

TOMBS  
*of* DROSS

By LEW ANDERSON

THE LORIAN STONES TRILOGY

Book One: *Tombs of Dross*

Book Two: *Battles Grim*

Book Three: *Pillars and Power*

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THE LORIAN CHRONICLES

*Horse Boy*

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*The Fire Between Us*

*Misty Grey*



BOOK ONE

# TOMBS *of* DROSS

LEW ANDERSON



TREESTONE BOOKS

*Tombs of Drass* © 2012 by Lew Anderson

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*To Isaac, Zachary, and Brielle  
May you always have the joy that a good story brings*

*To my amazing and beautiful wife  
Thank you for encouraging me to explore this new realm*

*And special thanks to all my gracious editors*





Wood of Yorne

Garlock's homel

Merrak's Mound

Field of Blood  
great stump

Semo Pillar

Yorne

Semo Lor

Bollock

Kharlome

Lake  
Kharlome

## PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Alle-Encer (AL-lee EN-sir)  
Ariel (AR-ee-el)  
Armadon (AR-ma-don)  
Bain Sarro (BAIN SAR-row)  
Barley ma-gundy (BAR-lee-ma- GUN-dee)  
Barthowl (BAR-thowl)  
Bre-alina (bree-a-LEEN-a)  
Calesh (KAL-ish)  
Calygrey (KAL-lee-gray)  
Dulac (dew-LACK)  
Eryn (AIR-ren)  
Garlock (GAR-lock)  
Gorron (GOR-ron)  
Grimalkyn (GRIM-ol-kin)  
Hornin (HOR-nin)  
Kharlome (car-LOME)  
Kroaken-gagger (KROAK-en-GAG-ger)  
Mersha (MER-sha)  
Mirrah (MEER-rah)  
Nusa (NEW-sa)  
Pharen (FAIR-en)  
Sasson (SA-son)  
Seraph (SAIR-if)  
Seren Ko (SAIR-en KO)  
Seren Po (SAIR-en PO)  
Shalom (sha-LOHM)  
Tercel (TER-sel)  
Tesoro (te-SOR-ro)  
Torrin (TOR-rin)  
Vogans (VO-gans)  
Yonnan (YO-nan)  
Zevant (ze-VAUNT)

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

1 THE WHITE STONE .....	1
2 LOST.....	8
3 THE GRIMALKYN'S HOVEL.....	18
4 A LATE NIGHT VISIT.....	28
5 UNSETTLING ENCOUNTER.....	35
6 BREAKFAST AT MIRRAH'S.....	45
7 A KNIFE AND A POEM .....	54
8 THE TRAIL TO KHARLOME.....	61
9 "THE HEAVENS BE A SHIFTIN'S" .....	66
10 BATTLE AT THE CITY GATE .....	78
11 "LET'S GO DIE IN GLORY".....	89
12 A LATE NIGHT RESCUE .....	96
13 THE SILVER BLADE .....	106
14 "ARIEL IS SPEAKING" .....	118
15 THE ISLE OF MOSS.....	127
16 THE TOMBS OF DROSS .....	139
17 BANISHED.....	151
18 THE GROTTO.....	159
19 A DREAM AND A SHIP.....	170
20 THE CAVE GORRON.....	179
21 GRAY-SAIL .....	188
22 INTO THE WIND.....	197
23 WASHED ASHORE .....	205
24 TRAPPED .....	214
25 BOUND FOR HETHER DAWN.....	223
26 HETHER DAWN .....	231
27 SOLD! .....	239
28 KIDNAPPED .....	247
29 A GRIMALKYN BRAWL .....	255
30 LUNCH WITH THE KING .....	263
31 A MYSTERIOUS LEADER .....	271

32 A PARLORD, A POISONED POEM, AND PRISON ...278  
33 REUNITED—DISUNITED .....290  
34 ESCAPE AND CAPTURE .....301  
35 INTO THE FIRE .....314  
36 A PRINCE, AN ANGRY PARLORD, & A TRAITOR...319  
37 WHY WEREN'T WE RESCUED? .....326  
38 THINGS ARE NOT WHAT THEY SEEM.....331  
39 THE MOORS OF MYRRH .....340  
40 THE DAY OF THE STONE .....346  
A PSALM OF LIFE

## PREFACE

“Throughout history there have been accounts of people who spontaneously disappear, only to reappear just as suddenly in a different place. Researchers speak of the different dimensions of time—past, present, and future—existing next to each other as parallel universes.” *Mysteries of the World* (Parragon Books, Ltd., p. 300)

True stories do not always fall into pleasantly organized plot structures like those in novels and books of the sort. They rather must be told as they unfolded, as the events that made them memorable occurred in the realms of time. So it is with this adventure—it can only be told as it happened.



## PROLOGUE

**L**oria has fallen. The earth wails, the hooves thunder, the wind scatters. You must take your brother and the girl. Flee to Yorne. Find the pillar of stone. It will protect you.”

A tall lad stood before his father as billowing smoke rose from the valley far below.

“Keep this safe.” His father handed him a knife with script upon the handle. “Protect the girl... she is your sister now. Travel only by night. Speak only the common tongue. When the time is right, you will return.” They touched foreheads, the father’s hands on the lad’s shoulders. “The pillar is hidden, so listen carefully. From the great stump, on the Field of Blood, walk south to the tree of Loom. When you see a wall of chiseled stone, enter only through the arch.” The man looked side to side, leaning close to his son. “When you see the pillar white... speak only these words...”



## 1 THE WHITE STONE

“By the moors of Myrrh...  
The stone cutters...  
In candlelight...  
Carved the letters...  
On pillars white.”

A young teen boy stared into a pillar of stone. The words appeared in rhythmic waves like long-drawn breaths awakened by things of old. He pulled the wool hat off his head. “Hey guys, come look at this.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Serious. I’m seeing words.”

He read more.

“In the Wood of Yorne...  
In time of need...  
Of darkened night...  
The pure will read...  
The pillars white.”

The last lines lingered as if calling to him. “Isaac, come look. It’s really weird.”

A girl came up. “I like it, Zacky... sounds mysterious.”

“I wasn’t reciting, Breeze. I saw real words.”

## TOMBS OF DROSS

The three teens stood before a pillar of white, its entire surface carved with sharp black lines of unknown script. The smooth column stood alone in a small marble courtyard surrounded by a crumbled wall of chiseled stone.

Isaac, the oldest, reached up and touched the top. At fifteen, he stood six feet if he stretched—a thin boy, but strong. His brother, Zachary, still staring into the pillar, was two days into being thirteen. Brielle, or Breezy, stood between them. Although six weeks shy of turning thirteen, she stood a whole inch taller than Zac. A lanky girl, and sometimes clumsy, she loved to venture with the boys, as she and Zac had been friends since ever belonged to forever.

Isaac narrowed his eyes. “Why is this here?” he mused, glancing dubiously at his brother. “You really weren’t reciting?”

Zac shook his head. “Honest.”

Having recently moved from the city, the boys were exploring the property behind their family’s farm, hiking into the woods as often as possible. Breezy, who now looked down at the white marble floor, always came along. Although mid-November in a wood of large oaks, maples, and elms, she pondered the lack of leaves and debris inside the courtyard. Glancing back to a narrow archway overgrown with brush and thorny vines, she pulled at a twig entangled in her wavy light-brown hair.

“How’d they get in here to rake leaves?” she asked, pulling harder at the twig. “Not where we crawled in.” She gave it a yank. “Zouch!”

Isaac turned, surveying the crumbled wall lined with birch trees and brush that made the tangled archway the only practical entrance. He scanned the clean floor, then watched a leaf drift down outside the wall. “It’s so clean,” he said.

Then as if on cue, they all looked up. The older trees grew high overhead, vying for sunlight as the young birches stretched over the wall, forming a cathedral of branch and bough, dangling the last of their autumn leaves.

“Feels ancient,” Zac said. “Who would come and clean?”

Breezy got the twig out and gave it a spiteful toss where it sat alone on the clean stone floor. Isaac had his hands on his hips.

“It’s like nothing falls in here.”

“Force field?” Zac offered, looking straight up. “Maybe the leaves get vaporized.”

Isaac rolled his eyes.

## THE WHITE STONE

Breezy went and pressed her nose close to the pillar, arms wrapping halfway around. “I don’t see anything, Zacky. Just the funny black lines.”

A watery white with translucent shades, the pillar had faint strands of red that wove through like veins in rock. It rested on a thick slab of pure white marble. The carved strokes and symbols of rich black contrasted sharply with the polished white surface. The strange writing gave no indication of left to right or top to bottom, its graceful curls and elegant lines mixing with strong bold marks and deep-set symbols.

“Kind of beautiful,” Breezy said, cocking her head. “You really saw words?”

Zac nodded. “Sort of came from inside. I didn’t make it up.”

Isaac leaned in close. “What language is this? Sort of looks like... nah. Maybe it’s... nah.” He knew a lot of things about a lot of things, but for this, he obviously had no clue. “A script with pictographs?” he muttered, fiddling with his right ear as he studied the lines.

Zac stepped back. “Feels sacred... like we should leave, but it’s kind of cool.”

“Yazzers,” Breezy said with a smile, rubbing her itchy head, spreading fuzzed hair in all directions. “A bit of eerie, with a hint of creepy, and just a twinge of... hey!” She pointed to the floor. “Look! A circle.”

Just visible in the marble floor was the faint outline of a circle around the pillar and slab.

“How’d we miss that?” Isaac said.

“Girls see things boys don’t,” Breezy said, flashing a triumphant smile with eyes twinkling. She had very unique eyes—one bright blue, the other a brilliant jade—beautiful, but unfortunately seen by most at school as freakish and weird. She’d once tried wearing sunglasses to class, but that only made matters worse. And so, she hated her ‘freakish’ eyes. The boys told her they were beautiful, but it still came up every time she had a bad day.

Zac got down on hands and knees. “More writing.”

Isaac groaned, narrowing his eyes again, scrunching up his nose. Breezy called it his ‘thinking face.’ He liked science and math, strategy games like chess, tough problems with awesome solutions. “Wish I could read this stuff,” he said with growing irritation.

Zac got up and sat on the slab, chin propped on his fists. “I bet in the summer you can’t even see this place. Be a great hideout.”

“It’s got to be a monument,” Isaac said. “A grave or something.”

But who comes to clean?"

"Is this our land?" Zac asked.

"Thought so, but we better head home."

The sun had dropped behind the trees and the air grew chilly. Isaac went toward the archway, concluding it was all just an elaborate tombstone.

"Staying for supper, Breezy?" he asked.

"Can't. Mom said be home for supper." She pulled her hair back with one hand, preparing for the squeeze through the archway. "Wish I could."

