

2 RUN!

Goosebumps prickled every inch of tingling skin. For a long moment, Yodin sat listening, his hands still holding the book. But nothing more came, only the gusts of wind and rain lashing at the window, pushing at the walls.

Imagined it? he wondered, his heart still beating like galloping hooves. He shook his head and swallowed. “Just... freaked out a bit,” he said, readjusting into his chair. “Just... the storm... and this... old book.” He nodded in agreement with himself, his gaze on the last line. Before he could decide about reading any more... it came again!

This time Yodin jumped from his chair, tripping as the blanket tangled his feet. The cry came on the wind, yet sounded near, like... just beyond the shed.

He peered through the bay window, straining to see into the blustery darkness. “Why’s it so dark? It’s not even eight o’clock.” His heart beat harder, his throat suddenly dry.

Staring at the doorknob, he wrestled with grabbing the flashlight and peering outside.

“No!” he warned himself. “That’s how kids disappear.”

But someone—it had sounded like a girl—had indeed cried

for help.

“Help... me,” he mouthed the words.

Stepping back from the door, he looked about. *Is this some joke?* he wondered. *Are Mom and Dad secretly watching?* He shook his head. “No... they wouldn’t do that.”

He put his ear to the door, re-checking the deadbolt.

The wind pushed against the frame in forceful lunges, each billowing blast like an unseen battering ram shaking the house.

“Call 911?” He pressed his ear tighter—only the wind and rain battering and splattering. He glanced back at the open book resting upside down beside his chair.

When nothing more came, he convinced himself, not without a struggle, that he had only imagined the cry for help. It was the book—putting crazy thoughts and fears into his eager mind.

“Books shouldn’t do that,” he said sternly like one who knows things. He made his way back to the chair, eyes peering into the storm, ears keen, listening hard for what sure sounded like a very real cry for help.

For a while, he sat just wishing Mom and Dad were back so he could put off reading this strange old book. He looked once more at the detailed etching, the boy with the long sword, the city and its fortress melding into the background. Again, the dark sadness came.

“Horlock,” he said softly. Then shaking himself, he declared, “It’s just a story. Just a book.” After another long exhale, he decided to read on but promised himself that if anything else happened, anything weirdish at all, he’d wait for Mom and Dad. *Read it tomorrow... in the daytime... maybe.*

“It’s just a silly book,” he chided. “You’re freaking yourself out... being a mouse.”

So, with steeled determination, he flopped back into his cozy chair and took to reading once more.

‘...frolicking with the shadows that danced in the yellow light, when from the darkness there came a forlorn cry, a cry

from somewhere distant, somewhere just beyond the shelter. The young boy's skin prickled as the mournful cry drifted on the wind.'

Yodin raised his eyebrows. "Got that right," he muttered.

'But being a brave lad, he forced his eyes to read once more the lines etched in black. Fear alone would not keep this young warrior from answering his call. Neither life nor limb be price too great when dire need doth beckon.'

Yodin's brow tightened. "Huh?" His jaw tensed. "It's just... a book," he said, pressing his lips. "Then why is my heart still pounding?"

A gust shook the bay window, striking it hard with a dose of pummeling rain. He looked outside, still perturbed about the cry for help. It sure had sounded real.

Before he turned to read more, a blue flash lit the sky. He froze, chills lifting every inch of skin. In the corner of his eye, from just beyond the shed, a dark silhouette had shone, a faint form of someone, something, running straight toward his house.

"M-m-mom... D-d-dad..." he stammered, wide eyes just staring. Outside, all had gone dark. The rain, flinging itself against the window, seemed bent on blinding his view, on cruelly hiding the dark image now running toward him.

He tried to move, yelling at himself to go hide. But only his chest thumped, a steady pounding beat like war drums calling.

Another flash lit the darkness, its light bursting through the window.

"Ahhh!" Yodin screamed, bolting backward over the arm of the chair. He tumbled hard to the floor, once again tangled in the blanket. Scampering to his knees, he peered over the recliner, eyes so wide they burned.

At the base of the window, peering right back at him, shone a face, a girl's face. Wavy through the watery glass, her eyes were

filled with the most horrid dread.

“Help me!” she cried, her palms pressed hard to the wet glass.

Yodin just stared, his whole body a frozen lump of cement.

“Please... I beseech you... help me!”

The terror twisting the girl’s face all the more cemented Yodin to the floor. His heart had stopped, his bewildered eyes stuck open.

Then, as suddenly as it had come, the face disappeared. He sat frozen, mind numb. *Who... was... that?*

But a loud thump jolted him. The doorknob rattled. Pounding thumps shook the door as the girl’s desperate cries pleaded for him to open.

“Pleeese...” she wailed, her voice like one being dragged defenseless into the fangs of death. “I beg you... pleeease!”

A bright flash lit the sky, a glowing bolt hitting just beyond the fields. Instantly the house shook, the thundering rumble shaking windows and dishes, rattling the whole house as if it were a toy. Yodin gasped, his body jerking like someone shocked back to life.

Again the girl cried. “Hasten! Do bid thee... please... pleeease!” Her cry became a woeful wail, the mournful cry of one forsaken.

But he had seen it. In the flash of blue light, he had seen a bulky form emerge from just beyond the shed, right from where the girl had come. Yodin stood and leaned into the window, squinting to see through darkness and rain. A pause. A distant flash. Then a sudden silhouette—the dark silhouette of a very large, heavy thing... a running thing, no... a loping kind of thing... a galloping, running creature of really big size... coming straight toward the house... *his* house!

“Pleeese!” came the girl’s desperate cry. “Grant mercy!”

Before he knew what he had done, his hand yanked open the door.

Tumbling in with the rushing wind and pelting rain, came the girl, her clothes soaked and dirty. Yodin stepped back, staring

down at her like some lost halfwit.

She tried to rise but slipped on the tile, falling hard on her rump. When she found her footing, she sprang to her feet.

“Run!” she huffed, swiping matted hair off her face. “We must... run!”