

# THEORIES OF FLIGHT

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## THEORIES OF FLIGHT

It began when he was five.

Working outside the enclave on a foggy afternoon, his father had gathered a mountain of dry brush and weeds and deadwood and set it on fire. Yaphet watched the flames climb through the pile, felt the heat in his cheeks, his gaze drawn upward to follow the spiraling smoke.

"Come, Yaphet, there's more work to do," his father called—but just then the pile collapsed. The force of it sent up a towering plume of smoke and ash and embers. A burnt leaf, edged in incandescence, rose up into the fog, higher and higher, halfway to the treetops before the glow of heat left it.

Never before had Yaphet seen a leaf fall up. He stood entranced, watching the flight of embers, until his father called him again.

\* \* \*

When he was seven—almost eight—after much experimentation and failure and reassessment (though he was too young to know such words or describe what he was

doing) Yaphet launched his first successful fire balloon.

The balloon's frame was made of thin ceramic struts that he'd grown in one of the vats in his father's atelier. He'd designed the struts to be like bird bones, honeycombed on the inside to keep them light. One, shaped in a circle, formed the base. He mounted a small pan within it to hold a packet of flammable rosin. White paper covered the frame.

The fire balloon was his own invention. Yaphet had not seen or heard of such a thing in his young life, though he'd watched the flight of ash and embers many times since that first time—and he'd felt compelled to try to harness the force that let objects fly away from the world.

His cousin Mishon was with him in the courtyard of his father's house when he lit the rosin. Yaphet didn't like Mishon much. She was a year older and seemed to think herself already grown up. She never ran about or played ball games or explored the orchards beyond the enclave's walls, and when she bothered to notice him it was only to make note of some fault or failure in the mechanical models he liked to build.

But she preferred the quiet of her uncle's house to the noisy chaos of her own home, filled with siblings, so she was often there, sharing her opinions.

"You've gone to a lot of trouble to make an ugly lantern," she observed.

The balloon's paper crackled, expanding under the pressure of heat and smoke. He held it until he felt it tug against his hand. Then he let it go.

It rose swiftly past the courtyard's eaves and up, into the blue afternoon sky.

Mishon squeaked in surprise, but Yaphet kept silent, kept his own fierce sense of triumph under wraps as he squinted against the glare of the afternoon, determined to observe the balloon for as long as he could.

With no wind blowing, it rose straight up. Immediately, he wished he had devised some means to measure its height and the speed of its ascent. He would do that next time. He could use a silk thread. It would weigh almost nothing, and he could mark off the units of measure.

The white balloon was bright in the sunlight, easily visible.

In the street outside the house a man shouted questions: "What is that in the sky? There? Do you see it?" He sounded offended, maybe a little afraid.

"It's climbing higher," a woman answered in astonishment. "But what is it? Is it an aerostat?"

"Move away! Move away!" another woman yelled, an older woman. Yaphet recognized the stern voice of the temple keeper. "It's gone too high. It's going to ignite the silver."

The balloon's ascent slowed. A small white object in the blue, surrounded now by shimmers of silver.

"*Yaphet.*" Mishon gripped his arm. "What is happening to your device?"

Yaphet wasn't sure. It looked as if luminous curls of silver fog were steaming from the fire balloon's surface. In seconds the silver expanded, consuming the balloon. But that was not the end of it. The silver boiled, becoming a glinting, gleaming cloud that billowed outward, doubling and then doubling again.

Too heavy to remain aloft, the cloud broke apart and began to fall.

\* \* \*

Silver was the name players gave to the fog of luminous particles that sometimes arose in the night. Silver seeped up out of the soil, flooding the land, forming a gleaming layer usually just a few inches deep, though in a great flood the silver might rise several feet.

Around the enclave of Vesarevi any appearance of silver was rare. But on those nights when the silver rose—no more than two or three times a year—Yaphet's father would take him to look at it, holding tightly to his hand as they walked together on the enclave's border wall. That wall stood twelve feet high. It existed to keep the silver out and the players safe within it.

"The goddess who created this world is not done yet in her task," his father would explain. "Each time the silver rises, it is her thought remaking the world."

