
Flyer

By D.L.Morgan

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On a high plateau where the grass was kept in check by sheep, a small child was dragged by her hand. Her grandmother's face looked down on the child in disdain and thought how much she looked like her mother. They walked down the narrow path that headed to the edge of the plateau. Villagers did not go so close to the cliff edge. Everyone knew how the edges of the high cliff could give away unpredictably. Only those who were required to go near it did so.

In the distance the old woman could see a small hut that was far away from the village. This flyer lived away and alone. As she came upon the hut she could see an old tattered kite that was left outside.

"Open," The old woman knocked hard upon the door.

Silence.

"Open!"

The door opened, but only for a small gap.

"What do you want?" an angry voice came from behind the door.

"I have a student for you."

"I do not take students. Go away!" And the door shut.

Tatana watched her grandmother leave. She wanted to go home. But there was no home and she was told to stay. The grandmother had taken the scrip from selling her mother's hut and used it to go to the big-city. Halfway through the trip, the scrip had become short and she now was leaving Tatana in front of the flyer's hut.

As she looked, she could see the zep making its gray smoke, leaving in the distance. She knew that her grandmother had left her for good. She stood. After a while she sat, getting her faded white chamois dress dirty. She pulled the white ribbons from her long black hair. She cried, thinking about how much she missed her mother, wishing that she had never died. Evening came and Tatana tried to fall asleep, tired and hungry.

She was cold. No one who stayed outside at night lived very long. The cold of the night had killed others and soon would kill her. Tatana waited for the cold of the night slowly to take her too. Out of the corner of her eye she saw a rollie. It was pink. All the rollies she had seen were green. That's the color they were in the day time. If you can see them. It was soon joined by a blue one. Rollies avoided people. Someone once told Tatana that rollies are real good eating. "You skin

off the thick fur and boil them for a whole day. But rollie stew is delicious.”

The blue one left and the other one stayed, curling up next to Tatana. Rollies have no feet or hands. They move by changing their muscles, kind of like a round snake with thick fur. Tatana used the pink one to warm her hands.

In a short time the blue one returned with ten or more other rollies. Tatana couldn't count them all. They were pink or blue, not the green that she was used to seeing. They covered her like a blanket. Tatana slept well, using her clothing bag as a pillow.

In the morning all the rollies were gone.

“You still here? You've been outside all night long?” Tatana rubbed the sleep from her small blue eyes and nodded yes as she looked up.

“You have any clan that'll take you?”

Tatana shook her head no. Her face was red from crying most of the night.

“So you want to join the Guild?”

Tatana gave no response. She looked up at the flyer, trying not to stare at the woman's cleavage, more than most women have. The flyer's face was still pretty. She was still young. Too old to be a flyer, though; at thirty summers she had made enough scrip to retire.

“I should send you to work in the village... Nay, I could not be that evil... Come in.”

“Thank you,” Tatana said as she stood up carrying her small chamois bag. The woman could see the fear in Tatana's eyes.

“Don't thank me. I'm going to feed you and then you can get water for me.”

Tatana looked at the stranger and almost shuddered, thinking that she must be kidding. *Only sliders got water (Sliders - Water boys).*

A feeling of dread came over Tatana. She looked around in the small, dark hut. Tuffen walls and a thatched roof. The small windows had not been opened. It was dark inside until the flyer opened the brown chamois flaps and tied them to the ruffen that hung from the rafters. Tatana ate from a plain ceramic bowl. The grub was a rice and mutton

mix. It was a lot better than the cornmeal that she had been eating for the last week.

“You're done?”

Tatana wanted more to eat, hoping that the woman would see that she was not full. She shook her head no.

“That's all you get, child.”

The woman now sat across from Tatana on a small picnic-type table. In the light coming from the three opened windows Tatana could see the old flyer's cap that hung over her shoulder and onto her back. She wore a faded red blouse and the fact that she wore light brown chamois pants and not a long white dress, would make her stand out as a flyer anywhere.

“How old are you?”

“I don't know,” Tatana replied.

“I figure you to be ten or eleven summers old. A good age to learn how to fly. Guess I am going to have to fix my kite. Actually, you will fix it and learn to fly it yourself.”

The thought of flying excited and scared her. Her mother always allowed her to watch them fly in the dark blue sky, although her grandmother hated them.

“Right now I want you to go for water. Go out and find Jabone and tell him that I had sent you to help him,” the flyer said, as she pushed Tatana gently on her back and out the open door.

Tatana asked how she could find Jabone.

“Easy. Just follow the cliff.”

Tatana walked near the cliff edge. She tried not to look down. It was over three jumps high. All her life she was told never to go near the edge. She remembered her young friend who had gone to the edge to look down and never came back (Jumps - About 100 feet).

The path coming from the village was well worn. There was no mistake; this was the path for sliders. A boy, maybe a summer older came up to her. He was carrying two wooden buckets. They were hung by ruffen rope from a tuffen pole that was slung over his shoulders.

“Are you Jabone?” Tatana asked the boy.

He had short hair and wore a light brown thin chamois T-shirt and pants that were a little too large, held up by a belt made of a ruffen rope. His arms were burned by the sun. His dark blue eyes almost twinkled on his freckled face. He looked tired and abused. He had bruises on his arms and hands. Someone had been beating the boy.

“Yeah. And who are you?” he asked.

“Tatana. I have been sent to help you.”

Tatana smiled at the boy.

He frowned.

“By who?”

“The flyer,” she said, as she pointed back in the direction of the flyer’s hut.

“Have you ever been down a ruffen rope?”

Tatana shook her head no. She wanted no part of climbing down the ladder. By its very nature, it did not look safe. Two cords, about two feet apart and only a man's thumb in diameter. The rungs were even thinner. About every ten feet or so there was a tuffen bar to keep it from collapsing upon itself.

“Okay, I want you to take these buckets back to the village after I have filled them.”

He seemed to jump over the edge with no fear of the great height. Within a few moments he came back up and tied a full bucket of water. Then he did the second. He told her to take the water to the village and come back with the empties. The buckets were way too heavy for Tatana to lift. Jabone dumped out half the water so she could carry them. Then he filled two more for himself.

“So you are going to be a flyer. Don't tell anyone but I am jealous. I wish I could be a flyer. But you know only girls can fly kites and you have to be born into the Guild to fly zeps...are you an orphan? Yeah, me too. I was given to the water master last summer. He can be tough but for the most part fair. When I started this job I had my hand slapped almost every day.”

Tatana knew what he meant by having his hand slapped. This was the common discipline that all children faced. She could remember how her mother would tell her to hold out her hands to be slapped. The worse the infraction, the harder the slap. Once she had been caught near the edge and she could not hold up her hands for a full day.

