Name: _____ Date: _____

Four Flights Up

Reading level 11 (7th grade) · 1642 words

On the first day at Gantry Middle, Imara Okonkwo took the wrong staircase, and it was not an ordinary mistake. The plan pinned inside the front door showed three floors and a roof. But Imara, who counted landings the way other people hummed, because counting kept her from having to talk, had reached a fourth that no plan had ever mentioned. A door was set into the wall there, painted the gray of a rainy afternoon, and when she laid her hand against it she felt it breathe, damp and slow, like something enormous asleep. She was eleven and new to everything, and she looked for a long time before saying a word.

The door opened onto a corridor with weather in it. A small cloud, about the size of a spaniel, drifted along at knee height, and from somewhere ahead came the sound of a wind being scolded. "Wrong staircase," announced a woman in a rain-colored cardigan, whose hair stood out around her head as though she had once been struck by lightning and had never forgiven it. "Nobody takes it by mistake." "I counted four flights," said Imara. "The plans say three." The woman considered her. "Did you, now," she said. "Well. I am Mistress Calder, this is the Weather Floor, and you had better sit down before the cloud gets ideas about you."

It was a school hidden inside the school. A dozen apprentices learned to tune the weather the way other children learn the cello. There were no wands and no spells. A tuner worked with her hands and her breath, easing a cloud warmer with warm palms, coaxing a wind left or right. Magic could shift the weather, but it could never make any. An old man in overalls pushed a mop bucket past and nodded to the cloud. "Mr. Penn sweeps up here," said Mistress Calder. "The stairs do not choose anybody. They are only a door, and you opened it, and you may walk down again whenever you like and forget it all."

Imara had failed every test the school had ever given her, the reading test and the quick-sums test and the one with colored shapes, largely because she had been busy examining the examiner's shoes. She mentioned it, as seemed only fair. "Everyone on this floor failed those tests," said Mistress Calder, "which is why we stopped giving them. Sit by the window. Do not touch the gray dial. And do not, whatever he tells you, believe the boy in the green raincoat." The boy in the green raincoat turned around, grinning. "Dax Lindqvist," he said, "best tuner here, and you may ask anyone."

Beside Dax sat a girl with a tight black braid and extremely straight shoulders, who said nothing, and Imara liked her at once. Her name was Pilar Santos. Imara noticed three things about her: she never sat near a window, she flinched whenever a corner of the ceiling rumbled, and her hands went white whenever a stray cloud began to darken, long before the cloud did. At the end of the day Mistress Calder led the three of them down to the Haze

Room, a whitewashed cellar lined with tall glass jars. In each one, gray and soft and perfectly still, lay a small piece of fog.

"Every jar in this room is borrowed," said Mistress Calder, tapping the three rules that were painted above the door. Nothing from nothing. Nothing for yourself. Everything back by morning. "We lend weather to the places that need it, a fog for the harbor on a scorching day, a mist for a field the sun is burning. We write down every loan in the Ledger, because whatever is taken must be returned, or the weather goes wrong somewhere else. Weather listens to whoever is in the room." She opened a heavy book with cracked leather covers, and then her whole face changed. "And that," she said, very quietly, "is not where I left the jars."

Three jars had gone from the middle shelf, the oldest and thickest of the harbor fogs, and where each of them had stood there was a clean, round ring in the dust. "Somebody has taken them," said Mistress Calder, "and not borrowed them, because there is no entry, and nothing is written down." Dax flung his arms wide. "It was somebody from the other class," he announced, "obviously, and I will have them found by Friday." Pilar took a very small step backward from the shelves. And Imara, who had been studying the rings in the dust, took out the notebook that she carried everywhere and wrote a single word in it: "Round."

By Wednesday a fourth jar had disappeared, and the teachers had begun to say the worst thing that can be said in a weather school: that the forecast was wrong. Imara filled six pages. The rings were round and clean, so the jars had been lifted straight up, by someone patient. They had all come from the far end of the cellar. And the mop bucket in the corner, which nobody had touched since Monday, was always wet. Only one person ever mopped the Weather Floor, and he owned one of the only two keys to the cellar.

"It is the barometer," said Pilar on Thursday. They were eating lunch on the fourth flight of stairs, where nobody ever came. "When somebody draws off a lot of fog, the pressure falls for a minute, and it makes a hum. It is exactly the sound a storm makes before it starts." "I have heard it at ten past six every morning this week, from my bedroom window, three streets away, and I thought I was only being a coward." Imara wrote down the time, and beneath it, "Ten past six, someone with a key," and she drew a line under both, and then, without quite knowing why, a very small mop.

