

## Beyond Boundaries

Somewhere close to the Texas-Oklahoma border, the citizens of a small town were making preparations for an upcoming storm, tearing down loose branches and clearing the streets of potential debris. Weather reports forewarned torrential downpour and lightning that could last most of the day, so everyone hurried to do what they could to reduce potential damages. That included anyone living out on the outskirts.

A short way outside of town limits there was situated a farm of average size that specialized in corn produce as well as dairy, operated by a couple and a few farm hands. While the sun's rays remained unopposed for the time being, the owners Jenny and her husband Burt hurried to batten down their farm. Having tidied up the fields and putting away farm equipment, their storm preparation focus turned to the barn. However, there was one individual who didn't share their concerns.

"Not now, Riley, I'm busy!" said Jenny to the excited bundle of white and black fur that threatened to trip her up. "Can't ya see we don't have time to play?"

Riley would have none of her master's seriousness, continuing instead to romp amidst her jean-clad legs. Whenever her masters move about she gets especially energetic, and what's a proper border collie without excess energy? Jenny didn't seem to agree at the moment, making an exasperated sigh. "Any idea what's gotten into her, Burt?"

In the middle of bracing a supporting beam against the side of the barn, Burt simply replied, "Can't say." Riley kept barking for her blonde-haired master's attention, who made an exasperated groan.

"Go on, shoo!" Jenny kicked lightly to ward off the dog. "Go see what Annabelle is doin' or something. I'll play with ya later."

The mentioning of the younger master made Riley perk up her ears, and with a kick of her legs she sprinted off to the open fields of the farm, forgetting the older masters and their busy work. It had been a while since she got to do some extensive playing, and on a sunny day like this, she thought, what could be more important? And she knew for a fact the younger master would have no objections in sharing in the sentiment.

Riley halted upon picking up distant chatter on the wind, then panted eagerly as she sped into motion. No doubt something more interesting was happening, and she was intent on finding exactly what it was.

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It had headed further into the forest, she was sure of it. With that in mind, Riley scrambled up the leaf-littered slope as quickly as her paws would allow. There was plenty of ground to cover and

no time to waste.

The trees grew thicker, their interlocking branches blocking out the sunlight. She noticed that they became more gnarled the further she ran, but only as a fleeting thought. There wasn't time for doubt, concern, or fear, only the determination needed to find her target. Acres of spooky trees weren't going to faze her.

One thing did catch her attention, though. Blurred movements constantly appeared on the fringe of her sight, and they became larger over time. And louder.

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Some distance from the farm proper there was a forest, and some yards from that was a lone tree. It was there that Riley headed, and eventually she came to a stop by a small thicket that stood between her and the source of the chatter. Poking her head through the shrubbery she saw the younger master and her two friends standing before the lone apple tree that held their clubhouse. The young master, Annabelle, had the same blonde hair color as the older master as well as the same fashion sense of blue jeans with a yellow shirt, whilst the one called Samantha had medium-length brown hair and a tidy skirt, and the scruffy one in dirty clothes called Serena had messy short red hair. These three were pretty inseparable and, in the past, them being together usually meant mischief wasn't too far behind. This made Riley keen with anticipation as she stood silently, catching her breath while watching the young master's meeting unfold.

"What's the deal anyway, Annabelle? You made it sound really urgent," said Samantha.

"That's cause it *is* urgent," replied Annabelle. "I just thought of something really awesome for us to do!"

"Really?" asked Samantha warily. "What would that be?"

"Treasure hunting!"

The two girls looked at Annabelle with eyebrows furrowed.

Serena tilted her head. "Uh, treasure hunting? You know we're not in kindergarten, right?"

Annabelle snickered. "No, Serena, I'm not talkin' pretend. I mean *actual* treasure hunting, with *actual* treasure!"

"What kind of treasure?" asked Samantha, eyeing Annabelle oddly.

Annabelle gave a nod, then replied in a very low, secretive voice, "...Pirate Treasure."

Her two comrades only stared at her, but then quickly scoffed.

“Oh come on!”

“Seriously, Annabelle? Not prospectors or outlaws, but pirates? You know how far we are from the ocean?”

“But I’m dead serious, Serena! And I even have proof to show for it.”

“Oh yeah? And what would that be?”

“Feast your eyes on *this*!”

