

2

The House of the Snows

'A journey,' said Shengo.

A journey. As simple as that. Later, Tahr wondered whether there had been something in the way the old monk had put on the water for tea—done it himself, instead of telling Tahr to. Or was it the way he had taken the bowl in his hands, watching the butter dissolve in a swirl on the greenish liquid—all this in more than usual silence?

A journey. Had it come to Shengo *then*, some message in the patterns on the tea? People liked to think that this was how his *leadings* happened—the people who climbed up from the village hoping for a bit of a blessing or advice. If they wanted to think it came by magic, well, Shengo would sigh to himself but wouldn't disappoint them. As they left, though, Tahr would sometimes catch the twinkle in his eye.

Tahr looked now, but his master's lined face didn't give a clue. Even with years of practice—maybe nine of his twelve years, in fact—Tahr could often not make out what was going on behind those eyes. *A journey*. For all he knew, the old man could have been planning it for weeks. With Shengo, you never could tell, and Tahr didn't expect to be told. Shengo was his master, even if he was something like a father too. If he said 'a journey' they were going on a journey, and even Shengo himself might not quite know why.

Not that this had ever stopped Tahr from asking. Now, for some reason, he didn't dare speak. The voice of a crow came through the window of the hut, up the hillside beneath them. Then all of a sudden Shengo smiled.

'Aren't you always nagging me to *move about?*' he said. This was a joke. The monk was so ancient, so much like a bundle of sticks in a blanket, Tahr thought to himself, that sometimes as he watched him at his meditation he would wonder whether those old joints would ever click and crack and move again. Shengo grumbled when he walked, but he moved lightly.

'Aren't you always pestering me with questions?' Shengo went on. '*What's on the other side of the mountain? Where do the birds go when the snows come? Do I ever have a moment's peace from it?*'

'Sir . . .' Tahr lowered his eyes. This wasn't fair. Shengo was teasing. Tahr asked a question like this once a month, maybe. Asked it out loud, that is. What Shengo knew, in the way he seemed to know things, was that this kind of thought was in Tahr's mind most days. Especially lately. Time and again, he'd find himself staring out of the small window when he should be meditating. Or he'd let the goats stray slightly, so he'd have to scramble up the hill to fetch them back. But *a journey . . .* There was something about the words that made Tahr's heart beat faster. This didn't sound like the usual trudge down-valley, followed by the trudge back with a sack of rice or barley meal.

Shengo laughed. 'You're allowed to be pleased!' He ruffled the fuzz on Tahr's shaved head, so suddenly that Tahr was startled. At once, Shengo made himself brisk again. 'Come on, get packing,' he said. 'We leave . . . almost *now.*'

'What about the goats?' said Tahr.

'Untie them.'

‘But . . . they’ll stray.’

‘No matter.’ This was it. In any conversation there came a point where Shengo said ‘No matter’. Beyond that point were reasons, but Tahr would have to put up with not knowing.

Strange, then, that this time the old man spoke again, without Tahr asking. ‘A life . . . ’ he said, slowly. ‘There is a life . . . on the edge.’ His hand made a little rocking movement, that made Tahr think of a boulder dislodged on the hillside, that catches on a ledge, and teeters, so even a gust of wind could make it fall.

A life . . . on the edge. Shengo’s brow wrinkled as he said it, as if he too was hearing the words for the first time. Then he turned away. There was a shadow, like tiredness or strain, in his face. You might even say *hurry*, if it were not for the fact that Shengo *never* hurried. But he turned away, as if he did not want young Tahr to see.

The way went scrambling zigzag up the hillside. It wasn’t a path. Downhill from the hut there was at least a dirt track, worn by Shengo’s own feet in his long years there—more recently by Tahr’s, too. The steps were worn deeper by the people from the valley—they came up as pilgrims now and then, to leave a bowl of food or a handful of flowers by the stone hut with red peeling patches of plaster on the wall.

Red: the deep red, almost dried-blood red, of holiness . . . Shengo’s eyes would glitter, some nights, as he told Tahr tales of a great *gompa*, home to fifty monks and fifty gold Buddhas. In his mind’s eye Tahr would see the high red halls and gateways, the many-storeyed ramparts clinging to the mountain. It would be a *dzong*, a fortress, if the Way they followed hadn’t been a way of peace.

Whether Shengo had actually *been* there, Tahr was not sure, because each time he told it the details would change . . . even down to the number of Buddhas. Still, the old man had dragged up a bucket of bright red mud to plaster on the wall that overlooked the valley. It was cracked and peeling now, but it seemed to be saying that their hut was a little *gompa* too.