At night, silver had the appearance of a dense fog, brightly luminous. If it arose on a slope, it would behave like a sluggish liquid and flow slowly downhill, but mostly it arose in low places and formed only a thin carpet that covered the meadows and the floor of the forest surrounding Vesarevi.

Only once had Yaphet seen a great flood. On that night, the silver rose halfway up the border wall. Yaphet came prepared to run a small experiment. He waited until his father's gaze was turned away, then dropped a small figurine into the flood. Somehow, his father saw. But to Yaphet's surprise he wasn't angry. "Why did you do that, Yaphet? Do you hope the goddess will change it?"

"I only want to know if it's true that she can."

"So you are testing her."

Yaphet had nodded, his serious gaze noting their precise location on the wall so that he could look for the figurine next morning when the sun had burned the silver away. But though he hunted for most of an hour he never found the figurine. It was not there, not in any form; but the face of the enclave's wall had been re-made so that it was glazed with white crystal to the height of the flood.

"The goddess will do as she will," his father explained that night over dinner. "Sometimes she touches objects but leaves them unchanged. Sometimes she changes their nature. Or she may take them away, like your figurine. Or she may restore them. But she never restores them as they were. They are always changed. And she will carry them far from their origin in both time and place.

"But no living thing can survive the touch of silver. No player or animal of any kind has ever returned from it. It is dangerous, Yaphet. Do not experiment with it. Too many players have died testing the ways of the goddess."

\* \* \*

*No living thing can survive the touch of silver.*

Yaphet remembered this as the silver cloud began to fall. He turned to Mishon. Her eyes were wide, her mouth round in shock. "Run away!" he shouted. "Hide under the eave. Don't let it touch you!"

She ran, but in an awkward, mincing gait. Yaphet risked one more glance up—in time to see that the falling silver was fading away. In only a few seconds it was gone. The danger had passed.

"It's all right," he said, turning to Mishon, wanting to reassure her, but he cried out in alarm when he saw her lying on her side beneath the eave, curled against the wall. Eyes closed. Face slack. A glint of drool at the corner of her mouth.

"Mishon!"

He raced to her. He shook her shoulder. "*Mishon*," he begged in a frantic whisper. "Mishon, wake up!"

Her eyelids fluttered. She looked at him, at first without recognition, but then awareness crept back into her gaze.

"Are you okay, are you okay?" he whispered. "You fell down. I don't know why. Maybe you got scared, but you fell down."

She did not try to get up, but she commanded him in an angry whisper, "Don't you tell anyone."

He would have complied, but it was too late. In through the courtyard gate came the temple keeper.

\* \* \*

Mishon was taken home.

Yaphet was made to explain himself to the temple keeper as his father stood by, angry and ashamed. When he was done, the keeper looked him in the eye and in a

stern voice she warned him, "Never do this again."

She explained to him what his father never had: that a dormant form of silver floated as particles high in the atmosphere. These particles gathered around any flying device until there were enough to ignite a silver storm even in sunlight.

"If the falling silver had touched you, you would have been consumed. Mishon would have been consumed. And your deaths might have ignited a silver storm all around you, potent enough to destroy our homes, our families, all of us. That is why no enclave will allow flying machines. Do you understand?"

One phrase of the temple keeper's lecture eclipsed all her other words. "Flying machines?" Yaphet asked. "Are there such things?"

"No," the keeper told him firmly. "There are not. Because every player foolish enough to be misled by such things has become outcast and died on the road."

\* \* \*

Yaphet had questions. Always questions.

"Have you ever seen a flying machine, Papa?"

"No, and I hope that I never will."

"If it is a *machine*, does that mean it's a mechanic?"

Mechanics were machine creatures. They existed in great variety. Tiny mechanics lived in the vats in his father's atelier and did the work of assemblage, but there were wild mechanics too, as large as rabbits or small dogs.

"There are no flying mechanics, Yaphet."

"Well, if flying machines are not mechanics, then they must be made by human hands."

"No. No longer. Not in our turn of history. Flying machines are wicked. Deadly dangerous. Stories are told of whole enclaves disappeared within a silver storm brought on by a rogue player who thought to fly."

This was another concept Yaphet had not yet considered. His eyes grew round, his heart raced with excitement. "Papa, can a flying machine really be made large enough to carry a player into the sky?"

