

ANDREW PETERSON

# THE WINGFEATHER SAGA

**SNEAK  
PEEK**



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ONLY**

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**NORTH! OR BE EATEN**

BOOK 2

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## NORTH! OR BE EATEN

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*For Aedan, Asher, and Skye.  
Remember who you are.*

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# The Lone Fendril

**T**oooothy cow!" bellowed Podo as he whacked a stick against the nearest glipwood tree. The old pirate's eyes blazed, and he stood at the base of the tree like a ship's captain at the mast. "Toothy cow! Quick! Into the tree house!"

Not far away, an arrow whizzed through some hanging moss and thudded into a plank of wood decorated with a charcoal drawing of a snarling Fang. The arrow protruded from the Fang's mouth, the shaft still vibrating from the impact. Tink lowered his bow, squinted to see if he had hit the target, and completely ignored his grandfather.

"TOOOOOTHY—oy! That's a fine shot, lad—Cow!"

Podo whacked the tree as Nia hurried up the rope ladder that led to the trapdoor in the floor of Peet the Sock Man's tree house. A sock-covered hand reached down and pulled Nia up through the opening.

"Thank you, Artham," she said, still holding his hand. She looked him in the eye and raised her chin, waiting for him to answer.

Peet the Sock Man, whose real name was Artham P. Wingfeather, looked back at her and gulped. One of his eyes twitched. He looked like he wanted to flee, as he always did when she called him by his first name, but Nia didn't let go of his hand.

"Y-y-you're welcome . . . *Nia*." Every word was an effort, especially her name, but he sounded less crazy than he used to be. Only a week earlier, the mention of the name "Artham" sent him into a frenzy—he would scream, shimmy down the rope ladder, and disappear into the forest for hours.

Nia released his hand and peered down through the opening in the floor at her father, who still banged on the tree and bellowed about the impending onslaught of toothy cows.

"Come on, Tink!" Janner said.

A quiver of arrows rattled under one arm as he ran toward Leeli, who sat astride her dog, Nugget. Nugget, whose horselike size made him as dangerous as any toothy cow

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in the forest, panted and wagged his tail. Tink reluctantly dropped his bow and followed, eying the forest for signs of toothy cows. The brothers helped a wide-eyed Leeli down from her dog, and the three of them rushed to the ladder.

“Cows, cows, cows!” Podo howled.

Janner followed Tink and Leeli up the ladder. When they were all safely inside, Podo heaved himself through the opening and latched the trapdoor shut.

“Not bad,” Podo said, looking pleased with himself. “Janner, next time you’ll want to move yer brother and sister along a little faster. Had there been a real cow upon us, ye might not have had time to get ’em to the ladder before them slobbery teeth started tearin’ yer tender flesh—”

“Papa, *really*,” Nia said.

“—and rippin’ it from yer bones,” he continued. “If Tink’s too stubborn to drop what he’s doin’, Janner, it falls to you to find a way to persuade him, you hear?”

Janner’s cheeks buri

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elf. The toothy cow

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drills had been a daily occurrence since their arrival at Peet's tree house, and the children had gradually stopped shrieking with panic whenever Podo's hollers disturbed the otherwise quiet wood.

Since Janner had learned he was a Throne Warden, he had tried to take his responsibility to protect the king seriously. His mother's stories about Peet's dashing reputation as a Throne Warden in Anniera made Janner proud of the ancient tradition of which he was a part.<sup>1</sup> The trouble was that he was supposed to protect his younger brother, Tink, who happened to be the High King. It wasn't that Janner was jealous; he had no wish to

---

1. In Anniera the second born, not the first, is heir to the throne. The eldest child is a Throne Warden, charged with the honor and responsibility of protecting the king above all others. Though this creates much confusion among ordinary children who one day discover that they are in fact the royal family living in exile (see *On the Edge of the Dark Sea of Darkness*), for ages the Annierans found it to be a good system. The king was never without a protector, and the Throne Warden held a place of great honor

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rule anything. But sometimes it felt odd that his skinny, reckless brother was, of all things, a king, much less the king of the fabled Shining Isle of Anniera.

Janner stared out the window at the forest as Podo droned on, telling him about his responsibility to protect his brother, about the many dangers of Glipwood Forest, about what Janner should have done differently during this most recent cow drill.

Janner missed his home. In the days after they fled the town of Glipwood and arrived at Peet's castle, Janner's sense of adventure was wide awake. He thrilled at the thought of the long journey to the Ice Prairies, so excited he could scarcely sleep. When he did sleep, he dreamed of wide sweeps of snow under stars so sharp and bright they would draw blood at a touch.

But weeks had passed—he didn't know how many—and his sense of adventure was fast asleep. He missed the rhythm of life at the cottage. He missed the hot meals, the slow change of the land as the seasons turned, and the family of birds that nested in the crook above the door where he, Tink, and Leeli would inspect the tiny blue eggs each morning and each night, then the chicks, and then one day they would look in sad wonder at the empty nest and ask themselves where the birds had gone. But those days had passed away as sure as the summer, and whether he liked it or not, home was no longer the cottage. It wasn't Peet's tree house, either. He wasn't sure he had a home anymore.

Podo kept talking, and Janner felt again that hot frustration in his chest when told things he already knew. But he held his tongue. Grownups couldn't help it. Podo and his mother would hammer a lesson into his twelve-year-old head until he felt beaten silly, and there was no point fighting it.

He sensed Podo's rant coming to an end and forced himself to listen.

"... this is a dangerous place, this forest, and many a man has been gobbled up by some critter because he weren't paying close enough attention."

"Yes sir," Janner said as respectfully as possible. Podo grinned at him and winked, and Janner smiled back in spite of himself. It occurred to him that Podo knew exactly what he'd been thinking.

Podo turned to Tink. "A truly fine shot, boy, and the drawing of the Fang on that board is fine work."

"Thanks, Grandpa," Tink said. His stomach growled. "When can we eat breakfast?"

"Listen, lad," Podo said. He lowered his bushy eyebrows and leveled a formidable glare at Tink. "When yer brother tells ye to come, you drop what yer doin' like it's on fire." Tink gulped. "You follow that boy over the cliffs and into the Dark Sea if he tells you to. Yer the High King, which means ye've got to start thinkin' of more than yerself."

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Janner's irritation drained away, as did the color in Tink's face. He liked not being the only one in trouble, though he felt a little ashamed at the pleasure he took in watching Tink squirm.

"Yes sir," Tink said. Podo stared at him so long that he repeated, "Yes sir."

"You okay, lass?" Podo turned with a smile to Leeli.

She nodded and pushed some of her wavy hair behind one ear. "Grandpa, when are we leaving?"

All eyes in the tree house looked at her with surprise. The family had spent weeks in relative peace in the forest, but that unspoken question had grown more and more difficult to avoid as the days passed. They knew they couldn't stay forever. Gnag the Nameless and the Fangs of Dang still terrorized the land of Skree, and the shadow they cast covered more of Aerwiar with every passing day. It was only a matter of time before that shadow fell again on the Igibys.

"We need to leave soon," Nia said, looking in the direction of Glipwood. "When the leaves fall, we'll be exposed, won't we, Artham?"

Peet jumped a little at his name and rubbed the back of his head with one hand for a moment before he spoke. "Cold winter comes, trees go bare, the bridges are easy to see, yes. We should probably go—probably go."

"To the Ice Prairies?" asked Janner.

"Yes," said Nia. "The Fangs don't like the cold weather. We've all seen how much slower they move in the winter, even here. Hopefully in a place as frozen as the Ice Prairies, the Fangs will be scarce."

Podo grunted.

"I know what you think, and it's not one of our options," Nia said flatly.

