

CHAPTER ONE



'Evil lurks in the walls,' they said.

Nobody would listen to her, so why should she listen to them? If she was too young, too stupid *and* a girl, then they were too old, too blind *and* men, so how could they see the truth that was so obvious to her? Arguing with herself, Janette hopped from one foot to the other in front of a stone wall, in the gloomiest corner at the base of the spiral staircase in the Mages' Tower.

She was really arguing with Nathan, who was not there. Usually he was as unobjectionable as a boy could be and he was her only sure way of returning from an excursion into the walls. And he'd said no.

His black spike of hair nodding in agreement, he'd responded to all her irresistible logic with that one word. And she'd let him think he'd won.

Her cheeks grew warm at the memory of his relief, his offer to help her in apprentice work in the forge, which he hated, or in binding her stories into books, which he hated even more. But she had not lied to him. She'd never said

she wouldn't go. He'd just assumed she wouldn't dare go without him. And if he'd let her down, then she had no choice but to go alone, did she?

The more she thought about it, the more she realised this was all Nathan's fault. He didn't appreciate how important her work was. He didn't appreciate her gift. He didn't appreciate *her*. He was just like the adult mages who still wouldn't allow girls into the walls. Now they'd even banned *all* apprentices from entering the walls unless under mages' orders and then only one at a time, in the company of Councillor Verity.

She mimicked the pompous tones they used. 'Because evil lurks in the walls.'

Janette had seen Councillor Verity often enough, a girl barely older than her, as waif-like as Janette was solid, as pale-skinned and golden-haired as Janette was dark and haloed in frizz. The Councillor didn't even have any magecraft whereas Janette could levitate Nathan with just a thought-beam. He objected to that, as did their tutor. Mage-Smith Kermon said it was a very clever trick but not respectful to a fellow-mage.

He could talk! Her teacher hadn't even looked at her story, however often she reminded him and said how important it was. Janette didn't need any of them. She'd been into the walls before and she could stand up for herself. She could balance on one leg too: it helped her concentrate.

The story. Telling stories was her special mage gift, just as Mage Kermon was a smith and a soul-reader. But it was as if her gift was cursed. Nobody believed her stories mattered. And this one could shake the Citadel to its foundations.

Was that what she wanted? Oh yes, that was *definitely* what she wanted. When she'd sneaked into the walls with Nathan, back when he'd been a true friend, she'd seen the honey hunter and she'd known in her bones how important the girl was. And she'd *known* she had to go back, to get the whole story. She'd imagined discussing the implications in Council, being a hero for what she'd discovered. Instead the story was languishing on a shelf. Read and dismissed. Or maybe not even read at all.

Calm now, in the ageless certainty of her gift, Janette stepped forward and walked smoothly into the walls.

A shimmering, a shift of the light and, instead of stone walls, stairs and darkness all around, she was now in a leafy green space. Not grassette like in the Citadel but real grass. Dozens of people ran, walked, played ball and not one of them could see her. Nor was she interested in them.

Janette's paces were regular as her heartbeat. She walked through people as if they weren't real – or as if she wasn't. She shivered and continued to picture the honey hunter in her mind's eye until the scene shifted to a village in the mountains, the inhabitants outside their huts, watching a girl argue her cause.

Qwian. Long black hair, flashing eyes and her father's two long bamboo spears in her hands. No woman had ever been a honey hunter and at first the Headman denied her passionate claim. She insisted that her dreams had named her the honey hunter, that her father's sacred role had been passed on to her when he died. Only when the village Shaman spoke on her behalf was Qwian given the chance to prove herself worthy, as judged by the bees themselves.

Janette's story lived and breathed in front of her. Qwian's team of twelve hunters carried bamboo ropes, slats

of wood and a wicker basket through the jungle, across the leech-infested river to the sacred clearing above the high cliffs.

When the men at the top lowered her down those sheer cliffs in a basket, Qwian was almost flying herself among the giant bees that streamed out to protect their comb. Vast, glistening slabs of their treasure filled every crevice in the rock face.

