

Edge of the Breach
Book 1 of the Rift Cycle



HALO SCOT

1

Pain Made a Man

Julian Kyder, Age 9 ■ *July 7, 7009*

Her body is stone. Her eyes glass. She doesn't see me. Doesn't want me. Yet her blood runs through me, a river of pain.

I call her mother, but she calls me nothing. She hopes to forget me. Hopes I will disappear. Conceived in violence, I am a constant reminder of the crime that made me.

"Come," she orders me. Like a dog. And I jog at her heels, obedient.

She won't use my name. It's a reminder I exist. The meaning behind it is empty, anyway. She refused to name me, so the hospital staff did. Julian Kyder — Julian after the doctor who delivered me and Kyder after the hospital. Forever marked by the circumstances of my birth.

She tried to abort, but I survived. She put me up for adoption, but no one took me. She tried to release me into the system, but they were already at overcapacity. We're trapped. Stuck together as two halves of misery. The doctor told me I am a miracle. She told me I am a curse.

"This way."

She leads me along the edge of the Shelf toward the market. With each step, my feet crunch along the parched gravel. To our left, cliffs drop hundreds of meters into the Ruined Sea, a toxic cesspool that encircles the island. In the distance, Mount Erebus puffs ash into the

blanched sky, a grandfather smoking the last bit of a cigar.

We mutilated our world, bombarded the planet for centuries with nuclear weapons until we ran out of missiles, until Earth flipped upside-down. The only habitable continent is Antarctica, now the North Pole, and even here, the war melted the desolate wasteland into a scorching desert. Humans near extinction, huddled near the top of the planet like exiles. But we deserve it.

A circular wound punctures the sky at its zenith, ever-present. It's the Rift — a dark, festering mass opened by the end of the war one thousand years ago. The hole in the sky is the size of my fist from here, unassuming from the ground, yet world-changing to civilization. It's a gateway to the other realms, though the gods are mostly silent, indifferent, rarely speaking and never interfering. They care as little about this place as I do.

Sweat trickles down my back. I pull my robe tight around myself, hoping to block out the sun. It's summer, so there's no respite from the heat. The days are endless. They bleed into each other like ink on a page, no distinction between the lines. Night won't come for another few months, and soon after it does, it won't leave till winter's done.

Some call it balance. Day and night. Light and dark. Sun and stars. Birth and death. People look for meaning when it's only chaos disguised as order.

"Halela, it's been too long." One of the men from church greets my mother with a warm smile.

"Reve." She shirks away but manages to dip her head in polite acknowledgment.

My mother has autism. Severe autism. Normal sensation is overwhelming. Pregnancy was torture. The doctors drugged her into a medically induced coma for the duration while I grew, a parasite in her belly. And when I was ready, they cut me out, lanced her uterus like an overgrown cyst. The first face I saw was a nurse. The next, the doctor. Then the midwife. My mother was fourth, high on anesthetic. She didn't touch me. Couldn't touch me. It was too much. She couldn't handle it. They put her back under.

I never blame her for her condition. I blame her for everything

else. For her cruelty, for the things she *can* help. She could say she loves me or be there for me in her own way, but she isn't. She's never even made an effort.

"Rations are limited today, I'm afraid." Reve motions to the market where a sprawl of tents crouches under the relentless sun.

He's one of the nice ones. Keeps his distance, understands our situation, but goes out of his way to help. Most aren't like him. The Shelf is a refuge for the rural poor, for those who can't afford to live in Zawad, the last city of human civilization. Most of our neighbors are half-mad zealots preaching about nonsensical bullshit. We fit right in.

"Yes, yes," my mother says. She taps her fingers against her thigh, a nervous tic.

"And who do we have here?" Reve asks. He squats down to look me in the eye. "Little Kyder, how you've grown! You'll be tall as the Four Towers when you're done."

He addresses me properly, by surname, even though I am but a child. First names are reserved for matters of love or intimacy. I have neither.

"Yes, sir," I say.

He ruffles my dark hair. "But too skinny. Here, take my bread. Ra knows I do not need it." He chuckles and pats his round stomach.

"I cannot accept, sir," I say. "Thank you, though."

Reve shoves the bread into my hands. "Take it, child. And get inside right after the market. A sandstorm's forecasted for this afternoon."

I blush at his kindness. "Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

"Always a pleasure, Halela." Reve bows and leaves us.

Silence follows in his absence. My mother speaks only if necessary. It's a wonder I learned language at all.

"Good morn!" an airsail vendor by the side of the path calls to us several minutes later. "On your way to the market? You'd go much faster in one of these."

He pulls out what looks like a wooden surfboard from behind his booth and throws it onto the ground. The board quivers. The top unfolds until a translucent sail interwoven with gold webbing stretches two meters in the air. The board hovers several inches above the gravel

path, sail shimmering like dragonfly wings in the sunlight. It's a shred of high technology pirated from Zawad, out of place in this apocalyptic Hel.

My mother twitches, flustered. Her mouth opens and closes like a marionette as she attempts conversation. "N-no money-y-y," she stutters.

"I'll make you a deal." The vendor, oblivious to my mother's deteriorating condition, continues in singsong. "Pay half upfront and the other half next year."

"M-m-my...I-I-I-I..." Words sputter from my mother's mouth like an engine failing to start.

I step in. "Thank you for your consideration, sir, but we will unfortunately need to decline your generous offer."

The vendor's eyebrows shoot up, noticing me. "How old are you, boy?"

"Nine, sir."

"You don't talk like a nine-year-old."

"I don't act like a nine-year-old, either," I say, my temper rising. "Please allow us to pass, and we will be on our way."

There's something in my look that causes men triple my age to cower before me. My eyes are an unnatural shade, a shocking cyan that glows with inner fury. They're my one gift from him, the him I never met, the him who abandoned me before my first cells joined. My mother never told me his name, but I don't need his name to know his soul. I see him in my face, in the blue fire that burns in my gaze. I sense him lurking in my subconscious, a shadow of aggression that threatens to unleash if I echo the darkness.

The vendor senses it, too. He stumbles backward, mumbles something about a special next month, and waves us on.

My mother glances at me, wary. I scare her. She fears me to be like him. I fear to be like her, an animated skeleton seeking death. She's all I have in this world. And I hate her, as I suspect she hates me, or at least hates what I symbolize. She's never shown me love or kindness or comfort, so in its absence, I substitute hatred and anger and loneliness. And she blames *me* for what I've become.

We reach the market at noon. People swarm the stalls like

maggots in a corpse. My mother freezes, paralyzed. She should have let me come alone, but she doesn't trust me. Her diet is very particular, of her own doing, and she only trusts herself to acquire the ingredients.

We make slow progress. The heat rises to stifling levels. In the village school, they teach that Antarctica used to be as cold as the Lost Realm of Mogard, but today, I find that difficult to believe. Each breath sears my lungs. The putrid mix of sweat and body odor permeates the tents. Mirages rise from the earth like warbled ghosts. People rest in the shade, passed out from heat exhaustion.

My mother doesn't mind the heat. She focuses on one stall at a time. First vegetables. Only the green ones. Five of each, except for seven leaves of spinach. Then fruit. Only those with large seeds. Peaches, nectarines, papaya, and mango are okay. No apples. No watermelons. No grapes or bananas. Next, starch. We can only afford potatoes today. She buys seven, for the Seven Realms, and touches each four times, for the Four Towers of Ma'at.

"Kyder!" I recognize the voice. A peer from my class. One I tutor. Jereby. My stomach knots. I'm in no mood for pleasantries.

Frantic, my mother scurries away. "I can't," she mutters in excuse and leaves to finish the shopping. The conversations with Reve and the vendor sent her over her threshold. It takes little to overstimulate her. I'm the opposite. I can't get enough.

Jereby jogs over to me, flanked by a group of his friends. All beautiful. All popular. All easy targets.

"Good morn," I greet.

"So this is the boy you can't stop talking about," a tall girl, Anjeli, says. As she speaks, her hair fades from auburn to platinum, and the lashes around her sultry eyes widen. A shapeshifter, then. Focused on parlor tricks. Pitiful.

After the nuclear war ended, the fallout radiation mutated human DNA. Everyone born since is connected with Earth's cycles and harbors a power linked with their season of birth — spring healers, summer mages, fall shapeshifters, and winter shields. Proximity to the North Pole heightens our powers. It's part of the village school's curriculum. They teach us best they can. If you're good enough, you can join one of the four seasonal guilds of Ma'at. Most aren't, though.

The majority of the remaining population is marginal at best.

Many found purpose in the knowledge of realms and gods and guilds, especially after the war. It gave people hope, something to look forward to, something to dedicate their lives to, someone to pray to, a category to fit neatly inside. No longer did they have to search for meaning. They were told from birth who they were, what they should do, and where they should go. Simple. Uncomplicated. You are your birth. And I am mine, more than I'd like.

