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Finding Starlight

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in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Visitor

Riley sat on the roof of his house watching the village light up below, window by window. From this far away the candle flames didn't flicker, they cast an orange glow to replace the fading warm tones of the sunset. His house was on top of the tallest hill on the island. Behind it, out of Riley's sight, the shipyard where his father built the flying ships lay in darkness.

A new ship had moored down at the docks only an hour past, and Riley wanted to see who it was. The ship was large, more solar sails than he could count from this far away. The central mast must be as big around as the dining room table.

Visitors usually came to the house of the shipbuilder. Sometimes they came to pay compliments, to order repairs, to barter rare items that his father might use to adorn a fancy ship. Occasionally, though not so often now, they came with requests for grand ships like the one that had docked today. The owner of that ship must be very rich, and a rich customer sometimes wanted more than one ship to his name.

The candles hadn't been lit in the study yet, though Riley knew his father was in there. He had been gilding all day, an intricate design on an instrument panel meant for a wheelhouse. He must not have realized yet that the light was fading--he rarely looked up when he was doing such close work.

Riley was going to climb down to light the candles for his father when he saw something moving on the path from the village. There was a lantern, bobbing in midair--no, it was hanging from a dark carriage, bouncing its way up the rocky path. The village didn't have any carriages, and no velt to pull them. This must be the owner of the massive ship.

Riley crouched low so that he couldn't be picked out from the dark silhouette of the house's roof. The soft clanking of the harness reached him when the carriage was behind a dip in the road, followed by the clapping footfalls of the velt as they cleared the rise.

His mom had told him stories, of course. She had painted a few velt on his bedroom walls while she tried to describe the softness of their fur. But Riley had never seen one in person.

The carriage came to a gentle halt outside the front door. There was no driver. A strange shape climbed out and Riley leaned closer to try to make it out, but what emerged into the growing starlight was just an old man with a cane. Riley had never seen him before.

A soft glow descended from the study's windows onto the ground below. Riley's father must have realized it was dark and lit the candles himself. Then the front door was opening, so he must have heard the carriage arrive, too.

"Can I help you?" His father's shadow was thrown out in front of him when he opened the door so that he looked impossibly tall and skinny.

The old man stepped forward, leaning heavily on his cane. "You are Frederick the Shipbuilder, are you not?"

"I am."

The old man nodded. "Perhaps you can help me. Demetrius Feather. I daresay you've heard the name."

Feather. Mr. Feather. Of Featherweight Trading Company. The massive ship was beginning to make a lot of sense. There would be a market day tomorrow, so that everyone could barter for the cargo held on that ship. Trinkets and tools and food from all over. The island subsisted on trade, as the only thing it produced was wool

from the herds of sheep roaming the hills. And ships. The best flying ships of all the islands.

Riley saw his father's shadow move aside, gesturing Mr. Feather into the house. Darkness descended again once the front door was closed. If Mr. Feather requested a grand ship they would have money to spare. Maybe his father would finally build him his own ship, like he'd been asking for since the day his mother first took him flying in hers. He could probably hear them, if he crept under the study window. It was usually open an inch or two, though never wide enough for an earnest wind to pick up the delicate flakes of gold that his father worked with.

When he climbed down off the roof, though, there were the velt. They stood over a full head taller than him and seemed to soak up the starlight with their coats. The nearest one shook its head at Riley's approach, its stalked ears flopping with the motion. Its front feet pawed at the ground, and it bared three-inch long teeth.

Riley held out his hands to show he meant no harm.
"Whoa. Easy. It's okay."

At the sound of his voice the stalked ears on both velt swiveled to attention.

"That's right, I'm not going to hurt you." He stepped forward, one slow foot at a time. Who knew if these creatures were violent, deadly even, when faced with a stranger, but he knew his mother had touched them, had enjoyed being around them. He wanted to feel their fur.

The closest velt snorted three times in quick succession, looking like it was tasting the air of Riley's approach. It shook its head again, its harness clinking softly with the movement. They were just too majestic to be beasts of burden, Riley decided. There was something about the way they glowed in the starlight. Like they were meant to be under it, and the stars shone brighter because of them.

The velt flared its nostrils with a drawn-out exhalation, almost a sigh. Riley took that as a good sign and held a hand in front of the creature's nose. He gave it plenty of time to back away if it wanted to. Riley looked up at its eyes. They were silver and glossy with no pupils, but gave the impression of a piercing intelligence that really saw him.

And then the velt was pushing its snout into Riley's hand, inviting a caress like it had wanted one all the time. The fur was softer than the finest cloth he'd ever

felt, with such a multitude of the thin strands that Riley's hand sank into it the length of a finger joint. It was like running his hands through sifted flour.

He couldn't help but step closer, under the polite-seeming gaze of the second velt. Riley raised his arms, set them lightly around the neck of the creature.

The harness dented the silken fur, actually cutting into it so deeply at points that the surrounding tufts hid it from view. Riley tried to get a finger under it but there wasn't enough clearance. The halter looked like it was pressing painfully into the creature's delicate nose. It must feel like a noose, wearing that and having to pull weight on it besides.

He glanced at the house to make sure his father and Mr. Feather weren't coming out yet, then ducked further underneath the head of the first velt to inspect the harness. Two minutes and some quick fingers later, and both velt were wuffling Riley's hair in appreciation and relief.

"I'm sorry I can't take the whole thing off," he said as he stroked them, a hand on each. "We might all get in trouble."

The gentle wuffling and lipping of his hair went on, reminding Riley of how his mother used to stroke his hair

to send him to sleep at night. The yearning that he had been turning away from for the past two years blazed into its full heat in that instance of remembrance. He missed her. Terribly.

His eyes filled with tears, and he buried his face in the neck of one of the velt. It didn't help anything to cry but it was almost impossible to stop once the tears started. The velt seemed to understand, or at least the sound of their even breathing had a calming effect. Their breath smelled sweet, too, like fresh flowers and springtime. That made sense, since they probably ate grass and things like that.

It was no good standing around and crying, though. He should find out what Mr. Feather wanted from his father. He stroked the velt one last time, wiping away the streaks of tears using his sleeves. "Good luck," he said, with a final pat for each. Then he hastened to the patch of grass underneath the study window.

The window was ajar. Just the width of a couple fingers, but it was enough. Once Riley settled into position he was able to hear what was said inside.

"She was working for you, Mr. Feather." It was his father's voice. Frederick sounded bitter, his words sharp.

Mr. Feather's voice was still that of an old man but with steel in it now. "And she never completed the job I was paying her to do. How do you explain the past two years, Shipbuilder? Tell me where she's hiding, and I might take mercy on you. And your child--a son, wasn't it? How old is he now? Eleven? Twelve? Your wife never really did specify."

They were talking about Riley's mom. Hiding? Why would Mr. Feather think she was hiding? Miranda had abandoned them two years ago.

"Don't bring my son into this. He knows nothing. We know nothing. My wife hasn't come home. She's either dead or lost, and I've no idea where she was going on this mission of yours. You might think of how you took a mother from her son, a wife from her husband, before you start threatening me."

"You might make the ships that grace the skies, but I own every patch of sky from here to every island and waystation. If you're hiding her, Shipbuilder, I will find her."

Riley heard a chair scraping--someone was standing up. His father's voice drifted out sad and tired, now. "Look all you want. But leave us out of this. Miranda is gone."

Stunned, Riley didn't move when he heard the thump of Mr. Feather's cane, and the click of Frederick closing the study door behind them. She's either dead or lost kept repeating in his head. Riley didn't understand. His father had told him that Miranda abandoned them. He said she didn't want to live with them anymore, that she was going away and didn't want to come back. Riley had begged every day for the first year for them to get on a ship and find her, to bring her back. He watched his father get more and more withdrawn, until he realized that he was driving his father away, too. So he stopped asking. He tried to come to terms with his mother's absence. But either dead or lost. Hadn't his father said to Feather that he didn't know where she was going? And didn't he make it sound like he blamed Feather for Miranda's disappearance? What did that mean?

He needed answers.

Riley heard the front door opening and had enough presence of mind left to get up and go around the house to enter through the back. He would give his father a chance to explain. There had to be an explanation.

When Riley went inside he made sure to close the back door loudly, so his father thought he was just getting

back. The house was dark, with only a sliver of light seeping from under Frederick's study door. Riley hesitated on his way down the hall, thought about turning into his bedroom and trying to forget the whole thing--but no, it wasn't something he could forget, or ignore. He had to at least ask what was going on. He wasn't ten anymore. Maybe his father would tell him what had actually happened, this time.

Riley knocked on the door of the study once before opening it. His father was silhouetted against the candlelight, sitting at his desk. He wasn't working again, just sitting there, but he turned around when Riley cleared his throat.

Frederick made a good show of trying to smile. "Hey there. How are the sheep doing today?"

"Fine. Normal. Sketch has them in line."

There was an awkward silence before Frederick tried again. "I think we'll have some of the vegetables for dinner tonight. We can get more tomorrow during Market Day."

Riley felt uncomfortable standing there, but he wasn't sure that blurting out questions was the best strategy. Frederick stood up, looking like he was going to go start

on dinner. Riley finally spoke up. "There was a carriage on the road. Did someone come by?"

Frederick feigned surprise, poorly. "Oh, that. Someone wanted to know what the turn-around was for a ship nowadays." He tried to go around Riley again to leave the study.

"I know that it was Mr. Feather." His father froze. "You were talking about mom."

Frederick sighed. "What did you hear?"

"Enough."

"It isn't what you think."

"How do you know what I think?"

Frederick sighed again and went back to sit down, turning his chair so that he faced Riley. "Why don't you tell me what you're thinking?"

"I think you've been lying to me." Riley tried to play it cool by leaning against the door jamb. He didn't want to sound angry, though he was. He had to prove that he was old enough to hear the truth.

"It's all very complicated, Riley."

"You don't think I can handle it?"

"You're not old enough to understand everything that's involved. There are a lot of different factors--"

"Don't you think I deserve to know? Don't you think that even at ten I would want to know exactly what happened to my mom? What aren't you telling me? What happened to her?"

Frederick sighed again and Riley felt like punching something. It was like dragging a full-grown ewe from her newborn baby during shearing time. His father wasn't going to give up the information willingly.

Riley counted to ten in his head, and with nothing further from his dad he decided it was time to take action himself. "Fine. I want answers, and I'm going to go get them." He turned and went to leave through the front door.

"Where are you going?" Frederick called after him.

