

THE CHIMERA'S APPRENTICE

BY ROSLYN MUIR – EXTRACT



"Kyra? Are you okay?" Coyne's voice faded in and out.

"You're supposed to hold your breath," squeaked Mercy.

"I did," I moaned. The pain in my head wasn't as bad this time, but it still hurt. I opened my eyes to see Coyne and Mercy's concerned faces staring down at me. "Did we make it through the wall?"

Mercy helped me sit up. We were in a small dim cave. Basalt. The most common of the volcanic rocks.

"So where are we now?" demanded Coyne. "And why did we bring this thing with us?" Coyne didn't even try to hide his disdain for Mercy. He moved to the mouth of the cave, eyes darting. Beyond him there was a misty, forested valley, divided by a black snaking river. Behind it was a vast snow-capped mountain range that seemed to stretch on forever.

"If you want the pain to stop, you must embrace the chimera," whispered Mercy, keeping one eye on Coyne.

"What does that even mean?" I asked.

"Once it controls you, you will control it," she said. "The chimera is ancient. You must do its bidding."

"How do you know that?" I asked her.

"I lived in the Reach for many years with your family, even after you left."

"Is this Deep Nestling?" I peered out at the rugged landscape.

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"No, this is the Corvid Range," she said, her paw gesturing to the mountains. "Behind them is Deep Nestling and then Murch City. Don't worry, we are far from danger now."

"But we were closer to Murch City before, in Fuuto," I shouted. "The rebels have captured my mom. She's in Thane's Reach."

"The rebels have the queen?" Mercy squeaked.

I ran to the cave wall. "Chimera? Why did you bring us here?" I slammed my hand against it. "Chimera?"

Silence.

"How will I find Mom now?"

"Maybe there is a way," Mercy was thoughtful. "We could follow the river downstream and cross at the narrows, go through the Corvid Pass." Her claws gestured to a distant point. "It's a few days away, but we can always ask for passage over the mountains."

"Over the mountains?" I asked.

"Ask who?" demanded Coyne.

Mercy's big eyes blinked with surprise, "The Corvie, of course. They will give us passage."

"What're the Corvie?" I asked.

"Believe me, you don't want to meet the Corvie," warned Coyne. "Huge black birds. They eat human flesh. It's a delicacy in these parts. That's why the rebels will never expect an attack from behind these mountains. Nobody would be crazy enough to enter them."

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"I will help you, Kyra. You have saved me from a life of slavery. The prophecy is true, Ko-ru-ku. I will go with you to Thane's Reach. There is always a way," she said proudly. The shackles on her paws couldn't dim her fighting spirit. Her eyes lit up as she schemed. "We only need a plan."

"Oh Mercy, thank you." I turned to Coyne. "Mercy knows the Reach. She can get us inside."

Coyne's laugh echoed through the cave. "I'm not going on some crazy rescue mission to a guarded castle in the middle of a vermin-infested city."

"But it's the Queen. If you helped rescue her, you'd be a hero in all of Murch City, in all of Antiica. My family would reward you. I'll make sure of it."

"I'm not hoping for riches or rewards, Kyra. I just want to get home," he said with a catch in his voice.

"Please, Coyne. Please help us." I pleaded.

Coyne stashed a loaf of bread in his long coat and went to the mouth of the cave. "I'm heading home," he pointed south. "It's only a few days walk from here. You can come with me, Kyra. It's safe there." The invitation didn't include Mercy, so I shook my head, no. "If you know what's good for you, you'll go back to your father." He started down the mountainside with a wary eye on the sky.

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"Wait," I shouted. "Coyne, you can't just leave. At least hear what Mercy has to say."

"I don't listen to vermin," he shouted back.

"You said you would help me."

"You'll be fine with your new friend."

"But I just saved your life. You owe me," I yelled after him.

"Saved you first!"

"Did not! You're a coward, that's what you are," I called after him. He just kept on marching down the hill, easily navigating the steep terrain of rocks, scrub, and small trees. "Coyne," I whispered, fighting back tears. He'd been kind of a jerk, but I knew there was good in him too.

