

ROMANCING THE HIGH SEAS



*TAKE NO  
PRISONERS*

EDIE MONTREUX

# *TAKE NO PRISONERS*

*M/M Pirate Fantasy Romance*  
*Romancing the High Seas book 1*  
Edie Montreux

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Content Warnings:

This fantasy pirate romance contains a male/male love relationship between two consenting versatile adults. The age gap is 45/25. This book contains scenes that may depict, mention, or discuss: abduction, animal abuse (chickens for the purpose of training how to heal with magic - these methods are not approved by the author nor by the participants), blood, child abuse (mentioned briefly), death, fire, sexual assault (mentioned briefly), terminal illness, torture (mentioned briefly).

*To everyone who needs more pirate fantasy in their lives.*

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# Chapter 1

## Efren

No pirate skirmish demanded Efren's attention more than a lover's spat between two sailors, especially when the ship languished beneath calm skies hours from land. The two arguing were the ship's wind weavers, and the ship lagged without their wind magic filling the sails.

The argument had escalated beyond them. The rest of the crew had taken sides and placed bets on who would come to blows first. Efren's bet was on Tovey, unanimous with the rest of the crew. Stan didn't have a mean bone in his body, which annoyed Tovey to no end. The spread covered the number of minutes before the inevitable first punch.

They weren't Efren's lovers, nor was it his spat, but it was still his business. They were his fucking sailors, and it was his godsdamned ship.

The ship could practically sail herself in such calm, but he called his substitute first mate to take the wheel in his absence. Olivia matched him in every way but her hair. Hers was black and tied back in a severe braid that pulled the hair at her skull so tight it was a wonder she could close her eyes beneath her tricorn hat. Efren had only a thin braid on the right to keep the strands free of his looking glass. The rest was loose and brown beneath his tricorn. His close-cropped beard hid the laugh lines around his mouth, while hers were exposed to the daylight.

They wore matching gray tailcoats and breeches tucked into black knee-high boots, a throwback to their time in the imperial navy. The rest of the crew wore more comfortable tunics and straw hats to keep the sun from their eyes, but Olivia could pass for a stranded naval officer from a distance. She kept up appearances for any imperial sightings. Efren couldn't disguise his water weaves from a seeker, but few enough imperial ships had one. They'd been lucky so far.

Olivia would make an excellent captain one day, but it had been five years, and still Efren didn't trust her with crew disputes. Nor did he confide in her the way he had in Vadim. That was far more Efren's fault, and his former first mate's, than hers, but nothing had burned him worse than being boarded and searched by the emperor's royal navy while Vadim had looked on with contempt. When they'd found no stowaways aboard, Vadim had requested clemency and spirited away with them, leaving Efren shaken, furious, and alone.

Five years had done nothing to temper his anger. Instead, it had sharpened to a fine blade. He rarely exposed that blade to his crew, but this morning's war of words between Stan and Tovey deserved a demonstration. Insolence of this nature would not be tolerated aboard *Starlight Specter*. All he had to do was catch their attention and point toward his quarters beneath the wheel, and they followed him with sheepish looks and downcast eyes.

"What is it this time, Kristov?" The captain used the wind weaver's formal name to show his displeasure.

The morning sun through the starboard windows had both sailors squinting as Efren leaned against the edge of his desk. It was either that or hold court from his bunk, and this was not the time to encourage them.

"He made a pass at one of the naval gits," Tovey said.

They'd overtaken a small naval vessel with a crew of five the day before. The ship's captain had dared to rush them and died for his actions. The other four had surrendered, begging transport to Glamiere, the country to the west, where they could flee the emperor's conscription. They were all weavers, not a seeker or suppressor among them. Weavers looking for freedom received free passage, while those who sided with the emperor died for their misguided loyalty.

The ship's log had mentioned a mining operation to the north, which had baffled Efren. Why was the emperor sending groups of five weavers at a time to mine ore from a rocky crag in the middle of the ocean?



“Said they should meet up in port and have a good time at one of the brothels.” Tovey looked angry enough to spit deck nails, and he wouldn’t meet Efren’s gaze, choosing to stare at the floor between them.

“He’s pretty,” Stan countered.

None of their passengers could hold a candle to Tovey’s northern good looks, in Efren’s opinion. Tovey sported tanned white skin, eyes the color of the ocean, and hair like spun gold to his shoulders. Tovey had swayed townspeople in their favor at several ports with his gorgeous face and his lute. The man could even sing at a good clip, though his voice sometimes veered too sharp if he’d had too much ale.

“I’m pretty, you bastard.” There it was, the veer to the sharp, both in pitch and in cutting insults. “You never take me to a nice brothel when we’re docked.”

“You always become a cross asshole as soon as the crow’s nest hollers ‘land ho!’” Stan was more of Tovey in every way. Darker. Taller. Broader. Older, though he still had the same physique as he had at eighteen, thanks to the amount of physical labor he did on deck. With earth as his primary element, Stan had no need to lift the ropes or haul up the anchor himself, but he always did.

“Maybe I wouldn’t hate it so much if you made it worth leaving the ship.”

“Gods own!” Efren shouted to disrupt the fast-paced sniping between the two. They could argue for hours like this, which was the reason they were in his cabin now. Efren put a stop to Stan’s attempt to drape an arm over Tovey’s shoulders by shoving them apart. “Either kiss and make up or don’t, but this constant bickering has got to stop. Stan, do you want to keep shagging Tovey or not?”

“Well, aye.” Stan’s dimples were on full display from his grin. “He’s pretty.”

“Is that all I’ll ever be to you?” Tovey asked. “Pretty?” He looked as mad as a wet kitten and made of claws.

“It’s all that matters, ain’t it?” Stan could be as dense as a barn door on a good day, and this wasn’t a good day.

“We’re done, Captain.” Tovey snapped his gaze to Efren’s with a nod of his head. “If I never speak to him again beyond the call of duty, it will be too soon.”

Stan looked like he wanted to argue. He squinted at Efren and thought better of it.

“The next time we have this conversation, one of you will be finding a new ship.”

Efren watched the emotions play across Stan’s face as he first understood he’d lost his fuck buddy, and then that he’d lost his verbal sparring partner, and finally that his livelihood had been threatened.

“Well, shit.”

Well shit, indeed.

“I’m sorry it’s come to this, Captain.” Tovey didn’t spare a backward glance as he stomped to the door. He could be light on his feet when needed, but he used the weight of his steps to toll the death of his relationship with Stan. He’d only needed the one step, but he’d taken three. He put the exclamation point on it by slamming Efren’s cabin door.

“I honestly don’t know what happened.” Stan’s face crumpled, and he studied his boots. “I was just teasing him.”

Efren slumped against his desk, dropping the mantle of captain. Stan was his oldest friend. They’d grown up together on Aquarion, raised on the outer edge of the empire in the time before weavers had become enemies of the state. Stan had been there for him after Vadim left. It was well past time to return the favor.

“Give him time to cool off,” he said, surprised by the gentleness in his own voice. He was even more surprised when Stan pulled him from the desk and wrapped him in a bone-crushing hug.

Efren gripped him by the shoulders and knocked their foreheads together, the same way they’d butted heads on the

training grounds when they were kids.

Stan grinned in response. That was better than his earlier desolate expression. If Vadim were still here, he would have chided Stan with a death threat, and they would have laughed and parted ways.

Efren needed to stop thinking about Vadim. He was never coming back. It was time to move on.

Tovey and Stan might still have a chance, though, if they could work through their disparate love languages.

“Off the ship,” Efren repeated. “The next time you try to work your shit out, I won’t have it disturbing the crew’s entire morning.”

“Aye, Captain.” Stan bowed his head and turned to the door.

Once he was alone in his tiny space, Efren sank onto his cot, also the seat behind his desk, and glanced through the star charts. They were close to port at Landale, Vadim’s last known location. For four years, he’d stayed in the capital as Emperor Hugo’s adviser. It seemed strange for him to be on the move again. Rumor had it the general had given Vadim his own naval ship and sent him off with a seeker to find more elemental magic weavers. The fucking traitor.

Efren reached for the cool comfort of the water. Even now, he could feel it kissing the sides of his ship, rocking her on her way to Landale. At first, Efren had wished for a more powerful element, like fire or lightning, but he’d been grateful for the calming effects of his water element over the last five years. He weaved a simple spell above his hands, casting water into a spinning circle he could look through like a barrel gasket. The spell rushed through him, filling him with calm as the light hit the stream of fast-flowing water and cast rainbows across the maps on the table.

They would know Vadim’s plans in less than a day. They would dock in the dead of night with hopes of leaving by morning, depending on the news from their sources. He hoped they weren’t too late.



## Niall

The whisper of the wind beneath the door called to Niall like a siren's song. He wished he was out on the town instead of holed up in the pottery shop. He'd been studying as an apprentice for ten years. Whenever he asked Master Othelio for a shelf to sell his own wares, Master would say he wasn't ready. Niall had heard apprenticeships in other lands were five years at most, but arguing with Master Othelio only resulted in tacking on more years of servitude.

The pitchers, bowls, and plates lining the walls were all Niall's creations, anyway. They had Master Othelio's special mark on them, but Niall had pressed that final detail into them with the branding stamp before firing them in the kiln. Everything from the clay itself to the color of the glaze was Niall's choosing. Master Othelio had little time to worry about such details these days. He was more preoccupied with the rogue weavers inflicting their magic on the land. Magic weavers were the largest threat to the empire's economy and safety, according to the emperor himself.

Niall's parents and most of their friends had been weavers in a time when weavers had been outlawed and called pirates. The empire especially frowned upon pirates who helped other weavers escape Embertide's oppression. Niall had a hard time believing any weavers, and especially pirates, were the vile oppressors Master Othelio detested. Master called him naïve whenever he suggested weavers might be trying to stay alive and free, just like everyone else fleeing the emperor's reach.

Niall tried not to think about weavers as he poured a little of his core into each bit of pottery. He also tried not to wonder at how much easier making pottery was without Master Othelio looking over his shoulder. Now that Master left him alone most days, the clay was more malleable in his hands.

Tonight, Master Othelio had sent a courier to share he would not return to the shop until early morning. That meant Niall had to sleep in the showroom to deter break-ins after hours. It didn't help that Master refused to install shutters to cover the glass windows when the shop was closed. Each week, the market was abuzz with tales of thieves in port who traded with pirates.

Niall's parents had been pirates, or so the navy's death weaver had claimed. General Coryn had come to Landale herself to see them hang alongside twenty other naval deserters when Niall was thirteen. Niall had been an orphan ever since. Niall's friend Klaus had loved hearing pirate tales after lights out in the orphanage. Klaus had recognized Niall from his parents' public execution, and they'd become fast friends.

Niall considered himself lucky to have a talent for pottery. His fellow orphans weren't as fortunate. Klaus sold his body for coin after the orphanage kicked him out at eighteen. He swore he'd rather turn tricks than work for the empire any day. He seemed to enjoy sex, which Niall found hard to believe. Niall had never had much interest in it, nor in anyone in particular.

Their other friends were gone now. Miysa had struggled against a cutthroat and died in the streets. Niall didn't want to think about the rest. They'd been like family. Now, Miysa had been dead for years, he hadn't seen Klaus in weeks, and he was alone.

He walked through the back storeroom for a cursory check after he moved the pallet of bedding into the showroom. Master would criticize him in the morning for putting it along the back wall instead of beneath the window, but he didn't want just anyone to walk by and see him sleeping there. His pajamas were threadbare at the seams and had a tear along the crotch. Master knew it was there because he'd poked Niall's backside through the hole once and laughed. He never gave Niall enough coin to buy a new pair, only enough to go to the market for food and the week's supplies to make more pitchers, bowls, and plates.

Klaus had offered to buy Niall a new set of pajamas the last time they met at the public baths, but then Klaus had disappeared. He'd come into a spot of money, or so he'd said, and things were looking up for him. He'd probably gotten himself killed, more like. Or he'd gotten so rich he couldn't be seen with the likes of Niall.

Still, Niall wished him the best. He hoped Klaus was on an island far north of Landale, somewhere the winter wouldn't find him.

Niall sank onto the pallet he'd placed against the wall next to the storeroom door, but sleep wouldn't come until he envisioned Klaus drinking from coconuts and having the time of his life.

Something woke him from his slumber. The room was still dark, without a trace of light from the front windows.

He heard it again, a jarring of the front window so hard it rattled in its casing. Niall wrapped the thin blanket around his waist to hide the holes and marched to the storefront windows. He couldn't see anything through them, even when he stood on the step-stool to see over the highest row of vases to the street outside.

Master Othelio had warned him against opening the door at night, but Niall was too tired to care. Someone had disturbed his slumber, and he was going to see who it was. If they had a knife, even better. Niall had grown up on a pirate ship. He knew how to turn a knife on even the most experienced cutthroat. Anyone looking to break into a pottery shop after dark probably wasn't a cutthroat, which increased his odds.

He opened the door and looked in the direction of the windows, but saw nothing. When he glanced the other direction, he fell backward through the door, startled by the closeness of a familiar face streaked with dirt. He landed hard on the stone tiles.

"Hullo!" Klaus said. "I didn't think you would answer." His dull crimson hair was pulled back with a shining

black satin ribbon. He sometimes received baubles from his patrons, but Niall had never seen him wear them before.

Niall grinned at his oldest friend. He jumped to his feet and pulled Klaus into a hug. “What are you doing here?”

“I promised you a new set of pajamas!” Klaus laughed. “I can do one better, even. I got you a new set of clothes.” Klaus shoved a paper-wrapped package into his hands. “A pair of fancy short breeches like they wear at the capital nowadays, and a flouncy shirt that’s bound to get you some attention from the ladies.”

Niall didn’t want attention from the ladies, and Klaus knew that. He also seemed to be playing for a crowd in his fancy ribbon and a tunic with puffy sleeves, as though he was putting on a performance. The baggy fabric didn’t hide the fact that Klaus was far too skinny. The dim light from the streetlamp did him no favors, making the purple half-circles beneath his eyes even darker.

“Put these on and join me outside. We’re getting out of here. Tonight.”

“I can’t leave!” Niall had who knows how many years left in his apprenticeship. He was willing to wait until Master Othelio died. The old man didn’t have a decade left in him, if that. It wouldn’t be long, and Niall would own the shop and be able to put his own brand on both his artwork and everyday items.

“You’re going nowhere here, and you know it. Master,” Klaus hissed the word like it was venomous, “is using you to make his wares. He’ll keep you at apprentice wages until he dies, and he’ll have squandered all your hard-earned money on gambling and women, so you won’t get a dime to continue the business. You’ll be lucky to keep this store from his daughter. You know she wants to turn it into a dress shop.”

That was news to Niall. He’d only met Master’s daughter, Ishta, once. She’d been nice enough, but he’d heard them laughing about his “misfortunes” when they thought he couldn’t hear. His only misfortune was to be born in a dark

time where a person's worth was measured by how willing he was to break his back for someone else's coin.

His frustration with Master Othelio resurfaced with the memory. In his heart, he knew Klaus was right about his work and his future, but he'd spent so long waiting for the old man to pass on. Master Othelio had been plagued with a harsh cough that had progressively worsened over the last week, too. If he hadn't sent a messenger to say he wouldn't be home tonight, Niall would have assumed he'd died when he didn't return to his rooms above the shop.

"He's playing you," Klaus said. "He's at the gambling hall tonight. He's already lost a week's earnings. At least this way, he'll not be using you to get them back."

Niall knew Master Othelio gambled. He bragged about his time at the floating casinos where townsfolk, visitors, and pirates alike lost their money.

He hadn't mentioned it when leaving the shop today, though. Perhaps Klaus was right, and the game had changed. Master had an end in sight, one where he would spend as much money as possible before his death, since he couldn't take it with him.

"I'll go with you."

"Fantastic! Where we're going, they're badly in need of potters. No apprenticeship, either. You'll be able to make a name for yourself."

"Where are we going?"

"Hearthstone."

Niall had one leg already in the new breeches, but the thought of going to Embertide's capital city stopped him cold. His parents had warned him against the ruling family, General Coryn, and anyone else who would dare subjugate weavers in the empire. His parents had hanged for false accusations of treason against the emperor. Niall had watched them swing from the hangman's noose. He tugged at the neck of his too-tight pajama shirt.

"Come on! He won't wait for us forever."



“Who’s waiting?” Niall didn’t like the sound of someone else’s involvement, either. Word could easily get back to Master Othelio, and then Niall would be hanged for deserting his apprenticeship.

“You’ll see.”

Something dark slithered across Klaus’s face, an emotion Niall couldn’t identify but which made him even more uneasy about their circumstances. He had nothing to gain if he stayed here, though, and only his life to lose. Besides, he had no magic. The general wasn’t looking for him. She could have dragged him onto her boat the night his parents died or claimed him at the orphanage if she’d wanted. He’d spent two full years in the port orphanage under his real name. Hell, he still used his real name now.

No one was looking for him in Hearthstone. No one was coming to save him here, either. It was time for him to save himself.

He finished dressing and followed Klaus into the night. The streets were fairly empty, especially when they turned away from the lanterns and headed for the docks. Instead of boarding one of the merchant ships docked there, Klaus headed for the naval vessels on the far side. Thankfully, he turned the corner instead of walking up the gangplank to the largest naval ship Niall had ever seen, *Imperial Fool*. The name seemed to be a private joke, between the general and the ship’s captain, Niall guessed.

Klaus motioned him to a stack of crates beneath a half-open window. “Up there. Let me know what you see.”

Niall climbed up and looked inside. It was a large building filled with crates. There were a few torches down below.

“Well? Do you see anyone?” he asked.

“No.”

“Good. In you get!”

Niall hesitated. It was a long drop to the ground without the crates.

Klaus seemed to sense his worry. “There are boxes stacked beneath the window on the other side. You’ll be fine.”

Niall slipped through the window, catching his sleeve on the nail hammered into place to hold the window up. It tore, and he cursed. He would do his best to mend the shirt, but the cloth was finer than anything he’d ever owned. He didn’t know how well it would take to his thick fingers and coarse thread.

“Hurry up,” Klaus said behind him.

He slipped through the window and lowered himself to the stack of boxes waiting for him inside the building.

Klaus scampered after him. “Thank fuck. They’re gone. We can stow away on the ship. Follow me.”

“On the ship?” Niall whispered. “The ship outside?”

Klaus nodded. “*Imperial Fool.*”

“The emperor himself is a fool if he thinks I’m getting on that ship.” Niall stood up straighter and loosely balled his hands into fists at his sides. He and Klaus had never come to blows before, but Klaus was underweight and underfed, while Niall had three square meals a day as an apprentice and the bonus of lifting fifty-pound bags of clay daily. There was no way Klaus would force him onto that ship.

“Be reasonable,” Klaus said. “You need to break out of your apprenticeship, and they’re leaving for Hearthstone tonight. By the time Master Othelio thinks to look for you, you’ll be putting a down payment on your new store.”

“I’m not getting on a naval ship, even if it’s the last ship leaving this port.” Niall crossed his arms, displaying his fists.

“I told you he wouldn’t come willingly.” That voice. Niall had heard it before. He shivered. The last time had been the night his parents had hanged.

## Chapter 2

### Efren

Landale's docks were calm. Too calm. It had been easy enough to secure passage to Glamiere for the four newly freed weavers, but the ship's captain had no news in return.

Even the gambling ship seemed quiet. No new reports of weavers to rescue. No Vadim sightings reported. The man was impossible to miss with his white hair and his aura of death. Even the mundane folk without magic could tell there was something off about him. Efren had been following him solely from reports of a bogeyman with white hair for the last six months.

Efren had been drawn to Vadim's aura of danger once. Now, he wanted to stay as far away as possible, but necessity dictated. Once they caught Vadim, they could pry the emperor's plans from him. Efren was looking forward to it. The bloodier, the better.

After he left the gambling ship, he met with the lookouts for each ship docked between it and *Starlight Specter*. They had nothing to report. Their claims seemed suspicious about the giant naval ship docked beside the pier's farthest corner, just out of sight. When he asked about it, they all said they knew nothing. Far too convenient.

He returned to the ship, hoping his crew had better luck.

Olivia waited for him at the wheel. She was again dressed the same as he was, but in a long, dark jacket over an even darker tunic. Color was difficult to discern, thanks to the ghostly blue light from the enchanted globe in Olivia's hand. Her gray breeches were just long enough to tuck into her over-the-knee boots. Beneath her tricorn hat, a single braid curved around her neck like a serpent and tapered to a knotted tail just above her belt.

"Ready to set sail?" she asked without further greeting.

“Has everyone else returned?” Efren would have left the gambling vessel sooner, himself, but he’d been too intrigued by an old shop owner betting heaps of money on craps, money he lost time and time again.

“They have,” she said. “Some with news. Have you any news?”

“Master Othelio of Othelio’s Pottery has really bad luck.”

She smirked. “You’ll be surprised to learn that’s not the first time I’ve heard his name tonight.”

“Oh?”

“Master Othelio has an apprentice who has been abducted by your dear first mate.”

“What would Vadim want with a potter’s apprentice?”

“What, indeed?” Olivia smirked, and Efren relaxed a little. She wasn’t trying to be a better captain or take the ship from him. She was doing her best to fill the boots Vadim had left behind. Her eagerness to take her predecessor down a peg or two gave him hope.

Olivia was the ship’s magic suppressor, the person who could keep them hidden from Vadim’s seeker until the last possible moment, allowing them to get the drop on him. Well, to give them a fighting chance, at least. Efren had never seen anyone surprise Vadim, not even if he was now commanding a hulking naval vessel.

“He’s taken at least five weavers, according to four missing persons reports ranging from children to young adults. The fifth is the potter’s apprentice. He’s older than the others, and he followed their seeker to the docks tonight. The seeker tried to convince him to come aboard without tying him up. From their argument, the young man seems to have his own issues with the navy.”

“If the seeker found him, that makes him a weaver, too, most likely.”

She nodded. “Vadim said as much. The apprentice denied it, and I believe him. I don’t think he’s been formally trained, not even in earth weaving, which would have made the most sense for pottery. I sensed something else, too, but it could be Vadim. His power has grown since he last sailed with us.”

Olivia was the only crew member who could get close to Vadim without his ever-present seeker knowing.

“You were close enough to hear them. Could you see them?”

“I hid in a packing crate. I saw the young man with the seeker. The moment I heard Vadim’s voice, I closed the crate. Good thing, too. He tapped the side of it as he walked by. You know how he’s constantly touching things.”

Efren bowed his head and remembered a time when Vadim had needed to touch him to know he was real. “It’s the damn gloves he wears all the time.” They locked his power inside with a magical weave. The emperor’s own glover had made them for him after his first naval battle had driven him nearly crazy. The gloves deadened his sense of physical touch, though. Even with the promise that Vadim wouldn’t hurt him, letting the death weaver touch Efren’s bare skin had been a test of loyalty and trust, one Vadim hadn’t returned.

“It was him. I’m sure of it. I’d know his voice anywhere.”

Efren met her gaze and wondered what he’d done to make her think he doubted her. “I agree.”

“His ship’s bigger than any other in the emperor’s navy. Goes by the name *Imperial Fool*. The ship is as ridiculous as he is.”

“Where are they headed?”

“Hearthstone, of course.”

“Raise anchor!” he shouted.

“Aye, Captain.” Stan was nearest the anchor. Instead of using his earth weaves, he threw his whole body against the

crank to get it moving and pulled the anchor aboard.

“Set sail for Hearthstone. A ship that large should be slow. We’ll get a head start and wait for her at the Quadrilles.”

“A good plan, Captain.” Olivia’s smirk returned. “We could have left sooner if you’d raised anchor the moment I asked if you were ready.”

He glared at her, hoping he looked angrier than he felt. He was losing his touch. “Next time, you could give me a report of what everyone else learned before asking me about some old fool losing his life’s savings on craps.”

She shook her head. “Where’s the fun in that?”

He grunted in response. She wasn’t Vadim, that much was true, but she could hold her own with the crew while keeping Efren on his toes. She’d gotten him thinking and talking about Vadim, too, something that usually sent him off to his quarters to grieve quietly without another word. Perhaps the tides were changing on his grief. Perhaps it was time to move on.



## **Niall**

Niall woke with a pounding headache and stinging in his wrists. First, the left throbbed as he was shoved against it. Then, the right ached as he was tossed in the opposite direction.

“I’m awake, Master Othelio. I’ll have the shop open in a moment. Just let me sleep a little longer.”

“You’ll open nothing but your eyes and shut your mouth.”

There was that voice again, the one he recognized from his parents’ false trial and conviction. The one who gave the order to drop the platform out beneath his parents’ feet, leaving them to dangle and die.

“Good. You hate me. Remember that. You’re going to need your hatred, where we’re going.”

*“Fuck, if that bastard Efren doesn’t intercept this ship, I’ll have to think of another plan.”*

“Who’s Efren?”

*“Fuck! How can you hear my thoughts?”*

“I don’t know! How can I hear your thoughts?” Niall had never heard another’s voice in his head, not even the last time they’d met.

*“Stop answering me, fool! You’ll get us both killed! We are on a fucking naval vessel!”*

Vadim, the most powerful death weaver in the realm, was afraid. Even more confusing, he was afraid of Niall.

*“I’m not afraid of you ... wait. Are you still in my damn head? Get out!”*

Niall sank into the welcoming blackness again. At least there was no pain.

The next time he woke, he recognized the lazy shifting from side to side for what it was. He was on a large boat, probably the giant navy vessel he’d seen docked at Landale before Klaus had betrayed him. The fucker had worked for the navy all along, seeking weavers among the commoners living in Landale. He’d handed Niall and a handful of weavers over to Vadim.

Niall wasn’t a weaver. That was impossible. His parents had tested him several times. His mother had tried to show him water weaves with no luck.

If he were a weaver, his life would have been easy as pie. He would have been able to conjure whatever he wanted and go wherever he pleased. He could have provided water to those in the desert. He could have lit the darkness as a lamplighter. With earth power, he would have made the most beautiful pottery with a thought, or built huge fortifications. The list went on and on.

Weavers were hailed and lauded in other countries. As a weaver, he could have jumped aboard a pirate ship and sailed away from Embertide to start a new life somewhere. A life of luxury. A life of relative ease.

Instead, he'd come of age as a mundane apprentice in Landale, orphaned thanks to the dispute between General Coryn and the weavers she'd kicked out of the navy. Apparently, the ban had been lifted. Vadim was a death weaver, and at least half his crew were wind weavers for the ship to be moving as fast as it was through the water. Niall didn't understand why General Coryn would ban weavers from the military when he was seven and then reinstate them and begin conscripting or killing every weaver in the empire thirteen years later. For the last five years, weavers had been running scared, even the ones who weren't pirates. Niall had been grateful his parents' power skipped him, or he would have been a sitting duck unable to flee his apprenticeship.

Niall's parents had been discharged from the navy when the general decreed she no longer trusted weavers in the imperial military. They'd saved enough to buy a sloop. Niall had spent his first seven years on an island out west, but when his parents came to collect him and his grandfather for their new life on the ship, he'd enjoyed sailing the seas with them. They'd pretended to be simple merchants, but secretly, they smuggled weavers across the sea to Glamiere, a country where they could be free.

Vadim had accused Niall's parents of smuggling weavers across the sea and sentenced them to death for treason. They were caught with a single water weaver, a child younger than Niall. General Coryn had strung them up on Landale's docks as an example. This was what happened to pirates smuggling weavers out of Embertide.

Vadim also claimed he found paperwork in the cabin showing they'd delivered countless weavers to Glamiere. Their entire crew were weavers, old friends from the navy. Vadim had accused them of aiding and abetting deserters and had taken them into custody.



Niall forced himself to take a deep breath. It eased the fury in his chest somewhat, but it was always there, lurking. Most of the time, he could smile and ignore it, but right now, his heart hurt worse than his bruised and chafed wrists. Seeing Vadim again and being betrayed by a friend the same way Vadim had betrayed his parents brought back all his rage.

Niall's parents had trusted Vadim as one of their own. He'd been the first mate on a respected ship. He'd boarded his parents' boat, the *Zephyr Starfish*, as a friend and regaled them with pirate tales for days. Young Niall had eaten those stories up like candy. He'd wanted to be a pirate when he grew up.

"No, boy," Vadim had said. "You'll be a landed man. A shopkeeper. Make an honest living."

"I can make an honest living on the sloop with my parents!"

How naïve he'd been. He hadn't understood the look his mom and dad had given each other. He didn't know how they knew what was coming, but they did. They'd feared for him. Something in Vadim's statement must have reassured them of Niall's future.

They couldn't save themselves, but Vadim had saved Niall. He'd taken him to the orphanage and agreed to the hefty sum the director demanded for Niall's room and board. Even so, Niall had hated him for uttering the one syllable that had ended his parents' lives.

*"Drop."*

Why had Vadim saved him then, only to bring him aboard the giant naval ship now? It wasn't like Niall had a chance to make anything of himself in the years that had passed. He was twenty-five and still an apprentice. If Vadim had intended to turn him over to the general all along, he might as well have died when he was thirteen, hung up for treason along with his parents.

*"I prolonged the inevitable. She's looked everywhere else. Now, she's moved on to the mundane children of weavers."*

There was Vadim's voice in his head again. How was the death weaver making his thoughts known? Niall wasn't aware of any weavers with that power, but then Niall didn't know much about weavers beyond the few nautical tricks his parents and their crew displayed.

Pirates had been captured and hauled off to the capital since Emperor Hesse's death when Niall was seven. The empress died and Emperor Hugo came to power when Niall was twenty, when General Coryn started rounding up every weaver in the land. Now, instead of executing all captured and conscripted weavers, she sent them to work in a prison camp on an island to the north in the emperor's name.

*"Emperor Hugo is a good man trapped in unforeseen circumstances, same as you."*

Niall didn't question the voice this time. His head still throbbed too much to think clearly. Anger left him feeling drained. He wasn't a weaver, so he couldn't heal his own aches and pains. He also couldn't break his way out of the cuffs around his wrists.

If he were a weaver, he would use fire or lightning to heat them, or hardened air or ice to break them apart. If he had death powers, he might be able to shrivel his hands just enough to slip from them.

He tugged on the cuffs, and his hands slipped free. It wasn't supposed to be that easy! He dropped his hands to his lap, and they tingled back to life as blood rushed into them. The sensation of pins and needles in his fingertips hurt almost as bad as his wrists, which still ached from the cuffs. He risked a glance at his hands. They looked perfectly normal, save for the horrible sensation of tiny teeth trying to poke through from the inside.

How had he escaped? The cuffs were made of silver. Vadim had said they would keep him from using his power. Maybe Vadim hadn't tightened them enough.

Niall pocketed the cuffs in case he needed them later and rubbed feeling back into his hands. They didn't look any worse for wear. They weren't shriveled with death magic.

They were his usual brown hands, streaked with dirt from the warehouse floor. He'd fallen after Vadim had thumped him in the back of the head. He'd come up from behind Niall, as though he could keep Niall from recognizing him if he didn't see his face. Niall would recognize his voice anywhere.

He glanced around the tiny cell of metal bars. They were made of an alloy of some sort, one he didn't recognize. When he touched the bars, they burned his skin, and he flinched away. He had no tools to work the outside lock. He would have to wait for a sailor to feed him or bring him water. Then, he would make a break for the deck and toss himself overboard. He was a strong swimmer. If he tired and drowned before making it to a safe shore, at least he would die a free man.

# Chapter 3

## Efren

“That’s a big fucking ship,” Tovey said. He handed the scope back to Efren with a grin. “That’s also Vadim. I’d recognize his ass anywhere.”

Efren cleared his throat. Vadim had a nice ass, it was true, but he didn’t need to be reminded of that right now.

“I meant his hair,” Tovey said. “I’d recognize his hair anywhere. White. Death. Scary.” He waved his fingers above his shoulders and stuck his tongue out.

“Enough,” Efren said.

“The crow’s nest can’t see us from here and no one on deck has looked this way,” Olivia said. “We’ll surprise them, as you wished.”

“Are you ready?” Efren turned to Tovey. While weaker in earth the way Stan was weaker in air weaving, Tovey was the strongest air weaver Efren had ever met. With Stan’s control of earth, Tovey’s control of air, and a touch of Hannah’s lightning, *Starlight Specter* had scourged the sea of many a naval vessel, thanks to their blazing missiles.

“I’m on it.” He turned. “Stan? We’re up.”

Stan had more finesse with earth than Tovey did, which is what they needed for their current endeavor. While Stan concentrated on gathering anything that would burn from the nearest coastline and smashing it into a tight ball on shore, Efren approached Tovey.

“Thank you for still speaking to him,” Efren said under his breath.

“I’m nothing if not professional.” Tovey’s eyes sparkled. “I’m sorry for throwing a temper tantrum in your cabin. It won’t happen again.”

Efren left it at that. He lifted his scope to monitor the naval ship’s deck. There wasn’t much wind in their sails,

almost as though they were waiting for something.

Once Stan condensed the pile into a projectile to hurl at their enemies, Tovey surrounded it with air and pulled it toward the ship. Thank the gods they weren't letting their little spat affect their success. *Imperial Fool* was a giant ship, larger than most Efren had seen before, and they would need all the help they could get to bring her down.

The wind whirled around them, carrying the tight bundles of detritus to hover just off the starboard railing.

“Hannah!” Tovey hollered.

“Ready,” they shouted from the crow's nest. Their brown hair streaked with blond hung limply beneath their bandana, an uncommon sight. Usually, their hair streamed out behind them like a short sail of their own, but the ship sat completely still in the water, the crow's nest positioned behind a copse of trees on the island to make it almost invisible.

Tovey lifted the first volley of two compressed balls of tinder into the air. Lightning crackled overhead and forked, striking each. Tovey sent them hurtling toward *Imperial Fool*. They hit the deck right above her name.

“Hit them in the side, you fools,” Efren muttered under his breath.

“Well, they know we're here now,” Olivia said, taking the scope from him.

The second volley was more devastating, punching giant holes in the front and back of her, right below the water line.

“I doubt those are repairmen.” Olivia handed the scope to Efren.

She was right. A line of sailors approached the side of the ship. The next volley of fireballs hit a wall of air and sank into the sea.

“Fuck,” Tovey said. “That was too quick.”

“I told you not to fire a warning shot,” Stan said. “Bastard doesn't deserve our chivalry.”

“That’s enough.” Efren wasn’t ready to concede just yet. The naval sailors hadn’t yet launched their own attack, so they had time. “What else have we got?”

An enormous wave crashed over the prow of the naval ship, thanks to Hannah. They were a true stormcaller. Supposedly, water and lightning were two sides of the same coin at one point, same as fire and ice, air and earth, or life and death, but those with both elements were few and far between. Hannah was a pirate of many talents. They also had more stealth than any one person deserved, and they used it to startle Efren and the rest of the crew all too often.

The wave hit the ship just right and dropped her low in the water. She started to list toward the prow, thanks to the original holes on the deck. Water also poured through the holes in the side of the ship.

“Wasn’t a warning shot.” Tovey winked at Stan. “I knew what I was doing.”

Efren added his water to the mix, combining his weave with Hannah’s. The air weavers aboard their target ship tried to block the wave, but their combined wave, aided by Tovey and Stan’s gust of wind, was taller than their shield and swamped the deck again.

When Tovey and Stan launched two more balls of fire against her side, the shield disintegrated, allowing another direct hit just below the water level.

“That should sink her,” Olivia said.

They’d done a little too well. The ship was sinking fast.

“Stan?” Efren looked to the earth weaver for his assessment.

“Total loss. We’ll have to work quick to scuttle her. I’ll be able to salvage anything that floats, but I can’t repair her enough to keep her from sinking. She’s just too big.”

That was Efren’s assessment, too. He could hold back the water for only so long.

“All right. We’ll board her, capture Vadim, put his sailors in the hold for questioning, and rescue any conscripted weavers we can. Agreed?”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Wish we had a seeker to know where the prisoners are,” Olivia said.

Efren wished the same thing, but there were too few and the emperor paid seekers too well to turn them to piracy. They could identify weavers among the mundane, even when they weren’t using their powers. Efren had been lucky to be around suppressors his whole life, first his uncle, and now Olivia. They’d been damn lucky Vadim hadn’t turned them all in five years ago, too. Why he hadn’t was beyond Efren. Vadim had seen them all in action and could point out their specific skills to the general in a line-up.

Maybe now Efren could extract some answers.

They pulled alongside the sinking ship expecting a fight, but the crew held up their hands and one waved a graying dishrag in surrender.

“Where is your captain?”

“I’ll come willingly.” Vadim stepped out of the shadows of the cabin. He raised both of his hands to show they were gloved. No fight, then. This wasn’t what Efren had expected at all.

“Olivia, cuff him and take him to my cabin. We’ll put the others in the false hold. Where are the prisoners?”

“You’ll be lucky if any are left, waterspout.” A sickly young man with auburn hair and a hard sneer crossed his arms over his chest.

“That’s the seeker,” Olivia confirmed. She locked Vadim in irons and pushed him toward the plank between their ships. *Imperial Fool* was so deep in the water now that it was almost a straight shoot across.

“You’d better hurry,” Vadim said. “It might be better if they died. If General Coryn can do what she thinks she can

with her new toy, we're all in deep shit.”

Efren rushed across the gangplank. He ordered his crew to tie up the sailors and take them for questioning. Most were conscripted weavers and would be set free at a port as far from the emperor as *Starlight Specter* could take them.

Vadim cried out as though something had attacked him and fell to the deck.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Olivia kicked him in the side.

In two strides, Efren fell to his knees beside his former lover. Vadim writhed on his back, gripping his head with both gloved hands, the chain rattling between them.

“Find the potter from Landale,” Vadim whispered, “before he takes us all down with him.”

Efren dashed down the stairs into the dark hold. The top hold was already half-full of water. There was a second level below, and from the way the ship was sinking, that level was already full.

He dipped his fingers into the water, searching for signs of life.



## Niall

Dead. Everyone else in the hold was dead. Niall didn't know how he knew it, but he knew.

Wait. There was one little trickle of life in the water. A little girl, barely over the age of seven. Fire. She could weave fire, and she was terrified of the water filling her cell, but she couldn't leave her ... brother. Her brother had been an earth weaver.

There was water in Niall's cell, too, but he didn't experience the same level of dread as the little fire starter. He'd been around water all his life. He'd loved sailing on his



parents' sloop. Once he'd been apprenticed, the pottery shop was close enough to the wharf he could sneak there to dip his feet in the water whenever Master Othelio's expectations were too high to reach, which had been often.

Fortunately, the blast that had torn a hole in the side of the ship had also damaged the locking mechanism on Niall's cell door, and he was able to swim to them. He didn't know how he'd survived the blast or the smoke, but he didn't have time to wonder. They needed him.

The girl held her brother's hand as water seeped through her cell's floorboards. She had him braced against her chest, trying to keep his head above the water. They were both dark-skinned with white hair. The boy's was shorn close to his head, while hers curled to her shoulders, where it then hung limp and wet below the water line. Niall worried she would soon sink beneath the water, if she continued holding her brother's dead body.

The children had shared a cell, by the looks of it. The cell door gave easily when Niall tugged on it. He entered the small space, and then he reached for ... he couldn't explain it. He sensed the boy's life force hovering just above the body, if only he could grasp it and force it back inside. He reached for it with a part of him he'd never used before, something almost outside himself.

The little girl shrieked as she noticed him for the first time.

"I'm here to help," he promised, though he didn't know what he could do. All he knew was, the boy's life force was now flowing through Niall. He reached out his hand and touched the boy, jolting his arm like an electric shock.

"Ow!" The little girl dropped her brother's hand into the water and rubbed at her arm. "You shocked me!"

"I'm sorry," Niall said. "I didn't mean to make it worse."

She scrunched up her face like she was about to scream bloody murder, but a cough, and then a violent choking fit,

caught their attention.

“Renald!”

The boy tried to stand on wobbly feet, but fell backward against Niall. “Jasmine?”

“We have to get out of here!” Niall hefted Renald over his shoulder the way he would carry a bag of clay. He offered his hand to Jasmine. “You coming?”

She took his hand. “You saved him,” she whispered.

The water was getting deeper by the moment, the waves sloshing over Jasmine’s shoulders and drenching her face with each rock of the boat.

“Can you swim?”

She shook her head.

“Float?”

Her shoulders came up above the water for a moment and sank beneath it again. “Never learned.”

“Do you trust me?”

She nodded.

“Lay on your back on my hands.” He held them out in front of him, and she jumped into his arms. Renald steadied himself on Niall’s shoulder, and he helped her float.

“Stiff as a board, all right?” he said as she started to sink. “There. Like that.” He dropped his arms and took her hands, walking ahead and helping her wrap her hands around Renald’s arm until Renald grasped both her hands in his.

“Got her?”

“Yes.” His voice was raspy and weak.

“We’re going to move as fast as we can toward the front of the ship. You ready?”

“Ready!”

Jasmine sounded far more hesitant than her brother, but Niall appreciated her attempt at bravery.

He ruined the mood when his first step and choppy movements sloshed water on Jasmine, and she shrieked again. “Sorry.”

Every step felt like fire as he pushed against the water’s resistance. Until it didn’t. The water seemed to divert around him, pushing up against the large cargo hold’s walls and away from the walkway. He wasn’t doing that, was he?

“Hurry! I can’t hold it for much longer.”

A man in a drenched leather tricorne hat hovered in a ray of sunlight before Niall. He looked like an avenging angel come to save Niall and the children from the emperor, or at least his sinking ship.

“Thank the gods,” Niall whispered under his breath. He pushed ahead, no longer feeling the burn in his legs until he banged into something with his shin.

“Stairs,” the man said. He wasn’t hovering in air, then. He was standing on the stairs to the hold with one hand outstretched. “Watch your step.”

Niall blindly stepped up and took the man’s hand, and a spark traveled between them.

“Sorry,” Niall muttered. He didn’t know where the static had come from, in all this water. The same thing had happened with Renald right before he ...

“Go,” the man said when Niall reached the first semi-dry stair. “Follow the gangplank to my ship.”

Niall risked a look back. Renald dropped his sister’s hands, and the man picked her up, placing his hat on her head. “Hello there, little one. Will you keep that safe for me?”

“Yes.” She gripped the rim with her small hand.

“What are you waiting for?” Renald sounded a little panicked. The water was now steadily rising behind them, already over his boots on the stairs.

Niall stepped up two stairs at a time until he reached the main deck. It was completely deserted, left to sink from the gaping holes in the deck and the ones they could no longer see

below. He walked around one hole, watching their chance for rescue slip away as the waves caught the gangplank and ripped it away from the deck. The other ship loomed over them, but it was too far for Niall to jump to her with Renald's added weight.

"Now what do we do?" Renald cried out.

Niall had no idea, but Renald wasn't asking him. Their angel, who now had Jasmine clinging to his neck with both hands and dangling down his back, stepped onto the deck rail and launched himself at the rope maze hanging from the side of the other ship. The ropes went every which way, vertical and horizontal, but Niall would end up back in the water if he dared the same move.

Jasmine was already scrambling up the side of the ship into the arms of another person dressed much like the man who'd rescued them. The only difference was the thick black braid over her shoulder beneath her tricorn hat.

"Toss me the boy," the man said.

"What?" Renald squawked. "No!"

"He was ... unconscious a moment ago," Niall said. "He might be too weak."

The man studied him with a frown that implied he knew exactly how unconscious the boy had been a moment ago. "I'll catch him, I promise. Toss him."

Niall didn't see any choice. The longer they stood on the deck, the more water licked at his boots. He cradled Renald to his chest, bunching his muscles. Then, he tossed Renald toward their rescuer with all his might.

Renald let out another undignified squeal as he landed on a cushion of water inches from the ship. The spout carried him to the rope wall, where the captain caught him under the arm and helped him grab onto his neck. Renald was a foot taller than Jasmine and still not moving the best, but he held on.

It was Niall's turn to jump, but he couldn't get his legs to work. His angel was a water weaver. Niall should have

known on some level. The man had just stopped the giant ship from sinking with them in it.

The angel in the tricorn hat glanced over his shoulder. “You coming?”

The water had entirely engulfed the deck and was fast approaching the railing. Niall had seen ships sink before, capturing sailors in their wake and pulling them to watery graves. He hopped onto the deck rail and jumped for it.

His hands still burned from where he’d touched the metal bars of his cell, and the rope was slippery, but he grabbed on tight. He hit the side of the ship so hard it rattled his teeth and every bone in his body. He hurt everywhere, but he was still alive. He pulled himself up to the deck rail of a brigantine. He would have been impressed with its size, had he not left a far larger vessel. *Starlight Specter* was far larger than his parents’ sloop.

*“Fucking thief.”*

There was that voice in his head again. Vadim was in irons, but he still looked deadly with his white hair whipping around his face.

*“You’ve usurped my power long enough.”*

Niall’s world faded to a small white circle as his legs gave out beneath him. The last thing he saw before complete darkness was the face of his angel staring down at him, concern darkening his brow.

# Chapter 4

## Efren

Efren didn't want to interrogate Vadim in his cabin, but there was nowhere else on *Starlight Specter* with privacy, not with her false hold full of navy sailors and the true hold full of supplies for Aquarion.

He also had nowhere to sit. His bunk was now a sickbed for the young man who had so valiantly rescued the two children from the sinking ship. After he'd passed out, Efren had carried him to the cabin and propped him up on the pillows, conscious of Olivia's and Vadim's gazes on him.

He slid around the desk and leaned against it, instead, leaving Vadim to stand with his back to the cabin door. Vadim's hands were cuffed in front of him at his waist, a single iron chain holding them together. It hadn't been enough to keep him from removing a glove during the skirmish, though. Olivia had ordered him to put the damn thing back on, and then she'd pushed him toward Efren's cabin with the butt of her rapier.

"He's a godsdamned siphon," Vadim said before Olivia had even shut the door as she left. "No wonder Klaus couldn't detect his magic when they first met."

"Siphons don't exist."

Vadim scoffed. "Coryn would have you believe that."

"You're saying General Coryn is a siphon, too?"

Vadim nodded. "I tried telling you years ago, but you didn't believe me."

"Why should I believe you now?"

Vadim shrugged, rattling the chains binding his wrists. "Don't. See if I care. But my hair was completely white, and now I have a streak of blond right in front. I haven't had blond hair since we were children smaller than those two."

In one step, Efren was in Vadim's personal space, examining his hair in the light of the setting sun. A handful of strands over his scarred left eye shimmered with a more golden hue.

“What does it mean?”

“We'll have to wait for him to wake to know for sure, but I'm guessing at least one child he rescued was a corpse before he reached them.”

“He brought them back to life?”

Vadim grunted. “Your deathly trio killed two other conscripted weavers, also children. Do you even care?”

Efren ignored the accusation. “He used your magic?”

“It felt like he was ripping my skull apart from the inside. I doubt he has magic of his own, but there's enough diversity on your ship to power him for days.”

“You don't have healing power. How could he steal enough to bring a child back to life?”

Vadim looked perplexed at that question. “He must be able to reverse it, to turn my death into life.”

“That would fucking hurt.” Efren had little proficiency with lightning, but the one time a spectral weaver linked with him and pulled the element from his core, it had burned like fire in his veins. “Are you all right, then? Did he hurt you?”

Vadim shrugged. “Better off than he is, for the moment.”

Efren studied Vadim, looking for changes in him. Besides the streak of blond now discoloring his white hair, which had grown from shoulder length to the middle of his back in the last five years, he looked the same. He wore the all-black naval uniform of Coryn's highest-ranking admirals. His thin black gloves would feel like butter against Efren's skin.

Same appearance, but everything else had changed. Efren saw a traitor where he'd once found refuge. He heard lies where before he'd trusted every word as truth.

He glanced over his shoulder at his bunk and the unconscious man. “How long before he wakes? What did you do to him?”

“I tried to kill him. He didn’t consent.” Vadim smirked.

The twist of his lips had once been enough to turn Efren on. Now, it made him want to vomit over the side of his ship.

“Did you kill the empress?”

Vadim shook his head. “You know I didn’t. I was still on your ship when we heard she died.”

“You can kill with a thought at ten thousand leagues.”

“Only with consent, and I would have never offered. She was my nephew’s mother.”

“Hesse wasn’t your brother.”

“He might as well have been.” The light of humor was gone from Vadim’s cat green eyes. “He was closer family to me than this ship and this crew. There was a time when I’d thought differently.”

Efren recognized that tone. It matched his own when he spoke of Vadim. Disappointment. “You left us. You betrayed us!”

“I did no such thing.” For his part, Vadim looked as indignant as Efren felt. “It was either offer my services to Coryn as a much-needed death weaver or tie my fate to yours. Would you have preferred to return to the navy?”

“You know I’d rather die.”

Vadim snorted. “You’d watch your procured family hang beside you?” Vadim raised his chin toward the cot. “Ask him. He watched his family hang.”

Efren risked a glance behind him. The man on his cot looked younger in his sleep. He had a day’s growth of stubble on his cheeks, or he would have looked like a tall, muscular child.



“He looks familiar.” The man’s curly hair was a shade darker than Tovey’s, more brown than gold, and his darker skin denoted island stock, if Efren had to guess. The hand tucked beneath his chin had a deep scar across the knuckles. The scar reminded him of a boy who had gotten his hand caught in a fishing net on his parents’ sloop and nearly took his fingers off. “Is that Willamina’s boy?”

“Astute guess.”

Efren shook his head. “I should have known then. You betrayed them to Coryn, too, didn’t you? Why did you return to *Starlight Specter* afterward? Coryn watched them hang. I’m sure she would have taken you to Hearthstone as her hero of the day.”

Vadim wouldn’t meet his gaze, staring instead at the young man. “I sacrificed a pirate ship, and Coryn gave me ten more years to search for the horrible Captain Reaper.”

“You started those rumors yourself.” Efren had heard the tales of Captain Reaper and the ship with no name, a ship which resembled his in every way but one. “A death weaver at the helm. All the while, you were a trusted member of my crew.” Efren’s heart ached for the tortured man who had turned the small sloop over to the general so he could sail with Efren’s crew for ten more years.

“I wish I hadn’t. It haunts me to this day.” Vadim swallowed hard. “They should have run, damn them.”

“Then why return?” Efren hated his soft, pleading tone. He was captain of the most fearsome pirate ship in the Southern Ocean. He didn’t plead with his former first mate, especially not after the stunt he pulled to have them boarded and inspected for stowaways.

“You know why.” Vadim’s throat bobbed as he swallowed. “I couldn’t give you up.”

“But you did. Early, too. You had two years left, by my count.”

He nodded. “Empress Delilah passed away, and I agree, it was suspicious, though I’ve yet to discover how she

died, let alone who killed her. Coryn's very tight-lipped on the subject, though, which leads me to believe she did it or ordered it done." Vadim raised his arms as if to cross them, rattling the chains and dropped them in defeat. "Let me go. This is silly."

"Not a chance." His denial rang with commanding force in the small space. "Why did you leave after her death?" He couldn't bring himself to say the words he wanted to say. "*Why did you betray us?*"

"Without her protection, Hugo needed me. His wellbeing was far more important than staying by your side."

"So you are sleeping with the emperor." The admission cleared away any sentimental haze blocking Efren's vision. Vadim had marked *Starlight Specter* and their home base on the island of Aquarion as enemies of the state, all for a one-way ticket to his new lover.

"I've known Hugo since he was a child!" If Vadim could kill with his gaze alone, Efren would have feared for his life. He'd never seen his former lover so incensed. "I would never despoil his father's memory that way. Hugh's a virgin, as far as I know. Coryn has kept him under lock and key. Not even his servants or guards may touch him. We were supervised by Coryn herself for an hour each day, allowed to play stones and nothing more. I couldn't even tell him I was leaving, for fear she would overhear. He thinks I've abandoned him. He's like a son to me, and he's all alone."

Vadim took a deep breath and let it out. When he spoke again, it was his turn to sound soft and pleading. "We must find a way to free him from the palace."

"We have more pressing concerns." They were now in the middle of a rescue mission for the two children who had lived through their attack and the young man on his cot, not to mention the number of sailors in their hold who would flee to Glamiere if given the chance.

"Leave it to me, then," Vadim whispered. In the close quarters, the sound was more terrifying than his earlier shouts. "You always do."

“You left us.” Efren had repeated the mantra to himself every time he’d thought fondly of his former first mate. Now, the words sounded hollow.

“I saved you.” Vadim continued to bore into him with his gaze. “She would have gutted you like a fish and strung up any of your crew who refused service to the emperor.”

The day Coryn had run them down and boarded them with *Death’s Vengeance*, a sleeker ship and three air weavers on her bow, had been Efren’s first experience with the general. He’d spent the last five years reliving it in his nightmares.

”*Death’s Vengeance* ... it was your ship, not Coryn’s!”

Vadim laughed, his usual bark of laughter that lit his eyes, for once. “If I live to see Coryn again, I’ll let her know you were five years slow on the uptake. She painted a new name over it as soon as we returned to Hearthstone.”

“Her ship, then?”

Vadim nodded. “She changes the name every time they leave Hearthstone.” He cleared his throat. “I’m sorry, Efren. I tried to make it up to you. I lied about your pasts and put my own life at risk if any of her sailors had recognized you. Luckily, Coryn’s crew were green, and she never paid attention to anyone with a rank lower than navy admiral.”

“Aye, a lowly captain like me slipped her notice.”

Vadim lowered his gaze to the floor again. “I’m sorry I left. It was the only way. I hope one day you’ll forgive me.”

“And Hugo?” Saying the man’s name out loud broke Efren’s heart wide open all over again, but it couldn’t be salvaged. He and Vadim were done. The only way forward was through the wreckage of his heart. “You’re saying everything she does in his name isn’t his doing?”

“He’s a prisoner in the palace, a puppet paraded before the masses on rest days. An air weaver acts as his mouthpiece. If you’re ever to the capital to hear him speak, you’ll see his mouth moving but those are not his words broadcast to the crowd.”

Efren had seen the emperor speak once. He'd watched Hugo's face through his scope, wishing he had a longbow sight instead. He had thought it odd that the young man's words didn't match his facial expressions, nor the movement of his mouth.

Vadim hadn't lied about that. What if he hadn't lied about any of it? What if he really had left their ship out of some misguided duty to the son of an old friend?

"I'm a coward," Vadim admitted. "I'd like to think I helped him by being there, but maybe I've only made it worse by giving him hope." He swallowed. "The most cowardly thing I did was ask for clemency, though. I couldn't watch you die."

"Don't." Efren could handle Vadim's venomous glare and his righteous indignation, but he couldn't bear the thought of Vadim hurting himself as much as he'd hurt Efren when he left. "You've given me few options. Olivia wants you to walk the plank, and I can't say I blame her."

"I'm not asking for my old job." Vadim scoffed. "I wish to speak with the council on Aquarion."

The council was made up of the island's elders. Most were already retired from the navy when General Coryn rose to power. They'd retaliated by sinking naval ships and giving conscripts rides to freedom. They also robbed merchant ships of grain and sold it back to Embertide with interest.

"I want a trial," Vadim continued. "You'll grant me that, at least."

Efren nodded. "We've already changed course for Aquarion." It seemed too good to be true. Efren had ached to find Vadim and bring him to justice. Hearing Vadim ask for a trial seemed to cheapen its meaning. Was he planning a spectacle to mock their procedures?

"In lieu of a holding cell, I'll have Stan set up a crate. Tim will bring you meals. I can't guarantee he'll protect you from Olivia."

“A crate?” Vadim looked amused, not angry. Efren hated the way Vadim could make him question everything with a single smug look.

“It’s more room than you deserve.”

“It’ll be fine until we reach Aquarion. Thank you.”

Efren felt like he’d just made a deal with a pit viper. “If you hurt any of my crew or our rescues, you’ll get a trial by anchor.”

Vadim bowed his head to hide his grin. It didn’t work. “I knew I could count on you. You’re so predictable.”

“You liked that about me once,” Efren said. “I’m honest. Trustworthy.” The ache in his chest deepened with each word. “I thought you were, too. Now, I don’t even know you.”

“I still like that about you.” Vadim met his gaze, but his smile didn’t reach his eyes. “Take me to my crate, Captain.”

Efren complied, but the uneasy feeling lingered between his shoulder blades. He didn’t like having Vadim on board, even after he and Stan tucked him into a six-by-six packing crate with a chamber pot and padlocked the door. He’d seen Vadim turn wood to dust with a touch before. The death weaver still had his hands tucked into his gloves and chained behind his back, but Efren didn’t trust either item to keep him from breaking out if he wanted. Efren could only hope Vadim was serious about the trial of elders. Gods help them if he was only buying time for Coryn to run them down.



## **Niall**

Niall’s nose burned with the smell of piss. “Fucking Klaus!” He tried to sit up, assuming he was on the floor of the public restrooms where they sometimes met. “I told you to cut me off before I passed out!”

A strong shove pushed him onto his back once more. “It’s smelling salts.” The voice was gruff and familiar, but Niall couldn’t place it. “You’ve slept the day away. Before I leave for duty, I need to confirm you’ll find somewhere else to sleep come morning, unless you want to share the bed.”

Share the bed? “What bed? Am I not on the floor?”

“You’re in my bunk.” The owner of the gruff voice was laughing at him now. He tried to open his eyes, but the light was too bright. At least the smell had improved considerably. He smelled crisp ocean air, and a boat rocked gently beneath them.

“I haven’t shared since the orphanage.”

“I could have carried you to the hold, I suppose, but it’ll be easier for you to find it on your own two feet.”

Niall cracked his eyes open and found his angel staring down at him from a narrow walkway between the side of the boat and a table. It was the same angel who had helped him rescue the children from the sinking naval ship. It wasn’t a dream, though his memory seemed blurred around the edges, as though he had been drunk or drugged.

“Are the children all right?”

His angel leaned an elbow on the built-in table. “Yes.”

Niall pushed himself up to sit with his back to the side of the ship, and to give himself more room between him and the ... man, though a beautiful man with gray eyes and a well-trimmed full beard. A single braid kept the hair from his right eye, but he kept fidgeting with the long strands trying to block the left until he swept the hat off his head and slid it back into place, trapping them beneath it.

The man cleared his throat, drawing Niall’s attention back to his piercing gaze. Niall studied him instead. He hadn’t gotten a chance to admire his angel before he’d passed out on deck. The rest of his unruly brown hair twisted to the middle of his chest. His skin was lighter than Niall’s, which could mean he was from the frozen south, or it could mean he spent

more time in his tiny cabin than he did out on deck during the day.

Maybe it was the hat, or the gentle roll of the ship beneath them, but everything about this man made Niall's body buzz with attraction. He'd experienced attraction so rarely, it surprised him. He'd only spent a few moments in the man's presence, but he had saved Niall's life in that short amount of time. Perhaps that had something to do with it?