"Obviously this Mr. Feather knows something about Mom. I'm going to go ask him." Riley slammed the front door behind him and started down the path, but it opened again right away and his father called out.

"Wait. Please, come back inside and I'll tell you what I know."

Riley weighed his options. Feather was likely to be just as uncooperative, and would probably lock Riley up or something, thinking he knew where his mom was. Better to

get the answers from his father, who should have told him the truth in the first place anyway.

Still, his father might lie again. "Why should I trust you?"

"Because I'm still your father, aren't I?"

Riley came back inside and Frederick went to get another chair from the dining room. He set it in the study and gestured for Riley to sit at his desk.

"What do you want to know?"

"Tell me what really happened to Mom."

"I told you she left. That it was her choice. And it was. She got a job offer from Mr. Feather. And she took the job."

"You told me she abandoned us."

Frederick ran a hand through his hair, looking frustrated. "And she did. She chose to take this job, even though she knew it was dangerous. I asked her not to go. I begged her not to go."

"Why did she want to go?"

"She said it was important. She wouldn't tell me any of the details. She said it was safer if I didn't know anything about it."

Riley didn't feel like any of his questions were really being answered. "Why did you lie to me? Taking a job isn't abandoning us. Something could have happened to her. She could be lost somewhere, stranded. She could need us."

"Or she could be dead." Frederick said it so quiet that Riley second-guessed what he'd heard.

"What?"

"Dead. She could be dead. She could have gone and gotten herself killed doing who knows what. You tell me, Riley. Tell me what could be more important than her family."

"Who cares? You want to be mad at her for leaving? Why don't you try being mad at yourself for not going to look for her?" Riley stood up, not knowing what to do with himself but feeling like he had to do something. "Why couldn't we go find her? You don't know that she's dead. You don't know anything."

"I know that she made me promise not to come after her."

"Are you crazy?"

Frederick frowned at him. "No, and you'll speak to me with respect. I'm your father. Together, your mom and I agreed that I should stay here to raise you in a normal

life if anything happened to her. It's my job to keep you safe." He held out a hand to stop Riley from talking again. "We all did what we thought was best. And you have to trust in that." Riley opened his mouth to argue but Frederick said, "No more questions for tonight."

Or ever, Riley thought as his father left the study. There was no way his father was ever going to talk about this again. For two years Riley had believed his lies. He had even felt sorry for his father, watching him struggle to live life by some new routine. But Frederick was just being stubborn, staying mad at Miranda and feeding lies to Riley to try to get him to forget about her. She could be in trouble. She might be stranded on an island somewhere, her ship broken or lost. She could be captured, locked away, unable to return to them even though she wanted to.

Riley looked at all the maps pinned to the walls of his father's study. Most of them done in the same careful hand, though a couple recent attempts of Riley's were up there as well. Miranda hadn't taken Riley out flying, much. She said it was better for him to stay at home, to learn everything he could learn there first, before he went off adventuring. He trusted her enough that he didn't challenge it often. They would sit down together at the dining room

table every night that Miranda was home. She would lay out all her cartographic tools and show Riley the steps to making a careful map. He learned about distances and scales and ratios, about the quality of the ink and paper, about how to mix his own paints. She told stories about the islands as they worked, sometimes about adventures but more often about what the people were like, what she had seen and heard there.

You could still tell the difference between Riley's maps and his mother's, but the gap in skill was closing. He wondered where she might have gone, and how he could trace her route. She made so many friends, everywhere she went. He could ask around, see if anyone knew where she might be. He would find her himself. He knew enough about maps to find his way.

Finding a ship would be a problem, but Riley thought he could work around that. He couldn't take one of his father's ships, that would be too obvious. The best place to find ships, other than Shipbuilder Island, was the capital. Corsa.

CHAPTER TWO

Stowaway

Riley was up by first light. His father's bedroom door was closed, and Riley stared at it in the brightening hallway for what felt like a long time. Dinner the night before was awkward and over as quickly as they could manage. Afterward they had each gone to their bedrooms and closed the doors. Riley knew he wouldn't be able to get his father to talk again, and convincing him to leave Shipbuilder Island wasn't going to happen. He had to go out on his own.

Riley gathered supplies, tip-toeing around the house and having to pause to re-pack his satchel twice, weeding out the unnecessary items so that it was not bulging at the seams quite so much. He left a note reading, "Out to pasture, might go down to Market Day later." It would take at least a day to sort out that Riley wasn't anywhere on the island, and the note bought him extra hours between now and when Frederick finally realized that Riley had disappeared. The only problem was how obvious it was where Riley would be going. There was only one ship leaving the island today, so only one option for stowing away. Riley

felt confident that his father would think twice, though, about chasing after Mr. Feather's ship.

His preparations in place, Riley slipped out the back door with his satchel.

He headed for the pasture first, intending to check on the sheep but more so that he could say goodbye to Sketch.

Riley remembered asking when he was younger why the sheep needed a dog to run herd on them. Only the smallest lambs were tiny enough to be in danger from the predators of the sky, but Riley's father had explained about the possibility of pirates coming to steal their sheep in the night. His mother had spoken up then, smiling at Frederick over Riley's head. "We don't need to worry about pirates so much as the sheep's own stupidity. An ewe will walk right off the edge of the island without realizing it. Dogs keep them from unwitting suicide."

She had laughed, then, still staring at Frederick over Riley's head. His mom's smile stayed lodged in his mind.

The memory threatened to turn into a yawning gulf of grief, but Riley took a deep breath and held it in until he felt a little more composed. He would do what his father

refused to even try. He would find his mother and bring her home.

Sketch gave his usual leaping welcome of kisses and tail-wagging, which lightened Riley's mood.

He crouched down in front of the dog, forestalling more coatings of saliva with an upraised arm. "I need to go away for a while, old boy."

This was met with a polite sit and a paw raised to shake, Sketch's large brown eyes expectant.

Riley took the paw. Sketch wanted a treat for the trick, but Riley would need all the food he had brought with him in the satchel. "Listen, you need to take care of the sheep. Make sure they don't wander too far, or get themselves into trouble. Especially the two little ones. Can you do that for me, Sketch?"

Big brown eyes blinked, and a slow wag of Sketch's tail accompanied every word Riley spoke.

"I'm going to miss you." Riley hugged Sketch and got a few licks on the ear. "Someone has to try to find Mom," Riley whispered into his thick fur.

Before the tears could overflow Riley straightened, slinging the satchel over his shoulder. He gestured for

Sketch to return to the field and the sheep. The dog ran off, barking to bring some errant loners back into the larger group.

Riley looked out at all their sheep, wondering if he would see them again. He might find his mother and never come back, if they both decided that they were happier together somewhere else. Unbidden, images of his father's decline after Miranda's disappearance flitted through Riley's mind. The shoulders, slowly drooping lower and lower, pulling his father's head down with them. And the eyes, red-rimmed and sore, though Riley never saw them shed a tear. Now his dad would be truly alone, no son to take care of, to distract him from his wife's absence. It was what he deserved, for lying. He had been the one doing the abandoning, refusing to go after Miranda to find her and bring her back home.

The sloping hills dotted with sheep still called out home, but Riley looked beyond the grassy expanse to the very edge of the island. His mother's ship had flown these skies countless times--until she just hadn't come back. Two years was too long to wait without taking action. Two years was too long to go without a mother.

Riley didn't meet anyone on his way down from the hills. Farmers let their sheep fend for themselves on Market Days, choosing to stay in the village to set up their booths and tables rather than making the trek out just to count the same number of sheep they always counted. The village hadn't lost a sheep to anything but natural causes in the last five years. About as long as Sketch had been around, running herd.

Everyone had a reason to be out on Market Day, so Riley blended in well. Neighbors he had known his entire life waved and smiled at him, but most were too busy setting up to spare him a glance. It was already mid-morning and ships rarely stayed more than a day to trade with their small island. Riley was counting on that, hoping he wouldn't be found before the ship left the docks.

The docks were a natural stomping ground for the Shipbuilder's son. No one questioned Riley's presence there, though some of the other children of the island would have been shooed away. He got some strange looks from the crew as they unloaded their cargo, but as long as Riley ignored them and stayed out of the way they wouldn't bother with him. The purring hum of the solar sails reached Riley even out on the dock--it must take an enormous amount of

power to keep the ship hovering, and even more to propel it anywhere. It wasn't meant to be a fast-moving cargo vessel, that was for sure. This one was all show. The name on her hull read Regal.

He thought he was right about the main mast being as wide as their dining table. Probably bigger, now that he got a better look at it. And the whole thing was teeming with crew members, most carrying crates of trade goods off into the heart of the village, some still on board checking ropes, fiddling with solar sails, carefully folding what Riley recognized as a cloud harvesting net.

Water might be a problem while he was aboard. Riley knew that the capital was only a few days' sail away. Mr. Feather and all his enterprises were based there, which made sense because it was the most densely populated of the islands.

Riley backtracked and filled a water skin at the central well, wondering about the timing of getting onto the ship. Market Days meant every person in the village was out, looking at wares or selling their own. It usually meant that every crew member of the visiting ship was on-island as well, making the most of their time. A young sailor might just get a farmer's daughter to fall in love

with him, and he might take her home to Corsa where Riley imagined they lived a more glamorous life together.

The other sailors, the ones with wives already, would all go home to their families. Their trips were routine, pirates almost unheard of since Featherweight Trading Company had grown large enough to police the skies.

His mother should have come home the way these sailors were going to. She should have floated in, flying her whimsical flag of lavender and violets resting on a blanket of green. Riley remembered scanning the skies every day for months. He still climbed up on the roof of their house to get the best view, but he'd stopped trying to spot his mother's ship a long time ago. Now he knew that she wasn't necessarily still gone by choice, and he had to find out. He had a right to know if she was alive or dead, and if she wanted to come home.

It took a couple hours of observation, but Riley finally found his way onto Regal. He was right about most of the crew going into the village, but a select few remained to guard the deck and load some early purchases into the hold. Riley saw his chance in the bales of hay and

wooden boxes of birds caught by the hobby birdermen of the village.

He sauntered up to the two men loading the items, timing it so that they were both off the gangway.

"Hey, kid, this isn't any place for you." The sailor who'd spoken gestured toward the village center. "Go play at the market like all the other kids."

Riley said nothing. He slumped his shoulders, feigning defeat, and swung around as if to go back toward the village. He aimed it carefully so that his satchel sailed out and knocked over the closest stack of boxes, smoked birds tumbling every which way in a puff of feathers.

