

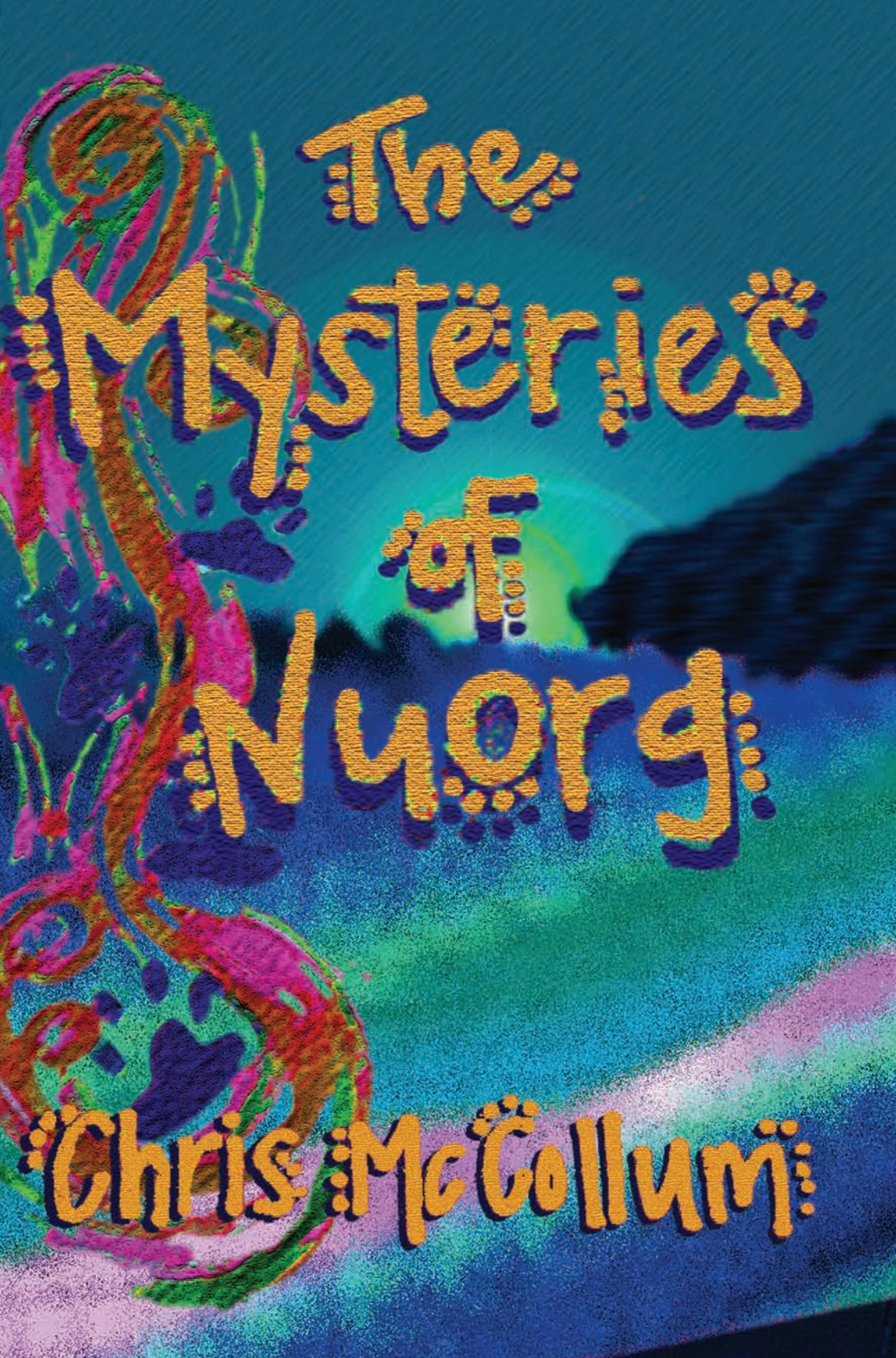
Installment two of this enjoyable adventure follows our returning group of characters as they seek help solving several mysteries concerning Nuorg and Mystic's Staff. How will this affect their home in The Great Forest, the lands over the mountain and those beyond the Black pond? As new characters are introduced, exciting and dangerous opportunities abound. Can Mystic, Lightning, Bubba and Vincen succeed? After the first visit to Nuorg, anything seems possible.

The Mysteries of Nuorg

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The

Mysteries

of

Nuorg

Chris McCollum

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“Well Keeper, what do you think of that?” The old Eagle perched on a tall chair in the Keeper’s enormous gathering room. As he awaited an answer, he quietly contemplated his feelings about the whole matter.

Hugoth smiled a great Bear smile before answering. He continued ambling to and fro, doing his best to tidy up the room after the exodus of the previous visitors. “I think it went fine, considering.”

“I’ll give you that. We were very fortunate to rid Nuorg of a major problem.”

“Yes sir. That didn’t happen a bit too soon. Although, his exit could have been painless for me had I removed him earlier. I’m afraid this shoulder pain will linger thanks to his attempt on my life.”

“Tell me Hugoth, did that actually surprise you? Did you not think somewhere in that massive head of yours that he would very likely try to kill one or more of us? Pardon me for saying this, but I am glad it was you and not a weaker creature.”

A small voice piped in from the window ledge where a marvelous little Hawk perched and listened. She was patiently waiting for her brother to return from a short errand. She tried to avoid interrupting the conversation, but could not help jumping in. “Excuse me, sir? Did you say kill one or more of us? And when were either of you going to let the rest of us in on this dangerous little secret?” She asked or rather demanded and she was more than a little bit agitated.

“Karri, before you get your red tail feathers in a snit, we don’t think that he knew of your involvement in the entire scheme of things.” The Eagle was not sure how the Hawk would reply to his reasoning. He was soon to find out.

Her lovely large eyes flared with the intensity of an exploding volcano. Her every feather stood angrily on end. “How dare you? You were not sure if he knew? You were not sure?” Each short question

was bitterly spat from her delicate beak as if they were poison. Her small body angrily quivered. Immediately she closed the distance from her perch to a chair directly across from the elder Eagle with less than a flutter of her wings.

Again, she asked. "You were not sure? What then are you sure of?"

The Eagle was taken aback by the intensity of her tone. "Karri, Karri, please calm down. There is no need for that attitude right now!"

"If not now, then when? I sat back and observed like a gentle little lady just as you requested of me. Now, I don't think that persona is warranted any longer. Where is my brother? He needs to get here fast. I have a few revelations to make of my own!"

Hugoth could not remain silent any longer, "Karri, I personally guaranteed you and your brother's protection and I never had any intention of anything to the contrary happening. Now," his voice was becoming very intimidating, "Calm down at once. I will not have any of our group doubting any of our plans. Do you understand?"

The Eagle followed each of the participants with wide-eyed interest. He was not about to interrupt these two, not now.

Karri did not answer, nor did she calm down. She rudely turned away from Hugoth, ruffling her feathers and digging her talons deeper and deeper into the high back of the well-worn chair. "Ugh", she spat towards the wall, "What is it with you opposites?" Clearly, she was not calming down.

"Karri," Hugoth called. "Did you hear me?"

Nothing.

"Karri, Karri! Enough!" Hugoth nearly roared. "If I sensed that you were in any danger, I would have taken care of Charlie immediately. My feeling was that he was after me. I had our Eagle friend here occupy his time or else I would have dispatched him myself...way too early. Mystic did an excellent job of extending Charlie's stay until the Staff returned to fulfill its own brand of judgment. I do not need you flying off with that heated temper of yours. You kept it well hidden and I intend for you to continue doing the same until you really need it to power you to explode, understand?" No answer, "Karri Booth-Hewitt, do you understand me?" Hugoth had moved to within an eyelash of the Hawk. The moisture from his snout wetted Karri's feathers and, with each of his forceful breaths, he nearly blew the sky-traveler off of her perch.

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Mystic looked on with a new appreciation for the leadership abilities of this huge Bear, not only was his size imposing, he also knew how to handle each individual on an intellectual level.

"Okay, fine, I have heard you, Hugoth. Now back away from me so I can see your eyes or, I promise I will bring a bleeding pain to your humongous snout you won't soon forget."

Hugoth backed away until he was staring a hole completely through the Hawk's beautifully feathered head. "That's more like it," he whispered.

The huge Bear turned toward the old Eagle, "I don't know if using these young ones is worth it Mystic. Why can't they just do what they are told and be done with it? They all have new ideas, new ways of doing things that have been done just fine for more years than I can count. Plus, they want to be involved in all the decision making as well. Is this how it will be in the days to come? Oh please tell me it won't be. Things are about to get bad out there. Will it really be necessary to involve them in every strategic detail?"

The Eagle smiled as well as sky-travelers can, "Yes Hugoth. Yes to everything."

Karri had finally heard enough. She jumped off the chair, landed on Hugoth's massive snout, jabbed her sharp beak at his tender nose and brought forth a steady trickle of blood. "Did you hear him Hugoth? He said yes to everything! Opposites, ugh."

Mystic the Eagle chuckled at the humorous sight before him.

Vincen headed directly for the Great Forest. How much time had elapsed since the last adventure started? Were things in the Great Forest just as they were before they left? Bubba had only noticed Mystic's missing Staff. Indeed, there were a lot of questions to be asked and answered, but time for that was not available. He flew to an area surrounding the once majestic dwelling in the center of the Great Forest. It sat just a little to the north of the main path. He noticed everything, other than the absence of his three fellow adventurers, was normal.

He lit on a low hanging branch overlooking a small garden tended to by a group of smallish but determined furry four-leggers. Each had a white stripe running down the entire lengths of their dark-brown, furry bodies with thicker stripes on each side of pointed noses. Uncharacteristically large front paws with sharp, curved claws furiously attacked clumps of unwanted weeds. There were five individual leggers of this type in varying sizes, working diligently as a team. The largest of the group raised her head toward Vincen before she knew he was there. She was startled at first.

"Why, a good day to you there Vincen," she called. "I trust you have seen that son of mine somewhere along your route this morning? I am sure he is probably running with the Cat today. Quite a pair, those two. Have you seen Mystic? I have a few ideas I need to talk over with him. I think it is about time that he put some work into that dwelling of his. It's beginning to look very worn-down. It was such a beautiful thing once."

