

UROS PETROVIC

AVEN

**or Aven and Badgerdog
in the Land of Wook**

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■ Laguna ■

Original title:

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AVEN I JAZOPAS U ZEMLJI VAUKA

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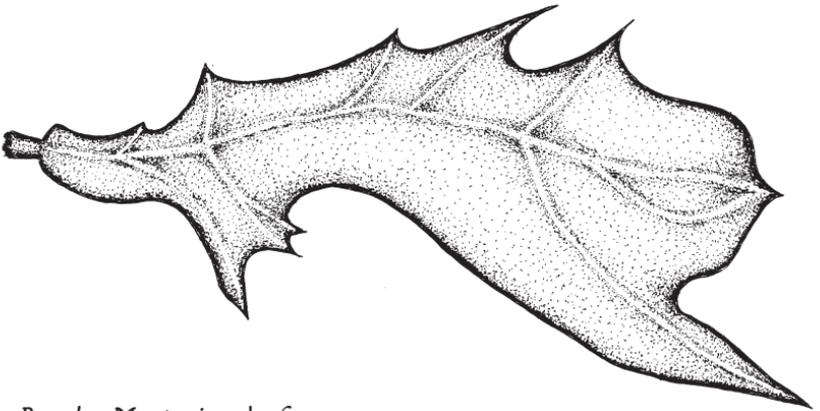
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AVEN
and BADGERDOG
in the LAND of WOOK

PROLOGUE

NO ONE'S'S HABITAT

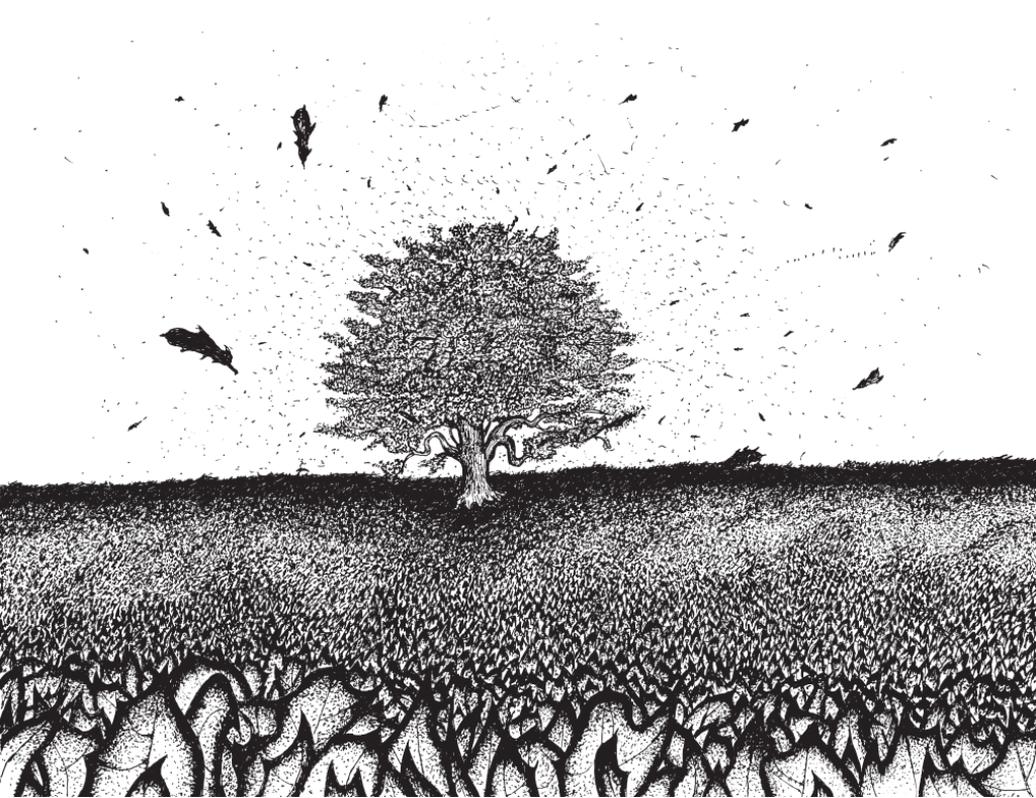
Baraba: The only one of its kind. Ancient name, *Baraba Mortarium*; in the books of druids only filed as *Baraba K.p.*) Baraba has existed since the dawn of time. It dominated the valley, deserted because Baraba shed its leaves every day. These leaves were sharp and spiked, and the wind carried them very far away. They cut down all that stood in their way. The Baraba tree didn't want to share this huge habitat, and no one ever dared approach it. The valley's destiny was insufferable.



