



KATYA HERNÁNDEZ

STARSEER

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Starseer II coming 2024

STARSEER

KATYA HERNÁNDEZ

★ STARSEER BOOK 1 ★

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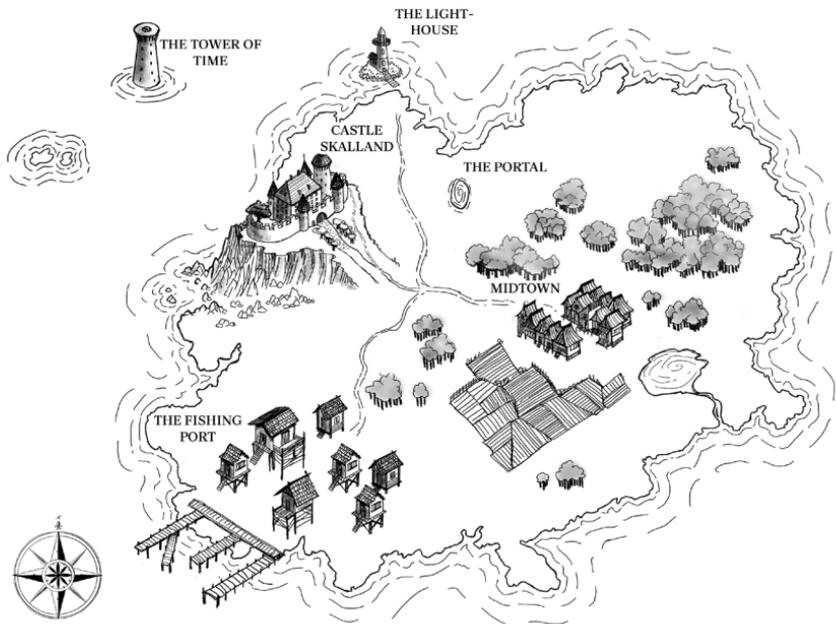
*To the stars who shaped my path.
You are not gone; you shine on in my heart.*

*★

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Skalland



Pronunciation key

Áehd

Sounds like: AY-edd

Colum

Sounds like: KOW-Lum

Etar

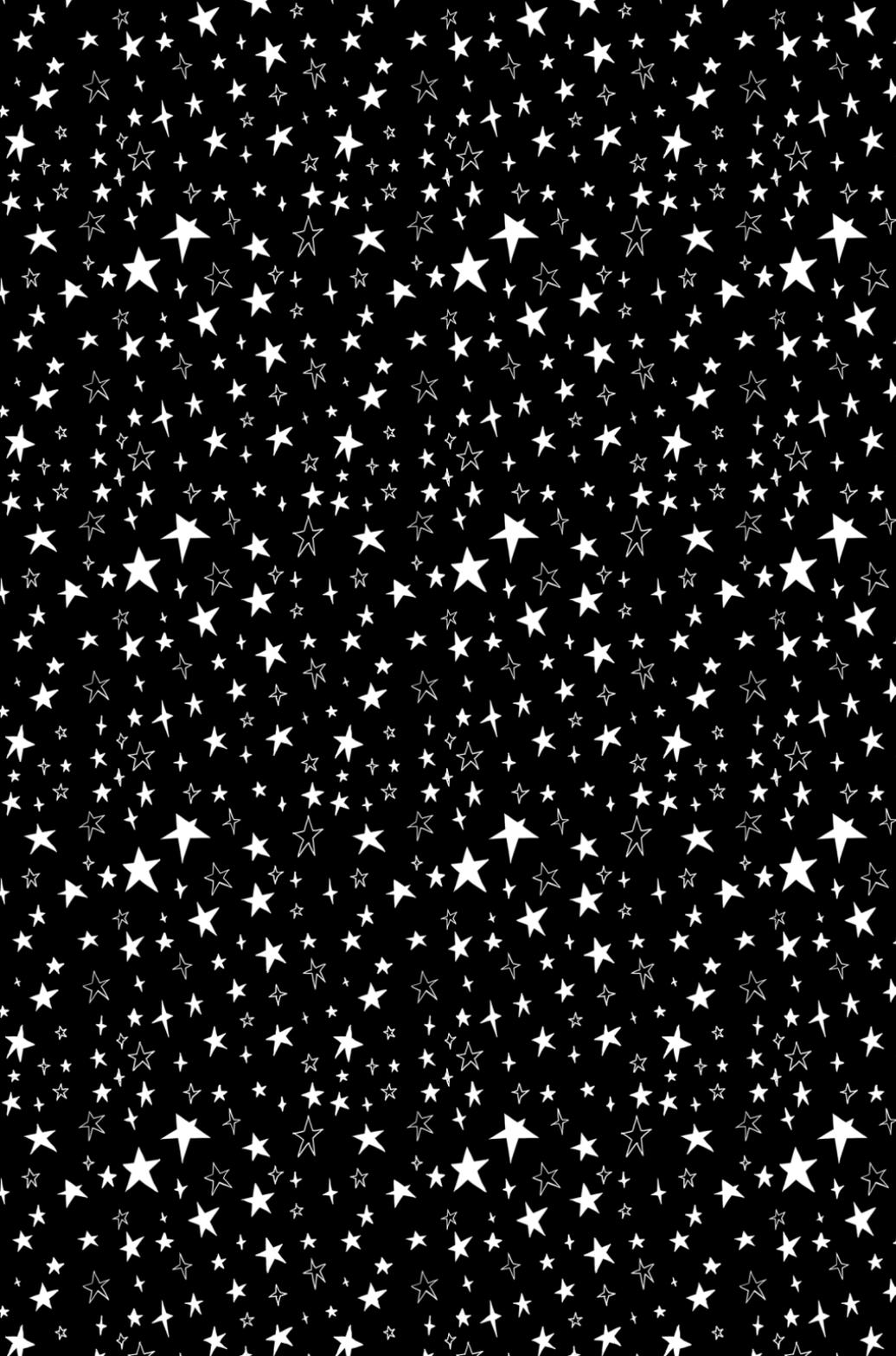
Sounds like: EE-taar

Jossan

Sounds like: JOW-san

Kharaph

Sounds like: HUH-raaf





Chapter 1

For all Etar knew, his life had started at age five. Not that understanding those first five years of bumbling around would suddenly reveal the purpose of his life, but sometimes he felt he'd been robbed.

He stood barefoot on the sand, gentle waves lapping at his ankles, and shuddered when a strong sea breeze tangled its fingers through his hair. But it wasn't just the night air that sent goosebumps down his spine. He had been fighting a headache for a week now.

"Are you all right?" Master Colum asked. The old Tidebreaker sat on the sand a few yards behind Etar, nursing a cup of tea.

Etar let out a ragged breath. He hadn't been 'all right' for the past ten years. His heart urged him every day to seek out what lay beyond the shores of this tiny island. His books—the precious few he owned—told him the world was vast and beautiful, and that people in other countries led rich, fulfilling lives. Sure, many of those were tales of fancy with fairies and shapeshifting magic—things only a child would believe in—but it seemed to him the templates for those characters

and their lives had to come from somewhere. Someone out there was living in a far more interesting place than Skalland, and he wanted that for himself.

Colum hummed when he didn't get a response. "What are you going to ask?"

How to get out of here?

"We'll see," Etar said instead.

Colum was the only magician Etar could talk with about his patchy, wonky magic. He'd taught Etar how to read and write, the names of the stars and the constellations, how the moon affected the tides. Etar would never understand why it was so terrible for him to visit the old Tidebreaker, but...

The thought made him look back at Castle Skalland, perched atop its crag over the ocean. Waves had eroded the crag's base for centuries, making the castle look like it would tip over at any time. It was such a familiar view, but as many other nights, Etar was a fugitive from the castle's sleepy hallways tonight. Uncle Theo didn't know just how often Etar defied his rules and curfews, but on the rare occasion he'd figured it out, there was always yelling and swearing. The castle stood two miles away. It was impossible anyone would see him from there, especially at night, but he could still imagine his uncle watching from the window of his room.

"I'll try now," Etar said, shaking his restlessness off his shoulders.

Colum nodded. "I'll keep watch for you."

Etar looked up. Overhead, the great dome of the night sprawled for as far as his eyes could see. He flexed his toes into the wet sand, still warm from the punishing summer sun, and shut down his revolving musings. The blackness behind his lids was sprinkled with the ghost of the stars above. He started counting down in his head and the dark expand-

Chapter 1

ed inside his head with each new number. This was always the scary part. It felt like relenting control of his whole being to a force he could neither see nor understand. Everything around him faded out of sight: the solid ground beneath his feet, the sounds of the sea, the taste of salt in the air. In the vast space beyond, stars blinked lazily in every direction. They were whispering—they always were—but no matter how hard Etar concentrated, he could never understand them.

“Can you hear me?” he asked, but the stars didn’t seem to pay attention. They were so far out, and his mind’s voice so tiny. “How do I get off this island? I want to see the world. Tell me how.”

No response. The whispering sometimes grew into lively conversation, but it was like listening to someone talk through a wad of gauze. He sharpened his concentration, keen on grasping the words, but as always, his ascent only lasted a few moments, then his body beckoned him back down. It was like waking from a gentle dream.

When he opened his eyes again, the crescent moon had barely advanced in her slow course through the sky.

Etar sighed. Another lackluster trance that would surely only yield useless visions of the future. Maybe the stars would tell him what was for breakfast tomorrow so he could skip and sleep late.

“Did you manage it?” Colum said.

“No. Yes. I mean, it was weak. Why won’t they talk to me? My starseeing book says they should.”

Colum shrugged. “I’m sorry, my boy. I wish I knew.”

Etar looked up again. He was supposed to hold the secret language of the stars in his heart of hearts. That was his gift, the one thing that made him unique. But so far, it always felt like the stars were giving him the cold shoulder.

“I’ll get it one day,” he said, both to Colum and the stars.

Etar didn’t think Colum fully understood his despair. As the only Tidebreaker on the island, everyone relied on Colum’s magic powers to make the sea safe for navigation. Colum always said he wasn’t powerful, but it sounded to Etar like being able to coax the currents of the sea was not only impressive—it was useful. Colum could say what he wanted, but at least he had a place in the world. Etar couldn’t even say that much of himself.

“It’s within every magician, Etar,” Colum said. “I’ve never met one who didn’t eventually grow into his powers. I just wish there were other Starseers here to teach you.”

Etar puffed his cheeks and pushed all the air out of his lungs. ‘I wish’ was the theme of his life. “I’ll be on my way,” he said.

“Be careful,” Master Colum said. “Come have tea with your old friend sometime, will you?”

Etar pushed a smile through his disappointment. Colum was one of the few people who would never judge him for his shortcomings. “My uncle doesn’t—”

“I know,” Colum said. “But you’re fifteen already. He won’t always be able to tell you what to do.”

Etar nodded. He knew that was true, in theory, but a part of him didn’t believe that day would come.

He walked back to the castle in the watchful company of the moon, a low pulse of pain nagging behind his eyes. Sleep would take care of it, but he didn’t like how often these headaches happened nowadays. Eventually, he’d realized they came when he went too long without using his magic. He thought they would go away as his body slowed its awkward transition into adulthood, but they only seemed to worsen every year.

Chapter 1

He snuck through the service gate to one side of the castle's outer wall. Guards didn't care to watch this gate at night, and Etar had figured out the rhythm of their lazy rounds long ago. He didn't blame them for their carelessness, though. Nothing ever happened in Skalland.

He traversed the wide-open space of the north courtyard, confident that no one had seen him. He yawned and stretched his arms, but before he could let air out of his lungs again, a hard shove from behind made him choke and fall face-first on the grass.

"What are you doing out here, maggot?"

Etar's heart leaped from idle pulse to frenzied.

"I asked you a damned question!" his cousin Friedrich shouted.

While he tried to scramble back to his feet, Etar felt Fried's heavy hand grab his calf, but Fried couldn't lock his grip before Etar slithered out of it. Too close. Etar clawed at the dewy grass, barely keeping his balance as he ran to the kitchen door. He could feel Fried's heavy steps hammering against the ground behind him. He reached for the stolen key in his pocket, but it slipped out of his clammy, shaking fingers, never to be seen again.

He whimpered a curse. Fried was closing in fast. Etar didn't know why he kept running toward the kitchen door if he no longer had the key, but as he slammed his body against it, he realized it was ajar. Fried must have come out through this door looking for him.

He scurried between the kitchen's workstations and cabinets and knocked a pile of recently washed pots to the floor. It hadn't been intentional but Fried crashed into them and cursed loudly. It slowed his cousin, but Etar couldn't let his guard down.

In the dark hallway outside the kitchen, Etar ran into a couple of confused guards doing rounds. They only had a sooty oil lamp with them, so they didn't immediately recognize him. They shouted for him to halt and tried to snatch him, but if he wasn't strong, he was at least slippery.

"Stop that idiot!" his cousin ordered the guards.

Inadvertently, the nonplussed guards blocked Fried's way. Etar heard metal and glass crashing against the floor and turned his head just long enough to see the darkened hallway. The lamp the guards were carrying had broken. His cousin brayed in frustration, but Etar didn't need lamplight to know where he was going. He knew this castle's layout better than the guards who walked it day and night.

Etar scurried upstairs to his room and slammed the door behind him, bolting and barring it shut. A minute later, his cousin's ham-fisted rap on the door made him wince. He huddled in a corner and watched the door, wrapped in his sweaty arms as if keeping still would make Fried forget about him. The acrid smell of his own fear-infused sweat pierced his nose.

"Dad will know, you hear me? He'll ground you for weeks!"

Fried would get bored in a moment. He couldn't break through the thick oaken door, but Etar's terror of him hadn't been born today. It was years of pain and humiliation making him shudder now, because his cousin always got what he wanted. If Fried couldn't get him tonight, he would find him in a lonely corner tomorrow or the day after.

Once Fried was gone, Etar finally let his breath out and broke out sobbing. He didn't know if he was crying because his head had exploded in pain after that chase or because of how narrow his escape had been.

Chapter 1

It took him a long time to change into his sleeping clothes and drag himself to bed. Like many nights before this one, he yelled his frustration into his thickest pillow until he'd cried himself to sleep. No one came to check on him, of course. Even if the guards or the servants heard him sobbing, nobody ever cared.



Chapter 2

“... making a racket in the middle of the night!”

Uncle Theo’s voice slipped in and out of Etar’s attention. He wasn’t really listening, but he tried to be present enough not to offend him. This routine was so old that Etar already knew when to nod and say, “Yes, Uncle,” so Uncle Theo would take his downcast eyes and solemn voice as contrition—a skill his cousin had clearly not mastered yet.

Fried was bickering about something or other. To Etar it was only background noise.

He was thinking of the vision he’d had last night after he finally fell asleep. It had been a strange one. Usually, he received inane predictions of the weather or future scenes of life in the castle. One day he saw a scullery girl tripping in the courtyard and splitting her lip. For many days after, he watched the spot where it would happen, and he’d tried to stop the girl in time, but when he called to her, she acted like she’d seen a ghost and ended up falling anyway.

But last night, he’d had a vision of a boy’s smiling face. Tall. Blond. Golden skin. The boy had been hauling water out of the castle’s well while he talked with someone. It didn’t last

Chapter 2

long, and the scene was blurry, but there was something unusual about it. Etar was a castle mouse, and despite the servants and guards' best efforts to ignore him, he knew most of their faces. That boy was a stranger, and his golden hair and hazel eyes made him look foreign. Why had the stars sent him this vision when he'd asked them how to get out of Skalland?

"... understand that?!"

An alarmingly long pause came after that half-heard question from Uncle Theo. A question that—Etar realized a couple heartbeats too late—was directed at him.

"Y—yes?" Etar said. He had drifted too deeply into his daydreams. He didn't know what he was supposed to understand.

Uncle Theo groaned and rolled his eyes, which wasn't too bad coming from him. He usually yelled and flung things around when he was angry. Etar wondered if Uncle Theo had ever been different. A picture of him above the dining table showed a man who perhaps hadn't been handsome in his youth but had a mischievous smile, dark auburn hair, and bright eyes. The Uncle Theo Etar knew had a deep crease between his eyebrows, dull hair peppered with white, and a wiry beard that did little to hide his permanent scowl.

"Get out of my sight. Both of you," Uncle Theo said, waving them out.

Etar stood obediently and bowed, but Fried crossed his arms over his chest—he was nineteen, but sometimes he acted like he was ten.

"He was up to something, Dad, I'm telling you! Aren't you going to do something?"

Etar stood in place and waited for his uncle to regret letting them go without punishment. Why couldn't Fried

keep his big mouth shut? But to Etar's surprise, Uncle Theo grabbed Fried by the arm and shoved him out of the door.

"Get out of here already," Uncle Theo ordered Etar when Fried was gone.

Whatever the reason for this rare show of leniency, Etar would not squander it. He bowed a second time. "Sorry, Uncle. It won't happen again."

Uncle Theo snorted and turned away, but before Etar stepped out, Uncle Theo called to him again. "Did he hit you?"

Etar looked at the bruised and chafed heels of his hands. He had scraped them when Fried pushed him on the grass.

He shook his head.

His uncle nodded.

"Whatever stupid thing you're up to, only I can punish you," Uncle Theo said stiffly, then turned to the view from his large windows.

As Etar treaded quietly away from his uncle's door, he saw Jossan approaching. It was not yet eight in the morning, but Jossan was already in full military garb, probably coming to give Uncle Theo some dull report on security. Etar wanted to tell her everything about last night, and Jossan was the only person in this castle who would care, but she was also always busy.

"Jo," he whispered, fearing he was still standing too close to his uncle's door.

She knit her brow. "What happened? Are you grounded again?" she whispered back. She was thirty-five, but Etar had always found an accomplice in her.

Etar shook his head. "Almost."

"Did he—"

"General! You're late," Uncle Theo said, suddenly popping out of his room. He had a preternaturally sharp ear.

Chapter 2

“Sorry, Your Highness,” she said, perking up.

Etar lowered his head when his uncle sent him an angry look and scurried down the hallway without waiting for the rest of Jossan’s question.

Etar spent that morning in his room with his eyes glazing over a thick history book, but he hadn’t made it past the same paragraph in the last hour. Surely Jossan would show up any minute. Only she ever stopped to listen to his problems, but whenever she could spare some time to be with him, he preferred asking her about her day. It made him feel closer to her. With how broken the relationship with his uncle and cousin was, it had taken him years to understand Jossan wasn’t his family. He hadn’t known the difference until his uncle yelled at him that Jossan was nothing more than a person who worked at the castle. That, however, hadn’t deterred Etar from looking to her for friendship, and she’d never stopped opening her arms to him.

He was nodding off over his book when a knock on the door finally came.

“It’s unlocked,” Etar called, putting the book on his writing table.

Jossan stepped in gingerly and skirted around the mess of clothes and books on Etar’s floor, finding a spot to sit on his bed.

“One day, your uncle will come look at this rat’s nest, and he’ll have an army of servants here in no time,” she said, pushing a shirt aside with the tip of her boot.

As unnerving as it was to imagine his uncle seeing this mess, he knew it was highly unlikely. “At least then I’d know he cares about me somehow.”

Jossan twisted her mouth to one side. “He cares, Etar. He’s just terrible at expressing it.”

Jossan was like that. She always tried to find the good in people, even in someone who often lost his temper and took it out on her. Etar didn't have the energy to argue. His headache had receded after his vision, but he felt out of sorts, like his mind was scattered out of his skull.

"What happened?" Jossan asked.

Etar looked down. "I snuck to the lighthouse. Fried caught me when I was coming back and told Uncle Theo this morning."

Jossan's face hardened. "Did he hit you?"

Again, that question. How many times had his cousin beaten him up since they were little? Everyone in the castle knew. It was impossible to miss their scuffles with all their yelling and running, but no one knew how to prevent them. Fried hated Etar for indiscernible reasons, and Uncle Theo sometimes treated the issue like they were both equally guilty—like Fried wasn't thirty pounds heavier than Etar and as prone to anger as a hungry bloodhound. Uncle Theo even said once having kids in his home was like keeping fighting roosters in close quarters. Never mind that Etar had done nothing to provoke Friedrich's rage other than simply existing.

"Are we going to the fishing port tomorrow?" Etar asked, letting Jossan's question hang in the air.

She sighed. "I wish you would tell me when you want to go out at night," she said, unimpressed by Etar's clumsy attempt at derailing the conversation.

"I already got a good scolding this morning. I know I have no rights here," he said.

"Etar, that's not what I said. This is not the first time this has happened. If you told me and we went out together, at least he wouldn't dare hit you."

Chapter 2

That was out of the question. Uncle Theo wouldn't kick Etar out of the castle for misbehaving—or so he hoped—but he feared if Jossan angered Uncle Theo enough, he would dismiss her like he had dismissed so many other people over the years.

“It's fine, Jo. I'll be fine.”

She gave him a doubtful look, which he did his best to avoid.

Defeated in her purpose to make him talk, Jossan stood, sighed, and kissed the top of his head. “I must go now, but I'll find some time to come see you later, all right?”

He nodded. He didn't want her to go, but she was already balancing so much on her shoulders.

“Jo?” he asked right before she left.

She stopped and hummed.

“Let's get out of here. I could learn proper starseeing somewhere else, sell my visions for money. We'd be fine.”

She pressed her hand against the door frame and flattened her lips. This wasn't the first time he'd thrown this idea at her. He shaped it differently every time, but the premise was always the same—running away together. She seemed closer to saying yes every time, but something always stopped her from yielding.

“We'll see. In a couple years, maybe.”

Close. But not close enough. “Right,” he said.

She nodded, hesitated, then awkwardly bumped her shoulder against the door on her way out. She closed the door quietly and left him wrapped in a silence that always felt heavier after she was gone.



Chapter 3

Jossan's chest swelled with satisfaction when the last stroke of her practice sword made Rowan recoil, then regretted it right after. It was a testament to her training, having a man as strong and skillful as Rowan yield to her, but he wasn't the subject of her welling frustration and she was taking it out on him. It surprised her how loyal Rowan continued to be, given how often she dumped all her grievances on him.

Rowan took a graceful step back, dropped his sword, and lifted his hands in surrender. "Who was that one for? Old Theo? Or did I step on your toes and didn't notice?"

She laughed between exhausted breaths and let the tip of her sword rest on the ground of the training pit. She watched the darkening spots on the sand where her sweat had dripped and tried to wipe her forehead, but her sleeves were just as soaked as her skin. "Lord Gorman is leaving. He's taking Prince Laurenz with him."

She didn't need to explain how dire their situation had become now that the last of the Crown officials was leaving—its Master of Coin, no less.

Chapter 3

“Fuck,” Rowan said, sinking to the ground, his back against the training pit’s wall. “When did you find out?”

“This morning.” She shrugged. It didn’t matter. Gorman had warned her for months that he would leave if King Theobald didn’t change his neglectful way of managing Skalland. He was the last in a long list of Crown officers who, realizing the island’s impending bankruptcy, had jumped ship in search of a better life. “They are leaving at dawn on the first ship going to the continent.” She dropped her rear on the sand, knees bent up, and cradled her head in her hands. “What am I going to do? I’m a soldier, Row. What do I know about economics?”

Rowan extended a foot towards her and tapped the outside of her ankle with his boot. “I’ve never met someone who knows more about how to run a kingdom than you, but I suppose that’s not the point.”

Jossan took a deep breath, then pushed it slowly out. “Yeah, it’s not.” It wouldn’t be long before the pressure broke her, and her king didn’t care if everything crumbled to dust. Sometimes it felt like Theobald was waiting for exactly that to happen.

“Why don’t we leave, Jo? Think about it. How hard would it be for two well-trained soldiers to find a job? There are merchants rich as kings who would pay a fortune to have the likes of us as their guards.”

Her heart sank. There were so many places in the world she still wanted to see, and she couldn’t think of better company for it than Etar and Rowan. But unfortunately for her pipe dreams, she couldn’t simply stop caring about a kingdom whose people were suffering. Besides, this was her home. How would she transplant her whole life to a new place? “Etar said something along those lines this morning.”

Rowan smirked. “The kid’s smart. You should listen to him.”

Jossan threw her head back and laughed. “Are the two of you colluding?” she joked. Etar thought everyone in the castle except for her hated him, and Rowan wasn’t the most talkative person in the world. She would love for them to be closer, but one was too stubborn and the other too reclusive.

Rowan opened his mouth to speak, but hurried footsteps bursting into the training pit interrupted him. They both stood and looked at the wide door, shielding their eyes against the glare of the day. A guard came in with a paper in hand.

“General,” the guard said, panting. “I’ve been looking for you.”

Jossan’s heart jolted. This day wasn’t giving her any breaks. “What’s wrong?”

“A small merchant fleet from Darvine docked at the port this morning. They were emaciated and sun-stricken. They said a Gleasaman fleet came to their coast and started shooting at one of their biggest fishing towns without warning. People fled as fast as they could, but everyone fears Darvine is lost to the Gleasaman now.”

Jossan held her breath. After two decades of slowly ransacking the archipelago’s riches and forcibly annexing its islands, the Gleasaman were finally closing in on Skalland. Jossan was, on paper, Chief of Defense. In reality, she was the commanding officer of a military force that had been reduced to a castle guard many years ago due to the kingdom’s failing arcs. Even if she tried to rally more people to strengthen their defenses, she would get a handful at best. Of the five thousand inhabitants of the island, most were too old or too young to fight. Darvine was the largest and richest

Chapter 3

island in the archipelago. If *they* couldn't fight back, Skalland was doomed.

"General?" the guard asked after a few seconds.

"Yes. Sorry. I heard you. We should keep watch for now. Set people with spyglasses at the lighthouse and at the fishing port."

Rowan threw her a questioning look. She knew what it meant, but she chose to ignore it.

The guard saluted and left as swiftly as he had come.

"They are closing in," Rowan said, too solemn for Jossan's liking. "Darvine is only four or five days away from here."

She kept her eyes on the open door. "It still doesn't mean they'll ever be interested in us. What do we have that they could want? Colored sea rocks and crabs?"

"You know that's not the problem," Rowan said.

She swiveled towards him, her teeth clamped together. "I know what you're getting at, but what kind of cowardly general flees when she sees danger approaching?"

"And what is the sense in staying? They will either conquer all the islands around us and strangle our trade or blast us for fun," Rowan said. Most people would have thought he sounded calm, but she knew him too well to ignore the tension behind those words. "*Everyone* should leave this dratted rock. Not just us."

"Then leave!" she said, then shook her head. "Row, I'm—"

Rowan cut her off. "I know you care too much to go away, and I won't leave you. I just wish we could both make it beyond forty-five, I suppose."

Her words knotted in her throat.

Rowan took the chance to strike again, stepping almost too close. "Marry me, Jo. Marry me, so you have an excuse to leave this place."

She trembled, not knowing if it was from embarrassment or rage, and she laughed, shrill as breaking glass. “I thought you respected me more than that.”

Something in Rowan’s eyes changed. It could have been resentment, but she didn’t want to look too deeply, because it mostly looked like heartbreak. But what was he expecting her to say? A big part of her wished she could take the proposal seriously, but what would she offer a husband? It was the same thing with Etar. She was so consumed by her duty to this island she wasn’t sure anymore who she was without it.

“Forget it. It was a stupid thing to say,” he said in the end, looking away.

He was so dear to her, the sight of his face such a familiar comfort, but she couldn’t trample over their friendship out of desperation. She didn’t want him to end up hating her company once he realized she was a shit wife.

“If it comes to that, we will evacuate. I promise,” she said.

He sighed. He either didn’t believe her or thought it was hopeless, but he tried to smile. “I’m starving. Let’s go find something to eat,” he said, and didn’t wait for her answer before he ambled towards the door.



Chapter 4

Etar found a lonely window on the castle's second floor and watched through a slit between the drapes. He yawned. Six in the morning was too early for him to be up, but he needed to see this.

Of all the four children Uncle Theo had, only the younger two remained in Skalland: Fried and Laurenz. But Laurenz stood outside with his handsomest travel cloak on, saying goodbye to Fried.

Etar didn't much care for Laurenz. Although he was too old at twenty-one to notice what Etar did with his time, that didn't prevent him from making cruel jokes and calling him names just to amuse Fried. Etar would have been more relieved if the news of his impending departure, announced two months ago at dinner, hadn't made Fried more unpredictably angry than usual.

Etar watched in the twilight as Lord Gorman, the Master of Coin, waited for the scene to end. Fried was hugging Laurenz so tightly that it looked like he wanted to break all his older brother's ribs. He was blubbering and saying something against Laurenz's shoulder, but the words were unintelligi-

ble from this far. Etar almost felt bad for this snotty, childlike version of Fried clinging so desperately to his older brother.

In contrast, Uncle Theo barely nodded goodbye, and Laurenz didn't try to hug him. By this point, Lord Gorman was discreetly pulling his watch in and out of his pocket.

The group dissolved rather unceremoniously as Lord Gorman, Laurenz, and a handful of servants rode out of the courtyard. Fried ran inside, still sobbing, barely looking at his father. Uncle Theo stood in the dim morning light, his vacant eyes on the castle's main gate. Etar was the only one who saw him sigh before walking back in, looking more tired than ever.

In a sense, Etar could sympathize with Uncle Theo's sadness. Laurenz would now live on the continent with his mother, where his brothers had gone long ago to marry noblewomen and pursue their studies. Etar didn't care about marrying a noblewoman, but he fervently desired the freedom that came with age. And Fried was even more trapped than he, because Uncle Theo hoped he would run the kingdom one day. After all, Fried's brothers were all men now and had never returned, not even to visit their father. None of them wanted to inherit their father's impoverished throne.

Etar went to the north courtyard to watch the servants and guards go through their routines. No one would mind his presence as long as he wasn't in the way.

His vision of the blond boy still intrigued him, and this was the hour of most activity for the servants as they prepared for cooking, cleaning, airing rooms, and keeping this place from falling apart. If there was a new servant, he would come through here eventually.

The sun climbed higher, dispelling the coolness of the early morning with its stifling embrace, but there were

Chapter 4

no signs of the blond boy. Servants started dispersing and guards formed outside for their sword fighting practice. Maybe Jossan would know something about a new servant, but as the morning advanced, she never appeared.

After two hours of fruitless waiting, Etar stretched himself out and stood. The guards were gone. The courtyard was deserted. His early start this morning was already taking a toll on him, so he thought of returning to his room for a nap. But when he turned to go back inside, Fried stood there, arms crossed, eyes puffy, and a savage scowl on his face.

“This is your fault,” Fried said, his voice hoarse.

Etar’s mouth went dry. He didn’t know how Laurenz leaving could be his fault, but logic had never been Fried’s forte. Any old excuse was good enough when he wanted to punch out his feelings.

Etar shook his head and took a step back. He didn’t dare look entirely away from Fried, but he tried to search for an escape route from the corner of his eye. The courtyard stood behind him. He could run in any direction, but where would he go once he reached the outer walls of the castle grounds?

“How is it my fault?” Etar asked. More than being glib, he was trying to gain some time to think.

Fried snorted. “If you weren’t so useless, Dad would leave his stupid kingdom to you, and then I could have left with Law.”

Etar almost laughed, but his self-preservation instinct was stronger. *Law*. That ridiculous pet name Laurenz loved so much, possibly because it made him feel important. Etar stepped backward and Fried hunched over in response, like a bull ready for the charge.

“We could talk to Uncle Theo, see if we can make him reconsider,” Etar said, knowing already his plea was useless.

His uncle would never agree, and it wasn't like Etar wanted to inherit a kingdom full of people who didn't like him. Besides, Fried had murder in his eyes right now, and nothing Etar said would make him change his mind.

"Run. I want to see how far you get," Fried said.

Etar shook his head.

Fried fainted, making Etar jump backward.

They held each other's gaze, but it only took a second for Etar's nerves to betray him. He ran as quickly as his skinny legs would carry him.

Etar's only advantage was that he knew more hiding places than Fried—places where he could scurry into where his cousin would never fit. Etar aimed for a narrow gap between the castle's outer wall and the back of the stables. He was almost there when excruciating pain exploded in his right calf. He lost his balance and rolled over the gravelly grounds where guards trained their horses. Fried had thrown a rock at his leg with uncanny accuracy and was closing in fast.

Before Etar could crawl away, Fried had already straddled him and was mashing his meaty fist between Etar's mouth and nose. Shocking pain spread all over his face, followed by warm blood gushing out of his nose. He scratched at his cousin's face before the second blow came, leaving three bloody gashes across Fried's nose and cheeks.

Fried squealed like an angry boar, but instead of taking another punch, he stood and started looking for something on the ground.

Etar was dizzy with pain, but horror dawned on him when he realized what his cousin was looking for. Fried picked up a flat rock that was probably ten inches wide and so heavy he had to carry it with both hands.

Chapter 4

Etar staggered to his feet. There was no one in sight to help him, and although he didn't think the guards cared about him, he wanted to believe they wouldn't let his cousin murder him. He started a limping race to the well on the other side of the castle grounds, where servants often gathered to chat. Fried didn't look like he was making any effort in his pursuit of him. He seemed to be enjoying the chase, but Etar didn't stop. He didn't want to know if Fried had the guts to smash that rock against his head.

When he turned the corner around the castle, a sharp memory of his vision assaulted him. A tall, blond boy stood by the well, talking to a young kitchen maid. Fried shouted behind Etar, and both the girl and the boy turned to look their way. The blond boy kept his smile on for a couple seconds, fitting perfectly in Etar's vision of that fleeting moment.

"Run all you want. No one will help you," Fried yelled.

Etar hobbled his way to the well as quickly as he could. The girl made her escape into a side door of the castle, but the boy calmly put down the bucket of water he had been carrying and waited.

"Help me, please!" Etar shouted.

Fried cackled behind him.

For a moment, it didn't look like the blond boy would do anything. Etar stumbled to the ground a few yards away from him. The boy walked to him and put his knee down. "Can you walk?" he asked.

Etar didn't know what to say. He sat on the grass and looked over his shoulder. Fried was still marching undeterred towards him, carrying his rock, eyes fixed on his target.

The blond boy stood and sauntered towards Fried. Fried ceased his march for a moment, confusion spreading over his face. Without warning, the boy stopped before Fried

and shoved him to the ground, making him lose his grip on the rock.

Despite being the object of Fried's anger many times before, Etar had never seen such fury in his cousin's eyes as when he lifted them towards the blond boy. Fried sprang to his feet and punched the boy in the stomach. Etar would have lost consciousness with the pain of such a blow, but this boy had the shoulders of a lumberjack and was taller than Fried by a couple inches. He winced and huffed but barely recoiled. He responded with a perfect jab, which caught Fried in the lip. A second one followed. It made a wet thud against Fried's open mouth, sending him to the ground again.

Fried didn't seem so sure of his strength anymore when he looked up at the boy, who loomed over him with his right fist at the ready. Fried stood, staggered, and puffed his heaving chest out. "You bastard," he hissed. "I'll have you flogged for this."

"You can try," the boy said, cocksure and unflappable. "I don't see any witnesses around."

Fried threw a ferocious glare at Etar, and for the first time, Etar saw fear crack through his cousin's bravado. A moment later, Fried trotted away with his head held as high as his bruised ego let him.

The boy turned back to Etar and helped him to his feet, but he didn't talk until they were sitting on a nearby bench.

"Let me see," the boy said, trying to touch Etar's face wounds.

Etar recoiled and slapped the boy's hand away. He felt lightheaded, but not enough for his survival instinct to have subsided.

Chapter 4

The boy chuckled. “Easy, bunny rabbit, I’m not here to skin you. I just want to check on your nose. You’re bleeding quite a bit.”

Etar didn’t appreciate the nickname. It was fitting, given Etar’s racing heart and frayed nerves, but in his limited experience, teenage boys never said those things kindly. “Leave it. I’ll go look for the doctor,” he said, trying to get up, but his spinning head didn’t let him get more than an inch away from the bench before he sat down again.

“Do you really want to be alone right now?” the boy asked.

Etar looked down at his shaking, bloodied hands. It was, in fact, a terrible idea to wander through the castle when Fried was both angry and humiliated.

He shook his head in the end.

“I thought so,” the boy said. “I’m Hans, by the way. Who are you? Why was that jerk chasing you?”

Etar gave Hans a perplexed look. “You work here and you don’t know who the prince is?”

Hans looked in the direction where Fried had escaped, then back at Etar. “You mean him or you?”

Etar’s eyebrows shot up. He burst into laughter but stopped when his bleeding nose gave him a stab of pain. “Him, of course! I’m no one here, but my name is Etar.”

Something changed in Hans’ eyes for an instant, but the expression quickly resolved into a pleasant smile. “Well met then, Etar. Here, take this,” Hans said, pulling a white handkerchief out of his pocket.

Etar looked down at his own white shirt. Blood had splattered all over it. He didn’t like the idea of ruining Hans’ handkerchief, but his shirt was so soaked that it stuck to his chest. He took the handkerchief, pressed it to his nose, and

leaned his head backward. “Thanks. I’ll get you a new one,” he said in a nasal voice.

“Nah, don’t worry about the handkerchief, but you should not be tilting your head back like that.”

“Why?” Etar asked.

“You’ll swallow your own blood. It could make you sick.”

Etar chuckled through his stuffy nose. “I didn’t think I’d ever find someone who knew more about nosebleeds than me,” he said, putting his head upright again.

Hans laughed. “Well, it’s not really my wisdom. Someone who knows way more about life than me once told me that.”

Etar smiled. Maybe the stars were right when they showed him this boy. He wanted to talk more, but the wind carried the voices of guards from around the corner of the castle. Etar perked up and listened. He couldn’t understand what they were saying, but they didn’t sound happy. “I think they are looking for you. Maybe you should go.”

“I’m not leaving you alone,” Hans said. “What if he returns? It looked like he wanted to kill you a moment ago.”

Etar always had a feeling things would escalate one day, but he couldn’t just lower his head at Fried’s abuse anymore, not unless he wanted to end up maimed or worse. “Leave, Hans, please. He must be filling my uncle’s head with lies right now, and I don’t want to test out if he can actually get you flogged.”

Etar stood before Hans could argue. He was still groggy from Fried’s punch but stood straight to convince Hans he was all right.

“Can I see you later?” Etar asked.

Hans smiled. “If the guards don’t get at me first.”

Etar shook his head. “Oh, they won’t. I’ll go take care of that right now.”



Chapter 5

Etar marched back into the castle to the beat of his racing heart. He had taken a gamble coming back inside alone, but his cousin was as dumb as he was predictable, and as Etar figured, he found him again in the hallway leading to Uncle Theo's sitting room, stomping towards the door.

Fried stopped and turned on his heels when he heard someone behind him. His eyes lit in fury when he saw who was following him.

"How dare you," Fried growled. He rushed towards Etar and grabbed him by the collar of his shirt, smashing his back against the wall like he wanted to break him. "You think your filthy friend will always be around to help you? Even the general doesn't always know. I'll cut your balls off for what that asshole did to me."

Etar held his breath until his lungs hurt, but he refused to break down crying. He was terrified, but all these years taking Fried's abuse had inadvertently taught him to suppress his panic. After all, the harder he cried, the harder Fried beat him.

“You touch me now, I’ll scream until my lungs burst, and I’m pretty sure Jossan is with my uncle now,” Etar hissed. He didn’t know that, but Fried had no way to verify unless he let go.

Fried’s chest rose and fell rapidly and a muscle in his jaw tensed like it would snap. But he was not angry enough to risk Jossan’s retaliation. Jossan had never touched Fried as far as Etar knew, but for reasons unknown, she was the only person Fried seemed to fear.

Fried let go and brushed his hands over his thighs, as if touching Etar had soiled him. “It doesn’t have to be now, maggot. I’ll find you alone one of these days and I’ll teach you your place.”

Fried turned around and renewed his march towards Uncle Theo’s sitting room, not even glancing back at Etar.

That wouldn’t do. Etar needed to be the first to tell his uncle what had happened.

Etar dashed down the hallway and gained over Fried, who tried to snatch him by the collar of his shirt but was a couple seconds too slow. When Etar burst into the sitting room, Jossan stood in the middle of it with her hands fisted to her sides, and Uncle Theo was sitting in his favorite chair, red-faced and scowling. They’d obviously been fighting about something—as they always were—but they both looked up when Etar came in. Their faces quickly shifted from mild annoyance to wide-eyed horror.

“What happened to you?” Jossan blurted out.

Fried, only a couple steps behind Etar, shoved him out of the way and said, “This idiot had a friend of his beat me, Dad. Look at my mouth!”

Fried was, indeed, bleeding, bruised, and dirty, but Uncle Theo barely paid any attention to him. Etar hadn’t done

his own bleeding nose any favors by running down the hallway, and his shirt was sticking to his chest with fresh blood. He made for a much more gruesome picture than Fried and his cut lip. This was, by far, the worst outcome of one of their scuffles.

“How did this happen?” Uncle Theo asked, his tone barren of emotion. He slowly stood from his chair and walked up to them.

Etar tried to explain, but Fried was already blurting out his version.

Etar was certain no one in the room expected it when Uncle Theo turned towards Fried and slapped him. Even Jossan gasped at the sharp sound. It was enough to send Fried into a confused silence.

“I will hear your cousin first,” Uncle Theo said tersely. “If I’m not satisfied with his story, I’ll ask you, but I don’t want to hear a single word coming out of your mouth until then.”

Etar had long known his uncle had no patience for either of them, but this was the first time he’d seen him take anyone’s side. It didn’t make Etar any less anxious, but at least he would have a chance to explain himself for once.

Uncle Theo listened intently, his brow creasing deeper and deeper as Etar spoke. Jossan went quiet too, but Etar could see her emotions fluctuate with every beat of the story, and her face at the end said it all. She wanted to punch Fried between the eyes.

Uncle Theo’s expression of contempt had barely changed throughout, and by the end, he only sighed.

“This is exhausting,” Uncle Theo said. “See, General? This country has no future. These two are the only ones who could inherit it, and they can’t even go a day without trying to kill each other.”

“The way I see it, it’s your son trying to do the killing, not Etar,” Jossan said through her teeth.

Uncle Theo fisted his trembling hand, looking at Etar and Fried in turns like he was deciding who to strike. “Why did my stupid brother have to burden me with yet another child? As if I ever liked any of the ones I already had.”

Even Etar felt bad for Fried at those words. Fried’s eyes went big and glossy. He stood there in silence, holding his reddened cheek. But he didn’t react, as if moving or speaking would cause him to come undone. For once, Etar didn’t blame him.

Jossan cleared her throat. “Sir, Etar is bleeding a lot. Maybe we should—”

“By all the Gods, General,” Uncle Theo said. “I’m tired of you intervening in these family matters. Etar is not your kid. I’ll manage this my way.”

Etar didn’t appreciate being spoken about like he wasn’t in the room, but he hadn’t come here to speak for himself. He was thinking of Hans and what the consequences could be for him. “I already know you don’t love me. No need to rub salt in the wound,” he said, trying to get his uncle’s attention.

Uncle Theo winced, but he didn’t bother retorting.

Etar went on. “I just want to know if you’ll have my friend flogged. He did nothing wrong, and if you want to punish someone just because, you can take it out on me.”

His uncle held a long silence. Sometimes, when Uncle Theo made these tense pauses, Etar could almost see something akin to pain in his eyes, but those moments never lasted.

“No,” Uncle Theo said at last. “The general will see that no one harms your friend,” he said in the end, his tone softer now.

Fried scowled. “But—”

Chapter 5

“Shut. Up.” Uncle Theo said, snarling at Fried, then turned to Etar again. “I don’t appreciate how insolent you have become, and I would slap you too if you didn’t look like you were about to crumple down. Go to your room and wait for the doctor. I don’t want to hear anything from either of you for a good while. Don’t come down to the dining hall tonight.”

Sometimes Uncle Theo sounded ready to give up on life, and Etar didn’t know how to feel when he saw his uncle dragging his feet out of the room, completely ignoring his son’s accusing face. Fried stormed out right after, and as soon as they were alone, Jossan cupped Etar’s cheeks.

“I want to kill him,” she said under her breath.

Etar tried to smile, but it probably just came out as a grimace of pain. “Do it before he kills me,” he said. He meant it as a joke, but Jossan sneered like she meant to go through with it.

Jossan hugged him tight, getting some of Etar’s blood on her uniform, and sighed loudly. He wanted to comfort her, to reassure him that he would be all right, but he couldn’t speak with her crushing him against her chest. His nose was a solid block of blood, snot, and pain.

“Let’s get out of here. I’m begging you,” he whispered when Jossan loosened up.

She slowly broke their embrace to look into his eyes. “We will, I promise you, but...”

That ‘but’ burned a hole through his heart. “Forget it,” he said, stepping back.

“Etar, sweetheart, this is not a good time. Be patient, please.”

He gave her a disappointed little smirk. “Forget it, Jo. I’m used to not mattering. I just thought I mattered more to you,” he said, turning away before he could see her reaction, and

before he could find out if she would follow, he started hobbling to his room without turning back.



Chapter 6

Guilt twisted Jossan's gut as she watched Etar walk away, but there were so many things she couldn't explain without making everything worse. So, as much as it hurt, she let Etar go without lifting a finger.

Letting him be angry at her felt like slicing her heart in two. She could end up losing his trust, perhaps even his love, but she couldn't tell him why he was safer here, hiding in plain sight—why they might never leave this island unless circumstances forced them.

She sighed. She couldn't think clearly with Etar pulling her heart one way and her duty pushing her the other. Maybe some fresh air would help her clear her mind.

Jossan took her horse on a ride along the island's northern coast. Only a few large fishing ships sailed here, but the people who mostly fished for their sustenance liked the inlets and the shallows for spearfishing and collecting snails and crabs.

She let her horse wander near the edge of a placid, shady inlet, where the thick mangroves lined the edges of the water with their ropey roots. A woman with her skirts tied above

her knees stood in the water, watching two skinny kids frolicking in the shallows nearby. The woman's sunbaked face seemed permanently set in a wrinkled smile.

Jossan dismounted on the first sand bank she found, took her boots off, and cuffed up her uniform trousers before wading into the water.

"General!" the woman said, waving her hand chummily as Jossan approached.

Jossan seldom left the castle nowadays, but she still knew most townspeople. This woman sold vegetables at a stall in the market. Her husband was a fisherman, and her brother a fishmonger.

"Lally," Jossan said, watching the kids for a moment. "How are the little devils?"

Lally's smile widened. "Oh, they are fine. They don't know half of what's wrong with the world."

Jossan frowned. People in town always smiled, and their laughter was infectious, but Jossan knew what fears they hid behind their jolly demeanors. "Are you still struggling with imports?" she asked. With the Gleasaman badgering merchant ships and robbing their goods, buying food from other islands had become almost impossible in the last couple of years.

Lally chuckled ruefully. "All I have are the radishes and potatoes I farm myself. I suppose it could be worse, and we should probably start trying to grow different crops at home, but it's a bit too late in the year for that."

A small fishing boat cruised in the distance. Fishing kept this island fed, but they needed more than just fish for subsistence. Jossan wished she could tell Lally this would pass, that the Gleasaman would get bored and return home, but their slow conquest had been escalating since Jossan

Chapter 6

was twenty. Now, judging by the constant news trickling from other islands, it would be a matter of a few years before they fully controlled the archipelago.

“If the Gleasaman showed up on our shores, what would you do?” Jossan asked. It sounded cynical, but the answer mattered to her.

“Die here,” Lally said with a sad little smile.

Jossan expected as much, but it was still heartbreaking to hear.

Lally laughed. “Honestly, General, would you leave? Outsiders think Skalland is boring and bare, but most don’t remember all our festivals, or the delicious food we used to serve at the port. This is my home. If I could save my children, of course I would leave, but it would carve a hole in my heart, and you know there’s nowhere to escape to, anyway.”

Jossan shared the sentiment. She’d grown up like those two kids, running half naked in the water, hiding in the tall-grass during spring, hunting hares in the moorlands. Even if the last ten years of Theobald neglecting this kingdom had forced her to stay inside the castle more, these cerulean skies and the song of the waves were engraved in her soul. She would feel stifled in one of those big cities of the continent. Lally was right. This was her home. These were her people.

“I’m sorry, General,” Lally said after a while. “I didn’t mean to bring your spirits down. We all just wish our king would speak to us from time to time. It feels like we’re on our own, and you’re the only person from that castle who listens to us.”

Jossan shook her head. “I’ll always fight for you, Lally. We will find a way.”

One of the kids ran past them, splashing water on them. Jossan laughed, but longing for that kind of freedom tinged her joy.

“We believe in you, General, but you cannot carry the weight of the world on your shoulders. Whatever comes, we’ll stay strong.”

Jossan could believe that. Skallanders were nothing, if not strong.

She left Lally with a warm hug. She still didn’t know the answers to this country’s problems, but at least talking with Lally had helped clear her head. Sorting things out with Etar wouldn’t be as simple, but she had to try, so she returned to the castle in pensive silence and made her way to his room.

Jossan stood outside Etar’s door for the longest time. Even if Etar didn’t know the things she knew, he was too smart not to suspect the choice of leaving the island was a difficult one for her.

She pressed a hand against the door and slid it down the smooth surface. “Etar,” she called at last.

She waited, but there was no reply.

“I’m sorry. I wish things were different, that I could give you everything you ever wanted, but the people of this island need help right now.”

A rustling noise came from inside, but no words. No signs of the door clicking open.

“Forgive me, please,” she said, fisting her hand. “I wish....” What? That she could forget her duty and her home? She couldn’t say that. “I know this is not what you want to hear, but I’ll always be here for you.”

For a while, all she could hear was the dusty grandfather clock at the end of the hallway. Jossan thought she’d heard Etar approach the door, but he never opened. She sighed and

turned to leave. A boy she'd never seen stood there when she faced the hallway.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, walking towards him with her hand on the hilt of her service dagger.

He tensed and looked at the stairs behind him. "I... was worried about him," the boy said. "His cousin beat him up, you know?"

"Oh, I know," Jossan said, stepping closer. The boy was tall—taller than her—well built. But judging by his face, he couldn't have been much older than Etar. "Who are you?"

"I'm Hans. I punched the prince. Just came to check on Etar."

Jossan let go of her dagger and tried hard to hide her smile. "Thank you."

"What for?"

Punching the asshole prince? "Standing up for Etar. Nobody else here would have."

Hans frowned. "That's a shame. Even if that guy is the prince, he can't do whatever he wants."

Bold. She narrowed her eyes. "Look, I'm thankful you defended him, but I'm struggling to understand why you cared enough. Why would a servant risk his position to butt into a fight that doesn't concern him?"

Hans frowned and cocked his head. "So, I was supposed to stand there and watch while that idiot bashed Etar's head to death? Is that what people do in this country? Is that what *you* would have done?"

In this country? Now that she thought about it, the kid had a foreign accent. "Of course not! But you're new here. Things are complicated."

Hans crossed his arms. “Complicated? Judging by all the shiny stuff on your uniform, you’re pretty high up the ranks. Why don’t you assign guards to look over him?”

“Guards wouldn’t dare go against the prince. It’s illegal to touch a royal without their consent,” she said.

He snorted. “If guards won’t do anything, then I will look out for him.”

“You realize what you did today was dumb, don’t you?”

“No. Letting his cousin beat him to a pulp would have been dumb. I don’t think there’s a job I care enough about to let something like that happen. I hate abusers.”

Jossan pinched the bridge of her nose. “Fine. Look, just don’t beat that idiot again. I would have done it myself long ago if he weren’t technically still a kid. The Gods know Etar needs friends, but you’re an outsider. You wouldn’t understand why things are the way they are.”

“Try me,” Hans said.

Such a cocky brat. His brashness made Jossan smile, but she shook her head. “Don’t go asking questions, and don’t get into more trouble. Understood?”

Hans gave her the most insincere smile Jossan had ever seen, but he nodded.

This boy didn’t seem like the kind to follow orders, and his eyes had the glint of a troublemaker. She would have to keep an eye on him, but maybe that was what Etar needed to take his mind off his worries—someone to get in trouble with.

“Be good,” she said before long and walked past Hans. Maybe things would be all right, if only for a moment. She would talk to Etar tomorrow, once he’d had a chance to vent.



Chapter 7

Etar thought the knock on his door was Jossan returning to plead with him. When he opened it, he was ready to tell her to leave, but he almost choked when he saw Hans' face instead. "What are you doing here? Did she see you?" Etar asked, peeking out of his door.

Hans looked down the hallway. "Who? The officer who was here a moment ago?"

"Yes. Did she tell you something?"

Hans shrugged. "Just not to get in trouble with your cousin anymore. I think she meant not to get *you* in trouble."

Jossan wasn't wrong. Every time a fight erupted between him and Fried, it was both of them getting in trouble. "I will only agree because you came really close to getting yourself arrested and flogged today, but Fried had it coming."

Hans gave him a flippant smile. "Wouldn't be my first time getting arrested."

Etar eyed Hans sideways, unable to decide if he was joking. "Right," he said. "Uh. You coming in?"

"I can't. I'm working," Hans said.

“Oh...” Etar said, more disappointed than he’d meant to sound.

Hans leaned on the frame of the door and grinned down at Etar. “*But* I need to run some errands, and I came to ask if you wanted to come with me.”

Now, that was interesting. “Where?”

“The market. The head cook sent me out to buy some stuff.”

“I can’t just walk out. I mean, I haven’t—I don’t—”

“What?” Hans asked, visibly confused. “Oh, wait. Are you telling me you don’t have permission to go out?”

Etar felt his cheeks flush. He couldn’t admit going out was on the long list of nonsensical prohibitions he lived under. It was slightly more embarrassing than he could bear. He just shook his head.

Hans chuckled, still sounding incredulous. “But the market is like twenty minutes from here. I assure you, we’re not finding any highwaymen on the road down there.”

Etar wished he could explain to Hans why he couldn’t leave the castle, but he’d asked his uncle many times, and the best answer he’d gotten was, ‘Because I say so.’

“Maybe I can ask Jossan?” he said, forgetting for a moment he was still mad at her.

Hans snorted. “What? No. Are you a prisoner here? Come on. Put on some shoes. I’ll wait.”

A loud part of Etar told him he was inviting his uncle’s ire right after escaping punishment twice, and barely at that. He snuck out at night all the time, but the difference now was he would go out in plain sight. The guards didn’t seem to like his uncle much, but the servants were all tattletales who loved telling his uncle any little thing that they considered juicy.

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Then again, he didn't want Hans to think he was a stupid little kid who couldn't do things on his own.

"Fine. Wait a minute," he said. His heart was racing, but he wasn't sure if it was out of fear or excitement.

Hans didn't know the castle as well as Etar did, so he guided the way, showing Hans the guards' routes, their blind spots, and the places they no longer cared to watch. They went undetected most of the way, but they had to stop and hide behind a pillar right before reaching the main hall. There were two servants engaged in a lively chat by the exit.

"Who cares if they see you?" Hans whispered. "Won't they think you're just going out to the courtyard? Or is that forbidden, too?"

Etar shook his head, trying to ignore the embarrassment he felt at having to hide in his own home. "I can't risk it. My uncle is already angry about what happened today and because I snuck out a couple nights ago."

"Oh, so you *do* have a rebellious streak."

"Ugh. No. I mean. Yes. Whatever." He sighed. "I would do it if that wasn't my uncle's valet. The bald one with the droopy eyes."

"Will he tell on you?"

"Ha. He wouldn't miss the chance."

Hans hummed. "Wait here."

Etar tried to stop him, but Hans was already three steps away when Etar attempted to grab his arm.

"Hi, good sir," Hans said, butting into the conversation with a huge grin on his face.

Uncle Theo's valet's face soured immediately. "What do you want, kid?"

Hans didn't lose the smile. "I'm sorry, sir. I'm new here, and I was told you're the king's valet. Am I right?"

The valet grunted.

“Yeah, I thought so. The king was looking for you. Seems there was a... spill in his room.”

The valet went pale.

Etar stifled laughter behind his hand. Hans probably didn't know how accurate that was. Uncle Theo often got angry, then drunk, then angrier because he was drunk, and ended up breaking glasses and bottles. No one wanted to deal with him when he was in a mood.

The valet ran upstairs without a word, and the other servant ambled off to continue with her duties.

