

A Pale Shadow



Eon de Beaumont

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

A PALE SHADOW

By Eon de Beaumont

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

The photo displays a three-quarter portrait of a young, black man with dreads and an arm tattoo.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

This is our hero of the story, a young prince, in fact the youngest of his many brothers and sisters. He spends his days studying to be a diplomat and socialising with his fellow students, but mainly just being bored and hoping that something, anything would happen to alter the monotony of his life.

Then the Royal Seer has a vision, a prophecy that will alter our hero's path and give him the adventure he craves.

Please, Dear Author, tell me what happens next to this young man, but most importantly tell me how he meets his true love.

Sincerely,

Verity

Story Info

Genre: fantasy, young adult

Tags: fairytale/folklore, young adult characters, prince, thief, steampunk, sweet/no sex, magic users, adventure

Word Count: 19,948

A PALE SHADOW

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Chapter One

Kaythan dodged a second barrage of arrows. He dashed along the branches of the Ceraylian trees, his bare toes instinctively gripping at the rough bark. He scanned the dark, blue-green leaves of the trees all around him, searching for the archers. Something moved at the very edge of his peripheral vision, and he leapt through the air, trusting to his training to get him to the next limb. A succession of arrows sailed just behind him, missing their intended mark. He felt the tree bark on the tips of his fingers and he gripped slightly, using his momentum to send him in a swinging arch beneath the branch. He flipped up and perched where the limb grew from the trunk.

He heard the arrow whistling before he saw it, and he jerked his head to the side just before the arrow sank into the tree behind him. The razor sharp arrow grazed one of the long, brown dreadlocks that marked him as a scholar to his people. "Oy-ay!" he barked, his chest heaving from the intensive workout, his dark skin moist with a thick sheen of sweat. "What are you trying to do?"

"Sorry, Kaythan." The archer, Millis, stepped out from the shade of the leaves. Millis's dark skin and matching leaf-colored tunic and trousers kept him nearly invisible among the humid canopies of the massive trees. "Kelelay!" Millis called and a small band of Aviar's archers also emerged, their bows at their sides. Those who weren't as dark as Millis used Cerayleaf paint to appear darker.

"It's all right," Kaythan said, raising his hand to shield his eyes from the midday sun, oppressive up in the highest branches. "It was a very good workout. Thank you."

"You did extremely well, as usual, m'laird."

Kaythan reached behind him and pulled the arrow from the bark with some difficulty. He tossed it to Millis, who caught it easily and slipped it back into his quiver. "You'd better take your men and return to your post before my brother becomes impatient."

Millis waved in response, then he and his band disappeared back into the treetops. Kaythan mopped his brow and thought of his brother, Marthan. As the second oldest of Aviar's royal brothers, it fell to Marthan to captaine the archers of the island kingdom of Aviar. They all had their roles to play, from the oldest, Dayvan, next in line to be king, to Kaythan, the youngest, tasked with being the scholar and eventually diplomat for the throne of Aviar.

Kaythan dropped easily from his perch and landed on the boards of one of the many bridges suspended in the limbs of the great trees of Aviar, connecting all the homes, shops and storehouses built among them. He wasn't surprised to see his uncle awaiting him with a stern look that melted almost instantly into one of amusement. "Why do you put yourself through such rigorous torture?" His uncle, Morlin the Ambassador, held out a dueler's belt with a long dagger in each of the two scabbards. "And you don't need these either, Kay. Your sister can have a man assigned to you if you feel threatened, though I can't imagine you feel anything but safe on our insular little island."

Kaythan strapped the belts over his light, snug, shorts that ended midcalf. He'd been topless, but now he slipped into one of the sleeveless vests with the long tails common among their people. "Oh, Uncle. I merely wish to keep myself in shape." They strolled through the relatively cooler shade of the city proper. "Besides, Shayara has enough to worry about as the first female Captaine of Aviar's Guard. I don't need a Swordhammer to babysit me."

His uncle chuckled. "I was once not so different from you, full of piss and vine-jager, ready to take on the world. But I learned the hard way that we have these traditions for a reason." He lifted the sheer, scholar's robes he wore, revealing a thin, but puckered scar running from his right nipple to the bottom of his ribcage. "The first children are the king and queen-in-waiting, the second children are the captaine of the garde and the captaine of the archers—"

"The thirds are bird keepers and skypanthar wranglers, the fourths are the steward and seneschal, the fifths, record-keeper and bookkeeper, and the rest are varying levels of tedious scholars, historians and ambassadors. I know, I know." He also knew that Marthan and Shayara had fought against those traditions, trading roles captaining the guardes and archers. Typically archers are more slender and agile where the guardes, the Swordhammers, are big brutes of men. Shayara had been blessed with power and height, and soon after she and Marthan reached puberty, it became obvious to all that Marthan would make the better archer. Still they'd been faced with a fight to maintain the traditions; Shayara would not have been the first woman more suited to garde work, but none had the fire that burned within his sister, and she refused to back down. "Shayara fought the traditions."

"Aye, she did. That girl is more like a force of nature than a woman. I daresay your father would rather face the armies of the mainland warlords."

One of the creatures the Aviarans shared the trees with, the ones they called the Old Men of the Trees, leaned down, reaching for Kaythan. He touched the

hairy little creature's hand, giving it a light squeeze as he walked beneath. The beast chirruped happily and climbed back up the tree. "What are the mainlands like?" Kaythan had asked the question many times before, and everyone who had journeyed there seemed reluctant to tell him.

"It's a strange place, Kay. The people are all the colors of the rainbow. They are the best and worst of mankind, and everything in between," his uncle answered after a moment of thought. "You'll love it and hate it. It's at once very beautiful and very ugly. The things they are building..." His uncle allowed the thought to trail away. Kaythan had heard all those things before and the rainbow comment always made him uneasy. He could picture people with blue, green, and red skin, but it scared him a bit.

Before his uncle could continue or Kaythan had a chance to ask another question, a scribewing, one of the birds the villagers used to carry notes and letters throughout the island kingdom, flapped down to perch on Kaythan's arm. It cooed insistently until Kaythan removed the tiny scroll from its scaly leg. As soon as its parcel was removed, the bird flew off, presumably back to its master. Kaythan unfurled the scroll and immediately knit his brows.

"What is it, Kay?"

He spun the parchment for his uncle to see. It was blank. "Comino."

"The seer? That old buzzard and his blank parchments. You'd better hurry on to his parlor. He hates to be kept waiting, and if he's summoning you, it's bound to be important."

Kaythan sighed. His uncle was right, but he failed to add that usually when Comino summoned someone, the news wasn't just important, it was generally bad as well.

Chapter Two

Comino's hut stood on the very edge of the island in what everyone believed to be the oldest tree in the kingdom, even older than King Tree, the palace where Kaythan's family lived. While King Tree remained lush and resplendent, Comino's tree, like Comino himself, was nearly bald, very few of its leaves remaining, however the tree looked as strong as ever with dark, almost black bark. Some of the children told stories of Comino's magic seeping into the tree and changing it, making it more like its master, forever alive, but twisted and strange. The hut itself was a woven ball, created from the very limbs around it. Some of the elder inhabitants of the island still lived in these odd structures, though most of the population had moved forward, building proper homes with planks and thatched roofs.

A thin column of bluish smoke drifted out of the small hole in the top of the spherical hut. All manner of birds nested on the exterior of the structure, and their constant murmuring surrounded Comino's home like a rippling sea of sound. Kaythan would have never been able to sleep with the never ending racket, and shouldn't wonder why the old seer might be a little crazy. Kaythan didn't want to get any closer for fear of setting the creatures squawking even louder.

"Don't just stand there," a voice boomed from within. The birds flapped and grumbled at the sudden sound. "Come in, come in. Don't dawdle."

Kaythan only hesitated a moment before crossing the unstable rope bridge leading to Comino's hut. He pushed aside the beads and sheer curtains that offered the old seer privacy from the rest of the Aviarans. The thick, incense heavy atmosphere inside the hut made Kaythan's eyes water instantly and brought on a fit of coughing.

"Oh, budger," the old man cursed. He pulled out an enormous fan and opened previously hidden flaps around the central portal. The smoke soon dissipated, leaving the air clear, but cozy and fragrant. "Sorry, lad. I guess I'm used to that smoke when I dry my herbs." Comino slapped Kaythan on the back with surprising strength for his thin, almost withered frame. "Are you all right, Kaythan?"

"Yes, sir," he answered, his voice rough. He wasn't accustomed to people speaking so plainly with him, but it made him like the old man instantly. Although Kaythan had only ever seen Comino from afar at various ceremonies

in Centre Royale, the district surrounding the palace, he'd always assumed the man was ancient. Standing face to face with him now, Kaythan would be hard-pressed to put an age on Comino.

"Good, good." Comino offered Kaythan a warm grin, and his dark-brown face blossomed with wrinkles. Still, his expression was so joyfully unguarded it made him look ancient and youthful at the same time. "Tea?"

Kaythan nodded.

"Sit," Comino offered as he poured hot water from a gourd pot into a pair of chipped teacups. He placed a small cloth satchel in each before he brought them over, handing one to Kaythan. Comino folded his spindly legs beneath him. He blew on his tea to cool it and took a tentative sip. Kaythan did the same and was surprised to find the tea tasted of hallaberries and chimmin sticks. "Good, ay?"

"Very," Kaythan said.

"You need some good tea 'cause I got some bad news." Comino fixed Kaythan with a serious stare. His eyes were strange to Kaythan, nearly the same blue-green as the Ceraylian leaves, with flecks of gold and silver swimming through.

"I was afraid of that," Kaythan said and sipped his tea.

"That's because you're a wise young man, if the stories I've heard of you are true. And I'd judge by those blades at your hips, they are. Not happy to be just a scholar?"

"I choose to be cautious, prepared. I see no conflict in honing my mind and my body."

Comino laughed and slapped his leg. "Ha. No. You're a gem, you are." His smile faded quickly to a frown, and Kaythan almost saw the antiquity in Comino's face. "That makes this even harder." He scratched at the ring of wiry, white curls circling the back of his head.

"Please, Laird Seer, I do not fear your sight. Forewarned is forearmed."

"Don't count on it, lad."

That confused Kaythan. If Comino hadn't called him here to warn him, what was the point of his visions? "I don't understand, Laird Seer."

"None of that Laird Seer budgery."

"Sorry."

“Fiffel,” Comino said dismissively. “Don’t apologize. You’re a prince, it’s how you were raised. I’m just a poor, crazy old man who sees things.”

“And what did you see?” Kaythan asked, his tea all but forgotten.

“You crave adventure.” Comino pointed at Kaythan.

Kaythan shrugged, neither confirming nor denying the old man’s claim.

“You’re going to get it. You’re not going to like it, but you’re going to get it.” Comino closed his eyes and took a deep breath. When next he spoke, his voice had taken on a strange dissonant tone. “A pale shadow will deliver sight stolen from the face of magic, and with it danger, fire, flight, and night.” Comino exhaled. He looked slightly diminished. “There’s more but it isn’t clear to me. You will leave Aviar—you may never return. Or you may return changed. That is the part that is unclear to me.”

“What am I to do? How can I avoid this?”

Comino shrugged. “In my experience, you cannot avoid this. All you can do is remain alert and hope for the best. But I have faith in you, boy. You’re an oddity and that’s always promising.”

“Is there nothing else you can tell me?”

Comino frowned, rubbed his chin in thought. “No,” he said finally. “That’s it. I hope you don’t die.” Comino stood swiftly despite his age. He snatched Kaythan’s cup from his hand and walked over to his washbasin. “That’s it. I hope the rest of the day finds you well. If you survive, come back and visit.”

Kaythan sat stunned for a moment at the old man’s abruptness. Then he stood because Comino had obviously finished with him and was dismissing him. He didn’t want to appear rude and overstay his welcome so he departed the woven hut. “If I survive?” he said to himself. Maybe the seer was crazier than everyone thought. Kaythan needed to think about this, and he wanted to talk to his sister, but he didn’t want to walk all the way back to Centre Royale.

He grabbed the thin silver chain he wore around his neck and retrieved the tiny whistle that dangled from it. He took a breath, remembered Comino’s birds, and jogged away from the hut before blowing the whistle. He only had to wait a few moments before a shadow slipped over the trees and platforms. Perfin flapped easily out of the sky, his two pairs of wings allowing him to land gently on his taloned feet, the yellow scales glossy in the light filtering through the trees. Perfin folded first the smaller pair of wings and then the larger against his body as he approached Kaythan.