The remaining four-leggers slowed their work slightly as they turned to listen in on the one-sided conversation between their mother and the Eagle. They too were wondering as to the whereabouts of their brother. He could perform the same amount of work with one swipe of a single paw as they could all do working feverishly together.

Vincen wasn't sure how he should answer her questions or in what order. Had she already seen Lightning this morning? He decided to answer her first question with a question, "When did you see him last?"

"Let me see...when did he leave his den? He was headed out early toward the fort. He had his sack of food with him. I figured he would be gone for a while. He needs to get back soon. We have a lot of work to do here."

"You have seen him already this morning? Really?" Vincen warily asked in return.

"Actually Vincen...no, I am confused and worried. We have not seen him in a few day-rounds. Normally that would not bother me, but since you are here speaking with me and not out trekking with him, I'm afraid I let the time slip my mind. He left...oh when did he leave?"

Another of the furry creatures ceased his weeding chores to join in on the conversation. "It was five day-rounds ago, Vincen. Like Hazzel mentioned, we were not that concerned until we noticed that you were here and not with our son and Bubba. Is Mystic with them? Why are you asking us where he is when normally we are asking you?"

Vincen felt stalemated. "I am curious. I have been with all three of them today. I left them earlier to fly back, but now it seems they have taken a detour. I thought they would be coming directly back. We had quite an adventure. They should be here soon."

Hazzel and the other four- legger stopped weeding entirely. They scurried closer to Vincen and looked up. Even the low hanging branch was too high for them. "We wish you would come down here to chat with us, Vincen. Our necks begin to ache if we look up in the trees for these extended conversations. It would please us if you would come down here."

Vincen's mind was spinning. How many questions did they have? How many of those questions should he answer? He was hoping the questions would not require detailed answers. He immediately hopped off his perch and lightly set down at their noses. "How can I be of service to my favorite pair of Badgers?" He hoped he could throw them off track.

"Vincen, you are so cunning. That is not what you should be asking. Let us ask the first questions. Where is Lightning?" Then the

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questions were asked in quick succession by both of Lightning's parents.

"Where is Bubba?"

"Where is Mystic?"

"Were you with them?"

"How come you came back and they did not?"

"Where did they wander off to this time?"

"When will they be returning?"

"We heard Bubba came running through here in a panic, then left just as quickly toting Lightning's ax-pike with him. What was that about?"

"Why did Mystic act so strange that morning?"

"What is going on, Vincen? We need to know!"

Vincen imagined this is where the meaning of badgering came from. These four-leggers wanted answers. Vincen glanced around. He noticed the other Badgers had returned to their chores. He asked, "Can we step into Lightning's quarters to continue this conversation?"

The Badgers looked at each other. "Sure Vincen. Why? Is there something wrong that his siblings should not hear?" Hazzel was now concerned for her youngest son. "Is Lightning alright?"

"Yes. When I left him, he was never better. We had ourselves a nice little adventure."

"Good. Then where is he?" Lightning's father had inherited some of the worrisome nature of his ancestors. He could not help it. In his heart, he knew Lightning could survive anywhere, especially if there were ample food sources to feed his bottomless appetite.

"Just a moment. I'll try to answer all of your questions as soon as we step in here." Vincen knew where he had left them, but had no idea why they were not back already.

"I have no idea where we are." Frederick continued to experiment with the rapier while Bubba and Mystic milled around the sleeping Lightning, scanning the landscape, struggling to come to terms with where they were now. "All I can assume is that we are where we are supposed to be. I've been thinking about it all morning and I am in agreement with Bubba. Everything that witnesses the globe's purging or purificating, if you will, is somehow able to take an active part in this journey we have thrust upon us. My bag? I'm sure it has some

role to play in a yet unknown way. Lightning's axe or ax-pike or whatever you want to call it opens doors for us, on its own mind you, obviously to places it feels we need to be. I'm sure it has no rational thinking in the matter, but is simply another tool used by whomever or whatever is spinning this yarn. I can't say for certain if that particular entity is a thing at all; maybe it is destiny."

"Yes, destiny. A notion often discussed by my family." Bubba settled down and was lying a short distance in front of Frederick, stretching every tight muscle in his lithe body. "I need to run. Can't we figure out what we need to do and get on with it?"

"Well, am I still the leader of this group or is it the ax-pike of the sleeping mountain over here?" Mystic was standing in front of their snoring friend, glaring into Lightning's closed eyes from no more than an eyelash away. "How can he sleep so soundly at a time like this?"

Frederick smiled as he got to his feet. He walked over to Mystic's side to join the stare-down. "Mystic, of course you are still in charge. You were selected by the Staff. I don't believe the Staff has a mind of its own either, but I can't worry about that right now." He was glaring into the eyelids of Lightning, awaiting their awakening. "What do you want to do now? Myself, I think we need to find out where we are."

Bubba jumped off the floor. "You two wait here with him. I'm going on a run. Maybe I will see something familiar. If I don't? Then, we are really no worse for wear."

Mystic nodded in agreement. "Do as you wish. Please don't run too fast. If something is watching, I would hate to expose one of this group's greatest assets."

"You shouldn't worry about that Mystic. I will be back." Bubba crept over to the edge of the shelter. He scanned the surrounding area for cover. There was none. Wherever he went he would be in broad sight of anything or everything around them. He turned to Mystic. "Leggers, we are right out in the open. Where is the hedge row we came through? I can't see anything but wide open fields. I'll find something."

Bubba quickly took off at only a fraction of his speed. He was out of sight before they realized he was gone.

Frederick raised his eyes from Lightning to watch Bubba fade into the distance. "Mystic, how fast is he?"

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Mystic kept his eyes focused on Lightning, "I don't really know. Every time he runs, he gets faster. Vincen can't keep up with him anymore."

"Mystic, now that you mention Vincen, where is he? I have not seen or heard him since we re-emerged. Did he happen to follow us?"

Lightning stirred. His eyes opened to see the Wolf's eyes staring a hole through him.

"Good morning, Lightning."

"Mystic, great Prince, I have felt your eyes on me since I heard you walk over. A stealthy one you are not. What do you mean we are not where we want to be? This place needs to be the Great Forest. I need to get back to my dwelling. My family will not be happy with me, I'm afraid, if I ever do get back." Lightning stretched his thick neck to the light peeking around the leafy roof. "Where is the mountain?"

"Lightning, we don't know where we are." Mystic turned to look beyond the edge of the shelter. "We don't know where we are."

Bubba was feeling good. He was created to run. The sun was shining down on the exquisite, shiny coat he inherited from his Mother while the strength from his Father coursed through his sinewy muscles. His speed? It was a gift from something altogether different, but it was his and his alone. No other living creature's speed could compare with his. No sky-traveler, four-legger or two-legger could compete with him over any terrain. His speed was effortless, defining and awe-inspiring at the same time. He was about to need it. Out of the sky dropped a wide shadow. Bubba caught sight of the menacing apparition on both sides of him. He remembered the day long ago when he was scooped off the ground by Vincen. This shadow had appeared in much the same way. Vincen appeared those many years before as a shadow out of nowhere to snatch the small Cheetah cub off the ground and out of harm's way. Bubba shook off the memory. He was much bigger now and so was this shadow. The dark lines on the ground around him thickened as the large creature lowered its approach from behind. This was not Vincen. Bubba could read the slow, graceful motion of the wings, but the size! These wings would have to be two or three times the size of Vincen's. What was this? The Cheetah was not scared; a little wary, but not scared. He knew

what he would do. The shadow dwarfed him. He veered off course to allow the sun to do some of his detective work. As he turned, he watched the shadow as it steadily grew. His course had changed enough to where he could easily see a shadow of what was happening beneath the wings. The creature's wings were now settling towards the back of its body. Bubba knew what came next. Two feet with strong, but, straight, blunt talons poised themselves for the attack. It was time to act. If he slowed down, he would be an easy pick for the attacker.

With a burst of speed, the likes of which this sky-traveler had never seen, Bubba shot ahead of his pursuer. He continued accelerating in a wild zigzag course that confused and nauseated the winger. He ran as fast as he thought necessary to put him far ahead of the pursuer. His escape speed allowed him time to turn around and catch a glimpse of the shadow maker. "Oh mercy that thing is big," thought Bubba.

The sky-traveler could not match the speed of the Cheetah. That fact became readily apparent. The Cheetah was toying with the large winger. This was supposed to be an easy catch. The four-legger even had the audacity to turn and espy him. That had never happened before. No matter, he had to get the message to the four-legger. Summoning the remainder of his sapped strength, the giant winger increased his speed and the elevation of his flight. He made a sharp arc at the apex of his rise which, once again, put him on a course to intercept the Cheetah. "Though this may not work, I must give him the message."

Bubba crouched as if he were hunting a prey. He would make a dash for safety if this creature brought on another attack. He had correctly decided that his speed was unmatched by the sky-traveler. He waited, ready to spring. As the winger approached, Bubba was not impressed by the creature's beauty. The body was all black except for white triangular markings under each wing. The head looked to be absent of feathers except for a tuft directly behind the face which was a patchy mixture of yellows, blacks and orange. Its beak appeared strong and menacing enough to rip flesh, but no aggressive action was taken. The creature was not much to look at; still, it was as graceful and powerful as any sky-traveler the Cheetah had ever seen, its size was shocking.

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The sky-traveler lined up his sights on the coiled Cheetah. He dove directly for Bubba. He never extended his talons as he had done the previous time. Instead he softened the angle of his dive and slowed as he approached. As he passed over the Cheetah, he calmly stated, "Beware of the intelligents. Godspeed Cheetah." He pointed his beak skyward and was gone with a few powerful flaps of his gigantic wings.

Bubba rose from his crouch. He watched with bewildered admiration as the sky-traveler slowly disappeared into a tiny black dot high in the bright blue sky. "Beware of the intelligents?" He did not know what that meant. He had to get back to the shelter fast. Maybe this was a clue, an omen or just the ranting of a giant sky-traveler. There was no time to waste. Bubba called on his speed again and made a bee-line back to the shelter. This should make for an interesting conversation.