Tatana could not believe that he was still talking. *Lights, can't this kid shut up?*

Jabone liked his work. He got respect from the other children because he was the only one of them to go to the edge and over it. Tatana was thankful for the break; it was so much easier to carry back the empties. Her arms and shoulders were sore and it was only her first trip. At the edge Jabone told her to come to the ruffen ladder. She shook her head no. It would be a lot bigger person then that chatter mouth Jabone to get me over the edge and onto that thing passing itself off as a ladder.

“Come on, don't be scared.”

“No!”

“Why do you think you are here? The flyer wants you to get over your fear of heights.”

“How do you know?”

“Because the flyer told me a long time ago that if she had ever sent someone to work with me, my job was to get them over their fear of heights. Come on, don't be scared. It is not as bad as everyone makes out. Tie the safety line around your chest like this. Every ten rungs there are two safety lines. Tie the new one before you untie the last one. You can't fall, and if you do, it is only ten rungs.”

“Have you ever fallen?”

“No. Even my Master, Ga-rule ties himself to the safety lines. Only fools like Nomad climb without them.”

He tied himself off, then her, and with some more words of encouragement he got her to the edge and slowly he had her follow him down the ruffen ladder. Tears started pour from Tatana's eyes. She wished she was doing any other job that a child would be given. *Sheep tender, candle maker, cobbler apprentice, or even the dreaded sand closet. To watch sheep all day or to burn one's fingers on hot wax or to smash one's fingers with a hammer had to be better than this.*

After ten rungs they changed safety lines. He used the one on the right and she used the one on the left. He showed her a special knot, called a flyer's knot. It was tight and strong but with one pull, it would come undone.

About halfway down the wind blew hard causing the ladder to sway and scaring Tatana once more.

“I don't like this!” Tatana cried.

“Yeah, me too. But you get used to it. Trust me. I have gotten some real rides on windy days. That was nothing.”

They finally reached the water spigot. It was a tuffen pipe shoved into the soft sand of the cliff face. Clear water poured out of the one pipe. Jabone had her fill as he carried two buckets up at a time. Then she climbed up by herself following Jabone to the top. Never in her whole life was she happier. She had a tingle of pride as she looked over the edge and beyond.

In the distance she could see the flash of a long white light that shot from the ground to the sky. The gods must be proud of me. She helped Jabone for the whole morning. At noon his master came to the edge and gave Jabone lunch. He had no grub for her. Jabone told his master that she was sent by the flyer to help them.

“She doesn't want to feed her lunch, is more likely.”

Tatana thought it odd that a man with a round belly would worry about grub. His unkempt hair and tattered old clothes made her wonder if the plate was clean.

Jabone shared his lunch with her.

The afternoon seemed long and Jabone was always talking, mostly about himself and the mischief that he had gotten into. Each story ended with his hands getting slapped.

Jabone and Tatana placed two water buckets in front of each hut. Then they went on to the next hut and filled two more. After all the huts had water, they poured twenty more into the cistern. The children of the village gawked at Tatana as she helped Jabone. They wanted to know who she was, but did not stop their own daily chores to ask. At the end of the day, Tatana went back to the flyer's hut carrying the last two buckets of water.

“How was your day?” the flyer greeted her. “Never mind. Are you as tired as you look?”

“Yes.”

“It's is ‘yes, sister’ from now on.”

On the morning of Tatana's second day, she woke only to have the flyer show her out the door once more. She walked closer to the edge, but not too close. She waited at the ruffen ladder for Jabone. After an

hour or so she wondered if he would come at all. Finally he showed up carrying no water buckets.

“Sorry I am late, but Ga-rule can find work for me almost anywhere. Look at that sky. It's going to rain. You know what that means?”

Tatana shook her head no.

“No work. Even the village idiot knows to put out buckets to catch the rain. We get to play. I'm going to visit my friend, Nomad. You can come along if you like.”

Nomad's hut was much larger than all the others. Jabone knocked and, when the door opened, he asked if Nomad could come out and play. The woman who answered the door wore a fine dress and some ornamental jewelry. She frowned. It was as if he had asked her to let her son out and get into trouble. Nomad ran to the door only to be stopped by his mother.

“Those are your nine-day clothes. Take them off and put on something old.”

Nomad pouted and returned into the hut. He had put on his nine-day clothes, including a bright blue cloak. It was long, covering him from his neck to the ankles, with small tuffen buttons up the front. He had put it on to impress the sheepherder's daughter. His father once told him, while putting on his pilot's cloak, that women were impressed by the clothing a man wore.

“No work today?”

“Nay, it's going to rain today.”

“Why don't you come in the shack and come out of the rain? Please introduce your young friend,” Nomad's mother said that with a broad smile because it was not raining yet.

Jabone introduced Tatana to her and told her that she was the flyer's trainee. He told her how she was helping him and she had a day off too.

“Maybe she should go home. Just because you have the day off doesn't mean that she can play too.”

“No. She doesn't have to go home. She is mine for the day.”

Tatana sent a dirty look at Jabone. She was going to tell him that she wasn't his for a day, week, or a lifetime.

There was a long silence from Nomad's mother.

“Why don't you go in and find out what is taking him so long?”

Tatana followed Jabone into Nomad's room.

“Hey, I'm dressing!”

Nomad's mother smiled and thought, Perfect timing.

Tatana turned her head and went outside to wait. Wow, he has his own room.

Nomad and Jabone came out of the hut to join Tatana. As they walked to the village Tatana noticed how handsome Nomad was. She switched sides to get a closer look at him.

Lights he's handsome. I wonder if he knows it.

“So you're going to be a flyer. I'm a pilot.”

“No you're not,” Jabone interjected.

“In a few summers I'm going to be one. After all, who do you think is going to take over my father's zep?”

He was trying his best to impress Tatana. He walked a little faster and puffed out his chest. He hated wearing old clothes. He thought that he should always wear the bright blue jacket of a pilot.

“Let's go get some stones! Come on; let's not waste a day when we can make some scrip.”

(Flat stones - are used on zeps as small hearthstones)

(Round stones - are used to make hammers)

“It's going to rain.” Jabone pointed to the sky. “I think that we should try to catch some rollies.”

“Rollies. I like rollies,” Tatana said.

“Yeah, me too. Good eating,” Jabone replied.

Tatana took the tips of her fingers and jabbed them hard into Jabone's side.

“Hey. Stop that.”

She had never thought about catching them to sell for stew. They are so cute.

“Rollies are way too fast. You know that they can jump over our heads and they don't get caught unless they want to, Jabone.”

“What are you saying?” Jabone asked.

“Stones don't move. We won't take long. If we find some flat stones we can give them to my father. And the rounds, we can sell them.”

“Okay, but we go up when I say.”

“Okay, let's go. Come on Tatana. Let's go and get dirty in the swamp.”

Tatana had never been in any swamp before. She followed Nomad to the ruffen ladder. Jabone shook his head as he watched Nomad go down without a safety line. Jabone tied himself and so did Tatana. It took them longer to climb down than Nomad. Nomad could not wait for them. He took his sandals off and waded through the muck.

