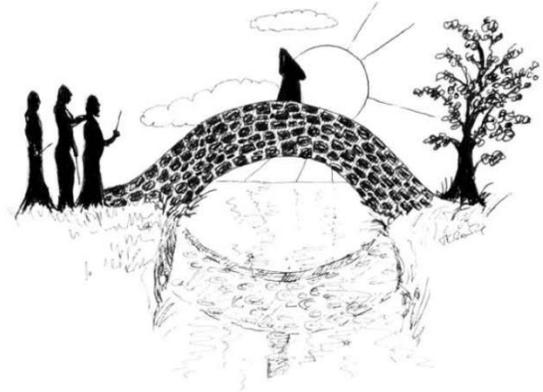


The Tale of the Three Brothers



"There were once three brothers who were travelling along a lonely, winding road at twilight. In time, the brothers reached a river, too deep to wade through, and too dangerous to swim across. However, these brothers were learned in the magical arts, and so they simply waved their wands, and made a bridge appear across the treacherous water. They were halfway across it, when they found their path blocked by a hooded figure, and it was Death. He was angry that he had been cheated out of three new victims, for travelers usually drowned in the river. But Death was cunning. He pretended to congratulate the three brothers upon their magic, and said that each had earned a prize for being clever enough to evade him.

"So, the oldest brother, who was a combative man, asked for a wand more powerful than any in existence. A wand that must always win battles for its owner. A wand worthy of a wizard who had conquered Death. So, Death had crossed to an Elder Tree on the banks of the river, fashioned a wand from a branch that had hung there, and gave it to the oldest brother.

"Then the second brother, who was an arrogant man, decided that he wanted to humiliate Death still further, and asked for the power to recall others from Death. So, Death picked up a stone from the riverbank and gave it to the second brother, and told him that the stone would have the power to bring back the dead.

"Finally, Death turned to the third brother. A humble man, he asked for something that would enable him to go forth from that place without being followed by Death. And so it was that Death reluctantly handed over his own Cloak of Invisibility.

"In due course, the brothers separated, each for his own destination. The first brother travelled for a week or more, and, reaching a distant village, sought out a fellow wizard, with whom he had a quarrel. Naturally with the Elder Wand as his weapon, he could not fail to win the duel that followed. Leaving his enemy dead upon the floor, the oldest brother proceeded to an inn, where he boasted of the powerful wand which he had snatched from Death himself and of how it made him invincible. That very night, another wizard crept upon the oldest brother as he lay wine-sodden upon his bed. The thief took the wand, and, for good measure, slit the oldest brother's throat. And so, Death took the first brother for his own.

"Meanwhile, the second brother journeyed to his own home, where he lived alone. Here, he took out the stone which had the power to recall the dead, and turned it thrice in his hand. To his amazement and delight, the figure of the girl he had once hoped to marry, before her untimely death, appeared at once before him. Yet she was sad and cold, separated from him as though by a veil. Though she had returned to the mortal world, she did not truly belong there, and suffered. Finally, the second brother, driven mad by hopeless longing, killed himself, so as to truly join her. And so, Death took the second brother for his own.

"But though Death searched for the third brother for many years, he was never able to find him. It was only when he had attained a great age that the youngest brother finally took off the Cloak of Invisibility, and gave it to his son. And then, he greeted Death as an old friend, went with him gladly, and, as equals, they departed this life."