“Hey boy,” Kaythan said as his skypanthar rubbed his chin on Kaythan’s hip. Kaythan scratched first behind Perfin’s ear and then dragged his hand down the creature’s soft, furry back. Perfin arched into Kaythan’s hand. He purred, deep and rumbling. Kaythan stopped petting him and Perfin turned, accusation in his golden-eyed gaze. “I’m sorry, Perf. I don’t have time for scratches right now. We have to go see Shayara.” Perfin yowled as if he understood. Kaythan climbed onto Perfin’s back, and with his legs gripped the creature’s torso between his sets of wings. Perfin glanced back and Kaythan leaned forward, wrapping his arms around Perfin’s neck. “Ay oh, boy.” Perfin spread his wings and flapped up above the trees with Kaythan on his back.

Chapter Three

Kaythan rested his cheek against the soft fur between Perfin's pointed ears as they glided through the air over Aviar. He closed his eyes, letting the wind wash over him, and he considered everything Comino had told him. "He could be completely insane, couldn't he, Perf?" Kaythan asked. The skypanthar replied with an admonishing yowl. "No, I don't feel like he's insane, either, and I've been feeling an odd sense of foreboding for a few days now. This just confirms it." Kaythan pressed his nose to Perf's fur and inhaled the clean, slightly spicy scent. He stroked the creature's chin as they flew toward Tower Tree, the headquarters of the Aviaran Guard.

Kaythan looked up to see his sister staring out over the top of the tower. She raised a hand when she noticed him. He waved back. Perfin swooped toward her. Shayara's skin was only slightly darker than his, and she wore her hair cropped close, just like the male members of the Guard. Two streaks of red paint trailed from her eyes over her cheeks, marking her Captaine of the Swordhammers. She wore the traditional Aviaran garb with proper guard armor strapped on over top. Her sword and hammer hung loosely at her hips with delicate chains connecting them. She smiled as she waved. Of all his siblings, Kaythan felt closest to Shayara, and he couldn't wait to discuss Comino's prophecy with her, to get her opinion.

Perfin circled lower, about to land when a large flash and a great thundering drew all their attention. Kaythan pulled Perfin back up into the air for a better look. A great plume of black smoke rose into the air among the normal dinner fires of the citizens of Aviar. Kaythan's gaze darted and locked with his sister's. She placed two fingers into her mouth and whistled. A skypanthar much larger than Perfin glided close enough for Shayara to jump on his back. They flew up to join Kaythan and Perfin. "Stay here!" Shayara barked as they passed, racing toward the commotion.

Kaythan grumbled and urged Perfin to follow. He hated how his older sister babied him, as though he couldn't take care of himself. He pushed Perfin to fly faster. "You're not leaving me behind," he shouted as they pulled up alongside Shayara and her skypanthar.

"Kay," Shayara called. "I can handle this!"

"I'm not letting you do this alone!" he shouted.

“My men are on the way.” Another blast of light and thunder erupted from below them. A bolt of skyfire grazed Shayara’s mount and they spiraled downward toward the platforms of the city.

“Shayara!” Kaythan called, steering Perfin to dive toward her. Perfin caught them both in his talons and eased them to the boards of the walkways below, his wings beating the air to slow them down.

People dashed about as they landed, some screaming, some weeping. A smoking hole gaped in the walkway, and a rope bridge dangled into the darkness below. Smoke and steam still rose from the ruined planks. As soon as Shayara’s feet rested on solid floor, she jumped into captaine mode. She barked orders to make sure the fire wouldn’t spread and started questioning anyone milling about.

“We saw someone below after the first blast. He ran that way,” a man said, pointing to another section of ruined bridge. “He was all dressed in black, so we couldn’t see much.”

“Thank you,” Shayara said, gripping the man’s shoulder. “Please help suppress this fire.”

The man nodded and dashed off.

Shayara stepped to the edge of the hole and peered into the depths. “Budgery dirt.”

Kaythan approached her, glancing over her shoulder. “What do we do now?”

“We don’t do anything,” she responded. “I’m going to climb down there and see what I can find.”

“I’m going with you.” Kaythan made it a statement and invited no argument. He knew Shayara would respect his determination.

“Fine. Just be careful. Your father won’t forgive me if anything happens to you.”

“Deal.” Kaythan turned and sent Perfin off to safety. Instead of flying away, Perfin leapt up to a low branch and sat lazily cleaning himself. “Oh fine.” Kaythan dropped onto the ruined rope bridge, and like Shayara, used it as a ladder to climb down to the unfamiliar ground below.

Kaythan, like most Aviarans, rarely, if ever, set foot on the forest floor. It had even taken on a mystical, almost religious atmosphere for their people, and

Kaythan felt as though he were descending into the world of the dead. His feet found the last intact plank on the makeshift ladder and he looked down. The ground was still a few feet away. "You'll have to jump," Shayara stated.

Kaythan dropped down until his hands were on the last plank and his feet swept through empty air. He hesitated, not because he was scared of the drop—he'd jumped farther than this in training. He could do this in his sleep. His heartbeat pounded in his ears. "It's just dirt," he whispered to himself, took a deep breath, and released the wooden plank. His partially bare feet touched the ground seconds later.

Shayara knelt in the cool shade of the forest. "Took you long enough," she said. Kaythan could hear the smirk in her voice. She pointed to the ground. "Someone was here. He's wearing boots. You can see the heel here." She stood up and followed the trail. "Broken branch. Another footprint." She continued to list off clues as she found them.

Kaythan looked around at the mostly unfamiliar vegetation at this level of the forest. He recognized a few plants that they cultivated above for various uses: medicine, cooking, cleaning. He wondered who had ventured down here first, who had discovered them and their uses. Shayara stopped abruptly and Kaythan walked into her. She pulled her sword out with one hand, motioned for Kaythan to be quiet with the other, then pulled out her hammer. Kaythan unsheathed his long daggers and turned, pressing his back to his sister's so they couldn't be taken by surprise.

"Show yourself," Shayara ordered. The authority in her voice made even Kaythan nervous.

"Damn," a male voice said with a chuckle. "You're good."

"I'm the Captaine of the Garde. I'm the best."

Kaythan turned to see a cloaked figure melt out of the shadows. "A female captaine? That's cute."

She thrust her sword at him. "Hands in the air, budger."

The dark stranger raised gloved hands. The lower part of his face was covered with black cloth, and all Kaythan could see of the man were his strange pale eyes, so blue they were nearly silver. Kaythan stared at those eyes, so he noticed the quick dart just before the stranger's hand shot forward and a bright flash of light obscured Kaythan's vision.

"What the dirt?" Shayara barked. "I can't see anything!"

Kaythan rubbed at his eyes. When he opened them, he saw a shadow retreating through the trees. "He's getting away," Kaythan shouted.

"Where?" Shayara asked, cocking back her hammer arm.

"Midday, ten feet away," Kaythan said. "And he's running!"

Shayara nodded and swung the hammer. It sailed directly at the escaping shadowy figure and smacked him right in the ass, knocking him sprawling to the ground. Kaythan sprung to his feet and dashed to the groaning stranger. He crouched over the man, brandishing his daggers. Shayara joined him. He could see her rubbing her eyes in his peripheral vision. She retrieved her hammer and gave the stranger a swift kick. He curled into a ball as Shayara searched him, tossing aside daggers, strange pouches, and vials. The last thing she discovered was a small wooden box with runes carved in the surface.

"What's this?" she asked, preparing to open the small container.

"Don't!" the stranger shouted, reaching out for his possession.

Shayara hesitated.

"Don't open that. You saw the damage it did when I opened it." The stranger pointed up at the ruined bridge and platforms.

"What's in here?" Shayara asked.

"It's a long story." The stranger started to get up from the ground.

"Shorten it," Shayara growled.

"It's an eye."

"That was certainly short." Shayara shook the box. Kaythan wasn't sure what an eye would sound like.

"It's a wizard's eye. I stole it. I think he's using it to track me."

"*What?*" Shayara and Kaythan shouted in unison.

The stranger nodded and shrugged. "I'm afraid so. Which means he's on his way here. And I need to get to the Night Island because I need the Shadesilver blade to fight the wizard's magic."

Kaythan chuckled. "That's a children's story. The Shadesilver blade isn't real. And the Night Island is called Tivara."

"It is real. And I need it. I come from Tivara. My people made their homes in the dark forest. We lived below your kinsmen. They call us the Shadows. We are thieves-for-hire."

“The Shadows?” Shayara asked. “They aren’t thieves, they’re assassins.”

“Some are, yes. But not me.”

“Why are you here?” Kaythan asked.

“I need your help. Our assassins were sent to dispose of the wizard but they not only failed, they turned to his cause. At least the ones he didn’t kill. We discovered the wizard had a false eye that turned men’s minds.”

“This?” Shayara held up the box.

The stranger nodded. “Our population has dwindled. My elders sent me to get the eye in the hope that it would break the spell. When it didn’t, we appealed to your kinsmen for the Shadesilver, but they refused to aid us.”

“Why would you expect them to aid you? A race of parasites that live beneath their society? I should think they’d be happy to be rid of you.” Shayara held up the box once more.

“What do you think he’ll do once he has my people at his command?” the stranger asked. “He’ll come for the Shadesilver first and destroy your kinsmen in the process. Once he’s secured the Shadesilver and ensured that no one can stop him, he’ll work his way through the outlying kingdoms, enslaving all he finds there.”

“And there are no kingdoms more outlying than ours,” Kaythan finished the stranger’s implication.

“The Four will be the first to fall,” the stranger stated gravely. “Please, help me.”

Kaythan and Shayara stared at each other for a long moment, each wondering what the other thought. “This is absurd,” Shayara whispered.

“But if there’s a chance it’s true?” Kaythan looked at the stranger, his face still covered.

“We’ve only his word,” Shayara said.

“The wizard is Eldertalon,” the stranger told them.

“Chancewell Eldertalon?” Kaythan couldn’t believe it. “The Butcher of the Third Age?” He turned to Shayara. “Is that even possible?”

“I don’t know, but it’s not a gamble I’m willing to take.” She grabbed the stranger’s arm. “Come on. You’re telling your story to our parents, the king and queen.”

“Finally,” the stranger said with a sigh. “But we’d better hurry. I’m sure Eldertalon is on his way here.”

“And what is your name, stranger?” Shayara asked.

The stranger flipped his hood back, revealing pitch-black hair that appeared unruly like a spike-tree bush, short in the back with longer bangs. Then he pulled his face wrap down around his neck. Kaythan almost gasped, but caught himself. The stranger revealed a face that looked like a sculpture: pale skin, high cheekbones, and a strong but thin jaw that ended in a chiseled chin. His eyes looked perfectly at home in that face. His nose was straight, regal, and pointed at a pair of deliciously thick lips, stung a pale pink. “I am Janze Harkin,” the stranger stated with a smirk. “Pleased to meet you.”

Chapter Four

After a short flight on the backs of Perfin, Shayara's skypanthar, and a third loaned by one of Shayara's guardsmen for Harkin, the trio reached the King Tree, the Royal Palace of Aviar. The palace was a patchwork of styles from the old, woven orbs, to the modern framed structures. Built on one of the biggest trees on the island, the palace sprawled throughout the giant limbs of the central tree. The throne room sat at the heart of the tree, just above the trunk, where the limbs started to diverge. Much of the tree was carved into elaborate decorations, columns and statuary. Gems and precious metals were worked into the wood. They'd landed on the platform reserved for members of the royal family and were able to walk straight into the throne room.

Shayara handed the prisoner over to the palace guards. As they marched Harkin along the hallway, Shayara leaned over to Kaythan and whispered, "Were you coming to see me for something before this budgering dirt-herder came in and budgered everything to dirt?"

"Nice mouth," Kaythan whispered back with a soft chuckle. His sister's swearing could put even the hardest guardsmen to shame. "I visited Comino this morning."

"He summoned you?" Shayara frantically whispered. "That's not good. What did he say?"

"I think he foresaw this 'budgering dirt-herder.' He said I'm going to leave the island and I think this is why."

"Then I'm going with you."

Kaythan shook his head. "You can't. If this wizard is on his way here, you have to be here to defend the kingdom. We're going to need every Swordhammer we have."

"It seems like you've already made up your mind," Shayara whispered back. "Looks like you're going to get that adventure you're always clamoring for. Let's hope all that training pays off."

"I'm not worried about that," Kaythan said as he watched a few members of court rush past them. "It's convincing Father to let me go, that's going to be a chore."

"You leave your father to me." Shayara put an arm around Kaythan's shoulder and they entered the royal court.

