

Chapter One

Cayuse Meets The Spider Man

“Dammit, Armand—you’re cheatin’ again!”

The angry little man’s fist slammed the tabletop hard enough to rattle the pins in the cribbage board. The man seated across from him smiled, then slapped his soft pink cheek in mock astonishment before moving the cribbage peg back two spots. Three men at a nearby table looked on with amusement.

“Caught him at it again, Brydie?” one old farmer laughed.

“Catch him every day! It’s getting to be damnably annoying.”

“Aye—just like me having to mop up your mess every day.” The mountainous innkeeper, known affectionately by the regulars as “Tubby,” slapped a soapy towel down between the two cribbage players and began to scrub the well-worn tabletop.

Brydie snatched up his half-filled wine mug in indignation. “You don’t need to knock everything a flyin’, Tubby. Between you and the peg cheat here, a fella can hardly have a quiet afternoon anymore.”

“You want a quiet afternoon, Brydie, go home,” Armand said, winking at the innkeeper. “I imagine Tubby would like a *paying* customer for a change.”

Tubby grunted. “Can’t change a man that late in life.”

Brydie looked at his nephew with a hurt expression. “You always gotta take *his* side, don’t you? And my own flesh and blood, too.”

The big innkeeper put both meaty fists on his hips and grinned. “I never asked for you to be uncle to me, so the deal must have been worked from *your* end. You must have prayed to the Light one night for pappy to plant a seed that would grow into such a fine young strapping buck as myself.

“Young?” Brydie hooted as he let his gaze travel from his nephew’s thinning hairline down to the thickening waistline. “Only thing *young* about you is your brains—we’re all still waitin’ for them to develop.” He shifted his feet and leaned back, satisfied with his clever repartee, then jerked forward as the sound of a muffled yelp came from beneath the table. “Sorry, little Cayuse,” he apologized as he bent to peer anxiously under the tabletop. “I forgot you was down there.”

The little brown dog looked at him with reproachful golden eyes, then rose and padded over to the fireplace as her owner, Tubby, laughed. “Uncle Brydie, you ought to be ashamed of yourself—now even the dog is suffering from your bad cribbage playing.”

Armand smirked. “Make sure she accepts your apology now, Brydie. I’m *sure* she understood every word.” He looked at the men seated at the next table and rolled his eyes upward. Brydie Perkins’ stubborn belief in the ancient legends that animals once talked with men was a source of amusement and vexation to them all. “But if you’re not sure you’re getting your message through,” he continued, “I suppose we could send to Bealah for one of the Acolytes of Light to translate for you.”

“One of these days, Armand, you’re gonna find out I was right as rain, you just wait and see!” Brydie drew himself up to his full seated height and launched into his favorite story, the one about the Circle of Life and the mythical heroes who would bring back the secrets of the Ancients. He stopped as the inn’s front door opened.

A tall, thin stranger stood silhouetted in the open doorway, sniffing the air before committing himself to enter the now silent room.

Armand turned to follow his friend's gaze. Seeing the stranger's quivering nostrils, he snickered and jabbed a finger into Brydie's thin ribs. "Must be you he smells," he whispered. "I took a bath just last week."

Brydie ignored him and continue to stare at the aristocratic figure now stepping into Tubby's Tavern. Some might have found the strong, angular features handsome, but Brydie thought he looked a little prissy.

The local patrons scattered around the common room looked on with interest, for strangers were rare in Pondera these days. After the main trade road had been rerouted further east to provide a safer route over the Dwarf King Mountains, Pondera had changed practically overnight from a hopeful crossroad village to a forgotten hamlet.

Brydie and the others examined the stranger in minute detail, not missing a thing from the expensive clothing and fancy silver-tipped riding boots, to the oddly stylized haircut with one sparse braid dangling behind the man's right ear. The entire effect was a dandified arrogance that elicited an instant dislike from the simple farmers who made up Tubby's regulars. They looked at each other with raised eyebrows and went back to talking crops, cribbage and darts.

Tubby moved forward, eager to greet the new arrival. He could smell money when it came into the inn and the aroma of silver and gold was all around this haughty man. He smiled and indicated a choice table near the fireplace. "You just traveling through, stranger, or might you be needing a room?" He quickly wiped down the tabletop with his towel.

"No room," the dark clad man answered as he seated himself. "Just some wine and maybe a little conversation. I'm on an errand for the Temple of Light. That's in Bealah." He added the last few words as though he thought Tubby and the others might not be aware of the largest city in their part of the world.

Armand fought to keep a straight face as he kicked Brydie under the table. "Pssst! Maybe he's one of them Acolyte's come to translate for you and the dog!"

Brydie ignored him, continuing to stare at the new arrival.

"I'm collecting area folk tales and the like," the stranger continued. "I've been interviewing local residents of this area. Are you familiar with the mountains around here?"

"Lived here all my life," Tubby answered as he used a corner of the towel to wipe his sweaty face. "Nothing goes on around here that I don't hear about." He used the towel to stifle a sneeze.

The stranger frowned, then forced his lips back into a tight smile.

Tubby recognized the expression. It was the all too familiar look that nobles assume when dealing with someone whom they deem to be of a lower status. "I'll be right back with your wine," he grunted.

The stranger waited, the insincere smile frozen on his face, until Tubby returned with wine and a platter of hot bread and fresh cheese. "As I said, I'm from the Temple, doing a little research on some of the old legends. And I've come upon the strangest thing. An old metallic tablet with strange lettering that's set right into a rock wall. Have you ever heard of such a thing? It's in the foothills not far from here."

Tubby shook his head and began to reconsider whether the man's purse would be worth the time spent talking the coins out of it. He didn't have all afternoon to chitchat about some oddity the man had found. Besides, this sort of thing was more up Brydie's alley than his. He brightened as he recognized the opportunity to have someone pay for his cheapskate uncle's wine.

The stranger picked up his goblet and swirled the ruby red liquid before swallowing a tiny mouthful. "Well, I saw it—golden metal engraved with some unreadable gibberish." He leaned forward to study Tubby's wide face, waiting for some sort of reaction. None was forthcoming. With a spark of annoyance, his eyes slid from the innkeeper to the others in the room, then widened with interest as he saw the little brown dog curled up by the fireplace.

"A peculiar thing about that tablet is that it had a dog pictured on it, and a paw print. An odd thing to painstakingly carve into metal and then carry miles into the wilderness, don't you think?" He smiled in satisfaction as Cayuse raised her head to look at him. "The tablet looked terribly old...possibly dating from the Before Times, or maybe even the Ancients." He turned back to stare at the disinterested innkeeper. "Are you sure you've never heard of such a wondrous artifact?"

"Nope. Never heard anything about it. You should speak to my old uncle would—he fancies himself quite the expert on the old tales. For a glass or two of wine, I'm sure he'd be willing to talk with you. Would you like me to send him over?"

"Excellent!" the man's smile was sincere now, although still lacking anything even remotely resembling warmth. "And bring a pitcher of this wine, along with a slice or two of your best beef."

As the stranger's attention switched to the approaching Brydie, Cayuse reviewed his earlier comments. A golden tablet with a dog on it? That reminded her of the stories her mother used to tell. She lifted her head and watched as Brydie proudly took his seat at the stranger's table. Keeping one ear cocked to monitor the visitor's rambling account of his journey through the mountains, Cayuse thought back to when she had been a pup suckling at her mother's teat. The entire known history of her kind had been preserved over the generations by spoken word. She had loved it when her mother told the old stories. One of her favorites had been about the great hero BoJo. She wrinkled her velvety brown brow in concentration, trying hard to recall the exact words her mother had spoken.

