

Viktor and the Sky Circuit Challenge





Viktor and the Sky Circuit Challenge

- *Mum and Dad*

The Two-Player Game

Once upon a time, there was a boy called Viktor who never gave up. Today, rain is drumming on the windows, and Viktor's scooter waits by the front door, dripping and useless. So he does the next best thing: he switches on the games console.

A brand-new game is glowing on the screen. Its title shimmers in gold letters: Sky Circuit Challenge. Underneath, smaller words blink: Two players only. Pilot and navigator.

"Two players?" says a small voice behind the sofa.

Stefan, his little brother, pops up with the second controller already clutched to his chest. He is holding it upside down.

"You don't even know how to play," says Viktor.

"I know colours," Stefan says proudly. "And I know you."

Viktor sighs, then smiles. He turns the controller the right way round in his brother's hands. "Fine. You're my navigator. Ready?"

They press START at exactly the same moment.

The screen fills with blue sky. The sofa seems to tilt. A warm wind ruffles their hair, the sound of the rain fades away, and suddenly the living room is gone.

The Stadium Above the Clouds

Viktor lands on his feet on a polished white platform. Below him there is no floor, no garden, no street: only an ocean of clouds, glowing pink and gold in the morning sun.

Above them floats the biggest stadium he has ever seen, shaped like a giant bowl and packed with cheering players from every corner of the game. Banners snap in the wind. Tracks of light loop between floating islands, twisting and climbing like ribbons thrown into the sky.

Viktor looks down at himself. His T-shirt has become a racing tunic in cobalt blue and charcoal grey, with a wide belt and sturdy boots with orange soles. Stefan is wearing a cosy navy jumpsuit with bright yellow patches on his knees and shoulders. He pats them, delighted. “Look! My favourite colour!”

Something hums beside them. A hover-scooter glides out of the starting gate, floating a hand’s width above the track. It is a Sky Scooter, long and blue, with tall handlebars and a small yellow seat clipped to the front. A ring of soft blue light circles it at waist height.

“A scooter,” breathes Viktor. “A flying scooter.”

A booming voice fills the sky. “Welcome, challengers! Every team needs a pilot and a navigator. Three rounds stand between you and the prize!”

High above the stadium, on a floating podium, something turns slowly in the sunlight. It is a cup of polished brass with sweeping winged handles, set on a tiered wooden base. The Golden Trophy.

Viktor buckles Stefan into the little front seat and checks the harness twice. Then he steps onto the deck and grips the handlebars.

Across the gate, a racer in a gleaming white and bronze flight suit glances their way. Her amber plait swings as she nods to them, calm and friendly. Someone whispers that she is Zephyr, the reigning champion, unbeaten for three seasons.

Viktor nods back. His heart is thumping, but his hands are steady.

“We’re going to win that trophy,” he tells Stefan.

“Yes,” says Stefan, very seriously. “Then can I hold it?”



The Ribbon Tracks

The practice tracks open first. They are thin ribbons of light that swoop around floating islands, dip under falls of mist and climb in steep spirals towards the sun.

Viktor pushes off. The Sky Scooter purrs forward, and at once he feels it: this is just like riding his scooter at home, only much, much faster. Lean left, and the scooter curves left. Press down on the deck, and it leaps. Twist the right handlebar, and a burst of speed throws the wind against their faces.

“Faster!” squeals Stefan.

“Hold on!”

On the third bend, Viktor leans too late. The scooter skids off the edge of the ribbon, and for one breathless moment they are falling. Then, whump, a fat white cloud catches them like a pillow, and with a fizz of sparkles they reappear at the last checkpoint, upright and unhurt.

Stefan is laughing so hard he hiccups. “Again!”

Viktor isn’t laughing. A fall costs time, and time is everything in a race. He studies the bend. The ribbon tilts just before the curve, like a wave about to break. If he leans before the tilt, not

after, the scooter should hug the track.

He tries again. Too early. Again. Better. On the fifth try, the Sky Scooter sweeps round the bend so smoothly that Stefan throws both arms in the air and cheers.