They mounted the steps to the great round hall. Many people already stood beneath its vast domed ceiling. Birds and Old Men of the Trees sat in the alcoves and vents that decorated the dome. Shayara and Kaythan walked up to join Harkin. "Looks like your light show attracted quite a bit of attention," Kaythan said, putting a hand on Harkin's shoulder and motioning to the assembled court.

"I've never seen anything like this," Harkin said. He looked around with his mouth agape. "Your people don't wear a lot of clothing, do they?"

"It's hot on Aviar," Kaythan explained.

"Aye, so bloody hot your king and queen don't even wear that much." Harkin pointed to the dais standing before them. "That's a lot of feathers though."

Kaythan looked at his father sitting regally on his throne. Kaythan tried to imagine seeing them as Harkin was for the first time. Kaythan was used to his father's traditional garb with his feathered collar, shoulder pauldrons, and crown that paid homage to the birds that lived among them. His father and aunt both wore their hair long and in dreadlocks that nearly reached their ankles. They wore beads and jewels in their hair and on necklaces and bracelets. Looking at Harkin in his utilitarian clothes that covered his body neck to toe, all buckles, pockets, and padded bits, Kaythan understood how he might find their clothes strange.

"Captaine Shayara!" his father barked, interrupting Kaythan's contemplation of their customs. "Report. Explain this disturbance."

Shayara stepped forward, took a knee before the dais, and stood. "Well, Uncle," she began.

The king cleared his throat and fixed Shayara with an admonishing glare.

"Sorry. Your Majesty," she corrected herself. She launched into her report of the disturbance.

"Uncle?" Harkin whispered. "I thought she was your sister?"

"She is."

"But how is the king her uncle *and* your father?" Harkin asked.

"We are all brothers and sisters," Kaythan answered. "Our king and queen are brother and sister."

"*What?*" Harkin blurted, interrupting the court for a moment.

“Calm yourself,” Kaythan whispered. “They aren’t married. See the man and woman on the smaller thrones?” He pointed to his mother and uncle on either side of the king and queen. “The one next to the king is my mother; the one next to the queen is Shayara’s father.”

“Oh,” Harkin said, nodding. “You and Shayara are cousins.”

Kaythan shrugged. “I do not know that word.”

“So how does your succession work?” Harkin asked.

“It’s all based on birth order. Our first king and queen were married, but the first born son and first born daughter became the next king and queen,” Kaythan explained. “Obviously they couldn’t marry one another, so they married others but ruled together. It’s been that way ever since. We are all siblings.”

“Hmm.” Harkin nodded. “That’s actually pretty keen. So what are you?”

“Ah. I’m the youngest of my line so I’m required to be a scholar and ambassador.”

“Kaythan!” his father shouted, interrupting his Aviaran nobility lesson.

“Sorry, Fath—I mean, Your Majesty. I was just explaining things to our guest.”

“Our guest? He sounds more like an invader to me.” His father leaned forward in the throne. “Have you anything to say for yourself, stranger?”

“Uh, well, yes, Your Majesty.” Harkin stepped forward and raised his chin defiantly. Kaythan felt a strange pride seeing it. “I’m here to request your assistance in defeating a mutual foe.”

“Mutual?” His father barked with ironic laughter. “Were it not for your untimely visit to our island, I don’t think we’d have ever seen this so-called wizard. You have made him a ‘mutual foe.’”

“Let him speak, brother,” Kaythan’s aunt said, laying a hand on the king’s forearm.

“Thank you, Your, um, Other Majesty,” Harkin said, bowing slightly. “The wizard in question is Chancewell Eldertalon.”

A hush fell over the room at the mention of the wizard’s name. “This cannot be so,” the king sputtered.

“I’m afraid it is.” Harkin glanced at Kaythan.

"Eldertalon is dead," Kaythan's uncle, Morlin, stated. "He was killed at the end of the Third Age."

"Everyone thought so," Harkin answered. "But he was biding his time, healing and accruing power."

Kaythan's father motioned for his advisors. Kaythan's uncle and the others ran up to the dais. The queen leaned in as they debated in whispered tones. Shayara ran up to join them.

"Is this good or bad?" Harkin asked.

"I'm not sure," Kaythan answered, drawing the words out slowly.

His father frowned as he looked from Kaythan to Harkin then leaned back into the conference. He shook his head and turned away from the huddle. Kaythan's mother pushed his father back in. "This is absurd," the king blurted. Shayara raised her finger violently and advanced on Kaythan's father. "Fine," he shouted and waved everyone away. The court waited breathlessly for their patriarch's verdict. "Kaythan," the king said.

"Father." Kaythan abandoned protocol.

"You're determined to help this blackgarde?" the king asked.

"I am." Kaythan stepped forward.

"What about this eye?" his father asked.

"I believe we should take it with us. If we can retrieve the Shadesilver, we can destroy the eye." Kaythan approached his father's throne. "If we destroy the eye, it will draw Eldertalon away from Aviar. Father, you must allow us this chance."

The king sighed and leaned back in his throne. "I do not love this plan." Kaythan's father shook his head. "But I cannot argue with it. If Eldertalon is truly among us, we need to stop him at any cost. Shayara assures me I have no hope of discouraging you from this foolishness."

"No, sir," Kaythan answered.

The king sighed once more. "I was afraid of that. I think I need to speak with Comino." He fixed his gaze on Kaythan. "I'm not going to stop you, son." The king paused. "But I am going to warn you. This is going to be extremely dangerous. I have faith in you, but as your father, I am frightened. I don't want to allow this, but I know I must not hinder you."

Kaythan nodded thankfully.

"I wish you luck, my son."

"Thank you, father. I will not disappoint you."

"I know, son." The king rose from his throne, walked over to Kaythan, and embraced him. "I know. Just come back to me, lad."

"I will, Father," he responded, hoping he wasn't lying. "I love you."

"I love you, too, son." The king released him.

Morlin joined them. "You'll take my boat."

"What?" Kaythan asked.

"You'll take my boat," his uncle said. "You'll have to visit the mainland for supplies before you continue on to Tivara. But it will cut your travel time in half. The Wavemen will make sure you get where you need to go."

"Uncle, are you sure?"

"Of course," Morlin answered. "We're equals. This will be your boat someday anyway."

"Thank you, Uncle." Kaythan embraced him gratefully.

"Anything to increase your chances of coming back to us," Morlin answered.

Kaythan's mother left her great chair to give Kaythan a hug and a kiss on each cheek. "My baby boy," she said, tears shining in her eyes. "Look how you've grown."

"Don't weep, Mother." Kaythan wipe a tear away from his mother's cheek with his thumb. He pressed his lips to her forehead and released her as his aunt, the queen, approached him. She held him at arm's length and smiled at him. "Auntie," he addressed her. Being the youngest of all the siblings, she still allowed him the luxury of the endearment.

"Little Kay. Not so little anymore." She kissed both his eyes in their traditional blessing custom. Then she pointed to the tattoo on her chest. It matched his father's chest tattoo and the one Kaythan wore on his upper right arm. It looked like a circle of four hearts all connected in the middle at their points. Each sprouted a symbol for one of the four islands of the Sky Tribe. "This." She touched his. "This means you are a part of something larger. Do not forget that, Little Kay. You are making your family and your kingdom

proud by accepting this burden. We thank you.” She kissed his eyes again before returning to her place on the dais.

Kaythan turned to find Shayara standing right next to him. “Are you absolutely positive you won’t allow me to join you?”

“Absolutely, sister.”

“Well, I’m still sending a few Swordhammers with you. The same ones that accompany Uncle Morlin on his ambassadorial journeys.”

“That’s fair,” Kaythan said with a nod. “I must gather my things for the trip.”

“Not yet,” Shayara said, motioning to something behind Kaythan. He turned to find all his siblings dismounting their skypanthars. They all rushed up to him to bid him farewell or offer blessings. Marthan insisted he allow two of the kingdom’s best archers to join them. Kaythan agreed reluctantly. Alara, Keeper of the War Birds, forced him to agree to take a regiment of the animals with him and Naythan, Steward of the Old Men, begged Kaythan to take a pair of the Battleapes to ease his mind. Kaythan declined.

“If I bring anyone or anything else with me, brother, the poor boat may sink beneath the weight of us.” His brother laughed half-heartedly at the joke, but respected Kaythan’s wishes. After finally saying good-bye to the last of his brothers, Kaythan led Harkin through Centre Royale to Kaythan’s rooms, where they gathered supplies for the journey.

Chapter Five

“What are the Wavemen that guy who gave you the boat mentioned?” Harkin asked as they walked toward the docks.

Kaythan shifted the pack on his back. “You do not know of the Wavemen? I suppose they don’t like the cold waters around Tivara. They are half-man, half-fish creatures who live beneath the waves and can speak to the denizens of the seas.”

“Mermen?” Harkin barked a laugh. “You’ve got to be joking.”

Kaythan shook his head. “Mermen? That’s an interesting term for them. They are a noble race. When the great society fell in the Third Age, they were integral in relocating the Sky Tribe to the Four Islands. Without their help, it would have taken my people much longer to reach sanctuary.”

“How so?” Harkin asked.

“Most ships rely on wind to propel them, but with the aid of the Wavemen, who harnessed whales and other large sea creatures to drag our ships, our people escaped quickly and safely to the Four Islands.”

“That’s bloody insane.” Harkin clapped his hands and laughed. “So we’re going to be traveling on a whale-drawn ship?”

“Yes.”

“Your people should look into steamcraft,” Harkin suggested with a chuckle. “Coal power instead of whale power. You wouldn’t have to make deals with magical creatures.”

“Our pact with the Wavemen is mutually beneficial.” Kaythan paused. “What is steamcraft?”

“Industrialization,” Harkin answered. “After magic began to die out after the Third Age, people had to invent ways to do the things that magic used to. They’ve built great machines and discovered new fuels to power them.”

“I’ve heard some references to such things from Morlin. He says the new practices are filthy and they spew dirt and poison into the air.”

Harkin shrugged. “It’s the price we pay for modern convenience.”

“Seems like a heavy price to pay—” Kaythan’s response was interrupted by a commotion atop the watchtower they were passing at that moment. Kaythan

looked up to see the guardes pointing to the west. He scrambled up the ladder with Harkin at his heels. "What is it?" he asked as they reached the platform at the top.

"Something strange, m'laird." The man passed Kaythan a spyglass and he looked through it. What he saw on the horizon disturbed him to say the least: a giant cloud, a storm raging across the distance with some kind of deck floating on top of it. Skyfire erupted from within the cloud, and danced between the cloud and the surface of the ocean.

Harkin snatched the spyglass next. "Eldertalon. That's his Stormship."

"We need to leave immediately," Kaythan said.

"Agreed." Harkin handed the garde his spyglass.

"Alert Shayara, sound a general alarm," Kaythan told the garde. "The wizard is still a few days away, but we should prepare our defenses."

"Aye, m'laird." The garde tipped a salute even as Kaythan descended the ladder. He and Harkin ran the rest of the way to Morlin's boat. When they arrived at the dock, men were already loading supplies and making ready to set sail. Kaythan threw his pack on board and urged them to move faster. He ran over to the edge of the dock to speak to a man in the water, who had pale green skin and tangled hair. Kaythan could see Harkin's shocked expression from the corner of his eye. Kaythan explained the situation with the wizard and his Stormship, the need for immediate departure. The Waveman nodded and called out to three others that floated in the water nearby. They flapped their large tailfins, swimming about two enormous swiftwhales in front of the boat. They fastened the immense harnesses with dexterity and speed.

"Bloody hell. Mermen."

"Don't just stand there," Kaythan told Harkin. "Lend a hand." Kaythan didn't wait, he dashed about carrying boxes, securing riggings, and making sure they were ready to launch.

"M'laird." The captaine approached. "We're all set here."

"Good, let us be on our way." Kaythan leaned over the rail of the boat to speak with the Waveman.

The Waveman raised a webbed hand. "Everything is ready, Friend Kay. I have instructed Angla and Arbla on where to take you and the need for swiftness."

“Thank you, my friend. And please be sure to pass that along to Angla and Arbla, as well.”

The Waveman nodded and disappeared beneath the water. “Cast off,” the captain called. “And brace yerselves!” The ropes were tossed to the men on the docks. The swiftwhales simultaneously spouted water from their blowholes, and the boat lurched forward in their wake. The ship launched into the air several times before the great beasts found a mutual rhythm and the tossing evened out. Kaythan stood at the stern of the vessel and watched the only home he'd ever known retreat into the distance.

“Are you all right?” Harkin asked. The ship jerked and Harkin stumbled, grabbing hold of Kaythan to steady himself. “Sorry.”

