

The Cloudbird and the Tiger's Boy

by Greg Wilson

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For Madeleine

who is taking me on the greatest journey of my life.

Prolog

Consider Cherne. A diamond adrift in the heavens, its single continent is surrounded on all sides by a great ocean whose outer shore, the Worldrim, rises up to hold that sweet speck of life as a child might cup a drop of water in her hand.

Cherne's history began with the Pilots, and nearly ended with them as well. Powerful and inhuman, their reign ended in a century-long Mutiny that scarred the moon, turned Lake Karaband into a sea of glass, and littered the land with strange magic. When it was over the Pilots were gone, leaving the world to carry on as best it could.

Now look there, where the Brumoso Mountains rise above the endless squabbles of the Ninety-Nine Kingdoms. A girl is doing her chores. No longer a child but not yet an adult, she has no idea that her world is about to change forever...

Chapter 1

Noxy was collecting spiderwebs when the soldiers came to Stale. Winter had turned to spring, and the sun shone diamond-bright in a clear blue sky, but stubborn crusts of snow still lurked between the twisted mountain pines.

“Shoo.” She poked a fat brown squirrel spider with a stick. It waved its hairy forelegs at her indignantly before scuttling away. Noxy cut the anchor threads of its with two practiced twists of her knife and began winding it onto a stick.

“Do you think I should put new buttons on my coat?” Sensy asked, pulling a branch aside to see if another web lay beneath it.

Noxy glanced at her. “Why? Are those ones coming loose?”

Sensy looked down at her soft brown yakskin coat critically. “No. They’re just kind of plain.” She sighed wistfully. “Granna Fee has some really nice red ones. She said she’d give them to me if I weeded her pepper garden.”

“Her whole garden?” Noxy shook the dew off the spider’s web and stuffed it into the loosely-woven bag slung over her shoulder. “That’s a lot of work for some buttons you don’t really need.”

“Oh, you’re no help,” Sensy pouted. She had spent the winter embroidering red and green patterns on her jacket’s cuffs and collar. All she seemed to want to talk about any more was her clothes and her hair and the boys she and Noxy might meet that summer, who couldn’t possibly be as boring as the ones in Stale. Especially Rash—practically *anyone* would be more fun to be around than Rash.

“A lot of girls are like that when they get their changes,” Granna Fee had said when Noxy had complained about the flighty stranger who seemed to have taken her best friend’s place.

“Not me!” Noxy had declared.

Granna Fee had laughed and ruffled her granddaughter’s hair. “No, daffodil, not you.”

Noxy was reaching for another web when a high-pitched voice shouted, “Soldiers! Soldiers!”

“Oh, great,” she sighed, rolling her eyes at Sensy. The whole point of going out to collect spiderwebs that morning had been to get away from the younger children for a few hours.

Young Gas crashed through a bush and tripped over a root, then picked himself up and ran to the two girls. “There’s soldiers in the village!” he said breathlessly, tugging at Noxy’s sleeve. “And they’ve been fighting! And there’s a *tiger* with them!”

“Sure,” Noxy said wearily, pulling her arm away. “And there’s a dragon under your bed.” The pass below Stale were still blanketed in snow. Avalanches happened almost every day—someone would have to be foolish *and* desperate to be on the road this early in the spring.

“But there *are*!” Young Gas protested, hopping from one foot to another with excitement. “They’ve got swords, and some of them are bleeding! And the tiger can talk!”

Noxy opened her mouth to say, “Why don’t you go jump in the fishpond?” but a deep *doom doom* cut her off. She and Sensy looked at each other wide-eyed. *Doom doom*, pause. *Doom doom*, pause. It was Stale’s home drum. It meant a house was on fire, or a bear had wandered into the village, or someone was lost in a storm and needed help to find their way home. It meant trouble.

Noxy hung her bag on a nearby branch. “Come on!” she told Sensy, setting off at a run.

“I told you!” Young Gas shouted behind them. “I told you there was—hey, wait for me!”

Patches of ice made the path slippery underfoot, but Noxy didn’t slow down until she reached the ridge overlooking the village. There, in a clearing left by a long-ago lighting strike, she paused to catch her breath.

The ancient walls of the fortress of Stale lay below her. Rain and snow had rounded the edges off the Pilots’ stonework, making it look like a snow fort that was just starting to melt, but it was still as solid as the mountains themselves.

The village’s two-story wooden houses sheltered inside the walls like ducklings in a nest. Thin wisps of smoke rose from their slate chimneys, while vegetable plots and racks of drying spiderwebs filled the spaces between them.

To the west, the wall dropped straight into a steep-sided gorge. A net woven from squirrel spiders’ webs was stretched over its top, as light as a dream but as strong as steel. Another net hung down at the gorge’s mouth to make a gate. Inside, just visible from the ridge, two gray clouds drifted half-asleep.

Noxy had spent every moment she could that winter watching the clouds, riding them, and, most importantly, learning how to mind-talk to them. Grownups called the pair slow and lazy, but they were the most exciting things in Noxy’s world—except, of course, for the herd of half-wild clouds grazing on the mountain peaks in the distance.

Noxy was about to set off again when Sensy grabbed her hand. “Wait!” she hissed, pointing into the trees. For a moment all Noxy saw was branches. Then a pair of brown eyes blinked, and suddenly she could make out a hairy form in the trees.

Noxy’s mouth went dry. She felt Sensy squeezed her hand, and squeezed back. As long as they didn’t startle it...

Little Gas burst out of the bushes behind them and ran headlong into Noxy. “Oof!” he exclaimed, “What are you—mmph!”

“Sh!” Noxy whispered urgently, her hand clamped over his mouth. “Don’t... move...”

Before Young Gas could protest, the troll stepped into the clearing. His fur was silvered with age, and his eyes seemed as old as the mountains themselves. He and Noxy stared at each other for one long moment before he leaped for the nearest branch and swung himself up into the tree. After one last look, he disappeared into the greenery.

Sensy was the first to speak. “Wh-what’s a troll doing *here?*” she asked shakily, still holding Noxy’s hand.

Noxy shook her head. “Worry about that later. Come on!”

The drum had stopped booming by the time the children reached the fortress wall. An enormous stone door stood half-open at the entrance, its iron hinges melted in some long-ago battle. The wooden gate that Stale’s current human inhabitants had built to fill the gap was made of whole tree trunks, but still looked like a child’s toy next to the Pilots’ ancient work.

Inside, it seemed like the whole village was standing in the main square—or rather, the whole village minus most of the adults, who had left a week ago to collect Stale’s clouds from their wintering grounds in the high peaks. Three hundred people were there, from babies in their mothers’ arms to Grappa Gas with his cane, all in an uncertain muttering half-circle.

A dozen soldiers stood at attention in front of them. Each one had a battle mask painted with fierce swirls of red and black pushed up on top of his head. Leather armor, as thick as boot soles and studded with metal, protected their bodies, while heavy wool kilts reached from their waists to their knees. Some had swords in scabbards on their hips, while others had bows or spears, but each had a heavy pack on his back.

And Young Gas had been right: they had been fighting. One man’s hand was wrapped in a bloody bandage, while another’s arm was in a sling. None of them had washed or shaved in days, and from their haggard faces, it didn’t look like they had slept much either.

But Noxy didn’t see any of that right away. What she saw instead was the tiger. His stripes were dark brown on tan, not black on orange like the picture in the story book that three generations of village children had passed from hand to hand. A pair of golden earrings hung from his left ear, and his tail twitched now and again as if the villagers’ murmurs reminded him that he had not yet eaten lunch.

A boy stood beside him, armored like the soldiers and carrying a pack as large as any of theirs. Four half-healed scars ran across his cheek, glistening redly against his

near-black skin. His back was straight, but he was trembling, though whether it was from cold, weariness, or fear, Noxy couldn't tell.

Sensy tugged at Noxy's sleeve. "Who *are* they?"

"Sh!" Noxy whispered back, not willing to admit that she didn't know. "I'm trying to hear!"

Noxy's mother Indy nodded at the soldier she had been speaking to and stepped up onto the speaker's stone that lay in the center of the square. "Friends," she said in what Noxy thought of as her official voice, "Friends, please. I know it is early in the year for travellers, but please greet Sergeant Dorbu and the Gifted Kulbinder."

The soldier she had been speaking to bowed to the villagers. The tiger merely blinked. "They and their companions will be our guests for the next little while," Indy continued. "I trust you will all make them welcome."

"How long's a little while?" Grappa Gas asked loudly. Noxy saw her mother wince. Everyone loved Grappa Gas—or nearly everyone—but as Granna Fee said, sometimes he had the manners of a constipated yak.

"Until they are ready to travel again," Indy reassured him. Her eyes swept across the crowd. "Their journey has been a hard one—they hoped to get through to Chaghan, but the forest had other plans. Sergeant? Would you like to say a few words?"

The sergeant bowed again and stepped up onto the speaker's stone as Indy stepped down. Like his men, his skin was black compared to the villagers' brown, and his head was fuzzy with wiry stubble. The two yellow ribbons around his sleeve were the only sign of his rank.

Before he could open his mouth, Grappa Gas asked, "So, are you lot loyalists or rebels?"

"I'm sure he'll tell us if you give him a chance to speak!" Heads turned as a burly man, all shoulders and scowl, pushed to the front of the crowd.

"Uh oh," Noxy said under her breath. Grappa Gas's son Aft was the best cloudbird in Stale, at least in his own estimation. After one too many arguments over plans for the summer cloud drive, Indy had ordered him to stay behind and mend equipment instead of going with the other adults. Grappa Gas had happily taken the mayor's side, and father and son had been squabbling non-stop ever since.

"Um, thank you, honored," the soldier said. "And thank you, people of Stale. As your mayor said, my comrades and I were trying to see if the pass was clear so that we could carry news to Chaghan. We—" He paused, and for a moment Noxy could see how exhausted he was. "There was an avalanche. Three days ago. It drove those of us who survived off the road into the forest. Everything seemed all right at first, but then the forest took offence and..." He shrugged. "Well, you can guess what happened next."

The villagers murmured. The Herd of Trees covered the Brumoso Mountains from Uws in the south to Garheim's frigid shores in the north. It didn't hate humans the way the Jungle of Thind did, but it guarded its territory as jealously as a mother bear guarded her cubs. Gifted creatures that wanted to live in the forest did so on sufferance, while humans were not welcome at all, not unless they stuck to the handful of roads built long ago by the Pilots. Travellers who strayed off them were rarely given warnings, and *never* given second chances.

A cold breeze whipped the sergeant's words across the square as he continued. "The worst of our wounded couldn't go any further, so our commander made camp and sent us here for help." All traces of his earlier smile were gone. "That was yesterday morning. I pray they are still safe, but if they are, they won't be for much longer."

Grappa Gas broke the silence that followed. "So which side *are* you on?" he asked, his voice still loud but a notch less rude.

"I have the privilege of serving Respected Shudarga in this matter," Sergeant Dorbu answered calmly.

A handful of oldsters gasped at the rebel leader's name, but Aft crossed his arms and nodded approvingly. "Good for you!" he said firmly, his glare daring his father to disagree.

Grappa Gas thumped his wooden leg loudly on the cobblestones. "Good for them, maybe, but what about us? If the king's men come looking for you, these walls won't keep them out for long."

"Quiet, both of you!" Indy said sharply. She was a head shorter than either of the men, but the iron in her voice left no room for argument. She nodded at the sergeant. "Please, go ahead."

The sergeants shook his head. "We didn't choose Stale for its walls, honored. We didn't really choose it at all. We just washed up here because we need help. If you're afraid that'll bring trouble, we'll understand if you send us on our way."

"Nobody is sending anyone away," Indy said firmly. "We may not have as much as some, but we take pride in our hospitality. I'm sure we can find some spare blankets to keep you warm and something better than hardtack to feed you for as long as you need to stay."

"Thank you, honored," the sergeant said. "But what we really want is a couple of clouds so that we can go and rescue our friends."

Chapter 2

The next five minutes were chaos. Out of the question, Grappa Gas said, whacking his wooden leg with his cane for emphasis. The king's law might overlook them giving shelter to a bunch of strays who wandered in out of the cold, but flying off to rescue their friends? Why, when the *tralpa* came back—

—they'd show him the gate and send him on his way, Aft cut in, arms crossed and brows knotted. The lazy good-for-nothing had run for the capital the moment word of the rebellion had reached the mountains, and hadn't been seen since. As far as Aft was concerned, he'd given up any right he ever had to tell people what the law was or wasn't. And anyway, if they were going to shelter rebels, it wouldn't matter if they'd come to Stale or Stale had gone to them. And anyway again, what would folk in other villages say if they heard that Stalers had left men in the forest to die? Saints, what would their own folk say when they got back?

The argument swirled and churned across the cobblestones. Little whirlpools of disagreement came together, spun about, and flew apart as people disagreed with their neighbors, or turned around to agree with something they had overheard and were sucked into yet another “what if?”

“This is going to go on forever,” Noxy sighed. She and Sensy had stayed aloof on the sidelines, old enough to want to be part of the grownup discussion, but young enough that the whole thing seemed vaguely ridiculous.

“It's so stupid,” Sensy agreed. “I mean, they're all going to wind up doing whatever your mother wants them to.”

“Unless they get eaten by a *tiger*!” The two girls shrieked and jumped as sharp fingers poked them in the ribs.

“Rash! Don't!” Sensy punched the smirking boy in the arm. “I *hate* it when you sneak up on me!”

“I know,” Rash smirked, running a thumb over the lip fuzz he insisted on calling a mustache. It had become a habit over the winter, one that Noxy had told him countless times he ought to break before *someone* broke his stupid finger. “But it's better than being eaten, isn't it?”

“The tiger's not going to eat anyone, you big yak,” Noxy said as scornfully as she could, her heart still racing.

“How do you know? He looks awfully hungry to me.” Rash licked his lips and growled. “Mmm... tasty, tasty human.”

“Stop it,” Sensy said, punching his arm again. “I mean it.”

“Ow.” Rash rubbed his arm, looking genuinely surprised at the force of Sensy's blow. “I'm just kidding.”

“Well, it's not funny,” Sensy grumbled, hugging herself. Stale's walls sheltered the square from the mountain winds, but the air was still cold.

“Anyway,” Rash said, not quite rolling his eyes, “What I want to know is, do we get to go on this rescue mission, or are we going to be stuck here with the littles again.”

“Of course we'll get to go!” Noxy exclaimed.

“Really?” Rash ran his thumb over his mustache again. “Then why isn't anyone ordering us around?”

Noxy opened her mouth, closed it, then grunted, “Wait here.”

She strode toward the center of the square where her mother was speaking with the sergeant. The tiger sat impassively on his haunches next to them, twitching his tail at every sudden sound. The boy with the scarred face stood beside him. His face was beyond exhausted, but when his shoulders started to droop, the tiger growled quietly and he snapped to attention again.

Noxy's mother caught sight of her. “Oh, and this is my daughter, Probably Noxious.”

“Honored Noxious.” The sergeant bowed slightly.

Noxy hesitated, wondering if she was supposed to bow back, and was immediately annoyed at herself. Cloudherds didn't bow—that was a silly lowlander custom. “Just call me Noxy,” she told him. “*Anna*, which cloud do you want me and Sensy and Rash on? We can go and start getting them ready while everyone's jawing.”

Indy gave her daughter a look that Noxy knew all too well. “Who said anything about you three going?”

But Noxy knew her mother almost as well as her mother knew her, and had already assembled her arguments. They were definitely old enough—why, they were all going to be riding *real* clouds in a few weeks, not just tame old pair floating about in the cloud pen. And they wouldn't be going far, just a few gallops down the pass, and it was really important for cloudherds to know how to do rescues, wasn't it? And

—

“Stop.” Her mother held up a hand. “You can go. But!” she continued, “But you ride with Grappa Gas and Granna Fee, and that's all you do—ride. Understood?”

Noxy nodded, trying and failing to suppress a triumphant grin. “Yes, *anna*.” As she turned to go, she heard her mother sigh and Sergeant Dorbu say, “My men do that to me all the time too.”

Rockfalls and avalanches were common in the mountains, and more than a few tinkers and traders had been lifted out of a difficult spot after running into a bear or a pack of trolls, so it only took the villagers a few minutes to gather what they

needed. Coils of hemp rope with spider-silk cores hung ready in the long shed next to the cloud pen, and everyone kept an extra yakskin cap somewhere, just in case.

"You look ridiculous," Sensy told Rash flatly as he came down the wooden steps to the mounting platform. The older men had been teaching him how to embroider during the winter's enforced idleness, and had stitched what he claimed were eagle's wings onto the side flaps of his cap.

Rash looked her up and down. "Really? Because I think you look amazing. Excuse me." He winked at Noxy and stepped around the pair of speechless thirteen-year-old girls to take his place on the platform.

"Ears all!" Aft called out, clapping his hands. Despite the cold, he only wore a sleeveless yakskin vest, knee-length wool shorts, and a sturdy pair of boots. His hair was braided back in a thick club with a blue ribbon from his wife's wedding collar woven through it for luck. "I'm fore on Big Blue, Gas and Fee will ride spotter on Pillow. We'll down, lift, and out, quick and simple, and get our new friends back here for soup before you can sneeze. No adventures, right?" He turned a steely glare toward Noxy, Sensy, and Rash, who nodded and mumbled, "No adventures."

"Right!" Without any more ceremony than that he walked to the end of the plank that jutted out from the platform, looked down to check that Big Blue was below him, and jumped.

Noxy leaned over the railing and held her breath. One, two, three... Big Blue dimpled under Aft's weight as the burly cloudherd hit him dead center, sending gray waves rippling across the cloud's back. Aft rolled over onto his knees and pressed his hands down firmly. Noxy couldn't see his face, but she knew his eyes would be closed in concentration as he mind-spoke to the cloud to rouse it from its morning doze.

Something twinged in the back of her head. She blinked, momentarily disoriented. "Did you say something?" she asked her friends.

"I said, show-off," Rash replied, a note of envy in his voice. "Look, he's coming up."

Noxy shook her head, the strange feeling already half-forgotten as Big Blue rose slowly toward the platform, bunching in on itself as it came. Aft had risen to one knee, but kept one hand on the cloud's back so that he could continue to mind-talk to it.

A silver-tipped scaw shot out of its cliffside nest, trilling its startled displeasure at the sight of a human just a few strides away. Aft looked up and smiled the way he only did when he was on a cloud. "You want me to get Pillow for you?" he called up to his father.

"No need, I can—damn that boy!" Grappa Gas harrumphed as Aft took three long strides across Big Blue's back and launched himself into the air again.

Rash whistled. "Nice leap," he said appreciatively as Aft landed squarely in the middle of Pillow's back with an audible *poof!* "And blind, too."

"It's not such a trick," Noxy said dismissively, though she was secretly impressed. "He must have got Big Blue to tell him where she was."

"Sure, but would you trust a cloud's eyes that much?" Rash challenged her. "Most of the time I can't make cheese or cherries out of what they say."

Noxy shrugged. She had realized early in their training that mind-talking was a lot easier for her than it was for Sensy or Rash, or even for some of the olders who had been riding clouds for years. She had stopped talking about it after a few muttered accusations of showing off. The only person she shared her progress with now was Granna Fee, and even she didn't—

Twinge. She winced and put her hand on the back of her head. There it was again, that feeling of, of—of something, but what?

This time Sensy noticed. "Are you all right?"

"Sure," Noxy lied. One of the few things Aft and Grappa Gas agreed on was that cloudherds shouldn't fly if they were sick, so she wasn't going to admit to anything that might give them an excuse to leave her behind.

Grappa Gas pulled a small scrimshawed yak horn from the leather sheath on his belt. "Here," he said, handing it to Rash. "Let's see if you've been paying attention to your lessons."

The boy nodded and raised it to his lips to blow two long notes, *dee dah*. Big Blue obediently turned and drifted over to the platform. It was hard to train a cloud to answer to sound, and much less reliable than mind-speech, but it was one of the hundred skills the teens had to master if they hoped to ride the giant creatures on their own some day.

Aft brought Pillow up next to Big Blue and stepped off nonchalantly. With a mutter and a glare, Grappa Gas told the teenagers to get on, get on, they didn't have all day. He and Granna Fee followed. "Oof," Noxy's grandmother said as she sat cross-legged. "That's not as easy as it used to be." But then she smiled like the girl she had once been and put her arm around Noxy. Her granddaughter leaned against her the way she had so many times before, wondering when and how her grandmother had grown so small.

Behind them, Rash nudged Sensy with his elbow. "You can lean on me if you get cold, you know."

Sensy sniffed. "I don't expect I'll ever get *that* cold."

Granna Fee pressed her hand against Pillow and closed her eyes. The cloud turned obediently and began drifting toward the spiderweb gate that hung down over mouth of the gorge. Meanwhile, two of Stale's other oldsters climbed aboard Big Blue. As they took their places behind Aft, the cloud slowly began to sink.

“Hold him there,” Indy called to Aft. She turned to Sergeant Dorbu. “Go ahead—jump.”

“Um...” Sergeant Dorbu looked from the cloud to Indy and back again. “Wouldn't it have been simpler for me just to climb on like everyone else?”

“Absolutely,” Indy said. “But everyone has to jump their first time. For luck,” she added cheerfully.

“If you say so, honored,” the sergeant replied dubiously. He glanced at the two soldiers beside him. With muttered prayers to the Pilots to watch over them, the three men pulled their battle masks down over their faces and jumped.

Poof! Poof! Poof! The three lowland soldiers hit the cloud feet-first and immediately toppled over.

“Mind yourself, he's a bit slippery,” Aft said as the sergeant and his men struggled unsuccessfully to stand. “Probably best if you just sit. You'll spook him if you keep tumbling about like that.”

“Ready?” Granna Fee called from Pillow's back. Without waiting for an answer, she turned the cloud toward the cloud pen's gate, muttering softly as she mind-spoke her orders.

Cloudherding is cold work. In the spring, in the mountains, when breath still fogs at mid-day and the wind pokes its fingers through every loose seam and down every collar, it's beyond freezing. A hundred heartbeats after they left the cloud pen, Granna Fee had wrapped a fleece around herself and Noxy, leaving only their faces exposed. Rash and Sensy had done the same—as Sensy said, he might be a yak, but at least he was a *warm* yak.

Only Grappa Gas seemed unaffected. “Saints and their inventions, but I miss this,” he sighed. He'd brought a cushion to rest his wooden leg on so that it wouldn't poke into Pillow, but was dressed in the same long coat and scarf that he had been wearing when the soldiers arrived. “Look, the condors are back in their nest! We should invite them them to visit some time.”

“They're not really the most sociable of creatures,” Granna Fee said dryly.

Grappa Gas harrumphed. “You just have to get to know them.”

“Do you think they'd want to meet the tiger?” Noxy asked. “I mean, another Gifted might...” She trailed off.

“Let's worry about today before we start making social arrangements,” Granna Fee said.

It had taken Sergeant Dorbu and his men a day to hike up the pass to Stale Leftovers. The clouds covered the same distance in less than an hour, even with the headwind. “There,” Granna Fee said, pointing at a thin plume of smoke.

Grappa Gas frowned. “I thought he said there were just a few of them.”

Granna Fee frowned too. "Maybe 'a few' means something different to lowlanders."

The soldiers' makeshift camp sat on a barren outcrop of rock that rose out of the forest like an island. Two dozen drab gray tents huddled around a small fire. Shading her eyes with her hand, Noxy saw a handful of men moving about, some propped against one another to stay upright.

Grappa Gas gave a low whistle. "Aft's not going to like this."

"Neither is my daughter," Granna Fee replied darkly.

One of the injured soldiers spotted the clouds a moment later. The cloudherds were too far away to hear his shouts, but there was no mistaking the urgency in the way he waved his arms. Other soldiers crawled out of their tents and began waving and shouting as well as Aft steered Big Blue in a long arc to the upwind side of the outcrop. After a brief argument conducted via tooted horns, Granna Fee had Pillow hover directly above the camp.

"You lot keep your eyes wide," Grappa Gas ordered the teenagers curtly. "Forest might be happy to let us take them, or it might not."

Big Blue descended until he bumped against the edge of the outcrop, his back level with its top. The older cloudherds riding with Aft stayed on board while he strode forward, barking orders to hurry the soldiers along. Only a few wind-borne words reached Noxy, but that was enough for her to know that he was telling the injured men to leave their gear, to leave their tents, to leave everything they couldn't pick up *right away*.

In singles and pairs, the men struggled to clamber onto Big Blue's back. A few wore their battle masks, but most had tied them out of the way on the backs of their helmets. It made them look like a doll Noxy had once seen with one happy face and one sad, except the soldiers' looked fierce and weary.

The older cloudherds helped drag the worst of the injured onto the cloud, spacing the soldiers out to keep their weight balanced. Meanwhile, a soldier began arguing with Aft, pointing at a large tent standing a short distance away from the others. Other soldiers joined in, until Aft was facing a half-circle of angry men.

Finally he threw up his hands in surrender. Noxy couldn't hear what he said, but half a dozen men broke away from the group and hurried as best they could toward the tent. As their comrades climbed onto Pillow, Aft made sweeping motions with his arm and pointed at the outcrop.

"No no no," Grappa Gas muttered. "You can take them all, lad, just get them loaded up and get out of there."

"What? What's happening?" Noxy asked.

"Butter-brain wants us to come in and load the rest," Grappa Gas said angrily. "But look—over there!"

Something brown moved behind the trees a dozen strides from the lower edge of the outcrop. Something else—something larger—briefly let itself be seen a few strides further away. In singles and pairs and packs, the forest was mustering.

Grappa Gas spat over Pillow's side. "They're holding back for now," he said. "But if we go in, they'll be on us like an avalanche."

"It's not your decision to make," Granna Fee told him. "Aft's riding fore on this one, and—"

"—and you follow your fore. I know, I know. Saints." Grappa Gas looked like he wanted to spit again.

Granna Fee pressed her palm into Pillow's back and closed her eyes. The cloud began to descend.

Grappa Gas glared at the three teenagers. "You see something, you shout, got it?"

"Yes, grappa," Noxy said. Rash and Sensy just nodded.

Ten heartbeats, twenty... They were level with the camp. Granna Fee halted their descent long enough for Pillow to lift off and drift out of their way. "Hurry up!" Grappa Gas shouted, waving urgently.

The soldiers who had gone back to the large tent struggled toward the cloud, each with a heavy canvas-wrapped bundle on his shoulder. As they made their way through the camp, a cougar stepped out of the trees. Catching sight of it, the soldier at the end of the line snatched a branch out of the fire and waved it, shouting, "Hah! Get back! Hah!"

"Oh no," Granna Fee breathed. Beside her, Grappa Gas swore fiercely and yanked his slingshot out of his belt. In one smooth motion he folded its brace down against his forearm, pulled a water-smoothed rock from his pocket, drew, aimed, and fired.

Thwack! Even from thirty strides away, Noxy heard the stone strike the branch and send it flying. "Run, you idiot, run!" Grappa Gas shouted.

It was too late. The forest was awake, and angry. Sensy shrieked as a brown bear charged out of the trees to rear up on its hind legs and roar, "Get them!" Another bear joined it, then a cougar, and then the trees were boiling with trolls, dozens of them, hooting and shaking branches until it looked like the trees were trying to uproot themselves.

"Get them!" the Gifted bear roared again, and the animals charged. Bears and cougars, a snarling wolverine, trolls on all fours with their teeth bared, all came roaring and snarling and hooting through the camp, the Gifted and the ordinary side by side, their own feuds forgotten because someone had raised fire against the forest.

The first of the soldiers fell to one knee, dragged himself back to his feet, and fell forward onto Pillow's flank. "I've got you!" Rash shouted, dragging the bundle and then the soldier up onto the cloud. Another, a third, a fourth, a fifth—

“Look out!” Noxy shouted at the last soldier as a cougar snarled and launched itself at him. The soldier spun around and flung up his hand as if to signal *stop!*

The cougar crumpled mid-air and fell to the ground as though it had hit an invisible wall. The soldier doubled over to vomit, then stumbled the last half dozen steps to the cloud. Rash and Sensy grabbed his bundle. Noxy took his hand. “Go! Go! Go!” she shouted.

Pillow pulled herself into the air. A second cougar made a leap for the soldier's dangling legs and snarled with rage as it missed them by a handspan. Noxy felt herself slipping under the soldier's weight, but strong hands grabbed her shoulders. Together, Grappa Gas and Rash pulled her and the soldier onto the cloud.

Noxy rolled over and stood up. “That was close,” she said shakily.

“Too close. Too *damned* close!” Grappa Gas rounded on the soldier he had saved. “We could have been dinner, all of us, and for what?” He whacked the long bundle beside the soldier with his cane.

The soldier surged to his feet and caught the old cloudbird's arm. “Stop.” His voice was as cold as ice fields beneath them.

Grappa Gas tried to pull his arm free, but the soldier's grip was like iron. “Well that's a mess of a thank you!” he said angrily.

The soldier released him. “My apologies. And thank you.” He swept his gaze across everyone on the cloud. “Thank you all.”

“Hmph.” Grappa Gas scowled at the impassive soldier. “What was so aching important you just couldn't leave it behind?”

“My men.” The soldier nodded toward the bundle at his feet, his face set. “I promised them we would give them a proper farewell.”

Half a dozen expressions flitted across Grappa Gas's face as he realized what their cargo was. “Ah. Hard world, lad, hard world.” He hesitated. “And that magic you did—I hope it didn't cost more than you can afford.”

The soldier glanced over his shoulder. Behind them, the forest creatures were tearing every man-made thing in the camp to pieces. “It doesn't matter. All that matters is that my men are safe.”

“Safe as houses, honored,” one of the men beside Noxy said, his accent as burred as any cloudbird's. “And don't worry. Stale's folk will give your dead a proper send-off.”

Grappa Gas spun around. “You! What are you doing here?”

The man who had spoken wiped a his nose on his arm, leaving a long streak of nose drool on his sleeve. “Flying, by the looks of it. Hey, Fee!” He patted the cloud. “Mind if I take over for a bit?”

Chapter 3

Later, in the diary she kept hidden under her mattress even though she knew her mother knew about it, Noxy wrote, “There was a lot of shouting after that.” Grappa Gas did a lot of it, just like always, but Granna Fee was almost incandescent. That man was *not* going to Stale. As a matter of fact, the only place he was going was off her cloud, right now, and the drop be damned.

“Because he's been shunned!” she said icily to the soldier who had been last to board—who, it turned out, was the troop's commander. “He's never to speak to a cloudherd, never to set foot in our villages, and never, *ever* to ride a cloud again.”

As weak as he obviously was, the commander didn't flinch under Granna Fee's fury. “We needed a guide. He was the only one we could find.”

“Would have been better off wandering around in circles than following the likes of him,” Grappa Gas said darkly.

The commander looked down at the canvas-wrapped body at his feet. “Perhaps. But what's done is done.”

Nobody said anything after that. Grappa Gas sat shoulder-to-shoulder with Granna Fee, each apparently trying to out-sowl the other. Noxy, Rash, and Sensy huddled together in a vain attempt to keep warm. The commander sat next to the grimy ex-cloudherd and watched the mountains slide past, while the soldiers did what soldiers always do when they have a moment of peace: they fell asleep. One started to snore, stopping only when the commander nudged him with his boot.

With her hand on Pillow's back, Noxy could feel how unhappy the cloud was. It wasn't just that she was carrying strangers, or that those strangers were bleeding and miserable. When clouds died, they just spread out into nothing. The thought that something could end but still be there—that it could go from being alive to being like a rock or a log—made the canvas-wrapped bodies more frightening than storm winds and lightning combined.

Sh, sh, sh, Noxy mind-spoke soothingly, stroking the cloud as if she was an overgrown house cat. *Home soon, then rest.* At that moment, she wanted it just as much as the cloud.

Aft brought Big Blue down in the clearing in front of the fortress gate. An ankle-high carpet of ferns and spring-green shoots bent under the cloud's weight as he settled into place. The waiting villagers helped the wounded soldiers to the ground and handed them heavy blankets and steaming bowls of sweet dark tea.

Aft slid down Big Blue's flank and strode across the clearing to Indy. Noxy was too far away to hear what he said, but from the angry way he waved his arms and the way

her mother rounded on Sergeant Dorbu, she could imagine the conversation. Even more soldiers? And the forest had attacked? This was more than Stale had bargained for—a lot more.

“Hasn't fallen down yet,” the rescued mountaineer said, wiping his nose on his sleeve again to punctuate his disappointment.

“Stow it, Yestevan,” Grappa Gas growled. “I hear another word out of you, and I'll put you over the side.”

A cold shiver ran up Noxy's back. She and Sensy exchanged wide-eyed looks. People weren't supposed to talk about someone who had been shunned, but older children had whispered Yestevan's name when grownups weren't around. None of them knew exactly what he had done, but he was the only cloudherd to be banished in years.

Yestevan just grinned at Grappa Gas, then winked at the two girls when he saw they were looking at him. Noxy glared in return, while Sensy huddled closer to Rash, not seeming to mind the protective arm he put around her.

“Look—there's the tiger,” Rash said, pointing.

Noxy shaded her eyes with her hand. Kulbinder was sitting on his haunches on the parapet of the wall above them, watching the second cloud come in with the same unimpressed expression that cats everywhere mastered long before they tamed human beings. His boy stood beside him, leaning forward to look down at the clearing. As Noxy watched, the tiger hopped down off the parapet, disappearing from view with his boy behind him.

Grappa Gas glanced at Granna Fee. “Your daughter isn't going to like this.”

“Sh.” Granna Fee waved a hand to quiet him. “I'm trying to land.”

Pillow touched down gently. Noxy and her friends slid down the cloud's flank and then stood together awkwardly, waiting for someone to tell them what to do. The soldiers ignored them. Those who had been riding with them gently lowered the bodies they had rescued into the arms of their waiting comrades, who laid them on stretchers rigged out of blankets and alder poles.

When Grappa Gas offered to help, the commander shook his head politely but firmly. “These are ours,” he said. “Though we would be grateful if you could gather some wood for a pyre—we'd like to send them off tonight.”

