

## Chapter 13

# THE ELDER DRAGONS

### —SKY—

It is dark by the time I reach the winery. People have long since gone to their beds, leaving the night to the crickets and frogs and foxes. Even the roads are near empty, missing the hum of engines. I drive through a gravel path until I can park my car on a gravel lot. Then I text Blake with my location, in case he needs to find me, and so he can pick up my beat-up car. There's a dirt road that leads deep into fields of grass. The man I seek is at the end of the path.

Kaden sits under an olive tree, sharpening his blade with a whetstone. His skin is pale in the moonlight and his eyes bright blue. His coat is crumpled off to the side. I see the vest he wears unbuttoned, revealing his bare arms and chest. His muscles coil and stretch as he grinds stone against steel. The burn mark on his shoulder doesn't appear to bother him anymore. He seems more sculpture than man. A relic from a time long past. When warriors and monsters did battle.

His voice is soft when he speaks. "I will be honest with you, Sky. There is a chance you may never see your daughter again. Even if you master all there is for you to learn. Even if you find your enemy and end him. It may already be too late."

My hand curls into a fist. "I know Kara may be dead already. But even if I can't save her, I won't stop fighting until Pike is stopped. Until he can never take a child again." I take a step forward toward Kaden. "You held your own against Pike. Teach me how to do the same."

He grins. "Usually, you would begin with a more basic teacher—"

"I need to be the best. Better than you, even, if I'm to defeat Pike." I lock eyes with him, studying his reaction.

For a moment, he seems to contemplate my words, then he smiles again. "Very well. I will begin your training. But, once we reach the Cliff,

we shall have to go our separate ways. I will have my duties to uphold, and you will have lessons to attend.”

I take another step closer. “The Cliff? I’ve heard you mention it before.” *Back in my Sanctuary.*

“It is the place where Ashlords are trained. Where you will be trained.”

“And what happens if I change my mind? If I want to leave?”

He grinds the stone once more against his blade, and the sharp edge glints in the moonlight. “You cannot. Those who give up on training, or those who fail, are made Charred. They remain at the Cliff, serving to its every need.”

“So they are made slaves?”

His eyes look far away. “We are all slaves in a way. Our duty is simply different.” He pauses. “It is too dangerous to let Twin Spirits run amok. So one way or another, they serve the Cliff. Willingly, or not.”

I look around at the dark rolling hills that surround us, at the fields of olive trees and their leaves swaying in the wind. “So where is this Cliff?”

“Like me, it is not of this world.”

I step closer again, sitting next to him by the tree. “What do you mean?”

“I grew up in a land far away, a land much different than yours. A land you will soon see. It is a place of harsh winds and magnificent beasts. A place of windswept ruins and towering castles. A place of spirits and serpents. A place of dragons.”

I glance at him, my gaze intense. “Dragons? Like my spirit?”

“They say spirits come from the dead. I speak of dragons that yet live.” He points to the night sky. “Once the stars are aligned, I will take you to my world. To the world of the Cliff and the Wall of Light. The world they call Nirandel.”

“Nirandel...” I repeat, trying to commit the name to memory.

Kaden flips his sword over in his hand and begins to work on the side yet dull. “I recommend you leave any electronics behind. They will not serve you in my world.”

I pull my cheap cellphone from my pocket. “Why not?”

He shrugs. "Each world has its own rules, laws of nature, as it were. Your technology does not work in Nirandel, nor can it even be made if one tried."

"Why?"

He raises an eyebrow. "Why does gravity pull us down? Why does time move forward? It's just the way things are, whether we like it or not." He pauses. "For example, your world, this world, Gia as we call it, has no limit on technology, and yet it is weakest when it comes to any forms of magic. In Nirandel magic is strong, but technology weak. There is no reason, as far as anyone knows, though some scholars do have a theory: that a world has only so much space for technology and magic. If it has much of one, it must have little of the other. A balance can also be struck, some say, if both magic and technology were to be of middling levels, but I have yet to see such a world."

"I see..." I say, my thoughts spinning. "So it's like a person. You can be lithe and agile and small. Or huge and muscled and strong. You could even be something in-between, but you can't really be both."

