

ANIMALS RISING

**Sample
Chapters**

*For Finn,
who loves all animals
and chooses not to harm them,
no matter their type or size*



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TREASURE **BAY**

When my winds blew the many sails of your ships across the sea, you were starving and feared all the animals of the world were gone. I promised to bring you to a new land filled with animals. The wild animals of this new land walk upon two legs and look like small people, but do not be deceived. These are animals. You will hear them bray and make noise with their mouths, but they are dumb and cannot speak.

I have not provided these animals to you to be beasts of burden or to do the work of idle people. I have provided these wild animals to nourish your bodies and strengthen your spirit. Fill your bellies and give thanks to the gods.

—THE WORDS OF THE GREAT GOD ZORUS, AS HEARD AND FAITHFULLY RECORDED BY
THE ORACLE OF THE PEOPLE

CHAPTER 1



Hawk waded silently down the center of the shallow stream, occasionally looking back over his shoulder. His back ached from a day of crawling in the dirt, but he had a bag bulging with mushrooms, and he was alive.

The dense tangle of thorn trees on both sides of the stream had branches stretching overhead with thick curtains of vines that hung down to the water. He waded through the vines on his left and stepped onto the firm ground of the bank. Shifting his bag so it hung in front of him, he wound his way carefully through narrow gaps in the undergrowth. How many times had he made his way through this maze? So many times he could probably navigate it with his eyes closed.

Sweat dripped into his eyes as he stepped out of the thicket of thorn trees and stood in a clearing. The ground sloped up from here into the small valley that held his village. Taking a deep breath, he wiped an arm across his forehead, his mouth watering in anticipation of the thick mushroom stew his mother would make tonight.

He walked into the village, quietly passing clusters of round huts. In front of the great hall, a few children played in the late afternoon sun. He used to play like this, without any cares or regrets, but that felt like lifetimes ago. Hawk stopped under a tree and watched, scooping up his hair so a welcome breeze cooled the back of his neck.

“Safe returns, Hawk.”

Hawk flinched and turned to face the village elder. Wasn't she sick? Why wasn't she still resting in her hut?

He bowed slightly. “Safe returns.”

The elder pointed at the sack under his arm. “Looks like a good day for mushrooms.”

“Yes.” He shifted his weight from foot to foot.

Her gaze raked over him. “You're filthy.”

What was she, his mother? Of course he was filthy! He'd spent all day grubbing on the ground for mushrooms. He made a small grunt in reply.

Her eyebrows drew together. “Any sign of the giant ones?”

“None that I saw, but I stayed fairly close to the village.” Fairly close was stretching the truth, but it was almost impossible to find good mushrooms in the forests close to the village. His bag was filled with ones he found in a dark valley most villagers avoided, since it was closer to the giants' town. His mother and sister loved it when he brought back a huge sack of mushrooms, making it worth the small risk. Besides, he knew how to stay hidden and silent. He'd never end up on some giant's plate.

Her eyes narrowed, as she leaned closer. “I'm glad you chose to stay safe rather than take foolish risks for a few more mushrooms.”

Hawk began to squirm under her piercing gaze.

She pointed with her staff to great hall behind her. Built of finely polished pine logs, the hall stood higher than two people. “It's been six months now. Isn't it time you started back to work?”

Under the eaves of the great hall, long panels were painted with images of ancient creatures roaming through the trees. A painting of a buck with thick, strong legs and green tree branches sprouting from its head was only half finished. Myths said thousands of animals once ran and flew around the forests. They'd died out long ago—if they had ever really lived at all.

Hawk sighed and looked at the ground. It was right here that the village artist had found him drawing pictures in the dirt with a stick. He was only ten at the time, but the artist took him as her apprentice. Seven years later, he was doing his own paintings on panels for the great hall. Hawk had once been proud to train as the next village artist, helping to preserve the memory of lost creatures.

His mind filled with memories of the day the artist died. One moment she was smiling and mixing paints with him. The next she was writhing on the ground in pain. And he had frozen. He couldn't even open his mouth to call for help. So he didn't deserve to paint. He deserved to grub for mushrooms and get filthy every day.

Hawk looked up and forced his lips to smile. "Maybe next week." Or maybe never.

He braced himself for more nagging, but the elder shifted to scan the forest behind him. "You didn't see Ash out there, did you?"

"No. Did he sneak out again?" Ash wasn't a child anymore, but he wasn't supposed to be outside the village by himself. As far as Hawk could tell, Ash had never shown any interest in learning how to walk silently and unseen.

"His father and his uncle are out looking for him."

Hawk's eyebrows creased. "How long has he been missing?"

"Since this morning. But I'm sure they'll have him back before dark." Her knuckles stood out white on her staff.

Their shadows stretched out long. Ash wasn't only a danger to himself. There was a risk he could be followed back to this area of the forest. "Perhaps I'll check a few places he could be."

The elder's sigh sounded like relief, and she touched his arm quickly, a gesture of approval. "Are you sure? You look ready to drop."

"It won't take me long." Ash usually didn't go very far, but one time Hawk found him all the way out in a shallow ravine close

to the Wide Stream. Ash didn't seem to believe the dangers out there were very real.

Hawk turned to a boy playing in the dirt. "Moss, would you take this bag to my mother? You can keep a few mushrooms for yourself."

The boy grinned. "I'll have it at your hut before you can turn around." He grunted as he lifted the bag and trotted off through the clusters of huts.

Hawk nodded to the elder. "Hide well and be safe." He turned and headed back toward the entrance to their small valley.

The elder softly called after him. "Hide well and be safe."

Hawk carefully wound his way back through the maze of thorns and vines that hid his village. He waded far down the stream before stepping into a heavily wooded area. From there, he padded quickly through the forest, checking for landmarks, until he reached the lip of a ravine. He paused and listened for any sound of Ash—or the sound of any giants.

Nothing but the buzzing of some insects. Hawk carefully picked his way down the slope. At the bottom of the ravine, the ground flattened out, and a trickle of water flowed through the dark forest floor.

Should he call out for Ash? No, better not. Too risky, even this far from the giants' town. He moved down the ravine. No sign of the boy. Ash would have left tracks and broken branches.

Maybe he should check the low ridge that ran along the Wide Stream. He'd found Ash there once, trying to hit the water with stones he was throwing.

Whoosh! Thwack! Hawk dropped to a crouch and froze. An arrow! But from where? Had some giant ones seen him? His heart raced as he scanned the area, every sense on alert.

Something flashed in the air. An arrow slammed into a tree trunk not five paces away. The arrow quivered in the soft wood. Hawk tried to slow his breathing and focus.

It looked small for a giant's arrow. He crept forward one pace, staying low. Red paint marked the arrow's shaft. His younger brother painted arrows like that. But Flint didn't have a bow anymore.

Another arrow flashed through the air and hit the same tree. Whoever it was, they weren't shooting at him. Hawk soundlessly squirmed between bushes until he could peer through the foliage at a small clearing. His brother aimed with a bow more than half his height.

Hawk stormed into the clearing. "Flint!" He kept his voice low despite his anger.

His brother jumped. "Hawk?"

"Where did you get that bow?"

Flint took a step back. "From a trader."

"A trader?" Hawk's eyes narrowed as he approached his brother. "What did you give him?"

"Something that belonged to me." Flint looked at the ground.

"Come on. Out with it." Their family had so little, and a bow wouldn't come cheap.

"I traded it for the carving of the mountain lion."

The words hit Hawk like a punch in the stomach. "I guess you didn't like the carving after all."

"I loved it!"

Hawk turned back. "Then why—"

Flint's expression turned hard. "We need weapons, not carvings."

Hawk sucked air through his nose. "Weapons? We've been through this before. You know we'd never win a fight with the giant ones!"

"No, I don't know that, and you don't either. What I *do* know is that we can't let them continue to tramp through the forests, hunting and picking off anyone they find. A band of well-armed humans could easily ambush a small hunting party." Flint thumped his bow on the ground. "We'd bury them, and no giants would ever know what happened."

