

Stand
on
the
Sky

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Erin Bow

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Scholastic Canada Ltd.

Toronto New York London Auckland Sydney
Mexico City New Delhi Hong Kong Buenos Aires

Scholastic Canada Ltd.

604 King Street West, Toronto, Ontario M5V 1E1, Canada

Scholastic Inc.

557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012, USA

Scholastic Australia Pty Limited

PO Box 579, Gosford, NSW 2250, Australia

Scholastic New Zealand Limited

Private Bag 94407, Botany, Manukau 2163, New Zealand

Scholastic Children's Books

Euston House, 24 Eversholt Street, London NW1 1DB, UK

www.scholastic.ca

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Bow, Erin, author

Stand on the sky / Erin Bow.

Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-1-4431-6379-8 (hardcover).--ISBN 978-1-4431-6380-4 (ebook)

I. Title.

PS8577.O7525S73 2019

jC813'.6

C2018-904388-1

C2018-904389-X

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6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in Canada 114

19 20 21 22 23

*For my late sister Wendy, who was Serik when I was Aisulu.
Kiddo, it's a little late, but I wanted to say that I would have
done anything to save you.*

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Chapter One

THERE WAS NO SIGN of Serik's horse.

Aisulu and her brother, Serik, had searching for almost two hours. They'd followed footpaths and goat paths, tracked through sand and skulls and sharp-cornered stone. "Well," said Serik. "That's it. Dulat's going to kill me. I'm going to die."

Aisulu slung an arm around her brother's shoulders. "You think that's bad? I'm going to have to do *embroidery*."

They were standing together on top of a shale outcropping, which they'd climbed to use for a lookout. Above them the sky was high and huge and bright, wheeled with birds. Below them the mountain swept away, fierce and dry and the colour of foxes. They could see up to the snow line and down to the power lines and the road. They could see the tracks of the goat herds and the hollow with the three tent-houses — the gers — where their herding family lived. What they could not see was any trace of stupid horses that had wandered off while their riders lay napping in the sun.

And the trouble they were going to be in was feeling less and less like a joke. Aisulu had been fetching water when Serik had come to her for help. Water was her job because she was a girl. She'd hauled pails of water up the mountain so many times that the wire handles had left raised yellow lines at the roots of her fingers.

Right now, Aisulu was meant to be bringing that water back. She was meant to be doing the morning milking of the yaks. Was meant to be churning that milk into butter. There was no chance she hadn't been missed. Their mother, Rizagul, was probably already planning the embroidery project that Aisulu would have to start when she returned. Rizagul never missed a chance to school Aisulu in girls' work. Aisulu did not mind girls' work, but she liked other things too: tending the solar panels that powered their light bulb and their radio, studying math, and riding fast with her arms stretched out like wings. In a land where girls are supposed to have hearts made of milk, Aisulu had a heart made of sky.

And as for Serik . . . Aisulu might have needlework waiting for her, but Serik might have the whack of a folded belt. At fourteen, he was really too big to take a beating — but if he lost his horse their uncle Dulat might make an exception.

On top of the shale outcrop, Serik stood with his head tipped back. He was watching the birds circling overhead. They were huge and black against the sky, a pair of golden eagles. Aisulu knew them well. She'd seen them all season, swooping

in and out from a certain crag high up the mountain. For a while there had been only one eagle — the father — but now there were two again. That meant their eggs had hatched.

She watched Serik watching the birds. Serik, her brother: in their faces, they were almost as alike as twins: the same moon-roundness, the same eyes like sunlight through dust, the same wind-burned cheeks, dappled as red as the sunny side of an apple. In the last year, Serik had suddenly grown tall — sprouting in both height and awkwardness — while Aisulu had remained small for twelve, though wiry-strong, and sure-footed as a cat. But as little children they had been inseparable as a pair of puppies. Even now, at an age when girls and boys were pulled apart, they stuck together.

Except. Serik was watching the eagles with a look she didn't understand, a longing so fierce it was almost like pain, or fear. His hand was squeezed tightly around his leg, above one of his knees.

