



Hundreds of hot-air balloons bobbed in the wind, their baskets tied together with long stretches of rope. From the ground, the Sky Village looked like a giant net, poised to capture the clouds as it drifted far above. Mei strained her eyes to make out the figures painted on the two closest balloons—a dragon and a phoenix, both symbols of power.

Mei had glimpsed the Sky Village only a few times in her life as it passed high over Luo Ye Village, like a parade of upside-down teardrops gliding across the sunrise. Now it was making a rare descent, on her account. But Mei did not want this special honor. She wished a sudden great gust of wind would blow the whole village high into the sky, far away from her and the home she wasn't ready to leave.

She and her father stood on the peak of the highest mountain in the region, the lowest point to which the sky villagers were willing to descend. Mei's father squeezed her hand as he glanced nervously at the trees just beyond the clearing. Mei hadn't seen the meks chasing them, but she'd heard them clanking through the trees. She and her father had lost them by scrambling up a pass that was too steep for their metallic bodies.

Mei could see the woven bamboo of the baskets, and laundry hung on lengths of rope, flapping in the wind. The few sky villagers who were awake this early in the morning waved greetings to Mei as they walked across ropes from one basket to the next. They seemed completely unconcerned about the dangers on the ground.

A small balloon near the front suddenly dropped below the rest. A woman wearing a feathered vest unhooked the ropes connecting her balloon to the others and let go of all but one. She appeared to be in her early twenties, with four beauty marks under her left eye in the shape of an animal footprint. She adjusted the flame until the balloon hovered just above the ground. She smiled and nodded at Mei and her father. Mei summoned the cold frown she had been practicing for this moment as her father greeted the woman.

"You've grown up, Ai-ling," he said.

"And you've grown old, Kai." She laughed, then turned serious. "You promised you'd look after Pei-shan."

"I'll find her," Mei's father said. "But there's no time to talk now. The meks are right behind us."

"Don't worry," Ai-ling said. "We never touch ground for long. Say your good-byes."

How could her father be so polite at a time like this? Yes, he had asked the Sky Village to take Mei away for safekeeping, but he was losing valuable time. Every moment he spent in conversation with these people, the farther away the mek army took her mother. Besides, Mei didn't need safekeeping; she needed to help find her mother! Since that morning, when Mei's father braided her hair into a neat rope, there had been near silence between them. Now, as he kissed her on the forehead and rested his hands on her shoulders, Mei tried to fight off tears. It was no use. She wanted to hug her father just as much as she wanted to pound on his chest for making her go. She wiped her eyes with her sleeve.

Mei's father's hands were strong and warm, and they made her feel safe. Maybe she could still convince him! But she knew her father never changed his mind.

"Mei, you'll be safer in the Sky Village. You were born here. These are your mother's people."

"I was only a baby when we left," Mei said, looking into his eyes. "They won't even remember me."

Her father turned away, shaking his head.

"Father, I should come with you," Mei said. "I can help you track those machines."

“You’re going to fight meks? I’ve made too many sacrifices to keep you safe. You’re my little dragonfly.”

“But I’m not little anymore,” Mei insisted. “Mother needs me. You need me.”

Ai-ling turned away while they argued. At least she was decent enough to mind her own business, Mei thought. Perhaps she could see what Father couldn’t—that sending Mei away was a terrible mistake.

“Dragonfly,” her father said, “you can help me from the safety of the sky. The sky villagers are information traders. Learn from them, and help me find your mother.”

“But how? Why can’t I just go with you?”

He looked at her a moment, with an intensity she’d never seen in his eyes. He pulled a small book out of his pocket and held it out to her.

“The Tree Book,” Mei said. It was the book of faraway stories her mother had read to her every night as far back as she could remember. She’d never allowed Mei to touch it or look inside its pages. Mei reached for it, but Kai pulled it away.

“Pay attention. There’s a reason we could never let you touch this book. But there’s no other option now. You have to guard it. But Dragonfly, you must not open it. You aren’t ready yet.”

“It’s just a book. I won’t break it.”

“It’s not just a book. Guarding what’s inside this book is the most important thing you will ever do.” He looked

straight at her, and she knew he was serious. He handed her the book.

“Mei,” he continued, “you must understand that I cannot be the guardian of this book. I don’t have the power. And I can no longer protect you while I search for your mother. It looks like the meks and beasts may be going to war again. If your mother found out I took you on a mek hunt, she’d kill me.” He tried to laugh. “Then she’d use her science to revive me and kill me again, just to make sure she’d made her point.”

Mei stared at the Tree Book. She ran her fingers over the large tree etched into the cover. *What if you can’t find her? Or what if you’re too late?* she thought, but it was too terrible to say. Ai-ling had begun to fidget, glancing nervously at the rocks around the landing.

