

*I love God.  
I love words.  
I love God's words.*

*Come with me on a journey of growth and imagination.  
See you at the end. ~Lori*

# The PriZin of Zin

Loretta Sinclair, 2014, 2016

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## The PriZin of Zin



What is *your* prison?

Can you set yourself free?

How far would you go,  
to help free another?

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*Hebrews 13:2, NIV*

*Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers,  
for in doing so,  
some have shown hospitality to angels  
without knowing it.*

†

Zin: *A Biblical middle-eastern desert, a wilderness,  
a barren wasteland, an unsettled area  
thought to be uninhabitable by humankind.*

Loretta Sinclair   
Sinclair Publishing

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Clan Sinclair motto, origins to 1068 a.d.

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All of the persons contained within this book are fictitious. Any resemblance to any persons, either living or dead, is entirely coincidental. *No giant spiders, sea monsters, or bigfeet were harmed in the writing of this work.*

## Chapter 1: Hunter

hunt·er - *noun* \ 'hən-tər \: One that searches for something.



His finger twitched on the trigger, but didn't pull. Morgan stared through the scope mounted on his rifle and into the brush at his prey standing on the other side. There he was. The biggest eight-point buck he'd ever seen. The animal stood in the glen, tall and proud. It had no idea its head would end up as a trophy on some human's wall, stuffed and staring through glass eyes for all eternity; a testament to one man's hunting ability.



“Quick! Hide! Maybe we can lose the little pain-in-the-butt.” Ian burst into the thick brush and crouched behind a large bush. He peered through the dark green

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leaves back at Hunter. Raising his index finger to his lips, he motioned for his friend to be quiet.

“No,” Hunter said. “We can’t leave her.”

“Why?”

“Because she’s my little sister— she’s only ten.”

“So?” Ian shrugged at Hunter’s lack of response. “I don’t know why she had to come along anyway. She’ll just ruin everything. Girls always do.”

“Hunter! Ian! Where are you?”

“See.” Ian jumped back out. “Shut up, stupid! You’ll scare all the animals away.”

“I am not stupid!” Aeryn turned to face her brother’s best friend. “And if you had any intelligence whatsoever you would know that, if you hadn’t run away from me, I wouldn’t have to call you to stop, therefore *not* scaring the animals away.” She stood her ground, feet firmly planted, unmoving, face upwards toward her taller opponent. “It’s all *your* fault.”

“And if *you*,” Ian loomed over her, “had any intelligence whatsoever, you would know when you are out in the woods hunting, you have to be *quiet*. Stop

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*screaming!*” Ian inched closer to her, bulking up his height as much as he could.

“Don’t leave me again,” Aeryn demanded. “Or else.”

“Or else what?”

“Or else, Ian. I mean it. I will not play your childish games. And if you think - - -”

“Stop it!” Hunter snapped. “You’re both making too much noise.”

“Shut up Hunter. You’re not in charge.” Ian turned on his friend now. “You don’t even know what you’re doing.”

“Yes, I do.” His face flushed.

“Oh, really? Then where’s your dad?”

Hunter squirmed. His eyes darted from the trees to the ground and back again, searching for any sign of his father. His palms began to sweat, but he dared not wipe them. Ian and Aeryn could not know they were lost. Hunter could feel his heart racing. Dizzy, head spinning, he staggered, but just one step. What had he gotten them into?

“You’re no big game hunter, you just think you are,” Ian laughed. “Just ‘cause your dad can hunt deer and elk doesn’t mean you can.”

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“Yes, I can.”

“Yeah? Then do it.”

“I will.”

“Go ahead and find one— just one. I dare ya.”

Hunter looked around, trying to decide which way to go. He hesitated just a split second, but it was too late.

“Go ahead,” Ian taunted. “I’ll just wait here with the little sissy.”

“I am not a sissy! I’m warning you, Ian.”

“Shut up!”



Morgan blinked hard, trying to focus his blurred vision through the thick morning mist. *Wait. He’s gone.* He shifted slightly from his hiding place in the low brush. *Was that real? Did I really see— Yes, there he is.* He took aim again. Morgan kept his gun trained on his trophy, his finger still twitching on the trigger.

It was unseasonably warm. His nose filled with misty morning dew with each breath, making it run. He dared

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not move to wipe it. There was a slight rustle in the bushes to his side, but Morgan remained taut. He kept his gun trained on his eight-point prize.

The deer heard the rustle, too, and froze. It raised its head, huge rack hoisting in the air, and turned toward the noise. Nervous eyes darted from one spot to another in the dense brush, then settled on the spot where Morgan lay, staring straight at him, unmoving. Morgan stared back, stunned. He couldn't believe his eyes. He released the trigger, pulled back from the scope on the rifle, wiping his nose and rubbing his face. He put his eye back up against the scope again, and stared back into the impossible; purple eyes. It was a deer with dark, royal purple eyes. What kind of genetic mutation was this, he wondered, taking a firm grip on the trigger again. Bracing the barrel against his shoulder, Morgan tried to contain his excitement. The crosshairs of the gun scope trained on the chest of the large deer, centering near its heart. It's one of a kind, he thought, a purple-eyed, eight-point buck; one of a kind. He squared his shoulder and seated the rifle hard against himself.

