

## Secret of the Keeper

**J. Lewis Kyle**

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*Secret of the Keeper* is an allegorical tale that follows the often harrowing journey of Romulus, a lion, and his three companions, an elephant, an owl, and a monkey, as they set out to seek truth and freedom.

Romulus is the newest resident of the Libertad Zoo, and the one most anxious to find a way out. When a storm causes enough damage to allow the animals to escape, it is Romulus who reminds his three friends that freedom is within their grasp. However, the animals have become so accustomed to their captivity that, at first, they cannot imagine another way of life. "Acceptance of her chains had drained her hope," considers Ariel, the owl. "And hope is the first casualty of bondage."

Believing it is his destiny to seek out and destroy the Keeper, who rules the land and is responsible for their imprisonment, Romulus is undeterred by the others, who initially scoff at his thoughts of escape and revenge. When Ariel confesses a vision in which all animals are saved by a mysterious "Whoo," Romulus seizes the opportunity to convince his companions that the journey is not only necessary but also prophesied.

Themes exploring the essence of truth and freedom provide the thread to which the story holds fast, and author J. Lewis Kyle weaves a tale which delves far deeper than the mere escapades of a group of zoo animals seeking freedom. Spiritual and moral questions are explored as the animals make their increasingly dangerous way across the kingdoms of Pain, Fear, and Doubt. What does it mean to be free? How much is one willing to sacrifice to be free? And who or what truly imprisons and keeps one from seeing truth?

These challenging and often murky ideas are accented by the striking and effective photographic illustrations by Courtney Barron, which blend shadowy silhouettes against detailed backgrounds, emphasizing the clarity that seems just outside of view, a truth sometimes overshadowed by the struggle to survive.

As the four companions travel together, they come to a deeper understanding of themselves and each other. As a group, they are well rounded, each animal's unique contribution providing a necessary element in their quest. Timara, the elephant, has the bulk and strength the others lack; Ariel, the owl, holds claim to wisdom and the relative freedom of flight; Hannibal, the monkey, is quick and agile, traits that soon prove necessary to all of them; and Romulus is determined, confident, and focused. As their journey progresses, they learn just how much they need one another on an elemental level, and when the Keeper's secret is revealed at last, it bears a message even the stubborn Romulus is ready to hear.

*Secret of the Keeper* is an absorbing, imaginative tale of self-discovery and perseverance as well as friendship and sacrifice. Kyle's characterizations are well done and occasional typos don't hinder the plot, which flows smoothly toward a satisfying conclusion.

JEANNINE CHARTIER HANSCOM (June 6, 2011)

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