On his return jaunt, Bubba searched the horizon for anything familiar. He found nothing. There was not a familiar mountain, forest, lake, ditch, rise or anything to key on. This area was completely void of landmarks. It reminded him of the plains on which he was raised, everything except for the tall grass. The grass which grew well over his head was abundant. He leaped high above it on occasion, hoping for a glimpse of something only to be disappointed again and again.

Hazzel, Lemeer and Vincen made their way around the garden watching as the young Badgers made quick work of the weeding. Their large claws and short, strong forearms enabled them to dispatch weeds at a fast clip. Each Badger looked up to give a respectful nod to Vincen as he strode by before returning to their work.

After the three of them entered Lightning's sleeping chamber, Lemeer began the conversation. "Vincen, please answer our questions now. We know Lightning goes off on these adventures all the time, however, it is very odd that he has been gone this long without even a message back to us. It is quickly nearing the time for his long sleep."

"Lemeer, I know you are concerned about your son. When I left him earlier, he was as fit and fed as I have ever seen him. One day,

one of us will tell you all about that, but now we have to believe the previous adventure has not ended. Maybe it has only begun."

It was a worried Mother that spoke next. "What do you mean, Vincen? Like Lemeer told you, it is nearing time for Lightning's long sleep. I have never known him not to require it. When will he return?"

"Hazzel, I wish I could give you that information. I cannot. I do not know when he will return. They were to follow the established path back to here once they found it."

"What do you mean once they found it?" Lemeer asked.

"Again, I am sorry Lemeer. I do not have time or the proper authority to speak of what we have been through. Suffice it to say, friend, we have taken quite a wondrous journey. None is the worse for wear and all emerged from the well with a new outlook on our lives here. Maybe in the future, we can take you back with us."

"Emerged from the well? What well?" Hazzel had picked up on the Vincen's slip.

"Oh my, I did say well. I should not have mentioned that yet. Please do not make me speak further of it. Would it be too much to ask that I not have to explain myself?"

Hazzel curtly replied, "Yes."

Lemeer was next, "Vincen, surely you are not speaking of "The Well of the Ground Below? That well cannot exist. I have heard only of it in stories." He fidgeted, "Old tales with no intention of being factual."

"Oh no Lemeer, it is that well indeed. It is real. I have experienced its true brilliance as did your son and our friends. Mystic discovered it in the South Quarter the morning we left or maybe it discovered him. He was the first in. I came for Lightning and Bubba. We gathered our supplies and followed Mystic down the well soon after he disappeared. It was hypnotizing and glorious."

"It does truly exist then? Why did you need to experience it? You mentioned it may have discovered Mystic? Lemeer, I am not enjoying what I am hearing. Remember what your grandfather told us about the well and what followed?" Hazzel remembered. She was not happy.

"No, Vincen, this can't be. They say when the well opens it can only be a portent. Will that be the case?"

Vincen became quiet. He whispered, "With the information we gathered from reliable, yet unique sources, we believe we can rein in

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the trouble that may be brewing. We have discovered many secrets, as well as strategies that we are now enlightened enough to set in place. Unfortunately, in order to accomplish that, those of us that went need to be together. I apologize for this, but I must get on my way. I must find them. Please do not allow yourselves worry fits. It will do no good to anyone. Go about your normal lives. If you should worry, we will let you know. I'm sorry I must go. Pray all will be well."

Hazzel and Lemeer watched Vincen hurry out. There was a side of Badgers that wasn't to be toyed with. A steely resolve was stirring in each of their eyes. "Hazzel, I don't like what I just heard. The well opened for Mystic."

"Yes, Lemeer, Vincen did say exactly that in a roundabout way. He knows and we know what that means. Please say the "Return" is not happening now. Our family, our lives here, what will happen to us? I never liked what our ancestors said we used to be."

"My dear this charade may be over. It may be time to be what we are. We should humbly begin our preparations just in case. Let the young ones know that it may be coming. They may be disappointed in the beginning, but we are what we are. If needed, we have and always will fight to the end." The steely resolve hardened in the eyes of Lemeer. "We will do what we have to do."

Hazzel looked into the eyes of her beloved mate. She nodded. Her eyes hardened with resolve as she agreed, "Yes Lemeer, we will do what we have to do."

Vincen hurriedly made his way out of the den. He hurriedly glanced around, saw nothing of note and took wing. He must find the other members of his group. The fact they had not showed up in the Great Forest was beginning to burden him. Inside his head, questions were banging into each other, knocking reason and logic around like sparks floating above a fire. The lack of answers wafted throughout his thoughts as if each had a mind and agenda of its own. Hazzel and Lemeer had not shown any outward signs of fear when he had told them the condensed version of his story. Did they know more than they were letting on? Were they more prepared that he was? According to Great Forest legend, the Badgers were long a family of seasoned worriers. They certainly showed no signs of that when he left. Oh well, things would either get better or worse. That,

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he knew, would definitely happen. He flew to his favorite perch. He scoured the land as far as he could see on all sides of the Great Mountain. Where were they?

Lightning rummaged through his bag looking for a proper morning kake. He found nothing to appease his taste. It was about this time every year when he became excessively hungry. He never understood it. His parents just told him it was the way he was supposed to be. He was sleeping longer and wanting it more. This was not how another adventure should be starting. His companions would be counting on him. He needed to find a way to win the battle over his want of sleep and increasing desire for food. He was not sure how much longer he would be able to keep up the pace.

"Lightning, are you eating again?" Frederick called from the edge of the shelter.

"I'm afraid I am famished Frederick. This time of year, I have to eat more than normal."

"Are you normally prone to a very long nap, once a year after a gluttonous desire for food fattens you up?"

"Yes, you are correct."

"We two-leggers call that hibernation. We don't practice it. It is solely for some of you four-legger species. This is not a good time for you to be thinking about that."

"I'm sorry. I have no control over it. When it hits me, it hits me whether I'm thinking about it or not."

"I think we will have to find a way to delay that habit of yours. The most important role you will ever play in your life may be speeding down a path directly at you and the rest of us as we speak. We will need the best effort we can muster to survive this future of ours if it gets as bad as it may. Lightning, you have to be there for all of us and all of those less fortunate than yourself. There is no other way. You must overcome this. If we are successful, you can take your long nap then. If we are not successful, some creature or happening may make that nap unnecessary for you."

"You mean I may get taken?"

"If that means dispatched or killed then yes. You may get taken. All of us may get taken. There are no guarantees. There are possibly

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some very bad creatures out there that will not take a liking to what we want to do."

"Agreed. You all must help me. There must be some way to delay this hibernation as you call it."

Mystic was listening to the conversation. He slowly walked over to the pair. "Lightning, I completely forgot about the timing of this. I am so sorry."

"There is nothing you could have done to prevent this Mystic. I will do my best. There must be something we can do." The irregular Badger hung his enormous head in despair. What could he do?

Frederick reached up and swatted Lightning between the ears. "Let us not worry about that now. Time has a way of dealing with things. Let's find that Cat then get on our way. Shall we?"

Mystic nuzzled Lightning's shoulder. "Let's go. Enough of this."

Frederick led them to the shelter's edge. "Now Bubba, where are you?"

Far above Bubba, far above the shelter, far above the clouds, Frederick thought he saw a dark speck circling, watching down on them. "There it is again," he mumbled to himself.

Mystic looked up and saw the speck too. "Well I guess we are not the only ones here are we?"

"No Prince, I guess we are not."

Lightning was not looking up. He was looking at a ripple in the tall grass. The ripple was moving rapidly in their direction. "If that is not Bubba, we may have a problem."

The other two swung their glances in the same direction as Lightning, temporarily distracting them from the flying speck high above. Indeed the ripple was moving fast, heading directly at the shelter.

The Cheetah raced out of the grass never slowing down until he was out of the spying eyes on high. Not even slightly out of breath he exclaimed, "Did all of you see that winger up there?" He sat down and pointed with a front paw. "It came down after me like Vincen did when he saved me from the poachers. It almost had me. I ran a little faster than it flew so I escaped. I got far enough ahead to turn around for a look at it and it came at me again. The second time it did not even try to grab me."

"Whoa Bubba," Mystic was in control now. "What do you mean? It came after you once or twice?"

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"It came at me twice. It only tried to grab me once. I saw its shadow. I got a read on what it was trying to do."

Frederick needed more information. "Was it unprovoked? I mean did you make it angry or something? Did you see anything else?"

"No...no...no, I did nothing to it. After I eluded it the first time it came back. The second time, it just flew over me."

Now Lightning was curious. "It just flew over you?"

"Yes, it just flew right over me."

"You mean it knew where you were and didn't attack you again?"

Mystic wished Bubba would just get to the point.

"What did it do when it flew over you?" Frederick had retrieved his writing stylus and pad from his bag and was taking notes.

"It spoke to me."

"Did that surprise you?" Frederick was writing down everything now.

"No."

Lightning moved a little closer to the Cheetah. "What did it say to you?"

"That's what I can't figure out. It said "Beware of the intelligents" and "Godspeed Cheetah."

Mystic stated to them all, "So it was not attacking Bubba, it was warning him, collectively warning all of us. It has been watching since we arrived here, wherever we are."

"Yes," continued Bubba, "It must be a warning of some kind."

Frederick looked up from his notes. "I wonder how that creature spells what it said?"

Mystic replied, "What do you mean?"

Frederick continued, "If he spells the word intelligence; i-n-t-e-l-l-i-g-e-n-c-e it would mean one thing, if he spells it i-n-t-e-l-l-i-g-e-n-t-s; it could mean something all together different."

Lightning laughed a small laugh, "That, two-legger, is a question only you would ask."

"Now wait a minute Lightning," Frederick was on to something he needed to get across to the four-leggers. "All of you listen to me. Our words can have multiple meanings. A lot of the meanings are dictated by the spelling of the individual words. You four-leggers do not get caught up in that necessarily, but whoever gave this message to the winger must have a reason for the wording, thus, a particular spelling. We, I mean two-leggers, don't have a word that is spelled i-

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n-t-e-l-l-i-g-e-n-t-s. If that is how this word is to be used then a four-legged or winger would have to interpret its meaning that way. If not, the message would be warning us to beware of intelligence which is something that we will certainly need to get through this. So, I'm asking, which definition do we use?"