"What does Grandpa think?" Tink asked.

"That's between your grandfather and me."

"What does he think?" Janner pressed, realizing he sounded more like a grownup than usual.

Nia looked at Janner, trying to decide if she should give him an answer. She had kept so many secrets from the children for so long that it was plain to Janner she still found it difficult to be open with them. But things were different now. Janner knew who he was, who his father was, and had a vague idea what was at stake. He had even noticed his input mattered to his mother and grandfather. Being a Throne Warden—or at least *knowing* he was a Throne Warden—had changed the way they regarded him.

"Well," Nia said, still not sure how much to say.

Podo decided for her. "I think we need to do more than get to the Ice Prairies and

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lie low like a family of bumpy digtoads, waitin' fer things to happen to us. If Oskar was right about there bein' a whole colony of folks up north what don't like livin' under the boot of the Fangs, and if he's right about them wantin' to fight, then they don't need us to gird up and send these Fangs back to Dang with their tails on fire. I say the jewels need to find a ship and go home." He turned to his daughter. "Think of it, lass! You could sail back across the Dark Sea to Anniera—"

"What do you mean 'you'?" Tink asked.

"Nothin'," Podo said with a wave of his hand. "Nia, you could go home. Think of it!"

"There's nothing left for us there," Nia said.

"Fine! Forget Anniera. What about the Hollows? You ain't seen the Green Hollows in ten years, and for all you know, the Fangs haven't even set foot there! Yer ma's family might still be there, thinkin' you died with the rest of us."

Nia closed her eyes and drew a deep breath. Peet and the children stared at the floor. Janner hadn't thought about the fact that he might have distant family living in the hills of the Green Hollows across the sea.

He agreed with his mother that it seemed foolish to try to make such a journey. First they had to get past the Fangs in Torrboro, then north, over the Stony Mountains to the Ice Prairies. Now Podo was talking about crossing the *ocean*? Janner wasn't used to thinking of the world in such terms.

Nia opened her eyes and spoke. "Papa, there's nothing for us to do now but find our way north. We don't need to go across the sea. We don't need to go back to Anniera. We don't need to go to the Green Hollows. We need to go north, away from the Fangs. That's all. Let's get these children safely to the prairies, and we'll finish this discussion then."

Podo sighed. "Aye, lass. Gettin' there will cause enough trouble of its own." He fixed an eye on Peet, who stood on his head in the corner. "I suppose you'll be comin' with us, then?"

Peet gasped and tumbled to the floor, then leapt to his feet and saluted Podo. Leeli giggled.

"Aye sir," he said, mimicking Podo's raspy growl. "I'm ready to go when the Featherwigs are ready. Even know how to get to the Icy Prairies. Been there before, long time ago—not much to see but ice and prairies and ice all white and blinding and cold. It's very cold there. Icy." Peet took a deep, happy breath and clapped his socked hands together. "All right! We're off!"

He flipped open the trapdoor and leapt through the opening before Podo or the Igibys could stop him. The children hurried to the trapdoor and watched him slide

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down the rope ladder and march away in a northward direction. From the crook in the giant root system of the tree where he usually slept, Nugget perked up his big, floppy ears without lifting his head from his paws and watched Peet disappear into the forest.

“He’ll come back when he realizes we aren’t with him,” Leeli said with a smile. She and Peet spent hours together either reading stories or with him dancing about with great swoops of his socked hands while she played her whistleharp. Leeli’s presence seemed to have a medicinal effect on Peet. When they were together, his jitters ceased, his eyes stopped shifting, and his voice took on a deeper, less strained quality. The strong and pleasant sound of it helped Janner believe his mother’s stories about Artham P. Wingfeather’s exploits in Anniera before the Great War.

The only negative aspect of Leeli and Peet’s friendship was that it made Podo jealous. Before Peet the Sock Man entered their lives, Podo and Leeli shared a special bond, partly because each of them had only one working leg and partly because of the ancient affection that exists between grandfathers and granddaughters. Nia once told Janner that it was also partly because Leeli looked a lot like her grandmother Wendolyn.

While the children watched Peet march away, a quick shadow passed over the tree house, followed by a high, pleasant sound, like the *ting* of a massive bell struck by a tiny hammer.

“The lone fendril,”<sup>2</sup> said Leeli. “Tomorrow is the first day of autumn.”

“Papa,” said Nia.

“Eh?” Podo glared out the window in the direction Peet had gone.

“I think it’s time we left,” Nia said.

Tink and Janner looked at each other and grinned. All homesickness vanished. After weeks of waiting, adventure was upon them.

---

2. In Aerwiar, the official last day of summer is heralded by the passing of the lone fendril, a giant golden bird whose wingspan casts entire towns into a thrilling flicker of shade as it circles the planet in a long, ascending spiral. When it reaches the northern pole of Aerwiar, it hibernates until spring, then reverses its journey.



## Room Eight of The Only Inn (Glipwood's Only Inn)

After it flew over Peet's tree house, the lone fendril's shadow passed over Joe Shooster, proprietor of The Only Inn (Glipwood's only inn), as he lay pinned facedown in the dirt, fighting back tears. From the front door of the inn, Joe's wife, Addie, watched in horror. Her hands covered her mouth to stifle a scream as the Fang drove his boot harder into Joe's back.

The day was bright and blustery. The wind drove leaves and tumbleweeds through the streets to collect in the nooks of the town's battered buildings. A few weeks ago, the Glipwood Township had been wrecked by a mighty storm that descended on Skree like an apocalyptic stomp of the Maker's boot. Ferinia's Flower Shop had lost its roof, and rain flooded the building. Some structures had been flattened, leaving parts of Glipwood in rubble. Others, like The Only Inn, Books and Crannies, and the town jail, survived, sad reminders of the town that once lay quiet and peaceful at the edge of the cliffs.

Joe grimaced and managed to speak. "No, my lord, I have seen nothing of them. I swear it."

The Fang cracked Joe's head with the butt of his spear—hard, but not hard enough to render him unconscious. A cry slipped out of Addie's mouth, and the Fang whipped his head around and fixed her with a cold look. Joe felt the Fang's cold, damp tail drag over him as the Fang stepped across his body and climbed the steps to the inn's front door. Addie screamed as the Fang burst through the swinging doors and seized her by the back of the neck.

"You, then, sssmelly woman," the Fang growled, covering his snub nose and retching.<sup>1</sup> "Look old Higgk in the eye and tell him if you've ssseen or heard from

---

1. Addie Shooster was in fact quite fragrant, by human standards. Her cooking was lauded in Glipwood as the finest in Skree, and when she didn't smell like roast and totatoes or cheesy chowder, she was careful to apply flower petal perfume in copious amounts to her neck and arms. This perfume is li

the Igibys or from that nasty man who used to run the bookstore, Oskar Reteep.”

Addie went pale and trembled, unable to speak or take her eyes off the long fangs jutting out of the creature's mouth, oozing venom.

“That one's useless, Higgk,” called another Fang who watched happily from the street. “See what it does when you bite it.”

“Aye!” called another. “That's what the poison in yer teeth is for, ain't it?”

Joe Shooster pulled himself to his knees and clasped his hands. “Please, lords! Don't hurt my Addie. She knows nothing. Nor do I, and I swear to it.” Joe tried to keep his voice steady, but seeing his wife's pale face so close to the Fang's teeth made it impossible. “Please.”

The Fangs of Dang derived much pleasure from watching Joe and his wife squirm and began to chant for Higgk to bite the woman. Higgk grinned and opened his mouth. His fangs lengthened, and tiny streams of venom squirted from them, crisscrossing Addie's blouse with steaming, hissing burns. Addie's eyes rolled backward, her eyelids fluttered, and Joe prayed that she would be unconscious when the Fang bit her. She went limp and sagged in the creature's grip.

