

Praise for A Matter Of Blood

A Matter of Blood is a familiar retelling set in a steampunk world full of creative inventions, fashion, and classes. Jake's story as a country boy heading to the big city allowed me as the reader to also experience everything through his eyes. I especially loved how creative Lauren was with the steampunk fashion which isn't always easy to convey through fiction form. Excellent steampunk adventure!

- Morgan L. Busse, award-winning author of the Ravenwood Saga and Skyworld series

In A Matter of Blood, Salisbury's imaginative creatures and steampunk inventions form the framework for a story of forgiveness and how far brothers will go for each other. With relationships that tug at the heart, this is steampunk worth reading!

- Cathy McCrumb, author of *Recorder*



LAUREN H SALISBURY

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*For my grandparents, Nancy and Bill, who believed in me
enough to support my writing career. I will forever be grateful
for your encouragement.*

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Chapter 1

Jake

Lightning nudged Jake's shoulder.
"Stop it," he said. Daft animal.

She bumped him again, nearly knocking him over, and he pushed her massive head away. "I'm trying to work, you stupid mammoth. Give me some room."

He stood back to inspect the fence post he'd just finished setting in place. It listed a little to the left, but it would withstand a brush with one of the cows. Good enough. Removing his hat, he wiped his sweaty face with the back of his arm and swigged water from his canteen.

Lightning's warm breath ruffled his hair, and she nuzzled his cheek. He reached up to stroke her long snout, the fur coarse beneath his palm. Her ears flicked, and he smoothed his hand over her crest and the line of feathers down her neck.

"Easy, girl. We've got hours to go yet."

He eyed the remaining pile of logs, which looked just as high as it had when he'd started that morning, and a huff escaped his lips. If only he had his brother's abilities. Nathan would have replaced half the fence line by now if he'd been here.

Jake's mouth twisted down, and his hands fisted at his sides. He turned his back on the mountain of wood and gazed across the meadow to the distant crags bordering their estate. The hazy, jagged peaks blurred as he envisioned his latest mechanical design—a machine that could erect a post at the crank of a handle and push of a button.

If only his father would let him build it. It would save so much time and effort. And he'd finally be able to keep up.

He jammed the stopper into his canteen and shoved it back in his saddle bag. "I need to get out of here."

Lightning snorted, and he scratched her flank, his fingers sinking into her thick golden fur. Her neck muscles rippled in response, accompanied by a low rumble in her chest. She lifted her forelegs off the ground and dropped them back down, her toes thudding into the earth a half beat apart.

"You want a break too, huh?"

She sidestepped, the feathers along her tail ruffling as she swished it around her rump.

He chuckled. A short ride wouldn't hurt. "Okay, you win. But only to the woods and back."



They flew across the fields, the wind whipping Jake's hair back and stinging his cheeks. All his problems fell away as he became one with Lightning, matching her movements and sinking into the perfect rhythm. Exhilarated, he tucked in close to her spine and urged her to even greater speeds.

In no time at all, they reached the edge of the woods and plunged straight on into their shadowy depths. Lightning was

barely winded, and he was having too much fun to turn back so soon.

The track they followed was well worn and safe at that time of day, so he slowed them only enough to be able to avoid any low-hanging branches. He didn't intend to finish their ride by being unseated or getting entangled in knotwood vine.

Gradually, the path grew steeper, the undergrowth thicker, and their breathing heavier. Jake eased up on the reins and brought them to a gentle lope. Still, he didn't turn back. Not yet. They'd come this far; they might as well keep going to the lookout.

It was his favourite spot to think and dream. He reached back and patted the pocket of his jacket, slung over the saddle packs behind him. His notebook was still tucked safely inside.

They broke through the treeline and came to a stop at the edge of a ridge, the entire estate stretching out before them like a vast, rolling carpet. So much potential. From the rocky northern coppices to the southern meadows, everything in the valley belonged to his family.

Make that his adopted family.

His heart twisted, his good mood evaporating. He'd never measure up to Dad or Nathan, never share their special gifts. He didn't even share their love of working the land or living so far from civilisation. How many times had his father refused even to listen to his ideas for improving things? His inventions wouldn't cause problems, they'd help. *If I could just build the machines...*

He struck his leg with his fist and turned Lightning back towards the path. Maybe coming here hadn't been such a good

idea after all.

She jerked to a stop, and the feathers along her neck shot up, quivering in a bright fan of chromatic pink-purple.

Leaning forwards to stroke her shoulder, he cooed softly, “Whoa, girl. What’s wrong?”

Her feathers calmed at his touch, but he nearly fell when she suddenly darted off the path into a patch of dunberry bushes. He looked all around but couldn’t see anything. “What in the name of the founders has gotten into you?”

As the rustle of leaves quietened, a faint howl caught his attention. Lightning shivered again and sidestepped deeper into the bushes. Was that a fell-hound? Impossible. They never ventured this far down into the foothills. Did they?

He sat up straighter and tried to ignore his skittish mount in order to pinpoint the sound. It came again, much closer. Definitely a fell-hound. If it had caught their scent... Icy fear doused his heated skin, and he urged Lightning back onto the path, headed for home as fast as she could manage.

Why had they come so far? He hadn’t cared about the distance on the way out. Now he became fixated on each marker they passed.

A cry rose no more than a few hundred yards behind them. He dared not look back.

Founders’ beards, let it not be a pack. They’d be lucky to escape a lone hunter—evading a multi-pronged attack would be impossible. Lightning was fast, but she didn’t have the strength or sharp tusks of her brother to fend off an assault if they were caught. He ducked closer to her neck, gripped her sides with his legs, and gave her free rein.

“Fly, Lightning! Fly!”

The ground sped past in a blur as she carried him back through the heart of the forest. Her powerful muscles bunched and stretched beneath him, her efforts spurred by the danger stalking them. The scent of hot sweat tinged with metallic fear clogged his nostrils. But the growls grew ever closer.

Jake squeezed his eyes shut. Images of slashing teeth and claws ripping through flesh flashed unbidden behind his closed lids. He opened them wide. *Don't think about it. Don't think about it.*

The gnarled fingers of a tree branch caught his shirt as they passed, tugging him to the side. It held on for only a second before the fabric ripped and he was free, but it was enough to throw Lightning's stride. She veered off the path at the involuntary yank on her reins and dived between two trees straight down the steep incline.

"Oh cra—" Jake's teeth clacked together with the force of their landing, and he was thrown forwards. He managed to right himself and cling onto the saddle pommel, his head bouncing as he tried to stay on Lightning's back.

She thundered down the slope, loose dirt raining around them, saplings snapping under the weight of her descent. How she kept her feet, Jake had no idea. He was too focused on keeping his stomach in place.

When they reached the bottom and regained the winding track that led out of the woods, he dared a glance behind. Nothing there but a dust cloud, so he pulled Lightning to a stop.

The thudding of his pulse in his ears made hearing difficult, but the sounds of pursuit seemed to have faded. His shoulders sagged, and he let out a breath—they'd made it.

He rubbed Lightning's flank. "Well done, girl. You saved us."

No sooner had the words left his mouth than something large and grey flashed among the trees deeper in the forest. A brace of birds took to the air, drawing his attention to a patch of dense bushes. Jake narrowed his eyes and shifted for a better look. A moment later, the fell-hound emerged from between the leaves, its yellow eyes glowing in the shadows.

Jake didn't wait to discover more. He dug his heels in to get Lightning moving again.

The poor mammoth was blowing hard, but they didn't have far to go. The fell-hound would never follow them out into the open. They raced through the woods, making better time on the flat terrain.

"Come on, Lightning. You can do it."

They reached the grass, and Jake breathed out with an almost triumphant sense of relief. Bright sunlight dazzled his eyes after the gloom of the woods, and he blinked to adjust. He swung his head around to make sure they were alone.

Unbelievably, the fell-hound burst through the undergrowth directly behind them. It let out a whiny bark when it left the shade but didn't even pause in its chase.

Jake's heart leapt into his mouth. Now what? He scanned their surroundings and steered Lightning in the direction of a nearby stream. Fell-hounds hated water, didn't they? *Please let it be true.*

He checked their rear. The beast bounded ever closer. It would rip them to pieces if it caught them, teeth and claws shearing through bone like an axe through firewood.

Shuddering at the image, he scoured the area ahead. Where was that water? A ribbon of blue caught the sunlight as they topped the next rise, the sparkling liquid beckoning.

Calculations whirled through his head. It would be close, but they should make it. He thought. He bent low over Lightning's back, squeezing with his heels, and she surged forwards.

At the same moment they splashed into the stream, an almighty yelp came from behind them. Jake peeked over his shoulder in time to see the fell-hound fly backwards through the air and slam into the ground. It scrambled upright and set off for the treeline, whimpering and favouring its left side.

What—? Jake whipped his head around, and his eyes landed on his brother.

Nathan sat atop his mammox, Flame, on the opposite side of the stream, one hand outstretched towards the fleeing fell-hound. Concentration pulled his features into a frown, but his muscles weren't straining as they sometimes did when he expended his power. Tossing a fell-hound through the air with his mind clearly wasn't overly taxing. He looked every inch the confident hero.

Of course he did, with his sculpted physique and thick black hair in perfect waves. Jake shoved a hand through his own mousy brown mane, dislodging a stray leaf and catching his fingers in several knots.

“Lucky I was out here. You all right?”

Yep. Here he was to save the day and show off his powers. Again. Why couldn't he, just once, wait to see if someone needed his help before stepping in? Jake ground his teeth

together. *Great. Now I get to feel guilty for resenting him saving me. Why do I always end up the bad guy?*

He said nothing while his brother rode down to him. What could he say? That he wanted to take credit for something on his own? That he was sick of constantly being shown he was second best? Nathan didn't get it, and there was no point explaining because he never would.

Jake winced. Maybe that wasn't fair. Nathan was a great brother most of the time. It was just hard to measure up to him when he did things like this.

Nathan folded his forearms over his pommel and stared across the gap between them as the silence lengthened. His eyes sparkled, but all he said was, "You're welcome."

"I had it under control."

"Under control?" Nathan's gaze swung to the woods and back, his brows disappearing beneath his fringe. "You were being chased by a fell-hound. Have you lost your mind, riding out there alone?"

"I only went up to the lookout. How was I to know it would come this far down the mountains in broad daylight?"

"You could've been killed."

"But I wasn't. And I'd have been fine on my own. I had a plan to get away from it. I was going to use the water as a barrier. They hate it. I was already in the stream, and it was still at least ten yards behind me. I'd have made it across in time." Jake clamped his mouth shut. He didn't need to explain himself. He was eighteen, not eight.

"Are you hurt?"

"Of course not. I just told you, I had it handled."

Nathan looked back the way they'd come and ran a hand over his close-cropped beard. "Yeah, I saw that." He smirked. "Nice riding."

Cheeks burning, Jake steered Lightning out of the stream and up the slope. "What are you doing out here, anyway?" he threw over his shoulder.

"Oh, come on, Jake. Don't be so sour. I did just save your life." Nathan's voice held a note of amusement that dug its way under Jake's skin. He spun around and glared at his brother.

Nathan shrugged one muscled shoulder. "I came to see how you're getting on with the new fence. Need a hand?"

"No." Jake set Lightning walking again.

"We could get it done in half the time if we work together."

"I can do it by myself. Dad gave me the job, not you."

"If you say so." Nathan's voice floated after him. "I'll see you back at the house then."

Chapter 2

Jake

By the time Jake returned to the barn that evening, he and Lightning were both bone-weary. He slid down from the saddle and leaned against her, scratching behind her shoulder. A ripple spread down her flank and through her tail feathers.

“Bet you’re ready for a rubdown after all that, eh girl?” She bent her neck around and nuzzled his pocket, but he batted her away. “Not yet, greedy. After I get you settled in your stall.”

He walked through the wide, open doors, her heavy footsteps following behind him, and snatched the bucket hanging from a nail just inside, replacing it with his hat. The water barrel was almost empty, but he scooped out enough to slake her thirst until he could fetch more from the well. He sloshed it into the trough in her stall, then checked her feed pouch and stepped aside to let her enter.

While she drank, he unfastened the saddle, hefted it over to the rack along the back wall, and returned with a cloth and brush. The action of rubbing her down usually calmed him, but his mind raced, and he swept the rag over her damp coat in jerky swipes. When she let out a whine, he dropped his arm and closed his eyes. *Breathe. Just breathe.*

Warm sweat wafted from her flank, mingling with the scents of manure and hay that permeated the barn. It brought to mind the days he'd spent here as a child, hiding in the hayloft and working on his designs when he should have been cleaning out the stalls. He smiled at the recollection of Smitty's expression each time the foreman had found him—red brows bunching and the slash of his mouth disappearing inside his thick beard.

The clang of something striking metal shattered the stillness, and Jake whipped his head towards the sound, his eyes popping open.

Matthew Dorver, one of the field hands, stomped across the open space at the front of the barn. His hands were clenched, face thunderous, and hat shoved down over his dirty blonde hair. The bucket he'd kicked came to rest against a coil of rope, its contents painting the surrounding dirt floor with damp patches.

“Son of a ryvax!” He slammed his fist against the central support beam before swinging around and pacing back towards the door, his massive shoulders heaving.

Indecision held Jake in place. Should he reveal his presence or let Matthew cool off first? He'd never seen him so riled before. The choice was taken from him when Matthew turned and their eyes met.

“Oh. Hey, Jake. Didn't see you there.” He continued to pace, muttering under his breath and scratching the two-day growth on his jaw.

Jake tossed the cloth over the partition and, patting Lightning's rump, stepped out of the stall. Leaning against a nearby hay bale, he gestured at the overturned pail. “Something wrong?”

“Yeah, your father. He’s crazy.” Matthew glanced outside, curled his lip, and spat on the floor. He stalked back towards the stalls, his narrowed eyes making Jake want to move out of his way. “You know that cripple he hired a few months back, Jonathan something or other?” He snorted. “Can’t work a sickle or lift a bale, just gathers the grain behind the rest of us and helps look after the livestock—like that takes a lot of work this time of year—his wife does more, taking in our laundry. Well, he’s getting the same deal as everyone else. Can you believe that?”

An image came to Jake’s mind of Jonathan and Sara when they’d arrived at the estate, their youngest only three and the whole family badly malnourished. He opened his mouth to answer, but Matthew ploughed on. “I just went and asked your old man, and he confirmed it. Same deal as the rest of us—his own place with a few acres to farm if he finishes out the season. I’ve worked here three years, but I’m only gonna get the same as that one-armed fool, not a single shill more for my trouble. How’s that fair?”

Jake spread his hands. “Come on, give the guy a break. He’s got five mouths to feed. Dad’s only being kind.”

“Well, he’s too soft if you ask me. Always taking in waifs and strays.” He sucked in a sharp breath, his eyes suddenly widening and shifting away. The ensuing silence rang loudly in Jake’s ears, and a knife lodged in his chest.

Matthew lifted his arm in an awkward gesture. “I’m sorry, Jake. I didn’t mean y—”

“It’s fine,” Jake bit out. “I know what you meant.”

His face flaming, he jumped up from his perch and grabbed one of the brushes from a crate on the workbench. He shielded his eyes as he pretended to check it for loose tines.

Matthew shuffled in his periphery, taking his hat off and gripping the back of his neck in a shovel-like hand.

“You know we all think the world of you, kid. You work as hard as anyone else on the estate. Walter’s done the right thing by you.”

Jake’s hands stilled. He forced them back into action, snatching up a piece of tack that needed mending and tossing it across to Matthew with a cocky smirk.

“Yeah, I’m pure crystal—worth as much as I weigh. Look, don’t sweat it. We’re good.”

His grin faded as soon as he turned away. He picked up another brush, absently turning it end over end. What would the men think of him if he couldn’t pull his weight like Jonathan? Would they whisper behind his back too, complain to his father until he was forced to send Jake from the property?

Behind him, Matthew cleared his throat. “Ah, I see Smitty out there. I need to talk to him about some money he owes me.”

Waving the brush over his shoulder, Jake made a noncommittal noise and slipped back into Lightning’s stall. Her coat blurred behind a sheen of tears, and he swiped at his face with his arm. He’d never live up to his family. He just wasn’t good enough.

He gripped her fur while Matthew’s footsteps receded and silence blanketed the interior of the barn once more. Only when he was alone did he let the extra brush fall from his hand, retrieve the cloth, and return to wiping her down, his mind in turmoil.

Matthew was right about one thing—Jake’s father never turned away anyone in need. Jake was living proof of that. Taken in as a baby, he’d been raised as one of the family, treated no differently than Nathan. He would always be grateful for that, even though he’d never be a true Amarel.

He switched the cloth for the brush and started again on Lightning’s coat. “But I’m a man now, aren’t I, girl? Old enough to make my own way.”

She nudged his shoulder with her snout, and he gave it an absent pat. He needed to find a way to show his father what he could do if he was allowed to use his gifts, that he could be a son to be proud of instead of constantly struggling to keep up. “I should go to the city. All the best inventors live there, and I’m sure one of them would appreciate my talent. I could study at the uni too, really make something of myself.”

A scene flashed before him, tantalisingly vivid. He’d have a workshop in the craftsmen’s district with his name painted over the door in large gold letters and a line of people waiting outside. He’d be too busy to take on every client that requested his services, so he’d select the most interesting commissions while his apprentices took care of the rest. A collection of awards and framed newspaper articles would sit on a shelf behind the counter, of no import to him but ogled by the customers as they entered.

“Argh, get off!”

Pain exploded in his foot, shattering the vision, and he shoved Lightning’s side. As soon as she shifted her weight, he pulled his leg up, gripping the end of his boot with both hands. His toes throbbed, but not badly enough to be broken. Thank the founders for solid work boots.

“Bad mammoth. You do not stand on my feet.” He glared at her. “What’d you do that for anyway?”

She shook the feathers along her neck, drawing his attention to the brush caught halfway down her side. He’d stalled mid stroke, the tines caught in a clump of matted fur.

“Sorry.” He untangled the knot and started brushing her with renewed care, testing his weight on the foot she’d squashed until he could stand normally.

His mind soon drifted back to his thwarted dreams. “I wouldn’t have to beg anyone for permission to make things better in the city. No one would tell me to leave things be or insist they’re fine as they are. They’d be encouraging me, even asking for my help one day.”

Lightning blew out a breath that ruffled his hair and went back to eating her food.

“I know. Seems impossible, but I could really make something of myself if Dad would let me build some of my designs or let me share them in the scientific journals.”

Done with the brush, he fished a couple of fruit slices from his pocket and held them out for Lightning. She ignored him, so he nudged her aside with his elbow and tipped them into her feed pouch.

He stroked her neck, the soft fur sliding easily between his fingers. “I need to show him I’m worth it,” he whispered in her ear before turning to leave.

Outside, darkness chased the sun towards the western mountains—supper would soon be on the table. Jake grabbed his hat on his way past the door and shoved it on his head. He’d let Smitty and the others close the barn up for the night. He needed to talk to his father.

His shadow raced ahead as he strode up the path to the main house, which sat on a slight rise overlooking the outbuildings. Living there had always made him feel special when he was young, and he'd loved watching the bustle around the bunkhouse, knowing he was the owner's son and could get away with anything. Now, his position felt hollow, his certainty gone.

Soft light spilled out from the porch, outlining the figure of a tall man leaning against the railing. Jake ran a finger under his collar. He wasn't ready to face his father yet. He needed a bath first and a change of clothes. Between his conversations with Nathan and Matthew, he needed time to think.

"Hello, son. How'd the fencing go today?"

"Fine." Jake took the steps two at a time and headed for the front door.

"How far did you get?"

He sighed. Stopped. Turned.

Walter Amarel cut an imposing figure reminiscent of an ancient oak tree and almost identical to that of his eldest son. Grey streaks at his temples did nothing to detract from the impression of his strength, and inadequacy taunted Jake.

"Only six posts in, but I'll get an early start tomorrow and make up the time."

"Six posts, huh?"

His father exuded self-assurance like a log fire gave off heat. It grated on Jake's nerves, and his hands curled in on themselves.

"Yes, six. If you'd have let me build the machine I suggested last month, I'd have been able to do twice that

many, but you wouldn't, so six."

Muscled arms crossing over his thick chest, his father sat back on the rail, causing it to groan under his weight. Wrinkles at the corners of his eyes only highlighted his intelligent gaze, which pinned Jake to the spot. He chafed under its intensity.

After an endless moment, his father said, "Six is good."

Jake snorted. "No, it's not. I could've done so many more if you'd just let me—"

"Not this again, Jake."

A note of warning entered his father's voice, but Jake was too wound up to care.

"Yes, this! Why not?" He threw his hands up. "Why shouldn't I build something that can help us?"

"I've told you before; I won't have city technology on the estate. It's dangerous, and we're more than capable of managing without it."

Jake's control snapped. "You are, you mean. You and Nathan. With your powers, you can manage anything. But the rest of us aren't like you. We can't manipulate matter with our minds." He waved his hands through the air in front of him. "My inventions aren't dangerous. They'd make our lives easier, but you'd rather keep us in the last century than trust me to improve anything around here. I don't know what you've got against technology anyway. It's not like it affects your powers."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"Then let me build my machines. Then I can show you how—"

His father took a step forward. “I will not have my decisions questioned in my own home. While you’re under my roof, you’ll do things my way.”

“Fine. I’ll leave then.”

“If that’s what you really want, I won’t stop you.” He spoke softly, but resolution rang in his tone.

Jake’s blood turned to ice in his veins. What had he done? This wasn’t what he wanted. Not tonight. Not like this. He hadn’t meant to push so hard. He stood on a precipice with no way to retreat without capitulating. It took him a moment to find his voice. “Can I have my inheritance to take with me?”

His father’s hand reached out but dropped back to his side. His jaw clenched, and he turned away. “Yes. Of course.”

That was it. Done. Jake was on his own from now on. He staggered backwards, spinning for the door and the sanctuary of his room.

As he barrelled across the hall, Nathan rounded the corner from the kitchen, wiping his hands on a towel, his black hair dripping wet. “Whoa. What’s set a fire in your pants?”

Jake ignored him and bolted up the stairs.

“You’re not still mad about this afternoon, are you?” Nathan’s voice drifted up after him, followed by the thud of his boots on the wooden treads. “I did save your scrawny behind.”

Why couldn’t his brother leave him alone for once? Jake snorted. Soon enough, he wouldn’t have that problem anymore. “Not everything’s about you,” he called out, opening his drawers one by one and throwing the contents onto the bed.

“Good to know.” Nathan stood in the doorway, amusement dancing in his eyes as he studied the growing pile. “So what’s going on here?”

“I’m leaving.”

Jake pulled a travelling bag down from the top of his wardrobe, sending a cloud of dust billowing out across the room. His pet flurtoo, Blue, let out a sneeze from her favourite spot on his pillow. She unfurled her leathery wings, four times the length of her tiny shell-covered body, and flew up to the top of his bedpost. Her legs pumped up and down, tapping the bottom of her mottled green shell on the wood as if in disapproval.

“I’m with her on this one,” Nathan said. “You’ve clearly been out in the sun too long.” He strolled across to the armchair by the window and sat down, rubbing the towel over the back of his head.

Jake found an old kerchief stuffed behind the laundry basket and ran it over the bag. When he opened it, Blue took to the air again and landed on the edge, peering inside and chittering. Carefully, he picked her up and placed her on the dresser out of the way. “I mean it. Dad’s impossible, and I’m sick of not being taken seriously.” His chest squeezed. *Close enough to the truth.*

“Well leaving’s a great way to fix that.”

He glared at Nathan and shoved a few shirts into the bag. Unable to bear his brother’s presence, he scrambled for a way to get rid of him. “I don’t care what you think of me. You’re not my real brother anyway. I bet you can’t wait for me to move out so you and Dad don’t have to look after me anymore.”

Silence greeted his statement, and he glanced up. Nathan stared at him, shock written in his slack jaw and wide eyes. His hair stuck out at odd angles, making him look like one of the scarecrows in the fields. The towel dangled, damp and forgotten, from his fingers. After a second, he blinked and clamped his lips together, his jaw working.

Jake lowered his gaze and carried on packing. To prevent hot, shameful tears from falling, he focused on all the times Nathan had shown off his powers or treated him like a nuisance, all the times their father had praised his natural-born son's abilities but forbidden Jake from pursuing his talent for mechanical invention.

A few moments later, Nathan stood to leave. He paused directly behind Jake, so close Jake could smell the soap he'd used to wash his hair. He nearly reached out, wished the hurtful words back inside his mouth, but it was too late. And it was all true, wasn't it? There had been no denial.

Nathan's hand lighted briefly on his shoulder, whisper soft but burning fiercer than a brand. "Go if you need to, but at least wait until you've calmed down. It's a long way to the city, and it's getting dark out." He walked to the door and stopped again. "You're wrong, you know. I hope you see that someday."

Jake slumped to the floor, his brother's retreating footsteps widening the distance between them into an uncrossable chasm. There was no going back now. He brushed wetness from his cheek and scrubbed his palm on his trouser leg. It didn't matter. This was what he wanted, what he'd dreamed of. He'd be able to prove himself in the city.

Blue glided down to his hand and rubbed her head against his skin, so different from Nathan's touch. She trilled a high

note until Jake brought his fingers, and her, to eye level.

“I suppose we should wait till morning to set off.”

She ruffled her wings, and he considered her, his head tilted to one side.

“You’re coming with me, right?”

She bounced her shell on his knuckle, and he laughed. “I’m glad you agree.” The weight on his shoulders lifted a fraction.

Chapter 3

Nathan

Nathan threw his towel into his bedroom on the way past and jogged down the stairs. He stopped at the bottom, adjusted his collar, and took a deep breath before joining his father for supper. *No need to let Dad know something's wrong.* Jake hadn't meant any of the things he'd said; he was just in a foul mood. He'd be back to normal in the morning and trying to make up for it for the best part of the next week.

A small smile lifting his lips, Nathan swung the dining room door open and came to a halt. His father sat at the head of the table as usual, but he slumped low in his chair, his hair messed, his tie loose and crooked.

Light from the candelabrum in the centre of the table flickered over his face, which was propped up on one palm. His brows were drawn together, deep furrows etched between them to the bridge of his nose. The fingers of his other hand drummed in short, sharp bursts on the oak table. *That probably explains Jake.*

With a couple of raps on the doorframe to announce his presence, Nathan walked around to his place and sat down. His father gave no indication of having noticed. *Serious, then.* "You had a run-in with Jake today too, huh?"

“Hmm?” The old man dropped his arm and lifted his head.
“What’s that?”

Nathan pointed upstairs. “Jake’s up there packing with some goat-brained notion of leaving, and you’re in here brooding. What happened?”

His father’s gaze swivelled towards the door, his jaw falling slack. “He’s packing?” He looked down at his hands. Regret lacing his voice, he added softly, “I didn’t think he was serious.”

“What’s going on, Dad? He thinks we don’t want him or something.”

“Gah.” His father rose, scraping his chair back, and went to stand by the fireplace. He leaned his forearm on the mantelpiece, staring into the flames as they danced and crackled. “We had a row earlier.”

“And?”

He bent to throw another log on, sending sparks flying in all directions. One caught on the rug and started to smoulder, but he tapped it out with his foot. “And I asked about the fencing.” He let out a heavy sigh. “I was trying to tell him he was doing a good job—he made good progress for the first day, you know—but he got all het up about those machines he wants to build.” He swatted his arm through the air. “You know how he gets.”

I know how you get too. Nathan leaned back in his chair, tipping his head up towards the ceiling. *Ah, Jake. I love you, but you do know how to push Dad’s limits.* No wonder they were both acting like caged biricats.

The silence lengthened, broken only by the wood popping in the grate, until his father muttered, “Maybe I should go up.

Tell him to stay.”

“Why don’t you tell him the real reason we can’t have machinery on the estate? He’s old enough to understand.”

His father returned to the table and sank into his chair. “I should, I know. I’ve been waiting for the right time. But he’s always loved tinkering with things. I didn’t want to ruin his passion for it, and finding out what happened in Berlath...” He met Nathan’s gaze, his eyes dull.

Nathan’s gut clenched, and he searched for something to say.

“I’ve made a mess of it all,” his father continued. “I wish your mother was still alive. She’d know what to do with him. Always could distract him with something or other. Same with you when you were small.”

Nathan reached out and squeezed his father’s forearm. “Let him cool off for a while. He’ll be down when he’s hungry, and you can talk then, clear the air.”

With a nod, his father patted his hand and pulled away. He snatched the napkin from his plate and dropped it across his lap. “You’re right. We should eat before Daniel’s roast goes cold.”

Nathan gave him one last look, but he was already digging into the meal, spearing a thick slice of meat with the serving fork.

“Hey, leave some for me.”

Nathan took mental control of the utensil and paused it halfway through stabbing a third slab. His father looked up, a twinkle sparking to life in his wide eyes. “You’d begrudge an old man his one joy in life?”

“Not at all.” Nathan made the fork skewer the beef and loft it into the air. “I know you’ve always put your children first, and I truly appreciate it.”

He was about to serve himself when his father snatched the prize back again, dancing the fork towards his own place. “Nate, I love you. I truly do. But when there’s herb-roasted beef on the menu, it’s every man for himself.”

With a huge grin, he shoved Nathan’s head away and dumped the meat on his plate. Nathan laughed it off and, picking up the platter, swept a large stack onto his own.

If only Jake were as easy to distract, things might settle down to how they used to be.

Chapter 4

Jake

The university tower disappeared behind yet another row of tenements, and Jake twisted back around on his seat in the driver's box, his leg jiggling against the wooden footboard. They'd been winding through the outskirts of Berlath for over an hour, catching occasional glimpses of the central buildings rising through the haze. The city must be huge, for they appeared no nearer now than they had when the stagecoach had first entered the city gates.

“Keep yer steam in, kid. We'll be pulling into the station soon enough.”

The driver—a middle-aged man named Gordon, with a long moustache and beard and a smart, charcoal uniform—had assured Jake that the city wasn't all that bad. Scratching beneath his bowler hat, he'd laughed at the face Jake had made when they'd passed through the tanning district.

He'd insisted several times since then that the dingy, ramshackle streets hemming them in would turn into wide, tree-lined boulevards when they were through the outer districts and into the city proper, but the stench of refuse and the thick pall of smog made that hard to believe. How could people live like this?

For the first time since setting off, Jake questioned his decision to leave home. After walking sixteen miles to the nearest village, sleeping in a hayloft, hitching a five-day ride in the back of a mammoth-drawn wagon bound for the coast, and then bouncing all afternoon on top of the stage, he ached in places he never knew existed. By the founders' beards, let it be for something more than cramped squalor and the taunt of unattainable recognition.

Stop it. You can't think like that. He stretched from side to side and scratched the back of his neck. All he needed was a bath, and a hot meal, and a decent night's sleep. Things would look better in the morning. They were bound to.

He'd made it to the capital. Was actually *in* Berlath. Home of the famous Cowin brothers and the most ingenious inventions ever devised. Pushing up from the seat, he strained to make out the library tower and palace spires ahead. Better that than allow his eyes to wander the hawkers lining the street or up to where a few half-dressed women hung from an open window.

None of the periodicals or newspapers he'd pored over back home had mentioned *them* when they described life at the Timion-Welles University. Then again, most of the rags he'd bought in Farraton had been second-hand or out of date, so things could've changed since they'd been printed.

Gordon's elbow dug into his side. "You're fidgeting again."

"Sorry," Jake mumbled, sitting back down and trapping his fingers under his thighs.

A handful of ragged children appeared alongside the coach, running to keep up while holding their hands out to him.

“Hey, Mister. Throw us a coin.”

“I can carry yer bags for ya.”

“Gi’ us summat, won’tcha, I’m starvin’.”

Gordon brought the coach to a stop. He raised his whip, causing Jake’s breath to catch, and the children scattered, blending in with the crowds at the roadside. As he stowed the would-be weapon down the side of the bench, he looked across at Jake and chuckled.

“Don’t worry. I wouldn’t use it on ’em. But it’s time ya got inside.”

“But—”

He held up his hand. “We’re getting close to the station, and I’m not supposed to carry passengers up here. Go on. We’ll be there before ya know it.”

The sole passenger that afternoon, Jake had convinced Gordon to let him ride up front so he could watch the horses. The bemused driver had agreed, but only until they reached the city. He smoothed the bristles around his mouth with his forefinger and thumb and squinted at Jake.

“You wouldn’t be squelching on our deal now would ya, kid?”

Jake twisted his lips to the side. He couldn’t complain so close to the end of the ride; it wouldn’t be fair. Careful not to catch his jacket on the metal railings, he jumped to the ground and took one last look at the chestnut pair.

When he’d first spotted them on the edge of the farmers’ market in Ambree, he’d stood transfixed for a good five minutes. He’d known they had horses in the coastal cities—the ancestors had brought them when they first settled the planet

—but he'd never seen one before, especially not up close. None had survived in the interior.

They're nothing like mammoxes. Lightning's feathers flashed across his mind, an array of vibrant pinks and purples, and a stab of guilt pierced his heart. He rubbed his chest.

He couldn't have brought her with him. The capital was clearly no place for a mammox, and... well, this was his chance for a new life. Banishing the image, he replaced it with the sight of the lead horse's sleek red-brown fur.

Gordon had shown him how to feed the team pieces of dried fruit from the palm of his hand, and where to stroke their muzzles so he didn't get nipped. Their fur was as soft as a newborn calf. Though they'd lost some of their allure after he'd spent several hours watching their rumps, his eyes were still drawn to each toss of their heads or swish of their tails.

Passers-by were beginning to stare, so he nodded to Gordon and climbed into the coach, shutting the door behind him with a solid snick.

Cool and quiet, the interior boasted faded paintwork and worn furnishings. A single half-full bag of mail sat forlornly on the spacious floor, in stark contrast to the hustle and bustle outside. The coach lurched into movement, jostling his thoughts and balance alike. With less grace than a hog at feeding time, he flopped onto the nearest seat and turned to the window.

Shutters blocked his view, but they were barred from the outside. Jake hit his hand against the frame. Asking to stop so he could open them was pointless so close to their final destination. He sat back on a padded cushion, the lumpy stuffing marginally more comfortable than the driver's bench.

With nothing to occupy his thoughts, they wheeled back to recent events. He sat up straight, leaned forwards with his arms resting on his knees, sat back and folded them. How much farther to the station? He should have asked.

At least before, he'd had company. Gordon had answered endless questions on their journey from the farmers' market, for which Jake was eternally grateful. It had kept him from wearing a hole in his memories.

Even now, with the sounds and smells of the city centre enveloping him and the buffer of over a hundred miles between them, his mind dragged him back over that last morning at home.



They hadn't called him down for supper the previous evening, hadn't even left a tray outside his door. They simply didn't care.

He'd eavesdropped from the landing, the sounds of them laughing and joking while they ate tearing through his chest. No, they were happier without him around, so he'd given them what they wanted and returned to his room. Only long after the house had settled for the night did he creep downstairs to raid the pantry.

The congealed leftovers curdled his stomach, keeping him awake until the early hours of the morning when he finally dropped off to Blue humming in his ear. He dreamed of his father's disembodied face floating above his bed, listing his failings as a son and then chewing up and spitting out his designs for steam-powered farming equipment. Nathan joined in, taunting him with powers he could never emulate and

scoffing at his attempts to keep up. Jake woke drenched in sweat with the sheets twisted tightly about his legs.

He was dead on his feet when he stumbled into the kitchen, tiny hammers pounding the insides of his skull and grit caking his eyelids. Dousing his face with cold water straight from the tap shocked the fog from his brain, washing the nightmares away with it. The pain, he hardened into resolve. He wouldn't stay there another day.

A hunk of bread slathered in butter and washed down with a mug of sahl made a good enough breakfast. Daniel wasn't around to cook anything better, and Jake hadn't been allowed near the oven since he nearly burned the house down trying to fry some eggs. Besides, his gut was tender enough without adding greasy bacon to the mix.

When he'd drained the last of his sahl, he slipped out of the kitchen, checked his appearance in the hall mirror, and put his ear to the door of his father's study. A floorboard creaked inside, so he knocked and waited to be admitted.

"Come on in." His father's voice was distracted, but the door swung open without Jake touching it. He frowned at the blatant use of power.

"Jake! I was expecting Nathan."

Jake's already misused insides dropped. Of course he was.

"I'm glad you're here. I wanted to—"

"I'm leaving this morning. I just came to see if I could get an advance on my inheritance."

His father sank into the chair behind his desk. His face fell. "Oh."

Jake walked farther into the room and stood next to one of the guest chairs. “Is that possible?”

“Yes, of course.” His father spoke without looking up, his voice distracted. “If you only want an advance, I can send the rest later. In a strongbox with Smitty.”

“I didn’t realise...” Jake cleared the rubble from his throat. “I don’t want to put anyone out. I can take all of it now if that’s possible.”

At last, his father’s eyes rose. Their hardness nearly took Jake’s breath. “You never put anyone out. You’re my son.” He stood and walked to the safe tucked between a bookcase and the corner of the room. “It’s all in here, ready for when you had need of it. Twenty thousand guineas.”

“What? That’s—” Jake’s legs turned to water, and he dropped to the armrest of the chair beside him. *So much?* Steady breaths helped, but words still refused to form. Eventually, his father’s voice filtered through the vacuum inside his head.

“...since you came to us. It’s yours, so you can take it now if you want it.”

He jumped up, and his father stepped back from where he’d been standing directly in front of Jake, holding out a thick stack of paper money. Jake couldn’t make eye contact, though he tried to force his head up. He took the wad, having to tug once before his father released it completely.

“Thank you, Father.”

“You’re welcome.” He cleared his throat and returned to his desk chair. “There’s something I need to tell you. About the city—”

“Whatever it is, it won’t change my mind.” Jake didn’t have the time or energy to listen to another tirade on the evils of technology. He took a step towards the door. “I need to finish packing.”

His father worked his jaw. “I wish...” He blew out a breath and pointed to the money. “Keep it safe so it doesn’t get stolen.”



And that was it. The last conversation he’d had with his father—would ever have unless he went home to visit, which was as likely as his father driving a steam-powered carriage through the middle of the western pasture.

He’d fared even worse with his brother. Nathan had gone out well before sunrise that morning to tend to the herd, not that Jake had deliberately sought him out to say goodbye. Still, he’d had to leave knowing the last thing he’d said to his older brother was filled with spite.

You don’t need them. You’ll find plenty of new friends who’ll appreciate you.

He cracked the carriage door open and peered outside. The university spire thrust up from the rooftops in the distance, its sun-kissed walls a beacon of knowledge throughout the city.

His childhood dream of one day becoming a famous inventor was nearer than ever before. He recalled the vision he’d had back then, and the corners of his mouth lifted. The details had expanded over the years to include things his six-year-old brain had been unable to comprehend, but the basics were still the same—being adored for his mental prowess.

In one of the most impressive lecture theatres in the university, a thirty-five-year-old Jake held an audience of hundreds captive with his explanation of the new engine design he'd recently patented. They hung on his every word and barraged him with questions afterwards, the flashes of image-takers blinding his view of the press gallery.

Eventually, he was able to fight his way through the masses, reaching the foyer where a beautiful woman waited for him. She sashayed towards him, the spark of excitement in her eyes as alluring as the sway of her hips. After a quick kiss, she slid her arm into his and asked, "How did it go? What did they think of the hydraulic—?"

Thrown from his seat without warning, Jake landed sprawled across the floor of the stagecoach. His face chafed against the coarse fabric of the mail bag, and one arm stung from catching the edge of the opposite seat. He scrunched his eyes shut and mentally inventoried his body, checking for damage. Aside from a few sore spots and throbbing in the arm he'd instinctively flung out to shield his head, he seemed to be intact, so he opened his eyes and peeled himself from the planks.

Fluttering above his head resolved into Blue, who landed on his shoulder and butted his ear. At least she seemed to be all right.

"Sorry," Gordon called down.

The coach rocked again, and a moment later, the door opened and he thrust his head inside. "You still in one piece?"

Jake nodded. Blue flew up to the window ledge and chattered while he sat with his back against the wall and gingerly rubbing his elbow.

“A bleedin’ steam carriage pulled right in front of us. Think they own the roads, they do. Anyway, we’re ’ere.” Gordon reached an arm in for the mail bag, giving Jake a toothy grin. “Want to hold the horses while I unhitch ’em?” The words had barely left his whiskered lips when he was gone again, the bag bumping out after him.

About to jump through the door, Jake stopped. *This is it.* He took a deep breath and smoothed his hair down flat. Then, when the roiling in his stomach had settled to a simmer, he stepped down into his new life.

Chapter 5

Jake

Once the team was unhitched, Gordon delivered the mail. He emerged from the station's baggage depot less than a minute later and stretched his back. When it audibly popped, he tucked his thumbs in the pockets of his waistcoat and patted his thick stomach with both hands.

“Well. I’ve got a right hankering for one of Mrs Rafferty’s pies and a pint of ale.”

“Are they the ones you told me about?”

“Oh yes. Full of meaty goodness, they are. Make—”

“Long shifts worthwhile?” Jake grinned. Gordon had mentioned them often enough on their journey for him to finish the sentence.

“Hah. Right you are.” Gordon glanced around the cobbled courtyard before settling his gaze back on Jake. His moustache twitched, and he rocked back on his heels.

“You remember everything I warned you about?”

Jake nodded. The list had been long and, he was certain, exaggerated.

“Then good luck, kid. See ya ’round.”

With a quick lift of his bowler hat, Gordon sauntered into the building through a door marked EMPLOYEES ONLY and was gone.

Jake was on his own.

He spotted a well-dressed lady exiting the ticket office and, grabbing his bag, jogged over to her.

“Excuse me, um, can you point me in the direction of decent lodgings? Please.”

She looked him up and down, her eyes lingering on his dusty shoes and bag. “Oh, you poor thing. Have you travelled far?”

“Yes, from just outside Farraton. I’m quite tired—”

“And this is your first time in Berlath?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Oh, aren’t you sweet. But you’re all on your own.” She touched his forearm and tutted.

“Yes. I just need the name of somewhere I can stay.”

“Of course, dear. You’ll want to freshen up before going out for dinner. Now, let me think...”

She hooked the handle of a lacy umbrella over her elbow and tapped a finger against her lips, her eyes staring through his chest. Jake placed his bag on the ground while he waited. She might not have been the best person to ask, but the only others in view were busy loading a carriage.

Blue stirred inside his shirt pocket, where she’d been hiding since their first encounter with the horses. She stuck her head out, yawned, and flew up to his shoulder. He fed her a tiny piece of dried fruit and stroked her knobbly head.

“Hey, girl,” he said. “You ready to see the sights?”

The woman’s eyes rounded. “Ugh. You’re covered in vermin.”

Her nostrils flared as she batted at Blue with her umbrella. Jake raised his arms to fend off her attack, while Blue took to the air, flapping around his head and causing the woman to swing more wildly.

Luckily, her aim was poor, and she soon gave up, shuffling away as fast as her voluminous skirts would allow. When she spun to hasten her retreat, a big wad of material at the back of her dress bounced angrily behind her until she disappeared around the corner.

“You all right?” He held out a hand, palm up, and waited for Blue to land on it, then stroked her head with one finger while she settled. “What does she have against flurtoos, anyway?”

Blue’s chittering soon quieted, and he transferred the miniature creature back to his pocket. “Maybe you’d better stay in there until we’re on our own.”

She chirped and burrowed into the depths of her cotton nest.

Now what? He had time to look around and see a bit of the city, and he might be able to find somewhere to stay on his own. Hoisting his bag, he headed for the main exit.

As he reached the stone archway, a young boy ran up to him and tugged on his jacket.

“Paper for a dari?”

Jake blinked. “I’m sorry, what?”

The boy stared up at him, waving a copy of the Berlath Tribute between them. His eyebrows rose beneath an overlarge flat cap that hung low on his forehead. Several more rolled-up papers poked out from a bag slung across his thin torso.

Papers were only two bits back in Farraton. Then again, this would be a brand-new edition rather than a week-old rag. It might even have news of Laybridge's latest invention or Captain Adler's voyage to the southern continent.

"Sure. I'll take one."

Within two seconds, the paper had been shoved into his chest, the coin snatched from his hand, and the boy was running back out into the street. He pulled another copy from his bag and waved it at the people walking past.

That was fast. Jake snorted and bent to stow his copy in his bag. He froze when he heard, "Paper for a shill."

His head whipped up, and he clamped his jaw shut on a curse. Of course it shouldn't have cost that much. His fingers itched to get his money back, but he forced himself to let it go, cracking his neck from left to right. The little thief wouldn't catch him out a second time, and he had better things to think about.

He was in Berlath. Picking up his bag, he passed under the shadow of the arch, stepped into warm sunlight, and ground to a halt.

Something inside him shifted.

This... This was...

Words failed.

Someone swerved to avoid him, growling, "Watch it, won'tcha," so he shuffled to the side, out of the way.

He spun in a slow circle and soaked up the details of his surroundings, his mind boggling at each new wonder. The street outside the coach station hummed with activity, though the pedestrians didn't overwhelm the space. Brightly painted shopfronts with gold-lettered signs flashed in and out of view behind them.

All the buildings reached at least four storeys high, with hundreds of windows winking down at him in the afternoon light. Jake goggled at the distant rooflines. The tallest structure he'd seen before this was the mercantile in Farraton where the owner lived on two levels above the store.

No piles of rubbish marred the busy thoroughfare, only a few scraps of old newspapers blown about by the traffic, and the air was significantly fresher than that of the outer areas of the city, despite a hint of smoke tickling his nostrils. He caught a whiff of something floral as a group of women passed by—more than he'd ever seen in one place before.

But by far the most impressive sight was the steam-powered carriages.

Jake crossed the pavement to get a better look. They mingled with the horse-drawn variety, outnumbering them by far in this wealthier district. Each one captivated him as it trundled by, a complicated series of pipes and chambers housed on a wheeled platform where the team would usually be.

I wonder why they aren't overheating. He snorted, causing an elderly lady to peer down her nose at him and give him a wide berth. Who cared, when there was a new design to study? They hissed and clacked along, their tall chimneys belching out smoke that dissipated above head height. Jake traced the

funnels back to small furnaces fed by young boys seated beside the drivers. Ingenious.

Unfortunately, no matter how much he craned his neck or how close he leaned to the speeding coaches, he couldn't see any of the inner workings. The drive shafts hid behind water tanks at the centre of the engine.

A forest-green carriage beeped its horn as it blew by him, the crest emblazoned on its door a blur of hooves and tails. Wow, they went fast. That one must have been going close to twenty miles an hour. At that speed, he could be home in—

He cut off the train of thought, unwilling to complete the calculation even theoretically. Instead, he made a mental note to look up the engine patent later to discover the exact configuration, and stepped back from the edge of the pavement.

“Now stop gawping,” he admonished himself. “You need to find lodgings, so get going.”

A quick check of his bag, and he wandered down the road, his senses overloaded and his head full of the future. He could have a fine life here, and he couldn't wait to start it.

He kept to the outside of the crowds as much as he was able, enjoying the late-afternoon atmosphere. On the lookout for “room to let” signs, he peered in the shop windows, marvelling at the variety of goods on sale.

The scent of bread hot from an oven lured him to a fancy bakery. His stomach rumbled at the array of sweet pastries displayed in the window. Fruit-filled, iced, glazed, they called out to him, begging to be eaten.

A cry a few yards farther along the street brought his head around to where a sudden gust had stolen a man's hat. It

tumbled across the street, picking up dust and dirt on the fine black silk until a small boy dodged between the carriages to snatch it up.

Instead of returning it directly to its owner, the urchin clasped it behind his back, demanding payment for his good deed.

“Why you little...” The gentleman hefted his walking cane, his features contorting and his face turning an ugly shade of puce. Jake stalled. Was he going to hit the child? A silver knob on the end of the stick gleamed in the sunlight.

He ran forwards and blocked the man’s arm. “I’m sure there’s no need for that, sir.” He faced the boy, whose eyes had grown wide. “Give the man his hat.”

The youngster produced his trophy and handed it over, staring at Jake the entire time. He said, “*You* gonna pay me, Mister?” at the same time as the man said, “Now see here, young man. You can’t just go around—!”

Jake fished a bit from his pocket and flicked it to the boy, who scarpered as soon as he caught it, weaving in and out of the crowd and disappearing in seconds.

“What did you do that for? Now he’ll never learn his lesson.”

Jake turned to the elderly gentleman, at a loss for words. He had his hat back, and not too much the worse for wear by the look of it. What did it matter if Jake had paid the lad?

“I’m sorry, sir. I was only trying to help.”

The man looked him up and down and harrumphed. With exaggerated movements, he knocked the worst of the dust from his hat and rammed it back on his head. A rap of his cane

on the pavement, and he spun on his heel and stalked away, muttering something that was lost in the surrounding hubbub.

“You’re welcome,” Jake called after him, though not loudly enough to be heard.

He continued on his way, his eyes flitting from one curiosity to the next. Excitement, anxiety, awe, and doubt fought for dominance, leaving his muscles tense and his nerves jangling.

At the next turning, he paused against the brick wall and took a calming breath. Forget lodgings for now, he’d find a hotel for the night. Then food, no, a bath first.

The ground in front of him darkened as a low thwumping reached his ears. He looked up to see the street slowly being swallowed by a giant shadow. Higher still, the front of a massive balloon drifted along the roofline of the buildings opposite. The thwumping grew steadily louder, and realisation struck. An airship. A real, live airship.

His open mouth could have caught a whole flock of flurtoos. He staggered forwards for a better view, heedless of the people in his path, attention riveted to the most incredible thing he’d ever seen.

It sailed over the street like a low-slung moon, blocking out all the light. The balloon jutted out above the body of a ship, which hung below it in defiance of gravity. A black hull gave way to crimson sides dotted with a single row of windows, and a network of struts bolted to a railing at the top held the inflatable in a solid brass grip. Two words were printed on the side of the prow, but they were too small to make out from that distance.

From what Jake could see, the entire thing must be huge, easily as long as two bunkhouses lined up end to end. He would've given anything at that moment to be up there. Thoughts of adventures in far-flung places, of learning the world's secrets, sent a thrill down his spine.

Men occasionally peered down from the edge, and as it drew directly overhead, a low buzz of voices mixed with the hisses and clanks of the machinery inside. When one particular head came into view, a cheer went up from the crowd around Jake.

He looked at the people near him waving up at the ship. Several pulled goggles down from their hats to cover their eyes. How strange. He turned his face skyward again. Maybe they were afraid of falling debris.

The airship passed slowly over them. At the back, dual propellers turned out to be the source of the thwumping, which increased even more in volume as they cleared the buildings. He clamped his hands to his ears but couldn't pull his eyes away.

After a few moments, the rudder turned, steering the ship to the west. It disappeared behind the opposite side of the street, and the noise lessened enough for Jake to drop his hands. Smoke trailed the airship from an exhaust pipe that stuck out of the rear, directly above the rudder, and within moments, that smudge of fumes was all that remained. Light streamed back into the street, and everyone went on their way, though the general chatter took on a more excited tone than before.