*One deep breath, and hold—*

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The rustle to his side turned into a crash. Morgan swung the gun to his left and tried to take aim at the noise, but saw nothing clearly.

“Stop,” someone squealed— a female voice; a small female voice.

“Shhhh,” shot the harsh reply, but it was too late. The buck bolted from its feeding spot and disappeared in a flash into the dense underbrush.

Morgan turned in his fury toward the intruders who took from his grasp his once-in-a-lifetime prize. “Who’s there?” he demanded.

There was no reply.

“Come out!” The brush rustled and parted as three young figures emerged.

Morgan looked down into the faces of his two children, and their friend.



“You said you were going to get a Bigfoot,” Hunter said. “I’ve never seen one, Dad.”

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“That’s because there’s no such thing. Bigfoot isn’t real.” Morgan clicked the safety on his weapon and lowered it.

“They do so exist,” Ian huffed. “I saw one once. He was watching me through my bedroom window.”

Morgan glared at Ian, but said nothing.

“Then why did you say you were going to get one?” Hunter turned away.

“Why do you have to shoot animals, Dad?” Aeryn looked up at her father. He hated those pleading eyes. She didn’t even need to say what was on her mind. He could see her disappointment written all over her face.

“I hunt for meat, Aeryn. You know that.”

“Can you eat a Bigfoot?” she asked.

“Yeah, sure. I hear they taste like chicken,” Ian snickered. “Hey, if there’s more than one do they call them Bigfeet?”

“There’s no such thing as a Bigfoot.” Morgan shot a sharp glare at his son’s close friend. “Does your father know you’re out here?”

“He knows I spent the night at your house.”

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“And you don’t think he would be upset about you wandering around the forest with hunters shooting all around you?”

“Oh, not at all, Mr. Welch,” Ian smiled. “He trusts you to always take good care of me.” The lilt of sarcasm and glint in Ian’s eye was unmistakable.

Morgan turned back to his own two children, Hunter and Aeryn. “You three should not be out here. It’s dangerous.”

“Then why are you here, Dad?” Aeryn was pouting now.

“Because, I’m a trained outdoorsman.” Morgan sat down and beckoned his daughter to his side. He put his arms around her. “I’m perfectly safe out here because I know how to take care of myself in the wild. You and your brother don’t. You shouldn’t be out here unless you’re with an experienced hunter.”

“I do so know how to take care of myself. I took the hunter’s safety class last summer.”

“That’s for gun safety, Hunter, not safety in the wild. You still have a lot to learn.”

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Hunter clenched his jaw and turned away, eyes flaring. Morgan could see he was incensed. He would have to deal with this later. “Come on,” he motioned to the kids. “Let’s get back home. The sun’s almost up. It’ll be breakfast time soon.”

Morgan turned back to the clearing where the buck had stood only minutes before. “I’ll be back later,” he whispered. “I’ll see you again.”



“Did you see that big buck, Mr. Welch?”

“Yes, Ian, I did.”

“It had *huge* antlers. How many points were there?”

“Eight,” he sighed. “It was an eight-point buck.” Morgan looked back at the kids. “It’s starting to rain. Let’s get back before we’re all soaked.”

“I like the rain, Daddy,” Aeryn smiled. She threw her arms straight out to her sides and twirled in the drizzle, batting the droplets away like tiny baseballs. Morgan kept walking. He didn’t want them to see his disappointment

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about missing his prize. The small cloudburst in the distance began to turn dark. Lightning broke free and tore open the sky, but it was still a ways off. There was time to get home before the storm got too bad.

“Did you see its eyes, though?” Ian pressed. “There was something strange about them.”

“This slope is very slick,” Morgan said, reaching back to help his daughter. “Be careful, those leaves are wet.”

“What do you think spooked it, Dad?” Hunter asked.

Morgan turned and looked into his son’s face. “I don’t know, son,” he lied, trying to spare Hunter’s feelings. He started to inch his feet down the slope, then stopped. Reaching out, Morgan put his arm around Hunter’s squared shoulder. “Let’s come back for him later, together.” Hunter smiled and nodded. Seeing his only son’s smile somehow lessened the blow of losing the prize. There would be another day.

Morgan planted his feet firm on the ground, then turned back to help the kids. “I want you all holding on to each other going down the side of this mountain. It’s very slick.”

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The three kids all looked at each other. Aeryn reached out to take her brother's hand. He batted it away. At his father's sharp glare, Hunter grabbed the back of her jacket left-handed and held tight instead. Ian grabbed Aeryn's jacket, and Hunter, right-handed, grabbed Morgan's. Morgan took the lead.

He stepped out. Lightning tore open the sky once again, directly overhead. Thunder roared on its heels, shaking the ground below. The flash of light was so bright it stunned his eyes. Morgan blinked to focus. The rain pelted them harder now, running in a torrent beneath their feet and down the mountainside like a small river. The earth rumbled beneath their feet, but this time there was no lightning or thunder to accompany it. The rumbling continued, rolling the mountaintop, first one direction then another.

"Earthquake!" Ian screamed as another violent wave of the ground hit beneath him.

