

JORDAN GOULD · RICHARD PRITCHARD

WYLAH

THE KOORIE WARRIOR



GUARDIANS





CHAPTER 4

I open my eyes, bracing for bright daylight, but the cave is pitch black. What happened? How long have I been out?

‘Po! Po!’ I cry.

Nothing.

I cough to clear the dust from my throat.

‘Po!’ I yell as loud as I can.

Still nothing.

Then I hear the sound of slowly moving rocks and a croaky little voice calls, ‘Wylah, I’m here.’

I could cry with relief. I crawl towards Po’s voice, over rubble and dust. ‘Are you okay, Po?’

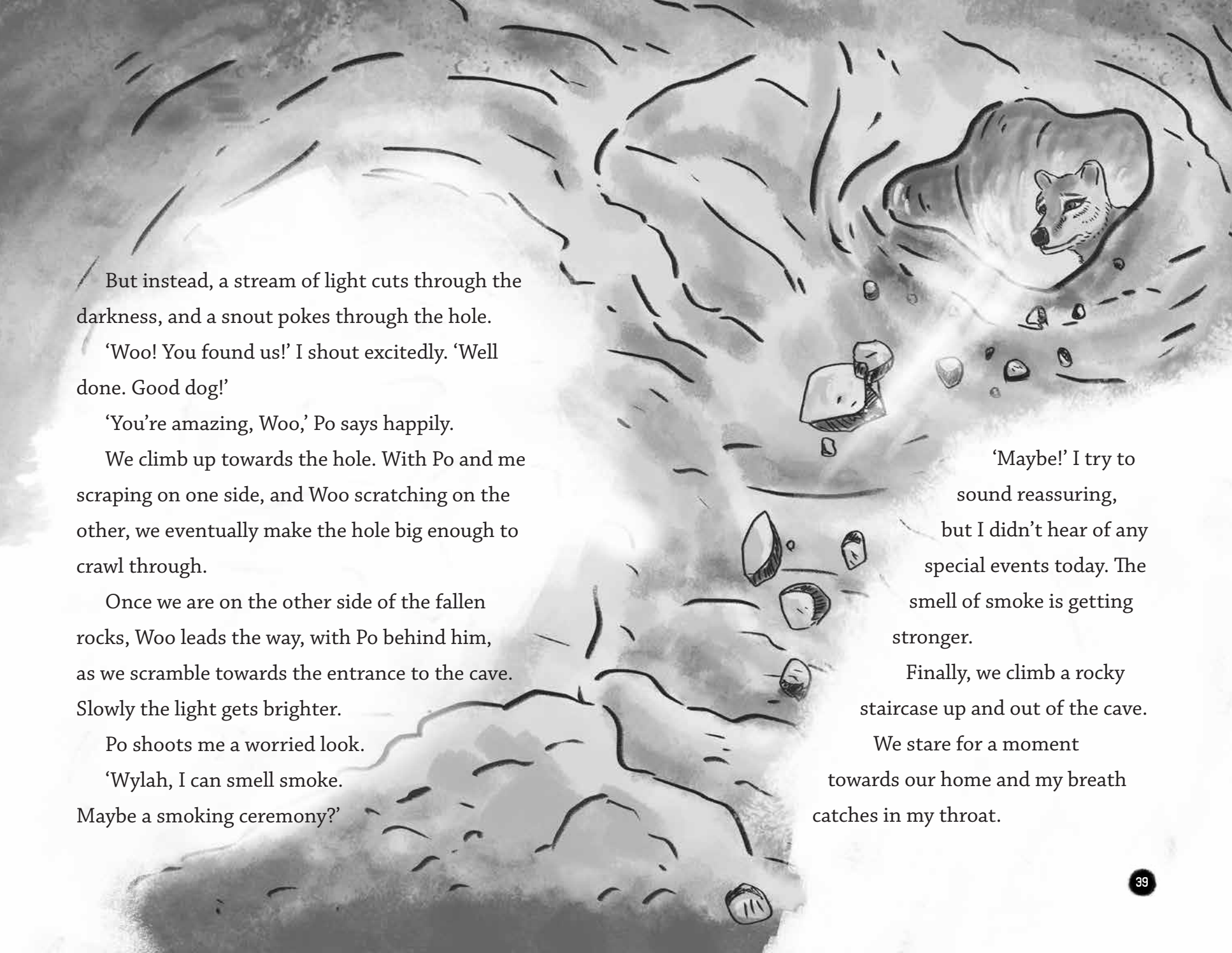
He coughs. ‘I think I am. Are you? I called and called for you! I thought you were... I thought... I was so afraid I was alone.’ Po’s voice quivers. ‘What happened, Wylah?’

‘I don’t know. We need to find a way out so we can check on the others.’

‘How will we find our way out if we can’t see anything?’ Po wails.

I am close to him now. I reach out in the dark, find his shoulder and squeeze it. ‘I don’t know, but we’ll figure it out.’

Just then I hear dust trickling somewhere, and what sounds like small rocks tumbling down the wall of the cave. I pull Po close and cover our heads with my arms, in case the earth starts moving again.



But instead, a stream of light cuts through the darkness, and a snout pokes through the hole.

‘Woo! You found us!’ I shout excitedly. ‘Well done. Good dog!’

‘You’re amazing, Woo,’ Po says happily.

We climb up towards the hole. With Po and me scraping on one side, and Woo scratching on the other, we eventually make the hole big enough to crawl through.