His father's gaze grew harsh. Anger clipped his voice. "Such a machine would only carry a player to their death. Do not think on it. Now go do your chores."

\* \* \*

Yaphet was only a child, but already it was clear to him that people believed many things without understanding. In contrast, Yaphet always strove to understand *why*.

Alone in his room, he held the glass tablet of his savant and asked it to search its library for anything at all about flying machines.

It answered in sad apology, using a young man's voice. "Your father has asked me not to discuss this subject." Then, in a hopeful tone, "Shall we return to mathematics instead? I have compiled an overview of airflow and pressure that I believe will interest you. And when we are done with that, we might make a study of dragonflies and birds."

The intelligence housed within the glass tablet was based on the persona of a genial young scholar who had lived a brief but influential life in some ancient turn of history.

Yaphet had been a scholar too, in his past lives. No one who met him could doubt it. He learned swiftly, so that the savant was not so much his teacher as his guide, helping him to find order in a maze of knowledge. With each new subject they explored, a key turned in Yaphet's mind, unlocking memories of what he'd once known—not the personal memories, but the skills and knowledge he had accumulated over many, many lifetimes.

The savant would sometimes tease him, "You are such a prodigious scholar, I think sometimes you must be me!"

This was a joke, because in personality they were nothing alike. Yaphet was so

often somber and serious that the lighthearted persona of the savant delighted in the challenge of drawing a smile from him.

\* \* \*

Mishon had been so frightened by the incident of the fire balloon that she never returned to the house, but Yaphet did not miss her. There were many children in the enclave happy to run and play and explore with him.

As he grew older he spent more time working with his father in the atelier, designing truck parts and hunting rifles and furniture and other things ordered by the players of Vesarevi or by passing truckers.

He designed the specifications of engines, too. This work he based on traditional designs, but he did not just copy. Instead, he taught himself the function of each part and worked the math behind it, making modifications when he thought it might improve efficiency.

He also made plans and drawings that he kept hidden from his father.

\* \* \*

At sixteen, Yaphet took a job as an errand rider even though he knew his father would object.

"An errand rider! That is an occupation for a player with no education. You are a scholar bound for University and you should spend your time preparing for that."

Yaphet had already designed his argument. "The more I see of the world, the more I learn of the world—and of myself."

He was more stubborn than his father, and soon he was riding a battered old motorbike on a trail that wound through the forested hills around Vesarevi before zigzagging down a steep cliff face to the enclave of Miamey—a precarious route, but faster by a day than the highway the truckers used, which skirted the hills and passed another enclave on the way.

Yaphet liked to stay overnight in Miamey, returning late the next day—or so he told his father. In truth, he would start the ride back as soon as his errand was done, but part way through the hills he'd leave the main trail, following a faint track to a remote valley where no one ever came.

In some past time a silver flood had washed over that valley, leaving scattered follies. On the valley floor where there must have once been a meadow, a sloped pavilion of white stone ran for a quarter mile alongside the stream, smooth but for the weeds that grew in the cracks. And in the surrounding forest there were nine tiny buildings made of black stone that might have been tombs in another turn of history, though they were empty now.

Yaphet used one of the tombs to store paper and frames and rosin, and he slept in it overnight, risking the silver so that he could run his experiments without harm to Vesarevi—and without incurring the wrath of his father and other players who lived there.

He built a fleet of fire balloons, sending them aloft only in the evenings and the early mornings when he was sure no one would be on the trail. These experiments taught him the height at which an object would ignite the particulates of silver—and he concluded it should be possible for a flying machine to survive if it stayed below that elevation.

One night when he was camped in the valley the silver came. He smelled the fresh cold scent of it seconds before it appeared—time enough that he was able to climb to the roof of the tomb.

His breath was ragged with fear as he watched the rise of the luminous fog. It carpeted the forest floor, hiding it beneath a flood that swirled and flowed with slow currents. He imagined he could hear in it whispers of an ancient language unknown to him.

Yaphet knew that if the silver rose high enough there would be no escape for

him—but after an hour it was only knee high. Fear became fascination, and he stayed awake all night to watch.

Yaphet's father explained the silver as the thoughts of the goddess—many players believed the same—but Yaphet had begun to wonder if it was something less ethereal, a mechanism, a machine devised in some ancient turn of history when phenomena were explained by structure and mathematics, and not through stories.

