

The kids were already tucked into bed when I heard the wave outside. It was unmistakable, singing speed, gathering dust and pitch, the voice of a million rocks flowing like water. And then, the hideous boom of boulders finding the valley floor, the irreversible footprints. But I could tell the avalanche was on the far side of the mountain. Not our side, not yet.

I coaxed the kids into staying in bed and went to the mouth of the cave in my worn sandals. A figure in a black headscarf ducked around the corner, just as I caught sight of her. Clearly someone appraising our cave for shelter. As the night wore on more and more people would try to shelter with us.

“Hello,” I said mildly, nearly blind in the sudden darkness, and she came around the corner into the light of our cave and I got a good look: young woman, southeast Asian, skin darker than mine, defensive posture, and wearing a shoulder-bag but appearing nervous, unarmed and alone. That was good, because I was too. She jutted her chin out. I had trapped her like a bug, and now to see what I had caught. Her face, sharp and small, wore a mixture of vengeance and shame.

“What’s your name,” I said, and she looked straight at me- not as nervous as I thought, then.

“Isbe. What’s yours?”

“Angelyn.”

“Go by Angie?”

“No.”

I stepped closer to Isbe, and I knew that behind me she could see the glow of the cave and had probably guessed, correctly, that we had electricity. “Isbe, you’re the first one to come by us tonight, but I’m sure you won’t be the last.”

“Avalanche,” she said, and her eyes betrayed no fear of what was coming or the wailing self-pity of weak women. She was holding her own.

“Where are your people, Isbe?”

“Two days’ trek. I was out looking for trouble.”

“Well, you found it. You were born in the mountains?”

“Yes, and I’ve heard of you. Room-Keeper.”

“Then you’ll know I’ll need something from you.”

“I have nothing to trade.”

I shook my head. “You know what I want. You’ve heard the stories.”

“No,” she said firmly.

“Ok,” I said. I didn’t force anyone, although it would be in both our best interests. Obviously she wanted my protection, and the warmth and shelter of my cave, but didn’t want to pay the price. I turned back to the cave. Someone else would be willing to make an alliance with me. Soon, I hoped. This night would be long, and who knew how many new refugees would come down the path in the night which, after all, led straight to the lowlands.

“Do you really kill and eat them?” Isbe said behind me.

So she was interested, then. Without acknowledging her question, I went straight to the kids’ bedroom and got them up. They had been levitating rocks and using them to eavesdrop on Isbe and I to the best of their abilities, which were still minimal. “Come on,” I said, “Come meet her in person.” They scrambled ahead of me.

“Know anything about kids, Isbe?” I said.

“Know enough to know that I could never have ‘em.”

“If you don’t, you don’t owe me anything. And these two are only on apprenticeship. Two years, right, Lin?”

“Right,” the smaller one, the girl, chirped.

“Ok,” I said, “Here’s what I got. You get to sleep in a nice bed. You stay with us until the avalanche crisis is over. Could be tomorrow, could be in a month. We protect you, you protect us. In exchange-”

“I give you my firstborn,” Isbe broke in.

“You get to send them to me for apprenticeship, yeah,” I said.

“Not ever gonna have kids,” Isbe muttered. “Deal.”

I took her arm and held it at the elbow for a moment, and she took mine, a common gesture in the mountains. There were black half-moons under her eyes. “Excellent,” I said. I didn’t trust her not to steal from us, but I could be pretty sure she wouldn’t harm me or the children in our sleep. She knew my reputation. “You take first sleep. I’ll wake you up when it’s your turn for watch.”

First I went to the ‘kitchen,’ which was just a few nooks I had rubbed into the walls, a large cooking-stone over the firepit, and a pot of water. From a basket, I took a handful of nuts that I had been saving which I knew had a stimulating effect, but tasted like black licorice. Then I ventured outside the cave, sat down and waited with my nuts. I could hear them coming from a long way off, the first refugee families to make it this far. The moon was strong enough that once my eyes adjusted I could see pretty far, too. I heard hooves, babies crying. Mothers shushing. Then the first of the steady stream of people came into sight.

