

**HORSE
BOY**

By LEW ANDERSON

THE LORIAN STONES TRILOGY

Book One: *Tombs of Dross*

Book Two: *Battles Grim*

Book Three: *Pillars and Power*

THE LORIAN CHRONICLES

Horse Boy

The Fire Between Us

Misty Grey



THE LORIAN CHRONICLES

HORSE BOY

LEW ANDERSON



TREESTONE BOOKS

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*For Aoden,
And all who enjoy the enchanting path into the land of story*

*Special thanks to Bradley J. K.
for decades of encouraging friendship*

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Ahrel	(ah-REL)
Ariel	(AR-ee-el)
Balbon	(BAL-bon)
Barloff	(BAR-loff)
Braegon	(BRAY-gun)
Chala Kon	(CHA-la KON)
Chia	(CHEE-ya)
Gorron	(GOR-ron)
Grimalkyn	(GRIM-ol-kin)
Horgol	(HOAR-gol)
Hornin	(HOR-nin)
Jori	(JOR-ee)
Ka Ra-Han	(KA-ra-HAN)
Kiana	(KEE-anna)
La-aki	(La-A-kee)
Mersha	(MER-sha)
Mya	(MY-ya)
Pallen-dore	(PAL-len-DOOR)
Parsi	(PAR-see)
Pharen	(FAIR-en)
Ra-el	(RA-EL)
Sasson	(SA-son)
Seela	(SEE-la)
Sheeshak	(SHEE-shak)
Taffa	(TAF-fa)
Terren	(TER-ren)
Tolhoff	(TOL-hoff)
Tortums	(TOR-tums)
Wodin	(WO-din)
Zeljin	(ZEL-jin)

PREFACE

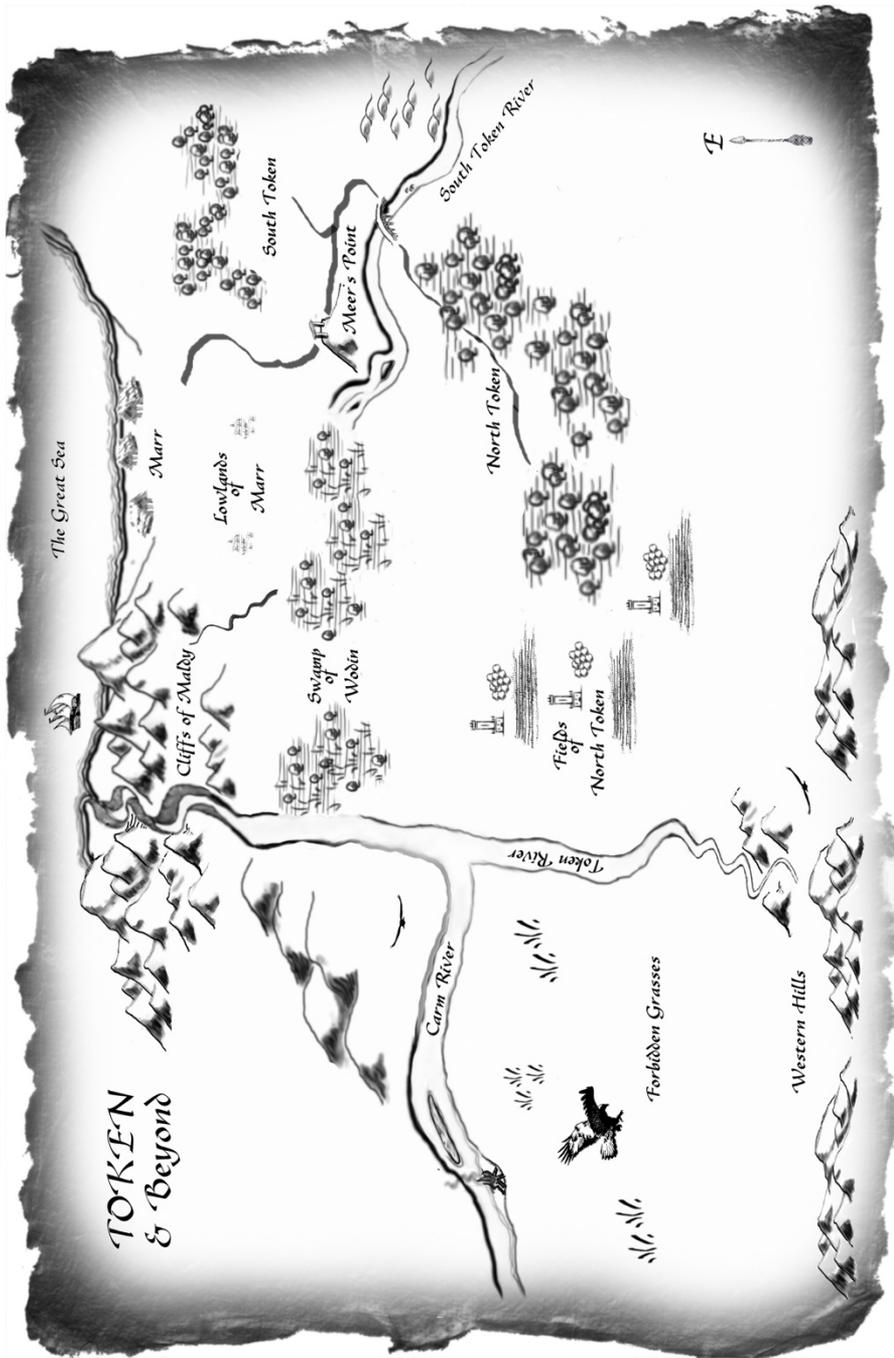
After completing my account regarding the restoration of the Lorian kingdom, my life came into imminent danger from which I had to flee. Finding sanctuary beneath the earth, along with other souls threatened by the same powers of evil, I had the distinct privilege to meet the remarkable character, Mr. Pernipity Snarls.

