

War of the  
Seasons

book one

the human

A SAMPLE OF  
THE NOVEL BY  
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**T**HE FIRST THING STORY REALIZED WAS SHE WAS SOMEHOW, miraculously, still alive. She knew this because every single inch of her body hurt; even her hair hurt. The second thing Story realized was she'd neglected an important rule in spelunking: always look up before you stand.



## CHAPTER ONE

*THE FALL*

**G**RAVEL SPRAYED OUT FROM UNDER THE JEEP'S TIRES AS IT skidded to a halt in front of the cave entrance. Story smiled as she saw the familiar, happy memory from her childhood. The longing—no, the *need*—to see it again had been consuming her for months. Set in a massive limestone outcropping that jutted out from the mountainside, the opening was shaped like a lopsided half-moon, as if someone had hooked the right side of the cave entrance and tugged upward. A warm, summer breeze rustled the treetops, and she took a deep breath, inhaling the sharp, piney smell of the surrounding woods.

“What do you mean *if* you go back to school?”

Story's smile evaporated, and she felt a flash of irritation over the interruption. Josh raised his fiery red eyebrows and peered over the rim of his sunglasses at her, waiting for an answer. Ignoring his question, she hopped out of the Jeep and after a quick look around noted that there weren't any other cars parked nearby.

*Good.*

Josh jumped out and slammed the passenger door shut before walking around to the back of the vehicle to block her access to their gear.

"I'm serious, Story. What do you mean *if*? You can't be thinking of dropping out of high school! What about your friends? What about prom? What about college?"

Story snorted. "Are you serious? Prom? College? Like those things really matter." She pushed past him and reached for her gear. "Besides, you're the only friend I have left."

Leaning into the back of the Jeep, she pulled out her daypack and slipped a headlamp over her purple-streaked black hair. She tossed some water and snacks into the bag along with a short length of rope and a few anchor points with carabiners.

Josh picked up his daypack and mirrored her actions, but stubbornly clung to the subject. "Of course it matters. You only get to go to high school once." His face softened. "Besides, didn't we have a good time last year?" He held her gaze with his sky blue eyes and, hesitantly, as if he was afraid he'd scare her away, reached up with his hand and gently brushed her chin-length hair back, tucking a stray curl behind her ear. His thumb came down to rest on her jaw, while his fingertips grazed the side of her neck.

Story looked up at him and felt a familiar ache rise in her chest: her breath became short and shallow. But she buried the rising rush of emotions before they could fully surface. She couldn't allow herself to feel anything anymore—not even good things like Josh, because, as her father always used to say, "*You can't feel the good without the bad.*"

She jerked away from Josh, as if burned by his touch, and turned back to the Jeep.

Ignoring the hurt look she saw before she turned, she threaded the string from her battered lensatic compass through

one of her belt loops and then shoved its considerable bulk in her front pocket. After pausing to make sure it was secure, she pulled on a faded, black hoodie with a peeling surfing logo emblazoned across the front; it would be enough to ward off the cave's chill.

Almost as an afterthought, she picked up the knife lying in the back of the Jeep.

*Her father smiled and pulled a poorly wrapped gift from his back pocket. "Merry Christmas, kiddo!" He winked and tossed it into her lap.*

*Story examined the oblong bundle, fairly certain she knew what it contained. Never one for trying to preserve gift-wrap, she made short work of the paper and found herself holding an old knife. Her father's old Marine Corps Ka-Bar, to be precise. She turned it around in her hands and pulled it from its brown leather sheath. It was nearly a foot long from end to end: the blade itself was seven inches in length. It was just an old, oversized knife—unremarkable in every way.*

*"Um, thanks?"*

*Her father's neck started to turn red, and he thrust his hands deeply into his front pockets as he leaned against the doorjamb. "It's not your only gift. I just wanted to give you this one now."*

*"Oh no, it's great, Dad, really!" She plastered a huge, and hopefully genuine looking, smile on her face. "I'm sure it'll come in handy a lot. Hiking, spelunking..."*

Slamming the door on the rest of the memory, she attached the knife to her belt with more force than necessary. When she looked up, Josh was eying her warily.