I had expected the refugees to come in spurts, but I was wrong. They were organized; they were dressed and packed. The mothers pulled wagons. Their dogs were with them. They must have known the avalanche was coming then, somehow. I let the first family go by. I stopped the second. “What village are you from?” I asked.

“Cradletop,” said the mama, her face grim, and they went right around me, wagon, donkey, and her lanky boy following behind. That was the answer I had expected. Cradletop was the only nearby village. But these people were too desperate to be dispensing information. I needed a different tactic.

“What’s going on?” I shouted at the line of people going past my front door.

“Gabe has died!” yelled a woman.

“An avalanche!” said another.

“Gabe has died?” I asked.

“Gabe, the oldest man still alive in the hills- just died. Only him. In the avalanche. Only him. The rocks curved a fist to wipe out his house, then retreated. It’s time to go, it’s time to go.” The woman speaking carried a silent toddler on her hip, and wore socks with holes in them on her hands. It was unlike mountain people to be startled by one death, but for once I agreed with the superstition.

Just then an explosion threw me to my knees. I couldn’t help crying out. I landed on a jagged rock and it splintered my palm as I fell. Then another explosion, this one a bit farther away, and I realized I was hearing a boulder from on high bounce to earth.

Wobbly, still on the ground, I felt my left hand with my right. My left was wet, bleeding heavily. I bound it in my scarf, letting the sting wake me up, and got to my feet using my other hand. All around me, people were doing the same, and screaming their misfortunes. A donkey had bolted, taking an entire wagon of supplies off into a ravine. Next would be a child.

“Everyone!” I said loudly, though people tend to listen when I speak no matter how loud I talk. “I will go down the mountain tomorrow at dawn.” It would be a different world down there, with so many of our men dead.

I wasn’t sure how long I would have their attention, or even if I had it at all. But I threaded my way back to the front of my cave, where the electricity still shone, and hauled myself onto a large rock near the entrance that I knew was steady, though I couldn’t see it well enough.

“Most of you know me as the Room-Keeper,” I said, speaking to blank darkness, since the light of the cave messed with my night vision. “The kids know me as a witch. I have been maintaining this cave with electricity and warmth for longer than most of you have been alive. It is spacious. Rocks cannot fall on us inside the cave, and it is too dark to run now. Shelter here tonight, if you wish. I will leave for the lowlands tomorrow at dawn.”

I would have my work cut out for me keeping the entrance clear from rock falls, but I didn’t mention that. The people assumed, correctly, that I would be using magic to protect them. But I could see the crowd wavering. Some of the women began pressing forward- angry, relieved, numb,

injured. Another significant minority, still gathering themselves, hung back, the urge to run now too strong. “Oh, and hitch your donkeys outside, please.”

I made my way down carefully from the rock, mindful of my left palm.

“Isbe?” I called.

“Here.” Good. Already she was a familiar face! “Please, go to the back of the cave, there is firewood stacked, and there’s matches in the kitchen.” She nodded and I realized, in the better light, that she was even younger than I thought. She looked sixteen. “Oh, and Isbe? Bring me the talisman from the kitchen, too. It’s hidden under the nuts inside the basket.”

The next few hours were a blur.

After the initial nearby boulder fell, the rocks slid down the mountain like water. I had never seen rocks move like that and I suspected foul play. But I kept them from falling on our roof, at least. That was, quite literally, all I could do. At some point it stopped.

A woman who had broken her leg in the rock fall was brought to me and I splinted it as best I could and gave her sleeping medicine. Her leg was badly broken, and she looked as though she was trying to crush a squirrel in her jaw, so hard was it clenched, and her eyes sat gaping and empty, like the hole left in a tree when the branch is removed.

Later, exhausted, famished, I found Isbe again, sitting near the fire on a rough cushion. The newly refugeeed children were sitting around her, begging for another story. She was enjoying it. An especially eager seven-year-old was sorting her hair into two clumps, one on either side of her head. “Any food left, Isbe?” I asked, and nearly cried when she gave me the bowl of chili- cold, but still- that she had cloistered in a basket in the kitchen.

