

Nature's Bond
By Hubert L. Mullins

The Foxmoor Forest was one of the most majestic places on Mystyria. Large, towering oaks filled its emerald canopy. Toward the east sat an incredible rock formation shrouded by mist that the god of nature himself must have placed. Wooded passes and trails went out between the dense trees, making the forest floor look like webbing from atop Westerhill.

That was the name of their humble town. Westerhill was built by tree dwellers for tree dwellers. It stretched along the south and western ends of the forest; high atop the massive oaks that made Foxmoor legend. There were rope bridges that connected large platforms, weighted lifts that brought people and supplies up to town, and a temple dedicated to Willow, the god of nature for choosing such a wonderful home for his beloved servants.

Foxmoor's wildlife was just as renowned as its trees and arboreal city. There was no other place on Mystyria with as many untamed and coexistent animals. Everything that the gods chose to spread out through the world had ended up finding refuge in Foxmoor. Three continents worth of wild creatures congregated in a forest no lengthier than a hundred square miles. There were lions, tigers, gorillas, bears, and even deer and elk. The hunters and prey all served the purpose that nature intended and the gentle folk of Westerhill watched with adoring and captivated eyes.

It had been raining for two weeks straight. The thick canopy of trees made it hard for water to break through but the wind had been fierce. There was a low, almost hypnotic groan as the congregation of century-old oaks shifted against nature's howling fury. Cold rain splashed against the southern platform of Westerhill; the one that was farthest from the temple and closest to the ground.

Although it was the lowest, it was still over a hundred feet to the sodden, forest floor. This was the platform that held the Westerhill Orphanage.

Willow was good to his people, especially when they lost their kin. Men and women fought valiantly for Mystyria, her plants, and her animals. Most of the world didn't understand their unique bond with nature which made it quite easy to plunge a blade into the gut of a protector of trees and wildlife.

Westerhill, and Foxmoor for that matter, were the last places of good on North Corscus. Most of the land was riddled with disease, overflowing with evil, and uncompromising to the land. Foxmoor and Westerhill created an invisible perimeter; an unspoken barrier that treated Mystyria and her creatures with dignified respect.

But man did not abide by the rules of unspoken barriers.

The nature loving society of Westerhill took up arms and fought for their land and their creatures and in the end, triumphed. A triumph for those that honored nature meant that the land they were defending survived—even if they did not.

Fights such as this were common when servants of Willow decided to stay in the Foxmoor. Men and women went out beyond the protective cover of the woods and met their deaths at the hands of the ruthless, evil denizens of the world. Day by day, more children woke up to empty houses and called out names that vanished into empty air. Orphans were growing all too common in Westerhill.

Warwick had been one such orphan. His parents left during the night about seven years ago and never returned. He felt horrible when he found out what had happened, but he wasn't the only one. His grief was shared by no fewer than twenty other children. Luckily he was ten years old at the time and had a better understanding than some of the younger kids who lost their mommies and daddies.

The orphanage wasn't a bad place, at least not to him. Willow took good care of the waifs and strays and made sure the institute was a home and not just a cold building with rows of beds and footlockers. Warwick couldn't imagine what life would be like if he wasn't here. For the past seven years, all he had known was routine; the same chores, the same meals, and the same people.

Willow's home for the children wasn't anything like a normal orphanage. They were able to come and go as they pleased. The strays that were old enough and thought they could do better in the world simply left and started a new life. Most of the time they came right back, often learning very quickly how twisted and cruel the unsheltered world was. Warwick was perfectly able and old enough to leave, but he was yet to find a reason. The orphanage was safe, warm, had decent food and caring people. What could the rest of Mystyria have to offer that was better than that?

After a year or so of constant questioning, the only thing he could come up with was 'adventure'. Life inside the logged home was incredibly boring. Even though he feared for them, Warwick would have loved to have gone outside the forest and marched with the men and women who were off to defend the Foxmoor. They would only be sending more children to the orphanage, but still he would have given almost anything for that small, fleeting sense of excitement.

Warwick was lying back on his comfy bed, listening to the storm above the trees and reading a book of his favorite poetry. It was written some time ago by scribes of Lyluss and depicted the greatest battles in the most beautiful prose and form. There were several other children around, mostly well under ten years of age, and to a normal person the noise of the crowded sleeping quarters would have been unbearable. With seven years to train, he was able to block out the noise and find the silence of his own mind.

How he wished it wasn't raining. He wanted to go outside and watch the battlements from the north platform. With the lingering storm and heavy clouds, the view of the forest was very limited. On a clear day, everyone gathered at the highest platform and watched Foxmoor's borders. Every so often, the fighting could be seen. There were dragons, men on horseback, and towering Dolgathas that hurled heavy stones. It was the greatest form of entertainment their sheltered eyes got to see.