"We don't have to do this today, you know—if it's too much for you." Josh stepped in closer, requiring her to arch her neck back to look him in the face, which was saying something; at nearly six feet, Story was pretty tall for a girl.

"We could just set up camp and try in the morning," he continued.

“If you keep talking like that I’m going to start thinking you’re claustrophobic.” Story hefted her pack and adjusted its fit. “Or a wuss.” She pushed past his linebacker’s bulk and walked toward the cave entrance.

She heard Josh give an exasperated sigh and, looking over her shoulder, saw him kick her Jeep’s tire before picking up his pack and following her. “Just once, you could try being nice to me, you know.”

“That would only encourage you,” she called back at him. He rolled his eyes, and she knew she had, once again, been forgiven. For some reason, that comforted her. As much as she drove Josh away, she felt like if he ever did give up on her what little remained of the old Story would be gone for good.

Those melancholy thoughts evaporated as she neared the cave entrance. She ran her hand up the smooth, white trunk of the solitary aspen tree that flanked the opening and heard its distinctive round leaves flutter in the light wind. She smiled as she remembered her father’s advice to her and the twins on one of their many trips here.

*“Aspen’s a terrible wood to use for a fire. Doesn’t burn very hot or fast. But the inner bark can be peeled and eaten in a pinch—”*

*“Does it taste good?” Katie interrupted, always eager to try something new.*

*“It’s actually pretty bitter, but if you were hungry enough, I promise you wouldn’t care. That’s what I learned in the Corps; why I remember back when I was in SERE School—”*

*“Daaaaaaad,” Will whined, cutting their father off. “No more boring Marine stories!” He brandished his pocketknife. “Come on Katie, let’s go try some.”*

*Chuckling, their father winked at Story, and she smiled back. Her younger siblings were so predictable; they always dove head first into any new thing.*

“Story? Hello... Anyone home?” Josh was standing before her, waving a hand in front of her face.

Startled, she shook her head to clear away the lingering memory. “Yeah, sorry. Just making sure I didn’t forget anything.” Then, switching on her headlamp, she plunged into the darkness.

\* \* \* \* \*

THE TUNNEL WAS TOO NARROW FOR THEM TO WALK SIDE BY SIDE. When she looked back to check on Josh, she saw he had to stoop slightly so that he wouldn’t scrape his head.

“Don’t worry, it gets bigger in a couple minutes.”

“I hope so. I think I’m getting a crick in my neck.” Josh’s voice sounded strained. “So, what you said back there, about hating the kids who trashed the entry way to the cave.”

“Yeah?” Story felt her blood boil as she remembered the scattered beer bottles and the graffiti-covered walls they’d come across before entering this tunnel.

“Well, that’s pretty rich, coming from you.”

“What? How?” Surprise tinged her voice. “I’ve never vandalized anything in my life!”

“I bet Sandy would disagree with you.”

Story bit her lower lip. “Oh. That...”

“Yeah, that.”

*Story was standing patiently in line to pay for her bagel and cream cheese at the cafeteria. Sandy Wright was standing in front of her, carrying on a loud argument on her phone. It was impossible to ignore what she was saying.*

*“Seriously, Dad, you’re such an idiot sometimes. I’ve already explained this to you like a million times—”*

*Story ripped the phone out of Sandy’s hands and threw it against the wall so hard it made a cracking sound and broke in two. Then she*

*calmly walked away, eating her stolen bagel and feeling better than she had in a long while. Sandy's shrieks in the background had been the icing on the cake. Or rather, the chocolate chip in her cookie—she'd never been a fan of cake.*

A smile crept across her face at the memory. "You know what? I think you're right. But I'd do it again in a heartbeat."

"I know. That's what worries me."

The tunnel they'd been working their way down abruptly widened, and Josh let out a loud sigh of relief. "Finally!"

"Dude, we were only walking for like five minutes." Story raised an eyebrow at him. "Does Coach McKnight know his star linebacker is this out of shape?"

"Shut up."

"I'm sooooo telling..."

