
CLOUDLANDERS
CHRISTOPHER MACKIE


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For Sophie, who promised to only
read this when it was finished
And for Grace, who has probably read it
more times than she can count – C.M.

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PROLOGUE

Years from now, in a strange place where strange things tend to happen, the world as we know it is changing. The waves are rising, the clouds are falling, and a frightful, nightmarish monster is sinking country after country beneath the sea, until only one is left.

Years from now, in some far-off, flooded future, time is running out for the people of Bastion: an island nation in the middle of a deep and endless ocean. The monster is coming, and they know they cannot fight it. All they can do is build a wall.

They need stone. Enough to build a fifty-foot barrier around their land. They start digging, deeper than anyone has dug before, through earth that has not been disturbed since the days of a long-forgotten magic, and they uncover something that was never meant to be found: a shimmering seam of silvery stone that glows in the darkness. And when they take it out in the open, it floats up into the air.

They call it

lightstone.

With this miraculous discovery, the islanders build with a newfound purpose: they hope that the lightstone wall will lift their land free and float it high into the skies above, out of the monster's reach. Each day the monster

draws a little nearer, and each day their wall grows a little higher. And as the islanders dig with fear-fuelled ferocity, a gleaming, ancient magic seeps out from the cracks in Bastion's soil, breathing new life into mystical beings of a bygone era, buried deep within the earth. They shake off the dirt of their thousand-year slumber and crawl to the surface in time to see the monster appear on the horizon.

CRRRAAACCCKK!

The inhabitants of Bastion are thrown off their feet as the lightstone wall floats up into the clouds, carrying their entire country with it, lifting away from the world below. All manner of newly awoken magical creatures, from nymphs and gnomes to faeries and fin-folk, stand with the humans at the edge of their airborne ark. This is their home too, and it must be protected at all costs.

Before the blanket of clouds closes around them, they catch a glimpse of the sea swallowing the last remains of their past. The inhabitants of Bastion have become Cloudlanders: untethered, drifting wherever the wind blows them, above the clouds and beneath the stars.

Years from now, in a strange place where strange things tend to happen, an entire land is wrenched from the earth at the eleventh hour, while a monstrous creature roars in bitter disappointment.

There is a country that floats above the clouds: a magic-

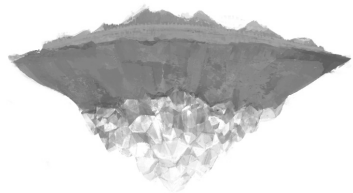
soaked, magnificent place where the land is lighter than air and the weight of impossibility ceases to exist. It skims like a stone across sea-blue skies, and its people believe they will float on forever. Over time, they forget about life before the Lifting, about the monster that sought to sink them, and they learn to live behind the lightstone wall that has become the beginning and end of their world.

But the creature does not forget. And it does not forgive. It waits patiently in the depths below for the day when their magic fails and their country falls back beneath the clouds. There is a change coming for the people of Bastion, one they cannot possibly imagine, and it crackles like an electrical storm on a silent night.

There is a story to be told, and it begins here, in the last country in the world.

It begins, as it must, on the brink of a windswept wall, above the clouds and beneath the stars…





1
The Wind and the Watchtower

Kurt

"Brrrrrr, it's freezing up here!" Kurt shivered, his granite-grey eyes gazing out at the swirling, swarming mass of clouds below them. "I didn't realise it'd be so cold."

"Of course it's cold." Flicker's squeaky, impatient voice was almost lost to the howling wind. "We live on a land floating thirty thousand feet in the air, Kurt. It's always cold."

"Yes, but it's colder than usual," Kurt argued as the moon shone brightly above. "It's always chilly behind the Brink, but never like this." He broke an icicle off his bulbous nose. "See?"

"That's because we're not *behind* the Brink any more, are we?" Flicker pointed out. "We're on top of it." She staggered sideways as the wind almost blew her off the

massive stone wall. "There's nothing to protect us from the elements out here, so let's make this quick."

Kurt followed his tiny companion across Windbreaker Brink, the colossal lightstone wall that encircled Bastion and kept it afloat, while stopping the Cloudlanders from tumbling off the edge of their airborne island. Kurt had never actually visited the Brink before, but it had always been there in the background, a towering monument to a time long forgotten.

The Brink was hundreds of years old, and it was one of the few things that remained from the days before the Lifting. Kurt supposed it must have been very confusing for the inhabitants of Bastion back then. One minute they were walking around on the surface of a flooding earth and the next they were up here, looking down at the clouds. Very confusing. And probably very cold too.

"Ugh, this wind!" Flicker cried, her gold-webbed wings beating furiously against the gale. "If this keeps up, I'll be blown away."

"Don't say that," Kurt protested, his stomach lurching like a horse leaping over a hedge. "At least you have wings. If I fall off the Brink, I'll have no way of getting back up."