As soon as the last of the sun's dying light fled the Foxmoor, the orphanage's headmistress made an appearance. The younger children stopped their playing; balls landed against the floor unattended, dolls were cast aside, and the loud roar of laughter hushed to a quiet giggle. Where once the room was bustling with activity was now two rows of shifting covers that wasn't ready for bed.

"If the rain stops tomorrow, children, we may venture down to the floor and pick berries. Who would like to do that?" the headmistress asked. A low cheer resounded from the younger children. The couple of teens did little more than raise an eyebrow.

Warwick looked across the room and smiled at Sali, a girl who came to the orphanage around the same time he did. She was only a little younger, fifteen or sixteen, although it didn't matter. He really liked her; liked talking to her and walking around Westerhill with her. It was her book of Lylussian poetry and it was her who sparked his interest to read such things. She grinned back, winked, and pulled the cover up to her shoulders as the headmistress began her rounds of blowing out the candles and lanterns.

Warwick closed his book and slivered beneath the sheets and cover. The headmistress gave him a warm smile as she passed; her hair and clothes were wet since she just passed through the playground and courtyard to get to the sleeping quarters.

It didn't take him long to drift off to sleep. The day had been filled with carrying lumber up to the temple. He only had to do it twice a week and on those nights, the deep hold of slumber came early and quick. Only tonight, he couldn't stay down. The anger of the thunder and a small, scratching sound kept him from finding peace.

His eyes flickered open and watched the reflection of the rain on the ceiling. The sleeping quarters were silent and unmoving. There were easily thirty children slumbering in two rows of the lengthy room but not one was stirring. Even Sali was still, the sheets over her chest were rising and falling with each breath.

Suddenly the flash of thunder illuminated the room and a large shadow was cast over her bed. Two more quick flashes and Warwick could tell that the shape had moved a little. The silhouette was being cast against an object outside of *his* window.

He bolted upright and flipped around and stared into the face of an enormous beast. Any of the children would have screamed their voices raw at the sight of the towering cat that was perched on the outside of the windowsill, but not Warwick. He smiled and watched as the tigress slid its claws down the window, its head turned to the side in genuine interest.

Warwick put his finger to his mouth and shushed the beast. It licked its lips and craned its head even further. After a moment's hesitation, it brought its paw back to the glass and scraped, causing a low screech.

"Denjah, quiet!" Warwick whispered with a hint of urgency. He looked the room over to make sure the other children weren't listening and that there were no lights in the hall. The headmistress would be angry to see such a large cat this close to the children.

About a year ago, Warwick was gathering wood down on the forest floor when a couple of elk stormed through. He had to jump to the side to avoid being trampled but that turned out to be the least of his worries. Along the path came an enormous beast; a tigress with colors so rich and deep, she looked like a fictional creature from one of Sali's books. When the tigress saw Warwick, she gave up the chase and turned her attention to him. The elk scampered away, happy to not be food for another day. The large beast circled and growled at the man cowering by the discarded wood. Warwick pulled his legs up and tried to wedge himself between two rocks, but the beast approached and looked undeterred by the obstacles.

She emitted a low growl and bore her fangs. Her mouth was salivating at the thought of a new kill—a flavor of meat she wasn't used to. Her paws were enormous. Each one was easily as large as Warwick's face and the thought of one of those striking him across the jaw was enough to make him reach out and grab a piece of his firewood. He pulled it close and clenched it with tight fingers.

She sniffed him and jerked away, tongue tasting the air around him. His heart was beating so fast and no matter how much he needed to defend himself, he knew he couldn't strike this animal. His mother and father had both gone off and lost their lives to make sure creatures like her had a home. He let go of the piece of wood and closed his eyes.

Once again, the tigress emitted a low growl and this time, she brought her paw up and patted him gently across the cheek. She made a few other curious snorts and rumbles, but finally Warwick recognized the docile sounds of purring. Slowly, he opened his eyes and saw the cat sitting on her

hindquarters, eyeing him with an inquisitive look. She lashed out and licked him across the cheek, burying him in a stinking, coarse and wet kiss.

From that day, Warwick continued to see the tigress. She was always hunting prey or simply playing along the forest floor. There were tigers all over Foxmoor but they never crossed paths with her. Wherever she went and wherever she was seen, she was alone. She was an orphan; a sad victim to the battles of the forest, just like Warwick.

He sat with her one evening and blurted out name after name in hopes that she would like one. For the most part, her nose turned up in disgust or she let out a disapproving snarl. Finally, when he came to 'Denjah', she started to purr and rub up against him. Denjah it was.

