

Jarvis the Duck

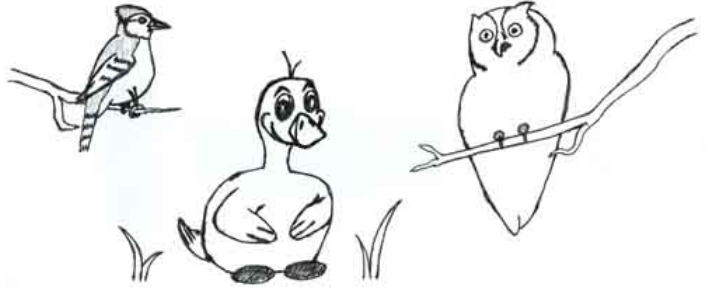
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The Council

Jarvis is a young duck that lives on a small pond in The Great Poplar Forest. These are the chronicles of his adventures.

In the cool, early morning of a fine day in mid-October, Jarvis, Angeldown, and about 50 other healthy ducks and owls were gathered together at the shore of The Great Lake. Before them was a very old owl, feathers as white as snow. His expression was strangely serene, and though old, a certain strength seemed to emanate from him. A small group of elder ducks and owls stood behind him, most with grim faces. Among them, a tall, muscular falcon stood out strikingly; his face was expressionless. Hundreds of other ducks, most with various degrees of the plague, floated out in the lake watching the gathering on the shore. Hundreds of owls, most also with the plague, were perched in the trees near the gathering watching intently.

Jarvis had never seen such a scene of carnage as had occurred at The Great Lake. He, Angeldown, Sage, and Jay had flown in the day before, arriving after dark. When they got a look around the lake in the morning, they saw hundreds of birds with the plague- ducks, owls, and many smaller birds. A distinctly nauseating odor hung in the air. Most birds at the lake were covered in the black splotches. For many, the black splotches on the feathers covered open sores that oozed yellow liquid. Many were so sick they couldn't leave their nests. As for the nests, Jarvis noticed that they were lavishly appointed here at The Great Lake. They shined in gold, as soft Goldenreed had been woven together with moss and thistle down.



Jarvis did not miss the irony of seeing the blackened creatures confined to their golden nests. The worst had begun to die. A makeshift graveyard had been designated a few hundred yards from the lake to bury the dead. Upon first looking around, Jarvis's heart sank, Angeldown began to cry.

All eyes converged on the old, white owl as he began to speak:

“Greetings travelers and fellow residents of The Great Lake. My name is Aristotle. The attendance of all is greatly appreciated. A horrific tragedy has befallen us. The only clue to a possible cure may be found in the Book of the Dead. This great book tells us that we must solve the riddle of Osiris to effect such a cure. Neither the riddle nor its answer is, of course, known. Our best chance of finding help lies with my old friend Gnosis of the Snowy Owls far to the north.”

“We will need a small party of healthy individuals to make the journey north. Many dangers lie within The Black Forest. A large contingent would inevitably draw unwelcome attention, so the party must be small and travel low, close to the tree canopy. The individuals of our party must also be among the best and brightest we have to offer. We are relying on these individuals, with the help of Gnosis, to do nothing less than find the answer to the

riddle of Osiris. This is our last and only hope. May Ra be with us.”

Jarvis looked over at Angeldown. She looked sad and frightened, though when Jarvis managed a faint smile, she mustered the strength to smile back.

“The healthiest and brightest among us stand before us. They have been asked by their peers to attend this gathering, and they have nobly answered the call. The elders and I have agreed to ask three riddles. The three that successfully answer the riddles will join a few others to comprise the party.”

One of the elder ducks waddled forward slowly. He stood beside Aristotle. He looked around at the great crowd, cleared his throat, and announced, “Welcome! I am Imhotep. I will ask the first riddle.” He recited:

“I soar majestic in eternal flight
I ride the winds of darkness and light
By day, my feathers shine in the azure of fable
By night, my plumage is glistening sable

Of this world, but not of the earth
I am not so different from those of egg or birth
Tirelessly grasping, from midnight to eleven
I kiss the land, while reaching for heaven”

This recitation was followed by a long silence. After a few minutes, Aristotle prodded, “If anyone can answer this riddle, please speak up.”

Jarvis looked at Angeldown. She looked back with soft eyes, slightly raising her eyebrows. He gently raised his in response. Jarvis was quite shell shocked by the entire spectacle. Most of those in attendance were

as well. After Aristotle’s words, Jarvis began to think about the riddle. His mind was reeling; he was having trouble concentrating. His hand involuntarily scratched his head. Suddenly, he blurted out, “The sky.”

Immediately after saying this, Jarvis felt his heart sink all the way down to his core. All eyes were upon him. Angeldown looked at him with a shocked expression. After what seemed like a century but was only a moment, Aristotle said, “Quite right, young man.” He outstretched his wing and continued, “Please come forward and tell us your name.”

Jarvis made his way to the front and approached Aristotle. His mind was spinning; he was walking on autopilot. Aristotle said gently, “Excellent job and what is your name?”

Jarvis managed to force out, “Jarvis ... Jarvis from The Pond.”

“Well, Jarvis from The Pond, if you accept, you will be a member of the party,” said Aristotle.

Without even consciously thinking, Jarvis somehow replied, “I do accept.”

Aristotle replied, “We are all indebted to you, Jarvis. Please stand beside me while we select two others.” He motioned to his right with his wing. Jarvis stood beside Aristotle.