Just past the high reeds and stalks of tuffen was a small pool of water.

Tatana stopped climbing down to watch Nomad swim. She had never seen anyone who could float in water. Jabone joined him in swimming in clear blue water. Tatana untied the last safety line from her chest. She took off her sandals and placed them by the boys. Then she went wading through the reeds to the edge of the pool.

“Take off your shirt and come in,” Nomad said.

Jabone looked over at Tatana, then swam to Nomad and whispered, “She can't.”

Nomad looked at his best friend as if to ask, ‘Why?’

“She's a girl. She won't take off her top and I don't think she knows how to swim.”

Nomad had realized his mistake and swam over to Tatana.

He took her by the hand and led her into the deeper water.

“Keep your top on. Come on, the water is not that deep. You can stand almost anywhere.” He said, as he moved his freehand in a sweeping motion across the top of the water.

“I'm scared.”

“Don't be, this is only water. It will only cool you off and make you wet.”

He splashed some water on her very gently. Then with the back of his hand, he nailed his best friend. Jabone returned the favour by using two hands. He splashed both Tatana and Nomad. Tatana splashed back at the boys. She laughed, unaware she had walked out until she was waist high. She found herself laughing at how strange each of the boys looked. They were like wet sheep. Nomad with his long shoulder

length hair, now wet, looked so weird. Jabone, on the other hand, whose hair was cut much shorter, did not look as bad.

“Toss me!” Nomad asked Jabone.

Jabone cupped his hands into a stirrup. Then he flung Nomad out of the water. He landed near Tatana, who was now enjoying being in the water. Nomad did the same for Jabone and laughed. They turned and both smiled at Tatana. Not saying anything, she already knew what they wanted, and shook her head no.

“We are going to toss you anyway.”

By now she knew the boys well enough to know that was very true. Each boy took a foot, and on the count of three, they flung Tatana out on to the middle of the pool. Tatana hit the water and went under. For a moment she panicked. She remembered Nomad’s advice and stood up.

“That was fun. Do me again!”

Nomad started to swim over to her, but Jabone stopped him. Jabone had been keeping an eye on the sky, looking for the change in weather.

“We have to go!” Jabone said, pointing to the darkening sky.

Nomad looked up and nodded in agreement.

“Sorry, some other time. The weather is changing and if we don’t climb out now we can get caught in the stream.”

“Okay, Nomad.”

They walked back through the high reeds that were made of tall, thin blades of brown grass and taller stalks of tuffen. Tatana and her friends watched the sky, waiting for the deluge that was soon coming.

“We have to make it back to the top before it rains.”

“Why?” Tatana asked.

“Because the stakes that hold the ladder will come loose in the rain. It’s my job to pull the ladder up before the rain and put it away in the bag. Don’t worry; we have enough time before the high water.” (High water - Flash flood).

Nomad nodded, “Yeah if... sheep dung!”

“Sheep dung right!” Jabone added.

“Why are you cursing?” Tatana asked. She had never heard anyone curse so loudly before. Usually words like that were said with whispers so no one could hear them.

“It's my father's zep. He is on his way back and if he sees us, I will have my hands beaten off my arms! Hide!”

The boys squatted and pulled her down with them.

“Don't move.”

The zep was flying low. Tatana guessed it was trying to come in low and fast to beat the weather. Zeps are large slow moving, lighter than air ships that have no motor. They rely on flyers to launch from their tops with a small string attached to the kite. When they land, the flyer will use the small string to pull a much heavier cord. Then she will anchor the large cord to the ground. After they have anchored the cord, the crank man reels them forward. Normally there are two flyers and one large crank man. Nomad's father's zep was moving forward only using one flyer.

The zep was dull blue. It had a few bright blue patches on it. It was showing signs of age.

Tatana watched the flyer working hard. The one young girl was doing the work of two. She could see the big crank man being helped by the pilot. She had never seen a pilot helping the crank man before. They must be in a hurry.

It started to rain and the zep was almost out of sight.

“Come on. We have to run to get up the rope before the high water.”

The boys took Tatana by the arms and ran with her through the reeds. The reeds were hitting her so hard that it felt like they were cutting her. Somehow they knew that she wouldn't be able to keep up with them. The boys were almost dragging her across the ground.

“You first!” Jabone told Nomad.

“Why?”

“You're the heaviest and fastest, and you don't use safety lines. Sheep dung.”

As Nomad was almost all away to the top, Jabone tied Tatana to the two bottom safety lines.

“We will pull you up.”

Tatana could hear the fear in Jabone's voice. She didn't want to be left alone. The rain was coming down now even harder. It felt like stones were hitting her. She was crying and the rain was washing her tears away.

At the top of the cliff Nomad was sitting on the stake, trying to keep it in the ground; the rain was making the soft sand under the grass so loose his task was becoming impossible. He was so relieved to see Jabone crest the top.

"Pull!" Jabone shouted at his friend. I've tied her to the safety lines. We're going to pull her up."

Nomad could barely hear Jabone over the downpour of the rain and see him even less. He nodded his head to show that he understood he and Jabone were going to pull ladder with Tatana tied to the end. The only problem was the ground had become very slippery. And with the weight of Tatana tied to the end it was too heavy for them. The little headway they had made was slipping away from them.

Tatana was relieved when she felt her friends pull her up. But moments later when they were slipping and she was going down into the now raging stream, she thought, *This is it, I'm going to drown.* The boys were now back where they had started from and were still losing ground.

"I think you can use some help!" the flyer said to them.

At first they could barely see or hear her because of the rain coming down so hard. But they were so relieved to have her there. With her help they pulled Tatana to safety.

The three of them was now lying in the mud, exhausted. The flyer somehow managed not to fall.

"How did you know?" Nomad asked, looking up the flyer.

"I was wondering what had happened to my student. I had been watching you three playing in the water. After all, who else would climb down that?" She paused, "By the way, you have to teach me how to swim," the flyer winked at the boys. "Roll that up." She said, pointing at the ruffen ladder. "Put it away. And come to my hut when you're done."

The rain had let up some and the three kids were still covered in mud as they arrived at the flyer's hut.

“I'm not going in there covered in mud,” Nomad told

Jabone and Tatana.

He stood under the eaves of the roof allowing the rain to give himself a shower. It removed all the mud from his long hair, then his shirt. The mud rolled down onto his pants and off to the ground. He was soon very clean. Wet and cold, but clean. Jabone and Tatana did the same.

The three of them sat at the small table, wet and very tired. The flyer dried Tatana off, skipping the boys.

“Hold out your hands,” the flyer said to the wet boys.

She slapped them hard. Tatana could see the pain on the boys' faces.

“Did that hurt?”

Both Nomad and Jabone looked at each other and then at the flyer and nodded yes.

