



WING & CLAW

CAVERN OF SECRETS



ALSO BY LINDA SUE PARK

NOVELS

Wing & Claw: Forest of Wonders

Seesaw Girl

The Kite Fighters

A Single Shard

When My Name Was Keoko

Project Mulberry

Archer's Quest

Keeping Score

The 39 Clues: Storm Warning

A Long Walk to Water

The 39 Clues: Trust No One

PICTURE BOOKS

Yaks Yak!

The Firekeeper's Son

Mung-Mung

What Does Bunny See?

Yum! Yuck!

Tap Dancing on the Roof

Bee-bim Bop!

The Third Gift

Xander's Panda Party



LINDA SUE PARK

WING
&
CLAW

CAVERN OF SECRETS

ILLUSTRATED BY
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HARPER

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First Edition



To Callan

OBSIDIA

The Sudden Mountains

Gilden

Guards Barracks

Southern Slims

Fields

Ferry Landing

Eastern Woodlands

Kuma's Settlement

Southern Woodlands

← To the Gorge





The Vast

Northern Slums

Shed Compound

Stables

The Commons

Chancery

Apothecary Quarter

Garrison

Northern Ferry Landing

Forest of Wonders

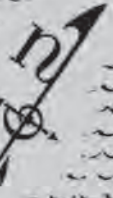
Everwide River

Farmsteads

The Mag

Raffa's Home

Pother Settlement



The Vast





PART I





CHAPTER ONE



THE wind stirred the green needles of the never-bare trees. They swayed and leaned toward each other, murmuring of the coming spring.

The trees surrounded the entrance to a cave, which was partially blocked by a huge lichen-covered boulder. Or perhaps it was a pile of dried bracken, for it, too, trembled in the wind.

Then the pile began to stretch and shift, taking on a more distinct shape. A shaggy head . . . an enormous torso . . .

The gigantic golden bear seemed to be emerging from the mountain itself. Rising to her full height, she

opened her mouth and growled, a low rumble that grew into a throaty roar.

Raffa was woken by thunder.

Odd upon strange, he thought. A thunderstorm at this time of year? He rubbed his eyes and saw Kuma sitting up on her pallet.

“That’s her—she’s awake!” Kuma exclaimed in delight, and jumped to her feet.

As Raffa followed her out of the shelter, he marveled at the thought of a bear so big that he’d mistaken her growl for thunder.

They stopped just short of the mouth of the cave. The bear stood on her hind legs, half again as tall as a man, and sniffed the air for several seconds. Back down on all fours, she shook herself so hard that fur flew like snow, then retreated a few steps deeper into the cave.

Raffa could see joy and relief on Kuma’s face. It was one thing to know that bears hibernate. It was quite another for Kuma to have seen her beloved Roo breathing so infrequently for these many weeks that it almost seemed as if she had forgotten how.

Moments of joy had been all but absent for Raffa’s little group that winter. Months earlier, they had fled

Gilden and escaped to the desolate wilderness of the Sudden Mountains. There, they had spent the daylight hours focused entirely on two activities: keeping warm and finding food. The work was too hard, the wind too cold, the snow too deep. There was never enough to eat.

Two days ago, the wind had changed. Its knife-edged sharpness had dulled, then softened. Raffa had almost cried with relief over the shift in the weather. Since then, Kuma had been checking the cave obsessively to see if Roo was awake.

Now Raffa hung back while Kuma entered the cave. She moved slowly and spoke in a soothing tone as she approached the bear. Squatting down in front of Roo, she made herself small and unthreatening, and let Roo sniff at her.

Roo whined and swatted Kuma's shoulder affectionately with an enormous paw. Kuma was ready for this and had braced herself; otherwise, Roo's exuberant greeting might have knocked her over. Then the bear turned away and began nosing at something on the ground.

Something gray and furry, with a striped tail.

The mound of fur did not respond at first, but Roo let out a plaintive growl and persisted, continuing to nudge with her nose.

