

How to Steal a Mountain

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For T, R (with a 'z') and E

How to Steal a Mountain: Cover Material

“They said I’d have to steal the forest ... But I’ve done better than that. I’ve stolen the mountain”

Samti’s life is happy, peaceful and illegal.

She lives next to a mountainous reserve, which she steals from, outrunning the guards who try to catch her. But then Samti’s world is turned upside down by the arrival of a conservation project devoted to saving a mysterious new animal. Only no one really understands the creature. They don’t know where it has come from, or what revolutions it will bring. Worlds that have been safely separated for centuries are colliding. Lethal criminal networks are growing in influence and power. Treachery abounds. When things begin to go wrong, and go wrong badly, Samti faces a deadly choice that could ruin all she cherishes.

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A Confession

When I first heard the story I have written in the pages of this book, I did not believe it. It was too fantastic, and too dangerous. No one should face the betrayals that threatened Samti and Ratona. In fact, nothing like Ratona could even exist. The whole thing had to be made up.

But when I set out to prove it was false, I failed. The more I probed, the more I investigated, the more truth I found.

There is a feeling you get when you imagine something impossible, but completely wonderful. Like winning the lottery, or being able to fly or turn invisible, or having magical healing powers. You get a tingling in your skin, a glorious wuzziness that fizzles through your fingers and up your arms, and ends in a delicious shiver. You probably know that feeling. Well, that's how I felt when I realised how true this story was.

And I shivered for another reason. This is a perilous tale. I have had to protect the people involved. Samti, Dawi, Molly and Ben have other names in real life. My editors, and their lawyers, insisted that I should disguise them. And no one dared to tell me Ratona's true name. But she is a different being from a different world. She does not fight her battles with legal arguments. She is more of a fire and brimstone type.

I have also kept secret the locations of this story. I can tell you that Samti and Dawi live somewhere in Eastern Africa, and Ben and Molly somewhere in Western Europe. You may think you recognise some places I mention – but that may just be a good disguise working. I can certainly never reveal Ratona's world. It must be hidden forever. Fire and brimstone are deadly.

With my informants' permission, I have not written this record as a set of mere facts and dates. These events are myth come true, legend re-enacted, and I have tried to capture some of the excitement, joy, grief and fear that its characters knew. This means that the different worlds you encounter may seem odd at first. Samti and the others also had to piece together their joins and ruptures. It's part of the mystery that they faced, and that you must now unravel.

Part One

Chapter 0

Toffee

It was the end of the dry season. Roasted grasses dissolved into powder. Dust devils danced with dead maize husks. And an alien cluster of clouds boiled over Samti's head.

They had to be alien. No earthly clouds dared defy the sun. So these strangers bulging above her must be invaders.

Samti was resting beneath a forest giant, her ti'ita. Its smooth grey limbs reared skyward, shielding her from the sun. Red maamáy fire lilies erupted from the ground around her, their delicate petals calling the rains. High in the forest reserve, this was her sanctuary, the place her mother had shown her. Hidden by mossy boulders, the ti'ita's shade, with a deep pool beside it, made a perfect refuge from the heat. Samti had a supply of guavas, a slender fighting stick and a large mound of toffee candies that were in a sun-patch before her. The toffees were heaped together. She was melting them into one enormous sweet, the biggest she'd ever eaten. Soon she would be in heaven.

Samti examined the sky. In one small patch above her head, the clouds beat and pummelled each other. Waves of heat rolled from their battling forms. Her sweets would melt even faster now. She rolled over to check the sticky pile – but her candy was gone.

Samti looked around in alarm. She jumped to her feet, stick raised, searching through the trees up and down the hill-side. But the forest liked to keep its secrets. It pretended that nothing had happened. All was silent.

As her heartbeat slowed, Samti's fists clenched. She beat the ground, challenging the stillness. She had stolen those sweets herself. They were hers. How dare anyone take her bounty!

But even as she scoured the forest the sun blazed around her again. Its heat deadened the air, smothering her anger. Samti glanced upwards. The clouds had dissolved. In the distance, she heard the clang of beaten metal. Her aunt was striking a saucepan, summoning children for the evening chores. She dare not be late. Reluctantly Samti gathered up her guavas. She threaded through trees and over tumbled boulders, kicking the stones and thrashing at the bushes with her stick.

Behind her, beneath the ti'ita, the echoes of her exit receded in a dull mutter. The forest stilled. It waited.

And when all was quiet, a slow growl rumbled in the air, followed by a dull, wet splat on the ground. A large mound of dissolving toffee slapped onto dry leaves and lay glistening, coated in dribble and spit. It had fallen out of nothing, from thin air.

A satisfied rustling surrounded the toffee, a whisper on the leaves. The sweet mass began to jerk and dance, pushed one side, then the other. Small chunks of it snapped off and disappeared. Drool pooled around it. There was a smack of sloppy licks – and a deep, contented purr.

A few minutes down the path, Samti stopped. She should go back for her sweets. She could not leave them behind.

But then the clanging summons resumed. She must not be late. One day she would come back and find the culprit – and then they would be sorry.

Chapter 1

The One True Story

A thin rain darkened the coarse asphalt of the school yard. The air tasted of metal and concrete and stank of rubbish overflowing from industrial bins. Steam from the kitchens wafted over, belching fumes of overcooked dinners.

Ben squatted on the ground, back against the wall. Blue veins marked his shivering hands. His trousers were damp. But he did not notice. He did not care.

He was glued to his phone. Ben had received a simple message from his aunts: 'WATCH THIS'. And so he was watching a short video, again, and again, and again. His skin was tingling.

It began ordinarily. Goats wandering along a mountain path, children tagging along behind. That bit was fine.

But Ben was watching what happened next. The animal that appeared in front of them. Out of nothing. Out of thin air. That creature was impossible.

But if this was faked, why did his aunts want him to watch it? That thing could not exist, yet it looked so real. Ben dared to hope.

Benedict Rawlins was twelve years old. His muddy blond hair was permanently messy, his face was earnest and freckled and he knew that he was living in the wrong place, and the wrong time. He couldn't be an

explorer – there were no places left to discover. He was too old to get lost in the rainforest and be adopted by an unknown tribe. He should have lived in the Dark Ages, swirling with rumours of dragons and knights. Or the Ice Age and battled mammoths. But if this video was real, those disappointments did not matter. He could find the adventure he craved. He had to be part of it.

A pair of trainers appeared before him, interrupting his dreams. Molly, his sister, was steaming after her workout. She was seventeen, a champion kick boxer and oblivious to the cold.

“Are you watching that video?” she asked. Her blue eyes were curious.

Ben pushed himself off the ground, wet grit sticking to his palms. “I can’t stop. It’s just the most amazing thing. Jacki and Meera will be around tonight, I can’t wait for them to explain it. We must go looking for that creature.”

“If you go, I come with you,” Molly said. “You’re scrawny, you’re annoying and you need protecting.”

“And you slip into extreme violence too easily,” Ben retorted. “I’m big enough to look after myself. You need to accept your retirement.”

“Retirement?”

“Yes, retirement. You can stop worrying about me. In fact, I’m going to get everyone worrying about you. I’m going to start a charity for you, because of your spots. No. I’ve got it.” Ben danced around his sister, edging away. “I’ll start a charity for your spots, because they’re on your face.”

And then he was running, with Molly a breath behind him, laughing despite herself.

* * *

“Where is my son?” Jacki demanded, bursting through the front door that evening, her bright clothes glowing, “and where is my amazing daughter? Ewe!” she marvelled at Molly in isiXhosa. “Ukasemhle! Yes. You are flawless.”