“Hey?” Aisulu elbowed him. “Lost horse? Remember?”

Serik shook himself. “Strong Wind!” he shouted.

It was unusual among their people — the Kazakhs of Western Mongolia — to name animals, but children did it, of course. Serik had named his horse Strong Wind because, he said, the horse was fast. Aisulu had agreed to call him that because, she said, the horse was also prone to farting.

Serik cupped his hands to make a megaphone. “Strong Wind!”

Only the regular wind answered. The sun was warm but the air was turning chill.

Serik dropped his hands. “Now what?”

“I don’t know,” said Aisulu. “Maybe we could follow his smell?”

“Shut up,” he said, brotherly. Then he sighed. Together — bracing each other and offering hands — they edged and slid down the shale face. Back on the ground, Aisulu slapped her coat to shake the dust from it. The coat was her brother’s old shapan, knee-length and made of corduroy. It had been black when Serik had worn it, but now it was so faded that it looked like a chalkboard covered in eraser marks. The scant bits of embroidery around the collar were fraying, and the wind whipped the gold threads into her black hair.

“Your horse,” she declaimed, helping Serik down the last step, “is dumb as two bags of rocks and a Russian tourist.” She wrinkled her nose and tucked strands of loose hair behind her ears. To her mother’s endless exasperation, Aisulu had trouble keeping her hair neatly braided. “What next?”

“We should check the high meadow.” Serik bounced a bubble of air from cheek to cheek. Under his jean jacket, he was wearing a Mickey Mouse sweatshirt. Mickey alone was smiling. “But — the herd was up there. We’ll probably run into them.”

He meant their father and their uncles.

He meant their oldest uncle, Dulat, with the empty eyes.

The bounce drained slowly out of Serik. He smeared his hands down his jeans. As he did, Aisulu saw something. There was a place in his leg — the place he'd been squeezing — and when he touched it, he flinched from his own hands, like a horse with a sore mouth overreacting to the reins. As she watched he squeezed again, seeking measurement of pain in a way that only humans do.

She'd seen him do this before. She'd seen a shadow of a limp that was beginning to change Serik, to darken him. She did not think anyone else had seen it. He hid it, and she did not blame him for that. They lived in a hard country. A goat with a limp got no help, except perhaps into the stew pot.

Serik caught Aisulu watching him and dropped his hand from his leg. He tugged his skullcap down and rubbed a knuckle into the middle of his forehead. "Look, Aish. You don't have to come. I can walk up."

"Serken, don't be stupid." He'd used her childhood nickname, and so she used his, though he'd almost outgrown it. They were on the edge of something, some big change. For a moment they looked at each other. "Look, we'll go up together, okay?" She offered him a fist to bump.

He hesitated, and then bumped her fist back. "Okay."

Aisulu whistled, and her horse, Moon Spot, came trotting. "See?" She grinned at Serik. "You can teach them to come when you call!"

"Oh, shut up," he answered, and slapped her arm.

She hit him back, because she loved him, and because he was her brother.

And then they rode up together, toward the high meadow, into the empty sky.

* * *

Doubled up on Moon Spot's back, Aisulu and Serik followed a goat path all the way to the high bowl. It was where their family herd had been that morning, but when they finally reached its rim, there was not a goat or an uncle in sight. Just an empty meadow of green grass and blue poppies.

"They're not here," said Serik.

"You're kidding! Really?" said Aisulu. But her heart wasn't in the teasing. Meeting their family would have gotten them into trouble — but not meeting them meant there was something wrong. Why would the herd not be here? The grazing was good — it was June, and in Mongolia that meant earliest summer, a time when the high meadows were soft but the weather was breakable.

The weather was breaking now. Overhead, shining streaks of cloud were sweeping past them like ribbons flung into the wind.

"I don't get it." Serik got down. "Where else would they go?"

"Farther up? Or back home?" Aisulu dismounted and climbed up to the rim of the meadow to look back the way they'd come. And from there, she saw it: Clouds were banked

behind the ridge of mountains across the valley. Snow reached down from them with long purple fingers. A summer blizzard. Aisulu froze.

