

KEEPERS OF THE DEEP

By rcheydn

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Cover

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Introduction

Nikko is happily playing in the backyard of his home when a giant bird swoops down and clasps him firmly in its talons and soars back into the sky leaving his mother desperately crying behind.

And so begins an incredible adventure for Nikko in a fantastical land where the Leaf Children live in trees with magical musical leaves, where the Drongs wage wars against them, where the beautiful Gabrysia is captured, and where Nikko and his new friends must go to the Dead Place in a bid to rescue her.

For Nikko it is just the beginning of things to come.

Keepers of The Deep is a story of wonder, of friendship, of trust.

About the Author

rcheydn worked as a journalist for newspapers and magazines throughout Europe, Australia and the Far East for a decade before entering the world of public relations.

For the next twenty-five years he was a senior PRO in the United Kingdom, Australia and, for almost 20 of those years, in Hong Kong.

Then he established his own public relations company in London which is regarded as one of the most dynamic and innovative agencies of its kind.

Keepers of the Deep is his first children's book

He is also the author of the political thriller *The Catskinner* which was set in Hong Kong.

Following *The Catskinner* was a crime novel set in the United Kingdom, *The Feathers*.

He is now working on his next project.

Dedication

For Nicholas

Chapter One

Nicholas's mother had never been outside her homeland before so it was not surprising that when she went to live abroad with his father for the first time she found everything strange.

Most things were unusual: The hot summer with its damp nights and sweltering days, and the chilling winter cold that seemed to slice through the wooden walls and seep relentlessly up through the floorboards of the houses she said looked like they were standing on legs.

There were other peculiarities too: The electric light poles which jutted out of the sidewalks like primitive totem poles, everyone rode in cars and seldom went for strolls even after the strong sun had settled behind the surrounding hills, and the language. Nicholas's mother found them all difficult to accept at first, but after a time she began to get a little more accustomed to them, even though she still regarded them as odd.

On the other hand Nicholas who had been born shortly after his parents had arrived found everything in his short life fascinating. A day did not pass without his discovering something new and exciting. Hours would be consumed as he searched every corner of the house, or picked his way around the outside garden in search of new wonders.

One afternoon he was playing in the garden of his parent's house when a shadow passed across the lawn. It was there only a minute or a few seconds really, and then it was gone. So quickly that Nicholas himself hardly noticed it as he busily explored the grass where there was a world unknown to him.

"What was that," Nicholas' mother asked his father "Was it a plane?"

"No," he answered. "It is something you have to know about and be careful of when you are out in the garden with Nicholas. You see," he went on, "here is this country there are special animals and birds and creatures that you don't find in other places."

He told her of animals that hopped instead of walking, and of others that slept during the day and emerged only after darkness fell, or which seemed to fly through the air as they leapt from the branches of one tree to another. There were even birds that could not fly even though they had wings, and reptiles that had all the appearances of miniature dragons and dinosaurs.

Nicholas' father also told her about a rare bird that apparently lived high in the hills, far away from the hustle and bustle of the city. There were very few of them and it was most unusual for them to be seen. In fact, not many people were aware they even existed. They were called Speckled Sparrows and they were said to have a special liking for little children.

It was a huge bird that sometimes left the remote trees and, around dusk usually, flew off towards the crowded city. As it soared high over the houses it peered downward looking for boys and girls. When it saw one, said Nicholas' father, it swooped down and in its long, strong claws picked up the child and carried it off.

"Oh, stop it," said his mother. She knew her husband liked teasing her and there were many times he had told her stories she had believed only to learn later he had been joking.

One day," she said, "you will tell a story too many." And with that she picked up Nicholas and went in to the house to prepare dinner.

The next day Nicholas' father went off to work as he always did and after having her own breakfast and doing some chores his mother went into the garden to water the plants. As it was summer the sun already beat down, sucking the night dew aloft.

Nicholas wailed loudly. He did not like having to stay inside his room playing with his toys when he knew his mother was outside. They were interesting enough but he preferred to be outside crawling around among the leaves and climbing on the handle of the metal clothes hoist. So he scrambled over the polished floor to the back door and carefully and very slowly worked his way down the single step. His mother kept a watchful eye on him and decided it was alright if he stayed out in the sun for a short time while she gave the flowers and ferns a good soaking.