Warwick pulled the latches to the window open and then slid it up. Denjah was dry, meaning she rode the lift up to Westerhill. He always found such humor in it. She was incredibly intelligent; smart enough to step into the ascending box, pull the lever with her paw and then get out when she reached the orphanage's platform.

The large cat started to paw its way into the room but Warwick held her back. "No, Denjah!" he whispered. "If the headmistress sees you!" His words went unheeded. Denjah pushed against him and climbed down onto the soft padding of his bed. Her breathing alone was loud and guttural and he feared that some of the children were going to wake. If Denjah's girth and sight didn't alert the headmistress, screaming kids certainly would.

"Denjah, you're going to get us in trouble! You have to go outside!" Warwick pointed out the window, toward the drenching platform. Denjah followed his finger and then snorted. She buried her head against the cover and shimmied her way beneath it. The cat kept clawing at the bed until her entire body was under the sheet and covers and her head was poking out at the far end. Warwick rolled his eyes and followed her.

"What's gotten into you, girl?" he asked, putting an arm around her. She licked her lips and closed her eyes a little, as if wanting a nap. Warwick rubbed her back and side, enjoying the thick sensation of her fur. Only this time she was shivering. It wasn't that cold out, and certainly not for a tigress. She was shaking out of *fear*.

"What is it, Denjah? What's wrong?" he searched the outside but couldn't see anything. The occasional flash of thunder only illuminated the platform enough to tell that it was quite uneventful. "Did you see something out there?"

Denjah licked her lips again and rubbed her face against his. She turned over in the bed, pulling all the sheets and covers along with her. Warwick smiled and rubbed her belly, keeping a watchful eye toward the hallway. The tigress' toes spread apart as she stretched and she softly began to purr.

Then she squeaked and bolted upright on the bed with enough speed that Warwick almost bounced onto the floor. Her ears perked up and she stood on the mattress at attention, as if she had just spotted prey on the horizon. Her mouth snarled just a bit and she sniffed the air with great vigor. She was fervently watching the door to the hallway.

"You smell something down there?" Warwick asked, sitting on the edge of the bed and pulling his boots on. He put a hand against her chest but she ignored it and kept vigilant to the doorway. Warwick stood and walked the length of the room and peered down the hall.

At the far end was the headmistress' office. The hallway itself was quite dark but a thin line of golden candle glow could be seen along the floor behind the closed door. There were voices down there;

heated voices that Warwick didn't like. Looking back toward Denjah, he could tell she didn't like it either.

"Stay here, girl," he said, tip-toeing back to his bed. She craned her head to the side, the same way she often did when she didn't understand or didn't want to understand. "I mean it, stay here, Denjah." Her ears went back and she sat down. After he stood over her for a moment, she completely settled down and crossed her front paws as a gesture of not going anywhere.

Giving a quick glance over to Sali, he crept out of the sleeping quarters and down the hall toward the headmistress' office. The orphanage was an old building and so were its floors. Each step he took was answered by a creak that was increasingly loud against the silent hall. Warwick stopped at the door and got down on his knees and pressed his ear against it to listen.

"And just why would Willow want them moved to someplace else?" the headmistress said venomously.

"Because they can be better taken care of inside the comfort of Ridgard," came the calm voice of a man. His accent was most definitely North Corscun. "We will take them away from the fighting and into a well protected city."

"You do not have my approval for this," the headmistress said. She sounded like she was on the brink of tears. Warwick eyed the hallway again to make sure Denjah was staying put and then pressed back to the door.

"I do not require your approval," the man snapped back. "I have *this*." There was the sound of rustling paper and then a loud bang which Warwick guessed was the slamming of it against the table.

"That doesn't change anything," the headmistress quickly said. "These children are mine. You'll not move them somewhere else. I don't care if we both serve the same god. Westerhill was built for the needy. It was built for *them*." Even though Warwick couldn't see, he was certain that she was pointing through the door.

Suddenly the floorboards next to him came alive with groans and squeaks. Warwick whipped his head toward the sleeping children and saw Denjah slowly stalking toward him. Her body was low to the ground, ears tucked back and eyes forward with a vengeful snarl as she looked to the door. She didn't like the man behind it anymore than he did. She sniffed the ground where the light bled through to the hallway and scratched at it with her paw.

"Are all of your children still sleeping?" came the man's alerted voice as a chair slid back. Warwick didn't wait around to listen for the headmistress' reply. He turned and darted down the hallway, pulling Denjah by the gruff. She dug her nails into the floor and resisted, but finally gave up the fight and jogged behind him.

"Out!" Warwick told her, lifting the window just a bit. Denjah sensed the urgency and licked his face before hopping onto the sill and dashing off into the darkness. Warwick quickly flipped around, pulled the covers over his body and closed his eyes just in time to hear the door open at the far end of the hall.

