

Madelyn of the SKY

STONES AND SWORDS

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For as long as anyone could remember, no one had ever crossed the Bridge.

Once a village stood along the banks of the lake. Travelers lodged in the numerous inns. Tantalizing aromas of stews and pastries filled the air. They welcomed visitors from the mysterious other side—visitors who brought magic with them.

But all that was before.

No one knows what happened, but people stopped crossing the Bridge. Without the travelers, the people of the village didn't make enough money to stay. Over the years they slowly moved away to be with their parents or cousins or maybe just to live in Berrien, the capital city of Ebhold.

Now, no one haggled in the market. No one gossiped by the well. No fire crackled in any hearth. The only sound was the lake's water gently lapping

at the muddy shore. Buildings stood abandoned. Owls and foxes had moved in, chasing after mice. No one lived who even knew the village's name. The few local farmers simply told their children to stay away.

"It's haunted!" they'd say.

The children would narrow their eyes. "You said there was no such a thing as ghosts."

And the farmers would nod. "There aren't. Except there. The rules are different there, especially when the wind comes from the west."

"From across the lake?"

"Hush! We don't talk about the other side. Just stay close to home. We won't have you taken."

"Taken?"

And the farmers would say nothing more, and their wives would usher the children inside with worried looks.

Some of the children still went to explore, of course. They always talked about the rotting buildings, about how they couldn't see the other side of the lake, about how strange it all felt, like their skin was shaking.

But the most important thing they talked about was the Bridge.

The buildings were so old, it was a miracle they still stood. Weeds had taken over every street.

But the Bridge? Its timbers glowed as if they had just been set in place. The supports stood firm. No moss grew on the stone pilings. It was new in a way most children had never experienced a new building.

Sometimes a brave child would dare to walk across the Bridge.

Those children never came home. Their friends were too scared to talk about them. Their parents wept.

Generation after generation, the families learned: stay away from the village by the Bridge.

And so it was for years. The village rotted in rain and sun. Parents warned their children. And the Bridge stood, never decaying, never shifting, always new.

Until.

It had been a dry year. The shore wasn't mud now but cracked dirt. The mice had fled the town, and the foxes and owls had gone with them. The sun shone down almost white in its brightness, burning through a gray haze. Still, fog shrouded the far side of the lake.

Someone crossed the Bridge.

Her feet scuffed the timbers. She groaned, holding her side. She limped. Her gray hair curled around her ears and fell down her back, longer

than most people could grow hair, all the way to the backs of her knees.

She held a baby.

“Well,” she said as she reached the end of the Bridge, “this is it, Granddaughter. One more step and we’ll be here forever.”

She sniffed, glanced at the rotting buildings, and stepped off the Bridge.

The old woman doubled over in pain, her hand clutching her side. After a long moment, she straightened and sighed. “Well. That wasn’t that bad. Not like last time at all. Now, come. We need to get far away in case my plan doesn’t work and they look for you.” She gazed down at the face of the little baby she carried. “Madelyn. Let’s find you a new home.”

CHAPTER ONE

The refugees stumbled deeper into the mist-shrouded hills. Mothers dressed in dusty rags hushed their children. Men kept to the outside of the little train, holding staffs and hauling weighty packs. They squinted through the heavy fog.

“This way!” hissed a figure ahead of them. She wore a wine-red skirt and a hat with a long green feather. One hand held a rapier. The young woman looked to be fourteen years old. She cocked an eyebrow at the group. “The mob’ll never bother you where I’m taking you.”

The group followed her urgings.

The young woman peered up toward the sky. She couldn’t see anything but gray, but something lay above.

Good.

She sheathed her rapier and scrambled up a rocky slope, resisting the urge to grab at the weeds to make her climb easier. The younger children would need that aid. After she'd scaled up a few yards, she turned back. "This way! Quietly!" she whispered.

"Aren't there dragons here?" a woman whispered back.

The leader shrugged. "They shouldn't bother us." She hoped no one could see her uncertainty. There were plenty of dragons around, but they should be sleeping. Should be. But Grandma would be brave for them if she were here, so she would be brave too. "Besides, I'm Madelyn of the Sky. Dragons won't mess with me." She offered a daring smile.

The men looked at each other and then back out into the fog.

"The Island is this way," Madelyn said. "We need to climb up. Then you'll all be safe."

One of the younger children whined. Her mother hushed her quickly. Madelyn held out a hand with a grin. "Come on, little one. Your freedom awaits!" She turned to once more scramble up the incline. The group began to follow.