"Hey!" one of the sailors yelled, and Riley pretended to run away scared. He stopped behind the nearest hay bale, painstakingly cut and dried by old Mr. Wethern.

Riley peered over, adrenaline making his lungs work harder. The two sailors were grumbling to each other, picking up their employer's cargo, making sure not to miss a single bird on the ground. Riley crept forward, using the boxes and stacks to hide himself from view. He got as close as he could, and then the two sailors were busy trying to secure one of the boxes closed again. This was Riley's chance, and he took it. He sprinted up the gangway that led

into the gaping maw of the loading doors, waiting to hear shouts and booted feet charging after him. But there was nothing--his own passage on the gangway had hardly made any noise at all, it being a sturdy, wide plank. He weighed less than the sailors, too, and that meant the gangway didn't dip and bounce as he ran up it. There were enough hay bales stacked nearby that they hadn't seen him running into the hold.

He hid behind a crate inside, crouching in the darkest shadow and willing his breath to calm, his heart to slow. When the pounding of his pulse lessened and he could hear properly again, Riley realized he had made it. The sailors outside were none the wiser, coming in now with arms full of more boxes, which they stacked opposite where Riley was hiding. He would just need to find a dark corner that wouldn't be uncovered during the flight to Corsa. He gazed around the enormous hold, half full of boxes, crates, and barrels. He didn't think hiding was going to be a problem.

CHAPTER THREE

Berth

Shipbuilder's Island to Corsa was a three day journey. Riley was sure of it. After five days in the air he was getting worried.

The islands stayed moored in their positions in the sky. Riley didn't know how exactly they remained in the same place when they weren't visibly tied to anything, but it wasn't something many people questioned. It was just the way it was. Distances stayed constant, so the three days it would take to get to Corsa could only be stretched so much by headwinds or storms. Riley didn't know if the size of Regal prevented its passengers from feeling the effects of turbulence, but it had been a smooth ride so far.

Smooth and terribly boring. Stuck in a dark hold with nothing to do and no one to talk to for five days gave Riley plenty of time to ruminate on his decision to leave home. Around day three Riley finally admitted to himself his actual chances at finding his mom--pretty slim. If Mr. Feather, with all the manpower and resources money could buy at his disposal, hadn't managed to find Miranda, then how would Riley? He was just a boy, alone. It didn't take

long for that despair to morph into anger at his father. If they had left sooner, if they hadn't waited a full two years for any word from her, they might have had better chances. Now Riley was left to chase a stone-cold trail by himself. Maybe stubbornness ran in the family, but he couldn't understand why his father wouldn't have gone out looking for Miranda. Couldn't he have been stubborn about wanting to find her? About having her in their lives?

Riley had much too much time to think. Had there been something going on between his parents? He didn't see them together much, since his mom was always out flying. She preferred the skies, even told Riley once that she would rather live out there all the time if she didn't have him and his father to consider. Was his father holding her back? Had she decided to leave him and take to the skies forever? No. She wouldn't have done that without saying goodbye. And she would have wanted to take Riley with her. She always wanted to take him with her. Besides, if Feather couldn't find her, that meant she wasn't just hiding anywhere. She had to be in trouble, hurt or lost or stranded. Hard to believe she could get lost, as good as she was with maps, but anything was possible.

Nothing really added up, and Riley had to admit he had next to no information. He wished he could talk to Mr. Feather, ask him all the questions on his mind. Maybe he would have some clue for where to look for Miranda. But, Riley had to circle back around to it again, Mr. Feather wouldn't have come around asking if he hadn't already reached a dead end in his search. That left little to no chance of Riley picking up some kind of lead.

Five days was plenty of time for a twisted ball of anger to lodge in his throat, directed at his father. He would find Miranda and show his father what family really meant. By the fifth day Riley was completely fed up with being locked away in the dark on his own. He needed to figure out what was going on.

The only possible explanation for the extended trip was that they were headed elsewhere. Riley tried to draw an imaginary line on the maps in his head, looking for a longer radius and what islands it would lead them to. They could be going to Merchant Island, he supposed, though Riley didn't know why they wouldn't just go to Corsa to sell all the goods they had in the hold. And Settler Island didn't make any sense, because it was just ruins that no one could make any sense of anymore. In the other direction

it was just the Agriculture Islands and a far-off water harvesting waystation.

Riley wasn't getting much sleep, constantly listening for the sound of booted feet coming down into the hold to roll up another barrel of water or food. He was cold all the time--he should have remembered to bring a blanket. He stole as much water as he wanted from the barrels, he even filched some rations that he didn't have to cook. But Riley was having a miserable time in this dark, lonely place.

He was on the verge of sneaking up into the more populated areas of the ship when the ever-constant hum of the solar sails began to die down to a lesser buzz. He had gotten used to the sound over the past few days, at least during daylight hours when the ship was at full power. Something seemed missing without it.

The ship's bell rang out in a complicated pattern that Riley hadn't heard before. Then the clomp of many booted feet coming below followed it. No one entered the hold, strangely enough. Landing usually meant sailors wasted no time in getting their cargo unloaded for trade. Riley had already hidden behind his usual stack of boxes and crates, but stood up when everything was quiet above. Maybe they were just hovering somewhere, not really at an island. That

would explain why everyone was staying on board. He did the calculations in his head again to make sure he knew what time of day it was, but he was sure the last bell he'd heard was for mid-morning.

Riley didn't want to risk trying to sneak above deck to see what was going on, but he didn't know what other choice he had. Soon they might be unloading the entire hold, and then he would be discovered. He weighed his seeming lack of options--he couldn't let Feather find him. Not only would it carry the possibility of being dragged home to his father where he would never be allowed off-island again, but Riley didn't trust Mr. Feather. The way that people talked about him, always with respect but no small amount of fear as well. Not to mention the way that Mr. Feather had talked to Riley's father, no apologies for sending his wife on a dangerous mission, depriving her son of a parent. Even without his family connections, Riley didn't know what Mr. Feather would do to a stowaway. And how did you convince someone that you didn't have the information they wanted, anyway? It wasn't like Mr. Feather would trust him if he said he had no idea where his mom was. No, he needed to sneak off the ship somehow.

Better to take the risk now, when he'd heard a good number of the crew retreating to what was probably their quarters. He hoped no one was left on deck to intercept him.

The hallways were dark, eerie without the reverberating hum of fully-powered solar sails. Riley tiptoed, conscious of how loud the sailors' boots always sounded on the wooden floor.

The rectangle of muted light at the end of the hall meant Riley had to stop for a minute, still in the darkness, to let his eyes adjust. No shadow darkened the floorboards, so presumably no one was up above looking down. He took the ladder slowly, craning his neck every inch of the way to make sure he wasn't going to pop his head up right into someone's sight.

The coast was clear, as far as he could tell. Maybe everyone really had gone down below.

He climbed up and out, still scanning all around, but what he could see of the deck looked deserted. They must be pretty low in the sky, since everything was obscured with the mist of a passing cloud. Riley could see the water droplets gathering on the beams and sails, sparkling in what little light had managed to filter through.

Because of the cloud's bulk Riley couldn't see the whole deck. He would need to move slowly, carefully, and perhaps he could use this cloud's cover to his advantage. Not knowing which direction was likely to hold their landing site, Riley headed starboard.

About four steps out he realized he'd gone the wrong way. A large shadow materialized out of the cloud, coming toward him on the deck. Before he could duck behind anything the sailor had seen him.

"Hey!"

Riley ran for it, heading to the port side.

"Hey, you, stop!" he heard behind him, but it was a large ship with a massive deck, and the sailor couldn't see him to give chase through the cloud. Riley wished he was taller so that he could have passed for one of the other sailors.

He needed an exit strategy. If the ship was just hovering in the middle of nowhere, he was caught. That sailor would tell the captain and the captain would tell Mr. Feather. The same cloud mist that saved Riley from the sailor's sight hid the ship's surroundings. They might be at an island, temporarily beset by high-flying clouds. They could just as easily be sitting in thin air.

He couldn't tell what angle he was jogging at, so the ship's railing came out of nowhere. He grabbed hold of it just in time to stop himself from tumbling over--all the breath leaving his lungs in a loud whoosh as it hit his stomach. He coughed, trying to get some air back into his chest.

Scared that the sound would tell the sailor where he was, Riley kept moving, now parallel to the railing. If he managed to be quiet enough maybe he could climb over the railing and find some protruding part of the ship to sit on while he thought about his next move.

That turned out to be unnecessary; the hand that Riley was sliding along the railing dropped into air. There was an opening and Riley could just barely see the gangway stretching out into the mist. Suppose someone was on the other side, already coming towards him? Voices drifting in the fog reached Riley. The sailor must have found a buddy and right now they could be looking for the gangway themselves.

He tried to walk softly, but tiptoeing on a plank of wood with nothing visible underneath and no idea what the other side even rested on was not practical or possible. It was sturdy wood, hardly wobbling at all, but even the tiny

reverberations of the plank knocking against the deck of the ship might alert the sailors who were looking for him.

The cloud enveloped him, slowly soaking into his jacket and making him blink more often as tiny droplets collected on his eyelashes. He rubbed his eyes with a damp sleeve--this was ridiculous. Who would want to live on an island sunk into the cloud layer? What kind of place was he walking into?

After what felt like an eternity of careful steps, Riley stepped off the gangway and onto the solid wood planking of a dock. He still couldn't see much of anything. The wind picked up a little, carrying voices. They sounded close, but Riley would have felt the gangway start to wobble if they had started crossing it. He needed to find cover, and to find out where he was.

The wind was helpful in lifting some of the mist, but that meant the sailors on the deck of the ship might see him soon. Riley caught sight of what looked like a giant tree trunk in front of him. Strangely, the trunk had a door set in it. The sanded, lacquered wood looked out of place against the rough bark of the actual trunk. And to the right of this important-looking door was a set of steps leading to a lower landing. He could go in the front door

or take his chances with the side route. Since Mr. Feather probably only ever used front doors, Riley chose the stairs.

He took them two at a time, stumbling when he got to the lower wooden landing. There was a door here as well, much smaller and less ornate. A hand on the trunk confirmed it--this was either a cleverly built structure made to look just like a tree, or it had once been a living tree, and had since been carved out and fitted with doors. Judging by the curvature, they could fit Riley's house inside the trunk three times over.