While hiding out together in preservation of our lives, he, being of Grimalkyn descent, thoroughly enjoyed engaging me with the histories of Loria and the surrounding kingdoms. Many a nights we sat beside our fire, he with his long pipe and I with my pen and paper, recalling the glorious adventures recorded in the numerous books he had acquired throughout his years as a rare book collector.

The following account, according to Mr. Snarls, occurred four cord and four, that is, twenty-four years before the tragic fall of Loria. Because it bears significance to my account of the Lorian Stones, I have chosen to record it to the best of my ability as told me by Mr. Snarls himself.

Sincerely,
L. A. A.

TOKEN & Beyond



PROLOGUE

Within a room of polished stone, long-fingered hands shifted a column of swirling green fog. Dark eyes watched the rising column twist and twirl until they could see two men beneath a balmy night sky, their figures lit by a three-quarter moon. A giant black bird circled above them, its silent shadow passing unnoticed. The long fingers moved, tilting, then slanting. The great bird swooped low, its ear listening.

“Ready up three ships... fully armed,” said the taller of the two. “The unwary fool sails on the morrow. We’ll sail at dusk.”

“Hey oh, Commander,” answered a stout man in uniform.

“Choose only loyal,” the taller said. “Our idiotic king shall find nothing but death. When this doltish journey ends, so shall the line of Elgin.” He paused to look out over the vast city shimmering below. “And Gelden... jewel of Mersha... shall finally have one worthy of her glories.”

“Yes, Commander. What shall I tell the captains?”

“That we sail in secret escort... protecting our cherished king from pirates.”

“Yes, sir.”

The taller glared down at the man in uniform. “Remember, Captain, fail me not... and the daughter is yours.”

“Hey oh, Commander.” The man snapped straight, expanding his chest. “I... will not fail.”

PART I
THE GIRL



1 THE TERREN

Faster, Faster!” A teen boy clung to the side of his horse named Faster. The panting beast galloped hard through the open land where stalks of long grass slapped the boy’s tawny skin. In their wake, the shadow of a terren eagle skimmed, gliding like an evil ghost over the forbidden grasses.

Just ahead, glistening in the morning light, flowed the Token River, beyond which lay the protection of the forest and the land of the Token—the boy’s home.

The massive eagle tucked its wings to swoop, thrusting black talons forward, eager to tear the sinewy boy from his horse and feed him to its voracious young.

In desperate earnest, the lad clutched the leather net that wrapped the steed’s sweating body—a netting made by his own hands, a netting that wrapped all around and up the neck. He could ride in a dozen places, even underneath if danger demanded.

He glanced back to see the giant eagle begin its dive, hearing once more his mother’s words of warning. He knew the danger

of entering the open grasses.

But the girl...

“Mighty Ra-el,” he prayed, shifting up onto the horse’s back, “I bid you... guide now... my blade.” Pulling the sword from over his shoulder, he pressed tight to the quaking muscles, bounding in rhythm to the thundering hooves, breathing in the smell of leather and sweat.

“Ride steady,” he said, his cheek pressed to the lunging neck, urging the beast, its nostrils flaring wide with fear. “We... can do this.”

The first dive had been a sideward strike. But the brave boy had remained atop his faithful horse, waiting till the sharp talons were just two arms away before dropping to Faster’s side. The jagged claws of death seized only empty air, skimming horse and boy. The terren’s angry screech seemed to still echo in the morning sky.

Now he rode, waiting as his horse heaved, hooves flinging sand and soil, pounding their way to the towering trees of Token. He watched the raptor pull its wings, diving from behind, aiming now for both him and his horse. It would knock them to the ground, kill the horse and carry the boy off. Kill him... like it had his father.

“Turn yo, then tso!”

The horse quickly turned left. The eagle shifted, its huge wings spreading to adjust, slowing its strike. Faster then jolted right, forcing the bird to again adjust its dive.

In a sudden twist, the boy spun himself to now face the leering claws of death, his feet tucked into the netting. With his back to the horse’s head, he readied his sword, its wyre-skin handle sticking firm to his sweaty palm, his lean muscles taut.

“Be with me... Father,” the boy huffed in pray. “Give me strength.”

Thundering onward, horse and boy rode as one, as if born of the same blood on the same day. He tucked his feet further into the leather netting, rising in rhythm to Faster’s gallop, rising till he stood, knees bent, eyes fixed on the swooping creature now a knife toss away.

The huge bird thrust its talons forward, its black feet spread wide.

“Drop your head and ho!” the boy shouted.

Dropping his head, Faster locked into a sliding halt. The boy flopped back, landing flat against the horse’s neck. The eagle struck in a rush of wind. The boy thrust, his blade piercing inner flesh. Ragged talons scraped his ribs and face. A screech of terror rippled the land of grass. But he held his sword tight, his arm jerking hard up over his head. A talon tore his skin from armpit to forearm. He cried out. Coarse feathers struck his face as the bird flew past.

Lungs heaving, he clutched the leather net, his fingers still tight about his sword. The blade had gone deep. Staring upward, he watched the huge wings beat the air, the dark gray terror soaring high into the morning sky. A trail of red fell like ribbon, a ribbon of death, of blood fresh from the heart.

A stunned moment passed, then they galloped toward the river, the dark shadow drifting west till the land of the grasses lay still. Soon the waters of the Token washed the weary hooves and bleeding wounds—wounds of triumph.

Still breathing hard, the young teen knelt in the river, watching the blood from his arm swirl off with the water’s cleansing flow. *Red Blood*, he mused, named for the night his mother gave birth to him, the night the moon glowed red like blood. His father had taken the new Token child out into the cold winter’s night and held him toward the sky. His frail flesh shone red in the moon’s eerie light, vapor steaming from the naked child—the firstborn of the Token New Year.

“Red... Blood...” he said slowly, his tone somber, “tole of the Token... curse of Teel.”

Faster gave a quick snort, shaking his head wildly.

“It’s what they call me, Faster. It’s who I am.”