A man's shout echoed along the rocky valley.

The men who protected the outside of the group flinched at the sound. Mothers reached for their children. A few of the women clenched their fists.

Madelyn slid down to one of the older men. “Climb to the top of this hill. There’ll be an outcropping that looks like a table. Wait there for me.”

“Where are you going?” he asked with a trembling voice.

“Well, someone’s got to deal with the mob.” Madelyn shrugged. “Might as well be me.” With a quiet chuckle, she slid back down to the base of the hill and dashed down the rocky valley. Soon the mists swallowed up the group behind her.

She had to lead that mob away from the refugees. All it would take was some clever words.

Grandma would be proud of her, rescuing fellow refugees. Madelyn shook her head. Now wasn’t the time to think about that.

Where was that mob? The same fog that shrouded her protected their location. She knew the hills as well as anyone could, but that didn’t give her an advantage over the people that lived nearby. She stopped as the valley split. Left or right? Madelyn closed her eyes and listened.

“Hey.”

She yelped. Her rapier was in her hand, its blade against the young man’s throat.

He held up his hands, his eyes wide. “Sorry. I thought I could help.”

Madelyn scowled. How had this refugee snuck up on her like that? “I don’t need any help.”

He nodded. His hair was the color of fresh soil, and that same color shaded everything he wore. Mud stained his cheeks and fingers. “Sure. That’s why I’m giving it. Peter Grave. What House are you from?”

She resheathed her blade, once more trying to listen for the mob. “House? I’m no noble. I’m a refugee like you. Now hush.”

Peter frowned.

Madelyn didn’t pay any attention. There. The mob was that way. Madelyn dashed away.

She barely heard the whisper of movement behind her. This Peter knew how to be quiet.

She should send him back, but if he was still following, he wouldn’t listen to her anyway, would he? Might as well let him follow, just so she could keep him alive. Plus, having an audience would help her keep her confident mask on, so it wasn’t all bad, she supposed.

Down through a rocky ravine and then up a low hill. The mist reflected flickering torchlight below.

Peter stood beside her, breathing deeply. "I'm not used to running," he whispered.

"Then you can't help."

"Might surprise you." He winked.

Madelyn wrinkled her nose. He thought he could help? She guessed she better find something for the overconfident jerk to do before he caused more harm than good. "Fine. The last branch we went down. Think you can go back and make some noise and then turn the wrong direction?"

"I can handle going the wrong way."

"Good. I'll come up behind them. Make sure you don't get caught or lost, all right? I'll make sure you don't get hurt."

"I'm a big boy." He dusted off his hands, and then he was gone.

Madelyn sighed. The refugees had already been through so much. They'd lost their homes. Many of them had lost their nation. All they had was what they carried. Some people it broke. But others, like this Peter, it emboldened. He thought he could handle anything.

Well, he couldn't. It was her job to handle everything. But she could still work with his overconfidence.

Behind her, rocks clattered. Peter's voice echoed as he swore.

Ahead of her, men grumbled. The torches bobbed closer and then past her on the path below. She could just make out their forms. Twenty, maybe twenty-five men from the nearest village.

"They're not coming back. We can give up," one of them muttered.

"We need to teach them a lesson. No one can take our food," another snapped.

Madelyn lowered herself after they passed. She snuck forward, drawing her rapier. If she could just tip the balance, convince them to turn back, then she wouldn't have to fight them. It would be a good day to not have to shed blood. She really hated when people made her use her sword. Well, no time to worry now. Time to put the cocky mask on.

"The dragons'll get them," the first voice said.

"Not unless they're stupid. We gotta take care of this."

"The refugees aren't stupid enough to wake the dragons," Madelyn called out. "But you're loud enough to wake the dead."

The men spun.

"Madelyn of the Sky?" one asked.

She offered a half-bow. “You have the advantage on me. Your name?”

The mob parted and a man stepped forward. The mist between them obscured his features, but he clearly wasn't from the poor local villages. He wore good leather boots and a stout doublet. “Daravin. I've come to find you and bring you to justice.”

“Oh, have you now?” Madelyn grinned. “Justice would be offering welcome to refugees, not hounding them, my dear man.”

He drew his rapier. “I've not come to philosophize.”

“I suppose it would be a shame to have a battle of wits when you're so clearly outmatched.” Madelyn saluted. “You should know, though, that I surely outmatch you with the blade as well.”