Once we are on the other side of the fallen rocks, Woo leads the way, with Po behind him, as we scramble towards the entrance to the cave. Slowly the light gets brighter.

Po shoots me a worried look.

‘Wylah, I can smell smoke. Maybe a smoking ceremony?’

‘Maybe!’ I try to sound reassuring, but I didn’t hear of any special events today. The smell of smoke is getting stronger.

Finally, we climb a rocky staircase up and out of the cave. We stare for a moment towards our home and my breath catches in my throat.

Then Po wraps his arms around me and buries his head in my side.

‘Wylah!’ he cries. ‘Everything is on fire!’

I pull him tight. ‘Stay close to me, Po.’

We run through the burning forest. Black ash falls from the sky and smoke blows into our eyes. It’s hard to see and it’s hard to breathe.

It’s like the worst dream I’ve ever had.

My mother’s yam farm and all our wuurns are completely destroyed. I can hardly recognise the village apart from the rocks and paths. Where are our families? Where is everyone?

And my beautiful animals! Where could they have gone?

‘Merri!’ I shout at the top of my voice.

‘Grandma! Mum!’ The smoke makes me cough and gasp. My heart is pounding. Where are Kamba, Kapa and Kinpa?

Woo sniffs at the ashes and uncovers a wooden toy turtle, blackened at the edges. Po picks it up and holds it to his chest.

‘This is my sister Merri’s toy. Everyone must be close, right, Wylah?’

Woo bravely dashes and leaps through hot ash and fire, sniffing and searching. He barks and runs towards a fallen tree at the edge of the cliff.



I hear a struggling voice call out. 'Wylah,' the voice rasps. 'Wylah.'

'Grandma!' I run to where she is trapped under a fallen tree.

'Grandma, hold still.' I turn back towards Po. 'Help me lift this,' I shout.

We heave and heave, but the tree is too heavy. Woo scratches at it with his paws, but we can't shift it.

'Wylah, Po, thank goodness you're both alive.' Grandma struggles to speak, her breath is rough and faint.

'Grandma, I'll get help! There must be someone here.'

'Wylah.' Grandma puts her hand on mine. 'I tried to save the children and the animals, but they took them all. Except for this little grub.' Grandma smiles painfully as she opens her cloak to reveal Kapa.

'My baby.' I hug and kiss Kapa tightly, He squeals and cries sadly.

'I tried to save his sister too, but everyone has been taken by the dragons.'

I kneel down next to Grandma, and gently wipe the ash from her face.

'I don't understand. Who are the dragons? What happened? Where is everyone?'

Grandma lifts her arm up. 'Take my boomerang.' Her voice is getting weaker. 'It is my gift to you.'

'Yahpurrr! Marntaro!' I scream with all my strength as I look around. 'We need help!'

Grandma squeezes my hand. 'Gather the five Guardians. Only they can help you now.'

I shake my head, confused. 'Grandma, I'm so sorry! It's all my fault. I shouldn't have left you with the children.'

'If you had not, you would have been taken with them.' Grandma coughs and rasps. 'Find Pippy, our Guardian. He fought bravely for us. He will tell you what happened, what you need to do and to learn.'

‘Please, Grandma,’ I plead desperately. ‘You haven’t finished teaching me all your amazing art skills and telling me all your stories.’

‘Wylah, this is your destiny now. Your path is to save our children. Bring back our people, restore the village and feed those smelly animals.’ She smiles at me, her eyes gleaming. ‘You are our only hope, my brave and beautiful granddaughter. You can do this, you can save our people, Wylah, the Koorie Warrior. Rise up, rise up within.’

‘Grandma, I can’t. I’m just a teacher, and not even a very good one. I’m not a warrior.’

Grandma musters the last of her strength to smile.

‘Neither was I.’

Her eyelids slowly close and I feel her hand loosen.



She enters the Dreamtime.*

Dark clouds roar with thunder and lightning as if all nature mourns for her.

Po gently wipes the ash from her skin, and we give her a final hug.

As the sun sets across the smouldering forest, a strong wind rustles against the remaining trees, blowing leaves that cover her body.

The light of my world has gone out.

This is the darkest day of my life.

'I can't live without you, Grandmother.' Grief overwhelms me. 'I'm not ready! I'm not a teacher or a warrior! How can I make you proud if you're not with me?'

My body shakes uncontrollably as sorrow and fear floods every part of my being.

Po hugs me tightly, giving me an instant boost of hope. 'I believe in you, Wylah,' Po sobs.

***Traditionally out of respect and grief many Indigenous communities avoided referring to a dead person's name. As Wylah referred to her as Grandma, she shall now be referred to as 'Grandmother'.**

Po's faith makes me realise what I must do.

I must be strong for everyone. I must have courage.

Our tears stream down, forming a pool of water on the chalky ochre rock.

Po and I look at each other. We must both have the same thought.

Water . . . we quickly surround it with a dusty wall and pull out our grinding stones. We crush the chalky ground into a fine dust.

We mix in our tears to make . . .

. . . our sacred ochre.

I cup it in my hand as I stand up.



For thousands of generations, my people have used ochre.

I cover my body and hair with it, the symbol of grief for the loss of loved ones.

I look into the distant sunset.

The entire countryside is devastated.

My home is gone.

My loved ones are gone.

Everything has been stolen from me.

I take a deep breath.

'I, Wylah, proud daughter of the Marr Nation, vow to find the Guardians, save the animals and rescue my people.'



OUT 31 MAY

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