

Never
Fear a new journey.

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BEYOND THE CLIFF & COURAGE

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Beyond The Cliff & Courage



Vanessa Bettencourt

Lost Valley Series



*For my husband J...
for his patience and support,
wisdom and honesty.*

*For making all my dreams
come true, zəzəhuwe Shna.*

BOOK ONE

Two Rivers City





Lies and Goodbyes

Aion tested the strength of his four brand-new belts. They were made of strong leather and had cost him all his savings. He wore one around his chest under his long coat, constricting his brand-new wings to his back.

Then he wore the rest on top of his long coat to make sure the wings would stay contained and imperceptible to anyone's eyes, especially to his father. Just to be certain, he wore a second belt around his waist and two more across his chest from his shoulders to his waist.

He looked in the mirror from every possible angle, and checked every buckle one last time.

They were probably his most valuable possession, but they were worth it.

"Very sturdy, no doubt," Aion quoted the craftsbug. "Made to weather the elements. They will even outlast you..."

He filled his chest with air and flexed his four arms, puffing up what muscles he had. His antennae vibrated, but his wings stayed invisible and still under his coat without giving him away.

"Something I could rely on for life, he said..." Aion whispered, staring at the mirror for a bit. "Well, we shall see..."

The front door banged shut. Aion jumped, and his heart skipped a beat. His father must have forgotten something.

Aion glanced to his bedroom door, then back to the mirror. *If Father sees all these belts at once, he'll know something's up.*

Aion fought to open the outermost belts quickly, stuffed them into his almost full traveling backpack like fighting uncoordinated snakes, then kicked the half-closed bag under his bed. He buttoned his long coat from top to bottom, then waited.

The front door banged again soon after, louder this time, and then

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the front gate squealed shut.

Aion peeked from his attic window and saw his father hurrying to the main square nearby, where Aion should have already been helping for the past hour, at least.

Aion allowed himself to breathe again. He took a good long look in the mirror to check his back one last time, then another look about the small attic room he had lived in for the past year.

Confident he hadn't missed anything, he pulled his backpack from under his bed, struggled with its buttons until they closed, and then hurried to join the party preparations.

Many citizens of Two Rivers City had already gathered in the middle of the city square when Aion arrived.

It was to be the most anticipated celebration the city had ever witnessed, and all the most important bugs of the most important families were already there. Mostly they were short and robust, with round bellies and sticks for legs, all wearing their best clothing and all the





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jewelry they owned.

Tores, one of the counselors who advised Aion's father, was tapping the microphone, looking about nervously at the unfinished preparations. Worker bugs struggled to place trestle tables among the gathered guests, and servers were finding half their plates empty before they reached the buffet.

"Welcome, welcome..." the microphone boomed then squealed. Bugs covered their ears, and Counselor Tores eyed the engineer crossly.

"Welcome, one and all, to Two Rivers City's inaugural... inauguration ceremony," Tores continued as the sound righted itself. "If you will all step a bit closer while the workers... finish their tasks..."



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The guests remained reluctant to follow his requests. Most had at least half of their eyes and antennae on the appetizers being set, bowls full of juicy boysenberries and three colorful flavors of the freshest spring leaves.

Aion looked about to be certain that neither his father nor Professor Twig were in sight.

Aion had worked hard in the days leading up to the event, helping to plan the entertainment and give a hand to the merchants, craftsbugs and workers responsible for all the stalls, stands and stages needed for the inauguration and its fair.

His main task of the day, it had been decided, was to make certain the tables stayed replenished with food.

He ducked under the largest table with his backpack, half of his body shielded by the tablecloth and the rest sticking out. He

unbuttoned his pack with a long sigh. His eyes skimmed the supplies quickly as he carefully considered what he could leave behind to make room for food. First he pulled out the rope with one hand, then his bundle of spare socks with another, then a very old copy of a survival manual – he had borrowed this from Professor Twig’s shelves – and finally, with his last free hand, he grabbed the sunscreen.

After barely a



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moment's thought, he abandoned the last beside the bag, then eyed the crates of extra food stored all about him.

"That will make space for some dry fruit, maybe... not much," he considered.

He glanced back into the bag. "I can't leave the belts... or my slingshot..."

Aion hesitated between the manual and the rope. He knew he could always

use the rope in any number of situations, but then he'd probably need the book to remind him what and how.

Finally, he discarded the large pack of extra socks instead and stuffed both essential items back into the bag along with a box of juicy berries. He was about to close his bag when someone tapped on his foot.

Aion crawled quickly from under the table and stood at attention before a tall dragonfly girl carrying a walky talky. She was frowning at a plump bug standing by the table stuffing his mouth with both hands.

