

Chapter 12 Excerpt from *The Barren Grounds*

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TWELVE

Morgan, Eli, and Ochek sat on the benches in front of the firepit. Morgan was reaching her hands out towards the fire, taking in the warmth gratefully. Ochek and Eli hadn't stopped looking at her, waiting for her to say something about the truth she'd just learned: Eli had been living here for fifteen days. But she didn't know what to say, because she didn't know what to think, so she just stared into the crackling flames. At least she'd calmed down now. Not long ago, her heart had been pounding out of her chest like she was in some Looney Tunes show. Was it any different, though, that instead of a kids' cartoon, she was actually in a fantasy world? She'd always escaped, in a way, to the worlds she was reading about, but ... to actually do it?

See here? She could hear Ochek clearly in her memory. *This is when I saved Eli from the Barren Grounds, just like I saved you from them today.* She repeated his words over and over in her mind. In the...

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...end, it was how he'd said the words, rather than what he'd said, that brought Morgan out of her silence.

"It has been over two weeks since he arrived in Misewa," Morgan said in her best Ochek impression. "Shouldn't you have said something like, 'Eli has been here for many moons; or something? You talk exactly how people talk. Humans.'"

"That's silly," Ochek said. "Who would talk like that? *Many moons.*" He scoffed. "The sun rises and falls and rises again. One day. Simple."

"That's seriously what you want to know, Morgan?" Eli asked.

"No, I just..." Morgan rubbed her temples. "I have a million things in my head and I have no idea how to get them out."

"Maybe I can try to answer a question you had when you first got here," Ochek offered.

"I really don't remember much about that," she said. "I passed out, if you'll recall?"

"You asked before how I would know about you," he said. "About humans."

She shrugged. "I mean, yeah. That was probably one of the million things I was wondering."

"Years ago," Ochek began, "a man came into this place. He arrived through the same portal that you did, in the Great Tree. Back then, the journey from the Great Tree to Misewa didn't seem as long. The Barren Grounds weren't so arduous. We were living in the Green Time, when birds and fish and four-

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legged animals were plentiful, and the land provided everything that we needed." "See?" Morgan almost got up from the bench. "That's..."

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...what I'm talking about. The Green Time. *That's* fantasy-world talk."

"Why does she keep...?" Ochek looked to Eli.

"Just keep going," Eli whispered to Ochek.

Ochek continued. "The man told us that he came in a good way, and we trusted him, took him into our village. He lived with us for a long time. He learned how to hunt and snare and forage, and we constructed an eighth lodge for him in which he lived. But there came a time when all that was provided to him, which is all anybody would need to live the good life, wasn't enough. He began to want more, and so took more. Of course, we noticed that our stores were getting lower and that the man began to change.

"You might think he would get full and content, consuming everything the way he was, but it was the opposite. He became gaunt and tired, and the more he took, the more he needed. He took so much that the game around the village began to dwindle. The birds and fish and four-legged animals weren't willing to provide for us anymore. Others in Misewa began to starve while the man got hungrier, and thinner, and we became afraid of him. Council, under the guidance of our Chief, Muskwa, decided to banish the man in order to save our village."

Ochek paused. Morgan, and even Eli, who had certainly heard this story before, waited. Tears had wet the fur under the animal being's eyes. They glistened like stars against a black sky. "What's 'Muskwa' mean?" Morgan whispered to Eli as Ochek gathered himself. "Bear," Eli whispered.

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"Oh, so ... their names are just what they are?"

"Not exactly."

"Not exactly? He literally calls me Girl. What does 'not exactly' mean?"

"Well, he calls me Eli, so..."

Ochek went on with a quivering voice that evened out only once the worst parts were told. The kids stopped their whispered conversation to pay him their full attention.

"On the morning he was to be sent back to his world, through the Great Tree, the village woke to a different world. The man was gone, along with one of our own. Tahtakiw."

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"That means 'crane'," Eli whispered to Morgan.

"See?" Morgan whispered. "Tahtakiw had been convinced by the man to run away and lead a different life," Ochek said.

"Why would Crane do that? Betray you like that?" Morgan asked.