Isaac tried to clear the vines away, quickly giving up and crawling through. Breezy followed with a groan.

For a moment, Zac stood staring at the pillar. "I really like this place," he said softly.

"Come on," Isaac called, "it's getting late."

Zac looked back one more time before squeezing through the archway. A yearning, warm and wistful, pulled at his heart. "Sort of... feels like—"

"Zac, come on!"

Leaves crunched as they walked and talked, following a dry riverbed. A large black turkey vulture drifted overhead, circling a few times before moving on.

"Should we tell your mom and dad?" Breezy asked. "Might say we can't go there."

"Why tell them anything?" Isaac replied, tossing an acorn at a squirrel clinging to the side of an oak tree.

Zac pointed up. "Look." A large brown eagle swooped low and rested on a limb up ahead, watching unconcerned as they walked towards it. Not until they came beneath did it push off, gliding toward the setting sun.

"Why not tell them?" Zac said, kicking a branch aside. "If we shouldn't be there, then we shouldn't be there, right?"

"Whatever." Isaac tossed another acorn to a squirrel scurrying about in the leaves.

"Mine'll believe whatever I tell them," Breezy said with a hint of sadness. Then, in a loud radio announcer-like voice, she belted out, "Which ya think would be great... but makes me feel like... like moldy cheese on a... scootenberry sandwich."

## THE WHITE STONE

Zac chuckled. "Scootenberry sandwich?"

Breezy giggled, then got serious. "I say we tell them." So they agreed to tell their parents, but no one else.

Coming out of the woods they crossed a sloping pasture, following a cow trail toward the old barn, where they squeezed through a small gate and came to the boys' house. Breezy got her school pack and strapped it to her bright red scooter.

"So tomorrow then?" she said, buckling her helmet. With a flare, she swung her leg over the scooter like it were some big Harley. "Gotta scoot," she said, flashing a silly smile. Waving as she sped down the dirt driveway, she wobbled about, barely in control, yet zooming onward.

The story of their discovery did raise some interest. The boys' dad said he would go sometime and see. Their mother just listened. At Breezy's home, they weren't sure they were getting the story quite right and were just glad she was outside having fun.

That night the boys talked about the pillar, the inscriptions, and the absence of leaves.

"You didn't make it up," Isaac asked again, "and weren't reciting something?"

"No, it was there in the stone."

"How?"

"I don't know. Was just looking at it, then the light changed and I saw the words."

"Hologram?"

"Don't know." Zac got into bed. "Maybe it's... ah, probably nothing."

Isaac crossed the hall to his room.

"Yeah... probably nothing."

\* \* \* \* \*

In a room of stone, built inside an ancient city wall, a teen girl tossed in her sleep. A small stone jewel hung about her neck as her long black hair tangled inside her sheepskin bed. A fire crackled and she twitched, muttering soft moans, dreaming of a time long past.

## TOMBS OF DROSS

“Hidden by veil, the pillars and power,  
Hidden from evils that destroy and...”

She saw herself as a young child, twirling a lock of her black hair. “I do not know this one, Father?” She rubbed the stone jewel that hung loose about her neck.

“Devour—a very old glyph,” came the reply. “See the tail like of a serpentine.”

The child nodded, her black spirals bouncing in the fire’s light. She read on.

“evils that destroy and... devour.  
The times they will turn...”

She yawned, rubbing her brown eyes.

“Seems the time has turned for bed,” came a woman’s soft voice.

“Oh Mama, I can do it. Father, please let me read more.”

“You have done well, but Mother is right.” He stroked her thick hair. “Remember, no one must know of what you learn.”

“I know, Father.”

The child sat near an open fireplace, a large book with tattered pages spread across her lap. An oil lamp of bronze flickered overhead. Her mother sat near the soot-darkened hearth as the fire’s light danced upon the cabin walls. Large fur rugs covered chairs and floor, holding back the winter’s cold.

“One more, Father, please?”

“The last for tonight... this one here... ‘tis said to be on the Lorian stone of Yorne.”

She adjusted the book, lightly touching the worn edges. Excitement filled her heart as she leaned over the yellowed pages. The cabin seemed to hold its breath, awaiting the words to come.

“In the Wood of Yorne...  
In time of need...  
Of darkened night...  
The pure will read...  
The pillars—”

Suddenly a thunderous boom rattled the cabin door.

“Open or burn!” a loud voice shouted from outside.

## THE WHITE STONE

“Hide the book!” Her father rose, a tall man with a ponytail, long and braided. Again, the door shook with pounding thuds. The mother went for the book just as the door burst with a deafening crash. An evil rushed in with the winter’s cold, spreading out across the cabin floor as snow flurries blew about, clashing with the fire’s warmth. A huge man, over seven feet tall, dressed in chain mail and furs, filled the doorway. Protruding from the center of his forehead was a horn, three or four inches long and several inches wide, curling upward like of a ram.

With instant movement, he clutched the father’s throat and yanked him through the doorway. Another man, even larger, pressed through into the cabin. The woman stood in protest, but fell silent with one blow. This man, dressed like the first, towered over the trembling child, the open book still covering her lap. He stared down at the black lines of forbidden script.

“Fools.” He spoke from the side of his mouth as if his jaws were fixed shut. A calloused nub, like of a severed horn, centered on his forehead. He scooped up the book and tossed it into the fire. Hoisting the girl under one arm he gave the command to burn it all.

Uttering curses, he paused to watch the flames engulf the hallowed pages. The child, peering through her twisty bangs, watched in frozen terror, eyes fixed on the burning book. In the distance, she heard her mother’s screams, her father calling out. The flames moved inward, consuming the precious script, advancing till one last piece remained, surrounded by the ever-encroaching fires.

Through quivering lips, the young girl softly read the last of the sacred lines.

“To the stone of Yorne...  
With blackened letters...  
Through battles grim...  
And broken fetters...  
Three ones will come...”

The teen girl awoke with a start, her chest heaving, her brow damp with sweat. She glanced about the small room as chills covered her skin. Tenderly touching the stone about her neck, she worked her tangled hair free as the fire popped, sending a tiny ember onto the hearth beside which she lay.

“They will come...” she whispered, staring into the dying embers. “Three ones... will come...”

## 2 LOST

“I was waiting aall day,” Breezy whined as she stood with Zac after school, watching the gray sky pour down a freezing rain. “Me too. We’ll go tomorrow.” Zac, too, had thought about the pillar all that day, eagerly waiting for the school bell to release him.

But the next day brought more of the same. He began to wonder if it had really happened. Would the pillar even be there? Was it a magical moment? Anxious doubts, even worries scurried through his mind like mice on a marble floor. That evening the rain turned to sleet and then to snow.

He woke early on Friday to the phone’s endless ringing.

“Zac? You up? It’s one of life’s most gloorious moments.” Breezy spoke like an actor in a Shakespearian play. “Not only is the earth covered in a beeeautiful rrobe of white, but it’s a snow day!” Then speaking fast, “Sup-awesome or what? Are you guys up? Can I come over?”

Breezy’s mom dropped her off, and the teens sat eating breakfast, planning their trip into the woods. The storm had passed, turning the world into a wonderland of ‘floating flakes of fluff,’ as Breezy called it.

“Thank you, Mrs. Alders,” she said, as the boys’ mother brought some pancakes. Although she had known Mrs. Alders before she

could walk or talk, she had recently taken up the habit of calling adults by their last name. ‘Makes ‘em feel good,’ she had told the boys.

Isaac readied his backpack. “I’ll bring matches and paper for making a fire.”

“I brought hot chocolate,” Breezy said with a muffled burp. “Hmm, that was delicious.”

The boys’ father stepped into the kitchen. “The burp, or the breakfast?” he asked.

“Hi, Mr. Alders. We’re going out into the wild white wilderness of wonder and... whatever.” She flung her arms up, giggling.

“Hey Dad, listen to this... I almost got it.” Zac cleared his throat.

“Tell me not, in mournful numbers,  
 “Life is but an empty dream!”  
 For the soul is dead that slumbers,  
 And things are not what they seem.  
 Life is real! life is earnest—”

“Not the whole thing, please,” Isaac whined.

His father gave a nod, requiring only the latest, and Zac cleared his throat with exquisite flare.

“Trust no future, however pleasant,  
 Let the dead past bury its dead.  
 Act,—act in the living present,  
 Heart within, and God overhead.

Lives of great men all remind us  
 We can make our lives sublime,  
 And, departing, leave behind us  
 Footsteps on the sands of time.  
 Footsteps that...”

He groaned. “I got the last lines, but not that one.”

Mr. Alders put his hands on Zac’s shoulders. “Well done, Son. That twenty’s getting warm.”

“It’s not fair,” Breezy said. “Even if my dad offered a hundred bucks, I couldn’t learn that poem.”

“Perseverance,” Mrs. Alders said, “not smarts. You will find your—”

## TOMBS OF DROSS

“It’s just a poem... doesn’t matter,” Isaac interrupted, rolling his eyes.

“It’s not just a poem,” Zac said sternly. “It’s Longfellow’s *Psalm of Life*.”

“Whatever. Let’s get going.”

“Today is going be so wah-some!” Breezy declared, bumping the table as she stood, nearly spilling everything. Then holding her head high with arm outstretched, she deepened her voice like some politician giving a congressional address. “Mark my words you people. This day shall be the most wonderfully... awesome... of all days.”

Zac chuckled.

Isaac put everything into a large plastic bag before shoving it into his pack. When they had donned their gloves, hats, and goggles, they set out looking like an expedition to the North Pole.

The woods had become a drastically different world from the other day. They each had a sense of wonder as they tromped through the snow-laden trees, longing to return to the pillar and courtyard of white.

Following landmarks, they found the courtyard and squeezed through the thorny archway. When Isaac came through after Zac and Breezy, he found them just standing, mouths open wide.

“What the...?”

Everything was just as they had remembered, just as they had last seen it. “No snow...” Isaac whispered. “How can there be no snow?”

Zac looked up. “Force... field...?” This time the words came with new meaning.

Breezy dropped her hood and lifted her goggles. “I don’t... think... this place is normal.” She walked over to a lone, thorny twig on the marble floor, holding it for the boys to see. “From my hair.”

The courtyard was clean without a sign of snow having ever been there. It had been snowing the whole time they hiked. It was snowing now as they stood in the courtyard, but not a single flake fell inside its walls. The stone wall lay covered in snow, yet the marble floor was dry. They walked toward the pillar in reverent awe—a magical mystery loomed in this place.

“If it’s a memorial,” Zac whispered, with skin tingling, “who’s buried under here?”

He walked up to the pillar wondering if he would see the words again. Pulling off his glove, he ran his bare fingers over the smooth shapes and delicate curls. He looked deep into the stone, following a white meandering vein that led to a red swirl far into the center. The swirl became words, which again came like ancient breaths. He read them without speaking.