"The girl was unharmed," the man said, jarring Niall from his thoughts and catching him making a third or fourth examination of every inch of his torso visible above the lip of the table. "The boy is still regaining his sea legs, but he will recover."

Niall forced himself to focus on the conversation. "Good."

"The boy ... how was he injured?"

"I was further in the prow of the ship. I don't know what happened."

"Please forgive me," the man said, sitting beside him on the cot. "We haven't been properly introduced. I'm Efren Tambor, captain of *Starlight Specter*."

He held out his hand, and Niall took it, giving it a hearty shake the way Master Othelio had taught him to greet customers.

"Niall Minas, potter's apprentice. Will you be taking me back to Landale to complete my apprenticeship?"

The captain ignored his question. "Minas. That's an unusual last name."

"It was my mother's. Well. It was part of my mother's first name." The orphanage had asked him for a last name, Vadim had said, "Willamina's," and it stuck.

"Willamina of the *Zephyr Starfish*." The way he said it, like he'd already made the connection, sent a thrill down Niall's spine. "I knew her. We served in the navy together."

The captain didn't look old enough to have served with Niall's parents. "How old are you?"

Captain Efren laughed. "Far closer to your parents' age than I am to yours."

The comment was a direct brush-off, but Niall wouldn't be dissuaded. "You look too young to be the captain of a pirate brig. I thought they were all ancient barnacles, the way ma told it."

Instead of earning another laugh, which did strange things to Niall's stomach, the captain's face hardened to stone. "Tell me what happened with the boy."

Niall's cock twitched at the command. Even when he'd been attracted to someone, that was completely unheard of. His body was responding to Captain Efren's voice as though it were a caress. His cheeks burned, and he squirmed in the seat. "The boy? In the hold?"

Captain Efren nodded.

"Another ship fired on us," Niall said, sticking to the facts. "Yours?"

Efren had the decency to admit it with a nod, though he looked worried.

"I heard his sister crying," he lied. He couldn't explain knowing she was a fire weaver, or that her brother was dead. He had just known. Now that everyone was safe, and he had a moment to think on it, those facts were terrifying.

"I found her holding his head above water. He wasn't breathing." Niall couldn't explain the sensation of pushing the boy's spirit back into his body, either, so he didn't try. "Their cell was blown open by whatever hit the ship, so I was able to get inside and help them. He started coughing and then he woke up."

"The death weaver says you stole his power to bring the boy back to life."

"He's a death weaver!" Niall couldn't believe Vadim had accused him of stealing his magic. "If I did anything, I



healed the kid. I didn't use death magic."

The captain looked even more angry now than when he'd first mentioned Vadim. Angry and severe, like he wanted to dole out punishment. Niall imagined himself bent over the man's legs with his ass in the air. Master Othelio had spanked him a hundred times, and it had never sparked desire in him before. He shook his head to clear it, but it did nothing to stop the heat spreading through his body.

"So you did heal him."

Thank the gods, Captain Efren didn't seem to notice his effect on Niall. He wiped his sweaty palms on his pants as he tried to explain. "I don't know! His spirit was outside his body, waiting to be put back in, so I shoved it a little. I don't know how I did it. I didn't know it would work."

The captain's hand was warm on his shoulder and steadied him to his core. When he risked a glance, Captain Efren's eyes were kind beneath the rim of his tricorn hat. Gods, one touch, and Niall wanted to drop to his knees.

He kept talking so he wouldn't embarrass himself further. "I still don't know that it did. If people didn't rise from the dead of their own accord, they wouldn't be buried with bells tied to their fingers."

The practice had started after the blazing fever outbreak a decade before. Once the fever broke, the person's body temperature continued to drop below what was considered normal, down to room temperature in some cases. If the person's breath was undetectable, they were sometimes laid in the ground while still alive. It was the stuff of Niall's nightmares.

"Come with me." The captain stood.

For a moment, Niall thought he would offer his hand, but that was silly. Niall wasn't a child. He very much wanted Captain Efren's hands on him, but not while they walked across the deck and down the stairs into the hold.

"Vadim." The captain kicked the side of a large wooden crate at the bottom of the stairs.

“Yes, Captain?”

Niall shivered. That voice had haunted his nightmares for far too long.

“The boy’s awake.”

“I’m no boy,” Niall said. “I may be an apprentice, but I’ll be twenty-six this winter.”

Laughter echoed in the crate. “Far too young to get yourself killed by stealing power from the wrong death weaver, then.”

“I didn’t steal your power.”

Movement, and a solitary green eye stared out at him through a knot hole. “You may not have known what you were doing, but you didn’t raise that boy from the dead on your own. How long have you known you had magic?”

Niall shook his head, hoping to convince the captain and Vadim what he already knew. “Ma was so disappointed in me when I didn’t have her water or Pa’s wind.”

“You’re a reverse siphon.” Vadim’s voice was muffled by the crate.

“Stan,” the captain called. “Bring me the key to this thing. I need a demonstration.”

A pirate with thickly muscled arms, a cherubic face, and short dark hair sticking from a faded bandana unlocked the padlock holding the crate closed. The captain swung the door open. Vadim stayed where he was, just inside the opening, his arms crossed over his chest.

“I’m not giving you shit.” Vadim spit on the floor beside the captain’s boots. “I’m not letting him inside my head again.”

“What do you mean, I’m a reverse siphon?” Niall asked.

“Each of the elements has its reverse,” Vadim said. “Your mother was water only, but your father was fairly balanced, if I remember right.”

Niall's heart clenched to think of them.

"I'm sorry," Vadim whispered, meeting Niall's glower. "They were my friends. They knew the necessary sacrifice. We all did. You have to believe me."

"You've been saying that a lot." The captain shoved Vadim to the back of the crate and shut the door again.

"You can test it for yourself." Vadim's hollow voice echoed in the crate. "Show him your water trick."

"I don't know how that's going to help." The captain raised his hands to his chest and held them out at his sides like a jester preparing to juggle. Then, a ring of water appeared between his hands and continued around in a circle, the water flowing clockwise in an ever-increasing motion.

"Do you feel anything?" the captain asked.

Niall felt the same calm as he always felt when his mother weaved a spell, but it wasn't anything he could touch or do himself. He shook his head. "Nothing."

Captain Efren released his weave, and the water disappeared. "Nothing," he agreed.

"Touch him," Vadim said.

"Touch him?" Efren scoffed. "What's that got to do with anything?"

"Not you. Niall, touch him."

Niall swallowed hard and reached out his hand. His only relief was that his body didn't react the same way to Vadim's commands as it did to Captain Efren's.

The hairs raised on the back of his hand, and a spark jolted between his fingers and the captain's arm.

"Oy!" The captain stepped back, rubbing the fresh burn mark. "He did that to me on the naval vessel, too. You're saying he's using my magic against me?"

"It's the opposite of your magic. He's using your magic to call lightning."

“Like Hannah.” The captain looked pleased, though he still absently rubbed the spot where Niall had burned him. “Do you think we could train him to use all the elements?”

“Coryn’s counting on it,” Vadim said. “We need to beat her to it, or we won’t have an empire to save.”

While the captain locked Vadim back in his crate, Niall shivered at the easy way General Coryn’s name rolled off Vadim’s tongue. The death weaver had been working with her for years. He’d turned Niall’s parents over to her and watched them hang.

“Do you trust him?” Niall asked the captain as they walked in the opposite direction they’d come, further into the hold.

Captain Efren turned to him with a frown and a shrug. He continued down a narrow hall into a wider space where sail hammocks hung to either side of a steel door. “There are no empty sails for sleeping until the day. You’re welcome to my bunk until I return in the morning. I’ll be sailing tonight.”

“You mentioned sharing, earlier.” Niall wished he’d been awake enough, and forward enough, to suggest what he now wanted: a nice tumble until they were both exhausted.

“We can take different shifts, aye.”

Niall may have missed his first chance, but he would take this one. He cocked his head to the side, letting his spill of brown hair cover one eye in a way some men found appealing. “What if you found me in your bed tomorrow morning when you returned from duty?”

The captain studied the ceiling, as though judging the distance between the sails. In Niall’s opinion, there wasn’t enough room to hang another sail where it wouldn’t interfere with the well-stacked cargo.

“I would tell you to get your lazy ass up and make yourself useful on deck,” the captain finally said.

Niall’s chest ached from disappointment, but he didn’t let it stop him from giving the captain a coquettish smile and a wink. “You might change your mind in the morning.”

Gods, he was such a fool to think a line like that would work on a pirate captain who looked like an angel, but the tinge of pink visible above Captain Efren's beard gave him hope.

# Chapter 5

## Efren

*“You might change your mind in the morning.”*

Efren had changed his mind at least ten times while he navigated the moonlit waters. He wished he could retract his flippant statement about sharing his bunk with Niall, but it was too late. It had been too long since he had flirted with anyone, if he could call it that, or since anyone had flirted with him. Niall had definitely been flirting, and Efren was out of practice.

With a cargo hold full of sailors and all the sails filled with pirates now that Stan and Tovey were fighting instead of sharing, Niall was either sharing Efren’s bunk at night or sleeping in the hold during the day, which got damned hot the further north they sailed. Olivia was already sharing her sail with the two children. There was nowhere else to put Niall, unless he wanted a crate next to Vadim’s. That seemed cruel and unnecessary for a man who’d done nothing wrong beyond trying to save two children from a sinking ship.

Efren checked the ship’s progress against the stars and steered them toward Aquarion. Then, he had too much time to wonder what Niall had meant. Did he want Efren to fall into bed with him after Olivia relieved him of duty? Or was it a jest? Or was Efren so out of practice that he’d misunderstood completely?

No, Niall had been flirting, with his head tilted so his hair covered one eye as he licked his full lips. Efren wanted to see those lips wrapped around his cock, but the young man deserved better than an old pirate captain with a broken heart.

Olivia startled him when she appeared at his side. He’d missed the sunrise while he’d been lost in thought.

“You look like you’ve been worrying over something all night.”

The two children ran ahead of her, racing to the railing to feel the spray of the waves. The seas were choppy from the wind, but the sky was still clear above them and as far as the eye could see.

“Do you have any chores for the young man in my bunk?” he asked.

Olivia grinned. “I can think of a few things you should do with him, if that’s what you mean. He looked completely smitten with you.”

“When?” This was news to Efren.

“When you first told him to jump to the ship. Again yesterday evening when he came on deck to watch the sunset. That’s what he claimed he was doing, but we’re headed north, and he spent far more time watching you.”

Efren shook his head and hardened his resolve. Niall was good looking, but Efren didn’t have time for a relationship, and he didn’t do tumbles. Not anymore.

“He’s harmless.” Olivia patted his shoulder before shoving him toward the stairs to his cabin. “Now go. Have fun. Be as loud as you want. The crew’s eating breakfast, and our guests are in no position to complain.”

Olivia loved calling them guests, be they rescued weavers, dignitaries hitching a ride, or captured sailors. They took no prisoners. With Vadim aboard and asking for a trial, he was Efren’s first exception. Normally, Efren would have sent Olivia to captain the other ship until they could question the sailors to weed the conscripts from the loyalists. Then, they would deposit the loyalists on the nearest uninhabited island to wait for a passing vessel willing to take them back to Hearthstone while the conscripts returned to their posts until they reached Aquarion.

With only one ship, the conscripts and rescues were their guests. Niall was simply a guest staying in his quarters, and Efren would treat him as such. He crossed the deck to the stairs at the stern again, passing Vadim’s crate and the now-

empty sails to the galley. Stan, Tovey, and Hannah chatted amicably at the nearest table.

Efren waited for Codger Tim to finish his breakfast before asking for three plates of poached eggs and sourdough. He wasn't as old as the name implied, but he was eccentric for a mundane sailor. He had some grays mixed in with his brown hair, which he kept pulled back beneath a white bandana, and his clear brown eyes had a hint of crow's feet around them, same as most of Efren's crew. Tim had gotten the nickname when he'd retired from the navy at the first mention that weavers would no longer be allowed. Efren had found him on the dock when they were discharged and he was the first member to join his crew, before Efren had even looked for a boat.

Efren was surprised when Tim scooped a spoonful of paradise fruit onto the corner of each tin. He and Stan must have recovered it from the naval ship's stores. They hadn't had fruit on board *Starlight Specter* for days.

Efren left two of the trays on Tim's counter and grabbed the key to unlock Vadim's crate from its nail beside the stairs. Part of him expected to find it empty, but he found his former lover curled in a ball in the far corner, hands pillowing his head, knees tucked to his chest. It was cool below deck at night, and Vadim's death magic made him sensitive to the cold. He wasn't openly shivering, but he didn't look comfortable, either. Efren tried to harden his heart against the pity blooming in his chest, but that's all it was. He pitied this man who had given up his crew for ... what? Wealth? Notoriety? What had Emperor Hugo offered him that Efren couldn't have given instead?

The clatter of the tin plate on the bottom of the crate sent Vadim scrambling to his feet in his corner. Efren half expected him to charge, but the trembling in his arms and legs said he was in no position to flee. The haunted look in his eyes was new, too. Efren had never seen the man look anything but confident of his beauty and prowess upon waking.

“Are you all right?”



“Thank you for the food.”

Efren recognized a dismissal when he heard one. “I’ll have Stan bring you a blanket.” He closed the door and locked the padlock again before he heard footsteps toward the front of the crate and the scrape of tin on wood.

Efren made his way back to the mess to pick up the other two plates. He wasn’t expecting a knowing wink from Codger Tim, nor the slap on the back and shove toward the door. “Good luck, Captain.”

Did everyone on the ship know the man in Efren’s bunk wanted him? Efren had been so wrapped up in seeing Vadim again that he must have missed the signs, except Niall had only been on board for less than a full day, and who developed a crush in such a short time? Someone far too young for Efren, that’s who.

Olivia saw him coming with two plates of food and sent little Jasmine to open the cabin door for him, her white curls flying behind her.

“Wouldn’t want to give you an excuse to turn around,” Olivia hollered.

“Thank you, Jasmine.” Efren bowed his head to her and swept into his cabin. He dropped the plates on the edge with the fewest maps and shut the door behind him.

Niall was still asleep. He was stretched out on the bunk, legs splayed. Only a tiny slip of the top sheet covered his left leg and his groin. The rest of him was deliciously naked.

Efren could survive breakfast, and then he would let Niall down easy. There was no reason to let him continue to pine. Efren was married to his ship. He had no time for dalliances.

He hauled his captain’s chair from its place against the wall and banged it open with a flourish. Once seated, the table blocked most of the bed from his view, but not Niall’s thick-soled feet, sturdy ankles, and toned shins with a dusting of hair

on them. Efren bit into his hard tack and tried to look anywhere else.

At the sound, Niall sat up and shifted the sheet to cover his lap. “Good morning.”

“How was your night?”

“I tried to wait for you.” Niall flushed as he met Efren’s gaze. “I must have fallen asleep.”

Efren scooped the poached egg onto his sourdough. “Eat up.” His egg was already a little too cool for his tastes.

Niall ate everything on his plate like he’d never seen food before. “Thanks,” he said after he’d soaked up the paradise fruit juice and picked every crumb off his plate with the corner of his bread and swallowed it down.

After Efren collected Niall’s plate, there was nothing to distract him from Niall’s handsome face. He had a smattering of freckles across the bridge of his nose and his cheeks, which stood out as brown islands in a sea of red when he blushed.

“Thanks for everything. When Vadim handed me over to Coryn, they were going to force me to help with her secret project on Stony Eel Island. I want no part in that.”

“Did he tell you this?”

“No.” Niall shook his head. “I could hear his thoughts.”

Efren knew life and death mages had the special skill of telepathy. In most cases, they used it to seek consent from people too injured to speak. In rare situations, they could speak to each other, presumably to coordinate attacks from afar. “That’s why he thought you were an untested death weaver at first.”

Niall shrugged. “I didn’t mean to borrow his power and make him mad, but I would do it again if it meant saving Renald.”

“The boy and his sister are running now,” Efren pointed to the ceiling, where the thumps of small feet chased each other and then thundered down the stairs.

“Good. I’m glad.”

The longer they sat staring at each other across the table, the less Efren’s arguments against sharing his bunk with Niall mattered. He had almost forgotten how tired he was until a giant yawn made his eyes water.

“How are you feeling?” he asked, remembering Vadim’s claim he had drained Niall of his life force. Without consent, Vadim couldn’t do any actual damage, but he had rendered Niall unconscious.

“I could stay in bed all day.” Niall raised his arms over his head in a stretch and grinned. “You mentioned sharing the bunk.”

Efren snorted. Niall wasn’t going to let it drop, then. “Olivia has some chores for you first. Are you ready to swab the deck?”

Niall frowned. “If that’s what you need me to do. I had half a mind to swab something else, if you’ll allow it.”

“You.” Efren swallowed. He wasn’t prepared for Niall to be so forward. He was glad they’d finished eating, so he didn’t spit his food across the table. “You don’t play around, do you.”

Niall grinned. “I’d enjoy playing with you.”

“I’m ...” He was nothing. He wasn’t taken. He had no lover, no paramour, no one waiting for him in a distant port. He was adrift and alone. The only person who had ever come close to capturing his heart had destroyed it instead.

“You’re gorgeous,” Niall finished for him.

“I’m too tired to give you what you want.”

Niall’s shoulders slumped in defeat.

Efren sighed. “Once Olivia wears you out, we’ll eat lunch together.”

Niall flashed him a grin and grabbed the neat pile of clothes resting on top of his boots beneath the table. “I’d better get to work.”

Efren turned to grab the water pitcher and cups, pouring them each a glass and giving Niall the only privacy the tiny cabin allowed. He tucked his chair away against the wall again and drank his water so fast he almost choked. Niall did the same, downing his water in one gulp and handing the cup back to him.

“Thank you.” Niall leaned across the table and patted Efren’s hand. Another jolt ran up his arm from the touch, one of anticipation instead of a physical static charge. “I’ll see you at lunch.”

Before Niall could dash past, Efren blocked his path. Niall was tall, almost as tall as he was, though he carried his broad shoulders like a man who tried hard not to look big and imposing. Sharing his bunk with a man as large again as Efren would be a challenge, one Efren was willing to accept.

Niall cupped his cheek, his fingers smoothing his beard. “May I?”

“Gods, please.”

The first brush of Niall’s lips against his made Efren’s head spin. Maybe it was the need for sleep, or maybe it was the visceral need for this man. All the blood rushed to his cock. Suddenly, he wasn’t tired anymore. Desire filled his senses with Niall’s scent, his taste, the way his hands gripped Efren’s hips and held him like an anchor to the present. His perfect cupid’s bow mouth fit perfectly against Efren’s. He tasted of paradise fruit and sunshine, and Efren couldn’t get enough.

Efren should have taken a step back and sent Niall on his way. Instead, he tangled his fingers in Niall’s curls, still mussed from the bed, and sealed their mouths together. Niall moaned as their tongues slid against each other, tasting, teasing.

Niall broke the kiss, panting. “You’d better sleep until I get back. You’ll need your rest for everything I want to do to you.”

Efren brushed his lips against Niall's once more before finally taking a step back and allowing Niall to squeeze past him to the cabin door. He caught Niall's hand in his and squeezed it. "Nothing you don't want to do. Despite what other ship captains may require, I don't take sexual favors for safe passage. You'd have it, regardless."

"I want you, regardless." Niall winked. "Stop trying to chase me away, Captain. I'll be back with lunch."

Efren was dressed in his pajamas and tucked into his bed, almost asleep, when a thought made him roll over and bury his head beneath his pillow. During the quarter hour he'd spent with Niall, he hadn't thought of Vadim once.



## **Niall**

Olivia immediately set Niall to work on the raised navigation deck with a bucket and mop. Thoughts of Efren distracted him while he tried to maintain his balance and focus on his task.

He was playing a dangerous game with the pirate captain. He knew it, but he couldn't stop himself. Now that he'd finally found someone who sparked his interest, he had no intention of letting him go. He'd learned the art of seduction vicariously, thanks to Klaus. Now, he hoped he could imitate the same confidence and effortless grace without acting a fool.

Efren had saved Niall from the sinking ship, but that had been only the beginning. Niall liked everything about him, from the sharp wit in his gray eyes to the lines around them that deepened when he smiled. Niall liked making him smile, but he enjoyed flirting even more, especially when his comments caught the captain off guard.

The most unsettling part of Niall's attraction was Captain Efren's commanding presence. It made Niall's cock take notice like nothing had before. And the man's outdated

naval officer's tailcoat and breeches ... If someone had told Niall men in uniform did it for him, he would have laughed, but he had to admit it looked damn good on Captain Efen.

"You're a potter's apprentice. I thought you would be used to hard work." Olivia's tone sounded harsh, but when he risked a glance at her between swipes with the mop, she was laughing at him.

"It's different when the floor you're mopping is moving," Niall said. He'd spent an inordinate amount of time mopping clay dust at Master Othelio's shop. While the waxed deck of the ship was probably more level than the stone shop floor, it swayed from side to side with each wave beneath the ship. Niall had almost lost his bucket over the side once already.

Olivia leaned in and whispered, "You're doing great. Giving the boys a good show, too. Once the captain's awake, you'll have him right where you want him."

Niall straightened and dipped the mop into the bucket to keep it from floating too far afield. "Could you hear our breakfast conversation?"

"I didn't hear a thing. Didn't need to." She laughed. "Anyone can see you're smitten with him, and he's been mourning his first mate a long time. Believe me, I'd much rather have him thinking about you than spending time below deck with that monster."

"Vadim?"

She nodded.

"He was first mate on this ship?"

"Aye. A job I took but have yet to earn." She sighed and leaned her head against Niall's shoulder, a gesture he would have thought too intimate, even between crew mates, but none of the others paid any attention. The two air weavers were busy pushing wind into the sails and the cook was catching fish off the starboard side.

She angled her head so she could still meet his gaze from her awkward lean against his shoulder. "You'll have

better luck replacing Vadim in Efren's heart than I ever had in replacing him as first mate. If Efren were honest with himself, he'd see Vadim was never in his heart to begin with. Vadim has only ever loved one person."

"The Emperor?" Niall had heard a few rumors around the pottery shop.

"Himself." Olivia lifted her head and patted his arm. "You'd be a good rebound."

Rebound. How could he be a rebound after at least five years? Vadim had been in the capital at least that long.

"You're telling me he hasn't been with anyone since Vadim?"

Olivia shrugged. "Hard telling where he goes when we stop at port, but most of the time, he doesn't leave this ship."

Niall wanted to be more than a steppingstone for the sexy captain. If he let his hair loose from its tie, it would smell like Efren's pillow, his sheets, the man himself. Niall wanted to roll around in Efren's scent and never be rid of it.

His erotic dreams of the captain would have been enough until he'd gotten his first taste of Efren's kiss. Now, Niall wanted more. Needed more. Gods, he'd gone from zero to full speed ahead with the merest hint of attraction. He was glad he hadn't experienced anything like it before now.

Instead of breaking down the captain's cabin door, he swabbed the deck for the goddess of cleanliness. Finally, he received Olivia's approval to move on to helping the others.

"Time to check on our dog." Stan led Niall below decks to a locked crate.

Stan opened it and somehow used magic to cork the stinking chamber pot long enough to take it out on deck and empty it. Thankfully, Niall's only task was to hand Vadim a hard sourdough roll, which he reached for with one unbound gloved hand.

"Where are your irons?"

Vadim chuckled as a spoon with a spiked handle slid from his sleeve. “On their way overboard, is my guess.”

“They were in your chamber pot?”

“No better place for them. They do nothing to contain my power. Besides, they chafe.”

“You asshole!” Stan yelled as he stomped down the stairs into the hold. “Iron’s expensive!”

“Stop putting it on death weavers, you twit. Iron can’t hold us.” He glanced around the crate. “Wood can’t hold us, either, but where would I go? I don’t want to sit about deck with you lot, and I hear Olivia wants to kill me, which is unfortunate.”

“You hurt the captain when you left.” Stan’s voice was soft, and he sounded guilty, like he was telling Efren’s secrets behind his back.

“No more than I hurt myself.” Vadim shrugged. “I can smell him all over you, though.” With his free hand, he gripped Niall’s shoulder.

*If you’re good to him, he’ll be good to you. If you break his heart, I will kill you.*

Vadim’s voice was an intrusion in his head, and Niall pushed back with his own message.

*How can I break something you already destroyed?*

Vadim dropped his hand back to his side and turned away. “I never lied to him. I told him our relationship would last only as long as the empress. Sometimes, I think Coryn killed her because she felt me slipping away.”

“Gods’ sake,” Stan said. “Is there anyone in the capital you haven’t fucked?”

“For the record, I am not fucking anyone, especially not Coryn.”

“Hugo?” Stan asked. “You left Efren for the emperor himself. You’ve got to be getting a little something out of it.”



Vadim rolled his eyes. “For the last time, I am not fucking my nephew.”

“He ain’t, though. You and Hesse ain’t related.”

“Get out of my prison cell, or I’ll make you a permanent resident.”

Stan set the chamber pot back in the corner. “Come with me,” he said to Niall.

“Wait.” Vadim pointed toward the prow. “Do you hear that?”

“What?”

“You left the seeker with my men!” Vadim pushed his way between Stan and Niall, pulling off his gloves as he went.

“Get back here! You’re our prisoner!”

Vadim rounded on Stan, bare hand outstretched. Stan stepped back so fast Niall crashed into him.

“I’m not going anywhere. I’ll submit to the elders when we arrive in Aquarion, you have my word. But if they’ve harmed one hair on Klaus’s head, I’m going to kill them all, whether they want clemency or not.”

“Son of a bitch,” Stan whispered. “Follow him. I’ll go wake the captain.”

Niall crossed the hold and stepped through the steel door into the galley. A small fire burned in a wood stove and a pot of savory beef stock bubbled on top. It reminded Niall of his mother’s cooking, but he didn’t have time to stop and taste. He didn’t want to lose Vadim’s trail. Another steel door stood open on the opposite side.

He shouldn’t have worried. Vadim had found an enchanted light globe and was shoving his way through a circle of men just beyond the door.

*Please. Make them stop. They’re going to kill me.*

Klaus’s voice was weak in Niall’s head, so soft that he hadn’t recognized it as he’d been working above.

“Fucking air weavers,” Vadim growled. “I will gladly kill every last one of you.”

Niall edged the door open a little wider. This part of the hold stank of unwashed men and piss.

“Please,” Klaus whispered. He was on his knees on the floor. Vadim had cleared a path to him. None of the sailors appeared to be harmed. They were all still standing, for now.

“Let him go,” Vadim said.

No one had their hands on Klaus. Niall didn't know what he meant until he noticed the whites of Klaus's eyes were red and his mouth gaped like a fish. Klaus clawed at his throat, leaving red gouges in his flesh.

Two sailors ganged up on another against the far wall, punching and kicking until Klaus inhaled with all his might and clamored to his feet. He took two steps toward Niall before Vadim snatched him up in his arms and carried him the rest of the way. Klaus seemed to weigh less than a bag of clay when Vadim handed him to Niall, forcing him to copy his bridal carry.

As he glanced down at Klaus, Niall's anger ebbed. He was still furious with Klaus for turning him over to the navy, but the man didn't deserve to die begging for his last breath. He put his rage aside and turned toward the galley.

“Take him to my crate,” Vadim said. “If Efren wants him tied up, that's fine, but he shouldn't be near them. He's a seeker.”

Niall almost laughed at the easy way Vadim said, “my crate,” as though it was the best cabin on the ship.

“I thought Efren knew better,” Vadim grumbled under his breath.

Niall left Vadim in the hold. He marched through the galley as fast as possible, not wanting to mix the smell of food with the piss and fear radiating off Klaus.

Between harsh breaths, Klaus gasped, “I'm sorry!” He clung to Niall's shirt and wiped his wet face all over it.

“General Coryn promised this would be my last trip. All I had to do was find a siphon, same as her, and it would be over. I would be free to go to Glamiere and find a healer who can cure whatever’s wrong with me.”

“Have you been employed by the emperor the entire time I’ve known you?” They’d met as orphans when Niall was thirteen and Klaus was fifteen.

“Of course not!” Klaus leaned his head on Niall’s shoulder as they passed through the metal door into the hallway. “Last year, I got so sick, the house mistress sent me to a healer. I let it slip that I could see his magic. When that healer ended up in the naval stockade for running an unsanctioned hospital, he told them about me. Coryn herself came to Landale to meet me. She showed me what the different kinds of mages looked like and put me on a ship.” He sniffed. “I’m so sorry. I never would have worked for the empire willingly.”

Niall nodded. “I know.” Klaus had always been awed by Niall’s stories about his parents smuggling weavers to safety. He hated the empire and General Coryn almost as much as Niall did. If Niall put himself in Klaus’s shoes, he probably would have turned to Coryn, too, to stay alive.

They were at the crate, so Niall set Klaus down on the wood floor and he sagged against the wall.

“There was always something shimmering about you. Remember when we first met? I asked you about it.”

Niall nodded. “You said it looked like water, but it wasn’t.”

“It’s unlike anything I’ve ever seen, but it’s the closest to Coryn’s silver shimmer when she’s not siphoning others’ power.” Klaus grinned, but then he paled as he glanced over Niall’s shoulder.

“How many of them hurt you?” Vadim’s voice was colder than Niall had ever heard it, even when he’d ordered his parents’ executions.

“Just the one, Sir, I swear.”

“He won’t hurt you again.”

Niall pressed himself against the opposite wall of the crate, shifting away from Vadim’s deadly hands.

Vadim pulled his gloves on one at a time and smoothed the black cloth over each of his fingers. Whether he was oblivious or ignoring their fear, Niall couldn’t tell.

“Thank you?” Klaus squeaked, sinking to sit on the floor of the crate. He didn’t seem to mind his proximity to the chamber pot, but he smelled just as strongly of piss as it did.

“We’ll find you some clean clothes.” Niall glanced at Vadim. “Right?”

Vadim laughed in Niall’s face and pulled him out of the crate. Then, he picked up the chamber pot and tossed it at Stan, who was rushing down the stairs.

Stan caught it by the rim, and cringed. “Gods damn it man, I just washed my hands.”

“We won’t be needing that. Klaus can use the head with the rest of the crew. Give it to those assholes.” Vadim pointed over his shoulder toward the hold.

“So what, you’re free now?”

Niall turned toward the sound of Efren’s voice. Without a hat and wearing a dressing gown that hung to his knees, Efren still commanded respect and all of Niall’s attention. He stood a little straighter and nodded at the captain.

“Your locks and your cuffs can’t hold me. Might as well let me sail for you tonight. I’ll grab a free sail tomorrow morning when the crew is on deck.”

Niall’s chest swelled at the thought of spending a night with Efren in his cabin. He couldn’t stop himself from smiling as he met Efren’s gaze.

“Not a chance,” Efren said.

Just like that, Niall’s hopes were dashed.

# Chapter 6

## Efren

Efren was too tired to deal with Vadim's bullshit. He'd gotten maybe two hours' sleep after becoming accustomed to Niall's delectable scent on his pillow. Then, Stan had awakened him by pounding on his cabin door and hadn't given him a chance to dress properly before pulling him off to Vadim's crate.

Now, Vadim was offering him a chance at a decent night's sleep, but Efren didn't trust him. A lot could go wrong between dusk and dawn. They could veer sharply off course during the night, or run aground on one of the unmapped islands, or Vadim could kill everyone on board with a thought in their sleep. That last was impossible unless they consented to die, according to Vadim, but Efren wasn't sure he trusted anything the man had said in the last forty years they'd known each other.

"Fine," Vadim said. "You steer. I'll keep watch. It's not like I'll have anywhere to sleep."

"You can take the captain's bunk at night," Niall said, pushing his way out of the crate to stand by Efren's side. "I'll keep you company," he whispered so only Efren could hear him. "I'd rather be on your schedule, anyway."

"I'm not sleeping in his bunk, no matter the time of day." Vadim squinted so hard Efren couldn't see the green in his eyes. Then, he glanced around the crate. "Do you have another empty crate?"

"Aye." Stan pointed to the second box they kept for silks and other treasures they might find on merchant ships headed for Hearthstone. They hadn't plundered a single merchant ship since they'd left Aquarion, so it was as empty as the first.

"I'll stand watch over Klaus, then," Vadim said. "Make sure no one else tries to kill him."

Efren glanced inside the crate that had once held Vadim. Klaus huddled in the corner with the blanket Stan must have provided. Deep wrinkles marred the seeker's forehead and he stank of piss and decay. Efren thought him a teenager at first, but he either looked old for his years or he was at least a decade older than Efren first thought.

"Why did they try to kill him?" Efren asked.

"You know why." Vadim clasped his gloved hands behind his back. Efren recognized the attempt to put everyone at ease by hiding his hands, but Efren couldn't forget. Vadim was the most formidable death weaver in the empire, and the solid white of his hair said he'd killed again since Niall had borrowed his power for the opposite effect.

"They blame seekers for their conscription," Klaus volunteered from his corner. "Even if I'm not the one who found them, they blame me. If Coryn hadn't known they were weavers, she couldn't have forced them to join the navy."

"Outside Coryn's elite circle, few of Embertide's soldiers and none of her sailors are volunteers," Vadim said. "Klaus is a rare asset. He can see all forms of magic, even the ones that aren't weaves."

"Even Olivia's?" Efren had never heard of a seeker being able to identify a suppressor's magic.

"There's a void around her. Colors dim." Klaus shrugged and pulled the blanket tight around his shoulders. "I knew she was at the docks."

Vadim grinned at Efren. "That's how I knew she was there. Klaus also has a hint of my telepathy."

"How?" Efren asked. He'd never heard of a seeker with telepathy. Only death weavers and healers were born with the trait. Communication and consent were a large part of their innate ability. Efren had heard the argument that seekers, suppressors, and enchanters were made, not born, their powers the product of over-healing. Klaus didn't look healthy, that much was certain. If he'd needed constant healing, Efren could only imagine the side effects.

“Not important.” Vadim stepped forward, and everyone except Niall took a step back. Even Klaus huddled further into his corner.

“Stan, help Vadim with the crate,” Efren ordered. “Klaus, if you’ll pile your clothes by the door, I’ll have Hannah wash them for you.”

That left Efren standing at the foot of the stairs with Niall. “Your clothes could use a wash, too. Come with me.”

Niall had already unlaced his tunic and pulled it over his head by the time they reached the deck. When they reached the cabin, he deposited it on the map table before bending over and unlacing his boots. Efren admired the well-defined planes of his back from his thick shoulders to his narrow waist.

Niall kicked off his boots and pulled at the strings tying his breeches over a decent bulge.

Efren cleared his throat. “I don’t know that my pants would fit you, but I can offer you a pair to return to the deck until sundown.”

Niall’s hands stilled. “You want me to return to deck?”

“I need sleep.” He sounded needy, not the flat tone he intended.

“I could hold you while you sleep.”

“You could, but—”

A splash off the starboard side and children’s laughter caught their attention.

“Captain! Vadim just tossed the seeker overboard!”

A second splash followed.

“He didn’t smell that bad,” Efren grumbled. “Let’s go swimming. Bring your dirty clothes.”

Efren pulled his sleep shirt over his head. He’d just grabbed it out of the storage under his mattress, so he folded it and left it on the map table. He kept his shorts on, same as he always did for a dip in the sea.

Niall stripped down to his bare ass and strolled to the railing, glancing back over his shoulder to confirm Efren was watching.

Oh, yes, Efren followed his every move. He stroked his fingers through his beard, hoping he wasn't also drooling.

The water was warm, almost warmer than the surrounding air. His element welcomed him home, and he swam for a bit before dipping his head beneath the waves and sinking until all his hair was submerged. He'd first learned to control his magic by washing his own hair when he was a child. Water took far too long to soak in on its own, so he gave it a little help.

He flipped his hair back like a breaching whale and bobbed above water for a much-needed breath. A few yards away, Vadim wore his gloves, and nothing else. He was trying to convince Klaus to take the bar of soap from him.

"He can't hurt you with his gloves on," Efren said.

"I know." Klaus glanced at Vadim, and then looked away, blushing. "Is he always this overbearing?"

Efren risked a look at his former first mate. He looked happier than Efren had seen him in a long time. "Only if he cares about you," Efren said, "so I wouldn't know."

Vadim passed Efren the bar of soap with a glare. Efren handed it to Klaus. "I'll take it when you're done."

Instead of swimming closer to Vadim, Efren swam farther from the ship, out to where Niall and Hannah were chatting about laundry. Hannah had their dirty clothes spinning in a whirlpool between them. Every once in a while, Hannah charged it with a fork of lightning. They said the charges dislodged dirt. Efren didn't know how it worked, but he couldn't complain. They got his clothes cleaner than any crewmate ever had. They even removed the blood stains after every fight.

"Hannah's going to teach me how to use my lightning." Niall bobbed closer to Efren as Hannah worked



with Tovey to spin their clothes dry in the air and transport them back to the ship.

“They can also teach you about water,” Efren said. “They have both, so you should be able to siphon both from them, in theory.”

Niall’s leg brushed against Efren’s beneath the water as he swam into Efren’s space. “I was hoping you could teach me about water. I’ve never seen anyone create a circular stream like yours.”

“It’s a parlor trick,” Efren said. “It calms my nerves when I’ve been away from the water for too long. It’s worthless in battle.”

“I disagree. It shows you have precise control of your element.” The pretty blush of pink returned to the bridge of Niall’s nose and across his cheeks. “Sorry. I sound like Master Othelio.”

“How long were you his apprentice?” Efren hoped his memory of Willamina’s son was correct. He thought the boy was around thirteen when she’d passed, too young to be a pirate but old enough to handle himself in an orphanage.

“Since I was fifteen. Ten years now.” The young man’s cheeks reddened as he looked down at the floor. “I assure you, my wares are professional grade.”

“I met Master Othelio,” Efren said. “The other night, he was gambling your fortune away. He even called it that. He knows who makes the money in his storefront. It’s a pity you’re here with us.”

Niall ignored his sarcasm. Instead of his usual grin, he wore a worried frown. “I should return.”

Efren shook his head. “You’ll be targeted by another seeker the moment you walk through your master’s door. No, it’s better for you to earn your title of master elsewhere. Glamiere holds crafting trials during their equinox festival. With a little more training in earth and water, you might try your hand at pottery weaving.”

“Pottery weaving? Master Othelio always said those were fake.”

Thankfully, Efren didn't have to debate the authenticity of weaved goods. A shout of, “Heads up!” caught his attention. He slowed the projectile bar of soap with a stream of water, so it landed gently in his upright hand.

He turned to glare at Vadim the perpetrator of the shout and the missile.

Vadim had already turned his back to usher Klaus to the rope ladder off the side of the ship, where Tovey waited with dry towels. Hannah hung over the railing with their clean and dried clothes already folded in neat piles for them. They wouldn't let Klaus touch his clothes until they'd scoured him with a fresh water weave.

“We should get back to the ship.”

“Are you going back to bed?” Efren couldn't ignore the interest in Niall's gaze.

“No.”

Niall's shoulders slumped and he dipped lower in the water.

“We're closing in on Loggerneck island,” Efren rushed to explain. “Any of the sailors who wish to return to the navy will need to be dropped there before we continue to Aquarion, which means we need to question them and keep Vadim from killing more of them.” Efren sighed. There would be no stopping Vadim if he truly intended to kill his own men. Efren had never seen the death weaver so protective of anyone before.

Vadim had his arm draped over the young man's shoulders, steering him toward the prow of the ship. The seeker wore a shirt over his trousers, but Vadim hadn't bothered with one.

“Klaus didn't deserve what happened to him,” Niall said.

“The seeker?”

Niall nodded. “He’s an orphan, like me. Seekers are just like everyone else conscripted into the military. They don’t have much choice.”

Efren had never thought about it that way. He supposed that was true. Coryn paid well for their skill, but she could blackmail or bully them into service just as easily.

“I’m glad he’s safe, then. I just wish Vadim wasn’t walking about my ship like he owns her.”

“You quickly dispatched his ship,” Niall said.

That was the problem. Vadim had wanted to be captured. He was hitching a ride to Aquarion. Efren only hoped he didn’t intend to kill the council and everyone on the island when they arrived.

He would have to wait and see, though. Questioning the sailors took top priority once he was back aboard and wearing freshly washed clothes. Niall followed Hannah to the crow’s nest to practice some basic weaves, or so they promised. No bolts of lightning hit the deck, at least, so Efren followed Vadim and Klaus to their corner of the hold with his captain’s chair.

After a brief discussion, they agreed to question Vadim’s former crew one at a time. A moment later, Stan led the first sailor to them.

“Drop him on Loggerneck,” Vadim said before Efren asked the first question.

The man sneered at Klaus, who sat in the open doorway of Vadim’s original crate. Vadim rested against the side of the new structure, only the two thin pieces of board separating him from Klaus. Most people would fear being that close to a death weaver. Klaus looked too tired to care as he glanced up at Vadim.

“He didn’t hurt me.”

“What have you got to say for yourself?” Efren asked.

“I don’t give a shit what you do to me. Coryn’s going to kill me, regardless. I gave my word I wouldn’t let this

bastard anywhere near pirates. We were supposed to sail for Stony Eel Island, and instead he set sail for Hearthstone.”

“Stony Eel Island?” Efren asked. “What the hell is there, besides a bunch of seals?”

“Not important.” Vadim’s tone was as cold as his gaze. “Loggerneck for this one. Next.” He had his glove off before the man had climbed the stairs to the deck.

“What are you doing?” Efren knew exactly what Vadim’s bared hand meant, but he wanted to hear him say it.

“When they signed on as my crew, they consented to forfeit their lives if they displeased me. They have greatly displeased me.” From Vadim’s smile, Efren thought quite the opposite. Killing them would bring him great pleasure, especially when Klaus stared up at him in awe.

“Fuck’s sake, can’t you just let them disembark, to give some semblance of decorum?”

“Decorum for whom? You know my true nature. I’m a death weaver and a pirate.”

“You haven’t been a pirate in five years.” Efren couldn’t keep the contempt from his voice.

Vadim ignored him. “Besides, it will take too long to ferry them to the island. Better to toss them in the sea.” Vadim rolled his eyes as he inhaled and held up his hand. The air in the hold chilled as though an ice weaver had spelled it, and a body thumped to the deck above.

“Gods damn it, Vadim!” Hannah yelled. From the sound of their voice, they were no longer in the crow’s nest.

“You’d better go check. I might have missed and killed your precious Niall.”

Klaus jumped to his feet, his fingertips brushing Vadim’s arm, still bare after the ocean bath, before he recoiled. “You wouldn’t!”

“First, he didn’t give consent the first time, so I doubt he’d let you kill him now.”

Vadim smirked, and Klaus blushed as he sank back to his haunches on the floor.

“Second, you can’t kill him if you expect to curry favor with Beatrice.”

Vadim hid his surprise with a grin, but Efren knew him too well. “You believe me.”

“I wish I knew why you needed to sink Coryn’s largest ship for a ride back to Aquarion, but yes, I believe you.”

“You were supposed to steal or scupper her, not drop her to the bottom of the ocean.”

“Tovey was a bit overdramatic with the fireballs,” Efren agreed. “Hannah also mentioned their waves and lightning were revenge best served cold.”

“Captain?” Stan asked, peeking his head around the furthest crate. “Are you ready for the next one?”

Efren waved. “Bring them in.”

The next dozen or so suffered the same fate as the first. Efren lost count of their names and faces as Vadim sentenced each with a single word.

Finally, he relented. “The rest are innocent.” He glanced down at Klaus. “Agreed?”

Klaus nodded. “Thank you.”

“We should still inquire if any are loyal to Coryn,” Efren said. “I don’t want any traitors in our midst.”

Vadim nodded. “As you wish.”

Stan brought them before their triumvirate, but to a person they agreed they wanted out of Coryn’s navy. The air weavers were all male-presenting, but the earth and ice weavers had more gender variety. Efren asked them their pronouns to be sure, and he was pleasantly surprised when Vadim was able to answer for them, as well.

“I told you so,” Vadim said after the last person was led back to the mess for a meal. He stepped out of his new

crate to gaze down on Klaus, who was once again seated with his knees up in the first crate's opening. "You'll be safe now."

Vadim straightened his shoulders and walked out of the hold like he was the one who had wrecked Efren's ship and taken Efren and his crew hostage. He never looked back.

Though he'd been in plenty of tavern brawls over the years, Efren had never wanted to punch a man so much in his life.



## **Niall**

Niall helped Stan and Tovey dump the bodies overboard. After the first splash, he thought he should feel something. The sailors' lives had been snuffed out like candles by the raising of a death weaver's hand. He had feared Vadim since the day he'd watched his parents hang, but this was different. These men had signed their lives over to him, and then they'd hurt Klaus. As angry as Niall was with his friend, he agreed with Vadim's decision to kill anyone who hurt him simply because they could.

He remained numb until first Stan, then Tovey, tried to pull him into conversation. Soon, he was laughing with them as though he were one of the crew.

He thought of them as Stan the tall, dark, and handsome, and Tovey the gorgeous golden statue. Niall recognized conventional beauty from his study of the great sculptors. However, Niall wasn't attracted to them, though Niall wasn't attracted to most people.

He wished he understood why, or even what about Efren turned him on, but he wasn't about to squander the chance to find out. If he were lucky, he might finally experience why his friends raved so much about sex. He'd always been so confused when they coupled up in the pleasure houses or even on the street, groping and moaning until they found shared release. The one time he'd tried to experience the

same, he'd been so embarrassed at his body's lack of response that he'd run away. Now that his entire being was completely on board with whatever Efren had to offer, he felt he had to act before it betrayed him again.

Tovey jarred him from his reverie and dragged him to the stern. "You'll want to see this."

"There's nothing to see." Efren waved his hand in the direction of the pile of bodies still sinking beneath the waves in their wake.

"Yes, there is, if you watch closely." Tovey tugged Niall to the railing and jutted his chin toward the water below.

Two gray streaks shot out from beneath the ship. There were ripples from all directions, following breached dorsal fins.

"Sharks?" Niall asked.

"Among other things." Efren sagged against the railing, resting his arms on the thick plank as though he were enjoying the show, but the way he twisted to crack his neck and his back said he would be better off in bed.

"It takes a strong water weaver to call marine life to do their bidding," Tovey said. "If I tried to call birds, they would laugh at me."

"Can some air weavers do that?" Niall had heard the horror stories of waterspouts, dust devils, and tornadoes from nowhere, or winds powerful enough to knock down city walls, but he'd never heard of other air specialties, like blowing holes through ships.

"I think it all depends on how much you like birds." One of Tovey's dimples popped as he smirked. His laugh was infectious, and Niall found himself caught up in it, especially when a seagull landed on the railing beside them and Tovey made another joke about calling it.

In the distance, Niall could no longer see the bodies for the swirl of gray beneath the surface. And blood. The water was red with it.

Niall scooted closer to Efren along the railing. Even when he placed a hand on the captain's shoulders, he didn't turn, and when Niall leaned over the rail again to get a better look at his face, his eyes were closed.

"Does your captain always sleep on his feet?" Niall asked Tovey.

"Only when Vadim keeps him up all day." Tovey winked. "You should probably get him to bed before he falls overboard." Tovey leaned over the deck to examine him, as well. "Come on, Captain. We're walking you back to your cabin."

"Did you see her?" Efren sounded groggy and half-asleep.

"Arrowtip? Aye. She's there." Tovey pointed to a shark with a notch out of her dorsal fin shaped like an arrowhead.

"I told you," Efren said. "She's been following him."

There was no question in Niall's mind who "he" was.

"Aye, she's following her food source, an' knew it ain't you."

"Fickle bitch," Efren said. "I'm the one who calls her."

Niall slipped under Efren's left arm and Tovey corralled his right. They made their way across the deck to the cabin, walking Efren along the starboard side of the masts, over the trap door into the bilge, and to his cabin door. His feet barely touched the deck.

"I'll let you take it from here," Tovey said with a wink. "You look like you could use a nap, too."

Niall was tired. He was still recovering from whatever had happened to him. He'd been meaning to ask Vadim if they'd drugged him on the naval ship. Each time he had a chance to speak with the death weaver, he lost his nerve.

Tovey dumped Efren on his bunk and flashed Niall a smirk before he closed the door, leaving Niall alone with Efren once again. Niall shoved Efren into the corner of his bunk with his legs extended in the narrow opening between the table and



the wall. There was just enough room for Niall to squeeze his shoulders so he could unlace and remove Efren's boots.

"Niall?" Efren's voice was thick with exhaustion, but when Niall looked up at him, the pure lust in Efren's gaze made him wish he was on his knees for another reason.

"Do you want your pajamas?"

"They're on the table." Efren didn't wait for Niall to move as he stripped off his shirt and began unlacing his pants. One moment, he was seated on the cot. The next, he stood and turned so his ass was in Niall's face. Gods, what a magnificent ass, too. Niall kept his hands to himself until Efren pulled off his tattered pants and stood naked before him.

Niall tried to stand and take a step back, but he was light-headed and crashed into Efren instead, shoving him against the bunk.

Efren flipped in his arms and pressed his semi-hard cock against Niall's through his pants. "You could have said you wanted me naked. Would have saved time."

"I fell." Niall finally took that step back, grabbing onto the table when his vision blurred again.

Efren stood, too, pressing Niall against the table as he claimed his mouth in a ragged, desperate kiss. Niall couldn't catch his breath and his vision began to dim.

Efren broke away with a moan and a gentle bite to Niall's lower lip. "Neither of us are in any shape to do what we want."

Niall agreed with a grunt, too afraid he would pass out if he nodded or moved his head in any direction.

Efren tugged his sleep shirt from the table and squirmed into it while Niall tried not to ogle him.

"Last chance." Efren nudged Niall's chin up with his thumb so he met his gaze. "There are open sails in the hold during the day."

"No." Niall dropped his hands to Efren's hips, loving the feel of him beneath the thin fabric of the sleep shirt.

“No.” Efren dropped to his bunk and fought his way beneath the thin blanket. Once he defeated the fabric, he backed against the wall. He lifted the blanket with an open invitation in his gaze. “Come on, then.”

It wasn't a command, but Efren's gruff voice made Niall ache in all the right places. Niall had expected Efren to resist. They both needed sleep, but afterward, Niall wanted to follow that desire all the way to its conclusion.

There was so much Niall hadn't experienced of pleasure. He and Klaus had talked about sex plenty, but it seemed too strange to ask his only friend to experiment with him, especially when it would have meant nothing and been awkward besides. Niall hadn't been saving himself for anything, or anyone, but he'd never wanted anyone the way he wanted Efren.

Niall removed his shirt and slid into place with his back to Efren, his knees bent so they hung off the bunk beneath the table. He still wore the short breeches Klaus had brought him in Landale, now clean. Even though it was the first time they'd laid on the bunk together, it felt like coming home. Niall had missed Efren's salty freshness. Like the ocean waves beneath them, the scent calmed him and lulled him closer to sleep.

Efren slid his arm across Niall's chest. “Don't want you to roll off.”

Niall chuffed a laugh. “I'm not going anywhere.”

He listened to Efren's breath slow behind him, and then he fell under sleep's spell, rocked gently by the waves.

When he woke, the afternoon sun was streaming through the windows, and Efren gripped him tighter when he tried to sit up.

“Sleep well?”

“Not bad for a nap.” He still knew where he was, which meant it was better than most times he fell asleep during the day. He found it impossible to lose his bearings with a hard

cock pressed against his ass. There was only one place he could be.

He rolled to face Efren, and he banged his shoulder on the table.

“Not much room here,” Efren chided.

Niall was sure Vadim would have been more graceful, but he didn't want to remind the captain of his former lover, not when Niall had Efren right where he wanted him, trapped against the side of the ship.

Efren cupped his cheek and pulled him in for a deep kiss. It was everything their first kiss had been, and somehow more. Now that they could take their time, Efren explored Niall's mouth with his tongue, when he wasn't playfully nipping at his lips. Niall released a groan as Efren continued to nip along his jawline and down the side of his neck. Niall loved the feel of Efren's beard against his skin. The hair was silky in some places and scratchy in others.

When Efren reached the limits of their position, he flipped Niall onto his back on the bunk and continued to kiss downward. His beard tickled as it brushed over his nipple, and then Efren's teeth clamped over it, squeezing with just enough pressure to make Niall squirm. He covered his mouth with his hand to stay quiet, but Efren pulled it away and trapped it against the wall.

“I want to hear you.”

Niall didn't recognize the sounds rushing through his lips as Efren continued to kiss every part of his chest. He devoted the same attention to his other nipple before continuing to his ribs and tickling his flat belly. Efren dipped his tongue into Niall's belly button, and continued lower. Each touch ramped Niall's arousal up a notch until his cock was so hard it ached.

Efren untied Niall's breeches and helped him get them off one leg. He kicked them off the other, wanting nothing to distract him from Efren.

Efren's breath tickled his thigh before he planted his nose in the crook between Niall's thigh and groin. "You smell amazing."

"I'm glad for the bath, then." Niall didn't know how he could still form words through the sheer desire in his gut.

Efren licked a trace of anticipation from his cock head. "You have a lovely cock."

Niall propped his head up with both arms so he could watch as Efren took him apart bit by bit. First, he docked his tongue inside Niall's foreskin and twirled around it. Then, he teased the slit, causing Niall to jerk and ooze precome.

Then, slowly, never taking his eyes off Niall, Efren sucked him down inch by inch. It was so much better than anything Niall had felt before. He'd had one blowjob in his life, from a friend of Klaus's who'd wanted to practice before selling himself on the streets. Neither of them had enjoyed it, and after a few minutes, the young man had given up. The experience had been unsettling enough to ward Niall away from anything resembling sex for the last six years. It made what Efren did with his tongue, the bit of pressure from his teeth, and delicious suction feel like heaven.

When he couldn't hold out any longer, he dropped a hand to Efren's shoulder. "Close."

Efren hummed around his cock as though saying it was all right to let go like this, right down his throat. Efren's trust and consent added to his orgasm, making it more than nerve endings and getting off. Efren swallowed him down like he was precious. He kissed his way back up Niall's chest, his neck, until Niall tasted himself on Efren's tongue.

"What would you like me to do in return?" Niall asked when Efren broke the kiss to let them catch their breath.

"What would you like to do?" Efren asked.

"I could return the favor, though I admit, I haven't sucked many cocks."

"Haven't sucked many, or none?" Efren's gaze was curious, not judgmental.

“None.” Niall’s voice squeaked with the admission.

“Don’t do it on my account,” Efren said. “Lying here with you feels wonderful.”

Niall wanted to, though. He wanted to give Efren everything he’d just received and more. The tiny hitch of breath as he kissed the sensitive skin behind Efren’s ear gave him the courage to retrace the path Efren had set on his body, trailing kisses across his jaw, down his throat, over his shoulders and collar bones. He dipped his tongue into the divot at the base of Efren’s throat and received a moan and a gentle thrust against his thigh.

Niall pushed against Efren until the captain took the hint and reversed their positions, rolling so Niall was now on top of him with his hip still pressed to Efren’s cock, his thigh between Efren’s legs. He gently rose on his knees as he trailed down Efren’s body, finding his nipples less sensitive than his own, but his belly and groin far more so. When he bypassed Efren’s cock to suck one of his balls into his mouth, Efren’s low, needy growl made Niall’s cock return to life.

He teased at Efren’s taint with his fingers as he continued to suckle his furred balls, the hair there far coarser than his beard but less plentiful. Niall wanted to tease him this way all night, but the sun was setting, and the captain would need to take the wheel soon. He continued to massage Efren’s balls and his cock as he sucked the drooling head into his mouth.

Efren ground out curses as he grabbed Niall’s shoulders, more to steady himself than to force Niall to act. Once again, confidence flooded through Niall as he realized how much Efren trusted him with his body, his pleasure. Niall forgot all about following the path Efren had set for him and dove right in, hollowing his cheeks and taking as much of Efren’s cock as he could in one go. He couldn’t take it all, so he gripped the base with his free hand and stroked him in time with his mouth. Each burst of precome told him he was doing something right, so he kept teasing Efren’s slit with his tongue and working his way around Efren’s foreskin until Efren’s hands tightened on his shoulders.

“I’m going to come.”

Niall tried to hum around Efren’s cock and almost choked as bittersweet essence filled his mouth. He tried to swallow it all down. What he couldn’t, he lapped up with his tongue. Finally, Efren chuckled and pushed against his shoulders. “Too much.”

Niall dragged himself up Efren’s body, no energy left to lavish kisses on his return trip. He rested his head on Efren’s chest and managed a weak kiss to his lips. “You wore me out all over again.”

“You can stay here and sleep.”

“Not a chance.” Niall stifled a yawn before he continued. “I’m coming with you. I’ll keep your hours and keep you company while you sail.”

Efren kissed the top of his head. “I would like that very much.”

Once again, Niall had expected an argument, and he was relieved to broker none. Efren’s simple acceptance filled him with energy for the evening ahead.

# Chapter 7

## Efren

Efren was still tired after the excitement from earlier in the day, but he felt far more relaxed, thanks to Niall. Niall's presence on deck after dark calmed him, much like his water magic did. Efren had needed the distraction with Vadim on board, and Niall had been so much more than a distraction. Efren couldn't take his eyes off the young man as he worked with Hannah on deck.

"You look rested."

Efren startled at the sound. Vadim must have been in the head below deck to sneak up behind him like that.

"Thank you." Efren couldn't say the same. "Rough day?"

"Klaus talks in his sleep."

"You could have taken a sail bed during the day."

"Klaus is death-touched," Vadim said. "There's nowhere on the ship I wouldn't hear his thoughts while I'm trying to quiet my mind to sleep."

Efren had heard of the bond between death weavers and those near death. Efren had mistaken Klaus's illness for exhaustion. Perhaps the young man suffered from something internal that would drag life from him. Niall said they'd grown up together in the orphanage. That made Klaus far too young to die, in Efren's opinion.

Vadim's gaze dropped to Efren's neck, and he smirked. Perhaps Niall had marked him. It didn't matter, either way. Vadim was nothing but an inconvenience now.

"His marks look good on you." Vadim tapped him on the shoulder as he passed him on the way to the stairs.

"It's nothing." Efren didn't know why he felt the need to dismiss their actions, especially to Vadim. Being with Niall had been special. Sweet. Efren didn't want to cheapen the

experience by giving it a name, nor did it deserve to be called “nothing.” He also didn’t want to discuss it with Vadim.

“Do you have someone?” he asked, hoping to turn the tide on his former lover.

Vadim halted at the top of the stairs, his gloved hand tracing the top of the railing. “Not in the way you mean, no. I have my sights on someone. Until today, I was certain he would have preferred to die by my hand than let me touch him. Now, I’m not so sure.”