Daravin flung himself at her, swinging his sword. Madelyn parried. The foils rang.

“What are you waiting for?” Daravin spat back toward the mob.

“Me? Well, I was waiting for you to surrender,” the brave woman answered, though she knew exactly what he meant.

The mob of local men rushed toward her, torches held high, drawing their own swords.

There was a reason she'd made her challenge here. The walls of the hills provided a narrow

passage, keeping the group from surrounding her. No matter how good you were, once you were surrounded, it was difficult at best to escape unscathed. And it was her plan to escape unscathed.

One of the men lifted his sword to smash it down on her. Madelyn raised her blade to block. He swung down. As his blade met hers, it shattered into a thousand rusty fragments. He grunted in surprise, but Madelyn didn't have time to think about it. She was just grateful the man's weapon was in worse shape than he'd expected.

She swung her blade low, catching Daravin's thrust and pushing it to the side. She spun into him and elbowed him in the gut. "It's not good manners to be so forward with a lady. And you're old enough to be my father, aren't you?"

He grunted, but his doublet protected him from the blow. Madelyn spun away with a laugh. Though now that she was closer, she realized he wasn't very old. Maybe just five or six years older than she was.

Another of the mob rushed at her. As he did, his club broke apart in his hands. Another lunged at her with a pitchfork, but its rusty tines burst under her parry.

One man not taking care of his weapon was luck. Three men in a row? That wasn't like the locals.

They knew they had to be ready to fight against marauders and wild beasts. Or, you know, just use their tools in their daily lives.

Well, it was something she could take advantage of at least. “See that? Your weapons aren’t good enough to face me, are they?” She drew back a few steps. “Do you really think you can stand against me? Especially if I keep doing that to your weapons?”

The men panted and looked at each other.

“These are my hills.” Madelyn swung her rapier around, letting it whistle through the air. “Yes, my hills. Maybe you should just run.”

They continued to look at each other.

Madelyn shrugged. “All right, then.” She charged them.

The mob fled before her. She slowed and stopped. They’d find their ways back home. The refugees were safe.

But Daravin. He was another matter. He’d fled with the mob, but he’d be back. He wasn’t some local. He had money and skill. She tucked the thought away so it wouldn’t run circles in her mind. She’d come up with a solution later.

Madelyn strode back toward where she’d left the refugees. When she got to the first fork in the path, she called out, “Peter?”

“Here.” He slid down an incline toward her. “You did good.”

“And I didn’t even need you to do it.”

“I’m sure I didn’t do anything to help.” He grinned. “Should we get back to the others?”

CHAPTER TWO

Both Madelyn and Peter were panting by the time they climbed that final hill where Madelyn had told the refugees to wait. She'd traveled farther than she'd intended to take care of the mob.

"You're safe," she said as she collapsed onto the stone table. "The mob went back home."

Peter leaned over with his hands on his knees.

One of the men asked, "How far to the Island?"

"Not far. Let me catch my breath and we'll finish the journey." Madelyn looked around at them. "Where are you all from?"

"Ebhold," one of the men said. "The drought took my farm. We came to find food."

Madelyn nodded. "Sounds like most of the people I've saved." She swallowed. "Kenevir used to be a place that welcomed anyone. It welcomed my

grandma and me when we came years ago. But now..." She shook her head. "I'm sorry."

"If we go home, we die," the man said.

"I know. That's why I'm trying to help." Madelyn stood. "Okay. I think I'm good. Are you all ready to go to the Island?"

The little group nodded.

"All right. Have a seat. This table'll take us the rest of the way." Madelyn crouched and swiped off her hat, placing it on the ground beside her. She spread her fingers against the rock. She closed her eyes as she concentrated.

The people looked at each other. A few murmured to one another. "The table will take us? What does that even mean?"

Peter grinned and sat cross-legged near her.

Madelyn felt sparks shoot from her heart, through her shoulder and elbow, until finally they reached her fingers, little hot bursts of power. It felt pleasant, like stretching her muscles after a good night's sleep. Oh, she wished she could tell Grandma about it, but all this was still so new. Instead, she concentrated on the sparks. She woke the stone up. "Time to fly," she whispered.

The stone listened.

The table creaked. One of the women cried out. The children gasped. One of the men grunted. A

few others swore. Someone yelled, “What’s happening?” They all rushed to sit as she’d suggested. Madelyn loved this reaction. Well, it’s not like anyone had ever seen magic before, so she expected surprise.

Peter laughed.