There were heavy footsteps; too heavy for the headmistress, that walked down the hall and into the children's room. There was also a thump after each second step. *Step, step, thump! Step, step, thump!*

Warwick tried his hardest to stay still and keep the guise of sleeping. Someone walked by his bed and knocked on his bed post before stopping completely. Warwick jumped a little at the sound of thunder and hoped it wasn't enough to notice. After only a few seconds of uncomfortable silence, the footsteps left and the door down the hall banged shut.

What was about to happen to their orphanage? Why would the children be moving to Ridgard? Sure, it was the largest city devoted to the god of nature, but why now? There had been attacks on Westerhill and threats to the children for ages. Something didn't make sense but Warwick wasn't about to fight it. He would accept the change. Things were boring as of late and he welcomed the chance to see something new, do something new, and learn something new. With that thought in mind, Warwick's thoughts and body eased and he drifted off to sleep with the hopes of a renewed tomorrow.

* * * * *

The sun was pouring into his eyes when the noise first started. All of the children bolted upright by the sound of a loud, heavy thumping. Warwick groggily rolled to the side and sat on the edge of the bed, first noticing Sali doing the same thing. She yawned and smiled at him but their brief flicker of joy lasted but a second. Everyone's attention was fixated on the man at the front of the room, banging his cane against the ground.

He was tall and burly, wearing a thick jacket of brown and gold. There was a short hat on his head that was creased and matted with dirt. His scraggly beard bobbed up and down as he chewed a piece of hay and his large, bulging eyes surveyed children like steaks in a butcher shop. His thick, meaty hands were placed over his cane as he used it to hold himself up.

"Mornin' children," he said, a toothless grin across his age-spotted face. This was the man that Warwick heard last night.

"Who are you?" Sali asked, reaching for her brush. She started pulling it through her unkempt, auburn hair, not caring what his business was.

"Name's Lucas," he said. "But you can call me Uncle Lu, little girl." He laughed with a raspy voice that sounded like his lungs were on the brink of decay.

"Pleasure, Lucas," she forced. "Why are you here?"

"Seems that you kids are getting a lucky break today. Who wants to go for a wagon ride beyond the forest?" A few of the younger children raised their hands and looked to one another in pure shock. None of them had ever been further than Foxmoor's perimeter. Lucas smiled and pulled the covers off the nearest little girl and said, "Well c'mon then! Let's take a little ride up to Broomstag!"

Broomstag? Warwick thought. That didn't make any sense. Ridgard was in the opposite direction. Why on Mystyria would he take the children two-hundred miles north, toward the evil cities? There were Mydianites lingering near Broomstag.

"Where is the headmistress?" Warwick asked him, standing up. He completely forgot to take his boots off last night.

"She's already on the wagon, little boy," he said. "She's going to Broomstag with us."

Sali crept close and put her hand on Warwick's shoulder. He looked into her eyes and saw fear. She felt as uneasy about it as he did. He shallowly shook his head and motioned for her not to speak up.

They needed to be careful and he didn't know why. Mister Lucas was keeping secrets and the children wouldn't be able to see through it.

"Well let's go!" he said, using his cane to pull the covers off the remaining children. Everyone gathered their things and started to dress. Warwick looked out the window and saw that the rain had dwindled to a sprinkle. Denjah was nowhere to be seen. As a matter of fact, he couldn't spot anyone. Westerhill looked deserted.

The young children were the first to head outside. They carried their backpacks; filled to the brim with paper, drawing pencils, candy, and whatever other toys they would need in their jaunting carriage adventure. Warwick passed his book to Sali and she smiled as she accepted it.

"Aren't you taking anything?" she asked him.

"I've got nothing worth taking," he said in a solemn voice.

They both lined up and headed out the door behind the children, passing the smiling ogre named Lucas. Once they reached the door however, he blocked their path with his cane.

"Aren't the two of you a little old to be sharing a room with the kiddies?" he asked.

"We like the view from the south window," Sali said.

"Ah, is that right?" Lucas asked, still holding his cane up. "But I must say, do you two really want to go on a silly little wagon ride? Why don't you go with the big kids? I'll show you the way to *their* carriage."

Sali and Warwick exchanged glances but before either could say a thing, Lucas pushed them through the doorway with his cane. He smiled and held the rear exit open for them and said, "This way, kiddies."

They followed him down to the south lift; the basket that took them down to the forest floor. Warwick was too busy watching the trees, the other platforms and the tiny crooks and nannies of Westerhill. The town was indeed deserted.

"Where is everybody?" Sali asked, also taking notice of the town's eerie absence of people.

