

THE CROSSING

A WAYFARER'S CHRONICLES

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PROLOGUE

September 18, 37 A.T. (Age of Tiragalda)

The room was in darkness. I did not need to open my eyes to know that the heavy damask curtains covered the window; I could tell by the shadows pressing against my eyelids. The room swirled with the stench of sweat and spilled ale. Candles were lit around the room to ward off evil demons, for what good it would do my spirit now. Given the opportunity, I would beg the demons to claim me.

I had no desire to see what I had become, yet still I felt it in my bones the instant I woke from restless nightmares of creatures that chewed upon the souls of sinners. No matter how fast I ran in those dreams—for I was by some great fortune no longer bedridden in sleep—I could not outrun the foul creatures. They yapped at my ankles and clawed at my back, and I woke with imaginary wounds and clammy skin that no amount of bathing would cure.

This day my breath could not bear the stink of my own flesh. It caught in my throat and rattled in my chest, and Renata, my own good wife, came back to chide me for the disturbing sounds. It had been many years since I had listened to her sweet voice, but I recognized it instantly. There had never been a lovelier sound and, though my eyelids remained heavy, I felt the tears trickle a path down my cheeks and puddle on the pillows beneath my head.

"Amadeo, my love." Her cool fingers smoothed the damp hair away from my face.

I turned toward the sound of her voice and there she was, as beautiful as the day I met her, a black-haired beauty, with large brown eyes like a doe, and a smile that was contagious. All who met Renata smiled at her. Her light shone from within, unlike my own, which my parents had failed to ignite when I was born into this world. For a while, my dear heart Renata encouraged my light to glow with a low and careful flame like the candles that burn steadily in the sconces. It surely would've burned more brightly, maybe even become a fire, had the gods above not seen fit to snatch my heart from me too soon. Renata. *Renata*.

I still remembered the joy on her face when she discovered that she was with child. "A son," she said. "Hush now." She spent the pregnancy sewing, nesting, preparing, as though there had never been a happier woman in all the land. But the child did not turn in the womb as it should have. Four days and nights Renata fought to push it from her, but she was not strong enough,

and she was taken from me along with our own son who never drew breath.

I had not stopped hating myself since.

"Renata," I whispered. I scraped brittle fingernails across the bedcovers in a feeble attempt to reach my wife's smooth hand. Cloth bunched up beneath my fingers. "Renata."

There were voices in the room with me. Low murmurs. Sounds that were not for my own ears. A metal bowl was held to my lips and warm liquid entered my mouth. I spat out the vile taste and knocked the bowl flying across the room. I was still their superior. They had forgotten their place if they thought to console me with potions and brews that did nothing to ease the agony. My manservant scampered toward the mess like a rustling rat.

The sight of him bent and cowering sickened me; I had no desire to have him linger in my presence. "Go", I managed hoarsely. "Go! Leave me!"

"My lord." A man's voice, hesitant and gentle.

Finally, I opened my eyes and saw that Brother Sancho was on his knees on the floor beside the bed, his hands pressed together in prayer. I glanced around the room again for Renata, but she was nowhere to be seen. The pain of losing her all over again was too much to bear and I felt a low growl like an animal sound rising in my chest.

Brother Sancho peered behind him and nodded. He turned to me once more and

murmured, "My lord, are there any sins of which you wish to be forgiven?"

"Ha!" I said aloud.

There were many transgressions of which Brother Sancho was aware, but many more that he knew nothing of. When my dear heart Renata was taken from me, I had given into the black clouds that weighed heavy on my shoulders. I had enforced my own suffering onto the shoulders of the people who most wished to help me, and for that I had remained childless and loveless unto death. That was my penance. And now...now he wanted me to confess.

Was there time yet? Was there time for forgiveness? Was there the opportunity to have my sweetheart returned to me before it was too late?

"Aye," I murmured. "Aye, there are sins."

Brother Sancho took my shrivelled hand in his and murmured words that barely reached my thoughts.

I was wandering through a field of dandelions, their yellow heads bobbing with the breeze. I stooped to pick one and as I held it to my face, its petals faded, the color washing from them and turning to gray feathers that caught on the wind and flew away. *Make a wish.* I heard the whisper in my head and fumbled around for a suitable wish, one that would cleanse me of the evil I had harbored since losing my wife and son. None came. The dandelion seeds were scattering around me. Soon they would be gone, and it would be too late for my wish to come true. I raised my hands to catch them. But the sky

turned dark and was filled with terrifying noises, the likes of which cannot possibly have been of this world. They filled me with fear, and I screamed for Renata to come and rescue me.

"Do you choose...?" Brother Sancho's words faded in and out of earshot. "My lord, do you choose...?"

"Aye," I muttered. I needed to confess before the awful creatures swallowed me whole and I was lost to this world forever. I needed to confess. I needed to... "Aye!" I repeated louder. "I choose..."

And then I was smothered by a heavy, silent darkness and all was still.

Water splashed my face.

I spluttered and opened my eyes. I was face down on the ground, but I was no longer in the elaborate bedroom where I had spent the last weeks of my life, battling the ailments that had consumed my body and spirit.

I turned my cheek and stared at what lay beneath me. Sand. Grit. The tiniest pebbles imaginable that shifted between my fingers like silk. My lips were dry and when I licked them, they tasted of salt and something else. Something I could not describe. Raising my head, I saw a vast expanse of blue reaching out before me as far as I could see.

Where was I?

I sat up. My clothes were wet, and I saw that the sea was lapping at my feet where I lay, the

tide foamy-white and hissing across the sand as it danced back and forth. I glanced down at my clothes, which I did not recognize. How did I come by such garments? Had I been given them by a stranger? But if so, why did I not remember? And where was the stranger now?

I rose to my feet and looked around me. It seemed that no matter which way I turned, the sea stretched ahead of me until it disappeared, melting into the distance. When I turned to face the opposite direction, there it was. Nothing but sea. To my left, the same. And to my right. And yet when I studied my feet, there I was, standing upon a sandy shore that did not feel like an island. An island would take shape. An island would have places to explore, trees, animals, hills. Possibly even people. I was standing in no such place. My feet were on a shore that went nowhere.

I closed my eyes. When I opened them again, the sea still winked at me as the tide rippled across the surface. I glanced upwards and the sky was painted in shades of pink and purple like red wine spilled across white cloth. I knew not whether this was night or day, and I had never seen such colors above my head. I searched for the sun, the moon, the North Star. There was indeed a silver globe high above me, its glow highlighting the foam on the sea, but whether it be the moon I was accustomed to, that brought with it magic and mayhem and tales of magical beings, I could not say.

I thought of Brother Sancho. I had been in my bed, the curtains hiding me from the world

outside. What was it that Brother Sancho had said? He had asked me if there were sins that I wished to repent, and Renata had been there holding my hand, telling me to hush. But they had taken her from me, swept her aside, hidden her from my sight. The usual rage grew inside me, filling my veins and clouding my thoughts red. My fists clenched by my side. There was more. He had asked me to choose, and I had responded, "Aye."

What had I chosen? This? This island that began and ended at my feet. This dangerous mauve sky and uncrossable sea.

"Hello!" I yelled. There was nothing in return. I cupped my hand around my mouth and tried again. "Greetings!"

I turned a slow, steady circle where I stood, keeping the sea in my sight, until I reached the position where I had begun. The water did not move, and aside from the gentle kiss of water on sand, there were no other sounds. No seagulls crying. No fish pecking at the water's surface for food.

Where in the world was I?

As I pondered my next move, an invisible, heavy weight pressed down upon my shoulders, and I fell to my knees. It pushed me down, pushed my head toward the sand until I felt that my neck might snap, and my head topple into the water to be chewed upon by sea-creatures. My forehead burrowed in the damp sand. My fingers clutched at the shifting shore.

I will be buried alive here. My body will never be found because no one knows that I am

here. I will die alone and gasping for breath as my lungs fill with treacherous sand and sea. A fitting end, some might say, for a bitter and unbearable man.

Then a voice filled my head. I clutched at my ears to prevent the sound from bursting my eardrums, but I could not block the words from my mind. It was a dark voice, solid as night.

"Welcome to Marivon. You are not here to be judged, wayfarer." It spoke in a language that I had never heard but suddenly understood.

Marivon? Wayfarer? What did it mean?

I could not think straight. The voice was filling my mind with words. As I breathed heavily, my head on the sand between my legs, the words began to rearrange themselves, to take order like words written in black ink on white parchment. I saw them as clearly as I saw my own predicament. They were my sins. They were being written aloud by the voice, spelled out inside my head so that there would be no mistake. I was guilty. Whether I had confessed to Brother Sancho or not, I was found guilty, and this was my punishment.

As suddenly as they began, the words ended. The voice vanished. The world was filled with silence once more.

I remained where I was, on my knees, my trousers damp, my breathing slowly settling into a regular rhythm. The weight had been lifted from my shoulders, but I knew from the ground beneath me, and the water lapping at the shore, that I was not to be returned to the life that I once knew. What was to follow, I did not yet know,

but my lungs no longer crackled with fluid, and my limbs were as agile as a younger man's. My thoughts also seemed not the thoughts of a lunatic. I understood that Renata had visited me, but I felt that she had not followed me to this land. Of course she had not! Renata was a kind and pure spirit whose soul would surely have been welcomed by angels.

Not mine. Ha! What need would I have for angels?

"What need, indeed?" came the voice.

"What?" I peered around me, rising slowly to my feet. I saw no one. "What say you?"

A low chuckle rumbled all around me. I spun around and still there was no person to break the view. "I bring you news of the Crossing," said the voice.

"The Crossing?"

"You were given the choice and you chose the life of a wayfarer."

Waves licked my feet. I looked up and there, waiting for me like a silhouette against the mauve-tinted sky was a three-masted ship, tall and proud.

The ferry.

CHAPTER ONE

February 14, 456 A.T.

The girl clutches the raggedy cloth to her bony chest. She sits in the back of the wooden cart staring straight ahead. Though the journey jiggles her to the core, and the heavy rainfall has stained her threadbare clothes the color of soil, she does not complain, or flinch, and never once does she glance behind them to view the path they have traveled.

The driver glances over his shoulder at her often, and always she meets his gaze with her cool blue eyes and a ready smile. It is as though, he thinks, she has laid her past to rest and is determined to see only her future.

It touches his heart. He knows better than she what awaits her at the orphanage. They're a wretched bunch of children, and the mistress a taskmaster worthy of the coldest jail. It pains him to think of this little blonde-haired child being beaten by the mistress. She'll find no

comfort from the other children either and some of them are still toddlers. Yet there is something in the way she sits with her head held high, her back straight, and her chin jutting, that leads him to think that she will fare well. In her own way. Maybe she knows something that he doesn't. She's an old soul for sure – been here before his wife would say. He would have loved for his wife to meet her; she would have recognized the signs of the old soul at a glance.

Maybe he will speak to his wife about adopting the child.

The orphanage is in darkness when they trundle along the bumpy lane toward the porch. There is not a light to be seen behind the windows despite the late hour, and the driver thinks of turning the cart around and taking the girl home before their presence is known. The girl has softened him with her aloofness. He does not want to leave her, but as is his wont, he dillydallies in reining in the horse and turning her around. His wife often complains about his indecisiveness and when the heavy door to the orphanage creaks open, he curses himself for not heeding his wife's words and acting sooner, for now it is too late.

The mistress stands in the doorway, her white apron stiffened and unapproachable, her hands clasped together in front of her chest. She does not smile, nor does she acknowledge the driver. Her small dark eyes have settled upon the child. It is difficult to fathom her expression at this late hour and with the lack of light from within the building, but the driver's blood turns to ice in his

veins. He does not like this. He does not like this at all.

The girl does not move. She still sits straight-backed and aloof in the back of the cart.

"I beg your pardon for the late hour, Mistress," says the driver.

The mistress inclines her head. She makes no move toward them, nor does she speak.

The driver clears his throat. "I can return tomorrow if it suits you better." He is still holding the reins in his hand. The horse has worked hard and needs water and hay, but he has made up his mind to stop at an inn on the return journey home and see that the horse is fed.

"No need," says the mistress.

The driver's stomach sinks. He has left it too late and now he has no reason to keep the girl. He has delivered her as he was instructed to do, and it is time for him to leave.

He murmurs to the horse and dismounts the cart. With his back to the orphanage, he smiles at the girl and whispers, "Will you go inside?" He offers her his hand, and she nods. He has tried, he tells himself.

The girl steps inside the orphanage behind the mistress. The air inside the wide entrance hallway is colder than on the outside and she shivers—her clothes have long since ceased to offer her warmth. The mistress closes the door behind them. It clangs loudly and the girl jumps, but the mistress is clearly accustomed to the sound because she does not react. She reaches a hand to the sconce and takes a candle which she

carries in front of her. She does not speak. She does not ask the girl's name and she does not meet the girl's eyes. Her shoes clip-clop across the flooring and the girl follows the sound and the woman's stiff back, still clutching the cloth that was once a soft ragdoll to her chest.

The girl peers around her at her new surroundings. She cannot call this home, although she knows this is where she will be staying most likely until she is old enough to be turned out onto the streets. Or until she finds a way to escape. She has heard the market sellers speak of orphanage children. Poor wretches locked away to rot while the mistresses fatten on food that barely makes it to the orphans' bellies, or worse, rented out as slaves in the pits or jails. She will not cry. She shed her tears when her mother passed, but she promised that she would stay strong and remember everything that she has learned from her mother and the other village-women.

She remembers well. She has a good memory and a quick wit. She remembers stories of her father that her mother told her. Of how he died, shortly after her birth, while fighting for his king. She remembers her family's dog, Tank, a gold-coated retriever who died at the age of fifteen, when the girl herself was just five years old. She remembers her best friend from her youngest years—an older girl with a brown ponytail named Thea. Thea, named after her own father, Theo—who was close friends with the girl's father, was raised in a strictly religious home. When her parents were ready, they took

Thea away to a convent where she devoted her life to serving the divine. After this, the girl never saw or heard from her friend again.

She remembers the stories her mother told her as she rocked her in her arms at night, stories of fire-breathing creatures that could set a man alight, and of knights in gleaming armor who fought valiantly to protect the people they loved. Her mother knew much about the world. She would tell her of ships that sailed across the sea until they reached the world's end, and fair maidens with silver tails that lived beneath the water.

She remembers everything. And she forgets nothing. Though there are times when she wakes during the night and goes to call to her mother, her father, or to her old friend, but no one answers. It's in this time that she briefly forgets that she's alone now in this world. No more family. No more friends.

The girl follows the mistress upstairs and along narrow drafty corridors. They are in darkness, save for the flickering glow from the candle that causes shadows to dance across the walls like lively spirits. They pass no one inside the building.

The mistress unlocks a door with a key that dangles from a large metal ring hanging from her apron waistband, and they enter a large room, the walls lined on both sides with narrow cots. Each cot holds a sleeping child. None of the children fidget or turn in their cots to watch them as they enter; it's as if they are invisible.

The air is so cold, the girl can see her breath like puffs of mist in front of her face.

She is led to the far end of the room, past bodies curled up in sleep beneath thin covers, knees huddled to chests, to an empty cot. Even in the gloomy shadows of the room, the girl can see the stains on the mattress she is presented.

The mistress snatches the raggedy doll from her. "No personal possessions allowed. We wouldn't want you thinking you're better than anyone else now, would we?"

The girl wants to tell her that her father was a knight. He served his king in battle and was awarded a coat of arms, yet he never felt that it made him better or worse than any other person. She wants to tell her this, but she doesn't. She already knows that her words will be wasted.

The mistress leaves and the girl climbs upon the cot, pulling the thin coverlet over her body. As her eyes adjust to the darkness, she notices on the next cot, a pale face and large dark eyes watching her. The child gasps when she realizes that the girl has caught her staring and rolls over to face the other way.

The girl's belly growls with hunger as she closes her eyes.

CHAPTER TWO

February 14, 456 A.T.

Twelve souls come aboard today. They wear the customary signs of the other travelers, eyes devoid of color, and shoulders that bear the weight of their sins. I expect no greeting, nor is there one forthcoming. Only the single gold coin in return for ferrying them to the other side.

I signal to the quartermaster to ready the crew. The sky is heavy with storm clouds and I tug my hat down lower over my eyes. It matters not the weather—we will make it across anyway. It bodes ill for us all if we do not reach the other side in time. Although I have yet to learn the consequences of such a disastrous act, I have heard the crew speak of punishment in low voices and with dull eyes, generally after they have emptied a barrel of ale. The previous captain, they say, was sucked overboard by a monstrous creature with tentacles that could

wrap around the ferry three times and still have length to spare. The creature's mouth was taller than a castle and dripping with drool and slime worse than a hound after a chase. All that remained of the captain was a half-leg severed at the knee and his hat which I am now wearing. I fear the ale gets inside their head and loosens their tongue, but still, I do not want to put their knowledge to the test.

I do not know why my thoughts insist on wandering today. Maybe it is the storm. Maybe it was the sight of the woman waiting upon the shore for us to collect her. She was slender. Her hair hung to her waist and framed her face. It is difficult to tell how these souls might have once looked in life—we only see them when, much like us, they have been rinsed of color and life and spat upon the water's edge with only their sins for company. Yet over the years, I have devised a game of painting them in my mind with color pertaining to the previous life. This woman I dressed in crimson cloth, her hair as black as the night sky, her eyes the palest gray like the birds that line the rigging, eyeing us up for morsels of food.

It has set me to thinking of my wife. Indeed, it was she I was thinking of when I spotted the lady upon the shore, knowing deep inside that it will never be Renata, and nor would I want her to be suffering this incessant journey back and forth, with never an end in sight. I would not impose upon her this loneliness, nor this foul mood that sets in with each new arrival. This is my cross to bear.

This is the journey I chose.

There's a knock at the cabin door. One of the few comforts for which I am grateful is the small cabin allocated to the wayfarer. Here I can sleep in some comfort upon the narrow mattress pushed up against the wall. I keep my ship's log under lock and key in the wooden chest beneath the desk—the crew have no mind to know my innermost thoughts even if they were able to read the lettering, which I know that many, if not all of them, cannot. Everything is written in the language of the ferry—something that we all speak, regardless of our language in life, but somehow only I am able to read. It is here that I am provided with the details of the souls we ferry to the other side. I know not where the information comes from. All I know is that upon reading, their sins become mine, and for a time I am unable to think clearly or see what is in front of my face.

I open the door. The information can wait until later, as I am not yet ready to see it.

It is the quartermaster, Graives, a wiry man with eyes like a dead fish and a pinched expression from years of mistrusting everyone he knew. "Captain," he nods, his eyebrows drawn together. His eyes take in the cabin behind me. I have no doubt that, given the opportunity, Graives would steal the hat from me and become the wayfarer himself. He would have the backing of the crew, if it came to it, I know. "The storm."

"Aye."

"'Tis a strange one, for sure."

Something in his voice causes me to pay attention. The quartermaster is the backbone of the ship, the one who calls the shots, the one the crew look to for guidance. How long he has been aboard the ferry I cannot say, and I have never yet come across an occasion that he hasn't seen before. But today, his demeanor is less than certain.

Could it be that today's storm will bring us something unexpected?

I step outside and follow Graives to the deck. The master, Bauldry, is leaning against the side of the ferry, peering into the distance, sniffing the air. The sky has deepened to a heavy violet which has cast everything on board the ferry in shades of pink. Even the new souls waiting on the bench to complete their journey from the land of the living to the land of the dead, have skin that almost looks alive in the glow from the extraordinary sky.

"Have you not seen the likes before?" I ask Bauldry.

The sailing master tilts his head from side to side. He sometimes has the look about him of one whose head has been toppled from his shoulders and never settled back in the right position. It is simply his way though. It must aid his concentration. "I've seen similar," he says finally. "We'll not stay ahead of it."

"We'll make it across in time though," I say.

"Aye. We always do." Bauldry doesn't look at me. "It'll be a doozy."

"How bad?"

"Difficult to say, but we'll need to ride the eye of it, if we're to fight it at all."

Excitement bubbles in my chest. I do not tell Graives or Bauldry that I am eager for the thrill of a journey, one that brings more than a diary entry and the handing over of some poor souls to who knows what awaits them. I do not tell them that if the storm brings danger, then I am prepared for that also. I do not speak of boredom and regret.

I rub my hands together. "Let us make haste."

A look passes between them. I ignore it. I know they speak of me in hushed tones when they think I cannot hear, and for the most part, I let it go for sanity's sake. We have been a long time together on board the ferry, and who knows how much longer we are to continue ferrying souls together. But one thing I do know is that the storm has lit our eyes in a way that I have never seen on this ship. We are souls too, devoid of life and spirit and energy. Aye, spirit, that is what I see the storm has awoken in us. I save the thought for later, for the confines of my cabin when the day is done, and the souls delivered to the land of the dead.

The storm is no tangible thing. We sense it in the violet sky and the rising of the waves. We hear it in the whispers all around us. So, riding the storm will be a game of chance with fate dealing its winning hand hopefully in our favor.

I glance at the souls we collected from the shore and my breath catches in my throat.

The woman is staring at me. In the land of the living this would not be worthy of a mention,

but in this crossing between worlds, the souls stare inwards, trapped in their own misery and the knowledge that they are beyond saving. But not the woman. She stares at me and her lips are moving silently. I recall the witches captured and tried for their treasonous witchcraft, the way their lips moved in the same manner, reciting a spell no doubt, one to save herself.

I look away. She may save herself; I do not care.

We have a storm to face, and I feel the way I once felt in life when competing in athletics. I feel alive. I am filled with a vigor I have not felt in many years, like finally, my strength has a purpose other than finding my sea legs on the deck of a ferry.

CHAPTER THREE

February 15, 456 A.T.

The girl is woken by voices. Someone is crying. Without moving, she opens her eyes a crack to see what is causing such distress.

The child from the next cot, the one who smiled at the girl when she arrived, is no longer in her bed. She is standing at the foot of the bed with her back to the girl, her head pulled down so low it appears she is folded in two, and above her stands a tall strong boy with mean eyes. In his hands, he grips a handful of the child's hair.

"What did you do with it?" he growls.

"I...nothing. I didn't touch it," whimpers the child who is younger than the girl's own nine years.

The boy doesn't miss a beat. He swipes at the child's face with his other hand and her head snaps backwards. She screams, and the boy

lowers his own face to hers so that their noses are almost touching. "If you ate my biscuit," his voice is low and filled with menace, "I swear I'll—"

"I didn't take your biscuit!" the child's voice trembles. "I didn't. Please...please don't hurt me. I swear I didn't..."

"Leave her alone." The girl sits up in her bed and pushes the coverlet aside. Cold air sweeps across her legs and makes her shiver. She must've slept, but now that she is awake, she can remember no dreams and her mind is spinning from lack of rest.

The boy stares at her, his mouth open. He is obviously not used to the other children standing up to him. The girl glances around and the children in the other beds close their eyes before she can drag them into the quarrel. The girl guesses that this is the way the orphanage must work, or at least this room, for she does not yet know if there are other rooms with as many beds. The strongest boy is the one who leads through fear. The smaller children back down because they are afraid of being accused of something they may or may not have done and suffering pain as a consequence.

"What say you?" says the boy. He is still gripping the child's hair, her scalp raw and livid.

The girl stands. "Leave her alone. You're hurting her."

The child watches her with tears in her large eyes. She is skinny, her collarbones protruding through the skin at her neck, her limbs barely more than bones. The girl would not blame her

if she had taken the biscuit, for she appears to be starving.

"Ha! The new girl has a lot to learn," he speaks to the room in general, although he receives no answer. He shakes the child's head by the fistful of hair that he is holding. It is a warning. The child screams again. "Now listen to me," he continues. "Unless you want to get hurt, you'll climb back onto your mattress and close your eyes. This is the way we do things around here. She..." he shakes the child violently to emphasize the word until her teeth chatter, "stole my biscuit, the one given to me by the mistress. And I want it back."

He has a big nose. His ears protrude on both sides of his head, as though someone has used them to lift him from the ground. These are not ugly qualities in themselves, but they are made ugly by the bitterness inside him, and the girl understands that he will not hesitate to hurt any one of them if it means that he will get what he wants. Why would he show kindness when he has received none in return?

"She did not steal your biscuit," her voice rings out loud and pure so that there is no misunderstanding. "I did!"

The child gasps. The boy's eyes narrow. The other children fidget beneath their covers, no doubt fearful of what the boy will do next.

"You?" He appears lost for words.

"I was hungry," says the girl.

"So, you stole my biscuit." His voice slithers from his mouth like the grass snakes the girl has seen in the fields.

"I did not realize that it was yours. I thought the food here was to be shared."

He peers up at the ceiling as if he might find an answer written above his head. He stares at the girl and a slow demonic grin parts his lips. "No one likes a thief." He releases his grip on the child's hair and pushes her to the floor. "And you know what they do to thieves."

The girl has seen the way the market traders dealt with thieves, slicing a finger if they caught the culprits, but she did not think the boy would be allowed a knife, no matter if he considered himself to be the ruler of the younger children. And she was fast.

"I am no thief, if I did not intentionally steal from you," she says.

The boy laughs out loud. "You stole something that did not belong to you."

"But I did not know that you had laid claim to the food, therefore it was not theft."

A small boy snickers from somewhere near the door. The older boy whirls around to see where the noise has come from, but the children are all beneath their covers.

The girl's breathing is shallow; she is poised to run.

The older boy pounces on her without warning, but she is light and nimble, and she is across the beds, leaping them easily. Behind her, the boy lunges with all his weight behind him and lands clumsily on the floor.

It isn't until the girl reaches the door that she recalls the heavy ring of keys dangling from the mistress's apron. The door is locked. She reaches

for the doorknob as the door opens and the mistress appears in the opening, her face as dark as a storm cloud.

The mistress does not speak. She stares at the girl panting in front of her from having leaped across the cots. The boy is back on his feet and not far behind. "She stole from me," he says with a shrug. The woman glances at the other children as if waiting for someone to deny the statement. When this does not happen, she reaches for the girl's ear. Pinching the delicate flesh between thumb and forefinger, she drags the girl out of the room and along the chilly corridor.

The girl squirms. Her ear is stinging but she doesn't complain — any punishment the mistress will see fit to give her will probably be less painful than that administered by the boy. He would lash out without thinking of consequences. The mistress would think first before calculating her reaction.

They march quickly through a maze of corridors, passing many closed doors along the way. The girl thinks that she would never find her way back if left to return alone. Maybe she could lose herself forever in one of the closed silent rooms, hiding in cupboards like a mouse and prowling the house at night for morsels of food.

Eventually they arrive at the kitchen. The room is warm and glows with the flames from the fire. The cook looks at them when they burst through the door. Her face is round, her cheeks

rosy, probably from years of bending over a flame. "What have we here, then?" she asks.

"We have a thief," says the mistress in her brittle voice.

"Well now, what's your name —"

The girl blushes and looks ashamed, like she doesn't know the answer or understand the question.

"We do not pander to thieves with pleasantries," interrupts the mistress before the girl can answer. "We treat them like the animals they are. You want to steal food from others," she speaks to the girl, "then you can go and steal food from the mice and the night creatures."

They cross the heated kitchen without stopping, the girl barely sniffing the aroma of whatever is bubbling in the pot above the fire. Her stomach, alerted by food, begins to grumble. She cannot remember her last proper meal. The cart driver had been kind enough to share his bread and cheese with her, but that was almost a day ago. Hunger and tiredness are making her feel slightly faint.

Outside, the bite of cold air raises goosebumps on her flesh. Still the mistress keeps a hold of her ear. They cross the cobbled courtyard, the girl stumbling on the dewy stones, to the coal cellar. The woman opens the lid. Finally, she releases her hold on the girl.

"You can stay here until you are ready to repent your sin." She peers at the girl briefly from below heavily lidded eyes and glances away, her nose raised to the sky as if she finds the girl distasteful to look at.

The girl considers her options. She could admit that she lied about stealing the boy's biscuit, in which case the younger child would suffer greatly at the boy's hands. She could beg forgiveness for her actions and return to the room with the other children, where hopefully they might soon be given breakfast and begin the day's chores. A day like any other. She has no doubt she could outrun the boy again if she must. But the door is kept locked, and she cannot rely on the other children to back her up, and who knows what pain the boy will attempt to inflict during the night while she is asleep.

No, she decides that she will accept her punishment and take her chances in the coal cellar. She steps inside and takes the few steps down into the recesses of the cellar. She has to crouch low as the mistress closes the door above her head. It registers with the girl that at least the cellar is not kept locked.

The smell of coal is strong but not entirely bad. It reminds her of home, of sitting in front of the fire, her mother in her rocking chair and the girl cross-legged on the floor with her ragdoll while her mother told her stories. Stories of faraway lands on the other side of the world. Stories of magical creatures and battles of good against evil.

The coal shifts beneath her feet, the black rocks grazing the back of her legs, and she slides deeper into the cellar where the dark is like a heavy blanket thrown over her head. She reaches out with her fingers to touch it and feels only the weightlessness of air. It is like silk. She

imagines a beautiful gown sewn from silk in colors of peach and apple green. She imagines herself as a lady presenting herself to the king's court in her beautiful gown. Everyone would admire her. Everyone would gasp at her golden hair and the jewels around her neck, for no such garment would be complete without brilliant jewels. She would curtsy and say, "Your Majesty," keeping her eyes lowered. She can smell the food of the great banquet, feel the warmth of a roaring fire on her skin.

She is so lost in her reverie that she pays little attention to the scampering of tiny paws across the coal beneath her. Mice cannot hurt her. They are the same, the girl and the mice. They are hungry and they have nowhere else to go.

A sound distracts her from her daydream. It is heavier than the tiny whittering mice. This sound is more solid. She holds her breath and listens. She can hear nothing but the rushing of her own blood in her veins and she wonders if whatever made the sound is holding its breath too, waiting for her to move.

She widens her eyes, waiting for them to adjust to the darkness. For a while, nothing happens. And then she sees it. A glimmer, so faint she might have imagined it. Something else is in the coal cellar with her.

CHAPTER FOUR

February 15, 456 A.T.

The crew make haste to ready the ship. The riggers release the sails where they billow like giant birds on the wind. The master keeps his narrow eyes focused straight ahead. The quartermaster keeps one eye on the weather and one eye on me. I have grown accustomed to his devil-eyes and weird behavior over the years; we leave well enough alone and speak only when it concerns matters of the ship or the crew. His trust is not something I need or desire.

The wind grows stronger. But it does not push us away in anger. Rather, it is sucking us toward the heart of the storm the way a sparrow would suck a worm from the earth. It wants us.

I nod my greeting to the storm.

The master tilts his head, first to the left, and then to the right. "You might want to go below deck, Captain," he says.

"I am happy here," I say.

"I want no interference."

"I will interfere if the task at hand warrants it," I say. Whatever they whisper about me when the moon is high in the sky, or whatever their speculation about my previous sins, I am still captain, and I will not let them forget it. I care not for being popular.

The master steadies the wheel. He thinks I do not notice how he turns the ship away from the eye of the storm, which is now visible like a writhing snake being piped to music. He turns it so gradually, a fraction at a time, so the ship does not lurch or list. The crew communicates by the feel of the boards beneath their feet. The quartermaster has registered the change of direction in silence. The riggers follow the movement with the sails.

The master is daring me to pass comment.

I do not look at him. He can read faces the way he can read weather. "We'll still hit the storm," I say.

"Aye, but I'm not fool enough to think we can take her on and win. We'll use her for our own gain. Catch her tail and she can drop us off the other side."

"The tail often carries the most dangerous sting."

He nods at that. "Not if we're prepared."

As we draw closer, the sails buckle and bend, and the riggers have a hard time keeping them straight. The boatswain and first mate run the length of the ship, making sure that everything remains intact. They make ghostly figures, gray

against the vivid sky above us, their flesh and clothes as gray as the day they had their roles forced upon them as I did. Yet, when the Crossing demands it, they still possess an energy befitting those who still live.

Again, the wheel is turned. The rear of the boat catches the squall, and we alter course, heading west of the storm. The sky has blended into one violet painting.

The master nods to himself. His plan is working. The ship, if it manages to hang onto the tail-end of the wind, will skirt the worst of it like a girl dancing around a tree, and we will reach the other side before we know it.

But whatever the sky has wakened in me today, I've a mind for danger. I can feel the restlessness itching away inside of me the way it did when I first stepped aboard. I've had my fill of monotony, of boredom, and of faces that all merge together in an ocean of grayness inside my mind.

And the only way to relieve the monotony is to change course. To dance with the storm, be it controlled by the devil or not.

Closer and our raggedy clothes are saturated. The wind swallows whole the shouts of the riggers to the quartermaster. The cabin boy has long since given up mopping the spray from the deck. If a crew member slips and breaks his neck now, so be it.

A glimpse of movement catches my eyes. The woman passenger. I had forgotten our cargo, the way it is possible to forget a last meal, or a conversation that happened a hundred or more

years ago. But I notice her now because she is no longer on the bench muttering under her breath. She is on her feet. Her face is turned toward the storm and her arms are raised to the sky.

It is the first time a soul has shown any awareness of their surroundings, and it is this that I am drawn to. So much so, that the ship tilts to the port before I realize that the master has moved the wheel.

We are close to the eye of the storm now. So close, I feel that I can hear voices from inside it. Yelping, screeching voices, clawing at my brain to be heard. I stare hard at its center. It has become a glowing mass of moving light. So enchanting, I cannot tear my eyes away from it. It beckons me, calling me to action, reminding me that I was once lord and should still be.

I understand what we must do. We must go into the storm.

I lunge at the master and knock him to the floor, his head sounding a hefty thump against the slippery decking. There is yelling behind us. The cabin boy is on his knees, watching me, his mouth open and drooling as sea-spray drips from the end of his nose.

I am on my feet and reaching for the wheel. I kick out at the quartermaster as he reaches the other side of the helm, catching his shins with the toe of my boot and causing him to yelp with pain. Behind him, the boatswain hesitates. It is all the time I need. I swing the wheel toward the heart of the storm, clutching the wooden spokes until I fear my knuckles will break free of my

skin, the crew members rolling across the slippery floor.

I hang on tight. The ship rears at the bow like a stallion would rear at a hound beneath its hooves, and barrels careen past me as they are pulled toward the rear of the vessel. One barely misses my head and I duck. The cabin boy is on all fours, his head between his knees and his arms covering his head protectively.

We are almost there. Despite the drenching, I am filled with warmth from the glow of the storm. A little further, and the ship is moving without help, the sails caught in the wind's embrace. That is when I spot it. Something reaching out of the sea to claim us. An arm. A tentacle, I cannot tell which, because my eyes are streaming with salty water. But whatever it is, it speaks now. It wants us. It called and I followed blindly. It reaches out of the sea, growing taller and higher, and too late, I wrench the wheel in the opposite direction.

The boatswain is on his knees and hanging from the other side of the helm, pulling with all his weight to set us back on a course out of the storm. The ship crashes down heavily on its new path, the bow dipping under the sea and the stern rearing toward the sky. The cabin boy is catapulted into the air and in a movement so fluid, so swift it will forever remain a blur in my memory, is snatched by whatever monstrous creature lives inside the storm and disappears.

CHAPTER FIVE

February 15, 456 A.T.

The cat leaps soundlessly across the coals and leans against the girl's legs. Its body is thin but warm, and the heat seeps through her skin. She feels a low rumble mounting in its chest. The girl strokes the cat's body with her hand, relishing the feel of its fur.

There was a cat that used to come to their home when she was younger — mostly when her elderly dog was sleeping and did not notice its presence. It would sit by the fire and wait for the girl's mother to bring it milk. She was always fascinated by its majesty. The way it held its head high peering down at them, like a queen or a princess, waiting for people to bring it whatever it needed. In return, the cat caught mice and rats.

And then one day, the cat went outside to play as normal, and never returned. She'd often

wondered whether it had simply been time for the cat to move on, or whether they had offended her in some way.

Now with the animal purring beside her in the consuming darkness, she realizes how much she has missed that regal creature. "Hello," she whispers, tickling the fur between the cat's ears. "Have you come to keep me warm?"

The cat steps carefully across the girl's legs and rubs its body against her left side, giving her more warmth.

"I'm sorry I have no food to share with you," murmurs the girl.

The cat stops purring and straightens.

"What is it? What did you hear?"

The cat leaps away from the girl and a fresh wave of cold air brushes her skin. She clutches her arms around her legs and draws her knees to her chest, trying to keep the heat inside her. Her eyes have adjusted a little to the dark, but still, she can see no further than her knees in front of her face. She doesn't know how long the mistress will leave her here. Maybe she will forget about the girl—she has not been in the orphanage a day yet and her face is still unfamiliar. Or maybe the boy will come to release her instead and inflict his punishment upon her in private before dragging her back to the room filled with beds where he will pretend that he has no knowledge of how she came to be wounded.