Jake started walking again, still gazing up at the place he'd last seen the airship as if it would magically reappear. *Maybe I*

should book passage somewhere in one? Dad gave me enough money to be able to afford a few luxuries.

Head lost in the clouds, he tripped and lurched forwards. He collided with a body, and instinct made him grab hold to steady himself. As soon as he could, he pulled back. He and his unwitting saviour spoke at the same time.

“I’m so sorry. Are you all right?”

“Unhand me at once.”

An elderly gentleman wearing a maroon velvet frock coat and elaborately tied cravat glared at him from a pair of beady eyes tucked beneath bushy white brows. Purple veins mottled his bulbous nose, and his cheeks were beginning to turn the same shade.

Jake held his hands up, palms out. “I didn’t mean any harm, sir. I just wasn’t watching where I was going.”

“Out of my way.” The man sneered down his nose at Jake, brushing off his sleeves as he stomped past. “Valley-born riff-raff.”

Rearing back at the insult, Jake glared after him. Did these people honestly think they were better than everyone else because they were from the coast? Well, the joke was on him because Jake had been born here in the city too.

Nevertheless, he studied the people he passed more carefully. More than one steered a wide path around him, a group of young women even going so far as to cross the street after wrinkling their noses in his direction. Sidelong glances and a few outright grimaces hit their mark, and his shoulders hunched farther with each one.

He discreetly lowered his head and sniffed himself. Nothing wrong there. What was their problem?

The answer came when he caught his reflection in a shop window. Covered in dust and splashes of dirt from the road outside the city, his jacket and shirt were decidedly ruffled. Scruff clung to his chin, and his hair had grown stringy beneath his worn trilby. He appeared in desperate need of a bath and a change of clothes.

He looked back at the other men nearby, and something else hit him. Their general attire was newer than his, and much more formal. Tailored suits in rich, dark colours, with a variety of bright or patterned waistcoats. At least half carried a cane, though only a few seemed to need them.

Incongruously, a large number wore brass goggles either around the crown of their top hats or dangling from their necks over silk scarves. What in the world were they for?

More importantly, how must he look to these fashionable gentlemen? No wonder the man he'd bumped into had been in such a hurry to get away from him. His jacket and trousers were plain brown and simply cut, more akin to what the men in the outer districts had worn than the clothing here. His hand rose to his open collar, regret sharp that he'd abandoned his tie along with his waistcoat the previous day. Too late to retrieve them from the crush of his bag now.

He forced his head to remain up, but mortification burned his gut. This wasn't supposed to happen. How was he supposed to make friends and find work—impress people—if they thought he looked like a, a... Whatever. He needed new clothes, and quickly.

Picking up his pace, he scanned the shop signs until he spotted what he was after. The window display comprised an arrangement of ties, cravats, and cufflinks, and two dummies

wearing full suits that appeared comparable with those of the passing men.

He grabbed the handle and opened the door, setting a little bell jingling above it.

Inside, cooler air and dark wood greeted him. A short man with a monocle emerged from a curtain at the far end of the back wall and gave him a disdainful once-over.

Jake took a step forward. "I need your help."

Chapter 6

Jake

He exited the shop and smoothed down his new waistcoat. He certainly fitted in now. With one last check that his money was secure and Blue was out of sight, he set off in the direction of a boarding house the tailor had suggested.

It had been nice of him to sew an additional pocket in the jacket lining for Blue. And at no extra charge. Jake chuckled at the yelp the man had let out when he'd discovered her crawling out of Jake's discarded clothes while he changed. It must have been quite a shock. But the sharp old man had recovered well and had been extremely accommodating.

Jake ambled down the street, watching people's reactions to him from the corner of his eye. The cravat he wore cut into his neck, but he daren't adjust it after the time it had taken the tailor to tie it just so. None of the people he passed sneered or crossed the road to avoid him, and he let out a relieved breath.

A couple of girls approached, whispering behind their hands and casting him occasional glances. Were they talking about him? Jake scanned his clothing for the problem. Finding nothing amiss, he felt for the goggles on his hat. Maybe they'd come loose or were on wonkily.

When the tailor had asked if he wanted a pair, he'd nearly scoffed aloud. But incredible to believe as it was, he'd been assured they were *the* latest fashion trend and that no one under the age of thirty-five—male or female—would be seen in public without them.

His question of why had been answered with a look of horror.

“Haven't you heard of Captain Adler? He's world famous.”

Jake shrugged. “Of course, but what's he got to do with it?”

The tailor tsked. “Everyone wants to be like him—do what he does, wear what he wears. Goggles are the safest and easiest way to do that. And they've been all the rage for the past two seasons. I can't in good conscience let you leave without a pair.” He flicked a hand at a wall of haberdashery drawers. “So, which style do you want? The straps come in leather, canvas, or the new rubber compound, and I have them in black, navy, or grey...”

Jake had bought a pair of each. The blue pair with studded gold trim he wore now felt secure enough.

The girls tittered, and he looked back at them. They blushed furiously and hastened their pace, their eyes fixed on him as they passed. Gears shifted in his head. Wait. Did they *fancy* him? He spun around to see them still watching him, and they giggled again.

A surprised grin tugged at his lips, and he fought back a blush of his own. What should he do? Drub it, why hadn't anyone thought to teach him this stuff? Emulating his brother on their trips into Farraton, he tipped his hat to the girls and

winked for good measure before continuing along the street with a swagger in his steps. Their muffled squeals were pure crystal, and he beamed with pride.

“Look at me, making the ladies swoon from the mere sight of this handsome face. Ha!”

Someone ahead huffed, and Jake snapped his mouth shut, averting his gaze as they crossed paths. Nevertheless, he walked taller, a smile spread across his face.

Several blocks later, he turned a corner and found a towering plane tree directly ahead. More stood along either side of the road beyond it. They swayed to the rhythm of the breeze, their broad limbs providing the only natural shade from the heat of the glaring sun.

Closer inspection of the first tree revealed two thin metal poles attached to a crank handle adorning the trunk at waist height. He craned his head back to peer up at the canopy, holding his new hat in place with one hand. The bars ended in a collection of gears and netting. Some sort of contraption, but for what? He grinned. There would be plenty of time for him to find out in the coming weeks, even if every turning brought some new wonder to explore.

He scanned the area. The street was long and broad, more orderly than those closer to the station and shops. While the road itself was still busy with traffic, fewer people walked the pavement, and those that did wore the more expensive styles the tailor had shown him.

The buildings were more impressive too, set back from the curb and with fancy edging around the doors and windows and along the gutters. Made of polished stone blocks instead of bricks, they oozed wealth and status.

Jake immediately straightened his shoulders. He checked the directions he'd been given and set off again. A room in this neighbourhood would be perfect.

He was about to cross the road when a young girl flew at him out of nowhere. She grabbed him around the waist and clung on, burrowing her face inside his coat.

“Help! He’s chasing me,” she sobbed.

Jake looked around but couldn't see anyone threatening. No one shouted or even ran towards them. He dropped his gaze to the top of the girl's head. She pulled back, wiped a snotty nose with the back of her arm, and peered up at him with the biggest, saddest green eyes he'd ever seen.

“There's no one there, sweetheart,” he said.

Her forehead wrinkled and she glanced down the street.

“Ahh,” she cried. “Here he comes.” And she was off again, her little legs pumping.

She veered down a gap between two buildings before he could think to call out or stop her. Appearances forgotten, he ran after her, but by the time he reached the mouth of the alley, she was gone.

He stood in the middle of the pavement, caught between following her and carrying on to the boarding house. The chances of him finding her weren't great, but his instincts screamed at him to help. How could someone take advantage of such a sweet little girl? He searched the street for whoever had been following her, finding nothing out of the ordinary.

He ran his hands through his hair and then shoved them in his pockets. Felt around. Frowned. Where was his loose change? He checked the rest of his person. Drub it! His fob watch was missing as well.

His eyes narrowed on the empty alley. She'd robbed him. He'd been so concerned about her, and she'd robbed him.

"Is this your bag, old chap?"

Jake swung back to where he'd dropped the rest of his belongings in his haste to save the little thief. A young man wearing a navy coat over tan trousers and polished black shoes stood next to his bag, prodding it with a gold-tipped cane. He turned an inquisitive face towards Jake, and a pair of goggles glinted around his neck.

"It's probably safe enough in this neighbourhood, but you never know. The city's full of thieves."

"Thanks for the warning," Jake mumbled. He walked over to the man, holding out his hand. "I'm Jake. It's nice to meet you."

"William. And likewise."

William's grip was firm, the sign of a confident man, Jake's father had always said. His face was smooth and clean-shaven, and his dark eyes twinkled with a hint of mischief. He couldn't have been more than a couple of years older than Jake, twenty-one or two at the most.

"Having a tough time?" he asked.

"You could say that. You're the first honest, friendly person I've met since I arrived."

William's gaze flicked to the alley and back again.

"Ah, I see. Let me guess." He stepped back and looked Jake up and down, a finger tapping the knob of his cane. His lips twitched. "You arrived today, you've been robbed at least once, and the locals you've met have been less than cordial."

Jake gaped. "How did you know that?"

With a bark of laughter, William spread his hands. “As I said, Berlath’s full of thieves. You’re still carrying your bag around with you.” He flicked his cane at the carry-all. “And the toppers—those with wealth and power—wouldn’t take too kindly to your friend there.”

He raised his eyebrows and pointed towards Jake’s chest, where Blue’s head poked out around the side of his cravat. Jake blushed and opened his topcoat to push her back inside. *So much for a good first impression. Thanks a lot, Blue.* He risked a quick look up and pasted on a weak smile.

“Sorry about that.”

“Not at all, old chap. I found it quite entertaining. And on behalf of my fellow citizens, I apologise most humbly and welcome you to our city.”

He performed an elaborate bow, finishing with a flourish of his hand. A grin broke out on his face as he stood, like a ray of sunshine after a stormy afternoon.

“Where are you staying?” he asked.

“I haven’t booked in yet, but I’ve been told about a good boarding house a few streets over.”

William shook his head. “No, no, no. That won’t do at all, old boy. Anyone who’s anyone stays at the Belmont when they’re in town.” He pulled out a fancy, gold-edged watch and glanced down at it. “I have a little time. I can take you there now if you’d like?”

“That would, um...”

Jake looked along the street in the direction of the lodgings. The Belmont sounded expensive. But if all the fashionable people stayed there, he might be able to find someone to look over his designs, introduce him to other

inventors, or maybe even buy one or two pieces. This could be the start of a lucrative career.

“That’d be great. Thank you.”

“Splendid.”

William scooped up Jake’s bag and started walking back the way Jake had come. He didn’t seem to have a problem with the menial task, hadn’t balked at touching the dusty thing or potentially ruining his coat with the contact. After a few paces, he spun around and beckoned with the hand holding his cane.

“Come on, then. If we get there early enough, you can join my friends and me for dinner.”

Jake breathed out. Any misgivings he might have had about his move dissipated in the breeze as he jogged to catch up.



The hotel looked as impressive as it had sounded. Set back from the street with potted palms on either side of the double doors, the entrance was flanked by marble columns supporting a grand portico.

Above that, a sign proclaimed the name of the establishment in gold letters on a blue background. Ranks of windows marched up a stone façade seven stories high with banners fluttering between them.

When Jake and William approached the building, the doors swung inwards to reveal a pair of lifelike automatons in blue uniforms holding them open. Jake stopped mid-stride, his jaw dropping.

They had automatons? Incredible. But how did they work? He glanced down at the ground beneath his feet. *There must be a trigger plate under the doormat.* How fascinating.

He started to walk closer to one, examining the metallic face with a critical eye, but pulled up short. Everyone else was walking straight past the mechanical marvels without so much as a passing glance, and he was supposed to be trying to fit in. Running a finger under the stiff collar of his shirt, he caught up to William, who waited inside, his eyebrows raised.

The foyer was even more luxurious than the exterior. Jake's eye was drawn to a gaping fireplace beside the velvet-covered furniture and potted plants dotting the wide-open space. Topped by an enormous gilt-framed mirror, it must have been large enough to accommodate three grown men.

He turned to William, but his new friend was striding across the room to a counter set between twin staircases dominating the rear. A couple of clerks manned it, wearing uniforms in a deeper shade of the same blue as the automatons.

Jake swallowed, his mouth dry. *Good thing I got new clothes, or they'd never have let me in.* He followed William like a lost sheep, smoothing the fabric of his waistcoat down his stomach.

On reaching the desk, William held Jake's bag out to the side, and a young man Jake hadn't seen on his initial survey of the room scrambled to take it. William tossed him a coin, and the man nodded and stepped back, presumably to wait for further instruction.

"Stuart, my good man. Glad you're on duty today. I need the best suite you have available for my friend, Jake, here."

William shared a look with the man behind the desk, slipped him a guinea, and winked at Jake.

“Of course, sir. One moment, please.”

The coin disappeared into the man’s pocket, and he pulled a large book out from under the countertop. He ran a finger down the open page and stopped three quarters of the way down. “Aha. As I thought. The Huntsman suite has just been vacated. It’s on the fifth floor with a fantastic view of the city.”

William turned to Jake, his eyebrows raised.

After an awkward moment, Jake stepped forwards. “I’ll take it. For a week.”

“Very good, sir. I’ll see it’s made ready at once.” Stuart gestured to the teen holding Jake’s bag, who left through a side door without a word, taking the bag with him.

“If you’ll sign in...”

Jake returned his gaze to the desk clerk, who held a pen out over a piece of paper. Clearing his throat, Jake took it and filled in his details, signing at the bottom before sliding both pen and paper back across the counter.

“And I will need a deposit, sir.”

Another slip of paper appeared, smaller than the first. The amount written on it made Jake’s eyes twitch, but he’d already signed and couldn’t back out now. He reached into the secret pocket sewn into the lining of his coat and pulled out a small stack of paper money, peeling off a note.

When he looked up, William turned his head aside. That was odd. Maybe the rich didn’t like to deal directly with money? But he’d had no problem carrying Jake’s bag for him.

Tucking the conundrum away for later consideration, Jake paid the fee and returned the rest of the notes to their hiding place.

“Splendid,” William said with a wide smile. “Well, I’ll leave you to freshen up and see you for dinner, old boy. Eight o’clock in the bar?”

He pointed out another set of doors opposite the one the youngster had gone through. A gold plaque to the side read TERRACE BAR. Jake nodded and shook the hand William held out.

“Until later, then,” he said, and tipping his hat up with the knob of his cane, he strolled back outside and out of view.

Uncertain what to do now that he was alone, Jake turned back to Stuart at the desk, but a discreet cough brought his attention to the bottom of the stairs. The young man waited with a key in one hand, his other directing Jake ahead of him. Jake tilted his head in thanks and climbed the staircase to the next floor.

The Belmont might be expensive, but he couldn’t fault the service so far. If William continued to show him the ropes, he could do very well for himself here.

Chapter 7

Nathan

Nathan walked into the kitchen through the back door and spotted Daniel over by the sink. Arm deep in soapy water, the cook used his shoulder to rub a splash from his clean-shaven cheek. He looked older than his fifty-four years, his hair more grey than brown, and wrinkles bracketing his eyes as he squinted down at the dishes.

“Seen Dad this morning?” Nathan asked. “Jonathan said he was looking for me.”

“He’s in his office.”

“Thanks.”

Daniel’s lips pursed as he scraped leftovers into the slops bucket. “He didn’t touch his breakfast either.”

Oops. Guess neither of us was hungry. Breakfast wasn’t the same without all three of the family there, trading jibes while Daniel loaded their plates with sausages and eggs.

Nathan gave the cook a sheepish grin and grabbed an apple on his way past the kitchen table. Taking a large bite, he ignored Daniel’s grumbles about meals being wasted on them and went to find his father.

He paused in the doorway to his father’s office and leaned on the frame as he watched the old man. He was slumped at

his desk, staring at a portrait of Jake and rubbing the salt-and-pepper growth along his usually clean-shaven jaw.

After a moment, he leaned forwards and touched the picture, then shifted to look out of the window. Loss etched his features.

He'd spent most of the last few days at the front of the house, gazing into the distance, too stubborn to admit he was waiting for Jake to come home. And he wasn't sleeping. He'd been out on the veranda again the previous night, the rocker he'd sat in to put Jake to sleep as a baby creaking back and forth.

Nathan's chest constricted. Seeing his father at such a loss was akin to having his guts torn out. *Drub it, Jake. Why'd you have to go to the city of all places?* But Jake didn't know what it was like there, what Nathan had seen. He pushed off the wood, clearing his throat as he crossed the threshold.

"Hey, Dad."

His father turned his head towards the door and smiled, though it didn't reach his eyes. "Nathan. There you are. Come on in."

Nathan dropped onto a chair in front of the desk. "You wanted to see me?"

"Yes, yes. What do you say to making a start on the houses for the men, eh? I've got the plans right here..."

The old man grabbed a roll of papers—plans for the row of cottages they'd been working on over the winter—and cleared room for them on the desk. His glance flicked over to the portrait as he worked, and a crease formed between his brows.

Nathan eyed the frame as well. "About Jake—"

His father flinched and quickly bent to retrieve something from a drawer. “No time for that now.” He pulled out a map of the property and dropped it onto the desk with the designs. “Come take a look.”

Why couldn’t he just admit he missed his son? Nathan looked up at the ceiling and blew out a breath. He missed Jake too, but if his father refused to talk about it... At least he’d found a distraction.

They spread the papers on the desk, securing the corners with a polished stone paperweight, some books on treating common animal diseases, and a half-full mug of cold sahl. Nathan moved around to his father’s side, and they both leaned over the various drawings.

“Here.” His father stabbed a point on the map about a quarter of a mile from the main house.

Nathan scratched his beard while he studied the area. It was a fair distance away, and the land there was covered in thorny bushes. “I don’t know, Dad. The ground’s full of rocks up there. What about over here by the western pasture?”

“No, too much of a flood risk.”

“That’s why we build on the rise. Here, see?” Nathan indicated one of the small hills along the edge of the pastureland. “It’s closer to the house, and there’s plenty of room to expand if we need to.”

His father leaned in close to the map—why couldn’t he just wear his spectacles?—and scrunched his mouth as if he’d tasted something sour. Pulling back, he shook his head and pointed at the first spot. “I still think this is the best place.”

Nathan took a deep breath before answering. “It’s not as good a location—”

“But it’ll be solid during the rainy season. I don’t want any of our buildings washing away in a flash flood like the Browns’ place last year. We’ll build them here.”

He leaned back and folded his arms across his chest, his jaw set. The conversation was over.

“Fine,” Nathan said. “But we don’t have explosives. Digging through the rock will be tough going.”

His father turned sharp eyes on him. “Nethylite is dangerous. I won’t have it—or any other crystals—on my property. Not for anything.”

Nathan raised his hands, palms out. “I know. I know. I was just saying.”

“Good. Because I won’t have it here.”

His father poked the air with his finger, then swung his head back to the desk and glared down at the papers as if they were planning to defy him. A moment later, his brow smoothed, and he slapped Nathan’s shoulder. “Besides, there’s nothing wrong with a bit of hard work. It’s good for a body. And this’ll give you a chance to stretch your powers.”

“In front of the men?” Nathan’s eyes grew wide. “We don’t know if we can trust all of them yet, and I thought you didn’t want—”

“They’ll never know. Just break up the rock a bit before they start digging it out.”

The notion appealed. Aside from emergencies, such as the incident with the fell-hound last week, he’d not used his powers for more than menial tasks around the house for... he couldn’t remember how long. Probably since before Jake discovered he couldn’t do the same things as his big brother.

Nathan recalled that night, back when he was about seventeen. Not for the first time, Jake had followed him out to the ridge and watched him practice manipulating the water in the brook. He'd taken a sphere about the size of Jake's fist and dumped it over his little brother's head, laughing at the enraged expression he'd pulled.

Jake had held his hand out towards the water, his muscles straining and his face going red with the effort of concentrating. Nothing happened. He tried again, his other fist clenched at his side, furious tears streaking his cheeks, and Nathan's amusement died.

His chest squeezing, he walked over to his brother and sat down on the grass next to him. He tugged the seven-year-old's shoulders around until he dropped his arm and met Nathan's eyes.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that, not when you can't do the same."

"Why can't I?" Jake wailed. "I try really hard, but nothing works." His shoulders slumped and he drew in a ragged breath, dropping his chin to his chest. His next words came out in a whisper. "I'll never be good enough to make it move."

Nathan pulled him in for a quick hug. "I'm so sorry, Jakey. I thought Dad told you."

Jake pushed out of his hold, and Nathan let him. The little boy sniffed and wiped his nose with the back of his hand. He wouldn't look up, so Nathan kept talking.

"It's not about whether you're good enough. You're the best kid brother around—"

"I'm the only kid brother around." Jake gave him a look that said he was an idiot.

That's more like it. Nathan grinned and continued, "Yup, but you're still the best. Only, you don't have the same gifts as me and Dad, and you can't force them to come 'cause it won't work."

Jake dropped onto the grass, tearing up a handful and throwing it aside. He found a flurtoo nestled among the stalks, picked it up and fed it a blue wildflower. After a few moments, he said, "Will I ever be like you? When I grow up, will I get powers?"

"Ah, kiddo. It doesn't work like that. Our powers are passed from father to son, since way back before the ancestors even. We don't know where they came from, but we've never seen anyone else with them, and..."

How did he say what he needed to without hurting Jake even more? Nathan rubbed the back of his neck. "As much as we love you—and we do, you know that—you weren't born an Amarel. Dad adopted you, so you don't have his blood." He paused. "Or his powers. Do you understand?"

Jake nodded slowly, his face crumpling.

"You *do* have his stubbornness, and his ability to annoy." Rolling his eyes and giving an exaggerated sigh, Nathan elbowed Jake's arm. Then he ruffled Jake's damp locks and stood.

Jake smoothed his hair back down and jumped up, his eyes narrowed and lips pressed together. He charged Nathan, the flurtoo flapping along beside his head, and Nathan ran, making sure he stayed one step ahead until they reached the brook, where he let Jake splash him with water until they were both soaked.

Jake had kept the flurtoo, calling her Blue and carrying her around on his shoulder, and Nathan had been more careful from then on about when and where he used his powers. He only stepped in when Jake would be hurt if he didn't or couldn't do something any other way. It would be good to stretch them without having to worry about upsetting him.

Nathan rolled the plans and straightened. "All right, I'll get a work crew clearing the land up there first thing in the morning." He studied his father. "Now, about Jake—"

"I don't want to talk about your brother."

The old man turned to the window, but not before Nathan saw that his eyes had misted. He stared down the main drive, no doubt hoping for an approaching dust cloud indicating Jake's return.

"Dad..." Nathan stood next to him, looking out of the same window at the rolling landscape beyond. "Give him time. He'll come back when he's ready." *I hope.*

"That's what you said about him coming down to dinner."

Nathan's head dropped, and he let out a deep breath. "I know. I'm sorry about that." He lifted his gaze to his father's face. "But we couldn't keep him here against his will. He needed to go."

That's what he'd convinced himself of, at least. *Was I wrong about that too?* Torn between cursing Jake for causing their father such grief, wanting him to have a chance to work with steam- and crystal-powered machines like he'd always wanted, and worrying about what might happen to him, Nathan's head began to throb.

"It's not safe in the city," his father said. "We didn't prepare him. Didn't tell him enough about the place."

Nathan forced a grin. “All he’s interested in is machines and science. He’ll have gone straight to the university and not set foot outside since. He’ll be safe enough there.”

His father sighed. “I hope you’re right this time, for his sake.”

Turning back to the view, Nathan hid his wince. *So do I.*

Chapter 8

Jake

Jake stood outside the Terrace Bar, searching the hotel lobby for William. He walked over to the fireplace and examined his reflection in the mirror again, but his hair was just as smooth as it had been the last time he'd looked, his collar just as tight.

He checked the time. Eight seventeen, according to the mantel clock. He spun it around and opened the casing. The mechanism looked to be in good working order; none of the gears had come loose. He closed the back and turned its face forward. Where was William?

Striding across to his previous position, he peeked through the doorway at those drinking within. Still no sign of a familiar face. Should he wait where he was or go inside and have a drink? If he did, would William be able to find him in the crowd? He scanned the room once more. Why hadn't he been more specific about where they would meet?

“Jake, my boy. There you are.”

He spun around. The shout had come from outside the main entrance. His clenched muscles relaxed when William sauntered through the double doors but tensed again at the number of people with him. There had to be at least twelve of

them. When William had suggested dinner with friends, Jake had assumed a few close companions, not a full complement.

One woman surged forwards, and Jake's eyes were drawn to her like a hummingbird to an open flower. Her hair was the lightest gold of ripened wheat, her smile sunlight on a bubbling brook. A silk cloak rippled around her body as she moved, a sliver of pale blue peeping out from the bottom.

"We're late, aren't we?" she said when she reached him.

His mouth lacked the moisture to reply, but she barely paused anyway. "It's my fault, I'm afraid. It took me an age to get ready, and I'm terrible at timekeeping at the best of times."

Her blue eyes locked on his, full of contrition. Then she winked.

Surprise caused him to jerk backwards, and he bumped into someone.

"I'm so sorry," he mumbled to the passing server before turning back to the stunning beauty, who was looking him up and down, a small tilt to the corners of her lips.

"Wherever did you find this one, Will?" she called over her shoulder, not breaking her perusal of him for a second.

William joined them, offering Jake a flask, which he refused. "On the street, if you must know." He grinned at Jake and touched the woman's arm. "Jake, this is Stephanie Meisters, but everyone just calls her Phee. Phee," he gestured towards Jake, "may I introduce you to Jake..."

"Amarel," Jake said.

"...Amarel. He's new in town, so don't scare him off."

Stephanie spun towards William and swatted his arm, pouting her rouged lips. Something in her hair shifted at her

movement, and Jake missed whatever she said. He peered closer at her pile of ringlets and started.

“You’ve got a spider crawling around in your—”

“Oh,” she gasped. “Has he come loose again?” She half raised a gloved hand to her hair but placed it on William’s arm, her eyes beseeching. “Fix the chain back in place for me, will you? I can never find the clasp without a mirror.”

Jake looked on, horror giving way to fascination as William turned Stephanie to the side and gently reached into her curls. A bright blue arachnid the size of his thumb sat on the crown of her head, a short silver chain running from one of its legs to some sort of hair clip.

“I thought you were going to get this thing replaced,” William said, untangling the clip from a few stubborn strands.

Stephanie winced at a particularly sharp tug and wrung her hands together. “I was, but I wanted to wear it tonight, and the shop said they’d have to send it off to get it repaired.”

“You’re wearing a *bug* as jewellery?” Jake couldn’t stop himself from blurting the question. It was the craziest thing he’d ever seen.

William and Stephanie both looked at him. William rolled his eyes. Stephanie’s rounded. “Of course,” she said. “Everyone who’s anyone is wearing them. Ever since Captain Adler brought one back from Myrander for the governor’s wife last year.” Tears welled. “Only mine won’t stay put.”

She gripped his forearm, gazing up at him from twin pools that sucked him into their depths. “You won’t mention this to anyone, will you?”

Jake forced his mouth to work, heat from her hand burning through the sleeve of his new evening jacket. “N-no. I don’t

know anyone to tell. But I wouldn't even if I did."

Her smile lit her entire face. "Thank you," she breathed. The scent of peppermint drifted up to his nostrils.

"All right. I'm done." William's voice cut through the haze surrounding Jake, and he pulled back from Stephanie, avoiding looking at the top of her head.

William introduced him to the rest of the group, but the names flew at him in a blur, and the only one he remembered aside from Stephanie was Bennett, a tall fellow with a bright yellow waistcoat and matching goggles over his grey top hat.

They waved down several carriages, Jake barely having time to glimpse the engines at the front before they boarded, and set off rumbling down the street. Thick curtains at the windows kept the smoke and steam from invading the interior and muffled the distinctive hisses, whistles, and clonks of the machinery.

The ride was fairly smooth, padded seats bearing the worst of the vibrations. Stephanie chose a place beside him, and her arm jostled his whenever they went over a larger bump in the road. His collar heated, and he cursed the fashion for complicated cravats.

By the time they arrived at their destination, she was pressed against him from shoulder to knee, her body heat driving his senses to distraction. She'd kept up a stream of conversation throughout the journey, but his mind never strayed far from the fact that the only thing separating them was a few thin layers of clothing.

They piled out of the carriages as soon as they came to a stop and straight through a doorway into a well-lit atrium. Jake glanced at the irium lanterns, the liquid crystal burning a warm

orange, and let out a low whistle. Had they come to the most expensive restaurant in Berlath?

The muted buzz of conversation and clinking of cutlery floated up from a wide set of stairs opposite along with the scents of roasted meat and a mixture of heady perfumes. Several couples waited in line at a small lectern where a thin man with an even thinner moustache spoke with a young woman holding a couple of menus.

William strode to the front of the queue and pulled the man aside, speaking quietly in his ear.

Stephanie beckoned Jake closer. “Don’t worry, he’ll get us in without having to wait. Will’s known the concierge here for years.”

A tinkle of laughter escaped her, but she cut it off at a sharp look from William. He must be struggling to get so many of them in at short notice. Maybe there was somewhere else they could go? Somewhere less fancy, more relaxed.

A moment later, the thin man’s face turned from harried to accommodating. He snapped off a few orders that sounded unintelligible to Jake, and another couple of waitresses appeared at the top of the stairs. William waved the rest of their group forwards and allowed the first waitress to lead him down to the dining area.

“Come on.” Stephanie pulled Jake across the room. “You can escort me in.” She handed her cloak to the flustered concierge and tucked her hand under Jake’s elbow.

He swallowed. Her dress hugged the curves of her torso down to her slim waist, the neckline swooping low at the front. A thin chain around her neck held a sapphire that matched the

blue of her eyes and the spider in her hair. He tore his gaze away from her cleavage.

Most of the men standing nearby did the same as he caught their eyes, jealousy tightening their nods of greeting.

“We make quite the pair, don’t we?” Stephanie whispered in his ear. She bit her lip and smoothed the ruffles on her gown when he turned back to her, a pretty blush warming her cheeks. Jake’s chest puffed out, and the corners of his lips lifted. They did indeed.

If only Nate could see me now. The pang hit hard. He bolstered his smile and squashed the irritating thought like the bug it was. This was his night, and nothing was going to ruin it, especially not the ghost of his brother.

His arm supporting Stephanie’s, he descended the stairs into the restaurant’s main room and followed the waitress to their table. Several pairs of male eyes followed their progress, and he walked taller. Yes, this was definitely his night.

They were seated around what turned out to be three tables pushed together towards the far end of the room. The waitress distributed their menus, mumbled something about giving them a minute, and started to walk away. William stopped her with a touch on her arm.

“A round of sliders for the table,” he said. “Oh, and a touch of Green in each.”

He gave her a dazzling smile and then turned back to the group. “Just enough to relax us,” he said with a wink.

The others made various sounds of agreement and began perusing their menus. Jake glanced around for a clue as to William’s meaning, a sense of disquiet flipping his stomach. What was Green? He couldn’t ask—he’d look like an

uneducated idiot—so he forced his eyes to the list of delicacies on offer. It was probably just a type of wine.

Less than a minute later, a cut glass tumbler appeared over his left shoulder and was placed on a paper mat in front of him. It contained a clear, green liquid with a couple of ice cubes rattling around the top.

When everyone had been served, William picked up his glass and held it out. The rest of his friends followed suit until only Jake sat empty handed. A dozen pairs of eyes landed on him, and he squirmed in his seat.

“Go on,” Stephanie said from beside him. “It won’t bite.”

She smiled encouragingly, and his misgivings fled. He picked up the glass and held it aloft like the others.

“That’s the spirit,” William said from Jake’s other side. He cleared his throat theatrically. “To friends, old and new.”

“To friends, old and new,” echoed around the table, and glasses were knocked back.

Jake took a small sip from his. It hit his tongue with the heat of a roaring furnace, but he managed to choke it down.

Stephanie nudged his elbow. “You have to drink all of it.”

Her glass was empty, and a scan of the table showed everyone else had finished theirs in one gulp as well.

Jake’s stomach rebelled, but the amused scrutiny of his new friends drove him to raise the drink to his lips a second time. He hesitated, the scent scorching his nostrils. *I may as well be drinking lit crystal powder.* Squeezing his eyes closed, he tipped the glass and poured the remaining liquid down his throat.

He swallowed, coughed, reached for the water jug. Applause resounded around him, but it was good humoured, and within a few seconds he wanted to join in. The fire turned pleasantly warm and spread through his body, no longer painful but relaxing his limbs and easing his mind.

Whatever that Green stuff was, it worked fast. He looked down at his plate. *I feel... good, happy.* He grinned at nothing in particular. His nervousness receded, replaced by a surge of confidence, and when a second glass arrived, he drank it all without question.



The rest of the meal sped by in a blur. Jake had a vague impression of steak and buttered vegetables followed by something fluffy and sweet, but none of the details stuck.

Handing Stephanie into another whistler—as she and William referred to the steam-powered carriages—stood out because he got to hold her waist between his hands, and she nestled into his side throughout a too-short trip.

They pulled up, and Jake stepped down into cool air, his head instantly clearing a little. His nose twitched at a faint tang he'd not smelled since entering the central district, and his forehead scrunched. He peered into the dim light cast by the few lanterns scattered along the pavement. Where were they?

The street was narrower than those of the hotel and restaurant, the buildings lacking their stone façades and large-paned windows. Still, the area was clean, and a decent pavement flanked the road. A buzz of conversation drew his eye to the plain wooden door immediately in front of them, above which hung a sign that read Captain's Rest.

William clapped him on the back. “Don’t let the outside fool you, old chap. This is *the* place to be seen this season.” He leaned closer as if to share a secret. “Captain Adler himself drinks here when he’s in town.”

With a bang on the lead carriage’s closed door, he sent them on their way and spun towards the entrance. He rubbed his hands together, his cane clamped under one arm.

Jake relaxed. His friend wouldn’t take him anywhere dangerous, and the possibility of meeting an airship captain was an opportunity he couldn’t miss.

Raucous laughter and a cloud of cigar smoke met them as they entered the tavern. Jake stepped aside to avoid a group of young men on their way out and bumped into a brass strut affixed to the wall above a railing. What in the world? He followed it up to the ceiling and blinked. Were those seams painted across the plaster?

Someone jostled him, and he brought his gaze back to the room. One half was raised slightly above the other, and as he walked forwards, he caught a glimpse of a ship’s wheel in the middle beside a large pipe that ran straight up to the ceiling. More brass struts stuck up above people’s heads at regular intervals around the walls.

Slowly, the odd décor sank in. “It looks like an airship.”

“Thought you’d like it.” William grinned and pushed into the throng.

Jake followed him to the bar, zigzagging around tables and squeezing between three rows of people standing at the long counter that extended across most of the right-hand wall. He looked behind him, but Bennett had steered the others in the

opposite direction and was commandeering a large corner table in the stepped down area.

Jake turned around to find a young woman standing in front of him. She raised her eyebrows, drawing his attention to her curly copper hair and the pair of oversized brass goggles that rested atop her fringe.

“Well,” she said. “What’ll it be?”

He dropped his gaze to her lips and then lower, discovering a white, open-collared shirt cinched in under her bust by a bright-red corset with brass fastenings down the front. They weren’t buckles, more like some sort of swing hook.

A design tickled the corner of his mind, something with a similar mechanism only on a larger scale, and steam powered, and... He smiled, his head tilting to one side as the machine took shape.

The barmaid’s fingers snapped in front of his face. Her eyes, when he focused on them, flashed fire. They were blue. Not deep and rich like Stephanie’s, but pale, like liquid silver.

They were also fixed on him. Right! He was supposed to say something, but what? He looked down again.

“Can you undo your corset so I can get a better look?”

Her head reared back. “What did you say?”

“Your corset.” He pointed to the top clasp. “I can pay if you want.”

William said something at the same time, but Jake didn’t catch it. His focus was entirely on the barmaid, who fisted her hands at her hips.

“Keep going and I’ll have you thrown out.”

A giant of a man loomed over her shoulder, intense gaze piercing straight through Jake. “Everything all right here?” he asked, his voice the rumble of rocks sliding down a mountain.

“I was just—”

“Yes. Fine.” William flashed a dazzling smile at the brute while gripping Jake’s arm in a tight hold. “We’re just ordering our drinks and then we’ll go back to our table.”

The man folded bulging arms over his chest and eyed them for a long moment. Eventually, he grunted and turned to serve someone else.

Jake watched him move away. “Who was that?”

“That’s Terence. He owns the Captain’s Rest.”

“Oh, I like your tavern,” he called.

Terence blinked.

William chuckled and held up a hand. “Sorry. He’s not used to the drink.”

“We had something green in them,” Jake said. He spun to William and clasped his shoulder. “I must thank you for introducing me to that.”

“Don’t mention it,” William said through gritted teeth. He tipped his head to the barmaid. “We’ll have a dozen pints of your best ale and a sherry.”

She gave him a tight smile. “Coming right up.”

“So, what do you think of the place?” William looked out over the tavern while she poured their drinks.

Jake scanned the room. “It’s splendid, just like you said.”

“We’ll just have the one here, and then I want to take you to a little spot I know where we can have some real fun.”

“We’re not staying?”

“Oh no, old chap. We never stay in one place for too long. But we had to stop in, show you around.”

Jake’s gaze drifted to the barmaid, who frowned at him. He replayed their conversation, trying to figure out why, but his brain refused to focus. *Maybe I shouldn’t have anything else to drink.*

But when the pints arrived and William handed one to him with a “Drink up, old boy,” he did.

Chapter 9

Jake

The next time they stopped, Jake followed Bennett straight out of the whistler, down a short, dark alley, and through a nondescript door.

Inside, a cramped staircase led down to another door, sturdier than the one above, with a grill and viewer set in its centre. The shutter opened to William's knock, and a pair of black eyes inspected them through the bars. A second later, the shutter closed again, and a series of muffled thuds and clicks came from the other side.

The door opened soundlessly, and they were hustled in by a huge brute wearing a tweed waistcoat over his shirt, minus a jacket, and a black bowler hat.

"Sign in." He pointed to a lectern in the corner of the small atrium.

Jake waited his turn and scrawled his name after the others, doing his best to shape the letters so they were legible. When he put the pen down, he looked up at the doorman, who checked what he'd written and directed him to an arched doorway partially concealed by a thick velvet curtain. Jake took that as his cue to enter, so he swept the curtain back and ducked inside.

At the bottom of another short set of steps, a cavernous room filled with people stretched out before him. Irium lanterns, set along the walls and suspended on chains from the ceiling, provided a soft glow that revealed at least a hundred well-dressed men and women either circulating or standing around tables dotted throughout the space.

A haze of smoke hung over their heads, fed by an array of cigarettes and cigars. It veiled the details of their appearances but not the roar of their conversations, and the very air vibrated with equal parts triumph and desperation.

Jake descended into the chaos, hunting for the rest of his party. Relief washed over him when Stephanie emerged from the crush of bodies.

“What do you think of the place?” she asked, leading him around the side of the stairs towards the front of the room.

He walked into a freshly-blown-out stream of smoke and coughed. His eyes watered, and he blinked, scrunching them tight and popping them open. “It’s—”

“It’s simply wonderful, isn’t it?”

A loud yell came from somewhere in the crowd, followed by the sounds of a fist hitting flesh and a chair scraping over the floor. Stephanie stood on her tiptoes and peered over a man’s shoulder towards the scuffle. After a moment, she dropped back down and scrunched her shoulders in. “So exciting. We come here all the time.”

She kept going, pushing between people vying to see whatever was happening. They were almost through the press when she stopped, waving at someone off to the side.

“Oh, there’s Rebecca. I’ll be right back.” She squeezed his arm and changed directions. “Keep going,” she called over her

shoulder. “The bar’s that way.”

She waved her arm in the air, but Jake couldn’t make out which way she was pointing. He edged around the spectators and looked for a bar, suddenly parched.

A tray carrying tumblers full of green liquid bobbed above the heads of the crowd. That was what he needed. Following the tray as best he could, he dived back into the throng. It was bound to lead him to the source at some point.

It didn’t, and he soon gave up, having lost sight of the waitress within moments. He wandered between crowded tables, some covered with cards, others with tokens or spinning balls, one eye out for any of his friends.

The spectators around a long, narrow table cheered, and a man at the end picked up the woman next to him and spun her around. Jake backed out of the way and into another woman carrying a tray of drinks.

“I’m sorry,” he said, but she had already moved on, turning sideways to squeeze between two young gentlemen who leered at her as she passed.

Jake spun around, or was it the room? He searched for his friends but found only a sea of strangers.

Low-cut dresses flashed amongst a wash of dark evening jackets with cravats loosened or discarded altogether. Jewels glittered at wrists, necks, ears, and in hair, drawing his eyes from one to the next. Faces swam in and out of view, laughter swirling around him at once loud and muffled. His collar tightened, and his skin prickled. If only they would stay still.

He was staring at a particularly elaborate hair brooch, trying to work out whether it was alive or not, when his view was interrupted. A couple of young women detached

themselves from a middle-aged man and glided over to him. They bestowed twin smiles and spoke at the same time.

“Well, aren’t you a handsome one?”

“Do you need some company, sugar?”

Jake’s eyes bounced from one to the other, and his mind blanked. “Um, I—”

“There you are, old boy.” William appeared at his side. “I’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

William turned to the girls and gave a curt nod, his smile tight. “Excuse us.”

Then, catching Jake’s arm, he spun him around and began towing him through the crowd. “Come on. You can talk to the pretty ladies later.”

Jake twisted to look behind him as they walked away. “It was nice meeting you.” He frowned at William. “That was rude.”

“You can thank me later,” William said, his expression unreadable.

As they neared a card table that had fewer people around it, he slowed to a stop and let go. He studied the players—an elderly gentleman with a full moustache and beard and a young man whose hair and cravat were dishevelled—and then eyed Jake.

“Sorry about that back there. Just trying to save you from the Henson twins.” He gave a mock shudder, then tilted his head towards the table. “How about I make it up to you? Have you ever played tandiit before?”

“Um, no.”

He slapped Jake's shoulder, a grin spreading across his face. "Then it's high time you did, old boy." He snatched two glasses from a passing waitress's tray and handed one to Jake. "But first, here's to winning, eh?"

Jake downed the green liquid. Confidence surged through his system, burning away the fog and setting his senses on edge. He breathed out and eyed his empty glass. "That's good stuff. Now," he looked up, "what about this game?"

William took his glass and walked over to the table. "It's easy enough. I'll teach you."

They sat next to each other, the younger man scooting over to make room.

"Deal us in," William said, handing a note to the dealer.

He received a stack of disks in exchange and nudged Jake to do the same. Jake gave the dealer his money and pulled his disks across the table, stacking them in two neat little piles in front of him.

The dealer flicked hexagonal cards towards the players and tapped the table twice when they had three each. Jake copied the others in throwing a single disk into the centre of the table and looking at his cards. He had a yellow three of swords, a yellow five of swords, and a blue six of crystals. Without revealing his hand, he raised his eyebrows at William.

William placed his cards face down on the table and leaned closer. "The aim is to have the highest score. You count numbers individually and increase the value by combining the suits and colours where possible. Two of the same colour adds five to your score, same suit adds eight, having both adds fifteen.

“If you have three the same, it doubles the extra points, whether colour, suit, or both. And there are two flame cards in the deck. If you get one of them, it doubles your entire score.

“Bet on what you have in the first round. Then you’ll get the chance to swap some or all of your cards in the second. After that, keep betting or fold. Got it?”

Jake blinked. He tried to calculate his current score, but the formula wouldn’t stick in his mind. Strange. He never usually had problems remembering things.

“You’ll pick it up soon enough.” William swapped two of his cards.

When the dealer asked if Jake wanted another card, Jake asked for one, sliding the blue six across the table. He picked up the new card and stared at his hand. All yellow. All swords. A two, three, and five. He threw down a disk, forcing his lips to stay in a straight line.

Two rounds of betting later, the elderly gentleman called the hand and turned over his cards. He had the red six and eight of stars and the green three of crystals.

“Thirty-two,” the dealer called.

The young man had folded in the last round, so Jake went next. He turned his cards face up, and the dealer gave them a quick scan.

“Forty,” he said.

William’s cards, the blue nine, red seven, and green four of crystals, received a “Thirty-six.”

“The hand goes to the gentleman with the navy waistcoat.”

A zing shot down Jake’s spine, and he sat bolt upright. Cheering behind him brought his head around. A few people

had wandered over to watch, and more than one man clapped him on the back, saying “Good show,” and, “Well done, there.” He grinned at them and turned back to the game.

The dealer collected the used cards and pushed the pile of disks from the centre of the table over to Jake. Jake stared at them. All that money from a few minutes of sitting at a table with some cards. He let out a short laugh. No wonder William and the others enjoyed visiting this place so much.

William gave his arm a light punch. “I could have sworn I had that hand. Well played, old boy. Well played. I told you you’d get the hang of it.”

Picking up the disks, Jake stacked them in front of him with the others, the smile refusing to leave his face.

“I think I like this game.” *And the city, and my new friends.*

William smiled, his eyes shadowed. “Splendid. Now let me try to win some of my money back.”

Chapter 10

Jake

Jake woke sprawled across the bed in his hotel suite, still dressed in his clothes from the night before. He sat up and the room spun, so he put a hand out to steady himself. The other covered his face as he closed his eyes. When the nausea settled, he peeped out from thin slits between his fingers and reached for the glass of water on his nightstand.

How much had he had to drink last night? Two, maybe three glasses of Green? So why did he feel like he'd been trampled by a herd of cows? He shifted off the bed and shuffled over to the dressing table. A dousing of cold water cleared his mind in short order. He shook the excess from his hair without thought and winced, pressing the heel of his hand against his temple.

For the love of the founders, why did his brain hate him so much?

Cautiously, he eased through the door to the adjoining sitting room and sank down on one of the sofas. A pile of papers on the sahl table caught his attention, and he leaned over to pick them up. It took a few moments of focused squinting, but he made out the words "ten guineas banker's note" on the top leaf.

The events of the previous evening flooded back to him. Everything from meeting William's friends to the green drinks to the embarrassing incident with the waitress at the tavern to winning at the tandiit table.

If he'd been able, he would have leaped up and shouted. He riffled through the stack of notes. There must have been a thousand guineas in his hands. He let out a soft whistle.

At the rate he was going, he'd be able to register at the Timion-Welles University without even breaking into his funds. Then what a life he would have. He let the money drop to the seat beside him and tipped his head back, dreams of his future dancing across the backs of his eyelids.

Something bumped his cheek, followed by the tickly brush of tiny wings.

He opened his eyes. Blue flitted around his head so fast he couldn't keep up with her movements in his delicate state. He closed his eyes again.

"Stop it, Blue. You're making my headache worse."

She hummed, and he held out a hand for her. A moment later, her tiny feet touched down on his index finger, her wings flapping against his skin once or twice before she stilled.

A keening made him look down at her, bringing her closer to his face. Her head drooped, and she cried again.

He stroked under her chin with his smallest finger. "Sorry I've been ignoring you. But I couldn't take you with me. I don't think they like flurtoos here."

He looked around the room, his gaze landing on a floral arrangement on the mantelpiece. Perfect. Regnig lilies were Blue's favourite treat. Transferring her to his shoulder, he

walked over to the fireplace and pulled a few petals off one of the flowers at the back, adding a couple of leaves to his haul.

“No one will notice a few of these missing.”

He walked back into the bedroom, deposited Blue and her breakfast on the nightstand, and filled her bowl—an old shill bashed into a curved dish shape—with a few drops of water from the jug.

After watching her dig in, her wings rustling at the first mouthful of petal, he opened his bag and dug out the last of his new clothes. The set he wore was wrinkled from being slept in and smelled like... Jake sniffed it and scrunched his nose, unwilling to finish the thought.

Ten minutes later, he felt like a new man. Dressed in a clean shirt and cravat and the day suit he'd worn out of the tailor's shop, his hangover was a distant dream.

He fastened the last of the silver buttons on his waistcoat and slid a new fob-watch into the pocket, attaching it to his belt with the silver chain. The goggles with the black leather strap secured around his hat, he snatched up his walking cane and document tube and spun around on the spot for Blue.

“What do you think? Will I do for a day on the town?”

She flew over to his shoulder and chattered, rubbing her head on the collar of his coat. He bit his bottom lip.

“Sorry, old girl, but you have to stay here again.”

She flapped her wings, but he picked her up by the shell and took her back to the nightstand. With a brush of his thumb across her back, he placed another regnig petal beside the one leaf she hadn't yet finished.

“Don't eat it all at once. I'll be back later.”

A final check that the money was safe in his inner pocket, and he swept from the room. He had a few things to do before dinner that evening, but first, he headed for the university campus.



Forty minutes later, Jake stood outside Professor Swire's office and watched the porter walk away. A dark oak door loomed before him, as steeped in prestige as polish. He'd waited years for this moment, but now that it was here, his nerves jangled and his feet refused to move. He adjusted his hat and collar.

If he made a good impression, he could secure a place in the natural philosophy and mechanical arts department, and all his dreams would be fulfilled. If not... That would be his worst nightmare. Still, he couldn't stand in the corridor all day. He swallowed the rising nausea, wiped his palms on his trousers one last time, and knocked on the solid panel.

"Come in."

The door groaned as Jake pushed it open, the scents of old parchment and fresh grease greeting him like long lost friends. He stepped inside and looked around, his eye immediately drawn to the workbench beneath a large, multi-paned window opposite. A partially built automaton sat amid a clutter of papers, tools, and spare parts.

"Leave it on the side table. I can pour for myself."

Jake started at the deep voice and whipped his head towards the far side of the room.

All he saw at first was books. Large, small, ancient tomes, and leather-bound sets, they filled every inch of space from

floor to ceiling, crammed onto shelves and, he realised on closer inspection, stacked around and on top of a large desk set in front of the wall.

A head popped up between them, blonde hair combed to the side and sharp eyes staring at Jake from under slashing brows. The professor blinked and rose.

“Oh. I thought you were Davies.”

“Um, no,” Jake said, glancing behind him. He cleared his throat. “I mean, I’m Jake Amarel. I’m here to see you about joining the university.”

“Well, you’d better come in then. Close the door.”

Jake did so, then took one of the chairs the professor indicated beside a small, unlit fireplace.

“So you want to attend Timion-Welles, do you? You and every other bright young person in the city. Have you got your letter of recommendation?”

Jake stilled. “Letter?”

“From your teacher or whomever you apprenticed with.”

The professor raised his brows expectantly, and Jake’s cheeks flamed.

“Oh, um, I didn’t, um. I was raised in the interior, in a remote area, so I didn’t really go to school. But I’ve read a lot, and I’ve been designing machinery for years.” He unbuckled his document tube and pulled out his designs.

The professor took the stack of papers and flipped through them, pausing occasionally and turning one or two around to study from another angle. After a few unbearably long minutes, he said, “These aren’t half bad.”

