

The Sight Excerpt

V. H. Mizzell

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To Robert Heinlein, for giving away the racket.

One

SNAKE

S nake came to me in a dream, as she had many times before.

Always a premonition; this time a warning! She appeared as an anaconda but bigger, impossibly large, large enough to swallow me in one strike.

She gazed at me, watching every move, waiting for me to flinch. I knew that if I turned one way or the other to run, or so much as looked away, she would strike. I knew with the certain knowledge of a dream that she planned to do just that.

I had no choice but to return her gaze. Her eyes smiled at me, penetrating the deepest parts of my soul. I felt as if she could see into my heart, my mind, and my past, that I could hide nothing from her.

Fight, flight, or freeze, I froze. If it was an ordinary nightmare, I would have woken up at that point. Awake, but unable to move at first, stuck in dream paralysis.

Presently she said, "You must go into the Forbidden Land Rion. You must cross the Forbidden Mountains and enter the Kingdom of the Morifati."

"How am I supposed to do that?" I asked.

The Forbidden Land was forbidden because of radioactivity left over from the Great Third War. Nothing lived there except rapidly mutating plants and animals, there was nothing anyone could eat and no water that was safe to drink. The ground itself was not safe to lie on, so I could not camp there. Grandfather said that no citizen of the Free State had ever come back home after going into the Forbidden Land. My own Father went in and never returned.

"I will die in there." I added.

"You will surely not die!" she said.

"If you do not go, if you hesitate, the Morifati will come here to you. They take everything they want everywhere they go. They will kill, steal, and burn. All will die, everyone you love will die, the Free State destroyed, everyone lost!"

"How can I go in there?"

"You must, you must stop them before they find the way through!"

"There is no way through! Everyone who tries to go through sickens and dies!"

"Yes, there is a path. Take that path and stop them on the other side before they find the way through to the Free State."

"How am I supposed to do that?"

"I will show you. I will reveal all."

Then an image appeared before me. I no longer saw her, I saw a landscape. She no longer spoke, but she showed me where to enter. And then I could see myself flying over

the mountains, I could see a path along a ridgeline.

The path traced the contours of the ridgeline for many miles until it ended where a great river cut through the mountains and divided them by a great canyon. I followed along the ridgeline path in the dream, then down another path to the river until presently, I came to the village of the Morifati.

“This path leads directly to their village and the path through the mountains directly to us. How have they not found it?” I said.

“They do not know the path along the ridge, but they know it exists. They are looking for it now, they cannot see its entrance.”

“If they cannot see its entrance, how will I find it?”

“I will send you a guide. He will lead you to the path and be your companion along the way.”

“Who will you send?”

“Wolf.”

Then an enormous wolf appeared to me. It turned and walked away toward the Forbidden Land; it stopped and turned to look at me. I knew it wanted me to follow. I followed it into the forest that leads into the Forbidden Land and up the hill to the path along the mountain ridge, with the scene changing and unfolding as only it can during a dream. The Wolf and I walked along the ridgeline with the village spread out beneath us. Then I woke up.

I lay there stunned, then sat up slowly. The dream had felt real. I knew I would have to tell Grandfather about it. He knew how to interpret dreams.

Two

GRANDFATHER

It was dawn outside the cabin. I lay on the bed for a while to give reality a chance to return. The dream had taken me somewhere else, I couldn't get up until I recovered from the shock of returning.

As I lay there, I thought about the dream. It was a dream, or so I supposed, and yet I felt I ought to treat it as real, as if I should go outside and start walking toward the Forbidden Land. I felt like I should pack up and go look for the entrance to the mountain trail.

I laughed it off, though. Some nightmares are so real that it seems like they really happened. This was one of those. Snake was just some dream symbol in my unconscious mind that kept recurring now and then. It was just a coincidence if anything she said came true.

Presently I got up and walked to the front door and out onto the porch. Grandfather was sitting out there, he was already up. He was smiling, but he looked a little concerned.

"You had a dream there, didn't you, Rion?"

"Yeah, yes I did. How did you know?"

"I could hear you trying to talk, moving around."

I walked over to him and sat next to him on a couch we put out there for that purpose.

"It was so real. Like it really happened. Like I was there in it. You want to hear it?"

"Sure. Go ahead. Tell it."

"This being came to me in my dream as a snake, an enormous snake, an anaconda I guess, but impossibly large, big enough to swallow me in one gulp. I knew somehow that her name was Snake, and that she is a Psychic. I've had some dreams about her before, but not like this. This dream felt real, like I was really standing in front of her, talking to her. I've heard people talk about the Psychics, but I've never seen one or dreamed about one this way. Are they real? Do the Psychics still live somewhere outside the Free State? Do they still practice their powers? Do we need to be afraid of them or is that just superstition?"