Nicholas crawled around happily picking up twigs and leaves and holding them precariously in tiny fingers, sometimes putting them in his mouth, but quickly spitting them out again. Ants tickled his toes and he searched for them in the grass. The sun was hot but Nicholas' mother was pleased he was getting some colour onto his skin and was no longer pale. A few minutes outside would not hurt.

Suddenly it was very still and Nicholas' mother began to feel the oppressive heat as all breeze dropped and a single cloud above drifted past the sun allowing unhindered rays to stream down. It was so warm she purposely allowed the water to sprinkle on her feet. The cool spray soothed her. Just as she was beginning to feel better there was a flapping sound and Nicholas gave a cry.

His mother turned around to see a huge brown and yellow bird holding Nicholas in its claws and lifting him off the ground, its large wings beating the air and scattering dead leaves. She dropped the hose and cried out but the bird continued to flap its wings and rose into the air with Nicholas hanging helplessly below calling in his faint voice for his mother.

Within a short time the bird had climbed high into the sky, above the trees and was disappearing towards the south. Then it was gone from view. And Nicholas was gone too, leaving his mother calling after him far behind. The Speckled Sparrow, for that was what it was, a rare Speckled Sparrow just as Nicholas' father had described, flew for miles, far away from the city and into the hills.

Nicholas was held firmly in its talons, but it was a grip that was not painful. The bird changed course and turned east, soon crossing the sandy coastline and headed out over the sea. It flew on, far over the water, until in the distance an island appeared and the Speckled Sparrow began to slow and gradually fly lower. Undoubtedly it was going to land on the island, which as it got nearer, looked very lush and green with hardly any surrounding beach.

As the bird descended into the thick growth, with Nicholas dangling beneath with his eyes wide, the tallest of the tall trees seemed to shimmer and shake with excitement. The closer he came Nicholas could see the trees were a lot bigger than he had thought. They were, he was soon to find out, the most unusual trees in the world.

The trunks were enormous and measured in a few cases many meters around. Generally they were no smaller than ten meters in circumference and had windows, not holed but actual windows, which had been apparently cut into the sides. And for a moment Nicholas imagined he saw inquisitive faces peering out of a few of them.

The leaves were remarkable. There was no doubting they were unlike any leaves he had ever seen before, either lying on the grass in his backyard or rustling on the trees around

the fence. They glistened in the sunlight and shook gently even though there was not the slightest wind. The sound they made was as if orchestras of forest elves were playing sweet lilting tunes with the sole purpose of creating peaceful and tranquil thoughts. And with every note the leaves almost imperceptibly changed their hue to a more delicate and softer shade of pastel green.

Nicholas' eyes grew wider and wider, all the more so as he realised there were indeed faces behind some of the tree windows, and there were more partly hidden by branches at varying levels between the ground and the tree tops.

The Speckled Sparrow flew noiselessly into the forest until quite suddenly it lifted its head slightly and dropped onto a thick branch of a huge tree, gently nudging Nicholas forward on his bottom with two skipping bumps.

He looked around startled.

The bird perched motionless, the leaves continued their colourful ballet, the elfin orchestras played their delightful compositions, and mysterious faces appeared momentarily and shrank quickly from his glances.

What seemed like ages passed before anything happened. Nicholas had been too stunned to move. But move he did when he heard from below: "Who are you then?"

He jerked his head down and there standing in the cleft of two branches was a young boy about his own age, his feet planted arrogantly astride and his thumbs stuck in his breeches at the sides.

"I said, what's your name?" the boy repeated. This time he was somewhat more demanding in his question.

"Oh, I'm Nikko," said Nicholas shyly.

"What sort of name is that?" demanded the boy, adding a jutting chin to his manner. "I've never heard it before. Sounds funny to me."

Naturally Nicholas was very confused. "Nikko is what my mother and father call me. I think my real name is Nicholas though. But I like Nikko better."

He wanted to ask the other boy what his name was, but he was too shaken and shocked to say anything more. He was still thinking this when the boy spoke again.

