The Stone Walkers, Sample Chapter

ONE

BUMBLE

Darkness filled the bowels of the Tarth mountain, darkness and silence.

Though a group of explorers had been swinging their picks for days on the surface of the mountain, not a sound, not even an echo of the sharp crack of iron on rock had reached

the deep places. The Stalli explorers didn’t know those places existed but if they had known, if they had excitedly carried torches down through the twisting corridors of caves, somehow surviving low oxygen levels and poisonous gases, they would have reached a small chamber.

Two boulders, taller than they were wide, leaned against one of the chamber’s walls. In the flickering torchlight, the explorers would have barely glanced at them. Tall boulders abounded in the Stalli Mountain range. Eagerly the young men and women would have hurried past, but after a few

more steps, they would have had to stop.

That back wall was the end of the interlocking cave system. The small chamber was the deepest of the deep places.

Nothing had changed in it for years beyond years.

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The young woman knew she seemed younger than eighteen. She was so short, for one thing, and frequently stumbled and dropped things for another. Just thinking about it made her trip as she went down the porch steps, and she dropped the bucket she was carrying.

The cat lying on the porch railing lifted its head and stared at her. The girl picked up the bucket and continued across the yard to the well, but she could feel the unswerving gaze of the cat on the back

of her neck where, sure enough, hair was falling out of its ribbon again.

She must not have tied the ribbon tightly enough, but if she tied it too tightly, it might break and she didn’t want to throw away the old threadbare thing. It reminded her of the past, when it had been a pretty green. Over the last four years, the color had faded until it wasn’t really green anymore. Vague was the word that described it best. *Vague describes me best too*, she thought dully. Her hair and eyes

had once been brown, but now...

When she reached the well, she leaned against its low encircling wall to catch her breath. Then she put the bucket on a hook and began to lower it into the water, but as she worked the ropes, she looked at the cottage next door. It was the only in Parsleyville made out of stone.

Her hands moved slower and slower until they finally stopped. Spring was almost over in Tarth, and the blue grass in front of the two cottages was beginning to grow into summer fullness, but the girl didn’t see them. She didn’t see anything but the cottage.

Three energetic boys had grown up there, and she had known all three of them, but Chera, who was the youngest, had only been a year older than she was. They had always met in the mornings and walked to school together.

Her eyes lost some of their vagueness as she remembered how Chera had teased her about her name.

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“Bumbly Bell is the name of a flower that can’t decide what color it is,” he’d complained loudly.

Six to eight rounded bells hung from the top of the wild flower undergoing Chera’s criticism. The bells were different colors even on one plant, and their long stems allowed the slightest breeze to toss them about each other.

A bumbly bell flower on a windy day was like a color wheel trying to play catch with itself.

Bumbly Bell had sniffed disdainfully as she informed the rude boy in front of her, “My flower is different colors because that’s the way Keshua made it. So there! I am a Bumbly Bell person, which means I can be whatever color I feel like being. Double so there!”

From then on, Chera had always greeted her with thequestion, “Bumbly Bell, what color are you today?”

“Yellow,” she’d answered most of the time, because yellow was her favorite color, though every now and then, she would opt for variety.

“I’m blue today,” she had shouted one spring morning before school.

“Blue! Why Blue?” Chera had shouted back, dropping his books in mock shock.

“Because the blue bumbly bells are the first to open every year, along with the new grass,” she had responded grandly, flourishing a hand towards the fresh sheen of blue grass

covering the ground.

Her friend had disagreed with an emphatic shake of his head. “No! You might be blue like the first bumbly bells, but you’ll never be blue like grass. Stalli mountain grass grows

much higher than you ever will.”

Immediately Bumbly Bell had thrown her books on the ground and chased the tall boy over their yards, both shrieking with laughter. Chera had come up with more and more “short” jokes, throwing them over his shoulder until they had collapsed out of breath on his porch steps.

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Loud tapping on the kitchen window made the cat on the railing jump to the ground in a huff. Stalking toward the shadows under the porch, the big yellow cat stopped an inch away from them and sat in the sunshine it was named for, licking one paw and glaring in the direction of the well.

Bumbly Bell didn’t see the silent accusation, because she didn’t turn her head. She didn’t need to. She knew what her aunt wanted. Slowly, because her hands no longer moved quickly, she began once more to lower the bucket into the water.

“What is it?” her Uncle Finken asked from his chair inside the cottage. He cocked his head and gray hair with a few red tufts left in it bristled out to one side.

“She’s staring into air. Getting depressed again, that’s what she’s doing,” Aunt Faso announced as she peered out the kitchen window, holding onto the counter to give her large body more support.