This smaller door was unlocked, thank goodness. Riley finally remembered to breathe normally again, though his heart was still racing from the adrenaline. When he stepped in and closed the door behind him his eyes met solid darkness. Resting as it did up above the cloud layer, Shipbuilder's Island always had the glow of sunlight and starlight to chase away dark. Riley had never known a blackness so complete.

His breathing sounded much too loud. He opened his eyes as wide as they would go, hoping for a glimpse of something, anything. He couldn't go back outside with the wind dissipating the cloud mist. He would be spotted right away, and brought to Mr. Feather.

But there, in front of him and about chest high, a light appeared. It was flickering--no, blinking. Like an indicator light on a wheelhouse panel. It was bright green, and Riley could swear it hadn't been there a few seconds before. He was about to walk toward it when a female voice sounded into the darkness.

"Please state your name."

CHAPTER FOUR

Greetings

Riley didn't move.

The voice repeated itself. "Please state your name."

It sounded female, but with less dimension somehow. The tone wasn't clipped or sarcastic--it hardly held any emotion at all.

It came again, "State your name and business for processing, please."

"Um...Riley?"

The light continued to blink in the darkness, and Riley strained to hear the breathing of the person talking to him. Nothing.

"Name insufficient. Further data requested."

"Huh?"

"Please state any identifying characteristics, for processing and access purposes."

"Um..."

The voice still sounded expressionless. "Useful information includes family ties, profession, surname, island of residence, age, and physical description."

Riley picked up on the thing that seemed the most obvious: "Shipbuilder Island. I live on Shipbuilder Island, my dad is Frederick the Shipbuilder."

"Frederick the Shipbuilder, husband to Miranda the Expeditionist, correct?"

"You know about my mom?"

"Purpose of visit?"

"Wait," Riley said, getting more frustrated than scared now. "Why do you know my mom's name?"

"Purpose of visit?"

Riley stamped his foot in frustration but it only produced an unsatisfying muffled thud on the thick wooden floor. "I want to know why you know my mom's name, that's the purpose of my visit!"

"Insufficient clearance level. Unable to provide requested information. Please wait here for assistance." The green, blinking light disappeared.

"What?"

There was no reply, not to any of the questions Riley tried asking after that. He couldn't go outside and risk the sailors seeing him. They might still be looking, and might even come down and open the very door he had entered. He turned around in the blackness and groped blindly,

feeling for a lock. The inside of the door was smooth, just a doorknob with nothing that felt like a locking mechanism on it. He followed the groove of the door jamb with his fingers, feeling for pins or sliding levers at the top and bottom. Nothing.

"Doesn't this stupid door have a lock?" He'd spoken aloud in frustration, not expecting an answer, but there came a soft snick in response. Riley tried the doorknob now and it wouldn't turn. The door was locked.

"Huh."

Riley sighed and sat down, facing the utter blackness. With the locked door at his back he didn't have to worry about someone coming up behind him. He could feel his way around the walls to try to find another door, but he was tired and didn't want to go forward and risk running into Mr. Feather or part of his crew.

He was starting to get used to the silence when he heard the doorknob rattle as if someone was trying to open it from outside. He couldn't hear any voices--the wood was too thick to let any sound in from outside. All he could do was cross his fingers and hope that whatever had locked the door didn't see fit to unlock it at this inopportune moment.

The rattling stopped. He couldn't hear if they had gone away or if they were lying in wait for him right outside. It was too risky to open the door, and anyway he didn't know if it would unlock on its own if he asked. He would just sit here in the darkness until "assistance" came, whatever that meant.

Riley managed to doze off. He woke when a dim light came on, revealing the contents of the room. A quick glance assured him that the space was empty aside from himself. It was tiny, like a closet of sorts. Coat hooks lined the walls, all empty. The paneling was more wood, with a rich, dark grain running through all of it. One small section on the wall opposite him was cut out, and held a little rectangle of something shiny and black, almost like opaque glass..

He heard a slight whirring and scanned above--there was a little black half-dome attached to the ceiling in a corner. As he watched it a miniature red light within moved slightly. It was more unsettling than the disembodied voice.

Riley stood up. "Hey, can you hear me?" he said into the emptiness, waving his arms. "I need help. Hello?"

The little red light didn't move, but the overhead lights didn't go off, at least. Riley took that as a good sign. He scanned the room again, noticing that it didn't seem to have a door leading anywhere else. He saw the outline of the door he'd entered through--still no visible locking mechanism. But all the rest of the walls looked smooth, seamless. What if he was trapped here? What if he could never get that door unlocked? It seemed a worse fate than being found out by Mr. Feather and his crew. To have gotten off Shipbuilder Island just to spend time in a dark hold and then a locked room, never allowed to make any progress looking for his mom.

That strange voice had said to wait. And the overhead light had gone on. Riley looked at it up in the ceiling, wondering how it was powered. It certainly didn't flicker like candlelight, but the only steady light he knew of came from trapping certain gases in very small containers. They were expensive enough that Riley had only seen them built into the most elaborate ships his father was commissioned to make.

He settled down on the floor again, leaning against the door. It was reassuring to be able to see, though the absence of an inside door was troubling. He rested his arms

on his knees, tilting his head back to rest on the door. His eyelids were just drooping shut again when he heard a snick come from the other side of the room.

Riley stood up, almost overbalancing in his hurry. Out of the smooth wood materialized a crack that rapidly widened. It was a door, so cleverly carved and fitted that Riley might not have been able to feel it if he'd run his hands along the wall.

What he saw behind the door was definitely not what he expected. A girl, a couple inches taller than him, her brown hair in braids, was framed in the doorway.

She was frowning. "You've come at a very inconvenient time."

"I'm sorry?"

Her frown deepened.

At Riley's blank stare she sighed and continued. "Can you come back some other time? We, er...don't currently have the staff to spare to assist you--"

Riley interrupted. "Wait. Who are you? I don't even know where I am. And I can't leave. I can't let them find me."

She dropped her face in her hands, not so much a dramatic gesture but one of hopeless despair. "This is bad. This is so bad."

Her reaction made Riley uncomfortable. Everything about this place since he'd stepped foot on it had made him uncomfortable. He sat down against the door again. Obviously this girl wasn't going to be any help. He had no idea where to go from here.

But she was shaking her head, looking at him through her fingers. "Oh, no. Come with me. You might as well help me figure this out." She held out a hand.

Riley didn't get up. "Who are you?"

"There isn't time for that. Come on. They're waiting--"

"Who's waiting?"

The girl dropped her arm and stamped her foot, making her look much younger and frazzled. "I told you, we don't have time. Will you just come with me so that I can get Mr. Feather off your back?"

"Fine." Riley stood back up.

She grabbed his hand and pulled him along behind her. They were in a narrow hallway with wooden walls. The light here was much more diffused, blue in color and coming from jars placed in regularly-spaced niches in the walls. Riley

tried to get a halfway decent look as they raced past jar after jar. It seemed like each one had a multitude of little light sources inside it, swirling around in intricate patterns.

The girl yanked him around a corner so fast that his free arm flew out and hit the wall. "Hey, watch it, can you slow down a little?"

She shook her head without turning back to look at him. "Sorry. Almost there. Just a minute. None of you are supposed to be here." That last mumbled part sounded more like she was talking to herself than to him.

They rounded several more corners, passing doors all the time, and Riley wondered how big this place actually was.

Finally she stopped in front of a door that looked like all the rest. She didn't look back at him, but said under her breath, "This is so not allowed..."

"What?"

She shook her head again--was that all she ever did? She opened the door and pulled him inside with her.

This room was larger than the one Riley had been stuck in, but not by much. A couple of chairs stood against the side wall, but what really caught Riley's eye was the

window that made up the left wall. Through it he could see another room, the same size as the one they were in, with two adults. One with a cane.

Riley ducked down, flattening himself against the floor, hoping they hadn't already spotted him.

The girl stared down at him looking confused, then her eyes widened and she smiled for the first time since he'd seen her. It was kind of a cute smile--it made her eyes crease into little crescents. "Oh, sorry, we can see them but they can't see us. Here, get up."

He was suspicious, but took her hand and stood up. The two in the other room didn't even glance their way. The girl was still smiling a little, though her forehead was starting to crease with worry.

She seemed too young to be here alone, doing who knew what. When she spoke, though, her voice held confidence.

"Gaia, what have they been saying?"

The same strange disembodied female voice from before filled the room and Riley looked around to see where it was coming from. "Mr. Feather has stated that he is not leaving until he has had an audience with the Master."

"Oh, drat," the girl said. "Well they can't wait out there forever..."

There was a commotion on the other side of the glass. The ship's captain had just come in, and was talking to the man to Mr. Feather's right. They spoke close to each other, and if Riley could have heard them he would bet they were whispering. Then the captain left and the man he'd talked to went to whisper to Mr. Feather. Riley watched for Mr. Feather's reaction. His eyebrows drew together while he listened, and then a kind of smirk settled in his wrinkled features. They were on to him. They knew Riley had stowed away, and they were looking for him. They would know by now that he wasn't anywhere on the ship--they would begin searching this place next.

Riley grabbed the girl's arm. "You have to get me out of here. Do you have any ships? I can't let him stop me, and I need to find my mom..."

She looked concerned, then surprised. "Find...Miranda? What's happened to her?"

This was almost too much, added to a day of complete weirdness. "You know my mom?" There was something in her tone when she said "Miranda," and Riley was almost scared to find out what it meant.

The girl nodded.

"But how...?"

Mr. Feather had started talking back to the man with him, and they were nodding at each other. It looked like they were planning something, and Riley was getting more and more nervous. He tried to keep an eye on them while he talked to the girl.

She had slumped into one of the chairs. "Miranda," she said, "used to stop by here on her travels. She told wonderful stories." Her voice trailed off.

Riley couldn't really process what was going on. Mr. Feather had led him straight to a place that seemed to know his mom intimately--a place he'd never heard of. This girl was surprised and sad at hearing that his mom had disappeared.

Mr. Feather and the other man were done talking now. They filed out the opposite door and closed it behind them.

The girl noticed and gripped the arms of the chair with tense shoulders. "...I think I'm starting to understand. We need to get out of here." Letting her voice fill the room, she commanded, "Gaia, do what you can to hold them off. Buy us a little time."

"Certainly," came the strange voice.