"Well it's still quite early, lass," Lucas said. "Everyone is probably still fast asleep." She only shrugged and stepped into the lift.

The trip to the forest floor was slow and uncomfortable. The lifts moved at a crawl and with the never-ending smile of Mister Lucas, it was incredibly unbearable. Sali and Warwick locked eyes and tried their best to keep him out of their sight.

At the bottom of the lift sat several large, black carriages. They were lined up, all pointed north. Warwick could see through the trees and picked out a couple in the distance, hastily speeding away. There were children inside, happily talking and playing and for a moment, he was at ease. The idea of heading off didn't seem as bad, even if the location was contradictory of last night.

"Right in there, kiddies," he said, pointing to the back of an opened, empty wagon. There were seats inside and something about it made Warwick nervous. He took Sali by the hand and led her in. Lucas stood behind them and put his hand against her bottom to help her up the rest of the way. She shot him a vicious glare but he backed away and pushed the door shut.

“Lucas!” someone called from the side. Warwick and Sali pressed their faces against the door and looked out through the tiny opening.

There was another wagon pulling up alongside theirs. The driver up top smiled and waved his hand. “Look, we found another one! This makes about seven today!” There was a loud growl and Warwick pushed Sali out of the way to see the back of his wagon.

A bulky metal cage sat on the bed. Inside was a large, matted tiger with splotches of blood on its paw. It kept its leg pulled up and tucked close to its body and cried with a defeated voice. It wasn’t Denjah, but it was hurt and needed help. Why were these men capturing animals?

“He needs medicine!” Warwick said, ready to head out of the wagon and help. His hand twisted around the knob and it wouldn’t budge. He tried it again and then slammed his hand against the door. “Hey!”

“Settle down in there,” Lucas yelled and banged against the wagon. “Head off!” he called to the driver.

The wagon began to lurch forward. Sali had tears in her eyes that fueled Warwick’s anger even further. As they sped away, he could see Lucas poking the injured beast with the end of his cane. The road out of the forest turned to the left and they were completely out of sight.

“Stop the wagon!” Warwick yelled to the driver. Sali stepped up and rattled against the wall.

“Quiet down in there or I’ll gut the two of ye,” came the low, steady voice of the man atop the wagon. The troubled teens looked to one other and realized just how serious their situation was.

Warwick retreated to the rear of the wagon, planted his bottom on the floor, and started kicking at the door with both feet. The carriage suddenly pulled to a stop and the driver began to bellow out curses as he hopped off the top and landed in the muddy dirt. Sali propped down next to him and started hammering against it as well. There was a massive keyhole that went to the massive lock and bolt. It would take more than the brute force of two youngsters to break out.

Suddenly the driver’s eyes peered through the tiny window. They were bloodshot and angry. Warwick heard the scraping of metal as he pulled out a blade and then, the sound of keys being jingled. The driver continued to spit curse after curse as he fumbled to find the right one. Warwick pushed Sali behind him and stood ready for when the driver opened the door.

There was the sliding sound of the key in the lock, the turn, and then the door swung open—

—and a vicious beast sprang from the woods and attacked the driver. His screams turned into a wet gurgle as the roaring creature tore at his throat. Warwick and Sali could only see his legs, twitching and convulsing as the last of his blood emptied over the soggy forest floor.

Sali was still backed in the corner and Warwick put his hand up for her to stay there. He slid across the floor and hopped out, ready to defend himself against whatever beast had just saved them. Not all of Willow’s creatures were kind to humans.

Denjah looked up from her kill and licked her lips. Her teeth were stained bright crimson and her vibrant fur seemed to shine against the misty, dank forest. She started purring the moment she laid eyes on Warwick and abandoned her kill long enough to rub her face against his chest.

“It’s okay,” Warwick said to Sali. She reluctantly slid out of the wagon and took his hand. Even though she had only met Denjah a few times, she was still a little hesitant around tigers and the like. Not all of them shared the unique bond that she and Warwick had.

“What’s happening Warwick? Who are these men?” Sali asked, looking at the mutilated corpse of the driver lying in the weeds.

“I don’t know,” he said, picking up the key ring. The man’s chest was up and there was an insignia beneath his long jacket. Warwick knelt down and pulled the flap aside, revealing a golden torch with a skull over it. It was the symbol of Mydian, the god of the Underworld; one of the most vile and ruthless gods in existence.

“Mydianites? *Here*?” Sali asked, her voice rising with the fog. “Why on Mystyria would they want the children?”

“Or the animals,” Warwick pointed out.

The rain suddenly picked back up and the horses tethered to the wagon grew restless. They started off without their rider and passengers and disappeared beyond the foliage. The path back toward Westerhill was empty, silent and foreboding. Warwick was sure someone heard the noise—was sure that Lucas or another wagon was about to make an appearance to inspect the roar. Perhaps they wanted to catch another tiger.