“Good. You two should know better. I should tell on you, but I... I want to see both of you here tomorrow afternoon. Now, go home and get dry.”

Tatana said nothing to the boys as they left. The rain was still coming down and her sister was ignoring her. The flyer made dinner and plopped it in front of her and said nothing. The whole evening Tatana thought that this woman, whom she had known for such a short time, was very mad at her.

When the rain stopped it was almost dark. The flyer went outside to use the sand closet. When she came back in Tatana was holding her hands out to be punished.

“Why do you think you need your hand slapped?”

Tatana said nothing. She just continued to hold her hands out.

“I'm not going to hit you. It was not your fault. I blame Nomad and Jabone. They should have known better.”

“Then why are you acting so mad?”

“The truth be told, I'm not used to sharing my hut. On occasion I share it with a couple of rollies. Two of them, a male and a female. They come and go as they please. I haven't seen them in awhile. It has been a long time. I must be getting old. Sorry.”

The flyer was kind and this was the first time that an adult talked to her like a person, not a child. Tatana started to cry. This woman who

looked nothing like her mother, sounded like her. She missed her mother so much. The flyer hugged Tatana.

“Don't worry. Besides if it's boys or men, it is always their fault.”

Tatana looked up at the flyer.

“Trust me; you can never completely trust a man.”

The flyer looked down at Tatana.

“You tired?”

Tatana looked up and nodded yes.

“Me too. I have made your cot. Tomorrow is nine-day, let's get some sleep, little sister.”

The next day Tatana woke up to see her fine dress cut in half. The bottom half was on the table. She wondered what had become of the rest of her dress.

“You have been wearing these rags too long. I have made you a flyer shirt.”

The flyer had torn off the top of her good nine-day skirt. It was now dyed red.

“And I have made you a flyer's cap.”

Tatana was at a loss. She wanted to be mad at the woman for ruining her fine dress, even if she thought it was a rag. But her anger was soon overcome by the thought that soon she would be a flyer.

“That was my nine-day dress. My only dress. So what am I going to wear today?”

“You don't need it. You can wear this now so that everyone can know that you are part of the Air Guild. Come on, we don't want to miss the first light, little sister.”

Tatana could feel the eyes upon her. She was new and the whole village had gotten together to pray to the southern light. On the plateau there were two seasons, just warm and hot. Other than rain or the occasional cloudy day, the weather did not change much. Villagers took a day off every nine days to get together to look at the light. From the south a great vertical light flashed in a large column that reached to the sky. It was always in the same spot on the horizon.

Some of the villagers sat on small stools and hummed, waiting for the flash of light. Some nine-days there was no flashes, other nine-days Tatana could remember their were more than she could count. Most would leave after three flashes of light or noon, whichever came first. Each villager would sit to watch the great light according to rank and servitude. Nomad and his clan sat near the cliff edge and the others of the village sat behind them. Jabone and his master Ga-rule sat further behind. Tatana and the flyer sat behind everyone.

Tatana and the flyer got a very good view of everyone's back. She could hear whispers and see the short turnaround glances, knowing that they were all about her.

Ga-rule sat in front of Jabone, but off to the side of the flyer. He would glance over and then he would go back to humming. Everyone was humming. Tatana could remember her mother, and how she would sit in her mother's lap humming. And having her mother humming to her more meant more than the light.

There were a few more quick glances from Ga-rule.

"I think he likes you, sister," Tatana said to the flyer with a childish smile.

"I have noticed. The third light. Good, we can leave."

"I want to stay and play with my friends."

"Okay, be back at noon."

"Yes sister."

Tatana ran over to Jabone.

"What do you want? The cistern is full from yesterday's rain and today is the nine-day. No one works unless they have to."

"I have to be back at the flyer's hut at noon. We can play until then."

"No, I'd rather not play with you today." Jabone replied, nervously looking around to make sure that his friends were not looking at him.

"Why?"

"Because you are a girl," Jabone said as he turned and went over to the boys standing nearby.

Tatana left to go over to Nomad, but he was surrounded by three girls, all wearing white dresses and had matching white ribbons in their hair. They were a little older and slightly taller and she was. She stopped to watch them.

“What's the matter child? No one to play with?” The woman's voice sounded very familiar. It was Nomad's mother.

Tatana shook her head yes and sighed.

“Come to my hut, child. I could use your help.”

Tatana only now noticed that Nomad's mother walked with two canes and had clubfeet. Her one foot was only slightly turned in, the other was so bent and so weak she had to place most of her weight on her canes. With great difficulty she managed to move across the ground slowly.

Her husband sat on a small tuffen stool, still humming, waiting, and hoping to see a fourth light. He, like so many others, believed that the more lights you saw, the greater the light spirits would be with you. And they would follow you and meet you upon your death.

Tatana was trying to help the woman for as much as her little body would let her. The woman gave Tatana one of her canes and used her shoulder for support. Nomad caught up with both of them about halfway home.

“I'm glad to see you got away from those girls,” Nomad's mother said to him with a grin.

“Sometimes I think that the only thing on their minds is getting me into a union,” Nomad replied as he brushed his long hair out of his eyes.

Nomad's mother gave her other cane to him and used his shoulder for support. She smiled knowing that he was just like his father. He is going to be a hard one to pin down.

“I saw you, kissing up to those girls,” Tatana teased.

“No, I wasn't.”

“Kiss, kiss, kiss,” she said, teasing him more.

“No. No. No! I have never kissed a girl!”

“There will be a time when you will, son,” his mother laughed.

“That's not funny.”

“Sorry, son, that joke was for me,” she said, remembering how hard it was to get Nomad's father to kiss her for the first time. They were childhood friends and were put in union on a nine-day a long time ago. She looked down on her son and thought, How much he looks and acts just like his father.

They both helped her into the hut.

“I need some water,” she said, wearily to her son.

He poured her a glass of water and handed it to her. Tatana was awed by the artwork of zeps that wound its way around the outside on the glass.

As Tatana looked around inside Nomad's hut she noticed how decorated it was compared to others. A sea shell necklace hung on the wall. No one would wear such a light ugly thing around their neck. It was there to add some white in an otherwise brown hut. Bright pottery that was never used sat on a shelf. ‘Show-off,’ as her grandmother had once called it. The hut was much bigger than necessary and had room for such things.

“Take off that blue jacket and put on something else. I get tired of cleaning that thing.”

Nomad huffed and went into his room without saying anything.

“Don't worry, he will be back. Will you tell me about yourself? Where do you come from? And how did you get that flyer to give you an apprenticeship?”

“I'm from a village in the far north...” Tatana paused, to think about how small her village was compared to this one.

“And I was going to the big-city. But my grandmother ran out of scrip. So she left me with the flyer.”

“What happened to your clan?”

Tatana stood silent and said nothing. Then she said, “My mother, she died. I don't remember my father.”

“I feel for you.”