“I know what you think. And you know what I think. Let’s not argue about it.” Hawk glanced toward the dropping sun. “Anyway, Mom won’t let you keep it.”

Flint strode to the tree and pulled out the arrows. “Well, Mom doesn’t need to know about it.” He looked back, his eyes begging. “Please, Hawk. I don’t want her breaking this one.”

Hawk sighed. If he told Mom, she’d destroy this bow, but Flint would simply find a way to get another one. Who knew what he’d trade next time? Maybe Hawk should keep his mouth shut. “Have you seen Ash? He’s missing.”

Flint jabbed his arrows back into the quiver. “No. And he isn’t exactly quiet.”

“I’d like to check on the ridge above the stream. Would you come with me?”

“Of course. Can I count on you to not say anything to Mom?”

“I’m not making any promises.” He probably would keep Flint’s secret, but making his brother wait for an answer might ensure Flint’s good behavior.

They waded across the Wide Stream and climbed to the low ridge on the other side as the sun began to dip behind the hills. They’d have to hurry to get back before dusk turned to dark. They snaked through the woods along the ridge, the only sound the wind rustling the leaves.

The ground trembled slightly. Hawk held up his hand and they both froze. Soon muffled grunts and stomping carried from somewhere upstream. Hawk signaled to his brother, and they dropped behind thick bushes. They waited and watched.

Three giants and a human appeared, all striding along a path beside the stream. Hawk’s stomach clenched.

Two of the giants had bows, similar to Flint’s but much larger. The two giants both wore light brown pants and jackets, but the third giant had a long black coat with white stripes and carried a strange-looking club. He was also holding a rope attached to a

collar on the human. The human must be a captive, but he didn't look or act like one. He held a spear in his hand and was striding briskly alongside the giant.

"They're coming back from a hunt," Flint whispered.

The giants with the bows each had a rope slung over their backs. As they got closer, Hawk could see what was behind their backs. Hanging upside down from each rope was a dead human.

One of the bodies was a stranger, not from their village. The other was Ash, whose lifeless body swung from the rope, red blood dripping from a large gash in his neck.

Hawk couldn't breathe. Everything went gray and seemed to spin. Was he going to pass out? He needed to stay conscious to protect his brother. He glanced over as Flint took an arrow from his quiver. Flint notched the arrow and drew back the string.

Hawk's mind snapped back. He lunged, bumping Flint's arm as the arrow released. It whizzed through the air and struck a tree behind the giants.

Hawk and Flint ducked back into deepening shadows, peering through tiny gaps in the bushes. The giants looked all around. One shouted and pointed at the arrow in the tree.

All the giants bellowed. The human pulled on the rope, straining toward Hawk and Flint, his spear poised to throw.

Hawk held his breath as sweat beaded on his face. *He can't possibly see us here, can he?*

The giant in the black and white coat gave a sharp whistle and tugged on the rope, jerking the human off balance. Another giant pulled the arrow from the tree. The human pointed almost directly at Hawk and Flint, and the giants all looked up toward them. One of the giants took a long arrow from his quiver. He notched it and advanced.

Should they run? Or would that make them easier to spot, easier to hit? The words Hawk had so often heard and repeated went through his mind: *Hide well and be safe.*

The giant holding the human's rope took out a huge knife and slashed two long marks in a branch that curved over the path. Then, he bent down, unhooked the rope from the human's collar and whistled.

The human streaked toward them holding the spear high. The giants all followed, pounding up the hill.

"Let's go!" Hawk jumped into a sprint. Flint panted close behind as the giants howled and crashed through the brush. Hawk dove into the thickest part of the woods. That would slow down the giants, and the human wouldn't get a clear shot to hurl his spear.

A loud boom sounded behind them. Hawk glanced back to make sure Flint was with him. An arrow whizzed past his face.

They couldn't outrun giants. They needed to hide.

"This way!" Hawk turned sharply and raced down the ridge. There it was! The stream narrowed here, picking up speed, before cascading in a waterfall down to a deep pool far below. They had both trained for this.

Hawk streaked out of the dark woods onto the cliff and dove over the edge.

He hit the water, plunging into the murky pool. He twisted underwater. Where was the hole? He could hardly see anything. He held his breath and swam with his arms out, feeling along the slimy rocks.

Found it! A hand brushed his calf. Flint was right behind him. Hawk's lungs were screaming, but he pulled himself into the dark tunnel just large enough to squeeze through. It curved up and he popped out of the water into a small cave. A thin crack high overhead provided the only light. Hawk gasped for air and dragged himself out onto a ledge. He reached for Flint's splashing arms and pulled his brother out.

The cascading water echoed in the small chamber. Muffled bellows and two large splashes punctured the sound.

“What if they find the opening?” Flint asked.

“No giant would fit through. And that human . . . even if he found it, he won’t know the tunnel leads to a cave.” But he’d know they disappeared in the murky pool. He might try the tunnel. Hawk felt around the floor with icy hands until he felt a rock he could use as a weapon.

“That human,” Flint said. “I know the giant ones keep some humans as pets, but I’ve never seen one before.”

“I’ve heard about some pets called hunters,” Hawk said slowly. “Humans trained by giants to help hunt other humans. That must be one of them.”

Hawk shivered. The giant ones were terrifying, but knowing another human wanted to help the giants kill them seemed even worse.

Hawk squeezed his eyes shut, trying to erase the image of Ash’s lifeless body. “I can’t believe they got Ash.”

“I can’t believe you jumped at me. I could have killed one of those beasts.”

Hawk glared at his brother in the darkness. “No, you would have injured one and put our entire village in danger! In case you don’t remember, someone shot a giant in the eye two years ago, and the giants searched for days until they found that village, burned it to the ground, and killed every human they could find.”

“That’s why we need to fight!” Flint’s voice hissed. “You may want to hide until everyone is killed, but I’m willing to risk my life to stop this.”

“You mean you’re willing to risk *everyone’s* life.” Hawk took a deep breath. They had to keep their voices down. *Hide well and be safe.* “I know you hate hiding, but it keeps us safe. You almost got us killed. And they marked a tree, so they can come back looking for us.”

“Let them come. I’m ready to fight, even if you aren’t.” Flint turned his back to Hawk.

Hawk dropped his forehead to his knees and groaned as the image of Ash's lifeless body hung in his mind. Maybe Flint was right. Giants were slowly picking off humans one at a time. If the giants were going to kill them all eventually, maybe they *should* fight.

He shook his head. No, fighting couldn't save them. Others had tried that and failed. They had to stay hidden. It was the only way to stay safe.

The little light from the crack above them faded, leaving them in complete darkness. The only sound was the splashing of the waterfall. Were the giant ones and their hunter still out there, waiting for Hawk and Flint to reappear?

They couldn't stay in the cave all night. Already Hawk's limbs felt heavy and stiff with cold. He cringed at the thought of diving back into that icy water, but they'd have dry clothes and a fire at home. Hawk nudged his brother. "Let's go."

The two pulled themselves back through the underwater tunnel and into the pool below the falls. They paused in the water, looking all around in the faint light of the moon. Finally, Hawk dragged himself onto the bank, his arms and legs clumsy as blocks of wood.

Flint climbed out beside him. "I'm going back to get my bow and quiver," he whispered. "I know where I dropped them."

"No. It's too dark and you're shivering. If your bow is still there, you can get it tomorrow."

Flint seemed about to argue, but only grumbled, "I could use some dry clothes."

"We'll change at Grizzly's hut," Hawk said. "I don't want Mom to see us in these wet things. But first we need to let the elder know about Ash. And his parents."

Hawk brushed water from his face. Ash was the first villager they had lost since last summer.

He had warned Ash not to risk being seen or heard by the giant ones, but Ash had just laughed at him. If only he had been able to get Ash to understand that the giants were ruthless hunters who wanted nothing more than to butcher him for their next meal.