Baraba Mortarium leaf

Without any other plants or animals, the whole area around the ghastly tree was named No One's Habitat. The wind blew incessantly over the area, and as by some miracle, the monstrous tree stood in its very center. The huge valley was covered with piles of dark blades as the falling leaves whizzed all around, killing the very thought of anything alive being able to spend some time, let alone live there. The flying rusty killers ruled mercilessly over No One's Habitat.

As it usually happens, life found its way and developed underground...

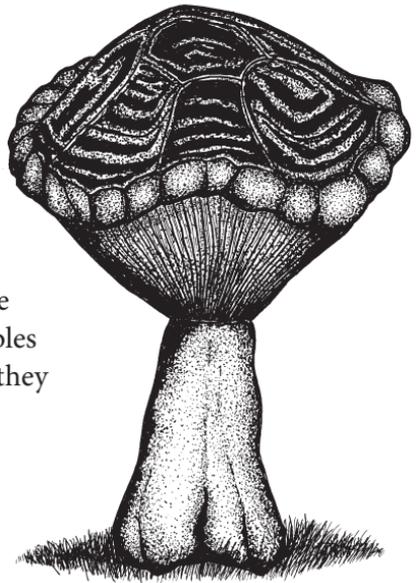


THE LIFE OF NO ONE'S HABITAT

Turtle Mushrooms

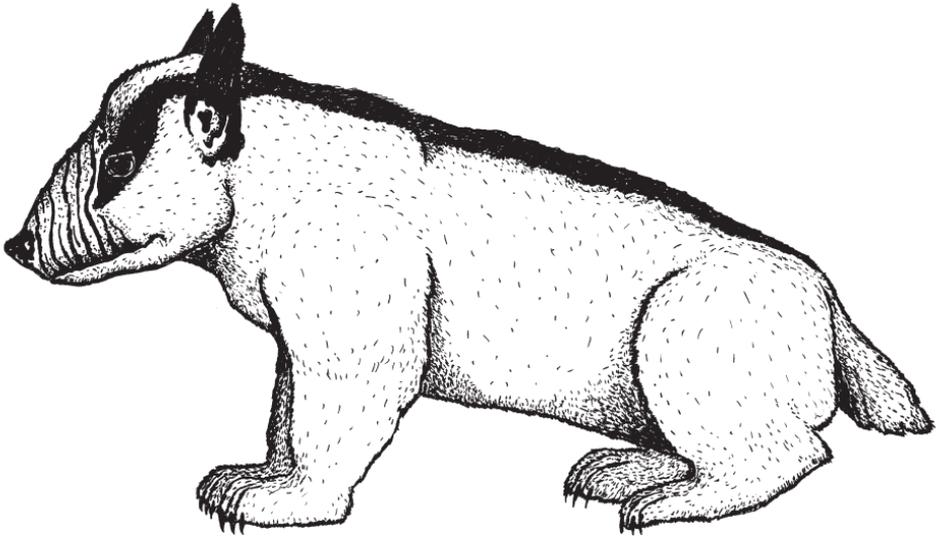
(*Podocnemis Lactarius*):

Virtually immobile mushrooms. They exist in other places as well, but not in such number or size. They are very nutritious and tasty. Their caps are protected with a cover that resembles a turtle shell, so that, even here they sometimes appear above ground.



Badgerdog (*Meles Canis*):

Subterranean beast of great strength and agility. Despite its stocky build, it can easily fight animals three times its size. It is an omnivore of bizarre appearance and unknown origin. A noticeable black line runs from its eyes along its back all the way to its short tail. It is immune to numerous natural poisons. In spite of its ungainly walk and unevenly developed forelegs and chest, badgerdog is a perfect hunter and killer. It