Imhotep returned to the group of elders.
This time, Aristotle asked a riddle:

“Alive, though I do not breathe
Save life, into words and deeds
Without me, all are slaves
Though minds see but my shadows in
caves

Happiness is my mother
Virtue is my brother
I am the principle, venerable, esteemed,
The doctrine of the mean”

Again, a long silence followed the riddle.
Aristotle gently encouraged, “Can anyone
solve this riddle?”

A duck in the back of the group ventured,
“Is it fire?”

Aristotle announced, “That is not correct,
but thank you for your response.”

Another long silence followed.
Suddenly, Angeldown felt as if a sharp spike
had been driven into her heart. She knew
the answer. She was frozen. She waited to
see if anyone would answer while she tried
to regain the ability to breathe. Finally, she
felt compelled; she said weakly, “Ethics.”

Aristotle replied gently, “Can you please
repeat that, young lady.”

“Ethics,” said Angeldown more loudly,
now beginning to regain her composure.

“Very, very good. That is correct.
Please step forward and tell us your name.”

Jarvis watched shocked as Angeldown
came towards him. He caught her eye as she
approached. She wore a look of
determination. She addressed Aristotle with

a slight nod, “I am Angeldown. Like Jarvis,
I live at The Pond.”

Aristotle laughed, then said, “Well, I do
not know what is in the water at The Pond,
but I should like to have a drink.” The
tension in the air seemed to lift a little.
Many managed a chuckle. After a few
moments, he said seriously, “Do you accept
this responsibility?”

“I do,” replied Angeldown.

Aristotle stretched his wing to the right,
“Please stand beside me, Angeldown. We
have one more to select.”

An elder owl walked forward and stood
beside Aristotle. He seemed very good
natured and wore a slight smile. He seemed
to almost transcend the misery around. He
announced, “Good morning. My name is
Dalai. I will ask the final riddle.”

“We are the mischievous twins
To self and world, we bind soul’s wings
Grounding fledglings not of age
Like songbirds in a gilded cage

The first of us is desire
For earthly things. It burns like fire
The other of us is the many ignored
Away from heaven we keep the core”

Again, a long silence followed, and
again, Aristotle encouraged, “Can anyone
solve this riddle?” This time, though, no
answers were forthcoming. Another long
silence ensued. Again, Aristotle repeated,
“Can anyone solve this riddle?” Silence.
Finally, Aristotle said, “If no one can answer
this riddle, then we have found two
members of our party, to which we will add
a few suggested by the elders. I want to
thank all in attendance. Your willingness to

help is greatly appreciated. This council is hereby adjourned.”

The crowd began to break up. Jarvis and Angeldown just stood in stunned silence, glancing at each other and the dispersing crowd. As Aristotle and the elders were talking amongst themselves, Jay and Sage flew down to Jarvis and Angeldown.

“I can’t believe you two solved the riddles,” said Jay. “Unbelievable.”

“Man, you guys on some kind of crazy mind expanding herb?” said Sage, then looking at Jarvis, “I know you’re into medicinal plants.”

“You guys are a little *too* surprised,” said Jarvis in mock anger. “We do have a few brain cells, you know, and we’ve been practicing riddles.”

“Man, but you guys solved the riddles, and *no one* else,” said Sage.

“It *does* seem very strange,” said Angeldown quietly to no one in particular, lost in thought.

Jarvis, Jay, and Sage just looked at her inquisitively.

“Man, we’re going with you,” said Sage excitedly, glancing at Jay, then Jarvis.

“You bet,” agreed Jay, adding quickly, “if you want us to,” as he glanced at Angeldown.

“I would like that very much,” replied Angeldown, now seeming to be back down to earth.

Aristotle, Imhotep, and Dalai made their way over to the excited foursome. “Again, excellent job,” said Aristotle.

“We certainly appreciate your agreeing to join the party,” said Dalai with a smile.

“Was the last one Materialism and Selfishness?” said Jarvis to Dalai on impulse. Dalai’s smile dropped as he looked at Jarvis in surprise.

“Gentlemen, I do believe we have found the right crew,” said Aristotle with a smile, glancing first at Dalai and Imhotep, then back at Jarvis and Angeldown. After a moment, he continued, “Jarvis, have you ever heard of the term, ‘Seer’?”

“Yes, a Seer is someone who without any special training just naturally possesses great wisdom,” replied Jarvis.

“Yes, well ... you may be one,” said Aristotle with a smile. Angeldown, Sage, and Jay looked at Jarvis in amazement. “Now, we must address the issue of the remainder of the party.”

After a moment, Jarvis exclaimed, “Sir, ... Angeldown and I would like Sage and Jay here to join us.” Glancing at Sage and Jay, he added, “They are trusted friends.” Jay raised his eyebrows and looked at Jarvis, as if to say, “Trusted friends?” but did not crack a smile.

“Yes, we would very much like that,” added Angeldown.

Aristotle looked at Imhotep and Dalai. They nodded back to Aristotle, who said, “If that is your wish, then so it shall be. We had a few others in mind to join the party, but we must keep it small. There is one that we definitely would like to go with you.”

Aristotle raised his voice, addressing the group of elders, “Talon, would you please join us here?”

The tall, muscular falcon walked over to Aristotle. “This is Talon. We have known each other for many years. He is originally from the north, like me. He will be your guide and can offer protection from some of the dangers you will face on your journey.”

“Good morning,” said Talon, glancing at each of the four in turn, his face still expressionless. “I am happy to offer my services for this important quest.”

There was a brief pause, then Jarvis said to Talon, “And we are happy to have them.”

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