Kaden nods. "Interesting perspective. I shall have to tell the scholars." He puts the whetstone away, and with the tip of his sword, draws a triangle in the dirt.

"What is this?" I ask.

"You're first lesson." He points to each corner of the triangle. "These are the three pillars of Spirit. Transmuting, Imbuing, and Beckoning. Beckoning you have already done twice. Once in the forest against the Fenrial. Once against Pike. It is when you summon your Spirit into physical form. Transmuting you have also done, when you changed your hand into a claw. Transmuting, you see, is the art of blending your body

and that of your Spirit's into one. Imbuing, you have yet to try." He pulls a silver coin from his pocket and runs it across his knuckles. "For it is the art of infusing other objects with Spirit in order to give them power." He flicks the coin to me, and I catch it.

"So Imbuing is how you make talismans," I say. "Like the one you used to create a barrier around us under the bridge."

Kaden nods. "Talismans may not have great power, in the literal sense, but their strength lies in their versatility. They have far more varied uses than Beckoning or Transmuting."

I grin, excited by the wealth of new knowledge I have access to. "How do I make one?"

"You start as we all start. By learning the glyphs." He points at the talisman in my hands. "That is the glyph for purify. One day, you will need to use it to vanquish corrupted spirits as I did with the Fenrial. Memorize it. Know it as well as you know your name."

He hands me a stick. "Draw the symbol into the sand. Over and over until you can draw it without looking. Until you can draw it without thinking."

I begin the exercise, remembering Kara. With every stroke I draw in the sand, I imagine a world in which I could have saved her. A world in which I could have used my abilities to stop Pike. A world in which Kyle and Caleb and Kara and I sit together on the couch eating 'pasgetti' and laughing at the silly things in life.

"Are you sure you wish to come with me?" asks Kaden. "If you do not, another Ashlord will come for you, but you may have more time with your brothers. Once we leave, you may not see them again for years. You may not see them again ever."

I have considered all the options, and this is still my choice. “Like you said, I need to learn to control my powers. If I don’t, I’ll harm the very people I care about.”

He nods, then looks to the sky. “The stars are almost aligned. Before we go, let me tell you a story. A story of how the nine worlds came to be.”

My eyes go wide. “Nine?”

“Don’t get too excited. They are not all inhabitable, much like the planets around earth. But yes, there are nine. Keep drawing the glyph and listen. For here is the legend of Nir and the creation of the Nine Worlds.

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Out of darkness was born the first dragon, Alandel, and she had nine children. Nir and Gai, Ava and Inf, Heln and Spri, Var and Min and Undi. When their mother died, the elder dragons divided her body amongst themselves. Var took her flame. Min took her blood. Undi her eyes, and Spri her wings. Inf took her scales and Gai her bones. Ava took her heart and Heln her spirit. And last Nir took her mind. And with what they took, each elder dragon formed a world for themselves, and so the Nine Worlds were born.

Nir, however, was not content with simply land. Why have land but no one to share it with, he asked? And so, using the last pieces of Alandel’s mind, he created mankind. He treated them as his children, and taught them how to master fire, how to tame water, how to grow crops and build homes. Nir enjoyed people so much, he took their form often for himself, and one day, even fell in love with a woman. They bore three children together, the first High Dragons, blood of both dragon and man.

It was not long until the other elder dragons grew jealous of Nir and his children. They too wanted the company of people, and so they approached Nir, asking for people of their own. The elder dragon Nir said he would let his children decide whether they wanted to live in other worlds or not.

Gai, who had taken her mother's bones, had built a large world full of mountains and seas and rivers and lakes, and some people said they would go to her world. Ava had built a world of flying islands and deep caves, and some people too said they would go there to live. Other people preferred other worlds. But Var had built a world of fire, and Min a world of ice, and no people chose to join them there. The two elder dragons grew furious. If they could not have mankind on their worlds, they said, then they would take the other worlds for themselves. And so, a great war began.

For millennium, the elder dragons battled each other, until it is said only Nir, the smartest, and Var, the strongest, remained. The two were equal on the field of battle, and so Nir devised a plan. We can continue for another millennium, said Nir, and accomplish nothing, or we can divide the worlds between us and have peace. But there are Nine Worlds, said Var. How do we divide them fairly?