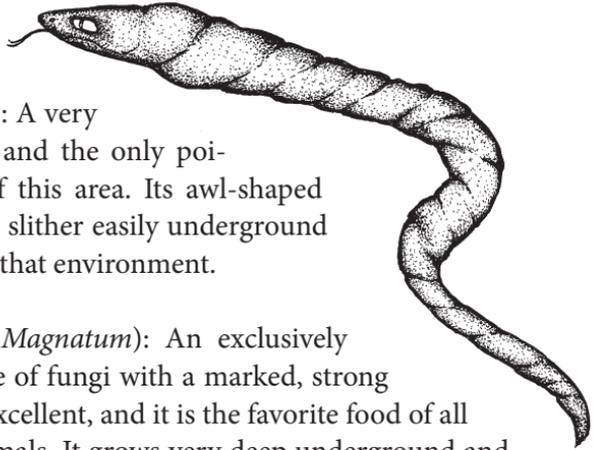
is one of the few mammals of No One's Habitat. All described specimens are primarily white. It is the only natural enemy of Pendulum Snakes, which are its favorite food. Badgerdog has long claws, which help it dig its subterranean halls.

Alba Mole (*Galemys Alba Anourosorex*): White, blind, and related to the more common pasture type. It feeds on insects and small snakes. It has underdeveloped eyes of a uniform blue color.

Oak Bark Beetle (*Scolytus Intricatys*): An insect introduced by the Wook in the hope that it would destroy Baraba, as it destroys oaks. The Oak Bark Beetle adapted to living underground, but it did not attack the ancient tree.

Pendulum Snake

(*Sub-natrix Terraphila*): A very poisonous snake and the only poisonous species of this area. Its awl-shaped head enables it to slither easily underground and adapt well to that environment.



Truffle (*Tuber Magnatum*): An exclusively subterranean type of fungi with a marked, strong odor. Its taste is excellent, and it is the favorite food of all subterranean animals. It grows very deep underground and never reaches the surface.

Aven had his very own badgerdog. This was the only case since history began of a badgerdog ever being loyal to a human. It slept underground, but never far away from the boy.

It all began on the southern border when Aven found the dangerous animal, which had been mortally wounded by a sharp Baraba leaf. He dragged the badgerdog to safety, risking being killed or injured himself either by flying blades or by the rage of the wounded animal. As a reward for its care and rescue, the badgerdog became the boy's most faithful friend and companion. He called it Gord, and hoped that badgerdogs lived at least as long as humans so that they would never have to part.

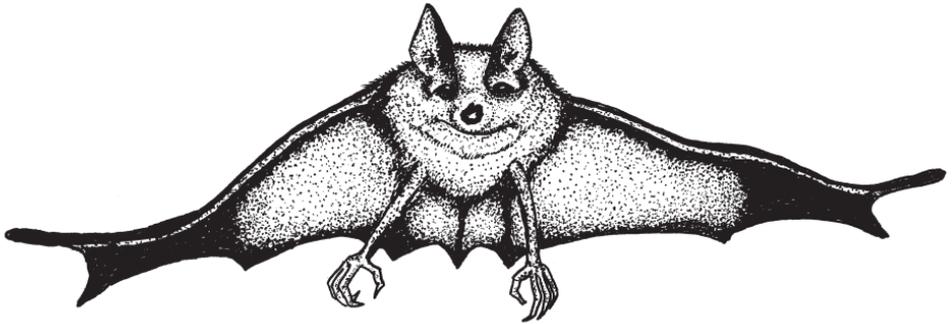
Aven belonged to the old Villus lineage, who were few in number and knew little of their origin. They lived in an isolated valley bordering No One's Habitat to the south and surrounded with steep and impassable cliffs on the remaining three sides. A wide stream ran through the middle of the valley, which provided water, fish, and crayfish for the small

population. Once out of the valley, the stream disappeared into the ground, as if unwilling to be exposed to the deadly onslaught of leaves from the south. The surrounding tall, slippery cliffs and the cruel neighbor in the southern pass allowed no one to ever leave the valley. The inhabitants had no idea of the land they belonged to, nor did they know anything about the world outside their valley. It cannot be said that they weren't well-off, sheltered within their perfect little world. Because they had a very undeveloped writing system with only ten letters and three symbols, very little written heritage existed. The laws of custom they followed were their legacy from times past.

THE LIFE OF AVEN'S VALLEY

(The Valley of No Horizon)

Fisher Bat (*Asvila*): A flying hunter with excellent eyesight, feeding exclusively on fish it hunts unerringly, diving into the water when necessary.