When the visitors came, Shengo sat with them, and rarely spoke. Some never even came inside. It seemed to be enough for them that he was *there*, the old monk in the red hut. And it pleased them now to see a young monk, young but with the same shaved head, was up there, training with the old one. They loved it when he greeted them three times—first in ordinary language, then with a blessing from the sacred texts, in Pali, then in a scrap of the English—*good afternoon thank you I beg your pardon*—that the old man taught him for some reason, maybe just to pass the time. Sometimes the bowl they brought would have bright yellow sweets made of honey and milk, so sweet they made your tongue curl. Shengo would leave these as if they were Tahr's by right.

The hillside was steep but Tahr went at it like a dog let off its lead. This was his place—and for the first half hour they climbed he was at home. Far above, the skyline was jagged with rocks and a few thin pines. That was further than he or anyone with any sense would venture. Here, though, there wasn't a boulder that he didn't know; he knew the fresh patches of green for the goats, he knew where there might be wild honey in a thicket. Most of all, he knew it from just scrambling, for the sake of it, while Shengo's back was turned. Thinking back, he realized that the old man turned his back quite often, knowing that a boy would need to play. And even when he caught him at it, sometimes the monk would watch a little before calling him down.

* * *

Tahr: that was Shengo's name for him, the name he gave him when he found him, a thin kid, no more than a toddler, who had lost his people and his name somewhere. *Tahr*: the shy wild sheep of the mountains, good at melting into the hillside when you so much as looked at them . . . then reappearing high up on a thin ledge with no way you could see for them to get there, unless they had wings.

As they climbed now, the old man went slowly. Tahr had to stop himself from pushing on past him. That would not be respectful. Instead, Tahr took the shortcuts, little gullies in between the boulders. He kept out of sight, scrambling up behind an outcrop ready to surprise his master, waving *Look at me! Up here!* Except when he jumped out and looked down, there was no Shengo. No, he was level with Tahr, a little higher even, trudging with his head down, and he didn't turn.

Below and behind them, the valley opened. There was the roof of their hut, very small now. Beyond it the green of the fields, line upon line of thin terraces scratched from the slopes, was plumped up after months of rain. There were a few clumps of darker green where trees still clung, in places too steep to farm. There were the heaped stone walls of villages, and smudges of smoke in the air. The further down the valley Tahr stared, the more the world sunk into haze.

When he looked back, Shengo was almost out of sight above him, and Tahr had to put on a burst of speed to catch up. Before he reached him Tahr was out of breath. And the old man? Climbing, slowly climbing, with his tireless non-stop steady step. *Hey, that's not fair*, thought Tahr, and nearly called out. But he knew the old man would not turn. He'd smile and trudge on, while his novice learned his lesson. In some way, though Tahr could

not put his finger on it, Shengo was not playing this time. Something was driving him on. Tahr wiped the cooled sweat from his forehead and from then on kept his head down, at a steady pace, with his eyes on the track.

All his life in the hut, Shengo had told Tahr stories. It was what he did when the child was ill, frightened, or sad. Some nights Tahr couldn't sleep; some nights he just pretended that he couldn't, so he could say *Tell me a story*. He loved the ones about the lamas of the old times who would stride across the mountains, covering a week's trek in one night. They used to go barefoot across snowfields and glaciers, hardly leaving a track in the snow, in only their everyday robes. *Why didn't they freeze?* Tahr would ask, and Shengo made a gesture like a furnace burning, as if they'd had a fierce heat inside them, stoked up by the powers of their minds. Experienced hunters or herdsmen who'd tried to climb the same way in their furs and boots might be found the next day frozen rigid to the ground.

When Shengo told tales like this, his eyes glinting in the yellow flicker of the butter lamp, Tahr would picture a blizzard on the high peaks, almost a white-out, except that in the middle of it moved a shadow, a man-shaped space where snowflakes melted instantly, an inch from the lama's skin.

I suppose they don't sweat, either, Tahr thought grumpily. Or get blisters. Even now he could feel where his thick felt soles would start to rub him. Pity Shengo never taught him how those lamas did it. 'No matter!' he would have said, if Tahr asked him. Well, thought Tahr, it mattered now.

The skyline they had been toiling towards was within reach—one last push and . . . No. Beyond the rise it rose again, as steep as ever. Five minutes later, he couldn't

even spot where his skyline had been. *No matter*, huh! Tahr was aching in unusual places, and they weren't even out of sight of home.

