

ABSTRACT

BLOOD OF THE WINDMAKER

by Elizabeth Jenike

BLOOD OF THE WINDMAKER is a fantasy/steam punk novel that attempts to make an exploration into human bodies and their significance/insignificance using fantasy tropes and an inverted Journey of the Hero structure. During the writing of this, I was especially interested in subversions and “otherings” of the human body—tattoo markings have an intricate role in the magic system of my world, but the acquisition of this “magic” marks a person as Other. I’m trying to answer the questions: why do some bodies generate more meaning than others? What do bodies really “mean”?

BLOOD OF THE WINDMAKER

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PART I

Chapter 1

TO BREAK THE LAW

The wind was just right today. A good breeze gusted around the small city of Briia, fully unfurling the standards that littered rooftops, displaying house colors and symbols, shop slogans, and simple city decoration. The small mountain ledge barely accommodated the steadily growing metropolis. Briia had started out as a small merchants' gathering, mostly a pit stop for traders on their way up the western mountains. In the present age, however, the once-tiny trading post sprawled all over the mountainside. Lanterns were beginning to shine bright enough to be seen in the fading light of the day, illuminating gleaming white buildings.

Katrya Millor grinned as she watched the city steadily approach. She knew that when she docked in this town, she would find a proper merchant to unload the cargo her ship carried. Wine was precious, especially to the "connoisseurs" this far up in the mountains, and she had fourteen full-to-bursting barrels of it sloshing around belowdecks, waiting for the right amount of money to exchange hands. So she smiled, imagining the payoff her most recent excursion to the valley floor would bring.

Her small ship, a *kebek* large enough only for the four full-time crew members to live and work, groaned as the wind took hold of its sails. She slapped her hands on the bow in annoyance and shouted over her shoulder, "Carefully, guys. I don't want a repeat of what happened in Vilomel." Her poor ship, named the *Arienna* after her grandmother, was still trying to recover from the hull beating it had received on the valley floor.

"You worry too much, Ree," Machinir Libbin called from his position near the central mast. "We landed on the *ground* in Vilomel; rocks aren't good for hulls." He grunted as he heaved on a rope connected to the main mast; the main sail shifted slightly. "Now, we're in the *air*. So quit complaining."

"Yes, let us do our jobs," said Ien Sandir, smiling quietly from the stern. Her Navigator's tanned face accentuated the bright blue wing-shaped tattoos at the corners of his eyes. He turned away from her and closed those eyes, clasping his hands together at his waist. Concentrating—the wind seemed to swirl with a little more . . . *amusement* was the only word she could think of to describe the warmth that brushed her cheeks.

Returning her gaze to Briia, crawling closer and closer every time she saw it, Katrya rolled her eyes. Smiling a little herself, she admitted that Ien was right. Her *kebek*, and all other ships, were, after all, made to tread in the skies—not on soil.

She turned away from the bow and from the approaching city, focusing instead on the members of her crew as they scurried about, preparing to dock. Ien stood, as usual, with hands clasped behind his back near the central mast. Now that he had nothing to chide her about, he stared into space with an expression of deep concentration etched across his features. Wind tugged at the ship's sails: one on the main mast and one each at the front and back of the ship, and also two on each side that acted almost like a bird's wings. Ien, as the Navigator, used his dominion over the wind to carry the ship on its journeys. She didn't know how it worked; she didn't question. It was just the way the world functioned. Navigators used the wind to pull ships. Katrya's job was simply to give orders and see that they were followed.

Nola Reen, the boatswain that oversaw repairs on Ree's ship, waved at her from her position up near the fore of the ship. Not only did Nola oversee repairs, but she worked as a regular crewman as well—with only four crew members on this tiny vessel, even Ree did her share of the dirty work.

“Hey Ree,” Nola said. “I sure hope that wine gets us a good vacation. I feel like we’ve been in the sky for years.” Nola tugged on a rope near the side of the ship, causing one of the “wings” to angle sharply and sending the ship into a slow turn toward the harbor waiting straight ahead. Nola’s long black hair, tied out of her face with a bit of twine, swung around her in the gentle wind, along with her deep green skirts.

“I wouldn’t count on it,” barked Machinir in response to Nola’s wishful words. He heaved on another rope, this one connected to the side sail. “Wine fetches good money, especially this high up, but there are four of us, and I want a flagon of beer. Or seven.” Mack’s scarred face broke into a grin, flashing rows of yellowing teeth at Nola, who smirked. His large muscles strained to hold the rope steady, but he still talked with ease, his gruff voice carrying a hint of amusement. “And besides, I get to decide where the money goes. After we divide it between my beer and you three, we might have a copper kip left.”

The dock, approaching steadily, protruded from the ledge, thrusting out over a sheer drop down the mountainside. The huge mountains afforded the opportunity to build cities within the confines of the rocky walls. The dock, jutting out into the void of the mountain range, was large enough to safely house eight or nine ships of varying sizes—from small boats such as Katria’s *kebek* to the huge carriers used by the Courts.

One such carrier caught her eye, and she sucked in her breath. Beautiful. Somehow the governing body of Daen employed the world’s most skilled metalsmiths to plate the hulls of their ships. And instead of proper sails, the gigantic ships boasted great rudders and engines that propelled them through the skies. Even though she had little idea how the engine worked, Katria would have given her left arm to be the captain on one of those great beasts. The Court of Ships had overlooked her application for a consecutive three years now, but perhaps this fourth would be her year. *Mount willing*, she swore to herself.

The *kebek* slid smoothly into the pier. Briia loomed above them, a white-washed city of fast-talking merchants and kind but wary citizens. Smiling, she nodded to herself and went to inspect the cargo.

“Below-decks” was a generous term for the place she kept her wares. The *kebek* was too small for a large space beneath their feet, but there was enough room for about fifteen barrels of wine or twenty medium-sized crates. As a small-time merchant that had to take whatever came her way, Katria had to know the capacity of her mode of transport. And as a woman who lived on her ship, she had to know the limits of her home. By the time she had opened the hatch to step down into the cramped area, noted that the wine was in good condition, and came back to the deck, Nola, Mack, and Ien had already lashed the boat to the pier.

The gangplank was lowered, and she saw Ien nod to her, a smile in his eyes. The dark blue robes of his position rippled in the steady breeze. Returning the smile, she fingered the hilt of the long knife at her side—only worn for precaution’s sake; in this line of work, one never knew who or what would come against her—and stepped from the sky onto the wooden walkway protruding from the city and, ultimately, the mountainside that soared above and around them.

“Come on, Ien,” she said over her shoulder as she strolled down the gangplank. “Let’s see which of these merchants wants to put money in my pocket.”

Long strides down the pier led her to the foot of the harbor, where she peered about for the customs officer. Ien trailed behind her, as usual. And, as usual, he drew grimaces of disdain and awkward discomfort from those around them. She frowned and continued down the pier.

A spindly-looking man with a pinched face and a clipboard caught her eye; that would be

the registrant with all the information as to who was docked here in Briia. She would be able to acquire a customs warrant and then find a merchant to unload her wine.

The man eyed her doubtfully as she approached. "I'm looking for someone to take fourteen barrels of the best Tinnan wine off my hands," she said. The man's nose arched upward as he peered at her through his tiny spectacles. An unhappy twist to his mouth soured his expression. Obviously he wasn't accustomed to seeing a *woman* in charge of anything at the docks, or anywhere else for that matter. She gave a sweet smile, only causing his lips to further curl in distaste.

"Maybe your captain should be making the proper inquiries," the man said through his nose.

She planted hands on hips and stared him down; they were of a height, so it wasn't difficult. Just as he began to shift in discomfort, she said, "I *am* the captain. The warrant, please?"

He made a show of slowly looking down at his clipboard to hide his surprise and disdain. From what she could see, Katria could tell that the list of merchants wasn't comprehensive. A simple look around could determine that there were more ships than his little list hinted at. Most of the ship captains probably had only recently docked and hadn't yet registered. No doubt the man's annoyed demeanor had a bit to do with the fact that he didn't have a full docket in front of him.

Finally he sniffed loudly. "Bren Tarrew docked here yesterday. He has enough room to accommodate your barrels. "He shrugged, moving his clipboard so that it became impossible for her to see it. "Or you could go into the city. I'm sure someone in the market ward would be willing to take on your cargo." He flipped up a few pages of the clipboard, scribbling a note on one of them. He ripped it from the others and handed it to her. "Here is your customs warrant. Go where you want with your wine. "

She looked back at Ien as she took the sheet. The Navigator raised his eyebrows, the wings at the corners of his eyes wrinkling. Ree nodded.

"We'll go to the city," she said, returning her attention to the customs officer.

"Aren't you going to leave . . . *him* . . . on your ship?" the officer wheezed, finally look around her shoulder at Ien with the most annoying sort of disregard on his features.

Ree fixed him with her coldest stare. "*He* is my Navigator, and what *he* does is none of your concern," she said quietly, ignoring Ien's embarrassed shuffles behind her.

The man pursed thin lips. "If you say so," was his dry response.

Despite the tone, Ree was able to shrug it off and turn away to raise her eyes at Ien. He couldn't respond for fear of breaking "proprieties," but she saw the glimmer of annoyance in his eyes, a slight movement in his shoulders, reminding her that just because Ien was used to this kind of treatment from "upper class" folks didn't mean he had to like it.

After turning from the customs officer, she and Ien headed for the entrance to the city. The light continued its slow fade beyond the mountains, painting the sky a watercolor of oranges and reds. Eventually, the sun would fall behind the mountains on the western side of the range, all the way across the void between the two sides, and sunset darkness would fall on Briia's side. She peered up at the steadily darkening canvas, straining to see the top of the mountain range behind Briia. Somewhere up there, Valt lay in the perpetual snows of the upper reaches.

And beyond that, beyond the mountains . . . No one had ever gone beyond. People whispered of a great, hungry darkness that could devour even Mount Yarah, the largest of the quiet giants in the range.

But Ree knew better. She knew there was adventure beyond those peaks. Something new. Something no one had discovered before.

“Ree,” she heard from behind her. She turned to see what Ien wanted. “There’s something I need to do before we travel again—”

“You!” a rough voice called from behind.

Turning abruptly, she saw a large black-haired man taking purposeful strides toward her. He carried a long wooden staff upright in his left hand. The crown had been carved into a spiral, with some kind of green gemstone set in the curl of the wood. The flowing gray silks covering his robust form barely fit his stomach. He was attended by five soldiers of the city guard, each of them carrying sharp spears in the same manner he carried his staff.

Ree was about to step forward and greet the man—something about him seemed familiar—when instead of addressing her like decorum dictated, he faced Ien. “You,” he said again, quieter this time but still brimming with the same urgency. His eyes narrowed as he took in Ien’s tattooed face.

Ien’s eyes widened. *Oh no*, Ree thought.

“Yes, sir.” His voice remained strong, but there was definitely some underlying anxiety. Ree frowned. She wasn’t used to seeing Ien flustered. Usually he was the unshakable one in their friendship.

“License. “

The one barked word put a long, worried frown on Ien’s face.

Oh no, Kat kept swearing. This wouldn’t turn out well. She looked at the customs officer, who sniffed and stalked down the pier. Obviously the goings-on of Navigators were beneath him. No one else looked in their direction.

“Sure,” Ien murmured. He pulled up one of his long sleeves to reveal a blanket of tattoos traveling all the way from wrist to shoulder. Most of the markings were vibrantly colored pictographs, but here and there lines and splotches of black mottled his skin.

The man with the staff leaned in to check a cluster of thin lines near Ien’s inner elbow. After a few moments of contemplation, he grunted to himself and nodded absently. “You’re good,” he said.

Ree let out a breath she hadn’t realized she had been holding.

Just as the man began to straighten and Ien was about to re-cover his arm, his eyes narrowed and he lunged for the arm in a lightning-fast grip. He twisted Ien’s arm so that one more little black line—one that had been hidden by the crook of Ien’s elbow—became visible. “Your license is expired,” he drawled slowly, carefully. Like he was calculating every word.

All of the color drained from Ien’s face. “By a day,” he said rapidly. “Only a day. I was going get it renewed tonight. We were traveling and I didn’t have time.” By the end, he was whispering.

So this is what he needed to take care of.

The official—a Navigation Officer, Katrya now knew—shook his shaggy black head. He didn’t say anything else, just waved a large hand at the soldiers with him. The men stepped forward. One of them grabbed Ien by the upper arm and began to tug him down the pier. Ien’s wide brown eyes stared at Ree in fear and surprise. “If you want to come see your Navigator,” the large man said, finally turning to her, “he will be in the Briian Prison.”

“Now wait a minute,” she said tartly. “You can’t just cart him away. He said he would get it renewed.” This was ridiculous! Who got arrested for being *one day* late for license renewal? She had never heard of this kind of harsh punishment for something so minor. *Ten*

minutes in Briia and the officials are already starting trouble.

“There is a law involved, miss,” the man grunted, smiling venomously. Her skin crawled just to look at him. All that muscle and fat hidden in silk was just unnatural, especially with his gruff demeanor and unshaven black-bearded face. His smile just seemed . . . off. She wanted to wipe it off his face. With her knife. “You can’t ask me to break the law, can you?” he continued. With his smile unwavering, he motioned to the soldiers and began to stride away.

With clenched fists, she watched them cart away her best friend.

Well, it was obvious what she had to do. Sadly, this wasn’t the first time Ien had been arrested.

As she ran up the plank back to *Arienna*, Ree was grateful that she wore boots and pants, with hair up in a tail out of her eyes. Running in a dress would be unseemly. When Nola and Mack saw her pace, they stood from their chores and came to greet her as her feet touched deck. They probably knew what she was about to say before the words came out of her mouth.

“Ien got arrested again.”

Mack snorted. “Of course. Crashing officials always arresting our crashing Navi.” He stopped short of spitting off the side of the ship.

Ree grinned at the man. “Let’s go get him.”

Chapter 2

A STRANGE WARMTH

When Ree and Mack slipped from the *Arienna*, the sun had been long gone beyond the mountaintops. A slight breeze still wafted through the sails of her ship as she looked out across the expanse of the void and toward the peaks beyond. Beneath her ship, the mountain fell away into black unknown, all the way down, down, down to the unseen valley floor. When she looked up again, the darkness was barely broken by a tiny point of light far away across the range: Praan, the capital city of Daen. She would have marveled at it had she not been so tense. *Ien, you owe me good this time*, she thought tartly. She hadn't even been able to sell her wine yet. That stuff only held its price for so long, especially in this economy. Grape prices had always been fickle in the mountain market. One day high, the next abysmal . . .

These thoughts are not helping.

Ree had pulled her hair into a bun and had checked her dagger at least three times, slung at her right hip. Mack kept a firearm—his beloved Arrow Seven—beneath his gray vest. All manner of jangling or shiny things—her gold earring, chains, jewelry, coin-purses—had been left with Nola, who was tasked with readying the ship for a speedy takeoff.

I just hope Ien is ready to fly her, Ree swore as she followed her quartermaster into the market ward. Her boots transitioned from the wooden dock and onto the gray cobblestones of the city with a notable *thunk*. Breathing out slowly, she re-oriented herself to solid ground. After even just a few days in the air, setting foot on rock again could prove confusing to her sense of balance. Lanterns, hanging on ornate metal rods, threw flickers of shadows down alleys and across avenues. In a larger city, like her home of Praan, the market would still be alive, and more nocturnal people would fill the streets. The smaller Briia, however, slumbered away under a strict curfew, awaiting the arrival of morning.

The city sprawled seamlessly from the edge of nothing to the slopes of the mountain. Even though Briia had been built on a relatively flat ledge, as they continued, streets began to gently ascend. Mack began to take them through back alleys, clinging to the shadows. This far from the market, there were few reasons for a ship captain and her crew to be sneaking through the city. One of those reasons—the true one for their excursion—would certainly get them arrested and thrown in prison alongside their Navi. That would be counterproductive, to say the least.

Somewhere behind them, thunder grumbled from far away. Ree frowned. Another storm.

The back alleys led them to a square large enough to house three or four large inns but instead proved empty and silent. Only two main streets came out in the square, but multiple alleyways, as it was still ringed by buildings that had the looks of barracks, austere and gray. They stopped at the side of the square, flush against a building out of the ring of light of the nearest lamppost.

Mack didn't do anything for a long moment, scrutinizing the area with narrowed eyes.

"Where is it?" she whispered.

"Beneath our feet," Mack grunted. "There is a main entrance over there." He nodded toward one of the side streets, where two stoic guards stood, looking forward, wearing swords and—no doubt, though Ree couldn't see—pistols, along with plain-looking leather armor. It was obvious they were guarding something, but not what, exactly. They looked more appropriate for a wealthy merchant's retainer than a city-funded prison, but maybe that was the point—to lull

people into thinking there wasn't anything right under their feet. *I wonder how many citizens actually know this is here.* For that matter, why did Mack know?

Ree doubted they would be allowed to "visit" Ien at such a secretive institution. This prison was an invite-only party, apparently.

"Okay," she said. "Let's take those guards out."

#

It was dark. Everything was dark.

Ien's hands explored the blackness. He sat against a cold, earthy wall in an undetermined space. The air reeked of sweat and a metallic odor he feared—and yet knew—was blood. Black, black, black. Everything.

He took a deep breath. *I've done this before*, he reminded himself. The prison in Port Aria had been smaller, but less dark.

He reached out again, but not with his hands. A breath of air shifted over his skin, beneath it. The inside of his right elbow tingled; he didn't need eyes to know the etching of a blue fish had faded to a sickly gray on his skin. The breeze, instead of fading, strengthened, shifted. He breathed in, out. In.

Out.

As his breath moved, so too did the air, and so too did his mind. Out, out, out. Beyond the four walls of his prison—he could sense them, now—and beyond the darkness. He felt, more than saw, the bright, organic light of torches in the corridor outside his room. He guided the breeze down the hall, past the torches and past more locked doors. There were men like him—yet different in subtle ways—in those rooms. He felt their minds throbbing in counterpoint to his own. None were active as he, searching the prison with his consciousness. This was not the first time he had ever wondered why other Navigators did not use their skills in the same way he did.

Another breath. The tingling spread to the blue leaf-chain that encircled his upper arm. A simple breeze usually didn't elicit such exertion from his markings. *The prison*, he realized. *Not letting me use too much at once.* It was an effective deterrent and jailer—possibly why his wind-brothers weren't also attempting the same reconnaissance. Still he pushed. Inhale, exhale.

Out, out, out. Beyond a door at the end of the corridor.

Something strange. A sensation he didn't recognize: like that of his wind-brothers, but . . . cold. Empty. He allowed the breeze to waft over this new thing, probing delicately.

As soon as he did, the *thing* lashed out, giant monster teeth in his mind, swallowed the breeze and Ien's thoughts whole. At the last minute, he pulled back into his own mind with a cry, and he found himself once again in darkness, with the echo fading into the walls, lungs struggling to fill and expel. In and out. In—

#

"Now!" came Mack's whisper from behind her.

Quickly and silently, Ree slid along the wall of the building they had been hugging, out from behind the boxes, behind the inn facing the square until she reached an alley near the guarded entrance. Around the corner of the building and to her left, the poorly armored guards still stood at their posts. The only thing she could hear now was the sound of her breath, heaving in and out of her lungs.

I've done this before. This was a matter of course when Ien Sandir was your best friend and Navi—especially because Navis were arrested all the time. He got arrested; they went to get him. This was the third time in the six years they had known each other.

This time felt different, though. Her heart pounded erratically. Something was wrong. Maybe it was the wine losing value in her hold while her pockets remained empty. The occasional flicker of lightning from the chasm behind them didn't help her mood, either. She counted to twenty in her head.

Eighteen . . . Nineteen . . . Now.

She whipped around the corner, drawing her knife and flashing it at one of the guards, who almost didn't get his own up in time. Ree would have sliced his stomach open if not for the small blade he brought to meet hers—but of course she wasn't intending to kill the man anyway. Ree danced around him—*one, two, three, four*, she sang in her head as she parried an attack and then, almost as though the clumsy man *wanted* her to do it, he opened too widely for a thrust and she planted a boot in his stomach. He grunted and fell backward, where she landed a blow to the back of his head with the hilt of her knife and knocked him out cold.

Mack looked up from dispatching the other guard with a thumbs-up and a grim smile. He grabbed the unconscious man's feet and began to drag him toward the alley. Ree did the same with hers, noticing somewhat guiltily that the man's skull was bleeding a little and hoping she hadn't done too much damage. They dumped the guards in the alley and slunk back to the entrance.

As soon as she crouched against the wall of the prison—or the entrance, or whatever—Mack's indistinct form appeared beside her.

"There should be a side entrance somewhere close," he breathed in her ear. "Can't go in the front." She could still make out the worry on his face. Those guards would be missed, and soon.

She scratched the side of her nose—it felt weird without the gold stud—and nodded. He moved away, running his hands along the brick as he ventured deeper into the alley, still at a crouch. She mimicked him, placing her fingertips at eye-level and feeling for a catch or lever of some kind.

BOOM.

She whipped her head up as a shockwave rippled through her boots. A circle of light had appeared in the ground at the back of the alley.

"Go, go!" Mack gestured furiously. He looked around for the inevitable guards.

They ran to what turned out to be a small, jagged opening in the ground—like a chasm had opened up along this specific crack in the cobblestones. She could see a dimly lit corridor below—the prison?

"Um," Mack started, but Ree was ready to trample her own uncertainty.

"It's big enough for me to get through," she said rapidly. Mack glanced nervously behind him. Before she could stop and force herself to think—*How am I going to get out?*—or do more than curse, she was falling past Mack's worried face and through the hole.

#

Ien removed his hand from the wall, trying to convince his legs not to give way. He stared at the thin crack that started where his palm had been—the tiny line that continued all along the wall and out of his cell. He knew the line was so long because of the light filtering in from his open door: the one that had been torn from its hinges and deposited in the hallway. The green ink on his body had faded completely to gray, leaving only ghostly twinges.

His legs were rebellious. He stumbled into the wall, clutched it as he forced his feet forward. Blowing a hole in a wall did not require a small amount of energy.

Mounts be damned if they think I'm going to just sit in here.

He hobbled out of the cell, looking up and down the hall. He stood at the corner of two corridors; the crack ran down the left-hand side and disappeared to the left into an open intersection about halfway down. On the right was a long hallway of doors: his wind-brothers.

As he followed the crack to the left, he wondered why there were no guards. No people. Only the memory in his head of that cold, dead entity at the end of the right-hand hallway. He shuddered and pushed the thought away, scurrying in the opposite direction.

A woman burst from the intersection in front of him.

#

“Ree?!” Ien’s incredulous voice called from her right. She whirled, and there he was, voluminous blue robes and all, leaning against the wall with his palm over the spider-thin crack she had been tracing with her fingertip. A small part of her breathed a sigh of relief. *I should have guessed it was his great idea to blow a hole in the ceiling of the most guarded prison this side of the range.*

Her own thought gave her pause. Guards? She hadn’t run into any yet, but . . .

Her Navigator smiled faintly, but before she could even move, he collapsed to the floor. *Crashing man*, she cursed. She bolted to his side. The ridiculous man was still conscious, trying to push himself up with shaking hands. Her eyes searched frantically down the hall for anyone coming; she could hear distant voices, but they were drawing closer.

“Ien, we need to move,” she whispered. How were they going to escape if he couldn’t move? She noticed that the ink on the backs of his hands and on his neck—the only skin she could see apart from his face—was completely gray.

He shook his head, whispering something unintelligible under his breath. The voices were closer now, accompanied by a frenzy of footfalls. “Come on, idiot,” she growled, pulling on his arm. He sucked in his breath, and with a sudden show of strength, lurched to his feet. He shook his head again, probably trying to clear his mind. She stood with him; he took a step forward and grimaced, but took another step, and then another. He pushed his sleeves up to the elbows, revealing purple zigzags that hadn’t yet faded—the only color left on his body other than the blue wings at the corners of his eyes. Those wings had never faded. In the six years she had known him, while all the other markings grew dark around them with use.

“Let’s go,” he said quietly, starting to limp the way she had come, toward the hole. The tattoos were still draining, the purple slowly fading like everything else on his body. The more color that seeped from his arms, the more he seemed to be able to function.

“What happened?” she asked breathlessly as the two of them walked down the hallway, retracing her steps. He didn’t answer. The guards were getting closer.

“Whatever you did to that ceiling, it was reckless,” she spat. “We won’t be able to show our faces here for months. Years maybe.” *Crashing Navi*. Making a nuisance of himself.

He shot an exhausted smirk at her. “You would have let them keep me?”

“Of course not, you idiot.”

He seemed to take that as a victory, because the smile grew wider.

“We would very much have liked to keep you,” a voice said from behind them.

They spun to come face-to-face with their pursuers. Four men held spearheads leveled at them, wearing the same plain armor as had the ones outside. A fifth man wearing black breeches and coat held no weapon save a staff taller than he. A hard, silver-gray gaze gauged her carefully, coldly. A symbol had been embroidered into his coat with silver thread—it resembled a half moon with the flat side on top and a red ruby teardrop in the center, similar to that of the Navigation Officer. A quick glance up at Ien showed the Navi’s downright terrified face, but Ree

had never seen the man before.

The man smirked, pushing platinum blond hair back from his face with a hand. Ree shivered at the strangeness of his hair and eyes. Blond and gray—so gray they were nearly white.

“So.”

It was only one word, but the *voice*. Deep, commanding. Powerful. A rock sank into her gut, turning her legs to ooze. Her hand went to the knife at her belt.

He flicked his attention to her. “Don’t do that,” he said softly.

She froze. Why was her body disobeying her? She imagined drawing the knife and sticking it in his ribs. That’s what she wanted to do. Before that voice could do anything to her . . . But of course it was too late.

He returned his gaze to Ien. “Did you think you were going to escape? Why do you continue to avoid me?”

At her side, she felt Ien flinch at the words, even though Ree had no clue what he was talking about. “You’re a monster,” he whispered. “I don’t even know who you are, but I know that.” She should have looked at him, to see his face and the emotions that filled his voice, but she didn’t want to take her eyes from the man.

The man shrugged, the ugly smirk still painting his features. “That’s a matter of perception.” He gestured with the staff. “If you perceive that I am such, maybe it is you who are the monster. You, who won’t use all that strength you possess.” The smile, cold and calculating, filled his face. “So, *rinnaeio*, how will you escape me? With this girl who doesn’t know anything about you?”

Ien shied backward, and Ree followed him. She drew her knife and held it before her, backing away slowly. “Look,” she said, finding her voice. “My friend here wants to leave. No one has to get hurt.” She pushed her lip up into a snarl. “But we can arrange it.” Never mind that the man clearly had the upper hand. Never mind that he had four men behind him—properly armored this time—that could poke holes in Katria all day and still be home in time for supper. Ien was her best friend and he was *coming with her*.

The blond man smiled. He was too cocky. Too smooth. And Ien was too exhausted to run. And Mack . . . She didn’t even know where he *was*.

Damn everything, she wanted to scream. Her mind raced. Her heart beat faster. *Something wrong. Something so wrong*. The room grew warmer. Her skin burned, like it was on fire. She blinked sweat away from her eyes, gripping a suddenly slippery knife hilt. The torches in the hallway were so bright. The palms of her hands began to ache, just as they always did when she panicked . . .

The blond man frowned and looked at her with interest for the first time.

The torches.

Her hands.

He opened his mouth.

An explosion rocked the hallway. Ree threw herself to the right, just as she heard Ien grunt in pain. The world seemed to slow, like molasses spreading from an upturned bottle, like a ship with holes in the sails drifting softly to the valley bottom. Debris and smoke filled the air, filled her lungs. She coughed from where she lay on the floor, putting a hand before her face and trying to see into the chaos that filled the corridor.

Another hole—bigger—gaped at them from the ceiling, this one ragged at the edges where the explosive had ripped rock. Ree stared in disbelief as Mack’s tousled head poked almost comically into the opening.

“Hurry up,” he said gruffly. “That will probably alert more guards.” He pointed his pistol at the strange man and his escorts, two of which lay unconscious on the other side of a particularly sharp-looking pile of ceiling. “Don’t try anything,” he barked.

She pushed herself to her feet, resisting the urge to shout at him that *of course* that would draw more attention to them. Ien knelt doubled-over. What was he doing? Had he been hit with rubble during the explosion? The strange man somehow had remained on his feet, a snarl marring his features. He was pointing the crown of the staff down at Ien. A closer look at her friend showed that he clutched his right arm; blood leaked from between his fingers. Ien directed a glare up at the man.

The fiend smiled hollowly, darting a quick glance at Mack and his pistol. It wasn’t a nervous glance—this man was too smooth to be nervous—but it was close. “Consider that my parting gift, *rinnaeio*. That mark guarantees that I will find you.” Ree noticed with a jolt in her gut that the top of his staff dripped blood—Ien’s.

When Ien moved his fingers, his ripped sleeve revealed a small, bizarre hexagonal symbol with dots at each corner. Blood seeped from the raw mark. Ree felt her eyes widen. The staff had made that? Ien’s scowl filled his face. Blue anger hid behind his eyes.

“So leave,” the man said, looking up at Mack again, then back at Ree. “The guards would kill you; I would rather you be alive for what I have planned for you.” He seemed nervous of the firearm pointed at his face, but didn’t move. “And you,” he said to Katrya, “will be a battle for another day.” The two conscious guards shot startled glances at him, but didn’t intervene as Ree shoved herself into motion.

The man’s white eyes never left her face.

Jumping to her feet, she grabbed Ien by the sleeve and pulled him up. “Come on, “ she whispered, heart thumping erratically, watching the man watch her. She didn’t know why, but he—a *monster*, Ien had called him—was giving them a way out. *Mounts help us*, she thought. If they could just get back to the *Arienna*, they could leave Briia and never look back. She would sell her wine somewhere else. There was no time to think about *why* he was letting them escape.

There was also no time to think about the way the man was looking at her.

Mack continued to point the pistol at the blond man, but it seemed that the stranger wouldn’t interfere with their escape. He just stood with the staff aimed at them with that smile on his face. With one last glance at him, Ree was pulled up by Mack through the hole by her arms. Mack then handed her the pistol to point at the crowd below. Even as she crouched in the street, aiming through the street at the stranger, Ree felt that *that* man was in control of this situation. That smile . . .

“Mack,” she said faintly.

“Yes?” He was pulling Ien through the opening. The Navi grimaced in visible admission to his pain.

“Where in the name of Mount Yarah did you get explosives?”

He barked a strained laugh. “I always carry explosives, Ree.”

She blinked. “Oh.”

“Guards’ll be here any minute.”

Finally tearing her eyes away from the hole and from the man—who was still standing there peering up at them—Ree nodded and stood. *I hope Ien can run* was her only thought.

And they ran.

Back through the streets, back through the dark squares and heavy night air, back through the market ward where vendors had long since closed their stalls. To the dock, to the plank that

led to their *kebek*, to their home. She immediately moved to embark, pulling on lines and barking orders to Nola and Mack. *Get us in the sky. Due southwest. Avoid that storm.* Mount willing, they could be across the mountains in Praan within the week. There, Ien could safely heal and they could let the hubbub of tonight's events die down. There, they would be safe.

Her heart only slowed its frantic pace when she felt the wind on her face and knew that they were no longer attached to the city that had brought them so much trouble this day.

#

The fools who had come to rescue their Navigator sprinted away into the darkness. Shrylu Rيسان watched them leave from the hallway of the Briian prison, looking up into the sky through the hole in the ceiling. When they were gone, he waved the staff at the guards behind him, causing them to slump to the ground with their unconscious mates. He then slit the throats of all four soldiers.

Such foolishness. The Navigator knew that Rيسان would find him again; Rيسان had seen it in the terror in the *rinnaeio*'s eyes. He couldn't let such a treasure of power slip through his fingers. His fist tightened around the staff in anticipation. The man would be a perfect candidate for one of Rيسان's more lucrative endeavors.

And the woman . . . Rيسان would write a letter. He had a theory, and if it was correct, his financiers would be interested, if not downright pleased at his discovery.

When the guards came and two holes were discovered, along with the four dead soldiers, Rيسان told them that the Navigator had escaped, but had been badly wounded and probably wouldn't survive the night. Hopefully that would deter them from making too large of an inquiry. He couldn't have Briian officials also scrambling to get at the Navigator and his witch.

He wanted the *rinnaeio* all to himself.

Chapter 3

AN AWKWARD SILENCE

It wasn't until Briia was six days behind them and had given no sign of pursuit that Ree allowed herself to breathe. She stood at the prow of the *Arienna* and smiled into the wind, Ien beside her.

The mountains around the *Arienna* remained solidly steadfast, as though the ship weren't moving at all. On a clear day such as this, the snowy peaks of the western range could be glimpsed. Behind Ree, the days between the ship and Briia had hidden the eastern range, but the void, the empty area between ranges, remained crisp and visible for miles until it disappeared into haze at the edge of Ree's vision. She watched the western range inch closer, taking in the incredible sight of Mount Yarah looming over the other peaks and the barest metallic glint she knew was Praan. A lump of cold anticipation settled into her stomach. Along with the flight from Briia, their trajectory toward Praan had its own reasons. For the last three years, she had put her name into the hat in hopes of being chosen for captainship of one of the giant, Court of Ships-commissioned carrier vessels that kept the economy afloat by ferrying goods around the range. This annual application would be her fourth.

The Court *had* to accept her this year. She had close to six years' experience running her own ship now—ever since her father had died and passed the *Arienna* to her. She and the others would benefit immensely from the experience funneling goods around the range and helping people in need. The carriers connected cities in way that would have been impossible without them. They flew faster, and could hold more, than even the large *barques* utilized by the wealthiest independent merchants. Men and women could purchase space on a carrier for their goods to be transported, which had two results: merchants were able to establish a base of operations in a city, because they themselves didn't have to travel from city to city pandering their goods; and costs were cut because said man or woman didn't retain the expense of maintaining a ship or funding a crew. Ree also thought the Court-approved stipend for a carrier captain and crew would trump anything she could scrape from the merchanteering she had been doing for the past six years. Hell, she still had a hold full of wine that was going to lose its value if they didn't hurry to port and find someone to buy it.

And there was also the nagging voice in the back of her head: *the outside. The end of the mountains. A place no one has ever gone except the Court carriers.* A shiver crawled up her spine at the thought: she could go beyond Daen, see the world outside the mountains.

So the job would be perfect in every way. She just had to get them to accept her.

"I have to meditate," Ien stated quietly, turning toward the one cabin that served as both Ree's quarters and the space where the Navi could commune with the ship.

As he moved away, she allowed the worry she felt to surface on her face. Even watching his back as he entered her cabin and closed the door, she saw him clutch his forearm with a hand clawed with pain. The man had not been himself since that day with the strange, monstrous man. Ien wasn't the most talkative person normally, but it felt like he had barely said two words to her in the whole six days. She knew that mark on his arm was bothering him, but he wouldn't talk to her about it. And he especially wouldn't talk about that man. The way that man had stared at her . . . She shuddered at the thought of his white eyes and blonde hair. There had been something strange in the way he had looked at both of them—and why had he *allowed* them to escape?

She had spoken with Mack and Nola about her worries after two days of flight from Briia. The older woman had clicked her tongue and frowned, green eyes flashing. "I thought Ien

was acting a little strange,” she had said, placing curled fists on her hips in thought. Her long, dark green dress fluttered in the breeze, showing the bottoms of the black stockings she wore underneath. Nola was one of the best sailors Ree had ever met, but she still considered herself a “proper” woman above all things, so Ree had never been able to convince her of the merits of pants, despite the constant breeze.

“The look of that man didn’t suit me,” Mack had said, arms crossed, staring sternward toward Briia with a grimace on his scarred face. Uncharacteristic anxiety flitted across his features, and then his face settled back into disgruntlement.

Nola had waved a hand. “Do we need to worry about this now? Shouldn’t we just be focusing on getting to Praan? Ree wants to put in her application, and then we can be on our way to Port Aria to pick up the textile shipment I have us scheduled for.”

Ree had stifled a stab of irritation at Nola’s flippant attitude toward her goals. It seemed Nola was quick to assume Ree wasn’t going to be chosen—again. Mack was indifferent about the whole thing. Part of Ree thought that Nola’s issue was that she had been born in Port Aria, the largest city in the range that considered itself *outside* the purview of the Praan-based Courts, and so could not care less about working for the government. Another part of her whispered that Nola may just not believe in Ree’s ability to do the job itself, which was a ridiculous notion of course. It still smoldered at the back of her head.

At the time, four days ago, Ree had agreed with at least the first part of what Nola had said: their priorities lay in Praan and not behind them in thoughts of Briia. Now, however, standing at the prow of her ship and watching Mount Yarah approach, she wasn’t sure. Whenever she remembered that . . . hungry . . . look in the strange man’s eyes, an ugly, cold knot of wriggling snakes snapped at the walls of her stomach. Somehow she knew that wasn’t the last time she would be seeing him.

#

Ien looked down at the palms of his hands and the blue stars embedded into his skin.

He sat cross-legged on the floor of Katrya’s cabin. The mark on his arm still burned, despite the six days since their flight from Briia. It was weird. And even though the rest of his tattoos had since regained their color after their use in giving him strength that night, the ones of the inch or so around that strange hexagon remained black and dead. Nothing like that had ever happened. It seemed that man really did have something against him . . . But that thought process would get him nowhere. He had been mulling it over for six long days. His thoughts kept returning to the strange, dead feeling at the edge of his mind when he had encountered the other man’s consciousness.

He focused on the blood flowing in his veins, the blood that replenished his tattoos whenever they ran dry. His whole life had been based on those markings. Even since before his memories ended, somewhere around ten years old. No use mulling over that gap in his memories; he had long since accepted that this was the life that he had been given to lead. Navigation. Whether he was to lead a life into glory or astray still remained to be seen. Ree seemed to find him useful, and that was enough for now.

Or *had* been, anyway. He rubbed his fingertips on his brow, trying to scrub the weariness and confusion away. Despite Ree’s apparent nonchalance about the events in Briia, he could tell she had been anxious, and still was. Who wouldn’t be? Things could have flown out of hand too quickly, and came very close. He could have died. *Ree* could have died.

He shook his head, trying to dispel the dark thought. He should concentrate on moving the winds around the *Arienna* to push the small ship toward the capital city. It was nice to be able

to retreat into Ree's cabin, especially when his thoughts were too muddled to stay by Ree and deal with *her* worry as well as his own. He looked up from his place on the floor, on a round rug placed here for this purpose, at the drawing in what looked like red paint on the wall of the cabin. A similar symbol had been etched into his skin, near his right hip, when he had first come aboard the *Arienna* as her Navigator. The symbol, or *syloom*, helped connect Ien to the ship due to the nature of the ink used to paint it—the same as had been used to scratch it into his skin. Other markings on his body drained of color when he used them—a blue vein of organic symbols on his left ankle was slowly dissipating right then—but the *syloom* on his hip never faded. It never would, unless his connection with the ship was lost.

He closed his eyes, feeling the power of the ship, of the waves of wind that pushed the *kebek* gently forward. He inhaled, and the waves breathed with him, swelling as he inhaled, ebbing with the exhale. The ship consumed his tiny soul. He became part of the bigger energy coursing through all things. He was one with this instance, this moment in time. There was no longer a distinction between his soul and that of the *Arienna*. He *was* the ship.

As the ship, he vibrated as the breeze pulled him along through the mountains, cradled his sails, and brushed his pine boards. Great peaks rose all around him, some still topped with snow despite the dying summer's heat on the lower slopes. The valley opened beneath, obscured by fog and altitude. He knew that grand cities lavished under that fog, their silver spires reaching desperately—futilely—for the sky. Each of their cultures would be distinct; even the cities growing from the mountainsides enjoyed different ways of life and love, though the mountains supposedly all fell under the umbrella of the Courts stationed in Praan. Above the fog and behind him, he could just make out the glint of another large metropolis, Karam, that made its home on the eastern side of the range, on the mountain beside Briia. There, men with long mustaches liked to fight with a long-bladed knife in each hand. And beyond Karam, higher up on the next mount north, lay Port Aria, where the women danced no matter who watched. So many cities and cultures. One day he would visit them all.

But for now, he set Praan in his sights. The capital city, the center of civilization. There, Katrya hoped to sell the wine that filled the hold, but Ien knew that that wasn't her only goal. There was a reason that Katrya Millor returned to this city every year.

With a deep breath, he gathered strength. Back in his body, strangely connected and distant simultaneously, the simple, green vine tattoo that snaked up his left arm in and out of countless others slowly drained of color until the leaves and stem showed black, like the marks on his right arm but with the promise of later refill. As the symbols emptied, energy filled him, and he took that energy and pushed it against the ship. The effect was a giant wave of wind that beat against the hull and sails, catapulting them forward on the swell of power and wind.

He exhaled, and the wave quieted, leaving the ship to drift along in the body of air that flowed around them. Calm, unhurried. Then he inhaled again and the process started over.

Ien allowed himself to drift in this form of meditation, letting the perception of his physical body slip under the current, away from awareness. There was only the ship, and the winds that caressed it. He sat there for some time, his chest rising and falling with the waves. Every minute brought them closer to Praan, closer to what Ree wanted. Closer to what he didn't want.

When he had begun to bring himself back to consciousness, the woman opened the door and stalked into the room, heeled boots clomping on the wooden floorboards. She had had a permanent scowl on her face ever since the incident in Briia, and today was no exception. The closer they got to Praan, however, the more the scowl tried to recede and the more her

excitement shone through the worry.

"You've been avoiding me," she said when the door closed behind her, leaving them alone in the room.

With a wry twist to his lips, Ien shook his head. He could see that his silence frustrated her, but he just *couldn't* say anything. He didn't know where to begin. He had so many questions himself that if he opened his mouth he would just add to the confusion.

"I didn't expect you to tell me anything new," she huffed, trying to hide her disappointment and failing. He had known her too long to be duped by her face. "It just feels weird not to talk about it. Who was he? It seemed like you two know each other, or at least he knew you." A befuddled scrunch of her nose replaced the scowl as she joined him on the rug.

"I don't know, Ree," he replied, unable to keep the exasperation out of his voice. "I've never seen him before."

"Ien." An admonition. "You're not telling me everything."

He shrugged under her scrutiny. "I really don't know." For a brief moment he remembered: the raw, monstrous emptiness of the man's mind, gnawing at his own. He suppressed the bile that rose in his throat.

She eyed him for another second in clear disbelief, then shrugged with feigned nonchalance and stood. It was obvious that she wasn't convinced, but there was nothing he could say or do to prove to her that the man had been a stranger to him. "Praan is just about two or three hours away," she said as she turned away, hiding her face. "Nola is going to find someone to take the wine, and you're coming with me to the Palace." No room for argument or opinion in her tone. Before he could protest, she had gone.

He inhaled slowly, deeply, trying to quiet the unsteady rhythm of his heartbeat at the mention of the Palace. That place was full of terrible energy, and he had managed for the last three years to avoid it when she signed her application. This time . . . He was just going to have to tough it out, for Ree's sake.

#

It took a little more than the proposed estimate of a couple hours, but soon Ien, Ree, and Nola stood on a wooden pier of the great city of Praan. Mack stayed behind to watch the *kebek* while the three of them ventured into the throng of boisterous sailors toting barrels and thrifty merchants with sharp eyes looking to sell their wares. Nola, as she moved off through the throng, turned a look on these men that held a similar sharpness. Ree watched her head directly for a mustachioed merchant in white silks sitting next to a tent over a number of barrels.

Ree led Ien into the city; he followed her silently a few steps behind, gaze on the ground, arms pensively folded in his large blue sleeves and hood up to cover his eyes. Especially here, in the capital city where the Court sat in its stone palace and made the laws that governed the mountains, Ree understood that he needed to watch his step. She shot periodic glances back at him, but he didn't acknowledge them. She stifled a stab of annoyance.

Praan loomed above them, throbbing with the noise and passion befitting a capital city. *This* was her city. *This* was her beautiful, beautiful home. On their way out of the port, the two of them walked down the harbor past one of the great carriers of the Court, and Ree's breath caught in her throat. The sleek, shining steel hull lurked monstrously in one of the larger Court-leased piers. Five carriers could fit in the gargantuan space provided, but only one ship filled that space at the moment. Others—Ree believed there were ten or twelve Court carriers in total—must have been on errands across the mountain range. The ship gleamed with steel plates, seemingly a great machine with no sails, because it needed none. A carrier used engines run by Navigators' power

to turn great turbines in the bottom and sides of the ship, effectively creating its own wind. It was amazing, the technology that the Court kept to itself. Those giant ships, sleek yet armored enough to withstand any sort of cannon-fire.

Through the gates of the city and into the madness that was Praan—Ree’s heart began to beat faster with every step taken toward the Palace. The market ward here dwarfed the one of Briia. Where the majority of stalls in Briia had been filled with precarious wooden tables and tents constructed of cloth draped over mismatched poles, here in the capital the wealthier merchants had permanent homes of wood and stone, with colored signs displaying names and wares. Two and three story buildings, created from the stone of the mountainside, housed one merchant on each floor in order to save space in the planning of the city. The merchants must have had rough truces with one another. Of course none of these contracts included men who sold the same product; competition remained as fierce as ever.

Hawkers still stood inside and outside stalls along the thoroughfare, and men standing on street corners selling exotic fruits and meats, and street musicians sending lilting, playful melodies to compete—poorly—with the general noise of the market. Laughing and screaming children ran this way and that, ignored by citizens and their parents alike, chasing each other or scraggly-furred dogs. Seeing a market ward in the daytime, especially the ward of the grandest metropolis of these peaks, was enough to stir an economic buzz in Ree’s chest—she should have been with Nola, haggling the price of those barrels, especially since those particular grapes may or may not have been the cheapest in Tinna. Ree was a little concerned the wine was no good at all, but the merchants here wouldn’t notice a difference without opening any of the barrels . . . she hoped. Plus it might have been pretty old when she bought it.

But this application isn’t going to sign itself, she thought. And so she was here, instead of with Nola haggling over wine prices. This part of the city—the market—always changed, day to day and month to month. One week a man with scarves from Valt would set up shop under a white-and-green awning; the next, the same awning would be home to a woman claiming she could read the future in the wrinkles on a person’s face. Ree’s lips twisted wryly at the thought. Anyone could see what the future held for the old woman standing before the “futureteller.” Those wrinkles shouted that death stalked the woman in dark corners at night.