“We'll do that,” Rash volunteered quickly. “C'mon, Sensy.” They hurried off together before Noxy could say that she would go with them.

“Here it comes,” Grappa Gas muttered beside her as her mother strode over with her mayoral smile firmly in place.

“Greetings, honored, and welcome,” she said, bowing her head to the commander. “We are glad to have you, though saddened by your losses.”

The commander inclined his head. His face was drawn, and beads of sweat were pearly on his face despite the cold air, but his voice was steady. "Thank you, mayor. We are grateful for your hospitality."

Whatever pleasantries Indy might have volleyed back were lost as Yestevan slid off the cloud and sketched a bow. "Hello there." He straightened up and rubbed his back as if to work out the kinks.

"Long ride, that. Glad to be back on the ground."

There was a moment of shocked silence, and then Indy said, "What are you doing here?" in a voice that could have frozen the fishpond solid.

"He is with us," the commander replied coolly. "I trust that will not be a problem?"

Indy's face darkened. Noxy took a sharp breath. She knew that look, and the storms that followed it.

Before her mother could speak, Aft hurried around Pillow's side with a question or a complaint on his lips. When he saw Yestevan, he balled his hands into fists, took three more steps, and threw a roundhouse punch that knocked the shunned cloudherd flying across the clearing.

Or at least he tried to. As he swung, the commander swept his arm in a perfectly-timed circle that knocked the punch to the side. His other arm followed the first, somehow tumbling Aft head over heels onto the ground.

The tiger was there before anyone else could make sense of what had just happened. As Aft rolled over onto his feet, he found himself face to face with a mouthful of very sharp teeth. "Honored?" the tiger rumbled.

"Let him up," the commander said. "And then..." With no more warning than that, he collapsed as the willpower that had kept him on his feet finally ran out.

The new few moments were a confusion of accusations and orders. Finally, under Sergeant Dorbu's direction, two soldiers rigged a stretcher out of poles and blankets, lifted the commander onto it, and followed Indy through the gate. Granna Fee stood between Aft and Yestevan, each glaring at the other with arms crossed, while Grappa Gas reluctantly admitted to Sergeant Dorbu that no, the shunning didn't extend to the forest, and yes, that meant that Yestevan could pitch a tent if he wanted to. "He can make a fire too for all I care," the old man added pointedly. "A nice big one, right around the oldest tree he can find."

Sergeant Dorbu beckoned to the tiger's boy. "You, Thokmay! Go fetch a tent. And a bowl of something—anything you can find."

"You're not giving him any of *our* food," Grappa Gas said hotly.

"Of course not," the sergeant replied soothingly. "I'm giving him some of *ours*."

Grappa Gas threw up his hands. "Fine. Come on, lad, let's get these clouds back in their pens." He climbed back onto Pillow, laid his hand on the cloud's back, and lifted off. A moment later, still muttering, Aft guided Big Blue into the air behind him.

"Well," Noxy said awkwardly, not sure what to do next. "I guess I'll go see if my *anna* has any chores for me."

"If she doesn't, you can do some of mine," Rash replied, as he had a hundred times before. He glanced at Sensy. "I guess we should go be useful too."

"I guess," she said. "See you later, Noxy."

"See you," Noxy echoed, feeling slightly bewildered as her two best friends walked away together.

Whatever else Noxy might have thought was cut off by a now-familiar twinge in the back of her head. A heartbeat later she heard the staccato blatting of Aft's horn come from the cloud pen, the quick, angry pattern that meant "back away and give me some room". She caught her breath. Grappa Gas must have been bringing Pillow in too slowly for Aft's liking, but how could she have known that before she heard the horn?

Her mother was organizing people in the square when Noxy got there. Yes, the soldiers would stay in the trading hall—where else would they go? No, she didn't know why the commander had collapsed, but Granna Fee was looking after him, and she was sure he would be all right. And yes, there *were* a lot more than 'a few' of them, but there was nothing they could do about that now.

Indy caught sight of her daughter. "There you are. I need you to go home and make some tea. Use the big pot, and all the honey we have left. I have the feeling we're going to have lots of visitors."

"That's what I was *going* to do," Noxy muttered to herself, but her heart wasn't in the complaint. This was the biggest thing that had happened in the village since she'd been a little girl, and she was more than a little proud that it was her mother sorting it out.

The water hadn't even boiled before Grappa Gas showed up. He rapped on the door with his cane and entered without waiting for a hello. "Hey, daffodil. Where's your *anna*?"

"She should be back soon," Noxy said. She added a handful of tea leaves to the cinnamon bark and green cardamom pods already in the pot. It was an extravagance—the pack traders who brought such delicacies to the village wouldn't be back until the last of the snow had melted in the pass, which was at least another month away—but Granna Fee had always said that a good cup of tea was worth a thousand words.

"Mind if I sit?" Grappa Gas asked, settling himself on a stool that was at least as old as he was and watching hungrily as Noxy drizzled the last of the honey into the pot.

“What did you find out?” Noxy asked after a moment.

The old man snorted. “Just like your mother, aren't you? And your granna, too. Always thinking one step ahead of everyone else.” He smiled. “You know, if your granna hadn't been so smart, I might've wound up being your grappa. I remember once when—”

“Grappa!” Noxy protested. “Tell me what the soldiers said!”

“And how do you know they said anything?” Grappa Gas challenged her.

“Because they're a long way from home, and tired, and sore, and want us all to like them,” Indy answered, closing the front door behind her as she came in. “And because I saw you duck into the trading hall on your way down from the cloud pen. Now, what did you find out?” She kissed the old man on his grizzled cheek and sat on the other stool.

For a moment all Grappa Gas could think of was how alike mother and daughter were. Noxy's hair might be brown and with a slight wave instead of straight and black, and her jaw square instead of round, but they had the same quick minds. When Indy had turned ten, he had predicted that she would be mayor before she was thirty. *Better start telling everyone that Noxy's going to take the job too*, he thought.

“The king's men hit them while they were crossing the ford below Duck Droppings,” he told Indy. “Just bad luck, but they were split between the two sides of the river when they were attacked. Their commander did some sort of magic to help them get away, but...” For a moment his years showed on his face. “Fellow I spoke to doesn't expect expect he'll see many of his friends again.”

Indy glanced at Noxy. “This doesn't go out of this house,” she warned. Noxy nodded, turning to the stove as the lid on the kettle began to whistle. She lifted it carefully with a pair of sticks to pour the boiling water into the tea, then replaced it on the stove and set the teapot on the table to steep.

“What about the rebellion?” Indy asked.

Grappa Gas frowned. “They didn't say it, but the king is winning. And about time, too—he's got help now from half his neighbors, all worried that Shudarga's craziness might be contagious. If you ask me—”

The front door banged open. Aft strode in and glared at Indy. “How soon is that rotting turd leaving?” he demanded.

“Well, good day to you too,” Grappa Gas muttered.

Aft ignored his father. “How soon, Indy? You know you can't let him stay. He's been shunned!”

“Glad to hear you talking sense for once,” Grappa Gas said. “But the real question is how quickly we can get those rebels back on the road. They've no place here.”

Aft crossed his arms. “Seems to me they have every right to be here.”

“Stop!” Indy stood up and pointed at the stool she had been sitting on. “Sit down and make yourself comfortable. Noxy, go get me the peeling stool from the kitchen.”

Aft glowered at his father a moment longer, then hooked Indy's stool with his foot and pulled it to him. The brightly-painted stool creaked in protest under his weight as he sat down.

Noxy put the peeling stool down for her mother, then tried to make herself invisible as she poured tea while Grappa Gas counted off the reasons the rebels couldn't stay. What if the king sent an army after them? Wait, what did he mean “if”, of course he would. There were only three hundred people in Stale, and only half a dozen of them had ever held a sword. Not that they *had* any swords. And even if they had—

“I'm surprised to hear you say all this,” Indy interrupted. “I thought if anyone would invoke travellers' law, it would be you.”

“Well, of course we have to look after them while they're here,” the old man blustered. “But this is different. When the king's men come looking for this lot, they're going to fight, and—”

“And until then, we'll make them as welcome as anyone else,” Aft cut in. “Just like the law says. They can stay as long as they don't raise a hand against one of ours or another traveller.”

“Raise a hand?” Grappa Gas laughed angrily. “You just got tossed backside over teakettle, and you're worried about their hands?”

Aft's face darkened. Before he could loose another volley, Indy slapped the table with her hand. “Enough! Enough, both of you. We have a stormload of trouble to fly through, and I will *not* have you making it worse with your bickering.”

Noxy set a mug of tea in front of her mother and two others in front of Grappa Gas and his son. Indy stared into hers as if hoping the tiny swirling leaves might spell out the answers she needed. “I know it's a big thing,” she went on quietly. “And I did think about turning them away, but look at them. They look like they've been through the Blight. If a storm caught them in the pass, they wouldn't even make it as far as Rancid. How would that make us look?”

Grappa Gas scowled. “What people think won't matter much if our heads are all on posts. No, wait, hear me out.” He slurped his tea and set the mug down with a clatter. “What we just did, saving travellers who got caught on the mountain, we can explain that if we have to. But letting them stay here—saints and all their gifts, Indy, we can't. We just can't. Never mind the trouble it'll bring when the king wins—yes, I said *when*, and you know as well as I do that's what's going to happen—never mind the trouble, it's three dozen mouths to feed when we're already down to our last sack of barley.”

“And what about the tiger?” he continued as Indy and Aft both started to reply. “What are we supposed to feed it? Or should I ask ‘who?’”

“Gastric Discomfort!” Indy snapped. “I will *not* have that kind of talk about one of the Gifted. Especially not in front of my daughter.”

“Hmph!” Grappa Gas snorted, which was as close as he ever got to apologizing. “All I can say is, let's hope we don't get snowed in out of season, because if we do, I'm going to be keeping myself behind a good strong door.”

As he leaned back, nodding in agreement with himself, Aft leaned forward. “What I want to know is, what are you going to do about... *him*.” From the way he said it, Noxy didn't have to guess who he meant.

Indy lowered her eyes and studied her tea again. “Leave him where he is for now. I know, I know.” She held up a hand to cut off whatever Aft had been about to say. “If he stays out of the village and we don't talk to him or feed him, we don't have to do anything.”

“That's some pretty fine stitching,” Grappa Gas grumbled. “Hope the other villages will wear it when they hear about all of this.”

Indy looked from father to son and back again, then laughed. “Well, if you two are agreeing on something, it *must* be the end of the world.” She drained her tea and set her mug down with a thump. “It's been a long day. Let's all sleep on it and talk again in the morning.”

Aft and Grappa Gas nodded and drank the last of their tea, setting their mugs down with same “conversation is over” thump as Indy. Grappa Gas swirled the last few drops in his mouth. “It's good,” he said to Noxy. “Maybe wants more cinnamon next time, though.”

“I'll try to remember,” Noxy promised.

After Aft left, Indy asked Grappa Gas, “Will you stay for dinner?”

He shook his head. “Thanks, girl, but I promised your mother I'd help her, um, peel some potatoes.” He winked, ignoring Noxy's little ‘eww’ of disgust. Indy smiled and kissed him on the cheek again. He was humming as he left.

Noxy waited until her mother said down again before saying, “Anna...?”

“Yes, daffodil?”

Noxy hesitated. She didn't know where to start. “Do you think the king really is going to come looking for them?”

Indy sighed. “I hope not. But what I really hope is that they aren't here long enough for us to have to worry about that.”

The summer before, after years of ever-louder protests, a bookbinder named Shudarga had gathered her followers and marched on the capital. Grappa Gas had taken the royalists' side. Aft had argued just as loudly that the villagers should support the rebellion. After all, what had the king's law done for them except take

half of what they brought home at the end of every summer and tell them they couldn't build a bigger fishpond? As the arguments grew more heated, Indy had taken the mayor's heavy embroidered collar out of its velvet-lined box, put it on, and laid down the law. This was the lowlanders' fight. The people of Stale Leftovers were *not* going to take either side, not while she was mayor, and if anyone didn't like it, they could have an election right then and there to sort it out. Anyone? No? All right, then, why didn't everyone get back to their chores, because they weren't going to do themselves.

The two sat in silence for a moment. Finally Indy stretched. "So tell me, did you collect some spiderwebs, or did you and Sensy spend the whole day mooning after Rash?"

"*Anna!* And how can you think about spiderwebs on a day like this? And anyway, Sensy's the one who's mooning after Rash and that stupid mustache he's trying to grow. *I* think it's dumb."

"If you say so." Indy raised her arms and stretched. "Now, what are we—"

Crash! Mother and daughter jumped as something landed on the roof above their heads, sending tiles skittering down to shatter on the cobblestones outside. A low, menacing yowl sent ice up Noxy's spine.

"What in the Pilots' names...?" Indy crossed the floor in three steps and threw open the door just in time to see a troll land in the narrow street in front of their house. She yelped and flung herself to the side as the hairy creature lunged past her and raced up the stairs on all fours.

The tiger hit the cobblestones a heartbeat later. "Where is it? Which way did it go?" he demanded, his ears back and his tail lashing.

The sound of a shutter being flung open upstairs answered his question before Indy could. "Stop! What in the saints' names are you *doing?*"

"He was spying on us!" the tiger snarled. "Now let me pass!"

"No!" As the tiger came forward, Indy stepped into the doorway to block him.

He pulled up short with a snarl. "I said *let me pass!*"

"And I said *no!*" The mayor of Stale glared at the tiger, her eyes lit with the same angry light as his. "This is *our* village, and you will *not* race around like a madman unless *I* say so, is that clear?"

It was the bravest thing Noxy had ever seen her mother do, and for one breathless moment, she thought it would be the last. The muscles in the tiger's shoulders bunched. He braced his legs to charge—and then, just as suddenly, relaxed.

"As you say," he growled, his tail twitching. "But I still want to know who that damn chimpanzee was spying for."

“We call them 'trolls' here,” Indy said, her voice still full of steel. “They are our neighbors, and I imagine he was doing what any neighbor would do if a bunch of strangers showed up next door—having a look to see what's going on.”

“There was a troll up by the spiderweb orchard this morning,” Noxy said, immediately wishing she hadn't when two heads turned to stare at her. “Sensy and I—we saw it when we were coming back down.”

“How come you didn't tell me?” her mother demanded.

“It's been kind of busy!” Noxy said defensively. “Anyway, it wasn't the same one. It was older. A lot older.”

The tiger sat on his haunches. “Is this normal here? Chimp— *trolls* coming this close to a human settlement? Because they very much keep to themselves in Thind.”

“They usually do the same thing here,” Indy said. She uncrossed her arms and gestured. “But if we're going to talk about it, would you like to sit down?”

The tiger regarded her coolly for a moment, then blinked and looked away. “Thank you,” he said, his voice calm once again. “Perhaps some other time. I should see if the sergeant needs me.” And without any more goodbye than that, he rose and loped out the door.

A moment later his boy leaned in, said, “Sorry about that,” and gently pulled the door closed.

Noxy let out her breath in a long whoosh. “Well,” she said shakily. “That wasn't scary at all.”

Her mother sat back down on her stool and squeezed her daughter's hand. “Hardly at all,” she agreed. “Are you all right?”

Noxy nodded. “Sure,” she lied.

Indy squeezed her hand again. “Good. Let's scramble some eggs and get changed. The service will start soon.” She took down their one frying pan and set it on the stove beside the kettle. “Tomorrow, I'm going to see if I can get to know the sergeant a little better. And I think you ought to get to know the tiger's boy. Let's see if we can find out if they have any other surprises tucked away.”

The ancient fortress had three sides. The one holding the gate faced the road that led down to the pass, and through it, the rest of the world. The second overlooked the cloud pen. The third—the shortest—stood to the south. A single well-tended path ran along its base and through the trees to a grassy clearing on the edge of a cliff. The grass was always green there: even in the worst storms, snow somehow never fell on that particular patch of ground.

The stones that stood in the center of the grass were as worn and as proud as the fortress walls. Two stood upright. A third lay beside them, broken in the middle, as if it had once rested on top of them to form an arch but had been knocked off ages ago.

The soldiers who were well enough to work had carried firewood from the village to make a pyre in front of the two standing stones. "Safer than going into the forest right now," Granna Fee had said, and Sergeant Dorbu hadn't disagreed. Those who hadn't carried wood had trimmed their dead comrades' hair, cleaned their uniforms, and polished their boots as well as they could.

As the sun kissed the peaks to the west, a small procession marched through the fortress gate. Each body was carried on a stretcher, hands folded and battle mask raised, and laid gently on the pyre. One of the bearers wept openly—his brother, Sergeant Dorbu explained quietly. They had been petty thieves before the rebellion, but had fought bravely since.

As the last stretcher passed through the gate, the sergeant nodded to Indy and Noxy, then lowered his battle mask into place. He and the last few soldiers, along with the tiger and his boy, followed the bearers around the corner. Indy put her arm around Noxy's shoulder and gave her daughter a squeeze.

Later, in bed, looking up at the stars through the little skylight her father had made for her when she was five years old, Noxy smelled a faint tang of smoke and heard a stray twist of melody. "Safe journey," she whispered. She watched the stars sail by until she fell asleep.

Chapter 4

“Oh daffodil, please, brush your hair!” Indy set her tea down on the table and began to stand.

“I can do it,” Noxy protested. “I’m not a baby.” She dragged the brush she and her mother shared through her hair another few times. “Is that better?”

Her mother sighed, just as her own mother once had. “Yes, I suppose. Honestly, someone would think you’d been possessed by lightning. Let’s get going. We don’t want to keep them waiting.”

They walked through the village together, squinting in the sharp-edged morning sun. The air smelled of pine smoke and fried eggs. People sat in twos and threes on stools outside their houses wearing yakskin coats or thick sweaters above sturdy trousers and sturdier boots. The men knit or embroidered while the women picked spiderwebs apart and wound the strands onto spools.

Indy had to stop every dozen strides to answer the same questions. How were the soldiers getting on? What did they think of the village? “We’re on our way to ask,” she replied over and over again.

Many of the village’s oldsters didn’t bother to hide their unhappiness about their guests, but the sourest face was Grappa Gas’s. “Has that tiger eaten anyone yet?” he asked, forcing an awl through a scrap of leather. “Or is he too busy racing around on rooftops?”

There was no sign of the tiger when they reached the village square, but Sergeant Dorbu was sitting on the steps of the trading with a dozen wary but curious children in front of him. Sensy and Rash looked up as Noxy arrived. Noxy blinked. Had they been holding hands?

“And this is called a greave,” the sergeant said, pointing at the armored front of his boot. “It’s to protect me from vampire mice. See?” He tapped it with his fingernail, *clunk*. “They could bite that if they wanted, but all they’d do is blunt their teeth.”

“What if they climbed up your leg?” asked Sensy. Noxy rolled her eyes. Sensy could always be counted on to ask the questions grownups wanted to hear.

“Ah, well, then I’d—oh, hello, mayor.” The sergeant stood up, brushing his hands on his kilt. “The boy will be out in a heartbeat.”

“Thank you, sergeant,” said Indy. “My daughter is looking forward to showing him the village. I trust you slept well?”

“Yes, thank you,” said the sergeant. “Although I...” He blinked, then sniffed, then started to say, “Excuse me,” but the sneeze came first. *Hwah!* One of the younger

children giggled, then clapped her hand over her mouth. The sergeant blinked and sniffed again. "Sorry—too many nights in the snow."

"Visitors from down below often catch colds in our thin air," said Indy sympathetically. "I hope it passes quickly."

"Dod't worry about be, I'b fide," he said unconvincingly. He blinked and sneezed again, grinning blearily at the fresh giggles that followed before turning serious. "It's the commander I'm worried about. He slept through the night."

"Well, that's probably the best thing for him," Indy said. "Isn't it?"

The sergeant shook his head. "He's not supposed to sleep more than a couple of hours at a time. It's not a spell price or anything," he elaborated hastily, "Just the way he is. And he's fevered, too."

"I'll have Granna Fee look in on him," Indy promised. "Let me know if anyone else needs doctressing as well."

The guesthouse door opened before the sergeant could reply. The children scrambled to their feet and stepped back as the tiger padded out into the sunlight. He wasn't as big as he'd been in Noxy's dreams during the night, but she still had to stop herself from reaching for her mother's hand.

His boy slipped out behind him and closed the door. Instead of his armor, he wore a plain brown rain cape. He kept his eyes downcast as the tiger said, "Good morning, mayor."

"Good morning, respected," Indy replied. "I trust you slept well?"

"Thank you, I did." The tiger seemed not to notice that thirty pairs of eyes were staring at him. *He must be used to it*, Noxy thought.

"And the commander? Is he feeling any stronger?"

The tiger flicked an ear. "You would need to ask him that."

Indy waited a moment to see if he would say anything more. When he didn't, she smiled firmly and said, "My daughter has asked if you could spare your boy for an hour so that she could show him our village while the other children do their chores." Noxy heard Rash mutter something at that. "If he would like to—oh dear." She stopped mid-sentence as the sergeant took a deep breath and scrunched up his face. "Nope," he whooshed a moment later, blinking. "That one's not ripe yet."

"You'd be better in bed than tramping around the countryside, sergeant," Kulbinder rumbled.

"I agree," said Indy firmly. "My mother will make you some lemon ginger tea. That will set you right in no time."

"Thang you," the sergeant said stuffily. "Honored tiger, will you—"

"I will explore the forest," the tiger declared. "I would rather we were not surprised as we were at the ford." And with no more ceremony than that, he padded off toward the main gate.

Indy clapped her hands. "Right. Everyone else, time for chores." As the children groaned and got to their feet, the tiger's boy finally raised his eyes to look at Noxy.

"Hello," he said, stepping down to the cobblestones and bowing ever so slightly. "My name is Thokmay. I'm pleased to meet you."

Noxy stuck out her hand. "Hi. I'm Probably Noxious, but call me Noxy—everyone does."

The boy hesitated for a heartbeat, then shook her hand with a strong, callused grip. He gestured toward the gate. "After you."

They set off side by side. "That's the South Tower," said Noxy, pointing at six rectangular stories of stone. "It still has a roof, but the stairs inside fell down a long time ago. You used to be able to get up there by climbing a tree, but they cut it down after Grappa Gas fell out of it when he was little and broke his arm. And that one's the Round Tower, and the short one over there is called the Quick Tower, because it's quickest to get up."

"It's a shame they've been allowed to go to ruin," said Thokmay. "Respected Shudarga's engineers have been working all year to strengthen the walls of Panday Castle. Perhaps when the war is over she could send some here to fix them."

"Perhaps," Noxy replied vaguely. She wondered how Grappa Gas would feel about having rebel engineers clambering around the village's wall. "Oh, and that's Granna Fee's house, the one with the moss green door. She's my grandmother. And she teaches school. And that's Grappa Gas's house, with the lavender one. He used to be mayor before my *amma*. And that's, um, well, they're all just different people's houses. Except those ones—those aren't houses, they're just for stores and drying things and... Well, stuff," she trailed off, embarrassed by her own rush of words.

Thokmay had a polite but absent look on his face, just like the one Indy got when Grappa Gas started talking about how things had been in his day. *It's probably not much compared to a real castle,* she thought glumly. Two-story houses with steep shingled roofs, little vegetable gardens nestled between log runners, and all around, sharp mountain peaks looming over the ancient gray walls... She wouldn't have believed how strange it all seemed to the young man beside her.

They walked in silence along the path that ran beneath the wall. Ancient cobblestones showed through the hard-packed dirt in a few places. Noxy scuffed crusts of frost off a few absentmindedly, wondering what else to say.

Thokmay pulled up short. "What is that?" he asked. A heavy wooden grill lay across a shoulder-high opening in the wall ahead of them. Behind it, rough stone steps led down into the mountain.

"It's just an old tunnel," said Noxy. "The grownups say they're dangerous, so we're not supposed to go in."

Thokmay nodded. "Sergeant Dorbu will want to know about it."

“Why?” Noxy asked. “They don't go anywhere—or at least, that's what everybody says,” she amended hastily. “We use the bigger ones by the shearing shed as yak pens, but that's about it.”

“He'll still want to know. Soldiers should know as much as they can about their surroundings,” Thokmay said, as if repeating a lesson to a slow learner.

“Whatever you want,” she said, feigning indifference. “Come on—we can see more from up top.”

She glanced back over her shoulder as they walked away and shivered. When she and Sensy and Rash were no older than Little Gas was now, the bigger children had dared them to come into the tunnels with them. It had been scary-exciting for the first two dozen strides, but when the older children had doused the little chip of dayglass they were carrying and plunged the tunnel into darkness, Noxy had suddenly felt the weight of the ancient stone above her pressing down, smothering her. She had screamed, and it was no satisfaction at all to remember that Sensy and Rash had screamed too. When Rash had suggested a few months previously that they play the same trick on the smaller children themselves, she had punched his arm hard enough to leave a bruise.

The steps that led to the top of the wall lay flush against its side. They had been built for the Pilots, not for human beings, so each one was as high as Noxy's knee, and so broad that it took her two strides to cross. Even after hundreds of years, the stones fit together so snugly that it was hard to tell where one ended and the next began.

Noxy put her hand on the wall to give herself a little extra push on each stair. She noticed Thokmay puffing and sweating after the first few steps, but didn't slow down.

The top of the wall was wide enough for three soldiers to march side by side. The parapet along its outer edge was interrupted here and there by slits for lookouts and archers. “Makes Your Breath Rancid is that way,” Noxy said, pointing. “You can't see it because the valley bends, but sometimes you can see their clouds coming out of their pen.”

“Why do you call your villages things like that?” the young soldier asked.

Noxy shrugged. “They're called dragon names. They're supposed to make things sound unappetizing, so that when the dragons finally fly, they'll think twice about eating us.”

Thokmay snorted. “That seems pretty far-fetched.”

“Well, where does *your* name come from?” Noxy bristled.

“From the army,” he replied, not looking at her. “I had another name in the orphanage, but the army gave me a new one.”

“Oh.” Noxy cast about for something to say. “Was that when you started working with the tiger?”

“I don't work with him—I work *for* him,” Thokmay corrected, running his fingers across the scars on his face.

Noxy hesitated. “Is that why you have those? To show that you're, you're...” She floundered, unable to think of a better way to say what she thought than “an animal's servant”.

Thokmay pulled his hand away from his face. “No. I got those for trying to desert.”

Noxy opened her mouth, then closed it. For once, she had no idea what to say.

Thokmay didn't seem to notice. Learning through one of the archer slits in the parapet, he pointed into the gorge below. “Are those the clouds we were on?”

Noxy glanced through the neighboring slit. “Yup. The bull is Big Blue, and the cow is Pillow. We've had them forever—they're practically tame.”

The two old clouds were hardly moving, but Noxy could have watched them for hours—and had, many times, especially when she was supposed to be doing chores. She loved the way they slowly changed shape as they drifted about, and how soft they felt when she stroked them. Being on a cloud was like riding on a grownup's shoulders when you were little, only a thousand times better. You could see everything—deer grazing beneath the twisted pines, wild yaks standing on rocky ledges no wider than the heel of a boot, broad-winged condors making slow circles as they waited for a rabbit to forget to look up... When the air was still, and the cloud was just drifting, it felt like the whole world was a story that was about to be told for the very first time.

Thokmay stepped back. “They smelled like wet yaks.”

“That was just because they haven't rained for a while,” Noxy explained defensively. “We'll probably take them out tomorrow and let them rain over the fishpond. Here, come with me.”

Descending the stairs was even harder on her knees than climbing them. Rather than cutting directly through the village, she led Thokmay on a roundabout path through the vegetable plots around its edges. She had seen the looks Sensy and Rash had given her when her mother had sent them off to do chores while she showed their youngest visitor around, and she wasn't keen to bump into them until they'd had a chance to cool off.

Once through the gate, she followed the trail at the base of the wall to the steps that led down to the cloud pen. Big Blue and Pillow were both floating fifty strides away in the middle of the gorge. The bull was almost at their height, while the cow drifted further down in his shadow.

“Can you call them over?” Thokmay asked.

Noxy shook her head. “Not without a horn. You have to be touching them to mind-speak with them. That's what the ropes and cradle seat are for—see? A lot of

clouds never learn to answer a horn, so someone has to be reeled out above them so they can jump on from there. It's pretty dangerous," she added airily.

"I suppose," Thokmay said. He wrinkled his nose. "But I still think they smell like wet yaks."

Noxy bit back an angry retort. They didn't smell anything *like* yaks, not really, and if he thought they did, then—

Twinge. "Ouch," she muttered, putting her hand on the back of her head. The feeling of something tugging the inside of her head was so strong this time that she was surprised not to find a lump.

"Are you all right?" Thokmay asked, eyeing her.

"I'm fine," she snapped. She closed her eyes. She had hoped the clouds would be right next to the mounting platform so that he could stroke one. Or even get on, though she knew what her mother would say if she found out. "Never fly alone" was one of the many rules she dared not break—not unless she wanted to be grounded.

"Um... Are they supposed to be doing that?" She opened her eyes at Thokmay's worried question and blinked in surprise. Big Blue was no longer drifting in the breeze. Instead, he had turned and was flying straight for them. Pillow was rising toward the platform as well.

Noxy looked up. The last time she had seen clouds move this fast without a rider driving them on, there had been a pack of lightnings snapping and sizzling above the peaks. But she couldn't see anything like that—anything at all. What had gotten into them?

Bump. Thokmay stepped back as the clouds nudged the mounting platform. Noxy pushed her question out of her mind and leaned forward to stroke Big Blue's flank. "See?" she said to Thokmay, grabbing a double handful of Big Blue's side and drawing it out. "You can pull them all which way, but it settles back after a while." When she let go, the cloud's flank slowly settled back into its original shape.

Thokmay patted Big Blue gingerly. Noxy grinned at his caution. She'd show *him* wet yaks. "Here, do this." She backed up, then ran at the cloud and threw herself onto his back. *Poof!* "Come on!" she said airily as Thokmay hesitated. "He won't bite."

"Noxious Aftertaste! What do you think you're doing?" Noxy's heart leaped into her throat. There, at the top of the steps that led down to the platform, stood her mother and Sergeant Dorbu. "You get off that cloud *right now*, young lady!"

Noxy's stomach was in knots by the time they reached the fortress gate. Her mother hadn't said a word to her on the walk back. "Thank you for the tour," Thokmay said politely, putting out his hand.

"You're welcome," Noxy mumbled. She shook his hand, dreading the storm she knew was coming.

“And thank you as well,” Sergeant Dorbu told Indy, bowing slightly over her hand as he clasped it. “It was a pleasure.”

“You’re welcome,” the mayor said. If she had been anyone but Noxy’s mother, Noxy would have said she was blushing slightly.

As the sergeant walked away with Thokmay beside him, Indy rounded on her daughter. “Tell me,” she said coldly, “What exactly would have happened if you’d slipped off the cloud? Or if *he* slipped?”

“He wouldn’t have slipped off!” Noxy protested. “It was Big Blue—he’s as safe as —”

“I don’t care if it was Big Blue or the mattress on your bed!” Indy said angrily, ignoring the half-dozen villagers who were very intently *not* listening just a few strides away. “Do you know what the soldiers are doing this afternoon? Do you? They’re settling all their friends who died before we could get to them. What do you think they’d say if we had to tell them there was one more to settle, just because you wanted to show off?”

“Yes, mayor,” Noxy said wretchedly.

“Don’t you ‘yes, mayor’ me. Now, Achy gave me some thimbleberries as swap for those old boots you’d outgrown. I want you to get the seeds out so that I can make a pie for dinner.”

“Thimbleberries?” Noxy said in despair. “That’ll take forever! Rash and Sensy and I were going to—”

“Well, you should have thought of that, shouldn’t you?” Indy took Noxy by the shoulders. “Daffodil, listen to me. *Really* listen.” She combed her daughter’s hair off her forehead with her fingers. “Half the village is so upset about this that they’re saying it’s time for a new mayor. How can I ask them to behave when my own daughter won’t? Now, go get washed up and start on those thimbleberries.”

Noxy nodded glumly. “Yes, *anna*.”

She moped home to collect the bucket full of the first spring thimbleberries and a large bowl, then climbed to the top of the Quick Tower. She and Sensy had covered a tumbled-down block of stone with a bit of gray canvas to make a pretend cloud the year before. Plopping herself down on it, she started squeezing bitter grain-sized seeds out of the thimbleberries one by one. Why couldn’t the stupid soldiers have washed up somewhere else? Why couldn’t her mother have come along five minutes earlier, or later? And why did the sun have to be so...so sunny?

When she heard the first shouts from the main square she ignored them, thinking that it was children playing jump-sticks or *kabbadi*. Then she heard Sergeant Dorbu shout, “Hah! Heeeyah!” She tossed another berry into the bowl and stood on her stone seat to look.

She was just in time to see Thokmay duck under the sweep of the sergeant's sword and lunge with his own blade, shouting "Hah!" in turn. Both his blade and the sergeant's were wrapped in leather so that they wouldn't cut. Every child in the village was gathered to watch, and not a few of the adults as well, while Kulbinder sat on his haunches on the speaker's stone with his tail wrapped around him, his eyes on the mock battle.

The sergeant knocked Thokmay's blade away and spun around, slashing left and right as if he was beating off an invisible second opponent. While his back was turned, the tiger's boy stepped forward and ran him through.

Or tried to. As Thokmay thrust, the sergeant spun around again and beat his blade to the side. Over, under, over, straight—blow after blow rained down on Thokmay, each one barely deflected by his frantic defense.

"Look out!" someone shouted exactly one heartbeat too late. Unseen by Thokmay, the tiger had hopped down from his perch and padded silently into place behind him. As Thokmay retreated under the sergeant's relentless attack, he backed into the tiger and fell sprawling to the cobblestones.

The crowd groaned in sympathy. "That's not fair!" someone said indignantly.

"Battles never are," Sergeant Dorbu said, raising his battle mask and holding out his hand to help Thokmay to his feet. "Remember, it's what you *don't* see that will kill you."

"I'm sorry," Thokmay panted. "I forgot." He picked up his sword as the tiger strolled leisurely back to the speaker's stone.