Etar didn't wait to see if anyone else would come by. He left his hideout and dashed with Hans for the castle's front gates. There were a couple guards outside, but they were immersed in a game of cards, and as Etar and Hans rushed past them, neither of the men lifted their heads. They ran down the paved road under the shade of the tall mango trees that flanked it.

“You're so getting in trouble,” Etar said, a fresh bout of laughter infecting him. “When the valet finds out you were lying, he's going to scalp you.”

Hans gave him a cocky smirk. “What are the odds of me being wrong, though? In the couple weeks I've been here, I've seen people being called to clean spills in his sitting room at least six times.”

Etar's lungs burned by the time they reached the bottom of the sloping road. He stopped by a mango tree to catch his breath. The tree's branches drooped, burdened with overripe fruit like golden baubles. They smelled of summer. When was the last time he'd been so far outside the castle walls and under the shining sun?

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“Sadly, I think you’re right,” Etar said, leaning against the tree. “My uncle wasn’t thrilled last time I saw him.”

“Can you walk, or are you done after that sprint?” Hans asked teasingly.

“Just give me a second,” Etar said. He pressed the back of his head against the tree’s trunk and looked up at its thick canopy. The sun filtering through felt so good on his skin. Such a sweet taste of freedom. “Fine. Let’s go.”

The road to the market was bereft of trees, surrounded by endless moorlands, but the colorful faces of wildflowers livened the yellowing tallgrass all around. Etar hadn’t been on this road since he was little, when Jossan used to bring him along on errands and long walks. That had gradually stopped as his uncle became increasingly apprehensive about him leaving the castle.

He let the tallgrass brush against his palm and thought of the beautiful places so daintily illustrated on the pages of his books. How easy it was to get lost in reverie without the castle walls to remind him how trapped he was.

“You really don’t go out often, do you?” Hans asked, kicking a pebble across the road.

Etar shook his head. “Why did you leave your home? This place is so... bare.” A lot of people wanted to leave the island, but Etar had never met anyone who wanted to move to Skalland.

Hans shrugged. “I’ve been everywhere, and I didn’t always have a place to call home.” He looked at the sky. “But this is a beautiful place, Etar. You’ve just gotten used to the landscape. That’s why it doesn’t make you smile anymore.”

Etar looked ahead. A variegated cluster of houses huddled together in the distance. To one side of the town, the yellows, oranges, and greens of the market tents puffed and flat-

tened in the summer breeze. With the fat clouds feathering the sky, it all made for a quaint picture. He supposed Hans was right. This was a beautiful place. “I don’t remember the last time it made me smile.” And he didn’t know if he’d ever called it home. He looked back at the castle, proudly perched atop its crag by the sea. “Are you planning on staying long?”

Hans shook his head. “I go where my feet take me, but you don’t have to stay here if you don’t like it, either. I mean, how old are you? Fourteen?”

“Fifteen.”

“I was out in the world at six. Not that I’d recommend it, but by ten I already knew how to do some manual work. You’d survive.”

Etar laughed bitterly. “Hans, my only true skill is hiding and sneaking around. I would starve trying to find work on my own.”

“Can you read and write?”

“Uh, yes?”

Hans chuckled. “And you take that for granted? I didn’t learn until I was ten, and I’ve met merchants as rich as kings who can barely manage. They hire scribes to write and read their communications. There are people in the big cities working as typesetters for printers or as secretaries to lords and princes. I’m sure you could do that.”

A job reading and writing? It almost sounded too good to be true. Growing up isolated from others his age, he had never considered reading and writing were not things everyone could do. His cheeks warmed when he realized he was thinking like a sheltered little kid.

Their idle conversation brought them to the edge of the market before long. A buzz emanated from beyond the first few tents that made Etar perk up, but it wasn’t a sound at all.

Chapter 7

Etar's skin prickled, like walking from a gelid room into a sunlit yard. His fingertips itched. His nostrils flared instinctively. Uncle Theo didn't allow magicians to work at the castle, and Etar had forgotten how much magic there was in this town.

"Are you all right?" Hans asked.

"Never been better," Etar said distractedly, and even though he didn't know where Hans needed to go, he took the lead into the cluttered rows of market tents.

Skalland, as Master Colum had explained when Etar was little, was full of low-grade Windcallers and Cloudherders—people who could coax the winds and the clouds to do their bidding, but only marginally, and without the big outbursts of power managing a storm or the raging seas required. Etar could relate, but Colum insisted there was no such thing as a low-grade Starseer.

But even though there were no powerful magicians here, together they felt like the heat radiating from a huge bonfire. Hans had to take him by the arm for him to stop mindlessly sauntering towards the feel of magic in the air.

"We don't need rice today, thank you. Only nuts and a few fruits," Hans said, grabbing Etar by the back of his shirt to stop him from wandering away.

Etar looked around. People were using their magic to dust carpets, stoke fires, and call on the clouds for shelter from the sun. A large lady sitting by a stand stacked full of carrots was twirling her fingers in the air as a gentle breeze made the hem of her skirts flutter. An old man on the other side of the alley was fanning the flames under a vat of oil full of what smelled like honey fritters.

Hans chuckled next to him. “Are you drunk? Stop day-dreaming. The stand I’m looking for is on the other side of the market.”

Hans dragged him in the right direction. Some people turned their heads as he passed them by, perhaps feeling his mild magic the same as he could feel theirs. Some people smiled, and others made shocked faces when they saw him, ostensibly because of his swollen nose and the darkening bruises around it.

They wound through messy alleyways of tents, baskets, and crates until they reached a stand where three older ladies were laughing their hearts out. Etar rarely heard the servants at the castle laugh like that.

“Oooh, here he comes again!” A lady with brown-and-white braided hair yelled.

The other two stopped bickering and grinned. “Hans!” they called almost in unison.

Etar felt the urge to bolt, but Hans was already dragging him forward.

“Morning, beautiful ladies,” Hans said, making an exaggerated bow, which sent them all into a new spell of excited laughter.

“So handsome!”

“Sweet!”

“Adorable!” They spoke over the top of each other.

Etar swallowed and held his breath, wishing his magic could turn him invisible.

“Aw, who is the cutie here with you?” one lady asked.

“What happened to your nose, sweetheart?” another one added.

“Are you new? I hadn’t seen you around before,” the third one chimed in.

They spoke almost without pauses between each other. Etar didn't know if he should answer or not.

Hans put a hand on Etar's back and nudged him forward. "This is—uh—*James*," Hans said. "He's new around the castle. He was carrying some water from the well and he stumbled."

The ladies commiserated with inarticulate sounds of pity.

"Here, have some candied dates," one of them said, grabbing Etar's hand and putting a handful of dates in it.

Etar stared at the dates in his palm, surprised but pleased, while Hans talked to the ladies about dried fruits and nuts for a pie. He picked up a date and started nibbling on it. He hadn't eaten one in a while. These came from off the island, but Etar had heard vague rumors of war at sea disrupting the trade routes. Things like these dates were becoming rarer and more expensive, and suddenly he realized he had no money to pay for them.

"S-sorry," he said, but he wasn't loud enough to cut through the conversation. "Excuse me!" Everyone stared at him. His ears grew hot. "Uh..." he said and had to clear his throat. "I'm sorry. I ate one of the dates, but I don't have any money."

The three ladies first looked at him like he was speaking in a foreign language, then burst out laughing.

"They are a gift, honey," one of them said. "Just don't tell that greedy head cook. She'll scold you for eating the expensive stuff."

Etar was still shocked at the generosity of these ladies who had known him for all of two minutes. He hesitated but ate the rest of the dates and mumbled a thank you as Hans bought everything he needed.

The old man in the next stall gave him a ripe soursop, which he put in Hans' bag. A lady selling nuts told him all about her grandson in the minute or so they stopped at her stand. Etar didn't know how to feel. People said hello to them like they were all old friends, even though there was no way they could recognize him from when he was six or seven—back when Jossan still brought him out this way. So many people in the market already knew Hans by name, and they laughed at his jokes and called him 'son' or 'darling.'

"How did you become so popular so quickly?" Etar asked as they walked towards the exit. "You sure you've only been here for two weeks?"

Hans laughed. "People out here are friendly. It's the castle folks that are sour. I don't blame them, though. Your uncle seems like a handful."

Etar looked back. "Will you bring me out here again?"

"Sure. If I didn't already get you in trouble today, we could do this again soon."

As they left the last few market stalls behind, they passed a young man and an older woman sitting on stools outside a tent full of fabrics. The man sobbed loudly while the woman ran a comforting hand up and down his back.

"My aunt. My cousins. All of them," the man said. "Damn pirates. Damn them to their graves."

Hans slowed down, and Etar followed suit.

"What about your brother? Did he make it out?" the woman asked.

The man nodded and rubbed tears off his face. "Barely. He's wounded. Feverish. They shot him, Mathy. He barely made it to his barge. Had the weather not been this good for so many days, he would have drowned at sea."

Chapter 7

By this point, Hans had stopped completely. He was pretending to check the contents of his bag, but Etar noticed him listening and grew curious as well.

“Darvine is lost,” the man said. “But you know what no one dares say out loud? That it doesn’t matter if the Gleasaman are not interested in Skalland. It doesn’t matter that all they would find here are mangos. If they keep enslaving our neighbors, they will starve us all to death. And no matter where we go, everywhere is occupied or cut off from trade. We’re all dead.”

A muscle tensed in Hans’ jaw. “Come. Let’s move on,” he said gravely, pushing on toward the lonely road.

“What were they talking about?” Etar asked once they’d left the conversation behind.

“No one’s told you?” Hans asked, frowning. “The Gleasaman have been slowly invading this archipelago for years. King Wilfred knows how rich in resources some of these islands are, so he sends Admiral Ainsworth and his fleet of ironclads to conquer and ransack them while making the locals work the fields and the mines. Wilfred has given at least ten islands to his cronies—noblemen who administer the islands in his name and pay a chunk of all profits to the Crown.”

Etar inhaled sharply. He only knew that everyone whispered about warships and invasion, but no one had ever explained to him what was going on. He’d asked Jossan several times, but she always skirted around the subject.

There wasn’t much talk between them as they returned to the castle. Hans grew pensive, and his smile only returned when they were about to part ways at the main hall.

“Thank you,” Etar said softly, looking over his shoulder to check if anyone had seen them walk in.

Hans gave him a wide smile. "I'll steal you away some other day, when you look less like you attacked a rock with your face."

Etar bumped him in the shoulder with his fist. "Sorry to make you look bad in front of the ladies. I'll get my ugly head in a hemp sack next time."

Hans guffawed.

Etar didn't remember ever making anyone laugh like that. It made him smile. "I should go before Jossan starts wondering if I died inside my room."

"Fine. Take care of that nose. And rest, don't go running around," Hans said a bit more seriously. He fled to the back of the castle before Etar could point out it had been him instigating the running around.

All the way back to his room, Etar couldn't stop smiling, even though it hurt a bit. Everyone said revenge was bad and all, but after so many years of pain, it tasted so damned sweet to witness someone busting his cousin's face on his behalf.



Chapter 8

Five days had passed since Etar thought he'd die at his cousin's hands, and he had spent all of them without speaking to Jossan or his uncle.

It was his way of protesting how he had lived so far and how little people seemed to care whether he got seriously hurt. Of course, he wouldn't have felt so emboldened without Hans' presence, but it was so satisfying to see Fried give him a wide berth whenever they ran into each other.

During those days, Hans would sometimes find him in the hallways and pull him aside for a chat, but those encounters were always cut short. Even for a castle with practically no royals and nobles left, the staff had a lot of work keeping such a large place one step from falling into complete disrepair. Hans was always dashing away from the judgmental glares of other staff when they found him slacking off.

"Come to the kitchens. I'll get you some pastries," Hans whispered to him one day as they passed each other in a hallway.

It wasn't the first time. Hans had started sneaking to him all sorts of delicious morsels from the kitchens, sometimes

delivering them personally, or sending them with other servants, accompanied by funny notes. Etar ate these offerings secretly, as if sharing this newfound attention with anyone else would spoil its magic. He knew Hans was part of the machinery that kept everyone fed in the castle, but Etar wanted to believe Hans made these treats with him in mind. Every taste filled his heart a little fuller, and for a few days, joy was the new constant note of his emotions.

One day, a jelly-filled pastry came with his lunch. There was a note folded underneath it.

Meet me by the stables at two, the note read.

Etar's heart leaped in his chest. Hans wanted to meet. Etar couldn't think about anything else for the next hour.

Twenty minutes before the allotted time, Etar hurried down to the courtyard feeling like his heart was stuck in his throat. There was no reason he should be nervous around Hans, but thinking of him made Etar's ears grow hot sometimes. He had never felt this way for anyone, and he was scared to explore what that meant.

Etar knew he was coming early, so he moved into the shade of a large cluster of firebushes to one side of the stables, but he froze when he found Hans already there, sprawled on the grass, taking a nap.

Etar wasn't sure if he should wake Hans, so he sat close by, as quietly as possible, but the breeze was so pleasant he ended up throwing himself on the cool grass, too. He stretched out and looked at the swaying branches of the old bushes. Butterflies and bees made their industrious rounds in and out of its orange flowers, their steady rhythms lulling him into closing his eyes.

"You're early," Hans said.

Etar startled. "I thought you were asleep!"

Chapter 8

Hans chuckled without moving or even opening his eyes. “We get a day off every three weeks. I didn’t know what to do with so much freedom.”

“You could have called on me earlier...”

Hans finally opened his eyes and rolled on his side to face Etar. “Thought you’d have something better to do than spending all day with me.”

Etar sometimes didn’t know whether Hans was joking, but surely he had noticed Etar didn’t have friends. “I’m glad I came early,” he said, keeping his eyes intently away from Hans’ inquisitive gaze.

Hans gave up trying to make eye contact and looked up as well. They watched a hummingbird zooming overhead.

Etar took a deep breath. “If I tell you a secret, do you promise not to tell anyone?”

“Of course,” Hans said, glancing at him sideways.

“I’m a Starseer,” Etar said, his eyes trailing after the hummingbird.

Hans didn’t react. Etar supposed that was a stupid secret. His uncle forbade everyone in the castle to talk about it, but most of them knew. What made it taboo to Etar was his uncle’s insistence that he should never mention it to anyone, especially not to strangers. But Hans didn’t feel like a stranger at all.

He was about to say something else, perhaps change the topic and laugh it off, when Hans spoke again.

“Come with me,” Hans said, but it didn’t seem like he was going anywhere.

“Huh? Where?”

“Come with me,” Hans insisted. “You’re not safe here, not with the Gleasaman getting close.”

“But I—”

“Etar, you’re a Starseer. If they find out, they will want you. Do you know how rare Starseers are? There are people out there who would kill to have one at their service. People who would enslave you for your powers, and the Gleasaman are probably the worst of them.”

“But I’m not powerful, Hans. My visions are fuzzy and stupid. I asked my uncle once if he could get me a teacher, and he said my powers were not worth it.”

“Bullshit. Besides, do you think the Gleasaman will believe you? Like, ‘Sorry, sir, I’m a shoddy Starseer, you don’t really want me.’ They have instruments to find and measure magic, and contraptions to dominate a magician of any level of power. But even if they never found out, living in a country under Gleasaman control is no life. I know. I’ve been there.”

Etar didn’t know how to feel. He had been begging Jossan for years to get him out of there, but facing the actual choice wasn’t as easy as he had believed, especially because he would have to leave Jossan behind.

He looked up at the castle towers. The tallest one ended in a cupola, and he’d learned through Master Colum that it was a Starseeing Dome—a structure specially constructed to help project a Starseer’s powers. What if the Dome really made a difference? Would he be able to find another one if he left?

“I don’t know,” Etar said.

“You look like you’re thinking about it, though.”

“I’ve wanted to go away for a long time,” he said. There was an unfinished statement there, but his attention had drifted towards the Dome. His starseeing book, the one book on magic he owned, put a lot of emphasis on the domes, but the one built in Castle Skalland was out of limits for him. *‘What would you do in there? Your father knew how to use it, but*

you know nothing. What if you break something? had been his uncle's words when Etar asked him if he could go in there. His uncle then ordered Jossan to set guards at the foot of that tower day and night. It had been an overreaction, and Etar had written it off as one of his uncle's strange moods, but now he was starting to question everything his uncle had ever prohibited him from doing.

"Etar?" Hans said.

Etar sat up, cross-legged. "Do you have a lot of friends where you come from?"

Hans sat up as well, facing Etar. "I've made many friends wherever I've gone, but I've never been able to stay anywhere for too long."

Etar wanted to hug him, but embarrassment at the thought made him refrain. "And you don't want me to go into your list of friends left behind?" he said, but he chuckled, unsure whether counting himself as Hans' friend was an overestimation.

But Hans didn't seem bothered. He looked down at Etar's hand resting on the grass and started playfully plucking at his fingers. There was something wistful about the gesture, and eventually, Hans stopped to rest his big hand on top of Etar's thin one.

"You don't know how true that is," Hans said.

Etar didn't know what to do with the sudden melancholy in Hans' voice, so he didn't move or say anything. Hans' hand was rough, full of small cuts and callouses, but the work of a kitchen scullion was hard, so that was not surprising to Etar. What truly made him wonder was all that strength wrapped in such gentleness. This was the same hand that had made Fried double over, but against Etar's fingers, it felt warm and protective. Etar didn't want it to let go.

“You’re my only friend,” Etar said. “I don’t want you to go, but if you must, I will follow you.”

Hans squeezed Etar’s hand and smiled. “Oi, don’t make it sound so depressing. You’re not leaving anything particularly good behind, are you?”

Etar thought of Jossan. Even if he was still mad at her, that didn’t mean he had stopped caring. “Can you wait for me to figure some things out? Just a few days. Then we can go.”

Hans nodded. “Just remember the Gleasaman are closing in. The more we delay, the more dangerous things will become.”

“I know,” Etar said. Hans let go of his hand, and Etar took the chance to stand up. “I need to talk to Jossan.”

“Now? Bummer, I thought we could go out for a while. There’s a beautiful lake on the other side of town. Have you seen it?”

That sounded enticing, but he would lose his nerve if he didn’t do this now. “I’d really like that, but the sooner I talk to Jossan, the sooner we can go.”

“You’re not telling her we’re going, are you?” Hans asked with a raised eyebrow.

“No. She would never allow it, but I need—” He stopped. Hans wouldn’t understand. “I need a favor from her.”



Chapter 9

Etar found Jossan in the war room, a vestige from this castle's grander days when there had been a real military on the island. To Etar, that was ancient history. He'd never known a different version of Skalland than the one he lived in now.

The gigantic round table in the middle of the room had a daintily painted map of the archipelago on its varnished surface. Highly detailed houses, trees, and animals populated every territory. It had faded in places, but it was still quite beautiful. Carved wooden pieces lay scattered over it without rhyme or reason: ships, banners, knights on horseback, and armed soldiers, all dispersed helter-skelter across the ocean. Etar remembered Jossan bringing him here to play with these as if they were innocent toys and not markers for military units. The memory made him smile.

Jossan sat with her back to the enormous oriel window at the far end of the room. A bunch of tiny scrolls—like the ones homing pigeons carried—and some larger papers were strewn over the table before her. She was holding her head with both hands as if she expected it to fall off her neck.

“Jo?”

Evidently, she hadn't heard him walk in. She jolted upright and knocked some of her papers off the table.

Etar helped her pick them up. “Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you,” he said.

Jossan shook her head. “Forget about them. Come, sit with me,” she said. She sounded both eager and exhausted.

Etar pulled a chair close to her and draped himself over the table. Knowing what he had promised Hans, he didn't dare look her in the eye.

“What's the matter? You're finally accepting you miss me tucking you into bed at night?” she asked mischievously, mussing his hair up.

Etar chuckled and rolled his eyes. “You haven't done that since I was seven.”

“Yeah. Well, deal with it. When you see a kid grow up, it's hard not to think back to when you first held them in your arms and they were still drooly and adorable.”

Etar gave her an annoyed sideways look, but he was smiling. “*Drooly*. I was drooly when you met me? I was five.”

“You should have seen yourself eating a ripe mango for the first time...”

Did he really try mangos at age five for the first time? One of the many irrelevant mysteries he might never have an answer to. But the comment still made him laugh. “I don't think I'm much more skillful at it now.”

“Is it too much to presume I'm forgiven?” she asked, but her tone was lower, more apologetic this time.

Etar straightened himself and sighed. “There's nothing to forgive. But I am still a little miffed.”

“I'm sorry,” she said.

Chapter 9

Etar shook his head. “I heard about the Gleasaman invading Darvine. Why do you hide these things from me? I’m not a little kid anymore.”

Jossan’s cheeks went red and she averted her eyes. “I didn’t want to worry you with things you can do nothing about. The Gleasaman should be my problem and your uncle’s problem. Not yours.”

“But it would have helped me understand why you didn’t want to get out of here. I mean, I don’t know a lot about politics or war, but I assume if they caught us in open water, they would blast us out of this world.”

“Well... yes. I shouldn’t have underestimated you.”

Etar hated being mad at Jossan. It didn’t happen often, but when it did, he always ended up feeling guilty. So, he hugged her, his stomach knotting up when he thought this might be his way of mending things before he left. But it didn’t have to be permanent, did it? Once he was safely out of his uncle’s reach, he could write to Jossan and tell her where he was, and they would be together again.

But that wasn’t why he’d come to her.

“Do you really believe I’m old enough to understand certain things or are you just saying it so I won’t be mad at you?”

Jossan let go of him and looked him in the eye. “I wouldn’t do that to you. It’s just that I forget how fast you’re growing up, and I still feel this stupid need to shield you from the world sometimes. But you’ll be a man in a few years, and I should really—I’m not even your family, Etar, I shouldn’t—”

Her eyes filled with pain. This would not be easy. “Maybe you’re not my blood, Jo, but no one in this place feels more like family to me than you. My uncle has never even hugged me. Not that I can remember. How am I supposed to feel about that?”

She sighed. "I promise I'll do better," she said.

Etar took a deep breath. This would be a test for both, but he needed to ask. "Then I want something, but it's a difficult thing. I have a feeling you'll say no."

Jossan furrowed her brow. "What?"

"I want to go into the Dome."

He could see her chewing the inside of her cheek. "But what if it's dangerous?"

"My starseeing book says the opposite, that it's more dangerous not to have a dome. And I don't know if it's that, but I've been feeling strange for a few years now. I get headaches, nightmares, and the birthmark under my hair—" He paused to touch it. It was just a small black dot under his hairline at the base of his head. He didn't even know he had it until it had started bothering him a few years ago. "Sometimes it swells, and it itches. Those things go away only if I go into a trance. And even then, they only go away for a few days."

"Why had you never told me any of this?" she asked but seemed to catch the irony. "I mean, I know I haven't been forthcoming about a lot of things, but Etar, if you're ill, then—"

"Please, don't say I should tell the castle doctor. I have. He said it's normal in puberty. I don't think he cares, though. He didn't even examine me."

Jossan looked up to the ceiling, then at the scrolls and letters on the table. She was obviously thinking hard about it, but before Etar could protest her hesitation, she spoke again. "All right. We'll do it. But your uncle cannot know."

"We will?" he asked, a little surprised she'd given in so easily.

She nodded. "Wait for me tonight. I'll try to free myself around ten."

Chapter 9

It was a bittersweet moment. He would finally get to see the inside of the Dome, which he'd fervently desired for a long time, but it also meant he would be faced with whether he was a weak magician.

"Thank you, Jo," he said, hanging himself from her shoulders.

She held him in a spine-breaking, suffocating embrace, but he wouldn't have it any other way. He'd always loved her rough affection, and he would miss it so much once he was gone.



Chapter 10

Etar tried to sleep while he waited for Jossan, to prepare for whatever awaited him at the Dome, but it was useless. He was too anxious, and his imagination kept building up all the worst possible outcomes of the transgression he was about to commit.

He'd repeatedly leafed through the most important parts of his starseeing book, but the one page he kept stopping at was the one with a full-page illustration of a Starseer standing under a white cupola, wearing beautifully embroidered floor-length robes. His whole being glistened under a beam of light coming from a skylight.

Jossan knocked on his door around eleven, an oil lamp in her hand. He was not ready for this, but he filled his lungs and walked out to get some of his questions answered.

"Are you nervous?" Jossan asked, squeezing the nape of his neck briefly as they walked.

He nodded but kept looking ahead. "What if..."

Jossan sighed. "Etar, you know you can talk to me, right?"

He did. How many times had he cried his embarrassment and pain on her shoulder when his cousin humiliated

or beat him? Jossan had never revealed his secrets or made him feel bad about crying. She'd never judged him for his vulnerability. "What if it's me who's lacking? What if I go in there and nothing changes?"

Jossan stopped him and made him turn to her. The flickering fire of her oil lamp dipped her face in shadows, but even in this distorted light, Etar could see the deep concern in her eyes. "No matter what happens up there, I will never stop helping you look for answers. If—*when* we get out of here, I'll help you find someone who can teach you."

Etar trapped the tip of his tongue between his teeth. It wasn't too late to say no to Hans. Maybe Jossan meant it this time. "When would we leave, Jo?"

"I've been saving money for a while, but a trip to the continent is not cheap."

"What about other islands?"

"Out of the question. The Gleasaman have taken over three quarters of the archipelago, and it's just a matter of time before they conquer us all. There are several countries on the continent that we can travel to that are safe from their influence, but—"

"You need more time. I know," he said, deflated.

"Well, yes," she said, looking down.

"I'm not mad at you anymore, Jo. I'm just sad that we're both trapped here, but I guess that's not your fault."

They stood in the gloomy hallway, looking away from each other until Jossan pointed with her chin down the hallway. "Let's go. We have work to do."

They passed several guards on their way to the north tower, where the Dome sat. It felt strange not having to hide from them. They all saluted Jossan amicably, and some stopped to tell her about their personal lives, like the births

of babies or newly purchased fishing boats. They all treated her like an old friend, which was not surprising. Jossan was tough and an excellent swordswoman, but she was also kind and understanding. It was easy to love and admire someone like her.

“Oi, boss, g’nite,” one of the men standing guard at a rather unremarkable wooden door said. Etar wondered if the Dome would be as lackluster as this old door.

“Night, Ed,” she said, nodding at the guard.

“What a surprise. You never come see us here, sir,” the other guard said.

“Don’t be dramatic, Finn. You say it as if I never speak to you guys,” she said, laughing.

The guards barely looked at Etar, but that was not new.

“How can we help you tonight?” Ed asked.

“Just open the door for us and keep watch, will you?” she said.

They both looked at each other, then at Etar.

“Sir?” Finn said.

Jossan put a hand on Etar’s back and nodded. “The servants can’t know. They’d run tell the king the first chance they got.”

Ed shrugged. “You’re the boss,” he said and opened the door for her without further questions.

“Let us know if someone comes,” Jossan said, nudging Etar forward.

The staircase inside the tower was wide and solid, and it looked like people came here often to clean because, at least in the wan lamplight, he could see no cobwebs or dust.

Etar counted the stairs as they went up to keep his mind away from anxious thoughts. Skinny and unathletic as he was, by the time he counted sixty, he was already lagging

behind Jossan, but it wasn't only the effort making him feel winded. When he placed his hand on the wall for support, his blood started pumping faster, buzzing in his ears. Something in this tower was very similar to what he felt in the market—a warmth, an expanding vibration of energy that tickled deep in his ear and made his fingertips tingle.

By the time they reached the top, Etar was panting heavily, and his heart felt like it was about to push out of his mouth. He put his hands against the double doors at the top of the stairs, arms outstretched, his head hanging between them.

“Are you all right?” Jossan asked, squeezing Etar's shoulder.

Etar nodded stubbornly and let the coolness of the metal-plated doors spread over his palms. He pushed his forehead against the bas-relief figures wrought on the surface. He had come too far to let a staircase beat him. “Just—give me a minute.”

Jossan withdrew her hand and waited, but her worry was palpable.

Soon, Etar's hunger to see this place grew larger than his exhaustion, and he straightened himself away from the door. Under the orange lamplight, he could see some shapes on the ornate doors. Moons, suns, planets, and stars, wearing amused or angry human faces.

Jossan moved closer to examine the place where the two doors came together. “No idea how to open this one. I don't see a lock. Or a handle,” she said as she tried to push the doors open. They didn't budge.

Etar took a step back. It felt like he was looking at a puzzle to which he was supposed to know the answer. He put a hand on each door and felt a subtle warmth radiating from

the metal. He pushed. It took the massive doors a moment to give way, but they barely made a sound as they swung open.

Jossan gave him an astonished look, but Etar was too busy being hypnotized by the waft of energy that hit him in the face to pay much mind.

The hum of magic inside hissed in tune with the flow of his blood, and he felt an immediate, irresistible attraction to the place. The moment he set foot into the dark, echoey chamber, a collection of brass lamps that ringed the high wall of the Dome lit into golden orbs, their brightness bouncing off every polished surface.

Etar's eyes took a moment to adjust. When they did, he saw Jossan staring wide-eyed around the immense chamber. "How did you do that?" she asked.

"I... didn't do anything?" Etar said, but somehow he knew the lights were reacting to his presence, and that was precisely what was supposed to happen.

As his initial surprise settled, he looked around to take in with his own eyes what he had only seen in drawings. The room must have been over a hundred feet in diameter and perhaps twice as tall at the apex of the cupola. Every brick forming the walls was white marble. Every huge tile on the floor was a resplendent type of black stone Etar had never seen before.

An enormous pool occupied most of the floor in the middle of the room, leaving only a few yards around it as a walkway. The pool had a few inches of water in it that had somehow not gone stagnant. Above the pool, right at its center, a skylight cut through the ceiling, letting the moon reflect on the water.

Etar reached behind his head. The itch in the back of his neck started again with redoubled fury. Was his birthmark

reacting to this place? It made him want to tear his skin off, but the thrumming sensation in the room grew inside him until it overpowered every one of his senses, and soon he forgot about the itch and everything else. A single-minded purpose enveloped him, and suddenly, he knew what to do. He took his shoes off, rolled the cuffs of his trousers up, and walked into the ankle-deep water.

“Etar?” Jossan called nervously, still standing at the edge of the pool. But there was no space for anything in Etar’s head anymore. He waved a hand at Jossan to say he was fine but couldn’t push words out of his mouth.

Etar strolled to the middle of the pool and stopped under the skylight. The lights dimmed almost to total darkness again. He looked up. A thick cloud moved over the moon, and the moment it passed, everything Etar thought he knew about starseeing was shattered into tiny pieces.

Hundreds of times in the ten years he’d lived under his uncle’s care, Etar had gone out to the lighthouse at night to try his magic. But this forbidden room had always been in the back of his mind, tickling his curiosity, making him wonder what it would be like to follow in the footsteps of all the great Starseers named in his book.

But in coming here, a truth both painful and mind-boggling revealed itself. He had grown up believing it was he who lacked power when in fact, it was the setting that was all wrong.

Standing in the middle of the starmirror—as his book called the pool at the center of every starseeing chamber—he was stripped so completely of his reality that he wasn’t sure anymore what flesh was. He tried to scream, an impossible feat without lungs, and everything around him became darkness poked through with starlight. No beginning. No end.

He fell upwards, and as he shot through the endless night, he noticed with alarming lucidity that he was being pulled into a disc of burning red light. A star, surely, but he had never seen one up this close. He'd never noticed the torrents of fire whirling and exploding on their surfaces.

The star soon eclipsed his view, and a high-pitched sound pierced maddeningly through his core. There were words in there. He could distantly recognize the cadences of spoken language, but to his understanding, it was all terrifying gibberish. He recoiled from the turbulent sea of red light. He knew the message the star was trying to convey was important, but Etar didn't want to hear its discombobulating yammering anymore.

As the star pulled him in with unfathomable force, he tried to scream again, and this time his breathless efforts shattered the trap of his subconscious like a crystal wall. He was in the Dome again, a fact he only registered because water sloshed around his feet, and Jossan's voice was coming from somewhere near his face.

"... wake. Please, wake up!"

Etar shook all over. He couldn't draw enough breath to speak. But most concerning of all, he couldn't see. The ghost of the star dominated his visual field. He dug the heels of his hands desperately into his eye sockets and screamed when the light persisted behind his tightly shut lids.

"Etar, please, tell me what's wrong," Jossan said, holding Etar's shoulders firmly between her hands.

It took several minutes for him to recover some composure. Every time he'd gone up among the stars, he returned with a pleasant sensation of having just woken from a good night's sleep. Now, he couldn't stop crying, he was blind, and his head felt like someone was trying to rip it open with a

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cleaver. “I can’t see,” he whispered, his voice breaking. His body faltered.

“Fuck,” Jossan said under her breath, her voice shrill. “Hang in there.” She hauled him up over her shoulder and started going somewhere. Etar could guess the rise and fall of the stairs, but after they hit the hallway, it was impossible to know where they were. All he could hear was Jossan’s frantic, whimpering breath and some of her men asking her questions she clearly couldn’t answer.

And slowly, as they moved along the castle hallways, Etar’s consciousness slipped out of his grasp.



Chapter 11

The fishing port. High noon.

T*A shaft of scorching sunlight cut through the steel-gray sky, washing over Etar's head. Beyond this circle of light, thunderous waves and the enraged howl of the wind drowned every other sound. The storm just off the coast had turned the sea into a jumble of gray strokes, through which Etar could see broken piers on fire and what looked like the ragdoll shapes of dead bodies bobbing in the water. From the irate sea, seven black warships pointed their thick cannons at the shore. Etar didn't recognize the sigil of the white eagle on their bows, but whoever they were, they did not come in peace. Etar watched on, transfixed, and when the first shot rang, a cannonball flew in his direction, snuffing the scene into black.*

More than waking, Etar shook violently back into reality. He sat up, gasping for air, unsure how or why he was back in his bed. Painfully bright sunlight flooded the room.

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Immediately the burning itch behind his head started raging again. He scratched savagely at it. It felt like his birthmark had turned dry and rugged, like a thick scab that simply refused to come off. He only stopped when his fingernails came back speckled with blood.

Jossan sat in a chair beside his bed, her upper body slumped over the mattress. She had fallen asleep there, but she jolted awake when she felt him move.

“Etar!” she said breathlessly. She waved a hand in front of his eyes. “Can you see?”

He gave her a confused look until he remembered that all he could see was a bright light that occluded everything else last night. It took him a few panicked breaths to calm down enough and realize there was pain behind his right eye, but there were no signs of the blinding light.

“Etar?” Jossan insisted.

He looked down at his shaking hands. Everything from the experience in the Dome to that vision of the ships made him shudder. He had finally realized he could do this. He was a *real* Starseer, but he’d never imagined his powers could have such alarming effects.

“He needs to know,” Etar said, stray thoughts mixing in his head. The clock on his nightstand marked five past ten, which was late in the morning even for his night owl standards. He started getting out of bed, but Jossan grabbed his arm.

“What are you talking about? Etar, you need to rest. The doctor came last night, but he didn’t know what to do. We don’t know why you fainted. You could be seriously hurting yourself.”

Etar shook his head and fought feebly to get out of her grip. He could barely lift his arms. “Jo, he has to know. My uncle has to know. I saw them. The ships.”

Jossan gave him a confused look. “What do you mean?”

His throat was too dry, his thoughts too jumbled to make the effort. He got out of bed without explaining and started mindlessly trying to find a shirt that wasn’t crumpled. He was still wearing the same clothes from last night, and they emanated an appalling smell of dried sweat, which his uncle would not appreciate. But what did that matter? If he told his uncle about the vision, that would be the least of his problems.

“Etar, what are you doing?” Jossan asked desperately.

Etar shook his head again. “I can finally prove to my uncle I’m not useless,” he said, putting on his shoes and giving up on changing his smelly clothes. “You can come if you want.”

Jossan tried to physically stop him again as he made his way to the door, but he took a deep breath and made a stand. “Jo, if you really meant what you said to me—that you were underestimating me and you want to do better—then you need to let me do this.”

She hesitated, tried to say something, but ended up nodding. “What are you going to tell him?”

“You’ll find out if you come with me,” he said.

She exhaled. Maybe she could already sense this was a stupid idea, but Etar needed to take advantage of his momentum. He would never again feel this powerful impulse to face his uncle.

They found Uncle Theo as he was most of the time nowadays—huddled in his sitting room’s favorite armchair, eyes lost in the sea, nursing a glass full of sour wine. The door was open, so they just walked in.

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“What do you want now, General?” Uncle Theo asked without turning towards the door.

“I need to speak to you, Uncle,” Etar said before Jossan could reply.

Uncle Theo twisted around to see him. “You’re not spilling blood all over the place again, are you?”

Etar wished that was the issue. He turned to Jossan. “Could you close the door, please?”

Jossan helped him with the door, but now she and his uncle were looking at him like he had grown a horn in the middle of his face.

His uncle got up from his chair and came closer, his eyes traveling between Etar and Jossan. It was a little early for his uncle to be drinking, which could only mean he was in a bad mood even before they walked in here. All the courage Etar had worked up on his way here began fading.

Etar took a deep breath. “Uncle, I had a vision.” He wasn’t looking at Jossan, but he could feel her holding her breath.

“Sir, I—” Jossan started.

Uncle Theo’s face hardened. “Let him speak, General. The boy just made an interesting confession. Don’t try to protect him.” He was speaking deliberately, which only made the stiffness of his tone scarier.

Etar heard Jossan swallow.

“So. What is it, Etar?” his uncle asked, sounding almost casual. “Because I thought we agreed it did you no good to practice your magic. Magic is unseemly, and yours is not even powerful enough to be impressive.”

Etar winced. Uncle Theo had never beaten Etar, but he knew how to deliver the precise words that would cut the deepest into his pride. “I know I disobeyed you, but—”

“Then why?” his uncle asked with a cruel tightness around the question.

“I....”

“Sir,” Jossan tried again, but Uncle Theo shushed her.

“Let. The boy. *Speak*,” Uncle Theo said, biting out every word.

Etar fought back his despair. Trying to explain the why was useless, but the vision had been important. He could feel it in his bones. “I saw warships attacking the fishing port. There were dead bodies. A lot of flotsam. A pier was on fire.”

Uncle Theo’s nostrils flared. “Warships?” he asked, grinding the word between his teeth. “What in the Dark Pit do you know about warships? Have you ever seen one? I think you stayed up too late reading and dreamed about pirates.”

Etar could sense Jossan trying to make eye contact, but if he returned the look, he would lose his nerve, so he kept his eyes on his uncle. “It wasn’t a dream. It happened after a trance. I know it was a vision.”

“And when have you ever predicted anything more interesting than rain? Your visions are useless!” Uncle Theo shouted.

“They may be useless, but they are never wrong,” Etar said, bunching all his faltering courage up in his chest.

Uncle Theo’s breathing became shallow. “And how, may I ask, did you go into a trance? You just *fell* into it?” he asked tersely.

Jossan tried to say something, but Etar wouldn’t let her burn herself in his name. “I snuck into the Dome,” he said hurriedly.

Uncle Theo shot Jossan a deadly look. “In defiance of my orders. Did you know about this, General? Is that why you’re here with him?”

“Yes, sir, but your orders are causing Etar pain. He told the doctor about headaches and other unexplained symptoms, but he did nothing. Etar figured out on his own that his trances help soothe him.”

By this point, his uncle was purple with rage, but Etar didn't let him voice his anger. “What does any of that matter, Uncle? Punish me if you must, but the vision was real. I saw those ships. They were all black metal, and they had eagles clutching bleeding hearts painted on their prows.”

Something in his uncle's face changed abruptly. It looked like fear.

“Leave,” his uncle said.

“But—”

“Now!”

And that was the extent of Etar's bravery. Jossan tried to touch his shoulder, but he was already escaping the room before his tears could fall in his uncle's presence.

Etar cursed the fate that had let his parents drown at sea while sparing his life. He sobbed into his hands outside the room and heard a heated argument that pierced even through the thick oaken door of his uncle's sitting room. He thought of eavesdropping but returned to his room instead and buried his face in his pillow to let his frustration flow.

He'd thought he could prove to his uncle he was useful and powerful, but his uncle, as always, had preferred to shut him down. All the more reason to leave with Hans. He doubted Uncle Theo would feel anything but relief once he was gone.



Chapter 12

“Those were Gleasaman ships the boy was talking about!” Theobald yelled in Jossan’s face after Etar left the room.

Jossan remained stoic. For years she had fought for the position she now held in this defunct court. She was a single-minded fighter, the sharpest student in those tactics lessons old General Jonas had taught to the once competent Skallander military. She also was the only woman who had dared brave the ascent through the ranks of a male-dominated institution, and she had wrestled them for their respect. Now, all those senior officers she had looked up to were gone, and the military structure had collapsed into a lackluster castle guard. More every day, her accomplishments felt like ashes streaming through her fingers.

But now, what did she fear? Theobald kicking her out and leaving Etar and the rest of this kingdom to their own devices. Disappointing her men, especially Rowan. Those were the only reasons she still tried to uphold Theobald’s authority.

“So, you believe him,” she mumbled, trying not to sound sarcastic.

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Theobald laughed. It was jarring, but also the liveliest sound Jossan had heard from him in months. “Of course I believe him! But I’m not about to discuss politics with a kid.”

Jossan tasted bile in the back of her throat. “Why does all this suddenly matter to you? I’ve been warning you for months that the Gleasaman are closing in, choking our trade routes. I’ve *told* you we need a plan, and you’ve blatantly ignored me. How is it different now?”

The king took a shuddering breath. “You *know* the only thing they could be after if they’re coming here. That idiot nephew of mine just undid everything I’ve worked for all these years. How in the world did you let this happen? I gave you explicit orders!”

Jossan felt the discomfort of a decade of secrets scratching deep inside her chest. She was not prone to anger, but she was getting close today. “Maybe, sir, if I understood why it’s such a sin for him to go into the Dome, I would care more about your nonsensical rules.”

Theobald clenched his jaw and examined her for a chillingly long couple of seconds. “I owe you no explanations,” he said breathlessly, his anger resolving into something darker and more unreadable. “And I will bear no insubordination from either of you. He is not to leave his room for seven days. No books. And your punishment, General, will be to enforce his.”

That was a slap in Etar’s face, and it was callous even for Theobald’s standards. “He just warned you about this horrible danger, and this is how you repay him?” she asked, outrage bubbling up in her chest.

“Oh, General, you know what your biggest mistake is? Not knowing where to draw the line. I’ve told you many times that boy is not yours. Never will be.”

Jossan bit her cheek, the reality of that statement burning like a trickle of acid down her gullet. “Never said he was....”

“Good! If you understand that, then by all the Dark Gods of the Pit, stop coddling him. He’s exactly like his father, you know? Turning his big brown eyes up at people to get on their good side. That doesn’t work with me. Even if you think I’ve been sitting on my hands all these years, I know what I’m doing, so I’ll tell you this once. He is dangerous. Stop enabling him.”

Jossan’s fistful hands shook at her sides. “But seven days—”

“*For his own good.* Now, don’t you think you can spend all this time with him. You’ll go to his room, oversee that the servants take his books away, and put the padlock on the latch. You will give the key to my valet, and you will stay away for seven days. The staff will take care of his needs.”

“But, sir—”

“Can’t you do as I say for once, woman?” he shouted at last. “If you don’t obey this once, I’ll make sure you never see him again.”

Watching as a group of servants took Etar’s books away was, indeed, punishment. He didn’t cry. He didn’t make a sound. But the dullness in his eyes was infinitely worse than any tears would have been.

“Are you all right?” Jossan asked, sitting next to him on the bed.

“It’s only a week. Right?”

His listless words broke her heart all over again. She nodded, racking her brain for something comforting to say, but came up empty.

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Etar only showed signs of life when a servant picked his starseeing book from the writing table. He perked up and bit his lip, but Jossan stared the servant down.

“Not that one,” she ordered.

“But—” the servant started.

Jossan went to snatch the book from the servant’s hands and found no resistance when she scowled down at the woman. Jossan returned to sit with Etar and put the book on his lap.

Etar hugged the book to his chest, and a fat tear rolled down his cheek.

Jossan wanted to believe his sadness was just about being isolated for seven days, but Etar was used to solitude. It obviously went deeper than that.

She brushed his messy hair out of his forehead and kissed him there. “I know he’s being unfair, but he has his own issues. It’s not that he doesn’t care,” she whispered while watching the servants’ work. Judging by their faces, they didn’t relish searching Etar’s mess and hauling all his heavy books away.

Etar shook his head. “Don’t excuse him to make me feel better, Jo. I know he wishes I’d never come here. He’s said so many times.”

She knew words would not fix his heartbreak, so she put an arm around his shoulders and squeezed him. She sat there in silent support until the last of the servants was out of the room, and when she stood to leave, he grabbed her by the wrist.

“Jo, those ships. That was not a dream,” he said. “You believe me, don’t you?”

Her shoulders locked. “I do. I believe you.”

He held her gaze for a moment, as if questioning the honesty of her words. In the end, he acknowledged her with a wordless nod, then threw himself in bed and turned his back to her.

Seven days.

Jossan screamed in the first empty hallway she could find and crouched with her back against the wall until a guard saw her and asked if she was all right. She was tired, she told him. She felt ill. Both things were true, but probably not in the sense the young guardsman thought. Eventually, he walked with her to her room, asking before leaving if she really would be fine alone. She wouldn't, but she preferred solitude to let her anger run its course.



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The thought of Etar's vision fueled Jossan's insomnia that night. After she overcame her anger at Theobald's unfair decision to punish Etar, a constant sensation that her heart would race out of her mouth walked with her every minute.

The Gleasaman were coming, and she dreaded thinking deeper about the reasons behind their sudden change of heart.

She got up early the following day to visit the fishing port. She had been going there almost every day in the last few months, but even though Etar's vision hadn't come with a date attached, things felt infinitely more urgent now.

As she rode through the colorful fishing huts that crowded the beach, Jossan wondered how the sticky heat of the coast never put a damper on the liveliness of the port. Here, under the bright sun, the world was always moving forward, and the sky would have to crumble down for the fishermen, merchants, and tradesmen of Skalland to stop the hustle that put food on their tables.

Jossan dismounted at the end of a pier and pushed through the lively crowd of sailors going about their duties

until she found a sea captain she knew. She tried to make herself small while she waited for the captain to fetch some messages from his ship. He commanded a crew of merchants that had come from Isla de Sapos last night. The intrepid little crew was one of the few still daring to pass through the lines of Gleasaman ships infecting the waters to the north-east of Skalland.

The captain returned to her clutching a bunch of pigeon-carried notes. All throughout the archipelago, this was the trustiest and fastest way for sailors to send messages back home, the disadvantage being that the carrier pigeons could only take with them what fit in the little bracelets around their feet.

“Here, General, hold these for me,” the captain said as he unfurled the tightly wound notes and passed them to Jossan. “I think I saw one that caught my eye this morning. It was from last night.... Here!”

Jossan took the note and read it twice.

TQOB making sharp turn Wward. 6 Gmn frigs following.
Coordinates and times followed the message.

“Huh?” This message used shorthand for too many things she was unfamiliar with.

“Oh! Sorry. I read these so often. I forget other people don’t know. It says here that The Queen’s Obsidian Blade made a sudden turn westward last night. Another six of Ainsworth’s frigates were escorting her.”

“The Queen’s Obsidian Blade?”

The captain smiled patiently. “She’s Ainsworth’s flagship. Such a beauty! It’s a shame he’s using her to wreck innocent people’s lives.”

Jossan fisted her hand around the note. “This was west from Darvine? Are we in their path?”

The captain patted Jossan's shoulder chummily. "I've received ten different reports of that movement since last night. They may be headed here, but there are more enticing targets along their way. Isla de Sapos has gold. Bromms has a lot of timber—no offense to your island, General. I love it here, but I don't think mangos and soursops are what the Gleasaman want."

She tried to smile. That was what she'd been telling herself, but there was something ominous about that unexpected turn happening almost at the same time as Etar's vision. "Why would a man like Ainsworth change the course of his flagship so suddenly?"

The captain shrugged. "Could have received notice of some juicier prize than Darvine. Maybe some emergency. Who knows? It takes a lot of coal to move a ship that size. Ainsworth wouldn't waste his time if whatever he's after wasn't important."

Jossan's mouth dried up. No one here knew that the one prize Skalland was hiding from the Gleasaman was far more valuable than all the gold and timber in the world. "Thank you, my friend. Come have lunch at the castle one day, if you have the time. Your reports are always helpful."

The captain laughed. He had several gold teeth, which were a sign of status among sailors—especially merchants. He probably gave her these reports out of pity because Jossan knew all too well she had nothing to offer this man in the way of reward. "You're too kind, General, but we're always on the move. Now, if you want to join my crew one day, I see you have a strong sword arm and a good strategic mind on your shoulders. Good fighting men are always in short supply. You'd be welcome."

Fighting *men*. She was used to people around her treating her like a man. It bothered her more when she was twenty, and at thirty-five, it still didn't feel right, but she had learned to choose her more important fights. Besides, she knew this man meant no harm.

"Aren't women bad luck on ships?" she asked with a cheeky smile.

The captain laughed again, louder this time. "You could be no one's bad luck. You're too smart." He gave her a little nod. "I've got to get going, but it's always nice chatting."

Jossan patted his shoulder goodbye and returned to where she had tied her horse. On her way back home, the thought of Ainsworth setting his sights on Skalland revolved in her head. She was taking the slope up to the castle, her mind still wandering, when a strange scene met her outside the gates.

Two of her men were shouting at a rider dressed in black from head to toe, mounted on a humongous pitch-black stallion.

"Show your hands!" One of her men ordered.

Both guards had their swords out, but the rider didn't seem to care.

"You will anger my horse," the rider said calmly. He had his hood drawn up, casting his face in shadows.

"What's going on?" Jossan asked, riding up to them.

"General," One of the men said. "This man says he wants to speak with the king, but he refuses to say what about."

Jossan understood why her men were on edge. The stranger wore a beautiful silken cloak that covered most of his body, but from what she could see—the many gold rings on his hands, his expensive-looking riding boots, his shiny black saddle—he was not the typical visitor Skalland re-

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ceived. And with the menace of invasion looming ever closer, it made sense that a wealthy stranger like him would raise her men's alarms.

She moved her horse between her men and the rider, gesturing for the guards to stand down. "Show me your face, sir," she said.

The stranger pulled his cloak back. His black hair spilled down to his waist, his skin was pale as summer clouds, and his features sharp and patrician. Even her men behind her went silent at the sight. He was definitely not an islander.

"Now, could you please dismount?" she asked, but she didn't intend to do the same.

The black rider obeyed without protest, and his horse snorted like the bass of a pipe organ. The scary animal stood perfectly still, and Jossan noticed it wore no bridle or reins. How could anyone ride this fearsome beast bridleless?

"Put your cloak behind your shoulders," she said next.

He obeyed without protest. The outfit under the cloak was all black, embroidered in iridescent black threads, and it was just as rich and beautiful as the rest of his garb.

"There is no need for hostility... General, was it your men called you?" the black rider said. His voice was smooth, no louder and no lower than it needed to be. His accent was not one Jossan had ever heard before.

Jossan swung her leg over her horse's haunches and slid off her saddle. "We don't treat strangers like this, but surely you know the waters around Skalland are infested with Gleasaman ships. If you're with them, know we don't take kindly to your ilk."

The stranger's face remained mostly expressionless, but a muscle twitched in the corner of his mouth when Jossan mentioned the Gleasaman. "Then we have a common enemy,

General, but I am afraid I bear ill omens. I would like to discuss them privately with your king.”

What had that vision done that everything was tumbling down like a landslide? Suddenly, it felt like time had already run out for Skalland, but they didn’t know it yet.

It was exceedingly strange that this princely man was here with no one at the port having noticed him and reporting it back to her. But if he genuinely had news about the Gleasaman, she needed to hear what he had to say.

“Search him,” she ordered the guards.

The stranger didn’t seem to enjoy the contact, but he didn’t resist the guards patting his clothes down in search of weapons.

“Take care of his horse,” she said once she was sure the man was carrying no weapons, then guided him inside.

Her two men tried to follow, but she waved them off. She couldn’t leave the gates unguarded as things stood.

“What is your name, if I may know, General?” the stranger asked.

This man’s refined politeness made her uneasy. Not even in Skalland’s better days had she seen a visitor with such manners. “Jossan. I’m the Chief of Defense here,” she said dryly. “And you are?”

“You can call me Áehd. I am an alchemist,” he said.

What a strange name. She expected him to elaborate, but he kept walking in silence. Then, a few hallways down, Jossan stopped hearing the click of his boots as they neared the castle’s sleeping quarters.

She turned around.

“General,” he said, standing still as if listening for something. “Are there really no magicians left in this castle?”

She stiffened at the question. “I never said such a thing.”

“It is said that King Theobald lost his mind and expelled all magic practitioners from his home years ago. I find it unusual that such intense magical energy still lingers in these hallways.”

Jossan stepped closer to him. “I’ll ask you a question, and remember I’m armed, sir. What do you want?”

“To speak with your king about the Gleasaman,” he insisted. “But I can tell you, whoever you are trying to conceal from me, they are in danger. I can feel their energy in turmoil.”

Her heart skipped a beat. Alchemists were not supposed to have magical powers of their own. Was he bluffing, or could he really feel Etar? “That is none of your business.”

“General, I can help this person. Is it headaches they suffer? Fevers? Nosebleeds?”

Jossan gritted her teeth. “Again. None of your business. Now shut up and follow me unless you want me to toss you back out.”

He looked at Jossan for a moment, then nodded graciously. “Apologies. I was out of line.”

She examined his face, trying to discern the hidden intentions behind his gaze, but his startlingly blue eyes were as unreadable as his accent was unplaceable. She nodded in the end and guided him the rest of the way to a guest room.

“Wait in here,” she said. “I will let the king know you want to see him.” She closed his door as she left and locked it from the outside, not caring what he would think of it.

She tried to keep calm, but as she walked away to find the king, the alchemist’s words kept drumming in her head: *They are in danger. I can help.*



Chapter 14

Gray morning light permeated through the gap between the drapes over Etar's window, but he had no desire to pull himself out of bed. Today was only the first day of his punishment, but even if it were the last, where would he go? He was sure his uncle would have someone watching to make sure he never went near the Starseeing Dome again, and now he worried Hans didn't know what had happened, and by the time Etar was free again, he would probably be gone.

Life had turned a little more somber.

Last night he'd had a vivid dream of a bird flying overhead while he stood on the beach, his feet soaking at intervals, the wind tousling his hair. It wasn't a vision, but the sensation of freedom in it dimmed his sadness down to a distant throb. Numbness and listlessness had taken pain's place, but he wasn't sure if that was any better.

The clock on his nightstand marked eight already, but the clouds made daylight hours blur at the edges on overcast days like this. He still dragged himself out of bed because servants would barge in at any moment to prepare his bath and bring in his breakfast. He wanted to talk with Hans so

desperately, but he doubted the servants would let him slip one of his silly notes with the food this time.

The mirror over his washbasin confirmed what he already suspected: he looked like a pale, hollow-cheeked, puffy-eyed ghoul. He shrugged it off. It wasn't like anyone he cared about could come see him.

He was so dejected that he was seriously contemplating picking up his room just to have something to do, but as he pondered the merits of having a clean room, he heard someone fiddling with what sounded like the padlock outside his door.

He sat still. After the clicking and jingling ceased, the door opened just a crack, and Etar heard Hans speaking with someone in the hallway. "Wait here," Hans said and slipped into the room, closing the door behind him.

"What are you doing here?" Etar asked. Hans never seemed to mind getting in trouble, but Etar didn't want Uncle Theo to end up sending him away.

"Oi, I thought you'd be happy to see me," Hans said, his business-as-usual smile never faltering. "I heard from some scullions that they had locked you up, but they didn't elaborate. What happened?"

"You have no idea," Etar said. He told Hans everything, from the Dome to his uncle's punishment.

"Damn. I'm so sorry. I asked if I could bring you food, but your uncle's valet had already set people up for that. I think everyone knows we're friends," Hans said and didn't let Etar talk before he started again. "Listen, I cannot stay long, but I brought someone with me. He's a friend of mine, and he really, *really* wants to meet you."

