

# Pelagic

by

Hannah Gazdus

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Signature of Author: \_\_\_\_\_

Program in Comparative Media Studies / Writing  
May 1, 2023

Certified by: \_\_\_\_\_

Shariann Lewitt  
Lecturer, Comparative Media Studies / Writing  
Thesis Supervisor

Accepted by: \_\_\_\_\_

Eric Klopfer  
Professor, Comparative Media Studies / Writing  
Head, Comparative Media Studies / Writing

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## ABSTRACT

The following submission contains five chapters from the beginning of the fantasy novel *Pelagic*, the first book in a trilogy set in a secondary world. The rough draft of the book was completed January 2023, and the following chapters are either rewrites or new content produced for the second draft.

*Pelagic* follows Maeve Brontide as she recruits allies to help her and her brother rescue their parents from the shipping corporation Argent. In its pursuit of wealth and influence, Argent has killed one of the four gods to steal his power over the sea and sky, known as Aeolia. As the Brontide parents are knowledgeable about Aeolia, their family has been in-hiding for the past several years to escape Argent. After her parents are kidnapped, Maeve navigates her new Aeolian powers and meets other individuals who have suffered as a result of Argent's conquests. By the end of the novel, she decides she can no longer step aside and let Argent wreak more destruction, even if that means risking the safety of her and her family. After rescuing her parents and friends and meeting the goddess Eurus, Maeve commits to taking down Argent.

*Pelagic* and its subsequent novels *Abyssal* and *Pacific* provide an exploration of responsibility, power, and agency; trauma and mental health; faith; and the search for meaning. Now that the death of a god has released magic back into the world, the characters must debate what purpose that magic should be used for; could there be a balance among Aeolia's use to accrue capital, to provide humanitarian relief, and/or to create? In particular, the author's background as a mechanical engineer and artist has inspired her to explore the ways elemental magic can influence architecture, construction, and art.

The thesis consists of the first three chapters of *Pelagic*, told from Maeve's perspective, and the seventh and ninth chapters, told from the character Theo's perspective after his introduction in Chapter Five. The first three chapters have been edited, while the last two are rough drafts.

Thesis Supervisor: Shariann Lewitt

Title: Professor, Comparative Media Studies / Writing

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## CHAPTER ONE

*Edited*

The chunks of stone were a puzzle. They rested on a platform in the tiny museum, scattered as Maeve had found them on the sea floor. From the sharp edges, it seemed they had once formed a large box. Some cataclysm could have shattered the sculpture along with the ship ferrying it, or maybe the artist had intended it to be viewed this way, cracked open like a geode.

As afternoon light poured through the high windows, Maeve kneeled on the platform, carefully hefting pieces onto cloth-clad dolleys. Some strained her arms, made her lower back wince, and she was glad the bulk of the work was done. The largest piece, coming up to her waist and an armspan across, was thankfully in-place after sliding it from the crane barge and wheeling it down the streets. Now she just had to align the other pieces to its craggy face, try to understand the entire composition before figuring out how to display it. What had been the artist's intent, what was the voice of the piece?

It was a simple puzzle—put the pieces back together—but it brought to Maeve an energy in her bones she hadn't felt in a long time. Here was a mystery, somehow hidden off-the-coast of Saffra when she'd thought the tiny island held no more surprises for her. What had the artist been thinking as they constructed it, where had it been heading all those centuries ago? Her work should yield some clues, but

hopefully not all of them. Some mystery would let her wonder, let her discuss, make the world seem more magical to her, when her parents' answers always made the ancients and gods seem so mundane.

Her parents' voices echoed from the lobby of the museum as Maeve knelt over the pieces. The words drifted, warm and clear as they explained artifacts to visitors, taking her back to being just a kid sitting in on their lectures.

It was surprising her parents weren't here sliding pieces instead of her. They were the experts on Aedrian artifacts, on Aeolia, the magic of the gods, from their time prying secrets from stones when working for Argent. But they'd said *go ahead* with a smile. They were giving her a chance she might never have again. Live out as much as she could of her once-dream of being an archaeologist. What other chance would she have when they were supposed to be in-hiding indefinitely?

As much as she wished to share this moment with them, hear her mother's long forgotten laugh, it was best for her parents to stay on the periphery of the project. Their goal in Saffra was to draw as little attention to themselves as possible. Any publicity, any interest others took in them meant potential whispers reaching Argent, and the company would be after them. She'd felt safe when joining the museum, as she kept quiet, but now her parents were here, and it made her stomach twist in unease. Right now, a group followed her father in-tour, and her mom was chatting with the director as she hung dried sponges from the skylights. Please let

the world be big, these wonderful people she loved so dearly not be as interesting to the Saffrans.

She let her gaze fall from them, feeling a twinge of guilt for being so scrutinizing. Maeve returned to the sculpture, letting her hands fall on the stones. She pushed the second-largest piece closer to the first, jagged edges pinching through her leather gloves. The drolley's wheels swiveled back and forth as she aligned the toothed edges. She held her breath as the two pieces slotted together, the crack disappearing as if they had never been parted. It was incredible — not even a hole left over or layer of dust. She better make sure to keep it that way. Blessed structures were immune to erosion, but not human hands.

The two pieces created a cave against the floor; a small chunk fit right in there, then another snug beside it. It was clear how to orient the pieces, as the exterior of the cube had been layered in pastel glazes, leaving the center chalky. Even so, the interior limestone still held color, small whorls of rose and pale blue lacing through the bumps and edges. The variation in tints helped her figure out which pieces went together as she aligned patterns with satisfaction.

"What's she doing?" a voice came from the front. Maeve glanced up to see her father and his tour group filing towards her, walking between the giant turtle shell and jars of nacre pigments. She stiffened slightly at the gazes on her, something she tried to avoid as a rule.

“Oh, this is our most exciting find yet,” her father said, voice filling the room yet somehow sounding soft. He was in professor-mode, his eyes alight behind their glasses. She felt the room bend around him, this unassuming man in wrinkled shirtsleeves. “Let’s take a look.” Even as her stomach turned uneasily, her heart warmed at the sight of him. She hadn’t seen him this at-ease in years.

To the group’s curious gaze, she gave a nod and a wave, the gestures perfected from several years of practice being polite and boring. As the crowd fanned-out around her plinth, she continued pushing another piece, trying to blend into the scene. It was definitely weird not to be speaking to them, but hopefully they’d assume she was deep in concentration. Their legs in her periphery, she could feel their gazes on her back, and it made her finally notice the heat building beneath her hair on the back of her neck, the slight huff to her breath.

As Maeve knelt on the floor, slotting a piece into the underbelly, her father’s voice came from above. “This is a sculpture from Aedrian times, and we pulled it out of the water just yesterday. To think it was sitting there so close to Saffra all this time. We now have an exciting opportunity to learn about Aeolian construction—” Maeve winced at that word said aloud so casually “—as we’re piecing it together.”

“You can see how the artist built-up the different layers. The inside’s chalky, but then there are those striations of glaze. They must have poured material over and



over, maybe fifty layers from those stripes. Here, you can tip-toe closer to look on top.”

She could be a little charitable. As the crowd inched closer and peered over, Maeve brought a piece to the top surface and held it in place. Threads of blue connected as the piece locked into the larger structure.

A startled laugh and a few *whoas* came from the crowd. Maeve glanced up, and the wide eyes made her smirk inch too close to a smile. She averted her gaze.

“Look at that pattern, the artwork,” her father said, hands hovering over the surface. He drifted a finger along strands of diffused color that twisted into a wave motif. “The artist must have been able to control the movement of the glaze from its water content, getting those individual colors to flow wherever they wanted.” A lot of construction from Aedrian times used this technique, back when humans had Aeolia and could control the sea and sky. With that spiraling border, the sculpture glaze looked a lot like the Karst gates, actually. Could it have come from the same area?

Her father continued, “You can see this technique on the gates at Karst—” Maeve smiled to herself “—if you’re familiar with that. We have pictures in the books over there.” He nodded at the stacks, but then leapt whipped back to the group as a young man reached out a hand towards the stone. “If you’d like to see how smooth it is, use that rag! We don’t want to get fingerprints on the stone.”

Maeve set the piece down to hide the wobble of her arms. When she unbent, a young girl was hesitantly sweeping a cloth across the top surface. She looked up at Maeve, her mouth forming an O, eyes alight. Maeve couldn't help it; she smiled at her. One smile couldn't hurt, especially given to someone young. If this girl remembered the friendly faces, the joy at this discovery, maybe she'd long to go into archaeology. If Maeve couldn't, she could at least help others live out her dream.

She backed away to the remaining pieces and searched for the next surfaces to match. Words pressed against her ribcage, yearning to tumble out, as she quested over foamy rock. She'd just have to leave the speaking to her father, her own thoughts for her field notebook.

"You can see the sides are more chaotic, more abstract, as the glaze fell down or ran over," her father continued. "You can't control gravity, even with Aeolia, but the artist still was able to nudge the colors and create an effect."

"What happened here?" someone asked. Maeve peeked around the limestone to see a finger pointing at two angled grooves cutting horizontally along the side, exposing layers of color as they sliced through tracks of dripping glaze.

"It looks like the current eroded it?" someone else said.

"Ooh, you're onto something. Here's a question: is there anything odd about this sculpture? We know it's been underwater for over fifteen-hundred years." Ha.

Totally professor-mode.

“There’s no barnacles,” someone said. “And everything looks brand-new.”

“Right! It’s Aegea-blessed, immune to natural effects. So these grooves, they could only have been made by the artist with Aeolia, absolutely intentional. We think they used to have big pipes of water they put things into to cut, using the water to slice, or maybe here just carving away these divots.”

“I’ve never seen anything blessed up close,” an older woman said, her hands hovering over the surface, suddenly hesitant.

“Oh, you get into my line of work, you see this stuff all the time. Back in the geology department—”

“The statue of Mal in Vridia is blessed—” Maeve interrupted, voice airy, though her heart had jumped up. “And a lot of the underwater statues around Barra.”

“Oh I’ve seen those!”

Her father met her gaze and nodded a sheepish *thanks* at her. Feeling rude even though action had been necessary, her face grew a little hot.

His head flicked back to the group. “Here, let’s look at some more examples.” He skirted around the platform, heading for the stacks of books beneath the second-floor balcony. The crowd followed.