“Someone on the ship, then?”

Vadim turned and grinned at him. “Not your loverboy.”

Efren halted the denial on his lips. Niall didn’t belong to him, and they weren’t exactly lovers unless Niall wanted more, but Efren couldn’t deny he liked the man.

“I could navigate for you tonight,” Vadim continued. “Let you get back to railing him.”

“We’d end up halfway to Coryn by morning. I’ll stay where I am, thanks.”

“I have no desire to return to the general until I can pry Hugo from her dead fingers.”

Efren wanted to believe Vadim, he did, but the ache of betrayal still rankled in his heart. “Is the emperor in immediate danger?”

Vadim hopped back to the top of the stairs and leaned against the railing. “I wish I knew. Coryn’s become even more paranoid over this last year. I took action when she demanded all weavers either join the military or be conscripted. She never gave Niall’s parents that choice.”

Efren shivered in the balmy breeze. If Coryn was no longer hanging pirates, she had something larger in mind.

“Do you know what she’s planning?”

Vadim shrugged. “I have an idea, but I want to know what the elders think before I spread any rumors.” A bolt of



lightning sizzled out of the clear night sky above the deck railing, and Vadim yelped.

“I’d better go before your loverboy gets the wrong idea.” Vadim had never been one for shows of affection, but he turned to Efren with his gloved hand raised to his lips and blew him a kiss.

“Get off my deck.”

“I’ll be fishing for our breakfast from the aft. Tim still trusts me to do that much.”

“In the dark?”

“You know I don’t need to see the fish to catch them.” Vadim sauntered toward the stern and vanished amidst the sails and the fast-approaching darkness.

Efren faced out across the prow again and checked their navigation against the stars. They were still on course for Aquarion. In another day, they would sail between two of the Equis Isles, unnamed islands where the main inhabitants were wild ponies.

“What did he want?” Hannah asked from far too close. He’d missed them coming up the stairs. Not only that, but Niall was with them. Efren was losing his captain’s intuition if he couldn’t keep track of his crew.

“He’s going to fish for our breakfast.”

“You weren’t talking about food,” Hannah said.

“None of us want him walking free, but there’s not much we can do to hold him,” Efren said. “He would rot his crate in a heartbeat if he thought he was trapped there. He could easily do the same to our ship.”

Hannah nodded. “I remember how he sank *Woolly Bovine*.”

“How?” Niall stood behind him at the wheel, close enough to block the steady northerly wind that had been pushing them all day. They would make good time while Tovey and Stan rested. During the daylight hours, when the

wind was usually lighter, they could reinforce the winds with their power.

“Vadim doesn’t need to be on the ship to compromise her timbers,” Hannah said in answer to Niall’s question. “Let’s leave it at that.”

Niall’s warm hand settled on Efren’s hip. “Hannah showed me how to use lightning to light Stan and Tovey’s kindling. I’ll be able to help you if you’re attacked.”

“I told him we’re the ones who usually do the attacking.” Hannah snickered.

“They also taught me to be stealthier,” Niall said. That explained the lack of footfalls on the stairs, then. Hannah cushioned their steps with magnetized plates on the soles of their boots. Their electric charge repelled them off the ground by a sliver. It would give them a hell of a shock in water, but on the dry deck in calm winds, they were deathly silent.

“I’ll take your boots to the hold and set your plates overnight. I use a special glue that repels water and keeps you safe from residual shock.” They winked. “I had to improvise for all the water when I became a pirate.”

“What were you before?” Niall asked.

“A brewer.” Their laugh sounded bitter.

Efren felt like he was eavesdropping. Hannah had never shared about their life before Vadim had rescued them from prison in Rodan.

“You don’t have to share, if you don’t want.” Niall always seemed to find the right words to put Efren, and now Hannah, at ease.

“It’s fine. It was a long time ago. I’ve been sailing with Efren for ten years now.”

A decade, and Efren had never once questioned whether Hannah had a life to return to in Glamiere after the pirates sufficiently trounced the imperial navy. They had a place to stay when they docked in Aquarion, but beyond that, he’d never asked.

Vadim had called it Efren's impossible dream, but there was still a chance Aquarion could negotiate freedom from Embertide. All the emperor had to do was recognize the pirates' right to govern themselves. The elders had been doing well enough since the empress had declared all weavers either owned by the state or enemies of it.

"I suppose you're wondering how a brewer ended up in prison," Hannah said, taking a step closer to the wheel.

"It's none of my business," Efren said.

"No, but I realized something when Niall came aboard. I've been milking my place as the new one for ten years now. I thought you would replace Vadim long before now, and then I could share my sad story with the new person and the rest of the crew would learn about me that way." They laughed. "Not the case, and then it got awkward, and now I'm so shrouded in mystery, no one dares cross me."

"You have an effective method of keeping people away." Efren pointed upward, where any moment a charged bolt could snap onto the deck from the clear sky.

"I didn't want that," they whispered. "Some of my past is a little hazy, though. I think I went to prison for burning a tavern to the ground."

"With people in it?" Niall asked.

Their laughter was a sound Efren wasn't sure he'd heard before. They sounded at ease around Niall, something they'd never been around their captain. "I don't think so, but I can't remember! No, it would have been early morning when I made deliveries, so I doubt anyone was inside. The barkeep testified he'd haggled over the price of the beer, and out of nowhere, a bolt of lightning had struck the roof of his establishment and it started on fire." They shrugged. "How was I to know he didn't have lightning rods? The building wasn't grounded. Of course it went up in flames."

"It sounds like you remember well enough." Efren grinned to soften his harsh tone.

“It’s all coming back to me now.” They nodded to him. “I should turn in. You’ve made it much easier to sleep with Tovey and Stan in separate sails. Thank you, and good night.”

“Good night.” They were just as silent leaving as they had been arriving.

“Stan and Tovey?” Niall asked. “What’s their story?”

“Lover’s spat. I told them to work it out at our next port of call. When on the ship, they’ve agreed to stop bickering, or one of them will find a new captain when we reach Aquarion. So far, they both want to stay aboard *Starlight Specter*.”

“How long have they been with you?”

“Codger Tim, Stan, and Vadim were my original crewmates when we set sail seventeen years ago.” The admission didn’t hurt nearly as much as the thought of Vadim had stung even a week prior. Yes, Vadim had been his first mate since he’d first boarded *Starlight Specter*, but he’d been absent the last five years. That fact didn’t have to stab Efren in the heart every time he spoke of it.

“Olivia and Tovey joined two years later,” he continued. “Hannah has been with us for ten, as they said.”

“And now me.” Niall grinned. “Or are you not looking for a crew member?”

“I haven’t considered it,” Efren said. “You’re a potter’s apprentice. Don’t you want a storefront of your own in Glamiere?”

“Maybe someday.”

Niall stepped up to the wheel beside him. He leaned into the touch as Niall’s arm slipped around his waist.

“I’m more interested in defeating Coryn. Vadim seems to think I can help.”

Efren didn’t want to think about Vadim, not with Niall watching the waves with him. The moon rose, its reflection shimmering off the dark water.

“How did you learn to call sharks?” Niall’s voice was soft, as though he didn’t want to disturb the moment.

“Even before the empire turned on us, Aquarion was rather brusque in their methods for training weavers. They separate anyone with magic from their parents when they create their first weave. My parents left me on Aquarion, so I had nowhere to call home, unlike Vadim and Stan. Vadim’s aunt lived on Horseshoe Island, and Stan’s father was a teacher at the school.”

Efren shook his head to dismiss old memories and return to the story at hand. “One sunset, I was so lonely while Vadim and Stan were off having dinner with their families, I wished I had a friend. That’s when I saw her. Arrowtip, the shark with the notch in her dorsal fin. She was far smaller then, just a little thing able to swim in the shallows. I thought she was going to take a bite of my toe, the way something had taken a bite from her fin. I fell backward in the surf trying to get away from her. Imagine my surprise when she brushed against my shin and circled back around.” He laughed. “Didn’t even cut me until I tried to touch her flank and she spun at me. Shark scales are smooth down the body, but they’re sharp the other way.”

“What did she do when she smelled blood?”

Efren laughed. “I didn’t give her a chance to think about it. I hauled ass out of there. The next day, I was catching fish with Vadim. I kept a fish when it was time to return to the barracks and sent Vadim ahead of me. I returned to the place I’d seen her before, and there she was again. I gave her the fish, and she’s been with me ever since. Well. Most of the time.”

“You said she returned.”

Efren had hoped Niall had missed that. “I should have known Vadim was back on the water the moment she disappeared. I hadn’t seen her in six months until today. Tovey’s right. She’s been following Vadim’s ship because death follows in his wake. He can’t sail from one port to the next without killing something or someone.”

Niall laughed. “It surprises me that people consent to die.”

“Nay,” Efren said. “It surprises me that anyone thinks they can kill him first.”

He glanced out at the moonlit waters and wondered where Arrowtip was now. “She followed me from Aquarion to Hearthstone and back when I first enlisted.”

“What happened with the navy?”

“Same as what happened to your parents, I imagine. I enlisted because Hesse wanted to unite the islands under the empire. We conquered the unincorporated islands to the east, and things were peaceful for a time. Then, Hesse was murdered by a healer, or so Coryn said. By the time anyone thought to question it, Coryn had moved from royal guard to general over the full military. She said no weavers could be trusted anywhere near the imperial family, and that included all military forces. We were all dishonorably discharged, except Tim. He’s mundane. He says he retired, but they discharged him, too, when he swore he wouldn’t sail for a navy that didn’t have weavers protecting his ass.”

“And then Coryn claimed the western islands, including Aquarion, for the emperor.” Niall sounded as bitter as any islander, enough to make Efren wonder where the boy had spent his youth before his parents had been killed. Efren had only seen Willamina at port over the years, and never at home on Aquarion.

“Aquarion is too far from Hearthstone to coordinate an outright attack,” Efren said, “which is what she would need to do to take the island from the pirate elders.”

“Are you safe, then?” Efren understood the unspoken question. Would *Starlight Specter* be safer for Niall than his parents’ ship had been?

“The only risk is if we are boarded in port or chased down on the open sea.”

Niall leaned his head on Efren’s shoulder. “I want to keep you safe. I couldn’t protect them, but I can protect you.”

Efren wanted to argue that he could take care of himself and his crew as he'd done for the last twenty years, but things had changed. He wanted someone to take care of him the way he cared for his crew. That desire was new, and terrifying.



## Niall

Niall's days and nights had shifted like the tides. When he and Efren were apart, he questioned why he'd even bothered. Exhaustion ruled every part of his body, from the soles of his feet to his scalp.

Spending time with Efren more than made up for it, though. Niall couldn't explain it in rational terms. He was drawn to the captain's calm demeanor. It reminded him of his mother, also a water weaver. He enjoyed Efren's anecdotes while they watched the calm waters. It wasn't just the stories, which were enthralling, but the sound of the captain's voice that commanded his attention.

The lull of the waves reminded Niall of his time on the deck of his parents' sloop when he was a boy. He'd repressed his memories, not wanting to remember how happy he'd been before everything went to shit. Now, the memories flooded back, and he shared them with Efren. The pirate was able to confirm some of his memories, like the giant swing set made from an old wreck off the coast in Hearthstone.

He also dispelled the rumor that sirens frequented the Equis Islands. "That's just an old wives' tale to keep the navy away," Efren said. "The only sirens I've ever seen with my own eyes were off the coast of Glamiere, and they looked very human when they spread their legs for us."

"Human?" Niall grinned.

Efren chuckled. "There's a brothel on the coast near Luminest. They employed a full choir to sing out to passing ships and entice them to stay the night. Sometimes, it worked."

“Did it work on you?”

“Luminest is only a few hours from Rodan, where we usually drop off our rescues. I completed our mission.” He smirked. “We might have stopped on the way back.”

The thought of Efren sleeping with anyone else instantly put Niall on edge. To his rational mind, it made no sense. He had no claim on the captain. Sure, they’d had a fun afternoon, but Efren hadn’t even agreed to take him on as a crew member.

Vadim was different. Niall knew Vadim and Efren had been lovers, but Vadim was no threat. Efren seemed more irritated with the man than anything.

Two hours after Hannah had gone below deck, Vadim returned with a string of fish. “Is this enough for the day?”

“Aye.”

“Good. I’ll turn in for the night.”

Efren nodded.

*Keep him safe.*

Hearing Vadim’s voice in his head was still creepy. Niall pressed himself against Efren’s side, and that’s where he stayed until the sky began to brighten in the east.

The sound of bare feet slapping against the deck roused Niall from staring out at the brightening waves.

“Niall!” Jasmine charged up the stairs and tackled him with a hug around his waist. “It’s so good to see you again!”

“Where is Renald?” he asked.

“Here!” Renald vaulted up the stairs in the manner of a rambunctious and perfectly healthy child. Niall still remembered him lying lifeless in his sister’s arms, and the sensation of pushing the boy’s life force back into his body. He still hadn’t found the chance or courage to ask Vadim about the healing magic he’d supposedly stolen.

He forgot all about dead bodies and death weavers when the captain pulled him to his cabin after a quick



breakfast of overnight oats.

Sleeping with Efren was difficult in the tiny bunk, but they managed to squeeze into it together. Thanks to the span of Niall's shoulders, he could lean against the table on his side, giving Efren a little more room to lie on his back.

When he woke hours later, he'd gravitated on top of Efren again, lips pressed to the captain's neck, cock pressed to his hip. He sighed as desire rolled through him.

Efren's rough hand caressed his cheek and drew their lips together in a brief kiss.

"Sorry for my morning breath, even in the afternoon." Efren chuckled.

"I don't care, if you don't," Niall said.

With that bit of permission, Efren took control, flipping them so Niall was on his back on the hard bunk doing his best to swallow around Efren's intrusive tongue. Niall wrapped his arms around the captain's shoulders and held on as the rest of the world seemed to melt away, leaving them on an island of their own desire.

A harsh whistle brought them back to reality.

"Land ho!"

"We're almost to the Equis Islands," Efren said. "I'll ask your friend the seeker if he's willing to seek for us."

Niall wished he had Klaus's power to seek out other weavers. He wanted to be of some use to his new friends. While the prospect of becoming a true master of pottery appealed to him, he wanted to help the pirates even more. He was born on Aquarion, according to his parents. Avenging their deaths and hurting Coryn at the same time sounded far more appealing than setting up his own shop in Glamiere.

Niall followed the captain to the hold and the open crates. They smelled much better without the overwhelming stench of chamber pot.

"Captain," Klaus said with a nod.

“He’ll do it,” Vadim growled.

“At least give me the chance to ask him like a decent captain,” Efren said.

“Do what?” Klaus asked.

“We’re coming up on the Equis Islands,” Efren said. “Coryn has deposited several weavers there and left them to die over the years. Would you be willing to search for weavers as we pass?”

“I will, gladly,” Klaus said.

Vadim hovered in the doorway across from Efren. Niall couldn’t read his expression, but he didn’t want to cross the man in the dark, or anywhere he couldn’t see his hands.

“Thank you. This way.”

When Niall had first crossed the ship from aft to prow, he’d thought it was small, but now it seemed far larger than a vessel manned by six people should be.

*Seven, Vadim reminded him with an eerie intrusive thought. There should be seven. You’ll make a good crew member, if Efren stops hitting on my ... crew ... long enough to realize it.*

Vadim’s hesitation to call Klaus his crew member made Niall curious. Was the death weaver sweet on Klaus? Niall’s thoughts vanished as they climbed to the navigation deck, and he saw the fast-approaching islands. It wasn’t his first time staring out at the four distinct landmarks. He had an overwhelming sense of déjà vu.

“Is there a lookout tower on the large island?” He pointed to the island so far east that it almost disappeared in the mist.

“Aye,” Efren said. “It’s been abandoned for years.”

“And a cove on the Aquarion side?”

Vadim sighed. “Yes.” He looked particularly stricken, and Niall wondered if Vadim could see his memories as they played like a dream inside his head.

“We spent our summers there. There’s a little hut south of the cove.”

Niall had been happiest there. They’d spent winters in port at Landale because the weather was more predictable. In the summers, his parents sailed between Aquarion and the island, leaving Niall with his grandfather. His grandfather had joined them on the pirate ship when he was seven, and his parents stopped going to the island after that. When they were gone, Niall had forgotten all about the island.

“No weavers on the far west,” Klaus said. “The one off the port, I’ll need a closer look. Nothing to the east.”

“Thank you,” Vadim and Efren said at the same time. Efren glared at Vadim, who was unruffled, to say the least. He never lifted his gaze from Klaus, and he looked pleased.

Niall hated to distract Vadim from whatever made him happy in that moment, but he had to know. “Was Renald really dead when I found him?”

Vadim crossed his arms over his chest and studied him for a moment. “Yes, though not long enough that he was permanently damaged. He died of smoke inhalation. I’m surprised the little girl survived, but she doesn’t seem to be hurt by it in the least.”

“She’s a fire weaver.”

“Shouldn’t matter, unless she’s balanced. She may have barricaded herself with ice. Did you find any ice?”

“Not that I remember.”

Vadim nodded. “You still have questions.”

“Why can I hear your voice in my head?”

“You must be siphoning the power from me. Both healers and death weavers have telepathy. Our power relies heavily upon consent.”

“People consent to die?” That made no sense to Niall.

“I have been known to put people out of their misery, if they so choose.” Vadim sighed. “It’s the true form of my

power. I can only enforce my consent over others and take their lives in self defense.”

“That’s why you couldn’t kill my parents.”

He nodded. “They didn’t attack me. They surrendered.”

*“They knew that would hurt me most of all. I loved your parents. They were family. We are all family, and we’re taking you home at last.”*

Niall was distracted from Vadim’s inner monologue by a pull from Klaus. He reached for Klaus’s shoulder instinctively, knowing it would help him hear better, but Vadim stopped him.

*“I’ve wanted to heal him for months, but he’s so far gone, I’m worried it would kill him first. I don’t have much finesse with healing. It’s all or nothing for me, so siphoning my power could still kill him.”*

“You can heal, though?”

Vadim shook his head. “I could never access that side of my power. I sailed to Hearthstone to study under their healers at Hearthstone’s weaver academy after Aquarion’s healer made no headway with me. I met Prince Hesse there.”

Prince Hesse had been a powerful fire mage, the first after a long line of weak rulers.

“It’s too bad the academy no longer exists,” Vadim continued. “They would know more about your reverse siphon abilities.”

“How do you know I’m a reverse siphon?”

“You stole my power and used it to heal, something even I can’t do.” Vadim shrugged. “I felt it when you restored Renald’s life, and you turned a lock of my hair blond again. You must be a siphon like Coryn, except she can only take what she’s given.”

“That’s why you think I’m a reverse siphon.”

“Yes.” Vadim started at a touch on his arm.

Klaus tugged on his sleeve and pointed. “There’s something weird on the island closest to us. It’s not a weaver.”

Vadim took Klaus’s hand in both of his and pulled him to the deck railing facing the aft. “Stan? Tovey?” They peered around their sail masts at his call. “We need to move.”

“Will you please stop giving orders on my ship?” Efren turned from the wheel and stepped into Vadim’s space, shoving Klaus aside.

“It wasn’t an order,” Vadim said. “It was a statement of fact. We need to reach Aquarion as quickly as possible to warn the elders. I’ll bring the rest of the wind weavers up from the hold.”

“Godsdamnit!”

Vadim huffed a sigh that stirred the wisps of white against his forehead. “What is your problem now?”

“We don’t need your naval fools blowing wind in our sails.”

“Yes, you do. Someone cast powerful magic on that island. If it wasn’t the elders, we might still have time to warn them.”

“Fuck’s sake.” Efren turned back to the wheel. “Go with him. Make sure he doesn’t break anything.”

Niall hurried after the death weaver with Klaus at his heels.

# Chapter 8

## Efren

At first, Efren was angry when Vadim ordered *Imperial Fool's* remaining wind weavers to man the sails and push them home faster. The more he thought about it, the hotter his rage because Vadim hadn't suggested it sooner. They could have reached Aquarion in two days with the aid of the wind weavers lounging in the hold. Instead, they'd lost precious time. Now, the dark coast loomed before them with the sunrise, shaving two days off their trip.

"Fishermen on the dock preparing for their day," Vadim said as he handed Efren back his scope. "Nothing's burning and no one's been strung up on the docks. We've arrived in time."

"For all you know, the magic the seeker detected could have been something set by the elders."

"True."

Efren wanted to punch Vadim right in his smug smile, but he clasped his hands behind his back instead, his knuckles brushing against the cuffs in his back pocket.

"We'll have our say with the council soon enough. Thank you for the ride."

"The ride." Efren snorted. "You're my prisoner." He took a step closer to Vadim and reached into his pocket. He needed to time this just right, so Vadim didn't have a chance to remove one of his gloves.

"You'd need a pair of silver shackles."

The ring of silver clicked into place around Vadim's right wrist, and Efren yanked him by it, grabbing his left arm and twisting it behind his back, too.

"All right," Vadim huffed as the other cuff clicked into place. "All you had to do was ask."

Efren spun Vadim around to face him again. He couldn't meet the hurt in his former first mate's gaze. "I asked you to stay. Look how that turned out."

"You knew I couldn't."

"I didn't know shit." Efren motioned for Stan, who looked like he didn't have much to do now that there were so many wind weavers on deck.

"Aye, Captain."

"Lock him back in his crate."

"Aye."

"You never stopped being his lackey," Vadim said as Stan led him toward the stairs into the hold in the aft.

Efren didn't listen to Stan's reply. He stomped the opposite direction, toward his cabin. It took all of his control not to shove one of Vadim's old crew overboard when the man stepped into his path.

He slammed the cabin door behind him and let out a string of curses.

"Are you trying to put hair on your grandmother's chest?" Niall asked.

Efren had expected to be alone in his cabin. His cheeks burned as his gaze fell on Niall's beautiful nakedness sprawled across his bunk in the faint morning light.

"What are you doing in here?"

"I wanted to get some sleep before we reach port."

"We don't have time to sleep," Efren grouched. "We're almost there."

"Some shared pleasure, then?"

Efren couldn't deny his desire, but part of him held back. "We shouldn't."

Niall swung his legs around the table, placed his feet flat on the floor and spread his legs wide, putting his hard cock on display as he stroked it. "Are you sure?"

Efren didn't want to mislead Niall. Since Vadim had left, Efren had new relationship rules, but they'd never been tested until now. A strangled noise was all he could muster when he tried to speak. He cleared his throat and tried again. "If you join my crew, you'll have a sail. You won't be bunking with me."

"Bunking is one thing," Niall said. "What about sex?"

Efren's dry cough didn't remove the gravel in his throat. "I don't do repeats." Not since Vadim.

"Technically, we didn't fuck, so you could still fuck me and we can pretend it was only the once." Niall continued to stroke himself, the action drawing Efren's attention so that the rest of the room and even the rocking of the boat beneath him faded away.

"You don't seem the type for a once and done," Efren said. He also hated the idea of casual sex. The thought of hooking up for one night of sex and never seeing the other person again made him queasy enough to keep him on the ship at most ports, and too far in the bottle to take advantage of any offers when he did make it to a tavern.

Niall beckoned Efren to come closer.

Efren unfastened the buttons of his shirt first, still trying to convince his body this was a bad idea, even though Niall looked like everything good and right in the world with his cock in his hand, his eyes half-lidded with pleasure.

"I'm up for whatever you're willing to give me," Niall said.

"Why?" Efren wasn't usually the object of anyone's affection. He and Vadim had fallen together naturally after months of squabbling like children when they reported for duty on deck. One night, Vadim had been mid-argument, and Efren had shut him up with a kiss. Vadim had slapped him and demanded consent. Their next kiss had been violent and demanding, a force of nature itself. Efren had never felt anything like it with anyone else.



He'd enjoyed kissing Niall, though. Niall was gentle in all the ways Vadim was unrelenting, which had been a welcome change.

Gods, would he never get Vadim out of his mind?

He tossed his shirt aside and went to work on his boots, kicking them off before untying his breeches and pulling them down so he could step out of them.

Niall was here, and he wanted Efren, gods knew why. That was enough.

Niall didn't wait for Efren to join him on the bunk. He stood and kissed Efren soundly on the mouth, so soundly he forgot about Vadim, his crew, and the fast approaching coast of Aquarion. They had over an hour before they needed to be anywhere outside his cabin. Efren intended to put that time to good use and leave all worry about the future for afterward.

Before Niall could pull him down on top of his bunk, Efren pushed him against the wall. He had a reason for it, but the softness of Niall's lips and the sweet sound he made when Efren plundered his mouth almost overtook his priorities. Finally, he remembered the bottle of oil tucked between the boat and his bunk mattress behind his pillow.

Niall's breath tickled his ear as he leaned over to retrieve it.

"You mentioned you wanted me to fuck you." Efren's words were huskier than usual.

"Either way suits me," Niall said.

Gods, the man was too good to be true. The pleasure house madams set him up with bottom after bottom because he was a captain. No one ever asked his preferences, choosing to assume he wanted to top.

"How quickly can you recover?"

Niall's chuckle tightened Efren's balls even more. "You think you can make me come?"

"I insist." Efren wasn't one to leave his partner dry while he finished inside him.

“Don’t worry about me. With you, it won’t be an issue.” Niall chuckled again.

A slight tingle of anticipation sent a ripple of goosebumps up Efren’s arms to the base of his neck.

“The question is, can you keep up, old man?”

“I am not old.”

“You were in the military with my parents.” Niall pushed him down on his bunk and kneeled over him. “I’ll be the judge of that.”

Niall had pilfered the bottle of oil. He poured a liberal dose into the palm of his hand and rubbed it with two fingers. Then, he wriggled and moaned as those fingers worked their way inside him while Efren watched. Gods, Niall was beautiful. The morning light sparkled across the sheen of sweat on his chest.

He coated Efren’s cock with the rest of the oil and lined up over him. Efren felt completely useless and enthralled at the same time as Niall sank onto his shaft with a moan. He fell forward, his head on Efren’s chest as his hot channel clenched Efren like a vise.

“You feel so good inside me.” Niall peppered kisses across Efren’s chest, so soft they tickled his skin with his light dusting of chest hair. “Are you ready?”

“Always.”

He was ready for anything with Niall, but the way Niall sat up on his knees and rode his cock as though it were a racehorse amazed him. It was the most erotic thing Efren had ever seen, but the sensation of Niall’s undulations on his cock had him squinting his eyes closed and trying not to come too soon. He reached for Niall’s cock to keep him grounded in reality. The purple head dripped with precome, and Efren used it to ease the glide of his fist over Niall’s foreskin, down his shaft and up again, where another bead of precome waited for him.

Niall’s hips stuttered above him. He bore down around Efren’s cock and cried out as the first ropes of cum hit his

chest.

“Fuck, yes Efren!”

Efren continued to stroke Niall’s cock as his own orgasm built like a tidal wave, threatening to take him under at any moment.

Niall leaned down and licked his spend from Efren’s chest, his eyes dark pools as he slurped it into his mouth. He kissed Efren, the salty-sweet mixture bursting on his tongue.

Niall broke the kiss as he continued to ride Efren’s cock. “Come inside me, Efren. I want to feel it.”

Niall trailed breathy kisses down his jaw. He sucked Efren’s earlobe into his mouth. Efren saw stars behind his eyelids as he thrust up into Niall with all his might. His orgasm rolled over him like a warm summer storm, as fast as it was intense. He grabbed Niall’s shoulders and pulled him down for another kiss, letting his body confess his gratitude. He craved more, even as he rode out his orgasm with erratic thrusts.

Niall’s cock had softened a bit after he came, but he rebounded quickly. He was almost as hard again as Efren tugged at his foreskin and dug his thumb into the slit.

Efren was not so lucky. His cock softened, and he slipped free of Niall’s tight channel.

Instead of switching places with him, Niall held him down with one hand as he pried the stopper off the oil with the other. “I’ve dreamed of this.”

Efren didn’t have time to question the statement before Niall’s slick fingers were inside him, opening him up. His ring of muscle always seemed too tight after sex, like it was somehow connected to his cock. He forced himself to relax around Niall’s fingers, taking them in. Soon, he was riding them, writhing on his back and pressing against Niall for more stimulation. He’d never bothered to switch roles like this before, always thinking he was too needy to want more. Now, he couldn’t get enough.

Niall twisted his fingers, pressing against the bundle of nerves that threatened to set Efren on fire each time. It had been too long since he'd been fucked. He was going to shoot off like a cannon enchantment all over again before Niall got inside him.

“Need you now.” He'd tried to be firm and commanding, but his voice was barely a whisper.

Niall didn't make him wait. While Niall slicked his cock with more of the oil, Efren pulled his knees to his chest for better access to his hole. In one smooth motion, Niall entered him.

Efren forced his muscles to relax and take him in, letting the sting melt into pleasure until Niall was fully seated inside him. Needing somewhere else to put his legs, he wrapped them around Niall's back and yanked him down for another kiss.

As much as he hated to admit it, he wanted to stay wrapped up in Niall for the rest of the day. Maybe forever.



## **Niall**

Holy shit. Niall was inside Efren, and it was as wonderful as everyone claimed. In the span of a quarter-hour, Niall had gone from being a virtual virgin to being fucked and now fucking the sexy pirate captain.

So far, the captain seemed unaware of his inexperience. Klaus had always said confidence was key. Niall had faked it by taking charge of the oil and working himself open, something he'd done often enough before pleasuring himself with the ceramic dildo he'd crafted in the pottery shop. It had been his sweetest reward, the first time Master Othelio had left him alone for a week. That's how long it had taken to cast, fire, and glaze the thing so it didn't cut him or break off in his ass.

He owed all of his confidence to his creation, but it paled in comparison to the real thing. Efren had felt amazing inside him, but nothing could have prepared him for the tight pressure surrounding his cock with warmth.

Niall broke their kiss to mutter, “You feel amazing.”

“When are you going to move?” Efren teased.

“When I know I’m not going to come too soon and spoil it for you.” He arched his back, trapping Efren’s hard and leaking cock between them. “You seem to be enjoying this.”

Efren’s laugh was high and needy. “I would enjoy it more if you—”

Niall pulled his hips back, wary of pulling out too far and hurting Efren. After a few experimental tries, he found his bearing and increased his speed and force, rocking into Efren with the rhythm of the waves lapping against the ship. It took all his will to keep his eyes open, watching Efren’s every move as he writhed beneath him and moaned with each thrust.

Efren surprised him by wrapping powerful arms around his shoulders and moving against him, bringing their bodies together so forcefully Niall worried he would crush the captain. He worked his oil slicked hand between them to grab Efren’s cock and lifted himself on an elbow to watch.

Efren begged the ceiling for, “More, gods, please.” His gray eyes were almost black with pleasure as he continued to thrust into Niall’s hand at the same pace Niall pounded into him.

Efren locked gazes with him. An entire conversation passed between them as they continued to move, their pleasure building to its peak.

Efren shouted Niall’s name as he came. Niall loved the way the captain gave himself over to pleasure so completely, his eyes drifting closed, his breath coming in harsh pants, his cock pulsing hot ropes of cum between them.

Niall kissed him again, and Efren’s every touch, movement, and joyful sound coaxed him to let go of the stranglehold he had on his pending orgasm. He collapsed on

Efren's chest with a moan as his cock pulsed in ecstasy. He laughed as oversensitivity gripped him. He'd never felt anything like it, even as his cock rallied and stayed nestled inside Efren.

Fuck. Niall had never felt pleasure this powerful and exhausting at the same time. He wanted to run around deck shouting to the heavens and anyone who would listen about how great sex with their captain had been, but at the same time, he wanted to take a nap. He rested his head on Efren's shoulder and let his eyes drift closed.

Efren kissed his forehead. "Thank you. That was amazing."

"Gods, you kept up with me," Niall teased. "I take it back. You're not that old, after all." He was drifting closer to sleep with his cock still balls deep in Efren. "That was far better than I'd imagined for a first time."

"First time with me?" Efren asked. "What kind of asshole did you think I would be?"

"First time with a person," Niall corrected. "I knew you would be perfect. That's why I wanted it to be with you."

"I didn't know." Efren stiffened beneath him. "Did I hurt you?"

Niall blindly sought Efren's neck and kissed a trail from his collar bone to his jaw. "Not at all. It was better than I ever imagined." He grinned, loving the feel of Efren's rough stubble against his lips. "I'll feel it when I walk, though."

Niall met Efren's gaze again and his heart pounded with unspoken feelings. In Efren's arms, he felt treasured and special, even though Efren had suggested there would be no repeat.

"I don't want this to be the end," Niall whispered. "I'd like to become a member of your crew and sail with you to rescue other weavers."

Efren wriggled out from under him, and his cock slid from Efren's body. "Are you saying you had sex with me for a spot on my crew?"

“Of course not!” Niall scrambled back on the bunk, and Efren sat up. They were eye-to-eye but might as well have been on different islands. “I had sex with you because—”

“You don’t know the first thing about casual sex.” Efren glared at him. “What did this mean to you?”

Efren was right. Niall knew little about interpersonal relationships beyond his work for Master Othelio and his courtesy toward the store’s customers. He’d never been great at lying, either. He stated the truth instead. “It was wonderful, and I want more.”

Efren rested his elbows on his knees with his head in his hands. “I don’t know what more I have to offer you. You’re young, but you’re older than most when they learn to weave. Not only that, but Vadim thinks you have the potential to siphon all elements, which means longer training. That’s time we don’t have to sit in port and wait for you.”

Niall sat back and pulled his knees up to his chest. “You have weavers on board. I can learn from them. I’ve already learned about lightning from Hannah.”

Efren’s head bobbed in his hands, as though he nodded without looking up. “I can’t give you an answer until we speak with the elders.” His eyes were red-rimmed when he met Niall’s gaze. “Your training will fall to them.”

“If it were up to you?”

Efren’s fierce grin reassured Niall. “I’d gladly sail with you. You’re much easier to get along with than half my crew.”

“Not only for the sex, then?” Niall enjoyed teasing the pirate captain.

“The sex was fantastic, don’t get me wrong.” Efren’s grin turned into a lopsided and cocky smirk, and Niall’s earlier passion reignited. He wished they had time to do it again, even though his body ached in ways he would feel for days.

“No, it’s not only about the sex,” Efren continued. “Your powers would come in handy in a fight, and having another crew mate willing to spend the overnight hours with me ensures I’m not falling asleep at the wheel.”

“I’ll wait for the elders’ decision, then.” Niall held out his hand.

Efren shook it, then pulled him in for a hug and kiss on the cheek. “None of that formality,” he said. “We’d better get dressed and see how close we are to shore.”

In a flash of prismatic light and a kiss of water so brief Niall wasn’t even sure he felt it, his body was washed clean of all evidence of their coupling. He was grateful his aches and pains remained as proof he hadn’t been dreaming.



# Chapter 9

## Efren

Efren was grateful they didn't have time to sleep before they arrived at Aquarion. If he allowed his muscles to cool down, he wouldn't be able to move. He'd somehow convinced Niall he was some kind of sex god. Still, he wouldn't have changed a thing.

That didn't sit well with his conscience, though. He would have taken more care, had he known Niall was a virgin.

Niall winced when pulling on his pants, and Efren pulled him against his chest. "Are you all right?"

"Splendid."

Efren was lost in Niall's awed gaze. He wasn't worthy, but he felt elated for making Niall look that blissed out and satisfied.

Niall tilted his chin up, and Efren kissed him, letting his tongue share all the gratitude and joy he couldn't find the words to express.

A knock at the door hastened them into their clothes.

"Approaching the dock, Captain." Efren didn't detect a hint of mockery in Olivia's tone, but he wouldn't put it past her to have the entire crew watching his walk of shame once he opened his cabin door.

"Be right there."

He dragged his boots to his captain's chair and pulled them on, though he missed a few hooks when attempting to tie them up. He'd been watching Niall's ass too closely.

Finally, he was as presentable as he could be in his worn uniform and scuffed boots. "I'll see you on deck."

Niall was right behind him, but no one glanced in their direction as they walked into the streaming sunlight. The other wind weavers were all at the prow of the ship, staring down at

the docks while Tovey and Hannah had stayed back to guide her alongside the mooring posts.

“Do you want to take over?” Olivia asked.

“You’re doing well enough.”

She smirked. “That’s the kindest thing you’ve ever said about my sailing.”

“Carry on, then.” He glanced back at her over his shoulder to see his words had the desired effect. She looked pleased as he walked away. He’d done his job as captain. Olivia didn’t want his ridicule, which Vadim had hated, too. She also detested high praise, so he’d quickly adjusted to giving her vague affirmatives.

Niall found an open space unimpeded by barrels or ropes along the upper deck, and he leaned on the railing. Emboldened by the lack of concern anyone had shown them since they’d walked out of his cabin, Efren sidled up behind him and rested his hands on Niall’s. Niall leaned back against him, which nestled Efren’s already interested cock in the crook of his ass.

“Will you take me home with you after we meet with the elders?” Niall asked.

“That depends on what they say.” Efren couldn’t predict what the elders wanted from Niall any more than he could determine the outcome of Vadim’s trial before it happened. The elders could be confounding sometimes in their logic. As much as Efren wanted to guess the outcome, he couldn’t make any promises.

“If it’s in my power,” he murmured over the lap of waves against the ship, “you are welcome to stay at my house.”

Niall turned his head and whispered against Efren’s jaw, “I’d like that.”

They watched the dock workers helping to guide the ship into place. Tovey worked with an earth weaver below to swing a rope onto the cleat. They swiveled to watch Stan do the same to corral the aft cleat to the dock.

“Lower the plank,” Olivia called.

Efren placed his hand on the small of Niall’s back and steered him toward Olivia at the wheel. She grinned at them, but she said nothing as Efren left Niall with her and led the way.

“Efren.” Elder Beatrice met him on the docks, her long salt and pepper dreadlocks swaying with her steps. She wore an unbuttoned dark blue tailcoat over a flowing yellow dress. Her dark skin glowed in the midmorning sun. “Welcome home.”

“Thank you, Elder.”

She wrapped her arms around his shoulders in a fierce hug. “It’s been too long.”

“Vadim took longer than expected to track.”

“I sense him on board. We have room for his crew in the new barracks until we can get them to safety. The rest of you will need to come with us to Horseshoe Island.”

“All of us?” Olivia asked.

“Your crew, this young man, Vadim, and the seeker. We will speak to all of you once we’ve eaten.” She opened her arms and drew Olivia into a hug, and then Niall.

“This is—”

“Niall, Willamina’s son.” Beatrice smiled as she released Niall and dropped her hands to take his. “Thank you for bringing him home.” She met Niall’s gaze for a moment and then turned back to Efren. She’d chosen her role of Elder over everything else, then. Efren didn’t know if he should be concerned or scared shitless. The atmosphere of the island seemed less welcoming already.

“Come,” she said. “Ride with me in the skiff and tell me everything that’s happened in the last six months.”

As it always did upon returning home, the blue-green shallows sparkled with brilliant intensity, and the sky above was a deeper shade of blue. Even in his exhausted state after his night shift and fun morning activities, Efren was glad to be

home. His mind drifted to showing the island to Niall if they had time. His favorite fishing spot wasn't far from his house. He recognized the buoyant sensation in his chest as something he hadn't felt in years: hope.

Stan, Tovey, and Hannah also received hugs from Beatrice, and then the sailors who had helped them made their way off the ship under Stan's direction. Codger Tim ushered the rest of Vadim's crew from the hold. The rescued conscripts looked as stunned and awed as Efren felt upon seeing the crystal blue waters offshore.

Klaus the seeker was with them. "What did you do to Vadim?" Klaus stared at the dock planks instead of meeting Efren's gaze.

"Confined him with silver."

Klaus sighed. "I sense his power, but I can't hear him in my head anymore. It's been peaceful."

Efren hadn't thought about that side effect of Vadim's power. He planned to leave the cuffs on for as long as possible, so the death weaver couldn't steal information from the elders' heads. Efren hadn't known silver worked for that part of Vadim's gift. He should have guessed, though. Wooden cuffs prevented Efren from touching his water source and from communicating with marine life.

"There you are," Elder Beatrice said to Klaus. "We'll have lunch on Horseshoe Island, and then we can talk about your involvement in the plot to rescue the emperor."

"Wait." Efren couldn't hide his shock. "You knew about Vadim's plan to rescue Hugo?"

She nodded. "We have much to discuss." She gazed at the hold, as though determining how much they carried. "I'll have a crew unload your cargo to give us time to talk. Wait here."

Efren couldn't argue with her. He circled his crew in the grassy sand off the dock boards and waited. Niall continued to stare at the driftwood docks, patchy grass

growing in the sand, and clear blue water as though it was unusual, or magical.

Codger Tim returned from the ship with the two rescued children. A young man about Niall's age collected them and walked with them to the barracks, a low building just off the beach. Efren recognized the young man as one of the teachers, but he hadn't spent enough time around the barracks to learn his name.

"Where is he taking them?" Niall asked.

"That's the barracks, which also serves as the weaving school. They will spend the afternoon testing the children's abilities, and then they'll find a foster family to take them in."

"How often does Aquarion take in strays?"

"Too often," Efren admitted.

Tim returned with Vadim in tow. Before Efren could suggest keeping him in silver, Elder Beatrice had the cuffs off and was hugging the death weaver as though he were her long-lost son.

"Elder," he said, holding her at arm's length after she'd tried to squeeze the life from him.

"Is Hugo well?" she asked.

"He was when I left him. He's disillusioned, as we all are, but he's unharmed."

"Wonderful." She clapped him on the back with her open palm. "We'll talk more after lunch. Come!"

Vadim hung back behind the rest of the crew, and Efren stayed beside him. When Vadim attempted to turn away, Efren clutched his shoulder.

"Where's Klaus?" Worry clouded Vadim's gaze as he scanned the beach. "I don't see him. Thanks to your cuffs, I can't get a lock on his location."

"He's ..." Efren had just seen the young man. His shock of red hair was impossible to miss.

“I need to find Klaus,” Vadim said, grabbing the front of Efren’s shirt. “Please. He’s part of this, too.”

“Klaus,” Niall called, waving toward the water. Klaus rose from where he’d been lying on the boardwalk, shaking his wet fingers.

“You didn’t answer me,” Vadim shouted to be heard over the waves.

“I was ignoring you.” Klaus rolled his eyes. “I got used to having my thoughts to myself.”

“She lied about the healing waters,” Vadim said once Klaus was close enough to hear his regular speaking voice over the waves. “She lies about everything.”

“I had to try.”

The waters off Aquarion were rumored to be restorative. Efren remembered when General Coryn had started the rumor. She’d organized several scouting parties to find Aquarion and claim it for Embertide.

If Klaus had believed the rumors, he was trying to heal something serious. Efren felt bad for the young man.

Thankfully, they had the land’s most powerful healer nearby on Horseshoe Island. The general claimed healing was a poor substitute when death weaving was so much more powerful. She’d made it her goal to eradicate all healers from the land.

Efren disagreed. He’d take a talented healer over a death weaver any day. Death weavers could only kill with consent or when attacked, and assholes were constantly attacking Vadim, thinking they could get the drop on him by hitting him first.

Vadim had just enough healing power to heal superficial wounds. It had kept him alive so far, but Efren worried a day would come when Vadim would meet his match.

As Vadim walked side-by-side with the young seeker, Efren hoped that day was far in the future. If he was lucky, Efren had a second chance at love with Niall. He wanted the

same for Vadim, someone who could shed some light on his internal darkness.



## Niall

Elder Beatrice led them to a beach on the west side of the island, where a small skiff was moored beside a rock jetty. The water was clearer than any Niall had ever seen. He couldn't stop staring at the sun's bright reflection off the waves, even though it burned his eyes and left negative imprints on his eyelids when he closed them. He supposed he would have noticed the harsh reflection when they'd been on the open ocean, if he had worked with the rest of the crew during the day instead of staying up all night with Efren.

The skiff was just large enough to carry the nine of them. Elder Beatrice stood at the helm and Tovey and Stan used their weaves to navigate the waves to the island named for its shape, like a horseshoe. The sides curved toward Aquarion as though the sand had piled up between the two islands over the years. The east side of the curve looked substantial enough to be a land bridge at low tide, but they easily sailed past the western curve and into a beautiful cove with dark water and an abundance of fish.

Efren and Hannah moored the boat with ropes along the dock, and the others quickly climbed out. Niall struggled with his balance when exiting the small boat, but Elder Beatrice and Efren helped him. After so long at sea, his legs wobbled beneath him on the dock. He wished Efren would steady him with an arm around his waist the way he'd done on Aquarion, but he walked ahead with the rest of his crew.

"You are your grandfather's greatest secret," Elder Beatrice said. She'd stayed by his side while the others walked ahead. "Did you know he was a grand suppressor?"

Niall frowned. "I remember my grandfather, but I don't know what a grand suppressor is."

“He wanted you to live a normal life, but yours has been anything but normal.”

“You knew my grandfather?”

“Oh, yes.” She helped him down from the dock with a delicate weave of air. “He and I grew up together. He let me take care of him, at the end. He passed away the winter after your parents died. He wasn’t well to begin with, but their deaths broke his heart.”

Niall had always assumed his grandfather was no longer living, but hearing the words, and the sympathy in Elder Beatrice’s voice, brought tears to his eyes. “I’m so sorry I wasn’t here.”

“It couldn’t be helped,” she said. “You were too far away to launch a rescue. Vadim suspected the truth, that you were a weaver of some sort, and Coryn was watching you. She knew your potential as we did. We waited for her to make her move before we attempted our rescue.”

“You’re calling Vadim’s abduction a rescue?” Niall scowled at her.

“It wouldn’t have been as harrowing, had Efren recognized it, too. Yes, Efren rescued you and Vadim from the hands of the general. I am forever in his debt.”

“Three other weavers died on that ship,” Niall said.

“Efren will have to answer for that, but I don’t blame him. We kept the truth from him. Vadim thought it best to end their relationship, but betrayal can fester after so long.” She patted his arm. “How did you find our brash Captain Efren?”

Niall’s cheeks burned. Was his attraction to the captain that obvious? Or had she noticed the careful way he walked?

Her next words caught him off guard. “I hope he treated you well, despite the circumstances.”

“Circumstances?”

“He and Vadim split on poor terms. I assume they bickered like children for the entirety of your trip.” She



smirked. “Not much different from when they were together, or even when they were children.”

Niall found his voice before she pressed him for details about their interactions. “Captain Efren was kind to me. I’d like to join his crew, if that’s allowed.”

She studied him as they walked off the sand onto another boardwalk and into the shade of a grove of leafy trees unlike any near Landale. They were so tall, Niall couldn’t see their tops, and the trunks were all bigger around than he was tall.

“There’s still a lot you don’t know about your power.”

“I learn quickly. I stole Vadim’s power without knowing what I was doing.”

“Stole his power?” She laughed. “You aren’t a siphon, Niall.”

“He said I was.”

“He’s the last person I would trust to assess a weaver’s ability. Come. We’ll talk more inside.”

They’d walked up to what Niall had mistaken for another tree trunk. When it opened, he recognized a door carved into the largest tree he’d ever seen. It opened into a large room lined with a circular staircase twisting its way up to a balcony with a row of doors. Whether they opened to additional rooms hollowed from the tree or outside, Niall didn’t know, but his fingers itched to grab the railing and climb.

“Down here,” Elder Beatrice called.

He’d missed the rope ladder dropping into the darkness below.

“It’s not far,” she said.

He’d never been fond of true darkness without stars or ambient light on the water. He shivered as he stepped onto the ladder and a cool breeze tickled his ankles. There was a light below, thank the gods. It put Elder Beatrice in shadow and didn’t stop him from groping for each wooden rung like a

drunken sailor. Finally, he made it to the chamber with the wall sconce. The rest of the crew waited for them at another door carved through a gnarled tree root.

Elder Beatrice walked ahead to unlock the ancient door, leaving Niall to mill behind the crew. Stan turned to him and traced his finger along the door jamb. "It's earth magic."

Niall thought he felt an ancient vibration as he pressed his thumb to the frame, the same as Stan. Something old and powerful reached for him, and it made his skin crawl.

Despite being far beneath the ground, the circular room at the bottom of the ladder and the hallway beyond the gnarled door smelled faintly of fresh pine instead of the damp earth Niall expected. The hallway walls were a mixture of wood and earth. Tree roots poked out of the floor here and there before curling back into the dirt. Niall would have feared a cave-in if he hadn't felt the same thrumming vibration throughout the corridor. Deep magic had been used to construct a hidden fortress from a giant living tree.

Niall wondered if all pirate islands had a sanctuary like this one. Pirates often raided the empire's ships and rich ports, but Niall had never heard of Coryn successfully sacking a pirate island. According to the sailors who frequented the pubs along Merchant Row, she had made several attempts.

The corridor ended in another gnarled door. This one opened into a giant natural cave hollowed from rock. Water bubbled from somewhere in the darkness beyond the raised plateau. Blocks of stone had been positioned like chairs around a table with ornate carvings down the middle. Elder Beatrice took the seat at the head of the table, motioning for Niall to sit at her right.

"Vadim." She motioned for the death weaver to take the seat across from Niall, and Efren dropped onto the stone block beside him as though he were guarding his prisoner.

The rest of the crew shuffled to empty seats around the table, leaving over half of them empty.

As if on cue, there was a deep scraping sound behind Elder Beatrice, as though a giant boulder had been shifted. Niall noticed another door-shaped indent in the otherwise seamless wall. Three men dressed in the same manner of flowing clothes entered through the door. They walked with the confidence of the gods themselves, buzzing with the same energy as the place around them. Niall touched the table and felt more earth magic reaching back at him, and a bald elder with a wrinkled face cut eyes at him. Instead of a rebuke, he flashed Niall a beaming smile.

“Elder Beatrice, what have we here?”

Niall heard a deep voice in the air, as though he was everywhere in the room instead of twenty feet away.

“Elder Jermain,” she said. “Have a seat. We have much to discuss. First, I promised these dear friends a meal.”

In the blink of an eye, plates of steamed rice and vegetables appeared before them, along with sauce bowls and wooden spoons wrapped in cloth napkins. Niall didn’t sense any magic in the food, but he could feel a residual spell along the edges of each item placed before him. It smelled delicious, but he watched the others, who each placed their napkins in their laps and looked expectantly to Elder Beatrice.

“May the gods bless this food to our use,” she said. “We are honored to have our brothers Efren and Vadim returned home to us along with their crews and our new guests.” She bowed her head, which seemed to be the signal for everyone to pick up their utensils and dig in.

Niall felt like he hadn’t eaten in days, though he’d only skipped breakfast. The exertion before they disembarked and all the walking in the sun would have normally knocked him on his ass, but he’d been too awed by his new surroundings to notice. Now, he was grateful for the chance to sit and eat in relative anonymity. Olivia sat between him and the other two elders, blocking them from view. Jermain seemed more intent on Vadim. Every so often, he glanced at the death weaver’s gloved hands.

A cup of water appeared before Niall, and he drank his fill, noticing it automatically refilled with each gulp. It seemed so simple. Niall hoped he would be able to do magic like that one day. The thought seemed foreign after a lifetime of thinking he was mundane, with no magical power whatsoever. His entire worldview had changed in an instant, and now he wanted to learn everything he could about his new skills.

That would have to wait. Once the dishes were cleared away, except for their water cups, Elder Beatrice called for everyone's attention and began the meeting.

# Chapter 10

## Efren

As Efren looked around the table at the assembled elders, he noticed how much they had aged in the last six months. Jermain and Frost had deep furrows around their mouths and more gray in their dark hair. Allora, their enchantress and one of the oldest on the island, was absent, as usual. Her usual spot beside Martiz was vacant. She was absent so often, Beatrice had overtaken her command of the elders at the last vote.

Even Bea looked more haggard and pale. Efren wondered what he and his crew looked like to them. Tracking Vadim had cost them a few gray hairs and a few bumps and bruises along the way, too. Thankfully, Hannah had only struck herself with lightning once, and they were practically immune to it by now.

Everyone showed their age but Martiz, who still held the glory of his youth thanks to his healing weaves. He and Vadim were opposite sides of the same coin, both strong in their natural talent and with only a trace of its opposite.

Efren glanced at his former lover. Vadim's laugh lines and crow's feet had deepened in his five-year absence, but so had Efren's. Vadim's white hair had always made him look older than his forty-five years. Efren didn't see any fresh scars on his face and neck, but who knew what damage the death weaver had taken as Hugo's palace guard. He never fully healed his wounds, leaving his skin painted and puckered with scars.

Long before Emperor Hesse had taken ill, General Coryn had made a faulty assumption. When she'd led the navy to overtake the unincorporated islands to the north, she'd assumed unbalanced weavers were more powerful than their balanced counterparts.

Efren knew better. Hannah was the most powerful weaver on his ship, hands down. Their control of both water

and lightning made them more dangerous than any water or lightning weaver alone. A weaver skilled in both earth and air could steer a ship toward land or move land to ship without touching the water. One with both the power to kill and the power to restore life would threaten the gods themselves.

Vadim had worked with Martiz from sunrise to sunset every day for six years before the council of elders decided the academy in Hearthstone might be better able to break through to him. Efren didn't know what Vadim had learned at that school, but he hadn't learned healing magic. When Hannah had been injured by a lucky swipe from a naval officer before their lightning bolt had taken him down, they'd used another bolt to cauterize the wound before they bled out on deck.

“All he could offer me was a quick death,” they said. ”  
No, thank you.”

Efren only half-listened as Elder Beatrice led Vadim through a list of questions Efren had asked himself. Vadim gave a greater accounting of his time with Emperor Hugo in his rooms. When the questioning turned to General Coryn, the conversation piqued Efren's interest once more.

“What does she think she's found on Stony Eel Island?”

“Something she's kept secret, but her men can be persuaded.”

Elder Beatrice scoffed. “What did you learn from them?”

“She's found an element, something between stone and metal. It's as strong as a gemstone. The earth weavers sent to uncover it say it speaks to them, that it wishes to be excavated from its stone prison. I thought they'd gone mad from overusing their weaves for too long.” He swallowed and took a quick sip of water before continuing. “Then I went there, and I felt it, too.”

“Felt what, exactly?” Elder Beatrice asked. “We've all sensed old weaves.”

Klaus shook his head. “Vadim took me to Stony Eel Island. There’s no residual magic that I can sense. It’s not a weave, but the general seemed to think it was magical.”

“It is magical,” Vadim said. “What’s worse, it wants to be free, and General Coryn wants to free it. Whatever we do, we need to stop her.”

Elder Beatrice nodded. “How soon do you think they will free it?”

“At this rate, it will take years. After a month, her strongest earth weavers are so burned out, they must return to Hearthstone to recover for half a year. I shuttled a group of them to the capital. Two were so exhausted, they needed the infirmary straight away. The other two were awake enough to share their tales. They said the thing is huge, and several lesser earth mages died for their efforts. Once they lock onto it, it’s almost impossible to pull away.”

Efren looked to Stan for confirmation, and he shrugged. They’d never sailed close to Stony Eel, always giving the island a wide berth thanks to her rocky inlet approach that would ground all but the shallowest keels at low tide.

“You’ve all sailed past the island on our usual route between Hearthstone and Luminest,” Vadim said. “It’s twice as wide as it is long. According to these folks, this element in the ground is four times as large as the island.

Elder Martiz whistled, and Elder Jermain, who was also an earth mage, nodded. “She would need every earth weaver on the continent working together to lift something that size out of the ground, and that’s after they free it from the surrounding stone.”

“She’s increased the number of patrols to the north,” Beatrice said. “This explains why the other islands have had so many unexpected visits. She needs more earth weavers.”

“They’ve also added suppressors to their fleet,” Vadim said. “I put mine on a boat headed for Glamiere when we

docked in Landale. I wanted Efren to find me without any trouble.”

“You wanted me to find you.” Vadim had said as much during Efren’s initial interrogation but hearing him state it to the council was irritating, to say the least. “In five years, you never thought to send me a message?”

“And say what? ‘I had to leave, there’s a reason, I’ll share more when I know Coryn won’t steal our correspondence’?” He glanced across the table to Stan. “You were supposed to tell him to forget about me.”

“When have words stopped Efren from doing anything?” Stan asked. “‘Captain, that’s a lighthouse.’ ‘Captain, I think we should repair the hull.’ ‘Captain, please don’t go swashbuckling into the night while our ship is sinking. That lighthouse brokered no argument with you.’ We’re lucky to be alive!”

“Gods, it was one time.” Efren took a drink of water to staunch the heat in his face. “And I was too drunk to be your captain.”

“Thank all the gods we had Olivia, or we would have cracked open on the rocks and fed ourselves to your friendly shark,” Tovey said.

Olivia’s cheeks darkened to a burnished red, but she said nothing.

“A fucking lighthouse.” Vadim grinned. “I’d forgotten about that.” He glanced at Niall and sobered. “Fuck. That was after ...”

“It was the night you returned and told us Willamina was dead.” Stan said the words Efren didn’t dare say, not with her son sitting across from him.

“At least he fucking cared,” Niall growled. In their short time together, it was the first time Efren had seen him angry.

“I said I was sorry.” Vadim looked down at the table. “I am sorry.”



Niall opened his mouth to protest, but Elder Beatrice cut him off. “Before we move on, we need to talk about the weavers who died when Efren attacked Vadim’s ship.”

Efren thought Vadim would be put on trial for his crimes, starting with what had happened to Niall’s parents, but now the elders’ heads all swiveled toward him. He sat straighter in his chair and squared his shoulders for the onslaught.

“This is not a trial for either of you,” Beatrice said, almost in answer to his thought. He shivered at the coincidence. “I have chores for both of you in the coming weeks, but we will talk about them later. Now, I want to know how many we’ve lost and how they died. Let’s start with how you attacked Vadim’s ship.”

Efren provided the stark details of the battle as he remembered them. They’d sunk six total fireballs into Vadim’s hulking naval vessel. Smoke inhalation had killed all but the fire weaver and Niall, possibly because he’d siphoned the little girl’s fire or ice to save himself. “Then we boarded Vadim’s ship, and he confirmed three of the newly conscripted weavers had died.”

“Did you help them on their way?” Martiz’s droll tone had an undercurrent of malice. There was no love lost between former master and student.

“I didn’t kill them,” Vadim said. “Nor could I save them. Efren had slapped me in irons by then.”

“Iron doesn’t hold you.” Beatrice cupped Vadim’s cheek, and an indecipherable look passed between them.

Still, Efren was surprised to hear Beatrice confirm what Vadim had said about iron. “You knew?”