But the silver did not reveal its mysteries to him that night.

In the morning, after the last trace of the flood had dissolved in sunlight, he climbed down from the tomb to find his cache of fire balloons turned to multicolored stone.

No matter. He had the data he needed. It was time to move on to the next phase of his plan.

\* \* \*

He built a small flying machine, a working model, with a wingspan only as wide as his outstretched arms—just big enough to let him test his theories of flight. The frame was made of flexible, honeycombed ceramic, each rod and strut custom-grown in his father's atelier. For the surface of the wing he used a white metallic cloth, light and strong, that he stretched and clipped in place.

Suspended beneath the wing was a small electric engine of his own design that would propel the flying machine through the air. He had no means to steer the model—steering would come later—so to ensure he couldn't lose it, he set the engine to run for only twenty seconds at a time.

On a windless morning under a bright blue sky he carried the little flying machine to the top of the pavilion for its first test flight. If it worked, it could fly as far as a quarter mile above the white stone before it encountered the trees—though he didn't expect it to fly that far.

He held the model waist high. Switched on the silent engine. Air rushed past him, and the flying machine bucked as it strove to escape his grip. He positioned it so that its nose was slightly up, and he let it go.

It shot away, wobbling a bit from side to side, but climbing steadily, five feet, ten feet, fifteen feet above the pavilion. He ran hard, trying to keep up with it, leaping over the weeds. He began to fear it would go too high and ignite the silver, or go too far and crash into the trees.

But near the lower end of the pavilion the engine switched off. The flying machine stalled and began to fall. It struck the stone floor before he could catch it.

It didn't matter. The experiment was a success. He jumped in elation, punched his fist in the air. *It had worked!* He wanted to shout, but he stayed silent. Silent and secret, always. No one else could ever know.

He retrieved the little flying machine, checked it for damage, found none, and launched it again. After many test flights he felt confident in his design. He would scale it up and build a new flying machine, one big enough to carry his weight and more.

But not right away.

Yaphet had built devices all his life, so his father hadn't questioned him about the small rods and struts he'd grown for this first small flying machine. But the large parts required by his new machine would certainly generate questions. So Yaphet waited. Each year his father traveled to a weeklong conference held in the enclave of Jodel. It took a day to get there and a day to get back, so he would be gone nine days.

Yaphet planned carefully, and as soon as his father left through the enclave's gate, he set to work growing the parts he needed and carrying them at night into the hills, risking the silver to keep his secret.

After his father's return there was work to catch up on and then three days of festival. An excruciating wait! But at last the time was right. Yaphet told his father, "I'm going to go to Miamey—not for work, but to spend a few days with friends."

Nonexistent friends. But his father agreed, and at last he was free.

Alone among the tombs, he worked quickly but with great care, assembling the flying machine on a wooden platform five feet above the ground—high enough to keep it above most silver floods.

Still, he did not feel safe.

He thought that if what he was doing was truly wrong the goddess would act, flooding this valley with silver, erasing both him and his work.

But each night passed without a gleam of silver.

Perhaps the goddess had not noticed what he was up to, or maybe she did *not* object?

He assembled the frame—this time including a cradle beneath the wing where he would lie, and steering mechanisms in easy reach of his hands. He stretched white cloth across the frame and clipped it in place. Then, lying prone in the cradle, he tested the mechanisms, imagining himself rising, descending, banking right and left, until the motions came easily.

By late afternoon on his third day alone in the hills, he was ready, but the weather was not. Heavy clouds lay over the hills and he had not seen the sun all day. As eager as he was, he did not quite dare to fly without strong sunlight to burn off any silver that might begin to form on the flying machine's long wing.

As he pondered these things, a breeze sougled down the valley. It caught against the cloth wings, lifting the flying machine three inches off the platform. Yaphet shouted in alarm and dove to catch it.

He was working frantically to tie it down when his cousin Mishon found him out.

"Yaphet!" she cried.

He whirled around, wild-eyed.

Fate was closing in.

\* \* \*

Ever since that day in the courtyard Mishon had treated Yaphet like a stranger, avoiding him when she could, speaking to him only when duty required. Since Yaphet had never liked her, he did not miss her.