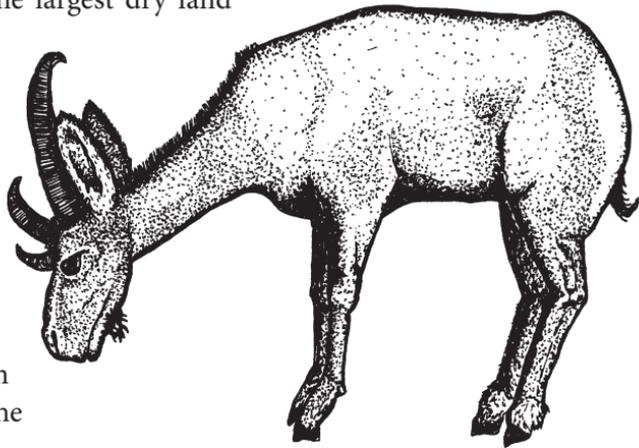
Blue Crab (*Okuga Uca*): An arthropod of a bright blue color and very tasty red meat. Its right pinchers are much larger than its left ones. It lives close to the spring, where the water is the coldest.

Dish Shell (*Angulus Planatus*): White and round, it is the main source of dishes for the settlement. The few written chronicles of the village are also engraved on this animal's shell. Dish Shells are also used for roof tiles, jewelry, and mirrors. The Villus call it "the only dish that comes served".

Spotted Fish (*Salmo Trutta Morpha*): A strong fish with very few bones, it is the valley's main source of food. They are all female and always carry roe inside. According to legend, the black spots on their bodies represent a map of the stars above their spawning place.

Atanas (*Atanas Liana*): A creeper whose fruits are used for food. Its stalk consists of strong, green fibers. Its leaves are used to make a bitter tea to ward off sleep. By weaving together the fibers of this plant's stalks, one can make ropes of various diameters, which by their strength and durability, surpass even the creeper itself.

Mountain Goat (*Capra Ibex*): A three-horned ruminant, the largest dry land animal population in the valley. Mild-tempered, these animals spend most of their lives sleeping. Their horns could have been useful as weapon tips, had weapons not been a forgotten concept among the peace-loving Villus.





Swayhorn Deer (*Unicorn Cervus*): The wild ancestor of the two-horned deer, a huge and lively ruminant. It does not live in herds, but rather alone. A nomadic species, it feels bound by the Valley of No Horizon's limited habitat.

All the children in the village used the halves of the round shells for tossing and playing except Aven, who found little challenge in the beautiful, smooth discs. He chose something far more appealing. Aven could throw Baraba's leaves far away and with great precision. In his hands, the leaves became deadly weapons. Whenever he and Gord went to search the nearby caves, he would carry a quiver

made of oak bark, which contained at least thirty leaves. Even at nightfall, Aven could knock down a beehive full of honey from a tall treetop. He was the only one who could see in these dangerous blades something other than a treacherous object to be avoided. All but he considered Baraba's leaves a useless evil that wouldn't even burn.

These traits, along with having a badgerdog for a friend, made the rest of the village people shy away from him a little, but he found this to be somewhat pleasant. Ever since he was a little boy he'd always been somewhat special, and Gord perfectly satisfied his need for company.

After all, Aven had shiny white hair and was built slightly stronger than any other boys of his age. The majority of the

Villus had pale hair, but the whiteness of his hair stood out, for it was as white as snow. Furthermore, like the swayhorn deer, he was the only other one who felt anxious and bound inside the valley. He was the only one who had ever asked about his parents, which was a forbidden topic in the village since the Villus raised their children mutually. If one had tried to choose the wildest or wisest boy, in both cases Aven would have been the best choice. He went a bit too far in his stubbornness, but thanks to this he learned quite early on how to take care of himself.

One day while gathering leaves for his quiver, Aven found a very special one. It had barely visible letters in an unfamiliar language written on it.

