

Whether viewed as an adventure tale or morality play, The Land of Nuorg will take you on an exciting adventure, loaded with interesting characters, plot twists, insight and humor. This book can be enjoyed by readers on several levels.

The Land of Nuorg

**Buy The Complete Version of This Book at
Booklocker.com:**

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/4351.html?s=pdf>

The Land of Nuorg

Mystic thought he was still alive, although he was not sure why. How long had he been in here? However, he assumed that since he was more interested in surviving, time was not a major concern right now. How long he would stay in here, where he was being taken and where he was, were all out of his control. Eventually, he hoped, he would stop sinking, if that was actually what was happening. He was awkwardly confused by the water that was surrounding him, for it seemed to be moving, as a whole, right along with him. The water did not rush by him like a raging river. He was not tossed and thrown about with reckless abandonment. The water did not allow him to rise to the surface as the water in the Black Pond had done on occasion. Undoubtedly, it was not the same kind of water that living things drowned in, for he had never felt any urgency to paddle to the shallows, which was good, because there were no shallows available.

Copyright © 2009 Chris McCollum

Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-60145-994-7

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-60145-995-4

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Printed in the United States of America.

Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

MessyHouse Publishing
Franklin, TN
2009

One ordinary day under an ordinary sky in an extraordinary Great Forest, Mystic, a wise and rather large gray Wolf, was playfully digging a hole to bury a small skeleton. The skeleton was that of a poor Seagull which, at some point in the past, had reached the end of his life. Why he decided to bury these remains on this particular day is a question that may never be answered. Let it be said, had everything not happened just as it did; the outcome of this day and the many others that followed would have drastically changed not only this story, but history as it is known today.

After digging a short time with his large paws, the hole was deep enough. It was, after all, just a small bit of bones. He sat on his back legs and rested, as all Wolves do, and curiously studied the new hole. He wondered why he had dug a hole in this area of the forest at all. He had never dug a hole here to bury a bone or to bury anything. This was the South Quarter of the Great Forest where he was not exactly permitted to go. Secondly, it was too far from his sleeping quarters for, normally, he liked to nap in his own dwelling during the day unless, of course, he was on an adventure. This was certainly no adventure, at least not yet. He usually never traveled this far from home for no reason. The significance of this moment escaped him.

Mystic let out a very deliberate and cautious breath, "Humph." He looked away from the hole for a moment of further contemplation and was ceremoniously distracted by the glorious magnificence of the Great Forest. Mystic turned his big, intelligent eyes to the hole and gave it one last thoughtful glance.

After this short rest, Mystic stood. He walked to the Seagull's remains, retrieved the bones from where they had rested, quite unaware of what was going on around them, and very reverently, placed them into the shallow hole.

"There", he said to himself, "What was so difficult about that?"

Something about that hole fascinated Mystic. He stood almost motionless eying this creation as if it was alive and breathing. Call it

Chris McCollum

instinct or extraordinary canine perception, but Mystic did not trust it. For reasons unknown to him, his whiskers were beginning to tingle. The tingling crept down each whisker. Soon, one by one, his whiskers began to twitch. Individually, they twitched slowly at first. Then each began to twitch quite frantically until they warned Mystic trouble was most definitely close at hand.

In this situation most gray Wolves would have asked for advice, but not Mystic. He was alone in this. The lesser Wolves left Mystic to run alone. He was, after all, their leader and was charged with the responsibility to come back and warn them should anything out of the ordinary take place. They never really tried to keep up with him or the odd friends he ran with. Did they really care where he went or whom he went with as long as he protected them against whatever harm might come their way? The answer, of course, was definitely, no!

As he stood in place, Mystic was becoming increasingly uneasy. Something about this moment did not feel right. This, he thought, was not the usual way of things in the Great Forest and could quite possibly mean some kind of danger. But what kind?

Danger was approaching. Not the kind that would hit you in the nose, but a distant danger that could pop up overnight like weeds in a garden or lie dormant for unknown periods of time. If so inclined, this danger, left unattended, could destroy every living and good thing in the entire world. The danger also could draw the pleasantness and frivolity right out of a perfectly serene and fun-seeking land, if given the least opportunity.

This was a danger for which no one could prepare. This danger could turn Mystic's world inside out. The seldom talked about "Terrible Years" began this way. If they were to have a resurgence, they would, like a cancer returning to a host, return stronger and more prepared to wreak havoc on whatever crossed their path in a next life. This danger was so woven into the daily routine that it would not be immediately or positively identified by Mystic or any other land walker.

That kind of danger was possibly in this hole Mystic had dug. He slowly and very carefully began to inch his way back from this mysterious thing, this...this hole in the ground. But why was this hole so different? He had dug thousands of holes in his lifetime. He began to ask himself why he had decided to bury those bones.

The Land of Nuorg

Mystic waited, strangely hypnotized by the unknown. He could not take his eyes off the hole. Suddenly to his wary eyes, the shallow bottom of the hole dropped away to nowhere with a deafening whooshing sound. He jumped to full alert then froze. The sound, Mystic instantly realized, had originated deep from within the hole. The only comparable thought that came to his mind was that of an immense giant creature, living under ground, inhaling a very deep and violent gasp of breath.

The bones Mystic had placed in the hole disappeared. Poof! Like an old magic trick, they were gone. Mystic remained absolutely still for the instant as the long gray hair on his shoulders stood straight up and the tips of his ears remained stationed at full attention. His large Wolf eyes were opened as wide as they possibly could as he watched in complete bewilderment. His whiskers were now dancing up and down his snout. Sensitive Wolf ears were next to warn him of the now clearly present danger that was boiling directly under his feet.

“It’s here!” his ears told him. “Move! Move back. Move to the side. Run. Do something Mystic. You can’t just stand here. Run,” his ears cried again. But as much as he would have liked to, he couldn’t move.

Mystic remained frozen where he stood. He did manage to brace himself as he settled slightly back on his haunches, spreading his massive paws much farther apart than normal. He bowed his head and concentrated on trying to scan in all directions at once. His eyes were bouncing left to right, up to down, down to up and diagonally. (This last feat is extremely hard to accomplish and can very easily make one awkwardly dizzy.)

Fortunately, Mystic had four sturdy legs on which to balance. He let out a very low and unpleasant growl. His, higher-than-normal, intelligence usually brought words to his mouth, but at this time, in this place, nothing but this growl could escape from his clenched teeth. The ground began to tremble terribly and fear began inching its way up Mystic’s tense spine like a spider scurrying across its web to capture and eat a helpless fly snared in a beautiful silken trap. It is said to this day, in that forest, that every living animal with two legs or more felt what Mystic felt at that very instant and that those creatures much, much older told unpleasant stories of a certain terrible tremble many years before.

Chris McCollum

Everything was shaking or was it just Mystic? He did not know and, at the time, he was far too busy trying to stay on his feet. He did not have time to worry about what else was trembling. He was absolutely positive that this disturbance was felt by everyone and everything, near or far in the Great Forest. He was, for the most part correct. The trees were swaying, the ground was heaving and small pebbles were bouncing back and forth beneath the large boulders that sat quivering about.

The poor old Seagull's bones had vanished right in front of Mystic's eyes along with the dirt, the sand, the rocks and everything else that had existed within the small area of that hole. Mystic noticed, as he watched the hole, that it was gradually getting bigger. Piece by piece, small and large chunks of ground on which he was standing disappeared to wherever the rest of the hole had gone. The whooshing sound was growing faint, but nerve-wracking amounts of dirt were crumbling and falling away directly beneath him.

"Oh, mercy, when will that stop?" Mystic thought to himself.

He was terrified. He could not force his muscles into moving his body anywhere, even while the edge of hole was steadily creeping towards him. When would this trembling stop and, if it did, would the hole stop growing? Fear had now traveled a path all the way up Mystic's spine and was now beating on a drum between his still alert ears.

Completely out of ideas, Mystic concluded he had no other option. Instinctively he called out for help. At least, he tried. Like the rest of his body, Mystic's mouth was paralyzed by fear of the unknown

"Vincen, Vincen, can you hear me?" Louder Mystic! "Vincen, please, can you hear me? Vincen, Vincen help me!"

It was all he could do. He hoped that some noise had gotten beyond his wavy canine lips and that the sound, no matter how weak, had miraculously made its way to Vincen's ears. Vincen was his best friend and wisest teacher. He was also the most majestic Eagle in a long line of glorious Eagles in the Great Forest. He was far wiser than his 150 or so years would indicate. Vincen was among the only true natives of the Great Forest. Even the Hawks and Falcons of the nearby meadows, mountains and valleys came seeking his advice. Mystic had cried out just as he had done several years before when he first felt fear tugging hard on his life. But that was another story for another time. This time he could only hope that Vincen was close

The Land of Nuorg

enough to hear his desperate cry for help and come to his rescue once again.

As he did day after day, Vincen was resting on his favorite perch, high in the top of the tallest and oldest oak tree in the forest. This perch had been handed down in Vincen's family for generations. No sky traveler could even remember the name of the first Eagle to wrap talons around this coveted branch. It had been handed down to Vincen many, many years ago. Legend says this particular perch also became one of the first lookout posts overlooking the meadow back in the days of the Terrible Years.

So far, this too, had been an ordinary day for Vincen, just as it had started as an ordinary day for Mystic. It was good to get old, the Eagle thought. There were the usual occurrences of too many feathers falling out when he groomed himself and an occasional ache or pain. But after all of his years high above the land walkers, he was doing quite well, thank you. All of the worries and distractions of being young and foolhardy no longer affected his disposition and time was something he seemed to have plenty of. No more did he race the young Eaglets. No more did he chase Wolf pups and young Badgers for fun. Those times were gone now.

All Vincen seemed to concern himself with now was watching the peaceful day-rounds turn in to peaceful moon-times from high atop this world of his. He had so many fond memories of growing up, learning the Eagles' many ways and studying their folklore. That, lately, seemed like some other Eagle's lifetime. Now, even the smallest of life's pleasantries were things he enjoyed daily and to the fullest. Yes, Vincen was content in thinking the young of this day would never have to live in desperate times. Those Terrible Years of old were now read about in the history manuscripts. Those that studied them could only imagine what life could have been like living day to day and hideout to hideout, never knowing who would come home and who would not. Yes, life now was so perfect, almost too perfect. Every now and then Vincen's thoughts would wander off to the stories he'd heard of that earlier day and time. He could only imagine how he might have reacted to the adventures his ancestors had learned to deal with on a daily basis.

Chris McCollum

Vincen's family was "The Family" to be descended from if you were an Eagle. Sky-travelers told stories of the Vincen Eagles that amazed even the most callous listener. Reverent to a fault whenever Vincen passed their way, it was as if they worshipped the very sky in which he flew. Vincen was far too humble to pay the tribute much mind, but he was respectful of the well wishes. His family included brave warriors, wisened intellectuals and every day heroes. Too young during the battles to witness first hand any of courageous displays of bravery, Vincen had, so far, lived a long, peaceful and productive life thanks to those who sacrificed before him. For that he was very grateful.

The Terrible Years and the clean-up afterward had taken his family away from him. Everyone but his twin sister, Mustanghia, had either been killed or lost in some of the most vicious battles and marches of that day. His Father was the direct heir to the Great Forest. Vincen's great Grandfather's Father had come to this forest seeking refuge for his family during the Terrible Years. He relocated the entire family to this area because, at the time, the Great Forest was off the beaten path.

Vincen and his sister were born in the Great Forest. They were born in the same aerie that Vincen has made his bed in every night since. His family returned to the land of the battles of the Terrible Years frequently to fly scouting missions and, one by one, they never came back. Vincen and his sister were too young to really miss them as they each failed to return. The Hawks and Falcons of the Great Forest raised the twins as their own. They taught them to hunt, eat and survive while the Owls of the area nurtured the young Eaglets' minds and never let them forget their heritage, especially, the importance of being a "Vincen Eagle." There would never be, in Vincen's mind, living creatures as wise as the Owls.

While no exact story has been told of their parents' demise, all rest assured that their end befitted a royal pair. Vincen's sister had flown away several years before on a personal mission. She was determined to find out what peril had awaited their parents. She left Vincen to oversee the Great Forest alone. Vincen's sister had received the adventurous side of the "Vincen Eagle" personality and so, was aptly named, Mustanghia, meaning "swift adventurer." Vincen's side of the family provided him with leadership and sensibility far beyond that normally allocated to Eagles.

The Land of Nuorg

Vincen and Mustanghia were a perfectly matched set and, although Vincen had yearned for the adventures his Sister told him about, they both knew that his path in life was to lead and protect the living creatures of the Great Forest. This was, after all, their Great Forest. Mustanghia occasionally sent Vincen messages by Falcon and once or twice a year she would come back to her home aerie. Then she would tell her beloved brother about facts she had discovered and stories she had heard. Vincen looked forward to those visits with his sister. He hoped that one day she would bring news of their parents' survival. However, no news of the latter had been discovered, leaving Vincen to constantly urge Mustanghia to stay with him in the Great Forest. Earlier in his life, Vincen often wished that she would bring back with her a She eagle, especially one that might be looking for a mate. Unfortunately, Mustanghia never brought any visitors back with her and, come to think of it, his sister hadn't been back in quite some time. It might have been several years now.

Vincen didn't like to dwell on bad happenings and, probably, blocked out the amount of time that had passed since Mustanghia was last in for a visit. Oh well, he wished her the best and looked forward to the next time she would come and share new stories with him. Vincen could not broach the subject of any harm touching her. There was, furthermore, no denying it: Vincen was growing lonely.