Behind Jacki, Meera shuffled in. She was short and slight, and wrapped in a thick dressing gown to ward off the cold.

"Auntie Meera," Ben said, "I think Jacki's going mad again. Did she just Molly was beautiful?"

Meera ignored him. "To think we've had a hand in raising you two," she murmured, kissing Molly and Ben on the forehead. "Now Ben, tell me how your amazing artwork is getting on, I want another portrait."

Professors Meera Kothari and Jaqueline Ngqola were not Ben's true aunts. They were zoologists and knew his parents because both his Mum and Dad worked for a large conservation organisation.

"Never mind the artwork today," Jacki said. "We know he is brilliant. Now we must talk. Yes! Did you both get the video we sent? It is the best."

"I did, and I've not stopped watching it," Ben replied. "What is that amazing creature?"

"It is secret we've kept for ages!" Jacki was triumphant. "But now we can reveal it. Yes! We have been trying to find proof of this animal for years. This video is the best evidence we have ever had."

"We must show this to Dad, now," Ben insisted. "He's always saying that the exciting things have already happened or been discovered. This will prove him wrong."

"We are about to," Jacki replied. "Where is your tiny father?" She ploughed on to the kitchen. "Richard!" Jacki stooped to embrace him. "How does your family put up with you?"

Ben's father was looking even more dishevelled than normal. His hair was wild, his clothes crumpled and he was noisily enjoying a smoothie. A mess of orange peel and banana skins surrounded the blender.

"Dad, Dad!" Ben jumped up and down, "you've got to see this!"

"If it's from Jacki and Meera," Richard said between slurps, "then I don't want to. They like making me look stupid."

"That's not fair, Richard," Meera protested. "You look stupid without us. And we have an important new species to show you."

“Really? The last new species you showed me was a rock-shaped tortoise. I spent ages staring at it, waiting for it to move, only to discover that it was, in fact, a rock.”

“It was quite funny Dad,” Ben said. “I mean that rock looked nothing like a tortoise.”

“It was hilarious,” Richard replied. “And now I don’t trust you.”

“But you are still going to look at our new animal,” Jacki insisted. “Ben, show him.”

Ben smiled. Jacki reminded him of a bulldozer. A beautiful bulldozer, with a perfect headdress and large, round earrings – and a bulldozer, nonetheless. He gave his phone to his father.

Richard jumped when the beast appeared. He replayed the crucial moment again, frowning at the screen.

“This is shot in your Indian field site, isn’t it?” he asked Meera. “How did you do that?”

“We did nothing,” said Meera. “That’s just what it’s like. Look at its fur again.”

Ben slowed the clip down, watching it frame by frame. “The colours aren’t stable,” he said at last. “Its stripes are moving. The reds become orange, the oranges yellow, and back again.”

“But how does that explain the way it appears and disappears?” Molly asked.

“Because it can change its colouring,” Meera replied. “That’s how the stripes move. But its special secret, and the reason why it’s never been discovered until now is that it can mimic its background perfectly, even when it moves – although its shadow can still give it away.”

Ben studied the video again. The creature, a cat of some sort, seemed to explode into view in front of the goats, its vivid coat aflame and its eyes wild and angry. “There is a shadow on the path,” he said at last. “That creature is was there all time, we just couldn’t see it.”

“Son, that proves nothing,” Richard insisted. “It’s a small leopard. They’ve doctored the video to give it those weird stripes.”

“But if it is a leopard,” Molly asked, “what’s going on at the end of the clip?”

It was a good question. The children herding the goats dropped something on the path, and whatever that was, it seemed to distract the creature. It stopped and disappeared. Only its shadow remained.

“That is the proof we were looking for,” said Jacki. “Those children dropped sweets to distract it. In some countries honey works as well. That creature has a sweet tooth, it prefers sugar to meat.”

“Right,” Richard said, “so you want me to believe that you have discovered a large cat with iridescent, bright stripes and stealth abilities. And the proof is that it likes sugar. D’you think I’ve got a tiny brain or something?”

Meera crouched down and inspected Richard’s head closely. “Yees,” she said slowly, “I think it probably is quite tiny. Because you’re missing the point here. All the stories agree on the sugar bit. That’s too weird to make up, and it is repeated by different sources who could never have met.”

“Oh stop it,” Richard said. “That proves nothing, you’ve fallen for a doctored video. This – this can’t be real. You’re peddling fables.”

Jacki rounded on him. “Wena kwedini! Une ngqondo yenja!” (This was not entirely fair: Richard was short, but he was not that stupid). “Fable, Richard?” she said. “No! I’ve collected mythical stories for many, many years. And this is the best. Yes. How do you know this is not the one: the true story amongst hundreds of falsehoods? I, too, have heard about these cats, when I was a child growing up near the Drakensberg. My grandmother told me about them. That is an entire continent away!”

“I’ve got an idea,” Ben suggested innocently. “We can let Mum decide if it’s real. She’s important.”

“Brilliant,” Meera exclaimed, “Mary always believes us.”

Ben’s father grinned at him, blue eyes twinkling. “Your mother may be my boss’s boss,” he said, “but really she’s only my mad wife.”

Molly growled at her father in protest, cracking her knuckles ominously. Jacki wagged her finger at Richard, hand on hip. "Ewe! You be careful, you messy man. Mary will fire you. You – you are under-performing."

"Well, I think that Meera, Jacki and I should discover these cats officially," Ben said. "We'll need to name it. I think we should call it the 'Bencat'."

"It already has a name, young coloniser," Jacki warned. "These are 'grimcats'. That translates from isiXhosa, Sesotho, Nepali *and* Lepcha. Which, by the way, is another sign that it exists."

"But could we find it?" Ben asked "Unfortunately, Dad's right. You'll need more than this video. And you'll need my help."

Molly laughed at him. "Ben, anyone who needs you to help with anything has gone mad. Jacki and Meera are a bit nutty, but they're not that crazy!"

Meera smiled at them both. "We leave soon for our next field visit. Maybe we'll have good news when we return. And then you can come with us."

Chapter 2

The Forest

A faint cry of ancient trouble seeped out of the night. Samti's thumbs paused over her phone. She pushed open the small wooden shutter that covered her window. Cold air and thin moonlight streamed in. Outside, the forest pressed against weeded fields. She looked to the ranks of trees looming above her in the mountains. What had she heard?

Samti quietened her breath. Around her, the night murmured. Crickets busied themselves, bats chipped hard echoes into the shadows, an owl called. Far in the distance, hyenas were yowling. Through earthen walls she could hear the usual farmstead sounds: hens stirring, cattle breathing, the night wind rustling banana fronds behind her home.

And then the cry sounded again. HAYYYOOOORDAT! HAYYYOOOORDAT! The call rolled, yodelling over the land, binding all hearers to come to its aid.

Samti sighed. For the ghosts of this land, that warning had sounded despair. But they were long dead. Now it was rarely anything serious. Most likely some lost drunk frightened of his shadow. But she heard her aunt, Mama Leo, beat on the wall of cousin Dawi's room. He had to go. Samti, only thirteen years old, was excused. In nearby houses neighbours alerted each other, summoning their youth to answer the call.

Samti heard Dawi bumping in the darkness, searching for his clothes and stick. Likely Ambrosi, his youngest brother, had hidden his torch, and his shoes. Finally she heard him stumbling from the house to join his fellows.