Lap after lap, Viktor learns the tracks the way he learns a new level in a game: where to boost, where to brake, where the ribbon jumps a gap and where it secretly dips. By the end of the morning, he can take the spiral climb without slowing down at all.

A few racers have stopped to watch. One of them, a tall rider in a slate-grey tunic with sharp crimson trim, gives a slow, mocking clap.

“Not bad,” he drawls. “For someone carrying luggage.”

Stefan frowns. “I’m not luggage. I’m the navigator.”

The tall rider smirks and glides away. Viktor watches him go. He doesn’t know his name yet, but he has a feeling they will meet again.



The Wall of Wind

The first real round begins with a roar from the crowd. A swarm of scooters bursts from the starting gate and races along the course, a twisting line of golden track that runs from island to island towards a distant flag.

Viktor settles into the middle of the pack. He knows these curves now. He passes one racer on the spiral climb, another on the long dip, and feels Stefan bouncing happily in the front seat.

Then the sky changes.

Ahead of them, a vast shimmering wall rises out of the clouds. It looks like a sheet of silver silk, rippling and humming, and it sweeps across the course at tremendous speed.

“Wind barrier!” shouts the booming voice. “Hold tight, challengers!”

The wall passes straight through them with a whoosh that tugs at Viktor’s hair. The Sky Scooter wobbles, but the ring of light keeps them steady. When Viktor opens his eyes, his stomach drops. The whole course has moved. Tracks that went left now curl right. The spiral climb has twisted into a corkscrew. The flag is somewhere else entirely.

All around them, racers slow down and stop, waiting for the maps on their handlebars to reload. Theirs just blinks: Updating... Updating...

Viktor could wait too. It would be safe. But every second they wait is a second lost.

“Stefan,” he says, “look at the little clouds. Which way are they flying?”

Stefan points. Long wisps of cloud are streaming off every island, all leaning the same way, like hair in a breeze. The wind barrier has pushed the whole course in that direction. So the finish must be...

“There!” Viktor spots a glint of flag behind a twisted island. He swings the scooter onto a brand-new curve of track and speeds away while the others are still staring at their screens.

The corkscrew makes his head spin. A loop appears where there was none. Twice he guesses wrong and has to brake hard. But they keep moving, and moving is what matters.

When they cross the line, they are far from first. But the voice calls their names among the qualifiers, and Stefan claps so hard his patches flash.

“You read the sky,” he says.

“We read the sky,” says Viktor.



An Unexpected Partner

Between rounds, the racers gather on the pit deck, a broad open-air platform hung with flapping banners and buzzing with little floating repair drones. The air smells of rain and sparks.

A giant screen flashes the next challenge: The Maze of Moving Platforms. Teams must enter in alliances of two. No alliance, no entry.

At once, the deck becomes a whirl of handshakes. Racers pair up with friends, with fast teams, with famous names. Nobody comes near the brothers.

“They think I’m too small,” whispers Stefan.

Before Viktor can answer, the tall rider with the crimson trim strolls over. Up close, he has sharp features, arched brows and sleek dark hair gathered neatly back.

“Name’s Vane,” he says smoothly. “Here’s an offer. You join my alliance, you follow my lead, and maybe you reach the final. Leave the little one in the stands, though. Babysitting slows a pilot down.”

Viktor feels Stefan’s small hand squeeze his sleeve.

“My brother’s my navigator,” he says. “He comes with me.”

Vane shrugs, as if he had expected nothing better, and drifts away.

That is when Viktor notices someone sitting alone at the edge of the deck. It is a creature no taller than Stefan, covered in fluffy sky-blue down. A feathered crest stands up on its head, long tufted ears twitch at every sound, and a tail with a white tip swishes behind it. It wears a high-collared vest woven from copper reeds, and its broad webbed feet tap nervously.

“Are you racing?” asks Viktor.

The creature springs up so fast it nearly bounces off the deck. “I’m Orin! I don’t have a scooter. I hop. Very far. Very fast. But nobody wants a partner who hops.”

Stefan giggles. “I like hopping.”

Viktor thinks quickly. In the maze, the platforms will move. A scooter needs solid ground to land on. But someone who can bounce ahead and test the way...

He holds out his hand. “Want to be our alliance?”