Progeny of rape. Heir to violence. Drunk with power. Forged from fire. The sun-made child. Sometimes, I wish to be ordinary. It would be easier if I was normal. Easier, but far less fun.

Jereby's ears redden. "I do *not* talk about him all the time." He nudges Anjeli, and the motion sends her flying. He's a mage, like me, a master of gravity. But he's not that good. I am.

I'm a prodigy. I was born at noon on the summer solstice and am thus bestowed with the highest possible genetic gift. It's wasted on me, though. I'm a poor nobody from the outskirts of civilization. The most I'll amount to is a criminal. The least, a statistic in a gutter.

Anjeli brushes the dirt off her robe. "Clumsy oaf."

"Sorry, Anj, I didn't mean to—" Jereby starts.

"Don't worry about it." She smiles at him. Perfect white pearls for teeth. Cheater.

"Are you okay, Anjeli? Do you need me to heal anything?" a tiny, shriveled boy asks. Spring-borns are always so annoyingly helpful.

"No thanks, Shel. I'm good."

The last of their group, a large brute, looks at me and squints. "Hey, aren't you the kid who got suspended last month?"

"Leave him alone, Rylan," Jereby says.

Rylan doesn't. "Yeah, I recognize you. You lit the gym on fire, didn't you?"

"Yes," I reply evenly. I have no wish to discuss my reasons with this pea-brained thug.

"Why?"

"I got bored," I say. I'm always bored.

"Bored?" Rylan asks, the word foreign on his tongue. "How are you bored? Don't you take advanced physics or something? And ancient

Latin?”

Jereby covers for me. “Kyder’s wicked smart. He’s top of the class. A genius.”

Please don’t, Jereby, I beg silently. Whenever people learn of my intelligence, I see the judgment in their eyes, the instant challenge of my brilliance. I want to be a fly on the wall. Unseen. Unnoticed. But then I’d have to stop lighting things on fire. That’s not going to happen.

“Is that true? A genius?” Shel asks.

“By the arbitrary conditions set forth by an antiquated system of determination, yes,” I reply.

His face is vacant.

“My IQ is over 200,” I say.

And there’s the spark of comprehension.

“Holy Ra,” Shel gasps.

“Who cares? He’s still a creep,” Anjeli says.

I turn my blue glare on her, and she falls silent. I could kill her with the lift of a finger. Puny fall-born.

“Careful, Anj,” Jereby says. “He’s summer-born.”

She scoffs. “So are you.”

“But he’s *really* summer-born. Noon on the solstice.” Jereby shifts from foot to foot, nervous. He’s seen what I’m capable of. Once. An accident. But it served its purpose. He won’t cross me again. He also won’t have full use of his left arm again.

“I’m not afraid of playing with fire,” Anjeli says. “Show us, sun boy. Rylan’s a shield. He’ll protect us if anything gets out of hand.”

He can’t. Few can match me, and I’d bet the last of my mother’s dwindling bank account that Rylan is not one of them. Winter-borns are too eager to prove their incompetence. My mother is one of them.

“It’s not a good idea,” Jereby warns. He cradles his arm, remembering. He challenged me to a duel a year ago after I stole his sugar rations. Before he could move, I crushed his arm from the elbow down. It took five adult healers to set the bone, but even they couldn’t fix it entirely. I was suspended for a month. I didn’t care. It let me focus on my own projects.

“What’s the worst he could do?” Anjeli grins at me, flirtatious. It’s disgusting. Fake. Plastic. Hollow like her head.

“Would you like a synopsis or a summary?” I ask, grinning back. I have a knack for charm that’s served me well in my short life.

“Oh, details, please.”

My eyes narrow. “I could squeeze your chest until your lungs pop like balloons. I could shatter your skeleton and make you a bag of bone soup. I could throw you from here to the Ruined Sea and scatter your limbs throughout the Shelf. And since we’re in the fruit section, let’s make a few comparisons, shall we? I could burst your heart like a melon, peel your skin like an apple, and pluck off your fingers like grapes. Would you like me to continue?”

Anjeli’s skin is green. Literally. “No,” she rasps, swallowing hard. “Thank you.”

“For the love of Llyr.” Shel swears the name of his patron god.

“You’re not normal,” Rylan says, backing away. He looks at me the same way the vendor did. With fear.

“No,” I say, “I’m not.”

Though I want to be. No thoughts rushing through my mind all hours of the day and night. No violent fantasies about how best to kill my adversaries. No questions as to my lack of empathy or guilt or remorse. It would be so much simpler. Maybe therein lies happiness. In ignorance.

“As I said, leave him alone,” Jereby says, embarrassed. He keeps rubbing his arm.

“We’re just playing, Kyder,” Shel says.

“I am not playing,” I say.

“Why do you hang out with this freak?” Anjeli asks Jereby. Her skin has lost its green luster, but she is still pale.

Because he feels my power and is drawn to it like a moth to the flame. If he can’t be the fire, he wants to feel its heat.

Jereby shrugs. “He’s not always like this.”

Yes, I am. I just don’t always show it. So I turn it off.

I flash them a stunning smile, concealing the monster within. I can hide from adults, but children have a way of revealing the truth in a person.

“I apologize,” I say. “I’ve been running lines to audition for the new play. I think I’ve taken to the role of Ra too well. Please forgive me.”

I lie easy as breathing. Always have.

The others relax a bit, though they're still anxious around me.

"Yeah, Ra's a crazy son of a bitch," Rylan says.

"Don't speak of his god in vain," Shel says. "Show some respect." He eyes me like a loose cannon.

"It's fine," I say. "So did you hear about the sandstorm?" I switch to weather, the universal topic for shallow conversation.

"It's going to be insane!" Rylan exclaims. "Bibby got a bunch of the guys together to watch from the top of Erebus."

"Is that safe?" Jereby asks.

"Who cares? They're saying the wall of sand could be five kilometers high!"

Anjeli rolls her eyes. "Boys."

"Weren't you the one who bungee jumped Blood Falls a few weeks back?" Shel asks, cocking an eyebrow.

"Touché," she says, and they all chuckle. I forget to exhibit normal behavior and join their laughter a few seconds late.

"Time to go." My mother appears behind me, baskets of groceries in hand. She stares at the ground, avoiding eye contact.

Before anyone can notice her condition, I interject. "It was a pleasure visiting with all of you. I will see you in school on Monday." I plaster on a smile and bow.

As I walk away, I hear Rylan whisper, "He talks like a bloody robot."

I *am* a bloody robot, you imbecile. I wish I was a real boy. I wish I fit in, like you, something you take for granted.

Once we leave the market, my body compensates for the bravado. Composure leaves me, and I succumb to my nature. My eyes twitch — twice the left, then the right, two times to match, then twice again the left — a rhythm to my insanity. My teeth clench together, my jaw locked like a vise. Pain throbs in my neck from the strained muscles, and I hum without realizing it — short, low grunts in the back of my throat, echoes of my inner torment. The doctors diagnosed me with depression, anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive disorder thus far, though I'm sure there are many other demons stuffed inside of me.

My mother ignores me when I have these spells. It's the one

decency she shows me. The one crucible that binds us. We are enemies to ourselves. And what we have, even the healers can't fix.

I try to calm my mind. I recite the powers of two. 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128, 256, 512, 1024. It's not enough. I try seven. 7, 49, 343, 2401. Still not enough. Prime numbers? 2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13, 17, 19, 23, 29, 31, 37, 41, 43, 47, 53, 59, 61, 67, 71, 73, 79, 83, 89, 97, 101. It's not working.

I switch to language. The seasons in French. *Le printemps, l'été, l'automne, l'hiver*. German. *Frühling, Sommer, Herbst, Winter*. Gaelic. *An t-earrach, an samhradh, an forghar, an gearmhadh*.

The Gaelic works. I repeat the seasons and move to months, days of the week, and colors. We're halfway back before I harness control of myself. My eyes calm, my jaw loosens, and my breathing steadies. I fear the day normalcy fails to return.

We pass the vendor's booth, but he's gone. Dozens of airsails stand unprotected behind the counter. I hop over the desk and snatch one. My mother glances toward me but says nothing. I throw it on the ground, and the sail unfurls. If they catch me, they'll throw me in prison. But I'm clever. I'm sure I could escape. I can bribe anyone with the proper leverage.

"You first," I say. My mother steps onto the board and grabs the mast. I step behind her and kick off. We skim above the ground, soaring over the edge of the Shelf on the way back to the village. We make it in a quarter of the time.

Our home is underground. The earth insulates against the heat. I descend the staircase, park the airsail by the door, and help load groceries into the freezer.

"You sh-shouldn't..." my mother starts. She taps her fingers against her thigh. "You shouldn't have d-d-done that." She points to the airsail.

A rage flares only she can summon. "*You're judging me?*"

She doesn't respond. Can't respond. Guilt was all she could manage. Unfortunate for her, I don't feel regret, but I do feel anger.