"Come with me," he said. "Come on. Hurry up." With that he turned and opened a window in the tree trunk and disappeared inside, still with his thumbs in his breeches in a very cocky manner.

Nikko did not want to stay sitting on the branch with the giant bird staring at him and with the feeling that many strange pairs of eyes were peeking at him. So he stood up and followed the boy, hitching his own breeches which had slipped around his knees during the long flight and bumpy landing. Warily he climbed in through the window and found himself in a large room.

The first thing Nikko noticed was that he was not alone. A group of boys and girls stood motionless around the sides staring at him. They looked just like him with the breeches securely fastened at the front and wearing pale green shirts. The one thing that instantly stood out with all the children was that they were scrubbed clean with big round brown eyes. And each carried a tiny bow and arrows on his back, even the girls. Having been playing in his own back garden before he was carried off Nikko was rather grubby with dirt on his hands and feet, and he felt a little embarrassed.

Above them where the ceiling would have been if the room had one, which it didn't because there seemed to be no roof and there was only a hint of light at the top, there

were miniature chandeliers,. They were not fixed to anything, and from time to time they rotated slowly clockwise, casting rays of green light on the walls which were covered with shelves stocked to overflowing with toys Nikko had never seen the likes of before.

His attention was interrupted by the arrogant boy who had spoken to him outside.

“Who are you,” the boy asked with the emphasis on the *are* this time.

“I told you before. My name is Nicholas or Nikko. I prefer Nikko.”

“Don’t be rude,” said the boy. “Just answer the question. If I want to ask it again I will. And I do so I will. Who are you?”

Nikko once more told him his name, and as he did so he looked at the other children who had said nothing and had not moved. They stood there staring at him with their big brown eyes.

“What are you doing here?” continued the boy. “Why did you let Torpah take you away from where you were?”

Nikko told the boy he did not *let* anyone take him away from his home. He had been happily exploring in his garden when the big bird carried him off.

“That big bird, as you call it,” chastised the boy, “is Torpah. And he doesn’t just carry off anyone.”

Nikko was about to ask why he had been singled out by Torpah when a pretty little girl stepped from behind some of the children and put her hand on the elbow of the boy, quietening him. She was the only one who did not carry any weapons, but she did wear a thin gold chain around her neck from which hung a shiny red marble.

The lights suspended in the air danced around, the sound of the sweet music from all the leaves seemed to grow louder and all the children, even the inquisitive boy, appeared to move slightly back.

“Jason sometimes thinks everyone should be as smart as he is, and know everything he does,” she whispered. “Welcome to the trees. And please, don’t be afraid.”

Nikko was not really frightened. He didn’t exactly know how he felt. If he thought about it he guessed he would probably have said he was mostly mystified. Apart from the boy Jason who had been his inquisitor, and the only one to speak to him before the girl, nothing else had caused him alarm. Even the flight in the claws of the Speckled Sparrow had been more of an adventure.

The girl continued: “My name is Gabryisia and we are the Leaf Children. You might have felt outside that you were being spied on by someone you couldn’t see. There are a lot of us here. But most of our family are very shy and hide when a stranger comes. Don’t mind them. They will come out and meet you after a while.”

Nikko continued to look around him at the other children. There was something else about them he had not realised before which surprised him now because it was so obvious. They all acted so grown up. They were apparently only the same age as he was but their manner they were so much older. They seemed confident and obviously perfectly capable of looking after themselves very well.

Jason over exemplified the confidence of the group with his arrogance, but there was quiet strength in the other children. He wanted to ask Gabryisia how they all got there and where in they were. Many other questions too.

Such as why he had been brought to the island and most importantly how long he was going to have to stay before he would be allowed to go home. After all, he was certain his mother would be worrying about him. But another of the children came forward, the

smallest boy in the room who was less tidy than the rest. His breeches hung lower and he had a tiny bow, but there were no arrows in his quiver.

He came up to Gabrysia's side and stated rather sternly: "Your eyes are green."

Before Nikko could say anything himself the little boy spoke again. "We all have brown eyes. Even Gabrysia doesn't have green eyes."