Orin’s ears shoot straight up. He shakes Viktor’s hand with both of his, then shakes Stefan’s, then shakes Viktor’s again for luck.

Across the deck, Vane watches them with narrowed eyes.



The Maze of Moving Platforms

The maze hangs in the sky like a giant puzzle that someone has kicked. Hundreds of flat stone platforms float in the air, some as big as gardens, some barely wide enough for a scooter. And none of them stay still.

They slide sideways. They sink. They rise. They spin slowly, then stop, then spin back. Between them yawns the soft white nothing of the clouds far below.

“Allied teams, go!”

Orin bounces off first. He lands on a platform, wobbles, then calls back, “Solid! But it’s moving left!”

Viktor eases the Sky Scooter forward. The first gap is easy. The second is not. Just as he pushes off, the next platform sinks, and he has to swerve back. Further along the maze, a racer misjudges a jump and vanishes in a puff of sparkles, sent back to the start.

Viktor stops. He makes himself breathe and watch.

Slide. Sink. Rise. Pause. Slide. Sink. Rise. Pause.

It is a pattern. Just like the moving blocks in his favourite game, every platform follows the same rhythm, over and over.

“Orin,” he calls, “count with me. When the next one rises, jump on

three.”

“One...” says Viktor.

“Two...” says Orin.

“Three!” shrieks Stefan, who has been dying to say it.

Orin springs and lands perfectly as the platform reaches the top of its rise. Viktor leans and pushes. The Sky Scooter leaps across the gap, hovering for one long, silent heartbeat above the clouds, and touches down beside Orin with a soft hum.

Stefan’s mouth is open in a perfect O. Then he shouts, “Again! Again!”

They find their rhythm. Orin bounces ahead and calls the movements. Viktor counts. Stefan shouts “Three!” at the top of his voice, every single time. Platform by platform, they work their way deeper into the maze, overtaking teams who are still jumping too early or too late.

Viktor’s arms ache and his legs tremble, but he grins. For the first time since the tournament began, he feels it: they are a real team.

And somewhere ahead, out of sight, someone is preparing a surprise for them.



The Wrong Colour

Halfway through the maze, the platforms split into a fork. One path climbs to the left through a tunnel of floating arches. The other curls to the right, longer and twistier, disappearing around a tall rock.

At the entrance to the left path, three glowing arrows hang in the air. Shortcut, they flash. This way. Fastest route.

“A shortcut!” cries Orin. His ears quiver. “We could win the whole round!”

Viktor revs the scooter. It looks perfect. The arches are wide, the platforms are steady, and the arrows are bright and clear.

Then a small hand tugs his sleeve.

“Viktor,” says Stefan. “That light is the wrong colour.”

Viktor frowns. “What do you mean?”

Stefan points to the beacons they have passed all morning: little lanterns on every platform, glowing a warm saffron yellow. The same yellow as the patches on his jumpsuit. He has been watching them all day, because they are his colour.

Then he points to the arrows. They are not yellow at all. They glow a sharp, angry crimson red.

Viktor looks to the right. There, half hidden by the tall rock, a small

lantern is shining. Saffron yellow.

Up on a high platform, he spots a figure in a slate-grey tunic with crimson trim, one hand raised and a satisfied smile on his face. Vane.

“They’re fake,” says Viktor slowly. “He made those arrows.”

Orin bounces to the first arch and peers along the left path. His crest flattens. A little further on, the arches simply stop. Beyond the last one, there is nothing but cloud.

“A dead end,” he whispers. “We’d have been sent all the way back to the start.”

Viktor’s cheeks burn. He came so close to falling for it. He turns the scooter firmly to the right, towards the true yellow light.

“Good navigating, Stefan,” he says.

Stefan sits up very tall in his seat. “I told you. I know colours.”

They take the long, twisty path. It is harder and slower, full of spinning platforms and sudden drops. But it is real. And at every saffron lantern they pass, Stefan points and says, “Yellow. Good,” like a captain giving orders.

Viktor laughs. Vane may be tricky, but tricks only work on teams that don’t listen to each other.



A Rival on the Edge

The exit of the maze is in sight at last: a tall arch of white stone, with the finish banner flapping beneath it. Only the first teams through will reach the final.