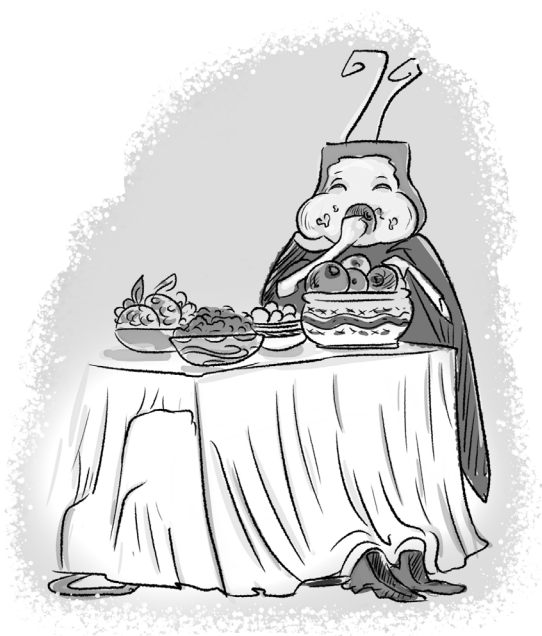
"Wood'ya haf mor'ovthese?" The stink bug pointed his antennae at the purple berries.

She ignored him and stretched the walky talky to Aion.

"Aion, right? Professor Twig wants to talk to you." She left to return to other duties as soon as the walky talky was out of her hand, without even looking back.

"Aion, here. Over," Aion said impatiently, eying the stink bug.

"So it's over?" Professor Twig's voice grew anxious. "We haven't yet arrived."



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“What is over?” Aion answered. “Over.”

“This is no time for philosophical meanderings, Aion. I mean the speech. The Governor and I are nearly there.”

“Oh, the speech...” Aion looked away quickly to the promenade where his father and his attendants would approach the square. He hoped they were not too close just yet.

When Aion turned around again, the stink bug had stepped closer to Aion. Behind him, a dozen other bugs were now devouring the food passionately. “Well, do’ya? These are very tasty. Do’ya have more?”

Of course they were tasty. They were brought from the best pantry in the city. Aion had made sure of it, though his father certainly would never have approved the emptying of his own larder, and would be very upset when he learned.

Aion thought this might help distract the guests from his own plans. It seemed to be working.

“No, sorry,” he answered the bug.

“No?” Professor Twig said immediately from the other side.

“No, no, no... I mean, yes,” Aion ducked again to get more privacy. “The speech is done, Professor. Don’t worry. It’s over... I mean done. Almost over now. Over.”

Aion frowned, now as confused as Professor Twig probably was on the other side.

It will all be over soon, Aion thought.

He pulled his pack from under the table and slung it over his shoulders. He felt safer having the extra weight on his wings, at least until he could buckle the other belts again.

He looked about for a good exit – saw a shortcut between the daisy bushes that few used. As casually as possible, he walked towards it.

“Aion!” one of the Bee Sisters half walked, half flew to catch up with him. “There you are!” She pulled up the large goggles from her eyes to look straight into his. “I know what you’re up to.”

“W-what?” Aion’s antennae curled up and down.

“I won’t have it. This has been a three bee show for a long time, and it will continue to be.”

“What do you mean?”

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“I can’t find my sisters. Are they trying to do this new stunt without me? They know I’m the best, and I’m the one who came up with the colored smoke. Where are they? Isn’t the show about to start?”

Aion stretched one of his arms quickly to point in the right direction.

“They’re by the souvenir stands,” Aion breathed a sigh of relief. “Right behind the new statue. Oh, that’s right... you weren’t there. We had to move all of your equipment last night. They weren’t trying to go behind your back, I’m sure of it.”

“I hope you’re right,” the bee quickly buzzed away. “We’ll see...”

Aion waited a moment. That might have been Sting or Stripes... he often couldn’t tell them apart. It was not Wendy, definitely. He was pretty sure.



He lingered a bit longer, watching her fly quickly towards the large covered statue, deftly avoiding every bug and obstacle in her path.

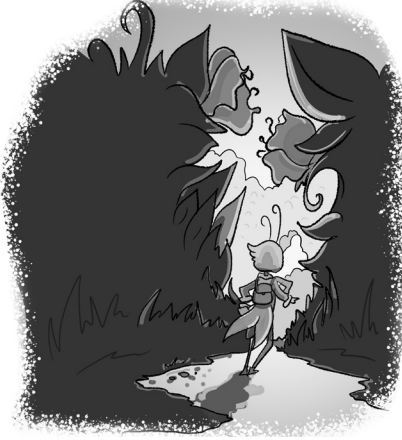
It had taken almost a year to build the statue, and just as much time for the silk worms to make the extravagant crimson cloth now covering it. It stood fully half the height of the great clock tower behind it at the edge of the square.