“It's fine,” Kaythan said. The rocking of the ship was not unlike the rocking of the rope bridges and platforms of his tree kingdom when a good wind blew through the island. He stood fairly steadily. “I have never been off my island.”

“I gathered that.”

“It has been my entire world for so long. Of course, I know there is more out here, but I've never seen it from this angle before.” Kaythan closed his eyes and breathed in the salty scent of the sea air. “It looks so small,” he said when he opened his eyes.

“I know the feeling,” Harkin said, squeezing Kaythan's shoulder. “I felt the same way the first time I left my island, though I was much younger. You're afraid you'll never see it again.”

“It is a possibility.” Kaythan sighed. “But this is something I must do.” Kaythan turned slightly to the right. “That bothers me more.” He pointed to the barely visible ball of bad weather looming inexorably near the horizon.

“He's headed straight for your island.”

“And there's nothing I can do about it.” Kaythan slammed his fist on the rail.

Harkin backed away from him. “That might not be accurate.”

Kaythan glanced over his shoulder. “Explain.” He noticed Harkin had the box with the eye in his hands, worrying it, spinning it thoughtfully. “What?”

“Well, Eldertalon's following a trail to the last place he sensed his eye, right?”

“Presumably.” Kaythan turned to regard Harkin.

"We're moving faster than the Stormship." Harkin held up the box. "If we open this, he'll know his eye isn't on your island any longer, and he'll change direction, follow us."

"That's a fair idea. What about the damage last time?" Kaythan reached out and touched the box. "If that happens here, it will cripple the boat."

"Damn." Harkin slumped, defeated.

Kaythan folded his arms and watched the wake of the boat stretch out behind them. "I think I may have a solution." Kaythan offered Harkin a wide smile.

"I'm not going to like this, am I?" Harkin asked.

Kaythan, still smiling, shook his head.

Nearly an hour later, Harkin pulled at the ropes crisscrossing his torso in a makeshift harness. "Do you really think this is going to work?" he asked, obviously unconvinced.

Kaythan nodded as he double-checked his knots and the sail attached to Harkin's harness. "Do you know what a kite is?"

"Of course I know what a kite is." Harkin rolled his eyes. "It's a children's toy."

"My siblings and I used to fly them all the time in the windy season. Sometimes the Old Men in the Trees would jump onto them and ride. This is the same idea."

"I'm not a monkey!" Harkin protested.

"No. But this is not a child-sized kite." Kaythan fastened the opposite end of the rope to the boat. "You'll be able to avoid the skyfire?"

"Lightning," Harkin answered. "We call it lightning, and yes, I think so. I managed to last time."

"Very well. I'm satisfied that your tether is secure. Are you ready?"

"Hell no." Harkin pulled at the rope tied to the boat, then nodded. "But I guess we may as well get this over with."

Kaythan motioned a few of the guardes over and showed them where to hold the rope. "Now all you have to do is climb up on the rail and jump into the air. The wind should do the rest."

"This is crazy," Harkin grumbled, but climbed up on the rail. "Here goes everything." He closed his eyes and jumped up. The wind did indeed do the rest. The sail strapped to Harkin's back snapped open and lifted him into the air behind the boat. The guardes fought to keep hold of the rope and stay on their feet. Kaythan hopped on and held the rope as well.

"All right, feed him a bit more," Kaythan said. They all released the rope little by little, allowing the wind to lift Harkin higher. Kaythan had been right; the contraption worked just like a child's kite, and surprisingly, Harkin looked like he was enjoying himself. He whooped as a crosswind swooped him to the side. "Stop having fun," Kaythan shouted with a smirk. "Let the rest of the rope out." They did, until the only thing holding the rope was the railing it was tied around.

Kaythan couldn't suppress a laugh at Harkin's unguarded enjoyment at flapping around behind the boat. He let him enjoy the ride for a moment before he shouted for Harkin to open the box with the eye in it.

"Brace yourselves," he shouted. Harkin extended his arms to the side and opened the box. A purple bolt of skyfire exploded from the eye, and the force of the eruption knocked everyone on deck off their feet. Harkin spun in the air at the end of his rope. Kaythan pulled himself up to his elbows just in time to see the eye tumble out of the box. Harkin reached for it. The morbid orb danced across Harkin's fingertips and almost tumbled into the sea, but at the last moment, a gust of wind pushed Harkin close enough to grab it. He managed to get the eye back into the box just as a second bolt and wave of force ripped through the air before managing to seal it in. "Pull me in!"

Kaythan and the guardes got back to their feet and reeled Harkin in. When he was within reach, Kaythan grabbed him and dragged him over the railing. The force and weight of Harkin's body tipped Kaythan's balance, and they tumbled to the deck, Harkin on top. "Thanks," Harkin said, his face nearly touching Kaythan's.

"You do not need to thank me. We are in this together now." He pushed Harkin off and sat up. Kaythan picked open the knots on Harkin's harness, freeing him. "That could have gone much worse," he said, standing and offering Harkin a hand. They both rushed to the side of the boat. "Is it changing course?"

"I can't tell," Harkin said with a shake of his head. "Not at this angle."

"Then we can only hope for the best," Kaythan said with a sigh.

“We’ll know soon enough,” the captaine said, surprising Kaythan and Harkin. They turned toward the man. “The island will soon be out of sight. If that giant, demon-storm remains visible, we’ll know it’s following us. For good or ill.”

They turned back, staring out over the water, hoping for one of the most dangerous men to ever live to decide to pursue them instead of attacking Aviar.

Chapter Six

The captain's theory proved correct after a few hours. Aviar disappeared but the Stormship remained in sight. Daylight steadily bled out of the sky, making the lightning of their pursuer easier to see. Kaythan constantly paced the deck of the ship. The guards prepared a simple meal and tried to coax him to join them, but he refused. Harkin walked over with a half-loaf of bread, a bit of cheese, and some dried meat. He thrust it into Kaythan's hands without warning. "Eat," he said.

"I'm not hungry." Kaythan tried to return the food, but Harkin refused.

"Eat, damn it." He sat down on the railing.

Kaythan scowled at Harkin for a moment before he dropped to the deck, crossing his legs and sitting. "Yes, mother." Kaythan tore a bit of bread from the loaf.

"Cute," Harkin said. "But at least you're eating."

"Thank you," Kaythan said around a mouthful of cheese and jerky.

"Someone told me we're in this together now," Harkin said, leaving his perch on the railing to sit next to Kaythan. "You don't need to thank me." He leaned his shoulder against Kaythan's.

"You are very friendly." Kaythan continued to work at his meal.

"We have some time to kill, don't we?" Harkin asked with a smoldering gaze. "Where are we headed?"

"My uncle's regular stop, Port Fenril." He tore a bit of bread off and slapped a piece of cheese on it. He bit into it, chewing diligently.

Harkin held out a wine skin. "Here, wash it down."

Kaythan accepted the drink. The wine tasted of citrus fruits and baking spice. "Thank you."

"It's the least I can do," Harkin said. "You've gambled your life to help me, a complete stranger. I'd do anything to repay you."

Kaythan relayed Comino's prophecy and how he thought it pertained to Harkin. "So you see? This is my destiny."

"I don't believe in destiny," Harkin said. "I believe all men are the masters of their own fate."

"I respect that," Kaythan told him.

"So, Port Fenril. Are you familiar?" Harkin asked.

"Not really."

"I think you'll hate it."

"Why?"

"Well, it's filled with brothels, gambling houses, and popium dens. It's a place where villains, thieves, and cutthroats meet and negotiate." Harkin took another pull from his wineskin. "There are factories and fisheries, blacksmiths and bustling neighborhoods that spew black poison into the air."

Kaythan shivered. "That sounds dreadful."

"Aye, it is, but there's no better place on the mainland to shop for goods. That must be the reason your uncle stops there." One of the Warbirds screeched, drawing Harkin's attention. "Your Warbirds are bloody impressive." He stood and walked toward the bird on the nearest railing. He held his hand out, testing the creature's trust. It did not lash out at him or snap. He gently stroked the shiny, pitch-black feathers with their green-blue iridescence. "They're enormous."

"The shadowings are our most effective Warbirds," Kaythan explained.

"We have these birds on the mainlands," Harkin said. "They aren't nearly as large and we call them ravens."

"Ravens?" Kaythan repeated. "That is a beautiful name."

"The mainland isn't all bad," Harkin said, continuing to stroke the Warbird. "It has its charms."

Kaythan watched Harkin with a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. He finished off the meal Harkin had provided. "It's shaping up to be a splendid evening."

"Aye, that it is," Harkin responded, leaning back on the rail of the ship. He gazed lustily at Kaythan, and the heat in that gaze made Kaythan feel exhilarated and apprehensive at the same time. He wanted to melt into that gaze, to surrender to it, and that scared him a little. He jumped up, forced a yawn, and excused himself. "I think it is time for me to turn in. It has been a very long day and promises to be a long journey."

Harkin opened his mouth to say something, but Kaythan interrupted him, said goodnight, and retreated to his quarters in the cabin. He lay for a few

moments, contemplating what he had just done, but he was truly exhausted, and his eyes grew heavy and he fell into a deep sleep.

Kaythan kept his contact with Harkin to a minimum for the next few weeks. He awoke and stretched as he walked onto deck in the bright, morning sunshine. The warm light felt good on his skin in the cool morning air. The crew already bustled about, taking care of all the little jobs required daily on boats. Kaythan had offered each day to help with those chores, but the captain and crew emphatically denied him each time, saying they had everything under control, and the prince need not worry about such things. It only served to make him more impatient.

Kaythan stopped in his tracks as he turned the corner of the cabin. Harkin, naked to his waist, stood on the railing, retying a knot that had worked loose on the riggings. Kaythan stared at the muscles flexing beneath Harkin's pale skin. He was nothing like the guards that Kaythan sometimes trained with and sometimes just watched train. They were big, dark men; Harkin was much leaner, much paler, and Kaythan couldn't take his eyes off him.

Harkin turned, finished with his knot work. When he noticed Kaythan, he hopped off the rail and smiled widely. He pushed the errant lock of hair from in front of his eye. "Like what you see, m'laird?" Harkin drizzled a bit of sarcasm on the "m'laird".

"What? I—No. I mean yes. I mean, you look fine," Kaythan sputtered, caught in the act of staring.

"Calm down, Kay," Harkin said with a laugh and picked up his tunic. "I'm not accusing you of anything. And not to worry, I can't have this fair skin exposed any longer, or I'll burn to a crisp. You can put your eyes back in your head." He smirked like the skypanthar that ate the scribewing.

"You are a budgering troublemaker," Kaythan barked.

"Guilty." Harkin held his hands up in surrender.

"What's burning? How will your skin burn?"

"From the sun." Harkin finished buckling his tunic and leaned against the rail. "I suppose your people don't really burn. Your skin is made to be in the heat and sun."

"Ah. Yes. I see what you mean." Kaythan shifted from foot to foot.

“Why are you suddenly so nervous around me, Kaythan?”

“I—” Kaythan opened his mouth to answer but reconsidered. Back home on the island, if Harkin were one of his people, he would just tell him how he felt. There was little to no deception among them. Love, physical affection, was never discouraged in their society. Kaythan remembered Morlin and some of the other Aviarans who had visited the mainlands speaking of their rampant dishonesty. Harkin had been honest with Kaythan so far though, at least as far as he knew, and he had no reason to return that trust with dishonesty. “I am attracted to you.”

“Really?” Harkin stood up, obviously interested. “I had no idea.”

“I’m not unfamiliar with sarcasm, Harkin.”

“Can we find a place to sit, talk?”

“Of course,” Kaythan said, dropping to the deck and folding his legs beneath him.

“Ah. All right.” Harkin joined him, his back against the rail. “Have you always been attracted to men?”

Kaythan nodded. “As a small boy, I kissed a girl. That was the last time I tried anything like that.”

“I’m attracted to men as well,” Harkin explained. “But on the mainlands, it’s frowned upon.” Harkin frowned, obviously thinking. “That might be putting it too lightly. There are certain factions and societies that find people with our tastes to be abominations, monsters. They feel completely justified to harm us, even kill us.”

“That is barbaric,” Kaythan gasped. “Morlin mentioned some people who did not share our beliefs about the nature of love, but he never went into detail.”

“Perhaps he was trying to protect you from the ugliness of the world outside your island.”

“Perhaps,” Kaythan agreed. He sat with his chin resting on his knuckles.

“Did you miss the part where I said I was attracted to men?” Harkin asked.

“Are you attracted to me?”

Harkin smirked and shook his head. “I’m not used to this directness and honesty.”

Kaythan remained silent, only regarding Harkin.