Hawk leaned back against a tree and looked up to the sky, He heard a faint swish and a loud thud. A long arrow quivered in the tree just above his shoulder.

He dove to the ground and glanced to where Flint had stood a moment before. But Flint was gone.

CHAPTER 2



“So, will you help me with the boycott?” Mira tied the sash around her waist and ran her fingers over the dress’s soft green velvet.

Mira’s friend, Pimmy, turned from the bedroom window and stared. “Wow! It’s beautiful! I’ve never seen fabric like that before! Where did you get it?”

“My mother special ordered it at the dress shop. She wants me to get noticed.” Mira grimaced at the idea. Her mother had been pestering her a lot lately, but she didn’t need anyone to notice her. She wanted to focus on her last year of school without worrying about what came next.

“Well, a dress like that is going to get attention. I mean, it’s gorgeous and clearly designed to help the boys see you’re not a little girl anymore.”

The top of the dress was cut embarrassingly low, but it was beautiful. There were flowers embroidered in several places on the dress and the bottom edge had a lace trim. Maybe it would be nice if a boy noticed her. She shook her head. No. There were far more important things to be thinking about right now.

She turned to Pimmy. “So, will you help me with the protest? I really believe it can make a difference. If people stop buying wild meat, it might save the wilds from becoming extinct.”

Pimmy sat on the bed and fingered the intricate woodwork

on one of the bottom bedposts. “Honestly, I don’t think my parents would let me, unless I had to do it for school, or your parents convinced them it was okay. Have you even talked with your parents about it?”

Something about the day felt special. Or maybe it was the dress. “I’m going to talk with them today. On the way to the temple.”

“Good strategy. Less chance they’ll start screaming at you in the middle of the road with other people around. But I really doubt they’ll let you do it.”

Mira sat down next to her friend. “Pimmy, this is important. They might not like the idea, but they aren’t going to stop me.”

“Uh-huh. Good luck with that.” Pimmy grinned. “So, who do you want to notice the dress? I mean, *you* in that dress. Rudd, maybe?”

Mira’s face heated, but she said coolly, “I didn’t say I wanted to get noticed. I said my *mother* wants me to get noticed.”

“Evasive answer.”

“Mira!” a voice shouted from downstairs. “It’s almost time to leave. I hope you’re dressed.”

“I am!” Mira shouted back. Good timing. She didn’t need Pimmy grilling her about boys right now. She needed to focus on convincing her parents.

The town bell clanged, and Pimmy jumped up. “I better run.” At the bedroom door, she looked back. “Good luck.” She winked. “With getting noticed, that is.” At the bottom of the stairs she shouted, “And with that other thing!”

“Mira, we’re leaving! Get down here, please.”

Mira took a deep breath. *Okay. I’m really going to do this.*

Mira stepped into the cobblestone lane with her mother and father. They were all dressed for temple, and her mother carried a

small basket with their coin and fruit offerings. People crammed the street, most walking uphill toward the temple. Scents wafted in the soft spring breeze, changing moment by moment. A woman's perfume. The scent of food cooking in the nearby marketplace. Flowers. All around them, people chatted as they walked, the voices blending into a background murmur.

At the corner, Mira's mother turned to a woman walking beside them. "Angela, what an adorable outfit your pet has!"

The woman pulled at a leash to get the human to turn toward them. "He looks like a little gentleman, doesn't he?"

"He does indeed," said Mira's mother.

Mira looked at the pet, who had neatly trimmed hair and a purple and yellow outfit that looked custom-made. He was lucky to be fed and pampered in someone's house. The wilds probably had horrible lives out in the forest, but they still deserved a chance to survive.

They rejoined the stream of people making their way up the hill to the temple. Mira glanced at her parents. They looked like they were in a good mood. Mira's stomach churned with nerves, but it wouldn't help to wait until after the temple service.

She took a deep breath. "Mom. Dad. I want to tell you about something I'm going to be starting this week."

Her mother glanced over as they walked. "Something in school?"

"Well, not exactly. But remember that report I did for school on hunting?"

"I think you mentioned some kind of report," her father said, "but I don't recall you telling us what it was about."

"I did a lot of research, and there's now overwhelming evidence that the wild humans are endangered and are being hunted to extinction."

"Perhaps it would be better to talk about this later." Her mother's lips pressed together.

Her father stopped. Mira and her mother drew close to him, and other people walked around them. “What are you are starting this week?” he asked.

“Well, I’d like to . . .” Why was she sweating suddenly? She had every right to do this! “I’m planning on organizing a boycott.”

“A boycott?” Her mother’s voice became shrill. “What do you mean a boycott?”

Mira sucked in a breath. “A boycott on wild meat. I mean, if people stop buying it, then the hunting would stop.” She rushed to finish. “If we don’t do something, there won’t be any humans left to hunt anyway.”

Her father held up his hand. “So, the fact that the great god Zorus told us the wild animals were put here for us to hunt and eat means nothing to you?” His quiet voice dared her to defy him.

Her mother put her hand on his shoulder. “Dear, maybe we should talk about this at home.”

Mira swallowed. It was now or never. Out here in public, her parents had to keep calm. At home, it would be a lot worse.

“Dad, I’m sorry, but that was a long time ago. Back then people were starving and there were thousands of wild humans in every valley, but that’s simply not true anymore.” She glared back at her parents. “Now the wilds are going extinct, and we don’t need to hunt them to get meat. There’s plenty of farm-raised meat in the market. So, my friends and I are going to stage protests in front of the meat stands and tell people what is happening.”

“That’s enough,” Mira’s mother snapped. “You are not starting trouble over this.”

Mira flinched. Then she stood straighter. “I don’t mean to cause trouble. I only—”

Her mother cut her off. “Well, it *would* cause trouble. Have you thought about what your little boycott might do to your father’s business? People talk, and if you cause trouble, they might decide to get their shoes made somewhere else.”

She hadn't thought about that. She didn't want to hurt her dad's business or her parents' reputation in town. But she couldn't back down. This was too important. She'd done the research and made her decision. Wasn't she supposed to stand up for her beliefs? "I'm sorry if you don't like it, but I'm going to do this." Her whole body shook.

Her father shoved his finger at her face. "No, you're not," he said, raising his voice. "Not while you're living in our house, you're not."

"Then maybe I won't be living there anymore!" she shouted.

"And where do you think you'd go?" her mother asked.

"Maybe I'll live on the streets!" Mira screamed.

People slowed down and turned to stare at them.

Mira's vision blurred. She had to get out of there. She turned from her parents and started running back down the street.

Angry tears made it hard to see. She turned down random streets, trying to avoid passersby. Finally, she slowed. She'd reached the town's west gate. Her chest ached. She shouldn't have lost her temper. She'd never convince her father if she couldn't discuss this without getting angry. And her mother would be furious that Mira had embarrassed them in public. Should she go back and apologize? No, the way they treated her was wrong.

She looked through the gate to the fields outside town. Most people would be at the temple now. She couldn't bear the thought of creeping into the service late, or of going home to wait until her parents returned. Her father said she wasn't allowed outside the city walls without a companion, but there was no law forbidding her from walking outside the gates by herself. It was time to start doing things she had every right to do—no matter what her parents said.

She wasn't going to leave home. Even if she could, she had no desire to live anywhere else. But she wasn't going to apologize for what she said. Not now. Maybe not ever.

Her feet started to take her through the gate.

“Hello, Miss Mira!” A guard stood beside the opening. “Nice dress. Expecting company out there?”

Was he smirking? Oh, the dress. Mira looked down at the sea of green velvet, her face heating. “No, I’m just walking. By myself.”

“I wouldn’t recommend it. It’s not safe out there. Yesterday, a couple of boys said some wilds shot at them up the stream a ways.”

She knew better than to believe this. No wild humans lived anywhere near here. “I’m just going for a walk. I’ll be fine.”

“Well, stay on the main road, and *don’t* head into the hills. If nothing else, you could get lost. I don’t want to be sending out a search party looking for you.”