Again the horse shook his head, the long chestnut mane flipping about. Red chuckled, watching the wise steed scan the sky, light-brown eyes searching. The morning sun enhanced the sleek, buckskin-colored body, its rays shimmering on the beautiful chestnut mane, legs, and long flowing tail.

“You did good, my friend,” Red said, lowering his arm into the current, blood still freely swirling with the water’s flow. “I should have... kept keener watch.”

A silver fingerling struggled against the steady current, its slim form fighting to stay behind a smooth rock. Downstream the larger fish fed where the Token met the Carm.

“The way of all life...” Red mused, watching the little fish in constant struggle. “Give in... and you’ll be swallowed up before Faster can stomp all four hooves.”

The horse watched the reddened current, giving a quick snort and shake of his head.

“I know,” Red said, clenching his teeth in a pain-filled grimace. “Marm’s gonna word-whip.”

He stood and with hands trembling, opened a small leather pouch fastened at the base of the horse’s neck where it met the chest. Taking out a smaller pouch, he loosened the strings and sprinkled a fine gray powder over his wound. It burned. He groaned, fighting back tears, the intense pain screaming. He moaned a quick prayer, the blood still dripping too fast from his arm, his whole body quivering at times. He knew pain, knew it well, but he’d learned to take it, to move beyond. But today it came with troubling thoughts, foreboding thoughts streaked with fear.

Soon the bleeding slowed, the gray powder clotting the wound.

Faster drank more and then snorted toward the trees, the towering trees that spread out over the blessed land of North Token. Red gave a nod, washing his chest and face one last time, careful not to wet the wound. He breathed hard through clenched teeth, quivering fingers feebly trying to tuck a flap of skin over the jagged rip inside his arm. He grimaced, eyes shut tight, and for a time just stood, breathing fast through his nose, teeth still clenched.

Slowly taking his sword, his father’s sword, he rinsed it in the current, watching the terren’s blood cling to the blade as if reluctant to admit defeat.

“We pierced a terren,” he said to his horse, a broad smile

THE TERREN

replacing the grimace. “Fought arm to arm with the ruthless lord of the sky.” The terren eagle was the giant death-bird of the grasses and beyond, the feathered demon that killed grown men, warriors even. He smiled at his horse. “Brought down by Red Blood, that *curse-burden* boy of North Token... and his faithful steed... Faster the grand.”

The horse shook his head, flinging drops of water that sparkled in the morning’s golden light.

Red sighed, glancing back the way they had come. “My gratefulness, O Guider Ra-el.” He studied his wounds. “You are the sword of my soul, my strength of arm, my arrow of deliverance.”

Hands still quivering, he wiped the blade, glancing toward the sky. Blood from his wound soaked the wyre-skin on the handle. “I held it, Father...” he said softly, “held it strong.”

Sheathing his sword, he grimaced again, his keen eyes looking back over the grasses, the face of the girl filling his mind.

2 THE GIRL

Morning fires brewed blackened pots as shafts of light angled through the lingering smoke. High in the towering trees birds whistled and chirped when Red and Faster rode into the cluster of mounds, huts, and tree homes of North Token.

“Them be terren wounds,” an old man, face wrinkled like tree bark, muttered through yellowed teeth. He spat, tossing a pebble at Red, the stone striking the boy’s calf. “Yus feeling pity for them terrens, tole boy?” Red ignored him, dropping gracefully from Faster’s back. The horse gave the old man a hardy snort, then went to find some grain.

“Red Blood!” His mother, or marm exclaimed, her shrill cry silencing the birds. She stood stunned, her face stricken. “Did I birth you to ride the grasses? What have you done?” A crowd gathered.

“Plead pardon, Marm.” Red bowed his head. “Out hunting.” He said nothing of piercing the giant eagle, though everything in him yearned to declare the feat, something he’d never heard done before. *Especially the way we did it*, he thought. He looked at the gathering crowd. *Wouldn’t believe me anyway... and only make Marm fuss up more.*

Some standing near murmured insults. One scrawny old

THE GIRL

woman in rough-spun cloth proclaimed, “Best be a terren just take the vex-some tole.” She wagged a long wooden spoon at Red. “‘Twe better for us all, pray Moc Bol.”

Red said nothing.

Tears filled his mother’s lovely eyes. Tall and slender, she was still declared by many to be the gem of North Token. After his father’s death, every eligible man came calling, but she wouldn’t yield up her love.

When the crowd finally returned to making breakfast, mending leathers, weaving cloth, and tending animals, his mother dressed his wounds. She explained again how the Token are people of the trees, not the grasses. Red peered out from within their tree home, a fine home built inside a giant oak, hollowed by his father’s strong hands.

The Token were hunters and farmers, tilling only the lands between the giant trees and the river. They entered the fields together with watchmen always at their posts. Only Red ventured beyond, but always with Faster, the horse he’d rescued from the Token River that fateful spring when the floods had come. He had found the young colt caught in the sinking sands, buried till only eyes and nose remained. Red nearly died freeing the animal, but never once rued the day.

Faster wasn’t like the Token horses—simple and slow, workhorses meant for pulling wagons and plows or dragging logs. He was fast and quick, jumping fallen trees almost the height of Spar, the tallest Token of the clan. And best of all... Faster knew speech.

“Aaah!” Red groaned as his mother cleaned his arm. The wound looked rough—a jagged gash, skin open and oozing.

“I’ll get Mender.”

Soon Mender came with her teen daughter Parsi. Together they sewed the skin, packing the wound with hot herbal mash, wrapping it in leaves beneath a strip of wool. Ointment covered the burning scrapes on his chest and face.