She leant back onto her hard mattress and curled up against the night air. Her sleeping blankets were coarse and stiff, they wanted replacing. But she was cosier than her cousin. Dawi was pushing up steep mountain slopes, walking into nettles or else treading on trails of siafu. These ants were the worst. The big warriors had vicious jaws, but even the smaller worker ants left painful bites.

Samti listened to the scratching of insects in the thatch. Something hungry scuttled after something edible. She could hear Mama Leo asleep again, cuddling her children. Snuffling and deep breathing came from her bedroom.

She wondered when Dawi would return. Phone reception was poor in the forest. They would get no messages.

Haayyyooooordat! Haayyyooooordat!

The call came again, quieter, filtered through moon-silvered clouds. Samti's skin still prickled for what it used to mean. Her mother had recounted the stories of the old times over and again as she braided Samti's hair. Head nestled against thigh. The safest place, for the worst of tales.

Once, Mama would say, the forest had been dangerous. Journeys into the higher reaches had required escorts of heavily armed men, guarded by charms and prayer. People missing late in the evening were abandoned. Cattle enclosures were built of tall timbers and ringed with layers of thorns to keep out the hungry threats that prowled in the darkness.

She would push Samti's hair to one side to scratch her own itching nose before continuing. Nimble fingers tugging, weaving, scalp-tingling.

And then, Mama said, it had tamed a little. People crept in, marvelling at the dappled shade, at the rough lowing and red flashes of the lourie birds. But it was not safe. Young ones, tempted by sweet berries, could venture too far. They only realised when it was too late, with the dusk rushing in, the sky darkening with storm clouds, and shadows deepening, brooding and growing. Then the creatures that the night hid grew bold and came scenting,

hunting, relentlessly coursing the thrashing undergrowth as panicked youngsters ran for their lives.

But that, Mama assured her, pulling and tightening, was long ago. Now there were no deadly predators left. The leopards were cautious, keeping to the highlands, preferring goats to people. Hyenas were only dangerous if you slept in the open. And the real problems, the elephants and the buffalo, were gone. It was many years since Bibi Anna had nearly been trodden on by a charging rhino when she was collecting firewood.

You see, my sweetness? Deftly Mama had squeezed her braids into bright bands. There is nothing dangerous. Not anymore.

Samti lay still in the peace of the night, trying again to feel her mother's touch in her hair. Her braids were loose. Despite all Mama Leo's enfolding protection, her aunt did not have the patience to get Samti's hair right. She turned to the wall, trying to blot out the memories. Would that all the wild dangers returned, baying outside the compound, if that could bring her mother back.

* * *

It was too quiet when Samti woke. She lay puzzled by the stillness. Then she realised: no Ambrosi. Normally he would be jumping and shrieking in Dawi's room, goading the brother he adored to chase him. The noise of his squeals woke her each day.

So, no Dawi yet either. Still, this happened. Sometimes the alarm meant a real problem. People could still get lost in the forest ravines.

Her aunt roused her, calling from the cooking hut. "Samti, my sweetness, I need water."

Samti groaned. Now she had to do Dawi's chores. "But ..."

Mama Leo ignored her protest. "And firewood. My parents will arrive soon. It's sinful not to welcome them."

Then Samti remembered. Babu was taking the youngest grandchildren to his hives in the forest, and she would help. She could eat honeycomb today.

Babu was soon holding court over his morning tea, his hat on his knee, perched on a low stool in the kitchen hut. A graceful halo of white hair rimmed his bald head.

“They’re probably going to die in there, I shouldn’t take them,” he said, trying to frown at his younger grandchildren. “They’re too young, they’ll get left behind. What if the beast eating the search party right now wants some pudding?”

Pretending it was dangerous was part of the ritual of the trip. But it was all pretence. The forest was safe. But Ambrosi and his cousins were still scared and excited. They crowded on a short bench near the cooking fire, rustling uncertainly. Samti saw them timidly desperate to go, and half-hoping not to. She could remember that feeling herself.

Mama Leo sighed at Babu. Her squat form leant over the fire as she fried mandazi for their trip, her hands and kanga were dusted with flour, her forehead beading sweat. She looked up and rolled her eyes behind her father’s back, making the children giggle.

“I know that Babu of yours,” she said. “He just wants that delicious honey for himself. But I, my beautifuls, I want you to eat more honey than him. You run along now. And look out for Dawi. He’s probably waiting for you by the honey tree. But don’t let him have any.”

The forest was close. It was all reserved, with squat concrete blocks guarding its edges, keeping the valuable trees, the duku and mininga, from the timber barons. An imaginary line, unfenced, ran between the blocks marking the trees’ territory on one side, and the village lands on the other. The boundary between fields and forests was stark.

Babu pushed quickly past the green wall of the forest edge and up the path, his patch-worked trousers and worn jacket flitting through the shade of the trees. The children jostled behind their grandfather, fearful of being left behind. Samti smiled at the tumble of bodies bumping in front of her. They would exhaust themselves. She would have to carry the smallest.

Babu stopped abruptly. “What was that? Did you hear it?”

Ambrosi crowded close to his grandfather, staring around with fright at the quiet trees basking in morning sunshine. But Babu was not trying to scare his grandchildren. He was teaching them the forest lore he knew.

"Listen again," he commanded. "It's friendly." A rough cough sounded, the bark of a buck. "That ba/asa has spotted us, and it's warning its friends. That means there's nothing more dangerous than us around."

Samti joined Babu, showing the children the tasty fruits of the gwaa'ami tree, the mooyaangw that she used as perfume. Babu pointed out the distant high ridges, where the duku groves grew with their precious timber.

They moved slowly on. They need not fear any guards. People were allowed into the reserve to gather firewood, honey and forage for the herds, or simply for family walks. Older children played in the forest with their dens and sanctuaries, making swings from forest vines.

The explanations, questions and detours for berry-picking, made reaching the hives a surprise. These were lodged high in the branches of a vast tumat'mo tree, thick with pink flowers and buzzing insects. This was the biggest treat.

Samti guarded their charges while Babu scaled his ancient ladders to smoke out the bees. The children's necks craned, their mouths watering. When Babu brought the honey down, Justini ate so much that he was sick. Babu made him stick his head in the cold mountain stream until he was clean.

Afterwards they rested in the shade. Far above them, vultures circled on peaceful thermals. Clouds danced and played again around the mountain tops. Samti watched over the children, cuddling a sleepy Justini. When she was an mkubwa, she resolved, when she had completed school as she had promised her mother, when she had a proper job and a big brick house in town, then her children would make this trip. And she would show them her sanctuary, the ti'ita tree. They would eat toffee and honey and nothing would steal it.

The lazy afternoon slumbered on. Just as she decided to rouse the children, Ambrosi sat up and spotted his dozing grandfather. He crept up to his sleeping elder and growled in his ear.

Babu's reaction saved Samti the trouble of waking the other children. She assembled their belongings as Babu chased a squealing Ambrosi over the rocks.

"Come on," he instructed the youngsters, "we must get back. You've just eaten honey and made yourselves tastier. And even Ambrosi shouldn't be eaten by a monster. It would be unhealthy for the poor creature."

The return journey was downhill. But they went at a gentle pace, easing tired young legs home. Samti, as usual, picked up the rear of the party. So she heard it first. A murmur she had not known before. She called ahead to her grandfather.

"Babu, what's that noise?"

They both paused, heads cocked at the sound chasing down from slopes above them. A running. A panting. Something was coming. Something was out of place.

Babu dropped his precious honey buckets and looked at his grandchildren clustered around him, his smile erased. Then he swept up Justini, and with a horrible whisper commanded: "RUN!"