But here she was again, seventeen now, though she was scrawny and small and looked much younger. She straddled a motorbike. A cap on her head, eyes hidden behind sunglasses. Her lips turned in a cold, triumphant smile.

"Did I scare you?" she asked. She cocked her head. "I saw the track of a bike leaving the trail."

"Did you?" He always took care to disguise the start of his secret trail. Not care enough, it seemed. "So you thought to follow? It could have been anyone."

She shrugged. "I thought it might be you. I heard my sister say you were gone to Miamey, but my friends there have not seen you."

"I have other business," he said.

"That I can see."

"You should go now. It's late. It'll be night soon."

"Do you think I'm afraid of the silver?" she asked. "I'm not, and I don't think you are either, which makes us both fools." She eyed the flying machine, returned her gaze to him. "This is something wicked, isn't it?"

Yaphet despaired for all his work, the years of planning.

"It must be wicked," she pressed, "or you wouldn't be hiding it here. Tell me what it is, my cousin. Tell me everything about it, or I will tell your father."

His chest tightened in anger. "It's *not* wicked, and it's not wrong. It's just . . . *dangerous*."

Doubt intruded on her expression. He wondered if she was remembering that first fire balloon. "I'll tell you, Mishon, if you swear to keep my secret."

"Tell me first, and then I'll decide if your secret's worth keeping." Perhaps she read something in his eyes because she added, "The truth. I'll know if you're lying."

"Can't you guess what it is? It's obvious."

Obvious to him, obsessed with the idea of flying machines, but Mishon had never seen such a thing before.

"I'm just a common player," she said icily. "Not a brilliant scholar like my dear cousin. If I saw this thing within the enclave, I would think it the frame of a festival sculpture. It resembles a dragonfly. But you have built it in secret. Tell me what it really is."

He moved, putting himself between her and his invention, ready to protect it, if it came to that. "It is a flying machine."

Her eyebrows quirked. She looked at the flying machine, looked at him, and laughed. A bitter laugh, with a high, crazed edge.

"It is *true*," he insisted, offended that she might doubt him or think him mad. "I have not flown it yet, but it will fly and it will carry my weight. *I will fly*."

"Oh, Yaphet," she whispered past the laugh that still bubbled in her voice. "I believe you. I do. I am only thinking of your poor father and how proud he has always been of his so-perfect scholar son."

"So you're planning to tell him?" Yaphet asked, his voice soft but unsteady with despair and rage.

She ignored this question, asking one of her own. "When will it be ready to fly?"

"It *is* ready." Hands clenched in frustration. "I was only waiting for a morning when the sun is bright so that . . ." His explanation foundered.

"The truth," she prodded.

"It's possible silver will gather on the wing, but bright sunlight should burn it off." This explanation emerged sounding like a guilty confession. "It's not wrong," he insisted, more to himself than to her.

Mishon laughed again. "Oh, it is wrong. Only a wicked player would ever consider such a thing. But none of us is really perfect, eh?" She turned a speculative gaze to the overcast sky. "These clouds will be gone by morning. I think I will stay the night and see what comes."

\* \* \*

That night in the dark of the tomb, Yaphet lay awake. He thought Mishon might be awake, too. He spoke softly, testing this theory. "Why aren't you afraid of the silver?"

Several seconds passed in silence until finally she spoke, but only to ask a question of her own. "Did you build flying machines in your past lives?"

"I think so. Yes."

"I think I have no past. Not really. I've only ever remembered a child's skills. Did you know that?"

He was embarrassed to admit that he did not. Most players began to recover the skills of their past lives by the age of nine or ten at the latest. What did it mean that she had not?

She explained, "I have some small skill at embroidery. My fingers knew how to stitch as soon as I held a needle in my hand. That is the one thing I remember from my past lives, but even in this my ability is basic, a child's. It's hard work for me to learn complex patterns. They're not something I've learned before."

Yaphet's mind leapt to find an explanation for such a strange absence of adult

memories. The one he seized upon made him shiver.

"I think all my past lives have ended early," she said, speaking aloud what he did not dare to say. "And it will be the same this time."

"You can't know that," he said.

"I do know it. I have no future, and that is why I'm not afraid of the silver. If it takes me, it takes nothing. And if your flying machine draws the silver down on us, so be it. It will be worth it to see you do this wicked thing."