He had often wondered about raising his own Eaglets, but that seemed to be out of the realm of possibility this late in his life. In a manner of speaking, he did have two children. Vincen's brood started out, and ended, with a pair of ragtag orphans. During different times in the past, he had either rescued or nursed back to health these "children" of his. They gave him some pleasure, as a Father, and at times he could easily have run each of them off for good. He guessed every Father felt that way once in a while. Yes, this duo had surprised him. Each had been a runt and both had experienced different disasters in their younger day-rounds. As fate would have it, they both turned out remarkably well. Each one had developed strong individual talents and worked together quite harmoniously. They graciously gave all the credit for their successes to their adopted Father, Vincen.

Sitting on his perch, Vincen had been observing the young four-leggers playing carefree along the edge of the meadow where the Quiet River ran into the Old Pond. How he longed for those early years. Those times had been so enjoyable, frolicking with his brothers

Chris McCollum

and sisters, occasionally swooping down to give a friendly ride to a terrified Badger or Wolf pup. Given a slight urging, he would race with his Father up to the family aerie built into the cliff that faced the meadow from the south, just to experience the view. He once chased a ruthless band of poachers away from the Great Forest, through the Great Plains, across the Little River and away for good. This had brought him quite a bit of adulation from the land walkers.

He fondly remembered the many, many years of classes taken at the foot of the very wise Owls in their small forest of trees on the meadow's north side. The Eagles were the warriors and the leaders. But the Owls, if it weren't for the Owls and the Eagles' willingness to learn, who knows what might have become of this world he now surveyed from this most honorable perch to the east on the west side of the Great Forest.

Vincen felt a slight shudder in the old tree, but gave it only a passing thought. It was only when he heard a bombastic whisper of frantic yelping on the wind that he became anxious. Yelping? It was coming from inside the Great Forest. The location, however, did not seem that familiar to Vincen. Where exactly was it coming from? Vincen turned his head from side to side and clicked his neck up and down until he located the exact spot where the plea originated. The voice sure sounded familiar to Vincen, but why would Mystic be over in the South Quarter of the Great Forest. He hadn't been there in years. Vincen had given him a good talking to the last time he came scampering in from there. What was even more interesting to Vincen was the yelping. Adult gray Wolves usually don't yelp, especially when they are as intelligent and powerful as this gray Wolf. The yelps had initially sounded like a scared little puppy in a fight for his life. That was exactly the situation several years ago when Vincen had, once before, come to Mystic's rescue.

Fortunately for Mystic, Vincen was very close in Eagle terms. Eagles, Vincen had once told Mystic, see great distances and see far beyond other creatures. For that reason, Eagles measure distances in shorter lengths than other creatures. Where a land walker may describe a distance as "one hundred tall oaks," an Eagle would use "ten pursuit beats." The Eagle logic simply stated thusly, one large Eagle, in hunting pursuit, can travel as far as 10 ancient oak trees are tall with one full beat of his wings. (Of course, the extending and closing of the wings is understood to be one beat of the wings. There

The Land of Nuorg

is no half beat of the wings and there is no one-quarter beat. There is only a pursuit beat, leisure beat and training beat.) Mystic was living lucky. Vincen definitely heard something and quickly calculated the distance to 27 pursuit beats.

Vincen, sensing a terrible calamity shot skyward from his perch. With one swift cycle of his immense, powerful wings he was propelled into the sky high enough to pinpoint Mystic's exact whereabouts. He circled, only briefly, and spotted Mystic outside of the thick canopy of first-growth branches. With his sharp eyes focused on the Wolf's dire position, Vincen shot down to Mystic's side faster than one of the shooting stars that can be spotted every night from his high perch. He swooped down with every intention of getting to Mystic's side before whatever trouble that was coming arrived and he succeeded.

"Mystic, my son what is it?" Vincen hastily asked his young friend upon landing.

Vincen's eyes were so totally focused on Mystic that he made no notice of the growing hole in front of the Wolf that was, even now, inching closer to the both of them.

"What could you have discovered, or gotten yourself into, that you should make such a horrendous, ear-shattering noise? What terrible incident brings me down from my watch?"

Vincen abruptly noticed the hole and paused to stare into it before continuing. "Mystic, why have you dug such a large hole in the South Quarter? Why are you even in the South Quarter? You know very well this place is not known for any good or decent thing." Vincen hurriedly asked these questions as he surveyed the Wolf's statue-like body position.

Mystic was still frozen. No muscle in his body was ready to move as yet, and fear was really beating on that drum in his head now. His eyes rolled in Vincen's general direction and, if he had had no fur, Vincen would have noticed that his skin was as white as new snow and covered with ridge after ridge of goose bumps.

"Come on, my boy, say something", demanded Vincen. "What is it?"

Mystic failed to move. It was not from a lack of trying. He was desperately trying. He couldn't move, or coax into moving, any bone or muscle in his body. His poor head was ready to explode. BOOM, BOOM, BOOM. Fear was continuing to pound that dreadful drum in his head and the hole, after settling on a good pace, was continuing to get bigger.

Chris McCollum

“Mystic, speak to me. I demand to know what is going on and I mean now! Why did you call so loudly?” demanded Vincen, in the sternest voice he could muster.

BOOM, BOOM, BOOM! Would fear ever release Mystic long enough to allow him speech again? He was only able to process thoughts now, not speech and, right now, those thoughts were concerned with that hole. Would that hole ever stop expanding?

Vincen hopped up on Mystic’s strong neck, leaned over those large gray Wolf ears and demanded one more time, “Speak to me!”

Vincen clamped down hard on Mystic’s neck with one of his magnificent claws and, this time, got Mystic’s full attention. Fearing a swat by Mystic’s snout, Vincen quickly hopped to Mystic’s shoulder for safety. He knew this spot well. He often perched on this shoulder during long travels through the Great Forest. If the trees got too thick, Mystic would often invite him down for a ride to keep from having to yell up at the Eagle to carry on conversations. Vincen would gladly oblige for fear of falling out of the sky from flying too slowly. These land walkers traveled very, very slowly as far as Eagles were concerned.

BOOM, BOOM, BOOM continued the drum.

“Ouuuuch!” growled Mystic as he aggressively swung his head in Vincen’s general direction.

The hole continued growing. It was, at Mystic’s last recollection, about as wide as he was long, excluding his tail of course.

“Finally”, overstated a very exasperated Vincen.

After what seemed to Vincen like days, Mystic feebly replied, “My dear Vincen, please look for yourself.”

Mystic’s eyes slowly rolled from where Vincen perched on his shoulder, then back to the hole, as if he was pointing to it and then slowly back to Vincen. Mystic was still struggling for balance and under no circumstances was he going to even attempt to point with either of his paws at the mysterious opening for fear of falling into it and going who knows where?

“I, I cannot explain what is happening, Vincen. Look at this hole!” he exclaimed.

Mystic cautiously rolled his eyes back to the hole again, still refusing to lift one paw off of the ground. “Is it still growing? Oh, I hope not.”

Mystic’s eyes rolled back to Vincen. “I called out so suddenly because an ominous fear has a hold of me. It is making such a

The Land of Nuorg

confounding racket in my head that I cannot think clearly. Furthermore, I cannot explain this hole in this spot or, for that reason, why I dug it in the South Quarter in the first place. I can't explain why I am even in the South Quarter. For those reasons and more I have called for help my dear friend. As you can see Sir, if you feel the need to do so, peer over the edge. This is not a normal hole and its actions, up to this moment, are strange and highly out of the ordinary. I was hoping that, of all my friends, surely you would hear my cry. Maybe you would know what I have just discovered. I did not realize that I called loudly, I thought I was barely able to utter a sound past my clenched jaw."

"And, if I may continue, my other friends are comfortably out of hearing range and would think I was attempting some kind of trick. I assure you Vincen, I am not. I believe this thing, is attempting a trick on me, and, at the moment, is succeeding Sir. With, all of my favorite hole-digging spots to choose from, I was drawn to this exact spot on this very day, obviously, for reasons beyond my control. Vincen, please enlighten me as to what this could possibly be so that I may cease this uncontrollable shaking."

"Grab hold of your senses Mystic. I can't talk to you unless you become more rational," stated Vincen.

Slowly, after hearing those words in Vincen's soothing tone fear eased up on Mystic a little while the beating of the drum faded away somewhat. His dear and trusted friend was with him now. Vincen's calming voice seemed to shoo the drumbeat out of Mystic's head and that, to Mystic, was quite a relief. He felt his mind returning to him and was very relieved to find that his body was again able to move under his own control. Also, and this should not be discounted, the hole had finally stopped growing.

Vincen lifted his wings and, with them, tapped the air enabling him to rise from Mystic's shoulder. He landed gracefully on the ground beside Mystic leaving no particle of dust unsettled. He lightly staggered over to the edge of the hole with his head and neck clicking new angles from which his keen eyes studied his surroundings. He scratched at the hole's edge with his talons until he found a stable spot to stand. His intense eyes continued to study every speck of dirt and every blade of grass within two training beats. Once satisfied he was on stable ground, Vincen firmly gripped a solid spot of earth at the edge of the hole and peered down. He peered way down into the hole with his Eagle eyes and seemed to study the hole for quite some time

shaking his head in amazement or, as Mystic had studied it, in total and complete bewilderment.

Vincen was not satisfied with anything concerning this hole. He hid his true uneasiness from Mystic and feared what he could not comprehend. Mystic had been deathly frightened. This was no time to make light of that fact. At one point, Vincen found himself peering so deeply into the hole that he almost toppled in. Instead, he collected his balance, lightly flapped his wings and steadied himself. Finally, he loosened his grip on the ground, stepped back, and looked at Mystic.

“Well?” Mystic hesitantly inquired.

Vincen shook his head, tightened his brow and relaxed. When he did, all of the feathers on his head slightly rose and fell back in place. He said, “My boy, I have no idea what that is, I have no idea where it goes and I have no idea how it and you came to be together right here, right now. Let me study on it for a while. Please Mystic, step clear away from the opening so that I may stop worrying about you and begin thinking about that opening, hole or whatever it is.”

Mystic was relieved and very willing to oblige Vincen’s request.

Vincen was puzzled. He paced around and around and around the hole. The feathers on his wings were swept back in such a way as to give the casual observer the notion that he might have his hands clasped behind his back. Of course, this would be the wrong thought since Eagles have no hands. Vincen continued to pace. Suddenly he exclaimed “Ah no, sorry, that’s not it,” and he kept pacing. He then asked, “Mystic, what were you doing exactly? Tell me everything.”

Mystic obliged and told the story to the Eagle from its start, early that morning, to now. He did not omit a detail and kept the narration void of any misgiving wanderings. If he had not been eternally thankful for Vincen’s presence, Mystic would have become slightly annoyed with the Eagle’s continuous strutting as he circled around and around and around the hole, again and again and again as the story unfolded. Mystic was getting a bit queasy watching the Great Eagle. When he had finished with the last detail, he lay down on the now still ground, closed his eyes and waited for the forthcoming answer. When the answer would come he had no idea, but he felt sure it was coming. Vincen was an older bird and patience was needed when dealing with him in a matter such as this. One couldn’t imagine all of the

The Land of Nuorg

knowledge, experiences and handed-down wisdom the old Eagle's mind was sorting through at this very instant.

Vincen had been pacing in circles for some time now. Mystic feared the Eagle might get dizzy, tumble into the hole himself and that he, the rescuee, would have to become the rescuer. It wasn't long before Mystic put that ridiculous notion out of his mind. Still, Mystic, though now resting, opened one eye and kept it glued to Vincen, just in case.

"Let me see. Several years ago my Father mentioned something about the South Quarter and its significance during the Terrible Years, yet this hole does not obviously remind me of any one event," Vincen quietly muttered to no one in particular, continuing to circle 'round the thought-provoking spot.

"Please, Sir", Mystic begged as he rolled onto his back, stretched his long legs and twisted a kink out of his neck. "Is there anything I might add to help you in your research?"

"No thank you, son, I haven't room for your knowledge, my knowledge and my own questions in my small head. Perhaps, if my head was as large as yours, then maybe. But my head has room only for my thoughts at the present. You have provided me with plenty of information. It is now left for me to sort through. The complicated order of events is, without a doubt, curious. I must urge my thinking in the direction of a solution. If you will permit me, I'll get back to my task," argued Vincen.

Vincen may have sounded a bit put out by Mystic's questioning, but truthfully, he wasn't. Vincen was more disturbed by the fact that Mystic had even entered the South Quarter. The Owls had warned Vincen about the South Quarter since he learned to fly and he had repeatedly passed these warnings on to Mystic. The reason for Mystic's being here was another riddle for a different day.

Mystic wasn't sure how he should take those tart remarks, yet he decided to stay silent and watch Vincen pace. Now, he had the top of his nose laid flat on the ground as he watched, upside down, as Vincen paced.

"Now it was Vincen's turn to be annoyed. Vincen had been watching Mystic out of the corner of his eye and had about enough of this increasingly juvenile behavior. "For all my ancestors' sake would you please turn over, be still and act like a grown Wolf?" Vincen said quite harshly. "Why are you watching me upside down?"

Chris McCollum

"I'm sorry sir, I had to stretch," replied Mystic as he reluctantly rolled onto his belly, stood up and shook the dirt off his back. Mystic was feeling better now. The rest, although a short one, had revived him.

"Now where was I?" asked Vincen.

"You had just reprimanded me for watching you upside down."