“To the stone of Yorne...  
With blackened letters...  
Through battles grim...  
And broken fetters...  
Three ones will come...?”

He pressed his hand against the stone as the red swirl disappeared. Then, as if being shocked, he jerked his hand away.

“What’s up?” Breezy asked, seeing him flinch, her wavy hair fuzzing out from beneath a blue-green headband.

“Shouldn’t this be... stone-cold?” Zac asked, saying nothing about the words. The other two each took off their gloves, brows wrinkled.

Breezy stood with open palm an inch from the pillar, eyes wide with apprehension as she looked from Zac to Isaac. Then with lips pursed, she pressed her hand against the stone.

“It’s... warm!” Taking her hand away slowly, she held it to her cheek. “Not like a stone... in winter.”

“Hot spring?” Isaac queried, his thinking face in full mode. “Ancient marker over a sulfur spring... lava tube... or...?”

“Would that keep the snow out?” Breezy asked, whipping off her headband, shaking out her hair.

Zac put his hand on the pillar again, searching for more words. The warmth felt good, slowly moving up his arm. When no words came, he sat down on the step, facing the archway, his back to the pillar. With a sigh, he pulled a partially frozen brownie from his pocket, thinking he ought to say something about the new words, but without knowing why, kept it to himself.

In spite of the puzzling mystery, they sat watching the snow float down outside the wall, enjoying the unexplained warmth. Like children watching a snow globe, they sat staring into the surreal wonder of this warm new world within the cold snowy wood.

Munching and talking, trying to solve the mystery, they touched the pillar a few more times. Zac stared long into the translucent stone,

searching for more words, but only saw the strange black script inscribed so beautifully within the stone.

Finally, they decided to walk about and look for clues. Isaac paused in front of the brush-tangled archway, searching the outer wall for a better exit point. “This way,” he said, climbing over the crumbled wall, pushing his way through the brush and birches.

Once again, Zac looked back at the pillar as Isaac and Breezy scrambled over the wall. Something tugged at his heart... something ancient... something winsome. His chest warmed.

Breezy helped him as he climbed over the wall, then she walked around to the overgrown entrance, twirling with arms outstretched. “Isn’t it beautiful... the snow, the woods? So quiet... so... serene.”

“You mean serene,” Isaac said.

“No, serene—it’s extreme serene.” She gave Zac a silly glance and was in the middle of continuing her twirl when something passed overhead, darkening the sky above.

“Whoa! Did you see that?” Zac stared up through the trees, his mouth and eyes wide.

“Just a little,” Isaac replied. “What was it?”

Breezy whipped her head back, dropping her hood. “What? I didn’t see anything.”

Zac stretched his arms out. “A monstrous black hawk or eagle... the size of an airplane.”

“Must have been a hang glider,” Isaac said, searching the sky.

“Who’d be hang-gliding in the snow?” Breezy asked dubiously.

“That was no hang glider,” Zac declared. “That was a real bird—beak, head, claws, feathers—huge!”

“It wasn’t a bird. It was a glider or a small plane.”

“You didn’t see it! I saw it! Was the biggest giant bird ever.”

“It wasn’t a bird,” Isaac argued, knowing Zac wouldn’t lie or exaggerate, but he knew it couldn’t have been a bird. Then again... the courtyard.

“A U.F.Oooh...” Breezy swayed about with gloved fingers pointing out from her head like antennae. “Come on guys, you’re freaking me out. Let’s hike around.”

Zac continued looking up through the trees, shaking his head, uttering disdainful comments toward his brother as only snowflakes appeared in the endless sky of white.

Walking on from the courtyard deeper into the woods, they dropped into a valley and found an outcropping of sandstone into

which an ancient river had carved a small cave.

“Could something live in there?” Breezy asked.

“Lots of things,” Isaac said, crawling in, “but nothing to worry about.”

“Except a skunk,” Zac said, glaring at his brother. Then seeing that it was large and dry inside, he let the bird incident go and crawled in after Isaac. With the ceiling just high enough to sit upright, the two boys called for Breezy to join them.

She remained outside shaking her head, pleading with them to come back out. When they built a fire near the entrance, enjoying its warmth, they were able to coax her inside. She whimpered like a frightened pony as she crawled in, but soon the fire eased her fears. The fragrant burning pine, the dancing flames, and radiant heat, all made the cave feel rather cozy. Outside the snow began to fall in large twirling flakes, enshrouding the woods in its wintery white.

“The fire’s nice,” Breezy said rather dreamily, her eyes staring blankly at the smoke and snow hiding the world beyond.

“This is the best snow day ever,” Zac said, carving a ‘Z’ into the cave wall.

They finished their snacks, talking and laughing, enjoying the smoky cave as the snow continued to fall heavy outside. When the last of the wood gave the last of itself to the flames, they crawled out, shivering and groaning from the cold.

After exploring a little beyond the cave, they worked their way back toward the pillar.

“Shouldn’t we be near the stone thing?” Breezy asked, looking all around.

“Something’s not right,” Isaac said, staring at a tree with its root wrapped around a boulder, like an older brother’s arm protecting a sibling. “I don’t remember this...” he said, a hint of panic in his voice. “Let’s go back and find our tracks.”

He led the weary trio back, wandering about looking for anything familiar, but ultimately that sickening feeling of things gone wrong washed over him like waves of woe. After an hour of difficult hiking, Breezy plopped onto a fallen tree.

“This isn’t fun anymore,” she whined. “I’m getting cold.”

“How’d we get lost?” Zac asked.

“We’re not lost,” Isaac said. “We just don’t know where we are in... relation to where we want to go.” He zipped his coat up tighter. “We’re tired, so things seem worse. If we just find the pillar, we’ll find

our way home. Come on, let's go."

Breezy whimpered as the woods darkened with the sky. It was time to be home—home drinking hot chocolate and telling stories of their day. Isaac knew their farm bordered several hundred acres of woods and fields. "Angst," he said to himself—a word he had just learned, "that feeling of deep anxiety or dread."

They entered a wide, open meadow with a rounded knoll. Stopping at a huge tree stump in the center, Isaac cleared a spot and they plopped their weary bodies down. The stump was larger than any they had ever seen—six or seven feet across if not more.

The dark gray settled in around them, pressing them down as they sat—three dark humps on the edge of the stump—cold, wet, and defeated.

"I just wanna go home," Breezy whimpered. "My toes are frozen."

"I'd carry you if I could," Zac said.

"Doesn't make sense." Isaac pulled off his hat, rubbing his head. "How can we be lost?"

They sat in sulking silence as the sky darkened. Then Breezy muttered softly, "No tracks... Why weren't there any tracks?"

"The snow," Isaac said, "covered them."

"No, not those."

"What do you mean, Breeze?"

"When we climbed out the stone pillar place, our tracks were gone."

"Our tracks going in?" Isaac leaned forward to look over at the disheartened girl.

"Yazzer. I remember now... wondering why our tracks were gone... but then that bird thing."

"I didn't even notice," Zac said, looking to Isaac. "What do you think it means?"

"It means... something's screwed up... and we're in a mess."

Isaac liked challenges but hated losing. He rubbed his head again. "No leaves, no snow, warm pillar, you see words, and now no tracks." He shook his head with a growing dislike for this mystery, even though it could be something special. It felt... too big, too weird... too far beyond his experience... and control. "A screwed-up mystery," he muttered, "I'm burning brain cells with nothing to show." Pulling his

hat back over his cold ears, he grumbled. “No tracks? Really? What next!”

“I saw more words,” Zac said, speaking softly to the ground.

“What? When?”

“Before we had snacks.”

“Same lines?” Isaac asked the questions like an officer.

“Kind of, but with stuff like, ‘battles grim.’”

“Battles grim?”

“And something about ‘broken fetters’ and ‘three ones will come.’”

“You should’ve told us.”

Suddenly Breezy perked up and pulled her hood and headband off.

“Hear that?”

“Hear what?” the boys asked.

“The music...”

“Music?”

“Shhh, listen.” Silence held the open meadow beneath the falling snow. Zac pulled up his wool hat. Isaac cupped his ears with gloved hands.

Breezy turned a circle. “Where’s it coming from? It’s... all around.”

Isaac looked to Zac. “I don’t hear a thing.”

“You can’t hear that?” Breezy gave an ornery look. “Don’t make fun.”

“Maybe it’s the wind,” Isaac said, straining to listen.

“It’s music!” she said sternly. “A low fluty kind of sound.” Tilting her head, she listened for a moment. “It’s beautiful... the saddest, sweetest, peacefulest music I’ve ever heard... like a heart lamenting, yet singing.”

“Peacefulest?” Zac watched her turn a slow circle, her eyes staring into the darkening world of gray.

“Hypothermia,” Isaac said out of the side of his mouth.

“I’m not hypo-nothing! I’m freezing cold, but not hypo-crazy. How can’t you hear that?” She cocked her head as she spoke. “Coming from... over there!” Without any hesitation, she started out across the meadow.

Isaac looked up into the heavy sky. “Come on, Breeze, we can’t go wandering about looking for music only you can hear.”

“Like, hello!” she shouted back. “Following you was better?” Her voice echoed off the trees circling the meadow.

When Breezy set her heart on something—a cause or some injustice—she took on this authority that no one with half a brain

would dare contest. The boys called it her ‘power mode.’

Isaac gave a sigh, knowing they could not possibly turn her back. And where would he lead them anyway? She was right—he’d gotten them lost.

Zac just shrugged. “Lead the way, Breezy.” He slogged on behind her, his whole body weary and cold. Then muttering to himself, “Lead us... to worlds yet unknown.”

They followed Breezy marching across the meadow into the woods, her hood and headband off, hair collecting snow, her soul locked onto finding the source of the sound. The boys, hearing only silence, blindly followed as she made her way through brush and over logs. The wood became darker, the trees tighter. Like being trapped in a narrowing labyrinth of doom, claustrophobic fears pressed in around them. After ten minutes, Isaac stopped.

“Come on, Breezy. This is stupid.”

She twirled around, her wavy hair limp like a wet mop. With eyes squinting and lips tight, she glared at him. “I followed you all day. Now I’m going this way.” Shooing him back with both hands, she spoke harshly. “Go wander... go!” When she turned to continue her quest, she stumbled over a branch, catching herself just in time. Zac exhaled with relief. Breezy had the potential of turning dangerously angry in power mode, making her impervious to reason, and with undaunted boldness.

And so, they trudged onward, the trees looking older, larger, with little undergrowth. Zac thought he saw something, a shadow of movement to the right. He looked hard, but all had become dull gray and dark silhouettes.

“God, could use some help here,” he whispered, his heart thumping hard as the darkness settled in. He looked again to where he thought he saw something move. Then he squealed like a young child. “Breezy! Look! You did it!”