Bitter words, and he couldn't blame her. "I'm sorry," he said softly.

She answered, "So am I."

\* \* \*

Yaphet had doubted Mishon's prediction of a clear morning, but dawn came with a cloudless sky.

"When will you do it?" she asked.

"When the sun is above the trees."

When the time came, Mishon helped him untie the ropes that anchored the flying machine. Then she climbed down from the platform. Yaphet clambered into the cradle, his heart hammering, fearful, excited, knowing he'd done this before in another life, that it could work.

He lay chest-down, right hand clutching a control stick. He glanced at Mishon to make sure she was out of the way. Then he switched the engine on.

Its vibration ran through him. A rush of air shot past. He gasped as he felt the wing begin to lift. From Mishon, a cry of shock and delight as the flying machine lifted away from the platform, left it behind, hurtling with shocking speed above the pavilion, gaining altitude as it went, but not nearly fast enough.

Yaphet remembered to work the controls. A steeper ascent. Not too steep; he didn't want to stall. Just enough to get over the trees. He knew he could. He'd worked the equations.

He glanced down, his mouth dry, seeing the ground so far below. He looked up. A gale of warm air in his face. The purling of a loose hem on the wing. The scent of evergreens. He thought he glimpsed a sparkle of silver on the leading edge of the wing, but the sunlight burned it off—and a fierce joy took him.

He flew on in a straight line just above the treetops for what he guessed to be a mile before he began to experiment with the controls. A shallow bank to the right and then to the left. Then steeper banks, and finally he circled full around to fly back toward the pavilion.

He knew how to fly. He *knew how*. He'd done this before in another life.

He reached the pavilion, flew a wide circle around it. Mishon was a tiny figure standing alone against the white stone, her face turned up to watch him.

One more circle. Then, exhausted by excitement, he steered the flying machine down. He missed the platform, but dropped in a gentle stall not too far away.

Mishon came ambling over. He met her, staggering on shaking legs. She steadied him with an unexpected hug.

"You did it," she said in quiet wonder.

He nodded, uncertain what to say, confused by her approval when memory told him to expect hatred and condemnation.

"Will you help me carry the flying machine back to the platform?" he asked her.

She pulled away with a frown. Worry wrinkled her brow.

"It's very light," he assured her. "Nearly all the weight is in the engine. I could disconnect that and move it easily myself—"

"No, I'll help you do it."

Mishon did her best, but her breath grew ragged from the labor. After they got the flying machine to the platform, it was her turn to stagger. She took only a few steps

and then sat down hard, her head lolling as if dizzy.

“Mishon?”

Yaphet left off securing the flying machine and went to her. He crouched to look at her face. Her eyes were unfocused, staring at nothing. He touched her cheek and found it clammy. “What is it, Mishon? Are you all right?” He felt her pulse, finding it faint and swift.

“It’s nothing,” she whispered, pushing his hand away. “Just a fainting spell. I get them all the time. *You* remember.”

That time when he’d launched his first successful fire balloon. She’d been so frightened when silver had consumed it that she’d collapsed.

“One time,” he said.

Mishon closed her eyes. Her spine slumped. “You know nothing of my life.” The joy that had briefly illuminated her voice was gone, replaced by a more familiar, bitter tone.

He drew back. “You had no time for me after that,” he accused—but as he thought back on that long-ago afternoon, understanding dawned. “I thought you hated me for scaring you, but that wasn’t the reason, was it?”

Her eyes opened. Her lip curled in familiar contempt. “I hated you because you saw the weakness in me—my brilliant, perfect cousin—and I was ashamed.”

“Do your mother and father know?”

“Don’t be stupid, Yaphet. Of course they know.”

“Then why don’t they—”

She cut him off with a hiss. “Stop! Don’t say it. There is nothing to be done.”

This he could not accept. “But what is the cause?”

“Why? Do you think you can fix me like you could fix a broken motorbike? Grow a new heart, maybe, in one of your father’s vats?”

“It’s your heart, then? It’s faulty?”

“*Faulty*,” she echoed, her eyes closing again. She seemed so weak. “The fault is in the code from which I am written. I think I have never lived to be even twenty.”