"There were no Psychics until about three hundred years ago. The world was a very different place then, and the only thing people believed in was Science. People used to think there was no psychic power, and no Psychics, they were wrong. But no one knows why there were a bunch of Psychics suddenly, even the Psychics themselves. It's thought now that people are born psychic. That it is genetic mutation. They gained their powers quickly, some say in a day, some say longer. But they didn't know each other, not at first. So they all went around trying to profit from their powers, each on his own, out for

himself. That's what caused the panic. People didn't know, couldn't know what was going on, and the explanation was something that the scientists didn't believe in, a thing they said was impossible. But everything that the people had in their world that depended on knowledge of the future failed. They had a thing called the economy, and a thing called the stock market, and they had big lotteries and whole cities where people would get together and gamble and all those things and places lost money, because the Psychics could see the future and knew how to win. They knew what all the numbers would be ahead of time. People knew everything was collapsing and failing, but they didn't know why. They didn't believe in psychic power, Scientists said that psychic power was impossible. The government said it was a computer virus, an attack on our computers by the Russians or the Chinese."

"What's a computer?"

"It's a machine that they had that could do all kinds of mathematics, and do it faster than any human could."

"So that's what started the Great Third War?"

"Yes. The USA accused Russia and China of launching an attack on the computers to shut down the economy, so the USA launched an attack on Russia's and China's computers. The Russians and the Chinese knew they hadn't launched an attack on USA's computers so they said that American's made it up to have an excuse for war, so all the countries that had nukes launched their nukes, and the death and sickness was great, so very great, greater than anybody had ever seen in the wars before that."

Grandfather paused then. I could see tears forming in his eyes. I had never seen him cry before for any reason. He was solid as an oak tree spiritually and the Chief of our village and served on the Council of the Free State. He was a powerful warrior in the past and had fought bravely against the Morifati. If he was this upset about the Great Third War, I knew it had been a terrible thing.

"It was a horrible time then, wasn't it Grandfather?"

"It was an atrocity! The greatest atrocity that the Human Beings have ever seen in all history!"

"How many died?"

"No one knows. Hundreds of millions, maybe a billion. There is no way to count the dead now because we cannot find their bodies. Records lost, people went missing. It wasn't just the nukes. After the nukes stopped, people started going crazy. Some formed into gangs, they went around looting, stealing, murdering, raping. They went from house to house taking everything they could, not caring whether they lived or died but trying desperately to survive like wild animals, not like men. They said, 'It does not matter if we die because death is our fate', and so they became known as the Morifati: those whose fate is to die. Their hearts became evil and corrupt, they worshipped death, they call death Than, and say Than is the only god. They say there is no heaven or hell, only this life and an eternity of death. They believe they can do anything they want in this life because there is no punishment or reward, only an eternity of nothingness."

"What did the people of the Free State do then?"

"Good people who were not Morifati fought back. The Morifati killed many people, but those who had weapons and fought back, those who believed that people should live together in peace with each other, protected by laws, they formed into tribes and nations and states. The Free State is one of these states. Men and women who wanted to protect their families and their children, their homes and their farms founded the Free State.

Many knew how to use weapons and make weapons and how to fight, and they taught the others who did not know. They had to form new governments and militias. The Free State believes in freedom. We are against killing except in self defense, and we do not steal, even to survive. If we need something from another nation, we trade for it or work for it. We do not take it by force. We give freely to those who need our help. Our God is compassion.”

“Grandfather, she said that the Morifati are planning to attack us!”

“So there is more in your dream? Tell me everything!”

“She said that there is a line of mountains from one end of the Forbidden Land to the other, and on this side is the Free State, and on the other side is the Kingdom of the Morifati. She said there is a trail along the ridgeline high up, high enough that there is no radioactivity. The Morifati do not know where it is, but they have heard that it exists. They are looking for it now. When they find it, they will use it to attack the Free State.”

“How could anyone know this thing? How could you dream this?”

“I don’t understand, Grandfather.”

“There is a trail along the mountain ridge, but its location and its existence is a secret known only to me and some elders of the Council of the Free State. It has been our warpath to the Morifati for hundreds of years. We have kept it secret from the Morifati and the people all this time. We did not want anyone to know the way through the Forbidden Land. The Forbidden Land is a barrier to the Morifati that has kept us safe from their attacks. They have to travel far to the north and through other allied nations’ territories to get to us. We also do not want anyone from the Free State to think they can hunt in the Forbidden Land, or to attack the Morifati without a decision of the Council.”

“I see. I had never heard of this mountain trail before. I thought to enter the Forbidden Land meant death from radiation sickness. But Snake said that the Morifati are looking for the entrance to this trail and will find it soon and that I have to stop them, kill them before they find a way through. I don’t know why I have to go and not someone else, but she said that I have to do this thing or the Morifati will find us and attack and she showed me where the trail is, we flew over it in the dream.”

“Did she say how you should defeat them?”