"Maybe he knew what was coming, and didn't want to suffer, like we have suffered," Ochek said. "You see, the summer birds were gone. They were the ones who brought warmth to the North Country, which created the Green Time, which ensured the land had the means to provide for us. The wind was hard and strong, the grass and leaves were covered in snow, and the waters were frozen in place as though stuck in time. The weather wasn't new to us, but there had always been a cycle. The birds would travel across this place and distribute their warmth. The Green Time led to the Dying Season, which led to the White Time, which led to the Birthing Season. We set off after the man..."

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...but he had gone too far already and we couldn't find him. Misewa has lived through this cold ever since, and now we are dying."

Ochek put a paw on Eli's shoulder. "Eli came here through the Great Tree. I was there to greet him."

"Why? How did you know?" Morgan asked.

"The answer to that is for a different time," Ochek said. "What's important now is that he greeted me in the good words."

"That's Cree," Eli said proudly.

"Still, I've kept him a secret to others, for my own reasons. I'll need to keep you a secret too, Iskwésis. But Eli here is able to live how we live. He is good on the land. I've taken him out with me on my trips, to check my snares and reset them, to forage for foods and medicines, to hunt. He eats only what is given to him. He respects this place and the beings within it. He is living here in a good way. He's been waiting for you, and because of that, so have I. It's why I was able to find you over the Barren Grounds, or else we might have been waiting forever."

Morgan's head was spinning. Fifteen days, in Misewa time. The North Country. Whatever Ochek called it. This place. In earth time, for Morgan, it had been maybe two hours, depending on when Eli had left while she was asleep. Math was never really her strong suit, but the calculation wasn't rocket science. Every week here was probably around an hour in earth time. That was a good thing. Because if she'd been here a few hours, it was probably a few seconds on earth.

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"Well, we should probably go," Morgan said abruptly.

"What?" Eli looked as if his heart had been torn out of his chest. "Why? I don't want to go anywhere."

"You've been waiting for me?" Morgan asked. She wasn't sure she believed that. He'd come because it reminded him of home, not to lead Morgan here. "I came here looking for you, to bring you back. We can't just..." Morgan went for the door. She stared at the marks that indicated the days Eli had been here, and the knife sticking out of the wood. "We have to go. We can't just leave our earth and stay here. I promised Katie that I wouldn't run away. This would be running away. Like, super far away."

"You promised Katie," Eli said. "I didn't. What's there for me now? They're not my family. I got taken away from my family."

"Yeah, but Eli..." Morgan went back over and sat next to him. She put a hand on his shoulder. "Even if you're not with your family, they're still waiting for you."

"How long have you been gone from your home, Morgan? Do you think your mom is still waiting for you?"

Morgan felt as though she'd been punched in the stomach. "That's not fair. You know that's not fair and that it's totally different."

"I'm sorry," he said. "That was..."

"Very Morgan of you?"

"Yeah. You could put it that way."

"What's this about your mother, Iskwésis?" Ochek asked.

"Nothing," Morgan said. "It's nothing. I just have to go back before Katie and James wake up. That's all."

"Katie and James," Ochek said, "these are your parents? Are you children brother and sister?"

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"They are not my parents," Morgan said. She tried to douse the flame in her chest with a few deep breaths. She spoke lower. "But Eli is kind of my brother, in a way. I'm responsible for him. That's why I walk him to school, walk him home from school."

"What is school?" Ochek asked.

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"Well, at least you're acting like a fantasy creature," Morgan said. "School's where teachers make kids redo poetry assignments even when the first poem they wrote is really good."

"Poetry?" he said.

"I'll fill you in on the walk back to the Great Tree." Morgan got up again. "Eli, come on."

"Can't we just...?" Eli stood beside her and looked up at her with those eyes of his. He may as well have been holding a black pirate hat against his chest, like that Puss in Boots GIF Morgan had seen a million times. "You said I was gone for, like, two hours and I've been here for two weeks, right? Can't we just stay here a bit longer, like a week, and still get back before Katie and James are awake?"

Morgan looked at Eli suspiciously. "I see you've done the math."

"It wasn't hard," he said.

"No, I guess it wasn't." Morgan went over to the shuttered window, stared through its cracks like there was something to see, but there wasn't. The snow seemed to overtake even the darkness. The White Time was the best name ever for the season this place was stuck in. "What is this place anyway? Like, the whole place."

"Aski," Ochek said.

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"Earth," Eli whispered.