"Well, just look on the bright side: if you actually do fall off, you'll probably set the record for the highest-ever dive," Flicker quipped. "Thirty thousand feet is quite impressive."

"Thirty thousand feet," Kurt repeated, looking down at his own enormous feet in awe.

"It's just a unit of measurement, Kurt," Flicker snapped. "I'm not talking about *actual* feet. Especially not those great big canoes you've got at the ends of your legs."

Kurt winced, but he rose above her remark. This wasn't hard, since he already stood a full head, shoulders, knees and toes above his companion. Yes, Kurt's feet were quite large, but so was the rest of him. It was one of the major drawbacks of being who he was: he tended to stick out like a sore thumb in a room full of fingers.

Flicker noticed Kurt's hurt expression and patted his arm sympathetically. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you," she said. "I'm only trying to toughen you up. Now, come on, let's head for that crumbly old tower over there."

Ancient watchtowers were set at regular intervals along Windbreaker Brink, although they had long fallen into disrepair. The Lightstone Gnomes maintained a few, but most lay cold and abandoned. After all, there wasn't much to keep watch for nowadays. There was nothing else out there.

"Look out," Flicker warned Kurt, her gilded wings carrying her over a great crack in the Brink. "It's pretty damaged here."

"I'm not surprised." Kurt hopped clumsily over the split and landed so heavily that a chunk of lightstone broke away behind him and floated off into the darkness above. "I doubt many walls could survive five hundred years of wind, rain and goodness knows what without getting the odd crack. We're lucky the Brink's still standing."

"Luck has nothing to do with it." Flicker craned her neck to watch as the sparkling stone drifted higher, wafting like a leaf in the wind. "They say that lightstone can withstand almost anything. Even clumsy great oafs like you."

"It's amazing, isn't it?" Kurt ignored her jibe and watched as the fragment floated out of view. "If Bastion were any lighter, we might've kept floating upwards until there was no air left, and if we were any heavier, we'd never have broken away from the world below in the first place. But we were just the right size to level out up here. What're the odds of that?"

"Alright, Goldilocks." Flicker rolled her eyes and flew off ahead. "We're not here for a sightseeing trip. If we don't keep moving, my wings might snap off in the cold."

Kurt smiled fondly and followed her. Flicker was a Gemstone Faerie – a proud and glitzy being whose family was formed by the melding of gemstones with magic during the Lifting – and her kind were notoriously dramatic. What she lacked in size, Flicker more than made up for with her jagged words and toxic tongue, and she loved telling Kurt what to do.

Her sisters were all carved from jade and amber, emerald and sapphire, and each of them was flawless. Flicker, on the other hand, was made from pyrite: a silvery-yellow gemstone more commonly known as fool's gold. She glittered like real gold, but was far more brittle and prone to explosive outbursts than her elegant elder siblings.

"I mean, pyrite is such an ugly gemstone!" she'd often complain. "My sister Lapis Lazuli has beautiful blue hair

that shimmers in the sun, and what've I got? Hair the colour of muddy straw and skin like a tarnished trumpet. It's so unfair."

Kurt didn't find Flicker ugly. He actually thought she was rather beautiful, in the way that a tornado or some other fearsome force of nature can be impressive and awe-inspiring when viewed from a safe distance. Her eyes were lovely and dark like the forest floor at night, and her gilded skin might be coarse to touch, but it shone like a lantern on a bleak and stormy night and reminded Kurt that he was never alone. Not any more.

"What're you doing back there?" Flicker hollered, derailing Kurt's train of thought. "Give me a hand with this door!"

Kurt hurried after his fiery faerie friend. They made an unusual pair, especially since Kurt was a fungi – and not just because he was great at parties. He was a Shroomling: a walking, talking, eight-foot mushroom with a red-and-yellow spotted cap. He had a face, of course (most Shroomlings did, unless they'd been in some terrible accident), but it was narrow with a bulbous nose and two ash-grey eyes that could have been swept straight out of a fireplace.

Together, Kurt and Flicker were about as far from normal as anyone in Bastion could be, and the people in the villages they passed through tended to avoid them, calling them names like 'Toadstool and the Gold Fool' behind their backs. The nicknames never bothered Kurt, who was just happy not to be chased off with a pitchfork

or turned into a risotto, but they upset Flicker, who pretended not to care what people thought of her while actually fretting over every word they said.

"I can't believe we've never tried this before," she said, hovering in front of one of the crumbling watchtowers. "We've traipsed through the woods for months looking for treasure, and we've never once thought to look inside any of these old towers! I mean, they're just sitting here, practically begging to be explored."

Kurt tried the handle. "It's locked," he said, giving it a little rattle.

"What?" Flicker flew in front of him and pulled on it with all her might (which wasn't very mighty), then let out a frustrated sigh. "Ugh, that's just typical."