It was easier to breathe now, though her heart beat a little fast in her chest. Her father had almost mentioned the university — how easily had he slipped up. This was the second time one of her parents had almost mentioned something from their

past, revealing their days as Professors Renae and Pascal Brontide and not the aliases they'd cooked-up for the islands. The museum was good for them, made them happy, but also too lax. And it had only been a month or so since they'd followed her into its staff.

She chewed her lip. She should say something to them, but she didn't want to upset them. If only they hadn't gotten involved...

Maeve listened-in as her father lectured, continuing to sort the pieces. The structure was looking mostly whole, a nearly crisp cube, and almost glowed in the sunlight. She couldn't help but stare, smile tugging at her lips. Is this what her mom felt when finishing a painting?

Maeve flipped and aligned the last few pieces, then settled the chunks in place, but a gap remained. A piece was missing, a slot about the length of her forearm along the top edge. A chance to return to the water, to search, to map out more of the dig site. The opportunity cut through the soreness in her limbs.

About to cry-out her discovery, she stepped towards her father and the group before chiding herself. She instead left a note on the sculpture and headed towards the front of the museum, to the family office. Its door sat between a spiky geode and the door to the director's office. It had been her office first, her own sanctuary away from the confines of their house, before her parents had stepped into the museum. Now the wooden cabinets and counters of the closet-like space held her mother's

history books, her father's magnifying glasses, and her brother Rook's coins and scraps of whatever he was building lately. She smiled to see these things, even as her heart broke a little. They made the space more full of life, even though it was a life straying too far into risk.

And most dangerous: the Aeolian crystal her parents had stored in here. It was hidden beneath a false bottom in an array of drawers, but it still felt like it was right out on the countertop. Why they'd kept it, she suspected sentimentality. And respect. Eurus had given it to them, after all. But it was evidence against them, should anyone find it. Anyone could have ties to Argent, even out here in the middle of the sea.

Maeve stepped over a crate of glass beakers, slid around the desk, and grabbed her diving suit from the drying rack in the corner. Next came her bag, stuffed with her passport, enough cash to feed her for a month, a knife, and among other things her field notebook. The latter would hopefully prove most useful for this task rather than the former supplies.

The lined cloth of the suit was damp on her skin, as she'd been out earlier, and it was a welcome relief after the effort of lugging those stone pieces. It covered her legs to her shins and arms to mid-bicep, more protective than the tanks and shorts swimwear normally worn around here. As she left the office, bag slung over her shoulder, the fabric bent around her legs, *scritch-scritch*.

In the lobby, her mom was drawing a pulley tight, raising the ghost-like form of a Eurus' flower basket sponge to hover beneath the skylight. She stood on her toes, arms pulling gracefully, and the dappled light from above made her tall figure seem to be moving underwater. She and Maeve waved at each other at the same time, and it was like a reflection. Her aunts had always said they looked so alike, with the same heart-shaped face. The glasses didn't help. Her mom hadn't passed down her height, though, which she was all right with. Better for slipping through tunnels, though Maeve's cave exploration plans had all become theoretical the night they'd fled Argent.

Maeve passed over the lobby tiles, a mosaic arranged to illustrate the gods, as usual at waypoints. Vague blue faces shone glossy at the points of a compass rose: Boreas at the north, followed by Eurus, Notus, and Zephyrus going clockwise. Presiding over them as earth, the ring around the compass represented Aegea. It didn't seem very holy to put their images where feet would tread, the custom always funny to her, though she'd definitely seen her parents step around them. As if treading on Notus' image would be any worse than what they'd unintentionally aided when working for Argent. In a moment of hesitation, Maeve's feet skipped to blank tile.

Through the double-doors, and the smell of parchment and wood polish was overtaken by that of the sea. A light breeze blew westward, ruffling the fat leaves of

the courtyard lemon trees. The museum entrance sat in the patio between two apartment buildings, three stories tall like most of Saffra's buildings. Maeve passed over the cobblestones, winding around hand-carved chairs and tables, the afternoon sun warming her shoulders through her suit.

Maeve turned left on the main street and headed for the pier. She breathed deep, feeling the salt air in her bones. It felt so good to have a destination, a mission. She had to relish every moment until the days sank back into stillness and routine.

She passed beneath two men on ladders stringing a cloth swordfish across the street. Strips of brilliant blue and green fabric wove together to form its crescent body, and pinpricks of sun shone between the gaps. Down the street, more woven creatures had appeared in the past few hours, brightening the warm tan of Saffra's sandstone buildings as they bridged overhead. On the ground level, people hammered wooden boards together, forming kiosks and stages. A ball shot her way across the cobblestones, and she let it roll past before weaving around the group of kids in pursuit.

The colors and movement made her steps lighter, her shoulders at ease. The seasonal festivals were always a welcome reprieve. Anything to bring more life to little Saffra. It was a shame the cloth sculptures were only up for a few days every few months, though that helped keep them novel, and she was in short supply of novelty after four years on this small island town. With the bustle, the faces turned

towards more exciting sights than her, she could meld into the flow of people on the street, pretend she was any other girl. That didn't mean she stopped watching the faces, eyeing reflections in shop windows, just that for a moment she wouldn't be so isolated.

She felt guilty for enjoying the festivals, as they always made her parents quieter. They still felt like they'd betrayed the gods, and it didn't help that this week was the advent of summer, Notus' season. Good thing the Aedrian sculpture was keeping them distracted. She hated seeing them still, eyes mourning and guilty. She did feel a little of the same, seeing the cheer of the islanders for Notus when they had no idea he was dead.

The crowd and buildings parted shortly down the street, revealing the stretch of pier. Small boats lined the weathered docks, sails fluttering in the breeze, the waves clapping against their hulls. Workers in the airy buttoned shirts of the islands lashed vessels to the docks or hefted crates onto dry land. One sailor lumbered past her, feet bare, trousers soaked, tugging a net of fish over their shoulder. Maeve sprang around them, the smell of brine sharp.

As Maeve followed a dock, she scanned the hulls and sails. No motifs of Argent, as usual, and they wouldn't waste efficiency on small vessels anyway. Or on Saffra, for that matter; the islands were too scattered and self-sufficient to be worth Argent's time, coming from so far north.



The company's original and primary drive was shipping and trade, and although they'd conquered the north end of the continent that spawned the islands, they still hadn't dominated the world market. That was the goal of their secret Aeolian division: steal the powers of the sea and sky to speed their ships. It had to be by Aegea's grace that they hadn't made it to the islands. Had their research really stalled without her parents' knowledge, or from weathering Eurus' vengeance? It made Maeve's skin crawl to think of them out there plotting.

Her family's boat was where she'd left it that morning after she and Rook had gone diving for conchs to sell for the festival. Stretching about twenty feet, with a billowing sail, it was one of the larger non-commercial boats on the island; after fleeing Nouveau, her parents had poured most of their funds into it. The cabin, large enough to fit four sleeping people, and storage compartments full of emergency supplies made *The Nova* perfectly suited for an abrupt departure.

Maeve unhooked the rope tying the vessel to the dock, squinting in the sun. She removed her sandals and stepped from grainy planks onto the polished wood of the boat's hull, slick with droplets of water.

"Off on an adventure?"

Maeve glanced up, sandals still dangling from her fingers. A girl maybe a year younger than Maeve's twenty years knelt in a boat slowly swerving past. Her vessel

puttered to a stop, and the girl stood, not even wobbling, and rested her arms on the gunwale beneath *The Nova's* railing.

With that smile, that open face, she was so eager. Maeve winced inside. She'd long ago gotten over being perceived as curt or rude, but it still hurt to turn people away. Mostly everyone in Saffra had gotten bored with her, but this girl had just moved here. They'd met when Maeve was sketching tide pools, and by her smile, she hadn't been turned away by her calculatedly bland responses to conversational attempts.

"Just moving it back to the other side of the island," Maeve said, casually putting her back to the girl as she knelt at a compartment in the deck. She dropped her sandals and bag inside. *Where are you coming from now? What did you mean at the tide pools when you said you'd seen a galloping starfish? From where did you move here?*

"Oh cool," she said. "Did you see the decorations yet? They're so much nicer than out on Srima. We don't get imported dyes out there." Oh, Srima, at the very edge of the archipelago. She would probably enjoy seeing the pigments at the museum. And the sponges, and the whale bones, and—no, she was get carried away.

Maeve turned and pretended to sort through a compartment beneath the bench running along the hull. "Yeah, they're pretty."

"I'm going to try and make one."

Maeve thought for a moment, then spoke up, "You should ask for Maia at the bookshop. She loves to teach." Of course, she'd never learned from her, just noticed

from a distance. She knew more about the Saffrans than they did about her. She couldn't help but feel invasive for it.

"Oh. I'll definitely do that, thanks!"

"Hope you have fun," Maeve said. "I gotta get going," she added, letting her regret shine through. "Enjoy the festival!"

The girl lifted her folded arms from the boat fast, as if it would zoom away that instant, carrying her with it. "You, too," she said, slightly surprised. She turned away, still not wobbling as she stepped up onto the pier.

Maeve breathed out, shoulders heavy. Another conversation safely over. Soon she'd lose interest just like the rest. She'd go from waving at Maeve on the street to gaze glancing over her. Another friend she could never have.

As she prepared the boat, she shared a few more awkward glances with the girl, the abruptness of their conversation thick in the air. Thankfully, it was not long before Maeve steered *The Nova* down the narrow channel between piers, sitting at the stern, hand on the rudder.

The masts and hulls on either side of her fell away, broadening her view into the teal of the sea. Fluffy clouds above, it stretched endlessly, islands scattered to the horizon, fading from green to blue with distance.

The island Vridia rose from the blue about a mile straight ahead; on its south side, to the right from Maeve's perspective, rose a cluster of limestone pillars. They shot

from the water into the sky, looming twice as tall as Vridia's hilly landscape, skyscraper-tall. With their vertical walls, the Spires couldn't have been naturally made. Another Aedrian artifact, although not Aegea-blessed, by that greenery speckling the pale cliffs.

The Spires had been one of many reasons that had attracted her parents to the area. Were they an abandoned construction project, or a mountain carved-up from battling the Auremari? Maeve wished she could justify a trip to Vridia to explore the broken staircases and hollows. Even now she saw a giant eagle splash down and rip a fish from the waves in the distance. Had anyone studied them and their home at the top of the Spires? There had to be a way up there. How wonderful it would be to take a Copernican balloon up into the sky, notebook in hand.