Well, he was an odd one, wasn’t he?

Someone drew a rapier. “Well. Here you are with your little band of criminals. Come along now.”

Madelyn’s eyes shot open. Daravin stood on the edge of the rocky table, blade in hand. “Unless, of course, you want to risk one of them getting hurt. You can’t protect everyone.”

Beside her, Peter growled. The men leaped to their feet, holding their staffs out for protection. They stood between Daravin and the women and children.

Madelyn tried to pull her hand away from the stone, but her fingertips stayed where they were. The rock wasn’t done with her yet. She told it she had to fight.

The stone didn’t understand. Instead, it pulled at her.

Peter stood between her and Daravin. “I’ve got this,” he said.

The man laughed. “Really?”

And then a staff swung in and thumped the well-dressed man on the back of the head. He winced and turned toward the refugees. "You want to fight back? All right, then."

The stone table shifted. It rumbled. Still it wouldn't give Madelyn's fingers back.

Daravin lunged toward the men. They spun their staves. Rapier bounced off wood. One of the men swung at Daravin's head. He somersaulted through the air and lunged again. The refugees dodged. Four men circled around Daravin, attacking and blocking. He danced. No one could touch him, now that he was paying attention to them.

"Hurry," Madelyn whispered to the stone.

Daravin was playing with them, wasn't he? Yes, these men knew how to defend their farms but not against a trained warrior like this. No, he wanted Madelyn, but he wanted to make it a fair fight between them.

Well. An honorable adversary maybe? That was a positive for once.

And at last, the table lifted. It floated in the air, just a few inches from the hill, but it floated free. It dipped toward Daravin and the men, where most of the weight was. The refugees cried out in wonder and surprise.

"Stay flat, please," Madelyn pleaded.

The stone heeded her command as it began to lift higher.

“Now, keep rising. Join your cousin in the sky.”

The stone would smile at her if it could.

And at last, it released her fingers.

She sprang to her feet, spun, and drew her rapier. “Daravin!” she screamed. Her hat lay on the ground where she’d put it. She hated fighting without it. Her hair floofed out around her head.

Daravin grinned at her. He kicked out the knee of one of the men facing him, slammed his elbow into the throat of another, stabbed the third in the thigh, and to the fourth, he simply raised an eyebrow. The fourth man backed off.

Madelyn didn’t bother saluting him this time. “You wanted me to drop my guard so I’d lead you here.”

He shrugged. And then he noticed what was happening around him.

The table now floated a few feet off the ground. Mist covered the landscape and sky as far as they could see. The children giggled. Women gasped. The men stood carefully away from the edge.

Daravin grinned. “Well, that’s new, isn’t it? You’re not just anyone, Madelyn of the Sky.” He flicked his blade toward a man’s throat. “You can give yourself up. Or he can die. Your choice.”

Madelyn glowered. "Cowards hide behind others." And she had thought he was honorable!

The man nodded. "Cowards also complete their tasks. Drop your rapier. Go on."

She crouched and placed her sword on the stone surface. She stood, her hands raised. "All right. I'm helpless. Let him go."

Daravin nodded. "Very good. Kick it over to me."

She wrinkled her nose as she obeyed.

"Step closer to me, please. Away from your sword. Yes, good. Now, hands behind your head."

Madelyn complied.

At last, Daravin lowered his blade. "Now. We're going back to Valan, to the capital. You'll stand trial for your crimes."

Madelyn sprinted toward him. She snatched up her rapier as she passed it. Two, three steps. He raised his sword. She felt a burning in her left shoulder. Her other shoulder impacted against his gut. His doublet protected him, but he stepped back under the pressure. Another step.

One of the men joined her. Peter joined. They all pushed.

Daravin saw what they were doing. He kicked at the knees of the man beside him. The man fell to the ground. Another man replaced him. The refugees shoved with everything they had.

Daravin seized Peter's shoulder and pulled. Peter lost his balance. He fell dangerously near the edge of the stone. Madelyn didn't know how high up they were now. She couldn't see the ground through the mist.

She didn't let up the pressure. Her left shoulder screamed at her. Daravin snarled. He tried to swing his blade, but everyone was too close. He tried to shove back. Too much weight pressed against him. Inch by inch they pushed him.

One of his feet slipped off the edge. His eyes shot wide. Faster than he could fall, he reached with his left hand and tangled his fingers through Madelyn's thick hair. He lurched back, hanging on to her hair. Pain exploded through her scalp. Tears burned her eyes.