A long whistle came from deep within The Only Inn. Joe dimly recognized it as the teapot on the stove in the kitchen.

Addie's eyes fluttered. “Tea's ready,” she slurred, and in a flash of inspiration, Joe leapt to his feet.

“Wait!” he cried.

“What?” Higgk barked. “Have you suddenly remembered the whereabouts of the Igibysss?”

“No, lord, but if my Addie is gone, who will cook you booger gruel? No one else in Skree can make a pot of it like Addie Shooster. And what about midgepie? And clipping-topped gullet swanch?”<sup>2</sup>

Higgk hesitated. The other Fangs stopped their heckling and cocked their heads sideways, considering Joe and Addie in a new light. Except for the whistle of the teapot, there was silence. Joe wiped his hands on his apron and met his wife's eyes. She took some strength from him and said, “M-my critternose casserole is dreadfully good, sir.”

“Fine,” Higgk said.

---

2. Joe remembered Nia Igiby's bargain with the late Commander Gnorm to prepare him a maggot-loaf weekly. Not only had it rescued her children from the town jail and the Black Carriage, but it had bought them a degree of immunity from the Fangs, who were too lazy to cook for themselves and who valued such

He released Addie, and she fell to the ground in a heap. Joe rushed over to her and placed a kiss on her forehead.

“Ugh,” said the Fang. “If I don’t have a plate of that critternose casserole by sundown, I’ll finish what I started.” The Fangs hissed and snarled and chuckled their agreement. “If you learn anything about Reteep or the Igibys and you don’t tell Higgk, no amount of food will save your smelly ssskins.”

Joe and Addie hurried to the kitchen, where they set to work concocting a critternose casserole, the name of which Addie had invented on the spot. She sent Joe out to round up as many rodents as possible so she could begin the work of removing their little black noses.

Joe kissed her and thanked the Maker they were both still alive. “I’ll be back soon, love,” he said.

He hung his apron on the back of a chair and pulled on his boots but hesitated with his hand on the doorknob. Joe peeked out the window that opened on to the back courtyard. He saw no Fangs.

Instead of going outside, Joe tiptoed up the kitchen stairway to the second floor of the inn. He paused at the top and stared at a hallway lined with doors.

He listened. He heard faintly the raucous Fangs in the streets. He heard the creak of the old building and the gusty wind outside. Joe stole down the hallway to room eight and eased the door open.

Room eight contained a neatly made bed, a wash basin on a chest of drawers, and a desk, each piece of furniture simple but sturdy. Joe moved to the window and paused, looking out at the wreckage of Glipwood with a pang of sadness. Below the window lay what remained of SHAGGY’S TAVERN. The stone chimney stood like the trunk of an old petrified tree, the ground littered with planks, broken stools, and shattered bottles.

Wincing at the creak of his footsteps on the wooden floor, he crept to the chest of drawers and slid it away from the wall. Behind the bureau was a small doorway. Joe looked around one last time and ducked inside, pulling the chest back into place behind him.

The doorway opened on to a cramped room lit only by a tiny window in the ceiling. The light was weak, but after a moment Joe’s eyes adjusted, and he could see the plump figure shivering in the bed.

“Hello, old friend,” Joe whispered.

The man stirred and tried to sit up. A blood-soaked bandage adorned his large belly.

Joe put a hand on his arm. “Don’t sit up. I have to step out for a bit, but I wanted to check on you first. Do you need water?”

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The man on the bed tried in vain to flatten a lock of white hair against his balding head. "I'm . . . parched," he said, "to paraphrase the wise words . . . of . . . Lou di Cicaccllicelli."

"I'll take your word for it," Joe said with a smile, pouring a cup of water from a pitcher beside the bed. He lifted it to Oskar N. Reteep's mouth. "I'll be up later to change your bandages. Do you need anything else?"

Oskar swallowed the water with a grimace. "A few more books would be splendid, if it's not too much trouble."

Joe looked at the stacks of books in every corner of the room. "I'll do my best," he said. "Rest. I'll be back tonight. It's nice that you're able to talk again, Oskar."

"Yes," Oskar wheezed. "And Joe, there's much I need to tell you. *Zouzab . . . beware—*" He broke off in a fit of coughs.

"It's all right. There will be time to fill me in on everything later." Soon Joe would have to tell Oskar that his little companion Zouzab was gone, probably killed by the Fangs. He didn't want to burden the old man with more grief.

Oskar leaned back and fell asleep immediately. As bad as he looked, he had come far in the weeks since Joe found him bleeding on the floor of Books and Crannies. The day the storm came, Joe and Addie had spent the better part of the afternoon maneuvering him into the inn. No Fang reinforcements had come since the night before the storm, when Podo and the Igibys fled to Anklejelly Manor to escape the hundreds of Fangs that had come for them. Joe still wasn't sure what became of the Fangs that night, but it seemed that someone, or something, had killed them all.

When the Shoosters emerged from their hiding place the morning after the battle, it felt as if the world of Aerwiar had ended. Dark clouds roiled in the sky above the deserted town, and the streets were clogged with the dust, bones, and armor of countless Fangs. Soon Shaggy emerged from the tavern, and the Shoosters felt great relief at his appearance. They had been neighbors for decades and were the only members of the Glipwood Township who chose to stay rather than flee to Torrboro or Dugtown the night the Igibys fought their way out of the Black Carriage.

But then the one friend the Shoosters had left was taken from them.

One afternoon a company of Fangs tore through Glipwood on their way north from Fort Lamendron. From a second-story window of The Only Inn, the Shoosters watched helplessly as Shaggy pushed a wheelbarrow of firewood across the street. When the Fangs saw him, they pushed him to the ground and one of the lizards sank its fangs into Shaggy's leg.

The Fangs left as quickly as they had come, but by the time Joe and Addie raced to

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Shaggy's side, he was already dead. The Shoosters wept as they buried their friend in the Glipwood Cemetery at the southern end of Vibbly Way. Joe scavenged the Shaggy's Tavern sign from the building's wreckage. It bore the name of the tavern and an image of a dog smoking a pipe. Joe placed it at the head of Shaggy's grave after carving, in his finest lettering, the inscription "Shaggy Bandibund, an Exemplary Neighbor and Friend."

Now the Fangs were back, demanding to know the whereabouts of Reteep, Podo Helmer, and the Igiby family, and Joe had no idea why. Oskar had mumbled a great deal in his sleep about the Ice Prairies and the Jewels of Anniera, whatever those were, but Joe Shooster was merely the proprietor of The Only Inn. He didn't know about such things and didn't care to. He just wanted Oskar to recover and things to somehow go back to the way they were before the Fangs set foot in Skree.

If the Fangs wanted Oskar, then Joe Shooster knew the right thing to do was to keep Oskar hidden. When the old man's wounds were healed, Joe would figure out what to do next. In the meantime, he had to be careful. As Joe had just seen with Higgk the Fang, it wasn't just Oskar's life in danger but his and sweet Addie's as well. He hated to think of harm ever coming to her.

Joe bid Oskar farewell with a pat to his leg, and Oskar grunted in reply. Joe listened at the back of the chest of drawers for a long moment before sliding it aside and creeping out from behind it. He scooted the chest back into place and froze.

What was that sound? Movement from the window behind him? A sheen of sweat swept over Joe's body, and his mind raced. As casually as possible, he removed a handkerchief from the pocket of his vest and dusted the top of the chest. He hummed to himself as he moved from the chest of drawers to the desk and risked a glance at the window.