She shook her head and her gray hair, cut short and pinned up every night in the hope of curls, lost what little shape had made it past breakfast.

“Better give her extra tonic,” advised Finken.

“I will. It’s almost tea time anyway.”

Her husband grunted, and Faso carefully measured tea into the teapot from a round canister with a wooden knob on its top. Then she reached for another round canister with a wooden knob. Three of those matching canisters sat on the cleanly scrubbed kitchen counter. The biggest of them held dried tea leaves and the second biggest held honey, whenever they had any. The third canister, the smallest

one, was in Faso’s hand now. Carefully she spooned out two teaspoons of a powdery substance and dropped it into one of the cups waiting on the counter near the sink.

Nodding with satisfaction, she said, “There. That should take care of you, Miss Bumble.”

In the stone cottage next door, Lynn dashed out of a back bedroom into the hallway. She needed to hurry if she was going to make biscuits for supper, though it was a shame there wasn’t any strawberry jam. Chera loved jam with his biscuits, and he would be home for supper tonight, but the

mountain strawberries were late this year. Honey would have to do.

A fuzzy body materialized directly beneath her outstretched foot, and she almost lost her balance trying not to step on it.

“Stupo, stop getting in the way,” she scolded.

Stupo barked with the habitual excitement of a small dog and bounced over to the other side just as she started to step there.

This time Lynn would have fallen if she hadn’t slammed her hands against the walls on either side.

“The boys are right. You were born with a gift for getting in the way, and you’ve been perfecting it ever since.”

Cocking his ears, Stupo panted happily up at her. She reached down and massaged the back of his neck. The green fuzzy hair was soft on her fingers, and she lingered longer than she meant to, rubbing her hand over and over the dog’s back.

Affectionately she told him, “I’ve always liked green dogs the best. I think it has something to do with my old world, but Keshua didn’t let me remember much about it. He said I’d adjust to Tarth better this way.”

Twenty-five years ago, Lynn had come to Tarth as a cocky, self-confident teenager who had fulfilled a prophetic rhyme and helped destroy an evil sorcerer. In the process she had met Keshua and lost her cockiness—most of it, she admitted now with a grin.

Stupo preened beneath her hand as if he had saved Tarth all by himself.

“Ha, you weren’t even born then,” she told him, straightening up

The little dog barked cheekily. He must have guessed what direction her mind had taken, because no one could hear someone else’s thoughts. The spoken word was different, of course. Tarth dogs could understand human speech. Everyone knew that, though only Lynn believed Tarth cats could do the same thing.

“Which boy named you?” she asked Stupo, as she hurried again toward the kitchen, but she answered her own question.

“Chera. It’s his kind of name.”

This morning, her youngest son had arrived in Parsleyville, unabashedly gleeful at escaping his brother Mindik’s latest exploration project. Sifting through dirt and cracking into rock on the surface of a mountain was boring, he had announced to his parents as they’d walked with him to the village archives.

Lynn had noticed Chera’s pride, however, as he turned over to the archival experts the body of a small animal, almost perfectly preserved. Presumably the animal had been killed by an earthquake, which had then enclosed it so tightly in rock it hadn’t decayed. The history of earthquakes in their part of Stalli was exactly why Mindik had chosen to explore here.

Lynn washed her hands quickly at the sink as she glanced out the window.

A Stalli girl was crossing the yard now, a bucket of water held out in front of her. The girl had almost reached the porch steps. Unfortunately, their neighbor’s cat chose that moment to saunter forward, like the queen of Tarth blessing the world with her presence. Sunshine had been well named.

Her bright yellow body resembled a sun in miniature. Nobody could have missed seeing her—nobody but Bumble.

Lynn sighed when the short girl stumbled over her aunt’s cat.

A yowl broke into the air, mounting higher and higher in both pitch and volume until the fullness of its outrage had been thoroughly expressed. The door of the cottage opened, and Faso leaned out.

Lynn couldn’t hear what the older woman was saying, but the rebuke on her face was obvious. Bumble waited stolidly until Sunshine, hair bristling in every direction, stalked up the steps and jumped back onto the railing. Then the girl took her turn, climbing sluggishly, as if she had to drag one foot after another.

An irritated voice from inside the cottage said something before the door closed.

*Poor Bumble*, Lynn thought, grateful for the peaceful quiet of her home.

Twenty minutes later, Stupo shattered the quiet with a frenzy of welcoming barks. The noise was justified in the little dog’s opinion. After all, everyone in his family except for Mindik had arrived for supper.

“Fredos arisht!” the entering Stallis shouted, giving the traditional blessing the exuberance it deserved but didn’t often get.

Humans rarely made enough noise, Stupo had always observed, not even his own family, though over the years he had certainly done his best to show them how.