“Let’s get off the path,” Warwick said, making a clicking sound that Denjah was quick to respond to. Sali followed them away from the dirt trail and up the mountain toward Westerhill. They only had to walk a few feet until the south platform was in view. All of the wagons had started off, taking similar paths away from the arboreal town.

There was a large clearing where the lift up to the south platform sat. It was where he and Sali had been thrown into the wagon, only now it was a barren dirt spot with a single carriage. The injured tiger sat in the cage but the driver was nowhere to be found. Perhaps he took the lift back up to Westerhill, Warwick thought. The rain continued to hammer down on top of the hurt beast but it only ignored it and continued to nurse the wound. Denjah started for it, but Warwick grabbed her by the gruff and held her still.

“Slow down, girl. There might be more Mydianites nearby. This could be a trap.”

Sali gasped at the mention of such a thing. She was desperately trying to fight the tears but the need to free the wounded animal took priority. Her eyes darted to the platform, to the woods, and back to the wagon. The inhabitants of Westerhill and Foxmoor had the advantage; they had better eyes when it came to spotting movement against the swaying foliage.

The tiger inside the wagon sat up and growled when Warwick grabbed the bars and gave them a jerk. A low, guttural rumble sounded out when it put weight on the injured paw and Denjah hopped up on two legs to see inside. She tried to press her face through the bars to lick his wound but the fit was just too tight.

Warwick spotted a pin in Sali’s hair and pulled it out. Her long, auburn locks fell to her shoulders as he ripped the metal ends apart. He twisted them to just the right shape and angle and then inserted them both into the cage’s lock.

“Where did you learn to do that?” Sali asked him.

“Stealing candy for the kids from the headmistress’ desk,” he said, allowing himself a brief smile. The iron cage was meant to keep things a little more important than peppermint and chocolate snaps. He had trouble picking it, but with enough persistence, or perhaps just Willow’s blessing, there was a low click and the door swung open.

The hurt tiger tested the distance and then quickly pulled itself back inside. It was too afraid of the impact to the ground. Again, it stepped out and Warwick leaned over and helped it down to ease the landing. The beast sat for a moment, satisfied with being out of the cage. Warwick knelt before it and inspected the wound on its wrist. He wasn’t a master healer, but he knew enough to tell it wasn’t anything serious. Apparently the creature had been snagged by a trap. Luckily there wasn’t a break, so the tiger would be able to mend the wound on its own.

“Go on, fella,” Warwick said, patting the tiger on the rump. It traded a warm purr and rubbed up against Denjah before limping away into the woods.

The orphans eyed the south platform with weary eyes. What had happened to everyone? Where did the Mydianites come from and what did they want? Warwick wanted adventure, but not at the cost of his friends, home, and surrounding creatures.

“We should go find the headmistress,” Sali offered. She was right. The headmistress was their best chance for help and answers.

Denjah flicked the mud from her paws and trotted over to the small dais where the lift met the ground. She pawed the lever and pushed on it with all of her weight until it shifted forward. Warwick smiled and patted her on the head. Her ears flicked back and she rubbed against him with approval.

The three waited impatiently as the slow moving box descended to gather them. After what seemed like an eternity, the wooden lift reached the ground and Warwick threw the lever to send it right back up. Sali pulled out a knife that had been tucked away in her boot and held it with clenched fingers.

“Where did you get that?” Warwick asked.

“From the cafeteria,” she said. “I like to peel apples in my bed.” Her voice was dainty, almost happy. For a moment her simple answers and light-hearted attitude made Warwick forget the danger they were in.

The lift reached the south platform and the three inside spilled out. Denjah growled when she looked over to the orphanage. The double doors were standing open, blowing in the heavy wind. A few scraps of paper and a pillow came tumbling out. There was a horrible smell in the air, as if something had been left on the stove for too long. Thick plumes of smoke bellowed out of the kitchen’s chimney and the tigress darted inside.

Warwick and Sali chased after her, keeping watchful of the lift and the connecting platforms. Westerhill was still quiet. There should have at least been church bells ringing from the temple. He didn’t think for one moment that the people of this town would allow their children to be taken away without a fight. Something bad had happened—something horrible and he knew it.

The orphanage was just as vacant as the rest of Westerhill. Beds were torn down, footlockers emptied, and doors stood wide open. Denjah was headed to the kitchen, toward the awful smell of cooked meat. A loud growl alerted them to the cat’s findings and Warwick couldn’t help but push Sali aside and bolt the rest of the way down the hallway.