In any case, she does not know how long it will be before she is given food, and the hunger is making her dizzy.

The cat leaps from somewhere nearby and lands at the girl's feet. She purrs lazily as if telling the girl that she is back. The cat paws at the girl's legs and drops something beside her.

"What is this?" The girl lowers her legs. "Did you bring me a gift?"

In the dark, she feels her way around with her fingertips until they find a tiny unmoving body. A mouse. It is dead but still warm.

"You brought me breakfast!" exclaims the girl. "It is very kind of you, but the breakfast is all yours. You've earned it."

The cat is so intelligent, it appears to understand the girl. It turns away with the mouse so as not to offend the girl and eats its breakfast. The girl closes her eyes. It is best not to think at all, best to empty her mind and pretend that she is not in a coal cellar with a cat who wants to feed her dead mice.

She does not know how long she has been sitting there with her eyes closed, when the lid to the coal cellar is raised. She covers her eyes with her arm to protect them from the startling daylight that is streaming through the opening.

"Are you all right?" says a child's voice.

The girl removes her arm from across her face and peers around her for the cat. It is gone. She looks up toward the opening and the watery blue sky above her head and sees the child who was accused of stealing the boy's biscuit.

"I brought you some food," says the child. "I...I thought you must be hungry." She offers the girl some bread crusts and a spoonful of blackberry jam wrapped in paper.

"Hurry, Besse," says a voice from behind the child. A silhouette of a woman appears behind her. Not the mistress, for this figure is rounder and shorter than the mistress. The cook maybe.

"Thank you, Besse," the girl accepts the food and devours it hungrily.

"Will you come out and stretch your legs?" says Besse.

The girl nods. Besse offers her a hand and helps her to her feet. "Thank you," she smiles at Besse when she is standing in the cobbled courtyard. Her legs feel stiff and her back takes time to straighten.

"Thank you," says Besse. "For, you know, covering for me."

"How long have I been here?" asks the girl.

"The better part of a day," says Besse. "The cook said you must be hungry, and in need of the latrine. I don't know when the mistress will come for you, but we mustn't be caught helping you."

The cook steps out from behind Besse and looks at the girl. "Look at ye, all filthy like a beggar." She spits on her thumb and starts rubbing at the girl's chin and cheeks to clear some of the soot away. "I tells the mistress, I does, she's no mind locking innocent children in coal cellars. It's worse than they does in jail, it is. Might as well lock ye in a tower and accuse ye of

treason." She steps back and surveys the girl's face.

The girl smiles at her. "I feel better now, thank you. I don't want to cause you any trouble."

"It's no trouble to me. Besse here tells me what ye did for her. That Topher is a greedy scoundrel. He knows where his bread's buttered, which is why the mistress gets him to do her dirty work for her while she sits with her books and..." the cook raises a hand to her throat as if she might take her words back. "Anyways, is there anything else we can get ye? I'm sorry I can't set ye free, but she'd wear my guts for garters if she gets wind we've been feeding ye."

"There is one thing," says the girl. "My doll. She took my ragdoll from me last night when I arrived. My father gave it to me when I was a baby and I want it back." She knows that she is in no position to demand anything, but she doesn't care if she gets caught. The ragdoll belongs to her and she cannot let the mistress keep it.

The cook shakes her head. "I don't know about that, dearie. It'll not be easy, and she'll know it's missing."

"I don't want you to suffer for helping me," says the girl. "If you can only tell me where I might find it and I'll go looking. You can shut me back in the coal cellar as soon as I have it and you'll not hear a peep from me." She watches the cook's face for a moment, the uncertainty in the round eyes. "Do you know where it might be?"

"Aye, it'll be in the chest the mistress keeps in her room."

"Is it locked?"

"Aye, it'll be locked," says the cook. "The key will be on the ring she keeps a-swinging from her apron."

The girl nods. "Can you tell me how I can get the key?"

"Even if ye can get the key, ye still needs to get into the room without her seeing ye," says the cook.

The girl is thoughtful. "When does she take off the apron?"

"The only time I've ever seen her without it is when I'm drawing her bath." The cook's eyes widen even further. "When I'm drawing her bath," she repeats. "She takes her bath in the kitchen and the apron is left in a pile with her clothes. And the keys. But no," she shakes her head vigorously and her chestnut curls bounce around her face. "'Tis too dangerous. Ye'll never get away with it, and there's no telling what she'll do when she discovers it's missing. I've seen the mistress when she is angry and believe me, ye'd rather face all your demons in the dead of night than that..."

The cook rubs at the little finger on her left hand. When she clasps her hands together in front of her, the girl can see that the little finger is nothing more than a stub, shiny pink flesh across the nubble of it, where the finger should be growing.

The girl reaches for the woman's hand and squeezes it. "I will make sure she knows you had

no part of it," she says. "If you will just allow me access to the keyring while she bathes, I promise I will return it as soon as I have my ragdoll and you can lock me in the cellar for as long as the mistress wishes." She holds the woman's gaze, her own eyes pleading. "Please."

"I'll help," says Besse in her timid voice.

"Two lassies, ye'll be no match for the mistress if she catches ye," says the cook, looking from one to the other.

The girl smiles. "Thank you."

Besse smiles too, her cheeks pink with excitement. The girl will need to be careful that Besse isn't discovered as her accomplice; it will not bode well for her if she is found out.

The mistress takes her bath in the evening when the children have finished supper and are locked in their room. They need to figure a way to sneak Besse from the room without Topher blocking her way or reporting her to the mistress in return for extra food as a reward. No wonder, thinks the girl, that the boy is taller and sturdier built than the other children if he receives extra portions for being a snitch.

The cook takes care of Topher. She sneaks castor oil into his supper when no one is looking. The boy eats fast, shovelling great handfuls of food into his mouth and barely tasting it before he swallows. If the food this suppertime tastes a little unusual, he will not notice.

Topher's stomach gripes begin as the children are readying for bed. He clutches his stomach, bent double over his cot, groaning like someone is trying to murder him. His intestines are grumbling so loudly that Besse can hear him from her own cot, and she stifles a giggle before climbing from her bed and resting a hand on his back. As discussed with the girl and the cook, she offers to help him down to the latrine, ringing the bell and asking the mistress in her sweetest voice.

The mistress takes one glance at the boy and the foul smell surrounding him and agrees. They were counting on her wanting no part in aiding the boy with his bodily functions, even if he is her right-hand man when it comes to doling out punishment.

Besse leaves the boy outside in the latrine and on silent feet, frees the girl from the coal cellar. The two of them hide in the pantry with the cook's help, crouching behind a large sack of corn, and wait for the mistress's bath to be drawn. The girl can sense Besse's high spirits and wonders if she has considered this a playful game with no consequences. The girl will have to see to it that she is not hurt if they are caught, for Besse's frailty worries her.

It takes the cook a while, and several journeys back and forth across the kitchen, heating the water in a pot over the fire and carrying it to the iron bath that has been set in a nook behind the range.

Finally, the mistress appears in the doorway, tall and straight-backed, her mouth a thin line.

She peers around the room as if someone has warned her of the girls' plans, before proceeding behind the range and out of sight. The cook doesn't wait, she beckons to the girls to leave the pantry and head toward the doorway from where the mistress appeared.

When the apron and clothes are removed and the mistress is settled into the steaming water, a sigh escaping her lips, the cook quickly unfastens the keyring from the apron and, wrapping it inside a dishcloth so that it doesn't jangle, presses it into the girl's hands. "Go," she whispers.

The girls run along the corridor toward the mistress's room, Besse leading the way, for the girl cannot remember any part of the building. When they reach the door, the girl fumbles with the keyring. She tries three keys before finding the one that clicks the lock and opens the door to the mistress's room, all the while Besse keeping lookout.

They enter, closing the door softly behind them.

Candles are alight in the wall-sconces. The curtains are pulled shut and the room is heavy with candle smoke. In the center of the room is a wide four-poster bed, the curtains pulled together so that the bed itself is invisible. The girl stops and listens. She knows that the mistress is downstairs, bathing, and yet she has the overwhelming sense that someone is behind the bed-curtains, listening to them. It makes the hairs on the back of her neck stand up.

"What is wrong?" whispers Besse.

The girl presses a finger to her lips, warning Besse to silence. She tiptoes to the corner of the bed and tugs the curtain aside, holding her breath. There is no one there. The bed cover is pulled smooth and tight as if it has never been disturbed by a sleeping body. The girl shakes her head and replaces the curtain. It was only her imagination playing tricks on her.

The wooden chest is at the foot of the bed. The girl finds the key easily—it is larger than the others, made with tarnished brass and with a heavy pattern on its contours. She kneels on the floor and raises the lid of the chest.

Inside, and right at the very top of the contents, is the ragdoll. It must have been the last thing the mistress placed in there, the last thing she stole. Besse joins the girl on the floor, her eyes wide and searching, her hands inside the chest and rummaging through the items piled neatly inside. She pulls out a silver locket hanging from a silver filigree chain. "This belongs to me," she whispers. The girl stares at her. "My mother left it with me so that when she returned, she would know who I was and not leave with someone else's abandoned child."

"Your mother is alive?" whispers the girl.

"They...she had to go away."

The girl asks no more questions—they must return the keyring before the mistress realizes that it is missing. But as she gets ready to close the lid, something else catches her eye inside the chest. Something snowy white and edged with lace. She removes it from the pile where it is almost hidden and holds it in her hands; it is a

baby bonnet, so pure and soft it appears that it has never been worn. The girl reaches inside the chest and removes more items of baby clothing, all white, all unworn.

"I wonder who these belong to," says Besse. "They look new."

"Aye." Maybe the mistress had been expecting a baby to arrive one day although it would be unlike the woman to show compassion for any child that arrives in her care. But there is no time for small talk. "We must go." She replaces the baby clothes back inside the chest the way she found them and closes the lid.

Besse slips the locket inside her pocket. The girl is holding her ragdoll.

They open the door and both gasp as they see Topher waiting in the corridor to catch them off guard. His face is pale, his forehead beaded with sweat from the gripes in his stomach, but his eyebrows are drawn together, and his lips are sulky.

"The mistress said we couldn't trust you," he says to the girl. "She said you were trouble."

"I wanted my ragdoll," the girl's voice is loud and sure. She will not show him fear because he will only use it against her. "It belongs to me."

"Aye, well, the mistress don't allow no possessions," he says. "So, give me it back."

He reaches out to snatch the raggedy cloth, but before he can lay his fingers on it, the girl slaps his hand away. "Run!" she says to Besse.

Besse doesn't hesitate. She whirls around and is running along the corridor toward the stairs.

As the boy watches Besse's thin form disappear, the girl seizes the opportunity to run in the opposite direction back toward the kitchen, the keys jangling in her hand. The boy cries out and chases after her, but she is fast. She reaches the kitchen before he is on her, bounding through the doorway and almost toppling over the range. She spies the cook with her arm wrapped in a wet cloth, her face pink and sweaty, her eyes crinkled in pain, but she has no time to stop and ask what has happened. She crosses the kitchen quickly and reaches the door that opens outside to the cobbled courtyard and the coal cellar.

The girl fumbles with the doorknob but it will not turn. She rattles it this way and that, but the door does not budge. Tears well behind her eyes and she blinks them back. She tugs on the doorknob with all her strength, willing the door to open, as the boy catches up with her and throws his arm around her neck.

She cries out but she can barely breathe, and the boy's grip is tightening around her neck. He is strong. The ragdoll slips from her fingers. Releasing the doorknob, she tries to loosen the boy's grip from around her neck, but though her fingers scratch at his flesh, he is stronger than she is, and his grip is like metal. Tears stream from the corners of her eyes. Strange choking sounds come from her throat as she struggles for air.

And then something smashes against the boy's head and she is released. He drops to his knees, surrounded by broken fragments of a clay

pot. Blood wells from a wound on the top of his head.

Besse stands behind him, breathless. She smiles at the girl. "Are you all right? I thought he was going to kill you."

The girl is still struggling to fill her lungs with air, but manages to say, "Thanks, Besse. I think he would have killed me had you not appeared."

Besse nods. "You saved me. I saved you."

The girl understands.

Then a tall figure appears behind Besse and the girl's eyes widen. The mistress. Her eyes are like narrow slits, and her face is still pink from the bath, but her mouth is so tight that it almost couldn't be seen.

"You!" She points at the girl. "Don't think you're getting away with this so lightly."

Besse shrinks away into the darkness of the pantry and that is all right—she has saved the girl once, and now she must look out for herself.

Behind the mistress, the cook is watching the proceedings, her arm cradled against her wide chest still wrapped in a wet cloth. She looks at the girl and nods at the door as if she is telling her to run.

In one swift movement, the girl bends down to reach for the ragdoll and turns the doorknob, which releases this time as if there was nothing causing it to stick before. The girl is through the door and outside in the cool air before the mistress has taken a step. She heads straight for the safety of the coal cellar. Reaching for the lid, she hooks a finger through the catch and raises it high. She takes a quick glance behind her, at

the mistress who is clutching a robe across her chest, striding after the girl, certain that there is nowhere for her to escape to. The woman's mouth is set in a thin line. Her eyes are dark.

The girl clings to the ragdoll and dives headfirst into the cellar.

CHAPTER SIX

February 15, 456 A.T.

The master pounces on me and we crash upon the deck, the boards bouncing beneath us. His hands are around my throat. His breath is vile in my face, but still I cannot look away as he raises my head from the deck and crashes it backwards, again and again, my skull resounding against the decking like the thumping of the quartermaster's boots. There is strength in the master's grip, I'll grant him that.

I want to laugh in his face, but I cannot even muster enough amusement for that. He will achieve nothing by his attack—I am already dead.

"The. Cabin. Boy." The breath wheezes from his lungs as he vents his anger.

Why should I care? The boy will be replaced tomorrow. We've lost seven cabin boys during my captaincy. By the very nature of their age and

inexperience, they are prone to accidents and a desire to climb the rigging simply because it is there to be climbed, or they reach for the sea simply because they are surrounded by it and are fascinated. Seven cabin boys have gone overboard. Tomorrow, the eighth will appear.

I do not question it. We are a crew, and we are here to fulfil the requirements of the ferry, nothing else. I feel nothing for any of them, same as they feel nothing for me.

I close my eyes and wait for the master's rage to diminish. I think he is angrier that I dared to interfere with his decision and alter the ship's course; navigating does not fall under my jurisdiction. The captain ferries the souls to the land of the dead. The captain does not navigate.

Slowly the echo of skull against floorboards softens to a dull thud. The bony fingers around my neck loosen a little. I breathe more easily, though I was not fighting for breath—there needs to be something worth fighting for and I gave up on that good fortune many years ago.

When I open my eyes again, I can barely see the master despite the closeness of his face to mine. A fog has crept upon us and settled aboard the ship like an extra passenger. It is dense, a blanket of swirling grubby whiteness that churns and twirls like a gypsy dancer around our heads. It has crept upon us fast. Too fast. And the master must have been too busy on the deck with me to notice it. Too late to change course now.

He drops me now, but still his weight pins my body to the floor.

"Fog," I mumble.

"Aye," his voice is muffled by the mist.
"Must've been the storm."

We put our tussle aside. We are a crew again and we must work together to steer the ship to safety and complete our crossing.

"Will you make the course?"

"It will be no thanks to you if we do," grumbles the master. He heaves his weight upright as the ship veers to the left. It is turning fast, so fast that even I can recognize that we will soon be off-course and losing precious time if the turn isn't righted. "Aiyeel!" yells the master as he lunges for the helm.

Muffled footsteps approach. More voices. I recognize the boatswain and first mate yelling to the master. "What happened? Why are we changing course?"

"I don't know. Grab the helm!" the master yells back.

Still dazed and fuzzy-headed from our near-collision with the eye of the storm, I follow the voices to the wheel, where I find the three crew members hanging from the wooden spokes, their boots dragging on the slippery floor as they fail to find their footing. The fog is still roiling and shifting around us. A boot comes into view and disappears as a head emerges higher up. I've never seen fog quite like it, and for the first time since boarding the ferry, I am filled with doubt that we will fulfil the task at hand this day.

I too lunge for the wheel and heave with all my meagre strength to set us back upon our journey, though I am fearful the master will not

be able to plot the course with any degree of accuracy in this strange and eerie mist. It's impossible to see further than the end of our nose.

But with four of us upon it, the ship still has a mind of its own. We are still turning.

"Pull harder!" yells the master.

"It is useless!" I cry. "Why is she not changing course?"

"The current has her," says the boatswain.

"No point fighting the current when it's this strong. The sea has a mind of her own also."

"Will we wait until the fog passes?" I ask.

"Aye, and have no chance of arriving in time," the master's voice is dull, hopeless.

The excitement of the storm has passed, and with it, I am once again shouldered with the responsibility of the welfare of my crew. "What chance have we, if we cannot see where we are going? We might be heading in the right direction, and we will never know unless we wait for it to pass. A fog this dense cannot keep its shape forever."

The master must follow my train of thought and realize that I am right. "Save your strength, lads. It is no use anyway; the ship has a mind to keep going and who are we to argue?"

It is the closest the master will ever come to agreeing with me and I have no mind to say so, not after my thoughtless actions and the loss of the cabin boy. They need no reason to trust me less than they already do.

If the sails have been furled, it is impossible to tell. I can barely see my hands in front of my

face. It is peaceful, like being aboard the ferry alone with my thoughts for the first time since I stepped aboard. I make my way to the side of the ship, clumsily, a step at a time and hands outstretched, as even the decking is invisible, and I do not want to be responsible for another mishap.

I reach the narrow passenger-bench and am surprised when the faces of the two souls emerge from the mist like pale moons. They sit still, as though this is a journey they travel every day, as though they are untouched by the fog and the panic and the change of course. But, I guess, they have no idea what to expect, no more than I have an idea of what awaits them on the other side. I have never once stepped ashore since assuming my role of wayfarer. And to my knowledge, neither have the rest of the crew.

It is not something we discuss.

I sit beside the passengers.

And wait.

I've no concept of time, but when the ferry begins to slow, I am numb from the cold and from my position on the bench. The fog has not lifted. There are no sounds from the crew and for all I know, they might've all joined the cabin boy overboard. I wait, and feel the ferry beneath my feet. I picture it slowing gracefully to a halt, somewhere in the middle of this vast sea that we travel each day without ever wavering from our destination.

Maybe the master found a way to navigate blind. Even as this thought occurs to me, I know beyond doubt that the ship has slowed of its own

accord, just as it chose its own course and speed, regardless of our task-at-hand.

The ferry stops moving.

I wait for the master to yell at the first mate to drop anchor. But I hear no voices.

The twelve souls who wait on the bench with me rise as though they sense that they have arrived at their destination. The woman is quiet now, serene. Her head is held high as she takes to her feet, her body filled with a peace that I did not sense in her when we first took her aboard.

One of the men, however, is snivelling. "No...don't let them take me. I can't go...please don't make me go..."

I have heard it all before. It is the way many souls react to their arrival at the land of the dead. A foreboding that they carried with them from the land of the living. I pay no attention to it. There is nothing I can do for them. I am the wayfarer, only here to see them on their way.

"Please..." he reaches for my hand now in the heavy fog and I shrink away from him. No contact. There has never been any contact. "Help me," he pleads.

I turn away. I cannot see his face and that is how it should be. I make my way carefully to the other side of the ship, where I am hoping the first mate will have lowered the bridge in readiness for the souls to disembark.

Before I find the first mate, there is a hand on my arm. I push the hand away and stumble backwards. I am suddenly filled with the irrational notion that the ferry has been altered by the fog, that this destination is of its own

choosing and that these souls have shed some kind of magic over us, like a second skin that has forever altered the way of things.

I shake my head. I have never been one for fits of whimsy or speculation. A nobleman is raised to be ever practical and confident, not picky like a child. I raise my hand to strike the man who is still crying like a baby, but it is the woman's face that emerges through the blanket of mist. "Away from me, woman," I say. "I have seen to it that you have arrived safely. It is time for you to go."

She nods. Her eyes waver before me like I have finished a bottle of rum on an empty stomach. "I am going. But first, I must give you something."

"I want nothing." I do not move closer to her. My ears strain because I have heard the first whispers of the dead from ashore. The ferry has brought us here safely and avoided any punishment that might have befallen us for our late arrival; she does indeed know the course without any help from the crew, it seems, and I praise her for saving us.

"I know," the woman continues, "but I must give it to you anyway."

In the suffocating blindness of the fog, she finds my hand with her icy fingers and presses something cold and hard upon my palm. My fingers instinctively close around it.

"You have already paid the crossing fee," I mutter.

"This is not for me," she says.

It is the last I hear of any of them. The whispers from the dead increase as the souls

leave the ferry, closing in on them and claiming them for their own. There is a scream and then nothing.

As soon as silence envelops us once more, the ship begins to move, gracefully, and without aid from any of the ferry's crew. I trust that she knows where she is going.

I retire to my cabin, feeling my way along the deck. Once inside, I lock the door and settle upon the narrow cot. In my hand is a gold coin. I bite it. It's real enough. It is the first time a passenger has handed payment to me and the first time anything other than the one required coin has ever been issued. It is an omen.

I open the chest and deposit the coin inside. I remove the ship's log and take it to the desk. I sit and open the log to the page which should contain the information for today's passengers. It is blank. I turn the pages back and forth. The previous page contains notes on yesterday's travelers. The following page is also blank, awaiting tomorrow's souls. There is nothing about the woman, the pleading man, or the other ten, although it is only the woman that I am interested in. Tired, I replace the log in the chest, locking it and slipping the key in my pocket. I lay on the mattress and close my eyes, forgetful of the woman's words: "This is not for me."

CHAPTER SEVEN

February 15, 456 A.T.

The girl braces herself for impact with the mound of coal, but she feels no sharpness beneath her hands. She is surprised when she lands with a soft whump beneath a sky that is as pink as the inside of her mouth. She tastes salt on her lips. The girl raises herself on her hands and peers in front of her. She is facing the sea. It glimmers pink and purple with the glow from the unusual sky, white foam speckling the waves in the distance.

The girl sits up. She is still clutching the ragdoll in her arms and she kisses the top of its head gently. She breathes in, filling her lungs with the salty air. She closes her eyes to give thanks to the gods above. She does not know how she happened to be here when she expected to be in a black coal cellar with the boy, Topher, attempting to yank her out by the collar, but she

does not question it. She recalls what her mother always used to say to her. "It isn't possible to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, because everyone is where they are meant to be."

She shrugs and rises to her feet. People used to visit her mother from far and wide. They would sit in the darkened living room in front of the fire and listen to her ramblings. They often stayed for a cup of ale and some bread and cheese. Some slept overnight on the mat in front of the fire if their journey home was to take them all day.

The girl checks her arms and legs, shaking them one limb at a time to check that nothing is broken. The sand cushioned her fall, and everything is intact. She feels a momentary twinge of fear for Besse, but dispels her thoughts with the belief that the cook will see that the child is all right. She hopes that one day, Besse's mother will return for her and that she will be allowed to keep the silver locket.

The girl turns around to face behind her and is surprised to find that the sea has followed her view. She spins around and around, her arms outstretched, the ragdoll's legs flying through the air, and giggles at the never-ending sea surrounding her. She glances at her bare feet, at the sand between her toes, and gazes with wonder at the pink sky above her head. This is surely magic.

Setting the ragdoll on the sand where she will not get wet, the girl wades into the water which is warm as a bath. She stands with her ankles covered and splashes her arms and legs, and

then her face, washing the soot and grime from her skin. The cleansing fills her with a sense of excitement. She is still consumed by the sadness of her mother's passing, but her mother made her promise to always search for the hope in everything that she saw. And this, this magical sea and pink sky has given her more hope than she could have ever imagined since being orphaned.

When she is clean, she sits on the sand, the ragdoll in her lap, and stares at the sea. She is searching for sea creatures. Her mother told her stories of merfolk, humans with scaly tails instead of legs. She cannot imagine anything more beautiful than a person with a fishtail. She is lost in a daydream of herself living underwater with sea creatures, collecting shells, and eating oysters and clams, when she hears a low murmur of voices behind her.

Her back tenses. For a moment, she thinks that Topher has followed her here, but it doesn't sound like his voice. She stands slowly. There are ten other people on the sand with her, the sea stretching out behind and all around them. They do not look well though. In fact, when she peers closely at them, at their faces, they are all gray-skinned and sickly, and one has the mark of the purple plague spots around her neck and arms. Their clothes also appear to have been on long journeys to get here without being cleaned or freshened. She wonders if they traveled together. If so, why did she not hear them arrive?

"Hello," she says brightly. "How did you get here?"

The ten—six women and four men—stare at her, open-mouthed, as though they did not understand her language. They do not speak.

“Did you travel together?” asks the girl. She smiles at them so that they will understand she is friendly. After all, they are standing on the same tiny island of sand surrounded by sea.

Still, they do not respond.

“I came from an orphanage,” says the girl. “One minute I was being chased by Topher, who surely meant to do me harm for taking the mistress’s keys, and...” Her mouth opens wide, and she stares down at her own clothes. Slowly, she slides a hand into her pocket and retrieves the stolen keyring. She gasps. She brought the keys with her. She wonders briefly if the keys had something to do with her being here; that, and the strange sense of foreboding she felt when she entered the mistress’s room. She shrugs. Whatever the reason she came to be here, it is not to be dwelled upon. She is here and she must trust that she is where she is meant to be.

She raises her eyes to the people standing on the sand and staring at her. The woman with the plague marks reaches out a purple-spotted hand to touch the keys. The girl jumps, startled. She has heard tales of plague victims. Terrible tales of people losing their minds, tales of victims chasing innocent, healthy people down the streets trying to kiss them and infect them with the deadly disease.

The girl steps backwards. The woman lunges for her, but her movements are slow, sluggish, and the girl easily avoids the woman’s fingers by

leaping into the water, until it reaches her knees and her tunic is soaked from the splashes.

She faces the people on the sand. "I am sorry," she speaks clearly, because she still does not know if they understand her words. "I am sorry that you are sickly, but I have no mind to catch the plague. I cannot help you if I am sick also."

She doesn't know why she said that. She isn't sure if, or how, she could possibly help them, but it makes sense that they should leave her alone, as she is the only one with any visible signs of good health. There is no telling how long they will be here. The girl is still hungry, and she has never heard talk of how to catch fish for supper, but they will find no other sustenance here.

The people on the shore still do not speak. Neither are they looking at the girl anymore. They are looking beyond her to the foamy ripples on the sea's surface, and their black eyes appear to sink even deeper into the bruised hollows of their cheeks. Their mouths move silently, as if in prayer.

The girl turns around to peer out to sea and she realizes why they are gaping and fearful. A ship looms behind her, tall and grand and graceful. She doesn't know how it appeared there without her noticing—only minutes earlier, she was facing the sea and searching for merfolk and there was no ship in sight. It must have been traveling fast to have crept up on them like that.

She watches as the ship comes closer and closer, its bow almost touching her where she

stands knee-deep in water, before it halts. She is close enough to reach out and touch the smooth wood. She turns to smile at the people behind her, but they are already wading slowly into the water and around the side of the boat, as if they were waiting all along for its arrival. They keep their heads down. It is as if they are being dragged aboard against their will or on threat of punishment. The girl sees resignation in their eyes; defeat and acceptance that they have no choice but to climb the bridge that she can see has been lowered for them.

She follows behind one of the men. She can see now that the back of his head is bloody and dented, hollowed out like a pomegranate with the seeds removed. It is a wonder he can still stand with a wound like this. She tries not to look at it as she mounts the wooden bridge behind them, still clutching the ragdoll to her chest.

The woman with the plague spots is first to reach the ship's deck. A narrow-eyed man awaits their arrival, his hand held out in readiness. When the woman reaches him, she opens her mouth and coughs into his hand. The man flinches and blinks but says nothing. He holds up to the sky whatever it is that has landed on the palm of his hand and the girl can see that it is a gold coin. The man slips the coin into a pouch hanging from his belt.

The second woman does the same: she coughs into the man's hand and he holds aloft a gold coin for checking, before it too is added to the pouch. The process is repeated when the

man with the dented skull and the remaining eight climb aboard.

When it is the girl's turn, she steps onto the deck and smiles at the man. He takes a hesitant step backwards, as though it is she who is contagious. He shakes his head from side to side and squints at her until his eyes are mere slits in his face. He peers behind her, as if she might be hiding someone else behind her small frame. The girl follows his gaze and then returns her eyes to the man.

"I am the last one on the shore," she says.

"What...why are you here?" mumbles the man.

"I don't know," the girl shakes her head, and her blonde hair settles on her shoulders. "I cannot explain it. I was —"

"You should not be here," the man points at the shore as if he wants the girl to leave the vessel.

She glances again at the shore before she speaks to the man. She doesn't know why, but she is certain that she should be on this ship. She is equally as certain that she should not be left behind on that tiny island that is no wider than three people standing. Where would she go? What would she do for food?

"I was waiting with the others for the ship to arrive," she says.

The man moves swiftly. Before the girl can react, he has pinched her arm and stepped backwards again with his mouth open. "You should not be here," he repeats.

"I have nowhere else to go." She stands her ground.

"Do you not know what this vessel is?"

The man's face is pale, she notices now; pale and gray like the people who waited with her. It is as though the color has been drained from them, sucked out and spat aside, leaving them with only this pallid sickly look of those in need of a leeching.

"No," she says. "Will you tell me?"

"This...this is the ferry."

"The ferry?"

"Aye, the ferry." He glances around him as if looking for assistance. When none is forthcoming, a thought appears to spring to his mind. "Where is your payment?"

"My payment?" The girl realizes that the man is speaking of the gold coin spat into his hand by the other travelers. She shakes her head. "I have none, I'm sorry. I did not know that I needed payment."

The man's eyes become slits again for an instant and then he stares visibly as the bridge is raised from the water and comes to rest, dripping, on the decking at their feet. He grabs the girl's arm and jerks her away from the side of the ferry and along the deck, toward the rear of the vessel. She tries to free her arm, but his grip is strong. She feels the ship moving, a gentle breeze tugging at the ends of her hair as they sail away from the tiny shore.

"Where are you taking me?" she asks. Now that the ferry is moving, she is fearful that the man will throw her overboard in the middle of

the sea if she cannot give him payment, and she does not know how to swim.

"To the captain," says the man.

A man is standing at the rear of the boat. He is tall and broad across the shoulders. He has his back to them and is staring out at sea, a colorless cap fixed upon his head, unmoving in the breeze which is stronger here.

"Captain," says the man.

"Aye," the captain turns to face them. His face has the same gray-tinged, sickly quality of the other people and the man who is still gripping the girl's arm. He jerks away from them when he spies the girl. "Who is this?" he demands.

"She came aboard with the other souls," says the man.

"She..." the captain eyes the girl with his eyebrows drawn and shakes his head, "She is not like the others."

"And she has no payment," says the man, holding onto the girl tightly.

The captain's eyes do not leave the girl's face. "What should we do?" he asks.

"She cannot stay," says the first man.

The girl, believing that the lack of payment is the problem with her presence on board the ferry, says brightly, "I can work for payment. I can scrub floors and serve food."

The captain continues to stare at her. "She speaks."

"Aye, a pretty mouthful of nonsense," says the other man. "She doesn't belong here, that's for sure, and the ferry has a mind to be on her way."

The captain's gaze turns to face the direction in which they are traveling. He turns back to them and says, "There is nothing for it but to take her across with the others. What would you normally do with one such as she?"

The man shakes his head. "I've never seen the likes in my time. We need the coin. Without the coin, there's no crossing. We could throw her overboard."

The girl renews her wriggling to free her arm from the man's grip. "No," she pleads. "Please don't throw me overboard. Please. I cannot swim. I'll work. Please don't throw me to the sea creatures." She doesn't take her eyes from the captain. If anyone can keep her aboard the ferry, she believes that it is he. Although he is fearful of her presence, he does not look at her in the same way the other man does.

He nods at her. "We'll take her across. She can alight with the others, and we will be done. It is not our place to question why she is here, only to see that she reaches the other side."

"And the payment?" says the man.

"I have the payment," says the captain.

CHAPTER EIGHT

February 16, 456 A.T.

She watches me with those big blue eyes. I have never gazed upon eyes so blue; it has been so long since I have gazed upon eyes with any color that I cannot look at them. I can sense the distress among the crew. The master grumbles under his breath, casting furtive glances in her direction. He is fearful of her, I think. Ha! Something other than the punishment for late arrival that has got them in a panic.

I will enjoy watching them squirm while we have the girl.

“What will I do?”

I glance down at her. She is tugging on my sleeve. I flinch away from her and then brush my sleeve with my hand. I don't want the crew to see that she has caught me off guard too.

She asks again. “What will I do?” Why is she looking to me for answers when I have none?

"What is your name?" I ask her.

She looks down, bashfully. "I don't have one..."

Thinking this to be odd, I ask, "Why not?"

"It's a tradition from my mother's side: the women in our family decide our own name—after what we love the most."

I scratch my chin. "Well, that's unusual. And you have yet to choose one?"

The girl shrugs. "Mother said that when the time comes to choose, I will know by the feeling."

I roll my eyes, thinking this to be nonsense. I have never heard of such, but perhaps the world of the living has changed much since I have been there.

"What's *your* name?" The girl asks.

I brace myself, as I know that answering will bring back a sting of painful memory.

"I was called Amadeo," I answer. "I had a different life, though I've forgotten much of it; I don't even remember the language I spoke among my people..." Fearing I may have given away too much information to a girl I know nothing about, I give her a stern look. "But you must not breathe a word of this to the crew. They only know me as the captain and that is the way it's going to stay."

She seems to ignore my words, and continues to stare at me, still waiting for me to tell her what to do.

"Go sit with the others," I grumble at her.

She obeys. Clutching the bundle of cloth to her chest, she crosses the deck and sits on the

bench with the other souls, but slightly apart from them. She has set herself apart. When I catch myself watching them, the difference between her and them is so striking as to take my breath away. We have ferried children before. Size, age, height, makes no difference when it is the souls we carry from the land of the living to the land of the dead. They are all the same. And they are all to be treated in the same way – no exceptions made.

Why is she here?

Where has she come from?

These are questions that need to be answered and yet I can find no explanation for them. The only thing of which I am certain, is that she should *not* be here.

I go down to my cabin, knowing that her eyes follow me. Once inside, I unlock the chest and look for the coin that the woman gave me before she disembarked. I rummage through the contents of the chest, dragging out silk and velvet and treasures that have been in the chest for as long as I can remember. I have no cause to dwell on them. They will bring me nothing, be it good or bad, but now I shake each piece, tipping them upside down, feeling inside and underneath for the gold coin which I have a need to find. It is like an itch under the skin that no amount of scratching will appease. Finally, I find the coin and take it quickly.

The quartermaster is waiting for me on the stairs as I leave the cabin. I slam the door closed behind me and make to walk past him, but he grabs my arm.

I don't wrench it free but look him in the eye and say, "Let me be, Graives."

"The coin," he says, maintaining his hold. "You said you had payment."

I forcefully hand him the coin. "There, happy?"

I move to take the next step, but he shakes my arm. "She better watch out for herself."

I move my face close to his, our noses almost touching. I keep my voice low and steady. "If anyone touches her, they will have me to answer to."

He drops my arm and I make my way up to the deck. We both know that if the quartermaster decrees the girl should go overboard, the crew will carry out his orders, but I console myself that they have not yet seen my wrath and that I still bear myself with the rank afforded to me in life. I am still lord.

I spy the boatswain and the first mate in conversation with Bauldry, the sailing master. I do not glance at the girl, although I know that she is still on the bench with the other passengers. I approach the crew. "What goes on here?"

"We're discussing the girl," says Bauldry with a hasty glance in her direction.

"And what have you come up with?"

"We think..." says Bauldry. "We think that she should go."

"Go?" I stare at each of them in turn. Bauldry is the only one who dares to meet my eye. They are scared.

"Overboard," Bauldry stands his ground.
"She shouldn't be here."

"Aye, I think we're all agreed on that, but whether she should be here or not, here she is, and here she shall stay. Under my orders."

"We do not know where she came from," he continues. "There's no telling what punishment we shall incur for delivering a *living girl*." He hisses the last words as though they might burn his tongue if he doesn't spit them out.

"And we do not know that she is a living girl," I say.

"She looks different," says the first mate.

"That I'll grant you," I say. "We take her to the other side on my orders," I repeat. "If she causes any trouble, she'll have me to answer to, and...and I'll accept full responsibility." I hold my hands up and walk away, hoping that I've said enough. I do not know why the girl should not be thrown overboard. I only know that the occurrences of the last two days have been different to any other we have ever experienced, and that somehow, she is embroiled in it.