“No, all she did, the only thing she showed me about the future was this being she called Wolf.”

“She showed you the wolves?”

“She showed me an enormous wolf, a big male called simply ‘Wolf’, she said he would guide me through the Forbidden Land.”

“I see. That is a great curiosity. There indeed are wolves in the Forbidden Land. They are not ordinary wolves, they are Psychics who have assumed the form of wolves. They can live there without radiation sickness. They usually stay far to the south, but they range over the whole territory. We agreed long ago that the Forbidden Land and the mountains would be their domain. They have sometimes been our allies but prefer to remain apart from us, they wish no contact with us, but they don’t want war either. They hate the Morifati. The Wolf Pack and the Morifati are mortal enemies.”

“So there are Psychics who can assume the form of wolves?”

“Psychics can assume many animal forms, but ordinarily one Psychic can only assume one form, the one that corresponds to their spirit animal. There are many advantages that they can gain by doing this. The primary advantage is concealment from ordinary people and from the Morifati. Many Psychics cannot bear the Morifati. They are too empathic to

be near them. They must hide from them rather than fight them directly. The wolves live this way in the Forbidden Land. What concerns me, though, is this Snake. She may not be a dream. She could be a Psychic who is contacting you through your dreams.”

“You think Snake is really a Psychic? I think she is only a dream. I have dreamed about her before.”

“How could you dream all these things that are real, things that you did not know existed? And this Snake told you these things, you did not just see them in a vision of your own.”

“Do you think I am I a Psychic?” I asked Grandfather. “Will I become a Psychic? The way people did in the before time?”

“You must find out for yourself, Rion, Grandfather said. You must complete this journey that Snake wants you to go on, not just to save us, but to find out who you really are!”

“I don’t believe this dream is true. I don’t see how it could be true. And why me? Why is it up to me to defeat the Morifati by myself?”

“Rion, if a Wolf appears to you and speaks to you with the voice of a man, you will know what to do.”

While I thought his words over, Grandfather got up and went back inside the house.

Three

WOLF

It was still early when Grandfather left me on the porch. I took a walk as I normally did first thing in the morning. I would walk along the treeline of the forest around the village, just to inspect things and get my blood flowing. When I got close to the woods on the eastern side of the village, a slow movement caught my eye. There next to the trees stood an enormous wolf. It was Wolf, from my dream.

“Don’t be afraid, Rion,” Wolf said.

He didn’t open his mouth when he spoke, nor did he speak inside my head, instead he looked at me and I heard him.

“I come to lead you to the Morifati, as promised by Snake.”

I stood dumbfounded. Snake was real. Wolf was real. I had been communicating with real beings in my sleep. Am I asleep now I wondered? I looked around to see what I could do to prove to myself that I was awake. Before I could act, Wolf spoke.

“You are not still asleep! Get ready for the journey ahead. We must leave soon.”

“I cannot leave now, I am not ready.”

“Gather your weapons and tools, prepare as if for a hunt. Tell no one you are leaving. We must go now!”

“Can I not leave a message behind? May I tell no one I am leaving? They will worry when they find I am gone.”

“No! They will follow if they know where you are going and all will lose their lives. If instead, they find that you and your weapons are missing, they will think you went on a hunt by yourself.”

I had to admit that made sense. It was not unusual for me to hunt alone. Still, I hesitated because it was all too sudden.

Could I trust these creatures? What were they, Snake and Wolf? They had to be two of the Psychics Grandfather explained to me about. I thought they were dream symbols, products of the unconscious, but here was Wolf in front of me, in the flesh, or so I supposed.

It occurred to me I should test my senses.

“I want to see if you are real,” I said.

I walked over toward Wolf. He did not tense or growl or threaten me, but said.

“I am quite real, see for yourself.”

When I got close enough, I held out my hand for him to sniff it, the way you would when you greet a dog for the first time. I could smell him, a smell not unlike the smell of a hunting hound. I felt his nose and his tongue warm and wet against my hand.

“It is our custom among the wolves to greet a stranger or a returning pack member by touching our tongues together.”

I reflexively made a face.

“It is just a custom. To show that you do not mean to fight. Make no sudden moves toward a wolf’s throat when you greet them.”

So I took one knee, and I let him touch his muzzle to my mouth. I stuck my tongue out, and he briefly licked it. He was definitely real.

“You may rise, Rion. Stroke my fur if you like. We are friends now, brothers.”

His fur was thick and soft to the touch. I could feel taut muscles underneath. I did not want him as an enemy.

“Now that you know I am as real as you are, we must start our journey. Go prepare for the trip.”

“How do I know I can trust you?”

“You don’t Rion, not now, I will only be able to prove myself to you later.”

“How will you prove you are trustworthy?”

“My words and my deeds will manifest themselves to you.”