Nomad's mother tried to get up to give Tatana a hug. Tatana backed up.

Nomad changed from his pilot's cloak and put on pants and a chamois shirt, older and faded white in colour.

“What do you want to do?” Nomad asked Tatana as he gently pulled her outside the hut.

“I want to go swimming again.”

“Yesterday you almost drowned and you want to go back?”

“Yeah, but it's not raining today. Besides you promised the flyer that you would teach her. It's almost noon, I have to get home.”

Tatana thought how strange it was to be calling the flyer's hut home. It bothered her in some way. It's not right; my home will always be with my mother.

“Where are you going? Don't you remember, I have to be at your hut in the afternoon too? I'll walk with you.”

She said nothing, but turned to the path toward her new home. Nomad walked behind her, then next to her. He bumped gently into her side and smiled. She smiled back. He held out his hand. She looked at his face as they walked, winked, and took his hand. Nomad was the first boy who was actually kind to her. Nomad stopped and sat down in the grass, still holding her hand.

“It's not quite noon. I want to rest.”

Tatana sat beside Nomad. When Nomad lay back on the grass, so did Tatana. He never let go of her hand.

“Look at the clouds. If you look hard enough, you can see things in them. Like that one, it looks like a face and that one could be a bird.”

“Yes, I think you're right,” Tatana replied, humoring Nomad because she thought they all looked alike.

They lay there for some time and watched the clouds, not saying anything. After awhile Tatana sat up.

“I'm going to be late.”

Nomad kissed her on her forehead.

“It's all right. We'll say that my mother kept us. I'll vouch for you.”

As they walked down the slope Jabone caught up with them. He was very hot and sweaty from playing with the other boys on this nine-day. He saw how Nomad was holding Tatana's hand and took the other. He looked over at his best friend and winked his left eye.

The flyer smiled as they arrived. She was outside working on her old kite. It needed a new skin and some struts. The ruffen rope used to make the kite stiff would have to be replaced. *This kite is way too big for an 80 pound girl. I will fix it and give her her first ride. She should make her own. Smaller and lighter. And when she gets a job then she can use mine.*

“I have brought you Nomad and Jabone, sister”

“I see that you had to drag them here.”

The boys let go of Tatana hands. They were very embarrassed that an adult had seen them showing some affection to Tatana. After all, they would be men soon.

The flyer looked up at the sky, then down at the children in front of her.

“This must be one of the nicer nine-days that we’ve had in a long time. I want two things from you. First, I want to learn how to float in the water like you do.”

Both Nomad and Jabone smiled.

“And I need you to help my little sister cut tuffen.”

The smiles washed away from both boys. Cutting stalks of tuffen was very hard work, usually left up to the men and the zeps to lift it from the valleys.

“Go, I will meet you at the ruffen ladder.”

“Why can't I go?”

“You will, but I need to get something and you need to change.”

Tatana changed out of her new flyer’s outfit and back into old cloths that the flyer had tailored and given her. The flyer was waiting outside the hut for her, holding a strange looking tool.

“What's that?” Tatana asked.

“It's a glass saw. We flyers use it to cut tuffen. It’s one thing about the Air Guild you should know, we have all sorts of secrets. One these days I'll show you how to make one. Come on, the boys are probably getting restless waiting for us.”

At the top of the cliff by the ladder, Nomad and Jabone waited. Tatana ran to greet them. The flyer took her time. I wish I had that child's energy.

“Before we climb down, I want to show you something. Take a look at this hook. See the pins and short spars?”

The tuffen spike had two smaller pieces attached to it in a way that the hook could be driven into the ground but once pulled on would not come out. The flyer had Tatana pound one into the ground. Tatana wondered why she had her do this. There were already four hooks holding the ladder.

“Pull up on it and take it out now.”

The hook only came up a little bit. Then it became harder to move, until it would not move at all.

“That hook won't come out of the ground!” Tatana exclaimed.

The flyer explained, “You have to push the top end like this so it will come up. Unless it rains.”

Tatana pushed on the very top of the hook and gave it one more yank. With a little effort and some twisting, it came easily out of the ground.

“Enough of this, let's go down and get wet.”

The flyer climbed down first. Jabone was going to show her how to tie the safety lines, but she did it for herself, a little faster and better than he could. At the bottom, the flyer held the ladder from swinging. The two boys followed Tatana down the ladder. The flyer waited for each of the children to climb down. Nomad used the safety lines. I'm in enough trouble, I don't need any more.

“I see some rain-berries,” The flyer said, pointing to a shrub that lined the bottom of the cliff face. They were weet and produced red juices that stained their hands. Only lasting a few days after a rain, the birds, wild dogs, snakes and other creatures enjoyed them too.

“Slow, they will make you sick if you have more than a few,” The flyer warned. “Come on, let's get wet.”

With Nomad leading the way, they walked barefoot through the marsh reeds to the pool. It was much deeper after the rain and had a light brown tint. Nomad dove head first into the water. He went under and came up on the other side. Jabone followed him, doing the same. The flyer and Tatana walked in until they were both knee-deep.

“Aren't you coming in?” Nomad asked the both of them.

The flyer hung her cap and saw on the reeds. Then she slowly walked in to the water. She had never been in a pool to swim before. She, like everyone else, used a sponge and a bucket of water to bathe.

The boys splashed the girls and they splashed them back. The flyer noticed a man watching them from high upon the cliff edge. From his outline, she knew it was most likely to be Ga-rule. Tatana was trying to get away from being so badly splashed. Both Nomad and Jabone were tiring from the water fight that they were clearly winning.

The boys looked at each other and knew what the other was thinking. The flyer's thin, old red blouse was sticking to her body and gave a clear outline of her breasts. They were large with big round nipples.

“Come over here. Now!” The flyer commanded everyone, as she moved into the center of the pond.

Nomad and Jabone looked at her and wondered why. It was quite obvious when they all saw the wild dog at the edge of the pond.

“She will not harm us while we stay in the water.”

Tatana held the flyer’s arm as the two boys made nasty and growling sounds to frighten the dog away.

“She is nursing a litter of pups. They must be near.”

“How do you know?” Asked Tatana.

“Because her nipples are large and swollen.”

The wild dog slowly moved on. But as she did, she left keeping her eyes on the four strangers.

“I think we should go,” Nomad said.

“Okay. But I still want you to cut down some tuffen for me.”

The boys were amazed at how the saw was able to cut through tuffen in no time at all. When they had cut down all the tuffen the flyer picked out, they used some reeds to bundle it into two loads. Then the flyer tied them to the backs of Nomad and Jabone. She had them climb the ladder first.

The flyer whispered into Tatana’s left ear, “It’s nice when we get the men to do the work for us, sister.”

At the top the flyer found herself out of breath. She wondered where Ga-rule had gone to.