Peter screamed. The men reached for Madelyn.

She gripped her rapier and stabbed downward. Daravin released her. The mists swallowed him.

Madelyn tottered. Finally, she fell back onto the stone. Her shoulder burned. Oh. She'd been stabbed. That wasn't good. She was getting blood on her favorite bodice. Really, her head hurt worse. She plucked up her hat and set it on her aching head.

She shook herself. "The stone will bring us to the Island. You're all safe now. You're safe."

CHAPTER THREE

The stone table lifted them higher and higher. All they could see was mist.

“Is it safe?” one of the women asked, her voice shaking.

“There’s a reason I told you all to sit down,” Madelyn answered. “It’s fine as long as you don’t fall off.”

“Rocks don’t often fly in Ebhold. Or ever,” one of the men ventured.

“Here either. But I can talk to them. Convince them it’s good to fly.” Madelyn’s head drooped. She sat back up. “I’m fine. I’m fine.”

One of the women stepped forward. “I was a wisewoman back in Ebhold, before the drought. I don’t have any herbs, but I still might be able to help.”

She gestured to Madelyn’s bloody shoulder.

Madelyn nodded. "Yeah. What's your name?"

"Essica, ma'am."

"Don't ma'am me. I'm not old enough to be a ma'am." Madelyn grinned at her.

"And I'm not old enough to be a wisewoman, but here we are." She stepped closer. Her golden hair was bound in a simple bun. She knelt beside Madelyn and looked up at the men who hovered nearby. "Now! You folk! Over to the other side of the table. No gawking!"

Peter crouched on Madelyn's other side. "She'll be fine." He tried to take her hand.

"Hey now!" She snatched her hand back and frowned at him. "What do you think you're doing?"

He rolled his eyes. "All right. For now."

Essica shooed him. "Move over there. I have to look at her shoulder."

"So?"

"You've been looking at women's shoulders?" Now Essica turned a frown on him. "You that kind of man?"

Peter blinked. "You're not supposed to look at a woman's shoulder? Why not?"

"It's not proper!" Essica snapped.

Madelyn tried not to giggle. She didn't really understand why, but that was the way it was. "Get over there, Peter."

Finally, he got up and plodded to the other side of the table, sitting by the children. Soon his voice floated over to them, and the kids began giggling.

Essica pulled back the fabric of Madelyn's shirt so she could peer at her wound. She hissed.

"That's not a good sign," Madelyn said.

"Well, it's too early to say. We don't have any water with us, so I can't wash the wound. And that's what worries me most. Infection isn't a good thing. Who knows how long it's been since that man cleaned his sword? I wouldn't want to see your blood turn bad." Essica bit her lip. She whispered, "How long do you want me to keep that one away from you?"

"Peter?" Madelyn asked. "This part of your care? Keeping men away?"

"Half the time healing is just getting rest. I give the excuse to keep men from bothering women when they should be healing. So, out with it. Do I need to keep him away? Will he listen to you when you tell him to leave you alone?"

"I have no idea. I just met him today."

Essica frowned. "Oh? I thought he came with you. He didn't travel with us from Ebhold."

“I thought he was another refugee.”

“If he is, we don’t know him.” Essica glanced over her shoulder.

Peter sat in a circle with three children. He waved his hands, telling some sort of story. Two mothers hovered nearby, wary.

Madelyn licked her lips. “Well, it really is too bad we don’t have any water. I’m getting thirsty.”

“Course you are.” Essica shook her head.

The stone table continued its gradual ascent, floating through a sea of mist. Only a few mountaintops dared to reach up to them. Slowly, the fog thinned until the sun shone through.

Madelyn lifted her face to the bright rays. “We’re almost home.”

“Home?” Essica frowned.

“The Island.”

And then, there it was above them. Just a shadow at first, a dark mass against the bright sky. A bowl of stone surrounded by a halo of smaller floating stones.

The people gasped. One of the children cried out, “Wow!”

As they rose higher, they could make out small stone buildings atop the Island. Here and there, green sprouted on its surface. People, tiny from this distance, moved about. An entire town lay be-

fore them, hidden here on an impossible floating Island in the sky.

“Home.” Madelyn smiled. “A place for anyone. Something better. Something that’s ours.”

CHAPTER FOUR

The stone table continued to rise. Now sun poured down on them from a nearly cloudless sky. The Island rotated slowly, letting them marvel at it.