"Look out!" Morgan yelled jerking his son toward him as a tree fell behind them. Hunter lurched forward, pulling the other two along with him toward the edge of the mountaintop. Hunter teetered on the edge, staring

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down at the world giving way beneath him, but Morgan's strong grip held him tight. More trees toppled and crashed around them, some of them slipping over the edge and sliding, like a swift toboggan, out of sight down the steep embankment.

"Nobody move!" Morgan yelled through the driving rain. "Stay tight."

"Is it over now?" Aeryn asked. "Daddy, I'm scared."

"I don't know," Morgan answered. "Everyone stay close." The four huddled together in the rain. Morgan felt his son's hard grip against the back of his jacket. He held the rifle tight against his body. Lightning and thunder ripped the sky open as the four clung together in the storm perched atop the cliff's edge. The earth shook again with the booming force of the thunder. Aeryn squealed and pressed closer to the others, inching them toward the precarious edge. Morgan dug his heels in, keeping the group on safe ground.

The earth gave another ear-shattering roar accompanied by a violent roll, causing the group to teeter on the edge again. Clinging to each other, they held fast. When the roar of the earth stopped, the roll beneath their

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feet continued. Morgan looked down to see the edge of the cliff where they stood give way beneath their feet. "Hold on!" he screamed as they all barreled forward, down the side of the mountain.

The four slid faster and faster, rolling over and over down the steep mountain trail in the rush of the whitewater, brush, and rocks slapping and biting at them every inch of the way. Morgan somehow managed to maneuver his body so that his feet were forward, as though he were on a water slide. Rifle lost somewhere along the path, he held tight to Hunter, with the others all clinging in tow like a human chain. The earth continued to quake beneath them violently. Through the rain and mud, Morgan saw the earth tear a giant crevasse directly ahead. They reached the bottom of the mountain and launched forward into the giant canyon.

With one final roar, the earth closed the hole, sealing the four in their dark, wet, doom.



## Chapter 2: LOST

Lost *adj* \ 'lɒst \: no longer known



The absolute black of the cavern surrounded them as father and children all fell spinning around and around in the giant hole. With no sense of gravity and no light to see, Morgan only knew down by the direction they were falling. His only reference for himself and the others was the sound of their screams echoing off the slick slate walls of the crater they were now engulfed in. Swallowed whole... eaten alive... the four plunged downward for what seemed an eternity, until they finally crashed through a thin, brittle landing, splashing down hard into a rapid underground stream.

Swept away in a roller coaster ride of white water rapids, Morgan barely had a chance to breathe before being sucked under water and dragged downstream. Kicking and flailing his arms, he tried to swim against the

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raging tide, but it was useless. Both he and the children were all swept away in the powerful current. Unable to scream any longer, he fought against the rage of nature just to keep his head above water and stay alive, each breath a small battle won in this war for their very lives.

Off in the distance, through the splash of the water and the echoes from the mammoth rock walls, he caught a faint flicker of light. It came from the direction they were headed. Wanting to call out to the others but unable to, he clung to the anticipation there might be a way out of this doom. Trying to relax and let the water carry him and the others toward the possibility of safety, Morgan hung with desperation on to the only thing he had left... hope.

Reaching what appeared to be the source of light, any false security Morgan had was once again shattered as the stream of rapids abruptly ended. The four now burst forward, first into thin air, then again plunging downward over an enormous waterfall. Dropping through hundreds of feet of water and air in mere seconds, Aeryn let out a deafening scream that echoed throughout the entire cavern. Reaching the bottom, the group splashed with

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tremendous force into the warm, soothing waters of a peaceful and tranquil pool in this underworld realm.

Coming up for air, the four gasped and choked until they were able to catch their breath. Clinging to each other for support, they floated in this new serene and picturesque land.

“Where are we?” Aeryn whispered.



One by one, Morgan dragged the children from the water and over to the sandy shore. Exhausted and scared, the kids all floated in the warm comfort of the underground hot spring, letting Morgan carry them to safety. He carefully checked each child for scrapes and broken bones as they were extricated from the water.

Dripping wet, sand clinging to her bare legs below her shorts, Aeryn stood and surveyed this strange new world, while the others sat motionless on the shore. It took a few minutes for them to speak.

“Where are we?” Aeryn asked for the second time.

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Ian and Hunter shook their heads.

“It’s beautiful.” She looked at the thick, lush vegetation and a multitude of brightly colored flowers. “Wow. And where is the light coming from?” She turned around, looking for the source of the reddish glow illuminating the entire cavern.

“There,” Morgan said. He pointed back across the water from where they’d come.

There across the lake was a bubbling, boiling mound of molten lava flowing down from its source higher up. It hissed and spit while churning its contents over and over again in the huge pit.

“It’s a volcano,” Ian said.

“Close,” Morgan jumped in. “It’s the bottom of a volcano. The top is up there,” his finger extended upward toward their homeland, “where we were hunting. That’s why the water is so warm. It’s like a hot spring down here.” He sniffed the air, taking in the heavy smell of sulfur. “This is an underground river.”

“And how do we get back up there?” Hunter asked, pointing upward like his father had done.

“Good question.”

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“Maybe we could ask someone,” Aeryn said.