"Don't patronize me," I growl, my cool cracking like ice. "If you provided enough, I wouldn't have to steal."

"Demon child," she spits at me. "Child. Child. Child. Child." She repeats the word over and over in echolalia, a symptom of her

disease.

The chant lights the short fuse of my temper. I pick up a peach and throw it at her. It catches her in the chin, and she staggers, clumsy, until she hits the wall. She turns toward the packed earth and bangs her head against the dirt, over and over. Each repetition is the same as the last, a dance of madness between her and the world that disclaims us both.

I desert the groceries and grab her arm, yank her back to sanity. "I'm sorry." It's a lie, but it's what I'm supposed to say.

She pushes me away and crosses to the opposite end of the room, leans over a table for support. "I see...I see...I see who you are...are. You're no bet-t-t-ter...no better...no better than him. Spawn of dark-k-ness...of darkness. I'd k-k-k-kill you myself if I wasn't a...wasn't a...wasn't a c-c-coward."

She straightens and faces me. Her fingers tap furiously against her thigh as her eyes meet mine. She looks away after a second, overwhelmed by sensation.

"I'd like to see you try," I whisper. She's a shield. A powerful one. Though she isn't as powerful as I will become.

Fear flickers in her gaze. I am her nightmare incarnate. But when she wakes, I'm still here.

"G-get out-t-t...out...out...of m-m-my house...my house...my house...my house...my house," she says, staring at the floor.

"Gladly," I say. I pick up the airsail and head toward the door.

"Bastard. Bastard. Bastard. Bastard," she murmurs behind me.

Fire floods me. Wild. Uncontrollable. I shoot out my hand and unleash a gravity wave. My mother raises a shield at the last second, a bubble of energy conjured from the heart of the universe. She protects herself, but our home crumples into a mound of dirt. Shafts of sunlight shine through the tattered roof. The walls slide in avalanches onto the floor. Furniture becomes kindling. The groceries explode. Their sticky juices cover the wreckage.

I almost killed her. And I feel nothing.

Fury mobilizes her. She takes two steps toward me and slaps me across the face hard enough to spark stars. The only time she touches me is in violence. Her hatred for me is the one force strong

enough to override her condition.

“Remember your birth,” she hisses at me like a snake. Her voice is the steadiest it’s been in years.

“You never let me forget,” I say. I mean the rape that conceived me, but she means my power.

I am a cataclysm. If I was born in Zawad, I could be Komanguard, Arch of the Sun Guild at Ma’at. But I wasn’t born in Zawad. I was born on the Shelf to a crippled mother and an absent father. I doubt I’ll live long enough to see the Four Towers.

“Take off your shirt,” she orders.

I freeze. “No.” I won’t let her do it again.

“Take. Off. Your. Shirt.” With each word, she closes the distance between us. “Shirt. Shirt. Shirt. Shirt.”

The word is like the pounding of a war drum.

I step backward, flatten myself against the door, clutch the airsail like a lifeboat. “If you whip me again, I won’t control myself.”

My back burns with phantom pain. She had a healer tend me afterward, so there are no scars, no evidence of her abuse. But my body remembers. It’s not the punishment that bothers me. It’s the shame.

“You won’t control yourself,” she says, noticing my word choice. *Won’t*, not *can’t*. The power inside me is a behemoth, bucking to break free. If I don’t stand in its way, it will possess me. I would let it possess me if it would save me from her.

“Go, then.” She dismisses me with a wave of both hands she repeats four times. “Don’t return until morning. Morning. Morning. Morning.”

I unfold the airsail and kick off into the sandstorm.

2

Love Made a Woman

Sira Rune, Age 11 ■■■ *August 23, 7014*

My room is on the top floor of the hospital. My bed is near the window, overlooking Zawad below, the last city in a world literally turned upside-down.

The city surrounds a lake in Souhait Valley like a necklace of civilization. The round buildings are white marble. Veins of silver run like webs through the milky stone. Domed roofs balance on airy colonnades and arched doorways. Mythical statues peer from every level, and intricate carvings ornament the porticoed walkways between residences. Canals stream from the lake into the city, and waterfalls pour from the balconies back into the lake, filtered and recycled for reuse.

The harsh, summer sunlight glints the skyline, silhouetted against the mountains beyond. The land slopes up and away from the city as dunes yield to bedrock, a feature common in all of Antarctica's Dry Valleys. The terrain is smooth at the base and jagged near the top where the crags break off in landslips. Sandstone decorates the mountainsides in stripes of slate, hazel, and violet bands. The view would be stunning if it didn't signify humanity's exodus.

Bedridden, I spend most of my time counting starboats. There are seven million people in Zawad and at least as many starboats. The hovering vessels ship residents across the city in multi-level traffic patterns. There are ferries for the public, yachts for the wealthy, brigs

for retro types, gondolas for romantic types, and kayaks for racers — all airborne. I sometimes blur my eyes and imagine they are lost species of birds from the golden days of Earth.

A stab of pain interrupts my daydreaming. My stomach cramps, and I collapse forward, grabbing my waist.

“Shh, shh, *mon cœur*.” My mother wakes beside me and gently strokes my bald head. “What hurts?”

“Everything, *Maman*,” I say. My chest, my head, my very bones. I sweat with fever, my body frail and slick and clammy. No matter what I eat, no matter how much I sleep, I remain emaciated, weak, tired. I used to be strong. Graceful, even. Now, I catch colds every other week. Bruises mottle my dark skin. Blood leaks from my nose, and I shove a wad of gauze into my nostrils to ebb the flow.

I was diagnosed with leukemia a year ago. I’m stage four. It’s terminal. My twin brother, Syh, lays beside me with the same fate, but he is somehow able to rest. My father curls around his bony frame, asleep from exhaustion. My parents are both spring-born doctors who work at the hospital. They can’t save us, and it torments them. Our curse is too strong.

Maman gazes at me with agonizing helplessness. Tears glisten in her eyes, the eyes we share, a rich sapphire like the night sky in winter.

“Rune, I would give all the *étoiles dans le ciel* to save you,” she says. “I would tear down the sun and shatter *la lune* if it would make you whole again. But I am human, flawed, limited. *Pardonne-moi*.”

When she is upset, she peppers her speech with French, the language of our ancestors, the language lost like the rest of our culture.

“It is not your fault, *Maman*,” I say.

Though it *is* a cruel irony. Give two healers the two children they cannot save. And give those twins immense power they can never use. We are winter-born, birthed at midnight on the solstice, shields of untold potential who will remain mysteries. We will never join the Star Guild, never set foot in the Four Towers of Ma’at. The hospital is the last place we will see. My mind lingers on the macabre. I need a distraction.

“Tell me a story,” I say.

“It’s late, *mon cœur*,” *Maman* says. “I’ll read to you in the

morning.”

“Please, *Maman*.”

“Sira, you need your rest.” She uses my given name when she’s serious.

“I try, but the sun will not let me,” I say.

“You are so full of life,” she says with a wistful, futile strand of hope. “So *plein de vie*. But you must sleep.”

“A story will help me sleep.”

“*Une nuit blanche* will not help your insomnia,” she says. “*Je dis ça, je dis rien*.”

“Just one story,” I plead. “*Je promets*.” It will ease both my pain and her worries.

Maman sighs. “*Si je dois*. Which one would you like?”

I think for a moment. “The Four Sisters.”

“*Encore*? You must have it memorized by now.”

“*Oui, mais* it’s a comfort. The words are like a lullaby.”

“A violent *berceuse*,” she says. “And that’s not a story. That’s history. Don’t you want something lighter, like a fairy tale or fantasy?”

I don’t want to escape to fantasy. I want to escape to possibility. A different life, one grounded in truth, based in reality, where I could live to see adulthood.

“*Non merci, Maman*.”

“*Très bien, l’élú*. The Four Sisters it is.”

She opens the history book to the page earmarked from use and reads.

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In the beginning, there was the sun. And from the sun, came a god.

Lord Ra was the first, the only. From Digard, he ruled the Seven Realms with a righteous, if not merciful, fist. After eons of solitude, loneliness drove him to the brink of madness. He split his heart and bore four daughters from the chambers — Nyx, Llyr, Raze, and Ramiel. Llyr married Baal, a giant from Fegard, Realm of Power, whom Ra blessed with divinity. And thus, the pantheon was complete.

All was well for a time. Ra ruled the summer sun, Nyx ruled the winter stars, Llyr ruled the spring sea, and Baal ruled the fall storms — patron gods of

each season.

Raze and Ramiel found it difficult to fit in. The sisters tried their hand at many different pursuits, but there were no seasons nor gifts left to claim. They were outcast, ostracized when their powers were not as focused as the other gods.

