

STORM-WAKE

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ACT TWO. SCENE ONE.

For Moss, storms had a smell: churned-up salt water and seaweed, damp wood on the tide, even the far-off burn of lightning . . . but this storm had something else. It was sweeter. *Wilder.* Moss pushed her hair sideways and looked up at the cliffs. Tiny pieces of color were everywhere, as if the rocks held gemstones. She growled as her hair flew back in front of her face, tangling in a hundred different sailor's knots.

But she'd seen right.

Stormflowers.

Opening.

Again, she shoved her hair clear to see where the flowers grew thickest, all around Pa's cave. Wind was pulling their petals, rattling their stems. The storm's sweetness was *this*. There were pink ones, white, others gold—petals floated from the rocks to settle on her shoulders. She heard a high-pitched singing sort of sound too. Pa had always said the flowers would sing. When they wanted to. When they were ready to open full.

She tried to see Pa at the cave entrance. *Now* she knew why he wasn't down on the beach with her, exploring for wash-up. He was doing this. Somehow he'd opened the flowers, made them work!

She dropped the collecting pot and ran. Fast, fast, faster, leaping the sharp stones on that part of the beach. Quick, quicker, she skidded through their camp, then took the well-used path up to the cave. She was huff-puffing before she'd gotten halfway. As she spread her arms wide so that she was almost touching the wild-moving pine trees, she was imagining how, later, beside the campfire, Pa would dance and sing and swirl her. Would tell stories 'til the fire went low, of the world where they had come from, of where they would go back to, also, one day. His smile would be broad beneath his bird-beak nose, his blue-gray eyes soft.

Now she felt lighter. Now she ran faster. She went quick-spinning and leaping beneath those petals, all swirling and falling. Until, flinching, she saw the sky smash.

"Lightning," she whispered, savoring the word like a treasure. "Sky's on fire."

Was what Pa would say. She spread her arms wide 'til her wrists brushed pine needles and felt their cool zing.

Sky's!

On!

Fire!

She loved Pa's sayings and how his voice tilted as he spoke them; she liked to test how they felt in her mouth. A bigger, second flash came, but she didn't lie flat on the ground like Pa had taught her and wait for it to pass. She stood still, feeling the wind claw, smelling the petals, hearing the sea moan above the reef. And, still, that singing—that high-pitched, sweet-pretty singing! From beyond the volcano, at very top of the island, she thought she heard the wild dogs howl in answer. Perhaps even the lizards hissed in their caves. Today, everything on the island cried out.

At Pa's cave, the heavy cloth across the door was half pulled back. Inside, the wind was not so firm. When Pa turned, his teeth caught the light from the candles and glinted like the petals did. He held out his arms and she ran for them.

"How did you make the flowers full-open, Pa?"

"Luck?" He shrugged, smiling. "Maybe it was just the right time."

She breathed in, there was smoke and earth; the smells always in Pa's coverings no matter how hard Pa washed at them. She crouched to Jess too, and breathed in running and rabbits. The dog licked her ear. Then Pa took Moss's hand and pulled her to the table to see the glass vase. She reached to touch it, thinking, as always, how special it was that something so fragile had survived their rough journey across the sea so long ago. Underneath its lid, a mixture swirled.

"Opened petals?" she asked. "All crushed up?"

Pa nodded. "Mixed them with salt water and sand. I told them dreams and stories! When they'd had enough, they opened."

"Island feeds on stories." She repeated the words he'd told her once when he'd been crouched close to the fire:

"Clever Moss." He tapped her on the nose. "I found these ones on the volcano. I sang for them. Perhaps I got the song right; perhaps they were just ready to work."

He winked, then hummed for Moss. It sounded more like a bird's song than the rowdy-loud sailing songs Pa sang beside the fire after palm wine. Two notes, up and down, getting faster and higher in pitch until it was like a finch's trill. He put the flowers he'd picked on the table, in a line. Before, when the island had storms, the flowers'd had only opened a little, and she and Pa had peered inside the closed-up petals to see their yellow hearts.