Red watched Parsi move gracefully alongside her marm. She had long chestnut hair like Faster’s tail—twirly, thick, and glistening. And just like Faster, the light-colored ends hung

uncut, free to grow. Her soft brown eyes were warm like the evening sky, her skin tan like a doe in spring. She, like him, had reached her full-moon, the time of double sevens, the time when the boys would choose their mate. He met her eyes as she glanced his way, knowing her deepest hope, and her darkest fear. *The fight will be hard, he mused. Black Claw is strong... his heart cruel.*

“Parsi will be back on the morrow,” Mender said, “if La-aki grants you yet another day.” Mender spoke harshly but with care. She and Red’s marm were dear friends. “And keep it dry... no swimming!” She then whispered a warning to his marm, to beware the terren’s black heat.

Red watched them leave. In two days would come the palledore, the time boys became men, fighting to win their chosen, wrestling for the girl who would become their mate. He glanced at his arm, now deeply regretting the terren encounter.

Should I tell her? Red pondered, longing to tell his mother how he had pierced the terren, but thinking more of the girl. Hair like the sand, skin like the wheat fields in fall, and eyes unlike any—one bright blue like the morning’s new sky, the other a glistening green, both like the polished gems traded for tools and weapons of iron. Again she filled his mind, her winsome smile following him, holding his gaze as he rode away.

3 SHIPS

A runner came panting out the words while a dark sky rumbled overhead.

“Ships at Marr... huge. Armored men... long hair, light and yellow.” The runner gasped and heaved, hands on his knees. “Balbon the Bull... has called war!”

The Token stood beneath their trees, their trees of life and protection. The leaves fluttered as a wind blew, swirling smoke and dust.

Ships? From where? The Token River, dividing the forest from the grasses, joined the Carm, which flowed into the sea. The Marr lived at the sea. *Could these ships sail up the river... up to Token?*

Red stood beside Faster, both listening to the runner’s frantic words and the talk of light-haired ones. Again her face appeared, her blue and green eyes held in terror, yet watching him ride, charging through the river, shooting his bow.

Red hoped his marm would not ask about his bow, left where he’d seen the girl... about to be killed on the sand.

“You are to join Balbon at Meer’s Point,” the runner panted. “Assemble there tonight.”

Red strained to understand the events of the day and the words of the runner. Red stains soaked the leaves and cloth. He saw Parsi watching, angst twisting her lovely face, tender heart

listening to the troubling news.

Light-haired ones... Red knew of whom they spoke. That morning, in the dawn's first light, he and Faster had rode, following the Token River, riding into the sun. He rode until he neared the Carm—the river to the sea. He liked it there where the two rivers met. Life was there—animals of air and land and sea all met to feed, to kill, to be killed.

He went to hunt, hoping to shoot a deer or a red leaper, something large enough to feed them for more than one day. That's when he saw the terren, its foot on the girl, crushing her where the rivers met. Its dark brown form loomed, pressing her into the sand, its huge beak poised to tear her flesh.

"Go, Faster, go!" Horse and boy sped over grassy clods, streaking like an eagle's shadow in the morning haze. Red shot when he reached the Token's edge, his arrow striking the wing. The giant bird turned to face horse and boy, opening its hooked beak, shrilling the air. Red shot again, his arrow passing just underneath, for the terren leapt high, wings spread wide. The arrow struck the sandy bank just beyond the girl.

She saw him riding, her eyes of spring and sky, her hair like twirls of sand and milk. She watched him shoot a third just as the horse sprung from the bank, gliding over the water's edge before its tumultuous plunge. The great bird shrieked, leaping high and catching wind. Sand swirled as wings pummeled the air, a sunken shaft jutting from the creature's chest.

"Swim, Faster!" They had to reach the bank before the bird found air. Red pulled his bow, trying to aim in rhythm with Faster's lunging, hooves splashing through the shallows of the Token.

The river widened where it met the Carm, no deeper than the horse's shoulder. Red followed the bird with his aim as it rose high, holding his shot, awaiting the return. But the bird climbed higher and then sailed for the western hills, the roosts of the dreaded terren.

The wet horse nudged the girl with his nose, water plopping onto her scuffed chest and face. She lay silent, eyes wide, watching the strong, lean boy who scanned the sky, bowstring

taut.

Red slid from his horse and stood staring at the girl on the sand. Bloody scrapes marred her arms and legs. She held his gaze, her gem-colored eyes so bright and clear, her skin so fair.

“Are you hurt?” Red asked. She only stared, still eyeing this boy with his strange bow, his pants of leather, his tawny chest and arms bare. She then rose with a grimace, legs weak and trembling, body swaying. Her eyes fluttered and she swooned toward Red. He dropped his bow to catch her tender frame. For a moment, she hung limp as if dead, her full, wavy hair covering her face. But then she awoke with a start, looking long into his light-brown eyes.

“Your horse... is fast,” she said, her voice weak. She spoke Token, yet not like him. For a time she just gazed at him, then her smooth lips parted. “You saved... my life. Accept my solemn appreciation,” her voice smoother now.

Red looked to see men running up the sandy shores of the Carm, most waving swords or spears, their long golden hair flapping.

“You must beware the terren,” Red said, staring into the eyes that shone like gems. “They rule the sky. Drop from the clouds.”

The girl nodded, glancing upward, then at her wounds.

The men came shouting, turning from the Carm to run up along the Token. Red flung himself up onto Faster, glancing back as his horse thundered up the bank. He would not cross the Token River till he was far from the light-haired men. He saw her raise a bruised arm, then she smiled... the smile that captured his heart.

4 NIGHT RIDE

The men assembled with weapons ready, their leathers oiled and dark. Red saw the fear in Tanner's eyes, his only friend since life began. Tanner already had his full-moon, but waited to choose his mate, waiting till the day of her full-moon, the day the boys would fight. But today he would learn war.

Red watched as the men said their goodbyes, Tanner fighting off fear. They would run through the evening into the night to reach Meer's Point. They didn't know their enemy—the light-haired men. This threat came fresh with terror.

Red said nothing of the girl and the terren and the men on the Carm. They were but two hands full, maybe twelve. The girl spoke Token. *Ships on the sea?* he pondered. *Those men had no ship, only a longboat.* He had followed them, watching from a distance, watching them carry the girl back up the Carm.

Then the terren struck.