“Ask someone?” Ian shot at her. “Ask someone? Who do you want to ask? Look around! There’s no one here, in case you didn’t notice!”

“Don’t yell at her,” Hunter jumped in. “Besides, you don’t know. *We’re* down here, aren’t we?”

Ian snorted and jerked his head around.

“Just look,” Aeryn kept going, unfazed. “There’s vegetation, a whole forest over there, and a lake.” She looked up toward what should be the sky. A rock ceiling and slick, gray, slate walls locked them away from their own world above. Floating as high as it could without escaping through the makeshift roof, was a fine mist rising from the warm water of the hot spring. It glistened from the light of the volcano, illuminating the entire sky like clouds in sunshine. “There’s oxygen, water, light, heat, and shelter. What else do people need to survive?”

“Um, food,” Hunter said dryly.

“I’ll bet there’s food in the forest.” She turned and walked toward the thick vegetation.

“Be careful,” Hunter blurted out. “Don’t go in there.”

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“I’m not going in, I’m just going to look and see- - - EEEEEHHHH!” Her scream jolted the others. It was followed by another of equal intensity, but not from her.

Ian bounded to his feet and was at her side in an instant. Hunter and Morgan followed suit.

Looking around for the source of the second scream, Ian peered through the bushes and there he saw a little pair of frightened green eyes looking back at him. Gently, he pulled some of the underbrush back to reveal a tiny creature, man-like in stature and characteristics, but very, very small. It stood only two feet tall.

“What is it?” Aeryn asked, pulling more brush back so she could see better.

“EEEEHHHH!” came the shrieking reply from the little thing.

“I don’t know,” Ian answered. “But I think- - -”

“EEEEHHHH!”

“I think it’s a- - -”

“EEEEHHHH!”

“- - -Troll.”

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“I am not a Troll ye eedjit,” the creature snapped back, openly irritated. “I’m a Leprechaun. Learn the difference.”

“You can speak?” Aeryn stared, eyes mesmerized by the tiny creature.

“O’ course, I can speak. Can’t ye?” it sighed.

Taken aback by the question, Aeryn stared back into the severely aged face of this tiny person. Dressed in a dark green suit and floppy, pointed hat, the creature looked like it could be a hundred years old. Skin like leather hung loose and wrinkled over his sagging face with two tired little eyes peering out from under its slouched hat.

“Why did you scream?” Hunter asked.

“Cause the wee lassie did, when ye flew down from the world above, and nobody better call me a Troll!” it snapped. “Trolls ’re mean. Gnomes ’re stupid. I am a Leprechaun. Don’t ferget it.”

“I won’t. I’m sorry,” Hunter said.

“I am Alastair.”

“I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. I was just—”

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“I know what ye were doin’,” it snapped again. “Ye’re jus’ like all the others.”

“Others?” Morgan jumped, grasping at the tiny glimmer of hope. “There are others? Like us?”

Alistair nodded. “Happens sometimes. When the sun gets angry.”

“The sun?”

A crooked little finger extended and pointed at the volcano bottom. “When mother sun becomes angry and shakes, beings from the above-world fall through.”

“Do they ever find their way back home?” Hunter asked from behind the group.

Alistair nodded. “Some.”

Hunter waited for Alastair to continue. The two watched each other in a long, deafening silence, looking each other up and down. “How?” Hunter asked when no answer came.

Alistair shook his little head and shrugged. “Evil knows. The serpents and shadows go up there often, but cannot ask them. Too dangerous. Should not know ye are here.”

“Is there any other way?” Morgan pushed.

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“Yup,” the leprechaun answered again.

Silence again.

“How?”

Alistair shrugged. “Need to ask another.”

“Another? There are others?” Hunter sighed.

He nodded.

“Is there any food around?” Aeryn asked.

Alastair grimaced. “There,” he pointed.

“What on earth is that?” Aeryn asked. She ran toward the forest.

“STOP HER!” the leprechaun screamed. “She must know!”

Aeryn stopped in her tracks and looked back.

“Must know what?” Ian was by her side.

“Danger. Near.” Alistair’s beady little eyes darted around frantically.

“Where?” Morgan’s eyes followed suit. Alistair’s prickly little finger spun around in a circle, and pointed directly at the four standing in front of him. “What?” Morgan was incensed. “What are you talking about?” The finger came straight at Morgan’s nose.

“Sometimes the closest danger lives inside.”

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“You’re crazy!”

“Spirit knows.” Alistair twitched, but kept scanning the grounds.

“What spirit?”

“Both. Yours and His.” He lowered his little leprechaun hand.

“His? Whose? And what does that have to do with us finding food?”

“Choices. Good choices bring good favor. Bad choice...” Alistair shuddered. “Purple is for Him. Ye must never, ever take it.”

“Who is him?” Ian asked.

“Him, not him. The One. But not just one. He is them.”

“What does that mean?” Ian sighed and looked to Morgan for clarification.

Morgan shrugged.

“Ye understand ‘leader’?”

“You have a leader?” Aeryn asked.

“Yup,” Alastair said. “The three are the One. They are Them. Ask Him, not him. Only Them.”

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“They?” Morgan asked, confused. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“What’s he like?” Hunter pressed. “I mean They?”