“Vadim himself has shared several secrets he’s learned in General Coryn’s service over the years,” Beatrice said. “Iron only works on fire and ice weavers. Silver works on both healing and death weavers. Wood for water and lightning. Gold for earth and air.”

“Where did you get the pair of silver shackles, anyway?” Vadim asked.

They’d been in Niall’s pocket when Hannah had cleaned his pants, and Efren had taken a chance that Vadim had told him the truth when he said they worked on death weavers.

“You used them on me,” Niall said before Efren could come up with an explanation for finding them. “When I broke free of them, I kept them in my pocket.”

“You shouldn’t have been able to break free of them,” Vadim said. “You’re a thief, not a weaver.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Beatrice said. “We’re getting off topic again. You said three weavers died in the hold.”

“This thief stole my power and returned a young boy’s life. Only two remain dead.”

“That’s more than most healers can do.” Martiz stared at Niall with the first hint of interest. “He stole your power?”

“He’s a siphon. A reverse siphon, since he used my power to heal someone already dead.”

The elders and Efren’s crew started talking amongst themselves. Beatrice banged her wooden water cup on the stone table until everyone quieted. “That’s enough commotion. We’ll get to Niall in a moment. First, I want to know the ages and types of the perished weavers.”

“An earth weaver barely of school age,” Vadim said, “and a water weaver around ten years old who could have saved themselves if they knew how. They didn’t know to sink into the water in the hold to escape the smoke.”

Efren bowed his head at the surge of guilt that rushed over him. He hadn’t meant to kill children. He hadn’t meant to kill anyone.

“You didn’t have a healer on board?” Martiz asked.

“Coryn has no need for healers. You know that.” Vadim smirked at Martiz. “She murders every one she finds.”

“She murders healers?” Niall asked. “Why?”

“Spite,” Vadim said. “A healer took liberties from her as payment, before and after he healed her. She’s also surmised anyone with the ability to seek, suppress, or siphon has been touched by a healer. They can’t make more if they’re dead.”

“That’s not true,” Martiz said. “I’ve healed—”

“Weavers,” Elder Beatrice said. “You’ve healed weavers who already had powers. When was the last time you touched someone who didn’t have some kind of magic?”

“I was Coryn’s healer!” Martiz exclaimed. “I never touched her inappropriately.”

“You weren’t her only healer,” Elder Beatrice said.

“She claims she will let you live, if she sees you again.” There was more Vadim left unsaid, Efren was certain. Vadim himself had reasons to hate Martiz, but Efren doubted he would voice them before the full council.

Martiz shook his head. “I wouldn’t harm a child, but our lives would be a little better, had I let that one die.”

“I only ask that you not let Klaus die.” Vadim didn’t hide the animosity in his glare. He had little respect for his former mentor, with good reason.

“I’m not here for healing,” Klaus said. “When you promised to release me from your bond, you said nothing about a healer.”

“You won’t do anyone any good when you’re dead.” There was venom in Vadim’s tone, and more fire than Efren had ever riled from him in their time together. That confirmed it more than anything Vadim had said while aboard *Starlight Specter*. Vadim cared for Klaus.

Klaus tossed his coppery locks over his shoulder and raised his chin in defiance as he glared at Vadim. “I didn’t ask for this.”

“If I would have left you in Landale, you’d be dead already.”

Vadim and Klaus glared at each other.

Martiz reached for Klaus's hand where it rested on the table. His expression shifted from confusion to one of pure horror. "Oh, Vadim." Martiz dropped Klaus's hand and hissed out a breath. "What have you done?"

"I kept him alive." Vadim continued to stare at Klaus until the seeker looked down at the table. "I needed to know when Efren got close to us."

"You've tethered his life force to yours." Martiz directed his gaze to Beatrice. "I can't heal the young man until Vadim severs the link with him, and even then, there's a good chance he'll die for losing it."

"It's time for you to learn to use your power opposite." Beatrice patted Vadim's hand. "Which leads us to our next point of discussion. Niall."



## Niall

Niall wasn't sure he understood everything from the elders' conversation. Coryn had a vendetta against healers, and Niall didn't yet understand how healers created enchanters, seekers, suppressors, and whatever Coryn was.

There was one tidbit he could offer to clear things up, or so he hoped.

"I've never been touched by a healer."

Elder Beatrice smiled at him. "I'd assumed as much."

"That's impossible!" Vadim turned his glare from Klaus to Niall.

"You're not a siphon, as Vadim guessed," Elder Beatrice said. "You're a spectral mage."

Efren grinned at Niall, but Niall didn't share his enthusiasm. "What does that mean?"

“It means you have your own power,” Elder Martiz said. “How did it first manifest?”

Niall shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Tell him about the first time you remember,” Vadim said.

“I heard your voice in my head at the docks, and again on your ship. You said that meant I’m a death weaver.”

Vadim nodded. “That’s why I assumed you were a death weaver, but then you broke free from the silver cuffs.”

“The cuffs didn’t keep him out of your head,” Klaus said. “You should have known they wouldn’t hold him.”

“I didn’t know the cuffs would sever our communication link,” Vadim answered. “I only tested them long enough to know they wouldn’t break the life link and kill you.”

“Wait.” Niall couldn’t recognize the emotion on Klaus’s face. “You tested them on yourself?”

Vadim turned back to Niall. His hair hid the trace of pink across his cheekbones from Klaus’s side of the table. “And then?” His glower deepened, as though he was personally affronted by Niall’s escape and subsequent—

“I brought Renald back to life.” Niall swallowed hard as the rest of the room erupted around him.

“How?” Elder Martiz leaned forward over the table to meet Niall’s gaze, his eyes wide with curiosity.

“I sensed his life force hovering over his body, and I ... shoved it back in.”

“Even perfectly balanced mages struggle to do that.” Elder Martiz’s quizzical frown said he didn’t believe Niall.

“He stole his power from me,” Vadim said. “I don’t know how he did it, but he did.”

“What evidence do you have of this?” Elder Beatrice asked.

“A lock of his hair turned yellow,” Efren said. “I saw it myself, before he killed again, and it disappeared.”

Elder Beatrice shook her head. “You saw, but you did not understand.”

Vadim turned his vicious glare on her, which was a relief to Niall. Vadim’s stare made his skin crawl, and knowing the death weaver could drain him unconscious with one bare hand raised in his direction only made it worse.

“Nature seeks a balance,” she said. “Though he is untested, I assume we will find Niall completely balanced in the middle between death and healing. You know nature exerts a price. It had nowhere to go for him, since he wasn’t balancing out a death with a life. Instead, it went into you.”

“I don’t need balance.” Vadim stared at his hands like a petulant child.

“You do,” she breathed. “You’ll need to find it to save your seeker’s life before we lose you both.” She patted his hand. “I believe in you.”

Niall didn’t feel balanced, whatever that meant. He hadn’t known he was a weaver at all, and now they said he had all elements at once. “This doesn’t seem real.”

“It’s very real,” Elder Beatrice said. “You’ve shown you have at least two variations of power, possibly more.”

“Lightning and life.” Efren nodded.

“Is that how I knew Jasmine was a fire weaver before I saw her?” Niall asked.

“Yes.” Elder Beatrice nodded. “You can detect all elements because you have all elements.”

Niall waved to an elder whose power he didn’t recognize. “I don’t recognize yours.”

“Ice,” the elder said, flashing him a smile of bright white teeth in his dark face. “It’s rare outside Hearthstone. I’m surprised you recognized the fire weaver.” The elder turned to Elder Beatrice. “How did we miss this? He’s spectral like you.”

She nodded. "It's only fair. He is my grandson."

Niall almost fell out of his seat trying to put a little distance between them. He'd grown up with his mom's father, but he and his mom had always looked sad when Niall asked about his grandmother. Now, he could see the resemblance. She had his mom's brown eyes, and her hair, if she would have grown it out and twisted it.

"They acted like you were dead."

"In a way, I am," she said. "I can't leave my duties on Aquarion, and they weren't safe to come here, with you."

"Weren't safe?" Niall didn't understand. They'd sailed past Horseshoe Island numerous times on their way to Glamiere.

"Did you see the school building where your young friends were taken?" Vadim asked.

Niall nodded.

"From this day forward until they have full command of their abilities, they cease to be children," Elder Beatrice, his grandmother, said. "Your mother wanted better for you, especially when she sensed you had more than one power within you."

"But I tried," Niall said. "She tried to teach me to use water, but I couldn't."

"Your grandfather worked his magic, then." She closed her eyes, but not soon enough to hide her deep sorrow. "He was a grand suppressor. When he became too sickly to sail with them, he did the next best thing. He must have cast a shadow of suppression over you."

"That isn't supposed to be possible," Efren said.

Niall's grandmother nodded, eyes still closed. "Everyone was so disappointed when Willamina was a plain old water weaver. Lawrence must have been so proud of you, my dear."

"She was one of the best water weavers I've ever seen." Efren met Niall's gaze with a sad smile. "I have my

own talents, but she could call krakens from the depths and send storm surges crashing hundreds of miles inland.”

“She couldn’t outrun death.” Niall glared at Vadim.

“She knew the cost,” Vadim said. “I told her what would happen if she was still in Landale that evening.”

Fragments of a memory washed over Niall, cutting him with sharp, half-remembered barbs.

*“I’m tired of running,” his father had said. “What’s the worst he can do? He can’t kill us with his element.”*

*“If we’re dead, he can protect our boy. If we fight, she’ll use us, and Niall, against Aquarion.”*

Coryn hadn’t taken Niall, thanks to Vadim. And he’d been protected from her seekers by his grandfather’s magic.

“How did Grandfather’s magic wear off?”

“You lost his protection when he died,” his grandmother said.

“You left me,” Niall whispered. “You left me at the orphanage.”

“I had to,” Vadim said. “I knew it was only a matter of time before she tried to use you against your grandmother, mundane or not.”

Niall took another gulp of water to drown the warring emotions in his gut. Vadim had caused his worst pain, it was true, but he’d also saved him and his parents from untold suffering at the hands of General Coryn.

“Will I be stuck here until I learn all facets of my magic?” he asked to change the subject.

Niall’s grandmother shook her head. “We don’t have time for that now. You will train with me each morning, and then I want you and Vadim to train with Elder Martiz every afternoon until his bond with Klaus can be broken.”

“You’ve got to be kidding.” Vadim scoffed.



“Perhaps you will understand what balance looks like when you see it in action,” Martiz said.

“Don’t speak to me of balance.”

Niall’s grandmother placed her hand over Vadim’s, and something passed between them. Niall was grateful he couldn’t hear Vadim’s wrathful thoughts in his head.

“I’ve never killed anyone,” Niall said. “I don’t want to kill anyone.”

“Good.” Vadim grinned at him. “It’s all about consent. You can try to kill me all you want, but I won’t consent.”

“After that,” his grandmother said, “we will need to find someone to train you in fire and ice. The rest are accounted for on Efren’s ship.”

“My ship?” Efren sounded surprised.

“Niall has asked to sail with your crew,” his grandmother said. “I agree, it’s a good fit. As soon as I know he won’t light your ship on fire or plummet it beneath the waves, I’ll give him leave to go with you.”

“Thank you,” Niall said.

“That’s fantastic!” Hannah whooped, and Olivia and Codger Tim joined in. Beside Efren, Stan and Tovey were locked in a staring match neither seemed to want to break. Niall wasn’t even sure they’d heard the news.

“It’s settled, then. You begin training tomorrow, both of you. Vadim, we will discuss your trial after we’ve severed your bond with the seeker.”

The death weaver nodded, but Klaus’s head snapped up with a look of abject terror. “You won’t kill me so you can leave, will you?”

“I don’t plan on leaving without a ship,” Vadim said. “Nor without you. You’re the only seeker I’ve found with the ability to tell one weaver from another by their strength. If Coryn has moved Hugo, you can pick him out of a crowd.”

Klaus nodded. “I can, but—”

“I’m not going to kill you, not if I can help it.”

Klaus nodded, and though he still looked scared, he also looked relieved. “When were we going to tell them about the anomaly on the Equis Islands?”

“Gods, I’d completely forgotten,” Efren said. “We searched the islands for weavers, since we had a seeker with us. He saw something else instead.”

“Well, tell us, then.” Niall’s grandmother nodded to Klaus.

“I can’t explain it. I know it wasn’t a person, but it was bigger than a spell. It almost seemed like a—”

“Beacon.” His grandmother nodded. “Coryn has left these traps before. Where it repelled Klaus and made him think something was wrong, it would draw me in.”

“I didn’t see anything,” Niall said. “Shouldn’t it have trapped me instead?”

“That’s one bonus of having an untrained spectral mage,” Vadim said. “Until he’s fully trained, he can’t be used against us.”

“How could I be used against you?” Niall wanted to help in the fight against Coryn, but not if she could manipulate his power somehow.

His grandmother shook her head. “He’s stronger than I am. His strength will work to our advantage.”

She patted Niall’s hand, but something in her far-away gaze gave him pause. “We’ll talk more tomorrow. For now, get some rest.”

Niall did his best to hide his exhaustion from Efren, but the captain steadied him on his feet and walked beside him, his hand at the small of Niall’s back. The warmth seeped through Niall’s shirt, both unnerving and reassuring in equal measures. Niall craved the simple touch, and so much more.

# Chapter 11

## Efren

“What’s wrong with your seeker?” Efren asked as he and Niall followed Vadim to the ladder back to ground level within the ancient tree.

“A heart defect,” Vadim said. “It’s been patched over a few times by inadequate healers. If I hadn’t linked with him, he would have died at sea. As much as I hate Martiz, he is one of the best healers in the land.”

“one of the few healers in the land, no thanks to you.” Efren couldn’t help the bitterness in his voice. Vadim had been Coryn’s principal weapon in the fight against healers for the last five years.

“You know I can’t kill anyone who doesn’t attack me first.”

“How many did you string up like Niall’s parents?” Efren tried to keep his voice low, but Niall turned at the sound of his name.

“Coryn’s decree, not mine.” Vadim shook his head. “I know you don’t believe me, but I didn’t willingly kill anyone. I gave them all the option to run. Some made the same decision Willamina did and stayed. Some thought Coryn would spare them, not understanding her deep hatred of all healers. Still others thought they could kill her with the little death weaving they had.”

Vadim shook his head. “Consider this a warning, old friend. I’ve never met anyone as adept at shielding as Coryn. I don’t know if she can steal offensive power and use it to defend herself, or if she’s surrounded by enough weavers of opposite strengths to deflect all types of magic. Whatever the case may be, she’s damn near invincible.”

Efren shook his head. “I’ve seen her bleed.”

“I’ve seen her heal from an arrow to the heart.” Vadim grimaced. “A martial attack is the only way to hurt her, and

even then, there's no guarantee of death."

"Beheading?" Efren asked.

"Possibly." Vadim stared up the ladder, where Klaus was struggling with footing on the rungs.

"Excuse me." In one leap, Vadim steadied Klaus on the ladder and helped him up into the darkness above.

"What is this place?" Niall asked as he glanced around the large circular earthen room with open corridors branching off like roots in every direction.

"It's a maze of sorts. If any of Coryn's seekers were to make it inside the tree, they would most likely fall from one of the trapdoors on the balcony above. If they found the ladder, they would get lost in the maze of tunnels."

"Grandmother is safe here?"

Efren heard the underlying suspicion. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you we would be meeting with your grandmother. Yes, she is safe here."

Elder Beatrice had surprised Efren by claiming Niall as her grandson. Willamina had been raised as an orphan. She'd even had her own bed in the barracks instead of returning home to her parents each night. Her absence almost broke her father, and it had pushed a rift between him and Beatrice. They'd split for good when he'd given Willamina his fishing vessel and stepped down to first mate. He'd sailed with her and Thomas for years before he became too ill, and then he'd kept Niall's powers a secret.

"How long did it take you to learn water weaving?" Niall asked. Instead of waiting for an answer, he hurried up the ladder after Codger Tim. It took everything Efren had to keep his eyes on his own hands and not on Niall's ass above him.

"Two years," he answered once he could be heard over the others without shouting.

Niall sighed. "That's too long."

"I was a child," Efren said. "It should come easier for you. You're an apprentice. You already know about practice

and hard work.”

“I never made it to master craftsman.” Niall waited for him on the landing. “What if it takes even longer to master magic?”

“You don’t need to be a master. You only need to be proficient in not drowning us all, or sinking the ship, lighting us on fire, blowing us up, blowing us off course—”

“I get it. No destruction.”

“No unplanned destruction,” Efren corrected.

Niall’s laugh was as light as the fresh breeze. Sunlight danced through the open door, beckoning Efren outside. Hours had passed in the underground darkness. Every time Efren was called to the meeting room, he worried he would be shut down there without light forever, and every time he crawled back to the surface, he felt a renewed gratitude for the sun, sand, and island wildlife.

He delighted in other sights as they sailed back to the main island of Aquarion, mostly Niall with his head thrown back, brown curls blowing in the wind, his eyelashes dark against his ruddy cheeks as he blinked away the brine. Niall had a simple beauty Efren hadn’t fully appreciated before.

After Vadim had left, Efren had assumed attractive men weren’t meant for him, so he hadn’t bothered to look. He preferred men who came to him looking to bed a sea captain, and he’d not been disappointed.

Niall met his gaze, and the world seemed to stop moving around them. He’d been caught staring, but he couldn’t look away. Instead, he offered his hand, and Niall took it to cross to the opposite side of the boat. Stan switched places with him without a word, offering only a lopsided grin.

“I’ll be taking you home after all,” Efren said.

Niall leaned against his side, chin on his shoulder. “You’ll show me around the island sometime, too?” His jaw cracked with a yawn. “Not today, though. I’m almost dead on my feet.”

“I will.” Efren was tired, too, after being up all night. He’d watched the seas skip by like a dream with the speed of five air weavers in their sails. He’d narrowly avoided a shoal that could have sunk them — they’d rolled up on it so quickly. Still, it was good to be home in half the time. “It will be nice to return to the life of a day dweller.”

“You always take the starlight shift?” Niall asked.

“Olivia and I switch. Two weeks on, two weeks off.”

Olivia scowled at him from her place at the back of the skiff.

He’d put in a good word for Olivia with Elder Beatrice while they ate lunch. Olivia wanted her own ship and crew one day, and while that would leave Efren without a suppressor, he didn’t want to hold her back. He hadn’t expected her to blush and demure. She hadn’t stopped glaring at him since they’d boarded the skiff, either.

Even though it was an extra half-mile walk to the cabin he called home, he and Niall debarked with Olivia at the boarding house dock.

Olivia waved to the rest of the crew as they pulled away, heading for the dock on the south side of the island, but she growled at Efren as soon as they turned toward the house. “You’re putting him up here for the night?”

“I wanted to speak with you.”

“I think you’ve said enough.” She turned her back and walked ahead.

He grabbed her arm. “Why was I wrong to praise your sailing to the elders?”

She brushed him off and turned to face him with a glare. “You’ve been trying to kick me off your ship since the moment I first stepped aboard. Now, you’re trying to shuffle me off onto my own boat!”

“I thought that was what you wanted,” Efren said. “You said—”

“I’ve said what you wanted to hear, Efren. You don’t want me on your ship, gumming your cogs. You’d rather see me drown than see me succeed.”

He deserved that. He ground his teeth together as he considered his words. “I didn’t want a new first mate, but that wasn’t your fault.”

“You didn’t want to be captain without him.”

“I suppose I didn’t.” It hurt to admit it, but he’d lost his desire to sail when Vadim left. Once the enemy had such a familiar face, he found it harder to muster the resolve to fight him. “Because I wasn’t a good captain, I didn’t allow you to fulfill your role as first mate.”

“And now you have this one,” she pointed at Niall. “You can make him first mate when you’re ready.”

Niall had walked a few steps away and turned his back on them, but now he turned, red-faced, and shook his head. “I don’t want to be first mate! I’d never get to spend time with Efren.”

“You’d make time,” Olivia said. “He always made time for Vadim.”

“You sound jealous.” Niall sat down on the dock and leaned back on his arms so he could glare up at Olivia. “You were the first one to push me toward him!”

“She’s not jealous of us.” Efren finally thought he understood his first mate’s dilemma. “I’ve never particularly enjoyed having you as my first mate.”

Her scowl deepened.

“You’ve been the most competent person aboard my ship for the last fifteen years. You are a bone spur in my heel, always reminding me what needs to be done.” He didn’t think her glare could get any deeper, but he could barely see the whites of her eyes. “Our ship wouldn’t function without you. If that doesn’t sound like a glowing performance review to you, perhaps you would be better on your own ship. That’s the best you’ll get from me.”

She snorted. “I prefer your typical asshole response over your glowing reviews any day.” Her gaze softened, but her lips remained in a stubborn line. “I will stay aboard *Starlight Specter* until you or the elders ask me to leave.”

Efren sucked in a breath to hide his smile. “I’ll let them know you prefer to stay.”

“Thank you.” She saluted him with a quick nod of her head and marched up the stairs to the boarding house.

“What was that all about?” Niall asked as he struggled to his feet.

“I thought she hated me and wanted off the ship.” Efren chuckled at his misunderstanding. “Now that we’ve come to an agreement, I have another stop to make.”

They walked to a small shed next door, where one of Martiz’s nephews, a young man about Niall’s age with long dark hair lounged with his bare legs up on a desk and a book over his face, hiding all but his stubbled chin. He snapped to attention when Efren knocked on the door, and the book fell into his lap.

“Who-at ... Efren. Good to see you.”

“Is that three-room still for sale not far from my house?”

The man nodded.

“I’m buying it. The gold should be in the onshore coffers by now.” They had a group chest for goods, but Efren took a cut of everything he delivered as Captain. “Deliver the deed to Olivia Nesbith at the boarding house next door, first thing tomorrow.”

“Yes, Sir.”

When they were back on the path, Niall stopped him with a hand on his elbow. “Do you really think buying her a house is going to make her feel better?”

“I never bought Vadim a house.” Efren laughed. “If I had, perhaps he would have stayed.”



Niall blinked at him. “Are you going to buy me a house?”

“Only if you don’t want to live with me.”

Niall captured Efren’s arm with both hands and slid them to his wrist, entwining their fingers together. “You’ll never get rid of me.”

Efren continued down the path toward his house. No one had ever taken such liberties to touch him in public before. Thanks to naval decorum, they hadn’t dared. Fortunately, Niall had never been in Embertide’s navy, and Efren had no desire to shove him away. His cheeks burned as he realized he liked the young man’s attention.

“You may wish you had more room.”

For the first time, Efren wished he’d spent more of his cut of the loot on himself. He wondered what Niall would think of him once he saw how he lived on land.



## Niall

Efren’s house loomed above them as they walked through the door. Niall’s eyes were so bleary from walking toward the setting sun and from yawning that he tripped over the threshold and crashed into Efren’s back in the entryway. The house had an entryway! Niall had never seen anything like it, but the tour would be lost on him now. Stairs led to the second floor on their left, and Efren led him up.

Niall hadn’t let go of Efren’s hand since he’d mentioned moving in with him. Now, Efren’s grip kept him on his feet up the tricky steps.

“I don’t have the guest room ready for you,” Efren said. “I can sleep on the floor, if you’d prefer.”

“We established our sleeping arrangements on the ship,” Niall said to the blurry Efren-shaped shadow standing at

the head of the stairs and pulling him upward. “Why would we change them now?”

Efren chuckled and pulled him in for a kiss when he reached the top of the stairs. “I’m trying to be a good host. If you decide you’d rather board with the other weavers at the barracks tomorrow, I will pay for your room.”

Niall growled and nearly toppled Efren through another doorway as he lunged for him, catching him around the waist.

“Easy, love.”

“You’re already trying to get rid of me? No wonder Olivia hates you.” Niall was as giddy as he was clumsy. He placed tender kisses along Efren’s jaw as the captain held him in place.

“Ah, but she doesn’t hate me.” Efren laughed when Niall sucked on the side of his neck. “We just established that.”

“You are impossible!” He laughed.

Efren dragged him further into the room. A cool blue light from an enchantment on Efren’s dresser filled the room. The eerie glow made Efren shine like a deity. Niall leaned against him and sighed.

“I want you to stay with me, but only if that’s what you want,” Efren said.

Despite the noncommittal words, Niall heard the undertone of rejection. Efren expected him to leave. Niall wasn’t about to leave, but he was too tired to argue. When Efren flopped him down on the nearest soft surface, his last thought was that he should remove his boots.

He woke before dawn to the lapping of nearby waves. At first, he thought he was on the ship, but then he realized he wasn’t moving with the sound. A trail of moonlight crossed the foot of the gigantic bed.

A soft shadow lay beside him. Efren’s mass of dark curls took up most of his pillow and hid his sleeping face

above his bare broad shoulders. Niall did his best not to disturb him as he scooted closer and pulled the sleeping captain to his chest.

Efren hummed and wriggled closer. Niall's cock had been dozing, but the motion felt so good. He hadn't changed out of his clothes, but he was naked now, and so was Efren. Niall did his best to relax and think about anything but the man beside him. He was still overtired from the upside-down sleep schedule. Soon, he was asleep again.

The next time he woke, the pale pink light of dawn allowed him to see the room in its entirety for the first time. The white-washed masonry walls were bare above a white dresser and wardrobe on the opposite side of the room. The bed where he lay touched both side walls. Efren's pocket watch sat open on the lowest shelf of the headboard, displaying the time as just before seven. The others were lined with books. Bits of shell, polished rock, and other minor curiosities kept the books company where there was a square inch between the spines and the edge.

Efren shifted against him, and they both moaned when Niall's semi-erect cock caught on the edge of Efren's hole before fitting into the groove between his cheeks.

“Good morning,” Efren whispered.

“Good morning. Did you have fun undressing me last night?”

As good as Efren felt against him, it was even better to see the amusement in his eyes when he rolled over. “I had even more fun having my way with you.”

“Oh?”

Efren shook his head. “No. I was almost as tired as you. I was going to dress us both, but I couldn't keep my eyes open long enough.” Efren traced Niall's clavicle with his thumb and halted at the divot between them.

Niall's breath caught at the possessive look in Efren's eyes. “We're awake now, and your training won't start until eight.”

Niall glanced at the pocket watch again. “We have an hour to bathe, grab breakfast, and walk back to the docks.”

“Bathing’s as easy as jumping in the ocean.” Efren leaned closer. “We’ll grab breakfast on the way to the training ground. The walk is short enough.”

“You don’t need to talk me into it.” Niall had been half-hard since he’d opened his eyes. With Efren’s hands on him, he was already at full attention and leaking.

Efren pushed Niall onto his back and kissed his way down his chest, pausing to tease his nipples with his tongue. He never took his gaze from Niall’s, and Niall was certain he already knew fire magic because he thought he was going to combust from that look alone.

Efren continued down his body, licking a trail of precome from his navel and digging his nose into Niall’s groin. The move was so primal, Niall’s cock jumped, slapping against his stomach and leaving another trail of precome behind.

Efren chuckled as he lapped it up again and then licked a stripe along the groove between his groin and thigh. Niall moaned. He didn’t want to be the only one losing his mind to pleasure before breakfast, though. He twisted his body downward, trying to leave Efren some room as he angled himself closer to his prize.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“The bed’s plenty big enough,” Niall teased.

“It is.” Efren sounded pleased. “You look so good like that.”

“I can’t let you have all the fun.”

Efren adjusted his shoulders and Niall’s hips to make it easier, and Niall licked his first stripe from Efren’s tip to the base, relishing the musky salt of him.

Efren must have taken the lick as a challenge because he sucked Niall down with so much force, Niall couldn’t think for a few seconds. The tingle of Efren’s beard on his raised

thigh almost tickled, but it felt so good he didn't care. He forgot what he was doing, relishing in sensation until Efren's blunt nails pinched the skin at his hip, reminding him to reciprocate.

He did his best to copy Efren's movements, rolling his lips over his teeth so he wouldn't hurt Efren as he took him in. He tried to take Efren deep and choked. His eyelashes beaded with tears, but he refused to give up, trying again and again to work past his gag reflex until he could take most of Efren's cock. The rest, he grasped with his fingers, loving the feel of hot silky skin above and coarse hair below. He loved how each twirl of his tongue inside Efren's foreskin made the captain's legs tremble. Efren was already close, and Niall had pushed him to that edge. Niall took pride in his efforts, the same contentedness he felt from his pottery.

Efren's tongue teased the opening in Niall's cock head, and he nearly lost it, popping off Efren's cock to take a deep breath to steady his nerves. He wanted to last, but he was quickly losing that battle. He took another shuddering breath and returned to Efren's cock, possibly too aggressively. Tears filled his eyes again, but he held on, gently tugging on Efren's balls.

This time, Efren moaned around his cock and salty-sweet liquid pooled in Niall's mouth. He tried his best to swallow it all down.

He'd done that. He'd pushed Efren over the edge first. That knowledge made him come undone, and he spilled into Efren's mouth. He whimpered around Efren's cock from the intensity.

Efren continued sucking and licking Niall through every twitch and shudder. Niall kept his mouth latched onto Efren, as well, loving the feel of Efren's softening cock as he held it in his mouth.

The sound of a door opening below sent them both scrambling.

"That will be Stan," Efren said. "I'll race you to the beach."

Niall was lost in the sound of footfalls on the stairs. When he glanced at the foot of the bed, the last place he'd seen Efren, there was no one there, only drapes fluttering in the early morning breeze.

Niall tossed the sheets aside and bounced across the mattress to the foot of the bed. There was a balcony outside the window. He hopped onto it and quickly found the ladder down to the beach. Luckily, the only spectators were more trees so dense they blocked the view.

Efren let out a whoop as he dove face-first into the ocean. Niall almost lost his footing trying to follow and half-slid to the bottom of the ladder. He passed two towels tossed carelessly in the sand above the tide line and he kept running, diving in behind Efren and tackling him in the roiling surf.

“Nice balcony.”

“I didn't have a chance to show you around last night.”

Efren tossed him a bar of soap. He almost let it sail past, but a spray of water caught it and held it in place for him.

“Convenient.”

Efren laughed. “I suppose. I need to work off the big meal we had yesterday. You'll want to eat up for breakfast, too. Magic burns more calories than sex, which burns enough as it is.”

Niall's soapy fingers touched on spots still sensitive from their morning exertions, and his whole body felt too warm. Was that all this was? A little morning workout? He didn't dare ask, for fear Efren would call it more harmless fun, same as on the ship.

Niall had been foolish, he realized as the sun broke free of the horizon. He was already too attached. He liked Efren far beyond a bedfellow but telling him that would be a disaster. Whether he admitted it or not, the captain was still hung up on Vadim. The death weaver had weaved a spell over Efren's heart, one so tight Niall wasn't sure there was room for anyone else.

Niall needed to guard his own heart before he broke it all on his own.

# Chapter 12

## Efren

Petri, the lovely person Efren paid to clean his house weekly, even when he wasn't there, also ran a food stand. Efren followed his nose to the delicious smell of fried chicken gravy. Petri themselves wore a light linen wrap with a thick red belt around their waist. Their black hair was twisted into a bun on top of their head, a look they often kept after changing into linen pants and a tunic for afternoon chores.

"Captain Efren," Petri said. "Good to see you. I will get out to your house later today to air it out."

"No rush." Efren held up two fingers to indicate he was paying for Niall's meal, as well. "Anything break while I was gone?"

"We had one bad storm, but the roof held. The earth weavers have been around to fix the weak spots. No leaks this time."

After six months, Efren had expected more repairs, but Petri's preventive maintenance for the last six years had kept Efren from needing the more expensive repairs his neighbors bemoaned after each storm.

"I've purchased the small cabin next door, as well."

"Yes." Petri grinned. "That needs a new roof, and the lovely Olivia would probably like some colorful paint on the windowsills."

"How did you know it was Olivia's?" Efren asked.

They laughed. "Captain Efren, the entire island knew the moment Martiz's middle son stepped foot in the Den." The Sea Dog's Den was the main watering hole on the island. "There's only one way to get him to keep a secret."

"What?" Niall asked. He leaned in when they motioned for him to come closer.



“Keep him in your sights until he’s alone, and then slit his throat.” Petri drew their thumb across their throat.

Niall choked on a surprised laugh. “I’d forgotten the pirate code.”

“Aye, you’re an island boy?”

“He’s Willamina’s,” Efren said, “and the pirate code doesn’t apply when we’re at home.”

“Willamina’s, eh?” Petri’s eyes sparkled as they grinned. “Heard he was yours now. You content with the master bed, or want me to make up the guest room?”

Niall opened his mouth, but Efren cut him off. He was the one with more experience in matters of the heart, after all. “Make up the guest room. It’s closer to the library, and Niall will have plenty of assigned reading, if I know his grandmother.”

Niall studied Efren and then smiled brighter than the morning sunlight. “Thank you.”

Petri bowed their head with a sage nod and handed them each a bread bowl filled with thick chicken gravy. “You’re welcome back for seconds, as well,” Petri said. “Magical exhaustion can hit without warning. Remember when Vadim put himself in a coma for three days?”

Efren remembered when the death weaver put himself in a coma for three weeks. Then, they’d been on open waters, wrapped in a storm of Hannah’s making to keep the navy at bay.

“Vadim has never taken care of himself,” Efren admitted. He wondered if that would change, now that he was responsible for Klaus’s wellbeing, as well. “I’ll take another bowl to go, Petri.”

Petri shook their head. “Two more. I’ve seen Vadim’s pet. He needs food, too.”

“That’s very kind of you,” Efren said.

“Not a kindness, my dear,” Petri reminded him. “As your housekeeper, I have access to your coin.”

Efren shook his head and stuffed the first spoonful of chicken gravy in his mouth to stifle a laugh. He could take the thief from Hearthstone, but he couldn't break the thief's desire for coin.

He'd caught Petri trying to break into his room at one of the inns in Hearthstone when they were a child no bigger than Jasmine. He'd put them to work on *Starlight Specter* for the return trip, killing rats and helping Codger Tim with meals. They liked cooking so much, they continued to study with Elder Beatrice and the other cooks on the island after putting in long hours to learn their air element. Efren had hoped to make them another of his wind crew, but they didn't like sailing, and cringed at the sight of sharks. Luckily for them, they made a good living on the island by feeding everyone and repairing their homes when needed.

Cooking hadn't surpassed their avarice, though. Efren couldn't complain about Petri's proactive attention to his home, and he probably saved money over the folks who had to rebuild after every storm, but Petri's services weren't cheap.

As Efren and Niall found a bench under a coconut tree to enjoy their breakfasts, Efren remembered Petri's drunken offer on a night seven or eight months ago.

*"You could always add sex to the list of services you want from me."*

Efren couldn't see past the child he'd rescued to the adult Petri had become. The thought had sobered him after too much rum shared over a game of cards.

He wondered now, as he had then, if Petri had developed feelings for him over the years. He reached the same conclusion after seeing the easy way Petri smiled at Niall and accepted him as Efren's. As they had with thieving, Petri saw sex only as a business transaction. With stealing outlawed on the island, Petri wanted as many other income streams as they could get. They had a decent body, Efren had to admit.

*"I'd be interested, if I weren't still tied up in that monster,"* Efren had drunkenly slurred.

For their part, Petri had taken his rejection by withdrawing an extra coin for their company, almost the same amount they would charge for sex, and Efren hadn't minded in the least. He had money. What he didn't have was casual sex.

With Niall, Efren was already doomed. As they ate, he imagined ways they could enjoy each other's company when they returned home for the evening. He would give Niall a tour of the island before sunset, and then they could sit on the balcony in Efren's deck swing and watch the stars rise over the water.

Efren wasn't a romantic person, really, he wasn't. But Niall had given so easily, his body, his joy, even his first times, and Efren felt like the thief who needed to pay it back in starlight and grand gestures.

Their bench wasn't far from the training grounds. As Niall continued to slurp at his bread bowl with the most suggestive noises Efren had ever heard outside the bedroom, he saw Elder Beatrice approaching from the west. He met her at the training grounds.

"What are your plans for today?" she asked.

"Stan and I need to update the island's main maps and distribute the rest of the coffers with the crew. Then, we're all yours."

She nodded. "I'll come find you when I finish the morning session. Martiz is taking the afternoons with Niall and Vadim. I think it's best to leave Vadim home for our trip to Equis. Do you think his seeker would sail without him?"

"Without Vadim?" Efren shrugged. "He has a healthy fear of Vadim, from what I can tell. He seemed happy to help us look for stragglers. I think he'd be amenable again."

"Good. I'll send Martiz to do a complete workup on his health this morning. While he's there, I'll have him ask about tomorrow afternoon. Will that work for you?"

"We'll be gone for days."

"Hours. We're taking your ship and Vadim's wind weavers." Beatrice nodded, as though it was already decided.

“As their reward, I’ll have Olivia drop them at the Glamiere port of their choosing the following day. You and Niall can go sightseeing on the day of rest like everyone else.”

Efren honestly couldn’t remember what day it was any more. He also should have known Niall wouldn’t get preferential treatment from his grandmother.

“When is the day of rest, again?”

Elder Beatrice laughed at him. “You’ve been too long on your ship. It’s three days from now.”

He hid his embarrassment by popping the last bit of bread into his mouth and chewing until it was almost nothing. By then, Beatrice had approached Niall’s bench, where he, too, was finishing his breakfast. Efren returned to the bench and grabbed the two extra bowls wrapped in cheese cloth and headed into the jungle behind the barracks.

Vadim’s hut was little more than one room with a roof over it. As usual, the death weaver lay in the hammock tied between two trees. He approached the hut, first, and knocked on the door.

The door creaked open on rusty hinges, same as it always had. Klaus rubbed at his eyes. “Captain?”

Efren shoved one of the bread bowls into his hands. “Spoons are in the lock box above the trunk.”

Klaus nodded. “Thanks.”

“There’s running water at the barracks.”

“I filled him a pitcher last night.” Vadim’s voice was all gravel and no warmth.

Efren handed him the other bread bowl as the door creaked shut behind him. He heard the muffled sound of a chair being pulled out from the tiny table Vadim also used for a desk.

With the flick of his wrist, Vadim dropped his handy utensil as effective for picking locks as it was for eating breakfast into his waiting hand.

“Petri asks you to stop by for lunch, on my coin, of course.”

“Petri.” Vadim grinned. “How is the little bugger?”

“Stop by the stand and ask them yourself.” Efren turned back to the barracks, where Stan leaned against the side of the building. “We’re going to watch Niall try to pick up air weaving. You coming?”

“No.” Vadim glanced at the door to the hut, and then shrugged. “I’ve been summoned after lunch. I’ll make sure Klaus eats a second bowl before then.”

Efren recognized the dismissal. He expected it to hurt, but the empty hole in his gut was almost worse.

He no longer loved Vadim, if he ever had. The realization left a gaping hole in his heart, but he already had a sneaking suspicion that hole could be filled soon enough, if he only dared to let Niall in.



## Niall

Niall stood in the middle of a crater in the sand. If he hadn’t seen Stan carve it into the beach himself, he would have thought it had been here forever. It was just far enough inland to stay dry at high tide.

Efren and Stan sat on a stone bench above, chatting like it had been weeks since they last saw each other instead of a few hours. Stan had a steaming bread bowl in his hands. Instead of a utensil, he brought it to his face and sipped the steaming gravy every now and then.

Niall hadn’t heard a single rooster crow near Efren’s house, but there were chickens everywhere near the beach. Two had fallen into the pit with Niall already. He’d lifted them to safety, noticing their wings were clipped so they couldn’t fly.

When he lifted a third out of the ring, he heard a disappointed hiss behind him.

“Why use your hands? You have air.” His grandmother circled above him, assessing.

“I don’t know how.”

A chicken squawked as it fell into the pit with him, and Stan smirked. Niall was starting to recognize not only what powers the weavers around him possessed but also when they used them.

“It’s air. Feel it. See it. Become it.”

Niall’s mother had pushed him through the same paces with water, but he’d never been able to latch onto her weaves.

This time was no different. He could sense how Stan moved the air around the chicken, but when he tried to gather the energy himself, it danced from his grasp.

“You are in charge of your power, and there are several competing for dominance within you. Air may not be your strongest to call, and it won’t answer when you ask. You have to demand it.”

He tried again and again, with little success. When he thought he could feel a ribbon of air starting to bend to his will, it would slip away.

Finally, he’d had enough. He slammed his hands against the sand, and the chicken let out a shriek and pounded her wings to flee, using his burst of air to lift herself over the wall.

His grandmother snorted. “Well, you did it, but you lack control. Do it again.”

“I don’t even know what I did!”

“Yes, you do!” Her voice was raised almost to a shout, but no emotion played across her face. He did not want to sit down to play cards with her. “You lost your temper and called the wind. Any child can do that. You can do better.”

Niall opened his mouth to shout again that he didn't know what he was doing, but a snatch of conversation he'd had with Efren resurfaced in his mind.

*"You already know about practice and hard work."*

He'd used fury to call the air. If he could temper that fury into a command, he could wield it.

Another chicken, or maybe the same one, fell into the pit with them, thanks to Stan's push of air.

"Lift the chicken," his grandmother said, as though he'd forgotten his objective.

He knotted his frustration and inadequacy and used it to tether the air to his core. In a rush, the power of the wind filled him, almost knocking him off his feet. He laughed at the feel of it, and it danced away again. He heaved a disappointed sigh and sank onto his knees in the sand.

"Yes!" She clapped her hands, drawing his attention to her beaming smile. "You're getting the hang of it. Once more."

He responded with a smile of his own. He could do this. Before, he'd always run from his anger, tamping it down so he wouldn't lash out at Master Othelio or his condescending customers. He hated the hot, greasy lick of impotent rage crawling across his skin.

It wouldn't be impotent if he channeled it, though. He latched onto that feeling again, jumbling it into a knot in his chest and letting himself feel all the rage for his former master.

*"You'll never be good enough for your own maker's mark. I should have left you at the orphanage. What a waste of my time you've been. You're only fit to carry bags of clay."*

This time, when the gust of wind ripped through him, Niall held onto his anger. He knew he could wield it like a whip, cutting the chicken in half, but that wouldn't do him any favors unless his grandmother wanted chicken for lunch.

He sent a controlled gust at the chicken, lifting and pushing her at an angle until she was outside the crater once

more. This time, her wings didn't even flap.

Stan whistled. "He already has some control."

"And you, Stan?" Niall's grandmother crossed her arms over her chest and raised one eyebrow at him as though she expected him to lie or embellish.

"I killed my first twenty chickens," Stan said. "We had a barbecue fit for the emperor that night."

"Gods, so much chicken," Efren said. "Arrowtip even had her fill."

"I wasn't the worst, though." Stan punched Efren in the arm. "Remember when Bea asked you to fill a pitcher for dinner, and you filled it with salt water?"

"You didn't say why you needed the water!"

Niall's grandmother laughed and raised her hands dramatically, as though she was rehearsing a play. "What else would you put in a pitcher?"

Niall had never seen Efren's face so red. Niall wanted to comfort him, but he couldn't stop laughing. Letting go of all that anger made him giddy.

"That's enough observation for today," she continued. "I'm sure you two have plenty to keep you busy after your long time away."

"Aye, Bea." Stan stood and gave her a quick bow.

Efren nodded his head, and then Stan dragged him away by the elbow. He turned back and mouthed, "Good luck," to Niall over his shoulder.

His grandmother scowled at them until Efren turned his back and they disappeared. Then, she turned to Niall with a beaming smile. "You're good for him. I'm glad to see him care about something, someone again."

"I care about him, too," Niall whispered.

"You've both experienced losses at the hands of General Coryn." Her voice hardened, no longer the voice of an elder, but of a mother still grieving. "If I learned anything



from your mother's death, it's this. Love can overcome anything. It can heal the hardest of hearts. It can turn the worst anger into the highest pleasure. If your grandfather and I had listened to our love instead of the world around us, we ... well. That ship sailed long before your parents' deaths, but love and grief brought us back together."

"I'm so sorry," Niall said. "I should have done something." There it was, the bottomless pit of rage in the core of his being, the one he could find even at the best of times. If he needed fury to guide his magic, he had an abundance for General Coryn.

"There," his grandmother said. "There is the source of your wind. There will come a time when you won't need anger to fuel your air weaves, but for now, it will do." She grinned at him. "Time for you to fill the pitcher, and I'll warn you, you'll also want to drink from it when we're finished."

Niall laughed with her. Then he got to work.

# Chapter 13

## Efren

Efren couldn't remember a time when he'd been so taken with a lover. As soon as Niall was out of his sight, Efren wondered when they would see each other again. It seemed too soon to want to spend every waking moment with him.

"He makes me feel young again," he confessed to Stan as they walked up the gangplank onto *Starlight Specter*.

"Aye," Stan said, slapping his shoulder again. "You look a bit younger, too, without those dark circles under your eyes." Stan had a way of clipping his words so that you sounded like "ya," and your sounded more like "yer," no matter how many times Elder Beatrice had told him he'd get further in life by sounding like he could brush shoulders with the Embertide royalty.

Efren had taken her words to heart and practiced his speech with Vadim in every free moment after he'd purchased *Starlight Specter*. He'd envied the effortless way Vadim discarded his island accent for the highbrow mainland nasal tones when he'd attended the Imperial Academy of Elements. Maybe Efren had been too eager to rise above his station. The words and flat accent of the royals came easy for Vadim after his stint at the academy, but Efren had never erased the hint of lilting islander twang from his tongue.

Niall spoke with an easy mainland accent, jauntier and more relaxed than Vadim's. The more Efren spoke with him, the more he noticed himself picking up certain tones and inflections until he sounded more like a mainlander, too. Over time, he might lose his accent completely in favor of sounding like Niall. He didn't know why that mattered to him, but it did, far more than sounding like the royals.

"You're still thinking about him, aren't you?" Stan asked.

Efren wanted to deny it, but he nodded. "I'm curious how long before we can return to the sea."

“It won’t take him long to learn his powers. It’s not even noon, and she’s already got him working on a second element.”

Niall had taken to air faster than any student Efren had known, which wasn’t saying much. Efren hadn’t stuck around the training grounds once he’d completed his studies, and shortly after, he’d shipped off for Hearthstone to join the navy. Still, he assumed Niall already had a basic education from his parents and through his apprenticeship, so once he mastered his weaves, he would be free to go.

“Each type is different,” Efren remembered. What had worked for Stan hadn’t worked for Efren, and vice versa. Once they’d both mastered their techniques to reach their magic, Vadim had still struggled to understand his own. Martiz hadn’t been a patient teacher, and Vadim fought against all attempts of healing instruction. Death came easier for him. Efren would never forget the day an entire school of fish had washed ashore with the tide, thanks to an argument between teacher and student.

“Let’s hope Niall is a better healer than Vadim.” Stan shuddered as though he recalled the same memory.

In his cabin, Efren propped the door open with his captain’s chair under the handle to air it out a bit. The room still smelled of sex, but a quick burst of Stan’s air made it better. Efren stripped the bedding and moved his dirty clothes to the deck, which helped even more.

“I hope you keep him,” Stan mumbled as he shuffled past the table to sit on the far corner of the bunk.

“Why?” He and Stan had been friends since they were boys, but this was the first they’d ever spoken of Efren’s relationships. They spent far more time talking about how Stan and Tovey had fucked up their on-again, off-again arrangement, but those conversations had been very one-sided of late.

“I meant what I said earlier.” Stan stared at the stone paperweight in the shape of an anchor before him. “You look younger when you’re with him. I’ve known you most of our

lives, and you've always had such a weight on your shoulders. Vadim only made it heavier. This one lightens the load a bit. He's good for you."

Efren had to agree, and he was surprised at Stan's astute observation. If only Stan had enough distance to view his own relationship through the same lens.

They spent the rest of the morning detailing star charts and updating the island's maps to match the updates they'd made at sea. Then, they discussed preparations for their trip to Equis Island the following day.

They returned to Petri's stand for lunch and found Niall and Beatrice there, too.

"How did it go?"

"Water isn't my best."

"No," Beatrice agreed. "You are far more proficient in lightning, which seems opposite to your nature. You have a calm presence."

"Perhaps that's the trouble," Efren said. "If his natural state is calm, but he's never manifested magic from that state —"

"That's water?" Niall twirled his finger in the air, and a tiny trickle of water droplets formed in its wake.

Efren laughed at the look of shock on Beatrice's face.

"How did we let you escape to the sea?" she asked. "You should be teaching at the barracks! We have another young water weaver who could use your help, I think."

"I'd be happy to do so."

"I'll introduce you when we return."

"You're leaving?" Niall asked.

"I need to see what's happening on Equis Island," Beatrice said, "but I had a few things to resolve before I left."

Efren wondered at that, but he didn't ask. Martiz and Vadim stood at opposite sides of the clearing around the food

stand, watching each other like wolves as they devoured their chicken and vegetables wrapped in flatbread.

“Anything I should know about their past?” Niall asked.

“Whatever Vadim is willing to share with you,” Efren said. “It’s not my story to tell.” Efren was going to leave it at that, but then Martiz turned his attention to Klaus with open hunger. “Watch yourself around Martiz.”

Efren averted his eyes. Martiz was too far away to hear them, or so he hoped.

“In what way?” Niall whispered.

“If he draws a knife with a stone blade on you, run. If it’s tomorrow while we are sailing, find Vadim or Petri. Or Frost. He can be trusted.”

“The others can’t be trusted?”

Efren shrugged. “We’ve been sailing for six months. I’d need to talk to Jermain and Allora to see how much they know. Beatrice warned me about Martiz before we set sail, but I didn’t believe her.”

The last night before they’d sailed for Embertide, Beatrice had come aboard alone and sequestered him in his cabin for over an hour, verifying tales Vadim had shared when he was angry or drunk. The tales always involved Martiz. Sometimes, he talked about mundane women Martiz had hurt. In others, he’d talked about life weavers who had been burned with a stone knife and found their healing powers reduced or gone forever.

“You believe now?”

Efren nodded. “Stay close to Vadim while we are gone. I doubt Martiz would try anything with him around.”

Vadim hadn’t wanted to go to the academy when he turned eighteen, but the elders insisted. Desperate to stay, he consented to Martiz’s final attempt to teach him life magic. Efren had never gotten a full explanation of what that meant, exactly, only that it involved the scar over Vadim’s left eye and

a knife with a stone blade. Vadim swore he would kill Martiz with it if he ever saw it again.

Efren risked a glance in Martiz's direction, but he was still openly admiring Klaus. "I'll speak to Vadim before we leave."

Niall had finished his wrap, while Efren had forgotten his. He took another bite to avoid Niall's bemused expression. He finished the wrap, and Niall still studied him with the same look.

"What's wrong?"

Niall shook his head. He looked a little sad. "Nothing. I want you to be happy."

"I am happier now than I have been in years," he said, remembering the conversation he and Stan had earlier. He dusted some crumbs off his lap and glanced at his pocket watch. He needed to round up Tovey, Stan, and Olivia to careen the ship before they left port on another excursion. "I have some errands to run and inquiries to make, but I'll return this afternoon."

Niall nodded. "See you then."

He still looked sad. Efren wished he had more time to determine the cause and possibly cheer him up, but there was far too much to do before they could sail again.



## Niall

Niall watched Efren walk further into the woods in a direction Niall hadn't explored yet. He hadn't expected a day off, but he was surprised at the immediacy of it all. He'd arrived on the island only yesterday, finally caught up on sleep overnight, and now he was learning all eight elemental weaves as quickly as possible. He wanted to learn, and he was glad for it, but his eyes burned from all the sand he'd kicked up. He'd been trying to remember how to channel air after he'd finally

figured out how to harness his water. He worried he would never be able to keep them straight once he learned them all.

Petri brought him a glass of fresh water with a grin and a slight bow before vanishing into the trees.

“We should get to training.” Martiz clapped his hands twice. “Let’s go!” He walked toward the barracks, not looking back as though he assumed they would follow.

“Don’t make us late.” Vadim startled him. He’d risen without a sound and was now offering a hand to help Niall to his feet. His gloves blended with the sleeves of his tight black shirt. It had buttons at the wrists and from its hem below the waist to his neck, covering him completely while still defining every muscle in his shoulders, arms, and chest. The death weaver wasn’t as bulky as Niall, but he had the physique of a man who knew his way around a martial practice field.

Niall downed the rest of his water as they walked toward the barracks. Vadim took the cup from him and set it on the barracks steps, along with a collection of others.

“Everyone is so kind here,” Niall said, motioning to where a child was collecting all the cups to take back to Petri.

“You’ll find Petri’s kindness only extends as far as Efren’s coin.” Vadim held up his gloved hands. “They didn’t bring me any water.”

“Efren bought your meals for the day.”

“He did.” Vadim’s cheeks looked a little pink beneath his large-brimmed straw hat. “His kindness extends far beyond the norms of human decency.”

Niall wished he had a hat to keep the sun out of his eyes, too. It hadn’t bothered him most of the morning, but now, with it directly overhead, he considered how unprepared he was to live on the island. He had nothing but the clothes on his back and Efren’s generosity. He would have to find a way to pay the captain back, and soon. He couldn’t stand the idea of leeching off him.

“I can hear you worrying, you know.” Vadim rolled his eyes. “First, Efren owns the clothier on the island, but you

wouldn't know it from his attire. Say you're his crew and you'll have a new wardrobe. Second, he doesn't keep score on anything. He'll always be one step ahead and above you, so get the idea of paying him back out of your head."

"Third," Vadim grinned as Petri sauntered into the sunlight, their hands full with towels and a sun hat, "A whisper on the wind travels far around here."

"I didn't even say it out loud," Niall said as Petri handed him the sun hat and dropped the two towels in the grass above the training ring.

"Vadim said you needed a hat. I don't make the rules." Petri nodded to Elder Martiz as the healer also emerged from the darkness of the copse of dense foliage.

"Are they ill?" Niall asked. "Is that how you can speak with them?"

Vadim shook his head. "I meant what I said. I saw you needed a hat when you first sat down. I whispered, 'Niall needs a hat,' when I grabbed food for Klaus and me, and they ran to the clothiers to grab you one."

Their exchange had been before Niall had even realized he needed a hat. "Thank you."

"I'm not always an asshole."

"Hmph." Elder Martiz crossed his arms as he examined Vadim from hat to boots. "That has yet to be seen." He hopped into the training pit and motioned for them to join him.

Niall affixed the hat on his head and jumped to the packed sand, ignoring the ache in his calves from the hard landing. He'd started the morning excited to learn, but now, he was overtired and overwhelmed with new knowledge. He could harness both air and water, but he still struggled to desalinate the ocean to something he could drink. Now, without his grandmother's gentle corrections, he worried he was done learning for the day, especially since Vadim had trained under Elder Martiz until he was eighteen with little success.



“You and I are nothing alike,” Vadim said under his breath. “You’ll probably pick this up with no problem. You’ve already done something even he couldn’t do when you healed Renald.”

Niall wasn’t so sure.

Instead of teaching them magic, Elder Martiz asked Niall about his rudimentary first aid training. Yes, he knew to apply pressure to an open wound, and how to apply a tourniquet. He knew to clean wounds with soap and water before applying bandages or sutures.

Then, Elder Martiz sliced up a chicken and Niall demonstrated his knowledge. He patched up the chicken’s bleeding wing, but when he removed the bandage, the wound had already healed with a subtle hint of magic. Niall hadn’t even sensed the weave. He’d almost forgotten how to tie a tourniquet as the same chicken squawked and landed badly in the sand on its severed leg. Thanks to his newfound air weaves, Niall quickly held the chicken in place and applied a cloth tourniquet until the leg stopped bleeding.

With a flick of Elder Martiz’s wrist, the chicken was healed again, as good as new. Niall was certain he would never be able to use healing magic. He still couldn’t sense Martiz’s weaves nor the emotion tethered to them.

Next, Elder Martiz asked if Niall knew how to test for fever or sepsis.

“Not a clue,” he admitted.

Elder Martiz chuckled. “You are already far more skilled than most of my proteges. How long before you learned to apply a tourniquet, Vadim?”

“Too long. My teacher was a dick who wouldn’t show me the proper way, all while the poor chicken bled out.”

“Of all my students, you are the only one who has complained about chicken abuse.”

“Stressed chickens taste terrible,” Vadim said. “At least I don’t play with my food.”

“No,” the elder said. “You cull too many fish at a time, more than an entire island can eat at once.”

“We’re supposed to be learning,” Niall said, more to Vadim than to Elder Martiz, though his words were also directed toward their teacher. “Why can’t I sense your weaves?”

“Sense?” Elder Martiz studied him for a moment. “You sense weaves?”

Niall nodded. Now that he had channeled his own air weaves, he recognized them as dry and angry, while water was wet and calm.

“That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard. Beatrice has never mentioned these things.”

*“Apologize and play dumb.”*

Niall cut eyes at Vadim, but he recognized the fear behind Martiz’s demeaning comments. “I’m sorry,” he said, flashing what he hoped was his most disarming smile at Martiz. “I’m new to all this. I’m not sure what’s associated with the weaves themselves.”

Elder Martiz continued to argue with Vadim, but Niall focused on his other senses. Air magic also had its own taste and feel when he used it. He was still struggling with water, but success with the element made him feel calm in a way nothing else had in his life.

As he and Vadim continued to wrangle the bleeding chickens, Niall became more frustrated. Elder Martiz was the most arrogant man he had ever met, and that was saying something after Master Othelio, and even Vadim. Niall tried to watch and learn, but the elder’s teaching methods were a lot of grandstanding and not much practical application, especially since Niall couldn’t grasp the weave or attempt to replicate it the way he had with air and water. After four hours, he was exhausted and wished for Efren’s bed.

Vadim looked as exhausted as he felt. His hair hung past his shoulders in frizzy tangles, and his eyes were smudged with sand from rubbing them so much. When Efren and Stan

returned, he brushed off their concern with a grin and a shrug. “Just like old times.”

“You still haven’t learned a thing,” Elder Martiz reprimanded. “You’re responsible for dinner tonight.”

“For the island?” Vadim smirked. “Or perhaps Efren’s sharks would like a meal as well?”

“They prefer catching live fish,” Efren said.

“Aye.” Vadim inhaled a deep breath. “How many people live here now?”

“Ninety-four.”

“On both islands?” Vadim frowned. “That’s less than before. Is Elsie still ...”

Efren nodded. “She was six months ago.” They both looked to Martiz.

“Aye, your aunt still lives. You would know that if you dared speak with her.”

“The woman fucking hates me and threatened to kill herself if I ever came near her.” Vadim took another step toward the beach. “I’ll see her when she wants to see me, though she will only be happy if I’m standing on the gallows or already hanging from it.”

Martiz opened his mouth to speak and closed it again two or three times before he finally turned heel and walked toward the barracks door.

“Gods, you are so dramatic,” Efren said. “If you tried even a little to assuage her fear of you, she might speak to you.”