A year ago, there had been no statue at all, but a schoolhouse. And

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a year ago, to the day, had been the tragedy that left the school in ruins.

All that had been left of the schoolhouse was the rock which had served as its foundation, and it was now the foundation of the statue waiting to be unveiled.



“Now they will see this day as the day my father became their governor,” Aion whispered. “To me, it will always remain a day of mourning.”

“Aion!” And he jolted at Professor Twig’s voice over the walky talky. “We’re nearly there... can you make certain that your fa – well, that Governor Portrio is properly announced?”

In the distance, Aion could just make out the shape of his father, Professor Twig and the Counselors approaching the square.

Aion raised the walky talky and pushed the red button. “I’m on my way, Professor.”

Aion stuffed the walky talky into the side pocket of his pack and turned down the short cut to the road leading out of town.





Memories

In the weeks leading up to the ceremony, Aion's father had approached him frequently about his wings – or rather his lack of them.

"Listen to me, Aion," his father would say. "With your mother gone, you must trust me to know what's best."

"Yes, Father," Aion would nod.

"You're still a pupa, but one day soon, things will... change."

"I understand, Father," Aion had said. "One day, I'll grow wings like you. One day I'll fly..."

"True..." Father hesitated. "On that day..." And he leaned down very close, taking Aion's shoulders in his hands. "On that day you must make certain they are not seen. You must be certain I'm the first to see them. Then you'll have a proper education."

Aion had swallowed heavily and nodded weakly.

"Understand, Aion," Father's voice grew strangely gentle. "It's better not to have them than to have the wrong ones."

"Father..." Aion hesitated. "How can any wings be... wrong?"

"Worry not, Aion. I'll be the judge of that."

Aion had nodded again, and his father had released him to start his work for the day.

"Father..." Aion had stammered.

His father had turned back, raised his eyebrow.

"Father, will my wings be like yours... or Mother's?"

Father had hesitated again, the door half-open. "Remember all I told you, Aion."

And his father had closed the door behind him and left for City Hall.

There was a distant buzzing, now, and Aion looked back over his shoulder to the sky above Two Rivers City.

The event had officially started, beginning with the stunts of Sting, Stripes and Wendy, the acrobatic Bee Sisters. They left trails of colorful

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lines and complicated loops above the guests' heads.

"It looks like the sisters are friends again," Aion nodded.

Aion knew how good they were and how hard they trained to make their show impressive. Even after helping plan their routine for the ceremony, he wasn't really sure how their contraptions worked. The



pollen or smoke or whatever they left lingered in the sky before fading and left a sweet scent for even longer.

"It's a shame I have to miss most of it," Aion sighed, watching them make loops in the sky with their almost-invisible wings. "I'm certain it's their best performance yet."

But Aion had other plans. He had made his choice and was ready – he had gathered just enough courage and enough spare belts to start his journey.

Memories

Thoughtfully, he checked the belts already strapped under his coat.

Beyond the bushes of red and black berries, two of the sister bees – was it Wendy and Sting? – made one of their most daredevil moves. They drew a perfect knot at the top of the clock tower around the building's silhouette.

This made Aion's new wings tingle and twitch, and he swallowed heavily as he pulled his backpack off of his shoulders.

Aion took an extra belt from his pack and looped it over one shoulder, buckling it over his coat. Finally, he took the last belt and did the same for the other shoulder.

"That should do it," Aion muttered to himself. "If anything will."

With another quick look at the sky above Two Rivers City, Aion set off again along the overgrown path. He planned to be as far away as possible before they missed him. That would be close to the end of the ceremony, when Aion was expected to make a brief speech in honor of his father.

By then, he should be well beyond the border of the city, and even the country, where his father's guards would surely not dare to seek him.

But first, Aion had one important stop to make, at the manor where he had once lived with his mother and father, before the tragedy.

"Ivanna will still be there," Aion nodded confidently. "She much prefers to avoid the exaggerated festivities."

It was Ivanna who had given him the idea, anyway, or sort of. She had been his nanny since he could remember, but had become his best friend since the accident.

Even after Aion and his father had moved into the city, Ivanna remained to take care of their former home, and Aion still visited whenever he could to hear her stories of her homeland.

"At the Home Tree, we had festivals like you've never seen." Ivanna's eyes would grow distant, her smile brighten. "It wasn't just ladybugs, of course, and it wasn't just to celebrate any governor or queen. Winter... Harvest... and my favorite was the Spring Festival – everyone would come together in the joy of each new season."

Aion would find himself nodding as he imagined the tree and its people himself.

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“Flower petals would fall from the branches as everyone gathered upon the field about the roots of the tree to welcome the new hatchlings of the tribes. Every bug you can imagine brought their young – Ladybugs and beetles, ants and bees... all gathered about in the bright green field full of flowers.”