And suddenly the noise surrounded them. Dawi's search party was back, crouching, scratched, sweating, exhausted and afraid. They had dropped their weapons. Some had lost their shoes. But they ran headlong down the hill. The foremost picked up any child they overtook, hoisting them squirming to their shoulders.

Down they fled. Bushes clung to them; rocks barked their shins. Vines and brambles snapped at their ankles. The path invented new turns and detours. The forest was trying to trap them in.

They fought on, ripping themselves from the forest's entanglement, pushing for the safety of the invisible boundary. Samti half-dragged, half-carried Ambrosi as she ran, but always looked to the shadows growing behind her. Dawi was missing.

And then he was there, surging after his companions, calling for them to run faster, hurdling the bushes, throwing himself down the mountain. But when he caught up, Samti smelt the smoke and soot on him. His face was

burnt, his clothes blackened. Blood and ash mingled with the sweat on his skin.

Even as he reached them, he lifted Ambrosi scrabbling from the ground. Together he and Samti pulled each other to the forest edge. Only when they were near, did Babu sound the alarm, breathless, desperate. “HAYYOOORDAT! HAAAYYOOOOORDAT! Ni’ii i hi’iitiya.” The Children Are Coming! Their friends and neighbours ran towards them, pulling them into their houses, dragging thorn branches to compound gates and barricading doors. Locking themselves away from the coming night.

Chapter 3

A Breach in the Walls

Pacing the cold walls of her cell, Ratona rued the fire-blast. It was her worst ever mistake. She had trained for the elite Guard squadron of the pyre-angels for seven centuries. She had served in it for fourteen more. Her time was full of accidents. But nothing, in over two thousand years, came close to firing at that Human.

She could not take all the blame. The alarm had sounded. That alarm changed the rules.

Usually, alarms were part of the rhythm of a Guard's service, measuring out the days. Ratona was used to alerts for flood, calls to attention for visiting elders, or cave-bear incursions. There were alarms to watch over the lava pools beneath the Guard towers where the fledglings hatched. Sirens summoned them to keep the peace at food refineries, breaking up fights around the petrol taps and acid distilleries. Time bells rang as they moulded new nests on lonely, rocky outcrops. Alarms signalled normality.

But there was one exception to this rule. The Guards' greatest task was to patrol the Walls: the massive stone barrier that hid them from their most terrible danger. And as the centuries had ticked by, no alarm for a Wall-breach had ever rung.

Until it had sounded that evening.

Ratona flinched. The memory was too painful, but her trial was tomorrow. She had to recall it. She had to find that inner space of recollection. She calmed her breathing, blotted out the harsh surroundings of her prison cell and retreated into her memories. Her mind's eye transported her back to that fateful evening, to relive the past as if it were real ...

Once again she was resting in the barracks, the massive towers of basalt that twisted high over the lava pools. Her whole squadron was with her, resting on the sleeping perches that spiralled up the central column of the towers, snacking on lumps of tasty tar. And it was just as she began to doze, wings sagging, fires smouldering, that it all begun.

The alarm, that alarm, thundered through the Guard tower. A huge bass drum sent tremors through the building. Every curve was lit by arc-lights. Brightness and noise filled the air. Ratona erupted into fires of alarm, all about her the sleeping perches were aflame with angry comrades.

There was a moment of black silence. The drum struck again. Flares exploded, fierce electric currents shivered into Ratona's sleeping platform. In flashes of light she saw the other ledges running up and down the tower. On each a Guard lay tensed as she, crouched for flight, wings half unfurled; every one a dark menace of power and fury. Horror filled their eyes, fire smoked from their nostrils.

The drum quickened, beating like a pulse. Then, in the distance, horns sounded from the watchers on the Walls. Deep, terrible, blaring – a collective cry of grief. This alarm was never meant to sound.

Faster still went the deep bass rhythm. Arcs of lightning crackled through the tower and off her skin, an eerie blue light snapped to the beat of the drums. The electric shocks sharpened, sending sparks skittering along the perches, adorning the gobbets of fire and smoke that dripped from the jaws of Ratona's comrades.

Ratona fixed her eyes on Raoul, her flight commander. He ignored the sparks and fire flying around him. In the maelstrom he was still. Even his tail was motionless. His hide mottled in the black-grey of combat. His eyes fed on the launch pad lights while his mind pulsated commands to his squadron.

Large circular doors rotated in front of each perch, their gears grinding. Misty grey holes opened before the Guards, revealing dark views of the landscape beyond, hazy in the half-light.

Ratona strained her eyes to the horizon. Far in the gloaming, warning beacons twinkled with red flame. There was a breach in the Walls, an abomination unfolding on their borders.

Ratona's training took control of her body. Her breath slowed, back legs braced, tail coiled to spring. Her wings tensed and arched. The central column and sleeping perches shook with the final countdown. And then the launch lights blazed around the evacuation doors. Instantly the air filled with glistening black scales and thrusting wings. Tongues of fire slathered from gritted jaws.

Leaping forward, Ratona pressed her legs to her body, flattened her wings along her back and arched into a dive. Her sleek form streaked through the air, trailing sparks. She plummeted downwards. The ground reared to embrace her. This was against all flight protocols.

But Ratona plunged onwards. A Wall-Breach required sacrifice. It demanded skill only she possessed. With inches to spare, she flattened out of the dive, an arrow of fire, scorching the earth with the violence of her passing.

Already her bulkier comrades were falling back. They could not slip through the air like she. Ratona knew Raoul and the heaviest Guards were spiralling upwards, beating at the sky, gaining height for one continuous dive to the Walls. She sensed them willing her onwards.

Beneath the Guard towers a fissured land belched flames. Cracked trenches boiled with lava. Ratona flashed through the scorched air. This was their most precious place. In the streams of molten rock their youngsters grew wings. Nothing must reach this spot.

She sped on through the mists, angling her wing tips to follow the terrain. Currents of cool air pushed behind her as she twisted down valleys. Then she gained altitude behind mountains, where back-winds drove her upwards. She burst over cols so close to the ground that her heat melted their frost.

The hostile land fought against her. Gusts of wind tried to smash her into cliffs. The taller trees reared to snag her hide. And cave-bear packs hurled boulders at her as she sped below them down narrow gorges. But Ratona never thought of slowing down or flying higher.

Steep valleys fell beneath her, cascading down in cliffs and crags. The Walls were close now, beacons blazing on their rim. What could have breached them? She closed on the nearest beacon, a ring of red flame, and scanned the paths for movement. Nothing. Ratona flew closer, losing speed and turning her senses to infra-red, looking for heat signals in the frosty landscape beneath her. All was still.

Twisting downwards, Ratona braked hard and landed on the rim of the Walls, looking back into her lands for the intruder. She held her breath again and listened. In the distance she could hear the other Guards streaming towards her. She focussed on their shared thought-waves, adding her own to the stream. But she heard nothing amiss.

She paced along the highest tier of the Walls. Close up she could see the beacon ring awash with flame, summoning help. But there was nothing to fight. Nothing had invaded their lands.

Except – Ratona turned her head. Except for the soft, padding footfall in the distance. But that noise came from behind her, beyond and outside the Walls. That was ridiculous. The Walls kept intruders out. The alarm meant a Breach, that something was invading their lands, coming in from the outside. Nothing would cross the Walls to go the other way, leaving their secure embrace. It was forbidden. Beyond the Walls there was nothing except the Shifting Zones.

But the quickening patter of feet certainly came from the outside. The noise was running from her. Something had crossed the Walls, but had crossed to leave, not invade. Something was going towards the Shifting Zones.

