*The Brueggen Stones* (Sample Chapter)

One

The Root Forest

Two heads with gray curly hair popped up through the cosmetics counter of the department store, like bagels out of a toaster, and two pairs of eyes stared at Lynn. She stood across the aisle, key to the watch display dangling from her hand, and stared back. These heads were smaller than the others. They had smoother skin and shorter curls.

“Children’s heads,” Lynn said under her breath and hid a yawn.

For several days, she had seen heads no one else could see, oversized heads with long gray curls and eyes as big as tennis balls. *Lynn does not panic*, she’d told herself.

She usually saw colorful light patterns during her migraine headaches. The doctor said light patterns, called auras, were a normal part of classic migraine headaches. This week Lynn’s auras had taken the form of heads, that was all, and the heads currently perched on top of the cosmetics counter belonged to children. She opened the watch display and put away a sterling silver watch. Then she locked the display case and glanced across the aisle again.

The smaller heads still had eyes the size of tennis balls. The shorter curls were still gray.

“Lynn does not panic,” she announced out loud and smiled brightly at the customer who had paused to look at herself in the cosmetic counter’s mirror.

The customer left in a hurry, and Lynn shrugged. The auras would leave soon too. Thanks to medication, her migraines stayed mild and never lasted more than a few days. When the children’s heads popped back down into the counter, she checked the department store clock. Five minutes to six o’clock! She could sign out now; well, soon.

After she’d signed out, Lynn grabbed her coat in one hand, her shoulder bag in the other, and ran through the store. She always ran at the end of her shift, hurtling through the big glass door that led to downtown Chicago. A block away from the store, she would stop long enough to put on her coat. Then she’d run again.

Six months ago she had graduated from high school and taken the job in a large Chicago department store. Everyone in her family had argued against the decision, even Aunt Isabelle, who’d offered to share her apartment in the high-priced city. Lynn was bright; she should go to college, they’d all insisted.

“I am an adult. I’m ready to earn my own living,” she had informed them, lifting her nose and sniffing at the inadequacy of their understanding.

One week into her new job, Lynn had known better. She wasn’t a child anymore, but she wasn’t an adult either. She was an in-between, and she ran after work to leave the store.

That evening as she bounded outside onto the Chicago sidewalk, she slid on a wet spot and fell backwards, hitting her head on the sidewalk. A pink light twirled past. At the same time, a bright blue light twisted from one side of her vision to the other. She closed her eyes briefly and then opened them again. Yellow, orange, and green lights were dancing around her this time. The orange one had a tail. She must have hit her head hard. Until her vision cleared, she should lie still, flat on her back. *Lynn waits patiently,* she instructed herself and closed her eyes for a full thirty seconds. Then she peeked out of one eye—good, no lights.

Lynn opened both eyes, planning to jump up and run the customary block; however, her eyes kept opening wider than necessary. In fact, they opened so wide they hurt. Instead of high buildings hiding a Chicago sky, gray branches intertwined far overhead, gray branches that couldn't possibly exist. She strained in the dim light to see car-crowded streets and people-crowded sidewalks, but no amount of eyestrain produced anything but gray tree trunks.

An engineer could have constructed a two-lane tunnel through any one of those trunks, but no car, not even a Chicago one accustomed to darting in and out of tight spots, would have had anywhere to go. Gray roots as big as roadside pipes curled out of the mossy floor of the forest and tangled with each other before plunging back into the ground where they belonged.

Lynn sat up gradually, feeling as if someone had clicked a remote's slow motion at her. Her pupils dilated until they covered their blue irises. She couldn't think clearly, but she could feel her hands doing something, so she stared down at them. Instead of a coat and shoulder bag, her hands were clutching big fistfuls of moss. She stared at the moss. It was light gray, the same color as her slacks. She stared at her slacks. They had wrinkled badly.

Linen always wrinkled.

It was an ordinary fact. One by one, she made her fingers relax until they gave up their efforts to uproot moss. Putting her hands in her lap, she straightened up. She still couldn't think though. She couldn't even make Lynn statements.

In the forest distance, someone spoke. Someone else answered. Lynn listened to the voices with all the focus of a slow-motion mind. When the voices got louder and she began to hear the sharp crack of twigs snapping underfoot, the edges of her mouth curved instinctively downwards. She didn't want to meet the owners of those voices. They talked an octave lower than anyone she'd ever heard, and they used odd guttural sounds in their words. The words themselves didn't make sense. *A foreign language*. The thought, her first one since she'd opened her eyes in a gray forest, released her from slow motion.

Tangled tree roots formed a cave over on her right, and she crawled quickly toward the cave's mouth. The ground sloped down under her root cave, and she scrambled through the darkness toward its lowest, most hidden part, wincing as her knees bumped over small rocks. A single ray of sunlight, somehow bypassing all the branches and roots in its way, flickered inside that low place. Lynn crawled to one side of the flickering light and stopped, but she had to push a few rocks out of her way to clear a space.

One of the rocks rolled into the flicker of light and sparkled turquoise. Lynn had collected rocks for years. Blue-green stones came from out west—at least, where she was from, they did.