The girl, who clearly was the leader of the children, put her arm around the small boy's shoulder and spoke very gently. "Jordon, don't be so impolite. And where are your arrows? What have you done with them this time?"

The boy dropped his eyes to the floor. "I don't know. I lost them again."

Jason snickered but was hushed with a quick glance from Gabrysia who spoke to the small boy once more. "Go outside and try to find them Jordon. Get someone to help you look, but remember not to go far. Stay close by."

However, before he could take a step the leaf music took on a very agitated note, and everyone in the chamber started. They looked at one another and then to Gabrysia who spoke sharply. "Call the others in quickly. Jason, get your group into position."

Immediately there was action as the children ran off in different directions and the leaf music became a continuous urgent rustle.

Nikko did not know what to do and stood watching the hectic activity without the slightest idea of what was going on. The girl Gabrysia had disappeared through the window and Jason had followed out the same way. Other children scampered up rope ladders that had dropped from above and still others had opened unseen trapdoors in the floor and slipped through them.

Nikko thought he was going to be left alone to fend for himself until little Jordon appeared at his side and took his elbow. "Come on," he said. "Come and watch the fun." And with that he led Nikko to one of the trapdoors where a rope ladder took them down to the ground.

There he opened a door and motioning Nikko to follow ran very fast on his bandy little legs across the grass to a smaller tree about twenty meters away. He opened a hidden door where another rope ladder hung.

Following the smaller boy Nikko climbed higher and higher carefully going up hand over hand and mindful to make sure his feet gripped the rungs tightly so he didn't slip. Eventually they reached the top of the rope, raised themselves through another trapdoor and once again stood in a chamber similar to the one they had just left.

Jordon repeated his earlier instruction "Come on. Come and watch the fun."

Chapter Two

When Nikko followed Jordon outside onto a platform built across two sturdy branches high in the tree he looked around and could not believe his eyes.

On similar platforms in surrounding trees scores of children stood and sat chanting an enormous noise and waving their bows in the air. Far below on the ground a small group of about ten boys and girls crouched behind tree trunks and bushes.

Gabrysia could not be seen anywhere but there was no mistaking Jason. As usual he was standing clearly visible in a small clearing, his legs planted astride and his thumbs thrust into his breeches.

Following the direction Jason was facing Nikko caught sight of movement, movement that was unclear for a minute or two but which then became the scattered members of a second group of children.

“There they are,” shouted Jordon. At the same time the chanting from the trees died down and everything was very still as the children watched the scene on the ground.

Nikko did not know exactly what to expect, but he felt sure there was going to be a battle of some sort between Jason and a group of children who were apparently members of the Leaf family as Gabrysia had called them, and a group of other children who he imagined were not part of the family.

“Who are the others?” he asked. “What’s going to happen?”

Very quietly, almost inaudibly, Jordon answered without taking his eyes off the scene below. “It’s a war. They are our enemies and they try to make us leave the trees, but each time we drive them back. We’ve been fighting them for as long as I can remember.”

“They are called Drongs,” continued Jordon. “They try to make us leave the trees so they can get all our toys and things.”

On the ground the two groups of children were getting closer and Nikko could now see that the Drongs were very different. Those he could make out were filthy. They had incredibly dirty breeches and torn shirts which had not been washed in a long time. The faces of the children were smeared and their hair was black and matted. Like the Leaf Children they carried bows and arrows. When they were only about thirty meters apart the two groups stood up and shouted at each other and generally acted very threateningly. Soon the Drongs started shooting their arrows and it was only then that Nikko realised they did not have sharp dangerous points. Instead they had little plastic balls which when they landed splashed yellow dye or paint everywhere.

It wasn’t long before many of the trees and bushes, and much of the grass was covered in yellow dye. But very few of the Leaf Children were stained. For that matter very few of the Drongs were marked either. Those who were had patches of bright red on their tunics because the Leaf Children had bubbles of red solution on their arrows.

Once the shouting started the onlookers in the trees resumed their loud chanting and it became a raucous din, drowning out the shouting of the opposing sides.