The journey proceeds like any other. The crew need no supervision; they could take the ferry across with their eyes closed, and some might say that is what we do, as she needs little in the way of mastering.

The girl does not move from the bench, but still her presence is felt amongst us in the way the quartermaster avoids the bench, crossing to

the other side of the vessel to pass from bow to stern, and in the glances directed her way when they think that I am studying the tide.

For a while, she draws her fingers through her hair, braiding its length and loosening the braids to leave a wave in the blonde locks that any maiden would be proud of. She smiles at me when she catches my eye and I turn away. I busy myself with the rigging, although there is no need for me to get involved—the riggers have everything under control as always. I pace the deck back and forth, back and forth. I am restless.

I hear a voice. It sings a tuneful melody, low and sweet, a lullaby maybe. I need not turn my gaze to the bench to know that it is the girl who sings. She is crooning to the raggedy cloth she has been clutching since she arrived, and now that it is on her lap, I see that it has a face and woollen strands for hair. A doll.

The other wretched souls watch her. No expressions alter their faces, but it is obvious that the singing is affecting them in some way, for they fidget in their seats and their vacant eyes dart about the ferry as though searching for the root cause of their discomfort. It occurs to me then, maybe for the first time since I found myself as the wayfarer, that they blame us in some way for their presence here. That, sins set aside, they feel they should have gone straight to the land of the dead without the need for this tedious journey in which they have time to mull over their actions in life.

It eats at me, the thought. What if, one day, they choose to rebel against us? We may outnumber them by far, but would we be stronger? It is difficult to tell. We have been here for longer than I care to remember, time enough for our strength to wane.

To my right, I catch a glimpse of movement behind the barrels of rum that never empty. It is the new cabin boy. When we awoke this morning, as predicted, the old cabin boy was replaced by this slight figure with hollowed out cheeks, misshapen eyes, and a forehead that appears too large for his head. He is crouching on the deck and staring at the girl.

"Boy!" I growl.

He flinches and hides further behind the barrels, only to appear on the other side, his eyes still focused unwaveringly on the girl.

I move closer and snap my fingers at him to get his attention. "Did the quartermaster not give you any tasks?"

"Aye," he nods, head down.

"Well get to them, lad!"

He stumbles out from behind the barrels and searches out Graives with his eyes, but as he moves along the ferry, his eyes settle once more upon the girl.

I lose patience. Crossing the deck in a few strides, I grab the girl's arm. She has no choice but to follow me, her feet barely meeting the floor, the ragdoll swinging from her free hand. I don't speak until I have opened the door to my cabin and pushed the girl inside.

My chest is heaving with the effort, despite that she is a tiny being. It is my own bad humor that makes my breathing so labored. "Stay inside," I warn her. "You are too much of a distraction."

She nods. "Please, my lord," she says. "May I have some food?"

It has been so long since I have been called 'my lord', that I falter at the words. Even in life, it had been many years since my subjects had called me so with any sign of good humor or reverence. To hear it now from the child is like receiving a blow to the stomach. To be called lord, one must deserve the title. It was a title I was no longer worthy of later in life, and with that knowledge came great humiliation.

I close the door and stumble back up the steps to the deck and back down below to the gantry, my thoughts swirling like the fog of yesterday. I have lost my way on this cursed ferry. Familiarity has forced me to accept my punishment and allow the crew to treat me like one of them, like a stray hound.

When I return to the cabin, the girl is seated on the edge of the mattress, her ankles crossed neatly. She smiles at me with her dainty white teeth and her wide eyes, and I hand her a dry biscuit and a cup of juice. She thanks me as if I have given her jewels. The biscuit she devours in seconds and the cup of juice is drained shortly after. She licks her lips and burps loudly. "Pardon me," she says.

I fear she may have entranced me, because I find myself standing there open-mouthed,

watching her eat, when I should be above deck. I turn and leave her alone without a word.

It is not until we approach the land of the dead that I return to the cabin to fetch the girl. The remainder of the journey has passed without event or drama, the other passengers awaiting their fate meekly as is the customary way. Even the new cabin boy has attended to the duties given to him by Graives, although I often catch his gaze wandering to the cabin steps. I will need to keep a close eye on the lad.

The ferry slows, guided instinctively toward the shore by the master, Bauldry. I wait until we are almost upon land before I make my way downstairs for the girl. I am leaving nothing to chance.

She doesn't question my order to follow me to the deck, but greets me with her wide expectant smile as though I have come to deliver her back into the arms of her family. I wait with her behind the other souls. They shuffle from the ferry on slow feet and with their heads hung low. Though they cannot know what awaits them, I have always assumed that the journey prepares them for the worst.

It is a strange sight: the girl following in their wake with her golden hair and her pink flesh, and her air of hope. It is disconcerting. Even now, walking beside her to ensure her safe delivery, I cannot convince myself that this is

where the girl belongs. But what choice do we have? We cannot keep her.

The girl is the last to leave. She steps onto the bridge and I swear that I am holding my breath, waiting for her to leave so that life may return to normal for us. As normal as this life can possibly be. She hesitates, her foot raised.

"What are you waiting for?" I growl.

She turns to me and the smile has left her face.

"I cannot move."

I step closer, grab her bony arm, and drag her onto the bridge, but she is right—I am on the bridge and she remains on the deck. "Step up!" I say. "Don't dally."

She makes to follow me, but it is as though there is some unseen force preventing her from leaving the ferry. I step back to her and, keeping her close to my side, shuffle forwards. I am shuffling alone. The girl remains steadfastly where she is.

Graives hurries over to us. His eyebrows are drawn low over his eyes. "Get her off!" he says. "We are running out of time."

"I cannot," I say.

"Here, out of my way." He shoves me aside and takes the girl's arm, but he stumbles with the force of his movement and the girl remains still. "Leave this ferry, now!" he says between clenched jaws.

"Sir, I cannot," says the girl. Her eyes are pleading. She must fear what will happen to her on this ferry with its strange crew if she does not do as she is ordered.

The ferry begins to move silently, and Graives leaps onto the deck as the bridge slowly slides back into place.

The girl swallows loudly.

Graives clenches his fists and squares his shoulders, his nose almost touching mine. "Now what do you suggest we do?" he spits.

"I don't know," I say. It is the truth. We have not been prepared for this eventuality and it is as much a first for me as it is for the rest of the seasoned crew.

"On your head be it." Graives grabs the girl's arm and turns to march her away. I see from the corner of my eye, Bauldry and the first mate, hovering, waiting for their orders. Their eyes are fixated on the girl as though she is a knight about to run them through with a sword rather than a tiny human who has no more mind as to why she is here than we do.

"Halt!" I say to Graives. "Give me the girl. I said she was my responsibility, and I am a man of my word. She stays with me."

I sense the way the girl's shoulders sag with relief, but I ignore it. Her presence is not something that either she or I can grow comfortable with, and I shall see to it that she is removed as soon as I find a way.

I lead the girl back to the cabin in silence. Once inside, with the door closed behind us, she settles on the cot and I begin the search for answers. Again, as with the woman who traveled yesterday, there is no entry in the ship's log for the living girl. Nothing. No comment, no

mention of sins that required her journey across the near-endless ocean.

I sit at my desk and complete my diary entry quickly, my words scratchy and marred with ink blots. When I am done, I scan every scrap of paper on top of the desk, every hand-drawn map, every parchment, every folded note. There is nothing that mentions a living girl boarding the ferry. Nothing. I empty the chest for a second time, scattering the contents across the floor. I peer beneath the desk, beneath the cot, scrabbling about the floor on my hands and knees. I know not what I am searching for; I merely hope that when I find what I need, I will know for sure.

I sit back and rub my hands across the back of my neck. I remove my cap and stare at it. I cannot think. Now, when I need to be able to think like a captain, I am lost.

On the cot, the girl has curled into a ball and is asleep, her face as pure and serene as any that I have ever seen. I cannot wake her. Indeed, if I must spend the night beneath the dimly lit sky with the crew, then so be it.

I sit at my desk with my head in my hands. Today has been unlike any other since I joined the ferry, but I cannot fathom the reasoning behind it.

The girl is sleeping soundly, her eyelashes long and delicate against her healthy pink cheeks. It has been so long since I have seen someone with the girl's vitality that I struggle to tear my eyes away from her face, but I would find myself sorry to wake her from such deep

slumber. If I am feeling the strangeness of the day's events, the girl must be overwhelmed with unanswered questions and uneasiness.

I close the door softly behind me. On deck, I do not touch my food, but fill myself steadily with rum.

CHAPTER NINE

February 16, 456 A.T.

The crew do not expect the girl to alight at the land of the living. That is not the way of things.

She waits on the bench patiently for the new travelers to arrive. They react to her presence with jerky movements and frowns upon their gray faces. Some reach out to touch her and she politely moves away from them. They cannot control themselves though; she is like the sun peering through a storm cloud.

Graives sets the cabin boy to watching them, to making sure they do not touch her. The quartermaster's mood is foul from too much rum the night before, and from the girl's unwanted presence. With the boy keeping watch, I go below and close my eyes.

I must have been dead asleep, because I wake with a startle when I hear the girl's scream. Grabbing my cap from the desk, I run above

deck and find Graives and the first mate dragging the wriggling girl to the side of the ferry.

"What is this?" I demand. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing for you to mind," says Graives.

The girl is still clinging to the ragdoll as she tries to free her arms from the men holding her. She is a feisty one. She digs in her heels and pulls against them with all her strength for what little good it does her.

I keep my voice controlled. "I said the girl was my responsibility. Set her down. Where is the cabin boy?" I glance around for the boy, who is skulking behind the rigging. There is a wound on the side of his face that was not there when he joined us.

"He's of no use," says Graives. "I caught him trying to furl the sails to set us off course. She's a hypnotist. She has the boy entranced and his brain addled by her wicked looks."

I glance at the cabin boy. He runs and hides to escape another beating. No use hoping to get information from him while he is running scared. "Is this true?" I ask the girl. "Did you tell him to furl the sails?"

Her chest is heaving with the effort of struggling against her captors, but she looks me in the eye and says, "No, my lord. It was him." She gestures behind me toward Briggs the boatswain.

I follow her gaze, but Graives slaps her hand away. "Enough of your vile lies, hypnotist!"

"Please," the girl begs. "It was not me. What would I have gained by changing course when I know not where we are headed?"

But I have already been too soft with her; she thinks that she can beg me with those blue eyes because I allowed her to seek comfort in my cabin. I cannot afford to be so soft in front of the crew. It has taken many years of beatings and battles of wits to get them to even half-trust me as the wayfarer, and I cannot allow this living girl to upset the balance on board the vessel.

"What say you?" I ask Graives. I know what his answer will be. I know what happens to hypnotists; I have seen the methods used to determine their guilt or innocence. I have seen the way they are treated when it is decided they have deceived others for their own personal gain.

The girl seems innocent enough to me. I see no evidence of her being a skilled hypnotist, capable of influencing the minds of beings a hundred times her own age. She doesn't look evil, either—her expression is pure. But there is no denying the effect she has had upon us all, and not only the cabin boy.

"We tie her to the ferry's side and let the sea decide," says Graives.

"No!" the girl's struggles increase tenfold, but she is no match for the men. "No, you cannot let them do that. I am not a hypnotist. I'm not!"

"Aye, we'll soon see about that," says Graives.

The first mate is already binding the girl's wrists with rope. Tears roll down her face and

onto her dress, but she no longer pleads with me, and neither is she fighting. Her bravery confuses me. Surely, she must know that to prove her innocence, she must drown. I say nothing. I make no move to help her. I must go along with the crew's wishes to keep the peace and restore the balance of the ferry. It is the only way to complete my punishment and gain my own release.

I cannot meet her cool blue eyes because I am afraid of what I will see behind them. Accusations. Fear. Contempt at my own uselessness when she had put her faith in me.

They bind the girl's arms to her sides and Graives throws her overboard himself, the rope writhing like a serpent until it reaches the end of its tether. There is no sound from the girl as she is thrown.

I bend and pick up the ragdoll.

Graives and the first mate peer over the side of the ferry. In a moment of anger, I am tempted to push them both over the side. I could do it before they even realized that I have moved. But all that will achieve is my own demise. They will be replaced and, regardless, I will still be outnumbered.

Never before have I felt such a coward.

It is the girl's doing.

But yet...there is a part of me that hopes for her to be a hypnotist so that she will have influenced them to bring her back up before she can drown.

"Get her out," I manage, my voice hoarse. When it appears that neither of the men heard me, I repeat, louder. "Get her out!"

Graives raises his head. "She needs more time."

I stride over to him and grab his throat, squeezing with all the strength I have left in me. I feel his neck muscles constrict beneath my fingers. "I said, get her out!" I hiss.

The first mate is already tugging on the rope. I shove Graives aside and help him heave the girl from the water, panic filling my own chest. I take no heed of Graives coughing and spluttering on his knees.

The girl is so light, she is lifted easily back over the side of the ferry despite the weight of her saturated clothes. We lay her gently on the decking. Her eyes are closed. Her skin is tinged blue-gray. All around her are puddles of seawater, creeping slowly across the deck. I lean over her chest, ignoring my wet knees, and wait for it to rise with the filling of her lungs, but there is no movement. I move her head to one side and open her mouth. Salty water spills onto the deck, but still she remains lifeless. I touch her. Her skin is cold.

I push her chest, the way a child would prompt an animal awake, and her body jerks and settles back to stillness.

We have killed her. She came to us with life in her and we have killed her. I do not know the reason we were entrusted with her, but surely it was not for this. What a futile waste of life.

I am so filled with rage at the men, and myself for my yellow-bellied cowardice, that I turn on Graives and punch his jaw, gratified by the sickening crack. I need him on board because it is he who manages the crew, who sees to their demands and their hard work, but for now, I want to see him journeying with the other souls to the land of the dead.

Behind me, there is a splutter, and I turn to find the girl coughing up water. When she is done, she lays back and her eyes finally open. She smiles at me before closing her eyes again.

Graives raises himself to his knees, staring at her.

"She is back from the dead," I say, "no thanks to you."

"She..." he coughs and rubs his chin with his hand. "She lives. She is a hypnotist and therefore we must deal with her as we would deal with such."

"She is alive," I speak slowly and calmly. "I checked her with my own eyes. She was nearly dead and now she is alive." Graives stares at me without speaking. "She is no hypnotist, aye, no more than you or I. She stays."

I hand the girl her now-drenched ragdoll, pick her up into my arms and carry her down to my cabin. I place her on the cot where she watches me with grateful eyes.

I lower my face close to hers and say, "Stay out of their way or you'll have me to answer to."

CHAPTER TEN

February 17, 456 A.T.

The captain has warned the girl to stay away from the crew. She knows when he says 'crew' he really means 'Graives'.

Graives does not like the girl, and she does not know what she has done to offend him so much. She thinks about making herself useful and helping the cabin boy below deck, but he is too shy, or scared of Graives and the captain, to tell her what needs doing. She helps him to scrub the floors and prepare the food, which is mostly just taking biscuits from a barrel and scrambling some eggs in a pan for breakfast, or taking more biscuits and piling them high with dried meat for supper. When it is time for the men to come for their food, she escapes to the captain's cabin.

He does not speak to her either, but she is grateful that he hauled her from the sea to safety when the men wanted her dead. She has not told

him what she saw when she was underwater, her lungs filling and her eyes stinging to stay open. She saw a creature swimming alongside the ferry. The creature clung to the ferry's side without touching it, its body wriggling so gracefully that she was reminded of the merfolk in the tales of long ago. Its tail was pink and mauve and turquoise and gold, and before the girl closed her eyes, the creature turned to her and she saw that it wore the face of her mother. She reached for the face to touch it, but her lungs were full, and her fingers floated away from her as she felt the rope jolting her from the water.

She wants to speak of this to someone, but she fears the captain already believes Graives' accusations and she cannot afford to anger the one man who is prepared to let her stay.

The girl is in the cabin reading a book. Her mother taught her to read and bade her not to tell a living soul, as it was considered witchcraft in her kingdom if a girl knew words, if she could see them on paper and speak them aloud. She does not know how the captain is aware of her skill, but each day he leaves her a fresh book beside the cot when she wakes. She must thank him. Maybe one day when he is prepared to listen to her. Until then, she will enjoy the simple stories that are living inside her head.

When the ferry begins to slow on the approach to the land of the living, the girl closes her book. She has been reading about a king who wanted a child to take his throne upon his death. His queen was barren, until one day, a witch came to the palace and gave her a potion that

would produce a baby. In return for the potion, the witch wanted to bring up the baby for the first sixteen years of its life. The queen was so desperate for a child that she agreed. But she was scared to tell her husband, and so, when the baby was born and the witch arrived to claim the child, the queen told her husband that the baby was stillborn. The king and queen were both so consumed with grief at this lie, that the queen became sickly and died soon after. The king lived, but he was no longer a caring and generous man; he grew angry and bitter at his misfortune and ruled with fear.

She is filled with thoughts of the story as the ferry stops and she hears the bridge sliding toward the shore. She understands how it works now. The ferry collects the pitiful souls from the land of the living—from the shore where the girl was found—and takes them to the land of the dead. She doesn't understand why she was chosen to travel with them, but she is grateful that she has a bed to sleep in, food to eat, and books to read. She is trusting her mother's words that this is where she is meant to be.

She places the book beneath the cover and leaves the cabin on silent feet, sneaking upstairs and to the farthest end of the ferry, away from Graves and the new travelers joining them.

The girl finds a spot where she can see everything that is going on. There are fourteen passengers today. Six of them are women, their breasts sagging beneath their woollen clothes, and their eyes sunken, vacant. The others are men, and one of them is misshapen, his back

hunched so that his head appears attached to his chest. He limps aboard.

Graives does not speak to them. He waits, thin-lipped, palm open for the gold coin in payment for their safe passage. She sees the way he recoils from the hunchbacked man in his brown friar robe, and she wishes that the captain would take payment instead of this unforgiving man.

As is customary, the travelers take their position on the wooden bench along one side of the ferry. The girl does not see the captain until the bridge has been raised and the ferry is once again moving toward its destination. With Graives busy once more, overseeing the riggers and the master's directions, she sneaks from her hiding spot and moves closer to the travelers. Although he does not know it, she is shadowing the captain.

He would generally give the travelers no more than a brief glance, his way of acknowledging that they are abiding by the rules of the ferry by remaining still and interacting with no one. But today, he stops in his tracks when he spies them sitting side-by-side on the bench. He falters. A hand raises to his chest and he stumbles away, almost colliding with the girl who has come closer without him realizing. He ignores her and continues below deck to his cabin where he slams the door behind him.

She doesn't know what happened, but she is certain the captain faltered when he saw the hunchback. Glancing around to make sure that Graives isn't watching her, the girl approaches

the hunchbacked friar, for she has seen the rosary in his hand, and she is certain that he is a man of the gods.

The friar peers at her with vacant eyes. She smiles at him, "Hello, Brother," she whispers.

The others sitting alongside the hunchback shuffle away from the girl, their fingers picking at their clothes and their mouths drooling. They must've fallen victim to some foul disease, thinks the girl, because they all react the same way to her. She sits on the other side of the friar so that the others cannot see her.

The friar watches her. He does not speak; they never do, the girl has come to realize this. "Forgive me," she says. This is the way she remembers the village-folk approaching the friar where she came from. "Why are you here?"

The friar turns away from the child, but she is certain that she has seen tears in those hollowed-out eyes. What could a friar be guilty of that his soul would be on its way to the land of the dead? Should he not have achieved salvation prior to his death?

She stares straight ahead and spots the cabin boy watching her. She doesn't acknowledge that she has seen him—he gets embarrassed enough when she is around.

"Did..." she begins, "Did the captain recognize you?"

The friar raises the rosary to his lips and his mouth moves, although no sounds come out. She thinks she must be right. She doesn't believe that the captain would fear the hunchback,

which means there was some other reason for his hasty escape below deck.

"Can I help you, Brother?" she persists.

The man shakes his head, his lips still moving in a silent chant.

She sits with him for a while, hoping that he might take comfort in her presence. When it is time for the travelers to leave the ferry, he finally meets the girl's gaze. He waits for the others to shuffle away before his hand reaches within the folds of his robe and he slips something into her own hand. He does not speak. He does not wait for her to thank him, but straightens his back a little and follows the women from the ship.

The girl does not look at the gift, but stuffs it into her pocket to be taken out later in the confines of the cabin.

Food is always eaten when the souls have been safely delivered. The girl eats alone, away from the others. Although her portions are the same as those of the crew, she finds that she is constantly ravenous, and has to take small mouthfuls and slow down her chewing so as to not be finished before they have barely begun.

Tonight, she is in a hurry to go below deck and look at the gift given to her by the friar. She swallows her food without tasting it and raises her cup of juice to her lips to wash down the dry biscuit and meat, when the cabin boy appears from nowhere and slaps the cup from her hand.

The metal cup bounces along the deck, juice splashing the girl's legs.

The captain is on his feet. He slaps the cabin boy's cheek and yells at him, "What is the meaning of this?"

The cabin boy holds his hands to his cheek and stares at his feet.

"Speak!" says the captain.

"I..." The cabin boy cannot seem to get his words out and the girl, shocked into keeping her peace, wishes the captain would merely order him to clear up the mess instead of scaring him this way.

The captain grabs the boy's shirt and lifts him from the floor. "What do you say then?"

"The...the quarter..." the boy glances at Graves. "He ..."

"Spit it out, boy!" growls the captain.

"He...he spat in the girl's juice."

Graves stops chewing, his cheek plump with a mouthful of food. The other crew members roar with laughter. Bauldry slaps Graves on the back.

The captain drops the cabin boy onto the deck, his fists clenched by his side. The girl rushes to the boy, who scuttles backwards away from her as though she might cause him more pain with her touch, and she is left with an empty space and a puddle of spat-in juice.

The captain takes the spilled cup to Graves, slams it down before him and says, "From now on, this is your cup."

He takes Graves' own cup and walks back to the girl. He hands it to her with a nod.

The girl takes the cup to the cabin so that she can be alone with her thoughts. She goes to sup juice from the quartermaster's cup, but a strong smell tells her it's something different, so she decides not to drink it. She sits the cup down and replays in her head the moment when the captain gave the quartermaster the cup tainted with his own phlegm. She does not know what to make of it. The captain took her side. He believed the cabin boy and he took her side against his own man, and it is this that is making her heart race. Maybe the captain will look out for her despite his black moods and relentless journeying. Maybe he will be her friend someday.

It is a while before she remembers the friar's gift; she reaches into her pocket and retrieves a silky yellow ribbon.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

February 23, 456 A.T.

It is becoming a game of juggling that is setting my teeth on edge. The girl. Graives. The man is a fool who cannot contain his hatred of the girl, although I think that is more through fear than he is prepared to let on.

Indeed, I sometimes wonder myself whether I should have left the girl to drown in the sea that day. There is something that is not entirely human about her demeanor, her manner of viewing us in our wretchedness without fear, and with a ready smile, but is also so human as to remind us that we are no longer of the living. Aye, this must be it. This reminder that she is the living girl, and we are merely carrying out our punishment with as little trouble as possible until the gods see fit to pardon us.

She now wears a yellow ribbon in her hair. A reminder of the sun that doesn't shine upon our

heads here. I do not know where it came from, and neither have I thought to question her, but I know the cabin boy is sweet on her and follows after her like a puppy. He is another one I strive to keep her away from, lest nothing will get done on this ship. I will ask Graives to order him below deck to help the carpenter. Aye, Graives has been too free with the boy since he is so consumed with his hatred of the girl.

Only this morning, I watched Graives toss a bucket of slops at the girl's feet. He laughed when she slipped onto her back and it was the cabin boy who overcame his shyness and rushed to help her. Poor lad. He is torn between keeping out of reach of the quartermaster's fist and aiding the girl he is so clearly fond of.

I cannot be seen to favor her over my own ship's crew, but if the storm ever reappears, it will not be the cabin boy who goes overboard and into the mouth of the sea-serpent. Graives will be easily replaced, and hopefully it will be with someone who has a gentler disposition.

This evening, I find the girl reading a book.

She glances up from the page and gives me that smile, revealing her tiny perfect teeth. I can see that her eyes are in a faraway land, as they take some moments to settle upon me and for her to remember where she is. Anger roils in me. Why should she have the joy of being released from her penance when I know not when my release will ever come? Or *if* it will ever come.

I snatch the book from her. "What is this?"

"I have wanted to thank you," she says. "For the books. They have given me so much pleasure, but I was wondering how you knew..."

"How I knew?" My voice is thick with contained anger.

"How you knew that I could read words." She keeps her head down as though she can sense the coiled rage inside me and knows that she has crossed a line.

"I did not know. I have never seen the book before."

She frowns. "Where do they come from, then?"

I toss the book back to her. I have no need of trivial stories and nonsense.

She can read. The words repeat themselves inside my head. If Graives were ever to discover this, she would be overboard before I could blink, and this time there would be no saving her. And I will let them do it.

I pass my desk and it dawns on me like the rising moon that if she can read books, she can read my ship's log. I will need to ensure that it is kept locked inside the chest.

The girl has been sick. I do not trust Graives to have not tried to poison her, although he swears on the gods that he has had no part in it. I do not believe him.

The cabin boy is below deck with her. I have seen the way he mops her brow with a cloth dipped in seawater to take away the fever. He cleans the vomit from her chin and raises her head to feed her cool juice and soup that he has made from broiling dried meat in drinking water. Aye, she is in good hands, but I fear she needs more than juice and soup.

I try to remember how it was in life when one was taken sick with the fever. The ailing person would be kept in a darkened room and leeches would be applied to the skin to remove the diseased blood. Here we have no leeches to apply. We could cut the girl's flesh and bleed her that way, but I have no mind to see blood and I cannot have Graives getting ideas. I do not want to wake in the morning and find the girl dead from loss of blood.

Aye, she is in the best place.

CHAPTER TWELVE

February 25, 456 A.T.

The girl smiles as her mother enters the cabin. She is carrying a basket of fresh lavender, and the fresh herby scent makes the girl smile.

Her mother sets the basket down upon the desk. "It will help you to sleep, sweetheart," she says. She sits on the edge of the cot and smooths damp hair away from the girl's feverish face.

"I've been sleeping a lot," says the girl.

"'Tis your body's way of cleansing itself of the poison."

"Poison?"

Her mother shakes her head. Dark curls sway around her perfect face. "The disease is like poison to your blood. I have fetched some other herbs to snip into your water—drink them and you will soon be back to your sunny ways."

The girl closes her eyes, but remembers something she's been wanting to ask her mother.

"Am I in the right place? No one else seems to think so."

Her mother's fingers are cool on her flushed cheeks. "Aye. Hush now, child. Sleep..."

When the girl opens her eyes again, it is dark and the cabin boy is asleep, curled up like a kitten on the floor. She tries to roll over, to change position because she is uncomfortable and her arm is numb where she has been laying on it, but her body aches and her head is thumping a strange tune. She closes her eyes to make the thumping go away. She is so tired. So thirsty...

The black cat snuggles against her side. It is giving her warmth because it is so cold and dark in the coal cellar that she is shivering uncontrollably. It hurts to move. Her bones ache and her head feels disconnected from her body somehow. The cat is bored and is washing its paws meticulously, its tiny pink tongue taking care over the task, in and around the soft pads until it is quite certain that it is clean before moving onto the next paw.

She must remember to send the cat with the cabin boy when she wakes. There will be plenty of mice to find below deck where the supplies are kept. The cat will feed like a king.

The cellar door opens, and a silhouette of a boy is watching her. Topher. The girl raises a hand to her face to prevent him from striking her and he laughs at her, the sound spiteful and prickly rather than filled with merriment.

"You stole the keys," he says.

"I...I meant to take them back," she mumbles.
"I only...I only wanted the ragdoll. My father...he gave her to me."

"Ha! You never had a father. You're an orphan like me, only I am stronger than you and she likes me! She will always choose me."

He reaches down to the ground where the girl cannot see, and something lands on top of her. It is heavy. Warm. A child.

"I'm sorry," cries Besse. "I didn't want to do it, but he left me outside in the snow and I was so cold, and the cook was forbidden to open the door and let me in."

"It's all right, Besse," the girl whispers. "It's all right. You're here with me now."

She wraps her arms around the trembling Besse, and they take comfort from what little warmth they have between them. "There, there," the girl murmurs, the way her mother used to do when sobbing women came to visit, bringing gifts of herbs and bread. "There, there."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

February 28, 456 A.T.

It seems that we all register the girl's presence, or lack thereof, while she is fighting the fever, in different ways. I find myself glancing around for a flash of that sunny yellow ribbon in her hair, or the quick smile—there are few smiles from the crew in this relentless existence.

I catch Graives occasionally lifting his head and narrowing his eyes to search for her; he is always looking for some kind of problem or chaos that he can blame on the child. He returns to his work without a second thought. The others too cast their eyes around the ferry and it is difficult to tell if they are looking for her or simply checking that all is well.

The travelers complete their journey with no interruption or discourse.

Until today.

I am finding it difficult to put into words what happened today as I do not fully understand it myself. But I shall try my best.

There were many travelers today. It was as though a wave of sin had passed through the world and everyone had fallen ill of the same disease. Or curse. They were particularly hollow-eyed. This is not something I would normally pay attention to, but the girl's eyes are so blue, so clear, unlike the hazy pink sky beneath which we are forced to travel, that I find myself searching for the color in the eyes of the other travelers. A hint of how they might have looked in life. It is a dangerous game, aye, I know the signs. But I cannot stop myself. The woman with the exposed shoulder dimpled with dull sores—were her eyes green when she lived? The man whose lungs still struggle to fill—brown eyes or hazel? I've yet to find one whose eyes I think might have once matched the girl's.

But today, a woman came aboard with her ankle in chains. She shuffled the chains along behind her as though they were a dreadful weight. Head down, she glanced at no one, not even Graives when spitting the gold coin into his palm. And yet still, I felt drawn to her bearing. She had the manner of someone born regal. Someone who recognized her own standing in life.

When I followed the chain around her ankle though, I was stopped in my tracks. My heart, or this semblance of a shrivelled organ that still beats within me, raced like it was facing the

punishment of not reaching our destination in time. And only then, with my own breath refusing to give relief to my lungs, did the woman glance upon me and I knew her, though it has been hundreds of years since I last laid eyes upon her.

It was my sister.

Aye, impossible for it to be her. Impossible for her to have remained in the land of the living these hundreds of years, were it not for some form of witchcraft or magic. Yet it was her. Her demeanor, her cheekbones, her eyes that, despite having an innocence to them, burned with the intensity of a thousand suns. It was that which had jogged my memory of a time long ago...

The great hall was filled with members of both courts, with jesters and musicians, and servants hurrying back and forth with platters of food. The ale and wine flowed constantly. There was laughter and good spirits. It was a special day, arguably the most special day in my sister's life. At fifteen years old, she was now considered a woman in our culture – there was a word for the ceremony, but I can't remember how to pronounce it in my old language.

My sister had been dreaming of this day since she was a little girl. She had it planned: she would wear a beautiful dress, dance with her friends, and receive gifts and blessings from our family and guests.

She woke up early and went to the royal chapel, where the priest blessed her and gave her a medallion with the image of a holy woman on it. She thanked him and kissed the medallion, feeling a surge of gratitude and joy. She then returned to her chambers, where her maids helped her get ready for the party. They combed her long black hair, applied some makeup to her face, and dressed her in a stunning white gown with lace and pearls. She looked at herself in the mirror and felt like a princess.

She descended the stairs and entered the ballroom, where hundreds of people were waiting for her. They cheered and clapped as she walked in, escorted by our father. She saw our mother smiling proudly at her, and me waving proudly. She also spotted our friends from the wing of the castle where we received lessons, who had been invited to share this special day with her. She gave a wide smile as she approached the dance floor.

Our father took her hand and led her to the center of the room. He kissed her cheek and whispered something in her ear. He then bowed and handed her over to her chosen escort, a handsome young man named Fernando, who was the son of a noble family as wealthy as our own. He smiled at her and said: "You look beautiful! It is an honor to be your partner." He then took her hand and spun her around, as the music started to play.

They danced gracefully and elegantly, as everyone watched them with admiration. They kept it up for several minutes, until the music

changed to a faster tempo. Then Fernando invited our friends and myself to join them on the dance floor. We formed a circle around the two of them and danced joyfully. We laughed and chatted as we enjoyed ourselves. My sister looked like she was having the best time of her life, but I could tell something wasn't right with her.

The party continued for hours, with more dancing, music, food, drinks, games, and speeches. She received many gifts and compliments from her guests, who wished her happiness and success in her future. She thanked them all sincerely, feeling overwhelmed by their kindness and generosity.

It was later that evening, after the hustle and bustle of the celebration had come to an end, that my sister and our father had a disagreement. He made it clear that he desired for her to marry Fernando. But my sister wasn't having it. She lashed out at my father and, after a short argument, he locked her away in her room to stay until she came to see that he was right.

I paid her visits from time to time, during which she confessed to me that, before being locked away, she had been secretly seeing a young man from a neighboring land. A land that we did not like. A land that we were forbidden by our father to associate with. I loved my sister. I felt for her and I understood that our father often treated her unfairly. I wasn't comfortable with the idea, but I promised to keep her secret even though I didn't agree with what she was doing.

To think of my sister alone in her chamber faced with a future of loneliness and uncertainty filled me with sorrow. My own marriage had yet to occur, but I had set my sights on a woman who would be deemed to be a profitable match for all concerned.

The following morning, I visited my sister once again. I quietly took her out of her room and down the secret staircase that led from our chambers to the rear courtyard, where I had her horse saddled and ready for her to leave. I handed her a pouch of coins.

My sister threw her arms around my neck and kissed my cheek. "I will never forget this, Amadeo," she whispered. "You have saved me."

She told me to return to my chamber in case someone should realize that I was not there, and this I did believing my sister to be a free woman.

I returned to my bed and slept peacefully, unknowing that what my sister had done was out in the open.

It was the sound of my father's temper that roused me from sleep. Leaving my chamber, I went to the great hall, where my father was pacing the floor, sword in hand. He turned to me when he saw that I was there. "Did you know of this?"

I kept my face expressionless. "Know of what, Father?"

"Your sister!" he bellowed. "Your sister has left our home with a man from Varentina!"

"She...did what??" I pretended not to know.

My father, not catching my bluff, relented, and crossed to rest his hand on my shoulder.

"Amadeo, you must find her and bring her back. This cannot go unpunished...you understand, don't you? I cannot show leniency in this matter because she is my daughter, or her actions will come back to haunt us, and we will face losing everything."

The more I thought about it, perhaps my father was right. We did not deserve to lose everything because of her selfishness. My own part in this event turned my thoughts red and set my blood on fire, for I knew now that I should not have helped her.

I left and went to find my sister, for she had not traveled far on horseback with the old maidservant behind her, and I brought her back to face our father's wrath. It was the first time that my heart began to harden. She accepted my order to return without question and though she tried to plead her case on our journey back to the castle, I refused to listen to her or meet her eyes. She had betrayed our father's trust, and now I had betrayed hers. But my own selfishness and fear led me to decide I wasn't going to take the fall for our actions — not if I could let her instead.

Our father was waiting in the great hall when we returned. I ushered her inside alone and turned my back on her. To my great surprise, she never revealed to my father that I had been a part of her escape.

I never saw her again.

Until today.

My sister was staring at me, her eyes deep hollows in her narrow face. She began to move toward me. Her movements were slow and

painful, the chain a heavy weight around her ankle, the beating heart scraping along the deck.

I moved backwards and stumbled over a length of rope, landing on my back. I think I cried out, but it did not startle my sister. Or the crew. I looked at them all going about their tasks without care or thought for anything or anyone else. Not one of them glanced my way. I wanted to yell at them, "Can you not see her?" But in their turned backs and their indifference to my position amongst them, I saw the hundreds of years we had spent together slip through my fingers like the sea upon which we journeyed. I meant nothing to them. And the loneliness that I now found myself shrouded in became a weight that would drag me through the wooden boards of the ship and down to the depths of the water to be feasted on by the invisible sea creatures that lived there.

She continued toward me, the chains rattling across the floor. She did not smile or show me any anger. I raised a hand to halt her, but it meant nothing to her. I was not her captain, neither was I her lord, I saw that now. Her punishment had not been mine to force upon her, yet I gave her over willingly to our father and forgot her.

And now she was here to make me pay.

"Halt!" I cried. "Do not come any closer."

She paid no attention to my words. My back was against the side of the ship and I had nowhere else to go other than overboard, but I was bound to this ferry as I had been since the day it arrived to collect me from the shore.

