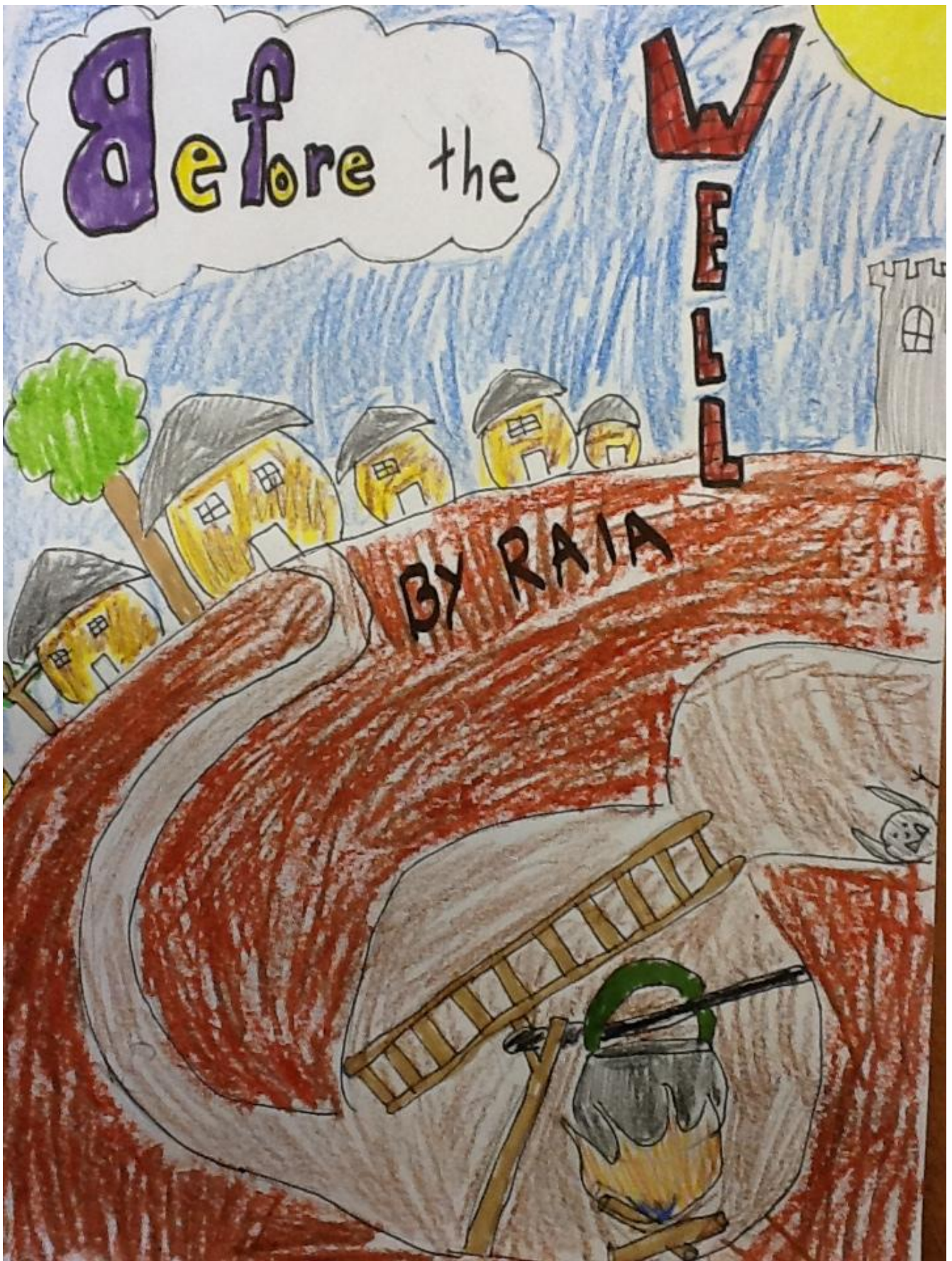


Before the

WELL

BY RAIA



# **Before the Well**

**A Prequel to *Beneath the Well*.**

By Raia

## Chapter 1

“Never to return again!” Even now, after the King had banished us from his kingdom, those words remained forever burned into my memory. I knew it was against the rules to steal from him, but he wasn’t providing us with enough food and supplies.