Viktor speeds up. Then he hears a shout.

To the left, a single platform is drifting away from the others, slowly turning in the wind. Standing on it, alone, is Vane. His scooter is nowhere to be seen: it vanished in a puff of sparkles when he tried another clever shortcut, and this time the maze has outsmarted him.

The gap between his platform and the rest of the maze is growing. Vane is pacing, trying to judge the jump, but every time he steps forward, the platform sinks and he steps back.

“He’ll be sent back to the start,” says Orin. “He won’t make the final.”

Viktor looks at the exit arch. They could be through it in ten seconds. Teams are already racing past them.

He looks back at Vane. Nobody should lose like that, alone and stuck, not even a trickster.

“The rhythm,” Viktor mutters. He turns the scooter and calls across the gap. “Vane! Your platform rises every fourth beat. Don’t jump when it sinks. Jump when it rises!”

Vane stares at him as if he has grown a second head.

“Count with us!” shouts Stefan.

“One... Two... Three!”

Vane runs, leaps, and lands on the nearest platform just as it reaches the top of its rise. He stands there, breathing hard, and for once he has nothing clever to say.

Behind them, the exit arch blazes. More teams have passed. Viktor’s stomach twists. Have they thrown it all away?

“Go!” cries Orin.

Viktor races for the arch, with Orin bouncing at his side and Vane running behind. They burst through together just as the voice booms, “Final places closed!”

For a terrible moment, nobody moves. Then the giant screen lights up. At the very bottom of the list of finalists, glowing in gold, is one new line: Viktor and Stefan.

Vane’s name is not there. He looks at the screen for a long moment, then at his boots.

Orin hops so high he nearly hits the banner. Stefan cheers. And Vane mumbles something that sounds a lot like “Thanks.”



Under the Evening Stars

That evening, the finalists rest on the Champions' Terrace, a wide open balcony on the edge of the stadium. The sky is turning violet. Lanterns float above the railings, and far below, the clouds glow orange in the setting sun.

Stefan has fallen asleep in the front seat of the Sky Scooter, still buckled in. Orin has curled up beside the scooter with his tail over his nose. Alliances have ended for the final, so he has promised to be the loudest fan in the stands tomorrow.

Viktor can't sleep. Tomorrow is the final, and Zephyr has never lost.

"Can't rest either?"

Zephyr leans on the railing beside him. Up close, her flight suit gleams pearl-white and bronze, and her amber plait hangs over one shoulder. She doesn't look proud. She looks curious.

"I saw what you did in the maze," she says. "Turning back for Vane. Most racers wouldn't."

Viktor shrugs, embarrassed. "It cost us a lot of places."

"It did," Zephyr agrees. "The final will be much harder than that maze. There are no tricks there. Only skill, courage and choices."

She smiles. "I'll be racing as hard as I can. I hope you will too."

She walks away, and Viktor feels a warm glow in his chest. A champion has just called him a real rival.

Then footsteps sound behind him. It is Vane. He stands awkwardly, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Listen," he says gruffly. "You helped me. So here's something true. On the last lap, a waterfall of cloud spills off the highest island. Behind it is a secret passage that cuts the lap in half. Nobody uses it, because it only opens for a few seconds, when the beacon beside it turns yellow. Go too soon and you bounce off a wall of solid cloud. Go too late and it closes."

Viktor narrows his eyes. "Why should I believe you?"

"You shouldn't," says Vane, almost smiling. "Check it yourself." And he is gone.

Viktor looks at his sleeping brother, at the little saffron patches on his shoulders. If anyone can tell yellow from a trick, it's Stefan.

He lies down beside the scooter and, at last, closes his eyes.



The Cloud Falls

The final arena is unlike anything Viktor has seen. Enormous golden rings hang in the sky, one after another, leading round a circuit of towering cloud islands. The stands are packed and roaring. Somewhere in the crowd, a blue blur keeps bouncing higher than everyone else: Orin.

The start horn sounds.

Zephyr shoots ahead like an arrow. She takes every ring perfectly, never wasting a centimetre. Viktor pushes the Sky Scooter to its limit and clings to her trail. Lap one. Lap two. He overtakes three racers on the corkscrew, but Zephyr is always there, a flash of white and bronze just out of reach.

