*Under the Golden Mists*, Sample Chapter

Three

The Second Dream

In the middle of the night, Lacht woke up; at least, she thought she did,

but she wasn’t in the tent anymore. She stood in the middle of vague, wavy

things—then her vision cleared, and the wavy things took on the shape of

long, dark red leaves.

Tarth’s leaves were always blue except for a brief time in autumn, when

they turned purple or pink. The unnatural color of these leaves bothered

Lacht, even in her dream, and she cringed away from their touch. The red

leaves grew unnaturally long too, because they started high above her and

waved and curled all the way to her feet.

Without warning, something outside of the leaves started coming

toward her, something that threw fear knives at her. She twisted in agony

as the knives cut into her mind.

Suddenly someone shrieked, “Help me! Please help me. I can’t get

out. Help—”

Lacht found herself sitting up in the tent, panting like a wounded animal.

Her mother and Irsht threw off their blankets and put their arms around her.

Her father lit a candle.

“What was it, child?” Winnel asked calmly.

“A dream, a bad dream,” she gasped out.

She couldn’t get enough air.

“It must have been a really bad dream. You should have heard yourself

scream,” Irsht said in a shaky voice unlike any Lacht had heard from her

practical little sister.

Who could blame her! Practicality had its limits, after all, especially at

night in the middle of desert wastes, with a pack of timidogs wailing not far

away. The candle gave a little light, but not much, and the shadows it made

wavered back and forth.

“There now, you’ve had bad dreams before,” Frenne comforted her

girls.

“Not here,” Irsht whimpered, expressing the thought Lacht would have

uttered if she’d been able to speak.

Winnel reached over and took his youngest daughter’s hand. “We can

sleep as safely here as we did in our Root Forest cave. Keshua loves us, sweetlings.

He will take care of us wherever we are.”

Neither girl objected to the childish nickname as they might have under

different circumstances. Winnel’s faith in Keshua was not only comforting, it

was contagious.

Lacht’s breathing began to slow down.

Irsht yawned. “Is there anything to eat? I’m starving.”

Everyone laughed, and Frenne reached for a supply pack. “When we

left the Root Forest, our Paigen friends gave us a gift that I’ve been saving

for a special time. I think this is that time.”

The candle flame revealed a small flat bundle. Frenne unwrapped its

protective covering, and a distinctive smell filled the tent, making every

mouth in the tent water.

“Cinnamon stickies,” Irsht cried out. “I want one!”

“Everyone all right in there?” asked a Munta from outside the tent, and

Lacht blushed to think how loudly she must have screamed.

Her father called out, “We’re fine. It was only a bad dream.”

“Good,” the Munta man answered and went back to his own tent.

“Um, I thought you’d share our cinnamon stickies,” Irsht said thickly, her

mouth already full of the treat. “We don’t have enough as it is.”

Frenne laughed. “We have a whole box full.”

“Not enough,” insisted the indomitable girl. “I’m almost ready for

another one.”

Lacht ate a cinnamon stickie and lay back down, but she didn’t sleep

well the rest of the night. She couldn’t forget this dream as easily as she’d

dismissed the first one.

Winnel and Frenne dressed in the dark before the sun rose and went

outside to start a fire. The girls waited until they could hear flames crackle. Then they

pulled on their clothes underneath the blankets. Shivering, they

wrapped blue shawls about their shoulders, knowing well that a half-hour’s

sunlight would heat the desert world so thoroughly, they’d pack the shawls

away for the rest of the day.

“What did you dream about?” Irsht asked before they left the

tent.

Lacht sat on the blanket she’d just rolled, glad her sister had waited

until morning to ask. “All these long red leaves waved in the air, and

something started coming at me. Then a voice said, ‘Help me, help me.’”

Her dream seemed stupid when she put it into words, and she hastened to

add, “It was scarier than it sounds.”

“Oh, it sounds pretty bad, though I’ve had worse,” Irsht assured her.

Lacht shook her head. Irsht hadn’t had a bad dream since she was

three years old. She was too practical to have bad dreams.

Irsht ignored her older sister’s skepticism. “All that talk about the

Wassandra last night must have reminded you that they asked for help to

find their missing girl. You’re too imaginative, and the whole thing got into

your dreams.”