The Token men ran single file beneath the great trees, chanting hushed moans of war songs long ago passed down. When the fires died low and the women wept inside their homes, Red slipped out into the night. He reached for Faster just as Parsi

touched his arm.

“It needs to heal,” she said, her voice soft, yet firm. “You cannot go to war. It is forbidden.”

Parsi’s beauty beckoned all the Token boys in the northern wood. Her eyes and lips spoke gentle calm into the darkest day. Her form and grace could weaken the strongest boy. On the day of her full-moon, the fight will be hard and long.

“I’m not riding to war,” Red said. “Tell no one I left.”

“Where *do* you ride?”

Red shook his head and pulled himself up onto Faster.

“If I don’t come back...”

She stiffened, her eyes widening.

“I’ll come back,” Red said quickly. “And will fight... if they let me.”

She held his gaze for a time, then looked away.

Faster walked with careful steps, weaving through the massive trees of Token. Red gave Sop a nod as he rode past the watcher’s tree. It wasn’t the first time he had ridden out by night.

Red was a tole—a reject from birth, born when the moon was full and red, born of the god Teel, the one who conjures up tricks, sets traps for well-meaning men, foiling dreams and breaking hearts.

“Curse bringer...” he said with a sigh. “Have I brought this? Am I truly a son of Teel?”

The horse gave a quick nicker, shaking his head vigorously.

“And what of you, faithful friend? Of what god are you?” Red gave the horse a hearty pat. “Ra-el himself, a-sure. A worthy gift you are.”

Flicker beetles danced over the fields at the edge of the towering trees, their lights blinking and swirling. Horse and boy paused to listen to the numerous sounds filling the fields and watery shores beyond. Croaks and calls mingled with the murmuring flow, the breeze rustling the tall heads of grass and reed.

“What do you think of her, Faster?” Red said, keeping his

voice low. The horse bobbed his head, giving a low whinny. “Of what land do they come?” He studied her features once more, recalling every detail within his memory. Never had he seen such light skin, and those sprinkled spots that dusted her little nose and cheeks. “Why are they here?” he mused aloud. “Where do they belong?”

Where do I belong?

Although brown-haired like all the other Token boys, Red had a streak of light blond that hung near his left eye, an obvious stigma to accompany his blood-moon birth. Together, with skin a lighter shade as well, these ill-omens marked him for pain and trouble, a boy doomed to live alone.

“They will forbid me, Faster... I’ve heard them talking... won’t let me fight.”

Faster gave a quick snort.

“Tanner can’t break him... he’s too big... too mean.”

Recently, Parsi’s father warned he would strike if Red came near his daughter. Most of the men wanted to forbid him the full-moon ceremony, to ban the blood-moon boy from choosing a mate and becoming a warrior. While his father had lived, no man dared speak such things, but now...

Red watched the clouds roll across the moon as he rode into the fields of Token. The river and beyond—the land of the grasses—was never safe, either by day or by night. The terrans came by day, soaring in the clouds, striking with talons of death.

A faint, painful memory of his father flashed. Red pushed it away.

At night, the prowls roamed, the fierce beasts that walk with silent steps. Red wished he had his bow.

“A blade is better at night,” he said, his voice low. “But it’s for you I fear.” He looked toward the river shimmering in the moon light. “Follow it?”

The horse paused to lift its nose, sniffing several times. Then with a low grunt, they pressed on.

In near silence they crossed the Token, its cool waters swirling over Faster’s back. When they reached the bank, the mighty horse paused again to sniff the rising night air.

NIGHT RIDE

“Let’s follow to the Carm. Maybe they’ve camped.”

Horse and boy moved with caution beside the flowing water. Lightning flashed in the southern sky, the sky over Marr and Meer’s Point. *Will there really be war? Red pondered. Have the light-hairs killed the Marr? The Marr don’t fight. They’re fishermen, sea dwellers.*

The moon came and went, peering through the dark clouds that rode the sky. The night sounds of unseen creatures rose and fell with the breeze as the two journeyed toward the Carm. Red searched the bank till he found the spot, the place he’d met the girl. His bow and arrow were gone. He stood in the essence of the sacred memory till he felt her hair against his face. Again her smile came.

They turned and traveled the Carm north, following the prints that told the story. Then Faster stopped. Red didn’t ask, knowing his horse sensed something. He listened, sniffing the cool night air.

“Smoke,” he whispered.

On they moved in silent rhythm, following the sandy banks of the Carm, slowly onward till a fire flickered up ahead.



5 THE BETRAYER

“Stay here,” Red said, slinking toward the glow, staying close to the grassy bank. The men from the morning sat around a fire near the center of a wide beach. He crept, edging closer, straining to see, as clouds now hid the moon. The moist sand, dampened by the dew, stuck to his hands and knees.

Should've grabbed my sling, he rued, deeply regretting his lost bow. He kept the sling tucked in Faster's netting near the pouch, using it to hunt small game. Moving side-to-side, he saw what must be the girl, her form so small among the men.

Then he froze. A man, squatting near the bank, sought the shadows, hiding from those around the fire. Red shrunk back, keen eyes scanning the darkness. Up ahead, hidden in the grasses, crouched another. And further on, yet another.

They're not Token, Red pondered. *Why do they hide?*

Without warning, the crouched men sprang and rushed the fire, a host of them, circling with bows, swords, and spears. Those around the fire rose, wielding weapons.

A scuffle ensued but ended abruptly, as harsh warnings barked across the land of grasses.

“Give ground!” a man shouted, “or we'll shed blood.”

A deep voice responded. “Captain Barloff? Dare you raise sword against your king?”

Like the girl, they spoke Token, yet different.

The first man replied. "Commander Gruel has promised—" "Gruel lies!" the other declared in booming voice. "He'll give you naught but strife and death."

Red strained to see through the smoky darkness. There she was! Standing now, clinging to the tall man—the one speaking with such authority.

