

THE WAY ACROSS

Misty Moncur

Chapter 1

He was a Zoramite. There was no question about it.

I could pick a Zoramite out of any crowd. I had seen Nephites here in Antionum, Jacobites, Mulekites, and more Lamanites than I could count, but I could always recognize someone who had the pure blood of Zoram.

And he had it.

I watched him move through the grand alley easily, as if he had done it every day of his life. The crowd was bustling—men with tools, boys with nets or bows, women with their freshly filled vessels of water, their little girls tagging along and older daughters herding toddlers behind them. He navigated the crowd with confidence and bearing, but he looked up at the stone towers, shielding his eyes from the mid-morning sun, and I knew. He didn't live in Antionum.

He had participated in the traditions, though. Even from this distance, I could see ink markings above the tops of his longboots and there, a marking on his neck. I would only have to get closer to him to see what family he belonged to.

I grinned and went after him.

I skipped down the stairs of the dress shop and fell in behind him when he passed me. I kept a pair of boys between us so he wouldn't notice that I followed him, and when they veered away down a road I knew led to a delta where they could swim at high tide, I followed a group of older men, the kind of men my father would be friends with, who were probably on

their way to the government building. And when they turned in that direction, I melded into a group of women on their way to the vendors' rows. When they turned, I went it on my own a few paces.

Once out from behind the women, I saw a friend of mine with her mother and sisters and waved to them all. They waved back, but they were headed toward the cistern.

"I'll see you at the gathering?" I called to Jane.

She nodded, her smile bright as always, and turned back to her sisters. When I turned, too, back to the road, the young Zoramite man was gone.

I lingered near the corner of an out-of-the-way building—a bootmaker Father went to sometimes—to take a sweeping look around for him.

Not near the governor's hall or the tanner. The temple wall was clear, the gates closed. Hadn't circled back around to the cistern for a drink, no, but was that him standing in line at Bekah's shop? Of course! He would be hungry if he had just arrived here.

I harrumphed. There was no ink tattoo on that man's leg.

My eyes fell to the ground, but of course there were too many footprints jumbled on the road to make out anything useful. Still...

There was a fresh print from someone who had stepped off the grand alley stones onto the dirt roadway of the vendor row. About the right size. Definitely a boot. A deep cut into the earth at the ball, a slight dip at the front of the print where he had dragged his toe, most prominent on the inside of the print, which was unusual.

So. If he was in the vendor row, he was in need of something. If it wasn't food and it wasn't water, he must be in search of—

"Mphh!"

A big hand covered my mouth as a hard arm snaked around my waist and lifted me off my feet. A quick whirl had my back up against the wall on the far corner of the bootmaker's stone shop. Well, it would have been against the wall if there hadn't been a person betwixt me and the stones.

I wriggled to get away.

"Be still."

His voice was warm and reprimanding.

I craned my neck so I could see him, but he squeezed tighter, holding me in place.

"Why are you following me?"

"Mmmphh-mph mmm mmph mmm mm."

Because I think you're cute.

Clearly.

He huffed and eased his hand enough for me to mumble, "You're not from here." I wriggled some more. "Let me go."

"Answer my question."

"Who are you?"

He huffed again. "I've got nothing but time."

I breathed heavy into his hand. Then I full on licked it.

He laughed. The sound was as warm as his voice, and the feel of it rumbling through his chest sent a little shiver up my neck.

"Let me go!" I brought my heel down hard on his foot and threw an elbow into his ribs, but still his arm didn't loosen, so I went heavy, letting my knees buckle, and when he bent to catch me, I swept a foot behind his ankles and we both went down into the dirt.

His arm finally loosened because he was...laughing?

I scrambled up and looked down at him, sitting squarely in the dirt behind the bootmaker's shop. Laughing. At me.

I harrumphed again. But then he looked up.

I couldn't help a little gasp. I shook my head and backed away.

He sobered and peered at me. “What is it?” He drew his knees up and was on his feet in a second.

His hair was curled at the ends and was dark as night. Darker. His clothing was of the Zoramite tradition, as I had noted in the grand alley. He had the hooked nose so common in our people. His skin was olive and had seen much of the sun. His eyes were quick and dark, almost black, made to look more so by the thick ink that lined them.

I didn’t realize I was still backing up until my back hit the stone wall.

“Look, I’m sorry,” he said, a deep frown drawing his brows together. He stepped closer. “I didn’t mean to scare you. I’m Seth.”

“I know who you are.”

His frown deepened. “Is that why you were following me?”

I shook my head. “No. But it’s why I’m leaving.” I tried to push past him, to run from the secluded corner of the vendors’ row, but he just held his ground. It was embarrassingly easy for him to keep me where I was.

“What do you mean?”

“The ink around your eyes.” I licked my lips. “When...where...have you...” I didn’t even know what to ask.

“Oh.” His grin was sheepish. “I’ve always had it. I don’t even remember getting it done.”

“Do you have amnesia?”

He burst into a laugh but sobered again when he saw my question was serious. “No,” he said slowly. “Not that I’m aware of.”

“Well, how would you know you don’t?”

He smirked. “My friends would have told me.”

I stared at him, wondering how he could look so unfamiliar, and at the same time so familiar.

“Would one of your friends happen to be Elijah?”

All laughter was gone from his eyes now.

I was right.

“You’re the lost son of the Snake Kings.”

He scoffed. “What are you talking about?”

“You do have amnesia.”

He waved that away. “Who are you?”

Slowly, I raised my hand to tuck my loose hair behind my ear, so he could see, so he would know exactly who I was, and quick as lightning, he stopped my hand and brushed the hair aside himself.

He took a step closer to get a better look.

And I punched him in the gut and ran away.

I didn’t stop until I was beyond the vendors’ row and nearly to the first houses. I ducked behind a synagogue and stopped to breathe. Slowly, I peeked around the corner and searched the streets I had run through.

No sign of him.

My mind was still reeling. Was it possible he could be here in Antionum? The place of his birth. The place he had chosen to leave so many years ago.

Seth.

Possible? I had seen the markings on his eyes myself, hadn’t I?

I touched the marking near my own eye, the place he had touched with his fingers. He had stopped my hand like he knew the mark would be there, but I had seen questions in his eyes, not recognition. I hadn’t let him get a good enough look at the line of my fathers before I had punched him.

But who wouldn’t punch a boy who accosted her in the market?

Confident he was gone, I stepped out, rounded the corner, and let myself into the synagogue. The door was never locked, but there would be no one here today, not until the day of the Lord, and a quick glance around confirmed I was alone.

The cavernous room made me think of the caves that cut into the jagged rocks near the seashore and filled with water at high tide, the fish that got stranded on the sandbars inside when it receded, the water that seeped from the ceilings and walls. But the beams and the thatch of the roof made me feel at home—home in the old days when I was small and Elijah let me sit by him in the evening.

Light came in through windows—something the caves didn't have—that were high on the walls. They let a breeze blow through, too, and with it the sweet scent of a cool morning.

I stooped to slide off my boots and left them near the door. The stone floor was cool on my feet and gritty with dust, and I thought perhaps someone should think to clean the synagogue. Stepping soundlessly around the thick pillars, I found the one I was looking for.

I fingered the carving on it. The rendering was good, but just the image of a boy, and I couldn't see Seth's face in it. But then again... I tilted my head, and if I just squinted my eyes a little...

No. It was indistinguishable from the likeness of every other Zoramite boy who had ever run through the streets of Antionum or jumped from the cliffs of Belim into the roiling sea. Crooked nose. Loose hair.

Lined eyes.

There was no denying that boy in the streets had been adorned with the lined eyes of the family of Kan. The lines that were *reserved* for the ruling heir of the House of the Snake Kings.

I splayed my hand over the carving one last time and then turned to the tower in the center of the room, a tower that the noble families called the Rameumptom. The steps weren't hard to climb, and I skipped up them to the top. The light was brighter up here, streaming in beams from the east windows,

and when I bent a little to look out, I saw the people bustling about their daily business.

But they didn't see me.

I pulled the strap of my satchel over my shoulder and sat on the platform, letting my legs dangle over the edge. I sat perfectly still for a moment, letting the quiet of the church calm my mind and hoping inspiration would come.

It did.

I reached into my satchel and took out my leather pouch, and when I untied the thongs, it unrolled before me. I bent forward and selected a curved bevel. Next, I took out a portion of clay—my last portion—and after peeling back the leaf I had wrapped around it, I began to mold it in my hands. This piece would do nicely. The weight was good. It was dense with moisture, but not too wet, and the color was fine.

When I was satisfied with the shape it was taking, I positioned the bevel between my first and third fingers and began to shave off small pieces of the clay in long arcing strokes. This piece, I decided, would be Ekchuah, the god of warriors, and after I fired him in my kiln, polished him with crushed shells from the sea, and colored him with pigments from the earth, the black around his eyes would gleam and light would glint from his dark features.