We split one world in half, said Nir, and each take one side. Var agreed.

And so the elder dragons met on the world of Ava, and together they prepared to cast a powerful spell to split the world in two. We stand on different sides of this river, said Nir, for this river is in the middle of this world, and this way it will be fair. Var agreed. And so they cast the spell. A giant blade of light fell from the sky to tear the world in two, but it did

not fall upon the river, for you see, Nir had lied. The river did not split the world in half, instead it was the field that Var now stood upon. And thus the blade of light fell upon Var himself, tearing his body, instead of the world, in two.

What Nir did not know however, was that Var was pregnant, and when Var died, from his stomach spilled a thousand dragons. They spread throughout the worlds, killing mankind and feeding off their Spirits. In days, almost all the people were dead, and so Nir did the only thing he could. He used all his strength to draw the dragons together and cast a wall of light around them, cutting them off from Spirit and man. So powerful was the spell, that Nir gave his own life to cast it. And so, the final elder dragon died to save his children, and the age of the Ancients ended. But some say Nir is not dead, just asleep, regaining his strength, and when mankind needs him once more, the elder dragon will awaken.

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Kaden pauses, letting his words sink in.

His mythology is so different from the ones I grew up hearing. It reminds me of a children's fable more than real history, and it would be easy to call it trivial. But I've seen too much dismiss the fantastical anymore. And I have a feeling I'm about to see a lot more.

Kaden stands and throws on his long black coat. "I can see the questions in your eyes," he says, "but it is time. The stars are aligned." He holds out his hand to me, and I take it, and he guides me to a fountain amidst the olive trees. The shallow water shimmers in the light, casting our pale reflections back at us. Kaden pulls a coin from his pocket and

flips it in the fountain, and the surface of the waves changes. Where once the water seemed shallow, it now seems of infinite depth. Where once it seemed chaotic, it now seems as still as a mirror. And where once the stars seemed but a reflection, they now seem to shine from beyond the waves.

“Are you ready?” asks Kaden.

I nod.

And together we jump into the fountain.



## Chapter 14

### NIRANDEL\*\*

#### —SKY—

I brace myself for the cold shock of water, but instead emerge into a sea of stars. A night sky never ending. I float through the darkness, as if there is nothing but space around me. No air. No water. Only cold. Only night. And the stars and planets and moons shimmering in the unspeakable distance.

There is the sound of water breaking. I look up and see Kaden appear from nothingness. His scarf and coat and hair drift up slowly, as if he were sinking, and he moves through the space as if swimming, until his arm is touching mine.

I want to speak, but I dare not let the air out from my lungs. I do not know if I can breathe in this strange place. Kaden gestures for me to follow him, then swims forward, toward a ring of golden light. A nebula, I think I've heard it called. I follow Kaden, paddling through the sky, and find that moving here is much like moving through water, but easier and faster, as if there is no friction of any kind. It's like my dreams, where I would fly as if swimming. I wonder if I am really in space, but I cannot be. I would freeze to death.

The nebula grows larger before us, until it covers all my vision with

gold. Up close now, I realize it's not a multitude of stars as much as a wall of light. Or perhaps it changed as I grew closer. Kaden swims past me, disappearing behind the golden hue. For a moment, I hesitate to follow, but there is no turning back now. I reach out with my hand, touching the light. It feels soft and smooth and warm. With one final push, I plunge forward, letting the sea of stars engulf me in its warm embrace.

My head breaks through the surface, and I emerge as if from a deep dive, gasping for air. I stand in a shallow pool of crystal clear water, my feet touching sand that was not there before. The air is thinner here. The wind weaker. And the heat stronger.

It is bright. Night has turned to day, the sky a clear blue. Lush green bushes that look like the tops of palm trees circle the pond we just stepped out of, and thick vines fall from taller trees. Dense emerald grass covers the ground, and small purple flowers that sprout in clusters dot the landscape. Far above, I hear a shrill bird call, then a chorus of responses from the nearby trees, a beautiful song reverberating through the air.

