

PART ONE



THE STORY PODS

Robbers with swords are easier to fend off
than the thief who creeps silently in.

Traditional Plains saying



CHAPTER ONE



Snarking bograts! I hate this!” Calantha flung the sharo thorn and sucked her

pierced finger.

Oh, pustering toadstools. Her mother had heard. With a swish of skirts, Luvena erupted from the cooking chamber onto the back porch. Her nostrils pinched as she took in the one piece of crooked thatch among the mess of ruined sharo leaves.

“Is that all you’ve managed?”

Calantha rolled her eyes. Why should she learn sharo thatch? She was not going to apprentice with Saeward the thatcher—never mind that Saeward himself would have ten fits at the thought.

She shoved the spray of tattered blue-gray leaves

off her lap. “I can’t do this.”

Luvena’s face tightened. She tried to speak coaxingly, but her voice soon rose—sharper, faster. “Calantha, for pity’s sake, all you do is stack five leaves together and roll the edges toward the center so the top is wider and the bottom narrow to direct the rain downward. Then pierce the edges with thorns to hold. It’s an easy enough task, if you will only apply yourself.”

Calantha’s jaw clenched. She deliberately turned her head and fixed her eyes on the path that led from the back of their yard to Kasmira’s hut.

Her mother’s face blotched with anger. “Don’t give me that mule face, Calantha. I know what you’re thinking, and you will put it out of your mind. Look, story pods are all very well, and I’m the last to say they don’t matter. But for goodness sake, child, think on a Gatherer’s life. You must have a trade that will allow you to barter for at least some comforts beyond the basics of life.”

Calantha stared stonily ahead. Five more moons. That was all. In five moons she’d be fourteen, and

then, by the Sower of Tales, she *would* apprentice with Kasmira, no matter how her mother pleaded or ranted. It was the only thing she'd ever wanted—to be a Gatherer of Pods—even if it didn't meet Luvena's notions of a fitting occupation for her daughter.

Luvena's voice softened now, plying the old familiar arguments. With the ease of long practice, Calantha slipped by her mother's words into one of the tales from the story pods. The sideways rolling of the leaves reminded her of the one about the snake who saved the angry dog.

"Did you even hear me, Calantha? Move!"

Calantha blinked.

Luvena thumped her hand against her dark hair. "For patience's sake! Go! Get some more sharo leaves—and from the copse beyond the Cheesery, not from the Mid Plains road. You are not going anywhere near your precious Field of Gathering. And while you're about it, Calantha, reflect on why Greeley the potter is so pleased with your sister Freya. Because she applies herself!"

Her face flaming, Calantha sprang to her feet,

scattering the heart-shaped sharo leaves. She ran full tilt into the blazing heat of the afternoon sun.

Snake's venom! If she heard once more how pleased Greeley the potter was with her sister, Calantha would throw something. As if Freya didn't give herself enough airs already; Freya, who was capable and beautiful, like their mother, with her silky, dark hair and round, smooth face. Calantha just seemed to offend every one of Luvena's standards and hopes—dusty, bumbling, and plain besides, with a long, bony face, a curved nose, and coarse, brown hair that never stayed in place.

As Calantha passed Freya's pottery shack at the rear of the yard, she saw the neat row of pots her sister had made earlier that day. All plain and alike. Dull and smug, just like Freya.

She strode by her mother's Cheesery onto the path that led to Kasmira's. It wound through a mass of trees, scrub, and grass, past a tangle of purplish harwenberry bushes, then alongside some sharo trees—the wide, blue-gray leaves casting deep shadows on the path ahead.

Calantha let her breath out in a huff. Sharo

thatch! Her mother's latest scheme was insane. But she'd been desperate since she'd realized that not even her good friend Benigna, First Herbroffe, would take Calantha as apprentice. Benigna had nobly picked Calantha for service a few times, but now she pointedly avoided her.

Calantha groaned. She detested offering service in the Green, which all unapprenticed youngsters did when they could be spared from home—she was almost always the last to be picked, and how Julissa gloated. But any service was better than the flikketting sharo thatch, or, for that matter, helping her mother in her precious Cheesery. At least when she'd been gathering herbs with Benigna, she'd been able to wander away to look for story pods.

She scratched her fingers. The wretched sharo sap made her itch, but what did her mother care? Well, she could send her for all the sharo leaves in Grenlea, but her mother would tire of teaching her long before Calantha would tire of not learning.

Something among the purplish harwenberry bushes caught her eye. A story pod! A beautiful yellow story pod, with traces of pink, nodding above

the bushes. Calantha's heart leaped. It was ripe! She could tell from the size, and the humming she sensed, even from here.

She glanced back. The Cheesery and Freya's shack blocked all view of the house. Oh, she must touch the pod. Just see what kind of tale it held.

Hands tingling, she pushed her way along the faint track through the shrubs, her skirt catching on the sharp branches. Gently, she cupped the story pod in both hands. Delight prickled through her at the familiar humming. It was ripe, all right! And there was a thrum to it that made her quiver. The tale would be mysterious and full of adventure.