"I'm not out of shape! That ceiling was just low and stuff. Shut up." Josh tried to stalk off down the tunnel, but Story grabbed his arm and yanked him back before he could take a step. Toe to toe, they faced each other in the dark, the soft glow of their headlamps illuminating their faces. She could see a spark of hope in Josh's eyes—hope that maybe she'd dragged him all the way down here to rekindle things. For a fleeting moment, she almost gave in. It would be so easy, so very easy to do it, to be with Josh like that again. To let him try to fill the void in her heart.

But even as she thought it, she knew it wouldn't be enough. Unable to hold his gaze any longer, she dropped her eyes and stared at the olive skin of her own hand and how it contrasted with the freckled, creamy surface of Josh's bicep where she still clung. As the ache in her chest grew, she wished again for the time when life was simpler: when he was all that she needed. All she had to offer him now was the occasional friendship of an angry and bitter girl. Yet he stuck with her, either out of loyalty or misplaced affection, or maybe both.

Story stood up on her toes and kissed his cheek. "Thank you."

She turned away from him before he could ask her what for and before she could see the hurt in his eyes at being rejected by her once again. Story angled her headlamp down to illuminate the floor near their feet. "Next time, before you go charging off, remember this is a cave. We're spelunking. Always look down before you step."

Josh looked at their feet and immediately scrambled away from the craggy, wide-mouthed hole he'd nearly stepped through. He pressed himself against the wall, breathing quickly.

"Holy crap! They should put up warning signs. That's dangerous!"

Story snickered. "That's half the fun! Besides, it's a cave. What'd you expect? Well-lit paths? Guardrails? How about a tour guide and a refreshment stand?"

"Ha-ha." Josh peeled the upper half of his body from the wall and cautiously peered over the edge into the darkness below.

"There's a ledge about a foot wide along the left side of the hole that leads to another tunnel. There are some gorgeous rock formations down that way, and it eventually leads to the underground river I was telling you about before." *The river where my parents met.* A hazy image of a flighty, ethereally beautiful woman began to surface, and Story frowned, refusing to think about her mother. *My mother who left me when I was just a baby.* She felt her cheeks flush with the heat of her anger, and she pressed her sea green eyes closed. *Sea green eyes, just like my mother's.* Banishing the memory with a sigh, she opened her eyes and pointed out a tall, narrow tunnel that was slanted on a leftward angle, on the opposite side of the sinkhole about ten feet away.

"Um...I don't think..." Josh's voice cracked.

Story gave him a sidelong glance. “Don’t worry, we’re going a different way.”

“I’m heartbroken.”

She smirked and shrugged off her pack. “We’re going down.”

“I was afraid you were going to say that.”

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THE SINKHOLE WASN’T AS DIRE AS STORY LED JOSH TO BELIEVE. Roughly six feet deep and bowl shaped, it had craggy, pock marked walls that provided ample hand and foot holds for climbing. The twins had named this part of the cave the ‘Toilet Bowl,’ because of the tunnel that Story and Josh currently found themselves crawling through. It shot off the bowl at a downward angle, leading the twins to call it the u-bend.

When Story’s hand dropped down into nothingness, she quickly stopped and felt Josh run into her backside. She looked over her shoulder in time to see his face turn almost as red as his hair.

“Uh, sorry. Didn’t realize...”

She didn’t say anything—to avoid embarrassing him more—and hopped down out of the tunnel. She let her gaze sweep the length of the massive cavern. Roughly the size of a basketball court, it was littered with holes, fissures, and crevices that led off into countless other caverns. She’d always found this part of the caves stunningly beautiful, due to the abundance of stalactite and stalagmite formations. Some had grown close enough together over the ages that they formed a beautiful pillar, narrowed at the center like an hourglass. She could hear the drip-drip-drip of water droplets around the room working ceaselessly for millennia to create these wonders.

“Whoa.” Josh’s voice interrupted the timeless symphony

of water droplets, inadequately summing up the natural beauty around them.

Story turned to the right side of the cave and began navigating around the columns toward the far wall. There was a tiny fissure back there that she'd discovered as child. It was the only place in the caves her father had gotten upset about when she tried to explore. In fact, he'd expressly forbidden her from entering it, saying only that it was "dangerous."

Behind her, she heard Josh curse under his breath as he stumbled. When he finally caught up to her, she pointed at an unremarkable rock face in front of them with a few stones jutting out from the base.