“Joseph Boggle, you'll have to stop daydreaming if you want to attend the council's meeting!” Father's words interrupted my unpleasant thoughts. Right. I straightened my best clothes and resumed my walk toward the council's small gray hut, which, like everything else in our village, was old and falling apart due to the lack of supplies. As we entered the hut, all eyes rested on me. I gulped, not certain of the council's reaction to my presence.

“What is that young one doing here, Mr. Boggle?” the head council member inquired of my father.

“He had some good ideas – I thought you'd like to hear them,” my father answered simply.

“Very well, then, he may stay.” The meeting began. “We will start with the boy's 'good ideas'.”

“My first idea is to go into the neighboring kingdom and live there,” I stated nervously.

“They are already angry with our king. I don't think they will welcome us,” a council member interjected sternly. I sighed. The council was not being very flexible- but this was to be expected, as rarely anything new was approved by the council.

“My next idea is to go underground and live in tunnels and eat the Gobi grubs.”

“Hmm... not bad.” I couldn't tell who said this, but I thought he meant well.

“You know, Mr. Ingenious Ideas,” another council member mocked, “it is my feeling that Mr. Smarty-pants should get out!”

I looked around and saw that other council members were nodding in agreement. Quickly, I turned, bowed, and left the room. I kept the rising sob in until I was well out of the hut. I then ran to the chilla-tree by my two story hut and climbed into the branches. As I sat in the tree, the bark slowly sapped my emotions away as all chilla bark do. Slowly, gradually, I calmed down and only then did I descend from the tree.

“Why did you run?” It was Miri, the girl next door. Being good friends, I trusted her.

“I was at the council's meeting,” I wondered if she had seen me cry. “They were rude.”

“Ohhh,” Miri let out a long breath. “It is strange how one's emotions can be affected by another's comment.” So she *had* seen me cry. “Why were you at the council’s meeting anyway? I thought ‘children’ weren’t allowed unless they got permission from the council.”

“My father is good friends with a council member and he was able to convince his friend to let me in. I had some good ideas about how to survive ... but, they didn't like them.”

“Hmm – what where the ideas?”

“To live in the neighboring kingdom, or go underground and eat the Gobi grubs. The council disliked my first idea because the neighboring kingdom is angry with ours. I was shooed out after my second idea.”

“I like your second idea! Why don't we convince a group of families who also like your idea to go underground. Even though we would be disobeying the council, if enough people would do it that they couldn't punish all of us.”

“That’s a great suggestion!” I replied with enthusiasm, “Let’s start with the families next to my house!” With Miri in tow, I headed through the rows of brown and gray ramshackle huts to our neighbor's house. I knocked on the door but no-one answered. I looked through their window, and noticed a candle farther in. When I knocked again, I heard a groan.

“What? Could you repeat that?” Miri said.

“C-come in,” the voice was weak, and it sounded like it took a great effort to speak.

I recognized the voice to be the eldest brother, Ttub. I pushed on the door and it fell in. I stared in horror as I had never 'vandalized' anything before.

“Oops,” Miri said, cheerfully, “come on.” She walked over the threshold and into the house. Not knowing what else to do, I followed her.

“Where are you?” I called.

“In mphhfft,” I heard faintly, then a screech, clang, bang!

“Are you alright?”

“Erg, uh-huh.” the words got fainter every second, “Need light – fever.”

“Hang in there – we'll get to you.”

The family, I realized, had been larger around the waist than most people in our village. They were not used to having less food and were likely to get sick from eating whatever they could find.

“Miri, why don't you go back to my house and get all the food and medicine that we can spare.”

After Miri left, it suddenly got quiet – too quiet. I hurried into the living room and saw their family lying face up, with red cheeks burning with fever, and bodies so thin you could see their ribs.

## Chapter 2

When Miri returned with the food, I had just finished propping up the youngest brother. We did what we could for them, pushing the antidote for the fever into their mouths. Then we went home because it was getting quite late. On the way home, I suggested we make up a secret language so we could communicate privately. Miri agreed enthusiastically, and we agreed to decide on it the following day when we would have more energy. As I turned to my own large, two-story hut, with rope tied around the bottom to keep it together, my mother came out. I knew I was in deep trouble by the angry look on her face.

“Joseph!” she exclaimed. “Your father is out looking for you! You scared us half to death! I nearly died from worry! Go out and search for him before I die here!”

“Yes, Ma,” I mumbled and hurried into the night.