Last lap.

Ahead, the highest island rises out of the clouds. From its edge pours a waterfall made of cloud, tumbling down in slow, glittering folds. Beside it, a small beacon glows. Red.

Viktor's heart hammers. Should he trust Vane? If the tip is another trick, they will slam into the cloud and be sent back. They will lose everything. If it is true, it is their only chance.

Zephyr takes the long way round, the safe way, the way she always wins.

"Stefan," says Viktor. "Watch the light. Tell me the second it turns yellow. Not orange. Not red. Yellow."

Stefan grips the edge of his seat. His eyes never leave the beacon. The waterfall rushes closer and closer. The red light flickers. It turns orange. Viktor's fingers tighten on the handlebars.

"NOW!" yells Stefan. "Yellow!"

Viktor doesn't hesitate. He leans forward and dives straight into the Cloud Falls.

For a moment, there is only white: cool, soft and roaring all around them. Droplets sparkle on their faces. Stefan squeals. Then the cloud parts like curtains, and they shoot out into a hidden tunnel of light, a secret ribbon of track that cuts straight across the island.

It is real. Vane told the truth.

The tunnel spits them out on the far side, and Viktor sees the final straight stretched before them. And there, swooping round the last bend right beside them, is Zephyr.

They are level. Side by side. The finish line glitters ahead.

"Hold on, navigator," says Viktor.

He twists the handlebar as far as it will go.



The Golden Trophy

The two scooters fly towards the line, so close that Viktor can hear the hum of Zephyr's engine. The crowd is on its feet. Viktor leans so far forward that his nose almost touches the handlebars. Stefan stretches both arms out in front of him, as if he could pull the whole scooter over the line himself.

Flash.

They cross the line together, or almost together. For a moment, nobody knows. The arena falls silent. Then the giant screen replays the finish, slower, and slower still, and there it is: the front of the Sky Scooter, ahead by the width of Stefan's little yellow seat.

"The winners of the Sky Circuit Challenge," booms the voice, "Viktor and Stefan!"

The noise is incredible. Fireworks of light burst across the sky. Orin bounds down from the stands in five enormous hops and flings his arms round both brothers, nearly knocking them over.

Zephyr glides up beside them. For a moment, Viktor wonders if she will be cross. Instead, she pulls off her gloves and holds out her hand.

"That was the best race I've ever lost," she says, and she means it.

"The Cloud Falls! Nobody has dared that in years."

"My navigator saw the light," says Viktor.

Up on the podium, the Golden Trophy is waiting, its brass gleaming, its winged handles shining in the sunset. Viktor steps up first. Then he turns, lifts Stefan up beside him, and together they grip the handles and raise the trophy high above their heads.

The crowd roars. Orin dances. Zephyr claps from the second step of the podium. And at the very edge of the stands, half hidden behind a banner, Vane gives them a small, quick nod.