"What do you want?" I asked, my voice feeble.

She did not speak. They never spoke, although this was the first time that I had ever made conversation with one of the passengers other than the girl. Closer she came, and when she was almost upon me, her mouth opened, revealing sharp teeth too large for her small head. She was monstrous, a ravenous beast set to consume me. I closed my eyes and braced myself as she leaped forward.

I awoke so suddenly on the side of the ship that I nearly fell overboard. In a panic, I looked around me. There was no sign of my sister. The crew was doing exactly what they should, still not minding me, and I realized it. My sister's appearance had been nothing more than a guilt-ridden dream. A mere manifestation of my remorse for betraying her all those years ago.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

March 1, 456 A.T.

The girl yawns and stretches. Although there is no sun that rises in this hazy sky, she can tell that it is daylight by the lightening shades of pink and mauve through the tiny round window of the cabin. Her body aches, and her mouth is dry. She is starving.

Sliding her legs over the side of the cot, she holds onto the mattress and closes her eyes to steady her spinning brain. She thinks she might be sick, but it soon passes. When she opens her eyes again, she spots the cabin boy curled up into a ball on the floor.

She nudges him with her toe.

The boy startles like a frightened animal and leaps to his feet, cowering against the door.

"I didn't mean to scare you," says the girl. "I was checking if you were sick."

The boy shakes his head. It is not clear whether he is denying that he is sick or that he is scared. It is difficult to tell.

The girl understands that the crew are not like her—they are not alive, at least not in the sense that she is still of the land of the living. But this is where her understanding ends. And though she recognizes that they are different, and that some, like Graives, do not wish for her to be here, she is not afraid of them. And of them all, the young cabin boy is her favorite. Maybe she sees something in him that the others do not see. She notices how Graives kicks him out of the way rather than walk around him; how Bauldry pulls him by the ear and shoves him onto the floor when there is water to be mopped; how the others barely notice him.

Maybe it is for this reason that the girl feels something for him. Pity? A motherly instinct to protect him maybe.

“Are you sick?” She kneels on the floor and reaches out a hand to touch his misshapen forehead and check for fever.

He shrinks further away from her and shakes his head. He points at the girl.

She thinks about it. She does not know how long she has slept for, but she feels as though she has woken from a dream that has lasted for days and was so real, she could have touched the people who appeared before her. “Have I been sick?” The boy nods. “Have you cared for me?” When he does not reply she smiles at him and says, “Thank you.”

The boy gives her a quick nod before scrambling to his feet, yanking open the door, and running away.

The girl glances around the cabin. All is as it was before she slept. She has no recollections of anything other than her dreams and even they are fading like the pink in the sky at night. She lays back upon the mattress and sleeps some more.

When the girl awakes, she sees that someone has left bread and curd on the desk for her to eat with a cup of juice. She eats the food in a matter of minutes and washes it down with the juice. Already she feels revived.

She is sitting on the edge of the cot when the door opens and the captain comes inside. She can see that he looks tired, more tired than he already appears with his gray skin and black eyes, like he has not slept in weeks. Maybe he hasn't slept in weeks.

"You're awake," he says. It isn't a question; he is merely acknowledging the fact that she is sitting up on the cot.

She smiles at him and he glances away. She wants to ask if she might go up on deck if she promises to stay out of Graives' way, but she feels it would be bold to come out with the demand after stealing the captain's cabin and bringing sickness to the ferry. She has caused trouble enough. She looks around, thinking about what to say next.

The captain, seeing the way her eyes are wandering, crosses to the desk and tidies a pile of paper, tapping it against the desktop to neaten the edges. He does this instinctively and not because of any malice or mistrust toward the girl.

"Might I go on deck?" she decides to ask anyway.

He looks at her and his eyes are different. He has changed while she slept through the fever. He has aged. Lines have sneaked around his eyes and made grooves across his already lined forehead, and he appears uncomfortable around her.

"Aye," he says.

She doesn't ask him to carry her, but he comes closer and lifts her easily into his arms. She wraps her own arms around his neck and rests her head upon his shoulder. As they are about to leave the cabin, she remembers the ragdoll. He returns to the cot and lowers her so that she can collect it. He doesn't say anything, and she allows him to carry her up the stairs.

On deck, Graives stops what he is doing and watches the captain and the girl. The cabin boy hurries over and, with a gesture from the captain, runs back to the cabin to fetch a coverlet which he places across some crates of provisions to make a comfortable seat for the girl. It is close to the side of the ferry, and it means that if she places her arms on the side of the boat, she can peer at the sea.

She smiles at the cabin boy who scurries away again.

The captain settles her down on the makeshift seat and leaves her alone.

The girl breathes deeply. It is good to fill her lungs with fresh air and not the stale air of the cabin. She peers at the sea, at the changing colors, sometimes blue, sometimes turquoise, sometimes the color of lavender. She stiffens at the memory of lavender. Her mother brought her some in her dream to help her sleep. Tears sting her eyes. She misses her mother more than she has ever told anyone. She misses knowing that her mother was always there to smooth away the girl's fears and to protect her from harm.

She leans her chin on the side of the ferry and peers into the water's depth. How would it feel to live underwater? To swim amongst the sea creatures and feed on seaweed and clams and sea-snails. She thinks that she would like it very much.

Occasionally, bubbles rise to the surface and she narrows her eyes at the water, trying to see the creatures breathing below. Several times, she catches a glimpse of a round open mouth with sharp teeth, or dull silver eyes. She plays a game in which she closes her eyes and opens them suddenly to catch the fish off guard. A couple of times it works, and she sees a flash of color as the creature darts away again and out of sight.

She is so consumed by the game that she barely notices the ferry slowing, until it halts at the shore of the land of the living. She leans over the edge to see the souls waiting to commence

their journey, but all she can see is water stretching into the distance in all directions.

She feels the sliding of the bridge to enable the travelers to board the ferry. She glances over her shoulder at Graives, as he takes his position to accept the gold coins and turns back to the sea. She decides she does not want to see the travelers today. She does not want to be reminded that she is alone on this ship even though she is surrounded by the crew. It is not her way to be so disappointed, and she thinks it must be because the fever has left her weak. It will be best to stay quiet until the mood has passed.

The ferry makes ready to sail again, the riggers climbing the masts and unfurling the sails, the ship filled with activity and readiness for the journey.

The girl lifts her chin. She knows what it is that she needs—it is simply to see something different. A land in the distance, complete with houses and trees and people. A large sea-creature that can leap above the water and land with a splash that drenches her face. A raincloud. A thunderstorm. Snow.

And that is when she spies it in the distance.

She rises to her feet and leans as far over the side of the ferry as is possible without toppling overboard, squinting to bring the shape into focus.

She stays this way until her eyes water and her fingers ache from gripping the side, but she knows that she is right.

Another ship is sailing toward them.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

March 1, 456 A.T.

Another ship!

In all these years, we have never seen another ship. We have never seen another soul other than those we ferry across to the other side, because this crossing is not of Earth. This sea is not the same sea that would be visible to those who are alive. Our ferry, too, is not of Earth. I can't say for sure, but I suspect that this sudden appearance of another ferry is some sort of a glitch, a burp in space and time caused by the living girl's continued presence here.

I stand by her side, watching it move closer, watching it grow, and I am mesmerized by the sight of it and what it means to me. A part of me hopes that it is not a glitch, but that rather it has come to rescue me. I have served my time, and this is my passage away from this cursed vessel and all who sail in her.

I dare not turn away, lest the ship should vanish when I am not watching. As though my eyes are what have made it materialize like a demon in the distance. Or angel. But as she grows closer, my thoughts take on a darker stance. What if all on board are not here to rescue me, but to kill us all? What then?

I falter. My hands still grip the side of the ferry, as do the girl's, but my knuckles are white and my arms are locked, putting a distance between me and the approaching ship.

Bauldry is at my side. I do not hear his footsteps or the wheezing of his lungs until he speaks. "Shall I turn us around, Captain?"

I look at him. "Run, you mean?"

"Aye," his head tips to one side.

I turn back to the other ship. The sails are more defined now, though we are not yet close enough to see the crew. Despite my doubts, we shall not run like cowards.

"No, we stay on course."

Bauldry's eyes seek out Graives. The man is staring at the ship in the distance, eyes narrowed. It is difficult to know what he is thinking. "Graives!" I yell. "Maintain our course?"

He turns, his eyes flickering between me and Bauldry, and he nods.

And then I realize that he is also looking at the girl behind me. A shiver passes through me as Bauldry runs back to the helm, and Graives focuses his eyes on the distance.

The girl's face seems brighter than it has in a while. Her lips part as she breathes in the spray

from the sea. She must sense me watching her because she turns to me wide-eyed and says, "Who do you think is on the ship?"

"I...I do not know. We have never run into another vessel before now."

She gasps. "Never?"

"Never." To my own ears, there is a ring of something strange to the word. Never has been a long time, and for this to be the first occasion that we have set eyes on another vessel...I worry.

My resolve to stay on course wavers. What would happen if we turned away? Would the ship close the distance between us? We would be late to reach the land of the dead, that would be almost certain, and we would face the punishment accordingly. But would facing this unknown crew be worse punishment than that of facing the soul eaters? Or is my anxiety unnecessary and we are set to become allies with this unknown crew?

I leave the girl where she sits upon her makeshift seat and go to Graives. He does not falter at my approach. "What do *you* think it is?" I ask.

He inclines his head. "I've not seen another ship." He nods toward the girl. "'Tis the influence she has brought upon us."

"You cannot know that. She is a tiny human being and a —"

"And you cannot deny that things have been different since we took her on board."

"Different?"

He stares at me then, his eyes searching inside of me. His stare is as unnerving as the approaching vessel. "Aye, I've seen it. The way you soften when she's around. The cabin boy is as good as useless. Maybe this will be a blessing."

It is several seconds before I realize what he is hinting at. "She does not leave this ferry!" I spit at him. "The ferry will not allow it. If you think she is hypnotizing us all, then you will have me and the ferry to answer to should you try anything. Aye," I add, choosing my words for impact. "The soul eaters will have nothing on me if she is taken. The ferry and I will both see to that."

I walk back to the girl. I am hoping I am right. The ferry would not allow the girl to leave when we tried to send her to the land of the dead, and I am hoping the same will be said if she is forced to board the new ship. I am hoping the ferry will deny her absence, the way it would deny mine, or that of Graives, or any other crew member for that matter. We can be replaced. I have a feeling that she cannot.

"Down below," I say to her.

She glances at the ship which is becoming more visible with every passing moment. I can see the master at the helm, although I cannot discern his face or expression, yet I can see the shape of him. "But I want —"

"Now! That is an order!"

She rises from the seat and I am filled with panic that they might have already seen her golden head above the side of the ship. There

would be no mistaking her for one of us, not with her pink flesh and clear blue eyes.

At her movement, the cabin boy scurries over. "Stay with her in my cabin," I say. "She is not to come to the deck until I say."

He nods and offers her an arm for her to lean on, as she is still weak from the fever.

I wait for the ship to pull alongside us. I wait beside Graives: the welcoming committee.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

March 1, 456 A.T.

This is not right. The excitement of seeing the other ship in the distance has twisted and changed shape until now its arrival feels ominous, filled with danger. The girl senses it in the captain's face. It is his command that she is to stay in the cabin.

The cabin boy has followed her, and they peer through the porthole at the ship as it pulls alongside and drops anchor. A group of men climb into a rowing boat and cross the small expanse of sea separating the two vessels.

The girl stares hard at the men in the rowing boat. She gasps and the cabin boy politely makes no reaction. "Can you see it?" she asks him.

He presses his swollen forehead against the glass, his mouth open, but he says nothing.

"The other captain," she says, pushing her fingertip against the window. "Do you see it?"

He shakes his head and drool falls from the corner of his lips.

"This is bad." She does not know how she knows this, but her head has cleared from the fever in an instant, and she feels it in the way her blood runs cold in her veins. She leaps from the cot and rummages through the drawers of the captain's desk. She hands a slim silver dagger to the cabin boy. "Keep this in your hand and use it if you must." The girl widens her eyes at him so that he knows she is being serious.

Next, she casts around the tiny cabin for somewhere to hide. The captain has sent her here because he has also sensed danger and yet, she does not feel safe. They will find her here, should they think to search the ship. And as this thought crosses her mind, she understands the reason for the ship's appearance—they have come for her. She wished them into being and now that she has seen them, it is too late for her to undo the wish.

Because now, she does not wish to leave.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

March 1, 456 A.T.

The other captain boards the ferry first.

The greeting I had prepared in my mind fades from my lips the instant his feet touch the deck. As captain, it is my duty to extend the first greeting. I step forward and offer my hand to shake. He accepts it with a swift movement. He is tall and broad-shouldered like myself, donning a hat similar to my own. I can't place what it is, but there's something familiar about his face. "Welcome," I say.

He nods. His gaze takes in everyone on board in one swift move.

"Aye," he says. "We'll not take up too much of your time. Time is everything." He does not smile, neither does he offer his name.

I vouch to do the same. We are clearly not meeting on friendly terms.

I scan the deck for the cabin boy, but he is nowhere to be seen, and that is to be expected — I hope that he is with the girl as ordered. Instead, I gesture for the first mate. "Fetch rum for our guests," I say.

Behind the captain, other members of his crew have boarded the ferry. I'd have recognized the quartermaster anywhere by the narrowed eyes from years of squinting out into the distance for land that only appears when it has a mind to. But also because of his uncanny resemblance to Graives. Perhaps being a quartermaster had a similar effect on all who were cursed with the job.

Graives hangs back. He is quiet, and for the first time since we began sailing this spectral sea together, I know that he is uncertain of his next move.

The first mate returns with rum for myself, and the other captain who accepts his drink without so much as a nod.

The captain stands his ground, his feet squarely planted on the deck as though it were his own, his crew scattered behind him, their gaze scanning our ferry as though examining it for faults. The crew looks as though they're ready to attack us, should the captain give the orders. But after sizing them up silently, I realize we are more than prepared to defend ourselves against such.

"This has taken us by surprise," I say. "In all the years of...in all our crossings, we have never spied another vessel."

"Nor I," says the captain of the other ship. He watches me from beneath lowered eyebrows. He is suspicious, I fear, although it is no different to how I feel about him and his own crew. "Yet I believe our paths have crossed for a reason."

I hold my breath. I am hoping that he is not here to take the girl away.

"You see," he continues, "I have no passengers aboard my ferry. When we arrived at the land of the living, no one was waiting for us." He hesitates, swallows. "Now what do you think is the reason behind that?"

I shake my head. "It is a mystery. We collected our own passengers a short while ago as expected." I turn to indicate the miserable souls sitting on the bench.

"Aye, I can see that." His lips draw back from an assortment of graying teeth. "Hand them over and we'll be on our way."

I sip my rum. He sees too much, this familiar captain and his familiar crew. He is the wayfarer in his own story. But, while I wish to prevent him from discovering the girl, I cannot afford for him to interfere with our own journey, and I need him to leave peacefully.

I nod. "I'll share the passengers with you. But I cannot let you take them all."

The other captain smiles, a movement that does not reach his dead eyes. "I am not leaving without them." The man downs his rum and tosses the cup aside. Without taking his eyes from mine, he indicates for his quartermaster to round up the passengers.

I hold up my hands to halt him. "I'm in no mind to incur punishment for my own crew. We'll split their number in two. Half each, fair's fair. And then I'll make certain that we do not cross paths again."

The captain appears to chew on something while he reaches a decision. "One thing I've learned in my time as a wayfarer, the only certainty is that we make that crossing with the passengers that were intended for us. Now you have my passengers and I've a mind to take them back." His eyes narrow just enough for me to notice before he says, "Unless you've something else I can take in their place."

He knows. I don't know how, but he knows about the girl. Maybe he spied her on deck before I sent her below and had set his mind to take her all along.

Graives steps forward and opens his mouth to speak, and I silence him with a stare that promises death if he utters a single word. But the captain has watched the altercation and has pounced upon the notion that we are hiding something.

"Whatever it is that you are keeping from me, I will find," he says in a low, flat voice. "And you can be certain that whatever it is, you will be well rid of it, for it is not a wayfarer's duty to keep secrets. They will always become known, no matter the cost."

I shake my head. "On my crew's necks, I know not what you are speaking about."

In my peripheral vision I see that Graives is speaking in hushed tones with Bauldry. He is

plotting to hand over the girl and be done with her; I know it in my rotting bones, and I vow to throw him overboard myself should he hand her over to this accursed captain.

Just then, the other quartermaster appears before us, dragging with him a squirming cabin boy. The boy's eyes are wide with fear, but I keep my expression neutral. If he has returned with the boy, then he cannot have discovered the girl.

The captain gives the boy a cursory glance. "I've no need for a cabin boy with a broken nose," he says, punching the boy in a movement that is so swift, I barely register it until I hear the sickening crunch of bone.

The boy lands heavily on the decking, both hands covering his face, before leaping to his feet and scurrying away.

"It is time for you to leave," I say, straightening my shoulders in a way that I have not done in many years and raising myself to my full height.

The captain's fists clench. "Not without my passengers."

"They are *my* passengers. Were they not, the ferry would not have welcomed them on board. The matter is done."

I turn my back on him to signal that the conversation is over, and it is time for them to return to their own ship, when Bauldry appears, cradling his bleeding hand against his chest. He seeks out Graives with his eyes and gives an imperceptible shake of his head. He has been searching for the girl.

I will deal with them later, but for now, I must get the crew of the other ferry off my ship.

From behind me, I hear the captain snap his fingers. I turn back to him and he is offering me his hand in a gesture of goodwill.

"We have seen enough, for now," he says. "But mark my words, we will be following you."

"Will...will you take some passengers?" I say. "It was not my intention for you to leave empty-handed. I understand the fear of punishment we face should we make it across without the souls."

The captain glances at the passengers without seeing them. "I've changed my mind."

I nod. I want them off my ship so that I can find the girl myself.

As the captain approaches the rope-ladder to climb down to the little rowing boat, his glance takes in the makeshift seat upon which the girl had made herself comfortable earlier, and at its foot, the ragdoll.

He nods at me and leaves with his crew.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

March 3, 456 A.T.

Following the appearance of the other ferry, the girl spends much of her time below deck. The captain watches Graives whenever the girl is around, as though any trust he must once have felt toward him has vanished.

He does not ask what happened when the strange other quartermaster, who she noticed looked nearly identical to Graives, came looking for her. Perhaps he believes that she discovered a secret hiding place, or perhaps he thinks it was something more than that and he would rather not know. The captain does not appear to be one for keeping secrets in this life.

Regardless, she tells him that she was able to pry open the chest with the silver dagger and curl up inside, covering herself in sheets from the cot. She tells him how the other quartermaster threatened to rip the cabin boy's

throat out if he did not allow him to search the cabin. Although since he sustained a broken nose, she has noticed that the captain treats the boy with more respect than the rest of the crew have for the captain himself. And this pleases her. The boy showed great courage when he might have protected himself and offered her up.

She tells the captain how, when she was curled up in a ball inside the chest, she was more afraid than she had ever been before. She remembers how the other quartermaster opened the chest, looked at the sheets covering her, and closed it back. She remembers how the cabin boy gasped and made ready with the silver dagger. She remembers seeing the boy's silhouette behind that of the other quartermaster. And then the lid was closing again.

Three days following the appearance of the other ferry, the captain asks the girl to take over Graives' duty of collecting the gold coins from the boarding passengers. She smiles at him when he asks her and says, "Thank you, my lord." She gives him a little curtsy and he turns away, embarrassed.

The girl enjoys the task. She is mesmerized by the way the ferry knows how to find the shore when it is invisible until they are upon it. She asks the captain how this is possible, and he replies, "It is beyond me."

One day, when the sky is darkening and they are eating side-by-side with the cabin boy at the girl's feet, she tells the captain about how it felt to be standing on the shore, surrounded by sea.

"Aye, it was the same experience that I had," he says.

"How did you get there?" asks the girl.

"That I cannot tell you because I do not know. One moment, I am on my deathbed, and the next, BOOM!" The captain makes an explosion movement with his fingers. He shovels a mouthful of food between his lips. "It was not the same for you, though?"

"I was in a coal cellar," laughs the girl. She realizes that Graives and Bauldry are listening to their conversation and she gives them a smile. Graives instinctively turns back to his food, but Bauldry continues to listen, albeit without any reaction.

"A coal cellar?" asks the captain.

"I was being chased by a boy called Topher. I had stolen the mistress's keyring to rescue my ragdoll."

The captain is quiet for a while and then he nods. "Were you sick?"

"No, I was quite well, thank you. I had spent some time in the coal cellar already, so when the boy chased me, I dived upon the coal with the black cat watching, and waited for Topher to drag me back to the mistress for my punishment." The crew startle at the mention of the black cat, but the girl ignores them and continues her story. "And then I was on the shore with some other people who...who did not look like me."

"It was the cat what did it," mumbles Bauldry.

The girl greets travelers with a smile, although she receives none in return. The boarding souls eye her with suspicion and cough up the coin into the cabin boy's hand. His nose is healing out of place, making him appear even more strange than he did previously, yet still his countenance does not deter the girl from maintaining a steady stream of conversation with him.

"Thank you, lady," she says to the woman whose face is drooping like melting butter down one side. "This is a special coin," she says to the cabin boy, "for the lady was poor in life and has never seen such a sum of money."

To the old man leaning clumsily on a crooked walking stick, she says, "Here, let me help you," and she grasps his arm to steady him while he makes his payment. "This coin was gifted to him by a wandering friar," she tells the cabin boy.

He does not ask how she came by this information, nor does he speak hardly at all. And when he does, the sound is so muffled by the misshapen nose that she uses her wit to guess at what he is saying. But they make a bright pair, and the travelers appear less troubled for the friendly greeting and bide their journey in calm acceptance.

And the crew, well, they have learned to suffer the girl's presence in their own ways. Bauldry eyes her with ever-lower brows and pursed lips. Graives still tries to assault her whenever the opportunity arises, for he has no fear of the captain's wrath.

At mealtimes, he makes sure that she is served only the slops, knowing full well that the cabin boy will share his food with her. He loosens the barrels so that they roll toward her when she is near, and the cabin boy must leap to her rescue. One time, he called her to him under pretence of speaking to her about the payment, and the riggers almost took off her head with the turning sails. It was only Bauldry's instinctive rush to prevent an accident that saved the girl.

Yet, she continues to smile, and her hair continues to shine with the golden glow of fireflies.

One day, when the sky is a shade of pink normally associated with a baby's cheeks, Besse joins the other travelers boarding the ferry.

The girl is smoothing the ragdoll's woollen hair and does not notice Besse until she is on board. She might not have noticed her immediately anyway as Besse is feral, on all fours, and prowling around the legs of the other travelers, who ignore her as though she has been pestering them this way for all eternity. Or maybe they are hoping she will go away.

The girl drops the ragdoll onto the deck.

"Be-Besse," she stammers.

The cabin boy's gaze flickers between the girl and the feral child on the floor. He instinctively holds out his hand for the gold coin and Besse tries to bite his fingers. He snatches them away

and his eyes widen at the girl, asking her for guidance.

The girl drops to her knees and reaches for Besse. But Besse snarls at her, revealing her teeth, and hides behind the legs of another traveler.

"Besse," says the girl gently, trying not to show her horror at her friend's presence here.

"Besse, we must take the coin, or we cannot take you...we cannot sail." She holds out her hand and Besse's dull eyes blink. The girl wonders if Besse does not recognize her so she adds, "Besse, it is me. Do you remember? I was locked in the coal cellar and you released me."

A low growl emits from Besse's chest and she pounces on the girl, knocking her backwards. Both girls tumble around the floor, Besse growling and snarling like a wild creature, and the girl in silence.

It is Graves who yanks Besse from her. He holds Besse by the back of her clothes, which are so loose they hang from her, her feet dangling at least a foot above the deck. "What is going on here?" says Graves in a low voice. He is breathing heavily, and his other fist is clenched in anticipation of a brawl.

The girl clambers to her feet. She does not take her eyes from Besse. "I...I know her," she says. "We—"

"I do not care if you are the Queen of Torvus and she your daughter," says Graves. "I will not have this nonsense on my ship!"

"Your ship?" The captain has come to them, obviously attracted by the fuss. He turns to the girl. "What happened?"

"Her...her name is Besse," says the girl.

"Her name *was* Besse," says Graives.

The captain glares at him.

"I do not know what has happened to her, but she was not like this...in the orphanage."

"Orphanage?" Graives gasps, but the captain shoots him another glare and he says no more.

The captain eyes Besse, who is writhing in Graives' grip, her lean body twisting and limbs flailing. It is clear that he has never dealt with such a soul, because he hesitates before saying to Graives, "Put her down."

Graives shakes his head. He addresses the cabin boy. "Has she offered the gold coin?"

The boy shakes his head.

"No payment, no crossing," says Graives, "I say we should toss her over the side."

"No!" exclaims the girl. "No, you cannot do that!"

For a moment, Besse stops wriggling, as if she is listening to the decision being made about her intended journey. And then, arms raised above her head and her body straight and taut, she slips out and bounds toward the rear of the ferry.

The girl gasps.

The cabin boy shrinks backwards, as if he fears being struck for his part in the turn of events.

Graives and the captain chase after Besse, the other crew members dodging away from them, uncertainty in their eyes. Besse crashes into the

first mate and sends him stumbling backwards into a barrel of water. He drags himself dripping from the barrel, water saturating the deck surrounding him.

The girl realizes where Besse is going. She is heading toward the sails. Besse is going to climb the ropes, although where she thinks she will go from there is unknown.

But Graives is fast, and he knows the ferry better than Besse. He catches up with the child when she is head-height up the ropes and with his arms around her waist, drags her backwards. Besse clings to the ropes, eerie animal sounds coming from the back of her throat, the ropes bending and straining with the force of Graives' hold on the child.

But Graives is heavier and stronger than a child, and he manages to wrench her hands away from the ropes. As she falls backwards into his arms, she twists her body and clamps her mouth around his ear, biting off the tip. Graives yelps and drops her again.

Besse springs onto all fours and leaps away, straight into the arms of the captain.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

March 4, 456 A.T.

The new child is trouble. It is more than the way she kicks and lashes out with her fists, more even than the snarling teeth and feral glint in her eye. It is the effect she has had upon the girl.

I carry her back the length of the ferry to the girl. Graives follows, clutching his bloody ear.

The instant I stop, the child spits out the tip of the quartermaster's ear and it bounces off his boots, leaving a bloody print.

"Little *rat!*" Graives makes to slap the child's face with the back of his hand and the girl intervenes, standing between them, her own chest heaving with anger. "Do not think you can stop me," he says through gritted teeth.

The girl raises her chin and says, as though she were herself a princess, "I do not believe it is your place to harm the poor souls. They are

doomed anyway. Allow them some dignity on their last journey."

Graives raises his fist to his chest. There is murder in his eyes if ever I saw it. I step forward and grip his arm, forcing him to lower it. "See to the wound," I say, gesturing to his ear. "We cannot have blood everywhere. There's no telling what sea-creatures will be sniffing around."

Graives glances into the horizon and does as I have ordered. It is a small victory—the man will not forget the missing piece of his ear so easily.

The child in my arms is still while the attention is on Graives, but her wriggling commences once more as soon as the man's back is turned. Bauldry is watching warily from the helm.

"Boy," I say to the cabin boy who is still loitering behind the girl. "Come here. I want you to take the coin by force, do you understand me?"

He nods and raises his hand to the child's mouth. She snaps at his fingers, teeth bared.

"Besse," the girl moves closer, her voice gentle. "Besse, we must take the gold coin. The payment."

Besse eyes the girl, but her wriggling slows enough for me to pin her arms to her sides without releasing my hold on her.

"Will you give me the coin?" The girl holds out her hand toward Besse's mouth. I brace myself for the child to snap. "I won't hurt you,"

continues the girl. "I simply want the coin and then we can be on our way."

The girl moves her hand until it is beneath Besse's chin, but still no payment is forthcoming.

"That's it, just open your mouth for me, Besse."

The child's body begins to shudder and tremble, her chest heaving and bucking like it is being wracked with tremendous pain.

The girl's eyes are wide, her mouth open in horror. "What is happening?" she asks me.

I shake my head. "I do not know. I've never seen the likes before." I fear the child, Besse, might be dying, but I also know that this is impossible as the child is already dead. Surely, she cannot be reliving her death. No god would be that cruel, especially not to a child. What sins can she possibly have committed to incur such punishment?

The heaving grows more intense, and I can feel Besse's lungs struggling in my grip. I lower the child to the floor and release my hold on her. She instantly slips from my hands, throws herself onto the deck and kicks at my shins with both feet. The force is slight owing to the girl's bony frame, but still, it is enough to make me stumble backwards and lose my balance.

Besse leans to one side and coughs violently, the gold coin appearing in a glob of sticky green phlegm.

The cabin boy pounces on the coin and adds it to the rest already in his pouch.

The bridge instinctively raises and slides away into position on the ferry and the ship glides smoothly away from shore.

Besse must sense the subtle movement because her body freezes, every muscle poised for flight. The girl drops to her knees beside her.

The girl looks at me with her wide blue eyes. "Can I keep her with me?"

The child appears innocent now, with her hollow cheeks. She appears to have been mistreated in life and I have no mind to continue in death the poor dealings she has already suffered. I have a ferry to run. If the girl can maintain the child's calm, then I will consider it a job well done. We have already wasted time.

"Aye," I nod. "For the journey." The girl thinks about it, as if she had not considered the timeframe imposed upon the child's appearance. "Any trouble and I will personally see to it myself."

"I...I promise," says the girl.

She lifts Besse to her feet. It would seem that the child has not walked on two feet for some time, as she loses her balance and leans upon the girl to steady her. The cabin boy appears on the other side of her, and taking one arm each, they take her to the bench where the other passengers have been waiting patiently. I wonder if the passengers have even seen the current happenings, for they register no reaction in their demeanor or in their expressions.

I go to Graives. He is leaning over the barrel of water and rinsing the blood from his ear and the side of his face. He knows that I am there

because I sense it in the stiffening of his spine, but he does not look at me, nor speak.

"How goes it?" I ask.

"Aye, I'll survive, no thanks to the little rat."

I wince at his words but refuse to acknowledge them. The man is understandably angry, and as his captain, his welfare must be my priority.

"Are you going to tell the girl the truth about the orphanage?" Graives asks.

I pause. Despite what I know, I cannot bear the thought of breaking the girl's heart by telling her what happened. I cannot tell her that, while she was sick and sleeping, a large group of deceased children accompanied by a few miserable adults boarded the ferry, covered from head to toe in burn marks. Though I didn't know at the time that the girl had come from an orphanage, it occurred to me as soon as she first uttered the word. I don't know how I know, but I know somehow...and so does Graives. The orphanage the girl came from had burned in a fire, likely during the dead of night, and everyone inside had been killed. If I tell the girl, she will ask why I didn't tell her about the children from the orphanage that crossed while she was sick. She will ask why, if Besse was killed in the fire too, had she arrived later than the others? I will then have to explain to her that not everyone arrives on the ferry at the exact moment they die—it takes some longer. I will have to tell her that it is likely Besse escaped, but didn't make it far before succumbing to the aftereffects of the fire and smoke. It will make

the girl sad, and I don't want to do that. I will tell her one day, long after Besse has crossed. Or perhaps I will never tell her.

I make as though I have ignored Graives' question.

"I have set the girl and the cabin boy to watch over her. I trust that will be the end of it."

He turns his face to me slowly. "In your book maybe, but in mine...the end of it will come when the living girl is no longer aboard my ferry."

He is baiting me. I could rise to his words 'my ferry', but my anger will achieve nothing. I will deal with Graives in my own way when the time is right. For now, I understand that he has the crew on his side and the odds would be stacked against me. They would all see to it that the girl is gone. I cannot say with any certainty why I feel protective of her, but I will not see her attacked by my crew, not when her innocence shines out of her.

And, despite Graives' word, I am still captain of this ship.

CHAPTER TWENTY

March 4, 456 A.T.

It hurts the girl to see Besse on all fours like an animal. She tells the cabin boy to fetch some water so that she might clean her up. Besse eyes her with her dead sunken eyes but remains limp now that she has been entrusted to the girl's care. She does not know if Besse recognizes her; she has given no signal that she knows the girl, or remembers their predicament in the orphanage, or the girl who saved her from Topher's punishment. Besse simply stares at her, unseeing, unmoving.

The girl cleanses the blood from around Besse's mouth. It is unnerving. Even more so because it is Graives' blood, and she knows that Graives needs no excuse to be rid of her. She must find a way to make peace with him once Besse is safely in the land of the dead.

But here is where the girl's thoughts wrench her heart and send her blood hurtling through her veins. The thought of Besse being all alone in the land of the dead is incomprehensible. She does not know how she can do this to the child. Besse is so tiny. So frail. Her life has not treated her well and it seems so unfair that death should continue the rotten deal that Besse has been dealt.

The girl attempts to cuddle Besse to her chest. If she can give her some comfort in this final journey, she will know that she has tried to help. But the instant Besse's head touches the girl's body, she recoils like a cat on hot coals. She crawls backwards, away from the girl, until she is huddled in a corner between a pile of ropes and a barrel of slops. Her knees are drawn close to her chest, her feet grimy and bare, her eyes peeping out from above her knees, watching the girl and the cabin boy as if they might have been sent to destroy what is left of her.

The girl goes to Besse slowly, her hands held out in front of her to prove that she means no harm. "Besse," she whispers. "It is me. I will not hurt you I promise." Another step and the girl presses her spine back against the coiled rope. "What is it, Besse?" Another step. The girl is holding her breath in fear that Besse will lunge at her, or worse, dive over the side of the ship. "Do you trust me?"

Besse does not move, but every bone in her body is tight, ready to run. The girl cannot begin to imagine what has happened to Besse after she was taken from the coal cellar and brought here,

but she fears the child suffered both their punishments. Anger broils inside her like potatoes bubbling inside a pot. It is unfair. Besse had no one to protect her and it was all the girl's fault—if only she had not insisted on retrieving her ragdoll.

And then a thought occurs to her. During the search for the ragdoll, Besse found her locket in the mistress's chest. The girl has not seen it around the Besse's neck though, or on any other part of her. The mistress had no right to take it from her again.

"Besse," she says, distracting the child while taking another step closer. "Your locket. What happened to it?"

Besse tilts her head to one side. She blinks. It is a movement so unnatural, so painfully slow, that the girl glances away and swallows back tears. She chews her bottom lip while she deciphers this strange emotion that Besse has prompted in her. And then it dawns on her: she has not noticed before that the passengers do not blink. Ever. She looks behind her at the cabin boy, and watches his face, and he does not blink either. She blinks her own eyes and registers how the movement is like a flash, so rapid, as to be unnoticeable. Why then, did it appear so weird when Besse blinked?

The girl drops to her knees so that her eyes are level with Besse's and closes the distance between them on the floor. When she is close enough to touch the child, she reaches for her cold hand. Besse does not resist.

"I will not hurt you," she whispers. "I will look after you, the way you looked after me."

Besse nods once, just a fraction. It is a start, thinks the girl. It means that Besse understands what she is saying. It feels important to the girl that Besse understands that she has a friend, and that she is not alone. If she is to face the land of the dead alone, at least she might take comfort from her final hours.

She sits in front of Besse, her legs crossed, and says, "Your locket, Besse. Did they take it from you?"

Besse raises her head from behind her knees, and her colorless lips part to reveal tiny teeth. Her lips move as if forming words, but no sound comes out.

"Did Topher take it?"

Besse's eyes dart behind the girl toward the cabin boy and she flinches behind her knees once more.

"He will not harm you. He is my friend," says the girl. "Where is your locket? Did the mistress claim it back?"

Besse's eyes remain so wide, the girl feels as though she might lose herself in them; they are so deep and vacant. And then the child shakes her head briefly and raises a hand slowly to her ear.

"Can you not hear me?" asks the girl. "Is that what happened to you? Did someone hurt you?" She is panicking, as all kinds of dreadful images flash through her mind about what might have happened inside the orphanage.

She watches as Besse unfolds her limbs and leans forward so that the girl might look at her ear. She reaches out a hand and Besse flinches. "Hush," she whispers. "Be still and I will not hurt you. I just wish to see." She moves to Besse's side so that she can better view her ear and brushes the child's hair aside. The ear appears to be intact—there is no part missing, like with Graives at least.