Sergeant Dorbu lowered his battle mask into place. He and Thokmay brought their swords up, touched blades, and started fighting again. Thokmay quickly lost again, and even from a distance Noxy could see that he was getting frustrated.

"Again," Sergeant Dorbu ordered. They touched blades. *Thwack! Thwack!* The sergeant attacked immediately, driving his smaller opponent back once more.

Thokmay stumbled on a loose cobblestone. The sergeant lunged—and somehow Thokmay found his balance, twisting at the hips and sweeping his free hand up to catch Sergeant Dorbu's sleeve and yank him forward. The leather-wrapped point of Thokmay's sword poked hard into the sergeant's back.

A handful of children cheered. Sergeant Dorbu pulled up his mask. "Well done!" he said. "That's quite a trick—where did you learn it?"

Thokmay raised his own mask. "I don't know. I must have seen one of the other men use it."

Sergeant Dorbu laughed. "Well, then that's two of you keeping secrets from me. Come on, let's go again."

They practiced for another half an hour. The children clapped and cheered every time Thokmay scored a hit. The older villagers shook their heads, their disapproval written on their faces. Still, they kept watching.

By the time the sergeant and Thokmay stopped, they were both soaked with sweat. They saluted each other one last time. "You're getting better every day," Sergeant Dorbu said. "But we could both use a sauna."

Thokmay nodded, breathing hard. "Smells like we could both use one too," he said. For the first time, Noxy saw him smile.

"Show me, show me!" shouted Little Gas. He clapped his hands with excitement. "I want to play!"

Thokmay's smile froze. He glanced at the sergeant, who shook his head almost imperceptibly. "I'm glad you liked it," the young soldier said to Little Gas, pitching his voice to carry across the square. "But it's not really a game."

He squatted so that he was no taller than Little Gas. "I can show you something else if you like," he said. He looked left then right, as if to make sure no spies or grownups were listening.

"Do you have any spare socks at home?" he asked. Little Gas nodded. "Good. You go and get me three pairs of socks, quick as you can, and three stones the size of your thumb."

Little Gas bit his lip. "I only have just one other pair of socks," he said. "They're for when it's winter, so my feet will fit in my boots."

"Um, well then," Thokmay said, "Do you think your mother would let you borrow some of hers? Just for a little bit?" Little Gas nodded quickly and scurried away.

"Do you want the rest of us to get some socks, too?" Sensy asked hopefully. She and Rash had been standing with the younger children, their chores either done or conveniently forgotten.

"Oh, Sensy!" Noxy said under her breath.

"If you like," Thokmay said, straightening up. Sensy sprinted away, a handful of other children scattering in her wake.

Little Gas came puffing back a moment later. In his hands he had one pair of green socks, one pair of gray, and one pair with red and white stripes. "Will these do?" he asked, fishing some stones out of his pocket.

"They look fine," said Thokmay. "Now, give me your stones... Good. The first thing we do is we roll up the socks like this, with a stone in the middle, to make a ball. See? And then the next pair... And the next... Now, are you ready?" Little Gas nodded.

Thokmay stepped back, took a deep breath, and threw the balled-up socks into the air. His hands darted back and forth like hummingbirds. Somehow, he managed to catch each sock ball before it fell to the ground, and then throw it again in time to catch the next one. He caught them overhand, he caught them underhand, he threw

two with his left hand while bouncing the third with his right, and then he threw them all in the air at once and caught them, one, two, three.

There was a moment of stunned silence. "That's magic!" Rash said accusingly. "You're doing magic!"

"It's not magic," Grappa Gas laughed, looking as delighted as any of the children. "It's called 'juggling'! I saw it in Chaghan once, years ago. It's just a trick."

"That's right," Thokmay agreed, "It's just a trick. Here, I'll prove it. Sergeant?"

Sergeant Dorbu took the brightly colored sock balls and tossed them in the air, one, two, three. He whistled a happy little tune as he juggled, and even managed to wink at Sensy, who blushed in response. By the time he was finished, Little Gas was laughing and clapping his hands. "Let me, let me!" he shrieked. "I want to!"

"All right, but you have to let me show you how," Thokmay said. "You have to start with just two, like this. Um, sergeant? Could you show the older children how it's done? Thank you. Now, put this one in this hand, and this one in the other, and..."

Noxy watched Little Gas drop all three pairs of socks, pick them up, and drop them again. The little boy laughed. Seething, she sat back down on her pretend cloud and glared at the bowl of thimbleberries. It was going to be a long day...

Chapter 5

Noxy was still on her make-believe cloud an hour later, squeezing seeds out of thimbleberries so angrily it was amazing the bucket didn't take fright and run away. Sensy almost did when she reached the top of the stairs, but then she plopped herself down beside her friend. "You should have tried it!" she burbled. "I only got them all up a few times, but it was so much fun! Rash could do it almost right away."

"I'm sure it was wonderful," Noxy grumbled.

Sensy pouted. "Don't be such a yak."

"I'm not being a yak! I just think he was showing off. And what did Rash think about him putting his arms around you like that?" The last time Noxy had looked at the juggling, Thokmay had been standing right behind Sensy, reaching around to hold her arms just below the elbows.

Sensy brushed her hair back over her ear. "Why should I care what Rash thinks?" she asked sweetly. Her grin turned into a leer. "Or maybe you're the one who cares?"

"Well, *I* think it was embarrassing," Noxy said primly. "You were all following him around like ducklings, just because he knew a stupid trick."

"Well, at least he didn't make everyone say please nine times, like you did when I wanted to play with the kite Granna Fee got you for your nameday last year!"

Noxy's mouth fell open. Sensy had never talked back to her before!

The same thought must have occurred to Sensy. She looked down at the bucket by Noxy's feet. "Anyway, Grappa Gas is taking him for a ride now. It's instead of them going on patrol," she added hastily. "The soldiers, I mean. Sergeant Dorbu said the commander ordered them to, but then your *anna* said they couldn't, and then they had an argument. Well, not really an argument, more like Sergeant Dorbu wouldn't take 'no for an answer and your *anna* wouldn't budge, so they agreed that some of the soldiers could go up for a ride, and the tiger was there and *he* said—"

"Never mind what the tiger said!" Noxy burst out. "Aren't we all supposed to be going out with Grappa Gas for training today?"

"Oh." Sensy blinked. "You're right. I forgot. But we can go out any time. If they're only here for a few days—"

Noxy stood and glared down at her. "What if they're not?" she demanded. "What if Grappa Gas has to keep taking them out and we don't get to fly and then we don't get to go with the herd this summer because we're not ready?"

Sensy gaped at her. Her mouth opened and closed a couple of times before she managed to say, "Noxy, what are you talking about? We're not going to be stuck here because—"

“But what if we are?” Noxy threw up her hands. “What if—”

“Stop interrupting!” Sensy stamped her foot, then clamped her hand over her mouth. The two girls stared at each other for a moment. Neither could believe that Sensy had snapped at her friend. Neither understood what it meant, but they both knew it meant something. Something had changed. Something was going to change. They were in uncharted skies.

Sensy stood up abruptly. “Sorry,” she muttered.

“It’s all right,” Noxy muttered back. “Listen, I’ve got to—” She gestured at the bucket of thimbleberries.

“Right. Um... So I’ll see you later?”

“Sure. Later.” Noxy made a little half-wave as Sensy turned and went down the stairs two at a time, then sat back on her stool and kicked the bucket hard enough to send thimbleberries skittering across the stones.

Twinge. “Not again,” she groaned. She rubbed the back of her head with her hand. She still couldn’t feel a lump. Why did this keep happening?

The second twinge a moment later was different. It was a tug, like the one she had felt that morning at the cloud pen. On an impulse, she clambered onto the parapet to look down on the cloud pen.

Sure enough, Grappa Gas was just coaxing Thokmay onto Big Blue’s back. Noxy couldn’t hear them, but from the beckoning motions Grappa Gas was making, she could imagine what he was saying. Littles jumped onto clouds all the time—saints, sometimes their parents threw them on when they were still in diapers, just so that they’d get used to the feeling. A strong young lad like Thokmay wasn’t afraid, was he?

A moment more and Thokmay jumped. Like every first-timer, he immediately lost his footing and fell. It only took him one slow-moving try to get back up, though. Against her own wishes, Noxy was grudgingly impressed.

He’ll let Big Blue rain on the fishpond first, she thought, That way, he won’t be fidgety.

Sure enough, Grappa Gas brought the cloud around in a graceful turn toward the fishpond. The old bull didn’t need any more instruction than that. He drifted to a stop, then started to rain contentedly. The pair of elders sitting on log benches beside the pond returned Grappa Gas’s wave.

Noxy closed her eyes. She could practically mind-hear Big Blue’s contentment as he slowly turned from dark gray to light. *Why don’t you just drop him in the pond?* she thought despondently.

Bad, she imagined Big Blue replying. Bad hurt.

Oh, he’d be all right, she told herself. The pond’s pretty deep. And it’d serve him right for showing off with all his stupid juggling and swording and stuff. She imagined Big Blue

thinning out underneath Thokmay little by little. He wouldn't notice right away, not on his first-ever flight with Grappa Gas talking a gallop a breath beside him.

She opened her eyes in shock at the sound of a faint yelp in the distance. There, a hundred strides below her, Thokmay was sinking into the cloud.

"Hold on!" Grappa Gas shouted, reaching for him, but it was too late. Thokmay shrieked as he fell through the hole in the cloud and splashed into the ice-cold pond.

His head burst above water a moment later. "Help!" he screamed. "Help me! I can't—" He thrashed his arms as if he was trying to swim, but something was pulling him down.

Noxy's hand flew to her mouth. His armor! He must still have it on from when he and Sergeant Dorbu were fencing!

Thokmay's head broke the surface again. He gasped for air and brought his hand to his mouth just long enough to blow a short, shrill blast on a whistle. *Phweee!* He splashed frantically, trying and failing to keep his head above water.

Kulbinder burst out of the trees and raced toward the fishpond. "Hang on, honored!" he roared as he threw himself into the water. He paddled to the struggling soldier, who threw his arms around the tiger's neck. Kulbinder turned around, but slowly, too slowly. The weight of Thokmay's armor, the icy cold water—they weren't going to make it, Noxy realized dumbly. They were going to drown. And it was her fault. She didn't know how. She didn't even know how it was possible. But she hadn't been imagining her conversation with Big Blue. Somehow, she had mind-spoken with the cloud a hundred strides away and told him to drop Thokmay in the water.

Grappa Gas was blowing his horn in the short-short-short pattern that meant someone was in serious trouble. Noxy heard an answering blast from below as someone in the village picked it up, and shouts as people asked what was happening.

Just at that moment, Yestevan ran out of the trees and shouted, "Grab hold!" as he threw a coil of rope toward the struggling pair. It splashed into the pond just out of Thokmay's reach. The young soldier let go of Kulbinder and struggled to it, his desperate thrashing sending gouts of water into the air.

He grabbed hold of one end and turned back toward Kulbinder. "Save yourself, honored!" the tiger roared. Thokmay ignored him. Three strokes, four, five—he reached out and grabbed the tiger by the nape of the neck.

"Pull!" Thokmay spluttered. Yestevan braced his feet and began to haul him in.

It was as if Noxy had suddenly been unfrozen. She raced down the stairs, yelling, "He's in the pond! He's fallen in the pond!"

"What? Who's fallen—where are you going?" She shot past Granna Fee and charged up the steps into the trading hall. There! On the shelves, right where it was supposed to be, lay the emergency bags that the villagers kept packed and ready. She

grabbed the one she needed, shouting, "Excuse me!" at the gaping soldiers, and turned to run back out the door.

"Oof!" She plowed headlong into the commander, who caught her with one arm.

"Where are you going with that?" he demanded.

"Let go of me!" Noxy struggled vainly to pull her arm free.

"Not until you tell me who you are and what's in that bag." The commander's eyes were fever-bright, and his grip was like iron.

"She lives here, honored. She's the mayor's daughter." Noxy recognized the soldier who spoke. He had arrived with Sergeant Dorbu, and was a head taller than anyone Noxy had ever met, and wide to match.

The commander held on for one more heartbeat, then released Noxy as suddenly as he had grabbed her. "I still want to know where you're going with that bag."

"They've fallen in the pond—the tiger and his boy," Noxy said breathlessly. "They're going to freeze if I don't—"

"Go," the commander ordered, stepping out of her way. As Noxy ran down the steps she heard him yelling at men to follow her.

Noxy ran across the square and through the gate. The path along the base of the fortress wall was still slippery in places, and she knew she should slow down, but all she could think was, *I did this. I did this.*

Around the corner, down the steps, right, right again, more steps, and she skidded to a clumsy stop at the edge of the pond just as Kulbinder and Thokmay waded out. Thokmay took two steps and collapsed to his knees, drenched and shivering. The tiger made it a step further before turning back and hunkering down beside his boy.

Yestevan was pulling off his coat to wrap around Thokmay. "Wait!" Noxy said. She dropped the bag and undid the ties with haste-clumsied fingers. "Here!"

The blanket she yanked out didn't look special. Gray with a red border, woven from yak's wool, it could have come off any bed in the village. But it tingled slightly in her fingers as she wrapped it around Thokmay's shoulders.

The young soldier tried and failed to hold onto it, his own fingers stupid with cold. "Let me," she said, pushing his hands out of the way and pulling it up on his shoulders again.

Thokmay nodded, still shivering. And then his shivering slowed and stopped. His eyes widened. "What...?"

"It's magic," Noxy said. "For emergencies."

Even as she said it, Thokmay was pulling the blanket off his shoulders to wrap around Kulbinder. Instantly, he started to shiver again. "You have to keep it on," Noxy scolded.

"H-h-h-help..." Thokmay struggled with her for a moment as she tried to push the blanket back onto him.

“Oh for saints' sake,” Noxy snapped. “Lie down!”

“Are they all right?” Grappa Gas yelled from overhead a moment later.

Noxy looked at the boy and the tiger lying side by side with the blanket draped over them. “I think so!” she yelled back. They had both stopped shivering, and they were both breathing normally instead of in short, struggling gasps.

“Good work!” Grappa Gas yelled.

“You're welcome!” Yestevan yelled back at him, his coat in one hand and the re-coiled rope in the other.

By the time Thokmay got to his feet five minutes later, Noxy's mother had arrived with Aft and a mix of soldiers and villagers. It took Noxy a minute to explain what had happened, and another minute to convince her mother that it had. Clouds did drop people sometimes, just like horses sometimes bucked people off, but Big Blue? He'd been with the village since Grappa Gas was Noxy's age. He was about as likely to hole under someone as the sun was to rise in the north!

“Unless he was told to,” Yestevan said, then spread his hands as Indy and Aft turned on him. “What? You were thinking it too!”

“Get out of here or I'll show you exactly what I'm thinking,” Aft growled. Grinning insolently, the shunned cloudherd slung his rope over his shoulder, sketched a bow toward Kulbinder and Thokmay, and headed back into the forest, whistling as he went.

“Come on,” Indy said to the bedraggled pair. “Let's get you dried off and into the sauna.”

“That would be most welcome,” the tiger replied with something that almost sounded like gratitude in his voice.

Grappa Gas met them at the top of the first flight of steps. “Everyone all right?” he asked.

“No thanks to you,” Aft said shortly. “What the saints' names were you thinking?”

“Me?” Grappa Gas straightened up angrily. “I didn't do this!”

Aft planted himself in front of his father. “Really? You've been telling everyone you want them gone, and then they just *happen* to fall through a cloud you're herding into freezing water?”

“I was the only one who fell,” Thokmay protested, but nobody was listening—especially not Grappa Gas, whose face had gone from shocked to furious.

“Now you listen here—” he started.

“Stop!” Indy pushed between them and pushed them apart. “Stop this right now!” She looked from one to the other. “Our guests could use a long, hot sauna. While they're doing that, we'll talk about this over a cup of tea.”

“But—”

“Tea! Now!” Indy repeated in a tone of voice that implied the alternative was to repeat Thokmay's dive into the pond from a much greater height and into much colder water.

They walked the rest of the way to the fortress gate in silence. When they reached the square, Thokmay handed the blanket back to Noxy with a quiet thank you. He and Kulbinder headed for the village sauna. “It will be like being back home,” the tiger rumbled, his still-damp fur making him look both skinnier and more menacing than usual.

“Give it to the soldiers,” the mayor said when Noxy asked what to do with the blanket. “It will keep someone warm even without the spell. Oh, and *anna*, can you please take Noxy for dinner?”

“Of course,” Granna Fee said. She had been waiting at the gate with her doctressing bag in case someone needed a bone set or a gash sewn up. She put her arm around her granddaughter. “It will be like old times.”

Noxy was silent as she walked to her grandmother's house. She jumped when she heard a door slam, wondering if it was Aft or Grappa Gas. It wouldn't be her mother—people wished the mayor would raise her voice and slam doors when she got angry, but she never obliged them.

Granna Fee didn't disturb her granddaughter's silence as she bustled about her kitchen. Three ladles of water went into the kettle, which went onto the stove above a fire that hadn't gone out since the last time Granna Fee had taken a herd of clouds south to rain on the farms of Ninety-Nine Kingdoms. She cut two thick slices of oat bread and dropped them into a pan smeared with a few careful drops of oil, then chopped some withered mint leaves and dropped them into a pot just as the kettle started to whistle. As the warm smell of the tea filled the room, she flipped the fry-bread over with a fork, poured the tea, scooped the bread onto a plate, and set mugs and lightly-browned toast in front of Noxy.

“Thanks, granna,” Noxy said listlessly.

Granna Fee studied her granddaughter for a moment, then raised her mug of tea to her lips and slurped as loudly as she could. As the slurp went on and on, a smile tugged the corner of Noxy's mouth. “Stop it,” she said, trying and failing to sound cross.

Granna Fee set her mug down. “I will if you will.” She held Noxy's gaze, not challenging, just waiting, until Noxy dropped her eyes.

The old woman reached across the table and put her hand on Noxy's arm. “You did well,” she said, “And your *anna* knows it. She's just got a lot of other things to worry about right now.”

Noxy nodded. She hadn't been thinking about her mother—she'd been thinking about Big Blue. “Do you think—will we be able to get another magic blanket?” she asked, instantly regretting her choice of question.

Granna Fee shook her head. “Probably not. Your father said he could only make one.”

Noxy picked up her tea. The mug was uncomfortably hot against the palms of her hands, but she held it anyway. “Do you know what it cost him?”

Granna Fee shook her head again. “He never said. It's not the sort of thing you ask a magician.”

She settled back in her chair, wincing slightly as something popped in her back. “All he ever told me was how he found out he could do magic in the first place. He was fishing one day—not in a pond like here, but with a net in the ocean, back where he grew up—and he wished that he was done for the day. A heartbeat later the net fell apart in his hands and...” She shrugged. “No net, no fishing. But when he got back to land and tried to tie up his boat, he couldn't make a knot. Every time he tried, he'd drop the end of the rope or it would tangle in his fingers or something else would happen. Something had heard his wish and taken it as a bargain.”

Noxy shivered. “That's horrible.”

Granna Fee shook her head. “From what I know, he was lucky. There was another magician in the town where he grew up who could teach him how to control it. But he still wound up making some bad bargains.”

“Like having to live where nobody had ever slept on the sea,” Noxy said.

Granna Fee nodded. “Like that. It saved someone from shipwreck, he said, but he was half-crazy by the time he got here. Even down in Duck Droppings there was someone who'd been on a ship once, so he couldn't stay there more than a couple of nights.”

“Do you—do you think I might be a magician some day?” Noxy asked as casually as she could.

Granna Fee started to smile, then realized her granddaughter was serious. “Maybe.” She put her hand on Noxy's arm again. “But nobody and nothing can make you a magician. You have to choose.”

They talked about other things after that, normal everyday things like when it would be time to shear the yaks of their winter wool and how Sensy only seemed to want to talk about her hair and her clothes, and how many dishes Grappa Gas would wash for a taste of honey. It felt warm and comfortable, and was almost enough to convince Noxy that what had happened earlier that day had nothing to do with her.

“I should go,” Noxy finally said, eyeing her empty teacup regretfully. “If I don't get those thimbleberries done, *anna* will shear *me*.”

Granna Fee smiled. "How about you bring them down here and we'll do them together?"

"Thanks, *granna*, but I said I'd do it." She stood, then impulsively stepped around the table to give her grandmother a hug. "I love you."

"I love you too, daffodil." They held each other for a moment, one wondering when the other had gotten so big, the other wondering when the first had gotten so small, and then Noxy left.

Chapter 6

Noxy walked home through the darkened village with a sliver of dayglass in her hand to light her way. Her mother was sitting at the kitchen table with half a mug of cold tea in front of her, brooding over whatever she had said to Aft and Grappa Gas. She forced a smile when her daughter came in, the tension in her shoulders easing only slightly when Noxy gave her mother a hug and kissed the top of her head and cautioned her not to stay up too late.

Lying in bed under a pair of blankets a few minutes later, Noxy looked up through the skylight her father had made for her and wondered what it had been like for him to realize he could do magic. Her thoughts ran from there to the ocean he had sailed on, the ocean she secretly hoped to see for herself one day, and then her eyes closed and her breathing slowed and she dreamed.

There was a house. Not a house like the ones in the village, with brick walls and cedar-shingled roofs, but one somehow woven together out of trees. It was deep in the forest—no, *she* was deep in the forest, sitting at a table just like the one in the kitchen below and drinking tea with the old silver-backed troll she had seen yesterday. They had been speaking about something important. The troll had asked her a question and was waiting for her answer, but she didn't know what to say. She couldn't even remember the question. It was the most important thing anyone had ever asked her, but she couldn't remember what it was.

She blinked. She was awake, still in her bed. A glance at the stars above told her it would be morning soon. Her mother was snoring in the room next to hers, a regular, comforting sound like someone pulling their boot out of a pool of mud over and over again. Noxy groped on the table beside her bed for her mug, remembered that she hadn't refilled it, and rolled over, annoyed at herself but not enough to get up. Within moments, she was asleep again.

She remembered her dream in the morning. If her mother hadn't looked as bleary as Noxy felt, she would have told her about it. As it was, they ate their porridge and drank their tea in a silence broken only by the occasional yawn.

"Come on," Indy finally said. "Let's go see what's going to fall on our heads today."

But the day passed without incident. The villagers washed their clothes, weeded their vegetable gardens, mucked out their yaks' stalls, and scolded their children as usual. The soldiers tended to their wounded and their equipment with an occasional word of praise or thanks from Sergeant Dorbu. The commander was back in bed, the

sergeant told Indy, but his fever was much reduced, and he apologized if he had scared Noxy yesterday.

By the middle of the afternoon, though, the sky started to darken over the peaks to the north of the village. The older villagers looked up from their chores ever more frequently, exchanging quiet observations and worried looks. Nobody knew how the clouds and the forest spoke to each other, but when the forest was hurt or angry, a storm was never long in following. In ones and twos people put aside what they were doing and began to make ready.

Stale was no stranger to storms. When bulls battled each other in the dead of winter, the snow fell so thick and so fast that people had to string ropes between the houses to find their way. And in the summer, when nimbus clouds that had stayed in the north to give birth flew south to rejoin their herds, the sky could darken in the time it took to sing a nursery rhyme. When that happened, the villagers knew it was time to tie their shutters closed and get the yaks into their pens, because the rain was going to come down in sheets instead of drops. Shutters that had been taken down at winter's end were put back in place. Children chased protesting chickens back into coops or hauled the morning's laundry off clotheslines to be re-hung in the sauna.

The worst, though, was when the pack of lightnings that haunted the highest peaks chased their prey all the way the valley. Noxy had only ever seen one such storm when she was little, but she could still remember the sizzling crack of the lightnings calling to one another, the smell of burnt air as they snapped and harried the hapless cloud they were driving onward, and the way her mother had held her close, whispering, "It's all right, it's all right, we're safe," into her hair as if to convince herself it was true.

Amid the preparations, Indy sent Noxy to the trading hall to invite the commander, Sergeant Dorbu, and Kulbinder to dinner.

"Tonight?" Noxy asked.

"Yes. I should have done it last night," she said, rooting through the vegetable bin in the kitchen. "It won't be anything special, just—I thought we had some parsnips left. And did we use the last of the cayenne?" She was still muttering as Noxy quietly closed the door behind herself.

She walked past the vegetable garden, where Little Gas was pulling apart strips of cedar bark so that Sensy could lay them along the irrigation trenches in the vegetable garden, and found Sergeant Dorbu sitting on the steps of the trading hall with a small brown pipe smoldering in his hand. "Thank you, we'd be honored," he said in answer to the invitation. "Though I'm afraid it will just be myself and Kulbinder. The commander is still..." He wagged a hand.

Noxy hesitated. "Would—I mean, if the commander can't come, would Thokmay like to instead? I mean, since the tiger is coming..."

Sergeant Dorbu's polite smile broadened into something more genuine. "I'm sure he'd like that."

The northern sky was as dark as a day-old bruise by the time Noxy got home. Diced onions were sizzling in a pot, and Indy was peeling what might well have been the last knob of ginger in Stale. Granna Fee had come by to help, and was busy assembling something out of oats, apples, and honeycomb on the kitchen table. When Noxy asked if she'd be joining them, she said, "Oh no. Gas and I have plans for the evening." She nudged her daughter with her elbow and stage-whispered, "He loves a good storm."

"Granna!" Noxy and Indy protested in unison.

Sergeant Dorbu knocked on their door just as the rain began to fall. His freshly-shaven scalp gleamed in the light of the dayglass lamp Indy had hung from the ceiling.

Kulbinder and Thokmay entered quietly behind him while he said his hellos. Thokmay stood uncertainly by the door until Noxy waved him toward a stool. Meanwhile, the tiger flowed up onto the chair across from Noxy without waiting for an invitation and watched impassively as she swept the last scraps of potato off the table. "Thank you for the blanket," he said without preamble.

Noxy jumped slightly. "You're welcome. It's pretty dangerous, getting dunked in frozen water like that. It happened to one of the yaks a couple of years ago. She got out of their pen and tried to get across the—um. It doesn't matter. But I'm glad you're all right. And Thokmay too." She could feel her cheeks burning under the tiger's cool stare.

Her cheeks heated up even more when she saw Sergeant Dorbu's grin. "Don't worry," he said cheerfully. "He has that effect on everyone. Saints, I almost swallowed my fork the first time I met him."

"It was a spoon," Kulbinder corrected. "And it was more than 'almost'."

And just like that the rhythm of the meal took shape. Sergeant Dorbu had a seemingly inexhaustible supply of stories about his own foolishness, clumsiness, and bad choices. Indy asked just enough questions to keep the stories coming, while Kulbinder's dry comments provoked protests of innocence and occasional snorts of laughter. Even Thokmay smiled, though he said little more than please and thank you.

As she tabled a tray bearing slabs of grilled cheese, fried onions, and gingered potatoes, Noxy realized with a start that she was actually enjoying herself. The mood was only slightly dampened by the tiger sniffing at the cheese and then saying thank you, but it would probably upset his digestion, he would find something in the forest after the storm was over.

Conversation became more serious after the dishes were cleared. The commander had declared for Shudarga the moment she raised her banner, and had been fighting ever since. "Or getting to a fight, or getting away from one, or trying to get enough food in our bellies to keep us fighting," Sergeant Dorbu added.

"So why did you choose her side?" Indy asked as she splashed some dark mountain *rak* into a glass and passed it to him. Catching Noxy's eye, she poured a thimbleworth into another glass and handed it to her daughter. The pungent fumes tingled in Noxy's nose as she tasted it gingerly.

Sergeant Dorbu rolled his glass between his hands. "My family used to have land. Not much—just a farm with a couple of tenants to work it—but it was enough to keep us. Then one of our neighbors decided she wanted it. She honeyed up the local *tralpa*, promised him a slice of the takings, and then found an excuse to drag us into court." He spread his hands. "By the time we got there, she had rented all the laws that would have saved us. We had a week to clear out."

"That must have been horrible," Indy said sympathetically.

"It is foolishness," Kulbinder rumbled. "The law in Thind is not something to be hired like a bullock. There are rules for each station. It is...simpler"

"Simpler *and* fairer," Sergeant Dorbu added with a quiet intensity that hadn't been there a moment earlier. "And that's what Shudarga's fighting for. Laws should be there for everyone, all the time, not just for whoever has the most money on the day of a trial."

"Is it worth killing for?" Indy asked quietly.

Sergeant Dorbu's voice was steady. "I believe it's worth my life. And if it's worth mine, it's worth others'."

A shiver ran up Noxy's back at the quiet certainty in his voice. From the look on Thokmay's face, she knew he felt it too, and she suddenly understood why Sergeant Dorbu's men followed him. When he raised his glass of *rak* and drained it in one quick gulp, everyone else at the table did the same.

The thick black liquid felt like fiery smoke as it went down Noxy's throat. She clenched her jaw, but a strangled wheeze managed to escape. "And that's enough for you tonight," her mother said in mock-disapproval.

"Yes, *anna*," Noxy said, gasping for air as her mother reached across the table and took the glass from her. Thokmay, Noxy noticed, hadn't even blinked when he swallowed his own mouthful.

Suddenly Sergeant Dorbu laughed. "Well, that got serious in a hurry," he said lightly. "How about some music to chase away the night?" He cocked an eyebrow at Thokmay.

"Yes, honored," the boy said. He took a round whistle out of his pocket and a short metal tube out of the other, screwed them together, and blew an experimental

note. The little fipple flute gargled like a blocked drain. "Sorry," he muttered. He unscrewed the two halves, blew into the fingering tube's holes to clear them, reassembled it, and tried again. A high, wavering note floated across the room.

The tiger rose to his feet. "This would be a good time for me to do my rounds," he rumbled.

The sergeant grinned. "You have vinegar for a soul, honored—vinegar for a soul."

"And sensitive ears," the great cat sniffed. He inclined his head in farewell and slipped silently out the door that the chuckling sergeant opened and closed for him.

Noxy wasn't surprised that Sergeant Dorbu had a good voice. What did surprise her was how well the tiger's boy played, and that her mother joined in the chorus. As they started a second song, her mother took her hand under the table and squeezed it. Tentatively at first, then with more confidence, Noxy hummed along. The words were different from those she knew, but the tune itself was as familiar as the stool she was sitting on or the matched pair of dayglass lanterns glowing softly on the table. However cold and dark it was outside, her home was, then and there, as warm and as bright as it had ever been.

After the third song, Sergeant Dorbu stood and stretched. "We should probably—oh, thank you." He sat down again as Indy poured him a second glass of *rak*.

"Daffodil, could you go up to your room and get the spare blankets out from under your bed?" Indy said, pouring more for herself as well. "I'm sure the commander would appreciate them."

"I'm sure he would," Sergeant Dorbu agreed, his eyes on Indy. "Thokmay, could you give her a hand?"

"I can manage a few blankets," Noxy protested, but she recognized the tone the two adults had used. She exchanged a look with Thokmay, who shrugged slightly as if to say, "Grownups—what can you do?"

Noxy climbed the steep stairs with Thokmay behind her and pulled aside the curtain that hung in her bedroom doorway. Thokmay squeezed past her with a polite, "Thank you," and ducked his head to enter. Inside, the dayglass that hung beside the skylight shed a warm orange glow as the sunshine it had trapped during the day slowly leaked out. The far wall was taken up by a narrow bed that Noxy suddenly wished she had remembered to make that morning. Three shelves at the foot of the bed held everything she possessed: her clothes, her little rock collection, half a dozen books she had borrowed from the village's library, and—

"Where did you get these?" Thokmay asked, picking up one of Noxy's knitted dolls curiously.

"They were nameday presents when I was little," Noxy said, instantly hating the defensive tone in her voice.

Thokmay smiled at the soft little blue and white figure in his hand. "My sister has dolls like these."

Noxy frowned. "I thought you said you were an orphan?"

Thokmay's smile instantly disappeared. He set the doll down exactly where it had been. "Are these the blankets?" Without waiting for an answer, he stooped to pick up the two winter blankets lying on the bottom shelf.

"That was quick," Indy said as the two teenagers came back down the stairs. The bottle of *rak* was half empty, Noxy noticed, and the smiles on her mother's face and Sergeant Dorbu's seemed— No. Her mother was just being the mayor, that was all. But he had undone the top button of his jacket, Noxy noticed. And her mother had untied the ribbon that held her hair back.

Thokmay hefted the blankets. "With your permission, shall I take these to the commander?"

"Good idea. Thank you again," Sergeant Dorbu added to Indy.

"Happy to help. And you, young lady." Indy nodded back up the stairs. "It's been a long day."

A few minutes later, Indy lay on her bed, still in her clothes, staring up at the storm through her skylight with her dolls cradled in her arms. Her mother and the sergeant were still talking, quietly enough that she could only make out an occasional word. The tone said enough, though. She closed her eyes and hugged her dolls tight, but that didn't make her sudden loneliness go away.

She counted to a hundred after she heard the door close, then got up and went back downstairs. Her mother was still sitting at the table. The bottle of *rak* was empty, and the dayglass lamp was starting to dim.

"What are you still doing up?" Indy asked, opening her arms to give her daughter a hug.

"Couldn't sleep," Noxy said, her voice muffled in her mother's shoulder.

Indy gave her a squeeze. "Well then, why don't we make some tea? Here." She took the kettle off the stove and passed it Noxy. "How about you go and fill that? It sounds like the rain's dying down, and a bit of air will help you clear your head."

Noxy nodded, not trusting herself to speak. She slipped her feet into her boots without bothering to do up the laces, pulled on her coat, and went out into the night.

Rain was still falling, but Indy had been right—most of the storm clouds had passed, and the few stragglers chasing them were already south of Stale, heading toward the plains. She watched them for a moment, then closed her eyes.

"Idiot," she muttered a moment later. Of *course* she hadn't been able to mind-hear anything. What had happened with Thokmay had been a coincidence. She shouldn't—

Something clattered in the narrow jitty between her house and the yarning shed next door. She set the kettle down quietly on the front step of her house and tiptoed

gingerly toward the narrow gap between the two buildings. Holding her breath, she leaned forward and peeked around the corner, just in time to see a shadow disappear out the other end. Who would be out in the rain? Curious, she hurried to follow.