I stayed there, carving carefully, letting the long curls fall where they would, until the sun was overhead and no longer coming in through the east-facing windows and spotlighting my workspace. The light wouldn't be good again until evening, but even then, it wouldn't be the same.

A sound startled me out of my concentration.

The door!

I quickly pulled my feet up.

Down below, someone was entering the synagogue.

I slipped onto my belly so I could see who it was without being seen, and in the process, sent a scuff of clay shavings over

the edge of the platform. I peered at the little pile on the floor far beneath me and smirked. It matched the rest of the dust.

Light from the door fell on the pile of clay, and I shrank back, though I doubted whoever it was would look up to notice me.

Whoever it was? I nearly laughed.

It was him.

Had he followed me? I glanced at the window again. It had been hours since he had accosted me—yes, accosted me—in the street. If he had been waiting for me to come out, he had waited a long time, and if he had tracked me here, then his tracking skills were lacking.

I smirked again. Poor spoiled nobleman.

He came in and closed the door quietly behind him. Almost reverently. He stood for just a moment, letting his eyes adjust from the brightness of high noon to the dimness inside the sanctuary. He moved forward among the pillars, touching nothing until he reached the same pillar I had. He gave the face there a fleeting touch but moved slowly around the pillar looking at the other faces, reading the stories depicted there, and finally stopping at the date panel.

If he had truly had amnesia, that pillar would make it all clear. But he would never have known about the pillar if he had somehow been coshed on the head and forgotten who he was.

No. He knew exactly who he was, and his sure steps through the synagogue proved it.

When he moved to the front of the synagogue, I lost sight of him. I wanted to swivel on my perch so I could keep an eye on him, but I didn't want to risk making a sound, because it would surely be heard.

He was quiet, and after long moments, I wondered if he had slipped out without me noticing. But the hairs on my arms were still prickling. There. There was the scuff of his boot. He

was turning, coming across the center of the room, directly under the Rameumptom.

He stopped again, and I could just see the top of his head below me—the dark hair that curled softly above his ears. I held my breath as he bent down to inspect the floor.

Was he looking at the clay shavings? He would have to be blind to miss them. Still, they would tell him nothing about me being way up here. But he was still for long moments. He cocked his head to the side as if he were listening to the silence, straining to hear again something he thought he had heard. Something like my breath, perhaps?

But then I heard it, too.

His steps were silent but quick, and he was in the shadows of the back corner by the time the door of the synagogue opened again.

I peeked over the edge of the tower again to see who it was, but the moment I heard his voice, I needn't have seen his face.

Chapter 2

What was he doing here in the synagogue in the middle of the day, and in the middle of the week at that? No one ever came here—no one but me—and Jamin was the last person I would expect to see here.

I rolled my eyes when his friends appeared in the doorway, but neither Levi nor Azariah stepped past the threshold.

“Hurry up,” Levi said.

Jamin laughed. “I know right where it is. Just hold on.”

Azariah leaned heavily against the door. “Get it already,” he slurred.

Azariah was already drunk by noon? I felt bad for him, but really, there were better ways of dealing with loss.

Everyone lost a loved one. Sometime.

Jamin entered the building, not even thinking of keeping his feet quiet, let alone reverent. He wouldn’t. It wasn’t really that he was disrespectful—not intentionally. It was more like he just wasn’t a humble person, and frankly, I would have found it difficult to be humble in his position, too.

He went to the front of the building like the newcomer—Seth—had, but I could hear him moving things, shuffling things like he was looking for something, and I was afraid I knew what it was.

I couldn’t see Jamin, but I watched Levi and Azariah. Levi was biting a nail as he scuffed a foot over the threshold and stole glances at Azariah while he watched Jamin. Azariah’s eyes drooped as if he were tired, and I wondered why he was even out with his friends. He looked like he would be more comfortable sleeping last night off in his bed.

“Ah!” Jamin exclaimed, and the other two looked to the front of the synagogue.

“Hurry, then. Let’s get out of here.”

Jamin laughed but not at Levi. He was just happy. Happy to have gotten what he wanted.

He came back into view below me, and I watched his dark head until he joined the others. Even Azariah straightened when he drew near the door.

“Let us see it,” Levi said.

Jamin was not bashful, and he held his prize right up.

The others didn’t look that impressed.

“That’s what you dragged me out of bed for?”

“That’s supposed to be six hundred years old?”

“It *is* six hundred years old.”

I almost had to smile at Jamin’s enthusiasm.

“I don’t think you’re supposed to take that.”

“It should be mine anyway. I’m a son of Zoram, aren’t I? That means it belongs to me and I can take it anytime I want. Besides, I need it.”

Azariah looked doubtful. Or maybe just sad.

“Come on,” Levi said as he backed away from the door. “It’s time for the midday meal.”

“You mean it’s time to see Bekah for the midday meal.”

I could hear Jamin’s laughter as the door closed behind them, and then it faded away as they went to find Bekah.

I nearly sat up but remembered the other person in the synagogue just in time. I eased back down and waited for him to leave so I could gather my supplies and go see Bekah for my own midday meal. I smirked to myself, because I knew something Levi didn’t know.

What was taking him so long?

I rose a little and peered into the dark corner where he had hidden himself. If he was there, he had hidden himself well. No wonder Jamin hadn’t noticed him.

I could wait him out. He would leave as soon as he...what? As he deemed it safe? To think those boys could be a danger to Seth was laughable. Jamin was carefree. A little reckless sometimes, but not dangerous.

I remembered his arm around my waist and the hardness of his chest at my back, and I didn't think Seth would be susceptible to danger, even if Jamin had posed it.

At long last, I did hear Seth move. I peeked over the edge and saw him emerge from the corner I hadn't been able to see him in. Truly, where had he been? He went straight for the door and opened it enough to leave, but he paused before slipping out and leaving me in peace. He bent around a little to get a better look at my boots.

My boots! So out of place all alone here with no legs inside them.

And then he caught sight of my footprints in the dust on the floor. He tracked them with his eyes, opening the door a bit wider and backstepping a little to get a better look. His eyes followed them all the way to the steps of the Rameumptom.

And with a wide grin, he left the synagogue.

I lay back on the platform and blew my hair out of my face. I wondered how long he would watch the door, waiting for me to come out.

Slowly, an idea began to form, and my eye caught the east window. It was high, but it wasn't like I was a stranger to dangerous things, either.

It didn't go exactly as I had planned, but pretty much exactly as I had figured. Getting to the window from the inside wasn't so difficult with a couple of benches next to the wall, but getting down once I was out had been a bit tricky.

Well, not tricky. It was a simple task, really, to fall from a window.

I hobbled into the courtyard of my family's home. Asher sat in the shade repairing a fishing net, and he looked up.

“What did you do this time?” he asked as he pulled a knot tight on his net.

“I fell from a window.”

His grin was instant. “Again?”

I huffed. *Yes, again.* “Where’s Mother?”

He nodded to the roof.

I squinted up. “The sun is hot this time of day.”

Asher shrugged. “I guess she doesn’t care.”

“Did Father come home for the midday meal?”

He shook his head. “Haven’t seen him.”

I watched him for a moment. “Are you going to fish today?”

He held up his net to inspect it. Satisfied, he nodded. “I have to have this done before the tide comes in. I’ll go check it in the morning.”

“I could go with you.”

“You’re not busy?”

I shook my head. “No plans, but I can’t come tonight.”

“Oh yeah, Jane’s party.”

“Don’t call it a party. We’re not seven.”

“Are you going with Jamin?”

“No.” I shifted. “Why would I?”

His eyes narrowed. “He said you’re going together.”

“Well, if we are, he neglected to inform me.”

He held a piece of cord in his mouth and mumbled something around it.

“What was that?”

He took the cord out and set it into place on the net. “I might have been supposed to tell you that.” He looked at me. “I like Jamin.”

“Me too.”

“He’s funny.”

And never serious.

“He is. When did he come by?”

“I saw him yesterday.”

“You didn’t accept on my behalf, did you?”

“Why would you say no?”

“I wouldn’t.”

“So, what’s the problem?”

I folded my arms. “Nothing.”

He bent back over the net. “I’m leaving before dawn tomorrow.”

“I’ll be ready.”

When I started to hobble into the house, he said, “Are you sure you want to walk all the way out to the beach?”

“I’ll wrap it,” I called back over my shoulder.

Surprisingly, it wouldn’t be the first time I had hobbled to the beach on a twisted ankle. I’d put a poultice on it. It would be good.

My mother was painting, as predicted, on the roof. I didn’t ascend the entire way, just stood on the ladder and watched her. I rested my elbows on the roof and my chin in my hands.

Mother was the most beautiful woman in all of Antionum. In all the lands of the Nephites and in the Lamanite lands too. Across all the seas you wanted to cross, you wouldn’t find a woman with glossier hair or so fair a nose or so fine of eyes. But Mother’s real beauty was inside her mind, where her pictures came from. She painted pictures of places you couldn’t even dream of.