I stood and waited before turning to gather my hunting gear and leave with Wolf. I did not sense danger, but I was a little afraid of Wolf, he was a large and powerful wolf. He could overpower me or any other man in a fight if that man was unarmed.

“If you do not come with me, all who live in this village will die! Snake has foreseen it! She has that gift, the gift of Foresight. When she foretells a thing it comes to pass, but only if you take no action. The past is dead, but the future is still unformed. Only the now is alive. Act now! You must trust us even at the risk of your life. You will lose everything if you do not. Go! Prepare for the hunt! We leave now!”

“Do we go to hunt? I thought Snake said to make war!”

“We go to hunt men! We go to hunt the Morifati!”

Four

DIANA

So I went back inside the house as quietly and as quickly as I could, so as not to wake anyone. You might say I stalked through the house, hunting what I needed for the trip. I grabbed my bow, my pack, tent, Grandfather's hunting knife, the one he gave me for my Order of Manhood, and my canteen, which I realized was empty. I would have to fill it at the well before I left. I took no food with me on a hunt, that was what a hunt was for, finding food. I always fasted on a hunt, it sharpened my senses. But no one could survive for long without water, and the water in the Forbidden Land was "hot" so I could not drink it. You could not trust any random source in there, maybe Wolf could sense the difference or knew a fresh stream. I had to fill the canteen, and without being seen, or I would have to tell a whopper of a lie about what I was doing and shake off whoever saw me so they wouldn't start following me. Also, from my memory of the ridgeline in the dream, there would be no streams along the trail, just rainwater if we were lucky. This time of the morning I would probably be okay unless someone was down there fetching water to cook with.

When I came back outside, Wolf had left, but no one else was out. It felt as though he was watching me, but I could not see him, even over near where he came out of the woods. While I stood there looking around for Wolf, I saw a beautiful raven fly past. It was very large and of a type I had never seen before. It flew quickly out of sight toward the woods. I had no time for curiosity though, had to get to the well and find Wolf.

The well had been dug near the edge of the camp, between the camp and the garden. I could enter through the garden, fill my canteen, and then leave through the garden without being seen. Then I could double back around to the spot where Wolf came out of the woods.

I wove my way through the garden. Luckily, the plants had grown tall. I got to the edge and paused, so I could look through the leaves and see whether anyone was there or whether anyone was coming.

No one was there, so I rushed out and began working the pump. It squeaked, of course, but that couldn't be helped. That noise by itself wasn't suspicious, it just made me nervous as I was trying my best to be stealthy and to stalk my way through and out of the village. I was already on the hunt.

I filled my canteen, slung it over my shoulder, turned to go, and when I turned, there was Diana.

"Rion!"

"I don't have time to talk!"

“Are you going hunting?”

“Yes.”

She had lied for me. She would want to go with me, so I had to think of something to say to put her off the trail. It was normal for her to want to go along. She followed me around a lot. It was annoying. People assumed we were lovers, not hunting partners.

She wore her hunting gear. Odd that she should prepare to go on a hunt. She had long black hair, dark and shiny like a crow's feathers. She kept it in a warriors' braid but let the braid fall down her back. Her sky-blue eyes were as piercing as a cat's. She was carrying a bucket, so I knew she had come to fetch water for her Mother.

Maybe that's how I can get away from her, I thought? When she goes back with the water, I can escape quickly and cover my trail. But what if she tries to track me?

“Can I go too? Can I go with you, Rion?”

“No. Look, I've got to hunt by myself today.”

She screamed, dropped her bucket, drew her machete and went into a stance. She stared behind me, horrified at something in the garden.

I whirled around to attack, and there was Wolf coming out of the garden.

“Do not be afraid, your Majesty,” he said.

“What? He is talking!”

“He is a friend.”

She looked unconvinced and continued to stand with her machete drawn. She glanced at me as if to say ‘what should I do?’

“See.” I said.

I walked over toward Wolf and he approached me and rubbed against me while I stroked his fur.

“You can pet him.”

He walked over to her and sat in front of her, then lowered his head and lay down.

“I am at your service Highness. I have come to help your people and lead Rion through the Forbidden Land.”

She lowered her machete and stepped forward. Wolf rose up on his haunches. She reached out and stroked his head and neck.

“I can't believe it,” she said.

She put her arms around his shoulders and kissed his muzzle. The spontaneity of it surprised everyone, including her. But even though he was large and fearsome, almost evil looking, he had a nobility to his bearing and when he spoke his face bore an expression of kindness. He leaned up and licked her mouth as he had done mine in the customary wolf greeting.

“Oh! I'm sorry! I just suddenly felt as though we knew each other somehow,” she said.

“You have a magnificent gift for feeling what others feel Highness.”

“Why have you come here? You cannot enter the Forbidden Land, no one can, it is radioactive. What do you want with us? And why Rion?”