"It was a different time, back in the Before Days," her mother had said. "Back then, all animals were of the same standing, be they four-legged, two-legged or winged. And all animals shared the same language and talked freely amongst each other."

"What about the belly crawlers?" one of the little male pups had inquired. "Them too?"

"Them too," came the laughing reply. "But the greatest of all animals was the wonderful BoJo, a strong and fierce dog whose adventures were once told all over the land. Everybody knew of the Legend of BoJo because it was so famous; the humans even preserved it on a special golden tablet of Light. But now days only a few verses of the song remain."

Could this tablet the man spoke of possibly be a piece of that old legend? Cayuse didn't believe it could be THE golden tablet of Light—that surely was impossible. But if it really *was* from the Before Days, it would be worth seeing!

Her curiosity now fully aroused, Cayuse crept closer to the table and lay down near Brydie's feet and pretended to groom her already immaculate paws.

"No, I never did hear of such a thing," Brydie was saying. His weathered old face glowed with genuine excitement at having found someone who not only didn't scoff at his beliefs, but was actually interested in what he, Brydie Perkins, had to say. "I sure would like to take a look at it, Mister. Especially if it's from the Before Times. Might be I could recognize a word or two of the lettering; my own father used to have some learning on letters and taught me a little of what he knew. Where did you say you found it?"

"I didn't," the traveler replied coolly, examining Brydie's facial expressions and body language. Perhaps it might be worthwhile to continue the interview with the babbling old fool – although he doubted the man could read his own name, let alone the writing on the tablet. He shifted his interest to the little dog and was startled when she returned his stare. The mutt had the most remarkable blue-rimmed golden eyes! The Master had said something about golden eyes and the Ancients.

He interrupted the old man's pompous drivel. "What a pretty little dog. And such remarkable eyes. Did you know that animals with golden eyes were said to be favored by The Ancients?" He fixed his dark, troubling stare on Cayuse while continuing to speak to the beaming Brydie. "Do you believe this dog of yours can understand what I'm saying to you right now?"

"Oh, aye—absolutely." Brydie nodded. He saw no need to mention that she was Tubby's dog, not his. She belonged in the family, so it wasn't like he was lying or anything. Besides, it wasn't every day that gentlemen from Bealah dropped into Tubby's

to buy old Brydie a glass or two of wine. He had no intention of ruining a good thing with an insignificant detail like the truth. He beamed with the newfound pride of false ownership and said, “She’s a smart little thing and a damnably good little watchdog, too. Keeps the stables safe from prowlers, and thievin’ critters out of the feed bins.”

“But has she ever given you any sign that she understands your words?”

Brydie looked at the stranger, puzzled. “What do you mean?”

“Oh, like barking once for ‘yes’ and twice for ‘no.’ Or counting with paw taps—things of that nature.”

Brydie chortled. “It don’t work like that, Mister...” He realized the man had not yet introduced himself. He paused expectantly. When no name was proffered, he continued. “Them’s circus tricks you’re talking about. In the *old days*, creatures really talked to each other.” He looked around quickly to see if anyone else was listening, then leaned forward and added in a stage whisper, “I’ve heard it said that they talked *mind to mind*.”

The corner of the stranger’s mouth twitched as he suppressed a smile. “I see. Well, Mister Brydie, would you be willing to join me in an examination of the tablet itself? Perhaps seeing it might spark recollection of something you haven’t told me.” He looked directly into the large golden eyes of the dog lying before him and added, “Perhaps we could take your little friend with us, too. See what she makes of it.”

Brydie beamed. Too bad Armand had already left; he’d like to rub the old fart’s face in this—he was going to, how did Tubby put it... ‘*consult*’ on the Before Times with this important looking stranger. He glowed with pride as he drained the last of his wine and held the goblet out for a refill.

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As the stranger leaned forward to fill the uplifted goblet, Cayuse rose and threaded her way through the tables and chairs to the kitchen. If they were going on a trip to the mountains, it was a good idea to see what scraps she could beg first. She wasn't going to rely on Brydie or the dark stranger for sustenance. She paused in the doorway to inhale the glorious scents before entering.

"Out! You know no dogs are allowed in the kitchen!" Mrs. Tubby waved a wet dish towel in Cayuse's direction. The dog stopped and wagged her tail. Despite her bluster, the innkeeper's wife was a soft touch and never failed to treat the little dog to a taste of whatever morsel was at hand.

"Oh, you're a beggar, you are!" Mrs. Tubby laughed, throwing a scrap of meat towards Cayuse. "Now get out of here before the old man comes in and bounces you out on your backside!"

Cayuse swallowed the treat and slipped out the back door. The secret was to wait until Mrs. Tubby left the kitchen, then pull the same tail-wagging act on one of the serving girls. While she waited for a new target, she glanced about the yard and noticed a very fine black horse with expensive livery grazing on the scanty grass near the water trough. No doubt it belonged to the stranger; nobody in Pondera had such an expensive mount.

In the kitchen behind her she heard the unmistakable step of the serving girl Karianne. A heavy-set girl in her late teens, Karianne always gave generous portions of treats. Mouth watering in anticipation, Cayuse turned back into the kitchen.

When she returned, the stranger appeared to be arguing with Brydie, who stood away from him with his skinny shoulders hunched and a defensive expression on his face. As

Brydie caught sight of her emerging from the kitchen, his body language changed and he jutted his jaw forward and said, “I told you she would come when we was ready to leave and sure enough, here she comes now. So what do you say to that, Mister Fancy Pants No-Name?”

Cayuse winced. Brydie had obviously consumed much more than his usual quota of wine. She knew he was one of those humans that others referred to as “belligerent” when he’d had too much to drink. She made a mental note to stay out of his reach until he sobered up a little; although he’d never struck her, there was no sense in tempting fate. A dog didn’t survive in this human world by being either careless or stupid.

The stranger swung gracefully onto the ornate saddle and stared down upon Brydie’s balding head. “Don’t push your luck, *Mister Brydie*. It could very well be that the dog is of more interest to me than you.”

Brydie glared up at him, opened his mouth to retort, but couldn’t find anything clever in his wine-befuddled brain to say. Finally he mumbled, “I’ll get my horse.”

“You do that, *Mister Brydie*. And let us hope the nag is in better condition than you are, or we won’t reach my base-camp before dawn.”

Cayuse felt a stirring of apprehension as she recognized the ugliness in the man’s voice and wondered if Brydie was aware of the dangerous shift in the man’s mood.

Muttering under his breath, Brydie stomped off and returned shortly with Clem, an old gelding who had seen better days. Clem snorted in irritation at being pulled away from the oat bin. Cayuse smiled as the horse’s expression switched from annoyance to disbelief when Brydie clambered onto the worn saddle. The old horse had obviously thought he was staying in for the night.

Without another word, the stranger reigned his horse around and set off at a brisk trot, leaving Clem, Brydie and Cayuse to follow as best as they could. Settling into a comfortable trot, Cayuse followed the others into the deepening shadows as night fell on Pondera.

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They traveled for hours that first night; it was well past midnight before they finally reached the stranger's camp. Once Brydie had recovered from the wine's influence, he had tried to re-ingratiate himself with the stranger. The only thing the man had seemed interested in were the stories of the old days that dealt with talking animals and Mind Speech. So Brydie had called up every tale he knew on the subject. By the time they rode into the small camp, Brydie's throat was sore from all the talking.