Ratona did not hesitate. Her orders were to find what had breached the Walls. Eliminate any threat. The threat was beyond the Walls, in the forbidden lands. She must go there. Ratona launched herself after the retreating sound. And as she crossed she triggered the unmentionable alarm for only the second time in her land's history.

Ratona dived again, heading to the small circle of light where the curtain of the Shifting Zones danced and played. She scanned the paths, but the craggy land, blasted by continuous target practice from the Wall gunners, hid the fugitive well. She closed her eyes, homing in on the pattering feet by sound alone. The fugitive was small and limping. But it was also a steady footfall. There was no panic.

She scouted the paths that lead to the platform of rock on which the Zones perched. She circled them, hovering over their peaceful pool of light. Still nothing.

What could make noise, but be invisible? A shiver of suspicion trembled through her wings. Ratona switched to infra-red and yes – there was a blur of movement in front of the Shifting Zones. But that was impossible! Ratona threw out her wings to brake and tumbled out of the sky, landing on the forecourt of the Zones. Before her, their sheen rippled like moonlight on oily water. They quivered, shaken by her landing. The fugitive posed before Ratona and turned its head. It seemed to smile at her.

The sight set Ratona's scales prickling in disbelief. The terrible fugitive which had triggered the alarm was a small, drab foelorn. Only these quiet cats could blend so invisibly into the landscape. But they should be no threat to the nesting grounds, any more than the rodents and deer they hunted, or the honey they stole from wild bees.

But a foelorn now surely approached the Shifting Zones. It was harmless no longer. Entering the Zones risked opening them. And that risked an encounter with the terrible foe the Walls guarded against. That was too horrible to imagine.

And yet the foelorn's intentions were horribly clear. With practised ease it turned its back on Ratona and limped forward to the Shifting Zones' forbidden boundary. It twisted on its feet and, somehow, the Zones parted. Ratona froze, horrified. The bright wall of slippery light dropped aside, welcoming its diminutive new arrival.

With sick dread, Ratona looked through the gap the Zones left in the air. All her fears erupted. She could feel the tug of minds, the minds of her mortal enemies. They were present on the other side. And, worse still, she caught

the briefest glimpse of them. A small hunting party on a high mountain, and one of them, one Human, turning towards her.

The disaster seemed to happen slowly. The opened Zones pulled at the cat, dragging it to them, beyond catching, beyond redemption. Ratona leapt in one last attempt to stop it, and –

She snapped out of her memory archive and lay panting on the floor of her prison cell. That was when she made the mistake. She had roared fire in her anguish. But as she aimed, the foelorn had shimmered before her. It had shone for a moment in bright, iridescent colours before blinking out of sight.

Ratona's blast, that she now regretted so bitterly, had missed the beast. And it had smashed on towards her defenceless enemy.

Chapter 4

Amandla

Ben spent the next few weeks glued to Meera's Instagram feed. Her field sites were in the high Himalaya. She had needed so much equipment that the professors drove there. Every day of their journey was filled with a new adventure.

Ben would read a post, savour the picture and close his eyes, imagining being there, breathing in fresh mountain air. He wandered to school dreaming of adopting a grimcat cub and raising it, training it to hunt in the wilds of the Karakoram mountains. Every day he messaged his aunts, sending support and countless questions.

But then disaster struck. One terrible evening there was a simple post that led to a newspaper article in *The Times of India*. It reported that the grimcat video was faked. Jacki and Meera had double-checked with their informants and found too many gaps. It could not be true.

Ben almost wept when he told his parents. "I wanted that cat to exist," he insisted. "I wanted us to live where it was found and help conserve it. That would have been amazing."

"Darling, we're trying to move," said Mary, hugging her son. "I applied for two jobs in East Africa this week. Your aunts have promised they'll explain when they get back. Let them deal with it in their way."

The day his aunts returned, Ben went straight to see them. He cycled through drizzle and dirty puddles and the dull roar of traffic. The dreary winter gloom matched his mood.

A fitful wind clawed at the trees, tugging at discarded papers that littered their branches. Ben cautiously approached his aunts' front door. It did not feel right. Their garden was normally well tended. Now rubbish blew across it. The place was desolate. He looked behind him for their car. Were they home?

And so, with his face averted, Ben did not see Jacki burst through the door to embrace her adopted nephew.

"Makabongwe uThixo!" she praised the heavens. She hugged Ben, jumping up and down, her vivid orange and yellow hair extensions bright in the evening light.

"Oh, we've missed you so much! Yes! We have so much to tell you. You are just the person we wanted to see!" And she punched the air in joy again, shouting to Meera. "I have wonderful news. The most important person in the world has arrived! It is our son." She swept him inside.

Jacki and Meera lived in a strange home. The living room, where Jacki herded Ben, was warmed by an ancient three-bar electric fire glowing brightly in a tiled fire place. Scattered over an aged carpet was a mongrel assortment of tired armchairs, a sofa and a rather beaten table. The whole place glowed with a red light from tired lamps. And it was filled with a musty, pungent aroma. Ben looked for incense sticks. There were none.

Jacki, shivering from her brief trip outside, settled into a reclining chair close to the fireplace. Her hand played in the air as if she were conducting an orchestra. She muttered soothingly in isiXhosa, with faint clicks and rich assonances.

Meera was curled up in the corner of the sofa with a book. She beamed a welcome at Ben and caught his mood in a moment.

"Ben, why are you looking so miserable? Sit down and tell us."

Ben sank into the deep recesses of the sofa. This place was his sanctuary. His aunts understood him.

"It's the grimcats," he said. "I so wanted them to exist. I can't believe they don't."

"But Ben, the grimcat stories were too incredible," Meera said.

"But grimcats could have given us a reason to move," Ben sighed. "Losing them is like a prison sentence." He rose and walked listlessly to the window, staring out, seeing nothing. Meera and Jacki waited. "It's not just the grimcats," he said at last. "It's everything else as well. This world is burning. By the time I'm old enough to do anything, it'll be too late."

Ben's breath fumed on the window, frosting the glass in condensed misery. Before him a flat suburban landscape slumbered. It was raining and the view dimmed into a fug of thick, low clouds. Nothing ever happened here. And everyday it seemed that this grey tedium infected more of the world. Forests were disappearing, starlight dimmed and the atmosphere choked. Grimcats had been a light in that darkness. Now they were extinguished.

"Oh, Ben, come back here." Meera pleaded. She glanced at Jacki. "Maybe there is hope."

"Yes." Jacki announced. "This boy is making our room unhappy. I am going to change that. Right now."

Her hand stopped playing in the air. She looked down by her side and murmured again in isiXhosa.

And then the atmosphere changed. It became heavy, turbulent. The fire seemed to shimmer. There was a strange scraping sound, of something heavy pushing past old ornate wallpaper.

Ben's skin prickled as if he were being watched. The pungent aroma grew stronger. Heat swirled in the room. Jacki glanced warily around. Suddenly she stared almost straight at him.

"Yima! Uhlale phantsi!" This confused Ben. He knew that instruction from years of Jacki's company. But he was already sitting down. What could she mean?

He looked to Meera for reassurance, but she was fading out of view before his eyes. He reached out to her, and his hands bounced off some unseen

obstacle. And then Meera, or the space by Meera, made the strangest sound. It growled.

Instantly Jacki gave a new command: "Zi bonise!"

Terribly, but unmistakably, the air that swirled by Meera solidified. She was hidden by an iridescent, predatory body. The beast's coat shone in bright reds and oranges, flickering in constant motion. Wild eyes stared straight into his.

