

## Chapter 1

On a wrongness scale from Bad to Certain Doom, this plan feels right up there. Six pregnant nanny gotals, three grimy villagers, setting off through one seriously disapproving white-out to our summer pasture.

I kind of feel if this was the right time to go up there, it'd be called 'not-even-spring-yet' pasture.

Obviously Father doesn't see it that way.

So, here we are.

The comforting aroma of dung fires is smothered by the frigid fog as we zigzag up and away from the village. The clouds crouch heavy over our heads, like dragon plumes. With each step I feel us climbing higher into these mountains.

And it feels wrong.

Sure, it's not like I believe in Ice-People. I don't believe they rule the lands beyond this ridge throughout our long winter. I don't believe that if we take the pass before the sun rises directly behind Dragon Mountain, we trespass on their lands. That's nonsense told to kids to make them eat their yams.

No. I know exactly why we shouldn't be taking this trek.

Because it's as cold as a winter's bath in a glacial lake. That's why. Because it's ridiculous. Sometimes I suspect Father thinks *I'm* ridiculous. But, you know, this was all *his* idea.

Ice-People don't exist, not their white eyes nor their glowing cities. But snowstorms do. And avalanches. And hungry snow leopards preparing to cub.

And the Sepels exist, too. Their First Daughter will marry my Second Nephew in three days' time, and there is no way Father wants his six prized nanny gotals turning into dowry.

I'd been looking forward to celebrating the wedding with the rest of the village. Instead here I am, one of three entrusted with keeping Father's precious nannies safe for the next month, and I don't know whether to be honoured or annoyed.

I'm leaning towards annoyed.

Ahead of me, one of the gotals slips on an icy slab, only narrowly regaining her footing. She glares at me and bleats her indignant gotal bleat.

'It's not my fault, ZuZu.' I rub her swollen belly and she nods, like we've agreed something. She's my favourite, spirited and cheeky. So shaggy, filthy and matted (kind of like me), you'd never guess her coat is the colour of silverthorn honey, nor how soft her fleece is underneath.

The unseen mountains mutter as wind stabs shards of snow into my face. I lift my head and grin into the sting.

First Uncle stalks ahead, hands plunged deep in his fur-lined pockets. Third Nephew springs from rock to rock behind him. Not that he feels like my nephew. Danam is thirteen, seven months older than me, and the two of us grew up together. I feel more like his sister, his friend, his rival.

I'm here because Father told me I had to be. Danam's here because he immediately volunteered to come too. And that instantly made it more of an adventure than a chore for me.

First Uncle stops, his brow creasing as he tries to see through the strengthening sleet. The wool covering his mouth and nose is already growing icicles, and he has the hunched look of someone wishing they were safe and warm beside the fire at home. We're already higher than any lost hermit or silly gotal has been since winter took charge, four moons ago. The pass hides above. I feel it humming with the rising wind.

If this was a normal trek to the summer pasture, the sky would be a cloudless blue, and the slopes around us would be studded with tiny grasses amongst tumbles of sun-warmed granite. I'd probably be wearing a simple shift dress instead of every warm thing I own. And I would've had at least one bath in the last moon.

As it is ...

First Uncle turns around. 'Last Niece! Here!' He shoves Danam back down the slope towards me, tip-tapping his fingers against his herding stick as Danam barely negotiates icy

snow and six wily gotals to make it to where I guard the rear.

‘Why is he swapping us?’ I mutter.

Danam’s shrug is defeated by a shiver as he kicks at a snow clump with his boot. ‘Just go, Sunaya. The sooner we get out of this weather, the better.’

He looks as cold as a wet worm in ice. If I didn’t have First Uncle boring a hole in my head with his glare, I’d offer Danam my coat. Instead I weave my way through the gotals, up the churned snow, towards where Uncle shivers at the front. First Uncle has taken us too far to the right, where the snow is deep and the wrong step could be your last.

Our route clings to the side of the slope, and passing the wide bellies of the nannies pushes me further out than I want to be. But the nannies are smart, and stick to the mountain side as I approach them.

Uncle grunts as I arrive. ‘Pick a path.’

I bow my head to hide my surprise. ‘Yes, First Uncle.’ I stare at the soggy leather protecting the base of my trousers, wondering whether Uncle’s icy pride got left behind in the rush to leave.

A stinging blow to my left ear makes me gasp. Herding sticks hurt.

‘Pick a path, Last Niece!’

I hunch away as far as I dare, mutter an apology and desperately search the surroundings. A huge boulder looms

ahead, icicles hanging down from its edge. No hint of a path. Anywhere. Climb up the boulder, or go under?

Whatever the decision, it’s got to be fast. Uncle’s herding stick is poised behind me.

Under looks safer. I almost choose it.

At the last moment my mind changes itself, my hands grip the burningly cold boulder, and I climb. A few metres of icy scramble and I’m on top, ear stinging even more in the wind, glad I wore pants today because climbing that in skirts would’ve been impossible.