Denjah was standing at attention, fur ruffled from her neck to tail. Her eyes were locked on the dead man within the brick oven. His legs had been broken and pulled around his neck so that he could be wedged inside. There were horrible burn marks all along his body and limbs but the large slash across the throat was probably the reason he died.

“No!” Sali screamed and buried her face against Warwick’s chest. He pulled her close and then out of the room, making the clicking sound for Denjah to follow. She gave one last look to the cook and then followed the pair of weeping orphans out into the hallway.

“Why, Warwick, why are these men doing this?” she asked, eyes flooded with sorrow.

“They’re Mydianites, Sali, you know why.”

People didn’t have to go far in the world to learn the reputation for the dark god of the Underworld’s minions. They were loathsome people who stopped at nothing to ruin the land of its people and creatures. They built war machines that ripped the trees from the ground, reshaped the majestic cliffs, and emptied the rivers that teemed with life. In essence, Mydianites stood for all the things that Willow did not. They were the enemy, the aggressor, and worthy of such fear and hatred.

“C’mon, let’s go find the headmistress,” Warwick said, dragging Sali down the hall. “Hopefully she’s okay.”

Denjah hopped over the beds and jogged to catch up. She padded her way through her friends and rubbed against them both. Warwick patted her on the head as they made it to the door where he listened last night. He quickly explained to Sali what he heard but she didn’t seem to care. Her mind was back in the kitchen, with the cook she’d grown to love over seven years.

Warwick pushed the door open but quickly pulled it shut before she could look in. He saw the headmistress. Her condition was similar to the cook’s but Sali wasn’t deterred this time. She pushed her way past her friend and his cat and shoved it open.

The headmistress’ throat had been slashed, her head hanging by only inches of meat. Her bloodshot eyes were bulging from her skull as she looked toward the ceiling. Her body was obscured behind a desk and a large trail of blood was oozing across the floor beneath it.

“Warwick, let’s go,” Sali said, tugging his arm. Denjah had already started out but he spotted something interesting.

“No, wait!” he yelled, separating himself. He approached the desk, forcing back the urge to empty last night’s toast from his stomach. The woman behind it was clutching a piece of paper in her vice-like hand. Warwick grabbed her wrist and wrestled the note free and looked it over, despite the large splotch of blood in the corner.

It was a letter to her, from some man named Ruster Hason. Most of it was written with great flattery but the point of the note was to tell the headmistress that the children were to be moved to Ridgard. Then it said the older kids were going north but didn’t mention where.

“It’s all a lie,” Sali said, reading over his shoulder. Denjah pawed at his pants, curious as to his change in tone.

“Of course it is. None of us were meant to go to Ridgard. The Mydianites were going to take us somewhere else and do something horrible to us. This was just to cover their tracks.”

“Cover their tracks? They killed everybody! What tracks need covering?” she screamed.

“Because the children didn’t die here. Don’t you see? They left this message for anyone who comes to Westerhill and wonders why there are no young corpses. Any outsiders will simply assume that the kids went to Ridgard before the massacre took place.”

Denjah’s ears went up when a noise sounded from the hallway. The trusty wooden floors always told of people sneaking around. Warwick grabbed the knife from Sali’s hand and motioned for her to stay quiet. He laid a strong hand against Denjah’s backside and pushed her into a sitting position. With his back pressed against the wall, he inched his way to the doorway and looked out.

Thin, stringy hands grabbed him around the collar and pulled him out into the hall. Warwick and Sali both screamed and Denjah lunged toward the attacker. Her massive jaws wrapped around his forearm and bit, sending a howl of pain through the slender hallway. Warwick used the opportunity to kick his feet from beneath and land him on the ground.

Denjah released him and backed off while Warwick straddled his chest and pushed the blade against his throat. It wasn’t Lucas, but he was just as eerie. He wore a pair of thick bifocals and had a tiny, black moustache. His forearm was gushing blood and his breathing was labored, but Warwick didn’t think his wounds were too severe. He was more afraid of the large cat than of the two humans.

“Why are you here?” Warwick asked him, pushing the knife even harder. The man was silent. His large eyes were magnified by the width of his lenses.

Sali knelt down next to him and pulled a length of his hair, forcing him to look at her. “What do you want with the children?” she asked.

He said, “I’m here for the creatures, little girl. Go ask Lucas about the children.” This was the driver of the wagon that held the injured tiger.

“And why are you here for the creatures?” Warwick asked, nervously looking toward the open doors.

“Money, boy.” He laughed as much as the blade would allow. “These critters are going to the north, to the Boudian fair.”

“As a show, you mean?” Warwick assumed.

“That’s right. Mind getting off me now?” He eyed his captor and helpers with little fear.