A tiny yellow glimmer of light worked its way through the heavy gray.

“Told you I heard something,” she said, shaking out her hair to then snap her hood up.

They followed the light to a small cabin built into the side of a hill, where the fragrance of burning wood hung in the still night as smoke rose lazily from the center of the hill.

“I don’t hear the music anymore,” Breezy whispered, now feeling apprehensive with her discovery.

“Doesn’t matter,” Isaac said, taking tentative steps toward the door. “We’ll ask to use their phone... and then we’ll...” He paused, his face showing obvious doubt.

Zac, too, felt the uneasiness creep over his skin. “Looks like... an old trapper-kind of guy lives here,” he said. “Maybe... it’s okay.” He tried to sound confident but his voice betrayed him.

A low wooden door stood beside a small window in a wall of hewn logs. Crowding together, the teens peered through the frosted glass, their breath quickly misting the window. Isaac wiped a gentle circle, leaning close to study the cabin’s interior.

A stone fireplace filled the end wall with two stuffed chairs facing the dancing flames. In the chair on the right sat an older bearded man smoking a long thin pipe. Small and cluttered, the one room cabin showed no signs of modernization.

“Think there’s even a phone here?” Zac whispered. “Looks like a hunting shack.”

Isaac swallowed hard. “Maybe we shouldn’t... looks a little... creepy.”

“Looks a bleepity lot warmer in there than out here,” Breezy said, shivering compulsively. “Creepy or not, I’m freezing.”

After some tense discussion, Isaac stepped to the door. With hand raised, he paused for a moment, glancing at his brother who gave an anxious nod. After a few deep breaths, he tensed his jaw and—

Suddenly a snarling growl rumbled from behind. In a startled shuffle, they whirled about. Breezy slipped, banging her head against the window. Catching herself on the ledge, she hung there quivering in terror, her blue and green eyes wide.

Only two yards away, standing silent in the snow, loomed a huge lynx-like beast. As tall as a tiger, its gleaming yellow eyes glared as they huddled together in a tangled mix of arms and legs. Breezy tried to scream, but no sound came. She ducked behind Zac, forcing Isaac back against the door.

Out front to face the beast, Zac stood with eyes bulging. A large flake came and rested gently on his nose, bringing not even a blink as he stood before the beast, his weary body frozen stiff like a rock in the dead of winter.

### 3 THE GRIMALKYN'S HOVEL

The giant lynx continued its rumbling growl, yellow eyes locked on the frozen teens. In total silence, it then stepped toward Zac who pushed back into Breezy and Isaac. His foot slipped, but Isaac grabbed his coat, holding him up. The huge cat came right up to Zac, lifting its head just an inch or so to look Zac square in the face. Long, stiff whiskers tickled his cold cheeks.

With his whole body quivering, he followed the black lines that trailed from the corners of the giant cat's eyes.

*Like some ancient Egyptian*, he thought, wondering how he could think such things at a time like this. Pointed black tufts rose from the tips of its ears, while two ruffs or beards hung down from its jaw. A thick coat of winter fur covered the lean body in a mottled brown and white that became all white around its huge fluffy paws.

Time seemed to hold its breath. Then a gruff voice came from behind the giant lynx.

"Ya lookin' for someone?" Stepping out from behind the lynx, a man not much taller than Zac, stood with an armload of wood. Dressed in a mix of leathers and fur, and a beard thick and bushy like a lion's mane, he cocked his head to eye the teens. A small fur hat that tied under his chin, seemed to struggle at holding in a mass of wiry yellow curls bent on trying to escape. Thin slit eyes peered from below eyebrows that rolled in tiny twirls, yellow light gleaming from the little man's keen gaze.

"Ah... we're lost," Isaac stammered. "Do you have a... phone we

could use?”

The man stood beside the giant lynx without responding, his stout arms holding the bundle of wood with ease. Large flakes drifted slowly down as another moment of silence followed.

“Would ya like to come in... and warm by me fire?” the little man finally asked.

“Yes, very much!” Breezy blurted, quickly putting a gloved hand to her mouth. Isaac tensed, feeling a stroke of anger at her brash reply.

The great lynx glanced about, then stepped toward the door, causing the teens to shuffle hastily out of the way, bunching themselves into the window. With a gentle nudge of its black nose, the big cat lifted the latch and pushed open the door.

Shaking its huge fluffy paws before stepping over the high threshold, it then flicked its stubby tail and entered the warm light. Still holding his bundle of wood, the bushy-haired man stood waiting for the teens to follow, giving them an encouraging nod. Zac and Breezy held their breath as they stepped over into the small cabin, while Isaac held the door for the little man.

The cabin, lit by the fire and two small lamps, looked every bit like a trapper’s shack. The walls were partially log and natural rock with beams across the ceiling. A small wooden table with two crude benches sat off to one side. A few shelves with miscellaneous items and the large stone fireplace with its two chairs covered in furs made up the rest of the room. Strong smells of pipe smoke and animal skin lingered in the air. But it was warm—a quiet, cozy, snug kind of warm.

The elderly man smoking by the fire had turned to watch them enter. Small and wiry like the younger man, he too had a bushy beard with twirling eyebrows—all dark brown with streaks of silvery-white. His curly hair bushed out in all directions, silvery locks shimmering in the fire’s light. Tan, weathered skin creased in leather-like folds around his little nose and eyes—eyes narrow and long like the younger man’s.

The giant lynx went straight to the fire where it sat on its haunches, dwarfing the older man while keeping its keen gaze on the wide-eyed teens. For the teens, the pipe smoke and strange smells all began to mix with the rising concoction of daunting fears and dreadful worries. In silence, they glanced to one another, each trying to sort their troubled thoughts and run-amuck feelings. The old man just watched for what seemed a very long time.

Isaac glanced about the little cabin—the sights and smells, the small bushy men, the huge lynx, or whatever it was—all began to

swarm like bees within his head, rapidly moving from perplexing and odd to creepy and eerie. Suddenly all merged into one dominant feeling—an overwhelming, gut-wrenching doom.

“Catch ‘em in yeer traps, Garlock?” the older man finally asked.

“Be standin’ outside, a spyin’ in.” The man, Garlock, stood at the open door and gave a quick whistle. He waited, then gave another. With a sudden whirring hum, a small hawk swooped in through the doorway. The man ducked, bumping his head against the doorjamb.

“Marrgh! Flyin’ with yeer eyes shut?” he grumbled, rubbing his head.

The little hawk had flown to a rafter near the fire, and after fluffing its wings, made an airy whistling call, which sounded very much like laughter.

“Yo, real humor-atin’s, ya little wog.”

Isaac watched the odd scene, trying to recall the exact type of hawk, but had trouble focusing his thoughts. A steel blue with rusty-colored breast, its leg feathers were streaked with brown. *A merlin*, he thought, *or maybe a...*

The older man continued to study the teens, finally motioning for them to come near the fire and warm themselves. Without hesitation, Zac stepped toward him.

“Sorry to bother,” he said, “but we got lost and need to call our parents. Do you have... a phone we could use?” He too struggled to control the anxious thoughts, trying to stay focused, to be polite, yet with eyes locked on the lynx. The older man gave no reply, but just sat watching.

Breezy still stood shivering with eyes wide. Wandering around in the cold, things going so terribly bad, and now a strange little cabin with two strange little men and a giant beast—her gut had gone queasy and her head felt so light.

“Would ya like some hot mulger?” the man Garlock asked.

Thinking they had misunderstood, but knowing he offered something hot, the boys nodded.

Having taken off his coat and furs, Garlock pressed between the teens to lift a blackened kettle from the hearth and pour them a drink that steamed from clay mugs on the small table. Thick, dark, and fragrant, the drink looked like a very runny oatmeal with an aroma hosting a rich mix of spices and milk.

With gloves, hats, and coats still on, the teens just stood staring at the steaming drinks, each face looking miserably weary and troubled.

“Ah... thank you,” Isaac said, taking a mug without any intention of drinking. “We need to call our parents. If you don’t have a phone... is there a neighbor who does?”

Again, there was silence. Garlock had set the kettle back on the hearth where he stood beside the lynx, warming his backside. Although small, he looked strong and agile. His thick brindled hair, tight and curly, spread out in all directions, with his long, arched nose looking like some Roman emperor.

The teens waited. The cabin’s warmth did feel good, but it was hard to fight the daunting feelings, the rising flood of creepy dread. Being inside the cabin, like at the stone pillar, did not make sense. But this felt more than weird—things were now getting seriously scary. What was going on?

“Not sure me knows yeer meanin’s, ho,” Garlock answered. “Where be yeer journey?”

“Home,” Isaac said. “Our parents are probably getting worried. Do you have a phone?”

Garlock glanced to the older man who still sat silent by the fire, then eyed the teens head to toe. “Ya ought be drinkin’ yeer mulger before it gets a thicken.”

Slowly they lifted the mugs to their lips, Zac and Breezy looking to Isaac for some explanation. He now thought to just get warmed up and get the heck out of there, to go find a house with a phone, or find a road... or just something normal.

“Hey, this stuff’s good,” Zac whispered.

Although rising dread filled their hearts and minds, the hot drink, whatever it was, did taste good. After several drinks, Breezy took off her gloves and headband, shaking out her damp hair.

“I heard music,” she said, looking to the older man sitting cozy in his stuffed chair. “Was that you?”

The older man’s twirly brows lifted, but he still gave no reply.

“Music...?” Garlock said, going to the door. “Ya heard music?”

“Yes... was beautiful.”

“Yub, and ya probably found a big white stone,” he muttered, placing a small beam across the door. All three looked at him with a start, for he clearly spoke cynically about the pillar.

*Why would he speak like that? Why would he fasten the door like that?*

“Is the pillar close by?” Isaac asked.

“Pillar? Didn’t speak a mutter ‘bout a pillar. Where’d ya say ya be from?”

Chills now covered Isaac's damp skin, a rush of panic trying to grab control of his thoughts. "Ah... we live on Old Highway One."

Garlock narrowed his already narrow eyes as he unbuckled a braided leather belt that held a sheathed knife with a bone handle. He kept his gaze on Isaac as he hung the belt and knife on a wooden peg near the door.

The older man scratched his beard and moaned a contemplating sigh. "Do you know of the white stone?" he asked, keeping his voice low.

Zac, who had been eagerly enjoying his hot drink, looked up with surprise. But Isaac shook his head in warning, pressing his lips tight.

The older man watched the two, then gave a little smile. "Tell me what ya know, and I'll try to help, if I can."

Again, there was silence, save for the crackle of the fire and a soft purring from the lynx as the old man scratched between its ears. Garlock leaned against a post, heartily gulping down a mug of drink, his narrow eyes watching the strangers. The older man waited for some reply, the fire's glow dancing eerily off his weatherworn face.