*Where am I?* her mind whimpered. *Lynn does not whimper*, she instructed herself immediately, but her mind ignored the instruction. She could feel another whimper on its way—with something worse following behind it.

In a jerky movement, she picked up the turquoise rock and put it into the deep pocket of her linen slacks. Then she picked up the other rocks, all she could reach, and held them in the flicker of light. It was something to do, and she badly needed something to do right then. Most of the rocks were as attractive as small, dull-gray rocks generally are. Only one more made blue-green sparkles. The second rock clinked against the first one when Lynn slid it into her pocket. She buttoned the pocket down and hugged her knees to her chest.

The voices sounded as if they were passing the root cave. Whiz-z-z-z-z, whiz-z-z-z, whiz-z-z-z-z. She jumped at the new sound, and she wasn't the only one who reacted to it. Deep guttural shouts and screams an octave below any screams she had ever heard, sledge-hammered the air. Heavy feet pounded until the ground until the root cave shook. Lynn closed her eyes and wished she could close her ears. Fingers didn't shut out enough noise, so she put her head between her legs and added knee pressure. Then she waited.

When the cave quit shaking, she straightened her legs as much as she could and pulled her fingers out of her ears. Then she slumped against the root directly behind her with her head drooping, and none of her Lynn does not droop her head statements worked, until the suggestion of insanity tried to sneak into her mind. That jerked her head up. She was not going crazy. She'd just slipped on a wet spot and fallen.

*Okay, I know that happened*.

She'd hit the back of her head and lost consciousness.

*I don't feel a sore place on my head, but that's because I'm unconscious. The pain will come later. I'm having some form of bad dream, and I'll wake up soon inside a Chicago hospital.*

The flickering light had moved next to her during the commotion outside the cave. Lynn closed her eyes so she couldn't see it, willing herself to wake up in a hospital room, but when she peeked, only the dark underside of gray roots surrounded her. The small ray of light soon touched her elbow, and she pulled her arm into her side, rubbing the warm place without opening her eyes. Something in a dream should not feel warm. A new thought made her sniff vigorously, but the results of her sniff put a frown on her face. Air in a hospital shouldn't smell fresh-clean; it should smell antiseptic-clean.

Birds began to sing outside the root cave, and Lynn nodded an approving, eye-closed head at them. Birds sang in Chicago. Granted, the ones in this bad dream had a spatial quality to their calls that she had never heard in the building-packed, downtown area. Nevertheless, birds sang in Chicago, and she nodded at the ordinary sound.

She listened intently for the noise of traffic. A hospital should have ambulances rushing to it. Lynn had never cared for the piercing shriek of an ambulance, but she wanted to hear one now. She wanted very much to hear one now. All she could hear were the bird calls, and Lynn opened her eyes and crawled toward the opening of the root cave. She needed something to drink. *I'll find a stream. Since I'm not really here, nothing can happen to me.*

At the cave mouth, she paused. A narrow sun shaft lay at a slant across the gray forest floor. It was late afternoon in her bad dream. She needed to locate water before the sun went down. Leaving the root cave, she straightened up with both hands on her back.

“My nurses ought to give me a back massage. What’s the good of a hospital if—"

A figure moved under the big tree across from Lynn. Underneath long gray curls, tennis-ball eyes glared from a head twice as big as Lynn's. The migraine-come-to-life head sat on top of a man's body...a hulking, big body. The man stretched an oversized hand toward Lynn and snarled.

Lynn couldn't move. That remote in someone else's hand had clicked her into pause now. One side of her mouth jerked with irritation, even in its pause mode. Lynn liked to hold the remote. The idea of someone else holding it and pointing it at her—Lynn’s mouth jerked again. *This is a good time to wake up. Are you hearing me, Lynn?*

The man tried to stand but couldn't. Several long, narrow things stuck out of his legs. *Arrows. That whizzing sound.* Then the wounded man lifted his head and howled. Lynn sprang away as if the howl had knocked her into fast forward. All thoughts of lying unconscious in a hospital vanished. She ran from that horrible man and his snarling and howling, and didn't even tell herself not to panic. Lynn statements about panic could wait.

Howls in the distance answered the migraine-headed man. She could hear big bodies crashing through the forest, and the crashing sounds grew progressively louder. They'd catch up to her soon. Hoof beats suddenly drummed next to the running girl, and hands hoisted her onto the back of a galloping horse. The hands that had grabbed her weren't unusually large; nevertheless, Lynn twisted around with her mouth open, ready to scream. The man who glanced down at her creased his forehead.

"Risht!" he commanded.

Lynn stared at him, mouth still open.

"Risht!" he said again and laid a finger across her lips. His meaning was clear. He wanted her to stay quiet.

Lynn closed her mouth, though her heart raced with a speed that matched the horse's. She no longer needed to scream, however. This man didn't look like the other one. He had a normal-sized head. *Lynn does not scream*, she told herself belatedly as the horse ran through the forest of huge trees, leaping over the roots that got in its way. The man had lifted Lynn to a sitting position, but both of Lynn's legs still sprawled on the same side of the horse. She'd have fallen if he hadn't held her firmly in place. When they reached a part of the forest that contained dense thickets of intertwining twigs, the horse slowed down, pushed into the middle of a thicket, and stopped. Its sides heaved in and out twice; then settled down to a non-noticeable breathing.

