

Chapter One

Nystagmus and Jennifer sat at the table, waiting for their friend Snoth to join them. On the table stood three mugs and three plates. Steam and a perfumey smell rose from the mugs. A large brown onion sat on each of the plates. A sharp knife rested at the side. The two waited for quite a while. Finally they both spoke at once: “Where’s Snoth?”

The door opened and in tumbled Snoth, his face red, breathing fast. He looked excited. His friends could see something important had made him late.

Snoth was so short of breath he couldn’t speak at first. But the three friends had Special Secret Rules. No-one could speak until after the Ceremony. First they had to drink then they’d eat, then they would recite the words. After that Snoth could tell them what he had seen or heard or discovered.

Snoth sat down. Without talking, all three raised their mugs, took a long deep sniff and started to sip. They drank in silence until the mugs were empty. Then all three raised the sharp knives and began to peel the large onion that sat in the middle of each plate. As they peeled, their eyes started to sting. Tears formed and fell from three faces. No-one wiped an eye, no-one spoke. Three knives peeled and peeled, tears flowed down cheeks, onto chins, then onto the table. No sound was heard but the soft scrape of knife on vegetable and the quick sniff of runny noses.

a
threefold
cord



A meeting of the Threefold Cord

Nystagmus finished first, as he always did. He was the quickest peeler. He had peeled onions in his grandparents' shop since he was five years old. He loved Yaya and Papou, his grandparents. And he loved to help them. Nystagmus waited, unspeaking, while Jennifer completed her onion, followed by Snoth, still breathing hard.

Three faces looked at each other, three heads nodded, then three hands raised the onions and all three friends began to chew. Still no words. Just tears, more tears than at a circus, more than at a funeral. Wet faces, chomping jaws, sniff-sniffing noses and swallowing sounds.

Snoth finished his onion first. He waited and when his friends had swallowed their last fiery mouthful, Snoth burped like a trumpet. Jennifer burped her small squeak and Nystagmus let rip. All three friends nodded. Solemnly they recited the lines of *The Threefold Cord*:

“If one is all alone, without friend or brother, this
is vanity.

“Two are better than one, for if one fall, the other
will lift him up.

“But a threefold cord is not easily broken.”

Finally Snoth spoke.

And when he did speak, Jennifer and Nystagmus sat up straight and blinked. At first they wondered if Snoth had made the whole story up, or imagined it, or had a bad dream. But his red face, his urgent voice

and his trembling hands told them it was true: every frightening word was true. And they would have to act.

(I know what you want me to tell you – the recipe of their secret drink. I might share that with you in a later chapter. Meanwhile, would you like to know what Snoth told Jennifer and Nystagmus?)

I'm afraid that will have to wait until you come to Chapter Two.)

Chapter Two

The three friends held their meetings every Sunday morning. At the meetings they always followed their Secret Rules: first the Secret Drink, second the Onion of Weeping, then the Threefold Cord; finally they could talk.

Jennifer spoke: “We have drunk the drink of courage and strength. We have eaten the onion to remember. We have recited the Cord that binds us. Now Snoth, the time of speaking has come.”

Snoth began: “I saw a boy, he was really little, too little for school. And a cat. And I saw what was happening. The boy was hurting the cat – on purpose. He did it again and again. It was ... it was ... teacher?”

Snoth’s friends looked at each other, puzzled. He said, “Not teacher, another word, sounds like teacher ...”

“Torture!” said Nystagmus and Jennifer together.

“Yes! That’s what it was, torture! Come with me, come quickly. If we hurry we might still be in time.”

The friends saw how worried Snoth was. They knew the matter was urgent. The three hurried from the clubhouse, climbed the back fence and ran down the lane, Snoth leading.

Snoth ran fast. His boots made a clattering sound on the cobblestones of the lane. Nystagmus and Jennifer wore sneakers. They made a sound like

horses galloping in Ugg boots. They ran and they ran, turning from the lane onto the dirt track along the bank of the creek. They ran so hard they could feel their breath burning in their chests. At the bridge Snoth raised his hand, signalling to Nystagmus and Jennifer to stop.

Snoth turned and pointed at a fence on the far side of the little wooden bridge. He placed his finger over his lips. They understood: they were very near and they must not make a noise. But their hearts beat so hard anyone near that fence would surely hear.

They need not have worried because a loud noise, a screaming mixed with a sort of hissing came from the far side. It was so loud, strange and sudden they thought their hearts might stop. Nystagmus felt panicky. He wanted to run but then he thought of the Drink of Courage they had all drunk and the Cord they shared, and he did not desert his friends.