"You don't even blink," Harkin observed. He sighed. "Yes, Kaythan. I am attracted to you. I was from the moment I saw you."

"Hm." Kaythan raised an eyebrow. "I found you intriguing. But I hadn't realized I was physically attracted to you until you fell on top of me the other day."

"Ouch," Harkin said. "You don't pull any punches, just say exactly what you think."

"Is that a good thing, or a bad thing?"

Harkin laughed. "I'm not sure. I love it and hate it a little bit."

"I appreciate your honesty." Kaythan rose to his knees and crawled over to Harkin. "May I kiss you?"

Harkin's feline smile returned. "Please."

"Hm. No. I'm not ready yet." Kaythan jumped to his feet.

"You're teasing me!" Harkin braced himself on the railing and stood as well. "You bloody bastard."

Kaythan laughed. "I am playing difficult to acquire."

"Do you mean 'hard to get'?"

"Probably."

"Well, stop it," Harkin snarled.

Kaythan shrugged. "Very well." He leaned in and cradled Harkin's face, pressing his full lips to Harkin's thinner lips. They kissed tentatively at first, before Harkin's fingers ventured into Kaythan's dreadlocks. When he gripped the dark tendrils of Kaythan's hair, the kissing grew a little more desperate, more frantic, until Kaythan pulled back, dragging Harkin's bottom lip until it popped away. "That was delightful," Kaythan stated, dreamily.

"Mm." Harkin's eyes were closed and a lazy smile sat across his lips.

"You have an interesting taste." Kaythan licked his lips. "I like it."

Harkin laughed. "You're a mystery to me, m'laird. You seem so liberated sexually while remaining refreshingly naïve about the world outside your island." Harkin twisted one of Kaythan's dreads in his fingers. "I find that pretty amazing."

"You should spend the night in my cabin," Kaythan suggested.

“I would like that,” Harkin whispered with a sultry smile.

“Yes. You would.”

Harkin laughed. “When we reach Port Fenril, you may want to rein that in. Don’t forget about those groups of people who will not tolerate intimacy between two men.”

“I will keep that in mind.”

That night, Harkin eagerly visited Kaythan’s cabin.

Chapter Seven

Kaythan woke to a commotion. He untangled himself from Harkin's limbs, pulled on his trousers and vest, then walked out onto the deck. He looked out over the bow of the ship. A dark cloud loomed on the horizon. No skyfire or lighting blossomed from it, but Kaythan still wondered how the Stormship could have maneuvered ahead of them. Kaythan heard the soft pad of bare feet before he felt arms wrap around his midsection. Harkin kissed his shoulder. "What is it?" he asked.

"I don't know," Kaythan answered. "What am I seeing?" He pointed to the dark cloud.

Harkin released Kaythan and stepped in front of him. He raised his hand to his brow, shading his eyes. "You're seeing Port Fenril," Harkin answered. "Or at least the pollution that hangs above it."

Kaythan grimaced. "That is terrible."

"You have no idea," Harkin said with a sigh before he retreated once more into Kaythan's cabin. Kaythan regarded their destination for another moment then followed Harkin.

Kaythan and Harkin helped the sailors prepare for docking as they approached the bay of Port Fenril. The captain spoke into a brass tube that led beneath the water so the swiftwhales could hear the command the Wavemen had taught him. They slowed immediately and guided the boat into the docks.

Kaythan stood at the port rail, his mouth gaping. He'd never seen anything like the city before him. Metal, bricks, and glass spread out before him in a hazy mist of smoke and pollution. Black clouds spewed from chimneys. Kaythan said a secret prayer, thankful that his people had shunned this way of life. They'd discussed it at one point and decided they could live more simply, more cleanly, and seeing this blighted city inspired pride in his home.

The ship bumped on the boards as the swiftwhales towed them into the docks. The captain approached Kaythan and Harkin. "We're going to dock here for a few hours while we restock our supplies. You may stay on the boat or explore the city. Just be sure you are returned by sunset and be careful."

“We will. Thank you, Captaine.” Kaythan watched the dock grow steadily closer. When it was close enough, he jumped over the side of the boat and ran out into the city.

Harkin jogged at his heels. “Kaythan, wait up!”

He shouldn't have worried, because Kaythan nearly doubled over seconds later, coughing and choking on the filthy air of Port Fenril. “My chest and eyes are burning,” Kaythan sputtered, tears streaming down his face.

“That'll be the smog,” Harkin said, rubbing Kaythan's back until he was able to get his coughing under control.

“How do people live like this?” Kaythan made a disgusted face. “The air even tastes horrible.”

“Are you all right now?”

Kaythan nodded and continued walking more slowly. “I do not understand this place.” Kaythan looked all around him at the shoddy, mismatched structures. On some he could see where salvaged ship parts had been incorporated into the buildings. He had never seen buildings made of stone and metal. “Everything looks so heavy.”

Harkin laughed. “How do you mean?”

“When we build our homes, we build them to move and grow with our trees. These are just planted.”

“You know, if we brought these people to your island, they might think the way you live is strange.”

“That is a fair point.” Kaythan continued to gaze about. The giant factories spewing their filth into the air almost frightened him; they were so alien to his way of thinking. “How did you get to my island?”

“What?” Harkin had stopped at a cart and bought two sleeves of food. He handed one to Kaythan.

“What is this?” Kaythan sniffed at the meal. It didn't smell awful.

“Fish and chips,” Harkin said. “It's battered fish and potatoes, fried. Try it.”

Kaythan took a tentative bite. His face lit up. “I like this.”

Harkin nodded with a satisfied smile. “Everyone likes this.” He took a large bite from his own portion.

"You did not answer my question," Kaythan said around a mouthful of fish and chips. "How did you get to my island?"

"It wasn't bloody easy," Harkin answered. "There are a lot of people who don't even believe your island exists."

"But my uncle comes to the mainlands from time to time." Kaythan happily chomped on his chips.

Harkin shrugged. "I'm sure your uncle doesn't deal with the common folks. There's quite a gulf between the rich and the poor on the continent. The average man on the streets isn't educated. They believe what they're told, and someone along the line decided to tell them that the Four Kingdoms were a faerie story."

"Odd," Kaythan said. "Back to your story." He motioned for Harkin to continue.

"Even those that believe your islands exist don't believe there's any way for outsiders to reach them. I couldn't charter a ship to carry me there. So I took a job on a merchant vessel that I believed would pass very near to the island closest to this side of the continent. That just happened to be yours. Based on what I could gather about the location, I waited until the ship was as close as it would get and I stole a lifeboat. Paddled the rest of the way."

"What if you had been wrong?" Kaythan asked.

Harkin took Kaythan's empty paper wrap and balled it up with his own. He tossed both into the gutter. "I don't know."

"That doesn't seem wise."

"Desperate measures, I suppose," Harkin said with a dismissive shrug.

Kaythan shivered. He hadn't expected the mainlands to be so much cooler than his island.

"You're cold," Harkin said. "Let's find a shop and get you some warmer clothes." Harkin guided Kaythan down a side street, not much more than an alleyway.

It appeared deserted, but when they reached the middle, they passed a dark recess in one of the buildings and a gravelly voice drifted out. "Well, well, well, if ain't Janze Harkin." A big, bald man emerged from the darkness. He looked rough, dirty.

"Hello, Gurnst." Harkin took a nearly imperceptible step back.

Another man, a bit smaller, just as rough and dirty, but with slightly more hair, appeared at Gurnst's shoulder. He smiled and Kaythan winced at the row of filthy teeth in his mouth. "Oy, Janzey," the smaller man said, his voice oozing menace.

"Mr. Ficks. I'd like to say it's good to see you, but we both know that's not true."

"Oh, there's that smart mouth we all love." Mr. Ficks said *mouf* instead of mouth.

Harkin pressed his hand back, urging Kaythan to retreat, but when Kaythan glanced over his shoulder, he noticed another man had moved into the mouth of the alley, cutting them off from their escape. "Not that way," Kaythan whispered. His hands fell instinctively to his daggers, readying himself for an attack.

"Look, Ficks, I don't want any trouble."

"Well, that's too bad in't it? Because I owe you some trouble, me fine lad. And Mr. Ficks always pays his debts. Do it quiet, Gurnst."

Gurnst cracked his knuckles and Harkin whispered, "Close your eyes."

Kaythan was confused but he did as Harkin instructed. His eyes were only shut for a heartbeat before Harkin yelled, "Run!" Kaythan opened his eyes to see Ficks and Gurnst covering theirs as Harkin barreled past them. Kaythan followed, elbowing Gurnst as he ran by. Ficks had fallen and Kaythan leapt over him. He yelped as he was suddenly dragged back by his hair. He spun, kicking Gurnst in the jaw and forcing the man to release his dreads. Kaythan followed through with a punch to the man's temple, knocking the dirt-rag unconscious.

From the corner of his eye, Kaythan saw a flash of metal. He pulled his daggers out, but Harkin returned with a kick to the back of Ficks's head before the villain could lash out with the blade. It fell uselessly to the ground. The man at the other end of the alley decided to give the job up as a loss and ran off. "Thank you," Kaythan said, more out of breath than he should have been from the minor workout.

"No need to thank me." Harkin touched the side of Kaythan's face. Kaythan's heart skipped at the contact. "It's my fault the filthy beggars attacked us in the first place."

"Why did they?" Kaythan asked as they left their attackers sprawled in the alley.

“Ah, let’s just say when you make your living as a thief, you’re forced to cross paths with some rather unsavory characters from time to time.” Harkin pointed to a shabby wooden sign with a picture of a needle and a spool of thread. “We were both hired by different men to steal the same thing. I was just better than they were. Their boss wasn’t pleased.” He smiled at Kaythan as he opened the door to the shop.

“If you are better than them, why do they blame you? Why don’t they become better?” Kaythan followed Harkin into the cramped, cluttered store.

Harkin laughed. “Life isn’t so simple, I suppose. Not out here.” He held up a long coat. “What do you think of this?”

Kaythan touched the fabric. It felt like the animal skins they tanned on the island, but much thicker and heavier. “It is not beautiful.” He tried it on. “Too constricting. I feel like I cannot move in it.”

“It’s not beautiful, but it will keep you warm. And as you wear it, it’ll get easier to move around in.”

“What about this?” Kaythan asked and pulled on a silvery-gray cloak, complete with a hood and shoulder cape. He shrugged out of the coat and slipped into the cloak. The fur lining felt warm and soft. “This will keep me warm and,” he said, throwing the cloak open and demonstrating, “when I need to move, I will be unhindered.”

Harkin nodded approvingly. “It’s a fine cloak. Good wool. Even if it gets wet, it will keep you warm.”

“And it looks similar to yours.” Kaythan lifted the hem of Harkin’s cloak. The material slid through his fingers like liquid. “Yours is not good wool, though.”

“No. It isn’t,” Harkin answered with a chuckle. “You might want to invest in a pair of boots as well.”

Kaythan looked down at his light, high-ankled, open-toed shoes. “Must I?” he asked.

“No. But the Night Island is quite far north and it can get rather cold.”

“The Night Island?” The storekeeper who had remained so silent, Kaythan thought him dozing, suddenly jumped up from his stool. “Are you out of your bloody minds?” He limped around his counter and approached them. “Cursed it is. Filled with assassins, monsters, and Nightmen.”

"Yes, yes, we've heard all the stories, old timer," Harkin said, rolling his eyes. "How much for the cloak?" Harkin and the shopkeeper haggled over the price for a few moments before they reached a compromise and Harkin passed the man a couple of coins. He and Kaythan walked toward the door. Harkin stopped suddenly and picked up a pair of boots. He held them up for the shopkeeper to see and tossed another coin through the air to the man. "Just in case," Harkin said, leaning toward Kaythan.

"Thank you, Harkin." Kaythan pulled the cloak around him tighter once they were on the cobblestones of the street again. "I will have the captain return your coin from my uncle's purse."

"Not necessary. Consider them gifts."

Kaythan smiled. "Are you taking care of me now?" He bumped playfully against Harkin's shoulder.

Harkin sniffed a little laugh and bumped him back. "I just want you to be warm." He dropped his voice to a whisper. "Be careful showing affection. Don't forget what I told you back on the boat."

"I haven't." Kaythan peered around at the booths as they walked along the main street. "What was that flash you made with your hand? You did it to Shayara and me, and I think you did it back in that alley as well."

"I did."

"How?"

"Magic."

"No. Really. How?"

"Magic. Really." Harkin stole a glance at Kaythan, who had stopped walking and stared wide-eyed at him. "Keep walking." Kaythan did. "It's not a big deal. I know a few simple spells. Most of my people do."

"This is all very overwhelming," Kaythan said.