"Hmm, you have a valid argument Frederick." Bubba was thinking the way Frederick was leaning. "Can we not call that winger down and ask him ourselves?"

Lightning was looking up and shaking his head. "Nope. It's gone."

If panic could be seen on an Eagle's face then it was all over Vincen. He had searched every nook and cranny for Mystic's group from one end of the Great Forest to the other. There was not a stone left unturned. They were, simply put, just not there. Vincen raced through every scenario possible in the limited space remaining in his mind. He would have to go back to the beginning. The problem with that line of reasoning was; the beginning was in Nuorg. How could he get back without the Staff? He again flew to the South Quarter of the Great Forest hoping to find some clues to re-open the well.

He flew in a hurry, using pursuit beats only. Any time wasted dilly-dallying could prove disastrous to their mission. How could he have lost a Wolf, a two-legged, a Cheetah and an extremely large irregular Badger? Why had he flown off without them? Had he taken the safety of the Great Forest for granted? That answer was obvious, he had. Again, questions, questions and more questions. He needed answers to all of those questions, but answers were not forthcoming. Who did he know? Who could he trust? Suddenly it came to him. Of course! He remembered a group of sky-travelers who just might be able to help. One, of their bunch, had been exiled from the Great Forest long ago, but the remainder of the group was trustworthy. Vincen hoped they had not fallen under the exile's spell. Now what was the fastest way to their dwelling?

Frederick wasn't feeling overwhelmed at the moment, he was feeling like an alien. This world of talking animals and talking birds, at the moment, seemed the sort of thing only fireside stories were made

of. Not to mention was the very real fact that inanimate objects were now making life-changing decisions for him, pointing his thought processes toward the surreal. He stepped away from the four-leggers physically and mentally. He felt an obligation to the others to determine their location and reason for being but knew the decision was not his to make, it had already been made by a higher power. As he numbly paced the area, he fought urges to abandon the mission and head back to his home, a land only of talking two-leggers. His gift as a Talker was an over-bearing burden at the moment and with no way to avoid or discard it, he felt imprisoned. Should it not be considered a blessing? The very idea that he could so easily converse with animals and birds should be listed as one of the greatest gifts to mankind. Now, it was his lonesome burden. He well knew he was not the only Talker, but he was the only one that existed within the realm of this small group of creatures. Being a Talker was not only a splendid reward, it was a great responsibility. Maybe he was feeling overwhelmed after all. Frederick tensely shook off the feelings of self-doubt to rejoin the others.

“Mystic, Bubba, Lightning...we have to make some decisions and we have to make them now. Which way was the sky-traveler heading? Did any of you see it fly off? We must decide where to go, where to travel from here. The day is burning away from under us. Vincen has obviously been called elsewhere. He was not included when the ax-pike landed us here. Which one of you has a strong thought as to which way we should head?” Frederick was determined to get something started, wrong or right they had to get moving.

Lightning answered, “I saw it as a dark spot heading north. I say we follow it.”

Mystic sided with Lightning, “From here, I don’t know where heading north will take us, but I agree, we can no longer stay here and ponder our predicament. The Staff is not glowing, so we can assume we are safe for now.”

Frederick nodded, “I agree, Mystic. We must pay close attention to the Staff. It knows more than we do of what is happening to and around us.”

Bubba spoke next, “I want to know the direction from where the winger came. That might be better to know than where it headed. If it was heading out to warn something else would we not be following it into potential trouble?”

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Lightning heard something in Bubba's question. "Bubba, you may be right. What if we do head south? Would we not be running into trouble there as well? Or, would be heading into some creatures in the same situation we are in? Who really knows?"

"I am thinking the same as you Lightning." Mystic's thoughts were becoming more focused. "If that winger is flying the countryside crusading its cause, would we not be more likely to run into others who share our same plight? If there are other groups like ours hunting the unknown, would it not be to our advantage to band with them for a strength in numbers kind of thing?"

"Good point, Mystic." Frederick looked to Bubba. "If that winger was not on our side and he was as big as you say he was, could he not have carried you away with little or no trouble at all?"

"Yes, no doubt. He could have easily carried me off with him."

Lightning perked his ears up and swung his large head back and forth. "So, what will it be? Shall we chase after the winger or chase toward whatever it was chasing before it chased our little Cheetah?"

Frederick stared high and long into the north sky. Seeing nothing, he turned to Lightning, "I am all for strength in numbers. We need a winger. We have no scout with the same eyes or speed as when we have a raptor in our midst."

Bubba reacted a bit miffed, "Excuse me? I am faster than any raptor I know of Frederick."

"Surely you are Bubba, but can you fly? Can you spy happenings from high above the ground as we travel? Can you see far down our path even when we are in low places?" Frederick was not being mean-spirited, he was simply stating facts.

"Well," Bubba stammered, "I uh, I don't...Yes, I see your point. Sorry."

Frederick bent down until his face nearly touched the Cheetah's. "Bubba, I was not doubting your speed by any means. Should we need speed, you will be called first. What I tried to say is that we miss Vincen's ability to espy great distances while he still soars directly over our position. Maybe I should have stated my case in a different way."

"No, Frederick you stated your case well. I'm on edge. Let's get on, shall we?" Bubba headed out of the shelter, looked back at the group then turned south.

"South it is." Mystic followed.

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“Wait, Mystic, I have something I would like to try on you.” Frederick removed a complicated set of straps from a side pocket on his bag. He fitted it around Mystic’s neck and chest. After adjusting a few buckles he looked at Mystic, then the Staff. “May I?” Frederick pointed to the Staff at Mystic’s feet.

“Yes, by all means.” Mystic was hoping Frederick had just fashioned a holster for the Staff.

Frederick took the Staff and inserted it inside a void between Mystic’s strong chest and the bottom strapping. After a few further adjustments, the fit was better than expected. The globe protruded slightly beyond Mystic’s shoulders allowing all but the Wolf a direct view in case it began to glow. Other than that, the fit was surprisingly good.

“I will continue to refine this as we travel. I think it is a much more efficient way to carry the Staff than your old way!” Frederick looked on smiling.

“Frederick, my teeth and my jaws wish to thank you. This contraption has already made my future journeys more pleasant.” Mystic turned and raced off after Bubba.

Lightning followed the four-leggers with his eyes before turning back to Frederick. “That was brilliant of you. What about this?” He raised his ax-pike to Frederick’s eye level. “Can you make me a holster for this as well?”

“I’ll tell you what large Badger; I will make you a holster. For now, I will throw it across my back and ride on yours!” He took the ax-pike from Lightning, slung it over his back then jumped onto Lightning’s shoulders. Frederick took hold of the coarse long hair at the base of Lightning’s neck and shouted, “Make for the south, you great steed!”

The huge irregular Badger did not move. “You great what?”

“You great steed,” Frederick reiterated.

“Oh mercy. I don’t like how this is beginning.” Lightning’s face showed traces of a sly smile. “If you think those small four-leggers are the only ones who can run, two-legger, think again!” Lightning nearly threw the rider from his back with an explosion of power which shot them both from beneath the shelter. “Hang on Frederick!”

Frederick was shocked with the Badger’s acceleration. He smiled and desperately dug his fingers deeper into the fur on Lightning’s strong neck. Ahead of the lumbering duo, Mystic was closing in on Bubba. The Cheetah had slowed to a trot; slow for Bubba, it was

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almost as fast as his friends could run. Bubba lightly came to a stop. He once again turned back to catch sight of the others. "Mystic, are you three coming or not?"

"Forgive me Bubba. You know we are not as fast as you. It is hard for me to understand, but I believe you are getting even faster with each passing day-round. How can that be?"

"I do think you are correct, Mystic. I can feel it in my bones. There is no doubt. I am faster than I ever was. I'm faster than I was a day-round ago. You too are faster with your new holster I see."

"I think so, yes. I am no longer worried about dropping this Staff or cracking my teeth while trying to hold on to the thing in my jaws. It makes for a more pleasant run at least. We are heading south aren't we?"

"By my measure, we are. Oh, I see Lightning and Frederick are on their way. Let's wait for them. I'm sure Frederick can figure a true southward direction for us."

No sooner than Bubba completed his statement, Lightning came barreling in. The tall grass parted at his feet. "That was fun!" The irregular Badger wasn't even breathing hard. "I think I enjoy running after all."

Frederick jumped off Lightning's back, landing softly on the ground. "What say we?" He asked. "Why have we stopped?"

Mystic answered, "We were waiting on you two. We were not sure if we were indeed heading south. Are we?"

Frederick jerked his chin, up pointing his eyes skyward. Once he located the sun, he took a step back putting both hands on his hips. He exhaled a deep breath. "One would think so. This landscape is so void of anything reliable enough to get a bearing on." He kept staring at the sun occasionally sweeping his eyes about the horizon which stretched in all directions around them. "I don't know. I do know we are not in Nuorg, for the sun in this sky is moving."

Lightning scanned the horizon where it met the blue of the sky. "Do any of you think it will make that much of a difference which way we head?"

"I'll have to agree with Lightning." Mystic could not make any learned decision between the right way to travel and the wrong way. They didn't know where they were, so what difference did it make where they went?

Frederick nodded his head with agreement. "I concur, Mystic. Why bother with our heading? I guess we will know for better or worse when we get to our destination. Bubba?"

"Whatever. I have no idea either. Let's continue. One way or another we are going find out...eventually."

"Very well. If we think south is this way, let us continue south." Frederick pointed the way and jumped up on the Badger's back again. "Southward, shall we?"

Lightning looked amused. "Two-legger, is this a habit in the making?"

"Very well may be, giant Badger. It very well may be."

Mystic and Bubba chuckled. Together they shouted, "Southward it shall be!"

The group traveled with no intended urgency for the remainder of sun time. As the sun began to fade to their right, the horizon began to offer slight hints of contours. Whether mountains or rolling hills, something lay ahead of their approach. The change in the horizon, although still very far off in the distance, brought a welcome chorus of sighs from the travelers.

Frederick had ridden atop Lightning for the entire second half of the day with various maps and notes spread out on the four-legger's table-sized back. "Does anyone think we will feel those hills beneath our feet by sundown?"