Mira gritted her teeth but nodded politely. No one was going to tell her what she could and couldn’t do today. A walk in the hills—away from her parents—was exactly what she needed right now.

CHAPTER 3



The sun was still rising in the sky as Hawk left the village and made his way through the forest. The ground felt cool under his bare feet, but it would grow warm later, so he only wore his loose leggings, and not his shirt or cloak.

He and Flint had been lucky last night. It seemed like only one giant was waiting near the falls when they came out of the water. After the first arrow missed them, they quickly melted into the darkness of the forest. The giant one didn't even try to follow them.

As he strode through the trees, Hawk tried to push away the images of that kept haunting his thoughts. The image of Ash's lifeless body mixed with images of Ash's grief-stricken parents. His stomach churned with a sense of guilt. Why did he feel guilty? It wasn't his fault that Ash was taken.

The elder hadn't made it any easier. She kept asking questions, as though she knew he wasn't telling her everything. He told her *almost* everything. He only left out the part about Flint shooting the arrow and the giants finding and chasing them. He did tell her about hiding in the cave. But she thought it was an odd thing to do since the giants never saw them. He had said hiding seemed the best thing to do. She couldn't argue with that.

He moved silently through the forest, listening for any sounds of giants, but he heard nothing except the wind, until the babbling

of the Wide Stream joined it. Coming back here was risky, but he needed to hide those marks the giants had made in the tree.

He crossed the stream and climbed the bank to the path, being careful so his feet wouldn't slide or leave tracks. He found the marked tree and scanned the area. He didn't see any obvious landmarks. Nothing would make anyone notice this spot except the deep gashes in the branch that hung over the path.

He hauled himself up the tree onto the branch that hung over the path. When he could touch the marks, he braced himself and dug into his pouch for the thick paste he had made. As he smeared the paste into the gashes, they disappeared. He had guessed well on the color.

Back on the ground, he brushed the path with a leafy twig to hide the tracks that showed giants had paused here. He didn't know how well a hunting pet could track. Since he couldn't think of anything more to do, this would have to be good enough. Time to get out of there.

A loud buzzing came from close by. Alongside the path, a bee struggled in a spider web. Hawk moved closer. The bee looked odd, its body long, but with short wings. Should he try to free it? He hated spiders, but they had to eat. The bee buzzed, shaking the web. Didn't it deserve to live too? A large spider began creeping toward the bee. Hawk scooped up the bee and moved it to a rock. He pressed down on the web on either side of the bee, and it struggled furiously for a moment. Suddenly it broke free and flew up the ridge, the sound of buzzing receding behind it.

There was a high hill on the other side of the ridge. It would be a good place to check for any signs of giants in the area. He silently made his way over the ridge and up the hill, stopping as soon as he could peer over the crest. The giants' town sprawled in the distance, far larger than his village and ugly with its high looming walls. The sound of wind rustling the trees was mixed with a muffled clanging from the town.

A shift in the breeze brought a faint smell of smoke. Only giants would have a fire burning during the day. Wisps of smoke rose from the other side of the hill, where the land dropped away again into a wooded ravine. He ducked down. Had a group of hunters built a campfire? Or maybe a search party was out looking for the human who shot the arrow. He'd been warm climbing up the steep slope, but now he shivered.

He wanted to run to the safety of the village, but he needed to find out if the giants were hunting this close, so he could warn the village. He waited until his breath came smoothly, with no rasping. Then he stayed low and silent as he made his way toward the small column of smoke. He'd expect giants to have bigger fires, but if it was a hunting party, they wouldn't want to call too much attention to themselves. Well, he was grateful for the warning.

He crept down into the ravine. It was deeply wooded with dense foliage under the dark canopy. *Wait. Is that starflower?* He'd promised his sister he'd find some. The herbalist needed the root to make an ointment for his mother's eyes. No, not the right plant. He hadn't found any yesterday either, but this dark, moist area was a perfect place to find it. It was way too dangerous to be looking right now with giants around. But maybe he'd come back another time.

At the bottom of the ravine, the trees thinned out a bit. He darted from one tree to another, moving toward the smoke until he could see into an open area.

A wooden hut stood in the middle of the clearing. Much too small for a giant. The column of smoke rose from a stone chimney. A man sat on a large rock in front of the hut. A human. Not young. Dressed oddly, so probably not from around here. Someone should warn this stranger about the dangers of smoke being seen by giants in the area.

Hawk groaned. Since no one else was around, it had to be him.

Hawk stepped out from the trees, still on alert in case he needed to run. If the man was surprised to see him, he didn't show it. "Good morning," Hawk said. "Or maybe it's afternoon already. Anyway, I didn't know anyone lived out here."

"I didn't either," the man said.

He didn't either? What does that mean? And why is he looking at me like that?

The man had gray hair, cut strangely short, and he wore a long blue coat. Hadn't he seen this man before? "I think I saw you last winter," Hawk said. "Or at least someone wearing a coat like that. Up on a hill overlooking the giants' town." At the time, Hawk had thought the person was asking for trouble, but he wasn't going to go out in the open to drag some stranger back to safety.

"That was me," the man said.

Hawk shifted his weight and glanced up the steep hill in the direction of the giants' town. "You know it isn't safe to stand out in plain sight like that."

"Maybe being seen is really safer in the long run."

What? Did this old guy have a death wish?

"No," Hawk said. "I'm pretty sure being out in the open like that is a good way to get yourself killed. And if doing that doesn't get the attention of the giants, I am sure the smoke from your fire will get them here."

"The fire wasn't for the giant ones. It was for you."

Hawk stared, his mouth open. It took several heartbeats before his mind found a response. "For me? You wanted me to see the smoke from your fire?"

"Yes, I need some help."

So, it was a distress signal? The man looked perfectly fine. Hawk glanced around but didn't see anything out of place except this strange man who didn't know the meaning of *hide well and be safe*. What kind of emergency required a fire in the middle of the day?

The man slapped the large rock he was sitting on. "I need

some help moving this rock.” He pointed at a spot a few steps away. “Can you help me move it to the other side of this path?”

What was so important about moving a rock? It certainly couldn't be important enough to risk lighting a fire. And the rock was really a large boulder. Far too big and heavy to move anywhere.

Hawk took a step back. If the guy wasn't going to listen to him about safety, Hawk should probably get out of there himself before a giant saw the smoke. “Sorry. I'd like to help, but there's no way we can move this rock. It's impossible.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really!” Hawk threw his hands in the air. “Look at it. It's huge.”

“You're not even willing to try?”

What was with this guy? He built a fire to lure someone here so he could ask for help with some impossible and pointless task.

Hawk looked at the smoke curling up into sky. If he walked away now, he'd spend the rest of the day wondering if the giants had killed yet another human. “I'll tell you what. If you put out your fire, I'll try to help you move the rock.”

The old guy grinned. “If you move the rock, I'll put out the fire.”

Hawk laughed. The guy was loony and probably very lonely out here by himself, but at least he was funny. He looked at the rock again. It was fairly round. Maybe it wasn't *impossible*. Maybe he could roll it.

The man hopped off the rock and stood off to the side. The boulder was almost as high as Hawk's shoulder. He put both of his hands on the rock, planted his feet firmly in the ground and pushed. He pushed until his neck was bulging and his legs were shaking. The rock didn't move at all.

He stopped to take a breath and looked over at the old man. He was laughing. The old guy was laughing. “What's so funny? You want to come and help me here?”

“No, no! Your job is to move the rock. My job is to put out the fire after you move it.”

Hawk almost kicked the rock. This was absurd. He should walk away and leave this weird man with his ridiculous ideas . . . ideas that would probably get him killed.

Hawk gritted his teeth. One more try. He put his shoulder against the rock and pushed as hard as he could. His feet dug into the soft ground. He grunted and shoved even harder until his shoulders screamed at him. Nothing.

The man simply stood there chuckling. Hawk's face burned. Now he wanted to move the rock just to prove he could.