Finally, there was a mewl of protest, and the masked face of a young raccoon appeared. Twig unfurled herself, sat up, and blinked a few times, her eyes glowing purple.

“Ter-tee wah,” she squeaked. “Tertee, grrrr-rum, tertee.”

“She’s thirsty—she wants water,” said Kuma, who almost always understood Twig immediately.

Twig had gained the ability to speak after being treated with an infusion that contained a mysterious scarlet vine from the Forest of Wonders. But she could not speak nearly as well as Echo the bat, who had received the same treatment. Twig’s speech was limited to a word or two at a time, interspersed with an assortment of growls, chuffs, and snorts. Raffa thought this was because she was almost always with Roo, whereas Echo spent most of his time with humans.

Raffa smiled at the little raccoon and went to fetch a strawful of melted snow for her. Following Kuma’s example, he squatted down and moved slowly, while Roo kept her eye on him.

During the escape from Gilden, Twig had become separated from Bando, her twin brother, and their mother. Fortunately, Roo had taken to the little raccoon at once, and they had bonded like mother and cub. The

bear tolerated Raffa and his cousin, Garith—the third human in their party—because she knew that Kuma was fond of them. Still, she never let anyone except Kuma touch her, which was fine with Raffa, who much preferred to stay a safe distance away.

Raffa gave Twig a drink. When she was finished, she pawed at the bear, who seemed fully awake and reoriented now. Roo relaxed, sat down, and allowed Kuma to scratch her with a stick. At the same time, she began giving Twig a tongue-bath.

The girl scratching the bear grooming the raccoon . . . Seeing the three of them together, Raffa felt a sharp pang of longing for his own special companion.

He made his way to the back corner of the cave. A tiny bat hung there, on a perch made out of a twig tied to a leather cord. Raffa blew on the bat's whiskers. Echo stirred, then produced an annoyed click.

Raffa tried again, blowing a little harder.

Another click, this one weaker than the first.

Raffa frowned. Neither Twig nor Echo were true hibernators like Roo, but both had slept for days at a time throughout the winter. Raffa didn't know if it was normal for bats to emerge from torpor later than raccoons. Carefully he donned the perch necklace; perhaps

the warmth of his body would help Echo waken.

Echo hadn't spoken for weeks. How Raffa missed their conversations! The bat never failed to make him laugh. He could hardly wait for Echo to talk again, for then it would truly be spring, a farewell forever to this harsh winter of too little laughter.

Garith was sitting partway up inside the shelter. He had been woken not by the bear's growls but by a shaft of sunlight piercing the screen of branches.

"Garith." Raffa waved his hand to get his cousin's attention. "Roo—and—Twig—are a-wake. Want—to—go—see—them?" He spoke slowly, enunciating each syllable as clearly as he could, and making exaggerated gestures.

"I've told you before, that doesn't help!" Garith said. "Stop talking to me like I'm some kind of idiot. I lost my *hearing*, not my brain."

His voice was often a little too loud since he had become deaf. Raffa should have been used to it by now, but every reminder of Garith's deafness twisted his insides—because it was his fault. Maybe not directly, but the fact remained that Garith wouldn't be deaf if it hadn't been for Raffa's decision to flee Gilden.

Raffa had spent the winter months trying to make it up to Garith, by helping with his share of the work. But Garith resented that, too, and Raffa felt as if he were always tiptoeing around his cousin's bad moods.

Garith yanked his hood up over his head and lay down again. "Go away," he said.

His anger was more than worrisome, and for the hundredth time Raffa wished he could talk to his parents about it. But he couldn't risk going home, for none of them had any idea what awaited them there. Were their families being watched? Would neighbors turn them in? Would guards seize them the instant they were sighted?

Raffa, Kuma, and Garith could hardly be considered enemies of Obsidia. But Chancellor Leeds viewed them as a threat, for she knew that they possessed something more important than strength or power.

Knowledge.