“One of the women made it with your supplies,” she informed me. She really was loyal. I removed the talisman from my head, slipped it into my pocket, and finally rested. All around us women were nursing babies, lying still, perhaps sleeping, perhaps crying. Among all the folks I could see maybe twenty-five or thirty women, and quite a few boys, but only two men, both of them

young, clearly born in the mountains. The physical dimorphism that made them men was clear, but the men acted like women: one was sewing, the other bouncing a small child. There was no one around to teach them to be men. Would their testosterone doom them anyway? Or did being surrounded by only women change them inside and out? And surely there must be more men than this, because at least a third of the women had children attached to them.

I didn't want to go down the mountain, I realized, watching my boy apprentice Hugo pull at Isbe's sleeve impudently, asking for a story. How scared I was for him. If we went down- when we went down- we would be reunited with all the men left behind in the war, when we women went into the mountains to shelter, taking the children. I had no idea what kind of world awaited us.

But Isbe might, I realized. Most of the women born in the mountains were fascinated by the world left behind. Isbe, keeping the smallest child on her knee, her hair still divided around her head, began another story. "Let me tell you of the War Between Men," she said, and the children gathered close. The nearby adults were listening, too.

"The War began with an obsession," said Isbe. "A man could not stop thinking about the word kill."

This was a story I knew too well. "I don't want to hear this story," I objected. "Please, tell a different one. Something comforting, maybe."

"But tomorrow we will go down to the world-left-behind," said Isbe, and there was that jutting look of hers again.

"And tonight we'll rest," I said. "That's it." And I got up from the fire, irritated that Isbe had challenged me in front of everyone, more irritated still that I couldn't stop her.

"How do you know about the world-left-behind?" a towheaded child asked Isbe, in that plaintive child's voice that cuts to the heart.

"I know because I go there. And most of your mamas do, too," she said.

This was not news to me. After all, given the vast gender disparities among the mountain people, there literally weren't enough men to impregnate all the women who wanted children. I had suspected for some time that hopeful women ritually visited the lowlands. But they always came back.

"The War Between Men began because one man hated his fellow men. He could not stop thinking the word *kill*," said Isbe. "His every thought was pestilence."

"Tell something else," I insisted, and to my relief Isbe held my gaze for a moment and nodded submissively. She then told the story of the birth of Cradletop village, which was a safely apolitical, time-worn subject, and halfway through I crept away, having gotten my way with Isbe, and feeling old and ornery for it. But I intended to see if Isbe would obey me even if I wasn't there.

Outside, the cold air soothed my injured palm. Likely there would be gravel bits to remove tomorrow. For now, I could live with the sting.

Part of what made my cave so covetous is the wide berth of sandy soil that separates it from the drop-off on the other side of the path. I have always been proud of my courtyard. I have planted protective pines around the rim. It is the flattest, most inviting piece of land for anyone journeying down the mountain- or anyone coming up. But now, with forty-odd people packed into the cave, even the sandy 'courtyard' wasn't far enough away from the sound and the heat. Near the entrance the donkeys had bunked for the night, steam rising from their bodies, and below us the distant cries of wild dogs cut through the mountain channel. I walked to the path, where the drop-off lay in wait. A few women were out there smoking saggy rolls of mountain sage and tobacco. The smell made me dizzy, slightly high. I turned away from the women, casually getting some air, so it seemed, or consulting the stars, which I might have done another night, but actually I was eavesdropping on Isbe with a sly levitating pebble.

Among the clamor for another story, Isbe cut through. "I was out looking for trouble when the avalanche came," she said, and her face glowed red in the firelight, her youth energizing her

pretty eyes. I could see it through the pebble- an advanced skill. But then again, I had fifty years of practice. “I went to the lowlands to look for a man,” she said, “and I found one.”