The flyer had the boys lug the bolts of tuffen to her hut. By the time they had reached the hut, they were no longer carrying them, but more like dragging them along the ground. She directed the boys to put their loads behind the hut while she and Tatana went inside.

“I’ve never worked so hard on a nine-day day,” commented Nomad.

“Then you don’t know what it’s like to work for Ga-rule.”

“Hey!”

“Hey what, Nomad?”

“What did you think of those large nipples?” Nomad whispered to Jabone. “And I don’t mean ones on the wild dog.”

“Nice... Very nice... We should go before they come up with some more work for us.”

“Good thought.”

Jabone knocked on the door to let the flyer know that they were leaving.

Inside the flyer’s hut both Tatana the flyer were changing into dry clothes.

“Sister, can I ask you something?”

“What little sister?”

Tatana noticed how the flyer’s arms showed her strong muscles from working as a flyer. And at the pond she also noticed the flyer’s large breasts through the wet shirt.

“I saw Nomad and Jabone were looking at your...”

“Yes. And so?”

The flyer was putting on another red blouse covering up her body. It was older than the one she had been wearing. Then she turned and smiled at Tatana.

“All boys and men like to look at a woman’s body. Get used to it. And it’s our jobs as women to make sure that they have a very hard time seeing us. Okay, little sister?”

Tatana smiled. “Okay.” *Sister sure did break that rule today.*

On the next day, Tatana and the flyer made a top deck. Or that’s what the flyer called it. It was two long poles with shorter ones tied across them. They each had about a two foot gap.

“Walk across this and don’t let your feet touch the ground,” the flyer commanded Tatana.

It was very difficult not to touch the ground because the thing was sitting on the ground. And as Tatana walked she inevitably touched the ground. The flyer made her hold up her hands and she slapped them hard for discipline. Hard enough to let Tatana know she was very displeased. She told her do it again and make sure that her feet only walk on the poles.

“Good. Much better, now walk back and forth until you can do it in your sleep.”

After a short while, Tatana was bored. She felt like her sandals were going to break apart. Her legs became sore as she walked back and forth across the deck.

“Close your eyes.”

Tatana slipped again. She stopped and waited with her hands held out to be punished.

“I’m not going to punish you. The slap was for not trying.”

Back and forth she went. Now with her eyes closed. By noon, Tatana thought she would drop dead from exhaustion. Why is she making me do this?

Lunch was a welcome break.

“You’re done for the day. Tomorrow I’ll have you do the same thing holding this.”

It was a tuffen poll with small rocks tied to each end. Tatana groaned, but did not let the flyer see her displeasure.

As Tatana ate, the flyer had her follow her to the back of the hut and showed her how a kite was constructed.

“The tuffen poles are very strong, but what really holds a kite together is ruffen rope. Ruffen is strong, and it shrinks when it’s wet. Every point is held together by the spar that sticks up in the center. The cloth is a special blend of wool and ruffen rope. Right now we need wool. And lots of it. I know you’re tired, but I want you to go to the sheepherder and ask him for enough wool to make two kites.”

The flyer added, “Be back before dark.”

“Sure.”

“Promise, little sister.”

“I promise,” she said, as she gave her empty lunch bowl back to the flyer.

As Tatana walked up the path she passed Jabone’s master, Ga-rule, who was carrying flowers.

What an odd sight. I have to see what the sister does.

The grass was just high enough so that when she squatted down they didn’t see her. She opened the blades of grass with her hands to watch. Ga-rule said nothing, only offering the flowers to the flyer. She looked at them and said nothing in return. Then she turned her back on him

and went into the hut and closed the door behind her. Ga-rule dropped the flowers and left very disappointed.

The sheepherder was out tending his flock on the far side of the plateau. His daughter, one of the girls who had been talking to Nomad the day before, was now helping her father. She no longer wore white, but the drab brown chamois clothes most people wore for everyday work. He was sitting on a small tuffen stool. His daughter was giving commands to the sheep dog.

“I see the Air Guild has come to pay us a call,” he said with a tone of voice that could only mean disrespect.

“What can I do for you? You look very tired.”

“I need... I need enough wool to make two kites.”

“Sure, I have that much.”

“Thank you,” Tatana said; she turned and was about to leave.

“Not so fast. Just how are you going to pay for it?” the sheepherder asked.

“I don't know. I thought the flyer would.”

“No. Don't count on it. She doesn't like me. Come closer, and sit here.”

Tatana realized that he wanted her to sit on his lap. She looked at his daughter whose face was turning red with scorn.

“I don't bite.”

She sat sideways allowing him to hold her back.

“What can you do for me? What do you have that I would want? Look at me. I already have a daughter to help me to attend to the flock.”

He started to mumble.

“I don't have a wife. You're way too young, besides she was a very good woman. She kept the hut clean and did more work than most women I ever met. My daughter, over there, is lazy. I don't know what to do if the dog goes. She can't keep up with the sheep. That's why I could use a new sheep dog. Darkness, why don't you get me a new sheep dog? A male and female, so I don't have to worry about the old dog. That would be worth two bolts of wool to me.”

The hand that was holding Tatana's back was rubbing it now. It made her feel uncomfortable. She said nothing as she got up.

“Where do I get two sheep dogs?” she asked, as she was now standing and looking face to face to him.

“I don't know and I don't care, but they should be pups. Hey, where are you going? Why don't you stay and help my daughter for a while.”

Tatana thought for a moment looking up at the afternoon sun and said, “Okay. I have some time.”

Tatana helped as much she could. They had to keep the sheep moving slowly otherwise they would eat too much of the grass. “Then the sandy soil will wash away,” explained the daughter.

“It's not that hard. Besides the dog does most of the work.”

The girl was about three summers older than Tatana. She was pretty even without her nine-day clothes. Tatana was envious. Her body was turning into a young woman. Or she had turned red, as her mother put it once.

For most of the afternoon she and the daughter watched the sheep. And the shepherd sat on his stool to watch them. Near the end of the day, with the help of the old dog, they put the sheep back into a large pen.

“You do good work. If you ever tired of being a flyer you could always be in a union with a shepherd.”

“Father, her day of union is far away.”

“I need to be home by dark,” Tatana explained.

“Then we will eat early.”

Tatana had salt mutton before, but never so tasty and fresh. As she ate a second helping Tatana realize how the sun had almost set.

“I have to go.”

As she went to the door of the hut the shepherd stood up and blocked her way. He picked her up under her arms and said, “You remind me of my late wife,” looking straight into Tatana's eyes.

“Put her down, father.”

He looked over at his daughter and nodded.

“I'm a man of my word. Get me two puppies and I will give you all the wool you need.”

He put her down.

Tatana was trying to run from one side of the plateau to the other. She did not make it back before dark. The small moon was now gone and she couldn't see. The night had become pitch black. She knew the flyer's hut was near, but where? A deep fear crept over her. She wanted so badly to go back to the flyer's hut, but she knew that she could walk off the edge of the cliff as her mother did only a few months before. She did not want to spend another night outside in the cold. Besides, she had promised her sister that she would be home well before dark.