"Oh yes, I remember."

"Oh well", go on", Mystic replied.

"What? What did you say Mystic, Quick son, what did you just say?" Vincen asked excitedly.

Mystic blankly replied, "I said oh well, sir."

"Well, well, well, why did that spark my memory? How were you watching me briefly ago? Tell me, Mystic. How were you watching me?" Vincen was on a roll. Thoughts were rapidly progressing in that old head of his.

"I was upside down sir, that's all. I was scratching my back" Mystic said sheepishly. "Why? Is that important?"

"Yes, it certainly is. I believe it's coming back to me now. Yes, I am remembering bits and pieces. I think I'll have it shortly."

Vincen was really strutting now. His wings were rising and falling with his every breath. Mystic felt a tiny gust of wind every time those excited wings closed back onto Vincen's sleek body. He was an old Eagle, but there was no denying the power and speed he possessed. Suddenly, Vincen stopped.

Mystic, who had been following the parade so intently that his eyes continued to proceed half way around the circle even though Vincen did not, was surprised by the abrupt halt. Vincen's stop startled Mystic. His eyes quickly backtracked and refocused on Vincen who was now standing at full height and the Eagle had his wings stretched above his head in a victory position. Mystic was not sure, but he thought the Eagle was smiling. His eyes were as bright as the midday sun. The wise old Eagle had figured something out. That much was definite. Just maybe, all of the pieces to this puzzle had come together at last.

Vincen was ecstatic and shouted so loudly that Mystic knew every land walker in the Great Forest must have heard it. Mystic was surprised by the Eagle's complete lack of restraint.

"My son, you have stumbled on 'The Well of the Ground Below.' I should have come to this conclusion sooner. You gave it away the minute you said, "well." My grandfather told me stories of an ancient

The Land of Nuorg

well filled with purple and green water. This well had appeared at various times over the past thousands of years, although, there is no modern record of its appearance in recent history.”

“My Grandfather, though he had never seen it, promised me it had existed. I went on expeditions when I was very young to find it and never did. As I got older, the old story lost some of its charm and I never pursued it again. You, my boy, have discovered an enchanted, forgotten part of the Great Forest’s history! Now, we must do whatever we can to fill up the hole and tell no one what we have seen today. If I told you the rest of the story, you would be more frightened than you were not knowing what it was. This must be that well. It must be!”

Mystic was confused. He sat back down rather lazily and exhaled a heavy sigh. His head hung like a dead weight resting on his chest. He closed his eyes then raised one paw and brushed it deliberately across his brow in a disgusted fashion. He couldn’t help thinking that Vincen may have finally reached senility.

Everyone knows that wells have water; if not, they are called holes, and holes normally have bottoms. This hole had no water, so it wasn’t a well and it had no bottom to keep the water from flowing straight through it, and into wherever it led. So, it wasn’t a hole either, yet, Vincen, undeniably, called it a well. He did not say dry well. He said well. As in a deep hole with water in it. In his now dazed mind he could see water running into the hole, but he could not reason how it could ever rise to level ground with no bottom from where to start. How would the water ever know where to stop so that the well would begin to fill up? Mystic was skeptical of this proclamation. He raised his head, closed his eyes again and stretched his neck in a wide arc.

He collected himself and boldly stated, “Sir, there is no water in this hole. It cannot be the well you speak of.”

“Oh”, replied Vincen rather disappointedly, “That must have slipped my mind.”

Just as those words passed over Mystic’s sensitive ears he heard, or thought he heard, a gurgling sound emanating from deep inside the hole. His ears perked up to full alert mode and his eyes opened wide in search of the sound. “Obviously,” Mystic thought to himself, “If that is water I hear, then this well needs no bottom from which to spring.”

Vincen noticed Mystic’s demeanor change and quickly picked up on it.

“Mystic, what is it? You look frightened again”.

“Not necessarily frightened, but Sir, I may have underestimated your wisdom and I apologize. We need to step closer to this hole. I think I hear a faint noise coming from deep inside it. The noise reminds me of gurgling water,” Mystic stated calmly.

Vincen perked his head up also and started clicking his head around in an attempt to pick up the sound. It was no use. An Eagle can certainly see better than a Wolf, but he could not hear nearly as well and his beak was not picking up any strange vibrations. “I will join you at the edge of the hole, Mystic,” he said as he carefully picked his way over to the rim.

Mystic’s canine curiosity was beginning to overwhelm his common sense. He would have to be very selective now in any action that he took from here on out. He surprised himself by rushing over to the hole’s edge. He had almost forgotten the fear that consumed him the last time he was this close. If curiosity had, indeed, killed the cat, then Mystic had better hope that the same saying did not pertain to members of the canine family. He was acting very cavalier in the face of this unknown malady.

“Please Vincen, step into the hole and see if your eyes can spy what I hear,” he said matter-of-factly.

Vincen was peering into the hole and, upon hearing that request, immediately jerked his head so he could look directly into Mystic’s eyes. He pulled himself up to his full height, clasped his wings to his sides and adamantly asked, “Step into the hole? Mystic, have you gone absolutely mad?”

Mystic did not even turn to see the look in Vincen’s eyes. A peaceful serenity began claiming him. He was feeling quite calm, not at all like before. The hole had cast him into a mysterious trance. He never took his eyes out of the hole. He casually droned to Vincen, “Looks like nothing to be concerned about to me.”

That was it. Vincen could take no more of this attitude and viscously snipped at Mystic’s front left leg with his vice-like beak and actually drew blood. “Mystic, look at me!” he demanded.

Mystic let out a loud yelp as Vincen’s sharp beak cut past his fur and into his skin. He jumped back in pain and immediately began to shake uncontrollably. His eyes glazed over and Vincen could clearly see that fear had throttled him once again.

“What happened, Father? Why have you wounded me?” Mystic asked as a child would.

The Land of Nuorg

“Did you not hear me speaking to you as you looked into the hole?” he asked.

“No sir, I did not. All I was thinking about or hearing was the water. I thought I saw it rising up to greet me. Excuse me, what did you say?” Mystic questioned meekly as he began to lick the blood off his leg.

“I asked you if you had gone mad and, by all my reckoning, I believe you did, at least, for the short time that you stared into the hole,” Vincen explained.

The water began to bubble up. It bubbled and gurgled and slowly began to fill the hole that just minutes before had no bottom. Mystic and Vincen gazed silently, stone still, as if they were both hypnotized at the water as it slowly rose to the edge of the opening. “Where was this water coming from?” they thought in unison. The water was not rushing up to the top. It was rather merrily making its way up to the edge with a slow circular motion, which was directly reversed from the direction in which Vincen had been pacing. Could it have been coincidence? Perhaps. They glanced at each other then back at the water with tremendous wonder in their eyes.

The two watched the water rise for about five clicks of an Eagle’s eye. This was the way of telling how long a day-round lasts in the Great Forest and was widely accepted by the four-leggers in the surrounding lands as the day keeping standard. This method of day keeping had been explained to Vincen by the Owls. As far as Vincen knew, they probably originated it. The Owls explained that with the Eagles keen sight, it is only reasonable to think their eyes are the most sensitive to light and, in being so, have been observed actually clicking with each movement of the sun. One complete keeping of the day-round lasts exactly 365 Eagle eye clicks. The keeping starts and stops when the sun is first and last seen over the mountain’s head. The Owls often debated whether the number of day-rounds in the entire day keeping record should remain at 365 also. The two legged land walkers had explained to the Talkers, who in turn, explained to the Owls that their year was the same as the Owls entire day keeping record except that the Owls were missing all of the 366th day, of which the two-leggers only used one quarter of anyway. The Owls decided to omit that 366th day altogether for reasons that were never fully understood. The Owls day round included sun time and moon time and a method was devised for partitioning the two, but it never got much attention since the defining line was always moving. The Talkers used

their own partitioning table for farming and other odd reasons, but the Owls saw no reason in that practice either. Suffice it to say, the two methods of day keeping were close enough in form and function that several words and descriptions found their ways into both methods of day keeping, or as the two-legged land walkers say, time.

Just as the water rose as high as it could, it calmly and politely stopped. Mystic took a step back, twisted his head at Vincen, tilted it to the right side and asked, "Does that water look suspicious to you Father?"

Vincen, glaring at the water, answered, "It's been said that once you take water from this well you are never seen again. Please be careful, Mystic."

Vincen, sensing that Mystic was a little frightened because he usually never spoke to him with such revered respect, continued: "Well maybe, no, it truly can't be the 'Well of the Land Below'." Look at the water. It is too clear. It looks more pure than the water we drink every day from the well by the Little River. As a matter of fact, that may be the clearest water I have ever seen. I can also see it is deep. I believe you could sink for several training beats and fail to reach bottom."

Mystic felt a little more at ease. He stopped shaking again and his fear waned. He carefully moved closer to the water's edge. Vincen turned his head slightly to catch a sudden breeze and noticed that an object of some kind had started to glow near a small grouping of trees at the edge of the clearing. He had no idea what was glowing or why and dismissed it along with the sudden breeze.

Vincen told Mystic, again, "Be very careful. Don't get too close to the edge, my dear boy. We are not sure that we know everything about what is happening. Let us be cautious and patient as we struggle to figure out this strange phenomenon."

Mystic, ever the curious one, could not stand the waiting. Every time he looked at the water he was struck with an odd yearning to get closer. With Vincen's attention turning to the breeze, Mystic couldn't help himself and silently dipped his left, wounded paw into the water. Immediately the pain in the paw was gone. Was it possible? In order not to distract Vincen's attention from the breeze that had come out of nowhere, he silently picked his paw out of the water and to his disbelief the wound had healed and all traces of the cut had been washed away. He looked into the water and saw no trace of blood or dirt. This

The Land of Nuorg

was odd. He placed his paw back in the water and decided to let Vincen know what was going on.

In a very trance-like calm, Mystic said, "Look Sir, My paw is in the water and nothing has happened. See there is nothing to be afraid of. Nothing is wrong here."

"What!" Vincen exclaimed and began flapping his wings and bouncing up and down out of anger. Vincen had quite a temper and Mystic had just unleashed a good dose of it. "Mystic," he screamed, "what have you done and why, Son? I told you to be patient. We know nothing of this water." Vincen turned and angrily paced away from this ridiculous turn of events.

Mystic began to act strangely once again. The beating of his heart increased at an accelerated pace. But, even as he sat at the side of the well in fear or wonderment, outwardly, he looked quite relaxed, almost too much so. He was, obviously under some other power besides his own. Keeping with his outward appearance, he rather casually replied, in a quiet, hypnotized manner of speaking, "Vincen, this water is very cool. It is not cold like water of mountain lakes. It is just so perfectly cool. I wonder if it may taste as wonderfully pleasant as it appears."

Without asking for permission, Mystic silently dipped the second front paw into the calm silent water. He was very careful not to disturb the surface more than necessary and began to lap up some of the tempting crystal clear water with his tongue. Suddenly, the instant his rough textured tongue nicked the water's surface, Mystic was overwhelmed. His existence in the Great Forest was shrunk and placed into, what seemed to his canine brain, a light, airy bubble whisked away on top of a river as it plummets down a tremendously violent waterfall.

He was helpless. His memories, his rank in the line of leaders of the Great Forest, his strong, well-defined muscles, all of his senses, his complete life in the Great Forest, everything he ever knew or would know was sucked within this tiny fraction of time. He felt an uncontrollable something reach out and grab him from the other side of the water. Whatever it was, it was very strong and very determined to have this Wolf. This sudden, undeniable force was heaving the large Wolf under. No strength Mystic could muster could stop this unrelenting tug.

The water encircling his paws gently started to swirl again. At the same time, the swirls began to bring slight changes to the water. The water was changing color. It was no longer crystal clear. It was now turning a beautiful purple and green just like Vincen had described earlier. The water, though still purple and green, had the clear, see-through look of the colored gemstones that were common up in the mountains. He struggled desperately to pull his head away from the water. It was just too little, too late. As Mystic was being forcibly drawn into the well, the water was no longer swirling. The water was crashing and banging into itself, beating its colors against one another. Wave after wave emerged and died tragically into its next increasingly larger, more thunderous companion. Mystic began screaming for Vincen. It was a valiant effort. His cry for help was muffled by the surging water.

Once Mystic's tongue had touched the water, the oddly calm surface of the peaceful water was broken. It immediately transformed into a living, tenacious creature. The fraction of time was so instantaneous that the great Wolf had no time to brace himself or plan another strategy. One final, helpless yelp did escape his gritted teeth as he vanished into the water and beyond. As Vincen turned to admonish Mystic again for unbecoming behavior, he caught the last of the commotion. At the last possible instant he turned, missing it all. He watched shivering and helpless, his beak frozen agape with an unintelligible word falling clumsily to the ground as his dear friend plummeted beneath the surface. Horror shone brightly in his large, keen and astonished Eagle eyes as the last hair on Mystic's tail glided beneath the water's surface.

In an instant Vincen was at the edge of the well. He stared straight into the water and could see Mystic sinking. Farther and farther down he went. He could also see that Mystic was not struggling to get out of the water. Mystic looked to be eerily calm and peaceful. The Wolf was not putting up any fight. This was very odd. Vincen watched as Mystic sank deeper and deeper into the well, he was now calling it a well because it had become a hole filled with water and that constituted a well in his book. He watched Mystic until he was out of Eagle's sight. A land walker would have lost him long ago, but Vincen's remarkable eyesight had given him extra time to study what was happening. Finally, Mystic was gone.

