

# THE THIEF WHO



# SANG STORMS



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Scholastic Press / New York

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Originally published in English in Great Britain by Usborne Publishing.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

ISBN 978-1-338-87543-0

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

23 24 25 26 27

Printed in the U.S.A. 37

First edition, May 2023

Book design by Maeve Norton

## CHAPTER ONE

# SNAILS AND TUBERS

I'm knee-deep in mud, wiggling my toes in the warm gloop, searching for snails and tubers for dinner. Nightingale is perched almost directly above me, on a thick branch of the red maple tree that overhangs the dirt road.

It's a late afternoon in early spring, but it's hotter than a midsummer day. The sun's rays are thrumming down, baking my neck and making my head feathers lift in futile hope of finding a breeze. The air is thick and heavy. If only the temperature would dip slightly, I feel sure a rainstorm would come. We need rain to bring the swamp edges back to life.

Nightingale and I come here, to the lee-side edge of the swamp, at least once a moon. I forage for food with Whiskers and Lumpy while Nightingale watches the road from the branch above us, waiting for a cart loaded with treasures to come past.

The last time we were here, there was a grassy hummock to sit on, and a narrow creek filled with clear, flowing

waters. I fished three fat trout from it using a bone hook on a milkweed line while a gentle rain made everything glisten.

But for the last moon, there has been a heat wave, and now the hummock is bare earth, cracked and dry. The reeds around me are brittle and yellowed, and the creek contains only a shallow, stagnant, mud-filled pool.

I blow upward, trying to cool the sweat-damp skin on my forehead; then I push my right foot cautiously forward, deeper into the mud. So far, I've found twelve large snails and eight arrowhead tubers—fat, round, edible roots—which is enough for a couple good meals. But if I can find a few more tubers, I'll be able to make flour from them tomorrow, by pulping them in water and then drying them in the sun's heat.

My toe hits something, and I lean down and push my hand gently into the mud, alert for the movement of anything that might bite or sting. My fingers close around another tuber, and I smile as I pull it out and carry it over to Lumpy. He's proudly guarding our little mound of food, which is tucked between two exposed roots of the maple tree. He croaks in approval as I place the tuber with the others, then uses his sword-leg to push a slowly escaping snail back onto the mound.

When I found Lumpy and Whiskers, two years ago, they were being attacked by a giant mud crab. Lumpy, who is about as big as my fist, was trying to defend Whiskers, who was only a palm-sized swamp-rat pup back then. Neither of

them stood a chance against the crab, who was wider than my arm is long. I scared the crab away by waving and banging a couple of sticks together, but both Whiskers and Lumpy had already been injured.

Lumpy had lost his front right limb in the attack. I kept him safe and caught beetles and crickets for him while he healed, and watched in amazement as a long, thin rod of cartilage with a spiked tip grew in place of his missing limb. This is what I call his sword-leg, and with it Lumpy can crawl as well as any toad, and he catches his own crickets now too. But he chooses to stay with me, even though he could leave any time he likes.

Lumpy glances up at me and winks one of his protruding, round eyes, then waves his sword-leg at the snail he pushed back, as if warning it not to attempt escape again. I give Lumpy a nod of thanks, then lean down to scratch Whiskers's head.

Usually, Whiskers would be foraging with me, but she's collapsed, belly to the ground, dozing in the heat. Whiskers is fully grown now, and as big as a large, fat cat. Her webbed back feet are splayed out behind her, and her white snout is resting on her brown front paws. White whiskers droop on either side of her snout like a long mustache, and her eyes are half-closed against the dazzle of sunlight, making her look calmer than I know she is.

Whiskers has always had a nervous disposition, perhaps because of the crab attack when she was a pup. Like Lumpy, Whiskers is independent and free to leave, but she never

wanders far from my side. And Lumpy and Whiskers never wander far from each other either. They have a special bond and their own way of communicating. Lumpy taps Whiskers with his sword-leg, and Whiskers grunts back at him. I have my own way of communicating with them both too, and I usually know what they're feeling from their posture and gestures.

Whiskers grunts without looking up, and I know she's longing to go back to our home-tree, in the cooler central swamp. We've been here by the red maple for at least an hour, but not a single cart has come past. Nightingale, unmoving on the branch above us, is still staring intently at the road though, showing no sign of giving up.

"Shouldn't be long now, Whiskers," I whisper hopefully, scratching her head again before I walk back to the muddy pool. As soon as I step into it, something unseen in the mud grabs my little toe and pinches so hard I clench my teeth to stop from crying out.