The sounds came again. The children were terrified. They all wanted to run away. But they did not do that. They remembered the Onions of Weeping. And when Snoth started to creep across the bridge, Nystagmus and Jennifer followed close behind. Now they crouched next to the fence. The sounds came a third time, closer now and louder. Nystagmus bent down on all fours, and Snoth crouched at his shoulder. Jennifer knew what she had to do. She placed one foot on Nystagmus' back, then another; then she climbed onto the back of the crouching Snoth. She straightened carefully, the boys

holding her legs to steady her.

Jennifer looked over the fence straight into the face of the creature that made those terrifying sounds.

(I think this is a good time for me to tell you one of the Secrets of the three friends. Their Secret Drink with the pleasant perfumey smell was a hot liquorice drink. Nystagmus made it for them before every meeting.)

While Yaya and Papou were busy working in the shop at the front, Nystagmus folded a liquorice stick into a mug and placed it in the microwave and turned it onto HIGH. After exactly 45 seconds, he took it out. The liquorice stick was now a little pool of hot black stuff. Nystagmus knew it was so hot it would burn your tongue off. [**This is far too dangerous to do without an adult!**]

Nystagmus added warm water from the tap and sixteen drops of white liquid that he took from a baby's bottle with a small syringe.

Then he repeated the entire process with the second mug and the third.

And what is so secret about a hot liquorice drink, you wonder? The secret is the sixteen drops of white liquid that Nystagmus counted so carefully as he syringed it into the mugs. The white liquid was rare and precious. Actually it was unique. It was human *breast milk*.

(And the terrifying noises from the far side of the fence? Please see Chapter Three.)

Chapter Three

Jennifer looked over the fence. She saw the creature that screamed and hissed. She jumped off Snoth's shoulders and back onto the ground. She pulled Nystagmus and Snoth to her side. Jennifer put her lips to the ears of each boy in turn and whispered. The boys' faces went pale, then they nodded.

Jennifer stood up. She reached high to the top of the fence and started to climb. Snoth held her hips and boosted her. He did the same for Nystagmus. Now Snoth raised his arms and grabbed the topmost timber of the fence and his friends grabbed him and pulled him up. Without a word the three leapt from the fence into the garden and faced the creature.

A small boy looked up, surprised. He held the tail of a tiger-striped cat in his hands. He was swinging the cat by the tail, swinging it in a circle, swinging it as the cat screamed and hissed.

When the boy saw the three children, older and bigger than he, his face turned white. He looked terrified. Jennifer noticed the front of the boy's trousers darken. She saw the dark patch growing as the little fellow wet himself. The child let go of the cat, turned suddenly and ran, his short legs scampering away from his visitors, away from the creature that he had tortured. The child headed for the back door of the house.

Nystagmus spoke. His voice was urgent: "We've

got to get out of here before that boy's parents come outside. And we have to take the cat with us so he can never torment it again.”

Jennifer and Snoth nodded. They looked at the cat. It arched its back and showed its sharp teeth. In between the hissing and screaming they heard soft, fast meowing sounds. The children felt their hearts beating even harder than before.

Snoth took off his jumper and tiptoed towards the weeping animal from behind, holding his jumper in front of him. Suddenly he dropped the jumper over the cat's head. He wrapped it firmly so the animal could not see or bite. He lifted the cat and nodded towards the fence, urgently signalling his friends to climb. Jennifer and Nystagmus helped each other to the top then looked around. The back door of the house opened as they watched and an adult emerged.

“Run, Snoth! Run!”

Snoth was trapped. He could climb and escape with his friends but he would have to leave the cat in the garden without any protection.

The taste of onion still fresh in his throat reminded him: he knew he would not leave the cat behind. He called in the direction of the fence: *Go without me! Go!*

Snoth turned to face the person hurrying in his direction. He saw a tall, tall person. He had never seen such a tall person before. Or such a scary face: sunglasses like blue mirrors hid the tall person's eyes. The person did not speak. Snoth heard Nystagmus'

voice from the fence: “Pass the cat to us!”

Snoth was a good runner, the school champion. He set a new school record as he ran to the fence. He lifted the cat and four arms reached down and took it from him.

He could feel the adult’s footsteps shaking the ground behind him.

Then he had an inspiration: he shouted loudly, as loudly as he could: “**Go! Go, get the police!**”

(This is a good place to end this chapter. In Chapter Four, I might tell you a little about the Onion of Weeping.)



Snoth, Jennifer and Nystagmus

Chapter Four

Jennifer looked up from her computer at her friends. She had been reading Wikipedia. She said: “Hey, look at this! It says here onions are a deadly poison for cats. We shouldn’t feel so bad that we left the cat at the animal shelter. If Tiger (his name was on his collar) had stayed and joined the Club, we’d have fed him the Onion of Weeping; he’d have cried like we do and then he would have died.”