Qwian's only protection was a veil around her head as she speared huge chunks of comb through black clouds of enraged insects, sent the severed pieces down the dizzying drop to the men waiting with baskets below. The rhododendron honey so prized in the village was its trading lifeblood. Men craved the heady rush, akin to madness, offered by a single teaspoonful. Those who risked a second helping, learned of its dangers.

As she swung in her basket, amid smoke and bees, doubts and stings, Qwian was smacked in the face by a morsel of comb, before it fell into the waiting basket below. She automatically licked her lips and then deliberately licked again. Qwian tasted the honey as she'd been warned not to do.

Hah! thought Janette, watching her story again. *Someone like me.*

And what Qwian saw during the honey madness was what had brought Janette back here. Not the boy and the kiss waiting in the village. Not the celebration for the first woman honey hunter, at the moment when she came back to the village, victorious.

In that honey-mad moment, swaying in a basket, dizzy from bee-stings and vertigo, Qwian spoke to the bees, thanked them.

And they replied.

We will need you, they told her. Your hive and ours. Never forget our gifts.

Through Qwian's eyes, Janette saw the smoke curl into the soft lines of a girl's face, surrounded by bees. The girl running through a forest. A tattoo glittering on her thigh, a queen bee coming alive, flying.

Never forget, the bees buzzed. We protect our queen. We protect you.

Born and bred in the Citadel, like generations before her, Janette had never seen living beings that weren't human until she'd made her illicit trip with Nathan into the walls. She knew of such creatures from books in the library and had been brought up to give thanks they'd been exterminated. The Citadel was indeed free of infestation but rumour populated the nearby Forest with all manner of monster, including the defectives in exile from the Citadel.

Like every citizen, Janette had heard the terrifying story of the Citadel freak who'd been infected with Forest. Who communed with bees, could even become one. And who'd been defeated – the stones be thanked! – in the Battle of the Forest, where she now lived in exile.

And then, in the mysterious world through the walls, where the past existed in layers of time, Janette had found the honey hunter and the bees. *What if?* Janette had asked herself ever since she shared Qwian's vision through smoke and the blackness of bees. *What if* the vision had come to pass? What if the girl running through the Forest was the Citadel's enemy, the Queen of the Warrior Bees?

Conquered but alive, she was held as a threat over naughty children by Citadel parents. Bees instead of hair, black eyes filling her face. 'She'll take you off to the Forest if

you don't behave. And if you don't obey her every wish, she'll have you stung until you're more full of holes than a hairnet.'

Not that Janette believed such stories any more. Given the number of times she'd misbehaved, she should have been whisked off to the Forest long ago.

What if this was where it began? This communion with bees, a promise and a prophecy? Were Qwian and the boy who loved her parents to the freak? And if the running girl was the Queen of the Warrior Bees, Janette knew something about her that would end her reign. Their queen would not be protected, however many bees were with her, if she was suppressed before her life began, here in the walls.

First, Janette had to follow the story, find out how it led from here to the Citadel side of the wall. Then she could go to the Council of Ten and impress them. Mage-Smith Kermion would be sorry he hadn't taken her story seriously.

'Show me the honey hunter returning with her harvest,' she instructed and, in the manner of the world within the walls, her focus created a destination and the scene shifted around her, until she was once more among the huts of the village, watching Qwian lauded by the Headman, returning triumphant with her two spears and precious baskets of mad honey.

By refining her search terms, she navigated the stages of Qwian's life, willing time to pass ever faster so she watched only key scenes. She saw Qwian and her young man grow older, their children playing hunt-the-honey with wooden sticks. Until the year came when one of the boys knelt in front of the Headman and received his mother's spears as pride lit her eyes.

Not a girl-child, thought Janette. And the other children

showed no interest in bees. So the running girl was still in the future. Janette must walk through time, following the story of the bees' promise. Once she was on the scent of a story, she was oblivious to all else and she was happy on the honey trail.

But her presence in the walls had not gone unnoticed and a great evil awoke. Finally, its time had come. And it laughed.