In Briia, the market ward had gone to sleep two hours after dark; here in Praan, the market never closed its eyes. Some things could only be procured at night here, and some of those same things were nonexistent elsewhere. Rich wines unheard of even in Tinna would find their way to lordlings’ tables; strange filmy cloth made from spiders’ silk that glowed subtly in the moonlight was made into elaborate gowns and fashionable sashes.

Ree led them through the market ward and into the city proper; the grand structures of Praan stood above and around them. It wasn’t the first time, nor would it be the last, but these monstrous, stone-and-mortar buildings always made her feel like a child clinging to her mother’s fingers. *The mother I don’t remember,* she thought sadly before she could help herself. The buildings had mostly been chiseled to perfection from the light gray stone of the mountain around them, but were also speckled with myriad colors in the forms of house flags, wall-paintings depicting entire scenes from literature or history, or brightly hued flowers made to grow in window-boxes. The structures reached toward the sky like a child’s slim fingers, supplicating the sky for stability and prosperity. *Peace and Glory* read the words at the bottom of the city’s official banner, displayed everywhere by artisans, taverns, guardhouses, and slums alike. The standard wavered in the perpetual breeze, brashly gold as the sunset.

The metropolis sprawled in all directions, but the city’s streets sloped gently upward, as

they had in Briia. The way that it had been built on a clear precipice did not change the fact that it still sat midway up the highest mountain in the range. More than once, as Ree looked back at Ien, he pulled his robes closer to him and his hood closer around his face—and she could tell it wasn't just because of fear of being recognized. It was *cold* this high up, especially if one was not used to it as Ree was, and would only become colder still the closer they got to her destination: the Palace of the Courts.

The Palace sat as far back as the city would go, actually carved into the mountainside rather than quarried from the hills. The gentle slopes of the city streets eventually surged upward to give way to the massive hunk of rock that was Mount Yarah. The Palace gleamed white against the gray of the mountain, drawing every eye to the massive center of power for the known world. The structure loomed smoothly above everything, windowless and impenetrable, save for one tiny window at the very top: the Apex Chamber. A tall iron fence protected the building from outsiders; inside the ring she could see a walkway surrounded by the green of a garden and a smattering of tiny yellow and blue flowers. The blossoms had to be resilient, if they survived at this altitude. Two men in light armor and bearing spears stood at the gate.

Ree and Ien weren't the only travelers heading to petition the Courts. Other ship captains and their crewmembers had formed a disorganized line from the gate; none were accompanied by their Navigators, and Ree found herself the recipient of a few curled lips and dirty glances. Some men sported the long dark mustaches and dirks of Karam, and women of the same city dressed in long skirts that dragged the ground behind them. Men and women alike from the valley floor town of Tinna wore vests and loose trousers of all colors. One man wore dark purple trousers with a white undershirt and bright green vest—Ree blinked when she saw that. Had the man even looked in a glass this morning? He looked like a flag.

The Court of Ships received petitions for a few hours of every day, but the Palace opened its gates to the captains of the mountain chain only once a year, claiming that whoever had the most impressive reputation and résumé would, eventually, be on the short list to pilot one of the giant carrier ships of the governing body. It was her dream, what she wanted more than anything. Even now her face lit up at the mere prospect, as it did every year when the Palace opened the gates to the common public. *Just a few more steps, now.* This year would be different.

Ree led them straight to the guards at the gates. There was no need for her to wait at the end of the line—the applications were due today, and the Court of Ships no doubt had left orders for any applicants to be shown inside immediately. The men gave Ree sour glances—ones that clearly questioned her qualifications for the position—but when she stated her business they stood out of the way. Disgruntled murmurs rose from the crowd behind; Ree hid her smirk as she and Ien walked through the gates and then up to the double doors of the Palace.

The large wooden doors were inlaid with gemstones and gilt, and they swung open to reveal an enormous entrance hall that could have housed six or seven of the Courts' carrier ships end-to-end from the front of the hall to the back. The painted ceiling stretched forever overhead, supported by infrequently-placed pillars of carved stone. For a terrifying moment, Ree felt infinitesimal under that ceiling, like the world had opened its mouth and swallowed her whole. Who was she kidding? Nola was right. They would probably be in Port Aria by this time next week. Doors marched up the sides of the room. The focal point of the room, however, was the grand staircase arching upward at the end of the hall that would carry her up to the sixth floor. As she strode with purpose down the hall toward the stairs, it would carry her dreams upward as well.

They had reached the bottom of the staircase when she heard Ien say, "Ree." His voice

sounded so tiny in that giant space. She turned around, and he was staring at his feet with an even greater intensity than normal, something like horror in his eyes. “Ree, go on without me,” he whispered. “I’ll wait here.”

She tilted her head to the side, but he wouldn’t look at her. Her heart throbbed in her chest. *I have to go up there on my own?* “That’s fine,” she said, turning away before he could see the disappointment on her face, and placed her foot on the first stair, then the second, then the third.

#

Ien’s own shallow breath was all he could focus on. He could *feel* something beneath his feet. It felt like rage, like pain and hopelessness and desire pouring into him at once. He felt like he might explode. *This*, was his only emphatic thought. Sadness, his own, filled him. *This place*. He watched Ree mount the staircase. Guilt filled him at leaving her alone to face the Court, but he knew he had done the right thing by staying out of this particular affair.

He hoped.

Chapter 4

THE APPLICATION PROCESS

Ien's cold feet . . . Ree growled to herself as she took the stairs two at a time. The past few days had been like one odd thing after another with that Navi. First the fiasco in Briia, then the unwillingness aboard the *Arienna* to tell her anything about that *man*. He had better shape up soon. She had no time for his idiocy.

Especially since today was the day. Today was the day she was finally going to join the ranks of the Court captains who could call one of those giant carriers their own. Today would be different than the past three years. She raced upward, trying to stifle the grin on her face.

The stairs reached an upper level that circled the lobby with elegantly-carved pine railing and ended before a grand set of double doors that opened to reveal yet another set of stairs, these marching in a calculated spiral into the belly of the Palace. The capitol seemed to reach forever into the sky, but after the first flight of steps, Ree didn't notice the height, even though nerves made her fingers twitch on the banister.

They *had* to accept her application this year. She was a better sailor than all those other idiots that would no doubt be applying. She had heard their names enough around town over the past year. Renn Terra, from Karam, a man who preferred to let his knives do his talking and had no sense for politics. Brannai Drun, from Vilomel, a soft man with soft fingers and a sense for wine but nothing else. The only man she thought might be able to beat her would be Kraen Ingarthi, because he was from Valt, and men and women from that village were always hard and unreadable—she had no idea what his strengths and weaknesses were. Living in a cold, inaccessible village on top of one of the highest mountains in the range made for a great upbringing—if by “great” one meant “hard, unforgiving, and nearly illiterate.” In any case, men and women who ventured down the slopes to Briia from Valt—on foot, since no ship could reach that kind of an altitude —were usually hardy and immovably strong. But she was the only one among them who had been continuously petitioning the Court of Ships for so long.

Other sailors she knew, men and women alike, scoffed at her for wanting to become “a dog of the government,” as they so eloquently called it. They didn't understand why she would want to end her “freedom” as her own captain, her own merchant and businesswoman, and enter into the service of the Courts. Truth be told, she didn't want to give up that liberty. However, some things were more important than others. To get what she wanted, to get to the *other side*, it required a ship beyond all imagination of power and stability.

Growing up in Praan, she had had a front row seat to the flurry of activity that the Court ships inspired in the metropolis. The city markets depended on the trade that the giant ships brought, and the ships brought everything available in all the great cities of the mountain range. Watching flavors of all cities, great and small, trickle in to grace the streets of Praan had always filled her with wonder. What new things awaited her beyond the mountains, beyond even the fabled outer foothills? Was there truly a place where the land was flat and the sun could be watched stretch across the sky from dawn to dusk? Where people made ships to cross giant bodies of *water* instead of the sky? She had to know.

Ree felt acutely conscious of the fact that the Court was only two more floors up, and now one. She slowed her breakneck pace to a more pensive climb; she gripped the glossy railing painfully.

When she finally made it to the fourth floor, Ree's heart felt like it was going to pound right out of her chest onto the floor. This was it. Heavy wooden doors stood between her and the

Court of Ships, that infamous group of people that would decide her destiny. She brushed off her anxiety—as much as she could, anyway—and pushed through the double doors before her.

Immediately, the seven people seated around the wide, rectangular room looked up at her. Each one of them, man or woman, looked down their noses at her, despite the fact that they were seated and she standing. Each of the Court members sat at his or her own large desk piled with papers. The desks marched up the room across from each other, three on each side, until culminating in the desk at the end of the room for the High Captain of Ships, facing the door. The gray floor had been covered by a lush red and gold rug, and the gilded lamps around the room, set with mirrors to magnify the illumination, filled the space with a warm, welcoming light. The two women and five men ceased scribbling and calling numbers to one another as soon as she entered. They all stared at Ree with disapproving scowls etched across their faces.

I am alone, a voice inside her quailed. She squashed it and stepped forward.

If this had been her first time entering this room, Ree would have been surprised and intimidated that the Court did not meet in a lofty chamber of high benches and echoing walls. This way, they seemed more human, more like normal people. Of course, that made them even more terrifying than their station proclaimed them to be.

“Katrya Millor,” said the woman seated at the desk nearest the door. “You’re back.”

And of course, she wasn’t a naïve deckhand anymore, and this wasn’t her first flight with the Court. She knew their dance now.

“Of course I am,” she scoffed. “You missed me.” She made herself swagger to the desk and lean over the woman. Somehow, Rinna Mareion *still* managed to look *down* her nose through her spectacles at Ree.

The woman, probably in her mid-fifties but would only admit to forty-seven if asked, sniffed loudly. “We were all under the impression that the unfortunate whirlwind incident of a few months ago had killed you.” A sour smile oozed across her face as she adjusted the tiny spectacles on the end of her nose. “Fortunately, here you are. Mount be praised.”

Ree had become accustomed to the level of sarcasm and contempt that she had always received from these people. It still rankled that they thought her so incompetent that a little *whirlwind* would do away with her, and the fact that they thought her unfit for the position because of her *sex*, whereas this woman ridiculed her each time she came. But there was nothing she could do about it. Her experience would have to stand on its own; this woman certainly would not vote Ree in for love.

Why does she get to be on the Court? What makes her so special? The insult in the woman’s eyes rankled more than she wanted to admit.

For now, she turned her arrogance back on. Acting weak in front of these fools would only draw vultures to rot. “I’m here to see that man,” she said loudly, leaning over with both hands on Rinna’s desk. “You know, the one with the papers I need to sign.” She looked up pointedly at the man she needed to see—Barin Walfored, the High Captain of Ships.

He was arguably the most handsome man she had met in her whole life. The first time she had walked into this room, young and green and hopeful, his face had taken her breath away. Now, three years and three meetings later, she still had to blink twice to make sure her eyes were working properly. Ree was rarely impressed by men, if their names weren’t Mack or Ien. But Barin Walfored, with his square jaw and tanned features, dark eyes, and black hair with wings of white above his ear, was *not* most men. The man had once been the captain of his own trading vessel. His muscles, lean but strong, spoke of years spent in the skies. And before he had worn the captain’s badge . . .

The bare shadows of wings still accompanied the crows' feet in the corners of his eyes. And Ree knew that in the palm of his right hand was carved a bright green etching of an exotic flower. The man had been a Navigator.

She didn't know how this man had risen so far above the position that society had delegated him. Navigators were ignored; they weren't allowed to be deckboys, let alone High Captain of Ships. But somehow, those restrictions had not applied to Barin Walford.

Ree barely understood the implications of *this* man holding *this* coveted position. Ien had tried to explain it to her once. "*Barin is not well liked in the Navigator community,*" he had said. "*He is, to put it delicately, evil.*"

"Katrya," the High Captain of Ships said smoothly in a voice like warm mead: soft, smooth, deadly if unchecked. "Welcome back."

Ree stood straight, hearing Rinna scoff derisively. "Barin," she said. "It's good to see you." She smiled, a grin so fake she thought it might crack her teeth.

"Well, let's get your signature on these papers. The applicant pool is a tough one this time around, I fear." The false worry in his voice was enough to make her want to puke.

She strode up the hallway, forcing herself to keep her eyes on the man. She could feel the eyes of the others in the room, like burning daggers in her shoulder blades.

When she arrived at his desk, he pushed one lonely sheet of thin parchment across the surface. She took the pen he offered and signed the paper. She already knew what it said. *Blah blah blah, some nonsense about serving the Court . . . Just give me the ship already.* She smiled at him and pushed it back. As she did so, the paper nicked the edge of her finger, and she snatched her hand away, leaving a tiny drop of blood on the page. The candle on the edge of his desk fluttered in the sudden movement. Walford's gaze flicked to the candle for a split second, and then he resumed his study of her.

"Congratulations," he said. "You've applied. For the fourth time." Handsome or not, she had an urge to slap the greasy smile off his face. *How did a Navigator come to be this callous?*

She rolled her eyes and whirled on her heels, putting him to her back. "For the last time," she retorted over her shoulder as she made her way back to the door.

When she exited the room, she ignored the glares and scowls of contempt that followed them.

Once safely outside the chamber with the double doors shut behind them, she allowed her shoulders to slump, her smile to fall. She exhaled. Done. She began the trek down the stairs, toward Ien and the security of friendship.

Those people . . . no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't shake an anxious feeling deep in her gut. For some unfathomable reason, they hated her. Even the women. That was what didn't make sense. She could have contributed their contempt to the fact that she was a woman overstepping her "station" only if there had not been women among them. And that man . . . He unnerved her, perhaps even more than the creature in Briia had. In Briia, the man in black had been a new threat, a strange punctuation to a strange day. Barin Walford, however, had been sitting at that same desk for four years now, and every year, he did the same thing. Infuriated her, befuddled her. How could one man, one former *Navigator*, be so unreadable and yet so intriguing simultaneously?

She met Ien in the lobby of the Courts' Palace. The man stood in the same position she had last seen him in, silently at the foot of the stairs with his tattooed hands clasped in front of him in the midst of the flurry of activity that was taking place in the Palace. His eyes were closed, but as she neared, they fluttered open to reveal the striking blue of his irises. He looked

almost serene, waiting there for her to return, but his eyes glittered in that dangerous way they did when his anger was too great to express in words. She would have asked, but she was still shaking from the encounter upstairs—*that man is too arrogant*—and it could wait.

“Katrya,” he said quietly but with a hard undertone, “we need to speak when we get back to the *Arienna*.” The anger in his tone sent chills down her spine. Her Navigator didn’t often speak to her that way; in fact, she had never heard his voice quaver as terribly. Ien was a gentle person by nature. Something was wrong, something beyond what had happened in Briia.

She gave a short nod, not trusting herself to speak. Too many potential ears. And too much of a chance for her to blurt things without thinking.

Chaos continued to brew around them. The palace servants, ship captains, and civilians hurried this way and that throughout the lobby. “What’s going on today?” he asked, strange tone gone.

Breaking her eyes away from Ien’s razor-sharp gaze, Ree looked around and took note of the flurry of activity. “Whenever the captain-choosing comes around, the whole city throws a party,” she murmured. “When I was a kid, we would go to the market and get sweets, and my parents would dance . . .” The happiness those carrier ships brought to the people of Praan was astounding.

As they made their way back through the lobby and, beyond that, through the city to the docks, evidence of the festival hung as banners from third-story windows, raced through the streets as children dressed in their best clothes, gallivanted along the streets as musicians and jugglers and foolish men looking for duels. An air of jubilation enveloped Praan, a whisper of joviality and festiveness that only this event could foster. She lived for this. Despite the stress of the day and the aloofness of her friend, her heart swelled at the mere thought of one day coming to Praan and playing a *part* in this wonderful feeling. Each of the traveling ships would return to moor at the dock; each captain would welcome the new member to their ranks. She could only imagine the raucous behavior that would follow. It had to be *spectacular*.

Even though Katrya had already seen twenty-six summers come and go, she felt like a little girl again as they passed the street musicians playing whimsical songs on their lutes, vendors selling sweet buns and spiced meats, and couples dancing in broad daylight in the middle of the street. Fond memories.

She could almost forget Barin Walfored in the excitement, but Ien still brooded, walking behind her as usual, and that bothered her. The man wasn’t usually so touchy. *Was it something I did?* She glanced back at him, and he actually gave her a small smile—a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. *There is something wrong*. Her chest constricted for a moment. Despite the crowds the festivities gathered, she quickened her pace, threading through the throng. They needed to get back to the ship so she could ask him—

A rumble in the sky turned her eyes upward. The pale blue blanket of midafternoon stretched interminably, but that didn’t mean anything. Greatstorms could swirl in at barely a moment’s notice. She waved for Ien to come beside her as she walked. “Ien,” she said quietly once he joined her, head down, eyes forward. They maintained their hurried pace. “Is there . . .”

“Yes.” It was all he said, but it sent panicked shockwaves to her fingertips. She exhaled shortly.

She began to run.

Chapter 5 GREATSTORM

Her feet carried her all the way to the marketplace before the storm hit.

It rolled in out of the southwest like some kind of dark omen. Giant black clouds encased the city, smothering it. Devouring it. The streets of Praan, previously filled to bursting with happy, festive citizens, emptied within minutes. Women ushered their children indoors, and even the alley dogs found places to hide from the strengthening winds. Everyone knew the power of this kind of storm. Katrya ran, heart pounding. The last time a greatstorm had hit Praan, half the market had been destroyed. That had been months ago. Usually these things swirled harmlessly in the void between the mountains, but every now and again they threatened the great cities themselves.

Why does this have to happen now? Her frantic mind immediately went to the worst possible outcome. She could see the city crumbling off the mountainside like so many tiny rocks, the ships smashed to splinters, except for the carriers, which rode the high winds somberly toward the cities across the void, carrying the dead and dying, the family-less, the homeless . . .

Ien grabbed her arm in a rough grip, pulling her up short. “You need to stop panicking,” he said softly. The anger of mere minutes before had evaporated at the knowledge of the coming storm. Navigators could sense when storms were coming; after all, the storms were their fault anyway, manipulating the winds in the void as they always were.

Ree broke Ien’s gaze and glanced down the street. She could just see the stone archway. She and Ien were already halfway through the market to the dock.

“Ree!” she heard from her right.

She turned in Ien’s grip, saw Nola running toward them. Ien released Ree’s arm forcefully.

“Where is Mack?” Nola asked.

Oh Mounts, he’s on the ship.

Ree opened her mouth to respond, and it hit.

The dark cloud over Praan exploded. A scream ripped from her throat as what seemed like a wall of solid rain slammed into her body. It felt like chunks of ice piercing her skin, tugging at her clothes, her hair. The empty street became a battleground of whirlwinds and flying objects. “Katrya we need to get inside,” Nola shouted over the deafening torrent. Ree’s mind flashed to Mack and the *Arienna*. No, no, no.

“Ien, can’t you do something,” she screamed back at him. Overhead, the clouds only darkened. Using the crook of her arm, she tried to hide her face from the near-scalding freezing rain. She peeked out and tried to see through the tempest, all the while taking one step forward, then another. She couldn’t see beyond a few feet; the dock and the stone archway were hidden by sheets and sheets of pounding, unforgiving rain, and the wind lanced her skin. She closed her eyes again. She felt Nola’s hands on her shoulders, dragging her back, towards a more sheltered alley. Before she squeezed her eyes shut and let Nola pull her to relative safety, she barely saw swirling darkness begin to descend on the harbor.

A greatstorm.

#

Bloody crashing captain leaving me with the bloody ship.

Mack grasped at lines and sprinted across the deck of the *Arienna*. The sky had gone black with anticipation of the storm, and drenching rain splattered all around. An atrocious wind sliced through his clothes, straight to the bone. An airborne bar of wood—part of the damn

ship—flew out of oblivion and landed a blow across his cheek, but he didn't have time to stop. For goat's sakes, this was Ree's ship. This had been her *father's* ship. If Mack let some damned greatstorm swallow it whole . . .

But the greatstorm was doing a great job of gobbling the little aircraft. And Mack was only one man. He had lashed the mooring line to the pier, but it wasn't doing any good. *Dammit, dammit, dammit.* The last time he had been in a greatstorm, he had nearly lost an eye. A whole eye. As it was, that chunk the storm *had* taken out of his nose didn't make him any prettier. As he ducked under a bit of rope swirling past his head, he realized that this one was lost. The *Arienna* wasn't made to take a beating like this.

Ree is going to kill me, he growled in his head as he jumped to the pier and sprinted toward the market, abandoning the tiny *kebek* to the mercies of the void.

#

Ien grabbed Ree and Nola in a protective embrace, pushing them further into the alley. He closed his eyes, scowling intensely as he tried . . . something. Whatever. Ree's brain simply sputtered . . . *No, Mack, no.* Over and over again, like a morbid mantra. One of the markings that she could see on Ien's neck—a crude green drawing of a bird—faded nearly to gray as he drained it. Whatever it was Ien was doing, he failed, because the storm raged on just as strongly as before. His eyes gleamed with despair.

What was the man doing? A sudden trickle of dark blood squeezed from both of the wing tattoos at the sides of his eyes. "I can't—"

His words were cut off by a miracle.

The storm suddenly fell *back*, back past the dock and into the void, inexplicably swirling the opposite direction, almost like some unseen force was pushing it away from the city. The winds died quickly, ushered out by whatever it was. It looked as though a giant bubble of . . . something . . . had exploded from the Palace and spread out, out, out, shoving the storm away. Ien let go of the two of them and whirled to stare back the way they had come, a strange mixture of anger and relief on his face. He wiped at the blood on his face, staring at his fingers. The relief quickly dissolved into an ugly rage.

"The Court Navigators," he hissed.

What in the name of Mount Yarah is his problem? She couldn't figure him out. They were alive, they were breathing. She was just grateful no flying objects had collided with her head.

Something seemed odd to her. Why had the bubble come from the Palace if the Navigators aboard the Court carriers had orchestrated it? Maybe it was the point of reference for all of them—maybe they had used it to magnify their abilities. In any case, she didn't care too much. *I have to check and see if Mack—*

With that thought, she was running again with no thought for Nola or Ien. The dock rushed up to meet her. She stared beyond, at the void, for a startling minute. It really seemed like a giant shield had encompassed Praan; the storm still raged beyond the "wall" of invisible energy as magnificently as before, lightning and whirlwind swallowing each other in turn in an intricate dance. Beautiful, when looked at with unendangered eyes. Relief spread through her like warm spiced wine would on a cold day . . . but the feeling dissipated when she turned her attention to the dock.

Half of the dock had been destroyed. Before the strange force field had shoved the storm away, the wind had had its way with a good number of the ships. The giant carriers remained untouched; they had moored at the section of the dock that had been shielded. She supposed that

was good, but . . . Chunks had been torn out of the wooden planks of the dock itself; entire sections were gone. The rest of the ships . . .

She stared at the wreckage of the *Arienna*, just a few stray boards swirling slowly downward. A hollow space opened up in her gut, and as she breathed in, it grew and grew, until she could feel it reaching grubby fingers up her throat. She leaned over and retched onto what was left of the wooden planks of the harbor at her feet. When she could focus again on what was left of her once-graceful ship, she wished she had something left in her stomach to heave. It was gone. *Gone*. The word tumbled around in her head like a loose coin rattling in an otherwise empty box. Only a few shards of wood remained on the pier as a reminder. The rest of the once-beautiful *kebek* had shattered into a million pieces, some swirling in the winds of the greatstorm confined to the void, some careening to crash into the sides of the mountain below. What of Mack? What if he—

“Ree!” his voice called from her left.

She tore her eyes away from the remnants of her ship and found the man running toward her. He looked a little banged up—a couple bruises on his arms, a shallow cut across his face that would no doubt add to his collection of scars—but was otherwise very much alive. He conspicuously didn’t look at the spot where the ship at been docked. “Thank all the crashing Mounts you’re alive.” Despite the relief in his gruff voice, his scowl filled his face.

Ree nodded numbly, acutely aware of the emptiness before her. She watched the greatstorm rage against its container in the void, eyes narrowed, not really seeing the storm. How was she supposed to gain a living now? How was she supposed to *survive*?

“Ien, what is *wrong* with you?” Mack suddenly spat. His voice carried an uncharacteristic strain of concern.

She turned. Her Navigator was doubled over, and as she watched he fell to his hands and knees on the planks of the dock, fists clenched. He coughed once, and blood splattered onto the wood. Ree’s stomach turned. She could almost hear the first words Ien had ever spoken to her, when they had been paired as captain and Navi, six years ago . . . “*As long as the ship is okay, I’ll be okay,*” he had said with a quiet smile.

As long as the ship is okay . . .

She fell to her knees beside her Navi. He coughed again, spraying the dock with more of that ugly red. She distantly noticed a tinge of blue in the blood that was now smeared across his temples. Somehow the blue ink of the wing tattoos must be showing through the blood. A part of him—she wasn’t sure how it worked—had been *attached* to the *Arienna*. That was how it had flown. Something about his soul being connected in an intimate way with the soul of the ship. And now that the ship was gone . . . She placed a hand on his shoulder. What was she supposed to do?

“I’m . . . fine,” he slurred. “Just give me . . . some time.” His ragged breathing slowed, eyes squeezed shut. She could only watch, heart pounding in her ears. Within a few moments, he looked up at her with his icy blue eyes and tried to smile. Blood painted the corners of his lips; it made for a sickly sight, but she was just glad he wasn’t dying. She hoped.

He tried to push himself to his feet, but stumbled. Obviously he was weak. Mack immediately rushed to his side, helping him stand and placing a supportive arm around his shoulders. Katria stood as well, staring into Ien’s face. The lines of pain she saw there stretched deeper than the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes—something *inside* him had been severed.

He caught her gaze. He was leaning on Mack a little too heavily, grimacing a little too obviously. She pursed her lips at him, opened her mouth to ask what he needed. Before she

could, he fell again, before Mack could catch him, clutching his side with gritted teeth as he knelt on the wooden surface of the dock.

“Ah, Katria?” he breathed, scrunching his shoulders together, making himself as small as possible. She could not imagine the pain.

“What? What can I do?”

“Bed,” he whispered. “My head . . .”

Ree looked around at the passersby, all of whom barely noticed that a man in their midst was in extreme pain. Of course, Navigators weren’t real men. Who cared what happened to them? Anger brushed her thoughts. *What do I do with you, Ien?*

“We’ll take him to Janne,” she decided. She fingered the hilt of the long knife at her side. Her longtime friend would help them—Janne was a scholar and knew something of healing herbs. If her father had been alive, she would have taken Ien to him . . . But that ship had sailed six years ago with his death. “Let’s go.” *And now my ship, my father’s ship, will never sail again.*

Mack helped Ien to his feet; the Navi still gingerly held his side, as though his ribs hurt. The group moved slowly away from the dock, away from the empty hole where their livelihood had been. Citizens had begun to inch from their homes and shops, barely glancing toward the tempest that raged safely behind its barrier in the void, and then continuing with their activities. Tension lingered in the atmosphere around the market ward, but Katria could see that this was not an uncommon thing here in Praan. She frowned. She had grown up in this city, and remembered hearing stories about greatstorms tearing ships apart, but never at the dock, and never with the familiarity that these people apparently treated it.

These people just went on with their lives; she, on the other hand, had no idea what she was going to do. The money gleaned from the sale of the wine, presumably clanking in the purse tied to Nola’s belt, was not enough to buy another ship, even one as small as the *Arienna*. What were they going to do? They were stuck in Praan until she could get them in the air again. With a chill, she realized that everything hinged on her becoming a Court captain this year. With a glance at Ien, she wondered if he would be allowed to remain her Navigator if she was indeed chosen—was he too injured to get one of the carriers in the sky? Her best friend’s breathing had grown more ragged, and his blue eyes seemed distant.

“We need to get him to Janne,” she said. “Now.”

#

Barin Walford turned away from the window in his personal office. Rinna stood in front of his desk, hands clasped in front of her, glasses set perfectly on the upturned nose.

“It’s done,” she said unnecessarily.

“I can see that,” he replied, keeping a hint of jollity in his voice. *Feel it, more like.* The greatstorm clamored to be heard even by his drained, dead senses.

Despite the hasty decision that had been made today, he felt accomplished. A plan was beginning to form in his mind.

“Bring me her file,” he said.

As Rinna left the room, he looked down at the sheet of parchment on his desk and rubbed his temples. It was a bill for services rendered. He supposed he would have to deal with this soon. Even though technically the other man hadn’t held up his end of the bargain yet, he had started the procurement process; he would see it through in the next few weeks, if his words were to be believed. And bounty hunters always wanted to be paid up front.

Of course, Barin didn’t believe anything the man told him, and with good reason.

Rinna brought him the file, and he sat down to work, pulling his candle closer to the

sheet. The name on the first sheet: *Katrya Millor*. The second sheet: her application, with a smudge of red at the bottom left-hand corner. A slow smile crept across his lips.

Chapter 6

OPTIONS

The stone door opened slowly, and then Janne Terrin let out a gasp and bundled Katriya up in a suffocating hug. “Ree! So good to see you!” As she noticed the other members of their group, however, she slid away from Ree and backed into the doorway of her streetside home.

Ree could see Janne reading their faces; her gaze lingered on Ien’s exhausted visage, and Mack’s supporting arm, for a long moment. “Maybe not so good,” Janne said quietly. “I suppose you want to come in.” She stood to the side of the doorway, watching Ree’s face carefully.

“I have nowhere else to take him, Janne,” Ree said, stepping past her friend into the house, ignoring the woman’s consternation.

The entrance room, which doubled as a living room, proved welcoming and warmly colored: from the ornate mahogany writing table to the yellow and orange throw rug, Janne’s sense of decoration had always matched her understanding, cheerful personality. The writing table was covered in vellum; she must have been working. A doorway in the far corner of the room led to a small bedroom.

Ree saw it all through a red haze. *My ship*, she thought. *My Navigator*.

“What happened?” Janne asked warily. The slender woman’s cheer had vanished completely at the sight of Ien being lain on the brown sofa at the side of the room.

“My ship,” was all Ree had to say.

Janne’s brown eyes grew wide, obviously putting two and two together. She rushed into the back room, and returned with a pouch of what Ree assumed to be herbs. Ree wasn’t quite sure what the herbs were going to be able to do—the man had no visible wounds apart from the drying blood near his temples—but if Janne could help ease Ien’s agony in any way . . .

“Why is he holding his side?” Janne asked. Before any of them could answer, she had opened his robes and lifted the shirt he wore beneath.

Ree sucked in her breath. Under his shirt was a massive red welt, about the size of her two fists put together, covering one of his larger tattoos. Something about the mark was strange, but she couldn’t quite place it. Ien groaned and tried to cover himself, but Janne pushed his arm away. The Navi seemed to be barely on the verge of consciousness. “It’s gone,” he kept whispering, over and over.

Yes, it’s gone.

Nola, frowning, crept closer to get a better look at the wound. “When did this happen? We were with him the whole time.”

Something strange about the tattoo.

It hit her. It was black. Every other discernable inch of him was covered in red, green, and blue marks: plants, animals, meaningless symbols. But the redness of the welt only obscured a black symbol . . . one that Ree had seen and touched, for luck, every day on the wall of her cabin for six years. “Ien,” she said slowly, tasting the words, making sure they came out correctly. She felt insane for having to ask the question. “The spot on your side. That’s the *syloom*, isn’t it?” When he nodded, she sat abruptly in the chair at the writing table. She had known Navis were connected to their ships through those strange markings, but she hadn’t realized they were *branded* with them . . . Strange power was involved here, something she didn’t understand.

The *syloom* was gone, just like her ship.

“I can’t do much for him,” Janne said softly from where she knelt next to the sofa, her

herbs bag limp in her hand. "He needs sleep. The rest is up to him." She replaced his shirt, then covered his body with a blanket.

As if in answer, Ien groaned and sat up. "No," he whispered. "I have to . . ."

"You have to rest," Ree commanded, staring into his panicked face. She placed her hands on his shoulders, gently pushed him back down.

"The Courts," he whispered. Their faces were only a few inches apart. "The Navigators." He was trying to say something important, but Ree placed a hand on his.

"It's okay. Tell me later."

He shook his head forcefully, or as forcefully as he could. "Ree . . ." Then he slumped backward, head hitting the pillows and eyes closing. Janne handed her a handkerchief, and Ree wiped away the crusted blood at the corners of his eyes, where crows' feet would have been if Ien were older.

My ship. My Navigator. What were they going to do now? Where would they go?

She could feel a fever budding behind her eyes. She traced her fingertips gently on Ien's face for a brief moment. "I'm going to the Palace," she announced, standing, swaying. *What's wrong with me?* Her face felt hot. Her skin felt hot. A wave of heat overtook her body, and she stumbled into Mack.

"Ree, you're burning up," he exclaimed.

That was the last thing she heard, nestled in with the music of her despairing thoughts.

#

When Ree awoke, she felt a breeze tiptoe across her cheeks, leaving freshness in her nose and throat. She did not open her eyes. She only wished to feel the coolness. Licking her lips, she tasted the stain of salt.

She had dreamed of a great empty room beneath the world, beneath the city and the mountains and miles under the sky itself. Empty save for a red, glowing chain, slithering toward her across the floor as though propelled by wind or water, a heavy iron snake growing closer, closer. Heat emanated from it, from her fingertips, from everything around her. Her throat constricted. She breathed out, and in, and out, and . . .

And then nothing. She woke in a blur of tears and fever heat.

What was left of Praan's late evening light slid into the room through the slatted window in Janne's bedroom, where Ree found herself as she opened her eyes. Janne, as a numbers woman for the Palace, lived in the middle-class district and could afford actual glass windows, no matter how bubbly they were. Ree slipped out of bed and stared outside. She saw the city, sitting in the shadow of Mount Yarah, which rose high and mighty in the west. A trickle of orange light could be glimpsed at the edges of the void, she knew, but she could not see the void from this close to the mountainside. Once the sun went behind the mountain, the world grew dark here. The citizens of Praan called it "sunset darkness."

"Do you need anything?" Janne called from the doorway.

From the bed, Ree looked hard at her friend. The slim woman had perhaps lost even more weight since the last time they had seen each other; her clothes hung from her body like so many bed curtains, and her thin hair flew away from her bun in untamed wisps.

"How is he?" Ree asked.

Janne's lips pursed into a thin line. "Sleeping still."

"Good." Ree put her hand on the bed she had awoken in, Janne's bed, where she didn't remember being deposited. *Why did I pass out anyway?*

"It's just the stress," Janne murmured, coming over to place a cool hand on Ree's

forehead, and Ree realized she had spoken aloud. “The shock of losing the *Arienna*.” She clicked her tongue in distaste.

Ree closed her eyes. She could no longer sense the fever, but the memory remained, along with a tingle along her arms and the feeling of the dream as it skittered beneath her skin, slouched at the base of her throat. She needed more rest. She needed a new ship.

She needed to make up her mind.

Eyes snapped open. Deep breath. Janne raised an eyebrow. “I’m going out,” Ree announced.

Janne’s other eyebrow joined the first. “No,” was her firm reply. “You are not.”

“Yes.”

Ree got out of bed and pushed past the other woman into the main room, where Nola and Mack sat at the small writing table in ladder-back chairs they had probably dragged from the kitchen.

“Mack.”

She didn’t need to explain. The big man stood when she called him and followed as she headed for the door. Unhalting, she looked at Ien’s exhausted form still prone on the sofa: gaunt cheeks, bags under his eyes. Even the wing tattoos at the corners of his eyes looked shrunken. He slept with his mouth slightly open, covered by blankets despite the heat. She would find him another box for his soul—another ship. She didn’t look back as she and Mack swept through the door and into the darkening city.

He didn’t ask her if it was smart to be out at this hour. He didn’t question her decision to head out of the Harta District. And he didn’t say anything when they came to the north-south crossroads and she turned north, to her left, away from the dock and toward the Palace. Walfored. He had to give her a ship now. There was no other option—Ien’s life could depend on it. She marched right up to the Palace doors. Mack trailed her silently, a looming shadow in the sunset darkness.

She pounded on the doors with both of her fists. Waited. Pounded some more. Petition hours were long past, and no doubt the servants in charge of the door had better things to do than to run for every peasant that showed up at the front. Well, they would run for her. She was Katria Millor and they would listen to her.

“I have business with the Court of Ships!” she screamed through the heavy wooden portal. The opulence of having a wooden *door* of all things grated on her nerves. These low-lives, pretending like they owned the entire mountain chain, using wood for doors. The only wooden thing she had owned . . . had been the *Arienna*. And that was now in splinters on the bottom of the void.

No answer.

She pounded some more, flailing both of her fists against the unyielding surface of the wood.

Still no answer.

Soon she realized that Mack was gently encircling her wrists in his giant hands and pulling her away from the door. She also realized that hot, salty water leaked from her eyelids and splashed onto the cobblestones beneath her feet. “Not fair,” she heard herself murmur.

She had no other option than return to Janne’s. To allow herself to be taken to Janne’s. To Ien, incoherent on the sofa. She sat in the chair by her Navi’s head and trained her eyes on him. She heard Mack mumble something to Nola, a deep rumble, like the noise the mountain makes when boulders have become too cumbersome to hold. The sound became no words in her

ears, only noise.

#

A week of nothing but that noise. Ien woke, moved around, slept again, woke, and slept. When he was awake, Ree waited on him, getting him water and food, anything he could keep down, and wiping the blood from his mouth when he couldn't. The week went by slowly, draining Ree's hope with it. The time drew nearer in which she would need to make a decision: leave Praan with what little money she had, or wait Walfored out and keep hoping he would choose her. She had the money from the wine sale, but it wasn't nearly enough to purchase a new ship; after discussion with Mack and Nola, she resolved at the end of the week to take the money to a bank to see if any interest could be gained, or if she could take out a loan. She would get a job swabbing the deck on another ship. She would get a job stomping grapes at a vineyard outside of Tinna. She would trudge through the snow to the top of the mountain to Valt, the Unreachable City, if it would net her enough cash to put her boots on a ship she could call *hers* once more.

Seven days after the greatstorm, she knew she had to do something besides sit around. She would inquire at the bank today. Just as she was getting ready to leave, however, a knock came at the stone door. She opened it. A man, dressed not unlike the herald who had announced the "all-clear" after the greatstorm, stood at Janne's front stoop.

"Katrya Millor," he said. "You are summoned by the Court of Ships to appear before High Captain Barin Walfored within the hour." He handed her a paper and then turned on his heel and left her there, mouth slightly agape.

The other years she had been in Praan for the choosing of the captains, she had not been summoned so. Walfored must have wanted to embarrass her by summoning her, raising her hopes, and then dashing them to shreds. She crumpled the parchment in her hand without reading it. This was the lowest he had ever stooped in his inexplicable desire to chastise her. A scream burbled up from her middle and sat in her throat, tempered only by her wish that Ien remain asleep.

She looked behind her to where her Navigator slept on the sofa. *Ien, I am going to get you a new ship.* His tattooed face seemed at peace, at least. Nola came up behind her, peering at Ree and then down at the crumpled note in her fist with a knowing look. Ree scowled.

"I will be back," she whispered furiously. She was going to give Barin Walfored such a large piece of her mind it would burn his hands to hold it.

#

Once again Katrya stood in front of the doors to the Court of Ships, biting her lip in anticipation. *Damn crashing man*, she grumbled to herself, thinking of Walfored sitting so smugly in his high seat. He certainly hadn't taken very long to make his decision to reject her. Seven days. She could imagine how his face would have curled into a gloating mask when the Court had discussed her application. Her own face pulled back into a scowl just thinking about it.

The door swung open at her touch, but when she saw the inside of the room, she took a step back in shock. Walfored, along with Rinna Mareion and the other five members of the Court, stood in a half-circle around the door, with Walfored at the circle's point, facing her with that slimy smile oozing across his overly handsome face. Their formal orientation was odd. She tried to hide the surprise from her features, but as his smile deepened, she knew she was unsuccessful.

"Katrya," he said suavely. Everything about him was suave. It was sickening. "Welcome."

“Well,” she said, regaining her composure and placing her hand on her hip. “Go ahead and give it to me. I have things to do and places to go, so if you could make this quick I will be on my way. I know how much my presence bothers you.” She glared pointedly at Rinna, who at least had the decency to blush furiously.

He nodded. “Yes, you will be given your assigned ship shortly, Katrya. Please sign these forms, and then you can be on your way.” He extended a sheaf of parchment and a pen to her.

Assigned . . . ? Her breath caught in her throat. “What?”

That must have been the reaction he was expecting, because he smirked, pulling the scar that stretched across his face. “You have been chosen, Katrya. Or, can I call you Ree? We will become good friends, I hope.”

This man had just given her a ship.

The tips of her fingers began to quiver with excitement. She tried not to show the emotion, but it was difficult. Four years of waiting. She couldn’t wait to tell the others. Especially Ien. He would love to be the Navigator of a giant ship. It would be good for him, keep his mind strong.

“When can I inform my crew?” she asked, maintaining her posture.

“You may inform them whenever you wish,” Walfored answered. “One caveat, though,” he said, the smile slipping away. His dark eyes glittered with hidden threat. “You will not be able to bring them on the ship with you.”

The excitement curdled in her stomach. “You aren’t serious.” A lump appeared at the bottom of her throat.

Rinna, standing to the left of Walfored holding a sheaf of papers with long fingers, shrugged carelessly. “The law is very clear, Katrya.”

She stood, stunned, as her frantic mind tried to make sense of the woman’s words. The law. She tried to imagine running a ship without Nola’s quick fingers and steady expertise with men and merchants, without Mack’s gruff words and easy strength.

Without Ien’s soft smile as he stood at the helm, guiding the ship gently through the winds of the void.

How can I do this to them? She *had* to take this opportunity. They knew how much this meant to her. *This isn’t fair.* She knew that the despair must have been painted on her face, but she didn’t care. She forced herself to exhale.

Chapter 7

LETTERS AND WARNINGS

Dear Ien, Mack, and Nola, the letter read.

Ien could already tell this was going to be bad. Three days without word from Katrya, and now this. Three days since she had been summoned and left—while he had been crashing *asleep*. Oh, yes. This was not going to be a happy letter for Ien. The now-constant headache pounded a furious rhythm against his skull.

The bright sunlight streaming through Janne's open bedroom window seemed at odds with Ien's dark thoughts. He lay in her bed, trying to convince himself to get up despite the ache in his side and his head. Ten days since the *Arienna*, and he felt a bit better, but the hole in his mind and on his body yawned every larger. And now Katrya was about to add to that.

I hope you have been faring well. Janne knows how to take care of guests. Ien, I hope you have recovered or are recovering nicely.

These words didn't sound like Katrya. The woman was gruffer than this; plus, she had seen part of his "recovery," and she knew it hadn't been going "well." Ien crossly elbowed the pillow that he leaned against, gave a restless ruffle to the thick sheet of parchment, and continued reading.

I am doing well in the Palace. I have been chosen as a captain for this year, so they have had me in non-stop training and meetings. Well, Ien had guessed that. However, I have some news. Here it came. I will not be able to bring you on board my ship. They apparently have very strict laws governing the selection of the captains, and this is one of them. I am to be given my own crew and Navigator. I am dreadfully sorry about this. I wasn't aware of this law when I applied to be a captain. I hope you understand.

Boom, boom, boom.

Ien slowly put the letter down to his lap, atop the thin blanket that covered his legs, and closed his eyes, breathing out through his nose. There it was. Exhaustion descended like so many rocks down a mountainside. The feeling that constricted his chest could only be . . . fear? She was really doing it. And he wasn't going to be given a chance to stop her.

She was *dreadfully* sorry? What a joke.

Nola, from her seat at the small stone table in Janne's bedroom, gave a snort of laughter. "You see?" When he reopened his eyes to look at her, she waved the knife in her hand at the parchment. "She became a captain just like she wanted. She's got that man on her little finger." She nodded to herself and went back to slicing her apple.

Something about the way Nola said that made Ien's insides cringe. For one, she was wrong. Barin Walfored answered to no one, that much was sure. Nola just didn't know the extent of the man's wiles. For Mount's sake, the man had been a Navigator, and not one of the sleazy money-grubbing tattooed freaks that polluted the market nowadays. He had been like Ien—born with the Navigation tattoos. He had betrayed his own people just to become the High Captain of Ships for the Court, to what end Ien didn't know. Ien's stomach turned just at the thought of Walfored's smug face, the faded wings at the corners of his eyes. What a waste of a man. A waste of a *Navigator*.

He picked up the letter again. *I am sending part of my advance payment. That should cover any fees that Ien's wounds incur, and you all will at least be able to eat while you look for other work. Again, I am sorry. I will visit when I can. Regards, Katrya.*

"Advance?" he asked out loud, folding the parchment and placing it on the bedside table.

Without looking at him, Nola hefted a small purse of coins with the hand holding her knife, then let it fall to the table with a clink, resuming her task without a word.

Regards, he thought. *She sends her regards*. They had known each other for years, and she sent her regards. She couldn't even come visit in person to give them this news? His anger rose as a wave within him. Walfored wasn't going to win this round. Ien wasn't going to let him.

A small voice at the back of Ien's head tittered. *You aren't at war with Barin Walfored*, it said reproachfully. *Katrya is allowed to make her own decisions. This is what she's wanted her whole life*. He knew that. But it wasn't right. Walfored was getting Ree, and Ien was getting . . .

The task of finding another job.

And then there was the question of that man in the prison in Briia. Ien still intended to find out what exactly that lunatic wanted from him, but he would need a ship to do so.

He noticed vaguely that he had crinkled his bed sheet in his fists, and that Nola stared at him without blinking. As his muscles constricted, the continuous vague ache in his right arm poked at his mind, but he pushed it away. There were bigger things at hand than that strange man at the prison. Katrya Millor had become a foolish pawn in Walfored's game—a game in which she had no place. Slowly, he released his grip on the blanket and smoothed it out, trying to make sense of his feelings while his insides raged without tether. How dare she? *She had to*. She had to leave them? *It is her dream*.

"Well," he said instead of voicing the tempest in his thoughts, "what are we going to do?"

Nola moved her gaze from him to the bag of coins on the table. "Mack has always wanted his own ship," she said carefully, narrowing her eyes in thought. She leaned back in the wooden chair, crossing her legs and kicking up a foot absently. "And you still need to get your license renewed," she added, gesturing absently in his direction with the knife. A smile played on her full lips despite the worry he knew she felt. "Maybe we can make this work."

Ien felt his face draw down into a scowl. *Yes*, he thought, *we can make this work. But will it?* Plus, she was right. He did still need to renew that damn license. *If only they weren't so strict with Navigators*, he thought sourly. *But of course we're only second-class citizens*.