"So what? It's a wall—am I missing something?"

"Looks like it, doesn't it?" She walked forward toward one of the bigger rock outcroppings and removed her pack. "But looks can be deceiving." She flashed him a mischievous grin over her shoulder and slipped into the shadows.

The sharp intake of breath she heard from Josh confirmed what she knew would happen. To him, it would look like she'd disappeared right before his eyes. In reality, it was just a trick of the light. Hidden in the shadows of the outcropping was a wide, horizontal slit in the cave wall that Story had pressed her body into. Built slim like her father, she was able to fit with minimal effort. It was only three feet or so deep, so she quickly slid to the other side of the fissure, into the cave beyond.

"Story? STORY?" Josh's voice was panicked, and he clutched her abandoned pack in his hands as his eyes searched vainly for her in the shadows before him.

Crouched down on her side of the fissure, she contemplated remaining silent just to mess with him a bit more, but he was getting upset.

"Hey, quit freaking out. I'm right here." She pulled her headlamp off and flashed the light at him.

His face popped into view on the other side of the crevice; his mouth had flattened to a thin line. "Not cool, Story. Not cool. How about a little warning next time?"

"Well, that wouldn't be nearly as fun, would it?"

"I'm serious." Josh looked left, then right, eyeing the length and width of the fissure. "Also, there is absolutely no way I will ever fit through this."

"That's fine. I just want to look around a bit in here anyway." Story's legs were starting to cramp from being crouched for so long.

"I don't think that's such a good idea—you going off on your own."

Story rolled her eyes. *Great, now he sounds like Dad.* "Just pass me my pack. I'll be back in a few minutes."

For a few moments there was only silence from the other side. Then Josh grumbled something that sounded like "Fine, have it your way," and started shoving her pack through the crevice.

She felt the prickling sensation of her leg falling asleep, so she stood up to shake it out. Time seemed to slow as two things happened: She cracked her head on the ceiling or a stalactite—she wasn't sure which—and lost her balance. She felt herself fall forward as her feet slipped out from under her, and she threw her arms out to break her fall.

What she hadn't realized before was that she'd been standing on the smooth edge of a precipice. Before she had time to process what was happening, her feet, followed by her legs, slipped over the edge and down into the chasm beneath her. Her chest slammed against the lip of the opening, knocking the wind out of her.

"Josh!" she gasped out. She tried to brace her legs against the wall and push herself back up, but there was only open

space beneath her. She felt the weight of her body begin to pull her down into the dark maw below.

“JOSH! Help me!”

She could hear Josh grunting as he tried to wedge his too-large frame into the crevice. “Story, hang on! I’m coming!” His voice was wild with panic, but it didn’t even come close to matching the terror Story felt. Her father wasn’t coming to save her; Josh couldn’t save her; no one could save her but herself.

She clawed frantically at the dusty cave floor with her hands, but it only made her slide down faster.

In that last moment, as Story was clinging to the edge with just her fingertips, she realized something: she was a terrible person. She had no friends anymore because she’d driven them all away. She’d been rude and spiteful to everyone and angry at the world for the unfairness of life and death and everything in between. She’d spent this entire trip behaving horribly to the one person who’d stuck by her through the worst year of her life. Truly, Josh was her last friend in this world. The knowledge washed over her, calming her, as if admitting the truth to herself had lifted a burden she didn’t know she was carrying.

“Josh?” Her voice was quiet now, calm.

“Story, just hang on a little longer—I’m going to throw you the rope!”

She heard the zipper on her bag being ripped open.

“Josh, I’m sorry.”

Story’s grip gave out, and she plummeted into the inky darkness below.



## CHAPTER TWO

*MONSTERS*

**S**TORY WOKE TO THE SOUND OF THE MOST BEAUTIFUL MUSIC SHE'D ever heard. It was faint and far away, but loud enough that she could make out the melody. All around her, the woods were lit up by fireflies of different sizes, all flying off toward the music.

*No, not fireflies—Faeries!* Story realized as one flew past her nose.