Ben could not move. His mouth dropped open. His body tingled and shivered. He looked to his aunts. Their faces were filled with the most mischievous grins. Meera just nodded at him and Ben yelled with delight. He jumped from his chair, punching the air with both fists. Then he tried to seize the grimcat in a delirious hug. But the startled animal leapt away into the middle of the room, and vanished before it hit the ground.

Laughing, Jacki rose to her full height. "Amandla! Zi bonise!" She commanded the grimcat to appear. With a long hiss it slipped into sight, its coat glowing as if afire. It stared quizzically at Ben, tail twitching and muscles flexing.

Jacki faced the animal, her rich voice now soothing. "Yiza." She patted her shoulders. "Yiza apha nam." The cat trotted slowly towards her and sprang up to balance on the scuffed shoulder pads of her coat.

"My son," Jacki said, "I would like you to meet Amandla. Please do not scare her again. She can be deadly. But I think you could be good friends."

Amandla stared down at Ben. Her pelt fused with the vivid extensions in Jacki's hair. And then the grimcat settled onto his aunt's shoulders and faded away. There was nothing there but Jacki's triumphant smile, and the prim, amused Meera sipping her tea.

* * *

"I think she likes me," said Ben, as he calmed down. "She genuinely likes my company."

Amandla was slumped on Ben's lap, her heavy body squashing him into the sofa. She was licking the last of the toffee residue from his hands, her rough tongue scraping his skin. She purred contentedly.

"I had no idea a cat could like sugar so much," he observed.

"Yes," Meera agreed, "but I think we'd better stop the toffees. She can get a bit hyperactive after too many sweets."

"But Amandla does love our son!" Jacki exclaimed. "Yes. She is a good cat. She likes him more than us."

"And that could be rather useful," Meera said. "Amandla is calm with Ben. We could use that if ever people get alarmed around her."

A rush of excited happiness tingled through Ben's toes and fingers. His dream was still alive.

"So, tell me," he said, as he stroked bright patterns in Amandla's flickering fur, "how did you find her?"

"We've looked for ages," Meera replied. "As a child I listened to the tales my grandparents told about an invisible cat that lived in high mountains, which you could only see from its shadow. When Jacki told me her stories, from thousands of miles away in South Africa, we knew something real was behind them."

"Other scientists dismissed them," Jacki added. "Fools! They kept saying that if it cannot be seen, then it cannot be there. But they were not looking at the pattern. There was too much agreement between different accounts. Yes. We knew that if it could not be seen, then it must be real."

"How did you find something you can't see?" Ben asked.

"Well, the official story is that we got funding for heat sensors," Meera explained. "Grimcats are visible in infra-red light."

"Official story?" queried Ben. "What's the unofficial one?"

"That's the most amazing part!" said Jacki "We did not really discover the grimcats. No. They chose to appear before our sensors. They led us to the remote pastures where they lived. And – imagine this – Amandla adopted us!"

“But why?” asked Ben. “Why did they want you to find them?”

“I have a theory about that,” Meera replied. “But it’s only a theory. I need a council of war with the whole family to work it out. I have a proposition for you all. A proposition I think you’ll like.”

The First Interlude

Humans. So many words. Boring. Ignore them.

The boy is strange. Bony. Brings in the cold. Annoying. Smelt sad. Smelt gloomy. Very annoying.

The tall one. She likes him. And the short one. Odd.

I focus. The bony one sees me. So surprised. As always. Boring. Skin goes white. Eyes too wide. Too excited. Too noisy. Annoying. Ignore him. I fade.

Now he is calm. Peaceful. Like pillow. Many sugar drops. Useful.

Chapter 5

The Guards

"I can't tell you everything all the time!" Dawi protested.

Samti refused to accept that. "You always have before. Why not now? Why the secrecy?"

"Let me work it out myself first, Samti."

"Let me help you. I know about the strange weather you saw up there, those boiling clouds. I've seen that too once. It's like something alive wriggles in them."

"I know, alive and explosive." Dawi retorted. "I saw the source of the flames. I'll talk about it when I'm ready. You're as bad as my mother."

Sulking, Samti joined the search party Babu ordered to scour the mountains. But she returned none the wiser. The party recovered the abandoned weapons and shoes. The only thing lost was the honey: Babu's buckets were wiped, or perhaps licked, clean.

To Samti's frustration, both Dawi and the forest tried to pretend that nothing had happened. He only seemed even more eager to return to it. The pigs and porcupines continued to raid the fields close to the boundaries. And, after a while, the villagers also returned to their usual routines.

There were some oddities. Some hunters complained their traps were raided. And something was taking livestock from even the best protected kraals. Otherwise, life was normal.

Mama Leo, angry at her son's injuries, remained wary. She refused to let Ambrosi into the maize fields to collect wild spinach. This was a mixed blessing. It added to Samti's chores. But Ambrosi could not yet distinguish manákw or sugdáy from inedible weeds, and so his spinach could taste awful.

Mama Leo also decreed that Samti must accompany Ambrosi to school. This was a calamity for him. He trailed sullenly behind his older cousin. Samti had to coax him out of his moods by practising Swahili with him, preparing him for impatient teachers who would refuse to listen to his mother tongue.

But Samti knew Mama Leo would not remain anxious. Dawi recovered, and Ambrosi proved too much of a distraction.

"Today mama I've been a helpful boy," he gravely informed her in his best Swahili, as he marched into the kitchen hut. "Chicken and I have killed the grandmother."

Mama Leo looked up from stripping pumpkin leaves. "I hope you held her down well," she said. "If you let them wriggle the blood goes everywhere."

"Oh yes, I didn't," replied Ambrosi with certainty. "I killed her carefully. With a house," he clarified.

Samti choked over the ugali pot. She risked a glance at her grandmother. Bibi Anna gazed at Ambrosi with loving pride. She had never gone to school and spoke little Swahili. So she found great joy in her grandchildren's achievements.

"You're a good boy," said Mama Leo. "Now you take the goats to water, it will be their turn soon." He skipped away.

"And you!" she rounded on Samti, who was giggling into her hands. "Don't you laugh at him, you toe-rag you. You used to mix up 'cook' and 'kiss'."

"What's wrong with that?" Samti asked.

“Wrong? Listen to yourself, child. You tried to tell everyone that my husband loved my ‘cooking’. That was bad. But then you said the priest loved my ‘cooking’ more. I had to miss Mass for a month because of you. That’s way worse than Ambrosi claiming he’s beaten his grandmother to death with a small building.”

Samti snorted again, and Mama Leo could not stop herself from laughing. “Oh, be away with you! Instead of laughing at my son, do something useful and put our buckets in the water queue. You must wash the children’s clothes today.”

* * *

Dawi’s mood still worried Samti. He clearly wanted to be in the forest, but would not say why. Her aunt blocked his return, insisting it was not safe. Samti knew that a show-down was coming.

The moment arrived when Samti was plaiting Mama Leo’s hair beneath the shade trees. Dawi probably thought it was safer when their aunt was sitting down. Samti watched him saunter up casually, but with a vein trembling in his neck.

“I’m going to the village soon,” he began, leaning against a tree. “I need a haircut. But I’ll be away afterwards.”

Her aunt eyed him. “You don’t need a haircut,” she retorted. “You want to go to Marko’s salon and ogle American rap videos. They should ban that rubbish.”

“They’re not American, the best rappers these days are from Nairobi. But I must talk with Marko. He needs help. He and Emily want to get married soon and they’ll need duku. I know where it grows.”

Samti glanced at the duku timbers sagging persistently in the house walls. Iron-hard and termite-resistant, duku symbolised longevity in a newly-wed couple’s home.