The girl grabbed Riley's hand again and pulled him out a door, into another hallway. They went through a door and

down a staircase, and then everything looked much more homey. Instead of long hallways with doors everything seemed to be directly connected, and with open doorways, more like a house. Riley glimpsed a dining area, a room full of overpacked bookcases, and a cozy room with a couch and a fireplace. The girl finally led him through a door into what looked like a bedroom, though it was cooler than any bedroom Riley had ever seen. The bed frame looked to be molded out of living wood, and built-in bookcases and a desk area lined the walls. The girl was rushing around, pulling things out of drawers and off shelves, stuffing everything into a bag. Riley saw a map above the bed and took a few steps closer to admire it.

It wasn't finished--only the western half and some of the northeast was completed. Pale lines of charcoal outlined what some of the unfinished portions would hold when it was finished. And it was so large--almost the length of the whole bed, and probably almost as tall as he was. There was detail on the islands that were finished, with delicate labels pointing to landmark buildings.

"My mom made this."

He said it almost under his breath at first, but then turned to the girl and repeated it. "My mom made this." It wasn't a question, but he did want some sort of answer.

She stopped her frantic packing for a moment and locked eyes with him. "Yes. Miranda made that. I'm sorry, we just don't have time to go over everything right now. Please, please, just carry this for me, and trust me for right now, okay?" She handed him a bag and then rushed to pack another one, and then she grabbed his hand again and pulled him back out the door.

They went down another flight of stairs and after a short hallway came out onto a sort of covered dock. It had a tall ceiling but one wall opened out onto the air, which Riley could see was still full of cloud mist. There was a big empty space by one prong of the dock that could hold a ship about half the size of Regal. To the right hovered a much smaller ship, probably only big enough for two or three cabin rooms, and with only two masts for solar sails, one fore and one aft.

The girl pulled him along the dock to the ship. Riley read Seeker on the side of the hull.

Several bulging cloth bags lay on the dock nearby, and the girl started to pick them up and throw them onto the

deck of the ship. "If we hurry," she said, "we can get out of here before he realizes we're leaving. The cloud cover will help us slip away...I hope."

"Wait, whose ship is this?" It seemed like an important question, since he didn't want to be on the run in a stolen ship.

"Don't worry, it belongs to the Library. Hurry, please."

Riley helped her with the bags, putting aside his questions for the time being. She seemed to know what she was doing.

They followed the last bag onto the deck of the ship and the girl headed straight for the wheelhouse, leaving Riley looking around for something to do. He assumed they were leaving right now, so he untied the mooring ropes. The sails were already unfurled, so with nothing better to do he grabbed a bag and started dragging it toward the opening that led below decks. He heard the hum of the solar sails powering up and watched the indicator built into the main mast that showed power levels. The level was dangerously low, but Riley reasoned that was what happened when you left a ship under a ceiling instead of leaving it out in the sun to charge. Then he realized that it wasn't just a

matter of getting out beyond the dock, but up above the cloud level, so the sails would actually start charging.

He dropped the bag and went for the wheelhouse, intending to tell the girl that this was impossible. The whole ship lurched forward suddenly, throwing Riley off his feet.

Riley managed to get up and make for the wheelhouse again. He heard a shout, though, and saw a few of the sailors from Feather's ship bursting out of the hallway he and the girl had used to come out here. They were running down the dock toward the ship. Riley ran for the wheelhouse, calling out, "They're coming!"

The ship lurched forward again, but this time kept up the momentum. Riley grabbed the doorway into the wheelhouse. "We're not going to make it." he said.

She shook her head. "We'll see."

Riley glanced back at the men just in time to see the dock slide away behind them, one man grabbing his colleague before he could careen off the end of the dock into the void. Close call. Now they faced another, with more deadly consequences. If the ship didn't have enough power to clear the cloud layer it would plummet below the clouds, into the

bottomless depths below. The ship cleared the covered dock and tilted upward.

They couldn't see anything through the cloud mist. Riley hoped the girl knew what she was doing. This little ship couldn't survive a collision with the side of that tree thing.

Riley hoped that his death came quick and painless, though he knew that if they started to drop they would be alive for a long time before they finally crashed to pieces. He went out to watch the power indicator on the main mast, since there wasn't anything he could do to help the girl. Maybe this was the way adventures worked. He tried to make a good start and then got pulled along into someone else's problems. He should have stayed behind and confronted Feather.

The indicator was an inch away from hitting empty. Then half an inch. As it settled down to rest at empty Riley closed his eyes, listening for the hum of the solar sails to cut out as they lost power completely.

Suddenly everything seemed brighter through his eyelids. He opened one eye just a slit, hoping not to see their impending doom.

Sunlight shone on the deck. Cloud mist was falling away below them and the hum of the solar sails was getting louder, more vibrant. They'd made it, somehow. The ship leveled out to skim the tops of the clouds, soaking up the much-needed sunlight. Riley went back to the wheelhouse.

The girl turned to him when he entered and she smiled. "There. We'll be okay for now. My name is Hannah." And she held out a hand to shake.

CHAPTER FIVE

Plans

After holding hands while they careened down hallways the handshake felt stiff and formal. Hannah seemed to realize it because she smiled a bit when Riley pulled his hand from hers.

She turned back to the ship's controls. "Sorry we don't have much time to talk. We have to make sure we aren't being followed, so you'll be on lookout. I'll navigate, for now. You can fly, right?"

That came out of nowhere. Riley was stunned. Angry, actually. He was his mother's son, and she asked if he knew how to fly?

Hannah turned to look at him when he didn't answer and frowned. "It's a perfectly valid question."

"No," Riley said, finally finding his voice again. "No, not really." He shrugged. "You want us to take shifts, right, so that one of us can sleep while the other pilots?"

She nodded, already turned back toward the controls.

"Sure. Great. Mind telling me where we're going?"

"Corsa."

He couldn't get any more out of her after that, no matter how hard he tried to convince her that going to Corsa was just about the worst idea. She finally shoved him out of the wheelhouse saying she needed to concentrate and he should stay on lookout. The skies were clear so far, ahead and behind. He couldn't see where the giant tree thing was, but it had been down below the cloud layer so it stood to reason he wouldn't see it up here. Now they were flying clear, with plenty of sunlight charging the sails. The indicator on the mast was already half-full, which either meant this ship didn't hold much power or it had an impressive charging mechanism.

She should have known that Riley would know how to fly a ship. He had been at the helm when he was still in his mom's arms. Since she had disappeared Riley hadn't been allowed to go flying--his dad always had some excuse for why Riley needed to stay home. Still, he hadn't forgotten any of it. Now that he could actually feel the wind and sunlight, his impulse to leave Shipbuilder Island felt like the best decision he'd ever made. Sure, if he tried to think about his father that knot of anger in his throat threatening to strangle him. But his idea of home was

tainted, now, knowing that his father had been lying to him about something so important, and for so long.

Riley missed the old days, when he knew what his place in the world was. He fit so well in his little family unit, mother and father and son. Now he was old enough to wonder what happened between his parents when he wasn't paying attention. They were supposed to rally around Riley as their common interest, at the very least. And he guessed they'd done just enough of that to keep secret from him their own problems with each other. What other explanation was there, for his father's reluctance to actually look for her? He wanted her gone, or was glad once she was.

Riley gripped the railing and stared out at the empty skies. Answers would be hard to find. No one ever wanted children to find the answers--the whole world would be stacked against them. He didn't know what Hannah's plans were--she wasn't in a talkative mood just now. But they needed to coordinate. He needed to figure out just what she was doing. If her agenda ran counter to his, he'd have to find his own way. It wasn't like she was trying to be friendly, anyway. He still didn't know anything about her.

He turned to lean against the railing and take his first good look at the ship. The solar sails were in good

condition, almost like new, but there was enough wear on the deck that the ship had to be a few years old at least. The deck and railing were of good quality wood. While the skies were clear he could check out the interior, see what kind of space they were working with.

He only got as far as the doorway leading below decks. Above the lintel was an intricate design in gold leaf. A giant tree, complete with texturing to make the trunk look like it had actual wood grain. His father had made this ship.

Riley went and felt the wood of the railings again, trying to guess how old Seeker really was. He hadn't seen it in the last two years, not since he'd been helping out so often in the shipyard. And he didn't remember it well, so it must have been at least a few years before his mom disappeared. He had seen so many ships built, and had flown in so many of them with his mom when he was younger, that it was easy to lose a single ship among the memories.

Riley wondered if that was why Hannah knew his mom-- because she'd helped deliver this ship to whomever Hannah worked for. She had to work for someone, right? She was probably close to Riley's own age, and she can't have been the only person in that place. Maybe it was time for some

answers, then. He took one last look around the deck and was glad he did, because behind them and a little to starboard a small speck was getting larger.

"Hannah!" he yelled as he ran, again, into the wheelhouse. "Someone's behind us, I can't see who it is yet..."

She must have heard because the ship was already dipping downward before he got all the way into the room.

"But the power cells aren't fully charged, how will we..."

Hannah waved a hand behind her, gesturing for him to let her concentrate. She seemed comfortable enough with the positions of all the controls, but her shoulders were hunched like she was tense. Scared, maybe, because of the ship following them.

Riley let her do her thing, since she obviously didn't want distractions. He went out to look behind them again but they were already going under the cloud layer and he couldn't see anything. The mist coated his jacket with a shimmery layer that soaked into the cloth when he tried to brush it off. He went back inside the wheelhouse.

A minute later Hannah's shoulders finally slumped a little. The ship felt like it had evened out.

"So," Riley began, "want to tell me what happens when the power cells are drained?"

She wasn't moving or turning to look at him. It was like she hadn't even heard him.

"Isn't it overkill to hide when we don't even know whose ship that was? It might not have been Feather. I think I deserve some answers, Hannah."

He heard a sniff and saw one of Hannah's hands go up to wipe at her face. Then she was turning around and he could see the smeared trail of wetness on her cheek. He took a step forward, but she put a hand out to stop him.

"No. I'm fine. This is all just so stupid. I'm not going to cry. I'm fine." She rubbed at her eyes a bit more, then opened them too-wide to stare at him, as if she was proving something. "Your mom told me about you. She said she thought we'd get along."

That wasn't really an answer, so Riley waited for Hannah to keep talking.

"I want to find out what happened to her, just as much as you do, you know."

Again, not really an answer. Riley stayed silent.

Hannah sighed and went to sit down at the navigating table in the corner. Riley assumed that meant the ship would be okay on the course it was on, so he joined her.

"I've been stuck at the Library," she began. "I don't know what's been going on out here in the world but I don't like it. Two years ago was the last time I saw your mom. She and the Master had a fight, I don't know what it was about."

"The Master?"