"Come on," Nola said, standing. "Let's go find Mack and see what he thinks." She hefted the purse and tied it to the belt cinching her waist, allowing it to dangle at her side. The coins within clinked together—Ien winced unconsciously at the noise.

He nodded, trying to push his dark thoughts to the back of his mind for now. There would be plenty of time to worry about these things later. When they started looking for a new ship. When Ien had to bind himself to a new vessel. He still felt worry for Katrya, and anger at the callousness of the letter, but he, Nola, and Mack had things to do. He couldn't allow himself to get distracted by his own mind.

He pushed back the blanket and carefully brought his legs over the side of the bed. An uncomfortable tug at his middle reminded him why he needed rest. Ships didn't like to be forgotten. On bad days, he could still hear the echoes of his first ship's screams raging around his cranium, and it had been six years since the untimely destruction of *that* one. The *Arienna* had especially seemed . . . adamant. Harsh, even. His insides still shuddered at the thought of the ship exploding *inside* his brain, around him, through him . . . Blood on the dock, blood on his hands, blood in his throat, behind his eyes . . .

Nola's careful touch on his arm brought him back to reality. He looked up at her, saw that her face was a study in concern. Ien tried his best to wipe away his scowl and stood. He wasn't going to get anywhere today acting like a novice. This wasn't his first recovery.

Just the hardest.

He stood slowly, nodded, and, wishing his robes weren't so wrinkled, followed Nola as she led them through the small house. Janne's house was tiny length-wise, but two stories tall. Within the city, it was easier to build *up* than *out*. The mountain ledge could only reach out so far into the void; but the mountain itself was tall and strong, and stone was easily found for building material. Here in the middle-class Harta District, wood was too expensive to use for anything but decorative purposes. When they stepped from the guest bedroom into the rectangular living space, it seemed crammed with a table, chairs, and sofa, but he remembered that there was another floor above them that looked just like this.

Janne sat at the table beneath the front window, taking advantage of the midafternoon light and writing something cautiously on a sheet of parchment. The sturdy table and two chairs here, along with the one chair in the bedroom and its twin upstairs in the other space, were the only wooden things she owned, and Ien knew she was proud of the set. Her long blonde hair was tied back in a thin tail that reached her waist, and her ankle-length green skirt matched the hue of her contemplative eyes. She wore a simple cream-colored blouse with elbow-length sleeves. A small, purple drawstring bag rested on the table next to her hand.

When Nola and Ien entered the room, Janne looked up and smiled vaguely. "Are you finally out of bed?" she asked, setting her pen down on the table. Ink had stained the tips of her fingers gray in places. Janne never seemed to realize this detail; her smile never slipped as she readjusted the thin spectacles that perched on the bridge of her nose.

Ien had never understood how Ree was friends with this absentminded scholar. Ree was so . . . forceful, blunt. Knew exactly what she wanted and how she was going to get it. The exact opposite of Janne, who only seemed to want to write poems and research different ways of growing strange flowers in her home—at this altitude! The woman was mad. Even now there was a tiny green *something* in the shallow stone pot on the window sill. Ien's ribs ached guiltily, and he admonished himself silently. Janne had allowed him to sleep in her bed for the last several days. The least he could do was show her some respect. He smiled and bowed his head.

"Thank you again for allowing me to rest here during my recovery," he said.

Janne's eyes clouded with worry. "You're not leaving yet, are you?"

Nola shook her head. "We are just going to find Mack. He went down to the docks earlier this morning, and we need to talk to him about what our next move will be."

"Yes," Janne admitted, nodding gravely, "that is probably wise." She then turned a surprisingly sharp gaze on Ien. "Don't over exert yourself. You're still fragile."

After Ien, somewhat taken aback by her tone, assented to the demand, she returned her attention to the letter in front of her. Just like they had ceased to exist. The pouch by her hand looked suspiciously like the one now hanging from Nola's belt. *I wonder what Ree told her. Probably the same nonsense.* He could feel his anger rising, and instead of saying anything, he just followed Nola across the room and through the door into the streets of Praan.

The city still surprised him, even after nearly fifteen years of coming here, even living here sometimes. There was so much life here, so much energy. Janne lived on a busy street near in the western quarters of Praan—almost next to the Arlyn District, but far enough away so as not to be terrible real estate. As he and Nola stepped into the street, he lifted the sleeve of his robe and glanced down at the license bars in the elbow of his left arm. He would have to visit the Arlyn District soon, if he didn't want to attract even more unwanted legal attention. The license was now nearly two weeks overdue to be renewed.

However, he and Nola walked in the opposite direction, toward the dock. If there was anything Mack was good at, it was ships. The man acted like he had been born with a mooring

line in his grubby little fist. On their way through the city, they skirted the Maniq District—the poorer part of town—and the center of town, through which they had run the day the *Arienna* had been destroyed. His head gave a reminiscent throb as they took the street parallel to the main road.

The dock was more crowded than the last time Ien had seen it, if that was possible. More ships had moored at the piers that protruded into the void—small personal *kebeks*, larger merchant *barques*, and even grander passenger ships waited to return to the air, trembling with invisible excitement and impatience. Of course, he had a heightened sense of exactly what ships “felt.” Looking at one particular craft, of similar size and build of the *Arienna*, Ien felt a tiny tug at his heart. The hole where the *Arienna* had been ached uncomfortably.

Weaving in and out of travelers and salesmen, it took them some time to locate Mack. Praan’s dock was constructed in a rough semicircle, following the contours of the mountainside, and stretched the entire length of the city facing the void. They passed sellers of all kinds, six different taverns emitting raucous noises even this early in the day, and pier after pier of ships. Ien had never been able to get used to this much noise.

Soon enough, Mack waved at them from the edge of a pier that was the current home of a large wooden vessel with the words *Summer Wind* painted in blue on the side. “The captain of this ship says he can take us to Port Aria for a small fee,” he said in greeting. In the six years Ien had known him, the man had never been one for pleasantries. All business, all with that gruff voice of his. He stood in the noonday light with his hands on his hips—one hand right above his pistol—and his arms exposed to the sunshine. His grin filled his face.

Nola placed her hands on her hips and gazed up at the ship with a critical eye, and Ien turned his attention to it as well. High sides, three tall, thick masts with accompanying white sails, portholes for the lower cabins, and large white side-sail wings that would stretch at least twenty feet from the ship’s hull, now resting against it, rounded out the appearance of the passenger ship. Nola nodded. Obviously Mack was all for leaving Praan far behind them, and had found their best option.

As was Ien. The inside of his elbow tickled with the mark that clearly *was not* there.

Mack looked at the pouch at Nola’s side. “Is that what I think it is?”

Nola continued to nod. “How much per person?” she queried with a gesture toward the ship.

“Five for each of us . . . and ten for him.” Ien saw Mack’s eyes flick to him and back to Nola like lightning.

Ien suppressed a sigh. The three of them were friends, had stood by each other’s sides—and Katrya’s—for six long years, but no one could circumvent the rules that society had placed upon them. Navigators were *less*. That much was painfully true. Even Nola and Mack—even *Ree*—had tendencies. Like Mack’s eye twitch. Of course passage would cost more for Ien. Resignation was like a second skin to him.

Nola frowned. “Five *gold*? Or five silver?”

Mack raised his eyebrows, stretching the old white scar that arched across his face from chin to hairline, and that was enough answer for Ien. Ree’s money would disappear quickly.

“When did you want to leave?” Mack asked, casting his green gaze between the two of them.

Ien shrugged. “I need to renew my license before we move anywhere,” he said, thinking of the Arlyn District and the appointment that awaited him. Barin Walfored would hear no excuses if Ien were to shirk on renewing his license much past this date.

The man was an idiot, but he was a powerful idiot, and nothing could be done about it.

Nola nodded. “And I want to try to see Ree while we’re still here. I know she is probably busy, but she will make time for us.” The confidence in her voice remained unshaken, even after reading that cursed letter. Ien wished he could say the same for himself.

Mack’s face pulled down in a thoughtful scowl as he stared at a point beyond them, eyes unfocused. “I imagine the captain will wait for at least one more day. He said he had some business in town anyway.” When his eyes came back into focus, he trained them on Ien. “Do you want me to go with you?”

Ien waved him off. “No, I’m fine by myself.”

Despite the way the two of them narrowed their lips and eyes at his nonchalant tone, they didn’t say anything when he turned away and retraced the path he and Nola had taken along the dock. The indicative blue robes of his profession—not to mention the wing tattoos on his face—acted like a beacon in attracting unwanted attention, yes, but it wasn’t like Ien couldn’t take care of himself. Just because he wasn’t attached to a ship didn’t mean his tattoos didn’t still work.

The majority of them, anyway.

In a roundabout way, that was another reason he needed to renew his license. If he started using his ink noticeably, for anything, that would no doubt attract the wrong kind of attention. Of course, Ien came from a profession for which *any* kind of attention was the wrong kind. Even the gazes he gleaned from the passersby, sailors, and citizens of Praan were shifty, untrustworthy. Sometimes he wished he had never been born into this culture.

Then again, he hadn’t. He didn’t often think about that fact.

Soon he stood at the edge of the Arlyn District. Like the other districts of Praan, each street of the district was marked with a metal street sign that had been hung from the sides of the nearest buildings. The iron signs boasted the district’s infamous title. This area was set apart in other ways than just street signage, however. Ien had felt like he was physically walking into a web of slime when he had set foot on Togrñ Street for the first time, years ago. The place wasn’t a dump, but there was something about it that wasn’t completely *right*. The cobblestones were littered with paper and discarded food, and skinny children, with their skinny dogs, had reign of the streets. Just like the rest of the city. Street vendors hawked apples, grilled birds, and meat pies. Just like the rest of the city. Women haggled, and men guffawed and pushed out their chests, some carrying pistols like Mack’s and some with slender swords at their waists. Just like the rest of the city. Something, though, was *different*.

Ien had long since learned how to pick out the *different*. He noticed, as he continued along Togrñ and passed such street vendors, that though the women looked more tired than perhaps a woman in the affluent Corsith District, they all wore expensive-looking brooches and bracelets. And the skinny children were only skinny *because* they were children, not because they were hungry. And the men . . . they all had a strange darkness behind their shifting eyes. Here, just as everywhere, Ien received piercing glances, but those looks were themselves different. Exacting. Expectant. These people were used to seeing his kind.

A cloth shop halfway down Togrñ boasted long swathes of blue silk, just like the robes Ien wore over his tan breeches, white shirt, and gray vest. The blue robes, embroidered on the hem with golden patterns, some like flowers exploding into bloom, some like birds about to take flight, were in many ways a symbol of his office. Though now he allowed his to flow openly, revealing the clothes underneath, his *kind* were supposed to hold them closed, with heads down, in subservience to the “true” citizens, and most of the time he observed this idiotic custom. Here,

though, there was no need. In the square ahead of him, where the four main streets of the Arlyn District intersected and where most of the business took place, he counted no less than three Navigators hurrying about doing their own errands. None of them looked in his direction. In most parts of the city, seeing a Navi without an escort was unheard of. It was common, however, to see Navigators in this place. After all, this was the unofficial district of the Navis. No other places in the city catered to them as much as this.

Every city had a section like this. It wasn't the most well-trafficked of any town, but still a necessity in the day-to-day life of the mountains. This district was the unofficial home of the tattoo market.

Ien smirked absently as he continued through the square and turned right onto Brelo Road. On a deeper, more emotional, more *raw* level, Ien knew the reasons this system existed the way it did, why the tattoo market was booming, why people hated Navigators with every part of their beings.

It was because at the end of the day, Navigators were criminals. People who had done wrong in the past. Arson, larceny, murder. Serious crimes. As punishment, the Court branded them—literally, with the ink that gave them their abilities—and sent them to work on ships in a strangely symbiotic and dangerous relationship. It was a neat little trap. There was no way to escape or rise up—despite the amount of power commanded by Navigators, it all stemmed from a ship, and a ship could be destroyed at a moment's notice.

That had become all too clear in the massacre of not ten years before. Ien had been thirteen years old when some Navigators had decided enough was enough and had staged an uprising on Praan—he had watched with a child's eyes as the Navis' ships had been burned and thrown into the void like so much kindling. The carrier ships and their Navigators answered only to the Courts, and their power trumped anything Ien had ever seen.

The politics of it was sickening.

On Brelo, he ducked into the first shop on the right. The sign above the door indicated in purple paint that it was "Remil's," though he had been here so many times he didn't need to read it. One mark for each season of the year . . . that was twenty-four marks since he had started coming to Remil. Trust wasn't something he could always afford, but Remil had been a confidant and, at times, friend to Ien when it mattered most. Right now, what mattered was the fact that Ien didn't want to get thrown in jail. Again.

When Ien entered the dark, empty dispensary, there was no one in the front room, but as soon as he closed the door behind him, a small, nondescript man swept into the area from the door in the back, into the light of the lamp on the table in the middle of the room. Remil was . . . well, he was nondescript. His medium-length graying hair was held back from his forehead with a simple black tie, and he wore a plain white shirt tucked into plain brown breeches and plain brown boots. His face was plain. His expression seemed disinterested at first, but when he saw Ien, his gray eyes lit up and a smile stretched his narrow lips.

"Ien Sandir," he said. "You're overdue." He gestured to one of the chairs. "Have a seat."

Good old Remil. The man was reliable enough that Ien knew what to expect from him, and professional enough that he didn't need to be told to do his job.

"Can I get you a drink?" Remil asked as Ien seated himself. Ien shook his head, but Remil smirked and walked to the bar in the corner anyway.

Ien snorted, rearranging his robes around him as he shifted to hold his left sleeve above the elbow, resting his forearm on the chair arm. He nodded in thanks as the man came back and handed him a glass full of dark golden liquid. The first taste of his favorite mead was sweet on

his tongue, the thick honey wine coating his throat and warming him all the way down.

Remil disappeared into the back room, only to emerge in a few moments pushing a contraption of wires and gears. It resembled a cart like one of the ones pushed by street vendors. On the side of it was a sort of transparent pouch. Inside the pouch were three glass syringes, all with different color liquid inside: one black, one blue, and one red. A strange-looking gun lay on top of the cart, connected to the contraption itself with two wires: one at the hilt of the gun and one where the trigger would normally have been. Instead of a barrel, the gun had a scooped-out indentation just big enough for one of the syringes.

Ien tried not to stare at the red syringe.

Remil took the black syringe and loaded it into the gun, then positioned himself into the chair directly to Ien's left so that he could easily reach Ien's arm. He pulled a small lever on the cart contraption, and a whirring noise emitted from the device. A needle head emerged from the gun in Remil's hand. Ien looked away, staring around the room, though he knew it was still as uninteresting as it had been for six years.

When the tip of the needle entered his skin, he winced, but the sting was nothing new. He blinked quickly, exhaled through his nose. Closed his eyes. "Hear any good news lately?" he asked Remil over the sound of the tattoo engine.

"There's been a man asking around for a certain Navigator."

"Oh?"

"I haven't met him personally," Remil said. "He has been seen around the city. Asking for a Navigator with a woman captain." Remil raised his eyebrows at Ien and then returned his concentration to the work. The man's thoughts were as plain as the needle now etching a thin black line into Ien's skin.

"You think he was looking for me." No need to phrase it as a question. Ien already knew the answer.

The man, focusing on the device in his hand, narrowed his eyes in concentration. "He wears all black, apparently. Even in this stupid heat."

As soon as the words were out of Remil's mouth, Ien tensed, which elicited a growl from the man and a sharper twinge of pain from Ien's arm. "Sorry," Ien muttered, but his thoughts were elsewhere. Even the pain seemed like a faraway thing.

That man was following him.

Remil sat up straight, and the needle's whirl ceased. Ien inspected the work, a thin black line near his inner elbow. A little blood seeped through the fresh tattoo. Finally he had twenty-five marks.

"Thanks," he said. The man smiled. Ien reached up his right sleeve and into the purse sewn into the fabric, producing two gold coins. Instead of taking the money, Remil just stared at the small hexagonal symbol, still rather raw, that the man in black had branded into Ien's right forearm.

"That doesn't look like it was meant to be in your skin, Ien," Remil said softly. He frowned.

Ien's gaze flicked to the syringes in Remil's tattoo contraption. The red one—red as blood, but with slight bluish undertones in the liquid—bubbled subtly. He exhaled in one short burst of air and let his eyes sink to his forearm. The hexagonal scar was deep red, a different color than the one in the syringe. It was almost similar to one of the many tattoos that snaked around it—though some of the marks had been disturbed with the advent of the new scar, and in an inch radius around it, the color had still not seeped back into the tattoos. What looked like

strands of ivy—usually vibrantly green—were dull and black, and beside them, following his veins, red lightning streaked toward his elbow, only broken by the gray blight in the middle of his arm.

The monstrous man's words still echoed in Ien's mind: "*Consider that my parting gift, rinnaeio. That mark guarantees I will find you.*" What did those words mean? A shudder crawled up his spine.

Ien stood. "Thank you, Remil," he said again. He placed the gold on the tattooing contraption with a clink. "For the drink and for the tattoo. I'll be back in three months." He attempted a smile.

Remil pursed his lips. He stood, staring into Ien's eyes with a searching glint in his own. "I don't ask a lot of questions, Ien," he said softly, even though there was no one else in the parlor. He pointed at his device, at the bluish-red syringe Ien had been trying to avoid. "I've never put anything but black ink on you."

Remil's eyes traveled to the emerald green bird Ien knew decorated the left side of his neck, which had been Remil's work—a piece that had been black when it had first been carved into Ien's skin. "But I don't ask questions. So for years I've kept my eyes on the needle and my foot to the pedal." He stepped closer, dropped his voice even lower. "My advice to you would be to be careful," he whispered. "Don't make a habit of bleeding everywhere, or somebody else will notice what I have sense to keep quiet."

Ien had to stop his eyes from widening, had to catch himself before he blurted his surprise. "Okay," he said instead. Remil nodded shortly, stepped away, and began fiddling with his machine, after pocketing the gold.

Ien knew when a conversation was over. He backed up a couple of steps, still staring at the man who had basically just revealed he knew *too much* about Ien, before finally turning and striding from the establishment.

Outside in the sunshine once more, he blinked, trying to give his eyes time to readjust after the darkened tattoo parlor. He wanted to sprint from the street, but he forced himself to walk steadily back toward the entrance to the district. The red-blue ink in the syringe floated before his vision, and when he touched the fresh tattoo on his elbow, his thumb came back bluish-red.

He needed to think. He gathered his robes around him and tried not to hurry back to Janne's.

Chapter 8

A FEW QUIET WORDS

The ship to Port Aria waited for them in the harbor the day after Ien's visit to the Arlyn District. He wanted to be as far away from Praan as he could in as short a time as possible, even if it meant giving in to the economic whims of a bigoted ship captain. And so here they were, staring up at the fat, passenger-laden ship in the early morning sunlight. The *Summer Wind* was a passenger vessel, with cabins above-decks for paying customers and hammocks below-decks for the crew.

The captain of the ship—a man named Branno Puertsmuth, a Tinnan name if Ien had ever heard one—swaggered over to the three of them as they looked up at his ship and each separately wished that things with Katrya had gone differently. Ien could tell by the uncomfortable silence that his crewmates had similar thoughts as he. *This* ship, captained by *this* man, could not replace the *Arienna*. It could not even come close. The paunchy, sweaty man stuck out his hand by way of greeting and barked: "Payment before boarding."

Mack drew his face into a grimace. Not that it took much effort, with those scars. "You're joking, right?"

The man blinked at him. "Five for you and you," he pointed to Mack and Nola, "and ten for that." He didn't even look at Ien.

Mack bristled, but Ien saw Nola lay her hand on the man's arm. Without saying anything, Mack reached into his coin purse and shoved the gold at the captain. The man smiled and tipped an imaginary hat to them, effectively ignoring Ien beyond the gold he pocketed swiftly.

Ien trailed the others as they mounted the plank and set foot on the ship. The vessel was so massive that it almost didn't surrender to the tugs of wind that buffeted its sides, but Ien could feel gentle swaying beneath his feet and a breeze across his skin. Simply because he didn't have a ship to call his own didn't mean he couldn't touch the breeze, or feel a ship's soul calling to him. As they crossed the physical and mental barrier between land and void, Ien became aware of a presence at the back of his mind. It was the *Summer Wind*, but connected to that awareness . . . A Navigator.

Ien would need to find a ship soon. Every ship he passed tugged at his consciousness, as though they sensed his suffering and wanted to offer themselves to him; he felt like the eye of every Navigator stabbed into his back. The vulnerability gave him a twitch. Something was going to go wrong. Something was already wrong. Something—

Ien took a deep breath. He had to think of something else. Anything else.

In his head, he wrote a letter to Ree.

Dear Katrya.

That wasn't the right way to start.

Dear Ree.

No.

Ree, he pretend-wrote while following Nola and Mack, I hope everything in Praan is going well. You will hopefully have been assigned your ship by now and are flying over the mountains as I write this. Even in his own mind, he was too cordial after only four days since he had seen her last.

I wish you were here, he finally thought. It's strange that you aren't here to tell Mack to hoist the sail or to tell Nola to stop flashing her eyes at the men on board. It's strange not to be pulling the wind strings and directing this ship we're on. He took a deep breath. *It still hurts, you know. Your ship's shadow in my mind. I wish you hadn't left so soon after.*

Ien blinked. It was the pain in his side and in his head—from the *Arienna*. Only the pain.

"Watching the wind?" a voice asked. When Ien looked up, the other Navigator, in the blue robes

and with red birds flitting across his collarbone, had the barest hint of a sneer on his face. The man's long black hair was tied at the back with a piece of string; his crooked nose gave him a somewhat sinister appearance. The only tattoos visible were those on his face, neck, and hands; lines left from the point of a blade riddled his skin along with the tattoos on the backs of his hands.

When Ien didn't answer, the man shrugged. "Just thought I would introduce myself," and then he did. Ien gave his name, but nothing else. Sheven Integral was obviously put off by Ien's iciness, but not enough to leave. He settled himself against the railing and looked out across the void with Ien.

Neither of them said anything. The hustle of takeoff preparations continued around them. Since this ship was so much larger than the *Arienna* had been, it required more workers. Mack and Nola were seeing that their meager possessions—mostly food items purchased with Katrya's gold and some clothing donated by Janne—were stored safely in their room. Ien looked at the other Navi out of the corner of his eye.

What does this man want?

As if in response, Sheven suddenly said, "Why are you here?" He said it quietly, as though he wanted to make sure no one else heard.

Ien didn't say anything. He owed nothing to this man, let alone the reasons he and the others were traveling to Port Aria.

"I just mean, here without a ship," Sheven explained, his voice taking on a conversational tone, even though he still kept the volume down. "There's only one reason a Navi would be on another Navi's ship." This time he didn't wait for an answer. "You don't have one. You were either kicked off—can't imagine how much that would hurt—or your ship . . . sank."

The man's eyes were *too* discerning. "Greatstorm," Ien said. Of course the man could *sense* that Ien had no connection to anything, as Ien could feel the squat bulk of the *Summer Wind* on the tip of the man's tongue, at the edge of his skin.

Sheven nodded as though he had known that would be the answer.

The captain of the ship strode by with purpose in his step. He stopped, however, and looked back at the two Navigators. "Sheven," he said. "We're calibrating the sails. Get to the stern."

Immediately the Navigator's posture changed. Sheven bowed low, touching the fingers of his left hand to his forehead with an inane smile on his lips. Lowly, subservient. When the larger man was gone, Sheven turned back to Ien, raking his suddenly untrusting gaze on the part of Ien's arm that Riesan had marked—despite the fact that it was hidden by a sleeve. "We need to talk," he said, and pulled up his own right sleeve.

It had faded, but the hexagonal mark was clear, nestled in the midst of a web of dead black ink. Compared to the man's other scars, this one was raw, new; the skin around it was still red, still angry. *Still burning*, Ien knew, feeling his own mark as it throbbed beneath his skin.

"Sheven!" the captain shouted urgently, angrily.

The man re-rolled his sleeve and gave Ien a dark look. "Talk," he said. "Your cabin. Ten minutes."

Ien felt his eyes widen, but the other man had already turned away to do his captain's bidding. His robes billowed around him in the wind, and the effect was rather mysterious. Ien suddenly wanted to scream with all these unwanted "mysterious" messages he was receiving lately. First Remil, now this . . .

Mack and Nola approached; they had been speaking with the captain at the bow of the ship. Mack's face drew down into a scowl at the look on Ien's features. "That man bothering you, Ien?"

Ien shook himself. "No," he answered, trying to sound chipper. "No, he just wanted to talk."

"I wanted to tell you," Nola said carefully. "You're going to have to be careful when we get to Port Aria."

As if that applies only to Port Aria, he thought with an inward grimace.

"The laws can be stretched there," she said, looking into his face and pursing her lips. Her eyes dug into him, and he understood. Port Aria wasn't part of the Free Cities that the Courts controlled. Flimsy though the laws were that kept Navigators from being persecuted on a wider level by the general populace, Ien more than likely owed his life to the system that simultaneously suppressed him. If the laws in Port Aria were even more effervescent than those of Praan, he would need to watch his back.

Mack shrugged. "As long as I can buy my own ship with Ree's money."

Ien flinched at the words and the harshness behind them. It was like Ree was dead.

"Anyway, I think we could visit my brother's place," Nola said. "Hopefully the place is still standing." The laugh couldn't mask the genuine nervousness in her voice. "We can figure out what to do from there. And I'm sure Cyril will help us out. I think being away from Praan will do us all some good." She looked over her shoulder at the brilliance of the capital city, and Ien noticed a wistful gleam in her eye. She thought going to her home would help them get over what had happened over the last few days. Ien didn't blame her. Ree hadn't responded to Nola's repeated pleas to see her.

Those brilliant buildings seemed to crouch over the harbor, squeezing the air from his lungs and the confidence from his mind. *Yes*, he thought, *maybe it will help*.

Still, the anxiety persisted. He stared at the rooftops of Praan, bright orange with the setting sun behind him, and thought of the words he hadn't yet written to Katrya. *The mark is growing, Ree. The darkness is spreading*. He now had a collection of black in his otherwise pale skin: the symbol of the *Arienna*, and now nearly all the marks on his right forearm. Would it stretch further? Would the deadness cover his whole body?

And what did it mean that Sheven had an identical mark?

Be careful, Ree, he wanted to write, looking at Mack from the corner of his eye, even though he knew he would never have the chance to do so.

#

It didn't take long for the other Navigator—the one *with* a ship, Ien reminded himself sourly—to seek him out. Ien had been in the cabin alone for not even two minutes before the door opened. No knock, no polite query for admission.

No, because Sheven Integral was not a man for propriety.

The man closed the door behind him and stood staring at Ien for a long moment. The tattoos that Ien could see, those on the backs of Sheven's hands and on his neck and face, lay black and hollow in his skin—it took a lot of strength to heave off from land. He did not have wings at the corners of his eyes. Ien couldn't help but look down at his own markings, seeing the vibrancy of the ink, and he knew that he and Sheven were . . .

Different from each other. And different was dangerous.

Before the other man could react, Ien sprang into action. He shoved Sheven against the wall beside the door, left forearm under Sheven's throat. Green vines on Ien's arm grew brighter for a moment as he called to the power in the ink. "What do you want," he hissed.

The other man seemed to have been expecting this. At least, his eyes didn't betray nearly as much alarm as Ien expected. Sheven simply nodded, and Ien released him.

"You're angry since you lost your ship," the man said. "I understand that."

Ien didn't say anything. Just crossed his arms and waited, mentally touching his tattoos, deciding which he would use if this man decided to attack him. Ien could feel the other man's presence in the ship around him: the calm hand of Sheven's consciousness resting lightly on the helm.

Sheven shrugged and sat down at the tiny two-person table that took up most of the space in the cabin. "Please. Sit down."

Ien sat across from him, staring at the man the whole time.

"I'll show you mine if you show me yours," Sheven quipped. With this inappropriate preamble and an even more inappropriate, impish grin, the man brought his right arm up to the table's surface, drawing back the sleeve of his robe. And there it was. Raw, ugly, red. Mostly faded, but not healed. With a start Ien realized he was touching his own mark through his sleeve; he jerked his hand away.

"I can tell this isn't the first time you've seen one of these," Sheven said. "Like I said, I show you mine . . ."

Ien lifted his sleeve. Sheven nodded.

"He gave this to me about four weeks ago," the man said, tapping his mark with a finger. "I'm guessing yours is newer."

"He?"

Sheven scowled. "You know who I'm talking about."

Ien shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "Who is he?"

A shrug was his answer. "Someone who wants Navigators dead. He called me something funny, a word I didn't recognize. Something like 'altemi.'"

Ien nodded, but the strangely monstrous man had referred to Ien as something completely different. *Rinnaeio*. Something about the way the vowels sounded in his mind pricked a forgotten place in his head. Perhaps from before his memories stopped. Why would the man have called them two different things, but in the same language? Ien was certain it was from the same tongue. He didn't know how he knew, but there it was.

"Who is he?"

The man shook his head. "I don't know. I was in Briia, getting ready for this last trip to Praan. Puertsmuth sent me and another crewman out to buy lamp oil. Then all of a sudden in the middle of the market, I feel this great damn pain on my arm, and there it was, and there *he* was. It didn't make any sense." He scrunched up his nose. "He looked at my face, said that weird word, and disappeared into the crowd. The crewman didn't even notice."

Ien nodded. "I was in Briia."

Sheven peered at Ien's mark, putting his face even closer than it already was. Ien instinctively pulled back, but before he could, Sheven latched onto his wrist with an iron grip. "Wait. Yours is different."

Snatching his arm back, Ien glared at the man, but looked at his forearm. Sheven was right: in the middle of Ien's hexagon was a small black dot, whereas the other Navi's was bare.

"Weird," Sheven said quietly, staring at Ien's arm. "I doubt we're the only ones." He shrugged, throwing off the tenseness like so much water. Ien knew it was a mask, but he could see the usefulness of false confidence, especially in situations like theirs. "He's probably some kind of bounty hunter."

Ien looked down at his mark again. "He allowed me to escape from prison," he admitted softly.

Sheven pulled back in surprise. "That doesn't make sense," he cried. "Why would that . . . man let you escape?"

Ien shrugged, trying to think of how to phrase his next question. "Do you know anything about the Court Navigators?" It was a touchy subject with Navigators, and for good reason if all the rumors were to be believed.

As if in response to Ien's thoughts, Sheven blanched and immediately looked around the room, as though they could be heard even here in the middle of the ship behind thick wooden walls. "Only the things that are common knowledge," was the nearly inaudible answer. "The Court Navis have been taken and bonded to the carriers so completely that they lose themselves . . . and they protect Praan from greatstorms." He locked eyes with Ien. "It would be very bad to be forced to be one of those Navis," he

said unnecessarily. The fear in his eyes explained the comment. It was a fear Ien felt in his gut.

“Do you know why those specific Navis are . . . chosen?”

Sheven shrugged uncomfortably. “I always thought they were chosen because they got in trouble one too many times. I mean, we’ve all broken the law, or we wouldn’t be in this position. But I figure that must be a punishment for something.”

Ien nodded. He figured as much. Never mind the fact that Ien himself had never actually broken the law. He was different, and different was dangerous. The black dot on his forearm nagged at the corner of his mind.

Remil’s words still filled his mind: *Don’t make a habit of bleeding everywhere, or somebody else will notice what I have the sense to keep quiet.*

I just wish I knew what he was talking about, Ien thought as he and Sheven stared at each other across the table, each with his own private terror of the Court and what it could do to a man.

Suddenly, Ien couldn’t breathe, had to get out, had to see the sky . . .

He scraped back the chair and fled the cabin toward the midday light.

Mack, who stood poised to open the door and enter the cabin, opened his mouth as Ien rushed toward the plank and pier. The man was probably going to say that the ship would be casting off soon and to hurry back, but Ien pushed past the other man, head down and hands holding his robes together in the front. He needed to think. He needed air. Needed Katrya, but that ship actually *had* sailed—four days ago.

He jumped to the harbor and headed into the city, no destination, just trying to breathe.

#

The man in black looked out over the city, squinting into the setting sun. He couldn’t see the man he knew scurried away from the *Summer Wind*, but the simple understanding of the Navigator’s presence made his lips twitch upward.

Shrylu Riesan shuffled his feet against the hard dirt of the cliff, steadying himself on a stone outcropping with an outstretched hand. It was nearly time for the plan involving the *rinnaeio* and the woman to start moving along.

He looked over his shoulder at the mess. The blood seeped easily into the red soil of the mountains. Blue robes fluttered in the evening breeze. This particular specimen had not been adequate. He had been a fake, an *altemi*, like most of the ones who called themselves Navigators. A replication of the true manipulators of the elements, the Ra’im. There were so very few of them left. Riesan admitted to himself with a privately sardonic smile that he was a large part of the reason for that lack. What he did with those he called *rinnaeio* was necessary.

Beyond that, he enjoyed it.

But the pile of goop that had been a man had bought his tattoos, and so Riesan felt no remorse for killing him. Only the Navigators with the ability to generate their own markings interested him—the Ra’im, the ones born with the gift. And Ien Sandir certainly fit that criterion. It was obvious to a trained eye. He only visited the tattoo shop once every three months for license renewal, never to reinvigorate his markings. Therefore, his blood must be doing it for him.

Riesan fingered his right temple, frowned for a brief moment. The blood. It would be intriguing to see the blue-red blood of a true Navigator spilling into the dirt instead of the ruddy mauve color of this idiot, but he knew that thought was useless. His superiors would never allow it.

Besides, if he wanted to see that blue-red, he could just open his own veins, or those of the pretender Walfored. The day would come when Riesan would watch Walfored’s blood drain onto the soil just as this fake Navigator’s had, soaking into the earth like so much water. He dreamed of it even while awake. The day would come.

With a short, quiet laugh, he began moving toward the city and toward the *rinnaeio*. Walfored's day was coming, but Ien Sandir's day had already come. *Get ready, rinnaeio. This is not the home place. You are not safe and never have been.*

PART II

Chapter 9

NEW WINGS

Ree took a deep breath and pushed open the double doors for the second time that week. After three days of informational meetings and hypothetical training, it was finally time to set foot on an actual carrier ship. Finally!

Walfored looked up at her as soon as she walked in, and she thought she saw a glint of amusement in his eyes. He set aside the papers in his hand and waved away the scribe that hovered over his desk at the high seat. “Katrya,” the man said, his deep voice like silk over stone. “You’re early.”

“Wanted to get a good start,” she retorted. The man was too full of himself. What did he have to laugh at her about anyway? She deserved to be here, and that was that.

His smirk only grew wider at her annoyance. “I was just making an observation, Katrya.” He stood, scraping back his chair. “Let’s get started.” Standing, the man certainly made an impressive picture. She couldn’t begrudge him that. His pressed and starched red overcoat covered a black shirt over dark brown pants, and the thin white scar that stretched from his smooth jaw to his hairline across his face only added to his imposing appearance.

She followed him back out of the room. His calf-length boots clicked on the stone stairs as they exited the carpeted space. The noise resounded from the walls; despite the tapestries lining the stairwell, the cave-like Palace created an echo effect within the hallways, as it had been carved from the mountainside of Praan. He led her all the way down the spiral stairs, through the double doors into the entrance hall. Here, the excitement began to turn her stomach in earnest. This was it. It was finally happening. It was all she could do to keep the grin from filling her face automatically; she needed to look professional if she was going to make a good impression on the people she would meet today: her future crew.

That thought caused the expected pang of guilt alongside her excitement. She made a mental note to go see Janne—and hopefully her friends—as soon as possible. Perhaps they were not too angry at her. Perhaps.

“I am taking you to your ship,” Walfored finally said, as they passed through the expansive entrance hall under the ornately painted ceiling. “It is called the *Painted Consort*. I hope it is up to your . . . expectations.”

The audible pause before the last word made Ree want to clench her fists. He was still mocking her. But she was going to show him that she could be the captain that he had hired. She was not his instrument, from which he elicited a response whenever he desired. The small smile on his face at the mention of the name of the ship was more than enough to stoke the small flame in her belly.

“When am I going to be assigned my first mission?” It wasn’t the question she wanted to ask, but it was enough for now. *I will get beyond those mountains*, she swore silently.

He looked at her over his shoulder, amused. “You’re not very patient, are you, Katrya?”

She wished he would quit saying her name like that. It made her feel like an annoying child that *Father* needed to apprehend.

He continued: “Shortly. But you need to learn how to wait for things you need.”

She didn’t respond.

As they emerged from the palace, Ree looked at the sky. Thick rainclouds hid the sun, covering the city in a moody gray haze. She wanted to rub her arms as a shiver of anticipation danced over them despite the uncanny heat of the day. Rain was coming, but it was more than that. She told herself she was being ridiculous, but a greatstorm had destroyed the *Arienna*, after the city hadn’t been hit by a greatstorm in many months. Anything was possible in Praan now.

She and Walfored took the path to the docks that she, Nola, and Ien had sprinted down that day. Now that she wasn't running, she could more clearly see the bustle that took place on a daily basis in Praan. She smiled; it reminded her of her childhood. This really was the grandest city in Daen. Despite the destruction of her *kebek*, she had come here to conquer Praan, to make it her own . . . and she had. The anger, the guilt, the *pain* all disappeared under a wave of pure elation. This was it.

The feeling only grew as he led her to the docks. They passed beyond the tall stone gate of the marketplace and into the port, and she peered into the void, across what seemed like the distance of the world. She had been beyond that distance more times than she could count, and now she would go even further. Growing up in Praan and helping out with her father's business had led to a childhood and adolescence rife with trade experience and information. It had also fostered a deep desire in her: seeing the Court ships and their mechanical beauty from afar had enthralled her, piqued her imagination and her passion for knowledge. How did these great iron beasts get into the sky? Where did they go on those fabled missions beyond the mountains? Burning questions as yet to be answered still to this day.

She had saved every penny she had earned as a deckhand on her father's merchant ships. At eighteen, she had taken a job aboard the ship of Nemirun Portheaul, a man from Tinna on the valley floor, and worked her way from deckhand all the way up to quartermaster. All with her eyes to the north. To the edge of the mountains.

And one month after she met Ien, one month after the day her father died, she had bought her own ship and sailed off into the void, looking for anything and everything that she could learn and dominate. Never forgetting her goal. Never ceasing to dream of the big iron machines that could carry her across the horizon.

Even the great merchant *barques* couldn't compare to the magnificent steel beauty she was going to call hers. She and Walfored passed a few of those on the way to the carriers: *The Genteel Mouse*, *Oaken Treasure*, and *Summer Wind*. As they passed the last, a Navigator with face hidden came sprinting down the plank and plunged into the crowd, startling Ree as he crossed her path. She thought of Ien and wished he were here to share this day with her.

She and Walfored passed all those other ships, walked down the harbor toward the end. And there they were. The ticket to her dreams. The Court ships.

Beautiful.

The metal-plated hulls shone in the burgeoning morning sunlight. *Which one is mine?* she wondered as she peered down the line of shining soldiers. They walked right past mediocre-seeming passenger ships—normally, the biggest vessels in the sky—toward the Court's section of the harbor.

As if in answer to her unspoken question, Walfored pointed. "That one." The ship he pointed to looked exactly like all the others.

A metal gangplank extended from the inside of the ship to the boardwalk, and as they approached the entrance, Ree's stomach did a turn.

"When do I get to meet my Navigator?" she asked as their boots clanked on the metal.

The look of surprise Walfored gave her was slight, but she noticed. "Don't worry about it," he said simply. It seemed he didn't feel like explaining. Which was just too bad.

"What do you mean?"

He scowled. "Just don't worry about it, Katrya."

They had entered the ship at this point, but instead of admiring the austere steel interior, Ree side-eyed Walfored and zipped her lips. There was something he wasn't telling her, but it would have to wait.

He turned left and started down the long, empty hallway. She had no choice but to follow him.

They stepped through another portal and started down a series of short hallways. Closed doors

branched at either side of every passage, some with plaques to the side as denotation for the rooms' use. They passed a mess hall and kitchen, equipment rooms, and many unmarked doors that Ree was sure led to crewmembers' personal quarters.

Walfored finally came to a stop in front of a door labeled "BRIDGE," and for the first time Ree felt butterflies struggling to find their way out of her stomach up through her esophagus.

Her mind flashed to Ien. She really was going to do this without him. She had been trying to put off thinking about his—and her other friends'—absence. She really was alone. She hadn't even spoken to Ien since the incident with the *Arienna*.

"I still don't see why you can't just let me meet him," she said in what she hoped was an offhand manner.

"Don't be difficult," he snapped, though the break in arrogant composure was short-lived. Immediately his features smoothed and poise returned, though Ree could still see a crinkle near his eyes, near the faded wings at his temples.

"*He's a dirty traitor*," Ien had said, all those years ago and every year since. Every time she asked him why, he would change the subject, but the dark gleam in his eyes would remain for a long while after the outburst.

There was more than one reason Ree didn't trust Walfored, but Ien's hatred was near the top of the list. Her best friend wouldn't feel that strongly without cause.

She mentally added this new shiftiness to the list.

"Let's meet your crew," he said, and pushed open the door with a heavy metallic creak.

They stepped into a large room. For a moment she could do nothing but stare. Ree and Walfored had entered the room from the back, from behind the dais where the captain—*Me!* her giddy mind blathered—would view the room from a decidedly uncomfortable-looking empty chair to their direct left. At the left and right sides of the room, there were six stations where crewmembers sat and monitored important-looking screens showing numbers and charts. There were so many knobs and dials! In the center of the room was a large table with a map of the mountains spread over its surface. And, commanding her attention from the start, was the glass window that took up the majority of the opposite wall. Through it, she could see Praan stretching into the distance and the mountainside stretching into the sky behind it. The city looked somehow smaller from the bridge of a Court carrier.

Ree could feel her grin digging into her cheeks.

Above the window, individual gilded letters came together and spelled the name: *Painted Consort*.

A man approached. He had the hard look of a soldier, with a scar above one eyebrow and graying stubble creeping up his neck. He wore the same blue uniform as the rest of the crew, with black boots and white undershirt, but one gold stripe adorned his shoulder. Her first mate. "This the girl?" he drawled. The way his lips curled back when he said it, she expected him to launch a mouthful of leaf at the floor.

The infuriating smile made a reappearance on Walfored's face. "This is your new captain, Katrya Millor. Katrya, this is Villial Trem."

The name sounded familiar. "Were you born in Praan?"

His green eyes flashed. "Born and raised," he said carefully.

"I recognize your family name," she explained, and extended her hand. "Nice to meet you."

He looked at her hand for a moment, then instead of taking it, he looked over his shoulder at one of men sitting at the map table. "Allin, check it out," he called. "Woman captain."

As Ree let her hand fall to her side, so too did her spirits. Only a little, though.

"Yes," she barked. "I am your captain. And you *will* show me respect. I didn't come this far to

be ridiculed by a bunch of two-bit sailors.”

A flash of surprise showed in Trem’s eyes, but other than that, no one reacted. Ree could *feel* Walfored’s smugness out of the corner of her eye. She whirled on him. “When do I get to fly her?”

He reached inside his coat and drew out a single piece of folded parchment. “Today,” he said simply, handing her the sheet.

The paper described her first task as the captain of a Court carrier. Simple trade mission, nothing special. Delivering a shipment of fruit—quickly, so that it didn’t spoil in this abnormal heat—to Port Aria. Her heart throbbed against her chest at the mention of the city. This had to be either luck or fate. *Maybe I can catch Ien and the others*, she thought, *explain in person why I wasn’t able to come to them at Janne’s . . . and why they can’t come with me anymore*. That thought brought with it a twinge of pain, but she tried to ignore it.

“I didn’t realize I was getting a mission already.”

He shrugged. “This isn’t a mission,” he replied. “Missions are more important than barrels of *fruit*. Really, Katrya, you should have paid more attention in training.”

She ignored the jibe. *Mission*. The word reverberated in her head. A tingling crept from her fingertips up her arms, down her spine. She refrained from looking north—there was a wall in that direction—but she could almost *taste* the edge of the mountain range. The edge of the world. *Missions are important*. That had to be what he was talking about. That was what waited for her, for every Court carrier, but especially for *her*. She would deal with Walfored’s ego and these misogynistic men.

And somehow, she would find a way to bend the rules and bring Ien and the others aboard.

“Port Aria, hmm?” she said, hiding her excitement in another glance down at the parchment. “Let’s go. That fruit isn’t going to last long.” *Only good thing about losing the Arienna*, she thought wryly, *is I don’t have any belongings to bring aboard and waste time with*.

Walfored’s smile was knowing, this time. “Yes. Please let me know if there is anything I can do for you, Katrya. There is a device on the ship that can commune with the Palace at any time and any location—I’m sure Mister Trem here will introduce you to the man who works it. You can do whatever you want—this is your ship, after all.”

Her ship.

“Okay, people,” she said, looking around the room. “Let’s go to Port Aria.” With any luck, she would find her friends and smuggle them aboard—or just welcome them aboard now. This was *her* damn ship, and she would welcome aboard whomever she damn well pleased.

“But first,” she said, “I want to know more about this thing.”

She turned to Trem. Raised her eyebrows.

After a minute, he realized why she stared at him so intently, and he turned to look at the bridge. “This is the bridge.”

“I can read,” she replied, with only a hint of sarcasm in her voice. “What about that?” she pointed to a device at the left side of the room.

Trem had the decency to look flustered for a whole of two seconds before turning away and walking toward one of the stations; she and Walfored followed. A thin, white screen had been set up on the side of the bridge, and using a strange array of light coming from behind the screen, a picture materialized in the center of the device, creating a faux tapestry effect. The lights seemed to . . . pulse, brightening and darkening in regular intervals. The crewmember that manned this monitor looked up as they approached: a man in his late thirties with brown stubble scattered across a thin, uninteresting face.

“This is Allin.” Trem gestured at the screen device and the crewman in one sweep of his arm. “And that is the NaviWatch.”

“NaviWatch?” Sounded like something Ien would be interested in. He had always shown a

particular fascination with the Palace Navigators. Fascination . . . or revulsion.

Allin nodded, looking at the screen. “Lets us know our Navi is still alive,” was the man’s flippant answer. His accent was strange; she thought he might be from Vilomel—at the bottom of the mountains, in the southern part of the valley.

That struck her as funny. “Couldn’t you just look at the man and see that he’s still alive?” Behind her, Walfored made an exasperated noise in his throat.

Allin stared at her bemusedly. No answers here.