She looked back again. She'd never harvest a ripe pod from the Field of Gathering; they were always to be saved for the Gatherer's choosing for Talemeet. But here...

She must hear this tale, she must. She'd take the pod to the woods beyond the sharo copse and open it there. Tell her mother she'd taken extra time to find sharo leaves of the same size. So what if Luvena didn't believe her and was angry—her mother was angry anyway.

Calantha closed her eyes and let her heart sink into the pod. She must wait for the right moment or the pod would tear and the precious seeds fly upward, back to the Sower of Tales, leaving behind only murmurs of the lost tale.

She waited, waited. Her whole body eased and settled. Any moment now—

“For pity’s sakes, are you never done getting into trouble?”

Calantha gasped and swung around. Freya. She carried a bucket of clay at each end of the pole balanced across her shoulders.

The pod. Oh, the pod! Broken. Tantalizing words whispered and danced as the milky blue-white seeds flew upward.

A bitter taste flooded Calantha’s mouth. Her eyes pricked. “You dolt! Look what you made me do!”

Freya’s jaw dropped. “What I made you do? You—you stupid little... Can’t you do anything without stopping for your flikketting story pods?”

Calantha gasped. She bent down, grabbed a handful of wet clay from Freya’s bucket, and flung it at her face.

The clay spattered right across Freya’s open mouth. Freya screamed, then sprang at her, hands like claws. The buckets clanged backward, and Freya fell.

Choking with laughter, Calantha scrambled through the harwenberry bushes on to the wider path.

Freya screeched, “Wait ’til I tell Mother!”

Lifting her skirt high, Calantha tore past the sharo copse toward Kasmira’s hut.

No! It was the first place they’d look.

She spun around in a cloud of red dust and pushed through the scrubby plum bushes and wild grasses to her left. When she reached the Shernthrip road, she bounded across it to a small track in the middle of a lorsha field. Luckily they hadn’t harvested yet, and the grain was high enough to hide her. She ran through the field, turned left on the path at the edge of the woods, then reached the North Plains road. The big chernow tree. She’d hide there. The feathery red branches made a perfect curtain.

She stopped, gasping. No, she mustn’t. King Ulric’s men had been around lately, and they’d like-

ly pass this way. Her father had forbidden her to come here alone. Then where could she hide?

The woods near Xenyss' hut—they wouldn't think to look there! She'd keep away until her mother cooled down, maybe even cut some sharo leaves from the grove nearby. Calantha tore down the road, back toward the Green. Story pods at various stages of growth winked at her along the ditches, but she didn't dare stop.

If only her mother wouldn't look out the window.

Calantha flew across the Green, and as she swung onto the Blackthorn road, which led westward from the village, she darted a look backward.

Crash! Down she fell, the breath punched out of her.

Xenyss.

"Oh, my b-blessed stars!" Xenyss was sprawled in the dust, his blue eyes blinking, his Seer's cap twisted partway off his bald head.

"Oh, Xenyss. I'm sorry, so sorry," Calantha babbled.

She pulled and tugged at him, but he was heavy, his crooked leg slow to find ground.

At last he was up, puffing, arms flailing. Calantha thrust his stick into his hand and straightened his cap. "I didn't mean...let me dust you..." She flapped at his pale blue Seer's robe, leaving behind reddish smears of clay.

"S-s-slowly, Calantha," wheezed Xenyss. "What are you up to n-n-now?" He put his hand awkwardly on her back and peered at her in his mud-turtle way—head tilted and half sunk into his shoulders.

Calantha groaned inwardly. If he were a better Seer, she wouldn't feel guilty running off like the boys usually did; but she couldn't just shake his soft kindly hand off her shoulder.

"Xenyss, I have to go. I'll tell you later—"

"Calantha! Wait!" Luvena's voice cut like an icy wind through the heat and dust.

"Oh d-dear," whispered Xenyss.

"It doesn't matter, Xenyss," said Calantha. "She'd have found me anyway."

Her mother advanced across the Green like a dark cloud, her skirt rustling, her eyes like lightning. She grasped Calantha's arm and shook it, paying no mind to Xenyss. But then, no one paid mind to Xenyss.

“Calantha, this is beyond belief, even for you.”

“But, Mother, Freya—”

“The trouble, Calantha, is that you did not listen to me. Yet again.”

Xenyss said feebly, “Now, Luvena, p-p-perhaps she—”

Calantha closed her eyes in despair.

“With respect, Xenyss, this is between me and my daughter.” Luvena couldn’t keep the sharpness out of her voice.

She marched Calantha back to their house, scolding in a low roll, like water on the boil. Why couldn’t Calantha manage the simplest task without fumbling and bumbling? If she would apply even half the effort she wasted on her wretched story pods to something useful—

Calantha felt hot and scratchy. She said nothing—she’d learned that much at least—yet when her mother steamed on about how Calantha could do better, for she was not stupid, Calantha’s chest constricted.