Hannah nodded. "The Master Librarian. My teacher. He...well, it's complicated. He sort of found me, and raised me, but he's not like a father really..."

Riley gave her a few moments to figure out what she was talking about, but when she just looked confused he stepped in to prompt. "Two years ago?"

She nodded. "It was a terrible fight, and they'd always been such good friends. The Master was never the same after that. I think he felt guilty, or something. But a year ago, a year after we'd seen Miranda, he was gone."

"Gone?"

"He left. By himself. Took our bigger ship and a note that said I should take care of things until he got back. Just like that."

"He went alone? And he hasn't come back?" No one went out piloting alone if they could help it, because everyone had to sleep some time, and even a hovering ship needed watching over in case of strong winds or other ships nearby. Maybe something had happened to him.

Hannah shook her head. "The Library only ever has a Master Librarian and an Apprentice Librarian. The knowledge, it's too important for just anyone to have access to. And that's one of the problems. He's been gone for a year now and he didn't leave me the upper level access codes. I don't have the clearance level to find anything useful that might tell me where he went or what he was trying to do. He's just gone."

Now it was Riley's turn to shake his head. "This doesn't make much sense. They have a fight, my mom disappears, and then your Master disappears? But you didn't even know something had happened to her. So how did this Master person know?"

She shrugged. "There was plenty he didn't tell me. I don't even know what they were fighting about. Just that Miranda left without saying goodbye, and she always said goodbye before that. But Riley, I think he went after her.

It's the only thing that makes sense. The Master went to look for Miranda, and now we have to find both of them."

"And Mr. Feather? You think flying straight to his home island is going to help us find my mom and your Librarian?"

"I know of someone on Corsa. A Bookbinder. He's a friend of the Master's, the first person the Master would go to if he needed help with something like this. He'll be able to help us."

Riley thought this plan was more far-fetched even than his impulsive stowaway trick. "So we're banking on your Master guy having left to follow my mom, and we're banking on this Bookbinder to know where they might have gone? There's a million places this could go wrong."

Hannah stood up and went back to the ship's controls. "Do you have a better plan?"

But of course he didn't--he had just been hoping that Mr. Feather would lead him to a clue about his mom. He would go along with Hannah's plan for now. It wasn't like he had much choice.

Later, Hannah showed Riley around the ship while it flew on its straight course. The power wasn't draining too

quickly, Riley was pleased to see, but they also had to factor in the nighttime, when the moonlight wasn't strong enough to do much to charge the sails. There was the wheelhouse, where they would be spending most of their time with only a two-person crew. The mess hall was tiny, just enough table space for four cramped passengers to sit together to eat, and it was combined with the galley to conserve space. There was a cabin with two bunks built into the walls, one on top of the other, a storage closet with various sundries, and space in the hold for minor cargo. Riley went into the engine room himself to check on things, and it was a beautiful model. The latest at its time, definitely. He patted the engine protectively on his way out, trusting Seeker to get them where they needed to go.

The next few days were monotonous and exhausting. They took turns sleeping so that someone was always watching the ship, but more than once they each fell asleep on night watch since there wasn't anything interesting about a ship hovering in place. They had to drop below the clouds four more times, each time waiting long enough before they dipped back up to hopefully avoid the notice of any ships in visible airspace. They were lucky so far, or at least no

one had chosen to chase them directly if they'd seen them. Still, Feather would already have passed them by on his way to Corsa, if he was going back there, so he might just have men waiting for them at the docks.

In their spare time when they were both awake Hannah told him more about the Library, which turned out to be the giant tree structure that they had met in. When Riley said it felt kind of cramped with its lack of windows and strange layout she got defensive.

"The Library is a beautiful place. It holds more than you could even imagine. And Gaia keeps it from being too lonely."

"Gaia--that voice you were talking to?"

"Yeah, she's an Artificial Intelligence."

That deserved a blank stare, which it got.

"Oh, right," Hannah said, "I forgot. Um, an artificial intelligence is like a person who can think for itself, but it's a program within a computer."

"Computer?"

"Yeah." Hannah paused. "This can get way too complicated. All you need to know is she's not real, she just sort of helps us access information and run the functions around the Library."

Riley nodded to reassure her that was enough of an explanation. He wasn't taking this trip to learn about computers, whatever they were, so he didn't ask for more. They were in the wheelhouse again, since they mostly lived in there either taking a piloting shift or sleeping. A cold wind had been blowing since the previous night, and Hannah sat with a blanket wrapped around her shoulders for warmth. They'd discovered early on that she didn't have a jacket with her. She'd beaten herself up about it when she found out, saying that she'd been so worried about forgetting any of the essentials that some details just completely slipped her mind.

Riley found that the more they talked, the more he thought his mom was right. They got along pretty well, now that Hannah wasn't being so stubborn and close-mouthed. He could see that she'd been overwhelmed with everything when they first set out. Relaxed Hannah was much more fun to talk to, and wasn't shy about sharing stories of her childhood growing up in the Library with her cranky old Master looking after her.

Even if Hannah had stayed unfriendly, Riley was just glad to have another person around again. He didn't ever want to repeat his stint alone in the cargo hold of Mr.

Feather's ship. No one should ever have to fly without feeling the wind and seeing the sky anyway. When he could, Riley went to stand out at the railings, scanning the skies and hoping that his mom was still out there somewhere, waiting for him to come find her.

CHAPTER SIX

Corsa

It took them four days to reach Corsa, when it normally would have taken two.

Corsa was enormous compared to Riley's village on Shipbuilder Island. They had to approach during the day in order to navigate by sight to the docking area. Riley let Hannah handle the maneuvering, since she wanted to and was more familiar with Seeker. Riley went to the railing to watch their progress and check out the capital. His own island was probably around the same size, just so much more flat. They had small hills, sure, but everything was grass and rocks, a suitable habitat for sheep. Corsa was built vertically to pack more people into the same amount of space, and the multi-storied buildings all stacked together made Riley wonder how anyone ever saw the sunlight from down on the streets. Regal wasn't at the docks with all the other ships, but Riley assumed Feather had his own private dock somewhere on the island, probably with a big estate where he lived when he wasn't off harassing Librarians or Shipbuilders.

Hannah got them safely docked, with Riley waiting on deck to scan faces and see if anyone recognized Seeker or her passengers. It was possible that Feather had spread the word to his crews to be on the lookout. For the first time it occurred to Riley that Feather might actually have a different plan in mind. He might be waiting to see where Riley and Hannah went, thinking they would lead him to Miranda, or information about her. Riley suddenly felt a lot more uncomfortable with all the faces nearby. Every single one of them could be under Feather's employ, for all they knew.

When he tied the last mooring rope into place Hannah was coming across the deck, braids freshly done but still without a jacket, so he asked, "Hey, am I going to be stuck here watching the ship?"

Hannah stopped and frowned. "Watch the ship?"

"Uh-huh. So no one flies off with her."

"Oh." Hannah looked a little crestfallen, and then her expression shifted to fear.

"What's wrong?" Riley didn't think he'd ever paid as much attention to someone's face before, but Hannah's often gave away what was in her head before she spoke, which was useful.

"Nothing. It's fine." She smoothed her skirt, though there was nothing wrong with it, but the motion served to hide her face from Riley.

"Spit it out, Hannah."

She sighed and looked up again. "Fine. I've never been off-island by myself, okay? And I've never been to Corsa. There's a lot of...people."

Riley scanned the crowds on the docks again to give himself time to compose his face so that she wouldn't think he was laughing at her. There was one guy in the crowds, maybe a couple years older than them, who was taking notice of Seeker. He was close to the street, but moving their way. Riley kept glancing back to check his progress while he talked to Hannah.

"Listen, I can go instead. I mean, this Bookbinder has a shop, right? So it won't be weird if I go into his shop and say I know you. I can ask about your Librarian, and see if he knows anything about my mom. No sweat."

But Hannah was shaking her head. "I need to face my fears. You don't know what to ask him, and anyway why would he trust you that you know me?"

They were good points, but Riley didn't want Hannah to go off into the city alone when she was scared. They would have to figure something out.

The guy was much closer, still looking at Seeker. What was his deal? It looked like they were about to find out.

Riley nodded in the direction of the guy and said to Hannah, "Incoming. We need a cover story or something."

But it was too late, the guy was already coming right up to them.

Riley put on a casual smile and called out to the guy, "Can I help you?"

His original estimation seemed right--this guy was probably fourteen or so. He was a lot taller than either Riley or Hannah. He was skinny, almost underfed, and when he spoke his voice was rough like he wasn't used to using it much.

"I'm sorry," he said. "This ship. It's yours?"

Riley frowned. What was he supposed to answer to that? It wasn't his, and it wasn't really Hannah's either, though she was allowed to use it...

The guy ducked down to get a better look at the ship's name, and said, "Seeker, huh? A Library ship, then. The mate to Finder. Both built by Frederick the Shipbuilder a

good six, seven years ago." He was talking almost to himself, like Riley and Hannah weren't even there. He hadn't taken his eyes off the ship.

Riley watched him crane his neck to study the mast and sails. He threw a glance at Hannah to see if she could make sense of this strange guy's behavior, but she just shrugged. "Listen, um..."

The guy seemed surprised to hear someone talking to him. He looked back at Riley and Hannah and said, "I'm sorry. Carried away, again. She's a beautiful ship. Could I possibly--I mean, would it be too much to ask if I could--"

"Who are you?" Riley interrupted.

"Ah...right. My name is Jack. I'm no one, really, I just love ships. Especially ones made by Frederick the Shipbuilder. He does the best work."

"Yeah." Riley looked at Hannah, but she shrugged again. Did everyone on the islands know his parents?

They stood around awkwardly, Riley not sure what to do and Hannah not offering any suggestions. Jack just kept looking at Seeker, a dreamy expression on his face. There was no way Riley was going to leave Hannah alone with the ship now that some creepy guy was looking at it like he wanted it to be his.

Riley cleared his throat and shifted his weight. Jack picked up on the sound and looked back at him. "Do you think I could come aboard? It isn't often we get ships at the docks made by the Shipbuilder himself. I'd love to look around."

"I don't know if that's a great idea," Riley said.

Jack frowned. "I promise not to touch anything, if that's what you're worried about."

"I think I'm more worried about you trying to take her."

The look of surprise on Jack's face seemed pretty genuine. "Oh. No, you don't understand. I wouldn't ever...I mean...no, a ship as fine as this, she deserves to be flown. I hate flying. I just really love ships. Like I said."