The inside of Besse's ear looks fine upon examination, but as Besse settles, the girl hears a quiet clanging, like the sound of metal upon wood. She helps Besse to stand and pats the child down, feeling for something. Finally, in a small pocket, the girl finds the locket. She pulls it out and shows it to Besse. Next, the girl feels something pointy sticking out of Besse's back. She feels around more until she realizes that several thorns are protruding from Besse's lower back and buttocks. It's as if the child had leapt into a thorny bush. Gently, the girl removes all the thorns, one by one. Upon seeing the relief on Besse's face, the girl smiles. "See, I told you that wouldn't hurt."

Despite the few years between them, the girl feels as though she is Besse's mother. She feels responsible for the poor child, who deserves none of the pain she has endured in life. No wonder Besse had been feral—anyone with so many thorns poking into them would've been driven mad.

The cabin boy watches as the girl releases Besse, reaches for the locket and fastens it

around Besse's neck. The girl helps Besse below deck to the cabin.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

March 4, 456 A.T.

The girl offers Besse a biscuit, but the child does not swallow. She paces the tiny space. "Who did this to you, Besse?" she murmurs. Still Besse does not answer. "Who harmed you? Was it the boy...or the mistress?" her words trail away as tears trickle down her cheeks. "I cannot fathom why you are here." She drops to her knees at the child's feet. "What did you do, Besse? What is the reason that you are here?"

The cabin boy picks at the skin around his lips and stares at his feet.

"Did you hurt Topher? Is that it – did you pay him back for what he did to you? Surely that does not warrant this journey. Surely there would be some forgiveness given the circumstances."

She does not expect an answer, it is merely her way of working things out in her head. She

already knows that when the time comes for Besse to depart the ferry for her final destination, she will not be able to bear it.

Unless there is some way of keeping Besse with her.

Think.

Think.

What could she do?

Graives is the one who sees the passengers disembark. He is the one who waits until the bridge raises before he gives the signal to sail. He will be glad to see the back of Besse, she has no doubt about that, not when half of his ear is missing, but he was willing to give up the boarding to the girl and the cabin boy. Maybe now is the time to request the captain to give the other task to the girl also. The captain might be willing. He understands that the girl merely wishes to be helpful, as her presence has been forced upon them.

But Graives...Graives will not be so easy to convince.

It is the only way though. It is her only chance of keeping the child with her. Once the ferry sets sail from the land of the dead, there will be no going back, not out of synch with their normal crossings, and it will be a simple matter of hiding Besse in the cabin. The captain rarely makes an appearance below deck these days and she knows that she can rely on the cabin boy to keep their secret.

Her thoughts spin and spiral around inside her head, working out the minor details, until

she has convinced herself that the plan will work.

She is going to keep Besse on the ferry with her.

The girl chooses her moment well. She waits until the captain is deep in animated conversation with Bauldry when she tugs on his sleeve. She has left Besse safely in the cabin with the boy.

"Captain?" she says, standing back so that the men do not think that she is deliberately trying to be annoying.

He turns to her, his face dark, his eyebrows drawn low over his eyes. "What is it?"

The girl bows to Bauldry and mumbles, "Apologies for interrupting. Captain, might I take on another job for you?"

"Not now," he growls.

"I know that you are busy, and this is the reason I am offering," she persists.

He sighs and waits for her to speak further. Bauldry is already trying to back away. "Wait there!" the captain snaps at him.

"Might I please oversee the souls leaving the ferry?"

The captain instinctively glances at the bench where the passengers sit meekly, awaiting their fate. The girl steps into his line of vision. She doesn't want him seeking out Besse.

"Graives handles the disembarking."

"I know," she says quickly. "I know he does, but I was thinking, with what happened earlier, with his ear..." She raises a finger to the tip of her ear and ignores Bauldry's brittle laugh.

The captain's eyes are everywhere. She thinks he is trying to work out whether to accept her suggestion, knowing that Graives will be angry at the girl's continuing interference in matters of the ferry.

"Please," she says. "I only want to help."

"Aye," he nods, dismissing her.

The girl hides her smile all the way back to the cabin.

Once safely inside, she says to the cabin boy, "He agreed. We will be seeing the passengers off the ferry when we reach the land of the...when we arrive."

When the ferry begins to slow, gliding silently toward the shore of the land of the dead, the girl takes Besse's hands in hers.

"Besse, we will take you to the bridge, ready to disembark. You must wait in line with the others and keep quiet. We do not want you drawing attention to yourself, or...or attacking anyone. Do you understand?"

Besse nods. Her eyes have settled since the thorns were removed, and she seems to be in no pain.

"We will keep you at the back of the line so that the crew can see you. We need them to know that you are there. Then, when it is almost

your turn to leave, the boy will run to the side of the deck and scream." She turns to the boy and smiles.

He nods, "Aye." He rarely speaks, and when he does his voice sounds so much like a child's that the girl cannot help but want to take him in her arms and hold him.

"The crew will run to see what the commotion is," the girl continues. "When they do, I will hide you on the other side of the deck, and you will be able to slip away and run back here to the cabin without anyone noticing you." She addresses the cabin boy, "You know what you must say?"

"That someone has leaped overboard. One of the...the souls. I must point and scream and say that I can see them in the water even though there will be no one there." He recites the words as though he is reading them from a sheet of paper.

"You are sure that you can do this?" asks the girl, encouraging him with her smile.

He nods once.

She must trust him. It is the only way she can think of to keep Besse on the ferry, and she knows that there is no one else that she can trust.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

March 4, 456 A.T.

The child, Besse, appears different when she makes ready to disembark, flanked by the girl and the cabin boy. Meek. She walks on two feet and with her eyes staring straight ahead, her head raised, although not quite as secure as the girl. The cabin boy also stares straight ahead, his eyes focused on the bridge, his lips moving silently.

I have been on this ship long enough to know when something feels off. I gaze at the sky, following the shades of deepening pink. We are on track to arrive on time as always—Bauldry has never yet failed us in that respect. He is a fine sailing master and is proud of his role on board the ferry. I have often wondered what Bauldry's position was in life for him to take such pride in his work in death, but it is not a question that I

would ever dare to ask. The dead do not speak of their lives. They do not look back.

Yet, something is building inside my head, like a bubble that is waiting to pop.

I watch the girl. She takes her place by the bridge, careful to keep Besse's hand in hers, often giving her a warning look. She is most likely scared that the child will attack another member of the crew and incur the wrath of Graives—something that is not to be coveted. But there is something else. She looks at the cabin boy in the same fashion, like a mother duck keeping her ducklings in check so that they do not wander far from the rushes.

And they look to her for guidance. It is almost like she has adopted them, despite her youth. It must be the mother instinct that she wears around her shoulders like a shawl.

I cannot be certain that I am right, but I accept that must be the reason behind my anxiety. There is history between the girl and Besse, and the cabin boy lacks a mother and has latched on to her as a baby would.

I busy myself with keeping Graives away from the children. I will not suffer another attack on either part; best to deliver the souls safely and be on our way. A few cups of rum and I will sleep soundly for another day's journeys well done. In normal circumstances, Graives would've argued the girl taking over the task of offloading the passengers, but embarrassment over the escapade with the child, and hatred of the girl, caused him to accept the order without a word. He watches them, though. His eyes dart

across to where they are standing as if he is waiting to catch them out. And if he were to catch them in an unwarranted act, he would take great pleasure in snitching on them to his captain.

I pray that the girl sees it through with no cause for alarm.

The bridge is lowered, and the girl smiles at each soul in turn as they depart. I notice that she keeps Besse by her side while the others mount the bridge and I realize that this, their second goodbye, must be more difficult than the first, as it is to be their last. I leave them to it—it is not for me to pry into their farewells.

So, I am caught completely off guard by the boy's scream. It is chilling, piercing the air like a maiden about to be murdered.

I cross the deck and reach the boy at the same time as Graives and Bauldry, the boatswain and first mate not far behind us. The boy is gesturing at the sea and blubbing like a baby.

"What is it, boy?" Graives shakes his shoulders, making his neck snap.

The boy shrinks away from the man's grip and points again at the sea. "There!" he says, dribbling. "There! Can you see?"

"What is it?" I ask. "What can you see?" I turn to Bauldry. "Do you have your eyeglass?"

"I'll run and fetch it." Bauldry turns on his heels and is away to the helm. He returns promptly with the eyeglass and raises it to his left eye. "What am I looking for?"

"What is it?" I ask the boy. "Who went over?"

"One of..." he glances quickly at the girl who is now waiting alone by the bridge, the other passengers having already departed. "One of the passengers. She...she climbed up and jumped. I...I couldn't stop her."

"Who was it? Spit it out, boy! Which one?"

"The...the child."

As if on cue, as if she had not realized what was going on, the girl rushes to the side of the ship, tears streaking her face and grips the edge, staring into the sea. "Can we save her?" she says to me.

I shake my head and follow the direction the boy had gestured to. I see nothing but the occasional swell of frothy white foam on the water's surface and the reflected glimmer of the stars in the sky. "I cannot see her. I do not think there is anything that we can do."

She takes a deep breath and nods her head once, turning away. "I am done," she says in a low voice. "The others are on their way. May I go now?"

I nod. "Aye."

She retires to the cabin, the boy following, his shoulders drooping as he walks slowly in her wake.

"What do we do now?" asks Bauldry. "The bridge."

Bauldry is right. The bridge is still lowered because the child did not enter the land of the dead. As far as the ferry is concerned, one passenger remains undelivered. Our job is incomplete.

"We raise it manually. We can do that, can we not?" I ask.

Bauldry's head tilts from side to side. "It is not the way of things, but there is nothing else for it. We have no child to hand over."

"We must trust in the sea to confirm that our journey is complete. Raise the bridge!" I order.

Graives does not speak, but I can see that he is unhappy with the situation. He is suspicious by nature, and I attribute it to his frustration at the unexpected disruption. "There is nothing more for us to do," I say to him.

The ferry complies and I assume that she is satisfied with the day's work, although the incident has left us all floundering a little. The riggers are sluggish in moving the sails. Bauldry keeps looking behind him as if he is being chased by a demon that is invisible to the rest of us. They are scared, I think. They are frightened of the repercussions.

It is my intent to give the living girl time to compose herself after losing her friend to the sea, before going below deck to check on her. She has gotten away with far too much and the crew are sickened by my leniency with her. Had Graives been attending to his customary task, this incident would not have occurred and there would be no unease aboard this ship. I make a mental note to return things to the way they were once I have spoken to the girl.

But I do not get the opportunity because Graives beats me to it.

I had not kept a close enough eye on him, and when the cabin boy appeared on deck to fetch

drinking water for the girl, Graives made his move.

What he returned with though, was unexpected. Or rather, it was to be expected, but I had determined not to see what was in front of my very eyes. He strides back onto the deck, his boots clip-clopping against the boards, and Besse being dragged by the ear.

"This," he spits, throwing the girl to the floor. "This is what your little living girl was hiding in your very own cabin! This is what the commotion was all about. She has played you for a fool."

His fists are clenched and his eyes like burning coals. I have never seen him so angry, or so filled with venom for the girl. My gaze flickers between him and Besse, who is now curled up into a ball on the deck, her face hidden behind her matted hair. She is only a child. Curled up, she would fit into my arms like a new-born lamb.

From behind me, the girl screams and rushes to her friend, where she drops to her knees, smoothing Besse's hair away from her face.

Graives turns to Bauldry. "Turn her around!"

Bauldry, at the helm, hesitates, and it is the worst move he could make in Graives' eyes. Graives lashes out with his fist and sends Bauldry wheeling backwards, away from the helm, which begins to turn of its own accord. The ferry is obeying the quartermaster's orders even if the sailing master isn't.

Graives faces me. "You want to negate my order?"

I swallow. I refuse to look at the child on the deck; I know that she will sway my words when I have no choice but to go along with Graives' command. Even the ferry knows it. I shake my head and drop my own fists. "Turn her around," I mutter in a dulled voice.

Bauldry gets straight back to the helm, his head listing from side to side more exaggeratedly than usual.

"They stay with me," I say, gesturing to Besse and the girl. "Until we arrive, they stay with me so that no more harm comes to them. I will personally see to it that the child leaves the ship."

I cross to the child and pick her up into my arms. I carry her safely below deck, trailed by the girl. When we arrive at the cabin, I set her down on the bed.

The girl watches with tears in her eyes. "Will you make her leave?" she asks.

"Aye. I have no choice. She does not belong here."

"Neither do I," she says in her haughty way. Her blue eyes see right through me.

I glance away from her stare. "She has no place on board this vessel once we have crossed, and you know it, or you would not have concocted such a deceitful plan—you would have asked me if I would allow it."

Her shoulders droop and I know that I have spoken the truth. It saddens me to see the girl defeated when she is always so filled with brightness and hope.

"She will be all right," I say.

"You do not know that! You have never been to the land of the dead."

"That is true," I say, choosing my words. "But it is where she belongs. It is where we will all belong when the time is right."

Tears well in her eyes. "She is a child. Do you believe that the time is right for her? Put your hand on your heart and say to me that a child deserves this."

I have to look away. "I cannot swear it. But the ferry is already turning. The ferry will do what has to be done, and if we are late with her..." It is the first I have allowed myself to acknowledge that we might be too late. The punishment. If we all incur the punishment for the child's late arrival, Graives will set the blame at my feet and the crew will follow. I do not know what will happen to us, or to the girl.

"If we are late?"

"There is a punishment to be endured if we are late delivering the souls."

"What is it?" Her eyes are wide.

I shrug. "I have yet to discover what it is, nor am I in any mind to find out. Nor should you be."

She nods.

There is a knock at the door. It is the cabin boy returning with the drinking water. I take it from him and send him on his way.

The girl lays her body beside the child's, as if to give her warmth. I could tell her that the child will not benefit from warmth now; it was only in life that warmth was necessary for her survival. But I cannot bring myself to be that cruel.

Aye, the girl is weakening me.

We are not far into the journey, so the return crossing to the land of the dead takes less time than usual. When the ferry slows, the girl studies my face, as though expecting me to announce that I have changed my mind. When she sees that this has not happened, she takes Besse's hand and leads her from the cabin, whispering all the while, "There, there, Besse. Do not be afraid. You will be all right, I promise."

I stay close behind them. I cannot afford any antics this time. Besse must leave the ferry and we must be on our way without nonsense.

The ferry knows what to do. She draws close to the shore and the bridge lowers in readiness. Graives waits by the bridge. His ear is crusty with blood and it gives his face a lopsided appearance that is not helped by the permanently narrowed eyes and the twisted lips.

The girl embraces Besse before she steps onto the bridge. Besse does not return the embrace, nor does she speak, but turns and walks away from us, her tiny body appearing even smaller against the misty backdrop of the land of the dead.

The bridge begins to raise as Besse takes her first steps onto the shore. I nod. If asked, I would have to admit that this crossing has affected me more than any other, but I turn to walk away.

Such is my mood that I am not prepared for the girl to do what she does next.

She jumps onto the bridge and flies across it on silent feet, leaping onto the shore from the raised end and disappearing into the land of the dead.

The cabin boy cries out.

Graives watches, open-mouthed. He too has been taken by surprise.

It is several moments before my thoughts stop spiralling and form a coherent decision. "I'm going after her," I say.

"You cannot," says Graives. "We are already moving."

"We can. I am going after the girl, and you are coming with me."

I reach for Graives' arm and he wrenches it away from me. "This is madness. The ferry will not allow it."

"She might not," I say. "But we are going all the same. You knew this would happen and you still returned with the child despite the ferry's acceptance of her."

The bridge is almost closed. We will have to swim if we are to reach the land of the dead from here and I know not if I am capable of such skills, but I am determined to find the girl and bring her back. It may well be madness, but it is a madness I must fulfil, or I will not be able to continue this existence for another several hundred years.

Graives peers at the water, at the land of the dead which will disappear from view

completely if we do not act now. "I...I will not..." he splutters.

I grab the man by his clothes and wiggle him toward the almost closed bridge and the water beyond. "Jump!" I say. "Jump or I will push you!"

The man must sense my anger and determination. He glares at the crew, who are all watching the scene unfold as if they are an audience watching a court jester. Then he takes a deep breath, mounts the bridge, and jumps feet-first into the sea. I do not feel the splash. I follow him and have jumped before his feet touch the water.

I am dragged underwater. I feel the pull of the ferry as it moves away from land, the way it sucks at my legs so that I can neither touch the bottom, nor make for the surface. My lungs are straining to fill with air as I spin, arms flailing instinctively. Something wipes my legs out from under me and I lurch forward, grappling against the water like someone falling from a horse. I don't know what happens, but it is this grappling, the flailing of arms and legs, that somehow takes me to the surface. My head breaks free, and I am gasping for air.

I cannot see Graives. My legs try to walk, and the movement makes me bob in and out of the water, my mouth reaching for air each time I reappear. The ferry is fast vanishing and I do not know if we will ever reach her again, but we need to get to the shore before it, too, disappears, and we are left forever paddling water.

Just then, a head appears within arms' reach of where I am trying to float. Graives. He too gasps for air the way I did, coughing and spluttering, his arms creating such a splash that I can barely see his face.

I lunge forward and take his arm, my legs propelling us forward toward the shore. We are both panting and coughing when we wade the final few steps toward land. My legs are sore. Our clothes are saturated and heavy. We lay back on the sand and steady our breathing.

When I finally sit up, the ferry is nowhere in sight.

Graives lunges at me and punches my face, splitting the skin beneath my eye.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

March 4, 456 A.T.

The girl's feet touch the shore, and she runs blindly to put as much distance between her and the ferry as possible. It is only when she stops and leans against a tree, panting, that she wonders why she has seen nothing of Besse. The child was only moments ahead of her. She had hoped to find Besse with little effort, as she couldn't have wandered far in such a short time.

And yet Besse is nowhere to be seen.

The girl looks around her. It is darkness. She appears to be in a forest, but it is a forest like none she has ever seen. She leans back against a tree, surrounded by other trees, and yet when she steps away, the tree is behind her back and she is surrounded once more, as if she has not even moved. She raises her eyes to the sky. The treetops are so dense, so interwoven, that only tiny glimpses of the pink sky above are visible

between the tangled branches. It provides a gloomy atmosphere down below that her eyes take a while to adjust to.

When they do, she squints into the forest, attempting to bring any objects other than the thick, scratchy tree trunks into focus. There is nothing.

"Besse!" she yells. "BESSE!"

She waits, but there is no answer. The girl shivers. She realizes now that she feels cold, that the temperature on board the ferry is constant. There is no early-morning chill, or sweltering midday heat. Now, she feels the cold like a winter morning.

She takes a step forward. Beneath her bare foot, a twig snaps. Behind her, she hears the snapping of another twig and whirls around to see who is there. "Hello?" she says. "Besse, is that you?"

Another step, and there is more movement behind her. She turns again and finds that she is still alone. "Besse, it is only me. Come out, please."

The girl darts behind a tree to hide from whoever is there and senses the same movement several steps away, mirroring her own. She counts in her head to twenty, before peeping around the side of the tree. In the distance, she catches a glimpse of another head doing the same and, without wasting a moment, she runs to the tree to catch Besse. But there is no one there. It is as if she were watching her own reflection in a mirror that moves away whenever she grows close.

"Besse!" she yells again.

She is panicking now. Reality is taking hold of her thoughts—if she does not find Besse, she will be stranded here alone forever. The ferry will not return for her because it does not accept passengers from this side of the Crossing. The captain will presume that she is dead, or lost. And even if he wanted to find her, the ferry would not allow it, because the ferry is in control. Graives would not allow it, either.

She understands that she should not have left the ferry to follow Besse. But it is done now, and she must continue to follow her belief in her mother's words. She is here because this is where she is meant to be.

Maybe there is still a possibility that she will find her friend. Maybe her friend needs her now more than ever. She will not give up hope.

She walks. There is no direction that is more appealing than any other because here, as it was on the shore when she waited for the ferry, the surroundings move with her, the forest following her in all directions. With each step she takes, trees shift and rearrange themselves to present a fluid, uninterrupted view.

She tries not to feel uneasy about the everchanging forest. If this is how it will be, then at least she is safe in this corner of the woods that has been allocated to her. It is her alone. There is no one to hurt her. This is what she tells herself as she moves cautiously in the direction that she hopes will take her back to the shore. At least there, she has the hope that the ferry will return tomorrow, and she will know that the captain

and the cabin boy are safe and continuing their work. If there is no hope for her, it will have to be enough.

The dense forest is filled with silence other than the sounds of the girl's own footsteps and those mimicking hers several feet away. She refuses to be tempted by the glimpses of movement. She knows that should she try to catch the culprit following her, there will be no one there.

Until she glances to her left and sees a different movement. A blackened silhouette against the already dark backdrop of trees. She stops. Her breath quickens and her heart hammers against her ribcage, clamoring to be freed or stilled. She stares at the spot until her eyes water, and she can no longer be certain that the black shape still exists. And then another black shape appears to her right, the movement spotted in her peripheral vision. She quickly turns. This time she is certain the figure exists, but she cannot tell if it is human or otherwise.

"Besse?" she asks, her voice trembling.

The figure does not reply, but shifts behind a tree and out of sight.

The girl waits, lost in thought. Whenever she moves, the forest moves with her. The figures, whoever or whatever they are, know the land of the dead better than she does, and they will always remain one step ahead of her. So, to reach them, she needs to move fast. But how? She wants to speak to them to ask whether they have seen Besse. One question, and she will be on her way.

She calculates that the closest one is about five wide steps away from her. If she could somehow cross that distance in one swift movement, she would be beside them before they realized, and before they could retreat. Moving her hands behind her steadily, her fingers graze rough bark. A glance up and she is standing beneath an overhanging branch that is not close enough for her to touch on tiptoes, but she could probably reach if she jumped. She isn't sure if it will hold her. Neither is she sure how far she will be able to swing if she catches hold of it, but it's the only option she can think of right now.

A quick glance at the nearest figure, which appears to be watching her, although she is unable to discern a face. The girl bends her knees and springs upwards. She catches hold of the branch and propels her legs forwards in the direction of the closest figure and lands on her feet a couple of feet away from it. Not close enough to touch, but she has taken it by surprise.

The figure changes shape, large wide wings unfurling on both sides of its bulk, and it hops backwards, but not before the girl has caught a glimpse of its beak. A bird. She thinks, because of its blackness, that it might be a crow.

She reaches out a hand toward the creature, to touch its feathers, and it doesn't move. "I won't hurt you," she murmurs. She doesn't know if it understands her, but its face is turned slightly away, and she thinks that it blinks one eye in acknowledgement of her words. Slowly, she inches her fingers closer. Closer. Almost

close enough to touch when she hears a voice from behind her.

"Stop!"

Dropping her hand, she spins around to try and find the person who spoke. Her eyes darting back and forth, she cannot make out any figures other than the crows who have been following her. "Who's there?" she calls out. The forest is still. "Come out so that I might see you." She hears nothing but the beating of her own heart. She must have imagined the voice. It must have been her own fear talking her out of touching the crow.

She turns back to the creature and gasps aloud. The crow has vanished, and Besse is in its place. "Besse!" she cries out. "I've been looking for you. Are you all right?"

A smile spreads slowly across Besse's face and the child looks more like how the girl remembers her from the orphanage. Besse reaches out a hand toward her and the girl rushes forward. But before their fingers can make contact, someone, something, lunges between them, shoving Besse aside.

"What?" the girl stumbles backwards, her back hitting the tree that has been behind her since she stopped here in the forest. She stares at the shadowy gray figure that leaped between them. The man turns to face her, and she recognizes him as the friar who gave her the yellow ribbon on the ferry. She instinctively reaches for the ribbon, which is still in her hair. "Friar?" she says. "Is it you?"

"Aye, it is I," he says. The instant the words echo around the trees, the man raises both hands to his ears, as if in pain, and sinks to his knees. "This is not the child you seek." He cries out in pain again. "Beware the crows!"

The girl looks at Besse. "Besse?" she asks, and her voice trembles, giving away the fear that the friar has instilled in her.

"I'm so glad you're here," says Besse. "I was so frightened on my own."

A groan escapes the friar's lips, and the girl turns to him. She is horrified to see that the friar's feet have disappeared, being swallowed by the ground upon which he is standing. Except that the ground beneath him is not solid; it bubbles and shifts, like water but thicker, because the friar is not sinking rapidly. The ground takes his ankles. He tries to raise a knee, to release his foot, even reaching down to his leg with both hands to aid the movement, but nothing happens apart from the squelching, sucking sounds of the ground as he sinks slowly, his shins now covered by the bubbling mass.

He turns to face the girl and he is crying, moisture falling from his nose. "Run!" he says. "Go back the way you came!"

"Don't listen to him," says Besse. "He is angry that his lies have been discovered."

The girl notices that Besse's words hiss gently, and despite the slithering sound, there's a harshness to her voice that is quite unlike the child she remembers from the orphanage, or the silent and disturbed child from the ferry.

The girl does not waste a breath, but turns and flees through the trees, hoping that she is heading in the direction from which she came. Trees block her path, and she has to leap around them, dodging low-hanging branches and bushes that appear to materialize from the ground as she approaches. She thinks that the trees are moving, but she cannot be sure because the forest looks the same no matter how fast or how far she runs. There is no end to it. No daylight to signal that she might be close to the shore.

But still she runs, clutching at the sharp stinging pain in her side. She runs, and leaps, and ducks, and the forest stretches endlessly before her, until she fears that she cannot run another step. She stops to catch her breath, her body bent forward, her hands on her knees, her breath ragged in her throat, rasping, her heart jumping to a completely different tune. She sees that her feet are scratched and bloody.

It is not until the beating of her heart begins to regulate that she hears the strange sound. Her body tenses. Her ears strain for the sound, but the forest is silent, and she thinks that maybe she imagined it when she hears it again. "Help..." It is faint, too faint to tell which direction the plea came from.

She peers through the trees, motionless, not daring to move or touch anything in case what happened to the friar happens to her.

"Help..." There it is again. She is certain this time that it is a cry for help, as faint and hoarse as the voice is.

"Besse?" she says to the dark strange forest. "Is it you?" She closes her eyes and opens them again quickly, trying to catch the arrival of the crows because they must surely be following her. But none appear.

She takes a step, placing her foot carefully on the ground, testing that it will not swallow her alive. It holds. "Besse?" she cries again. "Where are you?"

"Here..."

The girl turns her head. The voice came from behind her, but she cannot see anything other than trees. "I cannot see you," she says. She holds her breath to concentrate on the reply when it comes.

"Up..."

Slowly, the girl raises her face to the treetops. Nothing has changed since she arrived. The sky is barely visible between the canopy of dense branches. There is no movement, not even the rustling of leaves. And then she spots something out of the ordinary. It is like a cloud fallen from the sky, only this pink sky holds no clouds that she has seen. A nest maybe. A giant nest for the crows to hide themselves in. The girl studies the gray-white object, waiting for her eyes to come into focus in the gloomy shadow-light of the forest, and as it does, she realizes where the voice is coming from.

The shape amongst the branches is not a cloud.

It has not fallen from the sky.

A face peers from the top of the shape which, now that she can see it more clearly, resembles a

cocoon spun from spiderwebs, the likes of which a butterfly would emerge from. A chrysalis. And the butterfly is Besse.

"Besse!" she cries. She wants to tell the child that she will free her, but she does not know how that will be possible. Besse closes her eyes. The girl does not know if Besse sleeps or if she is suffering in pain; all she does know is that she cannot walk away and leave her. Besse is the reason she is here. If not for the child she would still be safe upon the ferry, sharing a meal with the cabin boy and listening to the lapping of the sea. She cannot leave and abandon her now.

The tree in which Besse is being kept stands alone. It is wider than the others, taller. It is so regal in its appearance, it almost appears to be the king of the forest, and for a moment she is reminded of the wayfarer, the way he was set apart from the rest of the crew. She wishes that he were here. He would know what to do and he would not leave Besse — she is sure of it.

The tree has no low branches that she could reach. And no other tree touches it, so she does not have the option of climbing another and then meeting Besse's tree higher up. She has no idea if it is even possible to climb a tree with no branches to hold onto.

She takes another tentative step closer, her foot testing the ground for solidity, when someone emerges from the trees to her left. It is one of the souls from the ferry, one that she is certain she has accepted a gold coin from. Another soul appears beside the first, and

another, until there is a group of about ten souls, all standing motionless, all watching her.

They part slightly, dividing into two groups. Another soul, a woman she does not recognize, one dragging chains from her ankle, appears between the two smaller groups.

She watches the girl carefully, as if gauging her next move. The woman offers the girl her hand. "Come," she says in a voice that is barely more than a whisper. "We will take you."

"Take me where?" The girl is afraid, after what happened with the friar, and the Besse who wasn't the real Besse.

"To where you arrived. You do not belong here. Come..." the woman extends her hand a little further.

The girl glances up at Besse cocooned in the treetops. "I can't leave her," she says.

"You have no need to fear. The Crossing is easy for no one...but she is an innocent child — her soul will soon find its way to paradise, and she will remember none of the evil that has befallen her." The woman's lips move, and though she speaks softly, her words seem to appear inside the girl's head like fully formed thoughts.

The girl is somewhat relieved. Her mother always taught her that the souls of young children were not judged, but rather allowed openly into a blissful afterlife. But still. She is afraid to depart without Besse.

"I can't leave her..." the girl insists.

"Come," the woman's voice is sterner now. On both sides of the woman, the other souls

move closer to the girl. "You will see her again one day. But you must go now. Hurry! Before the crows arrive."

The girl no longer knows who to trust. Her thoughts are racing, spinning. The woman's voice is inside her head, and she knows she should not be here, but she cannot leave Besse. She lunges toward the tree that is holding Besse, but Besse is gone.

The woman gasps, but she is no longer watching the girl. The girl turns to find hundreds of crows on the other side of her, their wings unfurled like great heavy cloaks. They watch her with glittering beady eyes as her feet begin to sink.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

March 4, 456 A.T.

I drag Graives to his feet. The man is pale, his lips blue, his eyes watery and bloodshot. There is no time to rest; the girl has been in the land of the dead for too long already. Who knows what might have happened to her?

All around us is forest. No matter which way I turn, I can see nothing but trees. I glance down at my feet and see footprints in the sand. They must have been made by the girl. "This way," I growl at Graives.

He shakes water from his hair but follows anyway without meeting my eye. He knows we must stick together. What choice do we have?

The trees appear to close around us, cutting us off from the shore the instant we enter their midst. A glance behind me, and the shore is gone. I do not know how we will return to the ferry, but I sweep that thought to the back of my

mind. One thing at a time. We are here for the girl. I trust that the ferry will return for her also.

The first thing I realize is that the forest is shifting. It is guiding us where it wants us to go, and my instant reaction is to follow a different route. The forest is too full of shadows for me to trust it, and why would it lead us to the girl? As instinctively as I know it is leading us, I also know that it will not be taking us to where we need to be.

I run a few more steps before veering left, a movement so sudden, the trees take a moment to catch up with me. But the moment was all I needed to view a clearer path ahead, which quickly fills with more shadow-trees.

"Girl! Where are you?" I yell. It would be nice to have a name to call her by right now—a nickname, a pet name...anything, truthfully. But it would do no good. Upon our first meeting, she made it clear that in honor of family tradition, she had to choose her own name, and it's not my place to interfere. *Name herself after what she loves*, she says. Ha! If she didn't love anything enough to name herself in the land of the living, there's certainly nothing for her to love on the ferry or here in the land of the dead. The only thing I *love* is the idea of being spared of this job and finally laying to rest for all eternity.

I do not stop running. We will not find her standing still. Graives keeps pace with me, and we veer left and right, attempting to fool the forest into believing that we are heading one way when we are changing to another. It is not easy avoiding the solid trunks and dodging

branches, and at one point, Graives cries out behind me. I glance over my shoulder and see that a branch has lashed his face, blood smearing across his cheek and down to his chin.

It does not slow him.

Left and right, we follow a zigzag course deeper into the forest, although truthfully, it is impossible to tell which way is leading us deeper or which way would reveal the edge of the forest and the shore.

Then Graives cries, "Stop!"

I stop abruptly, my breath catching up with me. "What is it?"

"I heard something." He holds his arm out as if to prevent me from making a sound.

We both listen. For a while, I hear nothing but the sound of my own breath and the gushing of my blood. And then I hear it. A cry.

"Do you hear it?" says Graives. He presents a ghastly figure with his blood-streaked face and wet, matted hair, but he is listening as intently as I, and for that I am grateful.

I nod. "The girl."

We turn and run in the direction from which the voice came, but when we stop to listen again, the voice has moved. For a while, it appears that we are running in circles, the voice moving each time that we stop.

"This is impossible," says Graives. He is breathing heavily.

I do not know what to do. I no longer know where the voice is coming from, or how long we have been following it. I think that I have brought Graives on a doomed mission when,

from out of the trees, appears an apparition. Or at least, that is my first thought. When I look more closely at the figure, a familiar looking woman, I realize that it is the woman who gave me the gold coin for the girl's passage.

"Come," she says. She does not wait, but turns and moves quickly, expecting us to follow.

Within a few steps, although we were not able to see her, we happen upon the living girl, who is sunk waist-deep in the ground. Quicksand. I have never seen quicksand before. Nor did I believe wholeheartedly that it existed other than in tales told to warn children from being naughty, but here she is, sinking.

When she spots us, she gives us a half-smile, though her face is pale and filled with fear.

With panicking fingers, I remove my belt from around my waist and, standing at the edge of the shifting mud, throw the belt toward the girl. It does not reach. When the girl moves to catch it, she sinks a little further.

"Be still," I growl. I turn to Graves.

Having seen that the belt did not reach, Graves has produced a knife from his pocket and, with one swift movement, has lopped a branch from a tree. He lays flat on the ground, one end of the branch in his hand and extends the other end to the girl. She can reach it with her arm outstretched, barely, her slender fingers wrapping around the end closest to her.

"Hold tight!" I say. "Do not let go."

Graives crawls backwards on his belly, a couple of inches at first, pulling on the branch. The girl does not move, and fear registers in the

widening of her eyes. Again, Graives moves, and the girl's body shifts a fraction, the quicksand sucking against her body to keep her stuck. Slowly, Graives crawls back and back, the girl's body slowly moving with him until she is covered head-to-toe in the thick mud. She is almost at the edge of the bog where I can reach her arm to heave her out fully, when a bird, a giant crow, descends from nowhere and grabs her with its talons.

"No!" I am on my feet immediately. "Release the girl!" I shout. "She does not belong here."

"*You* do not belong here," the crow retorts. It does not move, but its voice presents itself inside my head.

"Give us the girl and we will be away."

"It is not that simple." The crow's voice hisses inside my head, a slithering sound that raises the hairs on the back of my neck. "The girl has interfered with the balance of nature here. She has touched things that should not have been touched by a living creature."

"Tell us what to do," I say.

"If the girl leaves, a hole in the fabric of the land will appear, and all who stay here will begin to slip through the hole. It will commence a chain reaction that will result in the destruction of our land. Do you know what that will mean?"

"Tell me."

"It means that your dead will have nowhere to go. The souls who have been committed to journey here will remain in the land of the living, wreaking havoc in their quest for a final resting place."

"What can we do to stop this?" I say. The disappearance of the land of the dead will surely mean the end of my work as the wayfarer. And, standing here in this shadow-forest with the girl held captive by the crow-keeper, I know that I am not ready to relinquish the role. Not yet.

"You may take the girl, if one of you takes her place."

"One of us?" I sense Graives clenching his fists beside me, his spine straightening in defiance of the words.

"One of you will need to stay to patch up the hole that she has already torn."

My gaze flickers momentarily to Graives, whose jaw is set, his mouth a grim line in his bloody face. "I will stay," I say.

"No!" Graives' voice rings out. "I will stay!"

"What are you doing?" I keep my voice low, between us. "I brought you here. It is only right that I should stay. You would never have come, given the choice."

"Aye, and you are the wayfarer and the captain of the ferry. You cannot stay." He nods at me, his eyes not wavering from mine, as something cold and hard slides into my hand. The handle of his knife.

I grasp the knife, hiding it in my pocket, and nod.

Graives turns away.

The crow moves closer to us with the girl.

"The girl first," I say.

The crow's wing unfurls enough to urge the girl forwards. She runs the short distance between us and takes my hand in hers.

Something stirs within me. A flutter like the fragile wings of a butterfly beating against my ribs. It is a feeling I have not experienced since I first laid eyes on Renata, and I feel tears stinging behind my eyes. But I swallow the feelings. Nothing must interfere with the task at hand.

The crow's eyes remain fixated on ours.

The creatures move fast, we already ascertained that, so if I am to do anything to save Graives, it will need to be a sudden movement, no hesitation. I am not even convinced that the crows can't read our thoughts.

I clear my mind.

With the girl's hand in mine, I nod at Graives and step aside. Graives moves toward the crow, but before his foot hits the ground, I have released the girl's hand and lunged at the crow, the knife sliding through the creature's left eye and piercing its skull.