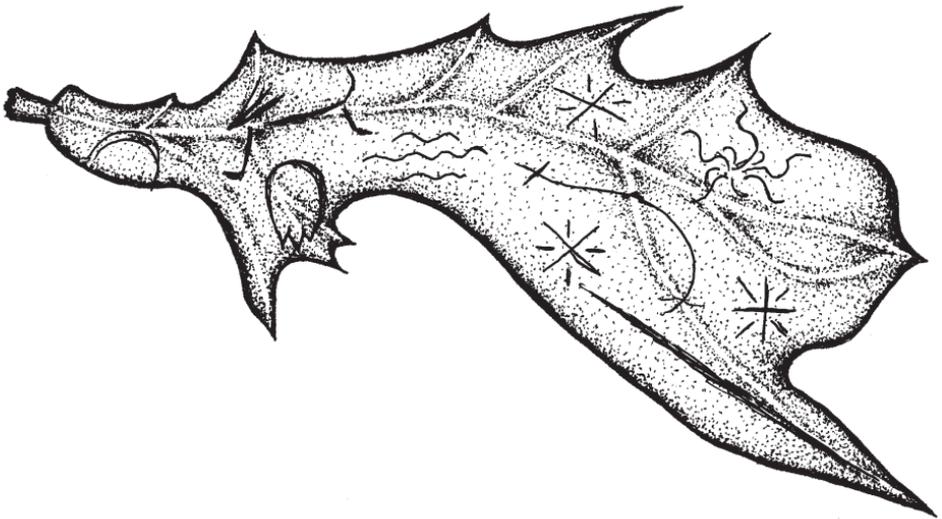
No one in the village knew how to read or interpret the symbols, which were painted in dark brown resin. The bizarre, secret writing seemed to describe something grandiose and horrible in the time to come. Curiosity got the best of him, so one day he made a firm decision: he would somehow leave the valley before autumn came and would take the note along to find someone wise enough to translate it for him. He believed it was not by accident that he was the one to find the message, even though no one else would ever dare come close to where the flying blades whizzed and flew.

Endlessly consumed by the mysterious message, Aven paid no attention to something equally unusual: the unique leaf that had been drawn upon was found at the exactly same place where some time before he had found his wounded badger-dog.

Even much before these events came to pass, Aven had wanted to leave the oasis where he and everyone he knew had been born. He knew the legend of the secret pass through the Sinking Stream. Supposedly not far from the surface of the water, there was a narrow, eye-shaped hole. A grown man

could not go through it, and no child had ever tried to. Aven hoped that he was still small enough to go through that opening and old enough to face the unknown world that awaited him beyond. Finding the mysterious note only hastened his decision to leave.

The days that followed were filled with diving exercises, shooting at high targets, and running with Gord. Sometimes it appeared that he didn't even have to talk to his best friend for the animal to understand him and behave the way he expected it to. The badgerdog even became very good at diving, which encouraged Aven for the upcoming trip.



Drawing on a leaf

WHAT TO BRING ALONG?

- *Quiver of leaves*
- *Message leaf*
- *Green rope*
- *Flint and steel*
- *Fisher bat claw hook*

In any case, Aven had no other possessions besides his badgerdog, but he considered himself the richest boy in the world (or at least in the part of the world he knew). He believed in an entirely different destiny than the carefree life in the valley, and he longed for it fervently. Of course, he wasn't the kind of boy who would simply sit and wait for things to happen, so he gladly helped them along.

For a very long time he kept thinking of his departure. What if he couldn't manage to squeeze through the opening under the water? And if he did, what if the stream never surfaced again or did so, but too far away? What if Gord, his only companion and friend, drowned? Was the distance to the hole too long to go back for air, in case he didn't succeed?

He considered tying Gord to himself but he decided against it, because of possible problems in passing through the narrow opening.

DEPARTURE DAY

Aven didn't get any sleep. He was too excited about the departure. He knew that he would soon be seeing with his own eyes what none of his people had ever seen before. He listened carefully and heard the badgerdog sleeping soundly. *At least one of us will be rested*, he thought.

Because of the high cliffs on its three sides, the valley's dawn was filled with shadows.

Gord growled while waking up, as if he were trying to chase away some nightmares. The only sign that he had a premonition of leaving was that he had slept somewhat closer than usual to the opening of his hole. Badgerdogs didn't sleep curled up as one might expect, but always stretched out facing the exit of their hole. The lower part of their bodies was much weaker, while frontally they could resist any attack. Badgerdogs had most likely developed their digging skill in order to keep safe while they slept.

Confident of his hunting skills and knowledge of wild plants, Aven decided not to take along any food,

They were all set to go. He ate some dried fish and took Gord to the place where the stream sank underground. He tied the quiver around his waist. One more time he glanced

toward the village over which the sun was rising, and mild sadness overcame him.