The man stayed as still as his horse, though he glanced cautiously over to one side. Lynn didn't know what he expected to see through the thick tangle of gray twigs. Her heart hadn't slowed down yet from its pounding run, but that obnoxious remote in someone else's hand had clicked the rest of her body into pause again. She didn’t mind as much this time. It seemed the group thing to do; though when a twig snapped outside of their thicket, she jumped. The man moved his eyes without moving his head and fixed her with a stern glance.

Lynn knew what his glance said. *Risht*! Okay, she didn't want those migraine men to find them either. She would risht for all she was worth. Another twig snapped. Then all noise stopped. The man holding onto Lynn gazed steadily into her eyes, and she gazed back at him. Her mind felt calmer if she studied him. *Lynn does not panic,* she told herself, but it was a shaky thought, and she concentrated on the man.

He wore loose blue pants on his legs and a blue tunic on his upper body. Dark brown hair, cut unevenly at neck level, swung above a short brown beard, also cut unevenly. His eyes were almost black in color, and his skin was darker than Lynn's. All in all, he was an attractive man, close to her own age; however, sitting on a horse's withers in a forest full of migraine-headed men had a tendency to change life-long values. Good looks didn't matter anymore. She stared into the man's eyes and the adjective trustworthy came to her. Pressing her lips together, she hoped it was the right adjective.

A half-hour passed, and the dim light began to fade. Lynn felt pleased with herself. She'd rishted as well as the man and his horse, and they must be used to it. *How much longer?* Her neck had stiffened, and she wanted to move it from side to side. A rustling sound outside their thicket made her eyes move in that direction, but a tightening of the man's fingers brought her attention back to him. His forehead had creased again.

*Okay, I'm not supposed to move, not even my eyes.* Fifteen more minutes passed. How could the man stay still this long? Lynn didn't like him anymore. How dare he keep her rishting when every joint in her body clamored to move! She shifted a hair's breadth, and the man's forehead moved into familiar lines as he frowned at her. Lynn frowned right back and wanted to stick out her tongue. She didn’t, of course. Eighteen-year-olds did not stick out their tongues.

To her surprise, the young man's eyes lightened with a trace of humor, though he didn't release her from his silent order to risht. Lynn could tell from the intensity of his gaze that rishting was the most important thing she could possibly do. *Okay, okay*.

Finally they heard howling far back in the forest. Footsteps thumped in response as a body outside their thicket walked away from them. Lynn could hear the footsteps move through the woods, going steadily away. That was why they'd stayed quiet. If she had made a noise, the migraine-headed man would have caught them. She raised an eyebrow at her rescuer. Couldn't she move now? He shook his head at her and slowly turned his eyes in the direction of the departing footsteps. Not until all sounds of walking had died away did he pull on Lynn's back.

Lynn straightened up, clutching at the man's arm and groaning. Now that she could move, her neck didn't feel so bad, but all that rishting had made her thirsty—*more thirsty,* she thought, wincing as her tongue found a cracked place on her lower lip.

The man pulled up a leather bag tied around the horse's neck and handed it to her.

*Water!* Lynn took a big swallow and promptly choked on the unexpected flavor.

The man frowned at her. He might as well leave his face permanently wrinkled, Lynn decided. It would save him the effort of doing it over again every two minutes. She tried another swallow of the drink. The strong flavor came from some kind of fruit she’d never tasted, but it didn't taste bad, only strange; and she drank deeply.

Then the horse began to move, rather to slide, through the gray twigs, not disturbing them any more than a breath of air would have. As they left the thicket, Lynn twisted until she faced frontward, and put a leg on either side of the horse's neck. When the horse started running again, she grabbed hold of its mane. *There, much better.* The trees started growing further apart. Their branches still intertwined overhead, but Lynn could tell where the massive trunks ended fifty feet in front of them and a treeless expanse began. Late afternoon had already changed into night, however, and she couldn't see the new land clearly, except for the outline of low, wavy hills on the horizon.

*They're like, uh, those things on sand. Baby hills. Sandy bumps. That's not right. Dunes, that’s it. Sand dunes.*

Lynn's mouth opened, and a yawn billowed out, closely followed by another one. She leaned back against the man. If he hadn't kept his hold on her, she would have slipped from the horse and fallen*. Lynn does not fall off horses,* she thought slowly and fell asleep.

Several hours later when the horse stopped, she woke up somewhat. They'd traveled to a hollow between three of the low hills, and hands were reaching up to help her off the horse. Even in her groggy state, Lynn checked the size of the new hands—normal! The hands led her through the darkness and pushed her gently onto a blanket, folded lengthwise on the sand. She yawned as she lay down and clutched at the blanket someone placed on top of her. It wasn’t until late the next morning that she woke up—but as soon as her eyes opened, she sat bolt upright.

Once again, Lynn's eyes opened so wide they hurt. Once again, her pupils dilated until they covered their blue irises.