Jake's heart lifted but sank again at the professor's next words.

"Your family must be very proud of you."

"Not really." Jake ducked his head. "They don't approve, so I'm on my own."

"I'm sorry to hear that." The professor placed Jake's designs on the sahl table between them and sat back, steeping his fingers in front of him. "Let me be frank. Timion-Welles is the most prestigious university on the western continent. Competition for places here is fierce, and I'm afraid that without a reference from one of the pre-eminent schools, you'll probably need to make a considerable financial contribution on top of the usual fees in order to secure a spot."

Jake slumped in his seat, the contents of his stomach congealing into a solid lump. "I see." Did he have enough money for that? The last donation to the university he'd read about consisted of an entire new building. He stared down at his designs, avoiding the professor's eyes. "Sorry to have wasted your time."

He was about to pack them away and leave when the professor spoke again.

"I'm sorry. I know how you must feel. I've been here for eight years, and I'm still considered an interloper among some of the older faculty." His gaze drifted to the empty fireplace. "I flew across from Janara with the highest grades in the region and a major breakthrough in understanding crystal energy, but they still treated me like a valley-born simpleton for the first three years."

He studied Jake for a long moment. "I suppose we outsiders should stick together. Tell you what, let me hold onto

a couple of these”—he slid the top two sheets from the pile of Jake’s designs—“and I’ll show them to a few of my colleagues, see what I can do.”

“Would you?” Jake straightened, his eyes wide. “Thank you. That would be wonderful.”

The professor held up his hand. “I’m not promising anything, you understand.”

“Of course. But I appreciate you being willing to try. Thank you, Professor Swire.”

“Well then. You’re welcome. Leave your information with my assistant, and I’ll contact you if anything comes of—”

BOOOOM!

The office trembled, setting the lanterns flickering and a small cascade of plaster raining down from a crack in the ceiling. Jake clutched the arms of his chair, his eyes darting about the room. “What in the world was that?”

“Nothing to fear,” Professor Swire said, brushing crumbs of dirt from the end of the sahl table. “Just Professor Wimbarton testing his latest nethylite formula.” He leaned forwards, his eyes alight. “There’s still so much we don’t know about what crystals can do. The properties of the different types, their power in different states. Did you know that the energy adymine produces can be almost tripled by immersing it in certain liquids, but that fluctuations occur when...”

He glanced at Jake and let out a short laugh. “Apologies, I shouldn’t bore you when you’re not even a student yet.”

“Oh, no. It’s fascinating.”

“Then you should ask Davies to show you around a bit before you leave. Tell him I said to give you the full, unrestricted tour.” He stood and held out his hand.

Jake shook it. “That would be brilliant. I’d love to see the laboratories, and the patent archives too. So many schematics I could study!”

He ducked his head, hiding the blush heating his cheeks.

“Then have Davies take you there first.”

Jake looked up and grinned. He shoved his designs back into his document tube and walked to the door. “Thank you, Professor. You’ve no idea what this means to me.”

“On the contrary, young man. I’m very glad we met.”



Jake strolled along a street in the merchants’ district that afternoon, his chest puffed out and a smile nearly splitting his face in two. The experience was completely different from his last excursion in the neighbourhood, people nodding greetings and giving him appreciative glances.

No one steered clear of his path, and no one looked at him like he’d climbed out of the gutter to soil their very existence.

He spotted a boy selling papers and reached into his pocket for some loose change. When he came alongside the youngster, he flipped a guinea in the air, and a small hand shot out to grab it. Jake took the proffered paper and walked on, whistling a tune William had taught him.

Behind him, the boy said, “Wow! Thanks Mister.”

He caught up to Jake, his legs pumping twice for each one of Jake's strides, his hands clutching the strap of his bag to keep it on his shoulder. "If ya ever need anythink, come ter me. I can carry messages and keep mi mouth shut, no problem."

He stared up at Jake through huge, awed eyes, and when Jake winked, his face lit. His smile revealed a gap where his front tooth should have been, and Jake lowered his estimation of the boy's age.

He stopped, pursing his lips to the side as if in serious consideration. Several passers-by glared at the scruffy street urchin, but Jake ignored them.

"All right," he said. "What's your name?"

"Jimmy, sir."

"Well, Jimmy, I may need some bags carried this morning. Think you're up to that?"

Jimmy nodded so vigorously, his cap fell down his forehead. He pushed it back up with one hand.

"Then let's go." He set off again, Jimmy fast on his heels.

They walked like that for half a block until one of the window displays caught Jake's eye. He stopped for a better look, moved his head from side to side for a different angle. *Perfect*. It was just what he'd been searching for.

"Wait here. I'll be back in a few minutes."



That evening, Jake lounged on one of the hotel lobby sofas while he waited for William and the others, one polished,

multi-buckled boot resting atop the other on the table, his arm draped along the backrest.

A message had been waiting for him with the desk clerk when he'd returned earlier. An invitation to dine out again, to which he'd happily agreed. So, there he sat, adorned in a new suit with a high collar and wide lapels, the brass buttons on his waistcoat buffed to a shine.

He brushed a piece of lint from the sleeve, the velvet soft and luxurious. The braiding embroidered over his torso had cost a small fortune to have completed in time, but he would compare favourably with everyone tonight, so it was worth it.

Beside him sat an assortment of packages, purchased that morning and wrapped in paper. A lacy ribbon festooned the one on top, and he fluffed the bow with his fingers. Anticipation coursed through him, a different breed than the nervousness of the day before.

The mantel clock had just struck the hour when William and Stephanie glided through the front entrance, followed by the rest of their group. Fewer than the evening before, there were still at least eight of them. Bennett's top hat stuck out above the others, his thin frame making him easy to spot in any crowd.

Jake grinned at the sight they made, dressed in their finest and drawing the eyes of several bystanders as they swept through the lobby. He lifted his hand, attracting their attention, and then rose to greet them.

"Well, don't you look the part, old chap?" William spread his arms, let out a low whistle, and clapped Jake's shoulder. "Been out spending your winnings, I see."

A blush crept up Jake's neck. He spun to pick up the stack of packages and tossed one to Bennett, who fumbled it twice before catching it against his bright-orange waistcoat. "Actually, I bought something for each of you too."

Suddenly the sole focus of their attention, Jake shifted his weight and, without making full eye contact, handed out some more of the gifts.

Bennett ripped into his package and let out a whistle. He pulled out a pair of gold cufflinks shaped into miniature airships with the details picked out in crystal. "Thank you, Jake. These are superlative."

William leaned close and whispered, "His grandfather's got him reading the dictionary to him again. The things we do for our inheritances, eh?"

Jake flinched but forced out an "mmhmm."

One of the other men, whose name Jake tried in vain to recall, removed an iridium lighter from his box. He looked up at Jake, a quizzical expression on his face.

Pointing to it, Jake said, "You had trouble lighting your cigar yesterday."

"You remember that?" Bennett asked. "I barely remember a thing."

Jake rubbed his forehead with his free hand and chuckled. "Not at first. But it came back to me eventually." He dropped his arm. "That Green is strong stuff. What is it, anyway?"

"Just something they add to drinks to help people relax and have fun." William shrugged. "You get used to it after a while."

He turned to the man with the lighter, suppressed mirth in his eyes. “That’s a fine piece, Henry. Better not lend this one to any old ladies.”

Everyone laughed, though Jake missed the joke. Bennett slapped Henry on the back while Henry’s mouth opened and closed, and Stephanie sat on a nearby chair, hiding her face behind a lace-gloved hand.

Jake crouched down beside her and held out the beribboned box. Her eyes lit, and she reached out for it, her fingers brushing his.

“For me? Oh, you shouldn’t have.”

He pushed it into her grip, leaned back, and grinned. “Open it.”

When she did, her mouth dropped open and she let out a small “oh.” Her gaze caught his, and she beamed. “They’re gorgeous, Jake. I’ll be the envy of every woman in town.”

“I’m glad you like them.”

“*Like* them? They’re divine. I’m going to put them in right now.” She squeezed his arm and stood, edging her skirts around him as she headed to the ladies’ powder room.

Joy buzzing through his entire body, Jake stood and brushed off his trousers. He stepped over to William, who was watching Henry chase the others with his lighter, cranking the handle again and again to produce bursts of flame that sent them scattering. Their shouts and laughter filled the lobby, earning them several disapproving frowns that went entirely ignored.

Jake touched William’s arm and, when he turned his head, handed him the last package. “Will. This is for you.”

William held the gift out towards him. “You shouldn’t have, old boy. There’s no need—”

“But there is.” Jake put his hands up and stepped back out of reach. He looked away and cleared his throat. “You’ve been a wonderful friend. Thank you for introducing me to everyone.”

Glancing back, he caught a shadow pass over William’s face. *Please don’t refuse the gift.* He shrugged and turned aside to watch the others. “It’s nothing, really. Just a token.”

William opened the box. Inside lay a one-of-a-kind pair of goggles with tiny gears and ornate gold studs around the rims. The thick, black strap was made of the new rubber that was all the rage among the fashionable set about town.

A moment passed. Jake shuffled from one foot to the other. Didn’t he like them?

With a shake of his head, William looked up. Then looked back down. Then up again, this time with a smile stretching his features. “They’re incredible. Where in the world did you find them?”

Jake grinned as William removed the goggles from his top hat and replaced them with the new pair. He ran a reverent finger over the decorative rims and huffed out a laugh.

“They’ll do, then?” Jake asked.

“Jake, old boy, they will dazzle. Thank you.” William looked at him for a moment, a crease between his brows. “You’re nothing like I expected when we met.”

“Is that good?”

William laughed. “I suppose it is. Come on. Let’s go celebrate.”

As he put his hat on, tilting it to a rakish angle, he gave a sharp whistle. The others stopped their antics, donning their hats again and picking up their various canes from where they'd been strewn about the furniture.

Stephanie emerged from the powder room while they were readying themselves. She glided over to Jake and clutched his hands in hers as soon as she was within range, giving them a little squeeze.

“What do you think?” she asked, angling her head to the side.

Nestled within her curls, attached to a small comb, sat an oarid beetle. It moved, and its iridescent shell caught light from the chandelier in myriad blues and purples. She twisted her face the other way to show him its mate, her hands clasped together at her chest.

“Well?” she prodded.

“Um, they look beautiful.” *They look ridiculous.* But her face glowed with the compliment, so he repressed an eye roll and held out his arm. “Shall we?”

She slid her hand around his forearm, pulling it to her side and saying, “Oh, you are just the last cog.”

His brows drew together. “What?”

“The last cog? You know, the piece that completes a machine, makes it work.” She giggled. “Don’t worry, it’s a compliment.”

His chest puffed out, and he grinned. *Well, all right then. That was worth paying a small fortune for a pair of bugs.*

They walked outside, and William secured a couple of whistlers, organising who would ride in which and then

debating with Henry where they should go for dinner.

Jake waited by the hotel entrance, the camaraderie and exuberance of the group washing over him like a balm. *Finally. People who like me the way I am and don't compare me to—*

He twisted his neck to the side, cutting off the thought. This was his new life, and he was happy. No need to ruin it with reminders of home.

When William beckoned him to the lead whistler, he straightened his hat and strode forwards, ready to eat. He lifted his foot to climb in, but something metallic creaked farther along the pavement, and he paused.

His gaze swung towards the sound, and his eyes opened wide. With an "I'll be right back" to the others already seated inside, he wandered over to the man who had grabbed his attention.

At the edge of the busy thoroughfare, a short fellow, his coat and hat discarded on the floor beside him, was winding the handle on one of the trees lining the street. Sweat beaded his brow and his muscles strained as he cranked the gears, slowly turning the metal rods that ran up to the top of the trunk.

Jake tipped his head back to see what it was for. While he watched, a series of large metal hoops jerked out from under the branches on either side of the tree trunk and up, one stilted step at a time, over the entire canopy. Fine mesh connected them together as they spread out, slowly enclosing the top of the tree in a giant net.

The handle squeaked again, and Jake dropped his head to study the gears. They needed oiling. He looked back up in

time to see the lead hoops clang together. The man pulled a lever in Jake's periphery, and something clicked above—a locking mechanism falling into place.

Why would they cover the trees in giant nets? Jake spun to ask the man, but he'd already grabbed his coat and hat and was striding down the street. He stopped at the next tree and began to repeat the process.

Jake turned his gaze back to the captured branches. Did they drop nuts at night that could injure people? He snorted. That made no sense. A simple net spread above head height would catch anything that fell. *So why the machine?*

His mind drew a blank. But then a small light flickered on halfway along one of the tree branches. It was followed by another and another until so many shone from beneath the netting that the treetop gave off a soft glow, illuminating the entire area below it.

Flame bugs.

He peered up and down the street and was rewarded by the sight of trees lighting up one by one as the bugs began to eat. Containing them was an ingenious idea. They usually stayed close to where they hatched, but the nets ensured the street was evenly lit each night, and that they laid their eggs on the trees before they flew away in the morning.

A hand came down on Jake's shoulder, and he jumped.

"Sorry, old chap," William said, coming up alongside him. "What are we looking at?"

"They use flame bugs to light the streets at night."

William shrugged. "Yeah. A gimmick for the tourists. Come on."

“But it’s such a brilliant design. There’s even a release catch, there, to let them out in the morning.”

Jake clamped his mouth shut when William chuckled.

“I never realised you were a gearhead.”

Face heating, Jake dropped his gaze to the ground. He inspected a crack in the pavement with the toe of his boot. “I came to the city to make a living as an inventor, maybe even study at the university, though it looks like getting a place will probably cost a small fortune.” He looked up. “If I can keep winning at tandiit like I did yesterday, I could pay the entrance fees and still have enough money to live comfortably. Not like this, but well enough until I can set up my own shop.”

William cast him a sharp glance, and Jake pressed his lips together. *Now he thinks I’m a complete dolt.* But William only nudged him playfully and looked up at the flame bugs.

“Why not get your father to pay the tuition?” he said. “That’s the best part about being rich, isn’t it? Unlimited funds?”

Laughter bubbled out without Jake being able to stop it. “I’m not rich, not really.” He studied William, trying to gauge his reaction. “And my father cut me off, so this is all I have.”

William winced, causing Jake’s stomach to drop. It must have shown in his face, for William gave him a huge grin, slung an arm around his shoulder, and turned them around. “We’d better get going then, old chap. It seems you have a small fortune to make.” He gave Jake a quick slap on the back and began walking back to the others.

“Hurry up, over there,” Bennett called. “Phee’s complaining she’s starving.”

A muffled cry of denial came from within the whistler, and Jake chuckled at the image of Stephanie's horrified face.

William raised his arm in their direction. "Coming."

Taking one last glance up at the flame bugs, Jake followed his friend back to the waiting whistler and scrambled aboard, swinging the door closed behind him just as it set off.

Chapter II

Nathan

Nathan pushed out through the front door of the main house, squinting in the bright afternoon sunlight, and walked around to the side of the veranda that faced the driveway. His father sat in the rocking chair, creaking back and forth and twirling a pencil in the air a foot above his right hand.

Beneath his growing beard, his face was drawn, and his eyes were fixed on the horizon. He was getting worse. For the last few days, he'd not left that spot other than to eat, sleep, or use the facilities.

A sigh escaped Nathan, and he rubbed the back of his neck. How could he go after Jake like he'd planned with the old man like this? He dropped onto the adjacent chair, leaning back and stretching his legs out in front of him.

The land on that side of the estate undulated gently into the distance, meadow grass blanketing the ground in soft shades of green liberally sprinkled with splashes of reds, oranges, and yellows. His mother had loved those wildflowers, threatening to make his father sleep outside if he ever planted the area with crops.

Nathan had taught Jake to read out there, sitting under the shade of the old oak, their father watching from the same chair

he sat in now. Taught him to whittle there too. So many memories. He let them come, embracing the nostalgia until present concerns for his family forced him to speak.

“Thought I’d find you out here.”

His father made no sign of having heard. Nathan rolled his head to look at him. “Good to see you, too, Dad. My day’s gone well so far, thanks for asking.”

“Hmmm,” his father said. “What was that?” His eyes never left the end of the long drive.

“I came to see how you’re doing.”

He stopped rocking and turned to look at Nathan then, his gaze clearing. “Sorry, son. How’d it go with Matthew?”

Nathan removed his hat and balanced it on the armrest of the empty chair beside his. “About as well as you’d expect. He wasn’t exactly thrilled at the notion, railed for a while, but he calmed down eventually. Said he was gonna go back to the city and find work there.”

“Good.” His father started rocking again. “I’m glad that’s done. Won’t have a man on the property too mean to share and too spiteful to forgive.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t reckon he’ll give us any trouble as long as we pay him to the end of the month.”

The old man only grunted, and they lapsed back into silence. Aside from the rhythmic scrape of the rocking chair, the only sounds were the trilling of the flurtoos roosting in the oak tree, and the susurrations of a spring breeze stroking the grass along the top of the hill.

Most of the men were out at the work site, excavating the foundations for the new houses, and Daniel was in the barn

fixing the handle of his favourite frying pan.

Nathan sat forwards and rested his elbows on his knees. “Listen, Dad, about Jake...”

“I’m worried about him. We shouldn’t have let him go to the city.”

Nathan’s eyebrows shot up. No deflection to another topic? That was an improvement at least. He chewed the inside of his cheek. How could he respond without pushing his father too much?

Before he could start, his father continued. “I should have let him build his machines. Then he’d never have left. A few clockwork tools wouldn’t have hurt, not really.”

What could Nathan say to that? He gentled his voice. “He wasn’t happy working the land, Dad. He’s not like us. He wanted something different, to study at the university and... Oh, I don’t know. But he probably would’ve gone sooner or later.”

His father twisted to face him, the pencil he’d been spinning clattering to the floor. “I’ve got a bad feeling, like Jake’s in trouble somehow. What if they found out who he is and went after him?”

“Why would they even be looking?” Nathan ran a hand through his hair. “As far as they’re concerned, we’re long gone, and he’s just one kid in a city of thousands. I’m sure he’s fine.”

He stood and walked to the railing. Turning, he leaned against it and looked his father in the eye. Stark concern stared back at him. Tension crawled over Nathan’s body, demanding he do something to ease his father’s mind. It didn’t help that

Walter Amarel's intuition was rarely wrong. Unease slithered in alongside the impulse to act.

"Why don't I go and check on him when we've finished moving the herd? Put your mind at rest?" *And mine.*

His father joined him at the railing, gazing out along the sweeping drive. "I can't help but feel that I pushed him away. Right into their hands."

Nathan put a hand on his shoulder. "I'll make sure he's safe. They won't touch him, I promise."

"I won't be able to rest until I know he's all right." His father turned serious eyes on him. "But I don't want both my sons in danger either. You'll be careful?"

Nathan nodded slowly. "Of course I will."

"And you won't use your powers in the city?" His father raised one eyebrow at him.

Nathan spread his hands. "No. I know the stakes. But I won't need them."

"Founders forbid you do," his father muttered.

"I'll be fine. As soon as the herd's settled in the high pasture, I'll go, check on Jake, and be home before you notice I'm gone."

"Ha." His father strode along the veranda to the front of the house. "I highly doubt that, son."

Nathan followed. "I can move faster than you, old man."

And if Jake was in danger, he'd pull him out of it just as quickly. Running off to the city was one thing—founders knew Jake needed something they couldn't give him—but his brother in harm's way would not be tolerated. Nathan would

bring him home at the slightest hint of trouble, and let anyone try to stop him.

Chapter 12

Jake

When they arrived at the gaming den, as Bennett called it, Jake was clearer-headed than he'd been the previous night. William—who'd been strangely quiet since they'd left the hotel—had only ordered one round of Green at dinner, and the buzz in Jake's veins simmered rather than boiled. Confident and relaxed, he surveyed the outside of the building for the first time.

The neighbourhood was... surprising. Reminiscent of the outer districts he'd ridden through on the stagecoach, the road was barely wide enough for the whistlers to pass the pedestrians without knocking into them. Shadows lurked between the buildings, fought back by irregularly spaced tallow lanterns held aloft on mere poles.

Why would they come to this part of the city? Surely there were places to gamble in the respectable districts. Jake stepped aside as an old man hunched in a plain woollen coat hurried past. The man barely glanced up as he walked, soon disappearing around a corner.

“Ready for this?” Henry asked as one of the other men with them heaved open a nondescript door partway down a gaping alley and ushered them inside.

Uncertainty rooted Jake to the spot, but his friends knew the city better than he did—all the best, most fashionable spots. Maybe for wealthy people like them, half the excitement was in travelling to a more dangerous area for their evening's entertainment. He forced his legs to follow the others, his nose wrinkling at the putrid stench of refuse emanating from farther down the alley, and ducked into the mouth of the den.

When they reached the lobby, he signed in last.

He was about to go inside when a gentleman behind him said, "Amarel... Amarel. Why do I know that name...? I say, do you know a Walter Amarel, by any chance?"

Jake faltered. To hear his father's name, spoken by a stranger, here of all places... He looked over his shoulder, his thoughts tripping. "He's my father."

"You don't say." The man dropped the pen he was holding onto the open guestbook and walked towards Jake, tracing every detail of his face. A vee formed between his eyebrows, drawing Jake's eye to a scar bisecting the left one. "You don't look much like him."

Though a fist squeezed Jake's gut, his voice came out evenly. "I was adopted."

"Oh." The man nodded slowly. "That explains it. Well, have a good evening at the tables, young man." He tipped his hat and slipped behind the curtain, leaving Jake staring after him. Who was that? And how did he know Jake's father?

"Wait—"

Hustling through the curtained entrance, Jake searched for a grey evening jacket and matching top hat, but the man had already vanished into the crowd. Jake rubbed his forehead. His father hated Berlath and everything it stood for, refused to ever

set foot there. How could anyone from the city know him well enough to know what he looked like?

A round of cheering interrupted his musings, and he descended the stairs, mumbling an apology to the couple waiting behind him. He shook the disquiet from his mind and wove through the revellers to the tandiit table.

No spaces were open when he arrived, so he stood behind a young woman with only a few disks in front of her. She pulled her cards up in front of her face, displaying a green seven of cogs, a red two of stars, and a blue two of swords. Her finger tapped the edge of the cards, a nervous, staccato beat. After a moment, she picked up all but two of her disks and dropped them into the centre of the table.

A young man sat next to her, barely Jake's age. He peeked at his cards, looked around the table at the others, and picked up a few of his disks. His lips pursed, he returned one and then placed the rest with the others already in play.

The next player, a thin man with a neatly trimmed moustache and beard, folded, taking a sip of clear liquid from his tumbler, but the young man beside him lounged back in his seat and upped the bid, tossing several disks onto the pile with a flick of his wrist.

Jake bounced gently on the balls of his feet. The hand would be over soon enough, and then he could set to work winning more tuition money.

While the hand was being called—in favour of the relaxed young man, as Jake had predicted—William arrived, handing Jake a glass of Green. He tipped his head towards the table. “You like this game, huh?”

A grin spread over Jake's face. "Yes. And I must be good at it too. Look how much I won yesterday."

William's smile was slightly dimmer. "Then here's to your imminent success, old chap."

He raised his glass, and Jake clinked the rim of his against it. One more wouldn't hurt.

They drained the drinks, the familiar burn melting into warm confidence that banished all Jake's fears and doubts. He twisted the empty tumbler in his hand, letting it catch the light from a nearby lantern and cast a kaleidoscope of colours across his waistcoat.

Wood scraped across wood, and he stepped back as the young woman rose from her place. She glanced up at him, her large brown eyes full of disappointment for a single second. They blinked, and indifference flashed across them so that Jake almost believed he'd imagined her first reaction. Then she was gone, sashaying between a couple of young men in the direction of the bar.

"You taking her spot?" the dealer asked, his eyebrows raised at Jake.

"Yes. Yes, I am." He sat, pulling the chair closer to the table and removing some notes from his money clip.

With a good-natured smile to the other players, he arranged his pile of disks and picked up the cards he had been dealt.

He lost the first two hands but won the hand after that, recouping most of his losses with a pair of red nines and a flame card.

The dealer had just started distributing a fresh set of cards when an extremely short man stopped him by clamping a

chubby hand on top of the deck.

“Excuse me a moment, gentlemen,” the dealer said. He turned away from the table and bent down to the little man. The man whispered something in his ear, gave him a hard stare, and pushed through the gathered spectators.

Jake twisted around and raised his eyebrows at William, but his friend wasn't paying him any attention. He was staring after the little man, his eyes narrowed and lips compressed into a tight line. What was that about?

He didn't get a chance to ask. With a small cough, the dealer continued to distribute their next hand. “My apologies, gentlemen. Shall we resume?”

Jake picked up his cards—a red three of stars, red two of cogs, and a blue four of crystals. Not the best hand he'd been dealt that night, but he could do something with it. He placed his initial bet.

In the next ten minutes, he lost three hands, two to the relaxed young man—who turned out to be the epitome of what William would call a topper—and one to the thin man opposite. He tracked the last pile of disks as it was pushed towards the young man, pasting on a thin smile for the winner. He had three disks left.

“You can't win if you don't have enough to play with,” he told himself, tugging his money clip from his inner pocket. He slid a note from the stack, scrunched his lips to the side, and peeled off another two.

He won the next hand. Lost one, won one, and then lost two in a row. What was happening? Where was his luck from the previous evening? Maybe he should stop. He rubbed his

forehead, the beginnings of a headache tapping against the inside of the bone.

“Would you like some more disks?” the dealer asked him.

Jake stared at the table, a solitary disk sitting in front of him while large piles rested before the thin man and the topper. Even the boy had a respectable amount left, though he kept rearranging his two small stacks so that Jake couldn't keep track of how much was there. He tried to blink his eyes back into focus.

Another round of drinks, sitting on a silver tray, slid onto the surface of the table past Jake's elbow. A waitress distributed the glasses among the players—a pint for the youngster, tumblers of Green for Jake and the topper, and more of the clear liquid in a shot glass for the thin man.

“Compliments of an admirer,” the waitress murmured, casting a heated look at Jake.

He fumbled his glass as he set it down. When he met her eye, she winked before slipping back into the melee. His face burning, he chugged the Green, setting his insides alight as well.

His head dropped forwards, bringing his eyes to the empty table where his winnings should have been. *It's not a problem. I can win it back.* Confidence blazed through his entire body, shredding the tiny voice that warned against being rash. Reaching into his inner pocket, he withdrew his money clip and handed the entire wad of notes directly to the dealer.

“Deal me back in,” he said.

Someone groaned behind him, but the sound was easily ignored when he was so close to achieving his dreams.

As the dealer handed Jake his new disks, a wave of excited whispers rippled through the gathered crowd. More faces joined those already watching in rapt attention. *They've come to see you win.* Jake's mouth tilted up in a smile, and he rubbed his hands together, more than happy to give them what they wanted.

He picked up his cards. They blurred for a moment, so he squeezed his eyes shut and then opened them again. This time the numbers stayed put—a green ten and yellow ten of cogs and a yellow four of crystals. His tongue pressed against the roof of his mouth, and nervous energy zinged through him. He schooled his features, shuffled the yellow four to the back, and set them face down in front of him.

The opening bets went quickly, and the dealer turned to the boy, whose turn it was to play first. He exchanged two of his cards. The thin man took one, and the topper stuck with what he had.

The dealer turned to Jake. “And you, sir?”

Jake slid the four off the top of the others and held up one finger. He reached for the new card, a slight tremor running through his hand.

The number registered first, and his spine jerked a little straighter. Another ten. But the colour and suit weren't a match. He placed the blue ten of swords on top of his other cards and worked out where his score now stood.

Two rounds of bets later, the thin man pushed the majority of his disks into the centre of the table. An excited buzz spread through the audience, and the air thickened around the table.

The topper met the amount without so much as blinking, and all eyes turned to Jake. His hand hovered over his stack,

his mind churning over the possible score the thin man held.

“Fold if the pot’s too rich for you.” The thin man waved a careless hand through the air, but his eyes met Jake’s, his challenge clear.

Jake placed his entire stack of disks onto the pile.

Another collective murmur spread through the crowd.

The boy flung his cards down as if they’d burned him. “I’m out.”

With a roll of his neck, the thin man matched Jake’s bet.

The topper chuckled, reaching forward to toss his share of disks into the centre. “Father will simply love this.”

The dealer looked at Jake. “Your cards, sir.”

Jake turned them over, and the dealer said, “Forty-five.”

“Beats my forty-one.” Out of turn, the topper tossed his cards face up on the table and threw back the rest of his drink.

The dealer glanced at them and gave a small nod before turning to the thin man, who flipped his cards over. Three of a kind—the blue three, six, and seven of stars. The dealer called it. “Forty-six. The hand goes to you, sir.”

A cheer erupted around the table, but the thudding of Jake’s heartbeat in his ears drowned it out. His world collapsed. He stared, transfixed, as the dealer pushed the pile of disks over to the thin gentleman, who started collecting them into neat little stacks.

Two thousand five hundred guineas. Gone. In a single hand of cards. His breath stuck in his throat. How could he have lost it all?

The table swam in front of him, the cards—stupid, betraying cards—merging into an ugly purple blob.

He lifted his head, and faces floated in and out of his vision. Some were drenched with pity, others horror, but more than a few sailed from view, dismissive now he was without funds. They whispered together, commenting on his humiliation like they would a specimen in an exhibit.

A hand came down on his shoulder, pulling him from the mental abyss. William's voice floated to him from a great distance, and Jake tried to make sense of what his friend was saying. The hand grabbed his arm and tugged.

“Let's get out of here,” William repeated, the words clearer than before.

Jake couldn't move. His body was so heavy, even lifting his eyes proved an impossible feat. They locked on the smooth, black cloth covering the table, focused in on a flaw in the weave right where his disks had been sitting at the start of the hand. The disks representing his future, his freedom.

This wasn't supposed to happen. He was good at this game, had proven so the previous night. The cards had been on his side, sliding into his hands and offering him the world. Had they turned on him?

No. He simply needed to play again. One more hand, and his luck would change. He felt it in the very marrow of his bones. He would win. He could taste the certainty, hot and green on his tongue. He just needed something to bet.

Dragging his gaze from the table, he turned despairing eyes on his friend. “I need a stake. Can you lend me ten guineas?”

William recoiled as if struck. His eyes darted left and right, then back to Jake, something lurking in their depths that Jake couldn't quite identify.

“Please, Will. I only need enough to get me started again.”

William opened his mouth to answer, but another voice spoke first.

“You could sign a blood oath if you're that confident of winning.”

William froze. He shot a glare over Jake's shoulder and tugged more insistently on his arm. “He's not signing one of those. We're leaving, now.”

Chapter 13

Jake

Jake pulled from William's grip and turned towards the origin of the voice. The dealer shrugged, collecting the last of the cards from the table and shuffling the discard pile. He flashed a glance at Jake but didn't stop what he was doing or offer further explanation.

"What's a blood oath?" The words came out thick, a metallic tinge of desperation coating them. Jake couldn't let the other players walk away with his disks.

"Nothing good," William muttered behind him.

If he said anything else, Jake didn't hear it. His entire attention was riveted on the dealer.

Leaning on the table, the dealer brought his face closer to Jake's, his eyes glowing in the lamplight. "A blood oath uses your blood as collateral for a bet. If you sign one, the house will give you the disks you need to play the next hand. You win? You give them back and tear up the chit. But if you lose"—he shrugged again—"your blood belongs to the house."

What? Jake tried to swallow, his tongue dry as a husk. "What does that mean?"

“It depends on the size of the debt. If you can’t pay it off in twenty-four hours, you’ll work it off in the mines or the fighting pits.”

He pushed off the table and returned to his position. “So, what’ll it be? You playing or are you out?”

Jake’s fingers tapped against his leg. He needed that money. He had the rest of his inheritance back at the hotel in case he lost, but he would win. He was sure of it.

“I’m in.”

“What are you doing?” William gripped Jake’s arm so tightly he was forced to spin around and face him. “Those things are binding.” He shook Jake’s arm. “Do you hear me? You can’t get out of them. If you lose, they’ll own you until they get their money’s worth.”

Jake prised William’s hand off him. “I know what I’m doing. I can win it all back.” He smiled, trying to convey the certainty he felt in his core.

William raised his eyes to the shadowy ceiling, muttering something about “damn Green,” whatever that meant.

He looked at something across the table behind Jake and took a small step backwards, holding his hands up in front of him. “Fine. Do what you want.”

It wasn’t the glowing endorsement Jake had sought, but he had his arm back. He took a deep breath and looked across at the dealer, who had produced a small card from underneath the table.

“Where do I sign?”

The dealer raised one eyebrow. “It’s a *blood* oath.” He removed a knife from a sheath in his boot and jiggled it in the

air.

Jake gulped. He allowed the dealer to pull his hand forward, his teeth clenched and eyes squeezed shut. A sharp pain sliced across the tip of his thumb, and blood welled in the small cut. The dealer pressed it to the card, let go of Jake's hand, and wafted the card in the air, the blood darkening as it dried.

That was it? So much fuss over such a little thing. It barely signified compared to all the times Jake had hurt himself growing up on the estate. He stuck his thumb in his mouth, the sting already lessening.

After scrawling something on the card under Jake's bloody thumb print, the dealer slid it back into the recess under the table and counted out a stack of disks for Jake. He was back in the game.

He looked at the other players, having almost forgotten them during his conversation with the dealer.

"Sorry about that." He smiled, avoiding direct eye contact. "Shall we?"

The thin man and the topper murmured their assent, but the boy stared at him, his eyes wide and face pale. "I can't... What if I beat you?" He shook his head and jerked to his feet. "I'm sorry, but I can't." He gathered his disks and pushed through the crowd, the space where he had stood soon closing behind him.

"Anyone else want to play?" the dealer asked.

No one stepped forwards.

"All right, then, the house plays the fourth spot." He dealt the cards, placing those that would have gone to the boy in front of himself.

Jake picked up his hand and looked down at them. The red six, nine, and ten of crystals stared back at him. That was... His brain sluggish, he did the calculations twice to be sure. It was a huge score. Practically unbeatable.

See, you will win. He'd just needed to stay in the game for one more round. His muscles relaxed and he placed his cards back on the table, throwing two disks into the centre to start the betting.

When it came to exchanging cards, Jake stuck with what was in his hand, a grin threatening to give away his secret. He tightened his lips and folded his arms across his chest to prevent his fingers from tapping his excitement on the table.

The thin man took one card, giving it no more than a passing glance before putting it with the others in front of him. He took a sip from his glass and focused on the handful of disks already in play.

The topper took two cards, studying them carefully and shuffling his hand several times before returning it to the table. Then the dealer exchanged one card from his three, twisting his lips to the side when he turned it half up to see what it was. His eyes fell on Jake to make the first bet.

Jake sat straighter in his chair. He picked up a stack of ten disks and moved it to the centre.

The thin man tapped the table with his forefinger three times. He took another sip of his drink. Then he pushed all his disks forward.

Jake's eyes fixed on the pile for a second. Was the thin man serious? He must have a good hand to make such a large bet. Jake swivelled his gaze from the disks to the man's face,

searching it for a clue as to his cards. He may as well have been trying to read a stone.

The topper folded, his cards falling onto the table before Jake had turned from his scrutiny of the thin man. Sitting back in his chair, the young man shrugged, swigging the rest of his drink.

“The house folds as well,” the dealer said, moving his cards to the side. He counted the disks the thin man had bet and turned to Jake. “The pot stands at six thousand, sir. Do you want to play or fold?”

Jake’s heart raced. This was it. His chance to not only get his money back but win enough to cover his first tuition payment at the university. He looked down at his remaining disks. He’d need to go all in to do it, but his cards were the best he’d had yet. *It’s not even much of a gamble. Not really.*

He slid the stacks into play and took a deep breath. “Call.”

One by one, he turned over his cards, gasps from those standing around the table greeting the last.

“Fifty-five,” the dealer announced.

The crowd grew quiet, leaning in. The thin man exposed his first card, revealing the green seven of swords. He placed the second next to it—the green eight of swords.

Jake looked up, meeting cold, dark eyes that gave nothing away. He shifted his gaze back to the table, holding his breath as the man’s arm came down one final time.

The last card landed on top of the others.

A black flame danced in the middle of the white hexagon.

Jake blinked. It took several moments for his brain to comprehend what had happened, and then his entire being

turned to stone.

The dealer's voice rang like a death knell. "Sixty. The hand goes to the gentleman on my right."

Silence. As if the very air had been sucked from the room. Then someone gasped—was that him?—and sound rushed back in.

Unable to tear his gaze from the cards, Jake watched the green bend and twist together, mocking his earlier assurance. The black flame came to life, burning Jake's to ash. The reactions of the crowd swirled around him, unable to touch him in his deadened state.

How could he have been so stupid? Bile rose in his throat at the thought of how much money he'd lost. He dropped his head into his hands.

What was he going to do now? He rubbed his temples, then paused. Maybe things weren't as bad as they could have been. Like a ray of light blazing through the darkness, realisation wound its way through his mind. He still had the rest of the money his father had given him, safely tucked under the mattress back in his hotel room.

Repaying the debt would mean the end of his dreams of attending the university, but he wouldn't starve. He could still make his way in the city working as an inventor. That had been his initial plan anyway, before the heady rush of life as his friends lived swept him on to better things.

And he still had them. He wouldn't have to do it alone.

He stumbled to his feet, his chair prevented from crashing to the ground only by the crush of people. Why was the floor so unsteady? With a hand out for balance, he started to walk away from the table.

Someone snagged his sleeve, halting his progress. He followed the arm up to the dealer's face, focused on his moving lips.

“You'll have twenty-four hours to pay back the debt, sir. After that...”

There was no need to say more. It was written in his eyes, the truth squeezing Jake's insides in an urgent grip.

After that, Jake's life would no longer be his own.

He nodded, and the pressure on his sleeve released. He was free to go now that he had nothing left. What he needed was to find his friends and get out of this place before his stomach revolted and he made even more of a fool of himself. Then he could fetch the money, pay his debt, and never return.

He searched the faces of those nearby. Where was William? Nowhere to be found. Jake scoured the room, but there was no sign of Bennett or Henry anywhere either.

He eventually spotted Stephanie at the centre of a group of young men, and he made his way in her direction.

When he was still a few yards away, their eyes met. Jake lifted his hand, but it ground to a stop mid-air. Stephanie severed the connection between them, her lip curled in a mew of distaste as she tilted her face away from him.

Had she not seen him after all? No, their eyes had definitely met. Jake was sure of it. He narrowed his on her hand, placed delicately on the chest of the man next to her, a gentle laugh and slight blush accompanying the fluttering of her lashes. Jake lowered his arm.

The truth flashed as tauntingly as the beetle on Stephanie's new hair comb, directly in his line of sight. She had heard of his loss at the card table and tossed him aside for richer game.

How had he not seen it before? She hadn't liked him, only his money.

He spun on his heel and stalked away.

Adrift in a room full of strangers, he looked around for any sign of friendship. The same pall hung overhead. The same multitude of unknown faces swam through his vision. But now the smoke was ominous, waiting to suffocate him. The crowd's blurred faces leered; their laughter shriller, sharper; their eyes greedy for blood.

He staggered towards the entrance, his skin crawling and renewed self-reproach writhing in his gut.

Chapter 14

Jake

The next morning, Jake woke to a throbbing head and a chittering in his ear. He swiped at it with his hand and connected with something small and solid. A shrill squeak brought his head up off the pillow, one eye squinting open. Blue.

She lay upside down on the sheet beside him, her legs waving in the air. With a few flaps of her wings and more than a little scrabbling, she managed to right herself and fly to the other side of the bed, where she landed on the nightstand and ducked her head inside her shell.

“Sorry, Blue. Didn’t see you there,” he rasped.

His mouth tasted like the back end of a mammoth, and his throat was dry as sandpaper. He clutched his head where the throbbing had morphed into an incessant pounding and dropped back onto the pillow.

“Argh, I’m dying.”

What had happened to him? He tried to remember how he got back to the hotel, but most of the night before was a blank. Thinking felt like slogging through thick mud and only made his headache worse, so he gave up, rolling over to block out the piercing morning light streaming through a chink in the

curtains. His stomach churned at the movement, and he groaned again.

Blood debt. The term popped into his mind out of nowhere, bringing with it nausea that had Jake scrambling from beneath the covers and reaching for the washbowl.

When the wracking of his body settled to an occasional fine tremor, he slumped against the dresser, his legs spread out across the cool floor. He swiped the back of his hand across his mouth and, closing his eyes, focused on breathing.

After a while, he cracked his eyelids and turned his hand up to inspect his thumb. Dried blood caked around a small cut at the end. He pressed it with his finger and let out a hiss at the stinging reminder of his stupidity. What had he been thinking?

That he was invincible. That he couldn't lose.

He recalled the feeling that had enveloped him the previous evening, overwhelming his good sense and crushing any rational thought that might have prevented him from going so far. Even now, it called to him, his mouth watering for more Green.

His jaw working, he squashed the impulse. *That's what got you into this mess. Now you need to get yourself out of it.*

He tipped his head towards the bed, a plan formulating. Get dressed. Take the money he owed to the gaming den to pay off the debt. Then show his designs around the craftsmen's district and find an inventor to apprentice with. If he was lucky, someone would buy one, or more, of his inventions, and that would give him a head start on building his own business.

The first step was to get up. Clasp his fragile head with one hand, he pushed onto his knees, then one foot, and then

stood. Wobbling, but upright, he shuffled across to the bed and perched on the edge, feeling underneath for his money clip.

There was nothing there.

His heart skipped a beat, but he huffed and reached farther. It must have worked its way deeper beneath the mattress. Sliding to his knees, he hefted the thing in one hand, spots flashing before his eyes, and shoved his hand all the way to the middle of the frame.

Empty.

Panic hit, and he threw the bedding aside. Naked wooden slats sat on the frame, laughing at his naiveté. Did you think your money would be safe *under the bed*? they sneered.

His frantic gaze swept the rest of the room, picking out the toppled frame on the nightstand—the one picture he'd brought from home—and the open wardrobe door he'd closed before he left. Scattered clothing, disturbed drawers, any number of tell-tale signs should have alerted him to the fact that someone had been in his rooms.

But he'd been out of his mind the night before. Between the Green and the losses, he had no idea how he'd even made it back to the hotel, never mind into bed.

He'd been robbed. Pain stabbed his chest, and he bent over, the room spinning.

Breathe. Just breathe.

How long would it take to pay off the debt? A year? Two? Would they take him as a slave or beat the blood owed from his body? Images of fists hurtling towards his face ambushed him, and he retched again, a ribbon of spittle dangling from his chin.

He had to find out who'd taken his money, had to get it back. Surely someone must have seen whoever it was. The desk clerk downstairs. And even if he hadn't seen anything, the hotel would do something about it. They couldn't have thieves preying on their guests.

Heedless of the fact that he was wearing only his underclothes and shirt, he scabbled up off the floor and lurched through the lounge, passing evidence of a search in there as well. He wrenched the door open and ran along the corridor, down the stairs, and to the front desk.

His breath came in gasps, his hands shook, and his head pounded, but he rang the bell on the counter until a head popped out of the office.

“Can I help you... sir?”

“Yes,” Jake said. “I've been robbed. The money in my room. All gone. You need to do something.”

The man stepped through the doorway, casting a nervous glance around the lobby. He positioned his features into a smile and gestured Jake inside. “I believe you would be more comfortable discussing the matter in here, sir. Shall we?”

Jake snorted. The man meant he and whoever else was in the vicinity would be more comfortable, but Jake looked down, took in his bare feet, and conceded the point. He rounded the counter, passing under the levered section the clerk was holding up for him, and sank into the first chair he came to inside the office.

The man walked to the other side of a small desk and sat down, his wary eyes fixed on Jake. “I don't know if you remember me, sir. My name's Stuart. I boo—”

“Yes. I remember. You signed me in here when I arrived. With William.”

He tilted his head a little to the side. “Of course. Now. Why don’t you tell me what’s happened?”

Jake took a breath. Suddenly conscious of his bare legs, he tugged his shirttail down. Then he recalled the events of the previous twelve hours, and propriety dropped to the bottom of his list of concerns. He laid both hands on the desk.

“You have to help me. Someone’s been in my room and taken all my money. You have to help me find it.”

Stuart leaned back as if proximity to the victim of a crime would somehow stain his reputation. He touched his fingertips together in front of him, his elbows resting on the arms of his chair, and furrowed his brow.

“Are you sure the money was in your room? You didn’t take it out with you, or spend more of it than you remember?”

Jake recoiled, shock slapping his brain fully awake. “Of course I’m sure. Would I be this upset if I didn’t know it’d been taken? You need to do something. Surely the hotel can —”

“Unfortunately, the hotel isn’t liable for any personal property left unattended during your stay with us. It’s in the fine print of the document you signed to book in, if you’d like to see it.”

“No, I don’t want to see it. I just want to get my money back.” Jake shoved his hands through his hair and sat forwards again. “What about calling the authorities?”

Stuart snorted. “The authorities won’t do anything. Things like this happen all the time, and Berlath is a big city. If your money’s been taken, I’m afraid it’s long gone by now.”

Jake gaped at him, but he pulled a blank piece of paper from a stack and picked up a pen. “We should focus on replenishing your funds. Can I message anyone for you? A bank? A relative?”

“No.” Jake’s voice came out small and tight. “There isn’t anyone to message.”

Stuart stilled, blinked. With a cough, he shuffled the paper into a pile with some others on his desk and then looked up again. “Then what concerns me now is your ability to pay your bill.”

“My— You’re not—”

“I apologise, sir, but the Belmont doesn’t let its rooms for free. You only paid for the first night up front, so if you lack the funds to pay the rest, I must ask you to pack your belongings and leave.”

Jake stood. “You can’t do this. I was robbed while staying here. *Robbed.*” He paced the small confines of the office, three steps to the far wall and three back to the door. “I’ll, I’ll tell my friends. Tell the paper.”

Stuart sighed and rose, rounding the table and standing directly in front of Jake as he spun from the wall to make another pass. “I can let you stay another night. But after that, if you can’t pay...” He raised his hands in a helpless gesture.

“I understand,” Jake mumbled. “Thank you.”

One night. He had no money, a huge debt to pay, and only one more night with somewhere to sleep. His head hung low and his spirit even lower as he opened the door and left.

Once back in his room, he shut the door behind him and leaned against it. Tears pricked his eyes, but he blinked them away. He would not cry. He needed to focus.

Blue flew in from the bedroom, alighting on the back of the sofa a few feet away. She trilled a few times and flapped her wings. He'd been neglecting her again.

“Sorry, girl.”

Pulling himself upright, he sniffed, swiped a hand over his face, and walked over to the sofa. Blue landed on his shoulder and took up her usual place in the crook of his neck. He reached up and gently stroked her head with one finger, and she rewarded him by humming.

The sound soothed his frayed edges and settled his thoughts. For the first time in two days, he allowed himself to sink into the feeling, soaking up the serenity she offered.

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and began to think through the situation logically. Every problem had a solution; he just had to find it.



Half an hour later, he was dressed and ready to go with a solid plan to follow. First on his list was to find William. He would help. If nothing else, he'd be able to shed some light on the fuzzy parts of their time in the gambling den. Jake's head had ceased its attempt to self-combust, but it still refused to give up large portions of what had happened.

He took the stairs at a steady pace, hefting a tube full of his mechanical designs over one shoulder and watching out for disapproving looks from anyone who might have witnessed his previous descent. When he reached the bottom, he cleared his throat and knocked on the office door.

A man Jake hadn't seen before opened it. "Can I help you, sir?"

"Um, well, I was hoping to speak to Stuart."

The man looked at his fob watch. "I'm afraid Stuart is on his break. May I be of assistance?"

"Oh." Jake hadn't planned for that. "Um, yes. Are there any messages for me? Jake Amarel, room five seventeen."

The man stepped out of the office and walked over to the cubby holes behind the counter. He glanced in one and said, "Nothing today, sir."

"Are you sure?" Jake asked. "Maybe something's been misplaced."

With a pinched expression, the man made a show of looking through all the shelves and underneath the front desk. "No messages for you, sir. Will there be anything else?"

"No. Thank you."

Jake gave the man a distracted smile and left. What now? He had no idea where William lived. It had never come up. He walked out of the main entrance, the clacking automatons opening the door for him. His eyes clung to them as they closed it behind him.

I've barely thought about how they work since I arrived. He'd spent his life tinkering with things, trying to figure out the mechanics involved. It had been his passion. His dream to come to the city and work with the best inventors on the coast had kept him up at night, spurred by his need to prove himself worthy. And now look at me.

Thrusting the melancholy aside before it caught him in its sticky web, he readjusted the document tube on his shoulder

and looked up and down the street. Where should he start?

A high-pitched voice spoke behind him. “Got any jobs for me today, Mister?” Jimmy jumped up from the curb and scurried over to him. “I been waiting here for ya, just in case.”

Jake considered the scruffy little boy. “I don’t suppose you saw my friend when he came to meet me yesterday? His name’s William... That’s odd. I don’t remember his surname.”

Jimmy scrunched his face and stared to the side. After a moment, his eyes widened. “The fella what wears them fancy gold goggles on ’is hat?” He nodded. “Yeah. I seen ’im before. Lots a times.”

Hope surged. “Have you ever heard him say anything about where he lives?”

His thin shoulders drooping, Jimmy’s smile deflated. “No.”

“Well, never mind. It was a long shot, anyway.”

Jake started to walk away, but Jimmy’s voice stopped him. “But I can find out.” Jake turned back around. “Yeah. I can ask some a the others on the street for ya. Not much gets past all a us.”

“That’s great, thank you.” He frowned. “I can’t pay you anything today, though.”

Jimmy waved him off. “That’s okay, Mister. What ya give me yesterday’ll see me through a week.” He gave Jake a grin and set off at a run, weaving through the traffic to the other side of the road.

With one last glance in both directions, Jake walked towards the university. He’d need to sell every one of his designs to pay back the blood debt.



The porter sat at his post just inside the arch of the university precinct's gatehouse. Jake took a moment to admire the carved stone façade—just as impressive as the first time he'd seen it—then walked up to the window and said, "I'm here to see Professor Swire."

"Is he expecting you?" The porter looked up from a leather-bound book and raised his brows.

Jake scratched the back of his neck. "Um, no. But it's important. I was here the other day, remember?"

The book closed with a snap, and the porter let out a breath halfway between a chuckle and a huff. "Hundreds of people come through these gates every day, young man. I can't be expected to remember them all. Besides, it doesn't matter whether I do or not." He tapped a sign nailed to the window frame. "All visitors have to be approved and signed in. Now, who'd you say you're here to see?"

"Professor Swire," Jake said.

"Professor Swire, huh? Let me see..." The porter pulled a ledger from the narrow shelf on the wall behind him and used a thin ribbon bookmark to find the correct page.

He'd just started scanning down it when a whistler turned off the street and clattered over the cobbles towards them. Jake stepped out of the way as the driver pulled up beside the porter's station and an elderly man stuck his head around the carriage's curtain.