"Uh-huh." Crazy. This guy was completely out of his mind. "Can I talk to you, Hannah, over here?" Riley gestured and they moved over to the door into the wheelhouse. "This guy is insane. I can't leave you here alone with him. You're going to have to go into the city by yourself."

Hannah was smiling, for some reason. "Maybe not. He's kind of...cute. I mean, the way he talks about the ship is

cute. Like, genuine. I don't think he's lying about not wanting to take her, and not liking flying. He could come in handy, Riley, he could stay with Seeker while we went into the city." She was excited, Riley could hear it in her voice, but now he started to think she was crazy, too.

"We don't know this guy. You really want to take that risk? Of their not being a ship for us when we get back here? For all we know he's working for Feather and just playing some game to trap us here."

Hannah shook her head. "Come on, Riley. Just trust me. I'm an excellent judge of character. I think we can trust him, and I think it would make our search go faster. Just let him stay here and admire the ship. No one's going to take Seeker under his watch."

Riley opened his mouth to argue some more but Hannah turned away and went to the railing to let Jack aboard. "This is such a bad idea," Riley muttered to himself.

Jack was still in some state of blissful serenity when they finally left. He had eagerly agreed to watch Seeker for them in exchange for being able to go aboard and examine her more closely. He said he had never actually been on one of the Shipbuilder's creations, and he was

honored. Riley had a hard time buying it...there was no way this guy was for real. But Hannah was adamant that they could trust him, and they needed to hurry if they wanted to try to slip off Corsa before Mr. Feather knew they were there, if he didn't already.

"I don't know if this is a good idea, Riley."

They were standing in the middle of a commercial street full of vendors, shoppers, and merchants. Hanging signs exhibiting a store's specialty hung over everyone's heads. Riley felt smothered by the tall buildings crowding up on either side. Compared to the open skies on deck of a flying ship, or the grassy hills on Shipbuilder Island, this was like being buried alive under twenty feet of rock.

Hannah wasn't the only one having trouble being in the city, but Riley could mask his discomfort for her sake.

"Look, there's nothing to be scared of. We can get this done faster if we split up, and you know exactly where I'll be. Don't worry."

She still looked concerned so Riley put a hand on her shoulder to get her to focus on him instead of the crowded street. He'd never been close to kids his age, so it was

strange to think that he and Hannah were starting to become friends. Spending all that time on the ship together had forced them to get to know each other, at least a little bit. "I'll be right here." He gestured to the store he was planning on entering. "When I'm done, I'll walk down the street in that direction." He pointed down the street. "Just don't go into any stores, and I'll catch up with you soon."

She nodded, and Riley nodded back to give her confidence. She really wasn't used to being around so many people, and Riley was surprised at the pang of worry he felt when he let go of her shoulder and entered the store. She would be okay, though. He knew more about journeying by ship and the supplies they would need, which was really saying something about her lack of knowledge, because it wasn't like Riley had been allowed to get much practice with this stuff. And she would probably spot the Bookbinder's shop more easily than he could, being an Assistant Librarian and everything. It sounded like she dealt with books some of the time, though maybe less often than he would have expected for someone with that title.

It made sense to do things the way they were doing them. He wouldn't let himself feel guilty for leaving her

in the crowded street to search on her own. The faster they found this Bookbinder and got on their way the faster they could find Riley's mom. She might be hurt, stuck somewhere, unable to fly back to Shipbuilder Island. She might have been hanging on for these two years, just waiting for someone to come find her, hiding from Feather's men for whatever reason. Now that the search had started in earnest, nothing was going to delay it.

Hannah had given him a sack of coins that she said came from the Library. She called it an allowance and said they often got paid for their services, and kept the money for expeditions like this. It was heavy, and Riley had to remind himself to spend it wisely. They needed more supplies, and they had no idea where they might be going next. Better to be over-prepared. Finding out the food had run out halfway through a voyage was nothing Riley ever wanted to experience, especially three or four or five days out from another island.

He negotiated for what they would need and paid the extra fee to have it delivered to the docks. They would be ready to go as soon as they knew where they were going. The shopkeeper didn't seem to mind that Riley was young when he saw that the currency was coins instead of barter items.

The coins were probably easier to use for things than trade items because they took up so much less space and didn't run the risk of going bad before you could sell them the way food did.

As he was leaving Riley spotted a rack of clothes. Hannah needed a jacket no matter where they ended up going--it got cold out in the wind on a flying ship. He picked out one that looked like it might be her size since it was slightly too small for Riley in the shoulders. It was dyed a dark blue, which explained how expensive it was compared to some of the other ones, but it was sturdy and lined with sheep's fur at the cuffs and collar. It would last her a good long while. He added it to the purchase and handed over the extra coins, a small part of him wishing that he was paying for it himself, but that was silly. He needed to save his own coins in case he needed them. He and Hannah might get separated, or she might find her Master Librarian sooner than they found Miranda. Then Riley and Hannah would part ways, and trying to keep up a friendship when they lived on different islands wasn't at all practical.

Back on the street Riley hurried down in the direction he had sent Hannah. The cobblestones were uncomfortable to walk on compared to the dirt roads in his village, but maybe they didn't have to deal with as much mud on the rare occasion that clouds rose high enough to rain on the islands.

He scanned all the people in the street, looking for braids and a blue skirt. After several minutes of walking he was worried that he'd missed her somehow. Maybe she ducked into a shop to escape the throng of people. But even seeing her cry that first day they had escaped the Library together, he knew she could be tough. She certainly had an obstinate pride, and Riley thought she probably didn't show many people when she was scared, normally. Either she really trusted him or she was too far out of her comfort zone to have any defenses. Maybe a little of both. He wondered what things might have been like if he had met Hannah under different circumstances. Maybe on a trip with his mom they would have gone to the Library and they all would have sat together to listen to one of Miranda's stories about her travels.

Riley was letting his attention wander. He should be looking for Hannah, and keeping an eye out for anyone who

might be working for Feather. He focused more closely on the faces of everyone he saw. He was much farther down the street, and everything looked older and less maintained. The people in the street seemed more suspicious, and every time one of them looked at Riley he wondered if they were working for Feather. One of the shops had a worn-down sign that was dangling from one side. The crowd had thinned out considerably and when two people in front of him moved aside he spotted Hannah. She was looking at the shop with the dangling sign, which Riley now saw had books painted on the weathered and stained wood.

He stopped beside her and looked in the shop window. It was dark inside, with vague shadowy impressions of stacks and stacks of books. Riley couldn't spot any sort of organization or order to it, they were just all over. Bookshelves were everywhere and hid the actual size of the shop.

"This is it?"

He saw Hannah nod in the corner of his vision.

"Well, here goes." Riley reached for the knob on the front door. He didn't expect it to turn, but it did. The door opened inward with no resistance, swinging clear and looking like it narrowly missed hitting a couple stacks of

books on the floor. The open doorway let in a little more light, but with the number of books and floor-to-ceiling bookcases they still couldn't see to the back of the shop.

Hannah stepped inside first, wending her way through the stacks. Riley followed, half expecting to see spiderwebs all over the place. It was dusty, definitely. In the light from the doorway Riley could see the dust particles swirling into the air that were disturbed by their passing.

Hannah was several feet ahead when a noise came from somewhere in the back of the shop. "Hello?" she called out. "Mr. Corulus?"

Silence from the back.

"Mr. Corulus," she repeated, "my name is Hannah, the Assistant Librarian. I've come to ask about the Master Librarian."

Again, silence.

One last attempt: "Mr. Corulus?"

Nothing.

Riley couldn't figure out why he felt so uneasy. It was probably a rat that knocked something over, making the noise they'd heard.

"Come on," he said, navigating around and ahead of Hannah in the stacks. "We'll just take a look, see if there's some clue for where he might have gone." It was easier to pretend to be brave for Hannah's sake. He could fool himself into believing it. Almost.

They wound through the obstacles, Riley wondering about why the store looked the way it did. It wasn't any way to run a business, that was for sure. And if he was a bookbinder, he must also have some place to make the books that he sold out here in the front. Finally Riley turned a corner around more bookshelves and saw a doorway.

The door was slightly ajar, letting some light filter through onto the bookcases. It was warm light, flickering from what Riley could see, so it must be candlelight. And candlelight usually meant that someone was home.

With a glance at Hannah to check her intentions--she nodded, they should go in--Riley pushed open the door.

They were presented with an empty room, homey and tidy, a direct contrast to the dusty, disorganized books of the front of the shop. In this back room the floors were swept, the cot in the corner was made up with a patterned quilt, and a little kitchen area in the far corner looked pristine. Against the right wall was a huge machine of some

sort, what Riley assumed was a printing press. He'd never seen one before, but since there were stacks of paper and ink bottles surrounding it he thought it a fair guess. A back door was wedged between the machine and another corner.

There was a little table, too, with a few chairs, and not much else. A chest in the corner close to the bed, maybe for clothes. It looked like the bookbinder lived here in the back of his shop, or at least spent enough time here to make it a second home.

Riley turned to Hannah, who was taking it all in as well. "What do you think?"

She shrugged. "The candles are lit."

Riley went over to the candle on the little table and lifted it. There wasn't much melted wax to drip down the sides, so that meant the candle hadn't been burning for too long. Maybe the noise they heard was someone here, and they'd left at the sound of Hannah's voice.

Riley pulled out a chair and sat down at the table. "We can probably wait here for a little while to see if he comes back. But if it takes too long I suggest we start asking around at the other shops, see if anyone else knows anything about my mom or your Master."

Hannah sat down opposite him with a sigh. "I've only ever heard the Master talk about Mr. Corulus. The Master doesn't really have friends, you know? It's just me and him at the Library, all the time. Sometimes he would come here to pick up a book, or supplies, but he was never gone long. I wouldn't know where else to look, or who else might know him here."

"Well, I'm sure a lot of people knew my mom, or at least heard of her. She always had jobs from people on Corsa, and anyway you knew her, so she obviously made the rounds."

They settled into a more or less comfortable silence. Riley thought about telling Hannah how she was brave to face the streets of Corsa, and that she should be proud of herself. It was the kind of thing he used to love hearing from his mom, actually. But Hannah was already standing up from the little table. She started pacing, occasionally going to pick up a book from just inside the shop. It made Riley antsy to hear her flipping through pages restlessly.

"Can you stop that? You're making me nervous."

Hannah snapped the book shut that she was holding. "Yeah, like I'm not already nervous enough for the both of us. I've never done anything like this before. I've never

had to. What gave the Master the right to leave me alone at the Library? Do you know what it was like, for that entire year, wondering if I would ever have a real person to talk to again?"