“Biscuits and cake both! I can’t wait to tell the exploration group,” Chera crowed from his vantage point six feet above the dog’s head.

“You won’t have any friends left if you brag like that,” warned Loraf, the oldest son in Stupo’s family and the only married one, while his wife, Sylla, quietly put the cake she had brought on the kitchen counter.

Sylla was always quiet. Stupo had no idea why Loraf had married her.

Meanwhile Loraf, who was as tall as Chera if not worse, sneaked two steaming biscuits from the breadbasket and threw them up and down in the air to cool them off. A green bundle of fuzz with an open mouth, Stupo wiggled breathlessly below him, willing, intently willing one of the

biscuits to fall to the floor where it would become his by natural right.

He should have known better. The boys he had grown up with had mastered food sneaking years ago.

“Yeah, no friends but hey, I have biscuits and cake. What’s to complain about?”

Expertly Chera stole one of Loraf’s biscuits out of midair, cramming it into his mouth. Loraf quickly bit into the other one, and the little dog’s mouth drooped as he trotted over to his corner where he turned in a sad circle before lying down.

“Supper’s ready, but I need help carrying food to the table,” Lynn announced.

During the ensuing chaos, Chell noticed his daughter-in-law slip something into her pocket. Sylla then picked up a hot platter of meat and carried it to the table, though she had to circumvent both Chera and Loraf to do so, which somehow took her right past Stupo’s corner where the something slid

out of her pocket and onto the floor.

Stupo leapt up, tail wagging madly, and Chell smiled.

It was like Sylla to take care of the underling. Lynn did the same sort of thing. Then he dismissed small dogs and their needs from his mind, sat at the table, and concentrated on getting his fair share.

When nobody could eat another bite, Lynn began to get up but stopped when Chell leaned back and lifted a finger to catch Chera’s attention.

“I got word this afternoon that Base Camp Village wants a number of precisely cut rocks as soon as possible. They’ve decided to build a wall and gate around the Opal Cavern to protect it from vandals. Loraf and I could use your help if Mindik can spare you.”

“How long would it take us to complete the job?” asked Chera.

Chell frowned thoughtfully at the ceiling. “Three weeks.”

“Good. I’ll do research in the mornings and work with you in the afternoons. Mindik wanted me to wait on an order of new picks anyway, because this mountain is ruining the ones we’ve been using. He says they lose their sharp edge because the rock on Slopes is so old and hard.”

“How is Mindik?” Loraf asked.

Chera laughed. “Need you ask? He’s on an exploration. Nothing matters to Mindik when he’s on an exploration except whatever he’s looking for—in this case, dead animal bones. An old mountain should have old bones in it, he thinks.”

“What you mean to say is, the fossils of the animals who lived on Tarth a long time ago,” corrected Lynn, but Chell could tell his wife was thinking of something else, because her correction didn’t have much force behind it.

“That’s what I said,” Chera assured his mother solemnly, “dead animal bones. Mindik can’t think about anything else.”

“He ought to think more about Cherry,” Lynn blurted out her real thoughts, and Chell nodded in agreement, noting that the table-at-large was nodding along with him.

Sylla remarked quietly, “I don’t see how Cherry can stand these long separations. Have they set a date for their wedding yet?”

The table-at-large shook heads in a mournful no.

“He isn’t thinking,” Lynn muttered and started clearing the table.

There was a loud noise as everyone pushed back their chairs and jumped up to help, but Chell wasn’t surprised when Chera answered as smoothly as if there had been perfect peace and quiet. Nothing squelched their youngest son.

He grabbed his plate with one hand, a serving dish with the other, and announced jauntily at the same time, “Oh, he’s thinking all right—about bones, you know.”

“Mom, who’s that?” he asked in a different tone of voice after he had crossed the kitchen and put his dishes in the sink.

Chell slid his own dish into the sink and peered out the window. It was darkening rapidly now and a foggy drizzle was making visibility even more difficult. He could barely make out the shapeless raincoat covering a short body that was trudging out to the well.

His wife’s mouth twisted. “It’s Bumble. You haven’t forgotten your old school friend, have you?”

“Bumble! You mean Bumbly Bell, don’t you?” Chera asked sharply.

Lynn put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed it. Chera was the only person in the village who refused to use the nickname Bumbly Bell’s aunt and uncle had given her not long after they’d moved into her cottage.

Four years ago Lynn had walked across the adjoining yards and found the girl’s parents dead at their kitchen table. Partial servings of scrambled eggs and mushrooms—poisonous mushrooms—had been lying on their plates.

Everyone in Parsleyville had gone into shock. Such a thing never happened to the mushroom-wise Stallis.