“Home,” Madelyn repeated. “You lost a home? So did I. But here we can make something better. Something that doesn’t belong to anyone else, so we’re not taking from someone else. A place where no one needs to fear losing what they’ve been given. Where anyone is welcome.”

“How is this possible?” Essica asked.

“I asked a big stone to float.” Madelyn chuckled.

“Will it float forever?”

“No.” Madelyn shook her head. “Stones are forgetful. They’ve lived such long lives it takes a lot to get them to remember what they were doing. So I have to remind the Island to stay where it is.”

“So what happens if you’re not there to remind it?”

Madelyn forced herself to chuckle this time. She had to be confident for them. “Well, I just make sure I come back often enough to remind it.”

“No one can get us there?” one of the kids asked.

Before Madelyn could answer, Peter said, “How? You think that guy that we shoved off can fly? No one will get you there.”

“How many people live there?” Essica asked.

Madelyn shrugged.

“You know exactly how many people are up there,” Peter said.

Madelyn wrinkled her nose.

“I’m right!” He grinned.

After a moment, she said, “Two hundred sixty-three people. With us coming up there, it’ll be two hundred seventy-seven.” She frowned. “How’d you know?”

“Because you know every person you’ve saved. You can’t forget them.”

Madelyn regarded him. “I don’t think I like you.”

“You probably shouldn’t.”

The stone table rose higher and higher into the sky, slowly coming level with the Island. The air grew crisp. A gentle wind blew. The sun shone down on the refugees. They stared, their eyes

filled with wonder. One of the women wept. Her husband held her close.

“You okay?” Madelyn asked.

The woman nodded. “Our farm was dust. Our older boy went to find work somewhere. We lost everything. We thought we were going to die when that mob started chasing us. And now Madelyn of the Sky rescues us? And brings us here?”

Madelyn gave an awkward grin. “People know about me?”

“There are whispers,” the man answered. “Rumors that someone will help us if we get to Kenevir. It used to be that the prince would welcome you. But now, well, they talk about you.”

Madelyn shook her head. “Well. Um. Yeah.” She tried to find her confident swagger, but it was lost in the moment. People talked about her?

She turned as their stone table rose into the halo of smaller stones that hovered near the Island. Most of the stones were smaller than the table they rode on but large enough to carry two or three people. As they came closer and closer to the Island, the people pointed here and there.

“Look! I wonder what that building is.”

“How high up are we, Mama?”

“I don’t see any fields for growing food. Maybe they will need farmers like us.”

Finally, the table tapped against the very edge of the Island.

“Welcome home,” Madelyn said over the other voices. She stood and groaned, her hand going to her shoulder.

“Here,” Essica said, “lean on me. Try to hold yourself steady on that side so the wound doesn't tear.”

“Usually I’m more excited for bringing people here. Sorry about that,” Madelyn said. “Hold on. I need to lean down.”

She reached once more for the table, placing her fingertips against the smooth surface. The sparks kindled in her heart and raced along to her fingertips again. The stone heard. The Island heard. They agreed.

The table melded into the Island, extending its surface just that little bit more.

The refugees gasped in wonder.

“Hey, gotta make the Island bigger somehow.” Madelyn stood and withheld the groan this time. “Come on. It’s time to meet the rest of the family.”

She pointed the way to the buildings that lay inland. They were low stone huts, most one story tall, though a few stood two stories high. They

were simple, but no one seemed to complain. The halo of stones cast dappled shadows, almost like strange leaves.

Madelyn leaned on Essica. "Sorry," she muttered.

"I've had to brace men much bigger than you. How old are you, anyway? You seem young to be able to bring together so many people."

"That's my little sister," a rich voice answered.

The refugees turned to see a woman with thick dark hair. She stood tall, with wide hips and a serious attitude. Her yellow dress might have been worn, but it was well tended.

"Renity," Madelyn said, "this is Essica. She's a wisewoman."

"Like Grandma?"

"She's not as grumpy as Grandma."

"That doesn't take much. Also, you need to stop getting hurt." Renity took up position on Madelyn's other side, helping support her weight.

"I only got stabbed a little bit this time."

"It'd be nice if you stopped getting stabbed at all. We really need you to not die to keep this whole thing in the air."

"Renity, I think Essica's got me. Want to take the others and show them around while I don't die?"

The larger woman narrowed her eyes. “You think you can get rid of me that easy?”

“I wish it was that easy. I know you’ll find me.”