After a few moments, she straightened. “Did you have a lovely morning, dear?”

“How did you know I was here?” I said, ascending the rest of the ladder to step onto the roof.

“I could smell ambition.”

I wrinkled my nose. “I could wash.”

She laughed. “I smell it on you like I smell fish on your brother.”

I went into her arms and let her hug me around the waist. I kissed the top of her head. "Should I be offended?"

She looked up at me and smiled, the lovely crinkles at her eye making ridges in her ink designs.

My eyes went to her canvas, a stretched length of hide. Her work was filled with perfect arching lines and a balance of shadows and light and was inspired, but her subject was just my father.

"You almost make him look handsome," I said.

She turned to look at it, too. "You think?"

I looked at it a moment more. Father was handsome, I supposed. Ladies seemed to think so. "You see something in him others don't see," I said, but I didn't know if it was the charismatic light in him, or the much darker side only a few knew about.

She pulled me slightly closer. "Someday, you will see it in your husband, too." Then she pinched me in the side, and I squirmed to get away as she laughed.

"I'm going out to the sea with Asher tomorrow morning. Do you need any pigments?"

Her brow rose a little, but she bent toward her pallet to inspect the colors that were globbed and smeared there.

"Always," she said absently as she pointed to a deep brown umber that was nearly black. The perfect color for the shadows in my father's eyes. "I could use more of this." She searched a minute more. "And this," she added, touching a bit of blue ochre. She smeared the granules into the skin on the back of her hand—not the first time she had done that with a pigment today, I could see—and considered it in the light of full noon. She turned back to me. "Do you remember where to get these?"

"I remember. That blue is a bit of a walk down the coast, though."

She waved a hand. "I can go another time."

“No,” I said. “I’ll go for it.”

“I’m so lucky to have you,” she said with a warm smile. Then she looked back to the picture of my father and tilted her head. She was already back in her own world of colors and lines, of light and shadows.

Mother was one of the most prominent artists in Antionum, and her work was displayed in many parts of the city. Even though this piece was just a picture of my father, it had probably been commissioned, and she would need those pigments to do it.

“Make sure to wrap your ankle” she called, her eyes still on my father, as I moved toward the ladder to descend.

I didn’t think she had noticed. “How—”

“I could smell it on you.”

Her laughter floated down after me.

I went into my sleeping room and flopped down on my bed. After a moment, I shifted and set my throbbing foot against the wall to elevate it. And while my foot throbbed, my head spun.

Was that boy actually Seth?

I had memories of Seth, but not very clear ones. He was my older brother’s friend, and most of my memories were of both of them together.

But I had one memory of Seth alone. One memory of a look on his face which I had since come to think of as inquisitive, though I didn’t know that word or what it meant at the time. I was very young. Five or six maybe. I was playing in the water of the fountain in the courtyard. He was waiting for Eli there, but Father came instead.

All too soon, the light began to change as the sun fell farther toward to the west. Father would be home soon, and I would have to muster some excitement for Jamin and for Jane’s gathering.

I let my foot slide down the wall and sat up. After a moment my whole leg began to tingle unbearably, and when it was done tingling, the throbbing returned. I sighed and went to the herb room to make a poultice and a wrap.

“Did you fall out a window again?”

Father.

I turned with the bowl and pestle in my hand. “Mother told you.”

My father folded his arms across his chest and sighed.

“She is making more of it than it is.”

He glanced pointedly down at the pestle.

“A precaution,” I said and turned back to the table. “It will be good as new.”

He was quiet a moment and then I heard a low chuckle. “Let me look at it.”

I set the pestle aside, turned, and slid up onto the workbench. Father took my ankle in his hand and stretched my leg toward him. He frowned at the bruise.

“You’ve broken it.”

“A sprain at most. Look.” I wiggled my toes. “It’s practically fine.”

He grunted and set my foot gently on the table.

I watched as he prepared the wrap with the herbs I had crushed. He searched the workbench and selected some ground kaein, and I laughed when he sniffed it and pretended to sneeze.

“You remembered yarrow?”

I nodded.

He added some drops of oil. “Mix this,” he said and left the room.

In a moment he was back with two large cabbage leaves, from the kitchen I supposed. He spread my mixture on the leaves and pressed them around my ankle. Then he took the bandage I had lain aside and wrapped it all up.

“Did you damage the window?” he asked as he helped me down.

I tested out the foot and we started toward the front of the house. “No, but I didn’t get the shutters closed behind me. I’ll have to go back.”

“Fresh air never hurt anything.”

Sure, but he didn’t know where the window was, and if I told him, I’d lose my secret place.

“Your mother said there is a party tonight.”

“Don’t call it a party. I’m not seven.”

“To me, you will always be seven.”

I looked up at my father and tried to see what everyone else seemed to see in him. Confidence. Charisma. Leadership.

But instead, I wondered if Eli had grown to look like him, and all I saw was the pain behind his eyes, an ache in his heart, and an emptiness in his soul that matched mine.

“Father,” I said, deciding suddenly to open the idea. “I saw a boy who looked like Seth today.”

It took him a moment to register who I was speaking of, but of course he knew.

He straightened his tunic. “Seth would be a man now. Grown.”

He was definitely that.

We passed through the front door out into the courtyard. Asher was gone but his nets were lying heaped in the shade.

The fountain was a spring that bubbled up and fell from one level of the courtyard to another over some pretty stones. A wall had been built to create a pool for the water, and a bench had been built around the top of that. I sat on the bench and trailed my fingers through the cool water. I scrubbed them together to try to get rid of the herby smell.

“Well, this boy was a man.”

Father’s eyes narrowed.

“And he looked very much like he would.”

“Were you close enough to see the line of his fathers?”

“No.”

A small fib.

Father sighed and sat next to me. He leaned forward, placed his elbows on his knees, and leveled a look at me.

“It is time for us both to think of someone else.”

My heart started to pound. My cheeks got hot. How did Father even know? Though I had heard him speak of Seth to Mother from time to time, it was always in conversations about Eli. He had never spoken of Seth to me, and of course I had never spoken of either Eli or Seth to him.

“I don’t know what you mean,” I said.

He took a breath. “I think you do.” He ran a hand through his hair, so dark but graying at his temples.

I wondered if Mother would paint the gray into her picture or if she would keep him young forever.

“That was so long ago,” I said. “I never even knew him.”

“Your mother and I made a mistake, letting you believe he would return.”

Was he still talking of Seth, or was he thinking of Eli?

“When you get an idea in your head,” he continued, “you can be very stubborn.”

I couldn’t help a smile. That was just a true fact.

“Father, I have to go.”

“Ah, yes. The party.”

We both turned to see Mother coming out through the door into the courtyard, an oil cloth in her hands stained with many colors.

“Your brother said Jamin is coming by to pick you up.”

I glanced around the courtyard to see if Asher was there. He wasn’t. Not unless he was hiding under the nets.

“As I understand it,” I replied.

Mother stepped to Father and put a hand on his shoulder, but she spoke to me. “I hope he will not keep you out too late.”

I shook my head. “Asher wants to leave early for the sea. I’ll be in my bed by the first watch.”

Mother laughed. “Well, that hardly leaves any time for fun.” She tilted her head at me. “Shouldn’t you get ready to go?”

I looked down at myself. I was wearing a dress I had scuffed through the dust of the Rameumptom, caught on a peg as I fell from the sanctuary window, and wrinkled when I had lain on my bed during the hot afternoon. Add the smell of my ankle wrap, and I definitely wasn’t ready to go.

“Hurry,” Mother urged. “I thought I saw him turning up the road.

I glanced at my father, who was frowning, and dashed off to freshen my clothing, though there was nothing I could do about the wrap. It had to stay.

I put on a fine sarong, one with fabric of silk that fell in waves past my knees and billowed elegantly when I walked. It was perhaps too fine for Jane’s gathering—it was suited more to one of Father’s business suppers—but I felt pretty in it. And wasn’t that reason enough? I powdered my cheeks with clay-colored talc and darkened my eyes with a bit of inky kohl—things I had made from mother’s pigments. I finished with a dab of mauve on my lips and topped it with a swipe of oil to make them shine.

I slid some bangles onto my wrists and the ankle that wasn’t wrapped. They would make a soft tinkling sound when I walked. It was just the thing. Finally, I slipped both feet into sandals that showed the rings on my toes to advantage. I frowned at the wrap on my ankle and slipped the ring from my second toe, which had started to swell, and slid it above the second knuckle of my finger instead. I admired how it fit with

the others. As an afterthought, I dabbed on a bit of fragrance. Maybe it would cover the smell of the herbal poultice.

Jamin was in the courtyard conversing politely with my parents when I emerged from the house. Father's arms were folded, but his frown had disappeared. Jamin had that effect on people. He always had lighthearted things to say that put people at ease when perhaps sometimes they shouldn't have been. Mother stood close to Father, hanging on his arm. She caught her breath when she saw me. Father's frown returned, but Jamin grinned.