“The woman hates me. She has always hated me. There’s nothing I could say to change who I am to her or what she thinks I’ve done.”

“You didn’t kill your mother,” Efren said gently. “Death weavers are born to perfectly healthy mothers all the time.”

Vadim sighed. “Aye, but my mother died in childbirth. She would blame me even if I was born another type of weaver, or mundane.”

“I’m sorry, old friend.” Stan patted him on the back. “Need me to row you out to the fish?”

“I’d like that. We’ll have grilled fish on the beach at sunset.”

Stan led Vadim toward a small boat tucked under some bushes beside the barracks.

Efren took Niall’s hand and pulled him away from the beach, toward the tree line. “Your new clothes should be ready.”

Niall didn’t question him, especially with the new knowledge that Efren owned the little clothing shop. The short walk through the woods led them to a building little more than a driftwood shack, but the roof was just as well maintained as the one on Efren’s house.

The dark-skinned islander running the shop looked to be twice as old as Efren, but she moved with the grace and agility of a dancer. Something about her felt familiar to Niall, but the thought slipped away as her gaze seared into him. She assessed his current wardrobe and then pinched at the fabric of his tunic and pants with her thumb and forefinger, her touch so light Niall couldn’t feel it.

“Finally, you bring your young man to meet me,” she chided, patting Efren on the shoulder. “You bring me measurements and old clothes to mend, but I’ve not set eyes on him ‘til now. You forget your manners, out there on the sea.”

Niall opened his mouth to say he’d only been there for a day, but Efren stopped him with a shake of his head.

“I’m sorry, Gulde.” Efren bowed to her. “This is Niall.”

Instead of shaking his offered hand, she handed him a bundle of clothes to try on and pushed him toward a screen in the corner.

“Gulde is the island’s only fire weaver,” Efren said, raising his voice so Niall could hear him behind the screen.

“Ha. You know I weave nothing but a little spark here or there. The empress wouldn’t even hire me to be her maidservant.”

“It’s enough for Allora’s enchantments,” Efren said.

Niall had never worn clothes like these before. They felt too tight, but he’d never had clothes made to his specific measurements.

Efren also had a new pair of long pants tucked into new boots, and a crisp white shirt tucked into that. He looked more comfortable in his clothes than Niall felt. He’d never had such soft fabrics against his skin, but the cut of the cloth made him feel naked wearing them. The button-down shirt fit much like Vadim’s, and it hung to mid-thigh, long enough for him to tuck in. The pants hugged his legs from the tops of his thighs to his knees, and then they belled out. He could either wear them over his boots or tuck them inside. He was surprised to find the hem caressing the top of his foot. Since he’d grown, Niall couldn’t remember the last pair of pants he owned that went past his ankles. He would need to tuck them in on the ship.

His new boots were weathered brown leather. They were softer and more supple than he expected, as were the pants. He rolled the pantlegs and tucked them in before lacing the boots to the top. Then, he shuffled around the screen, smoothing the shirt over his chest.

“How do they fit?” Efren asked.

“Perfect,” Gulde said, studying him from head to toe.

Efren’s gaze flicked from Niall’s head to his new boots, and back again. He said nothing, but his look of appreciation matched Gulde’s appraisal.

Niall felt his face heat as Efren continued to stare at him.

Finally, Efren cleared his throat and turned to Gulde. “Don’t you ever complain about me giving you measurements

again. Those fit him perfectly.”

“Aye, which is why I charged you extra.”

Niall bowed his head to Gulde. “Thank you very much. What do I owe you?”

“Your captain paid.”

Gulde held out her hand to Efren, and he placed a large gold coin in her palm. Niall had never seen so much money spent in one place before. Once again, he felt inferior to Efren in ways he could never compensate. He had nothing beyond the clothes on his back and a skill he most likely couldn't use on the island.

While Niall worried about his inadequacies, Efren made arrangements with Gulde for winter sailing clothes. Then, he thanked her and pulled Niall to the door with a promise to return before they left for Hearthstone again.

Aquarion was not a large island, by any means. It was bigger than Horseshoe by acres, but it would take less than a half-day to hike from east to west, and anywhere from a quarter-hour to an hour to walk from the north shore to the south shore. It only took a quarter-hour to walk from Gulde's shop to Efren's cabin on the north end of the island to drop off their packages.

Niall couldn't shake his melancholy, even as they watched the beautiful sunset dip below the ocean waves from the balcony. When they returned to the beach for their evening meal, he and Efren sat on opposite sides of a piece of driftwood with the rest of the crew between them. Klaus sat on a blanket at Niall's feet and tried to cheer him up, but even he stopped after Niall's fifth or sixth one-word answer.

If love made him feel inadequate and hollow inside, he wanted no part of it.

# Chapter 14

## Efren

Efren was relieved when Niall bid him goodnight and went upstairs to bed alone. He looked like he'd been run over by a horse and overtired besides. He'd learned to use two elements in one day. Granted, Efren wouldn't put him on the sails or ask him to fill their water barrels yet, but at least he wouldn't slice the sails to ribbons or fill the ship's hold by accident, either.

Efren still wanted to kiss him silly and bring him all manner of pleasures, but that could wait. Niall needed rest and time to acclimate to his new abilities.

Besides, Efren's mind was still buzzing with possibilities. Beatrice had once again hinted that Martiz was no longer the council's golden boy, and that Vadim's claims of what had happened before he left for the academy were finally being heeded. Two children had gone missing in the six months since Efren had sailed. No one had accused Martiz, but the stories Vadim had brought with him from Hearthstone made it sound like he'd been responsible for the deaths of many children when he was a ship's healer for the navy.

Efren had never liked the healer, but he didn't want to make assumptions. They needed proof, which was why Beatrice was forcing Martiz and Vadim to work together.

Efren finally calmed his mind by reading several chapters of a sea adventure tale. When his eyes blurred, he tapped the enchanted light globes to turn them off. Then, he made his way upstairs in the glow of the two globes on his dresser. Niall either hadn't bothered to turn them off or didn't know how. Efren couldn't imagine living without his enchantments, but Embertide's commoners had been forced to go without since Coryn had begun her vendetta against weavers after Emperor Hesse's death. Aquarion was lucky to have Allora to make their light globes, airtight trunks, and fire sticks. In return, she wanted to be left alone, claiming she needed space and time to craft each tool after she'd stored the

necessary weaves. She was the island's only enchanter, and they left her to it.

Niall lay on his side facing Efren's side of the bed, his arms wrapped around his pillow. Efren was once again awed by how young he looked while he slept, without the play of emotions across his face.

As he dressed for bed, Efren thought over their day. Niall had been full of joy and excitement that morning and had been glad to see him at lunch. He'd even been welcoming at the end of the day. Something had changed before sunset, though. Was it something Efren had said? Or was Niall having trouble with his magic or some other aspect of island living? Efren wished he knew what it was, so he could undo it and return some of Niall's joy.

The next morning started as joyfully as the one before, with kissing and groping in bed. Instead of blow jobs, Niall coaxed Efren to bathe in the surf and they washed away the evidence of their mutual release. Then, they dried themselves off and dressed in their new clothes.

Still, Efren sensed something was off. Niall's smile didn't reach his eyes, and his demeanor changed whenever he thought Efren wasn't looking.

"Do you like it here?" Efren asked as they walked the dirt path to Petri's food stand.

"Yes."

"What do you like?"

"The weather's milder than Landale's." This time, Niall's grin rivaled the sun.

"And the people?" Efren was fishing for compliments, but he didn't care.

"Everyone is so kind." Niall sounded sincere.

"Even me?" Efren was nothing if not shameless.

"Especially you." Niall's dark cloud reappeared. Something about Efren's kindness was the cause of Niall's unhappiness.



Efren didn't know where to begin to address the issue, even when they'd reached the food stand. Petri handed them bowls of porridge topped with fresh fruit, and there was no time to talk between bites. Beatrice arrived before they'd finished, and then she whisked Niall away to the training grounds without another word.

Efren had no time to worry about Niall as his morning progressed. They had to prepare *Starlight Specter* for another fast sail to the Equis Islands. Stan careened the ship with an earth weave and Efren covered her keel with a water weave that filled all her crevices and locked out the rest of the ocean. Then, they made sure the sails were unfurled, and the borrowed wind weavers had food and water at their makeshift stations.

Only the sound of Stan's growling stomach pushed Efren to look at his pocket watch. It was almost noon.

"Is she seaworthy?" Efren asked.

"As good as she's going to get." Stan pointed to the gangplank, where Elder Beatrice led Klaus, Tovey, and Codger Tim aboard while the five remaining air weavers from Vadim's old crew waited below.

From the large basket secured over his arm, Codger Tim handed out sandwiches and fruit for each of them. Efren took a mango and a chicken salad sandwich, and then he made sure each of his crew had a barrel of fresh water on hand while they worked.

Then, they were ready to set sail.

Klaus and Beatrice stood at the prow. Thankfully, Efren avoided the shoal he'd almost hit before with ease, even though it flew past twice as quickly. They arrived at the Equis Islands by mid-afternoon, in half the time it had taken before.

He grabbed the nearest wind weaver as the ship began to slow without their wind in her sails.

"Why did you hold back on the way here?"

"Your crew needed their sleep, captain," he said, "and we don't know the way as well as they do. We almost rammed

a sand bar as it was. Slower was safer at night. Now, with Tovey in charge and all of us working together, we're faster."

"We appreciate it," Beatrice said as she joined him by the wheel. "If any of you want to join the fight against Coryn, we would appreciate the help."

"Sorry, Elder." He gave a slight bob of his head, and his mop of unruly curls bounced into his eyes. "We're mostly cowards, though Milton's young and aching for adventure. This was his first voyage. What a time to get captured by pirates, aye?"

"Aye." Efren caught the gaze of the young man in question as he took a swig of water. He was slight and wiry, with a serious demeanor. He reminded Efren of Tovey when he was that age.

Efren would ask the young man if he was interested in sailing with pirates later. Now, he felt Beatrice's absence at his side. He turned just in time to see her dive off the prow of his ship into the crystal-clear water.

"What the fuck is she doing?"

"I don't know," Klaus said. "She cut off mid-sentence just as I was about to tell her I could feel the anomaly." He frowned. "Then, I couldn't feel it anymore."

"Fuck." It was a trap, as they'd guessed. Now, she was ensnared.

Efren rushed to the prow. Beatrice was already halfway to shore. He wrapped her in a protective bubble of water and slowly dragged her back to the ship. She had her own water magic, and air magic to push his water aside, but he was stronger. Eventually, he reeled her in and lifted her onto the ship with a rogue wave.

She was still fighting his hold, her gaze set on the shore where Klaus had indicated the trap was set.

"Damn it," he said. "The trap must be stronger than she expected." Now that she was caught in the snare, it would take her time to break free.

“Do you think she’s learned what she needed to learn from the thing?” Tovey asked. “We have just enough daylight if we turn back now.”

“We have days on Coryn, too,” Stan said. “She won’t expect us to work with Vadim’s crew. Bea will be safer at home, even if she can’t break free of the trap.”

Efren gave the commands to turn toward Aquarion, full speed ahead.

“I’m so sorry,” Klaus said. “If I’d have known, I would have stopped her.”

“Don’t beat yourself up,” Efren said. “Did it seem stronger than it was before?” They had been closer to the island when Klaus had originally noted the anomaly.

“Yes. Is that possible? Could it gain power the longer it sits?”

“I don’t know.” Efren hoped one of the other elders had an idea, if not about the trap, then about ways to sever its ties from Beatrice. If not, their brief trip could bring the imperial navy down on them before they were ready.



## **Niall**

Niall’s second day of training wasn’t nearly as successful as the first. That morning, his grandmother had tried to walk him through fire and ice, but he couldn’t sense them. Fire was hot and ice was cold, but beyond that, he didn’t recognize their corresponding emotions. He expected fire to be fury, thanks to Emperor Hugo’s scowl stamped on every coin in Embertide, but only the wind answered his anger.

“That’s enough for today,” she had decided at lunch. “I expect to be back in time for the evening meal tonight, and then we’ll start with earth tomorrow. Until then, work with Vadim and Martiz again.”

He was surprised when she leaned in and whispered, “Watch your back.”

“Efren has warned me.”

She nodded. “Good.”

Niall wanted to ask more, but the rest of the crew arrived, including Codger Tim with mangoes for dessert. Niall was surprised Efren and Stan weren't with them. Tovey confirmed they were preparing the ship to sail out.

“They could have asked me,” Vadim grumbled as they left.

“Aren't you still a prisoner?” Niall laughed at his dark scowl, which only deepened when Martiz beckoned them toward the barracks.

“Let's go see what that asshole wants.”

The afternoon training was a repeat of the previous day. Martiz injured the island's chickens, and Niall tried to heal them before they bled out. On one occasion, he failed, and the hen died. Only then could he sense her life force and push it back into her body.

“That's ... not life magic,” Vadim whispered under his breath. “How did I not know I could do that?”

“It's death magic?” Niall felt too hot beneath his sun hat, like the world was fading around him.

“It's both. You gave that hen some of your own life force.” Vadim clapped him on the back and hooted. “We'll save Hugo yet!”

“Aren't you already giving Klaus some of your life force?” Niall asked.

“Fuck.” He nodded. “You're right. We'll have to resolve our life bond first.”

“What's the commotion?” Martiz asked. He'd ignored them to talk to Frost, which was how the animal had bled out in the first place.

“No commotion.” Vadim hastily retreated from the hen, pulling Niall with him.

“Well, it looks like you’ve managed to heal one, after all.” Martiz studied the hen. “Except she’s still wounded. What ... how?”

Niall shrugged.

“It’s time to harvest the evening meal,” Vadim said, tugging Niall with him by his shoulder.

“Yes, fine.” Martiz dismissed them with a wave of his hand. “Go teach him death magic.”

“If I thought he’d be more delicious than a used mop, I’d offer Elder Martiz as our evening meal,” Vadim grumbled as he led the way to a boat made from a hollowed log.

“How did you two become such great friends?”

Niall earned a sardonic grin for his sarcastic remark. “We’ve always been like this.” Vadim motioned to the sea. “Can you feel it?”

“Feel what?” Niall didn’t know what he was supposed to feel, beyond the heavy call of the ocean water offering him the same calm he felt when he was near Efren.

“There’s a school of fish about a mile out. Sharks have them twisted into a bait ball. They’re spinning so furiously some can’t breathe. They’re begging to be free of their bodies before they feel the imminent pain of a shark bite.”

“I don’t ...” Except Niall did feel their fear. Their thoughts were much smaller than Vadim’s when he spoke in Niall’s head, but he recognized them in the same way. “I hear them. I can talk to fish?”

“You can talk to any dying creature. Sometimes they call to us like a siren’s song. Other times, they scream in the night.”

Vadim’s power felt seductive, like the confidence Niall had faked when he’d first bedded Efren. He kept that thought to himself as he harnessed his new power.

“I’ve never seen anyone take to death that quickly.” Vadim chuckled. “If we weren’t so damn desperate for new weavers, we would have an easier time training adults.”

“This seems like a difficult power for a child to wield,” Niall agreed. “How do I call them to me?”

“You don’t. Not with my power, anyway. If you can control water, you can float the bodies to us. Otherwise, we’ll use the net to scoop up the ones who gave themselves to us.”

Niall shook his head. “I want to learn it your way, first. Show me what you did when you fished off the back of Efren’s ship.”

“Gladly.” Vadim handed him a paddle, and they rowed out to the ball of dying fish. Niall shook himself and worked diligently to get the small vessel moving across the water. They paddled against the tide until they caught the same current in which the fish were circling. Then, they could lay off the paddles as the craft drifted toward them.

“You didn’t need to seduce Efren,” Vadim said once Niall’s heart rate had settled to normal. The sound of the fish was growing stronger in his head, but they were still a way off.

“I didn’t do it for him,” Niall said. “I did it for me.”

“Most men are proud to be someone’s first. Efren wouldn’t have been any different.”

“I don’t want anyone to fawn over me or think I’m special. Not about sex, and not about my powers. What good does it do if I’m a horrible lay, even if it is my first time?”

Vadim laughed. “You’re the wrong kind of mage. People will always think you’re special, though I understand what you mean. My first time was anticlimactic. I expected it to mean more because people made it sound so damn special, but it wasn’t.”

“What happened?”

“Martiz was the same fucking asshole afterward as he was before and during.”

Fuck. “How old were you?”

“Eighteen.” Vadim shook his head as he studied the bottom of their boat. “I thought I understood consent. My power demands it. I wasn’t ready for Martiz, but I didn’t know how to tell him to stop once he started.”

“I warned Petri before we left them here.” Vadim gazed at Niall and smirked. “They’ve warned everyone since.”

Niall couldn’t believe he was talking about sex with Efren’s former lover, but when he’d planned his day, he hadn’t expected to haul a net full of fish begging to die into a boat, either.

Some fish were already half-eaten by the sharks, and Vadim tossed them back to the circling creatures. The rest, they tucked into the enchanted ice chest in the hull.

“Let’s get these to Petri to cook for us. Beatrice and Codger Tim both went with Efren.” Vadim shook his head and pointed east. “Something went wrong.”

“How do you know?”

“Klaus is blaming himself for the failure.” Vadim snorted. “Your grandmother did something foolhardy, is more like. Age didn’t repress her tendency to run toward danger. She retired from the navy before Hesse’s death. I think she’s been craving the high seas since then, though she’s been careful since Coryn began setting these traps.”

“She tripped one on Equis Island,” Niall surmised.

“That would be my guess. To extricate her, we’ll need to get you up to speed.”

“Me?” Niall squeaked.

“You’d be the best candidate,” Vadim said. “It’s difficult to get eight separate mages to work together, and I’d bet anything Martiz will refuse to work with me.” He sighed. “Four balanced mages would be easier, but we don’t have anyone with fire and ice on the island.”

Niall had never considered the implications of being a spectral weaver before. He had all eight powers, like his grandmother. That made him the ideal candidate to free her.

Niall hoped he and Vadim had guessed wrong, though.  
He needed his grandmother to be all right.



# Chapter 15

## Efren

Efren had barely moored the ship and lowered the gangplank before the elders boarded. They found Beatrice tied to the main mast, her head held high, the cords in her neck straining as she fought the magic warring within her.

“How did this happen?” Martiz looked far too smug. Efren wanted to punch him in the throat.

“We got too close to the island,” Klaus said. He still looked miserable, even after Efren had Klaus repeat back to him, “This isn’t my fault.”

“Captain?” Martiz turned to him.

“Not his fault,” Klaus said.

“That makes two of us,” Efren muttered to remind him.

“The trap had spread since we were last there,” Klaus continued. “Captain Efren had no way of knowing. Elder Beatrice was already overboard when I recognized my mistake.”

“I can hear her,” Niall said as he and Vadim came aboard.

Vadim nodded. “Death magic.”

“She’s dying?” Efren took a step toward her with the intent to untie her, but Vadim stopped him.

“She’s not,” he said. “She’s fighting it.”

Niall walked around his grandmother, studying the ropes tying her to the mast. “That won’t hold her for long. She says there’s a room where she can be safe from Coryn on Horseshoe Island.”

“There is a holding cell in the tree,” Jermain confirmed. He and the others had held back while Martiz checked Beatrice’s vitals. “We can keep guards on her at all hours.”

“She’ll be comfortable.” Efren patted Niall’s shoulder. “As comfortable as she can be, anyway. We’ll tie her to the bed.”

“She says the trap is still spreading.” Niall pushed his hair back from his face and massaged his forehead. “It’s using her power to find us. The longer it takes to break it, the closer Coryn will come, even after Grandmother is safe on Horseshoe Island.”

“She’s stable, for now,” Martiz said.

Vadim had been staring at Klaus since he’d boarded the ship, but his attention snapped to Martiz. “We’ve trained for this. I’m willing to work with the elders to—”

“No,” Martiz said. “Niall will do it alone.”

“He can’t get a feel for your weaves, and he hasn’t practiced fire and ice yet.” Vadim’s knowledge of Niall’s progress made Efren bristle, though he was grateful someone was sticking up for Niall in his grandmother’s relative absence. “How do you expect him to break a spectral trap?”

“How can we trust you?” Martiz turned on Vadim, crowding into his space, his fist an inch from Vadim’s chin.

This was no different from how Martiz had treated Vadim when they were teenagers. Efren wouldn’t stand for it again. He shoved Martiz aside and stepped between them. “Knock it off. Niall’s already learned faster than any weaver we’ve trained, but he’s not a miracle worker.”

“Grandmother can show me,” Niall said. “I need a good meal and a good night’s rest, but we will start first thing tomorrow.”

“Come,” Martiz said. “We have just enough time to take Beatrice to Horseshoe Island while Petri finishes our meal.”

“You should stay and reassure the islanders,” Efren said. He wanted Martiz off his ship. “You’re Head Elder while Beatrice is incapacitated.”

It pained Efren to say Martiz was head of anything. The healer always played whatever side worked best to his advantage. After a lifetime of island politics and quid pro quos, Martiz didn't have many friends left on the island. His saving grace was his ability to heal anyone from anything. People who would have declared themselves outright enemies withheld their judgment more and more, the older and frailer they became. One day, they would need Martiz's soothing healing to keep them from their deathbeds.

Martiz knew it as well as they did. Efren hadn't yet heard him threaten to withhold healing during an argument since they'd arrived the day before, but it was only a matter of time. It was one of his favorite scare tactics, and Efren was embarrassed how easily it coerced the islanders to action, or inaction in this situation.

Efren stared Martiz down until he finally recognized Efren's authority on his own ship. Instead of arguing, he led Frost and Jermain down the gangplank.

Vadim stayed. He led Klaus to the railing along the prow just off the navigation wheel so Efren could see to steer.

Niall stayed by Efren's side at the wheel, though he occasionally helped with wind and water to steer around the sandbars.

"You've learned a lot in so little time," Efren said as they rolled up to the longest dock. They had to drop anchor and set the gangplank on the end of the dock with only Stan's earth weave holding it in place.

Niall remained silent as he untied the knots holding Beatrice in place and helped Efren secure another water barrier around her. They moved her from the ship to the large door in the giant sentinel oak.

Inside the tree, Vadim led the way up the stairway that wound to the second floor and beyond. He didn't stop on the first landing, instead walking up a second flight of stairs on the opposite side of the tree to a walkway that led to the center. From there, a rope ladder hung from the darkness, its moorings too far up to see in the weak enchantment's light.

Vadim climbed, and Efren pushed the bubble of water up to him, drawing it toward the moisture inside the living tree. The water reflected enough ambient light to cast a dim glow along the ladder's path. There was a door a hundred yards above. Vadim opened it, and Efren guided the ball of water inside. In a rush, all but a small light globe of water receded down its original path to the ocean, leaving them untouched and dry.

Klaus, Efren, and Niall climbed in silence. At the top, Efren and Vadim secured Beatrice to the feather mattress with twisted elemental ropes that would hold any weaver, even a spectral one. The bindings were handcrafted from iron, silver, gold, and wood. Niall reached out to touch them and recoiled. "They burn. You're hurting her."

Vadim shook his head. "It can't be helped. She arranged the room before she left. She understood the risks."

"I didn't," Niall whispered. "I didn't know she intended to set it off."

Klaus crowded into the narrow space beside the bed and patted Niall's shoulder. "She planned for the worst possibility, and this was it. She thought she could break the trap without help. It had seemed small enough, the way I'd described it." Klaus shrank in on himself again.

"This isn't your fault," Efren reminded him. "You had no way of knowing the trap would get stronger over time."

"It's Coryn," Klaus said. "I should have guessed."

Vadim lifted a gloved hand but stopped short of touching Klaus's arm. "You did well to alert them. That's all you could do. Everything that happened afterward was on Beatrice, not you."

Klaus lifted his chin to meet Vadim's gaze, but he still didn't seem convinced.

Once Efren checked all four ropes to make sure they were securely fastened around both Beatrice and the bedframe, and Vadim confirmed she still had feeling in her fingers and toes, Efren was ready to return home. He and Klaus left Niall

and Vadim to exchange any last words with Beatrice as they descended back to the main floor.

A few minutes later, Vadim and Niall followed. Niall now had control of Efren's glowing water orb, and he sent it back to the sea with a thought.

"Come on." Efren took Niall's hand. "Let's get the food and rest we all need, and tomorrow, we'll figure this out."

Niall was still pensive and withdrawn, but he worked his fingers between Efren's and squeezed. It was a start.



## Niall

Though the meal of fish and vegetables smelled delicious, it turned to ash in Niall's mouth. His grandmother had chosen her fate. If Niall couldn't release her from the trap, he worried she would consent to Vadim's offer and die. Niall hadn't even known he had a grandmother, and now, two days later, he could lose her.

Niall couldn't deny the peril of the trap. The only way he could communicate with his grandmother mind-to-mind was because her life was in danger. He didn't know how long it would be before the trap expanded beyond his strength, especially in his untested and untrained elements. If he couldn't keep the trap from spreading, they would have to sever his grandmother's connection to it. Because she'd enlisted Vadim's help, Niall assumed the worst.

He thanked Petri for the meal and shoveled down a second helping even though he couldn't taste it. He needed his strength. He already felt completely drained after two harrowing days of training. He'd been looking forward to spending the evening with Efren, too, but now, he had a hard time finding joy in any of his thoughts for the future.

Efren spirited him through the darkness to his cabin once the meal was over. So much for seeing the sunset on the

deck again. Niall took comfort in Efren's arm around his shoulders as they walked the dark jungle path to his house.

A globe enchantment doused the front porch in soft blue light. Efren ushered him inside.

"Are you all right?" Efren asked. "You've been quiet."

"I can still hear her voice." Niall shook his head. "I keep replaying what she told me. She says I can break the trap with her help. She'll teach me to use fire and ice tomorrow, and the bit of life she knows, and then I'll try to free her. We only have so long before Coryn tracks her here."

Days. Niall had days to save his grandmother, or he would lose another family member to General Coryn.

Niall's world had shifted when he'd overheard his grandmother's conversation with Vadim. She didn't blame Vadim for Niall's parents' deaths. Niall had been there, and Vadim had taken the blame at the time, saying the word to drop the floor from beneath their feet, leaving them hanging in the town square for all to see.

Coryn had given the order. Vadim had followed it. Would Niall have done the same in Vadim's place? He couldn't imagine the danger of playing both sides.

He also couldn't deny Vadim's claim. The death weaver had given his parents the opportunity to run, but they'd stayed. Niall hadn't believed him, but the conversation he'd overheard between his parents that night made more sense now. His mother thought death was the only answer. Niall hoped he never had to make the same choice.

Niall let Efren take him upstairs and undress him. The world around them glowed the same soft blue as the porch light. The effect turned Efren's room to a dreamscape. Niall lost himself to the gentle touch of Efren's hands on his shoulders, kneading his tired muscles and working through the knots that had tightened with the stress of yet another family member in danger.

Niall became aware of Efren by degrees beyond the gentle motion of his fingers. First, he felt Efren's soft breath

against his ear as he leaned closer, putting more pressure on a particularly stubborn knot. Then, he felt the warmth of Efren's bare skin, not touching, but close. Niall leaned back against Efren's chest, and Efren's breath hitched.

"Are you all right?" Efren asked, his voice low and gentle.

"I wanted to do so many things with you tonight." Niall couldn't keep the disappointment from his voice.

"You're in shock."

"I feel like I'm not really here," Niall admitted. "I remember the night Vadim told my parents to flee, and they didn't. Am I wrong to think Grandmother did the same thing by setting off the trap on her own? Why didn't she wait for me?"

"You come from a long line of stubborn people."

Niall almost didn't recognize the low rumble rolling from him. He was laughing, and he couldn't stop. He kept laughing until he was crying, giant tears rolling from his eyes.

"This all seems so unfair," he whispered when he could finally catch his breath.

"You've already come so far," Efren said. "Don't give up now."

"I'm not giving up. I only wish I'd had more time to get to know her."

Efren kissed the back of his head. "You'll have time."

Niall followed Efren's warmth as he shifted the covers and climbed beneath them. Once they were on their sides facing each other, the light dimmed and went out, leaving Efren bathed in moonlight from the open window.

Niall cupped Efren's face. "Thank you for taking me in. I'd be lost without you." If he were honest with himself, he'd been floating like driftwood since his parents died.

"You're a survivor," Efren said. "You've made it this far without anyone."

“Still, it’s nice.” He wanted to say more, to name the fragile feelings between them, but he worried he would scare Efren away. Niall had always craved stability, and Efren had been his rock since they’d met. He worried that rock would crumble under too much pressure, much like his first attempts at pottery had exploded in the kiln.

Niall wished he had time to touch every inch of Efren, to hear his breath hitch when he found every sensitive spot, to watch him as he came undone. When he was finished, he wanted Captain Efren to be ruined for any other man. No rebounds. No second chances with Vadim. Niall wanted to claim his captain for himself. Frustration gave way to exhaustion, though, and he drifted closer toward sleep.

His worry from the day before resurfaced, and his body jerked awake. “How can I repay you for your coin? Petri alone —”

“You’re part of my crew now.” Efren blinked his eyes open, and his voice was thick with sleep.

“I’ve sailed with you less than a week.”

“You’ve offered to sail with me until this war is over. That’s enough.”

It didn’t feel like enough, though. “I can work around the house.”

“You and Vadim caught the evening meal,” Efren said.

“That was for everyone on the island.”

Efren made a sound between a grunt and a snort. “So is sailing on one of our ships. Beatrice hasn’t earned a day’s wage since she retired from the navy, but she’s allowed our coin to feed and clothe herself, same as the other elders, and the same as anyone else. Trust me. You’ve earned the coin I’ve spent on you and then some, simply by surviving. Soon, you’ll use your magic to benefit everyone on the island, too. No one here would dare question the food on your plate or the clothes on your back, Niall. You’ve earned them simply by being here.”



It was a hard concept for Niall to accept after Master Othelio had treated him as an indentured servant, unable to earn his freedom without his own master's mark. In Landale, coin meant just as much as a person's name, and Niall had neither. On Aquarion, he had his family's pirate lineage and Efren's coin. Neither sat well with his own pride, but he was too tired to worry about it anymore.

He turned his back to Efren and was surprised when Efren pulled him against his chest and tethered him with a firm arm around his waist. It had the same effect as it did on the ship, securing Niall in place and calming his turbulent emotions. He slept.

# Chapter 16

## Efren

The next morning, Niall was still down in the doldrums, and Efren empathized. His grandmother was in danger, and he was the only one on the island who could save her. That was enough to worry anyone.

Efren tried his best to make Niall smile as they bathed and dressed. The closest he received was a cynical grin and, “Shouldn’t we be on our way to Horseshoe Island?”

It took a quarter hour to wait for Petri to dice paradise fruit, pineapple, and coconut into the large brown shells for their journey, and another three quarters for Vadim to talk Klaus into coming with them.

Finally, Niall had pounded on the door to Vadim’s shack hard enough to shake the walls and Klaus let him inside. It didn’t take long for Niall to return with a red-faced but compliant Klaus.

“I don’t know why he’s fighting so hard,” Niall muttered as he walked past Efren. “Vadim’s obviously smitten. If he were a paying customer in Landale, Klaus would be begging him to propose by now.”

Efren had a feeling Klaus feared death weavers, as did most people, but he said nothing. Instead, he looped his arm through Niall’s and directed him to the borrowed skiff they were taking to Horseshoe Island. They were steps away from the dock when he remembered what his crew was supposed to be doing without him.

“I forgot something,” Efren said. “I’ll be back.” He turned to Vadim. “Get her ready for us.”

“If you’re not back in fifteen, you’ll be swimming to Horseshoe.”

Efren grinned. “You think I haven’t done it before?”

“I know you have.” Vadim smirked. “You were younger, then.”

“I’m still young enough to catch you and drag you under the water.”

“Keep arguing with me and wasting time, then.”

Efren turned on his heel without another word and headed for the long dock where *Starlight Specter* was moored.

“Captain.” Olivia saluted as he came aboard. “We’re almost ready.”

“Is Milton going with you?”

“He is.” Her grin gave her away. Efren had pulled her aside at dinner the evening before and shared the information he’d gleaned from the other air weavers. “You were right. He craves adventure, and he doesn’t want anyone else to fall prey to General Coryn. He said a friend of his never returned from Stony Eel Island. He’d tried to leave the navy over it, but the general refused.”

“What about the others?”

“Those two,” she pointed to two men at the rear sails, “are a couple. They don’t want to be split up again. They have family in Glamiere. The other two are lazy cowards who would desert at the first sign of trouble. They’re best left to their own luck in Luminest.”

“Thank you for your report.”

“We’ll need another sail bed in the hold,” Olivia said. “Do you want Niall to have one, too?”

“Aye.”

Her face scrunched in confusion.

He held up a hand to stave off her questions. “I don’t want his choices to be either sleep with me or find a nest with the rats. If the sail goes unused, it goes unused.”

“I’ll see to it when we return, Captain.”

With seven wind weavers, they would make it to Luminest by early afternoon. “How long will you stay in port?”

“Beatrice has given me messages to deliver to the tavern and the grocer. While there, I’ll ask after news and grab whatever spring produce they have. We’ll be on our way before sunset.”

“You should make it back by mid-morning,” he said. “Have Tovey take the evening shift if you’re too tired.”

“I can still sail for seventy-two hours straight, Captain.” She straightened her shoulders and stuck out her chin, raising her hand in salute again.

“As you were.” He waved off her salute with a grin. “If you’re not here by noon, I’ll start to worry.”

“If we’re detained, I’ll have Tovey send you a message.”

Tovey’s idea of a message was a piece of paper wrapped around a rock and tied in place with string. He then tossed it into the air and pushed it to its destination. His accuracy defied explanation. As much as he claimed he didn’t communicate with birds, Efren often wondered how he could find a target over the edge of the horizon.

He didn’t have time to ponder his wind weaver’s talents. Both Efren and the rest of *Starlight Specter’s* crew needed to be off in their separate directions.

“Safe travels,” he said, raising his hand to Tovey, Stan, and Hannah before jogging down the gangplank to board the skiff.

Vadim and Klaus were still arguing over whether Klaus should go while Efren unwound the rope from its mooring.

“She doesn’t even know me!” Klaus said. “Why do I need to come with you?”

“You left without me yesterday and look how that turned out.”

Efren opened his mouth to ask if Vadim wanted him to push them to the other island with his water weaves, but Vadim tossed him a paddle before the words were out of his mouth. The hard way, then. Everything with Vadim was the

hard way. Efren knew better than to suggest using his magic once Vadim had committed to doing something himself. It would only irritate him further, and his argument with Klaus was doing that well enough.

“I didn’t know I needed to run all my errands by you!”

“You’re tied to me with a life link.” Vadim’s voice was barely more than consonants snapping and hissing in his mouth. “Did you ever think to question how far that link would let you go before you broke it and died on me?”

“That’s a possibility?” The last two syllables squeaked octaves higher than Klaus’s usual speaking voice.

“You’d have to be as far away as Hearthstone and locked inside a room lined with silver before Vadim couldn’t reach you.” Efren rolled his eyes. “Stop trying to scare the lad. Maybe if he wasn’t so scared of you, he could actually learn to like you.”

“You’re one to talk.” Vadim splashed water with each stroke, and the skiff started to turn from his extra effort. “All you have to do is lay an unconscious man on your bunk and he’s yours forever.”

“I—”

“Not my business, I know.” Vadim glared at him until he left the unspoken question to die on his tongue. “The captain is right, Klaus. Unless you hopped into a container made of silver without me, our link would survive any physical distance.” He stopped his choppy rowing to cough into one hand. “It still wouldn’t have killed you to ask,” he muttered.

“I didn’t ask for a life link!” Klaus’s shout was so loud and unexpected, it startled Niall backward. He almost toppled from the boat.

“You did,” Vadim said. “As with anything I do, you had to consent for me to link to you. Your life force was so strong and—I couldn’t let you go.”

“You know nothing about healing, or forming a link,” Efren said. “What were you thinking?”

“I wasn’t,” Vadim said. “He called, and I came.”

“Can we please get to the island?” Niall’s face had lost all color. “Something has changed.”

Vadim redoubled his efforts, and it took all of Efren’s strength and concentration to keep up. It had been a long time since he’d needed to row with his own power. His chest muscles ached as he wrapped the rope to moor them to the dock. His thighs hurt from bracing against the bottom of the boat, too. Gods, he was getting old. This was nothing like the pleasant ache of sex with Niall. This shit hurt.

“Stay here,” Vadim ordered Klaus after they’d entered the tree sanctuary. “If you sense anyone on the island besides us, tell me through our link.”

Klaus frowned like he wanted to argue but stayed silent.

“What’s changed?” Efren asked once they’d reached Beatrice’s bedside in the tree’s tower cell. To him, she looked the same as she had the night before.

“She’s not answering me anymore,” Niall said.

“We could try removing the restraints,” Vadim said. “The silver might be too strong.”

“I can hold her with water,” Efren agreed. He wrapped her in a containment weave much like the one he’d used to get her to the room. Niall worked with him to ensure she had enough air. Then, Vadim worked the restraints loose.

Beatrice’s eyes snapped open, and she gazed upon him. “Efren.” She turned her head to look lovingly upon Niall. “Grandson.” Then, she met Vadim’s gaze, and all resemblance to Elder Beatrice was gone, replaced only with cold calculation. “Hand of Death.”

“Why are you here, Coryn?”

“Why are you fighting against me?” She stared intently at Vadim. “We both want the same thing, you and I. Martiz and the other elders dead. Beatrice captured. I laid this trap for you and gave it a signature your seeker would recognize. I’d

worried you had become too cowardly to finish the job. You weren't even aboard when I made my catch."

"Someone had to keep Martiz company." Vadim sounded nonchalant, but behind his back, his fingers traced the hem of his glove.

"Martiz. How is the old bastard? Still denying he touched me?" Coryn's smile looked out of place on Beatrice's lips. "I have access to Beatrice's memories, you know. She knew. They all knew what he did to us, and still ... it doesn't matter, though. I'll deal with him soon enough. I'm coming for you, Vadim. Don't think this is over."

Beatrice's head drooped again as Coryn left her.

Vadim dropped his trembling hands to his sides. He'd removed his left glove, but he hastily pulled it back on. "Gods. That was creepy."

"Martiz lied." Efren wasn't surprised.

"I asked Coryn if it would be enough," Vadim said. Even his voice was shaking. "If I brought you his head on a spike, would that end this madness?" She said no. She wants to see every weaver in the world burn."

"Why?" Efren had never cared about Coryn's motivation, but it felt important now that she had set her sights on Aquarion.

"She claims our magic is unnatural, and she's furious that we affect everything we touch. Martiz has denied the effects of magic on non-magical people for as long as I've known him, but I've seen it too many times. Healers create seekers and suppressors, enchanters, and even siphons. We think we make the world a better place by healing people, but no one ever talks about the aftereffects. Coryn didn't ask to have power. It was forced upon her, just as Martiz forced himself on her. She consented to his healing, not to his dick, and definitely not to becoming a siphon."

"How many other siphons has he created?" Efren asked.

“Hard telling.” Vadim shrugged. “Coryn claims she’s the only one.”

Beatrice’s eyes fluttered open.

“She’s awake,” Niall said. “Can you hear me?”

“Niall.” Beatrice gripped both of his hands in hers. “It’s so good to see you.”

“Has Coryn released the trap?” Efren asked Vadim.

“No. This is a reprieve. She might be watching, Niall. Be careful what you say.”

“We’re going to get you out of here,” Niall said. Something passed between Niall and Vadim, and then they both stepped inside the water barrier with Beatrice.

Efren had never felt as useless or alone.



## Niall

*“Can she hear us?”* Niall asked Vadim using the telepathy that came with life and death magic.

*“Coryn? Not unless she’s tapped into another death weaver or she’s dying.”*

*“What about last night? Was she already in Grandmother’s mind?”*

Vadim frowned. *“I highly doubt it. Beatrice can still hear us. Let’s ask her.”*

*“Because she’s dying?”* Niall needed to hear Vadim say it to make it real.

*“No. Because she’s a spectral weaver like you.”* Vadim’s laugh sounded more genuine than any Niall had heard yet. Niall laughed with him, and it was even more of a relief to hear his grandmother laugh, too. *“Elder Beatrice, please tell your grandson you’re not dying.”*



*“I am not dying any more than anyone else,” she said. “Less than Klaus, though I think he can be healed sooner rather than later. Coryn dredged some memories about Martiz I would rather have forgotten. I’m sorry for what he did to you, Vadim. I apologize if I’ve never said those words to you before.”*

Vadim swallowed hard but said nothing.

*“How can I free you?”* Niall asked.

*“First, you must learn to harness ice and fire.”* She held out her hand, and he felt the cold as she formed an ice crystal the size of his fist. *“Can you sense it?”*

He did, but he didn’t know how to harness the weave.

*“Watch again.”* More slowly, she weaved the shimmering light until it slowed, the temperature dropping with it. Unlike the fury that fueled his wind and the calm that controlled his water, ice was pure sadness, as though every good thing in the world ceased to exist. He could slow time, freeze matter, and deliver an endless winter to their lands.

Niall had only seen snow once on a rare trip south of Landale with a wagon train when he was a child. He’d loved the beauty of giant flakes falling from the sky, but now he only felt their utter hopelessness. He pulled on the cold within him and solidified the ice particles in the air. Snowflakes swirled around them.

*“That’s it,”* his grandmother praised.

*“What is this?”* Vadim asked. *“Snow? I’ve never seen an ice weaver create a snowstorm.”*

*“It’s beautiful.”* his grandmother sounded as awed as Niall felt.

*“It’s not an act of war.”* Vadim grinned. *“I didn’t know ice weavers could create anything so innocent.”*

*“It’s ice,”* his grandmother said. *“That’s all that matters. Now, for fire.”*

Fire sprang from her palm so quickly, it seemed as though she manifested it without a weave.

*“Fire was my first and strongest element,” she said. “It’s also the most volatile and hardest to control, which is why it’s hard for me to slow it down for you.”*

*“I have an idea,” Niall said. “How long can we wait before Coryn ... He didn’t know how to describe what the general had done by taking over his grandmother’s body, let alone how to ask if it would happen again.*

*“If I had to guess, she’s arranging passage from Stony Eel Island,” Vadim said. “She doesn’t have as many wind weavers as I did, but she can act as one, herself. She could be here within the week. We may have bought some time by hiding Beatrice here, but she’s not stupid. She knows where we are.”*

Niall hoped his idea would work, and quickly, but first, he needed to learn how to harness three more elements. None of them were easy, and Niall was far from proficient in any of his skills, but with his grandmother’s help, he was willing to unleash the full torrent to break the trap.

*“Show me how to harness earth.”*

If water was calming, earth was stable. It was difficult to find that stability within his shifting psyche, but Niall thought of Stan. He was unflappable, even when Tovey shouted at him for damaging their shared wind weaves. Niall had wondered if the man had fallen and hit his head too hard as a child, but now he recognized the deep grounding magic within him.

Niall harnessed his own stable core, wrapping it into a weave and pulling one of the rope coils from the cell’s cot through Efren’s water weave and into their circle.

*“You shouldn’t be able to move the ropes with any kind of magic,” Vadim said, his voice a mere whisper in Niall’s mind. “That’s astounding.”*

*“That’s a true balance of power,” his grandmother said.*

*“I don’t have balance,” Niall said. “I am still missing fire magic, and I don’t know how I harnessed my life force to*

*save Renald.”*

*“Knowing how to use all eight powers and finding your perfect balance are separate skills,” she said. “You already have a strong sense of balance by instinct. I can show you life magic. Vadim taught you death weaves yesterday. Is that right?”*

*“Aye.”*

*“Then you already know the push and pull of life and death.”*

He glanced at Vadim, who paled. *“What does she mean?”*

Vadim shook his head. *“I don’t know.”*

She held up her hand and reached for Vadim. *“Both life and death have strong narcissistic tendencies. When you have a balance, you have empathy. Vadim, you used empathy to create your link with Klaus.”*

*“Klaus would argue that it’s the most selfish thing I’ve ever done.”*

Their skin touched, and Niall felt a wave of empathy pass between his grandmother and Vadim. *“In the years since your encounter with Martiz, you’ve regained a sliver of healing power, which is the only way you’ve kept yourself alive. Now, you’re using it to keep Klaus alive. It’s the most selfless thing I’ve ever seen you do. Show Niall.”*

Vadim closed his eyes. At first, Niall couldn’t sense anything, but then he felt it, a gentle thrum along a string that linked Vadim with Klaus. It sounded like a chord in Niall’s mind.

*“Your turn, Niall.”*

He reached for the link between Vadim and Klaus, but something pushed him away. Instead, he reached for Efren, still outside their bubble. Niall used the same lines of communication he had with Vadim and his grandmother to reach for Efren’s mind. He found him outside the water weave.

*“Do you consent to be healed?”*

Niall wasn't certain Efren needed to be healed. He had sore muscles from rowing the skiff, but those pains would fade over time. Niall never would have sought a healer for minor aches and pains, but Efren was the only one who could test his power here and now.

*"If it will help you, aye."*

Niall appreciated Efren's quick understanding of the situation. He shifted his hand outside the containment spell, and Efren met him with his palm raised, too. Touching Efren's skin felt the same as it always did, his rough rope callouses scraping against Niall's. This time, there was another level of awareness beyond his warmth. Niall could feel all the way to Efren's core and his water magic. He felt Efren's pain as his own, and his eyes stung. He could make that pain go away with a thought.

Power flowed from Niall into Efren. With it, he soothed the aches and pains he found with ease.

"Thank you." Efren released his hand, and he almost lost his balance. He sank into a crouch and lowered his head between his knees to stop the wave of nausea.

*"I thought you said he was balanced,"* Vadim teased. Fortunately, the death weaver's hair remained white.

*"Now that he has both life and death, he will need to find the balance within, rather than sending it outward toward you."*

Niall didn't know what that balance looked like, but he understood what she meant by the push and pull of life and death now. He held up his palm again. He could still feel the press of Efren's skin against his, and the memory of pain in his legs and back.

*"If this is how it feels to heal minor muscle aches, how did I bring Renald back from the dead?"*

*"You reached for Vadim by instinct, and he paid the price for you,"* his grandmother said. *"Some weavers find that a death balances a life returned, but others will tell you there's always enough death in the world. The balance must exist"*

*within you. When you broker a deal between life and death, you need to know the exchange rate.”*

Niall didn't fully understand his grandmother's idea of balance. Now, his only goal was to learn fire weaves so he could attempt to free his grandmother from the trap. She wasn't hurt to the point where he could heal her, but the trap was taking a toll on her magical energy and physical strength. When he used his empathetic awareness to reach for her, he felt her body weakening beneath the strain.

“I need to return to Aquarion,” he said aloud so Efren could hear him. “If it's all right with you, I'll take the skiff myself.”

“It takes two to row,” Vadim said. “I'll go with you.”

“You'll do no such thing.” Storm clouds passed through Efren's gaze.

“I don't need to row,” Niall said. “The skiff has a sail.”

“And you're an air weaver.” Vadim sighed. “Showoff.”

“I'll be back as soon as I can,” Niall promised.

# Chapter 17

## Efren

At first, Efren expected Vadim to stay inside the water prison with Beatrice, but he shoved his way through the orb a few minutes after Niall left.

“You must be getting old,” he said. “You had enough aches and pains for Niall to heal you after a quarter-mile row?”

“You keep saying you don’t know how to harness healing power, but you always manage to heal yourself.”

Vadim nodded. “I always could. I don’t know how to explain it.”

“Did you learn anything from Martiz yesterday, or Niall just now?”

“It will astound you to know Niall used death magic to shove Renald’s spirit back into his body.”

“Then how do you explain your hair color?”

Vadim chuckled. “Beatrice explained it to me. He used death to give life, but he didn’t have his own life magic. I have just enough healing to heal myself, so he found balance through me.”

Efren thought that was the end of it, but Vadim frowned. “Now that you mention it, I might have sensed something when Niall healed you. A pull of energy, and then it was gone.” He sat on the floor with his legs crossed, back against the bed, and closed his eyes.

“We probably should return her to the cot.” Vadim’s eyes were still closed, and his voice soft, as though he was speaking more to himself than to Efren. “Niall might be gone a few hours.”

“He’ll be back within two,” Efren said. He had a feeling he knew where Niall was going, and what he planned to do. Efren only hoped the little girl knew how to call her

flames. Just because Niall had identified her as a fire weaver didn't mean she had any control of her element.

For his part, Niall was quickly learning the other elements. Efren doubted Niall's ability to consistently fill *Starlight Specter's* sails the day after he learned how to harness air weaves, but he had other elements to call. He could create a current using his water weaves, or propel the boat by pulling it toward land, or even skate it across the top of a frozen glaze of ice. Niall's options were only limited by his imagination.

"I would have made a horrible spectral mage," Efren said aloud.

"Neither of us can harness two," Vadim said. "Stan was the best at that."

"Before Hannah," Efren reminded him. "Gods, Hannah scared the shit out of me the first time they called lightning."

"Also scared the shit out of that merchant vessel they blew out of the water, as I remember."

Efren laughed. "That, too."

He sobered. Speaking to Vadim of their shared past hurt. The deep ache in his chest only tightened the longer they stared at each other. Vadim closed his eyes and straightened into a meditative posture, which only made it worse. They shared the same physical space, but Efren was still alone.

He missed their conversations more than he missed their physical relationship. They had been friends before Vadim left for the capital, and they'd easily returned to their friendship when Vadim had agreed to sail with him as his first mate.

Their physical relationship had been explosive at first, but it lacked any sustaining passion. Now, kissing Vadim would be like kissing his brother. If he had a brother. And if his brother had betrayed him.

Efren didn't know if he had a brother, or more than one sibling for that matter. His parents might have had more children after they left him on Aquarion at the first sign of

magic. He was born to sea merchants who traded between Glamiere, Aquarion, and Bantora. His little sister had still been in swaddling clothes when they'd dropped him at the door to the barracks.

In lieu of parents, Elder Holden had taken him in and trained him in water magic. He wondered if Beatrice had taken Holden's role as water trainer after he passed away, or if she chose to teach Niall because she wanted to spend more time with her grandson. Most of the island's other water weavers sailed on their own vessels since command of the waves lent itself to sailing.

Niall had asked Efren about his family, but he didn't have much to tell. He couldn't remember their faces. His real family were his crew and the islanders he'd come to love over the years.

"Have you checked on Elsie?"

Vadim cracked one eye open, then shut it again. "No. You trying to get rid of me?"

"Only wondering."

"I can feel her through my connection with Klaus. She's still living here. I thought she would have moved to Aquarion by now."

Vadim's aunt was a lightning weaver. His mother had been an earth weaver, and his father a suppressor, an old man even when they were children. He'd passed away while Vadim was away at school.

"Don't," Vadim said.

"What?"

"I can feel your pity from here."

"I'm sorry. You don't have to see her, that's all. Martiz likes to get under your skin, but you're not obligated to see your family."

Vadim's eyes eased open. "I know. Thank you. Now, leave me alone. I'm trying to control my healing magic."



Efren slumped to the floor on the opposite side of his containment bubble. The water distorted his view of Beatrice only a little, but the curve and the amount of water between him and Vadim made his features almost unrecognizable.

He pulled his knees to his chest and wrapped his arms around them, rested his head on his knee, and waited for Niall to return.



## Niall

Niall hoped Jasmine knew enough about harnessing her fire power to teach him a few things. When he'd been working in the training pit the last two mornings, he'd heard Jasmine and Renald laughing from somewhere inside the barracks. When he opened the back door near the water spigot and stepped inside, he was pleasantly surprised to find the room cooler than the outside air. The further inside he went, the colder the air until he could see his breath.

The elder who had given Niall his first taste of ice magic stood beside Jasmine, his hand palm up below hers. A ribbon of ice hovered above her hand, spinning in the air. Her curly white locks blew about her face with an unseen wind as the ice weaver's creation danced on her palm.

"I still can't grab it," she said.

"That's all right," the elder said. "You recognize it now, and that's a start." The ice melted into thin air, and the man turned and held out his hand to Niall. "Nice to see you again. I'm Elder Frost. Not my given name, but the only one I need these days." He was taller than Niall, though reed thin. Everything about him was a warm brown, from his skin tone to the stubble covering his scalp. Even his eyes were amber flecked with gold. It was hard to believe he had ice without a lick of fire, but Niall couldn't sense any fire on him.

He grinned in response to Frost's amiable smile. "Nice to meet you. I'm Niall."

“Beatrice’s grandson. Jasmine told me about your harrowing rescue. Young Renald was lucky to have you aboard that ship.”

Niall withheld the barb against Vadim. Yes, Vadim had kidnapped him, but knowing he’d done so with the intention of delivering him to Aquarion made it easier to bear. Vadim had put them all in danger, but so had Efren when he sank *Imperial Fool*.

Niall didn’t have time to dwell on the past, though. He needed to get back to his grandmother as soon as possible. He hoped he could return with the ability to work all eight elements.

“I need a moment of Jasmine’s time, if I may.”

Frost nodded. “She’s due a break, if you’ll take her over to Petri’s for her afternoon snack.”

“Snack?” Niall frowned at Jasmine, who stared up at him with sad eyes and her hands clasped to her chest.

“Please?”

He laughed. “Is it a good snack?”

“Petri makes them special for us! Yesterday, mine was sugar cracker and cinnamon spice in warm heavy cream.”

That sounded disgusting to Niall, but he couldn’t argue with the way she clapped her hands and then dragged him toward the barracks’ back door. They exited the building and made their way across the already shaded yard to the copse of palm trees around Petri’s food stand.

Petri ignored him as they handed Jasmine a half-coconut of a frothy cinnamon-scented drink. “Here you go, Princess.”

“Thank you, my Sovereign.”

“My Sovereign?” Niall laughed and bowed his head toward Petri. “Do I need to address you that way?”

“Only if you want to be called the emperor of this island,” Petri quipped. “What can I get you?”

“Oh, I’m escorting the princess to her snack, in the hope she can return the favor and teach me a little fire magic.”

Petri nodded. “A lofty goal. If you do manage to light a flame in the palm of your hand, I will call you the Emperor of Aquarion from this day forth.”

“Won’t that get us both strung up for treason?” Niall couldn’t resist a grin as his face burned.

“We’ll say you’re acting emperor when Emperor Hugo is elsewhere.” Petri’s ceremonial bow made their word into an official decree. “What can I get for you? I’ve been too busy to ask about your favorite foods.”

“I don’t really have favorites.” Niall shrugged. “Fruit?”

“Have you ever tried cocoa powder? It’s delightful with the heavy cream I’ve mixed for our princess.”

“I don’t think so.” Niall had heard of cocoa, but it was far too expensive for Niall to try even a tiny piece in the candy store.

“You’d remember this.”

Petri shooed him away to the bench where Jasmine was sipping her drink.

She had a silly cream mustache above her top lip. “Where’s your drink?”

“Petri’s still mixing it. May I ask you a question while we wait?”

She studied him for a moment. “You’re really formal, like the guy with white hair, only younger. I’m just a kid, you know. You can ask me a question. It’s not like I can say no.”

“But you can say no,” Niall said. “You can get up and walk away if you don’t like someone. You can set their hair on fire if they piss you off. Why wouldn’t you?”

She laughed. “Not as formal, then. I like you. Set their hair on fire?”

“You’re a fire weaver.” He grinned. “That’s what I would do if I had fire magic.”

“Aren’t you about to ask me how to use fire magic?” she asked. “I don’t know if I should tell you, if you’re going to set people’s hair on fire. Frost said we shouldn’t use our powers for evil.”

“Self-defense isn’t evil,” Niall insisted.

Petri’s laugh proceeded them as they approached with another steaming half-coconut. “Vadim can attest to that, though I do sometimes wonder.” Petri’s eyebrows raised and lowered as they handed Niall his drink. “Pragmatic to a fault can sometimes seem a little evil.”

“This smells delicious,” Niall said as the rich scent filled his nostrils.

“Use your ice to cool it down a bit before you drink it.”

“I just learned how to use ice,” Niall said.

“Practice makes perfect,” Petri insisted. “Right, Princess?”

“That’s what I did!” she said.

“I thought you couldn’t control your ice weaves.” Niall gazed at her with a mock frown.

She squealed and took a sip of her drink. “I did it! I cooled my drink all by myself!”

Niall couldn’t help but smile.

“You did.” Petri winked. “Now it’s Niall’s turn.”

Niall cupped both hands around the hot coconut and reached for the sadness in his core. In seconds, ice crystals formed along the rim of his drink.

“Oops,” Petri said. “Too much.”

“Now you need to warm it up again,” Jasmine said.

“I don’t know how,” Niall said. “Can you show me?”

“Of course! I thought you’d never ask.”

Niall smiled again at the infectious joy on Jasmine’s face. He’d met her at her lowest moment when she was trying to keep her brother afloat. Now, he was glad she was happy,

healthy, and seemingly without a care in the world beyond her dessert drink.

Petri took the empty coconut from her, and she held up the palm of her hand. Niall sensed her power as a string of flame flowed along her palm from the center to the tip of her index finger. She rubbed it with her thumb, and it disappeared.

“Joy,” Niall whispered. “Fire is pure joy.”

Niall thought of Efren, and a ring of heat surrounded the lip of his cup for a moment. He let it go, and it faded back into his core. A single curl of steam rose from the center of his coconut. He took a sip of his drink and hummed in appreciation. It was the perfect blend of sweet and bitter on his tongue.

“Imagine being locked away from your joy to keep your magic at bay,” Petri said. “Emperor Hugo lives like that, if you can call that a life.”

“You know the emperor?”

Petri shook their head. “I made it inside the palace once. I propelled myself over a wall and into a courtyard, but before I could speak to him, the guards caught me and ushered him back inside.”

“You’ve seen him! How did he look?”

“Furious.” Petri’s smile didn’t warm their gaze. “If he were a wind weaver, he could carry himself over the walls without a second thought.”

Niall nodded. “Each element has an emotion and a sensation.”

“Have you found a way to balance them all?”

“Not yet, and I don’t have much time,” he said.

“Find the place you feel most comfortable. Comfort is key.” They grinned. “I feel more balance in the stability of earth, even though it’s my weaker element. Find the one that speaks most to you, and you’ll find your core.”

“Thank you.” Niall grinned. “I need to get back, but I hope to see you again at dinner.” He reached for Jasmine’s hand. “Are you ready to return to the barracks, Princess?”

Her hand felt like ice in his. He countered it with heat until she squealed and fought back with flames of her own. They arrived at the barracks out of breath, sweating, and a little scorched around the edges. Niall grabbed the door handle before she did and wove a tiny healing spell to regrow the delicate hairs on her arms before Frost chewed him out for hurting her.