Ree’s gaze moved back to the screen and sucked in her breath. She realized that the lights had to be a mirror of the Navigator’s vital signs. *Her* Navi, now. That ache in her chest gave a twinge. Instead of asking again why she couldn’t meet the man who had folded the soul of her ship into his own, she asked, “And do they die often?”

A part of Ree wanted that question to be a joke, delivered lightly with sounds of laughter following. Neither Trem nor Walfored laughed, or even smiled. The wings at the corners of Walfored’s eyes wrinkled with his frown. She scowled. What kind of job did the Palace Navis have that they may or may not survive their workday? How different could this job be? Maybe there was a good reason Ien never wanted to go to the Palace.

They moved on to the next station, which turned out to be the actual navigation systems. And the next, which functioned as the monitor for the state of the ship’s internal systems. All of the things that were necessary for the ship to function were here on the bridge, just as she had learned in training.

When they were finished with the tour of the administration systems of the ship, Ree turned to Walfored and shook the parchment under his nose. “Please get off my ship so I can leave now.”

He gave an exasperated sigh. “Yes, yes. Please. Leave before your incessant questions sink our city.” What an odd thing to say. When she scowled and opened her mouth, he put up a hand. “Stop. I will send you new orders when you complete this trade. All of the instructions are on the parchment. Just . . . Don’t mess up.” His thin lips curled into an even thinner line.

She smiled.

“Let’s get this thing moving!” she exclaimed to the entire room, and even though the crew didn’t quite jump at the order, they did begin to move in the general direction of their positions. She would consider it a victory for now.

Chapter 10

ANOTHER NOTE

The ship shuddered beneath her feet. She reached out a hand and steadied herself on the panels before her. The men gave her a quick look, but their gazes shifted away without taking purchase. The engine had been fired, and the metal—somehow—rose a few feet into the air. She could feel the iron beast's insistence to be gone.

Walfored twitched his fingers at Trem, and the two men stepped away to talk. Annoyance flared in Ree, but she beat it back. She would force Trem to tell her later. When they returned, Walfored bowed slightly to her—mockingly, she thought—and said, "This is where I leave. Remember, just follow those instructions and I will send more to you when you accomplish the task."

"I think I can get fruit across the mountains," she said with a wry twist to her lips.

"I know."

And with that he left, the heels of his expensive shoes clacking on the floor and following him for a few moments after he was out of sight. And then she was alone with the crew, all of whom were trying their damndest to *not* look at her, including Trem. A legion of butterflies paraded around in her stomach.

"All right," she announced. "To Arboram! Can someone please take me to the engine room?"

Trem exchanged a shifty, nervous look with one of the other men on deck. "Um," he stammered, "Arboram?"

She smiled. "Yes. Arboram. By way of Port Aria. Unless that's a problem?"

He scowled his obvious reply. "Oh. When you say it that way—well. What if he has other orders for you when we get to Port Aria?"

She strode over to the captain's seat and knocked a fist against the arm of the chair. She looked back up at Trem with an eyebrow raised. "Walfored may be my boss, but I'm yours, and I'm not interested in you questioning my orders. I say we go to Arboram."

He stared at her for a minute, along with every single other person on the bridge. *Don't let him see how scared you are*, she said to herself in Mack's voice. It was something he might say. Instead of calling her out, Trem shrugged his shoulders as though he were trying to dispel a displeasing thought, lips twisting in distaste.

"Now," she said. "Now that that's settled, could you kindly take me to the engine room?"

He beckoned to her with a gnarled hand and turned away. The door to the bridge swung shut with a bang behind him; she hurried to follow him with as much dignity as she could muster. Which was a good amount, considering.

She trailed him back through the door and up the metallic corridor. This time, they took a door on the left that led to another hallway and more doors.

Trem glanced at her sideways as they walked. "Why are you the captain?" he finally blurted, something she suspected he had been itching to ask for a long time, but a conversation she had hoped to avoid for some time.

"Because I am qualified." There was more than a shred of truth in that, but . . . Why *had* she been chosen? Mount willing, Trem would never know she doubted. A dull ache in her ribcage reminded her that she was alone, that Ien and the others were not here. *Ien*. She stopped walking.

"Miss . . ."

"You will address me as 'captain,'" she snapped. "I'm not a schoolteacher."

Surprise flashed in his features. A sigh. A grumble. He turned and shuffled off. She followed.

"We don't have enough supplies to get to Arboram without stopping somewhere between Port

Aria and there,” he said as they walked.

“Then we will stop somewhere,” she snapped. *I’m going to need patience if I’m going to succeed at dealing with these idiots.* At that, she almost laughed.

The engine room, deep in the proverbial belly of the beast, was a huge chamber of whirring, hissing, dinging mechanicals. Ree tried to pretend that she wasn’t impressed by the tall columns of machinery that housed liquids and steam, some with valves, some with technological screens that indicated some kind of status, some with both. No fewer than fifteen men—and two women—scurried around the room via grated walkways, reading figures, staring at water levels on the screens, yelling numbers and orders at each other. Ree’s head swiveled incessantly, trying to take everything in.

“What did you need to see here?” Trem asked in his insubordinate way.

She ignored him and walked over to one of the columns. Peering down at the screen, she saw some numbers that didn’t make any sense to her, so she waved him over. “What does this mean?”

He scratched his chin with a finger. “That actually connects to the NaviWatch on the bridge,” he said, something like surprise in his voice. She could understand. She was shocked, herself, that she had picked the exact machine that made the least sense to her and that she wished she understood the most. *Serendipity*, she laughed to herself.

“And before you ask how it works,” he said gruffly, taking the words out of her mouth. “I don’t know.”

“Who would know?”

He shrugged. She refrained from beating him senseless with her bare fists. *Crashing man, I will teach you respect.* But first she had to gain it. And that required self-control.

Somehow, the Navigator of this great boat controlled its motions and directed it across the sky, and with his life force he kept it from tumbling to a splintered death at the bottom of the mountains. And somehow, this room was connected to that Navigator and provided part of the power he needed. *Why can’t I just talk to the crashing man myself*, she lamented. Walfored’s shiftiness at the mention of her Navigator had given her pause, but she was bound to run into her Navi at some point during this voyage—he couldn’t stay holed up in the room that housed the *syloom* for long.

“Well, if you could please find that out for me at your earliest convenience,” she said, smiling at him. The spasm on his face told her that he had caught her tone. She would have to work on surprising him more often. Perhaps it would help get things done more quickly: he narrowed his eyes and moved away toward the workers at the opposite end of the room.

She turned back to the NaviWatch. The line of numbers on the screen—green on black—fluctuated minutely as the seconds passed. There were three numbers, each displayed next to different letters: H, S, and C.

Trem returned with another crewmember—a woman this time, with boots like Ree’s and a head full of tiny black braids that clacked together when she moved her head. Ree was almost surprised to see her working in the engine room, after the reactions her own sex had garnered from the men on the bridge. Of course, the look on Trem’s face belied his own alarm that the “expert” he was able to find was, in fact, a woman.

The crewwoman’s face lit up. “Captain,” she said. “I’m Erinn Ronx. Engineer.” She turned to the device, continuing as though she hadn’t ended her sentence, all in one long breath. “The three numbers here are designated with letters; I’m sure you noticed that already. The H stands for ‘heart’: this is the monitor that tells us that the Navigator’s heart is still beating at an acceptable rate. And the S stands for the amount of ‘strength’ the Navi has left; when it reaches zero, that’s bad, but not as bad as the ‘H’ monitor reaching zero.” She finally took a breath.

“And the ‘C’?” Ree interjected.

Ville waved a hand. "Not as important as the other two. As long as the first two are above zero, the ship will fly."

Ree felt the frown on her face and forced it away. "It's probably a good idea that I understand the whole thing."

The other woman's shrug was uncomfortable. "The 'C' stands for the amount of color left in the Navigator's body."

Ree stared at the shifting number. A person's body. "Wouldn't the 'strength' monitor do for that as well? My Navi always told me that the color *was* his strength."

Ville shook her braids. "There are nuances. It's a necessary measurement."

Ree nodded, but a whiny voice inside her continued to nag. She would have to add this to her list of things to check up on later, against various other sources. But what if—

"Captain Millor?" a new, younger voice said from behind her. She turned, and a red-faced boy stood leaning on the doorframe, breathing heavily and gesturing at her with a strip of rolled parchment. "Had to run," he forced out. "Ship . . . leaving."

She accepted the parchment. As soon as her fingers closed around it, the boy vanished back into the hallway like so much smoke. Trying to get out before the *Painted Consort* entered the void. She looked down at the paper in her hand; it was tied simply with a piece of green string.

Green string.

"Trem," she called. "Get this thing in the air. I'm going to my quarters." He opened his mouth. "Don't worry, I'll find it. This ship can't be that big, and I've already seen half of it so far."

Without waiting for him to close his mouth, she followed the messenger into the hall and closed the door behind her with a crash.

It took her longer than she had anticipated, but she found her cabin: a small space with a bed, lamp, and trunk for her belongings. *Of which there are none*, she couldn't help but think bitterly, remembering her cabin on the *Arienna* that hadn't been much smaller than this.

She pulled the trunk over to the bed and sat down on the mattress. She extracted her mission papers from her pocket and placed that to the side, using the trunk as a desk; then she pulled the green string and unrolled Janne's letter. The parchment boasted a bare four or five lines of text.

We got your letter the day before yesterday. No salutation, no preamble. Straight and to the point—just like Janne. It was kind of weird. We hadn't heard anything from you, and then you send money and it was like you thought everything was going to be okay. He thinks you abandoned him, Katria. They will be in Port Aria around three days from when you receive this letter. Do something about it. And that was it.

Abandon. The word was strange. Too many vowels. Too much guilt. *Ien thinks I abandoned him.* The word even sounded weird in her own mind-voice. Port Aria . . . she could be there in five or four days, depending on how fast these machines moved, and she was willing to bet that the carrier would travel a fair sight faster than her *kebek*. She had to explain. There had been a decision . . . They would understand—he would—if she could only give him the words boiling in her stomach. *I didn't abandon you. There just wasn't time.*

The other strange thing about Janne's letter was the fact that Ree hadn't sent them a letter or money at all. Ree felt her brow draw down.

She blinked back moisture. Stupid. She had other things to worry about. Brushing Janne's parchment to the side, she pulled the mission papers closer. Walfored had given her eighty barrels of unripe pears that needed delivery in ten days' time to avoid rot. That was easy enough. The fine print at the bottom caught her eye, though.

Orders signed by Barin Walfored and given to Katrya Millor this fourth day of the sixth month of the eighteenth year of the Courts' jurisdiction.

Sixth month?

She hadn't been hired until the end of the seventh month, and right now it was the eighth. She looked more closely at the tiny words. Her name . . . could it have been smudged? It looked like something beneath it had been erased and her name inserted. Maybe she was just being paranoid. Of course she was qualified for this job and of course they had given it to her. She needed to quit doubting herself.

Still, though. She would keep an eye on Barin Walfored. Something about him wasn't quite right, beyond the fact that he made her skin crawl. The way he looked at her . . . Something.

But I have my own ship, her mind whined. *I can go looking for Ien and Mack and Nola and take them aboard, no matter what Walfored says.* She could explain. Once she received her payment for this mission, she would see to it that they would hear her out. They were her friends. They would understand.

For now, she had a ship to captain and eighty barrels of pears to deliver. She would deal with Ien and the guilt when she saw him in Port Aria.

Chapter 11

A SMALL BLACK BOX

The sun was high in the sky over the marketplace of Praan when Ien noticed someone was following him.

It was a familiar feeling. Navigators were scum, after all. He saw it in the eyes of the passersby, in the way the merchants frowned when he inspected their wares. It was no surprise to be pursued.

He flicked his gaze at the textile merchant hovering over him and received a grimace of derision. Ien returned his attention to the cloth on the table in front of him and pretended he hadn't noticed, absently rubbing the mark on his arm beneath the fabric of his robe.

He had found himself in this textile stall after he rushed from the *Summer Wind*. It was fitting that he end up in the booth of a cloth vendor, simply from a utilitarian standpoint. The wound left by the blond man in Briia no longer felt on fire or in danger of breaking open again, but the ugly red marks and hexagonal lesion that remained weren't going to disappear anytime soon. He needed to cover the scar—and the strange blight in his ink that it had caused—until he could figure out how to remove it.

And he had noticed something else that was more than merely troubling: in the week since the *Arienna's* destruction, the drained area around where that bounty hunter had struck him had grown. Almost his entire forearm was colorless now. He thought briefly about revisiting Remil. The man was the only one Ien even remotely trusted. But if the *Summer Wind* was supposed to embark before sunset darkness . . . There was no time. If he could find an unsuspecting piece of black cloth to cover the area, it would at least help his psyche. If he couldn't see it, maybe he wouldn't worry so much.

He touched some silk that lay on one of the vendors' tables. The man behind the table flinched visibly as the Navi touched his goods, but Ien didn't care. He was more concerned with looking out of the corner of his eye at his pursuant.

The man following him was wearing all black, with the hood covering his eyes. Something about him . . . Ien's stomach turned over, and the mark on his arm twinged with a ghost of pain.

Suddenly right now was not the time to be shopping for silk. And so he began to push through the marketplace crowd, trying to ignore the dark mutters of passersby and people he jostled.

"Watch yourself, *Navigator*," a sour-faced woman spat at his feet as he passed. He murmured an apology, bowing his head, and continued on.

As soon as he picked up his step, so did his follower out of the corner of his eye. A flash of light reflected from something hidden under the man's cloak—that damned staff. The twinge in Ien's arm bloomed into an unimagined ache.

Ien began to gather the mental strength necessary for a defense—or an attack—against this man. He sent his mind reaching into his veins, into the blood that boiled there, the pictures in his skin. Beneath the skin, pinpricks rushed across his chest, down his legs, up his arms. He felt the strength begin to course through him.

Except for his right forearm. The blood there remained cold, gray, lifeless.

He turned down another street. He was moving farther and farther away from the harbor, from the *Summer Wind*. This street was narrow, the walls leaning over him until he felt like he would be squashed in their shadows. He quickened his pace. If he could get to the Arlyn District,

he could hide in Remil's, or if he could make it to Harta, he could take refuge with Janne.

The pinpricks beneath his skin grew hot, impatient. Without a ship to temper the desire, the power in his blood wanted *out*. He winced as the breeze dancing just above his bones resisted. He could already feel a trickle of blood running down his right arm from the blackened, empty spot—blood that should have wanted to explode into the air, should have wanted to reach into the sky and *command*.

His pursuer began to run. Ien quickened his pace and his breath. Would the bounty hunter really try something here, in the heart of the market of Praan?

His stomach sank to his feet. He wouldn't have help from anyone here.

He forced his legs into a stumbling run, hoping beyond all hope that he could get to Remil, force the man to hide him away, then squeeze answers out of his cryptic throat about who the blond man was and why—

"*Rinnaeio*," the man called. Ien stopped. The voice. Confident, amused.

He turned.

The alley had emptied as though a great tidal wind had come and swept the people to different parts of the city. The man in black stood just a few feet from Ien, hood down, staff in front of him, blond-white hair shifting lazily in the breeze. So close. "*Rinnaeio*," he hissed again, a tiny smile in his voice and on his lips. The strange black eyes appraised him.

The wind ran over Ien's skin, beneath his skin, to his roots. His mind reached out, all while his gaze remained on the man's tiny smile, and felt the wind, *became* the wind. Everywhere, all at once. *Everything*. His mind strained to retain his sense of self as he stretched his essence. A small blue ring mark on his right index finger drained of color.

He breathed. In, out. In. Out.

In.

But there was something else, too. A presence, pressing against his mind. The familiar terror that had gripped him in the Briian prison as this impossible thing—the man's own mind—slammed against his.

No! he thought. *Only Navis can have this power!*

Terror returned. Ien tried to turn away, to back from the alley. As he scowled, the other man's smile grew, and in the late afternoon sunlight, Ien saw something impossible.

In the corners of the man's eyes, light and small enough to be taken for crows' feet, gray shadows of wings languished on the pale skin. *Wings*. His own wing marks tingled just with the thought: the marks that *made* him a Navigator, that he had had since before his memories stopped, the only marks he remembered having until turning thirteen or fourteen. *Wings*. The marks that he had never drained no matter how much power he drew. No other Navi he knew had these—except for that traitor Barin Walfored.

"What *are* you?" he heard himself say. The wind tugged at his skin from the inside, waiting to be set free.

The man's smirk grew. "*Rinnaeio*. I am just like you. I am Ra'im." He took a step forward.

The alleyway shrank. That word. Ra'im. Something about it scratched at his subconscious, something heavy.

"What . . ." Ien tried to ask, suddenly breathless. He knew the answer. If only he could remember.

An impatient scowl swept across the man's face. "It's obvious, isn't it? Except . . . you don't remember, of course." His sigh was nearly sorrowful. "Little *rinnaeio*. My little

condemned Ra'im. So ignorant."

Ien took a step back.

The man immediately snapped his attention to Ien's feet. With a snarl, he waved the staff at the ground, and the paving stones heaved in response, spraying stone everywhere. Ien crashed to his rear, shins bleeding, the breath expelled from his lungs.

He released the power he had been holding back, at the same time placing hands on the now immobile street and hauling himself to his feet. He turned and sprinted down the alley. It seemed forever long.

His attacker made a noise in his throat. "No!"

Ien didn't look back.

The wind whispered to him, begging to be released. He prodded, even as he ran.

For a moment, time stopped, save for the pulse in his ears, the pumping of his limbs as he struggled to propel himself out of the alley and into the next street. The wind howled. He felt more of his marks drain, the point where skin met veins and muscle met bone. The breeze shoved Ien forward at the same time it pushed the other man back, a cushion of air. He almost made it. The light from beyond the clustered brick nearly touched his outstretched fingers.

The heavy, impossible presence pressing against Ien's mind flared hot. Blazing. His step faltered, and he tottered to the pavement. He clawed at his head with scraped palms.

So hot.

The inferno raged as the man came up behind him, taking his time. "We have a lot to do together, you and I," he said. "But first, I have to break you."

Ien called to the wind, to his blood, to the wind in his blood, but it was no use.

The wind died, and so did his consciousness.

#

He woke in a black box.

A box with no exit, no entrance, only the edge to the darkness that told him he was alone in a tiny space. Four corners, six sides. The first thing he noticed was that he could not feel anything.

He clenched his hands into fists. His breath caught. He couldn't *feel anything*.

A wordless roar ripped from his body. The ink, his blood. Dead. All dead. In the shiny wet blackness of this box, he touched his fingertips to his arms, legs, neck, face. All dead. He couldn't feel his blood anymore.

The wet, dead box opened from above him.

The man's smile stretched across his face. "You are finally awake." Behind him, Ien could make out the inside of a room—in a tavern, maybe?

"What did you do to me." It was not a question, because he knew he wouldn't get an answer. He worked to keep his voice level; his throat grew raw with the effort.

The lid of the box slammed shut, and suffocating blackness took over once again. Before the light disappeared for good, he saw the marks on his upturned palms—black, dead.

Nothing.

He could feel nothing.

His veins were empty. He ran his fingers on his right forearm and felt the hexagonal mark still burned into his skin.

Mount-waved crashing man, he swore. Maybe out loud. Maybe not. Did it matter? He was in a box and his blood was dead.

He fell unconscious with his forehead pressed against the wall, muttering, "No, no, no,

no.”

Ra'im. I am Ra'im.

#

The dream began immediately.

He stood in a field atop a hill, next to a wide river that snaked forever into the distance, stretching and stretching until it became one with the blue horizon. Long blades of grass drifted lazily in the breeze. Peace, the river whispered. Tranquility. He felt the cold stare of the mountains at his back, but here, there were no mountains, only the rippling ocean of green.

He had never seen an endless field such as this. He had never seen a river so long. But his mind remembered them, and he accepted that.

Ien.

He turned. Beside the river stood a woman. Her long black hair was tied simply back from her face with a piece of string; her soft blue robes matched his own. A benign smile hovered on her lips, a content glimmer in her eyes. She was covered in markings. Her hands, clasped in front of her, were riddled with designs, some following the structure of her bones, some threading between her fingers like knitting. From beneath her robes an emerald bird stretched its wings along her neck and upwards toward her face. Something about her was familiar, but he couldn't quite place it. In the manner of dreams, he smiled and nodded, accepting her presence.

Blue wings adorned her temples.

Ien. Her lips did not move, but he heard her say it anyway, like a gentle nudge in his chest or a brush of skin on skin. Despite her content smile, the voice inside his mind felt harried. Anxious. *You must remember.*

Remember what? He looked at the river and could almost feel it pressing against his mind. That was strange, since he only usually manipulated the wind. There had been that one time at the Briian prison . . .

Too many thoughts. He felt the river. He accepted.

But now there seemed to be something he should remember. He could sense it, buried deep, like a niggling itch between his shoulder blades. What was it? How could he find it? *Is it something I can find?*

You must remember. The voice was more insistent. Like a shadow just beyond his peripheral. But the woman's face remained smiling, posture relaxed. The face was one of welcoming, one of . . .

Homecoming.

For a moment, he *remembered*. A metal ship, metal prison, blood, metal, screams, metal, blood. Death. Panic. His heart thumped erratically, and his mind reached for the dream's surface, trying to escape the field and river, escape the memories.

And then, nothing. The thoughts vanished, and Ien accepted the field and the river and the woman once again.

What am I trying to remember?

Wake up, Ien.

He nodded. It was natural that he should wake up now. *Okay. You will have to tell me what I have to remember the next time we meet.*

The woman's eyes grew sad for a terrible instant, and then he awoke to the cold, wet, dead box.

#

His surroundings were different. He felt the box shifting, moving. He could sense the movement of the wind around him, but it was not like the movement of a ship. *He must be taking me somewhere in Praan.* Taking him *where*, though? At least his breathing had calmed somewhat, but he could still feel emptiness in his veins. Obviously his blood was still there, or he would have been dead, but Riesan had done something to him to cut off the rejuvenating flow to his markings. He would have to go to Remil and get them refilled for the first time in his life, once he got out of this mess . . . If he escaped at all.

Katrya will come, was his knee-jerk thought. A different kind of emptiness creaked open inside him. *Ree, why did you leave me?* And it's not like he could count on Mack and Nola. They were at the harbor, probably clueless.

And what did the dream mean? It was rapidly fading from his mind, but there had been a flash of terrifying clarity that he was afraid he wouldn't find again soon. Dreams were dreams, but he felt that this one was different. Mainly because that woman . . . She was familiar in the same way the word "Ra'im" had been. There had been that strange sensation of contentment, nostalgia, peace. Something subconscious.

The dream slipped like water through the fingers of his mind. *What did she say? What did she tell me to do?* A sob escaped his throat before he could think to stem it.

Thump.

The floor beneath him shuddered. The wind in his mind had disappeared. He heard muffled shouts, as though from far away.

He expected the blond monster of a man to poke his head in again for another round of gloating, but instead the world turned sideways as the box was lifted again. It seemed like days passed as he was jostled and tossed around. His exhausted body was unable to do anything but allow the movements to take him.

After some time—how much, and did it matter?—the movements ceased and he exhaled in—not relief. Anticipation? He thought he could hear voices, but that could very well have been the ringing in his ears. But gradually the noise grew louder. One of the "voices" sounded familiar: deep, throaty, smug.

Barin Walfored.

Rage exploded behind his eyes. *Of crashing course.* That meant he was at the Palace. He swung his fist against the side of the blackness, and pain skittered through his bones. That could only mean Court Navigators. Rage, terror.

A slight tapping on the top, above his head. "Now, now," came the smothered admonition in the blond man's greasy voice.

Breathe, he told himself. *Just breathe.* He was going to rip his heart out of his chest and splatter it across the wall of his prison. *Breathe.*

"You know where to set it," Walfored said.

"What about the woman?" The blond man's voice penetrated the box like a whetted sword sliding through ribmeat.

"Don't worry about her. Once she realizes he's here, she'll come running."

Ree, he wailed quietly, vaguely.

The box began to move once more, but the man inside slumped against the wall and became lost to his own heartbeat.

Thump. Thump. Thumpthumpthumpthump.

Chapter 12

BLUE CLOAKS AND AMBER ALE

When Mack and Nola decided at last to search for the Navigator in earnest, Nola knew it was too late.

That winds-cursed boy has got himself in trouble again. This time felt different, though. He was too weak, still, from the *Arienna*, to be out and exposed. Nola wasn't sure how Navigators interacted—could other Navis sense when one of their kind was no longer connected to a ship? Would that make Ien a target?

The crew of the *Summer Wind* had begun to make preparations for departure when Nola caught Mack's eye and saw that he was as worried as she. The man would never say, but she knew the signs. Standing at the rail, he shifted his weight from foot to foot and stared out at the city, arms crossed. The man's reddish-brown, nape-length hair and white shirt fluttered in the breeze, and as she watched him she pursed her lips.

A quick golden bribe in the captain's pocket had secured the position of the *Summer Wind* at the dock until morning to give Ien a chance to come back, but the look on the captain's face told her he probably wouldn't wait that long even for another blun. After all, his job was on the line. And who cared about one lousy Navigator?

She and Mack didn't discuss going to look for Ien. They just went. She watched Mack ensure his pistol remained hidden beneath his vest, and she fingered the small knife at the wrist of her dress's sleeve. With luck, they wouldn't need their weapons, but . . . just in case. There was always a *just in case*.

They retraced their steps from the dock to Janne's house. It had been only half a day since either of them had seen him, but anything could have happened in even that short amount of time.

When Ien had been absent for a couple hours after hurrying from his conversation with the *Summer Wind*'s Navigator, Mack had wanted to search for him right then. "He seemed upset," he had said.

Nola, however, had disagreed. "He probably went back to Janne's to cool off and say good-bye. Let's give him some space. He'll come back when he's ready."

With his characteristic scowl in place, Mack had acquiesced, saying only that the captain of the *Summer Wind* would not wait forever even with their gold.

Now, Nola regretted not going after Ien as soon as they knew something as amiss.

They first went to Janne. She shook her head and said she would keep an eye on the streets. After a quick look around the city, eyes pried open for any sign of familiar blue silk, they found only subservient Navigators whose gazes remained adhered to their feet—none with Ien's strong blue eyes.

They returned to the ship, but no one on the *Summer Wind* had seen him. When pressed, however, the Navigator Sheven Integral gave them some troubling information.

"What did you talk about?" Mack asked. The three of them stood at the side of the ship, hands on the aft railing with gazes fixed on the void.

Sheven shuffled his feet nervously. "There's been a bounty hunter out lately. I just wanted to warn him—"

Nola saw Mack give a start. "Bounty hunter?"

The Navi shrugged. "Yeah. Wears black, carries a staff. Your man . . . said . . . he's already met the guy." Sheven's hesitation on the word "said" bothered Nola. He wouldn't look

either of them in the eyes.

She exchanged a glance with Mack. That fit the description of the man he, Ree, and Ien had encountered in Briia. Nola had sensed the darkness behind Ien's eyes in the days since.

They left Sheven staring blankly out into the void, rubbing his right forearm. Back into the city they went.

As they retraced their steps and tried to think where he could have gone, Nola grew increasingly frustrated. No one had seen him, be they a merchant, tradesman, sailor, or other Navigator. No one cared to remember or distinguish one convict from another; the puzzled looks of disdain—why would a *citizen* be looking for a *Navigator*?—were enough to make them quit asking after a while.

Katrya, she found herself thinking. *If you had just taken us with you, none of this would be an issue. Or not applied for that idiotic job in the first place.* She wished the girl were here so Nola could give her what for. Nola had loved that girl's father enough to consider Ree a daughter, and when the man had died, Nola had vowed to look after her. She couldn't look after the silly girl if she was all the way across the void and traipsing around Daen.

She and Mack wandered in the direction of the Navigator district after discussing Ien's trek of the days previous. They knew he had gone to get his license renewed. Maybe folks in that part of the city would be more inclined to take note of individual Navis. The first stumbling description they gave—"He's a Navi;" "wearing blue;" "About this tall"—won them puzzled shrugs and vague hand-wavings at every Navi in the area—and there were quite a few. When Nola slowed down long enough to say what time he had come, what he had done here, and a description of his most prominent and unique markings—the wings—they were solemnly pointed in the direction of a tattoo dispensary called "Remil's."

At Remil's, the man behind the bar, wiping the counter absently, scrutinized them as they entered and closed the door quietly behind them, leaving the noises of the street outside. Something in his face told Nola that, *of course*, he only dealt with criminals on a regular basis—*of course* he would be wary of their entrance.

"Are you Remil?" Nola asked. When the man didn't answer, she pressed on. "We're looking for a Navigator; he came here on yesterday—"

"You're probably looking for Ien." Remil stopped wiping the counter and just looked at them. The surprise must have shown on Nola's face, because he finally snorted and said, "Obviously Ien is the only Navigator with a crew that gives two hides about him. You must be Katrya."

A spasm of anger snaked through Nola at Ree's absence. "Actually, no." She introduced herself and Mack, but Remil was already nodding.

"I see," was all he said. He went back to cleaning, this time beginning to wipe out some glasses.

She and Mack looked at each other. She saw what she needed in his face. "Excuse me."

Remil didn't look up, just filled two of the cleaned glasses with a thick, amber-colored ale and waved to the barstools in front of him. "Sit."

"We need you to tell us—"

This time, the man's eyes locked on them. "Sit," he said with more force. He filled a glass for himself and took a long swig, sighing ruefully.

Mack and Nola sat. *This man definitely knows something.*

"If you are here and Ien is not," Remil said in a calm tone, carefully looking both of them in the eye in turn, "then something has happened to him." He held up his hand as Nola opened

her mouth. “Don’t tell me the circumstances, because I already know them. I warned him something like this might happen. That man in black has been stirring up a ruckus around here.” He came around to the other side of the bar and strode across the room to the door, where he closed and locked it.

“I knew we weren’t done with him,” her friend whispered, staring into his ale as the vendor came to sit on the stool beside them. Mack then threw his head back and drained the whole thing in one gulp. She remembered Ree’s harried whispers, as they slunk away from Briia, about the man in black. And Ien’s pale silence even in the face of Ree’s furious questioning.

“He’s been asking around,” Remil murmured, hefting his glass and staring into the amber bubbles. “About Ien.”

“Why are you telling us this?” Nola asked.

Remil shrugged. “Ien is my friend, or the closest you can come to it in a business like this. He’s been comin’ to me for years and years. I’ve learned some things about Ien, things that this man wants to exploit.”

Nola looked at Mack, but the man still stared into his now-empty glass. Remil took and refilled it, then set it back in front of Mack, who grunted in thanks.

“I’m not entirely certain,” he continued, sounding pretty sure of himself despite the words, “but I know that there are different kinds of Navigators. And somehow, Ien is different from the normal thieves and murderers and law-breakers that come in here. His blood is different. There’s some kinda different power in it.” He shook his head. “And that weird man has been looking for him.”

The resignation in his voice told Nola the inevitable. “What do we do?”

“I don’t want to get involved, so I don’t,” Remil replied. “I’m only telling you this because I respect and admire Ien. But the man in black is interested in why Ien is different.” He ran a hand through his nape-length, raven-colored hair. “And I don’t think Ien is this guy’s main goal. He’s been asking about your captain as well.” Remil tapped agitated fingers on the bar. He didn’t say anything else. His hesitation was palpable. He opened his mouth and closed it again.

“There’s something else,” Mack said when the silence had lasted long enough.

Remil shook his head ruefully and sighed. “Hybrid Navigators.”

Nola’s head jerked around and her brow drew down before she could control her reaction. “Hybrid . . . Navigators?” she asked. “What does that even mean?” It sounded familiar, though, like something she had pushed to the back of her mind and tried to forget.

Remil waved a hand—before he cleared his features, he almost looked startled he had said anything. “Forget it,” he said, standing and moving back behind the bar.

He didn’t say anything more as Mack gave him money for the ales Mack had drained. They pressed him, but he stubbornly set his jaw and didn’t relent. He almost hid the fear in his eyes, but Nola saw the tremble in his fingers. The man really did think he had said too much—something interesting to ponder later. They left the dispensary, and she wasn’t sure she knew anything more than when they had walked in, except for one certainty:

Ien has been kidnapped. She was sure of it, and the glint in Mack’s eye told her he knew it too.

#

Instead of heading back to the *Summer Wind*, Nola and Mack immediately hurried to Janne’s house. They didn’t have to confer.

As they half-ran through the streets of Praan, Nola had a thought. “My brother might be able to help us.”

“Help us with what?” Mack said as they skirted a street vendor selling strips of cloth in the color of the banner of Praan: orange-gold as the sunset.

Great question. “The Navigator stuff. He studies it. Gives lectures about it at the library in Port Aria.” Mack nodded, but didn’t say anything, like he wasn’t listening, not really. Nola resolved to write to Cyril. “Hybrid Navigators” seemed like something up his alley; even if he didn’t know anything about them, he would want to know of their existence. Just the two words together sounded jarring in her mind, and she could still *swear* that she had heard them before somewhere, a long, long time ago, but her mind couldn’t grasp it. Her brother may be able to piece it together. And he could help her puzzle out what to do about all of this—Ree, Ien, everything.

Dear Cyril, she wrote in her head. *I need your help. Something is wrong with Ree.*

And someone has taken Ien.

“I guess I should tell Puertsmuth that we’re not going anywhere,” Mack groaned as they headed for Janne’s.

“It doesn’t matter. He’ll leave anyway. He’s probably already gone, with our money.”

He nodded in disgruntled agreement.

“What do you think about what Remil told us?” Nola said carefully.

Mack’s hands clenched and unclenched as they walked, probably subconsciously. If there was anything Nola knew about her friend, it was that if there was something he couldn’t solve by force or with the explosives he kept under his coat, he felt at a loss. And this was not a situation he could fix with his explosives . . . yet.

“I don’t know, Nola,” he said, more softly than she had expected. She hurried to keep pace with him, to catch his words. “Ien’s been taken before, but this . . . This is different.”

“I wish Ree were here,” was all Nola could think to say.

#

When they reached Janne’s, Nola wrote to Cyril, and fifteen days later, her academic brother appeared on the doorstep of Janne’s house, enfolded her in a hug, and set his books on the writing table in the front room. “Let’s find your Navigator,” was all he said, pushing his spectacles toward the bridge of his nose.

Chapter 13

FORGIVE ME

Katrya stepped from *The Painted Consort* onto the pier at Port Aria, already calculating docking fees in her head and wondering how long they would have to be here before setting off again to Arboram. There was someone on the ship that would take notes and then take care of the docking fees—Arnei Correlan; she had met him two days ago—but she couldn't help but do them in her own head as well.

Docking license . . . 5 gold bluns.

Trading license . . . 3 gold bluns.

Temporary amnesty, important because Port Aria considers itself outside the jurisdiction of the Courts . . . 3 gold bluns.

The rolled parchment in her hand said she needed to find a merchant by the name of Stra Rell—she wasn't sure if that was a man's name or a woman's—to unload her cargo of pears grown in groves on the valley floor; apparently the terms of the trade had been pre-arranged before Ree had even left Praan seven days previous. No doubt Walfored had done the dealing, or had overseen it closely to make sure she was given a task she could "handle." Her lip curled in distaste at the thought of Walfored determining what she could and could not do.

"Trem," she said to the man beside her, "check with the embassy in the city. See if our Head of Ships has sent us any messages."

The man grunted and headed in the direction of the Court's only bastion in Port Aria, south along the harbor. As she watched him stump away, she gripped the parchment tighter, crumpling its middle, feeling the sheet beneath her orders, the hidden missive. The one from Janne. The one that the hurried messenger had placed in her hands just before her departure from Praan.

They will be in Port Aria, Janne wrote. He thinks you abandoned him, Katrya.

The unwritten question rattled around in her mind: *Did I?*

She was going to find Ien. And ask him.

The city was big, but she knew where he would be . . . after she dealt with Stra Rell and the eighty barrels of ripening pears in her hold. She stuffed the papers into the pouch at her side and scanned the dock, searching for . . . well, she didn't know what she was looking for. Man? Woman? Someone selling fruit? Her gaze alit on a man who looked not unlike the pinch-faced old registrant who had looked askance at her in Briia, right before Ien had been arrested, complete with clipboard and pen. *The face must come with the job.* He would probably be able to point her in the right direction, or know who to ask.

She strolled up to him. "Excuse me, but I—"

"Name and title please." The man's curt interruption brooked no argument.

She blinked. "Katrya Millor. Court Captain."

He pursed his lips, licked his fingertips, and leafed through the heavy parchment in front of him. "You are looking for Stra Rell." It wasn't a question. She tried to look over his shoulder at the document, but he snapped the papers shut and glared at her before gesturing down the dock to her left and into the city. "First street on the left, second stall on the right. You'll see the sign."

Ree headed in the direction he had indicated. Behind her, the carrier still hummed quietly at the end of its pier. Her steel city in the sky. Her boots thumped along the wooden planks of the dock until contacting the cobblestones of Port Aria—her first official steps into the metropolis and into the market ward that flourished from the proximity to the influx of goods. So close to the port, denizens of every city on this side of the mountain range—and some, like Ree, from the other side of the void—flitted

from stall to stall, inspecting and bartering for merchandise. Port Aria was probably the most diverse of the cities aside from Praan itself, because the lack of Court enforcement meant that people could move around more freely.

People, Ree thought with a wry twist to her lips, *and criminals*. Her gaze slid over and past a man with shifty eyes that she could tell had loose fingers, even though he tried to keep them hidden in his pockets.

Since Port Aria and its citizens considered themselves outside the jurisdiction of the Courts, Ree's presence here was precarious. She now worked for the Courts, had in name become an extension of their political reach. She would have to step carefully around this Stra Rell. *Probably Walfored's plan all along*, she thought sourly, *to see if I'm good enough for the job*. Well, she was ready for him. Trade was her specialty. It had been her life, until that greatstorm had seen fit to smash it—the *Arienna*—into smithereens. Her mouth curled deeper at the thought as she scanned the market stalls. She took a left at the first street, past a young man selling what looked like grilled mountain goat on a stick. One could never be sure about the origin of meats on these streets, especially when the vendor was as dirty as this fellow.

There. The registrant had been right; the sign was hard to miss. STRA RELL sprawled in bright green lacquer across a large piece of canvas that hung from the stall's front steel poles. The pine counter—pine was the least expensive wood at this altitude—displayed different fruits: apples, pears, grapes. Expensive foods, especially the grapes, which had to have been brought up from the valley floor or somewhere close. Stra Rell—Ree couldn't help but say the whole name in her head; it would have been weird to say one name or the other—turned out to be a very fit woman with a long tail of black hair kept away from her face by green ribbon and a dress that seemed more like tight underclothes than anything, with cutouts in all the right—or wrong—places. To show off her toned biceps and legs, Ree suspected, along with other choice features that men—and some women, for that matter—couldn't help but ogle. The woman stood with her weight shifted completely to one side, hands on hips. Ree would have been surprised by the amount of skin the woman flaunted if she hadn't known Nola for fifteen years. Women from Port Aria were . . . different. And just because Nola didn't dress like this Stra Rell didn't mean she didn't have the same preferences.

The woman was engaged with a client at current moment, a familiar-looking man wearing the black breeches and coat of the Courts, with the symbol of the Court of Trade—golden scales set on a white triangle—embroidered on his right arm. Ree approached anyway.

"Excuse me," she said. "I'm on a trade mission from the Courts." She reached into her pouch to extract her mission papers.

The man—willowy, sour-faced, long-nosed—sighed pointedly. Mid-movement, she realized why she recognized his features. She had seen him on her ship.

Stra Rell gave her a knowing smile. "You must be Captain Millor. Your lovely crewman was just telling me wonderful things about you." The downturn to the man's lips and the slight widening of his eyes told Ree a different story, but she ignored him. Stra Rell continued: "Your man is negotiating the price of the eighty barrels." She shifted her weight to the other hip. "Unless you would like to take over for him."

Ree frowned. She had always done her own negotiating. *I need to stop thinking of the past*. "No, it's fine. He has my permission to negotiate the price. I just wanted to make sure everything was running smoothly." *Can never be too careful about trade*, she wanted to add, but refrained at the last second.

The woman flashed that smile at her again, and then completely shut Ree out of her attention. Back to work.

The crewman shot Ree a glance that she couldn't quite read—confusion, derision, both?—and

said, “Four hundred silver bluns for the lot.”

As she turned away toward the rest of the city, Ree heard the woman cackle incredulously. She should have assumed that there would be a person to take care of her trade. But anyone could make that kind of mistake, having been granted a Court ship two weeks ago . . . right? Especially only having been on it and traveling for fifteen days.

She shifted through the city toward where she remembered Nola’s brother lived. The city itself was arranged in quadrants that rippled out from the Market Ward. The founders and subsequent rulers, the Triumvirate, had sought a more organic plan, as the story went. The result had been four tiers that followed the natural inclination of the mountainside that sloped gently upward in some places and required stone staircases in others. Ree, despite her relatively normal physical wellness, began to breathe hard even before she had reached the second tier, called the Civilian Ward.

Nola’s half-brother, Cyril, lived in the section of the Civilian Ward quartered off for the scholars and other persons of intellect. He worked at the Grianan Library as a “visiting scholar”. Whatever that meant. For all Ree knew, he got paid for gluing his nose in a book for weeks at a time and then extracting himself to say something “important” about it or write another book or something. The line of work made no sense to her. Cyril was only a few years older than she, and they had talked a few times—he seemed nice, if unaware of reality at times. At the moment, his occupation was irrelevant; she simply needed to find his sister, and Ree knew for certain that Nola would be with him. She had been to this house two times in the past: once, when her father had still been alive, and again after his death and his bequeathal of the *Arienna* to her. That second trip had been a voyage to ask Nola to join her crew. Now, after six years, Ree would be pleading for something entirely different.

Forgiveness.

She got about halfway there—with the scattered shops catering now to the needs of the citizenry—before she recognized a man walking toward her in the Civilian Ward. His hair was blond and he wore all black.

Before her heart could do more than skip two beats, she had turned to the right and sprinted into the nearest shop. She barely registered the wares for sale—pen and ink and vellum, all arrayed nicely on tables around the small room, indicating the (closeness) of the library—before she moved to the front window. Pretending to peruse the selection of carefully carved quill and fountain pens, she half-hid and peered out the front window at the man.

Of course it was him.

He strode with purpose in the direction she had come, eyes front, lips set in a thin line. It was obvious he was on his way to something important . . . and annoying. What could annoy the man that had threatened her so easily?

Damn, she thought. *If he’s here, he must be looking for me and Ien.* Especially Ien. What had he called her Navi? *Rinnaeio*? Whatever that meant.

Once he had passed the front of the shop with no sign of having seen her mad dash from the street, she poked her head from the establishment and ignored the calls of “Are you going to buy something?” from the proprietor. She could just see the back of the man’s head as he melded into the throng. Before Ree knew what she was doing, she had begun to trot in that direction, keeping him in her line of sight.

She followed him all the way back to the Market Ward via the northern corridor, skipping down sets of stairs and heading down the incline of the city, but a street before they would have turned into the ward proper, he took an unexpected hook down another avenue, less populated.

It was obvious that this part of the market saw less business than the stalls closer to the port. Here, the signs were not so brightly lacquered, and Navigators prowled the area like half-starved dogs,

with the bags under their eyes and snarl on their lips. Of course. The tattoo district.

Every city had one. Ree had gone with Ien only once—to the area of Tinna that was home to darkened, dirty alleys of men who could carve magic into skin. It made Ree's own skin crawl with imagined filth. In this place, men—bad men that had turned to crime early in life—were allowed to cavort freely with each other, whisper behind the curtains of tattoo parlors noted more for their good liquor than for their cleanliness. At the same time she thought it, she knew she was a hypocrite. Ien was a good man, a better man than most. He was different. But he was still a Navigator, and he still had to come to this district.

She pushed thoughts of Ien from her head and ignored the bile that tried to crawl up her throat at her own callousness. She had no time for that, not when Riesen was almost out of sight . . .

And he had disappeared. The only likely suspect was a relatively unassuming establishment. One of the windows was boarded up and the whitewash peeled in places, but otherwise it seemed like a regular home in a lesser-income part of town. There wasn't even a sign out front—just an address number above the door.

I bet that's a dispensary, she thought, before turning and all but running the opposite direction. There was no way she could follow him in there without being seen. She would see if Nola or Mack had anything to say about this strange fellow—and she would return once the man was sure to be gone. She just had to make sure her crew would talk to her. She *hadn't* abandoned them. Besides, they had more pressing worries if this man was in town and looking for them.

Eventually she mounted a steep stair and emerged in the Library Square, a gigantic rectangular space home to Cyril's place of work and some upper-class housing, along with two relatively tame taverns and businesses that tailored to the librarian type: ink shops, places to sell oil and electric lamps, bookstores, apothecaries. The exact kind of commerce that Ree would rather eschew, even though to hear her fellow merchants talk, it was a lucrative business. *Give me a hold full of wine any day. Or fruit. Something useful.* She resisted the urge to scowl at the shops that they passed.

She turned onto a side street and stopped in front of a relatively small, flat-roofed building. This one had two floors as opposed to the four or five boasted by the other buildings on this street, but it was still a nicer home than many in the lower city, furnished and funded by Cyril's comfortable scholarly profession. A short walkway led to a deep red door carved with symbols of fire. Cyril's area of study, the way Ree understood it, had something to do with Navigation. Why he had carved fire symbols into his door was beyond her—Navigation only involved the wind. Maybe he was superstitious, or had become so in the last six years; those had not been there when Ree had last visited.

Her fist wavered in the air before the door, but finally came down three hard times. She waited.

She noticed the silence, the steadfastness of the closed door.

She tried the knob, found it locked—of course. Ree patted the pockets of her breeches before finding what she was looking for: a metal hairpin. Taking a swift look around the street, she slid the slip of metal into the lock and eased the tumblers into submission. She pushed the door open and stepped into the shallow foyer. Cyril wasn't much for decoration—probably had his head in a book more often than not, no time for frivolous things like wall ornamentation. The only furniture in this space was a small table that stood against the opposite wall. A piece of parchment lay there. To the right, an archway led into the sitting room, but it was dark, quiet. Curious, Ree closed the door behind her, slipped the pin back into her pocket, and plucked the sheet from the metal surface.

Dear Cyril, she read, and immediately recognized Nola's handwriting. As she scanned the sheet, the ball of nerves in her stomach wrung itself tighter and tighter until her intestines constricted. *Ien is missing. We believe he has been kidnapped by a dangerous man that he, Mack, and Ree encountered in the Briian Prison.*

Ien. Missing. Kidnapped. The fingers that held the parchment trembled of their own accord.
That man.