There was no mistaking the tiny human-like form, as another one landed on her outstretched hand. It was no bigger than her finger, with delicate dragonfly wings fluttering on its back. The faeries were just like the ones from her childhood dreams, only wilder and somehow all the more real for it.

Clapping her hands with delight, she sprang to her feet and chased after the faeries, deeper into the woods toward the entrancing music. The closer she got, the more familiar the melody sounded—almost as if she should know it or had known it at one point and forgotten.

The faeries were flying in time to the music; swirling around her, beckoning her to join them in their dance. Laughing, she threw her hands in the air, swaying and twirling with the faeries. There was no fear of running into trees or losing her path; her feet knew the way, and the faeries helped guide her steps. The music coursed through her blood, and her body tingled with magic, all the way down to her toes.

The trees ended abruptly, and there in the middle of a round clearing, bathed in moonlight, sat a boy playing a gold violin. He was perched regally atop a large, flat, moss-covered stone. She guessed he was roughly her age, though his face seemed almost timeless. Barefoot, he was dressed simply in a short, green kilt that looked as organic and untamed as he did. Bits of vines and leaves and flowers wound around his body, as if he was a physical manifestation of nature itself. His skin had a faint golden hue that shimmered in the moonlight, as did his matching golden blonde hair. He was so lovely that Story felt as though she would cry if she ever had to look away.

The faeries had all gathered around him and were flying and dancing about, even more wildly than before. The music coming from the beautiful, golden violin increased in tempo and volume, building until it was so loud that Story had to cover her ears. At the final crescendo, he looked up and they locked eyes for what seemed like an eternity but could only have been a second.

Then the music came to a crashing halt, and Story woke up.

She groaned. Every muscle in her body felt like a thousand tiny needles had been shoved into them, and even the thought of moving was painful. As the dream faded, she remembered her fall down the cave shaft. She didn't know how long she had been lying there, or how injured she was. Her back might be broken, and she was at the bottom of a long shaft where it would be extremely difficult for anyone to get to her. She felt her pulse

quicken, and darkness seemed to close in on her as she realized the seriousness of her situation.

She would surely be dead long before anyone ever arrived. *If* anyone ever arrived. She wasn't even sure Josh would be able to find the crevice again much less go through it. No, she couldn't wait around for a rescue.

Steeling herself, she slowly opened her eyes, wincing at the shooting pain she felt all the way from her neck to her toes.

*That's actually some good news,* she thought with a grimace. *If I can feel my toes, it probably means my back isn't broken.*

The bottom of the shaft was faintly illuminated, and looking up, Story could see she'd fallen a very long way. So far, in fact, that she couldn't see up to the top of the hole; it disappeared into pitch-black nothingness.

"Josh!" Yelling hurt a whole lot more than she thought it would. She paused a moment to catch her breath and tried to ignore the ache in her ribs when she called out again. "Josh! Can you hear me?"

There was no response.

Either she was so far down he couldn't hear her, or he'd left to get help. One thing was certain; she wasn't getting back out the way she'd come in.

She carefully turned her head side to side, ignoring the throbbing it caused, and looked around. Light shone from a small opening several feet above her head. It looked wide enough for her to squirm through without much trouble.

*That's assuming I can actually stand.*

Gritting her teeth against the inevitable pain, Story rolled onto her side and gasped. She felt like she'd been kicked repeatedly in the stomach—no, worse—like her ribs were being squeezed tightly in a vise. Grunting with the effort, she rolled over onto her knees, placed a trembling hand on the wall for support, and then shakily pushed herself up to stand.

The sudden rush of blood away from her head caused her vision to tunnel, and she nearly blacked out again. With a low moan, she leaned heavily against the wall for support. She stood there slowly breathing in and out, letting her body recover and get used to standing again. Looking at the grit and grime that coated what she could see of her body, she half-smiled. *If only the twins could see me now.*

Story stood a little straighter, wincing as her back protested the movement. She was definitely going to have bruises. Lots of bruises. She ran careful hands over her body, ignoring the shots of pain, and felt the tears that peppered her sweatshirt along the front and back. Dust caked the inside of her mouth, and she regretted leaving her daypack behind; she'd give a lot for some water right about now. Her eyes flicked back up toward the shaft she'd fallen down, and she marveled that she'd survived, relatively unscathed at that.