Past the trees and the grass, past this little oasis we have landed in, is an endless horizon of silver sand shining too brightly in the sun. An endless stretch of desert with no signs of life, at least above the surface.

"Something is wrong," says Kaden, walking out of the water, his clothes dripping onto the grass. "We were supposed to arrive closer to the Cliff. This place..." His words trail off, and he stands silent, looking at the sky.

I walk onto dry land, my wet clothes rubbing against my skin. At least it's warm. I'd be freezing in the wind. "What happened? Your fountain portal broke or something?"

"They're not portals," he says, "not really. It's more about the stars.

When the stars align over certain bodies of water, that water can be used to travel between worlds. All one needs is a travel talisman and the knowledge of which stars align where and when. It changes from month to month, year to year. It's not a simple science, but I was certain we should have arrived miles north of here." He pauses, frowning. "I heard whispers... talk of the stars fading, the light dying..."

I raise an eyebrow. "Care to explain what you're mumbling about?"

He turns to me. "Some say this world is ending. That soon our magic will fade away and the light will vanish. That darkness will come. Of course, there are always those who speak of the apocalypse and there always will be. I gave no credence to it, but the stars..." He shakes his head. "I must have made a mistake is all. Simple as that."

He glances around. "Now where was... ah. Here." He runs up to a tree with emerald vines and large, multi-faceted crystals that grow in place of fruit. He brushes away a pile of sand and stone, revealing a symbol underneath: two black swords crossed over each other in an X. "One of our hidden caches," he explains, grabbing a handle obscured in the ground and pulling. The symbol opens like a hatch, revealing a small space stuffed full of objects: clothing, a pair of daggers, something that might be food.

Kaden passes me a blue cloak and robes and a towel. "Dry off, then put these on. They will keep you warm in the night. And they'll help you fit in with the locals."

He grabs a pair of black robes for himself, then pulls off his shirt. He starts unbuckling his pants and—

"What are you doing?" I ask.

He pauses. "Apologies. I forget myself. Modesty is much less important on Nirandel than in your world. I'll find a more private

location.” He walks away, disappearing behind a tree.

I take the moment to undress and dry off, then put on the new robes. They are thin and light and seem made of silk, and it isn't long until I start to feel cooler in the heat. I throw a hood over my head to shade my face, and adjust the blue cloak on my back, then check my reflection in the lake. I look as if I've stepped out of a fairytale, one about knights and princesses and wizards.

Kaden emerges from the trees, dressed all in black once again, except for his red scarf. He grabs a bag from the cache and packs our old clothing. “This look suits you,” he says.

“Is this how everyone dresses here?”

“More or less. This world is much like your medieval age in some ways, and yet quite different in others.” He pulls a scroll of leather from the cache and unrolls it on the sand, revealing pictures of mountains and trees and cities and borders. A map. Kaden points to the bottom left of the scroll. “We are here, in the Silver Desert. We need to get here.” He points to a picture of a fortress to the north.

I read the script next to the drawing. “Dragoncliff.”

Kaden nods. “The place where you will train. We call it the Cliff for short.” He points to a line on the map near our location. “We will follow this river until we reach a village. Then we can hire a carriage. I'd say we should be at Dragoncliff in three weeks.”

That's much longer than I expected, and I feel anger burning inside me for the delay. Every moment I'm not training is a moment I waste. The faster I master my abilities, the faster I can stop Pike. But this rage is foolish. I was stupid to think this journey would be a quick one. I will need to train, but I will also need to eat and sleep and rest. I will need to

learn about this new world: the laws, the manners, the customs, just so I can survive long enough to defeat my enemy. This journey may take months, I realize, even years. I will need to steel myself for what is to come.

A small creature flutters down from the trees and hovers before me, pulling me from my stupor. I almost think it a bird, but it's unlike any bird I have ever seen. Its skin is smooth, featherless, and glows a pale blue. Though it has wings, they are more like fins, and the creature appears to swim through air rather than fly. I raise a hand, and it twirls around my finger, gently touching it with its wispy long tale. The creature hums, a sort of ethereal purr, and rubs against my palm. It has no beak, more a toothless mouth, and it seems to smile.