We went to Ien's tattoo artisan, Nola continued. He told us that Ien isn't a normal Navigator—he thinks that's why that man is after Ien. You know more about Navigation than even Navis.

Ree reminded herself to breathe. In. Out. In.

Ree is gone. We need your help. Please come to Praan.

She crumpled the sheet in her fist and stormed from the house, eyes clouded with hot rage. The man had tried to harm her friend . . . again. She ground her teeth as she ran, uncaring of the stares and disgruntled shouts she received as she jostled passersby in her way.

It took exactly six minutes to retrace her steps to where the man had disappeared into the unassuming building, and less than one minute to shove the door open, throw the heavy bar over it to set the lock, vault behind the counter of the comfortable-looking bar, grab the heavysset, sweating proprietor's shirt in her fist, and place the point of her knife at the meat of the man's neck. He didn't even have time to squeak. Not that he would have wanted to with a sharp object pressing into his gullet.

"You are going to tell me where the blond man is," Ree said slowly, enunciating every syllable with intent. "And your reward will be that I won't kill you."

He sputtered into his mustache, or made some kind of noise that she didn't care about.

"You misunderstand," she growled. "This is not a decision for you to make. This is where you tell me everything. Or your head ends up on the bar."

"Left five minutes ago," he drawled with a scowl. "Said something about weird Navis." She shifted her grip on the blade. His eyes focused solely on the point. The sheen of sweat on his forehead was no longer thin. "He asked if I had any customers that came to me only for black ink. Sounded weird." He swallowed, which proved difficult with steel poking his Adam's apple. "Mentioned something about Arboram."

Arboram, she thought, mind already whirring with images of the city on the edge of the range, which she had only visited once before. A city of secrets—the gateway to the outside, some called it. "Why did he come to you? Why not to any other tattoo mongrel in this dump of a district?"

He shrugged as much as possible in his current position. "Probably because . . ." He stopped, trembling harder. She narrowed her eyes. "Um. I do business with Valers."

Her stomach turned at the thought. Valers. Of course. *This man sells his own customers out to those political extremists.* "And have you seen any Navis that fit that description?"

"No."

"Right." She exhaled shortly. "Anything else?"

"Listen, lady, I—"

Ree snarled and pulled him closer to the point of her blade.

"Okay, okay. Could you at least let me breathe a little? Can't talk if I'm passed out."

"No."

"Anyone ever tell you that you need to get that stick outta your—"

She tightened the fist on his collar.

He gave an exasperated sigh, but he wasn't annoyed enough to forget his fear. "The Court . . . The guy seemed to know a lot about . . . the ink."

Ree flicked her gaze to the contraption at the end of the bar. "The ink?"

"He asked where I got it."

"And?"

"Um. I . . . get . . . eighty percent of my ink . . . from the Court." His voice became small and squeakish.

Ree's eyes widened. The hand holding the sword was suddenly slick with sweat. "From the Court?" she mirrored.

The guy squirmed in her grip, and she realized that the look in his eyes was no longer abject terror. And he was a large guy. And the arm holding the knife was beginning to shake. With one move, she slashed downward, nicked him shallowly on the wrist, and danced around the bar as he grunted in pain. She had the crosspiece on the door up and was in the street before he could do more than circumvent the counter.

She *ran* back to her ship, and when she got there, she told Villial Trem that they were leaving, *damn* the fruit, and to set a course for Arboram. The thin membrane between Ree and her panic held, for now, though her palms sweated and sweated as she retired to the room with the *syloom* and sat cross-legged on the floor, hands hot on her knees.

She had to fix this. The first step was to get to Arboram and lie in wait for the devil who had taken her Navigator away.

Chapter 14

A BRAND NEW BOX FOR YOUR SOUL

Port Aria dwindled behind Ree. A day later and not any calmer, she tried to keep her eyes forward as she stood on the bridge of the *Painted Consort*, hands clasped behind her back.

She tried to distract her mind with thoughts of what the tattoo dispenser had said about his ink coming from the Courts. It made sense, being that the economy couldn't function without the use of airships, but why weren't there many other distributors? From a business standpoint, it was a bad idea to get most of a product from one source. What happened if the source was cut off? It was unlikely the Court would suddenly stop distribution, but a possibility nonetheless. *I wonder if all tattoo dispensaries have the same source.* Ree's market-trained brain buzzed but could alight on no answer. It just didn't add up.

But all of these questions didn't mean anything until she laid eyes on Ien's face.

Trem, her supposed first mate, could sense her mood, because instead of antagonizing her like he had the whole journey to Port Aria, he kept his distance, overseeing—or pretending to oversee—the other crewmembers on the bridge. His eyes darted furtively to her every so often, but he didn't say anything or even approach her. Good riddance anyway. His shifty eyes, his curled lip . . . She wished she could wipe that ugly smirk from his face whenever she looked at him. The doubt of the whole crew in the capabilities of this *woman* captain was more than palpable—even from the women!—and it was mount-cursed *annoying*.

Ree walked slowly to the front of the bridge, to the wall-to-wall window that separated the wind from her hair, the sun from her skin. She could see the void all right, but the barrier of glass kept the world outside. Port Aria lay behind them, but she still felt the claws of Sildu Vorinn's words, dragging her . . . to Arboram? Or somewhere else? The man may have lied, but he had been afraid enough of her to whet his words with truth. Or so she hoped. She had a long eight days before her, and the fear would only grow harder to stem.

The sun shone on the void, illuminating a blue sky and the distant northern peaks. The *Painted Consort* had enough altitude now that the glass was cold to the touch when she splayed her hand across it; Port Aria lay in the middle of the range, but Arboram would be much higher and colder. The nose of the ship still pointed slightly upward, except that it was slowly falling. . .

Ree's stomach somersaulted. The glass turned hot beneath her hand, and she pried herself away with a gasp of pain—flecks of blood dotted the surface of the window, which immediately began to steam.

"Trem!" she called, stumbling back. She bumped into the console on the left. "What the hell is going on?"

She tried to right herself. She could feel the wrongness in the air, in the soles of her feet. She felt it beneath her fingertips as she brushed the instrument panel of the bridge. Trem didn't answer, just growled wordlessly and leapt to the steering column, taking it in his hands and pulling up. No response from the ship. Still the slow downward tilt.

"Someone tell me . . ." The words wouldn't come. She lurched sideways, crashing into the panel again, and she realized it was the NaviWatch screen, blaring hot and red, big emergency letters screaming confusion into the air.

The world tilted, and the men and women on the bridge clung to chairs and panels. Katrya, though her stomach now sat in her throat, screeched: "Hang on!"

The ship began a slow, spiraling descent from the sky like so much fancy steel garbage.

#

He could hear the heavy breathing of the man next to him. He could feel the man's life force slipping away.

And he could feel the ship, the lovely soul-box, struggling in the other Navigator's tenuous grasp. Something about it was familiar, but the pain under his skin clamored too loudly for him to concentrate. He knew that if he could find a box to house his soul, he would survive, but death didn't seem so bad now that he could smell it on the other man. He had smelled it even before the woman had come to inject the other Navigator in the hart with a long, vicious needle.

This dark underground prison, with its high walls of carved stone, groaned with the slow deaths of the men in this room, each chained nakedly to the floor in spread-eagle positions, each marked with the same hexagonal mark and black dot as he. Men that he now knew to be "different" in the same way that he was different. Same power, same blood that normally drained and filled the colored marks on his body all of its own accord. Except that the carvings that spiderwebbed across his skin remained colorless.

His insides were still dead.

There was something—someone?—he was supposed to remember, but his bones shrugged the thought away, concentrating only on the soul-box of the dying Navigator chained beside him, eyes trained on a ceiling he knew existed but could not espy through the darkness.

#

"Trem, report!"

Keep a level head. It became a mantra. *You are the captain. Keep a level—*

"Trem, report!" she shrieked at the man. No room for calm.

"Nothing to report," he called from the other side of the bridge. "We're falling out of the damn sky." Ree's eyes, trained on the NaviWatch, felt heavy in her head. She couldn't see her first mate, but the fear in his voice was enough. The Navi hadn't lost total control of the ship, so the *Painted Consort* drifted unsteadily, unresponsive to controls.

My Navigator is dying.

"Give it more power," she barked into the message pipe that led to the engine room. "I don't care how much, just get us righted." She didn't want to hear the response. The one that would tell her that the power was under the control of the Navi and was thus unreachable. So when it came, she ignored it.

Bracing herself against the map table, she turned to the main window. The void spun, showing mountain peaks at both sides as the carrier swirled in midair. North, south, up, down. Slowly, slowly to their deaths.

Maybe a passing ship would stop and help them. She knew the thought was useless. They would be splat on the valley floor before any helping hand would be found or forced. *This isn't supposed to happen. These ships are indestructible.* Her white knuckles, gripping the panel, cracked with the pressure.

It was a Navigator problem.

"Trem, with me! I'm going to the *syloom*." The question of "how" died silently on his lips as she latched onto the console, and then the chair of the nearest crewman, and began pulling herself to the door.

#

The Navigator who thought his name might have been "Ien" in a different life paid careful attention to his senses as the other man died. Out of the corner of his eye, the red, glowing chains allowed just enough light to witness the collapse of the man's chest for one, two, three more breaths. And then nothing.

Now. Ien forced his mind in a rush toward the other's body, toward the connection he knew was

there, but dwindling.

The presence of the soul-box suddenly burst into vibrant life in Ien's head. He reached out his mind, but recoiled instantly. The box was hot. Too much heat, like lava from Mount Kazan.

He needed this soul-box so that his blood would no longer be dead. He reached his mind toward the barrier again, and again. He allowed the heat to flay him. There was no other option.

#

Katrya *would not* allow this ship to crash. She rushed through the corridors, banged into walls, almost flying as gravity forgot how to work. Trem was screaming something at her from behind, but she couldn't hear him.

She followed the map in her head. She had been to this part of the ship twice, had been told that the Navigator needed space and would only emerge when he pleased, had been turned away by a crewmember at the entrance to the room where the *syloom* was housed without so much as a smile, both times.

She made it down the stairs at the back of her giant machine, threw open the door. She took in the steel walls and red swirl of paint on the floor that made the *syloom*: a spiral with a dot above and below. She would have been more impressed if the room had not been empty.

No Navigator. I have no Navigator.

She had thought for sure the man would be here.

Part of her, the calculative part that could view this from an objective angle, whispered, *Of course. That's why I haven't met my Navigator yet. He's not here.* Which meant that the ship was being Navigated from a remote location . . . The other part of her struggled to hold in a terrified scream.

If the Navigator is not on my ship, where is he? And why is he dying?

She lowered herself to the trembling floor and crawled to the *syloom*.

She prayed, kissed her fingertips, and pressed them into the paint on the hard steel floor.

#

Ien's mind . . . slipped into place.

#

The ship's mad descent . . . halted. Ree's stomach retreated into its rightful place beneath her esophagus but above her hips. Trem—so he had followed her after all—looked over at her, crouched low to the ground, his eyes wide. She looked down at her ten fingers, splayed against the red of the *syloom*. She pried them away, but a tingle at the ends of them made her stare. Crimson stained her fingertips.

She shook her head against the impossibility and pushed herself to her feet. No time for that. Trem scrambled to imitate her, brushing his knees. "Check for casualties," she ordered. "Anyone has any broken bones, set them as well as possible. We'll make for the nearest port."

For once he didn't argue, only nodded and hurried out of the room. Ree steadied herself with a hand on the wall, staring down at the symbol in the floor and breathing shallowly. She wiped trembling, bloody fingertips on her trousers without looking.

As she neared the bridge, she heard panic in the voices of the crew. She frowned. The emergency was past. They had stopped their plummet from the sky. Someone must be hurt. She pushed herself to run.

"What in the name of . . ." Trem shouted above the shriek of five different alarms blaring from the consoles on the bridge as she burst into the room. The man ran from one to the other, glancing at the screens and their loud red numbers.

Ree peered beyond the front window, beyond the ice . . . into an oncoming greatstorm. The swirl

of debris and wind churned as though it had a life force of its own, growling as the wind picked up the carrier and began to tug this way and that. Ree planted her feet firmly, shoulder width apart to prevent herself from falling, as some of the previously standing crew tried to pick themselves off the floor.

A flash of memory: the *Arienna*. Its pieces strewn like so much kindling into the void, slamming against Mount Yarah all the way down to the valley floor.

“If it’s not one thing, it’s another,” she grumbled under her breath and moved to stand in front of the helm, composing herself before announcing: “Turning hard to port!” She seized the great wheel in her hands and heaved to the left. If Trem wasn’t going to do his job, she would do it for him.

The shock on the crewmembers’ faces lasted only a second, and then the ship was moving, and she gripped the wheel with white-knuckled hands as everyone on board held their breath.

“What kind of damage will a greatstorm do to a ship like this?” she asked Trem through her teeth as she pulled on the wheel. The uncertain look on his face was answer enough. “Okay. Here we go.”

The ship turned, but it didn’t move away from the storm. They just kept sliding further into the storm; she had heard stories of storms this huge—once you’re caught in the whirlpool of its winds, it was nearly impossible to claw your way out without casualty. Well, this greatstorm had never seen Katria Millor. What exactly she was going to do was another matter. All eyes in the room alternated between her and the oncoming whirlwind seen through the heavy glass hull. The exhaustion in her bones from the previous emergency scrambled at her mind, weakened her grip on the helm. There was just no energy.

Wait. Energy. A memory surfaced of Ien, standing at the prow of the *Arienna*, on a stormy day two years ago. He had done . . . something to the heavy clouds over the void, and the blackness had dissipated. Slowly, and it hadn’t been a greatstorm, but it had gone. That memory led to a flash of the day the *Arienna* had been destroyed, of Ien trying so hard to push the storm back, tears digging trails down his cheeks . . . And then the Palace Navigators had reached out with their power and encapsulated the greatstorm in a bubble of energy well away from the port.

She strained at the wheel and shot at Trem: “What would happen if we fired a concentrated blast of Navigator power into the center of that storm?”

Trem shrugged, befuddlement clouding his features. Good enough answer for her. This had to work. The storm grew closer. The tremble of a thousand pounds of steel and turbines became a roar.

“You!” she shrieked at Allin, the crewman that maintained the NaviWatch console. “Can you get our Navigator to diffuse that thing?”

Terror filled the man’s face. “Captain, the backlash could tear the ship to bits. Plus, we don’t know the state of our Navigator. He could be severely wounded . . .”

“We don’t have a choice, Allin!” At least, she didn’t see another one. Still she pulled on the helm, but the uselessness of her actions grated on her. A timid voice in the back of her head whispered that she was going to die, but she squashed it. Now was not the time for frivolous fear. “Get that message to our Navigator!”

The man sat down at the NaviWatch and began to press buttons.

#

A strange sensation materialized in Ien’s mind. Yes, that was his name. His new soul-box wanted him to . . . do something. Something familiar, something he had tried to do before, not long ago, and failed. Panic layered the voice of the soul-box. But Ien was still so weak!

He had to try. Something about this soul-box was familiar, welcoming. Something warm—not, hot—inside it made him love it. He had to try.

#

Whatever Allin did at the NaviWatch console seemed to work. The floor of the ship trembled

harder, but Ree could see through the window that a force pushed the storm back, back, slowly back. She allowed the helm to right itself, watched in shocked silence as the storm receded.

PART III

Chapter 15

WAITING

Heave.

Ien sucked breath through a flayed throat to burning lungs and listened to the sound it made, like wind whining through blasted rock. He was alive, at least for another second before he had to fill those lungs with air again. His heart ached against the glowing golden chains that held him to the cement ground of this underground sepulcher. But he was alive, and so was *she*.

He could feel her, the heat of her body and mind pressing against his own. It almost lulled him into a trance of slumber as he hummed along with her heat. And the ship. The beautiful soul-box that he now called his own. His blood sang with life—as soon as he had wrested the ship from the dying Navi beside him, he could taste the return of his power. Alive for now, but for how long? Despite the swell of life in his veins, he felt it dwindling even now.

A sound to Ien's right. A doorway opened beyond his line of sight, a portal into blinding light. He squeezed his eyes shut. Three sets of footsteps advanced; the chains around Ien's body clanked as he shifted in terror. They couldn't take him now. He had only just acquired a home for his soul.

Instead, the dead Navigator's body was dragged by silent hands from the room. The door slammed once again, and the light was extinguished.

Darkness pressed against him seductively from all sides. The monstrous man and his words rattled around Ien's mind: *Rinnaeio. Condemned.* The dead wings at the man's temples haunted Ien's thoughts. That staff must have been the sole source of the man's power; there was no other possibility, if his blood was as dead as Ien's had been. Ien stretched against the chains for a fraction of a second, and the burning in his skin made him wish he hadn't.

Hurry, woman, he found himself thinking.

His chest rose and fell, guiding the waves of air that cradled the ship, and the rocking motion of his breath, of the ship, was enough to give him one sharp stab of hope, *there* in his bosom. The woman—he knew it was her—and his soul-box were moving away from him, away away. But they would return. He could feel it in her resolve. He could feel it in the blood that she had smeared across his hull, across the symbol that connected him to the ship. An accident, perhaps. But he knew she was coming. He just wished she would hurry.

But he would wait. And she would have a lot of explaining to do when she got here.

The darkness creaked. The chains around him shone painfully. He tried not to move and tried to remember to breathe.

Chapter 16

EPIPHANY

Nola Reen sat up on the sofa, dislodged herself from cloying blankets, and stood hastily. The darkness of Janne's home, broken only by starlight seeping in through the tiny front window, seemed to pitch and heave—another reminder that Nola should have been in the air instead of . . . this. Her body didn't know what to do with solid mountain earth for extended periods of time. She looked at Mack on the makeshift cot across the room, spread out in every direction, mouth wide open, with the sheets wrapped around him like some kind of sarong. That man could sleep through a greatstorm. Thank goodness he hadn't those weeks ago, because the splinters of the *Arienna* would have been his gravesite. Nola, on the other hand, couldn't seem to coax her tired brain into slumber for anything.

It was Katrya that had Nola's mind spinning itself in knots. Again. Still. *Ien could die*, Nola cursed to herself. *Or worse*. And where was Ree? Traipsing all around the mountains in hopes of a glimpse at the outside. Or maybe she was still in Praan. Nola couldn't say for sure. That girl wasn't thinking about anyone but herself. She wasn't *thinking* at all. She hadn't found it important enough to visit her old friends, even now, after Nola had tried to send word to her about Ien.

Nola repressed a sigh and decided that sleep wasn't going to happen tonight, after all. She pulled on her boots and laced up her dress.

She slipped through Janne's front door, careful to bring it shut behind her, and took a deep breath, trying to enjoy the freshness of the night air. Praan, unlike Nola, was asleep at this hour, only whispers of activity drifting to these upper districts from the ever-restless market. The air was calm, and clean, and the stars shone brightly above. A perfect night for a walk. If only Nola had been able to enjoy it.

"Couldn't sleep, eh?"

She turned to see her brother watching her with sharp green eyes. He sat beneath a street lantern on a raised stone ledge with—surprise—an open book in his hands.

"No," she responded, managing to keep the regret out of her voice. "You?"

"Too excited," he said, peering in the direction of the Palace. "You're sure he said *hybrid Navigators*?"

She nodded and sat beside him on the ledge. Behind them, a small garden of hearty flowers and tiny bushes flourished under the care of city workers. The heavy heat of the long summer had begun to wilt the flowers.

"He just . . . said it, and there was no explanation or anything," she said.

Cyril's dark brows drew together in concentration. "I can't say I've ever heard of it before, but that doesn't mean anything. Phenomena can go by different names in different cities." Of course, here was the academic, getting ready to lecture even at this hour of night. He had only been here for a day.

Nola jumped in, stemming the inevitable tide. "It seemed important when he said it, and he wouldn't tell us what he was talking about. Like it's some kind of secret."

For a long minute he simply stared past her, up the street. "I can't wait to figure out what that means," he finally breathed, bringing his gaze down to peer at the book in his hands. Nola caught a glimpse of part of the title: *On the Elements*. Just as quickly, he looked back up, staring off into the distance at the white building carved into the mountain. The starlight reflected from its surface, creating a sort of halo.

That feeling, along with the almost predatory fervor in her brother's eyes, settled something raw and nervous inside Nola's stomach.

"Nola," he said suddenly in his soft voice, gaze alighting on her, "did you ever go back?"

For a moment she didn't know what he was talking about. She pursed her lips and frowned, questioning him with her eyes, but then she realized. *Of course he would ask about that.*

"No," she said flatly. She had no desire to visit the site of Erik Millor's death.

He stood. His height always astonished her—more than six feet tall and lanky besides. He began to walk north, in the direction of the Peale District, and Nola closed her eyes. She wished he would stop walking. When she opened them, he was looking back at her, an expectant eyebrow raised. Not forceful, but still quietly insistent. He would be going that way no matter what she did, his look said, but she may as well come anyway.

She sighed and stood. The slumbering city ignored them as they turned down street after street, entering and exiting small squares. The Peale District, the location of middle-class residences, lay on northeastern side of Praan and bordered the market ward on two sides, east and south. It had been a perfect location for Erik Millor and his exotic wife to raise a child, twenty-five years before. Until childbirth had taken the woman, and until fire had taken the man twenty-two years later.

When they came upon the wreckage, it was a surprise. It had been so long since Nola had visited this part of Praan that she didn't recognize the same landmarks, until the pile of charred stones was practically beneath her feet. She wondered briefly why the city had decided to leave the remnants of the burned home, but decided that train of thought wasn't productive.

Instead she focused on the home itself, the way it should have looked, the way it appeared in her memory. A simple one-story stone affair, squeezed in beside houses twice and three times the height and width, Katrya's childhood home had been just that. A place to grow up, a place to come back to after she was old enough to start going out on trading missions by herself. The place where, eventually, Nola met and fell in love with Katrya's father, even though he had been ten years her senior. If the house had still stood, there would have been hearty mountain flowers in the box beneath the bubbled window—glass because the successful merchant Erik Millor could afford it; there would have been coffee brewing in the kitchen; there would have been a smiling man greeting them as they stepped into the tiny yard of thin grass and smooth pebbles. Instead of all that, there was nothing. A few burnt rocks and scattered foundation stones.

The fire had taken more than just Katrya's father. It had taken things from Nola too.

As they stared at the mess, Cyril kicked at a loose stone. Whatever wood had been in this pile had either burned up with the house or had been scavenged by looters as soon as it cooled five years before—too valuable to leave lying around.

"There has been something bothering me," Cyril said into the silence of night. The street lantern across the avenue was their only source of light.

She looked up at him. He was staring into the rubble, clutching his book close to his chest.

"The fire," he continued. "Why did the house catch on fire in the first place?"

Nola frowned, trying to remember. She didn't often think about that painful day and its aftermath. Fuzzy details came back to her bit by bit. She hadn't been in the house, but Katrya had, and she had known something was wrong as soon as the girl had come stumbling back to the *Arienna* covered in ash and tears. "She said it had something to do with an experiment of her

father's," Nola told Cyril, recollecting the girl's panicked words.

Cyril nodded slightly. "I remember he was interested in the elements. He was very nearly what got me started learning about Navigation," he confided, tapping the book in his arms absently.

Nola strained harder to sift through her memories. "She had marks on her arms." Yes, it was clearer now.

He shot her an annoyed glance. "She had just crawled out of a fire."

"No," she said. "Like she had been poked with a needle. Two tiny bruises with puncture wounds, near the elbow."

Cyril was silent for a moment. While he thought, however, Nola remembered something else. "Weren't you here that day?" she asked. "Wouldn't you remember?"

The uncomfortable frown on his face only added to her confusion. "Yes, I was here," he replied. "I was helping Erikk with—"

All at once his eyes grew wide, and he suddenly flipped open the book. She didn't know how he could see the miniscule words in this darkness, but something he saw on the pages must have been important, because he slammed it shut and exhaled long and hard. "Fire," he whispered.

"What about it?"

He shot her another disparaging glance. "Think about it, Nola. A fire. Puncture wounds. Erikk's element 'experiments.' Remil's hybrid Navigators." To her, it all sounded like things Cyril had just thrown together in one sentence, like vegetable soup that retained all of its separate parts. None of the ingredients meshed well with the others. She opened her mouth to tell him so, but he continued: "Ree is a *Navigator*, Nola. Or, at least, her blood is the same."

Nola's stomach settled into her feet. It wasn't possible, what he was saying. "How . . ."

"Think about it," he repeated. "Ree's blood caused the fire. I would stake my career on it. Erikk was always saying that he wanted to come across a different kind of Navi. His *daughter* was that person." The fervor in his voice vibrated into the city's dead silence.

"How can you be so sure?" Even as she asked, though, she knew he was right. The heaviness in her gut told her so.

She remembered the usually stoic Erikk being excited the week of the accident. When she had asked about his uncharacteristic giddiness, he had simply said, "Research is coming along."

Standing before the remains of that man's home, Nola felt a chill travel down her spine. Research. On his own daughter.

"Nola," Cyril whispered, still staring hard at the wreckage. "I have to go. I have to find her and tell her before she hurts someone or herself." He flicked his gaze at her. "If I'm right about the blood, she could do some serious damage."

Nola stared in horror at her brother, then back at the rubble. "What about Ien?" she mumbled.

"I have a feeling she and Ien are connected. Once I tell her about her own strength, we may be able to find Ien through her." He tapped his book with a long, bony finger. "It's in here. Apparently it can be done."

"I don't know, Cyril," she began, but he jerked his head.

"I have to go." And he disappeared running into the dark city.

Nola was left to watch the unmoving spot where the girl had been happy, once. *Oh, Katrya*, she thought. *Oh, you silly girl, what have you done?*

What will you do?

#

Barin Walfored hated to wait. Yet that was what he was doing.

Rinna knew that Barin did not take kindly to delay. And yet the woman dallied in her report about the state of the Millor woman's carrier ship.

The inevitable had finally happened. The Navigator for the ship had . . . expired, and the savage, Ien, had taken control. Just as Barin knew he would—no Navigator could resist the comfort a ship could provide, especially one in the mental state that man had made home. Now all Barin had to do was get Katria back to Praan so that he could complete the collection.

He sat in his comfortable chair, behind his comfortable desk, in his comfortable office, and felt like he sat in a prison of his own impatience. The paper in front of him held the words *It's done* in Rinna's handwriting. But no report.

Shrylu Riesen also knew that Barin hated waiting—but that man was on his own schedule. The bounty hunter was supposed to be in Arboram by now, but Barin hadn't received any communication. That ship would sail eventually. Part of him regretted sending Riesen to retrieve the woman, but after the hunter's delivery of the savage with little damage, Barin had figured he should allow the professional to handle this one as well. Katria would not be as . . . amenable . . . as Ien had been.

But all Riesen had to do was get her to Praan in one piece. Then they could work on doing the right kind of damage.

He sighed and pushed himself away from the desk. If Rinna wasn't going to bring him that report, he may as well go and see how the construction was coming. He stepped outside his office into the antechamber to his apartments, a large space furnished with a mahogany table and chairs in the corner, lamps complete with mirrors to magnify the illumination, and a deep crimson rug with golden detail spread over the cold stone floor. Two other doors leading from the antechamber led to his bedroom and a separate drawing room. A smile curled his lips, but curdled instantly. It eased his mind to have comfort. Just not today.

The hall outside his chambers led to a wide space where the ornate staircase began its descent straight through the bowels of the Palace. The sight he was greeted with every day when he went to work four floors below. He took it—slowly, because he didn't have anything else to do except wait for a report that Rinna was obviously taking her sweet time to finish—down one floor, through a door and then another, greeting the guard waiting outside the room where the chair was being constructed.

The chair itself was almost completed. As Barin entered the room, the man working on it looked up briefly then went back to attaching tubes to the arms of the chair. All the thing needed now were the siphoning devices and the three spikes that would go into the back of the seat. Looking at this chair and at the man who worked on it, Barin felt the familiar pain in his right temple and scowled. But it was nothing new. It happened whenever he thought about these chairs and their purpose. After all, the dead gray wings at the sides of his eyes had not happened by accident.

"It will be finished today," the man said, screwing in a tube. Barin couldn't remember his name. "The modification from when you were . . . well . . ." The man stopped his work, wetted his lips, and started over. "We will just need to condition it to draw in the—"

"Yes, yes," Barin interrupted. "I know. Find me when it's done." His frown had frozen on his face. The memories associated with this device were not . . . pleasant.

"There's something wrong," one of the handlers said with a quaver. "He's . . . he's not . . ." Barin could see nothing but black. Everything was darkness. Even the sounds of the men around him sounded far away, ephemeral.

"Doesn't matter," Shrylu Riesan growled in that oily voice, putting his hand on Barin's shaking knee. "He will handle it, or he will die." The matter-of-fact tone broke into Barin's dreamlike state, and with it . . .

Pain. So much pain.

He bucked against the chair, but the belts held him fast. Three sharp pangs called from his lower back. He could feel something draining out of him, into the chair, into the tubes enchaining his form . . . And his head, oh Mounts, his head. He strained against the trappings again, tried to scream. Whisper. Anything. His throat constricted with the agony.

He couldn't breathe.

Inhale. Exhale.

Inhale . . .

"We're losing him!" the first voice yelled. "Something wrong with the calibration!"

"Nothing is wrong," Riesan said quietly, so close to Barin's face that his breath fluttered against Barin's cheek. Barin opened his eyes against the pain and saw the man's white eyes crease into an ugly smile. "This is just fine, isn't it, Barin?"

Barin felt his life, his soul, his everything drain out through those three little holes in his back. His memories fled, too, of his mother, of his father, of the blue wings that marched across both of their temples . . .

Nothing.

"You're nothing but a savage," Riesan spat. "But now we've fixed you."

Nothing, nothing, nothing. The wind, the waves, the breeze beneath his skin—all gone.

Barin opened his eyes. The man working on the chair was very pointedly *not* looking at him. Barin wiped his face of emotion—of the rage that clawed at his chest—and unclenched his fists. He needed to find Rinna and pry that report out of her hands whether it was finished or not. Then he would get some sort of message to Trem about forcing Katrya—

"Father?" Barin heard from behind him.

He turned and saw Markus standing outside the room with the kind of solemnity only a six-year-old could muster, little hands clasped before him and imploring upward. The little gentleman dressed the part; he liked to be "presentable," as he called it, when he visited his father in the Court chambers. The only thing out of place, it would have seemed to an outsider, was the shadow of two blue wings at the sides of his eyes.

Barin smiled and squatted to look his son in the face. "Yes, Markus?"

The boy's curious eyes darted behind his father for a brief moment. "What is that?"

"Nothing for you to worry about," Barin soothed, standing and leading Markus out of the entryway, closing the door as he went. "Let's take a walk."

They made their way toward the stairs at the end of the hallway, Barin talking softly to his son and Markus listening with all the poise of an experienced bureaucrat. He felt his heart swell at the attention of his son, an affirmation that he was doing the right thing.

It was for Markus. So he didn't have to grow up in a world that looked down on the Navigators. So he could become one without the sin of crime. If Barin could perfect his blood solution—one part savage, one part manufactured Navigator, one part Katrya Millor—he could make Navigation a *privelege*, an honor that would attract real applicants who wanted real power.

It would work thousands of times better than the shoddy prison system in place now. If he had to kill a few people and suck another few people dry in the process, maybe that was worth it.

"You are nothing but a savage," Riesan had said, that smug smile sitting on his lips like warm sewage. Well, Barin *wasn't* a savage. Not anymore. He had left that part of his life in the dregs of blood siphoned from his body by that chair twenty years ago and had worked his way to the top. And he was going to make sure that Markus wasn't subjected to the same kind of attention as Barin, both from society and from Shrylu Riesan. He was going to make things better for Navigators, and for his son.

But for the real savages, like Ien, like Riesan, there would be little.

That sort of equality was definitely worth a little blood and a little sacrifice. And Katrya Millor would either understand, or she wouldn't—her blood would work the same whether he had to squeeze it from her or not.

Chapter 17

A QUESTION OF PROPRIETY

The *Painted Consort* headed directly for the nearest port. Since they had been closer to the eastern side of the range, the closest city had been Harrowport, more of a village with two piers. The people there didn't often do business with Court carriers, so the port was poorly equipped to dock a large vessel like Ree's, but it was their only option. Damned if she was going to allow the ship to continue to fly until she had fully checked every inch of it with her own eyes and hands. She sent someone to check on Harrowport's docking rates—she doubted there would be any, but there was always a chance—and made rounds of everyone on the bridge.

Her crew, though shaken, was resilient. The incident of an hour ago hadn't left any injuries, except for the smear of blood Ree left on everything she touched for the ten minutes following the episode. Trem swore that he had never experienced anything like it, but the lie strained behind his eyes. She just told him to put her in contact with someone at the Court in Praan and left him in search of someone who *wouldn't* lie to her.

But first she stopped in the room of the *syloom* and squatted down, brushing her hand across the red paint. The innocuous symbol seemed to pulse, and Ree shivered involuntarily at the memory of pressing her fingertips into the painted floor. She didn't often pray, but it had seemed the right—and only—thing to do.

"Captain?" a feminine voice called from behind her.

She stood and turned. A short, plump woman wagged a shaking hand at her, then returned to staring at her shoes. "First Mate Trem sent me to . . ." She trailed off, swaying slightly.

"To what?" If this is what women acted like aboard these carriers, no wonder the men all looked at Ree like she were some sort of monster.

"To tell you what happened?" the woman finished with a question in her voice.

Ree stared at her. The badge on her chest over the gray uniform said *Erinn Ronx*. The woman who had told Ree about the Navi device in the engine room. No wonder she had looked vaguely familiar. "Erinn?" Ree asked when the woman—girl, really, even though she looked middle-aged—didn't say anything for a long minute.

"The Navigator died, ma'am," Erinn whispered at her toes.

"Died? Then how are we still in the air?"

"Um." The woman shuffled her feet. "Another took his place."

"Okay . . ." Ree said, trying to wrap her head around the concept. "How do you know?"

The woman turned and walked away without a word. Ree stood confused for a moment before following, which she guessed was the right thing to do.

Erinn made a beeline straight for the steel column connected to the NaviWatch. The screen with all the numbers was still in place; nothing screamed at them in red.

"These numbers mean that the Navi is healthy," Erinn explained, suddenly more talkative now that she was in her element. Her fingers flew across the tiny keyboard attached to the monitor. "An hour ago, though . . ." She showed Ree the screen, where she had brought up a picture from the incident. There were the red letters and that had been glaring from the NaviWatch on the bridge. The only thing that Ree could understand: the large number zero plastered at the top.

"So how does it happen?" Ree asked. "The whole . . . Navi dying thing? And why did he die in the first place?"

“Well,” Erinn said, biting her lower lip as she stared at the monitor. “Maybe he was old. Or sick.” What an answer. “However, the important thing is that we are still functional. All of the systems are running smoothly—actually, more smoothly than before. This new Navi is strong and young, I think.”

Ree shook her head. The engineer spoke of their Navigator like an asset, like just another cog to the mechanisms that maintained the ship’s functionality. Ree supposed that he *was*, but that didn’t make it any easier to think of him that way. *Still so weird that a person is making this—all of this—tick.* It had been easier to believe on the *Arienna*, where all the workings had been straightforward. No steel columns of juice, no steam, no blinking screens. Just wood, and the sky, and Ien’s face turned to the wind, with that little smile on his lips . . .

She snapped herself out of it, but clarity didn’t save her heart from the ache at the thought of Ien’s tattooed face.

“Are you okay?” Erinn Ronx asked hesitantly, returned to her fomer, eyes-to-the-ground self.

Ree twisted her lips and didn’t answer.

Erinn’s confusion was only momentary. “However,” she said, peering back up at the screen, “we will need some recalibration time.”

“Recalibration time?” Ree didn’t like the sound of that.

Erinn looked down at her feet. “Six to eight days to allow the new Navigator to attune himself fully to us.”

“Six . . . to eight . . . *days*?! ” Ree repeated. “I don’t have that kind of time.” If she took that time, she would let Ien down. Again.

“It’s regulation,” Erinn explained apologetically. “If the Court finds out we skirted, the rules, you could lose your job.”

Ree turned around and stalked out of the engine room and off the ship. Fresh air would help her building fury. Damn if she were going to let this slow her down.

Once she convinced the people of Harrowport that she, in fact, was not there to enslave the citizens or take the town by force for the good of the Court—they really *hadn’t* seen a carrier except from far away in a long, long time—the *Painted Consort* and its crew was left alone. For four entire days, Ree sat in the *syloom* chamber and stared at the floor and felt her blood boil. On the morning of the fifth day, she snapped.

“Let’s go, people,” she barked from the captain’s seat. When Trem opened his mouth to argue, she cut him off with a simple: “No.”

Once again, her ship heaved off from port and begin to make its way north through the void to Arboram. She couldn’t shake a feeling of dread deep in her stomach that Arboram wouldn’t hold any answers, but she was in too deep now. They had lost two days; they couldn’t afford to wait any longer.

Just as they put Harrowport behind them, Trem announced that he had been able to send a message to the Court of Ships in Praan using one of the interfaces on the bridge. She simply nodded and didn’t ask what he had relayed. *I don’t want to know*, she lied to herself.

Trem also was able to impart their new instructions from the Court. Despite the fact that Ree had taken it upon herself to direct the ship to Arboram, it seemed that Walfored wanted them to go that way anyway. She was supposed to pick up a shipment of something—Trem didn’t tell her, and no amount of prodding would make him reveal it.

“What kind of shipment?” she asked as soon as he announced their orders.

“It will be in Arboram; you won’t have to worry about it. I will take care of loading it and seeing it settled.”

“Yes,” she pressed, drawing the word out and trying to keep the impatience from her voice, “but what is it?”

He shrugged. “Don’t worry about it. The captain never worries about this kind of shipment.”

Well, *that* set off a hundred warning bells in her head. She pursed her lips and watched the man walk away. *I’ll follow him to get this shipment*, she decided. The captain needed to know *everything* that went on aboard her vessel; it was only right. If he wasn’t going to tell her, she would figure it out another way.

Days passed, and Arboram drew closer. Everything with the ship seemed normal, or as normal as she could tell from only having captained it for barely a week and a half. Better than normal, actually. *Maybe the Navi was close to death for a long time before I picked this thing up*. She visited the engine room two or three times a day, asking how the Navi was, how the great machine continued to breathe. She eventually started to elicit smiles from crewmembers when she entered the area. Part of the plan: win their respect, and they will trust you before too long, her father had always said about his own crewmen.

Erinn Ronx, especially, looked forward to her visits; Ree could tell by the wide grin the woman wore each time Ree entered the room. “Navi’s healthy as a mountain goat,” she would say in anticipation of Ree’s question, voice becoming stronger by the day.

During this time, she could *feel* Trem’s silence at her back and knew that he didn’t understand why she did these things. The previous captains must have all just been uncouth and ill-equipped to deal with other people.

The *syloom* was on her list of daily walkthroughs. Whereas Trem sometimes accompanied her on the visits to the engine room and elsewhere throughout the ship, she specifically told him to remain on the bridge when she came to this sacred room. It was still strange to her that it housed no Navigator, but she was slowly coming to enjoy the solitude she experienced here.

She told herself she was imagining things, but she still felt a calming sensation, almost of peace, whenever she set foot into the space. Her fingers did not bleed again when she brushed them across the crimson on the floor, but a gentle heat still pervaded her body. It was almost like a fever, but a comfortable one that moved through her extremities slowly, like thin fog on a warm morning after rain. A comforting presence, a touch of confidence. She couldn’t explain it. But it helped her remain calm as anxiety—of Ien’s disappearance and of being alone and friendless on this giant hunk of metal—crept into and through her mind.

These visits helped her visualize her goal: get across those mountains. See *everything*. Do *everything*. Rescue Ien. Then come back and kick Walfored in the teeth for making it this hard in the first place. Mounts, maybe the Court would elect her Head of Ships and let her *change* things, like the absurd economic standards the Port Arian tattoo merchant had brought to her attention.

The majority of her knew it was stupidity and stubbornness that planted thoughts of changing anything in her head. Vorinn’s economic epiphany was beyond troubling, but more than that, it was *confusing*. What did it mean? Why did thinking about it make her stomach tie itself in convoluted, painful knots?

And where in the name of Mount Yarah was *Ien*? The *syloom* held no answers for her, only calm, and it was enough for now.

*

Nine days after the death and replacement of her Navigator and four days in the air after leaving Harrowport, the northern mountains—the highest, the most imposing, the most *impassable*—came into view. Four days after that, just after twilight and before the true darkness of the night had set in, the lights of Arboram faded into sight in the murky distance. A great storm swirled alone in the void to the west, and in the north, the edge of the mountains loomed ever closer, blotting out the night sky with the solid darkness of stone. Katria watched the mountains inch closer from her usual position on the bridge, one hand resting on the helm and one clasped into a fist at her back.

The sight filled her . . . with discomfort. Uncertainty.

Which didn't make sense. This was the *gateway* to her dream of getting *out* of Daen. Something she had been waiting for . . . forever. Ever since she was old enough to look out her window at the void. Since the fire had taken her father.

"Captain," Trem suddenly said from his position beside her. His voice sounded pensive rather than full of the expected film of disgust, quiet enough so that the rest of the crewmembers in the room took no note. Come to think of it, he had been quiet for the last few days. And he had stopped questioning her when she told him she was going to the *syloom*.

"Yes?"

"How do you do it?"

"How do I do what?"

Surprisingly, he shifted his feet and flashed his gaze toward the wall at the side before re-establishing eye contact. Nervousness? Or embarrassment? "How do you . . . make all these people *like* you so damn well?"

Ree tried not to let the shock show on her face. "What do you mean?" He raised an eyebrow at her. Decidedly unsuccessful.

"I mean," he said, "that you are the only captain I've ever seen come through this ship that the crew can actually *stand*. I just don't get it."

"Well . . ." She enunciated the word slowly, like that would save her from having to answer this question for this man. *Because I'm not a complete ass* was not a proper answer. "I talk to people," she finally said. *What a stupid response*.

The thoughtful turn of his face surprised her again. "I guess that's true."

"Wait," she said as she played his words back in her head. "What did you mean when you said you see captains *come through* this ship? How many of them have there been since you've been First Mate?"

He shrugged, suddenly noncommittal. "Eh," he muttered. "Seven or eight."

Ree's eyes grew wide. "Seven or *eight*?" she sputtered. "That's insane. This ship is only four years old, I thought." That was *two* a year. There was no way.

He shook his head. "Nah, this one is eight years old. High Court likes to fudge the details on the paperwork."

Eight years old. That was one captain per year. A shiver ran down Ree's neck, but she didn't say anything. The choosing of the captains happened once per year. It was probably just chance, but . . . *That is too big of a coincidence*, said the annoying little voice in the back of her head. "Okay," she said to Trem. "But there is definitely more than one ship. How come there is only one captain chosen per year?"

He shrugged again, regaining his usual disgruntled countenance. "How should I know? I'm not on the Court."

She sighed and went back to watching the approaching city.

He eyed her with suspicion but didn't say anything for a long while. The two of them stood at the helm in silence while the bustle of the bridge happened around them; preparations for docking in Arboram were underway.

"I do know some things, though," he said softly when she thought he wouldn't say anything more. They both continued staring straight ahead. "And I know you're different. I also know you won't like what you find in Arboram."

"What—"

He stalked away to inspect the NaviWatch.

She watched him out of the corner of her eye and tried to contain the ravenous snakes in her belly. A thought came to her: *What am I doing?* She pushed it away and focused on the beacon of light inching ever closer through the night. She would find Ien. And she would get over those mountains.

Fifteen days after leaving Port Aria—too long—the *Painted Consort* docked in Arboram, the city that had made itself gateway to the *outside*, under cover of complete darkness. And Katria Millor stood at her helm and continued to pray.

#

As soon as the *Painted Consort's* moorings were attached to the pier at Arboram, Trem disappeared. And Katria disappeared with him.

She followed him into the heart of the city, through the nicer districts, past terraced homes and decorative stone, right into the undesirable section of town. She started to notice, in hurried glances away from the back of Trem's gray head, more men wearing the blue robes of a Navigator, more tattoos. More filth in the streets. Not where she had expected him to go. But after the last couple of weeks, she supposed she shouldn't be surprised. Everything seemed to always come back to these seedy buildings.

He ducked into a tattoo dispensary with a harried glance behind him. Ree quickly hid herself in the footsteps of a large gentleman with the blue robes, but it proved unnecessary. Trem's unseeing eyes were already inside that shop with the rest of him.

You won't like what you find here, he had said. For someone looking out after her "interests," Trem sure was acting suspiciously. Ree leaned against a building in sight of the one Trem had entered—as nonchalantly as she possibly could, here in this district, with legs and arms crossed and sword clearly displayed—and fumed silently. The man had been hiding something from her from day one.

How do I get in there without making a fuss? Things would be so much easier if Mack were here. That man could get out of—and into—any situation imaginable. Especially gritty ones. She noted a minute window at the side of the building from her admittedly obvious reconnaissance position in the street. Her head could probably barely fit through that thing. But it was her option.

She strolled up to the window—*Nothing to see, nothing going on here*, she willed the people around her to think—and peered in through the dirty, bubbled glass. *Get a better glass maker*, was her irritated thought before realizing that the room she was looking at was empty. What to do. Go in, and risk being seen? Or go back to the ship and just ask Trem where he had been? She might have a better chance at catching him in a lie if she just went back now.

But of course her body did what her brain didn't want to do, and instead of turning around, she walked around the side and reached for the doorknob.

This is a stupid idea. But she was doing it anyway.

A short bar-like area took up one corner of the far wall, complete with stools and tidy glasses waiting for use on a shelf behind the bar. Because, like most things in life, being forced into servitude by the government—and the application of those “chains”—required alcohol in order to work properly. A couple of tables with chairs dotted the floor on the right side of the room, and a comfortable-looking sofa perched atop a nice, ovular red rug with gold fringe on the left. It truly exemplified the “parlor” aspect of this type of business. Muffled sounds came from the door that sat ajar at the back left corner of the room. Sounds of talking and . . . distress?

She pulled the street door behind her as quietly as possible, then slinked to the other door and crouched, straining to hear.

“More?” a seedy voice was saying. “I’m already exhausting my supply as is.”

“Too bad,” said Trem’s voice. “Find another supplier.”

Beneath their words lay the noises Ree couldn’t quite make out. Like a human throat trying and failing to create coherent words or phrases. And the shuffling sounds of chair legs being scraped back and forth on dirty stone. She inched closer.