She sat down. *Think!* She touched the ground. The path to the flyer's hut was not worn enough to get there by feeling the ground. She stood up and looked again. She saw a small light flickering off in the distance. The flyer had put a candle in the window.

Tatana still had to feel her way in the dark. She felt as if there were hundreds of eyes watching her. Then she realized that the rollies were following her from a safe distance. They stopped when she reach the flyer's hut.

She opened the hut door.

"I'm glad to see you made it."

"Sorry. The shepherder gave me supper."

"I figured that. Did he try to get you to stay?"

"Yeah, he did. He is strange."

"No. Not really, he just misses his wife. She died a few summers ago--before I came here to retire. You know he try to court me? Along with almost every other ununioned man here. Now only Ga-rule comes."

"Why didn't you take his flowers?" Tatana asked.

"The flowers would lead to more stuff I really don't want to get into and explain to you right now."

"He seems nice. Even if he makes Jabone work hard."

"I don't have anything against hard work. I've done it all my life and as a flyer you will too. It's just that the man I will have a union with must be clean in body and heart. He might have a good heart, but he really needs a good cleaning."

"Yeah. Like a day in the rain," Tatana said.

The flyer smiled.

"It's late. Let's get some sleep, little sister."

In the morning Tatana got up before the flyer and made breakfast for them both. She ate and waited for the flyer to wake up. Finally Tatana needed to use the sand closet. Then she dumped it into the field. It was a job given to the youngest child that could do it. Older children of clan would rejoice when they could dump it on to their younger siblings. It was a job that no child liked.

The practice deck was now a few feet in the air.

“I see that you have dumped the sand closet.”

It was obvious Tatana had emptied the sand closet. The nasty box was in her hand and she was putting it back.

“You need more training,” the flyer said, pointing to the deck that was now higher.

“If I slip, I’ll get hurt.”

“Don’t slip then.”

Another day of walking on the training deck ensued. Only it was now high enough that if she slipped she would get hurt. Not so high that she would break anything, but she would have a nice bruise. As she walked back and forth she wondered, *Why do I have to do this?*

“Sister. What is the point of this? I’m tired. I want to quit.”

“You never been top side, have you?”

“No.”

“It’s just like this on the top side. You’ve got only these tuffen poles for your feet on the deck. Otherwise you put your foot through the zep. And I almost forgot. Here.”

The flyer gave Tatana a pole with two large rocks attached to the ends.

“What did the shepherder say when you asked him for the wool?”

“He won’t give it to me,” Tatana said, out of breath from walking and concentrating on not falling.

“I guess you can stop training. Without wool, there’s no kite and no flying.”

“He said I need to get two puppies for him,” Tatana told the flyer as she walked back and forth.

“Well then, we will get him two puppies. And I know how. Come sister, take a break. I’ll show you something. But you can never tell anyone that I have it.”

They went inside the hut. And in the rafters, hidden in the straw that was part of the roof, the flyer brought out a crossbow. Tatana's eyes almost popped. No woman was ever allowed to own such a weapon. The men from the village would take it away from her if they knew she had it. And they most likely would toss her off the cliff. No wonder it was so well hidden.

“We'll need to go and kill that wild dog. Then we'll take the pups.”

“I don't want to.”

“Nonsense. You need the wool. A perfect solution to your problem.”

The flyer pulled back the string to cock it and she snapped it. She grunted.

“I'm going to have to re-string it,” she said, shaking her head in disbelief. “It will be ready in two days. Then we'll kill the wild dog,” she said, hiding the crossbow back into the straw.

Tatana went back to her training, all the time thinking, Why should the wild dog die?

By the afternoon she was more upset than ever, but she did not let the flyer know. She had her lunch and still said nothing.

“After you eat you can go play with your friends. But no swimming. I don't want that wild dog to get you.”

“Bye,” Tatana said as she scooped her food into her hands and ran off to the village.

She knocked on Nomad's door.

“Who is it?”

“Tatana,” Tatana replied.

“Who is Tatana?”

“The flyer's apprentice.”

“Why didn't you say so? Come in. Nomad is helping his father today. They have to patch the zep. It's fifteen summers old, and could really use a new skin. My husband has too soft of a heart and gives too many free rides.”

Tatana did not know what to say. She was still upset over the crossbow. But she knew better than to tell Nomad's mother.

“Could you be so kind as to help me?”

“Doing what?”

“Women's work. Cleaning and sweeping, helping me clean-up this mess of a hut.”

“Okay. But I will not clean out the sand closet. I already did one today.”

“Sure. I wouldn't ask you anyway.”

“Why?”

“That is Nomad's job and I love to see the look on his face every time I tell him he has to do it.”

Tatana smiled.

“He keeps reminding me to make him a younger brother or sister so he won't have to do it.”

I wish I could, she thought, as she remembered Nomad and Jabone together in a tuffen basket. It was the first time she had seen the baby boys.

She helped the woman who sat and smiled. Nomad's mother enjoyed the break. It was hard for her to walk around with a clubfoot. Nomad's mother thought, *It's nice to have the company*. The other women of the plateau had their own huts to take care of. The only real socializing was done on a nine-day. Then it was mostly humming.

“Do you like being trained into the sisterhood?”

“The sisterhood?” Tatana asked, as she washed the dishes.

“The sisterhood of the Air Guild. Most are born into it; you are an exception.”

“An exception?”

“Why, don't you like being different?”

“No. It's just that the training is very hard.”

“Hard work never hurt anyone. Besides in time you will be a flyer and get to share in the profits of the zep that you fly from. Later in life you will have students and you'll earn scrip from them.”

Tatana stopped washing dishes and thought for a moment.

“So I will have to pay the flyer when I work? For the rest of my life?”

Nomad's mother laughed.

“Silly girl, rarely anything is done for nothing. Why do you think she feeds you and is training you? Just because she likes you?”

“I should charge you for house cleaning,” Tatana said with a smile.

“I say rarely. People do sometimes do things out of the goodness of their heart.”

“Then why won't the shepherd just give me the wool I need out of the goodness of his heart? I only need enough or two kites.”

“Really child, think about it. Do you know how much wool that is?”

Tatana shook her head no.

“A lot. Two bolts. Trust me. I used to be a weaver before I was unioned to Nomad's father. He just can't give it away. He has to get something of real value for it. What does he want?”

“Two puppies. One male, one female.” Tatana replied.

“I can see that. He has to replace his old sheep dog. And he needs two.”

“Why two?”

“One for him and one for his daughter. When she has her union he will give her five sheep and a dog... Could you sweep for me?”

Tatana swept out the hut. It did not take very long, even though it was the largest hut compared to the other villagers. As Tatana was leaving, Nomad's mother got up, bent over and kissed her on her cheek and said, “Thank you out of the goodness of my heart.”