I twirled in the dress.

"You look like you're ready for the celebration of Mohu," he said.

I waved him off. "I have something better for that."

"That color of green is..." He glanced at my father. "It's really pretty."

"Seafoam," my mother and I said in unison and then laughed.

"It's the color of seafoam," I repeated.

Jamin shook his head with a grin, and if I wasn't mistaken, another glance at my father. "Are you ready then?"

"I am." I stepped toward him, and we faced my parents. I caught sight of Asher in the dark shade of the wall, moving two crab traps into his little cart. I would have waved him over, but he wasn't looking. He liked Jamin. I knew he did. So, what was wrong?

I noticed my father's arms still folded and put the pieces together.

Mustering a smile, I bid my parents goodbye, and Jamin escorted me out through the gate.

He wasted no time in gloating.

"Guess what I got today," he said, a smug smile tugging at his lips.

The relic of Lehi.

“How about I don’t guess, and you just tell me.”

He laughed. “You’ll just have to see with everyone else if you won’t guess.”

I feigned a pout. “A new bow and some arrows.”

He laughed again. “What would I do with those? No. Guess again.”

I did not want to guess again. If guessing again was required of me, I would turn right around and go home.

“Hey, what happened to your foot?”

I glanced down. “I slipped on the ladder.”

“Going up to the rooftop? I told you that’s dangerous.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Your father should install stairs.”

“Perhaps he should,” I said to be agreeable. I doubted he was really listening anyway. The thing to do was change the subject back to him, and then I wouldn’t have to make any more conversation.

“Tell me about the trip you are taking. To Zarahemla, right?”

And that was all that was needed for him to dominate the conversation again. What a relief.

Chapter 3

I didn't get in as early as I wanted to, certainly not by the first watch. But the second watch saw me safely in my bed.

After we had arrived at the party, Jamin and I had separated to see our own friends, and when he showed off the relic he had in his possession, I wasn't even present, and he didn't even notice. When he left me at the gate of my house, he displayed no real affection for me, nor I for him, and I wondered why on earth he continued to make a show of a courtship he did not seem to want.

It was still dark when I made my way to the courtyard to leave for the sea with Asher. The morning air was soft and for a moment all was still and quiet. Then I heard the scuff of Asher's foot on the stones.

"Are you ready?" I called softly through the darkness.

"Been ready for an hour."

I snorted. "Let's go already."

We went out through the gate into the silent street. The only sound was the creak of the cart's wheels.

"Do you want me to pull it a while?" I asked when we neared the edge of the city.

"You're still limping."

"How—"

"I hear it in the sound of your gait." He was quiet a moment. "I take it the poultice didn't work."

"It would have if I hadn't had to go to Jane's last night."

He made no reply to that, and we made our way toward the coast. The road was clear, and the last beams of the full moon lit our way until we reached a thick band of trees that stood between the city and the coast, but dawn began to rise, and we traversed the road without mishap.

“Where will you drop the traps?” I asked Asher when the ground began to feel sandy beneath my sandals.

“Still in Bengal Cove. My boat is there. I set my nets there last night.”

“I’ll help you drop the traps. Then I’ll go gather Mother’s pigments.”

He didn’t say anything, but I assumed he agreed.

Bengal Cove was secluded a fair way down the coast. It was not secret, but to get there required hiking over a jagged rock face, and it was so shallow that few people bothered with it. There was plenty of fishing in areas that could be accessed more easily, but that wasn’t really Asher’s way.

“I’ll help with the cart,” I said, but he just shook his head.

“I know the exact path. You’ll pull it off course.”

He wasn’t trying to be mean. He just wanted to do it his way, and I understood that. I liked doing things my own way, too, so how could I fault him?

I wasn’t careful with the placement of my feet, and my ankle bent on a jutting stone. I thought of yesterday. Had my way really been to fall out of a window instead of to confront a boy outside the synagogue? That was what I had chosen? I winced, but not at the sting of the twisted ankle.

It wasn’t just a boy. He wasn’t. Not just any boy. He was Seth of the House of the Snake Kings. He had the ink to prove it. He had the thick black hair that shone blue in the sunlight with the curl around his ears like his family did. He had Itzam-Ye on his leg and the line of his ancestors on his neck.

“Can you lift that cage?”

I focused on Asher. He had been right. He’d known the exact places to roll his cart through and had made it down the slope in good time. The cart was near his boat at the water’s edge, which was tied to a large rock in the sand. Asher was holding one of the cages.

“Where will you put it?” I asked. “Your boat is filled with these.”

“Just set it there.” He nodded to a spot on the beach.

I stepped to the cart, put my weight on my good foot, and hefted the heavy cage out. I hobbled a few steps and set the cage down as gently as I could.

“Go find Mother’s supplies,” he said. “I’ll drop the cages. I do it by myself all the time.”

I stared at him a moment. When had he gotten stronger and more determined than me?

He smirked, but good-naturedly. “You’ll capsize the boat if you do it like that.”

I smirked back, but he was right. My ankle was not better, and we both knew it.

“I’ll be back by noonday. Be careful.”

“Mmm-hmm,” was all he said. He had picked up a cage in each hand, stepped into the water, and was hefting them over the side of the boat.

I turned slowly to look around the cove. I could get everything I needed here except the blue ochre, which was an hour’s walk down the coast on a good foot. I gave a longing look to Asher’s boat as it left the beach.

I put my hands on my hips and turned back to the cove. I located the most likely spots for the umber.

But first, pain management.

Yesterday’s poultice and wrap wasn’t going to rewrap itself, so I found a place to sit where I could put my foot in the water. I removed the wrap and tossed the limp cabbage leaves into the sea. I inspected the ankle and then set it into the water to cool. I watched idly as the sea brought the cabbage leaves back to the sand and lapped at them gently. A gull would come and take them.

Finally, I pulled my foot from the water, wrapped it to reduce the movement around the ankle, and slipped my foot back into my sandal.

All fixed up for now, I traveled back up toward the rockface that surrounded the cove. There was obsidian here, black but with a slash of white through it. I stopped to gather a few pieces I could use to slice grooves into my statues. Sometimes my creations called for very precise details, and the sharp stone shards worked nicely.

I followed the rockface around to the south. The southern side of the cove was marshy. I would have to slog through it, but I saw the reddish stones I was looking for sticking out among the reeds. I would just need to find some that were broken off. After picking my way across the driest parts of the marsh, it was an easy task to pick up the stones, and I soon had enough harvested to keep Mother in dark shadows for months.

I left the stones underneath Asher's cart. No point in carrying them down to the caves to retrieve the blue ochre. Finally, noting Asher's boat bobbing way out on the horizon, I started south along the shore.

The sun was still low on the horizon and the light lay across the water, undulating with the waves. I stayed near the shore. The water that stretched as far as I could see was a color of blue I couldn't make with pigment.

Jagged rocks made the going tough until I passed the large craggy stone at the edge of the cove. Once I was around it, the shore fell away to the south in a long curving beach of coarse sand. I would know I was in the right place when the sand became as soft as the silk I had worn last night.

Gulls called from the air, but as picturesque as they could sometimes be against the sky and the sea, I was always wary of their droppings when they glided above my head.

After a time, I saw the stone tower. Abandoned now and nearly in ruin, it was rumored to have once guarded the city from invaders by sea. But Father said our government had treaties with every nation and people, so invasion was no longer a concern.

I studied the old building as I walked past, high up on the bluff. Its corners cut angles against vegetation that threatened to hide it. It was dark and seemed shadowed, even in the golden light of morning. It was the kind of thing that would be at home in one of Mother's paintings.

I left it behind and soon came upon the large stone tree that lay across my path and marked the beginning of a field of fallen trees that arced inland. Texture marked the stone, carved by some ancient people, but for what purpose, I knew not. Something spiritual perhaps, or something decorative. Or perhaps it had been someone like me, practicing technique way out here where no one would see.

Eventually, the sand did become soft, and I knew the caves were not much farther, just up ahead, as the beach began to rise into another bluff.

But the sun was higher now and the air was beginning to warm considerably, so I decided a short rest would be just the thing. I located a place up the beach with shade and some beach grass to sit on, and I stopped for a rest and a drink of water.

After I had propped my foot up on a little pile of sand I built, I noticed a small crew of fisherman near the bluff. It wasn't uncommon to see fisherman anywhere along these beaches, but I hadn't seen any others today. Four men were putting their boat in, preparing to go out for the day.

I didn't have to glance at the sun to know it was a little late in the day to barely be getting started. But if they wanted to miss the good fishing, that was their business.

I wondered if there was a village close by that they might live in, but then I noticed their tents tucked into the bluff just above the high tide line.

After sealing my canteen with the little stopper, I got to my feet. My ankle was throbbing, but I determined to make it to the caves for the ochre stones. I had already come this far, and I could rest in the cool, dark cave when I got there and let my ankle soak in the water again.

