

The background features intricate, swirling patterns in shades of grey and white, resembling stylized clouds or water. Two small, dark silhouettes of birds are positioned on the right side of the page, one above the other.

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To Rebecca Hill and Becky Walker,
who sing magic into stories



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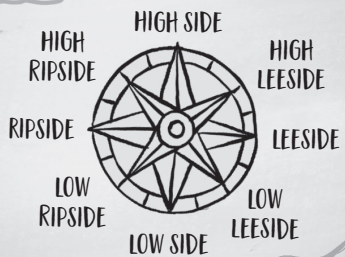


The Thief who Sang Storms

SOPHIE ANDERSON

ILLUSTRATED BY JOANNA LISOWIEC





MAGICLESS MOUNTAINS

GOLD MOUNTAINS

PURPLE CLIFFS

ELDOVIA

PERO PALACE COMPLEX

HOT HOUSES

THE KEEP

BRIDGE

ROAD

RIPPLING MARSH

COLD-FEET CANYON

LEESIDE FARMS

ECHO'S TREE

RED MAPLE

HOME TREE

WATERFALL

SMIRK'S POOL

MOURNFUL SWAMP

BUYAN

SPARK

MAP OF

FISHER'S FLOCK

HOPEFUL HUTS

MOROVIA





The Island of Morovia is shaped like a broken heart. The humans live on the calmer lee side of the island, and the alkonosts – the bird-people – live on the stormier rip side. But it wasn't always this way.

Until three years ago, alkonosts and humans lived together, all over Morovia. My parents and I had a home in Spark – the lee-side town by the shifting, sparkling sea. We loved sitting on our balcony, gazing at the soft sands and salted waves. The view was ever-changing, because our island, Morovia, is one of the Three Floating Islands. Morovia, Eldovia and Buyan all drift across the world's oceans, moving towards and away from each other, and the Fixed Land, in an endlessly varied dance.

Sometimes Eldovia would drift so close to us that we could spot seabirds wheeling around nests on the

purple cliffs. Buyan always floated further away, hidden in the mist that clings to it, but occasionally the mist would thin and we'd get tantalizing glimpses of something golden, glistening. We loved searching for new sights and imagining what might lie on the other Floating Islands and the Fixed Land, but we never talked of leaving to find out, because we were happy on Morovia.

My mother sang every day on our balcony, her voice high and bright as the moon, and her wings would open, blue as the sea and yellow as sunshine... My family are alkonosts, which means we're descended from the ancient bird-people of our island.

Most alkonosts look similar to humans, although we're smaller and lighter, and have feathers, while humans have hair. Only a few of us have bird features as prominent as my mother's – whose arms were so covered with long blue and yellow feathers that when she held them outstretched they became wings.

The biggest difference between alkonosts and humans though, and the one that has led to all the trouble on Morovia, is something that can't be seen.

Nearly all alkonosts, by the time we're ten years old, develop the ability to sing magic. There are many kinds of singing magic. I know alkonosts whose songs

can make flowers bloom, flames burn brighter, or lightning strike the ground. And there are legends of ancient alkonosts who could change the shape of mountains and the course of rivers, and communicate with the island itself.

My father, Nightingale, can mesmerize people with his magic, and my mother could call butterflies with her songs. I remember them fluttering down to land on her feathers as she folded her wings around me, soft and warm as a summer's day.

It was a summer's day, three years ago, when the ship *Joy* sank. The sea was calm and the sky was clear. *Joy* was taking a short voyage around the island to celebrate a holiday we call the Day of Union, when a tidal wave came out of nowhere.

The two queens of Morovia – the alkonost queen and the human queen – went down with the ship, along with fifty royal courtiers, fifty guests, an orchestra of fifty musicians and one singer: my mother, Halcyon.

As well as sinking the ship, the tidal wave flooded the low-rip side of the island – which is the flatter, lower lying part of the island's rip side. And when the waters receded, a swamp sat stewing, dark and damp and dreary, where pretty dunes and charming woods

had stood before. The landscape of the island, and our lives, changed for ever.

Some humans must always have been suspicious of singing magic, because whispers began immediately after the tragedy, saying the tidal wave was so powerful that it must have been caused by magic. Many of the whispers grew into angry shouts. But with both Queens of Morovia gone, and the only heir – Crown Heir Vasha – too young to rule, nobody knew what to do.

Then Captain Ilya appeared. He was the leader of a small group of royal guards called bogatyrs, whose role was to keep the royal families and the island safe. Captain Ilya spoke loudly and with authority. He said he had proof that singing magic had caused the tidal wave, and that it must be controlled for the safety of us all. The humans who were already wary of magic agreed with him, and Captain Ilya spoke so persuasively that soon many others agreed with him too.

Things on the island changed fast. Captain Ilya increased the number of bogatyrs every day, until they seemed to be everywhere. Alkonosts were banned from singing. Then banned from public spaces. Then we were pushed further and further into the swamp.

For the last three years, Nightingale and I have lived

here. We named it the Mournful Swamp because the air is filled with songs of sorrow – for my mother, and for our island. The swamp echoes our songs with its whole being. Willows weep over muddy waters. Sluggish streams murmur with melancholy. Crickets chirp cheerlessly and mosquitoes drone dismally. Even my toad friend, Lumpy, croaks the sound of a breaking heart.

My other friend, Whiskers the swamp-rat, smiles, although that's only because a giant mud crab pinched her lip when she was a pup, scarring one side of her mouth into an upwards curve. She often sighs and scratches her chin with an air of despair, and her brown fur smells funky enough to bring tears to a skunk's eyes.

But in these years that I've lived in the swamp, I've learned that sorrow doesn't always have to be sad. When the glow-worms glow through the gloomy nights and the bluegill fish burp the blues, Nightingale plays his grief on a tin guitar and something in my soul ignites like swamp-gas popping into flame.

My father says that feeling is nostalgia – a yearning for the happiness of the past. And I guess it's impossible to be truly sad when I'm thinking of a happy time – when my mother was still with us, and we lived

surrounded by our alkonost and human friends. I think it's more than that though, too. The swamp is our home now and it's beautiful in its own way; a shifting world of sucking muds and dappled waters that provides us with all the food and shelter we need.

Thousands of alkonosts live here, although we rarely see each other. In the early days after *Joy* sank, we lived together in a community. But then Captain Ilya offered rewards to anyone who reported the use of singing magic and a few alkonosts began spying for him in exchange for small luxuries. So now we're scattered like twigs from a nest flung by the wind, and suspicion thorns the space between us. But there is hope here too.

There is a Unity Movement that fights for change. I know that one day soon I will help it succeed, because my name, Linnet, is a kind of a prophecy, given to me through an ancient tradition of using singing magic to glimpse a child's future.

Linnetts are small but loud songbirds, whose numbers bloomed on Morovia when alkonosts and humans worked together to create the lee-side farms. My name tells me that my magic will be more powerful than any

rules to stop me singing, and that I will somehow use it to bring people together.

It's been three years since my tenth birthday – when my magic should have arrived and yet didn't. But I know when it does come, I will sing a storm that will change the landscape of our lives once more.

My song will send Captain Ilya far away from this island, and unite alkonosts and humans for good. We'll get our old homes and something of our old lives back, and see our friends again. Then my father will smile, like he did years ago, when we lived by the shifting, sparkling sea.