Jordon must have been one of the loudest even though he was one of the smallest and do so carried away he almost fell off the platform and Nikko had to physically hold him back more than once.

It was not long before both sides had used up their arrows and there was a lull when nothing happened. Then they charged each other and there was a mighty wrestling session with children falling over each other and rolling around in the grass locked in one

another's arms. They squirmed and huffed and puffed all trying to get on top of one another and pin their opponents to the ground...

The chanting from the trees got noisier and Nikko by this time was almost pinning Jordon to the planks of the platform to prevent him from dropping into the melee unintentionally. Suddenly out of the bushes stepped Gabryisia. Her golden hair shone and her clear brown eyes glistened as she called out: "Stop! Stop!"

Nikko thought her call would have no effect with the fierceness of the wrestling on the ground, but incredibly the two sides stopped at once with the brawling boys and girls remaining in their entwined positions like frozen statues.

A tallish boy walked from behind a tree carrying a large silver ball in his hand and wearing an elegant white beret at a jaunty angle. He was obviously the leader of the Drongs despite his comparatively clean and snappy appearance, and it was also clear that he was not afraid of anything that confronted him.

"Well Gabryisia," he began. "This is not like you to interfere with a bout. What are you doing down on the ground and why have you stopped the fun?" As he said this the boy narrowed his eyes and cocked his head to one side so that it looked as if his beret might well slide off.

"It is not fun Kerry," said Gabryisia. "And it is not normal for you to show yourself either. You usually skulk around in the background giving orders but you never risk anything on your own. You always let the others take the chances." She looked at the children who had begun to disengage themselves and form into two ranks behind their respective leaders. The children in the trees had stopped their noise and were watching the development closely. The leaves were rustling no more and it was as if the world had stopped to watch what happened next.

The boy laughed and patted two of his group on the shoulders. "We were just about to give you a good licking this time. Before you stuck your nose in."

Jason leapt forward and was about to strike the Drong leader when Gabryisia called sharply: "Jason! Stop it. This whole business is stupid."

"Stop it?" said the Drong leader. "Why should we stop now? We're having a great time. Are you afraid of losing Queen Gabryisia?"

When he used the title *queen* the Drong was not being polite and showing respect for Gabryisia. He was, rather, being facetious and displaying his derision. The last thing he considered Gabryisia to be was a queen. To him she was a little goody goody who deserved a "good licking".

That was something he had been trying to do for a long time but he had always been unsuccessful and had had to retreat to his hidden camp. Each time he blamed the fighters and usually took out his anger on one, often the weakest. The result was they feared him even more.

"Kerry," said Gabryisia calmly, "your bad manners and cheekiness does not hurt me. It hurts only yourself. All you are doing when you act that way is to show everyone how nasty you really are. So why don't you just listen and try to do something that would be good for all of us and not only you?"

The Drong leader laughed, throwing his head backwards so that his beret actually did fall off and land in a clump of red stained grass. Quickly picking it up and trying to brush off the stain, which only made it worse as his fist succeeded in spreading the offending mark, the boy glared at Gabryisia and then at the group behind her, one by one.

“You silly fool,” he spat. “I will never give up trying to beat you. I will go on and on until I win the trees and then I will take all your stupid toys and throw them on a big pile of grass and burn them. You will never see them again.”

He paused and then said: “You have a mistake Queen of the Leaves. This time you’ll see how smart I am.” And with that he tossed the silver ball that was in his hand high into the air over his head. As the sunlight struck it there was an enormous burst of white light which blinded the Leaf Children who had not had time to raise their arms to protect their eyes.

The Drong leader rushed forward and grabbed Gabrysia’s arms. Simultaneously two of his soldiers threw a bag over her head and together they lifted her off the ground and bundled her off into the trees. The other Drons also dashed forward and pushed all the Leaf warriors to the ground before turning and following their leader. Suddenly they were all gone.

The silver ball glowed brilliantly for another few seconds and then simply exploded in an even brighter light.

When the Leaf warriors had recovered and struggled to their feet they were alone. The Drons had vanished and with them Gabrysia. There was almost total silence.