Cayuse watched as Brydie stiffly climbed down from the saddle. He teetered next to the horse, holding a stirrup to maintain his balance. The stranger dismounted with a fluid grace that made Brydie's fatigue seem all the greater by comparison. The stranger quickly removed the saddle and the bridle, then quickly brushed the stallion down. When he had finished, he walked over to the tent, then paused at the entrance. "You and the dog may sleep inside; put your bedroll next to the door.

Brydie shuffled forward to comply, fearful the stranger would change his mind. Cayuse felt sorry for Clem; Brydie wasn't even going to remove the saddle from the poor old horse. With an apologetic glance over her shoulder, she followed Brydie into the tent.

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In the morning, they broke camp without even taking the time to heat up a cup of coffee. As they rode toward the Lone Rock Road, Brydie felt his stomach roil as the old gelding lurched forward in an effort to keep up with the black stallion. The damned stranger had been so generous at Tubby's, but now he acted as though he could care less if Brydie or the animals had another bite to eat this lifetime. Brydie's indignation was punctuated by the steady gurgling noise coming from his belly. He wished he had a little journey cake or even just a plain old piece of bread. Gods of Light, but he needed *something* to help settle his poor old stomach! Shouldn't have had quite so much wine last night, he told himself. He hated to admit it, but he just couldn't handle the grapes like he could when he was younger.

He stared at the stranger's back and resolutely vowed not to show any more weakness. The wine had muddled the memories a little, but he did recall enough of the prior night to know the man had turned cold, even cruel towards him.

"You know," he called out in a loud voice, "there are tales in these parts linking the old Dwarf Kings to some sort of special works commissioned way-back-when by the Temple. Nobody knows anymore what they were—could be something like that tablet of yours."

The stranger turned in his saddle to glance back at Brydie. "There's no such thing as real Dwarven people anymore. Just mongrel remnants. Do you believe in fairies, too?"

Brydie hunched his shoulders, stung by the sarcasm. The man was mean-spirited, that was for sure. And evil looking, too. He hadn't noticed it before, but now it seemed to him that the man's eyes were so dark that they seemed to be without pupils.

“There’s a reason why those big old hills are called the Dwarf King Mountains,” he shot back. “The folks that live up there work with gems and fancy stones just like the old Dwarfs did. They’re considered pretty much the best stone and mason workers you can hire—if you can get any of them to crawl out of their little podunk villages.”

Sensing mild interest from his companion, Brydie warmed to the subject. “They might not be Dwarfs like in the *old* days, but I wager there’s more of the old Dwarven stock left than you think. They just bred with regular folks over the years, so no one can see the difference anymore. And if anyone could tell you what your tablet is made of, it would be them.”

The stranger looked at him thoughtfully. He hadn’t contemplated the possibility that the so-called Dwarven villages might harbor any of the knowledge he sought. “You raise an interesting premise, Mister Brydie,” he said.

“What *is* your name?” Brydie asked, emboldened by the man’s response. “I can’t just keep calling you ‘stranger’ for the rest of the trip.”

The man frowned in irritation, then a smile began to form on his lips. “My name is Tarduk,” he said. “I am a buyer for the Temple of Light.” He gave Brydie his true name and position; after all, this annoying little man wasn’t going to tell anybody anything that could hurt him or his masters. Dead men tell no tales.

Chapter Two

The Legend of BoJo

The journey through the sun-drenched lower slopes of the Dwarf King Mountains might have been enjoyable but for Tarduk's continued cold arrogance. The haughty man's escalating rudeness to Brydie frightened Cayuse. He was, she thought, malignant and cold. He gave her the willies—just like a spider you woke up to find crawling over your paws. What bothered her even more was that Brydie acted as though he was oblivious to the man's dark nature, choosing just to smile weakly at the cruel jokes and snide comments.

Although he didn't possess the little dog's intuitive nature, Brydie *was* aware that his efforts to win back Tarduk's favor had failed. The Temple Buyer had erupted the night before as Brydie told the story of how the evil Dark Brothers brought the End Times upon Borealis.

'Angry' didn't even come close to capturing the man's rage. Brydie was absolutely certain that if the small sputtering fire hadn't been between them, Tarduk would have physically attacked him. Brydie had quickly disclaimed that it was just an old tale made

up to entertain folks, and that any good story had to have both heroes and villains. The craziness had slowly gone out of Tarduk's eyes and Brydie had allowed himself to breathe again. He was prepared to swear to anyone who would later listen, that those eyes had seemed to glow coal red with the heat of hell itself.

He wished now that he had paid more mind to the parts of the old stories dealing with the Dark Brothers. Why did the mere mention of them anger Tarduk so much? None of the other tales he'd told had even begun to illicit such a passionate response. In fact, now that he thought about it, Tarduk hadn't reacted to much of anything he'd said...until he'd mentioned the Dark Brothers.

"It is near this spot."

The terse words shook Brydie from his ruminations and he looked eagerly about, hoping to glimpse a twinkle or a sparkle of the promised golden metal through the surrounding trees.

Cayuse felt an overwhelming sense of relief. Once they found the tablet, she, Brydie and Clem could go home. Right now, she just wanted to find a nice spot in the sun and lie down. She picked her way through a cluster of pines growing adjacent to a warm rock wall. The humans could poke around for the tablet; she was going to groom her paws and rest her poor, tired body.

She nosed her way through a tangled clump of brush, then hesitated as something caught her attention. The foliage had almost caused her to miss it, but there it was - a metallic glint coming from behind the trees to her right. The afternoon light was causing something to sparkle and glimmer through the meager tree covering. Her fatigue suddenly vanished.

Leaving the human voices behind her, the little dog pushed her way through the green needled limbs and came out into a small clearing nestled right up against the base of a steep granite cliff. There, on the wall in front of her, was a golden metallic tablet embedded into the living rock.

Trembling with excitement, she looked upon the glyphs carved into the beautiful golden metal. She had never seen such markings before, and as she continued to stare in wonder, words began to form inside her mind, and she heard—as much as saw—these words:

*"There is a land beyond the waste,
where day is night and night is day.
The Silver Cat will show the way,
but first his price you must now pay.
The temple doors are locked up tight,
but sing the song to scale the heights.
The scroll of time speaks truth in rhyme;
remove the trine to find the sign.
Great BoJo waits beyond the gates
for two brave dogs to best the fates.
Pieper Dog is one of two.
The Other Dog, my friend, is you!"*

Totally fixated upon the tablet before her, Cayuse shivered with excitement and a little fear. The other dog was...her? And who was Pieper?

“So, the little dog has found the prize.”

She jumped at the sudden, sardonic words, jerking around to see Tarduk standing behind her. The speculative look in his eyes unnerved her and she took two short steps backward until she was stopped by the wall.

“Did you find it, Tarduk?” Brydie emerged from the scrubby trees behind the taller man, wiping beads of sweat from his beet-red face.

“Your little golden-eyed dog found it, Mister Brydie. You failed to mention what an excellent little explorer she is, along with all those other fine attributes you’ve ascribed to her.”

Brydie ignored the words and eagerly pushed up to stand next to the buyer. “Well, I’ll be...it’s just like you said!” He stepped past Tarduk and knelt on one bony knee to squint at the tablet.

Cayuse saw Tarduk’s face change. It was as though the mask of humanity had suddenly slipped, exposing the viscous, murderous animal that lay within.

“Can you make out the writing?” Tarduk asked, as he slowly moved one hand towards the leather bag loosely slung around his waist. “Perhaps it’s in one of those ancient languages your father taught you.”