Ramiel became dissatisfied with the hierarchy on Digard. She convinced Raze that, in order to belong, they must create a new realm, one where they ruled without Ra's oversight. Their subjects would pledge loyalty, after which the sisters would care for them completely. Free will would be sacrificed for protection. And if war dawned at the realm's gates, their people would fight without hesitation. Sanctuary in exchange for an army.

However, the creation of new realms is forbidden. It disrupts the balance of seven and causes splintering between the walls of the realms. Once Ra heard of the sisters' plan, he destroyed the nascent realm, stripped Raze and Ramiel of their immortality, and banished his two daughters to Mogard.

Since their exile, Raze and Ramiel lead the Lost Realm as joint rulers. For eleven years, they've brewed in bitterness and cynicism, plotting to reclaim their immortality. On Digard, the four gods continue to rule as more and more demigods flood the realm. And on Higard, Realm of Humans, we learned the truth.

One thousand years ago, after the nuclear war scarred the sky, a Rift opened between the Seven Realms and bestowed humanity with its final evolution, with its seasonal powers. Higard was unaware of the truth of existence until this atrocity. Digard introduced themselves to humanity and founded Ma'at.

The Four Towers is based on the principles of order, balance, unity, and the cycle of all things under the motto, "All is one is all." When one rises, all rise. When one falls, all fall. The training academy is the last hope for a people plagued by tragedy. But when man becomes myth, morality is dismissed.

—

Maman closes the book. "Rather dark for a bedtime story."

"So it's real?" I ask, mind muddled with fatigue. "The gods? The realms? All of it?"

"Oui, mon cœur," Maman says. "Now, sleep."

"What are the Seven Realms?"

"Sira, tu as promis."

“I know about Higard, obviously, and the story mentions Digard, Mogard, and Fegard, but what are the three others?”

“You must rest, or you will not...” She stops herself. She was going to say, “...or you will not get better.” Even if I rest, I will not get better.

“Please, *Maman*,” I say softly. Curiosity is all that keeps me sane. She wipes the pity from her expression. “Progard, Realm of Prophecy. Egard, Realm of Balance. And Sagard, Realm of Creation.”

“Has anyone ever seen them?” I ask.

“Sira—” my mother warns.

“Just answer this one more question, then I will sleep.”

“I suspect the Arches have.”

“The Arches?” I ask.

“The leaders of the four guilds.”

“What happened to Raze and Ramiel?”

“*Qui vivra verra. Bonne nuit, mon cœur.*” Maman turns off the lamp before I can ask any more questions.

—

When I wake, Syh does not. My twin passed in the night. I felt him go, felt him ease into everlasting peace without me. I am broken. No, I am missing. A part of me is gone. Maybe all of me is gone. I will never be whole again. Never feel right again. Never feel anything again. I am numb, a sculpture of ice.

They lay me beside him. His body is still warm. His eyes still clear.

“Sira, *je suis là*,” my mother says. “I am here.”

Her voice is the wisp of soul that fled with him. She sits next to me and places a hand on my back. Her face is wet with tears, but she sits straight, the strength for my father beside her.

Papa is a wreck. He cradles his dead son’s hand, face ravaged with anguish. “*Il est parti. Il est parti*,” he repeats over and over. *He is gone. He is gone.*

I can’t believe it, either. Can’t believe it’s over. I’ll never see Syh again. Never hear his voice. Never see his smile. What road do I travel down where he is not by my side?

“Time of death, 1:22 AM,” a nurse logs in Syh’s death certificate.

A fresh wave of grief drowns me. *Time of death*. It’s real. It happened. This isn’t a dream. I can’t wake from this nightmare. Sobs wrack my withered body as agony fights for escape. Let me out. Let me free. Let me go with him. Don’t prolong my suffering in this Nyx-forsaken place.

“I am sorry, Miss, but we must move the body,” the coroner says to me.

The body. They refer to him as an object, not as a human being who lived and loved and laughed. I don’t move. I can’t do this alone. I need you, Syh. Don’t leave me.

“Would you like to say goodbye?” the coroner asks.

No. This isn’t goodbye. It can’t be.

“*Dors bien, mon frère*.” I kiss Syh on the brow and squeeze his hand one last time. His body is already stiffening, turning to stone. “Till next time.”

They move me from his bed and wheel him from the room. Devastation wrenches my heart from my soul. The emptiness is stifling. I can’t breathe. Sorrow clogs my throat. I cough, hack up heartache, flail at the nurses who restrain me, beg the coroner to take me with him. *Maman* wraps her arms around me, rocks me like a babe. She holds me together, but barely.

“We failed him,” *Papa* sobs. “We failed our boy.”

One of the nurses approaches and lays a hand on *Maman*’s shoulder. “Our grief counselors are at your disposal should you require their services. Syh will be kept in the mortuary until the funeral. There is no need for an autopsy or post-mortem examination. Are there any special customs or rituals you would like to see performed?”

It’s all happening too fast. My life spirals out of control. I’m not ready for this.

“There will be no *funèbre*,” *Maman* says. “Donate his body to science. Except for his heart. Burn his *cœur*, and scatter the ashes in the Ruined Sea. Lady Llyr will watch over him.”

“No, *Maman*,” I say, weeping, “let him rest in peace. Don’t tear him apart like he’s some kind of experiment.”

“He *is* at peace, Rune,” *Maman* says. “And he’s no longer here,

but his body could help others.”

“Leave him alone!” I shriek, thrashing on the bed. “Don’t touch him!” *Papa* restrains me and holds me against his chest.

“Sira, *s’il vous plaît*, we must let him go,” *Maman* says.

“No!” I scream. “*Laisse-le tranquille! Laisse-le tranquille!* Leave him alone, you *animaux!*”

“I am sorry, *mon cœur*.”

There’s a pinch in my neck, and the world goes black.

—

I sleep till late afternoon. Each time I try to wake, grief overwhelms me, and I fall again into the abyss. I welcome the darkness. It’s my only escape. I want to end my suffering and leave this place with him. We came into this world together. It’s only right that we leave together, too.

Maman enters my room and throws open the curtains. Sunlight blinds me, and I cover my eyes. It’s disrespectful. There should be no light where he is not.

“*Comment vas-tu?*” she asks, sitting on my bedside.

“I want to die, *Maman*,” I say.

“Llyr forbid, *mon cœur*,” she says. Concern etches her elegant features into a mask of worry. “Do not say such things.”

“But I do,” I say, bitter. “There’s no reason for me to stay.”

She gazes at me fiercely. “Yes, there is. You must live for two now. His soul is yours. His journey mirrors your own. *Qui n’avance pas, recule.*”

“Am I not allowed to grieve?” I shouldn’t speak to her like this. She’s only trying to help. But she’s not a twin. She doesn’t understand. “I can’t let him go.”

“I’m not asking you to. I’m asking you to — *comment dis-tu?* — take him with you.”

“I share his fate, *Maman*. I am not long for this world.”

“I will not lose another child,” she says. Tears stream down her cheeks.

“You do not have a choice,” I snap.

“Actually,” a nurse interjects as she enters the room, “that’s

what I was coming to talk to you about.” She looks between us. “Unless this is not a good time.”

No, it is not a good time, you insensitive fool.

“Please, *entrez*,” Maman says, always gracious, always kind, even in the face of tragedy. I do not deserve her.

The nurse hesitates in the doorway and then crosses the room to stand in front of my bed. “This is somewhat of a miracle. Even the doctors don’t fully understand.”

“What is it?” I ask.

Her face breaks into a smile, unable to contain her joy any longer. “Your tests are clear. You’re going home, Rune. You’re healed.”

Healed. The word echoes in my mind like a pinball, silencing all other thoughts. *Healed.* I am anything but healed.

Maman gasps and claps her hands in pleasure. “This is marvelous news! Are you sure?”

“Yes, Ma’am. Her discharge papers are already filled out.”

This can’t be happening. We were supposed to survive together. We were supposed to leave and live and grow old together. But instead, his death is a sacrifice for my life, a life I no longer want.

“The gods have shown mercy,” the nurse says.

“Mercy?” I ask, revolted. “My brother is dead, and you speak of mercy.”

The nurse pales. “I am sorry, Miss, I only meant—”

“It is fine,” Maman interrupts. She shoots me a warning glance. “We are very grateful. Thank you, *Madame*.”

“Of course, Ma’am. Let me know if there is anything else you require. Your release is scheduled for tomorrow morning.” The nurse bows and leaves us.

“Do not let this break you,” Maman says. “You must remain strong, Sira.”

“You did not love him as I did,” I say. “If you did, you would not say such things.”

“I made him, *mon cœur*,” she says gently. “My love is tall as the skies, my grief deep as the Ruined Sea. Neither Nyx nor Llyr holds the power to quell my suffering. But I will pray to Ra for strength and to Baal for a sail large enough to weather this storm.”

A sob escapes my throat. Anger fades to sorrow. “*Maman*,” I weep. “I am sorry. I shouldn’t have said—”

“Shh, shh,” she says. “There is nothing to forgive.”