Without a moment to spare, Vincen extended his wings and clapped them together with a thunderous roar. He propelled himself as

The Land of Nuorg

high as he possibly could with one beat of his wings. (This was approximately as high as three pursuit beats are long.) What should he do? What could he do? He was in dire need of ideas and, at the moment, none were to be had. He shot up and out of the South Quarter and immediately made his way over the Great Forest. He was making excellent time, even for an old Eagle, and the rush of wind that accompanied each of his pursuit beats left trees, land walkers and tall grass quivering in his wake. Where were Mystic's friends? He was certainly going to need their help and then some.

In the period preceding the Terrible Years, Mystic's family pack of gray Wolves had the run of the north side of the Great Forest. The area, which they ruled, stretched from the far border of the Black, across the Meadow, completely around and through the Great Forest and over the mountain to the middle of the Valley. There a small river runs, which separates the gray wolves' area from that of the timber Wolves. Mystic was told this history by Vincen who had learned it from the Owls. After the Terrible Years the two-legged and four-legged land walkers went their separate ways and the two-legged land walkers became quick to blame any misdeeds on the four-legged land walkers. Only the Talkers could mediate between the two and Talkers had almost disappeared completely from the lands surrounding the Great Forest. It was a quick and incorrect reaction to one of these misdeeds that was responsible for the first major disaster in Mystic's life.

The story was told to Vincen, by the owls, that several of the two-leggers farmed huge tracts of land on the outskirts of the Black lands. Each tract measured many, many square leisure beats wide and long. Each farmer, in turn, rented part of this land to four-leggers who, in payment, would give the farmers milk, wool, eggs and occasionally the whole body of a suddenly dead four-legger. This last payment was never totally understood by the four-leggers. There was a growing tendency for this method of payment to occur more and more frequently. It seemed that, as the farmer's numbers increased, the amount of full body payments increased. There was fear running through the four-leggers of a deadly sickness that was taking their kind at ever-increasing numbers. It was a similar situation, or lingerings thereof, that caused the demise of Mystic's family.

The rumor had been spreading among the farmers that Sheep and young Cows were being mysteriously killed. A few of the farmers who had no Talkers in their immediate families began to suspect that the gray Wolves were killing their renters. This did not bode well for the gray Wolves. If the Talkers had been around, they would have told the

Chris McCollum

farmers that the Wolves would not kill a fellow four-legger for any reason. A myth was spreading that the Wolves were also eating the bodies of the dead Sheep and Cows.

This myth was preposterous. There had been a pact made in the early day-rounds among the four-legged land walkers of the Great Forest that forbid the consuming of one another for food. Even during the Terrible Years, when food was so hard to come by, no four-legged land walker sank so low as to eat a fellow land walker. Even the Great Birds of Prey, which included the Eagles, Hawks, Falcons and Owls refrained from eating land walkers. Now, water-residers were a different story. No water-resider had ever partaken of any pact and no Talker had ever been able to communicate with them. For this reason and many others, they were still a very reliable food source. The farmers, out of ignorance concerning the pact, set out on a quest to hunt down and kill every Wolf in the land. This was a terrible mistake. But as a result the Wolves were hunted relentlessly and killed off in vast numbers.

Mystic's family set out on their fateful journey in search of a Talker. They had heard from a trusted Hawk that a Talker would be at the bridge over the stream that runs alongside the town where the farmers gathered each morning to do their trading. He would be waiting to have a meeting with the Wolves. The meeting was to benefit all involved. The Talker desperately wanted to hear the Wolves' side of the story in order to state their case with the townspeople. The Talker figured once the townspeople heard the other side of the argument they would understand the Wolves were not to blame for the loss of four-leggers. This town, however, was quite a distance away. Mystic's Father had been told by the Hawk that the town lay at least one thousand pursuit beats away. That was easily a two day-round trip one way.

Knowing the trip would be long, Mystic's Father had selected the strongest Wolves to travel the full distance and meet with the Talker who, in turn, would explain the Wolves' side of the story to the two-leggers. He allowed the Mothers and young pups to travel half the distance, settle in for the night and await their return the following day. Mystic, the youngest and smallest of his family was too tiny to make even the half trip. His brothers and sisters always called him the runt. This was especially cruel since Mystic did not have anything to do with the fact that he was so much smaller than the others. Mystic's siblings all had Wolfen names like his parents. His three brothers were named

The Land of Nuorg

after the three rivers that ran powerfully down from the mountain. They were Rushing, Blue Rock and Rapid. His five sisters were named after his parents' sisters. Their names were Protector, Keeper, Hunter, Gatherer and Swift. Mystic's name was never given much thought, mainly because his Father did not want to waste a name on a Wolf pup that would surely die before 30-day-rounds passed. His Father later regretted that mistake after Mystic proved to be the wisest, although the smallest, of his family pack. Mystic was named by an Eagle. The Eagle noticed very early on the wisdom and intelligence this Wolf runt possessed. The Eagle had named the runt Mystic after his own Eagle Grandfather.

Mystic's mother decided before the trip was made that Mystic would be hidden among the tall grass in an old log near the edge of the Great Forest. She made him a bed for the nights and left him plenty of food. Looking out for his safety, she arranged for a dear family friend to check on him periodically until their return.

Mystic's Father, as the story goes, made a dreadful mistake of trusting the Hawk. Loyalty and trust were two of his greatest traits and he pursued them unerringly. He did not know, nor did he ask about the peril the Hawk was in or the punishment the Hawk's family would receive if the Wolves did not come to meet the Talker. How could he have known? He trusted the lives of his pack to the honesty and integrity of Hawks in general, of which this Hawk was most definitely a member.

The pack started out early on their journey with Mystic's Father, a huge mountain of a Wolf, properly named Giant, leading the way. He was followed in succession by his brothers and the fastest she-Wolves of the pack, who weren't yet mothers. In total, there were about 22 Wolves in the first group followed by the remaining 53 mothers, yearlings, ancients and pups. Seventy-five Wolves in all, the entire pack, with the exception of number 76, Mystic, who was resting and playing innocently back at the log at the edge of the Great Forest.

The trip to the halfway spot was uneventful. Giant and his immediate secret sharers were glad it had been so. Secret sharers were a very close-knit group of any particular type of land walker. They usually included the smartest, wisest and fastest of the particular walker's group. The Wolves had theirs, as did the Badgers, Foxes and etc. It was a dangerous business trekking into town, especially for a large pack of falsely accused Wolves in this very unsettled time. Giant

decided to have one of his secret sharers stay with the second group as a watcher. Should there be any trouble the watcher would alert the whole second group and send the warning signals ahead by a howling code. This was a primitive form of communication for the Wolves, but it worked well in times of need. Not that many land walkers understood howling, so, it worked very well when the Wolves were trying not to alarm any of the other land walkers. The Wolves ruled the Lands in and around the Great Forest and they took the protection of the less skilled and weaker land walkers seriously. Giant decided to leave his youngest brother, Ears. Ears had the keenest sense of hearing of any wolf in the pack. He would be the perfect watcher.

Once the pack arrived at the halfway point, Giant gave instructions for the bedding down of the pack to Ears and then set up the howling code. Three short howls followed by a long howl was the signal for "all's well." Any variation of that set of howls, any variation at all, was a signal for danger. If the first group got into trouble they would howl to the second group and visa versa. Whichever group heard the howling deviate from the "all's well" set would immediately, split into pre-arranged groups and run along different pre-selected paths back to the forest. Giant's group would head directly for the second group's bedding spot to protect them at all costs. All small groupings that successfully returned to the Great Forest were instructed to regroup at the spot where Mystic camped in his log.

Giant and the lead group had a brief rest and a bite of food after the planning session, then returned to their journey. Again, nothing out of the ordinary happened. It was a beautiful day and the sun and wind were smiling on them. The group made quick time of the remaining 500 pursuit beats and arrived on the outskirts of the town halfway through moon time. It was dark as the group came in silently. Upon their arrival, Giant sent his middle brother, Shine, in to scout for the Talker. Giant told him where the Talker would be and asked him to stay quietly away from the stream. Giant assumed that one training beat would be close enough to scout the stream and far enough back to remain concealed until sun time began. If the Talker showed up as planned, he would come back and join the group and the secret sharers would then meet with the Talker. If he sensed trouble of any kind he would howl for danger and make a hasty retreat to rejoin the group as they broke off and headed back to the Great Forest.

The Land of Nuorg

Shine was honored to be chosen the watcher. He proceeded with his part of the plan exactly as his brother had requested. The stream's water was running. With his excellent Wolf ears, Shine followed the sound and found the stream quickly. He lay down in the grass on a small hill over looking the wooden arched bridge where the meeting was to take place with the Talker. As he scoped the area Shine was a little surprised at how open the space was. He had imagined a very hidden, out-of-the-way spot for a meeting such as this. Though uneasy at first, he put that thought to rest and concentrated on staying awake until sun time began.

"The Talker should arrive as soon as the sun appears over land's edge," the Hawk had explained to Giant. And so, Shine waited patiently and listened alertly. Just as restlessness began to sneak down his spine, the sun did break over the land's edge. Soon thereafter, a two-legged land walker appeared in the clearing. Cautiously, the two-legger walked over to the bridge and stood there waiting, glancing about attentively for any activity. Wolves are not really interested in what the two-leggers wear so Shine made no note of it. Instead, he silently hurried back to the first group. He reported to Giant that a two-legger had indeed appeared as it had been said. There was a very good possibility that he may be the Talker the Hawk told them about. Giant arched his head back, turned it a little and searched to find a small bit of relief. The leader of the Wolves was so hoping that this sojourn had not been in vain.

The group of secret-sharers assembled in proper order, of course, and followed the Brothers back to the bridge. The two-legger was there just as Shine had said and, more importantly, just as the Hawk had described. The group quietly assembled at the base of the very hill that Shine had waited and watched from. Giant decided to walk up to the two-legger first. If there was no problem, he would then call in the rest of the group. He did not want the Talker to feel threatened in any way. Threatened two-leggers seemed to be one of the major problems in this muddle anyway. Giant walked majestically up to the two-legger and, at the same time, the two-legger turned to see an enormously large gray Wolf coming his way. Well, what would happen now? They intensely studied each other for a short while. Giant, comfortably feeling like he needed to initiate the conversation, asked, "Are you the Talker of which the Hawk spoke?"

Chris McCollum

“That would be me,” said the two-legger. “My name is Frederick Mounte, descendent of the Hewitt-Mountes and the Hawk is my beloved friend, Rust. I have been sent to meet with you, I presume, and you are?”

“As was no doubt stated to you, I am Giant, Leader of the Gray Wolves of the Great Forest,” replied the gray Wolf. “First, there are many with me as you can see on the hillside. May I introduce you to the rest of my party?”

“Certainly”, replied the Talker. “By all means, please do”.

With that, Giant called for the group to join him. Two by two, the six secret-sharers led the formation. The six gathered at Giant’s flanks standing alertly strong. Each secret-sharer took his place at Giant’s side alternating left to right as they approached. The remaining sentinel group fanned out forming a barrier between Giant, the secret-sharers and uncertainty. “These are my friends and my family,” he proudly proclaimed to the Talker. Of what shall we speak?”

“You have quite a handsome following Giant. Your size is immense and so those of your pack.” Frederick Mounte addressed Giant sincerely. “We shall speak of these oddly misguided times. The farmers’ losses of renter animals are quite disturbing although I can absolutely see no reason to blame your kind. There are other troubling issues I wish we had more time to discuss, but I must deal with those issues later,” the Talker answered.

“I speak with few words, Frederick. Please do not confuse my short plea with arrogance or ignorance, for I am neither. You must tell the farmers the gray Wolves are not killing the four-legged land walkers or renter animals as you say. Our ancestors made a pact long ago not to kill or eat any fellow “animals.” We have existed on a new choice of food for ages now. We eat only fruits, vegetables and plants. We do, now and again, eat the water-livvers should we get the urge to get wet. They are quite hard to catch, so we don’t partake of them often. When our little ones are sick we do trap a few and use them as healer food. They have ingredients that fight sickness quite well,” Giant explained. “Please let the farmers know, so that we, once again, may co-exist peacefully.

“I have no reason to doubt you Giant, my new friend. I will carry your truths to the farmers. I hope they may listen with a patient ear. For your protection, please make hastily away. Once the farmers arrive for

The Land of Nuorg

trading, they won't react lightly to seeing a pack of Wolves on their doorstep," Frederick warned as he reached for Giant's paw.

"Frederick, take my paw as a promise of good faith. The Wolves are not the problem here," Giant repeated as he laid his massive paw into Frederick's outstretched hand.

"Then the conversation is sealed Great Gray Wolf," replied the Talker as he grasped Giant's sinewy paw and released it.

"Frederick, you are welcome in the lands of the Great Forest whenever you may pass our way. Thank you and please do your best to convince the farmers that we are not the evil here," said the mighty gray Wolf.

With that, Giant turned to his group and with a nod of his head dismissed them. He bowed his shoulders to Frederick then led the secret-sharers away, up and over the hill. The rest of the group remained on alert until Giant was safely out of sight. They peeled off one at a time as Frederick watched the highly intelligent creatures disperse.

"Well Frederick," came a whiney voice creeping out from under the bridge, "That is not exactly the way this meeting was supposed to develop now, was it? What did that useless Wolf say to you anyway? Might I add, why didn't they kill you? It would have saved me some trouble."

Frederick replied, "The Wolves are not the problem with your livestock. They have no interest in killing or eating other animals."