The Spires swerved out of view as Maeve brought the boat around the north edge of Saffra, angling the sail to catch the wind. Dots of sea-spray peppered her face, the breeze carrying that clean, salty scent of the ocean. She breathed in it, relishing the wind streaking past her cheeks, the sun on her face. Saffra some hundred feet at her back, the glittering waves spread out towards the horizon, broken-up by the scattered mounds of islands. Out here was endless direction. She could go anywhere.

Her arms felt light, buoyed by the wind, as she perched at the stern, hand on the rudder. Surrounded by the open air, no buildings rising around her, she could pretend she was free.

As she headed north, Maeve eyed the surrounding islands—Zarin ahead, Vridia to the east—to judge her route, as well as the water. The patterns of coral rising from the shallows, with sandbars hovering below the surface, were a map themselves.

The boat drifted along with the rhythm of sloshing waves. She could've gone faster, but she only wanted to use the motor at the stern for emergencies. Save the gas, just in case they had to leave in a rush. And save money on gas, because they were mostly living on what her parents had made as professors. It hadn't been a lot in Copernica, but served them better here, living beneath their means.

About twenty minutes passed before a long sandbar reared up from beneath the blue, spreading trident-like fingers towards Zarin. Maeve guided the boat to the spokes of the trident and anchored in the sand. After retrieving her mask and fins from a compartment, she slipped into the water.

Her vision dissolved into streaming bubbles as the water closed over the top of her head. She bobbed upward with a few kicks, head breaking the surface, and lifted the end of her snorkel so the water could empty. As she treaded in place, the water was pleasantly lukewarm, probably thanks to the warm currents coming down from the equator.

Snorkel in mouth, Maeve tilted forward onto her stomach, and the world went quiet. The sloshing of the waves transformed from sound to only motion as the water rocked against the back of her head. The only sounds were the distant churning of the sea and her flute-like breathing through the snorkel.

The sandbar rose about six feet below, scattered with a net of wavering light. It quickly dropped off, sand fading blue with depth, and she kicked forward to that precipice.

As the sand dipped down, it became speckled with strands of kelp, scuttling crabs, and then mounds of coral. Maeve glided over a reef of brilliant reds and blues, her shadow following her fifteen feet below, rippling on the chunks of coral. Schools of fish flickered and swerved above spiny urchins, and she cursed the fog between her mask and glasses from obscuring the view. She spotted a chewing eel and the spine of a ray before the reef broke up. Chunks of coral divided patches of sand, the grains divoted into miniature dunes by the current. A branching tree of coral passed by below, the landmark signaling the area where the sculpture had lay.

The clearing was now just an empty circle of sand ringed by coral; the hollows left by the pieces had been smoothed away since yesterday. She'd wondered if the sculpture had been meant to sit on the sea floor, but they'd also dug up some pottery that signaled a shipwreck. They still had to analyze that, actually! Maybe her father would break out the chemistry set and they'd see what contents they'd carried,

deduce where the ship had been from. Another thing to look forward to, which was an unfamiliar yet delightful sensation.

All right, time to dig. Although the floor was smooth, the last piece (or pieces?) had to be around here. Maeve took a breath, removed her bite on the snorkel, and pulled herself downwards. With a few kicks, she hovered over the sand. She scattered the top layer, grit and pebbles rolling down the backs of her hands. Her fingers snagged on a hard surface, and her heart jumped, but it was just a shell.

Back to the surface for another breath, and down again. She furrowed the sand deeper, sweeping ripples away. Fortunately, this spot wasn't riddled with stones like near the Spires; she wouldn't have to judge sculpture or erosion. It was a miracle she'd recognized the piece at all, the chunks seeming natural until she'd spotted the faint hues rippling through the stone.

A few more breaths, more pulling herself across the sand, trying to visualize where the pieces had sat, and her hands caught again. With a pang to her heart, she scooped the sand away, and a white chunk with lines of blue began to emerge. Yes! It was right underneath where the biggest piece had sat — no wonder they'd missed it.

After another breath, Maeve unearthed enough of the piece that she could grip it in both hands. She planted her fin-clad feet in the sand for leverage and pulled, wiggling the stone. It broke free, sand and silt misting the water, a squared edge

facing her. It looked to be the right size for a snug fit into the rest of the sculpture, and it wasn't that heavy.

She turned it over to its rough side, grains of sand trickling over the edges. Protruding from the piece, round lumps sharpened towards the center where blue facets spiked. Those spikes. No, crystals. Her heart shot into her throat, and the urge to the drop the rock lanced through her arms. But she couldn't tear her arms away. Panic spiked as her glasses fogged, bringing with it the feeling of being trapped, being so small. As the fog cleared in several thumps of her heart, the crystals swam back into view. No, not crystals — they were opaque, and that glazed blue wasn't the right texture.

She felt like she could dissolve into the water in her relief. Thank the gods, they weren't Aeolian crystals. Just geometry of a broken rock.

Her chest was shrinking inward with the need for air, and her hands were shaking, so she hurriedly set the piece down and launched towards the surface. Gods, she was silly for getting spooked.

She retrieved the stone and headed back for the boat, hugging the piece to her chest as she kicked, limbs still hollow. Using her snorkel again, she was able to study the piece longer. Those faceted spines didn't look so much like crystals anymore, just a rough and broken edge of stone. She must have the Aedrians on her mind, Aeolia from her father's speech earlier, that was why they'd jumped at her. Then



again, it was always in the back of her mind. She'd always wondered if she'd find crystals someday. Her parents had said Notus' power would have scattered around the world after his death, so why not crystals here in the islands?

What would she do if she actually found some? If she destroyed them, keeping her distance so she wouldn't absorb the magic, then they'd just manifest somewhere else, maybe where Argent would find them. But if she kept them, her family guarding them like the crystal in the museum, that could lead her parents back into their research, putting them at risk with Argent. No good solution.

Back at the stern, Maeve hefted the piece above her head, sweeping her fins beneath her to remain upright. She could've slid it onto the deck, but it was best to avoid friction, so she gently lowered it onto the boat, awkwardly teetering in the water. She hauled herself up and pulled off her fins, leaving her feet feeling light as they dangled off the boat, suddenly feeling every miniature current in the water. Removing her mask was a relief to the spots behind her ears, the band no longer pressing her glasses into her skull. With the lenses open to the air, peripheral vision returned, the twist in her chest smoothed.

With the piece nestled in a compartment beneath the benches, Maeve was soon drifting back towards the tiled roofs of Saffra. The island before her was fairly small, about a quarter mile across and twice that running north-to-south. Even so, the town

itself only covered half of the island, the south side home to forest, west to a wide beach. She'd mapped every inch of it in the past four years.

It was disappointing to have found the last piece so quickly. She could feel the tension in her shoulders building as the dome of the museum drew closer and closer, queasiness lingering from the crystal scare. She loved the museum, she did, but over time, everything about Saffra had become too much. Every single day, the same. Lying in bed, limbs taut, thinking *is this all there is?*

She should stop thinking these things. They did her parents a disservice, even if she would never say them aloud. It was her duty to make things as easy for them as possible, ever since the night they'd fled. Don't complain, don't do anything that would make them worry, do everything to keep the family as safe as possible. And all that meant don't challenge them.

Heading back to the museum, where her parents were becoming more and more a part of Saffra's public life, these tenets presented a problem. The friendlier her parents became, the happier they were, but the higher the chance that Argent could track them down. Which was more important: their happiness, or their safety? It had seemed to be the latter four years ago, but what was the point if they were miserable? Or would they be equally as miserable forced to work for Argent, living in cells?

What was the best way to help them? She wished she had someone to talk to. Her parents were out of the question, as she would never risk making them upset. Rook always did his own thing, and it was best to seem in-control with him, as she also had to make him feel safe. She must have confided in her old friends back home, but even those memories seemed hazy. Her life in Copernica had dulled in just five years, one for the time living in Telare at the Argent headquarters, four for the years in-hiding. Who had she been with her friends, even her parents?

*You'll figure it out*, she told herself, the boat coasting east around Saffra. She always had to. Was that reassuring?

As Maeve rounded the corner, the masts of ships appeared between buildings, then the lengths of docks. One especially tall mast—no, three—swerved out from behind a rooftop, sails billowing and snapping in the wind. Visitors arriving for the festival, then.

The middle sail boasted the unmistakable sigil of Argent.

Maeve's pulse shot into her head as a single splitting *thump*.

Her parents. Where were her parents?

She had to get home. She had to get out of sight. Turn west, take the long way around Saffra. No — she should scout. Please, Aegea, let this be a coincidence.

Her fingers slipped on the rudder, shaking and sweaty, as she angled the boat onward. She could do this. Stay calm. Her arms felt like they could split from her shoulders, tension ratcheted through her nerves. She was so, so still.

Her pulse pounding in her ears, Maeve shakily breathed in and out as the rest of the ship swam into view. Half a block long, the polished wood hull stretched far beyond Saffra's small piers. While most modern ships had metal hulls and little ornamentation, Argent's were real ships, right out of the pirate and navigator stories the island radio shows broadcasted. On the middle sail, the company's sigil shone silver, a swoop of bird's wings forming an *A* shape from the Mari alphabet without the horizontal mark.

As Maeve drew closer, now about two hundred feet away, her heart sped up. The ship had docked on the street leading to the museum. People in pale blue streamed along the decks, a cluster of workers guiding carts of crates down the ship's ramp. Deliveries weren't uncommon around festival time, but they were usually from companies out of Lezara at the foot of the islands. Those pale collared shirts were a good sign, the uniform of commercial Argent. The Aeolian Division, the real threat, always looked like military in navy dress. What were they delivering?

Still heading south, Maeve passed the captain's cabin, still keeping her distance, though it felt like she was right beneath their sails. She shouldn't get any closer lest she stand out as Copernican. Although her family shared the islanders' black hair,

with their skin a warmer brown they could be picked out of a crowd by anyone specifically looking.

Okay, the ship seemed regular Argent, but she couldn't rely on appearances. No investigating, just get home as soon as possible. Pray to Aegea that everyone was safe.

## CHAPTER TWO

*Edited*

Maeve's chest shrank with tension as her boat drifted home at a pace not fast enough. She didn't risk turning on the motor to call any attention, so she lay at the mercy of the wind. The dock in front of their street drifted closer and closer as she breathed in and out, trying to steady herself. And then the hull drew flush with the dock, and she launched from stillness.

As she lashed the boat to the dock, she could feel the Argent ship looming behind her back. All the other boats stretching between them, blocking Argent's view, could not have been there at all. Just open sea, open sky.