A face stared back at him.

A small figure with delicate features and a patchwork tunic perched outside the window of room eight. His eyes were piercing and cold, and they froze Joe in his tracks.

"Zouzab!" Joe said aloud, glad and confused to see the little fellow. Oskar would be pleased his friend was still alive.

He waved at the ridgerunner, who nodded in reply. The little creature was probably worried about his old master and would be a great help to Joe and Addie as they nursed Oskar back to health. Joe placed the handkerchief back in his pocket and slid the window open.

"Welcome, Zouzab!" he said, as the ridgerunner skittered through the window like a spider. "It's good to see a familiar face in Glipwood."

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"Greetings, Mister Shooster," Zouzab said. His voice was thin and brittle—not like a child's, but not like a man's either.

Joe patted the little man on the head, failing to notice the look of disgust that flashed over Zouzab's face when he did so. "I suppose you're wondering about Oskar, aren't you?" He smiled at Zouzab, happy about his good news.

Zouzab's eyes widened almost imperceptibly, and he nodded. "Yes, Mister Shooster, I'm most concerned for his . . . health."

"Well," Joe said and then remembered Oskar's words just a few minutes ago: "Zouzab . . . beware."

Joe had assumed Oskar wanted to warn his little friend to beware of the Fangs—but now he wasn't so sure. He detected something sinister in the way the ridgerunner studied him.

"Oskar . . ." Joe faltered.

Zouzab took a step forward.

"Well—I haven't seen him. Not since the day before all this chaos descended on Glipwood. Have you?" Joe cleared his throat, removed his handkerchief, and busied himself with dusting the rest of the furniture in the room, tightening the sheets, and fluffing the pillow, acutely aware of Oskar's presence on the other side of the wall. He prayed the old man wouldn't wake up or snore.

Joe opened the door to the hallway and paused at the threshold. "Would you like to come with me? I have twelve more rooms to dust, and it's terribly exciting work, I assure you. Otherwise, you're welcome to leave the way you came in."

Zouzab watched him in silence, like a cat about to spring. The two stood in room eight for what felt to Joe like an eternity before Zouzab looked over the room one last time, bowed, and leapt lightly to the windowsill.

"Good-bye, Mister Shooster," Zouzab said, and in a flutter of patchwork, he was gone.

Joe crossed the room on trembling legs to close and latch the window. Then the silence was shattered by a loud burst of flatulence from Oskar's secret room.

Zouzab's head appeared in the window.

"Excuse me," Joe said with a shrug.

The ridgerunner narrowed his eyes, wrinkled his nose, and was gone.

## Two Plans

Janner's and Tink's excitement had evaporated.

Boys sometimes forget that before one leaves on an adventure, if at all possible, one must pack. There are situations in which packing is secondary—such as escaping a burning building—but if there is time to plan and arrange and discuss before leaving, then it is a fact of life that grownups will do so. When children say it's time to leave, they mean, "It's time to leave." When grownups say so, they really mean, "It's time to begin thinking about leaving sometime in the near future."

After Nia's pronouncement, she and Podo proceeded with the day's chores as if a monumental decision had not been reached at all. The next day, the children chopped firewood, washed clothes and blankets, fetched water from the creek, and prepared meat to be salted and dried while the grownups planned, arranged, and discussed.

That evening after dinner, Nia and Podo unrolled an old map to work out their route to the Ice Prairies. They agreed to travel south to the edge of the forest, then west along the border until they reached the road to Torrboro. At Torrboro, they would travel south and west again in order to skirt the city and avoid the Fangs concentrated there.

"Three days west of Torrboro, the Mighty Blapp River ain't so mighty. It's wide but shallow enough to ford," Podo said. "And the Fangs should be scarce there."

"What about the Barrier?" Nia said.

"What's the Barrier?" Janner asked.

"I reckon you wouldn't have heard of it. It's here," Podo said, and he ran his finger across the map. "The Barrier is Gnag's best attempt to keep Skreeans from doin' exactly what we're tryin' to do. It's a wall that runs the length of the southern border of the Stony Mountains. It's patrolled by Fangs night and day. A few years after the Fangs took over, some folks realized the Fangs didn't move too fast in the cold, so a lot of Skreeans fled north. 'Course, most of 'em died. Fangs are slower in the cold, but they can still fight, and they can still bite. Especially when those they're after are women and children and men without weapons. Gnag's answer was to construct the Barrier. It doesn't keep

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everyone out—it's a lot of wall to patrol, see—but it does its job well enough that the masses don't try an' run off. Oskar told me that if you're west of Torrboro and your company is small enough, you can find a breach in the wall and slip through unnoticed. That's what we aim to do."

"And Peet says he can get us through the mountains," Nia said.

"As long as he don't wake up some mornin' with his crazy head screwed on sideways and walk us off a cliff," Podo said. "Or into a crevasse or a nest of bomnubbles."<sup>1</sup>

"Nugget's not afraid of bomnubbles," said Leeli proudly. Below, Nugget barked at the sound of his name. Janner didn't want to tell Leeli that even Nugget might be an easy kill for a bomnubble.

"We'll need twenty days' supply of provisions," Nia said.

"Aye, which means we should plan for thirty," Podo said.

"Why?" asked Janner.

"Because, dear, you never know what might happen," Nia answered. "Journeys like this seldom go as planned."

"How did you come up with that number, though?" Janner asked. "It'll take twenty days to travel to the Ice Prairies?"

"Well, it's about two days to Torrboro, then three days past that to ford the Blapp, and—you know what, lad?" Podo said gently.

"Sir?"

"It'll be easier for me to just show you than to explain it. We've got a lot to sort out, and when ye get the journey under your feet, you'll learn more than I can tell ye now. Understand?"

Janner sighed. "Yes sir."

Nia and Podo moved the discussion to the other room and left the children with a long list of assignments from their T.H.A.G.S.<sup>2</sup> to keep their minds occupied until bedtime.



As the Igiby children settled in for a bedtime story from Podo, Oskar N. Reteep struggled to read by the fading light that drifted through the window in the ceiling of his

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1. Bomnubbles! Woe!

2. Three Honored and Great Subjects: Word, Form, and Song. Some silly people think that there's a fourth Honored and Great Subject, but those scientists are woefully mistaken.



secret room. He squinted through his spectacles at the last few sentences of a book titled *The Anatomy of an Insult*.<sup>3</sup>

“Daft old hag,” Oskar muttered as he tossed the book aside. It landed on a heap of other books in the narrow space between the bed and the wall. “Wouldn’t know a good insult from a digtoad.”

Oskar remembered falling asleep before he could warn Joe about Zouzab. He doubted the little traitor was still around, but Joe and Addie should know the ridgerunner was in league with the Fangs, just in case.

Oskar was dreadfully hungry and suspected he had slept for more than a day, though without a visit from Joe, he couldn’t be sure. He also felt stronger. He had crossed a threshold in his recovery and could now speak without coughing.

He grimaced as he leaned forward and swung his feet to the floor, one hand placed gingerly on the bandage wrapped around his torso. Early that morning, by the light of his lantern, Oskar had found he was able to stand and even shuffle around the small space afforded by his quarters. He was excited to demonstrate this for Joe at his next visit, but to Oskar’s disappointment and mounting concern, Joe never showed. He had heard none of the familiar bumps and voices from the kitchen or common room. All day he had read and reread books, trying to quiet the nagging fear that something was wrong.

Every day, Joe or Addie had changed his bandages, brought him water and food, and when Oskar was lucid enough to listen, they spoke to him in hushed voices about the Fangs and the Igibys and Podo. Oskar was careful not to tell them the true identity of the Igiby children. The less they knew, the better.