“It’s not that easy!” the seedy voice—like that of a rat—proclaimed. “There are regulations—”

Trem interrupted him. “You know that’s a weak excuse. Regulations mean next to nothing to you and to our client.”

Our client? Just a little closer, and she would be able to peek through the crack. She willed her bones not to creak.

Rat hesitated. “I will have to make inquiries,” he finally sighed.

Ree could hear Trem’s smile. “Good. She’ll like that.”

She?

Ree peeked around the corner and had to choke back a gasp.

Trem and a decidedly ratlike man—thin with wringing hands, large nose, and small mouth—stood next to an occupied chair, both of their backs to her. They seemed to be watching the man in the chair as they continued their conversation. Trem even had his hands clasped behind his back in a pensive position. The naked man in the chair was chained to the rungs of the ladder-back, arms hanging awkwardly at his sides and shins trapped to the legs of the chair, mouth gagged to prevent more than a murmur of complaint. His frightened blue eyes bored into the two men, darting first at Trem, then at Rat-Man, then back and forth. The chains around his rail-thin body *glowed* with an uncanny golden light, only emphasized by the paleness of his face, and myriad reddish-blue tubes connected his body with the machine beside him. Where the chains did not obscure his body, every inch was covered in pictures and runes—red, green, blue. A Navigator. Next to the chair was the kind of device that Ree had seen dispensers use to press marks into Ien’s skin, except the tubes, which Ree realized with a sickening plunk in her stomach were red not by nature, but by the color of the liquid running through them.

Blood. And the liquid . . . ran *from* the man *into* the softly whirring machine.

She ducked back out of sight. She struggled to keep her breathing as shallow as possible. *Oh Mount Yarah*, she swore. *Oh, what have I seen.* It was less of a question than a prayer.

She forced herself to look again, and noticed something else this time: the man had a blue wing at the corner of each eye. *Ien!*

But no, the man was too tall, too thin, too ragged to be *her* Navigator. Something else that was strange: the tattoos on the man’s body emptied of color and then were *refilled*—as though a child had picked up a colored utensil and scratched inside the lines—almost instantaneously. But as she watched, the refilling process began to slow, and the man’s eyes

began to droop.

Ree had never seen another Navigator with those wing markings except for Barin Walfored. The man's eyes closed. The blue wings faded to gray.

"Looks like this one needs a recharge," Rat-Man said, flipping a switch on the machine and cutting off the noise. The blueish-red liquid ceased its flow. Ree was suddenly aware of how loud her breathing was, how thunderous her heartbeat sounded in that near-silence.

Rat-Man reached around the machine, perhaps for something attached to it, but Ree knew this was the only chance she was going to get to make an escape. Slowly, carefully, painstakingly, she inched backward until she could no longer see or hear anything that was happening in that back room. When she felt safe enough to stand, she did, continuing to back away and trying not to bump into any of the ornate furniture. *For void's sakes, woman, you should have worn different shoes*, she said as her boots scraped the floor loudly, oh so loudly.

And then the doorknob was in her hand, and she was outside and running, running anywhere but that dispensary and that room with the man with the blue-red blood who looked like Ien and who was now nearly dead.

Oh Mounts, what have I seen.

Chapter 18

SO MUCH RED

She ran halfway to the dock before she decided that it didn't matter whether Trem knew that she had witnessed his dealings or not. Katrya Millor refused to be played the fool, and she had the feeling . . . *She will be pleased*, he had said. Could he have been referring to her?

She slowed to a walk, boots clomping on the paving stones; it seemed that her earring-chains sang angrily with every swaying step. Her hand rested on the hilt of the dagger at her belt. *He will not make a fool out of me. I would never pay for a man to be trussed up and—*

No.

She knew they were still following her. Let them. When she had dealt with this sick traitor Trem, Ree would continue the search for Ien. In fact, Trem might know something that could be of use to her, if he was dealing with people who kidnapped Navigators.

An image came to her of Ien, chained to a chair like the one from the dispensary, pleading, being bled dry for the sick bastards to populate the market . . . Her blood burned hot.

Another image. She stopped walking, eyes unable to register the busy street and ears unaware of the curses directed her way.

Ien lay chained to the floor, great glowing chains that lacerated his beautiful, tattooed skin. Tears leaked from closed eyes. A strange red symbol adorned the side of his naked thigh: a circle—no, a swirl, with two dots above and below. He breathed: in, out. In, out. In . . . Suddenly his eyes burst open, and he looked straight at her. He was alone, in the dark, with only the burning chains illuminating his face when he looked at her with pleading eyes—

Ree cried out in alarm, stumbled to the side of the avenue. A few people shot anxious glances in her direction, but most shuffled along with averted eyes. She grabbed the side of a tavern—loud music obscured the pounding of her heart in her ears—and gasped for breath.

What in the name of Mount Yarah was that? A cold sweat enveloped her. That couldn't have been normal. Ien . . . Her imagination must just be overreacting to the gruesome scene at the dispensary.

She pushed away from the wall and started toward the port with even more purpose than before. She had to deal with Trem—but on the equal grounds of the ship—so that she could find Ien. First one, then the other.

When she reached the ship, a familiar face greeted her at the pier. Cyril Reen's knowing smile was the last annoying thing she needed to see, but she waved to him anyway. *Strange.*

"What are you doing here?" she asked warily as soon as she was close enough. She hadn't seen him in close to three or four years, now. She had never known what to make of his friendship with her father, and now that her father was dead, the only link she had to Cyril was Nola.

"Ree, I have something important I need to talk to you about, but beyond that . . ." He took a deep breath. "I want to come aboard your ship."

"Do you even know what I do now?" she snapped, pushing past him to the plank. "Have you talked to Nola or Mack lately?"

For a moment he looked puzzled, but that didn't deter him. "I know some important things that you will want to know immediately. They told me you're looking for Ien, and I might be able to help with that." He exhaled impatiently. "Look, I came a long way. Can we find somewhere to talk?"

The shivery sweat coating the back of her neck had not completely dissipated; all she

wanted to do was lie down in her cabin and try to think of ways to deal with Trem. But the tone in his voice gave her pause. His anxious eyes bored into her. “Fine,” she said as she started for the gang plank. “Follow me.”

And as soon as she and Cyril set foot inside the *Painted Consort* she knew something was wrong. Something felt . . . off. Maybe it was the sweltering heat that enveloped her body as soon as she closed the door. Maybe she was still shaky from that weird picture her imagination had conjured up of Ien. Whatever it was, if she wasn’t crazy and something actually was wrong, she knew it had something to do with the wellbeing of the ship.

Cyril was positively trembling with impatience and a deeper anxiety she could not quite place, but she headed for the engine room, where she knew they were preparing for the trek over the mountains and into the beyond. Maybe Erinn Ronx would have some information for her about the new Navigator or about where they were going in general.

On the way to the engine room, she passed the stairway leading down to the *syloom*, and her feet turned of their own accord, toward the *syloom* instead of the engine room. Cyril followed, but at a distance, and he didn’t enter the *syloom* with her.

A strange magnetism pervaded the space, like a crank chain pulling her closer against her will. Cautiously, she peeked in. Nothing except the red swirl on the floor. The harsh electric lights illuminated every corner of the room, and still she felt like something was hiding in here . . . A red swirl. With two dots: one above and one below.

Something clicked into place.

Ree bolted back up the winding metal staircase. “*Trem!*” she roared, startling the few crewmembers in the hallway. “*Someone get me that man!*” She didn’t wait for them to move—they didn’t, staring at her in surprise instead. She threw herself down the hall toward the bridge, pushing people out of the way. *No, no, no*, her mind kept screaming. It was a coincidence. It was her imagination.

Ien lay on the floor, staring at her with that plea in his eyes.

Trem stood at the entrance to the ship, panting slightly, eyes thrashing her as she advanced. “Captain, you and I—”

“No, don’t talk. Just walk.” She latched onto his arm and began dragging him back with her.

A symbol etched redly into his side. A swirl with two dots.

She pulled Trem all the way back to the *syloom*, down the stairs and into the room.

“What in blazes are you *doing*, woman?” he yelled, trying to wrench his arm from her steel grip. “Have you gone mad?”

She didn’t answer. Instead, she shoved him into the room and slammed the door on the stairs behind her; Cyril was once again locked outside.

Trem stumbled; when he recovered, he realized he was standing on the crimson symbol. “What is this?” he demanded, immediately leaping to the outside of the paint with a frantic expression.

“You went to a tattoo dispensary today, Trem,” she growled. He opened his mouth, anger glittering in his eyes, but she screamed: “*You will tell me!* Everything.” She was done with diplomacy and pretending to get along. Just when she thought he was starting to respect her. She pulled out her dagger and raised it with a steady—gloriously steady—hand to point at his face.

The man’s eyes went blank. “I told you that you wouldn’t like what you find here.”

“Does that even *begin* to explain why you were in that back room of that dispensary?”

He didn’t reply.

"Answer me, Trem. Why did I see you exchanging money for a man's blood?"

He sighed but didn't take his gaze from the point of the blade aimed at his nose. "You are not going to like it."

"I *already* don't like it, idiot," she snarled. *Stop talking*, her gut said. *Stab him*.

"Okay, okay," he said, throwing his hands in the air. "It's part of my job description."

"To hustle men out of their own blood?" *Stab him before you can ask the important question. The question about Ien.*

He shrugged. "I guess you could call it that."

Ree tried to strengthen her grip on the knife, but her sweaty hand shook. "But *why*?" She wanted to know what Ien had to do with the *syloom* of her ship, but she also didn't. "Is this the *shipment* that you wouldn't tell me about?"

"Look, Captain," Trem sighed. "I like you. Please get that thing out of my face, and I will tell you what you want to know."

She took a deep breath. Exhaled. *Stab him*.

She nodded and sheathed the weapon at her belt. She didn't take her eyes off his face and didn't take her hand off the hilt. It was hard to hold anyway. So hard. She was so tired. So hot.

Ree drifted toward the *syloom*, stepped onto the red swirl. When she stood there, she felt calm. Almost serene. *Stab him*, her gut still insisted, *before he can tell you the truth*. The problem was, she already knew the truth. The aura around the *syloom* wrapped its arms about her body. She could nearly feel her best friend breathing in her ear. *Ree*. She ignored the feeling and instead focused on Trem's confused face.

"I've been doing this for eight years, give or take. As long as this bucket's been in service. It's in my contract." He snorted. "Prettier language than 'blood hustling' though, I'm sure."

"Okay," she said slowly, fingering the hilt of her pistol absently. "Why? Don't you have a conscience?"

He scoffed. "Conscience has nothing to do with it. These people are criminals, and I have to feed myself." His eyes narrowed at something behind her.

"Criminals? Are you sure?" Cyril's voice said.

Ree peered over her shoulder. She hadn't even heard him come in. The door had been closed again in silence as well.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Trem asked. "And who the hell are you anyway?"

Cyril opened his mouth, but Ree held up her hands. "I just want to hear what this man has to say, Cyril. Ask your questions later."

Cyril nodded. She raised her eyebrows at Trem.

"That's it, really," he said. "Everything you saw. I exploit the sources of the dispensaries so that the market stays afloat."

The market. So that disgusting Port Arian vendor had been right about something.

"But who cares about Navigator blood?" she asked. "Who buys this stuff?"

Trem blinked at her. "You're joking, aren't you?" His scarred face pulled into a grotesque smile. "You're dumber than I gave you credit for, Captain." She glared, and he shook his head. "You are a *merchant*, Captain. The entire economy depends on this ink. How else would the airships bring goods to remote areas? How else would—"

"Ink?" she heard herself say, then whisper: "*Ink*."

All she could think of were the grand, colorful images marching over Ien's body, sewn

inside his skin. Ink. Blood. Navigator blood.

"I knew it," Cyril whispered, pensive fingers to his lips and gaze looking beyond the floor at his feet.

She, too, looked at the floor. At the innocent-seeming crimson swirl that connected them to the man who kept this machine in the air. The *sylooms* were painted with the same ingredient that went into the ink. "So this . . . this is blood." Even to Ree her voice sounded flat. No one answered, because no one needed to. She surprised herself by sitting down right in the middle of the symbol, brushing her fingertips along the surface. The floor of the ship was cold metal, but the mark somehow felt warm to the touch. She exhaled slowly. "Have any new orders come from Walfored?"

"What?"

"Orders."

"Um." The scowl filled Trem's face from where she looked up at him. For some reason, even though she was sitting down she felt as though he were deferring to her. "We're to head north as soon as possible. But, Katrya—"

"Do not use my name aboard this ship, Trem. I am your captain and I will be treated as such," she snapped.

"Okay, but—"

"And how many dispensaries have back rooms like what I saw earlier?" The floor was becoming warmer with each word uttered, as aching fury built on itself in her chest, but their voices seemed farther and farther away in this dream-like haze.

Navigator blood, like that of her best friend. Of Ien. The same Ien she could *feel* through her fingertips, could sense in the gentle aroma of ginger in the air.

Oh Ien. What have I done to you. It didn't need to be a question, because she already knew the answer.

"I'm not sure, Captain." The tightness in his faraway voice made her skin crawl. She looked up at him. He had his teeth clenched like an idiot. "But it's important to know—"

"Trem, we're leaving Arboram." Even her own voice sounded distant in her ears, as though she were chewing on wool. It was the only thing she could think to do. There were hundreds of dispensaries across Daen. She had to stop them from this gruesome hypocrisy.

"What about Ien?" Cyril said suddenly, his gaze snapping up to Ree.

"I know where Ien is." Her mind screamed against the truth of that fact. *Mounts help me, I know where he is. He is under my fingers.* She looked down at the *syloom*. She didn't even need to ask Trem the question.

"Listen to me!" Trem bellowed, cutting through the haze. "You," he pointed at Cyril, "I have no idea who you are, but shut up. This is important." He exhaled, lowering the volume of his voice. "If you didn't like what you saw here, you will like it in the north even less," he said. "What Walfored wants from you is a lot uglier than that scene at the dispensary."

"That has to be a joke. There can't be anything uglier than a man being unwillingly drained of his own blood."

"Believe me," Trem said, scratching his stubbly chin with gnarled fingers, his face drawn in such a way that it made him seem older than his forty years. "There is."

A wave of anger once again rose in Ree. How dare this man tell her what she should and should not do? She had just witnessed him exchange money for blood. He had no right. No right at all.

This time, the floor *definitely* grew hot beneath her palms, so much so that she had to

stand in order to avoid being burned by the metal. She wiped her hands on her pants to dispel the heat, but that didn't do much. She frowned and decided to ignore it instead, bringing her head up to stare directly into Trem's face. "We're going north. Ready the ship for departure."

His brows drew down. He stared at her for a long minute before stalking back to the door and up the stairs.

Cyril watched him leave, and then he returned his gaze to Ree, concern etched into the lines around his eyes. "Katrya, are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she said lightly, pushing past him, even though she was suddenly and inexplicably dizzy. As she passed, she brushed her hand against his shoulder. "You said you needed to talk . . ."

He drew back with a hissed oath, grabbing his arm. "What—" His hand came away clean, but he still swiveled a wide-eyed gaze to Ree.

She looked down at her hands. There, along the lines in the centers of her palms, tiny, bright red flower tattoos had blossomed, two for each hand. They seemed to be vibrating.

No, that's just my body shaking, she thought distantly.

Everything, distant fuzz. And then, above the thrum of the ship, a different hum, lower: a man's voice singing slowly into darkness.

Ree had just enough presence of mind to look up at Cyril before falling backward into Ien's ephemeral arms—nearly real, but so, so *imaginary*.

#

And there she was. Ien smiled—grinned!—as Ree finally blazed alight to him. The symbol on his naked hip, the mark connecting him to the soul-box within which the woman stood, flared painfully for a second. The pain then subsided into the dull ache he had come to know. A good ache.

He wasn't surprised that he could suddenly feel Ree more completely than before. She had changed. For the better.

The chains around his wrists, encircling his chest, constricting his legs—lost their fire for a split second. Not enough for him to do more than notice. By the time he flexed his mind outward, their strength had returned and forced him back into his own head. But he remembered. He would have his freedom. The soul-box and its mistress would help him escape.

The smile remained on his face for a long while after that thought. He began to hum a lullaby quietly to himself, something a tattooed woman may have sung to him once.

Chapter 19

RA'IM

When she woke, the ship swam through darkness. She could feel it in the way the air sang past the porthole in her cabin, smell it in the atmosphere, sense it in the way the wind cradled the ship like a newborn. A massive, hulking, steel baby.

She sat up. In the light of one lantern hanging by the door in the cramped space, Cyril sat on an overturned barrel beside her bed with a graveness to his features, elbows on knees and hands folded under his chin. He stared at her with such intensity that she gave a start and shrank back into her pillow toward the cabin wall for a moment. *I've known Cyril for years*, she thought, *and he's never looked at me like that*. She brought her hands up to study. *Yep, still there*, she swore. The tiny, innocent-seeming flowers throbbed up at her, beating in time with her heart. *What is wrong with me? This is impossible*.

"What?" she snapped at Cyril. "Going to study me, now, too?"

The reality of her words trickled in bit by bit, piece by piece. *Cyril studies Navigators*.

"Probably," he said gravely.

No, no, no. She seemed to be thinking that a lot lately. That was all she could think. Some part of her knew that her thoughts were whacked, uncertain, out of order. The other part screamed, *shrieked* the denial.

"It's interesting," he began."

"How can this be *interesting*, Cyril?" She thrust her hands in his face. "Look at it!" *I can't be . . . I can't. I won't*.

He didn't shrink from her hands. "You realize a woman has never been branded before, right?"

Branded.

Her mind shifted in terror.

"Except for once," he continued slowly. "What do you remember of your mother?"

Ree felt herself blanch. "Impossible." Her mind answered the question: *Nothing*.

"Not impossible," he murmured, frowning to himself as though he were trying to figure her out. "Nola mentioned meeting her once."

"Surely she wasn't covered in tattoos. That would be ridiculous." She could feel bile rising in her throat.

"Of course not. But Nola said she did have two distinct marks at the corners of her eyes. Wings."

Like Ien's.

"What does it mean, though? Why do I have this . . . stuff . . . on my hands?" *I will not be a Navigator. What would Father say?* The easy answer to that question was that she didn't know. "I was never marked. It's not hereditary."

She stared at Cyril so hard she was surprised when all he did was blink and raise his eyebrows. He said: "But it is hereditary. Your father could have told you that."

"What does *that* mean?"

His frown deepened. "It's what I came here to talk to you about," he explained. "Your father."

"My mother, my father, what next?" she spat, feeling the tears gathering in the corners of her eyes.

He sighed and sat up on his barrel, hands on his knees. "Before your father died, he was

testing you for the Ra'im strength." He would have continued, but she interrupted yet again.

"Excuse me, Ra'im?"

"The nation of people that live outside the mountains. They were the first Navigators." As she tried to digest this information, he continued: "Your mother was one of the Ra'im. So naturally you have the blood." He gestured at the marks on her hands.

She stared down at them. Her mother. Ree had never known the woman her father had called wife. But he had talked of her often: of her beauty, and wisdom, and silly habits. And the picture he had always kept of her on his bedside table . . . A gorgeous woman with smudges at the edges of her face, like someone had taken a piece of rubber and marked out that part of the photo. And she had never thought to ask.

The last words her father had said crept like a funeral gong into her mind. *The soul of a ship . . . She never told me the fire would be so beautiful.*

The memory of that day came back to her in flashes.

She was agitated about the rising prices of fruit. Someone had to complain to the port authorities about the merchants giggling in their ever-richer stalls, so today she was going to do it. Erikk Millor had been hovering all day, following her as she moved from room to room preparing for the latest journey. She would have to hire another Navigator; the last one had found better employment elsewhere, and she was bound by law to let him go. So there was that to do, as well.

Finally she turned to her father. "What in the name of Mount Yarah do you want? Why have you been following me around?"

He ran a hand through nape-length black curls. "I . . . ah . . . need you to do something for me," he said, rubbing the back of his neck.

"And?" she stared at him pointedly, crossing her arms.

"You haven't had blood work done in a while," he said. "You should let me take a vial so we can get it analyzed."

She frowned. "This again?"

He shrugged. "You know we have to do it—Court orders." He smiled a little and raised his eyebrows.

Impatient to get back to the port and on the way to her next job, she simply nodded, mind elsewhere.

When he was done, she left for the port, but not before she heard him whisper those words as he turned away with the vial of her blood: "The soul of a ship . . . She never told me the fire would be so beautiful." Some kind of contemporary poem, no doubt.

And then when she had come back, not two hours later, the house had been in flames and everything had been lost.

"Quit looking at me like I'm part of one of your experiments and tell me what this means," she hissed at Cyril, head still lowered, full of the memory she had just unearthed.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him shrug. "I'm not sure," he admitted. "It could mean a lot of things. But the most important is that you know, now. You don't want to hurt anyone."

She nodded, wondering how much he knew, but she was unable to ask.

"My whole life just turned crossways," she whispered. She tried not to hear the words coming out of her own mouth. What was she going to do? Her blood. Her blood had started that

fire.

“Is this more important than finding Ien?”

Yes! she wanted to scream at him, but she knew that was wrong. Her breathing grew shallow; her esophagus constricted. *Ien*. It was important that they find him, and in order to do that they needed to go to . . . Praan. That was where she would find her Navigator, the one she felt even now in the very air in this ship. She didn’t know how she knew, but she did.

“You have to turn around,” Cyril said. “You can’t go through with this mission. Walfored’s trying to get you to do something. I don’t know what, but it can’t be good.”

She couldn’t return to Praan yet. The cards in her hand had not been totally played out. Anger rose in her. *I am going to see whatever it is that Walfored is hiding in these mountains. Then I’m going to go back to Praan and clean up this mess.* She didn’t know what that even meant, but one step at a time.

She exhaled slowly, softly. She peered up at Cyril’s scrutiny, didn’t answer him. *I will not become a Navigator, she thought. But I have to save one.*

“Ien is Navigating this ship,” she said. “I can feel him everywhere. Especially when I’m in that room with the mark.” She remembered the gathered heat in the hull of the ship, the cuts on her fingers and the blood she had accidentally dripped on the *syloom*. “I think he knows I’m here, too.”

Cyril frowned. “We are en route to wherever you were going before we got distracted by . . .” He coughed. “Your first mate seemed concerned with you at first, but he is now on the bridge doing whatever you ship people do.”

The memories of the events in Arboram came back. The dispensary. Trem’s insistence that she turn around and not look back. *Even he wants me to go back to Praan. Well, these men can all take their opinions somewhere else.* “How long have we been in the air?”

“About three hours. Your first mate said something about a week before we would reach . . . whatever it is.”

Ree stood, wiped her hands on her pants. Couldn’t wipe off the red. “Okay,” was all she said as she found her balance and headed toward the bridge.

#

Barin Walfored was a lot of things, but a fool was not one of them.

He tapped the end of his pen on his desk, ignoring the splotches of ink left on the paper in front of him. With his other hand he massaged his left temple. The missive he was currently defacing deserved to be destroyed anyway, with the kind of information it carried. This damn woman. And her damn . . . everything. It had seemed like a simple enough plan in the first place. Riesen had been sure from the beginning that there was something special about Katria Millor. She potentially could provide the missing information in their research about Navigators—information that could save the market system and keep the carriers in the air for another hundred years. How that beast of a man had intuited all this from meeting Katria just once, Walfored didn’t want to ask. The important thing was that he had the woman in his grasp. Now all he had to do was turn her back to Praan.

The ruse would be simple. She would take one look at the facilities of the Outer Range and race back to the Palace to demand why the hell Walfored would allow such an atrocity to take place . . .

And then he would have her. The final piece of the puzzle. Barin hadn’t believed Riesen until he had seen the spatter of blood on her application, the reaction of the candle flame as she flicked her hand. The woman had power, and Barin was going to use it. It was obvious that she

had the ability—whether she knew it or not—to manipulate fire, whereas the manufactured Navigators could only touch air. That was a miracle in itself. But imagine his surprise when he delved into her file—something he had never done despite her ridiculous track record for applying for that damn position—and discovered her parentage! A *female* Navigator? Her mother had been one of the savages, in fact. Astounding.

So of course she would be the perfect candidate. With the blend of savage, manufactured, and now Ree's blood, the economy would swell to bursting; there would be no more hunger, no more want. And best of all, Navigation would become a respectful profession.

Barin rubbed his right temple—the wing-scar there itched terribly whenever he thought of Navigator blood—and scraped back his chair and approached his sixth-floor office window that looked out over Praan. The city was beautiful in this dull, early morning haze hugging the buildings closely. Only the top floors poked from the fog. The sun was only just beginning to come up over the opposite side of the range, the peaks Barin couldn't see from his lofty vantage even if he had squinted. Sometimes the most beautiful things were the unseen.

He heard requests daily to expand the carrier program. People starved from the peaks to the valleys, and the carriers brought water and food to those in the most need. On a smaller scale, those desiring exotic goods would not have to wait as long. If he could streamline the process of creating and keeping Navigators, he could see the market grow by two hundred, maybe three hundred, percent. It would be beautiful.

He would explain all of this to Katrya. And she would agree to do this for the Courts and for the good of the people that she claimed to care for. Or he would kill the savage as punishment and take Ree's blood by force.

Savage, his mind hissed at him. He growled and swept from the room, leaving the inked sheet of paper on his desk, furiously scrubbing at both of his temples.

#

Ree waited. And waited. And waited. And the painful crimson flowers didn't disappear.

She had never felt so claustrophobic—so closeted away—as she did now, as the ship moved through the mountain passes. The wide expanse of the void gave way to cramped, tight corners and sharp cliffs. Standing at the front of the bridge, Ree could feel the world closing in on her despite the width of the window. There was no open air. She tried to ignore her fear, tried to focus on the calm blue of the sky above, but even that held no solace, ringed with the suffocating crown of peaks high above them. After the first day, she retreated into her cabin and only ventured out to visit the *syloom* once a day.

Ree had not slept in two days when Trem came to her in her cabin, where she sat on her bunk staring at her hands. “The crew is concerned, Captain,” he said tentatively.

“Of course they are,” she murmured. She had locked herself in her room and refused to sleep. She probably looked a horrific mess. She should have been ecstatic—she was on her way out of Daen, beyond the stone barriers that had contained her for twenty-seven years. But everything was wrong. Navigator blood was being used as ink to *create* Navigators out of criminals, Ien was out of her reach, and *she had Navi blood inside of her body*. Ra'im blood, Cyril had called it. The only hope she had was that she could finish whatever terrible mission Walfored had lined up for her and then turn around, back to Praan, and force the man to give her Navi back to her.

Trem gave a derisive snort. “If you're going to sit here feeling sorry for yourself, I will just run the ship without you,” he said. However, he didn't move.

“I don't *feel* sorry for myself, Trem,” she snapped. *I will not be a Navigator*. “I'm just

trying to decide what I'm supposed to do with this stuff on my hands." As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she wished them back.

His mouth twisted into an expression of distaste, and he pointedly did not look at her hands. "I don't care a whit what you do with yourself, Captain. I just care that this ship gets to the factory in one piece. And you're the person supposed to get us there."

"Good thing I know where it is, hm?" she retorted sarcastically. *The factory*. That was the first time she had heard him refer to their destination in concrete terms. The word forced a shiver over her skin.

"I don't have to tell you how to do your job, *Captain*."

The emphasis on the last word almost made her want to jump up and shove it back down his throat. The nerve. Of *crashing* course he couldn't tell her how to do her damn job. He was *crashing* right.

She stood, and he shied back toward the door, even though he didn't have much room to move. The look on her face must have been a sight. "Bridge. Now." He shuffled out the door and turned toward the front of the ship.

Stomping through the hallway, she caught a glimpse of Cyril sitting on the bunk in his hastily-found cabin. Cyril didn't look up at her as she passed.

She and Trem attained the bridge just as the front window showed the ship entering another cleft in the mountains. Whereas they had been traveling through tight spaces that left little room for the ship to maneuver, this ravine was wide enough perhaps for four carriers abreast. The slopes didn't press as badly, here. Ree felt the weight on her chest lift briefly. Enough to clear her head for that moment.

"Report on provisions," she said, watching crewmembers work away on the gadgets at their stations. She eyed the NaviWatch and its caretaker, Allin, as he pored over the green numbers on the black screen.

"We're good," Trem replied. She didn't reprimand him on his etiquette.

"Engineering? Everything runs?"

"Yep."

"How far are we from this factory?"

"Maybe a day. Probably two. It's just beyond the edge."

He didn't have to say the edge of *what*. The tingle in her spine, the cold sweat at the back of her neck: these things told her that she would soon achieve the goal that had always been just out of her reach. The end of her journey just wouldn't be as she had intended. *Tainted*, the sick feeling in her stomach groaned. Sullied Walfored, by the marks on her hands.

She walked to the front of the bridge, trying to ignore the crewmembers' eyes digging into her skin. "What am I looking at?" she asked Trem, who had followed her at just a step behind—surprisingly respectful, for him.

"Hemilin Pass," he answered. "We might meet another ship, but prob'ly not. The factory is mainly a refueling point for the carriers, but since there aren't that many of them, we should be good."

"What does Walfored want me to do at a refueling point? Isn't there something else to do there?"

He didn't answer.

Instead of pressing, she nodded as though he had said something interesting. "You're an idiot if you think I'm not going to notice your sulking," she murmured, keeping her face as neutral as possible.

“Sulking?” he exclaimed, then immediately lowered his voice to the usual growl. Out of the corner of her eye she saw some of the crew notice his outburst and then hurriedly pretend to go back to their work. “I told you that this trip is not going to be anything good,” he said. “You’re not going to like it, but then you’re going to get over it and continue to do your job.”

Continue to do my job, she echoed silently. That would be the smart thing to do, she supposed. She just didn’t know what she *should* do. If her “betters” were siphoning blood from men and using it to drive the economy, that wasn’t something she could exactly condone. *Father would never allow it*. A hollow guilt rang in her chest when she realized she actually didn’t know what to do, despite the assurance that her father would have put a stop to any such practice immediately.

The midafternoon sunlight illuminating the pass struck the front window at an odd angle, forcing Ree’s eyes away from the glare. Before she looked back at Trem, however, she saw a dark point on the valley floor, something out of place in the greens and browns.

“What’s that?” She pointed to the faraway mass.

He shaded his eyes with a hand and peered down. “Eh,” he said, waving his free hand. “Nothing. Local village.”

Local village? She didn’t know people lived this far into the mountain passes . . .

Ra’im.

“Take me down there,” she ordered.

“I can’t just . . .”

“Do it,” she said, glaring at him.

“Captain,” he began, voice low and dangerous, “That place is deserted. I know it for a fact. Nothing there.”

She didn’t say anything for a while, but the low heat that had gathered in her stomach subsided pitifully.

“I will do whatever you want,” Trem said after they had been silent for a time, “but you just remember what I told you: nothing about this is good. And don’t take it out on me when you realize I was right.”

A local village on the outskirts of Daen. It could have been nothing, or it could have been everything. Deserted, but why? She watched until the black speck vanished.

“I’m going to talk to Cyril,” she said, turning away from the window and mounting the shallow steps to the captain’s platform and the door behind the helm. “Take care of things up here until I get back.” The sour look on his face said that yes, in fact he would take care of things, and that he had taken care of things for the last two days while she hid in her cabin. However, he didn’t say anything when she turned and exited the bridge.

Chapter 20

SOMETHING BURNING

Two days later, as Trem promised, the ship slid from the crags and rocks out into the open, and Katrya's stomach fell through her feet. She could see for miles—the mountains here fell into hills that eventually were washed away by a green swathe of flat land. Instead of the evening sun hiding behind mountains in the east, light streamed through the windows all across the ship and refracted in the glass. Ree blinked into the harsh light and stared at the flat, wide expanse before them. They followed the path of a river that had birthed itself in the hills and now flowed right into a dark green forest of which Ree couldn't see the end. A glint of modernity wrinkled the dying sunshine right outside the forest.

The *factory*, as Trem had called it, was a huge glass-and-steel building, stretching for the sky with all its might. There were seven towers that Ree could make out; each was of a different height, and each emitted a dense white cloud. The clouds of steam rose steadily until they could join their natural brothers above. When they exited the mountains, the *Painted Consort* flew level with the top of the highest tower, but as the building crept closer, the ground steadily rose up to meet them until the carrier landed gently on the ground.

Ree felt the nerves sliding up her arms and slithering around in her midsection. A factory. An awful-sounding sort of word carrying images of work, rust, monotony. But something new, something unexplored. The little girl in her said, *Yes, I've waited my whole life to see something new. Now I will conquer it!*

Trem, obviously still half-convinced she should be turning and running the opposite direction, stood at the fore of the bridge, hands behind his back, feet shoulder-width apart, that perpetual scowl etched into his brow. A different kind of energy emanated from him today, like raw anxiety that had been raked over a bed of hot coals. The same kind of worry she had seen in him the day they had left Arboram.

I don't need him to tell me what I can and can't do.

When she stepped outside the ship into the new world for the first time, Ree didn't feel any different. The crisp air chilled her face, the vestiges of summer slipping away with the sun as the golden disk fell behind the flatness of the world—no sunset darkness, today, nor ever for this strange realm. Despite the strange, flat landscape—like they had landed on a perpetual valley floor—Ree didn't feel like anything had changed.

Except me. I've changed.

She pushed the thought to the back of her mind and led Trem and Cyril into the factory. The big double doors creaked open into a giant entrance room. As soon as Ree set foot in the factory, she felt the difference she had been searching for. The palms of her hands itched, ached. Her head swelled with pain in that space. It was strange. Unreal. Abominal.

The entrance space was a giant chamber—gargantuan, dark, metallic. Ree felt the emptiness of that room in the pit of her stomach, in the ache in her palms. Here, disconnected from the ship, from Ien, the emptiness was astounding. The only light in the room glowed from the doorways lining the chamber. With a sickening lurch of her insides, Ree realized that this room was a metallic replica of the Palace of the Courts in Praan. There were no obvious boxes in sight, or people, or tools—nothing she would have expected to see in a factory. The building was silent. Waiting for something. The empty feeling inside her intensified.

Shouldn't there be noise if this were a factory? Shouldn't there be machinery?

Ree shook herself. Her thoughts were out of control. She had to do her duty here,

whatever that was, and then she could focus on the real problem of getting Ien out of the mind of her ship.

“Okay,” she said slowly. “Where is the shipment Walfored wants us to pick up?”

Trem pointed at the first door on the left. “Though here,” he said. “I can probably carry it myself. It’s usually only a small box. I’ll get it and be back.” He started toward the open door.

“A small box of what?” she asked as she and Cyril followed him. Her mind filled with the memory of the man in the chair in Arboram.

He watched her warily, seeing that she was not going to wait in the entrance room. But instead of telling her to wait, he just kept walking. At least he knew her enough now not to argue. The thought elicited a pang of sadness. Mack wouldn’t have argued either.

“Ink,” he replied. Simple enough of a word, but it sent a pang of panic spiking through her stomach.

“How many times have you done this?” she asked as they entered a sort of antechamber. The blue glowing light came from behind another door at the far side of the small, sparse space.

“This is my fourth.” He pulled open the heavy portal.

They entered a large, rectangular room. To the left, the space seemed to stretch into forever, beyond Ree’s sight, but across, it was probably only ten feet wide. The other doors on this side of the entrance chamber must have led here as well. Pod-like structures lined the walls, three high; it was from these that the blue light emanated. The twist to Trem’s lips strengthened, grew into contempt.

“Okay . . .” Ree said slowly. “What is so nerve-wracking about a bunch of—”

She walked up to one of the pods and peered inside.

A naked man slumbered there. Tiny tubes entered and exited his arms and chest. At least, it seemed like he was asleep, until his eyes pried themselves open with visible effort, uncovering the dark red bags beneath his blue gaze. Azure wings adorned his temples, but they were slowly fading to gray even as Ree watched.

Ien’s wings had never gone gray. Not even when the *Arienna* had been destroyed. She had never asked, but she understood that it was not a good thing, realized that if it ever happened, something terrible would befall her friend. And this man before her . . .

She raced to another pod a few feet away. Another man. She ran to another, the lead drumbeat in her chest quickening. A woman. All with their eyes shut and wings fading. “Trem . . .”

“Captain, now, you have to understand.”

“What is there to understand? There are people in these things. We have to get them out.” The itch in the palms of her hands grew to a scalding ache. Her fingers scrambled along the edges of the glass, seeking a latch or lever. Nothing.

“That’s not really how it works.”

“Then how does it work?” she hissed, still bent over the woman in the pod. “These people are dying.” She turned to him.

The blond man from Briia stood next to her first mate. His white hair was longer, dirtier, and the hand grasping his staff seemed a little more wizened than when they had last met, but the eyes shone with the same eerie amusement, lips turned in the same smirk.

“Captain,” he said. “I see you made it here safely.”

She jerked a step back—bumped into the pod—and drew her dagger.

The smirk widened into a grin. “Now, I don’t think that’s necessary, is it?”

He flicked the staff carelessly. A gust of wind knocked the weapon from her grip. It

clattered on the cold ground beside her.

"I don't think this is necessary, either," he almost sighed. Another swipe of the rod.

Trem didn't even have a chance to gargle as his neck snapped. He crumpled to the ground, skin and bones without a conscience or a soul. Silence screamed into her ears as she stared at the body. A body where there had once been a man. She was alone.

"Okay," she said. She would get out of this. This man had most likely stolen Ien from her and needed to pay for what he had done. "Okay. Why are you here?"

He laughed and walked over to the nearest pod. Ree didn't take her eyes from him for a second, even to blink. "Collecting."

"Collecting what?" While his back was turned, she began to strafe slowly around the narrow space, pressing her back against the cool glass of a pod on the opposite side. She felt the non-gaze of the dying Navigator burrowing between her shoulder blades and tried not to recoil.

"What do you think?" he said in exasperation, showing an emotion other than contempt or amusement for the first time. "You're smart, Katrya. Use that." He waved around at the walls of people around him. "I am on a harvesting mission."

"Look, I'm not here to get made fun of." Navigator blood. People. Trem.

"Yes," he said with a frown in his voice. "We know why I'm here. But why are you?" He remained facing away from her.

"I wanted . . ." What had she wanted? She balled her hands into fists and felt the indentation of tiny crimson blooms digging into her skin. *Not this. Never this.* At the thought, she clenched her fists tighter.

"It doesn't matter now. You're here, aren't you? Quit moving."

She froze in her shuffle toward the door.

"I could kill you like I killed him," he said offhandedly, like he was bored with the whole situation.

"You won't." Her voice did not shake. He needed her for something. He wouldn't kill her so quickly as he had Trem.

At least, she hoped.

He shrugged, still staring into the pod. The woman in the device shuddered slightly, as though she could feel his unnatural white eyes scraping across her skin. "We'll see. You're valuable, no doubt, but not to me, exactly. The man who paid for you wants you alive, but I think your blood would be just as good to him if you were dead."

Ree stopped thinking. *The man who paid for me.* She turned, and she ran.

She ran through the door, into the entrance hall, gasping and trying not to think about how Riesan hadn't caught her yet. She turned toward the entrance and the way back to her ship, or tried, but—

A blast of wind slammed into her back. She flew across the room and landed in a crumpled heap on the floor. Every single part of her body screamed at her. Floor burns scraped up her thighs and calves; her wrist gave a sharp twinge of misery when she tried to move it. But she pushed herself up and turned again, throwing herself through the nearest door and behind the wall, out of the way of his power. Another room of glowing blue tubes with dying inhabitants.

Dying Navigators. What had Cyril called them? Ra'im.

Too late to think about them. *Is it really?*

She rushed into the room, bolted down a side corridor, skidded behind one of the tubes. There she crouched, listening to her own stupid breathing and holding her wrist. There had to be a way out of this. She had to get back to the ship, get a weapon, and sever this man's blond head

from his shoulders. If only she could get a message to Cyril . . .

"Katrya," he admonished from the doorway, where she couldn't see him. She held her breath.

The pods around her exuded enough soft blue light to illuminate bare contours of the room. Where there may have been a sharp edge, a dark smoothness slipped through shadows; in place of mechanisms and wires, Ree could only see whisperlike insinuations. The maze of a room slipped in and out of her vision as shadows and light played across the floor—where the man entered the room, darkness followed. His body blocked out the light from the entrance hall, but there was something else as well. A dimming of sorts.

Her own thoughts wailed in her ears, and she willed them to be silent, lest this monster of a man hear them and find her.

Stupid, she admonished.

"Can you feel it, woman?" he asked as he began to move slowly down the nearest aisle, searching in the crevices between the Navi pods. She shifted, still crouched behind the row of tubes, and scuttled in the opposite direction of his voice. "I'm sure you can feel *something*. The blood's in you, and you know it now." She felt the scape of the raised skin of the marks, the way the sweat slicked her palms.

The blood is in me. Ra'im.

The red flowers on her hands carried the burden of proof.

"I thought for a long time about how it could be possible that you carried the gene. Females are . . . resistant to the strain." With a sickening lurch of her stomach, she realized his voice carried knowledge and certainty that could only come from experience. She refused to think about how he could have achieved that level of surety. "The only available explanation is that a parent has the true blood."

She shrank back against a pod again, watching him.

"These lovely specimens are carriers of the true blood," he said softly. She poked her head around one of the tubes. In the blue half-light, she saw him stop and peer into one of the pods with a twisted smile zagging across his features. "Born with that powerful, expensive stuff just pumping away from their tiny hearts."

These people . . . were Ra'im.

He looked up right at her. "You understand why I'm harvesting, right, Katrya?"

The damn markets. He had seen her now, so she stood, facing him even though the trembling of her body screamed at her to run. *I can't run from this. I have to find out where he's got Ien.* "Where is my Navigator?"

"In the belly of your ship," was his smooth, immediate reply.

"I know he's not," she hissed. She felt uncomfortable heat rise in her cheeks as he continued to advance. "Tell me where he is." She injected all the command, all the anger that she could muster, into the words, and hoped he hadn't heard the tremor of fear.

The return of the slimy smile told her that of course he had. "Where else would he be? In Praan with all the other Court Navigators. But it's not likely you'll make it that far."

"Why does it have to be blood? Why people?" she asked. She backed up a step and bumped into something, saw the blue light out of the corner of her eye. The closed eyes of the not-dead person inside the pod bored into her shoulderblades.

The man's smile cracked. For an instant, the amused veil lifted from his eyes and the crazed creature shone through. "Because these *savages* do not deserve anything else."

The fury—the *pain*—in his voice caught Ree's breath in her throat. He began to move

toward her, like one of the great mountain cats of which she had only heard tales, boots clicking on the metal walkway. The door was too far.

He lunged, leading with his staff. She threw herself to the side in time to avoid all but a tiny nick on her forearm from the point—the thing didn't look sharp, but its bite sent a lance of pain up her arm and into her shoulder. Picking herself up from the floor, she looked down and saw spiderweb-like black marks skittering across her skin. *Like what happened to Ien. Oh, mounts. I'm in over my head.*

But Ien needed her. That was all that mattered.

She circled around the man. He pointed the tip of that staff at her all the while, flicking his eyes at the new marks on her arm and the old—albeit abnormal—splashes of red on her palms. The crazed gleam in his eye intensified. “These are people,” she said to him. “What could they possibly have done to deserve this?”

The twist to his mouth only deepened. “You would never understand. Know only that I will bleed these monsters dry until there is no more use for their blood.”

Monsters . . . Savages . . . “Use” for their blood? What else could the Courts be using it for but the creation of state-controlled Navigators? She was missing something.

“Aren't you one of them?”

“NO!” he screamed, and swung the staff at her again.

A gust slapped her down to the floor. She caught herself on her hands, but in the shock of the burning heat on her palms and the agony in her wrist tried to snatch her hands back and fell sideways, colliding chin-first with the metal.

“These people used to be my brothers and sisters,” he spat rapidly. “They refused to realize their full potential, and shunned me when I wanted more than meager elemental control. Then, when the ships came, I knew it was my chance.” He pointed the staff at her, keeping her from standing. “Instead, the Courts drained everything from me, and my *people* still wanted nothing to do with me.”

“What the ships came?” If she kept him talking, that meant she was alive for one more minute.

He spat into her face. “Dirty Courts and their disgusting carrier bitches. I'm going to drain you like the Courts drained me—like I've already done to Walfored.”

“You . . . you're the one who did that to him?”

He smirked. “Of course. Who else would he come to? He couldn't rise to power without getting rid of the savage inside him. So I ripped it out, and in exchange he lets me . . . Do this.” He gestured widely, taking in the whole facility.

She grated her teeth. She wished she had her dagger, so that she could defend herself, or sever his head from his neck, feel the fire of his blood leaking down her arms . . .

What kinds of thoughts are these? Her left arm, numbed from whatever he had done, hung limply at her side, but her right wrist itched fiercely. She brought it up, stared at the red marks that crawled steadily up the inside of her forearm, prickling as they etched deeper into her skin.

Hot. She was so hot.

A noise at the door brought her head around. Cyril stood there, face flushed, gaping at the man and at Ree. “You've been gone for a while—” he said without breath, gray eyes locked on the man in black.

“Duck!” Ree shrieked as the man launched himself at Cyril, the staff aimed directly at his face. The scholar leapt aside just in time. The man growled in frustration and swung again, this

time taking Cyril in the side and sending him sprawled on the floor of the factory room.

She crawled over to Cyril. She realized that the man in black had not used any kind of Navigator power, and didn't have any discernable weapon other than the staff. *The only way he can hurt us is with the staff. If we can get it away from him . . .*

But before Ree could do or say anything, the creature of a man turned and fled. The metallic echo of his frantic steps faded away long before the shock of the encounter left her. That man had almost killed her. That man had kidnapped Ien. And she had been powerless to stop him from doing either thing.

And she still didn't know how to save her Navigator.

"What . . . was *that*?"

The wince in Cyril's tone drew her back to the present. She felt herself trembling even as she tried to pull both of them to their feet, but her muscles laughed at her attempts.

"Ree?" his voice cried from far away, muffled by the smothering sound of flames pounding the walls of Ree's own head. "Ree, listen to me . . ."

All she could see was red. And all she could feel was fire in her blood. From the floor, she looked around the room at the rows and rows and rows of blue pods, of blue *coffins*. And she knew, as she had never before known anything in her life, that these people were already dead.

These are people. Same as Ien. Same as my mother. As me.

A sob ripped from her throat as words: "*THESE ARE PEOPLE!*" And then, a terrified whisper: "These are people."

She dragged herself to the nearest coffin and stared into the eyes of a young man, barely of age, his near-lifeless gaze imploring her. The question was simple.