I collapse, and she catches me, cradles me while I shatter.

“You will be okay,” she whispers in my ear. “We will be okay.”

3

Soul of Fire

Julian Kyder, Age 12 ■■■ *December 8, 7012*

The headmaster's office smells like dead fish. The filters are broken again. It's put him in a mood. He's more irate than usual. I should know. I'm here often.

"Welcome back, Kyder." He peers at me from across his rickety desk. Everything in this school is half-dead. "Would you care to explain exactly what happened between you and your peer, Marsen?"

"Not particularly," I say. I'm tired. Edgy. My mother forced me to sleep outside again last night. I refused to make dinner. She refused to give me a bed. Thus is our relationship on its best days.

He wipes a hand over his sweaty forehead. Air conditioning is broken, too. "Let me rephrase that. Explain what happened between you and Marsen, or there will no longer be a place for you here."

"Are you threatening me?" I ask. "I'm impressed, Headmaster."

"Kyder, I don't have time for your games. Just tell me so we can both go home."

You presume I want to go home, you scrawny moron. You also presume I want to stay here in this miserable, inhospitable excuse for a school. I want neither, but I'm bored, so I'll play along.

"It was an experiment," I say. "For one of my...personal projects."

"Lighting the cafeteria on fire was an experiment?" he asks. He doesn't understand me. No one does.

“That was an unintended side effect,” I lie.

“From the beginning, Kyder,” he orders. As if he has any control over me.

I sigh. “The beginning...well, that would have to be last Tuesday when Marsen called me, and I quote, ‘a fucking summer-born prick bastard from Mogard.’ A bit run-on, I know. Doesn’t flow as well as I would have liked either. Personally, I was rather surprised at his breadth of vocabulary, given the fact that he was held back for two years in a row.”

“And why did he call you this?” the headmaster asks.

“You think I instigated the insult,” I say. It’s what they all assume.

“Well, I—”

He cuts himself off. I’ve ruffled his feathers. What a weak creature.

“That’s the problem with society,” I say. “Everyone blames the victim.” And then the victim becomes the villain. “No, Headmaster, I did not instigate Marsen, though I don’t appreciate your insinuation.”

“Kyder, stop toying with me,” the headmaster says. “Just tell me what happened.”

“I thought you’d enjoy a bit of exposition, but if you insist,” I say. “Marsen and I are both in Master Hammedy’s Advanced Geospatial Analysis class, though how Marsen passed the entry exam is beyond me. Probably cheated. You might want to get on that instead of berating me.

“Anyway, we received our test results last Tuesday, and Master Hammedy read the grades out loud. I received a perfect score; Marsen failed with a zero. Since I’m three years younger than most of the students in that class and five years younger than Marsen, you can understand why there was a bit of resentment regarding my success.”

At least I’m teased for my intelligence now and not my size. Since I crested adolescence, my skinny frame filled out and packed on enough mass to make me a worthy, if not yet intimidating, opponent. And as I grow, the Shelf shrinks. It won’t contain me much longer.

I continue. “Most kept their comments to themselves, but Marsen found it necessary to share disreputable rumors surrounding my birth. I returned the favor and speculated as to his preferred

method of bestial fornication. That was when he called me, ‘a fucking summer-born—”

“Yes, yes, I get it,” the headmaster interrupts. Children swearing makes him uncomfortable. It reminds him that we’ll soon be the adults running the world and that his reign is a mere blip on the timeline. “What happened after?”

“I smiled at him, thanked him for his assessment of my character, and focused on the lesson,” I say.

“And then?”

“And then I minded my own business.”

Rage reddens the headmaster’s face. “Kyder, there is a boy in the hospital with a fractured spine and a severe concussion because of you. I am quickly losing patience.”

No one appreciates rhetoric anymore. “Fine,” I say. “This morning, I was in the cafeteria performing several different types of experiments regarding combustive chemical reactions.”

“You know that’s not allowed.”

“Yes, I was purposefully ignoring the rules.”

Frustrated, the headmaster makes a noise like a strangled hippopotamus. “Continue,” he says.

“Marsen must not have forgotten my creative observation of his sexual interests,” I say. “He snuck up behind me and smacked me across the back of the head. I keeled forward and dropped the chemicals and burners onto the ground. Hence, the fire. This one was unintentional, though.

“We ran out of the cafeteria, and I was willing to let our quarrel rest, but Marsen claimed I was plotting to kill him with the fire. Sludge for brains. I told him he was not a worthy enough adversary on which to focus my energy. Once he understood my meaning — and believe me, it took him a few long, awkward seconds — he shapeshifted to twice his size and charged at me. So I sent him flying into the side of the building with a gravity wave.”

“Why didn’t you ask one of the teachers to help?” the headmaster asks.

“The teachers would not have done what was necessary,” I say. “Bullies only respond to shows of force.”

“You could have killed him.”

“Yes, I could have. But I didn’t.”

Horror veils the headmaster’s face. “And you wouldn’t have cared?”

“Cared about what?” I ask.

“If you had killed him?”

“Not if he deserved it, no,” I say. “Realize that he was the one who called me a litany of swears and initiated the violence.” I point to the back of my head where a bruise swells.

“He’s just a child,” the headmaster says.

“So am I.”

He pauses, searches my blue stare for some measure of remorse. There isn’t any.

“The way you reacted...” he finally says. “Don’t you feel bad about what you’ve done?”

“Shouldn’t you be asking him the same question? Though I suspect the answer now is ‘yes.’” My lips curl into a smile as I imagine him bedridden and incapacitated. He shouldn’t have underestimated me. I’m no ordinary mage. I’m no ordinary boy.

“Kyder, I don’t know what to do with you,” the headmaster admits. He drops his head into his hands.

“How about I promise to never do it again, though I will, and you can suspend me for a few days, like you usually do, and we will revisit this conversation the next time I’m in here? Would you like me to schedule an appointment? I was planning on wreaking some havoc in a couple of weeks. Does Thursday work for you?”

He glares at me. And then he sighs. “You’re suspended until Monday.”

“Thanks for wrapping this up quickly, Headmaster,” I say. “I’m exhausted.”

“I’m calling your mother to take you home.”

“She won’t come.”

“She won’t come? What do you mean?” He knows my situation, but he pretends he doesn’t to soothe his conscience.

“My mother has little interest in my education or other affairs.”

“Oh,” he says, uncomfortable. “How’d you get to school?”

“Airsail.”

“Isn’t that a bit dangerous for a boy your age?”

I chuckle. “Headmaster, I’m in here for playing with fire.”

He emits a short, nervous laugh. I get up to leave, but he stops me.

“Kyder, I see how you hide behind your intelligence, how you use heightened language like a shield to distance the other kids. But inside, I know you’re a scared, little boy. If you ever need...if you ever want someone to...someone to talk to...”

He’s making an effort. It’s embarrassing. I’m not a scared, little boy. He’s a scared, grown man. I’m a dormant beast.

“Thank you, Headmaster,” I say. “I will keep your offer in mind.”

It’s what he wants to hear. He relaxes, knows he did his good samaritan duty, the bare minimal gesture required of polite society. Now, when I inevitably turn out a monster, he will rest easy knowing that one time, he extended an olive branch, and he will think my demise is not his fault. Whatever helps you sleep at night, Headmaster.

“Well, then...um...take care, and...um...and think on what you’ve done.” He extends a hand toward the door, ushering me out of his boiling office.

“Yes, I most certainly will.”

I won’t.

Outside, I unlock my airsail and glide home. It’s the only time of day when I am free. It’s winter, endless night, and though the Shelf is still sweltering, the scenery makes up for the heat.

My robe billows behind me like a flag of surrender. An indigo sky stretches between horizons, bisected by a gauzy belt of galaxy. The horizon glows blue with the absent sun, its fire hidden beneath the Ruined Sea. The Rift waits overhead, always watching, and the stars sparkle like glitter the gods poured across the heavens.

The heavens. I scoff at myself. The view made me sentimental. Something I can’t afford. What’s up there is no more paradise than what’s down here.

The lights of Zawad flare in the distance. I hear they have starboats there and buildings that scrape the sky. I hear men can

become giants and your past doesn't define your future. What life would I have if I was born there to a caring mother, a present father, and maybe throw in a sibling or two for good measure? Would I have been different? Could they have helped me? Or was I damned from my first breath?

I know who I am and who I am not. I am *not* sweet or kind. My only admirable trait is my intelligence, and that was luck gained, not earned. My temper is short and my grudges long. I harbor neither regret nor guilt for lying and cruelty, hold little regard for rules, and am immune to punishment. I have all the signs of psychopathy with no one to tell me I'm wrong. Yes, I am well-aware of my nature.