“Was everyone welcome?”



Memories



Ivanna nodded thoughtfully. “The queen denied no one, even non-bugs. Birds that once were enemies – pigeons, crows and owls. They were there. Even... even spiders. It didn’t matter how many legs or wings you had... no one ever had to feel... alone.”

“It will be Spring soon...” Aion had said. “I would like to see such a festival.”

“Oh, Aion...” Ivanna’s eyes had focused on him once again. “I should not be filling your head with such stories.” She hesitated. “Please do not mention this to your father. It would only make him...”

Aion nodded. “He doesn’t care about anything outside the city.”

It seemed to have grown darker than Aion expected, and the air was strangely moist.

Wait a minute... Aion looked up and around him. He had been so distracted with his thoughts that he hadn’t realized he had left the main trail.

“Where am I?”

The grass around Aion was thick, and the dandelions stood twice as tall as usual, waving slowly about him, casting deep shadows and muffling any noises from beyond the trail. The green leaves bent with heavy drops of dew, and a strong smell of wet earth announced a recent rain. The silence was unnerving.

“This is the Wild Lands,” he whispered.





The Wild Lands

Aion's antennae were tingling with a bad feeling, and he clutched the belts on his chest nervously. As quietly as he could, he slipped the backpack from his shoulder and opened it to retrieve his slingshot.

He stepped back slowly, then stopped, considering. He couldn't afford to waste any time. He almost considered leaving without Ivanna. But there was one more reason he had to visit the farm.

Aion peered ahead into the gloomy tall grass.

He knew he could cut across the forbidden territory, keep closer to the city boundaries and reach the farm faster this way than by any of the usual tracks.

It might not be the safest path, but it would at least be a way the guards would not be likely to look.

Aion held his breath and crept forward with tiny steps, while his shoulders grew tense and reached the sides of his head.

Soon he was proved wrong. He heard a loud snoring sound from the top of the flowers. Then he recognized the uniform colors of his father's guards.

It was too late to turn back now. Before long, the sisters would finish their routine, and the speeches would begin.

Eleven speeches in all, Aion thought. That should give me a bit more time...

Aion tiptoed. He focused on the sleeping guard while walking slowly along the muddy path to the stream.

The mud caught his boots.

His shoulders twitched slightly, his wings instinctively trying to help pull him out of the muck, but of course the belts held them too tightly.

Instead, Aion lost his balance and fell over into a puddle.

He looked over his shoulder at the sleeping guard, who was luckily

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still snoring.

Aion stood up and wiped the mud off his coat as best he could. His wings still twitched a bit, and the belts chafed against him.

“Surely it’s safe to get rid of one of them,” he decided, unbuckling it from over his coat and stuffing it into one of his larger pockets.

He skimmed the top of the flowers for more nuisances, spotting one other guard sleeping on the petals ahead of him.

He managed to tiptoe past without any more unfortunate puddle incidents. Soon the path narrowed as the grass overtook the muddy path.

Aion was a small bug, so he appreciated the tall grass to hide in. He pushed the stems aside and held his breath as he walked. His heart raced with all the memories of his father’s horrible stories told about the Wild Lands, the monsters within, and how those who visited it never came out.

“So... why are Father’s guards here now?” Aion wondered quietly.



The Wild Lands

They were not so much guarding as carelessly asleep on the flower-tops. “The danger can’t be *too* great, I suppose.”

One more step and he felt a strange tingling at the tip of his left antenna. It touched something, and a droplet of water shook loose in the air before him, then met several others as it slid down an almost invisible string.

It seemed to be a net of sorts, and more and more raindrops trailed from the corners and grew together as they neared the center, getting dangerously large.

Aion pushed himself away from the net, and droplets bombarded the floor among the flowers. His antenna was free, but now his arm was stuck to the sticky wet strands.

Somehow, Aion knew he shouldn’t shake the net again, but he had to get free.

He put a boot to the string to pull his arm free. He limped back, his arm now wet but unstuck, only to find his foot bare. His boot danced up and down in the air before him, making the rest of the strings vibrate intensely.

Aion hopped back a bit more to have a better look at the magnificent network.

Now that he could see all the raindrops shaking, glistening and falling, he could see that the net was huge.

In his lessons, Aion had learned that many creatures have amazing skills. If only he had paid enough attention in class to remember what



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kind of artist would be able to create a piece of art like this... and perhaps... Perhaps more importantly, he wished he could remember about the diet of this particular artist.

“What would Professor Twig say?” Aion whispered, balancing on one foot.

That’s when he remembered the book. Aion reached to pull his pack from his shoulder, took out the survival manual he had borrowed from Professor Twig’s library, and began thumbing through the index.