“I dreamed the same thing a week ago, the night

Crispin came to the cave for supper,” Lacht confessed.

Irsht nodded with a satisfied air. “That’s when he first

told us about the missing girl. Don’t worry; it’ll pass. Just try to be smart and

sensible, like me!”

Lacht laughed and shook her head, but something in the explanation

bothered her, though she didn’t know what. Hurrying out of the tent, she

welcomed the distractions involved in cooking breakfast and folding up the

tent.

Not until she’d mounted her horse for another day of traveling did Lacht

realize what was bothering her. *It WAS a girl In my dream.* She shifted uneasily on

the mare’s back. Irsht had dismissed the whole thing easily enough, but then Irsht

hadn’t heard the girl shriek in terror. *I don’t want to think about it.*

Urging her mare forward, Lacht joined her sister and two of their Munta

friends, but she didn’t mention anything to Irsht then; nor did she mention

anything later when they were alone.

She didn’t have to—she already knew what Irsht would say.

“Yes, yes,” Irsht would insist vigorously; “you dreamed about the

missing girl. The whole thing resulted from an overactive imagination.”

Undeniably, Lacht had an imagination, and a very active one!

She used it the rest of that day to picture the self-satisfaction that would

envelop Irsht’s face if, yet again, she proved herself right. Lacht could

almost hear the triumph resounding in her sister’s voice. The visual/audio

image made her grin.

*Who cares! It was only a dream.*

They reached the foothills in three days, just as Crispin had predicted.

Several herds of horses whinnied a greeting to their horses, who neighed

enthusiastically back.

Lacht inhaled the fresh mountain air in long deep breaths, but both she

and Irsht began shivering as Crispin led them up the first forested incline.

Long before the day’s warmth left the desert below them, they had

unpacked their shawls.

That night, for the first time, her family pitched their tent under Stalli

trees. Lacht walked away from the fire and tilted her head upwards until

she got a crick in her neck.

“Listen,” she told her mother when she joined her.

“What is it?” asked the older woman after listening carefully.

“The leaves are so small. They whisper to each other,” Lacht remarked,

mesmerized by the rustling.

“I know. That’s a sound I always loved,” Frenne agreed. “I’ve missed it.”

They stood and listened together for several minutes.

“What are you two doing?’ asked Irsht, coming up behind them.

“Uh, uh, nothing,” stuttered Frenne vaguely.

Lacht nodded and kept her mouth shut. The idea of telling Irsht,

practical Irsht that they’d been listening to leaves whisper— unthinkable!

“Dad says we should go to bed even though it’s early. He says

tomorrow will be a big day,” Irsht said, watching her older sister and mother

suspiciously.

“What were you doing?” she asked again as they walked toward the

tent.

“I’ll never tell,” Lacht stated immediately and emphatically as she pulled

her shawl closer around her. “A hundred Root Forest slugs couldn’t make

me tell. You’d laugh.”

“Oh, something stupid,” Irsht responded, her face relaxing as she

shrugged.

Obviously, Irsht didn’t need to know about something stupid.

Lacht never asked how well other people slept that night, but she lay

awake for hours. The next day, they’d reach Burkin Village, their new

home. She planned to wake up before anyone else that final morning, but

her mother beat her to it.

Frenne rushed outside the tent and banged two pots together before

the night sky showed any hint of morning light. “Get up,” she shouted. “Get

up so we can leave.”

Winnel chuckled in the dark tent. He pushed back his blanket and deftly

rolled it. “Your mothers excited,” he pointed out, a little unnecessarily. “You

might as well wake up.”

Irsht grumbled, “As if anyone could sleep through that noise. I thought

it was a thunderstorm at first. Crispin says Stalli Mountain thunderstorms

are the loudest storms on Tarth.”

Lacht had already hopped up, rolled her blanket, and tied it to Winnel’s.

As soon as the two girls dressed and stumbled outside the tent, Irsht gazed

pointedly up at the whirling nightlights.

“If the Muntas hadn’t left us yesterday, would you still have banged

those pots together?” she asked her mother grumpily.

Her mother answered hurriedly, “Why not? I’m sure they would’ve

appreciated an early start to their day. Do you folks want something to eat,

or shall we just pack up and leave right away?”

