

The Kielder Brag

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Chapter One: The Childhood Friend

Long ago, in the time when there were no cities for a hundred miles in any direction, and men and women folk were one with the land and the sky, there was a young man called Brook, who dreamed of adventure and fortune.

Brook lived with his father on their farm, just north of the village of Kielder. His mother had died the previous winter, and Brook's father was broken of mind and body. Brook was a good spirit and worked hard, but there was too much for one pair of hands to do, and he lacked the wisdom of his father's years. When harvest came, Brook toiled until his body could move no more. But no matter how hard he tried, it was not enough to save them from poverty. And all the while Brook gazed to the horizon, to the unseen adventures waiting for him just beyond the farthest hill.

One morning, as the first kiss of winter touched the fields and rooftops of the farm, Brook set out to walk the hard land, hoping the chill wind might blow his worries away. He climbed to the top of Deadwater Fell and rested there, looking out across the misty land, thinking how he might save his father's farm from ruin. His head heavy, he stared at the patch of grass between his feet, and spied a single daisy. The yellow and white of the flower seemed vivid against the damp fog, and Brook reached down and plucked it from the soil. He held it between his fingers and studied its simple form, then put the stem through the buttonhole on his jacket so that the splash of colour might lift his spirits.

As he sat on a rock and pondered his problems, with no answers coming to mind, his ears caught a haunting song drifting on the mist. It was a woman's voice – gentle and musical, young and ancient all at once. The words he did not recognise, for they were sung in an ancient tongue that had died long before Brook's feet had touched this earth, yet he could not help but be swept up in the emotion of the music. As the lilting tune ended the mists revealed a young woman with golden hair, walking up the hill towards him.

The stranger smiled at Brook and, in that way that young people often do, he fell instantly in love with her.

“Good day to you, sir,” she said, her smile drawing him closer. “What brings you up to the top of Deadwater Fell on the Halved Day of Harvest?”

Brook, his thoughts consumed by the fair lady’s beauty, found himself lost for words. Eventually, he replied, “I came here to think.”

“Any other day this is a good place for the mind,” she replied with a coy wink. “But today is the time of *Alban Elfed*, when the light and the dark are matched, when day and night are equal, and the lines betwixt the worlds become mere shadows. You should not be upon the Fell today, young Brook.”

Startled, he replied, “You . . . you know my name?”

“Aye, I know you, Brook the younger of Old Brook’s farm.”

“And who are you, fair maiden?” Brook asked excitedly.

The girl laughed. “You already know me, Brook. We have met many times before, but you were just a child, and you looked out on the world with the eyes of a child, eyes that see more than any grown man’s.”

Something sparked in Brook’s mind, a flicker of recollection.

The girl continued. “We danced by the stream in the long hours of summer, and I showed you how to catch a soil-fish. We played in the trees and I taught you the language of wood. We met at night and we walked through the dreams of men under the solstice stars.”

The memory of those lost days of youth burst into Brook’s mind, like a dusty old book – read once but long forgotten, until its pages are turned again.

“I *do* know you,” Brook gasped. “You are Haldora, we met when I was a boy! But I thought you just a dream, an imagining of my youthful mind.”

“Children see what men cannot understand, or choose to ignore,” Haldora said tunefully.

Brook stared at the maiden. When he had last seen her, she had been just a little girl. Now Haldora was a young woman, and Brook’s heart beat faster as he took in her radiant beauty. “It is pleasing to see you once more. You brighten up this grey day, and my mood.”

“There is much on your mind,” Haldora noted. “You carry the woes of two people on your shoulders.”

“Two people?”

She nodded. “Yours and your father’s.”

Brook sighed. “The farm is dying. I have tried to save it, but I cannot do it alone. We have no money to hire more help. Soon we will lose everything.”

“And you will be glad,” she replied knowingly.

“Glad? Not a bit of it!” Brook insisted.

Haldora's eyes narrowed. "When the farm is gone your burden will be lifted, your toil at an end. You will be penniless, but you have two feet, and strong arms. You can walk to the farthest hill, and beyond, you can work and find adventure over the horizon."

Brook blushed. It was as if she knew his desires better than even he. "But my duty is to my father, and the farm . . ."

Haldora moved closer, her hand touching his shoulder. "You can still save your farm, if that is what you really desire."

"Yes, truly," he said. Even as he spoke he pictured himself exploring a faraway land, with this beautiful woman at his side.

Haldora asked, "The welfare of the farm is your greatest desire?"