“All answers will be given to you in time. I do not have the authority to provide you with all the answers. You and Rion will have to discover some things for yourselves. Snake will teach you many things. I will take you to her when it is time. For now, I must take Rion to defeat the Morifati. He is the only one who can defeat them for us. I cannot attack them alone, and I will not lead my pack into a battle they cannot win. The other Psychics are too empathic to bear the presence of the Morifati and must retreat from

them. Only Rion can enter their midst. You must remain here for your safety. Do not follow us and tell no one.”

“Who is Snake?”

“Rion knows the one of whom I speak. She is a powerful Psychic with many powers. She has the Sight. She has seen your fate, and Rion’s fate, and the fate of the Free State, and of the Realm of the Psychics.”

“I want to go with you!”

“You cannot Highness.”, said Wolf.

“Why do you call me Highness? If Rion is killed by the Morifati, it will ruin all our futures. They are so evil, I can’t bear the thought of them. I have nightmares about them. Sometimes it’s as if I can sense their thoughts. I feel like I can sense their presence on the other side of the Forbidden Land.”, she said.

She straightened up, recovered herself, and held Wolf’s head up so she could look into his eyes.

“You must protect him with your life.”

“I will Highness, that is my purpose here. I will be his guide, bodyguard, and constant companion until we reach the Kingdom of the Morifati. When we find them, he must enter there alone. He will in time possess powers much greater than mine, and his fate is not to die at the hands of the Morifati. His fate is to lead us all, but he must face a great trial before he is ready to lead.”

I stood and watched this exchange anxiously. I knew we must slip away now before anyone discovered us. I said, “Diana, I have been in contact with a Psychic for months now. A Psychic named Snake appeared to me in my dreams. I didn’t believe she was real until now. I thought I was having nightmares. She would make predictions. Nothing proved she was anything more than a dream until this morning. Last night she said that I must stop the Morifati before they crossed the Forbidden Land to attack us. She said that Wolf would lead me through a mountain trail past the radioactive zones to the Morifati village. Then he appeared in my dream and showed me the path I must travel. As you can see, he is here with us now and he is quite real. I don’t understand everything that is happening now. I mean, why me? But I know in my heart that we should trust Wolf. I must go with him now.”

With that, I stepped forward and held her in my arms. She cried. I kissed her forehead. She looked up with eyes closed and offered her mouth. We kissed.

“Tell no one where I have gone. Do not follow me there!”

Then I turned to Wolf.

“We go, take the lead.”

And with that, we crossed through the garden and entered the forest. Diana stood silent by the well and watched us disappear while tears ran down her cheeks. She had to take water back to her mother, but she had not promised me she would not track us.

Five

FIRST NIGHT

We traveled many miles through the woods, moving quickly. I could tell I was slowing Wolf down. I wanted to double back to make sure that Diana had not followed us, but Wolf said,

“Keep going.”

“When will we camp?”

“There is a hill up ahead. The entrance to the path into the Forbidden Land is on the top of it on its eastern side. We will follow a trail up that hill until we reach a plateau. There is a cliff overlooking your land where we can camp for the night. We can watch this side of the trail so we will see anyone who follows.”

“How much longer?”

“We should make it just before sundown. We must make camp quickly then, and no fire. We must make no sign at all.”



That first night when Wolf and I camped on the cliff top, Snake came to me in a dream.

“You have chosen well, Rion.”

“Did you doubt I would go?”

“You thought I was only a dream, or a nightmare, or a symbol in your mind until now.”

“That’s true.”

“And even though you could see that Wolf was real, how did you know you could trust him? He could have killed you. He could kill you now.”

“If you wanted him to kill me, he would have killed me already.”

“So why did you trust him? Why did you agree to go?”

“I have faith in the Great Spirit. I know he will guide me. I know he will protect me from evil.”

“I see. You believe in the Great Spirit.”

“But why did you choose me?”

“Did I choose you?”

“Didn’t you?”

“No. You are the one who I saw.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Everything comes to pass in accordance with the decisions of the Great Spirit. But the entire future is too complex to be seen perfectly. There is always uncertainty about what

path a being might choose to take or whether the outcome will fulfill our desires.”

Then Snake showed me Diana walking alone along the way we had come, looking for signs that we had left, tracking us.

“Diana is coming.”

“She didn’t listen to me.”

“She loves you. You must not hurt her, but you must not allow her to follow. You must face a trial alone, greater than your Order of Manhood.”

“What trial is that?”

“You must allow the Morifati to capture you. They seek captives for their sacrifices to Than. They will not kill you until that time. They will keep you a prisoner and prepare you for sacrifice. You will escape from them. You will walk right out of their camp unharmed. You have a power within you, a special type of foresight, but you do not know how to use it now.”

“What power? How will learn to use this power?”

“I will not tell you, I cannot help you. It is a riddle you must solve for yourself. A secret that is only revealed by a trial of mind and flesh and spirit”

Then I woke, and it was first light.