Nystagmus said: “Well, that’s true. If anyone joins, they must eat the Onion of Weeping. We would have killed poor Tiger.”

The three friends all remembered the Old Lady. How Jennifer was running late for school one morning and had taken a shortcut through the garden of the Old People’s Village. She had heard sounds that made her stop and listen. The sounds came through an open window in one of the tiny little flats. She looked in and she saw an old, old lady, eating an onion and crying. The old lady seemed weak. She was very thin.

The old lady stood and walked shakily to her fridge. When she opened it, Jennifer saw it was almost empty; it held only a bottle of water.

That was the start of it all, an old lady, thin and weak. By the look of her clothes, which were faded and torn, the lady must have been poor. Perhaps she was so poor she had only an onion and some water

for her day's food. When Jennifer saw the lady, she looked in her lunchbox. Mum had packed a tub of yoghurt again. Jennifer didn't hesitate: she took the yoghurt, dropped to her knees and crawled to the window. She reached up and placed the little tub of food on the window sill. Then she crawled away. She didn't want the poor lady to see her and feel ashamed.

At lunchtime her friend Nystagmus wanted to swap his fetta sandwich for Jennifer's yoghurt. "I haven't got yogurt today," she said.

She told Nystagmus about the poor hungry lady in the old people's cottages. Snoth listened quietly to Jennifer's story. Quietly he popped his banana inside Jennifer's lunchbox so she wouldn't be hungry. At the same time, Snoth slid his fetta sandwich into Jennifer's lunchbox.

When Jennifer finished her story she looked down and saw what her friends had done. She felt as if she would cry. She realised how good her friends were. Jennifer said, "You are very kind to give away your own food so I wouldn't be hungry."

Both the boys said: *We only did what you did!*

The three all learned that day how lucky they were to be in this friendship. They thought about the old lady and wondered whether she had any friends. They decided they would try to make sure the old lady never had to go hungry. Every school day Jennifer would deliver a tub of yogurt and all

three would share their school lunches.

And on weekends, Nystagmus would drop off fish and chips from his grandparents' shop.

One Sunday morning Snoth tried eating a raw onion. He cried as he peeled it and he cried more when he started to eat. He had an idea. He ran to tell Nystagmus – he was a good runner, he ran everywhere – but Nystagmus was not at home. Snoth ran to the shop and found Nystagmus talking with someone in the house at the back. He knocked and found the person with Nystagmus was Jennifer. Snoth told them about the onion and about his idea.

And that was the day they started the Threefold Cord.

(We'll have to wait a while to find out whether Snoth escaped from the cruel boy and the terrifying adult.)

Chapter Five

The next day Jennifer arrived at school just in time for class. Her eyes were red and swollen. The teacher was very strict: you weren't allowed to talk. Nystagmus asked Jennifer with his eyes: *What's wrong?*

You would get into trouble even if you passed a note to someone. Jennifer wrote one word on the back of her hand – LATER. She showed it to Nystagmus, then she showed it to Snoth who sat on her other side. Her friends nodded. Every so often they heard Jennifer sniff. It made Snoth think: *What's made Jen cry? I can't smell onions ...*

At recess the three met behind the toilets. It was a smelly place and no-one liked to go there. So it was a good place for talking privately, for secrets.

Jennifer pulled her friends close so she wouldn't have to speak loudly. Snoth and Nystagmus stared, wondering about Jennifer's news. Jennifer's mouth opened, then closed. She shook her head. The boys saw tears in her eyes. Nystagmus couldn't bear it. He had to know: *What? What's happened?*

Jennifer took a deep breath. She opened her mouth and her whisper was like a shout: "*She's dead!*"

Two boys gasped: "Who? Who's dead?" – came from two throats. Nystagmus thought of Papou and Yaya. They were old. Old people could die, he knew

that because his grandmother's sister had died in Cyprus.

Jennifer's voice came again, a whisper half choked by tears: "The old lady. There was a big black car outside her cottage. And two men. Their car had words on the side: Jim's Funerals."

Snoth's arms were around Jennifer's shoulders. Nystagmus hugged them both. No-one spoke. No-one needed to. Six wet eyes, six sniffing runny nostrils, no words. Three friends thinking about a thin old lady. They didn't know her name. None of them had ever spoken with her. Just an old lady who had only an onion and no friends.

The bell rang for class. Jennifer said: "Every time I see an onion I will think of her and I will remember."

She smiled. Snoth and Nystagmus smiled back. Then they all laughed. In class they thought of onions and they smiled inwardly. They felt better, they had each other.

(If those children are always eating onions and crying and sniffing, why don't they carry hankies?)