“Ow!” Ten steps in, her foot connected with a pile of cobblestones that she and Sensy had put there as part of some long-forgotten game. The stones clattered as they tumbled over. Cursing under her breath, she stepped over them, wishing that she had taken a moment earlier to do up her laces. Some of the broken cobbles had sharp edges, and if she lost a boot now, she'd never catch up with her mysterious quarry.

But then something glinted among the cobbles. Frowning, she crouched down and pulled a couple of stones aside to reveal a small knapsack made of waxed canvas. The top flap hadn't been tied tight, letting a glimmer of light escape from a piece of dayglass stuffed in with a pair of socks, a ball of twine, and a couple of wrinkled apples that she was instantly sure had come from the village's storehouse. The twine had probably come from somebody's garden, she thought angrily, and the socks—no. They were as thick and as warm as the ones cloudherds wore, but the wool was much finer than what they sheared off the yaks. They belonged to the soldiers, which meant whoever she was chasing was stealing from everyone.

She bit her lip, then pushed the little pack back under the cobblestones where she was found it and hurried down the jitty. She reached the other end just in time to see the shadow disappear around the edge of the tannery. She sprinted after it, her boots splashing in shallow puddles of rainwater. Whoever she was chasing was bound to hear her—the only question was whether she could catch them first.

She rounded the corner of the tanning shed a moment later. Her quarry was nowhere to be seen. “Rot,” she cursed. Left toward the trading hall, straight on toward the square, or right toward the vegetable patches and the gate?

Crack! She shrieked with surprise as a bolt of lightning split the sky. *Crack!* A second bolt of lightning left a dazzling scar on the night. That one had been close—too close. The lightnings must be nipping at the clouds that had fallen behind their herd.

CRACK! BOOM! Noxy shrieked as the third bolt of lightning struck the weather vane spinning madly next to the fortress gate and shattered its wooden pole. Splinters flew in all directions to clatter off roofs and cobblestones.

A door banged open beside her. “Saints!” Aft hurried over to Noxy, his coat held over his head to keep the rain off. “Are you all right? What in the name of all that rots are you doing out in this?”

“Anna wanted me to fill the kettle,” Noxy said stupidly. “But—the lightning. It hit —”

“I can see what the lightning hit,” Aft said testily. “Come on, let's get you back to—wait.” He sniffed. “What's burning?”

Noxy grabbed his arm and pointed. “There! Upstairs!” A bright lick of flame was suddenly dancing in a window. Another joined it as the familiar herby smell of burning moss caught in Noxy's nostrils. One of the burning splinters had fallen into the piles of dried moss the villagers used to stuff mattresses and pillows.

“Get your mother!” Aft ordered, then cupped his hands around his mouth. “Fire! Fire! Fire!”

The village was lucky. That's what everyone told themselves half an hour later. They were lucky that the rain had made everything so wet, that there had been so little of the autumn moss left to burn, that Aft had spotted the fire so quickly. They were lucky the soldiers had been there to fill and pass buckets—with most of the grownups gone, the elders and children would have done the best they could, but things could have been a lot worse.

Most of all, the villagers told themselves, they were lucky the commander had been there. He had arrived moments after his men, obviously still weak but wearing his uniform jacket nonetheless. When the wind suddenly changed direction and splashed flames against the nearby buildings, he had ordered everyone to get clear and somehow *pushed* the flames back. The fire roared when he did it, briefly doubled on itself, and then collapsed at almost the same moment he did.

“No!” he grated when Sergeant Dorbu reached out to help him to his feet. His eyes blazed with more than just reflected light as he pulled himself to his feet. Jaw clenched, arms and legs moving jerkily as if pulled this way and that by an amateur puppeteer, he nevertheless strode back to the guesthouse with his back straight and his head high.

“But what were you doing *there*?” Indy demanded as she and her daughter walked home arm in arm. “You were just supposed to refill the kettle!”

“I thought I saw something.” Noxy shook her head. “I didn't get a good look at it.” Which wasn't exactly a lie, she told herself. As the soldiers had arrived to help with the fire, only one of them had been the height of the figure she had seen. But why would Thokmay have been out in the rain?

Chapter 7

Stale woke to the muffled stillness that comes after storms and minor disasters. The air was damp and chill, but the sky was so clear that the peaks around the village almost sparkled. A sharp-edged whiff of charred wood hung everywhere, sweetened slightly by the potpourri of the moss that the brief fire had consumed.

It was a day for dawdling: for taking a little longer than usual to get out of bed, for letting the kettle boil a few heartbeats longer than it needed to, for discussing the day's chores in a little more detail than absolutely necessary rather than getting up from breakfast to start doing them. No one wanted to hurry, not even the soldiers sent to patrol the road below Stale.

Sergeant Dorbu spread his hands helplessly when Indy asked if the patrols were strictly necessary. "Commander's orders," he said apologetically.

Aft nodded firmly. "That's right. Have to stick to routine if you don't want people to go slack." Indy and Noxy had found the two of them in the square, sharing strong cups of tea and talking about the fire and how the moss-drying shed might be rebuilt, though Noxy was willing to bet that Sergeant Dorbu had done more listening than talking. The sergeant smiled when he saw Indy, and Noxy tried not to notice how her mother tucked her hair back over her ear when she smiled back.

A shutter clattered open above them. Noxy glanced up to see Grappa Gas glaring down at them, his own mug clenched in his hand. When he realized she had seen him, he scowled and disappeared from the window.

Indy followed her daughter's gaze. "All right," she told the sergeant. "If you think it's necessary." She put her hand on Noxy's shoulder. "Why don't you round up Sensy and Rash and see if you can keep the littles busy this morning? We need to clean up the mess from last night, and they'd just be under foot."

By the time the soldiers and Kulbinder left twenty minutes later, Aft and Indy were working with a dozen elders to tear apart the ruined upper floor of the burned drying shed. Charred beams were knocked free with heavy hammers and set in a pile to have their precious metal nails pulled for re-use. In a moment of inspiration, Noxy had Rash and Sensy drag a few of the least-damaged timbers to the other side of the square and lay them out in a zig-zag pattern for the littles to walk along. Were they a tightrope? A secret path through a jungle? Or a bridge over a pit full of lava, and if you fell off, you'd be burned alive? The littles seemed to be happy to believe all three at once, and as far as Noxy was concerned, anything that kept them from interrupting her repeated yawns was fine.

It was shaping up to be a perfect morning until one of the soldiers who had gone on patrol came running through the gate with his sword in his hands and bellowed, "At arms! At arms! They've found us!"

The commander had been sitting on a stool in front of the trading hall making notes in a small ledger. At the sound of the soldier's voice he snapped the ledger shut and stood. "Report!" he snapped.

The soldier pulled up short and thumped his fist to his chest in salute. His left hand was still in bandages, and the stitches holding the gash on his cheek closed were crusty with scabs. "Honored!" he wheezed. "They... they..."

"Catch your breath, soldier." The commander pulled a whistle from his pocket and blew it long and hard. The shrill double tone made Noxy jump. One of the children who had been walking the zig-zag of beams stumbled, then started to cry because she had stepped in the lava and had to go back to the beginning. Sensy shushed her, eyes as wide as Noxy's as the soldiers who had stayed behind tumbled out of the trading hall door, some on crutches, others still pulling on clothes.

"Honored!" The soldier straightened up and saluted again. "Royalist rangers, honored. Two of 'em, light packs, with forest bows and short swords. The tiger got 'em."

"Alive?" the commander demanded.

The soldier nodded. "Yes, honored. Chased 'em into us, just like we practiced." He gulped. "But there was a bird with 'em, honored. A hawk or the like."

"Damn," the commander swore. "Was it Gifted?"

The soldier shook his head. "Dunno, honored."

Indy cut in. "Commander, does this mean there's an army coming?" The question sent Sensy's hands flying to her mouth. Before Noxy could say anything to comfort her, Rash put his arm over her shoulders and gave her a squeeze. On any other day, Noxy would have been shocked and said something sarcastic. Right then, her only thought was a slightly bewildered, *But I'm scared too.*

The commander shook his head. "Unlikely, mayor. Rangers usually stay a day or two ahead of regulars. My bet is a regiment has settled in at the foot of the pass to hold it closed now that the snow is clearing." He scowled. "But if these two don't report back—"

"—someone's going to come looking for them," Grappa Gas said loudly, striding across the square to join the growing crowd. "I told you, Indy. I *told* you."

The next few minutes were filled with the purposeful chaos of people who have long practice handling unexpected bad news. The commander headed to the Quick Tower, taking two soldiers at Sergeant Dorbu's deferential but unyielding insistence. "Make sure he doesn't kill himself," the sergeant muttered to one of the men.

As they left, the sergeant picked a dozen men by name and told them to get their gear on. He sent the rest back to bed—they could still barely walk, and if there was going to be a fight, he wanted them out of it. But no, he didn't think there'd be a fight—not today, anyway.

“And tomorrow?” Grappa Gas asked. “What are we all supposed to while you lot are chopping each other to pieces in the square? No, I won't shush!” he snapped at Indy as she opened her mouth. “Saying good riddance to the *tralpa* is one thing, but sheltering rebels, that's another, and if you think we won't be held to answer for it when the king's men show up—”

“It won't come to that,” Sergeant Dorbu interrupted. “I promise.” He raised his voice. “If the king's men show up in force, we'll either take our chances getting through the pass, or surrender. We won't put you in danger.” He drew his knife and laid it across his palm. “On my blood.”

“No need for that,” Indy said hastily, putting her hand on his arm to stop him. “We're happy to take your word. Aren't we?” She shot a stern look at Grappa Gas.

“If you say so,” the old man grumbled.

The patrol arrived back in Stale a few minutes later with its two prisoners, but without Kulbinder, who was combing the woods for other rangers. “Or that damn bird,” one of the soldiers said. “I'm sorry, honored, I should have got an arrow off, but it was just so rotting quick.”

“Don't worry about it,” Sergeant Dorbu said, clapping him on the shoulder. “Now, who do we have here?”

The royalist soldiers wore the same kilts and armor as the rebels, but with blue ribbons sewn onto their cuffs. Both men had weathered faces and close-trimmed beards, though the larger one's was going gray while the smaller's was still as black as his skin. Both wore expressions of stoic resignation, and neither seemed inclined to answer the sergeant's questions.

He waited a moment, then sighed. “All right. Mayor, is there a shed of some sort we could borrow with a door that locks?”

Indy blinked. “I don't think any of our doors lock. Oh, except the sugar cabinet in the trading hall, to keep the children out, but they'd never fit in there.”

Beside her, Aft snapped his fingers. “What about the tunnels by the yak pens? We could put them in there and nail some boards across to stop them running off.” He gestured at the salvaged timber beside them.

Sergeant Dorbu blinked. “What tunnels?”

He blinked again when Aft showed him. “Not that one,” Indy said hastily in front of the one that Noxy had shown Thokmay the day before. “It's too filthy even for prisoners.”

They wound up choosing one next to the yak pens. As the two prisoners pried the old wooden grill off its entrance under the watchful eyes of the sergeant, half a dozen of his men, and a handful of villagers, Noxy studied the younger ranger. He was a head shorter than his partner—had it been him in the rain last night rather than Thokmay?

The grill clattered to the ground. “Right, in you go,” Aft growled. He had been holding a spare piece of wood like a club while the prisoners worked, clearly not trusting them not to bolt or the rebel soldiers to stop them if they did.

The older ranger spoke for the first time. “What about the necessities?”

“We’ll get you a bucket,” Sergeant Dorbu. He cocked an eyebrow at Indy. “And something to eat?”

“Of course,” she replied.

The two captured soldiers lifted a salvaged beam for Aft to nail into place. The older captive watched him bang the first couple of nails into place, then snorted and looked away. “What?” the cloudherd asked.

“Didn’t say anything,” the royalist muttered.

Aft put his hands on his hips. “Well, you didn’t say it pretty loudly. You mind speaking up?”

The soldier shrugged. “Just don’t like seeing a job done poorly, is all,” he said, his lowland accent turning ‘seeing’ to ‘saying’ and ‘all’ to ‘ale’.

“What do you mean, poorly?” Aft blustered. Some of the villagers hid smiles.

The soldier shrugged again. “Don’t mind me, I’m just here to hold the heavy stuff.”

“Hmph!” Aft placed the next nail and lined up the hammer with exaggerated care. As he swung it back, the soldier snorted again. The hammer came down squarely on Aft’s thumb.

“Ow! Rot and damnation, man!” Aft stuck his thumb in his mouth, glaring at the soldier.

“Leave him be,” the younger soldier said. “Worse he does, the sooner as we’re quit of here.”

“Right, that’s it.” Aft strode forward and held out the hammer. “You’re so crafty, you show us how it’s done.”

The soldier glanced at the hammer, then at Sergeant Dorbu, who spread his hands. “As long as the job gets done,” he said, struggling to keep a straight face. Some of the villagers weren’t even struggling any more, and Grappa Gas was grinning outright at his son’s embarrassment.

The soldier shrugged once more. “Sure. Here, you take this.” Grunting, the two men swapped places.

“A little higher. Yup. That's it. Nope, in closer to the wall. Hold it.” The soldier eyed the beam's position critically. “Good enough.”

And with no more warning than that he spun around and swung the hammer at Sergeant Dorbu's head. The sergeant barely flung his arm to block the blow. *Thud!* The hammer made an ugly meaty sound as it connected with his forearm.

At the same instant, the younger soldier flung his end of the beam at Aft. Aft jumped back with a curse so that the beam clattered to the ground at his feet instead of crushing his toes. “Run!” he shouted needlessly as the older soldier charged through the crowd.

Someone shrieked. The rebel soldiers chased after the escaping prisoners. The younger ranger fainted left, then lunged right to go in the opposite direction. Without thinking, Noxy stuck out her foot. “Oof!” The soldier sprawled face-long on the ground, and “Ow!” as Aft landed on top of him.

The two scrabbled for a moment in the dirt before the soldier suddenly relaxed. “I yield!” he said. “I yield, damn it! Get off me!”

“Like hell,” Aft grunted, twisting the soldier's arm up behind his back. He got up on one knee, then rose to his feet without relaxing his grip. “What do you want done with him?”

Sergeant Dorbu was cradling the arm that had taken the hammer blow. His jaw was set and his eyes cold. “Put him in the hole,” he said curtly. “You!” He nodded at Noxy. “Get to the gate. Tell whoever's there what's happened, but keep your distance, you hear? Don't try to stop him.”

“What?” Indy exclaimed. “Wait! She's not a—” But Noxy was already gone.

The escaped soldier had gone back the way they had come, but Noxy knew the village like her tongue knew her teeth. She vaulted over a crate someone had left out through the winter, skidded on a cobblestone that was still crusted with winter ice, dodged around Sensy's startled granna and grappa with a shout of, “Look out, he's escaped!”, and practically flew into the narrow jitty between their house and their neighbors.

Her boots splashed in a puddle left behind by the previous night's storm. As she burst out the other end, she plowed straight into Thokmay and knocked him off his feet.

“Sorry!” Noxy exclaimed, reaching down to help him back to his feet. “Did you hear? One of the soldiers escaped! We've got to tell whoever's at the gate!”

“Go,” Thokmay gasped, waving her on as he tried to re-fill his lungs. “I'll find Kulbinder.”

Noxy was already in motion again. She raced along the side of the trading hall and sprinted across the square to the gate. Three soldiers were standing there, two on their own feet and one on crutches. She quickly explained what had happened.

"Hasn't come by here," the one on crutches said. He had a single yellow ribbon around his sleeve, and a thick bandage wrapped around his shin.

"Yet," another added grimly, drawing his sword and hefting it in his hand. "Best for him he doesn't, either."

Boots clomped on the cobblestones as Thokmay trotted up to join them. "Is there any other way out?" he asked Noxy.

She shook her head. "Not unless he can fly." She hesitated. "But if he gets up onto the wall, he might be able to jump into a tree. I've seen people do that."

Thokmay nodded. "The tiger is on patrol," he told the three soldiers crisply. "I'll go find him and let him know about the escape."

"I'll come with you," Noxy said.

"No!" Thokmay said. "It's too dangerous."

Noxy stared at him in disbelief. "Too dangerous? I know the forest a lot better than you do!"

Thokmay patted the sword at his hip. "And I know a lot more about fighting than you do."

"Take her with you," the soldier on crutches ordered.

"But—"

"That's an order," the soldier said sternly, pointing at the ribbon around his sleeve.

"Yes, honored," Thokmay replied woodenly.

The air was colder and damper in the forest gloom. Noxy rubbed her arms to warm them as she walked. Thokmay didn't seem to mind. *But he wouldn't with that thick coat on*, she thought sourly. It didn't look like it had gotten wet the night before, but if he'd been wearing a rain cape... And it would have had plenty of time to dry if he'd hung it up near one of the big fireplace stoves in the trading hall—their thick stone sides stayed warm all night.

Thokmay raised a hand. "Hold." He pointed the forest floor in front of them. "This must be where they fought. See where the branches are broken?"

"If you say so," Noxy said, rubbing her arms more vigorously. Cloudherds learned how to read the sky before they learned how to read books, but woodcraft was mystery to her. Truth be told, she had never really liked being in the forest. The trees always seemed to loom over her. It wasn't too bad when the birds were singing, but when it was silent—

"Why is it so quiet?" she asked, suddenly realizing that she hadn't heard anything for the last hundred heartbeats except the soft pitter-pat of water dripping from the branches around them.

"Sh..." Thokmay made a cutting gesture with his hand. "Something's watching us."

Noxy shivered. "Is it the tiger?" she whispered. She glanced over her shoulder. They were only a couple of hundred strides from the fortress gate, but it felt like home and sunlight and safety were a world away. The forest didn't want them there. It didn't want their voices or their boots or the short sword that was suddenly in Thokmay's hand.

She pressed the heels of her hands to her temples. What was happening? She couldn't be mind-hearing the forest—could she? She must be going crazy. It was too much—it couldn't all fit. Her head was going to burst.

"It's too big..." Noxy whimpered.

"Sh!" Thokmay hissed urgently. "Be quiet!"

Noxy put a hand on a nearby tree to steady herself. The bark was cold and damp but reassuringly solid. The little beads of sap under her palm were frozen nearly solid but still sticky. She took a deep, shaky breath. She wasn't going to throw up. She wasn't. "I'm all right," she said, though she couldn't have said whether she was talking to herself or Thokmay. "Just... just a headache." Somewhere nearby, a sapsucker chirped. A squirrel chattered in response, and from right behind her, the tiger spoke.

"What are you doing here?" Kulbinder demanded. Noxy shrieked and spun around. The tiger ignored her. "You should be in the village!"

"One of the prisoners escaped, honored," Thokmay replied. "The older one. Took a hammer to the sergeant, but he'll be all right. He's probably still inside the walls, and Corporal Choegyal at the gate is watching for him."

The tiger growled. "I've seen nothing. But you were foolish to come here." He glanced at Noxy. "And doubly foolish to bring her."

Noxy opened her mouth to protest that he hadn't brought her, she had volunteered, but a now-familiar twinge stopped her. She squeezed her eyes shut, and suddenly she could *see*, really see, everything all at once through dozens of eyes. She was looking at herself put her hand on the back of her head from the branch of a tree behind her. She was motionless in the bushes, looking over Kulbinder at her own drawn face as she crumpled to the ground. She was biting the top off a fern. She was scurrying along a branch. She was a fifty strides away with one paw in the fast, freezing water of a little brook as the ranger slipped by on nearly-silent feet.

"He's over there by the stream," she said, pointing. "Heading downhill." And then she was back on the branch behind herself, watching as she crumpled to the ground.

Chapter 8

Noxy lay on her back and looked up at the trees. Raindrops splattered on her face. No, not raindrops—just drips falling from the branches of the twisted pines around her.

She turned her head and locked eyes with a gray squirrel splayed out upside-down on the trunk of the tree nearest her. A wave of relief washed over her. She could see it, but she couldn't see *through* it. She could only see through her own eyes, and the pressure in her head was gone.

"We can't wait that long. It will take him at least a couple of days to get to them, and another three days for them to get back in force. We have to find some other way to stop them!" That was Thokmay speaking, she realized muzzily. She struggled to get up on one elbow to look for him.

"She's awake," Kulbinder rumbled. He was sitting on his haunches two strides away, studying Noxy as impassively as the squirrel had. Thokmay was sitting beside him on the trunk of a fallen tree. He stood, brushed bits of damp moss from the back of his kilt, and came over to offer her his hand.

"M a'right," Noxy said, waving his hand away and forcing herself to sit up. Her body felt like it was made out of damp laundry stuffed with porridge. "Wh'appen?"

Thokmay shook his head, concern written large on his face. "You fainted." He went down on one knee and put his hand on her forehead. "Sh, be still," he said gently as she tried to push him away. "I don't think you have a fever. Has this happened before?"

"Nuh uh." Noxy shook her head, instantly regretting it. She had seen through the forest's eyes, she realized with dull horror. The feeling was fading—it already felt like she was remembering a story she had heard rather than something that had happened to her—but it was the only explanation.

Her eyes widened. "Did you catch him?" she asked. "The ranger. Did you—"

"He got away," Kulbinder told her, still studying Noxy as if she were a puzzle to be solved or a meal to be refused. "I searched by the stream while Thokmay looked after you, but there was no sign of him."

The tiger stood and stretched. "There is nothing more we can do here. We should return to the village."

Something rustled in the bushes. Instantly, the tiger sunk into a hunting crouch, ready to chase or pounce or defend himself. Thokmay drew his sword, motioning at Noxy with his free hand to be still.

The bushes rustled again, and then the trio heard a familiar out-of-tune whistle as Yestevan stepped into the clearing, still buttoning up his trousers. "Whoa!" He jumped as he looked up and saw them. "Saints, you nearly scared the soul out of me!"

"What are you doing here?" Kulbinder demanded.

"Pretty obvious, isn't it?" the former cloudherd blustered. "Not like there's a privy to use." He put his hands on his hips. "Now, what are you lot doing here?"

"We're looking for a royalist soldier," Thokmay said curtly.

Yestevan's eyes narrowed. "Is there a reward?"

"I don't eat you," Kulbinder said flatly.

Yestevan gulped and ran a hand through his lanky hair. "Well, all right, can't ask for better than that. If I see him I'll, um, I'll come and find you?" And with no more farewell than that he spun around and hurried back the way he had come.

Thokmay waited until he had disappeared among the trees before sheathing his sword. "What an unpleasant man," he said. "Was he shunned for anything in particular, or just for being himself?"

"He killed a couple of people," Noxy said. "Not on purpose," she added hastily. "We're not supposed to use the clouds for anything except rain and sometimes passengers or mail, but he promised some river pirates he'd pick them up after a robbery, except something went wrong, I don't know what, and they were caught."

She had only been six or seven when it happened, but she remembered the trial. Her granna and two other old women from other cloudherd villages had put on long black coats, black collars, and black wooden masks. The *tralpa* had been there as well in his rich brocade jacket, but had sat to the side and let the villagers dispense their own justice. Yestevan had made his excuses, blustering and pleading and trying to make jokes. Then Aft and Indy got to their feet one after another and laid out the facts. Grappa Gas had shushed Noxy's questions, eventually lifting her to sit in his lap so she could lean back against his chest and let her eyes close as the proceeding dragged on.

The end was never in doubt. For the first time in his life, Yestevan was made to say his true name aloud in public so that the dragon could hear it and know who he was. He was given a yak to ride back to his own village, where he would have a day to collect his belongings. No cloudherd would ever eat a meal with him again, or share a fire with him, or nurse him when he was ill. And he was never to ride a cloud again.

Except he did, Noxy thought glumly as they started back up the path to the village. *And he's eating our food, even if it's the soldiers that are giving it to him.* It was just one more thing her mother would have to answer for when the other villages heard what was going on.

Noxy, Kulbinder, and Thokmay returned to a village under occupation. Soldiers patrolled the streets and the wall in pairs. It was just a precaution, Sergeant Dorbu was saying to the small crowd that had gathered in the square.

“Precaution against what?” Grappa Gas demanded. He was angrier than Noxy had ever seen. It wasn't the shouting rage he worked himself into when he was arguing with his son. This was as big as the rainstorms that battered the mountains as autumn turned to winter.

Sergeant Dorbu looked the old man in the eye. “Against whatever that ranger might bring down on us.”

Grappa Gas thumped his cane on the ground. “For how long? How long are you going to treat us like yaks in a pen?” The mutters of agreement grew louder.

“For two more days.” The commander's voice cut through the crowd like a cold wind. He strode across the square to stand beside Sergeant Dorbu and swept his gaze across the villagers. “My men will be well enough to travel by then, and if I have understood the mayor correctly, your herd will have returned, so we will take our leave for Chaghan.”

“Really?” Grappa Gas waved his cane toward the fortress gate. “How are you going to get them through the forest? It didn't go so well last time.”

The commander shook his head. “We're not going through the forest. You're going to fly us over it.”

“What!?” A double dozen voices echoed Grappa Gas's explosion. For a moment it was pandemonium as everyone shouted over one another. Even Indy was waving her arms, Noxy saw.

“We have no choice.” Once again the commander's voice cut through the noise like a cold wind, making Noxy shiver. Not even her granna at her fiercest could have quelled the turmoil like that. “We have to get to Chaghan. We can't go through the Herd of Trees, not with a royalist regiment and the trees waiting for us, so we're going to fly there.”

“You mean we're going to fly you there!” Grappa Gas shouted. “Well, rot that! We've got *contracts*! There's farmers down in Gandan depending on us to bring them rain. If we go kiting off to wherever, folks are going to go hungry!”

“People are going hungry already.” the commander said. “And those who aren't live in fear that they will, that someone with more money than they have will rent some law they've never heard of and use it to take half their crop or throw them off their land or have their house knocked down to to improve the damned view.”

“You don't see it up here because you've learned to stand together,” Sergeant Dorbu cut in, his voice almost pleading. “And that's what we need you to do now—stand together, with us, so that we can keep fighting to put the law in your hands where it belongs, so you can do what you want.”

Indy raised her hand to stop whatever Grappa Gas might have said next. "And if we say no?" she asked.

"Then we will insist," the commander said simply. "What we are fighting for is bigger than any one village. One way or another, you are going to carry my men to Chaghan."

At that, the crowd erupted. The villagers shouted at the colonel, the soldiers, and Aft, who found himself the bewildered and then irate target of a dozen angry people. "Don't look at me, I didn't know what they were planning!" he protested with ever-greater frustration.

The commander watched impassively, apparently caring no more about the cloudbirds' anger than he would have about a few stray raindrops. Beside him, Sergeant Dorbu's face was a contrast in weary resignation. Noxy saw her mother give him one contemptuous look before turning her back.

The commander waited a moment longer, then drew a whistle from his sleeve and held it up. On the edges of the square, soldiers took their out their own whistles and raised them to their lips.

Phweee! The shrill sound cut the conversation like sudden lightnings. A few people yelped in surprise, and a handful of children started crying.

"My men will do their best to stay out of your way until the herd arrives," the commander said into the silence that followed. "For now, it would be best if you all returned to your homes."

As the crowd began to break up, Noxy ran across the square and flung herself into her startled mother's arms. "Oh daffodil, where have you been?" Indy murmured in her daughter's ear, squeezing her. "I was so worried."

Noxy squeezed her in return before letting go and stepping back to wipe a stray raindrop from her cheek. "I'm all right, *anna*. I'm all right."

"Gifted! Report!" The commander's whipcrack voice shattered the moment. He strode toward the mother and daughter. Startled, Noxy realized that Thokmay and the tiger had followed her across the square.

The tiger's ears flattened against his head. "I apologize, honored. He escaped me."

"How?" the commander demanded.

"The girl fainted, honored. By the time she was awake, he was gone." The tiger's tail flicked from side to side. "Shall I try to pick up his trail?"

Noxy flushed as her mother and grandmother looked at her in surprise.

"Fainted?" her mother said. "You've never fainted."

The commander turned his cold gaze on Noxy. "Has she not? Then she chose a very convenient time to start."

Uh oh, Noxy thought as her mother's jaw set in a pre-explosion expression that Noxy knew all too well. Granna Fee cut in hastily before Indy could speak. "Well, you

know how it is,” the old woman said brightly, putting her arm around Noxy and giving her a squeeze. “Girls this age... I mean, young women... when they get their changes and all... Sometimes it can make them a little light-headed. The best thing for it will be a nice cup of tea. Come on, why don't we all go and do that and leave these men to their business?” She gave Noxy's shoulder another squeeze and the commander another innocent smile, and then dragged her granddaughter away with her bewildered daughter in her wake.

“What was *that* all about?” Indy demanded as soon as they were out of earshot of the soldiers.

“She's just shaken up by last night's fire, aren't you, daffodil?” Granna Fee said.

“Um, yes, I guess,” Noxy replied, grateful for her grandmother's quick thinking.

“I thought so,” Granna Fee said firmly. She steered them past the trading hall, where a handful of soldiers were putting a bar on the door and nailing the window shutters closed. One of the soldiers nodded curtly at the three women as they went by. It wasn't until later that Noxy wondered why they were putting the bar on the *outside* of the door.

Around the corner, past the vegetable gardens and the tanning shed... “Aren't we going to your house for tea?” Noxy asked.

“In a moment.” Granna Fee looked past her granddaughter at Indy. “There's something we need to show you first.”

It took them ten minutes to get to the tunnel she had showed Thokmay the day before, the one that Indy had said was too dirty for prisoners. Granna Fee slowed as they approached it and glanced over her shoulder.

“Granna...” Indy started.

“Shush,” the old woman said quietly. “It's time she knew.”

“Knew what?” Noxy asked.

A few minutes later, Noxy climbed the stairs to the Round Tower, her mind whirling. She had been told her whole life that the tunnels led nowhere, and that it was dangerous to go into them. It turned out that the second part was only mostly true. One tunnel, the one she had shown Thokmay, was still passable—dark and damp and narrow, but in an emergency, it gave the villagers a way to get out of the fortress unseen. Children weren't told about it to make sure it stayed secret, but... Granna Fee sighed and gave Noxy another squeeze. “You're not really a child any more, are you?”

Noxy stopped at the top of the stairs, gaped at the scene in front of her, and then quietly backed down three steps and cleared her throat noisily. When she reached the top step the second time, Rash and Sensy were no longer holding hands. “Hey,” she said awkwardly.

“Hey,” her friends replied. Rash would have denied that he was blushing, but he seemed unable to meet Noxy's eyes. Sensy, on the other hand, looked straight at her, challenging and searching at the same time.

Noxy swallowed the lump that was suddenly in her throat and turned to lean on the parapet. “This rots,” she said quietly. “The soldiers... all of it. I wish we could just get up on a cloud and fly away.”

“The grownups will be back with the herd soon,” Sensy promised. “Everything will be all right then.”

All right, but not back the way it was, Noxy thought. She put on a brave smile. “Sure,” she said. Then she straightened up. “Speaking of soldiers.”

Two men in battle masks marched past in step. One of them nodded to the trio as they went by. Noxy half-raised a hand in acknowledgment, wondering how many centuries it had been since soldiers last patrolled the fortress walls.

“Come on,” Rash said to the two girls. “My *anna* made pie last night, and it won't eat itself.”

“You go ahead,” she told Rash and Sensy. “I have to take care of something first.” Below them, sheltered from ground-level view by a bend in the wall and the corner of the tannery, Thokmay and Kulbinder were deep in conversation.

“Are you sure?” Sensy asked anxiously.

Noxy looked from her to Rash and back. “I'm sure,” she said, put all the emphasis she could into it. “But save me a piece, all right?”

She watched them go down the stairs together, looking away as they reached for each other's hands. The tiger and his boy were there. *Good*, she thought grimly. She had some questions, and it was about time they gave her some answers. And if she got to do a bit of yelling at the same time, so much the better.

Stale's privies stood beside the tanning shed, on the theory that everything that stank might as well be in one place. A soldier in a battle mask stood in front of them, and for a moment Noxy almost turned aside, but then the door opened and his partner came out, grumbling about how scratchy the mountain moss was.

Noxy kept her head down as they walked past. Glancing over her shoulder to make sure they weren't watching, she cut left and hurried along the side of the tanning shed, slowing as she reached the corner.

Silence. Had they left while she was sneaking up on them? Feeling foolish, she leaned forward to peak around the corner.

“Looking for someone?” She shrieked and spun around at the rumbled question. Kulbinder stood a stride behind her, one forepaw raised slightly, his ears back and his eyes narrowed.

“I—um. I was just—” Noxy babbled, retreating one step at a time as the tiger advanced. She shrieked again as she backed into Thokmay.

Noxy tensed, about to bolt, hesitated, and straightened. No. This was *her* home, not theirs, and she wasn't going to run away. "What are you doing here?" she demanded, putting as much of her mother and grandmother in her voice as she could.

The tiger blinked. "Sergeant Dorbu told us to patrol the—"

"No you weren't," Noxy said recklessly. "If Sergeant Dorbu told you to patrol anywhere, it would be the forest. Or he'd have you out looking for the soldier who escaped. Who you *let* escape," she continued as Kulbinder opened his mouth to speak. "I heard you. After I fainted. You're not really rebels, are you? You're spies!"

A yak mooed a complaint somewhere nearby. Someone hammered on a nail, and someone else called for a child to come back and finish weeding the vegetables. Finally Thokmay coughed, almost as if he was embarrassed. "Not exactly. But we're not rebels. We got caught up in this the same way you did, and we're trying to find a way to get out."

"So you're royalists?" Noxy asked, crossing her arms.

"He is," the tiger snorted. "Cats don't partake of such foolishness."

"We got stuck in the middle of everything when Shudarga raised her banner," Thokmay said. "We went along with things as long as we could, waiting for a chance to escape, but now we don't have a choice. We have to reach the king's army and warn them what the commander is planning."

"Warn them? Why not just let them go?"