At first, his concern was only for the Shoosters. Now he was thirsty, his stomach growled, and he was beginning to consider the seriousness of his own situation. He doubted he could yet care for himself or even squeeze through the small door on his own, and the thought of starving or dying of thirst in his hidden room made it seem like a tomb. He wondered if some day years from now, someone would discover his skeleton lying on the bed, surrounded by books. He wondered what book he might be reading when he finally breathed his last, and determined to grab a good one as soon as he sensed the end coming so that whoever discovered him would know he had good taste in literature. Oskar removed his spectacles and cleaned them with the corner of the bed sheet.

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3. By Helba Grounce-Miglatobe, a well-known psychologist who claimed to have been ridiculed unduly as a child and as such was an expert, according to her book, in the field of “meanery and insultence.”

He replaced his spectacles and adjusted a long tendril of hair so that it draped across his head. Oskar was no more able to admit defeat than to admit he was bald as a boulder. He looked at the small doorway on the opposite wall. His wound had stopped bleeding, but he was in no condition to crawl through the little door. He chuckled at the thought that his sizable belly might prove more of a hindrance than his stab wound.

His musings on his girth and its bearing on his escape were interrupted by a scream that worked its way through the wooden walls of the inn. Oskar tensed. The scream trailed off and gave way to the muted snarls of Fangs. The old man's lips moved with whispered prayers as he looked desperately around his shadowy cell, wondering what to do. He gathered his strength, took a deep breath, and stood. Stars filled his vision, and he heard another scream. It sounded like Addie.

Oskar made his way to the door one painful step at a time, cursing his weight, his wound, and the Fangs of Dang with insults heavily influenced by his recent study of Helba Grounce-Miglatobe's book. He reached the door and placed a hand on the wall to steady himself, breathing heavily and noticing with a stab of panic that new blood stained his bandage.

He lowered himself to his knees with great effort and placed a shoulder against the back of the chest of drawers that served as his door. The sounds of struggle coming from outside the inn were clearer now, and the Fangs weren't just snarling, but laughing.

He had no idea what he would do once he made it out of the room, but his instinct demanded he do *something*. He didn't know the right course of action, but clearly the wrong one would be lying in his bed and listening to the sounds of his friends being captured—or killed—by the Fangs.

Oskar heaved with all his might, and the chest of drawers slid out of the way.

Wincing at the pain in his chest, he crawled to the open window and gasped. Shaggy's Tavern was a ruin of broken planks. Across the street, what was left of Ferinia's Flower Shop sat broken and sad as a trampled lily. Beside it, to his relief, Oskar's own Books and Crannies still stood, just as Addie Shooster had assured him it did, intact except for a strip of wooden shingles missing from the roof.

Oskar's shock at the battered state of the Glipwood Township turned to dread when he spotted the source of the screams.

A team of black horses stood harnessed to the Black Carriage. But it wasn't the Black Carriage Oskar had seen the night Podo Helmer and Peet the Sock Man battled the Fangs. This carriage was longer and sleeker, and was, to Oskar's horror, more frightening to behold than the other. Instead of one chamber, there were several horizontal compartments just big enough for a man, as if the carriage were a wagon bearing a stack

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of iron coffins turned on their sides. Long spikes rose from the top of the carriage, creating a fortlike enclosure where two Fangs perched with crossbows.

Joe Shooster lay motionless in the street. A cluster of Fangs surrounded him and jabbed him with the butts of their spears. Another Fang clutched Addie's arms behind her back and pushed her down the steps from the jail. One of the Fangs on top of the carriage turned a switch, and the lowest of the horizontal doors clanged open. Two of the Fangs dragged Joe to the carriage and threw him in. Addie screamed as they forced her into the box above Joe's. The Fangs slammed the coffin doors and laughed as the hooded driver whipped the horses and drove the carriage out of sight.

Then a conversation drifted up through the window.

"That was fun," said a Fang standing in the street below.

"Aye. Nothin' like the squirmin' and the screamin'," said another wistfully. "Wish there was more of it these days. Been standin' around in thisss town for days with nothin' to do but pick at me scales."

"Won't be long afore we have some action," said the first.

"Eh? What do you know that I don't?"

"The ridgerunner says the Igibysss are in the forest."

"Impossible."

"Why?"

"Because the cows woulda swallowed 'em up by now."

"Nah. They're with that socky fella. The mean one. He ain't afraid of the toothy cows. The ridgerunner says he's got bridges all through the trees. Says they're livin' in a tree house."

Oskar's eyes widened, and he smiled in spite of his pain. The Igibys were alive!

"Livin' in a what?" said the Fang.

"A tree house."

There was a pause.

"What's a tree house?"

"Don't know. Sounds familiar, though. Something about it gave me an odd sorta sick in me gut."

"Well, we'll find out tomorrow. Tonight the rest of the troops arrive; then we're movin' into the forest to find 'em. Leavin' tomorrow after first feeding. Catch 'em by surprise."

"No," Oskar breathed.

Then his strength snuffed out like a candle, and he collapsed to the floor of room eight, unaware of the small puddle of blood that gathered beneath him.

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## Appropriate Words from Ubinious the Whooned

The next morning after breakfast, Peet the Sock Man returned to the tree house, carrying a skinned and gutted cave blat over his shoulder. He mentioned casually that there might be a pack of horned hounds hot on his tail, at which point Podo roused Nugget to be on alert. As Peet pulled himself and the cave blat carcass up through the tree house door, the howl of a horned hound curled through the air, and Nugget bounded into the woods after it.

Janner and Tink sat cross-legged on the floor of the tree house, trying their best to attend to their T.H.A.G.S. though their minds spun with excitement about the journey ahead.

Tink was busy sketching the Igiby cottage from memory at his mother's request. She said they might never go back to Glipwood, and wasn't it nice that Tink had his father's sketchbook to peruse so he could see bits and pieces of his family's past? At eleven years old, Tink wasn't able to imagine passing his sketchbook on to anyone, let alone his own children. But he liked to draw, and Janner knew he had a vague sense of the value of archiving his work, of telling his story with the pictures he made.

Janner focused on his journal, trying to describe the intense anticipation he felt over the impending journey to the Ice Prairies and his frustration at having to wait around while preparations were made. Leeli sat in the crook of a fat tree limb, memorizing lyrics from a book of songs.

Janner heard Nugget bark and looked out the window to see the dog returning from the deeper forest, carrying the limp body of a horned hound in his mouth. Nugget was so gentle with the children that it was hard to imagine him attacking anything, but the giant dog was capable of killing more than just horned hounds. He and Peet had faced an assault of hundreds of Fangs of Dang and survived without a single wound that Janner ever saw.

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At the base of the tree, Peet was hard at work, digging a hole to bury a chest full of his journals. There were too many to carry, and he didn't want them to fall into the Fangs' hands. He yelped when Nugget dropped the dead hound atop the pile of dirt beside the hole and shooed the great dog away.

"Hounds are bad flavor! Bad tastiness in your stew and worse on your books."

Nugget whined and dragged the hound back through the trees.

Just as Janner dipped his quill into the ink bottle and resumed writing in his journal, Nia's voice called from below.

"Boys, come down. I need you to try on your packs."

Janner and Tink tossed their books aside and clattered down the ladder.

Nia stood with her back to a pile of odds and ends and regarded her sons with her arms folded. She had spent the last few weeks working diligently at sewing packs out of Peet's old blankets and a few animal skins piled in the corner of the tree house and now handed each of the boys a completed backpack covered with flaps, ties, buttons, and compartments.

Janner slung it onto his back. He knew they'd need food, but he didn't know what other supplies a long journey required.