Brook hesitated, then replied steadfastly. "Yes."

She smiled and pointed towards the misty horizon. As if responding to her gesture, the fog parted enough for him to see the distant river. "Down there, in the dark waters, resides a brag . . ."

"A brag?"

"Tis an ancient beast that dwells in the divide between wood and water, between air and idea. It is said it can bestow great riches, or great ruin, on a man."

"How?"

"If your heart is true, and your cause a just one, then the brag must grant your wish. But the brag is a trickster, and he will not submit easily. If you lose, you and your family will be forevermore cursed. The ruin you face today will be as nothing compared to the misery that awaits."

Brook nodded, hypnotised by her beautiful features. "I will find this brag, I will make him grant my wish!"

Haldora shook her head patiently. "No, child, you cannot force him to do your bidding. Calm your mind and listen to what I have to say, for it may yet save your life, and your farm."

"I . . . I am sorry," Brook said in a whisper. "Please, continue."

"Wait by the river," Haldora explained. "When the sun sinks into the water, listen for the brag. If you see him you may seek your heart's desire."

Brook smiled, edging closer to Haldora. He so wanted to kiss her.

"Your thoughts must be clear," she warned. "Know your desire and picture it in your mind. Do not be swayed by impermanent needs."

"Impermanent needs?" Brook asked as the mist thickened in front of him. When the fog cleared again there was no sign of Haldora. Brook searched around the hilltop, desperate to see her once more, but he was alone. As the moments passed, her face grew vague in his mind, and the memory of

their meeting slipping from his thoughts like water over rocks. Eventually, not knowing why, he walked down the hill towards the river.

Chapter Two: The Shadow at the River

By the time he arrived at the water's edge the sun was low in the sky, and the warmth of the day was trickling away. He sat by the river, uncertain why he was there. He really should get back to the farm, he thought, but something kept him from leaving. Feeling thirsty, he knelt by the river's edge and cupped the crisp water to his mouth. He watched the sun set where the river met the sky, its orange reflection setting the water on fire, and he felt a change in the air. He turned away from the dying sun and saw an odd-looking man on the other side of the river, hidden in the shadow of an old tree.

"Hey-ho," the man shouted.

"A fine evening," Brook replied. "Step closer so that I might see you properly."

The shadow moved towards the river, and the last of the light touched its form, revealing its odd shape. This was no ordinary man, Brook realised with a gasp. He had two hooved legs, dense with dark muscle like those of a shire horse, but his torso was broad, covered in coarse hair and strange tattoos. His arms were thick and powerful, and longer than any man's; his huge hands hung down towards the ground so that his round knuckles scraped grooves into the soil. Finally, Brook glanced up to the creature's head: the beast had a man's face, with mischievous eyes under a heavy brow. His nose and mouth jutted out, almost into a snout that gave him a rat-like profile. His teeth were elongated and sharp, glinting in the setting light, and from his temples grew two twisted horns like those belonging to a ram.

Fear quickened Brook's mind, and in a flash, he recalled his meeting on the Fell with Haldora. "You are a brag!" he said, fortifying his voice against his trembling heart.

"I go by many names: Brag, Kelpie, Tarroo. Some call me Deadwater Tom, others named me Old Tom of the Tyne. But my true name is Tommy Tarrow and this water is mine, not yours."

"I do not claim it," Brook replied.

"And yet you drink of it," Tommy Tarrow said. "You take what is not yours, and I would have it back."

Brook looked down at the river, its waters coursing over the little pebbles. "You cannot own the water of the river," Brook laughed. "It is a gift from the sky, passing through to the sea."

"It is mine!" Tommy Tarrow bellowed, raising himself up to his full height. He towered over Brook. Feeling threatened, Brook took a step back. "I meant no disrespect, sir."

"You owe me water, you have a debt to me, man-child. How will you repay it?"

"Repay it? I have nothing to give," Brook replied.

“Nothing? Every man has something to give Tommy Tarrow.” The beast stomped its hooves impatiently on the river’s edge, shaking the ground.

“I can get you water,” Brook replied quickly. “I’ll bring you a bucket from my farm, to replace what I drank.”

“I have no need for water,” Tommy Tarrow said. “The hills bring it to me, and I sing songs to them for their gift.”

“Then what do you want?” Brook asked, his patience thinning.