Frost still glared at them like they’d started the place on fire. “I didn’t need two new fire weavers,” he grumbled.

“Luckily, you only have to train one,” Niall said. “I need to get back to my grandmother.”

“Good luck.”

Jasmine waved, and flames rolled up her palm to the tips of each finger. “See you soon.”

Gods, he hoped he could return in time for dinner. He had all eight elements now, but he still didn’t know the first thing about releasing Coryn’s trap.

# Chapter 18

## Efren

After what felt like hours, Vadim grunted and hopped to his feet. “Klaus?”

“It’s Niall,” Klaus hollered from the base of the ladder. “His signature feels different, that’s all.”

“He must have been successful,” Vadim said.

Efren was relieved Klaus also noticed the change in Niall. Efren had sensed a shift in Niall’s confidence as he learned each element. Efren hoped it was enough to defeat the trap.

Niall reached the top of the ladder with Klaus right behind him. He rushed Efren, throwing arms around his shoulders and pulling him in for a hug. The singed tips of Niall’s hair scratched along Efren’s cheek, and he smelled of smoke.

His face burned as he patted Niall’s back. “Good to see you.”

“I missed you.” Efren’s jacket muffled Niall’s voice.

“No lookout?” Vadim asked Klaus.

“I can tell from up here if anyone new arrives.” Klaus smirked. “I want to see a miracle.”

A miracle. Efren studied Niall. He was already a miracle to Efren, even with his face ruddy from the wind and sun, and the dark circles under his eyes from the magic he’d been using.

“Did Petri feed you?” Efren asked.

“I had a delicious cocoa drink, but I don’t think that counts as food.”

“We’ll throw a celebration and grill half the island’s chicken if you can pull this off,” Vadim said. “Come on, Klaus. Let’s give him some room.” Vadim hadn’t bothered to

stand from his meditative position. He crab-crawled across the floor to sit against the far wall, and Klaus stood beside him, hugging his arms to his chest.

Niall turned toward the water weave holding Beatrice in place, but then he turned back to Efren with an unreadable look.

“If this doesn’t work, it’s going to be messy.” He shrugged. “It might be messy either way.”

“And?”

“Will you still want me if I fail?”

Efren hadn’t known Niall when he was a child, but he recognized the naked need in his eyes. Niall had been disappointed too many times by too many adults in his life, from his parents to the orphanage director to Master Othelio using him as cheap labor without anything resembling gratitude. Efren had to do better.

Efren wanted to do better. He wrapped him in a tight hug and kissed his stubbled cheek. “I will always want you.” The words sounded like a platitude, but Efren’s heart soared in his chest, lighter than air with the confession. “You are a strong and capable man. You’d benefit any crew that would have you, and I’m sure you’ll be a master potter as soon as you can be tested. You’ve already achieved so much. If it takes you more than a day to work a dangerous weave no one but you could master, you deserve a little grace.”

“Thank you.” Niall’s voice was muffled against Efren’s shoulder. He’d curled into him and balled his hands in Efren’s shirt. Efren wanted to hold him there and protect him against the cruel world forever.

Niall relaxed his grip, took a step backward, and rose to his full height. “How will I know if it works?”

“You’ll feel the trap tighten like a vise until it snaps and breaks around you.” Vadim pushed himself to his feet and leaned against the wall beside Klaus. “If you can’t break it, you’ll both be trapped until Coryn arrives and takes you both as conscripts.”



“That’s reassuring.”

“You wanted to know what would happen if you fail.”  
Vadim grinned. “Now you know.”

“You don’t have to do this today,” Efren said. “You could practice more.”

“Do you have a practice trap lying around somewhere?” Vadim asked. “Have you all made such a thing, and I wasn’t aware?”

Vadim’s smug condescension rankled even more because Efren knew he was right. “No, we have not.”

“There are no practice runs. This is it. Either you’ll succeed, or you’ll fail. We can encourage and educate, but at this point, you’re on your own until she’s free or you’re both trussed up like fish in a net.”

Niall’s grim smile didn’t reach his eyes. “It’s now or never, then.”

With a burst of air, he created a doorway into Efren’s water prison and stepped inside. As it closed around him, the water shimmered and glowed until it was a mirror reflecting Efren’s distorted face back at him.

“What happened?” Klaus asked.

“He’s using my water weave,” Efren said. “That’s not balance.”

“It’s brilliant,” Vadim said. “Now to see if it works.”



## **Niall**

When Niall turned Efren’s water weave into a giant mirrored capsule instead of a constantly moving stream, he had only one goal in mind. He didn’t want Vadim to see him. It was one thing to have Efren’s gaze on him. Efren had judged him and found him worthy. He couldn’t say the same about Vadim. He didn’t want or need Vadim’s respect, but he

couldn't stand to watch while the death weaver judged his every move.

With the barrier erected, he focused on his grandmother. He could feel her in a way he hadn't before. He sensed the nature of her core. As she'd said, she had a higher concentration of fire and a lower concentration of death. Now, he could sense she was stronger in ice, as well, and weaker with life. She wasn't perfectly balanced, but her balance was symmetrical in its own way.

*"Niall," she said. "You've returned a changed man. I'd worried you wouldn't be able to claim joy as your own, but it is hard to resist the unbridled joy of a child to teach you."*

He swallowed back the sorrow that joy had cost him on the boat ride back to Horseshoe island. He'd wanted to hold the fire in the palm of his hand so he wouldn't feel the rush of reality dragging him down. While he held his fire, he could forget about his parents, his loneliness, and his desire to be good enough. Without it, those inadequate feelings filled the void and made him feel empty, which was worse than before.

*"They tell you the absence of joy is misery," his grandmother said. "They're wrong. It's numbness."*

*"Is it wrong to want to stay within the fire forever?"*

*"It isn't wrong," she said. "Joy is a wonderful place, but so are the others. Yes, even the suffering of healing and the release of death. You sought calm before you sought joy. You were drawn to Efren when you could have been drawn to Jasmine instead."*

Niall wanted to argue that he wouldn't be drawn to a child, but he recognized the truth in her words. There was nothing inherently sexual about any element. He'd been attracted to Efren far beyond his body.

*"You knew that she was a fire weaver from the start, but you weren't attracted to her joy. You empathized with her suffering, and you ended it by bringing her brother back to life. That was enough."*

*"Not with Efren."*

*“No.”* She lifted her hands and placed them in his. *“Shall we see if his calming water will help us break this trap?”*

Niall nodded.

*“Follow my lead. Push out with all your power at once, except water. Use Efren’s containment spell to hold back the tide until we need it.”*

Niall was surprised to find the balance so easily, even as he left his water element alone, trapped in his core the way Efren’s bubble held them. His grandmother led him through the steps, guiding his every move.

The trap tightened around them, physically squeezing them together until they stood with her cheek pressed to his chest. Some strands escaped from her bun and made their way into his mouth, but he couldn’t lift a hand to wipe them away. His body hurt from the pressure. He tried to take a breath and couldn’t.

*“Give it everything you’ve got.”* His grandmother’s voice sounded strained and hollow in his mind.

Niall pushed out with the other seven elements as his grandmother drew them out of him. He didn’t have control of his emotions or the weaves themselves, but he followed her lead and reinforced her power. It took his remaining effort to hold back his water element. He worried he wouldn’t be able to unleash it when the time came. They’d trapped it within a whirlpool of shifting elements.

The trap squeezed them even more, and Niall’s lungs burned with the effort to breathe. He gave some of his wind to his grandmother, but hers was batted away by another vicious compression.

His grandmother’s ribs snapped from the pressure, and Niall’s healing found its way into her bones, restoring them through their physical connection. He still couldn’t breathe, and his vision was beginning to darken around the edges. He focused on his reflection mirrored back to him from his weave

combined with Efren's water prison, the one he'd tied off before they began.

*"Now!"*

Niall released his hold on his water. As he'd expected, nothing happened. He'd effectively trapped it within his other weaves, and it was unable to work free and effectively counter the trap.

The mirror began to fade, and Niall could see Efren, only mildly distorted by his water weave. Niall had lived his life in a constant state of disappointment. Now, the thought of losing a future with Efren, not getting to know his habits and thoughts, his likes and dislikes, and his every idiosyncrasy, made Niall's chest ache beyond the lack of air. He wanted to know everything about Efren, and instead, he was going to lose consciousness and give Coryn full control of his power. Even now, he felt something, or someone, trying to sift through his defenses. Whether it was the trap or something else, Niall could do nothing to stop it. Once it touched his core, it would control him.

He reached for the orb of water surrounding them. It was risky, drawing both his and Efren's weaves into the mix, but he sharpened it to a point and used it like a lance to pierce through the elements swirling around him, freeing his own water. The moment his water collided with Efren's, all his power rebounded into his core. The giant tree shook beneath them, and Niall fell to his knees. His grandmother leaned against him, her body shaking as she hugged his shoulders. A strange musical sound rang in his ears, now that the horrible rush of his pulse had quieted.

Laughter. His grandmother's laughter.

"Niall, you did it!" She kissed the top of his head. "Coryn tried to reach for you, and you fought her off."

"Are you all right?" Efren asked, taking his grandmother's hand.

"I'm wonderful. Never been better. Niall healed some of my arthritis, and I'd dare to say my bones are stronger now

than they were when I was a teenager. Thank you, Dearie.” She gripped Niall’s shoulder with her free hand.

“Did you kill Coryn?” Vadim asked.

“There might be a way to trap her within her own power,” she said, “but no, I had no way to attack.”

“She’ll be here in a matter of days.” Vadim toyed with the hem of his glove.

“We’ll do our best to prepare, then.”

“My trial can’t wait,” Vadim said. “Please. The elders must hear what I have to say before Coryn arrives. If they don’t act against Martiz, we’ll lose the only advantage we’ve got. We’ll be as good as dead when she sends the entire navy after us.”

“Your trial must wait until we’ve broken your life link with Klaus. If they sentence you to death, he will die with you.”

Vadim winced. “They wouldn’t dare.”

“I won’t risk it.”

“We can worry about that after the verdict, then.”

Niall’s grandmother sighed. “All right, but only because you won’t learn any healing from Martiz. If we must break your link, I’ll be the one to teach you, just as I taught Niall.”

Niall’s healing power instinctively reached for Klaus again, searching his body for the defect that would eventually kill him. Beyond a sickly heart, a disease webbed throughout his entire body in his bones and his blood.

He opened his mouth to ask, but his grandmother gave a slight shake of her head. *“Don’t. Vadim has enough to worry about. Telling him Klaus’s sickness is systemic will only make him frantic to find a cure. We need to keep him calm before his trial.”*

“Tomorrow,” she said aloud. “Your trial begins tomorrow.”

“Let’s hope that’s soon enough,” Vadim grumbled.

# Chapter 19

## Efren

The sun was nearing the horizon as they approached the skiff. Yet another day had passed without watching the sunset off the deck. Efren would get Niall back there one of these days. He hoped they could enjoy it this time.

Now, he only wanted Niall to be comfortable. The weary young man stumbled and almost fell into the shallows as they approached the skiff, but Efren grabbed him around the waist and pulled him to his side.

“We’ll be sailing for my dock,” he said over his shoulder as he helped Niall into the skiff. “Please have Petri bring us some leftovers from the feast.”

“We’re not feasting.” Vadim ran to catch up with him and grabbed his shoulder, yanking him back onto the dock. “We need to prepare. This is an all-hands situation. Coryn could be here in days, if not hours.”

“Niall needs food and rest.”

“We all do,” Beatrice said. “Your alone time can wait.” She winked, but the words still pissed him off. Niall had used a huge amount of magic to break the trap. Even if he’d recouped some of it when it broke, he still needed to rest.

“The others will return from the barracks soon,” Beatrice said. “Vadim, you and Klaus can paddle to the mainland and ask Petri what they can prepare on such short notice. That will give Efren and Niall a moment to regroup while we wait.”

“Fine.” Vadim motioned for Klaus to join him in the skiff, and Efren helped Niall climb out again. “Thank you for taking this seriously,” he said as he pushed the boat away from the dock.

“Coryn’s not as powerful as Vadim thinks she is,” Beatrice said once Vadim was out of earshot. “I felt her strength waning. She can’t siphon from us at this distance, and

her weavers are too weak. I also sensed a change in Niall's power, something I've never experienced before. Did you borrow Efren's power?"

Niall sank onto the dock boards and kicked his legs over the side. "I took back what I'd given him to supplement the containment spell."

"You made it reflective." She frowned. "That wasn't all you took." She turned to Efren. "Could you feel it?"

"I felt something." He couldn't explain it. Yes, it felt like Niall was taking power directly from him, but he'd also given Efren a piece of himself, delicate and brittle like blown glass. Efren wanted to wrap it in a containment weave of its own to protect it, except when he tried, the weave fell apart.

"I think we traded tiny pieces of ourselves," Niall said. "My water magic is the same now as it was before, but it's changed. I know things I shouldn't know, like how Efren can call the sharks."

Beatrice frowned. "I've never heard of this type of exchange before."

Efren knew how to protect the fragile gift he'd been given. He reached out with his core and wrapped around it, smothering it in feelings too new to speak aloud. He cherished Niall's precious offering the same way he wanted to worship his body. New, indeed. He'd never felt this way about anyone.

"It's not power," Efren said. "We talk about soulmates like they're legend, but what if they're real? What if we really can exchange pieces of our core when we're truly compatible?"

"We're worried about an invasion, and you're talking about soulmates?" She scoffed. "Get your head out of your ass, Efren. We'll need your water weaves to refill our freshwater tanks beneath Horseshoe Island. One was compromised with salt water during the last storm surge." She ticked off several other areas he could assist with their defenses, but Niall's hand at his elbow stole his attention.



Niall grinned and placed his other hand over Efren's heart. "How did you do that?"

"I wanted to protect it, so I—" He didn't want to say it out loud, for fear Niall would judge him as harshly as Beatrice. This was Niall, though. If anything, he would know Efren was telling the truth, not making up a wild story. "I let you into my core."

"I did the same with yours." He leaned forward and pressed his lips to Efren's in a chaste kiss. Before Efren could make it more, he pulled away. "Beneath your gruff and commanding exterior hides a gentle softy."

"No one would dare say that about me on the ship." Efren tried to glower at Niall, but he couldn't hide his true feelings from the tiny bit of Niall's core inside him.

Niall grinned. "Whatever has changed between us, I like it."

Beatrice clapped her hands near their ears, and they both jumped. "Are you two listening to me?"

"Listening to what?" Niall asked.

"You said you'd give us time to relax while we wait for Vadim," Efren reminded her.

"I did." She nodded. "Please forgive me, though Vadim is right. There's a lot to do in a very short time. My list can wait until we're all together and each can take some of the burden. I'll prepare the table for our meeting."

"I'll fill the island's water tanks while we wait."

She nodded her approval and left them in peace.

Efren sat down on the dock. He found the tank in question. What had once been difficult was now as easy as breathing. He removed the salt from the tank and filled it with fresh water.

Niall sat beside him. They were close to the edge where the wood met the concrete moorings, with only a few inches of air between them and the sandy beach below.

“I’m sorry if I overstepped to break the trap,” Niall said. “I didn’t know what I was doing, and then I used your spell to break through all my other elements to free the water. Grandmother told me to hold it back, and it was trapped until I pulled my weave back to me. I didn’t mean to take yours, too. That’s when we exchanged power and knowledge.”

“You gave me a piece of your core.” Efren took both of Niall’s hands in his. “It’s the greatest gift I’ve ever received. I wouldn’t dream of berating you for it.”

“Thank you.” Niall’s cheeks darkened, and he glanced down at their clasped hands. “What happens now?”

“I suppose we’d better fix whatever your grandmother thinks needs fixing, and as soon as possible.”

Niall snorted. “That’s not what I meant. What about us?”

“Nothing has changed in my mind,” Efren said.

Niall exhaled and his shoulders dropped a little.

“Were you worried?”

“I thought you could sense my core the same way I can sense yours, and you’d think it was too much.”

“If you can sense my core, you know that’s not true.” He tipped Niall’s chin up to meet his gaze. “I’m in awe of you, Niall. I don’t know where we’ll end up, but we’re in this together. I couldn’t turn you away before. I certainly won’t now.”

Niall collapsed against his chest, his breath a rush of air that tickled Efren’s throat as it shifted his collar. The confidence Niall always exuded disappeared and raw, naked need filled his gaze. “I thought I was stronger than this. I thought I could handle another loss, another heartbreak, but the thought of you leaving me now ...”

“I’m not going anywhere.” Efren cupped Niall’s cheek, loving the rough feel of stubble against his thumb. Niall followed willingly as Efren pulled him closer. The touch of their lips was as gentle as mist and as vibrant as a rainbow

over dark water. The connection between them sizzled like lightning.

Niall pulled back. “What was that?”

Efren followed him. “I don’t know, but I like it.”

Niall laughed against his lips and leaned back until he lay on the boardwalk. Finally, Efren could take in his fill of the unique sensation. It wasn’t elemental magic, and it wasn’t an emotion, at least, not one Efren had ever experienced before. He’d loved Vadim, but that love had never developed beyond the basic emotion. This had teeth as sharp as Arrowtip’s, and Efren wanted it to eat him whole.

Niall groaned into his mouth and opened for him. Efren straddled Niall’s legs, not caring when he snagged the knee of his pants on the rough wood. He could patch it later. Now, he had to experience everything Niall had to offer.

Niall pushed him away with a gentle shove, breaking their kiss. He looked thoroughly debauched with his lips glossed with their shared spit and his hair tousled from Efren’s fingers. “We should wait until we’re alone.”

Efren rested his forehead on Niall’s and took a deep breath. “You’re right.” His chest ached as he lifted himself off Niall and sat a respectable distance away.

“I didn’t mean you should stop.” Niall’s pout was just as adorable.

“I’ll make time tonight.” Efren didn’t know the full extent of tasks Beatrice would force upon them before darkness overtook them, but there were only so many they could complete in the dark without light enchantments or a fire weaver.

“Fuck.” He rolled his eyes and slid an arm over Niall’s shoulder as they resumed sitting side by side on the dock. “You’ve got fire magic now. That means she’ll have us up all night.”

Niall laughed. “I have all the elements, so we won’t need anyone else to come with us.”

While true, “She might split us up.”

“We won’t let her,” Niall said.

Efren agreed. He couldn’t bear the thought of being separated from Niall again.



## Niall

Niall hadn’t wanted to leave Efren’s side, but his grandmother couldn’t be denied. After another meal in the strange meeting room beneath the sentinel oak, she ordered them to prepare the two islands for war.

“Jermain, Frost, and Efren will bring the children from the mainland,” she’d said. “We’ll keep them here in the caves until it’s safe again. Martiz will track down Allora to refill our store of healing potions. Niall, I have tasks only a spectral weaver can do here on Horseshoe Island.”

Efren patted his knee beneath the stone table, but Niall had to bite down on his bottom lip to keep it from jutting out. He’d been a stoic child, never quick to anger or act up. His petulant urges to throw a tantrum whenever he couldn’t be with Efren were as baffling to him as they were childish.

Once everyone had their assigned tasks, Niall’s grandmother stood by his side on Horseshoe Island’s dock. The skiff’s wake disturbed the sunset’s reflection.

“You’ve never been in love before,” she said. “It won’t always feel so raw, like an open wound when you’re apart.”

Niall stared at her, wondering how she knew exactly how he felt.

“I remember what love feels like when it’s new,” she said. “I’m not that old.”

“I don’t think you’re old.”

“Don’t lie to me.” She latched onto his elbow and led him into the forest north of the sentinel tree. “I am ancient. I

was old when your mother was born and look at me now.”

She still had an iron grip, and she led him down an overgrown path toward the sound of water falling over rocks. It was almost too dark for Niall to see the ground at his feet when a ball of light flashed before them. It took him a moment to see that it was balanced in his grandmother’s palm. “Enchanters borrow fire magic for most light globes, but the pure essence of water also works to reflect ambient light. Efren has worked with Allora on some glowing water globes. He can form them at will, as well.”

Niall nodded. “That’s another skill I know without learning.”

“Interesting. I’ve never heard of this core transfer before, but I’ve never seen a weaver do what you did. We can combine our power with others but taking someone else’s power as our own is something only siphons can do.”

“Vadim thought I was a siphon at first.”

Her lips pursed as she increased her speed. They didn’t speak until the surrounding scenery changed from dark foliage to a starry sky above and the reflection of the globe off wet stones. They’d found the water source, a freshwater brook that ran from the only slope on the island, a rocky cliff no higher than a ship’s mast.

“This is the only fresh water on the island. Efren and Hannah can desalinate the ocean water for us and put it directly into our underwater tanks.”

“Efren filled the tank earlier today.”

She nodded. “Now, we need to use a bit of earth and a touch of life to hide this water source from the outside. All maps of this island show a steep cliff and this brook. We need to make our friends think they’re on the wrong island if they land here.”

Niall wasn’t sure he understood the subterfuge, but he followed his grandmother’s instructions well enough. Soon, they had created a jungle landscape so dense no person could

find the newly underground brook without cutting through the jungle and then digging for days.

“Now to change the coastline.” She cut a path through the thick underbrush with a burst of air. When they reached the rocky coast, she started shifting the rocks from the horseshoe shape, flattening it out and making the island look more circular from a distance. Niall shuffled large boulders up from the ocean depths to sit just below the water line in what looked to be the only safe place to moor a boat along the rocky coast. Anyone who tried would bash their hull open.

Once his grandmother was happy with the earth movement on shore, she turned her attention further seaward, creating a shoal that would trap the water and raise the water level around the island.

“What good will that do?” Niall asked. She’d almost defeated the purpose of moving the boulders offshore.

“I’ll show you when we return to Aquarion. It helps with the illusion.” She’d let go of his elbow to work her magic. Now, she latched onto him again and dragged him into the surf. He had just enough time to worry about how much water his boots could withstand before she pulled him into the air. The water inches beneath their feet thickened to ice.

“Your friend Hannah uses static charge to walk above solid ground. You and I can work with air and ice over water and static over land. Just be aware, it’s harder to freeze the ocean surface.” She released his arm, and he dropped dangerously close to the water while he scrambled to find the perfect balance of ice, only enough to coat the water’s surface, and air to cushion his feet from that surface.

He lost hold of the air cushion and fell to the ice. Everything seemed to happen at once. His feet went out from under him and he fell hard on his tailbone, thankfully on the ice and not into the water.

“Close,” she said, helping him back to his feet. “Try again.”

This time, he started with the air cushion, finding his balance before pushing the ice out in front of him as he stepped forward.

“There. You’ve got it. Let’s get out around this forest, and I’ll show you another shortcut.”

Each step gave Niall more confidence. When they reached the westernmost part of the curve before it turned south, his grandmother led him back ashore.

“You’re using more ice than you need,” she said. “Let the air do most of the work. The surface only needs to be flat, not solid.”

He pondered her words as he followed her on a narrow path through another copse of trees, this one a little less dense than the area around the brook. He was surprised when they came upon a small hut in the middle of a clearing. A frizzy-haired ghost in white robes stood at the crossroads between the path leading to the hut and the main path they walked.

“Where is my nephew?” The ghost’s voice sounded real enough as she barred their path with arms akimbo.

“He’s returned to the main island.”

In the moonlight, Niall could see the woman’s resemblance to Vadim. They both had the same broad nose and fierce gaze. “Will Martiz hang him for his crimes?”

“His trial starts tomorrow. You should come.”

“Your tree gives me the willies. You know this.”

“The trial will be in the open-air caves beneath the tree. You can access them from the back way.”

“Hmph.” The woman dropped her arms to her sides and took a step backward toward the hut. “He is such a delicate boy. He’s suffered enough. Martiz should end his suffering now and be done with it.”

Niall couldn’t believe his ears. She wanted Vadim to die? Niall still didn’t like the death weaver, but he didn’t wish him harm. A powerful death weaver was always good in a

fight, or so Niall had heard. They would need him to win the war against Coryn.

“Martiz is not the only person on the council.” Niall’s grandmother’s voice rang with finality as she tugged on Niall’s elbow.

They continued on the path. Niall directed his gaze at the halo of light beneath the hovering light globe, though the area between his shoulder blades itched, as though the strange woman’s gaze could pierce his shirt and set his skin aflame.

“She claims Vadim has gone mad,” his grandmother whispered.

Her voice was well camouflaged within the night sounds of owls, bats, and insects, but Niall kept his voice low, too. “He’s so logical, it’s scary. How could he possibly be mad?”

She nodded. “The world has gone mad around him. He probably wishes he were mad, too. Five years ago, he came to me begging for a way to save Hugo, so I sent him after Coryn. I don’t know if I made it better or worse.”

“You knew then what he’d done to my parents.”

She nodded, and the little ball of light bobbed with her head. “I knew the truth of it, that Willamina had wanted to stop running. Some fight their fate to the bitter end, and some give in too soon.”

They finally reached the narrow shoal that formed the southern sweeping legs of the horseshoe. They had been dry at high tide earlier in the day, but now, they were submerged beneath a few inches of water.

“They’re still visible at low tide. We can’t hide them completely without flooding the island. We’ll need to make a decoy instead, and hope they find us during the day.”

“How?”

“Partly through earth moving. We form a horseshoe of sand to the southeast and hope Efren’s tweaked enough of the emperor’s star charts to make it believable. Then, we can swap



the image of this island with that one using our balance of life and death weaves. Your weaves might even stand up to starlight, but mine do not. They're too ethereal in the dark."

Niall heard her words, but they didn't make sense until he had a chance to weave the spell himself. In the darkness, the spell shimmered too much to be land. Without the reality of earth magic, he couldn't find the right balance of light.

His grandmother's side looked even more ghostly in the moonlight. "That will have to do," she said when they were finished. "It should buy us some time, at least."

"What happens if they find the island?"

"I know what Coryn seeks on Stony Eel island. We have a statue with the same capabilities here, hidden in the caves. Elsie and I are the only two who know where it is."

"Elsie?"

"Vadim's aunt." She sighed. "I suppose that means Martiz knows where it is, too."

"I don't like him," Niall admitted. There was something about Martiz that made his skin crawl, and it wasn't only his blatant disregard for the animals he so carelessly injured and then healed.

"You shouldn't. Though Martiz is many despicable things, he'll never be one of Coryn's loyalists. We can trust him with this secret, at least."

"What about Elsie?" Niall asked. "Do you trust her?"

His grandmother nodded. "If anyone hates Coryn more than I do, it's Elsie." Niall thought she would expand on that, but she patted his shoulder instead. "We need to get you back to the mainland before Efren starts to worry."

"There's no skiff!"

She laughed. "Haven't I taught you anything? We don't need a skiff."

"Walking would take an hour." Niall was already too tired to take another step.

Her smile was brilliant in the moonlight. “Why walk,  
when we can fly?”

# Chapter 20

## Efren

All the water tanks were filled and the docks moved, thanks to Petri's work with Jermain. Balance between earth and air was the most effective in a pinch, especially when Efren noticed Niall and Beatrice skimming over the water the way his air weavers would move a ship. Niall's curls defied gravity for a moment as they landed, and then sprang forward into his face, making him laugh. It was a good laugh, one Efren wanted to hear more often. Niall had been quick to laugh on the ship, but not on Aquarion.

Beatrice sent Niall off to find Frost. She'd put the ice weaver in charge in her absence.

"I see you've taught him all of your bad habits," Efren said to Beatrice as Niall flew upward, disappearing into the night sky.

"Not all. You taught him how to poison wells and call sharks without even trying, so you can't blame them all on me."

"You poisoned the well?"

"No, but you will. The one to the east. We'll rely on the tanks on Horseshoe Island until the coast is clear. Can't let our enemies restock when they're here. They'll have a thirsty trip home when they can't find the brook, either."

"Coryn has a water weaver of her own," Efren reminded her. "She won't travel without her full retinue, so she can siphon them at will."

"We'll make her work for it, then." Beatrice smiled. "We're almost done here. We will be leaving for Horseshoe at dawn, if you want to testify at Vadim's trial."

Efren worried he would say the wrong thing and end up hurting Vadim's chances more than helping him. "How does it look, in your opinion?"

“Martiz wants him to hang, but that suits Martiz more than it does anyone else, including my daughter’s memory.”

“What about Elsie?” Efren’s shoulders shook involuntarily as he remembered the bitter hatred in her gaze when she looked at her nephew. She still blamed Vadim for killing her younger sister by being born, and she let him know that at every turn.

“That’s why she’s not an elder,” Beatrice reminded him. “I will remind Jermain and Frost of Vadim’s original mission. They should vote with me.”

“And Allora?”

“I haven’t seen her for weeks. You know how she is.”

Allora was the island’s enchanter. She didn’t have power of her own, but she could focus others’ power into light balls or warding spells.

“Who worked with her last?”

“Elsie. They were trying to control the bloodsucking insect problem with some lightning balls. I sent a message about your arrival and subsequent meeting, but she ignored it, as always.”

Allora was a bit eccentric. Efren had worked with her for his indoor and outdoor lighting, but nothing beyond that. Beatrice preferred not to enchant their water stores in case they were attacked. Today, Efren had to agree. Removing an enchantment was far more dangerous than draining a tank and filling it with salt water.

“I’ll be there,” he said. “I’ll have Niall watch for *Starlight Specter*’s return.”

“If you plan to speak ill of Vadim, don’t come.”

Efren squinted his eyes shut to block out the disappointment in her gaze. “You both hurt me when you didn’t trust me.”

“We trusted you to understand,” she said. “If you knew of Vadim’s plans, you would have stopped him when he tried to leave. He loved you enough to stay.”

Efren scoffed. “He never loved me, but that doesn’t change my testimony. I do understand, Beatrice. I know we need him alive.”

She nodded. “Good. We will see you tomorrow, then.” She pointed upward. “Frost must have been detained. Once you’re done with the well, you and Niall are finished for the evening.”

Niall and Petri dropped out of the sky, landing a few feet away on the beach. Beatrice walked over to them and said a few words, and then she took Petri’s arm and led them further up the coast to a tall palm tree full of ripe nuts.

“You can carry someone with you?” Efren asked as Niall approached.

“Petri helped with their air weaves. I could try to carry you.”

Efren wanted no part of flying. “No, thank you. We’re not far from the well. We can walk.”

Niall sauntered up to him, his feet barely sinking into the sand. “Grandmother said we’re almost finished.”

“Almost.”

Efren slid an arm over Niall’s shoulders, awed again by how right it felt to have Niall by his side. He couldn’t define the feeling yet, but it was a happy one, a good one.

Polluting the well was easy enough. They added salt water until it was undrinkable. It would be just as quick to desalinate when the time was right if a water weaver was around to complete the task.

“I need you to promise me you’ll watch the horizon for the next few days,” Efren said once they walked past the well toward his cabin. The path was overgrown with trees that blocked most of the moonlight, but now and then, Niall’s eyes sparkled with distant radiance.

“I’ll be right next to you.” Niall leaned on his shoulder, and his breath tickled Efren’s collarbone.

Efren wanted to tell Niall they would be on separate islands until Vadim's trial ended. Niall nudged him off the path, and his mind pushed all thoughts of Vadim away. He collided with a palm tree with bark too smooth to find purchase and hold himself up. Thankfully, Niall grabbed him by his hips and held him in place. He kissed the corner of Efren's mouth, letting him get used to the softness of his lips.

Efren moaned and lunged at Niall, his hands finding purchase in Niall's shaggy curls, holding him in place while Efren plundered his mouth. He tasted sweet like berries. His tongue was hot with need as they wrestled for dominance.

Efren broke the kiss and dropped his hands to take both of Niall's. He pulled Niall back onto the path and then released him to sprint toward the blue orb already glowing on his front porch.

“Last one to the cabin's on the bottom!”

He looked back over his shoulder.

Niall grinned and took his time, walking and whistling a jaunty tune.

Efren removed the magic warding over the door. Then, he hurried to the second floor to throw open the windows and cool the room before Niall arrived.

“If you want to top, all you have to do is say so,” Niall said from the doorway.

Efren activated the light globes over his dresser with a touch.

“I'll do both before the night is over, if you'll have me.” Efren raised his arms, and Niall approached, gripping his waist and grinding his cock against Efren's. The delicious friction ramped up his desire another notch.

Niall tugged Efren's shirt from where it was tucked into his pants and pulled the hem over his head. Then, he started in on the pants, removing Efren's silk belt and laces at his fly while his tongue warred with Efren's. Efren wanted the kiss to go on forever, but he wanted so much more when Niall

pushed his pants down his thighs and the cool air caressed his cock.

Niall shoved him down on the bed, and the cool fabric kissed his skin while Niall went to work on his boot laces, unwrapping them and pulling both boots and socks off. Then, he pressed his thumbs against Efren's insteps, which felt far better than anything had a right to.

"We don't have time for a foot massage," he growled, though he wished they did.

"I thought we had all night."

"Tomorrow's a busy day." Once again, Efren felt guilty for not sharing his morning agenda with Niall. They'd planned to spend the day of rest exploring the island together. Now, the urgency of the trial and the probability of General Coryn sailing for them while they slept made those plans impossible. Efren barely recognized Aquarion once Jermain and the other earth weavers had rearranged it, but they weren't safe yet.

Niall leaned forward and captured Efren's cock in his mouth, taking away all coherent thought. He felt only the hot, wet suction around his tip and the pressure of Niall's tongue against his gland. He forced himself to relax, so he didn't come down Niall's throat too soon.

Niall pulled off him with a pop. His lips glistened with spit and his eyes were pools of darkness. It was hard to tell where his dark irises ended and the pupils began. He looked spellbound.

Efren took advantage of Niall's moment of weakness to pull him to his feet. In no time, Efren returned the favor, stripping Niall's clothes from his body, switching places with him on the bed, and giving him a little cock tease while peeling off his boots. From the way Niall's balls had drawn tight to his body and the way his cock quivered with every stroke of Efren's tongue across his sensitive tip, he was close.

"Need you in me," Niall whined. "Gods, you feel so good."

"On your back. Knees spread for me."

“Fuck,” Niall groaned as he wriggled into place on the bed. “I might come from you talking to me like that.”

“You like being ordered around?”

Niall nodded, his eyes liquid bright and reflecting the soft glow of Efren’s enchanted lamps.

Efren crawled to the headboard and dug until he found the glass vial of oil stored between it and the mattress. He sank onto his knees and let his shadow loom over Niall as he removed the cork stopper. “Hold out the hand you use to prep yourself.”

Niall squeezed his eyes shut as he offered his right hand. Efren poured a liberal dose of oil into his palm. “Coat your cock with it, and then use the rest to get yourself ready for me.”

“I’m not going to last,” Niall whined. Sweat beaded his brow as he smeared the oil over his pink cock. The head was almost purple and poking from his foreskin. Niall tugged on it before sliding his hand down his length. Then, he lifted one knee higher and worked his hand into place so he could slip his fingers inside his tight pucker.

He looked so gorgeous like that, working his fingers into himself and widening his hole for Efren. Efren tried to keep his distance, but he couldn’t resist stroking Niall’s inner thigh from his knee to his groin. Each time he approached Niall’s weeping cock, Niall whimpered and tried to thrust toward his hand. Efren loved having this effect on Niall, turning him from a confident young man to a puddle of need with barely a touch.

“One more finger,” Efren said. “I want it to be good for you.”

Niall complied, pushing another finger inside as he gripped the tip of his cock. Efren wanted to lick the bead of pre-come pooling there, but Niall was already shaking with the need to come. Efren didn’t want to set him off with a touch.

“Gods, please, I’m ready.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.”



Efren poured enough oil into his palm to coat his cock. He had ignored his own desire until now, and he was also leaking profusely. He grabbed Niall's knees and shoved them apart to take his place between them.

Niall whined and bucked his hips upward. His cock landed against his stomach with a wet splat. Gods, Efren loved that sound, and the weak, "Please," Niall uttered as Efren's cock kissed his rim.

"Relax. Breathe. Let me in." Efren accented each command with a thrust as more and more of his cock disappeared inside Niall. He had to look away from the gorgeous view. He looked so good buried inside Niall, all while Niall lay on his back, begging for more. He sank into Niall's heat with a moan.

"Please." Niall's hoarse shout moved Efren to action. He complied, easing out of Niall's hot channel only to crash into him again with a loud slap of flesh on flesh.

"Gods, yes. More."

Efren wanted to give him so much more. He wanted to give him his ship, his heart, and his whole world. He was so fucked.



## **Niall**

The intensity in Efren's gaze was hard enough to resist, but when he spoke, he pushed Niall right to the edge of bliss.

"The way you take my cock is gorgeous."

Even with his eyes closed, Niall felt Efren's gaze on him, watching him come undone without a single touch to his cock, not since he'd smeared the oil over himself. Efren found other sensitive spots, from his neck to his nipples and the perfect pressure to his abdomen so he didn't tickle. He even circled Niall's navel with his thumb, which Niall swore he

could feel in the flesh gripping Efren's cock. He was full, aching, and leaking. He needed more.

He opened his eyes to beg. "Please Efren. Touch me."

Efren swallowed hard.

Niall thought he would refuse, or maybe he would order Niall to touch himself. Instead, he sank onto one elbow. His gaze was even more intense up close as he took Niall's cock in his other hand, warm and already slick with oil. Niall wanted to move, to fuck into Efren's hand at the same time Efren thrust into his ass, but he was going to come.

"Hold on for me," Efren said. "I'm almost there. How close?"

"Very." Niall's voice was hoarse from all his babbling.

"Can you last for a count of five?"

"No!"

"You can. I know you can. You are so perfect for me."

"Gods, Efren, if you don't start counting..."

"Five."

Niall could already feel his orgasm building at the base of his spine. One more whisper of breath across his collarbone would send him over the edge.

Efren must have sensed his distress. He turned his head into the pillow. "Four."

Efren said three more words, but Niall was too far gone to know what they were. He could have been reciting the elements instead of counting down and Niall wouldn't have known the difference. Gods, Niall couldn't last, but he didn't want to disappoint Efren, either.

Efren's hot breath in his ear triggered the first tremors of his orgasm. He couldn't stop now if he wanted to. Thank fuck, Efren whispered, "Come with me, love. Let go. Let me see how wonderful I make you feel."

Niall shook with his release, and Efren held him down, soothing him with his weight on his chest as he thrust deep inside Niall and froze, his breath as unsteady as Niall's whole body. They shook and sweated through their mutual orgasms. Deep in his chest, Niall felt an outpouring of bliss and contentedness he didn't recognize as his own. Gods, he'd been trying to ignore the strange addition to his core energy, but his mind-blowing orgasm had also dismantled his emotional shields. If Efren would have told him he had feelings this deep, Niall would have assumed he was lying. Now, he felt like he was spying on Efren by knowing the depth of his feelings before the captain had spoken them.

Niall had those same big feelings of admiration, a desire that would never be completely sated, and curiosity. He wanted to know everything about Efren, and he wanted to stay by his side through storms and calm seas.

"I can feel your heartbeat." Efren tapped his own chest. "Here."

"Is that all you feel?" Niall didn't want to appear even more needy than he already felt. His voice was a weak rattle from pleading with Efren to let him come.

"It's delightful." Efren kissed Niall's cheek. "Can you feel mine?"

Niall felt so much more than Efren's heart beating beside his. He hid his disappointment by flipping Efren onto his back and kissing him until they were both half-hard and leaking again. If he lost control of his water element and a little of it fell from his eyes, so what?

"Want me to clean us up?" Efren asked. "I can't wash the comforter like Hannah could, but I can get us cooled off and clean again."

Niall nodded. He still had a lot to learn about his combined powers, and he didn't want to risk it, not when he could just as easily start the cabin on fire with a bolt of lightning.

“Hey.” Efren cupped his cheek. “You’ve come so far in a short time. When Hannah returns, they can teach you more of their tricks.”

Niall kissed Efren’s palm. He still didn’t trust his voice, and he didn’t want Efren to think he was ungrateful for the mind-blowing sex. He only wished Efren would let him in. He worried there was still someone else in Efren’s heart, making it impossible for him to love again.

Once they were clean and beneath a new comforter on the bed, Niall lay awake. Despite his long strokes down Efren’s arm, the man snored beside him, oblivious to his distress. He wished Efren was awake to allay his worries.

Niall hadn’t experienced anything like the ache in his chest before. If this was what love felt like, he wanted no part of it, especially if Efren could never love him back.

Efren said he didn’t love Vadim, but Niall couldn’t imagine feeling the way he felt about Efren and then losing it. Yes, Vadim had hurt Efren, but Vadim had apologized.

Niall had left them alone while he’d been off learning his fire element. Maybe they’d resolved their differences without him. It wouldn’t take long for Efren to realize he was still in love with Vadim, and he would return to him, leaving Niall with these unrequited feelings he didn’t know how to handle.

Niall swallowed back the pain lodged in his throat and wiped at the tears falling from his eyes. Though he was new to love, he wasn’t a child. He understood what was expected of him as a member of Efren’s crew. If Efren kicked him out of his bed, Niall would go without a fight. He wanted the best for Efren, even if it would hurt to see him with Vadim, or anyone else.

As he lay there, his thoughts became more vivid. He couldn’t tell reality from dreams, especially when Efren startled him awake with a hand on his cock, already coated with oil. The captain took them both in hand and stroked until Niall was a panting, writhing mess.

The splash of Efren's cum against Niall's chest and the growl he uttered pushed Niall over the edge again. The sharp barb of doubt returned to his chest as he regained his breath.

"Sleep," Efren mumbled. "We need to be up early."

As much as Niall wanted to obey the command, his mind was still reeling with questions about the future. "Why?"

"The trial."

The barb dug deeper. Efren had said he would take Niall around the island on the day of rest, but now he would attend Vadim's trial on Horseshoe Island instead.

Niall buried his head in his pillow and fell into an exhausted sleep.

Moments later, or so he thought, Efren shook him awake. The sun had risen.

"We need to be at the dock in fifteen minutes. We'll skip the bath today, if you'll allow me to freshen us up."

Niall thought he could do the self-cleaning spell himself now, but he still wasn't ready to try it. He reveled in the sensation of Efren's water caress, even if it was a cursory cleaning.

In his dreams, Niall had convinced himself he could show Efren how much he cared. He would stay by his side and prove he was a far better companion, friend, and lover than Vadim. It wouldn't take long before Efren would forget all about the death weaver, or so he hoped.

# Chapter 21

## Efren

They arrived at the dock just as Beatrice pulled the skiff alongside the mooring post.

“Good morning.” She waved. “Is Niall coming with us?”

Niall had tossed and turned half the night. After Efren had tried to calm him down with a mutual hand job, Niall had turned away from him and buried his head beneath a pillow for the rest of the night. At least he’d stopped moving, but it hadn’t saved his mood from sinking once again.

“Why can’t I come with you?” Niall frowned at him. “I’m part of your crew now. I should be by your side while the others are gone.”

Efren ignored Niall’s anger and latched onto his words. “You are a key member of my crew. As such, I need you to stay here and wait for Olivia to arrive on the south shore. I’ll have Petri watch for her from the north. One of you will point her to the new docks to the west.”

Niall dropped his gaze to the planks at their feet and nodded.

“We expect Coryn to sail from the east,” Efren continued, “but she might be fast enough to attack at sea. If *Starlight Specter* hasn’t returned by noon and you’ve received no message from Tovey, I need you and Petri to take the skiff to find them. If you hear shouting or explosions, return to Horseshoe Island to get us.”

“There must be someone else you can ask.” Niall’s voice was low enough his grandmother couldn’t hear him over the water lapping against the dock.

“You’re the only member of my crew who’s still on the island.”

Niall opened his mouth, possibly to argue, so Efren rushed ahead. “You’re the only one I trust.”

Niall usually puffed up with pride when Efren paid him a compliment, but his shoulders sagged instead. "I'll do it," he mumbled as he turned away from the dock.

Before Efren could reach for him, Niall straightened his shoulders and marched away. He headed south along the path that would take him to the back of the barracks and the beach beyond.

"You've made my grandson unhappy," Beatrice chided as he, Frost, and the children Niall had rescued boarded the skiff. She motioned him to sit across from her at the front of the small boat. Behind them, Frost started to walk the children through a guided meditation to calm them for the ride.

"I don't know what I did wrong," Efren said. "I thought we'd shared something special, but then he tossed and turned all night."

He expected Beatrice to pounce with an inquiry, but she silently stared at him until his cheeks burned. He looked away. "I'll talk to him."

"You will," she agreed. "He thinks you still love Vadim."

Efren could still feel the scar tissue over the gaping hole Vadim had rent through his heart, but it had mostly healed. He and the death weaver were speaking, which was unexpected and welcome, but he would never harbor the same desire for the man. Niall had replaced Vadim in Efren's thoughts.

"I don't love Vadim. I sometimes wonder if I ever did."

"You did." She patted his knee and pushed the skiff into deeper waters with a burst of wind in their sail. "It might not be the strongest of which you are capable, but it was the strongest emotion you'd known at the time. You've changed, Efren. I only hope you realize that before you break Niall's heart."

Oh, he knew. His entire mood had changed since he'd met Niall. Now, he caught himself grinning like a fool for no reason beyond something witty Niall had said. If he didn't find

a way to hide it, Olivia would notice the moment she set eyes on him again. The strangest thing was, he didn't want to shirk from his crew's observation. They'd all conspired to push them together in the first place.

When he roused himself from his thoughts, they were already halfway to the barely recognizable island to the north. Efren eased the skiff's passage through the water, and soon they swung around to the northwestern side. He and Frost helped everyone else to shore and then grounded the skiff, concealing her beneath the underbrush to the north of the brook.

Beatrice provided them a simple path through the island's overgrown flora, and soon they were at the back entrance to the cave system that would take them to the council meeting hall beneath the giant sentinel oak. Efren no longer remembered the path by heart, especially since the earth weavers could shift them at will whenever they feared a breach. Jermain knew the way and led them to the meeting room within ten minutes of landing.

The banquet table was set with cold meats and pastries, a hearty breakfast without being overly fancy or wasteful. Frost helped the children fill their plates, but he took nothing for himself.

Neither did Efren. He wondered if Frost felt as nervous as he did. Efren would only vomit the contents of his stomach when Martiz asked Vadim the hard questions, like who gave the order to hang Willamina and her crew, and why it had to be him.

Efren didn't want Vadim to die, but that didn't mean he loved him. He enjoyed spending time with Niall far more. It seemed strange to put a name to his feelings when they were so new, but Beatrice was right. He needed to give the young man a reason to stay. He was in the prime of his youth, and gorgeous besides. He could attract anyone he wanted, but for some reason he'd set his sights on Efren. He might not deserve Niall's attention in the first place, but he would damn well fight to keep it.



Maybe it wasn't love, but it had the potential to be deeper than any of Efren's other relationships with his family, his crew, or any of his former lovers. Niall had quickly become his closest confidant. Efren thought he'd never trust anyone again after Vadim's betrayal, but Niall was easy to trust. Efren had no choice now that he could feel the beat of Niall's heart and the raw emotion churning in the tiny piece of his core he'd given Efren for safekeeping. Those feelings had nearly overwhelmed him the night before, and he'd buried them deeper within his core.

Fuck. He'd hidden from Niall's emotions. No wonder Niall was upset. Niall had given him a gift, and he'd refused to open it.

Efren sifted through his core, searching for Niall's essence. Instead of locking it away, he embraced it, letting Niall's emotions sink into him as though they were his own. Sadness pricked the corners of his eyes. Anger followed, with a hint of regret.

Efren wanted to find Niall, to hold him and take away every hint of doubt and ounce of frustration. He didn't have a name for how he felt about Niall yet, but he needed to tell him it would last. If anyone needed stability and order in his life, it was Niall, after so many years of poor treatment and being told he was inadequate. Niall was perfect, and Efren wanted to spend the rest of his days proving that to him.

That sounded a lot like love.

Efren didn't have time to think on it.

Martiz hauled Vadim into the makeshift courtroom. The death weaver's hair hung messy and loose, half free of the leather cord tied at his nape. His white shirt, the same he'd worn the day before, was askew, the laces undone, with one shoulder exposed and the other side tight against his neck.

Efren didn't like what he saw there. Vadim's skin was perfect, completely healed where before there had been a puckered scar in the shape of a barbed arrow point. The shirt was also pulled from his pants in front but tucked in the back.

Martiz shoved Vadim into the lone chair in the middle of the room. It faced a line of five folding chairs set up for the council. The rest of the room was lined with more folding chairs for the audience. Efren slipped into the front row behind Vadim and chose the seat behind him and to the right, where he could lean forward to talk to Vadim. Martiz took his seat, and Vadim blocked Efren from his sight.

“Did he hurt you?” Efren whispered.

“My pride. I need him alive more than I want him dead.” Vadim bowed his head, and Efren saw a hint of a grin through his hair. “Bastard got what was coming to him. His dick won’t be very pretty for a while.”

“You bit him.”

“Aye, and he stabbed me for it. The bastard never knows when to quit. He healed too much. I’ll need you to testify to that fact. Or are you here to condemn me?”

“I’m here for the truth, Vadim. Nothing more and nothing less. You can count on me for that.”

Vadim nodded. “Thank you. That’s enough.”

Efren’s heart ached for the man he once knew. He didn’t know what all Vadim had been through the last five years, but it had made him even more cynical and rebellious. Where Vadim had been terrified of Martiz before, now, he was belligerent. Taking on the council member rather than taking Beatrice’s offered plea deal, no matter how unpleasant, could mean a death sentence. Efren couldn’t let that happen. Personal feelings aside, they needed Vadim to defeat Coryn.



## **Niall**

Niall’s connection to Efren brightened like the sun emerging from cloud cover. Efren’s muted emotions were now coming through like shouts across a still pond. Niall wished he

knew what to make of them. Was Efren even thinking about him while they were apart, or was he thinking about Vadim?

With Efren an island away, Niall had no way of knowing. He could only guess, and that made him more anxious about Vadim's trial. He strangled the little ball at his core, the part connected to Efren, so he could think again. He watched the waves roll over the beach, shallower each time as the tide went out.

He didn't know how long he'd watched the horizon before voices behind him drew his attention. He heard Petri's tenor, and the distinctive trill of Olivia's laugh.

"There's our newest crew member," Olivia said. "Efren had you watching the direct route. We got distracted by a ship following us, so we went the long way."

"A ship followed you?" Petri asked. "I didn't see anyone on the horizon."

"It was the strangest thing," she said. "It disappeared. One moment it was on the horizon, and the next, it wasn't."

"Illusion?" Niall asked. Before he and his grandmother had moved and reshaped Horseshoe Island, he hadn't believed it was possible.

"Illusions still have a wake. This left no trace."

Petri turned back toward the trees. "We can talk about it over breakfast. I'm starving. I got the kids something to eat before the trial, but nothing for myself."

"Vadim's trial?" Olivia asked. "So soon?"

"They moved it up after Grandmother got stuck in the spectral trap," Niall said. "Vadim insisted."

"That reminds me," Petri said. "I need to wake Klaus. Vadim wanted me to keep him safe until he's needed to testify."

"Keep him safe?" Niall asked. "What did he think would happen?"

“Martiz.” Petri’s dark chuckle made Niall’s skin crawl. “There’s a reason Coryn hates healers.”

“They make formidable interrogators,” Olivia said. “They don’t need consent to hurt with an implement and then heal with a thought.”

“That’s terrifying,” Niall said. “Martiz is leading Vadim’s trial?”

“The council won’t let him use torture, but being verbally interrogated by him is almost as bad.”

Olivia shared story after story, some plausible, others outright ridiculous, about Martiz’s bedside manner while they waited for Petri to finish making their breakfast. “But you didn’t hear that from me,” she said. “How did you learn healing magic?” Olivia asked Niall. “Last I knew, Martiz was feeding you a line of bullshit about how he couldn’t go any slower.”

“Grandmother taught me.”

Olivia nodded. “She’s free, then?”

He nodded. Before he could elaborate, Petri handed him a serving of vegetable stew in another delicious-smelling bread bowl. He nodded his thanks and turned back to Olivia. “Coryn was able to access her mind and speak through her mouth. As soon as we’re finished here, Petri and I should—”

“Shh,” Petri said. “Smell that?”

“Fire!” Olivia pointed. Thick smoke curled through the trees in the direction from which they’d come.

“The barracks,” Petri said. “Thank the gods no one is there today.” They dropped the wooden barricade over the food stand’s open counter and started running toward Vadim’s shack. Somehow, they’d still managed to grab two bowls of stew and ran without spilling them to kick the bottom of the door and shout for Klaus to wake up.

Klaus didn’t answer.

“We need to get back to the ship,” Olivia said. “From the water, we can get a better view of what’s happening and

sail to Horseshoe to warn the others.”

“Fuck!” Petri dropped to their knees and deposited a bread bowl on the stoop. “Klaus, if you’re in there, here’s a bowl of stew for you.”

Petri ran back to Olivia’s side, and they rushed into the thick underbrush in the direction of the new docks to the west.

“I can’t leave him,” Niall said when they turned and motioned for him to follow. He and Klaus weren’t exactly friends, not anymore, but leaving him for Coryn, or whoever had decided to burn the barracks, wasn’t an option.

“Meet us at the docks,” Olivia said.

Niall kicked at the door the same way Petri had. “Klaus? The beach is on fire! We need to go!”

He thought he heard someone stirring inside, but the sound of a twig snapping behind him caught his attention. Too late, he tried to turn and was shoved up against the side of the shack. The bread bowl in his hands smashed against the door and fell to the ground upside down. Thick brown gravy poured onto the cobblestone path.

“What do we have here?”

Another shove to his kidneys. Niall grunted as something cold snapped over his wrists. He reached for his elements in an attempt to free himself, hoping one of the eight would come to his call, but he was completely cut off from all of them. When he rubbed the material against his wrist, it felt like the rope they’d used to bind his grandmother.

The shack’s door creaked open inches from where his cheek was pressed to the wall. “Niall?”

“Two for the price of one!” The person’s raspy voice darkened to something malicious.

Klaus bent over and picked up the unbroken bowl of stew with a nonchalance Niall envied. “Fuck off, Brigham. I’d come willingly, if asked.”

“You want me to believe Vadim is the only traitor in our midst?” Brigham I feel his power all over you. Not buying

it for a second.”

Klaus paled at that, but he still took a swig of stew from the bowl. Niall hadn't had a chance to taste his before it spilled at his feet.

Niall felt silly for losing his skirmish with Brigham, who was shorter than Klaus and almost as skinny. He had a mop of blond hair and small eyes set too far apart. He sneered at Klaus, but then his eyes shifted. “She's got a new death weaver, you know. Spooky bitch. Makes Vadim seem downright friendly.”

Niall wanted to argue that Vadim was friendly, but that wouldn't do them any favors. He kept his mouth shut and tried to placate Brigham with a nod and a smile.

Instead of cuffs, Brigham tied Klaus's arms behind his back with a simple rope and looped that rope between Niall's hands before leading them both toward the beach. Niall tried to resist, but Klaus collided with his shoulder. “We'll get out of this,” he whispered. “Trust me.”

Niall didn't trust Klaus. That was the problem.

The brick face of the barracks still stood, but the thatched roof was gone, and the wooden supports were still smoldering.

“Where the fuck is Martiz?” Coryn's low alto echoed inside the barracks. The sound took Niall back to the gallows, the night his parents hanged.

The general herself charged out the back door. Limp brown hair hugged her face like a helmet. Her shimmering gray cloak smoldered along the bottom edge from dragging through the hot ash and coals inside. The lining of her cloak was black, as were the rest of her clothes and her boots, giving her the appearance of a storm cloud.

“You.” Her voice rumbled like thunder. She grabbed the rope from Brigham and pulled on it hard enough to bring Niall crashing to his knees. Klaus tripped over him and lunged forward, only to be caught by the throat.

Coryn lifted him to his feet with a gloved hand. “Where is Vadim?”

“I don’t know! He didn’t tell me because he knew you would come.”

She released him, and Klaus fell on his knees beside Niall. He raised his bound hands to his chest in supplication. “Please. I didn’t know he was a traitor. I thought we were sailing to Stony Eel Island. I swear it. Once we were captured, I told them where to find the trap, just like you wanted.”

Niall’s attention snapped to Klaus. “What did you say?”

“Seekers can’t see spectral traps, not even a grand seeker like me.” Klaus stared at the grass beneath them. “I lied, and Vadim believed me.”

The revelation startled Niall to silence, and Coryn laughed. “You had this one fooled, at least. Introduce me to your friend.”

“We’ve met,” Niall said through his clenched jaw. “I’m Niall Minas.”

“The potter’s apprentice.” Coryn curtsied to him with a little flounce of her cloak. “So wonderful to meet you, Niall. I am sorry for your parents’ poor choices. They would still be alive if they would have rejoined my navy.”

Niall didn’t believe that for an instant, but he hid his distaste.

A runner approached from the west. “*Starlight Specter* pulled anchor and is sailing away.”

“Let her go. We’ve got everything we need right here. If I’m not mistaken, this is the weaver who broke my trap.” She stepped behind Niall as she removed her glove. He felt a slight tug on his cuffs, and then she returned to face him, tugging her glove back onto her hand. “Yes. You’ll do nicely. You might be able to pull the artifact from the ground by yourself.”

After what Vadim had said about the artifact she was digging up on Stony Eel Island, he doubted he would survive.



# Chapter 22

## Efren

Efren sat close enough he could hear every syllable of Vadim's gravelly baritone as he recited his name, occupation, and where he'd been for the last five years. The people beside and behind him in the audience shifted uncomfortably and asked their neighbors what he said. Tired of the ruckus, Beatrice finally weaved a bit of air to amplify his voice for the crowd.

"We all know who you are and what you do," she said. "Repeat where you've been."

"Since I left *Starlight Specter*, I've been head of the emperor's security detail in Hearthstone. Six months ago, General Coryn sent me on a mission to recruit new weavers, mainly earth, for a secret initiative on Stony Eel Island."

"What does she want there?" Beatrice asked.

"It's irrelevant," Martiz countered. "General Coryn isn't here to answer for her crimes. Vadim has serious charges against him. We need to address those, instead."

"As you say." Beatrice bowed her head with a gracious smile and motioned for him to continue.

"I thought you of all people would want to know what happened to Willamina." Martiz looked smug as the audience around Efren erupted.

"I know what happened to my daughter." Her words silenced them again. "She stopped running and faced Coryn the same way I would if she dared to face me. But do go on and ask Vadim about his role."

Vadim didn't wait for Martiz's next question. "I gave Willamina the option to run, and she refused."

From Martiz's sour look, he knew he'd lost the crowd's support.

“I would have told Coryn they’d slipped past me,” Vadim continued, “but Willamina recognized the danger for all of us. Coryn wanted a spectral weaver. I made her promise she would hang Willamina and her entire crew before she interrogated them.”