I remove the knife in the same movement. "Run!" I yell.

I take the girl's hand and we run. Blindly. We do not avoid the trees or the branches, which we soon realize remove themselves from our path to avoid collision. We run, our footsteps thudding on the damp mossy ground, Graives at our heels. I do not listen for the flapping of monstrous black wings – I would not hear them over the beating of my heart and my raggedy breath. But no matter how far we run, we do not see anything other than forest.

I've no idea how we will ever find the shore, or the ferry, when a gray figure appears in front of us. I do not see their face, but I believe I know

who it is. I follow because it is the only hope we have of leaving this place, and I have no mind to be stranded here forever.

The girl is weary, I sense her steps slowing and know that I am dragging her with me, her feet stumbling and tripping over whatever lays in our path. But still, we keep going.

And suddenly, with no warning and with no sign of the trees ever clearing, we stumble, panting, onto the sandy shore. We drop to our knees. I can barely catch my breath and I close my eyes, waiting for my leg muscles to stop quivering. When they do, I roll onto my back to thank the woman who led us here, but she is gone.

The girl is also on her back with her eyes closed. Her chest moves and I know that she is breathing. Graives sits the on the other side of her, shoulders hunched, his head hanging low.

"Are you well?" I ask.

"Aye." He does not look at me.

At the sound of my voice, the girl opens her eyes. "You saved us," she whispers.

I nod and stare out to sea. What good it will do us to be stranded here without the ferry, I do not know. It was all in vain if we are to remain.

"Thank you." The girl reaches for my hand on the sand and squeezes my fingers. She does the same to Graives and the man does not pull away from her touch.

I blink back unexpected tears and face the sea stretching out as far as I can see, and in the distance, a silhouette of a ship.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

March 4, 456 A.T.

It is not until the ferry is nearly upon us that I realize. It is almost identical to my ship, apart from the crew, and the captain who already stands at the bow watching the approaching shore. Watching us. It is the other ferry.

Graives sits forward, his fingers picking at the sand beside him.

"It is not our ferry," says the girl.

Although I hear her words 'our ferry', I do not acknowledge them. It has been her home for some time now and it is only right that she should think of it as such. I take a deep breath, mulling over our options. I stand. "We cannot stay here."

For once, Graives does not question my decision. Maybe he understands that we have no choice. Maybe he has accepted compliance as gratitude for saving his life.

The girl clings to my hand. She has seen enough fear these past hours and I grip her cool fragile hand tightly to provide her with at least some comfort.

The ferry stops and the bridge is lowered. We wait for the passengers to leave, but when no one appears, I take the first step toward climbing aboard. The captain and the quartermaster are waiting to greet us on the deck, the captain with his cap pulled low over his eyes and hands on his hips.

"Well, well, well," he says, eying up the girl. "So, you happened upon a living girl in the land of the dead, how ironic."

"We'll not ask much of you," I offer my hand, but the captain does not accept it. "Only that you take us from here and allow us to stay until we can transfer to our own ship. We'll not get in your way."

"And what is in it for me and my crew?" asks the captain.

"We have nothing to offer you but gold coins in payment for travel and they are as nothing to the wayfarer. We are in the same position as you." I hold out my hands, palms up.

It is several moments before he speaks. "On the contrary, we are not in the same position, you and I, for you have the living girl, and I do not."

I pull the girl behind me. "The girl remains with us. The ferry discovered her, and she stays with the ferry. I thank you for your time." I turn with a nod at Graives. We will have to take our chances on the shore.

The ferry lurches and I realize that I am too late. We are already moving.

"Let us not be so hasty," the captain is saying. "I was merely testing the water, but I see that you are attached to the girl and I'll mention it no more. No doubt my reaction would be the same had she been sent to us rather than to you. Such a bargaining tool has not existed in all my days as the wayfarer."

"Bargaining tool?" My right fist is clenched, and I vaguely note the girl tugging on my left hand.

The captain is unperturbed. "Yes, how else will you ever reclaim your soul and leave this godforsaken place? An eye for an eye. A girl for a soul. It would be a fair swap if you want my opinion, but then, you care nothing for my opinion, I can tell. No matter." He raises his hand to the quartermaster. "Ale for our guests, Wonston! We will not be judged and found lacking in our hosting abilities."

The captain turns on his heels and leaves us.

"I do not think they want us here," murmurs the girl.

Graives fingers the knife. "I don't trust him."

"Nor I," I say. "We stay out of his way until we find our ship, and the girl does not leave our sight."

Graives nods. "There is only one problem with that—how long until we find our ship? How many years did we sail these seas before happening upon this ferry, huh? Who's to say it won't be several hundred years more before we find her again?"

The man is only voicing my own dreaded thoughts that I had brushed aside in my haste to be away from the crows. It is a question I cannot answer. Yet, I have a feeling that this captain knows exactly how to find our ferry should he so wish. It is his intentions that I am uncertain of.

"He knows how to find her," I say. "But we cannot leave it to chance or the captain's whim, for I fear that his whim does not align with our needs."

"How do we do that?" asks Graives.

"I am still figuring it out."

"Captain?" the girl tugs on my hand again.

I peer down at her pale face, her eyes wide with the horrors that she saw in the land of the dead and I remember the reason why she left the ferry. To follow the child, Besse. She must also be grieving the loss of her last remaining link to the land of the living. "What is it?" I ask, wishing that my voice was not so gruff.

"Do you not see it?"

I peer out to sea, expecting for my own ship to appear on the horizon, but I see nothing out of the ordinary and my shoulders sink a little.

"The captain...he looks like you and the quartermaster looks like Graives." She gestures to the captain who is head-to-head in talks with the quartermaster. "The crew is not that different from yours, either."

I study their faces. The girl is right. They are nearly identical to us—it's like looking at my own crew.

The only one missing is the girl.

"What are you saying?" I ask her.

"I'm saying that if he looks like you, maybe he thinks like you, too. You must watch them closely if you are to know their intentions."

The girl is right. But how do we keep a close eye on them without arousing their suspicions, and without taking our eyes off the girl? For I have no doubt that they will toss Graives and me overboard in the blink of an eye if it means they get to keep her.

"Aye, you are right," I say. "It would be easier if we could determine which course our own ship was on. Graives, what say you?"

But Graives is staring at the sky. At first, I think that he is trying to pinpoint our own ferry's position in the sea, as it was headed away from the land of the dead when we left it, but his eyes are focused on a shape in the sky that appears to be headed toward us. It is a creature. A large-bodied creature with black wings. It approaches at great speed and circles overhead, Graives never taking his eyes from it.

I glance at the man and his forehead is pink, beaded with sweat. "Graives? What is it?"

He stares at me without seeing and shakes his head, a movement so rapid, it might not have happened at all. "The crow. Do you see it?"

My gaze instinctively rises to the sky. "Aye, I see it."

"It has come for me." He is afraid. I have never seen the man look this way before, never seen fear in his eyes, but he is trembling, shivering as though we are passing through a snowstorm.

"It is merely a crow. It has not followed us. No creatures stir from the land of the dead, you know that."

His face is hollow with the look of the wretched souls we ferry as our punishment. "We just did. We dared to leave when it is forbidden and...and we double-crossed them. The crows. I was supposed to remain in place of the girl. They will not allow us to succeed, I know they are coming for me."

Panic and hysteria rise behind the dull black of his eyeballs. He will be no use to us if he allows fear to take hold, and I will be one person against an entire crew. If they determine to throw me overboard with Graives in this state of mind, he will barely even register their actions, let alone try to stop them.

I keep my voice level. "They are not coming for you. I will not allow anything to befall you, you have my word...but you must keep your wits about you, do you understand?"

I hear it before he raises his face to the sky. I hear the angry cawing as though the crow is beside me here on the deck. Only now there are more birds. Maybe twenty of them. They circle overhead, following us, as Graives said.

The girl gestures to the crew. "I do not think they can see them."

I look at the captain and the quartermaster, and they are still deep in conversation with no heed to the creatures in the sky.

"We must ignore them," I say. "The crew must not know that we are being followed or they will take action against us. They will not

want to incur the wrath of the dead creatures for letting us board their ship. Their work is difficult enough."

But still, I keep one eye on the crows, their angry cries echoing inside my head.

"We are turning," says Graives.

I turn my face to the breeze, ignoring the winged creatures in my sight. The wind has shifted slightly, and I hope this means that we are headed toward our ferry, although the chances of locating us twice in a matter of days when we have not spied each other in hundreds of years would seem an impossibility.

The quartermaster glances at us and his lips curl into a smile that is sinister rather than pleasant. He heads toward the helm to speak with the sailing master, who reminds me of Bauldry.

If they are so similar to my own crew, then right about now, Bauldry would be speaking with Graives, who is here with me. What would Bauldry do in this instance, without a captain or a quartermaster to take my place? Have I left my crew leaderless and in limbo? Will that incur a punishment that I do not wish to consider?

I cannot help but feel that this captain is not a man of his word, but what choice did we have? We are safer on sea than on land with all the terrors of the dead threatening to engulf us. This is what I am trying to convince myself when Graives leans over the side of the ship and retches into the water. His chest and back heaves with the effort, and when he turns back, he is

even paler, his lips drawn back from his teeth in an animal-like snarl.

"Wait here," I say to the girl. "Do not wander."

I leave the girl with Graives and go to the captain, who watches me, expressionless. "Graives is sick," I say. "I need to get him back to my ferry where I might tend to him and stop the spread of the sickness to your own men."

The captain glances over my shoulder at Graives. "What ails him?"

"I do not know, but I have never seen him sick. I have never seen any of my crew sick. Tell me truthfully, do you know how to find my ship? For if you do not, it may be wiser to turn around and take us back to the land of the dead."

"I am not turning my ship around. Keep him away from my crew." With that, he walks away and leaves me staring at his back.

"What did he say?" asks the girl when I go back to them.

"He said that we will find the ferry." I cannot look her in the eye when I tell the lie. Graives looks worse—his skin is gray, damp with sweat and the effort of vomiting, yet he shivers uncontrollably.

"What is wrong with him?" asks the girl. "Are they coming for him?" She does not mention the crows aloud, yet I know that she refers to them.

"Hush. I am sure that it will pass. He swallowed a lot of water when we leaped into the sea. It is likely his lungs needed to empty, and then he will be fine."

Suddenly, the crows disperse. But it is not long before they reappear in the distance, heading toward us in all directions. Graives turns to me, and the look in his eyes tells me everything I need to know.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"They want me..." he says.

I challenge him. "We will not let them take you!"

He shakes his head. "It doesn't matter. We can't outrun them, and if they chase us, they will drag our souls to the depths along with this crew and...and take the girl."

I clench my fists, trying to think of something to say to stop him. Meanwhile, he climbs onto the edge of the ship and looks down, and then out at the crows quickly approaching.

The girl holds onto my hand tightly, as if she, too, is worried for Graives.

He turns to look at me one last time. "It's been an honor serving alongside you, Captain."

I curse under my breath. "Why, Graives...?"

"For the ferry..."

I choke back a tear. "Aye, for the ferry."

I reach down and cover the girl's eyes as Graives leaps from the ship's side. There's a loud cry of pain from his lungs as the crows engulf him in the air. He falls silent as the crows turn and fly away with him, and I am left only to watch as he is taken away.

It does not take long for the other captain to notice that something is going on. He stomps over to us, his quartermaster following closely. They both look over the side of the ship. I take

my hands from the girl's eyes and move her behind me.

"What is the meaning of this? Why did your man jump overboard?"

"I cannot say for sure," I lie. "But I assume he was trying to spare us from his sickness."

The captain isn't buying it. He looks at the quartermaster, then back at me.

"We won't be having this nonsense aboard my ship. Both of you are too dangerous – you'll be going overboard right away."

I don't need to look at the girl to sense her fear, and even I begin to feel a twinge of dread as I picture the two of us being claimed by the cold, unforgiving sea around us. For a moment I silently panic, but then I remember what the girl said, that this crew is not unlike our own. That they have been doing the same job as I have for probably just as long...and it's likely they think the same way as I do.

"Your boat..." I say.

The captain looks confused. "What?"

"The boat...the small one that you rowed in over to my ferry. You still have it, do you not?"

"Aye, I do," the captain says. "But why should I give it to you?"

I think quickly. "You know as well as I do that we are always given what's needed on our ferry...we have done nothing to harm you, and if you show us mercy, another boat will be gifted to you within hours – maybe even moments of our departure."

The captain is deep in thought for what seems like forever. "You are right." He turns to the quartermaster. "Go and prepare the boat."

I sigh with relief and I hear the girl do the same. At least, in a boat, we will fare much better against the sea than we would just swimming.

The quartermaster and two members of the crew bring the boat from below deck and slowly lower it overboard with a thick rope. Once the boat hits the water, the captain nods to us and I and the girl begin to climb down. The girl safely reaches the boat and I give the captain a grateful nod and let go, landing in the boat beside her. The quartermaster pulls the rope back up onto the ship and it isn't long before the other ferry vanishes over the horizon.

I cannot hide the worry from my face. As we drift along out here alone, I cannot say what will happen to us next because I do not know. The girl looks concerned too, but she is more tired than anything. I can see it in her eyes.

"What are we going to do?" she asks.

"We wait, and hope our ferry comes for us," I say. "But for now, you must rest. Close your eyes. Relax and enjoy the calm of the sea."

She smiles, lays back, and goes to sleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

March 4, 456 A.T.

The girl awakes on a cot. She sits up quickly, looks around, and realizes she is back in the captain's quarters. Could it be? She leaps to her feet and runs above deck, where she sees the captain and Bauldry standing.

The captain spots her out of the corner of his eye and turns to her. "You're awake!"

The girl is excited, but also confused. "How did we get back here?"

The captain looks over at Bauldry, who has a proud look on his face. Then, he looks around at the ferry itself. "She found us."

The girl is relieved, almost overjoyed to be back safely on the right ferry. She looks up at Bauldry. "Thank you."

Bauldry glances down at the girl and gives her a brief nod. It is a start, she thinks. It is the most she has ever had from Bauldry.

When the evening comes, they break open bottles of rum and a barrel of juice for the girl—as ordered by the captain. It is time to celebrate his return and to remember Graives. For all the man's attempts to appear serious and reserved, he was well liked amongst the crew for his fairness and his unfailing loyalty to them and to the ferry.

But the girl also picks up on an underlying sense of uncertainty amongst them. The captain has not yet explained to the crew what happened in the land of the dead, nor do they know who will replace Graives. She believes that the captain is hoping for a more approachable replacement, someone who will show him a little respect. The rest of the crew do not have the same expectations. Maybe their previous lives were so lacking in any form of power or landed title that they are not so naïve as the captain.

Or maybe they have seen this before.

But for tonight, they brush their uncertainties aside and celebrate.

The first mate draws out a fiddle, which he settles in his arms like a newborn baby and stares at it lovingly before he draws his bow across the strings. He plays a merry tune and soon the men, whose stomachs are already sloshing with rum, begin tapping their feet along to the sounds of the fiddle.

The girl has the urge to dance. She rushes down to the cabin where she rummages through

the captain's chest. Smiling with the effects of the music and merriment, she delves into the chest, which the captain now leaves unlocked since the girl hid inside, and withdraws a length of yellow silk that she wraps around her shoulders like a shawl. Dashing back upstairs, she stands in the middle of the deck and begins to tap her feet to a steady rhythm.

"Here, let me show you a dance that was popular among my people," the captain says to the girl, his weathered hands extending a warm invitation. He signals to the first mate, who begins playing a more upbeat tempo. The girl hesitates for only a moment before placing her trust in the captain's words.

The captain leads her to the center of the ship's deck, where the wooden planks echo with their footsteps. With every move, the captain paints a story with his body, his feet stamping the deck with rhythmic precision, hands slicing through the air like the sails billowing above. The dance is passionate and fierce, mirroring the intensity of the sea they called home.

The girl watches the captain intently, her young eyes wide with wonder. She attempts to replicate his steps, her tiny feet following his lead as they embark on a journey that transcends words. As their movements intertwine, they become a living testament to the heart and soul of the dance.

Two intrigued spectators soon join the impromptu performance. Bauldry adds a percussive backdrop, clapping his hands to the rhythm in sync with the captain's steps. The

cabin boy can't resist the allure of the dance. He studies the captain and the girl's intricate footwork before seamlessly becoming part of the rhythm, a silent partner no more.

Beneath the endless canvas of the sky, with the vast ocean as their stage, the quartet embodies the spirit of unity and camaraderie abroad the ferry. The captain is smiling, and the girl thinks that he looks different since they returned from the land of the dead, but she puts it down to the joyous moment, and the rum. The girl wishes that tonight could last forever.

She does not know how long they dance beneath the darkening sky, or how many bottles of rum are opened and emptied by the crew. She sits out some dances and watches as the riggers take to the floor, their heavy footsteps shaking the ferry until she fears it might collapse and they will all be turned into sea-creatures. The cabin boy sits beside her, his fingers searching for hers on the bench. She smiles at him, and in return he kisses her cheek, and for once he does not run away and hide his embarrassment.

The night continues this way until the music slows, their heads spinning with the rum, and their dancing becoming less energetic.

The girl does not remember how it happens, but she sleeps on the deck with the captain, the cabin boy, and the crew, beneath the mauve sky and the faint twinkling of distant stars. One minute she is staring at the sky with a smile upon her face and her cheeks sore from all the laughter, and the next, she awakens as a shadow

passes across her face, turning the world behind
her eyelids dark and sinister.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

March 5, 456 A.T.

She does not recognize the man looming over her. He stands, feet apart, hands on hips, a scowl upon his heavily lined graying face. His brows almost meet in the middle as he stares at her with narrow eyes as black as coal.

"Get up!" he orders.

The girl glances around her. To her right is the cabin boy, curled up into a ball, his knees close to his chest and his thumb in his mouth; to her left is the captain, his sleeping face turned toward her as peaceful in sleep as a baby.

"I'm talking to you, girl," says the man, his voice rasping as though he too spent the night singing and cheering.

The girl rises, the yellow silk beneath which she has slept, falling to the floor at her feet in a puddle of sunshine. She holds the man's stare, her chin tilted toward the sky.

"Why are you here?" he asks.

She is about to answer when a voice beside her says, "She is here because the ferry chose her." The captain rises to stand next to her. "What is your name?"

"Gael." The man's stare takes in the captain's dishevelled appearance in a cold, calculating appraisal. "The quartermaster."

"Graives' replacement," says the captain. The girl can sense the disappointment in the captain's voice. She does not think that he has gotten his wish for a pleasanter version of Graives.

"The quartermaster," repeats the man. "I am no one's replacement."

The captain nods and offers Gael his hand in greeting.

The man refuses the offer. Without taking his eyes from the captain, he says, "She goes."

The captain swallows. For several moments, he ponders the man in front of him. "I am the captain of this ferry," he says in a composed voice, "and I say she stays."

Gael turns and without warning, kicks Bauldry in the ribs.

Bauldry groans as the boot makes contact, his eyes flying open. He is on his feet in a heartbeat, rubbing at his side. "What...?" he mutters. "What was that for, Captain?" His gaze takes in the new quartermaster.

Gael does not waste time introducing himself. "Where is the first mate? Show me him."

Bauldry does as he is bid and points to the first mate who is asleep on the floor, hugging the

fiddle to his chest. A lazy grin is on his face as though he is watching an amusing dream play out inside his head.

"You, man!" Gael strides over to the first mate, yanks the fiddle from his hands and snaps it across his raised knee. "On your feet."

The girl glances at the captain who is watching open-mouthed, as if he cannot believe this is panning out in front of his very eyes.

The first mate leaps to his feet, coughing noisily into his fist.

"Drop anchor!" Gael orders.

The first mate blinks furiously, giving his head a shake worthy of a dog. "What...? Where are we?" He peers out to sea and then back to Gael. "We...we have not arrived. The ferry...she is still moving."

"You always question an order, do you?" says Gael.

His voice is quiet, and the girl wishes that he would yell. Yelling would confirm anger, but this low tone with which the man speaks can only predict something malevolent, something calculated.

"Captain?" The first mate's mouth is open, still relaxed in his state of half-sleep; he is obviously confused.

"Do not drop anchor," says the captain. "Gael here understands the punishment we will *all* incur should we arrive late at our destination."

Gael watches the captain with eyes that are little more than slits. "I also understand the punishment for harboring a living girl on board the ferry."

"Tell me," says the captain. "What exactly is the punishment for that?"

Gael's gaze flickers between the captain and the girl. His fists clench and unclench, and she readies herself for him to lash out. But instead, he says, "The soul eaters will take us all."

"Aye," says the captain. "The girl has been with us for some time now and the soul eaters have yet to claim a single one of the crew. She stays." He nods at the girl and she gives him a quick smile.

"I'm sure that can be easily remedied," says Gael.

It is the captain's turn to control his anger. The girl watches the tic in his jaw as he fights to control his words. "You will do well to remember that this is *my* ferry. I am the captain. If anything is to be remedied, it will be on my command."

"And..." Gael steps closer to the captain, "As the quartermaster, it is my duty to see that the crew are treated fairly. Harboring a living girl is not fair upon them, as it will ultimately force danger upon their lives. I will not —"

"You will not question my orders. And that is an order!" yells the captain.

The girl has seen the captain angry before now, but not like this. This rage is fuelled by fear, she thinks; fear of this unknown man whose cold voice and cruel eyes have brought an edge of sharpened steel to the ship. She glances around her. The first mate is staring at his destroyed fiddle. Bauldry still rubs at his painful ribs. The cabin boy is cowering in a corner somewhere

and she knows that he will no longer be brave enough to be her friend.

She hates this man. She wishes that Graives were still with them, for she understands that their life will be altered for Gael's presence.

Without warning, Gael snatches the girl's hand and drags her across the deck where he throws her upon the floor and ties her ankle to the side of the ship with a length of rope. He does not look into the girl's eyes; she wishes that he would so that she might peer into his own and understand what kind of man he is.

But he stands and faces the captain. "She stays there where I can see her at all times." He turns to the other men and raises his voice. "If anyone releases the girl, they will have me to answer to!" He strides to the helm and waits for Bauldry to join him without a backwards glance.

The captain drops to his knees beside the girl. "Are you all right? Did he hurt you?" he whispers.

"No, I am fine," she replies. "Do not worry about me. You must watch him carefully. I..." she does not know if she should speak out of turn, but honesty, and a fondness for the captain, replaces caution. "I do not trust him."

The captain peers into her eyes. "Nor I," he says. "Nor I. I am disappointed..."

"I know." She squeezes the captain's hand. "He is watching us. You should not be seen showing me any preference above the crew."

"Remember this," he says to her. "I am the captain, and I will not be ruled by anyone, but I will definitely not be ruled by someone who

thinks that he can come aboard my ship and toss orders about like he is king."

Something in the captain's eyes startles the girl. She has not seen it before, but now she recognizes it: something regal, a manner of holding his head high as though he were born to greater things. It warms her inside. And in that moment, she believes that he will always be there to save her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

March 8, 456 A.T.

It soon becomes apparent that Gael is used to ruling through tyranny. He does not smile. He shows no expression other than one of mistrust. His anger is barely contained, his cruelty barely veiled.

He kicks over a bucket of slops, grabs the cabin boy from his hiding place and rubs his face in the mess before snapping at him, "Clean it up. The ship is a stinking mess because of your laziness."

The captain brings the girl a cup of juice as she can no longer freely move about the ship. She sips it gratefully, Gael watching their every move. The captain fetches her the length of silk and wraps it around her shoulders.

As he does so, Gael lashes out at one of the riggers for no reason, catching the man's face and cutting his cheek below his eye. Blood

streams down his face and Gael growls, "Get back to work, man!"

She can see that the captain is biding his time; she only hopes that he will control his temper until then.

Gael's cruelty does not end with the crew. He is equally as nasty to the passengers when they climb aboard. With the girl's ankle being tied, Gael has resumed Graives' duty of accepting payment from the wretched traveling souls. The man has no patience.

One traveler, an old man with a stooped back and thin strands of hair on his scalp, falters when he steps onto the ferry, his eyes roaming about the place as if he might turn and flee at any moment. Gael offers his hand for the coin. The man looks up at him, confused, and has a coughing fit that almost bends him double and results in a puddle of phlegm at Gael's feet. He sneers at the old man and stuffs his hand into the soul's mouth, wrenching the sticky gold coin free and wiping it on his pants before sliding it into his pocket. He shoves the old man aside, where he stumbles to the deck.

The girl cries out. She is trapped too far away to be of any help, but she worries the old man will incur more embarrassment if he does not pick himself up from the floor and take his seat on the bench.

The cabin boy, hearing the girl's cry, runs to the old man's help and lifts him to his feet, settling him safely upon the bench. Gael watches the boy's movements and says nothing. The girl has the horrible feeling that he will store his

comments up for later and reveal them when the cabin boy is least expecting them.

While she is tied up, the girl calms herself with memories of home, of her mother.

She remembers the aroma of bread baking in the oven, of flickering candles that gave off a scent of vanilla and honeysuckle. The village women often came to their home to speak with her mother. They came speaking of problems they could not resolve, or ailments they did not know how to cure. The girl would sit in the corner of the room on a plumped-up cushion, plaiting and unplaiting the woollen hair on her ragdoll, or arranging bird's feathers into patterns according to how pretty they were.

But she always listened to the low murmurs of the women and her mother. Their voices sometimes made her feel sleepy. Other times, they filled her with unexplained happiness, like a light shining inside her chest. Always, she felt safe in the knowledge that her mother could help these women and that she would always be there to help the girl. No matter what happened.

When she closes her eyes, she can still hear her mother's voice, as if she is sitting beside the girl on the ferry, listening to the gentle lapping of the water against the ship's sides.

"Remember to focus on the thing you want the most," says her mother. It is the advice she gave to the village women when they came. The girl knows it helped their visitors, because they always returned with gifts of strawberries, or cloth, or herbs, whatever they could afford to offer in payment for her mother's wisdom.

She thinks hard. There is nothing she wants on the ferry, other than for the cabin boy to be happy. For herself, she would love to be in the cabin reading a book. There. That is what she shall focus on for now, although she fears that the women always came with far more important concerns. The book will be enough for now, though. Enough for her to determine the thing that she has been keeping from her mind ever since she arrived here unannounced. The thing that worries her the most, but also pleases her at the same time.

People like Graives and Gael might call her a hypnotist, but the girl knows better. Even the captain fears that there is something sinister about the girl, something that he cannot explain even to himself. And while she knows nothing about hypnotism and the women who practice such a deceptive art, she is certain that her mother was not a hypnotist because she never deceived anyone. She never caused harm, nor grief, nor anger. She gave them only peace and joy and a sense of calm fulfilment.

Eyes closed, she thinks about the books in the captain's cabin. Each time she came to the end of a book, it would vanish to be replaced by another the next day. She thinks about the books she enjoyed the most, the fairy tales of strange magic, and spells, and curses, the tales of unusual fire-breathing creatures, talking animals, and people who live and breathe underwater.

She thinks it is the water stories that she enjoys the most. The stories that tell of merfolk,

half-human and half-fish. Squeezing her eyes closed, she imagines the book about the merfolk. The pictures inside the pages, in shades of blue and green and turquoise, the mermaid with her long golden hair flowing about her shoulders, her graceful tail more elegant than legs could ever be. She can see the words as if they are inscribed in ink behind her eyelids. She recalls the story word-for-word in her head. While she relives the tale all over again, she feels the warmth of the day upon her skin, and the way her body relaxes, from her toes all the way to the top of her head, while the story is read in her mind.

She senses movement beside her and her eyes fly open.

It is the captain. "I am sorry," he says when he sees that she is startled. "I did not mean to frighten you. I merely came to bring you this." He holds a finger to his lips to hush her and slips a slim book into her hand.

The girl peers down at the book with wide eyes that are brimming with tears.

The captain glances away, embarrassed at the tears appearing in his own bloodshot eyes. "I...I know how much you enjoyed the books. But do not let anyone see."

He says 'anyone', but the girl is certain that he means only the new quartermaster, Gael. She nods and tucks the book beneath her dress and out of sight. "Thank you," she murmurs. "I will always treasure this book, for you brought it to me when it was exactly what I was dreaming of."

The captain squeezes her hand and leaves her alone again. She understands that he cannot be seen to be favoring her above the men, but she also misses the warmth and safety of the captain's cabin. She misses the captain's dark eyes and his untidy beard. She misses the cabin boy sitting with her quietly and his unassuming protection of her, and she cannot wait for night-time to fall so that she might sleep with the book beneath her pillow.

But when the sky begins to darken and the ship slows in readiness for the night, the captain comes to untie her ankle and escort her to the cabin.

Gael appears on silent feet behind him. "What are you doing?"

The captain gives him no more than a cursory glance over his shoulder. "The girl can retire to my cabin for the night as usual. It has been the way of it since she came here. None of the men have ever questioned my decision, and I thank you to do the same."

"Oh, but I do question your decision," says Gael. The captain's spine stiffens, his fingers stop working at the knot in the rope. "For what reason is the girl given a captain's cabin in which to sleep? Why does she deserve such luxuries?"

"She is a child," says the captain with narrow lips. "She is female, and...and she should not be forced to sleep amongst men."

"Or is it because she has you entranced? The girl has hypnotized you. She has hypnotized you all, and your brain is addled." Gael stands his ground. "I say we should leave her tied up

where she can practice her hypnotism in full view. You know what they say about those hypnotists—they can make anybody believe anything. There is no telling what lies she will create in secret below deck."

"It is *your* brain that is addled," says the captain. "The child is no more a hypnotist than you or I, and if she were, the ferry is the last place she would have chosen to spend her miserable life." He returns to the knot, but Gael is not finished.

"Oh, but it is the perfect place for a hypnotist," he says, raising his voice for the crew to hear. "She has seclusion. A captain who is prepared to offer up his personal space and fall for her lies. A crew that allows her to go about her secret business with no interruption or interference. Who knows what she has been coming up with while she is safely below deck? I say that she stays here where I can keep an eye on her, and I'm certain my men will agree." He turns to the crew who have all stopped to follow the altercation between the captain and the quartermaster. "What say you, men?" he yells.

His dark eyes take in each man in turn, and they all glance away, unwilling to incur his anger. The captain's anger, they know from experience, will be less spiteful and shorter lived, than that of this man who is still somewhat of an unknown force to be reckoned with.

"Aye," say the men, almost in unison. None of them will meet the captain's eye.

Gael awaits his reaction with a smug smile on his narrow face.

The captain stands, straightens. "I hear you," he says, his voice cold and clear. "Now you all hear me. If anyone so much as touches a hair on this girl's head, you will have me to answer to, and I promise you that I will not be lenient. You will not remain aboard my ferry. Do you understand?"

The girl shrinks back against the side of the ship, the yellow silk draped around her shoulders, the book beneath her thigh. She has never heard this tone of voice from the captain, and she does not like the coiled anger that lies beneath the words.

The men must sense it too, for they all nod without meeting the captain's eyes. There is the odd murmur of, "Aye, Captain," from them. The cabin boy is nowhere to be seen.

The captain turns to Gael. "And that applies to you also." With that, he turns and crosses the deck, heading below to his cabin.

Gael surveys the men, his smile fading from his lips as none of them look at him. He narrows his eyes at the girl as if in warning and he, too, walks away.

The ferry is quiet and the men are snoring, or staring into their cups of rum, when the cabin boy approaches the girl, stealing silently along the side of the ship, away from prying eyes. He holds her ragdoll in his hands.

The girl inspects the deck with eager eyes, searching for Gael—she does not want him to know that the cabin boy is on her side and willing to help her despite his claims that she is hypnotizing everyone. She understands that her

own situation is now more dangerous than it has ever been since she first came aboard, and this despite Graives' obvious dislike of her. Gael is an entirely different person. His hatred is more inclined to violence and cruelty than that of Graives, who proved in the end that loyalty was still important to him. Not so with Gael. And she does not want the cabin boy to find himself in any trouble because of her.

"Thank you," she whispers, slipping the ragdoll beneath the length of silk that she is using for warmth. The temperature drops only slightly at night here, as though the ferry is crossing back and forth in constant springtime. But it is her inactivity with the rope around her ankle, and her exhaustion from recent experiences, that makes her shiver. "You must not let Gael catch you with me."

The cabin boy nods. Although he chooses to speak rarely, she knows that he understands everything, and sees more than most people. He leaves her and vanishes into one of his secret hiding places.

The girl takes comfort from the ragdoll beside her. She is aching to read the book, but refuses to read it while there is a chance that it might be noticed by one of the men. She cannot chance that one of them will tell Gael that she can read — he needs no encouragement to convince the men that she is no ordinary child, and the book in her possession will be all the proof he needs.

She dozes for a while, sleep coming over her in waves. When she wakes, the ferry is silent. She can see the riggers' sleeping bodies curled up

amongst the ropes and sacks of provisions. No one else is around and there is no movement other than the rats scratching at the floorboards below deck. She watches the sleeping men until her eyes begin to water, breathing deeply, enjoying the calm of the deep mauve sky and the gentle slapping of the water against the side of the ship.

When she is quite certain that no one will notice, she slips the book from beneath her thigh and opens it to the first page. It shows a picture of a mermaid swimming underwater, her tail covered in silver-green scales, her hair like melted gold. Around the mermaid swim dozens of tiny fish in all the bright colors of the rainbow. And upon the mermaid's head is a crown. She is an underwater princess.

The girl smiles at the picture as if she could not love the mermaid more. She feels certain that her face glows with the pleasure of holding the book in her hands. When she told the captain that she would treasure it always, she meant it, not simply because he gave it to her as a gift, but because it brings alive for her a whole new impossible world.

She is so engrossed in the fantastic pictures contained within the pages, that she does not hear or sense Gael until he is upon her, the ferry darkened by his shadow. The girl quickly closes the book and slips it beneath the yellow silk.

But she is too late. Gael has already seen it.

Without a word, he snatches the silk from around her tiny frame and grabs the book. He is breathing heavily, his chest rising and falling

with the effort of controlling his temper that shows in the closed lips and wrinkled forehead. He scowls at the object in his hand as if he has never seen a book before, slowly riffling through the pages, his eyes growing darker.

Eventually, he looks at the girl and says, his voice cold and brittle, "What is this?"

"It is a book," replies the girl. "I am looking at the pictures because I could not sleep." She does not want the man to discover that she can understand the letters, for that would mean certain death for her and trouble for the captain.

"Where did you get it?"

"It is mine. It came with me." She keeps her eyes focused on Gael's, hoping that he will not hear the tremor in her voice, or the way her heart thumps inside her chest, bringing color to her cheeks.

"And what does a child want with a book? No child has ever gained anything from staring at pictures that do not belong to them."

"I...I like the pictures of the sea," she says.

"Ha!" he smiles at her and then, before she can blink, he wrenches her from the floor and pushes her against the wall of the ship, her head hanging over the side. "You like the sea—then look at it! Why do you need pictures when you are surrounded by the real thing?"

Winded by the force of Gael's actions, the girl's ribs are hurting where they are being pressed against the side of the ferry, but she does not cry out. She does not want to bring more attention to herself and fuel the man's anger further. She feels the salty spray against her

cheeks and closes her eyes. She wishes that she were a mermaid. She wishes that she were brave enough to throw herself into the water and dive down and down, taking her chances amongst the sea creatures. But she is bound to this vessel in ways that she does not understand, and she remains silent.

Eventually, when the girl does not react, Gael drops her back onto the deck.

He still holds the book in his hands. With a look of sheer hatred in his eyes, he rips the pages from the book, one by one, scattering them up in the air. Most pages are caught on the gentle breeze and flutter away from the ship to land like leaves upon the water's surface. Others drift lazily above the girl's head, floating and bobbing up into the sky to end up the gods only know where.

She stares at him, fighting back tears. She will not cry in front of him—crying will be seen as a sign of weakness and she will not give this bully that power over her; she will not give him that strength because he does not deserve it.

"Enjoy the sea," he says as he turns and strides away from her.

The girl curls up into a ball on the deck, with the ragdoll beneath her and the yellow silk covering her trembling body. She does not know how long she remains that way, her body shaking uncontrollably. Eventually, she must drift into a dreamless sleep because she awakens, startled, to a gentle tapping on her shoulder. Her eyes fly open. It is the cabin boy. He holds a finger to his lips, the way he has seen

the girl do previously to hush him and offers her a creased slip of paper.

It is a page from the book. One edge is ragged and torn and there is a corner missing from the bottom of the page, but it the girl's favorite picture, the one of the mermaid with her golden hair trailing behind her as she swims amongst the sea creatures.

She looks up at the cabin boy and smiles. "Thank you."