After loud assurances that her family did, indeed, want something to eat,

Frenne settled down to the business of preparing breakfast. She wasn’t over her

excitement, though.

Lacht grimaced as she sipped a cup of hot water. She felt certain her

mother had meant to give her tea, but somehow the tea leaves had never

reached the cup, and Frenne had packed the breakfast supplies away five

minutes ago.

*At least it’s hot*, she thought resignedly.

Frenne ate a few bites and then hovered over her family until they’d

finished. She had the breakfast things cleaned and packed before the rest

of them had taken down the tents.

Crispin beamed as if personally complimented by her excitement. “Your

mother’s great,” he told Lacht when they had packed and mounted their

horses.

“Most of the time,” she cautiously agreed.

He corrected her with a smile, “All of the time! I can’t blame her for

wanting to get to Burkin Village. It’s the most—”

“Beautiful village in Stalli,” Irsht finished for him, coming up behind them

on her horse. “Yeah, yeah, we’ve heard.”

“Wait till you see it for yourself,” he told her, flourishing his hand in the

air twice.

They reached Burkin Village a little before noon. Lacht clutched the

mane of her horse with both hands. The cottages were either blue with gray

shutters or gray with blue shutters. Some of them had signs on their front

doors. Shops! They hadn’t had shops in the Root Forest. They hadn’t had

cottages in the Root Forest. Root people lived in hidden root caves spread

far apart under the sheltering trees.

*I could get down now.*

Irsht had dismounted long before Lacht finished her survey of the new

place. *Everyone has dismounted*, she noticed with a flushed face.

Her mare flicked an ear back toward her but stood without moving,

letting Lacht adjust to the new surroundings.

“Thanks,” she murmured in acknowledgment but didn’t release her

fistfuls of mane.

“Lacht,” Winnel finally called.

The eighteen-year-old glanced in her father’s direction and made

herself slide to the ground. At least she wasn’t blushing anymore. In fact,

her face didn’t feel as if it had any color left in it at all. She hugged her

horse’s neck one last time, but then had to step back quickly.

Free at last, the mare danced and snorted with excitement as she

waited for these humans to unload her friends. The unloading didn’t take

long. In minutes, all the Stalli Mountain horses raced at a gallop into their

forest home.

The horses set the pace for the day, because, after they left, everything

raced at a gallop, especially Frenne.

“We have a choice between two empty cottages. Let’s go see them,”

Frenne called to her family, the words galloping out of her mouth.

No sooner did Irsht and Lacht reach the first cottage, a gray two-story

on the outskirts of the village, than Frenne, who had managed to get there

before them, dashed out the door and said, “All right, let’s go to the other

cottage. I’m sure we’ll take it anyway! We don’t need something this big,

though the other one’s well needs cleaning, I hear.”

Sighing, the girls trudged through the unfamiliar roads to the second

cottage, a one-story blue one with gray shutters. Frenne had gotten there first,

of course, and charged out the front door just as they stepped onto

the porch.

“Yes, we should take this one, despite the dirty well. We’ll drink

mallowberry juice and boil water until someone can clean it for us. Don’t

you think so, Lacht?”

Lacht gave her mother a fierce look. “I haven’t been inside yet.”

“Oh, yes. Well, you go on in while I start unloading our things.

The carts should get here soon. I’ll walk back and help push!”

Lacht had never seen her mother this excited. She didn’t think she liked

the new Frenne, but she needn’t have worried. By the time they’d unloaded everything,

her mother had relaxed.

They ate a late afternoon supper since they’d skipped lunch, and then sat on the

porch. When a few neighbors stopped by to visit, Lacht slipped down the porch steps.

“I think I’ll take a walk,” she murmured and left with a headache,

yearning for the comfortable familiarity of old friends.

Crispin almost counted as an old friend now, but he’d left as soon as they’d

reached Burkin Village and she hadn’t seen him all that busy afternoon. Irsht had met

two girls her own age and gone off with them after supper, the three girls laughing and

chattering together. Lacht’s parents were making new friends now.

“I’ll make friends too,” she thought with a decided nod, but that didn’t

make her headache go away.