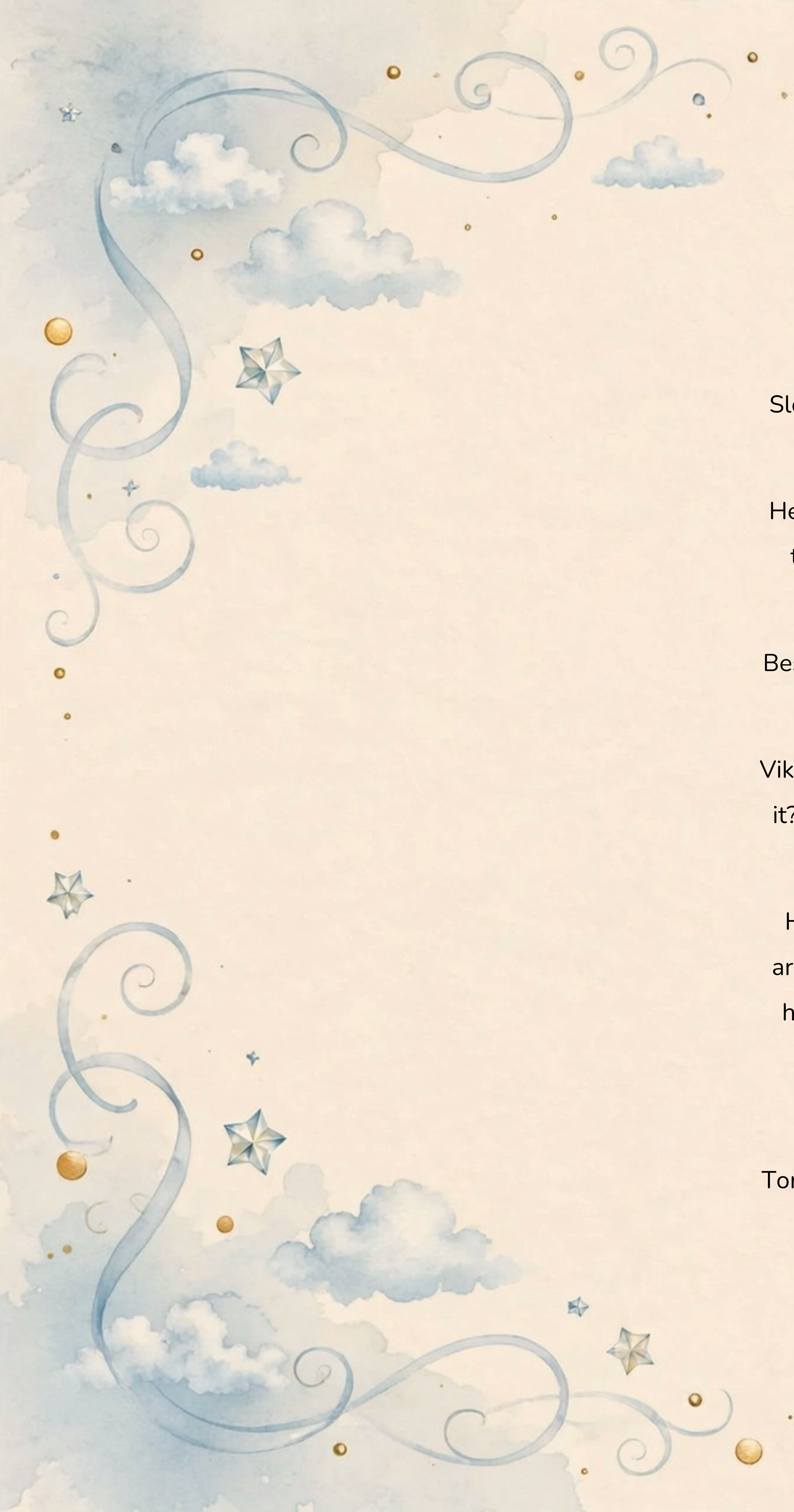
Viktor nods back.

The trophy is heavier than it looks, and it is the most wonderful thing he has ever held. But as he looks at Stefan's shining face, at Orin bouncing, at the champion clapping, he realises something. It isn't only his trophy. It belongs to a pilot who never gave up, a navigator who knew his colours, and a friend who hopped.

"Can I hold it now?" asks Stefan.

Viktor laughs and places it carefully in his brother's arms.





Home Again

Slowly, the cheering fades. The sky turns pale, then soft, then grey,
and Viktor blinks.

He is sitting on the sofa with the controller in his hands. Rain is still
tapping at the window. On the screen, golden letters glow: Sky
Circuit Champions: Viktor and Stefan.

Beside him, Stefan has fallen fast asleep, his controller upside down
again, a tiny smile on his face.

Viktor looks at the screen for a long time. It was only a game. Wasn't
it? His arms still ache from the handlebars, and he can still feel the
cool spray of the Cloud Falls on his cheeks.

He thinks of the wall of wind, the moving platforms, the crimson
arrows and the yellow light. He thinks of Orin hopping, of Zephyr's
handshake, of Vane's small nod. Most of all, he thinks of his little
brother shouting "Now!" at exactly the right moment.

He tucks a blanket over Stefan and smiles.

Tomorrow, if the rain stops, he will take his scooter outside. And this
time, he will teach his navigator how to ride too.