Serik had come up beside her. "Aish . . ." Her shortened name puffed out like a prayer. "We should go."

Yes. They should go. The blizzard might come fast. Their parents had taught them: Find shelter and you'll be fine. Don't and you could die. They needed to get back to their camp. But Aisulu said: "Without your horse?"

Serik chewed on his lip, and his hand sought the sore spot in his leg again. Aisulu watched him squeeze it. She could almost feel the stabbing throb. To lose a horse . . . The thought bruised her heart. Moon Spot was eating poppies while the wind pulled her mane and tail like banners. She made a picture: a grey horse with a black mane among the blue flowers. Moon Spot was not afraid. Aisulu tried not to be afraid either. "Home is down," she said. "But to look for Strong Wind, we should go up."

On the far side of the bowl was a high pass, where the mountain rubbed shoulders with another mountain. A faint track of bare sand and clay ran up it. There was another meadow on the other side of that pass, she knew. When last she had snuck away riding, she'd found it full of globe thistles, a favourite of horses. They'd been tight as fists then, but they would be open now. A horse might be drawn to them.

Aisulu whistled Moon Spot over and mounted. "Strong

Wind would go up,” she said. “Because otherwise we would have met him on the way down.” That wasn’t true — the mountain was full of folds and hidden places. After all, they’d somehow missed the whole goat herd. But Aisulu thought a horse like Strong Wind would follow the paths, because he had no brains. She thought he would go to the thistles.

Serik squeezed his leg again, as if he’d forgotten she was watching. “We’ll climb to the pass and look.” He did not say *and then we will go home*, but she could hear it in his silence.

We will check one place and then we will leave my horse.
That was the thing he was not saying.

There was pain in Serik’s face.

Aisulu understood it. They say in Mongolia that mares don’t win medals — meaning that girl horses are slow and girl riders are slower. Most girls couldn’t ride, but Aisulu could. Her father put his horses in the great fall races every year, and when Serik at nine had grown too big and heavy to ride them, Aisulu at seven had learned to make them fly. She was fast the way foxes are fast — she had quick ears and eyes, and she could make a gallop swerve sideways without even shifting in her seat. And she had won medals, a few, that hung on a square of velvet with her father’s old wrestling medals and snapshots of her grandfather holding his great hunting eagle.

She loved horses. She loved Moon Spot. If Aisulu lost Moon Spot, the way Serik was losing Strong Wind . . . It

was the biggest thing she could imagine losing, and even the brush of the thought was crushing.

But she had no time for such worries. She pulled her brother up onto the horse behind her. With the blizzard chasing them and their bodies pressed together, they rode fast. They swept across the bowl of poppies and climbed toward the pass. Moon Spot's muscles bunched and surged between Aisulu's legs. The horse's body felt warm, suddenly, because the wind had turned cold. The smell of the air sharpened.

At the highest point of the pass was a shrine to the sky. It was made of stones — from small boulders to fist-sized rocks — that were heaped up into a pile about thirty feet across and fifteen feet high. Poles were thrust into the top of the pile, wound with scarves and banners of blue silk. Aisulu and Serik skirted the shrine until they had a view of the northern slope.

Behind them, across the valley, the nearest peak wrapped itself in grey clouds like a woman wrapping up her hair. Beside them the banners of the shrine tattered and snapped. Before them the high meadow swept downward.

The storm was at their backs, but north-slope meadow was still sunny, crossed by quick-moving shadows from streaming clouds. It was full of songbirds, and full of thistles, and on the far side was the thumb-sized figure of Serik's horse.

Serik got down and dashed forward, a staggering limp in his run. He put two fingers in his mouth and stretched it to give a sharp whistle.

Strong Wind's head came up.

Strong Wind's head went back down.

He went back to his thistles.

"Two bags of rocks . . ." said Aisulu.

"... and a Russian tourist. I'm not arguing! Strong Wind!" Serik shouted at the top of his lungs, but the wind whipped and tattered his words away.