Digging into her pocket, Annabelle pulled out a shimmering gold disc. The sun glinting off its bumpy surface immediately left the other two girls in awe.

“Is, is that..?”

“Yep, Sam: an honest to goodness gold doubloon.”

“Where did you find that?” Serena asked eagerly, eyes wide over the tiny bit of fortune before her.

“It was the other day, I was helping ma and pa clear out some brush close to the woods. Just found it lying in the dirt. And where there’s one doubloon, there’s bound to be a whole chestful.” Annabelle grinned, proud at proving her claims to her friends.

“But where would the rest of it be, then?” Samantha asked.

“Deeper in the woods, I betchu. Which is why I wanted you to come over. I got us some shovels in the clubhouse, so that we can go into the woods and go stake us some treasure.”

“You mean right now? With the storm coming?”

“Do you see how nice things are, Sam? The storm’s still a long way off, and aren’t you the least bit excited in getting some of this booty, just waiting for the taking?”

“Samantha’s right, though,” Serena stated. “The storm’s supposed to be really nasty, and I don’t want us to get caught in it.”

“But I thought you liked running around in the rain? You sure did it plenty other times we hung out.”

“But there wasn’t lightning those other times, and there’s supposed to be lots for this one.”

“Alright, I hear ya,” Annabelle assented. “We’ll make this a short trip. Just go around, look for spots, dig a bit, then be back before the storm gets here.”

“And if we have no luck, we can always try tomorrow,” Samantha suggested.

“Now that’s the spirit! So you all in?”

The girls nodded, then reared and smacked their hands, exclaiming “*Yeah!*” From her spot in the bushes, Riley silently shook her head as the three ran into their clubhouse. It was clear they were up to no good, only this time she caught wind of it early. Having got her excess energy out during the run, she decided that she would follow the little ladies and keep an eye on them. Surely no harm could come from tagging along, if only from a distance.

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They were fast, whatever they were. Every time Riley shot a glance around her, the creatures darted from sight like fleeting shadows. Whether her pursuers were real or not wasn’t of importance. Getting away from them was.

As she bounded over the top of the slope onto level ground, a screech grabbed her attention to her left. One of the creatures had launched at her, claws poised to kill.

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After some time, the trio of girls left their clubhouse, each carrying a shovel and practically skipping into the nearby forest. Riley had been told many times when she was a pup to never wander into the forest, and she had heard those same warnings repeated to Annabelle. As such, she became extra wary as they got closer to the foreboding treeline. She maintained a comfortable distance to avoid being spotted. Though she was serious about keeping an eye on them, stalking something always got her blood flowing, even if it were just three little girls.

Clouds started appearing from the direction of the forest when Samantha spoke up. “Where do you think we should start looking, Annabelle?”

Annabelle put a hand to her chin. “Hmm. I reckon some ways in. I think it’d make good hidin’ if it’s way out of plain sight.”

“You think? Meaning you’re not entirely positive?” asked Serena.

“I’m one-hundred-percent positive, Serena,” replied Annabelle, raising her chin. “What pirate worth his salt would just bury his treasure right here for just *anyone* to find?”

“Still, it’s plenty of ground to cover.” At that moment Annabelle assaulted her with a surprise noogie.

“Tough no-nonsense Serena getting cold feet all a’ sudden? I never took ya for a chicken.”

“Stop that, Annabelle!”

The friends broke into giggles as they kept walking, eventually making it to the forest’s border. Riley stopped a moment to look up at the sky, sensing a shift in air pressure. The clouds that appeared earlier had grown thicker and grayer. A momentary chill ran up her spine, but she shook it off and headed after the girls into the forest.

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They came at her relentlessly from all sides. After narrowly avoiding the claws of her first attacker, Riley saw another creature charging at her right, and heard another coming from the rear. These things were done stalking her. They were going for the kill.

She ran headlong into the thick of the gnarled forest, never slowing her pace. As the beasts leapt and clawed at her, she bobbed and weaved to avoid both them and the twisted trees she ran past. The sky overhead had grown ever darker, further blotted by the thickening canopy of empty branches. Despite her keen sight, she was practically running blind through the darkening scenery.

The ground started sloping downwards again when something hit her right side. The wind knocked from her lungs, she fell over and rolled downward. The creature that slammed into her couldn’t get hold of her, but now she was tumbling helplessly down the hill, deeper into darkness.