The trio had discovered hundreds of animals trapped in a compound, where they were being dosed and trained against their natures. The Chancellor was keeping the project a secret from all but a favored few; Raffa had been one of them, for a short time. Now he was sure that she was seeking a way to silence him. He had nightmare visions of being thrown into the underground cells of the

Garrison, left to a life not worth living among the rats and the filth and the loneliness.

And the Chancellor wanted one thing even more than his silence: Roo. Raffa would never forget the shrill fervor in her voice during their escape, when she had screamed for the guards to recapture the bear. He had heard only dark and murky whispers of her plans, but he did know that she wanted to use the great bear as a weapon. Bears were rare in Obsidia, and bears the size of Roo rarer still: Keeping Roo out of the Chancellor's reach was the main reason Raffa and his friends had chosen to hide in the Suddens.

With spring finally banishing the ice and snow, Raffa found himself in an agony of indecision.

They couldn't stay here forever, but they couldn't go home, either.

Raffa slept poorly that night, waking several times to check on Echo. The next morning, the bat seemed even more inert. Raffa could see that Echo was still breathing, but his tiny body was barely warm to the touch.

He showed the bat to Kuma. "I don't know what's wrong," he said. "He should at least be starting to wake by now."

Kuma examined Echo. “Yes, I think so, too,” she said slowly. “I’m sure that I’ve seen bats flying around in early spring.”

Raffa’s alarm was growing by the moment. He scolded himself silently: Panicking would do Echo no good. He thought of his parents, Mohan and Salima. When they were treating patients, they were almost always calm and deliberate. Sometimes decisions had to be made quickly. Sometimes their actions were urgent. But they were never panicky.

Think the way they would. Like an apothecary.

Pulse slow and weak . . . unresponsive to stimulus . . . torpor that no longer seemed natural. Because Raffa did not know exactly what was wrong with Echo, any treatment he used would have to be mild—one sure to do no harm.

A restorative tonic, then. He had only a few botanical supplies with him, and no equipment other than his trusty mortar and pestle. He set about grinding some anjella root, then combined it with dried mellia and wortjon.

Three times a day over the course of the next two days, Raffa dosed the bat with the combination. He checked on him constantly, even massaging Echo’s tiny

back in an attempt to improve his circulation.

All to no avail. If anything, the bat was worse off, for no matter how many times Raffa blew on his whiskers, Echo did not respond.

Raffa made the same infusion again, but this time he added a powder made of the stems and leaves of the scarlet vine. He had taken the entire stock of the vine from Uncle Ansel's glasshouse in Gilden, and had dried the plants to store them.

Unlike the fresh vine, the dry powder emitted not a single spark or gleam when combined with other ingredients. Raffa concentrated hard while making the infusion, but nothing came to him—no moment of color or music, no prick of discomfort. No sign at all from his intuition.

As he held the reed that contained a dose of the infusion, he hesitated. What was he to think of this blankness? Was it possible that he was losing his gift? It made him feel frightened and uncertain to have to rely solely on his training and experience. Did other apothecaries have to do that all the time?

He took a deep breath, gritted his teeth, and dosed Echo with the infusion.

The next few hours dragged by so slowly that it felt

to Raffa as if the sun had come to a standstill. He looked down the neck of his tunic every few moments, hoping to detect even the smallest change in Echo's condition.

Nothing.

The bat remained as he was, limp except for the tiny claws closed tightly around the twig.

Raffa's relief that the infusion seemed to have done no harm was overwhelmed by the harsh disappointment that it had done no good, either. He went to Kuma and Garith, fighting back tears.

"I don't know what else to do," he said, the little bat cradled in his hands. "He should be awake by now, but nothing's working."

"What?" Garith said. "What's working?" He was staring hard at Raffa's face, and Raffa realized that his cousin was trying to read his lips.

Raffa shook his head. "*Not* working," he repeated.

Garith glanced down at Echo. "You need more botanicals," he said. "It's still too cold up here—nothing's growing."

"And maybe . . ." Kuma's voice was soft with sympathy. "Maybe you could use some help—somebody to talk to about what else you could try."