*Was that possible?*

He wondered. He’d never thought on it before. Players could be injured, of course, and rarely they would fall ill, but he’d never heard of anyone born with a malfunctioning body. The idea was so novel—horrifying, intriguing—that he was overtaken by it, by what it implied about the origin and design and rebirth of players.

*Are we made exactly the same in each life?*

“There must be some way to heal you,” he mused. “A physician—”

“No. I have been told. There is nothing to be done.”

“Maybe not in Vesarevi, but there are scholars in the coastal enclaves who have studied the codes that make us who we are.”

She scoffed. “And how should I get there, Yaphet? I can ride a motorbike as far as Miami, but that trip leaves me exhausted, sometimes for days. I could hire on with a trucker, but they would put me off at some enclave on the way when I couldn’t keep up with the work. And my parents have too many other children—”

“I will fly you there.”

She laughed at the absurdity of this. “No, my outlaw cousin. Just because you haven’t frightened me with your flying machine, don’t start thinking other players might tolerate it. You could not hide on such a journey. You would be seen, and you would be killed.”

“I’ll plan a route through wilderness,” he said. “Away from roads and enclaves.”

“And risk the silver each night?”

“You don’t understand the speed of this flying machine. I think we could get there in just one day. Two at the most.”

\* \* \*

She rested an hour and they concocted the story they would tell: A mechanical issue with her bike. She'd had to leave it in the hills, riding into Vesarevi with Yaphet to gather replacement parts.

"That will give us an excuse to return here tomorrow," Yaphet said. "No one will question us, and I'll have time to plot our route and gather what we need for the journey."

"You have a talent for plotting, Yaphet."

Stung by this truth, he reminded her, "I am a wicked player."

He finished tying down the flying machine, covered it with a camouflaged tarpaulin, and then helped her to her feet. Mishon remained weak, but a little better than she'd been.

They rode back to the main trail. He took a few minutes to more carefully disguise his secret side trail. Then they returned to Vesarevi.

\* \* \*

Trouble waited for them.

They were back too early to have made the journey from Miamey and their families noticed.

"It is nothing," Yaphet insisted when his father demanded an explanation. "We camped on a hilltop. I have done it many times before."

"Many times? When you always led me to believe you were safe in Miamey?"

"I knew you would worry."

"Of course I would worry! I *am* worried. What is there in the wilderness that has drawn your attention? That has made you neglect your studies? You no longer build your models or refine your designs—"

"I have many interests," Yaphet interrupted.

"No doubt. But only some of those interests will get you into University."

"I'm not sure I want to go."

He said it, knowing it was a mistake. Daring fate, maybe. He rushed to explain himself before his father breached the shock that had silenced him. "I could learn much at University, I know that, but even there the scholars are constrained by their own biases. They believe what they were taught, without always testing the truth of what they think they know."

"And are you testing some truth out there alone in the hills?"

Yes. Yaphet wanted to confess it all because what he was doing was not wrong, it was not wicked. But his father would never see it that way. So instead of answering, he offered a distraction. "Did you know that in every life Mishon is doomed to die young?"

His father drew back, studying Yaphet with a wary eye. "You can't help her," he said. "I would trust you to design any mechanical device, but a player is created and re-created by the thought of the goddess and if—"

Yaphet interrupted. "The goddess does not work by magic. There is a process to the world, and that is what I seek to understand."

"You are driven to understand. I know that. You achieved great things in your past lives, and you may achieve more in this one. But take care. I think it would be easy for you to overstep."

\* \* \*

He spent the afternoon alone in his room, revising the design of his flying machine so that cargo baskets could be hung alongside the cradle. The wing's surface would be able to carry the added weight. He'd planned for it.

He went to the atelier to start the new parts growing. His father was there working on a design of his own. Yaphet felt the weight of his gaze, but no questions were

asked.

Did he suspect the truth? Was he afraid to ask questions?

Would he turn Yaphet in, if he knew?

This was not a theory Yaphet wanted to test.

He returned to his room.

His savant had found a map of the land between Vesarevi and the distant coast.

“Do you see the problem with this map?” the savant asked after Yaphet had studied it for a few minutes.

“Yes,” he said with a slight smile. “I do.”