Cayuse watched in involuntary fascination as he removed a small flute-shaped pipe from the bag, then another smaller object which he inserted into one end of the pipe. What was he doing?

Brydie was leaning forward in rapt concentration. “Nah, but the shapes kind of remind me of something I heard about once.”

“And what would that be?” Tarduk lifted the pipe to his lips. He was absolutely certain the man didn’t know anything. It was time to put an end to this charade. He would make a rubbing of the tablet to take back to Bealah, even though he suspected the Master already had such a record. And he would also take the dog; his Master would no doubt like to study the odious creature, perhaps dissecting the small brain to examine it for abnormalities.

Brydie Perkins had outlived his usefulness. No one would find him in this wretched place. If anyone did happen upon the body, there wouldn’t be a mark on it once he removed the dart. They would assume he’d died of natural causes. He aimed the blowpipe at the man’s scrawny neck and blew into the silver mouthpiece.

Brydie slapped at his neck. “Damned horseflies!” Then his body went rigid and he fell sideways facing the horrified little dog.

As she saw the old man’s suddenly sightless eyes frozen open in surprise, Cayuse knew Brydie Perkins was quite dead. Without hesitation, she bounded past the startled Tarduk and began to run as fast as she could, not caring where she went as long as it was away from this horrid man and his deadly pipe. She heard his angry cursing and the crashing sounds he made as he ran back to his horse and began to remount.

Heart pumping furiously, she fought to reign in her panic as she continued to run straight down the steep hillside. She knew the horse could not take the same route with the speed she was maintaining...not unless the man wanted to risk breaking the poor creature’s leg. And his own neck. With grim determination, she watched the blurring

ground below her and tried to navigate a route that wouldn't cause any of the same damage to herself.

Finally, the sound of the pursuit behind her began to fade and she hoped the man might have abandoned the chase. She slowed to a safer trot and tried to think. Where should she go? She knew intuitively that she could not return to Pondera. The man wanted her for some reason—some reason having to do with the Legend of BoJo. She knew that as surely as she knew her own name was Cayuse Coyote Littlesox. No, she couldn't lead him back to Tubby's Tavern. He had killed once in pursuit of his goal; she had no doubt that he would do so again. But where could she go?

Although the man must be far behind her now, she dared not slacken her pace. If she kept on at this steady ground-consuming trot, she would reach the road leading to Pondera by late evening. Then she would have to decide which way to go. Cocking one velvety ear to listen behind her, she thought again of the tablet and was surprised to 'see' the words forming once more in her mind.

There had to be someone she could talk to about both the tablet and the man. But who? Only a human could do something about the murderous Tarduk. And what human would be able to make any sort of sense out of a panicked little dog?

There was only one possible option. She must go to Bealah, to the Acolytes. They would understand her. She could report both the tablet's existence and the murder of Brydie to the Temple of Light. Her heart began to race again, not from exertion this time, but with excitement.

Now that the decision had been made, she thought again about the words on the tablet. The Legend of BoJo was a tale that every pup had heard. But the words that had

formed in her mind when she looked at the tablet were not the same as those she remembered her mother reciting. She kept thinking about two lines in particular:

“Pieper Dog is one of two.

The other dog, my friend, is you.”

And what did that cryptic verse about BoJo waiting behind a gate mean?

As she continued to trot through the deepening twilight, she felt a strength of purpose begin to form within her heart, pushing out the fear and panic that had filled it earlier. Now she knew where to start—Bealah. Then, she would find this Pieper Dog. She knew of no such animal around Pondera, but perhaps the Acolytes would know more. The Acolytes of the Temple of Light knew everything. The thought comforted her as she raced on into the twilight.

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Although the lower reaches of the Dwarf King Mountains were easily navigated, the upper zone was difficult to travel, and downright treacherous at times. Cayuse was weary from her all-night trot. As dawn approached, she knew she had to rest and recover her strength before continuing any further.

The only passage through these rugged mountains was via the harrowing pass known as ‘Devil’s Staircase.’ She would have to cross it to reach Bealah; but first she had to find it. She had lost the trail long ago, and was now taking the path of least resistance upwards towards the distant jagged summits. Even though it was late Septem, these upper basins were still covered with the hard packed residue of last year’s accumulation. The slopes were icy in the shadows, and Cayuse was grateful for the extra grip her claws provided. Perhaps in this high, shadowy basin the snow never did totally melt. She

sniffed the thin air and smelled moisture; the weather was about to change for the worse.

It was time to find shelter before the storm hit.

Burrowing into the sheltered hollow at the base of a snow encrusted fir, Cayuse thought about what to do once she got to Bealah. How would she gain access to the Temple of Light? Would the Acolytes believe her once she told her story? She huddled against the tree and began to groom her paws. Could they find and then punish Tarduk? Would they know how to find Pieper? Her eyes began to droop and she finally fell asleep.

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Two cold, hungry days later, Cayuse was in a barren basin below the entrance to Devil's Staircase. She was famished, tired and chilled to the bone, but ecstatic at having finally found the two huge rock cairns identifying the pass. The sun had disappeared below the surrounding peaks long ago, and the early evening shadows were beginning to fade into true darkness. Once again, she needed to find shelter for the night.

As she forced her way into a thicket of gnarled branches, seeking a safe hollow in which to sleep, she felt a sudden presence behind her. Pinned in by the unyielding branches, she was unable to turn around or back out. It must be the man! In desperation she surged forward, ignoring the pain as one sharp limb scraped her flank.

“Wait! I don’t mean you any harm.”

In the thickening darkness, a shape took form before Cayuse’s fearful eyes as she peered out from her sanctuary. Relief flooded through her as she realized it was another dog. She could see plumes of steam rising off the strange dog’s form. It was starting to rain now and the air was very cold; soon the rain would turn to snow.

"I truly am sorry if I frightened you, but I've been following your tracks all afternoon and was so relieved to have finally caught up to you."

The voice was amiable, apologetic and very male. Surprised and relieved, Cayuse moved forward to get a better look at the new arrival. He was a handsome black fellow with a light-colored muzzle and chest.

Embarrassed by her panic and the fact that she hadn't known he was following her, Cayuse retorted, *"You shouldn't be sneaking up on someone like that! How was I to know it was you? And who are you, anyway?"*

Dark eyes glinting with humor, the handsome newcomer flashed a rakish smile made all the more endearing by its lopsided nature. *"They call me Wiener,"* he answered breezily.

Cayuse looked at him, aghast. What an undignified name! Unable to stop herself, she started to laugh.

He glared at her, then started laughing, too.

"Wiener Dog?" Cayuse sputtered.

"It's a nickname," he explained, his indignation quickly replaced by the joy of finding the attractive little dog he'd been tracking. *"My real name is Weasel Nose Rabbit Ears...or W.N.R.E."*

"Oh," Cayuse chortled as tears began to roll down her velveteen cheeks. *"That's worse than Wiener! What on earth was your mother thinking?"*

"There's no need to insult my mother," Wiener said, in mock injury. *"She was a very fine dog...at least what I remember of her."*

Cayuse looked at him, immediately regretting the insensitivity of her comment. *"I'm sorry,"* she said. *"That was very rude of me. It's just that...it seems such a silly name."* She trailed off lamely, realizing her latest comment was every bit as rude as the earlier one.