Shengo sat on a stone. Without a word, he held out a battered khaki flask, and Tahr slumped down beside him. *'Thank you, sir,'* he said, the way the old man liked him to. English was the language, Shengo used to say, to be polite in—though not much good for praying or for buying rice.

The water was *wonderful*. Tahr took a deep swig. Then he raised his head and looked around and saw a greater wonder still.

From the hut, the slope above had always seemed like one half of the world. (The far side of the valley was the other.) Now Tahr could see their hillside was just one rib of a larger hillside, which was rucked and folded like a robe—a robe wrapped around the shoulder of the mountain. Below them there was not just their one valley, but three, four, five valleys, folded in the mountain's side. In each of the creases, reaching higher up than they were now, was the dark green of pine forest or the paler green of oaks, slightly orange this high with a hint of autumn—all made paler by the wisps of cloud that hung around the hillside, wandering in and out of the trees.

This was the world! Tahr's heart was thumping, but it wasn't from the climbing. All those days he'd found himself gazing out of the window of the little hut . . . This was what he'd been looking for. The world! And it was big, big, big . . .

Downhill, the valleys vanished among foothills, then there was just distance, fading into a grey-green haze. Without thinking, Tahr was on his feet, spreading his arms like the wings of the lammergeier, the great mountain vultures they saw sometimes, so high they were

almost out of sight. Those wings never flapped, just angled slightly on the currents of the air, and the bird would sweep out over miles of valley. With his arms spread, Tahr turned slowly through the whole arc of the view, feeling as free as vultures must. Imagine it: just tilt your wing and you are heading . . . *anywhere*.

From behind him came a gentle chuckle, and Tahr turned to see Shengo with those little laughing creases round his eyes. ‘Oh, little bird,’ said the old man, ‘I wish I had your wingspan. Who knows where you’re going to fly one day.’

There was something in his voice that made Tahr look at him again. Back home, Shengo was the master, and he filled the tiny hut with his presence. Out here on the mountain’s shoulder he looked tiny too. Tiny, and old, and fragile. Now he held out a hand. Tahr helped him to his feet, as gently as those times when *he* had fallen over as a little child, and Shengo had helped him. He’d never scooped him up in his arms the way Tahr had seen fathers in the village do—but gently, courteously, offered him his hand, as if they were equals. Sometimes young Tahr wondered what it would be like to have a mother who would put your head against her soft warm shoulder, rocking you to sleep. His cheek seemed to remember the feeling, though his mind did not. Then just as he felt sad he would catch the old monk looking at him in that kind and anxious way, and Tahr knew he was loved, after all.

Tahr pulled at Shengo’s hand and he came upright with a little sigh. ‘A little higher,’ Shengo said, and glanced up the ridge behind him. It was as steep as anything they’d climbed that day—grit, rock, and scree, a few stunted juniper bushes. Here and there along the skyline something else peeped over, shocking white—a glimpse of the place where, even in the hottest summer, it is always freezing. The house of the Snows.

For a moment, Tahr quailed, and Shengo saw it. He gave him a nudge. 'Spread your wings again, little bird. You go first, and show an old man how to fly!'

At last there were the Snows, so bright that Tahr shielded his eyes and looked away. Some while back, toiling up the ridge, he'd given up hoping that they would get anywhere ever again. They would be climbing for ever, that was how it felt . . . and oddly, once he thought that, it felt easier, at least a bit. Now they came over a rise and suddenly the ground stretched round them in hummocks and dips. Here and there was a patch of melting snow, but mainly there was bare rock, grey but with splashes of orange and yellow lichen, all as smooth as if they had been worn that way by constant use. In the dips between the rock, a few pools of dark water lay as still as ice . . . which perhaps they were. Tahr felt the cold breath of the Snows on his face.

There was a clatter, like a little rock fall, as a flock of blue-grey sheep took fright. They poured over the edge of the rise like long grass in the wind. Then they were out of sight.

The line of snow peaks faced them, piled together in a solid wall. There was no way through, and as for habitation—not the slightest hint. Tahr knew all about snow: a few weeks now and the showers would come, and first the tips of the ridges, then gradually lower, would turn white, till it was lying all day and not melting just above their hut. He knew, too, that there were higher mountains not far off, behind the mountains he could see. From lower down the valley he would have seen those white crests as a backdrop all the time, but up near their hut the steep sides closed in round them

and only a certain colour, like a brightness in the dark, dark blue of some clear nights gave a sign that there were glowing wastes up there.

But nobody lived there. Nothing human could.