"Poppycock," came the reply from under the bridge. "They are Wolves and, by the size of them, I can tell they have eaten plenty of our livestock."

"Don't say our livestock! You don't even own one head of livestock. You are nothing but a hired helper, a miserable one at that. You have worked every farm in this town until you overstayed your welcome. You then proceed to the next farm where the next kindhearted farmer takes you in. After a fill of your whining stories, the cycle repeats itself. Now you have turned every farmer in this town against you. You are maniacally searching for any reason to make yourself a hero so these trusting people will allow you to stay in this town. I have known you were the root of the problem all along. I came to this town to do a good deed and was paid with blood money. I am afraid to ask where you got it, but I am sure it has something to do with all of those dead or

missing animals. I am a Talker and am blessed to be so. I have done an injustice to those magnificent Wolves and will do whatever I can to stop what I see developing into a merciless slaughter," Frederick answered.

The tail of the last Wolf was disappearing over the hill. Frederick suddenly felt heaving waves of anguish pummeling his body. He immediately acted on the feelings of regret that were churning explosively inside his stomach making him nauseous. He did not trust this man. What had he been thinking? Why had he let it come this far? There was something terribly wrong with this man's motives. Frederick knew he had to act quickly. He frantically turned in the direction of the Wolves, then yelling as loudly and boldly as humanly possible to the exiting group. He cried "Run, Friends, run! Run away quickly! You have been betray..."

The whiney voice, from under the bridge, manifested itself into a small, cowardly, slightly overweight, pale shadow of a man. This man was definitely, no farmer. He had no intention of ever letting those Wolves leave this town alive. In an instant, he stepped behind the Talker, pulled a hefty club from under his coat and brought it crashing down on Frederick's back nearly breaking him in two. Frederick slammed to the ground in a heap. The farmer's helper looked down at the helpless, broken pile of the Talker, laughed through several rotten teeth, then commented in a very sniveling and rude tone, "I, my stupid friend, think you have just done enough."

This poor excuse for a two-legged immediately headed for the wide hard clay street at the town's edge ripping his clothes as he went. Town's people were there as usual on a bright clear morning, milling about, setting up carts and outdoor shops of all kinds and shapes. Several groups had already gathered. Trading was soon to start. This vulgar individual summoned enough strength to break into a tragically awkward run toward those gathered. As he ran, he screamed and flailed his arms in a cruelly convincing fashion. "Help me, protect me! They are coming! The Wolves are coming!" He tumbled to the ground for effect and continued, "They have killed the Talker. I just escaped with my life! Those treacherous creatures almost had me." He began sobbing hysterically, "Please! We must kill every one of the evil creatures!"

Frederick was not dead, though soon he might wish to be. After the wicked little man had run off, Frederick came to and, though the pain in

The Land of Nuorg

his back was mind boggling, crawled his way under the bridge. He carefully pulled his body under the bridge where it was dark and cool. He did his best to get comfortable before he passed out from the pain. He reached out for a lump of grass on which to rest his head. Pulling it to him, he noticed it was not grass at all. The lump was the lifeless, warm body of a large red Hawk. He feebly crawled, gently cradling the Hawk's body to the darkest recess he could find in case his attacker came back to finish the job. Frederick tightly closed his eyes, set his chin and folded his body as tightly as possible, given the pain he was experiencing. He tenderly brought the Hawk's still body to his chest, held it tightly and wept. He bent his quivering head down to where his face, drenched with tears, was now buried in the Hawk's splendid plumage. Through the tears streaming down his ashen face, he whispered to the Hawk's unhearing ears, "I am sorry Rust, my dear old friend. I am terribly sorry." The pain became unbearable and, for Frederick, light faded to pitch black.

Meanwhile, the vile little man was taking advantage of the townsfolk's attention. The ranting, raving and all of those fake tears concerning the killing of the Talker were stirring the townsfolk into a scared and furious vigilante group. "How could we have been so blind?" he cried.

Whatever he said worked. The little fellow's only true talent was crafting words and theatrics into deception and lies. Every farmer he had encountered so far had fallen for his clever ruse at one time or another. This atrocious man wove lies and deceit together as well as the farmers' wives wove wool into coats. He performed a splendid job of inciting these gentle people into a revenge-fueled, bloodthirsty mob.

"We can't have these Wolves running wild. They will kill all of your children," he continued, choking back laughs and turning them into wails of despair. "We must attack them now...and kill every one of the vicious creatures...before they escape! We must chase them down and be done with them once and for all!"

He could see it coming. He was going to be the hero in this senseless battle yet. He was already counting the ways to profit from it. He would be famous and adored in this town, one way or another. So what if a hundred or so Wolves got slaughtered in the process.

The farmers and regular townsfolk couldn't believe what they were hearing. Why would the Talker be harmed by the Wolves? What would

he have told them to make them so angry? The pathetic human managed to climb back on his feet as every man, young and old, hastily grabbed any tool or utensil that could be used for killing. Then they assembled back at this coward's side. He fell once for show, shakily regained his feet and pretended to struggle as he led a large throng of weapon-carrying two-leggers down the clay street to the bridge. He was quite relieved and pleasantly surprised when he stepped off of the road, peered under the bridge and could find no Talker. Now, his talents would revel in their horrendous duties. He could now truly incite a riot. "See, the Wolves have taken this poor man's body away. There is no doubt they will surely eat him tonight as a sad moon watches from above. Poor, poor Frederick. We must avenge his murder. We can wait no longer! Please, we must hurry. The Wolves will escape. Townspeople, it could be your family next," he lamented.

That was enough. His last statement sent the crowd into a wild frenzy. Even the two-leggers who hadn't known what to believe were now giving the crazed little man the benefit of the doubt. The next hideous sound heard was that of horses' hooves as they came thundering over the arched wooden bridge carrying the most affluent farmers and their sons. These privileged few could afford animals to ride as well as animals to work the farms. The affluent, not at all prone to this kind of violence, charged after the Wolves with a budding, but bewildered hatred. Hundreds of two-leggers were after the Wolves. Blood boiled in their eyes and various kinds of killing tools were gripped tightly in their hands. The bright morning sun quickly fell behind ominous black clouds that were racing in, rolling across the sky like a thick acrid smoke. The darkness blotted out the beautiful blue morning canvas. The overhead of remarkable landscape frowned with a dark, deathly cold. A sinister, chilled wind began to howl through the trees. It burst past the thin line of trees, over the small hill and down on the black loamy soil. Death was in this foul wind. This was madness!

From deep under the bridge came a feint whisper falling away, "Run Giant, Run. I'm so sorry." Then the whisper was heard no more.

Giant's exceptional hearing let him witness from afar the two-leggers brief argument as it developed. The last Wolf to come over the hill met nose-to-nose with Giant as he sped back to observe for himself what the commotion was all about. He glanced at the bridge and

The Land of Nuorg

witnessed the small little man standing over the crumpled body of Fredrick with his club raised high into the air. He stood watch as the Talker helplessly crawled underneath the bridge. With his wolver ears he heard the pitiful moans of the Talker and heard the mindless cries of a small little man as he ran crazed in the streets. Giant's large ears heard the wind before it started to blow and his wise whiskers prickled as the clouds began to roll. There was nothing to do now but escape. How did this happen? He had no time to doubt himself. There was only time to run and not enough of that. Who would survive? No one knew for sure. Giant knew all too well that the time to flee was disappearing behind those hideously black clouds. It was obvious to the wise Wolf that Frederick Moute had known nothing of the betrayal. Danger was not coming; it was here. They must spilt up and run. Run as fast as they could toward the Great Forest.

The betrayed Wolf gave one long and mournful howl and rushed straight for the sentinel group he barked, "Run." As he passed the dazed secret-sharers he told them, "We have been betrayed. Some of us will make it safely back to the Great Forest and some of us will not. There is nothing to do now but run. Each of you knows your route, so take it. Take it now. Go," he demanded. He turned to Shine, looked him in the eyes and said, "I love you Brother, protect our family and if we see each other again, I will celebrate the occasion. We came in trust and that trust has been dashed violently away. Go Shine, may we meet again." He stepped close to his brother and nuzzled his strong neck and licked his snout. "Now go, Brother, go! Don't come back for me, or let the cold wind of this coming death catch you!" He howled longingly again.

Just as Shine ran off to join his small group, the first horse and rider came over and down the hill. The rider was stunned by the size of the huge gray Wolf that stood in his path. The Wolf had nowhere to go. He had waited too long. He had no idea how to fend off a two-legger on a Horse. Could he speak to the Horse? Could he tell it to stop? Suddenly, it did not matter anymore. He froze rock solid as pain and futility swept through his veins like boiling blood. This mistake could have been avoided. All that came to his mind was that whatever tragedy followed, it was his fault. The Wolf shivered as an extremely cold wind cut through his fur like a knife. The two-legger raised a huge ax with a glistening edge high in the air and brought it swiftly and unwaveringly down. It came down hard. The blade, well used from tree

cutting, was expertly sharpened and begrudgingly wielded. The heavy tool fell on and through Giant's massive head. Giant was the first and greatest Wolf to die in this heartless, confusing and senseless killing spree.

The killing had now started and spread across the black land with a vengeance. The Wolves were losing at an alarming rate. Badly outnumbered, one after another they were cut down by dazed and eventually remorseful farmers and town folk. Why? Why? Where was that worthless instigator, the one that started it all? It was obvious to most and soon to all that he was nowhere near the bloody, pitiful and tear-littered battle zone.

These Wolves were not used to protecting themselves from crazed hunters. The older, skilled Wolves had heads that were easily larger than their attackers. One swift bite from their powerful jaws would drive their canine teeth deep into soft human flesh and bones. A single bite to the neck would have easily and quickly dispatched any of the attackers. So many of the Wolves could have easily killed back, but that was not their way. The large ones were killed protecting the small ones and the small ones were killed protecting the tiny ones. It was a one-sided slaughter. This bloodletting spree went on and on as each Wolf was chased to exhaustion and killed. The second group fared no better. All of the Mother Wolves fought valiantly to protect their little ones. But, it was to no avail. The little ones were either trampled by out-of-control Horses or hit by errant clubs or mallets.

The Horses' eyes ablaze with the horror, frothy, steaming foam dropping in huge clumps from their mouths and nostrils, were horrified. They had never, before this day, been used in such a destructive, insanely murderous manner. The poor, unwilling draft four-leggers did their best to retreat from the killing. The riding steeds that rebelled were, in turn, kicked, whipped or beaten, if necessary, to force them on. These Horses never were the same trusting animals around the two-leggers, and many of them simply ran away in shame after the slaughter, never to be seen by the two-leggers again. A few of them made their way to the Great Forest and lived the remainder of their day-rounds in shame and retribution.

Mystic's Mother, Sky, never made it back to Mystic's side. She was lost when the second group tried to fight back, as were all of the Wolves in the second group. She had seen Shine when he first came

The Land of Nuorg

running in with Ears and begged him to rush back and rescue Mystic. "Please, go save Mystic," she cried. "He will be so alone."

Shine dashed around the second group, dodging in and under stampeding Horses' hooves and swinging blades, frantically trying, in vain, to rescue any Wolf possible. It was no use. At last, after feeling the cold wind Giant talked about rushing through the fur on his tail, he heeded his brother's command. He spotted Sky as she fought to save a smaller Wolf and again raced to her side. He pleaded with her to return with him to the Great Forest, to not only save her life, but to rescue Mystic. This plea from Shine stopped when his eyes froze on Sky's massive, fatal wounds. Sky was being swept away by the cold wind. They both realized she would never make it back. Ears overheard the conversation and demanded to stay by Sky's side and, furthermore, demanded that Shine do everything in his power to save the last remaining gray Wolf of the Great Forest.

Ears yelled at Shine, "It is your duty Brother. You must ensure Mystic's survival. I will stay with our brother's mate. I will nurse her wounds if any good will come of it."

Shine ducked as a pummeling blow from a large mallet glanced off his thick neck then, regretfully, made an escape for the Great Forest. Sky fought hard and bravely. She would quickly succumb to her wounds as the deathly chill rippled her fur. Ears was soon shamelessly destroyed while he valiantly took up Sky's battle to protect the last of the Wolf pups. This horrendous battle decimated the Wolves. It now was up to Shine to save the one last Wolf of the Great Forest.

The great Eagle landed on top of the log, clicked his Eagle eyes into the hollowed out middle and checked on the small furry pup as he lay sleeping soundly. To himself the Eagle thought, "This little fellow is fine. I only hope his pack is faring as well." He reached in with his sharp beak to delicately cover the pup with the straw that his mother had thoughtfully left in the log with his food. The Eagle hopped up the log, turned toward the little pup and whispered, "I will be back, little one. I must be off to check on the progress of your Parents' journey. Too, I must meet up with the red Hawk."

The Eagle flew high in the sky. The Hawk had told him the town was one thousand pursuit beats away. Even an Eagle would take the better part of a sun time to go that distance. Instead, he circled high

above the Black and waited for a sign or message from some other passing sky-traveler. None came and the Eagle had a very bad feeling developing in the pit of his heart. He circled for more than 150 clicks before he grudgingly found a resting perch. During his rest the feeling in his heart grew steadily more depressing. Up again, into the sky. He must find out some news, be it good or bad. He was now expecting more bad than good. He had circled for 40 clicks when he saw movement far away in the field below. The sun glimmered brilliantly off of whatever it was. He circled lower and, as the movement came closer, realized that it was a Wolf. The brilliant coat glistened brighter than the strongest sun's reflection off of clear water and that meant only one thing, it was Giant's brother, Shine. He had been named for the way his coat absorbed light, twisted it just a little and reflected it radiantly back to the world. He picked up his pace and headed directly for the young Wolf.