Etar didn't have time to process any of what Hans had said before he went back to the hallway to let someone in—

and whatever Etar had been expecting, it was nothing like the man that walked in.

The stranger walked with a step so light Etar could barely hear it on the floorboards of his room. His long black hair caught light like flowing water, and his eyes were distant in a deep, wistful way, blue and luminous even under this morning's gray light. He wore a black silken tunic embroidered with the most marvelous iridescent threads. Starbursts, suns, and moons, all decorated with tiny gemstones, crowded every corner of the fabric. Etar couldn't help staring at his jewel-decked hands. He had long, delicate fingers, as though made for minute tasks like building watches.

As soon as Hans closed the door, the man bowed, a gesture Etar had never received from anyone. "Starseer," he said, soft and reverent.

Panic rose in Etar's chest. How did this man know he was a Starseer? "Um. Hello?" he said, his mind struggling for coherent thought.

"It is such a great honor to finally meet you. I have been looking for you far and wide."

Etar couldn't parse the words from this man's mouth, so he gaped instead of replying. His eyes pivoted from him to Hans in search of explanations, but Hans only fell back into a corner of the room.

"My name is Áehd, and I am an alchemist," the man said.

An alchemist. A trade Etar only knew through books. To his knowledge, there had been alchemists and magicians in this castle long ago, but his uncle had expelled them all.

Etar supposed he should introduce himself, but he was too stunned to act properly. "How do you know I'm a Starseer?" he blurted out. No formal salutation. No bowing to

receive his guest. It showed so glaringly that he hadn't been raised as a royal.

The alchemist offered a gracious little laugh and pulled something out from between the folds of his tunic. When he opened his hand, a butterfly flew out of it.

At first, Etar thought it was a real butterfly because of how dainty its legs were and how its wings broke light, but on closer inspection, it was made of metal and colored crystals. It emanated a soft, bluish glow from under its belly.

"My constructs respond to energy, and no energy is more attractive to them than that of a Starseer," Aehd said.

The butterfly kissed Etar's face, making him flinch when it came close to his eyes, but he was afraid of breaking it if he flapped it away. Its glow intensified whenever it grazed his skin, and Etar could feel warmth wherever it alighted. After a while, the alchemist caged it in his fingers and put it away in his tunic.

The butterfly dredged out a memory of one such toy Etar had since childhood but which no longer possessed this butterfly's agency.

"That doesn't answer my question," Etar said, painfully aware of how curt he'd sounded. He didn't mean that at all, but a flying construct and an alchemist standing here in his room like plucked out of a storybook was too much to process at once.

Aehd cocked his head at Etar. "You went into a trance recently, did you not?"

Etar gaped at the alchemist. "How do you know?"

"Have you ever had a trance as powerful as your most recent one?" the alchemist asked.

"Not really. My uncle always told me I'm not very powerful."

A slim line creased between Áehd's eyebrows. "Why would he say something like that?"

Etar shrugged. He barely understood his uncle himself. How would he explain him to anyone else?

The alchemist hummed. His deep gaze pierced a hole through Etar's soul. "What was different about this last trance, Etar?"

Etar swallowed. "I—um—I went into our Starseeing Dome. I'd never done that before."

Áehd gave Hans a look like he was scolding him. Hans only lifted his hands as if claiming innocence. Áehd's jaw set. "It is no surprise that such a marvelously built dome would make a difference," he said, "but it is a terrible injustice for your uncle to make you think you're weak."

"You think it's not true? That my powers are useless, I mean," Etar said.

Áehd sighed. "Let me put it in simple terms. You were impressed by that silver butterfly flying on her own, were you not?"

Etar nodded a bit more enthusiastically than he meant to.

"And yet, the power that gets her going is only a drop of what would be required for a magician to project their mind billions of miles away from this world and graze the core of a powerful ancient being. There are no weak magicians in this world, and even the weakest Starseer is stronger than most magicians of any other kind."

Etar held his breath. He'd never considered things that way.

"Have you—?" Áehd started, but at that moment, the sound of muffled conversation came from the hallway outside.

Etar's hands went cold. "The servants. They are coming with my breakfast."

Chapter 14

Hans cursed under his breath. “Stay here for a second. I’ll divert them.”

Etar didn’t know what to do standing alone with Áehd, but his anxiety made him scratch his birthmark unthinkingly.

“Etar, are you ill?” Áehd asked.

Etar immediately withdrew his hand from behind his neck. “Well, not really, but....” He hesitated. “I have this mole. Sometimes it itches, but ever since I went into the Dome it’s become maddening.”

“May I?” the alchemist asked. Etar sat on the chair by his writing table and parted the hair at the base of his head. Etar couldn’t see the alchemist’s face, but he heard him sucking air through his teeth.

“How long have you had this... *thing*?” Áehd asked. He sounded aggravated by the sight of it. Etar didn’t blame him. He hadn’t seen it in a mirror recently, but the thing felt disgustingly coarse under his fingers since he’d had that last trance.

“Always. It’s a birthmark,” he said, turning to look at the alchemist.

“This—I have no words to describe what has been done to you, child.”

“What do you mean?” Etar asked, feeling sick to his stomach just seeing the scowl on the alchemist’s face. “I mean, it’s just an ugly mole, isn’t it?”

Áehd shook his head. “I can explain, but now is not the time.”

Hans hurried back in at that moment. “Sorry, Old Man, it took some convincing to drive them away, but they’ll return any moment. I told them some stupid lie about the porridge being spoiled. Come. I will take you back to your room.”

Had Hans just called the alchemist ‘Old Man’? It sounded like they knew each other well, but it was a strange nickname. Áehd looked, if anything, a bit younger than Jossan.

“Hurry, they must not see us together for now,” the alchemist said to Hans. He clasped the door handle but looked at Etar again before leaving. “That abomination on the back of your neck is why your visions have been weak all your life. I can fix it, but not here. Not now.”

Etar stood at once. “But, how? Why? What do you—?”

The alchemist shook his head. “We will talk soon.”

“But—”

“*Etar*,” Hans interrupted him. “We need to go before someone finds us here.”

The alchemist left first, then Hans gave Etar a sympathetic little smile before following. “Hey, don’t be scared. The Old Man will help you.”

Etar nodded, but he didn’t know what to make of this conversation. They left him staring at his closed door, wondering where fate was trying to lead him in such a hurry.



Chapter 15

“An alchemist,” Theobald said, chewing on the word.

Jossan sighed. She could already feel a tantrum building up. “Yes, sir. An alchemist. That’s what he told me.” She desperately wanted to get out of Theobald’s presence. It was mid-morning and his sitting room already smelled of stale alcohol.

“Arrange dinner with him,” the king said.

“But sir, given Etar’s vision, don’t you think this is urgent?”

Theobald chuckled. “If he is Gleasaman, we’re already fucked. I need to think what I’m going to say to him.”

“Sir—”

“General, stop arguing,” Theobald said, sounding deeply bored, which only meant he was too drunk to react any other way. “Don’t pretend you know better than me. Now go. I need to be alone.”

Theobald’s opaque decision-making was everything that was wrong with this impoverished kingdom, but thinking about it only made her angry. This argument wasn’t worth her while. “I’ll see that dinner is served at seven,” she said, bowing.

Theobald barely spared a look at her.

She sent a message to the alchemist early in the afternoon about dinner arrangements. Her men had brought him food and water, but they said he didn't seem unsettled about being locked in his room. He acted just as unbothered that night when Jossan came to collect him.

"Good evening, General," the alchemist said calmly when she opened the door. "I received your message. Shall we go now?"

She nodded. "Follow me."

Jossan walked ahead of Áehd towards the dining hall, trying hard not to look behind her. The man stoked her curiosity, but she didn't want to act like a small-town girl gaping at the rich stranger.

For better or worse, Etar was still locked in his room tonight. Jossan knew he would be even more curious than she, meeting someone who actually knew about magic. Even if he said he could help Etar, there were too many suspicious circumstances about his sudden appearance and his foreign ways. What if he was armed with magical weapons or other contraptions to capture Etar and take him to King Wilfred? She couldn't lower her guard.

The alchemist hummed behind her. She finally gave in to her curiosity and looked over her shoulder.

"These lamps used to operate with magic," he said, looking at the sconces along the wall. "I suppose no one is left who knows how to refuel them."

Most of the lamps along the wall remained dead, and someone had haphazardly fitted a few with oil fonts, wicks, and chimneys so they could be lit, but the only reason they were lit now was that they had a guest. Oil was too precious to waste, and guards and servants relied on oil lamps and

torches to move around the dark hallways at night, but there was no need to keep these abandoned corridors brightly illuminated at all times.

“Did you ever see them work, General?”

Jossan thought back to the lamps in the Starseeing Dome, how they had lit for Etar. She fell back next to Aehd and gave him a sideways look. This man knew too much about this castle. “What’s it to you? Alchemists and magicians haven’t been welcome here in a long time.”

“Except for the one I felt this morning?” he asked. There was a hint of a smirk on his lips.

Jossan stopped abruptly. “I suggest you stay out of that business, sir. You won’t meet him. I won’t allow it.”

Aehd gave her a cool look. “Even though his powers are killing him? I can help, and it seems you care about him.”

Jossan scowled. This man was playing with fire. “My feelings don’t come into play here, and I simply can’t trust you.”

The alchemist slowly curled his lips into a knowing smile. “And what do you gain from keeping him locked here? How have you concealed his enormous power for so long? It seems to me I am not the only one keeping secrets.”

“If it’s the King of Gleasam who’s sent you, I swear—”

The alchemist’s face darkened. “That man is the last person in this world I would run errands for. And you are right, I am withholding the truth, but I have nothing but this young magician’s best interest at heart, so I will offer you this: I will not say what I think you know, and you will not undermine me.”

Jossan snorted. “Are you *threatening* me?”

The sound of footsteps broke their standoff. They both looked down the hallway when the king turned the corner. Theobald gave Jossan only a passing look, but he lingered a

second too long on Áehd. He offered neither of them a word before walking into the dining hall. They followed him inside.

Jossan remembered a time when this table for twelve could still be filled. Theobald's four children, the queen, a few of Theobald's closest advisors, and on special occasions when he had time to visit, even Prince Fahlk—Theobald's brother. Empty chairs and ghostly echoes replaced laughter and lavish dinners, and though Theobald never said it, he seemed to know none of that would ever return.

She brushed the backs of the tall chairs with her fingers as she walked by, feeling nostalgic for a time when everyone here still had a reason to smile.

Jossan pulled a chair for the alchemist at the king's right, and she sat to Theobald's left. Servants scurried about to serve what Jossan considered a sumptuous amount of meat, but judging by his unimpressed face, the alchemist would rather eat the napkins.

"Master Áehd," the king said. There was a hint of sarcasm when he said 'master.' "Are you finding your accommodations comfortable?"

Áehd glanced at the dish placed before him. A bloody lamb steak with a side of braised potatoes. The neutrality of his expression didn't shift. "As comfortable as can be."

Theobald huffed. "I hope our humble household hasn't disappointed you."

"I could hardly be disappointed in material things. When you live for as long as I have, riches quickly lose their luster."

Jossan chuckled at this smooth-skinned, raven-haired man talking as though he was seventy. "Excuse me, sir, but you don't look a day older than thirty."

He gave her an unreadable smile. "You would not believe me if I told you my age."

Chapter 15

Theobald sneered. "I suppose now you'll tell us you're immortal?"

"No one is immortal, sir," Áehd said. "Not in this world. At least I hope not."

The king laughed without a bit of humor, then concentrated on his food.

Áehd tasted nothing from his plate, but he keenly observed the king, his hands folded over his lap. Theobald was normally curt and bitter, but this was by far the most awkward dinner Jossan had shared with him.

A few seconds of thick silence went by. The alchemist obviously didn't know Theobald well enough to read him, but Jossan could see a tantrum simmering behind the king's eyes. Maybe it was the alchemist's presence or that the man had not tasted a single bite of his food, but she could tell Theobald was aggravated and close to letting it out.

Finally, the king put his fork down and smirked at the alchemist. "So, my friend, what is this important news you had for us?"

"It is not news but a warning I bring. You have been hiding a Starseer in your home for many years, and now some dangerous people know. I have come to take him with me. His life is at risk here."

Blunt and to the point. Jossan held her breath.

Theobald's nostrils flared. "What in the name of the Gods do you mean?"

Áehd sighed. "Are you not aware of your own home's history, sir?"

Theobald seethed and narrowed his eyes, but he did not reply.

"What do you mean?" Jossan asked, and Theobald shot her a searing glare.

The alchemist sat back. “Centuries ago, magicians and alchemists built this castle to receive magic scholars from all over the world who wished to visit the Starseeing Dome. The Dome here is the largest and oldest in the world, and it is an extraordinary piece of architecture from the ancient magic masonry masters. When a Starseer powerful enough uses the Dome, it lights a beacon that can be detected for thousands of miles around. Two nights ago, it activated to its full capacity after over a decade of darkness.”

Jossan almost choked on her food. “But we haven’t seen anything.”

“Because, dear General, it is not a beacon that can be seen with the naked eye. But if you have the right instruments, it will tip them off immediately.”

Theobald looked like he had seen his own death pass before his eyes, but he still twisted his mouth in a mocking scowl. “You can tell your wretched king he can send all his warships and magicians against me, but I am not giving my nephew away.”

There was a hint of a sneer on the alchemist’s face. “My king? You mean Wilfred of Gleasam? You are sorely mistaken if you think I serve that man. But I certainly will not leave empty-handed.”

Theobald smashed an open hand against the table. “I will lock him up and throw away the key before I give anything to you, warlock.”

Warlock. That word. Most magicians and alchemists Jossan had met got offended at being called that. It implied the use of dark magic and trickery.

The alchemist, however, was having none of Theobald’s pettiness. He snapped his bejeweled fingers together, and the crystal cup Theobald had been drinking from exploded into

tiny shards. The king hissed, hurling the stem of the broken cup away and recoiling against the backrest of his chair.

“You small, foolish man,” Áehd said, his voice tight and low. “That child might well be the last seed of his kin, and you are willing to smother his beautiful soul by letting him consume under that monstrosity you put on the back of his head? Useless, misguided pride. I am no longer surprised by the greed and vanity of kings, but it will never cease to disgust me.”

Jossan watched in awe and terror. What was this man? None of the alchemists she had ever known could do this. They fashioned themselves scholars and scientists who sought to harness magic, but they all required instruments and tools to practice it. And yet, this man had just shattered glass with a snap of his fingers.

“Master Áehd,” Jossan said firmly, steeling herself. “Stop now. I will have you harm no one under this roof.”

Áehd’s otherwise wistful eyes sharpened. “And you will stand and watch while this man lets a beloved child wither away? Because that is what will happen, and you will both be equally guilty.”

“Again. You will not hurt anyone here. Unless you want me to hurt you.” She wasn’t sure how much water her threat held. Maybe this man could turn her own weapon against her. Who knew. She tightened her trembling hand around the hilt of her dagger, but she would not take his hostility lying down.

To her relief, the alchemist’s unrest subsided as quickly as it had risen. He placed both hands stretched flat on top of the table and sighed. “You and I both want the same thing, General,” he said and stood with barely a sound as he pushed his chair back. “Except, you think you have enough time to

solve this conundrum when you really do not. I am not the only person who wants to take your Starseer away, but others might not be thinking of his wellbeing.”

Theobald was still looking at the remains of his broken wineglass, his eyes wide. Shards of crystal stuck to the palm of his hand and he was obviously shocked, but he spoke again as Áehd started for the door. “And what will you do if I don’t give the boy up?”

The alchemist stopped and looked at Theobald over his shoulder. “You know what your problem is, sir? Thinking I came here to negotiate for cattle. When that young man decides, it will be the stars guiding his steps, and no one will stop him. He is already too powerful for you,” he said and walked out of the dining hall, leaving Jossan and the king to share a long, dumbfounded silence.



Chapter 16

The next day of Etar's punishment dawned with cautious optimism for him. The alchemist's visit had been unsettling, and half of his cryptic words still made no sense to Etar, but he seemed to know the answer to some of the questions Etar had harbored for most of his life.

Hans hadn't given him a time, but he'd promised to help him out of his room to speak with Áehd again. Etar was frantically trying to find the old mechanical spider Jossan had given him so many years ago. Apart from his starseeing book, that spider was the only possession he'd inherited from his father, but Jossan told him to keep both out of sight. For the first year, the spider had moved on its own, like Áehd's little butterfly, but the large, transparent stone on its belly had gradually stopped glowing until the spider died. Now he couldn't remember where he had hidden it to keep it away from his cousin's destructive hands, but he needed to know if Áehd could fix it.

It was childish, he knew, and probably not the most important thing he should be thinking about, but there was so

little left of his brief and forgotten time with his parents he was desperate for any small way to revive his past.

He found the old construct bundled in a shirt at the bottom of the last drawer of his writing table. The thing was big as a two-month-old kitten and intricately etched to look like its legs and abdomen were hairy. Etar had always loved the thing, despite Jossan finding it horrifying.

Around mid-morning, he heard someone tinkering with the padlock outside.

“Hey, you ready?” Hans asked as he slipped into the room.

Etar nodded, holding the spider against his chest. “Let’s go.”

When they reached Áehd’s room, Hans looked to both sides of the hallway before picking the door’s lock.

“How did you learn to do that?” Etar asked.

Hans had his face screwed in concentration. “Ah, well, trial and error. Survival stuff you learn when you grow up like a street rat.”

Etar didn’t ask more, but he found it sort of impressive how many interesting things Hans knew how to do.

“All right,” Hans said when the lock clicked open. “Don’t take too long. I still need to get you back to your room, but the servants are too busy with lunch service right now. They won’t bug you for a while.”

“Aren’t you...?”

“Nope. The Old Man wants to talk personal stuff with you. Besides, I’m supposed to be helping with lunch. Don’t worry. I’ll return in twenty minutes.”

Hans left him with a word at the tip of his tongue, and now that he was all alone in the hallway, he hesitated to go in.

“Come in, Starseer,” Áehd’s voice came from inside.

Etar winced. How did he know? The door was unlocked, but it was still closed. Going back to his room now would be stupid, though. He took a deep breath and opened the door.

The alchemist sat with his back turned to the door, hunched over his writing table. Etar closed the door and took a couple tentative steps in, but he didn't want to interrupt, so he hovered near the door.

Áehd chuckled without turning to him. "Come over, please. No need to be shy."

Etar swallowed and took a chair from a corner, making a point of lifting it instead of dragging it, and carefully placed it next to the alchemist. He set the bundled spider on his lap and watched Áehd work.

Áehd had a small metallic cylinder attached to one of his eyes—an instrument Etar had never seen, which looked like some sort of magnifying glass. He was squinting hard at a bunch of tiny mechanical pieces he was putting together with a delicate pair of tweezers.

"What are you working on, Master Áehd?" Etar asked, keeping his voice low. Those miniature metal pieces looked like even a strong breath could blow them away.

"A fire ant," Áehd said as he attached a tiny thorax to a tiny head. This was big for an ant but marvelously small for a mechanical thing.

"A fire ant..." Etar echoed. He had never heard of those.

"Aye. A fire ant," the alchemist said as if that should be enough explanation.

Etar gritted his teeth. He'd spent the previous night thinking what he would ask of Áehd, but he only had twenty minutes now. He had to prioritize.

"You said you have been looking for me. Why?"

Áehd sighed. “I am afraid that is a long and painful story I do not have enough time to tell you right now, but I am here because I knew your parents, and your father was very dear to me.”

Etar felt his heart sting. “My... parents?” he asked, clutching the bundled spider between his hands.

“Aye. From before you were born. I was Fahlk’s mentor for ten years.”

How was that possible? Áehd didn’t look old enough to have met Etar’s dad over fifteen years ago, but he had ached to know where he came from since he was old enough to understand he was an orphan. An afternoon wouldn’t suffice to ask all the questions bubbling in his head, but he had to know more.

He had utterly forgotten the spider until it accidentally slipped off his lap and fell to the floor, coming partially undone from its bundle.

The alchemist’s eyes locked on the spider, his eyebrows drawing together. “How...?”

Etar bent to scoop it up and untangled it from the old shirt.

The alchemist’s face had barely shown emotion during their first conversation, but upon seeing the brass toy, he looked like he’d seen a ghost.

“May I?” Áehd said reverently, eyes on the spider.

Etar put the spider in his hands.

Áehd turned the construct on its back to reveal the beautiful stone embedded in its abdomen and the guts of the mechanism that allowed its legs to move and articulate. Áehd made a long pause, caressing its small parts as if checking for damage. Then, he set it back on Etar’s lap without saying what he thought of it.

“Do you know anything at all about your parents, Etar? How they passed?” Áehd asked, peeling his eyes away from the spider.

Etar hummed. “My uncle says my father enjoyed sailing. He took me and my mother on a boat trip, then a thunderstorm caught us. My parents both drowned. They found me still on the wrecked ship, stranded against a rock, but I remember nothing before that day, not even when they found me.”

“Is that all? What about their names? The things they liked? Are those things all lost to you?”

Etar traced the spider’s legs with a finger, his eyes downcast. “They didn’t live on the island, so Jossan says she didn’t know them well. My uncle says he didn’t get along with his brother and that my mom was snobbish and wouldn’t talk much to him. Their names were Fahlk and Marguerite.”

“I hope you can see how unfair this is,” Áehd said. “You had a right to know your parents, if only through other people’s memories.”

Etar laughed humorlessly. “I don’t have a lot of rights here, Master Áehd. I exist. My uncle tolerates me. He changes the subject whenever I ask about my parents, so I don’t ask anymore.” He lifted his eyes to the alchemist and tried to justify his apathy, but he couldn’t put his feelings into words. His parents didn’t seem real to him. From them, he had the book, the spider, and two faceless names. He wondered if he should have grieved their deaths, but hard as he tried, he could not remember anything about them. He couldn’t feel genuine pain now they were gone. Instead, he felt hollow when he thought of them. “I want to get out of here, but I don’t know where to go.”

“Child, I sent Hans ahead of me because I have long suspected you were still here, somehow hidden from prying eyes, and I knew I would not be welcome. I understand why your uncle wanted to hide you, but I did not expect the appalling way he has treated you. I would love to take you away and teach you how to use your magic properly, as I did your father.”

Etar winced at Áehd’s words and averted his eyes. Was Hans’ friendliness only a ruse to get him out? He would deal with that later. Master Áehd was offering him everything he had ever wished for.

“I want to go with you,” he said, and as soon as the words were out of his mouth, he realized how deeply he meant them.

Áehd nodded. “Then I will give you a useful gift.” He took the spider again and turned it on its back. “Put your fingers to the crystal and give me your other hand.”

Etar hesitated for a second, but there was something compelling about Áehd’s presence, a radiance of power that Etar had only felt from other magicians. He slowly put one hand on the alchemist’s palm, the fingers of his other hand against the crystal. Áehd put the fingers of his free hand on the crystal, too, then closed his thumb over Etar’s hand. An unexpected warmth surged up Etar’s arm. It reached his head, his stomach, his toes. He felt buoyant, the tightness in his chest dissolving like fog in the sunlight.

Feeling real power course through his veins, Etar knew he’d never be able to go back to accepting his inadequacy and his dull sadness as immutable facts. He felt his own magic in every breath, in every pulse of his heart. He was going to ask the alchemist to take him away now. Nothing else mattered—until he heard footsteps coming from the hallway.

Chapter 16

A moment later, Hans burst into the room. Had it been twenty minutes already?

“The general is coming this way,” he said breathlessly, leaning against the closed door.

“You must go,” Áehd said, letting go of Etar and wrapping the spider up again.

“But—” Etar started.

“Patience, Starseer. The general must not see you here. Go for now, but you have my word: I will never leave you stranded again.”



Chapter 17

“How did it go?” Hans asked Etar while they hurried together down the hallway.

“Fine,” Etar said dryly. He didn’t want to talk to Hans right now.

“Just... fine?”

Etar nodded.

They took the stairs down to the old ballroom on the second floor. No one had used this place for ages. All the furniture was covered in white drapes, like dancing ghosts frozen in time. Servants only came here to clean once a month. It was a great place when he wanted to sneak around.

“What’s the matter? Did he—?”

Etar stopped in the middle of the ballroom. “I don’t want to talk about it, all right?”

Hans almost tripped trying to come to a stop. “Why?”

“Because you lied to me, and I haven’t decided how I feel about it.”

Hans’ eyebrows shot up. “Etar, I’m sorry. I couldn’t—”

“We’ll talk when I don’t feel like kicking you in the shins.”

Hans gave him a meek little look. “You can kick me anyway. I deserve it. But we should probably get moving again.”

Etar looked at the door on the other side of the room. That one led to the entrance hall downstairs. Hans tried to approach, but Etar took a step back.

“I don’t hate you, alright?” Etar said. “I don’t even hate my uncle, and he’s done a lot of shitty things to me, but you’ll have a lot of explaining to do when we get out of here.”

Hans seemed nonplussed at first, but then a smile broke on his lips. It was unfair how much Hans’ smile made Etar’s anger falter. It didn’t help him make his point, but he did his best not to smile back.

“So, that means you’re still coming with us?” Hans asked, obviously trying to curb his excitement.

Etar rolled his eyes. “I’d already told you I would. But look, I’m not going up to my bedroom right now. There’s one last person I need to see before I go.”

“Who? Maybe I can—”

“Go back to the kitchens before the head cook starts asking about you. I’ll be fine,” Etar said and dashed to the door before Hans could react.

“Etar, wait!” Hans said from behind him, but Etar was already out of reach, and he didn’t stop until he was outside the castle.

He needed to see Master Colum before leaving.

Skalland’s only lighthouse stood atop the rocky cays northeast of the island. Etar had made many furtive visits to it in the last couple of years, but only under the night’s refuge when he could slip out unseen. The view of the glimmering blue ocean and the bright white lighthouse under the sun made this feel like a different place to him.

He took the wooden walkway towards the door, but as he approached, he saw Master Colum sitting on a rock outside, a teacup in his hands.

“Who—” Master Colum said, suddenly startled. Some of his tea spilled over the edge of the cup.

Etar flinched. He hadn’t made a noise.

“Oh, Etar, my boy! It’s you,” the old Tidebreaker said. His tone was warm, but he sounded confused. “Why are you standing there? Come sit with me.”

Etar bumbled his way through the sharp rocks and sat next to Colum. Water lapped below them in a rhythmic calm, and Colum occasionally waved a hand out to keep the ocean tame. He made Tidebreaking magic look so easy.

“How did you know I was standing there? You’ve never felt me from that far before,” Etar said, trying to settle comfortably on the rugged rock. He wondered how Colum, at seventy-two years of age, never seemed to have trouble walking through all these slippery, jagged rocks.

“Hmm, hard to tell. Something feels different about you today,” Colum said.

Etar looked at his hands. “Well...”

Colum examined him with his graying eyes, waiting for the rest of that sentence.

“Someone came to the castle,” Etar said. “He said he could teach me how to use my powers.”

Colum frowned. “And your uncle allowed you to talk with this person?”

Etar shook his head. “Um, my uncle doesn’t know I talked with him.”

“Ah, and here I was, thinking dear old Theo had come to his senses.”

Etar knew what Colum meant. Even though Master Colum had nothing left to teach him, Etar loved coming to visit. But his uncle bristled at the idea of Etar spending so much time with another magician, and like with many other rules his uncle set, he never explained the reasoning behind it.

“What do you think?” Etar asked. “This man. He said he’s an alchemist.” He almost told Colum that he’d also said he knew his father, but he had a feeling that would only cause trouble.

Colum frowned. “An alchemist? Teaching a Starseer? Magic is something you *feel*. Alchemists are just normal people who dedicate their lives to studying magic. They don’t have powers of their own. How can you teach something you cannot experience yourself? That’s why I cannot teach you much about starseeing. Each type of magic works differently.”

“So, what you’re saying is I need to find another Starseer to teach me, or I will never learn?” he asked bitterly.

Colum shifted uncomfortably where he sat. “Maybe. Etar, I wish I could tell you. I have rarely left this island, and there used to be a lot of magic scholars here in my youth when it was your grandpa on the throne. I’m sure they possessed a lot of knowledge, but I was a small-town boy—still am, if not for the fact I’m not a boy anymore—and people like them would have never talked to me.”

Etar frowned. “And how am I supposed to find another Starseer? Didn’t you tell me once we’re extremely rare?”

“Well, yes, because only one of you is born in every one or two generations of the same family. But Etar, I’m probably not the right person to answer these questions.”

Etar clutched his spider tight. “Then you don’t know more than this alchemist, right?”

Colum sighed. “I most likely don’t. But you should be wary of this man’s promises. Every king wants a Starseer in his court, but there are not enough of you to go around. Some powerful people would not hesitate to trick a Starseer into slavery. Especially one as young as you.”

Etar wished he could explain how he felt after touching Áehd’s hands, but it was like trying to put a sentence together in a language he didn’t speak well. “He doesn’t want to hurt me. That’s all I know.”

“You cannot know that about a man you’ve just met, my boy. And I know how frustrating it must be that your uncle forbids you from using your magic, but opening yourself up to a stranger could be dangerous.”

Etar’s frustration rose to his throat. He loved Jossan, and he loved Master Colum, but they weren’t giving him the answers he sought. “Neither Jossan nor you understand. How could you? You’re not the ones who’ve been told you’re useless and weak all your life.” He didn’t mean to raise his voice. Colum, who had always been sweet and patient with him, didn’t deserve this lashing out, but the closer Etar examined this situation, the lonelier he felt.

“Etar, child, I don’t mean—”

“I’m not a child!” Etar snapped, standing away from Colum. “I know you and my uncle and Jossan all feel I’m still a slobbering toddler, but none of you ever stopped to consider I might want something other than staying locked in that castle for the rest of my life. This man talked with me for all of twenty minutes and understood my heart better than any of you ever has.”

Colum put his teacup down on the rocks and stood calmly. “Fair enough. I’ll admit, it’s hard seeing a beloved child grow and realize he doesn’t need you anymore.”

Etar lowered his eyes. He was frustrated, but that was not how he wanted Master Colum to feel. "I didn't mean it that way."

"Perhaps not, but that's the natural order of life. I taught you all I could so you could become an independent man one day. But now you've outgrown my teachings, and I understand why my meager knowledge of starseeing wouldn't be enough for you."

"You helped me understand a lot of my starseeing book," Etar said, reining in his outburst. He didn't want his last conversation with Colum to be a fight.

Colum nodded. "But it's still not enough. You're a special young man, and there is so much more about you that's beautiful and worthwhile, not just your powers. All I'm asking is that you don't let desperation drive you. Whatever choice you make, don't let anyone take advantage of you just because they make you grand promises. Your power is yours, and yours alone. No one should want to use it without your consent."

And no one should forbid him from using it, either, but Etar nodded.

Colum stepped forward and hugged him. "Promise me."

Etar returned the hug and nodded against Master Colum's shoulder, but he wasn't sure he could make truthful promises with his heart in flux as it was. "I should get going. No one knows I came here."

Colum let him go. "Very well. But remember, both the general and I are here for you."

Etar said goodbye with a heavy heart. He had come here because he thought Colum would understand, but apparently, he had been wrong.

He slipped back into the castle undetected, but he found Hans sitting outside his door.

“Oh Gods, you’re back,” Hans said, sounding relieved.

“You waited for me?”

“Of course, silly. How were you planning on putting the padlock back on the door?”

Etar blushed. The padlock was on the outside of the door. He couldn’t very well lock himself in, could he? “Uh... thank you. But I’m still mad at you.”

Hans smiled. It was the same smile that made the scullery maids and even some of the older cooks giggle like silly little girls. It was annoying how handsome it was. Etar didn’t want to admit it affected him, too.

“Fine. Be mad,” Hans said. “We’ll talk at some point, but you should pack now.”

“When are we leaving?” Etar asked.

“Don’t know yet. Could be tonight. You should be ready.”

Etar went in, but Hans caught him by the arm.

“Etar?”

“Yes?”

“I’m really sorry. I hid some things from you, but this? All the fun we’ve had together? I could never fake that,” Hans said.

The pit of Etar’s stomach tickled and his cheeks grew hot. He nodded at Hans, mumbled a clumsy thank you, and escaped into his room before embarrassment made him say something stupid.



Chapter 18

Thunder roared from someplace off the coast. Etar could feel the temperature dropping in his room as a light drizzle started pattering outside.

He'd spent his afternoon rummaging through his drawers, thinking and rethinking what he should take with him. He could have asked Áehd or Hans how far they were going or if they would make any stops along the way, but it was a bit too late for that.

With the last things packed into his bag, he only needed to do one more thing. Although he couldn't go up to Jossan and tell her what he was planning, he couldn't leave her without a word.

It took much longer than he expected to draft the correct words. Jossan would come after him regardless of what he said, but he wanted to set her mind at ease as much as possible.

In the end, he wrote:

Jo, I'm sorry. I know you were trying to keep me safe, but I can't stand living here anymore. I'm going to a

place where I can learn my true potential. Once I'm out of my uncle's reach, I will write, and you can join me. Hope you'll understand.

He folded it, wrote Jossan's name on the back, and put it on his pillow. He didn't sign it. She would know his handwriting.

Hans came very late that night, looking absolutely spent.

"Sorry I couldn't come earlier. The head cook started looking at me funny because I was out most of the day. I stayed back scrubbing pots all night to compensate."

"It's all right," Etar said. "Are we...?"

"Yes. Are you ready?"

He wasn't, but he shouldered his bag. He was halfway out of the door when he remembered his spider. "Wait," he said, whirling around to take the bundle from his bed. He couldn't see it well in the dark, so he grabbed it by one side and the spider rolled out of the shirt. A blue glimmer came from it, and it suddenly started running frantically over the mattress.

Etar stifled a yelp of surprise.

"What the...?" Hans said behind him.

Etar tried unsuccessfully to catch the darting spider, but the thing scurried out of his hands the moment he thought he had it.

"Etar, we need to move on. The Old Man will be waiting."

"Wait, just—" He tried tossing a shirt on it, but it was useless. He took a step back, starting to give up, but the spider stopped and turned its beady black glass eyes towards him, and when Etar took another step back, it followed him.

"Whoa!" Etar said. He tested it by sidestepping a couple times. The spider followed him like an orphaned duckling. "Look! It's—"

“Problem solved!” Hans said urgently. “Now, let’s move.”

The castle halls were quiet tonight. Etar liked rainy nights because they made it harder for guards to hear him, and some of them preferred huddling in corners, talking together and drinking tea to fend off the chill rather than doing their rounds.

It didn’t take them long to reach Áehd’s door, and Hans didn’t seem to need a light to unlock it—good, because lighting a lamp while trying to slip out was a good way of getting caught. Only the spider emitted its soft blue glow a few steps behind them.

“This is as far as I go with you,” Hans said once he’d unlocked the door. “I need to go ahead of you, but you know this place much better than I do. I’m sure you’ll be fine guiding him.”

Etar didn’t want to do this alone, but this was not the time for hesitation. He nodded and watched Hans scurry away.

“Master Áehd?” he called against the door after Hans had disappeared, but there was no answer, so he slipped inside.

His heart started pounding. The moon wasn’t bright enough to shine into the room, and other than his spider’s legs clicking on the stone floor and the incipient rainfall outside, he could hear no movement.

“Master Áehd?” he tried a little louder. Lightning flooded the walls with metallic glare, and thunder roared like it had landed just outside the window. The room was empty.

“No!” he said, letting his bag drop to the floor. He found an oil lamp on the writing table and lit it. The bed was made. The wardrobe door was open, its insides bare. It was as if no one had been here earlier today.

He thought of going after Hans, but he would be long gone by now, and he hadn’t said where he was going. At that

moment, Etar heard footsteps climbing up the stairs at the end of the hallway.

He hid back inside the room, not knowing what to do. Finally, he sat in bed, and as if feeling his distress, the spider climbed up his side to perch on his shoulder. Etar shut his eyes, trying hard not to panic when suddenly, a voice spoke in his ear.

“Starseer,” the voice said.

Etar jumped.

“Starseer, can you hear me?” the voice insisted. It was then Etar realized it was coming from the spider.

A chill ran down his spine, and out of instinct, he brushed the spider off his shoulder. It fell to the floor on its back and struggled to get back on its legs. “Starseer, do not be afraid. The general expelled me from the castle. I did not have time to tell Hans, but I am waiting for you outside the walls.”

Etar stared at the spider, whose blue glow dimmed and intensified with the rising and falling tones of the voice.

“Master Áehd?” he asked.

“Aye. Please go to the courtyard. Once outside, follow your mechanical friend’s lead. He will take you to me.”

“How are you doing this?” Etar asked. All he knew about magic came from his starseeing book, which made a passing mention of alchemists and how important their tools were to magicians. Still, he’d never heard of one being able to control a magical construct from a distance and projecting his voice toward it. Whatever this was, it was beyond Etar’s wildest imagination.

“Infrasound magic,” Áehd said.

“Infrawhat?”

“There is no time to explain now. I urge you, Starseer. Get out of there now.”



Chapter 19

This was far from the first time Etar had roamed the castle at night, but knowing he was trying to escape for good made everything more unnerving. He panicked at every light looming around the corner, sure that Fried would jump out at any moment. The storm was growing louder, which was a double-edged sword—the guards couldn't hear him, but neither could he hear them. He relied on his knowledge of their routes until he reached the kitchens and stood in the dark hallway just outside the swinging door. He didn't open it. There was a fine line of light coming from underneath the door.

He backed away from the door into a dark corner and scooped the spider in his hands, bringing it close to his mouth. "There's someone in there." Guards didn't always watch the kitchens at night, but sometimes they came to grab a bite.

"Sit here for a moment," the spider—or rather, Áehd—said. "What are you—"

Etar caught a glint of red descending from his shoulder to his sleeve, like an ember rolling over the fabric. He almost

swatted it away in panic, but when he inspected it, he realized it was the fire ant. He muffled a gasp with his hand. The ant jumped off his sleeve and scurried under the kitchen door. Had it hitched a ride with him from Áehd's room?

"What are you doing?" Etar whispered urgently to the spider.

"Wait and see," Áehd said, and for a good while, all Etar could hear was the rain outside.

From inside the kitchen, a gruff voice hissed and growled in pain. A few seconds later, there was a thud and clattering of pots and pans. Etar's eyes darted up and down the hallway. There were surely guards doing rounds nearby. He hoped they hadn't heard.

"Go," Áehd said, and the spider scampered ahead.

Etar found the guard folded over a kitchen counter, completely out but apparently still breathing. Someone had padlocked the door to the outside since Etar's unfortunate last escape to the lighthouse. He took the guard's keyring from his belt and fumbled with the keys until he found the correct one. The heavy lock slipped from its hasp before Etar could catch it, making a loud clanking noise against the stone floor. Just what he needed. More noise.

He groaned and followed the spider out. Voices rose from the hallway outside the kitchen, but he slammed the door behind him and dashed for the outer walls.

Etar ran with the crisp night air burning his cheeks, thick raindrops soaking him up and weighing his clothes down. He couldn't remember running this fast before, but panic was a great motivator.

"How is no one following us?" Etar asked after a few moments, glancing over his shoulder.

Chapter 19

“I took down a second guard with the ant, but there was a third one,” Áehd said. “I believe the remaining one went to tell the others, but he stepped on the ant. I can no longer see inside.”

Etar’s head was too jumbled to question how these animal constructs helped Áehd see. No time for that. His heart was close to bursting as he sprinted away from the castle. He looked over his shoulder again. No one followed, but the windows had begun to light up.

“Where are we going?” he asked, his breathing ragged.

“The service gate. Keep running,” Áehd said calmly. Easy when he was not the one racing under freezing rain.

Shouts erupted in the distance. His legs were about to give and his lungs burned, but he couldn’t stop now.

The gate Áehd was referring to was the same Etar always used to go to the lighthouse. It opened to an unpaved path, ending at the foot of the hill. When he reached it, he found the gate’s padlock on the floor, its shackle broken in two.

In the distance, torchlight flickered like angry fireflies in the dark. They were looking for him, but obviously they didn’t know where he had gone, or they would be running straight to him.

When he slipped outside, A massive black horse blocked his way on the other side of the door. He stumbled backward. He was scared of horses, and this huge black beast was particularly fearsome. It took him a couple seconds to notice it was Áehd sitting on top of it, wearing a black travel cloak. It didn’t seem like the rain bothered him at all.

“Do not fear, Starseer. This horse is smarter than any you have met before. He will not hurt you.”

That was even scarier. The smarter a creature was, the higher its potential for being mean. Etar shook his head.

Áehd dismounted. “We must leave, child. Getting you out a second time will not be so easy.”

Etar looked at the horse and swallowed. He reached for the pommel of the saddle and put a hesitant foot in the stirrup. Jossan had tried her best to teach him how to ride, but after the first time he’d fallen, he’d refused to try it again. But Áehd was right. Jossan would be furious after this, and if she caught him, there was no way she would let him out of her sight again.

He took a deep breath and scrambled his way up the saddle.

When he was finally sitting on the horse, Áehd picked up the spider and climbed nimbly behind him.

Taking the service road in the dark was a risk, with all the gnarled tree roots and rocks waiting to trip the horse and break its legs, but the main road descending from the castle’s front gate was too exposed. Both roads ended at the foot of the hill, so they would find their way out one way or another.

To Etar’s relief, Áehd soon proved to be a skilled rider, and they descended much faster than he expected.

Etar wrapped himself in nervous silence, and as they started clearing the castle, he realized he hadn’t thought this trip through beyond his escape.

“Where are we going?” Etar asked.

“To my home,” Áehd said like it was the only logical answer.

“Where is that?”

Áehd hummed. “That is difficult to explain while on horseback and without a proper chart.”

A chart, not a map? Áehd had a strange accent Etar had never heard, but he had a good command of the Skallander dialect. He doubted using the word *chart* was a mistake. “Uh....”

Chapter 19

“You will have answers once we reach our destination. I promise.”

But Etar should have figured their escape wouldn't be that easy. Five horsemen were already waiting there when they finally emerged at the junction of the two roads. Jossan sat in their midst, looking like she had just scrambled out of bed and rolled into whatever clothes she found in her way, but she was wearing her sword belt. Even before they went all the way down into the main road, Etar saw the glimmer of Jossan's sword sliding out of its sheath and he begged the invisible powers not to let this end in bloodshed.



Chapter 20

“I knew I couldn’t trust you,” Jossan shouted at the damned alchemist.

She was pissed. Pissed at Theobald for being so unhelpful. Pissed at this arrogant jerk, thinking he could just strut in here and steal Etar like nobody would care. But most importantly, she was pissed at herself for letting things come to this.

And as if to purposely stoke her rage, the alchemist smiled. “There is no need for violence, General. I know you care about Etar. You could come with us.”

“You wish,” Jossan said and spat on the ground.

“We have him. He can’t get out,” Rowan, who was right next to her, whispered.

She knew Rowan was trying to say ‘calm down’ without actually uttering those two infuriating words, but the icy rainwater and her sleeplessness didn’t help ease her increasingly foul mood. “Let Etar go now and maybe I won’t kill you.”

“Jo, please,” Etar said. It was as if she was noticing him for the first time. Jossan had already seen him, but all her attention was on the alchemist.

When she went to bed earlier that night, she already knew things were going downhill on every front and that her luck was cursed, but she never imagined when she put her head to the pillow that Rowan would wake her in the middle of the night to say Etar was trying to run away. That was the last straw.

So, she was pissed, but also hurt, and if she refused to look into Etar's eyes and ignored his anguished plea, it was because she feared her feelings trampling over her reason.

"Stand down," she growled, her eyes locked on the alchemist. "If you hurt that boy...."

The alchemist sighed. "That is where you are wrong, General. You are the one hurting him," he said and ordered his horse forward.

"Jo, stop it, please," Etar begged as the alchemist approached the formation of guardsmen.

"Ready!" She shouted to her men. "Aim for the beast."

Her men readied their bows. Even in this half-dark, they would never miss that massive animal the alchemist rode.

But the alchemist seemed to have a different idea. Without losing his cool, he put an arm around Etar's waist, and his stallion reared with a loud scream that pierced through the rainfall. All the other horses skittered nervously and one started trying to buck its rider. In all the confusion, Rowan was the only one who managed to adjust, dealing a quick shot from his bow.

Jossan was sure the arrow would pierce the animal's belly, but before it could land, the alchemist snapped his fingers together, like he'd done at dinner with Theobald, and the arrow disintegrated in a shower of splinters.

The black stallion trumpeted again and kept kicking his front legs out. The guardsmen couldn't maintain control of

their horses. One of them lost his seat, and the others panicked and started yanking their reins, only making their horses more frantic.

But Jossan had been riding horses since she was a kid, and instead of fighting against her mount's instincts to flee, she gently pulled the reins only on one side. The horse started circling, and just before she lost sight of the alchemist, she regained control.

She tore in pursuit, pushing her horse to the limit, but the black stallion was the fastest creature she'd ever seen on four legs, even when burdened with two riders.

The road ahead was all open moorland, wet grass shimmering for endless miles under the flicker of lightning. The alchemist quickly started gaining distance, his rain-soaked cloak snapping like a whip behind him. Jossan couldn't stop thinking how terrified Etar must have been riding so fast.

"Stop!" she shouted. She thought of pulling her bow out, but if she hit the horse and it tumbled at this speed, Etar would be thrown off too.

Wind and booming hoofbeats swallowed her curses. She could hear herself panting and wheezing as desperately as if it was her own two legs carrying her after that demon stallion. But she didn't give up, not even when her horse started lagging and her whole body shivered from the wet chill.

When she looked to the sky ahead, a gasp caught in her throat and made her choke. The clouds were merging like a vortex. They looked like a monstrously large tornado's funnel, the biggest one she'd ever seen, and one that seemed to have a life of its own.



Chapter 21

Etar could barely breathe. Once Áehd's stallion broke free from the formation of guardsmen, his neck-breaking gallop left no room for words.

Skalland was mostly flat grasslands, and Etar didn't know where Master Áehd was heading. All he could see was them getting deeper and deeper into the tallgrass, where the landscape became more indistinct and there were not even dirt roads to mark their path.

Etar looked up. A cluster of gigantic rain clouds tall as castles in the sky lumbered in their direction. His wet clothes could no longer fend off the cutting wind, and even though Áehd had a firm arm around his waist, he couldn't decide between keeping his arms around himself or clutching onto the saddle's pommel. Maybe Áehd could feel his heart pounding like a war drum because he yelled, "Keep calm, Starseer. We are almost there."

Etar nodded, but he had no idea where 'there' could be when they were in the middle of nowhere. Closing his eyes only made him nauseous, so he fixed them on the storm clouds until his breathing evened out. But Jossan's shouts

behind them shattered his fragile concentration. He thought they'd left her behind already, but he didn't dare look back to see how far she was.

The cold made Etar clench his jaw and his panic became a strange, trancelike numbness. There was a feeling of static in the air that made the tips of his fingers tingle. His birthmark started itching yet again. Something like a bubble wanting to burst out of him began to inflate in his chest, and the electricity in his fingers crawled up his arms, through his body, into the air inside his lungs. He exhaled, and almost in time, the storm clouds started moving faster, forming like they had a consciousness. It wasn't long before winds fast and savage started blowing water and debris into his face, forcing him to close his eyes.

Áehd gave out a choked gasp and called Etar's name, but Etar couldn't respond. He felt disconnected, only faintly aware of his surroundings. He opened his eyes again, but the rain and the dark made everything ahead fuzzy. He saw a shining light slicing the night open as they climbed a gentle slope. It was like seeing a well-lit room through a window in the dark, and as they approached, he noticed a rider on a chestnut horse waiting by it.

"Old Man!" The rider shouted.

Hans? Etar's head felt like it was floating a thousand miles above.

They were maybe twenty yards away from the light when Jossan's voice rose again, her shouts getting half lost in the wind. Etar couldn't make out what she was saying.

"Go inside!" Áehd ordered Hans.

"I'm keeping it open! You go first!"

Áehd groaned. "Stubborn boy," he said, and beyond all possibility, he pushed his horse to go faster.

Chapter 21

Distant hoofbeats followed relentlessly. Etar's fear rose, but he could barely focus. Rain hit his face harder, electricity building up. Savage thunder made the earth shake and the hollow spaces in his head and stomach rumble. The warmth of the floating light loomed closer. It was looking more and more like a giant, squared window floating in the middle of nowhere. He could see a sitting room on the other side. Or maybe he was just going mad.

"Where...?" he slurred as they neared the window.

Áehd didn't respond. The next moment, the horse dashed through the window. Etar shut his eyes. He expected them to bash against the glass, but the crash never came, and just like that, the deafening roar of the storm stopped.



Chapter 22

Jossan had seen hurricanes pass undeterred through the island many times. Hurricane season in Skalland was unforgiving, and if anyone was familiar with how a storm moved, it was Skallanders. But that behemoth overhead was not only out of season. It also moved like it had a mind of its own.

Her horse couldn't do this for much longer. They had crossed half the island at the inexorable pace the alchemist had set, and now with that unnatural storm blowing such strong winds in her face, she had no option but to slow down.

To make matters worse, the terrain started sloping upwards and her horse was heaving like it would drop dead in the next breath. Suddenly, in the distance, she saw the strangest light. It was large, squared like a gate, with no apparent source. It hadn't been there a moment ago, and the alchemist was heading into it.

"No!" she shouted and tried to spur her horse into giving the last of its strength, but the poor animal was spent, and some fifteen yards before reaching the top, it stumbled and threw Jossan off.

Jossan tumbled downhill, her hip landing on something sharp as she rolled uncontrollably. She saw clouds, then dirt, then clouds again, until she came to a stop with a rock wedged between her shoulder blades. She screamed in pain and frustration. The heavy rain fell into her mouth and made her cough, but she forced herself back on her feet, only to discover the strange light had vanished as mysteriously as it had appeared, leaving no trace of the alchemist or Etar at all. Soon after, the clouds above resumed their regular course, and the storm petered down.

Jossan hobbled the rest of the way uphill, her chest heaving with every effort. She clawed at the earth where the floating gate had been a moment ago, as if she expected to uncover some hidden contraption, some answer to this nonsensical chain of events. She only stopped when she peeled one of her fingernails almost completely off against a buried root, but by that point, it was already early morning.

There was nothing except two clear horse tracks going uphill, both of which vanished next to the dead tree where the mysterious gate had appeared. Some of her men had joined her moments after losing the alchemist, but she had no strength to answer their questions.

It was all useless. She sat on the grass, too exhausted to feel anything.

Rowan came to sit beside her after a while, but he knew her well enough to give her time to settle down.

“Your horse is lame, but nothing’s broken,” Rowan said. “Can I say the same about you?”

She shrugged and looked intently at an earthworm weaving into the ground. Etar loved all these disgusting critters so much. She wanted to scream.

“Do you really think that man wanted to hurt him?” Rowan asked.

She spun her head at Rowan. “What the fuck does that matter, Row? It’s impossible to know, and now they’re gone. I don’t know how to look for them.”

Rowan lifted his hands in surrender. “I’m only asking because he said you could go with them. It didn’t sound like he wanted to keep the kid from you. More like he was desperate to take him out of the castle.”

Jossan forced herself to take a deep breath. She needed to address something else before she sat down to think about how to solve this. “You’re right,” she said and got up. “Can you give me a ride back to the castle? I don’t think my horse is up for that walk.”

“Neither are you,” he said, and helped her to his horse.

Making her way back to the castle as a wet, shivering mess felt like proper punishment for her mistakes. Maybe it wasn’t even enough if she considered Etar’s life could be in danger, and she had no way of knowing where the alchemist had gone.

It was her fault. All of this was her fault.

Rowan kept quiet all the way back and Jossan had no energy left for conversation, but several of her men were waiting for them at the castle gates. They started firing questions at them. They thought the alchemist had hurt her, but she waved them all off without a word.

She got off Rowan’s horse at the main entrance to the castle and looked up at the sky. White sunlight stabbed her eyes. Not a single cloud, as if last night’s storm had been just a fever dream. By now, Theobald had probably been informed and had had several hours to simmer in his anger.

A servant said to her the king was waiting for her in his sitting room. When Jossan walked in, the king stood by the window, a glass of wine clutched in his hand. The king's hardened half-profile and the tense line of his shoulders told her everything she needed to know before he even opened his mouth.

"Sir," she said, limping to the center of the room.

Theobald didn't turn. His hand holding the cup shook lightly. "General, please tell me you are standing here alone because you already have that brat locked up in his room."

Jossan snorted. She couldn't help it. It was getting harder to hold any respect for this small, callous man she called her king. Etar deserved so much better than what he got in life, but this man standing here, unmoved by the possibility of his nephew being hurt or in the hands of someone with terrible intentions, deserved nothing but scorn from her.

"*The brat,*" she said, trying to subdue her anger. "You mean Etar, sir? He has a name. The name your brother gave him." She had only talked briefly with Prince Fahlk after he arrived in the castle with Etar, but she could still hear the desperate and sweet way the prince said his son's name.

Theobald flung his wineglass at her without warning. She ducked, but only barely. The king walked up to her, his face lined with rage.

"That *brat,* General, might be Fahlk's only legacy, but my dearest brother clearly did not understand what he was saddling me with, and now I know why the kid had that horrible vision of Gleasaman ships coming to our shore. It's because you're useless!"

The king was yelling so close to her she could feel his wine breath and spittle landing hot on her face, but she stood her ground.

He swiveled away from her and started pacing the room. “I worked so hard to keep his magic concealed. You and all the slobs I keep here as guards had nothing else to do but watch that he didn’t go in the Dome, that he didn’t talk with strangers. I should have listened when the old general told me a woman had no place in this army!”

Jossan sneered. Life had made her impervious to this kind of low-blow insults, but what truly made her bristle was Theobald trying to deflect responsibility. “Demote me, then. Throw me out of this place. I don’t care anymore,” she said, gritting her teeth. “I might have made a big mistake, but at least I care about someone other than myself.”

Theobald laughed. It was a dark, tired sound. “You don’t understand anything. You think what that wretched alchemist said about the Dome and the beacon was news to me?”

Jossan held her breath. “And whose fault is it you failed to inform your own Chief of Defense about something so important?”

“I have no obligation to explain anything to you. If you had followed orders instead of getting attached to the kid, maybe he wouldn’t have blindsided you so easily.”

Jossan walked closer to him until they stood inches apart, her eyes locked with his. “Strip me of my position then, but I will never regret having a soul.”

Theobald looked into her eyes as if considering the worth of replying to that, then shoved her out of the way with his shoulder as he walked away. She was sure that shove had been more painful for him, but it was disturbing how loaded with fear the gesture was. What else was Theobald not telling her?

The king reached the door and stopped under the threshold before leaving. “I will not dismiss you, General, be-

cause you still have to fix this mess. Find Etar before Wilfred does, but I wouldn't be surprised if that warlock has already taken him back to Gleasam."

After the king slammed the door behind himself, Jossan sank to her knees and let exhaustion overpower her. Etar didn't deserve to be in the middle of this mess, and Jossan regretted more than ever all the secrets she'd kept for Theobald. She'd genuinely thought she was protecting Etar, but she couldn't deny her responsibility in this outcome.

Eventually, she stood by the window and looked out into the sea. There had to be a way of finding the alchemist. The only thing giving her hope was that Áehd had acted so wounded when anyone accused him of working for Wilfred. A part of her wanted to believe his words about Etar being better off with him, but she couldn't take anything for granted.

For now, she needed her injuries mended, some food in her belly, and maybe a couple hours of sleep. She had an idea, but with how she felt now, she wouldn't get past the castle gates without falling off her horse. One problem at a time, she thought and swallowed her pride along with her fears.



Chapter 23

Etar's memories of the night before were fuzzy. He remembered worrying the horse would ruin the carpeting. He remembered being carried around, taken to a different room, and feeling searing pain behind his neck. He was in and out of consciousness. None of these things had rhyme or reason, and he would be hard-pressed to tell in what order they had happened.

He was now hugging a giant, fluffy pillow, conscious that he was drooling onto it but still too tired to care. He wondered whether those thoughts floating adrift in his head were only a bad dream. Everything from the ride into the storm until now had bled into a single nonsensical block of time. But he was so damned exhausted and the bed so warm and comfortable....