The surface end of the stream itself looked somehow different when they reached the bank. It used to be just a deep whirlpool to fish in, and now it was the place where their fate would be decided. He chased away gloomy thoughts and started breathing deeply. He cast a short glance at Gord and jumped right where the cold water disappeared. He was not surprised to hear another splash, for a moment later the badgerdog was diving down right beside him. The channel led straight into the darkness and visibility decreased. The tunnel curved slightly to the north, backwards so to say, in the direction the stream came from. Aven felt a sharp pain in his lungs. He turned around suddenly and started to go back up. He brushed against the badgerdog on purpose to let it know he was heading back. He followed the bubbles and soon saw above him the opening he had dived through a moment before. Catching his breath on the surface, he carefully looked at the animal to determine its condition. Aven then reached into his quiver, took out a rope, and tied one end around his waist. The other end was meant for Gord, and Aven carefully wrapped it around Gord's chest and shoulders, avoiding its strong neck with the noose. Then he turned around. A large stone the water was bubbling around caught his attention. With great effort he lifted it, and holding it tightly, he dived back into the depth of the pool. Gord didn't wait for the rope to stretch. He dived in right after Aven. Now they descended much faster, drawn by the weight. In a moment they were where it had taken them great effort to be to in their previous attempt. Darkness consumed them and the water became colder and colder. Aven felt fear and cold grasp his heart.

At that moment, the stone that was pulling them down hit solid ground. The boy let go of the weight and felt the bottom

with his hands. Instinctively he turned north where the tunnel slightly curved and found a rocky wall. Now he felt as if his lungs were being ripped apart, and the chill slowed his motions. Then all of a sudden the rope tightened. Was Gord in trouble? The strength with which the badgerdog pulled at the green rope suggested that the beast was in much better condition than he was, and Aven decided to give in and let Gord take him where he was headed. Slowly, he lost consciousness.

He did not know which way he was being led. Chill turned into peace and numbness. He was awoken from by a dull pain when he hit a rock. The rope was still taut and he was riveted to a wall of stone. That could mean only one thing: Gord had gone through the hole! This sudden revelation renewed his strength and he somehow pushed himself off the rock and dived blindly into the darkness where the rope disappeared. He felt a sharp pain in his shoulders. He had no more strength or air. Everything became somehow blurry, flickering, then dark, and he lost consciousness. In one single moment he felt a tiny flash of pain, then darkness.

Aven heard a whisper of the story of death and a creature of light, his guide through the darkness. It was dark again. His thoughts completely blackened.

Such a disappearance had never occurred in the village before. Everyone was frightened and surprised. Even before, Aven and his dreadful beast used to wander off for an entire day, but their absence for two days and two nights caused them to be on their alert and fearful of some unknown predator. In such an environment, the phrase "They had nowhere to go" had a very literal meaning: every side was simply impassable.

The villagers were surprisingly sad, especially Efen the cattle breeder and Arta the herbalist, but they were not allowed

to show their emotions in public, according to village custom. Their disappearance had to be explained somehow, and the rumor was that the badgerdog in the end had turned wild after all, killed the boy, and dragged him underground. Stories like this were told one after another around the fire.

“This is certainly the most horrible event in the history of the world,” they whispered. Even the stream no longer seemed to gurgle and had lost its usual serene sound. Every hum in the night was attributed to the return of the wild badgerdog, searching for another victim. They were right only about one thing – the badgerdog did sink its teeth into Aven that day, but only to save his life.

Around him, everything appeared some shade of blue. It was most certainly not a reflection of the sky, but the pain in his shoulders and hip told Aven that it wasn't death either. He turned around and peered through the blueness for the outline of his friend. The last things he remembered were darkness, the rock, the impact, the rope... THE ROPE. He felt for it around his waist and tugged. To his dismay, the other end was slack. Aven sobbed. He'd lost Gord. He was an extremely strong boy, but this was more than he could stand. He slumped, leaned his head on his knees, and quietly wept for his friend, who held all of his love and friendship. He cursed his restless temperament that had led him into the whirlpool. He didn't so much hate being all alone in some unnatural blueness not really knowing where he was, wondering if he would ever again see the light of day. He only missed his badgerdog. Tears and desperation clouded his already blurry sight.

He wiped his eyes with his arm and felt a sharp pain from the cut. He looked at his upper arm and felt hope again. Checking the wound on his arm, he recognized what had caused it.