“How?” Martiz asked.

“I told her Willamina had killed my brother in a sea battle, and I demanded revenge.”

“You always were a little lying brat.” Elsie’s high whine carried over the crowd’s murmurs.

“She didn’t change her mind, even when she knew Willamina was my daughter?”

“She knew killing your daughter would hurt you. She hoped you would come for her.”

“She wanted to squash our rebellion once and for all.” Beatrice nodded. “How disappointed she must have been. How did you protect Niall?”

“We lied. Said he was a boy they’d taken from a shipwreck when he was a baby.”

“She believed you?” Martiz sounded doubtful.

“It was easy enough when the boy had no power. Her seeker declared him mundane.”

Martiz continued to ask questions, and Vadim answered with the same automatic precision.

Finally, Martiz asked, “Why did you report Efren’s crew?”

“Beatrice ordered it.”

Efren had guessed as much but hearing the words from Vadim’s mouth cut deep. Beatrice had given the order, but Vadim had followed it, effectively ending their relationship with a split so final Efren still felt betrayed.

“Coryn had set up blockades around the Equis Islands. We worried she would catch me on board and discover the

truth, that I was his first mate and we were the dreaded pirate ship captained by a death weaver.”

“You could have told Efren to hide you in the hold,” Martiz suggested, “or slip you overboard in a water bubble.”

“She’s a siphon,” Vadim said. “She can harvest set weaves and enchantments, pull their power into herself and dissolve them. I didn’t want to drown.”

Martiz was poised to ask another question when Vadim leapt to his feet. The action shoved his chair back into Efren’s knee so hard it stung. “She’s here.” He turned to the east. “No. They’re leaving.”

“Sit down,” Martiz growled. “Stop trying to buy time with your ridiculous claims.”

“You can feel my link with Klaus, can you not?” Vadim marched to Martiz’s chair and grabbed his hand.

Martiz hissed and tried to pull away, but when his hand touched Vadim’s chest, he frowned. “He’s moving away at a fast clip.”

“General Coryn’s taken him.”

Efren had been ignoring his connection with Niall since the trial started. Now, he wondered if Olivia and *Starlight Specter* had returned, and if Niall and Petri were safe.

“This is your fault,” Martiz said. “You were supposed to break the link with him before your trial.”

Vadim took a step back and let Martiz’s hand drop to his lap. He turned on his heel and met Efren’s gaze. Somehow, his gloved hands remained at his sides, though his fingers twitched along the seams of his pants.

“We need the seeker,” Beatrice said. “That’s final. We’ll postpone the trial until we’ve dealt with Coryn.” She hopped to her feet and approached Vadim. Before he could right his chair, she placed a hand on his arm and guided him to the door. “Don’t worry. We’ll get Klaus back.”

She looked back over her shoulder and motioned for Efren to follow. Then, she turned to the rest of the council.

“Well, are you coming, or not?”

The sunlight seemed overly harsh after the relative darkness of the cave. Vadim winced as though the light physically hurt him. Efren wished he had his tricorn hat, but he'd left it on his dresser that morning, thinking he would be indoors for the better part of the day.

“Captain Efren!” Olivia's voice rang through the dense brush around them, coming from everywhere at once. “They've taken Niall!”

Where before Efren had been eager to help Vadim, now, he was rabid. He would tear Coryn limb from limb if even a hair on Niall's head was out of place, or if he had a single scratch.

“I can track them,” Vadim said. “How soon can you sail?”

“Captain!” Olivia rushed at him through the trees. She latched onto his arm and began pulling him toward the lifeboat anchored off the beach. His hat took up a seat on the bench. In the distance, *Starlight Specter* was already turned to the south, ready to slip between the two islands in pursuit as soon as they were aboard.

“I'm coming with you,” Beatrice said. “You'll need all the air support you can get.”

“Petri's on board, and Milton, our newest recruit, has already earned his weight in precious jewels with how quickly we returned from Glamiere.”

“Less talking, more rowing,” Vadim said. He was already knee deep in water and striding toward the rowboat. With a tremendous splash, he hopped into the boat and almost flipped out the other side. Efren and Olivia helped him get situated, and then he pulled Beatrice, Olivia, and Efren aboard.

Once again, Efren ended up with the oars while Beatrice used her skirt as a makeshift sail to steer them toward the ship. In no time, they had the tiny vessel tucked away on deck and situated Beatrice at a makeshift wind station.

It was strange to be aboard the ship without Niall now that he'd gotten used to the young man's presence. As he stepped to the wheel and followed Vadim's vague coordinates of, "a smidgen starboard," he wished Niall were there instead of Vadim.

Not for the first time that morning, he wondered if Niall could feel his emotions the same way he felt Niall's. He dredged their connection to the foremost of his consciousness and Niall's fear blossomed brightly in his chest like an exploding arrow. He surrounded the little bubble in his core with all the calm he could muster, and a single thought. "*We're coming for you. Hold on.*"

"You feel it, too," Vadim said after a quarter hour of silence. "That's the third time you've course-corrected without any help from me."

"Niall and I shared a piece of our cores with each other when he freed Beatrice from the trap," Efren said.

"You don't need me at all."

Efren cut his eyes at Vadim, expecting him to fake petulance. He smiled instead, a big fake smile showing all his teeth. Then, he sauntered portside and held out his hand to let the giant arcs of spray wet his fingers.

Only then did Efren notice Vadim's gloves were off.



## Niall

Brigham, the seeker who had originally cuffed Niall and tied him to Klaus, left them in a cell in the hold. Its only amenity was a round porthole window. The space was no wider than its door and far more cramped than Niall's prison cell on Vadim's ship. The cot beneath the window wasn't big enough for one man to sleep comfortably, let alone two. Niall supposed that was to be expected. Coryn's ship was smaller and faster than *Starlight Specter*, which didn't leave much room for prisoners.

“They won’t keep us together like this.” Klaus dug in his pocket and grinned as he flashed a hairpin in the beam of light through the port hole. He motioned for Niall to turn with his back to the light. That put him too close to the cell door. Someone was coming.

“Fuck.”

The cuffs dug into his skin as Klaus continued to curse. The hairpin made a horrible screeching sound inside the lock.

“I’ve almost got it,” Klaus said. “Then, you need to get us out of here.”

The footfalls got louder, and Niall jerked his hands away, shoving Klaus onto the small built-in cot big enough for only one man on his side with his knees pulled to his chest. Klaus’s head hit the side of the ship, and he winced.

“Sorry,” Niall whispered.

“Good thing you boys are having fun.” An earth weaver with striking blue eyes and an overlarge nose had stopped in front of their cell door. His stark features were almost comical, thanks to his severe top knot, which pulled his skin tight to his skull. “No one wants to bunk with a traitor, so you’re safe for now, seeker.”

“I’m no traitor,” Klaus muttered.

“I’d tell you to wait until we get to Stony Eel Island, but we won’t have much time for fun there, either. You’ll be lucky if you have a chance to warm anyone’s bed before Coryn ships you to Hearthstone to hang by order of the emperor. If the wind weavers get bored, they might toss a noose around your neck and tie you to the anchor instead.”

Niall didn’t like the way the man stared at Klaus like he was a piece of meat. “What about me?” he asked to draw his attention.

The earth weaver looked him over and scoffed. “You’ll be lucky to last a week on Stony Eel. Your weaves are too weak to make much of a difference. Coryn thinks highly of you, but you’ll burn out like the rest. We’ll be tossing you to the sharks within the month.”

Niall wanted to see the island, to get a better idea of what had Coryn so bewitched, but he worried the island was its own spectral trap, something that would pull him in and never let him go. It had been strong enough to entrance Vadim, even though his death weaves would do nothing to raise the object from its island base.

The earth weaver gave Klaus another once over. “I wish we had more time. We’ll be stuck waiting for the tides until almost midday tomorrow, and then Coryn will have us mining all night. You’re lucky sleep is more valuable than a quick fuck.”

He finally left them alone. Niall listened to his footfalls get fainter until they changed pitch with each step up the flight of stairs toward the deck.

“They treat seekers as nothing more than cabin boys.” Klaus flipped onto his side on the bed, his arms around his knees.

“I don’t want them to hurt you, but I wish to the gods I didn’t have to share this tiny space with you.” Niall glared at his former friend, and all his anger returned. “You could have killed my grandmother and me! No wonder you were so fucking apologetic when she got trapped. You could have kept your mouth shut, and we never would have found it!”

Klaus stared at him, and a tear dripped to the mattress. “Coryn promised to let me go once I helped her spring the trap. I had to try.” He sniffled and wiped his nose. “If I wasn’t tied to Vadim, I would have stowed away when Olivia went to Glamiere. I need to find a genuine healer, not the farces we have here.”

“I’m sorry.” Niall closed his eyes and tried to put himself in Klaus’s situation. Niall didn’t want to die, either, especially not now that he’d found Efren. Klaus had always been a fighter and a survivor. At the orphanage, he’d been small for his age, and finding a bigger kid who was also young and naïve had worked well for both of them. Niall was the muscle, and Klaus was the brains that kept them safe from bullies, cutthroats, and worse.

“I wish you would have come to me about your illness,” Niall said. “We were close.”

Klaus shook his head. “We haven’t been close for years. You’ve been so wrapped up in your work. You never leave Merchant Row, not even for a birthday drink. Besides, what could you have done? Master Othelio never paid you what you’re worth.”

“Still, I would have listened.”

Klaus nodded. “I wanted to, several times. I knocked on the pottery shop door the night an air weaver left me on the docks to die, but I ran away when I heard Master Othelio.”

Niall remembered cleaning blood from the walls and floor of the shop’s alcove one morning. So much blood.

“Vadim was different.” Klaus gazed into the distance. “He told his crew I was off limits. He had a bunk built for me on that giant ship of his, so I didn’t have to sleep on the floor.”

“That was kind of him.”

Klaus started rocking on his shoulder, hands brushing over his shins as though he were cold. All thoughts of escape had fled.

Niall wasn’t ready to forgive Klaus for abandoning him, turning him over to Vadim, and now for setting a trap for his grandmother. He didn’t know what to do. He leaned against the wall closest to Klaus’s feet and slid to sit against it.

“Fuck,” Klaus said. “I’m so sorry, Niall.”

“You were on a ship all those weeks I couldn’t find you in Landale,” Niall said instead.

“We made a quick trip to Stony Eel for *Imperial Fool*’s maiden voyage. What they’re doing to weavers there ... it’s not all Coryn.” Klaus slid his feet back to the floor and sat up. “I’m scared, Niall.”

“Me, too.”

“No,” Klaus said. He stood and fished the hairpin out of his pocket once more. “I’m scared for you. I don’t know



why she's been pushing to find a spectral weaver, but she wanted the elders on Aquarion. Now that she's found you ... the earth weaver's right. You won't survive whatever she has planned."

"That's why you're going to get me out of here."

Niall turned so his bound hands were in the strip of sunlight through the porthole again. It took several minutes and a lot of cursing, but Klaus finally unlocked the cuffs. Niall removed them and rubbed his hands together, and he was stunned when Klaus slipped them back over his wrists and locked them shut, looser this time, but still tight enough to block his power.

"Vadim and Efren are coming to get us," Klaus said. "Vadim was blocking me during his trial, but now I can talk to him again."

Niall missed most of what Klaus had said after "Efren." He dug through his core to find his connection to the captain and sighed with relief when it was still there. Efren was furious, and he was coming for Niall. He couldn't sense much more beyond that, but it was enough to give him hope.

"They need time," Klaus said. "They have more wind weavers with Beatrice and Petri, but not as many as this ship. They'll catch up to us when we approach the island, and then we can make our move."

"Until then, you want me to wear these?"

"They're loose," Klaus said, sliding the cuff from Niall's right hand to demonstrate. "You can slide out of them any time you want, but I don't recommend it. The galley's right there." Klaus pointed to the wall in the opposite direction from where the earth weaver had gone.

"You expect them to bring us food?"

"You need to keep up your strength," Klaus said. "They might ignore me, but it's in their best interest to give you three meals a day so you'll be ready to work heavy magic when the time comes." He shrugged. "They'll probably forget about me. They usually do."

“I could let you out of here, at least.” Niall slipped one of the cuffs from his hand. He already felt more like himself.

“Where would I go?” Klaus asked. “If they catch me alone where I’m not supposed to be, that’s an invitation for bad things to happen, and Coryn won’t even care if they kill me. She’s got Brigham.”

“You two know each other.” It wasn’t a question. Their banter suggested Brigham and Klaus despised each other.

“He’s the one who came for me and claimed me for the empire. He says he has grand seeker abilities, which means he can sense other seekers, suppressors, siphons, and enchanters. I think that’s bullshit.”

“Didn’t you say you could sense Olivia?”

“Yes, but that’s because I am a grand seeker. He’s not. He doesn’t give off the same vibes I do.”

Niall tried to hide his grin against his shoulder. Klaus had the same competitive scorn for other seekers as he did for other pleasure workers. “How did he find you?”

“I went to a healer who uses drugs to hide the fact that they can weave. I was so delirious, I told them I could see their magic. Brigham snagged the healer, and then he brought me in. Asshole likes being passed around to the sailors, too. He begs them to be rough with him.” Klaus gave his shoulders a shake. “Gives me the willies.”

Niall couldn’t blame him, but he didn’t want to lose Klaus to his bad memories. “When it’s time, what should I do to break out?”

“We can’t leave Coryn with a ship,” Niall said. “She won’t think twice about destroying the *Specter*. She left them alone because she needed to get you to Stony Eel Island. Once she drops us off, she’ll return to Aquarion to raid the island and sink every pirate ship she can find.”

“There are other pirate ships?” Niall only knew of one other.

“Olivia left messages at the taverns in Luminest, calling the others home for a meeting. They’ll be sitting ducks.”

“Vadim’s trial?”

“Possibly. Beatrice gave her the order before she was caught in the trap.” Klaus folded his hands together so hard his knuckles were white.

“Do you think Vadim will win?”

“He’s guilty as fuck,” Klaus said. “The question is, can he talk them into seeing things his way?” He sounded more unhappy with each word. “I never expected to care so much whether he lives or dies. If he dies, I die, so at least my worries would be over.”

Klaus closed his eyes. After a moment of silence, he snorted a laugh. “He can hear everything I think. He’s telling me not to be so morbid.” He flashed a fake smile at Niall. “I’m sorry for being morbid.”

“It’s fine,” Niall said. “I can’t imagine what you’re going through.”

Klaus bowed his head and closed his eyes again. Niall thought their conversation was over.

He was startled when Klaus said, “They’re staying steady with us, and he’s surprised Efren’s water is powerful enough to gain on her wind weavers.”

“You can hear his thoughts, too?”

“Most of the time. He can’t shield from me the way he can from you.” Klaus blushed. “It helps when I’m sleeping or trying to sleep. That’s why I stayed in bed so late this morning. I wanted to avoid the boring bits of his trial.”

Niall couldn’t remember the last time he’d heard one of Vadim’s thoughts without Vadim purposefully sending them to him. He’d surprised the death weaver on *Imperial Fool*, but they’d only traded conversations since then. No more eavesdropping. Niall wondered how it worked, and if he could learn how to block other death weavers from his mind, too.

“He’s not at all what I expected,” Klaus whispered. “He’s unlike anyone I’ve ever met. A pirate and a gentleman.”

Klaus sat up and tucked himself into a corner of the cot. “I never thought I’d live to see a pirate ship, let alone a pirate island. Your stories gave me so much hope when we were kids.”

Niall nodded, too choked up with emotion to speak. He couldn’t forgive Klaus, not yet, but he had a much better understanding of how he’d ended up working for the empire. It was pure luck that he’d found Vadim instead of another of Coryn’s captains.

Klaus motioned to the other side of the cot with his chin. “Have a seat. It might be a while.”

Niall sat.

# Chapter 23

## Efren

They'd been gaining on Coryn's ship through the afternoon, but then she started to pull away again in the evening. Efren had asked their newest recruit, Milton, to take a break until sunset on the off-chance Coryn would let her weavers rest overnight.

"She's got them working in twelve-hour shifts," Vadim confirmed when Tovey and Milton returned to take Petri and Stan's places. Even with Tovey's added strength, they lost more ground.

"Stan could send a diversion at dawn," Efren said.

"What are you going to do, hurl a ball of seaweed at them?" Vadim shook his head. "Nothing will slow her down until she reaches the inlet. Then, she'll have to wait for the tide to roll in before the water will be deep enough for her to make it through Reaper's Gate."

"Are we close enough to catch her?"

Vadim grinned. "You're the water weaver. How long before high tide?"

Gods, Efren was tired. He'd missed that detail. "For Stony Eel's inlet?" He sought his connection with the waves and then found the distant shore. "They won't make it overnight, but they might catch it mid-morning."

"We'll reach them by mid-morning, then. I'll wake Stan, Petri, and Bea early."

"We'll need them on the way back," Efren said.

"We'll have Niall." Vadim said it with certainty, almost as though he was trying to reassure Efren they would arrive in time.

"About Niall ..." Efren realized his mistake when he couldn't finish the sentence. He thought it would be easy to explain his relationship with Niall to Vadim. His former first

mate had been his sounding board before they'd been lovers. He didn't see why that should be any different now, except it was. Efren's tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth and the words wouldn't come out.

"Oh no." The whites of Vadim's eyes flashed in the moonlight. "Is this where you confess you still have feelings for me, and you can't fall for that sweet young man who's been mistreated by the world?"

"No!"

"If you do still have feelings for me, I'm sorry." Vadim sucked in a breath and released it slowly before he continued. "I know how that feels, to be in love with someone who will never love you back."

The nerve of that man. "I didn't mean you," Efren said. "Gods, why does everyone think I'm still in love with you?"

"You're not." Vadim heaved an audible sigh of relief. "Thank the gods."

"You're still one of my oldest friends," Efren said, the weight of truth hanging in the air between them. He had missed Vadim's friendship over the last five years far more than he'd missed the man in his bed.

"After everything I've done," Vadim said, "I don't deserve friends."

"I'm not saying I forgive you completely." He couldn't, not yet. There was still a niggling voice in his head screaming Vadim was a traitor and a murderer. He could ignore it until he had Niall by his side again.

"That's fair."

"I understand why you did what you did." Vadim had good intentions, though his methods had always been a little reckless. "I want to help you save Hugo from Coryn, and possibly salvage our empire."

Vadim held out his hand, and Efren shook it. "Thank you. You are more than I deserve."

“Klaus is ten times braver than I am.” Efren thought back to Vadim’s claim that he was in love with someone who would never love him back. “He allowed you to form a life link with him.”

“Death is a powerful coercion tactic. Just ask Martiz.” Vadim shrugged. “As much as I’d like Klaus to choose me, I didn’t factor into his decision.” His face fell as he studied the boards at their feet.

“Maybe once you have a chance to heal him, you can try—”

“No.”

The word was so soft, Efren almost missed it over the waves.

“I don’t deserve him. I don’t deserve anyone after what I’ve done.”

“I don’t believe that,” Efren said.

“You can’t forgive me.”

“Not for everything.” Efren admitted. “Not yet. You could have told me your secret mission to save Hugo. You could have explained it was Willamina or us, and that she chose to face Coryn. You could have trusted me, but you didn’t.”

“But Willamina, and—”

“I believe you,” Efren said. “Niall was there, and he believes you.”

“Gods.” Vadim sank against the railing. “I never expected him to understand. He was just a boy, and his parents trusted me to take care of him. He was so distraught, and I left him in an orphanage! How could I explain, or bring him aboard your ship, or... gods. I am a sorry excuse for a caregiver.”

Niall’s resilience inspired Efren to attempt forgiveness, but it was hard. “He’s fine.”

“So many aren’t. If you knew half of Klaus’s story, you would burn every ship in Coryn’s navy and murder every fucking air weaver in Hearthstone.”

“Air weavers?” In Efren’s experience, they’d all been high strung like Tovey, but that was to be expected, since anger fueled their weaves.

“Sadistic bastards. Coryn has twisted their anger into cruelty. I recruited the worst of them to my ship, hoping to get rid of them. I didn’t know how dangerous it would be for Klaus when you sank her.”

“Klaus is stronger than he looks. He’s also smart and resourceful.”

“He knew I would track him. He stayed with Niall so we could find them both.”

That didn’t quite match the story Olivia gave them, that Klaus was still asleep when they first saw smoke on Aquarion, but he let it go. They were together, and Efren and Vadim would rescue them from Coryn together. “We’ll get them back.”

“We will.”

Vadim raised his hands above his head to stretch. Efren took advantage of his vulnerable position to crush him in a hug. Vadim stiffened and then wrapped his arms around Efren’s ribcage and hugged him back. It wasn’t at all like the old days. This was new and fragile, but far more real. Efren could be friends with Vadim now that he knew the grim truth. Vadim had saved Efren and his crew. He couldn’t be angry about that.

He returned to the helm, and Vadim leaned against the inner railing behind him, the one that kept him from falling from the elevated deck.

They stayed like that for hours, Efren correcting course now and then. He still sensed the direction of Niall’s heartbeat, but nothing beyond that. He wished he could hear Niall’s thoughts the way Vadim could hear Klaus’s.



Vadim nudged his shoulder. “We’re veering off course to the south.”

Efren shook himself awake. He’d been asleep on his feet.

“You should get some rest,” Vadim said. “I’ll wake you when we reach the inlet.”

His heart protested, still certain Vadim couldn’t be trusted, but when Efren closed his eyes and sensed Niall’s location, Vadim was right. They were headed too far south.

“Thank you,” he said instead, and retired to his cabin bunk. He only had a moment to savor Niall’s scent lingering on his pillows before he was dead to the world.



## **Niall**

Niall sat. And sat. At one point the cook deposited a water skin through the solid metal flap at the bottom of the door. After what felt like hours, a child wearing a chef’s hat left them a tray with two sandwiches, two tins of fruit, and a wedge of hard cheese.

Niall slipped a hand free and reached for the tray the moment the child was out of sight, but Klaus slapped his hand and shook his head, motioning for him to put the cuff back on.

Klaus then proceeded to feed him a sandwich and almost drowned him when he poured the fruit into his mouth.

“You can have the cheese,” Niall said when Klaus broke off a corner.

“You sure?”

Niall nodded.

He grinned. “Thank you.”

“I wish it was Petri’s bread bowls.”

“Brigham didn’t let me finish mine.” Klaus stuck out his bottom lip in an over-dramatic pout.

“He destroyed mine before I got a taste.” Niall grinned. “I’ll beg Petri to make stew when we’re back on the island.”

“I got you into this mess,” Klaus said after taking a bite of cheese. “I’m so sorry.”

“I waited for you this morning,” Niall said. “That was my fault, not yours.”

“I meant before then, in Landale.” Klaus blinked. “You aren’t mad about that?”

“I was,” Niall admitted. “You said you would turn me over to Coryn, and I believed you.”

“I told Vadim it could go wrong if his pirate captain attacked us.” Klaus’s gaze turned wolfish. “So, what’s going on between you and high and mighty Captain Efren, anyway?”

“High and mighty?”

“He seems like an insufferable goody-two-shoes, especially when Vadim talks about their past.”

“He’s kind,” Niall began. “He could have let Vadim’s ship sink with us as casualties of war, but he gave us time to escape.”

“He’s hot.” Klaus winked. “The entire crew knows you’ve slept with him. Out with it. I want all the details. Did you find someone else while I was gone, or was he your first?”

Niall’s face burned. Klaus had always been more experienced and adventurous, even before he’d taken his first job at the pleasure house. He was also Niall’s closest friend and knew all his secrets. “My first.”

“Any good?”

Klaus’s usual response to a question about his bed partner’s prowess had been, “Not good enough to tie me down.”

Instead, Niall answered, “I’m not looking for anyone else, if that’s what you mean.”

Klaus's eyes widened. "That's it? He's the one for you?"

"If he'll have me, yes." Niall felt dizzy from all the blood rushing to his head and neck, and he couldn't meet Klaus's intense gaze anymore. "I think he's still hung up on Vadim."

"Vadim." Klaus snorted. "If he knew half of Vadim's thoughts about him, he wouldn't be. Vadim thinks the good captain's moral compass is wound a little too tight."

"So what if it is?" Niall didn't see that as a bad thing. It meant Efren would always want to do what's right.

"Vadim needs a man who can overlook a little rule-bending from time to time."

"Someone like you?" Niall risked a look at Klaus.

It was the seeker's turn to redden across the bridge of his nose. "Maybe. We've got to get out of here, first."

"What time is it?" Niall asked.

"Midnight?" Klaus hopped up on his knees to look out the port hole. "I can't see the right stars to know."

"We should try to sleep."

"You can take the cot, if you want."

"I'm used to sleeping on the floor." Niall thought back to the makeshift bed on the floor of the pottery shop. "Well, I was. Now, I might be spoiled."

Klaus lay on the cot, his legs stretched over the edge of the mattress at an angle because the cot was too short for his frame.

On the floor, Niall slid underneath and used its anchors to the side of the ship to hold him in place.

It seemed like only minutes had passed before Klaus was shaking his shoulder. "Wake up!"

Niall had removed a cuff sometime in his sleep, which had allowed him to lay flat on his back. He regretted being so

comfortable the moment his forehead banged against the underside of the cot. “Ow.”

“We’ve slowed down to approach the island. There’s a narrow inlet, the only approach to the beach. It’s too shallow and narrow to approach any time but high tide. Vadim says they’ll be waiting for us in the open water. He wants you to disable the ship once it’s entered the inlet. That will make it impossible for other ships to pass until they’ve cleared the wreckage.”

From the gray light shining through the port window, it was almost dawn. “When is high tide?”

“Vadim says it will be around mid-morning, ten or so.”

“We have time to sleep, then.”

Klaus laughed. “I thought I was the sleepyhead. Our breakfast just arrived.”

Niall yanked his arms behind his back at the sound of footsteps in the hallway. He wrestled with the cuff as the cook and his young helper peeked around the corner.

“I told you, you was seein’ things,” the cook said.

The boy looked like he was going to cry. The cook swatted him on the back of the head and led him away again.

“That was close,” Klaus whispered. “Keep the cuffs on until I tell you.”

They sat on the cot on either side of the tray. This time, the meal consisted only of hard tack and water, which was easier for Niall to eat on his own once Klaus held it out for him to grab with his teeth.

While they ate, Niall tried to come up with a good way to disable the ship and leave her stranded. He wished he could remove the cuff again and reach out with his magic.

Carefully, he slipped his wrist from the cuff, and his magic flowed over him like a hug from an old friend. He toyed with each of his elements, but no immediate ideas came to him. He would need to be creative if he wanted to take down Coryn’s ship.

“Now!” Klaus said. He hopped to his feet and braced his back against the barred door. “Hide behind me and do whatever you’re going to do.”

Niall slipped both wrists from the cuffs and hid them in his pocket. They would be easier in a pinch than the rope they’d used on his grandmother, if he didn’t lose them in his great escape plan.

He still had no ideas. What was he supposed to do? He squinted his eyes shut, waiting for a sign. Something. Anything.

His heart beat in his chest, and with it, he felt the pulse of Efren’s core infused with his. He called on his water to calm him, and it came, rushing into his palms and between them in a ring like Efren had showed him.

Klaus snorted. “Is that all you’ve got?”

“No.” He thought of Hannah, and he grinned. “I’m going to call a storm.”

He’d never tried to use more than two powers at once, but his wind responded the moment he called water and lightning together into a giant storm overhead. His earth responded as well, shifting the silt beneath the ship and pinning her in place while a tempest raged around them.

The first crack of lightning split the deck above them and splintered the cot they’d been sitting on only moments before. In no time at all, water rushed in through the breach.

Niall moved toward the gaping hole, shoving with earth to push the boards further apart. It was almost large enough to swim through. He hadn’t spent much time using his earth element, and now he wished he had. The wooden beams wouldn’t budge.

Another bolt of lightning struck behind him, and Klaus yelped. Niall turned to find his friend’s shirt on fire. That wasn’t the worst of it, though. Klaus’s fingers were blackened where they’d been wrapped around the cell’s metal bars.

“Klaus!” Niall ignored the water rushing into the ship. Unlike with Renald, Klaus’s spirit was still inside his body,

held there by the tether to Vadim. Their life link was the only thing keeping him alive, Niall knew, but it also prevented Niall from healing him.

His grandmother had warned against anyone else breaking the connection, but Niall didn't have a choice. If he left Klaus in this state, he risked losing both Klaus and Vadim. He couldn't do that to Efren. He felt Efren's fear for Vadim in his core.

He had to act now.

# Chapter 24

## Efren

Efren didn't have the benefit of invisibility, so he stayed as far back from Coryn's ship as he dared, skirting the inlet to the south and then running parallel to the ship and far enough away that they couldn't be seen by her crew's nest.

The morning was deceptively calm. The sunlight-tipped ripples bounced off the rocks, hiding the shallow bottom in the narrow pass between an island of rock and the broken boulder trail left behind by a glacier.

"I've told Klaus we're in position," Vadim said. "It should be any moment now."

At first, Efren wondered if Klaus had gotten the message, and then, if he'd relayed it to Niall. While they waited for a sign, Efren considered all the possible calamities that could befall Klaus and Niall in their escape attempt.

General Coryn could stop them. She'd put element-dampening cuffs on Niall, according to Vadim. All her crew had to do was keep them around Niall's wrists, and he wouldn't be able to escape.

If he did slip the cuffs, they might be injured trying to leave, either by Coryn's crew or by Niall's own elemental magic. All elements could be unpredictable, and Niall didn't have a good grasp of any one element yet. Efren hoped Niall sank the ship using his water, but it would be difficult without using another element to break holes in her hull.

Efren even let himself wonder if Niall had been working for Coryn all along. It didn't take long to disprove, thanks to the miniscule portion of Niall's core still fused with his. Niall was afraid they'd be caught, and afraid he didn't know enough magic to escape on his own.

Then, Efren felt the change come over Niall when he called on his fragment of Efren's core for calm. Efren poured his belief in Niall into his own part of Niall's core, hoping to

relay the message. Efren knew Niall would succeed in freeing himself and Klaus. He would also disable Coryn's ship so she couldn't follow them. Efren lacked faith in most things, but he believed in Niall.

"Storm's brewing," Hannah called from the crow's nest.

Efren took his scope from his breast pocket and watched the storm clouds circling Coryn's ship.

*Eel's Gold*, it said on the side. A flash of lightning hit the water off her port side. Then, another fork of lightning splintered the deck between the two masts.

Vadim clawed at his temples as he fell to his knees. "Klaus," he whispered.

"What's wrong?" Efren went down on one knee, trying to support Vadim back to his feet, but the death weaver fell to the floorboards, repeating Klaus's name.

Beatrice left her wind station and rushed onto the navigation platform.

"Your life bond is the only thing keeping Klaus alive. You have to break it before it takes you both."

"No." Vadim struggled to his knees and wiped at his face with the back of his hand. "I'm strong enough for both of us."

"You need to let him go." Beatrice took Vadim's hands in hers. "Concentrate on removing your hold on him."

"It's too far," Vadim insisted. "I can't reach him."

"It's no different from killing someone at this distance. If someone on Coryn's ship consented to die, you could grant that death from here. It's the same with healing, and with removing your tether."

"He's unconscious," Vadim said. "I can hear his thoughts, but they're a jumbled mess. Nothing makes any sense, but I can tell you, he doesn't want to die."



“Then let him live. Niall can heal him if you let go. That’s all you have to do.”

A tear slipped down Vadim’s cheek. “I can’t.”

“You can.” Beatrice patted his shoulder. “I know you care for him. You must if you were willing to tie him to you in the first place. I promise you, either my grandson or I will heal him in time. You have to trust us.”

Vadim nodded, but he lifted his gaze to Efren, the unspoken question clear.

“Niall is closer, and they’re friends. He won’t let Klaus die.”

Vadim sank back to the floor, his forehead flush against the smooth wood as he heaved a broken sob.

“Captain,” Hannah called. “You’ve got to see this.”

He rushed to the railing and looked through his scope again. He saw sharks in the water. Countless sharks. Big and little, their dorsal fins trailing streamlined wakes. The sharks circled to the landward side of the ship, where he couldn’t see them. The ship listed that way, too, her masts no longer at a ninety-degree angle with the water.

“She’s sinking,” Efren said. “That bolt of lightning must have put a hole right through her.”

“He’s calling your sharks.” Olivia sidled up to him with binoculars raised. “Does he know what he’s doing?”

Beatrice tugged his scope from his hand. “They need our help,” she said after a moment of studying the ship from aft to stern.

“If we help, she’ll send the entire navy to Aquarion,” Efren said. “If we let Niall escape on his own, she might search the closest ports for him, first.”

Efren would send messenger birds to every port between Stony Eel Island and Hearthstone to keep her off Niall’s trail. Later. Now, he wished he knew how to hide his ship the way Coryn hid from Olivia on their return trip from Luminest. He wanted to sail closer.

“It’s done.” Vadim wiped his face on his sleeve, and Beatrice helped him to his feet. He glared at Efren. “You’d better be right.”

Efren wanted to go to him, to ease some of his pain, but he felt another tug on his power, a request to call Arrowtip.



## Niall

Niall’s grandmother had warned him about magical bonds, especially now that he had one with Efren. He and Efren were linked through their water element, at least. Klaus didn’t hold any magic, which had baffled his grandmother. Vadim’s link to him was directly to his life source. Vadim had already used his limited healing power to keep Klaus alive. Now, if Klaus died, Vadim was as good as dead, too.

Niall hoped he could save his friend, and that Vadim could hold on until he reached *Starlight Specter* again, or maybe his grandmother was with them. He thought he sensed her magic, but she hadn’t tried to contact him. Maybe she was too far away.

Niall clasped his hands over Klaus’s chest by his heart and held his head above water. He inhaled a calming breath and pushed against Klaus’s chest with his healing energy.

Breaking Vadim’s hold seemed far too easy, as though Vadim had been waiting for him to try before removing the bond on his own.

Whatever had happened, this was the break Niall needed. He poured healing power into Klaus. Niall swore he felt Vadim’s power recoil on itself and retreat through the hole in the ship. He tried to chase it with a tether of his own, to try to restore their bond once Klaus was healed. He couldn’t connect to Vadim’s power with either life or death magic.

He didn’t have time, either. He kept Klaus afloat by balancing him on his thighs as he kneeled in the water. He placed his hands on Klaus’s chest and sought the damaged

areas throughout Klaus's body. When he tried to push healing energy into Klaus, it didn't work. He took a deep breath, and Vadim's words came rushing back to him. Consent. He needed consent to heal.

*"Do you consent to be healed?"* he asked.

*"What kind of ridiculous question is that?"* Klaus's voice thundered in his head, far stronger than Niall expected. *"Of course I fucking consent! Heal me of this shit once and for all!"*

Niall pushed more healing power into Klaus's chest, into his heart, and then into the vessels that pumped his blood. Klaus's ailment was bloodborne, either a virus or cancer that attacked his body from the inside out. Niall followed his healing instincts to remove the ailment at the source deep within Klaus's bones.

"Niall?" Klaus opened his eyes and stared up at him. "What's going on? What have you done?"

"We need to get out of here!"

Klaus gripped his arm and righted himself in the water. Niall turned his attention back to their cell. The water was above his knees when he was standing, and he still didn't have a way to escape.

He heard splashing in the hallway. Someone was coming for them. Niall didn't want to be trapped in the cell when they arrived.

A force rammed the ship hard enough to rock them away from the hole. Niall almost fell backward against the cell door. Then, giant teeth took a bite of the hull, widening the opening.

"All hells, no!" Klaus's grip tightened on Niall's arm. "I'm not ... those are ..."

"Efren's." Niall recognized the sharks as the gift they were and dragged Klaus to the opening. Niall hefted Klaus onto his back. "Hang on."

Klaus wrapped his arms around Niall's neck in a death grip.

"Not that tight," he choked out.

Once Klaus allowed him to breathe again, he collected a small pocket of breathable air between them, big enough to fit both of their heads. Niall didn't know how long the air would last, but it would get them away from the ship. Then, he pushed against the rush of water filling the hole in the ship. Once he was in the open water, a long gray body swam up to him. He latched onto her notched dorsal fin with both hands.

"Can you control these things?" Klaus whispered.

"I hope so." Niall didn't risk using their precious air to explain he recognized this shark. Instead, he reached out to Efren and told him to call Arrowtip home to *Starlight Specter*.

In the meantime, he hoped she would heed his commands. With a thought, he told her to rise to the surface. She took her sweet time, pulling them closer to the island. Niall didn't know how to share they were going the wrong way, but she changed course as their heads finally breached the surface. Beyond water, his control of his other elements was still fickle. He chose to refill the air bubble with fresh air instead of letting it go.

They were now facing the bulkhead of Coryn's ship, which sat at a jaunty angle from the waves. The shark headed for the nearest thrashing man, who must have jumped overboard. Niall's storm continued to roil the skies overhead, striking new scorch marks on the listing ship. He hoped that would draw Coryn's attention away from them and from the ship Niall couldn't see over the horizon.

"That sailor's mundane," Klaus whispered. "That means he's here by choice, and he'd tell Coryn he saw us the moment he's rescued."

Niall understood Klaus's words, but he squinted his eyes shut when Arrowtip's jaws snapped around the man's waist. She dragged them back under the water, taking them as deep as the inlet would allow and releasing him. A giant

bubble of air rushed from him, and then the shark attacked again, chewing him down and leaving the rest for the other sharks circling around them. Niall did his best to push the blood away from them on the current, but he could still smell it in the water around their air bubble.

“We need to go,” Klaus whispered.

Niall urged the shark toward Efren, but then he noticed the sharp rocks marking the edge of the inlet looming before them just below the surface. That way would be dangerous. He urged the shark to swim up the inlet instead.

“How long can you make it storm?” Klaus asked.

“As long as we need,” he said. He kept hold of the weave as it continued to draw moisture and static charge from the air above the boat. He didn’t dare tie it in place, for fear Coryn would siphon it and use it against him instead. He would remove it only when they were safe.

“Can we stay below the surface until we start to run out of air? Coryn might not see us escape.”

“It’s worth a try,” Niall said.

He directed the shark to dive to the silt-filled bottom of the inlet, and then to swim as fast as she could. Her tail jerked to the side with so much force, Niall almost lost his hold on her fin. He gripped it with both hands and tried to align his body with hers. Klaus flattened himself along Niall’s back and kept his grip tight around Niall’s shoulders.

The distance between Niall and his storm weave increased with each passing second until it was a tiny buzz in the back of his head. His chest swelled as he felt something else growing closer. He felt Efren’s presence in his core. That presence grew ever nearer, even as Niall’s vision dimmed.

“Surface,” Klaus choked.

Arrowtip rose to the surface, again at a gentle angle. Niall filled their air bubble with fresh air the moment they breached the water.

Klaus coughed, and then laughed as Arrowtip carried them into *Starlight Specter's* shadow. "I've never been so happy to see a pirate ship in my life."

They drew up to the rope net Efren had draped along the port side of the ship for them. Niall patted Arrowtip behind her gills in thanks, and then dropped his hold on her notched dorsal fin. She circled back toward *Eel's Gold*, possibly looking for more sailors to eat.

Niall helped Klaus grab hold of the nearest rope, and then it was a race to the railing. Niall won by a hand's breadth, but Klaus pulled himself up and over while Niall was stunned immobile by the man hanging over the side of the railing, staring down at him.

Efren was still the prettiest angel Niall had ever seen. He reached down and grabbed hold of Niall's arm. Niall forced his legs to move, hefting himself over the railing with Efren's help. Then, he pulled Efren into his arms and clung to him.

Efren kissed his cheek and grabbed him by his hair, turning his head from side to side and then examining him from head to toe. "Did she hurt you?"

"No."

"And Klaus is all right?"

Niall nodded. "Where's Vadim?"

"In the hold."

"Is he going to survive?"

Efren nodded. "He removed their bond himself. He's resting."

"Klaus needs to rest, too." His grandmother approached with outstretched arms, but he was sad to let Efren go, even to hug her. He felt guiltier when she weaved an air spell to wring his clothes dry.

She patted his cheeks and grinned. "You did well, Niall. You've healed Klaus completely. We'll need to watch him for exhaustion for a few days."

“Watch me?” Klaus covered his mouth to hide a yawn.  
“Why?”

“Vadim needs to see you,” his grandmother said.  
“Come. We’ve put him in the crate again.”

Klaus staggered toward her, and she caught him before he fell.

“He’ll be all right,” Efren said as Niall’s grandmother led Klaus to the stairs into the hold. “He’s crashing after the giant amount of healing and all the excitement after. We’ll feed him as soon as he wakes.”

Niall sank against Efren, letting his hands roam over Efren’s back, his shoulders, down his arms, confirming he was real.

“I’m here,” Efren said. “You’re safe.” He kissed Niall’s cheek again. “Come. You’ve burned most of your energy getting here. I’ll have Codger Tim prepare you something while you rest in my cabin.”

“Don’t leave me,” Niall pleaded. He couldn’t keep the whine of exhaustion from his voice.

Efren waved to Hannah in the lookout. “Any ships on the horizon?”

They scampered down the ropes to stand on deck. “None. Coryn and some of her officers escaped in a lifeboat. She used air and water to create a force field unlike anything I’ve seen before. It kept the sharks from attacking her, but everyone in the water is as good as dead.” Hannah patted Niall’s shoulder. “You did well to call them.”

“I didn’t,” Niall insisted. “I thought they were yours.”

Efren shrugged. “Maybe we called them together.”

Hannah slapped Niall’s ass with the flat of their hand. From the way Efren jumped, they’d done the same to him. “Get to your cabin. You both need rest.”

“Now that we’re away, would you have Tim prepare meals for Niall, Klaus, and Vadim?”

Hannah nodded. “Will do, Captain. Now get.”

Efren wrapped an arm around Niall’s waist and led him to the cabin door. Niall wasn’t too tired to notice the gentle care Efren took with him. For the first time since his parents had died, he felt cherished. He only hoped he wasn’t imagining it in his state of euphoria after the harrowing escape.

Once in the cabin, the thought he’d avoided throughout his time on Coryn’s ship hit him without warning. He’d been abducted. Again. He sank to the bunk, staring at his hands as though they had the answers to all his questions. What did Coryn want with him?

Efren kneeled before him, shifting him over on the bunk until he could sit with Niall in his lap. In his arms, Niall shook with the fear he’d denied himself earlier and the relief of not being alone.

“I’ve got you,” Efren said. “You’re so strong, Niall. I’m so proud of you.”

“Proud? I almost killed my best friend!” He shivered. “I didn’t—he doesn’t even remember.”

“It was an accident.” Efren kissed his cheek. “He’s better off for it, too. You healed him.”

Niall clung to Efren’s chest and cried big wet tears into his shirt. “I was so scared.”

Efren rubbed circles on his back and kissed his temple. Niall reached for that place in his core where they were linked and found that Efren had meant what he’d said. He was proud of Niall, and more. Niall wasn’t ready to forgive himself, but he could push his fears aside for another day.

“Let’s get you into some dry clothes so you can rest,” Efren said.

Niall had no fight left in him to argue.



# Chapter 25

## Efren

Once Niall was changed into a clean and dry sleep shirt, Efren lay him on his cot and passed his hand over Niall's eyes to force them closed. "Sleep."

"We need to talk," Niall whispered.

"It can wait until your food arrives." Efren wanted that talk, too, but Niall's health was more important. He was fading fast. Efren knew how easy it was to overextend with one element. He couldn't imagine expending the energy to ground the ship, bring the storm and the sharks, and the sheer amount of healing it must have taken to return Klaus from the brink of death.

"Soon?"

"Within the hour."

"All right." Niall slumped against the pillow. His brows were still pinched with worry, and Efren hated being the cause of that worry. It wasn't long before Niall's face relaxed with sleep and his breath steadied.

Efren was surprised to learn Niall blamed himself for Klaus's injury. Efren had made his own mistakes when he was first learning his element, and lightning was the most volatile of the eight. Even Hannah would tell Niall it had been an accident. Hells, Hannah was well-trained, and they'd started the ship on fire twice with errant blows of lightning. Efren would have the crew share their own horror stories with Niall when they had more time.

Efren pretended to study his star charts as he thought through the discussion they needed to have when Niall woke, and what he would say. He'd been too afraid to share his feelings, too certain Niall would break his heart, but now, he didn't care. They were fast approaching war with Coryn's navy. If he didn't tell Niall now, he may never have the chance

to tell him again. His feelings were far too strong to ignore, even in the short time since they'd met.

A knock at the door drew him back to the deck.

"How is he doing?" Beatrice asked.

"He's asleep. I promised we would talk when his food arrives."

She shook her head. "No. He'll need his sleep. Klaus and Vadim, as well."

"How is Vadim?"

Efren had never seen such a wry twist to Beatrice's lips. "He's in love with that young man, is what he is. Refuses to admit it, though. Don't make the same mistake."

Efren ignored her unasked question, choosing instead to help the crew with rigging until Beatrice returned to her wind station.

When there were no other tasks, he retreated to the port rail and eased their passage through the waves. It didn't take as much effort as Niall's escape, but at least Efren felt like he was contributing to their cause.

Hannah sneaked up on him, as usual, tapping him on the left shoulder and retreating right to avoid his wild swing. They laughed as he tried to compose himself. "I will never tire of doing that."

"For someone still claiming to be our newest crew member, that shit got old real fast."

Hannah grinned. "Niall and Milton are our newest crew members. And you had ten years to ask me to stop, but you never did." They bowed their head. "I am sorry, though. You're already dealing with a lot. How is Niall?"

"Sleeping."

"Good. I'm supposed to check back with Tim in a half-hour. Are you all right here?"

He nodded.

“I’ll come get you first, so you can wake Niall.”

“Thanks.”

They gave another slight bow of their head. “Don’t mention it.”

Efren returned to controlling the waves as they rolled past the ship, increasing their speed. He couldn’t believe a full half-hour had passed when he heard a gentle cough behind him.

“It’s time, Captain.”

He followed Hannah to the main deck and slipped into his cabin. Niall was still sprawled across the bunk, sound asleep. He’d wrapped his arms around Efren’s pillow and had his nose buried in it. Efren sank to his knees in the small walkway beside the table. He cupped Niall’s cheek and turned his head for better access to his lips. He’d heard the bedtime story of a prince awakened by a kiss, but he was surprised when Niall responded, tangling his fingers in Efren’s hair and knocking his hat to the floor.

Efren broke the kiss and met Niall’s sleepy gaze. “Hannah will be here any moment with your food.”

“You’re all I need,” Niall said, chasing him when he tried to back away. He ended up with Niall in his lap on the floor, unsure why he was fighting his desire.

“You need food and rest, not this,” he said when he remembered.

“Right. Food, and discussion.” Niall eased himself back onto the bunk. He still looked wonderful with his mussed hair, spit-slicked lips, and cheeks red from the scrape of Efren’s beard. Efren liked seeing his marks on Niall, but he liked the one he couldn’t see even more. Now that he’d opened himself up to the piece of Niall’s core inside him, he knew Niall’s every emotion. Right now, Niall’s lust matched his own, but there was a hint of concern, along with an overwhelming hope. Efren wanted to lay Niall’s worries to rest, but that would have to wait a while longer.

“Captain!” Hannah knocked at the door.

Efren motioned for Niall to stay seated on the cot. He rose to his feet and made himself presentable, adjusting his shirt collar beneath his jacket. Both had skewed sideways.

He opened the door, and Hannah unloaded a tray with half a loaf of bread, a large hunk of cured honey ham, and a heaping plate of steamed vegetables. “Eat up. We won’t need you until sunset.”

It was only midday. Efren had planned to return to the prow for the afternoon, but Hannah was right. They weren’t traveling as quickly now, with no one to follow and no one following them.

Hannah hovered over the table, looking between him and Niall expectantly.

“That will be all, Hannah.”

“Enjoy, Captain.”

When they were gone, and the door locked behind them, Efren unfolded his captain’s chair and sat across from Niall. “How are you feeling?”

Niall had already made himself a sandwich with the bread and meat and was now pouring the vegetables onto his tin plate to cool. “Curious,” he said.

“About what?”

Niall shrugged. “I’ve figured something out, but I’m waiting for you to say it.”

“You can feel my emotions,” Efren said.

Niall nodded. “Through the piece of your core I stole from you.”

“You didn’t steal it,” Efren said. “I gave it freely when you asked.”

“I ... asked?”

Efren nodded. “You needed something outside yourself to help you break free from the trap.”

“And the sharks today? That was you, too?”

“No.” Efren grinned at Niall’s disbelief. “That was all you.”

“You’re not answering my question.”

“You haven’t asked.”

Niall bit into his sandwich with a growl of frustration. He took far longer to chew than Efren thought necessary, and then he swallowed it down with a sip of water from the tin cup Hannah had filled for him.

“Fine. As your crewmate, I’ll humbly ask. Captain, did you enjoy our time apart?”

“I did not.” Efren snorted. “Is that all you wanted to know?”

“For fuck’s sake, I can feel your emotions toward me. When are you going to say it?”

Efren was around the table in a single step, pushing Niall into the corner of the bunk, trapping him between the ship and the table. He straddled Niall to make his point, one knee wedged in the corner and carrying most of his weight as he gripped Niall’s shirt with one hand and the back of his head with the other. “You want me to say I love you after we’ve known each other for a week? Do you know how foolhardy and ridiculous I sound?”

Niall tasted of ham and bread. Efren kissed him hard and deep, hoping his body could convey the lie in his words. Yes, he loved Niall, but he still felt it was far too soon to say those words to a man so much younger than himself, with higher prospects than an old pirate ship captain.

When he’d kissed Niall thoroughly, he sat back and let his love shine through his gaze.

“You are not old,” Niall said, answering his thoughts. “And I’ve never wanted anyone the way I want you. What makes you think I’d run off looking for someone else?”

“You can hear my thoughts?” Efren asked.

“You can’t hear mine?”

Efren had grown accustomed to the pulsing thrum in his core, but he hadn't listened to it, not really. He'd kept Niall's emotions buried, lest he feel too much. Now, he focused on Niall's core, closing his eyes to center on the sounds of the waves lapping against the hull and the tiny hum of excitement coming from Niall.

*"He said he loves me. Did he mean it? It's too soon, but that doesn't mean it isn't real. I feel it, too."*

Efren heard more than Niall's thoughts. He heard a lifetime of memories Niall associated with love, all of them fleeting. He'd loved his parents, and they'd abandoned him. He'd loved his work as a potter's apprentice, and Master Othelio had used him. He'd loved his friendship with Klaus, and eventually, they'd drifted apart, and then Klaus had turned him over to Coryn.

Niall still loved everyone and everything he'd lost. Some would have become embittered or angry, but Niall was still open to the possibility of love. All he needed was someone to take a chance on him, someone who would never leave him.

"I will never leave you willingly," Efren said. "I can't control the fates or when my time is up, but until then, you have my word I will stay by your side."

Niall knocked Efren's hat from his head again as he pulled him down for a kiss. It lasted only until Niall choked on a sob. Efren sank onto the bunk beside him and rubbed circles on his back while he cried. Some would accuse him of being soft for letting his new crewmate cry on his shoulder like this, but Niall was so much more than a crewmate. He was Efren's to protect, yes, but also to befriend. Niall needed someone to be there for him the way Vadim had always been there for Efren.

Until he wasn't. Efren hadn't forgiven Vadim for leaving, and he understood Niall's deep fear of being left behind. It was a fear they shared, Efren had to admit.

"I'll be yours as long as you'll have me, Niall." Efren's voice was barely more than a whisper, but it was enough to

draw Niall into his lap. “I love you.”



## Niall

Niall couldn't believe his ears, but he dared to believe the little voice in his core, the one that had been encouraging him through his escape from Coryn and even before that, reassuring him that Efren wanted more from him.

Efren loved him.

“I love you,” Niall said. “Everything you are. Everything you try to hide from the rest of the crew.”

“I'm hiding things from the crew?” Efren chuffed a laugh. “Like how I like to be fucked?”

“No.” Niall grabbed a fistful of hair at Efren's nape and pulled until Efren moaned. “Like how scared you are beneath that hard shell of confidence. When I first came aboard, you were terrified Olivia would mutiny, that Stan and Tovey wouldn't work their shit out, and that Vadim was going to kill them all and leave them to rot on some island.”

“And now?” Efren shifted beneath him, knocking him forward so Efren's breath kissed the shell of his ear.

“Now, you can worry about keeping me happy, instead.”

“Oh?”

“None of those other worries were real. Olivia would do anything for you, and so would Vadim. Stan and Tovey ... well, who knows when they'll get their shit together, but neither wants to lose their spot on *Starlight Specter*.”

“How did you come to know so much in such a short amount of time, half of which you've spent kidnapped or incapacitated?”

Niall couldn't resist a kiss before answering. “There's piracy in my bones. They trusted me enough to share their

secrets.” He leaned forward for another kiss. “The way you trust me.”

Efren tilted his head down and kissed him more thoroughly this time, sealing their mouths together and sweeping his tongue inside. “I do trust you,” he whispered once he’d left Niall semi-hard and panting.

Niall expected to sit on Efren’s lap for the rest of the afternoon, kissing and talking, or perhaps making good use of the bunk, but Efren shifted him off his lap and pointed at his plate. “I trust you to eat your dinner, and then we’ll lie down for a nap, the two of us.”

Niall almost opened his mouth to protest the nap, but he heard the truth from Efren’s core. That nap involved more kissing, touching, and whatever pleasure they wanted to bring each other. Niall could agree to that.

Efren picked at the ham while Niall ate his sandwich and all the steamed vegetables.

“What do I get for cleaning my plate?” he asked when he was finished.

“Whatever you want.”

Niall’s attempt at a smile was interrupted with a yawn so deep it made his eyes water. “I think I’d better take you up on that nap first.”

Efren helped him lie down on the inside of the bunk. Then, he peppered Niall’s face with kisses, something his parents had done before shutting him in his tiny cubby in their sloop. Niall wanted to ask Efren if he had accidentally shared memories with him through their core link, but he was already too tired to be embarrassed. He fell asleep feeling loved.

The next time he woke, he was alone, and the cabin was dark except for the tiny blue light globe enchantment Efren used as a paperweight for his map. Niall dressed in the clothes Efren had left on the table for him. The pants were Niall’s, freshly laundered, but the blue shirt was a new form-fitting one he hadn’t worn yet.



Outside the cabin door, he found his boots. They were dry, even after their extended dip in the ocean. He carried them back to Efren's bunk to put them on. Before he could return to the deck, Olivia knocked on the cabin door and stuck her head inside.

"How do you feel about a little wind weaving? We're almost to Aquarion."

"How far?"

"With your help, maybe an hour." She snorted. "It all depends on how much restructuring Martiz and Jermain did while we were gone, honestly. Efren's doing what he can with his water illumination weaves. We'd rather not run aground, but honestly, I think we'd all like to sleep in our own beds tonight."

Niall followed her to the nearest open wind station behind their new air weaver, Milton. Niall looked up and found Hannah staring down at him.

"I forgot," he said, motioning to Milton. "I'm not the newest recruit."

"When it rains, it pours, I guess." Hannah laughed. "I'm surprised you didn't recruit more wind weavers from Coryn's ship."

"Not worth the time to try," Milton said. "Her ship is full of loyalists, not conscripts. They've joined her because they believe in the cause."

Niall found his anger and released it upward, into the overhead sail. It came easily, thanks to the mention of loyalists. His parents had whispered about them when they thought Niall wouldn't hear. For years, Niall had blamed them for his parents' deaths. Hell, he'd thought Vadim was one. He still didn't understand why any weaver would want to turn against their own kind, especially now that he'd used his own power. Yes, it could be dangerous in the wrong hands, but weavers had trained at the Imperial Academy of Elements for centuries. Why would anyone give up their freedom to follow

Coryn? She had nothing to offer them, besides tyranny and the threat of violence if they didn't comply.

“Land ho!” Hannah shouted, breaking Niall's concentration on his air weave.

“Full stop,” Efren yelled.

The sails dropped to the masts without any air to buoy them.

“Come,” Niall's grandmother said, taking his arm. “Efren will need us to help navigate.”

“Have you seen Klaus, or Vadim?” he asked as they walked.

“Not since I visited them in the hold after you arrived.” She patted his arm. “They're alive, thanks to you. The rest is up to them.”

His grandmother always spoke in such cryptic terms, but he had no time to think about it as the ship ground to a halt.

“For fuck's sake,” Efren muttered. “Jermain's made her unpassable. Stan!”

“On it, Captain.” Stan brushed past Niall and took the steps to the foredeck two at a time. “That's a right mess.”

“Beatrice, Niall, help him.”

Niall knew his grandmother needed no help on the stairs, but she didn't let go of his arm, even when they reached Stan. She latched onto the earth weaver's elbow, too. “Those with like power can link together, to bolster each other. Find your earth magic, and I'll show you how to link with Stan.”

Niall tapped into his stability. Earth was a lot like water, and he found himself using both to shift the sand beneath the boat.

His grandmother smacked his arm. “Earth only, or it won't work.”

“Aye, Grandmother.”

“Gods, that makes me feel old.” She shared a look with Stan. “There it is. Now, we give our power over to Stan, so he can use it however he needs.”

Using their combined power, Stan cleared the sand from beneath the ship and flattened the rest of the sandbars between them and the western docks. “Ready, Captain.”

With a shove of Efren’s water and a turn of the wheel, *Starlight Specter* cut across the waves. They made a large arch and rounded on the new dock. In no time at all, Olivia hopped over the side to tie the mooring ropes, and then Tovey and Stan lowered the gangplank.

Martiz and Jermain waited for them on the dock.

“This should be interesting,” Niall’s grandmother said. “What excuse will they give us for making the approach impassible?”

“It slowed us down long enough for them to know it was us,” Stan said. “Not a bad idea, but they wouldn’t have seen Coryn coming.”

“Yes,” she said. “Olivia told us of Coryn’s vanishing act. Could you sense what powers she was using?”

“All of them, we think, and only in the moment after she disappeared.” Stan shrugged. “I felt air and earth. Hannah sensed water and lightning. We don’t have any fire or ice to speak of, and Vadim was with you.”

“I’ll feel much better knowing you’ll have Niall with you for this next mission,” she said, squeezing Niall’s hand before letting him go. “Our future may depend on it.”

As grateful as Niall was to be sailing with Efren, he wasn’t ready to go off on a half-cocked rescue mission to the capital. Still, he didn’t dare protest now, and not to his grandmother.

He found Efren waiting for him at the top of the gangplank. Instead of taking his offered hand, Niall wrapped his arms around him and pulled him close. He loved the feel of Efren’s soft beard on his cheek as the captain nuzzled his neck.