Will you end it?

But the answer was difficult.

Something in her snapped. They were *already dead*.

"Burn it," she muttered through a haze. "Burn the whole thing to the ground." And then the markings on her right arm glowed, strengthened, *deepened*. The agony of the flames grew to a crescendo in her head, *demanding*. She vaguely knew Cyril's hand tugged on her dead arm, pulling her to her feet and towards the entrance, towards the *Painted Consort*. A brief thought of Trem's body lying cold among the dead-not-dead Navigator people flitted across the burning landscape of her mind, but the heat pushed it away. Her arm, her mind, *everything was so hot*. Her lungs filled with smoke.

They lurched into the fresh air ahead of the too-real flames now licking the side of the building. The crewmembers on landing duty scrambled to pluck her from Cyril, but he didn't let go until the two of them had stumbled aboard the *Painted Consort*. Cyril threw her into the ship with a curse, and then they were flying, and the fire was beneath them, and she could finally breathe again.

PART IV

Chapter 21

EVERYTHING

Ien opened his eyes.

The darkness, but something else.

Something *burning*.

It was such a good feeling. Strength surged into his muscles, and he pulled at the golden shackles, watching their fire breathe against his skin. The darkness suddenly didn't press so closely, didn't cut so deeply. Because there was *something else*. Something gorgeous.

It was Ree. And she was burning everything.

Chapter 22

TROUBLE STARTER

The *Painted Consort* sailed through a sea of wind that howled like a pack of mountain dogs and raged against the steel siding. A greatstorm was coming.

Ree carried it with her.

Cyril didn't try to talk her out of her decision to fly directly back to Walfored and shove this shiny metal piece of blood money down his smug throat. She was not a fool and would not be taken for one. And now that she had the proper ammunition—information guaranteed to cripple the man's influence in the Courts and a giant steel ship capable of blasting a hole in the Palace should the first option not work—she would make him listen to her.

She sat cross-legged in the space with the *syloom* for hours on end, eyes closed, mind open. She placed her hands palm-down on the floor and accepted the burning tingle that snuck up her arms like snakes of lightning. And *he* was there. It was him. Ien Sandir. The man she was bound toward; the man with whom she shared more things than she had thought. *Ien, I hope you're ready*, she would think, even though she wasn't sure what he needed to be ready *for*. It didn't matter. She would raze Praan to stones if Walfored kept Ien from her.

Her duties as captain kept from helpless rage for at least a short time. She promoted Allin, the NaviWatch helmsman, to First Mate and made it clear that Cyril would stay with her on the bridge at all times. Despite the fact that it went against policy for someone not of the crew to be so respected—let alone a *scholar* who had no experience with ships of any kind—the crew didn't blink or complain.

Somehow she had become one of them—one of the crew—when she wasn't looking.

Probably when that evil man snapped their friend's throat, she growled to herself.

The mourning period for Trem was laughably brief. The man had not been well-liked aboard the *Painted Consort*. Even Ree hadn't liked him. But the manner of his death proved more than sobering; each day, as they neared Praan, the silence on the bridge grew heavier and heavier, until she thought she would be crushed under its weight.

As the days passed, she began to notice something troubling. The flowers adorning the palms of her hands tried to stretch toward the sun of her heart; creeping toward her wrists in tiny red lines. Her left arm's numbness had receded slowly throughout that first day and much of the next, but the growth of the marks startled her. Each time she placed her hands on the hard floor of the *syloom* she could feel the shiver of movement beneath her skin.

I will not be a Navigator, she swore to herself.

It became a mantra for every moment, waking and asleep—though even in slumber she couldn't ignore the prickles of the imaginary needle marching up her forearms.

Above all, she tried to forget what she had done to the people in the blood factory, tried to push the memories away. *I killed them*. She told herself that they deserved proper rest, that that was no life for hundreds of people, that she had done the right thing, that they were already dead.

It didn't make her feel any better.

#

Nola read Cyril's meticulously folded letter with care, taking each word and rolling it around in her mind like fine wine, trying to figure out the riddle hidden behind the language. It had arrived only yesterday, which meant that his words were more than likely ten days stale by now—an eternity considering the urgency of the message.

I'm traveling with Kattrya to somewhere in the mountains, he wrote. She wants to come home to Praan and search for Ien, but she hasn't turned around yet. I think she has another motive for traveling out this far. News of Ien's capture was not as much of a surprise as I had thought it would be. She is only prolonging the inevitable. It's almost like she doesn't want to find him.

He couldn't be right. He just couldn't. So Nola refused to believe it.

There's something else, too. She's convinced that dispensaries are involved in some sort of scheme to siphon blood from Navigators and turn it into the ink with which Navigators are created and maintained. I haven't spoken with anyone else on the ship about it, but the first mate, Trem, seems agitated.

And we are correct about her lineage.

"What are we going to do?" She and Mack stood at the edge of the square staring up at the cut white stone of the Palace and its opulent wooden doors. Merchants and sailors moved this way and that, all vying for an audience with some Court or another.

A feeling of betrayal deep in Nola's gut wrenched her first in one direction, then another. As an outsider, born and raised in Port Aria, she couldn't decide whether to hate the Courts . . . or pity the people who exalted them. The Triumvirate in Port Aria didn't need to resort to such deeply sinister techniques in order to keep the economy afloat in every literal sense of the term. If Cyril had the right of it, and the blood of Navigators was being used to create the power-infused ink that kept ships in the air, then something unacceptable was going on in that building—and Ien had to be a part of it.

"Ien's got to be in there," Mack said, peering at the Palace doors with arms crossed. "If he hasn't left Praan, that's the only place he could be."

That wasn't *necessarily* true, but it felt like the only truth they were going to find. After searching the city for weeks, it was last place they hadn't scoured. Janne thought they were crazy for even considering the Courts would do something like kidnap a citizen. Ree had always been fond of saying that Janne was a political hopeful that wanted to believe everything was right with the world—and now Nola understood.

However, Janne had helped: she had lent them floor plans to the Palace itself. Convenient that her job involved architectural numbers and things Nola didn't understand. The blueprints would be helpful if they could ever get into the building in the first place.

And now, with Cyril's news, it was as close to a confirmation they were likely to get.

Siphoning blood from Navigators.

"But how are we going to get him out?" Nola asked. It was a conversation they had had before.

He shrugged. "We gotta try and get an audience with that bloody pirate."

Barin Walfored was the only one who could answer their questions. Nola nodded and opened her mouth to respond, but a flurry of activity near the gates to the Palace caught her attention. The guards were turning petitioners away. "Doesn't look like it'll be today," she mumbled. The aggravated sailors and merchants began to shout at the guards, shaking fists in the air and placing hands on weapons. Even from across the square, she shivered and checked to make sure the knives she kept tied to her biceps remained loose and easy to access. She noticed Mack, arms crossed, touch the hilt of the revolver he kept beneath his vest. "What's happening?"

"Looks like trouble." He strode forward, caught an angry—but unarmed—merchant by the sleeve. "Why won't they accept any more petitions?" Mack asked the man.

The other man shrugged Mack's hand off roughly. "Some kinda moronic Court

emergency,” he snapped. “Prolly just wanted the *rabble* off the front.” He said it in his Tinnan accent with such derision Nola half expected him to spit on the cobblestones—and then he did, before stalking off into the city, away from the Palace. *Tinnans are such weird people*, she thought.

Sure enough, the mob before the gates to the Palace dispersed, but more soldiers came out of the Palace and rushed toward the port, wearing the light leather armor of the Palace Guard. “Whatever it is,” she said, “it’s serious.” She exchanged a look with Mack, who nodded and began to follow the soldiers.

#

“Well, Captain, he knows you’re coming,” Cyril announced quietly as the two of them stood at the helm, away from the ears of other crewmembers. Ree kept her eyes on the activity on the bridge, pretending that they were overseeing the activity.

“How can you tell?”

“Allin tells me that communications have been disrupted for two hours now. The NaviWatch is still working, though.”

In other words: Ien was not dead. Yet.

“How long until the NaviWatch . . . stops working?” she forced herself to ask.

“Probably not long. The communications issue means that you’ve probably . . .” he shook his head, sighing. “No, it means you’ve definitely got an informant on board.” He opened the book that of course he held and pretended to read. It seemed to be his defense whenever he felt uncomfortable.

She waved Allin over to them from where he stood with his hands behind his back, his new uniform strangely appropriate for his pensive posture, and he complied. “We need to get to Praan. Tell the engine room to speed it up.”

Allin nodded and hurried to the communication pipe connecting the bridge to the engineers at a lower level.

Ree turned to exit the bridge, pulling open the heavy door and entering the long hallway beyond. Cyril followed her.

“Katrya, we need to talk,” he intoned, brows drawn. “About that character and what he told you.”

She recoiled. She had been avoiding this subject with him; she had given him a bare-bones summary of what had happened in the factory between her and the man. Now that Cyril knew about her markings and about some of the things said between Ree and the man, he had been lurking, waiting to devour her in a fit of research. Ree could tell by the way he looked at her that his academic itch was flaring, but she would rather not talk about it. She especially didn’t want to talk about the . . . factory. And the fire. The beautiful, luscious . . .

“No,” she spat, then pushed on through the belly of the ship.

She almost smacked him when he followed her down the hall. “Listen,” he implored. “You’re doing too much. You have to rest. Your marks . . .”

They haven’t regained their color, she heard him not-say. She didn’t slow her pace, but she did briefly look down at the dead black marks reaching from her palms and up her wrists. “There are other more important things to talk about, Cyril. Like the fact that Barin Walfored has kidnapped my Navigator.”

She didn’t have to look at him to see the frown on his face; she could hear it in his voice. “Yes, that’s important, but we also need to talk about why Walfored thinks you’re so important that he would do such a thing.”

She said nothing. They rounded the corner and into the hall where her quarters were housed. She turned to him and tried to take the annoyance—and fear—out of her voice. “Listen. I will figure this out. But right now the most important thing is that I break Ien out of wherever they have him. And that is going to require all of my attention.”

His lips pressed into a thin line and his eyes narrowed. “Until you have more information, this is going to be weighing on your mind, Katrya.”

Just like Nola. So persistent. She sighed and rubbed her temples. “Could you just—”

“Nola and Mack know about your mother. And also about Ien’s heritage.”

Shock turned to terror beneath her skin, and she grabbed and pulled him into her small room. “What are you thinking, blurting things like that?” she hissed when the door was shut and locked behind her.

He sat down on the overturned barrel. “You weren’t going to listen to me, otherwise.” He certainly was smug for someone who had just manipulated her into speaking to him. She sat down on the three-legged metal stool, glaring at him with everything that was in her. Despite his victory, however, he didn’t smile. “Listen to me, Katrya Millor. This is bigger than Ien. I hate to say it, but you know it’s true. Walfored has to have a reason for wanting you. And the fact that you’re a hybrid Navigator has something to do with it.”

“Wait,” she stopped him. “Hybrid Navi. He used that term. What does it mean?”

“Well,” he began slowly, staring at the unopened book in his lap. “Basically, it means it was passed to you through only one parent. Full blood Navigators are born from two parents who carry the gene.” He quieted. “Like the people in the harvesting plant.”

A spasm rocked her; sweat rolled down her back. “Oh,” was all she could say.

“Sometimes, manufactured Navigators—the ones created by the Courts as punishment for crimes—have children, and that creates a different kind of power.” He waved a hand in dismissal. “But that doesn’t concern us.”

“What does concern us?” she snapped.

In the light of one lantern hanging by the door in the cramped space, Cyril stared at her with such intensity that she gave a start and shrank back for a moment before remembering herself. *I’ve known Cyril for years, she thought, and he’s never looked at me like that.* “It’s interesting,” he began.

“How can this be *interesting*, Cyril?” She thrust her hands in his face. “Look at this! At what I *did*!” *I can’t be . . . I can’t. I won’t.* She shuddered, remembering the sensation of warmth, of beauty, of *power* she had experienced in the factory. *Harvesting plant, he called it.*

“Well,” he said slowly, carefully, tasting each word. “You have the ability to manipulate fire. So we know that you got that from your mother. But most Navigators can only manipulate wind, or rarely, water. There has never been one with an affinity for fire,” he lectured. “At least, not that is known.” He tapped a long finger on his cheek; he looked like he needed a book. “That’s why Walfored is after you, Ree,” he said, leaning in. “You’re different. And different is dangerous.”

That still didn’t answer the question of why the man had placed a bounty on her head—and why her blood was *so important*. But if it made Cyril feel better to lecture her about things she had already put together for herself . . .

“What’s even more interesting,” he continued, “is the factor of Ien. He is a full blood Ra’im, forced into the trade of Navigation when he came within the jurisdiction of the Courts. So what is his role in Walfored’s plan?” He had the look of someone who didn’t want to be interrupted, even with answers, so she didn’t. “There’s got to be a connection, other than the fact

that you've worked together for so long. If Ien really is the Navigator for this ship, that means Walfored put him there. For a reason."

Cyril was speaking sense, but the words kept swirling around Ree's head like so much sewage. She put her forehead on her palms and exhaled slowly. "We just need to get to Praan. Find Walfored. And beat the answers out of him," she murmured into her hands. "And then I will look for reasons."

He touched her hand, and she looked up at him, watched as he took her palm and held it, staring at the black flowers that bloomed along the lines beneath her fingers and at the base of her thumb. "Whatever happened here," he said softly, "it started with your parents."

The door banged open, and Poltin Treeil, the Valt man who had been promoted to NaviWatch, panted into the room. She snatched her hand from Cyril's grasp.

"Captain!" Poltin gasped. "You're needed on the bridge!"

Ree didn't ask. The level of fear in Poltin's voice catapulted her from the bunk and behind him all the way to the bridge. "Report," she barked as they ran.

"You've received a message from the High Captain. He wants . . ."

"What? What does he want?"

He shook his head as she shoved ahead through the door. Through the viewing window, she could see Praan approaching. She could also see the five carrier ships sitting idle in battle formation in the void between the *Painted Consort* and the city.

Ah. So that's it.

"Is the NaviWatch still working?" she asked Poltin.

The man ran to his console and punched a few buttons. "Yes, Captain! Our Navigator is still alive."

He said it with such cold, logistical certainty that she wanted to scream at him: *Our Navigator has a name and he is my best friend! He's not just a number!* She brushed the insistence away and ordered someone to tell her what was going on.

"The High Captain of Ships wants to meet with you, Captain," Allin informed her as she sat in her chair.

"Of course," she grumbled under her breath. "Tell him to stuff himself."

"Captain," he said, hesitation thick in his voice. "He's got the weapons and Navigators of five carrier ships aimed at us. There is absolutely no way any of us would survive that."

She opened her mouth to tell them that Ien could face anything and survive, that he could use his abilities to destroy anything that got in their ways . . . *But there are other people on those ships. And these ones aren't comatose.* The memory of flames licked at the edges of her brain, and she exhaled slowly. She couldn't do it again.

"Okay," she said. "What do I have to do?"

"Follow me," a new voice said from behind and to her right. Ree turned and saw Rinna Mareion, the woman's sharp face pulled into a smug ugly smile. She pushed her spectacles further up her nose and turned that smile on Ree. "Well?" A lightly armored guard stood passively at her side.

"How did you get on my ship?" Ree hissed.

The woman giggled. "Sweetie, this isn't your ship. It belongs to the Court. And since I am on the Court, it technically belongs to me. Barin wants a word with you about the way you've trashed the place. Please come with me."

"Looks like a small *kebek* has drawn up on our side," Allin said from one of the consoles on the deck. "The Court crest is painted on the side."

"A little late," Ree grumbled.

A *kebek*. Like the *Arienna*. The smug smile on Rinna's face gained a whole new meaning. Ree glared at her and wished she could claw that smile from her lips. "Fine," she said instead, getting to her feet. *Wish I had my dagger*. But that was probably a puddle of melted steel within a puddle of a melted factory. She felt the knife in her boot against the side of her leg, and she flexed her fingers and the markings on her palms. "Cyril is coming with me," she announced. He stepped up beside her when Rinna said nothing.

She glanced at Allin. The man looked the obvious question at her: *What do I do?* For a second, her heart swelled with pride that she had been able to win the crew's trust, but the question still stood. *I don't know*, she wanted to yell at him. But she did know. She beckoned to him and took him aside. "Look," she whispered, shooting a glance at Rinna, who continued to stare at Ree. "If I don't come back, do whatever you need to do. It's in your hands. Protect what you need to protect. Do what feels right."

He nodded grimly, his youngish face determined. *Maybe I did something good here*, she hoped.

It became a prayer as she turned to Rinna and flicked her hand at the woman. "Let's go talk to the High Captain."

Chapter 23

A PROPOSITION

Machinir Libbin and Nola Reen reached the harbor right behind the soldiers, even though they had come from a different direction, through alleyways and quieter streets. They stood near a shop at the foot of an alley and tried to inconspicuously watch the dock. The armored men seemed to be waiting for something; they stood at attention at the top of one of the piers for merchant vessels, which was a mystery until a *kebek* docked and a group of people disembarked: two women and two men. Mack couldn't believe his eyes.

"That's Ree and Cyril," he said with a jolt. Ree was back. He exchanged a worried glance with Nola and started forward, but her hand on his shoulder stayed him.

As the guards escorted their charges through the harbor and got closer to Mack and Nola's hiding spot, Mack could see Ree more clearly. Something was different about the girl. Her shoulders slumped. Her eyes darted this way and that. This was not the captain he had known. Something had happened to her. Something about her eyes. There was fear there, but also *rage*.

And then he saw who she followed. A prim-looking woman with tiny spectacles perched on her nose, which was far enough in the air to require a Navigator. He had never seen this woman before, but the way Nola looked at her meant nothing good. And the fact that Ree was *following* this woman—and heading out of the harbor—left a sour taste in his mouth.

Not to mention the fact that the whole crashing fleet of carriers swarmed in the void like a cloud of huge locusts just off the edge of Praan. With weapons pointed outward at another carrier. *Ree*. Of course. His captain continued to stir up trouble as usual. The woman was probably an emissary of the Courts.

Is Ree the trouble the soldiers from the Palace are here for?

"Let's follow them," was Nola's soft suggestion, gesturing to the group of four making its way through the port: Ree, Cyril, the woman, and a bodyguard.

He and Nola melted back into the crowd, this time moving in the direction of their friends. Mack kept the back of Ree's head in sight—her swaying tail of hair and its gold charms was distinctive enough to latch onto. The crowds parted for Ree and her escort, and as he and Nola pushed past merchants and sailors on the edge of their wake, his feeling of dread grew along with the whispers that swelled around them. It wasn't exactly normal for there to be carrier ships in attack formation right outside the capital city. And who was this woman wearing pants and swaying in her boots? Why did she look so angry?

The existing tension in the city made the air even heavier, thicker. The Courts had begun to crack down on the comings and goings of its citizens for seemingly no reason whatsoever, and there were whispers of a tax hike on the horizon. The people of Praan were in the dark about the dealings of the Courts, and they were beginning to realize how that affected their businesses and lives. The rumor that had the city in the grip of fear, however, was the one that sent chills down even Mack's spine: Navigator ink was going to run out. Sometime within the coming months, it would become impossible to create new Navigators. Mack could hear the agitation in the winds that swirled around the city, taste it in his daily afternoon ale. Every bar, every tattoo dispensary, every tiny merchant's shop—the story was always the same. *What is going to happen to Praan if the ink runs out?*

It was a question that didn't have an answer. Or, at least, the answer was something no one wanted to think about. No trade. No way to deal with the worst criminals.

Mack and Nola followed the group all the way back to the Palace—no surprise there. While he and Nola watched from the entrance to an alley along the square, the four of them marched straight through the gates and up to the doors and went inside. As soon as the doors were closed behind Cyril, Mack turned to his partner. “That didn’t look okay.”

She shook her head but said nothing, staring hard at the iron gates.

“We have to get in there,” he heard himself say. He hadn’t broken the law in a good fifteen years—excepting the times he had broken Ien out of prison, which of course didn’t count in his mind—and he didn’t want to do so now, but what else could they do?

Nola remained silent, but that was as good as an affirmative to him.

#

Ree tried to quiet her wrath as she followed Rinna and the guard through the city, shoved the voice down as they entered the Palace, stifled it with useless loud thoughts as they walked up the spiral staircase and closer to the sixth floor. Then they hit the fourth floor and kept going: up, up, up to the fifth, sixth, seventh floors. Finally, as they crested the eighth floor, with Rinna breathing a little heavily and Ree’s legs protesting, Rinna led them from the stairwell and into a long corridor decorated with art from old times: golden-red silk tapestries, oil paintings, wall sconces that hadn’t been popular for two hundred years. At the end of the corridor was an open door.

Through the door she could see a large sunlit room carpeted with blue-and-gold silks that had been woven in the warmer climes of the southern cities of the range—Mimlan, or Purakin. As Ree and her escort approached, she could make out a lone chair in the middle of the room. In it sat Barin Walfored with an ugly, laughing smile on his stupid face.

“Katrya,” he called to them as they grew closer to the opulent room. “Welcome! I’m glad you could finally make it!” The false enthusiasm in his voice brought bile to the base of her esophagus.

She saw that the chair he sat in looked not unlike the one she had seen siphoning blood from the man in the back room of the dispensary in Arboram. Her heart beat a mangled pace against the hollow of her throat as she tried to breathe.

A big metal room full of pods emitting soft blue light. *All those people. You killed all those people.* Her mind taunted her in the voice of Shrylu Riesen.

Walfored was hooked into the mechanisms of this chair and so could only watch as they advanced, that idiot grin on his full lips. Damn, but he was still handsome, despite the . . . obvious flaws. Three thin tubes traveled from the arms of the chair to enter the soft skin of his wrists, leaving slight red incisions. Deep red liquid filled the tubes hooked up to his arms.

She brought up her gaze to return his stare and said nothing. Rinna and her bodyguard turned around and walked back the way they had come, though Rinna’s nose turned up and she shot Walfored what Ree could only call a glare. Walfored remained sickeningly confident. She was almost offended he didn’t believe that Ree would try to rip his face from his skull while alone.

“What you did at my facility is somewhat unforgiveable, Katrya,” he said, that patronizing tone in his voice. His face fell into an expression of false concern.

She wondered briefly what his face would look like without skin and clenched her fists. She felt Cyril’s pacific touch on her arm from beside her. Without looking at Nola’s brother, she attempted to quiet the tremors radiating through her and *breathe*. It became even more difficult when Walfored began to speak again.

“I’m going to have to revoke your captainhood privileges,” he said.

She could remember a time when that would have given her pause. Today, however, she barely felt the words as they slid past. It didn't matter.

She had seen what was beyond the mountains. A beautiful people, who looked like Ien and had the same markings, same history.

All dead because of her.

No, because of this man, she reminded herself harshly. *He's the one to blame.*

"What's your game here?" Cyril accused when Ree, too caught up in her internal struggle, said nothing. "Why the blood, and why give Ree her own ship if you knew what was going to happen?"

Walfored's smile slipped somewhat as he looked Cyril up and down. "I'm not sure we've met, but you look familiar. A relative of one of Katrya's groupies?" He snorted and sat back down in the chair.

Somehow, though Ree and Cyril stood over him, the idiot managed to look regal and as though he held total control of the situation. Which of course he did. If Ree did anything, she would be jailed or executed, and Cyril with her no matter if he helped or not. The knowledge of this fact shone from Walfored's face.

"I actually had quite different plans for what should have happened at the facility," he said to Ree. "I had hoped it would show you the kind of lucrative business you could be a part of—Trem was supposed to explain all that, but he obviously failed."

He shrugged. "I do still want to know what happened. I only know that it no longer stands and that Allin is now your first mate . . . which means Trem is dead. And I know Shrylu Riesan was involved somehow." His smile deepened. "Give me the gory details."

"No," she forced out in a whisper. Her palms sweated, heat dripping from her skin. "Where's Ien?" *Shrylu Riesan. That man.* So now the face had a name.

Her response delighted him. He crossed his legs and placed a thoughtful finger on his cheek. The tubes attached to his right wrist stretched the skin, and he winced, but he hid it immediately and was once again a perfect example of control.

The shadows of wings at his temples had begun to darken with color. So the blood flowed . . . *into* . . . his veins?

"I have a proposition for you, Katrya," he announced.

"I don't want to hear it," she growled. "I just want you to quit whatever business you have with these people. And I want you to *tell me where Ien is.*"

"Your people, you mean?" He smiled. "Yes, yes, I know all about you and your Ra'im lineage. You wouldn't be here if I hadn't done my research well before you applied for captainhood this year."

I wouldn't be here . . . "You mean you only accepted me because of . . ."

He shrugged. "Of course. Otherwise, you females are too volatile and unsuited for such a position. I even wish Rinna had remained at home, sometimes. But that's not the point." His gaze pierced her; she felt very small, an insect, pinned against the wall, ready for dissection.

You females.

"The point is that I need you, Katrya," he continued. "Your blood is one of three ingredients in the cocktail that I can use to change the way Navigators are treated. It won't happen today, or tomorrow, but for our children, things will be different." His eyes gleamed—he believed what he said, and it was important to him.

The pleading in his voice brought Ree out of her stupor. "What do you need my blood for? What three ingredients are you talking about?"

He lifted his arm slightly to show her the tubes flowing into his wrist. “Ra’im blood,” he put up a finger, “manufactured Navi blood,” another finger, “and yours. Hybrid.” He put up a third and final digit.

“Why am I so special? There’s got to be plenty of people like me. And what are you going to do with all of that anyway?”

He pursed his lips. “I’m going to create new Navigators, of course,” he said softly, slowly, with iron on his tongue. “With the ability to direct wind, water, *and* your fire. Something that people will not be able to ignore.” He flicked his attention to Cyril. “And as for why you’re so special, you should ask your friend. I’m sure he will be able to tell you all about his research. He was there when your father was killed in that fire, after all.”

He was . . . *What?*

“I thought you said we had never met,” Cyril snapped at Walfored even as Ree turned to him.

Another dangerous smile from Walfored. “Just because we’ve never met doesn’t mean I don’t know who you are.”

“What does he mean, Cyril?” she whispered. “Were you there?”

He shuffled his feet, not quite meeting her gaze. “I was helping him with some of the data gathering. Simple bookkeeping, things like that.”

“And you . . . didn’t think it was important for me to know?” Ree felt Walfored out of the corner of her eye, smile plastered to his face, watching their exchange. A voice in her head told her now was not the time to talk about this, that they would have time later, but she kept stumbling over Walfored’s words in her thoughts: *He was there when your father was killed in that fire.*

Cyril didn’t answer, only glared at Walfored.

The High Captain chose that time to continue his supplication. “So what do you say, Katria Millor, daughter of Erikk Millor, Navi researcher and merchant extraordinaire? Will you help me? Will you sit in this chair and let me use your blood to fix this . . . societal problem?”

“You’re a madman, Barin. Simply a madman.”

#

To Mack it seemed as though they were always trying to break Ien out of one prison or another. He knew this was only the fourth time, but “skirting authority” and “demonstrating total neglect for the law”, as Nola would have said, gave a bit of adrenaline fit to create an avalanche. The fact that breaking a Navi out of the Palace was an executionable offence gave him a jolt of the stuff. He fingered the explosives under his coat and hoped he would get to use them.

He and Nola didn’t have much time after Ree and Cyril were escorted inside the gates and through the Palace doors. The mob of petitioners swarmed the gate, and the harried guards yelled with little effect that the Palace was closed for business. “We’ve got to get in there,” Mack said for what seemed like the hundredth time.

Nola waved her hands at him in that “I’m thinking, so leave me alone” gesture he had come to recognize from her. She glared at the gate and the two guards standing outside. “There’s got to be a reason those guards would let someone in,” she murmured. “We just have to figure out what it is.” She was silent for another minute or so, during which Mack peered around and hoped that no one noticed how intensely this seemingly random, normal woman stared at the front gate of the Palace.

“Yes, there is,” a voice stated from behind them. “Everyone needs to get to work, even if the Palace is shut down to outside visitors.”

Mack whirled around and saw Janne standing there smiling at them, a bag of books and papers slung over her shoulder.

"Sure," Nola said slowly, "but you work there. We don't."

Janne shrugged, her long, thin brown hair wavering in the breeze. "I'm allowed to have guests."

"You could be fired for something like that," Nola admonished, but exchanged a questioning glance with Mack anyway. He exhaled and nodded.

It more smoothly than they could've hoped. Aside from a sidelong glance at Janne's companions, the guards showed no signs of suspicion as Janne led them through the gates and then the double doors of the Palace. As soon as they were inside and standing in the entrance hall, she stepped through a side door into, blessedly, an empty room. Mack scanned the space: a desk, some chairs, plush purple rug covering the hard stone floor: Janne's office.

Ree probably just told off the wrong person, he quipped to himself, but he knew there was no way this kind of mayhem would be justified by something small like that, even with these egos. Ree had done something wrong, and the scars that pulled the skin beneath his shirt itched at the thought of what she could have done. Or what her punishment would be.

"Okay," Nola whispered as she darted glances toward the door. "The floor plans said there is a massive underground chamber beneath this floor. However, none of them had it labeled as anything other than 'basement'."

Mack nodded. "We'll start there." Why the Courts felt the need to keep their Navigators in the Palace rather than aboard their ships still didn't make sense to him; how could they know how to move the carriers if they couldn't even see the crashing things? But if in fact Ien had been taken against his will, this was the place he would be.

Mack knew with every piece of his body that there was no other option. *Damn Courts and their damn scheming.*

"Be careful," Janne warned. "They don't let just anyone walk around. They saw you walk in with me, so that will buy you a little leeway, but stay alert."

He and Nola slipped from the room, leaving Janne to her work. How could she *work* when so much was *happening* right now?

Mack tried to imagine himself as a piece of the decor in the main entrance hall: he was supposed to be there, had been there forever and would continue to belong for eternity. If he could convince himself that he wasn't an intruder, he might persuade suspicious eyes as well. And it didn't hurt that he still had his pistol under his vest—under Janne's sharp glare, the guards hadn't taken it away at the gate. He sure as a mountainslide wasn't going anywhere without *that*.

They followed the map in Nola's head to the spiral staircase at the end of the entrance hall, and then instead of going up, Nola veered right and through an unmarked door at the side of the room. It opened into an even smaller room than Janne's office and proved equally empty. Other than the diminutive dimensions, it was the exact same in every aspect: the pine desk with shale top, the blue rug, the chair. An oddness pervaded the space, an ephemeral quality to the air. *That's ridiculous*, his logical side told him. But there it was. Nola immediately started feeling around the walls, with a piercing glance in his direction that told him he should be doing the same.

He shut and locked the door behind him and placed his hand on the wall to his right. Was that . . . heat?

"The schematic showed that the entrance to the basement level is somewhere in this room." She traced an absent square in the wall with her fingertip and stared around. So smart,

that one. Times like these he wished she liked him half as well as he did her. That ship, however, had already left the port.

And is halfway across the void.

The sad joke couldn't keep his attention from the task at hand, so he set to checking the walls. He started with the wall that gave off the heat—because that couldn't be normal. He felt this way and that along the surface of the smooth white stone, feeling his brows draw together above his nose. *This is pointless.* What made Nola think Ien was even alive? He would follow that woman to the tallest peak and then down again, but . . . What if Ien was dead? Or worse?

A very unmasculine shiver traveled from his neck to his tailbone at the thought. *Worse than dead.* And what was happening to Ree at that very moment? Maybe the same.

"Here!" came Nola's surprised whisper. He whirled to where she was touching the exact spot he had felt so much warmth in the stone.

"What about it? It's hot, but . . ."

His argument was cut short as Nola pounded on the wall with her fist and, of all things, a stairwell groaned open under the desk.

"Like a bloody fairy tale," Mack murmured under his breath, eliciting a raised eyebrow and pursed lips from Nola. This was too easy. The tiny hairs on the back of Mack's neck trembled a warning. "Go," he breathed, pulling the Arrow Seven from his jacket and aiming at the door. *Steady.*

Nola fled down the stairs, her green dress a sliver of color rippling through the air as she disappeared.

He counted and prayed. *One.* The heat on the wall. *Two.* Hidden staircase in the floor. *Three. Something is coming and we're not going to like it.*

The entire tower rumbled. "Mounts!" He set his feet wide and kept two steady hands on the gun pointed at the door, but the metal shook in his hands. *What was that?* He wiped a sudden cold sweat from his forehead.

"Mack!" Nola sounded far away.

He turned. Sloughed off more sweat. Rushed down the long, dark stairwell and tried to forget about the tremor.

Nola waited for him at the bottom—two or three floors down at least—with her fingers to her open mouth, eyes wide with horror. "What kind of hell is this?" she whispered thickly.

They stood in a sliver of light on an otherwise black room. Mack's boots rang into the space, and hollow echoes receded back into the oblivion of the darkness. The only other light came from periodic spots in the ground where glowing golden ropes seemed to be holding objects to the floor.

"I don't . . ." he began.

"Look harder."

He did. And he saw them.

People. The luminescent ropes trapped the naked bodies of men to the floor, feet and hands splayed to their sides as though they welcomed the darkness. A quick count told Mack that there were thirteen of them—the exact number of Court-commissioned carrier ships in the sky at that moment. Mack squinted, leaned over the closest of them. The ropes weren't made from hemp; metal chains lashed these bodies to the floor.

He whistled softly. "What kind of trouble has that girl gotten us into?"

The question had been more for himself than anything, but Nola shook her head. "The kind we don't want to mess with for too much longer. Let's find Ien and get out."

They stepped among the imprisoned men, searching faces and markings. As they edged further into the room, Mack began to notice something about the Navigators: they all had the blue wing-marks at the corners of their eyes, and they all had some sort of red swirl mark on the left side of their stomachs. The symbol came in different sizes and were accompanied by myriad other small marks, but the similarities were too striking to put down to coincidence.

He bent to study one of the men. This man's symbol had two tiny dots above and below the snake-like swoosh of the tattoo. Beneath the chains, Mack could see other tattoos on the man's skin, faint and discolored from use: mountain cat on right shoulder, tangle of leaves on left collar bone, bird on left side of neck . . .

A familiar face stared back at Mack.

"Nola!" he called.

She rushed over, and they both knelt beside their friend. Ien's blue eyes, diluted by the yellow-red light of the chains, stared straight ahead as though he could not see them. "Ien?" Mack ventured, putting his hand on the man's shoulder, but the Navi didn't even flinch. His chest rose and fell with breath, but nothing more.

Mack moved his gaze to the weird chains surrounding Ien's body. This close, there was something odd about the way they slithered across his skin when Nola tried to remove them. He stooped closer, letting his left knee drop to the ground . . . and jerked backward in disgust. The chains latched onto Ien via tiny tubes spaced intermittantly across his chest, arms, and legs, each about an inch apart. The tubes were filled with a red substance, and Mack didn't have to guess what *that* was. His gaze shot up to the other eleven Navigators chained to the floor of the underground prison, and bile rose in his throat. He had seen a lot in his time. Especially as a duelist on the streets of Karam—that city was hard, so its citizens had to be harder, and weakness welcomed death. But this . . . He did *not* want to see this. He didn't want to *know*. This was his friend, bleeding and dying on the cold ground, staring into nothing.

"What do these things even do?" He prodded one of the links, and it clanked loudly in the silence. "We don't know if taking these out will kill him."

As soon as he said the words, Ien shuddered and came alive under their hands. A sound burbled up from the man's disused lungs—it emerged first as a gurgle, then a shout, then a wordless roar. His lifeless eyes suddenly blazed with fury and power, and he surged up from the floor, ripping the tubes from his body and tossing the chains aside. Ien stood with that almost inhuman energy, naked and trembling, staring at the door to the staircase and the halo of light filtering in from the upper level. He took one step forward, and stumbled, losing his momentum. He would have crashed into the stone had Mack not been there to grab him by the armpits and steady him.

Mack looked at his friend, and Ien studied him as well with sunken, black-rimmed eyes. Mack could have lifted him like so much mooring rope, and indeed that's what he found himself doing as he supported the man. Where the leech-chains had bit into his skin, angry red wounds leaked thin streams of fluid that followed the pathways of his ribcage down to protruding hip bones.

For Mount's sake, it's only been two weeks, Mack swore to himself, cursing every second he and Nola had wasted with frivolous pursuits. How had two weeks been long enough to wreak this kind of damage?

"It took you long enough, friend," the Navigator croaked, the ghost of a smile on his chapped lips.

Mack didn't think, didn't allow his brain to talk him out of it, just scooped Ien up in one

swift motion to carry him like a man might a bride, or a child. The shaking Navi immediately slumped into his chest. Mack glanced at Nola, who had hung back this whole time, timid in a way he had never seen her before, terror in her face.

"Ree's here, isn't she?" Ien whispered into Mack's chest. "She must be."

"We have to get him out of here," Mack said for probably the hundredth time that day. She exhaled, visibly righting herself. The semblance of calm would be enough, hopefully, to see them through the doors of the Palace. Janne would help them escape . . . Or a miracle would happen and there would be no guards, no strangers to watch them leave and report to the authorities . . . Something.

#

Walfored blinked at her, inane smile still plastered to his face. He was waiting for an answer. "Well?"

Ree spat at his feet. "You have *got* to be kidding me. I would have to be insane to agree to do what you want."

His smile simply widened. "You know it's the only way."

When she shook her head, he gave an exaggerated sigh.

"I've tried to fix it from the inside, Katrya," he explained. "It didn't work. I'm the High Captain of the Court of Ships, but that title means next to nothing to the people who work in this building." He rubbed his index finger and thumb together in the universal symbol for money and raised his eyebrows at her. "*This* is the only thing that talks around here."

"And what do *I* have to do with your scheme?"

He had just told her: her blood was powerful. He needed it to . . . what, exactly? Transform the Navigator system?

Instead of answering, he peered up at her thoughtfully. Even though he sat and she stood—albeit awkwardly—he somehow maintained the upper hand. She saw it in his eyes: he thought she would agree with him eventually.

Won't I?

Her best friend was counting on her to save him. What if she could save him from the system itself?

"How does it even work?" she asked when it became clear he wasn't going to speak before she did.

He shrugged. "We create new Navigators with this combination of Ra'im, created Navi, and hybrid blood." He huffed. "Come on, Katrya. Stop scowling at me. You're a merchant. You know better than I do the economic mayhem it would cause to free every single Navigator from their contracts. Especially ones like your friend downstairs. Instead, we can create a new kind of Navigator that people will *want* to become, and we can get rid of the silly prison-punishment system. It can work."

Her breath caught in her throat.

"You're still crazy if you think I'm going to do this." The words sounded hollow to her. *What if I helped him? Would it change anything?*

"Your life for the lives of all the Navigators that will be born of the same blood you were," he murmured. "We can't sustain the current path forever, Katrya. At some point, the hybrid Navigators—people like you—will realize that they should no longer be so secret, and then will be prosecuted by this sham of a social system. So what will it be, Katrya? Your blood for theirs."

Cyril turned toward the door and tugged at her arm. "We're not doing any good here."

She jerked her elbow away. “You mean like the good you did when you escaped the burning house and left my father to die?”

He recoiled with a grimace. “It’s not like that.”

“By all means,” Walfored said, “please continue your conversation. But I need an answer from Katrya. A real answer. One that sounds like ‘yes.’”

She looked at him, sitting in his mechanical chair, tattoos growing brighter with color by the second. He thought—he *knew*—that he was going to win. She didn’t want him to win. “No,” she said, turning to walk out.

As soon as Ree’s back was mostly to him, and she could only see him out of the corner of her eye, Walfored ripped from the chair, blood bursting from the ends of the siphoning devices attached to his arms. Rage filled his handsome features. The Palace shook with a surge of the power that had been returned to him.

She and Cyril ran.

#

Katrya Millor didn’t blink, didn’t slow her furious rush down the spiral staircase as tremors surged through the Palace. She saw Nola and Mack come out of the unnoticeable side door, Mack *carrying* the person she cared for most in the whole of Daen, and didn’t slow her pace, didn’t check to see if Cyril still followed.

There was no time. If she had time, she would have stopped, hugged Nola and Mack and Ien until none of them could breathe—or maybe she would have tried to hug them and they would have turned away from her—but a madman followed on her heels, a madman that had recently regained destructive power.

The resolve in Mack’s features and the worry in Nola’s told enough of the story that she didn’t have to ask why they were here. She just started running break-neck for the front door without saying a word.

They followed her. They shouldn’t have, after all she had put them through, but they followed.

Chapter 24

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Oh, Mounts. Oh, damn crashing Mounts.

It was Ree's only thought as she flew through the city toward the harbor, her friends on her heels. *My friends. If I can even call them that after all I've done.* They were here, though: Nola, her brother, and Mack. Ien. Wasn't that enough? Mack hefted Ien's tiny body as though he were only air. A bare glimpse of Ien's emaciated form was enough to churn Ree's stomach. All she could think was: *I did this. I left, and now everything is wrong.*

They ran. How they had gotten past the guards, Ree was unsure. Blind, she had just pushed through the doors and sprinted across the main Palace square, Walfored's words ringing in her head.

They could *fix* the Navigator system, he said.

Walfored wanted her to allow herself and her life force to be used for the good of . . . good of what? The system put in place that imprisoned men and laid waste to entire cultures?

She had run from him. Not because she thought he was crazy, but the opposite: because she had begun to see the truth in what he said. Maybe his plan would work. People could start believing Navigators—descendants of the Ra'im—were real people, good people. Take away the need for the penal Navigation system, and take away the prejudice.

But it wouldn't solve the problem of his having chained her best friend to the floor of the Palace basement and siphoned life force from him for the sole purpose of some kind of sadistic power trip.

Got to get to the ship. If I can get there and put Ien on it, we can escape for good. She prayed that Allin and the crew would allow her to even set foot on the machine. If not . . . *If not, then we're finished.*

Panting, hands pumping in blades at her sides, she felt cold tears on her cheeks. *This is all my fault. Every bit of it.*

Citizens of all flavors watched and stared as the group rushed through the city. Though it was early in the day, Praan had awoken from nighttime slumber, and people teemed from the streets. Ree shoved her way past hawkers, sailors, women in a thousand different cuts of dress. Life went on for the people of Praan, while Ree's tumbled from the sky. It made no sense. Nothing made sense. Her thoughts had even vacated all semblance of coherence.

Muffled, urgent shouts from behind her indicated that she should probably run faster. Her tired legs protested, but she forced them forward.

She and her friends hurtled through the archway and into the harbor, ignoring the nasty looks given by peddlars and citizens alike. They couldn't know that Ien's life was at stake, but a surge of annoyance still shot through her.

The ship—her blessed carrier—huddled at the far end of the dock. Two other Court ships flagged it from either side and behind, lurking in the void like metal mountain lions ready to pounce on errant prey. Ree didn't pause. They would figure everything out when they got aboard the *Painted Consort*. Her mind blanked with fear, spinning scenarios before her eyes unbidden, each more distressing than the last. She could feel herself slowing down.

"Come now, Katrya," a motherlike voice said in her ear; Ree felt Nola's strong grip on her elbow, not quite dragging her but still spurring her on. "Can't stop yet." The absolute terror Ree had glimpsed in the woman's face at the Palace had not exactly disappeared, but it had faded enough to allow Nola's guiding presence to shine through.

They reached the ship and careened inside. Ree slammed the door shut behind them, but there was no time to catch breath or dignity. Erinn Ronx, who had been walking past, took one look at Ien in Mack's arms and started running the opposite direction, toward the crew's quarters. Cyril bent over with wheezes, and his sister placed hands on hips with a sour expression.

Mack was winded but remained stout as he turned to Nola's brother, who looked decidedly impaled with exhaustion. "Cyril, tell whoever is running this boat to cast off immediately." He thought about it, frowning down at the man in his arms. "I assume this ship can do things that your little *Arienna* could barely dream of?" he asked Ree, brown eyes coming up to lock on hers.

"Yes." Where was he going with this? Their pursuants couldn't be far behind.

"Then make it so the ship moves *up* instead of *back* into those waiting carrier ships. There's got to be a way to avoid them."

Cyril took his hands from his knees and straightened, for once without a book in his hands. He didn't argue, either. He just nodded and headed off toward the bridge at a trot.

"Mack . . ." A sliver of something resembling resentment floated to the surface of the pool of emotions roiling within her. *Why didn't he tell me to do that? This is my ship.*

Mack set Ien down on his feet, making sure he could lean against the wall. Ien curled in on himself, trying to hide his tattooed nakedness. The black marks on his skin were tragic shadows of the color that usually adorned him.

Ree looked away out of respect and addressed Mack and Nola: "Ien needs clothes and someplace to rest."

"No," Ien whispered. All gazes swiveled to him where he clutched the wall, shivering despite the early autumn heat. His own eyes had squeezed shut; tears leaked from the corners. "Take me to the *syloom*." The way he said the word . . . There was power in it. Something in the way the syllables slithered from his tongue.

The weakness in his voice was unmistakable, but Ree had heard him use that tone before: when he had tried to tell her of the Court Navigators, the day the *Arienna* had been destroyed. The mark on his hip—the same symbol that Ree had crouched over for weeks now, meditating and touching with the palms of her hands—had become an angry red, and the other marks around it were starting to regain color. Greens, blues. *Maybe we have a chance.*

"The *syloom*," he said again. "There's no time to rest."

She hadn't even told them about Walfored's proposition, as he had called it, hadn't told them what she had *done* at that factory in the mountains, and the way Ien looked at her said he knew she was hiding something. He really did know her too well sometimes. She saw a spark of tenderness behind the fear in his eyes, just for her. She swallowed and started in the direction of the *syloom*.

"Captain!" she heard from behind them just as they reached the door. She turned around and saw Erinn the Navi engineer running toward them with a thin brown material of some kind draped over her arms. Instead of handing whatever it was to Ree, Erinn shoved it at Ien and then stood back, nervous hands folded at her waist. It was a robe of some kind. Ien slipped it over his emaciated shoulders with a grimace.

"Erinn," she said, "thank you. Please return to your post." Erinn nodded once, her jaw set in a determined line, and scurried off to the engine room.

Cyril joined them as Ien stepped into the *syloom* chamber. He nodded once.

Mack sighed. "We don't have a lot of time. Walfored's lackies will be gearing up to

break down the door. Ien, can you get this thing in the air?"

Ien smirked tiredly, but said nothing, only turned from them. Ree followed. Mack and Nola headed for the bridge.

As soon as Ien stepped into the room where the *syloom* was housed, he visibly strengthened: his back straightened, his tremors quieted, the angry fear in his eyes receded to a mere spark. The robe Erinn had brought him hid most of his tattoos, but the ones Ree could see had begun to refill—blessed color bloomed along his neck and on the backs of his hands.