“Nets, *invisible...*” he whispered. “No... how about... *artistic lace patterns...* Nothing...! Wait... wrong order. *Maybe lace, artistic patterns..?*”

The light around him was disappearing now, and he had to squint to continue reading.

“Hm... is maybe *air fishing* a thing...”



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A large shadow now covered Aion, his not so helpful manual and the net.

Aion looked up, slowly turned around, and only had time to see several long black legs piercing down at him.

Somehow, he managed to leap backwards out of the way, and stood eyes to eyes with a gigantic black eight-legged monster with a silver-striped wave through the thick black hair on its head.

I remember now... Aion thought, fiercely gripping the book still open in his hands. *I should have looked for web, spider.*

Aion tossed the book straight in the spider's face, scrambled back and leaped through the web, somehow just making it through without tangling in the sticky strands.



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At first, Aion did not think the spider had followed, for there was only silence behind him, but soon a shadow crossed over him again, and as he looked up, a long thin black leg as fast as a spear pierced the ground before him. His wings trembled under their restraints, and he just managed to swerve out of the way of the leg, and then another.

He spotted an old hollowed out tree trunk nearby, covered in moss, and quickly dove inside, knowing the spider could not possibly hope to fit its long legs and bulbous body inside.

Aion had to crawl inside the tunnel, and it was frightfully dark, but he feared what was outside more. He scuttled along as quickly as his four arms could carry him, until he saw a light ahead.

It wasn't the end of the tunnel yet, but only a crack along the side where the wood had split and rotted at the edges.

Aion could just squeeze through and outside again. He breathed a sigh of relief as he looked to the far side of the trunk, where the spider already sat atop, waiting to surprise him where it thought he would exit.

Aion crept quickly to the cover of a grove of mushrooms, leaning his back against one stem to catch his breath and reconsider his lack of knowledge of the dangers outside his room and how careful he should be.

"Well, I can hardly go back for the book now," he sighed. *"For all the use it's been."*

Spiders... he again tried to remember his lessons, from Father, Ivanna, Professor Twig...

Is this spider one of Father's guards too?

It would certainly be the largest guard Aion had ever seen, and he had definitely never seen the like near the city barracks or in a parade.

Now rested, Aion rose and peeked around the mushroom stem at the soldier in question.

It wore no uniform or sign of allegiance to his father's guards.

It must be a hunter... why else would it have a net?

Aion looked towards the path, realizing he could not get past the spider if he went that way. But he could also hear water nearby, running shallow over rolling stones – a sound he knew well.

Aion would find the manor, and he would find it by following the

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stream. He moved from shadow to shadow quietly and stayed very still at any sign of movement or sound.

It was a good precaution, for as he stopped at what turned out to be only the wind in the leaves, he saw a shimmering in the air before him – another of the spider’s webs.

He found more and more of them as he walked, strung between bushes, flowers and mushrooms here and there.

With some relief, he finally reached the water, only to find the largest web he had seen yet, a thick silky bridge across the water the spider must have built for itself.

Aion nervously glanced about, now knowing the spider might follow at any moment.

What is it hunting for? Aion wondered, eying the banks of the water for any sign.

Well, Aion thought. *At least I won't have to jump.*

Aion ran out into the open, then started across the web bridge. It was slow sticky going, to be sure, but Aion was able to dislodge his boot (or his bootless foot) with each step, one after the next.

At the far side, Aion found a path along the stream that offered more shadows, and he hurried along, looking back over his shoulder, ready to jump into the undergrowth at any sign of the hunter.

Soon it appeared among the bushes on the far side of the stream, very near the web where Aion had crossed.

Aion held his breath and clung to the shadows of a knot of twisting vines.

Slowly, one sharp spindly foot at a time, the spider silently strode forward, its faceted eyes turning from side to side. Halfway across the bridge, all eight legs suddenly stilled.

Aion was still holding his breath, now growing dizzy.

And then, just as slowly, the creature retreated across its bridge, wandering back into the woods from whence it had come.

Aion nearly choked on his own breath as he finally exhaled.

To be safe, he watched and waited as he caught his breath again, then nodded at his good luck.

“Maybe only having one boot print confused it,” Aion whispered,



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looking down at his muddled tracks in the mud of the riverbank.

Aion looked from his left, where the spider bridge lay, all the way to his right, where he could just make out the old peach tree that marked the edge of the manor's farmlands.

I just have to make it that far without attracting the spider.

Unfortunately, there were few places to hide along the way, but Aion was confident he could creep as silently as a bug.

After two steps, there was a loud squealing, followed by, "Aion, are you there?"

Aion nearly stumbled over his own boot as he tore the walky talky from the pocket of his backpack and pressed it against his chest.