Mei felt like pulling away and running back home, back to her ruined and empty village, but she knew she could not. Her father would follow, and her mother would be taken farther away. And what if she ran into meks?

Maybe Father was right. It was true that the Sky Village traveled wide and far. She might be able to find out where the mek army had taken her mother and the others. Mei stuffed the Tree Book into her bag, next to a few brittle old books and other items she’d gathered quickly before the morning’s journey.

“And take this.” Her father slipped his yak-bone knife into Mei’s pocket. He turned her around so that she faced Ai-ling.



Hovering above the village was a sea of balloons painted every color Mei had ever seen and some she'd never imagined. Small children hung from ropes with one hand, staring at Mei and her father, while older children sneaked curious glances.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Mei's father said.

Mei nodded before she could catch herself. She'd always loved watching the Sky Village pass over her town—she'd stare straight up, imagining what life must be like for her mother's people, many of whom had never set foot on the ground. Sometimes she'd catch her mother watching the sky when there was nothing there, and Mei knew she must have been looking into the past, at her old life among the balloons. Mei always wondered why her mother had chosen to give up the Sky Village to marry a soldier. When Mei asked for stories about life in the clouds, her mother always responded, "Circling the fires of the past, however warm, will only singe the wings of the future."

"I liked it better from a distance," Mei said quickly.

"Go on, now," her father said. "I'll send word when your mother is safe. Keep the Tree Book hidden, and don't open it."

He stooped over so Mei could kiss him on the cheek. She didn't want to let him go. She felt so safe when he was near. He gave her a gentle push, and she took a few reluctant steps toward the basket. It was bigger than her bedroom at home, made entirely of bamboo, with furnishings of bamboo and

balsa wood. There was a sturdy rug on the floor, and a series of boxes hanging like a ladder from the lip of the basket.

"Safe travels, Kai," Ai-ling said. Mei noticed that the woman's smile was cold. Then she turned to Mei and bowed, her face full of warmth. "Welcome to the Sky Village, Mei. Give me your hands."

Ai-ling's arms were thin but muscular, and she pulled Mei over the edge of the basket easily. She dropped Mei gently on the padded floor and then adjusted a lever to increase the flame. The balloon rose until it was level with the bottom layer of the Sky Village. People in neighboring balloons threw ropes with carved wooden hooks, which Ai-ling connected to the edges of the basket, securing it once again to the group.

Mei held tightly to a handle on the basket and leaned over. As the village rose, she saw four metallic forms emerge into the clearing below.

"We have to go back," Mei said. "Those are meks."

Ai-ling put her hand on Mei's shoulder. "Your father has much experience fighting meks. He can take care of himself." Mei watched as her father armed his bow. She knew he had once been a soldier in the Trinary Wars, but during her lifetime she'd never seen him fight anything more dangerous than garden weeds.

He let the arrow fly. It struck a mek in the neck and exploded. The head toppled off and rolled toward Mei's father.

With a powerful kick, he sent it hurtling toward the nearest mek's legs. That one fell forward as an arrow pierced its shoulder and exploded. It crawled toward Mei's father, but four exploding arrows later, it was still.

The other two closed in, swords fused to their oversize arms. One mek began to rotate, its torso twirling like a deadly top, as it continued to move forward. Mei's father shot an arrow, but the spinning blades deflected it.

The other mek shot a length of rope from its arm compartment. Kai grabbed the rope and yanked the mek toward him, then lassoed his other attacker. The rope caught on the spinning torso, and Mei's father rolled clear as the two collided. Metal pieces flew across the clearing.

Kai looked up and waved. Mei waved back, speechless, barely breathing. She'd never seen her father fight; he made it look so easy.

"He looks like a child's toy down there, doesn't he?" Ai-ling said as they both eyed Kai, now little more than a speck far below. "Land walkers all look like that. Tiny toy soldiers, waving or fighting, rooted like plants to the ground."

Mei had never been higher than the mountain, and she had been so busy worrying about her father that she had forgotten her fear of falling. Now the fear rushed back. She moved away from the side, suddenly dizzy. Then she staggered again to the edge and called out to him, unable to stop the tears.

It was no use. He was too far away to hear. Mei felt as though the ground had just been ripped out from under her. It was as if something inside her was tethered to her village, to her parents, and the farther away she got, the more it squeezed her.

*He'll be OK, she thought. He'll find Mother, and then he'll come back for me.*

She thought of her village as she'd seen it last, broken and burned. She imagined meks dragging her mother away. She felt rage building up inside of her. She struggled to find words to fit the surge of hatred. *I'll tear those meks apart and use their bodies to rebuild my village.* The brutality of the thought surprised her. More surprising was the realization that she really meant it.