"Starcatchers," says Kaden, as he grabs two water skins from the cache and fills them in the oasis. "This one seems to like you."

I pet the little Starcatcher in my hand, half wondering if this is all a dream. "Where did the name come from?" I ask.

"They are born as little Pods." He holds his index finger above his thumb. "Little bitty things, that can't fly or glow. But when they're old enough, the old tales say Pods go on a quest, a voyage amongst the stars. And when they find a star of their own, they eat it up, and let it engulf their bodies in warmth. The star becomes a part of them, and so they glow from within and forever get the power of flight. And thus a Pod becomes a Starcatcher."

The little bird squeals in delight, then zips up, disappearing amongst the trees. I chuckle, and realize my sadness has been swept away by the little creature, at least for a while. There is so much to see here, so much to learn. Perhaps I can lose myself in this new knowledge, and make

learning, and not despair, my guide.

“Tell me more about your world,” I say, gesturing to the map. “Show me your capitols and borders. Your cities and towns.”

Kaden begins. “As I said, we are in the Silver Desert. Just north of us is the city of Al’Kalash, and deep within, lies the Palace of Storms. It is where the Emperor, Titus, rules.”

“How much land does he control?” I ask.

Kaden gestures at the map. “He is Titus, the Unbroken, the Slayer of Dragons, the Emperor of Nirandel.”

“Of Nirandel... so you mean... all of it? The whole world?”

Kaden nods. “Yes. The whole world. Though of course, there are places where his laws are... difficult... to enforce. The Ashlands, for one. The Frozen Mountains, for another.” He points to the locations. The Ashlands at the center of the map. The Frozen Mountains to the north. Then he points to the east. “Here are the Sunstar Isles, where people ride giant beasts amongst the waves and study the ancient arts of Kargara, a form of martial arts.” He points to the west. “And here is La’Moko, a giant island with a proud and wise people, who believe in peace above all.” Kaden leans back, sighing. “Once, long ago, these lands were ruled by the High Dragons.”

“The ones in the story? Half man? Half dragon?”

Kaden stares into the distance, at the silver sand, his eyes dark. “They were real. Magnificent beings with a connection to Spirits unlike any other. They could do things with Beckoning, Transmuting and Imbuing that I can only dream of. Their Spirits were like giants, titans, forces of nature capable of shaping the very earth.” There is awe in his eyes now, wonder in his words. “I dreamed of being one of them, wished for it with

all my being. But..." the thrill leaves him. "But it was not meant to be. And the High Dragons were not meant to live on."

There is a sorrow in him now, and I touch his hand with mine, seeking to ease the pain. "What happened to them?"

"First, they turned on each other," he says. "They divided the lands amongst themselves, but like Alandel's children, they were not content with a small piece of the world. They had to have it all, and so civil war after civil war ravaged the land. There were times of peace, of course, but they were always short lived. And then the High Dragons made a terrible mistake. They burned the wife of Titus Al'Beckus." He pauses. "Titus was a man of the middle class, a group of people who had grown in wealth and power yet still had to heed every High Dragon's order no matter how mad. They were tired of wars they cared nothing for, tired of rules that did nothing but rob them, and so, under Titus Al'Beckus, they rose up. Like a tidal wave, the rebellion swept through the land, killing every High Dragon in its path, until none remained."

He takes a swig from his water skin, and says no more.

"But if the High Dragons were so powerful," I ask, "how were they defeated in battle?"

"The Emperor's Shadows," Kaden says, his brow furrowed. "Little is known of them, other than they were Titus's most loyal servants, and underwent rituals best forgotten. They are... more beast than man. Unnatural things. I pray you will never come across one."

He turns back to the map, his mood shifting, turning lighter, as if to brush away the darkness of the past. He points to a large circle at the center of the map. "And here is the Wall of Light."

I trace my hand over the lines on the map. "The Wall of Light? Like

the one in the story?”

He nods. “It *is* the one in the story. The one Nir created to keep the dragons at bay. It is an Ashlord's sacred duty to defend the Wall, for if it were to fall, the Nine Worlds would be covered in death and ash.”