He stared at the boulder. Sweat dripped down his face. There must be a way, but pushing wasn't it. The bottom of the boulder nestled securely in the dirt. It had probably been there for hundreds of human lifetimes.

He ran his fingers through his damp hair. Maybe he could wedge a stick under it and force it loose. He found a long stick. Wedging the end of the stick under the rock, he pushed up on it to pry the rock loose. It still didn't budge. The stick snapped, and Hawk almost fell. He grunted and tossed away the broken pieces.

In the garden beside his family's hut, he could jam a sharp stick into the soil and, instead of pushing up, he'd push down on the stick to pry up chunks of dirt. Could something like that work on the boulder? Probably not. It was much too heavy. He put a hand on the stubborn rock. A stick by itself wasn't going to budge it. He needed something else. He stared at the boulder, a picture forming in his mind.

There was a stack of wood close to the house, probably for the still-burning fire. Hawk found a long branch in the wood stack that was as thick as his lower leg. He found a smaller rock and placed it next to the boulder. He shoved the branch into a crevice under the huge rock. With his foot, he pushed the smaller rock toward the boulder until it was wedged as far as it could go under the stick. Then he pushed down on the end of the stick with all of his weight. The wood creaked with the strain. The boulder

rolled slightly. He used his foot again to push the small rock tight under the stick and put all his weight on the end of the stick. The boulder rolled a little farther.

Finally, three broken branches later, the boulder sat in its new place. “There. I did it.” Hawk looked around and saw the man emerging from the hut. A few last wisps of smoke were rising in the air.

“Not impossible after all,” the man said with a silly grin. “So much better here, don’t you think?”

It wasn’t any better. It was just on the other side of the path. But Hawk found himself grinning also. He’d done it. Maybe it was pointless, but he did it. And the guy kept his word and put out the fire. Hawk looked at the man’s graying hair and strange clothing. “If you don’t mind me asking, why are you living out here? You’d be a lot safer in a village.”

“They call you Hawk, don’t they?”

Hawk took a step back, his shoulders tensing. “How do you know my name?”

“Your village elder. She described you quite well.”

“How do you know the elder?”

“You ask a lot of questions, don’t you?”

“So do you.”

“My name is Konti.”

Odd name. It was just sounds that didn’t mean anything. “Nice to meet you . . . Konti.”

“Well, you probably didn’t come all the way out here to help me move this rock. So, what brings you out here?”

“Looking around. Making sure there aren’t any giants in the area.”

“Huh . . . and what would you do if you found one?”

What a stupid question. “Maybe I’d kill it.”

Konti snorted. “Very funny.” He suddenly sat up straight. “Hey. What’s the difference between a human and a giant?”

Oh. And he tells jokes. Hawk sighed. “I don’t know. What?”

Konti tilted his head, giving Hawk an odd look. “Maybe that’s what you need to figure out.”

“Wait. Weren’t you telling me a joke?”

“Not at all.” Konti took off his jacket and looked into the sky. “So, only giants you’re looking for?”

“I was also looking for some starflowers. You can make an ointment with the roots.”

“Not the right time of the year for starflowers,” Konti said.

Hawk’s mouth tightened. “There still might be some around.”

Konti looked at the ground and knitted his brow. Suddenly, he looked up and snapped his fingers. “Ah! I think I know where you can find some.”

Hawk’s pulse quickened. If he found starflowers, at least he’d get something out of this bizarre encounter.

Konti pointed at a gap in the trees on the other side of the hut. “Go through there and keep walking up and toward the sun. There’s a large meadow in the hills not too far from here. I think you’ll find what you’re looking for there.”

“Thanks, I appreciate that.” Hawk raised his hand in farewell. “Hide well and be safe.”

Konti raised his hand as well. “So they say.”

Hawk made his way uphill through the woods. He paused occasionally to listen for any sounds of giants, but other than the soft buzzing of a few insects, nothing disturbed the silence. The path grew steeper, and Hawk stopped to catch his breath. This was probably a lot of effort for nothing. Starflowers didn’t grow in meadows. They only grew in the deep shade. And it really was past the season for starflowers.

The path became less steep, and sunlight shone through the trees ahead. He reached the edge of the woods and stopped short, freezing in place even as his mind screamed at him to run. A large

grassy meadow lay before him, and a girl was lying in the middle. From this distance she almost looked human.

She wasn't. She was a giant. Maybe twice as tall as he was.

She was on her side with her eyes closed and seemed to be sleeping. What was she doing here? She had one arm tucked under her head and light brown hair draped over her shoulders. She wore a dress, but not like anything Hawk had ever seen. It was a dark green that seemed to shimmer slightly in the sunlight.

He'd seen a few giants before, but never a girl. Why was a girl giant sleeping in a meadow?

He had to turn back. Giants were dangerous, and just because this one was female and looked young didn't mean she wouldn't kill him given the chance.

And yet he lingered, staring at the sleeping form. At this distance, he could almost imagine she was human, despite the strange dress. Konti's question came back to him, the one that hadn't been a joke. Was size the only difference between humans and giants? That couldn't be right.

What do giants look like up close?

He'd never have a chance like this again. He took a step into the meadow, then another, poised to flee at any signs of stirring.

A few more steps. His palms began to sweat. This was too close. He looked over his shoulder at the trees. If she woke up, he'd have to outrun her. Her feet were bare, but close by were shoes. Light brown, covered with colorful designs. They didn't look like they would be very comfortable, certainly not comfortable for running.

He gazed at the strange material of her dress, nothing at all like the loosely woven fabric of human clothes. The top of the dress scooped low. He had never seen so much skin below a girl's face. He blushed at the sight. Below the scoop, the dress clung tightly to her body, swelling out in dark green curves. He tore

his eyes away and shook his head. What was he looking at? This wasn't a *girl*. It was a *giant*.

He looked at the flowing skirt, which had yellow and white flowers stitched in different places, like flowers dotting a dark green meadow. The dress turned her whole body into a meadow, with rolling hills and gentle slopes. The fabric looked impossibly soft. Was it? If he touched it, would she wake up?

He watched her face. She breathed softly through slightly parted lips. Wisps of light brown hair hung down across her face, rippling in the breeze. A small clump of flowers grew close to her face. Starflowers! He'd found them here of all places—in the middle of a meadow! He had to get them.

She hadn't stirred yet. He held his breath and crept closer to the small clump of flowers. Crouching, he wrapped one hand around the base of the bunch and used the fingers of his other hand to loosen the soil around the plant. He needed the roots. Fortunately, the soil was soft. He pulled slowly and gently.

Please, please, please.

He pulled the entire plant out of the ground, dirt clinging to the slender roots.

What a story this will be!

Now to get out of there. He glanced at the face of the giant. Her eyes were open, looking straight at him. His legs almost collapsed under him. His heart hammered as he slowly pushed to his feet on unsteady legs.

She wasn't moving. He took a slow step backward. Another step. Her face twitched. She howled, her hand flying out to grab him.

Hawk leaped away. As he turned to flee, the giant grabbed one of his legs. His leggings tore, as he fell face down and slammed onto the ground. He wriggled and kicked his free foot into her hand. Her grasp loosened, and he pulled his leg free.

He jumped into a sprint, his feet digging into the grass as he

flew toward the trees. He had to get to the woods, where he might lose her or find a place to hide.

The giant bellowed, and her feet pounded behind him.

I'm not going to make it.

He hadn't thought he could go any faster, but he put on another burst of speed as the trees loomed ahead.

As he ran under the first tree, his foot snagged on something, and he fell forward, sprawling onto the ground. He rolled over and looked up into the face of a panting giant.

CHAPTER 4



Mira spotted the town in the distance and let out a huge breath. The sun was sinking toward the horizon. She shivered at the thought of trying to find her way back in the dark.

As she passed the apple orchards and corn fields, she walked faster, despite her sore feet. The town bell tolled seven times. Her parents would be furious. She shouldn't have wandered so far from town like that. As soon as she got home, she'd apologize for running off.