Refilling with his blood, she reminded herself, trying in vain not to rub the marks on her own hands with her fingertips. She couldn't just turn off her skin.

Ien sat on the floor in the center of the symbol, closed his eyes, and exhaled. On impulse, Ree sat across from him, just as she had every day since learning that Ien was the caretaker of her ship. Except now, instead of the ghostly presence she had come to associate with this chamber, it was her Ien, the *real* Ien, that accompanied her now. The ship thrummed beneath her splayed fingers as she spread her hands on the floor. Cyril stood at the door watching them; his gaze on her back caused pricks of nervousness to crawl up her arms and down her neck.

Because he knows what I did.

Ien seemed invigorated. The color filled his tattoos at an even faster rate.

"I know what you did," he said suddenly.

"How . . . ?"

He gave a slight shake of his bedraggled head, ice-blue eyes remaining locked on hers.

"Don't speak. Just listen."

Part of her balked, but another part was cowed. *Maybe I don't deserve to speak*, the smaller part of her realized. *After I killed those people.*

Boom. There was the thought.

I killed those people. I killed Ien's people.

Stop, his voice reverberated around her head, filling every crevice with the memory of sound until it felt like her head would burst from the *fullness* of him inside her mind. "You need to stop." This last came as a quiet, anguished mutter. "You didn't kill them. Walfored killed them." Raw anger ripped through her head—Ien's.

Somehow the two of them were connected in this room. His feelings were hers, and her thoughts could somehow be read . . . translated? That was impossible. Thought-reading was something people in story books could do, not people in real life, and certainly not Ree. She said as much.

"The ship," he answered her unspoken question. "We're both attached to it now. When you bled all over it, it kind of reacted."

She remembered that day—the day the Navigator had died and been replaced by Ien. Her palms grew hot from the memory of bloody handprints on the metal floor. Of course he would know that had happened—this was *his* ship, after all, as well.

"And the *syloom* amplifies whatever connection we have." He shrugged. "And besides, I can't really *read* your thoughts. It's more like I have a strong indication of what you feel."

She nodded. That explained how he knew she had . . . done what she did. At the factory. *The harvesting facility.*

"I also know about you," he continued, gesturing to her hands.

She held her right palm out to him, and he traced the line of flowers under her fingers gently. His fingers felt coarse, unclear. The way he peered at those marks . . .

A deep sadness had settled over his face. "What does Walfored want from you?"

Your life for the lives of all the Navigators that will be born of the same blood you were. . . So what will it be, Katrya? Your blood for theirs.

She shook her head and explained it as best as she could. As she talked, his face dissolved into confusion, then anger, then outright rage.

"You can't be thinking about going along with this, Ree," he said when she finished.

She looked away.

She knew what she had to do. There was no other way. Walfored was a bully, but he was right. The Navigator system was broken. It made no sense in today's world to continue forcing convicted criminals to take the tattoos, and if men—women, even—were given the *choice* to take up Navigation, were given the strength to oppose the prisons and the government, they might usher in a new era in which the classism of this time no longer existed. The masses of Navigators—their potential children, their families—clamored for this, or *would* clamor if they knew it was an option. If there was even a tiny possibility to make things less complicated for future generations . . .

"I have to," she said.

Ien was shaking his head before the words were fully out of her mouth. "No, Ree, that's not the way. He's gotten in your head."

"I have to," she whispered again.

Beneath her, she felt the ship's engines rumble to life. She looked around and discovered that she and Ien were the only two people in the room. The thought of her friends on the bridge put a small smile on her face—finally, there were here together. Together, but not for long.

Her smile slid from her face. "I have to."

"You don't have to do anything, Ree," Ien said. She turned her attention back to him. In the dim lights of the room, the anxiety cast horrific shadows across his face, but she thought he was trying to smile beneath the worry. That was the old Ien, the Ien from before the Courts had given her a ship and changed both their lives. *Before they gave me what I wanted.*

Walfored's shade continued to berate her: *Why do you think I gave you a ship in the first place, Katrya?* She shook her head, trying to ignore the hot tears that swam into her vision.

"Listen to me," Ien growled deep in his throat. "You are not his dog. You didn't kill those people and you're not going to kill yourself."

She stared at the red on her hands, felt the pulse of the foreign power under her skin. She remembered how it had felt, all that strength. The heat. The flames.

Gotta think of something else.

"No," he whispered. "You have to think of nothing else. You have to get *angry*, Katrya." The weakness had fled from his voice. He peered at her with such intensity in his gaze that fear flickered through her. "He is going to try to *use* you. There is another way, and we are going to find it."

If you say no, I will kill you anyway, Walfored's voice taunted. *And your Navigator. I've already drained him. It's only a matter of time.*

"He can't kill me." Ien rolled up the sleeves of the brown robe, revealing vibrant color marching up his arms—except for the place where the blond man had struck with that staff. Bile rose in her throat at the thought of that vile man and his infuriating smile. The color on Ien's arms was fading slowly, but in a familiar way, like it had when they had still been on the *Arienna*. When things had been easier, better.

Ien was flying the *Painted Consort*. Knowing he was at the helm caused a warm swathe of hope to once again swell in her belly.

Okay, she thought. Okay.

He reached out and took her hands once again, closing his eyes. The tingle in her palms spread up her arms.

The sensation ebbed and flowed, strong one moment and subdued the next, and after a time she realized it moved with Ien's breath. A deep sense of relaxation settled over her. The Court guards were no doubt trying to bash down the door of the ship; Walfored's threats still echoed in her mind. But here, in this place, with the syloom beneath her throbbing in time to her heartbeat and Ien's mind just at the edge of consciousness, she could almost forget. Breathe, she heard him think. In. Out. In . . .

Out.

She didn't just feel the ship. She *was* the ship. Its warmth—her warmth, and Ien's—spread throughout her body.

"Don't make that face, Ree," Ien said. She opened her eyes to see him arching an eyebrow at her. Without realizing it, she had been scrunching her nose.

"It's just . . . weird," she admitted, wriggling in her seat. After a moment, she said, "I'm going to the bridge." You give her the speed she needs; I'll steer us out of this mess. We'll figure it out." He nodded.

Instead of standing, she reclosed her eyes. She needed to leave this peace, reenter the world. But something . . .

Ree felt more than saw Shrylu Riesan slide into the room.

The entrance of the man from the factory, and before that from Briia, cloaked that gold band of light at the outside of her vision in shade, an aura of malignance that left a lingering taste like rotten flesh at the back of her mouth. Here, in this charged space, she could sense the hole inside the man—empty, where something had once been. *So this is what a man is like without the Ra'im blood.* Unlike Walfored, Riesan's emptiness was vast. And instead of being refilled, as Walfored, he remained a shell—his only power, she could see now, emanated from the staff he carried. In her heightened state of awareness, she knew now that the crowning red crystal was in actuality a hardened clot of Ra'im blood.

Ree's eyes snapped open on the man who now stood over them as a tower of anger, staff held in white-knuckled hands.

"How did you get in here," Ree growled. Her palms, still flat on the floor, pulsed against the syloom. When she tried to stand, a wave of that staff sent her sprawling backward on tendrils of painful air.

Ien still did nothing, didn't even open his eyes.

"We had enough of a chat last time we saw each other," the man said smoothly. "Now it is my turn to burn *your* life's work to the ground."

He was less amused now, less smug. Real anger bubbled in his voice. The side of his face was scarred—burned, she realized with a jolt. *I did that.*

"I will just ask you a simple question," Riesan murmured as he glared at Ien, who remained seated, cross-legged with eyes closed. "When did you meet Ien?"

Ree gave a start when she realized he was talking to her. "Why does it matter?"

"When did you meet Ien?" he hissed again, harder this time. He continued to stare at her Navi as though if he broke his gaze, Ien would overwhelm him immediately. The fear in Riesan's eyes certainly reflected that sentiment.

The question was a strange one. "Why is that even important? I met him six years ago. The year . . ." She paused. *Oh Mounts.* "The year my father died."

Ien's eyes crashed open in an accusatory glare at Riesan.

"And you never questioned it?" the man continued. "Hasn't it ever seemed strange to you?"

Her tired mind scrabbled to make sense of what he was saying. The mountain of his words fell apart in her grasp. Again she tried to stand, and again a wave of the staff bunted her to the ground.

"You," he snarled, finally turning toward her, white eyes gleaming, "are the child of a Ra'im. Your lover, or whatever you choose to call yourselves, is a Ra'im. Your friend's brother studies Navigators." A furious flash of teeth filled his face. "You were bred and raised to become one of us." He clicked his tongue in disdain. "What do you think your father was doing all that time he spent away from Praan?"

The discordant pieces ticked into place in Ree's mind, like the chimes of a grandfather clock gone sour.

"What?" she whispered, though she didn't expect an answer. "My father was a merchant. Of course he spent time away from Praan." The words rang hollow even in her own ears.

Her mind quietly filled with memories.

Of her father talking about her mother: *She was the most beautiful woman this side of the mountains. The other side, too.*

Of her father going down to the harbor of Praan in secret, cloaked in gray, thinking she didn't notice when he slipped out after sunfall. He had returned ever more tired, ever more gray, each time he had gone out.

And there was the memory she had tried to forget for six years. The house fire that had killed her father on the lonely night she had met Ien.

"No," Riesan said. "He was trying to solve the problem that Barin Walfored still thinks he can snap his fingers at. You were his solution, Katrya Millor. A hybrid." He poked at the gray wings at his temples with a finger. "Your *father* did this to me, trying to create the kind of hybrid he needed. He did it to *Walfored*. And he would have done it to you, his own daughter." The man spat at the floor in contempt. "And your meeting this *rinnaeio* was not a mistake. He was to be the next, if the accident had not happened."

The tingle in her veins slowed its advance toward her heart, poised to unleash itself, waiting. Something in that memory was strange, something she had never spared a thought for before. *The night I met Ien*. Why had it been that night? Why, as she had stood soundless and stagnant outside her childhood home, had the tattooed man come up beside her and said nothing?

She didn't have a better answer.

"No." Quietly. "No!" The voice in her head screamed and screamed. *I killed those people. This man is telling me I was supposed to kill those people. That meeting my best friend wasn't a mistake. That my father was the same kind of monster as Walfored.*

Something inside her snapped, and the greatstorm calmed in an instant.

I will not be responsible for an entire race's death. I will not allow this to continue.

She stared up at the man, Riesan, who had just told her that her father was not the person she thought, and set her jaw. *I refuse.*

Angry, Ien hissed at her, or maybe it was just in her head. *You have to get angry.*

Well, she was angry.

Furious.

The tingle in her hands shifted, crawled up her arms and down her back, tickling the base of her spine, down her legs. Heat radiated from her skin.

Ree would not be taken advantage of. Ien was her friend—her best friend, maybe more—and it didn't matter if he had been involved in her father's death. Or if he hadn't been.

The heat intensified, inside and outside of her body. Eyes still closed, mind now open, she willed it . . . willed something.

She breathed in.

And out.

Riesan's shrieks drowned the sound of his flesh melting from the inside out as she reached inside him to his useless Ra'im blood and *pulled it through his skin*. Sweat dripped down her face.

With the screams the memory returned, of the flames that had gobbled the walls of her childhood home. She had stood, an adult in name but child in inaction, and watched as the building had been consumed by that drunken fire. As her father's unrecognizable body had been pulled from the wreckage.

All I want is for you to sit right here in this chair, he had said to her earlier that day. *I'm going to prick your finger. Don't worry, you'll be fine*. Even though she had been feverish for much of that day, and her twenty-year-old mind had known something was wrong with the way his gaze shifted restlessly from her face to the seat he indicated, she trusted her father. Why wouldn't she?

Now, with the sensation of flame at the tip of her tongue and a twinge of red at the bases of her wrists, she knew she had as good as set that fire.

Riesan continued to project inhuman screeches into the echoing wall of the syloom chamber.

Heat still blazed behind Ree's eyes, and six years ago, right now, it burned through flimsy walls and through her father's bones.

"Enough!" Ien's command sliced into the memory, opened it up and spilled it on the floor of the syloom. His voice crashed through the membrane of sound that had encircled her. Her anger drained away along with it. "He's dead," he said.

Riesan quieted abruptly. His empty body folded clumsily in on itself at it fell.

She turned to Ien. The emptiness in her rose to the surface, spread across her throat, and forced her to her knees as it welled up and burst from her stomach. She retched for a long moment. The only sounds in the room, so loud the moment before with the screams of the burning man, were those of Ree's insides splattering on the metal hull.

I'm a monster, she wailed to no one.

After a time, the nausea quieted, and she dragged the back of a shaking hand across her mouth. She forced herself not to look at the body or the brown-green contents of her stomach; instead she brought her gaze up to Ien's hard blue one and pushed herself to her feet. He still sat cross-legged in the center of the room. His glare sent a a jolt of nerves through her, and acid in her belly almost fought its way up again.

"What was he talking about, Ien?" she whispered. She couldn't say it too loudly, lest the suspicions in her mind become truths.

"Your father . . ." The hesitation, the way he looked anywhere but at her. *Oh mounts. Oh . . . mounts*. "He contacted me the week prior to his death." He exhaled and slumped, staring at his knees, as though an inevitable weight had settled on his shoulders. "I had never met him, but somehow he heard about me through my tattoo guy. He wanted me to come and help him with something . . . He never said what, but he offered money."

"But . . ." Her exhausted mind tried to force sense into the words. She stumbled over to

Ien and sat down in front of him once again, placing hot palms on the even warmer floor. *Focus on the* syloom, she told herself. The room swam in front of her. “Why did this *man* know about that? How?” She waved vaguely at the pile of black cloth and bile behind her.

Ien pursed his lips. “I’m not sure. Things are . . . difficult.”

You’re not kidding. She wanted to smack him, to kiss him, to punch him in the gut all at once. “What did my father need you for?” She inhaled, exhaled. The trembles in her voice wouldn’t go away.

“I might be able to answer,” said Cyril from the doorway.

Chapter 25

MECHANICAL CHAIR

Ree looked up at Cyril through hazy eyes and recognized his face from her memories. Not just the face that looked nothing like that of the woman she had considered friend and mother for years and years, but that of the “assistant” that had been helping her father the day of the fire.

“You knew,” she hissed aloud to Cyril, acutely aware of the ache of the fire that had taken residence in her wrists.

“I was there,” he acknowledged, hands clasped behind his back. The words sounded like iron weights settling in her chest, right above her lungs.

“If you were there,” she said, as though if she could say the words slowly enough they would gain traction in her mind, “then why haven’t we talked about this? Cyril, *why did you let me into that factory?*” The last emerged as a scream. “If you knew what I could do to it?”

He pursed his lips. “I tried to tell you. I tried, Katrya. But it was impossible, because you’re so stubborn, and if you think otherwise, you obviously haven’t met yourself,” he spat, swaggering up to her and clenching his fists.

He was a tall man, and without books in either hand, he looked like a mountain cat with its back to a ledge. “I *wanted* to tell you, Katrya. Remind you, even. You wouldn’t listen.”

Breath came shallow, throat burning with unreleased fire. “You knew,” she forced out in a strangled curse. “You *knew*.”

“Ree—”

She whirled on Ien before he could continue. “You too. Why did no one tell me?” Her eyes carefully slid past the pile of black rags on the floor. The pile had begun to smoulder quietly.

Ien looked away.

A growl escaped her throat. *They should have said something, at least.* “Someone explain,” she whispered. She would *not* cry. “Someone.”

“Listen, Katrya,” Cyril said. His hands remained rigid at his sides, but he was no longer threatening. “You’re not exactly easy to talk to. And I never had a reason to even leave Port Aria until you got yourself into this Court mess. I’ve been studying Navigation for years *because* of what happened to your father. I was going to come to you with my research.”

His lecture traveled through her ears and squished against her brain; none of it made any sense. “I killed those people, Cyril.” With fire.

“For the last time, Ree—” Ien began.

She stopped listening. She became aware of the singing of the ship as it moved through the void. Through her feet she felt the thrum of the engines.

“We have to turn the ship around,” she found herself saying. The memory of Walfored’s maniacal face swam in front of her eyes. *Your choice, Katrya.*

“No!” Ien immediately countered, but she was already shaking her head at him. He could read her thoughts all he wanted, but there was nothing he could do about her will. His physical body was the reason her ship flew, but it was still her ship, and it flew *where* and *when* she wanted.

And right now, she wanted to be in Praan. She wanted Walfored to take this blood from her before she killed anyone else. There was nothing more she could do. She had to accept Walfored’s offer. It was the only way to make this right. *I killed those people and now I have to*

pay for it.

She stood and started for the bridge.

“You can’t do this, Ree!”

The anguish in Ien’s voice gave her pause. She turned to find him still cross-legged over the *syloom*, but hunched over, white-knuckled, skeletal fingers stretched over the floor, as though he were trying to hold the ship up with merely his fingertips . . . and was slipping. Tears traveled in ugly tracks down his cheeks as he stared up at her with those insanely blue eyes. “Ree,” he whispered. “You can’t let him kill you.”

She turned away.

His wordless howl followed her out of the room and through the halls of her ship, echoing too against the walls of her mind.

She fled from the sound, trying to shut him out of her mind. She opened the door to the bridge. Mack was indeed barking orders like she thought he would be, red in the face from excitement or fury, or both. The man was nothing if not predictable. Nola, hands on hips, watched him in disapproval. Allin trailed a step or two behind Mack as the man checked up on the crewmembers around the room.

“Report,” she demanded as she stepped up to the helm. She felt them staring at her red eyes. If only she could remove her face and toss it off the side of the ship. She clutched her wrists behind her back and tried not to wince at the heat on her fingertips.

“We’re about clear of the city,” Nola replied. “Three carrier ships following us hard.”

Ree nodded, pretended to consider. They watched her. She watched the movement of the ship through the void beyond the front window and tried to imagine what the winds must feel like.

Quietly, Cyril entered the room behind her.

“They’re readying steam cannons, Katrya,” Mack barked when Ree neither did nor said anything.

She peered down at the tired, scared faces of her crew and didn’t know what to say. And suddenly she realized. *I can’t ask them to do this.*

But she did it anyway.

“Turn it around,” she said quietly.

The faces of Mack and Nola fell into stone replicas of themselves, confused and angry in turn. Immediately, they clamored to fill the deadly silence with words.

“But we only just got away . . .”

“If we go back, they’ll kill you. They’ll kill all of us!”

“You’re confused, Ree. What they did to Ien was terrible, but . . .”

“You’ve *got* to be insane!”

Cyril was the only one who said nothing.

She held up a hand, and, miraculously, they stopped. “We have to go back there and get the other Navigators out.” An easy, if flimsy, excuse.

Nola sighed. “If we so much as touch the Palace doors again, we will be executed.” She moved to place a hand on Ree’s forehead. “Besides, those Navis are under Walford’s power whether they want to be or not. If they tried to escape, he would simply kill them.”

Ree dodged the other woman’s hand, but too late. “Katrya!” Nola exclaimed. “You’re burning up!”

“Not important,” she breathed, settling herself in front of the helm. Nola’s eyes darkened and her lips pursed, but Ree continued: “I have something he wants. If I give it to him, he will

have to set the other Navis free.” She glared at them: Nola with her dark brown hair and green dress, hands crumpled into fists at her hips; Mack, fingers touching the pistol she knew lay hidden under his brown vest, eyes crinkled with worry and age. It was Mack who gave in first. He exhaled and removed his hand from the gun.

Allin gave the order, but only after Ree nodded, and that was only after she had recognized the signs of resignation in her oldest friends. They hadn’t just given in to her; they had *given up*. She tried not to throw up at her own vileness. Again.

As messages were relayed for their surrender to the crouching battle cruisers behind them, Ree’s skin itched with the memory of Ien’s scream. She could imagine him now, sitting still on the floor of this magnificent steel beast, head bowed, tears streaking emaciated cheeks. *Do I imagine him*, she wondered, *or do I really see him?* The image was so clear.

Regardless. *Someone’s got to put a stop to all of this*. Images of Ien’s bones sticking from his skin flashed through her mind. Walfored said he had a solution, and maybe he was right. He had been the one to carve Ien’s bones from his body in the first place with those idiotic machines, but maybe that was what it took. The fires that consumed the harvesting facility licked the walls of her memory. If she didn’t do something, another factory would be erected, more people slaughtered for the sake of the Court-driven economy. If Walfored was telling the truth and the only reason he had become what he was—High Captain of the Court of Ships—so that he could change the system, then it was only right that she play her part.

She didn’t look at Cyril as the ship began its lumbering, wide swing to face Praan once again. Instead, she closed her eyes.

“I know why you’re doing this,” Cyril’s quiet voice intruded despite her attempt to ignore him. “And maybe you’re right.”

She opened her eyes and peered steadily into his intense green gaze.

It seemed to her that the ship groaned beneath her feet, protesting every movement that took it closer to Praan. The city came back into view in the front window, a giant expanse of stone and light with the white walls of the Palace, couched in the carved boulder walls of Mount Yarah, watching over everything. She released her breath.

“You’re angry,” Cyril continued. “And you think this will atone for whatever it was you did back at the edge of Arboram.”

Her hands shook as the desire to slap him surged through her. Was he really that thick? Did he think she was that selfish?

Am I?

No, that couldn’t be it. But she was tired of explaining it, especially to herself.

She didn’t answer Cyril, and eventually he turned away and watched with her as the city—and the steel carriers with their readying steam cannons—crawled closer. As they neared the dock once again, a tiny dot appeared on the wooden pier they had recently vacated, and the closer they got, the clearer the dot became, until Barin Walfored stood with arms crossed and a smug smile on his features.

With only a cursory glance at Mack and Nola—they wouldn’t forgive her, this time, but maybe that’s what she deserved—she went. Ien was nowhere to be found when she made it to the port of the ship, but to her surprise Mack and Nola had followed her. The sets of their faces told her she needed to explain, but there wasn’t time and she didn’t have the energy.

Instead, she let them follow her as she went to meet Walfored on the pier.

“Katrya,” the monster of a man said, still smiling, as she stepped from the ship and stood before him on the gangplank, straddling the long, long drop through the void to the valley below.

“You’re back.”

“Let’s get this over with,” she spat. Once she exited the ship, the echo of Ien’s scream ceased to bounce around inside her head. *Is that good or bad?* She could still feel his eyes on her from wherever he had hidden himself, accusatory sadness boring into her skull.

“What did you do with Riesan?” he asked casually.

Her lip curled of its own accord, but she didn’t answer.

Walfored smiled like a giddy boy. “Oh, good,” he said gleefully, even though she hadn’t spoken a word. He rubbed his hands together and gestured widely, as though they were headed to the city festival. “Well, let’s go! Let’s go.”

With only two her oldest friends at her back, Ree followed Walfored through her hometown and to the building that had once given her so much hope. Now she saw the dirt smearing the white walls. There was something ugly about Ien’s absence that slathered the back of her tongue with a sour grime.

The city around them continued its daily pace—not quite frenzied, but not lazy, either. The largest market in the range could not afford to stop for one squabble between carrier ships, and despite the fact that most of the people the group passed in the harbor and market ward beyond that had witnessed Ree’s flight from the city, they went about their business as though nothing had happened—as though life would just continue as normal after she did what Walfored wanted.

She supposed it would, in fact, continue. But eventually, if Walfored’s claims were correct, the whole system of Navigation was going to change for the better. *A new era*, he had said. *Navigators won’t be ridiculed, won’t be whipping boys any longer.*

He had a strange way of demonstrating his compassion.

She thought about Ien’s bones poking from his ribs, his sunken face. About the tiny red prickmarks in his wrists, ankles, and forearms.

The red marks she was trying to ignore on her forearms prickled upward toward her shoulders. She hadn’t looked at her arms in a long while, since before the fire in her veins had killed Riesan. She feared that if she did, she would see them blanket her skin, leaving nothing clear, nothing *clean*.

Anger, and guilt. Shame. She shouldn’t feel this way about the tattoos. Her best friend was a Navigator, a Ra’im. All she knew was how she wanted the marks gone.

Their journey from the harbor passed in a blur. Through the city. Through the gates to the Palace. Through the same hallways smothered in opulence that could feed entire sections of this city.

She stood in front of that instrument once again, staring at what appeared to be innocuous clear tubes trailing from its arms to pool in coils on the floor. Though she couldn’t see them from where she stood at the door to the large sunlit room, she knew that tiny needles waited at the ends of those whirls and in the seat and back of the chair. She felt her stomach make a slow crawl up her chest to wallow at the bottom of her esophagus.

Chapter 26 CACOPHANY

There was a problem.

Ien sat in the chair.

“What in the name of the Mount are you doing, Ien?”

Beside, her, Walfored’s face devolved into a scowl.

“What you shouldn’t have to, Ree,” he hissed through chattering teeth. It was all over his features and in the rigid way his back struck against the chair: Ien Sandir was afraid. And weak. Red liquid filled the tubes running from the chair to the housing device behind it.

Afraid . . . but doing whatever he wants anyway.

“I’m afraid it doesn’t work like that,” Walfored cut in. “Your *friend* here,” he continued, jutting his thumb at Ree, “is the only person that can solve our current problem. It’s her hybrid blood I need, not yours. I have buckets of yours anyway.” He snorted as though he had made some kind of private joke.

Some . . . kind of . . . *joke*.

“I don’t need you or anyone else like you,” Walfored continued, the familiar manic gleam in his eyes. He took a step forward, did something with his hands.

Ree felt the air in the room . . . exhale.

Ien’s eyes rolled back into his head, and his body jerked from the chair to smack the stone floor with the slap of bone on stone despite the padding of the red carpet. Blood painted the tips of the needles in the back of the chair; tiny red holes gaped in Ien’s new robes.

Ree shrieked and rushed forward, but Walfored pushed her toward the chair. She caught herself on the arms of the device, hands landing inches from where a needle would have punctured her skin to begin the drainage process. She threw herself away from it, aware of Walfored advancing, and tried to check Ien’s wrist for a pulse. The High Captain loomed over her, grabbed her hair, and yanked her skull back.

“Now, Katria,” he said in that almost sing-song tone. “We’re not finished rebuilding society yet. You can mourn your friend when this is over.” He began to drag her backward toward the device.

Mourn my . . .

“What?” she screeched.

“*Get angry, Katria,*” Ien had snarled at her an hour ago.

In her memory, she heard him hiss her name like he was trying to remove a scorpion’s stinger, saw the raw fury in his face. He had been angry.

And now, she realized, so was she.

Walfored had sent Riesen to her, that much was clear. To kill her, to capture her, to taunt her, did it matter? Walfored was the man who had imprisoned her best friend, and now had *murdered him*.

This is the man who has tried to murder and shame me.

And she had been ready to let him do it.

Fire exploded up her arms and across her shoulderblades. Not just the feeling of fire—actual flames lapped at her hair and elbows. It burned, and she felt the searing heat and saw it from the corners of her eyes, but it didn’t hurt her. Walfored yelped and released her hair. She stood, reached to the side in one sweep of her arm, and smacked Walfored in the teeth so hard he reeled against the opposite wall with a satisfyingly pathetic *oomph* noise. Red blisters blossomed

on his cheek, and wide-eyed he put his hand to his face as he stared at her.

"I was going to go through with this," she whispered at him. The flames dug into her shirt, began to crawl down her back, carving into her clothes and leaving unmarked, naked skin everywhere the fire touched. "You were going to let me do this. What proof do I have that you're telling the truth?" He opened his mouth, but she cut him off with a gesture. He flinched from the fire at the tips of her fingers. "I have *no proof*," she screamed. "None whatsoever." Deep breaths. She had to breathe.

No point in breathing.

Ien.

"And you *killed him*?"

Walfored seemed to take her pause as a chance to stand. "You are mistaken," he snapped, fists hanging limp at his sides. "I don't need you to *willingly* do anything. I will siphon cooling blood from your body if necessary." He wiped the corner of his mouth with the back of a hand and seemed unfazed by the red it brought away.

Ree advanced. One step, two steps. Walfored cringed against the wall as Ree drew the small knife from her boot. It was then that she thought to look around the cold room; Mack and Nola had once again disappeared.

Walfored's smirk had returned. "You're going to kill me with some fire and a knife?"

Her grip on the hilt slipped.

Walfored . . . threw something at her.

It wasn't solid—whatever it was. And it was invisible. And it wasn't wind. But it felt like a breeze filled with rocks as it pummeled her in the stomach. She crashed backward into Ien. *Not his body. Him. He is not dead.*

Walfored advanced. One step, two steps.

The fire singed Ree's hair. She couldn't control it.

Walfored, pretty features painted with an ugly snarl, thrust his palm at her. Something green began to congeal in the center of his hand, where she glimpsed a tattoo of an emerald flower at the base of his thumb.

Ree looked to the left and right; nothing to shield her from whatever he was doing. *Dammit.* Fire everywhere. No control.

Behind her on the floor, Ien yelled without words, and the room's atmosphere thickened to sludge. She couldn't move. Almost couldn't breathe. The fire crawling over her body was snuffed out, smothered. Just like that.

Oh Mounts. He's not dead. He's not dead.

#

Mack had seen some things in his life, but today had been ugly, and it wasn't getting any better. He had broken *out* of plenty of prisons before, but he had never had to break *into* a prison, until today. And today he had done it *twice*—the same prison, two times. Getting in wasn't the challenge, per se. The difficult part was when he would have to smuggle twelve weakened, emaciated men out with him the second time.

He and Nola had snuck away from the confrontation between Walfored and Ree as soon as it became apparent that Ree could handle herself. Fire on the girl's arms, for Mount's sake. At least Ien was there with her. To . . . do Navigator stuff. Whatever was about to happen, Mack knew one thing: that room was no place for him or Nola at this point.

They had their own issues.

Mack ducked and cursed as a gunshot rang down the corridor from behind. The bullet

grazed the wall to his right with the ping of lead on stone. He followed Nola into the first-floor side room they had already infiltrated once today, latching the door behind him.

"There's no other way out," that woman with the spectacles and pinched face—Rinna?—called through the wood in her haughty voice. "You'll have to come back through here sometime. How many guards do you think I'll be able to scrounge up by then?"

Mounts, but Mack was tired.

"Come on," he said to Nola. "Let's get this desk pushed against the door here." The secret entrance to the underground Navi jail still masqueraded as an office space, and as he suspected, the pine desk was heavy beyond belief—especially considering the shale top. Mack growled and heaved with his back. They would just have to move it out of the way on coming out, but it was the only way he saw to slow that woman and her damn pistol. *A woman in a dress with glasses and a pistol.*

When it was done, Nola folded her arms and looked up at him. "How are we going to get those men out of here alive? They're barely breathing as it is."

He shrugged, lifting his pistol from its holster beneath his vest. "Let's just do it and worry about how we did it *after* we've already done it." This was not logic. It was stupid. Too bad it didn't matter.

Nola frowned bemusedly at him, but she nodded, thank Yarah. They retraced their steps: cracked open the secret door, slunk down the dank stairwell, and stole into the black tomb of a room from which they had drug Ien not two hours before. Thanks to the sliver of light from the door, Mack could make out the shapes of bodies littering the cold stone floor, but there was still that eerie golden glow coming from the chains wrapped around their bodies like dull, heavy cocoons.

There was no time for hesitation. There never was, in his line of work.

That girl better be safe, he thought as they entered the oddly silent room. The men didn't even seem to be breathing.

Mack rushed to the side of one of the Ra'im. The man . . . actually *wasn't* breathing. And the red swirled symbol on his side slowly faded to black as Mack watched. The glow of the chains, which had been dim to begin with, began to extinguish completely. All around the cavernous room, even in the deep, far corners that *had* to lie beneath Mount Yarah, little points of light were going out one by one. *Nine*, he counted. *Ten, eleven . . . twelve.*

"Oh," Nola squeaked. "Oh, no. Ree!"

She had come to the same conclusion as Mack: Walfored had killed all these men. Not just that, but killed them and taken their ships—and if Mack had learned anything about Navigators over the years of working with Ien, it was that the stronger your bond with your ship, the stronger the . . . Navigator stuff . . . you could do.

And now Walfored had twelve ships.

"If Ree kills him, the entire Court fleet will fall out of the sky," Nola breathed.

"And if she doesn't, he'll kill her and Ien," Mack responded.

He thought of Ree, of the anger in her face, of the fire in her heart. That girl was changing the world today. But did she want to change it that much? In his mind's eye he could envision their only escape plan falling from the sky. Trembling, Mack reached out and grabbed Nola's arm, pulled her toward the door.

Don't kill that man, Ree, Mack thought desperately as they remerged in the light and looked at the desk keeping the guards out and keeping the two of them *in*. He encircled Nola in his arms, and she didn't protest. He studied the door and fingered the small package he always

carried at his belt. Rinna was going to get a surprise.

For Mount's sake, he projected at Ree knowing damn well she wouldn't and couldn't hear him, *don't crashing let that madman die*.

#

Whatever Ien had done to the air, it seemed like time had slowed. Ree couldn't blink.

Walfored—grimacing, hand out. The green leaking from his fist grew deeper, more solid, a green she had never seen before, even on the valley floor.

Ien—getting slowly to his feet.

Alive, crashing alive. It became a song in her head.

Ree forced herself forward. The air resisted. Walfored's face twisted in something approaching anger as he attempted to finish whatever it was he was doing. Slow, slow, everything slow. She could feel the exertion in Ien's mind as he maintained the strange force field in the room. The problem was that it kept her from sticking Walfored with the knife. She moved forward, forward. *You control fire*, Cyril had said. *Get angry*, Ien had whispered.

Breathe, she told herself.

In.

Out.

In.

She pushed outward with her consciousness, shoving Ien and his slow effect from the air. His mind resisted—she felt him shudder behind her—but she was stronger. The flames returned to her arms, this time burning blue-hot, searing through her sleeves and encircling the knife in her fist.

However, as Ien's influence over the air drained from the room, the energy Walfored held out before him reached its peak and came at her in a swirl of deep green light, taking her in her left shoulder like a boulder ahead of an avalanche. Pain erupted through her body as the jolt reverberated down her spine, and she careened backward, this time tripping over Ien and smashing into him on the floor, elbow digging into his stomach. She felt more than heard Ien's head bounce off the carpeted stone beneath her, and she certainly felt it as his presence drained from her mind.

She struggled to pick herself up, to extricate herself from Ien's arms and legs, but her shoulder wouldn't move . . . her right arm wouldn't work. She wrestled her left hand beneath her and levered herself to a sitting position. Her best friend remained prone on the ground. *Ien, wake up*, she screamed at him in her mind. He didn't budge.

Her lungs betrayed her, filled with false air that she couldn't use until her breaths tried to mimic her heartbeat: hard, fast, failing. *Dead. He's dead*. Her movements seemed stilted. Her battered arm swung uselessly at her side. *Onetwothree onetwothree onetwothree* went the animal in her ribcage.

His chest lifted, dropped.

The involuntary sigh of relief that rushed from her body sounded and felt to her more like a sob than a natural expulsion of air, even though now was far from the correct time to be crying. Though his eyes remained sealed shut, he was breathing, and that was all she needed.

She whirled on Walfored.

My father was trying to do the same thing as this man, she reminded herself. *But he didn't want to kill people*.

The only person that had died in Erikk Millor's experiments. . . was him. Ree had to make things right for what she had done to those people at the edge of the mountains, and killing

one more person wasn't going to change anything.

Or maybe it would.

The smug smile on the man's face spurred her forward, knife in unsteady hand, teeth gritted. A flash of uncertainty blazed across his features for one interminable moment.

Can't stop. She had made her decision of what to do with this man the moment the fire had blazed from her skin.

Ree stretched forward and elbowed him in the ribcage with her good arm, pushing him into the chair.

The surprise on his face lasted less than a second as the silver pinpricks on the seat and in the back of the chair found his skin, and he opened his mouth to scream, but only silence emerged. The translucent, coiled tubes glowed red-blue with the new liquid pumping through them. He shuddered once, twice.

That handsome face froze in terror, staring up at her. "No, Katrya," he whispered jaggedly. "You can't put me in this thing again."

"I just did."

He shook his head; dark hair, slick with sweat, flopped from one side of his head to the other. "I'm only trying to help," he said in a new, pitiful voice. "To make things *better*." The veins on his arms, visible only at the wrists beneath the formal coat he wore, flared bright blue beneath the skin, draining of their Navi strength. The skin of his face grew a sickly gray.

There was something strange about the *other* symbols she could half-see from under his sleeves.

She grabbed his arm and pushed the fabric up. Deep red marks had been carved all the way up his forearm, swirls of lines and dots that reminded Ree of the tattoo she knew adorned the side of Ien's body. She counted: *One, two, three . . .*

. . . Ten, eleven, twelve.

She sucked in a breath. "What did you *do*?" He jerked his head defiantly but didn't answer. "Barin," she said, "you're crazy. How are you Navigating *twelve ships*? How is it poss. . ."

And then she realized what he must have done to those poor men in the room at the bottom of this white-walled dungeon.

She leaned forward, snarling, and flashed the knife under his chin; he flinched away from the blade, but she put the point on his neck. "Genocide is *not* the answer, Barin," she hissed. Then she made a thrust, and he cried out.

The whirring device next to the chair sputtered. The hilt of her boot-knife now stood from the machinery. The cogs creaked, grated against the steel, then ground to a painful halt. The tubes emptied of the red-blue liquid as the remainder was deposited in the machine, leaving dark clots in the curves of the coils.

She backed away. Walfored, eyes closed and head back against the chair, breathed shallowly as ragged tremors shook his body. Ree noticed a dark stain spreading on the carpet beneath him. He opened his eyes wide and turned his weak green gaze on her, shock and fear and, above all, fury radiating from him. He started to extract himself from the chair, arms shaking as he attempted to push himself to his feet. The machine, however, had taken too much blood, and he sat back heavily with a frustrated sigh. It was too late for Barin Walfored. Ree grimaced as the pathetic man started to cry.

"It was for my son," he whispered, eyes closed once more. "All of it. He's got the blood, the wings. He's going to grow up into this mess." He growled wordlessly as she watched

awkwardly. After a moment, he hissed, “I would have killed *everyone* if it had meant he could grow up and not have to be a slave to you idiots.” His voice grew weaker as he said it, until he nearly whispered the last word.

Ree felt something happening to the air. Something *heavy*. A presence pushed itself into her mind—different from Ien’s, a thousand times stronger. It was one entity, but also many, its voices clamoring just beyond the scope of her consciousness. She knew the voices were whispering something to her, but she couldn’t quite hear it, couldn’t . . . She staggered sideways into the wall, knocking one of the decorative tables to the side, as the weight in and around her mind doubled, tripled. A painful haze hovered at the corners of her eyes.

Walford gave one last sob and grew still.

And there it was, without the barrier of his mind to keep it at bay: the twelve ships, coalesced into one entity in the space of the room. Ree fell back with the force of the mental power, beside Ien’s still unmoving form. She could *feel* these hulking masses of steel and steam, but only as though she had thrown her arms around a hull from the outside: cursory, surface-level. Almost as though she should be able to open the door and walk in, but a gate barred her from entering. Even from the outside, though, she could feel the panic smothering these carrier ships. Something was very wrong.

The ships were falling.

What do I do? Oh, Mounts, Ien, wake up!

Falling, falling.

A memory:

She left Port Aria—she needed to get to Arboram and rescue her best friend. The ship suddenly pitched in the sky, and she pressed white, cracking knuckles into the syloom as they all plummeted to their deaths, pressed hard enough that blood welled and smeared on the red painted symbol—or maybe it was the blood that had latched her fingers to the steel.

Everything in her . . . pulsed.

Suddenly, the ship righted. She and her crew were alive. What had she felt, in those last moments before everything was right again? A consciousness, pressing gently on her own, nudging her aside?

Yes.

Falling . . . but not anymore.

She reached. Reached and reached and reached, with her mind, with the flames that had burned through her sleeves to the clean, burning skin underneath. With everything. She *reached*.

Another memory:

Ien screamed with the pain as the greatstorm tore through the Arienna. Ree had to do something. Anything. The ship had been destroyed, and so would he be if she didn’t get him some help. She reached down, touched him on the arm, squeezed it. He pulled away as though she had burned him.

Her mind collided with the massive energy of the twelve ships, and this time, instead of banging on the hull, she was able to open that door and step aboard. Immediately, her head filled with shrieks of agony. It took her an excruciating second to realize that it was the ships themselves that were making that awful, awful noise against the walls of her mind. She forced

herself to her knees, hands dug into her skull, but in reality she was miles away, in the harbor of Praan, and in the middle of the void, and in the port at Briia, and flying over snow-capped mountains . . .

She cried out as she felt new markings simultaneously carving themselves into her arms, legs, chest. Twelve new *sylooms*.

And again, a memory:

She stood before the flames that had consumed her childhood home. They had been burning for hours, at least, but still raged without foreseeable end. She had long forgotten the tears that streaked her cheeks. Her fists had been clenched for so long that her forearms screamed with pain. Her palms were hot to the touch, but she remained immobile, eyes filled with the blaze and with the recollection of her father's last words. "The soul of a ship . . . She never told me the fire would be so beautiful."

What was she supposed to do with that?

So much. Too much.

One of the screams in her head was her own. She just couldn't hear her own voice anymore over the cacophony. But she did know that those people were depending on her to save them—she just had to figure out how . . . to . . .

She *pulled*. On one of them, on all twelve of them. She forgot everyone, Ien and Mack and Nola and Walfored and his son and her father. Everyone and everything. *Oh Mounts. Oh . . .*

Her mind . . . slid into place.

Chapter 27

SYLOOMS

The chorus of screaming carriers quieted. A collective sigh moved through them, and probably their crews as well. The fire on her arms guttered out instantly.

Consciousness followed suit.

#

Ree opened her eyes to a familiar room: Janne's bedroom. Ien sat in the chair beside her, watching as she reoriented herself to the conscious world. She wiggled her fingers and sucked in her breath.

Along with the sting of twelve new blinding red tattoos, her body felt battered, bruised. But she was alive. And so was *everything else*. The carrier ships and their crews lay nestled at the back of her mind. All twelve of them, sitting comfortably.

"Where is everyone?"

Ien gestured vaguely at the front of the house. "Mack and Nola wanted to see you, but I think you need to rest."

She nodded. Her whole body seemed to swell with those ships: ebb and flow of the wind, footsteps of the crew, squat solidness of the metal—all of these things were present for each one. She must have been crazy for trying to stuff them all in there. Walfored was even crazier for *choosing* this; Ree would have to find some Navis to take over for her later.

Ree closed her eyes and leaned back on the pillows. Something deep and hollow gaped within her: Riesan's death, and Walfored's. *I did that. I caused those men to die.*

"What about you?" she asked her friend. "You're not exactly in the best shape either."

He snorted. "And I didn't take on twelve ships all at once after never having done it before." He was sitting gingerly, though, and the bags under his eyes had not magically gone away. "Ree," he said, more seriously this time, "are you alright?" His eyes took in the visible red swirls that danced up and down her arms.

She ran a hand over her head. Her skin was clear as a baby's, but her hair had all been burned away; someone had taken the initiative to wrap her upper body in linens, so at least she wasn't exposed, but she trembled at the memory of that fire that had covered her body.

This isn't me. I can't ever do that again.

The gaping wound inside her tasted like ash, like the way a ship would as it splintered at the bottom of the void.

She closed her eyes.

She had twelve ships in her head. None of them were her own, but in a way, they all were. She was going to use them for something.

#

One month later, Ien strode into the Palace for hopefully the last time. A flurry of activity greeted him; preparations were underway for the ceremony to welcome the new Navigators. Ree's first decree as High Captain had predictably been to abolish all the previous practices for Navigation of the carrier ships. She had asked for applications; surprisingly enough, she had gotten some. It still gave Ien the shakes to even be in this building, but he was learning to control it.

Ien wasn't sure Ree was thinking soundly about the implications of her decision on the economy of Daen, but seeing the eager-but-nervous faces of the Navi applicants standing outside the door to her fourth-floor office made him realize that things would be okay—that maybe a

little economic turmoil was worth it, for a time. Already Ree had done what Walfored couldn't do.

He pushed his way through the long line of applicants and into Ree's office, closing the door behind him. She sat behind a large wooden desk that she clearly didn't know what to do with; a few papers and one pen sat in one tiny corner of the desk, leaving the rest of it empty. When he had questioned her about this earlier in the week, she had said she didn't want to scuff the wood . . . Oak was expensive, after all.

She looked up when he entered. "Oh, it's time?" She put her pen down. Her hair was starting to grow back, but she still wore a blue length of cloth tied over her head.

He nodded. "Just about."

She stood and walked over to him. Before he could say anything, she had bundled him in such a fierce hug that his still-tender ribs gave a sharp twinge. "Be careful."

"Of course," he said, forcing a grin. "You, too, okay? This transfer of ships is going to be a little tough. Make sure the Navis you pick can handle it."

She waved her hand in annoyance, flinging away his comment. "Yes, yes."

Her baggy sleeve slid up to her elbow; the raw, red *syloom* marks still marched up her forearm, and though he couldn't see them, he knew they covered other parts of her as well: kneecap, inside left elbow, right hip. They would never go away, for as long as Ree lived—they would only dim to black once her connection to those ships was severed—but she didn't know that yet, and he didn't want to be the one to tell her.

"If you find anything . . ."

"I'll let you know." He smiled.

Ree looked away, running a hand over her head and disturbing the cloth. She exhaled. She didn't have to say it; her body language practically screamed at him.

"Look, Ree," he said slowly, "this thing with the ink. You don't have to make any decisions now. If you destroy all of Walfored's stores, it may not be good in the long run."

She shot him a disparaging look. "And what am I going to do? Let people's *blood* be used to make tattoos still? No, Ien, we're going to have to find another way." The words sounded rehearsed. It was probably because they had had this conversation before.

He shrugged. "Well, I'm going." He didn't move.

Ree looked up at him, brown eyes sparking with anger and something else . . . Fear? Worry? It was hard to tell the difference. "Come back with something to report, Navi," she commanded.

He gave a lazy salute and turned around. Just as he reached to put his hand on the doorknob, she called after him.

"I hope you find them, Ien."

He closed his eyes, hand still outstretched. "Me too," he whispered. Then he opened the door, stared at all the anxious faces waiting there, and left Ree to deal with them.

There was a gap in his memories just the size of the factory outside those mountains, and had been there since he was ten years old. Ree was going to get rid of her *sylooms*, would figure out how to fix the markets and the Navi situation and everything else. He was going to find what was left of his people. And he was going to ask them a question.

Why can't I remember my mother?

THE END