I point at the picture of Dragoncliff. “But if this drawing represents a fortress, then the Wall of Light is huge. Longer than all your rivers, and larger than any city. This map can't be to scale... can it?”

Kaden sighs. “The Wall of Light is vast. It can be seen from nearly all of Nirandel. Especially in the night, when the skies are dark.”

“So it's enormous.”

“Thousands of dragons live within. Maybe hundreds of thousands. The Ashlands past the wall stretch on for hundreds of miles. We do not even possess an accurate map of them. Every couple hundred years, an Ashlord with great ambitions will set out to make one, but none have ever returned from the center alive.”

Kaden glances at the sun. “It's past midday now. We should travel while we can. Before it gets dark. Then we'll make camp.” He rolls up the map, stuffs it in a bag, and throws the pack over his shoulder. “Once I get a better look at our surrounding area, I should be able to pinpoint our exact location,” Kaden says. “Then it should be easy to find the river.”

“You seem to know these lands quite well,” I say.

He smiles. “There is a library at Dragoncliff full of books and scrolls. As a child, I would pour over all the maps, dreaming of adventure. I wanted to uncover new lands and discover new creatures, but as my teacher once said, such things are not for those of Ash.” He looks down. “It saddens me, sometimes.”

This world may be old to him, but it will all be new to me, and for the



first time since jumping into the fountain I'm filled with something akin to excitement. Then a thought occurs to me. "You were at Dragoncliff as a child?"

Kaden doesn't look at me. "We do not choose when we become Broken Ones, nor when we become a Twin Spirit, and my training began when I was very young." He walks away before I can say more.

I follow him through the brush and emerge onto a desert of silver sand, a vastness of rolling dunes as far as the eye can see. Kaden stares at something in the distance, his smile fading. I follow his gaze to a ruin amongst the sands. Structures and pillars half buried in the earth, withered by time and wind and weather.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"That place..." Kaden clenches his fist. "That place is where my best friend was murdered."

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## Chapter 15

### Dragonstone

"How did it happen?" I ask, staring at the ruins. There are burn marks along pieces of fallen stone, and deep grooves that look like giant claw marks.

"There were rumors of a Corrupted One," says Kaden, his gaze fixed

on the rubble. “A Broken One taken by a Corrupted Spirit. Reports said it attacked a caravan by the ruins, slaughtering all but two woman who escaped, feeding off the souls of the dead. My friend, Alec, and I, were ordered to investigate the matter and slay the beast. We found the creature at night. A Scabrial who had taken a strong host. It stood the size of three men. Had pincers for a mouth and four arms covered in razor sharp spikes. A hard blue shell protected most of its body, and a hundred eyes sprouted from its head. It was a challenging fight, but nothing we couldn’t handle. I took the beast head on. Alec circled around to strike from behind. We were winning, until...”

His fist hardens, vein pulsing on his neck. “Until *she* appeared. A woman. Clad in white armor, her face covered in a featureless mask, her hair crimson red. She had been sitting on top of the ruins, hiding in the shadows. She moved in an instant. Above us one moment. Then behind Alec the next. She stabbed him through the back, her sword exploding from his stomach. I entered his Sanctuary, to help him fight, but he was already dead there too. She stood over his corpse, the world around us disintegrating into ashes. The Sanctuary burned, and my friend burned with it.”

Kaden’s eyes glisten in the sun. “I tried to chase her. But she just vanished. One moment she was there. The next gone. As if she faded into shadow. It was as if... as if she had been waiting for us. As if the whole mission was a trap. But how? How could she bring a Corrupted One to the ruins? Or maybe... maybe she knew where we would be, and so she decided to strike. Maybe...”

His words turn to erratic murmurs, and I take his hand, stilling his trembling fingers. He looks at me then, eyes full of rage and sorrow and heartache. “He always wanted to return home. So I took his body back to Ukiah, the place he grew up. I made sure he was buried at the cemetery near his father and mother.” He says no more, though his tense body sends off waves of anger, like an energy pulse I can practically feel.

I let the silence linger before asking, “What happened to the woman?”

Kaden shrugs. “Some see her, now and again, clad in that white armor.