Shine was easily the most athletic Wolf of the pack and had been for most of his life. Now he was nearing exhaustion. However, he was stubbornly determined to carry out his brother's wish that he had long ago given up any idea of self-preservation. He would do whatever it took to carry out his older brother's urgent plea or summon death trying. He would find Mystic, now one of the last two surviving gray Wolves of the Great Forest. He would see to it that his nephew was protected and, when he was older and possibly able to understand, he would tell him of the great killing that had, so soon ago, taken place. Yet, even in Shine's weary state, he was well aware that no four-legged, Wolf or not, would ever make sense of the killing. He had raced for home at a full run since leaving Ears and Sky behind. Nothing could stop him now. The cries of his mortally wounded packsters were still ringing mournfully in his ears, haunting his every determined stride. He raised his tired head and victoriously caught a glimpse of the dark line that represented the first growth tree line at the edge of the Great Forest as it rose invincible just at the edge of the Black, tightly outlining the horizon.

"You're almost there," he thought to himself. "You must make it. A bit more and you will be home."

He was having trouble running now, yet he pushed forward with only adrenaline and a deep longing to be home to fuel him. His tongue was hanging like a dry, withered leaf from his mouth and he had far earlier stopped perspiring. Every extra ounce of moisture in his body

The Land of Nuorg

had been drained from him, but still he would not let his rapidly dehydrating muscles rest. The pads on his paws were worn raw and blood oozed between the cracks in the caked-on clumps of dirt. His ears lay flat on his head, as if dead, and he had no energy left for hearing. He was running blindly now. His mission was not over. He continued at a deathly pace. "Almost there," he whispered to himself over and over. "Almost there, almost there..."

The Eagle had seen enough. He knew Shine was in dire straits. The Wolf's determination was admirable and also life threatening. How could the Eagle help? He made straight for the Black Pond. He knew there were large lily pads growing near the edge. These would be an excellent water source for a Wolf in very desperate need. "By now, his exhausted body must be screaming for water," surmised the Eagle. He gracefully swooped down to the water's calm skin and, with his expertly guided talons, fiercely pulled the largest lily pad he could find out of the pond, roots and all. He proceeded at full pursuit speed to intercept Shine. He did. Shine never broke stride and was unaware of the Eagle's presence. The Eagle slowed his beating wings to match the heroic Wolf's pace. He gently placed the water laden lily pad on the Wolf's shriveled, muscular neck and sped directly back to the Black Pond for another.

Shine could not believe what had happened. The weight of the fully soaked lily pad crumpled him to the ground. With the soothing water now soaking his moisture-depleted body, his mind struggled with decision making. Could he not enjoy this refreshing feeling for just another moment? No, he could not. Some attacker might still be on his trail. He struggled to regain his footing. Putting all four feet under him again, he clumsily began to get his stride back. Not much later, he saw no clouds, but he felt rain. He was sure his mind was playing tricks on him. First the drenching lily pad and now rain? He knew it was his destiny to make it to Mystic's side now. He increased his pace, forcing his will on his weakened body, pushing it far too hard regardless of the moisture or rain or whatever. He could now plainly see the Great Forest's outer ring, a first growth tree line magnificently shielding the forest beyond from all comers. He could feel welcome coolness radiating out, drawing him closer and closer to home, as he moved steadily onward. The water from the lily pad had momentarily

refreshed him, although it was only a small drop compared to what his body was calling for. His dry fur soaked up every drop of water the lily pad had to offer. The Wolf never broke his stride.

Again, the Eagle came diving in with a third lily pad after squeezing a second one almost dry with his talons as he floated over the brave Wolf. He placed this lily pad directly on Shine's head. Again with a forlorn look in his brilliant eyes, the magnificent Eagle headed back to the Black Pond for yet another and another and another.

Shine, breathing deeply, but not deep enough to satisfy his oxygen-starved lungs, looked up with staggering dizziness, read his bearing and located the specific tree under which laid the old hollow log. He adjusted his direction and made a morbid, direct assault on the log. He was home at last. "Where is the pup," he asked himself. "Oh, please, where is the pup and let him be alive!"

Shine, revived by a blood bond and slim hope, sniffed up, then back down the log. He stuck his sun blistered, dry nose into a pile of straw that filled the hollow of the log. Frantically searching through the straw, he heard the most wonderful sound he had heard in the last two-day-rounds. The pup whimpered as it awoke from a deep, peaceful sleep. "You are alive," Shine breathlessly whispered, "You are alive." The pup looked at the large Wolf and playfully swatted Shine's dry, weathered snout.

The Eagle returned from the Black Pond with another lily pad and dropped in onto Shine's back. Shine raised his head, his sad, sunken eyes told the Eagle more than he wanted to know.

Shine softly whispered, "Vincen," and collapsed in a large furry pile at the side of the old hollow log. His dirt-caked chest was heaving as it desperately tried to inhale a complete breath of air. The Wolf was exhausted, nearer to death than he had been in the heat of the dreadful battle.

Vincen could only admire his courage and did not look forward to hearing the details, if he ever did. Vincen, holding back all emotion, quietly replied, "Rest Shine, if you should wake up you can tell me everything." Vincen pulled the lily pad up to the Wolf's mouth so the water could spill into the parched, gaping mouth, constantly gasping for air as the Wolf's body resiliently clung to life. Vincen flew off to the Black Pond several times over the next 30 clicks and brought back nearly 20 lily pads. He placed them all over Shine's body and several were placed where they would drain into his mouth. Vincen looked at

The Land of Nuorg

Mystic, who had no idea of what the big fuss was all about, and told him, "Mystic, your uncle is sleeping. Let us let him sleep and when he awakes, we will discover the facts of why, he alone has come back to us." Vincen was not sure Shine would ever wake again.

The vigil started. Vincen's main objective was to keep Mystic from bothering his deep-sleeping uncle and, at the same time, defer questions about Mystic's parents until later when he could get the full story from Shine. Vincen took Mystic on walks to collect food in case Shine did wake up. Vincen also flew to the Dwelling Places and borrowed a water container from one of the Dwellers. He brought it back to the Black Pond and filled it to the brim with water. Vincen had it waiting at Shine's side should he need it. The Wolf had now been collapsed for 150 clicks. He was breathing a bit easier. Vincen's hopes for Shine's survival were increasing. Shine had arrived back at the Great Forest at early sun time of the third day-round since their disastrous journey had begun. This was not entirely unusual, but it was much earlier than Sky had told him they would return. The horrible thoughts that Vincen was having revolved around the fact that Shine was the only Wolf to return and he had done so at such a high price to his well being. Sun time was fading and the Great Forest was getting cooler as moon time approached.

Vincen continued to check on Shine, all the while keeping Mystic quite occupied with hunting food for his uncle. Fortunately, Mystic was old enough to hunt for food and young enough not to ask too many questions concerning his uncle's solo return. Mystic was now napping in the old hollow log. Vincen took great advantage of this quiet time. He flew to a perch high atop the nearest tree and searched the land's edge for signs of the returning Wolf pack. There were no signs to be found. Something had gone horribly wrong. He had not seen any sign of the red Hawk either. Both of these strange happenings were, again, beginning to bother the great Eagle.

"Vincen, Vincen, are you still here," a voice barely audible asked from ground level.

Vincen was immediately at Shine's side to comfort the ailing Wolf. "I am here, friend. You must lie still until you regain some strength," Vincen answered softly.

"I am all that is left of the pack Vincen. I am all that is left. Ears and Sky demanded that I return to Mystic's side. I came to protect the Prince of the Great Forest. I tried Vincen. I tried. He and I, alone, are

all that is left of the Gray Wolves of the Great Forest.” Shine’s voice faded.

“Shine, I have food for you. Mystic and I have collected all that we could find. We have enough for three or four Wolves. Please, do you have the strength to eat?” Vincen asked.

“Yes, I can eat. I cannot guarantee how much information I can give you on the demise of the pack, but I shall try. Vincen, it was a slaughter,” Shine continued, “Too many two-leggers with too many killing tools on too many horses.”

“Please eat,” urged Vincen. “Start with some droopers.”

Shine nibbled at the droopers slowly and mouthed some plant roots. He then drank water from the basin before continuing with the fruit. Vincen carefully studied Shine’s breathing and body movements, looking for some sign that the Wolf’s health was improving. He did not find any. Shine’s breathing was becoming more labored as he ate. Vincen was worried. “Shine, can you tell me anymore about what happened.”

“Yes Vincen, I will tell you what I know. We made it to the meeting place in good measure. Giant set a camp halfway for the youngsters, ancients and Mothers. The secret sharers and the remainder of the pack went on to the predetermined spot. I was sent to scout the area and watch for the Talker. He arrived exactly when you told us he would and exactly where.” Shine then drank another helping of water and ate another drooper.

“Take your time,” added Vincen. “Do you know the Talker’s name?”

“Yes Vincen, the Talker introduced himself as Frederick Mounte, descendent of the Hewitt-Mountes. He was a very orderly two-legger and had no idea of the impending doom. My dear brother stated our plea as Frederick obligingly listened. He believed him. He asked for his paw to tender the conversation. Giant offered his paw and the promise to intercede for us was sealed. We turned to collect ourselves for the return here, to our home.” Shine broke down and could not speak anymore. He began to cough and he turned his head away from Vincen and threw up most of the food he had just eaten. Vincen moved directly in front of Shine’s eyes. The Great Eagle gently said, “Steady, son. Slow down. You are not well. You must save your energy.”

“Vincen, I can no longer deceive myself. I have noticed how you are overly concerned for me. You see what I feel. I will not make it through the moon time. I will likely join my brothers very soon. I can’t speak too

The Land of Nuorg

quickly. I fear I will run out of life. Vincen, we were all hunted down and slaughtered. The pups were killed. The ancients were killed. The Mothers fought fearlessly. They left their marks on more than a few two-leggers. Vincen, the two-leggers did not seem to know or understand why they were attacking us. I could not hear everything for the roar of horses yelling warnings to us and the mad ravings of the two-leggers. I am sure that the two-leggers did not know the exact reasons for the massacre.” Shine was breathing heavily and struggled to get the words out of his mouth.

“The Horses were yelling at us to run, Vincen! The Horses demanded that we attack our attackers, but we couldn’t. Although we were once born to be ferocious warriors, our ways have changed. I suggest, as Mystic grows, you teach him to be the warrior we were born to be for his own sake. My brother was such a good-hearted leader. He never saw evil in any living thing. I tell you, Vincen, as a witness, evil is out there. It may be hiding far away, but it is out there. Mystic must be prepared for it. The Horses were crying for us Vincen as the two-leggers beat them into running through us. Several Horses threw their two-leggers and I saw them running swiftly away from the blood. They are not to blame. I haven’t much left now Vincen. Sky demanded that I protect her runt son. We knew he was special as do you. As my last request Vincen, I ask that you raise him as Giant and Sky would have seen fit. They loved you, Vincen, as they showed when they requested you to watch over him in their absence. They trusted him to your protection as do I. My errand is finished. May I see him?”

Vincen pulled himself to full height then strutted over to where Mystic was sleeping. He nudged him awake and got him to his feet. “Come Mystic. Your Uncle would like a word with you.”

“Is he going to be well again?” Mystic asked.

“Come with me,” Vincen replied.

Mystic stepped up close to his Uncle’s beaten face and sat down in front of him.

Mystic asked, “Yes, Uncle?”

Shine raised his head and, with fresh tears running down his long snout he replied, “Mystic, my young Wolf, you are the last of the Gray Wolves of the Great Forest. I have come many beats to tell you that your Mother, Father and the rest of your pack wishes you well. They will not be returning to you. I will soon be leaving you as well. Vincen,

Chris McCollum

the Great Eagle of the Great Forest and wise and dear friend, of both your Mother and Father, will lead your pack from this day on. I have one last thing to tell you, young one. From this day-round on you will no longer be Mystic the runt. I proclaim, with Vincen, of the Great Vincen Eagles as a witness, that you Mystic, youngest son of Giant, the Ruler of the Great Forest and his forever mate, Sky, you, Mystic, are now The Prince of The Great Forest. You will abide by the Gray Wolf code and will diligently serve your lands under the wing of Vincen until he sees fit to release you and further proclaim you Ruler of the Great Forest. I love you, nephew.”

Mystic stood at attention with tears flowing freely from his wide eyes. He stepped up to Shine’s ears and replied. “I will forever love you, Uncle, as I will forever love my Mother and Father. I ask that you tell them so when you see them. Tell them further that I accept this honor and I will one day see them again.” Mystic stepped even closer to Shine, laid down at his neck, gently nuzzling him.

Shine looked at Vincen. He noticed that the Eagle had bowed with outstretched wings to the new Prince of the Great Forest. Shine tried to smile and nuzzled Mystic back. His eyes were clear and his coat was once again “shining” under the moon’s light. He laid his large head next to Mystic’s small body. He then closed his large, caring eyes for the last time.

Vincen turned, flapped his wings and rose quickly into the cold moon time sky. He flew higher and higher. Mystic, still weeping softly snuggled into his uncle’s neck. Sometime during the night, he heard a loud and piercing cry of an Eagle’s pain and anguish released somewhere high over the Great Forest as a very cold wind swept through, chaffing the Black.