Raffa swallowed past the lump in his throat and put

his hand protectively over the wee bat. Months earlier, he had saved Echo's life. Somehow that gave him a solemn responsibility for the bat. He hadn't failed Echo the first time. He couldn't fail him now.

He clenched and unclenched his jaw. Garith and Kuma were both right, and he was sure upon certain about what he had to do. When he spoke, the words came out fiercely.

"We're going home," he said.

Neither Garith nor Kuma uttered a single protest. They were well aware of the risks; at the same time, Raffa knew that each had reasons for wanting to leave the Suddens. Kuma needed to find a safe place for Roo, somewhere close enough to visit occasionally. And Garith had to go back to face his father, a meeting that Raffa suspected was both yearned for and dreaded.

"All right, then," Raffa said. "We'll leave tomorrow at daybirth."

He glanced down at Echo on the perch around his neck. "I'll get there as fast as I can, I promise," he murmured.

Ford the Everwide . . . find a hideout for Roo . . . and then go home, where—as long as no guards awaited

him—there would be plenty of botanicals to work with.

Even more important, his parents would be there. Mohan, with his profound knowledge of garden botanicals, and Salima, so familiar with wild plants; both of them having years of experience treating illness and injury. Surely, with their help, he could cure the little bat.

Then Raffa's stomach lurched at his next thought.

If only Echo lives long enough to get there.



CHAPTER TWO



AS they broke camp, the threesome discussed the route. They had felt safe in the Suddens, believing the terrain to be too remote and too vast for the Chancellor's guards to search, and indeed, there had been no sign of pursuit that winter.

But heading for home would bring them closer to Gilden—and to the risk of being recaptured.

“We need to ford the river here in the mountains,” Raffa said. He made snaking motions with his hands toward Garith. “Near its source.” Only there would the Everwide River be narrow enough to cross without a boat or a raft.

“But how will we find it?” Kuma asked.

Garith was glancing from his face to Kuma’s, his eyes narrowed in concentration. With a pang, Raffa realized how hard it must be to follow a conversation by reading lips.

“The source?” Garith said, looking at their faces for confirmation. “Da was there once. He told me about it. It starts near the peak closest to the Southern Woodlands.”

There was a brief, uncomfortable silence, as there always was when Garith’s father, Ansel, was mentioned. None of them could ever forget Ansel’s decision to send the screaming owl to stop Raffa and Kuma from escaping with Roo. It was an act of betrayal so agonizing that Raffa tried to keep it shut away in a far dark corner of his mind.

And it had to be even worse for Garith. By helping Raffa escape, Garith had in a single act estranged himself from his father.

Raffa avoided eye contact with his cousin as he shouldered his rucksack, regretting its near-emptiness. He had escaped from Gilden with a decent store of botanicals, but nearly all of them had been used up over the winter to treat coughs and colds, cuts and chilblains. The rucksack now held only a few powders, his waterskin, some rags, and a lightstick.

Over one shoulder, he wore his leather rope in a loose coil. He had made the rope himself by cutting up the fine tunic sewn for him by his mother. Salima had been more disappointed than angry, which he regretted, for he hated displeasing her. But the rope had proved its usefulness, and he was never without it.

He took one last look around at the site that had been home for the last few months.

No, he thought, that wasn't quite right.

It had been a shelter, not a home.

An unusual procession struck out down the mountainside. Kuma took the lead, walking stick in hand. She was followed by Roo. The bear was on all fours and wore a most decorative headpiece: Twig, clinging to Roo's ears, her striped tail curled neatly around the bear's forehead.

"Up *snuffle snuffle*," Twig chirruped happily. "Up *snuffle snork!*"

Garith was next, and Raffa was last in line, with Echo on the perch necklace.

Raffa hadn't realized before how dependent he had become on Echo's scouting. Months earlier, when the group left Gilden and made their way into the Sud-dens, Echo had constantly made forays into the air and

reported back to Raffa. More than once, his squeaks and clicks of alarm had directed the group away from dangerous crevasses. Without the bat's guidance, Raffa felt as if they were walking blind.