"Because the commander's not really taking her army to Chaghan," the young soldier said patiently. "That's just what he's telling you all to keep you quiet. As soon as the clouds arrive, he's going to make you carry his men right into the heart of Gandan and flood the city."

Noxy gaped at him. "My *anna* and the others would never do that!" she said angrily. "There are laws—cloudherd laws, not the kind we have to rent from the *tralpa*. We've never taken part in lowlanders' wars, and we never will!"

But Thokmay was already shaking his head. "He's not going to give you a choice. As soon they finish work on the trading hall, he's going to round up all of the children and hold them hostage until you do what she wants."

Noxy stared at him, stunned speechless. "You're—you're lying! The other kingdoms wouldn't let him. There's, there's laws and treaties, everyone knows that. If he tried to do that, the other kingdoms would all attack together to stop him!"

"They're going to do that anyway," Thokmay said quietly. "Everyone thought the king would crush Shudarga's rebellion out of hand, but she's gone from victory to victory, and now the other kingdoms are scared. The king has asked them for help, and they're going to give it."

"He wouldn't," Noxy whispered.

“You wouldn't,” Kulbinder rumbled. “We wouldn't. But the commander will, and Sergeant Dorbu and the rest of the men will help him. They'll tell themselves they have to, or that it's an empty threat because you'll never make them follow through on it, or that orders are orders, and they'll do it. It's what you humans always do. You make up a story, then tell yourselves you have to do something because that's what the story says.”

Sudden rage boiled up inside Noxy. “I'm going to tell my *anna*,” she snarled. Head held high, she stepped around the tiger and strode toward the square with stiff, angry steps.

She was barely past the tanning shed when Little Gas came running toward her. “Noxy! Noxy!” he shouted. “Come quick! It's Grappa!”

“What's happened?” Noxy demanded, seizing him by the shoulders.

“The soldiers!” Little Gas said. “They 'rested Grappa Gas!”

Noxy opened her mouth to ask what for, but a deep *doom doom* cut her off. She and Little Gas looked at each other wide-eyed. *Doom doom* , pause. *Doom doom* , pause. Stale's home drum was signalling disaster for the second time in three days.

She looked back at Thokmay and Kulbinder. “Well, what are you waiting for?” she snapped. “Come on!”

Chapter 9

As Noxy hurried toward the square, she did a quick calculation in her head. Most of the adults had gone to round up the village's herd of clouds. That left about three hundred people in Stale. Two thirds of those were children, which meant there were no more than a hundred villagers, versus almost able-bodied fifty soldiers, all of whom had actually knew how to fight. The odds would change when the other adults came back, but not by enough. And if the commander really was going to lock up the children, it would be too late.

Unless we run away right now, she thought. But how? They couldn't just fly away—it would take half a dozen trips for Pillow and Big Blue to carry everyone to safety, and they'd surely be caught before everyone escaped. They couldn't take the road—the soldiers would run them down before they reached the second turnback—and as for the forest... She shook her head. It was too much for her to figure out, but her *anna* would know what to do.

They reached the square to see two soldiers holding a struggling Grappa Gas in front of the commander. Indy stood between them, pointing angrily. Sergeant Dorbu was there as well, his expression carefully blank. Little Gas took Noxy's hand. She squeezed it, trying to put in all the reassurance she needed herself.

The commander cut off whatever Indy was saying with a curt gesture. "Then hear it for yourself. Sergeant?"

Sergeant Dorbu cleared his throat. "He was trying to pass a hammer to the prisoner, honored. Stuck inside a loaf of bread." He looked into the distance as he spoke, his voice flat.

"I wasn't passing anything to anyone!" Grappa Gas protested. "I was doing some work on my leg, and the hammer must have fallen into the basket along with the food."

The commander searched his face. "You're lying," he said after a moment. "And you are putting us all at risk by doing it. Sergeant! Put him in with the ranger."

"Yes, honored," Sergeant Dorbu said, saluting.

"Like hell!" Indy exploded. "This is *my* village! You don't give orders here."

The commander didn't even glance her way. "It's not your village, it's theirs." His wave took in everyone in the small crowd that had gathered in the square. "And we are their strong arm."

"Well then let's ask them what they want!" Indy turned to step up onto the speaker's stone.

“No.” The commander's voice rang out. “Do you ask a child when they want to go to bed? Or what they want for breakfast? We are not just the servants of the people, we are their voice as well, and so it is our right as well as our duty to decide if someone needs to be locked up.”

“But Grappa's not the only one you're going to lock up, is he?” Noxy burst out. Heads turned. She heard Kulbinder rumble behind her, but she didn't care. She was so angry she was shaking.

Her mother stared at her. “What are you talking about?”

“Ask him about the children,” Noxy said, shaking. “Ask him why he's *really* putting bars on the trading hall. Ask him what he really wants to do with our clouds!”

“That's enough!” the commander said sharply. “Sergeant, I want these people back in their homes and—”

“What is she talking about?” Indy might not have had a spell to put force behind her words, but at that moment, she didn't need one. She turned on Sergeant Dorbu. “What do you know about this?”

The sergeant patted the air helplessly. “Please, honored, calm down. I'm sure we can—”

“Enough!” the commander barked. “Sergeant, I ordered you to return these people to their homes. Do it! Now!”

And with that one command, the events of the last three days slipped out of control and turned into an avalanche. Grappa Gas twisted an arm free and swung wildly at the nearest soldier. Before he could wind up for another punch, the soldier drew his sword. *Ssshing! Ssshing!* All around the square, soldiers suddenly held sharp metal or knocked an arrow.

“You stupid girl,” Kulbinder said under his breath. “You stupid, headstrong primate. Now what are we going to do?”

Five steps, and the commander was looming over Noxy. “How did you find out?” he demanded.

“I... I overheard a couple of your men talking,” Noxy stammered. “Over by the privies.”

The commander shook his head. “No you didn't. Sergeant! Put the old man in with the ranger, and take this one to the hall for questioning.”

“Over my dead body!” Indy said.

The commander rounded on her. “This is where the villain would say 'if you insist', but I'm not the villain here, and this isn't a story. I will ask your daughter some questions, but I will not harm her. I give you my word.”

“You'll forgive me if I don't quite trust you,” Indy spat bitterly. She looked at Sergeant Dorbu. “Any of you.”

“Shall we put them both in the hall, honored?” Kulbinder asked.

The commander nodded. "Yes. Make sure they have whatever they need." He raised his voice again. "Everyone else, return to your homes. This will all be over soon."

There were tears in some people's eyes as they left the square. Others held their heads high, glaring at the impassive soldiers, or bent over to tell their children that they were going to go inside for a while to play, wouldn't that be nice?

Sergeant Dorbu waited until the commander had left and the crowd had thinned before sighing. "If you please, honored," he said to Indy woodenly.

There were tears in her mother's eyes, Noxy saw, but her voice was firm. "I *trusted* you."

"I told you," Grappa Gas said with bitter satisfaction. "They betrayed their king. Should have known they'd betray us too."

"I'm sorry, honored," the sergeant said.

Indy put her arm around Noxy's shoulders. "What do I always say about apologies?" she asked her daughter without taking her eyes off the sergeant.

"The best way to apologize is to fix what you did," Noxy said defiantly.

"I'm sorry," the sergeant repeated. Whatever else he might have said was cut off as Aft stepped around the corner and clubbed the nearest soldier over the head with a plank.

"Run!" he shouted, swinging the plank wildly to catch a second soldier in the ribs.

"Run!?" Grappa Gas shouted, sticking out his leg to trip the nearest soldier. "I can't run, you idiot!" He head-butted the soldier Aft had just hit and swung around to punch another.

Noxy and her mother bolted. They didn't even make it to the corner before Noxy heard her mother curse as a soldier tackled her. "Go! Go! Go!" Indy shouted, kicking away the soldier's hands.

Noxy hesitated. "Go!" her mother ordered, and Noxy ran. Through the vegetable garden. Over the knee-high fence. Around the barrel Rash was supposed to have moved a week ago. Past the sauna. There were shouts behind her, soldiers and villagers.

Around the corner. There were soldiers in front of her. "Stop!" She skidded to a stop, doubled back, ducked into the jitty between the sauna and the house where Granna Fee taught children how to read. Out the other side. There were stairs in front of her. She took them in long strides, panting for breath. Up, up, up onto the wall. There were soldiers there too, the two that had been patrolling earlier or two others, it didn't matter, they had heard the shouting and seen her running and one of them had a sword and the other had a bow. "Stop!"

She jumped. For half a heartbeat she thought she'd missed, but then she hit the roof of the sauna. "Don't shoot!" Kulbinder roared from below. "She has nowhere to go!"

That's what you think, Noxy thought giddily. She scrambled over the roof and down the other side and jumped onto the next house. The cedar shingles beneath her feet were slippery with moss and rain and bird droppings. She ran anyway, no more in control than she had been the time she and Rash and Sensy had taken an old yak hide and slid down the snow-covered hill above the pond and right across the ice.

House to house to house, then she grabbed the gutter to swing down to the ground. She peeked around the corner. There was nobody between her and the wall, nobody between her and the mouth of the old tunnel. She took a deep breath and sprinted across the gap.

Her fingers found the secret catch Granna Fee had shown her. *Click!* The grate pulled open just enough for her to squeeze through.

"Wait!" She spun around. Kulbinder stood on the outside of the grate. "Take Thokmay with you."

"Are you serious?" She turned to go.

"Wait!" he said again. "Please."

Something in his voice made her hesitate. She heard footsteps, and then Thokmay was there, panting for breath. He took in the open grate with one glance.

"Go, honored," the tiger said urgently. "You must get to your father. I'll find you in the forest." Thokmay nodded and squeezed through, turning to pull the grate back into place.

"Now what?" he asked Noxy. Without waiting for an answer, he pulled a small piece of dayglass out of his pocket. The little crystal gleamed yellow-white in the gloom of the tunnel.

"I don't know," Noxy said angrily. "And I didn't say you could—"

"Go!" Kulbinder said urgently. He bounded away, roaring orders to soldiers Noxy couldn't see to fan out, search the houses, look in the yak pens, the girl had to be *somewhere*.

The tunnel smelled like the inside of a yak's back end. Thokmay and Noxy had to duck their heads every few dozen steps, and turn sideways to squeeze through the narrower spots. The stonework was rough, and patched in places with mis-matched bricks. It wasn't an original part of the fortress, Noxy realized, but something human-made.

Noxy slowed as the tunnel dipped downward. "What's wrong?" Thokmay whispered. Noxy shook her head. His little piece of dayglass was the only light they had, and it was barely enough to see by. The stones glistened with condensation.

Something dripped up ahead, *plink plink*, and all she could think about was the mass of stone above her, the weight of it.

"Noxy!" Thokmay put his hand on her shoulder. "We have to keep moving!"

She took a shaky breath. Her head was swimming like it had in the forest, but this wasn't—this wasn't whatever that had been. This was the tunnel. It was so small. What if they got stuck? What if they got stuck and couldn't turn around and were trapped?

She didn't realize she had spoken aloud until Thokmay replied. "Well, if this was a story, there'd be some sort of dramatic cave in right now. Or we'd find the skeleton of a pirate holding a map and a key, or—"

"You're not helping," Noxy said through gritted teeth. The walls couldn't be closing in, could they?

Thokmay shook her shoulder gently. "Sorry," he said softly. "It's not much farther. Just keep moving and we'll be fine."

"So now you're an expert in tunnels?" she said shakily, trying and failing to put some bite in her words.

She felt rather than saw him smile. "Sure. I do this all the time. Here." He passed her the piece of dayglass. "Go ahead."

Noxy stopped again three dozen strides later. "Oh rot," she said weakly. The floor in front of her shimmered slightly in the captured daylight coming from her shard of glass. She stepped on it gingerly. Her boot made a soft splash that sent ripples in all directions.

"See?" Thokmay said encouragingly. "This must be the low point. It'll be uphill from here."

"How—how deep do you think it is?" Noxy asked, breathing hard.

"I don't know. Want me to go first? You can hold onto the light," the young soldier added quickly.

Gently, as if he was getting a skittish yak calf into a shearing pen, Thokmay eased Noxy to one side of the tunnel and squeezed past her. For a moment they were face to face, their bodies pressed against one another. He was taller than she was, Noxy realized, her mind wanting to be anywhere but underground. And he had a bit of stubble on his chin and upper lip. He and Rash should compare notes about growing a mustache.

"There, that wasn't so bad." He straightened his uniform jacket and forced a smile. "Now, shall we?" He turned and started cautiously through the water.

Three strides and it was up to the tops of his boots. Two more, and it was halfway to his knees. He moved slowly, one hand on the tunnel wall, testing his footing before shifting his weight. Higher, higher—he stopped. "I think this is as deep as it gets," he said over his shoulder.

"I hope so," Noxy said. She took a step, then another and another. The water spilled over the top of her boot. Rot, but it was cold. She swallowed dryly. Another, another...

Her foot slipped. She yelped and caught herself against the wall instinctively. The dayglass tumbled from her hand into the water.

"Hold still!" Thokmay said. "Just stay there, I'll get it." The dayglass gleamed softly at the bottom of the small pool. Noxy nodded jerkily. Where did he think she was going to go?

Thokmay slowly retraced his steps, moving his legs at a turtle's speed so that he wouldn't make waves. "Oops." His boot bumped the dayglass. He smiled at Noxy. "Wouldn't want to step on that, would I?"

"Please just hurry up," Noxy breathed.

Thokmay nodded and reached into the water. His fingers closed around the glass. He straightened up and held it out to her. "There you go."

She balled her hands into fists against the wall. "You probably ought to hold onto it."

Thokmay didn't withdraw his arm. "It's all right. I trust you."

Noxy swallowed again. Thokmay waited patiently. Finally she reached out. Thokmay pressed the glass into her open hand. "Come on," he said. "Let's go find somewhere we can dry out."

The tunnel rose steadily after that. When the passage in front of them began to lighten, Noxy had to bite her lip to stop herself from pushing Thokmay forward. It was still afternoon, she realized dumbly as they reached the brush-covered tunnel mouth. They had only been underground for a few minutes.

The thudding of the village drum brought her back to herself. The soldiers were still searching for her inside the walls. It wouldn't be long before they started combing the forest as well. "We can't stay here," she whispered to Thokmay.

"Why not?" he whispered back, gesturing at the salal bushes that hung down over the tunnel mouth. "If you and your friends never found this, nobody else will."

"And then what?" Noxy asked as he swept a patch of floor with his hand and sat down. "I don't exactly have a plan, you know."

The soldier shrugged. "Me neither. Kulbinder will make excuses as long as he can, but sooner or later Sergeant Dorbu will notice that I'm missing." He looked back into the tunnel as if hoping to see someone emerge from the darkness. "I expect he'll be pretty disappointed that I've deserted again."

"Again?" Noxy asked, settling onto the tunnel floor a stride away from him. Thokmay nodded, but didn't offer any details.

The afternoon took on the bluish cast of early evening light in the mountains. Noxy and Thokmay had both taken off their boots and wrung out their socks, but her

damp feet were still painfully cold by the time it was dark enough to risk moving. The village drum had long since fallen silent, but twice they heard soldiers pass by on the path that ran along the outside of the wall. Other soldiers were doubtless watching the cloud pen and the road down to the pass, and for all she knew the fishpond as well. The temperature was starting to drop—it would freeze overnight—and her stomach was an empty ache. It was nothing at all like the stories she had read and re-read about people having adventures.

Thokmay stirred. “Shall we get going?”

“Might as well,” Noxy replied, pulling herself stiffly to her feet. “Do you have somewhere in mind?”

He nodded. “Just follow me.”

The light had long since leaked out of the dayglass, and since they hadn't dared set it outside to soak up more, it couldn't help them find their way. They wouldn't have dared us it anyway—when they slipped through the bushes at the tunnel's mouth and looked back at the fortress walls, they saw a soldier outlined against the darkening sky. One stray flicker of light among the trees, and he would call others down on them.

They crept through the trees like a pair of mice. In some places, they actually did creep, going down on hands and knees to crawl under low-hanging branches rather than pushing them aside. Noxy's heart was in her throat every time Thokmay signalled stop, but they only heard voices once, and those were far away.

Thokmay led them downhill, snaking back and forth according to no pattern Noxy could see. She felt a little resentful—she had grown up here, not him—but she had to admit that he seemed to know what he was doing.

The sun was behind the peaks to the west when Thokmay finally halted next to a fallen tree whose trunk was almost as thick as Noxy was tall. It had lain on the forest floor so long ago that saplings were growing out of its slowly-decaying back.

They crept along its side to the tangle of dried-out roots that had, in the end, not grown deep enough to keep it standing. Thokmay reached into them, cursed under his breath, and slowly pulled out a bundle the side of his chest. It was a knapsack, Noxy realized, a smaller version of the packs the soldiers had carried when they first arrived.

“Where did that come from?” she asked as he shouldered it.

“It was Kulbinder's idea,” Thokmay replied. “We brought stuff out each time we went on patrol.” He hesitated. “I had to steal some of. I'm sorry about that.”

“I know. I found your pack the night of the fire.” Noxy shivered. “We should keep moving.” The branches around them rustled in the wind. The sky overhead was clear, and she could feel her breath fogging. They had to find shelter soon, and some way to warm up, or the soldiers looking for them would stop being their biggest problem.

They had only gone a dozen steps before Thokmay held up a hand to signal Noxy to stop. “What?” she whispered. Then she heard it. Somewhere nearby, someone was whistling out of tune.

She and Thokmay crouched among the bushes. The whistling grew louder. Footsteps approached. She caught a whiff of cook fire smoke and unwashed armpits as the shunned cloudbird walked by just out of reach.

Thokmay stopped her when she started to rise a minute later, shushing her with a finger to his lips. “What?” she mouthed. He shook his head. His lips moved, and she realized that he was counting under his breath.

Finally he relaxed. “All right,” he said quietly. They stood cautiously. Night had fallen—the scattered patches of snow beneath the twisted pines shone silver in the light of the tumbling moon, and every shadow was an inky pool.

Thokmay pointed downhill. “That way. Kulbinder found a gully that will get us out of the wind.”

“Can we make a fire?” Noxy asked, shivering.

Thokmay shook his head apologetically. Noxy nodded and pushed herself to move. She was so hungry...

They came to the gully ten minutes later and picked their way along it, stepping carefully from rock to rock whenever they had to cross the little stream that gurgled quietly in its middle. Eventually Noxy called a halt, unable to feel her toes or to focus on where she was putting her feet.

They found a dry patch of ground beneath a half-fallen pine and sat down side by side. Thokmay pulled a thin blanket from his knapsack and passed it to Noxy. “Take off your boots and wrap this around your feet,” he said.

“I know what to do,” she snapped. Then she sighed. “Sorry. I’m just...”

“Me too,” Thokmay said quietly. He pushed her fumbling hands aside, untied her laces, and pulled off her boots and socks. Wrapping the blanket around her feet, he started to rub them vigorously.

“Ow,” she complained. “No, keep going, I just—owww...” Pins and needles danced across her feet and up her legs.

After a minute she pushed Thokmay’s hands aside. “What about yours?”

“In a minute,” he said, rummaging around in his knapsack. “Here.” He handed her something wrapped in wax paper. “There’s enough for both of us.”

She unwrapped the paper gingerly. “What is it?”

“Sausage.” She eyed him blankly. “It’s a sausage. Don’t worry, it’s cooked.” He unwrapped his own and took a bite.

She swallowed the saliva in her mouth and handed it back. “No thanks. I don’t—we don’t eat meat.”

Thokmay stopped chewing. “Oh,” he mumbled. “Um, what about cheese?” He rummaged in the knapsack again and withdrew a hard brick the size of his fist.

“Thank you,” she said fervently. The cheese was so hard that she had to gnaw at it with her back teeth to scrape some off to chew, and the sharp taste was nothing like the grilled yak's milk cheese the villagers ate on special occasions, but her stomach rumbled appreciatively as the first mouthful reached it.

Thokmay had dried fruit, too, and little pebbles of something bittersweet he called “chocolate”. “Suck on it,” Thokmay advised. “It will last longer that way.”

She rolled the strangely delicious lump around in her mouth. “You must have been planning this for a while. Escaping, I mean.”

Thokmay shrugged. “It's mostly Kulbinder's doing. I tried once before on my own, but I didn't get very far.”

Noxy hesitated. “Is that when you got your scars?”

He took so long to answer that she almost thought he had fallen asleep. “He didn't have a choice. The commander was going to put me in a work gang, and then he wouldn't have been able to look after me, so he said it was his job to discipline me, and...” He ran his fingers over the four clawmarks on his cheek. “It didn't hurt as much as I thought it would. Honestly, the worst part was getting the blood off of my jacket.”

Noxy hesitated again. “And—look, you don't have to tell me if you don't want me to, but—he called you 'honored'. Back at the wall,” she plowed on. She had been puzzling over it as they walked, slowly putting pieces together in her head. “And when you fell into the fishpond—I hear him say it then too. Are you—are you a spy?”

Thokmay shook his head. “No. But he is.”

Noxy looked up where he was pointing. Her eyes met the tiger's. “Oh,” she said weakly.

“I thought you would be further by now,” Kulbinder said without preamble. If he hadn't spoken, and if his ear hadn't twitched as a drip from the branches above hit it, he might have been a statue left behind by the Pilots.

“Sorry, honored,” Thokmay said humbly.

“Is everyone all right?” Noxy asked, struggling to her feet.

“Be quiet, girl.” Kulbinder padded down into the gully in a quick, quiet rush. “Or at least quieter. Everyone is as well as they were when you left.” His tail flicked. “Do you know you are surrounded by trolls?”

Thokmay stood and reached for his sword. “Don't,” the tiger ordered. “They're all around you, and if they decide to attack, your sword won't save you.”

“What do they want?” Noxy asked in a whisper, scanning the trees. She couldn't see anything. She felt like she was half-blind there on the ground—it was so much easier from cloudback.

“I’m sure they’ll tell us when they want to,” the tiger rumbled. “Now pack up. We need to be a lot further from the fortress before dawn.”

Noxy crossed her arms. “No.”

The tiger didn’t snarl—not quite—but his lips pulled back just enough to reveal his sharp white teeth. “What do you mean, no?”

“I mean no,” Noxy repeated. “The herd is going to be here in a couple of days. There’s no way we can get help and get back by then on foot, is there?”

Thokmay and Kulbinder exchanged silent glances. “I didn’t think so,” Noxy said grimly. “So if we’re going to stop the rebels, we’re going to have to do it ourselves.”

“If you have a plan, this would be a good time to share it,” the tiger growled, his tail twitching.

Noxy took a deep breath. “You’re not going to like it,” she started.

Chapter 10

Noxy and Thokmay shared the blanket that night. Kulbinder lay beside them, rising periodically to disappear into the forest in search of trouble. He seemed almost disappointed when dawn came and he still hadn't found any. Yestevan had built a lean-to a few hundred strides away, and had somehow acquired a bottle of *rak* to help him sleep. The trolls stayed in the trees, watching and waiting for they alone knew what.

Noxy woke for the third time shortly before dawn, shivering. Thokmay was snoring gently beside her, the blanket tangled around him. She briefly contemplated taking half of it back, but her bladder had more insistent demands. She got up shakily and rolled her head, wincing at the popping noise her neck made. She missed her bed, and her dolls, and the smell of porridge steaming downstairs. She missed her *anna*. She hoped everyone was all right.

"Please," she whispered, not knowing if she was begging the commander, the forest, the Pilots, or all three. "Please let them be all right." Then she spotted Kulbinder approaching along the path and wiped her tears off her cheeks.

Breakfast was more cheese and the last of the dried fruit. Thokmay hung the little piece of dayglass in a finely-woven net bag on his knapsack to recharge it, then unpicked the stitching on his sleeve to remove the yellow ribbon sewn on it. "Just to make it official," he shrugged.

They picked their way downhill through the trees, steering toward the mouth of the cloud pen every chance they had. The underbrush was thicker here than it was near the fortress, and Kulbinder insisted on frequent stops to listen for patrols, so it was nearly mid-day by the time they could see the mouth of the gorge. No one was in sight.

"Wait," Thokmay whispered.

"I *am* waiting," Noxy whispered back. Kulbinder had vanished again, scouting ahead.

A minute passed, and another. Thokmay tapped Noxy's shoulder and pointed where sunlight glinted off metal. Noxy's heart sank. They had expected there would be guards, but she had still hoped they might be able to sneak in and steal a cloud the easy way.

"Well, I guess we climb," she said shakily. Thokmay squeezed her shoulder in response. On hands and knees, they crept back the way they had come.

The mountainside on either side of the cloud pen's entrance wasn't vertical—not quite. Noxy had seen it from the air often enough to know that, and had seen the

village's grownups scale it more than once to repair the pulleys that held the spiderweb net in place. But “not quite” didn't count for a lot up close, and watching other people climb while wearing harnesses was very, very different from doing it herself without one.

The worst thing—other than being afraid that she would slip and fall to her death—was how exposed she felt. “Nobody will be watching the cliff,” she had argued the night before. “They'll all be watching the clouds, because they think we have to touch them or call them with a horn to get on them.”

“And you don't?” Kulbinder had asked.

Noxy had shaken her head, glad that he and Thokmay couldn't see her face in the darkness. “I'm more sensitive than some people,” she had hedged, steering the conversation on to other things as hastily as she could.

The wind grew stronger as Noxy and Thokmay climbed higher. As long as she kept moving, only her skin felt the chill, but each time she stopped to catch her breath, the cold bit into her muscles. “Keep going,” she told Thokmay. “Just keep going,” she repeated grimly to herself.

They finally neared the top of the cliff. Centuries ago, someone had carved deep grooves into the rock. Ropes as thick as Noxy's wrist wove through them, black with hardened tar. Those ropes anchored two pulleys, each one as wide as the span of Noxy's arms. The spiderweb net that kept the village herd from wandering away hung from another tarred rope that ran from those pulleys, across the mouth of the gorge, to a matching pair on the other side.

They rested shoulder to shoulder for a moment, panting for breath, their feet braced against the cable. “Can you do it?” Noxy asked, kicking the rope with her boot heel.

Thokmay nodded. “Can you?”

Noxy nodded back, trying to feign a confidence she didn't feel. “Just say when.”

Thokmay took one more deep breath, climbed down so that the rope was level with his chest, drew his sword, and swung. The blade bounced off the frozen tar without making a dent. “All right, be like that,” he muttered. Bracing his feet, he set the sword's blade against the rope and started to saw.

The sword slid sideways at first, but once he had worn a groove into the tar, it began to bite, then to cut, squeaking like a soapy fingertip rubbed across glass with each stroke.

Thokmay paused to shake the cramp out of his arms. “How long will you need?” “Just a couple of minutes,” Noxy replied. “Do you think Kulbinder's ready?”

Thokmay shrugged. “If he's not, it's because he can't be.” He bent over the rope and started sawing again.

Noxy gave him another minute before closing her eyes. She didn't actually know how she had spoken to Big Blue from so far away. She had left that out of the whispered argument with Kulbinder and Thokmay about her plan, along with the fact that she was the one responsible for their swim in the fishpond.

Hello? she mind-spoke, instantly feeling foolish. That wasn't how she mind-spoke when she was touching a cloud. Without realizing she was doing it, she held out a hand as if stroking a cloud's flank. *Here*, she thought. *I'm here*.

?? The mind-voice was faint but instantly recognizable. It was Big Blue!

Here, she mind-spoke. *Come here*.

Big Blue's "no" was almost petulant. Noxy got a confused impression of him wanting to nap and wishing his new rider didn't want him to hurry, hurry, hurry.

?? Noxy mind-asked. Her eyes opened in shock at Big Blue's reply.

"Stop!" she exclaimed. Thokmay looked at her, confused. "It's Yestevan—he's on Big Blue right now!"

"What? I thought you said he couldn't ride clouds any more?"

Noxy shook her head. "I said he wasn't *allowed*. But he's on Big Blue. If we cut the rope now, they'll know we're here!"

"Never mind that," he said grimly. "If we don't hide, they'll spot us as soon as they're out of the gorge."

Noxy closed her eyes again. If she could mind-speak with Big Blue... "How close are you?" she asked, her eyes still shut.

"Maybe a minute?" Thokmay replied. "I don't know how far I have to go before it snaps."

"Get started," she ordered. "But don't cut the last bit until I say." Without waiting for an answer, she reached out with her mind. *Pillow?* she mind-said gently. *Pillow, I need you*.

Thokmay had to stop after every few strokes to give his exhausted arms a rest. Each time he did, Noxy had to stop herself from telling him to hurry up. Other people were getting on Big Blue. She could feel them somehow, as if she was sitting on a bed and someone else was sitting on the mattress beside her. And she could mind-hear Yestevan—not directly like she could mind-hear Big Blue and Pillow, but like an echo. She had never heard of anything like it, and on any other day, she would have been frightened of what she was becoming.

"There it goes!" She opened her eyes as the sound of Thokmay's voice. He gestured with the sword. The remaining fibers of the rope were stretched taught. Even as she watched, a few strands snapped.

"I told you to stop!" she said frantically.

"It's not like I've done this before!" the young soldier snapped. "How long do we have?"

"I don't know." She closed her eyes. Yes! Big Blue was moving. A horn blew, two short blasts and one long. Somewhere above them, someone began reeling in the gate net. The cut rope stretched alarmingly. More fibers twisted and snapped.

"Come on, come on," she muttered. *Hurry!* she mind-spoke to Big Blue. *Please, hurry!*

Don't want to, he mind-complained, speeding up nonetheless. She mind-felt Pillow falling into his wake. Someone would notice, but please, not yet, not yet...

"Now!" she barked. Thokmay pressed his tar-blackened sword against the rope and sawed. Back, forth, back, forth, and *snap!* The last strands of the rope broke under the net's weight.

The rope seemed to hang in the air for a moment like a child's scribble before falling, falling, right on top of Big Blue. The men on his back shouted in alarm, raising their arms instinctively as it dragged across them. One soldier screamed as it caught around his leg and dragged him over the side of the cloud. Noxy watched sickened and helpless as he fell.

"Come on!" Thokmay said. Noxy forced her nausea down and nodded jerkily. She could mind-feel Big Blue's agony—the rope had been like a lash across his back. Soldiers shouted as they sank ankle-deep. Yestevan fought for control, bellowing obscenities, trying to stop the cloud from thinning out to escape the pain.

Quickly! she mind-spoke to Pillow. *Please, quickly!*

And then she heard Kulbinder roar as he attacked the soldiers on the ledge above the pulleys. "He will post archers," the tiger had said. "I will take care of them."

"I will not leave you behind," Thokmay had said quietly.

"Do your part, and you won't have to," the tiger had promised.

Kulbinder roared again. Men shouted. A bow snapped. Noxy heard a second shot and saw an arrow shoot across the sky to fall into the forest far below. "Gandan!" the tiger roared. "Gandan and the crown!"

"There she is!" Noxy clutched Thokmay's arm and pointed as Pillow rounded the corner. She could mind-hear the cloud's fear and confusion. *Good girl*, she mind-spoke. Aloud, she said, "Come on!"

They hurried along the cliff face as quickly as they dared. One false step would send them tumbling into the gorge like the hapless soldier, but they had to get to the spur of rock Noxy had spotted as they climbed. Closer, closer—she scrambled onto it, her chest heaving as Thokmay pulled himself up behind her.

"Get ready," she ordered, crouching.

"I suddenly find myself wishing you'd come up with a different plan," he said, gathering his legs beneath him. He pulled his whistle out from under his jacket.

"Steady, steady... Now!" Thokmay blew a long blast on his whistle as Noxy took two long steps and flung herself into the air.

For one heart-stopping moment she was afraid she had misjudged the distance and the timing, and then *poof!* She hit Pillow's back spread-eagled. She shrieked and rolled out of the way as Thokmay plummeted toward her, his arms and legs flailing.

"Are you all right?" she demanded as she sat up.

Whick! She didn't even see the arrow as it flew past her ear. She shrieked again and threw herself flat on the cloud, throwing an arm across Thokmay to stop him from rising.

"Kul..." the young soldier gasped. His landing had knocked the wind out of him. He fumbled at his collar, trying to get his whistle out to signal Kulbinder again.

She rolled onto her stomach and raised her head as the tiger roared again. Two men on the edge of the cliff were cutting at Kulbinder with their swords, trying to keep him away from a third who was taking aim at *them*, he was trying to shoot *them!* She buried her face in the cloud as he loosed a second arrow. *Whick!*

Phweee! Thokmay's whistle called high and clear. "Get us closer!" he croaked, still struggling for air.

Noxy dug her fingers into Pillow. Closer was the last place in the world she wanted to go. "Please!" Thokmay begged.

Please, Noxy echoed. Pillow was almost as frightened as she was, but she had served three generations of cloudherds faithfully. She turned against the wind and headed for the cliff.

Thokmay whistled again. With a final roar, Kulbinder fainted left and then charged past the two swordsmen. The archer yelled in fury as the tiger knocked him off his feet and threw himself over the cliff.

Poof! Kulbinder landed heavily on the very edge of the cloud. "Grab him!" Noxy yelled, scrambling toward the tiger and grabbing one of his paws.

"Pull! Pull!" the tiger roared. Thokmay put a knee into Noxy's back as he crawled over her to grab Kulbinder's other forepaw.

Noxy mind-heard Pillow's yelp of pain as the tiger's claws dug into her flank. He lurched up onto the cloud. "Go!" he wheezed as Thokmay wrapped his arms around his neck.

Noxy didn't need to be told twice. *Fly!* she mind-spoke to Pillow. *As fast as you can!*

The cloud didn't need to be told twice either. She was already turning.

"Honored!" The commander's voice cut through the air like an arrow. "So good of you to grace us with your presence!"

Noxy glanced over her shoulder. Her heart fell. "Oh no," she whispered. There on the edge of the cliff stood the commander with two soldiers, each holding one of Grappa Gas's arms. The old man struggled and cursed, kicking at the men with his good leg.

"You've played well, Honored Thokmay," the commander called out. "But the time for playing is over." He drew his sword. Sunlight flashed along its edge.

Noxy whirled around. "We have to go back!"