His wings twitched even harder than before. It got harder to breathe as he ran, so Aion unbuckled his second belt and stuffed it into another pocket of his coat.

"Aion," Professor Twig's voice echoed with static and feedback, and Aion's coat did little to muffle the sound. "This buggity thing... is this working? Aion? Aion?"

The off button of his walky talky had been disabled on purpose, so Aion could never turn it off, and the only way to stop hearing the tutor's



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screams was to smash the walky talky or leave it behind. Aion held his palm over the speaker and looked back towards the stream.

Thankfully, still nothing.

Aion pushed the button and whispered, “Stop it. I’m here. Keep it quiet. Over.”

“Here? Over here? Where?”

“Here,” Aion whispered more loudly to the walky talky, showering it in spit. With another glance back at the water, he dove among the roots of the peach tree.

The sounds coming out of the walky talky unfocused Aion. He could hear the music in the background,

playing out of key, the guests applauding, and the voices of the council members congratulating his father.

“Here is not HERE. I can hear that you’re running. You’re late.” Professor Twig sounded more than usually twiggy. “Are you testing your father’s patience, young bug? Get here... as in over HERE... this instant.”

The feedback almost pierced Aion’s ears. His antennae stretched and curled twice.

“Yes, Master Portrio, I’m resolving it,” Professor Twig continued, but now speaking more gently to Aion’s father.

“Governor Portrio, congratulations,” a voice echoed near the tutor.



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"This is a great bug, Master Twig. The greatest of our time," Counselor Sane said. "We're very lucky to be under his protection and law since he took over for Fules the Unbeatable. Well, unbeatable... until now." They laughed, then suddenly sobered. "May he rest in peace..."

"Yes, yes... indeed," Professor Twig said.

"Where is that son of yours? He should be here," the counselor said. "For proprieties' sake, if nothing else."

"That little bug is far more likely to shame you, Governor," Counselor Tores grumbled. "Perhaps best he..."

"Yes, well, he's finishing an errand that I commanded him to do..." Professor Twig interrupted. "...to honor his father." He always covered for Aion.

"A surprise gift? Marvelous, I'm excited already," Counselor Sane sneered. "Can't wait to see if it knocks over the new statue."

"Hm, more likely to knock you off your feet, Counselors..." Professor Twig mumbled, with what sounded like little confidence.

Aion didn't have to be there to know that the disgusting sounds that followed were made by the fat Counselor Tores, sucking the greasy food from his fingers.

Aion truly hoped the spider wasn't going to do something similar if it found him.

He stretched to look from one side of his hideout. There was no sign of it or its webs.

"Professor, you have to shut this off for now..." Aion whispered into the walky talky.

"A great bug," Aion heard another voice. "Governor Portrio, blessed with only virtues. Never denies food to a hungry fellow. Look at this banquet, such rarity... Aion should be more like his father. I don't envy your work, Master Twig."

"Yes, yes... indeed," Professor Twig said tiredly.

Aion heard the scratching of clothes, and the voices grew muffled. The tutor must have pushed the walky talky into his pocket instead of disconnecting. Aion kept his against his chest.

"Good enough, I guess..." Aion sighed and moved around the trunk of the rotten tree in the direction of the manor house.

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A long black leg struck down from above, instantly piercing Aion's jacket and sticking him to the bark of the tree.

He hung there for just a moment, terrified, as the spider's face loomed down before him, upside down, its silver-striped hair full of static. He could now see the bright red hourglass on its back, surely not a good sign.

"What do we have here, little bug?"

And now Aion could tell it was not an it, but a *she*.

He swallowed heavily, but could not yet find his voice.

She blinked her eyes. All of them.

"Where have you been running to, hm...?" she said silkily. "Or... from?"

Aion might have mustered the courage to speak, but his jacket tore just then, and he fell luckily down among the rotten roots, leaving his backpack hanging where he had only just.

Immediately, the spider showered him with webs, but they covered the roots above him instead. He turned to run along the hollows among the roots, webs raining down above him, legs spearing the ground about him.

"Come now..." she soothed. "I only wish to talk a moment. There's no urgent need to flee."

His wings grew strong enough to toss him about as he dodged among the obstacles and his enemy, trying to ignore her hypnotic words.

Aion unbuckled the third belt from over his coat, as he made a circuit of the roots and came out again above ground.

She was already ahead of him, poised to strike with legs or webs.

Aion could see his bag just behind her, still hanging by a strap on a small branch near the trunk.

Aion's heart fluttered fast. His wings struggled to release themselves too, rustling his coat and straining the final belt beneath.

He could go over her, or he could go under her.

"You know there's really no point to this..." she said, all her eyes focusing.