That feeling broadened as she paced from the pier to the street, going as fast as she could without drawing attention to herself. It was a helplessness she felt at nights, staring at the ceiling, when she woke up and dreaded the day, when she saw her parents being too friendly. Like there was no real shelter for her, no matter the roof over her head and walls around. Pinned under the sky and very gaze of Aegea.

Bag thumping on her hip, Maeve ducked into the first alleyway on the street. The sun stopped pounding on her shoulders as shadow washed over her. She began scaling a fire escape, the metal rungs cool against her skin. Still sweaty, her palms grit against the rust and erosion of each rung. She'd climbed this ladder so many

times she lost count, but it had never been as easy. She felt so light she could fling herself upward with a single sweep of the arms.

Head craned upward, the fading sky bore down on her overhead. For many heartbeats, it was all she saw, its brightness searing into a buzz of black afterimage in her vision. But when she planted a foot on the roof three stories above the street, she could barely remember the shape of the clouds.

The red tiles and leafy patios of Saffra spread out before her, and she squinted against the setting sun, hand above her glasses. There—on a flat roof a block away—a figure stood at an easel, sunlight streaming around her dark silhouette. Feeling rushed back into Maeve's hands. Her mom was okay.

With a few shaking steps, Maeve set off across the rooftops, still hurrying, but now not fast enough to slip and break her neck. She put a hand to her chest, though the gesture did nothing to still her pounding heart. Her mom was here, looking over the city, not off on a mission to find the family or away because she'd been captured. Things were still in-control.

Following the curve of the block, Maeve picked her way around chimneys and potted plants, footsteps practiced. She barely went in the front door to their shop anymore. It was too easy to be jumped by anyone lying in wait there or at the top of the staircase. She liked to scout from the top-down, as did Rook, though she wasn't

sure about her parents. It was a lot less heart-pounding than haltingly unwinding the door knob to keep quiet, praying no shadows jumped from the inside.

As she drew closer, her mom's back was to her. Best not to frighten her. Maeve made sure to clatter her feet on the tiles as she paced across the neighboring roof.

"Mom?"

Renae bent around, bringing a paintbrush to her chest as she put a hand over her heart, shoulders curled. "Maeve! I'm so glad you're okay!" She dashed the brush into a jar and came forward, putting her hands on the lip of the roof.

"Rook, Dad?" Maeve called, hurrying the remaining distance.

"They're here!" Thank Aegea.

She landed next to her mom. Gaze soft, her mom wrapped her arms around her, surprising Maeve. She felt how she held her hands away, probably keeping paint from smudging Maeve's back. A smile escaped Maeve as she returned the gesture, shoulders falling, and broke away.

"You've seen the ship?" Maeve said, gaze snatched by its sails towering in the harbor several blocks away. It was a dumb question, but why would her mom be up here painting of all things when Argent had finally come to Saffra?

"Of course. I was so worried with you gone, I thought this would help—" she gestured at her easel. The wood frame bore a watercolor of the view, but her mom



hadn't illustrated the ship, just smooth sea where it should be. "I was also keeping an eye out for you."

"So we're not packing?" Maeve said.

"No, it's just a commercial ship," Renae said. "We saw it when our shifts ended and asked around. They're delivering specialty fireworks that the guild ordered. The rest of the cargo's for Mallorna since they're heading around the coast."

A special occasion. That made sense, but any explanation that spoke of normalcy could never be good enough. "What if it's a front?"

"I don't think we'd be here if it was really them," her mom said quietly.

Maeve grimaced. Back in Nouveau, half a year since they'd fled Telare, she'd awoken to a hand over her mouth. It was the most terrifying moment of her life, and the way her body screamed in panic as if struck by lightning was a sensation she remembered all too well. If she hadn't been training in martial arts, she may not have been able to surprise the agent, scream for her parents. They'd spent the night running through the city corridors before securing passage south.

That was the day Fara had left them, having let the agents in. The last they'd heard she was now director of the Aeolian Division. It was disturbing to think she'd been planning to go back the whole time she was with them. She'd been their friend, been her parents' mentee throughout her degree at the university. To be betrayed

like that... She must be looking for them now, had been for the past four years. Her family assumed the worst, as that was the safest option.

"We should still be careful," Maeve said. "We should probably keep home until they're gone."

"I just hope they don't decide to stay for the festival," her mom said.

"Wouldn't that be ironic," Maeve said. Most of Argent responsible for Notus' death had been killed that day, but it was still Argent. The squad Fara had led to their apartment proved so. That atrocity now ran through their ranks. And still no one else knew they'd killed him. No one had believed her family when they'd tried to expose what had happened.

They were both silent for a few heartbeats, staring at the ship. Then Maeve spoke, "I brought the boat back to our street. Tank's still full of gas."

Renaë nodded. "Good to know. Hopefully it won't come to that. We'll keep an eye out, decide later what to do if they're still here."

Maeve nodded. A little bit of relief flooded into her. That vast sky, that feeling of being watched, was shrinking back down to a ceiling. Her parents had scouted, had been cautious, had watched out for her as she did for them. It was as things should be. Security returned. She didn't have to do it all.

What to do with herself now? What was normalcy, again? “Gonna go see the others,” she said, turning to the open door on the roof. She’d take the ladder; swinging into her room via the window seemed a little much in front of her mom.

“Okay, we’ll be setting up for dinner soon.”

Maeve stepped around the drying frames of tiles Rook had been casting and painting, then slipped down the ladder to the third story. As she set her sandals on the floor, the third door on the tiny landing opened.

It was Rook himself. “I heard you were back — I’m glad you’re okay.” The door started closing again.

“Oh, hey,” Maeve said, starting forward. He swung the door back open, revealing the mess that was his room. Balls of clothes slumped across the floor, scattered with hammers, rulers, and planks of wood. In the corner leaned a printing press he’d built and gotten bored of before making any art with. His desk and shelves hid beneath scraps of metal and carved coins and parcels of concrete. His hand on the doorknob was splashed with coral pink from the paint he’d been using on the tiles, and he’d also gotten some in his curly hair. “Just wanted to say that we’re staying in until the ship is gone,” Maeve finished.

“Yup,” Rook said as if he’d said it a million times, looking up at her, eyebrows raised. He was a head shorter, at fifteen, and it didn’t seem he’d be inheriting Renae’s height. Nor their parents’ nearsightedness.

He radiated impatience and repeated, "I got it."

"Oh. Okay. Just wanted to say." Hopefully she hadn't insulted him. It was just that he often disappeared. He'd even looked guilty when they'd mentioned not going to the surrounding islands. First him, now her parents. She was the only one left consistently taking Argent seriously at all, holding them together.

"I know." He closed the door.

Feeling odd, she stared for a moment before heading down the stairs. She wished she knew how to talk with him. Years ago, she'd thought going into hiding meant she'd get closer with her brother, but she didn't really know him anymore. He was either holed-up in his room or on the streets. It seemed he took every chance he got to be away from them, which made sense. Four years and only the same three people. She might have been driven mad herself by her parents' circular discussions during meals if she hadn't found the museum.

Down two flights and she reached the shop at the ground floor. As she descended, Maeve glanced out the front windows and then around the bannister. After spotting her father, she stopped silencing her footsteps. "Hey, Dad."

Hunched over the counter, her father sat in the alcove in the back. Tweezers in hands, he peered through a series of lenses as he removed components from a watch. "Maeve! I heard you upstairs." He didn't glance up, gaze on his work, as she passed tables of his handmade watches, her mother's art, and Rook's miscellaneous

constructions. They made some sales on these, though they hadn't proved as lucrative as repairs. The table behind Pascal hosted radios, clocks, and even a cash register, all tagged as broken.

It looked like the watch before him was also for a customer, by the slip of paper listing notes. Maeve came to bend over the counter, holding still as he slotted a fine-toothed gear into place. Watching him move the delicate components always made her hold her breath, like he'd drop them if she stirred.

"There!" he said with satisfaction, dropped the tweezers. He leaned back and removed the rack of lenses from his glasses, exposing the hair silvering at his ears. "I was worried about you. Well, we know now there was no reason to worry, but still. Never know."

Guilt lanced through her, but she shoved it down. It wasn't like she'd known Argent was here when she'd went out on the water. "I'm sorry. I was worried about everyone, too. Mom said you checked out the ship."

"Yeah, we watched where they took the supplies and talked to the guild. It's all fine."

"You did that without them noticing?"

He nodded. "We stayed out of range." She nodded back, feeling foolish for doubting them.

"Oh, did you find the piece?"

"I did!" Maeve said, and the corner of her mouth tugged. "I did leave it in the boat to get here fast, but I'll show it to you later. I'm pretty sure it fits right into the sculpture."

"That's so exciting. Maybe we'll hang the pieces with gaps between them? If we get some strong cords."

Should she mention her feelings on their involvement with the museum? Her heart jumped a little in her chest at the thought. No, no, not with her father's eyes alight, beaming up at her. She couldn't bear it. "That would be cool," she managed.

Her father continued. "There should be a way to show all the sides of the pieces. You could have someone stand within all of them hanging in the shape of the larger work."

"I like it." The museum didn't have the space for that, or funding for importing cords, not with hiring the crane and barge to surface the piece in the first place. But she'd let him dream. "We'll have to figure something out. Probably in a few days, though. It doesn't make sense to go back when Argent's right there."

"That's right. Ugh, I hope they don't stay. I can't stand those starched shirts in the museum."

A good point — any worker with the night off (or day off) would see the sights. If only the festival wasn't happening, Saffra would look as sleepy as ever. Plus Argent wouldn't be here to begin with. Hopefully.

“Speaking of starch... dinner?” he said, rising.

They headed up the stairs to their narrow living quarters: sofa, carpet, and reclining chair she loved to journal in next to the kitchen. As her father went upstairs to get the others, she grabbed ingredients from the icebox and set out cooking ware. They followed island custom by buying produce and supplies daily rather than stocking-up. That also helped with their savings — nothing to rot after too long in the icebox, nothing to be left behind if they had to flee.

Soon the four of them were clustered around the counter, bumping elbows as they worked together to make dumplings. Maeve shredded lamb into a bowl as her mom kneaded dough, Rook caramelized onions on their single burner, and her father diced spinach. It was Copernican custom for everyone eating a meal to cook together. Although this room could barely fit the four of them, it still felt too empty for the cousins and aunts she missed, the way all the neighbors would gather at the outdoor kitchen in the university district. Not to mention, they were preparing her grandmother’s recipe. Rhea hadn’t been very old when they’d left, but Maeve still wondered with dread if she’d miss the chance to reunite with her before she died.

