

THE LOUD GIRL

By NOAH WEISZ

Long ago, before gravity had squeezed its coils so tightly around the chest of our planet, there was a city in the forest called Falimesh. Trees and vines grew downwards from roots in the sky, and waterfalls shot up to meet them. Houses hung in mid-air. Wise bear elders held sleepy council meetings in floating caves of mist. Often, rain drizzled sideways and bats stood upright on tree branches. It's true that the largest trees in the forest usually stayed still, but most things tended to move around a lot. On draughty days, camels sometimes blew in from faraway deserts, blinking their long eyelashes in mild confusion. A honeybee could lift off from an orchid, fly away in a straight line, and arrive an hour later to pollinate that very same plant. The world hadn't quite decided on its rules yet.

Needless to say, the archaeological record from this time is scarce. Yet one girl from Falimesh is still remembered in those parts today. Her name was Lennia. She was the loudest creature in the city – and in a forest where hundreds of howler monkeys announced the dawn, and thousands of shrieking ghoulbirds announced the dusk – that was saying something.

If you asked her parents or her schoolteacher, there was something wrong with Lennia. She was simply out of control. She had hurricanes of sound in her throat, which spun and whirled and thrashed and roared until they just had to get out. She would dash to a river with her gigantic handmade fishing net, belting out a tuneless song at such shockingly high volume that sloths would fall out of branches into the sky, and peacefully wading flamingos would bolt in a flutter of pink. In class, Lennia never followed directions; she would bellow the answer to a question (sometimes right, sometimes wrong) before her teacher had finished asking it, and everyone would shake their heads to dislodge the spiders and flies that had been blown off course by the sound waves.

'Just be quiet!' her teacher would plead.

'I DON'T KNOW HOW,' she would yell back.

Everyone avoided Lennia as best they could. She told herself she didn't mind.

Then, one day, when she was crunching giant water-beetles in a bucket to make blue paint for her treehouse, a boy called Piko half-walked, half-floated up to her.

Piko was the quietest boy in her class. Most people didn't even know he existed. 'Speak up!' the teacher always told him. 'Make your voice heard!' But he would just whisper, 'I like listening.'

'PIKO!' Lennia shouted. She wasn't used to visitors, and Piko was the least likely visitor of all. She was surprised she even remembered his name. 'WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE? CAN'T YOU SEE I'M BUSY?!' She had hauled thousands of beetles up from the river in her fishing net. It had taken her all morning.

Piko didn't answer. He just dipped his finger in the blue paint, plucked a wide leaf off the sycamore tree hanging crown-down above their heads, and began to write: *Gravity is getting stronger*.

Lennia was puzzled. 'WHAT DOES THAT EVEN MEAN?'

He wrote some more. *Falimesh is in danger. Everyone in the sky could fall to their deaths, and everyone on the ground could get crushed by falling trees. We have to hide in the underground caverns until everything settles down.*

Lennia stopped squishing beetles and stood up. 'HOW DO YOU KNOW?'

The boy picked another leaf. *The bears are getting anxious. I listen to them muttering in their sleep.*

This impressed Lennia. Whenever she approached the slumbering bears, they woke instantly.

'BUT WHY ARE YOU TELLING ME?'

Piko's eyes grew wide and earnest. 'Because you have the loudest voice,' he whispered.

That was when she understood. 'WAIT, YOU WANT ME TO…WARN EVERYONE?'

He nodded.

Lennia felt a hurricane growing. She started running in a circle – horizontally, then straight upwards into the sycamore, then upside-down on the roof of her upside-down treehouse, then down through the air and back in a flailing heap on the grass. Her arm hit the bucket of paint and it toppled sideways, forming a wild blue splash-shaped stain in the air.

'I CAN'T!' Lennia burst out, pulling at her hair. 'I CAN'T DO IT! NO ONE EVER LISTENS TO ME, NO MATTER WHAT I SAY!'

Piko didn't flinch. He sat down on the grass and took Lennia's hand very gently. 'Please,' he said, his voice quieter than the footsteps of ants. 'Falimesh needs you.'

Lennia looked down. She couldn't remember anyone holding her hand before. She looked into Piko's kind eyes. She was suddenly very frightened.

Who knows what might have happened next had the rain not started falling. Yes, falling: the drops were marching slowly but consistently down. And the downness was spreading. Lennia could already feel the slightest tug on her legs, her arms, her head.

Hurry, Piko mouthed.

Lennia jumped off the ground, grasped a wet branch of the sycamore tree, and hauled herself up. Little by little, struggling against the invisible force dragging her back down, she leapt and darted and swung and scrabbled up to the very roots of the tree. From up here, above the top of the city, even above the rain, she could see the floating houses and misty bear caves just starting to tremble and tip. Worried faces were appearing out of windows.

'LISTEN UP, EVERYBODY!' Lennia bellowed to all of Falimesh.

'Oh, not her again,' someone muttered from a vertical hammock.

'GRAVITY'S GETTING STRONGER! HEAD DOWN TO THE CAVERNS OR YOU'LL ALL FALL TO YOUR DEATHS!'

The tree shook beneath her.

People were pushing aside the ivy curtains over their doorways and stepping outside. 'What's going on? What's she yelling about?'

'QUICK! YOU HAVE TO CLIMB DOWN!'

'She just wants attention,' someone said.

Furious, Lennia picked up a flying squirrel that was curled in a fork of the tree and, in front of everyone, hurled it into the air. With a tiny fearful squeak, it plummeted a hundred feet before unfurling its skin flaps like a parachute at last, and latching frantically onto another tree trunk.

'SEE?' Lennia shouted. 'TO THE CAVERNS, NOW!'

No one wasted another second. With a great panicky roar, hundreds of people poured out of their homes and threw themselves onto every vine they could find, climbing down, down, down to safety. Even the council bears stretched and yawned and started clambering down tree trunks.

But Lennia wouldn't leave her perch. Not until everyone was safe. And by this point, gravity was tightening its grip. Things were starting to click into place – trees rotating downwards towards the Earth, bats slowly spinning around to the bottom of their branches, waterfalls wilting, everything bowing and settling into the forms they have today.

Only the great sycamore stayed put, hanging there with its roots wound tightly around the clouds. It quivered and creaked as gravity tried its best to dislodge it, and Lennia was tossed left and right, hanging onto the roots by her fingertips.

She was the only one still left in the sky. Smashes and splashes resounded far below. She just hoped everyone had made it to safety, especially Piko. She didn't know how much longer she could hold on.

And that was when she heard it. A voice – no, a chorus of voices – yelling her name.

'LENNIA!' it said. 'JUMP!'

For once, Lennia followed directions. Cold wind whipped against her as she hurtled downward, screaming. Down through the rain and mist, down through a canopy of thick green treetops…

And straight into the thick braided cradle of her own fishing net, stretched taut above the ground by Piko and a dozen other Falimeshians.

'You're a hero, Lennia!' someone exclaimed, as they all ran through the forest towards the underground caverns.

'And look,' said someone else, laughing, 'we finally got her to be quiet, too!'

It was true. For several minutes, Lennia was too shocked to utter a sound. It was the longest she had ever been silent. But as the rain thundered down, as houses and trees tumbled and crashed all around her, as the rules of the world hardened into permanence, she summoned a hurricane deep inside her throat and roared back, defiant, triumphant, and louder than ever.

THE END

Illustration: Muge Li