“He is good,” the leprechaun went on. “They will care for ye. Protect ye from the other one.”

“There’s another one?”

“Evil.” The leprechaun shook in fear at the mention of his name. “Must never venture into the forbidden forest without a guide. Danger inside might be let out. Choices to make. Will be hard. Understand?”

The three younger travelers all looked to Morgan. He shrugged and struck out toward the forest after Aeryn.

“I won’t go in,” he said. “I just want to look, from the edge.”

“Promise,” the leprechaun demanded. “Bad things will happen if ye do not obey.”

“I promise,” he said grudgingly. “Only looking. Never purple. Got it.”

“About the others of our kind,” Ian asked, “you don’t know how they got out of here?”

“No, mus’ find out. Wait here. I be return.” Without waiting for a reply, the tiny creature turned toward the

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underbrush and vanished, leaving the four alone again on the shore.



“What’s in there, Dad?” Hunter tried to peer over the edge of the forest.

“It looks like a garden. I see strawberries, and greens. I think there’s celery, lettuce, and watermelons.

“I’m hungry, Daddy.”

“I know, sweetie. Just hold on till I make sure it’s safe in there.”

“We’re going in?” Ian jumped. “Awesome!”

“But, Dad, Alistair said not to go in.”

Morgan looked at his daughter. “I know, honey, but we won’t touch anything. There’s a path that goes right through the middle. We should be okay if we stay on it.”

“Where does the path lead?” Hunter asked, still leaning forward.

“Looks like a giant tree right in the middle. I’m not really sure, Hunter. It looks a little odd.”

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“Odd, how?”

“Can’t really tell. Everybody stay close to me.”



“That’s not a tree,” Ian said.

“It’s got branches like a tree.” Hunter reached out to touch the bark, but Ian batted his hand away.

“Careful, man. I don’t want to lose my best friend.”

“You’re not going to lose me. I just want to know what it is.”

“What kind of tree has a mirror in the middle of the trunk?” Aeryn was mesmerized.

“It didn’t grow like that. Someone, or something, created that.” Morgan stared at his reflection. “Something intelligent, and very, very creative.”

“Do not leave the path,” a velvety smooth voice cautioned.

“Ok, Dad.” The three kids all looked at Morgan.

“What?” Morgan turned around.

“We heard you,” Hunter answered.

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“I didn’t say anything,” Morgan whispered, turning back to the tree.

Aeryn squeezed in front of her father and looked into the mirror. The sky twinkled and the mirror lit up, reflecting her beautiful, smiling face.

“Do you trust me?” It was the same calm, soothing voice as before.

“I don’t know who you are,” she answered.

“That is very true. I am here to help you, if you choose it. What do you need?”

“I’m hungry. Can I please have some food?”

The tree shook, flapping its branches almost like a bird. When it settled, the limbs were laden with food. Not just fruit, but food from home: granola bars, candy, apple pie, roast chicken platters. There were bottled drinks of every size and flavor, and a water spout flowing at the other end. A rainbow of fruits and nuts covered every vacant spot in the tree. In the middle was a giant prime rib roast with all the fixings.

Aeryn’s eyes lit up. “How can I get it if I can’t leave the path?” The tree bowed low, and the branches came within her reach. She and the boys all helped themselves.

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When she uttered her ‘thank you’ the tree returned to its original height, shuddered, and the food disappeared. “You have done well, young Aeryn.”

The tree turned on its roots and looked at Hunter. “Do you believe in yourself?”

Hunter froze, unable to answer. He opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. Palms sweaty and fingers shaking, he nodded unsteadily.

“You don’t have to go through life alone. There are others out there who can assist you, if you will only let them. The choice is yours. Have faith in what you cannot see.”

Hunter nodded again, seeing a tear at the corner of his eye forming in his mirrored reflection.

“What about me?” Ian jumped in, shoving Hunter to the side. “My turn now.”

“Ah yes, young man. Are you having fun?”

Ian nodded. “What’s next?”

“That depends on you.” Ian’s reflection in the mirror wavered and two paths appeared. “Two roads will show you two different possibilities. Learn to control what flares up inside, and the right path will make itself known.”

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“What’s that supposed to mean?” Ian’s face flushed and his fists balled.

The tree spun back around and faced Morgan again.

“I can’t believe this,” he whispered.

“Open your mind, and your heart to see all that life is truly about, Master Morgan.”

“How do you know my name - our names?”

“Look into your soul, Morgan. What do you see?”

In front of him, on the glass embedded in the impossible tree, Morgan saw scenes from his life flash by. School as a child, playing, homework, graduating, college, getting married, holding his children. One memory flashed by, replaced by another, strung together with him as the center.

“What do you see?”

“Just me,” Morgan answered. “My life.”

“And so you shall remain. Until you can learn to see life as these young ones do, you will forever be a prisoner inside yourself, Master Morgan. Learn to see the impossibilities around you. Look outside of yourself.” The tree shook again, and the mirror disappeared. It blossomed one more time with a rainbow of fruit;

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peaches, grapes, apples, strawberries. Low-hanging branches offered fruit of every kind, albeit strangely colored for its type. Reds, blues, greens, yellows, purples, and oranges of all shades adorned the branches.