“We’re not going to let you simply leave with our forest’s animals,” Sali said.

“Well it’s a little too late for that, girl. I’ve already sent eight wagons out. They’re probably halfway to Bloodgate by now.”

Warwick gripped the pommel of the knife and bashed him in the face with enough force that even Denjah growled. The man spit blood across his shirt and with it, two teeth. He laughed through a scarlet smile and seemed unbothered by the attack. “You’re gonna die, boy,” his slurred voice said before he collapsed.

Suddenly hands grabbed Warwick around the neck and pulled him away. Denjah snarled and leaped to the attacker but a swift kick to the face sent her flying across the room where she landed with a solid thump. Sali screamed and tried to grab Warwick’s assailant around the waist but he simply shoved her away with his gloved hand.

“Just how did you two get out of that wagon?” Lucas asked, holding Warwick at arm’s length. “I’d have much rather had you both alive, but I suppose Mydian won’t miss a couple of vampires.”

“Vampires?” Warwick asked through a nearly-closed throat. His eyes darted over to Denjah but she was unmoving. He could see the rise and fall of her chest but she had just suffered a pretty heavy knock to the head.

“That’s right, kiddy. Your brothers and sisters from the orphanage are going straight to Bloodgate to be press-ganged into vampirism. Mydian’s building an army. Too bad you two won’t be joining.”

“Why children?” Sali asked. “Why not the adults?”

“Because the children can be manipulated so much easier. Kids your age have the strongest, capable bodies. We can send the ones like you straight to fight and cultivate the younger ones until they are ready. Just think of yourselves as expendable soldiers who are easily replaced and easily produced.”

“That’s sick,” Warwick said.

“That’s *war*,” he corrected.

“Mydian will never control the Foxmoor,” Warwick said.

“Mydian already has control. In just a few short weeks, we’ll march through here and tear down the trees and haul away the wildlife.” He chuckled to himself. “What’s left of them, anyway.”

“Westerhill is for good people!” Sali screamed. She had crawled over to Denjah and was holding her around the neck. “They deserve this home as much as the creatures!”

“The creatures deserve *nothing*,” Mister Lucas said, throwing his head back in a hearty laugh. “These tamed beasts are pitiful excuses for life. They need to be in cages, at the mercy of men and at the entertaining expense of paying onlookers.”

“But you forgot something,” Warwick said, feeling a bit of strength in his bones and in his spirit.

“Oh, and what’s that, youngling?”

“You can’t tame something that’s wild at heart.”

A low, guttural growl sounded behind Mister Lucas. He turned just in time to see a large, drenched tiger step up to the doorway, its injured paw lifted up in the air. Its lips were pulled back, revealing the large, jagged teeth that salivated with the promise of an easy kill. The color and life faded from Lucas’ face before the tiger even closed the distance.

Warwick was thrown to the ground as the massive beast pushed the man down with its large pads. The tiger dug its claws into Lucas’ chest and bit down hard across his throat, yanking the evil, twisted life right out of the man who would dare hurt children and animals.

The mangling lasted only a few minutes but the tiger stayed around long enough to make sure Denjah was okay. Sali helped her to stand on wobbly feet. The cat yawned, licked her paw and then moseyed over to rub against the other tiger. After a friendly nip, the big feline left, a trail of evil blood in its wake.

Sali just sat there, rocking back and forth. Denjah sensed her discomfort and tried to rub the depression out of her. The cat purred and licked and Sali couldn't help but smile just a little. Denjah sneezed and flicked her ears back and then sat down, tail slapping the ground in approval.

"So what now?" she asked, stroking the cat's head and talking to Warwick. He was busy looking out the window and watching the rain dwindle.

"You need to head south," he told her. "Get on a boat and get to Ridgard."

"I'm not leaving you here," she said. "This is my home."

"It's my home as well, but I'm not staying right now. I'm going after the children and the animals."

"Then I'll go with you," she said, standing up. "I want to help."

"Then get to Ridgard and tell them what happened. Tell them everything. The world needs to know that Mydian is stealing children to convert into vampirism. People need to know that this time, he has gone *too* far." He took her by the hands and pulled her close and looked into her eyes. "I *need* you to do this."

After a moment's hesitation and a fresh stream of tears, she nodded. This had to be done. Warwick wanted adventure and now he had it. Not only would he live out his childish fantasies of swords and magic, he would get to save the things that he held dear.

The three of them walked out onto the south platform and looked to the north. There were so many bad things that way; Bloodgate, Xenthia, Crynsia, and Boudia. Why would the gods put so many dark spots on the map? Warwick hugged Sali around the waist and then knelt down to stroke Denjah between the ears. His quest to save the children and the animals were going to start in the middle of those vile, twisted places.