He was cruising into sleep again when a memory poked through his grogginess like a hot needle.

"Jossan!" he said, sitting bolt upright in bed.

The sudden motion made his head spin. His stomach turned.

“Are you well, Starseer?” a soft voice asked from the corner of the room.

It took Etar a few seconds to realize this was not Castle Skalland. His head kept wanting to make these walls fit with the configuration of his room, but from the polished wood furnishings to the massive window by the bed, everything here was different. The window was wide open, and from the outside, Etar could hear a steady crash of waves. The familiar aroma of sea salt filled his nose, and as his eyes adjusted to the bright light, he saw Áehd sitting calmly next to the door.

“Where...?” Etar asked.

“The Tower of Time. My home.”

Was that supposed to explain anything?

The alchemist smiled. “How are you feeling?”

Like crap. He touched the back of his neck gingerly. It stung like a hot iron burn when his fingers found the tender spot of his birthmark. It felt... different.

“Are you in pain?” Áehd asked, his eyebrows drawing together.

“What happened to my birthmark?”

Áehd pulled a folded piece of cloth from his tunic’s pocket. He stood, sat on the edge of the bed, and unfolded the fabric over his palm. In it, there was something like a scab. When Etar looked closer, he recognized the shape of the circle that had once been behind his neck. He’d never considered that the thing had been too perfectly round for a mole.

“Is that what I think it is?” he asked, feeling his face drain of color. He lowered his finger over the ‘scab’ but did not dare touch it.

Áehd put it away. “Do you know what *cursed iron* is?”

Etar shook his head. Cursed iron. What an unsettling name.

“A metal extracted from meteors. It is not really cursed, but people call it that because it can disrupt magic and lock it inside a magician’s body.”

“Meteors? As in, rocks falling from the sky?”

Áehd nodded. “Fortunately, it is quite rare, but it can kill a magician exposed to it for too long.”

Etar shuddered. “But wait, what does that have to do with my birthmark?”

“That was not a birthmark, child. Someone took meteoric iron and processed it into ink, then drew a tattoo with it on the back of your neck. It is an exceedingly cruel procedure, especially when done to a child. I had only seen it done to prisoners with magical powers, and all of them invariably got sick with the years. You could have died.”

Etar wanted to retch. His head hadn’t yet stopped reeling from last night’s events, and here was Áehd telling him someone had put a potentially lethal thing on his skin when he was little. “But why?”

“To keep you subdued. Whoever did it may have thought a small, simple figure would diminish your powers without harm. A magician as powerful as you would need a whole chart drawn on his head to be completely nullified by a cursed iron tattoo.”

As powerful as him? Etar looked down at his trembling hands. “But I’m not—”

“Stop repeating that lie, Etar. You almost made me faint with that output of power last night. Do you not remember it?”

He had a faint memory of static prickling all over his skin and the clouds moving strangely, but he was not a Cloudherder. He couldn’t have done that. “Did you remove the—the tattoo?” he asked. He didn’t know how to answer Áehd’s question.

Áehd nodded. "It was already starting to dry and peel on its own. I apologize. I took a scalpel to it and finished the job."

Etar touched the raw spot again. It still hurt a little, but nothing like that exasperating itch he'd felt before. "But I've had it forever. Why did it shrivel now?"

"My hypothesis? Your visit to the Dome triggered an explosion of your powers, and the seal was too small to contain you." Áehd paused. Shrugged. "The most important part is you are free of it. You are safe now."

Was he? He still couldn't find his footing. Everything was too new and strange, and only ten minutes after waking in this mysterious place, he was being told someone had done something to him that could have killed him. Uncle Theo was the only person he could think of that could have ordered this.

"I think I'm going to be sick," Etar said, pressing his knuckles against his mouth.

Áehd put a hand against the back of his neck and warmth coursed through his spine. He felt better at once.

"I am sorry this is how things happened," Áehd said softly as he withdrew his hand. "But I am sure you have many questions. You should get dressed and meet me outside the room. Your things are in that wardrobe over there," he said, leaving Etar alone to change.

Etar was still woozy and stumbled a couple times while getting dressed, but overall, he felt somehow stronger, more limber, like his lungs could suddenly receive more air and his heart pump more blood.

Besides his lightheadedness, the only thing bothering him now was the vague sensation that his eyes weren't quite right. Sometimes he saw lights sprinkled behind his eyelids when he closed them, and his right eye hurt a bit, but at least

it wasn't like that night at the Dome. He chose not to think about it. It was probably just exhaustion.

Before leaving, he went to the big window by the bed. The bright blue sky showed no signs of last night's storm. The drop from here was staggering, but the most dizzying part of it was how the tower seemed to emerge directly from the sea, and for miles around, he saw nothing but water. Not a speck of land. Nothing but cobalt waves and azure skies. Even clouds were scarce in this perfectly still portion of the world. He thought looking out the window would give him an idea of where he was, but now he understood even less.

And he was no less speechless when he exited his room.

Áehd was waiting for him next to the door, but Etar's attention was not on him. On the inside, the structure of the tower was simple: a vast, empty cylinder with a staircase spiraling along its inner wall and carved wooden doors running along it from top to bottom. The walls were made of something like slate, but the stone was a rich shade of blue instead of gray. It wasn't painted, he realized when he looked closer. The stone itself was naturally like that. The staircase was deep brown mahogany, polished to a golden sheen, and the banister was carved from end to end with vines and flowers. Shining brass lamps followed the stairs, and just like those in the Starseeing Dome, they were neither gas nor oil but magic-fueled.

"Beautiful, is it not?" Áehd said.

Etar nodded, too enthralled for words. He looked up. There was an enormous skylight at the top of the tower, its glass panels framed in a golden web of brass. The uninterrupted blue of the sky made it look like a gigantic jewel. "I still don't get where we are...."

“About eight nautical miles away from the coast of Skalland.”

“But I’ve seen maps. There’s nothing that near to us,” Etar said.

“It would not be on your maps,” Áehd said, walking down the stairs. “This place has been concealed from the world for centuries.”

The ground floor was decorated with a gigantic woven rug. Mystical floating eyes, a mythical menagerie, and blooming red flowers sprawled all over its surface. To one side, at the edge of the carpet, there was a sitting area in front of a hearth, and directly across from it, on the other side of the room, stood a huge glass-panel door with no discernible lock or handle. It looked out to a lush forest.

Etar stared at the forest, unable to comprehend how the view from his room’s window could be so disparate from this one. “That’s impossible,” he said.

Áehd stopped next to him. “It certainly is not. That is a portal. It opens to different places, and not all are from this world. We came through it last night.”

Etar started moving towards the door. He felt a pull like that of the Starseeing Dome, but Áehd squeezed his shoulder before he could go near. “Do not go out through that door alone. You do not know how to operate the portals yet, and if you walk out, you might not be able to return.”

A portal. This was the ‘window’ he had seen last night. “I thought portals were only stories. How does magic like that even work?”

Áehd hummed. “The people who built this tower are so beyond our reach that even the texts they left behind are crumbling to dust. There is no one alive who still understands

portal magic, and this is quite possibly the last instance of it anywhere in the world.”

Etar was about to ask why there would be a portal that connected with Skalland. Who in the world would waste good magic on visiting a barren little island? But as he opened his mouth, a small door he hadn't noticed opened on the other side of the room.

“Oh, you're awake? I thought you'd sleep all day. It was a rough night,” Hans said, walking towards them.

That was right. Hans had been there last night, waiting by the portal. “You have a lot of explaining to do. Don't you think I have forgotten,” Etar said.

Hans laughed. “Look, if you want to blame anyone, blame the Old Man. He's the scheming one. I'm just his pawn.”

Etar filled his lungs, ready to retort, but Áehd touched his shoulder.

“Child, please. Hans is right. It was my idea. But now that you are here, we can tell you anything you want to know.”

Etar sighed. “Fine,” he said, still glaring at Hans.

Hans flashed that infuriatingly disarming smile of his. “Will you forgive me if I make you breakfast and show you around?”

To Etar's irritation, it was really hard to stay mad at Hans. Especially because he would never forget the image of Hans punching Fried in the face. “Maybe?” he conceded in the end.

“That is probably for the best,” Áehd said. “This tower is a marvelous place, but it is also full of dangerous things that you should familiarize yourself with.”

“Leave him to me,” Hans said, beaming.

Etar had a lot of questions, but he didn't know where to start. “Will we talk more later?”

Chapter 23

Áehd nodded. “We will, once you have settled in. You are in good hands for now.”



Chapter 24

When Áehd disappeared behind one of the many doors along the staircase, Etar swirled around and backhanded Hans' shoulder. "Asshole," he said. He regretted it a little when he saw Hans flinch, but not enough to apologize.

Hans rubbed the spot where Etar had hit him. "I'm sorry. I should have told you, but I didn't know how you would react. Would you have believed me if I'd told you about this place?"

"It's still not fair. I trusted you, and you had plenty of time to tell me," Etar said, wishing he could sound angrier. He needed Hans to understand lying was not something he would tolerate. "Do you even honestly like me, or were you just pretending because Master Áehd told you to get me out of the castle?"

Hans grimaced. "Please don't say that. I didn't know what to expect when I first went to the castle, but I really do like you, and I want you to stay here with us."

Hans' pleading eyes were so hard to ignore. "Swear you won't lie to me again," Etar said.

"I won't. I swear," Hans said, tugging at the cuff of Etar's sleeve. "Do you forgive me?"

Friendship with a boy his own age was uncharted territory for Etar. He wasn't sure if his heart racing when Hans' fingers casually brushed against the inside of his wrist was a normal reaction, but it didn't feel like it was. "I guess...."

Hans snorted. "You *guess*?"

Etar grew more self-conscious by the minute. His tough act had lasted all of ten seconds, and as if the Gods were trying to punish him for pretending to be mad, his stomach growled loudly.

"Sorry," Etar said, his face warming. He had never regretted skipping dinner so much.

"Silly," Hans said, barely holding his laughter. "No need to apologize for being hungry, but if you're done being mad, follow me."

Etar had no will left to fight after that embarrassing moment.

Hans led him into the same door he'd walked out from a moment ago. Etar's brain flipped over when faced with yet another incongruous scene from the world outside the tower: through the window, he saw a small orchard, a vegetable patch, and beyond, an endless prairie under a clear morning sky.

Hans nudged his shoulder. "Hey, move along. I'll make you breakfast," he said as if it were perfectly normal that every opening in this tower looked out into a completely different place.

This was a kitchen, Etar realized after he forced himself to look away from the window. The space wasn't exactly small, but it was crammed with homey little details. Drying herbs hanging from the rafters, counters full of shiny copper pots and hefty iron pans, shelves overburdened with canning jars and spice bottles.

Hans pulled a stool near the window for Etar to sit. There was a basket full of ripe fruit on the counter. They were red and round and seemed like they had come from one of the trees outside.

“Take one. They are washed,” Hans said as he busied himself chopping some vegetables.

Etar chose the reddest fruit from the top of the pile and lifted it to his face. He took a deep whiff of it. It smelled like it would taste of honey.

“Oh, come on. You’ve never tasted an apple?” Hans asked with a teasing smirk.

“An apple...” Etar said, turning the fruit in his hand, watching its waxy sheen under the blue daylight.

“Are you serious?” Hans asked with a quizzical look. “Just eat it. There’s plenty where that came from. The Old Man loves them.”

Etar inhaled the apple’s pungent aroma again before digging in. He wasn’t far off thinking it would taste like honey. Skalland was full of soursops, mangos, and guineps. Most other fruits they got came by ship, already dried or candied. Apples were new in the tiny compendium of fruits Etar knew.

“Hey, can I ask something?” Etar said, trying not to gobble the apple like an animal.

Hans hummed as he put the cut vegetables into a pan and on the stove.

“Why do you keep calling Master Áehd ‘Old Man’?”

“Huh?” Hans said, briefly lifting his eyes away from his cooking.

“I mean. He doesn’t look *old*.”

“Oh. First, because ‘Master Áehd’ sounds way too stiff and I would feel like I’m talking to a teacher—no offense, you

can call him whatever you want. And second, because he is much older than he looks.”

Even if he was older than he looked, calling Áehd ‘old’ seemed like an exaggeration, but Etar didn’t insist. “Is he your dad?” he blurted out. “Or perhaps not. You don’t look alike....”

Hans chuckled and shook his head. “No, he’s not my dad. I’m an orphan. Grew up in a whorehouse.”

“How did you meet, then? He wasn’t, um, *visiting* the whorehouse or something, was he?” Etar instantly realized what an awkward question it had been, but it was too late to take it back.

Hans cackled so hard he almost tossed the vegetables out of the pan. “No. He doesn’t like that kind of fun—not that I know of,” he said, still laughing. “I was seven when I met him, just a smelly, starved little urchin. He saved my life.”

Etar arched his eyebrows. He couldn’t imagine Hans either as starved or smelly. “How did he save you?”

“I had been looking inside a butcher’s shop for over an hour. The butcher left some mutton on his counter while he looked for something, and I thought he wouldn’t see me. Of course, he turned my way just as I put my grubby little fingers on the meat. He grabbed my wrist and was ready to chop my hand with his cleaver when Áehd passed by. The Old Man asked what the problem was, and the butcher explained he could no longer sell that piece of meat after I’d touched it, so he was going to teach me a lesson. Áehd tried to reason with him, but the butcher didn’t listen. The Old Man tossed a couple gold coins at the butcher’s feet—which was more than enough to buy everything in that ratty shop—and took me away while the butcher was distracted picking the coins up.”

Knowing Master Áehd’s lack of expressiveness, it was hard to picture him as a soft man who would rescue a desti-

tute little child, and the story didn't make it any clearer what Hans' relationship was to Master Áehd. "So. Um. You came with him as a servant?"

Hans raised an eyebrow at him. "A servant? No. I do all the housework because I live here. And because I care about him. But he's never really asked me to do anything for him."

Hans slid a plate full of vegetables over the counter towards him. Etar couldn't believe vegetables could smell so buttery and sweet, nor that they could be so many shapes and colors. He started eating in silence, mulling over what Hans had just said. He thought about Jossan and how she'd always been there for him despite not being related by blood.

"Jossan thinks Master Áehd wants to hurt me or use me for something bad," Etar said.

Hans rolled his eyes. "No offense, but the general doesn't know him," he said, sounding defensive. "He's the kind of man who can't see an injured bird without running to its rescue."

Jossan would still haven't trusted him. In fact, Etar imagined that right about now, she must be cursing at the sky for letting him escape. But Etar could hear how passionately Hans believed the things he was saying, and it was nice thinking someone cared about his existence enough to break him out of the castle and bring him here.

"Thank you," Etar said when he finished his meal. "Those were the best vegetables I've ever tasted."

Hans smiled. "Whoever was cooking for you before me was obviously doing it wrong."

No one had cooked for him before Hans. Servants at the castle cooked for everyone, but no one had ever cooked a meal that was made especially for Etar. It sounded like a simple thing, but it made Etar feel welcome. "What do we do now?"

Chapter 24

Hans hummed. “Go get a coat on. I’ll do the dishes and meet you outside your room. I’ll show you something amazing.”



Chapter 25

Jossan woke with a gasp. Her heart and her head throbbed in unison when she looked out her window and daylight assaulted her eyes. Judging by the position of the sun, it was probably mid-morning. The couple of hours she'd slept had done nothing to offset her exhaustion. Last night still weighed heavily on her.

She stood on jittery limbs and went to her washbasin. The face looking back at her in the mirror was careworn and pale, but as her brain sharpened into focus, urgency took over.

She searched for some of the civilian clothes in her wardrobe, but she reconsidered when her hand brushed against the coarse wool of one of her uniform jackets. Theobald had tried to wound her pride as a commander, but she had to remind herself this king was a shadow of the man she had once served, and his outbursts were nothing new.

If the king wouldn't do anything to solve this problem, she would have to step up yet again. She'd made a huge mistake letting her guard down with the alchemist, yes, but her men still called her 'General,' and they would still follow her in this time of need.

With her short hair pomaded down and her sword and dagger hanging from her belt, she went to the stables to saddle a horse. Master Colum was the most knowledgeable magician left on the island. Maybe he would know how to find that slippery alchemist.

The lighthouse was less than twenty minutes from the castle on horseback, but her frayed nerves made her unthinkingly push her poor horse into a gallop almost all the way there. She dismounted outside the lighthouse, tied her horse, and dashed up the stairs to the top. Master Colum was standing in the main gallery, leaning against the railing and looking intently into a spyglass. Jossan followed the tip of the spyglass, but the glare of the sun didn't let her see at first what Colum was looking at.

"Master Colum," she said.

"What are those, General? Do you know?" the old Tidebreaker asked, giving her the spyglass.

She squinted hard against the sun, saw a few specks on the horizon, and put the spyglass to her eye. Her blood chilled when the small shapes came up magnified as black ships with large white sails and steam chimneys jutting out of their backs. She had never doubted Etar's vision, but a part of her still wanted it never to come true. "How soon do you think they'll be here?" she asked warily, returning Colum's spyglass.

"Hours, perhaps," Colum said, his eyes never losing sight of the ships. "They are cruising, but if they are visible from here, they can't be more than twelve miles away. Tonight, or tomorrow morning, if the weather allows."

"This is not good," she muttered.

Colum finally looked at her, his brow knit. "Are those what I think they are?"

Jossan swallowed, still looking into the sea. “A sea captain gave me a report a few days ago that Ainsworth’s flagship had turned our way. And... well. Etar had a vision of them destroying our fishing port.”

Colum’s eyes went round. “That’s a powerful vision.”

Jossan rubbed her face. “And there’s a whole messy story behind it. You don’t need the details right now, but Etar is missing, and I think—”

“He’s *missing*? And Gleasaman ships are coming this way?” Colum’s face hardened. “Does this have to do with some alchemist visiting Castle Skalland?”

Jossan’s eyebrows shot up. “You know about that?”

“Etar told me he’d met someone who wanted to teach him how to use his magic. I told him not to trust so easily, but I can’t say I was any more reasonable than him at fifteen.”

Jossan groaned and wondered how she could love Etar so much and want to strangle him at the same time. How had this boy snuck out to talk with the alchemist and Colum while grounded? But she had a good idea who had aided him. That insolent blond scullion had ‘mysteriously’ vanished the same night as Etar.

“Regardless. You lost him. You get him back,” Colum said unflinchingly.

Jossan understood Colum’s outrage, but she still felt scolded. “Look, I know I let him slip away, but I cannot deal with warships and a missing kid on my own. Can you help?”

Colum seemed offended by the question. “Of course. What do you need me to do?”

“Once those ships are within your reach, could you hinder them with your magic?”

Colum frowned. “It’s extremely dangerous to create turbulence over these reefs. I could sink other ships passing by.”

“We will notify the fishermen and merchants. It’s also dangerous for them to be going about their business with enemy ships approaching. My men can spread the word, but don’t send signals. I don’t want those ships to know what we’re up to.”

“You take care of that, then. I’ll mind the currents,” he said. “But General, you *must* find him.”

As much as Jossan felt judged, she was glad for Colum’s stubbornness. Theobald had barred Etar’s contact with any magician in his obsession not to let him develop his magic. No magicians could be hired as guards or servants at the castle, and though Etar adored the old Tidebreaker, he was not supposed to come out here to see Colum, either. Theobald had even tried to harass Colum into leaving the island. Colum had resented Theobald ever since but refused to be driven out of the place he’d called home all his life. Now Colum may be their last line of defense against those ships.

“Thank you, Colum. Truly,” she said.

“No need to thank me. This is my home, too,” he said.

Jossan had initially wanted to ask Colum for help finding Etar, but with the danger looming ahead, she could not afford to distract him from stopping those ships.

She galloped back home. This news would be a bucket of ice water to everyone’s head, especially to her men, who somehow had to prepare to defend the island against a menace they couldn’t possibly defeat.



Chapter 26

It was noon when Jossan returned from her trip to the lighthouse. She found Rowan with two other guardsmen in the courtyard, sitting in the shade of a large tree, chatting and laughing like not a thing was wrong with the world. She already felt guilty about the news she was about to break.

“Hey, General!” Karl, one of the men sitting with Rowan, said. “We were just talking about you.”

Selvyn, the other guard, kicked Karl in the shin. “Shut up!” he said, blushing.

Rowan and Karl laughed.

Jossan sat on the grass and basked in their merriment for a moment. It was so rare to hear them laugh so freely. Especially Rowan. “What were you boys talking about?”

“Oh, it’s nothing, General,” Selvyn said, tracing circles in the grass with his finger.

“Come on, Selv. Tell her,” Karl teased.

Selvyn cleared his throat. “I...”

Rowan sighed. “He’s getting married in two weeks, but he got assigned to night watch the night before.”

“Don’t listen to them, please,” Selvyn said, now blushing beet-red. “I’ll be fine. The ceremony is not until late in the day.”

Jossan’s heart sank. How old was Selvyn? Twenty? Too young to die in a raid before he even knew what married life was like. She thought of extending this moment for a little longer, but time was no longer in their favor. “Selv, you know I would move your shift, but—”

“No, I’m serious, General. I understand.”

She shook her head. “That’s not what I mean. I’m afraid there’s something much worse than the night watch coming our way.”

All three of them looked at her.

Jossan sighed deeply. There was no easy way to break this. “I just came from the lighthouse. Seven black ships are coming our way.”

“Ainsworth?” Selvyn asked, his face suddenly pale.

“I wish I could say no, but their formation was too perfect. They looked like warships,” Jossan said.

“And you’re certain they are coming our way?” Karl asked.

Jossan brushed her hair back. “Boys, if I could see them from the lighthouse, they are too close to our coast. There’s no mistaking their direction.”

“And we knew this was a matter of time,” Rowan said.

“What are we going to do?” Selvyn asked. It seemed like he was not all there anymore.

Jossan tried not to think about all the fears that must be running through poor Selvyn’s head. Would he even be alive in two weeks? Would any of them? “I had hoped this wouldn’t be necessary, but Row and I have been discussing evacuation for a while.”

“But....” Selvyn trailed off. He probably knew he couldn’t fight against this fate, but that made it no less heartbreaking to see him try to rationalize it.

Karl had become pensive. “Does this have anything to do with that alchemist taking the boy?”

Jossan understood why Etar was still ‘the boy’ to all these men. Most of them were too young to remember how Etar landed under his uncle’s roof, or they hadn’t really witnessed Prince Fahlk’s demise. Through Theobald’s efforts to conceal the facts, rumors overlapped with the truth until they became muddled together. Nowadays, only a handful of people truly knew what had happened, and Theobald had done his best to keep it that way, forbidding all castle staff from talking about it. He also discouraged them from talking to Etar, unless absolutely necessary.

“It might, but that’s not really important anymore,” Jossan said. “I will stay behind, try to parlay with Ainsworth, but that will be just a ruse to buy time for everyone to leave for some of the nearest islands that aren’t under Gleasaman domain.”

Selvyn took a deep breath before speaking again. “And that’s it? We won’t even attempt to fight?”

Rowan patted Selvyn’s shoulder. “Selv, no offense, but we lost the kid to a single man last night. If the reports are accurate, these men have ironclads with cannons, armed sailors, and magicians aboard. We can’t really fight.”

Karl spat on the ground. “Fuck,” he said. “I want to stay behind with you, General.”

Selvyn looked away. He probably felt called out, but Jossan couldn’t bring herself to make him stay when he and his betrothed might die before they could marry.

And though she appreciated Karl’s courage, him staying was equally senseless. “Nope. No one is staying behind,” she

said. "You boys will help me inform every sailor on the island about what's happening. Colum will create turbulence around the lighthouse, and every crew should be notified not to go by the cays until the situation clears."

Karl furrowed his brow. "But General—"

"Karl, don't," she said, cutting him off. "I cannot express how grateful I am for you boys staying even this long in this pointless job, but we're facing something we cannot fight. I won't waste your lives in some foolish attempt at bravery. This is an order, and you will not contest it if you still have any respect for me. Is that understood?"

The two men seemed conflicted for different reasons, but they said 'Yes sir' in unison.

"Good," she said, getting up. "I need to talk with the king, and while I do that, I need the two of you to start at the port. Tell everyone who needs to know what's coming, but try not to let the townspeople know yet."

Karl and Selvyn sprang to their feet, their military salute sharp as ever.

Jossan returned the salute with the respect they deserved and called Rowan to her side. "Walk with me, please."

Rowan's face changed as soon as the young guardsmen were out of sight. He seemed more jaded than ever, but she couldn't blame him. He was forty-three and had served in the military since he was a teenager. He had trained, supported, and pushed her to become the leader she was today. And what had all his hard work and commitment amounted to in the end? Even if they survived this, what would become of the only home they knew?

"What?" she asked as Rowan entered the castle with her. "Be honest, please."

He had a grim smile on his face. “I think we’re already too late.”

“That might be so, but sitting on my hands won’t do us any good. Even if we can’t save everyone, if at least some people can get out, that will always be better than nothing.”

Rowan took her by the arm. “Jo, I don’t mean to question you, but are you really going to stay behind? Do you really believe that will hinder Ainsworth even the slightest bit? Our only advantage is they don’t know yet we’re trying to leave. You’ll be wasting your life if you stay.”

“Do you really believe I can just run away without trying?” she said, pulling her arm out of his grip. “I can stall him because I bet he thinks we have what he wants. If giving my life can save others, I’m fine with it.”

“How is that fair to you?” Rowan asked, obviously frustrated. “How many years have you wasted trying to keep this place standing? That was never your responsibility, yet here you are, willing to sacrifice yourself on a hunch. Why can’t it be old Theo throwing his life away? He’s worthless anyway.”

Jossan took a deep breath. She didn’t want to fight Rowan, but she needed him to see her point. “It is not a hunch, Row. Those men *know* Etar is here—or was. Why do you think they turned around so suddenly? I truly hope the alchemist was telling the truth and Etar is safely out of reach. Without him, we’re still just the derelict little rock in the middle of the ocean that no one wants, and I will convince them of that.”

Rowan sighed. “And what if that’s not enough?”

“Then a few of us die so the rest can live another day. It might be painful, but our people are tough, and at least if they survive, they can figure things out. And Row, you don’t have to die here with me.”

Rowan laughed dryly, but she could hear his heartache spilling through that sound. He took a step closer, looming over her, and for a moment, she thought he would grab her by the shoulders and either kiss her or shake her.

“I will chop my sword arm off before leaving you behind,” he said without a hint of hesitation. “Doesn’t mean I have to agree with you, but I would follow you to the bottom of the Dark Pit, woman. I’m *that* kind of fool.”

Jossan’s jaw locked. If Rowan was trying to deter her, his words did quite the opposite. He was another big reason to risk it all. She still hoped she could save Etar, but if that goal was beyond her grasp, she wanted to at least fight for Rowan and for everyone who believed in her. “You are the biggest idiot in the world, Row, and I say it from the bottom of my heart.”

He looked into her eyes, his gaze softening. Rowan was always so hard to read, but his tender smile was enough for her to understand he was yielding to her stubbornness. “So, what are we telling good old Theo?”

Jossan smirked. “That we’re evacuating with or without him.”



Chapter 27

Jossan watched Rowan stroll ahead of her like they had nothing important to do, but there was a slight tension in his shoulders. Theobald got on everyone's nerves, but Rowan particularly hated him for how he treated her.

"Girl, where is the king?" Rowan asked a passing servant, who gave them both a wary look.

"In his sitting room, sir. I just brought lunch in for him," the girl said.

Jossan thanked her to soften Rowan's curt approach, then followed him down the hallway.

"Row," she said.

Rowan hummed without turning to her.

"Don't kill him, please."

"Why?" Rowan asked, thumbing the pommel of his sword.

"Because we're not murderers?"

Row hummed again.

"Please?" Jossan said.

They stopped outside Theobald's door, where Rowan finally faced her. "For you, Jo," he said, his hand still on his

sword. "But if it depended on me, I'd stick him with this thing and be done with his tantrums."

"What use is that now? We're all either abandoning this place or getting killed. I don't want trouble. I'm serious."

He gave out a frustrated sigh.

Jossan squeezed his shoulder. "Row, please. All I want right now is to get people to safety. Then...."

Rowan relaxed his posture under her touch. "Then what?"

"Etar. If you're staying with me, can you help me find Etar?"

"You make it sound like I'll tell you off for asking."

Jossan blushed. "I thought you didn't care about him."

Rowan groaned. "Jo, I might not be best friends with him, but that doesn't mean I'm keen on seeing him get hurt. He's just a kid, and I'm not a heartless monster. Besides, I know how much you care about him."

Jossan breathed a little easier. She'd thought so far she'd be alone in her quest to recover Etar, even though she knew Rowan would never refuse his help to her. "Thank you, my friend. Let's do this now," she said and opened the door to the king's sitting room.

Theobald sat facing away from the door. The light coming from the large vaulted windows turned him into a silhouette. Beyond, the sea churned restlessly.

"Did you find him?" Theobald asked, his voice flat. "Because if you didn't, I don't know how you have the nerve to come here."

They crossed the wide sitting area without answering until they stood behind the king's chair.

As they approached, Theobald sat up and looked over his shoulder.

“I haven’t found him,” Jossan said. “But there is a more pressing issue now. I was at the lighthouse. The ships are coming.”

Theobald stood and rushed to the window, scanning the horizon. “How far?”

“They will be here in less than a day, but Master Colum will try to stop them. We’re so lucky to still have him,” she said. She couldn’t help rubbing salt in that old wound.

Theobald spun around, anger creasing his brow. “Should I remind you it’s your fault that they are coming here in the first place?”

Rowan surged forward, but Jossan grabbed him firmly by the arm and blocked his way.

“I’m past your petty accusations,” she said. “If you would have told me why Etar couldn’t go into the Dome, I would have stopped him. But the way you did things, it just seemed like more unfairness stacked on top of a boy who was already suffering so much with your neglect. You were supposed to act like his father, for all the Gods’ sake.” She was snarling. She had to try hard not to yell.

Theobald chuckled, but he lowered his eyes. Something Jossan had never seen him do.

She continued. “But that’s irrelevant now. We have no way of countering cannon fire, so we must evacuate. Order the staff as far away from the coast as possible. Send them back to their families in town while my men and I coordinate their escape from the island.”

“And that’s it?” Theobald said with a sarcastic grin. “You could come up with nothing more creative than running?”

Jossan’s hands shook. Theobald somehow always found ways of making himself more unlikeable. “We’re talking about people’s lives. Nothing else should matter.”

“I pay you to defend this place! I—”

Rowan moved too fast for her to stop him this time. Before Jossan could react, he had a handful of the king’s dressing gown clutched in his fists. “You’re lucky the general is a compassionate woman. I would toss you out the window if not for her.”

“Row...” Jossan said, gently touching Rowan’s arm.

Rowan shrugged her off and pushed Theobald against the window. The frame rocked violently, the thick glass threatening to shatter. “You can stay here tossing in your expensive shit like a pig in mud all you want. We’re sending everyone home, and I don’t give a fuck if you get your head blasted off by those cannons. If you oppose us, I’m tying you to a chair and leaving you here to die. Got that?”

Even at the end of her rope, Jossan couldn’t see herself pulling off the sort of rage Rowan was displaying now, but she didn’t move a finger to stop him. She had a feeling this was the only way Theobald would cooperate, and he would have to be too proud or too stupid not to listen to a man who out-matched him in every way possible.

It was no surprise when Theobald lifted his hands in surrender. “No need to be a brute,” the king said spitefully, perhaps trying to sound defiant, but his voice quavered. “Say it was my order. I won’t deny it, but get out of my face.”

“Thank you, sir,” Jossan said stiffly as Rowan let the king go.

Rowan exited the room ahead of her. She was about to follow, but pity compelled her to look back. Theobald was looking out the window again, perhaps searching for the ships on the horizon. She scanned his profile and considered for the first time how much he’d aged in the last ten years.

“General,” he said, his eyes still on the surf outside.

Jossan closed the door softly. “Sir?”

“Will you believe me if I tell you all I ever wanted was to protect him?”

Jossan looked at the floor. Her heart sank a little for Theobald, even though he had been unbearable and obnoxious for so long. “You don’t make it easy, sir, but a part of me believes you became such an asshole because you’ve spent a decade grieving for your brother. We all loved him, you know?”

Theobald laughed. It was a brittle and small sound, but it was something. “Perhaps that’s it,” he said and followed with a long pause. “Fahlk would hate me if he saw what I’ve become. But you’re not like me. I know you’ll find the kid and bring him to safety.”

“That I will,” she said, standing a little straighter, then left Theobald to his dark musings.

Jossan had ordered some guardsmen to gather everyone in the courtyard. She watched nervously as people trickled in, huddling close, their faces drawn and wary. They all lifted their faces towards her as she stood at the top of the flight of stairs leading to the courtyard.

“Friends,” she said, projecting her voice. “An imminent danger lurks on the horizon. Seven heavily armed Gleasaman ships are approaching our shores.”

Shocked whispers spread through the crowd.

She lifted her hands to appease them. “It might well be they are just passing by, but King Wilfred has never been our friend. I will speak with their commanding officer personally, but for your protection, our king has ordered everyone to evacuate and take shelter in Midtown.”

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Jossan looked at them, expecting a reaction, but people still seemed to be processing her words. She drove the point home. “They will be here in a few hours. It’s better if you go pack now.”

Fearful voices rose until the crowd became a panicked mob, and had Jossan not stepped aside in time, they would have trampled her as they stampeded into the castle to get their belongings.

The chaos was impossible to hold, but at least it didn’t take long for the frantic castle staff to clear out, getting stuff on beasts of burden and packing transport carts to the brim. Things were moving forward, and that was all Jossan could ask for at that moment.



Chapter 28

Etar took the steps back to his room two at a time. He rifled through his new wardrobe for the coat he remembered bringing with him, but as he searched, something pricked his finger. He hissed and withdrew from the wardrobe. The mound of clothes he'd rumbled started moving until his spider emerged from the pile. It freed itself from the bundle and jumped down to the floor to run up his leg.

Etar scooped the spider in his hands and helped it perch on his shoulder. "I'm sorry. I didn't forget about you, but a lot has happened since last night," he said to the spider. He knew it could understand him, but it made him unreasonably happy that this bunch of metal pieces wanted to follow him everywhere.

When he rushed outside, Hans was already waiting there, resting against the banister. He gave Etar's spider a curious look.

"Huh, does this one always follow you around?" he said, leaning closer. "That's interesting. I don't think the Old Man's constructs do that with him."

Etar noticed the light freckles on Hans' nose for the first time. Then he caught himself staring and turned his face away. "Uh. So. Where are we going?"

Hans straightened himself again and smiled. "Come. I'll show you."

Etar followed him to the top of the stairs until they stood under a trapdoor in the ceiling. Hans pulled it open, and a set of wooden steps dropped with a clack that made Etar flinch. Hans stepped aside to allow Etar to climb up first.

Etar peered up at the open door framing the blue sky and hesitated. Looking back at the bottom of the tower from up here, he realized how high the roof was, and he suddenly questioned the wisdom of going out.

"Come on," Hans said, chuckling, and nudged Etar's shoulder.

Etar took a deep breath and grabbed onto the sides of the narrow stepladder. A fresh sea breeze assaulted his face when he poked his head through the opening. He looked around. The roof was terrifyingly naked. There were no parapets to protect unsuspecting visitors from dropping to their death and no means of breaking the wind. Not a single structure to grab onto if a gale came sweeping over the tower.

Etar tried to back off, but Hans was already climbing behind him.

"Hey, I know it's scary, but the Old Man says the winds are magically dampened out here," Hans said.

Etar shook his head.

"I've been out here hundreds of times. It's fine," Hans insisted and squeezed around Etar to go out first.

Etar climbed out gingerly. Hans was already walking straight to the tower's edge, and Etar had to hurry after him, but he froze when his shoes clicked on something that was

not stone. He looked down to find himself standing on the glass skylight he had seen from inside.

His stomach made a violent turn and he tried to back away, but Hans noticed and grabbed his forearm. “Hey, careful. You don’t want to trip and fall.”

Etar didn’t look down again, and thankfully Hans didn’t let him go until they had cleared the skylight, which out here made for the most terrifying floor decoration in the world.

They stopped a couple yards away from the edge of the tower, which was still too close for Etar’s comfort, but thankfully Hans didn’t insist on going further. Etar finally got his pounding heart under control and allowed himself to glance out.

For miles on end, a silvery-gray sea churned uninterrupted, the fuzzy curve of the horizon blending between water and sky. Down below, flocks of seabirds cruised through the limpid air, searching the ocean for fish, and sometimes the wind would carry their tiny voices over to his ears.

He swiveled on his heels to look around. On the other side, a lonely patch of bluish brown standing in the sea caught his eye. From its edge, a crag rose like a broken tooth, and on the crag’s truncated top, a tiny castle caught the morning sun on its shining face.

Etar gasped.

“That’s your old home,” Hans said, touching Etar’s shoulder.

“It looks so tiny from here,” Etar said. Seeing it from this distance, it was even more incredible how Áehd had brought him all the way from there.

“Do you want to go back?” Hans asked. “I’m sure the Old Man would take you if you asked.”

Did he? He felt guilty for causing Jossan this much trouble, and no matter how far they were, he couldn't thoroughly shake the anxiousness of defying his uncle's rules. But looking at Hans' smiling face made him wonder what his life would have been if they'd grown up together. "I like it here, I think."

"You *think*?"

"I mean, I have only been here for a few hours, but I enjoy spending time with you, and this tower is fabulous." He took a deep breath. Even from here, he could make out the shape of the Starseeing Dome. "Besides, I want to learn more about my magic."

"You'll feel at home in a few days. I'll see to that," Hans said.

Etar continued his slow revolution around the tower, and as his eyes glided over the infinite blanket of the sea, something less endearing made him stop. He shielded his eyes, squinted, and counted the figures cutting swiftly through the horizon. Seven of them, all of them black.

A shudder ran down his spine.

"Hans, those are fishing ships, right?" he asked warily.

Hans looked at the ships and hummed. "No, fishing ships don't form like that. The shape is wrong, too." He narrowed his eyes and walked closer to the edge. "Nope. Whatever they are, they are not fishing ships."

"It can't be," Etar whispered, frozen in place.

"Hey, what's wrong? They can't reach us."

Etar wasn't worried they would reach them here. He thought of Jossan and Master Colum, his vision of the invading warships flashing in his head. "Why are they coming so soon?"

“What do you mean? We can go back inside if they make you nervous.”

But Etar wasn't listening anymore. Something in his brain switched. His surroundings became muted and fuzzy, and the wind rose in rhythm with his panicked breathing. Hans' voice kept calling his name, but even the deepening howls of the wind sounded distant and unreal. Etar's hair and clothes whipped against his skin, but it all felt like it was happening to someone else.

“Etar!” Hans called from afar.

Etar's right eye throbbed uncomfortably. He struggled to keep himself upright, and his vision dulled down. The winds kept rising without reason, screaming in his ears, chafing his cheeks—until a startling pain shocked him from the base of his head to the bottom of his spine. He fell to his knees, panting, and the winds resumed their normal speed like nothing was out of order.

Hans knelt in front of him with his hair in complete disarray. “How did you do that?” he asked with a look of bewilderment.

“Do what?” Etar asked, rubbing his throbbing eye to relieve the pain.

“You were windcalling, Starseer,” a voice said from behind Etar.

Etar sat on the floor and turned around. Master Áehd stood there, holding a long golden needle between his fingers. Where had he come from?

“Wh—what?” Etar asked. He looked down at his chest. His spider clung to his shirt for dear life, its blue light pulsing fast and radiating warmth.

“I had to shock you with this needle to break you out of it. You are waking to your real powers, but you cannot control

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them yet," Áehd said. "We must go inside. It is not safe for you out here."



Chapter 29

“I was windcalling? Really?” Etar asked, his head spinning out of rhythm with the room. He was sitting in what Master Áehd said was his laboratory. A workbench next to Etar had a magnifying glass mounted on an arm, and under it, a metallic beetle lay dismembered.

Hans stood with his shoulder resting against the wall, looking at Etar in concerned silence.

Master Áehd took a deep breath and nodded. “Yes, child. Rather frenzied windcalling, but you were.”

“How?” both Etar and Hans asked at the same time.

“I thought Starseers could only talk with the stars and predict the future,” Hans added.

Áehd calmly pulled a stool from one of the workbenches and sat facing Etar. It was fascinating how, no matter what was happening around him, Master Áehd never seemed to be in a hurry. “That is usually true, but I have long hypothesized a sufficiently powerful magician should be able to break through the barriers that keep magic strains separated.”

“What does that mean?” Etar asked, rubbing his eye. Whatever had just happened on the roof had weakened his

vision, and the little lights pulsing in front of his eyes became more persistent.

“It is all very extensive theory, Starseer. I will be happy to teach you when things have settled. But to put it simply, I have met many magicians, but only one before you who could also master all other types of magic.”

“Who?” Etar asked, frowning.

“Your father,” Master Áehd said like it was obvious.

Etar let his jaw hang. “My uncle never mentioned him being powerful. I knew he was a Starseer too, but....”

Áehd’s brow creased. “Etar, your father was one of the most brilliant and beautiful minds I ever met. It pains me to learn the people around you have gone to such lengths to bury his memory along with his body.”

Etar thought he would pass out with how breathtakingly fast his heart was pumping. His vision narrowed, but there was no rogue wind blowing in response this time. He just felt like crap. “Is that why you were looking for me? For my powers?”

“In part, yes, but only because I feared they would put you in danger,” Áehd said. “I always thought of your father as a dear friend. I was supposed to follow when he fled from Wilfred, but circumstances prevented me from doing so. I wanted to protect him, and you, but I failed you both in the end.”

“Wilfred.... You mean *King* Wilfred? Isn’t that the same man who—” The image of the ships destroying the fishing port flashed in front of his eyes again. He darted to his feet, which didn’t help his woozy head, and looked out the window. He saw the ships continuing in their relentless path. “I need to go back,” he said and mindlessly started for the door.

Hans caught him by the arm just before his buckling knees betrayed him.

“Etar, those ships can’t find you here,” Hans said, helping him sit again. “No one can see or touch this tower from the outside. I’ve stood at the top and seen fishing ships go right through it.”

That was as incredible as everything else about this tower, but it wasn’t the point. “No, you don’t get it. I need to go back to tell Jossan they are here. I don’t think she and my uncle believed my vision of those ships. What if they haven’t seen them? I don’t think anybody’s looking for them.” He tried to stand again, but Hans blocked his way.

“You can barely walk straight. How are you going to go all the way back to the castle on your own?” Hans said.

“I...” Etar trailed off. He couldn’t concentrate.

Hans looked at him with a mix of irritation and concern, then turned to Master Áehd. “I’ll go.”

“Hans, if this truly is Ainsworth, it is not safe for you to go either,” Áehd said.

“Come on, Old Man, they are still several hours away. It won’t take me that long to find the general and let her know. I’ll turn right back.”

It took Etar a moment to see why Hans’ plan was flawed. “Wait, no,” he blurted out. “If you go back, she will try to arrest you.”

“The Starseer is right. I cannot imagine the general will be happy after last night’s misadventure.”

Hans shook his head. “I will negotiate with her, ask her to come with me to see Etar.” He turned to Etar. “Does she recognize your handwriting?”

Etar nodded.

“Then write her a note saying you’re safe and you want her to come with me.”

Etar doubted Jossan would want to leave Skalland knowing the ships were so close, but he had to try. Hours away. That was what Hans had said. He looked pleadingly at Master Áehd. He didn't want Hans to risk himself, but Etar knew they wouldn't let him go.

Finally, Master Áehd shook his head and stood from his stool. He fetched a few writing supplies from one of his drawers and put them in front of Etar to write.

"I will only say this once, Hans," Master Áehd said. "You are turning back the moment you have delivered this message. Fight her if you must, but I want you back before those ships reach Skalland."

Hans nodded, but he didn't seem as concerned as Master Áehd. "I'll most likely be back for dinner. Who'll feed the two of you otherwise?"

Etar bent down to write his message. He crossed out several words as he wrote, smudging the ink with his palm in places. His final note read:

Please don't hurt Hans. I ran away, no one forced me, and I miss you, but there are things you don't know. Follow Hans. He will take you to where I am. I am alive and well, but you are all in danger. Please hurry.

Etar signed the note and gave it to Hans. "She's not unreasonable, but please understand she might be furious now," Etar said. He gave Hans a meek look and added a soft, "Thank you."

Hans chuckled. "Don't worry so much about me. I'll be back soon," he said and made his way out.

Etar tried to follow him to see him off, but Áehd touched his shoulder. "You need to come with me."

“Where?”

“You have awakened to a dangerous power. I need to teach you how to control it before you hurt yourself.”



Chapter 30

‘Midtown’ was the most expected name for a town that sat precisely in the center of the island, and so was everything else about it.

The sleepy atmosphere of the town made Jossan want to stay. The houses in Midtown were built on tall pilings to withstand the floods that came with hurricanes, but they were all made with humble woods and uncomplicated designs. Most were painted earthy red, bright mossy green, or a sunny yellow—the most widely available pigments the island could produce.

Those few with blue walls—a much more expensive color to produce—belonged to merchants, who were relatively more well-off than the rest. But even the owners of blue houses didn’t mind coming out in the stuffy afternoon and mingling with their neighbors. Windcallers helped swing hammocks and spur the breeze into cool currents, and people played cards or watched over the band of kids playing across the wide dirt road that cut the town in half. They were all equal here, and they welcomed outsiders with the same warmth as old friends.

Disrupting their peace was a thankless task, but one that had to be done.

Jossan's horse cantered to the end of the main road toward an ancient Ceiba tree. A stage had been built under its generous shade for announcements, music performances, and the occasional play. She had danced many times at the foot of this stage, when the townspeople still threw balls to celebrate a new Summer Queen every year. She regretted never sneaking Etar out to one of these festivals. Maybe he would have made a few friends, perhaps even met a nice girl to crack him out of his shell. Now it felt like those moments of mundane happiness would forever live only in this town's collective memory.

She dismounted and walked up the stage. A large bell was mounted on a frame to one side of it. She took several deep breaths before she gathered the courage to ring it.

People started collecting around the stage. Some of them were smiling. Others just seemed confused. Jossan didn't come that often anymore, but she had grown up here. People knew her well enough.

"Sorry, friends," she started once she had enough of an audience. "I wish it weren't bad news that I bring, but..."

Jossan told them almost the same things she'd told the people at the castle, but the reactions here were completely different.

People didn't panic. They didn't trample or scream. Instead, they murmured with each other, and the older people in the crowd asked a few questions about the evacuation plan, but they seemed more mournful than scared. Jossan realized everyone in the castle, even the servants, were a lot more sheltered than the townspeople. These were the people that truly kept this island alive. They made this place colorful

and pleasant to live in, and without them to breathe life into the land they inhabited, nothing mattered. But they were also more exposed to the hardships of poverty, of a life where a day of rest could mean no food on their table. These were the types of people the Gleasaman loved preying upon.

It broke Jossan's heart to tear them away from this cozy spot they had carved with their hard work, but their sorrowful expressions also stoked her will to fight for them.

"Thank you for letting us know, General. The king doesn't seem to care anymore," an old man said to her as she exited the crowd. His name was Anton. She sometimes brought her work boots to him for mending.

"Maybe he doesn't, but I do," she said. "I want you to have a home to return to once things calm down."

Anton just nodded, perhaps thinking they wouldn't have anything to return to after the Gleasaman came, but she didn't want to lose hope yet. So she said her goodbyes and returned to the castle to oversee the evacuation.

There was no time to brood. Her men accosted her with questions the second she returned to the castle, and by the time the sun started to graze the horizon, the soles of her feet burned.

Looking for peace, she exited through the castle's front gate and sat with her back against the outer wall. No one would think to look for her here. Or so she thought.

"Jo," Rowan said, sitting on the ground right next to her.

"Am I needed?" she asked. She didn't want to know, but she would go if necessary.

Rowan gave her a crooked smile. "Nah. Just came to keep you company. I told everyone you needed to get packed."

"Thanks, Row," she said. "A smart excuse."

"But don't you actually need to pack?" he asked.

Jossan shook her head. “What’s the point? Even if I convince Ainsworth to turn back, I can’t leave until I find clues about where that skinny kid slipped off to,” she said.

Rowan sighed. “I was hoping you would change your mind and leave, at least for as long as the Gleasaman were here.”

They looked at the trees swaying in the afternoon wind. The peaceful rustle of leaves made Jossan melancholic.

“I want to hug him again,” she said. “Even if he never forgives me.”

“Why would he need to forgive you for anything?” Rowan asked, but she knew he was just being glib. Rowan knew everything she knew about Etar’s origins, about the secrets she had been keeping on Theobald’s behalf.

Jossan laughed. “Because I failed him, maybe? Or because I’ve lied to him about too many things, and he doesn’t even know the half of it?”

Rowan stroked her foot with the tip of his boot. “I know this might not be a big comfort,” he said. “But I’ve been thinking about it. You and I know the kid is the only logical reason for the Gleasaman to come. If the alchemist is their agent, how come the ships are still heading our way?”

“That hope is the only thing keeping me sane, Row. Every other possibility is too terrifying to think of.”

Rowan nudged her with his shoulder. “Hey, I’ll be there for you if we need to go raid Wilfred’s big old palace and kick him in the gonads for stealing your kid.”

She laughed. Only Rowan could make her laugh at a moment like this. She nudged him back and leaned her head on his shoulder. They didn’t dare break the sleepy silence of the failing day anymore, and at least for now, she felt like she could put her burdens down. Rowan pressed his raspy cheek

against the top of her head, and she was dozing off when hoofbeats rang on the cobbled road that led to the castle's gate.

They both perked up and looked down the road, listening to the clop-clopping of the horse. Soon, a rider on a beautiful dapple gray gelding emerged from the slope.

"You!" Jossan shouted, rushing to her feet. It was so easy to tell him apart from the islanders with that shock of blond hair on his head.

She lunged towards him before he could even set both feet on the ground, making him lose his balance. She used the momentum to slam his back against a tree, and before he could even breathe a word, she already had her dagger at his throat.

"General. Hi. I've been looking for you all day."

Jossan snarled. "You will tell me where you took him. Now!"

"That's what I came to do. If only you could move that nasty blade of yours a bit off my throat. I already shaved this morning."

Rowan came up beside her and chuckled. "If I were you, kid, I'd tread carefully. Never met anyone with a faster sword arm than this woman."

"I have a letter from Etar," Hans said. "It's in my right pocket."



Chapter 31

After Hans left, Etar followed Master Áehd out of the laboratory and into another room a few doors upstairs. At first, Etar thought it was a study or a small library because the space was packed end-to-end and floor-to-ceiling with sturdy bookshelves. On top of every table and hanging from every free space on the walls, musical instruments known and unknown to him gleamed in the mellow lamplight, their metals and woods carefully polished. Etar could only guess how some of them produced sound, and he wondered if some were magical.

“Do you play?” Etar asked, examining something that looked like a lute with more strings than he could count. It was inlaid with mother-of-pearl vines and flowers, and seemed extremely complex to play.

“I do. Tolerably so,” Áehd said, smiling. “But most of these I keep for research.”

“Research?” Etar asked, lifting his eyes to Master Áehd.

“Sound magic.”

“I’ve never heard of a magician who could manipulate sound,” Etar said, his eyebrows raised.

“There are none that I know of, but there are other ways of manipulating physical phenomena through magic.” Áehd shook his head. “Come. There is something else I need to show you.”

Áehd went to the far end of the room. A small bed, a wardrobe, and a large chest were all crammed together in a corner. That was when Etar realized this was Áehd’s room. He suddenly felt like he was invading his privacy, so he concentrated on the spines of the books nearby. Many of them were in languages he had never seen. Some were in entirely different writing systems. Had Áehd read them all? Did he really understand all these languages? Etar wanted to put his fingers to the spines, to feel the embossed letters and the fine fabrics and leathers of their bindings, but he had a feeling some of these books were very, very old, and he didn’t want to risk damaging them.

“Here,” Áehd said finally. He had a carefully folded bundle of black fabric in his hands and as Áehd moved closer and passed the only window in the room, Etar noticed the material shimmering under the changing light.

Áehd stood before him and extended the fabric, unfolding it carefully, then allowing it to unfurl on its own. Etar took a step back to make out its shape. It was a floor-length black tunic with fitted sleeves and a stand-up collar, sashed at the waist. Nothing too out of the ordinary if he didn’t consider the long train. But the truly marvelous thing about it was the embroidery. Hundreds of tiny suns, stars, and moons drawn in black metallic thread crowded every available space on the fine wool. There was no breathing space between one figure and the other, and every shift of the light made a myriad little black beads sparkle.

Etar didn't know he was holding his breath until Áehd spoke again.

"Would you like to try it on, Starseer?" Master Áehd said.

Etar couldn't find his words, so he just nodded vehemently before Áehd could rescind his offer.

Áehd smiled. "Take off your coat. Lift your arms."

Etar set his spider down on the floor and got rid of his jacket while Áehd rolled up the hem of the robes. It took Etar a couple of minutes to get into them, but once wrapped in the heavy garment, it felt like he had always belonged in it. He touched the seams at the shoulders. They were exactly his size. "How does this fit me so well? It didn't just magically sprout out of your chest made to my size, did it?" It was a joke, but after all the marvelous things he had seen since coming here, he didn't completely discard the idea.

Áehd chuckled. "Not even the magicians who embroidered these robes would know how to do that type of magic, child. No. They belonged to someone about your age, with almost your exact build. He was, perhaps, a little taller."

Etar's breath caught in his throat. "My dad?"

"Aye. These were his first starseeing robes when he was fifteen—when I started tutoring him."

Etar didn't know what to say. He looked down at the robes and touched the sleeves reverently, enjoying the feel of the embroidery under his fingers. "It's like we were the same person."

"You would not believe how much you look like him. I once hoped he and I would meet again, so I rescued many of his possessions after he—well. You will know in time. But anything that used to be his is rightfully yours now. I have many other keepsakes of his that I would like to pass on to you."

There was a painful longing in Master Áehd's voice as he spoke, but Etar couldn't think of anything soothing or intelligent to say. So far, his dad had been a faint shadow of a person, a vague idea in the back of his mind. Now things were taking shape behind his name. Fahlk, the Starseer who liked black moons and stars embroidered on his robes. Fahlk, the young man who looked so much like his only son.

Áehd gave him a brief look of approval. "Follow me, please," he said, leading the way upstairs.

The spider followed them and started climbing up the robes. Etar quickly scooped it and put it on his shoulder so it wouldn't damage the embroidery with its sharp legs. All the way up, he kept gathering up the front of his robes and praying not to trip. His spider could barely sit still as if something about the robes excited it. "Aren't they amazing?" Etar asked the mechanical critter. He'd dreamed for so long of looking like the drawings of Starseers in his book, but he never imagined he would get to wear his dad's own robes. He could barely keep his silly grin in check.

"Master Áehd?" he asked on their way up. "Why do Starseers wear these?"

Áehd looked at him over his shoulder. "They are made to diffuse magic so it doesn't bleed out of you too quickly. They will come in handy with the wild way you just shed it out of you."

As they emerged onto the roof, Etar's eyes veered towards the ocean. The ships loomed closer to Skalland now.

A cold terror grew steadily in him. Was it days, or maybe only hours, before his vision came true? Master Áehd caught him watching and put a hand on his shoulder. It took Etar a moment to turn his attention back to the present.

Master Áehd took to the center of the tower, standing on the unnerving skylight. Etar followed cautiously, trying not to look down.

“Do you remember what you felt when you woke that storm last night? Or when you made the winds rise this morning?”

Etar thought back to it. He was barely conscious both times, and he'd had a sensation of leaving his body, of becoming a spectator. “It was sort of like starseeing? Except, when I'm in a starseeing trance, I'm not in my body at all. Those other times I could still *feel* myself.”

“And were you frightened?”

“Yes, but everything was so... *vague*.”

Áehd nodded. “Strong emotions are a magician's most important tool, but if you do not learn to control them, they will overpower you.”

“I don't think I follow.”

“Let us perform a little exercise. Close your eyes and think of your vision of those ships.”