"Laybridge asked to see me," he said. "I'll go straight round, if you'll sign me in."

“Of course, sir.” The porter gave a small nod and waved the driver on.

With a great puff of smoke that caught under the gatehouse tunnel, making Jake cough, the whistler set off again. It trundled around the grass quadrangle in the centre of the precinct, passed the statue of the four founders, and disappeared through another archway on the far side.

Jake stared after it—he’d give anything to meet Laybridge. His gaze drifted to the tower rising up beside the arch at the rear of the lawn. It stretched into the sky like a beacon to all seekers of knowledge, the top lost in the clouds. Could his hero be inside at that very moment, preparing to unveil his latest invention or deliver a world-shattering lecture?

A wave of sadness engulfed Jake. He’d never be a student now, never climb that tower and see the city spread out before him, never have his name carved into a plaque inside as a reward for outstanding achievement.

His eyes fell to the founders’ statue. According to legend, they’d captained ships that sailed the stars before settling the planet. Imagine that! He’d certainly never live up to their legacy now either.

Swiping a hand over his face, he returned his attention to the porter, who was still writing something in the main logbook.

“I’ll be with you in... just a tic...” he said before closing the book. “Right. Where were we?”

“Professor Swire?”

“Ah, yes.” The porter started again at the top of the first ledger’s list, found the entry he was looking for near the bottom, and dragged his finger across to a notation scrawled

on the opposite side. “He’s not taking visitors today. Something about a big department meeting. Do you want to leave a message?”

Jake blinked. It had never occurred to him that the professor would be too busy to see him. “Oh, um, never mind then. I mean, no. Thank you.”

“Right you are.” The porter slid the ledger back into its place on the shelf, made himself comfortable, and picked up his book, leaving Jake standing in the entrance, staring at the cobbles beneath his feet.

He drew in a deep breath and made his way back out to the street. He still had most of his designs, and he could come back and get the others later if the rest sold well. Hoisting his document tube higher onto his shoulder, he glanced up and down the street and set off in what he hoped was the craftsmen’s district.



After half an hour of wrong turns and backtracking, he found what he was looking for. He strolled down a row of shopfronts displaying an astonishing array of machines and gadgets, some as simple as irium lighters, others more complex, such as a steam-powered, automatic crossbows. Personal keys that changed shape to fit different locks had pride of place in one window, and he stopped for a while to admire their design.

Despite the circumstances, his heart leapt at the chance to see so many inventions in one place, and he paused at each new wonder. The items for sale sent his brain spinning in a million different directions, and he would have given anything

to be able to find somewhere quiet to sit and get all his new ideas down on paper.

Unfortunately, he had a mission to complete. He looked back along the lane and studied the signs with a more critical eye. Which would be the best place to sell his designs?

He settled on the Marvellous Mechanical Emporium, which had a selection of kitchen tools, including steam-powered mixers and a clockwork can opener, in one of its three large window displays. His automated vegetable chopper should fit in there, and they might be interested in his farming equipment as well.

Checking his reflection in a nearby window, he smoothed down his waistcoat and adjusted his fob watch chain. “You can do this. Take a couple of deep breaths, stand up tall, and look confident.”

With a determined nod, he opened the door, setting a bell jangling overhead, and walked inside. He removed his hat and smoothed his hair down as he peered around.

The interior of the shop was less cluttered than he’d been expecting. He’d imagined machines of all shapes and sizes standing around the room and a counter with design papers strewn across the surface.

Instead, a wall of glass-fronted cabinets held smaller items at one side while a long, clear counter ran across the other with multiple ceiling-high sets of shelves behind it and a cash register at one end. A wrought-iron circular staircase wound up to the next level, and a curtained doorway at the back of the neat, square space presumably led to where the larger items were stored.

A man appeared from behind the curtain, removing a thick, leather apron as he entered the shop floor. A burning smell wafted in with him, causing Jake's nose to twitch.

“What can I do for you today?” the man said, peering out from a pair of wire-rimmed spectacles.

Jake stepped forwards and held out his hand. “Good morning. I'm Jake Amarel, and I was hoping you'd be interested in looking at some of my designs.”

“Stephen Jorret,” the man said, shaking it. “I suppose I can take a look. Over here.”

He walked across to the end of the counter, pressed a button, and waited. A soft hiss that was quickly joined by a rattle came from the other side, and a portion of the counter slowly juddered up. Mr Jorret ducked underneath, and the section lowered behind him.

With a glance at Jake, he said, “Installed that myself last month. It's not as fast as I'd like, but it impresses the customers.” He waved Jake forward. “Come on, then, son. I haven't got all day.”

“Yes. Of course.” Jake pulled a sheaf of papers from the tube slung over his shoulder and spread them out on the counter's smooth marble surface.

Mr Jorret leaned over until his face was no more than a foot above the drawings and studied each one carefully. He let out an occasional “hmm” and traced his finger over a few of the more complex designs, tapping the places where Jake had rubbed things out and started again. Otherwise, he was silent.

Jake clenched his hands together to stop himself from fidgeting. The tension of waiting pulled his neck and shoulders

into solid knots, but he stood as patiently as he could while Mr Jorret pored over his work.

“Where are you from?” Mr Jorret said without looking up.

“The interior. Just outside Farraton.” Why did that matter so much to people in the city?

“And have you had formal training? Studied anywhere?”

Jake’s face heated. “No, sir. But the professor I showed those to at Timion-Welles was impressed.”

“Hmm.” Mr Jorret glanced up, continued perusing the papers for a moment longer, then straightened and gathered them into a pile.

“I agree. You’ve got some solid designs here.”

Jake barely refrained from whooping out loud. “Then you’re interested in them?”

Holding up a hand, Mr Jorret said, “I’m not saying that. Just that you have a talent for design.” He removed his glasses and polished them on a handkerchief he produced from his pocket. “The problem is that you use mostly clockwork components, some steam. But the real money right now is in crystals. Anything powered by adymine is selling faster than we can crank it out.”

Jake slumped against the counter. “Then what do I do?”

“Get some training. Try again in a year or two...”

A year or two? Jake didn’t have that long. He needed money now. If he didn’t pay off the debt, he’d be in real trouble.

“...take you on myself, but I’ll have to finish the commission I’m working on first. No time to spend with you

until after that. What do you say?”

Jake jerked back to the present. “Oh, um...” A day earlier, even that morning before he’d discovered his money had been taken, he would have jumped on the chance to apprentice under a talented inventor like Mr Jorret. It was exactly what he’d dreamed of for so long. But now... now he needed more. So much more.

“The pay’s appalling, I know, but it comes with a room over the shop and two solid meals a day.”

“Thank you, but I—”

The bell over the door jangled, and Jake spun to see who had come in. A behemoth of a man stood just inside the doorway. He removed a bowler hat from his head and scrubbed a hand over his bald scalp. Was that a tattoo peeking out from the collar of his shirt? Deep-set, dark eyes roamed the store and landed on Jake. They flicked up and down him and moved on.

Jake got the impression he’d been sized up as a threat and found wanting. That was fine by him. The man’s muscles strained his jacket, and lethal-looking weapons bulged from several pockets about his person.

A shudder ran down Jake’s spine. He’d hate to find out what happened when this man didn’t like what he saw.

“You’re busy,” rumbled from the man’s mouth. “I’ll come back later.”

“No, no. I was just leaving,” Jake blurted. The man’s eyes swivelled back to his, boring into the back of his skull. Jake turned away. “Thank you so much for the offer, Mr Jorret, but I need to find a buyer for my designs.”

Mr Jorret didn't take his gaze from the huge man, so Jake grabbed his things and shoved them into the document tube. He skirted the room, searching for a way past the man without having to get within striking distance, and the man obliged by walking farther into the shop.

"Is it ready yet? I might have a job coming up where it'll be useful."

"I'm working as fast as I can, but these things take time. It's a complicated..."

Jake left them to their discussion, breathing deeply as he shut the door behind him with a jolly tinkling and a quiet click. He huffed out a laugh, his fear of the man evaporating in the morning sunlight.

What a ridiculous reaction. Anyone would think he'd never seen a large man before, and there'd been plenty on the estate. *None like that, though.* He shook off the thought and squared his shoulders, ready to go into the next shop. Surely someone would want his inventions.

The second place Jake tried proved to be even more disastrous than the first. It began with him mistaking the proprietress for a mere server and descended into the depths of humiliation from there. Less than ten minutes later, he scraped his pride from the floor, along with his designs, and stuffed them back into their worthless containers on his way out.

The third shop seemed a far better prospect until the man behind the counter offered to buy Jake's entire collection for five guineas, which was the extent of their worth according to him. Jake accepted the offer—he had little choice at that point—but with the sale, his hopes of repaying the debt with the proceeds of his inventions scattered in the wind.

He left the shop, his cache of papers and his hopes for survival equally empty.

The five guineas tucked safely inside the inner pocket of his waistcoat, he set off down the street. The windows no longer held the appeal they had earlier, only serving as a reminder of all he'd lost since the previous night.

He pulled his hat down lower over his eyes, taking the trend for jaunty angles to an extreme. *Hah. Not that the latest fashion means much anymore.* How stupid he'd been, spending so much on new clothes and must-have accessories.

What now? He couldn't give up. That would be akin to melting into a pool of blubber on the floor. *Stick to the plan.* If he could find one of his friends, he'd be able to ask for a loan, much as he loathed the idea. With the gaming den taken care of, he could look for respectable work and repay the new debt without an axe—or knife—hanging over his head.

He made his way back to the hotel. Hopefully, there'd be a message from William waiting for him.

As he turned the last corner, a young voice called out, "Hey, Mister. I found out where yer friend lives. Want me to take ya there?"

Jimmy. Thank the founders for the boy. That was the best news Jake had heard all day.

Chapter 15

Jake

“Are you sure this is the right address?” Jake asked.
Jimmy nodded, his hat falling down as usual.
“Sure I am. Old Blind Joe told me hisself.”

Jake cast a dubious glance around his surroundings. Jimmy had brought him to an area of the city he'd never entered before. Narrow, twisting lanes, exposed pipework running along the outside of buildings, and barefooted children playing with rocks in the dirt weren't what he would have expected in Berlath.

Then again, after what he'd experienced in the previous twenty-four hours, he was beginning to realise the city wasn't all top hats and goggles, whistlers, and flame bug streetlights. The outlying districts had been almost as poor as the structures around him.

A burst of steam shot out from the wall just in front of him, and he ducked. The broken pipe joint whistled and clanged in its bracket as burning moisture filled the air. It lasted a few seconds and then stopped abruptly, the cloud evaporating as quickly as it had formed.

With one eye on the joint, he rushed past, covering his face with his arm. Nothing happened, so he lowered his hand,

straightened his jacket, and walked normally again.

He couldn't picture William living here. His friend was one of the rich young men about town, knew all the most fashionable spots and the most influential people. William—fastidiously dressed, flashy William—wouldn't be caught even visiting a neighbourhood where refuse overflowed bins on street corners and occasional cries of pain caused no more than a passing glance from the other residents. He certainly wouldn't be *living* in one.

It couldn't be right. But Jimmy had insisted this was the place. So Jake kept going, waiting for someone to jump out and laugh at the jest they'd played on him or tell him there'd been a huge mistake. Maybe William himself was behind it as some sort of bizarre initiation into the group. Jake could only hope that was the case.

He picked his way along a small path between two apartment buildings and stared up at a rickety set of exterior steps. "Up here?" he asked, pointing to the metal treads.

"Yup." Jimmy shrugged his thin shoulders. "Old Blind Joe said to go in the back way, just in case."

"Just in case what?"

"He din't say. But ya don't argue with Old Blind Joe. He knows everything."

Jimmy's eyes were huge pale moons in his dirty face, and Jake didn't have the heart, or energy at this point, to disagree. He started to climb.

He was nearly at the fourth-floor door when a little girl came hurtling through it and down the steps. Tears streaked her grubby cheeks, but she didn't make a sound as she pushed past them and continued her descent.

Something about her face triggered Jake's memory, and he stared after her.

A bang resounded above them, and a muffled voice yelled, "Gertie! Where'd you get to, girl?"

She looked back over her shoulder, her terrified eyes flashing in the dim light brave enough to creep into the alley. They were the bright green of keijan crystal.

He knew those eyes, would never forget them. They were the eyes of a little thief. "Hey," he shouted. "Come back here."

Her mouth formed a perfect circle, and she was off running again—also something he'd seen before.

Jake was torn between going after her and finding his friend as quickly as possible so he could get back to civilisation and safety. He banged his fist on the thin metal railing, the sharp pain reverberating up his arm. "That's the second time she's got away from me."

Still, he had more important things to worry about. He let her go, swinging his attention back to the door and whomever she might be running from this time. No one charged out, so he slowly reached forwards and pulled it open.

A single lantern flickered inside, lighting a small island of dingy hallway. A few doors dotted the sides at regular intervals. Jimmy led the way to the second on the left and paused outside.

"Yer friend lives 'ere." He jerked his thumb at the door. "I can wait, if ya want me to."

Jake's eyes went to the 4D painted on the central panel, then to Jimmy, and then to the exit and back again. "No, that's all right. I'll be fine on my own."

“If yer sure.” Jimmy shrugged one shoulder and scampered back the way they’d come, barely opening the door before sliding through.

Alone on the landing, Jake cleared his throat and knocked. *Please let him be here*— something crawled along the base of the wall—*I think*.

“Let yerself in. It’s open,” a voice called from the other side.

Jake stared at the peeling woodwork. That wasn’t exactly how he’d planned for things to go. He reached out, turned the knob, and pushed, mentally preparing for what he might face on the other side.

A short inner hallway, lit by a candelabrum on a small, half-circle table, led to a closed door ahead and an open archway to the right. Jake stepped inside and, seeing no sign of life, kept walking to the arch, his heart beating loudly in his ears.

He crossed the threshold into another world. Floor to ceiling bookcases lined the wall directly across from the entrance, full of leather-bound volumes. A solid wooden desk, polished to a high sheen, sat at one side, and a thick rug covered most of the floor. Irium lanterns set in mirrored nooks cast a soft glow that warmed the space.

In the middle of it all, before a crackling open fire, William lounged in a huge, wing-backed armchair. One leg dangled over the armrest, his foot bouncing to a rhythm only he could hear. His waistcoat hung open over a loose-necked shirt that had been rolled up to the elbows, and a day’s worth of stubble shadowed his jaw.

He was reading.

It was the most dishevelled Jake had ever seen his well-put-together friend. He stood in the entrance, his mouth agape, his prepared speech fled.

“You live here?” The question jumped out of Jake’s mouth, the first words to slink back into his head.

William’s head jerked up. He did a double-take and sat upright, his foot sliding to the floor with a dull thump. His eyes flicked past Jake for a second before settling on him. “What are you doing here, old boy?”

He smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes.

“I’m so glad I found you, Will. I need your help.” Jake took another step into the room. “I was robbed last night. Can you believe that? At the hotel. All my money, gone. I...” Something about the way William was staring at him made him stop. He looked down, shuffled his feet. Quieter, he said, “I need to borrow some money to pay off the blood debt. I can pay you back. All of it, I swear. I just—”

“I’m afraid I can’t help you, Jake.”

“But. Why not?” He looked around the room again and back at William. “I don’t understand. What’s going on?”

William closed his book with a snap and stood. He stared at Jake for a long beat, then flung his arms up and sighed.

“It was a scam, all right?”

Jake’s chest constricted. His legs wobbled, and his eyes burned. “A scam?”

His voice came out as a mere whisper in the heavy silence.

The cogs in his brain ground into motion. Who else but a scammer would live in a place like this and have such a luxurious lifestyle? William was the one who’d ordered all the

Green, had encouraged Jake to gamble that first night. Had disappeared when he lost all his money.

Worse than that, he'd known exactly where Jake was staying, had even taken him there when he first arrived.

Jake stared at him, horror blurring his vision. How could he have been so stupid? Of course they wouldn't have actually liked an inland fool like him. He never measured up anywhere.

“You set me up.”

William moved forwards, and Jake staggered back a pace, holding an arm out in front of him.

“We only set out to take yer cash. When I found out ya weren't rich—” William ran his hands over his close-cropped, tight-knit curls, linking his fingers across the back of his head. Then he blew out a breath and dropped his arms, muttering, “What's it matter now?”

He gave Jake a pitying look. “It looks like the boss has other plans in mind for you.”

Jake shook the fog of betrayal from his head. “What does that mean?”

“It means ya need to get out of 'ere.”

Jake stared blankly.

“Look, I work for the Syndicate—”

“The what? Who are they?”

“Who are they? They practically *own* this city. Got people everywhere.” William glanced at Jake, who circled a hand for him to continue, then rolled his eyes. “The desk clerk at the Belmont? Works for them. He overcharged you for that room and passed the difference to the Syndicate.

“The dealer at the gaming den. Flames, everyone at the gaming den, including some of the patrons, are on the payroll. I’ve heard they even have a couple people high up in the government, though no one outside the top brass knows who they are.

“Don’tcha see? You never had a chance. And if the boss’s marked you for a blood oath, there’s no way out.”

He scrubbed a hand over his face, the new bristles along his jaw rasping, and walked over to the sideboard. Amber liquid sloshed over the side of the glass as he poured it, but he didn’t wipe it up, just knocked it back and poured again. He swirled the glass, staring into its depths, his lips pursed.

“If they find out I’ve seen you and not turned you in... But what the flames.” He looked up and held Jake’s gaze. “I like you. So run.”

Swigging his second shot, he tossed the empty tumbler onto the tray and turned his back. Jake took that as his cue to leave and did so, shutting the front door with a quiet snick behind him.

He shoved blindly through the exit and clattered down the metal steps. A single thought reverberated through his head, over and over. It was all a scam.

When he reached the bottom, he turned to the wall and retched. One hand pressed against the rough brickwork, the other resting on his knee, he closed his eyes and blocked out the noise around him, the acidic tang of bile, the sense of someone watching him.

His mind raced, circling around the events of the last few days, latching onto nothing. He was completely and utterly alone. And he was scared. So scared.

He twisted to lean against the side of the building, sliding to the ground and hiding his face in his arms atop his knees. The gold-topped cane fell from his fingers, his top hat tumbling from his head. Who cared? They were useless. Pathetic attempts to fit in with people who had been laughing at him the entire time.

The tears came then—uncontrollable, wrenching sobs that rose from his very core. He huddled tighter into a ball, allowing the anguish pouring out of him to soak through the material of his trouser legs. He owed a blood debt, and he had no way of paying it off.

He groaned. “What am I going to do?”

An image of his father and brother floated before him, and he scrunched his eyes tighter, banishing it. He couldn’t even think of letting them see him like this. Dragging them into the mess he’d created wasn’t an option. Besides, he’d already taken his inheritance; he had no right to any more.

A burning pit of shame opened in his gut. He’d been so sure of himself, so determined he knew how the world worked, better than a pair of recluses content to live in the last century. They’d warned him time and again of the perils of the city, but he’d walked straight into the worst of them all, so focused on his machines and finding fame.

“What’cha doing down there, son?”

Jake jerked his head up, his vision bleary. He sniffed, wiped the back of his hand under his nose, and then his fingers over his eyes.

With a few blinks, an old man came into focus, backlit by the lantern hanging at the end of the alley. He was standing

over Jake, his back bent with age, white hair sticking out from under a flat cap.

Scrambling to his feet, Jake picked up his hat and cane and brushed off his clothes. “I... um, I... Sorry. I’m fine. Thank you.”

The old man’s eyebrows shot up his forehead. “If ya say so. Best not hang around ’ere, though, fine young gent like you. Could find yesself in trouble.”

A short laugh escaped Jake as he edged along the wall, keeping the man in sight. “Good to know.” He stuffed his hat back on his head and nodded. “I’ll be on my way, then.”

He strode out onto the road, picking a direction at random.

No destination in mind, he wandered aimlessly through the warren of tenements, paying scant attention to where he was going or which way he turned. The physical exercise burned off his excess emotion, and as his heart pumped faster with the effort, his brain calmed to rational thought.

Putting aside the implications of William’s confession, he worked through the salient facts. He owed this Syndicate boss, whoever he was, a large sum of money, and he had nothing left to give him. His so-called friends wouldn’t help, and he couldn’t—wouldn’t—go to his father.

He kept walking, chewing over the problem while his feet ate up the pavement. If he could sell the things he’d bought, or better yet, return them, he might be able to raise enough funds to buy himself some time. With any luck, the boss would be satisfied with monthly payments for the rest. Getting his money back, however slowly, had to be better than having someone beaten bloody.

The whole “blood debt” thing was probably just a scare tactic to get people to pay up. Jake snorted. *But it works.*

He’d need to search for a job, preferably something well-paid. But where? The paper would have a section advertising all the positions available. He’d go through the listings when he got back to the hotel. Settled on a course of action, he glanced around.

The road he was following was little more than an alley, twisting and turning between ugly block buildings. Something banged off to his left, and he swung his gaze towards the sound.

A woman leaned out of an upper storey window, emptying a bowl into the gutter below. The thin wrap she wore gaped in the middle and revealed an expanse of pale flesh. She straightened, pulled the edges together, and glared at him.

“What’choo looking at?” she snarled.

He ripped his eyes away from her and fixed them on the ground in front of him. Not even daring to respond, he hastened his pace until he turned the bend and was out of view.

For the next few minutes, he focused on the toes of his shoes taking turns in the lead. His troubles receded to the back of his mind, the rhythmic slap of leather on tar-covered gravel consuming the entirety of his attention.

Out of nowhere, another pair of feet, wearing tall, black boots with several brass buckles up the front, strode into his field of vision. The slight body that accompanied them ploughed into his with an “oomph.”

He reached out a hand to steady them both and looked up.

“Watch where you’re going,” the lovely young woman said, disengaging her arm from his light grip with a rough jerk.

“I’m so sorry. Are you all right?”

She backed away from him, wincing, and brushed herself off. “No thanks to you.”

With that, she sidestepped him and walked on, favouring one leg. Her hair, caught up in a loose pile at the back of her head, bounced along behind her, several escaped ringlets cascading down her back. They shone copper in the sunlight, reminding him of... someone.

When she opened a door on the next block and entered the building, he looked up at the sign hanging above the entrance. The Captain’s Rest.

Wait, I know that name. He scanned his surroundings. He was standing at a tee junction, the narrow lane he’d been following spilling onto a wider, vaguely familiar thoroughfare.

Had he walked so far? Or was William’s place so close? No wonder he knew the tavern’s reputation, he was probably a regular. Jake turned right and followed the woman inside. It was as good a place as any to take stock and figure out his next move.

Chapter 16

Jake

There weren't as many people inside in the middle of the day. Jake stood in the entrance and let his eyes adjust, peering around at the décor now fully visible.

The walls had been painted to look like the view from the deck of an airship. A small village nestled amongst rolling hills beneath the Dekali mountains directly across from him, while endless ocean stretched to a sun-kissed horizon beside the door.

Wooden railings similar to those he'd seen on the real airship stood waist high around the edge of the room, and a taller version stretched across the centre from front to back between two short sets of steps leading down into the main seating area on the left. The wall at that side mimicked the rest of a long deck with a brazier in the fireplace.

To the right, the woman disappeared through a door behind the long bar fashioned as the front of a cabin. She worked here? Fragments of his first visit slotted together into a memory of her serving him. Right, the pretty barmaid.

Jake walked over to the nearest stool and sat down. He glanced up and flinched. A pair of yellow eyes glowed above two rows of razor-sharp teeth leaping out at him. He coughed,

tapping his chest with his fist, and peered around to make sure no one had seen his reaction.

Several framed scenes hung along the wall, the nearest of which depicted a captain single-handedly fighting off a hellhound, its jaws open and ready to attack. He rose to get a better look at the others. The next was of a cave filled with ten-foot-tall iridium crystals worth a fortune in any market, and a third showed a tentacled sea creature rising from the deep.

He sat back down, chuckling. Whoever owned the place certainly wanted to impress the customers.

The barmaid walked back through the doorway carrying a tray full of empty glasses, her limp barely noticeable. She'd removed her coat and was wearing the same shirt and corset he remembered from last time. Her legs were covered in a ruffled skirt, hitched up at the side to show a good amount of white petticoat underneath.

She looked his way and pursed her lips. After depositing the tray on a counter under the bar, she picked up a rag and began to dry the glasses one by one, angled away from him. Her silence, combined with her proximity, made his skin prickle.

“Um, can I sit here?” He clamped his jaw shut. *Smooth, Jake. Really smooth.*

“Fran’ll be out in a minute.”

Her tone could have been described as terse at best. What was her problem with him?

She turned and plastered on a patently fake smile. “I don’t have a problem with you.” Had he said that out loud? “No more than any other entitled, presumptuous topper in the city.”

He reared back. “I’m not entitled. Or presumptuous.”

She flung down the rag and glared at him through narrowed eyes. Suddenly adopting a floppy-armed posture, she said, “*Can you undo your corset so I can get a better look?*”

Jake winced. Was that how he’d sounded? From the expression she was currently aiming in his direction like a lethal weapon, he assumed it was. A blush crept up his neck.

“Sorry,” he said, not quite able to meet her eyes. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

There was no reply, so he peeked up at her. She’d gone back to wiping down the glasses. She paused to press a palm into her hip, her face pinching briefly. He frowned. Had he hurt her when they collided outside? She caught him staring and jerked her hand back to her work, standing straighter. Something else then?

Another barmaid walked towards him, but he shook his head with a brief smile and raised hand and returned his attention to the redhead.

“Look, can we start again? I’m Jake. Jake Amarel.”

She put one glass down and picked up another, eyeing him sideways. After a few seconds, she huffed and walked over to stand in front of him. “Clarissa.”

His shoulders relaxed. He held out his hand to shake, but she raised one brow at it, her fingers paused inside the glass mid wipe.

“Right. Sorry.” Clearing his throat, he pulled his hand back and tucked it under the other.

The door banged open, saving him from having to think of something else to say, and a group of young men spilled in. Dressed in smart day jackets and top hats, they pushed and

shoved each other, laughing and joking as they approached the bar.

Clarissa tossed her cloth under the counter and walked over to where one of the men leaned across it.

“I say,” he said, his eyes wandering over her, “you’re a fine-looking first mate. You can join my crew anytime you want to get out of here.” He slapped one of the others, pointed at Clarissa, and whistled.

She used the same smile on him that she’d used on Jake earlier, though the young man didn’t seem to realise it was fake. “What can I get you to drink?”

“Aside from yourself?” He laughed. “A round of ale, I think. Eh, men? What say we get this voyage off to a good start?”

“Aye, aye, Captain,” another answered. He grabbed the decorative wheel attached to the rail overlooking the seated area and spun it around, then pretended to look out over the side.

Clarissa quietly poured their drinks, lining them up on the bar. The first young man and one of his friends watched her work, their eyes rarely straying to their ale. The one not masquerading as an airship captain reached out to touch her as she neared him with the last pint, but she neatly sidestepped his groping hand and pushed the drink into it without even letting their fingers brush.

Halfway off his seat, Jake relaxed back into it. *She’s good at this, handles herself well.* The notion shouldn’t have been a surprise, but he studied her more closely, nevertheless.

She took the guinea the “captain” handed to her and placed his change on the bar next to his drink. Never outright denying

him, she refused to be drawn into his flirtation, her tone pleasant even as she redirected each comment he made.

After a minute or two, the group drifted over to the fake wheel, taking turns to steer and shouting out random sightings such as, “There’s Felicity Drewer and Phillip Kent out on the promenade. Old Seagreen will be jealous,” and, “Look, who’s that kissing Francis? I bet it’s that girl from the theatre. Oooh!”

Their laughter filled the tavern at that statement, and Clarissa called over to them, “If you gents want to spot any more of the wildlife, you’ll have to be quiet so you don’t scare them away.”

They settled down a little, shushing each other and huddling together, but soon returned to hollering and slapping each other on the back as they drank their ale.

Jake leaned one arm on the bar and watched them. They might have been rowdy, but they were clearly a close-knit group. His chest ached, a low, dull burn for the friends he no longer had. He turned away and stared down at the polished wood of the bar top. He’d never been more alone in his life.

A half pint slid between his hands, and Jake looked up. Clarissa stood before him, a reluctant smile tugging the corners of her mouth. She tilted her head at the young men. “They’ll never know.”

Jake glanced at them and returned his gaze to the glass. “I thought I’d have lots of friends when I came to the city.”

“Didn’t we all.”

His head shot up. “What?”

Sadness flashed across her face and was gone. She pushed off from the bar and snatched up the cloth again. “Nothing.”

Pointing at the men, she scrunched her face in disgust. “You mean friends like those? Like the ones you came in with the other night?”

“Them?” Jake hmphed and stared into his ale. “They got me drunk and took me to a gaming den. Stole all my money.” His brow furrowed. He still wasn’t clear on all the details.

Clarissa snorted. “They did more than that.”

“What do you mean?”

“The Green?” She widened her eyes as if he was supposed to know what she was talking about. He stared back blankly, and she rolled them. “You were telling everyone you’d had some the first time you came in here.”

“So what? I knew it was strong after the first sip.”

She dropped her cloth and gaped at him. “Green isn’t a drink. It’s a drug. They make it from powdered keijan crystals.” The blood drained from his face, and she softened her tone. “It lowers your inhibitions, makes you relaxed, suggestible. The more you have, the more confident you feel—invisible with enough of it in your system.”

“They *drugged* me? On purpose?” His stomach flipped.

She twisted her lips to the side and shrugged. “Probably cheated at whatever game you played too.”

Jake pressed his fingers into his forehead and rubbed. He ran through what he remembered of the game, but he wouldn’t know what to look for. Had one of the other players been in on the scam as well? He took a swig of his ale, his mind lost in his problems.

At some point, Clarissa must have wandered away, for when he next looked up, she was at the other end of the bar

serving an elderly man. She filled his drink, bestowing on him a smile that was much more genuine than the one she'd given either Jake or the young men.

The old man held out his hand, and she plucked the money up from his palm and returned to the cash register near Jake. When she'd finished ringing up the sale, Jake beckoned her nearer.

“What do you know about blood debts?” he asked in an undertone.

“You're a *blooder*?” She pulled back, her mouth slack and the whites of her eyes showing, and darted her gaze around the bar.

His face scrunched in confusion. “What's a blooder?”

“Someone stupid enough to swear a blood oath to the Syndicate.”

He winced.

Leaning in again, she whispered harshly, “How much trouble are you in?”

“That's what I'm trying to figure out. I don't remember much about last night, and I've never heard of a blood debt before. Please.” He reached towards her. “Just tell me what you know.”

“They're dangerous, that's what. And so are the people who deal in them. If you've got yourself mixed up with them...” She bit her lip and lowered her voice even more. “People who owe the Syndicate are sent either to the crystal mines or the fighting pits. Dig away in a black hole for years on end, dust slowly clogging your lungs, constantly afraid of a cave-in; or face one of the Syndicate Strongmen in a fight with no rules, and hopefully no weapons. Neither option is good. Of

course, there are those that run, but I wouldn't recommend trying that."

He swallowed, his mouth dry. "Why not? What happens to them?"

"The Syndicate have enforcers who collect their debts, and if anyone tries to run or hide, they send a hunter after them. They say most end up in the mines, beaten and with even bigger debts to pay off, but every so often, someone who gives them too much trouble is found dead in the outer districts, or never seen again."

Jake sat back. "Aren't those just rumours, though, spread about to scare people? Surely none of it's real."

"I don't know, and I wouldn't want to find out. If you owe them, you'd better pay up. Fast."

He traced a drip down the side of his glass with his finger. "What if I can't?"

She didn't respond, so he peered up at her. Her face had paled enough for freckles he hadn't noticed before to stand out across the bridge of her nose. She glanced about them as if the Syndicate were about to break down the door and drag *her* away. Jake's gut clenched.

"Should I go to the authorities?" he said. "I mean, slavery's not legal this side of the mountains, is it? And murder..."

"But gambling is. And technically, you bet yourself, so all they're doing is collecting what you owe. Blood debts are horrible, but they're not illegal. Besides, no one goes against the Syndicate, not even the high council."

They lapsed into silence, Jake digesting her revelations. He took a sip of his ale, the new pieces of information slotting

into what he already knew. Unfortunately, the picture that emerged was a beast of a machine that might very well chew him up and spit him out.

A shudder ran across his skin, leaving a trail of raised flesh behind. He swigged more of the ale, then set it aside. *That's what got you into this mess in the first place.* What he needed was to find a way to pay his debt before they came after him.

He stood, and Clarissa looked up from drying the glasses.

"I'm going to get this sorted out," he said. "Somehow."

"Good luck with that." Her tone didn't suggest vast confidence in his ability to escape the Syndicate, but her eyes told him she sympathised.

"Thank you. For your help. And the drink."

He instinctively reached across the bar and gave her forearm a gentle squeeze. She pulled away as if his palm was a brand.

"Sorry," he said, holding his hands up.

She started to say something, but another voice spoke first.

"I say, is that chap bothering you?" The leader of the young men stood, the rest of his group swivelling in their seats, their eyes on Jake and Clarissa.

"Not at all." She smiled her fake smile. "He was just saying goodbye."

The young men gave him suspicious looks as if they were about to come over and protect her honour or something. He tried to appear as non-threatening as possible and turned back to her. Was she going to physically kick him out for touching her?

“Do you know where I can sell some things for a decent price?” he asked, the words merging together in his haste.

She huffed out a breath. “Miller and Brumbee’s, over on Saffling Street.”

“Thank you.”

She waved him off, already turning back to her other customers.

Jake stepped through the door to a world that felt a lot colder than it had before. Buttoning up his overcoat, he scanned the entire street, scrutinising each gap between buildings for evidence of someone watching him. He set off for the hotel at a brisk pace, jumping at every loud noise he heard. He kept imagining someone following behind him in the shadows, but whenever he looked back, there was no one there.

As he walked around a corner onto a busy street full of shops, he caught the scent of hot pastry. His stomach rumbled, and his mouth watered. He pulled out his fob watch. It was getting late, and despite the huge debt, he still had to eat.

He followed the delicious smell down the road. It emanated from a little bakery tucked between a shoe repair shop and a haberdashery. His forehead scrunched at the name above the door. Mrs Rafferty’s. He’d heard it somewhere before, but where? He searched his memory and let out a short laugh. Hadn’t the stagecoach driver raved about her pies?

The window offered trays of tiny cakes, cookies, and sweet breads, but a sign at one side advertised hot food also for sale. Jake smiled. *Time to see if he was right.* His stomach gurgled again, and he ducked inside.

In the close confines, the aroma was even more pungent, promising meaty goodness and a buttery crust. He pulled the loose change from his pocket and perused the options, one leg bouncing on the ball of his foot while he waited his turn to be served.

An interminable minute later, a kindly-faced woman behind the counter looked up at him. “What’ll it be, sir?”

“One of those meat pies, please.” He pointed at the selection of large pastries at the end of the display case.

She slid one from the rack onto a sheet of waxed paper and wrapped it with string. “Good choice, sir. My pies go quickly of an evening, they do.” She held it out. “That’ll be five bits, sir.”

Handing her the money, he took the package and, without thinking, raised it to his nose. He caught himself halfway and, giving the woman a nod, strode for the door.

He stepped out of the shop and into a black-clad body. A hand grabbed onto his shoulder, the fingers vise-like. At the same time, the end of a cane caught him in the gut, forcing an “oomph” from his lips.

Visions of being dragged away leaving nothing but a smashed pie on the ground swarmed his brain. He sucked in a breath, tensing for the next blow.

“Watch where you’re going,” a gruff voice said.

Jake prised his eyes open. A thick moustache and bushy eyebrows dominated his view, so he pulled back. The rest of a middle-aged, male face came into focus, glaring but not wickedly so.

Jake’s body relaxed. It wasn’t the Syndicate, just a grumpy old man. He breathed out. “You’re not after me.”

The creases in the man's brow deepened. "I should think not. Unless you jump out at me again."

He made a show of brushing down his coat and stomped on, muttering, "Youngsters these days. No respect for their elders..."

Jake watched him walk around the next corner, leaning heavily on his cane. *I can't believe you mistook him for a Syndicate enforcer.* He shook his head, setting off once more. *You need to calm down. Nobody's out to get you—yet.*

Even so, he picked up his pace, and his heart didn't slow until the Belmont's automatons swung the doors closed behind him.

Chapter 17

Jake

Jake shut the door of his suite behind him and flipped the lock. Dropping his hat and cane onto a shelf in the vestibule, he strolled into the sitting room and put the pie down on the sahl table. He looked around, taking a couple of deep breaths.

It was so quiet. The last few evenings had been a whirlwind of new experiences, a cacophony of sound and movement. Now it was just him, and the silence pressed in on him.

“Don’t think about it,” he told himself.

He walked into the bedroom and sat down on the edge of the mattress, pulling off his shoes. His cravat came next, fluttering onto the floor in a pile of soft silk. By the time he’d removed his jacket and undone the top button of his shirt, he felt almost like his old self.

Blue stuck her head out of a handkerchief on the nightstand, yawned, and pulled her shell free of her makeshift nest, flapping her wings as she emerged. She flew up to his shoulder and chattered at him, tucking her cool snout into the side of his neck.

“Argh, that’s cold.” He shooed her away, and she launched into the air, flitting around his head as he walked back into the sitting room.

Flopped onto the floor with his back leaning against the sofa, Blue beside him, he pulled the pie towards him and untied the string. The paper unfolded to reveal a golden-brown pastry the size of his hand.

He closed his eyes and lowered his head, taking a deep whiff. It spoke of home—simple, hearty fare that satisfied the deepest parts of his hunger. His mouth watered, and he picked it up, paper and all, ready to dig in.

His hand stopped mid-air. It was a large pie, and money was tight. Reluctantly, he replaced it on the table and fetched a pocketknife from his bag. He cut it in two, wiped the blade on the edge of the pastry, and picked up one half.

The filling oozed out, so he brought it straight up for his first taste. When he bit into it, the flaky crust crumbled just the right amount. Hot gravy hit his tongue, causing his mouth to pop open.

“Ha-ha-ha.” He blew out rapidly, then chewed a couple of times and swallowed. The heat passed down into his chest, and he scrambled for a glass of water from the side table. *Yup, just like home.*

He slid back to the floor, and Blue chattered at him from the sofa cushion.

“Yes, I know. See?” He picked at the edge of the pie, scooping a chunk of meat up with the pastry and licking his fingers before going back for another piece.

If William could see him now... Jake scrunched his nose. His so-called friends with their fancy restaurants and latest

trends would be horrified to see him sitting on the floor eating a cheap pie with his hands.

William's apartment flashed into Jake's mind, and he tilted his head to the side. *Maybe not, after all.* Not that it mattered at that point. He was on his own and should never have allowed himself to be swept up by them in the first place.

He ate another piece of the pie, hot and delicious.

This wasn't supposed to happen. Things were supposed to have been better in Berlath, easier. He was supposed to have been free to pursue his dreams and invent, learning from the masters and incorporating the latest advancements into his machines. He hadn't even picked up a pencil since he arrived.

He wolfed down the rest of his meal, groped for the notebook tucked into his inner pocket as always, and flipped to a blank page. His hand hovered over it as he waited for inspiration to strike. Nothing presented itself, so he doodled a few cogs and gears. Maybe he could tease something out.

A few minutes later, he threw the pencil onto the table. It clattered across the surface and came to rest against his pocketknife, a gift from Nathan for his fourteenth birthday.

With nothing else to distract him, thoughts of home circled like predators around a fresh carcass. Opening that gift; spending the next weeks with Nathan, learning how to carve figures from wood with it; giving his first attempt to his father, who placed it on the mantelpiece where it still stood to this day.

His chest twinged, and he rubbed the spot. *Just indigestion.*

He shook his head, the truth pounding against his ribs. Despite the rocks strewn throughout their relationship, he

missed his family. He looked at his fob watch—just past nine in the evening. His father would probably be sitting out on the veranda by now, smoking his pipe and rocking in his favourite chair. He'd have one of his farming books open on his knee, though Jake had never seen him actually reading one.

Nathan would either be with the men, laughing and fooling around over a game of snares, or up on the ridge, exercising his powers where no one would see him. He'd come back to the main house after those sessions with his face alight and an infectious energy about him.

Jake had followed him once when he'd been five or six and Nathan about fifteen. He'd watched his older brother lift huge boulders with nothing but his mind and an outstretched hand, awe rooting him to the spot.

He'd eventually edged out of view and tried to copy him, standing exactly the same way, raising his arm just so. All his attention focused on a fist-sized stone on the other side of the creek, he bore down and told it to fly into the air. When nothing happened, he stomped his feet and tried again. After the next attempt failed, he cried.

Nathan came running over the crest of the hill, sweeping him up in a hug and demanding to know what was wrong. On discovering the problem, he laughed and effortlessly spun the stone in the air, glancing across and adding a few others to circle it.

“No need to cry, Jakey. I can move it for you. See?”

Jake had pushed out of his brother's embrace. How could he have shown off like that, rubbing Jake's nose in the fact that he was so inferior? “I want to be able to do it myself.”

He'd realised then that their father would never be as proud of him as he was of his first son. How could he be? They had amazing powers, and he was just... normal.

What would they think of him now, worth less than nothing with a blood debt hanging over his head, a complete and utter failure? They could never find out. Even the thought was too much to bear.

His nose prickled, and his eyes burned. *I wish I'd never come here.*

He jumped up, but the pie turned to lead in his stomach. Shame pressed it even farther down, holding him immobile in its grip. He squeezed his eyes shut.

“You can't think like this. You need to get ready for tomorrow.”

Saying the words aloud eased the pain and unlocked his legs. He strode into the bedroom and gathered his things. Once he'd laid them all out across the sofa, he scrutinised the collection and began sorting them into piles.

Necessities, he stuffed into his bag—mostly things he'd brought with him from the estate. The new purchases he hadn't yet used, he placed on the sahl table, those he had, on the chair. Then he calculated how much he should be able to get for each item and added it all together.

The total came to just under a hundred guineas. He rubbed the back of his neck. If he'd not bought so many gifts for the others, the figure would have been a lot healthier. *Or it would have been stolen along with the rest.*

Too late to worry about that now. He returned to the floor, grabbing a cushion to prop behind his back as he surveyed the last of his worldly goods. The top hats and fancy goggles

mocked him from their place on the chair, a pair of gold, cog-shaped cuff links winking at his stupidity.

Nausea welled, and he tilted his head back, taking deep breaths. His eyes fell closed as he went over his sums, searching for anything he'd missed that would increase the value of what he had left.

He drifted into dreams of raising the money at the last minute, which twisted into a nightmare of the Syndicate coming for him before he was ready. They sent hunters after him and dragged him in front of his family to kill him. The last thing he saw before he died was their disappointed faces morphing into disgust at the blood spilled on their doorstep.



He woke with a start, his hand going to his neck, which was intact. His breath came in choppy gasps, and his heart raced. He checked the rest of his body. No blood marred his shirt, and no bones were broken.

A trail of drool ran down his cheek towards a damp patch on his shoulder, and he swiped it away with the back of his hand. When he sat up, his muscles protested, but not from a beating. His back had simply kinked from too long spent in the same awkward position against the sofa in his hotel suite. He was safe. For now.

He groaned. What time was it? He fumbled with his watch, bleary eyes squinting to make out where the hands were. Was that six in the morning?

He'd slept all night on the floor of the sitting room. Dragging himself to his feet, he stretched his neck and waited for his heart rate to return to normal. There was no point

moving to the bed, especially as the notion of going back to sleep sent a frisson of dread down his spine.

Blue swooped in from the other room. She landed on his shoulder and hummed in his ear. He closed his eyes and focused on the sound, letting the vibrations spread through his body and soothe his ragged nerves. The nightmare faded, and he gave her head a scratch as he walked over to the dresser.

A wash and a shave, and he'd wake up enough to face the day. He looked down at the razor sitting next to the ewer, glinting in the last of the lantern light, and his hand rose back to his neck. *Well, a wash, anyway.*

He dressed quickly in the cheapest of his new clothes and folded the rest of the items on the chair into a neat pile that he wrapped and tied with string. Two other packages contained the things he intended to return, which he placed on top of the first.

After a last check of the rooms, he ate one of the complimentary apricots from the bowl on the end table, tipped the rest of the fruit into his bag beside what remained of the pie, and downed the last of the fresh water. Then he picked up his belongings, tucking the parcels securely under his arm, and called for Blue.

Pausing on his way out, he turned and walked over to the vase of flowers on the mantel. He dropped his load, plucked two regnig lilies from the front—what did it matter if anyone noticed now?—and stripped them of their leaves and petals. Once the bounty was stuffed in the top of his bag, he picked it back up and left without another backwards glance.

“There you go, Blue. At least one of us will be guaranteed a decent meal in the next few days.”

He swallowed. With the debt consuming his thoughts, he hadn't considered where he'd stay. He had no money to speak of, and where he'd sleep that night was a complete blank. It would be so easy to allow the terror clawing at the edges of his mind to consume him, but he forced it back with a deep breath.

"No time to be scared. You just have to keep moving forwards."



An hour later, he stepped out of the shop where he'd bought the mammoth's portion of his new wardrobe. Hope deflated and despair swelled like a ryvax's poison sac. The tailor had been nowhere near as accommodating as he'd been during Jake's first visit. In fact, he'd practically shoved Jake out of the door when he raised the subject of returning his purchases.

"*We have a strict policy of no returns, young man.*" Jake tugged at the front of his jacket. It was all right. He could still sell everything.

Blue chirped from his pocket. Thank the founders she'd stayed quiet while they'd been inside. Not that she could have made the stuffy old man's reaction any worse. Jake clenched his jaw and set off in what he hoped was the direction of the place Clarissa had mentioned, running over what he'd say in his head.

The goods wouldn't fetch as much anywhere else, but as long as it was enough to show the Syndicate he was serious about paying them back, that was all that mattered.

He found Miller and Brumbee's and walked straight inside. Confidence was key, and he couldn't afford to overthink it. He

scanned the shop, a small room with curios in glass cabinets displayed alongside clockwork toys and steam-powered gadgets. A row of top hats sat on a shelf above bottles of perfume and a stuffed fire bird. The place smelled of dust and engine grease.

A high-pitched chime brought his gaze to the side, where an elaborate mantel clock had just struck the hour. He walked closer. Several windows opened along the base, and tiny mechanised figures rattled out, one chopping a brass log, another reaching for silver shirts on a washing line, while two more danced together. It was more like a scene in a toy village than a timepiece.

Jake dragged his eyes away and continued on, keeping half an eye out for an automaton hiding in amongst the merchandise. He sidestepped a rail of waistcoats and corsets, avoiding directly looking at the latter, and hoisted his packages up onto the only open area on the counter running along the back of the shop.

At least they'd probably be interested in what he had to offer. From the looks of the place, they took anything and everything.

He rang the bell and waited.

And waited.

He was about to leave when a shock of white hair ducked through a low door on the back wall. It rose to reveal a tall, thin man wearing a black suit with a scarlet tie. His face came into view last, and Jake couldn't help but stare.

On the man's beak-like nose balanced a pair of spectacles the likes of which Jake had never seen before. While one set of lenses covered his eyes, at least half a dozen more fanned out

from the outer edges of the frames, connected by a series of miniature hinges and levers. The sight was at once startling and intriguing.

“Welcome to Miller and Brumbee’s. I’m Miller,” he said, a smile lighting his face. He walked farther into the room and gestured around him. “We have everything a fine young gentleman about town such as yourself might need. The latest trend in goggles, novelty cane toppers, a new shipment of embroidered waistcoats from Ekefelios.”

Jake squared his shoulders and met Miller’s gaze. “Sorry, I’m not here to buy. I have some things to sell, and I was hoping you might be interested in them.”

Miller’s expression immediately flattened. He adjusted his spectacles and peered up and down Jake. After a moment, he sighed and walked over to the counter. “Let’s see it, then, young man.”

Jake untied the packages and let the paper fall away.

Miller flipped a lever on his spectacles, bringing a thick pair of lenses over the first set. His eyes seemed to expand behind them as he leaned down to root through the things Jake had uncovered.

He picked them up one by one, placing some aside with barely a glance but taking his time with others. When he came to the cuff links, he flicked a third set of lenses down and examined the engraved gold for over a minute.

By the time he’d finished going through everything, Jake’s muscles, clenched to stop himself from fidgeting, were taut as a crossbow. Miller straightened, grabbed a pencil and paper from behind the counter, and, resetting his magnifying lenses to their original position, wrote down a few numbers.

“I can give you two for the cuff links and ten for the goggles with the rubberised bands, or forty-five for the whole lot.”

Jake stared. It wasn't enough, not nearly enough. He cleared his throat. “These things are brand new. Most have never been used. Surely they're worth more than that?”

“Brand new, yes. But they're second-hand now, used or not. I can't sell them on and make a profit if I give you any more than fifty all told.”

“What about the lighter and cigars? You could sell them at the original price.”

Miller pursed his lips and bent to take a second look, clicking the additional lenses back into place. He lifted his head, and his eyes, huge behind the spectacles, sparked with interest.

“Now if you added that beauty to the deal, I'd be able to triple the offer.”

What was he talking about? Jake followed the other man's gaze to where Blue's head poked out of his jacket, weaving from side to side as she looked around. He reared back, instinctively shielding her from Miller's view.

“No. I'm not selling Blue.”

“Are you sure?” Miller tilted his head to the side. His fingers and thumb rubbed together where they rested on the countertop. “It'd make a fine specimen once it's stuffed and mounted. Worth a fair amount.”

Jake glanced back at the fire bird. Its eyes stared lifelessly ahead, its beak open and its radiant wings spread wide, held aloft with wire supports. Someone had made flames from tissue paper and stuck them around the base of the stand.

Would they do something similar to Blue if they had the chance? He gritted his teeth and turned back to Miller.

“I’m sure. She’s not for sale.”

Miller shrugged, though his eyes flicked back to where Blue had retreated into Jake’s pocket. “Then the highest I can go to is fifty.”

Sickened by the man’s interest in Blue, Jake simply nodded. He held out his hand, and Miller counted the money into it, including far more coins than were strictly necessary, given the amount.

“Well, young man. It’s been a pleasure doing business with you,” he said. “Do come back if you change your mind about the flurtoo. They’re selling so well at the moment.”

Jake gave him a weak smile and pocketed the cash. With a last look at the pile of fashionable fripperies he’d so recently bought, he strode out of the shop, taking a deep breath when he stepped outside.

His shoulders slumped on the exhale. He wouldn’t be able to pay off the Syndicate with fifty-five guineas. His only option was to find work and hope the boss would be amenable to a long-term repayment plan.

Chapter 18

Jake

No one would hire him. Jake sat on a bench in the park at the centre of Berlath, his bag sandwiched between his legs, his head in his hands. He'd come here to get away from the noise and stench of the working districts so he could think. But all his mind could focus on was the fact that nothing had gone the way he'd planned since he'd set off from the Belmont that morning.

