



# the gift

by jenn reese

The queen of the snow leopards sat atop the tallest mountain in the world, waiting. She wore no crown, but the falling snow formed a glistening circlet of white between her two black-tipped ears. Her people had been born on a night much like this one, full of snow, and full of promise.

Behind the white sky, she watched the sun begin to die. She couldn't see its last gasps of beauty as it flailed color across the sky in one final, futile attempt at immortality. But not seeing was not the same as not knowing, and so she watched and gave the sun what respect she could.

Soon, she heard the pad of silent feet on the snow. A young snow leopard, his coat muddied and torn, his breath ragged, clambered up the rocks and bowed low before her. Against custom, the leopard spoke before his queen acknowledged him.

"Mother," he said, "it has been a full year since you bade me follow your scent! I have swum oceans, I have climbed trees taller than mountains, I have wound my way through the caves beneath the world."

He waited, but his queen - his mother - said nothing.

Frustrated, the leopard continued. "In the court of the giraffe king, I tasted fruits that grow in the clouds. In the Far East, I crossed into the spirit world and sought you in every lantern-filled tavern of that strange place. I performed rituals of finding. I did favors for information. I learned to speak six different tongues, and to dance fourteen different dances: six to bring rain, two to bring sun, three to find love, and five to find... things of which I will not speak."

The queen stared at her son, a soft crown of snowflakes falling on her head.

"Mother, for a year I have traveled back and forth across this world trying to find you. I have seen things you cannot even imagine. My bones are weary, my eyes are no longer young. And all in

service to your whim. Have you nothing to say for yourself?"

Finally, the queen of the snow leopards lowered her head and looked into his eyes. She said, "And how did you like your gift, my son?"

The young leopard opened his mouth to speak, but said nothing. His mind spun with images of temples and forests and cities, with the smells of curry and chocolate, with the feel of silk on his paws and the memory of cold nights and difficult climbs and impossible swims. He remembered terrible hardships and unexpected victories. He remembered uncontrollable laughter and the release of lonely tears. He remembered joy. Suddenly, he felt rich. Suddenly, he understood.

He lowered his head and crouched beneath his mother's gaze in supplication. "Mother," he said quietly, his muscles aching and his feet scarred and tender from his latest climb, but his heart soaring, "I liked the gift very much."

The snow leopard queen smiled at this, and the world grew a little brighter for it. She reached out and placed a paw on the center of her son's head. When she lifted it, a small circle of snowflakes began to form around the imprint.

"Arise, my prince," she said, "and let us watch the moon together."

Her son rose and took his place by her side. They could not see the moon behind the sky of white, but they knew it was there. And as they watched, the young snow leopard prince began to talk. He filled the bitter mountain air with tales of wonder and adventure so bright and lively that the moon itself lingered in the sky until it had heard every last one.