But I am also well-aware of my nurture. No one has ever told me the three words that can bring peace, end war, grow civilization, or ensure the future. *I love you*. It's a phrase foreign to me, one reserved for myth or fairy tale. And if I heard it, would it make a difference? Or am I truly what the kids call me, a "bloody robot," an "unfeeling bastard," the "devil incarnate"? Do I have any control over what I become?

I shake my head, banish the unwanted thoughts. It doesn't do to dwell on philosophy. I am what I am. Nothing more, nothing less. There are more important things to focus on than morality.

Ahead on the ridge, I see Rylan and a couple of groupies. As I approach, I notice a smaller boy in the middle of them, face bloodied and bruised. He lies on the ground, clutching his stomach, gasping for air. I shouldn't interfere. Let the kid stand up for himself. It's the only way he'll learn self-defense. I skirt around them and continue down the Shelf, but Rylan spots me and calls out.

"Kyder! Haven't seen you around much lately."

I skid the airsail to a stop and dismount. "You know how it is. Things to do, places to be." Fires to light, schools to explode. "What'd he do?" I try to feign disinterest, but I can't help relating to the bullied kid on the ground. Damn my conscience. It always shows at the worst possible times.

Rylan kicks the kid in the chest. I hear a rib snap. Or an arm. I cringe, remember my mother's hands on my wrist.

"Who? Parlyle?" he asks.

No, Lord Ra, you dunce. "Yes."

“What? You don’t know?”

Obviously not. “Other than bearing a rather unfortunate-sounding surname, no, I don’t know what he’s done. Let’s agree to call him, ‘Lee.’ Problem solved.”

“Problem not solved,” Rylan says.

Okay, you brute. “Then please, enlighten me,” I say.

His forehead crunches at my verb choice, but he catches my meaning.

“Parlyle — *Lee* — took the last spot for the field trip to Zawad next week,” Rylan says.

I wait for something more. “I still fail to see the reason behind the beating.”

Rylan gawks at me like a mutant vulture. “It’s the only trip off the Shelf for months!”

“Okay,” I say, walking him through his dilapidated rationale, “and did Lee steal a spot you had reserved, or did he acquire the position fairly?”

“Why does it matter?” Rylan asks.

“Because your answer determines whether or not I will interfere,” I say.

The blood drains from his face. I’d rather it drained from his body.

One of his groupies steps forward. I forgot about them. They provide little opposition, anyway. Shapeshifters, poor ones from what I remember, and I remember everything.

“He wouldn’t give up his seat,” the groupie says.

“So he didn’t steal yours?” I ask, quickly tiring of the interrogation.

“No.”

I set my jaw and narrow my eyes. “I will give you one chance. Leave now, and we can forget this happened.”

“This is none of your business, Kyder,” Rylan says.

I snap my fingers, and they all fall down. Like dominoes. Rylan couldn’t raise a shield in time. He and his groupies lie winded on the ground, spitting dust from their mouths.

“That was a warning,” I say. “Now, go.”

Rylan struggles to his feet and smooths his robe over his blocky frame. He scowls at me, and I laugh. The expression doesn't suit him. He's too shallow to conjure such a deep emotion.

"You shouldn't have done that," he says.

"Think very hard on what you're about to do," I say. "I've had a Hel of a day, and I'd prefer to leave this behind us."

"I'm not afraid of a twelve-year-old kid," Rylan says.

"Why does everyone feel the need to mention my age?" I ask, exasperated. "Besides, you can't be more than fourteen."

"I'm older than you."

"I *am* versed in the elementary principles of mathematics, though thank you for the deduction."

"Enough pretty talk," Rylan says.

"Yes, by all means, let's resort to your native communication method of grunts and growls."

Rylan lunges for me. I sidestep. He tumbles to the sand. His groupies morph their hands into blades, and they come at me, medieval soldiers with medieval minds. Lee stares up at me, afraid, though whether he's afraid of them or of me is uncertain.

"Remember," I say, "you brought this on yourselves."

I raise both my hands. Rylan moves to raise a shield, but again, he's too slow. The groupies, too. I close my eyes and yield to my nature.

I sync with gravity, the core force of everything. The spark of creation lies at my fingertips. Its power flows through me. I welcome it into my soul, let its strength course through my veins. I am one with the universe, cloaked in divinity, driven by a self-proclaimed justice. I reach out, feel Rylan's disturbance in the ocean of gravity, and tighten my hold around him and his couple of groupies.

They choke as I constrict their airways. Three gaping fish. The smell of the headmaster's office. An odd memory for my mind to summon at this moment, but I'll take the connection.

Rylan and his groupies claw at their throats against my invisible nooses. They would beg for mercy if I let them speak, a mercy I would refuse to give. Their faces turn red, then purple, then blue as oxygen leaves their bodies. Their eyes are wide with terror. I view it as a form of praise, a sign of success, my own personal accolades. I've

earned their reverence after all.

This is where I usually stop, when they've soiled themselves and consciousness starts to slip away. However, today, something is different in me. I'm sick of seeing the same bullies committing the same crimes with no one to end the suffering and no one to deliver the consequences. Marsen, Rylan, and a whole horde of playground thugs don't have the capacity to learn or to grow. They're rotten, nasty, and they'll only spoil with time. Like wine to vinegar. They're bad eggs. Cracked from the start. And like bad eggs, they must be disposed.

I reach further than ever before. Gravity coils around me like enslaved serpents. I harness creation and lash out.

Rylan dies first. I crush his skull into sawdust. His brain oozes out of his nose like porridge. I rip his tongue from his throat and tie it around his neck in a bow. His skin sloughs from his bones and gathers in a pile at his feet. Like discarded clothes. I disassemble his skeleton and toss each bone over the ledge. The rest of him follows in a squashy heap.

The groupies die next. They saw what I did to Rylan and pass out in shock. A pity. I prefer an audience. At least there's Lee. I wave my hands, and the groupies stretch. I pry them apart like a puzzle, joint by joint. Fingers then wrists, elbows and shoulders, feet then knees then hips. Human anatomy is ever so complicated. I catapult each chunk of child into the Ruined Sea to join Rylan's remains below.

Blood mists the air between me and retribution. I wade through it like a wraith. Crimson droplets cling to my skin, don me in vengeance.

And I *feel*. Elation. Righteousness. Purpose. Order. Rylan was a bully. He sinned, and I provided a suitable punishment. The epiphany is overwhelming. A dawn of comprehension that breaks through the cage of night.

Though I probably didn't need to be so inventive with their demise. Okay, I overreacted a bit. I couldn't help myself.

I cross to Lee and extend a hand to help him up. He recoils at my gesture. "You killed them," he says, revolted. He scampers backward and rises to his feet. He barely comes to my shoulders.

"Yes," I say, my blue eyes slits. "Are you not grateful?" Anger

boils in me. Thankless pleb.

“They were just kids,” Lee says, a parrot of the headmaster’s twisted philosophy. “You didn’t have to...you didn’t have to kill them.” His composure cracks, and he blubbers like an overflowing fountain.

“Just kids’ grow into ‘just adults,’” I say, “and unchecked, those ‘just adults’ go on to commit rape, assault, murder. Is that what you want? For me to have let those fetid creatures grow into fully-fledged criminals?”

“You don’t know that would happen,” he says.

“People don’t change,” I say.

“They can.”

“But they won’t. Listen, kid, it’s not that difficult to understand. We see the patterns again and again and again, but we don’t act on the proof, because it takes courage. Give a child big eyes, a poor command of grammar, and a fickle demeanor, and he’ll get away with a massacre. No. What we should do is nip evil in the bud. Pull it out by its roots.”

“And who is the judge of that evil? No one can be entirely objective.” He wipes his tears, tries to look strong. But a rabbit in fox fur is still a rabbit.

“I am,” I say.

“Why you?”

“Because I feel little and see lots. Civilian vigilantes. That’s what we need. I was only doing my duty. You’re welcome.”

“I didn’t ask for your help.”

“Yes, you were doing so well on your own.”

He backs away into shadow. Please, child. Darkness has no refuge.

“I see why they call you ‘demon bastard,’” he says weakly.

“Demon bastard?” I ask and grin. “Now, *that* has a better ring to it. I should tell Marsen ‘demon bastard’ is my preferred insult from now on. If he survives, that is.”

Lee pales. I seem to have that effect on people.

“You should get home before the Patrol finds you,” I say, releasing him from my spell. “You wouldn’t want me to save you again.”

“No, I wouldn’t.”

Lee scampers off like an overgrown pig fattened for slaughter.

Pathetic.

4

Soul of Night

Sira Rune, Age 12 ■■■ *December 21, 7014*

It's our birthday. The first I've celebrated without Syh. I'm older than he'll ever be. He's stuck at eleven, a child for all time, a cherub frozen in ice. Guilt gnaws at me. I survived. He did not. And now his soul is mine. His life, mine.