Keeping her head still to avoid getting dizzy again, she moved her eyes around the space, looking for an exit other than the hole she'd have to wriggle through. About ten feet away, on the opposite wall, there was some sort of writing. Story sighed; it was probably more graffiti from the vandals in the main cavern. What could be so important that someone needed to deface nature to say it? Probably "John loves Maggie" or something else just as trivial.

Deciding to get a closer look, Story took a hesitant step forward. When she didn't collapse, she released her hold on the cool surface behind her and took another step, and then another, until she was directly in front of the wall.

With soft moonlight shining directly onto the surface before her, she could see that she'd been completely wrong. This was no simple act of vandalism; it was a mural of sorts.

It was either very old or had been made to look so: the colors were worn and faded. In the center of the mural was a

simply drawn tree that resembled a cherry tree in shape, but the blossoms on it, instead of being pink, were vivid silver. In fact, the silver was the only bit of color that hadn't faded with time. The mural depicted the silver leaves falling off the tree onto the bodies of people lying beneath it. She couldn't tell if the bodies were supposed to be alive or dead. Hardly aware of her movement, Story reached out and brushed the trunk of the tree with her fingertips. As she traced the lines of the branches, she felt a connection with the tree. Somehow, she could understand it. The tree was grieving, weeping for the fallen.

*And just like me, it couldn't save the ones it loved.*

Tears pricked her eyes, and her chest felt like it was back in the vise again, only this time the emotional pain was far worse than the physical pain. She literally felt as though she couldn't breathe. Memories were overwhelming her. She was feeling things that she didn't want to feel—things she'd spent the last few months running away from.

Closing her eyes, she backed away from the mural carefully, forcing herself to breathe in and out with every step. And then for no reason, all pretense of calm evaporated. She whirled on her heel and moved as quickly as her wobbly legs would take her, back to the crevice that would lead her out of the cave and away from the emotions pulsing through her.

Looking up through the crack, she wanted to scream in frustration. She could see stars outside, she could feel the cool night air against her face, but she knew there was no way she could pull herself up into and then through the opening in her current condition. She was barely able to skim the edge of the crevice with her fingertips, and the wall was perfectly smooth with no finger or toeholds. It may as well have been twenty feet up for all the good it did her.

She closed her eyes and leaned her forehead against the wall. Behaving recklessly had seemed like a perfectly good idea

a few hours ago. Now, she could almost hear her father chastising her, his Smoky Mountain accent coming out thick. *“What the heck were you thinkin’, kiddo? Goin’ into a strange cave alone, where nobody could follow you? I warned you to stay outta there! I warned you.”*

She felt her cheeks flush with shame and anger at her stupidity, and before she could stop herself, she kicked the wall. Her howl of frustration changed immediately into a scream as a jolt of pain coursed up her leg to her spine. A curse word she rarely used—and never in front of her father—died on her lips as she noticed she’d left a fist-sized indentation where she’d kicked the wall with her hiking boots. That shouldn’t have been possible; she wasn’t strong enough to pull herself up and out of the hole right now, much less make a dent in a stone wall.

Bending down to inspect it more closely, she ran her fingers over the crumbling edge of the hollow.

*It’s not rock at all!*

It was firmly packed dirt that had broken away when she kicked it. Story felt a sudden surge of hope. She could cut away toeholds, and with the combined strength of her arms and legs, she should be able to free herself from her prison.

She unsheathed her knife, relieved to see it had survived the fall unscathed. In hindsight, she realized she was lucky she hadn’t landed on it.

Blowing out a breath, Story bent over and used the blade to scrape away two small footholds. Once she was finished, she knelt down to unlace her boots and tossed them, along with her socks, through the crack. She’d put them back on once she got out, but right now she needed the traction that only bare feet could provide. She rolled up the hem of her jeans a few times to ensure her feet were free; the last thing she needed was for them to get tangled. She gripped the edge of the hole and positioned the ball of her right foot in the small opening she’d dug. Steeling

herself, she took a deep and painful breath and heaved with all her strength.