The boy's smile fades before it is even fully formed, replaced by a look of genuine fear, as he is dragged away from the girl and thrown aside like the ragdoll that is still lumpy beneath her hip. The thud as he lands reverberates through her skull and she yelps as though she felt the contact herself.

Gael does not hesitate. He lifts the boy to his feet and wraps an arm around his neck, wrestling him back in front of the girl so that she can see the boy's frantic fingers scratching at the man's arm, his eyes wide and bulging. She hears him gasping for breath and leaps to her own feet, forgetting the rope knotted around her ankle.

"Let him go!" she cries. "Please, let him go."

"He heard the warning," says Gael. "He heard the captain say that no one was to go near you, or they would answer to him. He disobeyed a direct order."

"Take him to the captain then," her voice is surer now. She is confident that when the captain hears about the book and knows that the cabin boy rescued an image for her, that the boy will incur no punishment. "Tell the captain what

he has done. I am sure that he would love to hear how you destroyed a precious book."

Gael's face darkens. The man is clearly not used to anyone questioning his actions. He must prefer fear to adoration. The girl would spit on him if she were not so scared.

"You try telling him then," he hisses. "You try telling him that I destroyed your hypnotism to protect this vessel and you see what happens to the boy."

A glint of metal flashes in the girl's peripheral vision and she glances at the boy's ribs. Gael has a dagger lightly touching the boy's tunic.

"No!" she cries. "Don't hurt him. He has done nothing wrong."

Gael moves the knife a little closer. "Keep it up and I'll cut him like a fish. Do you understand?" he says. The girl nods. "If you want to see the boy again, you will tell no one what happened tonight. You will not mention the book. You will not mention the boy. If I hear a word about this pass your lips, he dies." As if to prove a point, he slices the boy's tunic so that a small piece falls off. The boy's face is pale, his lips already turning blue.

"I...I won't tell a soul," says the girl. "Please don't hurt him."

Gael turns, keeping the boy close to him, and disappears into the shadows.

The girl watches the spot where she last saw them, until the sky begins to lighten and the familiar sounds of the ferry awakening begin to penetrate her thoughts. She wonders if the night's events were merely a terrible dream, but

then she feels the crumpled paper in her hand
and she knows that Gael means to kill her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

March 9, 456 A.T.

The girl hardly moves today. She remains curled on her side like a puppy, the length of silk clasped to her chin. When I approach her, she barely raises her eyes to me, and turns away before I can speak, feigning sleep. I know she does not sleep, because I see the way her body flinches whenever she hears Gael's voice. And the man is loud today. He is overbearing, making conversation with the riggers when none is needed, and speaking with Bauldry about the day's journey as though he is on an excursion to a new land with a group of merry-makers following in his wake. Bauldry replies with short, empty comments—he is not one for polite chit-chat.

Even the cabin boy has not made an appearance on deck. I expected him to bring the girl some biscuits and juice to break the night's

fast, but instead the first mate sets a cup on the floor beside her with a biscuit and some dried meat on Gael's orders.

I watch Gael closely. The banter is prideful. The gesture of breakfast for the girl can hardly have been dealt out of kindness or any sense of compassion. No. I have known men like this before in life. They do nothing without motive. Every action is a means to an end, and generally the end benefits them in some way, rather than anyone else with any kind of involvement.

I am certain something has happened overnight. But what, I do not know.

When Gael is about his business below deck, I go to the girl. "Are you sick?" I ask, crouching beside her so that we are almost at eye level.

Her eyes are watery and there are dark circles staining the tender skin below them. "No," she says, averting her eyes.

I reach for her hand, but she snatches it away and tucks it beneath the folds of fabric.

"I know you will not have slept," I say. "I promise this will not be forever."

"I do not care about sleep," she says. I have never heard her voice so flat, so dull. She is the only ray of sunshine we have seen aboard this miserable ship, and it pains my heart like a knife wound to see her so changed. So defeated.

"What has happened?" I lean back on my heels and keep my hands from her so that she need not fear Gael's anger.

She peers at me then from beneath long wet lashes, and it is as if she is gazing right through to my non-existent soul. She opens her mouth to

speak and then a voice behind us rings out, "Where is the boy? This deck is in need of mopping." It is Gael.

She flinches visibly, her body shrinking against the ferry's side, and says nothing.

"Maybe if you were less aggressive and more approachable, the boy would not be cowering like a lamb without its mother," I say.

Gael's eyes narrow for an instant before he forces a smile. "Even lambs have to find their way in life," he says. He kicks at a bucket of water and yells, "Boy! There is work to be done."

But the cabin boy remains hidden and silent.

I gaze around the ferry, accounting for the other crew members, all of them, apart from the boy. The girl is shivering beneath the silk. "Have you seen the boy?" I ask, keeping my voice low.

She does not look at me but shakes her head, pulling the silk more tightly around her. "No," her voice is barely more than a whisper.

I stand, my knees stiff and achy from the cramped position beside her. She does not want to talk, and I vow to leave her be until she is ready.

I go to Bauldry. "Have you seen the boy?"

"No, Captain," he says, his head tilting from side to side in his customary habit. "I'm sure he'll turn up when he is ready. He is probably sleeping. He was in a proper state of agitation, because of the girl." He nods in the girl's direction.

"Aye, you are right," I say.

Gael joins us and I take a deep breath to swallow my mistrust. Anyone who insists on

approaching without a sound or warning can only do so because they have something they wish to overhear, or something they wish to hide. "This is what happens when you allow a hypnotist to take residence on a ship." His face is expressionless, but there is something dark skulking behind his eyes. I only wish I knew what it was.

Bauldry's glance quickly skims the girl and returns to the horizon.

"There is no hypnotist aboard my ship," I say. "The girl is the only one the boy trusts wholly; he would do anything for her."

"Which is my point exactly." Gael shrugs and offers his palms to the sky and to anyone who will listen. "And how do you think she has assumed that trust, eh, if not through hypnotism?"

"Since when did kindness pass for hypnotism?" I raise my voice to match his.

His eyes flicker back and forth to my face. "Since a hypnotist made us believe she was a golden-haired child with an innocent smile," his tone is cold as metal. "And since we lost a cabin boy while all were sleeping...apart from the hypnotist."

He turns and walks away before I can respond. I follow his back with my eyes. I recall a time when I wished for a replacement for Graves, one who would be more pleasant, more light-hearted and less rageful. My wish has come true in part—Graves has been replaced, but his replacement possesses none of the qualities I had hoped for. Gael is a hundred times worse than

Graives could ever be. And I must blame myself for his presence, for if I had not forced Graives to enter the land of the dead with me, the man would still be here now, with his foul temper and his unquestionable loyalty.

"If anything has happened to the boy, Captain," Bauldry is speaking, "we will see his replacement soon enough."

"Aye." I am not convinced that will be the way of it this time.

No one comes to replace the missing cabin boy.

His presence is missed more than I could've imagined – his scurrying around the deck with a mop in hand, or a plate of food for Bauldry or the girl, his lurking in the shadows watching the daily routine, pre-empting the tasks he will be called upon to assist with. But more than that, it is his shy, selfless persona that is lacking now from the crew. The readiness to assist, no matter what is asked of him. The speed with which he put others before himself, always making sure the girl is all right before settling himself to rest when the chores are completed.

The deck remains slippery and filthy. The riggers climb down from the masts to fetch their own refreshments. Gael has no one to lash out at when he is angry.

And the girl remains tied to the ship...unmoving, silent. As far as I can tell, she has spoken to no one, nor has she looked anyone in the eye. And Gael has kept a distance from

where she sits as though her very breath might taint him with something poisonous.

The quartermaster resumes his place by the bridge when we dock at the shore of the land of the living. He holds his hand out for the gold coins.

As a rule, I pay little heed to the passengers. They board, they offer payment, they alight when we reach our destination. There is no cause for me to interfere with the ritual unless something appears amiss. Today, I find myself watching the passengers with a wary eye. The cabin boy's disappearance has me feeling anxious, uneasy, and this anxiety is manifesting itself by making me overly cautious. The souls climb aboard and settle upon the bench. They meet no one's eye.

And yet...and yet something is different.

I shuffle closer to them, staring at the sea as if gauging the current so that I do not draw attention to myself, and when I am almost within touching distance, I allow myself to look at them. At first glimpse I do not see it. But it soon becomes apparent—they are the same, still wretched, miserable souls with vacant eyes that see inwardly, but, and now that I've seen it, I wonder if Gael did not notice as they crossed the bridge, their flesh is hanging from them in foul, bloody strips. Narrow strips of skin, clinging to their bones like meat to a carcass.

I look away and force myself to leave them be. I must not interfere with the journey; it is the first rule of the ferry. The souls board and then they depart.

I stumble the length of the ship. All is as it should be, the crew in their places, Gael standing beside Bauldry at the helm. The girl is watching me, and I instinctively cross to where she lays on the floor and sit on the deck beside her.

For the first time today, she speaks to me. "What is wrong?"

"All is well." I force my lips into a half-smile, and I know that she can see right through it.

She gazes at the passengers, her eyes narrowed, and I know that she sees it too when she gasps and raises her head.

"Aye," I say. "I saw it too. I do not know what has happened, but I have never seen them this way before."

"I did not do anything," she says.

I smile at her properly then. "You do not have to explain anything to me. Gael is...well, Gael is not the man I had hoped he would be."

"Am I the girl you hoped I would be?"

It is a strange question. She watches me with wide, pleading eyes as though her life depends upon my answer, but I do not know what to say. "You are the wisest, brightest girl that I think I have ever met," I say. She smiles, but the light behind her eyes has dimmed since Gael's arrival. "Do you know what happened to the cabin boy?"

Her eyes dart around the ferry and alight upon Gael, who averts his eyes when I follow her gaze. "No," she says.

I know that she is lying. I saw the way she looked at Gael, her whole demeanor physically sagging at the sight of the man. And something

else is eating away at me, something the man said when he was looking for the boy. He said that the boy had disappeared when all were asleep apart from the hypnotist. How had he known that the girl was awake when the boy disappeared if he were not awake himself at the time?

I do not mention the passengers' decaying bodies to anyone else. I do not rest until they are safely delivered to the land of the dead, and only then do I allow myself to take a deep, purifying breath. Still, I cannot shake the feeling gnawing away at my bones that something has shifted. The ferry is off kilter. I stand at the bow and study the vessel that I know inside out and with my eyes closed, and there is no single thing that I can put my finger on. And yet, I shake my head and look again—something is wrong.

The first mate helps himself to a cup of fresh water and spits it out upon the deck. Bauldry laughs and yells, "Try sipping more slowly and you might not miss your mouth."

But the first mate shakes his head. "It tastes foul." He swipes his mouth with the back of his hand. "There is scum on the surface. Where is the cabin boy?"

Bauldry glances at me and I go to the water barrel to check for myself. The barrel has always been filled with fresh water. We have supplies of rum and ale that never deplete, barrels of juice for the souls of children that come on board, and

we have food provisions that are simply here. I have never questioned it, nor have I ever had a need to. It is how the ferry works. We complete our side of the deal, and the ferry completes hers.

I dip a cup into the fresh water, and it comes out floating with gray scum and clumps of fatty matter. I tip it into the sea and take another. It is the same. Undrinkable. I toss the cup onto the deck. "Take some ale," I say. "It will have to suffice for now."

I do not know how long we can survive on ale alone, and if anyone other than the children try to drink the juice, it vanishes before touching our lips. The first mate fills his cup with ale and gives me a thumbs up. The water will need to be replenished somehow, but I do not know where to even begin. We cannot drink the seawater that is filled with salt, and we will provide a merry crew if we are to survive on rum and ale.

Alone in my cabin, I return to my earliest log entries and read through them, the ink having faded somewhat over the years. My words were concise, controlled back then, as though I wrote nothing more than the task demanded.

I riffle through the pages, searching for an anomaly, an entry that indicated an event other than the daily crossing, something extraordinary. Anything.

But no matter how hard I search, and how my eyes water making sense of my spidery cursive, I must admit to myself that nothing extraordinary occurred before the girl arrived.

I am trying to make sense of this knowledge when I hear raised voices from the deck. I run up the stairs, my heart thumping. Gael is yelling at Bauldry, fist raised as if to punch the man. I am able to cross the ship and lower his arm before he makes contact with Bauldry's face.

"What is going on?" I ask. My own chest is heaving more with the reaction from the raised voices than the effort of crossing the ship. "What is the need for violence among us?"

"Tell him," Gael says to Bauldry with a nod. "Tell him what you have done."

I look at the sailing master, whose head is bobbling from side to side.

"I've done nothing, Captain. I swear I've done nothing. I was after some food and," he shakes his head, "why would I have put maggots in my own food?"

"Maggots?" First the fresh water and now the food. "Show me," I say.

Bauldry points to his metal bowl. I peer inside and the food is alive, crawling with creatures that have no business living in someone's stomach.

"Here, Captain," says a rigger. He is standing beside a sack of grain which, when I look inside, is also alive with weevils.

"What are we supposed to eat?" asks the man.

"I do not know. I need time to think."

My thoughts are racing like horses at a jousting tournament. I do not know how to remedy the food situation because I have had no dealings with such things aboard the ship. And

I cannot say that I am happy about my correct presumptions, that the ferry has somehow shifted from its course.

"What should I do?" The man is still waiting for answers.

"I..." I shake my head and turn away. What use is a captain with no answers?

Gael appears before me. "The hypnotist is to blame," he says.

I try to step around him, but he blocks my path. "Step aside, man. Let me pass."

"I will let you pass when you take control of this ship and rid us of the hypnotist's influence." He eyes me levelly like one who knows that he is speaking the truth.

"There is no hypnotist aboard this ship," I say. I go to say more, to say that we are under anyone's influence, but I cannot hold my hand over my heart and swear to that being the truth, for it feels as though the ship may indeed be doing as someone is telling it.

"But you know that we are..." The man has sensed my hesitation.

"I know that something is amiss," I say. "We need to find out what happened to the cabin boy and then we will be back on course."

"Ask the hypnotist!" Gael points at the girl. "I'm sure she can tell you what she did with the boy."

I lean closer to Gael so that we are almost nose-to-nose. "While the girl remains on my ship, I will not have her referred to as a hypnotist, do you hear me?"

"Ask the men," Gael shrugs. "I'm sure they will agree with me that the girl is to blame for whatever is happening here."

"And I say that we should remember these events began the day *you* came aboard."

Gael sneers at me. He withdraws a knife from his pocket and slices it across the palm of his hand. Behind him, the men gasp. "I bleed," says Gael. "If I were a hypnotist, I could have caused you to believe that I do not bleed." He raises his hand to show the crew. "I say, we cut the girl and then we will know which of us is the real hypnotist here."

Some men murmur, "Aye," their eyes lowered to the floor so that they do not meet my accusing stare.

"No one is to touch the girl. Those are my orders!" I yell.

"What do you suggest then, *Captain*?" asks Gael.

"We find the cabin boy!" I say. "We find the boy, and then we will decide what to do next."

"How are we to find him?" asks Bauldry. It is obvious that he does not believe the boy is still aboard the ship.

"We search the ship," I say. "Every one of us. We search the ship until we find the boy or learn what has happened to him. Then...then things will return to the way they were."

I wish I believed my own words. I am not even certain that they sound more convincing to the men than they do to me.

The men stop what they are doing and spread across the ship like mice following crumbs. I

head below deck with Gael and the first mate. I do not trust the new quartermaster and, if I am correct, he knows more than he is letting on. I believe that the girl also knows what happened to the boy, but she has been threatened to remain silent.

We search the ship, all around, but find nothing. There is no evidence anywhere of the cabin boy.

CHAPTER THIRTY

March 17, 456 A.T.

Several days go by and nothing changes. I finally decide to go to the girl and not leave her side until I have some answers.

She looks up at me as I approach, her eyes still heavy with sadness. I get on my knees and take her soft hand in my own. "Please...tell me what happened to the boy. You have my word that I will protect from anything Gael can conjure up."

The girl sighs. She looks at me with trusting eyes, and I see that she is ready to tell.

"Someone...threw him overboard."

"And just who could have done that?" Gael grunts as he comes upon us suddenly.

The girl looks down bashfully.

Gael watches me, hands on hips.

"I have my suspicions as to who may have done it," I say.

I stand and turn to leave, but Gael speaks up.
“Will you get rid of the hypnotist now?”

Slowly, I face him. “Now, why do you suggest that I do that?”

“The girl is obviously to blame for this,” he gestures to the body behind us.

“The girl is tied up. She could not have very well thrown anyone overboard.”

“Are you saying it was one of your own men?” Gael persists.

I stare into the man’s cold dark eyes. “No, not one of *my* men, but a man aboard this ferry, aye.”

His mouth opens and closes, but no words are spoken. The first mate has been listening to the conversation and I know that it will be repeated for the benefit of the crew. Good! They need to mistrust this man, with his arrogant demeanor and his lack of compassion. He is guilty of the crime – of that I am certain. It is the reason the cabin boy has not been replaced because he has been tossed aboard by one of our own. I know that Gael cannot stay aboard my ferry, but I have not yet worked out how I will deal with the matter of getting him away from us.

I gulp in the fresh air from the sea and take in deep breaths. When my nerves have calmed a little and my breathing has resumed its natural rhythm, I go to the girl and untie the knot from around her ankle.

“Gael did it...I saw him but I could not stop him.”

I scratch at my beard. “I guessed of his involvement, but I did not for one moment

believe that he would go that far. That was my mistake."

"Captain," the girl places her hand upon mine. "It is not your fault."

She is being kind, but I will always blame myself. Call myself a captain—ha! How did I ever deserve my title when I could not stand up and prevent the death of a harmless cabin boy? The girl does not ask of a replacement boy, because she has no desire for a replacement, and I cannot blame her for that.

I see that Gael has joined Bauldry at the helm. They are pointing out to sea.

"Will you be all right?" I ask the girl.

She nods, clutching the ragdoll and a piece of paper to her.

"Go down to the cabin," I say.

I know what they are pointing at before I reach Gael and Bauldry. It is the other ship, the bane of our lives in recent times, although our savior when we were stranded on the shore of the dead. It occurs to me that we are bound to them somehow. Since the first time we made contact when it appeared, the captain was searching for the girl, and we have been bound to keep meeting, like lovers arranging a series of secret rendezvous.

"Captain?" Bauldry watches me as though he is waiting for a response to a question.

"What say you?"

"Shall we make course toward them?"

"Aye, I want to know if they are experiencing the same problems such as we are." I glance up at the sails and see that they are ragged, torn in

places, the material hanging from the mast in tatters the way the flesh hung from the passengers' bodies.

Bauldry follows my gaze. "What have you seen?"

"The ferry is in a state of decay. I only wish I knew what had caused it."

"Ha!" Gael emits a short snap of a sound. "It is the hypnotist. How can you not—"

I raise my fist to his jaw but stop myself from following it through. "The girl is not a hypnotist, and she has been with us far longer than you have." With the man's silence, I turn to Bauldry. "Proceed. Turn her around."

Bauldry places his hands on the helm which, now that I turn my attention to it, I can see is riddled with wormholes. I am so startled by the sudden realisation that the ship is fading at an alarming rate, that I do not see Gael slide the dagger from his pocket, or the movement that places the dagger through Bauldry's hand, pinning him to the helm.

Bauldry cries out and sinks to his knees, his hand attached to the wooden spoke by the dagger protruding from it. Blood drips onto his knees.

"What is your problem, man!" I yell. I pull the dagger free, releasing Bauldry's hand. The boatswain is nearby, staring open mouthed. "Fetch cloth for binding the wound," I say. "Now!"

I lean Bauldry back against the helm, his wounded hand cradled in his lap. His breathing is shallow, beads of sweat bobbling on his

forehead. I turn to Gael. "What was the meaning of this?"

Gael shrugs. "We should not approach the other ship. The problem has already been brought aboard."

"Aye, that's the only truth that has passed your lips since you arrived. But the problem will not be around for much longer."

"And that is the only thing we will ever agree on." Gael strides to the side of the ship to watch the other vessel in the distance.

When the boatswain returns with cloth, I bind Bauldry's hand tightly. Blood soaks through, turning the grubby cloth crimson within seconds. I take the helm myself and steer my ferry toward the other. I will speak to the captain, despite Gael's threats.

Bauldry is back on his feet when we pull alongside the other ship. He is pale, his lips turning blue, but the wound is no longer dripping blood as before. We have not spoken of Gael, nor has Bauldry glanced once in the man's direction.

The captain comes aboard with two of his men. This time there are no pleasant greetings, no handshakes offered on either side. I can tell that the man is taking in the ferry's condition, its state of decay, the ragged sails, and Bauldry's bleeding hand.

I nod at his questioning glance. "I do not understand what is happening. Our food is

rotting. Our fresh water has long since stopped being fresh. We...the ship appears to be self-destructing, rapidly, and I do not know how to reverse the condition."

"Aye," the other captain hesitates, measuring his words. "There is only one way to reverse the condition, but you won't like it..."

I become defensive. "What are you saying?"

He sighs and shakes his head.

"Is your ferry affected in the same way?" I look at him pointedly. He must know that we are connected somehow, that we are mirror images of one another, the ferry, the men, us.

"We are not as far advanced as this," his gaze takes in Bauldry who is shivering at the helm, and the filthy deck which has not been scrubbed since the cabin boy's disappearance.

"But you are seeing signs of deterioration?"

"A little. My men are scared. One of them is sick, feverish. He is delusional, screaming that the soul eaters are coming for us. His fear is contagious and now he has us all trembling with fear whenever a sudden sound startles him."

At that moment, Gael aims his dagger into the side of the ship with a dull thud. I watch him remove the dagger and inspect the blade, the whole action so pointless and with no result that I wonder if he did it deliberately to prompt a reaction from the other captain.

And, as expected, the captain is gazing around the ship for the source of the sound.

"It was merely my quartermaster," I say. "There, with his blade."

The captain follows my gesture, his eyebrows drawn together in confusion. "Where?"

"There, by the water barrel."

He is looking in the right direction, but it takes me several moments to understand that he cannot see Gael.

"You cannot see him?"

The man shakes his head, blinking. "The girl. Do you still have the girl on board?"

"Aye, what of it?"

"She's the reason for all of this. The only way to fix things is to..." He ducks, raising his hands above his head, and I am reminded of Graives protecting himself from the crows when they first came for him. "The crows," says the captain, as if reading my mind. "They have been following us. We cannot escape them."

"I...I do not see them."

"There..." the man ducks again, his men crouching on the deck behind him. "We must go, before it is too late, before we are taken with you."

"Taken with us?" I ask. "Where are we going?"

He shakes his head, as if he cannot believe the question I am asking. Then he raises a hand and points behind me. I whirl around and I know exactly where we are going.

The maelstrom.

I turn back to the captain. Gael has also spotted the maelstrom and is crossing the deck toward us. "Did you know about—" I do not finish my question, because as Gael approaches us, he does not stop to greet the captain of the

other ferry. He does not acknowledge his presence, not even with a sneer or a snide remark, but walks straight through him as if the captain were invisible.

I stumble backwards. I cannot believe what I am seeing. The captain is standing right in front of me. I shook his hand. And yet...and yet the captain and Gael cannot see one another, and Gael stepped through him as if...as if he did not exist.

I blink furiously to clear my thoughts and bring my eyes back into focus. The captain and his men are walking from me, hurrying, as though their lives depend upon leaving my ship before it sinks into the maelstrom. But even before they have reached the ladder to clamber down to their little rowing boat, they have disappeared completely.

I run to the side of the ship, although I already see that the other ferry has vanished. The sea is clear, calm, despite the approaching whirlpool behind us. There is not a sea creature nor a ship, not a single soul for as far as the eye can see.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

March 17, 456 A.T.

The girl wakes, her eyes opening the instant her dreams cease to exist. She cannot remember what she was dreaming about, but she is certain the cabin boy was there, and he was trying to warn her about something. She closes her eyes and has a brief vision of golden hair, her hair, being dragged underwater, down and down, to the bottom of the sea, searching for something that is lost. She is struggling to breathe but still she is dragged further down. Her hand touches seaweed and something else, and then she is kicking her way back to the surface.

She is still in the cabin, her breathing fast, shallow, as though the vision were real, and she is gasping for air on the water's surface. She forces herself to breathe more slowly, deep breaths in through her nose and blowing out through pursed lips. Her heart is still racing

though. Something has happened while she slept, something that has changed the course of the ferry irrevocably.

Panic takes hold and she slides her feet over the side of the cot and waits for her thoughts to settle. The ship is still moving. She feels the gentle listing on the water, hears the slap of the sea against the ship's sides, but the air is moving too. She holds out a hand in front of her face and watches the dust swirling around and around her fingers, like tiny silver stars dropped from the sky. The air is alive around her. It is constantly moving, spinning, shifting, as though she is already inside the maelstrom and is waiting for the water to swallow her whole.

She stands, hands held out on both sides to keep her balance. The yellow ribbon is still fastened in her hair. The length of yellow silk wrapped around her shoulders. She takes a brief moment to reach down and grab the ragdoll.

She is stroking the ragdoll's woollen hair when her mother speaks to her.

"Be strong, my child," she says. She is there in the cabin with the girl, although the girl can sense her presence rather than see her clearly: a shifting shadow in the seat at the desk, the stroke of a finger across her arm, hair settling across an invisible shoulder. She smiles in the direction where she believes her mother to be.

"Good girl," says her mother. "Remember what I always told you: you are where you are meant to be."

The girl nods. "I remember."

"You have been patient. I have been watching your journey and I am so proud of you, my darling."

"I...do not always know if I am doing the right thing though," the girl whispers. "Besse..."

"You tried to help your friend. Kindness is never wrong. Besse is happy now, and she will be for all eternity."

"What should I do now?" asks the girl. "I don't understand what is happening, but I fear that whatever changes are taking place, they are all my fault."

Her mother takes her hands in hers. The girl can feel the cool skin stroking her own warm hands and it is like the breeze in her hair when she stands on the deck. "No one is to blame. Everything is exactly the way it is meant to be. But..." her mother's voice darkens a little as though a cloud is passing overhead inside the tiny cabin, "It won't be easy. The hardest part is yet to come. You will be scared, my child, but do not forget, I will be right there with you."

"What do I have to do?" asks the girl. "I do not know what I am supposed to do."

"Follow the path that presents itself to you. You will know it when you see it."

The girl can no longer feel her mother's hands. She can no longer sense the warm smile or the scent of lavender that has always clung to her mother's skin.

"Mother," she says. "Mommy, I don't want to do this on my own. I'm scared..."

She does not know how long she sits on the edge of the cot, her bare feet cold on the floor,

the ragdoll in her hands. She knows that her mother is not going to return, but she waits there all the same. Just in case.

Dust flies around her. The air still swirls and spins. But her thoughts have grown peaceful, as though the turmoil in the atmosphere has provided a calm inside her. The calm before the storm, she thinks. It is what they say, isn't it?

And then she hears it. The sound of panicked water from outside the ferry. Footsteps on deck. Voices yelling orders. She imagines Bauldry at the helm, the riggers with the ropes wrapped around their arms, almost horizontal trying to guide the ship away from the approaching danger, the captain with his brows drawn together, knuckles white against the side of the ship as though he might be able to turn her with his bare hands.

And Gael, upright, narrowed eyes, staring straight ahead as if nothing can ever touch him because he is above such normal events. He is untouchable.

And suddenly she knows. Gael had to come to remove her. Gael was the last puzzle piece finally slipping into place. And now that events are in motion, she is powerless to stop them.

She stands, the ragdoll clutched to her chest.

The girl ignores the air spiralling around her. She opens the cabin door and slowly mounts the steps to the deck where the air is still whirling around her.

All is as she pictured it. Bauldry is at the helm, his eyes darker than usual in his gray face. A bloody cloth is wrapped around his hand, and

she thinks that he must have had an accident while she slept. The riggers are pulling on the masts with all their weight, their groans almost as loud as the roar of the water. The captain stands at the side of the ship, staring into the maelstrom toward which the vessel is hurtling, and she wonders if he is thinking that all is lost for his ship and his crew.

Her gaze wanders for the cabin boy and she is filled with sadness all over again at the loss of her quiet, loyal friend. He did indeed show her kindness when it did not always bode well for his own safety. Yet he did not question his fondness for the girl, nor hers for him. Maybe he had not experienced much affection in life, and she hopes, if this is the case, that he was happy during his time on board the ferry.

The captain does not turn when she reaches the deck. Gael is the one who spots her, and he wastes no time in hurrying to her side, the maelstrom air spiralling around him too and slowing his movements, as though she were watching the scene pan out through the eye of a needle.

They stand side-by-side, Gael and the girl, watching the maelstrom. It roars angrily at the ferry as though they are intruding upon its sleep, water spraying their cheeks and drenching their clothes. The water spins and lurches, forming a gaping monstrous tunnel down which there appears to be no end.

Without being told, the girl knows what is expected of her. She is to enter the maelstrom. Her mother told her to be strong even though

she is scared, because she must trust her journey. And she knows that her journey ends, or maybe begins, inside the maelstrom. There is no one she can turn to for advice; none aboard this ferry have ever mentioned the maelstrom to her before, let alone speak of those who have survived the beast. It is an unknown entity. And she is only a girl.

She turns to Gael and hands him the ragdoll.

He accepts the bundle of cloth and nods his head. "I am sorry it has to be this way, child," he says. "The ferry cannot survive with you upon it. I am only here to put things back on the right course."

"It is all right," says the girl. "I think I understand."

"You are brave," he says. "You must remain brave if you are to survive."

"I know," says the girl. Tears well in her eyes. She has enjoyed her time on the ferry; she has come to feel safe and, with this security, has come a sense of belonging. The crew are like her new family, and she will be sorry to never see them again.

Gael looks at her, expressionless. She shakes her head.

"Ready?" he asks.

She swallows and her throat is clogged with tears. All she can think about is the dream in which she was being dragged down to the bottom of the sea in search of something that was lost to her, and she understands the message. It was always going to end here, no

matter what events had led to this moment in time.

She nods and whispers, "Ready."

Gael tosses the ragdoll into the maelstrom, which is now whirling, open-mouthed, beside them. The girl climbs onto the bench, her bare feet flinching from the cold slippery wood. Gael steadies her by holding one fragile hand in his so that she can lean on him for support.

"One more step," he says.

The girl raises a foot to the ledge around the rim of the ferry. She does not glance behind her — she cannot do another goodbye. She lets go of Gael's hand and nods at him. Arms raised in the air, she leaps into the maelstrom as the captain's voice reaches her from over her shoulder, "Noooooooooooooooooooo!"

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

March 18, 456 A.T.

I run to the side of the ship too late. Why? Why did I not turn around sooner? It is a question that I will never be able to answer. I was only several feet away. I would have been able to stop her. I should have stopped her.

“Why did you let her jump?” I shake Gael and he does nothing to retaliate. He stares at the sea, at the maelstrom, at the spot where the girl vanished, as though he is sleepwalking and will wake in a moment to remember nothing. “Why?” I raise my fist and punch the man in the face. My knuckles crack when they make contact with his cheekbone, but the pain barely penetrates my anger. I thought hurting Gael would make me feel better. I thought it would ease the pain in my chest, but it has done nothing.

The ferry lurches suddenly, away from the maelstrom, and I quickly turn to Bauldry, who is hanging from the helm.

Gael does not hesitate. Before I can turn back to him, he has climbed onto the ledge from which the girl leaped, and has turned to face the ship, arms crossed over his chest.

"What are you doing...?"

Before I can finish, he throws himself backwards into the roaring water. His head and shoulders are swallowed by the tunnel, closely followed by his feet.

The maelstrom instantly closes, the roaring dwindling to a few foamy splashes, and then it disappears.

I punch the side of the ship and the wood splits, splinters flying into my face and water spraying my legs. "Where did it go?" I say to no one in particular. "Bauldry!" I run to the sailing master and grab the helm. "Where did it go? You need to turn us around."

Bauldry is on his knees, fresh blood dripping from the wound on his hand. The man looks exhausted. "We made it," he says, panting. He shivers, though his face is beaded with sweat.

"Turn her around. We lost the girl." I am heaving on the helm and the ship lurches as she struggles against my direction.

Bauldry stares vacantly at the side of the ship. "The girl?" He swipes his mouth with the back of his hand.

"She jumped. She entered the maelstrom. With Gael." I am still pulling on the helm, my

broken knuckles almost popping through the skin with the effort.

"Gael?" Bauldry has not moved. He looks washed out, drained of energy. "Gael's gone?"

"I'm not losing another soul from this ship. Do you understand?" I yell at him. "I'm not losing the girl."

Bauldry still does not move, but stares at the sea, which is now calm and still, barely a ripple lapping the sides of the ship. His head tilts to one side. "It's gone. We'll not find it now."

I drop the helm, ignoring the way the ferry rightens itself without my weight on the wheel. I grab Bauldry by the shirt-collar and lift him to his feet, my nose touching his. "I'm not going anywhere until we find it," I spit at him. "So, either you help me turn her around, or you go the same way as Gael."

"Captain, turning her around isn't going to find it if it's gone."

I drop him to the floor where he lands on his knees. "It can't just vanish. It if isn't here, then it must be somewhere else, and we're going to keep moving until we find it somewhere else."

"But..." Bauldry coughs and his body is wracked with the phlegm in his throat. He spits onto the deck and I am shocked to see that the green liquid is tinged red. It is Graives all over again.

I study Bauldry's face, the sunken eyes, the lines gouged into his forehead and both sides of his mouth. There's a green tint to his flesh also. But Bauldry has done nothing wrong. He has never once left the ferry in all these years, nor

disobeyed orders, nor caused disruption in the manner of Gael.

His lungs are struggling to fill with the oxygen he needs and saliva clings to his lips. I can hardly bear to look at him for fear that he will die right here in front of me, but he needs my help as much as I need his – I must keep him alive, at least until he finds the maelstrom.

I yell at the first mate and the boatswain to come and take over the helm. "Where are we headed, Captain?" asks the boatswain.

"To the maelstrom."

"Where's that?" he glances around as if he might spot it waiting for us in the distance.

"Your guess is as good as mine," I say. "But I am not stopping until I find it."

They glance at each other. "Why do we want to find it? Should we not be heading to the land of the living?"

I face them and keep my voice level. "The girl leaped into the maelstrom, and I am not going anywhere without her."

"The girl?" the first mate repeats himself the way Bauldry did minutes ago. "I beg your pardon, Captain, but we cannot be late ferrying the souls, or we will all be punished."

"If we do not find the girl and bring her back to this ship, you will all be punished anyway. By me. Now turn her around."

"Captain," mumbles Bauldry. He is on his knees and I offer him my hand to help him upright. "The men are right. The soul eaters, they'll –"

"They'll what? Have you ever seen a soul eater, Bauldry?" I wait until he shakes his head. "Have you?" I turn to the other men standing idly by the helm.

They mumble, "No, Captain."

"Then we are turning this ship around and finding the maelstrom if it is the last thing that we all do!"

The two men stand together, watching me. They do not move. A thought enters my mind and passes as instantaneously as it arrives, that if Gael were here, they would not dare argue with the cruelty in the man's eyes. But he is not here. And I realize now, the men always had more respect for Graives than they harbored for me.

"Move, men!" I bark. "The helm!"

The other crew members join the first mate and the boatswain. They form an exhausted bunch, but they are formidable nonetheless in their numbers. Bauldry stands beside me, more through pain and fear than respect for my commands. But I understand that, given the opportunity, he would also side with the men against my impossible demands.

The first mate steps forward. "Captain, with all due respect, we cannot waste time seeking out the maelstrom. The ferry, well, she will not have it. She will not willingly forego her duty to the souls who need crossing."

"I am well aware of this," I say, "which is why we all need to stand together. We will take turns at the helm, keep her moving until the maelstrom reappears. It has to be somewhere."

The hole in the water cannot simply vanish into thin air. It cannot!" I am aware that I am rambling, but the vast impossibility of the task ahead is clouding all rational thought and the longer we leave it, the more danger there is of us not finding the girl alive.

The men do not move.

The boatswain shakes his head and says, "Captain, forgive me, but you are entranced by the g—"

"I am not entranced! The girl was no hypnotist!" I pace the floor, my eyes darting everywhere, the men, the rotten food, Bauldry. I must convince them to believe me, but Gael has sowed the seeds of doubt in their minds and the seeds have already taken root. "Gael had no proof to back up his words. He did not understand the girl's presence and so he put his misunderstanding down to hypnotism because he knew no better. You've all spent time with the girl. When did you ever see her hypnotize anyone? Eh? Tell me!"

"The cabin boy," murmurs one of the riggers. "She had a hand in his death, did she not?"