"You can't go," Mama Leo frowned, folding her arms across her chest. "The forest guards hate people taking duku."

"I know who their informers are," Dawi scoffed. "Anyway, I don't cut down duku. I only bring out fallen trees."

"They won't see it like that," Mama Leo retorted.

"Come on, Mama. I'll be safe. I'm almost as fast as Samti."

Samti raised her eyebrows. 'Almost as fast' was pushing it.

"Besides," her cousin continued, "you know Marko cannot get married without duku." Dawi crouched down, wrapping himself in his mgorori. "Look, Marko would prefer a brick house. He can afford it. But Emily's parents are traditionalists. He has to respect them."

Samti looked up to the dark tongues of forest snaking down the mountain spurs towards them. Dawi was clever. Mama Leo could not oppose these traditions.

Her aunt turned a stern face on her son. "Do not get caught. Go before market day. The guards are distracted then. And don't you be getting cocky. I've heard that guard Claudi is back. He's dangerous, that one. He was born here and knows us too well."

Dawi nodded, but his mother was not finished.

"And I want you to watch out in that forest," she warned. She hugged herself, as if warding off evil. "Since that explosion, it's got a different mood. It feels edgy. I think something's in there. Watch for it."

* * *

Samti scooped a bucket of beans from the sack and poured them slowly out onto a large circular mat. The beans slipped over each other in a dappled pile. The chaff floated away in the wind.

She scooped up a second bucketful. The beans rattled into a rising mound. Samti wished they could spare more. Still, these would sell well. And she had

prepared a delicious tray of kashata from peanuts and sugar to sell near the coffee stands. Today was market day, a good day.

As she winnowed the last of the beans, two large ox wagons creaked into view on the dusty track that ran past their home. Each was drawn by a four-span of straining beasts and laden with newly cut planks of red wood. The oxen were salivating with tiredness, eyes white, pressing backwards, fearing the whip.

Samti glared at them. Only timber bigshots and rich money lenders could afford to bribe the guards. There were millions of shillings of wood on those wagons. Her family never saw that kind of money. The bigshots got richer, she stayed poorer, and their forest thinned. The wet, sweet smell of fresh planks lingered in the air, taunting her.

Samti tried to swallow her resentment. One day she would be an mkubwa. She would be a judge or a police commander perhaps – and no one would bribe her. She would put them all in jail. But first she would enjoy market day. She poured the cleaned beans into a fresh sack and wrapped a kanga over her shabby clothes. Its colourful patterns rippled in the breeze and glowed in the early morning sun. Her skin gleamed, lightly oiled for the journey. She set the beans on her head. It was still a good day.

Samti loved the market. It was a huge affair. Lorries delivered travelling sales-people and their wares, with everything you could want: clothes, iron goods, electronics, perfumes, hair ointments and livestock. There was an incredible abundance of things.

The sound of it reached her long before she arrived: the distant roar of a multitude. The paths thickened with people in their smartest clothes and kangas. Soon she was winding between shifting herds of docile oxen and noisy goats. She passed herders from distant cattle camps, squatting on their herd-sticks, their faces scarred, and their clothes thick with the smell of milk and wood fires. Around them, the butchers' cattle wagons waited.

Below the livestock, the rest of the market spread out higgledy-piggledy. Samti filed along the crowded paths between the stalls. The booksellers and stationers congregated on her left, small stands selling radios, phones and solar chargers appeared on her right. Blankets, cloth and school uniforms were spread out further down the hill, near the heavy clay pots and kitchen

goods. Carefully secluded for the bees they attracted, the honey sellers had congregated a respectful distance away. The place was alive with music, calls of hawkers, shouted greetings and laughter. Traders scolded small children trying to steal sweets.

Samti gave her sack of winnowed beans to a friend to sell and crossed to the coffee sellers with their kettles on trays of charcoal. The coffee was thick, rich and bitter. Just the thing to sweeten with kashata.

She settled down on an upturned bucket. Her kashata were tasty, and she had a steady stream of customers. But, she sensed, they were also anxious. There was a ripple of uncertainty in the crowd, necks craning to watch something. A squadron of forest guards was on patrol.

There were four guards in gleaming boots, pressed uniforms and berets poised above hard faces. One bore a rifle. They were inspecting produce, poking at piles of clothes with their sjamboks, and asking questions, and, strangely, heading for the coffee-sellers. In barely a minute a wall of uniformed hostility confronted Samti.

Their leader gazed down, eyes raking over her.

"You. Take this." He thrust a crumpled paper into her hand.

Samti shrank back. "What – what is it?"

"It's a note," the man smirked, "from someone we've just arrested inside the reserve."

With trembling fingers, Samti smoothed the paper on her lap. The handwriting was Dawi's. A soil of bloody fingerprints smudged the page.

"This criminal resisted arrest and insulted my soldiers. Now he is in pain," the officer announced. "His fine is three hundred thousand shillings, or he gets three years in jail."

The guard stepped back, surveying her. His boots shone in the sun.

"Did you hear me?" His sarcastic aggression chilled Samti. It would be dangerous to say anything. It was dangerous to keep quiet.

"I SAID DID YOU HEAR ME?" he shouted and struck her tray to the floor. Samti blinked back tears and nodded. The officer came close, grinding kashata into the ground.

"Then do not be late with your payment," he whispered. Abruptly he stepped back, and the patrol left, parting the crowd before them.

A flood of panic filled Samti. Her nose ran. She could not keep back her tears and she covered her face with her kanga. Barely controlling her sobs, she hurried to find Mama Leo.

Chapter 6

The Trial

The amphitheatre of the pyre-angel's parliament cut deep into living rock. Millennia of fiery disputes had blackened its perches. At its heart, rising high into the sky, was the blasting pillar, the focus of the most violent disagreement.

Now this theatre was full of angry, surprised noise. The Walls had been breached twice. Pyre-angels packed the chamber to hear this disaster explained. The terraces seethed with twisting tails and balancing wings. Excited blasts of flame sprang from unguarded gullets. The ledges dripped fire. The air filled with the stench of acrid smoke.

Three elders sat on the inquisitors' bench, their black and green judgement poles arranged before them. Ratona knew two of them: Ulma, a former general of the Guards, and Arlette, the lead-judge, feared for her harshness. The third was veiled by folded wings.

Ratona paced the floor before them. She was the Wall-Breacher. She must explain herself. Ranks of grim faces faded high into the smoky gloom above her.

A wrinkled old clerk with shabby wings prowled across the floor to the base of the blasting pillar. She sent out a bubble of blue flame and held up her wings for silence. The hubbub stilled.

Then the hidden judge folded his wings and rose to interrogate her. Her inquisitor was Aaron, infamous for his arrogance. Ratona's knot of worry tightened.

"Wall-Breacher," Aaron began, without looking at her, "we shall establish the facts first. Nothing can cross the Walls. Any pyre-angel who does so is banished to die in the cold lands. Did you know that?"

"Yes, Sir."

Aaron glanced at her. "Are you sure, Wall-Breacher? You paid no attention to that law. Why did you think you could cross the Walls?"

Ratona recounted the story of her pursuit. She described the alarm, her flight, and landing on the deserted Walls, and her discovery that the fugitive had broken out, not in.

"And who or what was this fugitive?"

"Sir, it was a foelorn."

A murmur of astonishment swirled through the onlookers. Some flared green in surprise.

"Are you certain, Wall-Breacher?"

"Yes sir, they have a distinctive shape, and they can disappear almost perfectly. I could only track this one using infra-red."