Tommy Tarrow smiled. “Each man is different; each has a gift to give old Tommy Tarrow. Some bring me fortunes; gold, silver, rings, jewellery. Others give me their children, young boys and girls who trip into my river and play in the depths forevermore, their games filling the long hours of winter with joyous laughter. One man gave me his misery, the tears for his lost life poured into the river and flooded the fields downstream. But your charge is small, and I do not require so large a price . . .”

As the creature spoke, Brook felt a growing urge to run away. The river stood between them, and Brook was young and fast. He could dart away, back to the farm, back to his father and their pitiful fire. He made his decision and turned to escape, bumping into something dark and hard. There was Tommy Tarrow, blocking his path.

“You’re not thinking of leaving me, are you?” Tommy Tarrow mocked.

Brook gasped, suddenly afraid. “How did you get across the river? How did you move so quickly?”

“I move as I please. And the river is my friend, it lets me pass. Besides, a gentlemen wouldn’t leave until his debt was settled, would they?”

Brook shook his head. The beast smelt of old earth and burning wood, like the heart of a forest

“Good lad,” Tommy Tarrow continued, putting his giant arm around Brook’s shoulder. His legs almost crumpled under the weight.

“I have nothing to give,” Brook replied. “My farm is in ruin, our crops are worthless, I have nothing to offer you.”

“Oh? That’s not true. I think you have much to offer Deadwater Tom. We will talk, and we will agree on a fair price.” He sat by the river’s edge and gestured for Brook to join him on a nearby rock. Nervously, Brook obeyed. Behind the beast the moon climbed into the night sky, casting a blue halo around Tommy Tarrow’s wide shoulders and head.

“Why did you come to the river this night, on *Alban Elfed*?” Tommy Tarrow asked. “This is a sacred time. Most men stay away, a long-forgotten instinct driving them towards the comfort of their homes. I walk these hills and peer into their windows. They huddle round their fires, pulling their blankets up to their chins, holding their children close to their chests, afraid but not knowing why. But not you.

You alone venture out on this night, to my river, to sup from its waters as the sun meets its mirror. That puzzles old Tommy Tarrow. Why did you come here?"

The vague memory of Haldora flickered in Brook's mind. "I came seeking my heart's desire."

The brag's heavy brow lifted. "Your heart's desire? Well, you have come to the right place. Perhaps we can agree a trade that will also settle your debt."

"A trade?"

Tommy Tarrow nodded with excitement. "Yes! A trade! I have lived many lives, seen much of this vast world, but there are still many things I seek."

"Such as?"

Tommy Tarrow shrugged. "Something unique . . . something rare and precious. Something I have not seen before."

Brook thought for a moment. He had nothing to trade, nothing unique or new to give to Tommy Tarrow. Then he glanced down at his jacket buttonhole and a plan began to form in his head. "There is something I have, but it is far too precious to give to you."

The brag's mouth opened with anticipation. "Tell me."

Brook shook his head. "No, no, it is too rare a thing. I could not give it up. I will think of something else instead. I have a beautiful fob watch that belongs to my father, perhaps I could bring that to you?"

Tommy Tarrow shook his head. "No, not a watch. There is nothing rare or new in a watch. Besides, I have no need to tame time. Not a watch. What is the rare thing you mention?"

"I have a three-legged sheep in my herd. Have you ever seen a three-legged sheep?"

"I have no interest in the number of legs on a sheep! Not unless it had more than thirteen. Do you have such a sheep?"

"No," Brook replied sadly, "but I do have a book that belonged to my mother, a rare first edition of children's nursery rhymes."

Tommy Tarrow stood, becoming agitated. "I know many rhymes, and I have written more than have ever been collected in books. Rhymes are not what I want. Tell me of the precious thing you mentioned."

"I am sorry," Brook said regretfully. "It is too valuable for me to ever give up. I couldn't possibly—"

"You will tell me now!" Tommy Tarrow bellowed, shaking the earth with his rage. "Do not dally any longer, man-thing. Show me this precious, rare, unique item, or I will surely drown your tiny head in my river."

"As you wish." Brook removed the daisy from his buttonhole and held it up to the Brag.

Chapter Three: The King's Star

"A daisy?" Tommy Tarrow asked, angry lines creasing his giant forehead.

"This may look like a daisy, but I can assure you that it is not," Brook replied, thinking quickly. "You have heard of the Star of Kielder, no doubt?"

The Brag hesitated. "No, I do not believe I have."

"Oh," Brook replied, feigning surprise. "I thought a well-read scholar such as yourself would have known of the legend."