Only one living creature had this sort of a jaw – the badger-dog. The bite was shallow and as tender as such a strong jaw could make it. The scratches on his back, which he could not see but felt, led him to a happy conclusion.

Gord must have dragged me out of the water! he thought, and his will to survive immediately grew stronger.

“Gord! Gord!” His shouts echoed disturbingly through the caverns.

The speed with which he now searched his surroundings was the complete opposite of his previous state. He was surrounded by water in a wet, moss-covered crevice where stalactites hung. It was impossible to spot any clear tracks in the ground, colored in various shades of blue. He noticed several holes around him that didn’t seem passable. The only sound that could be heard was that of water dripping. Aven decided to wait a while longer right there, where Gord had most probably left him. He lay down on his stomach, the only side on which he had no injuries.

From that position he could watch the surface of the water, whose stillness was only broken by some movement deep beneath. He shuddered at the very idea of what beast might be causing the ripples and how it could have easily caught his badgerdog. Instinctively he called his friend’s name again, and it echoed from all around.

“Whose name is that?” To his horror, Aven heard an tiny, unfamiliar voice right beside his head.

The boy jumped sideways and crouched into a defensive position, watching the ceiling unblinkingly. A tiny creature that hovered above returned his look. It was fragile, with four little legs and a thin, oblong body. From the edge of its tiny head with large, inquisitive eyes, long threads of some unearthly mane flowed backwards. The strangest thing was that the creature looked as if it were made of nothing but

whitish light. It stared at him, while his fear gave way to some strange delight at this encounter.

"Who are you?" asked Aven, not believing he was really going to get a reasonable answer.

"I am Sip, the light of these caves. I have never seen anyone like you."

"I am Aven, from the village above. Have you seen any other tangible creatures recently? I'm looking for my friend, who doesn't look like me, but he's not from your world either, I suppose," he asked hopefully.

"I've seen creatures. You mean the badgerdog? I've seen those before."

Aven's heart jumped with joy.

"Yes, that's Gord! White fur with a black stripe along his head and back. You've seen him?" asked Aven quickly.

"So he's the one you were calling. He couldn't have heard you, I think. Badgerdogs sometimes enter my caves. They cannot dig through rock, you know, and there are rocks all around. Truly mighty beasts. Your friend must be digging somewhere, if he's found a patch of earth in the dark. There's not much of it here. Almost none. As for the color, haven't you noticed there's no color here either? Color exists only where I pass and only in a limited spectrum."

"I thought the water beast had gotten him!" said the boy, fearfully.

"A beast? In the water? There's just one large fish down there. It often follows me when I float above the water. It's a spotted male, quite beautiful. Many fish visit him through the opening you came here through. He can't go through it. I don't go there, either. I think there is bright light somewhere beyond. It would make me fade away, because I'm just a fragile, flickering light."

"Can you help me find my friend?"

“I can glow for you. But know that a friend is not easy to find. I’ve been looking for a friend for a very long time now. I’m not sure I know how to look for a friend. I only know how to glimmer. Can you help me? You’ve most probably seen much more than I have. You are from the Village Above, you say. The village must be a bright and beautiful place. Is there anyone of my kind in the Village Above?”

Aven only just now noticed Sip’s long, thin tail, which made it look even more ethereal.

“I think not, but there are many stars. They might be related to you,” said Aven hesitantly.

“Stars? Oh, I love that word!” the voice fluttered with excitement.

“Can we go now? I’d like to see these patches of earth in your caves. You said there were some after all. Gord would have to get at least some sleep, and I’ve never seen him sleep outside a hole in the ground. I’m not even sure if he could fall asleep outside one,” concluded Aven.

“You’ll tell me of stars later. Follow me!” squeaked the voice, and the creature glistened toward one of the holes in the rock.

The boy quickly followed Sip, packing the rope into his quiver along the way.

Even though his wounds ached and his eyes could not get accustomed to the bluish hue of everything around him, Aven easily jumped across the obstacles and cracks that abounded in the area.

It seemed as if Sip had been leading him for hours, even though in reality much less time had passed. It became drier and warmer.

“Here’s non-rock!” shouted the guiding light.