He didn't seem annoyed, however, so she quickly added, *"My name is Cayuse Coyote and I am very pleased to meet you...Wiener."*

Wiener puffed his handsome chest out in pleasure, delighted with himself and his new companion. *"And I am very happy to meet you, Cayuse Coyote."* Then he added, *"You wouldn't mind sharing that hollow, would you? It's starting to snow."*

She looked at him for a moment, then smiled. *"Of course not; with two of us it will be much warmer."*

###

Cayuse woke to the sound of snow falling from the tree boughs and was grateful for the warmth of Wiener's body next to hers. It was freezing! Legs twitching and ears flicking, he seemed to be in the middle of a dream. She shifted slightly to study him and caught her breath at the sharp pain in her side. The gash from the tree limb hadn't been serious, but it would be sore until it healed. While she cleaned the wound, she thought of Wiener's sudden appearance. It seemed so...coincidental. She smiled at her suspicious reaction. Certainly his situation couldn't be any more bizarre than her own. It was obvious that he'd been on the trail for some time; his paws were heavily callused, his glossy black fur a bit unkempt, and his ribs protruded prominently along his long flanks.

As though aware of her scrutiny, he opened his eyes. Blinking in confusion, he looked at her for several long seconds before remembering who she was and where he was. Satisfied, he stretched luxuriously and yawned.

"Where do you come from, Wiener?" Cayuse asked. *"I mean, how do you happen to be up in this place?"*

His jaunty grin faded and Cayuse sensed this to be an unhappy topic for him.

"I was living on a farm not too far from Lanac," he said. *"It was a wonderful life. My humans ran a guide service. Harlik was the father. He died in an accident while exploring an old mine. It collapsed when he was inside."*

"I'm so very sorry," Cayuse said, seeing the pain that still lingered in his eyes from the memory. *"You must have cared very much for Harlik."*

"He was good to me," Wiener sighed. *"He used to take me with him when he went on trips. When he was in the mine, I was outside with his horse. I tried to dig through the rubble, but there was too much! I ran back to the farm, but the woman couldn't understand what I was trying to tell her."*

"I don't think," he added sadly, *"that she even cared that much. She just ignored me. It wasn't until someone found the horse wandering around that anyone bothered to ask where Harlik was. By that time, he was dead."*

"You mustn't blame yourself...you did all you could to save him"

Wiener lowered his head. *"I keep thinking that maybe if I'd just stayed and continued to dig, I could have reached him."*

Cayuse leaned forward and licked Wiener's coal black head.

"It wasn't your fault," she comforted.

He looked at her with mournful brown eyes. *"I'll always wonder if I did the right thing."*

Cayuse said firmly, *"He may have died instantly from the rockfall, Wiener. You can't assume he was still alive for you to save."*

He shook himself, embarrassed at having revealed so much to his new acquaintance. But she was so easy to talk to. *"Well, that was three days ago,"* he said. *"I left, rather than stay with the woman. There was no reason to stay without Harlik."*

"Where will you go?" Cayuse asked.

He brightened. *"To the other side of the mountains! Harlik took me there once when I was young."* He paused. *"I don't remember much, but it has to be better than where I came from. What about you?"*

She hesitated, not certain how much to tell him of the events that had led her to this moment. He waited patiently as she studied his open, honest face. She sensed she could trust this new friend, but what would he make of her fanciful story? She took a deep breath and said, *"I'm going to Bealah to speak with the Acolytes."*

He blinked. She had said this with such solemnity that he didn't dare crack any of the glib jokes that immediately came to his facile mind. *"The Acolytes,"* he repeated.

She fidgeted, realizing how silly her words must have sounded. *"It's sort a quest. You know, like in the old tales."* Oh, great—this was going from bad to worse.

"A quest to...?" he prompted.

She took a deep breath; she had to trust someone. *"It has to do with BoJo,"* she blurted. *"I found the golden tablet with the Legend of BoJo!"*

###

As he guided the horse around the remnants of a late spring avalanche, Tarduk was unaware of the two dogs not more than 500 yards away. He struggled to keep the stallion moving upward; the contrary beast didn't like the cold, icy snow any more than he did. He thought longingly of a warm fire and a cup of hot buttered rum, then shivered as he considered whether or not the Master would deem his mission a failure. His jaw clenched at the thought of what failure would mean, then he relaxed. Even though the dog had run off, he still had the rubbing he'd made of the odd lettering on the tablet. So all was not lost. And there were the stories the old man Brydie had told him. They would be worth something to the Master...especially that business about the Dwarfs. He shifted his lean body into a more comfortable position. Homecoming might be pleasant after all.

###

"A *tablet?*" Wiener asked with interest.

"*No!*" Cayuse said in agitation. "*Not just any tablet, but THE tablet– just like in the legend. And then the Spiderman killed Brydie because of it, and wanted to take me away with him because animals with golden eyes were favored by the Ancients.*"

Wiener looked at her thoughtfully. "*How do you know about that last part?*"

Before she could answer he added, "*Could you read the tablet? What did it say?*"

She shook her head in frustration. "*When I looked at the tablet, the words just formed in my mind. I could almost hear them being spoken.*"

Shutting her eyes, she visualized the tablet and recited the words to the attentive Wiener. When she was done, she opened her eyes and found him staring at her in rapt amazement.

"You remember all that in your head? Can you do it all the time?"

She thought for before answering. *"I don't know. I've never had anything like this happen to me before"*

"I think," Wiener said with building enthusiasm, *"that it has to do with the end verse. You know, where it says that the second dog is YOU! I'll bet no other dog could even read the tablet! And you do have different eyes than any dog I've ever seen. They sort of swallow you up in endless golden pools."*

"Why, Wiener!" Cayuse smiled. *"You are a poet!"*

The black dog cocked a rakish eyebrow. *"I have many talents. And since we're both traveling across these mountains, and I have no other great adventures occupying me at the moment, I think we should join company."*

"I think that's a great idea, Wiener." Her smile faded as she added, *"I just wish I knew what we were getting ourselves into."*

Chapter Three

Jedda

Wiener's familiarity with the mountains paid immediate dividends, for he quickly found the trail Tarduk had left. Cayuse stiffened with fear as she recognized the stallion's scent.

"It's him!"

"Him who?"

"The Spider Man, Wiener. We're following that evil man who killed poor Brydie!"

He stopped so abruptly that she ran into his backside. ***"You're sure?"***

"Yes," she said. ***"I recognize the horse's smell. Oh, Wiener, maybe we should stop...or even go back."***

He looked at her with a stern expression. ***"WE are tracking him, not the other way around. Besides, these tracks are hours old. He and his mount are well ahead of us by now. Although,"*** he added thoughtfully, ***"maybe we should trail him to see where he goes and who he meets."***

Her eyes widened in horror. ***"No!"***

He shrugged, a little disappointed at her rejection of his stalking strategy. ***“It was just an idea.”***

“A bad idea. YOU didn’t see him commit cold-blooded murder, Wiener!” She shuddered as she remembered Brydie’s sightless eyes staring back at her.

“I’m sorry that you had to see it. It must have been awful.”

She nodded and they padded along in silence for several long minutes. As the minutes lengthened, the silence began to turn into an almost physical thing. Cayuse sought for something to say to turn both their thoughts from the Spider Man. She thought of how competently Wiener seemed to negotiate this wilderness and said, ***“You must have learned a lot from Harlik. You’re just like a mountain guide yourself.”*** He shrugged in nonchalance, but she could tell he was pleased by the compliment.

“I learned everything I know from him. He talked to me all the time, just as though I was another person. It was like he knew I understood, even if he didn’t know he knew. Err...if you know what I mean.”

