

## STAND ON THE SKY

“Well,” said Serik. “That’s it. Dulat’s going to kill me. I’m going to die.”

Aisulu slung an arm around her brother’s shoulders. “You think that’s bad? I’m going to have to do *embroidery*.”

They were standing together on top of a shale outcropping, which they’d climbed to use for a lookout. Above them the sky was high and huge and bright, wheeled with birds. Below them the mountain swept away, fierce and dry and the color of foxes. They could see up to the snow line and down to the power lines and the road. They could see the tracks of the goat herds and the hollow with the three tent-houses—the gers—where their herding family lived. What they could not see was any trace of stupid horses that had wandered off while their riders lay napping in the sun.

And the trouble they were going to be in was feeling less and less like a joke. Aisulu had been fetching water when Serik had come to her for help. Water was her job because she was a girl. She’d hauled pails of water up the mountain so many times that the wire handles had left raised yellow lines at the roots of her fingers.

Right now, Aisulu was meant to be bringing that water back. She was meant to be doing the morning milking of the yaks. Was meant to be churning that milk into butter. There was no chance she hadn’t been missed. Their mother, Rizagul, was probably already planning the embroidery project that Aisulu would have to start when she returned. Rizagul never missed a chance to school Aisulu in girls’ work. Aisulu did not mind girls’ work, but she liked other things too: tending the solar panels that powered their light bulb and their radio, studying math, and riding fast with her arms stretched out like wings. In a land where girls are supposed to have hearts made of milk, Aisulu had a heart made of sky.

And as for Serik . . . Aisulu might have needlework waiting for her, but Serik might have the whack of a folded belt. At fourteen, he was really too big to take a beating—but if he lost his horse their uncle Dulat might make an exception.

On top of the shale outcrop, Serik stood with his head tipped back. He was watching the birds circling overhead. They were huge and black against the sky, a pair of golden eagles. Aisulu knew them well. She’d seen them all season, swooping in and out from a certain crag high up the mountain. For a while there had been only one eagle—the father—but now there were two again.