"Is it a memorial?" Isaac finally asked, thinking to cooperate enough to get directions back home.

"You've seen it, have ya?" The older man's eyes widened, flickering as he spoke.

"Is it nearby?" Isaac asked.

"You tell me."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

Isaac sighed. "We saw it... but then got lost... and ended up here."

Garlock groaned. "Let loose me beard, boy. None seen that stone since the Tarrin Wars. Ain't no more stones, no matter what old Grimals say."

"Ya don't know yeer speakin's, Garlock. Keep yeerself from talkin' wobble." The older man was firm, yet kept his voice low. "Look at 'em. Ask yeerself where they be from?"

The hawk, still in the rafters, made the strange laughing sound again, like it understood the conversation. Garlock studied the odd-looking teens still standing between the fireplace and the table. With a huff, he scratched behind an ear, shooting a scowl up to the hawk.

"Where did they get their cloth, I ask ya?" continued the older man. "How did they come through the wood? And music... is it not like I've told ya? Just tossin' pebbles, ya ravel?"

“Fuddle me whiskers,” Garlock grumbled before taking a long drink.

The old man motioned them to come near. “Please, sit by the fire... tell me everything.”

To Zac, it seemed the good thing to do—to tell everything—to just be open and honest. They hadn’t done anything wrong. Why should they hide it? He moved toward the blackened fireplace made of stacked flat stones. A large black fur skin covered the floor beneath the giant lynx or whatever it was. The older man’s chair angled toward the fire with the lynx at his side. Zac plopped into the other chair after taking off his coat and boots.

“We found a courtyard,” he said, “with a stone pillar.”

“Near the big meadow, was it?”

“It’s not far from our house. When I first saw it, I read... um... I thought it was really interesting.” He glanced at Isaac. “My brother thought it was a monument. We came back today. Then got lost.”

“You saw it this day?”

Zac nodded.

Breezy had taken off her coat and boots and sat on the fur rug next to Zac’s chair. She eyed the huge cat as it sat, enjoying the fire’s warmth.

“We... went there this morning,” she said, her voice wobbling. “We had munchies there, ‘cause it was warm. Why was it warm?”

The older man wagged his head.

“Then we—” She stopped suddenly, for the giant lynx had opened its mouth into a wide fang-wielding yawn. Breezy watched in fearful wonder. “Ah... then we walked and walked, but stuff didn’t look right. We walked for hours... then I heard your music.”

Isaac still stood fully dressed, having given Zac the look for settling in by the fire. The older man, having listened with keen interest, reached over and gently rubbed Zac’s coat sleeve between his fingers.

“Please pardon,” he said. “I be Alle-Encer and this be Garlock.” Garlock gave a little nod accompanied by a grunt.

“I’m Zachary, and that’s my brother, Isaac, and my friend, Breezy. You can call me Zac.”

“Esteemed to meet you, Zac,” Alle-Encer said with a nod. “Beg pardon our ways. Travelers at night be rare. Travelers like you...” He scratched his bearded jaw. “Never.”

“Can you just tell us where we are?” Isaac asked. “Our parents are going to be worried. If we could just call them.”

“Call them? Are we keeping ya from calling them?”

Frustration washed over Isaac’s face. “We just need a telephone. Is there a phone somewhere close?” He felt stupid, constantly asking for a phone.

“Telda fawn?” Alle-Encer tilted his head. “Not in these woods.”

“No,” said Garlock, “he speaks of the ferns of Windlum. Be afar from here, lad. Them giant ferns be no place for young sproots. Me hears many a tale—”

“Garlock, that is not their quest.” Alle-Encer wrinkled his brow. “What do you seek?”

Sudden woe struck Isaac’s soul. All hope seemed to leave like air from a shrinking balloon. They didn’t just get lost in the woods. Something weird was going on and he’d better figure it out soon or they’ll be the highlight of the evening news.

Zac held his hand to his ear, pinky and thumb extended. “Telephone,” he said slowly. He then tapped his finger into his left palm as if dialing. “You know, for calling friends.”

Alle-Encer shook his head, his bushy face clearly perplexed. Zac shot a troubled glance toward Isaac.

“Electricity?” he then asked, to which Isaac rolled his eyes.

The older man again shook his head.

“TV?” Zac said, with voice rising.

Again, the old man shook his head. He honestly had no idea to what Zac referred.

A moment of tense silence followed, then Breezy asked rather timidly, “So, where are we?”

“In the Wood of Yorne,” Garlock said, after swallowing a generous gulp. “But me tallies ya not be of the Wood.”

“The Wood of Yorne?” Isaac quickly glanced from Garlock to the older man. “Where’s that?”

With a loud guffaw that left him nearly choking on his mulger, Garlock stared wide-eyed at the lanky teen.

“Where’s that?” he uttered, stiffening as if offended.

“What?” Isaac asked, taken back by the little man’s reaction. “We told you what we saw...” He looked to the older man. “So please tell us where there’s a phone or road or something... anything.”

“Did ya now?” the older man replied with a nod. “Sure ya did.” He stroked the large cat’s head and took a draw from his long pencil-thin pipe, holding the smoke until orange plumes wafted out from his curly mustache and beard. With a gentle smile, he turned to Breezy. “The

music ya heard, young one, has been heard before.” The smoke curled out his mouth as he spoke, drifting past his face on its journey toward the rafters. He took another long draw, holding it like the first. The teens watched with bated breath, eyes and ears keen on the little man. “Comes from the stone,” he said very softly, “the stone of the Prince.”

“The Prince?” Breezy asked in a squeaky whisper.

The man nodded. “Marks the battle, it does—where he gave up the blood.”

“And no good it done,” Garlock said gruffly, breaking the spell. “Sasson still be holdin’ power.”

“Garlock!”

“Ah marrgh! All be lumpy mulger, I say. Me never be hearin’ music out there. Never seen a stone of white either, and I be born and growed in Yorne.”

“It’s hidden,” Alle-Encer said. “The stone has power. Evil cannot—must not, find it.”

“I’m not evil.”

“Can ya see what ya don’t believe? If these young sprigs have seen the stone... there is purpose a-brew. Might be our purpose, young Garlock, to help ‘em find theirs.” The man sunk a hand into his thick beard, scratching his jaw. He turned toward the fire as it popped, snapping out an ember that landed near his feet. With thick, claw-like fingernails, he picked it up and tossed the glowing ember back into the flames. A strong whiff of burnt hair rose from the fur rug on the floor.

With eyes sparkling in the fire’s light, he spoke softly to himself.

“Where are they from?

What lies ahead?

Why have they come?

By whom are they led?”

All three heard him speak the little poem, sudden chills crawling over their damp skin.

“You say ya live on the side of the Wood?” Alle-Encer continued, turning back to face the teens. “And be walking from yeer home to visit the stone?”

“That’s right,” Isaac said.

“Walked from the edge of the Wood, ya say?”

“Yes, it’s not that far.”

“Marrgh,” Garlock growled. “Ya don’t just come a walkin’s.” He had spoken into his mug, but now noticing all were looking his way, he set it down. “None comes a walkin’ through here, let be a handful

of sproots like you.” He spoke harshly and with reproach, his whiskers frothed with mulger. “What weapons have ya?”

“Is this your land?” Zac asked. “We didn’t mean to trespass.”

With that, Garlock let go a loud short laugh. “Hah! My land? Wouldn’t that be somethin’ to mix in yeer mulger? Me, ownin’ the Wood.” He chuckled, his long thin eyes nearly shut tight. The hawk seemed to join in with a laughing whistle to which Garlock gave the bird a single nod. “My land—hah!”

“One doesn’t just walk through the wood of Yorne,” Alle-Encer explained. “Takes a young Grimal three days to walk it through. But the beasts... they move unheard, unseen till they strike.”

Zac and Breezy looked to Isaac who shook his head.

“Well,” Isaac countered, “how do you explain that we just walked from our house to here?” He then dropped his voice. “Course... I’m not sure myself.”

“I cannot,” the man said, turning to stare into the flames. “Snarls me thoughts and tangles me beard.” He kept scratching his bushy beard as he spoke to the fire. “A shadowy mist that carries the fingers of fate.”

“So, you’re saying there’s no way we can walk home tonight?” Isaac said.

“This night?” Garlock barked. “Wouldn’t that be a feat? I don’t give ya sproots one rill before yeer fillin’ the belly of a horl. It’s nigh after sup and ya want to go skippin’ through the wood. Hah!” He shook his hairy head, to which the hawk gave a long, low whistle.

Isaac grew edgy. “You can’t tell me there’s bear out here. Fifty years ago, maybe.”

“Bear? What in a moss beetle’s dung pile are ya munchin’s?” Garlock, who had been seated, now rose, as if accepting Isaac’s challenge.

“I-zac,” Alle-Encer said, “I can see ya be wise. Ya must have raveled that something hokka has happened... that fate has led yeer trail. I believe ya be no longer in yeer land. By some shadowy gust you’ve come to us. I feel it... me knows it.” He nodded, convinced of his conclusion. “I believe ya did walk through the wood... yet... ya did not.”

Breezy glanced up with nervous eyes. “What beasts?” she asked, looking to Isaac, who still stood between the table and the fire. He again shook his head in disagreement.

But seeing the dark worry on her face, his heart grew heavy—

## THE GRIMALKYN'S HOVEL

overwhelmingly heavy. He suddenly wished they were home—safe with Mom and Dad and a good snow day behind them. *Why were they here in this cabin in the side of a hill with two strange men and a lynx on steroids? Why can't they just get to a stinking phone and call home?*

He glanced up at the peculiar little hawk perched in the rafters. With a cock of its head, it met his gaze, shrugging its wings, giving a low, soft whistle.

## 4 A LATE NIGHT VISIT

“**I** think we should have some eat,” Alle-Encer said, looking with concern at Breezy. “I sense I must tell more than ya want to know.” He gave a nod to Garlock who went to a large leg of smoked meat hanging from a rafter. After slicing off several strips, he put them into a black kettle, to which was added what looked like old vegetables, dried leaves, and other things unknown. He then hung the sooty pot from an iron rod above the fire.

As the kettle stewed, Alle-Encer urged the teens to take off the rest of their outer clothes and dry them near the fire. With reluctance, Isaac finally took off his backpack and coat, his tensions easing just a hint as he let the fire’s warmth soothe his soul. Soon a host of snow pants, mittens, gloves and hats, all lay strewn about the tiny dwelling.