Lightning shrugged, "I'm sure some of us will feel them beneath our paws, but if you stay up there I am positive you won't feel them under yours!"

"Now, now Lightning, I have made good use of my time up here. I caught up on lots of note-taking and map reading. I have been researching through my notes concerning the Staff and there are quite a few tidbits of information that are now becoming very clear."

"Like what for instance?" Mystic was very interested in anything regarding the meaning or wielding of the Staff.

Frederick never raised his head from his work. "Later this evening, Prince Mystic, we can discuss a few things I have learned lately along with some revelations regarding the ax-pike and rapier. Well, actually we need to have discussion on how these inanimate objects have been affected by the globe's purification processes."

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Bubba continued straight ahead. He added, "I assume there will be some discussion of the ability of my rapier to pass through living tissue without harming it or at least drawing blood."

"I'm not so sure of that, Bubba. I have found nothing that even comes close to explaining that little phenomenon. I have found no mention of that or anything of that nature in any of these notes or map inscriptions." Frederick took his quill and circled a section of his notes that was copied verbatim from the back of the map pages. He continued. "If it were me I would not want to experiment extensively with that trick."

Mystic was not sure of that answer. "Are you saying it was a magician's trick Frederick? Something learned by you two-leggers over in your world perhaps?"

"No, I certainly am not saying that. The rapier definitely performs on its own as it pertains to the piercing action. I don't want any creature outside of our group knowing what it can do. If it is accidentally revealed, the secret would be gone and so would our surprise use of it when needed. Be prepared for anything in the upcoming day-rounds. Who knows? Maybe we will need to fake an early demise for one of us in order to save the group later or the real heart of our mission. You just can't know at this juncture."

"I don't know why, but I understand your premise completely." Lightning was learning to deduce certain accumulated facts at an outstanding rate never seen before by his fellow four-leggers. The globe's earlier actions may have something to do with that as well.

Mystic and Bubba looked at each other with a look that could only be described as fascinating. Frederick didn't take notice of Lightning's response. He just kept studying from atop Lightning's massive back. The group kept walking with no further comments or conversation.

Off to the right, the sun was beginning to rest for the day. It lazily slipped past the horizon, offering its opposite partner the opportunity to continue the guide role. The moon was full and bright, ready and able to see the group's entry to the foothills. It gazed down upon the wonderers with a benevolent eye. The moon took note that not another creature of any sort was within seeing distance as the four meandered up the first slight slope of the rolling foot hills.

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“Mystic, do you feel a change beneath us. Is it my imagination or are we actually climbing a hill of some kind?” Bubba was thinking they were, but after the long day, he had to ask.

“Yes Bubba, I think the flat land is finally changing shape.” Mystic looked behind him and saw that the vast flat land they had covered was now able to be seen in its entirety. There was a clear view back as far as his wolveren eyes could see. He voiced silently to himself, “I do wish Vincen was here with us.”

The arrow sliced through the air silently as it flew toward its target. Even from 200 yards the archer was deadly accurate. The target perched high in a tree, shielded by a low canopy of thick green leaves. Slightly to the left, his wing stretched across a branch. Between two of the longer feathers was a gap just big enough for the arrow head to pass without harm. The victim closed his eyes partly out of boredom and partly from lack of sleep. The arrow arched a medium height before realigning itself and honed in on the target. With a smooth, barely audible whack, the arrowhead neatly embedded itself between the feather tips just as planned. The unknowing victim suddenly became quite alert and shot out of the tree. His eyes immediately located the archer and as he approached he demanded, "Now what did you do that for? Can I not get a short minute's rest without you trying to impale me with that gadget of yours?"

"Ah don't worry about it. I had no intention of impaling you today! I was just proving to my friend here that you were actually awake in the tree. We had a bet and I think I won, did I not Hemoth?"

"Yes, yes I think you did," replied the friend stifling his laughter.

Far from settled, the handsome Falcon added, "I refuse to be fodder for your jokes or a target for your games! You must respect me, for I am your elder. I told your Father I would always watch out for you. How am I to do that if you kill me? Hmm?"

With a great smile and a little laughter, the archer said, "Sig, you know very well if I wanted to impale you, I would have impaled you. I merely wanted to get your attention. Might I add that I did?"

"I'll say. I promise I will stay more alert for your protection from this day on."

"Oh really, from this day on? Are you joking with me? You are too old to stay that alert!"

"Really, and you talk this way in front of a guest...who I have never met or seen before?" Sig nodded at the friend and offered a wink with his eye the archer did not notice.

The archer could not keep from chuckling at this type of talk. "You always sound so proper when you are mad. I'm so, so very sorry. And may I introduce to you one of my dear old friends. Hemoth, please make your acquaintance with Sig. Sig is my dearest friend in the whole world."

"Why thank you. It is a pleasure to meet you Sig."

"Oh no, the pleasure is mine sir," stated the overly courteous Falcon.

"Well then, so be it. I have traveled a long way to speak with your charge here. Would you mind walking with us? We have lots to discuss and my friend here wants you involved with everything."

"Certainly, I will be honored to share your company."

The small group turned and began walking back to the archer's home. "Hemoth, please tell me why you have made this long journey just to bring me a letter...could it not have been sent by messenger? And, are you sure you and Sig have never met before?"

"I'm afraid not. The messenger was not available and the circumstances are far too sensitive for me not to get directly involved."

The archer's brow tensed, "Well since I have not seen it yet, at least tell me who sends it my way. Sig, please fly a route and let me know of any approachers."

"Yes, Miss." The Falcon was off.

"Very well Madaliene, I will certainly let you see it. Let us stop for a moment and you may open it. Then, you tell me if it is important enough for me to be here or not."

Hemoth gently swatted at a large clasp on his chest. A brown bag dropped to the ground beneath him and he used his snout to nudge it toward the archer. The archer kneeled down next to the bag and pulled an ornately detailed envelope from inside. The hand writing on the face was delicate and proper. The letters were feminine and spaced perfectly. It read:

For the sole purpose of notifying P.M., your family sends you here the best and most heartfelt wishes on your upcoming engagement. Stay sharp and invite your true friends. The guest list should not be

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short, as several here wish to make your acquaintance. The new invitees are wanting to combine and bring you a glorious gift. As we were taught, glorious is not always best. Do not write back. You need not make that effort. Love and rainbows. P.E.

The archer took a deep breath and turned to her friend, "Hemoth, is this a bad message from Evaliene? I can't really tell because it is so cryptic? If it is bad, she must be in a trouble of some kind."

"Very good point, Miss. I honestly can't say. Is it not full of well wishes?" Hemoth paused, "There have been several messages of this same sort being sent everywhere. I think it might be a ruse of some kind."

Sig returned and hopped upon the archers shoulder. "All clear my dear. Madaliene, did I hear you say the letter is truly from Evaliene?"

The archer, struggling to hold back frustration, closed her eyes, faced the sky and shook her head up and down. "Yes Sig. It is from Ev. I think we must go to her. I can't believe she didn't bring this in person. Should we hurry? Do we need to make plans?" Madaliene turned and grabbed Hemoth's shoulder, "Hemoth, did you just say several messages like this are being sent everywhere?"

"Yes, Miss, I did."

"How can that be?" Madaliene asked dumbfounded. "These types of messages were only meant for a select few individuals. Do you think someone may be setting a trap for a bigger catch? Whoever the instigator is will be in for more that they bargained for. I am sure this came from Ev, but she's my sister and I could recognize her style of writing anywhere, regardless of the circumstances."

"You are correct, Madaliene. Several of the messages have been received by two-leggers who are not Talkers. They have no idea what the messages mean. Someone is up to no good here, I assure you. They are wasting a lot of time and effort to communicate with folk who don't have a clue what they are reading."

"Well, Hemoth, don't jump to that conclusion. Do you not think that is part of the larger plan? Maybe besides our code, there is another code between these lines meant for other readers with other meanings. This situation could already be out-of-control. How many of these have you tracked? Where is the origination point?"

"That is exactly why I am here. You are the one with the means to figure that out. We have four-leggers everywhere as you know, but a

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few key messengers are missing, including Evaliene's. She hasn't been heard from in a very long time."

"You are joking...surely. How did you get this letter if she didn't bring it to you? Who else knows where you are?"

"It was not delivered to me by Ev's messenger. I don't know who told this letter's carrier of my whereabouts and that bothers me. That bothers me a lot."

"We need to let someone else see this, but first I have more questions. Sig, will you please fly again? Keep an eye out for foreign wingers." The archer and the giant Bear continued their conversation, the Falcon rose high into the beautiful blue sky.

The messenger returned under duress. Several of her fellow sky-travelers were in captivity. They were held in a decrepit, non-descript barn on the far border of a vast battlefield of the past. It had been used during the recent years as a nurturing area. A plot of land to grow food, raise young leggers, revel in youth or contemplate growing into the late years. Both two and four-leggers enjoyed this bit of land with a reverence for the ghosts of long day-rounds past. There could not be a more unacceptable use of this revered site than its current employment. Inside the failing, long since abandoned structure sat untidy row after row of dangerously tall, wobbly stacks of filthy wooden crates, each of which had seen better and happier days. Crammed inside each crate, various sorts of sky-travelers struggled to move or even breathe. There were countless hordes of Hawks, Pigeons, Crows, Doves—thousands, nearly every type of winger, some which were normally thought to be invincible. Confined for extended periods of time, several were experiencing their last days of existence in this world. Tragically, these were not randomly selected individuals; these were entire families of wingers—from the youngest to the oldest. Stolen away from their homes, they were all captives. The youngest watched as the strongest were sent on messenger treks well beyond normal flight distances. Gone for days on end, they would return within a given time frame or else return to a crate full of unmoving clumps of feathers. The captors showed no mercy on those left behind. Perform the task, return for the next directive or lose your family; that was the painfully simple guideline.

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More often than not, messengers came back to lifeless crates...regardless.

