

FIREBORN

PHOENIX AND THE FROST PALACE

AISLING FOWLER

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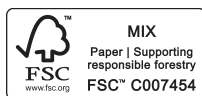
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CHAPTER 1

Phoenix's legs ached as she climbed higher and higher, up steep steps roughly hewn into the cliff face. In spite of the exertion, her heart was light. For the first time in days, the clouds had dropped below Ledge, revealing a bold blue sky above the mountain-clan village where the Hunters were staying. Finally, the rain had stopped and it was the perfect weather for a hunt.

'We're never going to reach the top!' Five groaned, trailing behind her with Seven and Six.

'L-let's take another break,' Seven gasped.

'Yes,' Six panted, just as out of breath as his sister.

Five heaved a sigh of relief. 'Genius idea, Seven.'

Phoenix glanced back and saw the three of them had already staggered to a stop. They slumped against one another, hair damp with sweat in spite

of the cold bite to the air. She swallowed her complaint – they’d just had a break and really wouldn’t reach the top at this rate – and nodded instead.

‘Maybe just a quick stop then,’ Phoenix said. It *was* quite nice to catch her breath.

On her shoulder, Widge, her squirrel, flicked his tail cheerfully, his chestnut fur gleaming in the sunlight. His bright eyes were fixed on something high above their heads and Phoenix puffed out a breath, craning her neck to look too. The cliff soared up and away from them, steps winding back and forth across it. Their destination was at the very top, where a red-painted platform poked out over the precipice. It was the place mountain-clan gliders launched and landed, and an edgeworm had apparently taken up residence there.

Phoenix groaned softly; it still looked miles above them. ‘You’ve got the best deal,’ she muttered to Widge. ‘Wish someone would carry me!’ He chirped merrily, unmistakably pleased with himself.

She glanced down and quickly regretted it. Clouds shifted beneath them, blocking the ground from view. Even Ledge, the colourful mountain-clan settlement, was completely obscured. Her stomach

dropped and she averted her eyes quickly, focusing back on the red speck instead.

‘Looks much closer,’ she said to the others.

Five snorted. ‘You are *such* a liar, Twelve!’ Dark hair obscured his flushed face.

‘I’m Phoenix now,’ she reminded him with a grin. ‘And we must be closer! Come on!’

With a sigh, her three friends fell in behind her, pressing themselves against the cliff as they climbed. The mountain clan did not believe in safety ropes and the vast drop clawed at them, making them all nervous.

‘Have you two had any more ideas for your Hunter names?’ asked Seven, glancing back at Five and Six.

Five brightened immediately. ‘Funny you should ask. I’ve come up with a shortlist.’ He paused and aimed a pointed look at Six. ‘Yes, *another* shortlist.’

‘Me too,’ grinned Six. ‘I thought “Popinjay” would suit you perfectly.’

Phoenix laughed. ‘What? Those rowdy, colourful birds?’

Six nodded, unable to hide his amusement at Five’s outrage.

‘Or m-maybe “Peacock”?’ Seven suggested innocently.

‘You two are both awful,’ Five sniffed. ‘No, I was thinking something more like –’ he paused for dramatic effect – ‘Nighthawk.’

Seven caught Phoenix’s eye and they both looked away quickly, trying not to laugh.

Six shook his head, struggling to quell the telltale twitching at the corner of his lips. ‘Terrible.’

‘Really?’ Five shrugged as everyone nodded vigorously. ‘All right, how about Bladewielder?’

‘No!’

‘Grim-stalker?’

‘Definitely not!’ Six rolled his eyes. ‘And when have you ever stalked a Grim anyway?’

Phoenix couldn’t help but shiver at the mention of that particular dark creature. It had only been three months since one of them had taken her mentor Silver’s life at the Hunting Lodge.

A shadow passed over Seven’s face too, and Phoenix wondered if she was remembering her kidnap on that same day. Or the resulting battle, where Phoenix had accidentally destroyed the lodge with her newly discovered elemental power . . .

She shook the thought away and forced herself

to concentrate on the conversation around her. ‘I think it’s your turn, Six,’ she said, forcing a grin on to her face. ‘I keep coming back to “Goat” for you.’

‘What?’ Six’s horror was comical.

‘You’re really sure-footed.’ Phoenix strove to keep a straight face.

‘That’s true!’ Seven grinned. ‘He always has been!’