Zac found his cushy chair, which was certainly Garlock’s, to be wonderfully cozy. Covered with a huge skin of jet-black fur—thick and soft like rabbit yet very long—it felt snuggly warm. He pulled his cold bare feet up under him and soon sat staring dreamily into the fire. When the kettle boiled, Garlock dropped in some dried leaves that offered up a rather enticing aroma, filling the little hovel with a fragrance of smoke and mint and well-seasoned stew.

Like a warm drink on a cold day, peace settled into Zac’s weary soul. In spite of all the trouble and strangeness, the endless walking through darkness and cold, he now felt a rising joy. Everything would be okay. He could trust the old man, enjoy the fire and the food, and even pet the giant lynx—well maybe.

## A LATE NIGHT VISIT

Still staring into the flames, he hoped with all sincerity that Isaac and Breezy also felt this strange, unexplainable joy. He then thought back over the long and difficult day. *Was supposed to be a fun day*, he pondered, *a snow day. Something sure went wrong. Or did it? Maybe not wrong... maybe... just not as planned.*

He watched Breezy sitting content on her thick fur rug—a brown one with cream-colored spots. She sat holding her knees in her arms, her toes basking in the fire’s warmth. She too stared dreamily into the flames, no longer concerned about the huge cat just a few feet away.

Isaac took a seat at the crude table made of a solid slab of wood. Like the others, he gazed into the fire, his head propped on one hand, weary eyes drooping.

Zac glanced his way, happy to see him finally sitting down. *Hope Mom and Dad aren’t fuming*, he thought.

No one spoke as Garlock prepared the meal, occasionally stirring the pot with a long wooden spoon. After declaring ‘the broth be infused,’ he set the kettle on the table along with some very dark bread. In a sudden swoop, the little hawk came down, hopping to the kettle where it peered over the blackened rim, squawking a sing-song tone as if in approval.

When Garlock brought a bowl to Alle-Encer, Zac held out his hands offering up a silly smile, to which Garlock huffed, mumbling something about sproots and chairs, but then brought a steaming bowl with a broken-off chunk of bread.

Zac held the clay bowl in both hands, peering curiously into the hot stew and the dark brown bread nestled on its side, a well-worn wooden spoon floating like a little boat lost in the fog of the steaming surface. Inhaling slowly, he took a moment to savor the alluring aroma that now filled the little hovel.

Breezy had trouble using the bulky wooden spoon, especially with her eyes on the hawk who danced and bobbed, pecking at the meat in Garlock’s bowl. The bushy man would take a bite and swat at the bird, which jumped and pecked, the two looking like an oddly matched fencing duel.

“Get yeer own, ya gollywog,” Garlock growled, after a feisty swipe. He had just given the lynx a large bowl of stew, setting it between her fluffy front paws, and now eagerly sought to fill his own hunger in spite of the pesky hawk. He’d taken no more than a few spoonfuls when Alle-Encer reminded him of their need for drink. Grumbling under his breath, he fumbled about, giving each a clay mug of a spicy

lukewarm drink.

Either the stew and bread were good, or they were all really hungry, for after that, no one spoke. When the teens finished eating, the world seemed a little brighter. Sitting back in his cozy chair, Zac asked Alle-Encer about the woods.

“Why is it not safe to be in the woods after dinner?”

“Horls,” the old man replied “They rarely prowl a Grimalkyn’s home or pounce in the day. But when the moon is up, they’ll make a meal of ya.”

“What do these... horls look like? And what’s a... grimalkyn?”

“By the horns of Morten,” Garlock bellowed, to which the hawk made its laughing sound again.

Alle-Encer gave an affirming nod. “We be Grimalkyns,” he said. “Horls be the bane of the Wood, beasts of fur and claw. They, like Nusa, walk unheard, leap a hundred strides, and kill with a swipe.” He put his hand on the overgrown lynx as he spoke, the creature looking straight back into his eyes.

“Aiya...” he said with a shake of his hairy head. “Bid pardon. This is Nusa, one of the last of the great perlines of Mersha. Befriend her and she will die for you. Betray her and she will kill you.” He ran his hands along the cheekbones of the feline and then scratched behind her tufted ears. All eyes were on Nusa and the old man. “The horls are beasts,” he continued, “not like our valiant Nusa. They tease their prey till its life be spent... then, when the sport is gone, they devour. None but a witless wog ventures about after dark.”

The fire crackled as Breezy looked to Zac, who looked to Isaac, who narrowed his eyes and cleared his throat.

“Have you actually seen one of these... horls?” Isaac asked.

“Seen one?” Garlock laughed his short rough laugh. “Yeer brother and the missy be sittin’ on ‘em. Trapped those last snow. Seein’ ‘em ain’t the trouble. Killin’ ‘em before they eats ya be the Grimalkyn’s trial.”

Zac and Breezy both ran a hand over the plush furs on which they sat, each looking at the other with widening eyes, while Isaac got up from the table to examine one of the skins. Its long, thick coat felt surprisingly soft, unlike any fur he had encountered. Without head or feet, it was hard to tell from what animal the skins had come. The brown and cream-colored one beneath Breezy, however, did have its tail—a thick bushy tail at least five feet long.

After examining the tail, Isaac let it slide from his open hand, the

## A LATE NIGHT VISIT

soft fur falling in silence to the stone-paved floor. A wave of sudden angst struck his soul. This didn't feel like a hoax. This, unfortunately, seemed very real.

"So, this is a... horl skin?" he asked.

"Caught and tanned 'em meself."

"How big are these... horls?"

"Big enough for all of ya to ride its back, if that were somethin' ever done. Huh! Wouldn't that be a feat... ridin' a horl?" Garlock chuckled as he stretched out his arms as if holding on to something. He looked to the hawk, who bobbed its head from side to side.

Zac squinted in the dim light watching the hawk. He mouthed the words to Breezy, 'You see that?' Isaac had seen the hawk too and tried to ignore it.

"But you're not concerned about them during the day?" he asked.

"Oh, we be concerned, just not that concerned. They know we can see 'em, and if we can see 'em, we can shoot 'em."

"With guns?" Isaac asked.

"Goons?" Garlock tilted his head. "I was meanin' me thorne."

"Thorn?" the boys asked together.

Garlock pointed to a small bow hanging above the doorframe. It looked like a short Mongolian bow, but with a recurve that wound into a full curl. Although the leather-wrapped handle was round, the bow was flat and several inches wide, and made of a dull gray metal. Beside the bow hung a fur quiver of arrows that also looked to be of gray metal.

Isaac longed to look closer since he had an interest in archery and was fair with the bow, but he needed to stay on the subject of these horls. Just as he turned back, Breezy let go a shrill scream, her slender arm pointing to the window.

"What's that!" she shrieked.

The dark silhouette of a giant bird's head filled the frosted glass. One black shiny orb glowed with firelight as the bird tried to peer through the crude window. So large, it had to bend low to see inside, the creature bobbed its huge head about, seeking to find a spot of clear glass. The teens looked on in horror as the fire's flames reflected off the huge peering eye.

Isaac froze, sudden chills covering his skin. Zac sat up with a start, mouth and eyes going wide as Nusa growled, hackles rising. The little blue hawk let go a piercing screech and flew to the highest rafter.

"Sasson carn!" Garlock growled. "Why in Mulder's mire—?"

“Look to the fire!” Alle-Encer suddenly commanded. “Don’t let it see yer face.” Motioning to Isaac, he called for him to look away. “Come to me chair!” he called.

But Isaac couldn’t take his eyes off the huge black bird. It continued to hop about, bobbing and cocking its head, straining to see inside.

Finally, Isaac moved to the front of Alle-Encer’s chair, where he tried to position his long legs without infringing on Nusa who now stood with chest rumbling, keen eyes fixed on the window. Breezy had lowered her arm, but sat as one frozen with fear, her wide eyes staring at the frosted glass.

“Little One!” Alle-Encer called, to which she jolted, turning quickly toward the fire. Zac had turned away, keeping his head low, even though every fiber yearned to stare at whatever beast prowled outside their little cabin.

“What’s a Sasson carn?” he whispered. Garlock had slipped to the wall and snuffed out one of the oil lamps. Like a sudden, unexpected lightning strike, the bird gave a loud raspy croak that rattled the window, frightening the teens. Then a flurry of snow covered the glass, and the huge bird was gone. For some time, no one moved, all listening till the fire popped out a large ember.

“Sooty scavenger,” Garlock growled, moving warily toward the window. “Why in Mulder’s mire be a filthy carn lookin’ in me window?” He stood off to one side, peering out the frosted glass.

“Tally carn...” Alle-Encer muttered, hand sunken into his bushy beard. “This day’s indeed a savory brew.”

Isaac had moved away from Nusa, as the big cat continued its rumbling growl, yellow eyes still staring at the window. Then her growl became a low rattle in her throat as she breathed, deep and slow.

“What’s a Sasson carn?” Zac asked again. But Alle-Encer and Garlock gave no reply, each very still, as if waiting—waiting for something dreadful to happen. Then Nusa sat back on her haunches, dropping her head to lick a foreleg. Alle-Encer sighed.

“The carns,” he said, his voice very low, “serve Sasson. Have served since the great war. They are his watchers... messengers... his warriors of the sky.” He paused, thinking over what just happened. “One nare sees ‘em like that. High up... far off... but nare like that.”

Isaac fought to make sense of what his eyes had clearly seen, his whole body feeling the frustrated anger over such a frightening

## A LATE NIGHT VISIT

anomaly. “If never up close...” he said with heart pounding, “how do you know—?”

“I-zac,” Alle-Encer countered, “this be not yeer land. We know a carn when it’s peering through our window. You best believe our words.” For some time, the old man just sat watching the terrified teens. Then he nodded. “Yes... there is... purpose.” His brow wrinkled, then his weathered face tightened with deep concern. Glancing at all three teens, he suddenly said something with such urgency, that it put goosebumps on all three teens. “Garlock...” he nearly shouted, “they cannot stay!”

Still standing near the door, Garlock looked at the older man with great alarm. “What ya speakin’?” he asked, his voice rising. “Can’t send ‘em out there. Wouldn’t know a horl be on their trail till they’re lookin’ out through its teeth.”

“Take them...” Alle-Encer said, his eyes intense. “Take them to...” He suddenly paused, then leaned toward the giant lynx and whispered into the cat’s furry ear. Sitting back with a sigh, he gave a satisfied nod. “Nusa will lead you.”

“Take ‘em?” Garlock squawked. “Me? What makes ya think I be stirrin’ to take these sproots anywheres?”

Alle-Encer rose from his chair and gave Garlock a stern look, but instead of replying to his objections, he spoke directly to Isaac.

“You cannot stay,” he said with frightening urgency. “Sasson now knows. Follow Nusa and obey Garlock. They’ll protect you in the Wood. Move quickly... quietly. Do not speak on the way. Hasten! There is little time.”

