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## High Flight & Flames

Kate Coe

**In memory of that surge of fierce anger when my city was attacked.**

And for my invaluable proofreader and beloved Aunt, who always has a warm fire and a ready supply of dinner and cake when I need writing time, and falls asleep over my drafts.

The land of Quorl is under attack. S'ian, badly injured when her Glider crashed is trapped in a city under siege. Meanwhile out on the plains, Toru is desperately defending his own city and people from the advancing enemy. The fighting is no longer between men: a battle for the air has started, and new weapons force both sides into desperate measures. Even if Toru succeeds in pushing the enemy back from Meton, what will the cost be? Can Toru reconcile his duty to his country with his own dreams?

## Chapter 1: Meton

"And what makes you think they're ready to move out?" Lord Idalin asked at his most gruff, glaring down the sunlit table.

Sitting down the other end of the table, Toru Idalin remained entirely unruffled, leaning back in his chair and meeting his father's gaze coolly. "One, the monsters have all been brought round from the harbour to the land gate. That suggests that they are not going to be used to attack Aleric, and the land gate suggests they will be heading for us."

"They're the metal...things?" Akia asked, looking up from her notes. "The ones that run on steam?"

"We think they do," Toru corrected. "We'll need to get closer to check."

"Not too close," General Ziana said sharply, knowing Toru's penchant for danger.

"Two," Toru continued with a grin for Ziana, "the attacks on Aleric have pretty much ceased. There have been no attacks on the third level for two days."

"That's not an indication that they've stopped trying to take Aleric," Ziana said. "I know the attacks were very frequent, but it could just be a lull."

"Three, the majority of the soldiers in the fourth level have moved out," Toru said. "They're at the land gate too, along with supplies. They've got what they want with the harbour and fourth level, and they haven't broken the city in the first six days. They may as well starve them out now, and attack us."

"We could at least start making preparations," Jan said quietly from the far side of the table. "Deploying our soldiers out into the countryside will not unduly affect us."

"It will if I need them here," Ziana said.

"The spark net should take care of the Pass," Rus said. "It's ready to go live."

"Toru and I will take care of that," Ziana said, indicating that Akia should note it. "All right, if we ensure that the pass is blocked, I will agree to the deployment of the forward lines."

"I think," Jan said, still in his quiet tone, "that the movement of the monsters will be the indicator. They are not going to be any use against a cliff, so cannot be used against Meton or Aleric. They will be using them to push through any opposition we place on the road."

Toru was nodding, and Ziana gave a brief nod of agreement. "Toru, I want as much news from Aleric as S'ian can give, and I want you and your scouts to...well, scout, as often as possible. I want to know what's happening with the soldiers and the monsters. And no dramatics," she added firmly.

Toru's brown eyes looked into hers with utter innocence. "I never intend to be dramatic, Ziana."

"It just happens," Aiden commented sourly. "When are we checking the spark net?"

"I've got a few things to take care of first," Ziana said.

It was nearing midday when Jan, Toru and Ziana had headed out to the pass to check on the progress of the spark net. The climbers had got higher than anyone had thought they could, and the top of the net was strung at least ten heights up the rocky walls. From the thick cable, twisted copper hung down and was interwoven with more copper, tied securely into a net. The holes had been designed to be a little way apart, using the least copper possible for the greatest coverage.

"What does it do?" Jan asked after Toru had carefully pushed a large wooden handle into a box sited further back along the pass and then walked forward to join them again.

"This," Ziana said, and threw a chunk of meat that they had brought along to demonstrate. The lump hit the copper at head height; there was a flash of blue and a sizzling noise, and the meat thumped on the ground. Ziana pulled it towards them with a stick, careful not to touch the copper, and handed it to Jan.

He turned it over in his hands. There was a scorch mark along one side, and the meat was almost cooked through. "Will it do this to people?"

"Oh yes," Toru said grimly. "We've set the cables for the spark this side, so they can't cut them. Even if they get higher than our climbers, they've still got to find out how to stop the spark getting through, and I'm going to leave a few men here to stop anyone who does get past the net. They can't touch the net to break it on that side – we made sure the spark is enough that it will go through most things, including glass. They'd have to have a really thick piece not to get burned, and that will take them time. The pass is blocked as long as that handle's down."

Jan looked at the net again. It looked beautiful; the copper was shining in the sunlight, brilliant red against the dark rock of the pass walls. Men would try to get through, and they would burn. He shivered. "It's a horrible weapon."

"Yes," Ziana said. "But it works."

"Is the net in place?" Rus asked when they arrived back at the castle.

"All set," Ziana said. "Report?"

"Mage Wike scouted and reported that nothing's moving yet on the road. The soldiers are ready to move out if you're satisfied."

Ziana nodded. "All right, dispatch them. I'll inform Lord Idalin."

As Rus headed off, she turned to Toru. "Any updates?"

"Nothing that you haven't heard. She's still injured from the crash, so I haven't got any news."

Ziana's mouth tightened. "That's frustrating. We need to know when those monsters move."

"She couldn't be on watch the whole time even when she was better," Toru said acidly. "I'll take the next scouting shift anyway."

Ziana nodded. "Do you want a spotter?" Anticipating the next question, she added, "I need Jan here. We've got defences to plan."

"Then no, if you just want an overview."

"Don't do anything stupid," Ziana said as she turned to leave, with Jan wheeling himself in beside her with a nod for Toru.

Toru felt the familiar drop in his stomach as the Fliyer fell off the edge of the cliff and deftly tweaked the vortex under each wing to lift the Fliyer before it could fall too far. As it rose towards the mountains, he swung the nose and shot round the cliff, following the road.