“Let’s go, kids. This was no help at all.” Morgan turned to leave, guiding the kids up in front of him. “He’s useless.” Stomach rumbling, Morgan turned back. He dashed from the path and circled the tree, grabbing fruit of every kind for his trip. “Who knows how long we’ll be down here, with help like that.”



“That was the most delicious apple I have ever eaten. I didn’t realize how hungry I was,” Aeryn said. She tossed the core off into the brush a few feet from the shore. Startled by a rustling and flapping sound, she turned back to see another small creature with long, slender wings swoop down and take off with the apple core in its mouth. “Look!” she squealed. “It’s a bird.”

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“That’s not a bird,” Morgan said. “It’s got the body of a squirrel, but with wings.”

“It’s a squird,” Ian added, chuckling.

They smiled, watching the small thing fly away with its prize between its teeth.

Ian was next to try. Tossing his apple core off a short distance away, another squird swooped down from the treetops, scooped up the leftovers, and flew back up to its perch.

Morgan tossed his away and waited. No animals came. “I guess they didn’t see it,” he said.

“Maybe you need to toss it again.” Aeryn ran to the discarded core, bent over to pick it up, and froze. Standing straight up, she spun around and stared back at him, eyes wide and in shock.

“What is it?” Hunter asked, running to his sister’s side. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s purple,” she whispered.

“What?”

“It’s purple,” she said louder, her voice cracking and shaking. “Dad ate a purple apple.”

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“What?” Hunter yelled. “Why?” he demanded spinning to face him. “You heard what the leprechaun said!”

“Relax,” Morgan said. “I wanted to taste it. I’ve never had a purple apple before.” He smiled, “and look, nothing bad has happened to me. The little runt didn’t know what he was talking about. I didn’t die.”

Morgan looked down into his daughter’s tearful glare. She grabbed the arm of her big brother for support. Ian backed away as well, standing next to the other two. Huddled together in a tight group, they scanned the area, eyes darting every direction. Seeing their rising panic, Morgan tried to talk to them.

“Oh, come on, you guys. Look. It’s just an apple—and a very good one, at that. I’ve never tasted anything like it before. I might just have another one. You guys should try one, too.”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea, Dad,” Hunter cautioned. “We don’t know anything about this world.”

“Well, I do know one thing,” he said, “apples are just as juicy and sticky down here as they are up there.” Morgan strolled back a few yards down to the water line

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and bent to wash his hands and face. Splashing the warm water on himself, he rinsed off the remnants of the snack, then stood and looked back at the others. “Don’t be such chickens. I told you nothing bad—”

A giant sea serpent burst through the water’s surface and hovered over him, showering Morgan with a sudden spray of saliva mixed with warm water. He looked straight up to see a long snout with giant nostrils breathing smoke and flame looming above him. A wicked snarl was wrapped across its ugly face, razor-like teeth protruding from under loose floppy jowls. The enormous snake had a red, diamond-shaped head with horns, and knife-like scales covering the length of its back all the way along the spine, disappearing into the warm tranquil water. It growled at Morgan, a low vibrating rumble that shook both the water and the sand on the beach where they stood.

Morgan opened his mouth to scream, but nothing came out. Wanting to run, but unable to move, Morgan, locked in time and fear, stared straight into the face of horror.

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Striking like the wind, the serpent swooped down, snatching Morgan in its mouth and slithered back down into the water in the blink of an eye. The three friends stood terrified and alone on the shore.

The only sign that evil had even been there were the lapping waves on the beach and, in its wake, two empty footprints.



## Chapter 3: SEARCH

Search *verb* \ 'sərch\ transitive verb: to examine in seeking something



Thunder boomed once again through the new world, and the sky went as dark as night. There was no lightning, but again and again the thunder roared around them. In the distance, the faint light from the volcano bottom shone. Rather than the crimson glow it offered just moments before, this was a dark foreboding phosphorescent light. Below the volcano, in the once tranquil pool, water caught in the raging turbulence of a violent boil, steam rising with urgent fervor, locked in by the stone ceiling above. Thunder boomed again, shaking the ground under their feet with all the force of the earthquake that landed them here just a short time before.

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“How dare you!” the thunder roared. “You were warned!”

Hunter, Ian, and Aeryn all looked around for the source of the voice. They saw no one.

“Does your kind never learn?”

“Who are you?” Hunter asked, eyes darting back and forth for some signs of life.

“I Am.”

“You are what?”

“Silence!” the voice boomed back even more loudly, and more menacing than before. “I speak!”

Ian spun around. “There,” he whispered, “the food tree.”

“I am dead. Nevermore shall I bear fruit because of you,” the tree said.

Ian, Hunter, and Aeryn all looked up at the massive wooden monolith before them. It had grown four times in size, and now a giant green eye glared at them from the center of its trunk. The eye blinked at them, pupil moving from one child to another, and back again, splinters dropping to the ground with each motion. Its branches now dry and brittle, leaves dead and falling.

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“Please,” Aeryn cried. “Where is my father?”

“Gone. You have foolishly unleashed the powers of those who will devour your essence; the ones who seek to extinguish your spark for all eternity. Only you now have the power to leash them again.”

