but not all at once."

Lily fingered the soothstone fragment in her pocket, its contours now so familiar. She remembered her reason for returning, and the thought sparked a flicker of hope. If Pax couldn't stay, at least she had something to offer in this strange, beautiful world.

“I can rebuild it, Pax,” she said. “I came back because I want to use my powers to help.”

“Indeed you *will* help, although not in the way you think. I did not bring you back to rebuild, Lily.”

The remark felt like a slap in the face. “I don’t understand. I’m an artisan. I can use my powers to—”

“Yes, you have the gifts of an artisan, and you *will* use those gifts for good. But I called you back to the Realm after the Catacombs fell for another reason.”

“*You* called me back?”

He tilted his head to one side. “Didn’t you know? Think back. Why did Cedric come to find you in the school, when Glorf attacked poor Mrs. Higgins?”

“Mrs. Higgins, the lunch lady? You know about what happened in the cafeteria?”

“I know about all of it, Lily. Now, think—why did Cedric come for you?”

“So that I could try to stop the Blight. Sir Toggbybiffle sent him to find me, because he thought an artisan could help.”

“And how do you think the professor came upon that idea? The Blight afflicted him terribly, and he could do little more than sleep before you arrived.”

“So, you’re saying *you* told him to do it?”

“Not in a voice he recognized at the time, but yes, I prodded him.”

“How? I mean, no one had seen you in decades.”

“Lily, you’ve seen the powers the King has given me. Do you think time and space can thwart my work? Toggbybiffle thought the idea to seek you was his own, but his inspiration came from my voice.” He stepped toward her, and his gaze deepened. “I brought you back to the Realm for a different purpose than rebuilding, or even than combating the Blight. I brought you back so that you can tell others what you’ve seen.”

“What do you mean?”

“Whoever you meet, tell them about what you have seen and heard in this valley. Tell them about what I gave for them, and won for them. This is the true reason you are here, Lily. You’re here to tell others the truth—that I have overcome the darkness.”

Lily’s throat tightened, and her mouth felt full of sand. *I’m good at creating things, not talking!* she wanted to shout. She lowered her eyes, but could still feel Pax’s gaze upon her, steady and penetrating.

“What troubles you, Lily?” Pax asked.

Lily shrugged.

“Lily.”

His voice rang with tenderness and thunder all at once. Lily finally answered, although she still couldn’t meet his eyes. “It’s just that I thought I finally had a purpose. I thought my powers, I don’t know, *mattered.*”

“They do matter, but they are not all that matters. And apart from my words, the things they build are like straw. The slightest gust of wind will blow them apart.”

Lily bit her lip. "I'm not great at talking to people. I always say the wrong thing."

"Rely on my words and not your own."

"But what do I say, Pax? How do I know when to say it?"

"You will know. Remember, dear one, although you will not see me for a little while, I will always be with you."

Pax bowed his head, and the tip of his horn gleamed like a tiny star. He gently touched the light to her forehead and then hovered it over her heart. A dozen tendrils of light, like stardust, coiled around her, and suddenly she felt a surge of warmth from her scalp down to the tips of her fingers. A swell of love for which she had no words accompanied it.

The next moment the light faded, and the stardust and the warmth disappeared. "Now I must depart," Pax said. He turned to Isla. "My lady, if I might have a few words with you outside, I would be grateful." Then he surveyed the room, all the occupants watching him with transfixed gazes. "I remain with you always."

Lily blinked through a sheen of tears. "I wish you didn't have to go."

Pax nuzzled her. "Always remember, Lily McKinley, that I love those in the Realm, and when its people are lost and hurting and alone, my concern for them grows all the more. Remember that I love you, no matter what storms assail you. I am with you always, and I will return and make all things new."

Pax bowed his head and strode regally out through the laurel-trimmed doorway with Isla at his side. As his light faded, a chill

fell over the room, even with the fire raging. No sound of chewing or silverware broke the calm; all present held their breath.

Finally, Philippe slipped a paw into one of Lily's hands. "He was *magnifique, non?*"

Lily nodded and pulled the soothstone from her pocket. A thousand questions churned in her head.