"Here's the book your father gave you," Nia said, placing it in Janner's pack. "I've wrapped it to keep it safe. And you'll need these." She handed him Tink's sheathed sword, pointing out the leather ties with which to lash it to his brother's pack.

The packs grew heavier and heavier as Nia filled them with necessary items: a box of matches, an oiled tinderbox in case the matches ran out, satchels of dried meat, packets of salt, a coil of rope, a folding knife Nia had scavenged from the weapons chamber of Anklejelly Manor, and the extra tunic and breeches. Nia lashed Janner's unstrung bow and a quiver of arrows to the side of the pack opposite the sword; then she did the same for Tink.

Nia stepped back and narrowed her eyes at the packs on her sons' backs. "The packs will suffice," she said with a nod. Then her eyes moved to her sons, and Janner moaned. "But your appearance will not. Come on."

Nia subjected Janner and Tink to a painful scrubbing. It felt to Janner like his mother intended to rub the skin from his bones. Then she set to work on their hair. Using one of the folding knives she'd placed in their packs, Nia sawed at their hair, grunting and tugging until locks of Janner's and Tink's shaggy hair lay in clumps at their feet.

When Nia was satisfied, she retrieved a looking glass and held it up. Janner looked at himself with surprise. In the harrowing weeks since they had first rescued Leeli from

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Slarb, a lot had happened. Janner could see it in his own eyes: a look of gravity, a maturity that he hoped might someday become wisdom. He handed the mirror to Tink, wondering if his little brother would notice the same thing of himself.

Instead Tink immediately made the goofiest, ugliest face he could muster and burst into laughter. Leeli encouraged it with laughter of her own, and Tink went on for several minutes, inventing silly faces and laughing until he couldn't breathe. Hard as he tried, Janner couldn't help grinning at his brother's antics, and he noticed their mother smiling too.

*Behold, Janner thought, the High King of Anniera. Maker help us.*

His thoughts were interrupted by a strange sound in the forest.

Janner peered into the trees, wondering if it was his imagination. After weeks in Glipwood Forest, he had come to recognize the shriek of the cave blat, the gribbit of the bumpy digtoad, the horrible moo of the toothy cow, and the wail of the horned hound. Peet had even taught Janner and his siblings about the various birds that sang in the boughs and how to tell which ones were hostile, which were mischievous, and which were singing dirges for fellow birds that had been gobbled by a gulpswallow.

But this sound was different. It was almost human. Janner took quick stock of his family to be sure everyone was present, and to his increasing alarm, all were.

"*Shh!*" Janner clamped a hand over Tink's mouth. "Hear that?"

"Mmmf," Tink replied.

The sound got louder, now accompanied by the faint *kshhh-kshhh* of snapping twigs and brush trampled underfoot. Podo and Nia heard it too. They all stood, heads turned, listening. Nugget whined and paced back and forth until Leeli hushed him.

Finally, the voice echoing through the timbers grew near enough that the words became clear.

"IN THE WORDS OF UBINIOUS THE WHOONED, 'RUN, IGIBYS! IF YOU'RE OUT THERE, RUN! THEY'RE COMING!'"

## A Traitor in the Trees

Oskar Noss Reteep bounced and jiggled atop the bewildered donkey like jelly in an earthquake. He held the reins high in the air and had long since lost any hope of his feet finding the stirrups. His spectacles dangled from one ear, and a magnificent swath of white hair, attached just above his ear, lifted from where he had pressed it to his head and flew behind him like a flag of surrender.

Janner nearly came out of his skin when he recognized his old employer. The last time he had seen Oskar, the old fellow lay dying on the floor of Books and Crannies, urging him to flee. On that last, awful night in the Glipwood Township, amidst the horror of the Fang battle, Zouzab's betrayal, and the family's escape to Anklejelly Manor, Janner had assumed Oskar was dead. To see him alive came as a shock, but it turned quickly to joy. Janner smiled as Reteep bounded toward him, making such a racket that flocks of wrenchies perched in the trees cawed and flapped away.

"Janner!" Podo's voice found its way through the thoughts in Janner's head. "Boy!"

Janner snapped out of his daze and realized that of all the Igibys, he was the only one standing still. He gasped when he finally realized what Oskar was bellowing.

"RUN, IGIBYS! IN THE WORDS OF—"

Before he could finish, the poor donkey—whether from fatigue or because he could no longer bear the indignity of such a jiggly rider—went down. Oskar's eyes bulged as he soared through the air toward the clearing where Janner stood. He flew with a surprising grace, hair trailing behind, spectacles dangling, his mouth forming a perfect O as the reins, still firmly in his grip, snapped taut and flipped the round man over to land on his back at Janner's feet.

The donkey brayed.

Oskar lay on the ground, blinking, surprised he wasn't dead.

"Janner! My boy, I'm glad to see you. I came as fast as I could." Oskar winced and placed a hand on his side as Janner helped him to his feet. The old man's middle was wrapped with bloodstained bandages.

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"I don't know how you're alive, Mister Reteep, but I'm glad," Janner said.

Podo descended the ladder from Peet's castle with a bundle on his back, while Nia and Leeli gathered food supplies and shoved them into various packs. Tink dropped Peet's leather-bound journals one at a time from a tree house window; Peet caught them and piled them atop a rectangle of coarse fabric spread out on the ground.

"That's all of them, Uncle Peet!" Tink called.

Peet nodded, folded the canvas over the books, and heaved the pile into the hole he had dug.

"Oskar! How much time do we have?" Podo barked.

"Oh dear." Oskar brushed himself off. "Not more than a few minutes. I tried to sneak away, but they saw me, and there are hundreds of them. Hundreds!"

A new sound drifted through the woods. A horrible sound, like nothing Janner had ever heard. Part moan, part growl, it was clear it came from something large. Even Nugget whined. He bounded to Leeli and pressed his great furry body against her, whether to protect her or to be protected, Janner wasn't sure.

"And that's the other thing," Oskar said gravely.

"Eh?" Podo heaved a supply-laden pack over his shoulder. "What's the other thing?"

"Trolls." Oskar shuddered and wrinkled his nose.

*Trolls?* A shiver of fear coursed through Janner. He had never seen a troll, though Pembrick's *Creaturepedia* depicted several troll races, all of which were formidable and ghastly to behold.

His heart skipped a beat at the look of worry that flashed over Nia's face. She was serene in the worst of circumstances, able to grow icy cold even as the heat of danger rose. But when the troll's growl-moan sounded again, closer than before, her face wrinkled in a way that made her look old and tired, though only for a moment.

Podo looked hard at Oskar, then nodded. "Well, whether it's trolls or Fangs or me Great-Granny Olaraye comin', we're getting out of here fast. Janner, get that donkey over here and tie what ye can to the saddle. Tink!"

"Yes sir," Tink said from behind Podo.

"Help yer sister with her things, then have yer bow and arrow ready. You ride on Nugget with her and shoot at anything you're sure you can hit. Be sure, understand? Arrows are precious."

"Yes," said a papery voice just above them. "Arrows are precious. But they'll do the Igibys no good, I'm afraid."

Zouzab Koit perched high in the overstory and looked down on them with an expressionless face. Oskar sputtered, so enraged that he could think of no one to quote.

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"You!" shouted Podo, his face already reddening for the torrent of curses about to burst from his mouth.

But before he could say a word, Peet the Sock Man screeched and leapt impossibly high, swinging himself into the boughs where Zouzab crouched. Zouzab skittered away, blowing his high-pitched whistle as Peet pursued. In a flurry of whirling branches and falling leaves, the Sock Man and the ridgerunner were out of sight, leaving Podo and Oskar trembling and speechless. Their anger was interrupted by another troll call, then another whistle blow, not far away.