Five nodded seriously. ‘Nice one, Phoenix. “Goat” is *definitely* a contender.’

‘You take it if you like it so much,’ Six snorted.

Together, the four friends bickered their way upward until an hour later, quite unexpectedly, the steps flattened out and suddenly they were at the top. The air was thin, the view so beautiful it silenced them. Far below, a milky ocean of cloud stretched to the horizon and from its rolling depths sprang mountain beyond mountain, each peak dipped in glittering snow.

‘Thank the frost,’ Five groaned, sinking to his haunches.

‘Right,’ Six said, suddenly looking purposeful. ‘Shall we run over what we know about the edgeworm?’ He offered Five a hand and hauled him back to his feet.

‘Elder Hoarfrost said that three days ago it nearly got one of the gliders,’ Phoenix said.

The gliders were the most respected people in the mountain clan after the chief himself. They used handmade wings to ride the thermals, often warning of dangers long before they arrived.

‘He thinks it’s probably still waiting there at the end of the platform,’ Five said, wincing. ‘But I’m hoping it might have got sick of all the rain and moved on.’

‘Five!’ Six exclaimed. ‘That is not a Hunter attitude, especially not on our first proper hunt!’

‘Even I’m h-hoping it’ll be there,’ Seven said brightly.

‘You don’t have to face it,’ muttered Five.

‘I’ll learn so m-much though.’ She smiled sweetly. ‘From your mistakes.’

‘Oi!’

‘There won’t be any mistakes,’ Phoenix said firmly, leading the group towards the red boards that jutted out over the hair-raising drop.

A little back from it stood an A-frame building: the wing shed. The roof was carved into a pair of downbeating wings, their brilliant white blinding against the blue sky. Steps down from the entrance

led straight on to the gliding platform. Just looking at the red planks gave Phoenix goosebumps. The thought of stepping on to them, walking to the edge, strapping on some bits of wood covered in feathers, then jumping and hoping for the best . . . She shook herself, pushed away the jolt of fear.

‘No mistakes,’ she muttered again to calm herself. Widge squealed his agreement, tail swishing cheerfully.

‘According to *A Magical Bestiary*, edgeworms are only a problem for the mountain clan, aren’t they?’ Six said.

Phoenix nodded.

Five sighed. ‘Go on then. We all know you know it off by heart.’

Phoenix grinned and mentally flipped to the *Magical Bestiary* entry on edgeworms.

‘Edgeworms are unpleasant pests of the mountains,’ she recited. ‘They lurk at the top of steep drops, taking on the appearance of their surroundings. By flattening themselves to the ground and extending themselves beyond a cliff’s true edge, they can make the precipice appear up to six feet further away than it truly is. Anyone unfortunate enough to step on one will plummet to their death,

whereupon the edgeworm descends to devour its victim's remains.'

'So disgusting,' said Five.

Phoenix ignored him. *'If attacked, these unpleasant creatures assume their true many-legged form. Their jaws are bone-crushingly strong and their whip-like tail is covered in poisonous barbs. Avoid the tail at all costs: its poison is paralytic.'*

'And the stats?' Six prompted her, checking his quiver of arrows.

Phoenix grinned. *'Aggression: four out of ten. Danger posed: six out of ten. Difficulty to disable: four out of ten.'*

'Pfft,' Five snorted. 'Four out of ten difficulty? We've faced *way* worse. We'll be fine.' He shot a sidelong glance at Seven. 'Won't we . . .?'

Phoenix frowned at him. Ever since they'd discovered that Seven was a Seer, they'd all struggled with the temptation to quiz her about what she saw in their futures. They knew how uncomfortable it made her.

Seven shook her head slowly. 'I haven't Seen anything, Five. I'm s-sorry.'

He shrugged, trying to look unconcerned. 'Come on then,' he said, drawing his sword. 'Time to give

Seven a faultless lesson in how to dispatch an edgeworm.'

Beside him, Six strung his bow and Phoenix pulled the axes off her back.

Phoenix glanced at Widge. 'Why don't you stay with Seven?' The little squirrel's claws tightened on her shoulder and his eyes narrowed. He was staying exactly where he was. 'Suit yourself,' she said with a sigh. Then, to the others: 'Come on.'

'Good luck!' Seven called after them. 'N-not that you need it,' she added quickly.

Phoenix took a deep breath and stepped up on to the platform.



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