The air in the cozy room now changed. All of a sudden, a bad day that had gotten just about as bad as it could get, got much, much worse. Not one of the teens moved. Like wooden statues they just stood with mouths open, weary eyes staring at Alle-Encer in total disbelief.

*Go out in the cold again, with a grumpy Garlock and a giant lynx, or perlin of Mersba, whatever that was, without knowing where they were going?*

Isaac turned to face the window, anger flaring up fast. He didn’t want to stay, that was for sure. Yet he’d seen with his own eyes that giant black bird. And the size of Nusa made him consider the talk of the horls. Fear and frustration pulled at his thoughts.

*A hoax? A nightmare? What else could it be?*

For a time, he stood staring at the window, his nose flaring with each heavy breath. Then he shook his head as if in disgust. Scooping

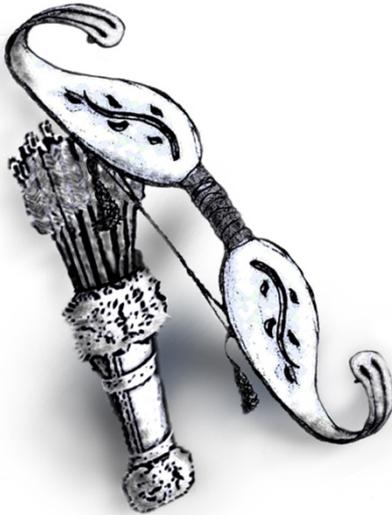
up his coat, he called to Zac and Breezy.

“Get your stuff on! We’re going home!” Yanking on his coat and gloves, he continued to shake his head. “This place is... whatever. We’re going back the way we came... find a road or something—anything.” He gave an awkward nod to Garlock. “Thanks for the food and for letting us warm up.” Pulling on his hat, he gave Zac a stern look. “Come on, I’m getting you home.”

Reluctant to even move toward the cold outside, Zac and Breezy were deliberately slow in gathering up their damp and clammy clothes. Sore and tired, Zac stood by the fire with a soggy sock in each hand.

Walking home now seemed horrible. Going back out into the cold, into the dark cold, with that carn thing lurking all about, seemed crazy—extreme crazy.

*What’s happening?* His heart pounded with dreadful fears. *What have we done? What have we done wrong?*



*Grimalkyn thorne with arrow nest*

## 5 UNSETTLING ENCOUNTER

Alle-Encer stood puzzled. Garlock begrudgingly pulled on his coat and boots, grabbing his thorne and quiver. He paused, awaiting instructions from Alle-Encer who gave none. Both watched as the two weary teens put on their coats and trudged toward the bolted door. Alle-Encer tried to speak once again with Isaac, but the determined lad just shook his head.

Garlock peered through the window before lifting the beam. Nusa remained beside Alle-Encer, but her keen yellow eyes watched as Garlock slowly opened the door. A rush of frozen air flowed across the floor, chilling the cozy room. The fire rustled in resistance and Breezy whimpered like a timid pony. Outside, the flakes still floated gently down, but the night seemed twice as cold.

*What's crazier? Zac thought. Staying here or going back into the freezing dark woods? "Isaac, are you sure?"*

*"We can't stay here, Zac. We have to get home."*

Garlock stepped out first, spinning to aim his loaded thorne up to the roof. All lay still, resting in the quiet cold of winter's sleep. But the gray evening had turned to night. Stepping out into the yellow light that spread out over the snow, their eyes, conditioned to the cabin's light, stared fearfully into the curtain of darkness that hung beyond the trees. A gush of foreboding dread washed over Isaac.

*This has to be a dream, he thought, freakiest, craziest... but realest dream ever. He tried to control the fearful thoughts. We'll get out of this... somehow.*

“I can travel with ya, for a bit,” Garlock said, “if ya know yeer goin’s.” The short muscular man looked about, bow and arrow at ready.

Isaac wanted his help but needed to just get away from all the weirdness.

“We can make it... thank you,” he said, his voice clearly stressed.

Zac looked up at his brother who was taller by more than a foot. He deeply respected him but saw the distress in his eyes. “Isaac... are you sure?”

“Look for a glow,” Isaac said. “The lights from town should reflect off the clouds.” It sounded good, but in every direction hung the curtain of darkness. Alle-Encer and Nusa stood in the open doorway, their shadows stretching out across the snow to where the teens stood huddled. Zac looked beneath the little window and saw the huge tracks left by the carn. This was either a vivid and scary dream or a real scary world.

“We came that way,” Isaac said. “I don’t see a road, so let’s go back the way we came.” He tried hard to sound confident.

Garlock gave a lingering look to Alle-Encer and Nusa. Zac and Breezy looked to each other and then to the warm glow coming from the cabin. What at first had seemed so strange and threatening had now become the place of longing. They turned to follow Isaac as he stepped into the darkness. Garlock came up behind, his soft moccasin-like boots moving silently as he turned about, thorne string taut.

They trudged into the dark unknown, grasping for any hope of actually finding their way. No one said a word. Unable to see far enough to chart any course, the dread of wandering aimlessly attacked their hearts with relentless fears. But after only ten minutes, they came to a clearing.

“The meadow with the huge stump!” Isaac declared in loud excitement.

“It’s too soon,” Zac said.

“Stay on the edge, lad.” Garlock tried to whisper. “Don’t tread the open.”

“The stump would be over there!” Isaac darted out into the clearing.

“Marrgh!” Garlock grumbled, blowing a plume of frosted air. “Don’t move yeer feet!” he said sternly to Zac and Breezy as he went

## UNSETTLING ENCOUNTER

out after Isaac, mumbling profusely under his breath.

Breezy began to shiver. “This is what happens in scary movies,” she said, her voice quavering. “They always split up. I always tell them, ‘don’t split up,’ but they always—”

Suddenly a gray flash bolted across the clearing. As Zac blinked, trying to follow the blur, he saw Isaac tumble into the snow a dozen feet from where he had been walking.

Zac blinked again. What had come so fast? “Isaac? Isaac!” Loud thumping rose up into his ears, his breath coming fast, his muscles tensing.

Garlock spun to shout back. “Get to that tree and don’t ya move!” The little man then ran toward Isaac. He had taken only three steps when the gray flash came again, a huge mass landing square on top of him. An arrow flew out, glancing off a tree.

At first, Zac thought it was a large bear, but no bear could move that fast and leap that far. As the beast held Garlock down, it turned its glare on Zac and Breezy.

Together they sunk down into the snow, pressing hard against the tree. The animal stood motionless, staring straight at them, while no sound came from either Isaac or Garlock. The beast looked like a house cat but the size of a polar bear. Its long bushy tail twitched back and forth as it held its prey, sizing up the others.

Breezy clutched Zac’s arm, her body shaking wildly, her skin going cold.

Zac spoke quick and short, barely understandable. “All my fault... should’ve stopped him... why didn’t I stop him?” He, too, shook in sporadic shudders, fighting to stay quiet, but all was lost. They were going to die in a cold, dark woods, killed by a massive gray beast. Why didn’t they listen?

The ground trembled ever so slightly as a dark bounding flash came from the far side of the clearing, stopping to sniff Isaac’s body. The beast still pinning Garlock gave out a wretched howling hiss. Even in the dim light, they could see the hairs on its back push upward. Then it arched like a threatened cat, its tail puffed and twitching. The other beast left Isaac’s body to circle round toward Zac and Breezy.

Panting out rapid puffs of white, Breezy tried to breathe but seemed to be suffocating herself with fright. Trembling beside her, Zac watched the giant cat move toward them, so huge, bigger than any tiger, each foot in direct line with the other, eyes locked on the trembling bodies pressing into the tree.

They pushed themselves hard against the trunk—pushing as if to get inside—to press through the bark and draw their legs and arms up into safety. Then the giant cat froze, lowering its body to the ground.

“It’s... it’s... it’s gonna pounce,” Breezy stammered through quivering lips.

“God... help us,” Zac pleaded as Breezy buried her face into his shoulder. She squeezed his arm tight, still struggling to breathe. He could feel her shaking and gasping, but all had gone silent, only the sound of throbbing thumps filled his ears.

The giant cat crouched, tail twitching back and forth. Zac stared into the eyes, watching the faint puffs of white mist float from its nose.

Then in slow motion, he watched it leap—front legs shooting high into the air, the great body extending as the hind legs thrust. Soaring with claws bare, it lunged straight for the trembling prey squished against the tree.

In strange stillness, he watched it glide. All had become still, even the pounding thumps had faded to perfect silence, the face of the giant cat zooming toward him. He shut his eyes and held his breath, lips and teeth clenched tight, his arm shielding Breezy’s head and face.

In silence he cringed, waiting for death.

As if by an explosion, there came a snarling roar, a slamming of bodies—tumbling, hissing, fierce growling like nothing ever known on earth. Horrid screams filled the woods as tooth and claw battled beneath the trees.

A third beast had joined the fray—smaller, but intensely fierce. Fastening itself onto the back of the pouncing cat, it dug its fangs and claws into the neck and head of the beast. In lightning speed, they tumbled and clawed, slamming into trees, rolling through brush.

To Zac it seemed long but was only seconds. The larger beast spun free, disappearing into the darkness.

With paralyzing fear, Zac sat frozen against the tree, left arm still shielding Breezy, his right arm held tight in her clasp. Like him, Breezy had opened her eyes to watch the screeching spectacle. She now sat perfectly still, not even drawing breath. Together they watched the smaller cat casually lick its fur as if nothing at all had ever happened. Then with sudden quickness, it turned, walking straight toward them.

Breezy gasped, but Zac squinted, trying to see into the pale darkness. Not until the beast drew almost upon them did Zac utter the name, “Nusa?”

The giant lynx stared with her bright yellow eyes, puffs of white

## UNSETTLING ENCOUNTER

mist rising from her panting mouth. With great relief, Zac and Breezy sighed as the lynx then turned toward the clearing. The other giant cat had fled and Garlock now fumbled to reset an arrow to his thorne. When he saw Nusa, he ran to Isaac and hoisted him onto his small sturdy frame, carrying him hastily from the clearing.

Tears dropped on cold cheeks as they watched the strange little man and the great silent lynx bring Isaac back. Still pressed against the tree, Zac stood with ears once more pounding. "Is he—?"

"Taint be dead... frap-torten-da-sossel! I told 'em. Ya heard me tell 'em." Garlock set Isaac down against the tree. Stomping the snow from his clothes, he ruffled his hairy head and beard. "Cursed crotters!"

"Are you okay?" Zac asked Garlock.

"Am I who?" the little man replied, cocking his head. He nodded toward Isaac. "Got a mean swipe... yieldin' blood."

"What happened?" Isaac moaned, looking up from the base of the tree.

"Ya didn't listen, that be what happened."

A tear fell from Zac's eye. "Thought you were dead," he said with a snuffle.