High in the trees the Leaf Children, so rowdy a few minutes before, were now mute. They were utterly shocked and seemed not to comprehend what had taken place. On the ground the children looked left and right, noticing they were all present, but also instantly aware that Gabrysia was missing.

“Gabrysia! Gabrysia! Where are you?” called Jason. “Gabrysia!”

There was no response.

On the platform where Nikko had been watching the battle Jordon was crying with tears rolling down his face, leaving thin watery marks before dropping off his chin onto the planks where they left a damp dark brown stain.

“Where’s Gabrysia?” he asked plaintively. “What have they done wither?”

He was about to start crying again when there was a shout from below. “The necklace. I’ve found Gabrysia’s necklace.”

“Come on Jordon,” said Nikko, “Let’s go and see what we can do help the others,” and he helped the youngster to his feet and together they climbed down the rope ladder to the ground where all the warriors were gathered in a huddle.

Jason had the gold chain in his hand and was looking at it when Nikko and Jordon approached. He seemed uncertain what to do but when he saw Nikko he turned on him and said: “It’s all your fault. Before you came here we always won the battles. But now we lost and they have taken Gabrysia away with them. We will never see her again.”

Nikko wanted to protest but Jason would now allow him. He went on: “Why have you come and done this to us? Everything was alright before. You are probably a spy and planned the whole thing.”

He grabbed Nikko by the arm and pushed him backwards so that he stumbled over a branch and fell. Jason and the others advanced and were about to set on him when out of the sky swooped a huge bird and flapped its wings violently.

It was Torpah and he settled on the ground in front of Nikko facing the group with his wings spread wide.

Nikko sat up and Jordon came over to him cautiously to help. “Are you?” he asked. “Did you come here to make trouble for us?”

“No,” replied Nikko. “I didn’t even know any of you existed until Torpah brought me here. Against my will. How could I be a spy?”

“Why did Torpah bring you then?” demanded Jason. “What is so special about you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Maybe it’s because he has green eyes and we all have brown,” suggested Jordon.

“Quiet,” said Jason sharply. He then added: “Alright, maybe he’s not a spy, but we have to decide what to do. The Drongs have captured Gabrysia and we have to figure out how we are going to get her back.”

As he was saying this Torpah hopped forward on his two big feet and picked up the gold necklace which Jason had forgotten and dropped when the big bird came to Nikko’s rescue. He hobbled back to where Nikko was sitting and offered it to him in his beak.

Nikko did not know what to do. He just stared at the chain and then looked at Jason.

Torpah inched closer with a hobbling step again and once more proffered the necklace. This time Nikko very carefully took it from the bird’s beak and as soon as he held it in his hands the red marble lit up in a dazzling glow. Nikko dropped it on the ground in fright.

As the glow suddenly died Jordon picked it up and slowly hung it around Nikko’s neck. Instantly the marble radiated its bright glow again and Torpah gave a piercing shriek that made the hairs on the back of the children’s necks stand on end. He then flapped his giant wings and flew off above the trees and disappeared, his shrieks getting fainter and fainter.

Chapter Three

“So, what are we going to do?”

The question was posed by Jason and it was the fourth time someone had asked. He and about fifteen other Leaf Children were sitting in a half circle with Nikko rather self consciously in the middle facing them.

One of the children, a young girl with long brown hair that flowed down her back in curls, spoke up. “You tell us Nikko. You have the necklace. You are our new leader.”

From the time he had had the chain placed around his neck and the marble had shone, which it continued to do, Nikko had been not only accepted into the family but held as their leader. Even Jason agreed reluctantly at first, and then more readily regarded him as the senior member. That did not mean he lost his arrogance. Far from it. Jason maintained his manner and made it quite plain that if Nikko was the Number One then he was Number Two.

The children were all looking at Nikko for an answer and he knew he had to give them a good one. There could be no uncertainty or indecision. He knew that, in a way, his future with the Leaf Children depended on how he was going to lead the rescue of Gabrysia. Indeed, his entire future depended on it.

Well,” he started. “First, we have to find out where the Drons have taken her.”

He looked into their faces and continued. “If I understand what you said before your search parties in the past didn’t find anything. Where have you looked?”

