

# FLYING UP THE MOUNTAIN



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## CHAPTER 1

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The peregrine falcon Tightened his grip on The branch up in the neem tree. It was unusual, he thought to himself; a prize falcon lurking in a garden tree. But he figured it was just the sort of thing one would expect in this garden. After all, it was a magical enough place, with herbs, bark, flowers, leaves, and roots that could be used for everything from healing sprained ankles to making tasty salads. He grimaced as he remembered the bitter taste of neem steam. Months earlier, it had cured him of a raging fever.

The falcon's binocular eyes locked onto its target: She stood on the front porch of her house. Her back was to the garden. Her phone to her ear. Despite his good hearing, the falcon couldn't pick up her words. She was too far away.

He smiled cunningly. It was time to pounce on his target. Nothing could escape a falcon in its stoop. By the time she sensed him coming, it would be too late.

He hopped down from the tree and plucked up a small bunch of flowers from where they grew along the wall in red, pink, and yellow blooms. Then he began his approach: Awful speed. Deadly silence. The falcon could usually see his hapless victim from a mile away—while it was still oblivious to the deadly predator plummeting toward it. He clenched his foot, ready to strike the mortal blow that would stun his prey. He was within a few feet. Now he could hear her.

"Nnoma's secret?" Nana said into her phone, giving an ironic chuckle. "If I knew anything and I told you, it would no longer be a secret, would it?"

Ato paused. He was no longer a falcon in lethal attack. Now he was in his twelve-year-old boy's body, and all ears. A secret on Nnoma? Who was his grandmother talking to?

There was silence. Nana was listening to the other person. "Do I think anyone else out there knows anything?" she asked. Her voice was sober. "Eyra does. You and I both know that."

Eyra. The mysterious owner of Nnoma, the bird island he was going to tomorrow.

Ato knew he wasn't meant to eavesdrop. Time to fly, he thought, fast as a falcon. He took a step back. Too late. His grandmother had caught sight of his movement. She whipped her head around. Her frown vanished. Affection lit up her face.

"Your partner is out of the tree now," she exclaimed into the phone, in a lighter voice. She spread out her arms invitingly to Ato. "Come, dear!"

"For you, Nana," the falcon mumbled. He thrust out his bunched fist.

His grandmother took the flowers, cooing her pleasure.

She handed him her cell phone and dropped a kiss on his sweaty forehead.

“Here, talk to your friend while I go get our lunch ready.” Ato put the phone to his ear.

“Hi, kiddo!”

“Max!” Ato broke into a smile on hearing the man’s brisk, friendly tone. Ever since Max had helped him nail the Prophet of Fire, he and the skinny reporter had become buddies.

“Wanted to say a quick ’bye before you set off,” Max said. “I called your mum. She said you were with your grandmother. Boy, you must be as ready as a preacher on Sunday morning!”

Ato’s smile widened even farther. “I’ve waited my whole life for this.”

“Ha, ha. Five out of your twelve years is hardly all your life. Have mega-fun, Ato!”

Ato glanced furtively behind him. He dropped his voice.

“Max. What were you and Nana talking about? I heard her say something about a secret.”

There was a brief pause. Then Max laughed. “I thought you were up in a tree!”  
“I was. I was doing a falcon stoop. Nana didn’t hear me coming,” he said proudly.  
Max chuckled. “You might need a falcon’s eyes and hearing when you get to Nnoma. Perhaps I’ve been wearing my investigative cap too tightly, but I keep wondering why Nnoma’s been closed for so long. Five years. Could there be some hidden reason? I asked your nana. No joy. But something doesn’t add up. To me, at least.”

Ato shrugged. This was just Max being Max. The most important thing for him now was that Nnoma was finally open. “It doesn’t matter anymore, Max.”

“I hope that’s true, Ato. I really do.”

That night, Ato lay in bed with the sweetness of Nana’s fried plantain lingering at the back of his throat. This was his last sleepover at his grandmother’s before the four-hour drive to the ferry that would take him and his friends to Nnoma the next day. He wriggled beneath his sheet in delight. For five years he’d dreamt of going to Nnoma, the famous island, the nature paradise where thousands of bird species lived protected. His father had helped to make it a sanctuary that children could visit. Now he and his friends were finally getting to go there: his dream had come true!

His mind traveled back a few months, when his hopes of going to Nnoma had been shattered. He and his friends had designed a project that they’d hoped would get them to the island. But some cruel person had burned their project to ashes, and had poisoned a beautiful nature pond so he could steal farmland nearby. To think the brain behind this evil act was the most powerful man in Ato’s community— the Prophet of

Fire! Facing him had been scary, but thanks to Nana, Ato had put his fear aside. Max had helped him too. Soon he and his friends had exposed the Prophet for what he really was: A ruthless man who would destroy anything— and anyone—to get what he wanted. A man who even made children in an orphanage suffer so he could get rich. Now the Prophet was behind bars. Ato sighed happily at the thought. His community was safe again.