He did not let her finish her thought, but dove



The Wild Lands

down between her legs. As he slid down among the roots again, Aion tore at the buttons of his coat.

“Ants always run to the roots...” The spider turned and speared at him again. Her two forelegs caught his coat between his legs, and Aion slid straight out of it and rolled to his feet. Before she could manage another attack, Aion pulled the last belt open and spread his wings in the warm sun, rising beyond the reach of her limbs.

“I am not an ant,” Aion answered.

Aion’s heart still fluttered with fear as he prepared for her to shot another invisible web, but it did not happen. She froze, surprised at the sight of his wings.

Aion did not wait for her to change her mind. He grabbed his bag from the nearby limb and flew safely away.





Unwanted Guests

Aion had no experience with his new wings. His flight techniques would probably make half of the Bee Sisters faint, but for a brief moment, as he was putting distance between himself and the giant spider, he felt happiness instead of fear.

His landing skills required refinement too. He started with one foot. And as its tip touched the floor he hopped on it for a bit until he ploughed both feet into the ground.

Aion landed at the top of a hill in the middle of the farm between the stables and the manor house. He could see the mill by the river and the entrance to the main house.

Still and quiet, Aion nervously turned his gaze to the old peach tree and the silhouette of the Wild Lands beyond, expecting to see the giant spider reappear. He pulled the strongest of his four belts out, but then the wind surrounded him and caressed his antennae and wings, tempting him to fly again.

It appeared his wings weren't ready to be put away just yet.

The wind passed by, dragging lonely petals and rushing to make the lightest branches of the treetops dance.

Aion sighed. Then he filled his chest with air and tried the belt once more. His wings folded languidly against his back.

Aion wiped the dust off his arms, then combed his hair with his fingers. He sighed and let his antennae curl up and down once before walking across the hill towards a single purple aster flower bowing over a square flat stone.

He knelt.

Another gust of wind, more rebellious this time, disturbed the tallest grass and twirled several petals up and about to rain on Aion and the grave before him.

Aion brushed the dirt off the cold lapis lazuli stone, then rested his palm upon it for a moment, just beside where they'd carved his mother's

Unwanted Guests

name.

He bowed his head and closed his eyes, but his moment of silence was quickly interrupted. Instinctively, he looked back over his shoulder towards the woods, and then as suddenly towards the sound of tolling bells and fireworks now echoing from the city.

"I'm running out of time..." Aion nodded, turned back and pressed his palm harder against the stone.

"I'm sorry, mother... For everything. You taught me to follow my heart. I must..." He struggled to find the words for what he felt. "Well... This is it."

Aion dried a tear from his face and stood up quickly.

He watched the fireworks for another moment, whispering, "Father will be alright without me."



With a quick gesture, Aion took his pack up from the ground and followed a trail leading to the back of the barn where he knew he could find some of his old clothes that Ivanna meant to donate.

Aion slid downhill fast and flattened himself against the barn wall to listen. A moment later, he climbed through one of the open

windows and searched among the dusty boxes for another long coat. He couldn't afford for his wings to be seen again. He found one at last, a bit worn and a little too small, then added this and the other belts to his body as he seriously thought of how to convince his friend.

Aion heard footsteps. He hesitated before he recognized the shadow cast on the ground beside the barn door. Ivanna walked into the barn carrying a heavy box of Aion's old toys. She rested a corner of the box on

Beyond the Cliff & Courage

top of a barrel and took a moment to dry the sweat from her forehead.

She picked the little wooden beetle warrior from the top of the pile of broken and forgotten toys. He saw her smile.

“Let me help you with that,” Aion offered, walking out of the shadows.

“Aion!” The toys scattered and she quickly knelt to gather them into the box again. “What are you doing here? You gave me a fright... Why are you hiding in the shadows?”

Aion hurried to help her collect the toys.

“Shouldn’t you be at the ceremony?” Ivanna huffed as she stood up and crossed at least a pair of arms. “The speech...”

“Yes...” Aion returned the little bow to his beetle warrior, then he placed it gently inside the box and got up himself.

Ivanna eyed him suspiciously and whispered. “He’s not going to like it, Aion... Whatever you’re up to.”

“I’m running away,” Aion said with determination.

Ivanna’s antennae curled and uncurled.

For a brief moment he thought he saw, for the first time, a little sparkle zap between them. “E-e-excuse me?”

“You heard me. I’m going. You know the plans he has for me. I don’t belong in a boarding school.”

Ivanna frowned and twisted her fingers. She always did that when she couldn’t find a quick and reasonable answer.

“We still have time. Your wings will... maybe still take a little...”

Aion opened his arms slowly, and she looked at his coat, then at the restraining belts, and her eyes widened.

“I’m running away, and you’re coming with me.” Aion pointed at her.