"We should get back to the boat. I'm sure Mr. Ficks and Gurnst are back on their feet by now, and they're going to be looking for us."

"You should open that box again before we leave port," Kaythan suggested.

"Mm. That's a good idea. Eldertalon will stop here and waste some time trying to find his eye."

“We should find somewhere secluded.”

“I know just the place,” Harkin said and ran toward a rock outcropping overlooking the bay.

Chapter Eight

After opening the box and running all the way back to the boat, Kaythan and Harkin helped load the rest of the supplies so they could be underway two hours ahead of schedule. As the boat pulled away from the docks, Kaythan and Harkin retired to Kay's cabin. Harkin emptied his pockets on the bed.

"What's all this?" Kaythan asked, shedding his cloak.

"Stuff I snatched while we were in Port Fenril."

"What? You stole all this?" Kaythan dropped his cloak. "Why?"

Harkin regarded Kaythan for a moment before clucking his teeth and answering. "Thief," he said, pointing at himself with his thumbs. "You can't be upset with me. You knew I was a thief. What did you expect?"

Kaythan shook his head. "My apologies. I have no right to judge."

"Really?" Harkin asked.

"Really. It's your nature. It is not my place to reprimand you for that."

"You're a little too good to be true, you know that?" Harkin lounged on the bed among his pilfered spoils.

"You think I'm being dishonest?" Kaythan asked.

"Not at all," Harkin said with a smirk. "I think you're adorable." He grabbed a bottle of wine, popped the cork and took a swig. "Wine?"

Kaythan looked at the bottle apprehensively for a moment, shrugged, took it, and drank. "It's good." They spent the rest of the afternoon and evening talking in the cabin.

The journey northward proceeded easily and without incident. The speed of the swiftwhales shaved months off their voyage and the farther north they traveled, the more grateful Kaythan was for his new cloak. He'd also given in and started wearing the boots Harkin had bought. They caught a glimpse of the Stormship before Port Fenril disappeared completely from view.

They spotted other ships soon after leaving the port, but the ocean traffic had tapered off to nothing. A few days away from Tivara, the night that enshrouded the island kingdom became visible during daylight. Kaythan spent

hours staring at the strange and improbable sight. His breath misted in clouds in front of his face, something he'd never experienced before but the captain explained it for him. Luckily for Kaythan, the sailors were used to sailing into colder climates and had extra warmer clothes they loaned to him. He felt constricted under all the layers, but he was thankful for the warmth.

He felt a familiar set of arms snake around his ribs and Harkin rested his chin on Kaythan's shoulder. "Why don't you come inside the cabin? It's nice and warm. And I know this cold is making you crazy."

Kaythan could see the frosty puffs of breath from Harkin's words. "I've heard about Tivara and its perpetual night my entire life, and I never questioned it. It's just something that was. I never wondered what caused it, but now, seeing it... It's impossible. I thought it was some natural occurrence, but this, what is this? Is the island truly cursed?"

"No." Harkin released him and stood next to him, his elbows resting on the railing. "Kind of. It's complicated actually."

Kaythan turned to look at Harkin, sparing just a moment to admire his profile. "Are you telling me my people living on Tivara are cursed?"

"No." Harkin stood and looked into Kaythan's eyes. "The island has been shrouded in darkness since long before your people came to it."

"Please explain."

Harkin sighed. "This may or may not be true, Kay, but it is what I was told as a child."

"Go on."

"The island was the site of a great battle. Two sorcerer-lairds used the island to stage a grand duel with amazing feats of magic, enormous war machines, and opposing armies. The duel raged for seven years."

"Seven?"

"I told you it may or may not be true. It's the story I was told."

"Sorry," Kaythan said.

"It's all right. I know it sounds preposterous." Harkin paused, squinting at the darkness in the distance. "Anyway, the duel raged for seven years. At some point, one of the wizards cast a 'spell of eternal night.' That's why the island is trapped in darkness."

“So what happened? Who won?”

“No one,” Harkin stated.

“What?”

“The wizards killed one another before the duel was settled. The armies continued to fight in the darkness until they learned that both their patrons were gone. They’d become experts at night-fighting, stealth.”

“They were your people,” Kaythan guessed.

Harkin nodded. “Not at that point, but, yes. The armies dwindled and eventually reached a truce, melded, became one army, one tribe, one civilization. They eventually repaired the ships that had originally carried them to the island and began selling their unique skill sets to the highest bidder. The fact that they operated primarily at night and from the shadows made it easy for people to deny their existence and relegate them to myth.”

“The world is infinitely more complicated than I could imagine,” Kaythan said.

“My people lived on that island for generations undisturbed. Then, at the end of the Third Age, your people showed up looking for a place to live. Our elders and your elders agreed to share the island, my people on the ground, your people in the trees. And it has been so ever since.” Harkin sighed. “Or at least it had been so, until my people started disappearing.”

“So the island is ensorcelled?”

“That was your take away?”

“I thought magic did not outlive the caster,” Kaythan said.

“Normally that is true.” Harkin nodded as he paced the deck. “But there are charms, wards, spells that can be constructed to draw power from the environment rather than the caster.”

“This is a whole new world to me.” Kaythan gazed once again at the looming darkness.

“Kaythan,” Harkin said, his voice gravelly with emotion. “I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry I dragged you into this.”

Kaythan caressed Harkin’s cheek. “You’ve nothing to apologize for.”

“I do. If I had gone right to the source, gone home, not bothered you or your island, you wouldn’t be in this situation. Your life wouldn’t be in danger right now.”

“But then I wouldn’t have met you,” Kaythan said. “And I wouldn’t trade that for anything, even my own safety.”

Harkin pulled Kaythan into a warm embrace and Kay melted into Harkin’s arms.

Kaythan stared at the wall of night they sailed toward. The swiftwhales slowed at the command of the captain. The bow of the ship pierced the bubble of dark. Kaythan half-believed the boat would meet resistance when it touched the dark but it glided easily through. He retreated from the shroud of darkness, step-by-step, avoided it as long as he could, his butt finally bumping against the aft rail. He closed his eyes and tried to feel the transition from light to dark. There it was: the slightly cooler air as the absence of light enveloped him.

The boat docked. The crew dashed about securing it. A few men from the land of night joined them, doing what they could to assist them. Kaythan disembarked as a man dressed all in black leather, with a scarf and goggles approached them. He was bald with skin much the color of Kaythan’s. Kaythan recognized the emblem of the Royal Tivaran Guard. “Hail, brother,” Kaythan said as they met on the dock. “I am Kaythan of Aviar. I have come to speak to your king.”

“Well met, brother. I am Kass.” They embraced quickly as was the custom of their people. “We were not expecting a visit from our southern brothers. Where is Master Morlin?” Kass craned his head, presumably to look for Kaythan’s uncle. “What’s this? Janze Harkin?”

“Ah, hello, Kass. It’s good to see you.”

“Something is wrong.” Kass grimaced in Harkin’s direction.

“It appears your reputation precedes you,” Kaythan muttered over his shoulder.

“Ha. Ha,” Harkin replied sarcastically.

“You are correct, Kass. We come to you in dire need. We are pursued by the wizard, Chancewell Eldertalon.”

“Budge!” Kass spat. “What have you done?” He advanced on Harkin.

“Me? Why do you just assume it’s my fault?” Harkin took a step back.

“Because I am no fool. Is it not your fault?”

"No. It's my fault," Harkin confessed.

"Budge!" Kass swore again. "Eldertalon is coming here?"

"I'm afraid so," Kaythan answered.

"This is an unbelievable amount of trouble, even for you, Harkin," Kass growled.

"We must speak with King Gnolin," Kaythan said.

"My father," Kass said. "Yes, I agree. Come, I will take you directly to him."

They followed Kass into the forest. Kaythan noticed that as soon as they'd moved away from the water, the island air felt noticeably warmer; nothing like on Aviar, but warmer. "It's warmer," he said.

"Yes, there are natural hot springs on the island and a few dormant fire mountains," Kass explained as they walked.

"Volcanoes," Harkin added. "On the continent they call them volcanoes."

"Fascinating," Kass grumbled, jumping onto a series of pegs running up the trunk of a tree. He climbed nimbly. Kaythan and Harkin followed slightly less nimbly. When they reached the platform, Kass already waited for them. The wood and trees were darker than those on Aviar. They had silver leaves. Kaythan knew they were in a hurry, but he couldn't help but look around at all the things that at once were so alien and yet so familiar. The rope bridges were similar to those on Aviar but they were covered almost like tubes that ran through the trees. The structures weren't as open and airy as the homes he was used to. Everywhere he looked there were points of light: bugs with luminescent tails, glowing moss, fruits and flowers that shone with their own radiance. He found it beautiful. "Can you fly?" Kass interrupted Kaythan's thoughts.

"Of course," Kaythan answered, his gaze drifting up. What he saw shocked and elated him. "I'd heard of them." Kaythan's voice was that of a child with a new toy. "But I never imagined how beautiful they would be." He ran over to the leatherwing that perched hanging upside down from a branch near the platform and wrapped his arms around it. The creature flapped, startled by Kaythan's attention, then yawned and leaned in so Kaythan could scratch it. The brown-gray fur on its body was so soft Kaythan couldn't help but run his cheek against it.

"Bats," Harkin said, smiling at Kaythan's unabashed joy. "On the continent, they call these bats, but they're a lot smaller." Harkin held his hands three inches apart to demonstrate.

"Is time still of the essence?" Kass asked, tapping his foot.

"My apologies," Kaythan said, color rising in his cheeks.

"Can you carry the troublemaker?" Kass hooked a thumb at Harkin.

"I can carry the troublemaker."

"Hey!" Harkin barked. "I'm standing right here."

"Follow me." Kass jumped on the second leatherwing and swooped off.

Kaythan mimicked the way Kass gripped the leatherwing around the neck and flipped. Harkin jumped on as well, wrapping his arms around Kaythan's waist. The leatherwing released the branch and dropped into the air.

Kaythan whooped laughter at the exhilaration of flying again for the first time. Flying on a leatherwing felt brand new, similar to flying on a skypanthar, but it was also unique and delightful. Kaythan urged the leatherwing up above the treetops. He could see mountainous rocks emerging randomly from the forest as the leatherwing dipped and whirled. Harkin interrupted Kaythan's elation with a furious tapping on his shoulder. He glanced back over his shoulder to see Harkin pointing south. His blood ran like ice when he saw the giant storm on the horizon. "Dirt," Kaythan cursed. He reined the leatherwing back into the canopy, catching up with Kass.

The royal palace loomed before them, dark, sporting towers and spires. It looked like something an evil witch would call home. Kaythan tried not to judge. His brothers' and sisters' society had grown from the same seed in a vastly different garden. Kass's leatherwing landed on the platform in front of the palace. The creature crawled along using its wings like legs. Kaythan brought his leatherwing to roost next to it. Kass dismounted his leatherwing and marched into the palace with Kaythan and Harkin on his heels.

Kass threw open the doors, and Kaythan had to squint at the sudden onslaught of firelight. The walls were crowded with torches, giving the interior of the palace the appearance of daylight. Kass waved off the guards and soldiers. He led Kaythan and Harkin directly into the throne room. When they entered, it was surprisingly empty. "Budge." Kass waved them along, entering a dimly lit corridor near the back of the room. They walked a few yards before Kass ducked through a door.

The new room was again blindingly bright and the walls were lined with books. A large, dark, polished desk sat at the center of the room. A man reclined at the desk with an open book. He wore his hair long, like Kaythan's, but it was more gray than brown. The man snapped the book shut, stood, and pulled his fancy robe closed, tying it. "Kasstien, what is the meaning of this?" He looked at Kaythan and Harkin. "Why is the troublemaker here?"

"There is a danger on the way, Father." Kass flopped into a chair in the study. "Kaythan is one of our brothers from the south."

"Aviar?" King Gnolin guessed.

Kaythan nodded. "Yes, Your Majesty. I am Prince Kaythan."

"Kaythan?" The king said with a nod. "You are off the island prematurely or Morlin has passed."

"Morlin has not passed, Your Majesty. I am here because a grave threat pursues us. We ask for your help."

"This is all very vague, my nephew," the king said, using the familiar honorific.

Kaythan launched into an explanation of the prophecy, Harkin's appearance, and the problem they all faced. "We spotted Eldertalon's Stormship on our way to the palace," Kaythan confessed. "I humbly beg your forgiveness for dragging this mess to your doorstep, Your Majesty."

"We're beyond forgiveness, nephew," Gnolin said. "What do you need from me?"

Harkin stepped forward, shouldering Kaythan out of the way. "We need the Shadesilver blade."