As I ran along the streets, my stomach growled with hunger. *Maybe we could have fresh berries with a fried fish from the stream?* This was to be my third day eating only the fruits and berries that we grew. As my thoughts were on food, I didn't see him and bumped into my father. “Ugh!” I exclaimed.

“Joseph, where were you? We were worried sick!”

“Please don't yell – Ma already gave it to me,” I pleaded. “Sorry I'm late – I was suggesting my ideas to Miri and caring for our neighbors.”

“Why were you caring for them?”

“They have fever and are all half-starved,” was my reply.

“I'll go tend to them in the morning. After all, I didn't go to the neighboring kingdom just to study medicine for nothing!” he mumbled. Then, “Come on. Your mother will be waiting for us.” As we were walking home, I suggested what Miri had said about gathering the villagers and living underground all together. “Are you suggesting that we disobey the council?”

“Yes!” I nearly shouted. “We can save the whole village!”

“All right – fine,” my father sighed. Because he agreed so quickly, I figured he just had said that to end the conversation. “Let's go home.”

Nevertheless, I wanted to share more with him about my plan. So I said, “It can really work, Father. I discovered a secret tunnel which is under the head-member's podium! There's a cavern which you get to by that tunnel. We can make our tunnels based off of that.”

“But how will you get into the tunnel with all of the villagers?”

“At night,” I answered simply. “Let's go home now, Ma is pretty mad, and maybe you can calm her down.”

When we got home, Ma was cooking dinner. The smell made me gag. “Hi, we're home,” Father

said. “What's for dinner? It smells delicious!”

“Fried guano with fresh maggots,” was the loving reply.

“Yum – what kind of guano is it?” Father was amazing like that.

“Freshly delivered Dragon; I think it might be from a Hooting Horn Hammerer.”

“Whoa – where did you find that? Those species are rare!” Father commented excitedly.

“Oh – just on top of our roof. Why are you looking at me like that, Joseph? Now sit down and give me your plate.”

“Uh – Ma,” I said thinking fast, “I'm not really hungry right now.”

“Well, if you're not going to eat anything, go up to your room.”

As I headed up the stairs, I realized how fortunate we were to have dinner at all, even if it *was* dragon dung. As I climbed into bed, my stomach growled. I realized I had to eat something. Sighing, I climbed out of bed and shimmied down the tree outside my window. Scurrying through the night, I arrived at a valley near my house where I had played with Miri when I was younger. In the valley, I dug a small hole. Inside the hole, to my delight, I found some Gobi grubs. Quickly making a small fire, I fried the grubs. Munching on my small snack, I headed back home with a quieter belly, exhausted by the day.

As I slept, my father was out in the night digging a hole. Not a small hole, but a very large hole. He had gotten to the hole by a tunnel. Not just any tunnel, but the tunnel I had told him about. Suddenly, the head member walked in.

“Well, well, well, the secret tunnel I built,” he said. “Good thing I was awake, because it seems as if someone is in there. I guess I'll have to seal it off.” Then he pushed the pedestal back in place and sealed it to the ground with a special paste, closing it permanently. Unaware that my father was trapped inside the tunnel, I slept on.



### Chapter 3

I awoke the next morning to the sound of weeping. I quickly got dressed and went down the stairs to find my mother on the floor sobbing her heart out. When I inquired what was wrong, she blubbered, “Your father, he’s gone, waaaa!”

“Umm .... Where is he now?” I asked.

“Gone to dig, boohoo!”

I decided I should find another information source. As I was going out the door, my mother called, “Joseph, he has been digging for you,” before dissolving in another sobbing fit. I gasped! My father had gone ahead with the plan without the council's permission anyway. I turned, “Where did he go!?”

“To the secret tunnel,” was Ma's reply – at least that's what I thought she had said. I turned around and dashed out the door. On my way toward the council's hut, I spied a nearby bush, luscious and full with blackberries; I was so hungry I didn't stop to think why it wouldn't be picked clean in a time of starvation. After filling my pockets, I continued toward the council's hut.

When I arrived, the hut was empty. Scrambling through an open window, I dropped to the floor. Then, pushing with all my weight – I tried to get the head council member's pedestal to move aside. No luck. I knelt down to investigate. As I leaned down, a berry rolled out of my pocket, and as it touched the floor, a hole the size of a whole pile of dragon dung appeared, right where the pedestal used to be. My first reaction was to completely panic as I realized that what I had found were explosive blackberries!!!!!!! Then I came to the conclusion that I could go find my father!