Too excited to sleep, he sat up and switched on his bedside lamp. He reached into the backpack on the floor beside him. His fingers closed around a piece of paper softened from having been folded and unfolded hundreds of times. He read the bold slant of his father's handwriting:

*My son, it's been months of hard work, but now the dream is forming before my eyes. I'm sitting at the highest point of Nnoma: It's called the Dawn Locus. One day I hope you will sit here with me. Ato, now that the Nnoma dream is here, it must stay alive. Those of us who believe in it must protect it. For now, the sun shines, but enemy storms are gathering. One day they may be unleashed. if they are, I have a plan. It is protected, somewhere below this rock peak, where the sunlight first greets Nnoma, where the falcons watch over the valley. Whenever I hold you in my arms, I can see you are truly like me – Asafo, a protector of our world. When your steps are strong enough to match mine, we shall walk this mountainside together, to protect this dream. Only a few people are privileged enough to step on Nnoma. you will be one of them. you'll prove yourself good enough to come here. I've asked Mummy to blow on your little toes to make you laugh. One day, your toes will be firm enough to grip this rock.*

Ato flung himself back on the bed, dizzy with happiness. He was going to be an Asafo! Was his father proud of him all the way up in heaven? he wondered.

For years, two questions had lurked in his head: What were the enemy storms his father had written about? And what exactly was his father's plan? The bedside lamp threw soft yellow light onto the ceiling. A familiar pair of eyes glinted down at him, sharp and intelligent.

"I wish I could see and hear like you can," he whispered up at them.

The peregrine falcon did not answer. It was painted onto his ceiling. Its outspread wings covered half the white space. Ato ran an admiring gaze over the barred pattern on its chest.

Falcons were his absolute favourite birds. Fast, clever, and ever so deadly, and with eyes that could see objects from a mile away. They hunted down their targets with deadly accuracy. That's what he needed. Speed. Accuracy. He carefully refolded the only letter he had from his father and tucked it back into his bag.

His door swung open. Nana padded in, a mug between her cupped hands.

“Just as I thought—you’re still up. Here’s a nightcap, darling. I don’t want the excitement to keep you awake.”

His tongue twitched. He was dying to ask about the secret she’d mentioned on the phone. But his mother had often reprimanded him for listening in on other people’s conversations. So he swallowed his curiosity. Instead, he took the warm mug, snuggled into her good-night cuddle, and breathed in the fragrant steam from her passionflower, honey, and lavender brew. He took a small sip. The evil man had been locked away. And Ato was going to Nnoma. Everything was fine. He sighed as Nana whispered prayers above his head, for protection and happiness on Nnoma. Minutes later, she took the mug from his still hands as he drifted into sleep, still smiling.

### **About Flying Up The Mountain**

#### **Sequel to *Crossing the Stream***

Ato and his friends Dzifa and Leslie have been selected to visit Nnoma, the bird sanctuary that Ato’s father helped build before he died. Ato is convinced that his father hid something valuable on the island, meant only for him. When the trio arrives at Nnoma with other children from across West Africa, they are split into teams and given missions to help broaden their knowledge of nature. The winners will become Asafo—ambassadors of Nnoma and defenders of the Earth. But then the adults running Nnoma start behaving erratically and Ato suspects foul play. When the trio uncovers a sinister plot to exploit the sanctuary, Ato and his friends must work together to protect it—and his father’s legacy.

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#### **About the author**

Elizabeth-Irene Baitie says, “Even as a young child, I was a voracious reader. By the age of seven, my dream was to create stories that would captivate young people just the same way the books I had read did.” She studied biochemistry with chemistry at the University of Ghana and earned an MSc in clinical biochemistry and molecular biology at the University of Surrey in Britain, before founding and directing a medical laboratory in Ghana. “The writer in me wasn’t pickled in the chemistry lab, though,” she adds. Her first novel, *A Saint in Brown Sandals*, won the Macmillan Writer’s Prize for Africa. Subsequent books include *The Twelfth Heart*, winner of the Burt Award for African Literature; *Rattling in the Closet*; *The Lion’s Whisper*, which was a finalist for the Burt Award for African Young Adult Literature; and, most recently, *Crossing the Stream*, which was named as an Honour Book for the Children’s Africana Book Award. Elizabeth-Irene lives in Accra with her husband. They have three adult children.