They say she burned a manor in Al'Kalesh. Sunk a ship in the Frozen Sea. No one knows who she is. Only that she appears as if from nowhere, bringing chaos and death in her wake, and disappears just as quickly. They call her the Outcast now. A ghost on the wind." He turns his eyes to mine, and they are hard and unyielding. His body is still, focused. A warrior bent on one thing. "I've been tracking her for three years now. Someday, I will find her and make her pay for what she did."

"She's your Pike," I say softly.

He nods his head briefly, then begins walking, into the desert.

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It takes us hours of hiking over sand to arrive at the river that will take us to Al'Kalesh. Kaden says we will have to pass through the city on our way to the Cliff, or waste days going around. By the time we wade into the river to refill our waterskins, tall grass sprouting all around us, my legs are tired, my lungs are dried husks, and the water I sip on tastes strange.

When I say as much to Kaden, he chuckles. "You're used to plastic or glass." He holds up the waterskins. "These are made from the bladders of Boxen."

I wrinkle my nose at that. "What's a Boxen?"

He points past my shoulder, and I turn, following his gaze to the horizon. In the distance, against the backdrop of the blazing sun, a caravan travels over the sands. Two giant beasts, covered in fur, carry large packs upon their backs. Two more pull a huge cart. The animals remind me of bison. But far larger, at least four times the size. Their horns are massive, elaborate things, splitting off at the tips like branches to make intricate shapes. There are symbols and lines and drawings etched into the white horns, difficult to make out, but beautiful.

Kaden walks up to my side. "The Akari—the people of the desert—carve their history into the horns of their Boxen. Tales of many generations. For you see, Boxens live for hundreds of years, passed down from mother to daughter. They are gentle, loyal creatures, used all over

Nirandel, but never respected as much as here in the desert.”

“They’re beautiful,” I say, as the caravan tracks across a sand dune. “Are they hunted?” I ask, holding up the waterskin.

“Yes, though such things are frowned upon. These waterskins were made in the natural way. When a Boxen dies, its family makes use of its entire body, letting nothing go to waste. They make tools from the horns. Clothing from the furs. Food from the meat. And of course, these waterskins from the bladder. They were a gift, from a family I once helped.”

I smile. “So is that why the water tastes funny? Boxen bladder is the special ingredient?”

“Yes, partly. Our water also has a lot more mineralization. Your water is rather... ” he pauses, trying to think of the word. “Bland. Lifeless.”

“It's water,” I say. “It's not supposed to taste like anything.”

He just shakes his head. “You've really grown up with such deprivation. It's hard to imagine. But alas, now you will see all you've been missing.” His tone is lighter, and it feels good to engage in some gentle banter after hours of tortured silence.

“Sorry if I don't find animal bladder to be a delicacy,” I say as we both use the river to wash the dust off our faces and hands. “At the risk of sounding like one of my kids, how much farther until we reach Al’Kalesh?”

“We should be there in two days.” He refills his waterskin and I do the same. “Perhaps soon if we catch a ride.” He grins at me, then turns and runs towards the caravan we saw traveling over the dunes.

By the time I catch up, Kaden is already speaking with a small man wrapped in white robes, his skin dark, eyebrows large and expressive. Kaden passes the man three coins — talismans, I realize upon closer inspection — then gestures to me. “Sky, this is Massani. He and his family have agreed to allow us to travel with them.”

I look at Massani, then at the cart behind him, at the woman with raven hair sitting there, three young boys scrambling around her and a little girl no older than four on her lap. “Thank you,” I say to all of them.

Massani walks up to me, grabbing my hands. "*Olkesb amish, Shashami. Orta enbu.*" He leads me forward, toward the giant Boxen in front of the cart. "*Artu, Shishami. Artu.*"

"What is he saying?" I ask, smiling to cover my nervousness.

"He wants you to touch the Boxen," says Kaden. "The Akari say the animals have the ability to read a stranger's heart."

"Alright then," I say. I step forward toward the Boxen. Its head is huge, about the size of my entire body, its nostrils near the size of my head. I raise a hand slowly and gently place it above the Boxen's dark lips. The beast groans, exhaling sharply, kicking up dust.