I started by hiking up the bluff. There was a stone there that made a lovely cerulean blue. Mother didn't use it a lot, just for highlighting, but I liked it and used it on my little clay statues and my pots and vessels. I found some of the stones and placed them into my bag.

I stood and stretched my back, looking out over the sea. From this height, I could see the ruins of the guard tower far to the north and the bright white of the silken sand on the beach below me. The fishermen still had not left the shore, but I couldn't tell exactly why. One stood on the beach with his arms folded. He was shaking his head. Two more stood inside the boat. The fourth was in the water working with the ropes.

It was this one who looked up at the bluff after he tossed the ropes into the boat.

We were too far away for our eyes to have met, but I knew he saw me standing there with the wind in my hair. I felt it. And suddenly, though I never worried about being out in the wilderness alone, being out in the wilderness alone with four strange men didn't seem so safe.

I grabbed my bag and hurried down the bluff as best I could. I would get into one of the caves and be virtually hidden away from the world.

The caves were not deep and were the height a man could reach to just by stretching up. The light penetrated nearly to the back wall, especially this time of day as the openings faced

the sea. At high tide, the caves filled with water, and the openings became very small, some of them completely covered.

The cave I picked had a low opening. I could have touched the top if I could have jumped, and I knew it was one of the ones that became completely flooded when the tide came in. I would get what I needed and soak my ankle, but I would be long gone before the tide came in.

Oomph!

I stilled, not daring to move a muscle, trying to assess the damage. Had I really just twisted my ankle *again*? I glared at the offending hole in the earth, caused by the rise and recession of the sea waters. Finally, I tried to put some weight on my foot.

I sucked in a breath.

The ankle was not having it. It wanted to be home in bed and elevated and pampered, not hiking over miles of uneven terrain to get blue ochre.

I glanced around. There was the stone I needed. I hopped over to it and lowered myself to the ground.

Unbelievable!

Why had I been in such haste? That fisherman wasn't going to chase me in here. He had work to do, and he was hours behind. While I thought about the fisherman, I broke off some of the deep blue ochre with my chisel. No need to waste time.

When I had the ochre in my bag, I scooted along the damp floor of the cave until I was in better light, nearly to the opening, so I could inspect the ankle.

I had done so well with father's cabbage leaves, keeping the swelling down, but it was swelling fast now. I moved quickly and removed the wrap, then I scooted far enough back inside the cave to lower my foot over the side of the small pool that never receded, even when the tide went out.

I couldn't feel the bottom of it, and I suspected that was because this cave was connected to the others by underground

tunnels. Father said clusters of caves like this were often connected.

I was feeling sufficiently sorry for myself when I heard a scuff at the cave's opening behind me. Startled, I turned and saw the fisherman standing there blocking a good portion of the light.

It was the man who had thrown the ropes into the boat, the one who had seen me up on the bluff. But he wasn't a man. Or he was, but a young one. My age.

"I didn't mean to scare you," he said.

I wanted to say something clever, but I said, "I hurt my ankle," and I was afraid I sounded slightly pathetic.

His posture completely changed, and he stepped inside.

"Let me see."

It was the strangest thing, withdrawing my foot from the water so some stranger could look at it, but I winced when he knelt and gently pressed it on the sides and the front with long fingers, calloused from handling those ropes. He may have been young like me, but he wasn't new to fishing.

"Hurt?"

We were definitely close enough for our eyes to meet now. I nodded.

His gaze caught on the line of my fathers, and he searched my face for so long, with curiosity growing by the moment, I became uncomfortable.

"My brother," I said. "He's up the beach to the north. If I can get there, he'll take me home so I can get this tended to."

I gestured to my ankle so he would look there instead.

The young man fingered the indentations where I had had it wrapped. "This was hurt before you came in here," he said.

I shrugged. "I fell out a window yesterday. It was weak. I was favoring it."

“Do you still have a wrap?” He leaned back on his heels.
“A window, you say?”

I grinned, shrugged again, and held up the wrap that was in my hand.

“I know something that could help, but I don’t know if it grows here.”

“Grows?”

“It’s a special kind of algae. I’m not sure if it grows in salt water.”

“There’s algae in this pool,” I said. “I could feel it with my toes.”

“This pool goes out to the ocean. These caves will fill with water. They can be really dangerous.”

“I planned to be gone by high tide,” I said

He nodded. “I didn’t want you to get stuck in here.”

He had left his friends on the beach to come up here and warn me of the tide?

He peered into the dark pool. Then he leaned over and plunged his arm in all the way up to his elbow. After a moment, he dipped deeper, up to his shoulder. When he sat up, he had dripping algae in his hand.

He gestured to my foot. “Should we give it a try?” he asked with a small grin.

I leaned back on my hands and watched him pat it over my foot and around my ankle and lower leg. It was cool and slimy.

He held out a hand for the wrap, which I passed to him. Then he proceeded to wrap my ankle, foot, and leg in a pattern I had never seen.

“How do you know this pool goes out to the ocean?” I asked while he worked.

He grinned. “I’ve swam it. I’ve explored all these caves.”

I had never heard of anyone doing that. “You’re not lying? Is it difficult?”

He shrugged, which I interpreted to mean yes, it was difficult and someone like me who hadn't grown up in a fishing boat wouldn't be able to do it.

"You can also get to that cave." He pointed to the south wall. "It's higher up and doesn't flood, but you have to know where the turn is or you'll swim around forever in the dark."

"Why doesn't it flood?"

"The entrance is on the other side of the bluff."

When he was done wrapping my ankle, he looked back up at me.

"My cousins and I can take you up to your brother in our boat. How far away would you say he is?"

I bit my lip. Get into a boat with four strangers?

He sat back on his heels. "It's a really tight boat."

I couldn't help a smile. He thought I was worried about whether the boat would sink.

"I tried to put weight on this earlier." I shook my head. "I think your boat might be my only option."

He got to his feet and glanced out the cave's opening. "I could go for him instead. Or one of my cousins could."

"I'd appreciate any help," I said sincerely. "My brother is just a morning's walk up the beach. I mean, it took me the morning to get here. You could cover it quickly."

He held out a hand to help me. I took it, and in an instant, I was standing next to him. His hands were strong, and he smelled like the sea.

"Let's go down to the boat and we'll decide what's the best course," he said.

"The boat's still here?" I asked as I took a ginger step. "You haven't started fishing yet?"

He grimaced. "Our friend is visiting for a while. He just arrived, and he says he doesn't think we should fish today."

I looked at the blue sky as we emerged from the cave. It was the perfect day for fishing.

“Your friend seems a little a lazy,” I said.

He laughed as if that were not possible. “Not in the slightest. He says...”

He paused, but when he didn’t continue, I looked over at him.

“He says he just has a feeling we shouldn’t. Can’t explain it.”

“A gut feeling,” I said.

“Something like that.”

“I respect gut feelings.”

He gave me his hand to help me down to the sand.

“I do, too,” he said. “That’s why I’m not out on the boat fishing.”

“And your cousins?”

He chuckled. “They’re still arguing about it.”

Halfway down the beach, my ankle gave out, and I nearly crumpled into the sand. The young man caught me by the elbow.

“I should have just done this to begin with,” he said, mostly to himself, as he swept me up into his arms.

I let out a little yelp, and he grinned.

“I feel like I should know your name,” I said, “since we seem to have gotten very close.”

“I’m Corban,” he said.

“I’m Noel. My brother,” I added, nodding to the north, “is Asher.”

Did I imagine a hitch in his step?

“A fisherman?” he asked. When I nodded, he added, “He won’t relish the idea of going home early on a day as fine as this.”

“But he will,” I assured him.

After a short walk down the beach, he set me on my feet near a large fishing boat that still had not sailed.

The three men who were there turned toward us.

“Uh...this is Noel,” Corban told them. Then he turned to me and introduced Cyrus, Mathoni, and Seth.

Chapter 4

The introductions to Cyrus and Mathoni were appreciated. The introduction to Seth was not necessary.

My eyes met Seth's for a long moment before I dragged my gaze to Cyrus and Mathoni. "Good day," I said to them.

Each bowed slightly in turn, as polite as their cousin. But though their greeting was familiar, I very much doubted either of them was from Antionum or the land around it. They both had light skin and fair hair. Mother would paint it with brown ochre. They both had the same wide, round eyes that were filled with curiosity.

My eyes turned to Seth, though, and I knew he was not related to the others. His hair was dark, his eyes were dark, and his smile grew slowly as he recognized me.

Would he tell the others we had met? Should I?

Seth's arms were folded, but he stepped forward and placed a hand on my shoulder, a greeting I sometimes received at Father's parties. A nod or bow like the others had done would have sufficed. The touch was not too unusual, nor unwelcomed, but it was unexpected. Why did he not greet me in the way of our people?

Corban dumped some ropes from a crate into the sand. "Here. Sit down," he said as he turned the crate over to create a seat for me.

When I was sitting, he turned to the others. "Noel broke her ankle. Her brother is fishing up the coast." He nodded over his shoulder toward the north.