But she wouldn't apologize for wanting to campaign against hunting. And now she'd seen one! A wild human she'd almost caught! If she'd been quicker, she could have grabbed him after he fell. But she had hesitated, and he darted off, melting silently into the dark forest.

The wild seemed terrified of her. She wouldn't have hurt him. But, of course, he didn't know that. Maybe he was going to hurt *her*. He didn't seem to have any kind of weapon, but he still could've hurt her while she slept. That really had been foolish, falling asleep by herself out there, but she had been sure there were no humans anywhere that close to town. She'd certainly never seen a human in the wild and hadn't imagined they'd come right out in the open.

She caught glimpses of the town wall between the apple trees. And there was the gate, still open! People clustered near the gate.

Someone shouted and ran toward her. Her dad! Oh, Zorus, she was in trouble.

“Mira!” he shouted, as he ran up and hugged her. He hugged her! Then he held her out from him, hands gripping her arms. “Are you alright?”

“Yes. I’m really sorry. I . . . uh . . . I just got a little lost. But I’m fine.” The group of people approached them. “Why are there so many people here?” She knew the answer before he said it.

“We organized a search party. We were about to head out to look for you.”

“I’m so sorry.” Her face got hot and she wanted to hide. “I didn’t mean to cause all this trouble.” She recognized most of the people there. Pimmy was there with that boy, Hockley. And Rudd with his hunter. It was getting a little hard to breathe with all the attention on her for being foolish. And they didn’t even know she’d fallen asleep and maybe almost attacked by a wild!

Pimmy hugged her. “We were so worried! Where were you?”

“She was lost, that’s where she was,” the gate guard said. “I warned her not to wander into the hills by herself.”

Her father put his arm around her shoulders and looked out at the group. “Thank you, everyone, for coming out to help. Fortunately, she’s back. I’m sorry to trouble you like this.”

“Just glad to see she’s safe,” Pimmy’s father said.

Mira smiled at his kind face. How could she have been so stupid?

“Yes, thanks everyone for coming so quickly,” the guard said. “I’ll go and ring the bell so everyone looking knows she’s been found.”

Mira’s mouth dropped open. She wasn’t *found*. She might’ve been lost for a bit, but she managed to find her own way back. It wasn’t even dark yet. Clenching her teeth to keep her mouth shut, she looked down and wrapped her arms around herself.

Her father kept his arm around her shoulders as he led her

back through the gate. She only half heard the murmurs of relief from the townspeople, along with a few upset grumblings.

Now that she wasn't worried about being lost, her feet ached all the more. She looked down at her shoes, which were scuffed and muddy. Her dress was better, but not much. "I'm really sorry about the shoes. And Mom is going to have a fit when she sees the dress."

He glanced at the dress. "Yes, she will. It'd be best to get changed before she gets back."

"She's not at home?"

He gave Mira a strange look. "Why would she be at home? We both spent most of the day looking for you."

"I . . . I wasn't gone that long."

"Mira, you've been gone since this morning. We had no idea where you were, until I thought to ask the guards at the gates." They walked in silence for a minute. As the smell of baking bread floated by, Mira's stomach grumbled. She'd had nothing to eat since that morning.

"Listen, Mira," her dad said slowly. "Maybe it's time you quit school and came to work in the shop full time."

Mira jerked away and halted. "You want me to quit school?"

Her dad held up his hands, his eyes pleading. "You've already learned everything you need to know. I hope you'll take over the shop someday. You can already do better finishing work on the shoes than I can. You have a real flair for style that I don't have."

"Dad, I love working in the shop, but I don't want to quit school. I want to finish with my friends." She met his eyes, but his gaze flickered away. He wasn't being honest. "This is really about my protest, isn't it?"

"Mira, I know you have strong feelings about this. But you have to respect how other people feel. We're not going to force you to eat wild meat if you don't want to. I wouldn't even care

if you decided to become a vegetarian. But you can't force your feelings and opinions on other people."

Of course, she couldn't *force* anyone to change their mind. But if they understood . . . "I only want to let people know about the issue. They can decide for themselves what to do."

"It's not just wanting to hold a protest." His face twisted as if in pain. "Look at what you did today, running off like that. You need to settle down." He took her arms gently. "You have a gift for the work you do in the shop. I don't want you to waste that."

"I can do both." Tears threatened but she forced them back. "It's my last year at school. Please don't make me quit."

He sighed. "Your mother has thoughts about this as well. We can discuss it over dinner." They walked the rest of the way without talking, as the bell in the tower still rang to announce she'd been found.

She wanted to tell him about the wild human she'd seen. It was so exciting! But it was probably best not to tell her parents. Even if they believed her, they'd probably think she'd been reckless. They'd use it as another reason she needed to quit school and settle down.

At least she could tell Pimmy. And maybe some of the other girls at school. That is, if she could convince her parents to let her finish school. She shot a glance at her father. She wasn't quitting. She'd find a way to convince them. Maybe she could even persuade them to support the protest.

"Well, hello there!" someone shouted from a window above the lane.

Mira looked up at her grandmother. *Wait! Maybe Nana could help.* "Hi, Nana."

Her grandmother scowled down at Mira. "Where have you been?"

"I got a little lost in the woods. But I made my own way back." She needed time to explain the situation to her grandmother,

before her parents made any final decisions. “Did you have any plans for dinner, Nana?”

Her father shifted his weight. “Oh! Uh . . . Yes, Mom. Would you like to come over for dinner tonight? We should have plenty you can eat. I think Greta was planning on serving some mashed potatoes and pea soup.”

“I do love your wife’s soups. Maybe I will drop by.” She looked back and forth between Mira and her father. “If it isn’t too much trouble.”

“No, we’d love to have you,” Mira’s father said.

Nana gave Mira an odd smile. “Then I’ll be there. Glad you’re back safely, Mira. I look forward to hearing about your adventures over dinner.” She waved and closed the window.

Mira and her father turned toward home again. A piece of paper nailed to a wooden post fluttered in the breeze. In the fading light, Mira couldn’t see what was printed on the flyer, but it gave her an idea.

CHAPTER 5



Hawk wound his way back through the maze of hanging vines. What a strange day. That bizarre man, Konti, . . . and the giant one. Maybe Konti knew there was a giant in the meadow. A sleeping giant! A giant *girl*! What was she doing out there by herself? Maybe hunting humans. No. Not in that dress she was wearing.

Still, she had almost caught him. If she had, he wouldn't be returning home now. He'd probably be dead. If Konti *had* known about the giant, he'd sent Hawk into danger. But why? Maybe he simply had a weird sense of humor and didn't understand or believe that giants were merciless hunters. More likely he hadn't known and simply directed Hawk to a place where he had seen some starflowers growing.

In the village, Hawk walked quickly past the huts, keeping his gaze down to avoid getting drawn into conversation. He had too much on his mind. He simply wanted to get back to the family hut and deliver the starflower.

Someone jumped in front of him. Hawk flinched and looked up to the grinning face of his friend, Grizzly.

"Safe returns, dirty one." Grizzly punched Hawk's shoulder and Hawk winced slightly. "See any animals out there today?"

When they were kids, Hawk said that someday he hoped to see an animal in the forest. Grizzly had teased him about it

ever since. Hawk managed a tired smile. “Not many today. Just a couple of foxes.”

Grizzly laughed. “And you didn’t catch one? Bring one back with you next time!”

Should he tell Grizzly about the giant girl? No. Not unless wanted to be constantly ribbed about that as well.

Grizzly frowned. “By the way, I was sorry to hear about Ash. But . . . it was bound to happen someday. He wouldn’t listen to anyone’s warnings.”

Hawk shifted his feet. He didn’t want to talk about Ash. “So, how’s the cricket business?” He immediately regretted asking. He didn’t want to listen to Grizzly go on about crickets right now.

“Exactly what I wanted to talk with you about.” Grizzly put an arm around Hawk. “I know you don’t have the heart to paint anymore. And you have to know that sneaking around the forest looking for mushrooms is no way to make a living.”