Six

FIRST LIGHT

As I lay there, I thought, these dreams with Snake are not any normal dreams. She is speaking to me with her mind. This dream left me with my hands and feet tingling.

I had not bothered to set up the tent that I brought with me when I hunted. Instead, I lay down a ground cloth and covered myself with a blanket. Wolf lay down near me. He was used to living in the open, being a wolf, and I could hack it. A light dew had settled on us.

I had been on many long hunting trips since my Order of Manhood; which by itself was two weeks on my own.

I got up, stretched, and drank a little from my canteen. My stomach hurt a little from hunger since I did not eat at all the day before. We left in a hurry and I intentionally brought no food.

The night before Wolf said, “We should fast until we reach the Morifati’s land. It is good to fast on a hunt, and we must travel fast and light. You do not need to be burdened with a heavy pack.”

“I always fast on a hunt.” I said, “Until I make a kill.”

I walked over to the cliff. There below lay a wide valley. There was a meadow between the forest that surrounded my village and this cliff, which I was standing on. The cliff which begins the range of hills that run through the Forbidden Land. We had crossed that meadow at dusk the night before. Wolf knew a trail that brought us up the hill to this spot where you could look out over the way we had come. I felt Wolf walk up behind me.

“She is coming,” he said.

I could see nothing beneath us.

“I don’t see her.”

“There, look back along our trail, watch for movement.”

I scanned back along the way we had come. I saw nothing, then a glimpse of motion.

“She has a powerful spirit, but she cannot come with us, the danger is too great.”

“She is such a pest, she follows me around all the time in the village,” I said. “Everyone makes fun of me because of it.”

Wolf snorted. I think he was laughing at me.

“I told her to stay behind, I will have to make her go back, or take her back myself.”

“Let me handle it, Rion. We can’t let her go any further than this. On the other side of the plateau is the Forbidden Land. I foresaw that this would come to pass. We will wait here and when she arrives I have made preparations for her. We cannot let her go with us,

let her follow us, or let her go back and cause suspicion in your village. They would question her until she tells what she knows. I have a place prepared where she will be safe until she can rejoin us.”

We watched her as she made it to the trail that lead up the side of the hill. I don't think she saw us, but I found out later she knew we were there.

“What should we do?”

“Just wait, take a seat.”

Wolf went over and lay on his stomach where we had slept, facing the path where she would enter the clearing where we camped. I sat with my back against a tree like I was expecting a turkey or a deer to arrive. She reminded me of a doe; slender, with tapered legs and feet. She knew how to hunt, though. She always moved quietly when she tagged along with me. Wolf and I relaxed and remained quiet, saying nothing to each other, nor moving.

Presently, after an hour had passed, Wolf said, “You can come out now Highness, we were waiting for you to arrive.”

She had been watching us from behind some brush. I could not see her, but I knew she was out there somehow. Wolf, with his keen senses and because he was a Psychic, knew exactly where she was and when she was coming.

“How did you see me?” she said.

I said, “Why did you follow? I told you to stay behind!”

“I cannot allow you to come with us, Highness,” Wolf said.

“I am going to take her back!” I said.

“It's too late for that. The village has found that the two of you are gone. Some expect the two of you to marry now.”

I had forgotten about that detail. After the two of us spent three days alone, that was the same thing as a marriage ceremony. Sometimes a man would intentionally kidnap his fiance because of this law.

“I am not going!” Diana said, “I won't. If Rion goes to that awful place, he will die! I have seen it!”

“You've seen that I will die? How are we supposed to believe that, are you a Psychic?”

“No, I am not a Psychic, you know I was born in the Free State. You remember when I was born, you remember when I was a baby. Rion, I see things somehow, I see things before they happen.”

“What do you see now?” Wolf said.

“Nothing, I can't control it. I just have these visions, and they come true. I can feel things too, like when I felt you were good and I could trust you back at the village and I hugged you. I knew you wouldn't hurt me.”

I said, “How am I supposed to believe that I will die at the Morifati village?” I turned to Wolf.

“Are you leading me to my death?”

“No, you will not die, Rion, I am taking you there to defeat the Morifati.”

I turned back to Diana and asked, “So Wolf is leading me to my death at the Morifati village, and yet you say that you can 'feel' that he is good. So how do I die?”

“I don't know.”

“Have you seen the manner of my death?”

She looked thoughtful for a moment while she remembered what she had seen.

“Try and remember, it could be helpful.”

“The future you see with the Sight is a potential future Highness, minor changes can lead to big changes later on,” Wolf said.

“I saw them capture Rion. I saw them take him to their king, an awful evil man, I can’t bear to remember him, and their God, their God is Death.”

“Were you asleep when you saw these things?”