"No," Kulbinder coughed. "We have to... run..."

"But he'll kill Grappa Gas!" Noxy cried. She pressed her hand against Pillow's back.

Before she could mind-speak the order, Thokmay put his hand on her shoulder. "I'm sorry," he said. "But he'll definitely kill Kulbinder if we give him a chance."

"That may be... unnecessary..." the tiger said weakly. That was when Noxy realized he was bleeding from a gash in his side where one of the swordsmen had landed a blow.

"Last chance, honored," the commander called. He raised his sword—

—and Grappa Gas drove the peg of his wooden leg hard into the foot of one of the soldiers holding him, yanked his arm free, and punched the other soldier in the face as hard as he could. "Go!" he yelled. "Get out of here!" And before the soldiers could grab him again, he threw himself over the edge of the cliff.

"No!" Noxy screamed. Grappa Gas's arms and legs flailed in the air as he fell.

Poof! He hit Big Blue shoulder-first, sending ripples across the cloud's back that knocked soldiers sprawling.

"Come on!" Thokmay said urgently. "We have to go!"

"But..." Noxy watched helplessly as the soldiers on Big Blue's back grabbed Grappa Gas and rolled him over. Had he knocked himself out? Or was he—

"Come on!" Thokmay repeated desperately. "Please!"

Noxy nodded. *Fly*, she mind-spoke to Pillow. A moment later the wind of their passage tugged at her hair.

There was a needle, some cotton thread, and some bandages in Thokmay's knapsack, and a small knife with a very sharp blade. The prince trimmed the hair around Kulbinder's wound as short as he could, then put in three stitches. Noxy almost threw up when he pushed the needle into the tiger's flesh, but other than twitching his tail, Kulbinder showed no sign that he even felt it.

When it was over with, Thokmay splashed the last of their water on his hands and wiped them with a scrap of bandage. "You look like you've done that before," Noxy said.

"Thanks." Thokmay balled up the bandage and threw it over the side of the cloud. "I wanted to learn to be a doctress, not a soldier."

"A doctress?" Noxy blinked. "Men can't be doctresses."

"Sure they can," Thokmay said defensively. "Lots of men are doctresses. Well, maybe not *lots*, but..." He shrugged yet again. "Anyway, that's yesterday's breakfast now."

They flew in silence after that, Thokmay on one side Kulbinder and Noxy cross-legged a few strides away. She was so lost in her own thoughts that she realized a storm was coming around the corner of the pass up ahead until a stray snowflake snagged on her eyebrow.

She swore under her breath as she stood and shaded her eyes with her hand. They were nimbus clouds, she realized, her heart sinking. Big ones, swollen with a full winter's grazing on the snowfields of the high Brumosos. If it was just a few weeks later, her mother would have the villagers up on their clouds to guide them south to bring much-needed rain to farmers' fields in the Ninety Kingdoms. She had no chance of doing that on her own—no chance of doing anything except get out of their way or go under them and hope she didn't spook them.

"Tuck the blanket around Kulbinder," she said to Thokmay. "It isn't much, but we have to try to keep him warm."

"How bad is it going to get?" Thokmay asked, reaching for the pack.

"Bad enough," Noxy replied grimly.

It wasn't bad—it was worse. The bulls at the front of the herd were still fighting for leadership. Every butt and shove threw a flesh flurry of snow into the air. The cows and calves behind them picked up on their agitation and shed snow of their own, until the air was a soup of wet white flakes whipped every which way by gusts of wind.

The three travellers were soaked in minutes and shivering soon after. "We'll freeze if we don't get out of this!" Thokmay said, shouting to be heard.

"I know!" Noxy shouted back. "But I don't know how big this herd is—it could stretch halfway to Chaghan!"

"Then let's turn around!"

She shook her head. "We can't outrun them! We'll have to set down!"

"But then we'll just freeze on the ground!" the prince protested.

"No we won't. There's a place up ahead where we can get shelter." *A place I never wanted to visit again*, she added to herself, but they were out of choices.

Three Springs Canyon was a narrow cut between two brooding mountains whose names Noxy had never learned. In summer, the stream that ran through it was full of diver bees, rock crabs, the stealthy squiddles that hunted them both, and the occasional bear or troll with a taste for fresh squiddle. But summer hadn't come yet, so the dancing water Noxy was familiar with was instead an angry torrent. Fog from the hot springs that gave the canyon its name drifted in the air like scraps of wool, chilling the already-freezing travellers.

"How can you see in this?" Thokmay asked as a spur of rock suddenly appeared out of the mist.

"I can't," Noxy said. "But *she* can." She patted Pillow. "Now shush." In truth, the cloud could barely see further than she could.

Home, Pillow pleaded.

Soon, Noxy mind-spoke back, putting all the comfort and certainty she didn't feel into her thoughts. *Soon*.

The air cleared almost instantly once they were past the last hot spring. Noxy pulled her coat tighter around her. "How's he doing?" she asked, jerking her chin at Kulbinder.

"He needs to be somewhere warm. And dry." Thokmay stroked the tiger's flank. Kulbinder's tail twitched, but he didn't open his eyes. "Wherever you're taking us, I hope we're there soon."

Noxy got to her feet and pointed. "There," she said. "We'll be able to set down there."

'There' was a one-room hut perched on a not-quite-level shoulder of the canyon. Its walls were piled stones with moss and clay in the chinks to keep the wind out, and its roof was slats overlain with branches. A bamboo tube with a shingle cap served as a chimney.

Pillow descended into the cul de sac beneath the hut and pressed herself against the mountain. Kulbinder struggled to his feet and limped off the cloud and picked his way uphill through the loose stones and patches of unmelted snow with Thokmay at his side. Noxy followed them.

"Hello?" Thokmay called as he approached the hut. "Is anyone there?" Silence. "Is anyone there?" he repeated more loudly.

Suddenly impatient, Noxy strode past him and knocked on the door. "Hello the house!" she called out, not waiting for an answer before lifting the latch and pulling the door open.

The hut was empty, but the embers of the morning's fire still glowed in the little brick fireplace beneath the chimney, and a piece of yellow-orange dayglass hadn't quite shed the last of the previous day's sunlight. Noxy wrinkled her nose at the heavy, unwashed smell of someone who had done no more through the freezing winter than splash a bit of water on his face and dab at his armpits. "Come on in," she said, half glad and half disappointed and trying to hide both. She yanked some blankets off the narrow cot on one side of the hut and made a quick pile in front of the fireplace. "Put him down there. I'll get some more wood."

As Thokmay began trying to make Kulbinder comfortable, Noxy went back outside. As soon as the door closed behind her, she sagged against the wall and wiped her eyes. She had no idea what she would have said if the hut's resident had been there, but judging from the fire, she was going to have to think of something soon.

She gathered an armload of wood and carried it back inside. Thokmay watched in silence as she stacked it beside the fireplace, then used her knife to shave some long splinters from one piece and laid them on the embers. When they began to smolder, she added a few more shavings, and finally the whole piece of wood. The warm smell of burning pine slowly filled the hut.

Thokmay stirred. "Thank you," he said quietly.

"You're welcome...honored." Noxy sat back and looked at him coolly.

Thokmay didn't meet her eyes. "I'll take first watch," he told Noxy, getting to his feet.

Noxy sat in silence after the door banged closed behind him. She could smell the tiger's damp fur, and for some reason that stirred her into action. She took a blue jug from the shelf beside the cot and shook it. Water gurgled inside. "Here," she told Kulbinder, settling beside him. "Let me give that a wash."

As she peeled back the makeshift bandage, the tiger said, "You have been here before."

Noxy nodded. "Not for a while, though. Sorry!" She winced as the bandage pulled a few hairs away from the tiger's side.

"Whose home is it?" Kulbinder asked.

Noxy carefully poured a few more drops of water onto the bandage to loosen it. "He's a magician. He used to live in Stale when I was little, but then a bunch of people got sick with the scribbles, and he had to do a spell to save them, and now he can't sleep in a house that's close to anyone else, so he lives here." She shrugged as if it didn't matter. "Or in a cave down by Duck Droppings, or sometimes in another hut that's further up the pass. He still does magic sometimes for us and the other villages, but my anna says *he's getting absent-minded*." The tiger made a sound deep in his throat as the bandage tugged at some more hairs, but didn't move a muscle. "Sorry."

"Don't be. You humans are sorry for too many things, too often." Kulbinder yawned suddenly. "Please don't let him stay out there too long." And then the only sound in the hut was his snoring, and the crackling of the fire, and the whistle of the wind through chinks in the walls.

Noxy must have dozed, because she woke with a start when the door banged open. "Trolls," Thokmay said curtly. "A dozen of them, and those are just the ones I can see."

Kulbinder struggled to his feet. "What are they doing?"

"Just watching, but every time I turn around, they've come a little closer." The young soldier knelt in front of the fire and chafed his hands. Tiny beads of sweat glistened on his dark skin. As Kulbinder struggled to rise, Thokmay put out a hand to stop him.

"I need to see for myself," the tiger rumbled.

“You need to rest,” Thokmay replied firmly. “We’ll keep an eye on them.”

Thump! Something heavy landed on the roof above them. Thokmay drew his sword with a quiet curse.

“So much for resting,” the tiger said.

“I don’t understand,” Noxy said helplessly. “We’ve had a truce with the trolls for years.”

Noxy picked up a stick of firewood. It wasn’t much of a club, but hefting it felt better than being empty-handed.

Too-eee! Someone whistled two high, clear notes. *Too-eee!* Noxy’s heart leaped into her throat. She knew that sound.

Claws scrabbled on the shingles overhead. A moment later someone knocked on the door. Thokmay looked at her, his eyes wide. Slowly, she lowered her makeshift club. “Come in,” she said.

The door swung open. “Hello.” The man who stood there was tall, pale, as bald as an egg, and smiling as if someone had just handed him a pot of honey. His clothes hung loosely on his skinny frame, and seemed to be made entirely of patches.

Noxy swallowed dryly. “Hi *adda*. Um, Thokmay, Kulbinder? This is my father, Ulfmaerr. He’s a magician.”

Chapter 11

"May I come in?" Ulfmaerr asked politely.

"Why not?" Noxy stepped out of the way. "It's your home."

"Oh hardly," he replied lightly. "I don't really have a home as such." His Vaardan accent added extra vowels to words in strange places, stretching them like yarn.

He ducked his head to enter the hut. The smile dropped from his face when he spotted the wound in Kulbinder's side. "That's quite a divot you have there, honored," he murmured. He knelt beside the tiger and gently placed his hand next to the wound, then exhaled with relief. "But not infected." He pointed to Thokmay without turning his head. "If you would, please, the green bottle off that shelf, the one with the brown stopper."

"Is he going to be all right?" Thokmay asked anxiously, hunkering down to pass the bottle.

Ulfmaerr waggled his head from side to side in a familiar gesture that made Noxy's heart ache. "Possibly. Probably. Yes, I think it more likely than not." The bottle's glass stopper squeaked as he twisted it out.

He took a quick swig and wiped his mouth on his sleeve before replacing the stopper and handing the bottle back to Thokmay. "Right," he said softly. "Let's see what we can do here."

Kulbinder's wound didn't knit in front of Noxy's eyes. The tiger didn't sparkle, either, and the air wasn't suddenly filled with the smell of scorched honey. In fact, none of the things Noxy had read in adventure books happened. Kulbinder just stirred and made a low, grumbling sound.

Ulfmaerr relaxed and patted the tiger's flank. "There," he said, sounding pleased.

"Will he be all right?" Thokmay asked anxiously.

"I hope so." Ulfmaerr took another swig from his glass bottle. "I hope so," he repeated more quietly.

"But your spell worked, didn't it?" Thokmay persisted.

Ulfmaerr shrugged. "That just means that I'm going to hold up my end. It doesn't guarantee it'll do what I want."

"And what price did you pay?" Kulbinder asked weakly.

Ulfmaerr shrugged again. "There are another few colors I won't ever see again." He smiled to himself. "Honestly, I was never fond of yellow."

Thokmay folded his hands together in front of his chest and bowed. "Thank you, honored," he said humbly.

“Oh, you're welcome, I'm sure,” Ulfmaerr replied lightly. “Now, would you like some tea? And if you don't mind me asking, do you have any idea why those trolls were so upset about you being here?”

Thokmay glanced at Noxy. When she made no move to speak, he cleared his throat and said, “I'm afraid I don't know, honored.” As the magician bustled about getting his kettle boiling and searching for a third mug (“I don't suppose the tiger will want any, do you? No? No, I thought not.”), the young soldier gave him an abbreviated version of the last few days.

“Well, isn't that a thing?” Ulfmaerr said when Thokmay finished. He massaged his bald scalp with one hand, frowning. “And now you're, what, you're going to find Stale's cloudherds and get their help? I suppose that makes sense, but how? You're not a cloudherd yourself, are you?”

“No, honored,” Thokmay said, “She is.” He nodded at Noxy.

The magician looked at his daughter blankly, then laughed. “I'm sorry. I didn't see you there. What's your name?” Without waiting for an answer, he turned back to Thokmay and continued, “But truly, this is going to be quite dangerous. Already has been, from what you say. Are you sure it wouldn't be wiser to, to—” He waved a hand as if hoping to conjure an ending for his sentence out of thin air. “Anyway, who wants some dinner?”

For all his magic, Noxy's father had never learned to do anything more complicated with food than boil it. After watching him for a few minutes with ever-increasing frustration and dismay, Thokmay volunteered to make the meal, then insisted. “To thank you for your hospitality, honored,” he said. “It's a lowland custom, you see—I would feel I was being rude if I did not.”

Noxy and Ulfmaerr sat in silence while the prince chopped, seasoned, and muttered. “So,” the magician finally said. “Would you like me to tell you a story? I swear it's mostly true.”

“Sure,” Noxy said. She leaned back against the wall and closed her eyes as her father began one of the Vaardan children's tales she had loved so much when she was little. Once upon a time, the Prince of Cats decided to go and see the dragon... She smiled at the funny parts, and was careful to only wipe tears from her eyes when he was wasn't looking.

Dinner was potatoes, two kinds of onions, and carrot shavings, all simmered together with a bit of salt and a precious little knob of ginger. Ulfmaerr praised it lavishly, humming a little as he wolfed it down. Noxy ate a full plate, but waved away Thokmay's offer of a second.

“Well then,” the magician said to Thokmay when they were finished. “I should probably go and see if your trollish friends are still about.”

“Please, honored, I can do that,” the prince said, rising.

“No no no.” Ulfmaerr waved him down, standing as well. “You should get some rest. And besides, I can't sleep under the same roof as other people. Which you'll be pleased to know includes the Gifted,” he added, patting Kulbinder's leg familiarly.

“What magic thinks of me matters little,” Kulbinder grumbled. Ulfmaerr patted his leg again.

A cold gust of wind swirled into the hut when Ulfmaerr opened the door. The flames in the fireplace crackled as they danced to one side for a heartbeat, then straightened and went back to their quiet conversation. Thokmay set the pot of stew aside, scratched Kulbinder's ears for a moment, and said, “Spell price?”

Noxy nodded, not trusting herself to speak for a moment. “It was the scribbles,” she said. The plague had swept through the mountains when Noxy was six, carried by clockwise gulls blown off course by a storm or by wandering Hett smiths or maybe just the turn of the season. At first it was just an itch that slowly worsened. Then dark marks appeared on people's skin. Over the course of a week, they condensed to form words written in an alphabet that no one recognized. By this point the sufferer was feverish and unable to sleep. Soon after, they were raving in some unknown tongue.

“So he cured us,” Noxy finished. “A couple of people died in Duck Droppings before he could get there, and a handful more further up the pass, but that was all.” She wiped her eyes with the back of her sleeve, not caring that Thokmay was watching. “As far as he's concerned, I'm a stranger every time he meets me. He can't see that I'm growing up, or that *anna is going gray*. He's just...stuck.”

“I'm sorry,” Thokmay said quietly.

Noxy forced a shaky laugh. “You know the worst thing?” She pulled up her sleeve to show the spiral of text running around her forearm. “We still don't even know what it means.”

They sat in silence for a minute and listened to Kulbinder breathe. “He made the skylight in my room so I wouldn't feel closed in. I used to lie in bed and listen to him tell stories, watching the stars and the clouds until I fell asleep. He'd take my dolls and make little plays with them, and now he can't even—he can't—”

Thokmay waited quietly until she was back in control of herself. “My sister has dolls too,” he said, staring into the fire. “Knitted ones, just like yours.”

He hesitated. “She gets upset easily,” he continued. “Little things confuse her sometimes, but playing with her dolls always helps her calm down. I've been learning how to knit so that I can make some for her.”

“What's her name?” Noxy asked, afraid to spoil the moment but not wanting it to end.

“Ogmin,” Thokmay said. And then he looked up and met Noxy's eyes. “Princess Ogmin.”

It took a moment for Noxy to make sense of what Thokmay had said. She straightened up. "Wait, what?"

"You asked me if I was a spy," the young soldier said in a rush. "I'm not. I'm a prince. The king is my father. It's a tradition," he continued, his tone almost pleading. "We're put in an orphanage far enough from the capital that no one will recognize us and then fostered for a couple of years so that we'll learn what it's like to be a commoner. I wanted to learn a trade or be a doctress, but my father wanted me to be a soldier, so... I'm telling the truth!" he finished indignantly.

"He is," Kulbinder rumbled softly, opening one eye. "Though he's very foolish to tell it."

"So—" Noxy hugged her knees. "So you're telling me that you're the next king of Gandan?"

"Maybe," Thokmay shrugged. "But it could be my brother, or one of my cousins. There are lots of people the king could choose. That's part of what the fostering is for—to help the king find out who we really are and whether we're fit for the crown."

The little room was quiet again after that until Noxy yawned and stretched. "Do you want the bed?"

Thokmay glanced at her. "Is that all you have to say?"

"For now," Noxy said wearily. "Unless it means you can just order the commander to—no, I didn't think so."

Thokmay was shaking his head. "It's part of why I was trying to escape. If he found out who I am, he'd use me as a hostage."

Noxy yawned again. "Would that make your father surrender?"

"No," Thokmay said without hesitation. "No, he wouldn't."

In the end, Noxy wound up on the cot while Thokmay curled up on a blanket next to Kulbinder. As fatigue pulled her down into sleep, Noxy reached out with her mind for Pillow. *Mmm?* the cloud mind-mumbled, barely awake herself.

You were good today, she mind-spoke. Really good.

Mmm. The cloud sounded like she was already asleep again. Within moments, Noxy was too.

She woke in darkness. The fire had gone out—a few stubborn coals still glowed dull red, but only when she didn't look straight at them. Kulbinder was snoring, and the wind whistled a soft, irregular tune through chinks in the hut's stone walls as it changed direction, then changed back.

She lay still, hoping sleep would take her again, but the mug of tea she had drunk with dinner had other plans. Sighing, she swung her legs over the side of the cot into her boots and laced them up. Neither the prince nor the tiger stirred when she unlatched the door and slipped out into the night.

Ulfmaerr was sitting on a stone a few paces away. "Hello there," he said absently, his knitting needles clicking busily in his hands.

"Hi," she yawned. "What are you making?"

He held up a strip of knitting the length and width of his forearm. "A scarf. Winter will be here soon, you know."

"Mm hm." She yawned again. "Who's it for?"

The magician hesitated, a confused expression on his face. "I... I don't know, I suppose it could be for anyone, really." He stared at it. "Someone who likes white and blue."

Anna's favorite colors, Noxy thought. What she said was, "That's nice. I need to pee. I'll be right back."

He was still there when she returned, but had stood up to give his seat to a large tufted owl. She stopped, not knowing if she should approach.

Ulfmaerr beckoned her forward. "Here she is," he said to the bird. "Um..."

"Noxy," she supplied.

"Exactly. I'd like to introduce you to Redclaw. We've been friends for years. Gifted, this is... um... the one I was telling you about, the cloudbird."

"Honored," the owl said, bobbing her head. Noxy bowed her own in return.

"Redclaw was just telling me about a conversation she overheard," Ulfmaerr said. "Gifted, if you please?"

"Of course." The owl shuffled forward a couple of hopping steps and looked around as if to make sure no one was eavesdropping. "I was just waking up, not looking to put my beak in anyone else's affairs, when who should I hear below me but some trolls. Gifted ones, too, at least some of them." She scratched her wing with her beak.

"Go on," the magician said.

"Anyhoot, they were talking about... you know." She looked from side to side again. "It."

"The forest?" Ulfmaerr supplied helpfully.

The owl nodded. "Quite. And about... you know." She looked around once more. "Him."

"The forest's voice," Ulfmaerr explained to Noxy. "A troll named Linger."

"Precisely," the owl agreed. "And do you know what they said? *They* said that *Linger* said that his time was almost up. And you know what *that* means." The owl nodded sagely.

"A new voice?" Ulfmaerr asked.

"A... new... voice!" the owl confirmed, rustling her wings for emphasis. "And then one of the trolls said, have you heard it might be a stowaway? Because *they* heard that

Linger sent some *other* trolls to watch one, and, well..." The owl nodded in agreement with herself as if that settled the matter.

"What's a stowaway?" Noxy asked.

"A human," Ulfmaerr answered absently, drumming his fingers on his crossed arms. "The forest calls us stowaways. But go on," he added hastily to the owl. "What else did they say?"

The owl ruffled her feathers again. "Well, one of the other trolls said he didn't know about that, but what he *did* know was that he hadn't seen Linger come into the shallows for years—years!—so whatever was happening had to be important. The shallow forest," she added impatiently as Noxy opened her mouth to ask. "As in not deep. The voice usually stays in the deep forest—the deep, *deep* forest, places where people and metal have never gone. Coming out here, where the trees can barely hear each other, well, it's not usual, I'll say that much."

The owl preened her chest with her beak in a quick gesture that in a human being might have been a shrug. "Anyway, that was all."

"And a fine job of listening it was." Ulfmaerr fished in his pocket for a piece of dried pear and set it down on the stone beside her. "Here—a little something for the road."

The owl looked up at him skeptically again. "I'm not going to use the road. I'm going to fly."

"Well then, something for the flight," Ulfmaerr replied, his smile stuck in place.

"Hm." The owl picked up the pear with one claw and winged away into the night as silently as a cloud.

"She is quite the character," Ulfmaerr chuckled as he re-seated himself.

"Although that's worrying news. Why would Linger come out of the deep?"

"The soldiers?" Noxy hazarded.

Ulfmaerr shook his head. "The forest doesn't care about that. The forest usually has trouble even noticing anything shorter than a season." His knitting needles click-clacked in time with his thoughts.

Noxy shivered. The night air was cold enough to turn her breath to steam. Even her coat couldn't keep the chill out. "I'm going to go back in."

"What? Oh, of course." Ulfmaerr nodded toward the hut. "Sleep well."

"You too," she replied.

Just as she turned to leave, something whooshed over her head. "Humans!" a now-familiar voice screeched. "Honored, there are humans in the canyon!"

Ulfmaerr surged to his feet, his needles and yarn still in his hands. "Are you sure?"

Redclaw circled steeply and landed back on the stone she had vacated just moments before. "Of course I'm sure," she said crossly. "They were on a cloud. Some

of them were getting off. They had bows.” She gasped. “Why—what if they had seen me? I could have been killed! Humans don't always ask questions first, you know,” she added darkly, casting a sidelong glance at Noxy.

“Get the others up and ready to move,” Ulfmaerr ordered Noxy. “If the tiger's well enough to walk, we might be able to lose them in the forest.”

“And if he's not?” Noxy asked, scrambling to keep up with him as he hurried back toward the hut. He didn't answer.

Chapter 12

Noxy roused Pillow with a mind-shout as she followed her father back to the hut. It took a couple of tries to wake her, and Noxy could feel how muzzy and exhausted the cloud was. She thought fleetingly that it would have seemed remarkable a few days ago to mind-speak to a cloud without touching it.

Kulbinder and Thokmay were both awake. The young soldier—the young *prince*, she reminded herself, and there was something else that would have seemed remarkable only yesterday—had thrown on his coat and stuffed their few possessions into his knapsack. The tiger stood on three legs, the fourth bent awkwardly so as not to stretch his stitches.

“Trouble?” Thokmay asked as Noxy entered.

“Soldiers on cloudback,” Ulfmaerr confirmed. “They’ll be here in a few minutes.” He glanced at Kulbinder. “Can you walk?”

“I can carry him,” Thokmay said before the tiger could reply.

“I do not need carrying!” Kulbinder snapped. He took a cautious step, then another. “The most important thing is that you get back to your father. You are not to let me slow you down.”

They picked their way down the path to Pillow. The sun was just starting to paint a sharp outline on the peaks of the mountains to the east, and ice crystals in the freshly-fallen snow around them glistened like handfuls of diamond dust. Noxy woke Pillow for a second time when they reached the edge of the canyon. The weary cloud began to drift toward the edge of the canyon, bunching up so that her passengers would be able to climb onto her.

“Honored?” Thokmay asked when Ulfmaerr made no move to join them.

Noxy looked at her father, who had hung back on the path with his hands in his pockets. He looked away after a moment. “You should hurry,” he said.

“You’re not coming with us?” Noxy asked.

He shrugged. “Giving shelter to strangers is one thing. Taking sides in their fights is another.”

And just like that, the tiny spark of hope that had somehow survived in Noxy’s heart all those years flickered and went out. He really didn’t know who she was. He never would, and she was a fool for thinking that the laws of magic would bend just this one time. Granna Fee had tried to warn her, she realized as bitterness welled up in her throat. All those stories she had read to Noxy about magicians realizing too late that they would regret the tragic prices of their spells...

She wiped her eyes. "I understand," she said, her voice betraying none of what she felt. "Thank you for giving us somewhere to rest."

Ulfmaerr sketched a bow. As he straightened up, his eyes widened. "Well, that's unfortunate," he said, pointing over Pillow at the peaks on the opposite side of the canyon. There, not five hundred strides away, Big Blue was coming over the shoulder of a mountain.

Noxy's mouth fell open in shock. Whoever was riding him must have flown him through the peaks in the dark. Recklessly, she closed her eyes and reached with her mind.

"It's Yestevan," she said, her shock turning to anger as she mind-felt the cloud's exhaustion, and the ache along his flank where he'd scraped against a peak in the dark. "He's been pushing Big Blue all night."

"How many soldiers are there?" Kulbinder demanded.

Noxy's brow furrowed. Clouds didn't really think in numbers. For a moment she saw what the big bull was seeing: the canyon as a strip of deeper shadow running through the early morning darkness, the wind as translucent ribbons of something that wasn't actually color but was close enough that human minds saw it that way, and there, warm and familiar, Pillow pulled dense to carry passengers, four sparks of life a few strides from her, and—she gasped. Other sparks were moving through the forest around them—lots of others. They were surrounded!

She opened her eyes, but before she could warn her companions, the biggest troll Noxy had ever seen swung onto a branch hanging over the path between them and Pillow. A second troll joined it, and another and another until the trees were full of their silent forms.

Their silence scared Noxy as much as their presence. She had seen a troop of trolls once from cloudback when she was younger. Then, they had hooted and chattered as they leaped from branch to branch, but now they looked down on the three humans and the tiger like a jury waiting for a trial to start.

A bush rustled. A hairy arm pulled it aside. A troll knuckle-walked onto the path and studied each of them in turn. His fur was silvered with age, and his eyes seemed as old as the mountains themselves. It was the troll she had seen the day the soldiers arrived, Noxy realized.

"The voice of the forest," Ulfmaerr breathed. He bowed his head and went down on one knee.

Thokmay looked wide-eyed from him to Noxy, who shrugged helplessly. The old troll had to be Linger, but she had no idea what he wanted or what they were supposed to do.

Thock! The moment was broken by the sound of an arrow burying itself in the trunk of a tree ten strides away. Noxy stared at it stupidly for a second before

Thokmay grabbed her arm and pulled her off the path. A second arrow whistled through the air.

The trolls in the branches exploded into motion like a startled flock of scaws, flinging themselves back into the forest. “They’re ranging us!” Kulbinder snarled from beneath a bush next to the tree Thokmay had dragged Noxy behind. She was suddenly aware of his arm around her.

She wriggled free and looked around. “Where’s my *adda*?” She couldn’t see Ulfmaerr, and Linger had vanished as well. She peeked around the trunk of the tree she and Thokmay were hiding behind.

Thock! The force of the arrow’s impact sent shivers through her fingers. “Kulbinder! Do we try for the cloud?” Thokmay asked.

“Not unless we want to be pincushions,” the tiger snarled. “Go deeper into the trees. Remember, if you can see them—”

The tiger never finished his sentence as the forest around them erupted with hoots and screams. A volley of rocks flew toward the cloud. Noxy heard the high keen of a stooping eagle and the startled curse of the soldier it attacked, then the twang of bows as the other soldiers started firing at whatever they could see.

“Move! Now!” Kulbinder ordered. Noxy and Thokmay crouched and turned to flee

—and pulled up short. Linger was standing right behind them, his old eyes hard and angry. “No,” he said, his voice as high-pitched as a child’s. “We must fly.”

“What we *must* is get the honored away to safety!” Kulbinder snapped as another arrow sliced the air above them.

“Then away,” Linger said calmly. “But the forest wishes to speak with herself.”

It took Noxy a heartbeat to realize the troll was pointing at her. “What? No! We have to go and find the herd!” She looked from the troll to the tiger to the young prince and back. “We have to tell them what’s happened in Stale!”

“How about we get away and *then* we argue about where we’re going?” Thokmay suggested urgently. He took Noxy’s sleeve. “Keep your head down and stay in front of me.”

The troll took a step to block their path. Kulbinder growled low in his throat, a warning sound that made the hair stand up on Noxy’s arms. Thokmay’s hand went to his sword.

“Stop!” Noxy said. “Just stop, all of you!” She closed her eyes. There—that was Pillow. She was as scared as Noxy was. She wanted the yelling and shooting to stop. She wanted to be back in her pen, floating in the sun. She wanted to go *home*.

And there—that was Big Blue, as clear in her mind as the hoots of the trolls in her ears and the cold slither of fear in her belly. She couldn’t mind-hear Yestevan, and

she desperately hoped he couldn't mind-hear her, but she could feel him squeezing and shoving Big Blue like someone trying to punch a pillow into shape.

Her jaw tightened. Grappa Gas and Granna Fee had taught her to coax clouds into doing things. Yestevan was bullying Big Blue like a big kid shoving a smaller one around. She felt her fear turning to anger. *Up!* she mind-spoke to Pillow. *Up, straight up, up!*

“Get ready,” she said aloud.

“For what?” Thokmay asked. A heartbeat later, shouts and curses came from the soldiers on Big Blue as Pillow bumped into the cloud and sent them sprawling.

Noxy smiled fiercely. “For that. Come on!” She sprinted down the path toward the edge of the canyon.

Thokmay shouted something behind her, and Kulbinder roared, but she didn't care. The trolls in the trees above her were screaming challenges and flinging rocks at the soldiers, but she didn't care. An arrow whistled by overhead as one of the soldiers regained his feet long enough to get a shot off, but that only made her run faster.

“Aaaaah!” She screamed as she burst out of the trees and charged across the last twenty strides of open ground to fling herself over the edge of the cliff. Pillow was right there, right where Noxy knew she would be. *Poof!* She rolled over onto her feet, mind-shouting at the cloud to make a wall, quickly, make a wall to hide her because Big Blue was right there just thirty strides away and the soldiers were getting back on their feet and Yestevan was shouting and pointing at her and that was Sergeant Dorbu, he was there and he was shouting too and pointing as Thokmay and Kulbinder came out of the trees. The tiger was limping so badly that he was practically running on three legs. The prince kept pace with him, his sword still in his hand for all the good it would do against an arrow. Linger was behind them, and there was Ulfmaerr in the rear.

“Come on!” she shouted. “Come on!” Pillow's flank rose to make a wall to shield her from the soldiers' view. It wouldn't stop their arrows, but at least they wouldn't be able to see her. One, two, three, four— *Go!* she mind-shouted to the cloud. *Fly! As fast as you can!*

Pillow pulled away from the cliffside and headed up Three Springs Canyon, away from the pass. An arrow flew overhead. Another punched through the foggy wall she had made. Sergeant Dorbu was still yelling, and Yestevan too. They were going too slowly, Noxy realized. Pillow was still exhausted from the previous day's flight.

She reached out to Big Blue with her mind. If she could get him to stop or turn or thin out, but no, Yestevan was pushing the cloud hard, practically mind-screaming at him. He was *hurting* the big old bull!

Stop! she mind-shouted, throwing her anger past Big Blue straight at Yestevan. She felt it hit him as if she had clouted him with a bag full of moss—no, as if she was the bag. He recoiled in shock at the impossibility of another human being mind-speaking to him directly, and for a moment his grip on Big Blue slackened.

Away! she mind-spoke to Big Blue. *Fly away!* The big cloud didn't need to be asked twice. He slowed, stopped, and began to pull away toward the pass and home.

A strong hand gripped her shoulder. “What did you do?” her father demanded. “Little girl, what in the names of all the saints did you do?”

Noxy sagged to her knees. “I dunno,” she mumbled. Her body felt like it was made out of wet rags. She looked up blearily. Ulfmaerr and Thokmay were both looking down at her, one worried and the other wide-eyed.

“Your hair...” Thokmay said. “Noxy, did you just do magic?”

She glanced down at her shoulder. Her heart skipped a bit. Her long black braids had turned as white as the snow on the peaks beside them.

“I...” She looked up at Ulfmaerr. “I didn't mean to.”

He squeezed her shoulder again. “Then be grateful the world didn't take any more than that.”

“But I don't want to be a magician,” she said. “I just want to go home.”

“That may have to wait.” Thokmay pointed down the canyon. Yestevan had regained control of Big Blue and was chasing them. Only a couple of hundred strides separated the two clouds. Even as Noxy watched, the gap narrowed.

She pressed her hand against Pillow's back. “She can't go any faster,” she said despairingly.

“No need of faster.” Noxy had almost forgotten Linger was there until the troll spoke.

“But they'll catch us!” she protested.

The troll looked at her. “No. They will not.”