"I thought we were all dead," Breezy said, wiping her eyes, hands in a constant tremor.

"Something knocked the wind out of me," Isaac said, trying to move his shoulders, stopping with a sudden pain.

"Them be horls," Garlock said, brushing more snow from his leathers, stamping his feet. "T'ain't for Nusa, we all be fillin' horl belly this night."

Zac tried to tell of the horrible catfight, but all his cold lips could muster was, "She saved our lives." Nusa looked casually about as Isaac stood to his feet with shreds of cloth hanging from the back of his coat.

"Ya brone lucky, lad. Could've been yeer last. Don't be fearin' the scars. Missies like 'em... makes a man and proves the tale."

"You two okay?" Isaac asked.

Breezy nodded with eyes still wide. "Alive is very okay," she said, her whole body shivering.

Isaac then swayed, bracing himself against the tree. "Feel weak," he muttered. "Doesn't make sense... tigers in the woods?"

"Them be horls, lad."

Isaac squinted toward the clearing. "Just want to... get us home."

“If ya want me advice... and if ya don’t... we follow Nusa.” Garlock brushed the last of the snow from off his chest. “The pot be stirrin’ to boil,” he said with a nod. “Not one to know much, but carns... carns at me hovel...” He wagged his head.

Isaac straightened, groaning through clenched teeth. “We have to get... some place safe.”

“Safe? In this land? Ha!” Garlock studied the tall teen. “Need salve on that wound, lad. Horl cuts go bad... brone-golly bad.”

And so, they followed Nusa along the edge of the clearing until they neared the other side. She led them into the trees onto a small trail that meandered along a tiny brook. Breezy wanted to talk about all that had happened, for she was either happy with relief or in some state of shock, but Garlock told her to ‘muff it.’ They were not yet out of danger, he assured them, grumbling to himself for ‘gettin’ tossed into such a boilin’ brew.’

Zac and Breezy trailed close in the footprints of Nusa, with Isaac and Garlock at the rear, his thorne ever ready. The grace with which Nusa moved through the trees was a marvel to Zac. He tried to step like her—to copy her smooth but sudden movements. His boots made him awkward, and the nylon zipping sounds from his coat defeated any stealth. But he found it intriguing to watch the shoulders of the giant lynx move up and down, the huge soft paws steady on the smallest of footholds.

“I smell smoke,” Breezy said rather loudly but wasn’t hushed. They all stopped to sniff the wintery air. Nusa paused to glance back, warm breaths condensing white as she watched them rest.

When they neared a large mound at the edge of a clearing, the smell of smoke lingered all about the cold, gray woods. Light soft flakes floated back and forth, drifting carefree through the trees, as the air hung still in the quiet cold.

Without hesitation, Nusa walked straight toward the mound. Zac wondered why they would climb over such when they could easily walk around. The giant lynx then went to a large boulder at the base and came to a sudden halt, growling soft and low as the others came up in line.

“What’s wrong?” Isaac whispered as Garlock turned to glance back, his bow creaking as he tightened the sinewy string.

Zac’s skin tingled. He had felt safe walking the trail with Nusa, for

## UNSETTLING ENCOUNTER

she could defend them against any danger of this woods. The chills moved in waves over his skin—his mind seeing the gray flash strike Isaac... the face of the giant cat... himself waiting to die at the base of the tree... and Breezy clutching his arm, her lungs fighting to breathe. In a burst of fresh terror, it all came back. He edged closer toward Nusa.

In silence they stood as the lynx again gave out a soft growl. What was Nusa doing?

Then they heard the movement of a metal latch, and from the base of the mound, directly beside the boulder, an iron hinge ground out an eerie creak.

“Nusa?” came a warm female voice that broke the cold night air. Suddenly the big cat disappeared. Zac squinted, trying to see where she had gone. “Come, it is safe,” the warm voice said. “Please, come in.”

Zac walked forward as one walks into a dark room, shuffling his feet, feeling his way along. “Wish I had Nusa’s eyes,” he said under his breath. Then a strong, slender hand gently took his and led him through a passageway into a room dimly lit by a small blue flame. The rest were helped in, and he heard the door shut and the iron latch reset.

“So these are the ones,” the warm voice said as the blue flame grew into bright white. Without delay, Garlock went to the fireplace and began reviving the coals. Zac had no idea regarding the time but knew it was late. He looked about the room, which rounded at the ceiling, his eyes stopping at their host.

A tall woman stood beside the burning lamp, her slender body adorned with long reddish-brown hair that reached to her knees. Not young, not old, she looked kind and moved with grace, her smooth cheekbones high with a fine nose—straight and narrow. A long robe with brown fur cuffs and collar hung comfortably from her strong yet graceful form.

“Your day has been long,” she said. “You need warm drink and rest. Undo your garments. Set them by the fire.” She poured a hot drink into tall wooden mugs with metal handles. The aroma that filled the room brought thoughts of Christmas and chocolate, peppermint spice, and all kinds of wonderful things. “Sit... rest.” Her hair flowed like a long veil as she moved about the room. “Please bid pardon, my home is small, but it keeps us close.” She spoke so kindly and her voice so pleasant, it felt like a dream.

“Please let this be a dream,” Isaac said to himself as he stood near

the fire, his back throbbing with pain. It now hurt to just breathe. He looked at his coat as he hung it on a peg near the mantel. Three long shreds ripped through the cloth. *Mom is going to kill me.*

The room was larger than the Grimalkyn cabin, filling the whole underside of the mound. A single doorway led off into another room. Two rather large half-round windows filled opposite walls, each covered with a dark sheer cloth.

“This will chase the cold from your hearts.” The woman handed Isaac a mug of spicy drink. It tasted like a hot chocolate but had a peculiar spice—a chocolaty-licorice-cinnamon-peppermint sort of flavor. After she had given the others their drink, including Nusa a bowl of something warm, she brought a light to Isaac and asked, “May I look at your wound?”

“It’s okay, just cut my coat.”

“Then your coat bleeds,” she said, parting the shreds that were once his shirt. Three claws of the horl had cut into his back. “Two are scrapes,” she said, leaning close, “but one is torn flesh. The night’s cold helped stay the pain.”

Breezy came to look, gasping loudly. “Isaac, you’re bleeding!”

“I have seen much worse,” the woman said, speaking with such calmness, such assurance, that it felt uncanny but very welcome. She had Isaac sit on a wooden stool. Breezy stood near and watched, feeling like she belonged there, like she knew this woman, like when being with a beloved aunt or long-time friend of the family.

“Aiya, ‘twas a tussle,” Garlock said, sitting on the large stone hearth unlacing his fur boots with a sigh. “Saved our hide, she did.” He put his hand on Nusa’s neck, to which the big cat winced.

“She, too, is wounded,” the woman said, going to a cupboard and taking out a small vial with some cloth. She handed it to Breezy. “Use this to clean her wounds. Do not be afraid. She will thank you for it.”

It took Breezy some time to gather the courage to approach Nusa so close, and despite the fact she hated the sight of blood, she became proud of her given task. Zac knelt beside her and helped part the fur, and together they cleaned and dabbed the wound.

“She’s poiky,” Breezy said, jittery with fear and excitement. She and Zac had a game of making up words. Nusa’s long thick fur, like stiff grass on bare feet, felt ‘poiky.’

As the woman dressed Isaac’s wounds, he suddenly swayed, feeling dizzy and weak. His t-shirt, undershirt, and fleece had all become dried into the blood and flesh. It was painful as she cut away some of his

clothing to reveal the wound. They moved near the fire as she cleaned and wrapped his chest in cloth.

“I thought he was dead,” Zac said to the woman, still burdened with guilt over all that happened. “It was... horrible.”

“Indeed. But why do you think it your fault?” The woman gave her long hair a swing as she turned to face Zac.

“What?”

“Did he not choose to go that way... to walk the clearing?”

“Yes, but... we should have stayed at the cabin. I should’ve—”

“You would be in great danger,” she said rather sternly, giving Zac a lingering look before helping Isaac don a soft knitted shirt. It went on with much less pain than his had come off, but his back burned with increasing throbs.

The tall woman mixed a mug of something that smelled fusty like a dry-rotted stump. “This will help. Drink fast.”

Isaac shuddered as he gulped it down, for it tasted like old weeds and mushrooms.

“Thank you... ma’am.” He blinked a few times suppressing another shudder. “I really appreciate... all you’ve done.”

“I am Mirrah. It is my honor to help you.”

After enjoying some dried fruit and bread with cheese, they settled in around the fire, soaking up its warmth, so glad to be out of their damp clothes, to be out of the cold dark woods. Although surrounded once again by the strange and unexplainable, they felt safe in Mirrah’s mound.

Soon Isaac’s pain subsided and the world—or wherever they were—seemed a little less daunting. They didn’t talk much about the day, but rather stared sleepily into the fire, watching the dancing flames, feeling the pulsing coals, enjoying its simple mystery.

“I’m tired,” Breezy moaned with a huge yawn, arms outstretched.

“Come this way, young Brielle. You can sleep in here.” Mirrah led Breezy into a side room, after which they came out to say goodnight. Dressed in one of Mirrah’s robes, Breezy shuffled out to face the boys, the robe trailing far behind, sleeves hanging to her knees.

“Goodnight, Breeze,” Zac said, getting up to see her into her room. “You gonna be okay?”

She nodded. “It’s a nice bed... really cozy.”

“Sorry about today,” Zac said.

She shook her head. “Like poop in a puddle... you didn’t know. It’s not your fault. But... that *was* horrible.”

“Try not to think about it. So sorry you came along on this one.”

“Never-lever,” she said, wagging her head. “Don’t you ever think of leaving me out.” She then lowered her voice to a whisper. “I’m just glad I didn’t pee my pants.” They chuckled together before she went into the bedroom where she and Mirrah would sleep.

The boys had a bed of furs spread out in front of the fire, while Garlock took a large fur and settled in near the passageway to the door. Nusa lay near the window calmly licking her wounds.

“How’s your back?” Zac asked, crawling under a heavy horl skin.

“That nasty brew really helped.” Isaac yawned big. “What a weird day.”

They both lay beneath horl skins and watched the flames flicker and dance in the fireplace. Zac played the day over in his mind—a long day. He worried for his mom and dad. How long would they keep looking? Maybe they will follow the trail. He wondered if Breezy would ever get to go exploring with them again. Would *they* ever get to go exploring again?

“Hey, Zac.”

“Yeah?”

“How’d she know?”

“Know what?”

“What happened out there. How’d she know about me going into the open? None of us told her, did we?”

“No.”

“And did you hear what she called Breezy? Used her real name. And... it’s like she knew we were coming.”

“Yeah...” Zac said, staring into the flames, “it’s like she knew.”