From the back of her own, much better horse, Aisulu snorted. "That will never work. We'll have to go get him."

Serik turned and looked at her. Then he looked past her, and his eyes went wide.

Aisulu turned, and there was the blizzard, close and solid as a wall.

"Wait here!" she shouted. "Take cover!"

She squeezed her knees and stretched her body over Moon Spot's back. She dug her heels in hard. They ran.

Moon Spot streaked across the meadow, and Aisulu, bareback, moved in the way she remembered from the great races, so that it was all effort and no impact. It felt as if they were skimming across the ground, hearts beating hard, hooves hardly touching the earth. Strong Wind saw them coming. He lifted his dull brown head and whinnied. He had a racing name, but Moon Spot had a racing heart.

Horse and rider looped around Strong Wind like a dog around a stray cow. Moon Spot swept into a tight turn, and Aisulu leaned far into it, her knees squeezing in, the horse's huge muscles surging as if they were her muscles. The speed was contagious: Strong Wind caught it. Moon Spot ran back toward the sky shrine and Strong Wind ran behind her, reins flying, his saddle blanket sliding under its strap. They were back to Serik just as the blizzard struck.

Serik grabbed Strong Wind by the reins. "This way!" he shouted, pointing.

The snow was suddenly all around them. From her height on horseback, Aisulu could not even see the end of Serik's fingers. But she followed him as he dragged Strong Wind around toward the sheltered side of the shrine. Aisulu saw that Serik had not just been waiting for them — he'd saved them. He'd shifted the rocks to make a V-shaped cove in the stones.

She swung to the ground and ran to help him, making the cove bigger and deeper even as the needles of snow pierced her fingers. Serik was wearing a sweatshirt and a denim jacket, jeans, and sneakers with the Velcro worn out. Aisulu's hand-me-down shapan was just corduroy and felt padding. The shapan might have been warm when it had been Serik's, but now the padding was lumpy and thin. Neither of them was dressed well enough to survive a blizzard. They both knew that.

The cove that Serik had opened was tiny. Aisulu thrust herself to the back of it and kept moving stones. Even though she was tucked down, the wind swirled stray hairs from the crown of her head. Serik worked beside her, their shoulders knocking. In just a few moments they had made a niche in the stones big enough for both of them.

“It can’t be big enough for the horses,” he said. They could not enlarge their shelter that much without tools, without time. Aisulu knew that, and yet she wanted to try.

“They’ll be all right, Aish,” said Serik.

Moon Spot was a wild little thing, still shedding her winter coat. Both horses were sturdy, shaggy, small, and wild: Mongolian horses, hardy as the plants that grew in the cracks of cliffs.

Aisulu told herself that as she left them in the cold.

Aisulu usually rode bareback, but Serik used a folded rug in place of a saddle. Now, he unstrapped it from Strong Wind and brought it into the cove. His elbow jabbed Aisulu as he unfolded it. The rug was not much bigger than a prayer mat — two feet across, four feet long. It was stiff with dirt and horse sweat, but it was made of thick felt and it would be warm. Serik shoved it into her hands and darted away. In two steps he had vanished into the snow, but in five breaths he was back. He had stolen the blue silk from the sky poles.

They bunched the silk up under them. They huddled

down and pulled the blanket up over their bodies and their heads. Darkness fell.

* * *

Aisulu and Serik huddled under the saddle blanket with the summer blizzard raging above them. The wind slipped in around the edges, and the blanket began to grow heavy with snow. Cold soaked up from the stones, but the silk protected them from the worst of it. Above them the blanket made a tiny tent. In it they lay face-to-face in dimness, their knees tucked together, their breath steaming.

It was cold, but not deadly cold. They were not going to die.

Aisulu made a soft fist and banged Serik in the heart, because he was her brother and he'd saved them. "Good thinking, with the rocks."

He hit her back. "Good finding, with the horse." He breathed out hard. "I think we'll be okay."

"Okay?" She made her voice light to cover her nerves. "This is perfect! We're not even going to get in trouble." When they came staggering down out of the storm, brave and clever survivors, their parents would simply be glad to see them.