Not stupid.

Somehow, those words always had the power to

wound. Calantha turned her head away—and saw Julissa gaping at them from the window of her small white-washed home on the southern side of the Green. She held a brush against her golden hair, and a smirk spread like grease across her face.

“Mother!” whispered Calantha urgently.

Thanks be to the story pods, her mother saw Julissa and stopped. She even turned the full power of her terrible smile on Julissa, whose smirk withered. Ha!

As soon as they were out of sight, her mother resumed her tirade, then stopped abruptly as the thud of hooves rang across the Green.

A group of horsemen galloped around the curve of the Mid Plains road, raising a swirl of dust. Luvena’s eyes narrowed as the horses slowed on the Green. They were fine beasts—one roan, two gray, and one white. The riders were helmeted and wore scarlet and gray. King Ulric’s livery.

Calantha’s eyes jagged over them. A wizened man, stringy as an old hen; a couple of beefy young lads, raw and red; and a sleek, plump man with a wide mouth who looked sharply around.

The pit of her stomach tilted. Years ago, when she’d

been playing with Neola, she'd tried to tell her how she sensed things about others, how it was like smell but not smell. But Neola had looked strangely at her and told the other children, who'd laughed at her and called her a witch. Calantha had since learned to keep quiet about her feelings, but something about the horsemen—and it wasn't just their livery, or the way her mother gripped her arm—made her insides churn.

A couple of the men doffed their helmets. Calantha turned away, glimpsing on one of the men a pair of plump earlobes, tilted upward like succulent new dignes leaves.

"Good day, Mistress," one of them called out.

Luvana barely nodded. Pulling Calantha by the arm, she hurried across the Green and down the road to their large, red-washed home. Calantha felt the men's eyes boring into their backs.

As they entered the house, Freya's face gladdened with spite.

Luvana said breathlessly, "Anwyll, they're here again. King Ulric's men. It's the fifth or sixth time these past two moons."

Calantha's father strode to the window facing the Green. He stood still, but the muscles along his cheeks tightened. Beagan ran up beside him and stood on his toes to look out, his mouth half-open. Calantha could just see the men on the Green, turning their horses in a circle, eyeing the houses. The roiling inside her grew.

At last they trotted toward the North Plains road and disappeared from sight. Thanks be to the Sower of Tales, she hadn't hidden there!

"Well." Anwyll slowly rubbed the side of his strong hooked nose. "They're going north, probably back to Jaerlfin. It's nothing, Luvana; they're just passing through."

Luvana's forehead creased. "But why do they keep passing through? And asking questions? Eythun says they were counting cows last time. I don't like it, Anwyll. What if King Ulric's after the plains, like his grandfather? People say with Sorcerer Odhran—" Luvana's breath caught. She flicked the fingers of her right hand to ward off evil, as did Calantha, Beagan, and Freya.

Anwyll said firmly, "Ulric won't be that foolish. We'll never be part of his kingdom again. He knows it. We've been freemen for over six hundred years, and we're well

prepared to repel any attack. As for Odhran, half those tales are made up just to frighten children.”

Beagan cried shrilly, “But doesn’t the Sorcerer send bad dreams? Didn’t he send Calantha’s witch dreams?”

Calantha flushed as Freya snorted. She should never have told Freya.

Her father said, “No, Beagan, he did not.”

Beagan’s face crinkled. “What does he do, then? Can he tell weather? Better than Xenyss?”

Freya’s eyes narrowed. “Mother! What about Calantha? Aren’t you—?”

Luvana frowned abstractedly. “Not now, Freya.”

Despite the uneasiness still coursing through her, Calantha couldn’t stop her smirk.

“And you, Calantha, go wash yourself and grind the lorsha. We’re behind enough already, thanks to your idleness and mischief.” The distracted look left her mother’s eyes. “You will continue to learn sharo thatch. And don’t for one instant think you can go running off to Kasmira’s without doing your chores after dinner.”

Calantha glanced at her father, who fleetingly put

his finger to his lips. She bit back the hot words and swished past the curtain into the cooking chamber. Her mother didn’t try to prevent her anymore from accompanying Kasmira to the Field of Gathering. Luvana had stopped that long ago, when she and Anwyll had realized that the screaming tantrums Calantha threw—if not able to go—caused her real harm. But she still resented it, and she took every opportunity to delay Calantha.

Calantha’s mouth tightened. As fast as she could, she flung handfuls of the coarse grain onto the stone mortar and turned the heavy pestle round and round, scooping the crushed grain into the nearby pot. By the time the pot was full, her hands and arms were numb and her shoulders and neck throbbed right up to her ears. But all the lorsha was ground, and finely enough for her mother’s exacting standards.

She stretched to ease her back. Her stomach felt slightly queasy, as though it held traces of undigested porridge. She couldn’t think why.

Then she remembered the horsemen.