“And cricket farming is?”

“Buying a box of crickets from that trader was the best thing I ever did. People are tired of eating nuts and roots all the time. Crickets are the answer. The most delicious and nutritious food you can eat. Everyone in the village is eating them now. Come on, be my partner. I need a smart guy like you.”

Grizzly was always upbeat and a good friend. But Hawk had no desire to be a cricket farmer. “Grizzly, I really appreciate the offer—”

“It’s also a great way to get to know all the girls in the village. Almost every girl over sixteen comes to see me at least once a week to buy or trade. You can learn a lot about a girl when you’re talking with her about crickets.”

Talking with girls about crickets! Hawk didn’t know which was worse. Trying to talk with girls or talking about crickets. The combination was too horrible to contemplate. “I’ll think about it. I really will.” Hawk started down the path again before calling over his shoulder, “Hide well and be safe.”

Just before he rounded a bend he heard behind him, “I’m not taking no for an answer!”

He was only a few paces from home when he saw his sister, Fawn, sitting with her back against a tree, weaving a basket with reeds of two different colors.

“Nice pattern,” he said.

She looked up and dropped her work. “Hawk! Where have you been?”

Hawk pulled the clump of wilted starflowers from the pouch tied to his leggings. The roots were all still there. “I was looking for starflowers.”

“And you found some!” She took the clump and examined it. “This should make enough ointment to last for months.”

Hawk sat beside her and picked up the basket.

Fawn touched his leg. “I heard about Ash.”

Hawk sighed. “Can we not talk about that?”

Fawn sat back. “Well, I’m glad those giants didn’t see you or Flint.”

Hawk averted his eyes. “Yeah. Me too.”

“Hey!” Fawn said. “You ripped your leggings! How did that happen?”

Hawk hesitated. “Well, that’s a bit of a story.”

“A story?”

He wanted to tell her. He needed to tell someone. “Can you keep a secret?”

“A secret?” Her eyes twinkled. “I love secrets! And I’m very good at keeping them.”

It was too late to change his mind now. Now that she knew he had a secret, she’d get it out of him. “Well, I met this strange guy up in the hills. He told me where I could find some starflowers.”

“Did this strange guy rip your leggings?” She pulled at the tear.

“No. He told me about this meadow. And when I got there, I found a giant sleeping in the grass.”

Flint stepped out from behind a tree. “You saw another giant?”
“Flint!” Hawk said, jumping up. “What are you doing there?”

“I’m just standing here.” Their brother crossed his arms. “So, did you have to run from this one too?”

“What does he mean *run from this one too*? I thought those giants never saw you.” Fawn stood up and glared at both of them.

Hawk held up his hands. “We don’t think they saw us. But we ran . . . just in case.”

“And this giant today. Did it see you?” Fawn asked jabbing a finger at him.

“Yes, *did* it?” Flint asked, almost laughing.

Hawk looked back and forth between his gleeful brother and his glaring sister. Oh, well, he sighed. Might as well tell them both.

It was almost dark by the time their mother called them in to eat. Hawk paused just inside the hut. His mother knelt by the small fireplace, where a small bed of red coals glowed under the big pot. Fortunately, coals produced a lot of heat and very little smoke.

His mother ladled stew from the pot into bowls on the ground.

Hawk sniffed. “That’s not potato stew.” Didn’t look or smell like it.

“No, it’s not. Fawn asked me to try something new.”

“Oh?” He gave his sister a questioning look, but she just smiled and sat on the dirt floor.

“What is it?”

His mother pointed her ladle at him. “Does it matter? Try it.”

He sat next to Flint, and they lifted their bowls to eat. Hawk sucked a little stew in mouth and swished it around for a moment. It tasted a bit odd.

“It’s not bad,” he said, taking another mouthful. He looked at Fawn. “What is it?”

Fawn grinned. “It’s crickets!”

Hawk spat the stew back into the bowl. “Crickets?” He looked at Fawn. “Did you get them from Grizzly?”

“What if I did?” Her face looked a bit red in the dim light. “They’re tasty *and* they’re good for you.”

Hawk held up his hand to stop her. “Save it. I’ve heard it all from Grizzly.”

“Are you not going to eat that?” Flint reached for Hawk’s bowl.

Hawk slapped his hand away. “I didn’t say I wasn’t going to eat it. I just need to get used to the idea of eating insects.” The things you ate were supposed to grow from the ground, not jump around on their own. But Grizzly and everyone else seemed to think it was a great idea.

His mother pointed her ladle at him again. “So where were you all day?”

Hawk hesitated. “Uh, Fawn told me you needed some more ointment, so I went out looking for starflowers.”

“It’s not the right time of year.” Their mother sat with her own bowl. “Besides, I don’t need any ointment. My eyes are fine.”

“He found some.” Fawn held up the clump of roots.

“You found some!”

“That’s not all he found.” Flint grinned at Hawk.

Hawk shot a look at Flint, letting him know he better shut up.

“What else did he find?” their mother said slowly, looking between them suspiciously.

“I hear he found a girl.” Flint was almost laughing again.

“A girl?” Their mother’s eyes went wide. “You found a girl?”

Hawk recognized his mother’s hopeful look. He needed to stop this now. “No, not a girl. I mean, not one that I . . .” He looked at the glowing coals. It was way too hot in here.

“Where did you *find* this girl?”

“Up in the hills. She was sleeping.”

“Sleeping, was she?” His mother peered at him. “Come on, out with it. What aren’t you telling me?”

“She was . . . I mean, it was . . .” His mother was even worse than his sister. He might as well tell her and get it over with. He sighed. “It was a, uh, . . . a giant.”

“A giant?” His mother’s voice went high. “You saw another giant? After seeing those giants who took Ash yesterday?”

“Um . . . yes.” Hawk scowled down at his bowl. *I’m not a kid anymore. Why does she have to talk to me like this?*

“Well, I hope to the great spirit it didn’t see you.”

Maybe I could lie. I could try. But I’m a horrible liar.

The words came out in a rush. “She might have seen me, but this was far away from here. On the other side of the Wide Stream.”

“How did she see you?”

“I didn’t expect her to wake up. There were some starflowers close to her and I went to get them.”

“You got close to a giant? What were you thinking?” Her voice was getting louder.

“It wasn’t that close. I had no trouble getting away from her.” Hawk avoided her gaze.

“No trouble, huh?” She reached over and grabbed at his leggings. “Is that why your leggings are ripped? If she had caught you, you’d be dead now.”

“It’s really not like you to be so careless.” Flint pursed his lips and cocked his head to the side, gleeful at Hawk getting in trouble.

“You’re the one who’s careless,” Hawk snapped. “You don’t care about this family or this village!”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Flint growled. “I care about this village more than any of you. I’m prepared to defend it, while the rest of you hide in fear.”

“And I guess you needed a new bow for this great defense,” Hawk said.

“What?” Their mother let go of Hawk and whirled to face Flint. “How did you get a new bow?”

“I got it from a trader. And it’s mine. You’re not touching this one.”

“Your father would be ashamed of you.”

Flint shot to his feet. “My father would be proud of me. I’m telling you, we need to defend ourselves. We can’t keep hiding.”

“I don’t want to hide anymore either,” Fawn said. “We should leave.”

Everyone stopped to look at her.

“Who should leave?” their mother said.

“The village. We can move the village farther inland, far away from the giants.”

Flint tossed his hands in the air. “There’s nowhere left to go. There are towns of giants everywhere now.”

“That’s not true and you know it!” Fawn’s face grew red.

“We don’t need to move the village,” Hawk said. “We can stay hidden. It’s what we do. It’s what we’re good at.”

“Well, you didn’t do a very good job of hiding today,” Flint said.

“At least *I* didn’t try shoot a giant in the *neck!*”

Fawn gasped.

He instantly regretted saying that. Flint looked like he was about to punch him. His mother rocked slightly, her face white. Hawk slumped. He hadn’t meant to say that.