“Hm. All right, everyone who isn’t Essica—nice to meet you, by the way. Make sure she doesn’t die—come on with me. We’ll see if we can find bunks for everyone.” She guided them deeper into the Island.

As the people walked away, Essica asked, “You got a bed or something I can set you down on? And maybe some water so I can clean out your wound finally?”

“Not sure on the water. My bed’s that way.”

“Not sure on the water?”

“It’s complicated. We have a hard time getting water up here. Not too many springs or lakes, you know?” She winced as they started moving toward the village.

“You don’t have cisterns? You can do all that with stone. Why not just hollow some of it out and catch the rain?”

“Stone doesn’t always like listening to me. I haven’t been able to convince it to catch water.” And she wished she could. She wished she knew why she could do some things but not others!

“You make stones float, but you can’t make them hold water?”

“I know. It doesn’t make sense. I don’t even know why I can do that with stone.” She looked down at her fingers. “I haven’t been doing this long.”

“That is crazy.” The male voice made them both jump, and Madelyn grimaced at the pain. She turned to see Peter following them.

“You’re supposed to be with the others.”

“Yeah, well, I’m following you instead. Seemed more important than whatever tour they’re getting.”

“What Madelyn needs is rest. And besides, she’s got a boyfriend already,” Essica snapped.

Peter raised an eyebrow. “How would you know? You just met her.”

“I’m a wisewoman. I know things.”

He burst out laughing. Then he saw her dismayed face, and he laughed harder. “Oh. Oh, I’m sorry. You’re serious! Oh, of course. Wisewoman. Yes. Of course.” He tried to compose himself but kept giggling.

“You done yet?” Essica asked.

“Yes. Of course. All done.” He pressed his lips together.

Madelyn shook her head. “I don’t have a boyfriend anyway. Why would you say that?”

“Some boys will only leave you alone if they think you’re taken. Wisewoman, remember? I was trying to get him to leave.”

“Sorry,” Peter said. “I’m not trying to be a creep. I just figured I might be able to help. I helped when she was dealing with the mob, after all.”

“You distracted them when I really didn’t need a distraction,” Madelyn said. “And now I need to go lie down.”

Something roared in the distance.

Terror snapped at Madelyn’s heart. She forced it away. It wouldn’t do to show that fear. Instead, she mentally straightened her hat and sighed. “I’m not going to be able to lie down, am I?”

Essica looked around. “What was that?”

“A dragon,” Peter said. “Big, nasty things. Always hungry. And they’re drawn by the scent of blood.”

Madelyn glanced down at her shoulder. It still oozed.

“Yep. You left a scent trail all the way up.”

The young woman pushed herself off from Essica’s support and drew her rapier. “Well. My guess is it’s going to be coming from the direction we came from, then. And a rapier isn’t going to help much.”

“Can’t you just fling rocks at it? Take a chunk of the Island and drop it on the dragon?” Essica’s eyes darted back and forth.

The roar came again, closer now.

“I don’t know. All I’ve been able to do is make them float and meld them together. I can’t even tell them when to go back down!” Madelyn snapped.

“You can’t fight that dragon,” Peter said. “But I can. Stay here.” He jogged back toward the edge of the Island.

Madelyn tried to follow, but the pain in her shoulder stopped her. She leaned on Essica again.

“Anyone else able to fight a dragon?” Essica asked.

“None of us ever have.” Madelyn squinted toward the edge. “Miah, our blacksmith, might have some ideas, but the dragons have left us alone so far.”

“Wait. You live in dragon country, and you don’t have a way of dealing with dragons?”

“Remember when I told you this is all new?” She sighed, watching Peter as closely as she could.

Peter stood at the edge, looking down. He held no weapons. He glanced up and around at the halo of rocks. He turned and waved at Madelyn.

And then he jumped off the edge.

Madelyn yelped. Essica gasped.

Something roared again.

And then a huge form shot past the edge. Wings blotted out the sun. A massive four-legged monster slammed onto the Island right in front of Madelyn. It rumbled. Golden eyes looked this way and that. Purple-green scales shimmered. Somewhere back in the village, not far away, someone screamed.

Madelyn's heart thundered. She couldn't breathe. Her rapier was in her hand, but what could it do against a creature that large? Everyone knew not to mess with dragons. But what happened if a dragon messed with you?

And then the ground shook. The entire Island tilted toward the beast.

The stones were happy to hold up the people. But the weight of a dragon?

The entire Island was going to break up if Madelyn didn't do something fast.

CHAPTER FIVE

Madelyn stared up at the dragon. The Island groaned beneath her feet.