That was easy. When he closed his eyes, his mind latched onto the terror of the big black ships destroying the piers. It came in flashes, and his heart lurched every time a shot rang through the air.

“Do not open your eyes yet,” Master Áehd said. “Think deeper. Every detail of that vision lives in your mind now. Drag it all out into the light.”

Etar hated the helplessness of witnessing the scene, but he forced himself to look closer. He noticed several horrible new details—a broken body bobbing in the waves, a scream of agony in the distance—and before he knew it, the winds had risen around him again.

A steady gale grew together with the quickening rhythm of his heart, making breathing difficult. His right eye throbbed at the same pace as his unhinged heart and lights sprouted in front of his eyes again.

“Starseer,” Áehd said in a commanding tone. “None of that has yet come to pass. You are not there. Open your eyes.”

Etar obeyed, but his heart wouldn’t slow down. He saw Master Áehd’s hair flapping wildly in the wind, but it was like his perception of the world had slowed down. It took him a second to feel the fierce gale scraping against his cheeks. “How do I—” he started but ran out of breath, fear mounting inside him.

“No matter how real it looks, it is not. The stars show you what could be, but you are not chained to their omens. What you saw was a warning. You can challenge their word if your will is strong enough.”

A warning for the future. None of his visions so far had failed to come true, but then again, he had never tried too hard to change them. He slowed down his thinking. If he could call the winds and command the clouds, couldn’t he unleash the waves on those ships? A warning from the stars could also be an opportunity to take control of the horrible things looming on his horizon.

The gusting wind started losing momentum as his heart settled. He could breathe again.

He sank to his knees, but maybe the robes were helping. He was winded but not woozy like last time. The spider had climbed to the back of his neck, and the stone in its belly felt hot.

Áehd knelt in front of him. “Are you well, Etar?”

Etar nodded, too out of breath to speak.

“Your powers are so unheard of, my boy. Your father was powerful, and he could control the elements, too, but I never saw him have these... explosions.”

Etar wasn't sure that was a good thing. Not using his powers hurt him, but using them made him weak. “Then how will I ever learn to manage my magic if no one knows how it works?”

“With patience. Remember you have missed many years of training, but I am sure you will manage in time. I am here to help you.”

Etar chuckled wryly. “Master Colum said it was impossible for an alchemist to train a magician. That you cannot feel what a magician can feel.”

Master Áehd's mouth tightened slightly, and if Etar had to guess what his expression meant, he would say the alchemist was wounded.

“I have heard that many times,” Áehd said, sitting cross-legged on the floor. “But magic is not only about what you feel. There is hard science behind many things in magic, and your powers are a nexus to measurable natural phenomena. That is the mistake most magicians make—believing that wishful thinking is more effective in mastering their magic than truly understanding its inner workings.”

Etar lowered his eyes. He hadn't meant to offend Áehd but accepting that no one could ever give him straight answers was becoming harder. “I'm sorry. I feel like I know nothing about myself, and I don't have enough time to learn.”

Áehd looked towards the sea. “I understand your impetus, but this is a process you cannot force.”

“But I could help. I used to think I wouldn't miss Skalland if I ever left, but Hans showed me there are good people still there. And even if it wasn't for anyone else, I want to protect

Jo, and Master Colum, and the lady who gave me candied dates at the market. They are all just trying to live their lives, and those men are coming here to burn everything down.”

“I wish I had a simple answer,” Áehd said, “but your powers are too out of control. You could end up hurting yourself or even the people you mean to protect.”

“Can I at least try?”

Áehd extended a hand to him, palm up. “Take my hand.”

Etar placed his palm against Áehd’s. That same buzz he’d felt the first time rushed through his veins. It was very much like the electric throb from the spider’s stone, but a thousand times stronger. He wondered again if what Master Colum had said was true. If Áehd truly couldn’t feel magic.

“We can try,” Áehd said. “But we should do it from a distance.”

“What is it you do when you touch my hands? It feels so *right*.”

“Correcting the flow of your energy. The cursed iron threw it off-kilter, and removing the tattoo so suddenly did not do you any favors, but it was an emergency. Give me your other hand.”

Etar did. The energy that felt like it was flowing out of him and into Áehd’s hand started coursing across his chest, from his right hand to his left. His eyes widened, and everything around him became sharper and more vivid.

“Do you understand now? We are creating a circuit. Your power flows out of your left hand and enters it again through your right. It follows the flow of your blood. This is how it should always feel.”

“Is this why I always felt so physically weak? I liked climbing trees and walking to the beach as a kid, but I never had much stamina for it.”

“Perhaps. I have never met someone who lived so long with a cursed iron tattoo. It might well be that it was sapping your physical strength as well as your magic.”

Etar basked in the sensation for a little longer. When Master Áehd let go, he felt so much better, but his mind couldn't stop going back to the ships.

Áehd offered him a hand to stand, and together they walked back to Etar's room. The alchemist helped him out of his robes, which he carefully folded into a neat bundle.

“We can attempt some other things tomorrow, when the ships are more within your range,” Master Áehd said. “We could try to divert them with some tidebreaking, but the sea requires more power to manage than the wind or the clouds, and you have spent enough energy for one day. Please, lie down. I will leave you to rest.”

“Master Áehd?” he called before the alchemist left the room. “Will you tell me more about my parents when things settle down?”

Áehd nodded. “You deserve to know,” Áehd said, then left and quietly closed the door.

Etar started dozing off soon after, and for once in a very long time, he felt he could truly rest.



Chapter 32

Drugging a seventeen-year-old to the gaol in the barracks and tying him to a chair felt almost cruel to Jossan, like she was a ruthless torturer who had no qualms about manhandling someone who was still technically just a boy. He was Etar's friend, too—which, really, wasn't hard to understand because this obnoxious boy was so annoyingly charming.

But her patience was short as the hairs on the back of her neck today.

"So, he is safe," she said, reading Etar's note for the third time. "And he wants me to come with you to... wherever you took him?"

"Uh, yes?" Hans said, giving her a pleading look.

"I have a better idea. Why don't you tell me where you have him so I can send a few armed men to recover him, and I keep you here while we wait?"

Hans sighed. "Because it's not somewhere you can simply walk into. I wouldn't even know how to explain it to you."

Rowan patted Hans' shoulder. "Kid, you're not doing yourself any favors. Warships are coming our way, you know?"

“How is that my fault?” Hans asked. “The two of you wouldn’t have to worry about the ships if you’d just come with me.”

Hans was probably telling the truth, but Jossan wasn’t willing to test if this was a trap. She pulled another chair to sit across from Hans and watched him in silence. A technique for interrogation she’d learned from the previous general.

“General, I really have to go,” Hans said, starting to sound distressed. “I’m pretty sure the Old Man will come out to look for me if I don’t go back soon.” He looked nervously behind him at the window. The sky was reddening with sunset light already.

“*Old Man?*” she asked.

“Ah. Sorry. Aehd.”

Jossan lifted an eyebrow. “But he looks my age.”

“Look, you can ask him all the questions you want. He *loves* explaining stuff to people, and he’s really nice, so—”

“Oh, he’s nice?” she asked. “Outside of kidnapping people’s children for mysterious purposes, you mean?”

Hans groaned. “He didn’t kidnap anyone. Don’t be such a sore loser.”

Jossan leaned forward and gave Hans her best hateful glare. “Say again?”

Hans grinned. “What I mean is I’m not the right person to answer your questions. Etar is happy and safe, and he misses you a lot. That’s all I can tell you.”

Jossan almost gave into Hans’ peace offering, but she couldn’t with all the other things weighing down her shoulders now. She didn’t have time for this.

“Well, that’s enough,” she said, standing from her chair. “Put him in a cell, Row. We’ll have another conversation in the morning once he’s mulled things over.”

Hans slumped down, finally shaken out of his unflappable good mood. “General, please, don’t do this. Those ships will be here in the morning. *I need to go back.*”

Jossan stopped to reconsider her approach. This boy had infiltrated the castle at the alchemist’s behest, following his scheme, and even now she wasn’t convinced that the alchemist was lying when he said he had Etar’s wellbeing in mind. She patted Hans’ shoulder and softened her tone. “I’m sorry. Even with Etar’s note, I cannot trust someone didn’t coerce him to write it, and I don’t have time right now to deal with you.”

“General...” Hans pleaded again.

Jossan didn’t enjoy this kid’s anguish. She wouldn’t want to be locked up as things stood, either, but Hans was her only clue to Etar. She couldn’t let him go.

She left while Rowan was putting Hans in a cell. Hans coming here gave her some peace of mind. She wasn’t naïve enough not to question his sincerity, but it was a good sign that he had returned and was offering to take her to Etar.

Rowan came later to inform her Hans was secured and someone was watching over him, and they quietly shared supper after that. She was nodding off by the end of her meal, so Rowan sent her to bed and allowed no excuses.

She worried that something would happen while she was passed out, but she could do nothing other than wait for the ships and hope the evacuation went smoothly.

It was still dark when she woke up again, and she couldn’t fall back asleep.

She sat up in bed, her face buried in her hands. The chill of the early morning raised her skin in goosebumps as soon as she left the warmth of her sheets. This restless wait was killing her, and once she was in full uniform, her weapons

strapped to her side, she wasn't sure what to do, so she went down to the barracks.

She found Hans pacing his cell nervously, looking like he hadn't slept. He latched onto his cell's bars when he saw her.

"General, both Etar and the Old Man must be worried sick. I don't want them to come out here looking for me. It's not safe," he begged.

"Will you behave?" she asked.

"I swear," he said.

She took a keyring from a nearby wall and opened the cell. "Just know that you might be bigger than me, but I'm trained in hand-to-hand combat, and my dagger and my sword are both very sharp."

"General—"

"Just saying. Don't try anything stupid."

Jossan stepped aside to let him out. He didn't flee, so she pulled a couple chairs to the side and invited him to sit. On her way to the barracks, she'd stopped at the kitchens to pick some bread and cheese. She gave him half the food.

"You like him, don't you?" Jossan asked while she sliced some of her cheese with her service dagger.

Hans looked at her, struggling with a big bite of bread. "Um...."

"Etar, you nitwit. You like him."

Hans finally swallowed his bread. "Of course I do. He's funny, and he likes my food. Can't dislike someone who praises my cooking."

Jossan chuckled. "Come on, stop playing. You know what I mean."

"Well, I..." Hans said. He suddenly seemed extremely interested in the breadcrumbs that had fallen on his trousers.

Jossan groaned. “I think you’re a good kid. You stood up for him. You made him smile, and I can’t thank you enough, but try to see my side. I’ve taken care of Etar for ten years. Losing him was like having a limb chopped off. I haven’t slept well since he left, and all I have is a hope that you and the alchemist haven’t harmed him.”

Hans took a deep breath. The mischievous glint in his eyes was gone. “I would never hurt him if that’s what you need to know. And the Old Man has a strange way of doing things, but he saved me when I was just rubbish on the side of the road, and I know he feels responsible for Etar’s safety. He is a good man.” He shifted in his seat and leaned forward. “Come with me, please. Let Etar show you he has a nice room and a million books to read. He has someone to cook for him and someone to teach him magic. Isn’t that what he’s always wanted? Don’t you want that for him?”

That was what Etar would have defined as happiness. Everything neither she nor his uncle had given him. “I saw that... *door*. I saw you disappear through it the other night. Is it possible for you to ‘knock on the door,’ see if Áehd will come out?”

Hans finally smiled. “We can do that, yes.”

Jossan heaved a sigh. Maybe it was foolish, but she was starting to like this silly boy. “Come on. Show me the way.”

Daylight was barely beginning to color the clouds when they walked out into the courtyard. She was guiding Hans to the stables when an explosion ripped through the sleepy quiet.

Both she and Hans looked up to the dawning sky as if it would reveal the origin of the sound, but the next few explosions spurred them into action.

“Cannon fire,” she said.

She started tacking her horse up, and Hans skillfully followed suit. When they came out of the stables with their horses, several of her men had come out into the courtyard. They all wore the same shocked expression.

She whistled to one of her men. "Find Rowan. Tell him to meet me at the lighthouse," she ordered, then turned to Hans. "You still coming with me?"

Hans nodded but gave her a worried look. "What are you planning, General? You shouldn't be trying to fight these men. I have seen them. They raided my hometown when I was little, and it wasn't pretty."

Jossan had never come face-to-face with them, but she knew Hans was right. "I don't intend to fight them, not if I can help it," she said, urging her horse into a gallop.

"Then...."

"I will convince them there's nothing here for them."

They took the path to the lighthouse at a breakneck speed. Yellowing grass and a gray ocean whizzed past them on either side, cannon fire marking their pace like the toll of a monstrous bell.

They cut through the moor, their horses crushing the tallgrass underfoot. It couldn't have been more than a few minutes since they left the castle gates, but to Jossan, it felt like the ground was melting under her horse's hooves, bogging down her advance. Time stretched. Every new blast of a cannon tore through her chest, her revolving thoughts threatening to paralyze her.

She reached the top of the hill first, Hans not far behind, and she fumbled out of her saddle before her horse came to a full stop. Her knees buckled and she sank to the ground. Where the lighthouse should have been, there stood only a broken husk of the building, rubble scattered at its feet.

Chapter 32

Cannonballs speckled the beach, and as the day grew quiet again, her eyes darted to the figures on the water beyond.

Seven warships lazed on the ocean's surface, the tips of their black cannons painted in the same shade of blood-red as their fluttering banners. They swayed gently with the currents as though pleased with their wanton destruction. Even standing this far from the shore, Jossan could see the sigils on their black bows—an eagle painted in white outline, clutching a bleeding heart with its talons. King Wilfred's hounds had finally come to claim their prey.



Chapter 33

Etar didn't remember falling asleep, but mild sunlight flooded his room when he came around again. The throbbing in his right eye had returned, and now another worrisome symptom flared up—the light that had blinded him on the night of his vision had returned. It wasn't nearly as bright as back then—he could still see enough to handle himself—but it wouldn't fade, no matter how hard he rubbed his eye or how much he blinked to make it go away.

He tried to push the discomfort to the back of his mind. Its pervasiveness scared him, but he was also afraid to speak out because how long had his uncle told him he shouldn't be using his powers? Rationally, he knew Uncle Theo was wrong, but ten years of the same admonishments didn't vanish in one day. He didn't want to face the idea that he might be harming himself with this uncouth desire to become a competent magician.

He had slept longer than he'd meant to. The ships would be much closer now, so he jumped out of bed and his spider followed him possessively as he threw some clothes on. Every muscle in his body ached like he had run miles uphill the

day before, which was an unexpected side effect of using his magic. There were so many things he still didn't understand, and he wasn't sure he was enjoying this 'extremely powerful magician' thing.

Outside his room, the tower remained shrouded in silence, the lights along the stairwell dimmed into a cozy bronze light. For a moment, he feared his clattering steps on the hardwood stairwell would rouse Áehd, but not even the racket of the pull-down ladder and the trapdoor dropping open alerted him.

When Etar peeked outside, the sun was starting to lift over the horizon. He trudged nervously towards the tower's edge and looked for the shores of Skalland. Waves rose wildly beyond the gnarled lines of reefs just beyond the coast, but it wasn't enough to stop the enemy ships. From here, they looked like debris bobbing in the water, but when he compared them to the lighthouse, he understood how monstrous they were.

But something was wrong with the lighthouse. He squinted, trying to focus through his bad eye until he realized what was happening.

"Master Colum," Etar said under his breath. The top half of the lighthouse was gone.

The sounds came to Etar delayed by several seconds, and from this distance they were just little pops, like nuts cracking open, but he remembered from his vision the dry, expansive boom of a cannon's blast. His heart galloped. He watched helplessly as the ships adjusted again. The next volley didn't fail. The remains of the old lighthouse crumbled like a dry biscuit, its guts exposed after the dust and rubble had settled.

Etar rushed back inside and almost crashed into Master Áehd on his way downstairs.

“The ships, Master Áehd, they—” he said, unable to articulate his thoughts.

“Are they attacking?”

“They destroyed the lighthouse. Master Colum, our Tidebreaker, he...”

Áehd frowned. “If he was in the lighthouse, there is nothing you can do for him.”

“I have to stop them before they hurt someone else,” Etar said, whirling around the alchemist to run downstairs.

Áehd grabbed his arm. “Etar, you will burn yourself out. You spent too much energy yesterday and you can hardly control your powers. I cannot allow it.”

“Let me go! I don’t care if I die or go blind or whatever. Skalland is helpless against them.” Etar fought Áehd until he freed himself, but he didn’t go far before tripping on his own feet, only saving his fall by clutching onto the banister. He was finding out the hard way that having only one good eye made him misjudge the distance of things.

“Go blind?” Áehd asked, trailing behind him.

Etar picked up speed after regaining his balance. There was no time to explain, but there was no need. At that moment, a voice from the alchemist’s pocket interrupted them.

“Old Man,” Hans’ disembodied voice said.

Etar stopped.

Áehd pulled a small metallic disc from his pocket. It was flat, and it had a cut gem embedded in the middle, which looked very much like a diamond.

“The Gleasaman destroyed the lighthouse. Someone’s coming to the shore. I think it’s Ainsworth.”

A deep crease formed between Áehd's brows. "Hans, do not engage that man. Come back. This is not your fight."

"Let me take Etar's friends with me," Hans said.

Etar grabbed Áehd's wrist to pull the artifact closer. "Hans, is the man who was in the lighthouse safe? Is Jossan all right?"

"The general and one of her men are here," Hans said. "They are safe, but they are searching through the rubble. I don't know if someone was in the lighthouse, but...."

Áehd reclaimed his wrist and started briskly descending the stairs. "Hans, do not waste more time. Bring them in if you must, but come back *now*."

Etar chased one step behind Áehd.

"I doubt the general will come with me," Hans said. "She wants to talk with Ainsworth."

Áehd hissed out a word in a language Etar could not understand, and he didn't stop until he stood before the portal door. He put his metallic disc against the glass, and the landscape outside changed to the Skallander moorlands. The brass frames around the door's glass panels started retreating like thin golden snakes, and the glass gradually became more and more transparent until it looked like there was nothing between the inside of the tower and the moor outside.

"You will stay here," Áehd said firmly.

"But—"

"I will bring your friends back. I will do what I can for your Tidebreaker if he still lives, but I do not want you putting yourself in danger's path. Ainsworth is one of the main reasons your parents are dead."

If Áehd intended to scare him off, his words had the opposite effect. If that was true, this man had robbed Etar of

his childhood, and he learned for the first time how much contempt he could hold for a person he had never met. But Áehd didn't stop to discuss it. He disappeared through the portal, and this time, the landscape cycled until it stopped at the harrowing view of a desert. The brass frames resumed their position, and the glass recovered its solidity.

“No!” Etar yelled and put his hand against the door.

To his surprise, the door responded to his touch in a similar way it had to Master Áehd's metallic disc. But maybe because he didn't know how to operate it or because Master Áehd had done something to it, it kept cycling quickly through unfamiliar landscapes and he couldn't make it stop.

But he could feel his energy resonating with that of the portal. He couldn't stay locked here. Now that he knew he could command the winds, perhaps up close he could control the waves, too. A more troubling thought crossed his mind. If his powers flared up again and these murderers became trapped and drowned in their death machines, Etar didn't think he would feel too sorry for them.



Chapter 34

Jossan found a thick piece of floorboard to shovel through the wreckage, but it was a mindless task. Rubble was all there was on the rocky cay where a lighthouse once had stood.

“It’s no use, Jo,” Rowan said, squeezing her shoulder. He had come from the castle a few minutes before.

It took some physical coaxing from Rowan to make her stop and stand away from the rubble, but once he succeeded, she tossed her piece of board into the ocean and hollered her rage out. How could anyone have such little regard for life? She looked at Ainsworth’s ships, her hands trembling at her sides.

“Someone’s coming,” she said.

A small steamboat carrying two men approached. She turned to the beach and saw Hans talking into his hand, which was either him going off the deep end or using some of the alchemist’s strange magic.

“The moment of truth,” Rowan said, taking a deep breath.

She adjusted her sword belt. There would be time for grief later. “Let’s see if we can convince the Pirate Lord there’s nothing for him on this rock.”

She led the way back to the beach. Hans accosted them as soon as they returned. “Hey, the Old Man says you can come with me to our home.”

“Not yet. I need to look this murderer in the eye,” Jossan said.

Hans squinted at the approaching boat. “General, if that man on the boat is Ainsworth, we’ll all be safer if you come with me.”

Hans’ words made her hesitate. Etar was just one step away, but how could she leave without at least trying to give Skalland a chance to survive this invasion? Her heart tugged in the opposite direction, but she stood her ground. Etar was safely out of reach for now. She had to believe that.

“General,” Hans insisted.

Jossan kept her eyes on the boat. “Go if you must,” Jossan said. “I won’t stop you, but I can’t leave Skalland unprotected. Please take care of him.”

Hans groaned, but she could still see him from the corner of her eye, stubbornly standing there.

“I’ll wait only because I don’t want to go back empty-handed, but this is foolish,” Hans said.

“Noted,” Jossan said between her teeth. He wasn’t making her choice any easier.

The boat came as close as the rocky shallows allowed. The two men tethered it to a rock and waded through knee-deep water. They wore pristine black uniforms with red trim, decked with golden military insignia. They both dressed like high-ranking officers and wore their hair pomaded to perfection, but their cold eyes and sun-burnished skins were those of hardened sailors. ‘Pirates’ was a fitting word for them, no matter how dapper their uniforms were.

One of the two—a gruff, ugly thug—stood at attention for the other, a raffish blond, maybe in his forties, with a scar crossing diagonally from his temple to his jaw. It made for a grim decoration on his haughty face.

Jossan examined them carefully. They each carried a cutlass at their waist, and this was the first time Jossan had seen pistols outside of illustrations in books. Not even in the best of times had Skalland been rich enough to equip its soldiers with firearms, but these two carried their pistols like a normal part of their outfit, as if inflicting death was part of their routine.

“Skallanders,” the blond said while his underling stood a few steps off. He sounded like he was trying to sound casual, but there was iron hidden in his tone.

“Gentlemen,” Jossan said, guarded but holding her head high.

“What’s this strange welcoming committee?” the blond said, a sing-song Gleasaman accent marking his speech. “A soldier, a peasant boy... and a woman in uniform.”

Jossan hadn’t known him for more than a minute and already wanted to punch this smug bastard. “My name is Jossan, and I’m the commanding officer of King Theobald’s armed forces. How can we help you, sir?” She carefully glossed over the fact that her ninety-odd men barely counted as an army, but she hoped these men wouldn’t see through her deceit so soon.

The blond ambled closer. Rowan tensed next to her.

“Commanding officer of Theobald’s armed forces,” the blond repeated slowly, looking down at her. “No offense, darling girl. You look cute with your hair cut like that and your little uniform, but—” He snorted. “I thought the rumors of Theobald’s kingdom being run down were exaggerat-

ed. He must have painfully few fighting men to use *women* as officers.”

“What is your name, sir?” Jossan asked, sidestepping his mockery.

The blond examined her up and down, obviously unimpressed. “Matthew. But you can call me Admiral Ainsworth, sweetheart.”

Jossan could sense Rowan’s anger, but she begged the invisible powers not to let him act on it. He was strong, but so were these two, and they had firearms.

“Admiral,” she said, hoping she sounded calm. “An impressive rank. What is such a distinguished gentleman doing in a run-down little rock like Skalland?” She opened her arms and smiled. “There isn’t much to see here, and you just blew one of our last landmarks. What can we possibly offer a man who can shed so many cannonballs like they’re lint off his expensive jacket?”

He didn’t seem too bothered, but a line was deepening between his eyebrows. “I’ll ask you a question, and you’ll answer honestly.”

She nodded.

“Where is that starseeing little rat your king stole from Wilfred?”

“A Starseer?” she asked and followed with a derisive chuckle.

Ainsworth grabbed her jaw. Rowan reached for his sword, but she made an appeasing gesture at him with her hand. She didn’t flinch or look away from Ainsworth’s spine-chilling blue eyes.

“Do you really believe this is a laughing matter, girl?” Ainsworth asked, tightening his grip like the jaws of a bear trap. “Old Theo has Wilfred’s property here, and I’m truly as-

tounded he hasn't taken advantage of it. We all thought the little shit was dead, but you and I know that's not the case."

The pain of Ainsworth's fingers digging into her flesh made her eyes water, and while she kept a defiant smile on her lips, inside, she wanted to scream. "If we had a Starseer, Theobald would be rich, and he wouldn't stoop so low as to let a woman lead his soldiers."

Ainsworth let her go, but the relief didn't last. He slapped her so hard that black stars bloomed in her eyes. Rowan stepped in front of her, ready to unsheathe, but she grabbed his wrist to stop him. "Don't. That's an order," she snapped, jaw clenched, while Ainsworth watched with an amused smirk.

"I see nothing has changed with you, Ainsworth. Murdering old men, hitting women, and hunting for children. Honorable as ever."

Jossan spun around to see who dared insult this man with the pistol at his side and the giant cannons behind him. To her surprise, the alchemist strolled down the beach, his bejeweled hands hanging relaxedly at his sides, his silky hair flowing in the sea breeze. How did this man keep so calm all the time?

Ainsworth scowled like a dog smelling a trespasser. "Warlock," he said, his voice a dark growl. "I should have known you had your filthy hands in this mess."

Jossan quickly slid out of the way. She still had mixed feelings about the alchemist, but right at this moment, she would take any help she could get.

Áehd closed in and gave Ainsworth an almost pleasant smile. "I did not come here to argue with Wilfred's hound. Leave now, and perhaps I will not hurt your ego a second time."

Ainsworth barked laughter in Áehd's face. "Fuck you, Warlock. If you have the boy, cough him up. I have those ships loaded with magicians and fully armed sailors. They may not be individually as shrewd as you, but there's only one of you. They'll crush you like they did your precious Fahlk. Or is he alive somewhere, too?"

A minute twitch of a muscle twisted Áehd's mouth, but his tone remained impassive. "You will not get what you came here for, Ainsworth. You have done enough damage," he said, eyeing the rubble that had once been the lighthouse.

Ainsworth chuckled. "Aw, stop crying. That idiot in the lighthouse had it coming. He got cheeky with my fleet. Perhaps he didn't know how hard it was to sink a frigate."

Áehd smirked. "You really believe the poor old Tidebreaker is the only means I have at my disposal? You certainly are naïve for a man who has conquered half the world."

"What are you playing at?" Ainsworth asked, pushing the words through clenched teeth.

"I am being generous with you. For the last time: leave," Áehd insisted, unmoved by the intensifying rage in Ainsworth's eyes.

The Admiral reached for his cutlass, but a sudden gale blew sand in everyone's faces. Jossan could only hear grunts and complaints from the people around her for several seconds. Then, as the wind moved away, Jossan opened her eyes to wild waves rising beyond the coast, but there was something strange about the way they clashed against each other. Had Ainsworth's tender boat not been tightly secured to a large rock, the sea would have surely sucked it in. The bigger ships didn't look like they were doing great. Their masts tilted madly from side to side, and Jossan thought she'd spotted some men washing overboard.

Ainsworth swiveled towards the water and gaped. “How the fuck are you doing that? Stop at once!”

While Ainsworth was distracted, Áehd started looking around, like he didn’t know the origin of this unnatural riptide either.

The alchemist frowned, pulled Hans close and said something in his ear. Hans nodded and ran off.

Ainsworth finally shook his head out of his daze and pulled his pistol on the alchemist. “Let’s see if your parlor tricks can stop me from blasting your chest open,” Ainsworth shouted while his minion pointed his pistol at Jossan and Rowan. They became powerless spectators.

Áehd offered a disdainful look to the weapon pressed against his chest, then fixed his eyes on Ainsworth. “You would be doing me a favor, but killing me is unlikely to solve your problems.”

Ainsworth cocked the hammer of his monstrous flintlock in response. “Whatever you’re not telling me, I’ll start shooting your friends if you don’t stop this.”

Áehd looked beyond Ainsworth’s shoulder. Opposite currents made waves slam both sides of the largest ship. Jossan could intermittently hear men shouting in the distance.

“I am afraid I cannot help you if you do not leave,” the alchemist said.

The tension in Ainsworth’s pistol arm faltered for a second when he tried to see what Áehd was looking at. At that moment, the alchemist snapped his fingers close to Ainsworth’s ear.

A tinny sound stabbed through the noise of the waves. Jossan, Rowan, and Ainsworth’s lackey all covered their ears, but Ainsworth dug the heel of his hand into the hollow of his

cheek instead. He bent over, groaning like a festered back tooth was causing him immense pain.

Ainsworth recovered enough to look back at his flagship and cursed under his breath. He holstered his pistol and made a hand signal to his underling. They trotted to their boat, and once they started back to their ships, the freak currents relented and died out into a spray of sea foam.

A striking silence followed. Jossan turned to the alchemist and grabbed him by the front of his tunic. “How are you manipulating the elements like this? You did the same freakish thing with the clouds when I was chasing you. How!”

“That was certainly not me, General,” Áehd said calmly.

Jossan twisted the fabric of his tunic tighter into her fists. “Are you somehow using Etar’s power for this?”

Áehd gave her hands the same detached look he’d given Ainsworth’s pistol. “I am not using him. I explicitly ordered him to stay behind, but I underestimated his will to break through my security.”

“You have him *locked away*?” Jossan asked, snarling.

Áehd sighed. “Your attitude is most confounding, General. I asked you to come with us. You refused. And I locked Etar in—or tried to—because I knew he would put himself in danger, but he is not a prisoner in my home. Now, for his sake, would you stop arguing and come with me?”

Jossan hesitated before letting go. “Fine. But you’re not fooling me a second time,” she said, and before Áehd could add anything, Colum emerged from behind a rock. He was pale and unkempt, but he seemed to be in one piece.

“You’re alive!” Jossan said, running to him.

The old Tidebreaker shook like a leaf. “I escaped the lighthouse when I saw the first ship adjusting to shoot. I tried

to pull some waves on them, but I believe they had a Tide-breaker countering me.”

“This is not the moment for small talk,” Áehd said, walking up to them. “I can offer you all shelter in my home, but we must leave now. Ainsworth will return, and he is now angry and humiliated. He will retaliate.”

Master Colum frowned at the alchemist. “I don’t know who you are, sir, but this is my home. I won’t leave while it’s being attacked.”

Jossan touched Colum’s shoulder. “We cannot fight them, Colum, but you can help the evacuation efforts at the port. The townspeople respect you. They will listen to you.”

Rowan stepped in. “We don’t need you for that, Jo. I’ll stay with Colum. You go with the alchemist. See that the kid is safe.”

Jossan’s heart split in two. She needed to see Etar, but why couldn’t she have the two people she cared the most about safe under the same roof? “Row...”

“You won’t convince me,” Rowan said. “Go see him. We’ll find each other when we’re all out of trouble.”

Every second they spent on the open beach put them at risk. She wanted to argue, but there was no time. She could come back to help as soon as she had confirmed Etar was safe.

She hung herself from Rowan’s shoulders and hid her face against his neck. “I think I’ve changed my mind,” she said.

“About what?” Rowan asked.

“That stupid question you asked me? I think I got the answer wrong.”

He didn’t react. She was about to spell it out for him, but a second later, he hunched over her, arms tight around her, and pressed his stubbly cheek against her neck. “We’ll be

gone before these bastards have time to turn around,” Rowan said. “Then I’ll come for you.”

“Stay safe until then,” she said. She kissed him, hesitating between his cheek and his mouth, which ended with them awkwardly flinching apart and staring into each other’s eyes. She wished this moment would stretch into eternity, but time was not on their side. It took her an immense effort to look away after they went their separate ways, but lingering would only make this decision harder.

Áehd was obviously in a hurry. She had barely separated from Rowan when the alchemist turned to her and said, “General, we need to go.”

“Old Man!” Hans shouted from afar as they started walking away from the beach. Jossan looked up. Hans stood near a small thicket of shrubbery, waving at them.

“I think he found Etar,” Áehd said, but he stepped in front of Jossan before she could rush to Hans. “General, I must warn you. I intend to tell him the truth about his parents eventually.”

Jossan felt the color drain from her face. “What?”

“How old are you? Thirty?”

“Thirty-five. Why?”

Áehd nodded. “So, you were twenty-five when Etar landed in Theobald’s care. You must know what happened.”

Jossan scowled. “And how do *you* know what happened?”

“Because I was his father’s mentor while he lived in Gleasam. Fahlk left a hidden message for me, which I did not learn about until a few days ago.”

That also explained why the alchemist seemed to know Ainsworth personally. Her stomach sank. “But he will be devastated.”

“He deserves to know. I understand why you fear him hearing this story, but hiding the truth is harming him. Stop thinking of your own apprehension and think of his wellbeing.”

“Shut up,” Jossan said. She looked over to where Hans was waiting for them. “I shouldn’t have kept secrets, but what good will it be for him to know now?”

“It will allow him to heal. He cannot recover from a wound he does not understand.”

That, as hard as it was to hear, was the truth. She couldn’t be a coward now. If Etar ended up hating her, so be it. He had been begging for the truth all these years, and she could no longer keep it from him.

“Would the two of you hurry, please?” Hans shouted impatiently.

“Come, before Hans leaves without us,” Áehd said, leading the way. “He has taken a liking to Etar, you know?”

She smirked. “He better keep his hands to himself.”

Áehd arched an eyebrow. “I did not mean that kind of liking, but I have never been a good judge of those things.”

Despite everything, she laughed. For a man so wise, Áehd sure was blind to the simplest things. “By the way, what did you do to Ainsworth that made him bend like that? He seems like such a tough man.”

Áehd smiled with what almost seemed like pleasure. “He has a silver molar. I made it vibrate at an extremely uncomfortable frequency.”

Jossan looked at him in awe. “You’re dangerous...”

“Not at all, General. It was self-defense. Did you not see the monstrous pistol pointed at my chest?”

He said that with a straight face, but somehow Jossan doubted the alchemist had been in any real danger from

Ainsworth's weapon. She'd rather not know. For now, she would be content if she found Etar unharmed.



Chapter 35

Etar had no idea how he'd come back to the tower. He woke up alone and blinked himself into alertness, noticing with deep dismay that the bright light in his right eye and the pain accompanying it had worsened. He pressed the heel of his hand into it, but to no avail.

The draft coming from the open window made Etar shiver. He tried to get up to close it, but a hand gripped his arm suddenly. He winced. It had grabbed him from his blind side.

"Don't get up. You look queasy," a familiar voice said.

"Jo," he whispered, short of breath and shaky.

Jossan drew him into a hug. He would have reciprocated, but his arms felt like boiled noodles, so he placed them loosely around her and melted into her. She smelled like home.

"I didn't mean to startle you," she said, her voice muffled against his hair.

A part of him didn't want to say anything because he was tired of feeling weak, and he didn't want to bring attention to this issue with his eye, but he still wanted to trust Jossan, like he'd been doing since he was little.

"I can't see out of my right eye. It hurts," he said.

Jossan held his face in her hands to examine his eyes, but Etar had checked before. Nothing was visibly different about his eye.

“Like when you went blind at the Dome?” she asked.

Etar rubbed his eye hard and nodded. “It’s not exactly blindness, I think. There’s this big bright light wherever I look—like when you stare at the sun. It fades at times, but it doesn’t completely go away.”

“I’ll call the alchemist. Maybe he can do something,” she said urgently, getting up.

“No, Jo, wait,” Etar said, grabbing the sleeve of her uniform jacket. “He told me not to go out. He’s probably mad at me now.”

Jossan sat again and frowned. “Oh, and because you were being rebellious, you don’t want to talk to him? If he scolds you, you had it coming, but I bet he’s only relieved you didn’t break your brain by pulling those currents.”

Etar stared at her. “How do you know it was me?”

Jossan shrugged. “He told me. I still can’t wrap my head around it, but he says you are built differently. It was you who threw that storm at me the other night, wasn’t it?”

Etar swallowed and made himself smaller. “That was not intentional, Jo. I was scared. My magic just flares up when I feel any intense emotions.”

Jossan’s shoulders fell slowly like she was deflating. “This could have gone really wrong. Áehd has explained himself to me, but what if it had been someone with terrible intentions instead of him? You would be out of my reach now. Maybe hurt or even dead.” She paused and shuddered. “I would have never forgiven myself for that.”

“I’m sorry I lied to you.”

She shook her head. “I understand why you wanted to flee, but please, *please*, stay by my side from now on.”

Etar nodded. He couldn’t come up with words to tell her how relieved he was that they were together again.

“You’re safe,” she said, her expression softening. “We’re all safe for now, and that’s all that matters.”

He crumpled his bed sheets with his fists. “I couldn’t save Master Colum.”

Jossan smiled. “He saved himself. He escaped before the first cannonball hit the lighthouse. Did you see that? The ships attacking?”

Etar sighed in relief. “Yes. From the top of the tower. I don’t know how it works, but Master Áehd says we’re eight miles from Skalland, but no one can see the tower. You can see the island from the roof, though.”

“You’ll have to tell me about this place. I’ve been here since yesterday, but—” Jossan’s words cut into a yelp. Etar’s spider scurried from under the bedsheets only to hide under a pillow again.

“It’s not real,” he said, laughing.

Jossan huffed. “I thought you’d forgotten about that thing. How is it moving again? Can I get you a kitten instead, or will you always be the strange kid who finds maggots and bugs fascinating?”

“... They are sort of fascinating...”

“Ugh!”

Etar laughed harder. It felt good to laugh, even though they weren’t out of danger yet.

“Oi, what’s with this racket?” Hans said, walking into the room with a tray in his hands. He set it on Etar’s nightstand and dragged a chair beside Jossan. “I thought you’d sleep for three days when I found you passed out on the beach.”

“How long did I sleep?”

“Hmm, about twenty-four hours, give or take,” Hans said. “Now, eat. I bet you haven’t eaten since I left. The Old Man is not precisely good at keeping track of mealtimes.”

“Neither is this one,” Jossan said, pointing at Etar with her chin.

Etar groaned. “I’m not hungry. How did you know I’d be awake now?”

“I didn’t,” Hans said. “This is actually my breakfast. Decided to bring it when I heard the two of you being all noisy.”

Etar eyed the plate suspiciously. “Then you should probably eat it. Why are you so obsessed with vegetables anyway?” he asked. He’d always hated the boiled vegetables served at the castle, but he had to admit what Hans had cooked for him the other day had been good, and this smelled lovely.

Hans rolled his eyes. “Because animals are your friends, idiot. Why would you kill the chickens in your backyard when they can give you eggs?”

Jossan laughed. “Fair point.”

Etar reluctantly took the plate and started picking on little bits of food. A second later, he was wolfing it all down.

“That’s the first time I’ve seen you eat anything so enthusiastically, let alone vegetables,” Jossan said.

Hans lifted his chin proudly. “That’s because I’m an excellent cook, General. I can teach you if you want to impress your boyfriend.”

“He’s not my boyfriend!” Jossan said, blushing up to her ears.

Hans patted her shoulder. “Come on. Don’t be embarrassed. He’s sort of good-looking—if you squint hard.”

Jossan smacked Hans on the arm. “He is objectively good-looking. You’re just being a jackass. What do you know, anyway?”

Etar gave them a quizzical look. “What are you talking about?”

Jossan blushed even redder. “N—nothing.”

“Aw, don’t be like that. Tell us why you like him so much,” Hans said, elbowing Jossan’s arm chummily.

Jossan sighed. “Ignore Hans, please. Forever, if possible. How are you feeling?”

“A little woozy, but all good,” Etar said, ignoring the throb in his eye. “Did the sailors tell you why they came here? I thought Skalland was not attractive to them.”

Jossan averted her eyes. “Well...”

“They were coming for you,” Áehd said. Etar hadn’t heard him come in.

“Ha. As if I would let them take me,” Etar said. He was joking, really. What he had done at the beach was a combination of thinking really hard about the waves and releasing all of his magic power in a panic, but he still didn’t like the silence that followed his words.

“I like your newfound confidence in your powers, Star-seer, but I will not have you get cocky. Not when it makes you disobey orders given for your own safety.”

Etar cleared his throat. “Sorry. I was—I mean—”

Áehd lifted a hand. “I know. You were worried about your friends, but I could have handled Ainsworth myself. If you feel better now, Hans will prepare a bath for you, and you will meet me at the top of the tower in one hour. You must learn how to govern yourself before you can master your powers.”

That sounded both scary and exciting, but he knew the part about governing himself was a veiled rebuke. “Yes, Master Áehd,” he said meekly.

“Being good does not make you any less brave or capable, dear boy. Remember that,” Áehd said.

“Yes, sir.”

Áehd nodded, apparently satisfied with this answer, then turned to Jossan. “General, can I have a word with you?”

Jossan tensed like she was about to get called out on something, too. “I’d hoped to have more time with Etar.”

“And you will, but there are some matters I wish to discuss with you. I have been monitoring the ships. They anchored at an islet some way off Skalland, and they have not moved since yesterday, but we need to talk strategy. I could help your men if necessary.”

That made Jossan sit bolt upright.

Hans chuckled and whispered ‘boyfriend’ at Etar.

Jossan swatted the back of Hans’ head as she walked by. “Dumbass. I heard that.”

“Ow! What was that for?” Hans asked.

“Being a bad influence on Etar,” she said and followed Áehd outside.

Etar chuckled once he was alone with Hans. “What do you mean she has a boyfriend?”

Hans shrugged. “I found her having a sweet little moment with one of her men. But I’ll let her give you the details.”

Etar wrinkled his nose. “I don’t think I want any details.”

Hans produced a ripe tangerine from his apron’s pocket and casually started peeling it. Etar didn’t remember when he’d last seen a tangerine that was not candied or sun-dried. The aroma made his mouth water.

“Don’t be a prude,” Hans said. “Have you never escaped into a dark corner with a pretty girl?”

Etar laughed. “Me? Ha. No. Before you came along, I don’t think anyone even noticed I was there.”

Hans gave him a segment of his tangerine. “Pfft. Their loss. You’re amazing. And cute. Especially when you get mad,” he said, nonchalant as ever.

Etar almost choked on his piece of tangerine. “Are you making fun of me?”

Hans screwed his eyebrows together. “I’m being honest,” he said, putting a piece of tangerine in his mouth. “Why would I say something like that if I didn’t mean it?”

Etar looked away. “I don’t know.” His cousin Fried had called him a cutesy little girl more than once, but that had decidedly not been a compliment.

Hans rolled his eyes. “Listen, I love teasing you because you get miffed so easily, but if I say you’re cute and amazing, you take it, all right? That thing you did at the beach was impressive.”

If Hans was not teasing him, then that was, hands down, the most flattering thing anyone had ever said to him, but he wasn’t used to compliments, so he derailed the topic. “Do you have a girlfriend? You look like the type who has more than one.”

Hans threw a piece of tangerine at Etar’s forehead. “You really are dense. I don’t like girls. I mean, some of them are nice and pretty, but I never met one who became more than a friend.”

Etar blinked a couple times. “Wait, then....”

Hans groaned. “I. Like. Boys. Have you ever looked at a boy and thought, ‘Damn, I would absolutely kiss him’?”

Etar's face grew hot. "N-no?" In fact, he'd never thought that of anyone at all. The castle had always been his world, and it was full of people who were either indifferent or downright hostile to him. If he'd ever thought of anything remotely like that, it was about the drawings of magicians and knights he sometimes found in his story books when he was a kid. And didn't Hans look a bit like some of those fairy tale princes? He would have been embarrassed to admit that out loud, though. Just the fact that he was having that kind of thought mortified him.

Hans chuckled and shook his head. "Never mind. I'll go prepare your bath. Meet me at the stairs in ten minutes? I'll show you to the washroom."

Etar didn't know what to make of this entire conversation. It made him strangely giddy, but he kept thinking Hans couldn't be serious about his praise.

He watched Hans walk to the door and called out to him before he left. "Hey, Hans."

"Yes?" Hans said, turning to him again.

"Do you really think what I did at the beach was impressive?"

Hans snorted. "Have some faith. If you don't learn how to tell yourself how amazing you are, you'll never believe it, no matter what anyone says—but hey. You're powerful enough to move that humongous metal boat. Of course it was impressive."

Hans left the room with a wave of his hand and a reminder to be downstairs in ten minutes, and as soon as he was out of sight, Etar let a silly smile curve his lips. Maybe he was actually amazing.



Chapter 36

Etar should have imagined the washroom would be no less mind-boggling than the rest of the tower.

The wide circular room had a sunken tub in the middle, which looked like a small pool. Steaming water flowed into the tub via wood piping from a spring outside. The walls were encrusted with hundreds of tiny colored tiles, making quaint pictures of birds and small reptiles. A large round window in front of the tub looked into an infinite meadow.

More than bathing, Etar languished for a long time in the warm water. He could spend a lifetime in this room if he only had some books to keep him company.

Was he really what those men on the ships wanted? He still had trouble accepting his uncanny powers, and although he wanted to set them free, a big part of him still feared what that entailed. Would he go blind if he kept pushing? He kept tripping and misjudging the distance of things even though his right eye wasn't fully gone, just occluded by that annoying light.

Maybe if Master Áehd could really teach him he wouldn't hurt himself. He had to trust.

With his skin still cool from the bath, the wind at the top of the tower made his cheeks sting. He shivered and hugged himself against the wind as soon as he exited the trapdoor.

“Here, wear your robes,” Master Áehd said. He had already been waiting there when Etar came up.

Etar scanned the waters. Like Áehd had said, the ships were anchored at an islet to the west. He kept thinking of how close they had come to killing Master Colum, and the idea of sending them a wave and ending it all started playing in the back of his mind.

“Let go of your anger, Starseer,” Master Áehd said as if reading his thoughts. “It will obfuscate your reason.”

Etar’s bad eye gave him a sudden stab of pain, but he resisted the urge to rub it. “I could have drowned them,” he said.

“Aye. Such is your power, but abusing it will not only damage your body. It can turn you arrogant and callous.”

Maybe so, but this Ainsworth hadn’t cared about anything when he blasted the lighthouse. That Master Colum had survived didn’t change the intent of the attack. “What should I do if they strike again? Sit on my hands?”

“Be patient, Etar. You still have no control, even as powerful as you naturally are.”

Patience was what everyone kept asking of him, and he was quickly running out of it. “I want to know what that man did to my parents.”

The alchemist seemed to ponder the wisdom of stoking that flame. He shook his head in the end. “You deserve the truth, but I fear it will spark you into action. I need to make sure you know a few basic things about your powers before you end up hurting yourself.”

Etar nodded. “But after we’re done here...”

“I promise. It is long overdue,” Master Áehd said, looking up at the sky.

“So, um. What are we doing now?”

“Look at that cloud,” Master Áehd said.

“The one that looks like a fat horse?”

“I suppose,” Áehd said. “Commit its shape to memory and imagine touching it, jumping on it, putting your arms around it until it becomes solid in your head.”

Etar closed his eyes. He got lost in Áehd’s words, and the images he painted with them brought Etar a tender joy. He had no trouble picturing the cloud, making it small, and turning it in his hands, feeling its cottony texture. That was probably not how clouds really were, but it was so easy to imagine it was. A pleasant tingling warmed his fingertips and his blood started flowing faster. He became strangely aware of his heartbeat, but it wasn’t like the anxious rush of other times. It was more like seeing a beloved person smiling at him.

“Open your eyes,” Áehd said after a moment.

Etar thought the cloud would already be some way down to the east, but to his surprise, it remained anchored above their heads.

“I’m doing that?” he asked.

Áehd nodded. “Magic energy moves with your emotions, but anger and despair are not the only emotions you can feel, are they?”

“But what if I’m physically injured, or my life is in danger?” he asked. He didn’t know how anyone could expect him to always feel these fuzzy feelings.

“Conditioning, my dear boy. Many magicians think it is a mystical thing, but it is not. If you eat breakfast every day at the same time as the rooster crows, it will condition you

to feel hunger at the sound of a rooster, regardless of where you are.”

How could it be that simple? His frustration seeped through. The cloud that had been docilely sitting overhead started swirling violently and eventually tore into wisps. “But that could take years,” Etar said.

“Indeed. But sometimes, you can use your existing memories to trigger certain feelings. A hug. A kiss. Something that made you laugh.”

Etar sighed. “How can I think of those things with cannonballs arcing over my head?”

“Restraint and control, Etar,” Áehd said. “Mastering your emotions through conscious thought is a skill, and skills never come without work.”

The wind started picking up speed, but it did not surprise Etar this time. He felt too frustrated for this meticulous work, and again his thoughts were soaring toward the ships. He imagined sending this gale there, but he could feel the distance was too long. His heart started beating sickeningly fast, his right eye pulsing, and it wasn’t until Áehd sank his fingers painfully in the tender flesh above his collarbone that he stopped.

“Is this how you taught my dad?” Etar asked, gritting his teeth.

“It is. And he felt equally discouraged at first, but you are just as intelligent as he was. I know you, too, will be a quick study.”

“Sorry,” he said, not feeling the apology too deeply, but he couldn’t let his exasperation defeat him. “Let me try again.”

And trying was all he could do for a long time. Every passing hour he felt closer to grasping things. It was like reading a line he almost understood, which he kept twisting

to untangle its meaning. He destroyed many other clouds in the following hours and caused more flurries of unruly wind until he became so exhausted he forgot why he wanted to learn this in the first place.

Etar welcomed Hans' interruption when he came up with food for them.

Áehd didn't join. He returned inside the tower while Etar and Hans sat on the floor to share the meal.

"He's a tough mentor, isn't he?" Hans asked, eating the food he had brought for Áehd. "He taught me how to read and write."

"I can barely keep up," Etar said. He reached for a wooden cup Hans had filled with water for him and accidentally knocked it over with the side of his hand. This blind eye of his was driving him mad. "Damn it."

Hans produced a rag from his pocket to catch the spill and set the cup upright again. "It's all right. You're just tired."

"I suppose so," Etar said listlessly.

When Master Áehd returned, Hans picked up the empty dishes and leveled a scolding look at him. "You need to stop skipping meals. It's getting really bad of late."

"Do not take it as an insult, dear child. Your cooking is unmatched, but you know how poor my appetite is," Áehd said.

"And I'm supposed to just stand by and watch like the last time?" Hans said bitterly.

Áehd sighed. There was pain in his eyes. "There are things you cannot change in this world, but that does not mean I do not appreciate your efforts. I simply wish you would not worry this much about me."

Hans' usually cheerful expression turned into a deep frown. "Is it so hard to try?" he asked. "No, don't answer that. I don't think I'm in the mood for excuses."

“Hans...” Áehd said. He sounded so weary.

Hans shook his head. He left without a word and let the trapdoor slam behind him.

“What was that about?” Etar asked.

“Are you tired?” Áehd said, ducking the question altogether.

“No,” Etar lied.

Áehd nodded. “Then let us keep on.”

The lessons ended with the last of the day’s light, and for all the years he’d spent wishing he had starseeing robes, Etar never thought he’d be so happy to ditch the stuffy thing. He bundled it haphazardly and tried to give it back to Master Áehd.

“Put them away in your drawer. They are yours,” Áehd said, giving Etar the robes back.

When they went inside, Etar saw Jossan sitting with Hans by the fireplace at the base of the tower, talking quietly.

“Come. We will join them,” Áehd said while descending the stairs. “I think the general will want to hear this story as well, but I can ask Hans to leave us if you like.”

Etar shook his head. “It’s fine,” he said. He knew he was deceiving himself, but he thought having more people around would make this moment lighter.

Etar stopped at his room to put his robes away before going downstairs. He took the armchair nearest to the fire and Áehd the opposite one.

Jossan sat up when they joined. “How were your lessons?” she asked.

“Tiresome,” Etar said, smiling weakly. His spider, which he had left behind so it wouldn’t interrupt his lessons, scurried from under the sofa and climbed on his lap.

Hans still seemed unhappy, but he stood and touched Áehd's shoulder. "Supper is in the oven, and it's almost done. I won't let you skip another meal."

"Can I inconvenience you to bring it here?" Áehd asked. "Etar and I need to talk, but he wants you and the general to stay around."

"As long as you eat," Hans said. His answer was dry, but he squeezed Áehd's shoulder before ambling towards the kitchen.

"Why does he sound so irritated?" Jossan asked once Hans was gone.

Áehd gave a wistful look at the kitchen door. "He is concerned for my wellbeing, which is entirely my fault."

Etar bared his feet and put them on the seat of the armchair. "Are you ill, Master Áehd?"

Jossan glared at Etar. She obviously thought the question inappropriate, but Áehd didn't seem to mind.

"After a fashion, yes, but there is nothing Hans can do about it. It soothes him that he can make my life easier, but I am not the best at expressing that all I need is his company."

Etar frowned. "Just tell him. Life would be easier if people kept fewer secrets," he said and caught Jossan averting her eyes at these words.

"Wise words, Starseer," Áehd said, but he seemed disconnected from the moment.

Hans returned with a large tray. It filled the air with the aroma of tea and freshly baked pie. He left the tray on the center table and returned to his place on the large sofa next to Jossan.

Once everyone had settled, Master Áehd took a deep breath. "May I have your spider for a moment, Etar?"

Etar looked at it sitting calmly on his lap and put it on the center table. “What do you need it for?”

Áehd put the spider on his lap, belly-up, and touched one of the rings on his fingers against the big zircon in the spider’s belly. “To show you the truth of how you came into this world and how your father lost everything.”



Chapter 37

*F*ahlk cradled Marguerite's face in his hands and smothered her with a kiss. She giggled against his mouth and playfully pushed him away.

"Stop it!" the princess said, slapping his shoulder, but her bright blue eyes said the opposite. She slipped away from him, a coquettish curl of her mouth lingering on her face. "When are you telling my father?"

"Today," Fahlk said without hesitation. "After Áehd's report. He cannot refuse."

Marguerite's expression turned sad. "He can refuse, my love. But he likes you so much. We must try."

Later that day, Fahlk followed Áehd down the long corridor to the throne room. This place was so much richer than Theo's old castle, but Fahlk didn't care whether he lived in a palace or a mud hut by the sea. The only thing he truly valued was his freedom to go wherever the wind would take him.

"Care to share the reason for your joy this morning, Star-seer?" Áehd asked.

Fahlk was caught off guard. Had he been smiling? "Uh, you'll know soon."

Áehd hummed. “I hope it is not some terrible trouble I will have to rescue you from.”

Fahlk cleared his throat. He supposed his plans for today counted as ‘terrible trouble,’ but what was the worst that could happen?

Guards opened the gigantic carved doors that led into Wilfred’s throne room. Fahlk loved this place. Every wall in the Gleasaman Royal Palace was saturated with magical currents, but this room made him buzz up to his scalp.

“How is my favorite Starseer this morning?” Wilfred’s voice boomed from the throne. The king wore an emerald-green tunic decked with pearls and gold thread whose cost alone could feed Skalland’s population for a month, but Fahlk didn’t want to think of Skalland. Not after Theo’s last spiteful letter.

Fahlk grinned. “I would take the compliment if I weren’t your only Starseer, Majesty.”

Áehd had never liked Fahlk’s familiarity with the king, but as always, the king laughed at the jest. Fahlk knew a scolding was waiting for him after this. Áehd had told him numerous times that the king was dangerous, but Fahlk had never felt threatened. His starseeing made Wilfred a lot of money, after all.

The report was eye-wateringly long. A royal clerk took notes about the future weather, the tides, and the potential for enemy vessels. Fahlk predicted all these with granular precision, but it was a tedious job. He’d rather ask the stars about his own love life.

Fahlk waited patiently until Áehd was done. His nerves told him to postpone his confession, but the more he shirked around it, the harder it would become.

“Sir,” Fahlk said when the king had already dismissed them. “There is something I need to ask of you.”

Wilfred gave him a curious look.

Fahlk cleared his throat. “Marguerite and I have been talking. A lot. And we’ve decided to tell you—um, well—we want to get married.”

Deafening silence followed his words. Fahlk’s heart doubled its pace. Wilfred looked at him like he was expecting a punchline to come, but as Fahlk remained silent, the king’s brow knotted.

“What mockery is this?” Wilfred asked.

“Sir, please hear me out. I am a prince, after all. I know Marguerite is first in the line of succession and I’m only a second son, but can any of her suitors offer you visions of the future?”