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Thunder rumbled overhead, yet the girls continued their treasure hunt. Riley grew concerned, and inevitably concluded that they had had their fun for long enough. It was time to make herself known and bring them back home like wayward sheep, a skill she was rather proud of. But as she was about to make her move, Samantha started talking. “Still no treasure. I’m starting to think there might not be none.”

“Yeah, probably,” Serena agreed. Turning to the other girl she said, “Annabelle, it’s been, like, fifteen minutes, and we’ve only got some dirty shovels to show for it. Maybe we should call it a day?”

“It’s somewhere here, I just know it. It just doesn’t make sense that a pirate would leave only one doubloon way out here. That just goes against the pirate code.”

“Not sure if the pirate code says that, exactly,” Samantha said. “Besides, that thunder seems to be getting louder. We really should be heading back.” Her gaze widened abruptly as Annabelle suddenly ran past her, leaving the two behind.

“We can’t give up now, not when we’re this close!”

“I don’t even think we’re anywhere near close!” yelled Serena after her.

The two remaining girls broke into a run to catch up with their friend. Yet another round of silly recklessness. One that would undoubtedly get them dirty, and maybe get an assortment of things caught in their—

*“Aaaaaiiiiieee!”*

The scream immediately snapped Riley back to reality, and wasting no time she broke from the underbrush and made for the scream’s source. She halted at the start of a downward slope after some yards, and looking down she saw a terrible sight. A ways below there stretched out a sizable ravine, wide and deep like a gaping maw. Samantha and Serena were down at the ravine’s edge reaching out to something. To Riley’s horror, that something was Annabelle, hanging over the abyss by a very flimsy tree root.

“Grab my hand! Grab it!” cried Serena, desperately holding out a palm.

“I-I’m slippin’, y’all! I can’t keep my grip!”

“Just hold on!” yelled Samantha, more desperate-sounding than her imperiled friend.

Riley re-entered her run as she took to the slope, determined to get the girl out of danger. But halfway down she saw them: the raised hand, the wind-blown hair, and the wide-eyed look of horror. Annabelle had lost her grip.

Riley leapt into the air, willing herself to cover the remaining distance as fast as possible. She had the girl in her sights and nothing else. Even as the ground gave way to open air, all she could think about was protecting young Annabelle. As the two other girls looked on helplessly, both dog and master fell into the ravine.

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Riley awoke feeling cold. She must have lost consciousness during the tumble, though she had no inkling of how much time had passed. Blinking her eyes, she lifted her head and looked around. Bare, sickly trees surrounded her, along with a deathly silence and black haze that hung amidst the branches like fog. She noted the heaviness of the still air before standing up and moving on. There was no sound as she walked, not even that of her breath. Nothing could be seen, could be smelled. It was only her.

Suddenly, a flicker of light appeared in the distance, followed by another some distance ahead, and then in every direction. All around, there were ethereal orbs of light, each one a different pale shade of color, hovering lazily deeper into the valley. While their movements seemed erratic, they all tended to move in the same general direction. From them she detected whiffs of raw emotion that made her shiver: confusion, fear, despair. She felt compelled to follow them, however, and pressed on.

The dim glow of the orbs soothed her with a strange yet sad comfort. After a time, some of the orbs would break away and drift off in another direction, bringing a melancholic light to the endless dark of the outlying valley. They sought comfort, she could sense that. But as much as she wanted to provide it, she couldn't afford to lose the trail, and continued forward with an added weight of remorse.

The number of orbs floating around her grew steadily, and deep down she finally sensed *it*. More pronounced than the lights that bobbed around her, and something that caused the air to grow heavier on her. The ground at her paws darkened. A trick of the eyes maybe, except the newborn shadow grew thicker and flowed ahead of her, seething with an unearthly presence. It rose up, taking on shape, towering before her.

*"Why are you here?"*

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Riley's ears rang with an incessant buzzing and the tastes of earth and rust covered her tongue. She felt nothing, save for her eyelids. Opening them, the world before her appeared slanted, blurry, and constantly shifting. Slowly, everything came into focus, and across from her was a small mound of blue and yellow, lying perfectly still. There was a low rumble from the clouds overhead. She slipped back into unconsciousness as she felt the air grow heavy.

The next time she opened her eyes, there were voices, garbled by distance and shock. Something came down the side of the ravine and leapt to the prone girl's side.