"Here, let me give it another go." Kurt pushed her aside and gripped the handle with both hands, feet braced against the tower. He gritted his teeth and tugged as hard as he could.

CRACK!

The old brass lever snapped off inside his fist and Kurt went reeling backwards.

"Oh, brilliant," Flicker groaned. "That'll make it *so* much easier to get inside."

Kurt steadied himself again. "Don't worry, I have a plan."

Kurt's plan really just involved throwing himself at the door like an out-of-control cannonball and hoping for the best, but it worked surprisingly well. He tore

through the storm-battered wood like a marathon runner hitting the finishing tape, wrenching the door from its frame. He landed in a crumpled heap inside, dust and stonework all around him, rocking helplessly to and fro. Shroomlings were astonishingly solid beings, but they were also notoriously clumsy and utterly useless whenever they toppled over, which meant that Kurt wouldn't be able to get up again without Flicker's help.

"Woah," she said, stepping through the ruined doorway and looking around in awe. "I don't think anyone's been here in years."

"Apart from us," Kurt pointed out, his arms and legs flailing about like an upside-down woodlouse. "Uh, Flick?"

"There's got to be some treasure hidden away in here," Flicker continued, clicking her heels together to make her hands and feet glimmer. "If you were a warden way back when, where would you stash your goodies? Upstairs, maybe?" She looked around the derelict tower with a hungry glint in her eye. "Just picture it, Kurt: guards from before the Lifting keeping watch for whatever it was they kept watch for back then. They're bound to have something squirrelled away—"

"Flicker!" Kurt cut her off loudly. "A little help here?"

"Oh, sorry." Flicker flew over and eased him into a sitting position, then craned her neck to look upwards. "I bet there's a big old treasure chest up there with gold and rubies and all sorts in it. There must be a ladder around here, right? It wouldn't be a very good watchtower

without one." She took off without waiting for a reply, bouncing upwards like an excitable chunk of lightstone.

Treasure hunting was Flicker's favourite pastime. It was why they were in a lonely, storm-battered watchtower in the dead of night when anyone sensible would be tucked up safely in bed. She was like an overly talkative magpie, with an eye for anything that glittered or shone. Kurt had never really understood her obsession with the various trinkets they picked up around Bastion, but they fetched a good price at the local markets and kept Kurt fed, which he liked very much.

They weren't thieves: Flicker had made that much clear to him on their first day together. They were scavengers, sifting through the remnants of Old Bastion in the hope of unearthing some long-forgotten treasure that would buy them their Everhome: a place where they could live safely together, free from Bastion's many perils and prejudices. For Kurt, this was just a pleasant daydream he could lose himself in whenever they had a tough day, but for Flicker it was something more tangible, more real. And maybe, Kurt thought, one day she would find what she was looking for – for both of them.

"Found it!" Flicker shouted down from the first-floor landing.

"Found what?" Kurt frowned.

"The ladder, silly," she replied, lowering it down. "It was buried under a pile of junk. Now, chop-chop: it's a long way up. You'd better start climbing."

Kurt took hold of the rickety ladder and tried not to

notice it shuddering beneath his weight. He had always hated heights, which seemed silly given how high they already were, but something about being so far from the soothing softness of the earth really riled Kurt's inner-mushroom.

He took a deep breath and started climbing. *I'm doing this for Flicker,* he reminded himself. She had saved his skin more than once this past year. So what if the thought of climbing this ancient watchtower made him quiver like a nervous kitten in an earthquake? It was the least he could do for his friend.

As they moved upwards, Flicker flew into each and every doorway they passed. "There's a bedroom in here," she observed, "and a kitchen in here. Isn't that weird? It's like an ordinary home, only every room's built above the last. How did they carry their food around? Did they have to balance a piping-hot bowl of soup on their head as they went up the ladder?"

Kurt tuned her out and focused on putting one foot above the other. When climbing ladders, he knew there was only one rule: *don't look down*. He also knew that the moment he thought about *not* looking down was when he would immediately *have* to look down, so it was probably best to get it over with now.

"What're you doing?" Flicker asked. "You've stopped."

"High," Kurt gasped, "so high…" He hadn't realised how far they had already climbed.

"You are such a scaredy-shroom!" Flicker cried, taking hold of his hand. "You just have to take it one step at a

time. Put your left hand here…" She pulled it up a rung. "…and your left leg here…" She moved his leg. "…and before you know it…" She lifted his other hand. "… you're moving again!"

She was right. It was easy. So easy. All he had to do was not look down.

"Aw, c'mon Kurt!" Flicker groaned. "Just close your eyes, will you?"