"*Ikashi. Ikashi,*" calls Massani, grabbing the Boxen by its harness, calming it down.

I back away. "I'm sorry. I didn't—"

Kaden laughs. "No. It's good. The Boxen likes you."

My hand falls on my chest, and I sigh in relief. "Oh... okay."

"*Artu, Shishami. Artu,*" says Massani, taking my hand and guiding me onto the cart. I sit next to the woman with black hair and yellow robes, Kaden on my other side.

"*Anavri et tuu ah,*" says Kaden, and the woman says something back, smiling.

Kaden glances at me. "She is Etu. Massani's wife. And these are their four children. Gatack. Alep. Etoon. And the little girl is Kenta."

I wave hello to all of them as the cart begins to move, catching up to the rest of the caravan. The little girl pulls on my hair, and I barely escape her grasp, laughing. We chat for a while, Kaden translating my words, until the sun begins to set, and the children become drowsy.

I turn to Kaden, whispering in his ear. "They called me *Shishami*. What does it mean?"

He turns his head to the side, squinting. "I believe it means traveler... in Akari."

"Traveler," I repeat, grinning, as the caravan stops for the night. We make camp under the shadow of a great ruin, a black tower jutting from the sand. Kaden tells me it was once a fortress of the High Dragons,

shattered in the uprising, and now withered by time, as we help Massani and his family set up tents. A great fire is made at the center of the camp, using wood carried by the Boxen, and the entire caravan huddles around, dozens of people all related in some manner. I sit with Kaden and Etu, her children playing a game in front of us, making symbols with their fingers. As the sun sets, three moons rise in the desert sky, and I marvel at the wonder of it, so different from my own world. Kaden notices and winks at me. "Magnificent, aren't they? Legends say the moons represent the mother dragon and her children, for only one is ever full at one time. The other two are always growing, trying to become as great as the mother."

My focus is pulled away from the sky as the elders begin to tell stories. Kaden translates the main details, but mostly I enjoy the flow of the language, the poetry in its beats and rhythms even when I don't know the exact translation.

The younger men and women pull large drums from the carts, and play loudly into the night, chanting as the thunderous thumps of their instruments reverberate across the sand dunes. Their voices blend together, a rising cry both primal and beautiful, filling my body with euphoria.

A young girl runs up to me, presenting me with a necklace. Black beads with a small black horn as the pendant. "Is this for me?" I ask.

The girl nods, and I take the necklace, smiling and thanking her. She runs back to Massani, and I catch his gaze. He nods thoughtfully, and I think the gift may have been his idea.

Kaden leans closer, his voice soft. "That is dragonstone, Shishami. A great gift, taken from the horn of a dragon."

I trace my hands over the necklace, feeling the weighty pendant. "Why would they give this to me?"

"Because they know who you are," says Kaden. "A Twin Spirit. In their culture, our kind is revered, our connection to the Spirits honored. They know we keep them safe, and this gift is but a small thank you."

I raise my shoulders, mouth agape. "But... I haven't done anything."

"Perhaps not yet. But you will. One day. It will be your duty to defend

the worlds of men and women.” He pauses, taking a piece of bread from a plate. “The Akari have a special sense when it comes to the Spirits. An understanding most could only hope to achieve. Perhaps they know things we don’t. Perhaps they see something in you that even I do not.”

He says no more, and I turn back to the fire, to the pulsing drums and chanting voices. Some of the men and women begin to dance, their bodies writhing around the flame, their figures casting strange shadows on the sand. The rhythm of the music grows louder, syncing with my heartbeat, echoing within my very chest. My skin grows hot, my palms sweaty. The dragonstone seems to throb in my hand, matching the drums. Thump. Thump. Thump. The music grows louder. My vision begins to spin. The fire and stars and moons and people blending into a chaotic painting. Dots cover my eyes. My head feels light. The dragonstone pulses. Thump. Thump. Thump. I notice my wrist then. I notice the bare symbol there. Stripped of the brace I left behind. The dragon gazes back at me, pushing against its circular cage. Thump. Thump. Thump.

The world spins.

And I fall back.

Into darkness.