Because there had to be an end to this hiding. At some point, Argent would no longer care about her parent’s knowledge, either finding it on their own or growing too powerful that it didn’t matter. And then, at that point, they could go home to Copernica, right?

Definitely naive thinking. But she couldn't accept that there was no end to this. Because then what was the point? Why was she here on Aegea in the first place if she wasn't to do anything with her life?

"You're decimating that lamb," Rook said, voice near her ear.

Oh. Shoot. She tried to affect a casual tone. "Trying not to make them too chewy."

He bugged his eyes out, a skeptical *okay* expression. Her heart twisted a little in embarrassment. Now he'd think she was upset about something, see she was off her game. He needed to be confident in her, to trust her. Thank gods her back was to her parents.

"How much should we sell the tiles for?" Rook said, breaking the silence of the kitchen. They all hadn't spoken much besides greetings and general comments on the weirdness of Argent. Maeve felt relief spill through the air as her parents began discussing her brother's latest interest. As she mixed onions, spinach, and goat cheese into the lamb, her father excitedly went on about pigments and stones, and her mom jumped in about the history of Rook's paints. Rook nodded enthusiastically, but she could tell he wasn't looking for a whole lecture. His expression made her smile.

She wished she could chime in, but she didn't know what she could add. Her parents, geologist and historian, knew so much, so much more than she did. Self-taught in archaeology, homeschooled by them, she didn't have anything new to



share. It was more than a little intimidating, still dreaming of a field they knew so much more about than her.

“You should see the glaze on the sculpture, Rook, maybe you’ll get ideas,” her father said. “It’s beautiful, right Maeve?”

“Oh. Yeah,” she said, surprised. A chance to share. Her heart grew warm. “There are... whorls in the pattern, the way the different colors diffused into each other, like ink. I bet you could replicate it by pulling with a toothpick.” The words bubbled up in her chest. “You would like the textures, too.” They’d seen a piece like it at Argent’s headquarters, long before Eurus had gifted her mom Aeolia and started Argent on the path to doom. Did he remember? She didn’t want to bring it up, since her parents always treaded lightly around discussing that time.

“I’d love to see it,” Rook said, and folded a dumpling into a four-pointed star with a pinch.

“Sometime when things are back to normal,” Maeve said, glancing at her parents.

Normal was such a relative term.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *Rough Draft*

Maeve tucked her fingers around a piece at the top of the sculpture and lifted. Strain arced up her arms and into her biceps as she slowly lowered the rock onto the dolly at her feet. The piece she'd found yesterday had a tab that fit under the surrounding pieces, so she couldn't put it in without taking a few others out.

"Hey Maria," Nara called from the lobby. The museum director dipped out from behind a column and waved. "I'll be closing up in ten."

"Got it," Maeve called back. She'd specifically chosen this time to come by: near closing, so low chance of Argent employees visiting for fun, but still occupied with other people in case she needed help. That looming ship still sat in the harbor. She and her family hadn't been out at all until now. It was selfish for her to be here, but she couldn't take another second of walls surrounding her, of her parents' solemn faces.

"Sculpture's looking fantastic! Can't wait to see how you decide to arrange it," Nara said before disappearing into her office. Maeve smiled to herself. Nara was so inspiring, having spent the past fifty years diving the islands and tracking shipwrecks. She would totally talk with her more, but she was likely to be someone who'd ask too many questions. Instead she had to decline her invites to her lectures at Vridia's university or to join her on dive. Without being able to explain herself,

Maeve could only leave their chats awkward and curt. Her parents were now experiencing what that was like as they pretended to know less about Aeolian construction in front of her.

Maeve lowered a second piece to the ground, exposing the jagged and foamy crevices of the internal sculpture. As she inspected her gloves for dust, the museum doors creaked. She glanced up to spot a young man entering. His head lifted as he saw her, then he glanced towards the director's office. He curved around to a display case in the lobby, giving her his profile.

He was an odd sight, with that pale skin and fire-red hair. North CONTINENT then. Where Argent was from. It was rude of her to make such a sweeping generalization, especially since Saffra had a few families originally from other parts of the world, but he stood out for sure. She hadn't seen him before, too.

Festival-goer, or Argent member for sure. Maybe apprentice, as he looked university-aged. Good thing Nara was still here. He was tall, but without muscle, so Maeve could take him, and for sure with Nara's help. Unless he was Aeolian.

To make it less obvious she was studying him, she set her gaze back to the stones. As she lifted the new piece into place, in her peripheral vision he drifted closer, following the exhibit of island photographs and paintings. He didn't look at her.

To stay or go? He should be normal, commercial Argent, a bookkeeper or manager. He shouldn't be a problem, even if he made the skin on the back of her neck crawl. Plus she only had five more minutes, anyway.

Maeve hefted the pieces back into place, and the cube was complete. How incredible that someone had actually made this, had made this before the gods even were gods. To think as her gloved hands followed the divots and patterns that she was tracing the path of the artist's fingers from so long ago. Did they make others like this? Were they traveling with it? Secrets to ponder some other time.

Maeve shed her gloves, grabbed her bag, and headed out. As she passed the director's door, she waved at Nara, not wanting to make sound and draw the attention of the man behind her back. Nara waved back from her hunch over an atlas. Maeve kept her sandals soft against the tiles, and they fell against the compass and gods before she passed through the doors.

Purple and pink clouds lined the dim sky, filling the courtyard with evening shadow. The breeze was cool and dry against Maeve's bare shoulders.

All right — out of the museum with no problem. She'd stick to the side-streets on her way back home.

As she reached the lemon trees, the doors creaked behind her. Totally normal, as the museum *was* closing. She took two steps before the sound of someone jogging echoed.

"Hey!" The man from inside slowed beside her. Dear Notus.

Don't act like you suspect anything of him. Face soft. This is normal. Is probably normal.

Maeve turned, keeping one foot further back for a balanced stance. She curled her fingers seemingly casually around the strap of her bag. "Something I can help you with?" she said with a professional lilt.

As he came to stand beside her, he towered a head taller. Although he was skinny, he didn't hunch, and seemed solid enough. Still, all she needed was one good kick.

The street hovered in her peripheral vision. She kept her eyes on him, and even as she thought about looking away, he did himself, glancing for the courtyard exit.

Not good.

"You're Maeve," he said, narrow chin dipping forward, as if in discretion.

Blood rushed to her head. "Oh, sorry, it's Maria. Easy to get confused." She scrunched her eyes for a kind smile and it felt like moving plaster. Mom and Dad and Rook. Street, plaza, home, boat.

"No, listen, I know who you are," he said, pulling a wad of photographs from a pocket. The top was an old photo from back in Telare, her family and Fara in front of an Aeolian carving. That could only have come from Argent. "See? Why are you even here? Don't you see the ship? You should have left!"

Futile playing the fool. "Who the hell are you?"

"Doesn't matter. Here, I can get you and your family out fast."

Ah. A clever trick. "You can? That would be incredible," she said, heart pounding.

"I can go get them, and we can meet back here. So that they don't see you."

"That doesn't make sense. It's much easier if I come with you."

Well, he wasn't stupid. "You're not safe, either, so you should lay low."

"Look, I'm Aeolian, it doesn't matter."

Oh gods. Whether that was true or not, he was a major, major problem.

"If you want to help, just listen to me, okay? Stay here," she said, stepping away.

"That's so stupid," he said, stepping forward.

All right. She'd tried. She'd have to lose him.

Maeve sped to a run and whipped past a couple strolling down the street. A cry of surprise echoed over the rush in her ears, as well as a "stop!" from the Argent man. She could draw all the attention she needed. There was nothing left to lose. Saffra was through.

She threw herself into the nearest alley, thudded over the flagstones, and flung open the backdoor of a market. Her mind reeled at the sudden orientation of a new space, then locked onto the door at the end of the room. Just as she'd remembered. She bolted around crates in the dark and dashed out the door.

Darkness flashed into warm sandstone. Cheers from the festival followed her as she took a fork to an alley heading south. Had she lost him? Were the footsteps just hers? She flashed a look over her shoulder but just saw a blur of stone.

Keep running. She dodged right, then continued straight, slowing her steps as she emerged out onto the green. To her left, clusters of people sat on the grass, facing the plaza where crates of fireworks were being arranged. It would be fastest to cross through them, but she'd be easily spotted by the agent out in the open. Instead, Maeve curved right and started down the pathway threading through the green's patch of trees.

Under their boughs, she sped up again. She felt like throwing up, like she'd run miles and not a block and a half. Gods, Aegea, anyone, please make Argent unaware of their home. Please. Please let her arrive and see everyone safe. If the agent had approached her at the museum, then they must only know about that location. They had to.

Commercial vessel! The one time she'd tried to be less paranoid and it was the moment that mattered most. Gods, if only they'd left already.

The street on the other side grew closer, closer, then she was striding for an alley, and she was through. Maeve lurched into motion. She darted forward, skidding side to side for connecting alleys, yanking her mental map to the front of her brain,

because even though she'd memorized the paths through years of scouting, it was suddenly all so distant.

Then there it was: the back of their building with its fire escape leading upward. She didn't even slow, grabbing the knob of the back door. To hell with stealth — if Argent was grabbing her family now, why would she even try to save herself?

Empty shop. Maeve burst forward and slammed up the stairs, footfalls drumming. "They're here!" she shouted. A chair screeched. Her dad appeared at the top as she reached the last few stairs. His face was ghostly. "It's them. AD," she said, shoving past him to the living area. Her mom was standing, hands clutching her arms around herself.

"Rook!" her dad barked. "We're leaving! Grab your things!" Her mom stayed frozen, and he leapt toward her. "Back down here in 5."

"Yes!" Maeve said, thudding up the stairs. The door above flipped open, revealing Rook tugging on his backpack. His eyes were wide. Their gazes met as he flew down towards her. She felt like she should say something, but they shoved past each other.

In her closet of a room, she joltingly looked around. It felt like she was looking through a diving helmet, the way the world was so shrunken in her vision and glazed-over, the images meaning nothing. Her maps on the wall were a blur. The red spines of her journals jumped out from the mess. There were four of them. She



couldn't fit all in her bag. She tossed the two containing schoolwork, and the remaining two — all her thoughts over the past years — she shoved in her bag.

