

STORM WITCH

By Ellen Renner

Chapter 2: Extract

They sat in a circle, just above the tideline, and swapped stories. The black sand was already hot.

Storm plunged her fingers knuckle-deep, needing the gritty warmth.

Cloud was telling the story of his Choosing night. "Then, as I neared the shrine of the Albatross, I heard something following me on the path. Its feet went *pad-pad-pad*. And there was another sound – halfway between a pant and a cough."

A murmur of anticipation ran round the group.

"It was one of your four-legged cousins, wanting to make friends!" shouted a boy.

Laughter: it was a good joke. The mountain was home to a tribe of cloud leopards.

"So it ate you, right?" Thorn asked. "And was that before or after the Albatross told you that you were destined to become the greatest Air-witch ever born?"

"Oh, after. Definitely after." Cloud grinned. "And how did you know what the Albatross said? It must have been the Dolphin whispering in your ear, saying: 'Poor Thorn! You'll never be as good a diver as that Cloud, even if you are a Child of Water!'"

"Ho ho." Thorn tossed a handful of damp sand at his friend, and for a moment stories were forgotten in a barrage of laughter and stinging sand.

"Tell us about the shrines," Mixi said suddenly, when giggling had replaced battling.

"What are they like inside? What will we have to do? What do the Elementals sound like?"

Silence fell over the group. She's gone too far this time, Storm thought. Most of the boys looked away, faces reddened with embarrassment. Cloud frowned at the tall girl, who sat fiddling with her thirteen plaits. Storm's fingers itched to count her own braids, still damp from the sea: the proof that she was a Thirteen-year at last.

"We can't talk about the ritual, Mix. You know better than that."

Mixi shrugged and tossed her plaits over her shoulder. "Don't be so stuck-up, Cloud! We girls will find out next week anyway so what harm can it do? Who would know? Unless you go and snitch to the Elders."

"Hey, Storm, tell us a story!" Plump Hild – who hated arguments – smiled at Storm, eyes pleading.

"Yes! Tell us a story, Storm. Come on." The cry was taken up by the others. Only Mixi wrinkled her nose. But she glanced at Cloud, whose frown had grown thunderous, and closed her mouth.

"All right," Storm said. If it hadn't been for storytelling – the gift she had inherited from her father – she might have been shunned completely for her name. She looked around the circle of expectant faces. Except for Thorn, none of these people were real friends. "Which one do you want?"

"The one about the flesh-eating octopus!"

"Tell us about the girl who turned into a seal!"

"Baby tales!" scoffed Thorn. "We're men now. Tell us about the time the Drowned Ones ransacked Yanlin, when our great-grandparents were our age."

"Too scary!" moaned Hild.

"I don't mind," said tall Jai. "Come on, Storm!"

Storm shook her head. The tale was popular, but it gave her nightmares. Thorn smiled at her. "Please, Storm."

The others took up the cry, chanting: "The Drowned Ones, the Drowned Ones!"

She gave in and sat with her hands in her lap, staring ahead but seeing events long past. "Many years ago, when our parents' parents were not yet born, the fame of our island spread far and wide. The sea-cursed race heard tales of the beauty of Yanlin, of its fertile gardens. Greedy as ever, the Drowned Ones decided to attack Yanlin, murder our grandparents' grandparents, and steal the island for themselves.

“Their plan was cunning: they set spies to follow our fleet at a distance as the men of Yanlin sailed the trading routes, selling the beautiful things the women had made. When the island’s fleet had done its trading and the monsoon winds began to grow in the west, the spies reported to their masters that our fleet was sailing for home.”

Storm paused, waiting for the suspense to build. They all knew this story. It belonged to Jai, whose grandmother’s eldest sister had been murdered. And to Cloud, whose great-great uncle had been killed on Yanlin beach, a boy of twelve fighting his first battle. It told of the lost children of Yanlin who had been stolen, along with the island’s treasures, and taken away by the pirates. Tales whispered at midnight claimed those children had been eaten one by one: human boat-pigs kept for meat.

“Go on! Tell the next bit.” Voices clamoured. Then silence fell like a thunderclap at a new sound: the *blat-blat-blat* of conch horns coming from the headland.

Every face wore the same stunned expression Storm felt on her own. Had they just heard that? Really heard it?

Blat-blat-blat-blaaaaaat!

Behind her, someone screamed – a shrill cry of disbelief. Storm jumped to her feet and saw a giant raft-town powering past the reefs guarding Yanlin. She would not believe her eyes – until the bleat of the warning horns and confused shouts of her companions told her she must. The Drowned Ones had sprung out her story and into life.