“Oh mercy, here,” urged Lightning, the irregular Badger. “I have not left you out, little brother. Of course I have brought food for you. Don’t I always take care of you, little friend? Well, usually either Mystic will or I will. Please come and eat some real food so you can quit taking bites out of your own tail.”

This lighthearted ribbing embarrassed Bubba. For sure enough, either Mystic or Lightning had always brought food for the Cheetah as long as his young mind could remember. He couldn’t recollect being anywhere without them or their food. Only today, and odd it was, Mystic had decided to pursue adventuring alone. This surprised Bubba. Mystic was not one to go off on his own. It was not out of fear, but Mystic just always loved company. Why Mystic had not told Lightning where he was heading or what he would be doing at the start of this sun time was odd, very odd indeed.

“Well,” prodded Lightning, “Do you want some food or not?”

“Yes, yes, of course I do,” replied Bubba eagerly. “Lightning, another thing, do you have any idea why Mystic took off so early on his own today? Why wouldn’t he want us with him? What if he needed us for protection?” Bubba always assumed Mystic was helpless without the Cheetah nearby.

“Would you come and eat some food and quit asking so many questions. I *am* trying to eat here. If you don’t hurry, I could very well end up eating the food I have so graciously set aside for you,” Lightning said, quite annoyed. It was clear to see that his willingness to share was diminishing quickly. “I have no idea what was on Mystic’s mind this day-round. He started out very early and, really, it was none of my business. He is the Prince of the Great Forest. He will go wherever and whenever he chooses, with or without my permission. Should he ask us, we will accompany him to the ends of our lands or to the ends of our lives. Here, young Cheetah. Eat this drooper before I do.”

“As you wish,” answered Bubba. Bubba sat up. The Cheetah was careful not to step on his sore tail. He quickly scampered over to where Lightning had spread out the food. Bubba stood eyeing the choices. Finally he chose the fruit that he disliked least. Bubba preferred water-livvers, if he had his choice. He was not that crazy about fruit. Lightning told him years ago that he would come to enjoy the food of the Great Forest if he would just give it a chance. Well, Bubba had given this selection of food a chance and had not yet learned to enjoy it. He was, after all, a Cheetah. “You know Lightning,” Bubba continued as he ate a small drooper. “I am getting restless. Building this fort is fun, but I think it is time for another adventure, a real adventure!”

“Bubba, every time we leave the Dwelling Places it is an adventure,” Lightning said. “One knows not whether you will bring food, get lost, hurt yourself or just confound us with your questions. Up until now, you have fulfilled three of those four measures. That is enough of an adventure for me,” he answered as he began to eat a dessert of poke salad.

“Thanks for thinking so highly of me, oh great huge one,” Bubba snickered and, losing his bearings for an instant, sat down hard. He saw Lightning chuckling while motioning with a large clutch of poke salad leaves at something on the ground directly below where he was about to sit. “Fine, oh great round one!” Bubba said as he sat down hard on the ground.

“Owwwww!” A loud cry came roaring out of the Cheetah’s jaws as soon as he completed his abrupt landing, then popped back up immediately. He had paid absolutely no attention to where Lightning was pointing and had absentmindedly failed to move his poor tail out of the way of his haunches. Lightning’s stomach began to heave violently. He was no longer chuckling. He was laughing very loud gut-busting, rolling laughs. He was spitting poke salad all over the place and was trying to retain his balance. He rolled onto his back and continued laughing at the unfortunate young Cheetah. “Oh mercy, young one,” he laughed while looking straight up into the towering trees, tears pouring around his big round jowls, “What am I to do with you?” He laughed a deep wonderful laugh for a long, long while.

Meanwhile Bubba stubbornly gritted his teeth and shed some tiny tears of his own, although they were not laughing tears.

The Land of Nuorg

“There they are,” Vincen thought out loud. “Whatever are they doing?” Vincen dropped from the sky like a stone into the middle of the eating break, startling one out of a laughing stupor and the other out of a private pity party. “I have some tragic news of the most desperate kind,” he said urgently to the two surprised friends.

Bubba and Lightning scrambled to their feet, immediately standing at attention. The laughing and crying stopped at once. “Why Vincen? What has happened for you to burst in here so recklessly?” queried Lightning.

“My dear young friend, we have a desperate situation. A horrible dilemma is developing if it has not completely done so by now. I have scoured the Great Forest in search of for you too long. I have several dreadful feelings encompassing my rational thought at this moment.”

Bubba was clueless. He usually lost the battle of understanding when Vincen talked in the olde style as he was doing now.

“It pains me so to converse with you so tersely when short, urgent planning and quickness of actions is of the utmost pressing importance. Do my bidding at my request and ask not several questions of me. I shan’t excuse you to do such. Mystic is at a loss for our current situation, being such, that our dear wolvern friend is no longer of this land. We must assemble our needs quickly and, armaments at the side, spring into this dreadfully dire situational crisis that he finds himself surrounded from outside to within.”

Bubba’s ears relaxed, he slouched slightly and with a glazed uncomprehending look in his eyes, turned his head to Lightning for an interpretation. Vincen was upset, more upset than he had ever been since Bubba had known him. Bubba glared directly at Lightning, furrowed his brow, squinted, tilted his head at a sideways angle and asked, “Is Mystic in trouble?”

Lightning sternly gazed back at the Cheetah, as the remaining poke salad leaves fell crumbled from his tightly clasped paws. He explained, “My not so excellently witted young friend, Mystic is in terrible danger. He has been swallowed completely by something.” He allowed his enormous head to swivel back to Vincen and asked respectfully, “Where must we go and what are we to do?”

“To the dwelling edge of the South Quarter, my friendlies. Hasten not. Brought with your sibling and to the place of my ceased direction shall you and your necessaries follow,” Vincen answered.

“Oh mercy Vincen, please speak so I can understand. My mind is working too fast to understand the olde speak. It will take several clicks to comprehend what you just told us. I beg you to speak in a manner we can recognize. Without a doubt, we need to know,” Lightning pleaded.

Vincen stomped around in no specific pattern. Eventually he gathered himself ever so slightly and deliberately stated, “You two, go to the Dwelling Places and get whatever food you can quickly pack. Bring it hurriedly to the dwelling edge of the northwest side of the South Quarter. We must hurry! Too many clicks have passed since Mystic left me. Bring your weapons!”

Vincen was well into the sky and gone before a dazed Cheetah or confounded Badger could ask another question.

Now this last bit of information got Bubba’s attention. Vincen never approved of weapons in any fashion. He had always, up until now, been agitated by their presence among the trio, but now the Great Eagle was requiring them for this travel.

“Well?” said Bubba.

“Oh mercy,” replied Lightning. “We have certainly got us an adventure now. Follow me. No, wait. Bubba, you are the fastest. Go to the Dwelling Places and get my ax- pike. You know where it is. Next, go to Mystic’s dwelling and retrieve his wand/staff. I will collect the food as I go. I will take the direct route through the middle of the Great Forest, which should be shorter, and meet you and Vincen at the northwest side of the South Quarter. Bubba, we are depending on you not to forget anything. Please hurry. I have never seen Vincen that excited. Now go.”

“Yes Lightning, I will not forget anything and I will meet you just where Vincen has requested.” Bubba was off, instantly running faster than Lightning had ever seen him run.

“Please don’t forget the wand/staff,” Lightning yelled loudly as the Cheetah disappeared from sight.

Lightning made off through the Great Forest opening his pack every time he came upon something that seemed remotely edible. If there was a fruit, he picked it. If there was a nut, he gathered it. If it was a plant worth eating, he pulled it. He would not be able to prepare any bark kakes or poke salad properly, and those were his favorite foods in all the lands.

The Land of Nuorg

The Badger reasoned with himself as he hurried through the Great Forest trying to answer the question that would not leave his mind. What had happened to Mystic? What was Vincen trying to say? Vincen's behavior was highly unusual. What complicated the situation further was the way Mystic had also acted highly earlier this day-round when he had spoken with him, only briefly, as they were both headed out of the Dwelling Places but in different directions.

"Good to see you as always," Lightning greeted Mystic as he passed the Wolf on his way to Bubba's dwelling place. "Are you not coming with us on this fine day-round?" the Badger asked. "After all, it was your idea that we work on Bubba's fortress today."

"I apologize. Lightning, I remember nothing of what you say. I must not have been thinking too clearly if I did schedule the work. I must be off on my own today. I feel there is something else calling to me. It began late during the last day-round. I must give it an ample amount of my attention. You and Bubba must continue working on that fort of his without me. Should I finish my mission soon enough, I will meet you both on the north side. I can't explain to you why I need to go alone. I can't explain to you where I am going either, because I don't know where I am going! I am following a gut feeling that has burrowed its way into my head. There is no real reasoning to explain. I left those lazy timber Wolves with a few tasks to do 'til I return. I doubt they lift a paw toward accomplishing any of them. When I get back, should it be early, I will, more than likely, be completing those tasks for them. Timber Wolves are so lazy and temperamental. I have no idea why we took them in. I suppose I am the Wolf leader and I guess it was my destiny," rambled on a very peculiar-acting Mystic.

"Very well Mystic, you know where we will be," replied a very suspicious Badger. Wait a click. Where is your wand/staff? Shouldn't you have it with you? It's your weapon of choice isn't it?" Lightning was having a difficult time comprehending these lapses in Mystic's judgment. "Pardon me, but I can't understand this Mystic. Your only weapon you leave behind on an adventure that takes you to who knows where for a reason that you cannot figure out?"

"Please, Lightning, I don't understand your unending questioning. My wand/staff? Really! Where is your ax-pike? Don't you think you need that as well?" said a very agitated Mystic. "What good would my

Chris McCollum

wand/staff do for me.? I know not where I go or for what, so why would I need a weapon? Do you suppose you know something that I don't?"

"Well, no," answered Lightning. "As for my ax-pike, it's too heavy to lug around for no reason. As for your wand/staff, I would just assume that one who travels for unknown reasons to unknown places would take every precaution available to him. Excuse me for suggesting such a thing. I will be on my way!" The Badger abruptly turned his overly large-sized body and walked away in a huff.

"So be it," retorted Mystic. "I'll be on mine as well!" Mystic shook his head, took one inquisitive look back at the miffed Badger and continued on his way.

Thinking back on their meeting, nothing about their conversation made sense to Lightning. Now he was genuinely worried about Mystic's behavior. Mystic had never missed an opportunity to work on the fort with them, nor had he ever left those slow-thinking timber Wolves to do anything alone. It had been Mystic's idea, not so long ago, to construct the fort to keep Bubba's mind from wandering. That youngster always wanted to go adventuring. No small adventure ever seemed to satisfy that one. He had his mind set on a great adventure full of danger and mystery. Now, it seemed to Lightning, that Mystic's mind was doing the wandering and, too he thought, Bubba might actually get his great adventure after all. Well, whatever the reason for Mystic's strange actions earlier, it wasn't turning in to anything good.

On his trek across the Dwelling Places, Lightning made a detour from his path that early day-round to check on Mystic's dwelling. In case something was amiss, he could summon Bubba and have him chase down the obstinate Wolf. Lightning cautiously stopped in front of Mystic's rather large, royal dwelling. It had been a home of awesome, simple splendor back in the days of Giant and Sky. Lately it had been in need of some loving care and Mystic just didn't have the help he needed to put the place back in good repair.

The Badger studied the Dwelling for a click or two. In due course, he decided everything was as it should be, everything except the wand/staff that is. There it was on the large front stoop of the immense dwelling. Why had Mystic left it there? He would never intentionally

The Land of Nuorg

leave it out in the open. They had both wondered about the origin of the wand/staff. They protected it from overly curious eyes, lest it should disappear. They had imagined that it had once been a tool of great power. They spun story after story about what it might have been ever since they had been old enough to do so. But still, there it stood.

Lightning glanced around curiously, plus he noticed the sun was rising fast. He decided everything was pretty much normal, outside of the wand/staff's location. Making one last scan of the stoop, he thought his eye caught a glow about the wand/staff. "That's odd. Why would it be glowing?" He surmised it must be the bright sun playing tricks on his eyes. He hurriedly continued on his way in search of the young Cheetah.

The Badger was making good time through the forest. He should meet up with Vincen and Bubba in somewhere around 10 or more clicks. For a Badger of his proportions, he was moving extremely fast. He had collected enough food to last several more day-rounds, as long as no one ate too much. He filled his pack until it could absolutely hold no more. Water was the problem. Wherever they were heading, he certainly hoped they would find water...and Mystic.

Bubba raced to the Dwelling Places, finding the ax-pike right where he knew it would be. He collected it as it lay on the floor beside Lightning's, enormously large, well-worn, often-used table. The ax-pike was a giant tool. Maybe he should have thought more about how he would carry such a hefty piece of gear. It was too late to worry about that now. He quickly scavenged the den for straps to secure the ax-pike to his back or side or wherever he could fit it. Some lengths of rope and a torn floor mat were laying on the back stoop, so he fashioned an unlikely looking scabbard using these scraps and, more than anything else, a significant dose of imagination. With his ever-present rapier snugly on his back, he fastened the scabbard like a harness around his barreled chest, stuffing small, soft pieces of bedding between his fur and the roughly textured ropes. The head of the ax-pike ended up in front of Bubba's shoulders, between his legs, acting as an odd sort of battering ram. Once the substantial tool was secure, he swiftly made his way to Mystic's dwelling on the far side of the Dwelling Places.