School isn't the same without him. Nothing is the same without him. We were the closest anyone could be, two halves of the same soul. We shared a womb, a world, a life. Without Syh, I am the Earth with no ocean, the sky with no sun, the moon with no stars. He was my brother, my twin, my dearest friend, the person who knew me best in this world, and he's gone forever.

I keep forgetting he's dead. I look for him when I wake, expect to find him at breakfast. I round a corner and see a shadow, think he's returned, that it was all a dream — the cancer, the hospital, everything. I look for him between classes, cross the paths he used to take, his memory driven like ghosts into the walkways. I call out for him in the night, sometimes in nightmare and sometimes in anguish, but he never answers. He's a phantom limb whose presence I feel despite its removal.

Why did it have to be you, Syh? Why put this burden on me? To carry both your life and mine? You were the one with purpose. You were the one who knew where you wanted to go from the age of four. To train at Ma'at, to become Arch of the Star Guild and explorer of realms. I don't have a dream that doesn't include you. So what am I

supposed to do now that you're gone?

Maman tells me to rest, to let myself heal in mind and in body. The answers will come, she insists, if I give them time. My cancer is in remission. In fact, there is no evidence it ever existed. No evidence that *he* ever existed.

My hair's growing back in patchy tufts. The kids make fun of it behind my back. I laugh at them behind theirs. They think I care what they think. After staring death in the face, I could give two shits.

Oops. *Papa* says I shouldn't swear. He says it's a sign of laziness. *Maman* says it's a sign of creativity. She encourages anything that will aid my healing. I don't know how she's managed to keep calm through all this, to be the rock *Papa* and I cling to through the storm.

"Rune? Rune, did you hear the question?"

It's the teacher. I keep forgetting where I am, what I'm supposed to do, who I'm supposed to be.

Master Jadea smiles nervously. She's afraid of me. Afraid of my grief. Afraid it's contagious. I am a reminder of mortality. She doesn't know what to say, so she only says things school-related. Why is everyone so afraid of death? It's something that unites us, something we all share, so why shirk away from its merest mention? *Ask* me about my experience. Maybe you'll learn something. Unless we're not here to learn...

"Sorry, Master, I did not," I say. "Could you please repeat it?"

A facade of a human. An echo of a spirit. That's all I am. I bow and curtsy in polite behavior, sacrifice my true self to avoid confrontation. But what is my true self? It's a question I thought I'd never live long enough to answer.

"What are the four guilds of Ma'at along with their corresponding season and power?" Master Jadea asks.

It's an easy question, one every citizen of Zawad knows before they are potty-trained. She pities me. She wants to boost my confidence, ease me back into society. And it would be a kindness, a consideration, if I didn't see right through her intentions. Still, I obey like the good little student I am.

"The Sea Guild of spring healers, the Sun Guild of summer mages, the Storm Guild of fall shapeshifters, and the Star Guild of

winter shields," I recite.

The last is my guild, Syh's guild. *Was* Syh's guild.

I draw a few stares — half curious, half sympathetic. The rest of the class pretends all is normal, that I wasn't away fighting for my life this past year. Yes, mortality is a fearsome subject, indeed.

The teacher claps her hands together and over-praises me like a toddler. "Wonderful job, Rune. Yes, after the war, radiation bestowed seasonal powers on the population..."

She babbles on about post-war fallout, the Rift, and a grocery list of mundane subjects. I used to love school. Used to look forward to it with the start of each year. Used to cherish every assignment, every project, every test. Now, it's empty for me. A pointless categorization of knowledge into what some arbitrary group of educators deems important. It didn't teach me how to suffer cancer. It didn't teach me how to die. It didn't teach me how to be reborn. It didn't teach me how to live without Syh. What use is school now if it can't give me the skills and the knowledge I need to overcome this heartache?

So I do something I've never done before. I lie.

"Master Jadea?" I ask, raising my hand.

Her head snaps toward me, a ridiculously exaggerated smile on her face. She means well, I remind myself. But she can't help me.

"Yes, Rune?"

"I have to use the restroom. May I please be excused?"

"Of course, dear," she says.

Blind trust. I cringe inside and ignore the shame. "Thank you, Master."

I rise from my desk, walk out of the classroom, and shuffle briskly down the marble hallway. The corridor is lined with arched windows, vistas into the dark city. Moonlight illuminates the domed buildings and starboats in glowing outlines.

I'm still weak. My muscles atrophied in the hospital. After every step, I heave like I've sprinted a hundred-yard dash. My heart beats hard enough to shiver my robe. Around every corner and behind each doorway, I fear my plan will be discovered, but the wing is empty, the other grades at lunch. I find the fire escape and, once I ensure I am alone, climb out the window. But instead of down, I go up.

The winter air is like an oven. The heat assaults me as soon as I leave school. Light from the city pollutes the sky, and the stars are dim smudges against the inky canvas. Each footfall sets fire to my muscles. My bones feel like they'll splinter with exertion. I'm on the verge of hyperventilating. My vision darkens around the edges.

And I love it.

It's the first time in my life that I've done something I'm not supposed to, and the freedom is intoxicating. I hurry up the fire escape, pass dozens of levels, on my journey onward and upward and over. I don't know where I'm going, and I don't want to. To be healthy, alive, with no end in sight is invigorating.

I was a walking death sentence for so long, I didn't realize that I drew comfort from danger, because it was a constant. Scaling the side of the school in the open air with nothing between me and mortality but a rickety railing soothes my tattered soul, reminds me of Syh. Oh, how I wish you were here, brother. What I wouldn't give to show you the stars.

I reach the roof, hundreds of feet above the valley floor. A smile washes over my face, an expression both involuntary and unfamiliar. There is nothing above me but the Rift, the moon, and the stars.

I'm free. I skip across the tile, elated, light as a balloon. Giggles escape me. My feet blur beneath me as I dash faster and faster across the roof. I hurry across the bridge between buildings and leap over a chimney. I'm *alive*.

The skyline becomes my playground. I race across Zawad, a ghost reborn. I skitter up and down the domed roofs, sail over the buildings like waves in a marble sea. Worries and concerns and nerves and anxiety evaporate as my legs pump harder and my heart pounds louder, bedridden no more. I lose track of time.

Near the Zawad border, where city cedes to mountain and the valley ends, I stall. A group of people gathers in the center of a roof. I don't notice them until I'm nearly on top of them. They are a range of ages and shapes from all walks of life. Nothing obvious unites them. I start to turn away, but a rough-looking teenager calls out to me.

"Come to fight, love?" she asks. Her voice is kind and her face

open, despite the scars that crisscross every exposed bit of flesh.

I should head back. By now, school will know I'm missing. They'll call my parents or maybe the Patrol, and I'll be grounded till the dawn of spring. Still, curiosity overwhelms reason.

"To fight?" I ask.

The girl smiles. "I'm Ela, head of the Roofers." She shakes my hand with a death grip. The gentle name does not suit her brawny nature. She has bronze skin, platinum braids, and dark eyes that twinkle with a hint of amusement, like she's laughing at her own private joke or daring fate to block her way.

"Rune," I squeak, my fingers numb from her grasp.

"She's too scrawny to be a Roofer," a boy says, a couple of years younger than I am.

He slinks over to us like a cheetah. Hypocrite. He's skinny himself and fine-boned with golden, wavy hair and matching eyes. Aristocratic, like a banker's son.

"I won't be scrawny for long," I say, annoyed.

"You wouldn't last your first match," he says.

"Chak, behave," Ela chastises the boy. "Forgive us. My cousin speaks from his anus."

Her cousin? I look between them, failing to find resemblance. "No worries," I say.

"Sorry," Chak says. He scans my face and then the rest of me. "What happened to your hair?"

"Chak—" Ela warns.

"No, it's fine," I interrupt.

I like his blunt honesty. It reminds me of Syh. My brother was never afraid of struggle, of allowing himself to accept both the darkness and the light. Everyone else treats me like glass, as if the wrong word could shatter me. Chak's frank appraisal is a cool relief from the suffocating trepidation with which the teachers and students regard me since I returned.

"I had cancer," I say.

His eyes widen. "Was it serious?"

"It was terminal."

"We're all terminal, love," Ela says.

I beam. I love her irreverence. Finally, someone who doesn't pity me, someone who sees me as a girl and not as a patient. She slaps me on the back, and I gasp, winded.

"So, will you fight?" she asks.

"What am I fighting?" I ask.

"Why don't you try a round and see if you like it?" she asks. "A short one. If you hate it, leave. But if you love it, and I think you *will* love it, join." Her eyes shimmer with a mischief seldom found in Zawad.

I'm in no condition to fight. The run here drained me. But I can't stop myself from saying, "Yes."

"Wonderful!" Ela exclaims. "Are you ready now?"

"Now?" I ask, confused.

"Yes, are you ready now?"

Definitely not. I don't know what I'm doing. But it's the first time since my diagnosis that I've felt alive and the first time since I lost Syh that I've felt camaraderie.