Isbe, realizing her audience was at least half kids, added, “Sometimes when a man and a woman find each other, a baby decides to live inside the woman,” and the kids had lots of questions about that, which she ignored.

“The world down there is not as ruined as we thought,” said Isbe. “In fact, it’s time to go down the mountain. It’s more than time! Women like me want men in their lives- and not just for a night. The War Between Men is over. The men still left in the lowlands are burnt out. We can rebuild the world together.” Through my eavesdropping pebble I could see her face shining as she spoke. She must really be in love.

“But how do we know it won’t happen again?” I said, striding back in, holding the talisman in one fist, surprising everyone, most of all myself. Isbe, comfortable in her fantasy, by the fire, looked at me contemptuously for a moment, then softened to pity, and I saw that in her own time she would be a great leader, perhaps already was one. She was so unusually attentive, showing up just when I needed her to prevent a crisis.

“Isbe,” I said, “What were you doing outside my cave? *Looking for trouble?*” I asked softly, not caring about our huge, gossiping audience.

“I was coming back from seeing my man,” said Isbe. “I was coming up the mountain path.” She laughed, a delicate, tinkling laugh coming from a delicate, dangerous teenager.

“You weren’t afraid of the avalanche. I saw you.”

“The War Between Men is so, so over!” said Isbe. “It was over fifteen years ago. We are changing. We need to return.”

“The men of the lowlands warned us of the coming avalanche,” whispered a woman who until now had remained quiet, tending the fire. “Isbe took a great risk by traveling.”

“You knew?” I said, shocked.

“You didn’t?” said the woman. She was Black, short haired and sweet-faced, young like Isbe, and seemed genuinely surprised, frowning at me like I might be joking.

“No,” I whispered. But I had noticed when our visitors dried up a few days ago. So this was why. Our mountains were no longer safe- *and everyone else knew it*. Suddenly the cave felt too crowded with smells and bodies, the electric lights I had strung up somehow both too strong and too weak. My hand throbbed and I wished I’d remembered to change the bandage.

“Like Gabe,” said Isbe pointedly, “Angelyn didn’t know because she has no contact with lowlands people.”

“Don’t talk about Gabe,” said the Black woman softly. “He was a friend.”

“You can’t deny that he is dead because he refused to heed the warning! He was the only one to disregard what the lowlands men said, and he is the only one dead.”

“How do you know anything about Gabe?” I said quickly to Isbe, not wanting her to continue on her antagonizing tirade. “You aren’t from Cradletop.”

She stared at me dully. “No. I’m from Two Rocks. But village people know each other better than you can imagine.”

I could see from her snide posturing that Isbe was right and I had committed a faux pas. Despite their disagreement, the two women knew each other- well. Two Rocks and Cradletop were less than two day’s trek from each other. They had probably run into each other all their lives.

“Mikayla,” said Isbe, “How long til you think people from Two Rocks arrive?”

“Tomorrow morning,” said the Black woman, Mikayla, “at the very earliest. And that’s only if they left the village before the avalanche actually struck.”

My body was begging for sleep, but something was bothering me. “How did they know?” I addressed both women at once, to avoid looking like Isbe was the authority here. “The lowlands men, I mean. How did they know an avalanche was coming?”

“Satellites.” said Isbe at once.

“What?”

“It’s like your magic, but different. Their magic can predict the future,” she said, and smiled at me, pityingly, like I had smiled at her just a few hours before when she refused my original offer. “There’ll be lots of work tomorrow,” she said. “Let’s sleep.”

Even though the rocks were no longer falling, I felt threatened. Hadn’t I protected everyone as best I could? Weren’t we safe now? Tomorrow... I would get Isbe in line.

I took my blanket and pillow and laid them out uneasily in the kids’ bedroom, on the floor, among the refugees, hearing their breath all around me, and I knew we were doomed, but still I sank into a lovely apathy, hiding the talisman under my pillow and contributing my own breath to the hundred tendrils above us.

It was hard to sleep and even harder to wake. I rubbed my eyes, not wanting to snap at Lin first thing in the morning. She prodded my cheek again with her stubby finger. “Wakey-wakey, eggs and bakery,” she said.