She was exhausted. Maybe, if she was lucky, this would be her last mission for these heathens. She stretched open her wings, pulled her head up and slowed down to the speed necessary to enter the void in the barn wall without slamming into it. Famished from a lack of nourishment-there was no time afforded for food, she toiled desperately with her balance. Maybe she should just slam into the barn and ease her suffering. No, she would fight for her family trapped inside. Watching her suffering from very high above, a much larger sky-traveler was also approaching at a rapid pace, much faster than her own. This winger had no intention of slowing to enter the barn. He rotated his body in an instant to intercept her path. In a short blink of an eye he was honed in on his target, strong, blunt talons extended, wings folded tight to his side. He pierced arrow-like through the crisp air. This shouldn't take long and he needed to get back to eat. Just as the rank odor seeping from the barn hit his nostrils, he gently, but swiftly snatched the weary messenger from the opening. With a few wing beats, the immense sky-traveler bore his prey away from the sickening barn and high off into the still crisp air.

She emitted a shriek that sent shivers through the feathers of the wingers still breathing in the crates. "Noooo! My family! They will kill my family..."

A voice completely void of emotion replied, "They already have."

Inside the barn, the caged wingers were terrified but silent. The creatures responsible for the captures and mission assignments were livid. Arguments broke out amongst them all. The leader demanded to know what just happened and who was responsible. Chaos followed. Blame was thrown at every creature not crated. "How could this have happened? What was that thing? Where did it go? How? How? How?" The leader panicked then screamed, "Kill them all! Kill them all!"...and they did. No crated winger escaped. To some, their horrifying end came as a relief. To others, it was dreaded but expected. The scrambling within the barn took a toll on the integrity of the building. Great numbers of falling crates smashed into weakened old poles, chipping away at the barn's fragile structural integrity and crushing the captives within. Without any feeling, good or bad, for the occupants, the entire structure collapsed upon itself. Unfortunately,

some of the captors escaped. Even more unfortunately, the leaders were in that group. With an eerie, rabble-spewing, ear-shattering, thunderous crash, it was over. A large stomach-turning cloud of dust and feathers, freedom and hope exploded into the sky where it lingered for a few clicks before silently drifting closer to the ground. That cloud of misery would hover and ferment for days to come. The destruction posed a very unfitting memorial to those brave sky-travelers buried in the rubble.

"Ev's winger did not deliver this to you? How else would you get it?" Madaliene asked.

"A Golden delivered it. How she found me still baffles me. I don't think the letter was meant for me. It was addressed to you, but study the impressions above your name. There was another name or location written first then removed. I believe it was to be delivered to someone else first then to you by different means. I think something else was supposed to see this and, by the fact that they did not, we may have avoided a scenario a bit more troubling. The Golden was adamant that I deliver it directly to you. She mumbled some information I could not make out when she left me. I figure she may have stayed long enough to draw three, four breaths? Then she was gone."

"A Golden? A Golden delivered this to you? Are you positive she was a Golden? What did she tell you? You must remember something Hemoth! You must!"

Yelling, "Miss, do you not think I already know that? I have tried Madaliene! I have tried! I am not familiar with the Golden's dialect. It sounded mostly like gibberish to me. I was fortunate to understand what I did. Since she left me, I have been trying to recall exactly what she said. Believe me, I want to know too!" Hemoth was visibly upset with their predicament. He stormed around in a circle, shaking the ground with each fall of his giant paws.

"I'm sorry Hemoth. You know I trust you, but this is so unnerving. Ev has a White not a Golden. If this came from her, where is her winger? Did the Golden do away with her, steal the letter and bring it to you knowing that you would find me? Are we being watched right now? Was she watched?"

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"What is it with you two-leggers? Do you think every winger has its own agenda? What is the problem with a Golden? Are they so different from the Whites? No matter. We will certainly take up this conversation later, if we are able. I don't have the stomach for it today. Where is that tiny winger of yours? Did you terrify the life out of him?"

"Hah! That brave little Falcon has seen his fair share of bad times. I certainly did not terrify the life out of him. It would take far more than being shot at with a bow." Madaliene put two fingers in her mouth and blew three strong breaths. The whistle that was emitted from her delicate features was stunning. Hemoth turned his head away to escape the shrill noise.

"My sakes, Madaliene! You want to give me a little warning before you do that again?"

"Oh I'm sorry. I forgot what sensitive ears you four-leggers have. Next time I'll warn you." She quickly, put her fingers to her mouth again and blew a long straight breath. Again the noise was just as shrill and stunning as the one before, maybe a little more so. She coyly smiled, cut her attentive brown eyes to Hemoth and through pouty lips whispered, "Sorry."

"Madaliene!" Hemoth roared.

Within a breath Sig was perched on Madaliene's left shoulder. Three short bursts followed by a long burst called Sig down from whatever route he was flying or roost he was roosting. The bond between the legger and her winger could not be broken by anything less than one's death.

Sig, with a gleam in his keen eyes, asked Madaliene, "Should I dispatch him?"

"Who is he talking about dispatching, Miss?" Hemoth inquired.

"Why you of course my large furry friend!" She answered.

"Me? He wants to dispatch me? You are teasing me. You are...teasing...correct?"

Madaliene and her sister had glorious laughs. Smiles widened, exposing perfect white teeth, their noses twitched and the dimples in their cheeks appeared, brilliant eyes twinkled like bright stars on cloudless nights. Yes she was teasing Hemoth. She and Sig had a good laugh at the big four-legger's expense. Hemoth just looked puzzled and shook his enormous head. "Very well then, I have been

spared the might of the little Falcon. How might I show my appreciation, Miss?"

"First, we have to get back to my dwelling. There is a lot to figure here. Night is near and we shall eat, plan and rest. In the morning I hope we can get to the bottom of this, or at least be headed in the right direction. Shall we?"

"Please my lovely two-legged friend, lead the way."

Sig initially planned to ride Madaliene's shoulder back to her dwelling. He wanted to listen in and be a part of the coming conversation. Instead, with one look in conjunction with a tilt of Madaliene's head, he was off to scout the several paths home. Should he discover a problem, only then would he return to her side. If nothing was out of the ordinary he would continue on his own, making his way back to the dwelling as he saw fit. This way, if either of them was seen, no connections would be made tying the two of them together.

The trip back to Madaliene's dwelling was a route taken distant from the paths most generally traveled in the area. There were few inhabitants of this region that even knew she was here, much less any that knew of her dwelling. She always shied away from the normal gathering places since she had nothing but bad memories where large numbers of people were concerned. She had always assumed her parents were still around somewhere. Her family split up voluntarily many years before when word came that the heirlooms were being hunted again. The heirlooms, what would anyone need with an ugly handmade decoration and a bow? The heirloom Evaliene received wasn't satisfying to look at. Madaliene never bothered an interest in it. She had received the bow that was now slung across her back. What value could it have? It was just a bow. She learned to use it early in her childhood. She was a marksman by the time she was four years old. The bow was big for her then and smallish for her now, but it could out-shoot skillfully made longbows, much to the disdain of those expert bow makers. Evaliene was her older sister and only sibling. Evaliene was about 18 years old which made Madaliene closer to 16. She never really kept up with her age much except for an occasional reading of the calendar that sat at her bedside. Madaliene stayed outside more than she stayed inside. The outdoors appealed to her tastes where Evaliene had grown accustomed to either. Both of them could defend themselves

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whatever the situation, ride Horses or the like as well as any male or better. Madaliene had a strong will and Evaliene possessed a quick temper.

The separation was planned years in advance of either of their births. Plans were made and followed out perfectly in practice runs beginning when the girls could walk. When Madaliene turned 10 years old the practice runs ceased and the actual separation took place. Madaliene ventured to her secluded fort and her grandparents, Evaliene followed her parents where she was met by her guardian who took her to a secret location inhabited by several of her father's trusted and loyal secret-sharers. Each secret-sharer was trained and loyal beyond death. There were no betrayals, no traitors, no non-believers. They shared lives with folk common to the township where the guardian placed Evaliene. This location was left completely up to the guardian. The secret-sharers made their way into the township in small groups, avoiding suspicion, until they blended in perfectly with the naturals. The secret-sharers were a very powerful group of people, linked by blood to the girls' father. No foe could win a battle against them.

After a long walk that saw several clicks pass by, Hemoth began to wonder if they would ever reach Madaliene's dwelling. "Will we see your dwelling today, Miss? Or will we keep walking 'til morn?"

"Oh poor Hemoth, we are almost there. Look up." She pointed directly over her head. High on the cliff to their left was an outcrop of rock. "See the outlook? Just below that is the entrance. You will just squeeze through. The path is narrow, just don't look down. There is a row of fir trees that screen the entrance from approachers and you can use them as a railing."

Hemoth was not feeling at ease. "Do we climb up the cliff to access the entrance?"

"Yes, we have to. There are clefs and steps that you should find very handy. You aren't afraid of the climb are you?"

"Well, I am not keen on climbing cliffs for at least one good reason."

"Oh dear, you will be fine. I will even let you carry me up so you will have a great reason not to fall!"

"I guess that would give me a good reason to make it up," Hemoth added.

"Let us give it a try, shall we? We are here. There is the first clef."
She pointed at a rock about two times her height off of the ground.

"Bend down and I'll climb on your back."

"You were serious then?"

"Yes I was. Get over here."

"No promises. If I fall, we both fall, right?"

"Right." Madaliene grabbed fist-fulls of thick fur just behind Hemoth's large ears. "This doesn't hurt does it?"

"No. You would have to pull a lot harder to hurt me. Just hang on. Here we go."

Hemoth climbed the face of the cliff nimbly as a Squirrel. He was extremely proud of himself and knew this was exactly what Madaliene had in mind when she suggested it. Carrying a part of history on his back gave him all of the strength and confidence he needed to conquer his fear of falling.

"Whoa there Hemoth. You are about to pass the entrance. One more clef up to your right, then look down to your left. Swing me onto the ledge, then you can easily climb onto the path. You can grab hold of the trees and step right through, but don't look down!"

"Gotcha."

Without further incident Madaliene and Hemoth both landed solidly on the path in front of the dwelling. After a short stroll past the row of fir trees, Madaliene slid through a round opening in the side of the cliff directly under the rocky outlook. After a little huffing and puffing Hemoth entered the front chamber of the dwelling and was amazed at the amount of room he had to stretch out. He immediately fell to the floor to rest.