The man Barloff raised his sword. "Your reign crumbles, oh King." He struggled to sound bold. "Can you not see it? A dark shadow settles over Gelden. Yet Commander Gruel has vowed... you shan't be dishonored."

"Oh, Captain Barloff," the tall king replied, "Gruel deceives you. He *is* that dark shadow. After this day, will he let any of us live?"

Barloff stiffened. "Lower the weapons my lordship, or we will shed blood."

Greatly outnumbered, and unable to see their opponents in the darkness, the king ordered his men to comply. He pulled the girl to his side.

"Although you betray me," he said to Barloff, "give oath that Chia not come to harm. Keep her from Gruel. Promise me this!"

A moment of silence passed while Barloff stepped forward. The fire snapped, sending a flurry of sparks into the growing night wind. "She's been promised..." The man stuck out his chest, again trying to sound brave. "Been promised... to me."

"To you!" The king's voice rang out over the waters of the Carm. "Has the wicked way of Gruel so clouded your eyes? Barloff, you are a pilthran, and the least of your clan." The king spoke as a father pleading to a son. "Listen to your words. Can you not see, his dark deceit beguiles you?"

"Release her!" ordered Barloff, raising a long spear. "And surrender yourself. Now!"

The sudden sound of hooves came pounding up the beach. Red grasped the leather netting and flung himself atop Faster as the horse galloped by, the steed's bulk charging through the men. In the chaos, Red hung to the side and grabbed the girl, dragging her over the beach and up the bank into the grasses. A

spear shaft brushed his shoulder, just missing Faster's ear. Harsh cries and curses followed the boy who still hung to the side, wounded arm dragging the girl with the eyes of spring and sky.

When out of range, Red pulled her up onto Faster's back. "Did I hurt you?" he asked, helping her climb on behind him.

Without reply, she held his waist and together they galloped through the grasses. Faster soon slowed to a walk, keeping eye on the boat that now carried the captive king down the Carn.

"He will kill my father." Her voice cracked. "Commander Gruel will surely dishonor him."

"Your father is a king?"

"Yes, the king of Gelden."

"Is your marm here?"

"Marm?"

"Your mother."

"No... died when I was young."

"I know well your sorrow," Red replied. "Who is Gruel?"

"Commander of the royal navy. A wicked, dark-soul man. He leads the war ships, and now has turned on my father." Her voice broke as she stifled a sob. "Gruel cannot reign, his heart bleeds black, poisoned by the fallen one of Skone Lor." She sniffled, her head resting on Red's shoulder. "He'll display my father, blame him for the sickness."

"Why are you here?" Red asked. "Where do you belong?"

"The old seer... told him to sail west. A moon and three days we sailed. Gruel followed. The seer said my father would find hope among the great trees. We have found nothing but betrayal." She sniffled again. "Your land is strange," she continued. "In one day I'm taken by a giant bird of terror, as large as a carn. And while the wounds still burn, I'm taken by a boy on a horse that rides like the winds of winter."

Faster glanced back and whinnied.

"My people," Red said, "have gone to meet your Gruel in the land of the Marr."

"Are your people strong?" the girl asked. "Gruel knows war."

Have they weapons of iron and steel?”

“Bow, sling, sword and spear.”

“How many?”

“A hundred hands full.”

“A hundred? They will die.”

Red held up both hands and wiggled his fingers. “A hundred hands full.”

“Five hundred?”

Red wiggled his fingers once more.

“Oh... a thousand.”

For a time, the girl rode in silence, holding tight, moving as one with horse and boy. “Commander Gruel has ships of three,” she said, “sixty-six men a ship, but their weapons rain fire. Do you have weapons that rain fire?”

Faster came to a halt where the Token met the Carm, where Red had met the girl, where the terren had been robbed of its prey. Red’s arm burned. The moon lit the rivers with a silver glow as the boat that carried the king now drifted with the current of the Token and Carm, the waters that would take them swiftly to the sea.

“You have saved me twice,” she said, her breath brushing his ear, hair falling down his shoulder. “Help save my father... please.”

6 THE GIFT OF WORDS

In the land of the Marr, the last of the flames drifted upward, their smoke joining the angry clouds where lightning flashed in the east over the sea. More than a thousand men crept through the darkness, pausing to watch the smoldering fires and the ships anchored just beyond.

The Marr had fled, leaving their huts and homes, their boats and nets. Four large ships swayed with the waves, their flags of yellow and blue fluttering in the wind. Blackened timbers that once were homes, now smoldered in Marr, pulsing red with the wind's caress.

Balbon had gathered the Token, their weapons oiled like their armor of leather and brass. They'd heard of the fire from heaven, the fire that rained on the Marr. How could they fight an army at sea, an army that wars with fire?

Red, Chia, and Faster continued toward the sea, following the boat till it reached the cliffs of Maldy.

"We must ride to Marr," Red said, dropping from Faster, offering his hand to the girl.

"How long?" she asked, standing beside him, gazing at the silhouette of hills.

“A full ride.”

She frowned. “Gruel will sail at dawn.”

Red pointed south. “We cannot cross the cliffs, and the sea swamp lies there. We must ride through Token and then to Marr.” He looked about with nervous eyes. They were near the swamps of Dire. “Wodin...” he said with subtle fear.

“Wodin?” Chia asked.

“Yes,” Red said with a nod.

“What is Wodin?” she asked again.

Red looked at her with head cocked. How could she not know of Wodin? “Wodin,” he said, “serpent of Moc Bol. The great water lizard that can swallow a young horse whole.” He paused, expecting her to nod, but she just stared. “A great black beast covered with shields, a tail like a tree, and fangs of sharpened knives.”

Chia gave a long slow nod. “Maybe like Braegon,” she said. “A giant snake with legs.” She held her hands high over her head, lowering them in an arch with arms fully extended to each side. “The jaws of Braegon.”

Red nodded. He looked back over the grasses, now wondering how long before they met a prowler. He had never spent so much time in the grasses at night. Maybe the girl brought good fate.