He checked on Echo constantly. It seemed that with every step he took, his worry for the little bat grew. He struggled to smother his darkest thoughts. *What if . . . what if we don't make it home in time?*

Over six grueling days, they hiked down one mountain and up and over the next. The going was slower than slow; they moved a step at a time, fearful of the treacherous terrain. They had to stop each day well before sunfall to find shelter and gather firewood. In their makeshift camps, the nights were cold and miserable; the lack of sleep exhausted them, delaying their progress still further.

Raffa found himself thinking of the people who had traveled through the Suddens to reach Obsidia, including his own ancestors on his father's side. The groups of people known as the Afters—because of their arrival after the Great Quake—had crossed the entire range, a trip so perilous that more had perished than survived. No matter where the Afters came from, they would have had to scale a dozen or more peaks. He marveled now at

their courage and determination.

At last the rugged terrain eased into rolling hills. For two days they traversed the foothills, where the snow was only ankle-deep, a relief from the hip-high drifts in the peaks. Midmorning of the third day, Kuma called out that she could see the beginnings of the Southern Woodlands. They continued hiking until they came to the Everwide.

Snowmelt had turned its flow into a boiling, foaming torrent. To the group's disappointment, the river at this point was too wide to cross. Reluctantly, they turned back toward the mountains and began climbing again. They followed the riverbank upward but had to diverge from it often when their path was blocked by overgrowth or downed trees or snowdrifts.

A little after sunpeak, Roo raised herself to her hind legs and bellowed. She plunged into the river, with Twig hanging on for dear life. Two-thirds of the way across, Roo scabbled about in the current for a few moments. Then she crossed to the far side with a large trout in her mouth.

The three humans watched Roo chomp away at the trout until only the piece closest to the tail remained. Then she reached up and pulled Twig off her head, as

if the raccoon were a hat. She set Twig down on the ground and gave her the fishtail.

The raccoon took the tidbit to the water's edge, washed it thoroughly, and ate it with obvious enjoyment.

Kuma clapped her hands, laughing, and Raffa had to join in. Even Garith smiled.

“It’s a sign,” Kuma said. “We should ford here.”

Roo’s crossing had shown them that the river at this point was no deeper than her chest. Raffa studied the water. The current was swift, but there were no foaming rapids.

Plate-sized chunks of ice floated past. Raffa scrambled back onto the bank for a better view. Upriver, he could see patches of white where the snow had not yet melted, indicating sheets of ice beneath.

He rejoined his companions. “It’s as good a place as any,” he said. “Farther up, there are ice patches, but they don’t look like they’d bear our weight.”

He held his coiled leather rope out to Kuma. “If you could call Roo back and tie this around her,” he said, “we can use it to guide ourselves across.”

Kuma put her hands behind her back.

“Tie her up? I’d never do that,” she said indignantly. “She’s not some kind of—of performing bear.”

Raffa scowled. “I know that. It wouldn’t be like tying her up to . . . restrain her or anything.”

For response, Kuma pressed her lips together into a straight line.

Raffa glanced at the river. It might be possible to ford without the rope, but he wouldn’t want to risk it—not for himself or any of the others.

At that moment, he realized with surprise that ever since the decision to leave the Suddens, he had been acting as if he were the group’s leader.

He had never meant for that to happen. Throughout the winter, it was Kuma who had taken the lead, with her greater experience at living in the wild. Raffa had been glad to follow her instructions on how to build the shelter, weave baskets, string fish to dry. And before that, in what now seemed like another life, Raffa had always shadowed Garith, who was a year older and a head taller.

But Garith was no longer himself. And Kuma, it seemed, was now thinking of nothing other than Roo. Raffa usually admired her commitment to the well-being of animals, but sometimes—

Animals . . . That was the answer. Kuma’s strength and weakness.