Each potential employer he'd seen since then had turned him away. Most had informed him he lacked the requisite qualifications for the position in question, their exact wording ranging drastically in politeness. One had taken offense when he'd caught sight of Blue, claiming his respectable establishment did not tolerate filthy vermin on the premises.

Another had seemed favourable until the subject of any outstanding debts had risen. Jake snorted. *Why couldn't I have lied, or just kept quiet?* As soon as the words "blood debt" had left his mouth, the merchant had shoved away from the table, and Jake had been forcibly ejected from the building.

He reached down and pulled the last of the pie from his bag. His stomach churned, but he needed to eat, and the meat wouldn't last much longer in the afternoon heat.

Not a whisper of a breeze disturbed the flowerbeds dotted around the expanse of green, and the gravel paths lay across it like bleached bones. The air held a salty tang and something he couldn't quite name.

Aside from a sea bird cawing overhead and a gardener weeding one of the borders under a large-rimmed, straw hat, the immediate area was relatively empty. Jake turned his gaze towards the open seafront as he took his first bite. Many of the fashionable set promenaded along the boulevard between the park and the ocean, shielded from the sun's blistering rays by palm trees lining the walk and, in the case of the ladies, lacy parasols.

They strutted about, preening for each other like a group of mammoxes during mating season, their goggles and hair bugs the equivalent of a chromatic feather display. Just one of the necklaces strung around the women's necks would pay off his and probably half a dozen other blood debts.

A group of girls a little younger than him strolled past his bench, cooing over something one of them held. It yipped, and she paused to place whatever it was on the ground.

A tiny dog fled her skirts and cocked its leg over the head of a sprinkler poking from the ground a yard or so off the path. Large eyes and ears stood out from a small snout covered in orange fur. The rest of it was a fuzz of long red hair, apart from the tip of the tail, which was black.

"Oh, how darling," one of the other girls said, clapping her hands together over her chest.

Jake snorted but covered it with a cough. Fortunately, they were too intent on the dog to pay him any heed.

“Isn’t he just the last cog.” The phrasing of a second girl’s compliment caused him to flinch.

“Yes. Father paid a small fortune for him.” The owner squealed, clutching the hand of the girl next to her. “I can’t believe I have my own Sissonama hound. And Captain Adler delivered him personally this morning.”

They all squealed at that, and the dog yipped again, a piercing wail accompanied by it curling a front paw over one of its ears.

“I know what you mean,” Jake said under his breath.

The owner fluttered over and picked it up, cuddling it under her chin. “I can’t wait to show him off on the Walk.” Her head rose, and a dreamy tone entered her voice. “The captain only brought one litter back, you know. I’ll be the toast of the season.”

Captain Adler had brought that thing back from his travels? Jake twisted to look in the direction of the air dock, only a few streets away from the park. The white curve of an airship’s balloon poked out above the rooftops like a promise of escape just out of reach.

An afternoon strolling around the docks would have been the pinnacle of his childhood dreams. He pictured himself gazing at the marvels for hours, listening for the tell-tale hisses of a launch and following their progress skyward, calculating the perfect valve release moments and exact velocities required for a smooth landing.

Barking drew his attention back to the privileged girl, who had resumed her walk to the boulevard. The others trailed in her wake, their skirts flapping around their legs like a fleet of sails. They were soon surrounded, the girl proven right in her

assessment of her new pet's popularity. Even from his distance, he could hear the clamour of interest from those gathered.

How many of them realised there were people living less than a mile away in some of the worst conditions Jake had ever seen? How many of them would care if they did? *You didn't*, a voice in the back of his head chided. *Not until you became one of them.*

He bit off a mouthful of the cold pie, reconciling himself to his fate while he chewed. Fear had become his constant companion since he swore the blood oath. The rock lodged in his gut, the cold press of fingers down the back of his neck, and the metallic tinge to each swallow, all familiar now.

He'd almost forgotten what it felt like to be lauded as the hottest arrival in the city. The security of the estate was naught but a distant mirage. He took another bite of the pie, the buttery texture turning to ash in his mouth as reality reasserted itself.

Tossing the remaining crumbs onto the grass for the sea bird, he retrieved Blue from under the bench and took the path towards the merchants' district. It was time he got back to his hunt for employment.



An idea struck him as he walked past the sign for a tavern, and he changed course, heading for the Captain's Rest. When he stepped inside, he searched the bar area and breathed out in relief. Clarissa stood behind the counter next to a vaguely familiar large man. She was pouring a cup of sahl for a well-dressed woman, chatting away as if they were best friends.

Jake waited on the barstool nearest the door, tapping his fingers against the countertop. Blue stuck her head out of his pocket, and he transferred her to his knee, hiding her from the other customers.

“Didn’t think I’d see you again.”

He jumped at the voice and looked up to see Clarissa peering over the bar at his lap. He tucked his legs farther under the lip and folded his arms across the top, blocking her view. She dropped back onto her heels and gave him a look that screamed of “well, what do you want?”

Clearing his throat, he said, “I was hoping you’d be able to help me.”

She glanced behind her at the man, who was at the other end of the bar filling a tray full of cups with sahl, and lowered her voice. “You shouldn’t be here, especially not while Terence is around.”

Jake blinked. Why not? He looked at the man—red waistcoat over an open-necked white shirt and the obligatory goggles dangling from a thick, muscular neck—and a memory struggled to the surface.

Right. Terence owned the tavern. Probably didn’t like people coming in and not ordering anything. Jake edged sideways so Clarissa was between them, acutely aware that his hands were empty.

“I’m sorry. I just wanted to ask about a job.”

Her head reared back. “You can’t work here.” She leaned closer, scanning the room. “You shouldn’t even be in here. Terence doesn’t allow blooders anywhere near the place.”

“What’s he got against people in debt?”

She rolled her eyes. “It’s not the blooders he’s worried about. He stays well clear of anything to do with the Syndicate, and they stay out of his business in return.” Her gaze strayed to the door and then snapped back to him, and she straightened. “So you need to leave before anyone finds out about you.”

Jake slumped. “Well can you at least—”

“Men,” she spat. “Never think of anyone but themselves.” She brought her face close once more. “If Terence finds out I know about you being a blooder and haven’t said anything, he’ll kick us both out. Do you understand?”

“I’m sorry,” he said, checking they couldn’t be overheard. Terence was serving a customer, and no one else was nearby. “I don’t want to get you in any trouble. I just thought you might know of something... since you helped me out yesterday. With the pawn shop.”

“I can’t help you anymore,” she hissed. “I need this job. You have to go.”

“Is there a problem here?” Terence appeared at Clarissa’s shoulder, his arms folded across his massive chest. He glared at Jake. “You again.”

Jake dragged his attention from Terence’s looming form back to Clarissa. Surely she’d say something, assure her boss he was no threat. She’d jumped aside and was standing against the back wall of the bar. Her eyes flicked between them, hardening from fear into resolve.

“I was just telling this blooder to get out of here.”

Terence uncrossed his arms and strode to the end of the bar, where he lifted a portion that swung up to let him pass through. “A blooder, huh?”

Jake scrambled off his stool and backed towards the entrance, his hands raised in surrender. “It’s all right. I was just asking about work, but she told me to get lost. I’m leaving now. No need for any trouble.”

He caught Clarissa’s eye as she turned away, guilt painting her face. He couldn’t blame her. He’d probably have done the same in her position.

“Good.” Terence’s voice carried across the entire tavern. “Everyone knows we don’t serve blooders in here. And we definitely don’t employ them.”

He continued advancing, so Jake rushed to the door, casting one last sad smile in Clarissa’s direction. He pulled it closed behind him and stepped out into the street. Now what?

“You should try the council.”

Jake spun to the voice, his heart leaping into his mouth. It came from an elderly man standing a yard or so farther along the pavement.

“I overheard you in there.” The man gestured with his thumb towards the tavern. “Tough break.” He shook his head, the wrinkles in his face deepening. After a moment, he looked back at Jake. “The council’s always looking for casual labourers. You get paid by the job, so the more you can do, the more money you make.”

“Will they employ... someone like me?”

The man chuckled. “Lad, they employ anyone, no questions asked. The work’s hard and there’s not many as want to do it, so they’ll sign you on like that.” He snapped his fingers together.

Jake walked over to him, hope bubbling. “What’s the work like?”

“Oh, mostly manual labour.” The man rubbed his chin. “Strong lad like you should be able to earn a steady income easily enough.”

Jake grabbed his hand and shook it, the bones frail beneath his fingers. “Thank you. That’s just what I’ve been looking for.”

The man’s eyes widened, a smile peeking out from his scraggly beard. “Well, then. You’re welcome, lad. They hire on at the council building, Department of Labour.”

A grin crossed Jake’s face for the first time that day, and he set off for the central district. As he walked away, the man called after him. “Oh, and make sure you ask about lodgings too. They have rooms for those that work, not that they’ll tell you unless you bring it up first.”

Jake turned around, walking backwards. “Thank you. I will.” He faced forwards again and pumped a fist. “You hear that, Blue? Work, good pay, and somewhere to sleep at night. This is perfect.”

Ten minutes later, he stood outside the council building, staring up at the intricately carved stone façade. It covered an entire block, set back from the street with a wide walkway leading through a manicured lawn to the front entrance. Five steps marched up the central section to triple sets of arched double doors protected from the elements by an elaborate portico.

“I don’t think they’re going to want to see you,” he said to Blue, nudging her inside his pocket.

He watched a distinguished gentleman with a brocaded frock coat and shining top hat stroll through one of the doors

that had been opened for him by a young boy in burgundy livery. *I'm not sure they'll even want to see me.*

But this was where they were hiring, so with a deep breath, he smoothed down his hair, adjusted his jacket, and walked up the path to the entrance.

An older youth, in the same livery as the boy, stepped out of a hidden alcove when Jake reached the door. He gave Jake a once over, his face devoid of expression. "Can I direct you to the right department?"

No "sir" today, I see. Jake pointed towards the doors. "I've come about work. I was told the council's hiring."

"Ah, then you'll want to go round the back." The doorkeeper gestured to the right, where a small path led around the outside of the building. He smiled as if the matter was settled and stepped back into his alcove.

Jake stared after him for a moment, then turned and descended the steps. He followed the thin line of stones to the rear of the building, where a non-descript door sat at basement level at the bottom of a short staircase. A sign next to it read EMPLOYEES AND LABOURERS.

"Well, this says a lot."

With a last look at the garden, he plodded down the stairs and swung the door open. A short corridor took him to a plain, square room with a second door to the side, a desk at the end, and a large bookcase behind it.

A man was standing between the two, reaching for one of the books on the top shelf. When he had it in hand, he sat down at the desk, adjusting a pair of wire-rimmed spectacles as he flipped through the pages.

Jake walked over and stopped in front of him. The man ignored him, so Jake cleared his throat, still to no avail.

His eyes strolled over the desk while he waited, stopping on a small brass object. He picked it up, turning it around to find a metal owl staring back at him. A tiny key at the side begged to be turned, but the man half stood and snatched it from his grip.

After returning it to the desk and positioning it just so, the man finally looked up. His face was tight. “Yes?”

“I was told I’d be able to find work here. Is this the right place?”

“I’m the clerk for labouring contracts, yes.” He looked Jake up and down. “Have you any experience to speak of?”

Jake glanced about for some idea of what he meant. “Um, experience?”

“Yes.” The clerk sighed and shoved his spectacles up his nose. “Mechanics, plumbing, carpentry...” He waved his hand in a circle, raising thin brows.

“Um... I used to work on my—an estate. Herding cattle, breaking mammoxes, bringing in the harvest.”

The clerk harrumphed. “I’ll put you down as a general labourer.”

He pulled a large volume down from the second to top shelf and spun it around to face Jake. “Fill in your details if you can write. Otherwise make a mark in the first column and I’ll do the rest later.”

“Of course I can write.” Jake pulled the pen towards him, pumped some ink into the chamber, and started scribbling his name.

The clerk gave him a hard look. “You understand this is piece work? You’re not paid by the hour, so don’t bother trying to draw it out to get more money.”

“Yes, sir.” Finished, Jake returned the ledger and twisted his fingers together. “Um, I was told there might be accommodation included.”

“You’ll need a stamped slip to get in. The dormitory costs a shill a night. It includes water for washing but no meals.”

Jake breathed out. *Perfect*. “So, where do you want me first?”

The clerk laughed, short and sharp. “Through there.” He pointed to the side door and went back to leafing through the original book.

Jake looked around. There must be some mistake. “I thought I’d be starting today?”

The clerk glanced up with another sigh, peering at Jake over the rims of his spectacles. “Look, when something suitable comes in, I’ll call you, but until then, you wait in there with the others.”

Others? Jake walked over and opened the door. Behind it was a room twice as big as the one in which he stood. Rows of benches lined both sides of a wide aisle, several men on each.

Jake sagged. *This can’t be happening. I need to work now.* He walked over to the nearest bench, choosing a spot beside a middle-aged man wearing homespun trousers and a mismatched jacket. The man held a worker’s cap between calloused hands, twisting the worn fabric as he stared at a blank space on the floor. He didn’t even twitch when Jake sat down.

Jake waited on the hard wooden bench, counting the minutes and hours, watching a few of the others get called out by the clerk. His leg started bouncing after the first half hour. An hour later, he was chewing his lower lip as well.

His head lifted each time the door opened and dropped farther each time his name wasn't called. He was never going to earn enough to pay back the Syndicate.

Eventually, the clerk stuck his head in and said, "Martin and Jake."

Jake popped up off the bench and almost ran to the door. The older man who'd been sitting next to him followed behind. When they were both standing in front of the desk, the clerk handed Jake a slip.

"Clogged cistern over on Hartrey. Hand them the ticket, and they'll provide the supplies you need. Come back when you're done, and make sure you get a signature, or there'll be no pay."

Jake looked down at his bag and then around the room. "Can I leave my bag here while I work?"

The clerk glared at him. "This is an office of the council of Berlath, not a storage area."

"Oh, um, sorry. I'll just..."

The clerk hmphed and went back to his ledgers—they were dismissed.

Despite Jake's embarrassment, he could have danced inside. He held a steady pace out of the room, along the corridor, and up the steps outside. Only then did he pump his fist and let out a soft "Yes."

He changed his mind when he discovered exactly what the job entailed. The cistern was underground. It was part of the sewage system, and it was clogged with... Jake's mind refused to settle on the overflowing mess long enough to put a name to it. The odour alone made his eyes water.

Equipped with shovels, buckets, and a mid-sized tank on wheels, they were told to clear out whatever was blocking the pipes and transport it to the city's dockside dump. Then they were left to it, the men who'd explained the issue making a hasty retreat. Their laughter carried back to Jake, along with "...wouldn't want to be those poor..." but that was all he caught before they turned the corner.

Martin used a crowbar to lift the grate over the cistern, releasing a stench that reached down Jake's throat and yanked at the contents of his stomach. Was he actually about to climb into a tank of human waste to earn less than a guinea?

He swallowed. If it was a choice between that and being beaten or buried, then yes, he was.

His bag safely stashed in some bushes in a nearby garden, he tied a cloth over his face, hefted the shovel, and walked over to the hole in the ground. *It's just like mucking out Lightning's stall. That's all. Just the same as that.* He stepped down onto the first metal rung and got to work.

The rungs soon became slippery with filth, forcing them to move slower to keep their balance. At a certain point, the full buckets of waste had to be hauled up on a rope rather than carried, so they took turns to stay below, Jake often gagging as his condition worsened.

Blue was no help at all, flying around his head and getting in the way while he was topside, landing at the edge of the entrance and keening when he was working below. She

refused to go in with him, which he couldn't really blame her for, but the mournful tone of her calls only worsened his misery.

The only respite came when the mobile tank was full and they had to pull it all the way from the respectable, central street to the city's dockside dump located in one of the outer districts. Then the briny sea air battled the reek of their clothing, overcoming it for short periods before the trudge back to the cistern.

Jake took those opportunities to scramble down a ladder in the sea wall and wash off the worst of the muck. He never stayed clean for long, but the act helped him to endure the long stretches of standing knee deep in near blackness.

By the time they'd finished, he was splattered from head to toe, his muscles ached, and night had fallen. It was too late to go back to the council office for their pay, so when the ticket was signed by a gruff man at the dump, Martin shoved it inside the lining of his hat.

"You never know who's about this late at night," he said. "It'll be safe in here till morning. I'll meet you at the office tomorrow, make sure you get your fair share."

Jake twisted his lips to the side. Could he trust Martin to keep his promise? Everyone else he'd met so far in the city had either used him, scammed him, or robbed him outright. *Well, the clerk knows we both worked the job, so...*

"I guess that'll be all right."

"See you in the morning then." Martin shoved his hat on his head, gave a salute with two fingers to the brim, and lumbered down the road back to the council's lodging house.

Jake stood outside the gates of the dump and looked around. He'd meant to pick up his accommodation slip when they returned to the office after the job, and they wouldn't let him in without one—both the clerk and Martin had been clear on that.

So he was on his own for the night. Too tired to even care that he'd made so little money, he trudged down the same road Martin had taken.

Chapter 19

Jake

He'd retrieved his bag and was looking for a cheap room for the night when someone grabbed him from behind. A meaty hand over his mouth prevented him from calling out, and the speed at which he was dragged backwards down a side alley made pulling away impossible.

Help. Someone help me. The words flew through his brain, tossed about in a raging whirlwind of sheer terror, circling again and again to mock him with their futility. Images of what his captors were about to do to him bled together in a zoetrope of pain, and his heartbeat raced in his ears, each thud trampling the one before it.

His feet scabbled along the ground for purchase, kicking up loose gravel and dust. He beat at the arms holding him with his fists, but none of his efforts made the slightest impact. Swinging wildly, he connected with something solid above his head. A jaw? An elbow?

Either way, all he accomplished was a guttural grunt and an altered, tighter grip on his throat. They were going to kill him, and he couldn't do a thing to stop them. They hadn't even asked him for the money.

Wait—the money. They couldn't kill him. They needed him to be able to work off his debt. The worst they could do

was give him a beating.

A doorway passed overhead, plunging him into darkness, and they descended some wooden steps. When they got to the bottom, he sensed a wide space opening up around them just before they came to a stop.

He ceased his struggles, and the hold loosened a fraction before he was shoved forwards. He fell, sprawled across cold stone, scraping the skin from his palms. Though he reached out as far as he could, he felt nothing, so he rose to his knees and listened for movement.

A light flared to one side, illuminating a vaulted, brick-lined cellar. Kegs hid the far wall, but the room was otherwise empty. The perfect place for them to extract their payment. He shivered as he staggered to his feet.

“You’re a hard man to track down, Mister Amarel.”

Jake spun around. A man stood in front of him, the glow from a lantern casting flickering shadows across close-set eyes. They glared at Jake above a hawkish nose and thin lips outlined by a close-cropped moustache and beard.

“Not hard enough,” Jake muttered.

The man tutted, shaking a finger at him. “Ed was very put out you weren’t at the hotel. He’s been wanting to say hello since we heard about you.”

A compact man with a square face and crooked nose stepped between them. A second later, his fist planted into Jake’s stomach.

Jake bent double, the wind forced from his lungs. Bolts of white light flashed across his vision and pain burned his gut. He fell to his hands and knees as he struggled to draw breath. Why couldn’t he get any air?

He'd been hit before, sparring with the men on the estate, but never like this. Those punches had been the taps of a baby mammoth wanting fruit treats compared to the steam engine that had just collided with his torso. They might not be trying to kill him, but a few more punches like that, and they could manage it anyway.

A sharp slap stung his face, and his body gulped in air. Thank the founders. He coughed it out and sucked in more, the blurred patches receding to the edges of the room.

“Now that we have your attention,” the first man said from above him, “we can have us a little chat. Stand him upright, won'tcha Ed.”

He was hauled to his feet by the collar and pushed back against the wall.

“Y-you're Syndicate enforcers.” Jake's voice came out barely above a whisper.

“Good.” The man grinned, his eyes gleaming in the lantern light. “You've heard of us. That'll make this go a lot easier.”

He closed in, the human battering ram cutting off any means of escape at the other side. “Where's the money you owe?”

Jake's attention darted back and forth between them. He licked his lips. “Um, well, I've got some of it. And—”

“Only some of it?” The leader's eyebrows rose, and he sneered.

Hands quivering, Jake reached inside his coat, but a vise-like grip on his arm stopped him. His gaze jumped up to the one who'd spoken. “I was just getting it out,” he said.

“Slowly.” The man tipped his head at Ed, who instantly let go.

Jake pulled the money clip from his inner pocket with exaggerated care and handed it over. The one in charge plucked it from his fingers, flipped through the notes, and looked back at Jake.

“You’re a bit short, ain’tcha? You owe thousands, not hundreds. What’s this?” He held the thin wad up between two of his fingers, his eyes narrowing.

“That’s a first instalment,” Jake said, his words running together in his haste to explain. “I’ll work for the rest and pay it back each month. I can get another twenty—”

“You think the Syndicate accepts payment plans?” The man laughed, the harsh sound echoing around the underground chamber. “What are we, a bank?”

Jake’s gut squeezed. “Please, I can get you the money. I just need a little time.”

All joviality fell from the man’s face. He leaned closer, nose to nose with Jake, his breath reeking of cheap cigarettes.

“Either you pay, or you *pay*. The money or...” He stepped back and flicked his eyes over Jake’s body like a farmer at the cattle market. “Looks like the mines for you. Unless you’ve got a bit of fight in you?” He feinted towards Jake, and Jake flinched, shrinking back against the wall.

The man chuckled. “Whad’ya think, Ed?”

Ed grunted, his biceps flexing in Jake’s periphery.

Don’t let them bait you, he told himself. They’re not going to do you any real harm. They need you to pay off the debt.

The leader sniffed. “Either way, we get what’s ours when it’s due, not whenever you feel like handing it over. Got it?” He folded his arms across his lean chest. “Show him we mean business, Ed.”

Ed drew back his arm. It flew forwards, and Jake ducked, scrunching his eyes closed. There was no thought behind the move, just an instinctive need to avoid the blow. The shorter man let out a roar as his fist smashed into the brick wall at Jake’s back. He staggered backwards, gripping his bloodied hand with the other and providing the opening Jake needed.

Pushing past them, he ran. Behind him, Ed wailed, and his partner cried out, “Stop him!”

They were too late. He was already halfway up the wooden staircase and reaching for the door handle at the top. Flinging it open, he dashed through and looked up and down the alleyway.

A second later, he was running again. He turned down random junctions, swinging around corners at breakneck speed. Hopefully the zig zag would throw off his pursuers and he’d be able to lose them in the warren of backstreets.

He didn’t stop until his lungs screamed and his legs gave out, dropping him in a quivering pile behind an external porch of some sort. Every gasp burned, and shadows crowded the edges of his vision.

It took several minutes for his breathing to return to normal, longer for his heart to slow. He rubbed the aching muscles in his legs and took stock of his surroundings.

The thin alley snaked around to the left not far from where it opened onto a minor road. A tall wooden fence ran along one side, and the squat, brick structure that hid him from

passers-by stuck out from the otherwise blank wall of a high-rise building.

He pressed farther into the shadows, his eyes locked on the street corner. Though he strained his hearing, only the normal sounds of people going about their business drifted down to him—feet hitting solid pavement, the generic buzz of conversation overlaid with an occasional holler or loud greeting. No running footsteps or angry shouts approached.

All right, what now? He felt his pockets, glanced down at the weed- and refuse-strewn ground. His fist came down on an old newspaper. He'd lost his bag in the attack.

There was no way it would still be on the street where he'd dropped it. Someone had all his clothes, his notebook, the last of his food. The penknife Nathan had given him.

At least he had a few coins tucked inside his waistcoat in a small money pouch. And he still had Blue. She crawled out of his pocket and flitted to the bend in the alley, up to the top of the fence, and then back to him. She landed on his raised knee, chirping in distress.

“I couldn't help the bumpy ride,” he whispered. “I was running for my life.”

She took off again, completing the same circuit as before but landing on the ground next to him when she returned. Her wings folded into place under the rim of her shell, and she bit into one of the weeds. A second later, she spat it out and backed away from the wilting plant.

Jake laughed despite himself. It continued longer than it should have, turning high and desperate. When it petered out, he wiped his eyes, picked up Blue, and placed her back on his knee.

“Well, it looks like we’re officially on the run from the Syndicate.”

The words nearly choked him, but his father had always said that half of facing your fears was in naming them, though it might be more like a quarter in this case.

How had things gone so wrong? He’d had a solid plan. Go to the Syndicate, give them what he had, and reason with them regarding the rest. They weren’t supposed to kidnap him. And they were supposed to want their money back more than revenge.

The crunch of Ed’s fist smashing into the brick wall replayed in Jake’s mind. His situation had gone from dire to deadly in that split second. Maybe he should have taken the hit? He imagined the sound of flesh connecting with flesh and shuddered. Nope, he couldn’t have faced it. He’d just have to try to avoid them while he thought of a new plan.

He scratched under Blue’s chin. “At least we’re alive and unharmed, eh girl. We’ll think of a way out.” *I’ve always had brains on my side.*

Pushing to his feet, he crept to the end of the alley and peered around the corner. There was no sign of the enforcers, so he slipped into the foot traffic. It was getting late, but he daren’t risk trying to find somewhere to stay for the night. A landlord might turn him in if the enforcers tracked him down again, and he needed to save what little money he had left for food.

A night under the stars wouldn’t hurt him. He’d spent plenty of them out on the ridge or in the far western pastures after moving the herd out for the summer. This would be no different. Huddled somewhere out of sight, the Syndicate’s enforcers after him—no, it would be no different at all.



A hand jostled Jake, and he woke with a start. “Wha-what is it?”

“Get out of my doorway.”

The outline of a woman stood over him, backlit by the light spilling from the shop’s interior. Her arms akimbo, she leaned down, glaring from beneath a beribboned hat with several long feathers sticking up at the side. They quivered at her movements, drawing his attention.

Hands flapped in front of his face, and he dragged his eyes back to hers. “Sorry,” he said, sitting up and sending a spike of pain down his back. He rubbed a hand over his face. “What did you say?”

“I *said* you need to leave. I won’t have ruffians sleeping on my premises, so move out before I call the authorities.”

Jake looked around, his senses slowly returning. He was sitting in the entrance to a room swimming in ribbons and lace, his filthy clothes a stark foil to the sea of silky what-nots. A faint floral scent struggled to repel the stench of refuse that clung to him, and his cheeks burned at the impression the woman must have of him.

The tapping of her foot hastened his scrambled retreat to the pavement. He went to doff his hat but lowered his arm when he recalled selling it along with the rest of his recent purchases. He didn’t even have his old one anymore, having allowed the tailor to bin it the day he’d arrived.

She produced a set of keys and made a show of locking up, the bolt sliding across with a solid snick. A last glare and she

set off down the street, her hat feathers wagging disapproval with each step.

He walked away, hunching his shoulders against the bitter night air. *You're lucky that was just a shopkeeper. It could've been the enforcers.*

There was no way he'd sleep again that night, so he wandered the district, sticking to the shadows and taking the nearest side street whenever anyone came into view. His eyelids drooped, and his feet dragged, but he kept moving. Better tired than dead.

Chapter 20

Ralph

Ralph strode down the twisting back alley, his new bazooka in a holster across his back. People scuttled out of his way as he approached, their eyes darting to the tattoo peeking out from his collar as often as the weaponry on display about his person.

He was proud of his hunter's tattoo. It had taken years to earn, and with it came the freedom and opportunities he'd craved growing up. He cracked his neck from one side to the other and rolled his shoulders. It was late, and he'd barely had three hours of sleep after his last run before the message arrived to come in.

A right-hand turn took him down a shortcut to the meeting place. High walls on either side cast deep shadows along the pathway and hid him from the crumbling old tenements beyond. Most locals avoided the route, but Ralph embraced the dark. That was where he did most of his best work.

The scuff of a boot on loose gravel gave him a mere second's warning, but it was enough. When a young man stumbled into him from a darkened doorway, Ralph spun to the side and let the youth's momentum carry him into the opposite wall.

Grabbing him by the throat before he could regain his balance, Ralph slammed him against the bricks and lifted until only the tips of the young man's toes touched the floor. He increased the pressure a fraction, and frightened eyes bulged beneath a mop of stringy black hair.

"I'll have that back now." Ralph brought his face close, showing no mercy.

"Here. Take it." A hand came up between them, Ralph's clockwork lock pick dangling from it. He returned it to his pocket, maintaining eye contact the entire time.

"You know who I am?"

The would-be thief's gaze flicked down to Ralph's neck and back up. He nodded.

"And you tried to rob me anyway?" Ralph cocked his head. Then he lifted the man up the wall until his feet left the floor.

The young man's face turned an ugly shade of purple, his heels scrabbling for purchase against the bricks. He pulled at Ralph's fingers, tight around his neck, but his weak efforts proved no more than the tickle of a feather on stone.

After a few moments, Ralph lowered him and loosened his grip. The pickpocket crumpled to the ground, gasping and coughing. He held up a hand. "I'm sorry... Didn't see ... who ya were ... till it were too late."

Ralph crouched beside him, waited for him to look up, and said, "Check first in future."

He whipped his pistol out of its holster and cracked the butt into the youth's temple in one sweep. The man dropped, blood oozing from a cut at the corner of his eyebrow.

Ralph wiped the end of his weapon on the man's jacket and felt in his pockets. He kept the money, what little there was, but threw a fob watch and two fancy lighters over the wall. That would teach the gutter rat not to mess with a hunter. And send a message to the rest of them. He looked down at the unconscious body, disgust curling his lip. *I'm no target.*

He walked on, emerging onto a more populated lane before plunging down the next shortcut. Checking his timepiece, he picked up his pace. Dealing with the fool of a thief had cost him a few minutes, and he couldn't afford to be late.

The clattering of empty bottles being knocked over brought his head up. He scanned the area with narrowed eyes, pausing on a large bin a few yards ahead.

A small dirt-streaked face poked out from behind it only to disappear just as quickly, wide-set eyes rounded. Ralph fished around in his coat pocket. As he came alongside the heap of overflowing refuse, he flicked a shiny silver coin towards the shadows.

Stubby hands reached out and grabbed it mid-air. A second later, the face re-emerged, attached to the thin body of a young girl. She smiled, her eyes squeezing into upturned slits and the tip of her tongue sticking out of her mouth.

"Fanks Wawf." A missing front tooth made her lisp even more pronounced.

"Don't mention it," he growled.

He meant it. If she told any of the others, they'd all be running after him, and that was the last thing he needed in his line of work. He grunted. All right, so there were a few more street urchins he favoured, but that didn't mean he was soft.

He was just looking out for his information network, that was all.

He rounded a sweeping bend and took a sharp left down a snicket barely wide enough to accommodate his shoulders. Ten yards in, he kicked a section of the wall, and it swung inwards with a grating groan. *Johns'll have to see to that soon.* He made a mental note to speak to the keeper of the house as he ducked through the gap and pushed the panel shut behind him.

A single lantern, sitting on a table beside the secret entrance, illuminated the immediate area. Several others—unlit—hung from a bracket on the wall above it, along with a glass jar of tapers. *Every time.* He grabbed one and lit a second lantern from the first, then turned and descended the stairs at the other side of the doorway.

The basement had a distinct musty odour that made Ralph's nostrils twitch. He sniffed and carried on, the thud of his boots on the stone steps reverberating through the silence. When he reached the bottom, he passed a row of wooden casks to the far wall where a metal gate covered the entrance to a long tunnel.

A man wearing a fancy hotel uniform hurried out, nearly bumping into him.

“Oh. Sorry, Ralph. Didn't see you.”

“Stuart.”

Face ghostly pale in the lantern light, Stuart cast a nervous glance behind him, edged around Ralph, and scurried up the stairs like a fleeing rat. Ralph huffed and scratched his neck. The boss had that effect on most people.

Passing through the gate, he followed the tunnel until he saw light spilling from an open doorway set into the wall. His hand reached for his weapon, and he patted the handle before setting down the lantern and stepping into the well-lit room.

His boss was busy counting the money in a thick envelope. He sat in a high-backed chair behind a large rectangular desk strewn with papers. A decanter of wine and a long-stemmed glass on a silver tray took up one corner, a huge candelabrum the other. Irium lanterns hung from the corners of the ceiling as if determined to keep even the smallest shadow at bay.

Ralph walked over to a bookcase at the side of the room and picked a tome at random, flipping through the pages before putting it back on the shelf and pulling out another. One day he'd find something interesting to read among the dull collection.

“Do sit down and be still, Ralph. Have I taught you nothing of decorum?”

A scene flashed across the page in front of Ralph of himself as a child, the boss standing over him while he threw knives at a wicker target, cuffing the back of his head whenever he failed to hit the bullseye. He closed the book with a snap and did as he was bid.

“Your last mission went well, I trust.”

“It was straightforward enough. The loose-screw was hiding in his parents' attic.” He tossed a stack of guinea notes onto the desk. “They paid his debt in full when I explained the situation, and he won't cross us again.”

“Good.” The boss shuffled through some papers, bringing a sheet to the top with a small card attached to the corner. “We have a new target for you. Another runaway blooder.”

Ralph let out a breath. *Easy work.* “How much does he owe?”

“We’re not interested in the money in this instance.” The boss glanced at the envelope and smoothed a finger over the scar in his eyebrow. “He doesn’t have it anyway.”

Ralph’s brows rose.

The boss continued, “Bring him in. Unharméd, if possible, but by any means necessary.”

“The name?”

The boss leaned forwards in his chair, his hard eyes glittering as he held the paper out across the table. “Jake Amarel.”

Chapter 21

Jake

Jake stood behind a tree, hidden from the path at the back of the council building by a large, purple-flowering shrub that Blue was finding particularly tasty. After checking one last time that no one was around, he scurried across the lawn and down the steps to the rear door.

The office was in a shambles when he entered. A mountain of papers covered the desk while others formed a haphazard arc around the bookcase, not one still attached to its bindings. A lantern lay on its side, liquid irium oozing from the broken glass in a pungent, sticky pool.

Jake's jaw dropped. What in the world had happened? Nausea stirred his stomach, a possible answer tickling the back of his mind. He took a step forward and something crunched under his foot. A tiny spring, twisted out of shape, fell from the sole of his shoe when he lifted it. *Oh, no.*

The clerk's head popped up from behind the desk, his eyes huge behind his spectacles. They narrowed at Jake. "You."

Jake backed away as the clerk scrambled to his feet, depositing the papers in his hands on top of those on the desk and causing a partial landslide in the pile. He rounded the desk and stalked across the room, shooing Jake out of the door.

“Go on, get out. I won’t have any more trouble from you.”

“But I—”

The clerk held his hand up, whipping his head back and forth. “You’re not welcome here. They searched every file for your name. Destroyed the lot, even though I told them they wouldn’t find anything.” His voice took on a faraway quality. “They broke my owl, the barbarians.”

He blinked and glared at Jake as if he’d smashed the toy himself. “It’ll take me days to get this straightened out, and if they find out I’ve given you another job, they’ll come back and burn it all to the ground.”

“But I need the work.”

“So do I, and I won’t lose it over an ignorant blooder, so get out!” He slammed the door in Jake’s face, rattling the frame with the force.

Jake stood frozen in place. They’d come *here*? To the council building itself to get at him? He shuddered. Their reach was incredible. His father had said Berlath was corrupt, but for a clerk not to feel safe in the very seat of the city’s power, the Syndicate must truly be everywhere. No one would be able to help him, not even the authorities.

Stark reality sank in until he drowned in it, towed under by stupid decision after stupid decision. His head spun, and he leaned a hand against the wall for support. There was no way out, nowhere he could go to escape them. They’d find him eventually, no matter what he did.

The memory of a fist ploughing into his gut jolted him from his stupor. He pushed off the wall and walked out of the building on unsteady legs. They carried him to his hiding spot,

where he dropped to the ground, his back resting against the rough bark of the tree trunk.

Moisture filled his eyes, but he wiped it away with his sleeve. Other than that, he remained still, letting his mind empty and the world disappear. If only he could stay like that forever, unmoving, unfeeling.

He stared blankly ahead, only vague impressions filtering through the numbness. Light creeping across the grass towards him, flowers releasing their scent, birds chirping overhead, Blue nestling against his neck.

After a while, the will to live returned to his limbs, spreading like the sun's warmth on his face. He sat straighter, shaking free of the malaise, and brushing leaf fragments from his hands. "There's always a way. You just need to hide until you find it."



He left the city centre and wandered the streets. The possibility of being taken by force again kept him to the busier thoroughfares of the more respectable merchants' district, but even so, he walked with one eye out for Syndicate enforcers. If they'd had no compunctions about raiding the government building, what would stop them from snatching him from the streets outside?

He looked at the people around him. Would the well-dressed gentleman ahead intervene, or the woman scribbling notes on a paper as she walked by, or the young couple with matching goggles and overly loud laughs? Would anyone care, or even notice, if he disappeared down the next alley?

Desperation drove him to step in front of the next person to pass in the opposite direction. “Please, can you help me?”

The man’s nose wrinkled with distaste, his mouth pulled taut. He lifted his cane as if warding off a dangerous animal and walked on, giving Jake a wide berth.

Humiliation weighed Jake’s shoulders down until they bowed. What had he been thinking? He huffed—he hadn’t. Keeping his head lowered, he glanced around. No one glared at him for approaching one of them, but no one stepped forwards to offer aid either. Why would they?

He inventoried his state—a good-quality suit but in a simple style and now splattered with malodorous stains he’d done his best to remove; untrimmed whiskers covering his jaw; finger-brushed hair with no hat to cover it. And Blue had chosen to ride on his shoulder in clear view of anyone close enough to spot her.

Not that anyone was getting within range. He probably stank. He sniffed himself, but his nasal passages had ceased their struggle sometime the previous evening. All he could pick out was something vaguely sour. *If I were them, I wouldn’t help me either.*

His head lifted. *But I know someone who might. If he remembers me.* He changed directions and headed for the craftsmen’s district.

He reached the Marvellous Mechanical Emporium as the crowds began to thin out and signs started appearing in doorways that read “Back Soon” and “Out for Lunch.” Thank the founders. It was the perfect time to approach the one person in the city that had been genuinely impressed by him.

Just as he had the last time, Jake checked his reflection in the shop window, smoothing his hair and straightening his tie before reaching for the handle. It made little difference to his appearance but soothed his jangling nerves. The overhead bell tinkled when he opened the door, a light, whimsical sound so discordant with the reason for his visit that he nearly turned tail and ran.

He peered around. The interior was much as it had been the last time he'd been inside, though a large crate sat to one side of the rear entrance, tucked under the winding staircase.

Mr Jorret stood behind the counter, sketching something on a notepad with fevered strokes. He looked up, blinked a few times, and smiled, dropping his pencil and lifting his hands. "You came back. Changed your mind about my offer, did you? I thought you might."

Jake walked farther into the shop. "Sort of."

"Sort of?" Mr Jorret tilted his head to the side, his eyebrows drawing together.

"Um, well. I was hoping you'd be able to help me. You see, I was robbed a few days ago, and I owe some money..."

Mr Jorret scooted under the raised portion of the counter, concern replacing the confusion on his face. When he got a couple of feet away from Jake, he stopped and pulled back, grimacing. "What's that smell?"

Jake shuffled away, his cheeks burning. "I'm sorry, that's me. Like I was saying, I—"

"Ugh, and you came in here like that. Get out, quickly, before someone else comes in." He shooed Jake towards the door, staying out of range of actually touching him.

“Mr Jorret, please. I need your help. I have a blood debt I have to pay.”

Mr Jorret froze, his nostrils flaring. “And you came *here*? Are you insane?” He redoubled his efforts to herd Jake out of the door. “Get out. Now. And don’t come back.”

As soon as Jake cleared the threshold, the door closed behind him, the thud of a deadbolt slamming into place punctuating his abrupt removal from the premises. He covered his face with both hands and took several deep breaths.

What now what now what now what now what now. His stomach growled, but the thought of food caused nausea to rise. Blowing out hard, he scrubbed his hands down over his jaw and looked up at the sky. *You’re no worse off than you were an hour ago, and who cares what he thinks of you?*

He went back to wandering the streets, his mind churning through possibilities and calculating odds. He kept circling back to the pivotal moments over the last few weeks that had led to his current predicament. If only he’d done that or not said this or ignored one person and listened to another, he could have been safe at home, or at least safe here in the city.

Footsore and bone weary, he sank to the pavement and leaned back against a brick wall, heedless of what those around him thought. Most carried on as if he wasn’t there, while a few adjusted their course to avoid his position. He let their movements wash past him like water around a stone.

One set of legs paused briefly, and a coin fell into his lap. He glanced up, mumbling thanks, but the legs had already moved on. The shill, shiny and new, lay crest side up, the Berlath coat of arms emblazoned in the centre. He stared down at it until the edges blurred and a laugh bubbled up his throat. *One down, a few thousand more to go.*

Blue crawled down his front to investigate the foreign object, nudging it with her snout and then clamping her mouth around it and tossing it across his open palm. He snorted. Maybe if she performed some tricks, someone would give them another.

Some time later—whether minutes or hours, he had no clue—booted feet stopped in front of him, and he braced himself to be moved on.

“What are you doing down there?”

The voice was exasperated, and familiar. He peered up from beneath lowered lashes. Clarissa. One hand planted on her hip, she tapped her foot in a rapid staccato.

“Come on, get up.”

He dragged himself to his feet, dislodging Blue in the process. She flapped around his head a few times but ignored his offered finger when he was upright. After a second of hovering mid-air, she flew to Clarissa, who held out a hand, a glimmer of excitement in her eyes.

“Oh, a flurtoo. How sweet.” She stroked Blue’s head with a lace-clad little finger. “There used to be a flock of these in the tree outside my window at—”

Her expression flattened. She jiggled her hand, and Blue flew back to Jake, chirping annoyance at being disturbed twice in so short a space of time.

Clarissa looked at him and slowly shook her head, a few loose curls bouncing behind her ear. “You can’t stay here, or you’ll be caught before supper.” She bit her lip, glancing up and down the street. Then she turned her gaze directly to his, and her tone took on a business-like quality.

“Go to the seafront. There are ladders down to the beach at the far end. You should be safe there for a few hours. Then come to the back of the Captain’s Rest an hour past dark. I’ll meet you there, and we’ll work something out.”

He raised his brows. She was helping him? He opened his mouth to thank her, or ask why, but she held up a hand. “No promises. But I’ll see what I can do. Now get going before anyone sees us together.”

With that, she was off, striding down the road with her full skirt fluttering behind her.

Jake stared after her and rubbed his jaw. “Would you look at that?” *She’s the last person I’d have expected to help me.*

He scanned the area—if anyone had seen them together, she could be in trouble—but there was no sign of anyone paying him particular attention. The same generic collection of respectable customers went in and out of the shops along the pavement. Whistlers blew past, too fast for the occupants to notice a couple at the side of the road, even if their window shutters were open. And no one lingered anywhere nearby.

With a lighter step than he’d had for the past few days, he headed in the opposite direction to Clarissa. She’d said the beach would be safe, and he’d been a little preoccupied last time he’d seen the water up close.

Chapter 22

Nathan

Nathan's friendly grin faltered. The hotel clerk stared at him as if he were a talking mammoth.

"Look," Nathan said, leaning on the counter. "I've tried a dozen hotels so far, and I've got a powerful need to eat sometime tonight. I just want to find my brother."

The clerk let out a deep sigh, pushed wire-rimmed spectacles farther up his thin nose, and started flipping through the pages of a large book. "Amarel, you say?"

"Yes. Jake Amarel." Nathan wiped the sweat from the back of his neck and grimaced when his kerchief came away grimy. He shoved it into his trouser pocket. "I figured he'd be at the university, truth be told. That was the first place I looked. No idea why he's not there, but he's got to be somewhere, so here I am, eighth hotel so far, and it's a mighty fine one you have here."

He glanced around at the opulent furnishings, his gaze catching on the automatons he'd passed on the way in. *Jake'd love to tinker with something like them.* A grin tugged at his lips as he imagined his brother asking if he could unscrew one and poke about inside.

The clerk gave a discreet cough, regaining Nathan's attention. He offered Nathan a tight smile, his finger held on an entry near the bottom of a page.

"A Mr Amarel booked in on the fifteenth, but he left yesterday morning with no forwarding address."

Nathan clenched his jaw and let his eyes close. *Only just missed him.* He popped them open again as the clerk cleared his throat. He adjusted his spectacles, and unease whispered across Nathan's scalp. "It seems he was unable to pay the balance of his bill..."

What? Jake had more than enough money to pay his way, even at an overpriced place like this. "Why not? What happened?"

"I couldn't say, sir. I wasn't on duty that day."

Concern drawing his brows together, Nathan fished in his pocket for his wallet. "How much did he owe?"

The clerk slid the book around and pointed out a sizeable sum next to Jake's name. Nathan whistled at the amount but paid it without comment, his mind racing through scenarios that could leave Jake without funds.

"Thank you, sir." The clerk deposited the money in a canister that whooshed down a tube behind the counter. He turned back to Nathan. "I'm sorry I can't be of any further assistance."

Sure you are. "Thanks anyway."

At least Nathan knew something now. He walked out of the hotel and stood in the street, looking around. What could have possessed Jake to stay in such an expensive hotel? And why in the world couldn't he pay his bill? Nathan slapped his

thigh with his hat, causing a small cloud of dust to puff up around his leg.

A passing woman coughed into her lace handkerchief, giving him a stern look. He conjured a smile, tipped his hat at her, and picked a direction to walk at random. *What's going on, Jake? Where are you?*

Chapter 23

Jake

Jake dropped onto the beach from the last rung of the ladder and brushed his hands together. Turning, he shielded his eyes from the sun and gazed out across the water. Light glittered on the surface, which rippled like a cornfield in the wind from one end of the horizon to the other. *It's so big.*

To think all this had been hiding beyond the dockyard walls the previous day. He drew in a deep breath, and his nostrils twitched at the briny assault.

Blue flitted about the beach, trilling with pleasure. She stopped here and there, investigating an upturned shell, followed by a clump of seaweed and a large rock.

Voices drew his head to the left, where a couple of youngsters pushed and shoved each other farther down the curving beach. Beyond, a figure strolled along the darker sand bordering the ocean, feet and ankles playing peek-a-boo in the surf.

A smile lifted Jake's face, and he headed for the water's edge. Would it feel as cool as the brook back on the estate? His feet sank in odd directions with each step, causing the smile to waver. Why couldn't he walk properly? He removed his shoes and socks and scrunched his toes into the soft grains, his eyes

closing for a moment before he continued his slog across the sand.

When he found firmer footing on the damp section, he tossed his shoes aside, rolled up his trousers, and picked up speed. The swell rushed to meet him, engulfing his calves while icy droplets leaped up his legs and arms. He gasped. Almost as cold as the brook.

The water soon receded, sucked back out into the ocean's depths. It dragged the sand from under his feet, and he flexed his toes, causing them to burrow deeper. At the next wave, he wriggled them until his feet disappeared beneath the muck, then pulled each one loose with a wet "fflupt." Laughter bubbled up, and he jumped to a fresh spot, ready for the incoming surf.

He closed his eyes and let the liquid swirl around him, shushing his troubled mind. His problems washed away with each chilly rinse of his legs, and the strain in his shoulders eased. Perfect. Maybe he could actually relax for an hour or two.

He turned to walk the tideline and caught movement in his periphery. One of the boys had picked up his shoes.

"Hey! They're mine."

Their eyes met, and the kid was off, his plunder clutched one in each hand and his feet kicking up sprays of sand behind him.

Jake raced up the beach after the little thief. "Stop. Come ba-argh!"

His toe smashed into something hidden beneath the sand, and he went sprawling to the ground. He put his hands out to break his fall but still got a mouthful of fine grains. By the

time he'd risen to his knees, spitting and blinking grit from his eyes, the boy was halfway up the ladder to the walkway above.

Fists pounding the sand, Jake let out a groan that grew into a yell.

How could he ever have thought the city was perfect, the answer to all his problems? It was worse here than anywhere else—cultured and innovative on the surface but riddled with corruption and poverty underneath. Thieves, swindlers, thugs, murderers. When would this nightmare end? He squeezed his eyes tight against the sting of gritty tears. *I should never have left home.*

Blue landed on his hand, bounced up and down a few times, and took off again. She flew to a nearby pebble and nudged it with her snout. Then she burrowed underneath it and jerked her head up, sending the pebble tumbling, only to follow it and repeat the whole process. The corners of his lips curled up. It was good to see her play again.

He sniffed, wiped the back of his hand across his face. Twisting to sit, he pulled his leg out from under him and inspected his foot. Aside from a dull ache that spiked when he touched his toe, it appeared fine.

He dug through the sand and found the rock that had tripped him—a misshapen lump of limestone the size of his fist. Stupid thing! He hurled it towards the water, watching it thud into the beach and roll once or twice before coming to a stop. Then he rested his forearms on his knees and looked out at the ocean, just as serene and awe-inspiring as it had been only minutes before.

A crumpled ball of fabric hovered at the waterline, listing to the side with each wave that reached to tug at it. He peered

closer, and a bark of laughter escaped. “At least I won’t be completely barefoot.”

As he retrieved his damp socks and wrung them out, a low thwumping came from the city. The noise grew steadily louder, and Blue flew to his shoulder, burrowing under his collar. An airship crested the seawall a few moments later, and Jake stopped to stare.

Not as large or grand as the one he’d seen when he first arrived, it nevertheless took his breath. The waning sun painted soft browns and golds over the dark hull, and a gigantic, rust-coloured balloon bulged out above the deck as if testing its restraints.

It passed directly overhead, aimed towards the horizon. The clanks and hisses of the internal mechanisms and the steady beat of the propeller called to him, promising excitement and adventure. Even as he clamped his hands over his ears, he burned to climb aboard, solve the riddle of the design, and find freedom in far-off lands.

His feet carried him farther out into the surf, following the path of the airship above. If he could begin again somewhere else, he could dedicate himself to his true passion and escape the mistakes he’d made in Berlath. *So do it. What do you have to lose?*

Nothing. He had nothing to lose now, not even his shoes.

A tug at his legs brought his eyes down to the water, where a wave crested directly in front of him. Angry froth surged forwards and drenched his lower half before he could retreat to dry land. He gasped at the renewed cold biting his flesh and sloshed back to the beach, his trousers clinging to his skin.

He dropped onto the sand well away from the tideline and stared at the receding airship, the thrum of the engine slowly fading behind the repeated shushing of the ocean. Could he get aboard one and leave Berlath behind? A whisper of an idea began to form in his mind, twisting and turning until it took shape.

Finally set on a course of action, he whistled for Blue and hunkered down to wait for dark.



Late that night, he slipped through the wooden gate Clarissa help open for him and took his first deep breath since arriving outside half an hour earlier. Night had a firm grip on the city, but fear of being caught had still dogged his steps, prodding him to run as he'd huddled in the alleyway listening for her.