The land below was the same as it ever was; green, split between open moorland, forests and the scattered farms. The roads were quieter; the flood of refugees had slowed and it was mostly farmers on the roads. But as he got closer to Aleric, he spotted a mass up ahead.

The first thing to strike him was the smoke. Black and sooty, it was rising so thickly that it was masking the view of the city behind it. Toru swooped lower and saw the monsters ahead. They were massed just outside the city gate with their huge wheels turning slowly as the smoke drove them round. Men, looking tiny against the metal, were fussing around the wheels.

Toru gave the cloud of rising smoke a wide berth and flew over the city. One other Glider was up, and he waved to the pilot, Dakan, before heading down over the Harbour. It didn't look as if there were any further Monsters, and he turned the Fliyer back to the road again, trying to forget what the broken city had looked like before the attack.

As he swooped over for the second time, the monsters were beginning to move out; they were slowly filing along the road with the fussing people gradually forming a trickle behind them. Behind the rolling metal beasts, bodies of men were moving, clutching weapons and baggage.

Toru dropped lower on the way back, examining the land that lay ahead of the Ziricon army. The road to the bridge was mostly flat, but after that it began to dip and twist as it passed through farmland and woods. Toru knew that Ziana had rejected suggestions of destroying or blocking the bridge and planned to focus on delaying the Ziricon army through the land. Toru nodded to himself

as he flew over. They wouldn't be able to reach the bridge, but the engineers had some ideas for weapons that would deploy quite well in the open farmland.

As he neared Meton again, he spotted the first bodies of soldiers coming out from the city and dropped down to wave at them. Most waved back, cheerfully hauling weapons along with them. Their supplies would come on wagons behind them; Ziana insisted on mobility before anything else and had pointed out that supplying the soldiers from Meton meant that they could carry more weapons.

And then the cliff was ahead, and Toru shot upwards along the cliff face as he approached the courtyard to land.

He had only just leapt out of the Fliyer and began to strip his flying clothes when Aiden, followed by two others, approached him.

"Toru," Aiden said, "these Mages have just arrived from Aleric with the last of the refugees."

Toru bowed. "Toru Idalin, Fifth level Air."

The dark-haired woman bowed back, pulling up her sleeve to reveal her tattoos. "Mage Miva, Fourth level Air."

"Hod," the taciturn man next to her said shortly but held out a hand. "Fourth level Air."

"We were told you wanted Air Mages," Miva said as Toru shook Hod's hand. "There are seven of us in total, but we are the only Airs."

"I do need you," Toru said, feeling his hands shaking from backlash and determinedly ignoring the headache. "Aiden, can you get the Mages settled? I have to report to Ziana. The monsters are finally moving."

"Oh, good," Ziana said when he put his head around her door. "I'll start putting things in motion here. Aiden had some Mages..."

"I'm going to deal with that now," Toru said and escaped again.

Hod and Miva were being shown around the sheds by Anold when Toru arrived back at a run. "Who else have we got, Aiden? Alenna's asked for any Fires we have, and..."

"Two Fires, one Earth, two Waters," Aiden said. "Does she want the Earth too?"

"If she's willing. Apparently it helps with identifying materials."

Aiden nodded. "I'll go and sort that. Mages," he added, bowing to Hod and Miva, and headed back to the castle.

"Have you met everyone?" Toru asked.

"We've only just got here," Miva said frankly. "The Fliyers are fascinating."

"How are you both with heights?"

"We are both from Taderah," Miva said with a faint lift of her eyebrows. The Mages' centre was situated in a huge forest, the rooms built into the tops of trees. Standing at the tip of the canopy was like looking over a rippling green sea. Any Mage from Taderah would be able to cope with heights, or at least the height from the canopy to the forest floor. "You want us to fly?"

"Yes," Toru said simply. "We've only got the one Fliyer at the moment because it needs quite a lot of power, and everyone else uses the Gliders." He gestured to the elegant sets of wings that were haphazardly hanging from the ceiling. "If you're both fourths, you should be able to fly a Fliyer. Anold, can we..."

"Already on it, Toru," Anold said from the other side of the workshop. "Yours will get evicted shortly."

Toru grinned. "Will you be happy flying?"

Miva nodded. "Anything I can do to help, I will."

Hod nodded in turn with his eyes still on the Fliyer, examining it with interest. Toru grinned. "I'll introduce you to the rest of the scouts, and then let's go flying."

Only two of the scouts were sitting in the corner that had been set up in the sheds for the Air Mages. Meton's Mage complement had tripled due to the refugees, and although there was enough room in the Mage's centre and castle for everyone to sleep, the scouts preferred to spend their time in the relatively spacious sheds, helping with the new builds and mending their own Gliders in between sleeping.

Wike had recovered from his early-morning scouting and glanced up as Toru walked in. "Afternoon," he said through a mouthful of bread. "Anything happening?"

"Monsters are moving."

Wike nodded and stood, bowing formally to both Mages. "Wike, Second level Air."

Kin looked up from her scroll long enough to say, "First level Air."

"The other scouts are Tollie and Bonri," Toru said. "Both Firsts. Ziana, our General, wanted scouts as a priority and the Gliders are easy enough to fly."

"How about Fliyers, then?" Miva asked.

"Attack," Toru said, showing his teeth. "They're slower but more stable, and they can carry things. Alenna's making progress on potions that we can drop."

Hod's eyes turned back to the Fliyer, and he nodded. "Let's start."