Her fingers shook as she ripped open her bedside drawer. She took a watch made by her grandfather and a scrap of silk from a childhood doll. From the wardrobe she grabbed the blue poncho her grandmother had knitted for her.

She stood, staring. That had to be all. That had to be it. She'd rehearsed this so many times. She couldn't be forgetting anything — anything else important should already be in her bag and on the boat. If she forgot anything, it should matter little compared to their lives. She was wasting time.

Maeve ran into her mom on the landing. "Ready?" Renae breathed.

"Dad?"

"Downstairs." Renae pushed open Rook's door, glanced, closed it.

"We good?" her dad called from below, a foot on the stair. He started up at their nods.

"Come on, Rook!" her mother called.

"I thought he was with you?" her dad said, reaching the top.

"I thought the same — he's not in the shop?"

"No!"

Maeve's heart jumped to her throat. "Rooftop, right?" They all nodded, her parents' faces softening, and her mom grabbed the ladder. She pushed the trapdoor open, head swiveling around. "He's not here!"

"What?" her dad said. "He has to be around here."

"Did he already head for the boat?" her mom said.

"You know where he went?" her dad said, fixing her in his gaze.

Maeve couldn't move. No, not at all. How could she let this happen? She should know. She was his sister.

Gods, why would he leave? He could only be escaping or getting something important. He had stuff at the museum. Useless things, coins and scraps. Except for one thing.

"He must have gone for the crystal," Maeve said, words tumbling. Stupid! The one place Argent was going to look.

"I'll go get him," her dad said.

"No — I will," Maeve said. "You two get to the boat, meet us at the south cove."

"You can't go on your own," her mom said.

"I'm the fastest, I know the way the best. I can get there quick." She couldn't risk her parents heading there. Argent could grab her, she wasn't important — what did she know of Aeolia?

"Absolutely not. We all go together."

"Too obvious. Too slow. And you're too important. Get out." She waved at the ladder. "Come on!"

Her mom's boots disappeared through the trapdoor, then her dad hauled himself up. With shaking arms, Maeve ascended. Her parents stood over her as she emerged.

"I can do it! Go now," she said, pushing herself onto the rooftop.

"Be safe."

"We love you."

"I love you," she said, voice strained. They headed across the rooftops, glancing back at her.

Maeve stepped along a plank to the rooftop west of theirs. She'd curve around the plaza, staying hidden from below. Under the darkened sky, she flew over gaps, stomped across shingles, and dashed around towers.

Too far to go, too far. Gods! How could Rook do this! The crystal was not worth their capture. Argent must have plenty by now, so what was keeping one more bit of magic from them? The only thing they could ever do to resist them was evade capture.

She reached halfway across town, sweat trickling down her forehead. The green and plaza opened up to her right, a spread of people watched over by the Argent

ship in the harbor. The sizzle of fireworks echoed as she ran. Her lenses flashed green and red, the lights illuminating the rooftops and casting shadows.

Someone grabbed her arm.

It was like lightning had struck her bones the way her entire body screamed.

Maeve whipped around, slicing her wrist out of the grip. Against all logic, the agent from before stood on the roof. No peaks to hide behind — where had he come from?

Maeve thrust a kick at his sternum, but he was already jumping back.

“What the hell! I’m trying to help you!” he cried. She whirled and kept running.

“No, stop!”

Eurus, this guy! She didn’t have time to try and take him.

“Can’t you just listen to me!” he called, voice still close.

He wasn’t shooting wind at her or anything, so he was ineffective. Good.

“I’m not with Argent!” he called.

“You can drop the act!” Maeve called, hopping across a gap.

“This is real! I came to warn you.”

“Good job!” She spit out hair from her mouth, the wind blowing.

“I need your help!”

The dome of the museum was getting closer as it rocked back and forth in her vision. Come on, come on. Rook better be there.

The lights were so bright ahead that the museum shone like a beacon, calling her. It was all she could see.

The lights were growing brighter. Redder.

Maeve skidded to a halt, and that's when she saw the smoke billowing through the dome, no longer blurred against the night sky.

The man cursed, and she started. He was right next to her.

"It's Argent for sure," he said.

She leapt forward again.

"Seriously? You can't just go in there."

"My brother's in there!" She didn't have to talk, but it could help. If Argent, he'd want to ensure they were all accounted for. If not, then he could make himself useful and "help" as promised.

Maeve ran across the next three rooftops before standing at the brink of the museum. She shielded her mouth from the smoke, blinking away tears. Through the shattered panes of the dome, flames swarmed the wooden beams, columns, and paneling, bathing the entire museum in red. The fire covered everything. The Euris' flower basket and sponges were gone. One whale rib still hung from the ceiling, the rest piled on the ground. Empty stone plinths stood as islands in the flame. Her sculpture, the geodes, any stones were all missing. Anything else must be beneath the flames.

But no Rook. And no Argent.

She had to get down there.

Maeve ducked away and vaulted over a low wall. She slid down a ladder, the metal hot and ragged beneath her palms. She darted out of the alley onto the street and gasped. The fire had spread. The cloth sculptures hanging across the street were burning. Shutters and wooden shingles blazed against the stucco. Everything was so bright.

Maeve staggered around the bend into the museum courtyard. Flames poured through the gaping windows and doors of her beloved museum. The fire ringed the space, spreading across bushes, vines, the carved patio chairs. She ducked away from the bonfire of the lemon trees as flaming leaves and fruit fell to the ground.

“You’re really going in there?” the man said, stopping beside her.

“Yes!” she gasped. “Come on! We have to get him out!” He stared at her as if she were an idiot.

Maeve skirted around the burning chairs and tables, head whipping around at the different paths forward. She held her arms close to her body, clutching her bag, moving slowly. As she breathed, her throat scratched and burned. Tears leaked down her face, heat searing the back of her neck.

“Can’t you put this out?” she called.

The man wove around the furniture behind her. "It's too hot! There's literally nothing I can do here — you need to leave him!"

And he thought she was an idiot! Yet he was still following her.

She leapt the steps up to the front doors. Open on their hinges, the fire was eating their beautiful carvings. Beyond their maw was red.

She really was going in.

Holding an arm to her mouth, Maeve leaped over a line of flame at the door. Her feet smacked against the mosaic. She stepped forward, whipping her head around. Ceiling on fire, walls on fire. A beam fell where the photograph collection had been.

"Rook!" she called, heading towards the offices. She wanted to run, but her whole body screamed not to. It felt like pushing through water, the way her limbs held her back, muscles tense. The ceiling could fall at any second. She could have to jump away at any moment. "ROOK!"

Nara's office door was open, the inside ablaze. Maeve's was closed, the door wreathed in red. No! She had to get in. What if he was trapped? She glanced around for some tool and was met with the man holding a crowbar as he stepped forward. An actual godsend.

He rammed the end in the door gap, pushed, and half the door swung open, the other half splintering and falling away.

And there stood Rook atop a pile of drawers. His head whipped up, arms frozen as he rooted through the stack. "Maeve! Come on and help me!"

"Get out!" she commanded.

"We have to get the crystal!"

"It doesn't matter! They probably found it!" She lunged forward, drawers crunching beneath her. She grabbed his arm and yanked him away. "Rook, please! We need to go!"

"No, that's it, look!" he yanked a piece of wood away, revealing the false bottom of a drawer. There was the crystal, a faceted spike. Rook held it out. "See, we got it!"

She ripped it from his hands and put it in her bag.

"What the hell Maeve!" he said as she pulled him away.

"Keeping this blasted thing safe if it really matters to you!" she grunted, coughing. She shoved him out the door where the man stood watching, eyes flickering around.

She rushed forward after Rook, heading for the doors. As her foot hit the mosaic, a creaking split the air. She whipped her head up to see a beam tear from the ceiling. Maeve lunged forward, shoving Rook with her. She fell onto her bag with one elbow, another smacking against the ground.



She sucked in a breath, feeling smoke shoot through her nostrils. She yanked her feet forward, fortunately free of the beam. As she whipped around, her head throbbed. The world spun and dipped.

She was on the floor again. Vertigo. Too much smoke. They had to get out. She pushed up, and then an arm was looping beneath hers.

"I got you," Rook said. His voice was loud in her ear, suddenly sharp. Eurus, why was everything fuzzy? They'd cleared the beam. She'd hit her head? No, she couldn't have.

Her vision cleared as she stood with his help. The flames were suddenly so hot, too hot. Scouring. Too long they'd been here.

The world stopped spinning as she stepped over the flames licking at the museum threshold. Everything was aglow, but they still had the streets.

What on earth had that been? Why did it feel there was something she'd forgotten?

Oh Aegea.

She flung open the pouch to her bag. Books, papers, watch, no crystal. Broken in the fall. She'd breathed in its magic as she had the smoke.

She stared, then closed the pouch too slowly for the flames encroaching around her. She looked up, and the man was there meeting her gaze. His eyes flicked down at the open bag, and his eyes widened in understanding.

Rook was halfway across the patio. "Notus, now you're the slow one here!"

He hadn't realized? Or had he?

Didn't matter. She'd deal with it later.

No use taking side streets, with the paths too narrow they'd surely be eaten by flames. Across the streets.

Maeve ran forward, her limbs so hollow, her chest wheezing. Rook at her side, that man in tail, she bolted down the street. Not fast enough.

It was a corridor of red open to the black sky. As she ran, a man carrying a child sprinted past them. She heard people calling but couldn't see them.

After jumping over the remains of decorations, they were at the plaza. The fireworks stage was ablaze as well as the scant forest. Small figures ran west, where the buildings in the far corner had yet to be consumed.

Keep going, keep going. Everything blurred by as her feet rammed against the flagstones. She was gasping for breath. She couldn't keep going so fast. But she couldn't stop. They had to reach the pier.

Coughing, she slowed, striding forward for their street. One building, two, and there was their house. Through the shattered glass, the shop was completely ablaze. The neighboring buildings were only burning on the outside. Argent had set fire here, too, then.

Rook stared up, the fire reflecting in his glassy eyes. She grabbed his wrist.

“Almost there.”

She tried to run but couldn't. She stumbled and coughed and put one leg in front of the other. Slowly her grip on Rook's wrist transformed into both of them holding each other, staggering forward.

The buildings loomed overhead, fire spreading tendrils like a tunnel. It climbed towards the pier with them, blaze spreading down the block. The darkness of the sky and ocean hovered in the distance, looming.

The fire blurred in her vision, ringing that patch of sea and sky a few blocks away. Maeve threw her battered limbs onward.