“No, I was awake. I have visions. I go alone into the meadow or sometimes the woods. I rest beside a tree. I daydream, then the visions they come to me as real as you are now, as if I was there. It is horrifying! I feel as if I am there and the Morifati can see me. I am afraid of them, Rion. They are so evil. They have filled their hearts with murder, envy, and greed. They sacrifice their captives! They plan to sacrifice you!”

“She has the Sight Rion,” Wolf said.

“What?” I said.

“She has the power of Foresight. Just like Snake does, and I do too. You may in time develop powers yourself if you choose wisely.”

“Diana, tell me exactly what you saw,” I said.

“I saw you a prisoner inside a dark room in an old hut that is guarded day and night. There is only one high window with bars. An old hag comes to feed you every day. They give you lots of food, but they never let you out.”

“What happens after that?”

“I don’t know, I can’t see that far.”

“How am I supposed to believe this?”

“I see them capture you, and take you to that prison! I see them bring you to their king! I see their awful ceremonies, their horrible faces! They will kill you if you go there! They kill and torture everyone they capture just as they have always done!”

While this was going on, I slowly became aware of the presence of others. I looked around and a pack of wolves stood behind me, waiting for Diana to finish. They had joined us silently as she spoke. Wolf was clearly expecting them, and Diana was not afraid this time. They all stood behind him in order to show respect. I could see right away that they were his pack.

“Highness, these are the wolves of the Forbidden Land, I am their leader. They belong to me and me to them. You must go with them. They will take you to our most sacred place and keep you safe from harm by the Morifati.”

“I will not! I must go with Rion!”

“You cannot, I will not allow you to do anything that would lead to your death. You are precious to us. Our future, the future of all the Psychics, and the Free State depends on you and on Rion. Our journey over the mountain trail will take three days and will be very hard. At the end of this journey, Rion must go to the Morifati and surrender to them. You have seen it yourself. They capture him and hold him prisoner.”

“Surrender? I thought I should defeat them!” I said. I had not taken the time to tell him about the previous night’s dream and what Snake said in it.

“Do not contend against your fate, Rion. In order to defeat them, you must first allow them to capture you.”

“But that is too dangerous! They will kill him! They plan to sacrifice him! Why cannot I go too? I may see more of his fate in time to save him!”

“You will not survive the journey. Not this time. And besides, the two of you alone for three days? You would be obligated to marry.”

“But we are going to marry, anyway. I have seen it.”

“Then you have nothing to worry about, he will survive.”

Diana looked stunned at that remark. She was trying to understand all the things she had seen, or maybe dreamed in her future and mine. These visions didn't all fit together, didn't have resolutions yet, just as Wolf said.

I wasn't sure I understood myself. Until now Wolf had said nothing about allowing the Morifati to capture me, but then neither had Snake before last night. I started to press him on this, but before I could, he called to a large white she-wolf.

“Lara!”

She stepped forward and approached Diana.

“Greetings Highness. Come with me, please. Climb upon my back and hold on!”

Diana looked uncertain and went quiet. I could tell she didn't want to go but didn't know how to refuse all of us.

“Lara is my mate, Highness. You will be safe with her. She will take good care of you.” Wolf said.

“Please go with them, Diana.” I said, “I will return to you unharmed, and when this is over, we will marry.”

I surprised myself when I said this. I had not until then considered any such thing, but it was the only way out of the deadlock we were in. She brightened up when I said it.

She said, “You will marry me when you return? You must swear it in front of all present!”

She had me. I had stepped in it.

“In the space of time, yes, I will. Now I must accomplish this thing. I must travel across the hills along the mountain trail through the Forbidden Land. I must go to the Morifati and let them capture me. I must escape from them somehow and prevent them from finding the way through the mountains at all costs, for if they find the way through they will attack the Free State. Then I promise I will return to you and we will marry.”

“It is so, you understand your tasks, Rion,” Wolf said.

Lara said, “It is so. All has been foreseen. Come with me, Highness. Delay no longer. Your love will return to you in the fullness of time. We must go now so that he may proceed.”

Diana ran to me and embraced me. She was weeping. The force of her embrace knocked me a little off balance. Then just as quickly she turned and mounted on Lara's back.

“I love you, Rion! You will return to me!”

The wolf pack turned and leaped into the forest in an instant, making no sound. They suddenly left Wolf and I alone, looking at each other as his mate and my future wife rushed off into the wilderness.

Seven

THE TRAIL BEGINS

“**Y**ou didn’t tell me before that I would have to surrender to them.”
“There is much that you will have to learn about them, that you can only learn first hand, by living among them.”

“But how can I defeat them, how can I prevent them from finding the mountain trail if I surrender to them first thing?”

“They are about to depart. Their leader wants to go look for Snake so he can kill her. They also have some idea about the mountain trail, some legends, but they have never found it. They believe as you do that the Forbidden Land is radioactive.”

“Isn’t it?”