“I think I do,” Cayuse said. ***“Some humans think we’re just creatures with no capacity for thought or reasoning, but others know differently. It’s more an emotional understanding. I think the word humans use is ‘intuitive’. Maybe it’s a trait some of them still have left over from the Before Times.”***

“Well,” Wiener said brightly, ***“I intuit that we’d better get moving if we’re going to make the most of this day. It’s hard traveling on these steep snow slopes, and we have to cover as much distance as we can while there’s daylight. We don’t want to stumble upon your Spider Man in the dark.”***

Cayuse nodded in vigorous agreement. *"There was something repulsive about that man, Wiener. Like a spider crawling over your paw."* She shivered at the memory.

"He gave me the heebie-jeebies long before I knew him to be a murderer."

Wiener gently bumped up against her and said, *"Don't worry, dear damsel! I, Wiener, shall protect you."* The words were spoken with humor, but offered with the utmost sincerity. He would do just about anything to protect this wonderful new friend.

###

The two dogs climbed slowly but steadily up the steep mountainside. The wet snow gave way to drizzle, then to a dense mist. As they climbed higher, they broke out of the worst of the mist and were soon moving through patchy pockets of fog that clung stubbornly to the hillsides like ghostly fingers unwilling to let their prize go.

Contouring carefully upwards, they crossed a series of shallow ravines which Wiener said had been dug to channel the melting snow so the narrow path wouldn't be swept away each year. Harlik had been one of the packers hired to carry supplies for the workers involved in the original construction, so Wiener had a great deal of familiarity with the route.

"It was a toilsome project," he said, *"building the route over Devil's Staircase. Several people and horses died in the process. This section became known as "Dead Horse Point" because of an accident in which a whole string of packhorses fell to their deaths."* He shook his head at the memory. *"I was just a pup when it happened, but I can still remember how white the men's faces were when they talked about it. "*

Looking sideways at Cayuse, he added, *"But there's nothing to be afraid of now. The route is very safe. Even with the snow we had last night. Just follow me and we'll be up to the top in no time."*

Cayuse looked down the steep mountainside, but couldn't see through the fog to the ground far below. *"There isn't any section known as 'Dead Dog Point' is there?"* she asked.

Wiener sat down and absently scratched his ear. *"Not that I'm aware of. I'd have remembered that."*

"I was only joking," she protested. *"At least, I think I was."*

Soon they broke through the clouds and saw the purest, deepest, blue sky that Cayuse had ever seen. They were finally on the rocky summit. The mountains stood in stark contrast to the cobalt sky that was flecked with white, puffy clouds. Black, silver and gray rock rose sharply on both sides of the pass, etched with intricate patterns of crusty ice tracing the outline of ledges and cracks. The silence was overwhelming. Although nothing grew in this high inhospitable place, its stark beauty appealed to Cayuse.

"It's so beautiful," she said softly, feeling somehow sacrilegious for breaking the silence.

"It puts things into perspective, doesn't it?" Wiener said. *"Makes you realize how small and insignificant we are. If the mountains notice us at all, it's probably like fleas to a bear."*

She smiled at his imagery. *"I never knew how much there was outside of Pondera. Now I'm beginning to understand just how naive I was to think I could just start walking down the road and solve the mystery of BoJo's tablet."*

"You don't find anything if you don't start looking somewhere," Wiener replied.

"And Bealah does seem like a pretty good place to start."

Cayuse looked at her companion thoughtfully. *"You're right. It's just like you said...putting things into perspective. First, we get to Bealah. Then we figure out the next step."*

Wiener raised one ear and flashed his jaunty smile. *"Piece of cake. Now, let's head down before the path starts icing up. There will be even more snow on the north side and going down can be a lot more treacherous than going up."*

Cayuse took a last look around, wanting to always remember the glorious scenery surrounding her. Then she turned and followed Wiener down the steep trail.

###

Heavy black clouds began to fill the sky as the two dogs picked their careful way down the steep, slick path. The breeze that had been so pleasantly cool on the way up now grew chilly and uncomfortable. As they descended into the late afternoon shadows, Cayuse tried to concentrate on her footing, but couldn't help but glance up now and then at the row after row of mountain peaks stretching before them. They seemed to go on forever.

Finally, the incline grew more gentle, the switchbacks longer, and the trail a little wider. She felt the tension begin to fade and would have actually enjoyed the walk if she weren't so terribly tired. They had covered mile after mile without resting because Wiener insisted they must be down out of the snow before nightfall. She wondered how he could be so certain if he'd only been on this side of the pass once before, but opted to simply trust in his mountain sense.

"Looks like there might be trouble ahead," he said suddenly. *"I can't tell from here, but there seems to have been a recent slide across the trail."*

He trotted forward to investigate. Cayuse soon caught up, gingerly picking her way over the edge of the debris to stand next to him. Both dogs stood in silence, looking at the frozen river of snow that had completely covered the mountain path they'd been traveling.

"Well, at least it's something we can get around without too much difficulty," Wiener said with a measure of false brightness. He was trying as much to convince himself that this was so, as he was his companion. Besides, there was no other option; they had to cross this slide area. *"If this would have happened higher up, we would have been forced to turn back. But...it's not too steep here."* Looking at Cayuse, he asked, *"What do you think?"*

She was caught off guard by the question. After evaluating the ground in front of them, she said, *"We can't go back and we can't spend the night here. You pick the way. I'm sure I'll be fine following you."*

He beamed. *"I knew you had the makings of a mountain dog!"*

She shrugged. *"If Tarduk and his horse made it, so can we."*

Wiener snorted. *"They probably started the slide. You can see the horse tracks picking up on the other side."*

He stepped off the trail and gingerly began to pick his way across the hillside. *"It's not as bad as I thought it would be,"* he called in encouragement. *"Come on!"*

With a deep breath, Cayuse began to follow the intrepid Wiener. Slowly and ever so carefully, the two advanced across the rough, snowy slope. She looked down to where

the snow slide terminated on a small ledge. There was something out of place. She stopped, cocking her ears forward to listen.

"Did you hear that?" she asked.

"Hear what?" Wiener replied.

"A moaning sound...like a hurt animal. There it is again."

Wiener raised his large ears and cupped them forward. *"It seems awfully far away,"* he said doubtfully.

"Look down there," she said. *"Doesn't it look like something—or someone—half buried in the snow?"*

Wiener took a few steps forward and said, *"You may be right. Let's take a look."* With both forelegs held stiffly out in front and hind haunches close to the ground, he began to inch down the slope like a furry plow.

"There's a little blood here," he said.

Cayuse watched for a moment, then copying Wiener's example, she cautiously followed him down to the ledge.

"It's human!" Wiener said in surprise. *"What in the Light is a human doing up here?"*

"He must have been swept off the trail by the slide. We have to help, Wiener!"

"It'll be a little tricky getting down the last bit," Wiener said, eyeing the jumbled pile of rock and snow. *"It looks pretty unstable."*

Cayuse nodded. *"But it's just a long first step down to that big rock."*

He looked at her with surprise. What had happened to the timid little dog who had asked about Dead Dog Point just this morning? Then he grinned. ***“I’ll go first. Wait until I tell you it’s OK to follow.”***

He placed first one paw, then a second onto the rocks below him. The right gave way, but the left held. He tested the adjacent rocks with his right paw. They held. He moved carefully down until he stood on the large boulder Cayuse had mentioned. Relieved, he released the breath he hadn't known he'd been holding. ***“It’ll work if you’re careful with your balance,”*** he assured her.