"Oh no, Annabelle! Riley!"

Master... master had come. She looked to be at a loss, scared. The distant voices continued.

"Y'all stay put up there! Neither of you come down, y'hear?"

Master had come to save them. Because Riley had failed to protect Annabelle, or even herself.

"Hang in there, darlin'! Just hang in there!"

The two of them were lying at the bottom of a ravine, battered and crippled. All because she hadn't stopped the girl sooner. The thought of failure lingered as her mind drifted again.

Her master hadn't left when she opened her eyes once more. Her face was tense and haggard, and Annabelle remained still. A beating of feet, and a lithe farmhand entered the bleary picture.

"I came as soon as I got the word. Oh gosh, she looks bad. Riley too."

"Don't talk like that, Jess! Jes' help me get them outta here."

“Joe and the others should be here soon.”

As they talked, she saw it. In an unoccupied space next to Annabelle, a specter appeared out of nowhere, cloaked in darkness. The two adults seemed unaware of its presence, but Riley could see it. She could even smell the overpoweringly ominous stench it gave off. She watched as it extended a tendril over the girl and, right before the adults, pulled something from her. Something small, emitting a fragile aura. The creature withdrew its tendril and its prize back into itself, then disappeared like a passing mirage.

The thunder grew louder. The others had begun moving the girl, none the wiser as to what had happened. Something had to be done. That thought stuck with Riley as she drifted away. They didn't know, but she did. Something had to be done.

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Riley stiffened. The specter she had sought stood before her, tall as the trees around them and made of infinite darkness. Most intimidating though was the fact that it had spoken to her, despite having no discernible mouth.

*“One such as you doesn't belong here. You retain form, hold life. I ask again: why are you here?”*

The specter's voice was even, melancholic. The kind of voice that could lull one to sleep, but Riley stared at the being more intently to avoid that. This wasn't the time to lose her focus.

*“...I see. You are seeking this.”*

A part of the specter separated from its side like an arm, and where its palm would be there rose a familiar light of mixed yellow and blue. Riley eased her stance upon seeing the orb. So similar to the others she'd seen, but there was no mistaking it: it held *her* scent.

*“Interesting, but also unsurprising. It's in your kind's nature to seek one's master, but to take it this far could be viewed as extraordinary, if ultimately pointless.”*

The specter's words irked Riley, and she growled deeply, baring her teeth.

*“You hold an uncanny intelligence despite your primitive disposition. That said, you have undoubtedly realized what this land is, as well as the meaning of **our** actions. You should also have come to the realization that such actions cannot, and shall not, be undone.”*

The orb of light sunk back into the darkness of the specter's arm, causing Riley to whine softly, only to be followed up with a low snarl.

*“All living things follow their course, and in time, must release their essence. Some far sooner*



*than others, and some more painfully. You were spared your end today, though barely. The other one met her end, and had to be collected. Such is our task, and we make no exceptions.”*

Her snarl grew louder.

*“It goes without saying that what you want is impossible. Were I to relinquish this soul, it would become lost like the ones that inhabit this realm, and they are the fortunate ones. The beasts you encountered devour those that stray too far, who in vain try to return to their former states, only to be met with oblivion. Through us, this soul shall be able to move on to the next stage of the grand cycle. But you cannot grant such salvation, such certainty. Were I to give it to you, it would have little hope for a continued purpose. In all likelihood, it will simply drift away.”*

She couldn't stand it any longer. Sprinting forward, Riley made for the specter, and jumping she opened her mouth for a devastating bite. Something hard and scathing grabbed her neck, stopping her in midair before throwing her into a distant tree. Spots filled her vision as she fell to the ground, coughing harshly from the impact. She laid on her side and looked at the creature, which appeared to be turning away from her.

*“Leave this realm. Return to your home and live out the extension you have been granted this day. There is nothing for you here.”*

The tone of finality in its last words struck something in Riley. For a moment her vision blurred, and she found herself drifting away to another time.

Riley remembered the day she first met her. She was barely an adolescent when her master talked of a new arrival in the household: a lively babe by the name of Annabelle. She recalled that the little one took an immediate liking to her. “Watch her and protect her” was what she was told to do. She did more than that though.