"It's not broken," I broke in, but he finished explaining my circumstances to his friends without seeming to notice the interruption.

“I could run for her brother,” Corban offered. “Or,” he turned to Seth, “if it’s all right with you, we could sail up and find him on the sea.”

“I think that would be best,” Seth said. “Even if he came immediately on foot, she still wouldn’t be able to walk back with him. It won’t take long to reach him on the sea.”

The others seemed to agree, and I did as well. I thought of Asher’s boat, small in comparison to Corban and his cousins’, and I knew I had a ride amidst the crab traps in my future. I looked toward their boat, bobbing as the small waves rolled in to shore. My eye caught on the rope ladder hanging from the side. “I’m sorry, but I don’t think I can climb into your boat,” I said.

Cyrus followed my gaze to the ladder. “We have a plank we use for loading things,” he said. Then he turned abruptly and waded into the water. When he reached the boat, he swung up into it, pulling himself easily over the side, hardly using the ladder at all.

The idea of a plank was a relief until I realized I wouldn’t be able to climb the plank, either.

Corban followed Cyrus out to help him set the plank in place, and Mathoni turned to me.

“Can I take your satchel?”

I looked down and grasped the strap. “My bag?”

He just nodded and held out his hand.

I hesitated but lifted it off my shoulder and passed it to him.

He hefted it a little, and I could tell he was feeling the weight of the stones, perhaps wondering what was inside. But he turned and waded into the water, too, and only Seth and I remained on the shore.

Seth rubbed the side of his nose with his thumb and glanced back at the boat. “Are you ready?” he asked. “You’ll have to get a little wet.”

I glanced at Corban and Cyrus. They had both climbed up into the boat. Neither of them was wading back through the water to get me.

“They assure me the boat is tight.”

I looked back to Seth and burst into laughter. “I’m not worried about the boat being tight.”

He held out his hand. “You don’t need to worry at all.”

I raised my chin a little.

“I won’t drop you.”

“I know,” I said, remembering his strong arms from the previous morning very vividly. And recalling how I had dropped him to the dirt, I added with a sweet little smile, “It’s more likely that I would drop you.”

Seth rubbed the side of his nose again, then bent, swept behind my knees, and gathered me up into his arms. As he straightened, I slipped my arms around his neck. Might as well take advantage of the situation. My ankle was throbbing. I deserved a strong, handsome man to carry me around.

He splashed into the water.

I tried to concentrate on the sound of the waves as they rolled into shore. I tried to keep my eyes on the gulls over head or the fishing boat he was carrying me toward or the young men who were moving things about on board—were they cleaning up?—but my eyes were drawn to Seth’s face, to the inky tattoo that lined his eyes.

“I know who you are,” I said without thinking.

He hesitated a moment before glancing at me and saying, “We met yesterday.”

I scoffed. “You can’t call that a proper meeting.”

The side of his mouth tipped up.

“And anyway, I didn’t mean yesterday.”

“Then you couldn’t know anything about me.”

I wanted to say *Elijah is my brother*. I wanted to say *You are of the House of the Snake Kings*. I wanted to say so much

more, but we were approaching the plank, and instead of any of those things, I said, “That plank is too narrow.”

“Close your eyes if you’re afraid.” He splashed up out of the water.

I wanted to say *I’m not afraid*, but I no longer trusted my tongue, so I bit it and squeezed my eyes shut as I felt the plank bounce with each of Seth’s steps upward. In a moment, I felt Seth descending into the boat and opened my eyes to see a stack of crates that resembled stairs. He alighted and set me on the bottom crate—gently, but also a little like cargo.

Cyrus and Mathoni hoisted the sails while Corban pulled up the ladder and secured it. Seth pulled in the long plank and balanced it on his shoulder until Corban could help him latch it to the side of the boat, and soon we were sailing north.

The waves on the blue sea rolled gently beneath us and the sun was high and yellow.

“Your brother,” Corban said.

“Asher,” I reminded him.

“Would that be Asher of the House of Mohu?”

“That’s him! Do you know my brother?”

Corban leaned against the side rail of the boat. Mathoni went to his heels near me. Cyrus stayed at the far end of the boat with his hand on the rudder, but he was interested in my answers.

It didn’t matter where Seth was. I would always feel him right behind me like I had in the city yesterday.

“We see Asher sometimes,” Mathoni said. “We fish the same waters.”

Of course!

“So you do,” I said, smiling over at him. Of the four, he looked the closest to Asher’s age, though he was older than Asher to be sure, and probably older than me.

“A man of the House of Mohu can hardly go unnoticed in our circles,” Corban added.

“He’s just a boy,” I said, glancing around when their expressions turned skeptical. “Our parents encourage his interests. Well, our mother encourages his interests. Our father indulges his whims.”

Cyrus chuckled, and his eyes turned back to the sea.

“Asher? He’s got to be nigh on eighteen. Fishing is hardly a whim at his age. It’s a vocation,” Corban said.

I glanced between them all again. They were all fishermen. This was *their* vocation. Though it wasn’t exactly an appropriate trade for Asher, it was an honorable man’s work. I wouldn’t insult it.

“Asher is a skilled fisherman,” I said. “If he has chosen it as his trade, he will live well.”

“Does he need a trade?” Corban asked bluntly.

I wasn’t sure what Father’s opinion was, but I said, “My father is reasonable. He will guide Asher onto the right course, whatever it may be.”

Corban nodded, as if the matter was closed. Then he turned to Seth. “You will recognize Asher.”

One of Seth’s brows rose, and I was sure mine did, too. He shifted his weight and glanced at the boat that had come into view.

“It’s true this is the land of my birth,” he said. “But I no longer know anyone here. I was...I have no family here. No connections.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” I heard Mathoni say under his breath.

This was all very strange, but we would see it through soon enough because we came upon Asher’s boat very quickly. It couldn’t have been a quarter of an hour since we had begun to sail. I stood as best I could and waved when we were close enough for him to see me. His eyes widened when he recognized me and darkened in confusion when Corban caught me by the waist and helped me back onto the crate.

Cyrus skillfully pulled beside Asher's boat. "We've got your sister here," he called. "She's broken her ankle."

Well, it was hardly broken, just a little twisted. Maybe a small sprain.

Asher folded his arms, and somehow, out here, alone on his own boat, his stance braced against the waves, he did seem like a man. "I'm not surprised," he called back.

Corban moved to the stern to converse with Asher and Cyrus. Seth stood stock still, staring at Asher. And Mathoni, still at his heels near me, looked up at Seth with an unreadable expression. When he noticed me staring at him, Mathoni cleared his throat as if he might say something, but he didn't.

"Help me up," I said to him.

He stood, but Asher called, "Don't move her. We're going to meet on shore."

"Move me? I'm not a sack of cargo."

Asher laughed as Corban jumped down onto his boat.

In a moment, we were pulling away. I turned to watch as the boat got farther and farther away from us.

"Corban will help him pull up his nets so he can come in sooner," Mathoni said. "It won't be long, though."

I nodded so he'd know I heard him, but I just leaned back on my hands and enjoyed the sea breeze in my hair and the sunshine on my face.

The others were quiet, and we were soon approaching the shore.

"It's not as deep here as the other beach. We'll have to wade in for a bit," Cyrus said. He dropped an anchor while Mathoni and Seth tied up the sails and I wondered how I was going to wade in to shore.

It didn't need to be very deep for either boat, but I knew what the problem was. Bengal Cove was shallow for quite a way out before the bottom dropped off in the open water. The bottom of Asher's boat was flat, but the bottom of this one

wasn't. Asher's boat was smaller, built for just one or two people at most.

"Can you get down the ladder?" Mathoni asked.

"I'll die trying," I said, but when I was perched on the side of the boat with both feet dangling over the edge, I really wasn't sure. Cyrus and Mathoni were already standing waist deep in the water, each holding the rope ladder taut, steadying it for me.

Seth stood behind me. "It might be easier to—"

"Go down backside first," I mumbled.

He chuckled. "Wouldn't be the first time, I reckon."

Heat rose on my cheeks as I wondered if he had seen me exit the window at the synagogue, but I slowly turned to face Seth and readjust the way I was sitting.

"As I recall, you were reckless as a child, too."

My eyes shot to his.

He hesitated a moment, and his voice gentled when he said, "Come on now, Noel. Put your arms around my neck and swing your legs over the side. I won't let you fall."

I took a silent breath and began the ordeal of getting off the boat.

"They won't look," Seth said. "Don't worry."

"I'm not worried about that."

At least, I hadn't been.

"I definitely have better places to look than up your skirt," Cyrus called dryly.

"I feel strangely insulted," I called down.

All three of them laughed.

"Hold on tight," Seth said. I'll lower you down to the next rung.

I did, and it went smoothly, like he lifted girls down ladders all the time.

But then he said, "Hold tight to the rope," and he swung down behind me.

“This is getting to be familiar,” I murmured low so the others wouldn’t hear.