I whistle softly. The route I’ve chosen feels strong and calm. Just as well, because Uncle is hauling himself up behind me. I dash forwards, giving him space. He glares. At me. At the path I’ve chosen. At the heavy clouds. At everything really. Then he yells back down for Danam to herd the nannies up.

If birds fly on the thermals, then gotals fly on rocks. They’re heavy with kid, as ungainly as I’ve ever seen gotals be, but they leap up that boulder like it’s a low fence between them and an entire field of juicy buckwheat. Uncle grunts, and then gestures me to keep leading. The closest I’ll get to approval.

I turn, best to hide my grin. There is what looks to be an easy route up a crease to our left, but I don’t like how it sings. I stick to the right. Not as direct, but it feels more secure.

The wind cuts through my many layers and the sleet settles into snow. I pull my scarf up over my nose. The temperature will

continue to plummet as we climb, but the summer pasture is much lower than this pass. Hopefully warmer, more protected.

Father must think it will be better. He wouldn't have sent his precious gotals here otherwise. But he can't know for sure. Because no one from our village has ever been to the summer pasture in the winter.

Because Ice-People, remember?

I work my way up the slope until the glow through the clouds indicates the sun has reached its zenith. Sweat soaks my underclothes and breath freezes in my scarf. The weather has calmed, but I feel less at ease. The temperature is still dropping. The mountains, freed from the concealing blizzard, teeter above us. To my left, the Dragon rears its wind-sculpted head, frowning disapproval on our unseasonal passage.

The gotals trot doggedly on with the kind of focus only gotals have. Uncle's head is bowed, shoulders hunched. He has been seething ever since Father told him he must attempt this trek. Father's the elder, so Uncle had to obey. Danam's trudging through the churned snow at the back, making sure the gotals keep trotting forward. He must be beyond cold, his sleeping rug wrapped around him. It drapes heavily, almost to the ground, making him look like a great aunty.

Uncle doesn't have enough energy to yell at us anymore. He seems too tired to even glare. But I never forget he has his herding stick.

Danam catches my eye, gestures at the pristine slopes around us and tips his head, like a question. Does he feel it too?

I'm not enjoying this anymore.

It's harder to choose the way now. Everywhere feels wrong. The slope seems to be trembling. The last thing I want to do is keep climbing. Okay, the second-last thing. The actual last thing I want to do is tell First Uncle I'm not going any further. So I keep going, choosing the least-awful option each time.

Above me the pass is white against white, snow billowing out like hair in the wind. It looks close. Once we get over it, things should start to improve. I take another step, then stop.

At my feet lies something impossibly blue on the pure snow. A stone, smooth turquoise, big enough to snuggle into my palm. How it ended up here, I don't know. I bend down to pick it up, hold it in hands so cold I swear it feels warm.

Greatest Aunt Mera believes the storm birds of Dragon Mountain collect blue things to line their nests. Father tells her she is full of nonsense and to get back to her weaving. I wonder how he would explain this stone being here, right in the midst of a storm.

I slide the turquoise into the pocket of my coat. Because of Mera. Because it feels lucky.

## Chapter 2

The pass is blanketed by snow, buffeted by wind. Lost are the slabs of golden rock I sunbake on in the summer. I'm glad for the clouds that hide the sun, everything is blinding enough already.

When I turn around, my world is arrayed below me. White bleeding to icy brown under the heavy snow-clouds. My eyes follow the weave of the stream down until it knits with the smear of our village. Very far away. Too far to make it back before nightfall.

I sigh and face forward again. A different world lies ahead. Pristine. Glistening. Patches of brilliant blue sky. Our summer pasture nestles below, dwarfed by the mountains that contain it. It looks nothing like it does in actual summer. I can discern the white lump that must mark the hut. The centre of the pasture is a dirtier white, hinting at some forage, but it doesn't look like the sort of place I'd choose to birth and nurture my offspring if I were a gotal.

Beyond the summer pasture is another pass, and then a vast alpine valley stretches on forever. The mythical lands of the Ice-People.

We never set foot there, even in summer.

The cloud breaks completely near the horizon, and the spreading valley glows. Mera loves to tell tales of a great city in the centre of a plateau, with a palace of greenstone and gold, where when the sun shines everything glows like a forest.

I haven't seen those forests. But even though I know the forests are real and the green city isn't, Mera's tales still sparkle for me. The only reason I'm so good at weaving is because I love to sit by her and listen. I sit and I weave and I dream. Now I wish I hadn't dreamed quite so vividly, because the moment I choose to step off this pass towards our summer pasture, I'll break an unwritten law. Mera used to talk about it often. Always in her 'spooky story' voice. I grimace. If I take one step forward, I cross our winter border. I invade the lands of the Ice-People.

Father derides those stories, berates Mera if he hears her telling them, but even he has never broken the winter border.