She wandered through the village, deliberately keeping to the side roads, because

fewer people used them. When one of the roads ended in trees, Lacht didn’t hesitate. She

couldn’t wait to get away from all these cottages and people. Once she plunged into the trees,

her headache ebbed, but at the same time, her throat tightened. The damp leaves smelled

like the Root Forest. Walking fast, she tried to empty her mind.

Suddenly she found herself teetering on the edge of a steep downward slope.

Clutching at a low hanging branch, the homesick girl stopped herself from falling headlong,

but she had to sit down hard on the slope’s top edge. Lacht didn’t try to get up.

She sat very still on the top of the slope, her mouth dropping open.

At the bottom of the slope, shimmering in the early evening light, swirled the

golden mists of Wasso Lake. She couldn’t see the water. The mists completely covered

both the surface of the lake and the lower third of the bank. Lacht stared at the misty

curls of gold until the light faded. Then with a sigh, she got up.

“I have to go now, but I’ll come back tomorrow,” she told the lake.

The wood gave her no trouble on the way back. Lacht had grown up in

a forest, after all, and was woods-wise. She was not, however, roads-wise.

Three times she made a wrong turn on the village roads and had to retrace

her steps; but finally, when the Stalli nightlights were dancing in all their fullness

above her, she came in sight of her new home.

A running, panting Irsht greeted her. “Guess what I saw?” Without

waiting for a reply, Irsht answered her own question. “I saw Wasso Lake,

and it’s covered with these weird mists that move as if there’s a wind, when

there isn’t any. I can’t believe people live under that water—if they’re

what you’d call ‘people’! I’m glad we got this cottage and not one of the

closer ones. You can see the lake from their porches.”

“What?” Lacht responded immediately, wishing they could move again.

“I went to the lake too, but I didn’t see any nearby cottages. Where did you

go?”

“Oh, down some road over there,” her sister said, waving vaguely in the

air.

“Girls,” their mother called. “I found your sheets.”

“Coming,” Irsht called back and grabbed Lacht’s arm as they walked to

their door. “Didn’t you think the mists were weird?”

“No, I thought they were beautiful!” Lacht commented with a faraway

look.

Irsht changed the subject as if used to odd comments from her

sister. “Crispin came by.”

Lacht lost the faraway look.

“What? When did he come? Where is he now?”

“I guess he’s home, wherever that is. I think he might have helped us

unpack.”

“He’s got family too, you know. Maybe he wanted to see them,” Lacht

said, defending her friend.

Crispin’s mother and father had died several years ago, leaving him

with an older married sister and a younger brother. He’d talked about them

on the trip across the desert. Meddy bossed the two boys around, he’d said.

Irsht had nodded sympathetically. “That’s all right, Crispin. All older sisters are

bossy.”

Lacht had laughed loudly. Even Winnel and Frenne had chuckled. Irsht

was much more bossy than Lacht, and everyone knew it.

Crispin had winked at Lacht and continued talking. His younger brother

had hurt one of his legs as a child and limped badly ever since. When they

got older, he and Crispin had started a wood and metal business.

“Ploddin can design an iron gate with such lifelike flowers that people

bend to smell them as they walk past. He’s the best metal worker on Tarth!

He doesn’t get along with people, though. I do most of the selling.”

*Crispin is good with people*. *Of course, he wanted to greet*

*his family and friends,* Lacht thought warmly as she and Irsht

climbed the porch steps.

The front door of their new home opened off the porch into a big kitchen.

Behind the kitchen, two small bedrooms snuggled together across a short hall

from a sitting room. Cobwebs hung everywhere, and Lacht felt as if she were

wading through several layers of dust, but the place had a cozy feel. She liked it.

In their new bedroom, the sisters made up their beds side by

side.

“Is this room really any bigger than our cave room?” Irsht asked

critically when they’d finished and stepped back to see the results of their

labors.

Two steps and their backs brushed a wall.

“Well, it has a window,” Lacht pointed out. “The cave didn’t have any

windows. I think an outside view makes a small room seem bigger.”

Irsht yawned. “That’s true. I’m going to bed.”

Lacht didn’t feel tired, but she got ready for bed anyway. She lay curled

under her blankets, staring out the window at the Tarth nightlights that spun

and twisted inside their circles, moving ceaselessly. They reminded her of

the golden mists swirling up the bank of Wasso Lake.

*No, I didn’t think the mists were weird.*