

## Chapter 19

### Beast of Burden

Silver Sky woke up several hours later feeling warm and dry, but very, very sore. The sun was still high in the sky, as it tends to do during the long Alaska spring and summer days. Grudgingly, he stood up, though his legs protested the move.

He looked around for Rebecca, and saw her fast asleep in the tall grasses near the river, still clutching tightly to a clump of his tail hairs. She looked deathly pale, and as he nudged her with his nose, she felt frightfully cold. She let out a soft groan as Silver Sky prodded her.

Opening her eyes, Rebecca felt as though she were being stabbed by the light. She squinted, trying to block out as much as she could, but still see. She felt dizzy and weak. Trying to speak, it seemed no sound would come out. She sunk back into the grass, wishing sleep would take over again. Had they made it through the water, just so she could die here? Everything hurt. Her empty stomach churned and her head pounded.

Silver Sky was becoming increasingly worried. Something was obviously wrong with Rebecca. He needed to get her up and to Joe. Joe, he hoped, would know what to do. But how was he to get her there? It seemed likely that she could not walk the remaining distance like this. He nudged her again, hoping it would prompt her to try and stand. All it did was elicit another moan.

He kneeled down beside the little girl. "You need to get up, dearest," he whispered. "I can't lift you up. No thumbs, remember?" But Rebecca did not respond.

Rebecca could hear Silver Sky clearly enough. Every sound rang in her head like a bell. It was just that it felt like the effort to escape the water had sapped every last ounce of strength from her. She was deeply frightened, which only seemed to increase her exhaustion. Not knowing what else to do, she felt she needed to talk. She needed to tell Silver Sky the truth. She needed, she thought, to do it now in case there was no later.

She tried to open her eyes again, seeing Silver Sky's giant nose right in her face. She wanted to laugh, but that hurt to. "I need to say something," she tried her best to say, but it mostly came out as a squeak.

"Not now, dearest. We need to get you to Joe. But I need your help getting you on my back," said Silver Sky, more pleased than worried at Rebecca's sudden attempt to talk.

"No. Listen," she squeaked some more, but the words just were not coming out well, and she felt herself weakening again.

Silver Sky gripped the back of her dress in his teeth and attempted to pull her onto his back. It was clumsy, but it got her closer to where he needed her. If only she would help, or at least hold on, he thought. What could she possibly want to talk about at a time like this?

"Save your talk for later. Just hold on while I try to stand up," he instructed.

Rebecca tried to protest, but felt Silver Sky's muscles tense up as he started to stand. She held on as best she could, only to find herself draped over his back like a sack. It was not a comfortable position, all things considered. Too weak to move herself into a better spot, she slowly slipped out of consciousness once more.

Silver Sky started out slowly. Rebecca did not feel well balanced, and she was making no attempt to right herself on his back. That worried him considerably, but he knew he had to make good time towards the village.

Occasionally, he could hear her muttering to herself, as though half asleep. She still felt very cold on his back as he walked along the river bank. He gave up on figuring out what time it was and decided he would just keep walking until either his hooves gave out, or he found the village. Mostly, he

just hoped the sun would stay high in the sky and warm his friend.

From time to time, out of the corner of his eye, he could swear he saw something moving in the trees. It seemed like a red blur. Maybe he was seeing things. His muscles still ached, and his imagination was prone to wander without Rebecca's conversation to keep him occupied. He paused and looked into the trees. "Nope, nothing," he thought and continued his steady pace.

An hour or so later, he thought he saw it again. He stopped and once more stared off into the trees. This time, however, he spotted an unmistakable bushy red tail. Something was following them.

"Come out here!" shouted Silver Sky.

The tail twitched and swished out of site behind a tree. Whatever it was apparently did not want to be seen.

Silver Sky stomped in frustration, nearly sending Rebecca tumbling off his back. She muttered something inaudible and quickly fell back asleep.

"I said come out here!" again shouted the horse, growing increasingly frustrated.

Out of trees slunk a red fox, his head held low like a scolded school boy. His tail dragged the ground.

"More of you. Always more of you," it grumbled as it approached Silver Sky cautiously. "Why does it yell, and what does it have on its back?" asked the fox.

"I'm sorry for yelling, but why are you following us?" asked Silver Sky, trying to get his patience back.

"We're following them because we were told to," replied the fox. "She's hurt. Does he know?" he added, sniffing towards Rebecca and quickly jumping away as though she might reach out and grab him.

"Yes, *I* know," responded the horse, impatiently. Silver Sky started to walk again, hoping this nuisance would go away.

"She needs help. He can't give it and neither can we," the fox said following closely behind. His ears twitched as though he were hearing things Silver Sky couldn't.

"I know, that's why we're headed for the village," grumbled Silver Sky.

"Oh, *The Village*. There are lots of villages around here. This one must be special," the fox went on. "Perhaps we can show them the right one," he stated.

Silver Sky thought about that a moment. What if they went to the wrong one. Wolf had not indicated there might be more than one.

"Wolf said that the village we're looking for is at the end of this river," Silver Sky stated.

"Wolf, huh? What does Wolf know?" questioned the fox.

They walked on in silence, with the fox following Silver Sky closely, keeping an eye on the sick little girl. From time to time, he would sprint up to the front and look ahead, like an uninvited scout, making sure the path ahead was safe.

It was several hours later when the fox returned from one of these scouting missions and proclaimed that they were very close to the village. Rebecca had not made a sound in quite some time and Silver Sky was increasingly worried. He tried to hurry up, but that only jostled Rebecca around and put her in danger of falling off his back.

The fox gave Rebecca a worried sniff and sprinted down the trail and was quickly out of sight. "Now he leaves?" grumped Silver Sky, trying his best to keep Rebecca from falling while maintaining as quick a pace as he could.

The day was drawing to a close as he walked. While the sun barely set at this time of year, it was threatening to drop behind mountains in the distance. He worried that Rebecca would get colder.

It was nearly an hour later that he could swear he heard voices. He stopped and listened. Out of the bushes, emerged the fox again.

"They should come this way," he hurriedly instructed.

Silver Sky followed the fox and found himself surrounded by several people. A woman

approached him.

"It's ok. We know who you are, and we're here to help," she said. She approached Silver Sky and gently pulled Rebecca from his back, wrapping her in a blanket.

"Follow me," she instructed, leading Silver Sky beneath a giant, wrought-iron gate.

As he walked beneath the arches of the gate, he looked up. "All Welcome Here" proclaimed rusty iron letters on the gate.