Raffa looked into her eyes and spoke in a voice both earnest and pleading. “Kuma, we have to get across. It would be safer using the rope, and quicker, too, and I need to get Echo home as soon as I can.”

He saw her gaze flick to his neckline; Echo was tucked away, out of sight under his tunic. Then she sighed, and he knew that her innate kindness to all beasts and creatures had won out.

“Just this once,” she said.

Kuma whistled for Roo, who loped back through the icy water. It took Kuma a few tries before she was able to tie the rope around the bear’s massive waist. Roo let out a growl and pawed at the leather.

“It’s only for a few minutes, Roo, okay?” Kuma said.

At Raffa’s request, she also tied the rucksack around Roo’s neck. It now contained Echo on the perch necklace, wrapped carefully in soft rags.

Kuma sent Roo to the far side again. When the bear turned and looked at her, Kuma held up both hands in a “stop” gesture. Roo planted all four of her massive paws firmly on the ground.

Because of the length necessary to circle Roo’s waist, the remaining rope did not reach all the way across the

river. Holding the other end, Raffa and Garith gritted their teeth and stood knee-deep in the freezing water at the edge. With one hand on the rope, Kuma waded into the current. She moved hand over hand, reaching the halfway point easily.

“It’s p-p-pretty s-s-slippery,” she called out, her teeth chattering.

As if to prove her point, she lost her footing and almost went under. But she hauled herself back up using the rope, with both boys bracing themselves against her weight. On the other side, Roo moaned a little but moved not a hair, while Twig watched intently, chittering in concern.

Kuma crossed to the other side without further mishap. She crouched down and hugged her knees, trying to warm herself.

Raffa put a hand on his cousin’s arm. “Wait,” he said. Knowing that he would be holding Garith’s weight on his own from this end, he wrapped the rope twice around his wrist.

Garith started across. Strong and athletic, he made rapid progress to the middle of the river, where he stopped to look at Raffa over his shoulder. He waved, signaling that all was well.

Then a thunderous *crack* splintered the air. Raffa jerked his head in the direction of the sound.

Upstream, a huge plate of ice had broken away. It caught the current and was now hurtling directly toward Garith. In the next second, realization struck Raffa like a blow.

Garith wouldn't have heard the noise.

If he had, he could have hurried and made it across before the floe reached him. But he was just beginning to move again, and with his eyes on the water in front of him, he didn't see Kuma gesturing frantically on the far side.

Raffa did the only thing he could think of to get Garith's attention: He gave the rope a tug.

It was a disastrous mistake. The rope jerked out of Garith's hands. As he flailed his arms trying to grab it, the floe slammed into his legs. He toppled into the water, where the current snatched him and pulled him under the ice.

"GARITH!" Kuma screamed in horror.

Raffa took a single giant step, then dove.

It was so cold that his breath seemed to freeze solid in his lungs. His eyes were open, but he saw only blackness, the unspeakable cold numbing his brain. Instinctively,

he surfaced, every muscle and nerve in his body pushing him upward.

Forcing another breath into his paralyzed lungs, Raffa ducked under again. He focused his entire being on a single thought: *Find Garith!* He kicked his legs and tried to make swimming motions with his arms, which felt like they were made of wood.

Through the fog of his vision, he saw a shadow to his right and made a desperate grab for it. Was it a branch or—or—

It was Garith's forearm!

Raffa's fingers closed around it. He gripped it with all his might. Hardly knowing what he was doing, he yanked his cousin out from under the floe.

Both their heads emerged. Raffa could no longer feel his limbs. He took a strangled, choking mouthful of air as he slipped on the rocky riverbed. Unable to regain his balance, he fell back into the water. With no strength left to fight the cold and the current, he was dragged beneath the ice.

A raging red cloud filled his brain and blotted out all thought.



CHAPTER THREE



RAFFA couldn't move, couldn't breathe. There was a terrible weight on his chest. On his face, too, smothering him. . . . Was this what it felt like to drown?

Odd . . . upon strange. Never knew . . . drowning . . . smells awful. So awful . . .