Unwanted Guests

“I need your help.” His mind wandered very fast to the Wild Lands. He had only just started his journey, and he had already lost a boot and his survival primer.

“No, Aion.” Ivanna shook her head in silence and walked out of the barn towards the main house.

He had to run to keep up with her quick steps.

“Running away suddenly is not the solution,” Ivanna insisted without looking at him.

“Not so suddenly...” Aion argued. “I’ve been planning this for months. I want to see your homeland. I want to enjoy its beauty and be part of it. You must miss it terribly. We hardly even have seasons here...”

“Aion...” she stopped walking abruptly. “That was a long time ago. It’s not like that anymore. Things changed.” She quickened her pace even more, head low and tears in her eyes. “*People* changed. People left.”

Aion pleaded. “People can return,” he hesitated. “They can change it back to what it was. I can... I can help.”

Ivanna stopped in front of the large white door. Aion noticed how she panted, her hand closed into a fist. She shook her head slowly.

“I don’t believe that can happen... I shouldn’t have told you those stories. I only told you about the good and the beauty of it. All of that is gone...” she paused and turned slowly to face Aion, as serious as she had ever been.

“We should be thankful the awful creatures that took over the Home Tree never found their way here. Because they *take*, Aion. They take all from you. To grow up without knowing what a spider looks like... it’s a blessing,” she whispered low.

Aion gulped.

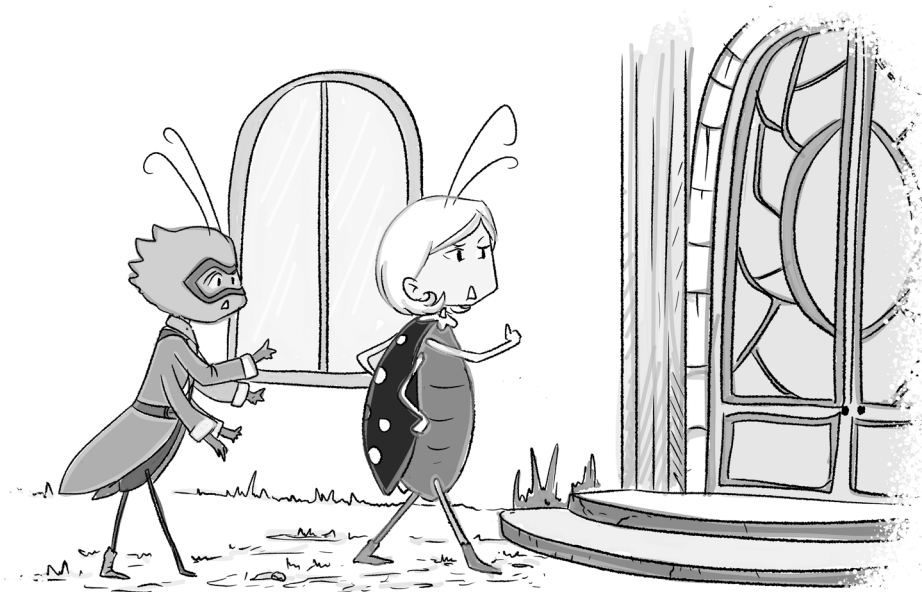
“We’ll sort this out in a better way... Together,” she smiled. “I promise!”

She opened the door and walked in.

“I baked your favorite cookies this morning, Aion. They’re—”

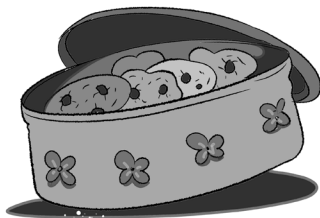
Inside the house, in the middle of the hall, Aion counted at least four black spiders. One was holding a bowl of fresh baked chocolate chip cookies. Ivanna closed the door very quickly.

Not quickly enough. A spider loomed up behind Aion and Ivanna



and pushed them into the house.

“Don’t be shy... come in,” the spider holding a spear said, shoving them both forward again and closing the door behind her.





About The Author

Born in Lisbon, Portugal, descendant of pirates, poets and bards, I sailed to America not so long ago to meet the love of my life, who has supported me to follow my dreams.

My dream is to write books that will inspire future generations to share their stories, worlds, and adventures.

Beyond the Cliff & Courage started as a way to heal my arachnophobia. The idea came to me (literally) when I was driving to work and an itsy-bitsy spider started to descend from the car roof in front of me.

I sang the traditional song, to keep calm and continue driving safely. I sang so loudly that the people in the car next to me turned to see. The little spider didn't run away with my singing. In fact, I believe it kept her longer than necessary dancing on a string in front of my nose.

No spider, car or person was harmed during this trip. I let her go and named her Valia. When I arrived home I began to write.

