Chapter 21
Battle of the Fwanix

We made sure that Ms. Sykes and Junia stayed well hidden in the stairwell. Ivan said it over and over to them, "stay off the roof." I mean, we were pretty sure that humans couldn't see the Fwanix clouds, but what if the clouds could suddenly, after the business with Mr. Rose, see humans? What if one decided to suck up Junia or her mother just for fun? We had our spell, we had our wishing sticks, we had our shimmerbugs. We all agreed, though, that the shimmerbugs should stay inside our spellbags. Alert for spell luck, but we thought it too risky to have them out spinning around close to the clouds. For once, none of them protested. I think the shimmerbugs were as frightened of the clouds as we were.

From the rooftop stairwell, we took turns peering out. Through the tiny window in the steel door, we could easily see the Fwanix clouds circling and chomping and so we asked Junia what she saw. When it was her turn, she looked this way and that, twisted her mouth around and said, "big, black cloud."

"Shhh," Ivan shushed her. "Whisper, please. They'll hear us."

Junia looked at us like we were crazier than ever, but she was getting used to our particular kind of crazy, I think, because she didn't argue with us at all.

"Okay," Ivan said. "Make sure you leave the door open and hold onto the rope. Really tight."

Ms. Sykes helped us wrap a thick rope around our waists, one after the other in a chain. Ivan in the lead, then Fornier, then me. "The most important comes last," she whispered in my ear as she tied, though I hadn't complained about my position. Last was fine with me. When we had asked for the rope, Ms. Sykes had rummaged through the supply closet, but found nothing of use other than some thin twine. We thought of magicking a rope, but Ivan had many concerns

about that, and I think he was right. What if the Fwanix had powers we didn't know about? What if the battle took more than thirty minutes? And most importantly, we needed all our strength for the fight. Ms. Sykes went out to what she called a hardware store and came back with a super-sturdy rope I would have never thought to whip up.

Ms. Sykes made some impressive-looking knots around our waists, leaving five or six feet between us. "My father taught me how to sail," she said. Whatever that meant, we felt more secure having the line on us.

"Sailors use a lot of knots," Junia explained.

"Ready?" Ivan asked. Fornier and I nodded, but I have to say, Fornier looked as worried as I felt. Ivan, though, trudged right ahead. "Wishing sticks at the ready," he said. "Shimmerbugs on alert!"

Then he opened the door, and the battle began.

The winds felt as dizzying as when we had been thrown about in the portal. The Fwanix spotted us immediately and roared in our ears, trying hard to separate us and suck us up before we could orient ourselves. We clung to our wishing sticks, which we had taped securely to our hands. Junia had also thought to secure our spellbags to our bodies with a thick silver tape. She had wound the tape around and around our waists and over the openings of our spellbags so the shimmerbugs couldn't be sucked out. And thank the lucky dragonflies she had, because anything that was not secure would have gone whipping up into the clouds.

The Fwanix—there must have been twenty-five of them now—bent down and bared their giant cloud teeth to us that were terrifying, though made of mist. Their empty, dark mouths let out a terrible stench that made us want to hold our breath. We huddled close to each other, locking arms, rope tangling beneath our feet as the clouds attacked from all sides.

Ivan, exhaling, shouted, “Go!”

We dropped arms and immediately got whipped apart. The rope held us taut, though, as we raised our wishing sticks to the clouds. I looked back to see Junia and her mother yanking hard on the line. They might not have been able to see the Fwanix, but they sure could feel the effects of them on us. How strange that must have looked, us bending and swaying as we were beat from every side by brutal winds.

My wishing stick felt like it was trying to leap from my hand, though I gripped it hard. The tape itself yanked against my skin, tearing the little hairs on the back of my hand. A scream tore from Ivan as his body looked like it might be pulled right out of the rope circle. He held fast with his free hand. “Quick,” he yelled, his back to the clouds, his body being yanked up.

Ivan lifted into the air and the tension from the suction looked like it might snap the rope. He was nearly inside one of the cloud’s mouths when Fornier reached up and held onto Ivan by the scruff of his shirt.

“Hands up,” I screamed, nearly gagging on the stench.

All three of us pointed to the cloud, Ivan floating, legs yanked out towards the clouds. One of his felt moccasins flew off and into the mouth of the nearest clouds. Even in his suctioned state Ivan joined us as we chanted over and over, “*mistana mex, mistana mex, mistana mex, mistana mex*.”

The Fwanix did not go easily. At the first chant, they reared back, as if struck, but then came back, rocking us, dropping Ivan and knocking each of us off our feet. We stumbled and fell, stood up and kept chanting. One after the other of us fell until at one point I felt the whole rope go slack. We sat in a pile, weakened, but still chanting as we began to slide across the roof. I looked back to see Ms. Sykes and Junia grabbing at the line, making sure it didn’t slip from

where we had anchored it. One cloud swooped down to suck at them, but neither of them were affected. They simply yanked the rope tight again and stopped our slide. They stood now in the open, holding fast, watching our invisible battle. We must have looked like a bunch of crazy monkeys about to make a jailbreak.

We kept up our chant until, little by little, the clouds dispelled. We must have said the words a hundred times before they all disappeared. We stood, exhausted and bruised, ropes slack around our waists, shimmerbugs wiggling to come out, looking around for Mr. Rose, who we assumed had been controlling the Fwanix. Those clouds, from what I remembered, simply did not exist on their own. They had to be conjured. But for now, they were beat back. Mr. Rose had retreated. But now, he knew where we were.