“You don’t have to poke me again,” I said, “Message received. Are there actually eggs?”

She giggled.

“Lin?”

“No, there’s only mush,” she said. “With beans.”

“Go find Hugo,” I said, “And find something useful to do.” I didn’t tell her that getting me up had actually been very useful.

I rolled onto my back, forcing myself to stay up. The bedroom was quiet. It was unlike me to sleep past dawn. I felt under my pillow for the talisman and my fingers grabbed it reflexively, possessively.

Protecting our cave from the rock fall last night must have drained me more than I knew.

Outside, it was gray, not yet dawn- everyone else was just up early. Isbe was organizing the refugees from Cradletop into caravan order, distributing some semblance of breakfast- that must have been the mush- and which was, I'm sure, the full capacity of my supplies. Then she leapt onto the rock- like I had done last night- and parceled out the orders for the day.

"Mikayla has agreed to stay and await the next wave of refugees from Two Rocks," Isbe announced. "I will lead the way into the lowlands. I know it well enough. We will regroup at a place called Long Bridge. The men there can help us. I will return for the refugees from Two Rocks tomorrow."

I stepped forward. "I will go, too." This crisis is far from over, I almost added.

She looked at me irritated. Evidently I had interrupted her train of thought. "So you're awake."

"Is something wrong, Isbe?"

She got down from her perch. "If we want to have any hope of setting that woman's leg right, we need to leave- and soon," she said, ignoring my question.

"I understand that," I said, "I just wanted to say- you were so helpful to me last night, and- I'm sorry I snapped at you. About the story." I winced.

"The more you struggle to protect them, the less they know of how to survive," she said.

"I think I know when to let things rest," I said hotly.

"If you'll excuse me," she said, and meeting my eye coldly, she hurried away, giving instructions over her shoulder as she passed younger children, helping to hitch the donkeys, like she was the one that lived there.

I threaded my way through the crowd, rubbing the sleep from my eyes, subtly, I hoped, looking for Hugo and Lin- two that, despite everything, surely needed me- but I ran into Mikayla and her mother instead. Her mother had lighter, wrinklier skin than Mikayla did, and the efficient

movements of someone in such a rush she could hardly bear to take a breath. She wore the same loose green pants that her daughter wore, since they were made and worn by all Cradletop residents.

She and Mikayla together folded a blanket, walking in towards each other, that within it contained nearly all their supplies in the world- small metal tins stuffed with seeds or dried powders, dented spoons that chattered together like teeth, and a well-loved paperback, prewar by the looks of it. Mikayla's mother tied the blanket deftly into a tufted square, and smiled at me with just a tiny twitch of the mouth, as if she were conserving movement. She secured the blanket in her pack. If she had had four arms she couldn't have moved more quickly. I looked closely at her and realized she had a tiny bundle tucked against her chest. So that bundle- presumably a baby- was why Mikayla was staying and she was fleeing to the lowlands.

"Mikayla," I said, "Goodmorning. Can I talk to you."

"Sure." She looked at me expectantly.

She didn't intend to walk away from her family. "Here is fine." I said unnecessarily. "It's about Isbe. Is she ok? She- I don't know her very well. But it seems she has some-" I wanted to say, she has some antagonism towards me, but I realized I was being totally unfair, as Isbe was a refugee and I was not- yet.

"It just seems like there's something else going on," I finished lamely.

"Yes," said Mikayla's mother, who was apparently capable of divvying up their supplies into two smaller packs and speaking simultaneously. Two knives- one in each bag. Two first-aid kits- which were very, very expensive in the mountains. Two twisted apples.

"The first of the people from Two Rocks has arrived. Isbe's family is not among them."

"Ah," I said. There was such a sea of commotion in the little courtyard that constituted the mouth of the cave and the wide trail before it that I hadn't noticed any more people joining us.

"I'm sure they'll arrive any minute," Mikayla put in hurriedly, "They were among the most prepared in either village."