Her entire body protested, and her back burned like it was being dragged across a bed of coals, but she didn't let go. She knew if she gave up now she'd never get out. She felt hot tears stream down her face as she pulled with her arms and pushed with her legs through the fiery agony, until, crying out in triumph, she was free.

Story barely had time to register her escape before the pain racking her body was too much and she lost consciousness again.

\* \* \* \* \*

A PIERCING SCREAM JOLTED STORY AWAKE. Her eyes flew open, and she was momentarily blinded by the bright sunlight as she sprang to her feet, hands held before her in defense. Adrenaline coursed through her, wiping away any pain her body felt.

*Josh!*

The yell sounded again to her left, and now that she saw nothing was attacking her, she took off running into the woods, pursuing the sound. She held her hands in front of her face, afraid of losing an eye to the branches that whipped at her as she ran. The cry abruptly ended, and she poured on speed. Lances of pain shot through the tender pads of her feet when she landed on a sharp rock or stick, but she didn't care. Josh—or *it could be someone else*, she realized belatedly—was in trouble and needed her help.

About four hundred meters later, Story ran through the tree line into a perfectly round clearing. It had to be manmade; nothing in nature was a perfect circle. She scanned the clearing looking for the person who had been screaming but saw only a crumbling ruin of a building and a few thin tree stumps, about two feet tall, on the far side of the circle.

*They must be in those ruins.*

She crept closer to the decaying edifice. Broken bits of marble littered the ground, and one silvery white marble column leaned precariously against another. It reminded her a bit of an old Greek temple, only smaller. If it had once had a roof, it was long gone now. All that remained was the carving of a tree, like the one she'd seen in the cave, at the top of each column.

Her head snapped in the direction of another shout. It had come from the opposite side of the clearing, where the stumps were. Instinctively gripping the hilt of her knife, she quietly made her way to the edge of the ruin and peered around slowly.

A young man—not Josh—was bound and gagged at the base of a tree, surrounded by the three tree stumps, one of which suddenly rose up on two knobby legs. Story stifled a gasp as she realized the stumps were living creatures. Looking more closely, she could see that they had two arms that reached nearly to the ground with dozens of long, branch-like fingers.

As she watched, one of the stumps flung a rock at the man, striking him in the chest with a force she would not have believed could come from a creature so small. She heard another muffled cry of pain; the man curled into a fetal position while the tree stumps doubled over with insane laughter, their alien cackles sounding like an icy wind slicing through a hollow log.

Horror rolled over Story as she realized the creatures were just toying with him.

*They had to have broken at least one of his ribs!*

She grabbed blindly at the rubble near her feet and ran toward the stumps.

"Hey!" she shouted, heaving a rock at the man's three tormentors. "Leave him alone!"

In unison, three sets of burning, yellow eyes immediately opened on the backsides of the little monsters. They hadn't even turned around! They eyed her for a moment, as if sizing up their

prey, and then, again in perfect unison, identical smiles split across their wooden faces. They remained there, unmoving and staring. She felt locked in their gaze, as if they were hypnotizing her into staying still. Then suddenly they were rushing toward her, cruel smiles still in place and rocks held at the ready.

“Uh-oh...”

She hastily threw the last of her rocks at her attackers. The monsters avoided them easily. Out of ammunition, she reached for her knife, frantically grappling with the strap that kept it in its holster. It wouldn't budge, and her shaking fingers weren't helping the situation. The creatures were moving with impossible speed, chattering shrilly at each other, and leering maliciously at her.

Story backed away as fast as she could, still fumbling with the strap on her knife. Then suddenly, she was flat on her back, the wind knocked out of her. She'd tripped on a jagged piece of marble half buried in the soil.

“Ouch!” A thrown rock grazed her shoulder.

They were nearly upon her now, so close she could make out the individual bark patterns in their skin—or hide—or whatever it was. She scrambled away, scooting along the ground on her backside like a scuttling crab, and they paused in their pursuit. Eyes burning, they stared down at her, and she thought—no, she hoped—that they'd decided to leave her alone.

That hope vanished when she saw the bark on their upper halves spilt into unnatural grins, and with the speed and ferocity of a pack of lions, they bore down on her once again.

### *END OF SAMPLE*

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