“Almost there,” he said as he held to the ladder with one hand and lifted me down the rungs one by one with a strong arm wrapped around my waist.

“I’m glad my brother is not here to see this,” I said.

Seth went still.

My good foot was dangling just above the water.

“Seth? I only meant, didn’t you see the way he glowered at Corban when he helped me sit down?” He must have. He’d been staring at him. “I didn’t know Asher had any protective feelings toward me.”

Seth let out a breath. “Asher.”

I gasped when the cold water washed over my legs, but Seth pulled me from the ladder and held me high on his chest above the water. And that was all there was to it. Before I knew it, I was sitting in the shade of Asher’s cart, listening to Seth talk to his friends, and watching Asher’s boat float nearly to the shoreline.

I stood and gathered Mother’s pigments from under the cart. As I dropped them inside it, I turned to Mathoni. “Do you have my satchel?”

His eyes shot to the boat halfway out in the bay, and he shook his head. “I’ll go for it.”

“Don’t,” Asher said as he waded into shore hauling the tow line over his shoulder. “Bring it when you come for a meal. My parents will want to thank you for hauling Noel around.”

Mathoni glanced at me.

“I can do without it for a time. Please do come for a meal, all of you.”

“We will of course return your satchel when next we come to town, but you needn’t provide a meal,” Corban said. “No grand accolade is necessary.”

I shared a look with Asher. “We won’t plan anything grand then,” I said. But Mother would.

Corban waited until Asher had tied off the boat. Then he introduced him to Seth.

Asher would have made both Mother and Father proud. He might have been a dignitary at one of Father’s parties. He greeted Seth with a quick, appropriate bow but was ready to accept the arm clasp Seth offered him in return.

“Corban tells me you are visiting from the Land of Melek.”

“I consider it home,” Seth said, “but I’ve traveled a lot over the years. I come recently from Ammonihah.”

“Well, thank you for your help today.” Asher looked around to include them all.

Then he looked at me. “Come on, Troublemaker, let’s get your ankle home. Does it hurt?”

I bit my lip and nodded. “Mostly when I put pressure on it. It’s sharp.”

“The ride home might bite then.”

I sighed. “I know.”

Asher surprised me when he bent at the waist and made short work of sweeping me up, lifting me over the side of the cart, and setting me inside it. He was every bit as strong as Seth. We had an amicable relationship as siblings, but he had certainly never held me in his arms before, for any amount of time or for any purpose.

“Are you going to pile the fish on top of me?”

He laughed. “I thought about it.”

Turning, he gave a crisp bow to the four young men. “We will see you tomorrow,” he said to them. “For the evening meal.”

I thanked them all and then turned to wave a goodbye as Asher began to pull me toward home in his cart. We bumped up the craggy rocks until we were high above the beach and I

could see the four men below hauling the nets from Asher's boat.

"They're taking your fish!"

"I offered them to Corban as payment for their trouble."

"Payment!"

"Well, not payment." He shrugged. "Gratitude."

"Gratitude?"

He wiped his brow with the back of his forearm. "Politeness. They lost a day of fishing because of you."

"They hadn't even started fishing for the day! They wasted their own day!"

"I know them to be successful fishermen. They don't waste good days on the sea. And anyway, I wasn't going to let you sit on my fish. It would ruin their flavor."

I burst into a laugh. "Alright. Do they know how to get to our house?"

"I'd be surprised if they didn't, but I told Corban." He paused a moment. "What did you think of the dark one? Their friend."

"I liked him."

No reason to lie about it.

"You didn't feel like he was, I don't know, staring at you?"

I frowned. I did, but not because he actually was. "No."

"Maybe I imagined it, but I swear he was staring at me the whole time on the beach."

I thought of the way Seth had gone still on the ladder when I mentioned my brother.

"Maybe you remind him of someone he knows."

Chapter 5

Father frowned down at my ankle as he scraped the dried algae off. “I’ll send Asher for the healer.”

“Don’t,” I said. “He had a long day.”

Asher was leaning against the wall near the door watching us.

“I’ll just put more cabbage on it.”

Father sighed. “It could be broken.”

I looked down at the swollen, bruised ankle, but before I could say again that it wasn’t as bad as it could be thanks to Corban’s algae, Father turned to Asher.

“Fetch Noam here.”

Asher glanced from Father to me and then left the room.

Father helped me down from the table. Bundles of dried plants hung from the ceiling. The room smelled of herbs and spices, aromatic in the afternoon heat.

“Go put your foot up,” he said. “I’ll bring you something for the pain.” He turned back to the table and began gathering ingredients for a medicinal tea.

I sighed and hobbled from the room. I did want some of Father’s good tea, but it was Mother who brought it to me.

“Your father said to drink it all to the last drop.”

“But that’s the bitter part.”

Mother lowered herself to sit beside me on the bed and raised a brow. “If you’re going to jump from windows, you must drink from the bitter cup.”

I squeezed her paint-stained hand and sipped at the hot brew. “I brought home the umber, but the lovely blue ochre is still in my satchel. I accidentally left it on the fishing boat.”

“Thank you for the pigments. I suppose Asher will bring your satchel home when he next goes to the sea.”

I shook my head. “I twisted my ankle on the beach. Some fishermen rescued me. They are acquaintances of Asher’s, and they took me to him in their fishing boat.”

“Oh?”

“It’s a wonderful, big boat, Mother, and they were so kind. There were three fishermen, and a friend was visiting them.”

“Rescued by fishermen?” Mother looked unconvinced.

I grimaced down into my cup. “Yes, we both liked them very much, and Asher invited them to the evening meal tomorrow. I hope that’s okay.”

“Asher did?”

I nodded.

“Of course! That was the appropriate thing for him to do. We owe them all a debt of gratitude!”

I could see she was getting excited.

“They didn’t seem to want a grand...” What had Corban called it? “Accolade.”

“But of course they should be thanked properly!”

“I agree, but I fear they would be made uncomfortable with a large fuss.”

I could see Mother was already making plans.

“Should we invite Jamin?”

No!

“I really think just the family would suit them better,” I said quickly. “And anyway, he’s leaving for his journey to Zarahemla.”

Mother pretended to pout, but when I laughed, she burst into a wide smile, too.

I sniffed at the last of the tea in my cup. “Mother?”

I took a breath, and she squeezed my hand.

“I don’t have any feeling for Jamin beyond friendship.”

She sat up a little straighter.

“And he never shows me any affection, either.”

“Oh, dear, he’s just being proper. You didn’t see the way his eyes lit when he saw you in your dress last night.”

“I did see his eyes, and that wasn’t affection. We are both old enough to go a little beyond proper.”

Mother laughed.

“But he never does,” I continued. “Instead, I feel like he looks right through me. He only talks of his own interests. He is never serious. He has no real goals, only frivolous escapades.”

Mother’s laugh subsided. “I do see that side of him. I suppose I thought he had a romantic side he hid from your father and me.”

Romantic? Jamin?

“Has he never kissed you?”

I shook my head slowly.

Her brow quirked again, and she leaned back, letting go of my hand.

“Don’t let Father marry me to Jamin. I know he’s thought of it.”

“But it would be such a good match.”

“How? Politically?”

“Yes. On both sides.”

I twisted the cup in my hands.

Mother stood and kissed me on the forehead. “It will all work out. You’ll see.” She moved toward the door. “Now, finish up that medicine. The healer will be here soon.”

After she left, I looked down again at what was left in my cup, the bitterest part of the brew. I set the cup on the table near my bed.

“No, I don’t think I will,” I said softly.

The healer was an old friend of my father’s. They had grown up together but had gone their own ways as adults and taken their proper places in their classes—Father in the government, and Noam as a prominent healer.

Father trusted Noam so implicitly that he didn't even hover when Noam tended to my wound. I knew Noam would see Father on his way out and give him an update and probably drink some of Father's wine with him.

"It's not broken," he said. "But you'll have to stay off it for a few days."

"How will I get into mischief if I have to stay off my foot?"

Noam's eyes twinkled as he packed all his things away, all but a large jar, which he handed to me. "Put this on three times a day, just as you saw me do," he said. "You'll be back to mischief in one week."

"Is that a promise?"

He winked before he left through the door.

I sighed, leaned back into my pillows, and grabbed fistfuls of blankets.

A week!

"What did he say?"

I looked over at Asher as he came through the door.

"It's not broken, just like I've been saying."

Asher flicked my foot, sending prickles of pain up my leg. "Yeah, you're pretty smart."

"I have to stay off it for a few days and use Noam's paste for a week."

"Ouch. What are you going to do?"

I shrugged. "I suppose I'll think of something." I was already thinking of the small figure in my satchel, the one with the dark lines around his eyes. "I'll do some painting."

Asher sat down, folded his hands, and stared down at my floor.

"I'm sorry I won't be able to help with your nets," I said.

He scoffed.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

He let out a deep breath. "That guy. Seth."

“Ash, I really don’t think he was staring at you.”