And indeed, they found themselves in a low-rimmed cavern, and apart from the its color, everything else suggested that the walls were made of clay. Seeing something familiar gave

Aven additional hope. He quickly searched for some holes in the clay. He noticed the walls were caved in at some places, and that they were not as smooth there as in the rest of the cave, but it was also obvious that these changes had taken place long ago.

“This is where I saw a badgerdog twice in my lifetime,” said Sip.

“I’d have preferred it if you had seen only one, but recently,” answered Aven forlornly.

He was trying to think of a reason other than a need for sleep that would make Gord wander off from the spot where he had dragged him out of the water. He knew that the badgerdog was in total darkness, but also that the underground halls were not such uncommon surroundings for him.

“Is there anyone else of your kind down here?” he asked Sip, who shuddered visibly.

“Much to my regret, I think there are none anywhere,” it answered. “If we don’t find your friend, will you stay with me?” said Sip, hope and worry mixed in his voice.

After these words, there was silence.

“You know where Gord is, don’t you?” asked Aven coldly.

That very same moment the light disappeared. Aven was left alone in pitch darkness, far away from the place where he’d awoken, which was his only connection with his lost friend. It would be difficult for him to trace his way back even if it hadn’t been for the total darkness, let alone this way. He was exhausted, desperate, and furious. He waited for a while and then was overcome by extreme fatigue, brought on by great sadness and exhaustion. He sank into a deep sleep.

A thought came to him through the daze. *Am I dead now?*

He was coming to through a great effort of will. It was so dark that he wasn’t quite sure himself if his eyes were open. The pain in his shoulders was real enough. He was awake.

He thought fast. Suddenly, he felt around for the flint in his quiver, took it out, and struck it against the closest wall. There was no spark.

It occurred to him that he might have been standing by a clay wall. He repeated the blow, this time striking the ground beneath his feet. A spark appeared, and for a moment he saw the outline of the cavern. He turned his head in the direction where the narrow hall that led out should have been. He struck the flint again and made another spark. The shadows danced, and Aven glimpsed a passage. One more strike and he would be in the corridor. There was a dangerous fissure in the ground. One more flash, and he'd know where to jump.

The next strike was halted by the familiar squeaky voice.

"No more, please! You're killing me!"

Aven stopped. He couldn't see a thing.

"I don't need a light. The one I make will not abandon me and it's worth more to me than some whimsy creature, which only means something to itself," muttered the boy through clenched teeth as he struck again.

"Put that cursed stone back where it was. I fled because maybe I did know where your friend was. Maybe I didn't want to accept that I knew where he was. I checked. I found the hole he'd slept in right away. There are black and white hairs in it," yelled Sip, still at a safe distance.

Aven carefully returned the flint to his quiver and almost pricked himself on one of the leaves inside.

"My guess is that you did know where my badgerdog was. I've put the stone away. Do you know where Gord is now?"

The glimmering creature appeared next to him in an instant, bathing the hall in blue light.

"I guess I do. It's not all clear to me either, Aven from the Village Above. Pardon my hesitation. I've been shimmering through these halls of darkness for a very long time. Will you

accept me again to be your guiding light? Unless I'm mistaken, I'll guide you directly to your friend that you are so anxious to find."

"Guide me and light the way," said Aven, in a voice just a bit cooler than friendly.

They didn't take the same route they had taken when they'd come there. They passed through narrower corridors with steep slopes, and then gradually ascended along the paths that resembled the cascades of Aven's village's stream. They went past rocks of various shapes, but could not differentiate their color. When they passed through the hall where the rocks looked much like ice and were partially transparent, Sip stopped.

"I can go through these too, just like through water. If you could do that, I'd show you the wonderful spirals they hide in their hearts. There would be other colors there, too," Sip said.

Aven touched the rocks. They were smooth, hard, and warmer than their surroundings. He leaned his cheek against the strange matter and tried to look through it. He immediately recoiled. His vision was blurry enough even without the spirals that had stood there for who knows for how long and for what purpose.

"Let's go on," he said hastily, trusting all his hope to Sip's uncertain feeling that he knew where Aven's friend was.

At the next ascent they came across a waterfall. Water spurted from the ceiling in narrow but steady jets. Every ledge above had its double below, and every drop from the ceiling fell unerringly to its twin underneath. Sip passed through them with no effect other than a bit of refraction. Aven stopped for a moment and drank some cold water, wondering if his strange guide ever had any similar needs. Then they left the springs and the noise of the waterfall behind them and continued on.