He watched her hair waving in the wind as the moon peeked through the night. She stepped close, touching his arm. Blood soaked the wrappings.

“You’re wounded,” she said, eyeing this boy of wonder, the boy who twice in one day had brought her deliverance. His dark hair tossed about with the wind that moved the grasses. Flashes of lightning painted the sky out over the sea. She studied the streak of blond lifting in the wind. “Have you a name, boy of wonder?”

“I am... no one... a tole... a curse to my people.”

“Who says that?”

“They all do.”

“Does that make it so?”

Red shrugged. “My name is Red... Red Blood.”

HORSE BOY

The girl giggled, quickly covering her mouth. She then straightened. "I am Chia Kiana, daughter of King Wolff, ruler of Gelden of Mersha."

"He is Faster," Red said, with a nod to his horse.

"Faster than what?"

"His name is Faster."

The horse gave a low grunt.

The girl giggled again, her teeth glinting in the moon's light. "He is indeed fast, faster than..." She paused, resting a hand on the horse's muscular neck.

"Faster than... the winds that flow from the hills of Tolm,
that ride the slopes of Willum,

When the days turn cold and the snows come home,
And the hearths burn bright with cheerum.

His feet devour the earth beneath, his hooves, they thunder
fear.

He strikes the land with hardened hoof, eyes of fire, bright
and clear.

He runs to save the weary soul, to rescue all in need,
To meter out the justice due, as evil dares the mighty steed.

Faster, the horse of justice, the gift of heaven, the one who
clears the way."

She smiled big as Faster whinnied loud with nose toward
heaven. Red stared in wonder.

"How do you do that?" he asked.

"I'm the king's daughter. I have the gift of words." She
smiled, brushing Faster's neck and cheek. The horse, damp with
sweat and dew, gave a low, sing-song nicker.

Then the girl sniffled, wiping her eyes. "Please help me," she
said softly. "He will kill my father. And..." She took several
quick breaths. "And if I refuse to marry..." Her face tightened
with pain. "Please help us. Please save my father."

"Is your father a good man?" Red asked.

"Yes!" Chia answered adamantly.

"A good king?"

She put her hands on her hips and gave Red a stern look. “A very good king.”

Red studied her carefully, then nodded. “You have my oath, Chia Kiana, daughter of King Wolff. I will... rescue your father.”

They rode toward Token as soft rain sprinkled horse, boy, and girl. Throbbing pain surged through Red’s arm, the terren wound now burning like fire. When they reached the mighty trees of Token, all went woozy. Chia’s arms tightened around his waist, pulling back and upward, her distant voice calling to him. The lights of home blinked through the trees, the torches of the watch swayed. Then they swirled and spun, twirling dots of yellow fading off as darkness cloaked his eyes.

7 SCORNED

“**S**he is not Token!” The words echoed inside his head. Red strained to see, but all that came was darkened mist. “She cannot stay!” His mother worked the fire, heating broth to feed her only son. The morning light streaked the smoke that rose lazily up the hollow tree.

Chia sat against the wall, knees to her chest. She watched the flustered mom revive her wounded son. “Why were you in the grasses... at night?” Red’s mother pleaded. “The prowls feed at night. Are you just food for terrens and prowls?” Tears dropped into the broth that steamed a misty column.

No one had slept. The village had come to life when Faster reached the watch. The young boy on watch blew the horn at the sight of Red held captive by a light-haired girl. Faster plodded on despite the boy’s attempt to make him stay, even aiming a shaky arrow that rattled against the bow.

The old men sent a runner. The women spoke of doom. Mender and Parsi scolded Red as they tended his wounds, speaking like he could hear. His mother cried and fussed, glaring at the light-haired girl.

For a while, Red heard them. Then he and Faster walked a

beach of sand, a light golden sand, the color of Chia's hair. Chia... the girl with eyes of spring and sky, the girl with the gift of words. She walked beside him, her wavy hair drifting with the breeze, her smile like the morning dew. They laughed together, tossing pebbles into the sea. Ships with flags rose on the waves and men shot fire into the sky. A king sat alone inside a boat that drifted on the waters of the Token. He wore a gold chain about his neck that held a glowing stone. He called to Red, taking the chain from off his neck and holding it out with both hands. A wave came and suddenly the king was gone, the boat drifting empty till it met the sea, fading into the morning's mist.

Parsi softly called his name, touching his lips with broth. He opened his eyes and met her gaze. Her large brown eyes glowed with life. He swallowed the broth, nodding his thanks.

"I told you to let it heal," she whispered, glancing at the girl in the shadows. Red sat up, his head swirling.

"Chia...?" The word barely formed. His lips were hot like his head and arm, burning from the inside.

"You have the terren's black heat," Parsi said. "You must drink and rest."

"Chia..."

Parsi looked to the girl, the girl of strange hair and skin, her clothes of fine-spun cloth, yellow and purple with golden threads, shivering with arms about her knees pulled close and tight, fear marring her face.

A crotchety old man peered into the tree home. He growled, spitting a sooty slop through his blackened teeth, sunken eyes glaring at Red and the light-haired girl.

"She brings death... 'tis the work of Teel," he said, his voice scratchy. "They'll come for her. Burn our wood, burn it like Marr." He narrowed his eyes at Chia. She pulled her legs closer. He wagged his head. "Take 'em to Balbon the Bull." He spat again. "Take 'em now."

A group of old men came and grabbed Chia, dragging her from the tree home, heedless to her wounds. Red could hear

them arguing, old men and women void of leadership, working themselves into nonsense.

“Toss her to the terren,” said one.

“No, give her to Wodin.”

“Feed ‘em both to Wodin,” squawked an old woman. “Rid us the imps of Teel.”

“They’ll come for her... they’ll burn our wood,” warned a deep voice.

“The boy’s father done bring it,” wailed a high-pitched woman. “Vexed the gods he done.”

“Hai, ‘tis so,” they all agreed. “The tole boy brung this. ‘Tis the work of Teel.”