“Ah, so you are serious,” Wilfred said with a sour little laugh. “Don’t you understand? Your pay is rich because I appreciate your services, but why would I want an islander mongrel tainting my bloodline? Whoever said you are a prince was delusional, and that rock you call a kingdom is a big village at best. By law, I can make you and your descendants serve me forever without you ever touching one of my daughters.” He shifted in his seat and gave Fahlk a dark look. “So, let’s set this straight. You’re my servant, and servants don’t marry royalty.”

Áehd clutched Fahlk’s arm, but he was looking at Wilfred. “We apologize, sir. Youthful impulses.”

Wilfred nodded. “I will let it pass only because I like you, boy, but I want no more of this nonsense.”

Fahlk wanted to retort, but Áehd gave a painful squeeze to his arm, then dragged him out and they didn’t speak until they were in their laboratory.

“Have you gone mad?” Áehd asked as soon as the door was closed behind them.

“Marguerite loves me, Master. My lineage may not be to Wilfred’s liking, but my visions have filled his arcs. I could choose to go back to my brother and make him rich instead.”

“And let them hunt you down for it? You are not indestructible, and building riches and power takes time. Threaten Wilfred, and he will have you beheaded before you can think of walking out of here.” Áehd softened his tone. “I do not wish to see you harmed, my boy. You have a good life here, and you can find someone to love who is not forbidden to you.”

Fahlk wasn't unreasonable. He knew losing Margie wouldn't kill him. People went through heartbreak all the time, but Áehd was missing a piece from this puzzle. “She's pregnant, Master.”

Áehd sucked air through his teeth and made a long pause. “How does she know? Did she consult with the royal physicians?”

“What? No! We're not stupid. She suspected, so I asked the stars. They showed me my little boy.”

Áehd's disapproving look hung heavier in Fahlk's heart than Wilfred's disdainful words. “The king will not accept this. You must keep it a secret from him for as long as possible. We will figure out a solution.”

At that moment, Fahlk believed him wholeheartedly because there were no problems in this world Áehd could not solve. But Marguerite's severe morning sickness was difficult to keep under wraps. Although Áehd tried to keep her comfortable with the many remedies he knew, she had to consult the royal physicians only two months into her pregnancy. Marguerite refused to confess who the father was, but Wilfred quickly put two and two together.

For several days, the king would not summon Fahlk or ask for his predictions, and one night, while Fahlk struggled to fall asleep, his door banged open. Armed guards pulled him out of bed, manacled him, and dragged him to Wilfred's presence.

Wilfred sat in his dimly lit room wearing a nightgown, sal-low candlelight painting long shadows on his face. The guards forced Fahlk to his knees before the king.

“Sir, why are you doing this?” Fahlk pleaded, but a guard hit him across the face with the butt of his pistol.

“You know why,” Wilfred said calmly.

“I have committed no crime,” Fahlk said, his voice quavering. “And you can’t kill me. Who will make your predictions if you do?”

Wilfred looked at him with the same regard he would offer a wriggling maggot. “No, I won’t kill you. But now you’ll work from the dungeons. If you refuse, I’ll fill your days with pain,” the king said, then ordered the guards to take Fahlk away.

Fahlk spent his first few days of imprisonment in denial. Surely Áehd would intercede. If they had taken him in the middle of the night, it was because they feared the alchemist. Everyone did. But time bled away, and there was no sign of relief for him. And as Wilfred had promised, whenever he refused to go with the guards to the Starseeing Tower, they beat him within an inch of his life.

“How long have I been imprisoned?” he asked the guard who came to feed him one day. He sat on the floor with his head between his knees.

“A month and a few days,” the guard replied dryly.

Fahlk heard the plate with whatever unpalatable gruel they were feeding him slide across the stone floor. He laughed ruefully. “I waste here, and no one cares, not even the king who abuses my power.”

Fahlk might as well have been talking to a wall. The man left without a word, and Fahlk was sure he would die a slow death here. He could feel it in his bones. The way Wilfred was squeezing visions out of him was taking a toll on his vital force.

Many months later, as he curled on the floor of his cell, he heard a strange metallic sound clicking in the hallway outside. He had seen rats here, but they didn’t sound like that. An enor-

mous spider scurried through the bars of the cell. He recoiled at first, but his overworked brain started tying loose ends. It was an incredibly realistic spider, especially in this dim light, but it was not real. He knew because he had built it himself.

“Come,” he whispered, extending his hand to the spider. He cradled it and cried, pining for the life the king had stolen from him.

“Child,” the spider whispered to him. Fahlk’s heart faltered. He and Áehd had tried communicating through magically charged stones from long distances, but they had never managed more than choppy bits coming through.

“Master?” Fahlk whispered back.

“Aye. Keep your voice down.”

“How...” Fahlk said.

“I have little time. Keep your spider at hand and charge it with your energy whenever you can spare some. I know they are demanding a lot of you these days.”

Fahlk wanted to say so many things, but he held his tongue.

“I am trying to get you out, but the magic wards around your cell are intricate and dangerous. You could die if I do something wrong.”

“Can’t you plead with the king?”

A sigh came from the spider. “You wounded his pride, and men like him value nothing more than their ego. I will break you out. Be patient.”

Fahlk nodded as though Áehd could see him.

“Your baby was born a week ago. He was taken from Marguerite and given to a nursemaid to raise. If the boy is a Starseer, Wilfred will allow him to be raised within his household, but not by Marguerite. If he presents no magical powers, he will kill him. He wants to hide Marguerite’s out-of-wedlock pregnancy at all costs.”

Fahlk knew Wilfred wouldn't be happy, but for him to be willing to murder his own grandson was beyond any cruelty Fahlk had imagined.

Áehd went on. "Marguerite begged the nursemaid to name him Etar. Is there a reason for this?"

Fahlk's throat knotted up. "The star who showed him to me. She said that was her name. She wanted me to name him like her."

"I will see that the nursemaid follows through. I have not talked with Marguerite in a long time, and as far as I know, she is healthy, but Wilfred has cut her off from the world."

"Will you get her out, too?"

Silence, then a deep sigh. "I am not sure I can help her, dear boy. I must go now, but I will return as soon as possible."

A faint hope reignited in Fahlk's heart. Áehd talked with him almost every day after that, but there was a lingering fear in Fahlk's heart. Most children didn't manifest magical powers until they were four or five. Etar was safe for now, but Fahlk didn't want to wait to see if Wilfred would go through with his threat.

Áehd told Fahlk about his research for breaking the magical barriers around his cell, but the sun and the moon went innumerable cycles through the sky, and days turned to months and months to years without them finding an answer. Time became meaningless. He grew thinner, his hair turned brittle, and whenever he touched his own face, it felt dry and bony. Only Áehd's stories of Etar helped him keep his feeble grip on reality. Almost five years passed by. The deadline approached, and Etar hadn't yet manifested any powers.

One night, as Fahlk did what passed for sleeping, the spider climbed onto his face and woke him with a start.

"Fahlk, I have the answer," the alchemist said.

By this point, Fahlk had replaced hope with obsession, but after trying for so long, he didn't really think the magic on these walls could be disrupted. He chuckled dryly. "Have you gone insane from reading so much?"

"I found an old journal from the architect who designed this palace. The source of all its magic is under the throne."

Fahlk sat up to listen.

"There is a powerful stone buried there. If I destroy it, the system of magic currents around the palace will crumble. No one knows you can manipulate the elements, so once you're free, use that in your favor."

Now it made sense why the throne room felt so charged with magic. "I will be free..." he said, too numb to cry.

"If everything goes well, yes, but you must move fast. The nursemaid will give me your boy. She is sad to part with him, but she never wanted to be part of this cruel scheme."

"And Marguerite?"

Áehd sighed. "I cannot save her. Guards watch her day and night. Wilfred has promised her to Ainsworth in marriage."

Fahlk's mouth dried. "Ainsworth? But that man cannot love her. He—"

"This is not about love, child, and you know it. Ainsworth is the son of a duke, rich as a prince, and the king's right-hand man. Wilfred thinks this is not a terrible deal for a daughter who—as he put it—is already sullied."

It was useless. Áehd would never risk the plan by trying to save Margie. "Very well," he said, but he was not planning on leaving without her.

"Be ready tonight," Áehd said.

Fahlk's heart beat faster. "How will I know when I can go?"

"You will feel it. Once out, make your way to the piers in Morgantown as quietly as you can. I will wait for you."

“Won’t Wilfred hunt you down as well?”

“Aye, but I do not fear him.”

That night, Fahlk felt the distinct tug of magic dying around him, like a strong wind snuffing out a candle. He made a racket in his cell, pretending he had finally lost his mind, and when a guard came in to beat him, he lifted a hand in front of the man’s face. The guard started gasping for air. A second guard tried to help, but he shared the same fate not long after. Fahlk had sucked all the air out of their lungs but didn’t stay to see the outcome.

Five years ago, the thought of killing a man would have made his stomach turn, but now it had become a means to an end, and it granted him the confidence to race to Marguerite’s room, no matter how many guards got in his way.

“Fahlk!” Marguerite cried out when Fahlk woke her. She broke into breathless sobs in his arms.

Fahlk felt his resolve falter. He pressed his face against Margie’s neck and cried with her. It had been too many years without a tender touch, and feeling her warmth made him want to stay here and let fate take care of him.

“There’s no time, Margie,” he said, gathering his courage and extricating himself from her arms. “Come with me. We’ll hide in Isla de Sapos for a time, then we can make it to my brother in Skalland and raise our son there.”

“But—” she said, fearfully glancing at her open door.

“Trust me now, I beg you.”

Marguerite’s body trembled in his arms and it took her precious long seconds to agree, but in the end, she threw a dressing gown on and followed him. She yelped the first time she saw Fahlk suffocate a guard, but then she followed in shocked silence, looking away whenever he had to kill. They stole horses from the stables and, under the shroud of the gray morning, they rode to-

wards the piers with no more possessions than the clothes on their backs.

No one followed them, perhaps because the hour was too early, but someone would eventually notice Fahlk's trail of bodies.

They met Áehd at the lonely piers. He had two large bundles by his feet and a five-year-old boy in his arms. The boy looked puffy-eyed and confused, but Fahlk immediately fell in love with his huge brown eyes and his shaggy, dark hair. This was the same beautiful face the stars had shown him. He wished they'd told him the ordeal it would be to reach this point in time.

Marguerite ran to Áehd to take her child in her arms. The alchemist gave Fahlk a reproving look, but it was too late to make the princess turn back.

"Can you handle yourself at sea?" Áehd asked, helping Fahlk and Marguerite board the barge he had prepared.

Sailing wasn't his strong suit, but he had done it for fun before, and Isla de Sapos was only a few days away in good weather. "Yes, but you will come with us, right?"

Áehd shook his head. "I am going back to the palace to create a diversion for you. Where are you going?"

"Isla de Sapos. I can hide there until things settle down. Then Skalland. But Master—"

"Good. I will follow you there when I can."

Again, he believed Áehd because it had taken the alchemist five years, but he had freed him. They would find each other when things were better.

Navigating through the open ocean wasn't as easy as Fahlk thought. Áehd had packed food, clothes, and water for him and Etar, but Fahlk's cautious sailing was taking them much longer than a trip to the archipelago normally would, and Áehd had not accounted for Marguerite's presence.

Etar cried a lot, especially when the sun was high in the sky, and whenever he talked, it was to call the nursemaid's name. By their twentieth day at sea, their resources had dwindled, but they could see a speck of land on the distant horizon.

"Do you think we'll make it?" Marguerite asked one night while she lulled Etar to sleep. Her lips were cracked and her face blistered by the sun.

"We're close," Fahlk said listlessly.

Marguerite nodded. She seemed too defeated to do anything else, and he didn't have the heart to tell her how all these years of being milked for his visions had eroded him. In some indescribable way, he was aware of death circling him. Every night he felt his eyelids heavier. Every waking day his body sagged a little lower. His only comfort was that his lover and child would have a chance at a peaceful existence.

When land grew more prominent on the horizon, Fahlk thought his toils were over. There was still a little food left, a little water; they wouldn't have to suffer for long. But one day, sunrise revealed an enormous warship in their pursuit.

"The Gods preserve us," Marguerite said, her face coming alive with fear.

"It probably has nothing to do with us. They couldn't have found us. This is just a small boat, and they—"

"Fahlk, that's one of Matthew's ships!"

She was right, but what could he do? He scarcely had any strength left to breathe. In different circumstances, he would have unleashed a hurricane on that ship, but now he couldn't sit straight without feeling his body falter.

"We will reach land soon. That ship is heavy, slower than ours."

Marguerite shook her head. "That boat has a steam engine. Can you attack it in some way?"

“If it gets close enough....”

But it never got close. It didn't need to. It undoubtedly had magicians aboard because soon enough, a storm fell on their heads with the suddenness of lightning. Etar wailed in Marguerite's arms. Fahlk tried his best to counter the waves, but he was no longer strong enough.

They would die here.

The storm broke their barge open like a chestnut in the fire. All three of them hung on to a large piece of flotsam, but the waves became so wild and the attack sustained for so long that eventually, Marguerite lost the last of her strength and let go. Her eyes were hollow when Fahlk last looked into them, and he wished his enervated soul had allowed him to feel anything at that moment. But he took Etar's little hand before the sea sucked his mother in. He had no time for grief. The storm was getting stronger, and his own consciousness waned. He grabbed Etar in both arms and let himself sink into the sea.

He was too far from the shore to swim. Something inside him told him this was the last of his vital force, but if Etar could live, it would be worth it. He prayed in his head for the stars to lend him a last breath of magic, and as the quiet currents under the surface swallowed him, he formed a bubble of air around himself and Etar.

Fahlk didn't know what happened between that moment and when he woke in bed with Etar sleeping quietly at his side. He'd thought he'd been heading to Isla de Sapos, but it was Colum, Skalland's only lightkeeper, who had seen them floating adrift in the waves through his spyglass while monitoring the tides. He and a couple of fishermen rescued them along with an oilcloth bag Fahlk had shouldered before their barge floundered. Along with the last of their food, the bag contained the only be-

longings he would inherit to *Etar*—a starseeing book and his old spider.

When he recovered enough to sit up and talk, Colum sent word of his arrival to Theo. *Etar* barely spoke, but at least he ate his food whenever Colum brought it in.

Their arrival at Castle Skalland was, as expected, icy. Theobald housed, fed, and clothed them, but Fahlk held little hope that Theo would ever forgive him for bringing so much danger to his doorstep.

A few days after coming into the castle, when his strength faltered and he couldn't even sit up without his head spinning, he called his spider to his side. He knew in his heart he didn't have many hours left, so he tested a little hypothesis he and *Áehd* had. The stones could not only transmit spoken words. They could record them as well.

Fahlk lay in bed and put the spider next to his face on the pillow. For hours, he spoke about everything he had gone through during his imprisonment, his ordeal at sea, and his arrival at Castle Skalland, so there would be a record of the truth behind his death. He felt sleep calling as he reached the end of his story, and before his eyes closed, he spoke of *Áehd* and cried for his mentor's absence in this hour of need. But *Áehd* would come and take care of *Etar*, wouldn't he? He always came. He would teach little *Etar* the ways of a Starseer.



Chapter 38

Only the crackling noise of the fire remained after the story ended. Etar didn't realize he was biting his lip until it hurt. His throat was thick and dry. He couldn't speak or look at anyone in the room.

Etar's eyes were on the spider, from where his father's voice had spoken uninterrupted for what felt like hours, his sweet but tired tones so clear that it felt like he had been there in the room, telling his painful story. It made things so much more difficult to digest.

"I don't remember any of this," Etar said at long last.

"My only explanation is that the tattoo damaged your memory, but I cannot be certain," Áehd said.

It was probably for the best that he didn't remember. He had been born of two royals, and the result was a prince and an orphaned bastard all rolled into one. He'd at least thought his parents had been happily married, but even that was a lie. How fleeting their love sounded. How helpless when challenged by the cruelty of a powerful king.

“How do I know any of this is true if I can’t remember it?” he asked Áehd spitefully. He’d never wished more for something to be a lie.

The spider rolled on its legs again and scurried out of Áehd’s lap to climb on Etar’s shoulder. What he had thought of as a toy before was now his father’s biggest legacy to him. He grabbed the mechanical critter and clutched it over his racing heart, wondering if a part of his dad’s soul still lived in it.

“I am afraid I have no good answers for you, dear boy,” Áehd said. “And I wish I had known earlier that a message was recorded in that spider. I would have made your uncle listen to bring all his lies to light.”

“How did you find out about the message?” Jossan asked, avoiding Etar’s eyes.

“Mere coincidence,” Áehd said. “When I brought Etar here, I took the spider while he slept. It surprised me to see it had survived its trip from Gleasam. The stone in it clicked against one of my rings while I examined it, and it reacted. Fahlk was extremely clever.”

There were tears somewhere inside Etar reserved for this moment, but he couldn’t conjure them.

“It was difficult to listen to,” Áehd added, his voice strained, “but I believe his love for you was obvious in his message, Etar, even if you were only together for a moment. I hope you can find him in the stars one day.”

Etar wanted to disappear, to be alone with his pain, but a thought was still nagging at the back of his head. “You knew,” he said to Jossan. “You knew how they died, and you never told me. Master Colum knew. Maybe even the servants? The guards...?”

“Your uncle was desperate to hide you, and back then, we thought it was for the best,” Jossan said, her hands clenched into fists over her lap.

Etar trembled in his effort not to cry. “And you let all these years pass with me asking questions, desperate to know where I came from and why everyone around me seemed to dislike me. I grew up alone, and I didn’t even know why. But *you* knew.”

“Etar, I’m sorry. I didn’t know everything, and I thought—” Jossan started.

“No. Not now,” Etar said through gritted teeth. Tears finally came. “I don’t want to fight. Leave me alone.”

Jossan looked down at her trembling hands.

Áehd reached out to touch Jossan’s shoulder. “We should respect Etar’s wishes, General.”

Hans quietly picked up the leftover food, which had gone mostly untouched, the story not being the best background for a cheerful thing like pie, then quietly disappeared into the kitchen.

It took Jossan a long time to get up, but she gave up when Etar refused to return her gaze. Áehd guided her upstairs and followed her into her room.

With everyone gone, even the heat from the fire felt tepid. Etar curled in his chair and sobbed violently, only his own arms around him for comfort. He needed a real hug, but he couldn’t bear anyone else’s pity right now. He felt enough of it for himself.

The hollow in his chest grew larger in the silence of this vast space, but he didn’t have the strength to get up and go to his room.

He flinched when he felt a warm touch on the back of his neck.

“Sorry,” Hans said, rubbing a calloused thumb against the nape of Etar’s neck. “I know you want to be alone, but you can’t stay down here. Even with the fire it will get colder later. Come on, I’ll walk you to your room.”

Etar shook his head.

“Hey, don’t be like that. I’ll stop pestering you when you’re in bed,” Hans said.

Etar faltered when he stood, his feet numb from curling in the armchair, but Hans held him in his arms. Etar’s sobs redoubled.

“I was on a mission when I first went into the castle,” Hans said, “but I can’t tell you how much your company made me waver. I went there to get the Old Man his Starseer, but I got myself a friend instead.”

Etar couldn’t find words to say how thankful he was for Hans’ friendship, for his understanding and tenderness, so he just held on tighter.

“It hurts to see you like this,” Hans whispered against Etar’s head, rocking him slowly back and forth.

Etar felt so small in Hans’ arms. So frail. It didn’t matter that he had within him the power to tame the elements and talk to the stars. He’d been brought to his knees by such a heartbreaking truth he could barely face it. “I feel so lonely,” he said between sobs, his mess of a face buried in Hans’ chest.

Hans squeezed him. “I know. But I’m here, for whatever that’s worth.”

Etar dug his trembling fingers into Hans’ back. It was his way of accepting his company, even if his tears didn’t let him express his gratitude with words.

But Hans didn’t let him linger. Instead, he gently broke the embrace, picked up the spider from the chair, and put it

on Etar's head. "Come. Let's get you in bed," he said, grabbing Etar by the wrist.

Once in his room, Etar crawled into bed and sat with his back against the headboard. The spider hid under the pillows.

Hans lit the lamp on the nightstand. "May I?"

Etar nodded. No matter what he said, being alone meant his grief would only grow in the quiet hours of the night until it was larger than everything else in his head.

Hans removed his shoes, joined Etar in bed, and placed his upturned hand between them. Etar took it hesitantly, warmth shooting from his chest to his face when their fingers threaded together.

"It sucks, you know?" Hans said.

"What does?" Etar asked, rubbing his nose.

"Feeling like you don't belong anywhere."

Etar grimaced. He didn't like hearing his uncomfortable feelings spoken out loud like that.

"I've followed the Old Man around for ten years. He feared if we stayed anywhere for long, Wilfred would send someone to hunt him down and I would get hurt. I didn't know why he was running from Wilfred, but it hardly mattered to a starved little thief like me."

"He never told you?"

"No. And we kept jumping from place to place until we found this tower."

"I thought he'd always lived here."

Hans shook his head. "The people who built this place hid it well. We'd heard about it during our travels but only found it a few years ago."

"And there was no one here?"

"Nope. Cobwebs and dust everywhere, although previous tenants had left magical artifacts and books lying around. I

cleaned up the place, and Áehd restored all the magical contraptions. I hope we never have to leave.”

Etar squeezed Hans’ hand. He was so scared of how impermanent everything had become around him. “I want to stay, too.”

“I’m sure that’s the Old Man’s intent. I know he doesn’t show a lot, but it would hurt him if you left.”

Etar let a brief silence linger. “Is he well? Why are you so worried about him?”

Hans gave a mirthless little laugh. “Because I fear I’m not reason enough for him to want to stay alive.”

Etar thumbed Hans’ wrist. “Don’t say that. He cares a lot about you.”

Hans snorted. “Well, it’s not for lack of trying that he hasn’t killed himself.”

A chill ran down Etar’s spine. “What do you mean?”

The corners of Hans’ mouth twisted down. It was such an outlandish expression on his sunny face. It made him look older. “When I was about ten, he spent a week without tasting food or water. He was too weak to move, and his heart kept slowing and slowing, but it never really stopped. He gave up trying, I guess.” Hans said these words with uncharacteristic dryness, but that was precisely how Etar knew they were painful to say.

“I’m sorry.”

Hans shrugged. It took him a moment to speak again. “I’m scared of being alone again. As infuriating as he can be, I love that stupid Old Man to pieces.”

Etar smiled, albeit weakly. “You won’t be alone. But I know what you mean.”

Hans rewarded his words with the sweetest smile. “I know. I’m not letting you out of sight anymore.”

Etar cleared his throat and thanked the dim lamplight that Hans wouldn't see him blush. "There's something I don't understand, though. A week without food and drink would kill anyone. How did he manage that?"

"I didn't dare back then, but I confronted him years later. He told me he did some reckless experiment when he was young. A diamond he was working on exploded and the shrapnel got embedded in his chest. At first, it was superficial, but he couldn't take the pieces out. He even tried to cut his flesh open, but it would just close again around the diamond shards. He was in agony for days while the pieces traveled through bone and muscle. They only stopped when they reached his heart. The diamond was supposedly like the crystal that powers your spider, except much more powerful."

It must have been such a horrifying experience, but now Etar understood why there was such a great flow of energy whenever he touched Áehd's skin and why Áehd could feel magic. He was like a living, walking magic energy storage. "So, that's what keeps him young?"

Hans nodded. "But he thinks it also robbed him of his capacity to express emotions properly."

"Can he even cry?"

"I don't think so..."

Crying wasn't the most pleasant thing in the world, but Etar imagined not being able to do so must be like holding on to pain forever. He thought of Jossan's agonized face from earlier and guilt seized him, but he couldn't let go so easily of how betrayed he felt. That was a conversation he'd need to face at some point, but Etar was done with painful conversations for tonight.

“You cook really well, you know?” Etar said after a moment, pushing a smile to his lips. “I never knew a pie stuffed with carrots and peas could taste so good.”

Hans gave him a dumbfounded look, then burst out laughing. “Are you serious? We’re here, talking about heartache and whatnot, and you want to talk about pie?”

Hans’ laughter made Etar’s heart flutter. “Life hurts too much. Better to enjoy pie while you can.”

“That is pure wisdom, my friend.”

Etar slid down to lie on his back and closed his eyes. His head hurt too much to think of anything, and he was ready for sleep to take over, but he opened his eyes again when he felt Hans getting up.

“Don’t go,” Etar blurted out, hanging tighter onto Hans’ hand.

“You need to sleep. You’re tired,” Hans said.

“And hurt and lonely....”

“That’s blackmail,” Hans said. He slipped his hand out of Etar’s grip, but it was only to turn the lamp off. “Move over, skinny. This bed is large. I’m not hugging you to sleep,” he said in the dark, but Etar could hear a smile in his voice.

Etar snorted and moved aside. “Shut up. Who said I wanted you to hug me?”

“Why wouldn’t you want me to hug you? I’m the handsomest guy you know.”

Etar laughed. “Humility is not your forte, huh?” Knowing he could laugh through his pain was a relief. Maybe he wasn’t broken beyond repair.

“Wake me if you need anything, all right?” Hans said, curling on his side so close that Etar could feel his warmth. “And try to sleep, please.”

“I will,” Etar said. He opened his mouth to say something else, something sweet to let Hans know how healing his company was, but his nerves got the best of him. “Good night,” he said in the end, wishing he was brave enough to kiss Hans’ cheek.

He closed his eyes and slid as close to Hans as he dared, and for a while, he just enjoyed Hans’ solid and warm presence near him, but his revolving thoughts kept him awake long after Hans’ placid breathing had turned into light snores.

Etar had been using a lot of magic of late, but not the type he was born to do, and he wondered if he could understand the stars better now that he was free of the cursed iron tattoo.

After a long while of staring into the dark, he slid out of bed and took the spider and his starseeing robes. If he could talk to the stars like his father did, maybe their wisdom would guide him.



Chapter 39

Etar never thought the most challenging part of being a Starseer would be putting the robes on without help. He wasted a good ten minutes trying to pull them over his head, but at least once they were on, he didn't feel the biting cold of the night as much.

He stepped gingerly on the glass skylight, the spider on his shoulder, and looked up at the sable field of the night. He took a deep breath. The memory of his last frantic trance still lingered in every fiber of his body. "All right. They are right in front of you. You can do this," he said.

He started losing his nerve, and he was about to give up when his consciousness cracked open without warning, like an overripe pomegranate falling from its branch. Then, there was only peaceful blackness and billions of tantalizing fires trying to lure him in, whispering in his ear.

The fear of his trance at the Dome dissipated, but he had never heard the stars' chatter with such clarity, so he had to fight to focus them out. They would drive him mad if he allowed them. But who to ask? There were so many of them, all of different ages, with distinct personalities. Some spoke

of worlds he didn't know existed, and it became increasingly difficult to concentrate. Until he heard a soft voice calling to him while sifting through the rabble.

A dying star. He didn't know how he knew that.

At first, the star was just a dot amongst a gaggle of other blinking jewels, but she gently drew him in until her massive body, marbled in red and gold flame, blotted out the endless dark. There was something protective about this star's aura, but Etar could also feel enormous power barely contained behind that thin film of tenderness.

"I see you have escaped the traps of your world, little Starseer. You couldn't understand me when I tried to reach you before. I think I scared you."

"You know me?"

"Yes. All your life, I've known you. Your father named you after me," the old star said, pulsing like a flaming heart.

Had Etar been in his physical body, he would have cried, but out here, all soul and no flesh, he only had the memories of his bodily sensations. "Can you help me?"

"What is it you wish to know?"

Etar had to focus hard. Even before he came here, he wasn't sure what he wanted to ask. "The men who came in the ships. The ones who came for me...."

"Humans have a way of turning pain into hatred and violence, little one. They will destroy your old home, and your dearest friends will always be in mortal danger while standing in their path. So will you."

No surprises there.

Etar got lost in the star's blazing face, her flames surging and colliding like a turbulent red sea in flux. The turmoil of sweltering light made his focus falter. He wanted to plunge in and never come back out. "But how can I defeat them?"

The old star hummed. “I cannot say. You could destroy them before they destroy you. Or you could plead with them. Both paths lead to pain. I can unravel all the plausible threads of time for you, but I cannot tell you which one to follow.”

An undefined pain flourished through Etar’s core. “I—”

“You must go back. Your body complains because you’ve been here too long, and you don’t have enough command of your blazing soul yet. I loved your father’s bright presence, and I would have made his soul mine, but he burned too quickly, and I could not find him in his final minutes. You humans are cosmic dust. So easily blown away....”

“Made his soul yours?”

“Yes. All Starseer souls are made of starmatter, and you all must return to the fold eventually. His soul probably belongs to a different star now. Such a shame.”

Pain surged. How did pain even work in his current state of consciousness? “You mean he’s somewhere out here?”

“Yes, like all those who came before him. Now, little Starseer, return to your body before your soul burns too bright.”

“But I want to know—”

“Everything has already happened. Go back. Your flesh reclaims you.”

He woke with a violent shudder shocking his spine. The moon was already fading into the brightening sky when he opened his eyes again. How long had he been in a trance? The spider felt somehow heavier on his shoulder, more alive. He could feel the throbbing heat from the zircon in its belly.

The star’s words had been more confusing than enlightening, and now his right eye pulsed with a dull pressure deep inside its socket.

He shook his head into focus and walked closer to the edge of the tower. The ships were moving, but they no lon-

ger sought the destroyed lighthouse. They were sailing towards the castle. He could no longer sit and watch while those vicious men razed everything down in their path just to get to him. They'd either take him and go home, or he'd destroy them.

Etar wiggled out of the robes and bundled them haphazardly, the spider scurrying inside his shirt like it feared being thrown off. He hurried inside and as soon as he crossed the trapdoor, he saw Hans standing someway down the stairs.

"What are you doing? I woke and you weren't there," Hans said, groggily climbing towards him.

"The ships. They're headed for the castle." Etar said, trying to go past Hans on his way down.

Hans caught him by the wrist. "Etar, the castle is empty. The general evacuated it."

Etar threw the bundled robes at Hans' face and took advantage of his surprise to slip out of his grip. "And you think they'll stop there?" he said and kept running downstairs.

Hans followed as soon as he'd gotten rid of the robes. "You plan on stopping them on your own?"

"Yes!"

Etar reached the portal door and desperately tried to make it work, but he couldn't concentrate. Hans caught up with him and tried to grab him again. Etar instinctively blasted a bubble of air against Hans' chest, making him stagger back. Even Etar flinched in surprise.

"You can't stop me," Etar said, standing back. "That man was supposed to marry my mother and still killed her. Do you think he'll care for a few thousand peasants he's never met?"

"I'll shout for Áehd and the general if you try to cross," Hans said and closed in warily, rubbing his chest where the air had hit him.

“I’ll be gone by the time they come down. Stand back. I’m begging you.” If there was someone he didn’t want to hurt right now, that was Hans, but Etar would push him again if he tried to grab him.

They faced each other in the twilight. Etar was about to leave Hans standing there when Hans said, “All right. I’ll go with you, but we’ll need horses.”

“No! You can’t. Besides, I don’t know how to ride.”

“Then you’ll take Kharaph.”

“Who?”

“The Old Man’s horse. You don’t need to know how to ride him. He’s as intelligent as a person.”

Etar shuddered. That horse was the scariest animal he’d ever met, but Hans was right. He couldn’t simply run all the way to the castle, even if the island wasn’t all that big. He groaned. “Fine.”

“I’ll meet you on the other side. Wait for me.” Hans used his disc key to open the portal to a dark stable. “*Wait for me,*” he repeated, then crossed through the portal.

Etar finally cleared his head enough to control the portal and cross to Skalland. He stood in the cold moorlands for a long time while early morning light diffused slowly through the mist. He hugged himself, his skinny arms not nearly enough to shield him against the dewy air. By the time Hans finally crossed, Etar was shivering.

Hans came mounted on a chestnut gelding, and the alchemist’s massive black stallion trailed closely behind him.

“What took you so long?” Etar asked, his teeth chattering.

“Had to give the horses a quick brush, tack them up. They don’t sleep in their saddles, you know?” Hans said, then dropped a coat on Etar’s head, and Etar realized Hans hadn’t only been getting the horses ready.

“Thanks,” Etar said, Hans’ thoughtfulness making his cheeks burn. When he was slipping into his coat, a glint from Hans’ belt caught his eye. “Wh—what’s that?”

Hans looked down at the pistol hanging from his hip. “By your expression, you know what it is.”

“Why would we need a pistol?” he asked nervously. He knew the answer and was embarrassed that he had even asked, but not even the guards at the castle wore firearms. Etar had never seen one up close.

“Why do you figure?” Hans said, rolling his eyes.

“Hans—”

“No. I won’t argue about this. We’re doing something reckless, and this is not some fun adventure where we slap the bad guys on the wrist and they go home. Those men are ready to kill Etar, and if we want to face them, we should be, too.”

Cold, hard truth. Etar had already thought about that, but slamming a wave on someone’s head seemed a lot more impersonal than shooting at them. And yet, morally speaking, wasn’t it the same?

Perhaps to soften his words, Hans leaned to the side and mussed Etar’s hair. “Mount up. Maybe we won’t need to use it if you can wreck their ships somehow.”



Chapter 40

It took Etar several tries and some help from Hans to get on top of Kharaph, but once he got moving and understood how docile the big stallion was, he stopped thinking about falling.

To take the edge off his nerves, he tried to remember the few things Jossan had taught him about horseback riding, but Kharaph didn't seem to need—or care for—Etar's input at all. Etar ended up caressing Kharaph's neck to distract himself. His shiny coat felt just as silky as it looked, and the big horse kept looking back at him and leaning into the touch. Etar hoped it was a sign of appreciation and not an 'I'll buck you off if you don't stop' kind of gesture.

But Hans' horse didn't seem special in any way, yet Hans sat on it with natural ease. Etar admired Hans' practical intelligence. He wondered how many things Hans had to learn for his survival, like cooking and shooting a pistol, and if he'd ever learned something just for the pleasure of it. Such different lives they'd led. Hans was only two years older than him, but he acted like a man already. Etar still felt like a boy.

A pale sun watched them through the clouds. They could see the ships sailing along the coast whenever the hills didn't interrupt their view, but something had changed. Four ships had broken away and sailed faster ahead of the other three.

"They're probably trying to go around the island," Hans said. "If the fishing ships are not gone..."

Etar furrowed his brow. "I assume the big one is Ainsworth's. I could attack that one. If they see their leader in trouble, maybe the others will return."

Hans nodded. "The others are sailing too fast, anyway. We wouldn't catch them before they reach the fishing port."

"Had you been to Skalland before you came to the castle? You sound like you know the whole island."

"Yup. The Old Man scried for magicians here years ago but only found the old Tidebreaker."

That hit hard. How different Etar's life would have been if Áehd had found him earlier. Maybe he would have spent his childhood learning magic instead of being beaten by his cousin and trying to figure out who he was. Now he wasn't even sure he would survive this adventure or if his eye—which now he was sure was going progressively dimmer—would end up going completely dark. But he had a kind of power none of his friends had, and he refused to live the rest of his life in fear of these murderers. He had to fight for his friends, and for the promise of that good life he could still have.

They dismounted at the base of the crag where the castle sat. With the tall mound of rock in the way, they could no longer see the ships, which made the quiet more unsettling.

Etar wished he could go into the castle for a better vantage, but he risked catching a cannonball with his head. Suddenly, he wondered where his uncle was and felt a strange urge to talk to him.

“There’s a path around the crag that goes into the beach,” Etar said. “It’s too narrow, though, and the beach here is too rocky. I don’t think we can get the horses in.”

Hans nodded. “I’ll tether them here. They should be safe.”

Kharaph flicked his ears towards Hans and trumpeted loudly. He didn’t seem pleased with their plan.

“Fine, you grumpy four-legged bastard. I’ll tether *my* horse, and you can do whatever you please,” Hans said, smirking at Kharaph, who bared his teeth in return.

Etar would have laughed at Hans arguing with a horse hadn’t things been so dire.

Instead of tying his horse to the rocks, Hans linked the two animals together, from Kharaph’s neck to the other horse’s bridle. “Take care of him. Lead him to safety if things get difficult,” Hans said, patting Kharaph’s neck.

Etar wondered whether Kharaph truly understood, but Kharaph nuzzled Hans’ mouth rather enthusiastically, and Hans seemed to take that as acknowledgment.

Leaving the horses, they took a narrow path flanked by rocks. It eventually opened to a patchy expanse of beach where knobby tendrils of volcanic rock rose and fell through the sand, water pooling in places where the ocean had retreated. Four of the ships had already anchored when Etar and Hans emerged. The tide was low now, but Etar knew the water would climb rather high later.

“Do you think they could disembark here?” Hans asked, looking towards the ships.

As a child, Etar often came here with Jossan to collect seashells and colored rocks, but he had never seen anyone try to disembark on this side of the island. “Who knows? Let’s have a closer look.”

“You’re full of terrible ideas, you know?”

Etar snorted. “And yet here you are, following me.”

“Only because you’re a disaster waiting to happen. Someone needs to keep an eye on you.”

Etar laughed, some of his tension easing off.

After a moment of trudging through the rocks, they found one as tall as a house, and they hid behind it to watch the ships.

“What’s the plan?” Hans asked, hunkering by the rock.

Etar looked up at the castle standing defiantly on its old crag. “Wait until they attack the castle. They’ll be too busy to notice us.”

“Why are you so sure they’ll attack the castle?”

Etar shrugged. “A star told me.” Which was sort of true. Then again, the star hadn’t said when this would happen. His visions after a trance usually provided context, but he hadn’t slept last night, so he hadn’t had a vision yet.

“Oh. Makes sense,” Hans said with a pensive face.

Etar nodded with a certainty he didn’t feel.

“And then?”

“Then you watch over me. I...”

Hans frowned. “What?”

“Well, I’m not precisely an expert at this pushing waves thing. I lose track of my surroundings when I’m at it.”

Hans sighed and looked up at the sky as if asking the Gods what had possessed him to come into this stupid mission. “And you were going to do this alone? You and the Old Man are the same,” he said as he flopped his rear down on the sand.

Etar sat next to him and nudged him with his shoulder. “Don’t be mad, please. I just don’t want anyone to get hurt, and I know I can stop them.”

“You don’t *know* that.”

Etar looked down. "You're mad that I wasn't going to tell you?"

"I'm mad that you think the people around you don't care what happens to you. But now is not the time."

"Fine," Etar said and rested his head against the rock. He didn't want to start an argument.

But maybe an argument would have been more entertaining, because for the longest time, nothing happened.

"If you faint, I'm carrying you away. No questions asked," Hans said after a long, sulky silence.

"Good thing I'm skinny," Etar said, grinning.

Hans kicked sand at him. "Bones are heavy."

The first blast cut their banter short. They peeked over the sides of the rock and saw all the ships adjusting their cannons. The first volley hit one of the outer castle walls. After that, all four ships started shooting at intervals, repositioning at times, and judging by the damage they did with every shot, it would only take them a few hours to level the entire castle to the ground.

Etar knew the castle was empty, but it still hurt to see his fondest childhood memories destroyed along with the painful ones. Not everything had been bad, after all, and there were so many things he would miss: the books he'd left behind, the curious toys alchemists of old had manufactured for his ungrateful cousins, the windows from which you could see the island from end to end. The Starseeing Dome.

Now was the time. He sprinted out of their hideout and immediately regretted doing so. With that annoying light still blocking his right eye, he stumbled on a terrain he'd had no issues navigating when he was little. He stubbed his toe and almost fell face-first, but he got as close to the shoreline

as he dared. He climbed on the flat top of a rock and stood facing the ships.

Hans caught up with him a moment later. "I'll watch your back," he said between cannon shots, and Etar noticed from the corner of his good eye that Hans had drawn his pistol.

Etar wished he'd had more time to practice with Master Áehd. He tried what he'd learned about using pleasant memories to control his power, but it was more complicated than he thought. Back in the tower with Master Áehd's guiding hand, it seemed to happen naturally, like when Master Colum was teaching him how to write, and he would first draw the letters in pencil so Etar could follow the strokes. Now, his mind kept hanging onto the fear and the anger he felt at all this senseless destruction, and eventually, he started losing himself to the power of the waves.

He could almost see underwater as if a part of his mind had latched onto the currents. He felt the sea sucking his mind in, waves pulling him like a helpless piece of debris. It felt like drowning, and it made his emotions reel out of control.

"... Etar!" Hans shouted, and Etar was only vaguely aware that this was not the first time Hans tried to draw his attention. "Be careful! You'll drown us!"

The tide was rising. When Etar looked down, water was splashing against Hans' shins.

"S-sorry," Etar said.

He stopped and drew a deep breath. This time, instead of thinking of the water, he remembered how these monstrous ships looked from the top of the tower. They were so small. Just little specks lost in the immensity of the ocean.

That was it. Maybe he couldn't think happy thoughts knowing these men were hunting for him, ready to destroy

the island to get him, but he could take fear out of the equation by making them insignificant in his head.

The wind was much easier to coax than the currents, but once he reached the right headspace, he understood the rhythm of the waves. His thoughts wove into the ocean's natural cadence instead of trying to force its will, and when he let his magic loose, the waters swelled with his power, bucking under the hulls of the ships.

Waves gathered momentum under the nearest ship until it started rocking wildly, and a terrible grinding of metal screeched over the noise of the cannons. The vessel turned loose, and for a moment, it looked like it would capsize. It had yanked free of its anchor, its massive chain broken.

Etar's heart soared. He had the power to subdue these evil men and force them to turn back. He concentrated on the next ship, the biggest and most fearsome in the formation. Between the waves, the cannons, and his half-stripped consciousness, he didn't react when a bang rang much closer to him. Then another. Then—

"Get down!" Hans shouted, and Etar processed a second or two later that Hans had pulled him off the rock to hide behind it.

Etar shook his head. "Why did you do that? I had them!"

Hans whimpered. He was gripping his own arm while cowering against the rock. "Wake up, damn it! They are behind us. This was all a stupid trap. They appeared out of nowhere, from inland, and started shooting at us."

Etar gasped. Blood was slowly soaking into the white fabric of Hans' sleeve, and he was struggling to reload his pistol.

A shot hit one side of their hiding place, pulverizing a chunk of volcanic rock. They huddled closer together.

Things couldn't end like this.

Hans was bleeding.

Scared and in pain.

Desperation grabbed Etar's mind again.

The winds rushed around them. Etar didn't know what he would do with them—perhaps smacking these murderers against a rock would do—but they needed to hurt for making Hans bleed.

He tried to stand to see where the sailors were, but Hans held him with his good arm. "Have you lost your mind? They have muskets. They'll—"

A man appeared behind Hans and hit his head with the butt of his musket. Two other men emerged from behind the rock on Hans' side, and Etar felt a pair of brawny arms hauling him to his feet from behind.

The voice of the winds rose to a furious scream, whistling loudly among the rocks—until someone closed a metallic ring like a thin shackle around Etar's neck, and the mounting gale inexplicably flopped into a soft breeze.

Hans groveled, struggling to get up until the man behind him hit his temple again. Then, Hans lay unmoving, bleeding into the shallow water that pooled among the rocks.

Etar screamed and tried to conjure the winds again, but the collar around his neck heated in response and the elements would no longer answer his call. He struggled against the man holding him but wasn't strong enough to break free.

"Hans. Hans. Get up, please," he begged, whimpering and thrashing in his captor's arms.

A tall, blond man with a scar across his face stepped before Etar, blocking Hans out of view. "Shut up, you little piece of shit," the blond said and backhanded Etar so hard Etar bit his tongue.

Chapter 40

Etar tried to scream, but it came out as a breathless whimper.

The blond laughed. “Fuck me. The spitting image of his daddy, this little rat,” he said and looked at someone behind Etar. “Put him to sleep. He’s fucked up enough things for today.”

Someone on Etar’s blind side pressed a cold metal object against his forehead. Pain shot from the top of his head down his spine and a terrible bout of nausea made him gag. *Cursed iron?* His body seized. He no longer had control of his limbs, and all his terrified mind could think of before losing consciousness was the image of Hans bleeding out a yard away from him.



Chapter 41

“I failed him,” Jossan said, trying to expel the heaviness in her chest with a sigh.

“You did not fail him, General,” the alchemist said. He sat on a chair in front of her. “You did what you believed was best for him. But it is a childhood illusion that adults will always know better. You should give yourself some grace.”

Grace was difficult to come by after seeing the heart-break on Etar’s face, but she could understand what the alchemist was saying. “Have you ever hurt a loved one? How do you come back from that?”

Áehd sighed. “Hans had no one in this world when I found him. He tried to call me Dad when he was little, but I thought I did not deserve the name, so I made excuses about it not being necessary and said I would take care of him regardless of what he called me. He gave up rather quickly, but as close as we are now, I think he took it as rejection. It remains one of my biggest regrets in life.”

Jossan’s chest ached thinking of all the rejection Etar had experienced throughout his life and wondered if she

wasn't adding to his suffering. "So, you haven't actually forgiven yourself..."

Áehd smiled. "Some pains you only learn to live with, but they should never mar the love you feel for others."

That she could agree with. Her love for Etar would never dwindle, but there was still the fact that she'd been a coward, and Etar had all the right to resent her for the rest of his life. "And what would you have done in my place?"

Áehd shrugged. "Hard to say. But how would you have explained to an oblivious five-year-old that his father died trying to protect him and no one could recover his mother's body?"

Or that his own grandfather had been responsible for it. "I know. Theobald's fake story was one of the few compassionate things I remember him ever doing for Etar."

"See? Even a callous man like Theobald could not speak the heart-rending truth to Etar's face. It would have been good for Etar to know earlier, but he was not your charge back then. It was a hard choice."

"It still feels like I betrayed him," she said, anxiously running her fingers through her hair. "I don't know how to deal with this."

"You can start by forgiving yourself," Áehd said. "Try to see it this way. Now that he knows the difficult parts, we can talk to him about the ingenious young man his father was. Etar will finally learn where his enormous power came from."

That brought Jossan comfort. Etar deserved to have happy memories of his parents and be proud of his origins. But there was something Jossan still couldn't wrap her head around. "I hear you speak of his power, and all I can think of is him being so happy the first time he predicted the weather. How is he pushing clouds and making riptides now?"

Áehd made a long pause. “Your king tried to dampen his magic in a clumsy and dangerous way. Maybe to hide Etar’s powers from Wilfred—who knows—but that is why Etar never showed his real potential before. I have removed that obstacle now.”

Jossan recalled Theobald bringing a shady man in when Etar was little. She didn’t see what the man did to Etar, but she remembered Etar’s week-long fever, the swollen mark on the back of his neck, then Theobald making sure everyone told him that was a birthmark that had always been there.

Áehd let her process it before speaking again. “Underestimating any magician is dangerous, General, but especially one of Etar’s lineage. That is like keeping a tiger as a pet and expecting it to behave like a house cat.”

Learning Etar had these enormous powers was like losing him somehow. Maybe because it felt like he didn’t need her anymore. “Is he really *that* powerful?”

“Aye. Even more than his father, and now that he has no restraints, he is growing into his full potential at a vertiginous pace.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“The power? Not in itself, but he has missed at least ten years of training. What we saw the other day at the beach was only a small taste of what he can do.”

Jossan gave a nervous hum. That rogue tide had been terrifying. “Wouldn’t any trained Tidebreaker be able to do that?”

“Perhaps. But there are no Tidebreakers who can talk to the stars. Etar was flustered and angry that day, so he set the currents against each other. He does these things instinctively. Like breathing.”

“He could kill someone without realizing,” Jossan reflected.

“Or himself.”

That was a fear she hadn’t thought about. “Oh, Gods...”

“I am sorry my decision to take him with me has brought you so much pain, General.”

Jossan shook her head. “This is not about me. All I care about is his happiness. I didn’t realize how much damage we were doing to him.”

Áehd nodded and smoothed his tunic over his lap. “I should leave you to rest. My room is two doors down from here if you need anything.”

Jossan stood to see him out. “Thank you for your kindness.”

“No need to thank me. I have an adolescent boy of my own, so I understand your pain all too well,” he said, smiling.

Jossan chuckled. “Why is it so difficult with them?”

“Loving an adolescent is an exercise in resilience,” he said as they walked together to the door. “They have an uncanny ability to break your heart and profess their unconditional love in the same sentence.”

Jossan smiled and gave the alchemist a light hug, which he returned with a gracious pat on her back and a soft “Good night.”

Jossan’s sleep was erratic that night. At some point, she thought she heard running and whispering outside her room, but these walls were thick, and sleep pulled her back under.

She woke with the first rays of the sun and couldn’t fall back asleep, so she groggily ambled outside to find some of last night’s pie. It sounded like an excellent way to start what she could feel in her bones would be a strenuous day, but as she walked downstairs, her foot caught on something. Had

her reflexes not been good enough to grab onto the banister, she would have tumbled all the way to the bottom of the tower. At least now she was fully awake.

The treacherous item was a large piece of heavily embroidered fabric. A sort of black robe, she realized once she lifted it in front of her eyes. She didn't take either Hans or Áehd to be messy people. Etar, on the other hand...

A door was open a few steps below, letting sunlight in. Etar's room. His starseeing book was on the nightstand and the bed was undone, but there was no sign of him. The kitchen was her next stop. She thought Hans would be feeding Etar there, but that, too, was deserted. Her heart picked up its pace. Maybe Hans had convinced Etar to sleep in his room—that insolent brat—but she didn't know which of these rooms belonged to Hans.

In the end, she went to the alchemist's door. She hesitated. Maybe she was overreacting, but it was too early for Etar to be out and about. She let her instincts guide her and knocked.

"General," the alchemist greeted her. He was dressed down for his standards—a simple linen shirt and comfortable trousers—but he seemed alert for the early hour. Did this man ever sleep?

"Sir, I'm sorry to bother you this early. Maybe it's nothing, but the boys are nowhere to be seen, and I tripped over this on the stairs," she said, showing the alchemist the robe.

Áehd frowned and took the garment from her.

"Did you hear noises earlier?" Jossan asked.

He shook his head. "I was meditating quite deeply." He returned to put the robe away and retrieved something from his writing table.

“Hans, can you hear me?” the alchemist said into a small metallic disc.

“What are you doing?” Jossan said.

“Trying to reach Hans,” he said as he rushed downstairs. “He has one of these, too. We can communicate from many miles away, but not if we are too far from each other or from a portal.”

“How does that even work?”

“Never mind that. We need to find them.”

The alchemist took her to the portal door. He put his metallic disc against it and it soon changed into a stable.

Áehd peeked inside and sighed. “They took my horse.”

“That demon stallion you escaped on? Etar is riding on *that* thing?”

“I assure you, General, Kharaph is a highly intelligent creature. He is very noble of heart and would never buck a child off his back. Etar is safe in that sense, but they must have gone after Ainsworth.”

She had thought of that already, but her heart still sank. “What do we do now?”

“I have other horses. Can you prepare them? I need to grab some of my instruments. I will not be long.”

Jossan looked at the portal warily. Maybe she was being provincial, but she still thought she would step through and end somewhere completely unexpected. “But how do I—”

“Just cross the portal. I’ll follow in a moment.”

Fortunately, the portal didn’t hurdle her into some twisted otherworld but into a long, twilit stable housing six gorgeous horses. Jossan chose two animals, hands trembling through every step of tacking them up, but at least this was a task she knew how to do with her eyes closed. It helped her

calm down, but she couldn't stop thinking of Etar chasing after Ainsworth.

She was so lost in thought that she yelped when the alchemist touched her shoulder.

"Apologies, General. I have bad news. I went to the roof to watch Ainsworth's ships, and they have split: three are attacking the castle, and four are going around the island. It is only a matter of time before they reach the fishing port."

"Fuck. Where is the flagship?"

"At the castle."

"Do you think that's where Etar went?"

Áehd shrugged. "It would make sense. The portal is much closer to the castle than the port. But we should not both go after him. I can help at the port, and you can look for Etar."

"All right," she said, trying to breathe some calm into herself.

Áehd nodded. "Let us wait no more."

This whole affair of crossing portals made her nauseous, or maybe it was her nerves, but all the way to the castle after she and Áehd parted, she wanted to retch.

She could hear the cannons booming in rapid succession when she reached the foot of the crag where the castle stood. Some of Castle Skalland's tallest towers already stood beheaded, and the sight made her stomach sink. She dismounted to look around, but it didn't take her long to run into the alchemist's stallion with a chestnut gelding linked to him with a bowline. No sign of the boys.

Áehd's horse reared when she closed in, kicking his front legs out menacingly. The alchemist's stallion seemed uneasy, like he was trying to protect the other horse.

“Whoa—what was your name?—Kharaph! I hope I’m saying that right.” She dismounted and held her hands up. “I’m a friend of Áehd’s. Please calm down.” Maybe she was losing her mind because she thought the horse had understood her. He stood still and perked his ears forward when he heard Áehd’s name. “Have you seen Etar? Hans?”

The horse cocked his head at the mention of Hans.

“Hans is your friend, isn’t he?”

Kharaph swung his head towards the beach. Yes, she was losing her mind if she was about to follow directions from a horse, but what else was she supposed to do?

Unable to continue on horseback over the rocky ground, she hiked a short distance to the beach. The place was desolate, the tide already too high to let her go further. But she could see four of Ainsworth’s ships from here and noticed one of them was not in formation. She watched them for a while, but standing there was no use. She had a feeling that if Etar had been nearby, the sea wouldn’t be so calm.

She went back to her horse and just as she was pulling herself up on the saddle, Kharaph nuzzled her rear.

“Whoa! I hope that was just terrible timing on your part. What do you want?” she asked, letting go of the saddle.

Kharaph shook his head, showing off his magnificent mane, then bent his neck as if he were making a reverence.

“I’m in a hurry, friend, and I don’t speak horse,” she said. Then, when she tried to mount again, Kharaph nipped at her sleeve.

“Hey!” she said, completely backing away from her horse.

Kharaph bowed again, then nudged her shoulder with his forehead.

“Oh. You want me to ride on you?” She looked at the horse linked to Kharaph, then at the one she had ridden here. “Sor-

ry, friends, but this guy is faster, and this is an emergency. I'll try to come back for you later." She released the chestnut and got on Kharaph.

Mounting Kharaph changed Jossan's perspective on him. He was beautiful, and it was as though his hooves didn't entirely touch the ground. They were galloping, but Kharaph hardly seemed to break a sweat. Crossing the twelve or thirteen miles from here to the port would take them less than an hour at this speed.

The sky above had turned jarringly gray for the season. It matched Jossan's mood. Her mind wouldn't stop its anxious race, but now that she'd heard how powerful Etar really was, she kept telling herself he was not defenseless, that he wouldn't have let himself fall into Ainsworth's hands—but if Ainsworth captured him, if that man harmed as much as a hair on Etar's head, there would be no polite conversation to buffer her rage this time.



Chapter 42

Jossan sighed in relief when she and Kharaph started approaching the port and there was still no sound of cannon fire in the distance. Just chatter and the usual din of human activity.

As she took the road down to the beach, she saw the crowd below flowing steadily into the many small merchant and fishing ships docked at the piers. Her men yelled orders, helped people with their luggage, and organized the long queues. Pride swelled within her. People were cooperating, and for a moment, it seemed like things would sort themselves out.

From the top of the beach, she spotted Rowan standing to one side of the promenade. He was huddled with the alchemist and Colum, all wearing serious faces as they conferred with each other. She was about to steer Kharaph towards them, but Kharaph started going there before she asked. “Whoa! Missed your dad, didn’t you?”

Kharaph broke into a canter. The crowd was thick, but people moved out of the way for the regal stallion, and he didn’t stop until he had his huge mug pressed against the

alchemist's face, as if he was a needy lapdog and not this gigantic beast.

"All right, thank you for bringing me here, I guess," she said, and before she could get a foot out of the stirrups, she felt herself being pulled out of the saddle. She didn't have time to protest before Rowan smothered her against his chest. He trapped her in a back-cracking hug, and a sharp smell of sweat and brine rose to her nose—not the most pleasant aroma, but the way she felt now, she could have lived in his embrace forever.