She slid an iron bolt home, then turned to him and held a finger up to lips illuminated by the lantern she held. Through the darkness nipping at the flickering light, she steered him to the side of a courtyard and down a gap between the rear of the Captain's Rest and a large shed that leaned against the wall like a drunkard at the bar.

Only when they were deep in the recess did she stop. She placed her lantern next to the downpipe on a water butt and pulled a package from beneath her coat.

"Here." She shoved it into his hands and leaned back on the wall. "It's just some leftovers from dinner, but I thought..." Waving her hand in his general direction, she avoided meeting his eyes.

Jake peeled back the paper, revealing a few torn crusts of bread and a half-eaten meat pie. They sat on top of a

congealed lump of stew with some cold beans mashed into it. Blue took one look and flew over to Clarissa, who started but held out her hand and stroked Blue's head when she landed.

"Traitor," Jake muttered. He sank onto an upended barrel and dug in, stuffing his mouth until his cheeks bulged. "Thank you."

The words, spoken around a mouthful of pastry, sent a spray of crumbs flying through the air. His eyes flicked to Clarissa, who watched him openly. He brought a hand up to wipe his lips, deliberately swallowed, and cast her an apologetic smile. She shrugged one shoulder, and he went back to eating.

A few moments later, she straightened with a gasp and pointed at his feet, dislodging Blue, who flew to his shoulder. "Where are your shoes?"

He looked down. "Um, well, I..." There was no way to dress it up, and his shoulders dropped. "I was robbed."

Her "tsk" branded his chest—*such a failure*—but she suddenly said, "Wait here," ran to the tavern's back door, and slipped inside.

The minutes ticked by as he finished the leftovers, picking up the last of the crumbs on his fingertips before wadding up the paper and stuffing it in his pocket. *Better not leave any evidence of me being here.*

His gaze strayed to the door again and again, but it remained resolutely shut. Where was she? Had she changed her mind about helping him? If so, he'd have to slip out through the gate and... His mind blanked on what to do after that.

The door opened, and his breath caught. His gaze swung wildly about him, landing on the water butt. Would hiding behind it make too much noise? Before he could move, a skirt rustled, footsteps approached, and Clarissa appeared beside him. His heart restarted, and he forced his body to relax.

She held out a pair of mismatched boots.

“From the lost and found,” she said. “You’d be amazed what rich folk’ll take off when they’re drunk. They won’t be missed. Here, try them on.”

He pulled them onto his feet. The left pinched his toes, and the right swallowed his foot. Examining them side by side, he flexed them and chuckled. He wouldn’t get into Leoman’s, but it was better than walking around in his socks. He looked up. “Thank you.”

“No problem. They were just sitting in a box full of junk behind the counter.” She cleared her throat and tipped her head in the direction of a covered enclosure opposite the shed. “I can’t let you inside, but you can sleep in with the animals if you want. Got to be safer than anywhere out there.” Her thumb pointed over her shoulder towards the back gate.

He glanced up at the tavern behind him, at the windows where slivers of light escaped around the edges of curtains and shutters.

“No one will see you if that’s what you’re worried about. I’m the only one living upstairs since Grace got married last month.”

His brows scrunched together. “What about Terence?”

She shook her head. “He has his own place over on Keple Street. Keeps the upstairs rooms for those of us with no place else to stay. Trust me. No one will see you overnight.”

Relief welled, closing his throat, so he just nodded.

She leaned against the wooden wall of the shed. “So, what’re you going to do? You can’t hide forever.”

“I know. I need to get out of Berlath.”

“They’ll just come after you. I told you that.”

“Not if I’m on an airship.” He grinned at her stunned expression. “I could start again somewhere else, somewhere far away. There’s no way they’d track me across the sea. What?”

Shaking her head again, she pushed off the wall. “Uh-uh. You’ll never make it. The crew train for a year before they’re even considered, and the last person one of the captains caught stowing away was tossed overboard—in the middle of the ocean.”

An image of slowly sinking into the freezing depths swam across his vision, but he blinked it away. “How do you *know* these things?”

She lifted one shoulder. “You hear a lot working in a place like this.”

He opened his mouth, then closed it. Why *did* she work there? Come to think of it, what did he actually know about her? His lips pursed to the side.

He took a breath and opened his mouth again, but she spoke first.

“Why don’t you go home? Your family—”

“No!”

She flinched at his sharp refusal, making him wince. His hands clenched, and he swallowed. “They wouldn’t want me

back now. Not after I... And I can't bring trouble to them. I have to fix this on my own."

Her head turned aside, and she stared out over the courtyard, her expression impossible to read. "All right," she said, facing him again. "What other option do you have?"

He lifted his chin. "I'll have to leave by air, whatever the risks. It's the only way."

"Then you'll need money."

They lapsed into silence.

He glanced at Blue, and words drifted through his head. "*Do come back if you change your mind about the flurtoo.*" An image of her stuffed in a display case followed, and he shook it loose, nausea rising.

"Clarissa! You out here?"

Light spilled from the back door as it opened towards them, drawing the silhouette of a female figure across the courtyard.

Jake jumped to his feet, but Clarissa laid a hand on his arm. She put a finger to her lips before calling out, "I'm getting water for the pigs. They knocked their trough over again."

The door opened wider, the silhouette shifting, but the woman didn't step over the threshold. "Well hurry up. Terence wants to lock up, and he's threatening to put you on kitchen duty if you keep him waiting much longer."

Clarissa let out a snort. "And lose his share of my tips?" She raised her voice. "Tell him to keep his hair on. I'll be in in a minute."

Jake's eyes widened, Terence's bald pate and glaring countenance fixed in his mind. His head whipped between Clarissa and the back door, half expecting her boss to storm out and fire her. And then turn on him.

Instead, the door closed, and the courtyard was plunged into darkness once again. She glanced at him.

“Don't worry. You're safe enough out here, for a blooder. But we'd better get moving.”

She retrieved the lantern, looked up at the windows—shuttered for the night—and led Jake across the courtyard to what would best be described as a poorly-constructed hovel.

Rough sheets of plywood covered three sides of a wooden frame abutting the wall. A wide gap ran around the top, above which a piece of corrugated metal had been wedged between the front upright supports and the wall. The pungent hum of manure emanated from within.

Clarissa yanked open an old door fixed to one of the posts at the back and gestured him inside. He ducked under the frame, his nostrils protesting at the increased stench. Even the estate's *chickens* had better lodgings than this.

But he had nowhere else to go, and at least it was a roof over his head. A wry smile tugged at his lips. Unbelievable as it would have been only a week earlier, he was grateful for even that much. Without Clarissa's aid, he'd probably be in the hands of the Syndicate by now.

She nudged him farther inside. “Stay out of sight until the lights go out, will you? I can't afford to get caught.”

“Of course,” he mumbled.

Edging around one of the pigs, he found a relatively clean patch of straw and dragged it into a pile with his foot. It was as

good a spot as any to bed down for the night.

“I’ve got to go, but you should be okay here. Just make sure you’re gone before sunup. You can climb over the wall using the stack of crates in the corner, and the water in the butt’s mostly drinkable.”

He turned to thank her, but the words wouldn’t come. He swallowed his emotions. “Why are you helping me?”

She transferred the lantern from one hand to the other, its light washing over features grown still as stone. With a one-shouldered shrug, she said, “Everyone needs help sometimes.”

She spun then and walked away.

Darkness surrounded him as the door to the tavern closed behind her, blocking off the last sliver of light. He sank to the ground and shivered, despite the heat radiating from the pig beside him. It snorted and adjusted position, hemming him in and causing Blue to flap her wings a few times on his shoulder as he also shifted.

“Don’t worry, girl,” he whispered. “It’s not for long. Tomorrow, we’re going to figure out how to get on an airship.”

Chapter 24

Jake

The next morning, Jake clambered over the wall and dropped into the alley before the sun had fully risen. Avoiding the busier thoroughfares, he scurried from one hiding spot to the next until he reached the coastal outskirts of the city.

He wandered along a narrow path flanking a series of industrial buildings and emerged not far from the Berlath Waste Management Centre, as proclaimed in wrought metal above the entrance. Not that the sign was necessary—the smell emanating from the massive site warned of its proximity long before he arrived.

As he spun to leave, a couple of men walked through the gates and disappeared between giant piles of refuse. They pushed no waste carts and carried no bags of rubbish. They simply walked in, one with an empty sack slung over his shoulder, the other trailing an empty wheeled basket behind him. What in the world were they doing?

Jake looked around. Farther along the road, a woman also trudged towards the dump, folded-up burlap held in one hand. He stepped out to intercept her.

“Excuse me. Miss? What are you doing here?”

She looked up, surprise rounding her eyes and mouth alike. Her forehead scrunched. “Working the dump,” she said in a tone that named him imbecile.

“Um, what’s that mean?”

She sighed, jutting one hip and pointing to the open gates. “You go through the rubbish looking for scrap metal and then sell anything you find to the salvage office over there.” Her finger swung to a nondescript building on the other side of the road.

“It’s called dump diving.” She laughed, and Jake joined in weakly.

He followed her as far as the entrance but stopped just outside. “What do you think, Blue? The Syndicate probably won’t look for me in there.”

No answer came from his pocket. He pulled it open, but her head was tucked inside her shell.

He returned his attention to the dump, where piles of waste rose above the walls like foothills of the mountain range behind them. The woman had said there was money to be made inside. *Maybe enough for airfare if I work hard and get lucky.*

“It’s not for ever,” he said aloud. “Just until I can get enough money together to leave.”

He took a step forward.

The breeze shifted, hitting him with an especially pungent odour and a stray piece of half-rotted fruit peeling. What was he doing?

Every time he thought he’d sunk as low as he could go, something else happened to push him even further. Eating

other people's leftovers, sleeping with animals reared for the table, and now rummaging through filth in hopes of finding a few pieces of junk metal. Was there no end to the depravity to which he'd subject himself? He bent down and tightened the shoelace on his overlarge boot, on the verge of running back down the coastal path.

He stood, firmed his jaw. No, this was different. This was him taking back some control. The task might be repugnant, but it was no worse than cleaning out the cistern—or the mammoth stalls back on the estate—and he had a new purpose pushing him forward.

Taking one last lungful of relatively fresh air, he stepped through the gate and headed for the nearest refuse pile. A bent pipe jutted out from the middle of the stack, but when he tried to tug it free, it dislodged several bags of waste that tumbled down the mound towards him.

One burst open, spilling rotten food scraps and balled up napkins over his feet. He shook them off with a grimace and turned back to the pipe, but a flash of red in his periphery stilled his outstretched hand. Slowly, he swivelled and looked down.

A handful of battered tandiit cards lay amidst the debris. Disgust ripped through him, and he kicked them aside, unable to bear the mocking reminder of his stupidity. How he wished he'd never even heard of tandiit.

Head bowed, he swallowed his regret, exhaled, and returned to his task. He had metal to find.



By the time the supervisor called for the gates to be closed that night, Jake's back ached, and a fresh layer of grime coated his skin. He hauled his collection over to the salvage station and waited in line with the other dump divers, warning Blue to stay out of sight.

When his turn came, he stepped forwards and heaved his bag onto the counter. A middle-aged man with clips holding his shirtsleeves halfway up his forearms gave him the once-over and said, "New, huh?"

"Um, yes. First day. Do I need a permit or—"

"Just pass me what you've got, sorted into different metals, and I'll pay you what it's worth."

The reclamation agent said nothing while he weighed the tin cans, old pipework, and copper wiring Jake handed him, but his eyebrows rose at the section of broken automaton. Jake had discovered it underneath a particularly nasty-smelling pile, the contents of which he'd tried to ignore as he worked his prize loose. His perseverance had paid off, though, as the parts should fetch a tidy sum.

On first inspection, the pile of coins he received didn't match the value he'd calculated in his head. He opened his mouth to question the amount, but the agent spoke first.

"You get paid by weight here. Might get more from one of the engineers on Locke Street, if you want to take the workings there."

And risk being caught by enforcers? "No. This is fine, thanks."

A guinea was still a fine amount for a day's work, more than many of the other divers had earned. *If I can keep this up, I'll be able to pay for passage on an airship in a couple of*

weeks. A trace of hope stirring to life in his chest, he moved aside and tucked the money into the inner pocket of his jacket.

At the corner of the building, a young girl stared at him from wide-set eyes. Her flat face tilted to one side as their gazes met, and she stepped closer to the wall as if about to flee. Was she a dump diver too? His heart squeezed at the notion.

He smiled and held out a shill. She shuffled forwards, the tip of her tongue sticking out of a broad grin, and snatched it from his hand.

“I’m Jake,” he said, checking no one else was within hearing. “What’s your—”

The rest of his question stalled as she gasped, covered her mouth with stubby hands, and ran down the passage between the salvage station and a wrecking yard.

“Well, that was odd.”

Blue poked her head out of his shirt collar.

“Let’s get out of here. Want to hang out by the water again till it gets dark?”

She sneezed, tacit agreement if ever he heard it. He chuckled, rubbed her head, and ducked out of sight of the others.



That night, he waited in the alley for nearly an hour before hearing footsteps on the other side of the back gate. Clarissa’s face appeared around the edge at his knock, but she pushed him back when he tried to enter.

“You can’t stay h— What’s that smell?” The portion of her face illuminated by her lantern crinkled, and Jake’s cheeks heated.

“Sorry. It’s me. But I made some money at the dump today.”

“You went dump diving?”

“Yes, and I made a guinea. See?” He held out the coins he’d been given earlier. “At this rate, I’ll be able to pay my way onto an airship in less than a month.” He ducked his head, the excitement fading from his voice. “If I can sleep here and you can keep feeding me, I should be able to avoid the Syndicate till then.”

“That’s what I was trying to tell you. You can’t stay here. Ralph’s hunting you—it’s all over the tavern.”

He gaped at the firm set of her jaw, desperation clawing between his shoulder blades. “I know they’re after me. That’s why I need to hide here.”

She shook her head so vehemently one of her curls escaped its pin. “Not the enforcers. Ralph’s the Syndicate’s top hunter.”

A shudder ripped through Jake. He looked over his shoulder, half expecting a lethal-looking man to jump out of the bins behind him.

Clarissa’s expression softened a fraction. “Look, hiding you from enforcers was one thing, but a hunter’s different. I’m sorry, but it’s too dangerous.” She peered behind him as well, her eyes darting from one end of the alley to the other.

“They say he runs with a fell-hound, and I can’t risk...”

He gripped the gatepost. A fell-hound. The rest of her words faded, a pair of glowing yellow eyes filling his fear-shrunken brain. Teeth like razors bit down on his neck as flashing claws sliced deep into his belly. He clutched the spot, staggering backwards, and came back to the creak of the gate closing in his face.

Wedging a hand in the gap, he tried to make eye contact.

“Please. I know you’re scared, but please help me.”

The pressure on his fingers eased. “You can’t stay here.”

“I know. But at least...” What? What more could he ask of her? He dropped his arm. “I’m sorry. Thanks, for everything.”

He turned to leave, and felt her hand on his shoulder. She sighed. “Wait here.”

She closed the gate, plunging him into darkness filled with unseen terrors. Every noise, however slight, caused his pulse to beat faster in his ears, and his fear-laden scent became a beacon to every predator within ten miles. Even Blue became infected by his nerves, fluttering around his head and keening.

An endless few minutes later, Clarissa returned. She thrust a package into his hands, similar to the one she’d given him the previous night.

“You may as well have these. And I suppose I can leave some more in the rocks at the end of the beach tomorrow afternoon.”

He clutched the lukewarm paper to his chest. “Thank you. I mean it. Thank you. If I can ever pay you back someday, I will.”

She rolled her eyes, the whites flashing in the darkness. “Be careful. Ralph’s their top hunter for a reason.” With that,

she closed the gate for a final time.

He waited for the bolt to slide into place and edged along the alley. He'd have to find somewhere else to sleep from now on—maybe the beach—and keep a closer look out for people watching him, but at least he'd have food.

His foot struck something metallic, the dull clang echoing through the still night and taunting his earlier confidence. He held his breath and kept perfectly still. The Syndicate hunter could be tracking him right now.

When would this nightmare end? He'd never be easy until he could escape the city, and maybe not even then.

Chapter 25

Jake

The next morning, Jake crawled out of the sewerage maintenance tunnel where he'd slept fitfully through the remainder of the night and stretched his back. Blue flew out behind him, banked around his head, and swooped down to investigate a crab twice her size that was crawling across a seaweed-covered rock. It snapped its claws, and she took to the skies again, chittering as she flapped over to Jake's shoulder.

The beach was deserted at that hour, the pristine sand still damp from the receding tide. Only a couple of seagulls broke the calm, fighting over something farther along the shoreline, while streaks of pink and orange along the horizon promised the sun's imminent arrival.

He climbed halfway up the ladder to the promenade above and stuck his head up, checking both directions for signs of life. The immediate area appeared empty, so he clambered the rest of the way to the top. He was about to step out onto the walkway when he spotted a man sitting on a nearby bench reading a paper by the light of an irium lantern hanging above it.

Jake ducked back down the ladder and waited, straining for sounds of the man's movement. *That could have been*

anybody. You're lucky he's just out for the early paper.

After a few minutes, the bench creaked, and firm, even footsteps faded into the distance. Jake climbed up to the pavement again and cautiously emerged. As he passed the bench, a slight breeze lifted the top pages of the man's paper, which he'd left folded in half on the wooden slats.

The headline caught Jake's attention. **BREAKTHROUGH IN CRYSTAL TECHNOLOGY!**

His mind raced. What could it be? And who'd made the discovery?

There was no one else within view, so he walked over and picked the paper up. It was still warm, the scent of fresh ink wafting from the front page as he opened it out to reveal the whole article. The man must have bought it directly from the printers.

Jake read the first paragraph. 'Professor J T Swire, of the Timion-Welles University, has discovered a means of harnessing and directing the energy created by adymine crystals...' The professor had mentioned something about that when they'd met. So, he'd done it then.

Jake read on. And stopped. His hands clenched, crumpling the sides of the paper. Professor Swire hadn't figured it out. He'd stolen Jake's design. The picture beside the text, crude as it was, confirmed the ugly truth. Part of the machine depicted was one of the designs the professor had kept, supposedly to show to his colleagues in a bid to secure Jake a place at the university.

Jake dropped his arms, letting the paper fall from his fingers. "He never meant to help me. He just wanted my idea."

No wonder the professor had been unavailable since their meeting. *Well, he'll see me today!* Mind wiped of all else, Jake set off for the university campus.

By the time he reached the gatehouse, he'd worked up a considerable head of steam. He banged on the outer door, still closed for the night, and ground his teeth while he paced the cobbles and waited for the porter to open up. Images of the professor soaking up praise for his work made his head throb, and he pounded the wood again.

Footsteps approached from the other side of the massive arched door, followed by the rattle of keys in a lock. A small section opened at one side, and the porter appeared, holding a tallow lantern aloft. "What d'you want? D'you know what time it is?"

"I need to see Professor Swire."

"At this time of the morning?"

The porter frowned but opened the door wider, allowing Jake to step through, and walked over to his office. He reached inside for the ledger he'd consulted last time and started flipping through the pages. Jake clenched his jaw on a demand to hurry up.

Eventually, the porter raised his head and said, "He's not available today. If you'd—"

"Sorry, but that's not acceptable." Jake walked through the gatehouse arch and straight across the lawn towards the doorway leading to the professors' offices. He spared a glance for the founders' statue on his way past. Had they been this corrupt?

"Hey. What're you doing? You can't go in there."

Sounds of the porter scrambling after him chased Jake to greater speed, and he flung open the door and stormed up the staircase to the second level, taking the steps two at a time. The porter's continued calls for him to stop floated up behind him, and a man at the top reached out to bar his way, but Jake brushed past him like a blizzard past a wildflower.

He marched down the corridor, his footsteps ringing loudly on the stones. When he reached Professor Swire's door, he threw it open and glared around the empty interior. Of course it was empty. The thieving bilge-swill would probably still be in his rooms.

Jake spun on his heel and looked up and down the row of identical doors outside. Where now? He didn't have much time to decide if the clatter of feet on the stairs was anything to go by. He set off in the opposite direction.

“Professor Swire! Where's Professor Swire?”

A door opened farther along the corridor, and a man stepped out wearing a thick leather apron and face shield. He raised the headgear and asked, “What's going on out here?”

It took Jake a moment to recognise the professor, but when he did, he levelled a look filled with more venom than a bucket full of biricat saliva at him.

“You stole my design.”

Professor Swire's head jerked back, his eyes widening and mouth falling slack. Then he blinked, pasted on a smile, and walked towards Jake. He opened his mouth to speak, but whatever he was about to say was cut off by the arrival of the porter.

Huffing and puffing, the porter staggered to a halt beside Jake, leaning one hand on the wall for support. “I'm sorry, sir.

I tried to stop him.”

“It’s all right, Banks,” the professor said. “I’ll deal with this.”

“Very good, sir.” The porter tugged his waistcoat down and gave Jake a look of disdain before walking back along the corridor to the stairwell.

“You’d better come in.” Professor Swire ushered Jake inside his office, closed the door behind them, and draped his protective gear over the back of one of the chairs.

Jake stood in the middle of the room, his hands clenched. “Why’d you do it? Why’d you steal my design?”

“I’m sorry, Jake. I tried to get you a place in the department, but the others... You have to understand. They went to the best schools in the city and came here with the highest recommendations. They wouldn’t countenance someone with no formal training being given a place, even with a large donation to the university.”

“So you stole my design.”

The professor winced. “I needed it—for my research. Obviously, I’d have preferred we work on it together, but that wasn’t possible. I tried to reach you, but the hotel said you checked out. You must understand—”

“I understand all right. You stole my design.”

“Will you stop saying that!” The professor clamped his lips together, then took a calming breath and fixed his smile back in place. “Your work has so much potential. Would you really want it to go to waste because I was unable to get you a place here? Anyway, I didn’t *steal* it. I used it. For the betterment of mankind. This could unlock so many secrets of crystal—”

“But it wasn’t yours to use. That design could have saved my life if I’d been able to sell it.”

The professor snorted. “Sell it? You didn’t even know what you had. You used a revolutionary idea to make an automated scoop when it could be applied to so much more. With this shielding, we can focus and control adymine reactions, direct all that energy at a specific point. This will change everything!”

“Great. So you can afford to pay me a decent amount for my design.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I don’t have that kind of money. Not yet anyway.” A faraway look came into the professor’s eyes as if he were seeing the guineas pile up in front of him.

“Then I want it back. And recognition for whatever you’ve done with it.”

“I can’t do that. I’d be thrown out.”

Jake stared at him.

The professor scratched his neck. “Look, it doesn’t have to be like this. I could give you a job, as my junior assistant. We work well together—your ideas, my expertise.” He held his hands out to his sides and gave Jake a wide grin. “What do you say?”

“You mean me doing all the work while you get all the credit.” Jake snorted. “No thanks. I’d be better off going out there and telling the world it’s mine.”

The professor stepped forwards, his eyes narrowed. “Don’t you threaten me, you little dross-bound twek. No one would believe you for a second.” He looked Jake up and down and sneered. “I don’t know what’s happened to you since we last met, but you look and smell like a gutter rat. I, on the other

hand, am a distinguished professor at the Timion-Welles University. I'll have you thrown in jail if you try it. Besides"—he stepped back and sniffed—"you have no proof."

Jake's fingernails bit into his palms. He needed his drawings back. His eyes landed on the desk, papers strewn across the surface, and he shoved past the professor and started looking through them. "My design's got to be here somewhere. I sign and date all my work."

The professor slammed his hand down on the sheet Jake had just picked up. "Your scribbles went on the fire yesterday when I presented my invention to the faculty. The only evidence you'll find here is a year's worth of my work, culminating in the shielding breakthrough used in the final design." He straightened and adjusted his cuffs. "Now, are you going to leave under your own steam, or shall I have you thrown out?"

Jake worked his jaw. Much as he hated to admit it, the professor was right. No one would believe he'd created the key component of such a complex, ground-breaking design, and there was nothing he could do about it. He blew out a breath, pushed back from the desk, and headed for the door. "Fine, I'll go. But you won't get away with this."

The professors parting words stabbed straight through his back. "I already have."



After spending the next six or seven hours at the tip with only half an eye and even less of his brain on the task of finding scrap metal, Jake made his way along the coastline to the beach where Clarissa had said she'd leave him some food. He

should have waited until dark, until she was long gone, he knew that, but he needed to talk to someone who could answer back with more than a high-pitched chirp.

He clambered around the seaward side of the rocky headland, staying below the ridgeline and using boulders for cover wherever possible. A gap between the raised terrace and a jumble of boulders provided the perfect place to wait, so he hunkered down and peered through a crevice at the beach beyond.

An hour or so had passed when he saw Clarissa walking towards him. Her gaze meandered over her surroundings, and her steps were slow and even over the sand. She looked like any other worker taking a stroll during her break.

When she reached the first of the rocks, she stood for a while, gazing out to sea, one hand shielding her eyes from the sun. Then she climbed up and perched on a large boulder, her hands spread out to the sides and her face tipped up to the sun.

A short while later, she let her fingers drift over the area around her, occasionally picking something up for a closer look. She held a pearlescent shell up to the light and examined it, sliding a small package from her jacket with her other hand and letting it fall behind the rock she was sitting on before returning to her exploration. The action was so slight he would have missed it had he not been looking so closely.

Jake checked no one was nearby and crawled through the rocks until he was within an arm's reach of her, still hidden from the rest of the beach behind the outcrop that formed her makeshift seat.

“Clarissa,” he whispered, barely loud enough to be heard over the splashing of the surf.

Her head whipped around. “Jake? What in the world!”

She started to get up, but he reached out to stall her.

“Don’t leave. Please.”

Her body tense, she angled away from his position and stared out at the water, her voice coming through gritted teeth.

“Are you trying to get me killed? What are you doing here?”

“I needed to talk to you. And no one can see me. I promise. Please, just stay.”

It took a few moments, but her posture relaxed, and he released a breath.

“Is Blue with you?” she said without moving her lips.

Jake put a hand to his pocket, where Blue was curled up in a handful of wadding he’d pulled from a broken sofa that morning. “Yes, do you want to—”

“For goodness’ sake, keep her hidden. She’s a dead giveaway you’re here.”

All right then. “I went to the university this morning.”

Clarissa’s forehead scrunched, and she put a hand up as if protecting her eyes from the glare of the sun. “Are you insane? Why?”

“Because I read about Professor Swire’s invention in the paper. Only it’s not his invention, it’s mine.”

“What are you talking about?”

Jake shifted on his haunches, blew out a breath, and started again. “I came to the city because I love building machinery, and I wanted to see if I was good enough to make a living at it. So I went to see the professor when I first got here, and he kept a couple of my designs to show to the other faculty, see if

he could get me a place there. Only he didn't do that. He stole them instead."

Clarissa didn't answer straight away, and when she did, her voice was distracted. "At least you know your ideas are worth something."

What? Jake's entire face twisted into a scowl. "Didn't you hear me? He stole my designs, and now he's in all the papers, and I'm still hiding from the Syndicate."

She glanced briefly in his direction. "You wanted validation. You got it—your designs are good enough for a university professor to steal. That's brilliant. And when you invent more, you can sell those knowing their value." She shrugged. "That's as much of a win as the likes of you or me will get from one of them."

Jake stared down at his hands, his frown slowly easing. *Huh*. He hadn't considered it that way before, but it made a twisted kind of sense. Maybe he could take something positive from the disastrous experience after all. "Still, selling it would have meant enough to pay for both of us to leave Berlath."

She looked directly at him. "You'd have paid for me too? Why?"

He tilted his head to the side. "You've helped me. Seemed only fair."

Her mouth hung open as she slowly shook her head.

"I have to go." She stood and brushed off her skirts, pulling him back to the present. "Don't come out from there, or even move, for at least half an hour after I'm gone."

"Yes, Miss." He gave her a mock salute, then added, "Thank you. For listening. And for the food, and all your help over the last few days."

“Yeah, yeah. You’re grateful. I get it. But don’t come here while I’m around again, or I won’t be back.” She climbed down the rocks to the beach, muttering something about getting talked into things and too soft.

Jake waited until she’d walked back along the beach to the steps at the far end, then reached into the crevice where she’d let the package fall and pulled it out. He opened it to reveal a cracked pie with a few bites missing from one edge, and a few crusts of bread, fresh from the lunchtime service at the tavern. The savoury aroma made his mouth water, and his stomach rumbled as he licked a blob of gravy off his finger.

He shovelled the leftovers down his gullet as fast as he could chew and swallow, thanking the founders that he had at least one friend in the city.

Chapter 26

Ralph

Ralph paid his surroundings the barest attention necessary to turn down the right alley and step over a stinking pile in his path. He reread the message he's just received from one of his informants, his jaw clenched against swearing aloud.

Of all the people for the blooder to be seen with, a barmaid from the Captain's Rest was a complication he could've done without. Still, if Terence wanted the Syndicate to stay out of his business, he should've kept a closer watch on his staff.

Crumpling the scrap of paper into a tight wad, Ralph tossed it onto a pile of rubbish overflowing the nearest bin. He took the next left, his long strides eating up the uneven ground between him and the tavern. The lead may be a day old, but he was confident he could persuade whichever barmaid the blooder had contacted to talk.

Footsteps pounding behind him made him pause. His lips twitched, and he turned around, already pulling a coin from his pocket. Only one person ran with a gait like that.

"Hello, Wawf." The little girl gave him an overly large smile.

"You have information for me."

It wasn't a question, but she nodded, nonetheless. "I found that man you're after. Jake Amra— Alma—" Her dirty face scrunched with effort.

"Where'd you see him?"

"At the dump."

"The dump, eh?" Smart. Only one entrance but a thousand places to hide amongst the city's rubbish and enough routes through the mounds to make a blooder feel safe. Not that they were. Not from Ralph, at least. He could navigate every span of Berlath blindfolded, had done as much during his training under the Boss. But he'd need to strike fast before the blooder moved on.

"When was this?"

"Two days ago, but he's still there, dump diving."

Ralph pushed out a breath and squatted down to the girl's level. "Tell me everything."

"The first time I saw him, he was coming out with the others, but he din't walk like no dump diver, an' you could tell he wanted more for his haul than he got, so I thought it might be him. Then when he caught me watching him, he give me a shill and told me his name was Jake." Her forehead scrunched, her tongue sticking out between her lips. "He din't say the Amwell part, but it had to be him."

"And that was two days ago?"

Her face crumpled. "I tried to tell you straight away, but Little Gem wouldn't let me through. Said I was behind on my dues, but I'm not, Wawf, honest." She scowled with the ferocious intensity of a sleepy kitten. "He just wants the coins I get for duskin', but I wouldn't give 'em to him. I keep 'em in a safe place like you taught me."

She beamed at him, and Ralph couldn't help the smile that sprang to his lips in reply. He'd have to have words with Little Gem—for interrupting his information network.

“When I couldn't get to you, I went back to the dump and waited outside in case the blooder went back. He was there again at closing yesterday, but he was too fast for me to follow. But he's there again today—got there at first light—so I come to find you. I went the long way round so Little Gem wouldn't see me.” She shifted her weight and stared at him. “Did I do good, Wawf?”

“Sure, kid. You did great.”

His spies never let him down. No one ever thought to avoid the street urchins. He held up a dari, then set it spinning on a clear patch of ground nearby, watching her eyes widen. The huge grin that spread across her face wasn't why he made sure it stayed upright, catching the light as it rotated. He just needed to distract her from asking questions or following him.

By the time it came to rest with a dull, ringing thunk, he was halfway along the alley, heading for the city's dump. He checked the bazooka holstered across his back—net cartridge loaded and the crystal tank full. He wasn't likely to need it on this run, given the type of blooder he was hunting, but it paid to be prepared.

As soon as he had it resecured, he picked up his pace. A few more hours and he'd be done. Then he could pay Little Gem a quick visit and get some much-needed sleep.

Chapter 27

Nathan

Nathan walked into the tavern and straight over to the bar. After days of looking, he was no closer to finding Jake than he'd been when he first arrived. He removed his hat and shoved a hand through his hair.

When a barmaid appeared before him, he said, "I'll have a sahl, please. Black and as burned as you can get it."

She blinked at him but spun to fetch it from a hotplate on the back wall.

He leaned his elbow on the bar and glanced around. Huh. The place was made out to look like an airship—Jake would love it.

A scattered handful of people sat at tables, drinking or reading papers. A group of young men lounged against a railing, their attention fixed on two young women near the fireplace. And a white-haired man propped up the other end of the bar, his head lolling over his tankard. Did none of them have anything better to do in the middle of the day?

They looked the same as everyone else in the city—fancy fob watches on chains, hairpieces that appeared to move, unnecessary buckles and ruffles, and goggles everywhere he looked.

He shook his head, stifling a chuckle, and turned to the barmaid, spotting a pair of brass frames peeking out from her curly hair as well. “What’s with all the goggles?”

“Ha, very funny.”

“They have a sale on ’em or something?”

She rolled her eyes as she walked back over to him. “You mean you’ve never heard of the daring Captain Adler?” She set his cup down, put her hand on her chest, and fluttered her lashes like she had something stuck in her eye.

He shrugged. “Nope. Who’s he?”

Pausing mid-gesture, she pulled her head back and wrinkled her forehead. “You’re serious? Everyone knows who he is. Captain Adler—intrepid airship captain who explores the continent and beyond, going where no one’s been before and bringing back all sorts of exotic new things.”

She circled her hand in a “you get the idea” gesture. He gave her a blank look, and she rolled her eyes again.

“Everything he does becomes the latest trend less than a week after he gets back from one of his trips. And you’ve never heard of him?” She snorted. “I’d like to live where you come from.”

“I’d like to go back there.”

Crossing her arms over her chest, she gave him a speculative look. “There’s a place around the corner if you need a pair. Top hats too. Reasonable prices.”

It was Nathan’s turn to snort. “No thanks. I’ll stick with what I’ve got.”

He took a swig of his sahl—almost as charred as his father made it—and grinned. “Not bad. Thanks.”

She tilted her head, the corners of her lips twitching. After glancing up and down the empty bar, she leaned back against the cabinet behind it, her fingers idly fidgeting with a cloth rag.

“So what brings you to the city, if it’s not the fashion? Or celebrities.”

The sahl soured, and he lowered the cup to the counter. “I’m trying to find my brother.” He looked up into sympathetic blue eyes. “I’ve searched everywhere I can think of, but there’s no sign of him.” He dragged a hand over his beard. “I’m not sure what to do next.”

“What’s he look like? Maybe I’ve seen him around.”

He scanned the tavern again and sighed. The décor would draw Jake in. “Shorter than me, and thinner. Brown hair, green eyes, crazy about machinery. And he has a pet flurtoo.”

She straightened, her hands stilling. “You mean Jake?” she hissed under her breath.

“You know him?” He leaned forwards, his arm coming down on the countertop. At last, a solid lead. “Where is he?”

“Keep your voice down.”

Something about her tone and the furtive way she glanced around made the skin on the back of his neck prickle. “Why? What’s going on?”

She stepped closer, tipped his drink over, and whispered, “You’re not the only one looking for him.” Louder, she said, “I’m sorry, sir. I’ll get you another one.”

Grabbing the sahl pot from behind her, she refilled his cup and then took her time wiping down the spilled liquid. “He got

in trouble with the Syndicate, and now he owes them a blood debt big enough that they sent a hunter after him.”

Nathan groaned. *Oh, Jake. What have you done?* He ducked his head to her level. “I need to get to him first. Do you know where he is now?”

She paused her wiping and narrowed her eyes, her gaze traveling over his features in a disconcerting manner. After a few moments of silent scrutiny, she turned away, muttering to herself.

Why won't she— Impatience flared, but he tamped it down. “Please. I need to help him.”

Without turning around, she said, “If you’re that desperate for cash, try the dump. You can get good coin for scrap metal at the salvage yard. Best be quick, though, the best finds are all gone by mid-afternoon.”

Jake was at the dump? *I should've come sooner.* Slivers of pain pierced his chest, and he relaxed his hands so his fingernails didn't press so forcefully into his palms.

“Thank you.” He snatched his hat up and strode from the tavern. *Hold on, Jake.*

Chapter 28

Jake

Braced against a table missing one of its legs, Jake pulled a piece of sheet metal inch by laborious inch from the middle of a stack of old timber. He paused and wiped the back of his arm over his forehead, checking his surroundings for signs of life.

It had been two days since he'd discovered Ralph was hunting him. In that time, he'd pieced together more information about his foe from snippets of conversation overheard on the streets. None of it had been encouraging. He bent to his task once more, squelching the trepidation in his gut for the hundredth time that day.

The man had a reputation. He was one of the Syndicate's toughest operatives, had an array of state-of-the-art weapons at his disposal, never failed a mission, and was willing to travel well beyond the city limits after his quarry.

He was also, according to a drunken, white-haired beggar on the beach, an orphan raised by the boss of the Syndicate, though Jake wasn't certain as to the veracity or usefulness of that claim.

One thing was certain—Jake was living on borrowed time. He'd earned only thirteen bits on his second day as a dump diver, and if he couldn't free the piece in his grip without

toppling the entire pile onto himself, he'd not even match that amount.

He took a deep breath and pulled, every muscle straining. The panel shifted another couple of inches. *Nearly there. You can do this.*

A foot crunched on broken glass somewhere off to his left, and he whipped his head towards the sound. His hand slipped, and the edge of the metal sliced into his palm.

“Thsssss.” He sucked in a breath, closing his fist and pressing it to his thigh. Keeping his eyes on the gap between the mounds on his left, he reached into his trouser pocket for the cloth Clarissa had wrapped around the barely touched pie the previous day.

Another footstep, more of a squelch this time, but much closer, made him freeze. He stuffed the cloth back into his pocket and slowly, as quietly as possible, retreated to ground level.

Various escape routes danced through his mind, borne of hours spent learning the dump's layout. He was in the section farthest from the entrance, but that only gave him more directions in which to run.

It could be nothing more sinister than another dump diver, but he couldn't afford to find out. He shoved the morning's haul into a pile of rotting plant matter and toppled a couple of bags over it. If he was still free in an hour, he'd come back for it, but it would only hinder him now.

He put a hand to his empty shirt pocket. Had Blue been there, she could have created a distraction for him, but she wasn't. She'd refused to enter the dump after their first day

and was eating her way through a patch of weeds outside. He was on his own.

On near-silent feet, he turned to the right, aiming for a narrow gap between a mountain of general household waste and a precarious tower of broken chairs and bedframes.

Two steps on, he froze.

Struggle as he might, his body refused to move, rendered immobile against his will. What was happening? He'd only ever felt this back—

“Nathan?”

The name fell from his lips somewhere between a plea and a curse.

His mind balked at the notion of his brother in Berlath, never mind wading through a landfill site, but it had to be him. No one else besides their father could hold someone in place like that, and the older Amarel would never set foot in the capital.

Reeling from the implications, Jake groaned. If Nathan was here, he knew what Jake had done—was doing. Shame scorched his cheeks. *He must hate me now.*

The footsteps resumed behind him. He swivelled his gaze back and forth along his periphery but could see nothing of the person approaching.

An indistinct shadow fell across the ground beside him, lengthening as whoever it was neared. The silence was torturous. Why didn't they say something?

Maybe it wasn't Nathan after all. Maybe one of Ralph's weapons could freeze someone, giving him time to close in.

This was probably part of the punishment. If so, it was working.

Jake renewed his struggles to no avail. His pulse pounded faster and louder, the shadow growing into a feral beast—a fell-hound of his own making come to rip him apart one piece at a time.

After an eternity, a body stepped around to face him, but Jake clamped his eyes closed, terror sealing them shut. He waited for the pain to begin, every muscle in his body tensed in anticipation of the first blow.

It never came.

Slowly, he peeled first one eye and then the other open. And his jaw dropped.

Nathan stood in front of him. Tears rimmed his eyes, and he swallowed, his head shaking infinitesimally from side to side. He lowered his arm, and Jake sagged, only to be caught in the fiercest hug his brother had ever bestowed.

“Ah, Jake.”

The effort it took Jake to stop himself from crying caused his body to convulse. He wrenched free of Nathan’s grip and spun away. An urge to run and hide overwhelmed him, but what was the point? Nathan had already seen the state he was in, and had probably heard the rest.

“Trying out a new cologne? Can’t say I like it myself, but...”

Jake squeezed his eyes shut. Did his brother have to rub it in? He turned, and Nathan’s grin fell flat. “Well now you know. Why don’t you go tell Dad what a huge failure I am, and then you can go back to being happy I’m gone.”

“Happy you’re—” Nathan planted his hands on his hips and narrowed his eyes. “I’ve just spent the better part of a week searching this festering peacock of a city for you. How about ‘thank you, Nate. I appreciate you caring enough to come looking for me.’”

“Of course you came. Any chance to play the hero, right? Guess that’s why you kept me around, so you’d have someone pathetic to save all the time.” Jake cringed. *Shut up. What are you doing?*

“Arrrrrrgh!” Nathan grabbed his shoulders, locking him in place as effectively as he’d done with his powers earlier. His eyes bored into Jake like hot coals, their perpetual spark of humour absent. “Listen to me, you goat-brained idiot. You’re my brother. I—”

“Only because you got stuck with me when I was a baby.”

“No.” Nathan’s grip tightened. “We were never stuck. We chose to take you with us. Don’t you get it? We love you, and that’s stronger than blood.”

“Love me. How could you? I’m nothing like you. You prove that every time you show off your powers.”

Nathan pulled back, his arms dropping. “Show off? I was helping you—protecting you, you dummy. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you.”

Jake refused to believe it. He’d break if he did. “Right. Because I can’t do anything on my own.”

Nathan tilted his head, his brows raised. “Yes, Jake. That’s exactly it.” He ruffled Jake’s hair before pushing his head away. “Now are you coming back to my hotel or not?”

Jake shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Dare he involve his family in the problems he’d made? He couldn’t

take that amount of trouble to them, but what was the alternative—root through the detritus of the city until he found enough scrap metal to cover an airship ticket? Live every second of the day plagued by the prospect of being beaten and enslaved?

Something inside him began to crumble. Ralph would catch him long before he could escape on his own. His vision blurred, and hot lines forged down his face. He swiped at them with a grimy fist.

“I’ve wanted to come home—so many times. But I can’t face Dad. He’ll hate me for what I’ve done.”

“No, he won’t. But we can talk about that later.”

Jake shook his head. He had to get it out. “I lost all the money he gave me, and, and I destroyed our name, and... I’ve failed at everything.” He flicked a glance at Nathan and dropped his gaze to the ground, his voice lowering to a whisper. “There are dangerous people after me, and I’m scared.”

Nathan’s arm landed around his shoulders, making him jump. “Yup. Kid brothers are all kinds of annoying, but what can you do?” He shrugged, his voice taking on a wistful quality. “Can’t disintegrate ’em—gets dust all over the couch.”

He squeezed Jake’s neck and let go. “Now can we please get out of here? I’m not sure there’s enough soap in the whole city to get this stench out of my nose. Seriously, you reek.”



Nathan’s hotel was a pale shadow of the Belmont, but it was clean and out of the way. Several times on their walk there,

Jake felt eyes on him, but each time he whirled around, the street behind them was empty.

After the fourth incident, he let it go. Exhaustion dragging him down, he followed Nathan's lead, counting on him to handle any attack that might come. He took Jake in the back way and straight up to his room on the third floor, where Jake soaked in a portable tub for the next half hour.

When the water was cold and he'd worn the soap down to a sliver, he got out, wrapped himself in a towel, and padded over to the single chair by the desk. His hand had started to bleed again, so he looked around for something to use as a bandage.

Blue flew over from her perch on the edge of the tub. She sniffed his fingers and chirped, flexing her wings, so he gave her shell a quick scratch. "Don't worry. It's not that bad."

Nathan rose from the bed and dragged the lantern closer. He'd not spoken since Jake stepped into the tub, but his eyes swam with questions. He looked down at Jake's palm and quirked his lips to the side. "I see you're as clumsy as ever... Want me to fix it?"

Jake bit off his retort and turned the chair to face Nathan, who perched on the end of the bed. He cupped Jake's hand between his palms, and heat radiated over Jake's skin, warming his whole arm.

"Why'd you come looking for me?" he asked. As soon as the question left his mouth, he willed it back, but it was too late. He watched his brother from the corner of his eye, his lower lip caught between his teeth.

Nathan cleared his throat. His eyes were serious when they met Jake's. "I missed you," he said. "So does Dad. The place

isn't the same without you."

Really? For the life of him, Jake couldn't see why.

"Do you really think I show off my powers?" Nathan asked.

Jake thought for a moment. "I think you like to be the hero and see me as a little kid who can't do anything for himself."

"What?" Nathan pulled back. "That's— I think you can do anything you put your mind to, especially with the things you invent."

"Then why wouldn't Dad let me build any of them?"

Nathan lifted one shoulder. "You'll have to ask him that."

"If he ever talks to me again."

"I'm sure you can sort things out when we get back."

Jake shook his head. "I can't go home. I told you, there are people after me."

"About that. You ready to tell me everything now?"

Dropping back against the chair, Jake rubbed his uninjured hand over his face. How could he explain the situation? Where should he start? At the beginning, his father would say. He breathed in deep and began to talk.

By the time he'd finished, the cut was fully healed, only a tingling sensation remaining of the healing process. Beads of perspiration dotted Nathan's brow, but he swiped them away with his arm and crossed to the window. He pulled the edge of the curtain aside and glanced up and down the street, the glow of irium lanterns lighting his profile. Was it really so late?

The silence sent spikes of apprehension through Jake's shoulder blades. His skin pebbled, so he busied himself

dressing in a spare set of clothes Nathan had laid out for him, rolling up the trousers to fit his shorter legs.

After a while, Nathan cleared his throat and turned. “One question. Doesn’t being a syndicate mean there isn’t a boss?”

Jake stared at him. “Yes, that’s the most important point right now.”

“Come on. You have to admit it’s a dumb name. *The boss.*”

“When you’re that powerful, you can call yourself whatever you want.” He shoved his feet into the mismatched boots. “And he’s sent his best hunter after me. Shouldn’t we be focused on that?”

“Fair point.” Nathan held his hands up in front of him but immediately dropped them, his face straightening. “We’ll get this sorted, Jake. I promise. We’ll get you home then pay them off when you’re safe.”

His stomach rumbled, and he pressed a hand over it. “I need some food. You want anything?”

Jake shook his head.

“I’ll be back in a few minutes. Don’t do anything crazy while I’m gone.”

The withering glare Jake threw at him went ignored.

When the door closed behind him, Jake looked around the room and sank back onto the chair, closing his eyes. Sleep called, and for the first time in days, he allowed himself to completely relax as he drifted off.

Chapter 29

Jake

The door banging open startled Jake awake. “Huh. What?”

He rubbed his eyes and looked up, only to freeze. The shadowy figure in the doorway wasn't Nathan. Jake stood, but there was nowhere to go with the man blocking the only exit. He backed up, and his legs hit the edge of the chair, nearly toppling him.

“The boss wants a word with you.”

Jake tried to work moisture into his mouth. “H-how did you find me?”

The man stepped inside, though he remained in the shadows.

“Followed you from the tip. Would've taken you then, but your friend got to you first.”

Jake reeled. They'd known he was there?

“Don't look so surprised. I know almost everywhere you've been and everyone you've spoken to in the last few days.”

“How?” He'd been so careful.

The man laughed. “You can’t hide from the Syndicate in our own city.” He walked farther into the room. “And you can’t buy loyalty with a single coin.”

Light from the fireplace finally touched his features, and Jake stared. He knew that face, recognised the clothes, and the weapons, and the tattoo.

“You!” he breathed.

Of all the people the Syndicate could have sent after him, he was sure this man had to be the worst. The last time they’d met, he’d filled the Emporium with more than just his physical presence. An aura of menace surrounded him that reached out and squeezed Jake’s windpipe closed.

“We’ve met before?” The hunter—Ralph—cocked his head, frowning. Then his brow cleared. “Right. You were with Jorret when I picked this up.” He produced a lethal-looking weapon from a holster strapped to his back, twisting it this way and that as if admiring a precious jewel. He flicked a switch, and a panel on the side glowed turquoise—adymine-powered. “I’ve not had a chance to use it yet.”

He narrowed his eyes and dropped the barrel into his other hand. “You gonna come quietly then?”

Before Jake could respond, a voice chipped in from behind him. “Not exactly.”

Nathan grabbed his arm, pulled him around the chair, and shoved him through a door Jake hadn’t noticed before tucked into the corner. “Run!”

He stumbled into an adjoining room and dashed towards an open door at the other side while Nathan locked the one they’d just come through and pocketed the key. Something thudded against it hard enough to rattle the frame, but it held.

Outside, Nathan used his power to slam the door of their original room shut and wedged a knife in the lock. Then he pushed a half-sized bookcase from farther along the hallway in front of it.

“Hurry. That won’t hold him for long.” He took the lead, flying down the rear staircase and out the same way they’d come in earlier.

Cool night air met them, the only light coming from the windows behind and a couple of lanterns at the corners of the hotel’s courtyard.

They were halfway across it when Jake pulled up short. “Blue!”

His hand went to his chest—and met a solid lump under the fabric of his shirt. He patted it, feeling its shape with frantic fingers, then yanked the pocket open and peered inside.

Blue shifted, one wing flexing in the sudden gap, and Jake breathed out. “It’s okay. She’s here.” Thank the founders she’d crawled in there while he was sleeping. He’d almost left her behind. He eased the pocket closed and tried to calm his racing heart.

“How long was I asleep?” he asked.

Nathan shrugged as he unlatched the back gate. “A while. I didn’t want to wake you, so I took my meal back downstairs.” His face pinched. “Sorry about that. I was only gone for about twenty minutes.”

A crash from inside drew their focus back to the hotel, and they both stilled. “Come on,” Nathan said, flinging the gate open. “Let’s get out of here.”

They rounded the building and took the first turning they came to, Jake barely aware of the direction he was going. *At*

least I'm dressed. An adrenaline-infused snicker bubbled up, earning him a disparaging glance from his brother.

But he couldn't help it. Days of living on a knife edge, expecting to be snatched at any moment, had left him raw. The ludicrous image of having to flee straight from a bath with only a towel to cover himself made him laugh again.

Nathan yanked him into a recessed doorway and clamped a hand over his mouth. "What are you doing?" he hissed. "Do you want him to catch us?"

Instantly sobered, Jake shook his head, as far as he was able.

"Good." Nathan dropped his arm and peered out along the street.

Jake leaned his head back against the door. "At least he didn't have his fell-hound with him."

"He has a—" Nathan threw a hand up. "Of course he does."

"Still glad you decided to help me?"

"Ecstatic."

They set off again, and Jake took the next turn to the right.

"Hey, where're you going?"

"To get Clarissa."

A hand around his upper arm brought him to a halt. He looked over his shoulder, raising his eyebrows as he locked eyes with his brother.

"Home's this way." Nathan pointed towards the distant mountains behind them.

Jake shook his arm loose. “And Clarissa’s this way. If Ralph knows she helped me, she’ll be in danger.”