The young Cheetah frantically searched for the wand/staff. "Where could it be?" he asked himself. He could not find it anywhere! It was neither inside nor outside the dwelling place of the Prince of the Great Forest. Feeling his actions becoming futile, he curtailed the search. He must meet up with Vincen and Lightning as he was told. That meeting was to take place without incident. He vigilantly circled the dwelling once again and raced off. With his incredible speed, he arrived well before the Badger, but the Eagle had beaten him to the rendezvous point.

"Oh where is that Badger," Vincen asked Bubba. "If he wasn't so enormous, I should have flown him here.

"I'd like to see that," Bubba answered lightheartedly. "There is no way you could have picked that Badger up and flown him anywhere!

"Yes, yes, I know, I know, I know" Vincen answered as his pacing became increasingly agitated. Eagles are never late. Vincen's patience wore thin when dealing with tardiness. "Where is that Badger?" he demanded.

No other words were said. The wait was spent in silent paces. Each individual's mind was exploring thought after thought on the facts, as they were, to this point. Vincen's thoughts dealt more with trying to answer the questions posed to this point, while Bubba's were of the mounting dangers the three of them might face after this point. Further, Bubba explored how they might be able to combat each and everyone they might face. Not too many more clicks had passed before Lightning showed up, but for the original two, the time spent waiting could have very well been an eternity. The Badger could not have shown up soon enough.

Lightning came rushing up to the others. Though nearly exhausted, he was ready and willing to initiate any plan that Vincen's wise mind had devised.

"Got the food!" announced the weary Badger. "What do we do now?"

Vincen was first to speak as he circled Bubba. "Well, I see that the young one has brought the weaponry. Good my young Cheetah, you have your ever-present rapier I see. You have, as well, Lightning's ax pike." Turning his elegant head to Lightning he continued, "One day Lightning, you must tell me where, or how, you ever came to possess that thing? However, we shall talk about that later, if we are allowed to

The Land of Nuorg

do so. Turning back to his inspection of the Cheetah, he asked, "Where is Mystic's wand/staff?"

Lightning angrily burst in, rather un-politely, "Bubba, I begged you not to forget anything. You only had two items to retrieve. How could you have possibly forgotten the wand/staff?"

"But Lightning, I didn't forget the wand/staff! I made the trip to Mystic's dwelling just as you asked. I searched and searched in vain for the wand/staff. Please believe me, it was nowhere to be found. I looked inside. I looked outside. It was not there! I tried. I really tried. I was running late, but I looked everywhere at least three times. You must believe me. It was not there!" Bubba pleaded dejectedly. "It was not there."

"I know for a fact that it was there. I saw it earlier when I went by to make sure everything at Mystic's dwelling place was normal, for he, most certainly, was not. I saw the wand/staff as plain as I see your spots young Cheetah. It was standing on the stoop just at the front door, leaning precariously on the door box," Lightning declared quite adamantly.

"But I am telling you both again, it was not there!" Bubba felt hurt because Lightning obviously did not believe him.

Lightning's stare never wavered from Bubba. "Vincen, it was there. In my haste, I even thought I saw it glowing. The oddest of the odd things I have seen with my own eyes. The sun must have caught it just right, because, as I stand here before you, I thought it was glowing," said the Badger.

Bubba shook his head defiantly, "No! I'm telling you, it was nowhere to be found!"

Vincen did not want to see this type of interaction between the two friends. Time was getting away from them. "There, there now you two, stop this bickering. It is doing Mystic no good. I assure you," Vincen calmly stated as he stepped between the quarrelers. He looked up at the Badger, "I don't believe Lightning, that this young one would tell us a false story. He well knows what is at stake." The Eagle was speaking normally again, much to Bubba's satisfaction.

Lightning reluctantly backed away from the confrontation with the Cheetah. He placed his paws on the top of his head and began to pace. "Vincen, there still lingers something here that disturbs me." The Badger stopped and addressed the Eagle directly, "If I saw it, and I did," Lightning said. Taking a paw from his head, he non-maliciously

jerked it at Bubba then continued, "And if he didn't, then where is the wand/staff and, if it is missing, who has it?" Lightning's pointing paw came down to join the other now wrapped around his colossal back. He looked with bewilderment at Vincen hoping for a good answer.

"I don't know," answered Vincen with a shrug. "We can't be concerned about that now. We must enter the South Quarter, locate the clearing where I last saw our departed friend, exhaust all means known to us and find him. We must find him. The Great Forest's legacy depends on it! I will lead. You two shall follow. Stay with my pace and do not wander off my lead. I will lead you down the most manageable path to the clearing. The trouble I see immediately is this: we know enough to stay out of the South Quarter and not nearly enough to go stomping directly through it."

With that Vincen gave the pair a determined stare, flapped his wings and was off. The four-leggers desperately struggled to match the Eagle's pace. They miraculously managed to stay on Vincen's tail as he carefully searched out, then, flew over, the clearest path the land walkers could possibly travel. Nothing was said. The land walkers were intensely studying the Eagle's flight path and had no time to talk for fear of losing the trail. Vincen knew exactly where he was going, although he was having trouble following an indirect path that avoided the dense underbrush that, otherwise, would have slowed their progress. "How I wish they could fly!" he mentioned to himself more than a few times.

What seemed like ages passed agonizingly by as the trio traveled within the unfamiliar confines of the South Quarter. The land walkers never wavered from the path blazed by Vincen. When they did encounter some seemingly impassable obstacle on the trail, Lightning dropped down on all four of his massive legs and powered his way over or through to the other side. Size had its advantages and Lightning, the irregular Badger, had plenty of size to spare.

Suddenly, Vincen made a sharp descent into a small clearing. How Mystic had stumbled upon this clearing this day-round was just one of the many mysteries Vincen's brilliant mind had yet to figure out.

Lightning and the young Cheetah arrived soon thereafter, huffing and puffing, looking quite the worse for wear. They had barely managed to crawl out from beneath the last and most impenetrable thicket of underbrush that, in most cases, certainly would not have been passable. Thanks to badgered determination, Lightning's

The Land of Nuorg

strength, in addition to his ax-pike still strapped to Bubba's chest, they burrowed, clawed and finally forced their way through the dense blockade. At last, clear of the intimidating vegetation, they managed to stand up once again.

The land walkers were filthy. They each had mud, thistles, thorns, sand and heavy coatings of dust all over their bodies. They would never be welcomed at any self-respecting Dwelling Place in this dreadful state. They took a click to stretch some very cramped muscles. Taking turns, they beat the dust off each other. Needless to say, Lightning nearly knocked Bubba down repeatedly as he playfully swatted his much smaller friend.

The last obstacle had been the most difficult challenge of the trek. So far, so good. Once stretched and relatively dust-free, Lightning and Bubba had a moment, at last, to take in their surroundings. They ogled in amazement at this secret clearing. Looking at each other, each wondered silently to himself the same thing Vincen had been thinking. "How did Mystic find this place?"

Vincen proudly looked them over, shaking his head as he studied their slovenly appearance. One more thing, the Cheetah's tail was beginning to ache again. With all of the past excitement Bubba had forgotten how he'd taken his frustrations out on his innocent tail. He was now remembering that incident vividly. The tail hurt. It hurt a lot.

"Here we are," Vincen, pronounced matter of factly. "Now we must find that Wolf!"

Mystic had eaten plenty and felt refreshed. Truthfully, he had eaten too much. He scoured the remnants of the food looking for maybe one last bite, correctly deciding against it. After circling the remnants three times, he gallantly trotted off in the direction of the largest bridge he had ever seen. The closer he got, the larger the bridge appeared. "How big is this thing?" he wondered to himself. "And what kind of creature would live in those dwelling places? If they, indeed, are two-leggers, I beg of good fortune that they be not the evil kind."

It had not taken him as long as he thought to make the distance to the bridge. In all fairness to his judgment, it was much closer than he thought. He had made the mistake other travelers that had come this way before him had made. He, as they, confused the distance to the bridge by drastically underestimating its actual size.

"Oh mercy"! Mystic exclaimed when he got to the edge of the walkway.

The Wolf had remembered a considerable amount of activity here before his nap. Now, there was not one solitary individual, be it of the two or four-legged variety, on the bridge. Mystic logically was led to assume that all of the two-leggers and four-leggers were performing some kind of work or eating a meal inside the dwellings. He also could not help but notice that all of the dwellings now had their heavy shutters closed tightly. "I wonder what's behind that," he thought to himself.

Mystic was now at the edge of the bridge finding he had no way to get up on it. The logs that made up the main walkway were thicker than he was tall. The stone fence that had seemed short and easily jumpable was, on further discovery, as tall as some of the middle-sized trees in the Great Forest. Being one of a long line of highly educated and intelligent Wolves, he attributed this mistake in judgment to an incorrect rule of scale. There was, albeit obviously so, no way he could even imagine making an unassisted jump to the walkway. He was

even more impressed with the Donkorse's strength and agility now. There had been no smaller entry ramp noted when Donkorse had boarded the bridge. Mystic searched the entire end of the bridge vainly looking for any kind of step only to find none. This was yet another mystery in a long line of mounting mysteries. "What shall I do?" he asked himself. "I guess I could stand here and yell loud enough, make a dastardly disturbance until something came to let me in. Or, I could keep pacing until I found something, or..."

"May I help you?" came a deep voice from high atop the walkway.

Startled, Mystic retreated. He had heard no footsteps on the walkway. This, in itself, was unnerving, given his remarkable sense of hearing. The Wolf swung his head from side to side, up and up higher still, trying to get a glimpse of whatever this voice was coming from.

"Where are you?" Mystic asked.

"I am up here Prince of the Great Forest. We have been expecting you," boomed the loud but pleasant voice.

Mystic answered, "How could you know me? Furthermore, since you do, may I then ask of you mysterious sir, who in this land are you?"

Laughing quietly, the voice answered, "Why certainly, I am Hugoth, Guard of the Forever Trees."

"Well thank you Hugoth, Guard of the Forever Trees, for your kind words. Let me first say thanks for your forthcomings; secondly, for your hospitality; and, thirdly, your gentle tone of voice," Mystic said gratefully. "Forgive me for being more than a little startled at your abrupt announcement of presence to me."

"You are more than welcome Prince," replied Hugoth.

Mystic was not at all accustomed to this level of address. He had always taken his royalty humbly for granted, never wishing it or its practices upon anyone. He was only addressed in this manner, disrespectfully so, when Vincen of the Great Vincen Eagles, Bubba of the Great Plains or Lightning, the Irregular Badger needed to put his pride in check. Feeling a large bit embarrassed. Mystic replied, "Well, Hugoth, your manner of speech seems a bit formal to me, but thank you again. May I be granted the kind favor to see just who and what you are?" asked Mystic, "so that we can continue this conversation face to face?"

The Land of Nuorg

"Yes, yes, of course," Hugoth replied. "How rude of me. Please turn to your left and travel about three of your paces. You will find the entrance ramp most accommodating for a creature of your size."

Mystic squinted his eyes a bit and twisted his head noticeably. He found himself questioning Hugoth's directions. Had he not just come from that very position? There had been no ramp then and Mystic was more than a little leery of its being there now. Obediently, Mystic did as he was told. He steadily followed Hugoth's calming voice with his eyes and blindly stepped directly into the entrance ramp. "Owww!" he exclaimed.

"Is there a problem down there?" asked Hugoth.

Mystic was embarrassed and tried to hide that fact. He grimaced, looked away from the bridge and shook his hurting paw to soothe the stinging pain. "Oh nothing," he said frustrated, "I just stumped my paw. I will be right up."

Mystic hobbled to the entry point of the entrance ramp and gingerly bounded up to the walkway. There, again, his eyes remaining half closed from the pain, he literally bounded head first into something else. This had to be, without a doubt, the largest creature he had ever seen. After colliding with the enormous Hugoth, he was tossed backward onto his hind legs, thus winding up in a remarkably awkward and unstable sitting position. "Oh mercy, excuse me sir," Mystic announced as he ungracefully fell onto his side in a very non-regal heap.

Hugoth was big. He was very big. He was monstrous. This was the largest creature Mystic had ever, ever seen. Hugoth made Lightning, the irregular Badger look normal sized. Mystic struggled to his feet as he studied the creature. He raised his throbbing paw and wiped his snout twice before returning it to the walkway. Again, with his weight firmly balanced on three healthy paws and one that ached, Mystic asked an elementary question, "What kind of creature are you?"

"A big one," Hugoth answered with a hearty laugh.

"That's obvious enough," answered Mystic.

"Please come with me, Mystic, Prince of the Great Forest. We must get you cleaned up." With that Hugoth began to walk the bridge heading for the two very, very, very large Forever Trees.

"How did you know I was coming? What did you mean you were expecting me? How did you know my name? How did you know I was a Prince?" Mystic questioned Hugoth.

Chris McCollum

“My friend the Donkorse was correct. You never stop asking questions, Prince of the Great Forest,” laughed Hugoth. “Follow me Prince, your questions will all be answered in good or bad time.”

“You know, Hugoth,” Mystic remarked, “You look a lot like a dear friend of mine.”

“And who might that be?” asked Hugoth.

“My true and trusted friend, Lightning, the irregular Badger, Duke of the Great Meadow,” replied Mystic.

“You don’t say?” answered Hugoth as he ambled on down the walkway.

Whether viewed as an adventure tale or morality play, The Land of Nuorg will take you on an exciting adventure, loaded with interesting characters, plot twists, insight and humor. This book can be enjoyed by readers on several levels.

The Land of Nuorg

**Buy The Complete Version of This Book at
Booklocker.com:**

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/4351.html?s=pdf>