“Now if you’ll excuse us-” said Mikayla’s mother- “The caravan should be leaving any minute...”

It was a caravan in name only, but still, I got the hint. I nodded again to Mikayla, as much thanks as I could give her, realizing she was preparing to say good-bye to her mother.

As I walked back through the makeshift camp, the women shouting, the steam rising, the idiot kids playing too close to the edge of the trail, I tried to regain my grace, my sense of confidence I had had only twenty-four hours before. I shook off the ursine feeling of sleeping too late, the sun now rising pink over the eastern peaks. In my pocket I had the talisman- an exquisite headband that held back the hair, lioness-like, vibrating as it always did with blue thread and macroscopic purple birds, each no wider than a pencil, and each embedded with glinting ruby eyes, a shiny display of power, prowess and authority, uniquely held by my line of witches. The diadem focused the mind. Allowed one to manipulate latent life, not humans, but everything else, practically.

I put it on.

I saw, to my pleasure, that Hugo and Lin were helping to rub down the donkeys and to feed them uncooked oatmeal and tufts of mountain grass carefully plucked from the rockfalls not far from camp. No one, as far as I knew, had gone to investigate where the boulders from last night had landed. If refugees from Two Rocks had already arrived, surely, thankfully, the paths were clear.

“Go pack,” I reminded both of them. They did so immediately. They probably hadn’t been sure if we were staying or leaving until that moment.

I wanted to catch Isbe before we left, as she would be at the front and I at the rear. I didn’t want to leave things as awkward as they had been, especially given that we had a pact now. She would be a part of my life. The air was clogged with impatient snorts of beings in line, waiting for the go signal. I hurried back to the cave and packed: oats, scrolls, batteries, socks, medicine kit, hat, nuts, canteen, a chapter book for each of the kids. Orange. Flashlight. Knife. That should be enough.

Isbe leapt back onto the speaking rock. I had before used that rock to pound out flours and to dye shirts, but in the past twenty-four hours it had served well as a podium. “Everyone line up now!” She called. If she was grieving prematurely for her family, she kept it out of her voice. I came out of the cave, turning the lights off behind me. She locked eyes with me, and I felt as special as if she was a rock star. “And you,” she said. “I’m challenging you for possession of the talisman.”

“Um,” I said cleverly. In all the ways I had imagined my first challenger, she had always been- older.

She leapt down again, bending her knees to stick the landing. She looked for all the world as sleek and calm as a wild puma. “Everyone else get in order,” she yelled around her shoulder without looking. “This won’t take long.”

I backed up to get a good look at her, to give myself more time. I could fight her. She was young, strong, and filled with so much fire she could hardly stand it. Unskilled, yes, but ready to lead, and the trails down to the lowlands demanded a leader.

I, on the other hand, knew more magic, and I could probably kill her. Should I? I had made a lifelong pact with this woman just yesterday.

Kill, maybe- but I couldn’t afford to be injured in the process.

But there was another way this could end. My heart pounded. A lonely crow cawed overhead.

“Take it,” I said, holding out the talisman. “Lead us down.” I will teach you later, I thought to myself. A moment passed. Was everyone watching us?

She reached out and took it, not quite daring to believe her luck, not quite able to hide her smirk. I felt relieved without it. That talisman indicated the most powerful witch in the area, and

even if she had never levitated a pebble, with the talisman she would be able to lift boulders. But I was sure she had some latent ability. Developing it subtly would be another task.

I myself had held it for twenty-five years. Yet I felt okay. As long as I could guide Isbe, she could be a great witch. And we would need a great witch where we were going. Clearly she had something I didn't- knowledge of the lowlands.

"That's it?" she asked, softly.

"Go ahead," I said. "Lead. I will teach you how to use it as we go."

Suddenly her hand shot up, showing everyone the talisman clutched in her fist. A slow clap rolled through the camp.

She was so capable. I felt something in my chest as I watched her. It felt like birds taking off. "Let's go, then, I said. "Perhaps the men of the lowlands will surprise us yet."