He tried to turn his head away from the nasty odor. From somewhere far away, he heard voices.

"Is he— It looks like he's waking up!"

"Roo, you can get off him now. Gently—"

"Raffa, wake up!"

Garith. That was Garith's voice. Did he drown, too?

With a dreadful spasm, Raffa retched several times, spitting out mouthfuls of water, then curled up on his side. Opening his eyes seemed to require as much effort as lifting a boulder.

Garith's face swam in and out of focus. Raffa fixed his gaze on Garith's nose, trying to get it to stay in one place. To his relief, it finally stopped moving. He blinked and looked into Garith's eyes.

"You scared us, you wobbler!" Garith punched his shoulder, which hurt so much that Raffa knew he wasn't dead. Relief pierced through the muddiness in his brain with the realization that Garith wasn't dead, either.

Slowly he raised himself on one elbow. Every muscle in his body twanged with pain. He saw that he was in a clearing on the riverbank, lying on a patch of dead grass.

Garith and Kuma both began talking at once.

Raffa shook his head; his brain jangled in protest. "One at a time," he croaked, and held his hand up weakly for Garith's benefit.

"Take off those wet clothes," Kuma said. "I'll get a fire going."

Raffa struggled out of his sodden boots, trousers, and undergarments, then donned his tunic again; its soft heavy wool was warm even when wet.

Shivering in muscles he didn't know he had, Raffa crouched by the fire next to Garith, who wore only his linen underclothes. In silence, they turned around from time to time, alternating roasting and freezing their fronts and backsides.

Kuma piled an armload of wood next to the fire. She spread out their wet clothes on flat stones near the flames, then plopped down beside them and stretched her toes toward the warmth.

"It was Roo. I didn't even have to say anything to her," she said proudly. "She went right into the water and dragged Garith out, and then she went back for you. Garith started coughing right away, but you were . . . I had to make you spit up some water. And you were practically frozen solid, so I got her to lie down on top of you."

So that was the smell: pure, unfiltered bear.

Then Raffa felt a little guilty for the thought. Roo couldn't help it that she smelled . . . well, like a bear. And she had just saved his life, which in all likelihood neither Kuma nor Garith could have done.

"Thank you, Roo," he said earnestly. The bear was busy grooming Twig again. Recognizing her name, she showed him her teeth in what he hoped was a smile, and

Kuma reached up to scratch her behind her ears.

“Ta-too, Roo,” Twig said, imitating him. “Ta-too, *chuff chuff*, ta-too.”

“It was a good thing, the rope,” Kuma admitted, a little gruffly. “We pulled on it, and it led her to you, sure upon certain.”

Then Raffa sat up with a jolt. “Echo!” he cried out. “What—? Where—?”

“He’s here,” Kuma said immediately, and brought the bat out from under her tunic. “I took him out of the rucksack to keep him warm.”

“Is he—”

The look in Kuma’s eyes stopped him from finishing the question. Carefully she handed over the perch necklace. Raffa cupped the little bat in one hand and placed a tense fingertip on Echo’s chest.

He waited. Garith and Kuma waited with him. Even Roo and Twig were silent and still.

Please, please, please . . .

Then he felt it.

A single heartbeat.

An eternity before the next one.

Echo was closer to death than life.

* * *

Garith slumped on the ground. “It’s my fault, isn’t it,” he said. “The ice—did it make a sound?” He looked from Raffa to Kuma and back again.

Raffa could not bring himself to answer. Kuma, stricken, gave Garith a tiny nod.

“I knew it,” Garith said, and this time the bitterness in his voice was clear. “I didn’t hear it, and that’s why everything went wrong.”

“No, Garith,” Raffa said. “It was mostly my fault. I yanked on the rope—if I hadn’t done that—”

But Garith wasn’t looking at him. He had drawn his knees up and put his arms over his head, as if by making his body as small as possible, he could somehow disappear.

Once again, Raffa felt the familiar surge of guilt, but this time it was tangled up with anger. Garith hadn’t even thanked him for pulling him out from under the ice.