The two clouds raced up the canyon. Slowly but surely, Big Blue drew closer to Pillow. Eight strides, seventy, sixty... “Kulbinder!” Sergeant Dorbu yelled. “Kulbinder, Thokmay, please! We don't want to hurt you, but you have to come back with us!”

“Don't answer,” the tiger growled. Thokmay nodded. Noxy could see the hurt on his face.

Sixty strides, fifty... “Please!” Sergeant Dorbu yelled again. When no reply came, he tapped the soldier beside him on the shoulder. In one smooth motion the man raised his bow, drew, and let fly. The arrow arced gracefully and fell short.

“Do you want me to make a wall again?” Noxy asked.

“Yes,” Thokmay said.

“No,” Kulbinder said at the same moment. “Better that we see the arrows coming in.”

Noxy suddenly realized that Pillow was drifting toward one side of the canyon. *Straight*, she said. The cloud ignored her. *Fly straight*, she repeated, but it was as if the cloud had gone deaf.

Or as if she had gone mute. Her heart leaped into her throat. What if she had lost her ability to mind-speak completely? *Pillow*?

?? The cloud's mind-voice was as clear as ever. Noxy sagged.

“What's wrong?” Thokmay asked.

Noxy shook her head. “I don't know. I...” Someone—no, *something* was giving Pillow orders. Something big and ancient. It was the forest.

The canyon bent left ahead of them. Pillow kept drifting toward that wall. “Hey girl!” Yestevan yelled from behind them. “What are you going to do, scrape us off?”

A sudden chorus of hoots answered him. “Look!” Thokmay shouted. The lip of the canyon was alive with trolls. Rocks flew like hail. The archers on Big Blue's back fired back, but this time they were the ones fighting gravity. Their arrows climbed, hesitated, and fell short, but the trolls' rocks kept coming.

Thunk! Even fifty strides away, Noxy heard the stone that caught the lead archer in the chest. The man toppled backward off Big Blue and tumbled to the canyon floor below.

Sergeant Dorbu shouted an order. Yestevan pulled the cloud toward the other wall of the canyon, falling behind and then dropping out of sight as Pillow rounded the bend.

“Saints...” Thokmay breathed. Below them, the canyon dropped away into a square valley with nearly vertical sides. A crystalline lake filled the bottom of the valley, its blue surface mirroring the morning sky above. Sharp-edged blocks of stone, some larger than the entire fortress of Stale, littered the edges of the lake.

Noxy gazed at it in wonder. She had heard of places like this where ancient caverns had collapsed during the Mutiny to create holes in the surface of the world, some large enough to swallow entire kingdoms. Some people said that the last of the Pilots lived in those caverns. Others said that they were full of treasure or monsters or both. And Pillow was taking them straight into one.

They descended so rapidly that Noxy felt it in the pit of her stomach. The temperature dropped as they fell into shadow. It took her eyes a moment to adjust to the gloom. Trees sprouted wherever they could find purchase in the walls, but most of the stone was bare and forbidding. There were no birds. The only sound was the wind rushing past her ears.

Down, down, down... There! A dark shadow beneath a slight overhang of stone stayed inky-black as they approached. It was an opening in the rock, flat-bottomed and as wide and as tall as the gate at Stale.

“Why does it have to be tunnels?” she muttered as Pillow slowed and stopped in front of it.

“Off,” Linger ordered, sliding down the flank of the cloud onto the stone. Ulfmaerr followed without question, but the other three held back.

“What is this place?” Kulbinder asked.

“The heart of the forest,” the troll replied. “You need not come.”

The tiger growled. “I agree completely.”

“No,” Thokmay said, putting his hand on Kulbinder's shoulder. “We stay together.”

“Honored—”

“No,” Thokmay repeated sharply. He looked at Noxy. “If she is going, so are we.”

Noxy swallowed dryly. The forest was watching them—watching *her*. She couldn't mind-hear it, but she could feel it. And there, in the distance, she could feel Big Blue as well. Yestevan was trying to force the big bull into the collapsed valley. He was resisting, but it was only a matter of time.

“Come on,” she said. “Let's get this over with.” Impulsively, she leaned forward and gave Pillow a kiss. *Good cloud*, she mind-said. *Good girl. You go home now.*

Alone? the cloud asked plaintively.

Not alone when you get there, Noxy promised. She ran her hand over the cloud. *Go as slow as you want. No hurry.*

She straightened up, took a deep breath, and slid down Pillow's flank. The stone was as unyielding as fate beneath her boots. Thokmay joined her a moment later, turning to help a protesting Kulbinder get down.

“I don't suppose anyone has any dayglass?” Noxy asked shakily, looking into the cold darkness in front of them.

In answer, Ulfmaerr scooped up a handful of pebbles and muttered over them. The stones began to glow with a warm greenish light. He poured a few into Noxy's hands and gave the rest to Thokmay. “Shall we?” he asked. Together, they set off into the tunnel.

Chapter 13

Noxy expected to feel trapped and breathless like she had beneath the fortress wall, but she didn't. This tunnel was so wide that twenty people could have walked side by side, high enough to hold a house, and dry where the one at Stale had been damp. More than that, she could feel the forest all around her like ice-fog tingling on her skin, or the sound of someone humming in the next room.

The tunnel climbed steadily, a series of gentle ramps interrupted by a single step every fifty strides or so. Noxy gave up trying to keep track of how far they had come. She was happy to not have anyone chasing her or shooting at her as long as the stones in her hand kept glowing.

"Look," Thokmay said softly, pointing with his free hand. There, the tunnel's smooth wall was interrupted by a half-relief of an uprooted tree. Another, its branches spread wide and covered with leaves, filled the wall a few strides further on.

"Do not," Linger said as Thokmay took a step toward the carvings. "You might wake them." When Thokmay hesitated, the troll added, "They do not like to be woken." He knuckle-walked away without waiting for an answer.

The tunnel ended shortly after that in a half-circle room the size of Stale's main square. Dozens of carved panels alternated along its curved wall with dark openings, human-sized where the passage behind them had been made for giants. Linger chose one without hesitation. Noxy paused and took a deep breath, jumping slightly when Thokmay touched her arm.

"Here." He handed her all but one of his glowing rocks. "It's all right," he said as she started to protest. "My eyes are getting used to the dark."

The smaller tunnel rose more steeply, steps interrupted by the occasional ramp rather than ramps interrupted by occasional steps. After one hundred and seventy one carefully-counted strides, Noxy felt cold air brush gentle fingers through her hair. She took the last few dozen steps two at a time and practically flung herself through the bright square of daylight at the tunnel's end.

They were back in the forest, but what a forest. The trees were true giants, thicker at the ground than her house was wide. Their branches wove together overhead to make a canopy so dense that everything was in permanent gloom. Here and there a few small bushes found enough light to grow, but the forest floor was strangely empty. The duff beneath their feet was spongy with centuries' worth of fallen needles.

Linger raised a hand to block Thokmay as the prince stepped away from the tunnel. "No iron in this place," he said, nodding toward the prince's sword.

Thokmay unbuckled his belt and set his sword in its scabbard back in the tunnel entrance. "In your house, your rules," he said, bowing to the old troll. In single file, they followed Linger into the trees.

Noxy had never felt so small, not even when she was ten years old and her mother had taken her up to see a herd of wild nimbus fly by. Walking among the ancient firs was like being a toddler surrounded by giants. And the stillness of it only made the trees seem bigger. She heard jays call and squirrels chatter, and once something that might have been a bear grumbled in the distance, but it all seemed muffled by the majesty around them.

The ground rose and fell as they walked. Small streams, crystal cold, bubbled their from the snowfields above to the busy world of noise and change in the valleys far below. It took a moment for her to notice the standing stones on the ridge above them, uprights and lintels covered with centuries of moss. She nodded toward them. Thokmay nodded back wordlessly. What was there to say? She knew somehow that very few human beings had ever seen what they were seeing.

They walked for hours, her growing hunger the only guide to how much time had passed in the gloom. Kulbinder finally called a halt. He lay down where they stopped while Ulfmaerr fussed over his wound. Noxy and Thokmay took the canteen from his pack and went to fill it from a nearby stream.

The house took Noxy completely by surprise. One moment all she could see was the forest stretching away on all sides. The next moment, a house stood on the other side of the stream.

Noxy blinked. The house was *her* house, the house she and her mother shared in Stale, right down to the slightly discolored patch next to the door where Rash had thrown an egg at her while she was painting it but hit the wall instead.

She started to step forward, but Thokmay caught her arm. "Wait," he said in a low voice. "There could be sentries in the tower. Or archers."

Noxy blinked. "What tower?"

Thokmay tightened his grip on her arm. "*That* tower." He studied the scene with a scowl. "It looks just like the one outside Panday. Look—you see that window? There's a set-back inside so someone can stand watch without being seen from the ground."

Belatedly, the prince realized that Noxy was studying his face instead of the window he was pointing at. "What?"

She looked from him to the house and back. "Thokmay, I don't see a tower. I see my house."

"You see what you need to see," Linger said from behind them, making them both jump. "Or what the forest needs you to see."

“So it's magic,” the prince said flatly.

Linger shook his head. “No. This is the forest's doing.” He held out a handful of red berries. “They're not much, but you'll want something in your stomach before you go and talk to it. The forest,” he continued when Noxy looked at him blankly. “That's why we're here. The forest wants to talk to you.”

There was a moment of silence. “And the... the tower? Or house, or whatever it is?” Thokmay asked. Linger shrugged as if the question was unimportant.

“And what if *I* don't want to talk to *it*?” Noxy asked quietly in an ominous voice that had sent her friends in Stale running for cover more than once.

The old troll looked around, then back at Noxy, his gaze saying more clearly than words ever could that they'd come this far, and it was only by the forest's grace that they would ever make their way home.

“Fine,” Noxy muttered. She splashed through the stream and strode toward the house that couldn't possibly actually be hers.

She stopped when she reached the front door and glanced over her shoulder. Her companions seemed to be frozen in place, their expressions betraying a mix of curiosity and concern.

Squaring her shoulders, she knocked three times. No one answered, so she pushed the door open and stepped inside.

“Hello dear. Would you like some tea?” The old woman sitting at the kitchen table wore a yakskin vest over a heavy gray sweater that would have passed unremarked in Stale. Her face was the same dark shade as Granna Fee's, and her gray hair twisted into two heavy braids, but her eyes were clouded by milky cataracts.

“No thank you,” Noxy said. “Are you—are you the spirit of the forest?”

The old woman smiled gently. “That's rather like asking if you're the spirit of you.” She tilted her head to the side in a gesture that reminded Noxy of a small bird. “Which I suppose would be a fair question right now, all things considered. Please, sit down.”

Noxy pulled a stool—*her* stool—out from under the table and sat. “I'm sorry for all the trouble you had getting here,” the old woman continued. “It would have been a lot easier for both of us if we'd been able to take this slowly, but events seem to have taken on a life of their own, haven't they?”

“I suppose,” Noxy said uncertainly. “What—I'm sorry. What am I doing here, exactly?”

The old woman's smile broadened. “You're very direct. I like that.” She leaned forward, her elbow on the table and her chin on her hand. She drummed her fingers on her cheek for a moment, her blind eyes drilling into Noxy, then sat back and sighed.

“Well, how to put this?” she mused. “This is... I suppose you'd call it an audition of sorts. Lingers Hopefully Where Ripe Fruit Has Been Found In The Past is getting on a bit—I mean, six hundred and eighty winters is a fair run for any sort of primate—so it's high time we started training his replacement. It requires someone with some special talents, and the right sort of character. Are you the right sort?” She leaned forward, her eyes bright and curious.

“I... Um, I don't know?” Noxy shook her head, bewildered. “What sort are you looking for? And what do you mean, his replacement?”

The old woman nodded. “Those are good questions. For the first, I need someone who is audacious, curious, unflappable, wickedly intelligent, completely trustworthy, has a wonderful sense of humor, and obedient. Obedience is the hard one,” she confided, stirring her tea with the tip of her little finger and then wiping it on a scrap of cloth that Noxy hadn't noticed before.

“And replacement?” Noxy prompted, wondering if this was some sort of strange dream.

“No, dear, it's very real. This,” the old woman elaborated, waving her tea-damp pinky to take in the cottage and its contents. “It's as real as the end of the world. Which,” she continued, raising her tea to her lips but not sipping, “Brings us quite neatly to your second question. My friends and I need this world to keep on sailing, and that means occasionally... taking steps.” The distaste she put into the last two words made her sound more than a little bit like Granna Fee talking about what came out of the back end of Stale's yaks.

Noxy opened her mouth, not sure which of her dozen questions would come out first. Before she could speak, the old woman leaned forward again and gently covered Noxy's hand with hers.

The forest. On and on, the forest. It stretched from the northern slopes of the Brumoso Mountains in the south to Cape Grind in the north, and from the Gulf of Plangentia along the Heladas to Uws. But those were human names. What Noxy saw/tasted/felt was the soil, dark and slightly tangy where thousands of years of fallen wood had turned to duff and then rotted into soil. The tiny trickles of water, too small even for squirrels to notice, that joined and joined again to become streams and rivers. The sun, the beasts, the clouds, the nameless, shapeless things that stirred occasionally in their sleep in caverns deep below the surface.

And there, to the south, a jungle. Loud where the forest was quiet, quick where the forest was slow, with a joke or a cruel quip always ready, but grieving now, grieving for centuries, half-mad with loss and rage and sorrow.

It was too much, too big for a mind that could fit inside a skull. Noxy felt herself falling helplessly.

“Sh, sh, sh,” the old woman said, patting Noxy's hand comfortingly. “It's all right, we're back. Are you sure you don't want some tea?”

Noxy drew a shaky breath and wiped at tears she hadn't realized she was crying. "What—what happened?"

"The dragons came," the old woman said. "The Pilots did what they could, but..." She shook her head sadly. "Sometimes what you can do isn't enough. And in the end, they did as much harm as the dragons. You see, there were three of us once, but now we are only two, and the jungle misses him so much."

"I'm sorry," Noxy whispered.

The old woman—no, the forest, Noxy thought dumbly, I'm talking to the forest—patted her hand again. "It's all right, dear. You can get used to anything if you have to. It's just taking the jungle a while, that's all."

Noxy wiped her face again. "So what do you need me to do?"

The forest sat back in her chair. "As I said, Lingers Hopefully Where Ripe Fruit Has Been Found In The Past isn't getting any younger. I'm sure he'll be all right for another century or so, but that's not really very long when you think about it, is it? And he'd like to slow down a bit, too. Chasing after stray princes, well, it's more a young person's sort of thing, wouldn't you say?"

"I guess," Noxy agreed doubtfully. "So you want me to...?"

The forest spread her hands. "To be the voice of the forest, dear. To be my hands in the world." Her voice hardened. "And to remind those who wield iron and fire that they are *not* welcome. I may be getting on a bit myself, but I'm not about to start tolerating that sort of nonsense."

"So Linger's your, your voice?" Noxy asked. She felt like she was back in the lake, struggling to get her head above water. "And that's why he's six hundred years old?"

"Six hundred and eighty two," the forest nodded.

Noxy stared at her, then shook her head violently. "No. No way. I mean, thank you, but no. I mean, what about my friends, and *anna*? I don't want to..." She laughed shakily. "I'd be as lonely as the jungle if I lived that long."

"Ah ha!" the forest said triumphantly. "I *knew* you were intelligent. Most of those I interviewee take a lot longer to think that part through. But no," she continued, "You won't be lonely, not unless you want to be. You can trade away missing people for all sorts of useful magic. And anyway, you'll always have me. And the jungle too when it calms down," she added as an afterthought. "It actually has quite a sense of humor, once you get used to it."

Noxy stood up. "Thank you very much," she said, folding her hands together formally the way Granna Fee had taught her, "But I really don't think this is what I want." She bowed, counting to three slowly under her breath before straightening up again.

The forest stood. "Well, I can't say I'm not disappointed, but there's plenty of time for you to reconsider. And speaking of time..." She glanced out a window that wasn't

there in Noxy's house, and which hadn't been there a moment before. "I think you should be getting back. Your friends are starting to worry about you."

"Thank you again," Noxy said. "I'm very flattered."

"As you should be," the forest said, but she smiled as she said it. "If you do change your mind, you know where to find me." As Noxy turned to go, the forest added, "Besides, you may find you have less choice than you think."

Noxy turned back, wanting to ask what the forest meant, but she wasn't in the house any more. She was on her back with her coat draped over her to keep her warm and her father snoring softly on the forest floor beside her.

She tried to sit up. Her arms and legs were strangely heavy, but her head felt as light as a cloud. "Hey." Thokmay appeared from behind her and crouched down to put his hand on her forehead. "How are you feeling?"

"..." Noxy cleared her throat and tried again. "What happened?"

Thokmay handed her a canteen full of lukewarm water, concern written on his face. It was night, she realized, or getting there—she could barely make out his face. "You froze. Sort of," he amended, taking the canteen back and swirling it around before swallowing a mouthful and settling cross-legged on the forest floor. "You started to walk over to the tower, then you just...stopped. Ulfmaerr said not to worry, but when night came, he thought we ought to—"

"Wait." Noxy held up her hand. "How long was I, um, how long has it been?"

Thokmay studied her. "We got here yesterday afternoon. You stood there for an hour or more until Ulfmaerr got you to lie down. It was like you were sleepwalking. Your eyes were open, but you weren't really seeing anything. Oh, here." He pulled a small bundle of his pocket and unwrapped it to reveal a handful of salmonberries. "He said you'd be hungry when you woke up."

She was, Noxy realized. In fact, she was ravenous. She popped two of the thumb-sized yellow berries in her mouth, wincing at their sourness, and began gobbling the rest. "'ank you," she said as she chewed. "So what ha'ened 'en?"

Thokmay shrugged. "Nothing. Linger disappeared, and Ulfmaerr said we just had to wait. Kulbinder has mostly been sleeping." The worried look on his face deepened. "He needs a real doctress to take a look at his wound."

Noxy swallowed. "And you stayed here? Aww—that's sweet." She leaned forward and punched him gently in the shoulder.

"Well, don't get used to it." He fished a second bundle of berries out of his other pocket and passed it to her. "A cloud flew overhead twice today, going upwind. I think it was one of yours. If the commander is on it—and if he's using a finding spell to locate us—"

"—then he'll be very frustrated," Ulfmaerr broke in. He propped himself up on one elbow. "This is the deep forest. He'll only see what it wants him to see. Now try to

get some sleep—some *real* sleep.” He lay back, pillowing his head on his hands. “I suspect we're in for a long day tomorrow.”

Chapter 14

“Noxy! Wake up!” Why was someone shaking her? She pushed the hand away and rolled over.

“Noxy, you have to get up! The soldiers are coming!” She sat up abruptly and wiped the crust from her eyes. Thokmay was standing over her, his knapsack already on.

“Wha?” she managed to get out.

“Linger says there are soldiers coming,” he repeated impatiently. “We have to get away before they find us.”

She pulled herself to her feet, brushing ineffectually at the twigs and pine needles in her hair. Her mouth tasted like a hamster had been using it as a privy. She pointed at Thokmay's canteen.

“How can they be in the forest?” she asked after rinsing her mouth, spitting, and taking a long swallow.

“No iron.” She spun around, nearly dropping the canteen in surprise as Linger swung down from a branch behind her. “And no fire. The forest has a hard time seeing them when all they have is wood and stone and leather.”

“And magic,” Ulfmaerr added, rebuttoning his trousers as he stepped out from behind a handy nearby bush. “Powerful magic. The commander must have traded something big to see through the forest.”

A horn sounded in the distance. Another answered. Kulbinder's ears went back. “I say we stand and fight,” he snarled. “We are not mice to be hunted by the likes of these.”

“We are today,” Thokmay said grimly. “We run.”

“But honored—”

“We run,” the prince repeated flatly. He and the tiger locked eyes. The tiger blinked first.

So they ran. Later, Noxy could barely remember it. She must have stumbled—how else could she have gotten so much dirt on her hands and knees—and a branch must have caught her in the face to leave the deep scratch that took weeks to heal, but it all blurred together.

The narrow track Linger led them along ended abruptly at a smaller version of the great sinkhole they had seen the day before. “Look out!” she warned Thokmay, putting out her arm to stop him from tumbling over the edge. The hole was almost square, its edges covered in bushes where the soil was too thin for tree roots to anchor.

Thokmay kicked a small rock. A few heartbeats later, they heard a *sploosh* as it reached the dark pool ten stories below. "Well, I guess we're not going that way," he panted.

Ulfmaerr peered over his shoulder. "Best not," he agreed. He was breathing hard too, and his beard was matted with sweat. Leaning against a tree, he unslung his canteen and raised it to his lips.

The exhausted silence was broken by an all-too-familiar horn blowing in the distance. Noxy felt a twinge in the back of her head. "Pillow's back," she said, waving her hand vaguely to indicate a direction as if it still mattered.

"We're not going to make it, are we?" Thokmay said quietly.

Noxy hesitated before shaking her head. "I don't think so."

The prince straightened. "Will they hear us if we call out?"

Noxy looked up, puzzled. "Maybe." Then the look on his face sunk in. "Oh no," she said. "You are *not* giving yourself up to them."

"It's one or all," he said calmly. "We can't keep running," he continued as Noxy opened her mouth, "Besides, it would be nice to lie down on a cloud and get some real sleep."

A bush rustled three strides away. Kulbinder stepped into the light, blinked at them, and sat on his haunches to begin cleaning his wound with his tongue.

Thokmay half-smiled again. "He likes to make an entrance," he whispered loudly to Noxy, rolling his eyes.

The tiger gave his haunch one last lick, stretched, and padded over to join the trio. "If you lot are done with your holiday," he said dryly, "There's something you should see."

Noxy was beyond caring about the noise they made as they waded through the waist-high salal and ossefra that carpeted the sinkhole's edge. Kulbinder kept outpacing them and then pausing, his tail twitching with impatience, while they caught up.

After a hundred strides or so, the tiger led them into the forest again. They climbed a small rise and came down the other side to find a second sinkhole, smaller than the first but just as deep. The ground they had just been walking on was a bridge, Noxy realized.

"Softly now," the tiger rumbled. "And don't startle them." He moved forward in a silent crouch that would have been terrifying if Noxy hadn't been looking at his rear end.

The sides of this sinkhole were covered in the same bushes and brambles as the one they had first seen, but it smelled like the floor of the yaks' barn in Stale after they'd been shut in for the winter. "Eww," Noxy said under her breath. Thokmay glanced at her and mimed holding his nose.

“There,” Kulbinder said quietly. “Watch.”

Something stirred in the shadows of the sinkhole's far wall where a cascade of bushes straggled down. Something else moved a few strides away. There and there and there, up and down the wall, small gray shapes were climbing up and down, popping into crevices in the rock only to emerge a few strides away.

Noxy's heart missed a beat. “Saints,” she whispered. “We have to get out of here.”

“Why? What is it?” Thokmay whispered back.

“It's a squirrel nest.” Noxy glared at Kulbinder in disbelief. “Are you crazy?”

Thokmay looked from her to Kulbinder and back. “What's wrong with a few squirrels?”

“These aren't lowland squirrels, most respected,” the tiger said. “Up here, the squirrels have teeth.”

“There are a lot of them,” Ulfmaerr observed cautiously. “Do you think they know we're here?”

Instead of answering, Kulbinder looked up. Noxy followed his gaze. A small gray squirrel clung to the trunk of a twisted pine a few strides away, its head turned to watch them. A second squirrel sat on a branch above it.

“Now what?” Noxy asked despairingly. “We can't go forward, we can't go back, and we can't just sit here—what's left?”

The squirrels looked up in unison as a shadow fell across them. The foursome slipped back under the trees as a cloud passed overhead. Noxy closed her eyes for a moment, then relaxed. “It's not Pillow,” she told the others. “It's just a calf separated from its herd.” A calf separated from its herd...

“Noxy?”

She blinked. “Excuse me?”

“You've had an idea, haven't you?” Thokmay asked patiently.

Noxy nodded. “Yup. But you're not going to like it.”

She quickly outlined her plan, glossing over the really dangerous bits. Kulbinder growled a couple of times, but didn't object. Ulfmaerr's frown deepened the longer Noxy spoke, but he didn't object either. And all Thokmay said when she was done was, “All right.”

Her plan almost fell apart at the first step. She had been climbing trees since she was old enough to walk, but never when she was quite so exhausted and hungry. Ulfmaerr finally had to give her a boost to get her up to the first branch.

A light breeze blew through the tops of the trees. Juncos and beecatchers chirped at each other as they darted through the branches chasing insects. The two squirrels who had been watching them kept pace as they climbed, disappearing momentarily among the branches only to reappear higher up, their eyes always on the three struggling humans.

Kulbinder waited until they were almost at the top before launching himself up the nearest tree in one single burst of speed. "Showoff," Thokmay called out.

Kulbinder froze. "Quiet," he hissed.

"I was only saying that—"

"Quiet!" The tiger's tail twitched. "It's the soldiers."

Noxy stared into the forest, but saw nothing. "I thought they would know about the squirrels."

"They do," Kulbinder growled softly. "But there's always some idiot who—"

Noxy shrieked as a squirrel scampered across her arm. Another landed on a branch an arm's length from her face and chattered at her angrily. More squirrels appeared among the branches, all the same shade of gray, and all angry.

"Whatever you're going to do, you'd better do it now," Thokmay said urgently.

"I'm trying!" Noxy closed her eyes and tried to concentrate. The stray calf was *there*, three hundred strides east of them, but it—he—wasn't really a calf any more. He was a young bull, a little worried about being so far from his herd, but enjoying the freedom as well. No other bulls bumping into him to keep him in his place, no adults hurrying him along... He hadn't strayed, he had... wandered, and he was in no hurry back.

Come, she mind-spoke. Come. New friends.

??? The young bull was so startled that he rained a little before catching himself. He had never mind-spoken with a human before, Noxy realized. All the clouds she had ever known had been brought down from the mountains by grownups. They'd had time to get used to strange voices in their minds, but not this one.

Friends, she mind-spoke as soothingly as she could, biting down to suppress another shriek as a squirrel ran across her leg. Its little claws were just long enough to poke through her thick wool trousers.

"Come on, come on," Thokmay muttered.

"Sh!" She took a slow breath and let it out. *New friends, she mind-coaxed. Come.* In her mind, she heard the steely tone her *anna* sometimes used when saying, "Please," but *actually giving an order.* *Come, she repeated, trying to put that same tone into her thoughts.*

She realized instantly that she had made a mistake. *Won't, the cloud mind-spoke stubbornly, his mind shaping images of his mother pushing him to keep up with the herd when he just wanted to sleep.*

"Where's our cloud?" the tiger demanded.

"He won't listen to me," Noxy said helplessly. "He's never been ridden before, and I can't—"

A shout of fear and rage cut her off. Below them, the squirrels had finally had enough. First ten, then a hundred, then a great gray flood of them had thrown

themselves onto the archer. He tore them off by the handful, but more kept coming. Their teeth and claws couldn't get through his fur, not at first, but then the sheer weight of them made him stagger, and his armor didn't cover his hands or the backs of his knees...

"Pilots preserve us," the prince whispered, horrified.

"Not if we stay here they won't," Ulfmaerr said. Even as he spoke, pairs of small eyes were starting to look up into the trees and branches were rustling around them.

"But I *can't*!" Noxy protested. "He won't listen!"

Thokmay put his hand on hers and squeezed it. "Most people can't mind-talk to clouds at all," he said quietly. "But you can. And you can do this. I know you can." He squeezed her hand again.

Maybe the world didn't really hold its breath at that moment. Maybe. But later, looking back, Noxy would always remember that it felt like it did. The prince had dirt on his cheek and bags under his eyes and his coat looking like goofs had been sleeping on it, but all Noxy saw was his quiet smile.

She nodded, squeezed his hand back, and closed her eyes again. *Come now*, she told the cloud bull, not letting a single speck of doubt into her thoughts. She wasn't asking. She wasn't even ordering. She was just stating a fact. He was going to come to them, and he was going to do it right now. There wasn't an "or else" because there didn't need to be.

Nothing happened for a heartbeat, and then she mind-heard a meek, *All right*. The image that came with it was of a dark gray cloud so big that it stretched from one horizon to the next. That was her in his mind, Noxy realized dumbly.

Good. Hurry. She lightened the image a couple of shades and mind-pushed it back to the bull by way of encouragement, then opened her eyes.

"He's on his way," she told her companions. Ulfmaerr nodded. The tiger rumbled, his eyes on the horde of squirrels gathering below them. But the only one Noxy really noticed was the prince, who was still holding her hand.

She squeezed his and let go. "So," she said, looking up even though she knew she wouldn't be able to see the cloud bull yet, because if she looked at him she'd blush and she was *not* going to blush, "Now we wait."

"And hope the squirrels don't decide to attack," Ulfmaerr added.

"The forest is trying to calm them down, but they're not listening," a voice from behind Noxy agreed. It was Linger, bloodied and battered but with his head still held high. He settled onto a branch a couple of strides away, one arm cradled in his lap.

A squirrel scampered along another branch near his head and chirruped at him. The ancient troll regarded it with his dark, sad eyes and peeled his lips back from his teeth in something that definitely wasn't a smile. The squirrel flicked its tail and disappeared into the greenery.

Moving slowly, testing his weight at each step, Kulbinder joined him. "Thank you, most respected," he said.

The troll nodded. Whatever he might have said was cut off by Noxy's quiet, "Uh oh."

"What now?" Thokmay groaned.

"It's Big Blue," Noxy said, pointing north through the trees. "He's over there somewhere. But he's coming this way."

Kulbinder growled. "Have they seen us?"

"How would I know?" Noxy snapped. But even as she said it, her thoughts came together like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. "No," she corrected herself. "They haven't seen us. But I bet Yestevan saw the bull double back."

"So who's going to get here first?" Thokmay asked.

"I don't know," Noxy confessed. She didn't know much about Yestevan, but she knew he had raced clouds when he was younger. *Of course, those races were fair,* Noxy thought grimly. She closed her eyes once again. There was the young bull, hurrying toward them. And there was Pillow, further away but with the wind behind him.

Go slow, she ordered, careful to send her thoughts only to Pillow.

No, the cloud shot back, angry and in no mood to listen.

Desperate, she turned her thoughts back to the young bull. *Faster,* she urged. *Go faster.*

Even as she mind-spoke, small gray shapes were scampering up tree trunks, racing along branches, chittering and squeaking. One would have been cute. Ten would have been spooky. A thousand was terrifying.

And then one didn't run past them. Noxy stared at it, willing it to move on. Another squirrel stopped beside it. "Uh oh." A third, a fourth—she grabbed Thokmay's arm as angry shouts rang through the forest. Another and another and now they were creeping toward her, freezing whenever she looked straight at them but she was surrounded, she couldn't look everywhere at once.

The light dimmed. The young bull had arrived. *Bunch up!* she commanded it. *Come down!*

The cloud hesitated. *Prickly,* he complained.

Now! she mind-shouted, throwing everything she had into it. "Get ready!" she told the others.

And there he was, clenched tight like a fist to fit into the gap in the trees above the sinkhole. She took one step toward him and stopped at fresh shouts from the soldiers closing in below.

"Get to the cloud!" Kulbinder snarled.

Noxy didn't wait any longer. She gathered her legs underneath her and threw herself into the air. One heartbeat, two— *poof!* Ulfmaerr landed beside her, and

Kulbinder and Thokmay a moment later. They rose into sunlight. Noxy sat up, then stood and whooped. They were airborne! She was back where she belonged! *Thank you*, she mind-spoke to the young bull. *Thank you*.

Good? the cloud asked tentatively.

Good, Noxy mind-spoke firmly. She knelt and stroked his back. *Very good*.

"Are you all right?" Thokmay asked. She looked up, then took his hand and let him help her to her feet.

"I'm fine," she said. She had a cloud of her own, she realized. Rash and Sensy were going to be so jealous.

Clouds... She shaded her eyes with her hand. "Rot," she cursed. There, up high to hide in the sun, was Big Blue.

"Stop digging your claws into my cloud!" Noxy told the tiger sharply. She could mind-hear the bull's rising panic. No one had ever ridden him before, and having the tiger knead him like an old scrap of carpet wasn't helping anything.

"What now?" Thokmay asked quietly.

Noxy squinted at the approaching cloud. "Run as fast as we can," she said bitterly. "Again."

"We can't run forever," Thokmay said to her quietly.

She nodded but didn't reply. What was there to say? Yestevan wasn't holding back, and Big Blue was a lot bigger than the young cloud they were one. She would do her best, but it wasn't going to be a long race.

Go fast. It took her a moment to realize the thought wasn't hers, but the cloud's.

I know you will, she mind-spoke back as comfortably as she could. *But—*

Go fast, the cloud insisted. *Show you*.

The sudden jolt almost knocked her off her feet. Thokmay stumbled, and Ulfmaerr fell clumsily onto one knee. "What in the names of the saints?"

What had been a gentle breeze a few heartbeats ago was suddenly strong enough to lift stray strands of hair off Noxy's shoulders. She held out a hand flat and tilted it back and forth to test the speed of the wind. Her eyes widened. *How long can you keep this up?* she mind-asked.

Go fast all day, the cloud replied proudly.

Go faster? Noxy asked recklessly. *Go faster all the way to the mountains?*

The cloud's answer was another burst of speed. Noxy whooped.

"What's wrong?" Thokmay asked.

"Nothing!" she said. She spun to look at the cloud chasing them. Big Blue's flanks rippled with effort, but he was already falling behind. She whooped again and hugged Thokmay before she realized what she was doing.

"Uh..." He hugged her back a little awkwardly. "Thanks?"

She was suddenly aware that everyone was looking at her. She let go of him and stepped back, hugging her arms around herself as if cold. “He’s a real peaks runner,” she said self-consciously to no one in particular. “The cloud, I mean. Most of the ones we herd graze on the lower slopes, because it’s easier to get to them and they can carry more water, but he must have been part of a herd from further east, or maybe west, the mountains are higher in both directions, and anyway, we don’t go up that high because they don’t rain as well but they’re a lot faster and...” She shrugged, suddenly feeling warmer and unable to meet anyone’s eyes—especially Thokmay’s.