But today their centers shone, and their petals glistened vivid-bright as fish scales.

“When I felt this storm coming,” Pa continued, “I knew the flowers would open—I felt it core-deep! Now we can send them out to the world.”

“Heal the floods,” Moss murmured, repeating other words she’d read in his book.

“Fix the darkness,” he added.

“And then we’ll go back there, yes?”

But Pa didn’t hear her words. Instead, gentle-slow, Pa picked up one of the smallest, most orange flowers and held it out. Glow-bright, it was.

“The pollen . . . ,” Pa explained, “. . . making it glint.”

But she knew that; Pa had told her a thousand times.

Healing pollen.

Magic pollen.

Pollen to change the rest of the world and make it safe again.

Pollen to heal Pa, too.

When she breathed in, the pollen’s sweet smell tickled the back of her throat.

“Try it now, Pa,” Moss said. “See if it heals anything! See if your brain feels better!”

He ruffled her hair, got fingers caught in it. Careful-slow, he took the flower between finger and thumb. Snapping the flower’s head from the stem, he put it inside his mouth. His eyes widened, and he chewed.

Moss squinted as she watched him, waited for his Adam’s apple to bob down his swallow. Did Pa look any different? Could one flower make him better?

Pa laughed at her expression. “Do you want to try?”

She took a pink flower. Closer up, its smell was sweeter than the honeycomb she fetched from the hives. It wriggled in her fingers and felt almost . . . alive. There was a sound like giggling. Was it coming from the flower?

“We can’t eat something that laughs!”

Pa’s eyes went crinkle-kind. “Sing to it. Let it know you mean well.”

She copied him—those two bird-trill notes—moving her mouth in the same way he did. Jess barked. The flower went still in her hand, almost as if it were listening too. She turned it this way and that, seeing its million shades of pink.

“It’s too beautiful,” she said. “It giggled!”

“So? You giggle too! What six-year-old wouldn’t when I do *this* . . .” He reached forward to tickle her ribs and she squirmed away, giggling louder than the flower. She wanted to spin and spin with the whooshing feeling inside.

When she opened her palm and looked back at it proper, it seemed to buzz on her skin. Something felt different inside her as she watched it, like her pulse beat faster and stronger.

“Like magic,” she whispered.

“It likes your stories . . .,” Pa said. “. . . It gets energy from them, wants to be inside you to hear them better.”

She laughed again, and the flower seemed to move—just a little—toward her.

“See?” Pa said.

Quick-fast, she put it in her mouth. Chewed. Got an explosion of sweetness on her tongue. It made her teeth tingle. Made her want to laugh and laugh and spin and swirl. Made her want to sit beside the fire and tell stories with Pa, read from his book. Draw pictures with sticks, dance in spirals. Pa

had been right: These flowers were full-magic. Now she felt full-magic too.

Pa tipped rock-pool water from a scallop shell onto the table. "Watch this, Moss."

On a breeze from outside, the flowers moved toward the water, their petals darkening as they soaked it in.

"They drink it?"

Pa nodded. "They'll make the floods go down."

But how would little flowers drink in all the great big sea?

He laughed loud, his noise all startled-bird. She jumped. She felt the zing of petals against her cheeks, a sway inside her. Had the flower changed her, too? Healed her of something she didn't know she had?

"But what do I know about flowers like this?" Pa continued. "What does anyone? A new species, Moss . . . a new chance. And we're the explorers!"

She saw hope and happy in his face. She dug her fingers into Jess's fur to go steadier. The flower's taste was strong. Now it made her want to shut her eyes and do nothing but dream.

When a gust of wind tried to pull petals from the table, Pa caught them quick.

"If I can just get the mixture right, maybe we'll make the world better without even leaving our island," Pa said. "Later, we'll send my book back to show them what we did!"

There was glinting in Pa's eyes, as if pieces of pollen were caught there. He picked up the vase and tilted it. Inside, the mixture glinted too, buzzed like a million fireflies pressed tight. "Perhaps whoever first discovered the healing given from poppies or willow felt like this too. We could be about to change . . . everything!"