She slumped to a halt at the base of a pier. Their boat was there at the end. Her parents were not. The Argent ship was gone.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

*Rough Draft*

The morning after the fire, Theo flipped eggs. Along with ten other students and townspeople, he and Cirese were crammed into her dorm's ground-floor kitchen making breakfast and lunch for anyone who needed it. The food was mainly for the Saffrans, who had been directed to take up lodging in the college since it was empty of most students for the summer. He'd twice hit his toes against a stack of boxes beside the countertops; the floors were covered by crates of ice-packed fish and grain, all donated, and the past few hours were taken up by people squeezing around the room. So many legs and so little space.

Steam rose from the pot of water beside him, and Cirese sat in front of it, waiting for it to boil. The steam and heat from his own griddle wafted up at him. His shirt stuck to his skin. They'd opened the windows, but it didn't do much good. That was all right. Humidity was safe.

The air was filled by the sounds of pans clacking, voices calling from the hall, and the sizzling of eggs as their edges crisped and the whites bubbled. Theo liked flipping eggs. Flipping eggs was easy. He couldn't fail flipping eggs. Well he could, if they weren't runny enough. But it was a relief to be doing something that didn't make his heart pound, his limbs freeze. His eyes felt sore, his throat hoarse; he'd been at Saffra nearly until the sun rose, only leaving once the flames had withered.

He hadn't been able to sleep, but that was nothing new. His head felt fuzzy, and it felt like he was seeing out of someone else's eyes. The warmth rising from the stove only made him feel more distant; the arm connecting to that hand holding the spatula flipping the egg was so far away, like at the end of a tunnel. It was so weird to exist.

Okay, he had to focus. It was easy to get distant like that, ever since he gave up his power. Suddenly the world had shrunk and his awareness was shoved down into his skull, and he would get used to that. Sooner or later, right?

He might not feel real, but what was happening around him was, so yes, it was back to eggs, and to the kitchen. A waterfall of sound echoed as Cirese poured a bag of occa into her pot, her craned arms brushing his shoulder. The flat pieces of pasta were shaped like the torpedo bodies of fish, pinched at both ends. She stood on her toes, grain rushing at the pot, her head craned down at the counter to look at a stack of flashcards.

A little dangerous. "Need help with that?" Theo said, watching her elbows and ready to leap if they strayed near the hot metal of the pot.

"Oh, all set," she said, the now-empty bag limp. She flashed a quick smile that dropped as she sat back on her stool, hunching over the cards. Eyebrows pinched, her eyes flicked back and forth along the cards, then the pot ladle, then to the pasta.

She'd said she had a big exam tomorrow — it seemed like a reasonable thing to cancel because of the fire, but here she was studying. "Why don't you ask for an exemption from the exam? I'm sure your professor will understand."

"She's giving us more time if we want, but I need to take it now. I just want it over with, and everything's all fresh anyway. Don't want to drag it out," she said, a card pinched in her hands. She darted her head at the pot, then back down.

Theo slipped his last egg onto a serving tray, then set down his spatula. "Hey, how about I quiz you instead?" Any way to make her less tense, and to keep her from being unsafe near the stove.

"Okay, yeah," she said, giving a small laugh. She stood and gave her attention to the pot, stirring, as he picked up some cards.

At his request, she rattled-off some economics formulas, her words quick and precise. Currency, exchange rates, all stuff that made his eyes glaze over further. He sorted through the cards with one hand, cracking eggs and flipping with the other. Then the looped script on her cards demanded longer answers.

"In what ways have the trade routes across the Auremari Ridge changed in the past few years and why?" he read.

"This is an essay question — I won't bore you with the whole thing, but it's like it's changed to east-west flow up north, and they think Notus removed the winds

preventing mid-latitude crossings, maybe cause he trusts us now, which I think is pretty cool, by the way..."

Removed the winds. No, that wasn't intentional. They'd dropped when he'd died, no longer around to maintain them. Theo'd never heard anyone discussing stuff like this before, but of course they would notice the effects. And no one thought it was wrong, prescribing motivations to the winds and currents as always. He shouldn't be surprised, but he was because it was another reminder of how separate he was from the world. He was alone with the truth. No way he could tell people, because that would be devastating information, and because they'd ask questions.

"Uh, Theo?"

Theo remembered to flip over the card, though he barely recognized the answer on the back as words, not reading them. "Ha, yeah, that's it."

"Here," Cirese said, beckoning with a hand. "It'll just be faster if I read them to myself." She slid the cards from his fingers before he could react. His arms felt a little hollow, his chest slightly shaky from a single throb of his heart at the mention of Notus. It was terrifying how his body reacted so strongly — but he shouldn't think about it, no. Focus on Cirese.

Her stressing like this made him uneasy. She didn't deserve to torture herself this way. "I know you're gonna do great. You don't have to worry like this."

“You’re just saying that,” she said, rapping the cards against the counter to align the edges.

“Well, I know you’re going to be fine in general. One test isn’t going to stop you in life.”

In response, she made a face at her cards—lips thin, eyes wide—like his statement was absurd.

Was she annoyed with him? He shouldn’t keep prodding, then she wouldn’t be upset. But if he didn’t confront her at some point, then she would keep up these habits, and they wouldn’t be good for her in the long run. Was there anything he could do?

Well, immediately, he could distract her. Which would be a bad thing to do, because this focus on the exam must be giving her peace of mind, in some way. But there was something else bothering him, and he needed to be at ease, too.

“I saw Argent ships last night,” he said. “Do you know what that’s for? Is Fara visiting you?”

Her head flipped up from the cards and to him. “Argent? That’s so weird. No, haven’t heard from her and I rarely do. If she was here on business, I’d have no idea if she’d even reach out to me. What would we even do? A formal dinner? We never even played as kids.”



"I thought it had to be something, since they don't come by here." He hadn't seen their ships since last night. They'd taken Saffrans from the beach to Barra and kept south. It could've been that they'd just stopped for the festival on their way around CONTINENT. He'd still watched the streets on his way here.

"Probably just a detour, then," Cirese said, slouching back down.

Could that be all? Was he really safe? Just a fluke, a stray spark from the fireworks?

"Hey, we're gonna need more gas," called another volunteer, a student. "Does the market sell tanks?"

"Oh! I have two," Theo said, his heart jumping up. "I can bring them over right away."

"These will last us the rest of the afternoon, but for dinner that would be great."

"Okay, will do." Smiling, he handed a plate of eggs to a volunteer ferrying food to the courtyard.

Even with Argent and Notus briefly out of his mind, and then more intentionally ignored, his unease lingered, a slight weight in his chest. He tried not to let it affect his work, and soon he was out of eggs to crack.

Shortly after, he and the others on kitchen-duty filed outside to finally eat. Through the hall and out the doors, cool air spiraled about him, a relief after the smothering kitchen.

In the courtyard between the dorm and main building of the college, people clustered in groups. They hovered around wooden folding tables bearing food, stood in tight clumps, or hunched on blankets spread across the grass. Volunteers in blue hefted furniture across the space, streaming from the college's hallway into the dorm's double-doors. The brick building loomed overhead, and beyond that the sky a chalky gray. Hopefully the smoke wouldn't hurt anyone's lungs, both the islanders and his eagles.

Theo didn't take much food from the serving dishes, not wanting to take away from the Saffrans. Then, between bites of steamed fish and soft occa, he ladled food onto plates. Pinched faces gave him nods of thanks. Children stared up at him, eyes wide and white, hands clinging to the soot-stained shirts or fingers of siblings, or parents, or maybe neighbors. He couldn't tell or assume, and gods, there had to be people who were lost, or separated. People with family who hadn't escaped the wreckage...

He thought about this more and more, as the line advanced and new faces appeared, and then someone did speak on it. A girl who seemed to be his age—nineteen—murmured thanks at being served, then spoke up. "Is there any chance you've seen my younger sister? She looks just like me, people always say that, and she's ten, long braids."

Oh gods. He wish he had. "I'm so sorry." If only he'd been around when they were moving Saffrans into the dorm, maybe he'd be recognizing people. He needed to start keeping track. "You should ask the other volunteers, but let me write that down for you, and I'll see if I can find her. Let me just—I'll be right back with paper—"

"I got you," Cirese said from farther down the table. She sifted in the pack at her feet and handed him a pencil and parchment.

"How about you write your name, names of family, who you're looking for, where you lived, anything. Where to find you, too," Theo said, hope rising in him.

"Thank you," she said, giving him a fragile smile.

He kept the paper out in front for the rest of the line and soon had to flip it over. This could work, this could really help. He would be the best person to do this, too, traveling fast to the other islands to hopefully make connections.

When the line dwindled and he'd scrubbed his fingerprints off rinsing and drying kitchenware, Theo headed back into town. He strolled in the shade of store awnings, keeping an eye out for navy uniforms, but there was only the usual bustle plus blue-sashed volunteers and people in stained clothing. Too many people.

A block from the university stood the Post, unassuming next to the corner store surrounded by stacks of books. Up a few steps, beneath the old red awning, and past the jingle of the door, and he was safe again. Everything in the small space had

a faded, worn look, with the scuffed floorboards soft underfoot and main wall taken up by stamps and newspapers. Cirese's plants were the only spots of color, bundles of leaves in red pots snug against the rack of shipping material and the couches.

"How was everything at the college?" The voice came from further in the store, behind the counter on the right. Marco emerged from the shelves, carrying a set of nested crates in sturdy arms. With his broad shoulders and build, Theo's boss often joked to customers with a flex of an arm that carrying mail had given him his muscle.

"Great!" he said, while inside him a voice whispered *not enough, not enough*. Standing around just flipping eggs for several hours now seemed like an inefficient use of his time. He needed to get out there with his lists. And there would be clean-up and rebuilding on Saffra soon enough, too — that could work. He needed to optimize how he could be of use.

"Hey, do we have anything for the surrounding islands? I'm on my way out."

Marco set his crates on the counter. "Surely that can wait till tomorrow, with what's going on."

Theo frowned. "Well, I'm headed around anyway."

"I mean that there's plenty to do here, and you should take some rest. Don't know if anyone will be missing a few postcards what with the fire still fresh."

Was that allowed, legally? Well, Marco had been working this job for over forty years now, so he had to know—anyway— “I’m collecting names and trying to match-up families and friends, that’s why I’m going. I’ll be taking the eagles, too, so always room for mail.” Marco knew about the eagles, as that was supposedly why Theo was such an efficient post carrier, but not much more. “Is it okay if I say I’m with the Post? I want it to be official.”