Fortunately,Bumbly Bell had been sleeping at a friend’s house the night before and hadn’t eaten breakfast at home.

She’d heard the news at the same time everyone else heard it. Immediately her aunt and uncle had come to live with her, but the traumatized fourteen-year-old had deteriorated over the years from a bright active girl into a lethargic young woman.

Chell and Lynn went out of their way to speak kindly to her. Often they invited their next-door neighbors to supper and every evening they asked Keshua’s father, the Great One, to take care of her. What else could they do?

Lynn grimaced. She liked to fix things. She didn’t like to admit there was nothing else she could do.

“Bumble is an insulting name. The Fink gave it to her deliberately,” Chera continued his protest.

“You shouldn’t call him a fink. His name is Finken,” Lynn responded automatically, still trying to come up with a solution to the problem.

“Yeah, well, her name is Bumbly Bell,” countered Chera.

“They nicknamed her Bumble because she’s always dropping things. Finken and Faso get annoyed,” Loraf pointed out as he came up behind them with an armload of dirty dishes.

“You mean Fatso and the Fink,” muttered Chera.

This time Lynn glared at him. “Chera! You will not talk about our neighbors in that way.”

He subsided, but she saw his face as he glanced back out the window. It wasn’t a bit repentant.

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Two days later Mindik straightened up on the western slope of the mountain he had chosen to explore, rubbed his back, and glanced around to see if anyone needed help. It was unlikely; they had been working on the surface of Slopes for almost four weeks now, and everyone knew what to do.

Still, he liked to check periodically. He was the leader of this expedition, and it was his job to make sure everything was going smoothly.

Botan waved from the north and Mindik waved back. He couldn’t see Pesom in her southeastern location, but one of the members of her group was waving. Wait, he was

pointing. Two people were coming out of the forest at the bottom of the mountain.

Mindik stared hard and then whistled under his breath.

Climbing up the mountainside toward him were the chief directors of the Parsleyville Archives. They must have identified the animal Pesom had found. This was big! He had to bring the group together. Pesom especially deserved to hear the name. Scrambling across the mountain, Mindik banged on the bell they had hung for emergencies. Maybe the news didn’t constitute an emergency, but he didn’t care. Everyone would want to hear this.

The archival directors stayed a full hour. After Mindik had waved goodbye to them, he turned beaming toward Botan and Pesom.

“Can you believe this?” he asked, trying hard to ignore the scowl on Pesom’s face.

She had stayed very quiet throughout the archivists visit. *Modest*, he’d thought, trying hard to fool himself, but he’d known better. He, Pesom, and Botan had known each other since childhood. They could tell when one of them was upset, though he’d never seen such a scowl on Pesom’s face.

Actually, he’d never seen any scowl on her face. She had always been known for her kind gentle ways, but at the moment the young woman in front of him didn’t look either kind or gentle. Furthermore, now the two visitors were gone, she was no longer staying quiet.

“Spidergut is the most sickening name I can imagine. How dare they give such a name to my fossil!” she fumed.

Botan tried to reason with her. “Somebody named the animal a long time ago, Pesom. The archivists only identified it. Spiderguts got their name because—”

“Don’t tell me that nauseating reason again,” Pesom snapped before turning her back on her old friend.

Botan shifted positions and stared at Mindik as if he expected him to come up with an explanation for their friend’s behavior.

Mindik sighed. His jaw joint tightened. Both bodily reactions had begun around the time he’d started leading exploration groups. He had never sighed or clenched his jaw as a child. Now the joints around his mouth were often sore, and he had to hide sighs several times a week.

“We’re almost through with the more promising sites on the outside of the mountain. In a week or two we can switch to caves. I can hardly wait to get inside Slopes,” he reminded his two team leaders, hoping to change Pesom’s mood.

“Slopes of Death,” muttered Pesom, but she left to rejoin her group.

Mindik winced at her use of the mountain’s full name. He didn’t know how this place had earned such an unsavory label, but he did know the mountain was old, very old. Slopes of Death didn’t slope very steeply now, though maybe it had years ago when it first received its name.

A grassy area on the top of the mountain seemed like a place someone might choose for a picnic lunch. Interestingly enough no one did. On their occasional mornings off, the explorers stayed

together in small comfortable bunches.

Mindik had noticed the tendency but hadn’t said anything about it; neither had he said anything when someone shortened the mountain’s name to Slopes. Ostensibly the shortened name made it

easier to say, but the real reason, as everyone knew, was to leave out the ugly part. In fact, he had switched to the shortened name along with everyone else. After all, the slopes were exactly where they were working.

Soon though, they would be able to leave the surface of the mountain and start exploring its caves. Then everyone could forget the ominous name and what it might mean.