The enclaves, the roads that connected them, and the surrounding land were depicted in detail, but the empty hills were half-drawn, blurred and fanciful. “This mapmaker had no real knowledge of the uninhabited hills.”

“This pleases you?” the savant asked curiously.

“It does.”

\* \* \*

Late that night, after his father was asleep, Yaphet collected the new parts from the vat. He took them outside the enclave and hid them among the trees. Then he returned to his room and endured a restless sleep before rising at dawn.

He gathered his things: a jacket, a change of clothes, food for several days, and his savant. He told his father, “I’m taking Mishon to fetch her bike. After that, we’re going to visit her friends in Miami, so we may be gone several days.”

His father said nothing as doubt and anger crystallized in his eyes. Only when Yaphet turned away did he speak. “Stay a moment.”

Yaphet looked back. His heart hammered. His throat had gone dry. He knew suddenly that if his father were to demand the truth, he would tell it. “Do not ask me,” he said softly.

From his father, a woeful sigh. “I lost your mother to the silver. Will I lose you that way too?”

Yaphet released the breath he’d been holding. “I will be careful,” he promised.

His father bowed his head. “The goddess will decide.”

\* \* \*

### *The goddess will decide.*

During the steep descent into his secret valley, Yaphet’s attention was all on the trail. The bike was burdened with his weight, Mishon’s, and all their gear so that he had to work hard to keep it balanced.

It was the catch in Mishon’s breath that alerted him, the squeeze of her hand against his shoulder. “Yaphet, look up. Look. This place is changed.”

He risked a glance down the slope. The pavilion, half-seen past the trees, glistened with golden highlights that had not been there the day before.

“The silver came in the night,” Mishon said.

“Can you see the flying machine?” he asked her, voice tight with fear.

“Not yet. But we left it elevated on the platform.”

Safe from a shallow flood, yes.

They were still some way above the valley floor when they passed close to one of the tombs. The silver had reached it. Its black walls were now tattooed with curling lines and spirals of gold that gleamed in the leaf-filtered sunlight.

Mishon cried out, giving voice to Yaphet’s despair. This had been no shallow flood. The silver must have reached the flying machine, and it was likely gone, or changed to a stone folly that could never be airborne.

“I’ll build it again!” he promised Mishon—although he did not think he would be able to hide such a large project from his father again. He would have to leave Vesarevi, establish his own atelier, find another remote hideout where he could

practice his outlaw obsessions . . . while Mishon's life faded away.

They reached the forest's edge and rode on to the pavilion, still white, but like the tomb, marked now in gold. Yaphet turned to look for the platform and the flying machine.

"Still there!" Mishon exclaimed in amazement.

Still there, but was it changed?

He raced the bike, bringing it to an abrupt stop just a few feet from the platform. "What do you see?" he demanded of Mishon, not trusting his own eyes.

She laughed in sweet relief. "I see an outlaw flying machine that will not give itself up to the silver, either on the ground or in the air."

It was true. Both the flying machine and the platform on which it rested appeared untouched by the silver.

Yaphet parked the bike. On foot, he circled the flying machine, examining every part of it. Mishon sat on the sun-warmed, decorated stone, awaiting his judgment. "Well?" she demanded when he finished his circuit.

"All untouched," he said, scarcely believing it. "Not a scar. Not a tattoo."

"It doesn't feel like chance," she said.

He'd thought the same thing, but had not dared to say it.

\* \* \*

It took almost two hours to add the cargo baskets to the flying machine's frame. Mishon would ride in one basket, her weight balanced by the gear he piled in the other.

It was almost noon when they were ready to go. Yaphet coiled the last rope, secured it in the basket. "It will be dangerous," he reminded Mishon.

"It is a flying machine," she answered from her basket seat, waving her hand in a dismissive gesture. "We are sure to be killed and to destroy any enclave that we approach."

He answered her seriously. "That is the common belief, and it could be true."

She looked away. Her fingers clutched now at the basket's rim. "We will stay far from any enclave."

"Yes," he agreed.

He settled himself in the cradle, relishing the familiar feel of it, the echo of memory. "We will test the common belief and learn if it is true."

He toggled the engine on. Felt a rush of artificial wind, a vibration in the frame. The flying machine lofted with smooth grace, white wings bright in the sun.