Or at least, they would be glad to see Serik.

Kazakhs nomads live in big families, ruled by the eldest brother: in their case, their uncle Dulat, who was fierce as a king. But Dulat had no children, and so if he was a king,

then Serik was a prince. And if Serik was a prince, he was a shining one. He was fast, and sweet, and funny. He could ride anything from a billy goat to a bull yak, and his name had been Aisulu's first word: she'd learned it because her mother was always shouting it across the steppes. *Serik, get down from there! Serik, come back!*

And yet, for Serik, their mother's scolding had never been truly angry. Serik was a handful, but a handful was what he supposed to be. Aisulu was a handful too, but that was different.

She was not sure her mother would be quite as happy to see her.

But that was for later. For now, they lay together. The blizzard went on. Serik kept shifting and shifting, which let the cold come in to brush against Aisulu with its blue hands. "Hold still," she said when a shift tugged the blanket up to expose the nape of her neck. Serik held still for a while. But then he shifted again, slowly, as if trying to sneak the movement by her. Aisulu realized: he was lying with his weight on the painful spot in his leg. "Do you want to switch?" she asked.

It would be risky for them to roll over. It would let out all the heat they'd hoarded. Serik did not seem to understand. He said nothing.

"Turn over," she said. "Take the weight off your sore leg?"

She felt how her words hit him. He pulled a breath in

and held very still. “There’s nothing wrong with my leg.”

“Nobody sees it.”

But she saw it.

For a moment they were both speechless, breathing into each other’s faces. They were very close together. They loved each other. Surely they could say anything. “How long has it hurt?” Aisulu whispered. “Have you told anyone?”

Aisulu’s nose was full of her brother’s smell: boy sweat and horse sweat, but something else, too, something sharp and angry, a smell that made her heart twist. Something — he was sick, she realized. The thought punched the air out of her. It was the kind of blow that is so bad that for a moment all you feel is numbness.

Aisulu felt numbness. She felt tears make her eyes wide.

“It’s nothing,” Serik mumbled.

“It’s not!”

“It will heal itself.”

“But what if it doesn’t? Serik, what if something is really wrong? We have to tell someone. Tell Mother — tell Father.”

“Don’t you dare. *Don’t you dare.*”

“But it might be . . .” she said, then stopped. She didn’t know what the limp might be. It wasn’t as if they had diagnosed all those doomed limping goats.

Serik jerked out of her arms and thrust the blanket up.

He pulled himself into a stiff crouch. The blizzard swirled in. The gathered snow slid onto their shoes. “Switch, then,”

he said. “If you know what’s best. If you think you’ve got all the answers. Let’s just switch.”

Silent, Aisulu rolled into his space. And then he lay down again, in her space, still facing her, but this time on his other leg. It was cold for a little while, and then it warmed again.

“Serken . . .”

“Don’t you get it?” Serik’s voice was low and rough. They were so close that she could feel the hitch in his breath. His hands were curled into fists between them, but he did not hit her — whatever this pain was, it was not one that could connect them. “Don’t you get it, Aish? I can’t — I can’t stay here if I’m limping. I can’t ride with the herd, or wrestle the goats, or — any of it. They’ll send me away.”

Serik, the golden child, the prince. He wanted the life that left Aisulu wanting more. But how could a boy with a limp rule a nomad family?

“They won’t — they’d never —” She curled a hand up and tapped it against his heart. “Serken — together. We’ll tell them together.”

“No!” The space between them was tiny, but his arms stiffened in it. He was pushing her away. “Don’t you dare, Aish. I’ll lose everything.” The stones under them were hard. The snow over them was heavy. “If you tell, I’ll lose everything,” said Serik, and Aisulu knew he was probably right. “And I’ll never forgive you, Aish. I’ll hate you forever.”

Aisulu fell silent. Her throat felt as if it had been wound

up in wire. It got tighter, and tighter, until she thought it might stop her breath. She huddled with her brother in the darkness as the wind howled and the snow fell, weighing them down.