"Where did this beast go?"

Ratona's fire subsided within her. A drab brown smoke seeped from her mouth.

"Sir, the fugitive went to the Shifting Zones."

There were murmurings of unease. Small streams of flame ran between the terraces. Acidic phlegm dripped to the floor. Aaron held up his wings for silence.

"Did it reach that cursed place? Were you able to stop it in time?"

"No, Sir. I could not, it was too far ahead."

"But why was it going there?" Aaron stopped moving. All eyes fixed on Ratona.

"It was going to the Shifting Zones in order to open them."

There was complete silence in the chamber. Going to the Shifting Zones was one thing, but opening them was beyond madness.

"But this is absurd, Wall-Breacher." Sparks of unease skittered down Aaron's back. "We erased the procedures for opening the Shifting Zones hundreds of years ago. How can a foelorn open them?"

"Sir, I do not understand it. But I know it went to the Zones to open them because ... because that is what it did."

Ratona's last words were whispered, but still they echoed around the chamber.

The shock of Ratona's testimony silenced Aaron. After a long pause he drew close, looking her full in the face.

"Nothing has opened the Zones for millennia," he growled. "What happened? What did you see?"

"Sir, the Shifting Zones are a curtain of light, that sit on a platform of –"

"We know this, Wall-Breacher! Tell us what you saw."

"Sir, I circled the rock platform. When I saw the animal I landed to engage it. I was as close to the Shifting Zones as possible. I saw the animal open them, and ..."

"And what, Wall-Breacher?"

"It went through them, Sir."

Aaron and the other judges rose, wings outstretched, commanding calm. The air crackled with anger and filled with smoke as the onlookers fought to prevent the flames of their anguish erupting into the room.

"Sir, I tried to stop it, I tried to blast the beast, but it was too quick for me."

Aaron was stunned. His next question came as if he dreaded to ask it.

"So, you did not hit the foelorn. Then where did your blast go? Did it ... did it cross the Zones?"

"Yes, Sir."

Again the Elders commanded silence. Heavy smoke boiled from the terraces.

"And? What did the blast hit? Could it have struck *them*?"

A nauseous bile rose in Ratona's gullet. She remembered again the hunting party, the face turned towards her.

"Sir, they were there. I saw them. I felt the tug of their minds, Sir. It was as if we might talk to them. But Sir ..." Ratona stopped talking. She hung her head, a thin trail of dismal smoke sank from her nostrils. "I think my blast did hit a Human."

Torrents of flame erupted from astonished, gaping jaws amid cries of horror. Angry sheets of fire roared around the blasting pillar until it seemed ablaze itself. All the way up the chamber, bright jets poured out in vented rage. Fire spilled down in a heavy rain around the pillar's base. An inferno of grief engulfed the hall.

Amid the noise and fire, Ratona tried to redeem herself.

"Sir, I hit only one Human, and not badly, I could feel surprise in his mind more than hurt. They were far away. I only sent a small jet to wound the foelorn. Sir, I apologised to him!"

But the fires of rage and disgust rained on.

Aaron sagged in front of her, his face hidden, visibly wounded by her news. Slowly the other elders recovered, wings aloft. All around the chamber the air rumbled and shook as pyre-angels continued to attack the blasting pillar in disgust.

Ulma rose to take on the questioning. "Humans betrayed us, Wall-Breacher," he spat. "They drove us here. We fled Earth for our survival."

"I know that, Sir."

"You say that you know, Wall-Breacher," Ulma raged, "but nothing you have done demonstrates that! Did your memory training fail you?" He raised his voice to the throng around them. "Let us remind the Wall-Breacher of the history we cannot forget."

He began to beat the air with his wings, a slow rhythmic clap. The assembled pyre-angels joined him, fire-blasts flashing in time with their beat.

"We made metals for them," Ulma bellowed.

"THEY BETRAYED US!" the gathering shouted back.

"We made them glass."

"THEY BETRAYED US!"

"They flooded our nests with water and ice."

"WE HIDE FROM THEM FOR EVERMORE."

"We survive."

"SURVIVAL IS VICTORY. WAR IS RUIN. PROTECT OUR YOUNG."

Loud explosions filled the air again as the chant ceased. Ulma turned back to Ratona.

"Wall-Breacher, this is our history. We fear Humans above all else. A calamity happened not because you fired at a fugitive foelorn, but because you, a member of the elite Guard, you missed."

"Yes, Sir, the foelorn changed. It was no longer grey and drab, it was bright reds and oranges. And then it disapp - "

"SILENCE!" Ulma roared. "We have heard enough! We will decide this case immediately."

He turned his back on her and addressed the judges.

"Our prisoner is accused of the worst crime in our lands. By crossing the Walls and firing across the Zones, she has threatened our very existence. This crime carries the worst punishment – banishment to the cold lands and certain death. We must make our judgement now."

He glared at Ratona. "For the crime of crossing the Walls," he declared, "I find the prisoner guilty." He strode over to the table, seized his black judgement rod and flung it to the ground before the blasting pillar.

Ulma looked to Arlette, the supreme judge. She rose to her feet, elegant and tall, wielding her black rod. She threw it towards the pillar. "I too find her guilty."

Ratona gasped in horror. A queasy yellow gel dripped from her lips and fumed on the floor.

All attention was on Aaron. He did not look at Ratona. But he also ignored his fellow elders. Finally he unfolded his wings, looking around the chamber, defying anyone to meet his gaze. His claws gripped a green rod.

Aaron paced to the pillar with deliberate slowness and flung the rod at its base. Then he raised his voice to the surrounding throng.

"I do not agree. The actions of the Wall-Breacher are serious. But the greater threat is in the strange action of that foelorn. It is the source of the problem. Until we can explain it, we are still in danger."

The chamber filled with shouts of dissent. Shots of anger struck the blasting pillar, sending balls of flame to the chamber floor. Ratona stood again in a thin rain of fire. Aaron raised his wings to quell the noise, ignoring the rage igniting the judges' bench.

But Arlette rose, roaring to address him, her anger exploding in fumes and fire around her head.

"We must punish this crime! We must have justice."

"Arlette," Aaron reasoned, "we do not understand what has happened. The foelorn's actions are almost impossible. We cannot just banish the Guard who discovered them."

"This is no time for such niceties!" Arlette spat in anger. "Humans must never know we are here. And yet this Guard has blasted a Person through the Zones."

Ulma intervened. "Perhaps," he suggested, "there is an answer that will satisfy Aaron's curiosity, and Arlette's desire, and mine, for justice." He rose

and paced again to the blasting pillar, smouldering at Ratona with every step. His skin leaked a hostile, orange flame.

"It is shameful for a member of the elite Guard, the elite I say, to miss with a fire-blast." He flared in disgust. "When I served with the Guards, they always punished such a failure. We must suspend the Wall-Breacher from her unit."

"And you call that a fair penalty?" Arlette was incredulous.

"The shame of this punishment is terrible," Ulma replied. "She will begin the suspension with two months in a public cell which her captain himself will guard. But, I have a further suggestion to make. The Wall-Breacher must also explain the foelorn's actions. And if she cannot, then we shall banish her."

Rumbles of agreement rang around the chamber. Jets of flame scorched the air in approval. Arlette calmed her rage. "We have agreed your punishment," she announced to Ratona. "For your failures as a Guard you are suspended. And you must explain the breach or face banishment."

She looked haughtily at her prisoner. "Sentence is passed. Go."

Ratona displayed no emotion. She permitted small jets of flame to flare from her nostrils acknowledging Arlette's words, and followed her guards from the chamber.