Shengo had stopped beside him. The old man's face never showed much, but now Tahr saw a shadow in it that might just be doubt. 'This way,' he muttered. Yes, he was worried. What if this time he was wrong? He'd had one of his *leadings*, Tahr knew—but what if he'd misunderstood it? However they worked, those odd sure thoughts that came to him sometimes, they didn't come in words he could explain. Still less did they arrive with maps. For the first time Tahr found himself thinking: his old friend *was* very old. What had he meant by *A life . . . on the edge*? It hadn't made much sense. Tahr had seen old people in the valley, going slightly crazy, slightly vague. That couldn't happen to Shengo, could it? Tahr didn't like to think. But . . . the thought came back: if it did . . . ? If it did, would he know—would *either* of them know—before it was too late?

'This way,' said Shengo, and they went on.

Then they saw the shelter. It was tucked behind a boulder, for a little protection from the wind, and could almost have been a random pile of stones itself, apart from the flutter of a ragged prayer flag above the door. *Om . . . Mani . . . Padme . . . Hum . . .* the letters spelt out on the wind, the same sounds as he and Shengo chanted every day, but up here they felt different—here, where there was no one to hear apart from sheep, a flock of birds . . . or at best the *yeh-teh*, the Mountain Spirits who were said to roam the Snows.

A life? On the edge? Did somebody live here? If so, maybe theirs was the life Shengo meant. So they wouldn't be going any further. This morning, Tahr had wanted an adventure. Now he'd seen their way barred by the

mountains, and felt the breath of the Snows, he thought: if this was *it*, then that was a relief.

But there was no one in the shelter, and Shengo showed no sign that he'd expected anyone. 'Is . . . is this it?' Tahr whispered.

'You are doing well, very well,' said Shengo—a gentle way, Tahr knew, of saying No. If he'd dared, he would have asked, very carefully: *Shouldn't we go home now? Come back in the spring, maybe?* But one look at the old man's face told him what the answer would be.

'Time for something to eat,' said Shengo. They hunkered out of the wind. A few flat stones had been hauled up to form a roof, and inside the shelter it was almost warm. Shengo opened his bag, and though the food was only cold *tsampa*—*Thank you, sir*, said Tahr—they both went at it like a feast.

There was a clunk as Shengo put the flask down between them. He did not speak. Outside, the prayer flag flickered and whispered, blown to shreds by years of snow and wind. Now they'd stopped, Tahr felt the moisture chilling on his skin. He needed to move . . . but as he poked his head out of the shelter he saw something had changed. Half the peaks had vanished, and the rest were darkening, as grey clouds rolled up out of nowhere. Almost at once, Tahr felt slight prickles of snow.

The darkness moved across them, and so did the cold. Tahr shrank against Shengo and they crawled backwards into the shelter, as far in as they could go. He'd seen sheep on the hillside in crevices; sometimes you could stumble on a boulder cave and find it one packed mass of the quivering beasts. Tahr and Shengo crept back into the tightest corner—out of the snow and wind—but the cold of the sunless air pressed in after them. Shengo pulled his thick wool cloak around them, tucking the edges in and under. Just feeling the old monk's body, frail as it was,

next to his was a comfort to Tahr. 'Don't fidget,' said the old man, but not sharply. 'We must save what warmth we have.'

'Those lamas you told me about,' Tahr said, 'you know, with their mystic inner heat . . . ' If Shengo was ever going to teach him the trick, now was the time.

The old man smiled. 'Hah! So you *do* listen . . . ' He tucked in an extra fold of the cloak around Tahr. 'When you are Enlightened, you come back and teach *me*! Just be calm. Breathe . . . Breathe through the cloth, like this . . . ' Then he was silent, and the wind groaned in the cracks around them. Sometimes the sound of it was muffled by a swirl of snow, sometimes it would ease a little. Then Tahr looked out and there was a small drift of snow blocking half of their entrance. Outside, the bluish ground was lighter than the sky. 'We'll be snowed in!' he whispered.

'No matter. It will keep us warm.' The flurries came and went, and in between it was a little lighter, but only a little, and never for long. Tahr's left leg went to sleep and when he moved it pins-and-needles bit him, till he cringed with pain. 'Wiggle your toes,' said Shengo, just like any parent anywhere. Gradually Tahr began to notice that the sky was darker all the time.

'No matter,' Shengo said. 'We are better in here for the night.' There was a pause.

'Please, excuse me, pardon me for asking,' Tahr said, 'but . . . what did you mean by *a life . . . on the edge*?'

In the dark, Shengo's face was not even an outline, but Tahr thought he felt the warmth of it, turned towards him in this dreadful place. 'We eat a little *tsampa*,' he said as if that was the answer. 'Then we get some sleep.'