In the years to follow, they experienced much. While the master tended to the harvest, Riley looked after the girl and they would play together. She remembered the trouble they often got into, and even the troubles she found herself pulling Annabelle out of. The messes they made, the scoldings they received, the treats and accidents they shared, all things for better or worse. On days of celebration, and on lonely nights when the master was away, they were together. The two of them getting baths, looking over one another in times of sickness, and the laughter they shared. The happiness of those memories gave her warmth every time she thought of them, and in that singular moment it was all there, all at once.

Such an innocent girl, one so full of life and vigor, was something worth protecting, worth defending, worth risking life and limb. Riley realized this in the years she spent growing up with her. Whatever she felt for the girl, it was more than simple loyalty. Something that this “collector” clearly didn't know. And Riley was going to show it.

She slowly got back onto her paws, strength steadily returning to her limbs. By the time she was standing again, her whole body was fully refreshed and her mind cleared. With the specter's back to her, she immediately bolted. The dash caught the specter's attention, and by the time it turned around the dog was already airborne, jaws open.

A tendril swung around to stop her, but the specter had reacted too late. The farm dog hit the specter's center and tore into the inkiness that composed it. Riley's senses became smothered by the dark, but she kept biting fiercely, until her muzzle latched onto a sudden radiance. With a strong tug, she pulled back and freed herself from the creature's innards. Her paws back on the ground, she shook her head of the ooze that had clung to her, her senses accosted by smells of death, the groans of dismay, and the sight of the glowing prize held in her mouth.

A violent tremor cut Riley's triumphant moment short. The lights that were nearby began bobbing wildly, as trees in the distance began uprooting and disintegrating. Following in the wake of the disappearing trees came an approaching brightness in the shape of a devastating wave.

*"You meddlesome animal. To forcefully take a soul upsets the balance. All must be purged to set everything back in order. You have condemned yourselves to destruction."*

Riley didn't stick around, turning around to high-tail it outta there. Her prize clenched firmly in her teeth, she ran as fast as she could from the approaching destruction. No monsters leapt out to face her, but the sounds of the realm undoing itself grew louder and louder to the point of deafening her. The cleansing light was closing in, but Riley spotted a different kind of light ahead of her. Lowering her head, she charged straight at it. She kept running even as the opposing lights collided, enveloping everything in an all-consuming white flare.

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The storm came as predicted. It didn't take long for thick clouds to replace the sunny afternoon with considerable rainfall. The residents of the town had long since retreated into their cozy abodes to wait out the storm with friends and loved ones. However, if one were to look out into the thick downpour, they might have caught a glimpse of a lone splotch of black and white, gliding slowly through the dreariness with what may have appeared to be a slumbering girl.

Riley walked steadily through the streets with purpose. The rain didn't bother her whatsoever, as it paled to her considerable fatigue. Even so, she continued forward, mindful not to jostle the little one she was carrying too much.

The veil of rain and her exhaustion made the distance seem unending, but she was fine with that. They were familiar surroundings, so she could take her time. But not too slowly; there was still

the one task to do.

By the time she made it to the gates of the farm, the rain had stopped. As she made her way up the road to the homestead, the clouds began to recede, returning the sky to its earlier azure splendor. The first breaks of sunlight beamed through around the time she made it to the front door. It was unlocked, and she didn't hesitate to nudge it open.

The living room was filled with many familiar faces. Close family friends, especially the closest friends of the master. All of them looked haggard with worry. Some were even crying. None of them paid mind as Riley made her way upstairs.

On the second landing she saw the other two masters of the house sitting in the hallway in the comfort of each other's arms. They too paid her no mind as she walked past them and into Annabelle's room. Upon entering, her gaze turned to the little bed at the other end of the room where her master slept under its covers. Riley approached the bed and hopped onto it, and went up to the girl that lay under the covers. Gently, she lowered the orb down onto the girl, whereupon it was readily absorbed. Immediately her body emitted warmth as her cheeks began to blush with life, her hair regaining its original bright sheen.

Wagging her tail weakly over a job well done, Riley hopped off the bed and moved to the back corner of the room. There she took a moment to look over the little bundle wrapped in bandages on the tiny comforter. She had to admit she was in pretty bad shape. Riley didn't think further on it, instead pacing around in a circle before lying down and curling up. She took a moment to look up at her little master and felt herself at ease, all fatigue and worry dissolving instantly.

The warm air played over her, the light shining across her face.