"No time! Move!" Podo said.

While Janner pulled the tired donkey to its feet, Nia pushed the dirt into the hole where Peet had stashed his precious journals. She threw a pile of leaves atop the fresh dirt and spread them around to conceal it.

"Papa, where will we go?" Nia cried as Podo rushed up the ladder to the tree house.

"Don't know, lass! North, I reckon," he called over his shoulder. "We can't go south now, like we planned."

"But—but there's nothing north but the river. We'll be trapped!"

"Ah!" Oskar said. "There's a bridge. A way across . . ." He doubled over and coughed. Janner rushed to his side to steady him.

Podo climbed down the ladder in a blur, carrying an armful of dried meat, which he shoved into his pack. "We're fools to stay here a toot longer. Hurry!"

"Here." Nia tossed Peet's leather satchel to Janner. "Tie this to the donkey, then get your things. Go!"

"Mama, Mister Reteep is hurt," Janner said. "Where's the water from the First Well?"

"I don't know, son. Artham had it. We'll have to give Oskar some when we get far enough away from the Fangs." She turned to Oskar. "Can you make it? Can you ride?"

Oskar nodded, wheezing.

Janner's sword, lashed to the side of his pack, thunked against his hip when he threw the pack over his shoulders and reminded him how heavy and real and dangerous swords—and the situations that called for them—were. The growl-moans of the trolls grew louder, and Janner could hear the faint *thud-thud-thud* of marching feet.

Leeli sat astride Nugget, her hands on the tufts of black fur that gathered at the sides of her dog's great head, her newest crutch slung with twine over her shoulder. Tink sat just behind his sister with his bow ready. Nia held the tired donkey's reins and ran a soothing hand along its jaw. When Oskar tried to mount the donkey, it fixed him with a surly eye and brayed.

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“All right, lads and lasses,” Podo shouted, “we’re off at a quick pace, hear?”

“But Grandpa, what about Uncle Peet?” Leeli asked.

Podo lowered his voice and spoke without looking his granddaughter in the eye. “We ain’t waiting fer him. No time. He’ll catch up.”

“But—”

*“After them!”* snarled the faint, unmistakable voice of a Fang of Dang.

Janner saw a green, scaly face appear in the tree-choked distance, then another, and another. Podo took hold of Nugget’s collar and led him at a run, deeper into Glipwood Forest.

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## The Gully Rim

Through the forest they ran. Behind them, like an invisible storm blowing through the trees, came the howls and moans and stomping feet of the Fang army. The donkey needed no prodding from Janner to quicken its pace. Peet the Sock Man was nowhere to be seen, but his screech occasionally cut through the darker sounds behind them.

Podo drove them onward, and even with his peglegged limp, he had to check his speed to allow the rest to keep up. Janner and his mother ran with the wild-eyed donkey between them, and Oskar huffed and wheezed in the rear.

As they ran, Janner looked over his shoulder and saw a line of Fangs weaving in and out of the trees, and among them, three lumbering trolls, which broke fat limbs like twigs. Janner felt a combination of horror and fascination and wished he could somehow stop the pursuit so he could get a better look at one of the smelly hulks.

“Janner, watch where you’re going,” Nia said, and he just had time to dance around a small tree. Ahead, Nugget trotted beside Podo, choosing his path with care so that Leeli was safe from low branches. With each troll bellow, Nugget’s ears flattened against his head and he whined.

“*Shh*, boy,” Leeli said, leaning forward to speak in her dog’s ear.

Tink sat behind Leeli with his bow at the ready.

“Tink, can you see them?” Janner huffed.

“Yeah, I see them,” Tink answered, trying to hide the worry in his voice. “They’re getting closer. Grandpa, they’re getting closer!”

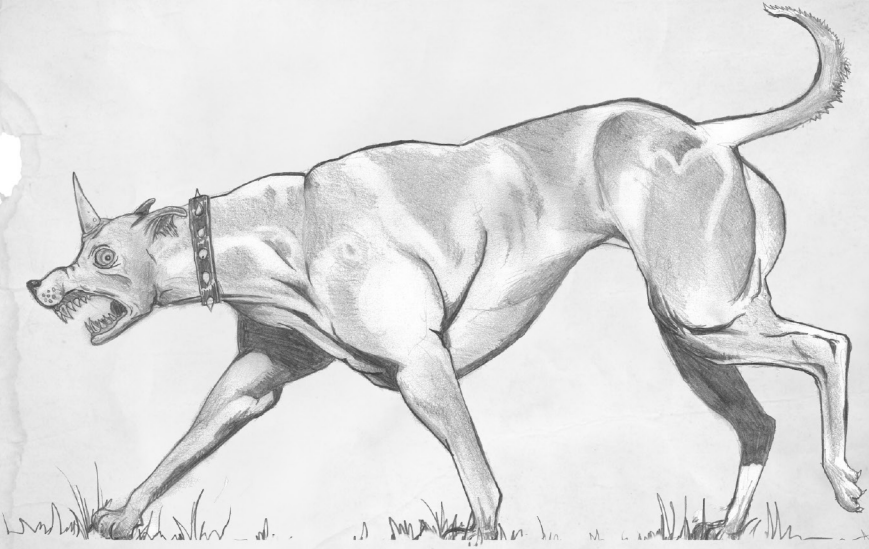
“Aye, I hear ’em, lad,” said Podo. “You just keep that arrow on the string.”

Janner tried not to look back, but he couldn’t help himself. He saw even more Fangs and trolls, close enough that he could make out looks of vicious glee on their faces. He could also smell them. A sharp, bitter odor polluted the air, and with the smell came memories of Slarb, of Gnorm and the Black Carriage, of cold, damp Fang flesh. With the memories came deep and overpowering fear. Since Oskar had burst into the clearing, Janner had felt tension and urgency—but now that he remembered the iron grip of a Fang claw and the oozy

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afraid.

## Horned Hound



The horned hound bites. It also chews and eats and can stab with its pointy horn. Petting is not recommended. Like the toothy cow, it is drawn to—and driven mad by—the smell of fire.

From Pembrick's *Creaturepedia*

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“Oskar!” Nia cried.

Janner saw the old man stagger, teetering like a pile of dishes about to collapse. When Oskar reached out to steady himself on the nearest tree, Janner saw with alarm that the old man’s hand was bright with blood. Oskar’s knees buckled, and he crumpled to the ground.

Podo rushed back to his friend and pulled him to his feet.

“Janner, make room!” Podo ordered. Janner shoved the bedrolls and supplies from the donkey’s back and with Podo’s help heaved Oskar onto the poor beast. The old man lay on his stomach, draped over the saddle like a game animal freshly killed. His eyelids drooped, and his face was pale and clammy.

“Tink!” Leeli screamed, and Janner turned to see a new reason to fear. A horned hound burst from the ranks of the charging Fangs and barreled toward them. It wore a collar, and its face and body were decorated with black war paint.

Tink sat frozen on Nugget’s back.

“SHOOT!” Podo roared.

Tink blinked twice and came back to himself. He drew the bow and loosed the arrow, and the hound collapsed in a burst of leaves.

Podo didn’t need to give the order to run like mad. Nugget leapt into motion so fast that Tink nearly toppled from his back. Nia ran beside the braying donkey and steadied Oskar, who moaned as he jiggled along.

The way was difficult. The forest north of Peet’s tree house rose and fell in steepening hills. Now and then they had to skirt around treacherous gullies, dried riverbeds tangled with fallen trees.

