

NINETEEN

The wood along the edge of the Skylt bench was worn and scratched, proof of countless landings and takeoffs. Alec hopped up and flung out his arms, allowing the wind to lift his shirttail and balloon out his sleeves. Not only did he feel like a Skylt, he felt like the most powerful one on the planet.

“I will carry Mordecai to Viper Mountain!” he shouted at the top of his lungs. “I will find the Question Mark Cave. I will! I will! I will!”

At his declaration, a star popped out, as if turned on by a switch. It hung brightly in the blue-black sky and looked close enough to touch.

A furious voice was even closer.

“Come back, you foolish boy!”

Alec turned quickly, nearly falling off the bench. Only a few feet away, a stern-looking Turin loomed through the trap door. He was holding a candle whose light exaggerated his frown and the prominence of his nose.

Turin’s candle chose that moment to go out. Alec heard the clatter of brass as Turin threw the holder down the stairs.

“Come back,” repeated Turin, a thread of anxiety rising above his anger. “The Skylt roof isn’t safe these nights, especially if you’re not a Skylt!”

A violent wind began to blow, causing shingles to fly and lifting Alec off the roof. He hung in the air as if fixed on a peg, flapping his arms and kicking his feet. He stopped when he saw what was in front of him.

A ghoulish figure pulsed in the sky, robed in a cloak so black that its color was at variance with the night. Slit eyes, devoid of pupils, bore into him. Two small appendages flapped wildly on either side of the ghoul, keeping it in the air. With a jolt of pure terror, Alec realized that they weren't wings but hands.

Child hands.

Alec screamed.

The specter drew closer and opened its mouth, revealing double rows of small, sharp teeth.

“Away, foul thing,” shouted Turin, flinging out his ring hand. “By all the doors, I command you to leave!”

The creature was flung back and forth, but when the agitation subsided, it reverted to its shape and smiled, inching closer to Alec.

“Out by the authority of the Ring!” Turin was standing on the roof now, legs apart for balance and spine straight despite the wind. The ring flashed back and forth in the dark, blindingly bright, and an arrow of blue light pierced the specter. The creature screamed, angered and anguished.

Alec fell on the center beam and rolled to the right, digging his hands into the spaces between the shingles and hanging on for his life. The impact knocked the wind out of him, and he wondered if he'd broken a rib. Each breath was accompanied by knife-sharp pain. Above him were the horrible sounds of rotten flesh tearing and bones snapping as the body of the ghoul broke apart.

Turin held his ground, the ring on his hand flashing as he dissected the creature and sent its parts through different doors. Alec squeezed his eyes and pressed his cheek flat against the sloping roof. The sounds of the banging doors seemed to go on forever.

Finally, it was over.

Turin walked about, searching the sky for lingering remnants. The creature was gone, but Alec couldn't move. He breathed as carefully as a beggar drinks gruel.

"Careful now," said Turin. "It's a long drop."

"I can't hold on much longer." Alec lifted his head, searching for the bright star. The sky was filled with lights now, his star lost among them. "Will you help me?"

A steely hand gripped his forearm and dragged him to his feet. In one fluid motion, Alec found himself hoisted over Turin's shoulder and carried to the Skylk hatch. Turin put him down, but waiting while Alec made a wobbly descent down the stairs. Turin came after muttering caution under his breath. The wind was a gale now; the hatch snapped shut on its own.

Alec stood in the hallway, facing the Water Skylk. Turin had somehow found the candleholder and tapped it as if it were an especially hard eggshell. The wick flared again. Rivulets of sweat ran down Turin's face, and he looked as though he'd aged twenty years. Alec gasped, causing the pain in his side to spike.

The cord hung between them, perfectly still.

"Explain yourself," said Turin. His ring finger was burned and swollen. The ring itself was misshapen; the edges looking as though they'd melded into his flesh.

"I couldn't resist the cord," he admitted. Taking his eyes from Turin's finger, Alec stared at the top of his sneakers. "It was swaying when I walked down the hall to the Princess's room,

so I grabbed the knot. After that, my palms kept burning and burning until I had to go back and pull it again. I tried not to, I really did, but it seemed like I had no choice. Pretty dumb, huh?”