“We looked everywhere.” It was Jason who answered. “We went out to the north and the south and then east. Nothing but empty forest.”

“What about the west? Didn’t you look there too?”

“There is nothing there. Once you go about a kilometre the trees end and there is nothing but rocks and sand hills. It’s known as the dead Place.”

“Are you sure there could be nothing there? A camp hidden in the hills?”

“It has always been known as the Dead Place,” said Jason. “No-one has ever seen anything there.”

Jordon interrupted. “Venki went there once. Ad when he went back we didn’t see him again.”

“Be quiet brat,” said Jason and glared at the younger boy.

“Who is Venki?”

“Who is this Venki, and what was he doing here?” repeated Nikko when he received no immediate response.

There was a brief silence and then the girl with the long curls spoke. “He was our leader before Gabrysia. He went to the dead Place looking for one of our family who had disappeared and he thought the Drons might have taken him. But he came back and said he could find nothing. Then he said he was going back to have a closer look at the Dead Place and we never saw him again. At least that’s the story that has been passed down to us. It was before our time too.”

“Maybe we should look again,” suggested Nikko. “There must be a reason why this Venki didn’t come back. He couldn’t have just disappeared like that.”

There was a general fidgeting by the children as they exchanged glances. There was an air of fear in the room and Nikko sensed they all suspected he was right but did not have

the courage to agree in case the next decision was for someone, maybe one of them, to go to the Dead Place and see what was there.

They were absolutely correct in their worrying assumption for Nikko elected to reinforce his position. If he was going to be ultimately held responsible for either finding Gabryisia or leading a search party that turned up nothing, he was not going to neglect any possibility. Even if it meant facing the mystery of the Dead Place.

“We will go there,” he stated, “First thing in the morning some of us will set out.

We will have to leave early because it is a long way and we don’t want to have to spend the night there if it is as desolate as you say.”

There was an audible shiver in the chamber, and again all present looked sideways to one another, asking in their eyes if they or their companions would be chosen.

Little Jordon stood up and said firmly: “I’ll go. Please Nikko, can I come with you?”

“Don’t be silly, squirt,” said Jason. “You’re too small and would get in the way. Anyway, you keep losing your arrows and if you came you would probably lose yourself. Then we would have to go looking for you too.”

“I will not,” said the boy. “Please Nikko. Can I come?”

Nikko thought for a moment and said: “I think Jason is right Jordon. You are too small for this. We might actually find the Drongs and have to do battle with them. You could get hurt. Why don’t you stay here this time and help the others look after things.”

Jordon was about to protest but sat down and sniffed a few times before lapsing into silence with his eyes downcast.

“I will go of course,” said Jason. “And I suggest five others come with us. We don’t want too many to go crashing through the forest making all sorts of noise. Also we have to leave a good group behind as defenders just in case.”

He looked at Nikko who did not disagree. Jason immediately went on: “Those who will come are Fallon, Danielle and Simon.” He paused before adding: “Porky, you and Josh should be with us too.”

Seated to the left of Nikko, nearest the doorway, a fat boy with ruddy cheeks and blonde hair that seemed to stick out from his round head in all directions, smiled broadly. “Great,” he said and slapped the boy next to him on the knee. His friend, who was facially the mirror image of Porky, also grinned and said “Great.”

Nikko was to learn later the two boys were identical twins whose names were Joshua and Mordacai. They were alike in every way except Mordacai was a lot heavier. They both ate huge amounts of food but for some reason while Mordacai expanded sideways Joshua kept a slim figure. He also kept an abbreviated proper name whereas his brother was soon to become known to all simply as Porky.

They were excellent fighters who were not only skilful but who also loved to test their abilities in any way, whether it was in archery or physical combat, or in tracking or devising tactics. The others in the intended search party would be glad to have them along.

As much as Porky and Josh were alike, Fallon and Simon were dissimilar. They were about the same height and weight with fair hair and brown eyes of course, but Simon was the most talkative member of the Leaf Children. He would enter any conversation and attempt to take it over completely with his incessant patter. Fallon was the complete opposite. Comments had to be prized out of him and then they were more often than not limited to a single word.

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