Gnolin leaned back and bellowed laughter. "Our most precious artifact? By all means, thief, please allow me to fetch it for you. Just be sure to return it when you're finished."

"He's being sarcastic," Harkin needlessly explained to Kaythan.

"Your Majesty, please consider it," Kaythan pleaded as he stepped forward. "Harkin has the wizard's ensorcelled eye."

The king raised a curious eyebrow, and Harkin shook the eye box in response.

"If we can destroy the eye, we can free Harkin's people. Maybe we can even put a stop to Eldertalon."

"You're insane, Kaythan. Two boys and a knife isn't enough to stop the Stormbringer." Gnolin paced the room. "And you will forgive me, but I do not want this war fought in my home. That is why the council of elders denied you the first time you asked for it."

"Father!" Kass shouted. "We are not cowards. Are you really suggesting we hide, that we don't face this battle head on?"

"No." Gnolin raked his fingers through his hair. "I don't know. Of course I do not want to back down from a fight, but this is not our fight. It is his." Gnolin pointed to Harkin. "And I don't want to endanger my entire island to protect one troublemaker."

"What if you didn't have to?" Kaythan asked.

"Didn't have to protect the troublemaker, or didn't have to endanger the island?" Kass asked.

"Am I invisible?" Harkin asked, wiggling his fingers in front of his eyes.

"We can take the fight to him," Kaythan said slowly with a devious smile.

"You're mad." Gnolin shook his head. "You cannot mount an assault on that flying monstrosity. He will see the attack coming a mile away. Literally."

"He is connected to the eye?" Kaythan asked, pointing to the box in Harkin's hand.

He nodded. "That's why it shoots lightning when I open the box, and also how he can track it."

"Then we can assume that if we destroy the eye, he will feel it?" Kaythan grabbed Harkin's shoulder.

"He will. It should hurt like a bastard."

"And while he's distracted with the pain, we attack!" Kass thumped his fist on his father's desk.

"We?" Kaythan and Harkin asked in unison.

"I am not missing this," Kass answered. "I have trained all my life for something like it." Kass paused. "And, if I'm honest, I think it sounds like a great adventure."

"Budge it, Kass," Gnolin growled. "This is no child's game."

"I am well aware of that, Father." Kass stood with his back straight, his chin thrust out and his shoulders back, looking the picture of the legendary hero. "You cannot talk me out of this."

Gnolin sighed. "Obviously." He rubbed his eyes and then his temples. "Fine." He walked around his desk, opened the top drawer, and pulled out a silken cord. At the end dangled an elaborate silver key. He tossed it to Kass. "Go to the armory. Get the Shadesilver blade. Then go to the garde barracks, assemble your best team. Twenty men, at least."

"Yes, Father."

"You." He pointed at Harkin again. "Can you fly a leatherwing?" When Harkin nodded, Gnolin continued, "Good. You will fly out first, drawing the wizard's attention, and then you'll use the Shadesilver blade to destroy the eye. When that is done, you pass the blade to Kass. He is the most skilled. The rest of us will keep the wizard distracted long enough for Kass to get in close enough to use the blade."

"Wait. 'The rest of us?'" Kass repeated.

"You don't think I'm going to let you do this budgering fool thing on your own, do you?" Gnolin patted his son on the shoulder. "Have the guardes that remain evacuate this end of the island. Just in case. I'm going to dust off my battle armor." He waved them out. "Go. I'm assuming we don't have time to waste."

"We do not, Your Majesty. I have guardes as well, Swordhammers, two expert archers, and a regiment of Warbirds."

"Excellent. Summon them. We will need all the help we can get."

Kass, Kaythan, and Harkin left the king without another word to prepare for the fight of their lives.

Chapter Nine

Harkin and Kaythan weaved through an excited crowd of Tivarans. Some were trying to get a look at the Stormship and others were clamoring to get away from this side of the island. Kaythan yelped when Harkin ducked into an empty building, dragging Kay with him. The sparse room was lit by a single large bloom growing from the ceiling. Harkin reached up and spread his fingers, creating a flash of light. To Kaythan's surprise and amazement, the light in the flower dimmed to nothing as the flower collapsed in on itself. "How did you discover that?" Kaythan asked.

"When I was a boy, I noticed that none of the luminous bits and bobs of plant life were glowing near lit torches," Harkin explained. "I thought it had to be the heat or the warmth so I tested it out. I found out the lights went out when another light was near."

"It is fascinating," Kaythan said with a smile he knew Harkin wouldn't see. "Why have you pulled me into this dark room?"

"Two reasons," Harkin whispered, his breath warm on Kaythan's ear. "The first: I can eliminate the glow of the plants on this side of the island with a big enough burst of light. It should hide us from Eldertalon, buy us a few more minutes."

"That's a good idea." Kaythan leaned in until he could feel the heat from Harkin's skin. "What is the second reason?"

"I wanted to kiss you one more time in case we die," Harkin answered in a husky tone.

"You better do it quickly," Kaythan whispered. Harkin dipped in and they kissed, deep and desperately. They grasped and explored with their hands before their embrace was rudely and prematurely interrupted.

"Brothers!" Kass growled, leaning into the building. "I appreciate the sentiment, but now is hardly the time."

"Dirt," Kaythan groaned, before Kass dragged them both out and toward their rendezvous with the rest of their regiment.

After Harkin blacked out the southern edge of the island, King Gnolin, dressed in his dark leather armor, marched before his royal garde, his son, the

two visitors, and their Aviaran guards. Kaythan watched with respect and awe as Gnolin addressed his troops. "You will wait until I give the signal to leave the safety of the darkness. As planned, Harkin first, then Kass and I. Kaythan, you stick with the right set of flyers. When the eye is destroyed and Kass has the blade, we move in. Are we clear?"

"Clear, Majesty!" the guardsmen shouted in unison.

"I cannot guarantee anyone's safety or survival. What I can guarantee is the Tivaran people's gratitude for your sacrifice," Gnolin announced. "If we succeed here today, the entire world will be grateful."

"Do you see that sparking, thundering behemoth blundering toward us?" Kass inquired. "It is time for us to end it."

His men cheered.

Kass turned to his father. "You really don't have to do this," he said. "We can handle it."

"I know that you can," Gnolin answered. "I really do have to do this. I am your king. I must set the example."

"You could not sway my decision and I know I cannot sway yours," Kass said with a chuckle. "What a pair we are."

"Are you ready?" Gnolin asked Harkin.

"I am, Your Majesty. We're going to make this filthy beggar pay."

Mounted on their leatherwings, the small army dipped and darted about through the air within the bubble of night, invisible to their enemy. The sparking, thundering ship bore down on them, nearly to the bay beyond Tivara's shores. They circled for more than a minute, within the dome of darkness, tossing worried glances at one another. Kaythan's men sat behind Gnolin's on the backs of the flying creatures, and the Warbirds weaved among them.

Kaythan was relieved he wasn't chosen as the one to administer the deathblow to Eldertalon. He saw the wisdom in Gnolin's choice. He waited impatiently in the dome of darkness, shifting his weight, resting his chin on the back of his leatherwing's skull amid the soft fur while the chill wind whipped past. He was thankful for the thick, black leather flight suit the Tivarans had loaned him.

The wizard's ship was close enough now for Kaythan to see the crewmembers milling about the oblong disc of the deck as the storm raged beneath it. The men on the deck stood armed to the teeth and seemingly ready for a fight. Kaythan nervously reached down and checked both of his daggers. Gnolin's men traded glances, waiting for their king to give them the signal to attack.

They didn't have to wait for long. Gnolin raised his open hand then snapped it shut into a fist. Ten men banked to the left. Another ten men and Kaythan broke off to the right. Harkin flew directly at the ship, flanked by Kass and Gnolin. The flyers on either side fanned out to surround the ship as Harkin reined his flyer back. He held the eye box in one hand and the Shadesilver blade in the other. Kaythan had been amazed that the legendary weapon looked like just another dagger. Harkin held the box in front of him and instead of opening it, he brought the blade down, stabbing through the wood and destroying the eye.

Purple light exploded from the box at the exact time the same color lightning leapt from Eldertalon's empty eye socket. The wizard screamed and gripped his head. Smoke poured out from between his fingers. He bellowed as he started lobbing lightning bolts at his attackers. Harkin, Kass, and Gnolin dipped, rolled, and dove to avoid the energy blasts. Kaythan continued to cast glances back toward Harkin, concerned for his friend's safety.

The first of the flyers reached the deck of the ship, which had begun to list to one side. Apparently navigating the giant vessel required the majority of Eldertalon's attention. The wizard's men were at a distinct disadvantage as the flyers dove in to attack. The Swordhammers leapt to the deck, leading the battle. The Warbirds joined them, fighting the wizard's men. The archers rained arrows down at the ship. Kaythan hooked his legs through the saddle and harness on his leatherwing, hanging upside down. He drew his daggers and attacked the enemies. He managed to drop three before his 'wing flew back up. He climbed back onto its back and glanced up at Harkin just in time to see the pass off of the Shadesilver blade get interrupted. A bolt of purple skyfire caught Gnolin in the chest, and he tumbled from his leatherwing.

"No!" Kass screamed and forgot the blade completely, diving to save his father.

"Kass!" Harkin shouted, still holding the Shadesilver blade. "Bloody hell!"

Kaythan looked back at the deck of the ship. Eldertalon, satisfied that he'd blasted Gnolin, began to attack the other flyers and the Swordhammers.

“Budge!” Kaythan barked. Leatherwings were dropping from the sky. Some landed on the deck and the riders who were able continued to attack the wizard’s men. One of the Tivaran flyers swooped at Eldertalon. The wizard ducked to avoid the flyer’s blade, then he rose and extended his arms. Purple fire erupted from his hands and engulfed the retreating leatherwing and its rider. The screeching of the immolated creature blended with that of the man on its back, and both dropped from the sky, bounced off the edge of the Stormship, and fell to the water below. Eldertalon had to be stopped. Kaythan pulled his wing up and flew directly for Harkin. He grabbed the Shadesilver blade from Harkin’s hand.

“What are you doing?” Harkin shouted.

“Ending this,” Kaythan yelled. He urged his leatherwing around and dove for the Stormship. He heard Harkin swear and glanced over his shoulder to see Harkin following him.

Eldertalon’s men were all dead or injured and still the wizard fought the remaining flyers. Six Tivarans and two Swordhammers sprinted at the wizard from behind. It looked like they might make it before Kaythan, but at the last moment, Eldertalon spun to face them, and with a swipe of his hand knocked all eight men back where they crumpled unconscious on the deck. All but one of the Warbirds had been destroyed, and Eldertalon grabbed the last one from the air, snapping its neck with his bare hands. He’d stopped holding his smoldering eye socket so he could attack twice as many men. With his left hand, he tossed magical fire at the flyers attacking him, and with his right, he shot bolts at Kaythan and Harkin. They tucked and rolled to avoid the blasts.

Kaythan had almost reached the deck of the crashing ship when one of Eldertalon’s bolts struck his leatherwing and they both tumbled, rolling across the deck. Kaythan managed to hold onto the blade. His gaze snapped up just as Harkin crashed his leatherwing into Eldertalon, all three of them cartwheeling across the deck. Kaythan spared a glance for his injured leatherwing, its wing jutting at an odd angle. He shook off his worry and sprinted for the wizard.

Eldertalon shoved Harkin and his leatherwing off. He grabbed Harkin by the throat and his good eye glowed bright purple while the hand not holding Harkin bloomed with fire. Kaythan pushed harder to reach him. He raised the Shadesilver blade. Three feet from Eldertalon, Kaythan bounced off an invisible barrier.

“Filthy little tree jumper,” Eldertalon growled. He stood, still holding Harkin by the throat. The wizard pulled himself up to his full height, thrusting

out his broad chest. He looked more like a blacksmith, with arms like fence posts and a full, bushy black beard, than a wizard. Harkin clawed at the hand gripping his throat. "What is this troublemaker to you?" Eldertalon doused the magic fire around his free hand and ran it over his shiny, bald pate.

"What do you care?" Kaythan said with a defiant sneer.

"Call me curious." The wizard narrowed his gaze, and Kaythan suddenly felt compelled to answer.

"I—have feelings for him."

"Love?" Eldertalon said, sarcasm dripping from his tone. "Oh, that's rich. Perhaps I should kill him?" The wizard squeezed Harkin's throat, a strangled yelp escaped his mouth.

"Stop!" Kaythan demanded.

Eldertalon chuckled. "Adorable," he said with a snarl.

Kaythan threw one of his daggers and Eldertalon used Harkin as a shield. The dagger sliced Harkin's arm.