"Stubborn woman," he said. "What are you doing here? We were managing just fine."

She chuckled against his chest and reluctantly pulled away from him. "I needed to make sure you were all surviving without me. What did you expect?"

Rowan laughed. "How did anyone pry you away from the kid? I thought you'd want to keep guard over his door until all of this was over."

"Áehd didn't tell you?" she asked, her heart growing heavy again.

"Sorry, General," Áehd said. "We started planning as soon as I arrived here. There was no time."

"What happened?" Rowan asked.

Jossan swallowed. "The boys escaped from us in the early morning. We think they went after Ainsworth," she said, looking at the ocean. The waters were flat and the day remained stubbornly gray, promising a thunderstorm, but there was no sign of the invaders yet.

Rowan lifted his eyebrows. "Why would they do that?"

She sighed. "I'm afraid Etar thinks he can defeat them alone."

"And the blond kid?"

“Hans has a soft heart,” Áehd said. “He probably followed Etar to protect him.” At the mention of Hans, Kharaph muzzled Áehd’s face. Áehd said a few soft words to the horse in a foreign language and scratched him between the eyes. “Do not fret, dear friend,” he added. “You know how willful that boy is, but we will find him.”

Jossan hadn’t stopped to think about Hans. It suddenly hit her how worried Áehd must be. Hans was a sweet boy, and he didn’t deserve to die at the hands of Ainsworth any more than Etar did, but Etar was no use to the Gleasaman if he died. Hans didn’t hold the same value to them.

“We will find them both,” Jossan said.

Áehd smiled, and maybe it was his natural inexpressiveness, but it didn’t seem like he had high hopes.

Jossan was about to ask what the plan was when the sounds of a heated argument broke through the crowd’s chatter. On the nearest pier, a group of sailors gathered around a young man, scowling and gesturing angrily at him.

“Is that Fried?” she asked Rowan, squinting.

Rowan looked where Jossan was pointing. “Yup. And that’s old Theo with him.”

It looked like things would soon come to blows if no one intervened.

Jossan groaned. “I’ll take care of it,” she said before Rowan could offer. She knew Row would gladly punch the king and his son in the face, but she didn’t need more trouble than she already had.

Cutting through fifty yards of crowd wasn’t easy, and one of the sailors was already rolling his sleeves up when she got there.

“Hey! Hey! Wait, what seems to be the problem?” Jossan asked, butting between Prince Stupid and the sailors he’d offended.

“This kid wants to load all his shit on my boat,” the sailor said, pointing to a ship moored a few yards away. “I already told him we’re not carrying his weight in crap.”

Jossan looked at Fried’s feet and sighed. He had six bags and a heavy chest with him. “I can see the problem,” she said, trying not to lose her temper.

Friedrich had always been unreasonably scared of her, maybe because Theobald had once tasked her with teaching the blockheaded prince sword fighting, and she had to admit she had been a little rougher than necessary. He was an excellent brawler, but useless at anything that required finesse. Jossan had bruised him on Etar’s behalf once or twice.

“I won’t leave all my jewelry and my best clothes behind,” Friedrich said, but Jossan could see his body language going slightly into submission. Funny, because he would turn twenty soon and was already taller and much thicker than her.

“Then you’re staying behind with your stuff,” Theobald said, pushing through the circle of angry sailors.

Jossan looked at the king for the first time since she’d arrived. He looked sleep-deprived and disheveled, his beard and hair matted with sweat and standing at odd angles, and he sounded like he’d been having this argument for far longer than necessary.

She calmly stepped closer to the prince. He and Theobald should have been some of the first to board, but Jossan had a feeling this debate had gone on for a long time already. “You are holding the queue. I can throw your stuff in the sea, or you can board the ship with only one bag like everyone

else. Take your pick.” She gestured for one of her men to approach. “Help me with this,” she ordered.

It looked like the prince was going to yield for a moment, but when the guard leaned down to take the bag closest to Friedrich’s feet, the boy tackled the guard and started fighting him for it.

“Don’t touch that, you asshole!” Friedrich yelled.

The guard was too surprised to react. Jossan and one of the sailors leaned down to break the fight. Behind them, some people in the queue started cursing and groaning.

It was Theobald who put a stop to it by snatching the bag Friedrich was fighting for and throwing it into the sea.

Jossan had never seen Friedrich so enraged. He scrambled up from the ground and advanced on his father with a fist in the air. Had a sailor not been quick enough to grab him, Friedrich would have landed a jaw-breaking jab on Theobald’s face.

But to Jossan’s surprise, Theobald didn’t even flinch.

“Restrain him and move him out of the way!” Jossan ordered some of the other guardsmen that were coming to help.

But even three grown men had trouble subduing the bullish prince. By the time they got him out of the queue and kneeling on the pier’s boards, all the guardsmen were red-faced and panting.

As soon as Theobald approached, Friedrich started yelling again.

“I had my brother’s hunting dagger in that bag. You had no right to do that. You’re the worst fucking father in the world!”

The prince’s face was red up to the ears and a thick vein bulged in his neck, but Theobald simply watched. Friedrich eventually stopped fighting and slumped between the

guardsmen, then started crying. “I don’t want to go to some island. I want my brothers and Mother,” Friedrich said.

Jossan would have felt bad for him if she didn’t have the image of Etar’s bloody face still seared in her mind.

Theobald knelt in front of Friedrich and looked up at the guards. “Let him go.”

The guards hesitated and looked at Jossan. She wasn’t sure it was wise, but she ordered the men to let go.

Friedrich cried pitifully, snot and tears dribbling over his mouth. “You’ve always cared about Etar more than you care about me, and now you’re trying to ruin my life even more. I would rather have the Gleasaman shoot my head off than living like a peasant on some island I don’t even know. I hate you. I fucking hate you!”

Theobald wasn’t the type who cried in public, but Jossan had never seen more misery in his eyes. Still, the king managed a rueful chuckle. “You know what’s funny? That I believe you’re stupid enough to let the Gleasaman kill you just to spite me.”

The prince frowned, but Theobald had made him stop and listen.

“If you stay here,” Theobald continued, “I will stay just to make your life miserable. If you really want to get rid of me, you’ll have to get on that boat.”

Friedrich was panting. Jossan could see his mind working, but she didn’t expect the words that came out of his mouth next.

“Why don’t you love me?” he asked. He sounded so young.

Jossan wanted to look away. This conversation had suddenly turned too intimate, but she couldn’t let her guard down in case Friedrich tried to assault his father again.

Theobald lifted a hesitant hand, and for a moment, Jossan thought he would strike the prince, but instead, he put a hand on Friedrich's shoulder.

"You're right. I've never shown you any love," Theobald said, sounding the most sober Jossan had heard him in months. "But dying just to make me angry would be the dumbest thing you've ever done, and that's already saying a lot. Am I really worth dying for?"

Friedrich gulped down and looked like he wanted to cry again, but he shook his head after a long, uncomfortable silence.

They finally looked away from each other, and Friedrich got up, chose one of his bags to take with him, and walked up to the queue again.

Theobald got up and patted dirt off his knees. "Crisis averted," he said to Jossan as if that whole scene had meant nothing, but there was a slant of disappointment in his mouth.

Jossan put a hand on his shoulder. "You should board with him."

Theobald chuckled. "Listen, General, I do care for the stupid kid in my own way. Doesn't mean we won't kill each other if we spend that much time bunking together. I'll be fine on the next boat."

Jossan laughed. Theobald was awful, but sometimes she appreciated his horrible sense of humor.

The lines ahead moved without a hitch after that. The boat Friedrich was holding up with his tantrum had just packed its last passenger and was already casting off when the blood-curdling blare of a horn blasted through the air.

Jossan rushed back to her friends. Rowan was standing on a crate to gain vantage over the crowd and held a spyglass

to his eye. He didn't have to say anything for Jossan to know what he was seeing.

The crowd froze, listening for danger, until a man screamed, "*Pirates!*" and chaos erupted. Panic stirred in a wave from one end of the port to the other. People shoved, cried, and ran in whatever direction they could. Some were frantically trying to get on the boats still moored, but the sailors became so desperate that they started cutting lines instead of untying them, and they kicked gangways out of the way, some of them still with people on.

Rowan jumped off his crate right before the mob pushed him off. Sailors had been moving people out all morning, and there weren't many still left on the island, but hysteria had turned them into an ants' nest breaking open. Jossan soon lost sight of Theobald, and she could see Rowan but couldn't reach him.

Jossan turned on her heels to find a way out. Kharaph was standing a few yards away, rearing to protect himself, and even the panicked townspeople had more sense than to come close.

The alchemist cut through the crowd to calm him down. It gave Jossan an idea.

"Master Áehd, I need Kharaph's help!" she shouted.

Áehd nodded at her and said a couple words to the horse's ear. Soon the big stallion was pushing through toward her.

Jossan dragged herself on top of the saddle, and once she had a firm seat, she took a deep breath and patted Kharaph on the neck. "Kharaph, friend, we need to scare people in the right direction."

Kharaph stomped with his front legs, kicking loose some sand reed underfoot. He huffed like a charging bison. Jossan stiffened. Maybe he did understand human words.

The same gentle giant who had brought her here safely now made the hard-packed sand under his hooves tremble. He charged ahead, the sound of ship horns in the distance heightening the thumping of his hoofbeats.

Kharaph made a wide circle around the mass of people, screaming menacingly at them over the noise. He corralled them like a dog herding sheep. No one would have listened to Jossan in the middle of this chaos, but people still had enough sense to move out of the path of this battering ram of a stallion.

“Good Gods, please don’t buck me off!” Jossan said, cringing at the insane speed this mass of muscle had built up in seconds. With no reins to hold, she grabbed onto the pommel of the saddle for dear life, regretting the moment she decided to encourage this otherworldly beast.

Even her men’s horses scattered away, but Kharaph didn’t need their help. He had made the mob flow into a steady stream uphill toward the road, and a few minutes later, the beach was clear.

“Karl. Karl!” she yelled, spotting the young guardsman near the piers.

“General,” Karl called back, waving at her.

“Guide the people to town and take the guards with you. Protect that town with your lives.”

“Yes, sir,” Karl said just as she passed him by.

Kharaph still didn’t give a damn what she wanted, and he seemed rattled and on edge after all the chaos. She slid off the saddle the moment the horse slowed down enough, and she watched him trot away.

“By all the Gods, can’t we catch a break?” she asked herself, facing north to see the ships. Once again, their horns rattled her bones along with her remaining composure.

“General,” someone said from behind her.

She jumped. It was Áehd, standing with Colum.

“What in the Dark Pit are we going to do?” she asked.

“Master Colum and I have a plan,” Áehd said, casual as if he were talking about breakfast.

“I’m still skeptical, but it might be worth trying,” Colum said. “If your friend here does what he says he can do, then we may have a fighting chance.”

Jossan gave them a quizzical look. “What do you mean?”

“Follow us,” Áehd said. “It will be easier if you see it with your own eyes.”



Chapter 43

Etar woke face down with a light headache pulsing between his eyes, and for all of two seconds, he forgot this was not his bed in Master Áehd's tower. A soft undulating sensation surrounded him, and the rank smell of stale sweat on the pillow made his stomach roil. He had eaten nothing since yesterday, so fortunately nothing came out when he gagged.

His hands were tied behind his back, and when he opened his eyes, he saw Hans lying on his belly on an adjacent bunk, his hands also tied, his right sleeve ripped off to reveal a jagged wound near his shoulder.

"Hans," Etar whispered after trying twice to speak on a dry throat. Hans didn't move. "Wake up, please," Etar insisted, a little louder.

Hans stirred and groaned, but he didn't open his eyes.

"Hans—"

"I heard you the first time," Hans said, eyes still closed.

Etar sighed in relief. "Then why didn't you answer, you jerk?"

Hans opened one eye. "Because everything hurts, and I wanted to sleep a little longer." He smiled. "I'm fine, silly.

They didn't do a great job, but apparently they patched me up while I was unconscious. I was more worried that you wouldn't wake up. What did they do to you?"

Etar wiggled to sit up. The rope around his wrists was unyielding and his shoulders felt stiff. "I can't do any magic. This collar around my neck—I don't know how to explain it, but I can't *feel* my magic."

Hans rolled on his good side to look at Etar. "Welcome to the realm of common people."

Etar examined their surroundings. This cabin was tiny, but it could house at least four sleeping people, two stacked on each side, and there was no room to do anything but sleep. He was not even an arm's length away from Hans.

Some time later, the door to the cabin opened with a loud whirring of metal, and two large men walked in to make the already small space feel even tighter.

"Ho, ho, look at this, Howlitz. The pups are awake," one of them, the blond with the scar on his face, said. This had to be Ainsworth. He moved about as if he owned the entire world.

Etar cowered against a corner. Hans didn't look at them.

"They are resilient, Admiral. Like vermin," Howlitz said, leaning against the door frame. He was an ugly bear of a man. Rugged was an understatement when it came to describing him. Volcanic rock had a smoother texture than his face.

Ainsworth kicked the frame of Hans' bunk. "Oi, bastard, you ought to be thankful. I was going to sacrifice you at the beach, like a mangy dog. You shot one of my best men in the hand, and now he can't work for shit." He sat on the corner of the bunk. Hans still didn't look at him. "But see, Howlitz here is a genius. He said you look like a lad who could lift a sack of potatoes or two, and working mules always fetch good prices at the slave market. Methinks that would be a fair punish-

ment for being a little prick—and it will leave me with some profit, too.”

Howlitz smiled—or tried to. His face wasn’t very conducive to joy.

Hans didn’t react, but Etar’s stomach bunched up. “He was trying to protect me. Let him go, please. I won’t put up a fight.” He felt dirty begging this man for anything, but rebelling would do neither of them any good. Not yet, at least.

Ainsworth laughed. “Too late. I wasn’t going to harm your friends, but you chose to become a pain in my ass. Now you must face the consequences.”

“But, sir, I—”

“Your fate won’t be much better. I was charged with taking you back, but no one said it had to be pleasant for you.”

Etar swallowed. “King Wilfred is my grandfather. I don’t think he will be pleased if you harm me.”

Ainsworth gave him a stiff smile. “You think wrong, honeybunch. You’re a bastard, and Wilfred is not precisely the loving granddaddy type—he certainly won’t be offering you biscuits and hot milk when you arrive.”

Etar wasn’t surprised. Wilfred sounded like a ruthless man, but for Etar sharing his father’s fate as a slave was not an option. He had to find a way out before Ainsworth could take him and Hans away.

“No saucy comebacks for me? No crying and begging? Bummer. I wanted an excuse to slap you again,” Ainsworth said while examining his own fingernails. “I mean, this idiot friend of yours cost me a good man, but you... you cost me a fucking windlass and an anchor. This was supposed to be a simple job of retrieving a helpless little boy, but no one told me you could pull off that sort of shit.”

Ainsworth stood and grabbed Etar by the jaw. Etar cringed away from him, but he was already backed against the wall, and Ainsworth's grip was like an iron vise.

Hans sprang up as if his hands weren't tied behind his back, but Howlitz punched his cheek, busting it open. Hans countered with a bone-crunching headbutt. Howlitz staggered back with blood pouring out of his nose, braying like an injured beast.

Ainsworth ended the chaos by pulling a huge knife on Etar's throat.

"That's enough! You included Howlitz!" Ainsworth's shout made Etar's ears ring. "I didn't come here to play. You both will do whatever the fuck I say, or I'll beat one of you until the other complies."

Ainsworth's fingers dug deep into Etar's cheeks, making him whimper. He wanted to check on Hans, but Hans was on his blind side, and with Ainsworth clutching his face, he couldn't turn his head to see.

Ainsworth leaned in, his voice a contemptuous growl. "I was just going to return home after nabbing you, but you've pissed me off. While you were busy holing up with the warlock, we did a reconnaissance of the island on horseback. We know there are ships trying to get people out at the port, so the two of you will watch as I exterminate every one of them."

Etar froze. His impulsiveness had landed him here, tied up and with a knife against his throat. No one even knew where he was. He closed his eyes, bracing for whatever pain Ainsworth was going to inflict on him, but Ainsworth just let him go in the end.

"Good boy," Ainsworth said in a silky voice, patting Etar's cheek gently. "Keep your fear alive because if you act up like your boyfriend did, I'll punish him." He straightened him-

self, pulling on the hem of his expensive-looking uniform coat, and casually sheathed his knife back in his belt. “Let’s go, Howlitz. You’ll need that nose mended before we reach the port.”

Once alone, Etar threw himself off his bunk in a futile attempt to help Hans, who was now trying to suppress his moans of pain. Etar wished with all his might to ease Hans’ suffering, but all he could do was kneel on the floor and place his chin on the edge of Hans’ bunk.

“Is it broken?” Etar asked softly.

“I don’t think so, but it hurts just as much.”

“Please, don’t do that again. They won’t kill me, but they don’t care enough about you to keep you around.” He dreaded the idea of a punch to his face, especially by someone with Ainsworth’s strength, but watching Hans getting battered for him made him nauseous.

“Etar, if they hit you the way they hit me, they’ll break you. Can’t allow that.”

Etar shook his head. “Idiot,” he said, his voice breaking.

“I’ve never denied it.”

In other circumstances, Etar would have laughed at Hans’ self-deprecating joke. But Hans wasn’t smiling now, and the earnestness of his words made them hit differently. They looked at each other in silence, deadlocked in that stubborn desire to protect each other.

But not all hope was lost. “Look,” Etar said, looking down. His spider peeked from inside the collar of his shirt.

Hans’ eyes lit up. “How did they miss it?”

Etar shrugged. “All of my clothes fit baggy. Advantages of being skinny.”

Hans laughed and kissed Etar’s forehead. “You’re a genius.”

Even without having a mirror, Etar knew his face had never turned a deeper shade of red. “Maybe it can cut through the ropes,” he said, barely overcoming his need to hide his flushed face.

“I bet. I’ve seen the Old Man’s constructs do incredible stuff.”

“Let’s wait, though. We don’t know how far we are from the coast. We could drown trying to escape. So, um—”

“Yes?”

Etar bit his lip. “I don’t want them to beat you again. Please, don’t give them a reason.”

Hans smirked. “I’ll be good until we reach the port.”

Etar somehow doubted Hans could keep in good behavior for more than a couple minutes at a time, but he’d have to take his word for it. “Promise?”

“I promise,” Hans said. “Try to sleep, Etar. You don’t look like you’re doing much better than me.”

Etar didn’t want to sleep. He wanted to stay by Hans’ side. He tried to protest, but Hans blindsided him with another kiss on his forehead. This time, it was a tender, lingering thing that made Etar’s heart flutter.

“Please,” Hans whispered. “For me.”

That was blackmail, but Etar was too flustered to call Hans out on it, so he returned to his bunk obediently. He shut his eyes, not expecting much, but he fell almost immediately into a deep sleep.

Images flooded his mind. He’d never had so many disjointed little visions at once. He didn’t even know it was possible to have more than one. He woke again with his heart in his throat and rough hands dragging to his feet. It was hard to keep hold of that flurry of visions he’d had, but he

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thought he had caught a glimpse of hope among all the confused images.



Chapter 44

Jossan stood at the end of a pier with Colum and Áehd, watching closely as the last Skallander ships left their docks. These wooden trawlers and merchants with their small sails were nowhere near as fast as the approaching frigates, and every new scream of the enemy horns sounded nearer to the coast.

“I understand what you’re saying about crystals. What I don’t understand is where are we going to get one powerful enough to do what you’re suggesting,” Colum said. He and Áehd had been bickering for a while—which wasn’t what Jossan expected when they said they had a plan.

“You already have it in front of your eyes, my friend,” Áehd said and extended a hand to Colum. “Take my hand.”

Colum gave the alchemist a skeptical look.

“Indulge me, please,” Áehd insisted.

Colum gave in and his expression changed into awe.

“That’s impossible,” Colum muttered. “How?”

“I have a diamond inside me, and it is so pure and hungry I do not even have to do anything to recharge it. There are

a lot of magicians on this island. It has been slowly siphoning magic from the environment since I came here.”

Colum let go of Áehd’s hand, but he seemed reluctant, like he was enjoying whatever he was getting out of the contact. “But won’t it suck my power in, too?”

Áehd shook his head. “I have gained enough control over it to decide which direction the energy moves. You are safe.”

“All of this is fascinating, I’m sure,” Jossan interrupted. “But I think we’ll have those four war machines upon us in minutes. Can you prevent them from coming close?”

And as if to mark her words, another horn blast cut through the air.

Áehd nodded. “I don’t think we can destroy them, but we can stall them.”

That wasn’t an encouraging answer. Stalling them would only delay the inevitable, and there was another thing Jossan feared. “Do you think Etar is in one of those?” she asked.

Áehd produced a small conical pendant dangling from a silver chain. He let it hang between his fingers, and the small trinket began twirling in small circles, then it started aggressively swinging toward Colum.

“What is that thing?” Jossan asked.

“A scrying plummet. It can show natural magic sources. But if Etar was on those ships, it would swing towards them.”

“Even at this distance?” Colum asked, his eyebrows arched.

Áehd smiled. “Aye. Etar is so much more powerful than everyone here realizes. I do not believe even Ainsworth is aware.”

“What are we waiting for?” Jossan asked, growing impatient.

“For them to come a little closer,” Áehd said. “But we should prepare. Please step forward, Colum.”

Colum stepped towards the end of the old pier. Áehd touched two fingers to the base of the Tidebreaker's head, and Colum's shoulders tensed as if a jolt of electricity had gone down his spine.

The old Tidebreaker lifted his hands towards the sea, and for a few seconds, everything remained calm. Even the sun couldn't be bothered peeking from behind the clouds today, and the ships' horns went quiet as they came closer.

Jossan's eyes followed the frigates expectantly for a while, and suddenly, the sea roared.

Water splashed so high around them that though the tide had been low a moment ago, now water leaped over the edges of the piers. Jossan felt a primeval impulse to run away, but Colum and Áehd remained calm, so she stayed in place.

She looked at the Gleasaman ships mounting over the sudden rise of the waves in front of them. It was a tempest with no rain clouds, a bizarre churning of the sea like nothing Jossan had seen before.

But the ironclads pushed on. Their blade-like prows cut through the waves, lifting to the sky like they would turn over and flounder, but they kept afloat.

"Stronger, Colum. Do not fear draining me out. You cannot hurt me," Áehd shouted over the deafening roar of the sea, but Jossan wasn't sure he was telling the truth. The alchemist had his brow furrowed and his mouth twisted in a grimace, as if whatever Colum was doing was causing him pain, but Colum was looking ahead, and the alchemist sounded so assertive Jossan didn't think Colum would know the difference.

Colum twisted both hands into fists, and the enraged ocean responded with a deep rumble.

The waves bucked and crashed, the surf slamming high onto the beach. As Áehd had predicted, the ships didn't stop,

but they slowed down, giving the Skallander vessels more time to flee. It was eerie how calm the sea was a few miles beyond, the supernatural tempest concentrated against the enemy frigates. This was the first time Jossan witnessed magic used as a weapon of war, and her chest filled with dread thinking of what a man with Wilfred's wicked mind could do with a magician such as Etar under his control.

As the four ships started passing by the piers, one of them sailed close enough that Jossan could make out the tiny figures of men like insects crawling all over the upper deck. And, of course, if she could see them, the sailors could see her and her friends, too. They probably had watchkeepers with spyglasses assessing their surroundings.

Jossan squinted. She saw a light flashing from the foredeck of the last ship in formation. Was there someone waving flags, too? Slowly, the ship sending the signals started changing course.

"They spotted us," Colum said. "They are splitting up."

Jossan's heart raced. Some of the Gleasaman ships were gaining on the fleeing Skallanders and starting to shoot at them. The black frigates were still less maneuverable than the small fishers and merchants, but they spewed so many cannonballs with one volley that some inevitably found targets against the small ships.

"Damn those bastards," Colum shouted. The ferocity of the waves redoubled, but the three Gleasaman ships that sailed ahead were getting out of his reach.

"Concentrate on the nearest one," Áehd shouted. "It will—"

Cannon fire swallowed Áehd's words. The ship that had turned course was upon them, and it was shooting at the piers.

“We’re too small a target,” Colum said. “Hang on, friends.”

A cannon blast hit behind them on the beach. Another landed in the middle of the pier, shattering part of the boardwalk and making the wood catch fire.

Even Áehd seemed surprised at the fire.

Colum looked behind him. “Ha. They are heating their rounds, the bastards,” he said, but more than scared, he sounded like this was the most exciting thing that had happened to him in many years. Maybe it was.

“The waves are not enough,” Áehd said, pulling something from his pocket with his free hand. It looked like a small fork with only two squared and blunt prongs.

“What are you doing?” Colum asked.

“Sound magic. I will try to dislodge some rocks from the bottom with the vibration,” Áehd said, and he hit the fork against his own shoulder, then touched the nearest dock piling with it.

“Sound... sound *magic*?” Colum asked.

Áehd didn’t pay Colum’s astonishment any mind. “Brace yourselves, friends,” he said. “This will not be pleasant.”

Just as he said that Jossan started feeling every hollow part of her body vibrate. It was a sensation like the low rumble of thunder, but she couldn’t actually hear anything other than the noises of the sea and the battle. Dread didn’t come near to describing what she felt. She bent forward, suddenly nauseous.

“What now?” Colum asked, his face gone pale.

“Make a maelstrom under the ship,” Áehd said.

“A maelstrom won’t sink a ship that size,” Colum argued.

“I know,” Áehd said. “Create an updraft. Just trust me. I cannot hold this for too long.”

Colum's shoulders sagged, but he made a whirlpool underneath the ship. As Colum warned, that didn't stop the frigate, but it threw its aim off-kilter. The next volley landed way ahead of the piers.

"It won't hold them forever," Colum said.

Áehd didn't bother replying, or maybe he couldn't. Sweat beaded his forehead, and his eyes were almost all blue, his pupils constricted into pinpricks. His hand shook around the little silver fork, and all the gems on his fingers glowed white, their light pulsing thick and slow like a strangled vein. After the waters rose to the call of the alchemist's mysterious magic, he touched his fork against the wood piling again. The ground started shaking.

Jossan had experienced an earthquake only once before, but it didn't compare to this. That had been a quick jolt of the earth, an invisible force rocking the ground back and forth, violently and swiftly. Whatever the alchemist was doing with that tiny piece of metal only made her want to bury her head in the sand, but the tremor wasn't strong enough to tear down the fishing huts uphill or the piers themselves. It was a slow thing that wouldn't let up, gradually filling her head with terror. She didn't know how Colum could stand in such deep concentration, just doing his thing.

The shaking ground gave way to a grating screech of metal, louder than the waves. It was like hail hitting a tin roof, but a thousand times louder. The sound repeated a second and a third time. Jossan still didn't understand what was happening, but by the fourth bang, the ship started leaning at an odd angle in the water, its aft pointing upwards while its fore dipped deeper into the water.

"Did you just breach that ship's hull?" Colum asked, wide-eyed and perhaps with a bit of fearful awe.

“*We* did,” Áehd said.

Jossan didn’t know if it was too early, but hope grew inside her that they might actually win.



Chapter 45

Etar shut his eyes against daylight as Howlitz shoved him and Hans through the narrow stairs to the top deck.

“Welcome to the Queen’s Obsidian Blade, Admiral Ainsworth’s pride and joy. Ain’t she beautiful?” the gruff sailor said. “Shame you ain’t here to enjoy the trip. She sails very smooth, you know?”

Etar couldn’t stand this prick’s good mood. He had busted Hans’ face open and was now purposely pushing him by his injured shoulder every chance he got. And despite his broken nose making him speak like a congested goose, he sounded as enthusiastic as if Ainsworth had promised him a fief and a fleet of his own. Etar would have gladly kicked him in the shins.

Howlitz shoved them through the upper deck. Around them, men came and went in organized chaos. They talked of rudders, rigs, bearings, and many other things Etar didn’t understand. Had he boarded this ship in different circumstances, he would have liked to know how everything worked.

Overhead, a tangle of ropes and nets marred his view of the sky, and he felt dizzy just looking at the men crawling their way up and down the masts, so he kept his eyes ahead.

Eventually, they found Ainsworth looking through a spyglass.

“What the fuck is this?” Ainsworth growled as Howlitz moved up next to him.

Howlitz’s good mood fizzled out. He rubbed the back of his neck in perplexed silence.

Ainsworth lowered his spyglass, but he had his eyes on the coast. “Tell me, Howlitz, how do a bunch of peasants and a woman-led force incapacitate an ironclad frigate? They don’t even have guns!”

Howlitz’s throat worked loudly. “The alchemist, sir?” Despite his thick build and rough demeanor, Howlitz looked like a scolded child in the face of Ainsworth’s rage.

“The *Pérfida* had two Tidebreakers and a Stormbringer aboard, but there she is, with her ass pointing to the sky. Which, to me, Howlitz—and maybe I don’t know enough about seafaring—is not the right way a ship should sit!” Ainsworth pushed every word through his teeth with such tension that Etar thought something inside the man would physically snap. “Also, don’t call him an ‘alchemist.’ A fucking warlock is what he is, with his damned black magic.” He shoved the spyglass into Howlitz’s chest. “Full steam. I’ve had enough of this lunacy.”

Etar felt a sudden rush of pride for Áehd. This powerful, cruel man with the gigantic ships was so obviously afraid of him that he couldn’t even hide it properly. His anger was just for show, and Etar, who had spent his whole life watching people who didn’t pay attention to him, could see right through it.

Howlitz assigned two armed sailors to watch over Etar and Hans and left to carry out Ainsworth's orders. Ainsworth remained with his back turned to them, looking at the destruction ahead. He seemed superficially calm as his ship plowed ahead, swift and unstoppable. Behind them, the ship's chimneys whistled loudly as they picked up speed.

Etar took a shaking breath in. His heart raced like a hunted rabbit, but he had to try something.

"Sir," Etar ventured. Hans shot him an alarmed look.

"Hmm?" Ainsworth said without turning to him.

Etar swallowed. "Why don't you just turn back now that you have me?"

Ainsworth huffed. "You have nothing to offer that can take you out of this mess."

Etar almost lost his nerve at this rebuff, but he pushed himself to speak. "But I'm still a Starseer," he said shakily. "Maybe you can take advantage of me before you deliver me to King Wilfred? I know nothing about sea travel, but I bet there are many nights from here to Gleasam."

This finally made Ainsworth turn. "Indeed. And why would you make such a generous offer? Because you want me to take that collar off your neck, so you can slam this ship with a wave?"

Etar shook his head. His hands trembled behind his back. "Because those are my friends on the shore, you are going to sell Hans as a slave, and none of this is their fault." He took a deep breath. Baring his heart to this monster made cold sweat trickle down his spine. "I can't fight you, sir. I'm only trying to buy my friends' lives. Let Hans go. Forget about Skalland. I'm yours."

Ainsworth walked closer, towering over Etar. "You know I could force you to do it, right?"

Etar panicked. For a second, he thought he'd dug his own early grave. "I've read that some Starseers of old could project whenever they wanted, but I don't know how to do that. I need to concentrate a lot, and if I'm too distracted by pain, I might not even be able to go into a trance."

Ainsworth chuckled. "You have answers for everything, don't you? How annoying."

"Please, sir. You don't need to like me, but isn't it useful to have someone who can tell you the future?"

"You might not even need Wilfred in the end if you had a Starseer of your own," Hans said. Etar startled when he heard him speak. So far, he'd only been watching warily.

"Who said the two of you could speak, anyway?" Ainsworth said, but he didn't sound half as menacing as before, and Etar could see his mind working. He called one of his sailors over. "The *Soberbia* is still afloat, isn't she?"

The sailor put a spyglass to his eye. "Aye, sir. It looks like she and the *Espada* are still afloat. Can't see the *Furia* from here."

Ainsworth nodded. "Call the signalman. I want a message sent to them as soon as we are within hailing distance."

The sailor left without hesitation to do his admiral's bidding. Ainsworth drove all these men with the efficiency of a cracking whip.

"Are we going to Gleasam? Will you let Hans go?" Etar asked hurriedly.

"No. I need to aid that ship your friends damaged. As for your boyfriend, if I'm going to use you, I'll need insurance."

Ainsworth patted Etar's shoulder and his heavy hand lingered there.

"Sir?" Etar said in a small voice. Ainsworth's sharp blue eyes bore through him, but he couldn't look away.

“You talk like your obnoxious daddy, but you have a bit of your mamma in your eyes,” Ainsworth said, but it sounded like he was talking to himself. Etar didn’t want to inquire.

After a few spine-chilling seconds, Ainsworth gave him a tiny smile and squeezed his shoulder painfully before ambling away towards the hatch to the lower decks.

Both Hans and Etar watched him in stupefied silence until he disappeared.

“What the...” Hans said. “Do you think he actually liked your mom?”

Etar shuddered. “I’m not sure how you can like someone and still drown them in the sea.”

The wind whipped Etar’s hair around, sea salt heavy in every breath he took. He looked back and saw the thick white steam clouds swelling behind the ship’s chimneys. They were moving extremely fast, and his time to figure out things would run out soon.

The visions he’d had during his shuteye had shown him a possible solution, but there were too many loose ends and open-ended questions he could not answer, and his head kept racing ahead of him without rhyme or reason. He still dreaded his own inexperience as a Starseer and that he didn’t know if he had the power to change the outcomes of his visions—because not everything he’d seen gave him hope.

“Hans?”

“Yes?”

“Be good. Seriously,” he said, hoping even in the face of their terrible odds that everyone would stay alive until his chance to seize their freedom came.



Chapter 46

Watching ships fight from the shore was the most frustrating thing Jossan had ever experienced. The crew of the vessel Colum and Áehd had attacked was too busy jumping into the water, but that didn't stop the others from chasing the Skallander ships. All she wanted was to jump into action.

The sinking vessel fired flares into the sky and started communicating through flags. Jossan didn't know how to read semaphore signals, but the other attacking ships soon turned around to assist their distressed partner.

Colum and Áehd stopped when the other ships formed along the coast. The black frigates flew white flags in place of their red, eagle-emblazoned ones, but their broadsides were all pointed at the beach.

"Steam warships striking the colors for an old man and an unarmed alchemist," Colum said, finally letting his body sag. "Sorry, Áehd. We make a great team, but I don't have much more left in me."

Áehd nodded. He looked a shade paler than usual and his breathing was shallow. "It is wise to take a break now, re-

ardless. I am nearly spent, too, and I do not believe the sincerity of their flags.”

“What are they trying to say?” Jossan asked.

It was Áehd who answered. “Surrender. But it will not last. I see Ainsworth’s flagship on the horizon.”

Everyone turned their heads north. The other three ships in Ainsworth’s fleet were approaching at top speed.

Áehd knit his brow. He reached inside his pocket for his scrying plummet again. He held the chain in his fingers, his hand pointed toward the newly arrived ships, and let it swing. The little chunk of metal made small circles at first but then started tilting more intently toward the warships.

“Etar?” Jossan asked, biting her eagerness back.

“Yes—I believe so, at least. But the signal is strangely weak. Perhaps they are suppressing his magic.”

That would make sense, but the thought gave Jossan no peace. What if they had hurt him? What if the signal was weak because he was dying?

The sound of a galloping horse made her look behind her. It was Rowan coming down the beach. He dismounted and made a gesture for them to come over.

“We should get off this pier,” Jossan said to Colum and the alchemist, looking at where the pier was still on fire. “Before we get completely cut off.”

They carefully negotiated the partially broken structure of the pier to get back on the beach, to where Rowan was waiting for them.

“We heard the blasts all the way to town. I came back as fast as I could,” he said breathlessly. “What happened?”

Jossan looked towards the water. “These two happened,” she said, pointing a thumb at Colum and Áehd. “Is everyone back in town?”

Rowan nodded. “Karl is managing things. People are taking shelter in their basements.”

“And the king?” She asked.

Rowan rolled his eyes. “He’s fine. A little shocked and all, but fine.”

Jossan sighed. At least Theobald was accounted for, and the boat Fried boarded had escaped the attack of the Gleasaman. No matter how infuriating they were, she had no desire to see them dead.

She just wished she could say Etar was safe, too. “We think they have Etar on the flagship,” she said, feeling her breath falter.

Rowan looked at the approaching boats, then gave her a concerned look. “We’ll get him back, Jo.”

She huffed. “Of course we will. I’m just trying to figure out how...”

Ainsworth’s flagship and its two escorts surrounded the floundering ship. They lowered tender boats into the water to aid it, and the men on them threw lifebuoys at the struggling sailors. Jossan almost felt sorry for them, but it had been such an overreaction on Wilfred’s part to send this powerful flotilla after a single boy. She was certain the decision had more to do with pride than logistics. A morbidly overpowered kingdom trying to humiliate a small island for a perceived affront. It was disgusting.

Once they’d rescued the surviving crew of the sinking ship, even Ainsworth’s flagship lowered its red ensigns and replaced them with plain white flags.

“What a display,” Rowan said with a sardonic little laugh. “It makes me want to punch Ainsworth a bit more. I haven’t forgotten how he slapped you.”

“You’re not alone, my friend,” Jossan said between her teeth.

Ainsworth’s ship released yet another tender. A big one, steam-powered and carrying at least a dozen men aboard. It was coming to the piers. Their peace offering seemed more fragile by the minute.

“General, can I ask something very important of you?” Aehd said.

Jossan nodded.

“If he has the boys, whatever state they are in, please remain calm. Ainsworth is a fickle and cruel man, and if you attempt anything against him, he will not mind hurting them to punish you.”

Jossan swallowed and nodded.

Ainsworth’s men moored their tender at a wharf not thirty yards away. Once the sailors got off, Jossan saw Ainsworth and his burly henchman standing with Hans and Etar on the deck. The boys both had their hands tied behind their backs, and they had been obviously mistreated. Etar, whose skin always showed even the lightest bruises, had a large purple mark radiating from the corner of his mouth, and someone had placed a ring around his neck. Poor Hans couldn’t even stand straight. He had two deep cuts on his face, and one of his arms sported a jagged wound close to the shoulder.

“What has he done?” Jossan asked. She had promised Aehd not a minute ago that she would remain calm, but she was fisting her hands already, her whole frame shaking with poorly contained rage.

Rowan unhooked her fisted fingers one by one and took her hand in his. “The alchemist is right. It’s better to keep calm until we figure a way to take them to safety.”

She gave Rowan a tense nod without taking her eyes away from Ainsworth.

The twelve men who came with Ainsworth disembarked and started walking in formation towards them, but Ainsworth and his ugly underling remained on board with the boys. Ainsworth's man put his pistol to Hans' head, announcing without words which of the two boys was disposable to them.

"Damned beast," Jossan hissed.

"General..." Áehd said. It sounded like a plea. The alchemist had his eyes on Hans. This was the first time Jossan had seen so much concern show in his face.

The armed sailors formed a line in front of Jossan and the others, then took aim at them. One of them broke from the line and walked towards Áehd.

"By the powers conferred to me by His Royal Majesty Wilfred V, King of Gleasam, I place you under arrest for the crime of high treason," the sailor recited to Áehd and pulled a pair of manacles from his belt. "Will you come voluntarily, or do we have to slaughter your friends to persuade you?" the man asked, breaking his formal tone. "Nothing would give the admiral more pleasure than us putting some lead in them."

Áehd glanced at the boys. Hans shook his head slowly, but Áehd looked away from him and offered the sailor his wrists. "I do not fear nor answer to your corrupt king's laws, but for the safety of those children, I will go."

The sailor spat at his feet and manacled him. Jossan stepped forward on impulse, but the firing squad in front of them cocked their muskets in unison. Rowan held her hand painfully tight and pulled her back.

"General, please," Áehd said, offering her an appeasing smile. "If they think they can hurt me, they are sorely mis-

taken. I will liberate those boys, no matter what. When they return to your side, take care of them for me.”

The sailor pushed Áehd forward. “Shut up,” he said and led Áehd towards the tender.

As Jossan watched the alchemist walk away, a familiar thundering of hooves rose from behind her.

She spun around.

Jossan had lost sight of Kharaph after he went uphill a while ago, fleeing the commotion of the crowd. But maybe he had seen Áehd being taken away, because now he was stomping down the beach at full gallop, the ground rumbling as he closed in.

“Master Colum, get out of the way,” she said, pulling the Tidebreaker and Rowan to the side.

The firing squad all gaped at the riderless horse. Some men shot at Kharaph, but in their confusion, none of them hit, and now they had to bend down and reload.

Jossan instinctively ducked when a second volley came, even though they were not pointing at her. A shot grazed Kharaph’s shoulder, but it did little to slow the black hulk of muscle.

Before the first group of sailors could finish reloading and taking aim, Kharaph was already upon them. The two who did not get out of the way in time got savagely trampled, the sickening, wet crunch of bones mixing with their cries of pain.

“Fucking butter fingers. Kill it!” Ainsworth shouted from the boat, looking like he wanted to jump into action, but he clung to his prisoners’ side instead.

Áehd took advantage of the confusion to escape the sailor escorting him. By whatever trick, either practical or magical, his manacles clicked open and dropped into the water.

He gained the sailor's back, produced his tuning fork again, and tapped the man in the temple with it. The sailor fell limp on the boards of the pier.

"Stay where you are!" Ainsworth's minion shouted at Áehd, barring Hans' throat with his forearm and pressing his pistol harder against the boy's head.

Áehd lifted his hands in surrender and watched the unfolding chaos.

"General, can you and Rowan swim?" Colum asked.

"Y-yes." Jossan blinked at him, then realized what he was about to do. "But Colum, the boys...."

"That's a big boat. It won't capsize so easily. Brace yourselves," Colum said, and a wave started rising in the distance.

No one was paying attention. Kharaph kept trampling the startled sailors, not giving them time to load their muskets, while Ainsworth tried to shout his men into order.

Jossan made eye contact with Etar and pointed her chin towards the rising wave, which kept gaining momentum behind Ainsworth's boat. Etar looked behind, and his eyes went wide. By the shape of his mouth, Jossan could tell he was mouthing a 'fuck'—the first time she'd ever seen him say a curse word.

Ainsworth only noticed the wave when it was too close for him to do anything. It swept everything around. Jossan tumbled for the longest time underwater, helpless as a dry leaf in a whirlwind. Everyone else had scattered around when she could finally set her feet on solid ground.

Jossan located one of Ainsworth's sailors and ran to face him, sword in her right hand and dagger in the left. He tried to shoot her, but his musket kept clicking ineffectually.

"Is your toy drowned, asshole?" she shouted at the man.

The man dropped his soaked musket with a grunt and met her sword with his cutlass, the whistle of metal on metal rousing her into a battle rage.

“You’re dead. All of you are,” she spat out.

The man withdrew and slashed again. She countered easily, his reliance on brute force slowing him against her fluid parry. She opened his defense in two strikes. The third was from her left hand, her dagger sinking between his ribs.

She didn’t wait for the first man to fall. She whirled around and saw Rowan fighting another one close by. Row seemed to have trouble lifting his sword arm. The sailor was overpowering him, but she charged, stabbing the enemy seaman in the neck, then danced around him to take on the next one.

Together with Rowan, they killed five of the twelve men. Kharaph had trampled the rest. “I can’t see the boys, Row. Áehd. Colum. Where is everyone?” And worst of all, Ainsworth was nowhere to be seen.

“There,” Rowan said, turning uphill where the sand reed thickened. Ainsworth’s tender had turned on its side and it was leaning against a fishing hut, mostly in one piece. Some distance away from the boat, Áehd was tending to Colum, who seemed to have lost consciousness after his last-ditch effort with that freak wave.

Jossan ran uphill. “Áehd, is Colum all right?” she shouted as she ran.

Áehd nodded. “Only passed out,” he said, so Jossan ran straight to Ainsworth’s boat.

But Ainsworth emerged from behind it before she could go around the upended boat to search it. He had both Etar and Hans in front of him, pistol in hand. He looked battered, his perfect hair now a mess, and a trickle of blood ran down

the middle of his forehead, but he was alive and dry. The surf had most likely carried the boat up and beached it as the water retreated.

“I’ve had enough of this fucking shithole. Stand down. All of you, or I’ll pop this brat’s head open,” Ainsworth said, threatening Hans with his gun while pushing Etar forward with his free hand. Etar looked like a spooked rabbit trying to find an escape route. Hans wheezed loudly as he limped ahead.

“That gun of yours probably drowned like the rest,” Jossan said, defying Ainsworth.

Ainsworth laughed from the bottom of his chest and shoved the gun barrel hard against Hans’ temple. “Do you want to find out?”

Jossan immediately dropped her sword and dagger to the ground and looked back at Rowan to do the same.

“And you, little shit, don’t even think of running,” Ainsworth hissed at Etar, nervously scanning the beach. “Now, all of you, go down to the piers again. My captains will send reinforcements any moment, and I won’t hesitate to order you slaughtered if you so much as look at me wrong. The Gods know you’ve pissed me off enough to last me a lifetime.”

Jossan wanted to tackle this man and bite his nose off, but the boys’ helpless and wounded faces tempered her. Ainsworth didn’t simply look pissed—he was on the verge of a breakdown.

Áehd had no option but to leave Colum lying on the ground before joining them to follow Ainsworth’s orders.

“What do we do now?” Jossan whispered once they turned their backs to Ainsworth.

“Wait. Watch,” Áehd said, and to Jossan’s dismay, she heard doubt in the alchemist’s voice.



Chapter 47

Etar's anger and frustration ticked up with every passing second. All this power inside him, and he could not use it to protect the people he loved. Master Colum's wave had helped, and for a moment Etar thought it would turn matters to their favor, but Ainsworth was either too capable a sailor or blessed by the Gods because he'd somehow held onto both him and Hans and still managed not to fall overboard as his boat was dragged up the beach.

Now everyone had their hands tied because Ainsworth had his gun firmly pointed against Hans' head, and their lives dangled from the flimsy thread of Ainsworth's mercy.

In the water, more boats were lowering from the anchored ships. It was just a matter of time before Ainsworth started killing everyone. Etar still had one trick up his sleeve which Ainsworth hadn't figured out, but he depended on Áehd understanding his cues for it to work.

"Hans, are you all right?" Etar asked, noticing Hans leaning forward where he stood. No wonder. He'd lost so much blood.

“I can manage,” Hans said, his usually beaming smile now a tired twist of his mouth. It was a blatant lie, but what else would he say? No one could do anything to help him.

Etar leaned his forehead against Hans’ shoulder. It was the only comfort he could offer, but Hans didn’t dare move an inch away from Ainsworth’s gun. The only thing that gave him a bit of wicked joy was that Howlitz, who had mistreated Hans so much, had apparently washed overboard and was now lost to the sea.

A quiet tension permeated the air. Jossan looked at Ainsworth like a tiger ready to pounce, every muscle in her body coiled in anticipation. Rowan, whom Etar recognized as her right-hand man, stood with her, barely moving, and Master Áehd kept his eyes on the pistol pressed against Hans’ head.

Ainsworth was a caged beast, glancing anxiously between his prisoners and his ships, his pistol hand trembling.

Etar turned his eyes to Áehd, who eventually returned the look with narrowed eyes. When Ainsworth was not looking, Etar turned his back partially towards Áehd and slumped his shoulders forward, hoping Áehd would see the bump on his back where the spider hid.

Áehd pivoted his attention back to Ainsworth. “Matthew,” he said, discreetly putting his hands behind his back. “I know they charged you with retrieving Etar, but Hans is of no use to you. Take me instead.”

Ainsworth scowled. “Don’t ever call me Matthew again. *Ever*. And it’s not like you can choose whether you’re coming with me. Wilfred will have pins pushed into your eyeballs for your treason, and I’ll be glad to be the one putting them in.”

Áehd smiled. “Still running errands for Wilfred? How many small countries have you conquered for him in your

years of service? You are descended from a duke almost as rich as the Crown itself, the most experienced seaman I have ever met, and yet your king does not show you even a shred of respect.”

“Shut up!” Ainsworth barked.

Hans scrunched his eyes shut. His breathing had become one panicked gasp after the other.

Áehd pressed on. “That scar on your face. Was that not the ultimate act of humiliation? I heard it was Wilfred who took the knife and cut you to remind you of your mistakes. But you did not know his daughter was on that barge with Fahlk, did you? People were so flustered with Fahlk’s escape that no one noticed she and her son missing until it was too late. You never meant to kill her.”

There was a flash of pain in Ainsworth’s face. “She deserved it if you ask me,” he said, dark and low. “Stupid girl. She would have lived like a queen with me, but she chose the ratty magician instead.”

Etar struggled not to react to these hateful words, but the spider was working diligently behind his neck. He couldn’t risk disrupting it, and Master Áehd was doing a great job keeping Ainsworth distracted.

“Still, it was not what you wanted,” Áehd said. “I may not have any love for you, but for the lives of my friends, I would serve you, especially if I can aid you in destroying Wilfred. The only reason you still serve him is that the ships are his, and in lieu of a wife, they are the ones you have devoted your life to. Is that not so?”

Ainsworth laughed, ragged and a touch shrill. “You won’t get out of this with your sentimental speech, you traitorous bastard. Your stupid Starseer already offered his generous

help.” He spat on the sand. “You’d both stab me if you had the chance.”

There was a series of tiny clicks behind Etar’s neck, but he wasn’t yet free. Áehd lifted a hand slowly, perhaps to gain more control of the spider, but Ainsworth misinterpreted the movement as a threat.

“Don’t you fucking dare,” Ainsworth said, his face twisted in panic. He yanked Hans by the collar of his shirt, then pushed him towards Áehd. Hans staggered, struggling not to lose his balance. Áehd was ready to catch him, but Ainsworth pointed his pistol at Hans with the steadiness of a practiced murderer, and a plume of blue smoke followed the loud crack of the shot.

The acrid smell of gunpowder stabbed Etar’s nose before his brain registered what was happening. Blood bloomed over the back of Hans’ white shirt. Hans dropped to his knees and fell face-first with a wet thud on the sand. He didn’t scream or complain. He only drew breath in a high-pitched gasp, then moved no more.

Etar heard several gasps and a choked whimper, but his world revolved around Hans’ unmoving body.

The spider did a last turn of a leg in the lock, and the metal ring trapping Etar’s magic fell to his feet. Áehd sank to his knees beside Hans, pressing his hands against the sputtering wound.

All this while—which couldn’t have been more than a few seconds—Ainsworth had been trying to reload his pistol with unsteady hands, but he looked up and dropped his round and gunpowder when he heard the ring fall, and his cruel blue eyes slowly filled with fear.

Etar screamed his pain to the sky.

The clouds above danced in circles until a shaft opened to the burning white noon, and with the blinding sunlight bathing his head, a trance deep and relentless swept Etar's mind under the wild currents of the sea.

A clarity he'd never known before opened his mind to his surroundings. He was not entirely in his body, and he could touch with his senses everything that his magic could reach.

He saw Ainsworth in front of him, his hands still shaking to reload his pistol, but Etar blew him against the side of a fishing hut like a dead animal. It was nothing to him. Ainsworth had lost all his aura of danger in Etar's eyes. He was about to roll the murderer into the water and drown him when the dull pops of cannons distantly caught his attention. He turned to the sea and saw cannon balls arcing towards the piers, some landing and rolling over the beach, crushing fishing huts and beached rowboats in their path.

Ainsworth had hit his head and seemed too dazed to stand. He could wait.

Etar turned his will towards the attacking ships, and at his bidding, water withdrew from the coast and rose like a rampant stallion.

Etar lifted the Queen's Obsidian Blade on a rolling wave, tall as a crag, then flattened the water from underneath it. A dormant part of him cringed at the tortuous sound of bent metal when the frigate slammed the surface of the water, but he was too far gone, his feelings tightly wrapped in cold purpose. The image of the ship cracking in two meant nothing to him.

The wills of the Gleasaman magicians on the ships struggled against his own, trying to wrest control of the waves and the winds away from him, but they were so puny. He bent them into submission without breaking a sweat, felt them

buckle and yield, and in his mind's eye, he saw them bleeding from their noses with the effort. But no cruelty infected the sterile void of his mind. There was no joy or concern behind his actions. Just a blind, unfeeling need to destroy.

The gaping maws of his magic expanded around him. Rising winds and raging waters made almost every vessel nearby capsize under their force, threatening to swallow every piece of the cruel iron machinery Ainsworth had brought with him.

Perhaps in a desperate attempt to stop the destruction, the last ship still afloat took another shot toward the beach. This grim slice of time was what the stars had shown him—the gray skies of a storm that wasn't really a storm, but his own volatile magic blowing the waters into wanton wrath. The cannonball flew in his direction with such fortuitous precision that Etar now knew the stars had been warning him of his own death.

But the black iron round would never land.

Etar twisted the winds around the cannonball with such force that it swirled on its axis, suspended in the air like a weightless bauble. And when he let it go, the cannonball plunked blandly into the waters below.

With the same sudden impetus Etar's magic had extended its beating wings, it closed in again, compressing around its core. And unfortunately for Ainsworth, he was still within its constricting radius, trying uselessly to stand up and escape.

Etar took a step towards his enemy. Ainsworth tried to grovel away while Etar made ready to cast a gale at him so strong that it would surely embed him into the thick boards of the nearest fishing hut. Would Ainsworth's head crack like

a melon? Would it sound more like a ripe mango splattering on the floor from the highest branch of its tree?

“Etar, don’t!” Jossan said. Etar knew she was nearby somewhere, but she could have been a million miles away for all he cared.

“He killed Hans,” Etar said in a breathless, furious whisper, not looking at anyone but Ainsworth. He created a bubble of air around himself. No one would touch him. No one could stop him.

“Ainsworth is defeated, sweetheart. Please let him go. You’re not a murderer,” she pleaded.

He still had his hands tied behind his back, but he hooked his fingers all the same. It had no effect on his magic, but it felt right, like he was squeezing Ainsworth’s throat in his fingers.

But when the pressure he’d been gathering was ready to burst forward, his right eye started burning like it would melt out of its socket. He tried to ignore it, but the pain grew larger within his skull until pain was all he could feel. He saw red, literally, and his magic faltered.

Someone grabbed him from behind, and he heard Jossan’s voice saying “Please” right in his ear. She squeezed him against her chest, and he was no longer strong enough to fight out of her arms.

Etar got a last glimpse of Ainsworth, now face down on the sand. His body failed like a puppet cut from its strings. He collapsed in Jossan’s arms, and the world grew narrow and dim.



Chapter 48

“Row, help me!” Jossan shouted despite Rowan being only a few steps away and already hurrying to her aid. She was holding Etar from behind, and when he went limp, she could feel him slipping out of her sweaty, briny grasp.

Rowan lifted Etar in his arms with ease and placed him gently on the ground. It was not lost on Jossan how careful Rowan was or how delicately he brushed the hair out of Etar’s forehead. But that little drop of tenderness did little to relieve the gashing wound in her heart. How would Etar feel when he woke up and Hans was still gone?

Jossan cut through the ropes around Etar’s wrists and felt for a pulse. His skin was a notch too warm, and the vein pressed under her fingers throbbed rather slowly, but he was breathing regularly. He was alive and apparently unharmed.

While she straightened back up, bone-weary and ready to let this cursed day end, movement caught her eye. Ainsworth was trying to get up.

“Look over Etar,” she said to Rowan.

She stood over Ainsworth and regarded him coolly, rejoicing in his groveling figure. She kicked him in the shoul-

der to force him on his back, straddled him, and started punching his nose with her bare fists.

As the first hit landed, unchecked rage tore through her. “You damned animal,” she hissed through her bared teeth, her blows becoming increasingly vicious.

Ainsworth still lay dazed from Etar’s attack, but he grabbed her by the collar of her uniform, and his grip was still surprisingly firm. She grunted and savagely elbowed his arm away. Jossan’s next punch to his mouth made his eyes flutter and roll back.

“Fucking peasants,” he mumbled, blood-tainted spit-
tle spraying out of his mouth, then he started coughing and gasping for air.

She couldn’t stop. Her right shoulder felt like it was about to come unhinged from its socket, her knuckles hurt like she was hitting a brick wall, but she was not ready to stop, and in her ire, she wasn’t sure why her bloody fist suddenly halted mid-strike.

“Hey. Hey. You’re hurting yourself,” Rowan said, his hand tightly wrapped around her wrist.