Trying to still her racing heart, she looked at the rocky pile separating her from Wiener, then bunched her muscles and started down before she lost her nerve. As she stepped off the last rock, it gave way and began bouncing down the icy hillside. Using her claws like crampons, she gingerly inched her way past Wiener and crossed over the hard snow until she was able to scramble onto the ledge where a still figure lay.

“It’s a girl!” she called back to Wiener. ***“She’s hurt, but alive.”*** She sat down and began to lick the grime off the bruised face.

The girl moaned.

Wiener soon stood next to Cayuse, appraising the avalanche victim. She looked to be about fifteen or sixteen in human years, he thought. Shaking the loose snow from his gleaming black fur, he said, ***“I wonder if she’s from that dwarf village—Grand Elm.”***

Cayuse glanced at him, interested by his comment. ***“Brydie said there were any dwarfs left because they married with humans.”*** She looked back at the girl. ***“She looks like a regular human to me.”***

Wiener shrugged. ***"I don't know what dwarfs are supposed to look like, but SHE looks like she needs help."***

As the two dogs turned back to study the girl, she painfully opened one swollen eye, saw the furry forms above her and screamed. "Wolf!"

Cayuse sat back so quickly she tumbled hindquarters over tail. Wolf? Where?

"She means you," Wiener growled. ***"That's gratitude for you."***

The girl now had both green eyes open and was staring at them in fear. Cayuse whined, not sure what to do next. Timidly, she stepped back towards the girl.

The green eyes widened with incredulity. "Why, you're just a dog!"

Wiener snorted in disgust.

"Two dogs," the girl amended, slowly lifting her arm to place her hand on Cayuse's soft head. "I fell," she said. "The path just disappeared in a wall of snow and I fell." Abruptly, she stopped speaking and her hand flopped back onto the snow. "What am I doing explaining things to a dog?"

"Rowf!" Wiener barked loudly and stared into the dirty, bruised face.

Startled, the girl offered an automatic apology. "Sorry."

Wiener woofed once in satisfaction, sat down and licked her hand.

"I guess," the girl said with a weak smile, "that means my apology is accepted."

Wiener looked at Cayuse and grinned his lopsided smile.

"Wiener," she said, ***"we have to get her out of this snow and warm her somehow. She's terribly chilled."***

The girl lay on her back, half buried in the jumbled snow with one slender leg bent at an odd angle. Wiener sniffed at the torn fabric of her heavy woolen trousers.

"The bleeding's stopped," he pronounced, *"but it doesn't look right."* Putting his head down, he nuzzled the girl's knee. She choked back a scream. *"If it's not broken, it's badly twisted. I don't think she'll be able to walk on it."*

The girl's eyes moved from Wiener to Cayuse, then back to Wiener. She saw that some form of communication was taking place between the dogs. "You're talking about me! You're trying to decide what to do, aren't you?"

Cayuse looked at the wide green eyes and barked in soft confirmation.

"Grandfather says animals understand," the girl said, the pain of her injury almost forgotten in the excitement of this moment. "Everyone thinks he's just joking, or an old fool, but he's right...you DO understand, don't you?"

Cayuse woofed solemnly and cocked her head towards the girl's injured leg.

"Yes...so what do we do now? I can't walk; I can barely sit up. We have to find help."

Wiener jumped to his feet and wagged his handsome plumed tail in a vigorous display of enthusiasm.

"Ah," the girl smiled, "a volunteer. Well, my friend, let me think this over a bit."

She shifted position and groaned at the resulting pain in her injured knee. Looking at each other, both dogs lay down on either side of the girl in an effort to warm her.

"If I could find something to splint my leg with, I might be able to walk."

Wiener considered the possibility. *"That may be,"* he said finally to Cayuse, *"but I still need to find someone to help us, or she'll never be able to get down off the mountain before she freezes to death."*

Cayuse agreed. *"I'll stay with her while you go find help. It would be better for you to go now than to waste time helping to dig her out. Find someone who can help and lead them back here."*

Wiener stood up, looked at the girl, then walked a few paces away and barked. The girl lay with one arm clutched around Cayuse, trying to interpret his intentions. Wiener barked again, this time with more urgency.

"I'm guessing that means you think you should go find some help," the girl said. Her voice was weaker now than it had been just moments ago. The adrenaline generated by the excitement of being discovered was beginning to fade. Reaching inside her fleecy overcoat, she labored to unlatch the clasp of her necklace. "Take this; someone will recognize it as mine."

Wiener stepped towards her and bowed his head.

"My name is Jedda. My father is Glonzen, the leader of our people. Just a few miles down this trail there's a faint path heading east. It leads to the entrance to our village. She draped the necklace over Wiener's head. The brownish-golden stone shimmered in contrast to his creamy white chest patch. "You look very handsome," she said as she ruffled the soft fur between his ears.

He nodded in agreement.

Cayuse smiled.

"Time to go," Wiener said. *"I'll be back as soon as I can. I won't fail either of you."* He was about to add, "Not like I did Harlik," but stopped when he saw the uncompromising trust in Cayuse's eyes. *"Stay to the path, if you do manage to get her*

up and walking. Just keep moving, no matter how slowly. Don't overheat, just stay warm. If you stop to rest, try to do so out of the wind."

Cayuse nodded, then said softly, *"Go with care, brave Wiener dog."*

"I will. You do the same. I don't want to lose the best friend I think I've ever had."

Then he turned and bounded powerfully up the hillside.

###

As he ran toward the reddening western skyline, Wiener pondered on how he was going to get anyone to follow him back up the trail. Well, first he had to find someone, didn't he? And that meant paying attention to where he was going so he didn't run off the trail and have an accident himself. Disciplining himself, he slowed his pace and attentively watched the ground before him.

Bushes and small trees began to appear as he descended towards the valley below. The sweet smell of plant life filled his nostrils. Hungry, he snatched a few mouthfuls of sweet grass. It didn't taste good, but it would give his complaining stomach something to work on. In the diminishing sunlight, he continued loping down the trail.

Soon he caught the tangy scent of wood smoke. He must be near the village. He began scanning both sides of the path for any break in the brush. As the minutes ticked by, Wiener began to fear he had missed the trail. No - there it was! It was partially concealed between an sticky hawthorn tree and a large bolder, but there it was. He forced his way through the hawthorn branches, squirming to clear the tangled shrubbery. Then he stepped right into nothingness.

###

It was hard work, digging away the densely packed snow, but Cayuse finally managed to clear enough of the debris that Jedda was able to pull herself out from underneath the rest. Looking around in the fading sunlight, the girl saw a gnarled tree branch that had been torn loose by the snow slide. Gritting her teeth, she began to crawl towards it.

Once Cayuse realized Jedda was after the branch, she ran forward and seized the ashen limb in her mouth. It would not budge. Crestfallen, she released the branch. What would Wiener do? He'd find out why, she thought. Digging away the snow, she saw the branch was hooked on a larger limb under a medium-sized stone. She set to digging with renewed energy. If she could just dislodge the stone, she could move the limb!

Soon she felt the stone give way. Just a little more, just a little bit more...there! She nudged the stone away and triumphantly pulled the limb free.

"You are so clever, little one," Jedda said in frank admiration. "If I survive this night, I will surely owe my life to you and your handsome friend."

Cayuse dropped the gnarled branch at Jedda's side. The girl maneuvered herself into a sitting position and began to break the smaller side branches off the main limb. Finally, she grunted, "I guess this will have to do." She looked around, then laughed. "I guess this is no time to be modest." With clumsy fingers chilled by the snow, she removed her coat and then both shirts. Her bare skin erupted in goose bumps as she quickly re-donned the heavier shirt and the coat. Then she began to tear the undershirt into strips with which to secure the makeshift splint.