I shudder. My sweaty underclothes are freezing against my skin. I can't shake the feeling of being watched.

I'm letting fairytales spook me. There are no Ice-People. No winter borders. No summer borders. The Ice-People were probably invented to explain something that is simply

common sense: people don't come up here in winter because it is too cold and too dangerous. The end.

I hope Father is enjoying his seat by the fire.

A tug at my leg brings me back to the now. It's ZuZu, and she thinks my pants are her meal. I tickle her ears, catching a whiff of my own odour. Ugh. I can't understand how she thinks anything of mine would be good to eat.

Back in our perpetually muddy village, I don't have the opportunity to compare my filth with anything pure. Up here, everything is pure. Everything except us.

A hacking cough sounds from just below the pass. Uncle. I stiffen. He will be hungry. And I've let my mind drift. I drop my pack in the lee of a boulder, cold fingers fumbling to release the rope tie and fold out the rough sacking. Push past the pots. No chance of a fire in this wind, even if we could find fuel. I reach for the roasted barley, quickly mixing it with a little water from the flask I keep in my inner pocket to stop it freezing. Then I spoon it into balls. I could use my hands, but, well, I know what my hands look like.

Uncle has arrived. I hear him stomping around and complaining at the cold and the climb and my tardiness, swearing on the Dragon and his father's ashes that this is a fool's mission.

I bow my head and ball the mix faster. Pull out the vinegared cloth that holds my precious dried gotal strips. I

assemble a plateful of barley balls and four strips and take it to where Uncle fumes. I watch the snow beneath my boots as I approach him. It was pristine when I arrived, now it is churned and sullied.

He grimaces as he takes the plate. I bow, heart beating, turn to retreat. His stick whistles as he swings it. Ouch. I deserved that. Too tardy. I'll have a bruise on my leg, but not so bad. He is probably too hungry and cold to bother hitting any harder.

When I return to my pack, Danam's there. Reddened fingers hovering over the barley balls. 'Are some of these for me?'

I'm his aunt, he should be making *my* lunch. But he is also the elder, so I should be making *his*. I grin, because we've never quite worked out which of us is senior. 'Half each? Let's make more while we eat.'

Danam nods and stuffs two barley balls in his mouth at once. 'How's Grouchy?'

I whip a glance in Uncle's direction, but he's absorbed in perfecting a frown while eating. 'Shhhh.'

Danam rolls his eyes. 'He won't hear me, he's chewing those gotal strips too hard. Any of those for us?' As he speaks, he mixes more barley.

'Not if we want any peace for the next moon.' I hand him my spoon.

'I'm starving! Who cares about peace?'

I rub my still-smarting leg. 'I do.'

He shivers. 'It's as cold as a winter pantry up here. How is it you're not shivering?' He offers me a barley ball. Not as perfect as mine, but this is the highest pass in our village's domain, I'm hungry, and I'm not First Uncle. So I guess I'm saying I don't care. I take it gratefully, then use the spoon to roll one for him.

'You did well getting up here,' Danam says through a mouthful of barley.

I shrug. 'Anyone could have.'

'Himself couldn't.' Danam gestures to where Uncle sits. His lack of respect makes my guts panic. 'You've got a knack for finding the path. How do you do it?'

'I just feel my way. Don't you?'

He shrugs. 'I suppose.'

There's a tickling kind of sensation down my face and I swat at it. I'm expecting to see one of the gotals studying me, but none are. All I see are expansive, empty Skylands. The chill I feel has nothing to do with the weather.

It's like I'm being watched again.

When I next see Mera, I'm going to tell her to keep her stories to herself. How she'll laugh at me.

'Hurry up and finish your food,' Uncle growls. 'We need to keep going.'

I get up and refold my bag, tying it securely. Dragon Mountain is just visible beyond the smaller peak that rises above our pass, clouds pluming from its blackened nostrils. I

gasp as the side of it shimmers.

'What is it?' Danam asks.

I point. 'Avalanche. On Dragon Mountain.'

Danam laughs and play-punches my arm. 'You don't believe that superstitious dung, do you?'

I poke my tongue out at him, though it almost freezes in the chill air. I don't want him to see the avalanche has freaked me out. It's one of the baddest bad signs of bad bad luck we have. On top of all the premonitions tickling the back of my neck like hungry lice, it doesn't bode well. I'm jittery before I even step off the pass. Before I even cross the winter border.

I don't want to take that next step. Not onto the untouched snow of the other side. But Uncle will be annoyed if I delay. I make my boot rise. I force myself to go forward. Breathe stupidly fast. Ease my boot down on the snow. Shoulders hunched, ready for whatever I may unleash.

ZuZu bleats behind me and I jump high enough to touch the peaks. Danam smothers a cough. Except honestly? Probably not a cough.

I glare at him and his eyes dance. At least I don't have my sleeping rug draped all around me. I straighten my shoulders and stride off the pass.