“Your arrival there will create a distraction for them. They will not want to leave to make war before they know exactly who and what you are and how you found them. They will suspect rightly that you know the mountain trail and used it to find them. They will not kill you as long as you can lead them to your people.”

“But how can I ever escape from them?”

“I cannot tell you. Snake has warned me not to tell you or help you. It is something you must learn for yourself. No one can understand the truth of a thing unless they find that truth on their own. You have the power within you. You will defeat them, but you must face a trial as their captive first. You will be their captive for a month, from new moon to new moon. They will try everything they know to make you talk, but if you tell them nothing and if you endure until the end you will defeat them. Snake will tell you more about what she expects of you later. My task is to guide you through the Forbidden Land to them and wait for your escape.”

“Snake came to me in a dream last night. I didn’t have time to tell you about it with Diana tracking us. She told me I would have to let them capture me, that they will prepare to sacrifice me, but little else. She claims she foresaw me and these events. That I will have a type of foresight in time, but I can see nothing now. All of you seem to know what is going to happen, but I know nothing and you will not tell me how to learn. The only reason I am here is because I feel that the Great Spirit has led me this far.”

“Do you believe the Great Spirit dwells within your heart?”

“Yes. Are we going to leave now?”

“Yes, you will lead the way.”

“How can I lead the way?”

“You must learn to find your way through the wilderness by sensing what is ahead of you.”

I shrugged my shoulders.

“You know we are going to the top of a mountain ridge. Look around, how would you find such a thing?”

So I looked around us. Although we were in a heavily wooded area, there was still a gradual slope through the woods to our northeast.

“That way. Where it slopes.”

“Lead on.”

We made our way along a faint trail that I found through the forest and the slope grew steeper. Presently, I heard a sound that I recognized as rushing water.

“There is a stream ahead.” I said.

“Yes. Keep going.”

After some more effort, we found the stream rushing down the slope, which by then was moderately steep.

“So what do we do now?”

“Look there.”

He gestured with his head uphill. A tree had fallen across, making a natural bridge.

“We will cross to the other side.”

“And follow the stream as far as we can up the mountain?”

“It will lead us to a point where we can see the way to the top more easily.”

So we went up to the tree and crossed easily enough. On the other side was a worn trail leading up the mountain.

“There is a trail there, faint but still visible, is this it?”

“No, but it will lead us to the mountain trail. We wolves use this trail to follow the stream down to a place that is holy to us. Lara is taking Diana there.”

“But we should continue uphill.”

“It is so.”

We followed the stream uphill and though the slope got steeper; it was never so steep that Wolf could not climb it. I could climb a cliff face if necessary, but wolves do not climb cliffs or trees as humans do.

The trees thinned out until there were none. The stream was just a trickle by then. It started as a spring from within the mountain higher up. There the stream was really just a small waterfall that fell down a cliff face. You could not follow it anymore unless you wanted to climb a sheer cliff. There was no point in that since the way the trail led was more gradual and got to the top of the ridgeline.

I could see the top of the ridge still higher up. I remembered in the dream how we walked along that ridge which widened into a plateau, narrowed into a ridge in other places, but was still passable along its length.

“That’s where we are going, up there,” I said, more a statement than a question.

“Yes, but we can camp just a little further along. We have a hard couple of days ahead of us.”

We came to a place where the trail left the stream and went along the side of the mountain to a plateau. The top of the ridge was still hundreds of feet higher up, but within sight now.

“We will camp here,” said Wolf. “This cliff will shelter us from the wind tonight.”

An icy breeze blew as we neared the top of the mountain. I had not dressed for winter. I regretted I had not brought a coat. I wore a hunter’s cloak for rain and snowstorms and I

brought my tent to sleep in. I would have to use the breathing techniques that Grandfather taught me for the cold.

“It is going to get cold tonight, isn’t it?”

“It will snow.”

“Snow!”

“We are at the top of a mountain.”

“I didn’t expect Winter conditions. It is Spring in the Free State.”

“It is still winter up here, but it will not last long, it will melt and we will get through.”

“So we will camp here until it passes.”

“The storm will have gone in the morning, only the snow will remain.”

“Great.”

A chilly breeze gusted around and the skies darkened overhead, but it came from the North, from the other side of the mountain. I thought I better prepare as best I could for a snowy night.

About the Author

Born in Mobile, Alabama, V. H. Mizzell spent the entirety of his childhood there, except for a year in Summit, New Jersey. He holds a BS in Physics from Auburn University and almost but not quite an MS in Mathematics from UAH. He has spent thirty years in the Defense/Aerospace industry, most notably working as a Fortran programmer on the Burst and Transient Source Experiment (BATSE) and as a Systems Engineer for the Boeing Company, Lockheed Martin, and Northrup Grumman. He developed a love of Science Fiction when he found Heinlein's juvenile series in the Mobile Public Library Bookmobile. That was also the year that Star Trek premiered and his big sister bought a telescope.