"Hey you can't fall sleep right there! We aren't quite inside yet. Come on."

"We're not?"

"No. Just a bit farther in." Madaliene led Hemoth through three larger chambers before turning to the left and traveling down a slight ramp. At the end of the ramp, she turned left again and turned to her guest.

"Welcome to my aerie, Hemoth!"

Hemoth rose up on his back legs and stared in utter amazement at his surroundings. "Who built this for you? This is a palace! I can't believe I have never been here before."

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"This is merely one benefit of being royalty my friend. My father, his father, his father's father...their secret-sharers built this for me under extensive direction way before I was born. Evaliene has one just like it, but I don't know where it is. Actually, I don't think she does either. Oh well."

"Madaliene, you are home." A sweet voice echoed from within a side chamber. "I'm glad you sent Sig ahead of you. I had no idea we would have a visitor tonight."

"He is really not a visitor at all Gamma. I believe you know each other."

The large Bear stepped into the smaller chamber. "Hemoth!" Gamma shouted as she hurried over to greet the furry visitor with her toned arms stretched high, reaching nearly to his shoulder. "I can't believe you are here! When was the last time I saw you? You were so much younger and a tad smaller. My, my you are so very big now. I wish I could have known your parents, how big they must have been. How are you? Where is your dwelling?"

A thousand questions could be asked all at once by all parties. Madaliene interrupted the merriment. "Hemoth, show Gamma the letter. She needs to know. You remember she is a pretty smart lady."

The Bear was struggling to understand how this lady could even be standing in front of him, let alone, asking so many questions. "You?" quizzed Hemoth. "You live here with Madaliene? What else do I not know about this mysterious young lady?"

"All in good time my friend. I find it hard to believe she has not told you of me. Where is this letter? Sig told me you brought an important notice to my dear granddaughter. From what I hear, it can't bode well for our future."

"How, how, how are you here? They buried you years ago. I was there. I saw it. You suffered a terrible accident. I saw you after you fell. How did you live? If you are here...it must have been a trick? That was so mean spirited of you. I guess you are going to tell me that..."

Another voice approached from the back, "I am alive as well?"

"Oh my." Hemoth was startled once again. He felt very weak in all four knees. He attempted to steady his enormous bulk. "Gann, you are...you are...I ought to stomp you 'til you can't breathe! I have to lie down. Let me rest. You read the letter and tell me about it when I

wake up." With that, Hemoth dropped where he stood and immediately fell fast asleep.

"You might should have warned him about us," Gann grinned.

"Gann, you know I can't speak of either of you outside of this mountain. This letter proves that things are changing again and no one can know of your existence. For all plans and practices, you and Gamma are long since dead and buried."

"But you could have told Hemoth couldn't you?"

"No Gamma. I cannot tell anyone or any creature, period! I am not going to lose you!"

"It's okay Mad, show us the letter."

"Okay, here it is." Madaliene pulled the envelope from a pocket on the inside of her shoulder bag. She removed the exquisitely hand-written letter from the envelope and handed the scented paper to Gamma. She gave the envelope with its broken wax seal to Gann. "What now?" she asked.

"This is absolutely your seal," Gann stated. "The wax is not of the kind your family used in the past...still its quality is sincere. The stamp looks original. It has not been tampered with. Wait..."

"Evaliene writes so beautifully doesn't she?" Gamma had wondered over to a short table near the rear wall, unfolded the paper and laid it close to a large reading candle that illuminated most of the chamber.

"I don't think she has used any words to trigger the code. Let me see..."

"Wait? What do you see Gann? Is there something wrong with the stamping? It all looked normal to me." Madaliene raised her hands to shake her wild hair loose from her silk head scarf. She folded her arms and shrugged.

"No, no dear, most everything is normal here. No sign of panic. It's just that the stamp is not perfectly straight. Evaliene never stamps her work without fretting over every small detail. Hmmm, here is something else. See how the wax is thicker on one side? She did this in a hurry. She would never rush something like this without cause."

"What do you think was her reason for the rush? Why was she in a hurry?" Madaliene asked the same question twice, she was nervous.

"It's okay Mad. We can figure this out. Let's look at the letter before we jump to conclusions." Gann tried to ease Madaliene's

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thoughts, as he turned to Gamma huddled over the letter. "What have you discovered my lovely?"

"You are so sweet," she answered. "At first read I saw nothing out of the ordinary. I mean there were no trigger words to invoke the code. But, as I read it over and over...something just doesn't seem right. She is trying to tell us something."

"Did you remove the spaces? Did she use a letter count instead of the code trigger words?" Gann loved using his wits to solve puzzles. All three of them knew there was more to this simple letter than one might see at first glance. But what? Evaliene was telling them something important. They had to figure it out. They would figure it out.

Madaliene looked over Gamma's shoulder to read the letter again. This time she noticed something that startled her. "Oh no!" She did not react well this time. "Oh no!"

"What is it dear?" asked Gann.

"It is so obvious. Can neither of you see it? The capital P and M on the first line! Ev always said she would never refer to me as princess unless she were dead! It has been that way as long as I could remember. All of the parties and festivals, we were always two princesses in public or when we were introduced with Mother and Father, but in private? No way. She was oldest, she was the princess. She did not ever let me forget that. Of course she was wrong since we are both real princesses, however in our speak, she was the princess and I was only the little sister. Oh no, she is in danger." Madaliene steadied herself next to the table.

"Now Madaliene, don't jump to a bad conclusion just yet. Let's think about this rationally first, shall we?" Gamma was trying to gather her thoughts as well. The little bit of information Madaliene had just revealed was now troubling her too.

"Now both of you need to collect your thoughts. Gather yourselves. There is more to this. We cannot discover anything if we do not approach this with reason. You must take your emotions out of it." Gann was not going to tolerate this turning into an emotional disaster. "Give me the letter. This is far too important to cry over!" With that he took the letter. He walked to the other side of the chamber, sat in a tall chair and read it again...over and over and over.

"Where did you put the envelope Gann? Let me see it again."

Madaliene walked quickly over to Gann's side as she spoke.

"I have it right here dear. You may inspect it again if you wish, but be sensible! We don't need tears washing away all of the evidence your sister has given us."

"I understand, sir. I will control myself better this time." Madaliene retrieved the envelope from Gann then sat down beside him. She carefully went over every minute fold and crease of the envelope. Where were the other clues?

"Madaliene are you hungry? I can get you something to eat anytime."

"Sure, Gamma, a snack may help me think more clearly. Fruit and tea would be nice." Madaliene continued tracing every delicate detail of the envelope. "There has to be something here," she said quietly. "Gann what are these little marks around the edge?"

"Madaliene have you ever known Ev to write so rudely? The words do not flow as hers normally would. She seems very determined that you not make certain mistakes. Should not, is not, do not and need not. That usage is simply abrupt and rude. What marks are you speaking of dear? Four nots, why four and not five or six? Why any?"

"Here you go loves. Time for a break. I have fruit and tea, Madaliene, just as you asked." Gamma came back in the room and set the table with ornate cups and beautiful green porcelain plates. "Come quickly, the tea is hot. The letter can wait a bit. Oh, the four nots may refer to the four knots that you girls always tied in the cords that secured your diaries. Remember, one knot for Father, one knot for she, one knot for Mother and one knot for me? You still have your diary, don't you Madaliene?"

"Oh spiked tree toads!" Madaliene jumped up and raced to her bed chamber. With one fluid move she lifted her well used diary off her side table, slid the cord from around it and bounded back to the table. She grabbed a large round fruit from the grouping and took a tasty bite out of the fattest, juiciest apple one could imagine. "Thank you so much Gamma for that clue. We may be on to something!" She hurried back to Gann's side.

"Not so fast young lady. Gann you bring her back to this table. Both of you will sit down and you will eat. When your stomachs are full, your heads will work better. Get over here now!" No creature was going to take the call to the table lightly with Gamma. Gann and

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Madaliene humbly sat down at the table to begin eating a very decent snack. The possible clues and riddle-like connections zipped through their minds. "That's better."

She couldn't hold it in any longer. "I think the knots on my diary cord are the key to the code, if there is a code in the letter! What do you think about that Gann?"

Gann said nothing in reply. He ate his food while nodding to Madaliene. He knew better than to get into an argument with Gamma. The repercussions would be harder to deal with than just waiting until after eating to deal with the letter and the code and whatever else. And she was correct, as usual; a full stomach usually leads to a sharper thought process. He continued to eat in silence. Gamma turned her attention to Madaliene.

"Young lady, if you want to finish your experiment with Ev's letter I suggest that you eat now. If not, I can make that a very difficult process for you."

Madaliene wasn't going to win this fight. She acknowledged Gamma with a nod of her head. Being a smart girl, she kept eating. Not another word was spoken until the last tidbit of food was removed from the platters and eaten.

It seemed to Gann and Madaliene that hours had crept by as they sat at the table trying to enjoy the meal. With each bite, their minds scrambled through the options for decoding the cryptic message that must be hidden within the letter. It must have taken Ev quite some time to assemble the wordage which correctly placed each individual letter. Gann was positive that the true message contained in the letter would eventually show itself. Madaliene was not so sure. Gamma, secretly, wanted to take another look. What could Ev be telling them?

"Should we wake Hemoth? I am sure he could use a bite to eat also." Gamma knew every creature had to eat. Even though Hemoth could easily deplete their immediate stores in one sitting, she was determined to make sure he had the opportunity to fill his stomach.

"No. Let's not wake him yet. He has come a long way on little sleep to find me. We have enough to do on our own. He will awake on his own time. Where is Sig?"

"I assume he is out watching the mountain on your behalf dear."

Gamma began to clear the dishes from the table. "He was a bit perturbed when he could not figure out how Hemoth reached you with him knowing nothing about it. There were, according to him, no

signals or mentionings of Hemoth being in this area. It seemed to him like all of the posts were inexplicably abandoned. He hasn't seen or heard from another winger in weeks now. I am sure he will be back soon enough."

"Yes, he was noticeably flustered," Gann added. "But now let us get back to Ev's riddle, shall we?"