They made it to the top eventually, Flicker pushing open an old wooden hatch while Kurt kept his eyes squeezed shut. She guided him off the ladder and onto the lookout platform above, where the wind was howling like a heartbroken wolf. Kurt opened his eyes again and his world lurched violently to the side. They were higher than they had any right to be, above the great billowing clouds, on a rickety column of wood and lightstone, with the elements battling all around them.

Kurt shook his head and started back down the ladder. "No, thank you."

"Stop being a cowardly chanterelle," Flicker chided, grabbing his hand. "You're perfectly safe. There are barriers all the way around the platform. You aren't going to fall." She let go and flew off. "You can climb back down if you like, but I'm going to find some treasure."

For a fraction of a fractious second, Kurt considered going back down the ladder alone, then he took a deep breath and stepped back onto the platform. In the moonlight, he could still see the Brink far below, calling out to him like a distant friend, and he would give

any amount of undiscovered treasure to be back down there and not at the top of this terrifyingly tall, creaking watchtower.

"Keep your eye on the horizon," Flicker advised. "It helps whenever I feel queasy."

"How do you know I feel queasy?" Kurt tried to put on a brave face, but it slipped right off again.

"Because the spots on your cap have turned vomit-coloured," Flicker told him. "Look, just brace yourself here until I've finished looking, okay?"

Kurt nodded and leant against the metal barrier at the edge of the platform. He had no idea how Flicker was staying so calm. The view was enough to unlevel even the most level-headed person, and Kurt was about as level as a sand dune at the best of times. "Find anything?" he hollered.

"Not yet." Flicker was rummaging through boxes under a tattered tarpaulin at the back of the platform. "But I'm getting close, I know it!"

"Uh-huh." Kurt gripped the barrier with shaking hands. "Hey, Flick?" he called out, his voice two octaves higher than he'd intended. "Do you think there's anywhere else out there?"

"What do you mean 'out there'?" Flicker's rummaging sounded more impatient.

"Out *there*…" Kurt, reluctant to release the barrier, inclined his head towards the horizon. "Beyond the wind and the wall and the nothingness of it all. Do you think there's any other place?"

"No." Flicker tutted. "I think that's the whole point in us

being the last country in the world, Kurt. There's nowhere else out there. Just a whole lot of forgotten memories sunk far beneath the sea."

"Okay." Kurt tried to hide his disappointment. He kept his gaze fixed on the horizon, but in his mind he was far away, picturing the wild, untamed lands that had fallen to the flood.

Behind him, Flicker let out an excited yelp as a stack of old copper goblets tumbled out from one of the crates. "Jackpot!" she exclaimed. "Help me get these into a bag."

"In a minute," Kurt mumbled, distracted. "I was just thinking about all the places we could've known if things had been different. It's kind of sad, isn't it? Lonely, even."

"I guess, but at least we've got each other. That's all I need." She paused her rummaging for a moment. "Well, that and treasure."

Kurt was about to agree when out amongst the ocean of clouds something caught his eye. "What's that?" he asked, pointing towards a tiny silhouette dipping above and below the horizon line.

Flicker flew over to join him at the edge of the watchtower. "I'm not sure. A bird, maybe?"

"Why is it flying so far from land?" Kurt wondered, as the shape vanished behind a big black thundercloud. "There's nothing for it out there."

"Maybe it got lost and can't find its way home," Flicker suggested. "It'd better be quick about it, though. There's a storm rolling in."

"It's flying so strangely," Kurt said, as the mysterious shape rose and fell faster than a short-lived civilisation. "Almost like it's running out of energy."

"No wonder. To be that far out, it must've flown for hours."

"It's getting closer. I've never seen a bird fly this fast before." The mysterious object was drawing nearer by the second, and Kurt could make out two mighty wings being buffeted by the wind, fighting to keep the shadowy silhouette above the clouds. "It's absolutely enormous, Flick!"

"That's not a bird," Flicker gasped, its shape finally becoming clear. "That's a … that's a … Oh, what's the word for it again? A plane!"

"A plane?" Kurt had no idea what a plane was or what it looked like, he just knew that he was afraid of it.

"Humans used to fly them," Flicker explained, "but aeroplanes haven't been seen for centuries. No one in Bastion would even know how to build one."

The enormity of what Kurt was seeing began to sink in. "So, that means…"

Flicker finished his thought: "Whoever is flying that plane isn't from Bastion at all. They have to be from out there." She gestured wildly beyond the clouds. "From *outside*."



"SKIES BELOW!" KURT GASPED, HIS FEET DANGLING JUST ABOVE THE CLOUDS.

"UH, GUYS?" HE CALLED UPWARDS. "A LITTLE HELP HERE?"

In a far-off flooded future, there is a country that floats above the clouds. But this sparkling magical island is now in deadly danger.

Can Kurt (an eight-foot mushroom with a fear of heights), Flicker (a tiny, tough-talking gemstone faerie) and a brave gang of misfits save their home from crashing into the Endless Sea?

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