"We might make it out of here yet, pup."

###

Bruised and startled, Wiener looked up at the darkening sky. He'd fallen into a hole! “*Oh, brave, knowledgeable Wiener,*” he mocked himself. “*How could you have been so blasted stupid?*” He forced himself to calm down and examine his surroundings. There were shovel marks in the earthen walls, so that meant it was a pit trap. Someone probably checked it periodically, but it might be days before they came again. He tried to climb the walls, but they were too steep. Exhausted, he sat down on his haunches and considered his options. There was only one. He began to howl.

###

After a lengthy time fraught with much jaw clenching, Jedda had succeeded in securing the splint. She felt reasonably sure it would prevent her swollen knee joint from moving around too much. The knee itself was badly sprained, but nothing appeared to be broken. At least, nothing was sticking out of the skin. What she needed now, she decided, was a walking stick. Pulling herself over the snow, she reached the spot where Cayuse had dug out the splint stick. Trembling in exertion, she tugged at the remaining tree limb. It grudgingly moved a little, then a little bit more. White-faced with exhaustion, Jedda gave a mighty pull and heard a snapping sound.

Cayuse started. Was that the wood or the girl's leg?

With a sound of exultation, Jedda pulled the stick from the snow. “Yes!” She struggled to her feet and leaned heavily on the stick. Would it bear her weight?

The stick sank into the snow. That wasn't going to be of much help. She thought for a moment, then rotated the stick so the thicker end was to the bottom. When she jabbed it into the snow it sunk a few inches, then stoutly held. Jedda sighed, in as much fatigue as gratitude. She was weak and exhausted, but now there was hope. She looked at the

ground around her, analyzing the angle of the slope and the point at which to best intersect the trail. With studied care, she stepped forward.

"Now, dog, we're going home!"

###

His voice cracked and his throat felt raw, but Wiener continued to howl with increased desperation and volume. Finally, he heard voices.

"What in the shades is that infernal racket?" a gruff voice demand.

"Don't know. Never heard anything like it before," said a younger voice. "Kind of sounds mournful doesn't it?"

Wiener began to bark as loudly as he could.

"It's over by the pit...shades, it's *in* the pit!"

A lantern was thrust down into the hole. Wiener stopped barking and turned a hopeful look upward as two faces appeared in a surrounding halo of lamplight.

"It's a dog," said the young voice. It belonged to a clean-shaven young man with a truly startled look upon his face.

"Of course it's a dog," said the older, white bearded face. "What in Sam-hill did you think would be barking like that?"

The younger man retorted with indignation, "Well, it could have been a coyote or even a wolf!"

"Right," the other guffawed, "and you could be the Dwarf King! Well, let's have a look at the little fellow."

Soon, a rope was lowered into the pit and the younger man shinnied down and dropped to the ground.

"Lower that lantern a little, Gannin. He's got something around his neck; maybe it's got the owner's mark on it."

"Nope. The light is staying up here with me, Dally. Just tie the rope around him and I'll pull him up."

Grumbling, the youth did as Gannin suggested and Wiener soon stood on the surface, well away from the hole. Shaking the mud from his fur as the younger man climbed out of the pit, Wiener looked at his two rescuers and began wagging his tail.

"Easy there pooch; you'll knock Dally back into the pit," Gannin growled. Wiener abruptly stopped. The older man raised his bushy white eyebrows in surprise.

"Look," Dally interjected, "he's got something around his neck, just like I said."

"I can see it...I'm not going blind, you know!" Gannin growled, reaching for the necklace. "Blazes! This is Jedda's necklace! Where'd you get this, dog?"

Wiener ran towards the hawthorn trees that shielded the side path from the main trail. He stopped, turn back to face the two men, whom he now knew to be from the Dwarven village of Grand Elm, and barked. They looked at him with blank faces. Frustrated, he stepped through the branches and gave an impatient yelp.

"You'd almost think he wants us to follow him," Dally said.

"Almost? Are you daft lad?" Gannin shook his head in disgust as Wiener appeared again. "Of course he does. There's something wrong with Jedda! Go get Dash and some others, then follow us. I'll leave markings that even you can follow." Then he was gone, pushing through the brush behind Wiener.

Dally shot an angry look at where Gannin had just stood. How come *he* had to stay behind instead of going with the dog? The old coot had ruined his opportunity to rescue

Jedda and impress her. Damn, but he could be so irritating sometimes! Turning, the young dwarf started to run back to the village.

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"I don't think I can go any further," Jedda said, sinking down in the darkness. "I'm so tired and my leg hurts so much."

Giving into her own fatigue, Cayuse sat down by the girl's side. Wiener had been gone so long. What was keeping him?

"I have to rest...just a little," Jedda groaned, gathering the dog into her arms. "At least I have you to keep me warm."

Cayuse had no idea how far they had come, but the pace at which they moved was painfully slow. As full darkness had fallen, their pace became even slower. The girl could not go on much longer. Cayuse realized, studying the dark rings of exhaustion under Jedda's pain-dulled eyes. But they had to keep moving. Puffs of vapor rose from each of them in the now icy air and Jedda was shivering.

"When we get home, little one, you're going to have the best meal you've ever had. And I'll have a big bowl of Marta's hot stew with a huge slab of fresh bread just dripping with butter! I am *so* hungry."

Cayuse pulled away and barked. She was hungry, too, but sitting here wasn't getting either of them any closer to dinner. She barked again with more insistence, willing the girl to get to her feet.

Jedda just looked at her, seeming not to have the energy to speak.

Cayuse barked a third time, her voice shrill with her own mounting desperation.

Suddenly, off in the distance, there was an answering bark. Or was it just an echo? She barked again, furiously trying to make her voice carry above the building wind.

Jedda pulled herself to her feet and leaned on her walking stick. "All right, all right. No need to get rude about it." She took a few unsteady steps forward.

Attentive to the sounds in the distant night, Cayuse stood still, straining desperately to hear that faraway bark again. But she heard nothing.

"Well, let's go, little one. We haven't got all night."

Maybe she had only heard what she'd wanted so much to hear, Cayuse thought in resignation. Looking up at Jedda's tired face, she whimpered softly and then turned to lead the girl down the dark trail.

Hobbling after the small dog, Jedda fought to keep her mind focused. She wasn't quite sure where they were, or how far there was yet to go. She knew this trail like the back of her own hand, why didn't she recognize anything? Where were all the familiar markers she used each time she journeyed along its rocky length? It was the fatigue, she realized. She was so tired that her mind was beginning to shut down. It was a combination of fatigue, the injury and the dropping temperature—a dangerous mix, she knew. She had to concentrate on placing one foot in front of the other. Just keep moving. To move was to live.

Head down, concentrating on her foot placement, she almost tripped over Cayuse. The little dog had stopped abruptly in the middle of the trail and was standing with both ears alertly raised. Then she began baying. What on earth was going on? Then Jedda heard a deeper bark answering from the darkness. Could it be the black male dog? Had

he returned with help? “Please the Light, let it be so,” she whispered through cracked lips.

As though in answer to her soft prayer, Cayuse turned to look up at her and began wagging her tail so furiously that it seemed her hindquarters would levitate off the ground at any moment.

Jedda leaned on her stick and stared down the trail. Listening intently, she heard voices.

"Jedda! Jedda...where are you?"

Sobbing, she sank to the ground. Her ordeal was almost over; it was going to be all right.