Nathan stared back the way they’d come and blew out a breath. “Fine. Let’s go save the barmaid.”

They set off again, Jake’s stride soon turning to a jog as concern for Clarissa mounted. Nathan talked as they sped along the deserted street. Something about a safe place and leaving the city as soon as possible, but all Jake could muster was an occasional “Uh-huh.”

He replayed Ralph’s words in his mind—I know everywhere you’ve been and everyone you’ve spoken to—and mentally kicked himself for getting her involved. *I hope I’m not too late.*



When they arrived at the Captain’s Rest, the door was locked and all the lights were out. Jake banged on the solid wooden panel, paused for a few moments, and banged again. *Come on, Clarissa. Open up.* He kept going until he heard movement overhead.

Stepping back into the road, he peered at the upstairs windows and spotted a faint glow shifting behind one of the closed curtains. He hustled back to the door and waited for her to appear.

At last, a sliver of light appeared under the door, and scuffing sounds preceded a voice on the other side. “We’re closed. Come back in the morning.”

“Clarissa?” he whispered. “It’s me, Jake. I need to speak to you.”

The ensuing silence lengthened.

“It’s urgent, or I wouldn’t have come.” He gave the door a couple of open-palmed taps. “Let me in.”

Her sigh was audible, but a key scraped in the lock, the bars at top and bottom jolted loose with muffled thuds, and the door opened a crack. Clarissa’s eye glared out at him from the dark interior.

“What’re you doing here? And who’s that?” A finger flicked out towards Nathan around the edge of the wood.

Jake glanced at his brother, a mass of shadow behind him, and pursed his lips. “That’s my brother—”

“He found you then.” The door eased open a fraction more, her nose and chin coming into view.

“Um, yes. How’d you—?” He shook his head. “Never mind. Listen. Ralph found me.”

She jerked back a step. “And you came here? Are you crazy?”

The door began to close, but he put a hand out to stop it. “Wait. I’m serious. You need to—”

“Go away.” She put more of her weight against the wood. Why couldn’t she be reasonable? He was trying to save her, after all. He dropped his arm.

“Oh, for the love of the founders.” Nathan reached over Jake’s shoulder, pushed the door open, slowly but firmly, and ushered them into the tavern. With a glance up and down the street, he closed it behind them and slid one bolt home.

“Inside is better, in case either of you were wondering. Now tell the lady what’s going on so we can all get out of here.”

Jake gave him a withering look and turned to Clarissa, who folded her arms across the front of her robe and glared at him. “Um, right...” He took a deep breath. “Ralph nearly caught me just now. We managed to escape, obviously, but he said he knew where I’d been. So, um, we came to warn you. You need to leave for a while, to stay safe.”

Her eyes grew huge. “He knows you were here?”

Why wasn’t she moving? “Did you hear me? You need to leave. Now.”

“I knew I never should have helped you,” she whispered.

Jake’s gut twisted. “I’m sorry... But you really should stay somewhere else for a while.”

She stepped back. “And lose my job? No, thank you. Besides, he’d find me sooner or later.”

“Then come with us, at least until we leave the city. We can keep you safe.”

“Uh-uh. No way. That’s—”

“Time’s up.” Nathan closed the door—when had he opened it again?—and threw the bolts into place. “The big guy’s headed this way, and I don’t think he’s after a cup of sahl.”

Jake stepped closer to Clarissa. “So will you come with us?”

She tightened her robe. “I don’t have much of a choice, do I?”

“Nope.” Nathan looked around. “Please tell me there’s another way out of here.”

“Through the kitchen.” She pointed to the end of the bar and led the way across the room.

The front door rattled, and Jake swung towards the sound, his heart beating double-time. No sooner had the handle stilled than the entire door exploded inwards with a rending crash. It rebounded off the central railing and landed on one of the tables at the other side before Jake could do more than raise his arm against the wave of wood fragments shooting out around it.

He ducked behind the nearest cover, a barrel beside the fake ship’s wheel, and peeked across at Nathan, safely hunkered behind the bar with Clarissa at his far side.

Footsteps crunched through the wreckage and paused. “I know you’re in here.” They resumed, descending to the seating area as something hiss-clicked and a faint turquoise glow lit the furnishings. “Come quietly, and I won’t hurt anyone. But if you make me chase you again...”

Jake ran through his scant options—hand himself in, with no guarantee that Ralph would keep his word, or try to escape and risk Nathan or Clarissa being caught in the next blast. He glanced around, muscles taut and throat closing.

Three doors flanked the room: the front entrance, the one to the kitchen, and one at the other end of the rear wall. Closing his eyes, he brought up a fuzzy picture of the area beyond the third door from his first visit to the tavern. His eyes popped open.

Ralph’s moon-limned bulk sidestepped a table, heading back towards the entrance. He was much larger than Jake, probably too big to fit through the window in the customers’ privy. If Jake drew him away, Nathan could get Clarissa out

through the kitchen before the hunter doubled back and caught up.

They'd be out of the line of fire, and Jake could meet them in the courtyard, assuming his memory and calculations were correct. Either way, they'd have a shot at getting clear. That was all that mattered.

He glanced over at them, offered a weak smile, and jugged his chin at the door to the kitchen.

Nathan's eyes locked on his and narrowed. He shook his head slowly as if he knew what Jake was thinking, but this wasn't his decision to make. He wasn't the one being hunted. The one putting his brother and friend in danger. Jake emptied his mind of everything but the route to the far exit and shifted into a sprinter's crouch.

Something fluttered in his periphery, and he turned to get a fix on it. A second later, his hand went to his shirt pocket. Blue was gone.

He gripped the edge of the barrel as he traced her meandering flight towards Ralph, who was passing back in front of the doorway. *What are you doing? This isn't the time to be curious about new people.*

True to form, she swooped down right in front of the hunter's face. His arm came up to bat her away, but she dropped under the blow. Wings spread wide, she flitted about his head, avoiding his hand and chittering like it was some kind of game.

This was Jake's chance. He shot out from his hiding spot and charged down the rear steps to the lower level, praying Ralph followed him.

Instead, he heard a muted boom a split second before something knocked him forward. A drumroll of thuds behind him preceded chunks of plaster whizzing past his head, and he ducked, using his arms for cover.

For a few moments, everything stilled as if the room itself held its breath.

Jake slowly turned around, squinting through a haze of dust to find a fine net dangling from the centre of a ruined wall mural beside him. A series of claws sunk into little craters around the circumference held it in place. His mouth dry, he looked up at the bar.

Nathan stood in plain sight with his arm outstretched, horror written across his face. Had he just used his powers? In front of others? Beyond him, Clarissa's bulging eyes and slack jaw suggested he had.

"Impossible." Ralph pumped the handle of his bazooka, the turquoise light on the side brightening. He leaped down the steps, ignoring the wreckage, and pointed the weapon directly at Jake, aiming down the sights.

Jake's insides turned to liquid. He dragged his gaze from the muzzle to his brother, and the next few seconds merged into a collage of the unthinkable.

Nathan's hand reached out, and Ralph flew backwards. He slammed into the front wall, shattering the window, and slumped to the floor in a shower of glass, unmoving.

Was he dead? No. Nathan would never kill anyone. But he'd stopped him.

Jake stared at the prone man still clutching his bazooka in the centre of the debris. Try as he might, he couldn't look

away. Nathan had done that—gone against every rule he had for his powers, risked exposure to the Syndicate—for him.

Nathan's voice floated to him as if through thick soup until Ralph groaned, pulling him from his stupor, and some of the words finally penetrated.

“...no time... run, Jake.”

He backed up until he hit something solid—the door he'd been aiming for. It opened easily, and he stumbled into a black passageway, feeling along the wall for the door to the gents.



He'd barely straightened from the drop outside the window when Blue swooped in to land on his shoulder. Thank the founders she'd made it out. He rubbed her head and edged along the side of the shed towards the open courtyard, where Clarissa waited with her foot tapping the ground.

“Are you trying to get yourself killed? What did you do that for?”

“I thought—”

She stomped up to him and poked his chest with her index finger. “He could have blown your head off. You're lucky it was just a net. If your brother hadn't—” She turned to Nathan, her brows furrowed. “What was that anyway?”

“Nothing,” he said, looking at Jake. “But maybe I should've left you to him. Might've knocked some sense into you.”

“How was I to know he'd shoot instead of chasing me?” Jake's cheeks blazed under the cover of darkness.

“The gun didn’t give it away?”

His hands formed tight fists. “I was trying to save you.”

“Yeah, well. Next time, don’t. It’s hard enough protecting you when you’re not pulling crazy stunts.”

Jake stepped toe to toe with his brother, but his mind went back to Nathan’s look of horror after he’d used his powers, and he released the tension in his muscles. “I didn’t mean for that to happen. But I’m not completely useless.”

A crash came from the tavern, drawing all their eyes.

“Did you want to get that then?” Nathan asked.

Jake glanced at his brother and back at the kitchen door as footsteps crunched on broken glass inside. A tell-tale cli-click magnified his fear.

Was he willing to risk his life, Clarissa’s life, for pride he’d otherwise given up long ago? He looked into his brother’s eyes. Nathan had come for him when no one else had. Despite the filth and the debts, he’d helped without hesitation. *’Cause he loves you, you fool.*

Jake’s gaze dropped to his feet, clad in new boots Nathan had bought to replace the mismatched pair Clarissa had given him. The truth stabbed straight through his chest, and the last of the fight drained out of him.

He hid his churning emotions behind what he hoped was a casual tone. “Seeing as you’re here, I can let you handle it.”

“Very generous. Thanks.” Nathan faced the tavern, flexing his hands and twisting his neck from side to side. He jutted his thumb at the gate behind him. “Get to the end of the next block and wait for me there. I’ll be with you in a minute.”

“I can help. I—” Jake cleared his throat. “Sure. I can do that. Just don’t take too long.”

He stalled. Could he really let Nathan risk himself while he ran away? He was the one with the blood debt, the one Ralph was after. But he was no match for the hunter. Clenching his jaw, he forced his limbs into motion and joined Clarissa, who was already working on the padlock on the back gate.

When she’d got it open, she stuck her head out and looked both ways before slipping through. Jake followed, looking back as he closed it behind them.

Nathan was using his power to create a barricade in front of the kitchen door, piling everything within view against it. Crates, barrels, the tavern’s cart, even a broken old table and some metal poles soared through the air to join the growing stack while ropes slithered in and out, tightening their hold on the various objects.

Jake had to admit he wouldn’t have been able to accomplish the task anywhere near as fast, no matter how much he’d like to have. A smile lifted his lips at the familiar tune Nathan whistled softly while he worked. But they weren’t out of danger yet.

He pulled the gate shut and caught up with Clarissa at the end of the alley, keeping an ear out for sounds of pursuit.

Chapter 30

Jake

As soon as Nathan joined them, they set off, keeping to the back ways and walking fast to put as much distance between them and the Captain's Rest as possible.

The city was deathly silent. No clatter and hiss of whistlers, no drunken shouts, not even the scurrying patter of street urchins reached their ears. But the total stillness only unnerved Jake more. Did the rest of the inhabitants know a hunter stalked their streets? Were they staying inside, staying quiet, to avoid bringing danger to their own doors?

He shuddered and paused to scan their surroundings. One alley looked much like another, and there was nothing to see, especially in the depths of night when only a slice of moonlight and what lanterns they passed lit their way.

“Where are we going?” Clarissa asked. Her shoulders hunched in, and she kept her arms folded around her middle as if she were trying to make herself a smaller target. A lump of guilt lodged under Jake's breastbone.

Nathan pointed down a narrow side passage. “There, for now.”

An external staircase rose at the far end above a row of bins, creating a triangle of space hidden from the main road.

He hunkered down in the gap and gestured for them to join him. Ignoring the faint whiff of decay emanating from the small, dark hidey-hole, Jake crawled in beside him, leaving room for Clarissa to squeeze between them to the back.

She stood in the middle of the path, her head swivelling between them and the direction they'd been heading. A crease pulled her brows together while she dithered.

Something clattered at the end of the alley, and with a little jump, she dove in, huffing as she wriggled into position. Her face contorted, but there was no time to worry about her offended sensibilities at the cramped conditions.

“Now what?” she whispered.

“Catch our breath here,” Nathan said. “Then make our way to the hostelry where I left Flame, pick up a couple more mammoxes when it opens in the morning, and leave the city.”

Clarissa snorted. “You’re kidding?” She looked at each of them in turn. “Ralph has informants everywhere. You may as well lead him straight to your home if you do that—if he doesn’t catch us before then. Can’t you just, you know...” She made little exploding gestures with her hands.

“No.” Nathan frowned.

Her shoulders slumped. “Oh. Then we definitely need a better plan.”

“She’s right,” Jake said. “Look how quickly he tracked me to the dump. We need to find a way to throw him off our trail long enough so he can’t follow us.” His mind whirled, catching on the memory of an airship flying out across the water. “Oh! I have an idea.”

“Jake...”

Nathan started to shake his head, but Jake held up his hands.

“Trust me, please. This will work.”

A beat of silence followed that dug its way under Jake’s skin.

Eventually, Nathan nodded. “Go on then. What’s your idea?”

Jake blinked. *He’s actually going to listen to me? Wow!* A little smile worked its way onto his face.

“Jake?”

“Right, yes. If he is following us, we should use it to our advantage and lead him across the city to the air docks. Then we—”

“They went that way.” The high-pitched voice of a young child carried to them like a death-knell.

Lantern-light swung into the passageway from the main street, reaching halfway towards their position as if desperate to seek them out. Jake peered around the edge of the steps as a familiar shadow swallowed the entrance. A small boy holding a cheap tallow lantern pointed down the alley. “Free of um.”

“Told you,” Clarissa muttered.

Jake met Nathan’s steady gaze.

“All right. Let’s go,” Nathan said.

“I’ll fill you in when we get there.”

Heavy footsteps approached, punctuated by an occasional rattled handle or the screech of a metal bin being moved. Ralph was checking hiding spots.

While they were still concealed in darkness, they eased out from under the staircase and around the bins, keeping their treads soft and their eyes trained on the oncoming hunter. Then, staying flush with the wall so they weren't seen too soon, they crept to the next intersection.

"This way." Jake set off at a jog as soon as they were out of sight, not bothering to stay quiet. They needed Ralph to follow them for the plan to work—as long as he didn't catch up before they got there. He picked up the pace.

A few metres farther on, Clarissa gasped and lurched to a stop.

He and Nathan turned around at the same time.

"What's wrong?"

"What happened?"

"My hip," she ground out.

Had crouching under the stairs caused that? No wonder she'd been reluctant to join them. Jake's stomach soured at the notion of having caused her pain, and he fisted his hands. He should have thought.

She kneaded the joint, her face pinching at each press of her fingers, and when she tried to take a step, she all but collapsed.

Darting forwards, Jake offered his arm for her to lean on. She let him take most of her weight but still screwed her eyes shut, biting her lip. There was no way she'd make it to the end of the block under her own steam, never mind the air docks.

Nathan glanced back the way they'd come, then met Jake's gaze over her head. His lifted brows said "we can't stay here."

Before Jake could do or say anything, he bent level with Clarissa, whispered, “I’m going to help you, okay?” and scooped her up into his arms. She made a strangled sound, half pained, half indignant, but clamped her lips together and held on.

Thus encumbered, Nathan set off again, only marginally slower than before. He must have been using his powers to cushion her, for she made not a sound during the remainder of their race across the city.

Ralph maintained his pursuit, sometimes gaining, sometimes dropping farther behind. The cadence of his footsteps never changed, though, heavy and relentless, spurring them on throughout the small hours of the night.

Once, Jake wondered whether they’d lost him and their trek in the opposite direction of home was for nought. A net whistling past his head and thudding into the wall beside him proved otherwise, and he redoubled his efforts to get ahead.

The streets widened as they neared the hub of all air travel in and out of Berlath. Lanterns became more frequent, then turned into flame bug-lit trees that illuminated the main approach to the air dock. Two airships lay above the roofline of the neighbouring buildings to the left, one of which appeared to be a hive of activity.

The balloon above its deck hung low, perhaps three-quarters full, and Jake sent up a prayer that it was preparing to depart rather than having just landed. He searched the surrounding sky for a plume of smoke that would indicate the engines were being stoked up. When he found a lighter smudge on the dark canvas, his spirits soared.

“Yes!” *This might just work.*

The ship sank from view as they closed in, and he brought his gaze back to ground level. When they reached the last street paralleling the air dock, he turned right and plunged down an alley between two warehouses, Nathan a few steps behind him. They stopped at the other end, and Jake braced his hands on his knees while he sucked in air.

Only a narrow lane and a twelve-foot stone wall stood between them and the compound. Jake scanned both directions and spotted the manned checkpoint farther along the wall. Well-lit as the area around it was, they were far enough away to remain hidden in darkness.

Nathan lowered Clarissa to the ground and waited for her to gain her balance before letting go.

“Thank you.” She straightened her skirt and brushed nothing that Jake could see from the hem.

“No problem. You’re not as heavy as a hay bale.”

Her head snapped up, eyes narrowed as if she were deciding whether to take offense, but Nathan had already joined Jake at the corner.

“So why are we here? Tell me we’re not getting on one of those things.”

“Not for long.”

Jake grinned as understanding dawned on Nathan’s face. He glanced back at the far end of the passage, and the grin fell flat. “We should get going. He can’t be far behind.”

Clarissa took a limping step towards the wall, but he blocked her path. “Whoa. You need to stay here.” She opened her mouth, and he hurried on. “We’ll need to move fast, and you won’t make it with your hip. But we’ll come back for you as soon as we lose Ralph. I promise.”

“You can probably hide in here while you wait.” Nathan tried the handle of a side door in the warehouse on their left. After a quick glance around, he shouldered it open and slipped inside. He stuck his head out a moment later, said, “It’s clear,” and disappeared again.

In the dim interior, ranks of shelving units filled with containers of all shapes and sizes marched into the distance. A bird flapped in the rafters at their entrance, but the cavernous space was otherwise still and silent, a trace of old sawdust pervading the air.

While Nathan rolled a barrel into the corner behind the door for Clarissa to sit on, Jake found a wooden crate the size of a mammoth yearling.

“Help me with this, will you?” he called to Nathan when she was settled.

They carried it outside and set it beside the wall. Then Nathan ran back inside and emerged a moment later carrying a barrel. He placed it on top, gave it a shake to test its stability, and turned to Jake.

“Ready?”

Jake braced to jump up onto the crate when something pinged off the wall beside his leg. He flinched, his hand coming up to shield his head even as he swept their surroundings for the source.

Ralph charged towards them from the direction of the checkpoint, weapons drawn. Another bullet zinged through the air, taking a chunk out of the side of the crate.

Jake ducked behind it. “He looks like he’s about to blow a gasket.”

“We wanted him to follow us, didn’t we? Let’s give him something to aim at.” Nathan leaped up onto the crate, launched off the barrel, and pulled himself to the top of the wall.

“He’s not firing nets anymore,” Jake said from his sheltered spot.

Nathan held an arm out to him. “He won’t hit anything. Trust me.”

Jake took a deep breath in, let it out, and scrambled up the stack. Two more projectiles ricocheted off the stones beside him, sending chips flying, but his only injury came from scraping his palm as he slipped over the top and dropped down to the grass on the other side.

Pressing his stinging hand against his thigh, he took a moment to orient himself. A line of empty dock towers rose in front of them like dark, brooding sentinels at least sixty feet tall. Multiple lights and a hum of activity filtered through their skeletal frames from one at the far end, where Jake spotted the airship he’d seen earlier beneath a now full balloon.

“There.”

He set off at a run, eyes trained on the operational tower ahead. Something thwacked into the grass by his feet, causing him to veer aside, but he dared not look behind. *Keep going. Nate’s got your back.* He glanced across at his brother, who loped beside him as if they were having fun back home rather than evading a dangerous foe.

As they neared the bottom of the dock, Jake took in the scene. The airship sat on a platform attached to the top of the tower, its propeller jutting out from the rear. Huge directional lanterns banished the pre-dawn darkness around it, their

mirrors throwing light across the deck and the area below. Men swarmed everywhere, some crawling over the ship's rigging while others scurried about on the ground. Every one of them moved with purpose.

A flash of vibrant fabric drew his eye to a group of fashionably dressed people emerging from a building across from him. They walked over to a gated platform beside the tower and stepped onto it one by one.

When they were all on, a uniformed man swung the railing into place and gave a signal. The platform jolted and rose into the air, suspended from a thick chain that pulled them steadily up to the top level.

If passengers were boarding, it wouldn't be long before the airship took off. They had to move. He spied a group of labourers carrying supplies up the tower and headed in that direction. "That's our way in."

He skirted the open ground until he reached the cart they were offloading, hauled a hessian bag up onto his shoulder, and joined the back of the line. Nathan followed suit, and they soon entered the mouth of the dock tower.

"I hope you know what you're doing," Nathan mumbled.

So do I.

A thought occurred to Jake halfway up the tower, and he paused on a landing, pretending to adjust his load until the others had rounded the next set of stairs. "What if he doesn't follow us, or—"

"I wouldn't worry about that. Look."

Below, Ralph was easy to spot. He stalked across the staging area to the bottom of the tower, ignoring several shouts in his direction and pushing past the few who stood in his way.

He looked up once, and Jake could feel the heat of his glare. At least he wasn't shooting anymore.

Jake tightened his grip on the sack and took the next few steps two at a time. They'd need all the head start they could get to lose the hunter on the airship. Schematics memorised during his first visit to the university appeared in front of him as he mentally traced the route they would take.

It would be tight, requiring both precision and agility. But Ralph would find it impossibly so, and that was the goal.

After divesting themselves of their loads, they followed the others around to the off-loading ramp but ducked through a door amidships instead. The general hubbub on board covered their descent to the passenger cabins, where luck gave them another boon.

A couple of men blocked the staircase to the next level—crewmen, from the mixture of soot and sweat staining their clothes and faces. They were chatting, one sitting with his elbows on the step behind him, the other standing lower down, leaning against the wall.

Jake feigned bewilderment as he looked all about him. "Excuse me, could you tell me where the passenger accommodation is?"

They shared a knowing look, the one standing rolling his eyes, but the one sitting pointed at the corridor behind Jake. "Right down there, mate. Can't miss 'em."

"Oh, of course. Thank you." He walked down a wainscoted hallway and entered the first open door he came to, maintaining the ruse until they were out of sight.

A scan of the room showed a silk-covered bed, a built-in porcelain washstand with an irium lantern hooked above, and

a single wardrobe with the Berlath coat of arms inlaid in gold on the door. It probably cost a king's ransom. *And I was trying to save the fare. It'd never have worked.*

“What now?” Nathan whispered, peering around the edge of the door.

“Hmmm?” Jake shook free of his thoughts. “Slip out without them seeing us. Then get down to the water stores via the galley steps.”

“And let them tell Ralph they sent us this way if he asks. He'll have to search every cabin to be sure. Not bad, Jake.” Nathan's lips scrunched to the side. “But how do we get off?”

Jake grinned. “I'll show you.”

On silent feet, they left the cabin and retreated to the other end of the corridor, where they descended two levels to a quiet, empty one.

The storage bay was lit by a single lantern next to the door, the gloom farther in pierced only by occasional shafts of light that squeezed through chinks in the walls or ceiling. A series of tanks filled the room, their round bodies rising in the darkness like metal loaves in an oven.

Pipes jutted out of the front of them, angling down from stop cocks to one that ran the length of the floor. They were fed by another suspended along the outer wall at head height. It sloshed faintly, the sound drowned by the clomp of feet overhead.

Jake followed the pipe to the bow, opened a hatch in the wall there, and entered a crawl space that led to the anchor room. At the other end, he stared in awe at the sheer size of the spool held in place by a ribbed cylinder poking through the ceiling. The rope coiled around it had to be as thick as his arm.

The rest of the rope disappeared through an opening in the outer wall, and he edged around to get a better look. It was supported by a smooth brass spindle mounted across the bottom that would roll to prevent friction when the anchor was deployed. Ingenious!

“Hey, Nate,” he called over his shoulder. “Come look at this.”

His brother squeezed in behind him, making the confines considerably more cramped than the notation on the schematics had suggested. Thankfully, they wouldn’t be there long.

Nathan leaned across the rope to look outside and immediately pulled back. “You want me to climb out of an airship down a sixty-foot rope? Are you crazy?”

“Well, we couldn’t exactly walk off the tower ramp. Ralph needed to think we’re trying to stow away.”

Nathan turned back to the hatch. “There’s got to be a—”

The ship rumbled, accompanied by a slow thwump. Vibrations in the floor increased in intensity as the thwumping picked up speed. Jake caught Nathan’s arm. “We need to hurry.”

With a curse, Nathan closed the hatch and glared at him. “Fine, rope it is,” he said, rubbing his hands down his trouser legs.

Jake went first. Gripping the oiled leather padding the upper rim, he climbed out of the anchor hole and lowered himself, hand under hand, a few feet down the rope. He hooked his leg around it to keep himself steady before looking up at Nathan, who still stood inside.

“Nate! What’re you doing? Come on.”

Nathan dragged his gaze from the ground far below to Jake's. He closed his eyes, mumbled something incoherent, and breathed out through his mouth.

Jake blinked. "You're scared of heights?" A bark of laughter escaped him. "How did I not know that?"

"No I'm not." Nathan clenched his jaw. "It's the falling and splatting that bothers me." He groaned. "You owe me for this."

He clung to the rim while he pulled himself through the gap above the rope, a tighter fit for him than it had been for Jake. Another deep breath, and he followed Jake, inch by inch, down the rope without once looking down.

"At least Ralph won't find us out here." Jake's jest fell on deaf ears, so he clamped his mouth shut and focused on his movements.

Three quarters of the way down, the rope jerked and began to move.

He looked up—and swallowed. *Oh, no.*

They were raising the anchor. Redoubling his efforts, Jake slithered down the last of the rope and onto the cold metal arc. Without a moment to waste, he jumped, rolling as soon as his feet hit the grass verge of the air dock.

Nathan hesitated only a second before he, too, leaped from the anchor to the ground. He landed smoothly, dipping to one knee with a hand on the grass in front of him. Show-off. Still, Jake couldn't begrudge him, given his rare display of fear earlier.

They stood and watched the airship slowly turn and head across the city along the coastline. Out to sea would have been

a preferable direction, but it was more than Jake had a right to hope.

They'd done it. They'd bought themselves enough time to leave the city without being tracked. It barely sank in.

Nathan clapped his shoulder. "Can't say as I'd like to go through that again, but we're free and clear for now, so I won't complain. Just don't go mentioning the details to anyone, you hear?"

"What details?" Jake grinned.



They found Clarissa where they'd left her, fingers twisted into her skirt and a scowl on her face. She started when they walked through the door to the warehouse. "What took you so long?"

Nathan pulled up short. "What took us—?" He turned to Jake and pointed at her with his thumb. "Why that's a fine greeting after we risk our lives to get Ralph off our trail."

She took a half step forward, brows lifted. "So you did it?"

"Yep," Jake said. "He's stuck on an airship heading down the coast, so we've plenty of time to get out of the city."

She blinked. "How in the world did you manage that?"

Jake lifted one shoulder. "I figured he'd follow us on board easily enough, and then we climbed out the anchor rope hole. I saw the schematics at the university, so I knew he wouldn't fit through the access panel." He ducked his chin. "But it was mostly just luck."

Her eyes widened. “That’s brilliant.” Then she narrowed them and studied him. “You might just be the first blooder ever to escape Ralph.”

A chuckle escaped her lips, and she shook her head slowly.

Jake rubbed his neck and grinned. He hadn’t thought about it like that. For the first time in days, hope blossomed that he might actually break free of the blood debt hanging over him.

“Shall we?”

He held his arm out to the door, and her face broke into a smile, which flattened as she limped past him. Her jutted chin defied assistance, so he followed close behind but said nothing.

They took the coastal path around the city and arrived at the hostelry as morning light painted the tops of the mountains golden and splashed the sky with orange. Set back from the main road, it comprised a double-fronted house with a large courtyard and stables, a barn, and a couple of sheds surrounded by trees to the rear.

They crept around the buildings and hid in an empty shed while they planned their next move.

The first order of business, according to Clarissa, was a change of clothes.

With everything that had happened over the course of the night, Jake had barely considered her attire. He scanned her now and winced. Her skirt and boots appeared fine, if a little dishevelled, but her upper body was covered by a thick robe over what he could only presume was her nightgown, and her hair was a tangled mess of coiled copper. Had they really dragged her across the city like that?

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled.

She rolled her eyes. “Just see if you can find me something to wear.”

Nathan jumped up. “I’ll go.”

He slipped out of the shed and returned within minutes holding a matching dress and jacket. “Don’t know about the fit, but these should do.”

She took them from his outstretched arms. “Thank you.”

“The woman put some, uh, underthings in there too.”

He waved at the pile of hunter-green fabric, then cleared his throat and shoved his hands in his pockets. When he turned to leave, Jake hustled out behind him, giving her space to change.

“How’d you find those so fast?” he asked.

“Stayed here the first night I arrived. Got talking to the owners about mammoxes.” Nathan shrugged as if that explained everything.

“Right.” Jake snorted.

He stretched his arms above his head and breathed in the early morning air. Was this what freedom smelled like? A breeze carried the mingled scents of baking bread and manure across the courtyard, and a pang of homesickness hit him. He rubbed his chest, chastising himself for the ridiculous reaction.

“What’s the plan with her?”

Jake started. “Who, Clarissa?”

“No, the landlady.” Nathan swivelled his head towards him. “Can we drop her off somewhere? With friends? Family?”

“Um...”

Nathan's brows drew together. "Does she not have any?"

Jake blinked.

"Do you know anything about her?"

Jake bit his lip and scoured his memory. Nothing real—not her interests, her background, or even her family name. Somehow, she'd managed to either deflect or give minimal answers to his every question. "I really don't."

"Sounds like she's on her own then." Nathan rubbed his beard. "Maybe we should offer to take her with us? Everyone needs help sometimes."

And put her in more danger? Some help that would be. "No. She's better off here."

He turned to the shed and started again to find her outside, her eyes on him. How long had she been standing there?

She did up the last of the buttons on her jacket as she walked over. "What'd I miss?"

"We need to find somewhere for you to stay before we leave," he blurted.

"What're you talking about?" She gave him a puzzled frown.

"Somewhere to stay. Now we've got Ralph off our trail, I thought..."

Her eyes darted between them. "I'm coming with you, aren't I?"

"Um, no..." Jake turned to his brother.

"Don't look at me," Nathan said. "I think she should come too."

"But—"

Nathan raised his hands, backing up from them before spinning and walking around to the front of the hostelry. “I’m going for the mounts.”

Jake gaped at his retreating back. *Thanks for nothing.* He pushed a stone loose from the packed gravel path with the toe of his boot and faced Clarissa again. She was glaring at him.

“You really should stay here,” he said at the same time as she said, “Are you trying to get rid of me?”

“No. I’m trying to protect you.”

She snorted. “Bit late for that, isn’t it?”

“Look, I’ve disrupted your life enough. The safest place for you now is far away from me.”

“You said yourself Ralph won’t know which way we’ve gone once we leave the city.”

“Yeah, but he’ll still be looking. He’ll just be too busy tracking me to bother with you anymore.”

She threw her hands up in the air. “You can’t just leave me here.”

“Well you’re not coming with us!”

A flock of birds took flight as his voice rang out, their raucous cries tearing through the morning stillness. His head came up, ears and eyes alert for any indication they’d been discovered.

“Can we take this inside?” he said.

“Fine,” she hissed.

She stalked to the shed, and he followed, easing the door closed behind them once they were inside. He leaned his head

against it for a moment. Couldn't she see he was trying to keep her safe? It was the least he owed her after all her help.

Before he could figure out how to explain, she whirled on him. "What's the matter? Afraid to let me meet your family?"

His face scrunched. "No. Nothing like that. If anything, I don't want you to see *me* meet them."

He clamped his lips shut, his eyes darting to hers and away again. Why had he said that? *Because it's true?* He'd been so preoccupied with getting away from Ralph that he'd not considered what he was heading towards until now. He swiped a hand through his hair, brushing the tangle from his mind.

One thing at a time.

He glanced up, meeting her steady gaze. At least his admission appeared to have sucked the heat from her engine.

"I thought you'd be happy to be out of danger," he said.

"And we are. As long as we leave before Ralph gets back."

"But don't you want to get back to your normal life?"

"*Normal life?*" She spluttered, her face taking on a dangerous hue. "The tavern's *destroyed*. I've lost my job and my home. There's no way you're leaving me behind to start over again." She stepped into his space. "You owe me."

The door creaked open, and Nathan slipped inside. Jake turned desperate eyes on him. "Help me out here, Nate."

Nathan looked at her. "Can you ride?"

A grimace flashed across her face, but she tilted her chin up to meet his stare. "I can if I have to."

He studied her for a long moment. Then he nodded and spun to the door. "The mounts are outside."

Chapter 31

Ralph

Ralph shoved through the door to his favourite pub on the outskirts of Berlath and emptied a table in the far corner of the room by removing his bazooka from its holster. He didn't even need to check the chamber. The couple who'd been having what looked like a cosy date fled to the bar, and Ralph squeezed around to his usual spot, placing his weapon within easy reach on the chair next to him.

Seated with his back to the wall, he scanned the other patrons—no threats in the immediate area, no one between him and the rear exit. He allowed his shoulders to relax.

The barkeep wandered over, wiping his hands on a towel. “Evening, Ralph. What can I get you today?”

“Got any pies?”

“Sure, I always keep a few aside for—”

“I'll have one, and an ale.”

The barkeep's hands stilled, and he peered at Ralph. “You all right? Not like you to touch the drink.”

“Just make sure the pie's hot.” Ralph flipped the man a shill and returned to studying the room.

The barkeep caught it and went to fetch Ralph's pie, muttering something under his breath that Ralph couldn't make out. Let him think what he wanted; Ralph needed a shot to his system.

He cracked his neck to the left and right and leaned back in his chair. Jake Amarel was turning out to be a more difficult run than he'd anticipated. And the man with him—Ralph had never seen anything like that before. He hadn't been holding anything, but it had definitely been him. Every time Ralph's shots had gone wide, that man had been holding his arm out.

What was he? And why was he protecting the blooder? Ralph's fingers drummed the table, and he pressed them against his leg. He pulled a handful of nuts from his pocket and cracked one open, picking the pieces out of the shell.

That trick at the air dock had been clever, wasting enough of his time for them to get away. Luckily, the captain had seen reason—with a little persuasion—and had dropped him off only a few miles outside Berlath.

He mentally inventoried what he knew of his adversary as he threw back a couple more of the nuts. What was his next move?

When the barkeep arrived with a tray, Ralph swept the shells aside and brushed his hands together while his meal was placed in front of him. The pie, deep filled and golden brown, made his mouth water, so he picked up the ale.

He raised it to his lips and paused. Dark, frothy liquid sloshed in the tankard, giving off a sweet, buttery aroma. He sniffed it and caught the sharp tang of alcohol hiding behind the mellow fragrance. Fragments of memory struck like the whiskey-fuelled fists they contained, and he lowered his arm to the table.

“Bring me a juice instead.”

The barkeep’s craggy face didn’t so much as twitch, but his eyes twinkled. Ralph glared at him, and he started. “Right away.”

He grabbed the ale and scurried back to the bar, returning a few seconds later with a glass full of red liquid that he placed in front of Ralph. “I poured this just in case. I know how much you like garberry juice.”

Ralph took a sip, and the juice slid down his throat, smooth and tangy. He grunted and cut into the pie. Before he took the first bite, he looked up at the barkeep from the corner of his eye. “You heard of a Jake Amarel?”

The barkeep stared into the middle distance, a hand scratching his stubbly jaw. “Can’t say as I have. Why? You looking for him?”

Ralph finished chewing the meat and swallowed. “I’d appreciate you passing on anything you might pick up.” He pulled a couple of daris from his coat pocket and slid them to the edge of the table.

When the barkeep reached down, Ralph kept a finger on them, meeting his eyes. The barkeep nodded, and Ralph let go, watching the coins disappear into the depths of the man’s apron. He turned back to his pie, shovelling another forkful into his mouth, and the barkeep left him to it.

Movement at the bar alerted Ralph to a man swivelling on his stool to face him. He carried on eating but kept the man in his periphery, his muscles tensing. People rarely looked directly at him if they could help it. The man swept his gaze over Ralph, sucked down a mouthful of his drink, and took a few steps in Ralph’s direction.

Ralph looked up, halting the man in his tracks by placing a hand on his bazooka. The man held his arms out to his sides and took another step forward. “I couldn’t help overhearing you say you’re looking for the Amarel boy.”

“What of it?” Ralph kept his finger on the trigger, his eyes on the man’s.

The man stood behind the chair opposite Ralph, his movements unsteady but not aggressive. “I know the Amarels, and I might be able to help you out.” He held Ralph’s gaze—no mean feat—and added, “For a small finder’s fee.”

Ralph slid his hand off the bazooka and leaned back, studying the man more intently. Medium height, sturdy build, callused hands. His clothes were clean but worn and simple—a labourer. Nothing about him stood out from any other workman in the city except the sharp eyes and mean slash of his mouth.

“And I should pay you because...”

“Name’s Matthew. Worked for them for three years before they fired me for nothing.” He spat on the floor. “I can tell you anything you need to know about them and their estate.”

Estate? Ralph took a slow sip of his juice and let the silence lengthen. Uncomfortable for some, so he’d been told. He shoved the chair opposite his away from the table with his foot, the legs scraping across the floor with a squeak. “Have a seat, then, Matthew. It seems we have business to discuss. Start with everything you know about a muscular man with a short black beard.”



An hour later, Ralph left the pub, his stomach full and his mind sorting the information Matthew had given him into useable intelligence and worthless chatter. He hadn't known anything about the second man's powers, but he'd identified him easily enough from Ralph's description. Jake's brother, Nathan—now that was something worth mulling over. He could be a problem.

Ralph walked to the nearest tubing office and typed a message to his boss on the first available machine. As soon as it dropped out of the slot, he strode to the front of the queue at the counter and grabbed an envelope from a rack by the teller.

“This needs sending with a priority code.”

He scrawled the address on the front, sealed the message inside, and held it out. “Now.”

The teller jumped, knocking one of the empty brass cylinders lining his workspace to the floor. He scrambled to pick it up before taking the message and casting an apologetic look over Ralph's shoulder. Ralph folded his arms. Whoever was behind him could wait. The boss wouldn't.

Less than a minute later, the bullet-shaped cylinder containing his missive was sucked up into one of the tubes, on its way to the main office. The teller mopped his brow and handed Ralph a receipt, turning quickly to the next customer.

Grunting, Ralph pocketed the slip and returned to the street.

He headed inland, whistling for his companion once he left the city behind. That was how he thought of the creature, whenever he bothered to stop and think about it at all. He hadn't assigned it a name—it wasn't a pet—and he didn't order it about—it was even less domesticated. They just ran

together when it suited them, both enjoying the thrill of a good hunt.

The fell-hound appeared on the ridge of a foothill a few minutes later, well out of sight of the nearest buildings. Clever beast. Ralph grinned and jogged up the slope.

When he reached the crest, he held out his hand, maintaining eye contact, until the fell-hound sniffed his fingers and a hot breath puffed over his skin. He dropped his arm.

“Hello. Ready for another hunt?”

It turned and padded away, and he drew alongside as they walked towards a narrow track that led up into the higher peaks.

He glanced across at the top of its head, on a level with his own. They’d been companions since he was a small boy, long before he’d been taken in by the Syndicate. Back then, he’d towered over his new friend, but he had to admit that time had given the fell-hound an edge.

Why did people make such a fuss about them? They were intelligent, fierce, and loyal to their chosen mates—much better than most humans. Their stamina was incredible, and they never backed off once they’d chosen their prey.

They also commanded the fastest routes through the mountains. He checked his pocket watch and picked up his pace. The Amarels had a good head start, but he’d catch them in the wilds on the other side of the mountain range. He never lost his prey either.

Chapter 32

Jake

Jake placed another branch on the fire, trying to ignore Clarissa squirming across from him. She'd not moved from her blanket since they'd stopped for the night, shrinking from every sound and periodically inspecting the dirt around her for insects.

“Still afraid of touching the ground?” Nathan chuckled as he plopped down beside Jake. He stretched his legs out in front of him and repositioned his hat. “At least the mammoxes are settled.”

Clarissa glared at him, pulling her legs closer in to her chest and tucking her skirts tighter around them. “There’s nothing wrong with being careful. I don’t do wildlife. Or camping. Bugs are attracted to my skin.”

“You’re okay with Blue,” Jake pointed out. He instinctively reached up to his neck, but Blue had curled up in a side pocket of his saddlebag and refused to budge since an hour out of Berlath.

“Well, she’s cute. And she’s not a bug.”

“You hid in the alleys in Berlath without complaining,” Nathan said.

She shrugged. “It’s easy to be pragmatic when you’ve got a hunter on your trail. Besides, that was just dirt. This is bugs.” She shuddered. “Bugs are different.”

Nathan laughed. “Well, you may as well get used to them. We’ve got more’n one night under the stars ahead of us. And the estate ain’t exactly bug-free either.”

She huffed out a breath and rested her chin on her knees, her expression that of a lost pup.

Nathan snapped a twig in half and threw one piece on the fire. “So, Clarissa... What’s your story anyway? Jake can’t tell me a thing about you.”

Jake flicked a glance in her direction, warmth from more than the fire heating his cheeks. “Subtle way to get to know someone.”

“What?” Nathan’s eyes turned serious. “We’re bringing her home with us. I need to know we can trust her.”

Jake spluttered, but Clarissa said, “That’s fair, I suppose. You want to hear the whole pathetic story?”

“Yes.”

“No.”

Jake and Nathan answered at the same time, but she carried on as if neither had spoken.

“I’m from New Hemmel originally. No close family to speak of, not anymore anyway. I came to the city for my cousin’s wedding—a fancy affair on an airship—but I missed the departure, and they left me behind. Probably didn’t even notice I wasn’t on board. They were supposed to drop me off at home on their way down the coast, so I hadn’t planned any other way back—not that there was much to go back for.”

She swiped a stray hair from her face. “I didn’t have any money or anyone to help me, so I struggled for a while. But then I met Terence. He gave me a job in the Captain’s Rest so I could pay my way, and he let me stay in the rooms upstairs. That was nearly three years ago.” She shrugged. “I’ve been in the city ever since.”

Jake sat stunned, but Nathan scratched his beard and asked, “Why’d you miss the takeoff?”

She turned away, her fingers fidgeting with the fabric of her skirt.

He grinned. “Too busy fluffing your hair and getting your makeup just right?”

Her face whipped back to his. “Of course you’d think that.” She huffed, folding her arms across her chest. “If you must know, my arthritis flared up the night before and I took a sleeping draught. I could barely get out of bed that morning, never mind walk to the air dock. All right?”

Nathan studied his boots for a moment. When he looked up again, he nodded slowly. “Thank you, for telling me the truth. I had to know before we got home.” He threw another stick on the fire. “You know... the estate’s a good place to make a fresh start. I reckon you’d fit right in if you want to stay.”

He looked at Jake, the mischievous twinkle back in his eyes. “I always wondered what it’d be like to have a kid sister. Gotta beat having a little brother following you round all day.”

Before Jake could respond, Nathan turned back to her, mock horror written across his expression. “You’re not gonna want doilies and lacy what-nots everywhere are you?”

She rolled her eyes.

The corners of his lips twitched. “You roll your eyes a lot.”

Those eyes spat fire at him. “Yeah? Well... you laugh too much.”

He blinked.

Jake splurged out a laugh, and she whirled on him. “And you fidget all the time.”

She leaped to her feet and stomped away from them, holding her skirts well off the ground as she went.

“I do not.” Jake looked down and pulled his hands apart, shoving them under his thighs.

Laughing, Nathan slapped him on the shoulder. When his mirth settled, he put a hand to his stomach and groaned. “I’m hungry. Let’s eat.”

He used his powers to drag his saddlebag towards him and float a burning piece of firewood closer. By its light, he rummaged around in the bag, pulling out a couple of cans of beans and a flat round of bread.

“So you do have powers.”

Jake started at Clarissa’s voice—he hadn’t noticed her return. Her wide eyes were locked on the stick hovering by Nathan’s shoulder, awe dancing across her face in the flickering light. She turned to Jake, cocking her head to the side.

“Do you have them too?”

“No.”

Her brows drew together, and he could guess her next words. “Why—”

“I’m adopted,” he said in as neutral a tone as he could.

“Oh.” She lapsed into silence, sitting down and carefully tucking the edges of her skirt under her again.

He jumped up, dusting off his trousers. “I’m going for more firewood.”

As he walked away, her quiet, “Did I say something?” drifted after him. He sped up. The last thing he needed was to hear Nathan’s reply, but it carried on the still night air, causing him to stumble to a stop.

“He’ll be all right. I’m actually glad he doesn’t have powers. I wouldn’t wish them on anyone.”

“What d’you mean?” Clarissa asked.

Nathan didn’t answer straight away, and Jake backtracked a few steps, careful to stay out of the light from the fire.

“All you see is a gift, but there are downsides to them as well. When people find out about my powers, they either want to use them, steal them somehow, or blame them for anything that goes wrong. And they never see me anymore, only what I can do.

“But the worst part is the constant pressure. Figuring out what I can change and what I shouldn’t, who to help if I’m forced to choose. I used to think it was too much for a person to take, so it’s almost a relief to keep them hidden.”

Nathan lapsed into silence, and Jake crept away, his mind reeling.

How had he not known any of that? He started collecting firewood from the thicket beside their campsite, all the times he’d made Nathan’s situation ten times harder stalking him from the darkness between the trees. No more. When they got back to the estate, he’d find a way to heal the rift between them and be the brother Nathan needed.

He'd gathered only a handful of sticks when a faint howl interrupted his musings. *Was that a—?* He dropped the wood and jogged back to the others.

“Hey, did you hear that?”

Nathan was standing at the farthest edge of the firelight, staring out into the darkness beyond. “Yeah. It came from over there, on the other side of the plain.”

Jake walked across to him. “Sounded like a fell-hound.”

“But they don't hunt out in the open. Must be a biricat or something.”

They shared a meaningful look before Jake turned back to Clarissa. She'd moved closer to the fire than was strictly safe.

“Ralph runs with a fell-hound,” she whispered. “You don't think that's him, do you?”

The howl came again, much nearer, and her eyes grew to the size of saucers. She wrapped her arms around her middle, her entire frame trembling.

He walked over to her but stopped short of reaching out. “Hey, don't worry. We've lived out here my whole life. We know what we're doing.”

“We'll pack up and move on, though,” Nathan said, heading for the mammoxes. “Just to be safe.”

Jake nodded and set about dousing the fire. “Hey, Clarissa? Why don't you roll the blankets while I grab our things?”

Her nod wobbled, but she picked up her blanket and started folding it into a neat square. He grinned, despite the knots in his stomach. It was close enough.

Nathan saddled their mounts in record time, but they were in the middle of securing their things when a blood-chilling howl rose from the top of the rise on the far side of the valley.

The mammoxes' feathers shot upright, vibrating along their necks and tails, and Jake ran a calming hand over the new male's muzzle before peering across the land. Even from that distance, two glowing yellow pinpricks hovered above the ground, menacing and wicked. A dark, hulking mass around them had just enough contrast with the surrounding night to cause his gut to clench.

"Quick," he hissed to Clarissa. "Get on."

She fumbled the stirrup, so Jake gave her a boost. Nathan swung into his saddle and steered Flame between them and the beast still standing on the distant hillock.

"What're you doing?" Clarissa asked.

Nathan grinned over his shoulder at her. "I'm going to freeze that thing in place till morning."

She stared at him, her mouth hanging open, then turned to Jake. "Is he serious?"

Jake snorted. "Rarely." He glanced at Nathan. "But in this case, it's probably true."

The fell-hound charged, snarling and snapping as it sped down the slope and across the open ground towards them. Jake slapped the rump of Clarissa's mammox and mounted his own.

They raced away from the threat, leaving Nathan to guard their rear. He'd catch up once he dealt with the raging beast. But what was it doing there? Following someone onto open ground when they were starving was one thing. This was something else. Jake shivered and ducked lower over his

mount's neck, the sound of its feet thundering in his ears as it ate up the ground beneath them.

A flash of light came from the ridge ahead, followed by a crack that rent the night sky. Jake had no time to process more than that, for something knocked him from the saddle and sent him flying.

He hit the ground hard, the air whooshing from his lungs and pain radiating from his shoulder and hip. He rolled to the side, or tried to. What the—? His body was tangled in some sort of netting, his arms and legs caught in awkward positions.

The next thing he knew, the cords vanished, and Nathan leaned down above him with one arm out. He grasped it, scrambled to his feet, and swung himself up behind his brother. Then they were off, speeding across the plain again.

“Thanks,” he yelled. “What was that anyway?”

“Ralph,” Nathan replied. “The fell-hound was a diversion. He set us up.”

Jake's heart sped. “Where's Clarissa? Is she safe?”

“She's up ahead.”

Around Nathan's shoulder, Jake could just about make her out some distance in front of them. He let out a breath but swivelled to look behind him.

“And Ralph?”

Nathan tensed. “He's still back there, but he won't catch up to us again before we reach the estate. We'll keep going through the night. Just stop to water and rest the animals.”

Jake's stomach revolted. His worst fears had come to pass—his failure was following him home, and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

Chapter 33

Jake

The closer they got to the estate, the tighter Jake's nerves wound. He mentally rehearsed what he'd say to his father until the words jumbled together and his head throbbed. Nothing sounded right. Nothing covered all the things he needed to say.

He glanced at Nathan, and his mouth curved into a smile. His brother rode home without a care in the world, one arm resting on the pommel of his saddle while he pointed out the various landmarks to Clarissa. He really was the perfect son. Jake would never measure up, but he didn't need to, not anymore—they were brothers. The notion was surprisingly comforting.

They topped the last rise, and the Amarel estate came into view, spreading out in both directions like a forgotten valley lost in the wheels of time. How would their father react to Jake's return? The last time they'd spoken... He could barely think of it. He took a steadying breath that did nothing to ease his fears.

Riding through the main gates, emblazoned with the Amarel crest, caused his throat to close. Tears slipped down his cheeks, and he swiped them away with the back of his hand, making sure the others hadn't seen.

By the time they approached the house, his insides were a writhing mess. Movement on the porch caught his attention, and he shaded his eyes for a better look.

His father stood from his favourite chair out front, took the steps two at a time, and ran down the drive towards them. *Must be pleased to see Nate home.* He seemed thinner, and he sported at least a week's growth of beard. Had he been ill? Nathan hadn't mentioned anything.

Jake's stomach twisted. His news probably wouldn't help if that were the case.

They dismounted, and he hung back beside his mammoth, trying to make himself as small as possible. He stared at his feet, unable to bear watching the reunion between father and son.