“Where? Please tell me where?”

The eye crackled and blinked again. “Nowhere.”

All three stared in silence as the tree continued to grow and die at the same time.

“Your father is neither here nor there,” the tree said. “He is not lost, but neither is he found. He is nowhere.”

“Nowhere?” Ian asked. “Where is nowhere?”

“A place of nothingness. A barren wasteland with no future. He has gone to the wilderness.”

“Can we find him?” Aeryn pleaded.

“You can find him,” the tree thundered, “but escape is his and his alone. You can only lead. He alone must choose his path.”

“How can I lead if I don’t know the way?” Hunter tried to ask.

“Silence!” the tree boomed again. “Listen, and you will know. Hear, and you will understand. Seek, and you

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will find. You must all choose wisely from this moment on. To not choose wisely will mean certain death. You will all be sent to the place of no return. You will be thrown forever into the darkness of the Pit of Despair. It will then be too late. For now, there is still time. Knock and the door will open.”

Snapping sounds crackled and popped around them. Branches began to break off and fall to the ground like monstrous spears. The giant tree listed dangerously to one side. The more it leaned, the more the trunk broke, the fibers of wood giving way under the enormous weight. It slowly began to fall in one painful, final, death throe.

“Please! Please,” Aeryn cried, running toward the tree. “Where is my father? Where is the wilderness?”

“The prison,” the tree echoed as it fell. “Beware of the Spark Eaters!” it wailed, timbers snapping in two.

“What is this place called?” Hunter screamed.

Seconds before it hit the ground with an earthshaking roar, the tree uttered one single word.

“Zin.”

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“I don’t think he’s coming back.”

“He said he’d come back,” Aeryn turned to Hunter. “We just need to be patient.”

“He’s not coming back.” Hunter snapped. “The little green monster left us here.”

“He’s not a monster. He said he was a leprechaun.” Aeryn looked around.

“I know,” Ian shot back from the dark shore. “He’s Alastair.” The sarcasm in his voice was unmistakable.

“Maybe we should look for him.”

“Where?” Ian screamed at Aeryn. “The bushes he disappeared into are gone, thanks to your father. That tree killed everything. There’s nothing here now. Everything’s dead here, including him.”

Aeryn burst into tears. She tried to speak, but couldn’t.

“Stop it, Ian, or else.” Hunter was at his sister’s side.

“Or else, what?” Ian squared off against his long-time friend. “What are you gonna do?”

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Hunter turned and put his arm around his crying sister.

“Oh, you gonna be a chicken now? Gonna hide like a little girl?” Ian’s anger flared. “Come on, rich boy, don’t turn your back on me.” Ian shoved Hunter’s shoulder. At the lack of any response, he shoved again, harder.

“Stop it, Ian!” Hunter screamed. He wheeled around to face his friend head-on, and froze.

It was faint, but he heard it. The others looked around too. Hunter paused, waiting to see if he could hear it again.

Nothing.

“Push me again,” Hunter whispered. He looked at Aeryn. “Cry.”

Ian reared back and shoved Hunter so hard he fell to the ground. Aeryn wailed and threw her hands up to her face. Ian dove on top of Hunter and the two rolled around in the wet sand for a moment, while Aeryn, ever the drama queen, sobbed on the sidelines. Then, they all stopped.

There it was again.

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Laughter! Someone was watching them. Watching, and laughing.

All three bolted toward the dead food tree where the noise was coming from. They split up to surround the trunk from all sides. Hunter was the first to clear the limbs. As they rounded the backside, there was the little green leprechaun, rolling in hysterics on the ground. Hunter grabbed the tiny creature, making sure he did not get away.

“Nnnnooooo!” he screamed, his merry little mirth changing to fear. “Ye can’t have me treasure.” He fought against Hunter’s tight grip. “Ye can’t have it, I sayz!”

Ian caught up and threw himself into the mix, pinning the old man to the earth.

“Nnnnooooo!” it wailed again. “I will not give it to ye! I will not!”

“Calm down!” Hunter yelled. “What are you talking about?”

“Treasure. The gold is mine. Ye can have the other, but not the gold. NOT THE GOLD, I SAY!”

“CALM DOWN!” Ian shook the little man to get his attention.

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“Ye don’t have to get violent, laddie,” Alastair snapped back. “I didn’t hurt ye.”

“No, you just left us out here alone, that’s all.”

Alastair giggled again.

“You promised to come back,” Aeryn snapped. “What happened?”

“Never said when,” Alastair giggled again.

Ian threw the little creature to the dirt again and pounced on him. Alastair screamed and wailed until Hunter pulled him off.

“Stop!” Hunter screamed. “Everybody stop!”

They all froze and turned to look at the eldest boy.

“What is ‘the other’?”

Alastair looked stumped, aged little head cocked sideways. He did not answer.

“You said, ‘you can have the other, but not the gold’,” Hunter demanded. “What does that mean?”

“Oh,” Alastair said, standing and brushing the dust off his tattered green suit. “The legend,” he said, “and the wishes.”

“Wishes?” The children all looked at one another. “What wishes?” Aeryn asked.