"Sure, why not?" I ask.

Ela grins. "You'll fit right in. You'll fight Jenèro. He looks like a wolf, but inside, he's a puppy."

The teenager who waves to us does not seem like a puppy. He's pale with an angular yet friendly face, spiky black hair, and warm, brown eyes like cinnamon tea.

"Um...are there any rules for this fight?" I ask, doubting my judgment.

"Nope!" Ela says. "I mean, no killing, obviously, but other than that, go to knockout or surrender, whichever you prefer."

"She's going to bail," Chak says, watching my face turn gray.

"Only if he does," I say with more confidence than I feel.

A small crowd gathers around us, sniffing for blood like sharks drawn to a wounded seal. No, actually, that's not right. Let me revise my analogy. At first sight, they seem intimidating, but upon closer inspection, I see them for the people they are — passionate, caring, curious about life. Much like me.

It's not where I thought I'd fit in, but it's where I do. *Maman* won't like it, and *Papa* will throw a fit. Guilt tightens my stomach. I betrayed them. I never disobeyed them before, never did anything they

didn't sanction. But this is who I am. This is how I can honor Syh, by knowing what it means to be mortal, to be alive. They won't understand. I don't understand, but I feel it. I know it.

"Who's the newbie, Ela?" Jenèro asks.

If ever a starboat gained sentience, it would resemble this boy. His body is clay-poured muscle. I'm tall, but he clears me by a good foot. Yet, his voice is gentle and his interest genuine. It's nice to be seen as a girl and not as a victim.

"Rune," Ela says.

Jenèro smiles at me and lightly squeezes my shoulder. "Nice to meet you, Rune. Are you sure you're ready?"

No. Not at all. Have I gone insane?

"Yes," I say, though in answer to his question or mine, I do not know.

It's something I would never have done before cancer. *Before cancer*. Like my life is divided into two eras. But it is. Syh's death is the sword that signifies my resurrection. And I will never be the same again.

"I'll referee," Ela says. She clears a circle in the middle of the crowd and places me and Jenèro opposite each other. "On my mark."

Shit, it's happening. Shit, I swore again. Who am I anymore? Who am I without the sickness, the treatment, the constant struggle, the looming reaper? I guess I'm about to find out.

It may seem dramatic (it is), or desperate (most certainly), but it's the only way I can find something to live for, something important. Since I'm living for two, I need to live big. My life needs to be worthy of not only me but of him as well. To do that, I need to try and test and fail and fall down to uncover what lies beneath, what doesn't change, the skeleton beneath the bruises and the blood. That is worth the broken rules, the disappointed looks, and the probable punishment. I never knew life until I knew death. And I'll skim its edge to peel away the layers of nonsense to reveal the meaning within.

I've never been brave or ambitious or fast or strong. That's why this is something I *must* do. It won't be easy. No part of it will be fun, at least not at first. But it will push me in a way I've never been pushed, challenge me in a way I've never been challenged. I will become the best I could ever be by trying things both difficult and alien. I will experience

all life has to offer, even if it means putting myself in the eye of danger. I never thought I would enter a street fight willingly...well, a rooftop fight. It sounds crazy, and maybe it is, but I've never felt so resolved before in my whole life.

This one's for you, Syh.

Ela counts down. "Three, two, one...mark!"

Jenèro charges me like a bull. No, *as* a bull. Nyx Almighty. He *is* a bull. I've seen shapeshifters of course, but most are children or teenagers preoccupied with changing hair color, eye color, and elongating certain...ahem...let's just say, "limbs." Jenèro is a full-sized bull, complete with horns and everything.

I raise a shield. It crackles in a fragile bubble around me. I'm weak, out of practice. As Jenèro's horns connect, I'm thrown backward like a wad of bubble gum and splatter on the rooftop. The shield fizzes out, and I stumble to my feet, lightheaded and disoriented. But adrenaline boosts me like a drug, and I know I've found my fix.

This is what I've been waiting for.

Jenèro pivots and makes another pass. New plan. Take the bull by the horns. I know, cliché. Sorry, I couldn't resist.

The crowd shrieks, ecstatic, as I stand my ground against the galloping beast. Closer, closer. I hunker down and keep my eyes trained on his head. Come on, boy. Almost there — now!

I lunge sideways just in time and grab his head, swing up onto his back. My muscles strain in protest. I clench my thighs around his neck and hold both horns like handlebars. Jenèro bucks in circles in a violent dance, attempting to throw me off. I hang on through some miracle of will.

Now comes the hard part. The part I've been dreading. I either need to render him unconscious or hurt him enough to force a surrender. He won't surrender. I know his type. His honor is too strong and his pride too high. No, I'm going to have to knock him out.

But how? My power is defensive. What use will a shield do as a weapon?

I have no time for further thought. With a powerful jerk, Jenèro catapults me from his back. I'm airborne. Meters above the enraptured crowd. Thrown like a frisbee across the roof. Instinct kicks

in, and I roll as I connect with the tile. The motion dampens the fall, but I still feel the pain. My back screams in agony. My ankle gives out, and I crumple sideways.

Jenèro rears at me. He charges again, head low, eyes intent. I roll out of the way just before his hooves can crush my ribs. He veers and pivots to face me again, tireless. I run toward him, grab his horns, and swing once more onto his back. But I overshoot. Instead of landing on top of the beast, I launch myself over him in a graceless somersault. At least the acrobatic blasphemy takes him off guard. He cocks his head at me and pauses, confused, as I pirouette blindly through the air.

I land on my side. The breath forced from my lungs. I wheeze and stumble to my feet like a drunken cat. I will never beat him physically. I can never hope to match his speed or strength. No, I need to do something else. The shield again. But in Syh's way.

My brother was fearless. He knew the path to finding oneself was through constant dare and provocation. Never let yourself be comfortable. Never let yourself be content. Put yourself in harm's way to acquire self-understanding and knowledge.

I am not fearless. I am very aware of the danger Jenèro poses. But if I am to win this fight, I must acknowledge the fear, understand its purpose, and move past it. I must put aside not only my fear of the bull, but also my fear of myself, my fear of what I am capable of.

The last time I used the shield, I was afraid. Afraid it would exhaust me. Afraid it wouldn't appear. Afraid it wouldn't be enough. And it wasn't. My conviction was weak and so was my power. The restraints I impose on myself are much more difficult to overcome than the restraints imposed on me by others. I held myself back. I shackled myself to fear, and it dragged me into the pit. To win this fight, I need to cast off my safety net. Let myself free. I am a magnet of power, and my reach has no end. I am ready, and this time, I am not lying.

I turn to face Jenèro. He charges. I wait until he's in range. With a thought, I activate a shield. Energy explodes from my hands in a tidal wave. That's better. Something Syh would be proud of. Something he would be jealous of, I realize with a grin.

The bubble blossoms around me and knocks Jenèro off his feet. He soars across the roof and slams into a chimney. The crash

knocks him out. He fades from beast to boy. Blood trickles out of the corner of his mouth, his body limp.

Horror seizes me. I killed him. My foolish ambition turned me into a murderer.

But I soon see that I overreacted. A healer passes his hands over the boy's body, and Jenèro wakes. He and the rest of the crowd stare at me as if I'm Nyx Herself.

"When is your birthday?" Ela finally asks, breaking the awkward silence. She peers at me as she would a specimen under a microscope.

"Today," I say, hesitant.

"And when?"

"Midnight."

She laughs. "That explains a few things."

The crowd moves closer, revering me like a god. It makes me uncomfortable.

"Midnight on the solstice?" Chak says, circling me. "Holy Ra."

"Oh, back up, you gagging buffoons," Ela says, waving the crowd away from me. "She's just a girl. Leave her alone."

"A girl with enough power to challenge the Four Sisters," Chak says, impressed. At least I've earned his respect.

"And here I thought you were a well-bred babydoll," Jenèro says, standing. He crosses over to me. "A newbie never beat me before, and no one ever won against me so fast. You're a natural, Rune."

No, I'm a survivor, and I know what it takes. I know when there's room for decision and when there isn't. I know how to trust my body, how to let it react when my mind is too slow. I know how to fight to live, what it takes to survive.

"I believe she deserves a proper round of applause," Jenèro says. He smiles at me and raises my hand in victory. "For our ice queen!"

The crowd erupts in cheers and hollers. They shout my name. They clap until their hands are numb. Bliss fills me with euphoria. *Our* ice queen. I made friends here today. I was right about everything. This is where I belong, testing the bounds of life surrounded by others brave enough to explore the same.

Though I doubt my parents will agree. Anxiety capsizes my

elation. What will they think when their daughter, their last remaining child, returns swollen and scratched from a fight with a teenage boy after she skipped school? They won't care that I won. They won't understand what it means to me. How could they? I have trouble explaining it to myself.

They'll call it unnatural. They'll call it wrong. But how can something so "wrong" feel so right?