“Take her head!” shouted one, “Give it to the ships.”

“Hai! Hai! Hai!” the old men cheered.

“Put the fear of Token in them sea-walkers.”

Red sat up to a spinning room, objects swirling all about. The circle of fear-filled Tokens now pushed and pulled at the light-haired girl. Black Claw, the son of Feller, joined the frenzied throng. The husky boy grabbed Chia by the hair, pushing her down, cursing and spitting. He flashed a triumphant grin at Red as kicks and curses railed on the daughter of the king trembling in the dirt.

In a burst of cries, bodies tumbled left and right, as Faster swung his head, clearing a path into the crowd. Red stumbled out, clutching the leather net to steady himself. The world of trees and huts spun, his body shuddering with chills. Hand trembling, he helped Chia to her feet and up onto Faster.

Black Claw came and stood defiant, his face tight and mean.

“You cursed be son of Teel,” he bellowed, puffing his chest. Black Claw was a head taller than Red, a big boy, big like his father—a woodcutter, a tree feller. “Go feed a terren, you tole, you and your white-haired eel. Go die as the gods declare.”

Red clenched his jaw, hearing his father’s voice. “Try to choose when and where.’ He had taught Red strength of heart, as well as strength of arm. The day to face Black Claw would surely come. *But not now*, he told himself through clenched teeth. Red glanced back, seeing Parsi standing with his mother, anxious

pain twisting her beautiful face. Tomorrow brought the full-moon ceremony, and so the fight for Parsi. *If allowed...* Red silently promised, pain surging. *I will fight for you.* The pain shooting through his arm caused him to buckle. He straightened, muffling a groan. *If I live... to see the morrow.*

He pulled himself up with a grimace, sweat beading as he shivered. Faster turned, spreading the crowd. Red watched his mother weeping, her eyes red and swollen, red like the day his father was taken, snatched by the talons of a terren, ripped from his life the day Feller was on watch, the day Black Claw's father had slept at his post. *Or had he?* Red often wondered.

"Go, you wretched son of Teel. Leave us!" Black Claw spit, kicking up dirt. "Go feed your light-skin flesh to a hungry terren. Go die like your fa—"

A hoof slammed Black Claw square in the chest, launching him into the crowd, tumbling him onto an old woman who squealed when they hit the dirt. Snorting with satisfaction, Faster stomped his way from the silenced crowd. Red swayed. Chia wrapped her arms, holding him tight, softly crying.

Parsi watched them ride through the streaks of morning light. She too cried, but without sound, without tear.

8 THE HOPE

Faster stopped near a small lean-to at the edge of a melon field just beyond the trees, but still far from the river Token. Chia tried to help Red down but they landed in a pile. After some effort, she dragged him into the shade of the rickety shelter. She sliced a melon, squeezing its sweet yellow flesh with one hand while forcing his mouth open with the other. He swallowed, muttering her name.

A mist rose over the fields and gardens while Chia then tended her own wounds. She softly cried, wiping the dirt from the bloody scraps on her face and limbs. Her royal clothes, stained with blood, torn by the terren and the angry Tokens, looked like the rags of a beggar. She rose to cut another melon when suddenly a voice came from behind.

“He needs broth.” Parsi stood with a small skin flask and a wooden bowl. The two girls stood over Red, each eyeing the other—one holding his knife, the other his broth. Silence held the morning mist as brown eyes met blue and green. Then Parsi handed the flask and bowl to Chia who shook her head and stepped back.

Parsi quickly knelt, feeding Red, speaking softly, tears dropping.

“You cure sickness?” Chia asked, kneeling.

“My mother is Mender. She teaches me.”

“My people are dying,” Chia said.

“What sickness?”

Chia shook her head. “The skin turns red, red with spots like blossoms.” She sighed. “Then the sweating comes, sweating and moaning, the black heat turns the bones to fire.”

Parsi straightened. “The eyes then yellow?”

“Yes. Some live but many are dying.”

“Gossel. You need gossel root. It grows beneath the trees of Token. A Token never dies if given the broth of gossel, even when the eyes have yellowed.”

Chia sat, pondering the words of the brown-haired girl. *Could the trees really bring hope?*

Red coughed, moaning yet swallowing.

“He saved my life... thrice,” Chia said, looking at Red’s wounds. “The giant eagle had taken me.” She pointed toward the river. “But he came, riding the great steed, Faster.” She looked up, smiling at Faster who snorted. “But it came back, pursuing him. We watched from the river. He killed it. We saw it fall.”

She told Parsi all about the daring rescue and Red’s battle with the terren eagle. She then told about the betrayal and the fireside rescue, of the Gelden people and Commander Gruel.

“He won’t give me to Barloff,” Chia said, looking out over the fields, dirty cheeks lined with tear stains. “Gruel needs me... needs a queen of royal blood.”

Parsi fed Red the broth as she listened. “So why have you come to Token?”

“The seer. He told my father he would find hope here... here among the great trees. But Gruel seized the chance, following just out of sight. He will kill my father... and burn your trees.” They sat in silence for a while, then Chia looked from Red to Parsi. “Is he your chosen?” she asked.

Parsi blushed. “The pallen-dore is on the morrow,” she said, “the time for choosing.” She told how the men, under pressure from her father and Claw’s father, will most likely forbid Red from participating. “They’ll drive him from the wood...”

forever,” she said, gently wiping her eyes. “Maybe... I shall ride away with him.”

She explained how a blood-moon child was always sent down the river in a basket, an offering to Moc Bol, but Red’s father had risen to be leader of North Token, a fighter of great skill and wisdom. “And his skin... was like yours,” she added.

Chia listened with great interest. “In Gelden,” she said, looking intently at Red, “born of a red moon... is an omen of greatness, a gift from Ahrel.”

Faster whinnied short and quick, bobbing his head toward the river. A fleet of boats filled with men came rowing up the Token.

“Commander Gruell!” Chia gasped, looking back at the trees. “He will burn it all.”