He shook his head. “It’s not that, really. I just, well, I feel like I should know him.”

I watched his face, the pure confusion written across it. It wasn’t possible for Asher to remember Seth. He and Eli had left when Asher was but a toddler. Asher barely knew of Eli’s existence, let alone Seth’s.

“I felt something, too,” I offered, and he looked up at me. “All four of them seemed different somehow.”

He chewed on his lip. “Different,” he said after a moment as if he were mulling the word over.

“Mother is planning an event, I fear,” I said.

“There wasn’t really a hope otherwise.”

“They don’t seem like they’ve been to many noble events,” I said, understating severely.

Asher folded his arms. “I’ve met them a few times, Corban and his cousins. I bet they surprise you.”

“Well, I didn’t think they would embarrass themselves. I just meant—”

“I know what you meant. It will be fine.” He was quiet a moment, and I stared at my ceiling. “Seth will be right at home, though,” he said. “I wonder how they became friends.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“He’s of the noble class.”

“How can you know that?”

“How can you not know it? His nose. His hair. The ink around his eyes. He looks so much like Jamin. He clearly comes through the line of Zoram.”

“He’s way better looking than Jamin.”

Asher snorted. “I’m going to note that for some later time when you owe me.”

He pretended to write on his hand, and I laughed.

The next day, I sat in the dining room while Mother decorated it. She had hired some help, and I watched them work

together to make the room beautiful. That's what Mother did—made things beautiful. She and her helpers had draped a swath of fabric across the far wall and now they were accenting it with a fabric that had the look of a fishing net. Next, she would place out the fancy lamps and the jeweled goblets. Then the green fronds across the doorways and banisters, the flowers on the tables after the fine linen tablecloths, and the bowls full of fruit—the ones that were for decoration, not eating. Later she would light the incense to create just the right atmosphere. I had seen the process many times. I had helped with the process many times, but not today. Today my help was not required.

But Asher's was. Mother had him running around everywhere, fetching water vessels, lifting sconces, delivering messages, placing pots just so. He was really good about it. I knew he would rather be on the sea.

At last, Mother pulled his face down to her and kissed him on his cheek. "It's time to get ready."

Asher made a show of looking around the spacious room, and Mother laughed.

"It is time to get yourself ready." She turned to me and called, "You too, young miss."

She made sure I got to my feet before she hurried away to get herself ready.

Asher watched me for a moment, awkwardly moving toward the west door with my crutch. "Do you need help?"

"No. I think you've helped enough."

He rubbed the back of his neck. "Alright. See you in an hour."

As he left, I wondered if an hour was going to be enough time to get ready. I had decided on a dress almost as soon as Asher had invited Seth and the others to our home, but my hair might take a while, as well as applying my makeup. Perhaps I would leave my hair down. No. That was childish. I would have to find the time to pull it up.

Once in my room, I applied the colors to my cheeks and eyes and lips. Then I brushed my hair and began the braids and twists that would make my simple style look elaborate. I tugged and smoothed and pulled on my hair until it was just right. Then I donned the dress that was laying across my bed.

It was silk like the one I had worn to Jane's with Jamin, but where the seafoam dress had billowed about my body, this one draped to my waist in the back, much like the draping fabric in Mother's decorated hall. It was the color of a twilight sky, and I loved it. Perhaps a bit too formal for dinner with some fishermen, but wearing it would do no harm.

And Asher was right. It was not too formal for dinner with a member of the House of the Snake Kings, whether Seth would admit to being a member of it or not. But why wouldn't he? Surely his family would accept him home. I knew my family would accept Eli home without question.

Father's eyes flicked to me when I came into the dining room. He had pushed back the dishes at the head of the long table and was perusing a scroll. His head stayed down but his eyes followed me.

"How is your ankle?" he asked. But his expression said, "Go put on more clothes."

I looked down at the bulky bandage, discolored with Noam's black, pungent medicine seeping through. "It doesn't feel much different, to be honest," I said.

He straightened. "Noam said you wouldn't notice a change for three days, and on the fourth it would feel good as new. But you must keep wearing the medicine until the seventh day."

Noam had explained the instructions to me. "I'm doing what Noam said, and I trust him. I am not worried about the ankle."

Father nodded.

Asher came in and then Mother. Asher was clean and presentable, but Mother looked exquisite.

Her dress was similar to mine, but it draped in the front to show her long, pretty neck. The hem fell just above her ankles, which were adorned with silver bangles. She wore a flowing robe, too, in brilliant colors and a red silk scarf tied in her hair.

She came across the room to me and adjusted a few pieces of my hair. "Very pretty," she said. She tilted her head for a final inspection. "That dress would be set to much better advantage if you were standing," she said, fingering the drape in the back to make it fall just so. "But I think I might have missed the part when you told me these fishermen were handsome."

"I didn't tell you they were handsome!"

She leaned down to say softly, "This dress says it for you."

Her eyes were sparkling, and she straightened. "Asher, go with your father to greet our guests."

Father looked up from his scroll, and realizing what his wife had decreed, he pushed his chair back and rose. He gathered Asher with the flick of his fingers, and they disappeared through the west door.

"Now," Mother said as she sat near me. "Tell me which one you are wearing this dress for."

I couldn't help a smile. "I don't know what you mean, Mother," I lied.

"Would this stranger have something to do with what you told me about Jamin yesterday?"

"I can see how you'd think that, but no. My opinion of Jamin is independent of the handsome fisherman."

Mother adjusted some of the greenery. "I suppose if you had eyes for only Jamin, you would not have noticed any of the fishermen."

“Oh, Mother. Jamin is fine. I just don’t want to marry him. You have been lucky to spend your life with your love. Can you not want this for me, too?”

“Of course. But our hearts do not always tell us the truth when we are young.”

Her eyes looked sad for a moment, and I wondered what past experience she was thinking of. I did not want to think of Mother experiencing sadness.

“Have you finished the portrait of Father?” I asked her.

Her eyes lit, but she shook her head. “It’s not right yet.”

“You should paint in here.” I gestured to the wall. “One of your paintings, a mural, would make this room truly unique. Everyone would want to dine here.”

Her brow rose, and she turned to look at the wall. “I wonder if your father would let me...”

I laughed. Father would let her do anything she wished.

Father’s voice came from the front of the house, and we both turned toward the door. I couldn’t make out his words, but they were coming closer. Mother and I glanced at each other. I sat up straighter, and she rose and smoothed her dress.

Father entered through the door first. Cyrus came next, then Mathoni, Corban, Seth, and Asher last. Mother moved toward them. I stayed seated and watched.

“My wife, Eliana,” Father said as Mother came to his side.

Each of the young men gave her a small, proper bow.

“And my daughter, Noel, for whom we owe you all a debt of gratitude.” Father gestured to me, and the men each bowed again. I gave them a little wave.

My parents bid them all to sit at the long table, and as they found their places, I noted that they hardly looked like the humble fishermen I had seen on the coast. They were clean and their clothing, while not top tier, was of very fine quality. They didn’t keep these clothes in those tents on the beach, did they?

“Noel?”

“Oh! Yes?”

Corban stood next to me, and he was clutching my satchel in one large hand. He held it out to me.

I took it and hugged it to myself. “Thank you for bringing it back!”

He grinned as he sat next to me. “It is our pleasure. Have you missed it very much, then?”

I laughed as I realized I must look very silly hugging the thing to my bosom. I shook my head. “It contains the blue ochre I walked all that way for, that’s all.”

“Ah. Pigments?”

I nodded. “For my mother. She’s a wonderful painter.”

“You needn’t have gone for it if your ankle was hurting,” she said.

I waved her comment off. “Twisting it was my fault entirely,” I assured her. “It was weak from the previous day. I should have been more careful on the rocky ground.”

I looked around the table. Corban sat on one side of me and Mathoni on the other. Cyrus, Seth, and Asher sat opposite, and Mother and Father both sat at either end. I tried to catch Seth’s eye, but he seemed preoccupied fidgeting with his water vessel, and he kept glancing between Mother and Father.

Father’s brows were knit in a deep frown. “Tell me again,” he said. “What are your names, and where are you from?”

Asher cleared his throat. “Corban, Cyrus, and Mathoni are from a fishing village on the west coast,” he said, gesturing to each in turn. “Right?”

Cyrus nodded. “It’s called Rehoboam. We grew up on the sea together. Mathoni is my brother, and Corban is the second son of our father’s brother.”

Father nodded and looked to Seth, who was so clearly unrelated to the others.

Seth looked my father in the eye. “I am Seth. I have just arrived from Ammonihah, but I call Melek home.”

Father’s eyes shot to Mother’s.

He leaned forward in his seat. “Seth? Did you say?”

Seth shared a look with his friends, one I had no hope of interpreting, and then looked back to my father. “I am that Seth who once ran so freely through your home.” He finally caught my eye for the barest of moments. “I know I left in unfavorable circumstances, but I hope you will receive me here once again.”