Jossan snarled and struggled to get free of him, but he pulled her up by the forearm in one swing. She tried to push him away, and he grabbed her other wrist before she could jab at him.

“Let me kill him!” she shouted. “Do you know how fuck-
ing devastated Etar will be that his first real friend is gone?”

“And mashing Ainsworth’s face in will magically fix things? Will it heal the kid’s heart?” Rowan yelled back. “Ar-
en’t you the one who’s always insisting we’re not murderers?”

She struggled, grunted, bent her knees and planted her heels to get out of his grip until Rowan’s face was red and sweaty with the effort of keeping her in place. But he didn’t

let go. She didn't like the sound of her own furious sobs, but they were the truest thing she had ever felt.

Rowan forced her towards himself until his face was so close they could have kissed. They panted angrily at each other instead. "You didn't let the kid kill him. I'm not letting you."

"General," Áehd said faintly from somewhere behind her.

Their bodies unclenched. When she turned around, Áehd was struggling with something while leaning over Hans' body. Rowan finally let her go.

"Tie this pig up," she ordered, but she didn't stay to see if Rowan would comply.

Áehd was trying desperately to undo the knots tying Hans' wrists together, but the ropes looked impossibly tight.

"Allow me, please," she said, touching Áehd's shoulder. Áehd's futile urgency to untie Hans twisted her heart in a knot, but she didn't think any magic could bring Hans back from a shot at point-blank range with that fat cannon Ainsworth had been packing.

Jossan found an abandoned sword lying nearby and slipped it between the ropes. They fell away without resistance. She turned Hans gently on his back and looked at his pale face. "We should clean him up and carry him home," she whispered, her anger morphing into pain. Such a beautiful life, discarded like driftwood on the shore.

"Clean him up?" Áehd said, his tone strangely terse. "General, he is not dead. Cut his shirt open. I need access to his wound."

Jossan gave another good look at Hans. She could not see any signs of him breathing, but she wasn't about to question the alchemist. She sat behind Hans' head, cradled it in her lap, and slashed his shirt open.

The pistol round had gone right through. There was a fleshy wound on Hans' chest, just below the collarbone, mirroring the one on his back.

Áehd inserted his forefinger deep into the wound, and the gems on his rings started glowing like a slow-beating heart.

The alchemist's body sagged as he applied his mysterious magic to Hans. It was obvious by his waxy pallor that this was an even greater effort than what he had done to Ainsworth's ships, but he still touched Hans' face with infinite tenderness. "Wake, dear child. Please wake," he said privately, his voice hoarse with exhaustion, his hair spilling forward and matting in tendrils over his sweaty face.

For a minute, Jossan thought of telling Áehd it was no use. But she didn't want to accept it either, so she kept running her fingers through Hans' hair, praying in her head for a sign of life.

"Maybe you shouldn't—" Colum's voice came from behind Jossan.

Jossan looked over her shoulder. Etar had regained consciousness and was struggling to get up. Colum and Rowan were trying to coax him to lie back down.

"Let me go," Etar rasped, weakly swatting their hands away.

Rowan shared a concerned look with Jossan, but in the end he helped Etar wobble his way to where Hans was lying.

Etar fell to his knees between Jossan and Áehd. He put a trembling hand on Hans' chest and Jossan could see the enormous effort he was making not to cry. "Is he...?" he asked.

Áehd shook his head. "Not yet."

Etar looked at the alchemist with big, glassy eyes. "Can you save him?" he asked, his voice a thin wisp.

"I—"

Etar gripped Áehd's wrist without warning. The alchemist gave a soft, sharp gasp, and suddenly his pupils dilated.

"What are you doing?" Jossan asked, but neither Áehd nor Etar seemed able or willing to talk. Their eyes remained locked on each other, and their silent exchange went on for a long time without either of them moving.

Maybe it was her imagination, but Jossan thought she felt Hans' skin getting warmer, then Etar crumpled where he sat. Fortunately, Rowan was still nearby and took him back to the shade of one of the fishing huts again.

Jossan was so entranced with the surreal scene that she whimpered when Hans suddenly sucked air through his teeth. Áehd let out a languishing sigh, but he didn't pull his finger out of Hans' wound, not even when Hans started moaning and writhing.

"Hold him still, General," Áehd said.

Jossan pressed Hans' shoulders down carefully but firmly.

Seconds dragged on. Hans took another labored breath in, and another, then his eyes fluttered open.

"Hey there," Jossan said, smiling down at him, a fat tear spilling down her nose, but Hans barely reacted.

Hans' eyes searched blindly for a moment before fixing on the alchemist's face. He gingerly touched the blood pooled on his chest and grimaced, then lifted his trembling hand towards Áehd's face. "Old man—" he croaked. A pause for air. "You're crying," he said, and one of his bloody fingers traced a downward course over the alchemist's cheek. "Don't, please...."

Jossan examined Áehd's face. The streaks of blood Hans had left on him were soon cut through with tears.

"Child of my heart," Áehd said in a thin voice. He wiped his cheek with the back of his free hand, and slowly, as Hans

started showing more signs of alertness, he withdrew his finger from the wound.

Hans cried out in pain, but he sounded like he was breathing with less effort.

Áehd sat back on the sand, his body swaying, threatening to give in. “I need help, General.”

“Anything,” Jossan said.

“We must get him to the tower. He’s not out of danger yet.”

Jossan looked around. There were over fifteen miles between this coast and the portal. Carrying Hans through that distance, who by Jossan’s estimate was close to Rowan’s weight, would be nigh on impossible. But she had an idea. “Áehd, where is Kharaph? I haven’t seen him since the wave, but maybe...”

Áehd sighed, and she wasn’t certain if it was exhaustion, frustration, or relief. “He likes to wander off,” he said, bringing two fingers to his mouth. A loud, musical whistle issued from his lips, and they both looked anxiously around before Áehd repeated his call.

Jossan then shouted for Rowan’s attention.

Rowan came to kneel next to them. He looked at Hans with a raised eyebrow. “This boy is made of steel. How is he still breathing?”

“I am afraid he is barely managing,” Áehd said. “But there is not a lot I can do out here. He needs suturing and pain relief, and I need my magical instruments.”

Hans opened his eyes again and grabbed Áehd’s sleeve with a shaking hand. “I can ride.”

Áehd gave him a stern look. “No, you cannot. You must stop acting as though you are indestructible. This was foolish from both of you, and—”

“I’m scared,” Hans said. “I don’t want to die.”

Áehd's face slackened and drained of color. He took Hans' hand with both of his and kissed it. "There is nothing I would not sacrifice for you. Forgive me for not protecting you, but I will give every bit of my vital energy to keep you alive."

Hans nodded weakly. His eyes kept rolling back, perhaps in and out of consciousness.

A moment later, Kharaph's shimmering figure emerged from beyond the slope that crowned the beach. He closed in swiftly, soaked through, wounded in the shoulder, and wearing seaweed as decoration on his saddle, but he enthusiastically nuzzled Hans' face as soon as he was close enough. Hans could only smile in response. He looked like he was growing weaker again.

"Row, let's build a stretcher and tie it to Kharaph," Jossan said. "There has to be some canvas and rows on Ainsworth's tender."

"I'll do it. You help the alchemist," Rowan said.

"Before you go, I need your shirt," Áehd said to Rowan.

Rowan seemed perplexed, but he removed his uniform coat and surrendered his undershirt to Áehd.

Jossan helped Hans sit up while Áehd twisted the shirt around Hans' torso in such a clever way that it served to immobilize his arm and put pressure on both sides of his wound. When done wrapping Hans, Áehd held him in his arms, waiting for Rowan to bring the stretcher.

"I am sorry I never let you call me Dad," he whispered against Hans' temple.

Hans somehow managed to chuckle. "Who cares? You're my old man," he said weakly. "Isn't it the same?"

Kharaph stood guard over them, anxiously stomping and swinging his head, urging them to get moving.

It didn't take long for Rowan to return with a makeshift stretcher, and together they loaded Hans into it. They attached one end to Kharaph's saddle so the horse could drag it behind him. It wouldn't be a comfortable ride, but it would be faster than anything else.

Áehd mounted on Kharaph with difficulty. He hadn't complained all this while, but as he shakily pulled himself up on the saddle, Jossan noticed the strain and the pallor on his face.

"Ride safe, Áehd. We'll follow in a moment," Jossan said.

Áehd barely nodded. "If you remember where the portal is, just stand by it and I'll let you in," he said.

"How will you know?"

He gave her an exasperated look. "Keep Etar safe and bring him home as soon as you can," he said and rode away. Kharaph was slowed by his burden but not at all deterred.

Jossan watched them go, still not knowing what to feel.

Colum came up to her and squeezed her shoulder. "Try to find horses. I'll take care of Etar and watch our prisoner."

Rowan gave a disgusted glance in Ainsworth's direction and nodded. Ainsworth was passed out cold, hogtied, and his once attractive face would never be the same after Jossan's beating. That, at least, was a satisfying end.

Jossan sighed. "Do you think Hans will live?" she asked, watching the deserted slope of the beach.

"He has to," Rowan said, squeezing her sideways against himself. "That kid of yours just busted seven warships in his name—it would be incredibly rude for him to die just like that."

Despite everything, Jossan smiled. This wasn't over, not by a long shot. Etar had single-handedly rid the archipelago of King Wilfred's most menacing flotilla, but they were not

the only warships in the king's possession, and news of this destruction would eventually travel back to the continent.

Another more immediate concern was recapturing every surviving enemy sailor that washed ashore and letting the people of Skalland know that, at least for now, they could return to their homes. Building a more robust defense, reimagining the broken structure of the Skallander government, repairing damaged buildings that could still be salvaged—those were worries she'd have to face at some point, but they were all things better left for tomorrow. For now, she just wanted to rejoice that Etar had come out of it alive and relatively unscathed.

“Let's go, Row,” she said. “Let's take our kid home.”



Chapter 49

Jossan itched to get out of her sticky uniform. Out of the sun. Out of her damned skin. But more than anything, she wanted to see Etar healing from these bruising few days, so she and Rowan packed him on a horse, and she was immensely thankful that Colum, despite his own efforts, was still willing to stay behind and take charge of things.

Jossan was afraid she wouldn't remember where the portal stood, but the memory returned to her once she saw a dead tree standing at the top of a bare hill. And as Áehd had promised, he knew when they were at the portal. It didn't take him long to come and let them in.

Seeing it all for the first time, Rowan gawked at every detail: the portal, the tower's glass skylight, the blue stone walls specked with their spiral of golden lights. Jossan still loved the place, but the events of the day stuck to her soul like drying blood, and the only thing that would make her happy at this point was hearing Etar and Hans laugh again.

Etar remained unconscious. Áehd told them to take him to his room and let him rest, but he didn't bother saying what else he expected of them. He just mumbled some-

thing about going back to work and disappeared into his own room, where he apparently was taking care of Hans. He looked wretched and spent, his face and clothes still painted with dried blood, and Jossan didn't dare ask how he'd carried Hans all the way up there.

Áehd disappeared for the rest of the day without giving them any news on Hans' state. The next morning, after having collapsed for hours in the first room they found unoccupied, Jossan and Rowan stood at the door of the alchemist's kitchen, trying to figure out how to feed themselves and Áehd—who, by Jossan's reckoning, had eaten nothing since yesterday.

But it didn't take them long to realize this was uncharted territory.

"Row, when was the last time you cooked something?" she asked.

"Uh, I roasted a hare a couple weeks back..."

"On a stove? In an oven?"

Row raised an eyebrow at her. "Open fire, outdoors. Do you know how to operate a stove?"

She half sighed, half laughed. "Well, there's an apple tree out there..." she said. Apples. When was the last time she'd tasted a fresh one?

Rowan gave the tree a pensive look. If he was anything like her—and she knew he was—he needed a big bloody lamb steak and potatoes after a full day of fighting the enemy on an empty stomach. He walked up to the stove, examined its surface, opened the door on its front, then let out a defeated sigh. "Yup. The apple tree it is."

Jossan walked into the quaint little vegetable patch outside, which someone—presumably Hans—kept in obsessive order. And when she looked into the distance, it sud-

denly struck her that the landscape around the vegetable garden was alien to her eyes, with rolling hills and a green prairie sprawling beyond. She had so many questions about this tower.

Rowan followed her outside, squinting at the sunlight. “I remember your mamma was an excellent cook. Didn’t you learn anything?”

Jossan laughed. “Row, I scrubbed pots and peeled potatoes for her. She knew I was a lost cause. Never let me touch anything.”

“Sounds like we’ll starve when we marry,” he teased, giving her a cheeky little smile.

She almost choked and tried to act nonchalant about it, but she wasn’t sure if Rowan was joking. Her heart pumped embarrassingly fast. “You can always ask Hans to teach you,” she said, cutting a couple apples down and throwing them at him more forcefully than necessary.

“What makes you think I’d be a better cook than you? You’re the smart one. I respect your leadership,” he said.

She snorted. “Because I don’t believe anyone in this world or the next could be a worse cook than me. Believe me, I’ve tried.”

Rowan laughed. “Ah. Well, when you put it that way....”

But before anyone could learn cooking skills from Hans, they needed to do whatever they could to help the alchemist. They peeled and cut a few apples and took them upstairs to his room. They found Áehd bent over Hans, using a different fork than the one he’d used at the port—a smaller one—and still looking like he would keel over any minute. It was still horrifying to see Hans’ wound, even if it was sutured and clean now.

Áehd barely looked at them or the apples. “Thank you, General,” he said listlessly.

“How is he doing?” Jossan asked.

Áehd exhaled, letting his shoulders fall. “I hope his strength and youth will aid him, but making promises at this point is difficult.”

Jossan nodded. She and Rowan watched over Áehd’s shoulder for a moment, but eventually he looked at them with an annoyed smirk.

“I am afraid this process is not exciting enough to warrant an audience,” he said.

They took the hint.

They closed the door behind them and sat on the steps outside, silently contemplating their surroundings. The sun had not yet climbed high enough to fall directly through the web of the skylight above, and mellow lamplight still bathed the tower from crown to bottom. These lamps, Jossan had noticed, intensified or reduced their glow as the day rose or lost its luster.

“How do you figure these lamps work?” Rowan asked, looking at the wall lamp directly above his head.

Jossan shrugged. “Magic?”

He snorted. “Right. But I mean....”

She patted his shoulder. “Row, I don’t know about you, but my head hurts when I try to find explanations for everything we’ve seen recently. I’m not sure understanding how these lights work will enrich our lives.”

“Fair point,” he said, but he kept looking at the lamp. After a moment, he added, “Good thing you don’t seem interested in intellectual types. That alchemist would give me a run for my money.”

Jossan cackled in a very unladylike fashion. “He’s too pretty for my taste. I like ‘em rough.” She bumped his shoulder with hers and they laughed together, then allowed the silence to return. Jossan was glad they had known each other long enough that they didn’t need to force blabber to fill their interludes.

She examined the side of Rowan’s face—the sharp-cut cheekbones, the strong nose, the squared jaw—until he felt unsettled enough to return the look.

“What?” he asked.

She smiled. “You *are* good-looking. No one can change my mind.” She wasn’t the flirtatious sort, and she couldn’t help color rising to her cheeks. What she didn’t expect was Rowan’s face flushing as well. Jossan didn’t think she’d ever seen him blush.

“Ah, I never knew your eyes were faulty,” he said.

She brushed his jaw with a finger, enjoying every bit of the coarse stubble growing there. “I’m serious.”

He hung his head and smiled—a smile that made the corners of his eyes wrinkle but also made him look younger. “Well, you’re gorgeous, but I’m pretty sure you knew that.”

Did she? She never thought of herself in such terms. Her heart picked up its pace. “Row, I cut my hair like a man, dress in these ungainly uniforms that flatten every part of my body, and my hands are as soft as sandstone. I don’t think I’ve ever heard a man call me gorgeous.”

He gave her a sideways glance. “Because the ones you know respect you too much... and maybe a bit because I would have beaten the crap out of them if they went around flirting with their commanding officer.”

She laughed. “I would have knocked their teeth in myself, and they know it.”

He moved his knee out to touch hers. “I know, but I guess they were also trying to respect my feelings.”

“Come on. What are you talking about?” she asked, slapping his shoulder playfully.

He laughed, but he sounded mortified. “I’ve been in love with you for a very long time. Long before I asked you to marry me. They figured it out.”

Her heart jolted. In love? Jossan wasn’t even sure Rowan wasn’t being practical about their marriage, that his reasoning didn’t have more to do with keeping each other company than it actually being something romantic. “Row, you jerk, stop it. I mean, you never told me you liked me that way, not even when you proposed. How—”

“It was inappropriate. You were only nineteen when I realized it, and I didn’t want you to think I was teaching you how to handle a sword because I wanted sex. I helped you because you had such a big spirit, and it made me furious that the old general and Theo refused for so long to allow a woman officially into the military. If I’d acted on my feelings, the older guys would have drowned you in gossip and ruined your career.”

Jossan had never heard him string so many words together. She gawked at him until he averted his eyes again.

Rowan shrugged. “I’m sorry. I should never have asked you to marry me. It cheapened the admiration I always felt for you.”

“Row...” she said, but whatever else she wanted to say stuck in her throat.

Words wouldn’t suffice now, anyway. She grabbed his face, and she wasn’t all too gentle when she dug her fingers into his cheeks and commanded him to look her in the eye. Neither was she shy when she pulled him into a greedy kiss.

His lips were much sweeter than she'd expected. A man as strong as this one, tough as the sea-battered reefs, had no right being this gentle. It was she who infused hunger into every breath.

Row melted between her hands. He sounded conquered whenever he moaned, and had they been standing, she would have slammed him against a wall just to show him how much she wanted him. She bit his lip. He put his big hands around her waist and pulled her closer. How long had they both been bottling this up?

It was only breathlessness that made them come apart. She pressed her forehead against his and laughed. "We could have started with this long ago if you'd just been clearer," she said.

Rowan hummed. "I thought you were too good for me."

She laughed out loud and put her arms around his neck, undecided between a hug and a chokehold. "Don't be ridiculous."

The click and whirring of an opening door behind them made them flinch apart. Jossan looked over her shoulder to find Etar standing there, face drawn and pale, looking like he'd just woken from a nightmare.



Chapter 50

When Etar woke in his room at the tower, he thought for a moment time had reset itself to the day he first came here. Except that day, he hadn't felt like a building had collapsed on top of his head. And that day, he'd still had two working eyes.

He couldn't even be sure what day it was. He only surmised it was daytime because of the bright and diffuse sunshine coming into the room, but even the cheery light couldn't warm his heart. Everything that had happened—that he'd done—came to him in a flurry of horrifying pictures he could not stand to examine closely. He panicked, his breath hitching, then dread sank in when he remembered the most harrowing image the encounter against the Gleasaman had left him with—Hans lying face down on the sand, lifeless and bloody.

He scrambled out of bed, tripping with his tangled bed sheets, almost falling face-first to the floor. His eye was completely dead, as though its light had been snuffed out. It didn't hurt anymore, but it felt like having a void embedded in his face.

He barely had enough presence of mind to pull some trousers on his legs before rushing outside, and his mind didn't quite register what he was seeing. Jossan had her arms around Rowan, and he had her by the waist.

But when Jossan saw him, she pulled away from Rowan and hurried upstairs.

"Etar," she said, choking up.

They hadn't really talked since Áehd's story about Etar's parents. A different pain rose to his chest when he remembered all the hurtful things that night had revealed, but he didn't have the strength or the will to push Jossan away. He was still confused about his feelings, but when she put her arms around him, he realized he could not bear the weight of his problems alone.

"Hans—" he said in a broken whisper, hiding his face against her shoulder.

"Oh... Oh, Gods, you don't know," Jossan said, separating from him and putting her hands on his face.

Know? That Ainsworth had shot the first person Etar could call a true friend? The one who made him smile like a silly little boy? Of course he knew. He wanted to break something or punch someone, but he had no strength left.

Jossan went wide-eyed when she saw him tearing up. "Oh, honey, no, that's not what I meant! He's alive. Not out of danger yet, but Áehd is caring for him."

He cried at last, his face buried in his shaking hands. He felt Jossan crushing him against her chest, snotty nose and all. Could he be any more of a mess?

"You should go see him," Jossan said. "He's in Áehd's room."

It took Etar a while to break away from his confused pain, but he sucked all his tears in before entering Master Áehd's room.

Hans was lying in bed with his eyes closed and his lips parted. Unconscious. Etar's throat clenched.

Master Áehd was sitting by the bed, his face half obscured by his hair. His back sagged as if an enormous weight rested on his shoulders. Etar found a chair and quietly sat next to him. He gritted his teeth as he approached and saw the raw wound on Hans' chest. He had to bite the inside of his cheek hard for the memory of what had caused that wound not to drown his mind.

"Etar," Master Áehd said.

"Can I help you?" Etar said, trying not to look at Hans.

Áehd smiled grimly. "Your company is all the help I need."

Etar doubted that, but he didn't object. He observed Áehd's work in silence for a while. It was evident in the way Áehd struggled to keep his eyes open that he was at the end of his strength. "Master, let me give you some of my energy. Even with the diamonds you—"

Áehd frowned. "Hans told you?" But he didn't let Etar answer. "It matters not. It would be immoral for me to suck your magic out like that again." He pushed his hair behind his ear, only for the same lock to fall in front of his eyes again.

"Now I understand why Hans gets so frustrated with you. You're so stubborn."

"He cares for me more than I deserve," Áehd said.

Etar had a sharp retort ready at the tip of his tongue, but he bit it back and turned his attention to Áehd's work again. Such peculiar magic he practiced. He was hitting a

tuning fork with a tiny rawhide mallet, then applying it to Hans' wound.

"Why a tuning fork?" Etar asked.

"The sound carries magic, and magic is slowly regenerating his damaged tissue."

Etar didn't know how any of that was possible, but it sounded fascinating. He wanted to ask a million questions, but he was not here for a magical sciences lesson. What Áehd was doing was obviously draining him. "Isn't what you're doing dangerous?"

"Without the diamonds in my heart, I would be dead by now."

Áehd was so infuriatingly casual about it, but if helping was an option, Etar would not sit on his hands. He put the tips of his fingers against the back of Áehd's neck, right over his spine. Áehd winced but didn't move away. Etar suspected he was so starved for energy that he simply couldn't refuse it.

The same tingling warmth he'd felt the first time he'd touched Áehd's hands took over his arm. Except, back then, it had been reciprocal. Now he felt the hungry, one-sided pull of the gems inside Áehd's heart. It was a sensation much like vertigo, gripping and hollow.

Áehd averted his eyes, but this was about getting Hans better, so Etar pressed his fingers a little firmer, pushing his magic out with a stronger intent. A healthier color returned to Áehd's cheeks in a matter of seconds.

"Have you ever encountered the concept of a vampire in your books, Starseer?"

Etar shook his head.

"Apologies. I sometimes forget where I learned some words," Áehd said. "Vampires are mythical creatures who lust for the blood of living things. It gives them power."

As a person who'd grown up regularly tasting his own blood thanks to his cousin's abuse, that sounded disgusting. "Do they die if they don't drink?"

"No, but they weaken and waste away."

That was definitely not a myth he'd ever heard, but he could see where this was going. "Ha. And you have a taste for blood? Can't picture it."

"Not blood, but what I am taking from you right now."

Etar huffed. "I am gifting this to you. And if you haven't noticed, I have a lot of it to offer." He glanced at Hans' vulnerable and battered body, strengthening his resolve. "Besides, this is not for you."

"I would never presume. I know which of us you like better."

Etar only knew by the half smile on Áehd's face that he was teasing him, but his cheeks still went hot. "That's—I'm not—I..."

Áehd chuckled. "Do not mind me. I am glad to be the vessel for your generous gift."

After only minutes of this energy transfer, Etar felt like his head was stuffed with cotton, but the sensation wasn't entirely unpleasant. The numbness allowed him to let go of some of his worries.

"Master?" Etar said after a while.

Áehd hummed.

"You're not a common alchemist, are you? I mean, it's not like I know many, but..."

"No, I would not say I am," he said. "Although I do not know whether that is a good thing."

"Why did you choose to study something you could never do yourself?" Etar asked. He wondered a little too late if the

question was rude, but something he really liked about Áehd was that he never balked at tough questions.

“Because I was an arrogant young man, and I was once told an alchemist could never truly understand magic, much less starseeing.” He sighed. “I took it as a challenge, but two hundred and thirty-two years later, I am still learning.”

Two hundred and thirty-two years. Hans had already implied Áehd had lived an unnaturally long time, but hearing this number from Áehd’s mouth was shocking. “I know how that feels, though.”

“What, dear child?”

“Being told you’re not good at something you love.”

For a moment, Etar thought Áehd’s eyes had gone a little glassy, but no tears came. “Aye. I suppose you know that all too well. I wish I could have sheltered you from all this pain, that you could have had your father’s freedom to experiment and invent.”

Etar also wished that with all his might, but he was still young. Even as grim as life had turned recently, everything felt like a new chapter. He just had to turn the page. “You loved my father, didn’t you? And it sounds like he loved you back.”

Áehd chased a long silence with a deep sigh. “I loved him. Wholeheartedly. I can only hope he at least found my company pleasant.”

Etar smiled. “I cannot deny I would have loved growing up with someone like you. But I’m only fifteen now. Isn’t this the age he was when you met him? There’s so much time ahead of us. I want to learn everything you have to teach me.”

“I would like us to build what we could not have before, if that is what you want.”

An unintended flow of warmth rushed out of Etar's fingers, and he could tell Áehd felt it because he closed his eyes for a moment.

"My uncle always said I ask too many questions," Etar said. "Are you ready for that?"

Áehd laughed softly. "Your uncle obviously never met seven-year-old Hans. I am not afraid."

"I just wish I could give you something in return for your kindness."

"Your beautiful existence is all I can ask for, dear Starseer. A man can take advantage of the sun's power, but he cannot expect the sun to give anything other than her presence."

Etar chuckled. "Can I tell Jossan that when she pesters me about how messy my room is?"

"At your own risk. I suspect the general is not as easily impressed as I am."

Hans suddenly stirred. All the pain and fear Etar held in his chest dissipated like mist in the sun. Hans groaned, struggling to open his eyes, but he finally looked at them in turns, and a lopsided smile brightened his face. Etar wanted to touch him, to run his fingers through his hair, just to let it sink in that Hans was alive and that his skin would feel warm against his palms if he reached out. He kept his hands fisted and pressed against his lap instead.

"Hey there," Hans said, his pretty smile widening. It made the pit of Etar's stomach tickle.

"Hey," Etar said, and he had to beg his heart not to let him break into tears as he spoke. "You didn't die."

"I didn't intend to," Hans said, cocky as his weakness allowed.

Áehd stood and stretched, and Etar heard his back pop in several places. Who knew how many hours he'd been sitting here.

"Where are you going?" Hans asked, lifting his head to look at Áehd.

"To sleep, before you scold me for not doing so," Áehd said.

Hans looked around. "But I'm in your bed."

"Then I will use yours," Áehd said.

"Old Man..."

Áehd shook his head. "There are many things I wish to say to you, but Etar woke up not knowing if you would survive, and I am sure he is eager to be with you. Besides, I am exhausted."

Hans sighed. "Come sit with me later, then."

"I will. If you are not asleep." Áehd made his way to the door, but he lingered there. "I love you, child. I hope you know that," he said, sliding out like a breeze before Hans could reply.

Hans snorted and shook his head. "He's unbelievable," he said, amused, as if Áehd's emotional skittishness was something he already took for granted. He struggled to a sitting position. Etar tried to help him, but Hans brushed him off. Once he had his back against the headboard, he patted the mattress next to him. "Come. Keep me company."

Etar removed his shoes and squeezed between Hans and the wall in the alchemist's small bed. They sat shoulder to shoulder, feet touching playfully.

"Don't ever do that to me again," Etar said.

"What?" Hans asked, raising an eyebrow at him.

"Getting shot. Almost dying. Making me worry so much, in general."

Hans laughed and grimaced, touching his injured shoulder. “Oh, sorry about getting almost-murdered. It sort of wasn’t planned.”

Etar turned around to sit on his heels, facing Hans. “I’m locking you in this tower forever with me, so you can’t do any more reckless stuff.”

“Huh? I wasn’t aware I was the one doing reckless stuff. Wasn’t it you who set out to fight seven warships alone? That you actually made it changes nothing.”

Etar smiled, but it had been an extremely close call, and he wasn’t sure he wouldn’t have to repeat some of the things he had done at the port. He had almost killed a man in cold blood and drowned many others. The thought still made him squirm. “More reason to stay here, don’t you think?” he asked softly, trying not to think too deeply of Hans bleeding in the sand.

Hans started playing with the collar of Etar’s shirt. “Doesn’t sound like a bad deal, as long as you’re locked in with me.”

Etar held his breath. There was something purposeful and deep in Hans’ eyes, and before Etar could decipher what it was, Hans was pulling him in slowly by the collar of his shirt.

Feeling wanted was so dizzyingly new that he could have thrown himself into it and never looked back, but it was disconcerting enough that he wanted to hide his head under a pillow.

When their mouths were only inches apart, Etar put his fingers to Hans’ lips and pulled away. “N–no. Stop.”

As if struck by a whip, Hans let go of Etar’s shirt and gave him an embarrassed look. “Sorry, I...”

That had been the wrong way to stop it. That look made Etar's heart hurt. "No, *I'm* sorry. It's not that I don't want to. I just—"

"You don't like boys?"

Etar groaned. Hans was making this ten times harder. "No. That's not—what I'm trying to say is, I know I like *you*, but...."

Hans' eyes filled with confusion. "But...?"

"It's not the right time," Etar said, stumbling with his words, desperate to fix the hurt in Hans' eyes. "Come on. We both smell like stale seaweed. You still look like you need several days straight of sleep, and my head is floating in the clouds. Besides, I had a vision when we were on Ainsworth's ship, and I need to do something back in Skalland."

"Wait, slow down—a vision? What about?" Hans asked.

"It's nothing dangerous, I swear, and I'll ask Jossan to come with me, but I need to see this through. Can you wait for me for a couple hours?"

Hans sighed. "Do I have a choice?"

Etar gave him an apologetic smile. "I'm afraid not."

He gave Hans a clumsy kiss on the cheek—which he knew was a poor consolation prize—then scrambled into his shoes and scurried away at an awkwardly fast pace.

He almost collided with Jossan and Rowan when he stepped outside. Jossan opened her mouth to say something, but Etar beat her to it.

"Jo, I need something."

"Huh. Someone's woken up a little bossy."

Etar rolled his eyes. "I'm serious. I need to find my uncle. Can you take me back to Skalland?"



Chapter 51

“Are you sure we couldn’t have brought Kharaph?” Etar asked, looping his arms tightly around Jossan’s waist. Master Áehd had many beautiful horses in his stable, but none were as intelligent as Kharaph. Riding double with Jossan on a different horse was Etar’s only option, but she rode like a haunted soul straight out of the Dark Pit when she was in a hurry.

“The poor thing dragged Hans all the way from the fishing port with Áehd on top and on an injured shoulder. He earned the right not to do anything for a while.”

“Just asking,” Etar said, tightening his grip around Jossan.

She huffed. “I don’t even understand why you want to do this.”

“I’ll explain when I don’t feel like I’m about to fall to my death.”

Jossan laughed and patted his hand.

The castle showed no apparent damage from the main entrance, but Etar knew it wouldn’t be so on the other side.

Jossan slowed down as she surrounded the castle to reach the north courtyard, and as soon as they cleared the

west wing, sunset assaulted Etar's one working eye. There were gaps like broken teeth on the outer bailey, letting glimpses of the sea through.

Etar looked up at the castle when they dismounted. The view from this side was heartbreaking. The facade looked like someone had demolished it with a giant club, exposing its beautiful, old bones. Torn wooden beams, broken rafters, gables scattered like scales off a fish's back. And stone. So much broken stone spilled across the yard, mixed with dismembered furniture and torn drapes.

The Dome, that beautiful room that had lived in Etar's dreams for so long, was cracked open like half an eggshell, gaping at the purple sky.

"We will rebuild it," Jossan said, squeezing his shoulder.

Etar wasn't sure that was possible. Were there even still any alchemists in the world who knew magic masonry? But perhaps Jossan was talking about the castle. Still, he didn't know if that was even worth trying.

The noise of rolling stones made him drag his eyes down from the Dome. Emerging from behind a torn wall was Uncle Theo. He looked so lost. His eyes were trained on the ground, and occasionally, he would lean down to lift stones and push them aside, but there seemed to be no purpose to his actions. He hadn't seen them yet.

"Can you give us a moment?" Etar asked Jossan.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. I had a vision of... never mind now. I need a moment with him."

Jossan looked at him like she was trying to discern his reasons. "I'll be just around the corner if you need me," she said, and she hesitated in her next move, but she put a hand behind his head and kissed his forehead. He still had a diffi-

cult conversation pending with her, but his uncle needed his help more urgently.

“Uncle?” Etar said as he approached, trying not to startle him.

Uncle Theo got startled anyway. “What are you doing here?”

Etar shrugged. “Jossan took me to Midtown. We looked for you for hours until someone told us they’d seen you heading this way.”

“Oh,” Uncle Theo said. A gust of salty breeze blew between them, underscoring their awkward silence.

Etar looked around until he found a stone bench and nodded at it. “Come. Sit with me.”

Uncle Theo followed him to the bench.

They kept stiffly apart from each other. Rain clouds were gathering above, occluding what was left of the daylight. He looked up at the sky and conjured his overflowing feelings of relief and joy at knowing his friends were out of danger. He swirled a hand at the clouds and they moved aside.

Uncle Theo looked up with wide eyes. “How did you do that?”

Etar looked down at his hands and shrugged. “Master Áehd said my dad could do all these things too. Did you know that?”

“Your dad,” Uncle Theo said, the corners of his mouth turning down. “No. I didn’t. But maybe I suspected something was different about him. He was always doing strange things.”

Uncle Theo’s voice brimmed with longing. Etar wanted to ask him everything he knew about his dad, but he didn’t dare. He still feared his uncle’s sourness.

His uncle unexpectedly chuckled. “How kind of you to come check on your good old uncle,” he said.

Even in this context, his uncle couldn't stop being sarcastic. Etar sighed. "I know you could have left me to die or given me away. I'm a bastard child, after all. Call me a fool, but I want to believe you don't really hate me."

"Who told you that? That you're a bastard, I mean," Theobald said, but before Etar could answer, he pinched the bridge of his nose, understanding dawning on his face. "Damn. This demonic alchemist of yours is the same Fahlk gushed so much about in his letters."

Etar nodded.

"But how is that possible? Shouldn't he be a middle-aged man by now? He looks like he could be one of my children."

Etar didn't feel like explaining the diamonds or anything else to his uncle. It wasn't like he entirely understood it himself. "I don't know, but my dad cared a lot about him."

Uncle Theo made a long pause. "You really think I hate you?"

Etar laughed humorlessly. "What else am I supposed to think?"

Uncle Theo shook his head. "Your existence was inconvenient to me, but hating you would be a little excessive."

"I don't know if being a pebble in your shoe is worse."

"Take it as you will." He swept a hand at the ruins of his castle. "I always expected this outcome with how your dad came back here, and he was selfish enough not to see it."

Etar's face flared hot. "He was imprisoned and tortured. He escaped to the only place he thought was safe."

Theobald locked his jaw, but his expression didn't look like anger. There was a glint in his eyes, more like suppressed tears. "I know."

"Then why—"

“Because no one can see how incredibly moronic what your father did was. How was he expecting Wilfred to react? I was only trying to look after him.”

“Oh, because you’ve always had such a big heart, right?” The words were unkind, Etar knew, and a part of him regretted them, but his resentment had been festering inside him for too long to keep it down now.

Uncle Theo’s expression twisted between anger and sorrow, and when he chuckled, he sounded more defeated than amused. “I told that halfwit brother of mine to give the princess some mugwort tea, forget about everything, and come back home. Everything would have worked out.”

Etar didn’t know what mugwort tea was for, but he could guess. “Then I wouldn’t have been your problem.”

“You’re not seeing my point,” Uncle Theo said, his old exasperation resurfacing. “I should have treated you like a son, yes, but I never really liked children, and you came with the added burden of your dad’s grudge with Wilfred.”

“But if you didn’t want me, why did you fight so hard to keep me locked in?”

His uncle let a pained sigh out. “I was protecting you. I know I was a terrible guardian, but I don’t care if you believe it. I loved my brother, no matter how stupid he could be. I would have *never* tossed you out.”

Etar’s heart drummed uncomfortably against his ribs. Everything he had ever believed about his uncle started crumbling down. He hadn’t dared tell Jossan, and he didn’t want to tell his uncle either, but the vision that had brought him here was of his uncle hanging himself. It was in the distant future because his uncle looked much older than now, but despite their broken relationship, that was not how he wanted Uncle Theo to end.

“Uncle, are you trying to say you—”

“Kid, please, don’t get sentimental,” his uncle said with a little laugh. “It’s hard enough to admit I should have done better.”

Etar smiled. “Wish I could refute that. No offense.”

His uncle laughed. “To my credit, I kept you hidden from Wilfred this long. Your alchemist friend and the general are not the heroes they think they are.”

Etar wanted to shake his uncle for hiding the truth, but even so, he felt liberated. Maybe he would never fully understand his uncle’s behavior, but now Etar could see his side of things much better, and that made all the difference in the world. Etar could live with that. It was a start. “What will you do now?”

Uncle Theo shrugged. “I saved my jewelry. Perhaps I’ll hire a barge to take me to another island and assemble a merchant fleet. You people can keep this accursed rock for all I care. How does ‘Prince of Skalland’ sound to you? I don’t think any of your cousins want the title anyway,” he teased.

Etar laughed. “I have to admire your ability to not give a damn.”

“Maybe you could learn a thing or two from me,” Uncle Theo said and looked up at the sky.

A different sort of silence fell between them, and for the first time in years, Etar caught his uncle smiling.

“It was you, wasn’t it?” his uncle asked after a moment.

“What was?”

“The ships. People in town were all talking about a storm destroying Ainsworth’s fleet. Some say it was Colum or the ‘strange man with the long hair’—but it was you, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.” There was no way of qualifying that answer. It was what it was, and Etar wished he could feel proud of what

he'd done, but now that he was recovering, memories of the things he'd felt from the magicians on the ships returned to him. How many of them were now dead? How many sailors?

"Self-defense, Etar. You sound like you regret it, but you cleansed the world of a few looters and slave drivers." In a rare gesture, Uncle Theo squeezed Etar's shoulder. Was that pride in his uncle's eyes? "But I'd hone those skills if I were you. You've chosen to fight. You must know Wilfred will retaliate."

Etar tensed. It was logical, but he hadn't stopped to consider it. "I have powerful friends now," he said, but his confidence faltered. He didn't want to kill anyone else. He knew the road to forgiving himself for sinking those ships would be long and arduous, but for his friends, for the innocent lives on this island, he would do it again.

Now all he needed was some closure. He hugged his uncle, who obviously didn't know what to do with the gesture, but eventually he returned the embrace firmly, even with a bit of warmth.

"Maybe one day you will see me truly as family and not just the nuisance you took care of out of pity," Etar said before letting go.

Uncle Theo laughed. "You're every bit as dramatic as your daddy. If you ever run into any of your cousins, don't tell them I said this, but you would have been a better son than any of them. Ungrateful bastards."

His uncle seemed incapable of dealing out tender words without insulting someone in the same breath, but this was the first time he said something genuinely nice to Etar. He would never forget it.

"I'd better get going," Etar said. "Are you sure you don't want to come meet my new friends? Stay with us for a while?"

Uncle Theo made a show of shuddering. “No, thank you. That alchemist friend of yours is terrifying. I’d rather stay away,” he said, standing away from the bench.

Etar laughed. He supposed Áehd wouldn’t be too happy to see Uncle Theo either. “Good luck with your merchant fleet, Uncle.”

“And good luck to you with....” Uncle Theo swirled a hand at the sky, “whatever it is you do.” He started leaving, but stopped only a few steps away. “By the way, we buried your father under that big acacia. Visit him sometime. Tell him I miss his stupid face.”

Etar turned toward the far end of the courtyard where a beautiful acacia stood, cascades of yellow flowers weighing down its every branch. It was not the first time he saw it, but Etar never paid much attention. Now he was glad it had survived the attack. He would never look at it the same.

Etar looked back, but Uncle Theo was already several yards away, walking briskly to who knew where.

“Thank you,” Etar said, not loud enough for Uncle Theo to hear it, but he meant it with all his heart.



Chapter 52

Night had already fallen when Jossan brought Etar back to the tower. He was only partially disappointed when he went into Master Áehd's room again and found Hans sprawled in bed, sleeping contentedly. He approached quietly to look at Hans' sleeping face and wished he was brave enough to wake him up.

He slipped out again and sat on the stairs, looking at the starry skylight. He wondered when he would feel normal again. His exhaustion went beyond sleeplessness or sore muscles. His very soul had drained, and he didn't think he could give an ounce more of anything for today.

But he kept thinking of that kiss. He now knew he'd desperately wanted it, but the gesture had been so sudden, and even though he had imagined it happening, he never thought it really would.

He covered his good eye with a hand while keeping the blind one open. Not a sliver of light penetrated on either side. He had tried not to bring attention to it, but he wondered if the people around him had noticed. Maybe it was

time to come to terms with the fact that he had damaged his body irreversibly.

“Stop thinking of that,” he chastised himself, digging the heel of his hand into his blind eye.

He looked back at Áehd’s door and thought again of waking Hans, then climbed to the top of the tower instead.

He’d expected to be alone up there, but he found Jossan sitting with her feet dangling over the edge of the tower. He was about to scurry back inside, but the noise of the trapdoor opening made Jossan look around.

“Etar,” she said, sounding happy at first, then concerned. “Shouldn’t you be resting?”

Etar stood by the trapdoor and shuddered. Even with the winds magically dampened, this place was chilly at all hours, especially at night. “I don’t think I can sleep right now,” he said.

Jossan called him over and smiled when he refused. She came to him instead and unbuttoned her military coat to put it over his shoulders. It was warm and heavy, and it smelled like her. It was like her hugs.

They sat together on the skylight, which was only marginally less unnerving than dangling his feet over the tower’s edge. They faced each other, their legs crossed. Etar looked below. The lights spiraling along the tower’s inner wall looked like a pearl necklace glowing under candlelight. Then, he noticed mellow music swaying in the wind beyond the edge of the building.

“Do you hear that?” he asked.

Jossan nodded. “It’s coming from a window just below the top of the tower. I think it’s Áehd. I was listening when you came up here.”

Etar closed his eyes and let the music seep in. It was such a melancholic melody that Etar couldn't help remembering Aehd had once tried to kill himself. And after that gut-wrenching vision of his uncle dangling from a beam in a dark, dilapidated room, Etar promised himself he would hug the people he loved every single day.

"I wanted to say something," Jossan said.

Etar looked at her expectantly but also fearful of the wounds this conversation was about to reopen.

"I'm sorry," Jossan said, her mouth flattened into an anxious line.

Etar hated this. Even if he felt wounded, he hated the pain in Jossan's voice, how small and vulnerable her apology made her sound.

"It's all right," he said, unable to look at her.

"No, it's not. I lied to you. I didn't know how to say these things because your father seemed so troubled when Colum brought him in. His last days—I hate to admit it, but Theobald's story sounded less painful than the truth."

Etar shrugged.

"Etar...."

"It's done, Jo. I understand why you wanted to shield me as a child, but it hurts that you didn't think I was strong enough to hear it once I grew up."

"I was a coward. I feared it was too late to speak and that you would...."

"What? Hate you?"

A pause. "Yes."

Silence. Etar sighed. "I'm still hurt and a little humiliated that no one thought I needed to hear these things, but how could I hate you?" Not ever. She had been his world since he

met her. That his horizons had now broadened didn't change how he felt about her.

"But can you trust me again?"

Etar put his arms around her, burying his face in the nook of her shoulder. This place against Jossan's neck remained his safest refuge from the world. "I love you, Jo. All I want is for you to understand I'm not as fragile as I seem."

She smothered him against her. "Oh, Gods. I'm so sorry. I never knew I was making you feel that way. But I don't think anyone can ever call you fragile again."

"Because I destroyed those ships?"

Jossan shook her head. "Because you never stopped trying your hardest to protect your home and family."

Home. Family. Etar nodded against her and squeezed his eyes shut. He didn't know if he'd done anything other than act on his rage, but the sentiment behind Jossan's words gave him courage.

When they let go, Jossan squeezed his cheeks and gave him a stern look. "Regardless, I'm still watching you. Don't go thinking you can have a boyfriend without me approving of him."

Etar blinked several times at her, then blushed furiously when he realized what she meant. "Jo!"

She snorted out laughter. "You should see your face."

He laughed, too, but then he thought again of Hans' kiss and how hurt he seemed by Etar's rejection. Etar looked away as his laughter tapered off. Moonlight grazed the surface of the sea below, scattering diamonds over the black waters. "He tried to kiss me. I pushed back."

"He did?" Jossan asked. "Oh. So... you don't like him that way?"

Etar laughed dryly. After basking in the light of Hans' charm for so many days, it was impossible not to feel attracted to him. "No. It's definitely not that."

Jossan hummed. "Then what? I'm sure this is all new to you, right? You've never had a boyfriend that I know of, but he is a good boy. I was only teasing you now."

Etar sighed.

"Do you fear things getting intimate?" Jossan asked.

The earnestness of the question made Etar's ears grow hot. This conversation was going to places he wasn't prepared to explore, but Jossan was asking the right questions. "Maybe. A little. But I want it to happen one day. I want to know how it feels when someone wants you that much, but then...." He let a shuddering sigh out. Now that he was out of danger, more private fears started occupying the front of his mind. "What if I die young?"

Jossan raised her eyebrows. "What?"

"I blinded myself, Jo. The magic. I don't know how to use it, and Master Áehd told me it was dangerous to let it explode in anger, but I couldn't control it, and now I can't see out of my right eye. What if I accidentally kill myself?"

Jossan's face went slack. She examined his face for a long time, then touched his cheek and stroked under his right eye with her thumb. "Áehd said you could hurt yourself, but are you sure the thing with your eye is permanent? Can't he do something about it?"

Etar shrugged. "I... I'll tell him when I feel ready," he said, trying not to cry. He feared Áehd telling him it was too late. He suspected as much, but hearing it from Áehd would make it final. "It doesn't matter now. I had no control over my feelings. What if we fight and I end up hurting Hans?"

Jossan furrowed her brow. “Isn’t that why you came here? To learn? You ditched me and threw a storm my way because you were desperate to learn from Áehd, and now you’re just giving up? He taught your dad. I’m sure he can teach you.”

“But that could take years.”

“So what?” Jossan said, arms crossed over her chest. “You’ll still be breaking Hans’ heart on an assumption, and he chased after you when you were about to face off with seven warships. How’s that for devotion?”

The truth of that statement burned. “He’ll probably just think I’m an idiot when I completely ignore what happened, and he’ll move on. With his looks, I doubt he’d have a hard time finding someone else.”

Jossan looked at him like she was at a loss for words, but she burst out laughing unexpectedly. “Weren’t you the one getting all high and mighty about people keeping secrets? Let him choose. He probably already knows you’re a liability, but I doubt that bothers him. After all, he tried to kiss you even after getting shot in your name.”

Yes, Hans had earned a lot more than the right to choose. Etar already knew that, but it didn’t make things any easier.

Finally, Etar nodded. “So, this means you approve of him?”

Jossan laughed. “Yeah. He’s a little insolent and a complete brat, but he seems to know how to keep you in check, and he makes you eat. He’s good for you.”

Etar chuckled. “Remains to be seen if I’m good for him.”

“Debatable,” Jossan said and ruffled Etar’s hair. “Now, stop wasting your time here. Go talk with him.”

Etar gave Jossan her military coat back and treaded downstairs to Master Áehd’s door. After a long while of star-

ing at it, he took a deep breath—which did nothing to appease his nerves—and took the doorknob in his hand.

Etar's heart beat wildly. Hans still lay sprawled in bed, deeply asleep. Maybe it wasn't the right time. Perhaps he should let Hans sleep out the exhaustion of his personal ordeal.

"Don't be a coward," he said to himself, pushing on towards the bed.

He took his shoes off and climbed on carefully, passing over Hans to reach the far end of the bed. He sat there with his knees up and his back against the wall, but Hans didn't move.

"Hey," he whispered, running a gentle finger below the swollen cut over Hans' cheekbone. "I'm back."

Hans didn't stir.

Etar let a mild stream of magic course out of his fingers, spreading warmth over Hans' skin. "Wake up."

Hans groaned. It took him a while to open his eyes. "Hey," he said after a moment, a slow smile gliding over his lips. "I thought you'd abandoned me."

Etar knew Hans wasn't serious, but he felt guilty that he had considered not having this conversation. "I'm here."

Hans sat up in bed with some difficulty. He was wearing a fresh shirt now, so Etar could—thankfully—no longer see his largest wounds. But he supposed even with Áehd's magic to heal him, that gunshot would stay with Hans for a long time.

"What were you doing in Skalland?" Hans asked. "I thought you wouldn't want to go there for a while."

"Rescuing my uncle from himself."

Hans raised an eyebrow. "Your uncle?"

Etar shook his head. "I'll tell you the whole story tomorrow, but I don't want to talk about him now. I want to talk about... well...."

Hans cocked his head at him. “You don’t have to do this.”
“What?”

“Explaining yourself. I tried to kiss you without knowing how you felt. I should be the one explaining things,” Hans said, pushing a lock of hair out of Etar’s forehead. “Sorry. I’m a jerk.”

Etar wished Hans wouldn’t sound so serious saying those things. It was fine when he jokingly called himself a jerk, but now it hurt because it was Etar who had made him feel like this. “Don’t say that. I’ve spent my life trying to keep out of people’s hair. I never expected this much attention from anyone, and it feels strange.”

“It was still thoughtless of me to assume you would want to kiss me just because.”

Etar looked down and relentlessly picked on a loose thread in his own sleeve. He could take the apology. He could pretend all he wanted was a sweet friendship, but if the last few days had taught him anything, it was that lies tended to grow and fester in people’s hearts. “You don’t understand. I’ve never liked anyone the way I like you. But I do like you a lot, and you have no idea how hard it is to say that out loud.”

Hans paused wide-eyed, then pinched one of Etar’s blushing ears between his fingers. “I sort of do have an idea....”

“Idiot,” Etar said, playfully shrugging away from Hans’ touch. They laughed together, letting the uncomplicated pleasure of each other’s company eclipse their worries for a moment.

“I’m serious, though,” Etar said. “If I stopped you, it wasn’t because I hated the idea of you kissing me. I stopped you because I was confused and scared. Still am.”

Hans touched Etar's jaw with a finger. "I didn't mean to put you in that position. I was just hoping you felt the same way I do."

Etar wanted to cry out of sheer tenderness. He shrugged, not knowing what else to do with his body. "I've always been invisible. It's still hard to believe a boy as handsome as you likes me enough to kiss me."

A silly smile rose to Hans' lips. "Did you just call me handsome?"

Etar rolled his eyes, but he knew his cheeks were painted red. "As if you didn't know that already."

Hans laughed. "The reminder never hurts."

Etar grabbed Hans' hand in a tight, nervous grip that almost immediately quelled Hans' laughter. He didn't dare look up when he spoke again. "Are you sure you want this? I just made an enemy of a powerful king, and you didn't see it because you were passed out bleeding, but I knocked myself unconscious with a burst of angry magic. I'm like a walking target, and I hurt myself whenever I get mad. Don't you feel you're wasting your time on me? Damn, I even got you shot."

Hans made a poignant pause and started thumbing Etar's hand. "We won't know if we were meant to have two minutes or an eternity together until one of us dies."

Etar had never heard Hans sound so grave. When he lifted his eyes again, Hans' mouth was tense, his eyes sad. Etar couldn't speak.

"Seriously, Etar. Even Starseers cannot see the entire future. So why would you worry about that now?"

"I know, but—"

"Why would I turn away from you simply because of that? Not long ago you thought I was dead. Does thinking of that put you off kissing me?"

No, it did not. In fact, the memory of Ainsworth's shot going clean through Hans' body made Etar feel a deeper urgency for his company.

They looked into each other's eyes for the space of several longing heartbeats. Etar searched his head for the right thing to do, but his heart knew the answer. Taking a deep breath, he shut his eyes just as tightly as he was squeezing Hans' hand and leaned forward.

His timid kiss landed on Hans' cheek, the corners of their lips touching in an ambiguous enough way that Hans might still interpret it as purely accidental, but Etar didn't dare withdraw and readjust. He didn't even dare turn his head to the side so his lips would find their target.

It was Hans who bridged the distance, and taught Etar in a few strokes of his soft lips what being wanted really felt like.

Their kiss was deep and perfect at times, but mostly, it was clumsy and sweet. They fell apart, out of rhythm, then came back together and tried again. Etar was startled when Hans put his tongue in his mouth for the first time, not expecting it at all, and they laughed when their foreheads knocked together with the sudden movement. Eventually, Etar got lost in the taste and warmth of their shared breath, letting his magic surge. He knew Hans wouldn't feel anything beyond his skin getting warmer, but to Etar it felt like enclosing this moment in a bubble of euphoric joy, so opposite from the furious rapture that had taken him when facing Ainsworth. It was healing.

All throughout, there were no words. They didn't need any words, and that was what made it feel more special. And even though Etar felt a little embarrassed at his own cluelessness when juxtaposed with Hans' obvious experience, he never felt out of place.

When Etar was too out of breath to go on, his lips puffy and tender, he put his forehead on Hans' shoulder and held on to the collar of his shirt. "I guess the answer is no."

"What?" Hans asked.

"No. It doesn't put me off kissing you."

Hans chuckled. "And you say I'm the idiot."

They lay flat on Áehd's bed, cramped together in the tight space. They searched and found each other's hands, fingers tangling together, and they looked at the wood-paneled ceiling for a long time.

"Be my friend," Etar said.

"Huh? Aren't we friends already?"

"Yes. But I mean, I want things to stay the same. I want to be silly and careless around you without worrying that I'll do something embarrassing and you won't want to kiss me anymore."

"You're doing a great job already."

"Shut up!"

Hans laughed. "You worry too much about things. Let the Old Man and the general be the ones worrying. That's their job."

"But you will still want to kiss me tomorrow, right?" Etar teased.

Hans stretched like a lazy cat. "Ask the stars."

"You're insufferable."

"But I make you laugh. Doesn't that compensate?"

It more than did—plus, Hans' insufferable banter was at the top of the list of things Etar liked about him—but Etar still couldn't flirt as shamelessly as Hans did, so he rolled his eyes to pretend he wasn't already utterly smitten. "You'll have to do better than that."

“Hey, give me some credit. I’ve been following you around like a fool for weeks.”

Etar chuckled. “And?”

Hans groaned but played along. “You might not know this, but I’ve been washing your clothes since the day you came here.”

Etar blushed. That probably included his underpants, and he wasn’t sure he was ready for that much intimacy. He cleared his throat and fiddled with the top button of Hans’ shirt. “And?”

“And...” Hans trailed off, like he didn’t know if he should say what was on his mind.

“Come on. What?”

Hans’ eyes went from playful to soft, and suddenly there was something unfathomably sweet and sad about them. “And it makes me happy when you enjoy my food. So....”

The pause made Etar’s heart stutter. “So...?”

“I want to cook for you every day,” Hans said, and for the first time since they’d met, he couldn’t hold Etar’s gaze.

Etar sighed, out of breath. “Every day?”

“Until....”

“Until the stars call me back. Until you—” He couldn’t bring himself to say it. Hans dying still felt like a memory of something that had already happened and not just a consideration for the future.

Hans nodded.

Etar could live with that. Two minutes or a hundred years. He could definitely live with that. “Then I’ll be here when breakfast comes,” he said and curled tight against Hans’ side, engulfed by warmth and lofty wishes for the future.

For the first time in his life, Etar understood exactly where he belonged.

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When she's not writing or drawing the fantasy worlds that live in her head, she's cosplaying as the creepiest monsters from all her favorite horror movies.

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