"Well . . . of course I've heard of it, but my memory is sometimes slow. Perhaps you would remind me of the details?"

"I would be delighted," Brook said with a theatrical wave. "Long ago, there lived a great king."

"Which one?" Tommy Tarrow interrupted.

"Which what?"

"Which great king? There have been many."

Brook hesitated, then said, "King Ethelbert."

The brag seemed to accept this, so Brook continued. "Long ago, King Ethelbert travelled to this part of the kingdom. He was searching for a falling star that he believed would bring him great prosperity. After many days of searching through the hills and the valleys, through the fields and the lakes, King Ethelbert came upon a clearing where all of the trees had been knocked to the ground. At the centre of a vast hole the king found a glowing orb. He reached out to touch it and . . ."

"And what?" Tommy Tarrow asked impatiently.

"And before he could take it, the orb fell on a simple daisy. The orb merged with the flower and became the fabled Star of Kielder. It is said that if ever the Star is removed from this land then the entire valley shall be flooded."

Tommy studied the little flower. "You're saying this is the Star of Kielder?"

Brook smiled. "The king took the Star and placed it on his armour. That night he met a beautiful maiden who lived close to here. She was a simple woman, the daughter of a farmer, but she stole the king's heart. When it was time to leave, King Ethelbert, knowing he could never marry such a lowly woman, gave her the Star of Kielder as a token of his love. From that day to this, the Star of Kielder has been passed down through my family, until, upon my mother's death, it came to me. Now, I offer it to you, in return for my heart's desire, and as a settlement for my debt."

Impressed, Tommy Tarrow asked, "You would give this to me?"

"Yes."

“A falling star, discovered by a king, given to his true love, passed down through generations into your hand?”

“Yes.”

“And now you offer it to me?” Tommy Tarrow said.

Brook extended his hand to the beast. “Is it not worthy of our trade?”

Tommy Tarrow chuckled. “Oh, it is most worthy, most worthy indeed. For this our debt would be settled, and I would grant you your heart’s desire. And more! You would dine with me this night; a feast to mark the passing of *Alban Elfed*. A feast fit for King Ethelbert himself!”

“That is not necessary,” Brook said politely. “Once our business is settled, I must return to my father.”

“But I insist! You offer me riches, honour requires that I toast you and your health with food and wine.”

“Your offer is most kind, but—”

Tommy Tarrow held up his massive hand. “There will be no discussion on this point. If you cannot accept the hospitality of a brag then I cannot do a deal with you. Even though it would pain me for the rest of my pitiful life I would decline your trade, and you would remain in my debt. These are my terms, sir.”

Brook sighed with frustration. He felt he was close to deceiving the brag, but he did not wish to linger in his company for any longer than was necessary. “Very well, but the toast must be brief, for the night is old already.”

Tommy Tarrow tutted loudly. “I will hear nothing of it. We will feast as your king of old once did. Here, come with me so that we can begin.”

The brag stepped into the river, the chilly water lapping around his hooved legs.

“Where are you going?” Brook asked.

“To my home, of course, on yonder side of the river.” He held out his giant hand to his guest.

“But I cannot swim, and the river is dark and wild.”

“That is no matter,” Tommy Tarrow said with a wicked smile. “Climb on my back and I will carry you to the other side.”

Chapter Four: The Trickster

Reluctantly, Brook edged closer to the mighty torso of Tommy Tarrow and climbed onto his back, gripping the thick hairs sprouting out of his shoulders as the brag waded into the river. The water lapped at Brook's feet, soaking through his shoes, chilling his toes. By day, when the sun was high and the world was painted in vivid light, the river looked shallow and narrow. Now, with only the moon to puncture the dark heavens, the waters seemed to stretch out in every direction. The gentle babble of the river became an angry torrent, enough to buffet even the mighty brag's body. Brook tightened his grip, pulling his legs up out of the water as Tommy Tarrow waded deeper into the water.

"She's not happy tonight," Tommy Tarrow said as the river reached his chest.

Brook squinted, trying to see the opposite side, hoping that his ordeal would soon be over, but it seemed as if the far bank was further away than ever. The surface of the river boiled with rage, throwing waves into Brook's face.

Suddenly the brag disappeared beneath the water, and Brook felt himself being dragged beneath the surface. He fought against it, reaching out with his arms, desperate to stay afloat. But it was no use, he was being pulled deeper and deeper, down amongst the depths, into the reeds and weeds that made their home beneath the surface.

The last few pages of this story have never been found. Can you complete this tale?