“Oh that’s an excellent idea, and yes. I’m headed over to the plaza now and can tell the relief organizers about it.”

“Thank you!”

With his messenger bag stuffed with letters, a clipboard, and plenty of notepaper, Theo slipped out the door. Continuing along the main street, he headed south, the slope of the island’s hill and the towering Spires rising far down the end of the street above grey-weathered buildings.

As he stepped out onto the plaza, navy blue flashed from the street opening onto the pier. Theo froze, his heart pounding in his ears. No, it wasn’t a mistake; two people in uniforms resembling military dress strolled along the market colonnade. Not even regular Argent sailors or traders, actual Aeolian Division agents, by their outfits.

They had to be here for something.

Theo forced himself to step forward and turned uphill. He'd take the sidestreets back. He paced slowly—hopefully casually—away from the plaza, feeling his heart pound with every step.

If there were here for him, then they'd have already known about him, then they'd have showed up at the Post or the Spires. He'd already be gone. They must be lingering from the fire. Did they really care about helping the Saffrans, or was that only a front? They couldn't be searching for Aeolia here, with his scouring and smashing of any deposits in the area. What had happened on Saffra?

Whatever they were here for, he couldn't stop going out. It would be cowardly and cruel if he let them prevent him from helping out the Saffrans, and he'd already done enough cowardice by running away to the islands. As long as he kept an eye out and stayed his distance, he'd be fine. If any of the agents were also Aeolian, they'd only be able to sense his familiarity within conversation distance; the two he'd spotted hadn't radiated power from across the plaza, so they couldn't be that sensitive.

Nope, no hiding. He'd have to stick to the sidestreets, the rooftops, the skies at night. They wouldn't stop him. And they'd leave Saffra shortly and that would be that. They were bound to come here eventually, and good to get it over with. It was almost a relief, actually. Not that his pounding heart got the message.

As Theo ascended the path from the lookout balcony near the Spires, he got a good look at the pier. Sure enough, a three-masted ship rose from the water, sails billowing. Only one of the three ships from Saffra. Good, not full force. Hopefully he wouldn't find the other two at the neighboring islands.

Theo let out a breath as his boots touched-down on the hay-strewn floorboards of the Aviary's barn. Wings dissolving, he rolled his shoulders, wincing at the soreness in his back; he must have pulled a muscle hefting and roller his propane tanks to the university. What had he been thinking when he'd agreed to do that? Now he didn't have any gas to cook, which he could learn to live with, but would inconvenience Cirese (though of course he would eliminate any inconvenience to her no matter the effort). They'd cost a fair share of wages, too, a week's worth, with how they were imported.

But he'd done a good thing, so it was selfish of him to second-guess.

He plodded across the space, pausing to ruffle the feathers of EAGLE, perched on one of the wooden beams curving above the floor. His arms felt heavy, his back a weight that made him want to roll forward. Didn't matter, and was worth it. He'd covered half of Rulea to witness a couple Saffrans spot names on his list, delivered the mail, plus brought medical supplies from a few miles away back to Vridia. No sign of Argent, and his eyes were pleasantly sore.

He might even sleep tonight.



## CHAPTER NINE

### *Rough Draft*

The early afternoon brought Theo back to Vridia. He'd spent most of the day at other islands, but he couldn't keep avoiding his home just because of the Argent ship still docked in the harbor.

According to Cirese and the other desk workers, the agents hadn't been back to the university, so he started his rounds there. By the time he'd made his way to town, the sun had begun to dip towards the horizon.

In the lobby of a small inn, he stood before a line of Saffrans waiting to get to his notepad. The manager had let him use the reception desk, and after he'd felt bad sitting behind it while the others had to stand, he'd given the chair to join the slim couches in the lounge area. It was a good set-up; he had sight of the door and was next to a hall leading to an alley exit.

"Thank you so much," said the man in front of him, handing back the notepad.

Theo took it and smiled. "If you can't get to Barra, tell the other volunteers to find me. I'm Theo."

The man repeated his thanks and headed to the door. Hopefully Theo wasn't creating more trouble for those he'd matched-up. With boats in-demand, would there even be a way to get them to their loved ones (and he'd really just volunteered

to find a way despite not knowing)? At least his lists would give peace of mind to Saffrans, no longer wondering if their friends or family had escaped the fire.

Holding the notepad out, he looked up at the next in line and froze.

She was an Aeolian. The way his heart pulled towards her, sensing that familiarity, there was no denying it.

Before he could react, she took the notepad. "Thank you." Her eyes flicked away from his face as she began flipping through the pages, holding it to the side so a teenaged kid could also read. Heads ducked, the two of them leaned together.

Theo haltingly dropped his hands to his sides. She'd barely looked at him. She must not know what that feeling of familiarity meant. She must be newly Aeolian, or maybe isolated. Either way, she wouldn't realize what danger she was in.

Was Argent here for her? He had to talk to her. That meant exposing himself as Aeolian. This would be the riskiest thing he'd done in all his time in-hiding, dragging him back towards before, but he couldn't leave her. It would be selfish to leave her.

"I don't think they're in here," the girl said, glancing up at him. She offered the notepad. "Thank you, though."

Routine took over for him, forcing him to act despite the shakiness in his hands and beat of his heart. "You could write your name in there, and if I wind up finding

them, they'd see it." She had to be using an alias. This suggestion of his couldn't endanger her more.

"Right," she said, face blank. She flipped back through and took a pen from the desk.

The kid next to her—probably her brother—leaned in, eyes bright. "What are those goggles for?"

Theo put a hand to his head, slapping the glass lenses ruffling his hair. Oh, stupid, he'd forgotten to take them off. "Oh, it gets windy. Out on the ocean." He picked up speed. "I've been traveling to all the islands trying to reunite people."

The kid nodded. "Cool." His politeness was ringed with disappointment, which was the goal. Even so, Theo's heart lurched with the need to tell him about flying and introduce him to the eagles.

"Here you are," said his sister, placing the notepad on the desk. When she looked up at Theo, her head tilted slightly, glasses glinting. "Sorry about this, but have we met before?"

"No," he said way too soberly, then caught himself, "but I am with the Post, so maybe in passing." No, idiot, he shouldn't still be in avoidance-mode. "Actually, wait, I might know your parents."

"Oh!" She frowned, leaning in slightly. "Really?" She said it not so much excited as skeptical. Her brother looked up at her to try to share a smile, but she didn't share

his glance, fully looking at Theo. Those dark eyes scrutinized him, and she seemed to loom over him despite being a head shorter.

“If you stick around until I make it through the line, then we should talk,” Theo said, his heart shaky.

“Okay,” she said slowly, eyes slightly narrowed.

“That’s great — thank you!” said the kid.

She looked at her brother for the first time, then gave Theo a polite smile. “Yes, thank you. We’ll just be over here.” They slipped towards the lounge.

He had no time to breathe as the next person in line stepped forward. He managed his greetings by rote, trying to keep a helpful and friendly expression, though it felt more like a wince. He could feel the girl’s eyes on him from where she leaned against the wall at the edge of the hallway.

It wouldn’t be right not to help them. He didn’t deserve to stay safe away from Argent and Aeolian business, in fact he should be running towards it. So this was good. He needed to make up for failing Notus and CITY and this would be one step of the way, and if he got into danger, well it would be justice, then.

His heart still skipped in his chest. He had to pull himself together or he would be of no use to anyone.

As the line progressed, the shock slowly seeped away from his chest. His fingers felt solid, his mind less ratcheted back in his skull. A few people recognized names on his list, which helped.

When the last in-line said their goodbye, Theo turned to the two waiting for him. "We can go, uh, down the hall," he said, gripping the strap of his messenger bag.

The girl nodded, giving him that look like she was appraising him. Of course she was — he must seem suspicious.

Theo slipped into a small room. It was bare save for a serving table, and it must have been a private dining room before the furniture was requisitioned for the Saffrans. As the girl passed through the door, her eyes leapt to the windows, and she swept a glance through them into the courtyard.

"Door?" the kid said, hand on the knob.

She frowned at him, looking back at Theo.

"Yeah, actually," he said, and the kid closed it. The girl raised her eyebrows, looking at Theo as if saying *is that so?*

As soon as it closed, he spoke up. "I don't actually know your parents, I'm sorry," he said, then added quickly, "I just had to talk to you and I couldn't hold up the line or say anything too detailed. Do you know about Argent? You have to get out of here."

"Oh, sorry, I don't really know what you mean," she said with a small laugh of polite confusion.

"Oh, sorry," he said. So she didn't know Argent at all? Didn't know she had to run? "You're in danger cause you're Aeolian." She just stared at him. "I can tell, any Aeolians can sense each other. It's why you recognized me, because I'm one too."

The confusion melted away from her face, replaced by a steady set of the eyebrows. "What do you want?"

"Nothing," he said, startled by her tone. "I just wanted to tell you to get out of here. Do you know about Argent?"

"Of course, and we've been trying to." She glanced at the kid, who leaned against the door as if holding it back. "You should as well."

"I can't, but let me help you. I can get you out fast, and far if you need. You know the eagles? You can come with me up the Spires."

"That would be amazing," the kid said.

"Can you prove to me you're not with Argent?" the girl asked.

Theo blinked. Gods, *him* with Argent? "Of course I'm not with them." He tried to think of a way to explain, but that wordless churning of revulsion and fear slipped from his grasp. "I've been hiding from them, they were after me, I would never help them." That wouldn't be enough, but his mind was blank. How could he explain,

when it was too big for him? "I've been living here for years, I've probably delivered you mail."

"You could be collecting names just to find us."

"No, I just want to help," he said calmly. "I understand what it's like. If you don't want to come with me, do you need a boat, or supplies, or anything?"

"Come on," she said to the kid, heading for the door. "Listen, if you are just a regular guy, I'm sorry about this," she said hurriedly.

"Wait, Maeve," the kid whispered as she slid past him into the hall. He glanced back at Theo, eyes wide. "Sorry." He ducked into the hall.

Theo was left alone in the small room. His sore shoulders begged for him to slouch and sink to the ground.

Why hadn't he realized they wouldn't trust him? He would probably have done the same. He should respect her decision—that was the right thing to do—but it also wasn't right to let her get caught. The two of them could be capable, and maybe they were heading to a boat right now, but it was still dangerous. It would be cruel to let them get caught, and he'd be an idiot if Argent learned of him from them.

He'd have to help them one way or another.