After noticing my good fortune, I hurried down into the hole that the berry had made. Crawling along the dark and damp tunnel, it was a relief when I finally arrived in a big cavern. I sighed with relief, for there was my father. “Father!” I cried. “There you are! We've been looking for you and here you have been digging. How come you didn't come ho -?”

“Joseph, I couldn't get out. Believe me I tried,” he said wearily. Then, after a short pause, he asked curiously, “How did you get in here anyway?”

“Umm ....I found some explosive blackberries?” I said, not sure he would believe me.

“What do they look like?”

“Um, here – like this,” I fished one out of my pocket for him.

“Hmm – they just look like regular blackberries. I think I'll try one. I haven't eaten all night, you know.”

“Father, don't!!!!” I yelled, “They're explosive!” Too late – he had already eaten one.

“Huh,” he said, “I feel a little funny. I'm tired.” With that he promptly fell asleep. Then after a few minutes of snoring softly, he began to change.

“Father – wake up.” I shook him, but to no avail. His skin turned all scaly like a fish and his rear end became quite pointy. His bottom teeth grew upwards and he grew a tail. His fingers and toenails grew out so that he almost had claws. “Father, wake up!” I yelled again, confused as to what to do.

This time he stirred and groggily said, “What's up?” His voice came out all scratchy sounding, like metal on metal.

“Father,” I began, not knowing what to say. “Why don't you take a look at yourself?”

“YOWWW!” he exclaimed. Before I could start to say something, he said again, “Wait, I smell something tasty.” He started to dig. Curious, I helped him. Suddenly, we came across a patch of Gobi grubs.

“Amazing!” I exclaimed. “Your nose is much more powerful than mine!”

“Wait a minute, we might be on to something.”



## Chapter 4

“Are you sure this will work? You know, they might turn against you.” My father said for about the millionth time.

“Positive. And I know what I’m going to say,” I replied.

“OK then, go ahead.”

I took the explosive, magical blackberries and, running back through the tunnel, emerged into daylight. Running to our hut, I found Ma still sobbing.

“Ma,” I comforted, “I found Father, and he's ok – sort of.” My words seemed to work wonders. She stopped crying and sat up.

“Where is he?” she inquired.

“Come with me. I’ll show you to him.” I led her to the tunnel. “When you go down and see Father, eat this,” I handed her a blackberry, “and you’ll find yourself in the same state he is.” Before she could ask why, I had gone.

After sending Ma down the tunnel, I rushed back and rang the big gong outside the council's hut. When most of the village had assembled, I made a small speech. “Villagers, I have just made a startling discovery. These blackberries here will allow you to find food much easier.” At that remark most of the villagers rushed at me, trying to get a blackberry.

“But, there is a cost. You will turn in to what some people call a hobgoblin. Although your appearance may be quite startling, don’t worry. You will now have the ability to sniff out food even when it is one foot underground. I know because my father and I tested it out.”

There were several cheers and someone said, “Grab your shovels, boys! Let’s get to work.”

“Without the council’s permission, perhaps?” a steely voice said. I gulped when I saw that it was the head council member. How could I have been so simple? The council was bound to come at the sound of the gong. Now, I was going to be in de-e-e-p trouble.

“Who needs the council for this decision?” a villager came to my rescue. “We all know perfectly well what we want to do!!!!” I grinned as the council members stood and gaped at the crowd of shouting people. Even if they made most of the decisions, I realized, the power of the villagers together could leave them defenseless.

“Then, follow me!” I led the villagers to the tunnel and gave them each a berry.

Before I gave one to Miri, she whispered, “What about the sick neighbors?”

I slapped my forehead. “Let’s go and give them berries, maybe once you’ve eaten one you can’t get sick!” Fortunately, it turned out I was right.

After giving the berries to our previously sick neighbors, I then realized that I hadn't eaten a

magical blackberry yet. I reached into my pouch for the last one. I chewed, swallowed, and then promptly fell into a de-e-e-e-e-p sleep.

**Epilogue** (several months later)

I groaned. Who knew the Gobi grub died if exposed to the methane that we produce all the time? Because the Gobi grub is our main sustenance, we would have to find a new source of food all over again!

I wonder where we could get more...

***THE***  
***END***