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Alastair sighed, arms dropping to his sides. “Everybody knows when ye catch a leprechaun ye get three wishes. Everybody but ye three dunces, apparently. Ye can have yer wishes, and the legend, but no more! Ye hear me? No more. Then ye’re on your way. The lot of ya... pain in my arse, I tell ye.”

“What’s the legend?” Ian asked, still holding Alastair by the coat tails.

“The rainbow. Do ye not know of the legend of the rainbow?”

“Rainbow?” Aeryn asked. She turned her head toward the sky.

“Yes, the rainbow, lassie. Ye do know what a rainbow is, do ye not?”

“Yes, I know what a rainbow is,” she snapped. “Do you get them down here?”

“Oh, aye, we do. Beautiful they are. Especially when He is there.”

“He?”

“Yes, He. The One.”

“He lives on the rainbow?” She looked upwards again.

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“Aye, there, and other places at times.”

“Is that how we find Him?”

“’Tis one way. There are others.”

“How do we know when He’s there?”

“Look for that which is forbidden, and you will see.”

“What does that mean?”

“Have ye forgotten so quickly? Dense, yer kind. No sense. No sense at all!” Alastair huffed and pulled away. “I just told ye.”

“I wish you would just speak English,” Ian said.

Alastair smiled. “Aye, laddie. That I will. And that be one of yer wishes.”

“No, wait,” Ian protested. “I didn’t mean- -”

“Too late, lad. One be gone and two to go. Use them wisely.”

“Everyone be quiet,” Hunter yelled. The group calmed down and stared at one another, then all three turned to look at Alastair. He stood smiling at them. Raising his little hand, he wiggled two tiny crooked fingers.

“We need some help,” Aeryn said. “We can’t do this alone.” The boys nodded.

“Would it be an official wish, then?”

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“Yes,” Aeryn said. “I wish for help for us.”

“So be it. Ye shall each have a helper on yer journey.” One finger went down, and one wrinkled digit wiggled in the air.

“I wish I could understand what you’re talking about,” Hunter whispered.

“No!” Ian screamed and shoved Hunter again. “Now you’ve wasted the last wish!”

Alastair smiled. “Wisdom,” he said, impressed, “a fine choice, lad. And so ye shall have it, but only you. Now for yer warnin’.”

“Warning?” Ian asked. “Is he kidding?”

“Heed it well, child, or suffer all eternity because if it.” Alastair stepped back from the group. His voice took on a serious note. “The road is long and fraught with danger. Seek the one who will stand and fight, not he who will run and hide. Ye must each journey separately, but find the same road. What ye seek is the same, though a different path.”

“Why do we have to go separately?” Aeryn asked.

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“Silence,” the leprechaun said, “time is short. Ye must complete yer journey by the time the sun rises on the third day. For then, it will be too late.”

“What sun?” Ian asked.

Alistair shook his head. One tiny aged digit pointed toward the bottom of the bubbling volcano. “Each time mother sun boils with anger is one morn. Aye? And each time she settles herself calm-like is what ye call night. Can ye grasp that, laddie?”

“Aye,” Ian snapped. “And what if I refuse to leave them?” he asked, feet planted hard, pointing at the Welch siblings. “They’re my friends.”

“Stubbornness will get ye nothing, if not killed, lad. Learn to work with the world, and not fight against it.” He turned back to the group. “Seek the great warrior, for only he can save ye when evil closes in. Listen to him. Fear the warrior. Flee when he tells you, and don’t look back. It will take the essence of all of ye together to defeat the evil one. Don’t hide yer spark. Let the world see it. It will be the only thing to save ye. If ye fail, then the lot of ye will be damned to die the living death – fer’ever.”

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“You shall each have a gift for yer journey.” Alastair began backing away, almost looking as though he was afraid, eyes darting around, wringing his hands nervously. “Use it wisely. Ye shall find yer destination by land, sea, and air. Hold fast to the strings in the mist, for they alone will sustain ye when all hope is gone. There are those to guard ye, those to fight ye, and those to challenge ye. Ye must learn to know the difference.”

“Only trust beyond a shadow of a doubt.” Alastair was at a decent distance now. “Never forget, especially in the castle. Fear the one who can extinguish yer spark for all eternity. Flee from him.”

Without warning, a small feather floated down from the sky and landed at Aeryn’s feet. She reached down and picked it up. In front of Ian landed a small flask of clear liquid, and at Hunter’s feet, a quartz rock.

“Seek the truth which will light your path. Evil must always give way to the truth, and darkness to the light. Wash away all that holds ye back. Ye can only lead your father back home. He alone must choose. Put out your hands.”

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Each of the three extended their open hands, palms turned upwards. Into each, floated down a single tiny yellow seed from the sky. “This is all you will need.”

“What is it?” Ian asked.

“Now go!” the tiny creature boomed. He turned and disappeared once again into the rocks. The earth jerked and shook. The ground beneath their feet lurched, sending them all hurtling through time and space.

The light of the volcano went out, and the temperature plunged.



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*Their screams became muffled and faint as they flew through absolute darkness, swallowed up in the pitch black hole of this new world. Slamming into the dark, hard ground, three separate aftershocks rocked the earth beneath them, and then, nothing.*

## Hunter or Hunted?



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~Lori