Their mother stared at Flint. “Those giants, you shot at them?” she whispered.

Hawk wished he could go back to when they entered the hut and start over. Better yet, back to when he entered the village. When was he going to learn to keep his mouth shut?

“Yes! And I don’t regret it,” Flint said. “They killed Ash and took him!” He straightened his back, and his voice grew louder. “You can all hide, but I am not going to sit around anymore and do nothing about it! Next time I see a giant, it *will* get an arrow through its neck.”

“Where is the bow?” their mother asked.

“You’re not touching it,” Flint said.

Their mother’s face was stone, but her nostrils flared. “You think you can do whatever you want! You’ve ignored our laws and endangered the lives of everyone in this village. The elder can decide what to do with you.”

“No, Mama!” said Fawn. “You can’t tell her. He could be banished!”

“If he is banished, he only has himself to blame. We’ve covered up for him before, but I will *not* do it again.”

Hawk closed his eyes. His brother might be banished. To live a life like that poor old man, Konti. He could try talking his mother out of telling the elder, but it probably wouldn’t work.

If only he had kept his mouth shut.

CHAPTER 6



Mira's father opened the door to their house and gestured for her to go inside. "Better go up and change out of that dress before your mother sees you."

Mira walked upstairs on aching legs. In her room, she lit a wax lamp and looked in the large mirror hanging above her dresser.

The dress was filthy but not torn. Her hair was a disaster. She changed into a simple brown dress and picked up her brush.

Everything was so unfair. Every stroke hurt as she pulled the brush hard through her thick hair. She didn't care that it hurt, but it was impossible to brush out the tangles.

So what if her hair was a mess? She threw the brush into a dresser drawer and slammed it shut.

The front door creaked open, and voices came from downstairs. Her mother was home. If she couldn't convince her father change his mind about the protest, there was no way her mother was going to back down.

Fine. Mira wasn't going to back down either. One way or another, she would start this protest.

The voices downstairs got louder. It sounded like her parents were arguing. Probably about whether there should be consequences for what she did today.

After a while, the voices stopped. Maybe she should skip dinner and stay in her room tonight. But she had already invited Nana.

“Mira!” Her mother’s voice had a sharp edge to it. “Can I get some help down here? Now.”

Mira dragged herself to the kitchen. Her mother was unpacking a bag. “You can chop the carrots.” She didn’t even look at Mira. “Tilly didn’t have any onions left in her stand, but she said she’d get some and bring them by.”

Her mother took out a brown paper package. She unwrapped it, revealing three glistening pieces of red meat. “Mag had some wild meat. Your father will love it.”

“I’m not eating it.”

Her mother took out a knife from the drawer. “I hear you invited Nana. You can eat vegetables and bread like her.” She began cutting the meat into smaller pieces. “Or you can starve, if you’d like.” She tossed the meat into a hot skillet.

The meat frying in the skillet was cut from a wild human, just like the one Mira saw earlier that day. She felt sick and wrapped her arms around her stomach. When a knock came at the door, she fled the kitchen.

“Hello, Nana,” she said, as she opened the door. “Dinner’s almost ready.”

Nana walked in carrying a basket of warm bread. “Before we sit down,” she whispered, “do you want to tell me what all the fuss is about?”

“I hope you can help. Mom and Dad are being horrid.”

“Well, parents are supposed to be horrid at your age.”

“Please, Nana!”

“Okay, tell me what the problem is.”

Mira quickly told her grandmother about her plans for the boycott and the fight with her parents. “Will you help convince my parents?”

“Let me think about it.”

At least it wasn’t a no. Once dinner was ready, Mira set a bowl of steaming mashed potatoes on the table next to the plate of

pan-fried meat. Strange. The smell of the cooked meat didn't turn her stomach. In fact, it smelled delicious.

"Thanks for bringing the bread, Nana," Mira's mother said.

"You know I'm always happy to contribute something." Nana took a seat across from Mira.

Mira's father raised his hands. "For all this food, we thank the great god Zorus."

A loud knock came at the door.

"That will be Tilly, I imagine." Mira's mother got up. "Excuse me a moment."

"Could you pass the meat, please?" Mira's father said.

Mira passed the plate. It might smell good, but she was not going to eat it. Every time someone cooked wild meat, it was bringing the wild humans closer to extinction.

She picked up the breadbasket. No one could make bread as good as Nana.

"I hear that Mira wants to protest the hunting of humans," Nana said to Mira's father.

That was Nana. No chit-chat.

"Um . . . yes."

"And you don't approve."

Her father seemed to shrink as Nana stared at him. "I think that Greta would like to be here for this discussion," he said.

Mira's mother returned. "It's Tilly daughter. She's two hours late and has turnips instead of onions. It's ridiculous that her mother sent her. She can't talk or understand a thing I'm saying. That girl is completely useless. Mira, can you try to make her understand?"

"Mom, she's not useless. She's just deaf." Mira headed for the door.

In the front hall, Mira found Breena holding a bag of turnips. She smiled and moved her hand in greeting. Mira smiled and responded with hand signs as well. Breena was about her age, and

Mira enjoyed using sign language even though she wasn't as good at it anymore.

After taking several turns each making signs, Breena left. Mira took the bag of turnips into the kitchen and rejoined her family in the dining room. "They couldn't get any more onions. Breena's mother sent the turnips as a gift with her apologies."

"Well, that's really nice of Tilly, but she shouldn't have sent her daughter," Mira's mother said.

"The meat is delicious," Mira's father said.

Mira's mother smiled. "It's wild and fresh, compliments of Mag Gorman."

"Really? Was that part of the deal for the job?" he asked.

"What job?" Mira asked.

Mira's mother held up a hand. "Maybe it would be best to talk about this later."

"You mean, later after I've gone home," Nana said.

Mira's father sighed. "We might as well talk about it now." He wouldn't look at Mira.

"Talk about what?" Mira put down her spoon. She was still hungry, but suddenly she didn't want to eat.

"Mag wants you to come work for her," her mother said. "A few days a week after school."

"You mean at Gorman's Meats?" She had to be joking!

"Yes."

"Why would I do that?" Mira's whole body flamed with anger. "I'm starting a protest against wild meat. Not getting a job selling it."

Her mother's face went stiff. "I already told her you'd be happy to take the job."

"I'd never take a job like that." Mira's voice rose. "Why would she even want me?"

"She's heard from the head of the girl's school that you're one of their best students. She needs someone smart to help at the stand."

“I can’t believe you told her I’d take the job. You knew I wouldn’t do it. Besides, Dad needs my help in his shop after school.”

“Your mother and I talked about it,” her father said.

So that’s what the arguing was about.

“You need to get out and meet more people,” her mother said. “You are never going to meet anyone finishing shoes in the back of a shoe shop.”

“By *people*, you mean *boys*. You want me to do this so I can meet some boys. Get married. Settle down. That whole thing.” Gods, her mother never let up on this!

“I met your father when I was working in the marketplace.”

“You were selling buttons and bows. I’m *not* going to work at Gorman’s Meats. If I can, I’m going to put them out of business.”

“All right, that’s enough, Mira,” her father said.

Mira wanted to scream and run away, but that would only make things worse. “Nana! Talk to them. You know how I feel.”

“I think it’s best if I stay out of this.”

“You won’t even touch meat. How would you feel if I got a job selling it?”

“It doesn’t matter how I feel.” Nana spooned up some potatoes.

“Mira, it’s settled,” her mother said. “I told Mag you could start next week.”

“You can’t make me do this!” Mira’s gripped the edge of the table, her knuckles white.

“Fine. Then we’re taking you out of school.”

“You can’t take me out!” she wailed. “This is my last year. I already talked with Dad about this.”

Her mother’s gaze narrowed at her. “Your father and I are agreed on this. It’s Gorman’s or you’re done with school. You can choose.”

Mira glared back at her mother. She was *not* going to choose. There was no way she was going to work at Gorman’s and there was no way she was going to quit school.