A moment later, his father's arms wrapped around him, the strength of his embrace lifting Jake off the ground. He stiffened at first, but when he breathed in the familiar scents of woodsmoke and soap—of home—his body relaxed, and he buried his head in his father's shoulder.

“Ah, son. I've missed you so much.”

Something wet slid down Jake's temple. At the second drip, his forehead puckered. Was that... His father was crying? Jake's eyes welled, and the dam broke.

“I'm so sorry,” he choked out. “I'll pay it back, all of it. I'll work for you like one of the men until I do.”

His father leaned back. “What are you talking about?”

“The money you gave me.” Jake kept his gaze lowered. “I... I lost it. All of it. Gone. And I'm—”

“I don’t care about that. You’re home. That’s the most important thing.” His father pulled him in for another hug before finally letting go. “Now let me look at you.”

Shoving his hands in his pockets, Jake summoned the courage to try again.

“You don’t understand. I—”

“You can tell me later.”

“But—”

“Later, Jake.” The firm set of his father’s jaw signalled the end of the discussion. He raised Jake’s chin until their eyes met. “I just want to enjoy having you home first.” His whole face lit. “We should celebrate. Daniel!”

He spun to where Daniel stood on the veranda at the side of the house, beating something in a large bowl. “Ah, Daniel, prepare a feast. Jake’s home.”

Turning back to them, he missed Daniel throwing his spoon into the bowl, his hand flying through the air as he scowled. Jake ducked his head, but his father beamed.

He spotted Clarissa then, half hiding behind her mammoth, and his eyes widened. “And who do we have here?”

She stepped out, gave him a small smile, and bobbed her head. Jake walked over to stand beside her. “This is Clarissa. She helped me in the city.”

“Then she’s more than welcome here. Come, let me introduce you to our cook, Daniel.” He held his hand out towards the house. “You’ll want to change and freshen up no doubt.”

Clarissa shifted her weight from one foot to the other. “Um, thank you, but I’m fine.”

“We had to leave quickly,” Nathan cut in. “Neither of them have anything but what they’re wearing.”

“Oh, my dear. Well, that won’t do.” Their father studied Clarissa, scratching his beard. “Maybe something of Kira’s will fit... Clarissa, is it?”

She blushed, her fingers twisting into her travel-stained skirts. “Yes, but you don’t need to go to all that trouble. I’m sure your wife won’t want a stranger wearing her things.”

His father walked forwards, lifted her hand, and patted it. “If she were still alive, Kira would love to have a young girl to fuss over.” He held up his palm when Clarissa started to speak. “Trust me, she wouldn’t mind a bit.

“I’m so glad you’re here.” He smiled at her, then at Jake, snagging him around the neck and pulling him in for another brief hug.

When he let go, he took Clarissa’s arm and turned to the house, guiding her along next to him. She glanced back, and Jake gave her an encouraging grin from where he trailed behind with Nathan and the mammoxes.

Daniel met them at the bottom of the steps up to the veranda. He’d replaced the bowl and spoon with a tea towel that he slung over his shoulder when he’d finished drying his hands. A few stains marked his apron, but the rest of him was as neat as ever, his short hair combed back from his face, and his shirtsleeves folded precisely above his elbows.

“Daniel,” Jake’s father said. “This is Clarissa. She’ll be staying with us for a while.”

“Hello,” Clarissa said, barely above a whisper.

Daniel nodded. “Hello.”

“Can you set her up in one of the guest rooms? And see if there’s anything in the attic she can wear.”

“Sure, boss.”

“Oh, and the feast. We must have a great feast with all the trimmings.”

Daniel pursed his lips. “It’ll have to be tomorrow. I’ve already got dinner ready for tonight.”

“Oh.” Jake’s father’s face fell, but he soon brightened again. “Well tomorrow it is. That’ll give us time to make it extra special. And in the meantime, Jake can tell me his important news.”

Jake fumbled the clasp on the pack he was untying.

His father smiled at Clarissa. “If there’s anything else you need while you’re here, anything at all, just let Daniel or me know.”

As she disappeared into the house with Daniel, Smitty strolled up and took the reins of Jake’s mammoth. The animal tried to take a bite out of Smitty’s hair, which curled over his collar in shaggy red waves, but he batted it away like it was no more than a pesky fly.

“Good to have you home, Jake,” he said with a nod.

He collected the other reins as well and led all three animals down to the barn, leaving Jake alone with his father and brother.

“All right, then.” Nathan clapped his hands together. “I’m off to see what trouble the men have got into while I’ve been gone.”

Their father huffed. “I’m more than capable of running my estate without your help.” He squeezed Nathan’s arm. “But it’s

good to have you home too.”

Nathan tipped his hat and turned to leave.

Jake searched his mind for a reason for him to stay, but it remained stubbornly blank. Nathan caught his eye on his way past and angled his head towards their father. Then he sauntered off after Smitty, whistling as he disappeared down the slope to the bunkhouse.

Silence descended.

“Shall we sit on the veranda?” their father asked.

Jake nodded, and they ascended the steps together. His father settled into his rocking chair, and Jake took a seat on the padded bench beside it. They sat for a while, the flurtoos flitting about the old oak tree providing a welcome distraction.

Blue poked her head out of Jake’s shirt pocket and looked hesitantly around. With an excited trill, she climbed out, flexed her wings a couple of times, and swooped over to join the flock. His lips tilted into a half smile—she was clearly happy to be home.

After a few minutes, he turned to find his father scrutinising him. “You’ve changed.” The old man waved a staying hand. “I know you’ve been gone less than a month, but I can see it in your face. You’re more a man now.”

“A lot’s happened. I—” Jake ducked his head, breathed out, then looked across the lawn to the pastures and mountains beyond. “I don’t know how to say what I need to.”

“Why don’t you start at the beginning? It’s usually the best place.”

A smile nudged the corners of Jake’s mouth at the words said so often when he’d been caught getting into trouble as a

child. His lips flattened. What he'd done this time was so much worse. He looked up into his father's steady gaze, and the truth tumbled out.

"I'm so sorry. I should never have left. It wasn't how I thought it would be at all."

Sadness crept into his father's expression, and he swung his head in the direction of the city. "I should have told you what it was like sooner," he said.

Jake huffed. "I probably wouldn't have listened. And they do have amazing things there. The university archives were incredible, and there's automatons, and steam-powered carriages, and airships." His enthusiasm waned. "But it's so..."

"Corrupt," they both said at the same time.

Their eyes met, but Jake broke the contact and stared down at his hands. "I don't know how it happened, but I... I got in with the wrong people, and... I'm in trouble."

As he recounted his experiences in the city, his father rocked in his chair. Aside from an occasional tut or muttered curse, and the lyrical creak of the rocker, he remained silent.

When Jake finished, he still said nothing for a long time. Jake twisted a loose cushion thread around his fingers, unable to make eye contact. "You must be so ashamed of me. I can't stand knowing I... I'm so sorry."

"I know you are, son." His father's voice was soft, understanding, which only made it worse.

"Like I said, I'll work until I can pay it all back, I promise. I can sleep in the barn so you don't have to include lodgings in the pay, and if they find me, I'll leave so you're not caught up in it."

“You’ll do no such thing. And you have a perfectly good bed upstairs. ‘Sleep in the barn.’ Pah!”

He leaned over and rested a hand on Jake’s arm. “Look at me, Jake.”

Slowly, haltingly, Jake did. His father’s eyes glistened but showed no spark of hate or disappointment. Jake sucked in a breath.

“You’re my son, and I love you. You don’t earn that; it’s given, freely. Maybe I’ve not been the best at showing it, but there it is. All I care about is that you’re home and safe. And if the Syndicate ever come after you, they’ll have me to deal with.

“Now,” he put his hands on his knees and pushed up, “we’d better get ready for dinner, or we’ll both be in trouble with Daniel.”

“Yes, sir.” Jake stood, a smile tugging at one side of his face at the image of his powerful father being browbeaten by their diminutive cook.

He blew out a breath. Their conversation had gone nothing like he’d imagined. Maybe his father really did love him. He tucked the possibility away for later consideration.

His father walked to the door and held it open. “I wonder how the young lady’s getting on in there. I must thank her again for helping you.”

An image popped into Jake’s head of Clarissa staring daggers at him while his father heaped praise on her all evening. He groaned and followed the old man inside.

Chapter 34

Jake

Jake leaned back against the old oak and closed his eyes, soaking in the last of the sun's warmth before it dipped below the mountains. Flurtoos chattered in the branches above, and children's laughter floated up from beyond the barn at the bottom of the hill, but neither disturbed the calm that had settled in his soul since his conversation with his father the previous day. He ran his hand over the soft grass and breathed in the scents of home.

It was good to be back. Had been good to run Lightning up to the lookout that afternoon. Less so convincing her to forgive him for staying away so long, but fruit slices had helped there. He smiled. His shirt still smelled of her.

An idea for a machine to help Daniel with the laundry popped into his mind, and he scrambled for the notepad he'd dropped beside him when he sat down. If he didn't write it down straight away, it would disintegrate like last year's leaves.

He was mid-stroke when a scream made his arm jolt, snapping the end of the lead onto the page. He looked up, his head still swimming with interlocking cogs and gears.

Clarissa tore across the hill, skirts flying, with Jonathan's eldest son, Amos, chasing behind. A few steps later, her gait

faltered, and she put a hand to her bad hip, her face pinching. The boy closed the gap between them, flung something at her, eliciting another scream, and ran whooping back to the barn.

She jerked around, brushing off whatever it was, and grimaced in pain.

“Are you all right?” Jake called.

She looked up, straightening her posture, but relaxed when she spotted him. She limped over, an uncertain smile on her face and one hand pressed into her hip.

“Mind if I join you for a bit?” she called as she approached.

“Of course. Here.”

He ran to fetch one of the chairs from the veranda and placed it next to the tree trunk, facing out over the sweeping lawn. When she reached him, he hovered while she lowered herself to the padded seat, then sank back down to his previous spot.

Blue flew over from a wildflower she'd been munching and circled above their heads a couple of times before landing on the arm of Clarissa's chair. Clarissa scratched her knobbly head with her forefinger, and Blue purred, bouncing her shell on the wood and tucking her wings closer to her sides.

Clarissa smiled and leaned back in the chair, taking in the view.

“I've not seen much of you since we arrived,” Jake said. “What've you been doing with yourself?”

She rolled her head towards him. “Oh, this and that. Mostly helping with the children”—she brought her head upright—“though that one's a little terror.”

Jake huffed a laugh. “He’s not so bad when you get to know him.”

“I’ll believe that when it happens,” she muttered, leaning her head back again and closing her eyes.

They sat in companionable silence for a while, and Jake doodled a little more of his design, the mechanism not quite fitting together as well as it had in his mind earlier.

“So, what’s it like being back?” Clarissa asked.

Jake put his pencil down with a sigh and closed his notebook around it, then squinted up at the distant mountains, their outline as familiar as the nicks on his hands. “Strange. In some ways, it’s not changed at all, but in others... Everything feels so different. Does that make sense?”

He turned to find her looking at him, her eyes serious. She nodded, and he returned his gaze to the horizon before continuing. “I can’t quite relax, though, knowing Ralph’s out there somewhere.”

Her skirts rustled as she adjusted her position. “I thought Nate said it would be days before he arrives, if he can even track us all the way here. He’s got no mount far as we could tell.”

“Unless he rides the fell-hound,” Jake replied absently.

The image of Ralph trying to climb atop a snarling beast danced across Jake’s mind. He caught Clarissa’s eye, and they burst into laughter at the same time.

The noise must have startled the flurtoos above, for they took to the air en masse, swirling out from the tree and chattering their displeasure. A couple flitted down to investigate the disturbance, landing on the back of Clarissa’s

chair, and a few second later, more joined them, dotting the surrounding grass.

She held still, and some of them hopped across to her shoulders, yet more landing on her arms until she was covered in green and brown critters. Her mouth stretched into a huge grin, and Jake laughed, causing them all to scatter again, and her to frown at him. Tipping her head back, she followed their flight until the majority had returned to the tree, then stared out across the lawn, one hand dangling over the edge of the chair while her fingers swirled through the long grass.

“This place is so peaceful,” she said at last. “Certainly not what I expected. And your family are wonderful, so welcoming.”

“Yeah, they are pretty great.” He scratched the back of his head. “Just taken me a while to realise it.”

“You’re lucky to have them. They’re nothing like—” She clamped her lips shut.

Jake’s eyes narrowed on her. “There’s more to your story than you’ve told us, isn’t there?”

She said nothing, only gave him a sidelong look.

“Will you tell me about it someday? Not today if you don’t want, but, when you’re ready.”

The corners of her lips lifted slightly, and she gazed at the mountains. “One day.”

“Miss Clarissa!”

The call came from Sara, who was climbing the slope behind a much-subdued Amos. When she reached them, she prodded her son forward. “Go on.”

“I’m sorry for chasing you with a meelit.” He glanced back at his mother, who raised her brows. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“You didn’t just scare her,” Jake said before Clarissa could respond. “You hurt her.”

Amos’s head shot up, horror paling his features. His eyes went to Clarissa for a second before he hung his head again. “I’m sorry. Truly I am.”

Clarissa glared at Jake and turned to the young boy. “I have a bad hip. You weren’t to know.”

“Like my dad has a bad arm?” He stared at her leg as if it was a miracle he could see anything at all.

Clarissa’s lips quirked to the side, but she quickly wiped the mirth from her face. “In a way. But not as serious. It just aches sometimes or hurts if I twist it in a funny way.”

Amos scrunched his face and nodded slowly, then stared down at the ground. Sara cleared her throat and touched his shoulder. “All right. Go on back to your brother and sister now.”

He looked up at Clarissa one last time, the rims of his eyes wet, and spun to leave.

Clarissa pushed to her feet using the arms of the chair to support her weight. “I’ll come with you. Can’t sit here all day when there’re things to be done.”

She winked at Jake and mouthed “Thank you” to Sara over Amos’s head, then started walking, cautiously at first, towards the barn. Amos matched his pace to hers, pointing out dips in the ground and reaching out once or twice as if to catch her if she fell.

“You wanna lean on me?” he asked as they began the descent, and Jake just caught her response of, “No. But thank you.”

Beside Jake, Sara cocked a hip and folded her arms. “I hope she stays—she’s good with them.” She glanced at Jake. “Well educated too, and we could use a teacher now there’s a few more youngsters around the place.”

Jake watched their progress down the slope. As they dipped out of view, Clarissa grinned over her shoulder at him, and it hit him that he’d never seen her truly smile until they got to the estate. He turned to Sara and lifted one shoulder. “Maybe you should mention it to my dad.”

Chapter 35

Jake

“**J**ake, there’s a couple of men at the front gate say they’re here to see you.”

Jake stilled, wiped his brow, and looked up at Jonathan standing in the entrance of the barn.

“What’d you say?”

Jonathan lifted his hat and scratched underneath. “Two men. At the front gate. A big burly fella with a tattoo, and an older, fancy-looking gent. What d’ya want me to...”

Dropping the pitchfork into the fresh pile of hay he’d been spreading, Jake snatched his hat from the end of the stall. He gave Lightning a quick pat and ran out of the barn, heading for the main gate.

“They friends of yours?” Jonathan called out behind him. “Should I get Daniel to set a couple extra places for dinner?”

“No!” Jake spun around while continuing to jog backwards and forced a smile. “No need, thanks. They’ll probably not stay.”

“You sure?”

A crease lined Jonathan’s brow, but Jake didn’t have time to assuage his doubts. He needed to get to the men before his

father or Nathan found out they'd arrived. "Yes. Positive. I'll be back to finish up in a bit." *I hope.*

He ran across the vast lawn and down to the main gate, the cogs in his brain jammed on one inescapable fact—he'd have to pay the blood debt. His heart raced, and a chill spread down his back in defiance of the warm afternoon sun.

He'd had two days to assess the situation, distance allowing him to approach the problem like one of his complex designs. If Ralph had found him, he'd take responsibility for his actions and deal with the consequences on his own. His family shouldn't have to suffer on his account, and the thought of bringing the Syndicate to their door left his chest hollow.

They'd taken him back, loved him despite everything he'd done, so he could accept his fate. He might not have their powers, but he had their determination, and he was at peace with what he had to do. Almost.

He reached the gate sweaty and out of breath. Hands on his knees, he sucked in a few lungful of air before straightening and striding to the centre of the track a few yards from the bars.

"You found me then." His voice quivered only a fraction—good.

Ralph grimaced. The other man put a hand out in front of the hunter, though, and he stayed quiet.

Was that Ralph's boss? Jake studied the older man, dressed in an understated grey suit with an elaborately tied cravat at his neck. Something about his face tugged at Jake's memory, but it refused to surface, shrouded in a fog of green.

"Do I know you?" he asked.

The man laughed—a short, sharp sound.

“Only in passing. I’ve been looking forward to properly introducing myself.” He looked behind Jake. “Will your family be joining us?”

“No.” Jake took a step forward. “It’s me you’ve come for.”

The man’s nostrils flared. “Very well. To the point, then. You owe me a blood debt, Mr Amarel, and I’m here to collect.”

Realisation dawned. “You’re the boss.”

He tilted his head in acknowledgement.

He’d come in person? All this way?

Jake shook off his questions. He had to focus; his father could arrive at any moment. “This is all a mistake. I had the money, but my hotel room was robbed. I can—”

“Yes, I know all about that.” A smirk played across the boss’s lips. “I couldn’t let you escape the net, now, could I? Not after all the trouble I’d gone to.”

Jake staggered backwards.

“Hadn’t figured that part out yet?”

The malicious gleam in the boss’s eyes robbed Jake of his ability to speak. His stomach rebelled, and he swallowed.

“Why?” He looked up. “Why me?”

The boss shrugged, glanced behind Jake again. “I had my reasons.” He pulled a piece of paper from an inner pocket of his jacket and held it up between his finger and thumb. “I believe this says you’re mine. Unless you’d prefer I come inside and speak to your father?”

Jake’s world imploded.

“I’ll come with you.”

He walked forwards, his movements jerky as if his legs resisted what he was forcing them to do. Before he'd taken more than a couple of steps, he was yanked back by an invisible hand. Feet pounded down the drive behind him, and a few moments later, his father appeared at his shoulder.

“Leave my son alone.”

“But, Dad—”

“Go inside, Jake.”

He shook his head. This was his mess, and he needed to handle it. Besides, there was nothing his father could do.

The invisible hand pushed him towards the house, but it released its hold after a few feet, and he returned to his father's side.

“Hello, Walter,” the boss said, his tone surprisingly warm.

“Hello, Jonah.”

They *knew* each other?

Jake's gaze bounced between them, his mouth hanging open. Fuzzy memories came into focus, and his eyes popped wide. “That was you that night. At the den.” His brow furrowed. “But, if you know Dad, why would you come after me?”

The boss—Jonah—didn't even look at him.

“How is Kira?” he asked Jake's father. “I don't see her anywhere.”

“Leave my wife out of this.”

Jonah narrowed his eyes. “Very well.” He flicked a glance at Jake. “I warned you never to return, Walter.”

What? Jake's face scrunched. "This's got nothing to do with Dad. He didn't even want me to go to Berlath."

Jonah waved a hand as if batting away a fly, not taking his focus from Jake's father. "The terms were clear enough."

"Show me the bond."

Jonah walked up to the gate and held the paper out between the bars. It flew from his grasp and into Jake's father's hand.

Wide-eyed and slack-jawed, Jake stared. His father had used his powers openly in front of city folk. And Jonah hadn't so much as raised an eyebrow. What in the world was going on?

The old man pulled his reading spectacles from his pocket. Once they were in position, he perused the document, his mouth working.

"It's legally binding." Jonah straightened his cuffs.

"So it seems," Jake's father muttered. He returned the spectacles to his pocket and stared at the ground in front of his feet. Looking up, he lifted the bond. "I'll give you triple what this is worth."

Jonah tutted. "You know it's worth more than the amount on the chit."

His eyes bored into Jake's father's, conveying some message Jake couldn't decipher.

"Fine, ten times the amount."

Jake gaped. That was an astronomical sum. Why would he suggest so much?

“Sorry, Walter.” Jonah stepped back from the gate and spread his hands. “Money isn’t the issue here.” He pointed to the bond. “That’s a blood debt, and I have a reputation to maintain. Now give me the boy.”

His eyes strayed briefly to Jake, and Jake’s last hope died. He rubbed his palms down his trousers and walked forwards.

His father stepped in front of him, blocking his view of Jonah and locking calm, clear eyes on his. “Go inside, and don’t come out until I tell you to.”

“But they’re here for me.”

“No. They’re not.”

Jake’s stomach writhed. He stared into his father’s steady gaze, willing him to understand. “I have to go with them, to pay off my debt. This is all my fault.”

His father sighed and rubbed the back of his neck.

“Jake... Just do as I say, and I’ll explain everything when I come in. Now go.”

A glance at Jonah showed him inspecting his fingernails as if they were discussing nothing more important than the weather. Jake turned back to his father and opened his mouth. Then closed it again.

He had no idea what was happening, but the last thing he wanted was for them to argue again. Especially as it might be their last conversation.

A hand landed on his shoulder as Nathan’s voice whispered from behind him. “Don’t worry. He’s not getting you.”

Jake started. He hadn’t even heard Nathan arrive, so intent had he been on the events unfolding in front of him.

“Take him in the house, Nate,” their father said.

Aided by a nudge of power, Nathan tugged Jake towards the house, and that time he went, his mind churning with what was to come.



“More of his men just showed up, but I’ve set protections around the estate so they can’t get in. We have some time.”

Jake whirled to the doorway. He’d been pacing the lounge since Nathan had shut them in nearly half an hour earlier. “What happened? What did he say?”

His father shut the door behind him, and Nathan stood from his seat by the fireplace. They exchanged a look, causing Jake to explode.

“Someone tell me what’s going on. How do you know him, and why’d you use your powers in front of him? You never do that.” He slammed his hand down on the back of the sofa. “No more secrets. This is *my* life we’re talking about.”

“Calm down, Jake,” Nathan said at the same time as their father said, “Have a seat, son.”

Jake skirted the sofa and sank down onto it, resting his elbows on his knees. Nathan sat as well, but their father walked to the fireplace and leaned on the mantelpiece, staring into the empty grate.

“I’ve known Jonah for a long time. He used to be my assistant when I... when I ruled Berlath.”

Jake sat forwards. “You what?”

He glanced across at Nathan, but his brother merely tilted his head in confirmation. How had they not told him this? He looked back to the man who had raised him, seeing a stranger in his place.

His father smiled a sad smile. “Before you were born, I was governor of the whole colony—until Jonah and his partners forced me out. They used nethylite-fuelled technology to cause an explosion while I was using my powers, made it look like I’d brought half the mountain down on the city.

“It was like something out of a nightmare—an avalanche of rocks crushing buildings and fleeing crowds; screams, dust, and fear clogging the city’s streets. Dozens were killed, and Jonah made sure everyone blamed me.”

Jake looked up. No wonder they didn’t have machinery on the estate. He opened his mouth, but his father continued.

“He convinced the council to depose me that same night and worked the people into a mob that came after me and anyone who supported me. I did the only thing I could without hurting anyone else—I left.

“I should have known he was behind this. It’s his style—to prey on the weak and beat anyone who stands against him into submission.” His mouth twisted into a mew of distaste, and then he sighed. “If he controls the council *and* the Syndicate, he really does have the whole city in his grip.”

“Why come after you then?” Jake asked. “If he has what he wants?”

His father straightened and turned towards them. “He must have seen your arrival as me testing the waters. I’ve not set foot in Berlath for nearly eighteen years, not even placed an order with anyone remotely connected to the place, but he

always did want absolute power. He's probably afraid I'm about to go back and retake the city. I won't." He firmed his jaw. "But I will save my son."

The knots in Jake's gut tightened. With all that history between them, what could his father possibly suggest that would make Jonah give up his claim? He hadn't budged for a fortune. Whatever it was would have to cost his father dearly.

I'd rather be a slave.

Clearing his throat, Jake stood. "I'm so sorry I got you involved with him again. You've no idea how grateful I am for-for everything." He clenched his trembling hands. "I'm going to give myself up."

"No!"

"You can't be serious."

Nathan jumped up as their father stepped forwards and grasped Jake's upper arms. "Let me handle this. Please."

Jake pulled out of his father's grip. "No. I've thought this through, and it's the right thing to do." He took a deep breath and looked up. "We can try bribing him not to hurt me before he puts me in the mines, but I can take a beating if I have to. Then, when things have died down, in a year or two maybe, he might agree to let me pay off the rest."

"A year or two?" Nathan spluttered. "He could do anything to you in that time. You've got no idea what he's capable of."

"What do you suggest then?"

"I don't know," Nathan said. "But we've got all night to think of something. He's not exactly going anywhere."

Their father stepped between them. “All right, that’s enough. This isn’t getting us anywhere.” He sat down and ran a hand over his face, his features haggard like an old man’s. “He won’t take the money, no matter how much we offer him.”

Nathan’s brows drew together in a scowl. “He needs to be stopped. If we used our powers—”

“No.” Their father shook his head. “That’s what he accused me of last time. If we use them now, we’re playing straight into his lies about us, and I won’t risk any more innocent lives.” He scratched the evening stubble along his jaw, the steady rasp filling the silence between them.

“Then there’s only one thing we can do.” Nathan folded his arms across his chest. “If it’s blood he wants, we give it to him.”

Jake slumped onto the sofa, the comfortable padding at odds with the rock in his stomach. “I agree. Thanks for trying to think of another way out though.”

“You don’t understand.” Nathan stepped towards him. “I mean me, not you.”

“You? Why would you be going?”

“I made a promise a long time ago that I’d protect you from Jonah with my life. I’m not breaking it now.”

“I can’t let you do that, not for me.”

“You don’t understand. I have an idea.” Nathan sat on the end of the sahl table. “Jonah’s bound to put me in a fighting pit rather than the mines. I can handle myself well enough not to get too injured, then Dad can heal me as soon as I’m done.” He turned to their father. “If you’re all right with going back to the city, that is.”

A steely glint entered their father's eyes. "For my sons? Anything."

Nathan nodded and turned back to Jake. "Then I'll be fine, and the debt will be paid in one go. That's got to be better than you wasting years of your life in the mines."

Jake drummed his fingers on the sofa cushion. It was a crazy plan, and dangerous—he blocked images of flashing knives from his mind—but it might just work. "So I'll do it."

"No. It has to be me. It takes a lot of energy to heal someone—just fixing that cut on your hand nearly wiped me out. But with the power already in my blood, Dad will be able to handle much more serious injuries if he has to without as much strain."

"He's right," their father said. "Your body doesn't react to power the same way ours do. If you got badly hurt, we might not be able to save you."

Nathan looked Jake straight in the eye. "Everyone needs help sometimes, right?"

"So people keep telling me."

"Then let me help you. You've got an amazing gift for inventing things, truly. Even that mammox-dung professor had to steal your design. But that won't help you here.

"Jonah's devious as a sandsnake, and a master at manipulating and tricking people. We should've warned you about him—not that we knew how bad it'd be—but you went to the city knowing nothing, and that's on us.

"I had to watch him go after Dad when I was ten, I won't let him come after you now. So let me do this for you. I can fight, and Dad can heal me. I've had worse odds breaking in

some of the mammoxes. And it's the only way to pay the blood debt and keep you safe."

Jake considered him, a grin stealing onto his face. "That was some speech."

"Yeah." Nathan rubbed the back of his neck. "Didn't know I had it in me. So what do you say?"

Jake took a juddery breath and nodded.

His father eyed him. "You mean that?"

Jake took another, steadier breath. "I promise. But if I can't fight, I can at least design you a weapon to use. It's a big enough debt for them to be allowed. Something to extend your reach maybe, and give you some added protection. You never know, it might even help you win."

Nathan looked at their father, then shrugged. "Sure. Why not?"

"I'll get started straight away." Jake walked to the door and paused. "You coming?"

"We'll be there in a minute."

Chapter 36

Nathan

As soon as the door closed behind Jake, Nathan turned to his father. “You’ll need to take some of my power if this is going to work. And it’ll be better if I’m not tempted to use it in the fighting pit. We both know I need to lose.”

His father stood and cupped Nathan’s face in callused, sun-darkened hands. Their warmth spread through him like a summer’s day. “I’m proud of you.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Nathan pulled away. “I’m a regular hero. Now let’s do this before I change my mind.”

His father tutted and shook his head as he pushed his chair aside. “Never takes anything seriously.”

Nathan shoved the other furniture back as well, clearing a space in the centre of the room. They stood opposite each other and breathed deeply as they brought themselves into sync.

With his mind cleared of all but the task before him, Nathan raised his hand, palm up, and focused all his energy there. His father did the same, and their powers merged into a blinding ball of light that only they could see.

The sphere grew as they poured more of themselves into it, filling the space between them and pulsing in time with their

matched heartbeats. When only a tendril of his strength remained, Nathan closed his hand and stepped back.

His father brought his other arm up, and the power flowed into him, dimming to a single point and then winking out. He strode straight to Nathan.

“Are you all right?”

Cold and wobbly, Nathan merely nodded. When his father moved to help him sit, he waved him off, straightened his shoulders, and lifted his head. “I’m gonna talk to Jake before I go. Don’t let him come out there tonight, or to the city with us. It’ll be hard enough to focus as it is, and better if Jonah doesn’t see him again.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll make sure he stays here with Smitty.”

“You really all right with going back to Berlath? I should’ve—”

“And don’t you worry about me either. I can handle myself just fine.” His father pulled him into a tight embrace.

Nathan closed his eyes and returned it, feeling the power moving under his father’s skin. “Sure you can handle all my awesomeness?”

His father’s eyes misted as he let go. “I think I’ll manage.”

Nathan forced a chuckle. With a pat to his father’s shoulder, he walked across the room and opened the door.

“I love you,” his father called out behind him.

Nathan shut the door. “I love you too.”



He found Jake upstairs in his room, pacing.

“Trying to wear the floor out?”

Jake spun to face him, his face a mask of concentration. “I’m trying to come up with the perfect weapon for you to use, but I’ve never designed one before.” He flopped onto the bed and dropped his head into his hands. “I should just go myself.”

Nathan sat beside him. “You promised you wouldn’t.”

“But the blood debt was my mistake.”

“Not entirely. But you’ve always caught on quick. I doubt you’ll make the same mistake again.” He snorted. “Besides, you’re not the one Jonah’s really after.”

Jake lifted his head to speak, but Nathan held up a hand. “Don’t worry. It’ll work.” He nudged Jake with his shoulder. “A cold night out in the plains makes nearly everyone more reasonable. Maybe they’ll take the money in the morning.”

“But what if they don’t?” Torment darkened Jake’s gaze, strengthening Nathan’s resolve.

“Then I’ll fight some city thug. I can handle myself.” He stood. “Have you told Clarissa we’re heading back to the city in the morning?”

Jake’s eyes popped wide. “No. She was busy with Daniel when I saw her, so I left them to it.”

“Better tell her soon, but rather you interrupting them than me.” He grinned wide. “They’re all yours, little brother.”

“Thanks.” Jake walked towards the door.

Nathan’s fingers itched to give him a hug, but he forced them into fists and clamped them to his sides. “I love you, Jake.”

Jake turned and stared at him, then ducked his chin. “I love you too.”

He left, his footsteps clomping down the stairs at double speed, and Nathan looked around the room. Blue sat on the nightstand, her head weaving back and forth as she chewed a dunberry leaf.

“Look after him while I’m gone, will you?” he said and closed the door behind him.



The evening air, much cooler inland than on the coast, chased bumps across Nathan’s skin as he crossed the lawn and strode down to the main gate. He huffed. *You’re not cold, just scared. Now get it over with.*

He slid aside the bolt and pulled the gate open. Before he could rethink his decision, he stepped through and tugged it shut behind him. The metal bar grated back into position, his father’s power protecting those within. If only he were one of them.

A quick scan of the undulating landscape revealed where Jonah had set up camp for the night at the top of a nearby rise. A ring of irium lanterns surrounded a large rectangular tent flanked by a couple of smaller ones, their orange glow throwing out shadows that danced on the grass beyond.

He’d kept his word, then, staying close until their business was finished. Good. Nathan didn’t need to add a long trek to the night’s activities.

He walked forwards, scuffing his boots across the ground and whistling one of his father’s favourite tunes. If that didn’t

warn them of his approach, whatever sentry Jonah had posted wasn't worth spit.

A low growl came from somewhere in the long grass to his left, and he halted. *Okay, decent sentry.* He searched for a pair of glowing yellow eyes. *I hope that thing's on a leash.*

"That's far enough, Nathan. What do you want?"

Jonah appeared from around the master tent, slicing into an apple. One of his henchmen hovered beside him, pulling a weapon from its holster. At the flick of a switch, a panel in the side lit up with a turquoise glow accompanied by a low buzzing.

Nathan's mouth dried, and he licked his lips. "I've come to make a deal. Me for Jake."

Jonah's hands stilled. "The *real* son of Walter Amarel. Now that *is* interesting."

"Jake's his son too. Ever since you—" Nathan clamped his lips shut.

"We both know there's a big difference between you."

Don't argue with him. You need to make this work. "So you agree? I'll take Jake's place."

Jonah walked down the slope, gesturing for more light. He stopped a few yards away and met Nathan's gaze. "You fed up of farming and want to try the mines instead?"

"We both know you'll put me in one of the fighting pits." *At least I hope you will, or our plan's on the dung heap.*

"I've been told you have your father's powers." Jonah inclined his head. "What's to stop you using them to win your fight, or turning them on me?"

“You have my word.”

“The word of an Amarel... Unbreakable.” Jonah took a step towards him. “And your father knows about this? He won’t interfere?”

“You know he won’t.” Nathan clenched his fists and mentally replaced the man’s eager expression with images of him being tossed through the air or chased out of the valley by a herd of mammoxes.

“Then I accept. But you won’t be going to a pit. We’ll do this here, tonight.” Jonah raised his brows, the hint of a smirk twisting his lips. “Sure you don’t want to back out?”

Nathan folded his arms and returned the smirk. Jonah could take his taunts and stuff them somewhere dark. “I’m good, thanks.”

Jonah nodded to someone behind Nathan and relaxed his stance. Nathan glanced over his shoulder to find the hunter, Ralph, at his back. How had he got so close?

No matter. Nathan wasn’t about to run. Now or later, the plan would be the same, and he’d see it through. He faced forward again. Movement came from the centre of the camp, but he kept his attention fixed on Jonah.

“You know, I used to take you to the park for ice cream when you were a kid.” Jonah cut another slice off his apple, adopting a sad frown. “Such a shame it’s come to this.”

Nathan opened his arms. “Well, I won’t hold it against you if you change your mind.”

Jonah tutted, his eyes glowing in the lantern light. “I’m afraid that won’t happen. Blood debts must be paid.”

“Worth a try, right?” The words came out weakly, more like a plea than anything else. Nathan’s gaze flicked to where two burly men strode from between the tents, knives and meaty fists at the ready. He swallowed. *Dad, please find me quickly.*

As they closed in on him, he fixed the faces of his family in his mind and stood his ground. At least Jonah would finally see the true strength of an Amarel.

Chapter 37

Jake

For Jake, sneaking out of his father's house was child's play. How many times during his early years had he climbed down from his bedroom window and skirted the bushes until he could race across the short gap to the old oak tree? From there it was a straight shot down to the barn and freedom. He grinned at the memories—and then paused.

Maybe his excursions hadn't been as secret as he'd thought at the time. His father had invariably appeared an hour or so later with no forewarning. Jake's smile faltered, and he looked over his shoulder. Curtains closed, lights out, the entire house appeared asleep.

Nevertheless, he kept his steps as light as possible as he cut around the barn and across to the front of the property. If his father found him this time, he'd use his powers to bar Jake's window. But Jake needed to see his brother.

By the time he'd figured out the perfect weapon, Nathan had already handed himself over, and their father had stopped Jake from going after him. There was no way they'd keep him from at least giving Nathan his gift though. He swallowed. Ralph and his fell-hound might.

He crept to the main gate, his palms damp and throat dry. There was no sign of Jonah, or Ralph and his vicious beast,

but something lay in the dirt just outside. Was it a trap? Some way to get two Amarels instead of one?

Scanning the mist-shrouded slopes beyond, he edged closer—and made out the shape of a man's body in the pre-dawn light. He ran to the gate, yanked the bolt free, and flung one half open only to skid to a stop on the other side.

Pale skin mottled with bruises and criss-crossed with knife wounds met his horrified gaze, and he spun to the side, his stomach emptying. When only bile remained, he turned back to the corpse, his entire body shaking.

Nathan stared up at him from sightless eyes, his mouth frozen in a grimace of pain. Dried blood caked his torso and ran down his sides, the darkened, twisted fingers reaching for the pools below.

Jake sank to his knees, anguish pouring over his cheeks like liquid lava. He struck the ground, the sting of grit lodging in his knuckles barely registering.

“Why would they do this?” He hit the dirt again. “You were supposed to fight, not die,” he cried. Then quieter, “Not like this.”

Unable to take the pain in his chest, he let it out, sobbing uncontrollably. “I’m... s-so... sorry. This is... all my... f-fault.”

He swiped at his face and yelled, “It was my debt, not his! You should have killed me.”

Only the whispering grass replied, taunting him with echoes of “too late, too late.”

His eyes came back to his brother. He'd never laugh again, never crack another one of his stupid jokes. Jake reached out

and touched his face between the cuts. Cold, dead flesh met his fingers, and he pulled back.

The tears came again, and Jake let them fall.

Eventually, spent and hollow, he came back to himself. What was he doing? He couldn't leave his brother there like a heap of refuse. He needed to get him inside and clean him up before anyone else saw him.

With a final sniff, he wiped his face on his shirt and struggled to his feet. He slid his hands under Nathan's shoulders as carefully as possible, trying to ignore the unnatural feel of his skin, and took a firm grip. Then he lifted him up and heaved him through the gate.

In slow, painful increments, he managed to drag Nathan's body up the slope towards the house, a flattened trail in the dew-laden grass marking their progress. Nathan had always been huge, but his weight now left Jake panting, his muscles quivering.

He was halfway across the lawn when the door banged open behind him and footsteps crossed the porch. Jake closed his eyes, lowered his brother's corpse, and turned to find his father and Smitty racing towards him.

His father's face paled when he saw Nathan, and his strides quickened, his lips pressed into a tight line. Something about his expression triggered Jake's brain.

"Did you know Jonah would do this?"

He stepped between his father and the body, glaring at the old man.

"Is that why you wouldn't let me out here last night? Because you knew he'd kill Nathan instead of taking him to the city?"

His body moved without thought, as if he'd stepped outside himself. Inconsolable grief took over, and he surged forwards, lashing out, mindless of whom he struck. The words "hold him, Smitty" floated from somewhere far away, but strong arms wrapped around him and tugged him aside.

He struggled against them, frantic in his attempt to get back to his brother. "How could you let this happen?" he screamed. "He's your son."

"And so are you!"

The words hit Jake like a slap to the face.

His father dropped to the grass beside Nathan. "Now let me focus; I'm not done yet."

He closed his eyes, breathed deeply, and laid his hands over Nathan's chest. A soft light emanated from beneath them, and Jake stilled, his anger forgotten. He tried to get closer, but Smitty's grip was solid.

"Let go of me. Please."

After a moment, the restraining arms disappeared, and Jake knelt opposite his father.

"What're you doing, Dad? It's too late. Nathan's—" He gulped, couldn't bring himself to say the word, though it floated through his head, mocking, accusing.

His father's jaw clenched, the brightness of his power intensifying. Keeping one hand firmly pressed against Nathan, he groped with the other until he found Jake's and pulled him closer with a desperate grip. He said nothing, but he didn't need to.

They were in this together.

Static hummed through the air, raising the fine hairs on Jake's arms and setting his teeth on edge. Nothing else happened for a minute, and he was about to tug his father away when Nathan's skin began to glow, radiating out from the point of their contact. It lost the greyish pallor and blue-black bruises, and the edges of his wounds slowly knitted together.

Jake gaped, transfixed.

But his father's breathing grew choppy, and Jake wrenched his gaze from his brother. Beads of sweat dotted the old man's brow, strain deepening the lines of his face. He pressed down as if exerting the last of his energy in one final push and slumped back on his haunches, releasing Jake's hand.

Concern thrummed through Jake's veins. "Dad—"

Nathan jerked upright with a gasp.

Chest heaving, Nathan lifted a hand to where the worst of the cuts had been, his eyes darting back and forth.

Disbelief held Jake frozen.

Their father had no such problem. He launched himself at Nathan, wrapping him in a hug. Nathan's arms came up around the old man's back, and they held each other in a tight embrace.

Jake reached out, his heart pounding against his ribcage.

"Nathan?"

Strong hands yanked him into their hug, circling his shoulders and pressing his head in with theirs. His arms automatically returned the squeeze, and he closed his eyes and inhaled a juddery breath.

Light seeped into their huddle as the first rays of the sun crested the mountains. Somewhere behind Jake, a warbler began to sing. He let go and straightened, blinked the moisture from his vision. But the mirage didn't clear. His brother was moving, breathing—*alive*.

“I can't believe... How...”

Nathan pulled back from their father and gave Jake a tremulous smile.

“I don't know. But good job we pooled our powers last night.”

Jake looked from one to the other. “So you knew you could do this—bring people back to life?”

“No.” Nathan rubbed the back of his neck and turned to their father, who shook his head.

“I've never done anything like this before. I don't think anyone in our family ever has.” He raised his hands in a helpless gesture. “But what else could I do?”

Jake's mind filled with the image of his brother's cold, dead body left dumped outside the gates. His eyes stung again, and he swallowed. “I thought we'd lost you.”

“Sorry about that.” Nathan's voice came out rough. He cleared his throat. “Looks like we underestimated Jonah's hatred for us.”

“*You're* sorry? I—” Jake dropped his head. “*I'm* the one who should be sorry. And I am. More than you can imagine.”

Tears flowed unchecked down his cheeks, and he closed his eyes. Afterimages of the knife wounds scoring Nathan's body seared the backs of his eyelids, and he jerked them open

again, gulping in a ragged breath. “How can I ever repay you?”

A hand grasped his and squeezed until he looked up.

“I love you, Jake. I told you we’d figure it out together.”

Warmth from more than the rising sun spread through Jake’s body, and he bit his lip. Nodded. It really was true. They loved him just as much as they did each other.

“Um, boss?” Smitty pointed to where the men were stirring about the bunkhouse. “Might want to move this somewhere else.”

“Come on.” Jake’s father stood, dew-dampened patches circling his knees, and helped Nathan to his feet. “Let’s get you inside.”

Jake scrambled up as well, scooting under Nathan’s other shoulder to take some of his weight. Nathan opened his mouth to speak, but his eyes met Jake’s, and an indecipherable emotion flashed across them. He pressed his lips together and let Jake support him the rest of the way into the house.

Chapter 38

Jake

Nathan sat at the kitchen table while Daniel checked him over for injuries. Jake hovered to the side, searching his brother's torso for traces of the numerous knife slashes he'd received. Save for a few thin, red lines, his skin was smooth and unmarred.

"Nothing wrong with him," the cook pronounced. He wiped his hands on a cloth tied to his waist and returned to the stove and a simmering pot of porridge.

One arm already in a fresh shirt, Nathan batted Jake away. "Told you so."

Jake leaned back against the sink, then moved to a chair when Daniel shooed him out of the way. He stared down at his open hands resting on his knees.

Nathan had died for him. Actually died. No matter how many times Jake repeated it, his brain refused to process the incredible, impossible fact. It should have been him.

"Thank you, Nate." Tears pricked, and he sniffed. "I'll never be able to make it up to you, but I—"

"Sure you will," Nathan said. "Just muck out Flame for the next year or two."

Daniel sighed. "Yep, nothing wrong with him."

Jake pushed his lips into a brief smile. He had so much still to say, but it could wait until later. “Think Jonah will leave us alone now?” he asked.

Nathan finished buttoning up his shirt. “He got what he came for. I doubt he’ll be back any time soon.”

Jake nodded slowly. “So what now?”

His father took a sip of his sahl, studying him over the rim. He glanced at Nathan, and when he spoke, his voice held a painful mixture of hope and caution. “You’re staying?”

“If you’ll let me.” Jake traced his finger over a whorl in the wooden tabletop.

A chair scraped across the floor and his father’s arms wrapped around him a moment later. “Ah, Jake. You’ve made me so happy.”

Jake let out a breath and, with it, the last of the anxiety that had plagued him since his nightmare began. His father smelled of woodsmoke and sahl, and Jake squeezed his eyes closed as he returned the hug.

Eventually, muffled mutterings about breakfast going cold prompted him to let go. His father stepped back just as Daniel shoved a bowl of steaming porridge under Jake’s nose.

“Eat.”

Nathan leaned back in his chair, the legs groaning at the shift in weight. He pointed his spoon at Jake while he chewed and swallowed.

“You’re back just in time to help with the new housing project. We’re building on the ridge up on the north side of the brook.”

Jake’s eyebrows rose. “On all that rock?”

Nathan looked at their father from the corner of his eye. “Yep. Solid foundation so the houses don’t flood come spring.”

“Hmmm...” Jake grabbed Daniel’s shopping list and pencil from the counter, flipping the paper and sketching with quick strokes. “I’ve got just the thing for that. It’ll grind through rocks in no time.”

He stilled, glanced at his father, and ducked his head. “If that’s all right with you.”

His father scratched his jaw and looked at Nathan, who nodded.

“All right, we’ll give it a try.” He held up a hand, forestalling Jake’s fist-pump. “But only if it can be made locally, nothing brought in from the city. And none of that crystal-powered malarkey. That stuff’s a disaster waiting to happen.”

“Absolutely. Yes. I mean, no. Whatever you say. This is the last cog.” A grin overtook his face, and his brain went into overdrive. “You won’t regret it, Dad. I promise. I have so many ideas...”

He jumped up to fetch his notebook while, behind him, his father groaned and Nathan laughed. Jake smiled to himself—the sounds of home.



Later that evening, he found Clarissa on the porch, sitting in one of the padded chairs with a book from his father’s personal collection open on her lap, though she paid it little

attention. He cleared his throat from the doorway into the house.

“So Dad offered you a place here.”

“Yes, teaching Sara and Beth’s kids.” She stared out across the valley, the fingers of one hand tapping the armrest.

He walked over and sat next to her. “You going to stay?”

She watched Nathan and Smitty working with a young mammoth in the training field, and her lips quirked to the side. “Maybe. Sara seems nice, and even Amos is easier to wrangle than Old Ben at closing time. It could work out.”

“I hope so... Um, I got you something. Just, be gentle.”

He held out a box filled with soft down and a few leaves. Her forehead puckering, she took it and eased the top layer aside. Then her eyes widened and a small “oh” escaped her mouth.

A tiny flurtoo lay in the centre of the box. It stuck its head out of its mud-brown shell, yawned, and flexed tawny wings.

Clarissa looked up at him, and he shrugged. “I know you like them, and if you bond with them when they’re young, they’ll never roam too far from you, even after they’re mated.”

“You didn’t take it from its nest, did you?”

He huffed. “Of course not.” He pointed to the old oak tree. “One or two runts get pushed out most years, and they don’t survive on their own. I saved that one this morning. It’s a female.”

Her gaze returned to the box. She picked up one of the leaves and held it out for the baby flurtoo to eat. “Aww, she’s so adorable. Thanks, Jake.”

“You’re welcome. Least I could do.” He leaned back in his chair, his gaze straying to his brother.

Nathan was running the mammoth in a wide circle, not a hint of the morning’s events in his movements. How could he bounce back so quickly?

Jake’s lips quirked. *His powers, of course.* Strangely, the notion brought no jealousy or resentment. Instead, an image of the machine he planned to build later that week flashed into his mind, and he shifted in his seat, a full grin spreading across his face. He couldn’t wait to pit his technology against his brother’s abilities.

Clarissa’s chair creaked as she turned to face him. “You don’t have to keep paying us back, you know.”

Nathan looked up at the house just as the mammoth butted him from behind and sent him sprawling. Jake tensed, half rising from his seat, but his brother’s laughter rang out across the field. He righted himself and raised his arm, pushing the mammoth’s head away from the treats in his pocket with the other.

Jake blew out a breath and waved back.

“I know I don’t,” he said to Clarissa. “I just want to.”

“You’re staying as well then?”

He took in the estate, the rolling land, the mountains beyond. A deep breath, filled with the scents of home, brought peace to his soul. “Yep.” He nodded. “I’m an Amarel. This is where I belong.”

A Note of Thanks

Thank you, dear reader, for taking the time to read this story. In a world where every day is filled to overflowing and a million things call for our attention, putting aside time to read means ignoring other, often more important, demands. I'm honoured that of all the options out there, you chose to relax with my work.

Jake and Nathan have been on my heart for many years, though not in the exact form they've taken here. The parable of the prodigal son has always been one of my favourites. I love the way the father must have watched for his son's return every day to be the first to spy him on the road. I love the way he runs out to meet him and hugs him, filth, stench, and all. I love the way he won't hear of apologies or a reduced position to pay back past mistakes until they've feasted in celebration.

I also love that, in reality, the father doesn't sit and wait by the window for his son—or daughter—to come home. He sent his oldest, trueborn, son out to look for his lost sibling and pay the price for any crimes or debts the boy—or girl—may have accrued. That's love. That's sacrifice. That's redemption.

When I told my mother I wanted to rewrite my favourite parable but change the ending, she claimed only I would think to improve on Jesus's work. I humbly disagree. I could never do such a thing. But I can combine several stories meant to highlight different aspects of my Lord's wonderful character to show how truly incredible his love really is and how blessed I am to be considered part of his family.

If I've managed that in any small part, I'm thankful to the people who've helped me along the way.

To my mother, Marion, who despite initially poking fun at the idea, read every iteration of this novel from the first draft to the finished piece, tirelessly encouraging me to keep going and work out every kink and knot. We dived into steampunk together, and I hope those spider accessories didn't put you off forever.

To my beta readers, a wonderful group of victims—ahem, I mean people—who willingly ploughed through this book before it was all polished and shiny. Thank you for your valuable feedback. You challenged, encouraged, supported, and pushed me to make this the best version of the story in my head. That you fell in love with my imaginary friends along the way means the world to me.

To the designers at Miblar, for creating an incredible cover and being patient with my questions. And to Anne, for making the interior just as beautiful, and for walking me through all the things I'd never done before. You are a true friend in this writing journey.

To Dave, for whom there aren't enough words. Your support and encouragement have been a light through some very dark places over the last few years. Thank you, my wonderful husband!

And to my God, the One whose creativity and love know no bounds, and without whom I would have no words at all.

I hope you enjoyed *A Matter of Blood*. If you did, please consider leaving a review on whichever platform you feel comfortable. Reviews help authors, but more importantly, they help other readers too. Your rating could introduce someone to their next favourite read.

You can find more of my work, and details of my newsletter for the latest updates and a bonus story in each, on my website: www.laurensalisbury.com

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