I pull my foot up and frown at the mud crab dangling from my toe. It releases its grip and scuttles away. It's only a small one, about as wide as my outstretched hand, but still Whiskers squeals and scrambles backward into a hollow beneath the maple's roots, her eyes rolling in panic.

"It's all right." I try to soothe Whiskers while wiggling my pinched toe in an effort to make the ache go away.

Nightingale makes a cooing sound from the branch above, like a pigeon, then holds out his left hand, palm down, which is his signal to be quiet and hide. I creep closer

to Whiskers, putting my finger to my lips to ask her to be silent, then duck down among the roots and reeds.

I'm well camouflaged in the swamp. In the years we've lived here, it seems like the swamp has crept over me. My head feathers, which are short and fluffy, used to be red and white, but during my last few molts—which is when old feathers shed and new ones grow—my feathers have become the mud brown and algae green of the swamp. And my skin, which used to be uniformly pinkish-white, is now freckled in shades of brown and green, like the dappled waters of a birch-shaded pool. Alkonost skin often changes color during molts, like our feathers, to satisfy the need to blend in or stand out.

Sometimes I feel like the swamp has seeped into my body too. I sense its tidal surges deep inside. It's hard to explain, but it's as if I can breathe easier when the tide rolls in and the water level rises, and I feel tension building in me when the tide rolls some of the swamp water away. Maybe that's why I feel on edge here, on the drier, far reaches of the swamp. Or maybe I feel on edge because of what Nightingale and I do here when a cart loaded with treasures comes past.

I hold my breath when I hear the clip-clop of shod hooves, along with the churning of wooden wheels on dry dirt. Nightingale's hand is still held out, palm down. *Stay down.* I lift my head just slightly to study the approaching horse and cart.

It's traveling from the direction of Spark, which is about



an hour's walk away on the low-lee-side coast. Two humans sit proudly on the shiny, well-oiled cart, and a smile grows on my face because they're the richest of pigeons—which is what Nightingale calls the royal courtiers who live in Pero Palace Complex.

The courtiers are men: tall and broad, and dressed in the luxurious blue silks and gold jewelry that only the most powerful members of the royal court wear. Their cart is loaded with parcels, bags, and boxes. It's easy to work out that they've spent the day shopping at the market in Spark and are now heading back to their homes in the palace complex, which is almost a day's walk from here, on the high-lee side of the island—which is the mountainous part of the lee side.

Nightingale begins to sing, and I stare up at him in wonder. He's beautiful, my father. His voice is sweeter than any sound on Earth, finer and more delicate than music from any instrument or any alkonost or human throat. Sweeter even than birdsong.

The feathers on his head are reddish-brown, like the rich mud of a cranberry bog, and are so long they trail past his shoulders. When we lived in Spark, my father's feathers had a bright iridescence that is now almost gone—but that's just as well, because here he needs to sit in the shadows, unseen. His russet skin has become rough and lined from living outdoors, and his eyes are huge dark pools that ebb and flow with all the sorrow and pain of being an alkonost, banished to the swamp. His beauty tells his story.

Nightingale's song flows out like the maple scent steaming off the tree he's hunched in. He's curved over like a vulture, his clawed feet gripping the branch tight. I've never seen another alkonost with feet like my father's.

When we lived in Spark, I remember people—alkonosts and humans—admiring both my father's feet and my mother's wings. Bird features used to be considered a precious gift from our ancestors. But these days all of us with feathers hide, from humans and from one another, because anyone might be a spy for Captain Ilya.

Bogatyrs often patrol the swamp, and any alkonost even suspected of singing magic is captured and taken to The Keep, which is a heavily fortified, densely guarded enclosure with towering stone walls. It sprang up in the Magicless Mountains not long after Captain Ilya took charge of Morovia, and anyone sent there is never seen again.

So when Nightingale and I cross paths with a bogatyr or anyone else in the swamp, we've perfected the art of slipping away unseen, dipping in and out of the muddy waters, or climbing silently through the trees. Occasionally, if the bogatyrs aren't wearing their magic-proof iron helmets, Nightingale might use his singing magic to conceal us, like he's doing now.

Nightingale's magic is to mesmerize and hypnotize with his songs. It only affects those who he looks directly at, which is why it's not affecting me right now. Before *Joy* sank, Nightingale worked in the hospital in Spark, soothing patients who were in pain or calming those who were

upset. I know Nightingale misses his old job and the opportunity to use his magic for something other than what we're about to do.

His slow, sweet song has entranced both the horse and the courtiers. Their eyes glaze over, and they come to a stop right beneath the maple tree. Nightingale, still singing, turns his hand so it is palm up. *Time to move.* Time to be a thief.