Heat burned behind Raffa’s eyes so fiercely that he realized his anger was not of the moment. He understood then that he’d been angry with Garith for a while now—weeks, maybe months—his ire stewing and roiling beneath the surface of his thoughts.

Because Garith's deafness *was* Raffa's fault . . . but at the same time, it wasn't. Raffa hadn't forced Garith to drink the infusion that caused his deafness; Garith had made that choice all by himself. I wasn't even *there*, Raffa thought. He clenched his jaw to keep resentful words from spewing out. The last thing he needed now was an argument with Garith.

Raffa hung Echo's perch around his neck. Then he got to his feet. His limbs still felt leaden and sore, but he forced himself to ignore the pain.

Home, he thought. Maybe not all the answers were there, but he hoped that some of them would be.

Raffa winced as he put on his clammy clothes. At least they were no longer dripping. He and Kuma tamped out the fire and scattered its remains. They waited for Garith to finish dressing, then set off again.

By midafternoon, they found themselves walking through a gorge with majestic limestone cliffs on either side. The river cut through the middle of the gorge, occasionally diverting around enormous rock formations or disappearing underground for yards at a time.

The cliffs were high, but not sheer, their faces pocked with hollows, as small as fists, as large as Roo. Hardy

trees, shrubs, and vines had gained rootholds in cracks and on ledges. The vegetation was just beginning to bud out; Raffa could tell that the gorge would be cool and shady when the trees were in full leaf.

Kuma was looking around, appraising the gorge with keen interest.

“What do you think, Roo?” she asked. “Do you like it here?”

Roo sniffed the air. Like a tiny shadow of the big bear, Twig raised her head and sniffed, too.

“There’s water,” Raffa said, “and the caves and trees give plenty of cover. Plus it’s too steep for horses. I think it would be easy for her to find places to hide if they come looking here.”

He saw Kuma frown, and he added hastily, “Not that they would. I mean, it’s still pretty remote.”

Kuma nodded, then trotted to the base of the cliff on the left and reached for an outcrop of rock above her head. “I want to check out one of those caves,” she said. “I’ll only be a little while, I promise. You can go on ahead if you want. I’ll catch up.”

Anxious as he was to reach home and help for Echo, Raffa decided that it was a good time for a brief rest. He sat down on a handy boulder. Garith slumped to the

ground with his back against the cliff. Roo, with Twig on her shoulders, began climbing in Kuma's wake. Raffa marveled at the sight of the great bear, with her bulk and weight, scaling the cliff.

"Up up up!" Twig said.

Raffa wasn't exactly afraid of climbing. But he had always thought it a more sensible choice to stay on the ground, where he couldn't fall any farther than his own height. Climb only when necessary, not for fun, please upon thank you. He shaded his eyes to watch Kuma's progress. She made scaling the cliff look easy.

The yellow and gray limestone wall was streaked thickly with white in some places, including an area not far above where he sat. Curious, Raffa stood up on the boulder to examine the white streaks more closely. As he suspected, they were droppings of some kind.

Raffa frowned and scanned the cliffs on both sides. It would take a huge flock of birds to make so many droppings. But there were no birds in sight. Where were they all?

Then he heard a tiny squeak, and at the same moment, Echo spread his wings and left the perch necklace.

"Echo!" Raffa gasped.

It was the first time in many days that the bat had made either sound or movement.

Raffa's delighted surprise vanished almost immediately: Echo was barely flying. His wings flapped erratically; if he had been walking, Raffa would have called it a terrible stagger. The little bat struggled a short way up the cliff, following a heavy line of droppings. Then he disappeared into a Y-shaped crevice.

In that instant, Raffa realized that the white streaks were *bat* droppings. Their presence showed that a large number of bats lived in the many caves riddling the cliffs, and Echo had apparently sensed their proximity. Perhaps he was seeking out his own kind—

Raffa's throat seized up with fear.

Had Echo gone into the crevice . . . to find a place to die?