The young bull hadn’t been lying. He seemed to have been born to gallop. Yestevan, Big Blue, and the soldiers fell further and further behind. Noxy had to keep reminding him to stay bunched up so that they wouldn’t fall through, but he could mind-hear her exhilaration, and it seemed to spur him on.

The forest swept by beneath them like flotsam. Nameless little rivers split and split again as they approached the mountains. Noxy knew she wasn’t the first cloudherd to see them—people took shortcuts over the Herd of Trees all the time—but there were no fields, no roads, no twists of smoke rising from chimneys. This wasn’t the deep forest, but it was still not somewhere for human beings, and if she closed her eyes and let go even a little, she could feel its slow attention.

After a while, Ulfmaerr stretched out with his satchel for a pillow and began to snore. Kulbinder settled a couple of strides away. Thokmay came over to join her near the front of the cloud. “So what happens now?” he asked.

Noxy stared at the mountains. “I wonder if this is why my *anna* runs things,” she said as Thokmay opened his mouth to repeat his question. “I mean, did people just start asking her, what do we do now, and she didn’t want to disappoint them by saying, how would I know, and—why are you laughing at me?”

“I wasn’t laughing,” Thokmay protested, a grin still on his face. “Well, not *at* you. I just—it’s funny. I mean, not you,” he added hastily as Noxy’s brows gathered menacingly. “I mean this. I’m supposed to be king one day. I can’t count how many teachers I’ve had trying to get me ready for that. Law and strategy and fencing and dancing and—”

“Dancing? Kings have to know how to dance?”

“Absolutely.” Thokmay nodded solemnly. “It’s a very important part of diplomacy. Right up there with dissimulation, which as far as I can tell means how to tell lies with a straight face when you’re so important that people won’t actually say you’re lying. My brother and I had to practice on each other for hours last summer. He was a lot better at it than me.”

“You made that up,” Noxy accused.

“I’m serious!” Thokmay protested. “He was gallops better than me.”

Noxy rolled her eyes. “You don’t really have classes in lying.”

“Absolutely. Lying and bluffing. He's better at that, too. He won't even bother playing skulls and roses with me any more.”

Noxy shook her head. “You're a little strange, you know that?”

“Says the girl who can talk to clouds from gallops away,” Thokmay observed pointedly.

Noxy's smile died. “I didn't ask for that part.”

Thokmay nodded again. “I know what you mean. I didn't ask to be a prince. I wanted to be—”

“—a doctress,” Noxy finished for him. “I remember.”

Thokmay shrugged. “Or a bookster. Or maybe a storysmith. There was one in the market in Panday on Yellowdays and Bluesdays. She looked like she was a hundred years old, and if you paid half a shell she'd put anything you wanted in her story for that day. I used to ask for ribbons. They reminded me of my sister.”

He looked at the distant mountains. “She's older than me, but she thinks and talks like a six-year-old. All sorts of doctresses and magicians have looked at her, and they say it just happens sometimes.” He shrugged. “Kind of the opposite of being Gifted like Kulbinder.”

“I'm sorry,” Noxy said awkwardly.

“It's all right. She's pretty happy most of the time.” A half-smile flitted across his face. “Especially if someone will play dolls with her.”

They flew in companionable silence after that. The air was cold and Noxy was tired, but she'd had lots of practice staying awake on cloudback. She and Rash and Sensy had gone down to the cloud pen three nights in a row the summer before. There, under the watchful eye of Grappa Gas, they had pretended to stand watch on Big Blue and Pillow for hours at a time. “You can close your eyes if you want to,” the old man tempted them. “Just for a moment.” Rash had, once, and Sensy and Noxy promised to never let him forget it. She wondered what they were doing right then. She wondered if everyone in Stale was all right, and what Thokmay was thinking about, and how much longer the cloud could keep flying this fast. He needed a name, she realized, patting him absently.

Charger.

She blinked at the young bull's mind-voice in her head. *What?*

My name. It was less than a statement but more than a question. *Charger.*

Noxy nodded. *All right. Charger.* She patted the cloud again.

Chapter 15

The day melted into afternoon as they flew on. The sun's hard yellow disk cast sharp-edged shadows, but no warmth. Noxy's toes ached, then burned, then lost all sensation. Thokmay suffered in silence beside her, his hands pulled up into the sleeves of his jacket and his knees pulled up against his chest. He turned his head once to watch a V of birds fly by in the distance, but could otherwise have been a statue.

Eventually Noxy stirred. "There," she said, jerking her chin toward a distant peak. "That's the Bentfather. The herd takes pasture in the valleys on the other side. They have to go by it on their way back to Stale, so we can start looking for them there."

"And if th-they're already g-gone?" Thokmay shivered. Noxy shrugged instead of answering.

They reached the mountain an hour later. A handful of huts like Ulfmaerr's dotted its lower slopes. Wisps of smoke rose from their chimneys, and with them, Noxy's hopes. She walked to Charger's leading edge and scanned the sky. There! And there, and there! Dozens of clouds floated in the little corries around them, almost hidden against the snowfields below. They were only a small part of the village's entire herd, but Noxy was suddenly bursting with impatience to speak to their riders. They would know what to do, and then she could rest.

Charger slowed as they approached, his natural brashness tempered by the sight of so many older and larger clouds. First one and then another turned toward the newcomer, edging instinctively in front of their smaller calves. *Friends*, Noxy mind-spoke, but all she mind-heard in return was a jumble. There were too many clouds, all of them strange to her.

Charger set them down a hundred strides away from the huts and immediately took off again to put some unthreatening distance between himself and the herd. Noxy hurried up the mountainside, cursing whenever she had to flounder through a knee-deep snowdrift. "Hello!" she called out. "Hello the huts!"

The door of the nearest hut opened. An all-too-familiar voice said, "Boo!"

Noxy stopped dead. It was Yestevan. He leered at her, leaning against the door frame. "Fancy meeting you here," he said.

More doors opened. The soldiers who had been hunting them stepped out onto the mountainside. Four held bows, arrows notched and aimed. The rest had swords in their hands. They spread out to form a semi-circle around the new arrivals.

Kulbinder snarled, hunkering down. "No!" Thokmay said sharply.

“You should listen to him,” Yestevan said, nodding sagely. “Save you from being turned into a rug.” He worked a scrap of something out from between two of his back teeth, eyed it appraisingly, and then flicked it onto the ground. “Though I could use a nice warm rug after the flight we had. Straight up over the mountain. Just about froze us, didn't it, boys?” His smile slipped slightly when none of them answered.

“How did you know where we'd be?” Noxy asked wearily.

“We didn't.” Noxy's heart sank even lower as Sergeant Dorbu shouldered past Yestevan to join his men. His battle mask was up, and his sword was in its sheath. “Grappa Gas told the commander what route the herd would take coming home. This is the last stop, and the one closest to you, so...” He spread his hands.

“And what exactly did your precious commander have to do to him to get him to talk?” Kulbinder demanded.

Sergeant Dorbu looked away. “I'm sorry,” he said. “We did all we could, I swear, but...”

Noxy's heart skipped a beat as the sergeant's words sunk in. “Grappa?” she said in a small voice.

Sergeant Dorbu looked at her, pain in his eyes. “None of this had to happen. None of *this* has to either.” He gestured at the archer beside him. “Please, just come back with us.”

Thokmay's boots crunched on the stones beneath them as he stepped forward to stand beside Noxy. He put his hand on her shoulder. “There's nothing we can do,” he said quietly.

Noxy nodded and wiped her eyes with her sleeve. The prince looked over his shoulder at Kulbinder, then at Ulfmaerr, nodding to each in turn. Raising his right hand, he slowly unbuckled his belt and let his sword and scabbard clatter to the ground.

“Well now—” Yestevan began. Sergeant Dorbu held up a hand to stop him without turning his head. The shunned cloudherd scowled, but bit back whatever he had been about to say.

“On the bright side,” Ulfmaerr said half an hour later, “At least we're not freezing any more.” The soldiers had built a fire in the pit that the huts were clustered around. A pot of something that smelled an awful lot like dinner burbled away above it, making Noxy's stomach rumble. She stared into the distance, warming her hands on the tin cup of tea the soldiers had given her and just grunting every time her father or the prince tried to make conversation.

She didn't stir until Yestevan sat down opposite her. “Quite the cloud you were riding,” he said. “Who caught it for you?”

Noxy took a slow sip of her tea, but didn't answer. Yestevan sighed theatrically. “All right, I get it. You think I'm lower than barrel scrapings. But here's the thing.”

He leaned forward, the humor dropping from his face. "You're just like me. You'd do whatever you had to if it meant you could get back up on a cloud again. All their rules, all their laws—you'd throw 'em all over the side, just like that." He slapped his thigh. "So don't you be putting on airs like you're better than me."

"I wasn't putting on airs," Noxy said, dumping her tea on on the fire and carefully setting her cup on the stones at her feet. "I was concentrating."

Yestevan laughed derisively. "Concentrating? On what?"

Noxy stood. "Not who. What." She looked at the mountain peak behind the huts, then back at Yestevan, a cold smile on her face. "And for the record, I am *nothing* like you."

Charger didn't make a sound as he scraped against the peak behind and above the huts. But then came a sound that every mountain dweller knew and feared, the swishing distant thunder of snow slipping and sliding. *Good?* the young cloud mind asked.

Yestevan leaped to his feet with a curse. The soldiers stood, not sure where to look until Yestevan yelled, "Avalanche!"

Good, Noxy mind-said firmly. She grabbed Thokmay's sleeve and pulled him with her as she ran down the mountain. "Come on!"

A single arrow flew past them in time with Sergeant Dorbu's shouted, "No!" and then Noxy tripped and fell, rolling and sliding down the steep path. Thokmay dove forward and caught her pant leg. They skidded to a stop. Noxy scrambled to her feet. "Keep moving!" she shouted above the rising thunder.

It was too late. A wave of snow poured down over the huts and soldiers. The huts had been built to survive avalanches, their uphill sides pointed like the prows of boats, but the soldiers had not. A lucky few were close enough to the huts to take cover, but the rest were swept off their feet, as helpless as twigs in a raging river.

"Like this!" Noxy shouted at Thokmay, crouching down and covering her head with her arms, knowing that it wouldn't be enough to make a difference.

But she had forgotten about her father. He planted his feet on the path a few strides above her, facing the avalanche, and raised one hand. The onrushing snow parted and roared past on their side of them.

A bedraggled figure burst out of the snow. With a roar of incoherent rage, Yestevan tackled Ulfmaerr. As the two men went down in a heap, Ulfmaerr's spell broke and the last wave of snow swept over them all.

Noxy had just a moment to cover her face before the freezing white wave engulfed her. Its greatest force was spent, but it was still strong enough to knock her backward. She pushed herself upward, clawing at the snow to clear space so that she could breathe. People drowned in avalanches, just like they drowned in water. She had to get above it. She had to—

“Hwaaah!” she gasped as her head broke through. The snow had stopped sliding. She wriggled and struggled to get one arm free, then the other.

Snow flew in the air as Thokmay and Kulbinder clawed their way free a few strides further downhill. “Noxy! Are you all right?” the prince shouted.

“I’m fine! *Adda! Adda*, where are you?” Noxy shouted.

She heard a muffled shout from further up the mountain. “*Adda!*” She floundered through the chest-deep powder, scooping it aside with her hands. There! She dug into the snow, grabbed a clutching hand, and pulled as hard as she could.

“Thokmay! Help me!” She wasn’t strong enough to pull her father free. “Please!”

“I’ve got you!” Somehow the prince had pushed his way through the snow to join her. He grabbed her around the waist. “Heave!”

Nothing, nothing—Yestevan’s head burst free of the snow. “Gotcha!” he shouted in triumph. Noxy tried to pull her arm free, but his grip was like iron. He yanked her forward as a counterweight to pull himself upright, spun her around, and clamped his arm around her.

“Back away!” he snarled at the prince and Kulbinder, raising a knife to Noxy’s throat. “Now!”

The tiger crouched low, his tail snapping furiously. Thokmay raised his hands. “Easy there,” he said, as if calming a startled horse.

Yestevan dragged Noxy back one step, then two. “Sergeant!” he shouted. “Sergeant, I got ‘em!”

Noxy’s heart pounded in her chest. The knife’s blade felt like a thin line of ice under her chin. The prince patted the air, repeating, “Easy, easy,” over and over again, taking a cautious step forward each time Yestevan stepped back.

“Fwah!” A mound of snow ten strides away collapsed in on itself as Ulfmaerr struggled free of it. He took in the scene with a glance.

“No!” Yestevan snarled as the magician raised his arm. “One word outta you, and I’ll do it! I swear I will!”

Step, step... The snow dragged at Noxy’s legs. Each time she stumbled, she thought it would be her last. She could smell the *rak* on Yestevan’s breath and the woodsmoke on his clothes. She didn’t want to die, not like this, not now. “Please,” she whispered, not knowing who she spoke to.

“Noxy! Noxy, look at me!” She opened her eyes. The prince scooped up a handful of snow and patted it into a snowball, then made a second and a third. “Here, watch this.” And with a deep breath, he began to juggle.

“What are you doing, you idiot?” Yestevan snarled.

“Distracting you,” the prince said calmly, just as a strong hand snaked up the front of Noxy’s coat to knock Yestevan’s knife away from her throat. She fell forward into the snow with a shriek as something pulled Yestevan.

Thokmay floundered forward as Noxy rolled onto her feet. Kulbinder charged past him and threw himself onto Yestevan's back as the renegade cloudherd struggled with Sergeant Dorbu. The three of them fell in a heap as Thokmay wrapped his arms around Noxy. "It's all right, it's all right," he said.

She stood there for a moment, shivering, before pushing him away and wiping her face on her sleeve in time to hear Ulfmaerr say, "Oh dear. Oh no."

Yestevan lay sprawled in the snow, the slowly-spreading red stain near his throat the only epitaph he would ever have. Sergeant Dorbu struggled weakly to sit up beside him, then lay back, one hand clutching the hilt of the knife driven into his chest by the force of the fall. Kulbinder crouched beside him, ears back and teeth bared.

"I think... you're safe..." the sergeant wheezed. The right side of his uniform was soaked with blood.

Thokmay stumbled forward and fell to his knees beside Sergeant Dorbu. "Don't move," he said frantically. "Please, just—magician! Magician, help us!"

"I can't," Ulfmaerr said bleakly, the weight of all his past choices heavy in his voice. "I gave the last of that away a long time ago. I'm sorry."

"Please," Thokmay repeated. "Please..."

Sergeant Dorbu wheezed again. "S' worth it," he mumbled, looking at Noxy with dimming eyes and trying to smile. "If I can't save the girl... it's not much of a revolution."

A shout from higher up the mountain broke the stillness that followed. "Honored. Honored, we must go." Kulbinder nudged the prince with his muzzle.

Thokmay shook his head, tears streaming down his cheeks. Tentatively, Noxy put her hand on his shoulder. "It's all right," she said, knowing it for a lie. When Kulbinder nudged the prince again, he stood and left his childhood behind.

They mounted Charger from a sharp spur of rock a hundred strides further down the mountain. "North," Ulfmaerr said. Noxy didn't ask where they were going or why. She sat shoulder to shoulder with Thokmay, who draped his other arm over Kulbinder. No one spoke as the world slipped by beneath them, until finally Ulfmaerr had them land near an ancient stone bridge over a fast-running stream.

Noxy and Thokmay walked slowly up the potholed mountain track to the bridge. The forest smelled cool and moist around them. Juncos and nutcrackers whistled and chattered in the branches above their heads, and something the size of a small raccoon rustled through a patch of thorny misery a few feet away. "Do you like being a prince?" Noxy asked Thokmay as she picked up a stone.

He thought for a few steps before replying. "I think so. You have to be a prince before you can be king, and being king like my father is all I've ever wanted, ever

since I was little.” He paused again. “But I guess it’s kind of like asking Charger if he likes being a cloud, or Kulbinder if he likes having a tail.”

“I guess,” echoed Noxy.

“Do you like being able to do magic?”

“I’m not a magician,” Noxy said defensively. “Not really.”

Thokmay patted the air with his hands. “Whatever you want to call it. Talking to clouds with your mind looks a lot like magic to me.”

Noxy shrugged. “Everyone I know does it, so it doesn’t seem like something special. I guess like how you’re going to be a king some day doesn’t seem special to you?”

Thokmay stooped to pick up a stone of his own. “Not really. People think being a king is about having adventures all the time, but my father spends most of his time judging law cases, or listening to Honored Dolkar explain why we can’t raise taxes to pay for repairs to the Apple Bridge. It’s actually about as exciting as watching soup go cold—until there’s a rebellion,” he amended.

“So why doesn’t he let someone else do it? Can’t he just order Honored whoever to fix the bridge?”

Thokmay shook his head. “The law says the king has to decide anything that affects the safety of the kingdom. Or any case of murder in the capital, or anything involving foreign magicians.” He frowned. “There’s another one as well, but I can’t remember what it is.”

“If I was king, I’d make a new law that said other people could worry about those things for me,” Noxy mused.

The prince sighed. “That’s what Shudarga thinks too. She says that laws shouldn’t belong to people, they should belong to everyone, like, like the ocean or something, but then what’s to stop everyone from just making their own?”

He stared into the depths of the forest, not really seeing the trees. “I think—I think laws are different from magic. Magic happens the way it’s supposed to whether you do anything or not, like the sun coming up or tea going cold if you leave it on the table. Laws only work if someone makes them work. If you let one person make a law or change one just because they want to, it would be like having no laws at all.” Suddenly he pulled his arm back and threw his stone as high and as far as he could. A moment later they heard it go *thock!* against a tree.

Noxy threw her stone as well. *Thock!*

The prince grinned at her. “Sounded like the same tree.”

Noxy grinned back. “I bet it was.” She almost reached out to take his hand as they started walking again. Almost.

Ulfmaerr was waiting impatiently when they got back. “I was about to send Kulbinder off after you,” he said. “Where have you been?”

“Throwing rocks at trees,” said Noxy. Kulbinder turned his head and stared at the prince, who blushed slightly.

“Well, never mind that,” said Ulfmaerr. “Here.” He handed them each a dry brown leaf. “Don't lose it.”

“What's it for?” Noxy asked, turning it over curiously.

“It'll keep you warm where we're going,” Ulfmaerr said. When he smiled, one of his front teeth was missing.

They let Charger pick his own pace as they flew north, rising hour by hour as the pass snaked between the sharp mountains. The last trees were far below them, and only an occasional clump of saxifrage or cutleaf daisy clung to the rocks. The air was so clear that it almost hurt to breathe.

Finally Ulfmaerr pointed and said, “There. Up over that.” A narrow mountain valley hung above the pass, filled to the brim by a pristine white glacier. A tumble of snow and broken ice made a jumbled white fan beneath it.

Charger had to circle twice to gain enough altitude to get over the lip of the glacier. Noxy was so cold that she reached into her pocket for her magic leaf, but Ulfmaerr said, “Not yet. Not until you really have to.”

“I *do* really have to,” Noxy chattered, but she pulled her hand out of her pocket. She, Kulbinder, and Thokmay were huddled together to stay warm. Ulfmaerr didn't seem to notice, even though his toenails were turning blue.

They raced along the glacier. The mountains rose on either side of them like Stale's ancient walls. There were no flowers, nothing green, not even any of the gray-brown lichens the cloudherds called “belly scrapings”. It was like the first day of the world, or the last, with nothing around but jagged rocks and glaciers glistening like newly-made gems in the sun.

Suddenly Kulbinder stiffened and hissed, “What is that?”

“What?” asked Thokmay and Noxy together. They struggled to their feet.

“I hear drums.” snarled Kulbinder. “Magician! What is this place?”

Ulfmaerr took a deep breath. “They're not drums. This is the Valley of Lightnings.”

Chapter 16

Noxy gasped. “The what?” Thokmay asked.

Ulfmaerr didn't turn his head. “There,” he pointed. “And there. See them?”

Noxy stared at the horizon. “Turn your head a bit,” Thokmay told her. “Try looking out of the corner of your eye. Sergeant Dorbu taught me.” Sure enough, when Noxy looked at one of the peaks, instead of straight up the valley, she could suddenly see little flashes of light darting from place to place. A few heartbeats later she heard the *szzzzzt!* and *crack!* of the lightnings' dance.

Charger slowed abruptly beneath them. *Sharp brights!*

Friends, Noxy mind-spoke back, trying to soothe the frightened cloud.

Sharp brights not friend, Charger mind-spoke emphatically, resuming his flight reluctantly.

Then it happened. One moment the lightnings were tiny sparks on the horizon, and the next they were dazzling and dancing around the travellers. Up close they were almost invisible, just shimmering wisps like colored ripples in the air. They crackled like twigs being broken, over and over.

Noxy and Thokmay cried out with fear. Kulbinder snarled, his ears pulled back and his hair standing on end. *Friends!* Noxy mind-spoke at Charger frantically. *They won't hurt you!* She had to close her eyes—she knew she wouldn't be able to convince the cloud as long as she could see the lightnings herself.

WHAT WHY HERE WHY YOU COME WHY COME WHY? The angry words burst into Noxy's mind like a shout. She gasped, and her eyes snapped open. Thokmay was staring at her with a frightened look on his face. He could hear it too, she realized. It was like mind-speech, but so powerful that it felt like someone else was using her brain to think with.

At the same instant she realized that her hands and feet had gone numb. She fumbled at her pocket, but couldn't get the button undone. Thokmay pushed her hand out of the way and undid it for her. As soon as her fingers touched the leaf that Ulfmaerr had given her, the freezing chill eased reluctantly out of her bones.

Ulfmaerr raised his arms. “You know me!” he shouted. “You know me, and you remember the bargain I made!”

WHY WHY HERE WHY COME NOT TIME! The lightnings flickered red blue purple blue green blue red.

“I know it's not my time!” Ulfmaerr shouted. “But I need your help again! Men have come from the plains, evil men. They plan to take the clouds to war! You must help us stop this thing!”

The lightnings rippled with yellow and green. *MEN TREES WATER CLOUDS MEN LIGHTNING NOT LIGHTNING.*

“No we aren't, but the law is the law!” Ulfmaerr sounded desperate. Noxy suddenly realized that he didn't know if the lightnings would help them or not.

The thought that came into her mind was almost amused. *MEN LAWS SLOW DULL NOT LIGHTNING NOT LIGHTNING.*

“But the law!” Ulfmaerr protested. “These people would make weapons of the clouds!”

SLOW DULL NOT LIGHTNING CLOUDS NOT LIGHTNING NOT LIGHTNING LAWS, the lightnings mind-spoke dismissively.

“If not for the law, then for power!” Ulfmaerr shouted at them. “Look into me! I will give you anything I am if you will aid us!”

There was a moment of stillness, and deep, biting cold, before the lightnings replied. *EMPTY NOTHING GIVEN ALL AWAY NOT ENOUGH YOU EMPTY NOT ENOUGH.* There was a sizzle as the lightnings began to flash away.

Wait! Noxy mind-thought desperately. She felt the lightnings' attention turn to her, and felt their surprise.

SLOW DULL NOT MAGICIAN DULL SPEAK NOT MAGICIAN SPEAK?

Not magician, she agreed. *Slow and dull. But!* She reached out and ran her fingers lightly over a puff of cloud, concentrating as hard as she could on the sensation. *Touch,* she thought.

!!! the lightnings mind-spoke back. There was a buzzing, almost like a conversation in another room, that she could barely mind-hear as they mind-talked amongst themselves.

You could have touch, she mind-spoke again, as persuasively as she could. “Touch, taste, water running through your fingers, hot porridge sugar on your tongue, the smell of thimbleberry pie baking... You could have.”

“What are you doing?” Ulfmaerr gasped.

Chocolate, Noxy continued. Kitten fur. Warm under covers. Cold water on face. Hugs...

Ulfmaerr grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. “What... are... you... doing...?” he hissed. “Have you gone mad?”

Noxy pushed him away. “They have to help us! And if you don't have anything they want, maybe I do! They can take my body and know what it's like to have touch and smell and taste. Maybe they'll help us for that.”

“No!” Noxy could see the horror in Ulfmaerr's eyes. “You can't!”

“You did,” she said simply. There was no bitterness in her voice, no anger—not any more. Her father had done what he had to to keep her safe, her and everyone else in Stale. She understood that now, just as she understood that she had to do the same.

Kulbinder snarled. Ulfmaerr groaned. “Girl, girl, you don't know what you're doing! The lightnings can survive without bodies, but you can't! When they get bored and leave you, your body will be as empty as a boot without a foot in it! And your ghost will wander until the ice melts!”

“It's the only way,” said Noxy stubbornly. Fighting against tears, she turned to face the lightnings again. *I wish I'd said goodbye*, she thought. Granna Fee, Rash, Sensy, her *anna*... She spread her arms and closed her eyes and—

—and fell clumsily onto Charger's back as Thokmay knocked her off her feet. “Children of the sky!” he shouted. “You of the thousand and one colors! Hear me! I am Thokmay Prince Gandan, fourth of that name. I am a plainsman, but even on the plains, we speak of the beauty and terrible strength of the blades of light that never grow dull. Hear me, for I would beg for your aid!”

SLOW DULL WORDS SLOW DULL BORING, came back disdainfully.

Thokmay set his jaw. “Yes, slow, and dull, but I have something to offer that you have never had before. Look inside me! Look in my heart! If you will help us as the magician has asked, I will give you something precious.” He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. The look of concentration on his face was so powerful, so painful, that Noxy could almost hear his thoughts.

There was a pause, just a heartbeat. Noxy felt the lightnings probe, searching, and then for the first time she mind-heard hesitation from them. *THRONE POWER MAJESTY NOT SLOW DULL NOT YOURS NOT YOURS TO GIVE*.

“No, the throne isn't mine,” Thokmay agreed. He was no longer shouting. He didn't need to—Noxy could feel the lightnings' attention. “But the chance that I would be king is. it is all I have ever been, and that's what matters, isn't it? That's what makes it magic?”

“Your Highness, you can't—” Kulbinder started.

“Be still!” the prince snapped. “If people can give up their lives for me, I can give up my throne for them. What say you?” he shouted again. “Have we a bargain?”

There was another pause. It stretched until Noxy thought she would scream. Finally the lightnings spoke. *DONE. WHAT WHERE WHEN HOW?*

Charger was the only cloud in the sky as they flew toward Stale. The soldiers on the walls had seen them, of course—a single cloud swimming against the wind is a hard thing to miss. Half of the commander's soldiers were watching as Charger touched down in the clearing in front of the fortress gate. Kulbinder dismounted with a single smooth leap and loped toward the village.

A dozen soldiers waited for Kulbinder at the old fortress gate, battle masks in place and swords in hand. The commander stood in front of them, unmasked and scowling.

Kulbinder stopped a few strides away. "In the name of Thokmay Prince Gandan, as his chosen herald, I salute you," the tiger said formally.

"And in the name of Respected Shudarga, I return that greeting, and swear safe parley," the colonel replied, equally formally. "Your fame stretched before you like a long shadow, Kulbinder of Thind. It is a shame to see such a reputation tarnished by treachery."

"Whatever reputation I might have shall pale beside your infamy," the cat purred. "When even the ghosts of our ghosts have been laid to rest, still people will talk of how you sowed war where it should never have grown, but reaped only your own disaster."

The commander's face darkened. His men murmured behind him. "Strong words," he said in a voice as cold as the mountain air. "Here is mine. Surrender the prince to us, and I swear on my name that he will not be harmed if his father ends his unjust war."

"No!" Kulbinder snarled. "In the name of the king, and by right of ancient law, I command you to surrender yourself and your armies, and to place yourself before the king's justice!"

The commander laughed. "Surrender? To a feeble old man, two children, and a lame tomcat?"

"No," Kulbinder replied. "To a great magician, two great hearts, and your death wearing black and yellow fur!" He roared for all he was worth.

Up on the cloud, Thokmay heard the tiger's signal. He stood and mind-shouted, *Now!* There was a tremendous sun-bright flash as the lightnings that had been hiding in the terrified cloud's nooks and crannies burst forth.

Thunder boomed all around Noxy. The lightnings' dazzle blinded her, and she smelled burning air. Then there was an even louder *boom!* and a rumble that went on and on.

"What's happening?" she shouted, blinded.

"That was the south tower," Ulfmaerr. "The lightnings blasted the roof right off it. And there! Your wind goose is going to need a new pole."

The dazzle spots started to clear from Noxy's eyes. Her mouth went dry as she saw the fires burning in the village below. *Down!* she frantically mind-shouted at Charger. *Down! Down!*

The soldiers scattered in panic as the lightnings played around them. They had fought men and Gifted beasts and the hundred-legged things that sometimes came crawling out of the Blight, but who could fight this? In the middle of it all the commander shouted, "Come back here! I command you!" One of his soldiers, blinded by the light, stumbled into him as he tried to run.

The commander shoved him aside and drew his sword. "You!" he spat at Kulbinder. "You mangy scrap of fur! I am going to make a carpet out of you, do you hear me?" He charged at the tiger.

Kulbinder snarled a curse in Thindi and dodged under the commander's swing. His claws screeched across the commander's armor as his weight carried them both off their feet. The two rolled over and over, Kulbinder snarling and snapping as the commander tried to get his sword up to stab him.

Above them Thokmay shouted, "Bring us down! Bring us down! Faster!" His hands were clenched into fists. "We have to help him!"

"I'm trying!" Noxy said desperately, mind-shouting, *Down! Down!* at Charger.

Thokmay leaped from the cloud the instant they touched down. Noxy and Ulfmaerr slid down behind him.

Good good good, Noxy mind-spoke, but the cloud was already in the air and fleeing.

"Kulbinder! Look out!" Thokmay shouted. Noxy spun around. The tiger and the commander were rolling toward the edge of the gorge! Thokmay raced toward them, but he was too late! The last thing Noxy heard as they rolled over the side was Kulbinder snarl in rage.

Someone grabbed her and spun her around. She started to fight free, but then her mother's arms went around her in the biggest, fiercest hug of her life. "Oh, daffodil," Indy wept, her voice breaking. "I was so scared. I was so scared."

"Me too," said Noxy, her face buried in her mother's shoulder.

Indy straightened up and brushed the tears off her daughter's face. As she did so Noxy heard Thokmay cry, "Kulbinder!" He was standing at the edge of the cliff. "Kulbinder, hang on!"

Noxy ran to join him. "Down there!" the prince said, pointing. "Quickly, get help!" Before Noxy could stop him, the prince slid over the edge to pick his way down the steep rock face.

The tiger was wedged between a rock and a manzanita bush. His fur was wet with blood, but his eyes were bright. "Boy..." he panted.

Thokmay braced his feet against the rock and cradled the tiger's head in his arms. "I thought I'd lost you," he said.

The tiger licked his arm with a tongue like a warm piece of sandpaper. "Don't you know cats always land on their feet?" he wheezed. He tried to gather his feet beneath him.

"Don't try to move," Thokmay ordered. "They'll be here soon." The tiger licked his arm again, but didn't speak.

Noxy woke up in her own bed early the next morning. For a moment she just lay there, wishing it could all have been a dream. The aches in her muscles from her

long, cold ride, and the smell of burnt homes that lingered in the air, wouldn't let her pretend.

She slid out from beneath her blankets as quietly as she could, pulled on her clothes, and tiptoed downstairs, and slipped through the door. The main square was covered with burned boards that had once been part of the trading hall's roof. The scorch marks on the old fortress walls looked like the brown soot shadows that candles left on lanterns. A few wisps of smoke still rose from what was left of the wind goose's pole, and a soldier's helmet lay beside the speaker's stump, bright with dew.

A rebel soldier stood at attention outside the trading hall. They had surrendered once they knew the commander was dead. Noxy walked past him as if he didn't exist, though her heart beat a little faster. The guard just stood there and looked straight ahead, thinking about whatever soldiers think about when they have been defeated.

Granna Fee opened her door when Noxy knocked. "He's upstairs," she said, hugging her granddaughter. "Don't worry—cats are tough, and big old cats like him are the toughest. It's the little kittens like you that we all have to worry about."

"Is Ulfmaerr still here?" Noxy asked, not letting go of her grandmother.

Granna Fee shook her head. "He couldn't stay," she said. "But I think your new friend is up on the wall somewhere."

"I'm sorry to hear that," the prince said when she found him and told him that Ulfmaerr was gone. He was standing on the wall, staring at the pyre on which the casualties from yesterday's fighting would be sent to their rest. "I wanted to say goodbye."

"Goodbye?" Noxy immediately felt stupid. Of course—he would be leaving now.

The prince nodded, a bit sadly. "We'll give everyone another day, then..." He shrugged.

"Have you thought about what you're going to tell your father?" Noxy asked.

Thokmay shook his head. "The truth, I suppose. Some good men died."

"That's not what I meant."

The prince smiled wryly. "I know. When we were little, my brother Lormay used to say that he ought to be king because he's taller than me. I guess now he'll get his wish."

"And what will you be instead of a king?" Noxy asked.

Thokmay shrugged again. "I don't know. Being king was..." He trailed off. "It's like when Ulfmaerr told you that if you let the lightnings take over your body, it would be empty when they left it. I feel empty like that."

He glanced at her. "What about you? Have you told anyone about...?" He tapped his temple with his finger.

Noxy shook her head. "Not yet." She looked into the distance where a single young cloud was grazing on an icy peak. She could mind-speak to Charger if she wanted to, but he deserved a rest.

"Mm." The prince nodded, agreeing with everything she hadn't said, then cleared his throat again. "So... want to go throw some rocks at some trees?"

Noxy took his hand and gave it a squeeze. "Sure." She didn't let go as they made their way down the stairs, and neither did he.

Greg Wilson was born and raised on Vancouver Island, where it rains so much that people get a rust rather than a tan. He lives in Toronto now with a wonderful woman and their particularly wonderful daughter. When he's not writing, he teaches people how to program. He apologizes for the lack of pirates in this book, and will try to do better next time.

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