“Welcome home,” Efren whispered in his ear.

“I want to see nothing but the inside of your bedroom for the next twelve hours,” Niall growled.

“I think we can arrange that.”

Efren scooped him into his arms, and his cheeks burned like the blushing brides he always heard about, but he didn't care. He clutched Efren's neck and let himself be loved as Efren carried him toward home.

# Chapter 26

## Efren

Efren carried Niall down the gangplank of the ship in front of everyone, which had sent a message to his crew and the rest of the island, but now that he had Niall to himself, it wasn't enough. Despite Niall's protests, he again lifted Niall at the entrance to his island home and carried him across the threshold.

Niall stopped protesting the moment they were inside with the door shut, choosing instead to kiss every part of Efren's beard and neck before finding his lips and forcing his tongue inside.

"I missed you," Niall said. "When I woke up from our nap, you were gone."

"I missed you, too." Efren kissed him again and eased him to the floor before his arms gave out. "You needed your sleep."

"I needed you more." Niall still had his arms around Efren's neck and reeled him in for a kiss.

"You have me now."

"I'd like a tour. Do you realize I still haven't seen the main floor of this house, beyond the kitchen?"

"There's not much to see," Efren warned.

"I'm sure there are some surfaces to claim with our bodies." Niall kissed the corner of his mouth and grazed fingertips down his arms, grabbing his hands as he walked backwards into the room. "Show me."

Efren gave the signal for his light globe enchantments in the main entrance, and they cast their eerie blue glow over the rattan furniture in the sitting area. "Nothing but splinters in your ass here."

"You said there's a spare bedroom."

"Aye, past the library."

Efren led the way through the small library. The walls were lined with built-in bookshelves, but the space was only big enough for a single chair and a small table with a drawer to hold his paper, ink, and quills.

The doorway was half-filled with more books stacked one on top of the other to their waists.

“I need a bigger library,” Efren said.

“I’m glad Coryn didn’t burn your house down.”

“I’m sorry you had to see that.” Efren led Niall into the small spare bedroom. The single bed was made with Petri’s favorite quilt, a blue, red, and purple thing they had pieced together from scraps torn from the coats of defrocked merchants.

“Why does she hate Martiz so much?”

“She has her reasons. I don’t know the full story, either, but I’m sure Vadim could fill volumes, and we would have nightmares from reading them.” Efren and Vadim had discussed ways of using their shared history to their advantage, but it would be up to Vadim to share his full plan to rescue Emperor Hugo with the council. “Enough about them. Here’s the bed you wanted to claim so badly.”

Niall shook his head. “The bed doesn’t matter. You’re the only prize I wish to claim.” Niall’s kiss was light and sweet against his lips. “I didn’t know it was so small.”

Efren laughed. “It’s a small house.”

“Take me to bed. Our bed.”

“The oil’s there,” Efren agreed.

Once upstairs, they undressed slowly in the blue glow of the enchantments on the dresser. Niall still had bruises on his wrists from Coryn’s restraints. Efren brought first one wrist, then the other, to his mouth to kiss them. Then, he kissed the old scar across his knuckles.

“I almost forgot,” Niall said. “Here.” He dug around in his discarded pants pocket and pulled out a set of wooden

cuffs wrapped with coils of gold, iron, and silver. “These might come in handy someday.”

“They’ll be easier to store on the ship,” Efren said. “The metal attracts moisture to the wood, and the ropes rot in the hold. These cuffs can be stored in my cabin.”

“We’ll be sharing it, yes?”

“Our cabin,” Efren agreed.

“Our bed.” Niall pointed to the monstrosity Petri had built Efren as a joke. “I love you, Efren.” Niall kissed him, and a burst of air turned down the quilt and top sheet. “Let me show you how much.”

“You already have,” Efren said. His eyes burned from the overwhelming love coursing through him. He loved Niall, and Niall loved him. It seemed impossible. Niall was too good to be true. He was gentle when Efren needed him to be gentle, and rough when he needed something to get him out of the spiral of anxious thoughts telling him Niall wouldn’t stay. A bite to his shoulder returned him to the present.

“Spread your legs for me. I want to look at you.” A new ball of light shone from the top of Efren’s headboard, spreading soft yellow light across his bed. It was unlike any enchantment Efren had ever seen, but it wasn’t an enchantment at all. It was Niall’s own light weave.

“It’s a blend of fire and water,” Niall explained. “The fire makes it bright, and the water contains the flame and feeds it as it evaporates.”

“My clever, clever Niall.”

Niall’s gaze traveled over every inch of Efren’s skin, from his hair, surely already a mess, to his toes, still itchy from his wool socks. They itched even more from Niall’s attention until a gentle wash of water and blast of air cleaned every part of him in the blink of an eye. Then, Niall weaved the same spell on himself.

“I should have done that sooner, sorry.” Niall’s cheeks darkened as he continued to stare. “Is it wrong of me to read your thoughts? I’ll stop—”

“I have nothing to hide from you,” Efren said.

Niall’s throat bobbed as he swallowed, and his gaze brightened with unshed tears.

Efren wanted to comfort him, to promise again he would never leave, not if he could help it.

Then, Niall eased two oiled fingers inside him. Efren took over, ordering Niall to continue pleasuring him the way he liked.

“More like that.”

He was surprised at the feedback from Niall’s core. Niall wanted his orders. Craved them, even. “There. More.” And he loved praise, so Efren praised him. “Aye. Gods, yes. You’re so perfect.”

He was going to come from Niall’s fingers alone if Niall kept massaging his prostate. Instead of begging, he gave another order. “Now. Need you now.”

Niall removed his fingers and made a show of wiping the oil still clinging to them onto his erection.

“Hurry,” Efren ordered, still resisting the need coursing through his body. Niall needed him to stay in command.

Finally, Niall’s cock was slick with oil and pushing against Efren’s entrance. He rolled his hips and lifted his knees, giving Niall easier access to him. They both moaned as Niall’s cock head slid inside. The stretch was almost too much, but Efren needed more. He wanted to feel Niall’s body the way he heard his thoughts and felt his desire through the piece of his core. He wanted to feel all of it. He relaxed his body and opened his mind and soul to Niall completely. The rush of sensations was almost overwhelming, but he embraced them.

Niall sank into him to the hilt, and they both let out a shuddering breath. “Gods, you are amazing,” Efren whispered.

Niall’s cock twitched inside him, and he groaned. “You’re going to make me come too soon. I want this to be good for you.”



Efren kissed his sweaty forehead. “Everything you do is good for me, from the moment I first saw you on that sinking ship.”

Niall pushed himself up onto his elbows and slid his thighs beneath Efren’s, angling his body to hit his sweet spot and giving them both more room to move. Efren moved against Niall, slapping their flesh together with each thrust. The connection between them grew with each breath. Efren had never felt this close to anyone. Before, that thought would have terrified him. Now, it filled him with relief. He would never lose Niall because Niall would always be with him. If something separated them again, Efren would find his way back to Niall and bring him home, wherever Niall wanted home to be.

“*Home.*” The shared thought reverberated through every part of Efren’s being, and he came hard, snapping his hips up to be as close to Niall as he could. His vision went dark around the edges. Pure elation cascaded through his body, mind, and core. Through their connection, he sensed Niall’s pleasure. The sensation filled him with satisfaction as Niall shouted his name and tipped over the edge of his own orgasm.

Niall collapsed on top of him, and Efren felt Niall’s cock pulsing inside him. Efren was a sweaty, sticky mess, but neither of them minded as their mouths collided. The added connection extended Efren’s pleasure until he collapsed boneless and sated to the pillows.

“You are my home,” Niall whispered in his ear. “On the ship, here in this house, it doesn’t matter. Wherever you are is where I belong.”

Efren sought Niall’s lips again as a warm trickle of tears ran down his face, gathering in his beard before dampening his pillow.

Niall brushed at his tears with the backs of his hands, and then he kissed the rest away. “I love you, Efren.”

“I love you.” Efren didn’t trust himself to say more, not when the truth rang clear between them, thanks to their core link. Efren had never dreamed such a connection was

possible, but now that the link existed, he would treasure it for the rest of his days.



## Niall

Until they were all stuffed into the cavern the council used for a courtroom, Niall hadn't known so many people lived on the two islands. It was standing room only behind Vadim's chair. Efren and Niall stood directly behind him, with Klaus to Efren's right. The two children Niall had rescued from Vadim's ship stood to Niall's left with Petri.

Martiz stood to lead the proceedings, but Niall's grandmother interrupted with a hand on the healer's shoulder. "There's a traitor amongst us, one who would use today's verdicts against us."

"How dare you," Martiz hissed.

"It's me," she said. "We got lucky yesterday. We were close enough to rescue Niall and Klaus without Coryn sensing us. It won't happen again if I'm with you."

She sighed, and her shoulders slumped. For the first time, Niall had to agree that she looked old. She had deep circles under her eyes, and her mouth pinched when she frowned. "Last night, I sensed a residual connection from the trap. I could feel her in my head, trying to find a way inside. I beg the council to strip my powers now, before she finds a way to eavesdrop."

Niall had never heard anyone speak of stripping a weaver's power before. "Is that even possible?" he asked Efren.

"Niall." She waved him forward and put both of her hands in his. "This object Coryn seeks on Stony Eel Island has the same properties as a small statue here in our sanctuary. The statue can be used by a spectral weaver to strip another of their power. You are the only one besides me with the power to use it."

Vadim stood so quickly his chair scraped the floor. “There has to be another way.”

“You know there isn’t.” She smiled up at Niall. “There’s no time to debate.” She turned back to the remaining four council members. “Any objections?”

Jermain and Frost both looked stunned, but they hid their hands behind their backs and bowed their heads as a sign of agreement. Then, they looked to Allora.

This was the first time Niall had seen the island’s illusive enchantress. While Renald was probably tall for a boy of twelve, he and Allora were the same height. Her long white hair hung in a loose braid down her back, and her brown skin had golden undertones. She locked gazes with his grandmother and took the same stance as the others, head bowed with hands behind her back. Martiz still stared at her, stunned, but he didn’t protest.

“Good.” His grandmother sighed. “This is between me and my grandson. Continue the trial while we are gone. Start with the children. If we haven’t returned by the time they are finished, continue with the seeker, and then Efren.”

“As you say,” Martiz motioned for the others to take their seats and motioned for the two children to step forward.

Niall followed his grandmother to a narrow fissure in the cavern wall behind the council. Until they passed through it, Niall had assumed it was nothing more than a large crack, but it led to a tunnel. The sound of water dripping seemed overloud, though there was no water in sight. The only light was a glowing yellow orb hovering overhead. It moved with them as the passage widened. They turned away from the sound of crashing waves and rounded another turn. When Niall swore they’d reached a dead end, his grandmother waved her hand, displaying a cavern the size of an alcove.

A white statue the size and shape of a portable balanced scale filled the recessed space. “We’ve never been able to identify the stone, nor where it came from,” his grandmother said. “I’ve only ever used it once, to remove a fire weaver’s power. Before Emperor Hesse outlawed the

practice, bounty hunters used to bring the heads of fire weavers to the palace in Hearthstone for a reward. There was a superstition that magic power diminished exponentially by the number of people who could wield it. The ruling family of Embertide has always been strong with fire magic. A particularly weak descendant believed the superstition and started the barbaric practice.”

She grimaced. “There are virtually no fire weavers outside the royal family now.”

“Gulde.” That’s why he’d felt such a strange connection to her. He could feel his grandmother’s magic on her.

“Yes. Now, I need you to remove my power, and leave nothing, no matter what you learn in the process. Is that understood?”

Niall studied his grandmother, certain there was something she wasn’t telling him. He wanted to ask more questions, but she removed the statue from its shelf.

“There’s no time,” she said. “Hold the scale in place with one hand, and place the other on the balance.”

He did as she instructed, and she grabbed hold of the other side.

Niall felt the object pull on all of his elements at once, a giant rush of power that latched onto his grandmother, as well.

*“This isn’t just a way to remove a weaver’s power.”* His grandmother’s voice echoed in his head, coming from everywhere, but mostly concentrated within the object in their hands. *“I can give you my power. Coryn will lose her link to me, and you will be stronger.”*

*“Strong enough to defeat her?”* He didn’t have a way to filter his thoughts before they echoed in the same small place between them.

*“There will still be stronger weavers with only one or two specialties. Hannah. Vadim. Jermain. Emperor Hugo, if I*

*had to guess. You and Efren will be evenly matched in water with my added stores. Do you accept my power?"*

*"What if I don't?"*

*"It will return to the ether." Niall experienced a vision, then, of his grandmother and Gulde holding the balance, and of Gulde's power leeching into the island itself, and then dissipating. "This is the first time I've attempted a balance transfer."*

If there was a chance he could end Coryn's tyranny by overpowering her, he would take it. He nodded his consent, and power rushed into him. He couldn't tell where his power ended and his grandmother's began, and he almost panicked when he thought of the sliver of Efren's core embedded within him. Thinking of it brought it to the surface of his thoughts, and of his power. His connection with Efren was still there, and the captain was proud of Niall for being brave. He was also filled with sorrow.

*"Something's wrong with Efren."*

*"No, dear."*

*"He's sad!"*

*"He is. He knew what I came here to do." She let go of the scales, and the remaining power funneled into him with a loud pop in his ears.*

"What do you mean?" He couldn't hear his own voice, but he couldn't wait another moment to ask.

"I won't be here when you return from Hearthstone." She took the statue from him and placed it back on its shelf. When she stepped back, the cavern wall closed over it again, once more a dead-end cave.

"Where will you go?"

She grabbed his arm, and this time it felt different from before. Her arm trembled against his, and she leaned on him for support. "I'm not going anywhere, Niall. I will always be a part of you now."

He checked her over for a single ailment, but found nothing he could latch onto, nothing he could heal or cure.

“It’s old age, Niall. It comes for all of us. I’ve staved it off longer than most.”

Niall’s eyes stung, and he blinked his angry tears away. “I could have left you some healing.”

“The scales wouldn’t let you. They demand balance.” She patted his arm. “There’s no remedy. What’s done is done.”

“I’ll get Martiz to heal you.”

She shook her head. “If all goes right, Martiz will be stripped of his power before the end of this day, too.” She grinned at him. “That’s my only satisfaction in all this. I’ve reminded them that the scales exist. Now, they must use them.”

Niall didn’t understand how taking Martiz’s power would help anyone, but he didn’t dare argue with his grandmother. He guided her back to the makeshift courtroom with a heavy heart.

# Chapter 27

## Efren

When Beatrice and Niall returned to the packed room, she and Vadim shared a look that made Efren uneasy to his core.

“It’s done,” she whispered as she came to stand beside Efren. She’d sent Niall to take her place on the council, in the middle chair facing Vadim. Niall sat on the edge of the seat, his back straight with every muscle tensed. Efren wanted to stand behind him, rub his shoulders, and tell him everything would be all right, but it was still too soon to tell.

“How is he?” he asked.

“Upset.”

“Understandably. You’re the only family he has left.”

“Not true,” she whispered. “He has you.”

Martiz shot them a nasty look for whispering, but Efren’s heart lifted at her words. He would be there for Niall, as would the rest of his crew.

“You could sail with us,” he said. The winter ocean was never a kind place for old joints, but they would be together at the end.

“I would only be in your way.”

Martiz glared their way once more, but Efren had run out of arguments. Beatrice had made her decision, and he would gladly carry out her last wishes.

“Efren, Captain of *Starlight Specter*. You’re next to testify.”

“He’ll try to put you on trial,” Beatrice whispered. “Don’t let him veer off topic. Coryn needs to be stopped.”

Efren took the chair Klaus had vacated. It was perpendicular to the council and to Vadim, depending on which way he turned his head.

After he answered the preliminary questions, Martiz started in on the same line of questioning he'd used on the others, about Vadim's ship, *Imperial Fool*.

"How long had you been chasing them?"

"Six months around the crescent. We almost caught him at Hearthstone, and then we followed him to Landale."

"Why didn't you accost him in port at Landale?" Martiz asked.

"They had more crew than we did," Efren said. "Twenty air weavers, if I remember right."

"How many air weavers do you have?"

"Two." He swallowed. This was how Martiz was going to lambaste him before the council and his crew.

"Yet you caught him in open water?"

"He had to slow for the Quadrilles. We approached from the south and surprised him with an aerial assault."

"You attacked a ship with a death weaver and lived to tell the tale?"

"We didn't attack *him*," Hannah hollered from somewhere near the middle of the crowded room. Efren couldn't see them, but he was glad they were there.

"Silence!"

"Hannah's right," Vadim said. "They were very careful not to attack me, personally."

"How did they attack you at all?" Martiz asked. "You had twenty air weavers on board, and ten air stations, if I'm correct about the size of your vessel."

"We did."

"Stan and Tovey can only do so much. You could have outrun them with four moderate air weavers."

"I didn't hire them for their exceptional ability to weave air," Vadim said. "I hired them because I knew we'd be captured, and I wanted them to die."



“Fuck’s sake, Vadim, we’re trying to save your ass,” Efren said under his breath.

“You wanted them to die?” Martiz’s eyes seemed to glow with internal glee. “Why?”

“You heard Klaus’s testimony,” Vadim said. “They hurt him. They’ve killed seekers in the past. I knew Efren was coming for me, and I wanted the chance to prove myself to him while also removing some of Coryn’s worst offenders.”

Martiz turned back to Efren. “Did you know Vadim was on a secret mission for Beatrice?”

“No. Would have saved us all a lot of time, if I had.”

“Explain your secret mission,” Beatrice said. “Some on the council were not aware of it.”

Vadim shared the details of his five-year mission to seek out information about Emperor Hugo’s state of mind and to get a firm layout of his whereabouts in the palace for a rescue attempt.

“We need to get him out of there,” Vadim concluded. “Eventually, Coryn will tire of using him as a pawn and rule on her own.”

“What of the two youngsters they invited to the palace to be his companions?” Beatrice asked.

“His cousins are dead. One supposedly fell off a horse. The other drank poison. There’s still a rumor that he drank the poison of his own accord, but how it got to the palace is a mystery.”

“You had nothing to do with it?” Martiz asked.

“Why use poison? If I’d wanted him dead, I would have drained him when he threw a knife at me instead of the dart board.” Vadim cleared his throat. “This is old news. They were buried together two springs ago. You don’t relay messages to and from Hearthstone?”

“You were supposed to be our eyes and ears there,” Martiz said. “It’s your fault if we’re uninformed.”

“I didn’t relay most of your messages to the council,” Beatrice said. “They would have demanded your return when those children died, and I knew you weren’t ready yet.”

Vadim nodded. “Coryn has a way to create a doppelgänger for the emperor. It’s the same type of illusion that allows her to cloak her ship and make it appear invisible.”

Olivia and the rest of Efren’s crew nodded.

“Without a seeker who can sense someone’s level and type of power, I didn’t dare try to rescue him, for fear we’d get one of her loyalists instead. Now that we have Klaus, we can tell the difference between Hugo and someone else, even if it looks like him. Once I confirmed Klaus’s ability, I was ready to come home, and I knew Efren would take me. Any other ship would have killed me on sight.”

Efren couldn’t argue with that. *Wildfire* and her captain Nola wanted Vadim dead.

“Why didn’t you kill him?” Martiz asked.

“Beatrice would have strung me up on the gallows the moment I returned,” Efren said. “Besides, have you tried to kill him? I’ve seen him put his own head back on his neck after it was rolling on deck.” While not exactly the truth, it wasn’t far from it. Vadim had nearly lost his head to a sailor’s cutlass. The cut had been so deep, Efren had seen his spine between the gouts of blood gushing from the wound. Vadim had calmly ripped his shirt into strips and wrapped them around his neck while the battle raged around them. By the time the battle was over, his neck had completely healed beneath the scar, and half the naval ship’s crew lay dead from a single weave of death magic.

“That’s a bit of an exaggeration.” Vadim’s chair squeaked as he stretched his shoulders.

“My point is, you only get one shot. Vadim’s counterattack is swift and deadly.”

“Martiz knows.” Vadim traced over the scar above his eye with his index finger. “Care to tell the room how I got this?”

“You were so focused on your death magic, you never tried to learn to heal. I thought I’d give you something to heal from.”

Vadim shook his head. “I showed mercy for you because you were my teacher.” Vadim left most of the story unspoken, but Efren remembered his drunken tale. Once given to Martiz, Vadim couldn’t retract his consent. He’d agreed to far more than he’d first thought. He had only been able to drain Martiz to unconsciousness once it was done. “I was wrong to trust you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean, you ungrateful brat?”

“You made Coryn what she is.” Vadim sat straighter in his chair. “You claim you never hurt her against her will, but that’s a lie. You did to her what you’ve done to anyone who’s had the misfortune of training under you for more than two days.” Vadim glanced at Niall. “Except Coryn was mundane.”

“If you’re going to accuse me of something, say it. Don’t walk around it.” Efren had never heard Martiz’s voice so devoid of emotion.

“You hurt her, and then you healed her. That’s called torture in some parts of the world. What I want to know is how many times it takes before a mundane woman becomes a siphon. Or was she still a child?”

The hiss of audible gasps filled the room. “Martiz would never,” someone whispered behind them.

“He did it to me.” Gulde stepped forward and pushed between Beatrice and Efren to stand beside Vadim. “After Beatrice took my fire power from me. He said it was an experiment to see if I would become something else. He stopped when all I gave him were more sparks.”

“I asked if you’d tried to heal her somehow, and you swore you never touched her.” Beatrice was no longer content to stand by Efren’s side. She stepped forward, her hands balled into fists at her sides. “You lied to me. Said I must have missed something. The statue demands balance!”

“We needed a seeker,” Martiz explained. “She was mundane. I had to know.”

Vadim turned in his chair and met Klaus’s gaze. “Where was your first healing attempt?”

“My parents were merchants between Glamiere and Landale. We were stranded on Aquarion one spring, and that’s when I first got sick.”

“Aye,” Gulde said. “I remember that hair. I remember you, lad. Martiz claimed he wasn’t strong enough to heal you then. He kept trying, though.”

“Consent,” Vadim said. “Klaus gave it the first few times. He was sick, and he didn’t want to die. That’s the first rule they taught us at the Imperial Academy of the Elements. Consent matters, Martiz. When you coerce it, you fuck with the balance.”

“What balance? What are you talking about?”

“Seekers shouldn’t exist. Suppressors shouldn’t exist. Enchanters shouldn’t exist. Siphons are so rare, Coryn claims she’s the only one.”

“My Lawrence,” Beatrice said. “He was your first experiment. He became a grand suppressor, able to weave suppression into magic. What did you do to him?”

Once the whispers started, it was several minutes before Frost and Allora brought the room to order.

“You’re right.” Allora’s whisper was barely audible from where Efren sat, but then she stood from her seat on the council and appraised Martiz with her stony gaze. “I was born mundane. He was testing me for magic. He slit my wrists and let them bleed out, claiming I would have to explain the scars to my parents if I didn’t let him heal me. So I did, of course.” She slapped him so hard his head banged against the back of his chair. “I say we turn him over to Coryn.”

A chill ran up Efren’s spine as the room called for Martiz’s swift execution instead.

Vadim rose from his chair, and the room fell silent. “I’m going to propose a trade. Martiz for Hugo.”

“She’ll never let the emperor go,” Klaus argued. Efen was surprised to hear the seeker voice his opposition.

“I know,” Vadim said. “I’m counting on it.”

Beatrice held up her hands to keep the room to a dull roar again. “Martiz has upset the balance through what he’s done. What do you propose we do about that?”

“You can’t possibly mean you want to strip me of power and then hand me to Coryn!”

“Why not?” Beatrice asked. “You’ve endangered every weaver on this island because you don’t understand the meaning of consent. Niall, as my replacement, how do you vote?”

Once again, the room was silent.

“In favor of stripping Martiz of his power,” Niall said.

“Aye,” Allora said.

“Aye,” Frost said.

“I remember the day Vadim got the scar over his eye,” Jermain said instead of giving his answer. “How bad was the original injury?”

“I lost the eye,” Vadim said. “Martiz repaired it but left the scar so I’d always remember he was the better fighter.”

“How old were you?” Allora asked.

“Eighteen.” Vadim cleared his throat. “He made sure I was old enough for the rest of his plans that day.”

“Old enough?” Allora’s gaze snapped to Vadim, and then she backhanded Martiz into his chair again.

“I don’t care how good a healer you are. Nothing is worth that price.”

“It was supposed to teach him balance,” Martiz said. “He was supposed to heal the scar himself!” He sounded desperate as he clasped his hands to his chest.

“Stop acting like this has anything to do with magic!” After Allora’s outburst, the room took a collective breath, waiting in silence.

Jermain shook his head. “I agree with the council. Martiz doesn’t deserve the power he was given.”

“And Vadim’s guilt?” Beatrice asked. “How do you rule?”

“Not guilty,” Niall said.

“Not guilty,” Frost and Jermain agreed.

Allora locked eyes with someone behind Efren. Elsie, if he had to guess. “Not guilty,” she agreed.

“There you have it,” Beatrice said. “Court dismissed. Vadim and Niall, come with me, and bring Martiz with you.”

For someone who had relinquished her power, Beatrice was still the most commanding person in the room.



## Niall

The return trip to the statue’s hiding place took twice as long, thanks to Martiz dragging his feet and begging forgiveness the entire way.

“Please. I didn’t mean to hurt anyone.”

“Yes, you did,” Vadim countered. “It still counts as hurting someone, even after you heal the wound.”

Niall remembered the care Vadim had taken not to injure him when he was a prisoner on his ship. Vadim could have easily turned to cruelty after what Martiz had done to him, but he’d chosen kindness instead. Kindness disguised as gruff tolerance, but kindness, nonetheless.

“The council has ruled,” Niall’s grandmother said. She hadn’t flagged during the trial, but she now looked like she

would rather take a nap than continue through the curving tunnel.

“The council is out of balance again,” Martiz said. “You’ve let a man replace you.”

“And now we have another vacancy to fill,” she said. “If Captain Nola is ready to give up her ship, she would be welcome on the council. If not, we have lesser weavers on the island who would be happy to serve. Petri, for instance.”

“Still a—”

“Nonbinary people count as part of our minority,” his grandmother countered before Martiz could speak.

“Why doesn’t Petri sail with Efren all the time?” Niall asked Vadim, keeping his voice low while the other two continued to bicker.

“They can’t handle the fighting. Or the sharks. They’re deathly afraid of sharks.” Vadim grinned. “So is Klaus. Said he nearly shat himself when you called one.”

“I thought Efren called it.”

“Efren doesn’t use them for transportation.” Vadim tapped his shoulder. “That was all you.”

*“I never thanked you for healing Klaus.”* Vadim’s voice wasn’t the grating intrusion it once was. Now, it felt more like a conversation between friends.

*“I did what anyone would have done.”*

Vadim shook his head and discreetly pointed to Martiz. *“Not that asshole. That’s why I was trying so desperately to heal Klaus myself. I knew Martiz would let him die, given the chance.”*

*“You’re going to take his power.”*

*“With pleasure. You were right when you said we need him. We need his power, not his methods. I’ll put his healing to good use.”*

Niall couldn’t argue with that.

Finally, they reached the alcove holding the statue. “Niall, you will hold the scale. It takes a spectral weaver to control it.”

“You’re not coming anywhere near me with that thing.” Martiz shoved Niall’s grandmother and drew a dagger from his robe. The blade was made of the same stone as the statue, not metal.

“I told you he had it on him,” Vadim said.

“I believed you.” She righted herself and flipped her hair back over her shoulder. “What a despicable tool. You’ve been using this all along to steal others’ power.”

*“Toss the scale at him while he’s distracted.”*

Niall didn’t see how that would help, but he threw it with all his might at Martiz’s chest. Martiz blocked with the arm holding the dagger, and the blade shattered when it connected with the statue. Luckily, Niall had anger to spare. He buoyed the statue on a cushion of air before it hit the ground.

“Look what you’ve done!” Martiz charged Vadim with his fingers curled into claws.

“It’s time to reset the balance of power.” Vadim raised his bared hand toward Martiz.

“You wouldn’t.” Martiz dropped his arms to his sides and took a step back. “You need me.”

Vadim closed his fist and lowered it to examine his nails. “I’m not above delivering your rotting corpse to Coryn. It would still gain entrance to the palace, which is all I need.”

“Fucking bastard.”

Vadim grinned. “I always knew how you really felt about me. You guarded your thoughts around Beatrice, though.”

“You’re nothing but a little tattletale, running along to tell your auntie, and when that didn’t work, Beatrice.”



“Leave my aunt out of this.” Vadim pointed to the scale, and then Niall. “Let’s do this before I change my mind on how valuable his power is.”

Niall felt his power surge from him and into the statue as soon as he touched the base. Then, it returned to him when he gripped it with his other hand.

His grandmother took Vadim’s hand and placed it on the scale. Then, she wrestled Martiz into position on the opposite side. He screamed as he stuck to the statue when he tried to back away.

Niall felt as though he held the power of the gods in his hands. The object itself seemed to recognize Vadim as the rightful owner of Martiz’s power. Healing power flooded through the statue from Martiz to Vadim. The whirlwind lasted far longer than Niall’s own transaction with his grandmother. Finally, Martiz’s power was drained from him, and a small amount of it remained within the confines of the statue.

His grandmother nudged Vadim’s elbow. “Take what’s yours.”

“You should have it,” Vadim said. “Please.”

“Fuck’s sake, Vadim, I’m an old woman. Let me die in peace.”

“If that’s what you wanted, you would have consented when I offered.”

She scowled at him and extended her hand. He took it, and Niall swore he could hear their conversation in his head.

*“Hugo needs you. He’ll need someone kind and gentle to guide him. Please. You know I’ll never force you to take it, but please, do this for us.”*

She nodded.

*“I consent. I wouldn’t steal it from Niall, but I’ll gladly take it from Martiz.”*

The look she gave the man still clinging to the other side of the scale was almost predatory. Then, she looked

toward the ceiling, rising on her tiptoes, her back arched as power rushed from Vadim to her.

“This is blasphemy,” Martiz moaned. “Where is the balance you always speak of?”

“*Are you ready?*”

“Yes.”

She let out a wail as the whites of her eyes turned black, and then they were the pools of brown Niall remembered.

“Life and death, once again in balance,” Vadim said. He released Niall’s grandmother and the scale at the same time.

Martiz jerked his hand away and fell to the cave floor with a sob. “You always thought you were better than me,” he said. “Now you’ve taken everything.”

“You brought this on yourself.” Niall’s grandmother offered Martiz a hand. When he gave it to her, she locked a mundane iron shackle around his wrist.

Once both hands and feet were shackled and bound together with a chain, Vadim pushed Martiz back the way they came. “You’ll have plenty of time to think on it in *Starlight Specter*’s hold.”

Outside the sentinel oak, they found the ship’s crew huddled around Renald and Jasmine, who were showing them how much they’d learned from Frost and Jermain over their time together. Jasmine drew the moisture out of the air to make an icicle, while Renald made the ground ripple beneath his feet. “I’m better with living things,” he said. He placed his hand on a bare patch of ground. As he raised his hand, grass grew beneath it.

“Earth and life magic together,” Vadim said. “I wonder how he got that.”

“Everything we do has a consequence,” Niall’s grandmother said.

“Balance.” Niall risked a glance at Vadim. The death weaver was smiling, which was even more terrifying than his usual scowl.

Vadim dragged Martiz to Stan and Tovey. Niall tried to appear interested in their discussion, but his gaze settled on Efren. He nodded to Vadim and left them discussing partitions in the hold.

“Beatrice looks well,” Efren said.

“Right.” He wanted to lose himself in Efren, to spend the rest of the day curled up with him on a hammock under some shade trees, but he had something to do first. He pressed a chaste kiss to Efren’s lips. “I’ll be right back.”

He found his grandmother seated in dry sand, her skirt pulled up over her knees. Her toes were buried in the wet sand left by the tide. A beatific smile painted her face.

“If you’ve come to gloat and say you told me so,” she warned as he sat beside her.

“I’d do no such thing.”

“You were right, though,” she said. “The moment I lost my power, I regretted it.” She cracked her eyes open to glare at him. “I would do it again in a heartbeat, don’t doubt it.”

“I’m honored,” he said. “I’m also glad Vadim had a more compelling argument than I.”

“Not true,” she said. “You broke the link with Coryn, which mattered more than anything. Vadim’s gift was something I couldn’t have predicted.”

“I heard your conversation, about protecting Emperor Hugo.”

She nodded. “You and Hugo are of an age. If he’s been as sheltered as Vadim claims, he’s going to need a good friend.” She gazed across the beach, and Niall followed to where Stan and Tovey dragged Martiz to the skiff. The rest of *Starlight Specter*’s crew joined them, except Vadim, who stood beside Klaus on the dock, and Efren, who leaned against a palm tree.

“Go to him. We will have plenty of time to talk when you return from Hearthstone.”

He leaned in and gave her an awkward side hug, squeezing her shoulders. She laughed and kissed his cheek.

“I’ll hold you to that.”

“I’m sorry I worried you, Niall. There’s nothing like the prospect of death to rekindle one’s will to live.”

“Do life weavers die?” He asked. Martiz already looked years older than he had an hour ago, but he’d also been through a stressful ordeal.

“They go when they choose.” She patted his cheek. “Now leave me. You’ll only have a few hours before Vadim demands to set sail.”

“It’s not his ship.” The familiar voice made Niall’s body tense with anticipation. Efren was no longer leaning against the palm tree. He hovered over Niall, creating a spot of shade to block the sun from his eyes as he gazed up. His silhouette in the sunlight again reminded Niall of an angel.

“You’d deny him?” Niall’s grandmother asked.

“Not a chance. We’ll leave before dawn.”

She chuckled. “May the winds be with you when you sail.”

Efren helped them both to their feet and led them to the dock, where Stan and Tovey were loading the skiff.

Niall longed to set sail again. Even though he’d been captured twice and taken onto naval ships against his will, he looked forward to it. With Efren by his side, he would be content anywhere.

# Chapter 28

## Efren

Efren shivered, more from the sheer look of desperation on Martiz's face than the cool breeze Stan and Tovey created as they pushed the skiff to her limits. Yes, Martiz deserved every scrap of his power gone, but Efren vowed to stay on the council's good side from now on, lest he receive their worst form of punishment.

"I'm taking these two once we have Hugo." Vadim pointed to Stan and Tovey. "If we swing by Landale, we can pick up two more."

"We don't have time," Efren said.

Martiz stilled. They'd caught his attention. Efren would owe Vadim a gold piece if their rehearsed conversation worked.

"We'll be risking a frozen harbor as it is," he said.

"You'll be a sitting duck," Vadim countered.

"We'll have Milton and Niall."

"Niall will want to keep to your schedule."

Efren grinned. "I'll stick to daylight, then. Let Olivia take the overnight hours." He reached across the small skiff and patted Vadim's shoulder. "Don't worry, old friend. We'll swing by Landale on the way back and pick up your wind weavers."

"You won't," Vadim insisted. "They won't recognize you."

"Are they loyalists?"

"To me, yes."

Efren snorted at the audacity of that statement. "Loyal to you, and no one else?"

"Emperor Hugo."

“Maybe you should swing by Landale on your way and leave Stan and Tovey with me.”

“Taking the southern route this time of year with nothing but sails would be suicide, and you know it. Coryn would have us in a heartbeat.”

“Taking the northern pass to Glamiere is just as foolish,” Efren countered.

“Gah, talking to you is foolish.” Vadim rolled his eyes. “We’ll have two weeks on the water to hash it out. Just promise me Stan and Tovey.”

The wind weavers in question were both avoiding their gazes. Voices traveled too well over the narrow stretch between the two islands.

“Oy, winders.” The way they cut eyes at each other before turning to glare at Efren, he knew they’d already sussed out his request. “Vadim wants you for a secret mission once we have Hugo. Are you game?”

“As ever,” Tovey said.

“Aye, Captain.”

Tovey rolled his eyes. “Is this going to be another Melcher’s Pass?”

Vadim jerked his head to glare in Martiz’s direction. The former healer quickly looked away. Vadim leaned toward Tovey. “Hush. We don’t speak of Melcher’s Pass.”

If Martiz heard them, his countenance didn’t change in the slightest. He continued to gaze forlornly at the water.

Finally, they reached the docks and could end their farce. Stan and Tovey heaved Martiz out of the small craft first.

When they were past the gangplank above them and out of sight, Beatrice helped Niall out of the skiff. She stopped Efren with one leg up. “If you don’t take Petri, Martiz will question why you don’t have all available wind weavers at your beck and call.”

“Petri’s still terrified from this last trip. It’ll be another ten years before I can talk them into a day trip, let alone the two-week slog to Hearthstone.”

Beatrice nodded and helped him up the rest of the way. “As you say. I don’t like it, though. You’re putting all your eggs in one basket.”

“She doesn’t want us. She wants Vadim.”

“And if she catches Vadim’s ship on the way to Glamiere and finds he’s not on it, she’ll be gunning straight for you.”

“We’ll be in such a thick fog, she’ll never find us.”

“Fog.” Beatrice scoffed. “Your answer is fog.”

“It beats snow, but we’ll have Frost aboard, too. And Jermain.”

She nodded. “All eggs in one little basket.”

“We’re building a bunk fit for an emperor.”

“And one for Vadim?”

“He’s got a crate in the hold.”

She laughed. “He does.” She gave him a hug. “Be off with the tide before dawn. Don’t give Martiz the chance to plot with Elsie tonight.”

Efren had forgotten about Elsie. He wondered if Vadim had spoken to his hateful aunt after his trial, or if the crowd had kept them apart.

Efren stopped worrying about Vadim the moment he and Niall were alone in his house. They needed to pack for the weeks-long trip, but Efren had more immediate concerns. He pulled Niall to him and kissed him gently. The kiss devolved into a clash of teeth and tongues as Niall kissed him back, all passion and desire.

“Gods, I love you,” Efren managed between kisses as Niall untied the laces of his shirt and tugged it from his breeches.

“Love you more.” Niall dove to capture a nipple as soon as it was bare. Efren moaned as the scrape of teeth over his sensitive flesh sent a shock wave straight to his cock. “Want to prove it to you and make you scream my name as you come for me, over and over.”

How could Niall make something so filthy sound delicious at the same time? “Yes, please.” Efren unbuttoned Niall’s shirt, wishing they had more time for him to worship every inch of bared skin as it became available to him. The afternoon light shone through the south windows, casting everything in a warm glow, including Niall’s delectable skin. Efren wanted to kiss every inch of his body, to claim it as his own.

“Upstairs,” Niall said as he discarded his shirt on the floor. “Now.”



## **Niall**

They raced up the stairs. Unfortunately, a shadow occupied a seat in the middle of the bed.

“I thought you’d never make it.” Olivia placed her tricorne hat on the comforter and tossed her glossy black hair over her shoulder.

“How long have you been here?” Efren asked.

“I knocked, but you didn’t answer.” She shrugged. “I have a report on the new construction. We’ve combined the crates as you requested, added new sails if Vadim is displeased with the arrangement, and quartered off a section of the true hold for Martiz on the way there and Hugo on the way back.”

“Thank you.”

“I’ve also built myself a cabin below decks.” She looked pleased with herself.

“Where?” Efren asked.



“Below yours, of course. Needed to get away from the rest of the crew.”

“You obviously have no sense of smell, then.” Niall couldn’t help it. His nose wrinkled at the thought of being that close to the head.

“It’s not that bad!” Olivia insisted. “Besides, I’ll have our new crew members scrub the loo twice a day.”

“You have death magic,” Efren said to him. “It’s worse for you. Vadim even struggled with a sail in the hold. Said it was too close.”

“He slept with you for the fresh air?” Olivia arched an eyebrow at him.

“There were other perks.”

Niall couldn’t hide his flare of jealousy if he wanted to. Efren had a direct link to his core. Efren held his arm out in response, and Niall crowded against Efren’s side, reminding him with his body that he was the only perk Efren needed from now on.

“We’re ready to leave when you are,” Olivia said. “The longer we stay in port, the more likely Elsie will conjure lightning to keep us here.”

“She wouldn’t dare.”

“Beatrice pulled her away from shore earlier.” Olivia shrugged. “She has no way to stop her now.”

“Fuck.” Efren shook his head. “The last thing we need is lightning.”

Niall remembered all too well its effect on Coryn’s ship. “We’ll be there as soon as we’re packed.”

Olivia slid her hat back into place and tipped it to them in farewell. “See you then.” She slipped out the window through which she’d come.

Efren turned to the dresser. He dug into a bottom drawer and retrieved a rucksack. “I’ll get you a proper trunk in Hearthstone. This will do, for now.”

“A trunk? Where will I keep it?”

“We’ll make it a permanent addition to our cabin. It will serve as the table’s other bench.”

It would be crowded in the tiny space, but Niall was pleased Efen wanted him to have his own spot in the cabin. He accepted the rucksack and filled it with the new winter clothes delivered sometime while they were gone.

Niall fought off a wave of fear. He still didn’t know what Coryn wanted from him, but it felt better to act than to sit on Aquarion and wait for her to strike again.

Efen squeezed his shoulder. “I’ll give you a tour of our updates to the ship, too. You’ve yet to see the true hold.”

Niall packed the few clothes he’d brought with him and the rest of the winter wear Gulde had made for him and still had room left in the rucksack. “Room for books,” he teased. His grandmother had given him a stack from the library on Horseshoe Island, hidden somewhere in the tunnels beneath the sentinel oak. He stacked the large leatherbound volumes on top.

“We should get going.” Efen pointed out the window to the west, where the red sun hung low over the horizon.

Niall was surprised to find Petri waiting for them at the dock. Efen motioned for them to follow them up *Starlight Specter*’s gangplank. They wouldn’t join until Efen swore no one would release her from her moorings until they were safely on the dock again.

“I’m not going with you,” they said to Olivia when they boarded. “Do not make me swim.”

“I would never,” she said. “There are simply too many sharks in the water around here.”

“Stop tormenting them.” Efen draped an arm over Petri’s shoulders. “My cabin. Now.”

Niall didn’t expect to be invited inside, so he was pleasantly surprised when Efen waved him in. He set his

rucksack in the corner as Efren motioned for Petri to take a seat on the bunk.

“Do you know how to do a silencing weave?” Efren asked Niall.

He’d never tried. The first attempt left them all breathless. The second managed to lower their voices to whispers. The third try made the cabin airtight, and their ears popped.

“This will work,” Efren whispered.

“Only until we all feel lightheaded.” Petri rolled their eyes. “What’s the plan for your house, Captain?”

“Any upgrade you feel is fitting for the emperor. He’ll need a place to stay, as will the diplomats traveling from Luminest.”

Niall blinked. He’d believed the conversation between Efren and Vadim, that they were splitting up at Hearthstone. Vadim was supposed to take Hugo north to Luminest. Now, he understood why they hadn’t tried to hide their plans from Martiz. They’d wanted him to hear the lie.

“What if Elsie asks what we’re doing?”

“We have new crew members. Vadim’s got two wind weavers in Landale waiting for him, and we’ve picked up a new one, as well. For the updates at the sentinel oak, tell her we’ll need somewhere to parley with Coryn if she should return.”

“Parley?” Petri wrinkled their nose in disgust. “Wouldn’t it be best to declare her an enemy and attack?”

“She’s got a death weaver,” Niall said. “I didn’t see her on the ship, but Brigham, the other seeker, seemed terrified of her.”

“Anyone who attacks General Coryn will suffer the same fate as someone attacking Vadim,” Efren said. “With magic, anyway. Siphons only have the ability to fight magic with magic.”

“You mean if someone were to attack her with a sword, her power wouldn’t see that as an attempt on her life?” Petri asked.

“It’s unknown if a weaver could attack her with a sword and live. A mundane archer hit her with a crossbow bolt to the heart, and he lived to tell the tale.”

Petri nodded. “I’ll work on recruiting mundane folk from the passing ships.”

“That’s more than I would ask of you.”

“Nay, it’ll keep me busy building, and keep Elsie guessing. She and Allora are supposed to be bottling her lightning.”

Efren nodded and extended his hand across the table. “It’s a plan.”

“Safe returns, Captain.” Niall had nowhere else to go but out the cabin door to get out of Petri’s way.

They emerged to jeers from Olivia and the rest of the crew. “Get out of here, Petri!”

“Ye landlubber!” Stan shouted. Tovey elbowed him in the gut, and he coughed mid-word.

“I hope the captain and Niall make it.” Petri stuck out their tongue at Hannah, and then raised both middle fingers toward Stan and Tovey. “The rest of you can drown.” Petri and Olivia shared a grin, and then they were off down the gangplank. A gust of air returned the plank to the ship while Petri unhooked the mooring ropes. Stan used his earth weaves to retrieve them to him, both swaying like charmed snakes. With a comical look on his face, he raised them above his head, as though he would place them about Tovey’s neck.

“What did I tell you about resolving your differences on land?” Efren’s voice was soft, but the glint in his gaze was deadly.

“Sorry, Captain,” Stan said. “E started it.”

“I did.” Tovey turned, and a gust of wind knocked the ropes to the deck. Then, they coiled around Stan’s waist,

locking his arms in place. "I'll finish it, too." He caressed Stan's cheek and kissed him before the gods and everyone on deck.

Stan tried to shake the ropes, but Tovey hopped over them like a cat and vanished into the hold.

"Damn it all," Stan swore as he coiled the nearest rope for storing. "Now I have to wait for Hearthstone to ask what the fuck that meant."

Niall helped Stan with the second rope as Efren made the rounds on deck, confirming everyone was ready to sail.

"Do you love him?" Niall asked.

Stan shook his head. "Don't matter. He's cold as ice. His powers must have been switched at birth."

Niall laughed at the joke, but Stan's grin didn't reach his eyes. It was none of Niall's business, but he hoped they worked out their differences. They were a great team when they weren't at each other's throats.

"Niall," Efren called, motioning him to the stairway into the hold with a wave. A new light globe brightened the area outside Vadim's crate, if he could still call it that. Someone had crafted the two crates together into a wider, taller space with a working door and a sail hammock strung longways from corner to corner. Beneath the hammock was a mattress.

"Klaus hates sails," Niall said. "They agreed to bunk together?"

"Klaus is aware. Vadim?" Efren shrugged. "Could go either way."

They continued through to the galley, where Efren showed him a trap door that led into the deepest bowels of the ship. This was also lit with new globe enchantments that looked suspiciously like the ones in Efren's house.

"We won't be needing them until we return," Efren said when he asked. "I didn't trust Allora to make new ones with Gulde's minuscule power. Everyone who had the luxury

has donated their personal enchantments, including this one we took from Martiz's residence on Horseshoe Island. He graciously gave us permission when he realized he'd be sitting here in the dark if he declined."

"You're here to gloat already?" Martiz sat on a wooden box in the middle of a six-by-six cell of newly cut pine. At first, Niall thought the man was free to leave, but then he noticed the tied-off weave of air blocking the doorway. Martiz could still breathe, and the others could check on him without entering the cell.

Martiz was still in his robes, but they looked far more bedraggled than they had before, and he had a smear of something on his face. "Your cook threw his slop at me. What more did I expect?"

"I'm sure you provoked him," Efren said. "We're only passing through." He led Niall further into the large, empty hold.

Martiz shouted pleas for freedom mixed with curses and insults at their backs. When they were two steps away, the shouts cut off abruptly.

"That air weave allows him to scream all he wants, but no one can hear him. Tovey's idea."

Niall added it to the list of weaves he needed to learn.

"We have all this space for looting. We rarely use it, but it's good to hide timber and other bulky goods."

"How do you get them down here?" Niall was certain a full length of ship's timber wouldn't fit through the trap door.

"Stan can manipulate the decking, and I can control the seas around us so we don't flood in the process."

That knowledge would have helped Niall on *Eel's Gold*. He would ask Stan to teach him when he got the chance.

Thankfully, Niall already had a good grasp on his water magic and could help Efren in a pinch. He wasn't proficient in any element yet, but he hoped to be better

equipped to help their little band of pirates once they reached Hearthstone. He still had so much to learn.

On the way to Hearthstone, he would spend the days studying with Frost, Jermain, and Vadim as much as possible, and Hannah, Stan, and Tovey when they were available. The rest of the time he would spend with Efren. He hoped his water weaving lessons would be as erotic as they were educational.

Efren brought him up another trapdoor near the head. Olivia had built herself a pleasant cabin. It was smaller than Efren's, with only a bunk and a low shelf where she kept her journals, but Niall took it for the sign it was. Efren had finally replaced Vadim as his first mate, and as his lover.

Efren kissed him long and hard beneath the trap door that would take them right outside their cabin door.

“What was that for?” Niall asked.

“I need a reason to kiss you?”

“No.” Niall kissed him again.

“I didn't think so. Get up that ladder and we'll make good on our promises from earlier. Olivia's got the wheel tonight.”

After Efren had his way with him on the bunk, Niall stripped his captain bare and took him over the table. It wasn't the kitchen table at home, but the map table was even more appropriate. Efren had first claimed Niall in his cabin, and now it was time for Niall to claim the cabin, and Efren, as his own.

# Epilogue

## Vadim

Vadim and Olivia faced into the wind as she steered the boat south. They would cut between the Equis Islands and then veer east toward Hearthstone in the hopes of avoiding the snowy winter squalls that plagued the southern coast of Embertide.

“What do you think of your new cabin?” Her smug grin looked almost ghoulish in the moonlight.

“Cabin?”

“We combined your two crates and put you and Klaus together.”

“What the fuck do you mean, you combined them?”

She feigned surprise at his outburst. “Klaus agreed.”

“Fuck’s sake.”

“I haven’t heard you swear this much since ...”

He didn’t have to ask her not to finish the sentence. He remembered that night all too well, when he’d returned to tell them Willamina was gone. He’d sworn up an impotent storm of threats to the gods. Their answer had been to send him after Willamina’s son over a decade later.

“He’s coming around.” Olivia met his scowl with a quizzical smile. “I don’t know why he’d want to spend time with the likes of you, but he insisted.”

Vadim very much doubted that. Klaus had been adamant they would never see each other again once he was free of Vadim’s tether. “*If that means I’m dead, so be it,*” he’d railed.

“He’s probably waiting for you,” Olivia said.

She didn’t say it, but he could feel the judgment in her voice. He wasn’t the first mate of this ship anymore. He had no business above deck after dark. It had been his place,



though. He knew *Starlight Specter* like the back of his hand, knew her creaks and tells as well as Efren did. He'd lovingly swabbed her deck more times than he wanted to admit, grateful to have something to do to pass the lonely days on the sea.

He'd been unhappy here, more often than not. He'd been unhappy most of his life, if he dared to admit it. Unhappy at home, where Elsie tormented him for living. Unhappy training with Martiz because he always took and never gave in return. Unhappy leaving Aquarion at eighteen because he shouldn't have had to leave, damn it. Martiz stole his healing power and then sent him to learn how to use it in Hearthstone, the bastard.

Hesse had made him happy. He smiled at those memories, even now. Their former emperor had been a headstrong troublemaker and a violent drunk. He'd created problems and then used his imperial guards to make them go away. The few times Vadim had taken mortal wounds to the heart, he'd been protecting the dumbass from arrows.

Mortal, except Hesse was nothing if not giving. He always had a healer on hand, and she worked faster than most, knitting together Vadim's heart muscles when his own body refused. His lack of healing power provided enough of an imbalance that he could steal power from her without her knowing it. He felt guilty each time, but if she noticed, she never said, and he was stronger for it next time. After the third time, he was able to heal well enough on his own.

Now, he had the whole of his power returned. He was a formidable death weaver, the most powerful he'd ever met. Most death weavers couldn't stomach using themselves as bait, so most had turned to their healing powers, no matter how small, and used them instead.

Vadim had turned to death out of spite. Spite for his auntie. Spite for Martiz, the stealing asshole. Spite for a world that saw him for exactly what he was and feared him, anyway. He couldn't harm anyone who didn't consent, or who didn't want to harm him. It was that simple. If you didn't want to be

on the wrong side of a death weaver, you should have left them alone.

Vadim fully expected Klaus to leave him alone. He was surprised to find a light enchantment in the hold by their door, and even more amazed to see Klaus sprawled above an open book on the floor in the doorway of their makeshift cabin. He was shirtless and tangled in what looked like a double sail for sleeping.

Their private room was almost the size of Efren's, though the walls were too thin to hold much body heat, not to mention their voices. It was a good thing Martiz was on the other side of the ship, locked in the soundproof true hold.

“I didn't think you'd return so soon,” Klaus said.

“Were you waiting up for me?”

Klaus glanced up, where an anchor for the sail bed had torn loose from the wall. “I needed to talk to you. It's fallen three times now. I didn't want you to try to lie in it and crush me to death.”

They'd been over the sail bed debate numerous times. Vadim swore by them on the sea. He hated rolling from one wall to the other on the boat's whim. He much preferred hanging within the sail, rocking side to side with the boat but never moving.

Klaus was quite the opposite. He hated sails. Too many times, he'd woken from slumber to find a member of Coryn's navy had twisted his sail so that he couldn't escape, and when he screamed for help, they'd descended on him and used him for their pleasure. Only once the crew was satisfied could Klaus begin his day.

Vadim knelt in the doorway, his knee only inches from Klaus's head. “No one on this ship will hurt you.”

“You're in my light.”

Gods, this young man would be the death of him. All Vadim wanted was to protect him, and still he railed and fought like a wildcat.

He stood and brushed at his coat, as though he could brush the dampness from it. “I’ll take one of the sails in the crew’s hold, then. Good night.”

“I’m sorry.” Klaus was now looking around the lip of the door like a curious tabby, the book forgotten beneath him. “Please, stay?”

“You have no reason to be sorry.” Vadim grinned, though his chest ached with the words. “I’m nothing to you now that you’re healed. You can move on without me, as you’ve so desperately wanted.”

Klaus closed his eyes, hiding the giant brown disks from view. “I am sorry, though. I said things I didn’t— shouldn’t have said. I was rude, and I’m sorry.”

“I’ll try to fix the sail, then.”

Klaus disappeared from view, rustling around with the sail. When Vadim looked through the doorway again, Klaus had the sail spread over the mattress he’d been laying on like a top sheet. “I’d rather you didn’t. We can keep each other warm down here.”

Fuck. Now it was Vadim’s turn to squeeze his eyes shut in an attempt to fight his baser urges. As a death weaver, he was always cold. He craved Klaus’s heat, and thanks to the tether between them, Klaus had known it. He’d never exploited that fact before, though, always too afraid of what might happen if they slept in the same bed.

Gods, Vadim didn’t need those worries, either. Klaus’s invitation was a gift, a sweet offer from a young man trying to make amends for the awful slurs he’d uttered while they’d been tethered together with no filter between their thoughts.

“You’re as skittish as a horse.” Klaus’s tone made Vadim open his eyes to scowl at him again. “I’m not proposing marriage. I’ll face this way,” he pointed to the stern, “You’ll face that way,” he pointed to the aft, “and we’ll both be warm and cozy under this sail.”

Vadim wanted more, though, so much more. He stepped back from the doorway to hide the naked want in his

gaze.

He could do this. It was only two weeks to Hearthstone, and then he would be needed elsewhere, educating Hugo on the tense political situation in the north, or sitting watch by his door, or helping Efren navigate through stormy seas to the Equis Islands. Once there, he'd need to meet with the emissaries from Glamiere to make certain they meant the emperor no harm before letting them board. Then, there would be additional negotiations once they returned to Aquarion.

He faced two weeks of being completely useless and cramped in this tiny box with a man who hated him. It wasn't anything he hadn't faced before. It had been two weeks with his shitty roommate at the academy before Hesse had demanded he move into his quarters and become his personal bodyguard. Granted, Vadim had killed Hesse's personal bodyguard, but only because the fool had attacked him first. The fire hadn't even singed Vadim's eyebrows before the man lay dead at his feet.

A gentle touch on his arm brought him back to reality. When had Klaus taken to touching him? No one touched him, for fear their intentions be misconstrued and they'd end up dead.

“Come to bed, Vadim.”

There was no hiding what those words did to him this time, with Klaus staring up at him with something akin to want in his eyes.

“We have much to discuss,” Klaus continued.

Discuss. Ah, yes. Klaus's favorite thing in the world was to talk around, above, and below his subject without ever saying what he meant. The direct link to his thoughts had been helpful with that, at least. Vadim had known exactly what Klaus meant with all his pretty words.

He wished there was a way to rebuild their life link, but now that Klaus was healed, it would be impossible.

Klaus slipped his bare hand into Vadim's gloved one and pulled until Vadim half-stepped, half-fell into the crate. Once they were both inside, Klaus shut the door.

This was going to be the longest two weeks of Vadim's life.

THE END (for now)

# Thank you!

Thank you so much for reading Efren and Niall's happily ever after (for now)! You'll also see more of them in Vadim's story, [\*Tell No Tales\*](#), and all of our heroes will find their happily ever afters in [\*Suffer No Fools\*](#).

Oh, you can't get enough of them and want more now? What if Olivia didn't interrupt Efren and Niall's last night at home on Aquarion? [\*This bonus deleted scene will answer that question for you!\*](#) (And sign you up for my email list!)

If you loved *Take No Prisoners*, [\*please leave a review\*](#) so other readers can find it and love it, too!

If you want to know what's coming next, let me entertain you via email twice a month (or 3 if you read mpreg)! Subscribe on my [\*website\*](#) or [\*follow the direct link\*](#) - there's a free story in it for you!

If you'd rather find me online, [\*join my Facebook Group, Edie's E-Team \(a.k.a. Edeez Nutz\)\*](#).

Thanks again for reading! We readers are a rare breed, and our time is precious. Thanks for spending a little time with me!

# Acknowledgement

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And to my Bestie, who was no help with pirate titles but who smashed it on the vampires. I will never let you live that down. Bwahaha - you're welcome!

# About The Author

Edie Montreux (She/They)

I am nonbinary, demisexual, and an ally for all aspects of the LGBTQIA+ rainbow. I love my partner, Queen, dogs, and video games. I write full time, except when walking the dogs or protecting imaginary worlds from fantasy creatures.



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# Books By This Author

## [Farbonnur Elves Series](#)

Farbonnur Elves is a six-book epic fantasy M/M romance series with elves searching for their fated mates in a world decimated by human blood mages. It's a race against time to fulfill the goddess's prophecies before the mages raise their blood demon and destroy the realms of the living and the dead.

## [Haunted Hollywood Ever Afters Series](#)

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## [Edie Monte Mpreg](#)

If you love my snark, spice, and happily ever afters and you read eggpreg/mpreg, you'll love my mpreg novellas, too!