From the top of a long slope, Janner saw the Fangs were no more than an arrow shot away, and two more of their horned hounds sprinted toward the Igibys. Tink loosed another arrow and missed. As he hurried to draw another arrow from the quiver, Peet swooped down from the trees with his talons bared, killed the hounds, and disappeared into the leaves again.

Janner knew Peet was no match against so many Fangs, but his sudden presence was like a cool wind on a hot day. A Throne Warden of Anniera occupied the space between the Igibys and their enemies.

Peet’s appearance had a surprising effect on the Fangs as well. Janner couldn’t see much, but he sensed the space between himself and the Fangs increasing. Though they numbered in the hundreds, the Fangs hung back, wary eyes on the branches above.

Suddenly Janner found himself skidding down a steep bank. Podo had led Nugget into a deep gully and was halfway across the depression, amidst old branches, brown

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leaves, and rotting tree trunks. The trench stretched a long way in both directions, so they had no choice but to cross it.

The donkey stopped dead in its tracks on the rim of the slope. Janner pulled at the reins while Nia pushed from behind, but the animal wouldn't move. Its eyes were fixed on the gully floor, its nostrils expanding and contracting like a beating heart.

If Janner had not been running in fear for his life, he might have remembered what Pembrick's *Creaturepedia* had to say about such gullies in Glipwood Forest; he might have thought to warn his family before they scrambled down into the tree-clogged floor. If Janner hadn't been thinking about the Fangs and trolls snarling through the woods behind him, he would've suggested firmly that the Igiby family find a way *around* the gully, even if it added hours and miles to the journey.

If Peet the Sock Man, so familiar with the dangers of the forest, had been with them and not fending off the Fangs and trolls and horned hounds, he would've most emphatically suggested that the Igiby family *not* descend into the hole.<sup>1</sup>

But they did.

- 
1. From Pembrick's *Creaturepedia*: "Avoid the gullies and sinkholes of Glipwood Forest at all costs. It is commonly known that the gargan rockroach sets its trap in such places. But the gargan rockroach lying in wait beneath the leaves and limbs gathered at the bottom of the gully is only one of the dangers to the oblivious gully crawler. The sweet scent emanated by the female gargan rockroach sends some animals into a temperbolic trance and draws them irresistibly to the waiting rockroach. It is not uncommon to find gathered in the gully any number of deadly creatures trapped and awaiting the gargan rockroach's return from deeper in the earth where it tends its young."

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## Monsters in the Hollow

Nugget stood at the bottom of the gully with one great paw atop an old rotten tree trunk, Leeli and Tink on his back. Nia slid down to join them while Podo and Janner, halfway up the slope, tugged at the donkey's reins. Janner scrambled to the rear of the donkey and pushed with all his might, but it did no good. The fear-struck beast brayed and whipped its head in defiance. It had no intention of going any farther.

"COME ON, YOU STUBBORN OLD CLOMP CHOMPER!" Podo yelled.

"We need you to come just a little farther," Leeli's voice called sweetly from across the gully. "That's it. Come on!"

The donkey's ears moved forward at Leeli's voice, and its braying ceased. It took one halting step forward. Podo arched an eyebrow at Leeli, who smiled in return. Janner risked another look behind him as he slid down the gully slope.

Peet the Sock Man had dropped from the trees and stood before the line of wary Fangs with his arms folded across his chest, his back straight, his chin thrust out, and his eyes closed. He reminded Janner of Mayor Blaggus when he conducted the Glipwood Township Orchestra.

Then a troll emerged from the Fang front lines. It was the first clear look Janner had at one of the creatures, and he understood why Nia and Podo looked so worried when Oskar mentioned them. The troll's legs were short and stout, but the creature still stood twice as tall as a man. Its torso and arms bulged with muscle and veins; a tiny head with a sprout of gray hair peeked out from between its shoulders. The troll's eyes were hidden in the shadow of its bony forehead—a forehead matched by a bony jaw that looked strong enough to batter down a castle gate.

The beast gripped an iron-studded club in a fist the size of a wheelbarrow. It held the club above its head for a moment, then growled at Peet (in a moanish sort of way) and slammed it down. The ground vibrated, and pebbles shook loose from the bank where Janner stood. The donkey lost any courage Leeli had awakened and backed away.

"Grandpa!" Janner

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They scrambled out of the gully, lowered Oskar from the donkey's back, and draped his arms over their shoulders.

The troll slammed its club into the ground again.

Peet still hadn't moved. He stood petulant and motionless, buying the Igibys precious time just as he had on their escape to Anklejelly Manor. When Janner and Podo reached the bottom of the gully where the others waited, Janner took one last look up at the terrified donkey. He felt sorry for it and wondered if the Fangs would put it to work or if they would eat it.

Then he saw, dangling from the donkey's saddle, Peet's satchel.

Janner ducked out from under Oskar's arm and skittered back up the slope. The trolls and Fangs had inched closer to where Peet now skipped in circles and whistled to himself. The man was as brave as he was crazy, and the Fangs didn't know what to make of it. Janner tried to untie the straps that bound Peet's satchel to the donkey, but they wouldn't loosen, so he tore it open to grab what he could. He dug through a bundle of journals tied together with twine, a hammer, one old boot, a live mouse, and a leather flask—the water from the First Well.

Janner gasped. He tucked the flask into the side pocket of his pants and leapt back into the gully.

But something was wrong.

Nugget should have crawled up the other side by now, but he stood motionless in the bottom of the gully. Leeli pleaded with her dog to awaken from his trance. Tink had dismounted and stood in front of Nugget with his hands on the sides of the big dog's face, calling his name.

Nugget responded with a lazy whine.

Then Tink screamed and struggled with something at his feet. Janner scrambled over fallen limbs to his brother before anyone else had time to react. When he saw the source of Tink's distress, Janner screamed too.

From a space between two dead limbs on the gully floor—which Janner now realized wasn't a floor at all—a milky-eyed head emerged. Its nose was moist and wide, its snout long like a horse's but stouter, and two yellowed fangs jutted down from a mouth full of crooked, sharp teeth: a toothy cow, trapped below them in a gargan rockroach den. What they thought was the gully floor was more like a giant brushpile hollowed out from below.

Within the cow's mouth was Tink's left foot, a foot that would've been removed from his body and well on its way to the beast's digestive system had the cow not been sluggish in the fog of the rockroach's gassy trap. The toothy cow's eyes oozed a yellow fluid and rolled around

le deeper into its maw.

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Janner pulled at Tink's leg, but the cow's smaller teeth were angled inward.<sup>1</sup> If the cow had been fully awake, Janner was sure Tink would be yet another member of his family with only one working foot.

Podo appeared with his sword drawn and whacked at the monster, but the cow's head was only partially visible through the opening in the branches, and he couldn't do enough damage to release Tink's foot from it's mouth.

- 
1. To prevent prey from escaping. It is but one of the many deadly features of the Skrean toothy cow. See illustration, *On the Edge of the Dark Sea of Darkness*, page XX.



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The commotion jarred Nugget out of his trance. The great dog barked and tensed his body, taking in the situation as if he had just woken from a dream. When Nugget saw the cow, he pounced at the opening in the floor, which nearly sent Leeli flying from his back. When he landed, the patchwork of branches where they stood shifted and revealed more of the toothy cow's head.

The brothers and their grandfather looked at one another long enough to share the realization that they were about to fall—and then they did.

Nugget crashed to the ground. Leeli landed in the soft fur of her dog's flank, and Janner, Tink, and Podo followed, head over heels, slamming into the leafy floor of the gargan rockroach's den.

Janner was disoriented but realized that in the fall, Tink's foot had slipped loose from the cow's jaws. Then he saw the fear on Podo's face. The old pirate looked past Janner at something that froze him like a statue.

The den was crawling with monsters.



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