"Well"—Morgan turned away from the window—"the whole darn place should be called the Barren Grounds. What are we even going to do here for a week, Eli? Have snowball fights?"

"We're going to help: Eli said.

"Help?" Morgan said. "How can I help a village full of..." She looked at Ochek. "Are you all animals here? Walking, talking animals?"

"In the village or everywhere?" Ochek asked.

"In the village," she said.

"Then yes," he said.

"Okay," Morgan continued, "how can I help a village full of walking, talking animals stuck in some never-ending winter?"

"You can help like I've been helping," Eli said.

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"Eli, I don't know the first thing about what you've been doing out here."

"We can teach you," he said.

Morgan threw her arms up in the air. "Have you even looked for this guy? The one who stole your birds or what-ever?"

"We've no idea where the man went those many years ago," Ochek said. "Aski is big and our time is short."

"The Green Time is only where the man lives," Eli said. "Wherever the summer birds are, they're being held captive. It's winter everywhere."

"And I guess even if you went on a search party, you'd starve to death if you didn't find the summer birds, like, right away," Morgan said.

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"We'd have to know exactly where to look, yes," Ochek said.

"Well, that sucks," she said, and nobody spoke for quite a long time. Then Morgan remembered the conversation that she and Eli were having before. "So, this man, just curious, I know he's evil and everything, but ... what did you call him?"

Ochek looked ready to speak, stopped, then said, "Napéw."

Morgan wondered if that was what he'd originally intended to say. Regardless, she prompted, "And napéw means ..."

Eli sighed as he responded. "Man."

"Okay!" Morgan clapped her hands. "So, every being on Aski is literally named after what they are. Girl. Fisher. Man. Bear. For real?"

"Not always," Ochek said defensively.

Morgan continued as though Ochek hadn't said anything. "What if there are two of you in the same village. Like, two fishers. Is it like Dr. Seuss? Thing One and Thing Two? Or what?"

"What is Dr. Seuss?" Ochek asked.

"He was a writer. Never mind that," Morgan said.

"Well, I'm not going to name every being on Aski, if that's what you want," Ochek said.

"Just call them what they want you to call them, Morgan," Eli said through his teeth, chiding her.

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"But Eli's Eli and I'm Girl," Morgan said. "Just to clarify."

"I've known him for weeks now," Ochek reasoned. "That's why."

"Seems a little sexist maybe, that's all," Morgan said under her breath, shrugging.

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"Stay here with us. We could use your help," Ochek said.

"I don't want you to call me by my name that bad," Morgan said. But then she looked at Ochek, noticed how even he, who seemed so powerful, was thin. His clothes looked too big on

him. At some point, they had probably fit him just right.

"I am the only hunter well enough to do the work. With you here, Iskwésis, we could survive longer," Ochek said.

"How much could I can learn in a week?..." she asked.

"You learn by doing," Ochek said. "Being on the land is being with the best teacher."

Morgan took a deep breath. She looked at Eli and saw the hope in his eyes. And saw something else: happiness, even in the midst of this barren world. How could she take that away from him, when he was right? They could stay a week, go back, and nobody would be the wiser. She looked at Ochek. Proud. Strong. Dying. What if she could learn? Do the things that she'd never got the chance to do, because her mother had given her away when Morgan had been so young? What if she could do something, anything, to help them survive here. even for a bit longer? Finally, she looked at the knife stuck in the wall. It was primitive, not a calendar event she could enter into her phone, but it would tell them when they needed to leave.

Seven notches. Seven days.

"Fine," Morgan said. "We'll stay. We'll help."

"For real?" Eli beamed.

"Yeah, for real," she said.

"Ekosani," Ochek said. "Thank you. Southeast of here, through the forest, is my trapline. It's a difficult journey. We'll need strength and rest."

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"I passed out twice, so I'm probably good," Morgan said. "Unintentionally well rested."

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"Iskwésis," Ocheq said, "the White Time is at its worst without the sun. It's best to wait until morning."

Morgan shuddered at the thought of the black this place offered, without any city lights, without even the flickering light from the fires at the longhouses. She'd already experienced it. What had she been thinking? She shuddered more than she would have from the cold.

"Okay, Thing One," she said. "Tomorrow it is."

Source: Robertson, D. (2024). *The Barren Grounds*. Thorndike Press, a part of Gale, a Cengage company. pp. 97-107.