“You're welcome out of the goodness of my own heart,” Tatana replied and kissed Nomad's mother on her cheek back.

Ga-rule's hut was small and very unkempt.

I wonder if the inside looks as bad as the outside. She knocked nervously at his door. Ga-rule came to the door. It was obvious that she had woken him from his sleep.

“What do you want?” he said, in a half asleep and very angry voice.

“Jabone. Is he here?”

“No,” he said as he closed the door on her.

“Where is he? Please,” Tatana begged.

“Why should I tell you? You’re a flyer, or going to be one. Right now, I don’t want anything to do with any flyers.”

“Because she didn’t take your flowers?”

“Then you’ve seen the way she treats me?” Ga-rule said, getting angrier with her.

“Yes. That’s because you need to clean-up. Have you ever seen your face in a reflection of a bucket of water? I think she admires your persistence, but you have to do something about your looks.”

“I’m that unattractive?” Ga-rule said. It had never had dawned on him.

“What do I need to do?”

“Cut and groom your hair, put on a nice wool shirt and clean pants to match. Wash your hands, clean your teeth with salt and bring more flowers. A lot more flowers,”

Tatana took a deep breath. “You got the flower part right.”

“Is that all?”

“No. You have to talk nice to her. She is very... Independent.”

“Thanks,” Ga-rule replied.

Ga-rule took a deep breath and said, “Jabone is helping Nomad with the zep.”

The flying field had two thin towers. Made from tuffen, each was only about a foot square. They were held in place by ruffen guide wire ropes on three sides. A zep would have to maneuver around them to be tied between the towers. Nomad’s father’s zep was completely deflated. The top deck and the lower deck were both off to the side. And the fabric of the zep was carefully laid on the grass.

Tatana approached them. Nomad’s father looked at her as she was death warmed over.

“Do you know how to repair a zep?” he asked her.

“No.”

“My son and I need to concentrate with no distractions. Please go away.”

Tatana looked over at Jabone, who was holding one edge of the fabric. On the other side was a young girl, maybe 13 or 14 summers old. They had the fabric stretched out between them. Nomad and his father were

barefoot and on their knees. Nomad was carrying a small cup of something. Nomad's father would take his thumb, dip it, and then push it into the fabric.

They didn't need her help.

“Thank you, sister of the air. I will show you my zep someday, but not today,” he said, going back to work.

Tatana walked away wondering who she could talk to about getting the puppies.

Near by she saw a very large man sitting with his feet dangling off the edge of the cliff. She approached him. His face had a few small scars and he was missing a front tooth. Being near the flying field and wearing a tank top shirt to show off all his muscles, Tatana knew that the only person who looked like that and had no fear of heights was the crank man.

She sat next to him. He looked up at her

“Look at the sky. You can see things in the clouds. Like that one looks like a face and that one could be a bird or maybe not.”

“Strange. Nomad said the same thing to me. Then he kissed me.”

“Sorry child. I say that to every young woman that I meet for the first time. It helps some women to feel more comfortable with me.”

“Does it really work?”

“Yeah, I have three unions.”

“I'm so sorry.”

“Sorry?”

The crank man looked at her funny.

“Two of your wives are dead.”

“No. They are all alive.”

Tatana stopped to think about what the crank man had just said to her.

“You have three unions, all on the same plateau?”

“Ha ha. You funny. They would kill me, if they all knew,” he said and kissed her upon her forehead.

“My name is Gotzillion.”

“Gotzzz...” she could not pronounce the name. She felt a little ashamed.

“Call me Gott. That is what everyone else calls me. Okay? What's yours?”

“Tatana.”

“Tatana. That's a lovely name. I have five sons and nine daughters,” the crank man boasted.

“That's a lot. How do you support them all?”

“Carman Hold, the pilot, pays me a fair share as the crank man. And I do stuff on the side.”

“They don't want me near them,” Tatana complained.

“Yeah. Me too. Last night they took a candle and shined from the inside to mark all the small holes in the zep. Today they are patching them. If light can go through, so can air. A very delicate operation. They don't want me near them either,” Gott flexed his large arm muscle.

Tatana nodded her head and looked down in the valley. She was trying to see if she could find the wild dog. It wasn't fair that they were just going to kill her for its puppies.

They each sat at the edge of the cliff deep in their own thoughts.

Gott reached behind Tatana and lifted her flyer's cap.

“Something bothering you?”

She nodded her head yes.

“What? You can tell me. I have more secrets then you can ever imagine.”

“More then three wives?” Tatana asked, as she looked him in the face.

“Much more.”

A flash of light came from the South.

“The gods must be busy today taking souls to Heaven,” Tatana said.

“Yeah. I used to be a God once,” Gott said with a broken tooth smile.

Tatana looked at him, wondering what he meant by that.

“So tell me, young flyer. What is so bad?”

“I need to kill a wild dog,” Tatana said to the crank man.

“Why?”

“So I can give two puppies to the sheepherder.”

“And why?” asked the crank man.

“So he will give me enough wool to make two kites.”

“Sometimes I think I shouldn't ask too many questions. Just how are you going to kill the dog? With a hook hammer?” he asked her.

“No, I think I'm going to sneak down and take two puppies while the dog is away. That's it! I don't have to kill her. I can sneak around the den and grab two puppies. Thank you. Got to go, Gott. Bye.”

Tatana got up and ran to the ladder.

“Stop. Child, stop!” Gott called after her.

Although Gott was a big man and his arms were very strong, he was no runner.

“Think!”

Gott was out of breath. So was Tatana.

“You're not thinking. Where is the den? And how are you going to carry the puppies up that?” Gott said, pointing to the ladder. “And what are you going to do if the wild dog catches you?”

Tatana cried. She felt so helpless. She knew that Gott was right. She wanted Nomad or Jabone to help her.

“Take the rope bag. We'll use it to carry them in it.”

Tatana picked up the sheepskin rope bag. It was much larger than what she needed. But it was lot better than nothing.

“Why are you here? Everybody wants something.”

“Good question. I'll have to ask myself that one these days,” Gott said, scratching his head.

“I don't have anything to trade.”

Gott thought for a moment, “You can apprentice one of mydaughters.”

“You're going up against a wild dog for an apprenticeship for your daughter? I haven't even finished my own training.”

“You're right. Then you can teach two of them,” Gott told her.

Tatana looked down in the valley. Gott looked over the edge too.

“What are we looking for?”

“The den, silly,” Tatana replied.

Evening was approaching when they saw the wild dog. She was leaving her puppies in a thicket of rain berries to do her night hunting.

“Let's go,” Gott said, hoping that they could get down and bag the puppies long before the wild dog came back.

END OF PREVIEW.

The rest of the story is in a book titled:
Children of a Dark Sky and Alice.

Note: Share this book. Read it, then pass it on.

Thank you.

Dale