“Yes,” said Turin, then he spoke in a language Alec didn’t understand and spat on his finger. His spittle must have offered some relief for his expression relaxed. Alec watched the ring return to its proper shape.

“What *is* that?” asked Alec, forgetting that he was supposed to be explaining himself.

“This is the Bidding Ring. I’m the Water Skyll, yes, but in some circles, I’m called the Bidder. When wearing it, I can bid any of the Calling Doors to open and close. I had to use it a moment ago, in case you didn’t notice,” replied Turin. “I don’t use it often because the consequences are complicated and I can’t imagine anything more complicated than what just occurred. I split the Shadow Wraith into seven parts and sent it through seven doors! I’ve never opened all the doors simultaneously. Besides, when the creature doesn’t return—bearing you in its cavernous mouth—the renegades will know that the Wraith, though dead, came close enough to cause alarm. Your impulsive action put us all in jeopardy.”

“I tried to resist, but the cord seemed to command me.” Alec moved his hand, mimicking the motion that had mesmerized him. “Once I touched it, all I could think about was touching it again. I tried to fight.” Alec knew he’d been a fool, but Turin’s anger was bringing out the anger in him. “Claudine’s room reeks of lavender. Did you know that? I might have held out if her room hadn’t stunk.”

“Don’t use that as an excuse,” replied Turin. “Alec, you’ll always have choices, and tonight you chose danger—quite unnecessary when danger is all around. Your foolishness caused me to use the Bidding Ring in a reckless manner. But what could I do? You were defenseless!”

“No, I wasn’t,” began Alec, but he didn’t get very far.

“What else would you call it? The enemy nearly killed you before the journey began.”

Turin took a deep breath. When he continued, it was as though a dam had burst. “The fate of Casoria lies in what you do or what you don’t do over the course of the journey. Do you intend to stop and loll about in a patch of red flowers all day? Will you leave Mordecai in the middle of nowhere when he gets to be too much—and believe me, he will. Will you put on the Staunch Traveling Shoes every morning or sleep in? Will you crush the hopes of the true remnant of Casoria or stay the course?”

“I’m sorry,” Alec finally managed, his voice thick. He lifted his head high enough to see Turin’s chin. “I’ll do better. I swear I will.”

“See that you do,” said Turin, sounding slightly mollified. He turned to go back to his room, and then abruptly turned back. “Mum’s the word, understand? I don’t want anyone to know to what extent I had to use the ring. The battle has begun, and the renegades have sent the most powerful part of their arsenal early on. Eugenia might well forbid the King to go when, in actuality, he needs to leave as soon as possible.” Turin added, more to himself, “Even some of the Skylls might object.”

“I promise,” said Alec, knowing he meant Finnegan. “But what happens if I meet another Shadow Wraith?”

“You won’t—at least not in the near future. Shadow Wraiths take time to create. The one I destroyed took years. That’s why it was so hard to kill and why I had to open all the doors. It takes time to seek fears, coax them from where they hide, mix them with just the right amount of violence, and put everything together in a viable and terrifying form. Fear comes more quickly than violence, but Sarris can draw out both. As for the unspeakable joinings, Gerlatch has

fashioned those. Creath? I'm not sure what he added, probably his own fear. And above them all is Garious, giving orders and stirring the pot. Shadow Wraiths don't work without reward. Guess what Garious promised this one?"

"Me," said Alec. "I was to be its reward."

Nodding, Turin lowered the light until it shone directly into Alec's face. "But the Shadow Wraith didn't get you, and now it's gone. Sleep. Morning will be here soon."

Turin vanished almost as soon as he'd finished speaking, and Alec was left staring down an empty hall. Back in Claudine's room, he blew out the candles and crawled between the lavender-scented sheets, still wearing his clothes. He slept soundly, despite the branch that tapped against his window like an animal trying to claw its way in.

Tap.

Tap.

Scratch.