"I'm going to kill you," Kaythan said, matter-of-factly.

"Try it." Eldertalon spread his legs and tossed Harkin aside.

Kaythan worried for his injured friend, but had to remind himself that Eldertalon's defeat was his first priority, and he desperately wanted to stop this dirt-herder. He glanced at Harkin, holding his throat, kneeling on the deck. They shared a miniscule nod and glance. Kaythan held his arms out to the side. "You win."

Eldertalon laughed, tilting his head back. Kaythan took advantage of his distraction, tossing the Shadesilver blade to Harkin. "Any weapons?" Eldertalon asked, his eye flashing purple. The wizard patted Kaythan down, removing his dagger and tossing it away. He clucked his tongue three times. "Little tree man, why would you take the side of this thief and troublemaker? He's pretty but not *sacrifice your life* pretty."

"Hey!" Harkin shouted.

"Silence!" Eldertalon backhanded him, knocking him to the black planks of the deck. "You do realize that you're on the wrong side of this fight?" the wizard asked Kaythan, aiming a kick to Harkin's midsection. "I'm the victim here. My eye was stolen and destroyed for no reason. My men were attacked and killed." Eldertalon stepped over Harkin and pressed his foot down on

Harkin's neck. "I'm the hero of this story, you know." He ground his foot on Harkin's throat. Harkin winced and slid the blade back to Kaythan.

Eldertalon shot a glance over his shoulder. "That wasn't?"

"Oh. It was," Kaythan answered. He jumped at Eldertalon but the wizard swatted him away, sending the blade clattering to the deck. The wizard strode over to Kaythan with murderous intent in his eye. Whatever he planned for Kaythan was interrupted when Kass appeared on his wing. He dropped out of the sky, bellowing with his sword extended menacingly. Gnolin sat behind, cradling his injured arm. Kass dove off the flyer's back, shooting straight for Eldertalon.

The wizard held his hands up and muttered something Kaythan didn't understand. Kass stopped and hovered in midair, as did his father and the leatherwing. Eldertalon's fingers curled in like he was gripping something very tightly. Kass, Gnolin, and the creature all screamed in unison. The leatherwing's delicate wings crumpled like parchment. Somehow the wizard used magic to crush them.

Kaythan knew he had to move. He scrambled across the boards of the deck, retrieving the Shadesilver blade, and then he marched over to the distracted wizard and plunged the blade into Eldertalon's back. He turned, fuming, and his prisoners dropped to the deck, unmoving.

Eldertalon seemed unfazed by the blade sticking out of his back. He reached out, and Kaythan's blood ran icy cold. Harkin grabbed the wizard's ankle in a futile attempt to save his friend. Eldertalon kicked Harkin in the face and lunged. Kaythan dropped to the deck and used the wizard's momentum to throw him over. He rolled and regained his feet. Kaythan could see smoke, light and blood leaking around the edges of the blade.

If it caused him pain, Eldertalon didn't show it. He moved his hands in an elaborate pattern as he muttered continuously and furiously. Sparks of arcane fire gathered in the air between his hands. Kaythan could feel the magic on his skin and in his teeth. The air tasted sour and metallic. Kaythan couldn't see the wound, but he saw smoke rising from behind Eldertalon.

The wizard stopped chanting, his eye growing wide with shock. The ball of fire evaporated and Eldertalon spun, clawing at the handle of the Shadesilver blade. Energy exploded around the wound, and Eldertalon fell face-first to the deck. He tried to pull himself along as if he could escape the wound as it billowed smoke. Energy crackled around the blade and then Eldertalon swelled,

his face growing fat, his clothes splitting. He opened his mouth as if to scream. The sound that came out was more like thunder booming, and the wizard popped, leaving a fine mist and a greasy stain on the deck.

Kaythan walked over and helped Harkin to his feet. "Thanks," Harkin said in a gravelly voice.

"Don't mention it," Kaythan said. He walked over and retrieved the Shadesilver blade.

"Kass and Gnolin?" Harkin asked, bruises already blooming on his face.

Kaythan pointed. Kass hoisted himself up. He limped over to his father's sprawled form. The ship finally crashed onto the ocean and everyone braced themselves against the impact. "Is your father—?" Harkin motioned, unable to finish the question.

"He's breathing," Kass answered. "Eldertalon?"

"Dead," Kaythan stated proudly.

Kass nodded slowly, his eyes closed. "We lost too many good men today." Those that weren't dead or catastrophically injured tried to pick up the pieces, taking the wizard's remaining men into custody.

"We did it," Kaythan said with a smile.

"Yes, we did," Harkin agreed, putting his arm over Kaythan's shoulders. He winced and sucked air through his teeth sharply.

"What are we going to do with this giant, budgering ship?" Kass asked.

Kaythan shrugged and Harkin shook his head. "How are we going to get off this ship?" Harkin asked in return. "None of these big bats look like they're in any shape to fly."

Kaythan remembered his injured leatherwing. He jogged over to the creature. He kneeled to inspect the injury, running his hand over its twisted limb. He realigned the break and splinted the appendage. "It's all right, girl," he whispered. "We'll get you sorted." The leatherwing lifted her nose and nuzzled up under Kaythan's arm. He scratched her behind her big ear and she made a sound something like a purr.

Gnolin finally stood. He bled from a head wound and still cradled his injured arm, but he seemed to master himself instantly. He strode over to Eldertalon's remaining soldiers. They looked dazed and disoriented. Gnolin

soon found out that the men had been under the wizard's mind control; they'd woken up when the wizard had been destroyed.

Two leatherwings landed next to the small group soon after. They had been knocked into the water and had only just managed to regain their wings. The two flew back to the island to arrange for the remainder of the ship to be dragged back to the island.

Harkin joined Kaythan on the deck next to the injured leatherwing. "If I never have to do that again, it will be too soon," Harkin said, laying his head on Kaythan's shoulder.

"At least you know you've freed your people." Kaythan pressed his cheek to Harkin's hair. "If those men woke up when the wizard was destroyed, then your people did as well."

Harkin nodded but didn't lift his head. "I reckon they'll be pretty confused." He chuckled lightly and flinched at the pain it caused. Kaythan sat enjoying the weight of his friend against him, the soft fur of his leatherwing. They had lost much and Kaythan would help his Tivaran brothers mourn the loss of their brave warriors, but right now, in this moment, Kaythan felt right and content.

Chapter Ten

Gnolin and his people spent the following week in mourning for their lost brothers. Those who made it through were patched up and healing. Kaythan and Harkin stayed in the capital city for another month. Harkin visited the forests and caves of his people, looking for signs of their return.

“The Tivarans have spotted a ship coming in from the west,” Harkin called from the other room as Kaythan packed for their return trip. “That’s got to be them. Some anyway.”

“That is wonderful,” Kaythan answered. It didn’t feel wonderful. He knew Harkin wouldn’t want to leave his people now that they would be restored to their home.

“What are you doing in here?” Harkin popped into the room.

“Packing,” Kaythan responded. He pushed the Tivaran flight coat in with the pants and cinched up his pack.

“Oh. Are we leaving?” Harkin asked.

Kaythan nodded. “Since we released the swiftwhales to return to the Wavemen, the voyage is going to be much longer. The captaine doesn’t want to delay any longer.” Kaythan paused. “We? Are you planning to come along?”

“Do you not want me to?” Harkin asked.

“Of course I do,” Kaythan said, throwing his arms around Harkin.

“Careful,” he said. “Ribs.”

“My apologies.” Kaythan released him. “I forgot.” He picked up his cloak and pulled it on over his traditional Aviaran clothes. “I was not sure you would want to leave your home with your people returning.” He pulled on the boots Harkin had purchased.

“I’d rather stick with you, if you’ll have me.” Harkin dropped his head, his dark hair shielding his expression.

Kaythan took his hand. “I would like nothing more, Harkin.”

Harkin looked up, blushing and smiling. “That’s great.” He darted forward and planted a kiss on Kaythan’s mouth. “Stop using my last name. I think we’re good enough friends now.” He tipped Kaythan a cheeky wink.

Gnolin, his arm no longer in a sling, stood next to Kass and an entourage of Tivarans eager to bid their guests a good voyage. "Kaythan, I wish we had met under better circumstances, but I am honored to have fought beside you." He opened his arms. Kaythan embraced him happily. "We have stocked your boat with plenty of supplies."

"Thank you, Your Majesty. You have been uncommonly kind to us considering we brought this scourge to your doorstep."

"Evil wizard." Gnolin held one hand up. "Evil-wizard-killing knife." He held his other hand up mimicking a scale, then shrugged. "It was bound to occur at some time." They shared a sad chuckle. "And you, troublemaker." Gnolin turned, putting his hands on Harkin's shoulders. "I've come to tolerate you." The king offered him a big smile.

"Wow. I feel so loved," Harkin answered with a sneer. "But thank you for not having me executed anyway."

"You are welcome." Gnolin released him.

Kass embraced them both and wished them luck. "I will have to come and see Aviar some time," he said.

"You are welcome anytime, brother," Kaythan said with a grin.

"My father has given you a gift," Kass said as they walked along the dock.

"That is not necessary."

"Ah, you say that now, brother." Kass patted Kaythan on the back. "But wait until you see it." He moved so that Kaythan could see the deck of his boat. Kaythan's face lit up when he saw the leatherwing waiting near the cabin. He sprinted up the gangplank onto the boat and over to throw his arms around the creature's soft neck.

"Hello, girl." Surprisingly the leatherwing hugged him back with her good wing while she made her strange cooing purr. Harkin and Kass joined him on deck. Gnolin leaned on the rail, watching the exchange.

"We thought you might like to take her home with you," Kass said.

"That and the way she cried every time you left the caves became terribly annoying for the people living on that part of the island," Gnolin said, then laughed heartily.

"Yes. There was that," Kass added. "Perhaps you should name her?"

“Doesn't she already have a name?” Harkin asked.

Kass shrugged. “We called her Veera.”

“Veera,” Kaythan repeated. The 'wing cooed at the sound of her name. Kaythan laughed and hugged her again. “I wonder how you and Perfin, my skypanthar, will get along.”

“M'laird,” the captaine said. “We are ready to be under way.”

“Very good, Captaine. Thank you.” He stood up. “I can honestly say that she is the best gift I have ever been given.” He glanced at Harkin, who looked wounded. “Second best,” Kaythan whispered so only Harkin would hear. “She will be cherished.”

“Obviously,” Gnolin answered with a large, warm smile. “You must be off, nephew. Your captaine grows impatient. Take your troublemaker and your new leatherwing and go home. Hug your brothers and sisters.”

“Thank you, Uncle. I will return.”

“I know you will and we await that day with great joy.” Gnolin stood and waved. He waited for Kass to jump back onto the dock as the crowd dispersed. The captaine and crew unfurled the sails and they slipped easily away from the docks leaving Tivara, the Night Island, behind.

“What time is it?” Kaythan turned quickly.

Harkin pulled out a watch on a chain. “Eight bells.”

“Day or night?”

“It's always night here.”

“But not out there.” Kaythan pointed out to sea.

“Day out there,” Harkin responded.

“Help me get Veera into the cabin and get the curtains drawn. The light will hurt her eyes.” Kaythan grabbed her harness.

“Where will *we* sleep?” Harkin didn't move.

“She will not need to be in there at night. We'll switch. Now don't just stand there, help me.”

Harkin helped get Veera settled in the cabin. “Thank you,” Kaythan said, taking Harkin's hand and leading him to the bow of the ship. He stood at the rail looking at the horizon. Harkin snaked his arms around him and rested his

chin on Kaythan's shoulder in a now familiar gesture. They watched as the edge of night crept closer and closer until they broke through the bubble and into the bright morning sunshine. Kaythan squinted until his eyes grew accustomed to the light. "It's a brand new day, Janze."

"I'm glad we're facing it together, Kay."

Kaythan leaned back and Harkin hugged him closer. "So am I," Kaythan said. "So am I."

The End

Author Bio

Eon de Beaumont is a versatile author, craftsman, and raconteur. He has written a number of short stories, novellas, and novels, both solo and with his longtime writing partner and best friend, Augusta Li. Eon is an accomplished playwright and actor under an alternate identity. Above all Eon loves storytelling in all its myriad forms and sometimes has trouble sleeping for the abundance of ideas in his brain. Eon is alternately a mask maker, seamstress, doll maker, and amateur cook. His passions include makeup, shoes, comics, movies, and the pursuit of an ever-higher gamer score. He has recently discovered burlesque, finding another outlet for his creative expression. Eon welcomes and encourages feedback and questions from his readers.

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