On Friday night they slept on the Weather Floor, in sleeping bags between the cloud-racks, with their notes spread out around them and the big gray dial turned down to quiet. Dax declared that he was not afraid of the dark, and fell asleep at once. Just after six, Pilar sat up as sharply as a drawn bowstring. "There," she whispered, and the hum came up through the floorboards, low and heavy, until every hair on Imara's arms stood on end. Outside the window the sky had turned the color of a bruise, and a thin black thunderhead was assembling itself over the roof, because Pilar was frightened, and weather listens.

"Steady," said Imara, who knew nothing whatever about tuning, but a good deal about being

frightened in an unfamiliar place. She took Pilar's cold hands between her own and warmed them, slowly, one finger at a time. "Breathe out for longer than you breathe in. Look at me. We only have to find out where the hum is coming from." Pilar breathed. Her shoulders came down by an inch. Above them the thunderhead flattened, and thinned, and fell apart into a few harmless rags of gray, and Dax woke up and said, "Did I miss it?" Neither girl answered, because the cellar door was opening one floor below them.

The Fog Thief was a stooped old man in janitor's overalls, with a flat cap and a ring of keys as big as a dinner plate, and he was carrying a milk jug with a lid. He was drawing the last of the fog into it, a thread at a time, the way you might pour tea for someone unwell. "Mr. Penn," said Imara, who had known since Wednesday. "I have been wondering about the mop." The old man made no attempt to escape. He set the jug on the shelf, very gently, and sat on an upturned bucket as if his legs had been waiting all week to do it.

"It is my wife," he said. "Alma. She was a deckhand on the harbor ferry for thirty years, and now she has forgotten nearly everything, her own name and mine and the way to the kitchen. But when the fog comes in off the water, she knows exactly where she is. She says, there's the Morning Star, we'll be at the quay by seven." His thumb moved back and forth along the lid of the jug. "I know the rules, and I have read them every night for twenty years. I only could not see how to ask."

Mistress Calder was standing in the doorway, and nobody had heard her come. She was silent for a considerable time, and her face did several things in a row. "Nothing for yourself," she said at last. "That is the second rule, Mr. Penn, and you have broken it four times, and every jar of that fog goes back today." The old man bowed his head. "But I have read the Ledger too," said Mistress Calder, in a voice like gravel, "and it says not one word against lending to someone who asks. So you will ask. Each evening, in front of three apprentices, and each dawn the fog comes home."

That was how the Weather Floor came to have a new jar on the middle shelf, and a new line in the Ledger. Dax claimed to have solved the mystery, which nobody disputed, as a kindness. Pilar never again mistook the hum for cowardice. And on Monday Mistress Calder put the pen into Imara's hand, and Imara wrote, on the first clean line of the page, "Fog, one jar. Lent to a window on Quay Street. Back by morning." Somewhere on Quay Street a window was turning soft and gray, and an old woman who had forgotten her own name was sitting up in bed to say they would be at the quay by seven.

Questions

1. How did Imara find the Weather Floor?

A. She followed a cloud in the hall

B. She climbed one staircase too many

C. Mistress Calder sent her a note

2. Which of the three rules did the Fog Thief break first?

A. Nothing from nothing
B. Nothing for yourself
C. Everything back by morning

3. Why did Imara see what the others missed?

A. She carried a notebook and looked at small things
B. She had the strongest magic
C. She stayed awake all night

4. What helped Pilar when the storm began to build?

A. Running away from the roof
B. Dax telling her it was nothing
C. Keeping her breathing slow and her hands warm

5. In this story, when Imara says "Steady," she means

A. bright and loud
B. calm and firm
C. very small

6. What does Mistress Calder do about Mr. Penn's fog at the end?

A. She lets him keep it forever
B. She lets it be lent each night and returned by morning
C. She sends him away without a word

Words to know

apprentice: learning worker
ledger: record book
barometer: pressure gauge
tuning: gentle adjusting
steady: calm and firm

Answer key: Four Flights Up

1. B. She climbed one staircase too many
2. B. Nothing for yourself
3. A. She carried a notebook and looked at small things
4. C. Keeping her breathing slow and her hands warm
5. B. calm and firm
6. B. She lets it be lent each night and returned by morning