She could only do two things: use her rapier and talk to rocks. And right now, her rapier was useless, so it was time to talk to rocks. She tugged the brim of her hat. “Put me down. I have to touch the Island. Convince it to stay together.” She felt her voice tremble.

Essica shook. “What about the dragon?”

“You’re the wisewoman! I can’t do anything about the dragon.”

“Can you get the rock to hold on to its legs or something?”

“That’s actually a good idea! I’ll try it. But help me get down to the ground. I have to touch stone to talk with it.”

The dragon shook its head on its long, long neck. It shook its head again. Stones from the halo clattered against it. It didn't seem to notice these two women on the ground, so near its feet. It didn't look to the buildings not too far distant. But still, it was here, and it was hungry.

Well, whatever Peter thought he was going to do, clearly it had failed. Wonderful. At least that was one headache taken care of.

Madelyn felt a stab of guilt. No. Peter, whoever he was, had been a pain, but he'd at least tried to stand against the dragon.

Essica lowered her to the ground. Madelyn spread her fingers. She was so tired. So, so tired. Talking to stone always drained her, but the Island needed to be reminded that it wanted to float, that it wanted to stay together.

She didn't take her hat off this time. There wasn't anyone to yank her hair, but she wasn't going to risk it. Instead, she whispered as the sparks ran from her heart to her fingertips. The stone accepted her touch. It heard her pleas.

"And maybe, could you please hold on to the dragon so it can't hurt anyone?" she added.

"It's just standing there shaking its head. Shouldn't it be eating us?" Essica asked.

“Let’s not complain,” Madelyn said through gritted teeth. She sent her sparks farther, deeper into the stone Island, begging every facet of every rock to float, to float together.

The stone didn’t want to listen. Too much! A dragon should not stand atop us! We fall apart! It groaned again, louder. The Island *hurt*.

Madelyn shoved her will back into the stone. No! You will stay together!

Even as she begged, she imagined what would happen soon. The stone would give up. It would forget to fly. It would fall apart. And two hundred seventy-seven people would tumble, falling between plunging rocks, slipping through the mists below, and shattering on the hills. Renity. Essica. Even Madelyn.

No. She wouldn’t let it happen. Madelyn pushed into the stone, shoving her will against it, holding the Island together.

The ground near the dragon’s claws cracked. Shards of stone floated up from the fissures. The lines spread. Madelyn felt the bottom of the Island begin to give way. Boulders tumbled into the mists.

No!

She forced more of herself into the Island. There were too many people here. She would not let

them fall. They needed her, and she would not fail them.

The dragon groaned. It shook its head again. Its teeth were fearsome. Its mouth would swallow a person in a single gulp without having to bite down. Finally, it lowered its head. It snuffled, as if tracking the scent of blood.

Madelyn closed her eyes. She couldn't deal with the dragon when the Island was falling apart. Ignore it. Ignore it.

Essica trembled.

Something slipped from the back of the dragon's neck. And then the beast shook out its wings and flew away. Essica cried out in relief. The dragon was gone.

But the Island wasn't done falling apart.

Madelyn pleaded and cajoled and begged. She felt blood drip from her nose. Sparks ran from within her to every corner of the Island. Her hands sunk into the stone. We need you. Stone, lift. Stone, keep us safe. This is our haven, and we need it. We need you.

Someone laid a heavy hand on her shoulder. "The dragon won't be coming back."

Essica supported her. "Madelyn. It's done. We're safe."

No. They didn't understand. Still, fissures formed in the heart of the Island. Still, Madelyn urged the stone. Come together. Meld. Be one again.

Madelyn's breath shook. She felt sweat dribble down her forehead. Her heart beat faster and faster. Stone, listen. Remember the joy of flight. Recall the joy of being the Island, the only flying Island in the world, the haven of any who need a home.

And slowly, slowly, the stone agreed. Fissures sealed shut. The cracks where the dragon stood healed. The groaning faded. Once more the Island was whole.

And finally, the stone released her. Madelyn fell backward. All of her hurt. Essica sat on one side of her. On the other, Peter.

Peter.

She frowned at him. "Weren't you dead?"

He laughed. "No. I jumped to land on the dragon's neck. They've got a weak spot behind the eye if you know just where to hit it. I started punching it as hard as I could. I'm sorry I didn't hit it hard enough to make it run sooner."

"Well, it's gone now. And now can I sleep?"

Essica nodded. "Hell yes."