All at once Sig came barreling into the den. Flying much too fast within the confines of the dwelling, he crashed into a back wall before tumbling to the floor. Righting himself immediately, he again took wing heading for the table where the letter was spread out in front of the readers. He crashed into the back of Madaliene, flapped his wings and clawed his way up to perch on her shoulders. Frantic, he spoke. "They are all gone! Every post was empty! There is not one watching eye remaining within this whole land. I saw some disturbing sights at some of the posts. Not all. Only some. Those were bad enough. Blood, feathers, signs of struggle. They are gone. They are all gone!"

"Sig, who is gone?" Madaliene was distraught after she saw the look in her Falcon's eyes. Normally a brilliant brown, they were now a dull black. His feathers slightly tousled from the brush with the wall, showed wear from flying at a high speed.

"Madaliene, they are all gone! There is not a sentry left at any post from here to forever. I checked going, I checked coming back. I found blood. I found signs of great struggles. I found lots of feathers. I did not find one sky-traveler! Not one! Where are they? Who could have taken them all? Who?"

"Calm down, Sig. You need to eat and drink. We will take care of you first, then, we will listen again to what you have to say. Not another word until you gain some strength from food." Gamma knew something was amiss. It would be no use to sap Sig's willpower at this instant.

"Madaliene, let Gamma take care of Sig. She will let us know when he is better. Now we must decode this letter from your sister.

"You are right as usual, Gann. What do we have so far?" Madaliene picked up the exhausted Falcon and laid him on a soft chair cushion near the hearth. He didn't need warmth, just rest and food.

Gann cleared off the rest of the big table. He used a flat knife to scrape the crumbs into his hand before tossing them away. He laid

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the letter and the envelope on the clean table. "Madaliene, we should not expect to leave this table until this riddle is solved. If it takes all night, so be it. Are we in agreement?"

"Yes, Gann, no one here wants to know more than I do. What do you want me to do first?"

"You take this envelope and that string of yours. Use your brain. Think like your sister. What would she naturally do with her string if she were sitting here next to you? How would she bide her time with it? I will go over this note stroke by stroke until some pattern emerges. Your sister is as brilliant as are you. Unfortunately, I can think like neither of you. You two got the smarts from your mother's side of the family."

"Right Gann, I'm sure we did because you and Gamma are as dumb as rocks! Please." She began twirling the string in her hands, wrapping it around her fingers, tying her hair back, just about every use for the string was exhausted sooner than she hoped for. "One knot for Father, one knot for she, one knot for Mother and one knot for me." Madaliene said this short poem repeatedly. "One knot for Father, one knot for she, one knot for Mother and one knot for me. Come on Ev, what did you mean?" She placed the string on the envelope. She went through every geometrical design she could by lining up the knots on her string with specific nodes on the envelope. Suddenly she shouted, "I need another string! Quick Gamma another string! I must tie it exactly like this one. Please hurry!"

Gamma left Sig recovering on the cushion. She rushed to her bed chamber and came trotting back holding a string almost identical to the one Madaliene was using. "Her you go child. You nearly stopped my heart."

"Thank you Gamma. I may be on to something."

Gamma moved behind Gann, wrapped her arms around him and gave him a great hug. "How's it coming, old man?" she asked before returning to Sig.

"I don't know if I'm getting anywhere dear. If I think I am, I will let out a holler just like Madaliene did." He winked at Madaliene. She returned it.

Madaliene successfully tied the knots in the new string in exactly the same spots as the knots in her original string. She had more trouble maneuvering the two strings across the envelope than she bargained for. She laid one string across the top of the envelope and

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a thought suddenly occurred to her. "How clever is Ev? This is so elementary." She reversed the two strings then laid them side by side. The knots were not equidistant from each other, which left every other knot between the originals. "Gann, please hand me the note. Do you see how she has left her spacing completely random? She never writes like this. Now, I am going to lay these strings over each line of words. I want you to write down each word and letter that falls under each of these knots. I will reverse the strings on every line. When we are at the end of the note, let's read what we have left."

"Madaliene, that sounds a little too easy, don't you think?"

"Well Gann, in order to even try this you would need one of our strings. If this works, like I think it will, you would need the two identical strings to figure it out. Who else would have that?"

"You may be onto something Mad." Gann leaned forward in his chair ready to write down whatever Madaliene told him to.

"Let's try it Gann."

*Solepurposefamilyhere
yourandyour
listnotwishyour
wantingcombinegiftwere
notbestneedthat
rainbows*

"Those are the words, let's get the letters."

*eye
ydr
lnwo
tefw
obnt
w*

"I am afraid this says nothing Madaliene. It is nothing but gibberish."

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"Gann, there is something there, I know it!"

"Well, let's find it then my girl."

"Gamma, do you have a sharp knife? We need to cut some holes in this envelope." Madaliene's mind was spinning. "Gann, may I borrow your quill?"

Before she realized it, Gamma handed her a thin bladed knife. She placed the knotted string over the envelope in the shape of an "E" and marked the spots where the knots fell. She then did the same in the shape of an "M" and marked those spots. She cut out slots where the marks were. She placed the envelope over the words Gann had written down.

The visible words were:

*Sole purpose combine family gifts
need you here
were your wish rainbows
not the best*

"I don't get it. This should have made sense."

Gamma took a look at it. "Why Madaliene it does make sense. Your sole purpose is to combine your family gifts. She needs you with her to do so. If you thought you could avoid trouble with your bow that would not be the best method of solving the problem. You have to find her. Before anything good can happen, you have to find her. You and Evaliene are the family gifts, not anything you have."

"All of that puzzling for that? It is so cryptic, why did she not just write it plainly so we would not have spent so much time on it!"

"Madaliene, that is not the only riddle there dear. The letters you found beneath the words are the real puzzle."

Madaliene and Gann both looked at Gamma simultaneously, "Huh?"

"Believe it. That is the real puzzle. Let me see what I can do. Gann, you go check on Sig, he needs to eat. Madaliene, you need to wake Hemoth. I'm sure he is very hungry as well. I'll figure this out for you two. You have done the hard part. Let me have some fun with it."

Chris McCollum

Gann stoked the fire with another log. It wasn't cold. They merely enjoyed hearing the crackling and popping. Its randomness eased the deafening silence of the cave. They had lived here for several years, since Madaliene was 10 years old. She was now closer to 17 than 16 which meant this cave had been their dwelling for close to seven years. If it had not been for the safety of their granddaughter, he and Gamma would have taken their chances in the old family manor. The "Terrible Years" had displaced so many people. Factions of instigators continued to roam the world of the two-leggers.

It still wasn't a safe place for the families of the Defenders. His ancestors raised everyone in their family the same way. The difference between right and wrong was never a grey area. It was black or white--right or wrong. Gann knew several acquaintances who could not define the difference between right and wrong and several of those were caught up in the middle ground of the debates that sprung up in the years after the "Terrible Years". Now, he correctly assumed, some of the remnant factions were growing, bent on forcing the issues again. They were easy pickings for any of the polar opposite groups. He hated that aspect of social change. Unfortunately, the world of the two-leggers was changing and would never be simple again. His job was to protect Gamma and Madaliene to the death and he would do that. His son and daughter-in-law had not been heard from since they sent Madaliene with him and Evaliene with her Protectors, who were the surviving families of the Majestic Guard. It was too dangerous to keep the family together in their homeland. It was too easily approached by their enemies. The family was split up so that each daughter could be raised under different circumstances in order, hopefully, to be reunited at some point in their future. This was a dangerous theory, which Gann had argued up until the day they separated. He was of the mind that if the girls were raised in completely different environments, their opinions of what was right for one may not be what is right for the other. That way of thinking was dismissed by the most intelligent person most people had ever met-his wife, Gamma.

"Sig, are you back with us now?" Gann stroked the feathers on Sig's head. The Falcon looked completely different now than he did

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before his nap. His feathers had laid down nicely, his breathing, once again, steady and light. "Sig, wake up. You need to eat."

Across the way, in the front chamber, Madaliene was having more trouble awakening the sleeping Hemoth. "Hemoth, get up you huge furry beast! Get up!" Madaliene pushed, prodded, poked, pulled, shoved and pinched the sleeping, snoring mountain of a Bear. "Good knights of yore! Get up you snoring beast!" Madaliene took a few steps back; she readied herself for a running leap onto Hemoth's heaving back. "Here I come; you are going to wish you had awakened sooner!"

She propelled herself a few steps and jumped with all of her athletic grace and strength. She aimed to land atop Hemoth's backbone in the middle of his shoulders, grab his ears on either side of his monstrosly large head and shake violently until the Bear came to. Madaliene did jump, very high and gracefully. However, during her flight, Hemoth opened one eye, caught sight of the airborne lass and timed his next move perfectly. While Madaliene was gaining height with her jump, Hemoth rolled towards her while holding up his giant front paw. Madaliene saw the movement too late to correct her direction. "You're gonna pay for this you stubborn oaf! Uumph."

"Am I really?" Hemoth held his paw high, Madaliene wrapped tightly around his trunk of a forearm. "Were you about to pull my ears lassie? You know that is not a wise move."

Madaliene slid off slowly like a slug crawling down a rock to the cavern floor. There she sat. She blew out a long perturbed breath, puffed out her cheeks and rolled her eyes and neck up at Hemoth who was now towering above her. "One day I will best you Hemoth. Dread that day beast. Dread that day."

"Madaliene, although you are an arrogantly diligent lassie with loads of spunky charm, may I politely say you will never best me. Hah! What does Gamma have for me to eat? I hope she has rooms and rooms of food, because I certainly feel like I could eat for days." He extended a paw to Madaliene. "Truce?"

Madaliene took a hold of the Bear's paw with both hands as he easily lifted her off the floor. "We have lots of food, but if you eat it all, I will have to throw you off the mountain. Is that clear?"

"My dear Madaliene, you never quit do you?"

"Never, you overgrown toad, never."

Installment two of this enjoyable adventure follows our returning group of characters as they seek help solving several mysteries concerning Nuorg and Mystic's Staff. How will this affect their home in The Great Forest, the lands over the mountain and those beyond the Black pond? As new characters are introduced, exciting and dangerous opportunities abound. Can Mystic, Lightning, Bubba and Vincen succeed? After the first visit to Nuorg, anything seems possible.

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