"She did not!" I yell. "She did not. Gael was responsible," I address the first mate. "The girl was tied up; how could she have committed such a foul crime?"

The men bow their heads. I need to keep them thinking.

"In the land of the dead, Graives and I chose to save her of our own accord. We were not influenced!"

"Graives," says the first mate, as if only now remembering the man who journeyed with us for hundreds of years. "What happened to him, then?"

"He made a promise that we tried to deny. He offered himself in return for the girl," I speak more gently now, my gratitude for the man's loyalty outweighing the years of mutual dislike we felt for each other. "It was none of the girl's doing. Graives chose his own destiny and he saw it through."

"We only have your word for it, though," persists the first mate. "None of us were there to disprove your version of events."

Anger flares inside my head, hot and red and vicious. "I have never lied to you in all these years, not a single one of you. And now, when I need you to help me, you all turn your back on me. I am your captain!" I stare at each of them in turn. They avert their eyes, unable to face me but unwilling to obey orders. "I see how it is. I will take her myself, and if I am late in fulfilling our duties, the soul eaters will take us all with or without your help!"

I return to the helm. It only takes a moment to figure the ferry's course and I steer her due west back to where the maelstrom was when it claimed the girl.

The men watch for a while before dispersing back to their duties. Perhaps they recognize my determination. Or perhaps they fear meddling with the mind of a supposedly entranced captain. Either way, they leave me to it. It is not easy taking the ferry away from her true course,

and within minutes I am sweating, the muscles in my arms tearing from the effort of keeping the helm where I need it to be.

I sense movement beside me and raise my eyes to find Bauldry gripping the wheel with me. He doesn't look at me when he speaks, but says in a low voice, "I cannot say that I am wholly in agreement with your decision, Captain, but the girl," he pauses. "Well, the girl never did me any harm." He nods. I think he is finished when he adds, "I fear I have nothing to lose by finding her."

I do not need to ask what he means by that. I have seen the blood in his phlegm. I have seen the look in his eyes before—on Graives. Bauldry fears that he is going the way of the quartermaster and I fear that he is right.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

March 23, 456 A.T.

I do not know how many days, and nights, I have been at the helm. They are blurring into one hazy period in which my fingers are sticking to the wooden spokes and I can barely flex my arms and legs without crying out in pain.

The men have come around. They realized that I would not be deterred from finding the girl, no matter what it took, and they have been replacing Bauldry whenever he tires, which is happening more frequently. His coughing fits are worsening. He now coughs so violently that it seems his eyeballs might pop from their sockets, and he is lifeless for hours after, propped against a sack of weevil-crawling grain while he recovers a semblance of strength. I do not know how long he has left, but he is sick.

We have no food, and no fresh water. The ale is dwindling, and we have had to ration our

intake to a half-cup in the morning, and a full cup at night to aid sleep. Not that we need any assistance with sleep, we are all exhausted to our very limits. My mouth is dry. I can barely swallow, and my stomach has long given up growling for food. My mind spins at times and I must sit until the dizziness passes, but I am not giving up.

We need to find the maelstrom, and the girl, so that we can get back on track.

We need to do something to help Bauldry.

The only thing working in our favor in our current predicament is that there has been no sign of the soul eaters, which are meant to punish us for failing in our duty, although I have noticed that the men are constantly looking over their shoulders and starting at the faintest of noises.

Bauldry is sleeping, when his body jolts with the effort of coughing up the liquid from his lungs. He is on his hands and knees, his back arching with each wracking sound, his tongue hanging from his mouth. This time, it is all blood that comes from him. He settles back on the deck, eyes staring vacantly at the sky.

And then he cries out. "They are coming for me," his voice a whisper of what it used to be.

"Who?" I ask. I squint at the sky in search of what he might have seen.

He raises a trembling hand and points upwards. "There..." he turns his head away, but still his eyes return to whatever it is that has spooked him. "Do you see them?"

"There is nothing there. It is all right. They are not coming for you."

The first mate watches me warily. I know what he is thinking, but I will him not to say it out loud. For if he does, then I am convinced we will be giving substance to our fears and there will be no avoiding them.

It is not long before our fears are realized anyway.

The next time that Bauldry cries out, his arms are covering his face and he is pushing against some invisible forms that only he can see. "Get away!" he cries. His arms and hands are bloody, as if someone has taken a knife to him.

I drop the helm and one of the riggers takes my place. At Bauldry's side I drop to my knees. Bauldry has quieted, curled into a ball like a baby in the womb. "What is it, man? What did you see?"

He opens his watery, pink-rimmed eyes and stares at me. "Captain?" he whispers.

"Aye. It is all right. I am still here."

"Did you see them?"

"No, there was nothing there. It is the fever showing you things that do not exist."

He closes his eyes, and I am hoping that he will sleep for a while and maybe find some peace, but his eyes fly open again and he grabs my wrist, clutching at it with feeble fingers. "The girl." His breathing becomes shallow. His lips are blue with fatigue and the shivers. "Did we find her?"

"Not yet," I say. "But we will."

He closes his eyes at that. "Don't let them take me," he mumbles eventually. "The crows. Don't let them take me."

So, it is the crows that have come for him. If they have a mind to take him, I do not think there is anything that I can do for the man, but his eyes are filled with such fear that I take pity on him. These are surely his final moments, and this is all down to me. It is my own selfish determination to find a girl who is most likely already lost to the world that has brought him to this miserable end.

I squeeze his hand. "I will not let them take you, I promise."

His eyes close once more and his head lolls to one side. I release his fingers from my wrist and place his arm across his chest. The first mate and the rigger watch me from the helm. I should replace one of them, but I am suddenly bone-weary and can barely find the strength to stand, so I sit back against the sacking beside Bauldry and close my own eyes. I must rest while I can. If we do ever find the maelstrom, I need strength enough to enter it and to find the girl, and then to bring her back from it alive. It dawns on me then that I do not even know if it will be possible to return to this world from the maelstrom. But I also know that it is a chance that I am prepared to take, for the girl's sake.

I am startled from a deep dreamless sleep by Bauldry thrashing about beside me, arms and legs flailing in all directions like he is battling an army of demons.

I immediately leap upon him and use my weight to pin him down. His knee gets me in the groin, and I am doubled up in pain, but it is nothing compared to the pain in my back. My flesh feels as though it is being sliced open, my back wet with my own blood. I turn onto my back to protect it from further harm and deep razor-sharp wounds slice into my forearms.

The crows.

I cannot see them, but I can hear the flapping of their wings, the raging caws, the talons tearing and slicing. Bauldry will not survive the attack—it is plain enough to see. His body bucks and bends beneath the onslaught, slivers of flesh rising into the air to be gobbled up by the invisible crows.

If I'm to have any possibility of saving Bauldry, I need to act fast. Now.

A vision of Graives flashes into my mind, the way he offered himself to the crows to save me and the girl when we were aboard the other ferry. That is what I must do. It may not work, but what other options are there?

I crawl away from Bauldry and the vicious birds, drag myself to the side of the ship and climb onto the ledge. I turn to face the creatures that I cannot see and open my arms wide. "Come and get me, vile creatures!" I yell. "Take me if you dare!"

I wait for the bite of talons in my flesh, the sting of sliced flesh, the welling of blood. But instead, I hear the gushing of water from behind me and turn around in time to watch the

maelstrom appear like a spinning tunnel carved
into the sea's surface.

And then I jump.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

March 23, 456 A.T.

Down and down I fall. I think I must cry out, but my voice is swallowed by the gigantic tunnel of water that encircles me. Headfirst, I hurtle, my arms flailing above my head, and yet I am not wet. I can hear the roaring inside my head, see the foamy turquoise all around me, feel the way I am sucked ever downwards. Yet I cannot be certain that I am in the water, and if I am not, then I face certain death at the bottom of the maelstrom.

I stop fighting the force of nature. If I have saved Bauldry then so be it, this will not have been in vain. If I survive the fall and find the girl, then I promise myself, I will have achieved all that I set out to do and my life will be complete. I control my limbs, stop breathing, and close my eyes.

And then I open them.

I am no longer falling.

I am on a shore, facing a calm blue sea the likes of which I have not seen since my death and enrolment into the life of the wayfarer. Gentle waves slap against the sand at my feet, leaving a trail of pink-white foam and seaweed in its wake. I can taste the air and it is like nothing I can remember in my lifetime. I lay my head back upon the warm sand and turn my face to the sun, imbibing its heat, a smile upon my face. If this is punishment, I would survive a thousand lifetimes of this to feel the sun on my skin and breathe fresh air.

It is such a contrast to the giddy whirling passage through the maelstrom that I remain with my eyes closed for some time, my chest rising and falling as I fill my lungs, the smile never leaving my face. Occasionally I let out a sound that is beyond my control, a chuckle, and shake my head at the calm and beautiful strangeness of my situation.

When my breathing has regulated and I feel refreshed from the sunshine upon my face, I stand and view my surroundings. A sandy, shell-strewn beach that stretches away from me, the sea rippling and glinting in the distance. Blue sky. The occasional fluffy clouds floating lazily on their way. Trees with branches reaching up to taste the sunshine, the same way that I have been doing.

Behind the beach is a small grassy hill. I climb the hill slowly, as I am still weak with hunger and thirst. I think that if I can find someone to take pity on me, or even find a river from which

I can quench my thirst, and some berries or nuts to eat, I will regain enough strength to begin my quest for the girl. Maybe it is the warmth of the sun's rays, but I am more hopeful than I have been since the girl plunged into the maelstrom followed by Gael. If this is where she landed, then she must surely have survived the fall. Maybe some kind soul has taken her in and kept her safe.

I am filled with hope. And with hope comes renewed determination.

At the top of the hill, I take note of the view facing me. In the distance I see a village. I almost run down the other side of the hill. I am sorry, when I glance over my shoulder, to be leaving the sea behind me, but I need to satisfy my hunger and thirst. I cross a path and enter a field dotted about with apple trees. Beneath the closest tree, apples have already dropped onto the grass, as if in readiness for travelers to feast upon. I drop to my knees, take the largest apple, and bite into the ripe green flesh, expecting to hear the crunch between my teeth, to taste the sweet juicy flesh upon my tongue.

But the reality does not meet my expectation. The apple is vile, and when I gaze at the bitten fruit in my hand, a fat white maggot wriggles from a tiny brown hole and drops onto my lap. I spit the rotting fruit onto the ground and toss the apple aside.

It must be that the fruit had been on the ground for too long. I stretch on tiptoes and pluck another apple from the lowest branch. This time, I bite into it gingerly, not wanting to

discover another vile maggot. This fruit is the same — bright green on the outside and rotten in the core. I pluck another, and another, and each one is discarded the way of the first. All rotten.

Discarded, my stomach now sore with hunger and disappointment at its almost-meal, I walk along the lane. I ignore the bushes heavy with berries until the disappointment over the apples has faded a little, and then I stop and pluck a ripe blackberry, testing its firmness between my fingers before I place it in my mouth. Again, it looks perfect, but tastes disgusting.

There is nothing else to do but to walk in the direction of the distant village and hope to meet someone there who will take pity on a poor traveler and share some food with me.

I have been walking for some considerable time, the sun's rays warming the top of my head, the dusty lane turning my worn shoes brown, when I stop and listen. I do not know what has caused me to stand still, a sound maybe, but I strain my ears waiting to hear it again. Nothing.

A few more steps and I stop again. Something is bothering me, eating away at my brain, but I am feeling almost feverish with hunger and the unusual heat, and I am struggling to focus on any one thing. I wipe sweat from my brow with the back of my hand. I can hear the sound of my own breaths. I can hear my heart thumping with the exertion of walking. I can hear these things because there are no other sounds.

I turn a slow circle, searching for birds, crickets, voices, laughter. There's nothing. I peer

into the trees, the perfect trees with their perfect leaves and their rotten fruit, and there are no birds. I crouch to the ground and scrape the dirt with my hands and there no insects, no beetles, ants, worms, nothing. The sky is clear of birds. I guess that if I were to run back over the hill and down to the sea, there would be no fish either.

I continue walking toward the village, the grass roofs of which I could see in the distance from the top of the hill. My steps are slower now; any hope of finding people, or food, has already vanished, along with the hope that had kept my head high and my footsteps light. What are the chances of finding the girl if no one lives here? And more importantly, what kind of place is this, if there are no people?

My first assumption that I would find food and someone to help me was obviously wrong, I realize that now. And with the realization returns the cold dread I have been feeling since the girl leaped from the ferry.

The ferry. It seems like years since I was on board the ship that I have come to know so well. Years rather than hours.

Eyes focused on the dirt lane ahead, I keep walking, although my progress is slow. I pass fields, flowers, bushes, and trees. But despite the vibrant nature surrounding me, I see not a single animal, bird, or creature. The silence hums in my ears.

Approaching the village, I am numbed by the silence, the lack of life, of movement, of anything other than empty homes. The dread creeps up on me like a thick menacing fog, clouding my

thoughts so that the silence rings even louder in my ears.

Where are all the people?

Why have homes if they are not to be lived in?

And that is when the thought creeps into my head that there must once have been people here, but they have all been driven away, and they would only be driven away if they felt unsafe here.

So, what was it that made the people run?

The homes are simply built, the walls made with stones and mud, the roofs made of dried grass and hay. They would serve a family well. I allow my mind to wander. Maybe the hunger fuels my daydreams, but I picture myself with Renata and the child that we never had, living simply, growing food, baking bread, playing and laughing with our child. As hard as I try, I struggle to recall a time filled with laughter. Even when my sister and I were children growing up in the castle, our lives were so rigid—with lessons, with propriety, with spending time alone in our rooms with our servants while our parents entertained, or traveled to neighboring lands—that we had to make our own enjoyment.

Looking back now, after all these years, I can barely recall a childhood in the castle, let alone recall laughter and joy. My sister was the one who loved to play outside the castle walls, running, skipping, chasing chickens and geese. I was the solemn child. The child who would grow up to be lord of our land. The child who could not afford to show weakness. How

different my life would have been had I been raised a simple farmer's son.

Blinking back tears, I raise my eyes to the sky. The skyline is disturbed by a tall building that was not there when I first entered the uninhabited village. A castle. The castle I grew up in and indeed spent my lifetime as a nobleman.

No. It can't be.

I shake my head — I must be seeing things. But when I look again, the castle is still there. I recognize the tower in the eastern corner where my rooms were situated. There's the window there through which I gazed out upon the world as a small boy. As I grew older, I still gazed out of the same window, but from a different perspective — one of power and responsibility. It's different gazing upon a land that offers you loyalty and riches, because hand-in-hand with these things come disloyalty and theft.

The cloud of bitterness and regret settles upon my shoulders once more, so much so, that at first I do not hear it.

A sound.

I stop in my tracks, my heart suddenly thumping louder than ever. I dare not raise a hand to my chest to still the violent beating, so I remain still, only my eyes shifting around me as far as my peripheral vision will allow to discover the source of the noise.

There it is again. Behind me. Faint, but I definitely heard something, a slippery slithering sound as though the cabin boy were there mopping the deck.

Panic consumes my thoughts, my breathing speeding up and making me feel dizzy. I dare not turn around and confront whatever it is. Instead, without a second thought, I run to the nearest home and crash through the door, pushing it shut behind me.

The door does not close fully, but leaves a crack through which I can see the dusty path and another home on the other side. My back pressed against the wall, out of sight of anyone who comes to the door, I wait. My chest is heaving with the effort of drawing breath. My eyes cannot keep still; they dart from side to side, as if at any moment someone will push open the door and laugh at me for being scared. I do not even glance around the home, but keep my eyes on the entrance.

I wait. My chest feels as though it will explode. My head still spins.

But nothing happens. The door remains almost closed. No one appears, and I think I must have been mistaken—it must have been my mind playing tricks on me with the castle dragging up childhood memories.

Slowly, holding my breath so as not to make a sound, I move first one foot and then the other, keeping my back pressed against the wall, until I am close enough to touch the door. I raise a hand an inch at a time, watching its slow progress but not daring to move any faster, as the tentacle slithers through the crack in the doorway and across the floor toward my feet.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

March 24, 456 A.T.

The girl settles the ragdoll into the tiny cradle, making sure that the soft downy blanket is tucked in tightly all around the doll's body. She does not sing a lullaby to the doll, nor does she whisper, "Goodnight." If questioned, she would not be able to explain why she does not speak, she would simply say that it feels safer if she is quiet.

She has everything that she needs in the castle. She has a cot that is even softer than the cot she shared at home with her mother, although it does not smell like her mother. Each night, when she lays her head on the cushion, she wishes that her mother was here with her. Or, because she knows that her mother is dead, the captain. She misses the ferry. She misses it more than she misses her life at home, because she had come to feel like she belonged there, like

she was a part of the crew, even if she did not have any allocated chores. She misses the cabin boy, and here, tears well in her eyes and she brushes them away. She accepts his death now, the way she accepts that she is here in this strange world. But it does not stop her from missing him.

When she arrived here from the maelstrom, her reaction was one of laughter and happiness. She felt the sun on her face, and she poked out her tongue so that she could taste the salty air. She lay back on the sand and allowed her fingers to burrow into its shifting warmth like an insect hiding from a predator. She momentarily forgot her mother's warning because she felt free. She felt alive. She felt happy.

She was surprised when Gael appeared beside her on the sandy shore. Between them lay her ragdoll, and she reached for the comforter as though she feared Gael might destroy her if he touched it first. But Gael merely looked at her with the same fearful expression she was certain he must have seen upon her own face.

She waited for the captain to follow. She had heard his cry when he realized her intentions. She had followed the leap into the maelstrom through anyway because she knew that she must, but she fully expected the captain to leap in after her, not Gael. She tried to conceal her disappointment at being here with the man who had despised her on the ferry.

"Where are we?" she whispered to him.

Gael shook his head. "I do not know."

"Do you..." she hesitated, not wanting to upset or anger the man, "Do you think the captain will come?"

"No one is coming. Your arrival on the ferry was a mistake...you know that. Without you, everything will return to normal and the crew will forget any of this ever happened. Your sacrifice will save us all."

Sacrifice? What did he mean by that? He rose to his feet and offered the girl a hand up. He walked toward the grassy hill at the back of the beach and the girl followed.

"Where are we going?" she asked, the ragdoll clutched to her chest.

"We are going to...explore."

They too had reached the top of the hill and marvelled at the familiar land facing them. They had walked quietly in the direction of the village, and it wasn't until they reached the first uninhabited homes that the hairs began to prickle on the back of the girl's neck.

She had reached out a hand to Gael, touched his arm and whispered, "I'm frightened."

He had picked her up and carried her to the first home. They had stepped inside and peered around them at the hay-mattresses in the far corner of the room, at the table and chairs, the empty bowls as if someone had consumed a meal immediately before they left. Gael had raised a finger to his lips, warning her to be silent, as he wandered around the basic room, looking but not touching. When he seemed sure that they were alone, Gael took a knife from his

pocket. He raised the knife in the air and slowly approached the girl.

"W-what are you doing?" the girl asked. What was wrong with Gael? Then she realized it: he brought her here to kill her without the captain knowing.

"I'm ending this!" Gael shouted, not realizing he was raising his voice.

It was the girl who had glimpsed the movement outside through the window. She had crouched on the floor, Gael watching her with narrowed eyes and knife raised high. She pointed to the window and Gael looked back, but the girl had already seen it. The monster. She did not know what else to call it.

Gael spotted it too late. It had already sensed their presence. It reached through the window with arms that were long and stringy, the arms feeling their way around as if they could see. The tentacle circled Gael's body before he could react with his knife. The knife dropped to the floor with a clatter which made the tentacles jolt, but only for a second, before they slid further and further around him, tightening, squeezing the life from him.

The girl crouched on the floor with the ragdoll, unable to speak, unable to look away. The monster had attacked so suddenly, so silently, that she felt stupefied, frozen to the spot. She did not even think proper thoughts in those moments, but simply watched, staring, as the monster tightened its deadly hold.

Gael gasped. The tentacle raised itself as if it had heard the voice, before it slithered back to

the man, crawled the length of his body and found his mouth.

The girl did not hesitate. The movement had somehow jolted her back to life. She grabbed the knife from the floor and ran through the doorway. She ran as fast as she could, her breath scratching her throat, her heart thumping wildly. She ran from the pathway, thinking that she would be more difficult to find amongst the homes and hay carts and water troughs. She did not glance behind her, the vision of Gael spurring her on, but kept on running until she found herself in the courtyard in front of the castle.

A quick glance up at the towers and turrets and she was inside the castle, pushing the heavy door closed behind her with a resounding clang. There was a metal lever attached to the back of the door and the girl slid the lever down so that it connected with a metal holder on the opposite side of the frame. She tugged on the door and it did not budge.

The girl did not wait around for the lever's strength to be tested. She ran across the great hall, the sound of her feet slapping across the floor, making her shudder with fear, and to the stone staircase. She flew up the stairs, climbing to the highest rooms of the castle, where she came upon the room in which she has just put the ragdoll to sleep.

She has not left the room since she arrived. She is too scared to leave. She feels safe inside, despite the monsters that constantly surround the castle. The castle is new and unfamiliar, but it is much more comfortable than the ferry. The floors are hard and solid, but there are no stray pieces of wood, or nails or splinters sticking up through them.

The girl has a few things to hold her over. She has a jug of fresh drinking water which she has rationed to a few sips in the morning, a few sips in the middle of the day, and a cupful before she sleeps. She has a loaf of bread which she has rationed the same way. The crusts have turned hard and crumbly, but she cannot chance that the food will be replenished the way it was on the ferry. She does not question where the refreshments came from, or whether anyone else lives in the castle. She has simply accepted that she needs food to survive and this food has not poisoned her, so she continues to eat it.

She has no idea which land this is. She is only sorry that the captain has not yet followed her because she was hopeful that he would. Although she is frightened that the monsters will kill him if he does come for her, she is still clinging to the hope with all her heart. She still has Gael's knife. Maybe she will be able to save the captain from the monsters when he does come.

So, while she remains locked inside the castle, safe for now, part of her still exists outside; watching, listening for the wayfarer's arrival,

where the monsters patrol the castle perimeter but never attempt to come inside for her.

She does not know what they are. Her mother spoke of demons in hushed whispers to the women who often came to her for help. But never in the girl's wildest imagination did she expect them to look like these creatures: spherical, their bodies the length of Gael but much wider, long slithering tentacles instead of arms and legs. And a giant eyeball in the center of their writhing, squirming body that moves around in circles, up and down, left and right, and also turns in upon itself as though the monster might see right through the back of its head. No, not demons, these creatures. Demons would resemble humans, not grotesque deadly monsters.

The crew spoke of soul eaters – the monsters that would wreak punishment upon them should they be late fulfilling their journey. None spoke of the soul eater's appearance, but she saw what the first monster did to Gael. It crushed him, squeezing the breath from his body. And the worst thing of all, the sight that she ran from and that wakes her up in a cold sweat in the middle of the night, the tentacle reaching into Gael's mouth. Did it eat Gael's soul? The more she considers it, the more she believes it to be true.

She wonders how it would feel to have your soul sucked from you. Would it be painful? Would you feel your soul being dragged through your body and out through your

mouth? Gael did not cry out, but she saw the fear in his eyes.

She shudders at the thought. Best not to think about something until it happens. No good ever comes from dwelling on bad things.

The girl is so accustomed to the constant, almost imperceptible hissing of the monster's tentacles' scraping across the ground outside, that the silence startles her from her nightmarish reverie. She half-turns her face toward the window, listening. No, she can hear nothing.

She rushes to the window and peers down to the ground, to the castle's cobbled courtyard. The soul eaters are still there, their giant eyes all turned toward the village as if they too are listening to the silence. Waiting.

The girl scans the village that she has been watching for days now: the silent empty homes, the paths that no one treads, the haystacks that feed no animals. The silence weighs heavy upon her slender shoulders, for she feels it is the bringer of bad news, that when the silence ends, her peaceful life inside the castle walls with the ragdoll will be over.

She holds her breath, her shoulders tense. One of the soul eaters begins to move away from the castle, hissing across the cobbles in the direction of the village.

And then she spots the single figure at the far side of the village, and her heart rolls around inside her chest like a kitten chasing a ball of wool.

The captain!

He has come for her.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

March 24, 456 A.T.

The girl stuffs her fist inside her mouth to stop herself from crying out. She wants to wave at the captain, to let him know that she is here, but she dares not move. She is fixed to the spot, her fingers gripping the window ledge, tears of joy in her eyes.

She can see him clearly, his strong strides as he travels along the path. He has that wary look that has become so familiar to her on the ferry, the look of a man who has spent hundreds of years staring out to sea. Only now, when he stops walking, his whole body tensed, listening, she can tell that he is filled with a different kind of wariness; driven by panic, by uncertainty.

While she has been watching the wayfarer, the soul eater has silently traveled through the village and is almost upon the intruder. But the man is quick. He must sense danger, or else he

has heard the slithering of the soul eater's tentacles, because he darts inside the empty home that is closest to him and disappears from the girl's view.

She stares at the doorway through which the captain vanished until her eyes water. She refuses to look away. Something inside her brain is telling her that if she keeps him in her sight, the soul eater cannot touch him, and that the second she looks away, something terrible will happen. The worst thing that could possibly happen, the captain will be killed.

It feels like hours that the girl waits at the window.

She knows that the other monsters are still surrounding the castle. Until now, she has contented herself with the notion that the monsters have been protecting her. They followed her here, and although she secured the lever across the front door, she does not think that they have tried to enter, neither have they tried to climb the walls and claim the girl through the window opening. Now though, with the captain's life in danger, she wonders if they have been biding their time, waiting for her to come outside.

The monster in the village has been motionless since the captain went inside the grass-roofed hut. It too is waiting; she guesses it is waiting for the captain to come back out. She then almost cries out when the monster appears directly outside the hut's entrance. She didn't see it move, it was so fast, like the adders that

used to slither amongst the long grasses when she was a girl back in her home village.

A tentacle wriggles and writhes in front of the monster's body, creeping slowly toward the doorway and in through the gap between the wall of the hut and the wooden door. The girl wants to scream. She wants to warn the captain to run, but she is too frightened in case she makes his situation even more precarious.

And then, as she watches, the monster rears away from the hut, rising on the other tentacles so that its body is higher than all the homes in the village and turns its giant eyeball to the sky. Red water sprays the monster and the grass roofs surrounding it, and the girl does not know what is happening. And then she understands that the red water is blood. The captain has somehow sliced off the end of the monster's leg. She thinks he has somehow discovered her knife, and then she remembers it is safely tucked inside the crib beneath the ragdoll's body. He must have found another instrument to use against the soul eater.

While the monster is rearing and bucking in pain, the captain climbs through the window at the other side of the hut and runs.

The girl instinctively raises a hand in the air and waves at the captain, praying for him to look up at her. She prays that the other soul eaters will stay in the courtyard. She prays for the captain's safety.

And as the monsters begin crawling away from her haven and closer to their prey, the

wayfarer glances up at the castle tower and she knows that he has seen her.

She could cry with joy, but she is too filled with fear for his safety.

She must do something. She needs to stop the soul eaters from reaching him, because now that he has wounded one of them, they will not spare his life.

The wayfarer runs in a zigzag pattern through the village, dodging the huts and avoiding the path which would be the most straightforward route, but also the one which the soul eaters will expect him to take. He keeps his eyes on the girl, as though he too believes that he will be safe as long as she is in sight. But still, they are edging closer and closer to him. There are so many of them that when they begin to spread out, the girl knows she has no time to waste.

She jumps up and down at the window, waving her arms above her head. They appear to slow, but she is not sure if that is simply her imagination willing them to slow. She opens her mouth and yells at the top of her lungs, "Come back! Look, come and get me!"

The soul eaters stop, and the silence is so sudden that she thinks she can hear the cries of the injured monster who is now rolling around on the floor, its sliced tentacle still spurting blood all around it. They turn their eyes toward her, and she yells again, "This way!"

The wayfarer also halts in his tracks, for one moment, before he shakes his head at the girl and runs even faster toward the castle. He too is

waving his arms, but his gestures are warning the girl to stop.

The soul eaters appear hesitant. A few are already turning away from the girl.

She reacts fast. Turning from the window, she runs to the crib and removes the precious ragdoll from beneath the cover. Clutching the doll to her chest, she returns to the window and raises it above her head. "Look what I have!" she cries out. Her throat is sore from shouting and from the days of drinking too little liquid. But she keeps her voice as loud as possible. "Over here!" The girl leans out of the window and drops the ragdoll.

She watches its slow spiralling fall to the cobbled courtyard below. She thought that she would be sad to lose the doll that has been with her for as long as she can remember, the last gift that her father gave her. But instead, she feels a surge of excitement as the soul eaters turn away from the village and crawl rapidly back toward the castle to see what has fallen.

It has worked.

They are no longer paying attention to the wayfarer. They are more interested in the girl at the window and the unknown object which now lies broken upon the ground.

The girl knows that it will only be moments until they discover that the fallen object is not worth their time. She also knows that when this happens, they will renew their efforts to reach the wayfarer and no amount of yelling will deter them.

She has to save him. She has to repay him for rescuing her from the land of the dead and for all the security and comfort he gave her on the ferry. She knows that he never understood the living girl's presence and that she made his life difficult because he was always trying to protect her, but she has grown to think of him as the father she barely remembers from her early years. She thinks that she has even grown to love him.

And she will not let him die. Not here. Not after everything.

She could run down the stairs and across the great hall to the door of the castle, raise the lever and run outside, but there is no time for that. By the time she is in the courtyard, the soul eaters will have discovered the wayfarer who is now approaching the near end of the village.

No, there is only one thing that she can do.

Dragging her eyes away from the wayfarer, she climbs up onto the window ledge, holding on to the walls to keep her balance. The wayfarer's expression turns to one of horror and he cries out, "No! Get back! No!" He throws his arm back and forth above his head, pointing at the castle.

The girl smiles at him. She hopes that he will understand why she has to do this. She hopes that he will know how much she loves him. He is on his knees on the ground, his arms now limp by his sides, and she can tell that he is sobbing by the way his shoulders are juddering. She prays that this will be enough to save him.

The soul eaters have sensed the girl's movement, or else they have understood the wayfarer's cries, for they have turned back to the castle, scurrying and creeping across the cobbles, their skinny pink tentacles clawing their way up the castle walls.

It all makes sense to her now; the ferry, the captain, even Gael. Everything was leading up to this point; no matter which paths they had chosen, they would have always ended up here.

The girl lets go of the walls on both sides of her, raises her arms to the sky, and jumps.

EPILOGUE

May 19, 456 A.T.

The girl runs through the woods, her skirt filled with berries that she has picked from the bushes lining the road that leads to the trees, so that she has to keep stopping to collect the fruit that she drops. She is breathless by the time she reaches her home, her cheeks rosy with the cool air and the sunshine following her race.

She does not want to be late—her father promised that he would have a surprise for her when she comes back. She has a surprise for him, too.

Her father allows her to walk to the woods as long as she is back home before the sun begins its journey down to the ground; he knows how much she loves to be in the woods. Her mother showed her the leaves to pick for healing potions, the lavender to help aid sleep and keep a home smelling fresh, the best blackberries to

pick for jam. When she is there, images flash through her mind and she often hears her mother speaking as clearly as if she were standing beside her.

She cannot wait to tell her father what she has just decided. She already pictures his surprise, the way his eyes will light up. He will be tired from a hard day's work in the nearby village, but happy nonetheless. She hopes that his leg will not be so sore once she has made the ointment to coat it with—she knows that it still pains him because she can see the lines etched more deeply into his forehead, the way he clenches his jaw and then smiles when he realizes that she is watching him. He pretends well, but she has seen him rubbing the back of his leg when he thinks that she is sleeping.

The wound has healed, but the raw mark remains. The girl wonders if it will ever vanish completely, or if it will be the price he paid in return for the bite from a soul eater. It is the sole reminder of their previous life. The wayfarer brought nothing with him into the maelstrom from the ferry, and the girl sacrificed her ragdoll when she jumped from the window of the tower.

She rarely thinks about what happened after she leaped from the tower. There are times, mostly when she is sleeping, when she will feel herself falling, her arms and legs flailing, her hair whipping her face with the force of the fall. On these occasions, she sits upright on her bed, her nightclothes damp with sweat, her breathing frantic and shallow. Her father holds her close to him and strokes her hair until the night terror

passes and she slips back into peaceful slumber. Other times, she will be walking through the woods and hear the slithering of a mouse into a hole and the fear will grip her again. But she has learned to remind herself that there are no soul eaters in the land of the living.

When she jumped that day, to save the wayfarer from the soul eaters, he did in fact save her. Somehow, inexplicably, he was waiting at the bottom of the tower to catch her. She landed in his arms. Such was the force of their love that they would both sacrifice their own life for the other, and despite the tentacle wrapped around the wayfarer's leg, they were transported here, to their new life. Here Amadeo—once a bitter and selfish man, then wayfarer and the captain of the ferry, was given a second chance to live and awarded the opportunity to be a father, an opportunity that had not presented itself in his first lifetime.

He became the girl's father.

The girl slows down when she is almost home. This is what she likes to do—stand outside the house that she shares with the wayfarer and stare at the squirrels running around, breathe in the smell of the flowers, listen out for the sound of his gentle voice.

She takes a deep breath, opens the front door, and steps inside.

"Hola." He smiles at her while hiding something behind his back. She can't get over how different her father looks now. Where before his skin was colorless and rotting, it is now tan with a healthy glow and radiance.

Where there had once been only a captain's hat atop his head, there is silky black hair sporting streaks of gray.

"Hola?" the girl asks. "What does that mean?"

"I've remembered the language I spoke in my old life—I'll teach it to you. There's so much you need to learn about my culture. It's truly beautiful."

"I look forward to it." The girl replies.

"You've been busy." Her father gestures to the raised skirt and her exposed grubby knees.

"And you're hiding something from me," she smiles broadly, her eyes crinkling at the corners.

"I do not know what you mean," he says, only half-meaning his words.

The girl looks intrigued. "What is my surprise?"

"I was going to make you wait until night," he says, "but I cannot wait any longer. Close your eyes and hold out your hands."

She does as she is told and closes her eyes, her grin still in place, hands out in front of her, palms facing upwards. Something soft and light is placed into her hands and her eyes fly open.

It is a ragdoll. Her face is made from soft creamy muslin stuffed with hay, her hair tightly braided with soft fluffy wool, her eyes two shiny wooden buttons stained blue to match the girl's eyes. Her clothes are made from gleaming yellow silk and upon her feet are yellow wooden clogs.

The girl inspects the ragdoll, her eyes wet with tears. She lifts the doll carefully as though

she is a freshly laid egg that she is scared to crack. She pulls the doll close and kisses her face.

"What do you think?" asks her father. "Do you like her?"

The girl runs to her father and throws her arms around him in a tight embrace, the ragdoll between them gently pressing into their chests. "She's amazing!" She stares at the doll as though she has never seen anything quite so beautiful.

"I cannot believe you made her for me."

"I have been wanting to make her since...since we came here. I know how much you missed the other doll."

The girl nods thoughtfully. Her eyes widen. "I almost forgot my surprise for you," she says, breathless.

"Well now, what could it be, I wonder?" asks her father.

"You'll never guess, so I shall have to tell you."

"Go on," says her father. "The suspense is killing me."

"I've chosen a name."

Her father looks surprised. "Really? What is it?"

"You have to guess that part!"

He scratches his chin. Recalling what the girl said at their first meeting about the criteria for choosing her name, he teases, "Hmm...Graives?"

"No!"

"Gael?"

"No, silly!"

He shrugs. "Well, our home is surrounded by flowers...and who doesn't love flowers? Did you choose to be called Lilly, or perhaps Rose?"

"Amadea!" The girl exclaims.

The father pauses for a moment, then chokes back a tear. "Amadea...that's a *wonderful* name."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

J. Edwards Holt is an American author who has always harbored a passion for writing. After initially pursuing a degree in education, he followed his heart to become a novelist and children's author. Now celebrated as a bestselling author, Holt is also an ordained minister and a dedicated mental health advocate. In his free time, he enjoys reading and actively contributes to the well-being of the less fortunate in his community. His works often carry Christian messages, and he delights in the realms of science fiction and superheroes, with a notable collection of comic books to his name.

Holt's literary contributions include the haunting tale *The Crossing: A Wayfarer's Chronicles*, and the award-winning children's book *The Jealous Little Ogre*, which clinched the Golden Wizard Book Prize. He is also known for his *Barrenworld* series and his involvement in the

anthology *Called to Intercede*, which topped the Amazon Best Seller List. Beyond his novels, Holt has expressed his creativity through poetry and has been recognized for his efforts in translating important works to reach a wider audience.