Obviously Riley had hit a sore spot. "You can't have gone an entire year without visitors. You said people came to the Library pretty often, looking for lost or forgotten information that might help them."

Hannah put the book down on the table, more forcefully than she must have intended because she looked a little surprised at the thump it made. "Of course there were people coming by. But what was I supposed to do, tell them I was all alone and ask them to rescue me? I have a duty to the Library. I shouldn't even have left at all. He shouldn't have disappeared and made me leave."

It was a good thing her anger wasn't directed at Riley, because he thought she looked ready to strangle someone. But she surprised him again by sitting down at the table and putting her head down in her arms. He sat there wondering what to do for a long time, hoping that she wasn't crying. Her shoulders weren't shaking and her breathing seemed normal, so that was a good sign.

"Hannah?"

She didn't respond at first, but then she raised her head and Riley saw how tired she looked. "Hey," he said, "we're going to get through this. It's not fair, it shouldn't have happened to either of us, but we're all they've got. We need to stick to it and find out what we can." He'd never given a pep talk before, and it felt strange trying to reassure someone when he felt so scared himself. But she was still looking at him. "Okay?"

She nodded and finally looked away. Riley let out the breath he hadn't known he'd been holding.

Hannah went to put the book back in the shop, and they continued to wait.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Bookbinder

The candle had burned down a full inch before anything happened. Hannah had crossed her arms on the table and rested her chin on them, staring at the candle flame. Riley was wondering what the time limit should be when the back door opened.

Riley and Hannah both stood up in a rush and watched an older man with a hat come into the room. As soon as he noticed them he feigned surprise, but Riley privately thought he was a terrible actor. And if he wasn't surprised they were there, then who else knew where they were?

Hannah took a step forward and addressed the old man. "My name is Hannah. And this is Riley. We're sorry to have barged in like this, but we're looking for a Mr. Corulus."

The man hung his hat on a peg near the back door and stepped up to them. "What a pleasure," he said. "I am Mr. Corulus, and you must be the Assistant Librarian, and you must be the Shipbuilder's son." He nodded to each of them as he said it, and Riley was immediately more suspicious. Someone must have told Mr. Corulus that they were traveling

together, because as far as Riley knew his name wasn't well-known the way his father's and mother's were.

Mr. Corulus walked past them to the kitchen area, saying, "Have a seat, please. I'll make us some tea. We can have a nice chat."

They sat, but Riley caught Hannah's eyes while Mr. Corulus' back was to them. He shook his head, looking from Mr. Corulus to the back door and back at Hannah. She seemed to get the message because she said, "Oh, we wouldn't want to be a bother. We really just have one question for you, and then we have to be on our way."

"Nonsense," Mr. Corulus replied. "You have to have some tea, it's only proper. I regret that I don't have anything sweeter to offer you children--my appetite for sweets has greatly decreased with my old age."

Riley bristled a little at being called a child. Sure, they were young, but children?

They waited while Mr. Corulus got the tea things ready, which he brought over on a little tray. He didn't seem to be in a talking mood, at least not until the tea was ready, because he kept his back to them the whole time. Riley kept glancing at the back door and keeping an ear attuned to the front of the shop. This felt too much like

stalling for time on Mr. Corulus' part. Riley wanted information and then he wanted to get out.

"Mr. Corulus," he spoke up, "you know the Master Librarian?"

The old man didn't respond right away. He was filling the teapot with water and hanging it over the fireplace, which Riley realized wasn't even lit yet. This was going to take longer than they had time for.

They needed a different approach. Riley got up and went over to the fireplace. "Here, Mr. Corulus, let me do that. You should go sit down and rest." Two could play the patronizing game.

Riley started building the fire and smiled a little at the genuine surprise on Mr. Corulus' face. He hadn't seen that one coming.

"Why thank you," Mr. Corulus said. He got up and went to sit at the table with Hannah, who glared at Riley when Mr. Corulus couldn't see. Riley just shrugged and nodded at her to try to get him to talk.

Hannah repeated Riley's question: "You know the Master, don't you, sir?"

Mr. Corulus sat down with a loud sigh of contentment, but once he was sitting there weren't any more excuses to

put off the conversation, so he responded. "Yes, child, the Master and I go way back. He used to come here sometimes for some of the books he wanted to add to that impressive collection of his, and he would talk about you. Quite a handful you were, from the sound of things."

Riley saw Hannah blush and look down at the table. Now was no time to get caught off guard or manipulated by this guy. Riley was almost sure now that he was playing some sort of game, and they couldn't risk the consequences slowing them down. He spoke up. "Mr. Corulus, when did you last see the Master Librarian?"

"Oh, I'd say about a year ago, maybe a little less. He was in quite a hurry if I remember right, the same as the two of you."

Riley was still working on getting the fire going, but he could split his attention pretty well. "And what did he want, when he came here?"

"Well, he was wondering if I'd heard anything from my little grapevine on the island."

Hannah finally seemed to have recovered, so she took over. "Heard anything about what, sir?"

"Well, about why this boy's mother might have stolen an artifact of Mr. Feather's, actually, and ran away with it."

That was news to both of them. "What do you mean, an artifact?" Riley asked at the same time that Hannah said, "Ran away?"

Hannah and Riley looked at each other. Riley couldn't tell what Hannah was thinking. Surely she wasn't going to judge his mother for something this old bat said. They had both run from Mr. Feather together. Riley knew Hannah was scared of him. And if his mom had stolen something from him, it would be for a good reason. The disappearing, though, that still didn't make sense. She should have come home, she should have told Riley and his father that she was in trouble, or needed help.

Mr. Corulus got up and started fiddling in the cupboards above his kitchen sink. He took down a jar of honey and some spoons. "You know," he said, "the last time I saw that woman, she seemed in a bit of a hurry as well. She wanted to know where she could get her special compass fixed, you see. An intricate little thing like that needed a real craftsman. Then she rushed out of here as if someone was on her tail. I didn't give it a second thought, she was

always rushing away on some job or another. But it's curious, now, don't you think?"

Riley didn't want to sit here and listen to this old man say anything more about his mother. He wanted to end this, right now. "And did you know a craftsman who could help with the compass?"

Mr. Corulus nodded. "Of course. Brilliant man on Merchant Island, comes to get books for his young children sometimes."

Riley nodded. Time to lie through his teeth. "That was nice of you to help," he said. "But Mr. Corulus, we really came to ask you if you know where the Master Librarian might have gone. He hasn't been back to the Library since you saw him."

Mr. Corulus nodded. "Yes, I gathered that, when Mr. Feather came to talk to me this morning."

Hannah stood up, backing away from the table. Finally she was getting it. They definitely weren't safe here.

But Mr. Corulus kept talking. "You see, children, all trade depends on Mr. Feather. He runs the skies, and quite a few of the people in power on our island here as well. When he's displeased with you, life becomes very difficult. You saw my shop in the front. No one buys from me anymore.

No requests for books to be made, no copies selling of the old ones. All the beautiful information contained within, and no one wants a single one. I haven't had a customer in nine months."

"I'm real sorry for the trouble you're in, Mr. Corulus." The sarcasm was overdone, but Riley was pissed. "But that's no reason to sell out your friend." Riley grabbed Hannah's hand. "Come on, Hannah. We need to find someone who might be able to actually help us." If Mr. Corulus thought that they were still stumped for information then he wouldn't expect them to fly right off of Corsa. It might buy them some time. "Let's go."

Hannah came without protest, though Riley could see that she was still shocked and starting to be appalled. Mr. Corulus didn't stop them from going out the back door, and Riley realized their mistake as soon as he thought how strange it was for Mr. Corulus to just let them go.

There were two men on either side of the alley. They weren't wearing any particular uniform and they were just leaning on the walls trying to look casual, but Riley knew they would try to stop them. They must be some of Mr. Feather's men.

"Whatever happens, don't let go of my hand unless I say, okay?" he whispered to Hannah. She nodded. "Don't look so scared. They don't know that we know who they are, yet. Just act casual. We're just going to walk right out of here."

He had to say something to get Hannah to play along, even if he didn't believe it himself. They started walking in the direction of the man that Riley judged to be shorter and less muscular. Might as well give themselves a fighting chance. It might have been better to go out the front of the store--at least in a crowded street Mr. Feather's men would have more trouble catching them. But this was where they were, and they would just have to deal with it.

Hannah was gripping Riley's hand too tight. It hurt, but he didn't want to ask her to stop. She was scared and relying on him, and he couldn't disappoint.

Riley glanced behind them, trying to look casual about it. The man from the other side of the alley had started walking toward them, still trying to look nonchalant and unthreatening with his hands in his pants pockets. Riley wasn't fooled.

He got close to Hannah's ear, smiling so that it looked like he was just whispering a joke or secret. "We're

going to have to go on the offensive. When we get to this guy in front of us I need you to kick him as hard as you can, preferably in the knee. He won't expect you to fight, so he's going to go for me first."

Hannah nodded. She wasn't doing a good job at keeping her expression clear. She looked worried and scared, so Riley picked up the pace a little.

Ten more steps. The man was putting his cigar out on the wall he was leaning against.

Seven steps. He was straightening up, taking a more balanced stance.

Five steps. He was stepping toward them to close the gap--

"Now!" Riley yelled.

He shoved Hannah to his left as if telling her to run away, hoping that she understood and still did what he'd told her to do. Riley crouched a little as if to spring up at the guy, distracting him just long enough for Hannah to kick out his knee from the side. She'd packed a real punch in the kick, because the man went down at once with a loud groan.

"Run!" Riley yelled again.

Hannah turned to run but the man on the ground reached out to grab her and got hold of her leg. The man from down the alley was running toward them. They didn't have time for this.

Riley kicked out himself, this time at the man's face. He tried to angle it so that his foot was coming down with a lot of weight behind it. The man got an arm up in time to block, but the impact did loosen his grip on Hannah and she was able to pull free.

She proved her bravery then by reaching back for Riley's hand instead of taking off right away. They ran together, going as fast as they could without turning an ankle or falling on the cobblestones.

The other man was following them--Riley looked back in time to see him jump over his fallen comrade to keep chasing them. And the man on the ground was even trying to stand up, either to follow or to go get others to help. They needed to get back out onto the main street, where they could blend in with all the people. There might be plenty more of Feather's men out there, but they had to risk it. Better than the open visibility in this alley.

"Come on," Riley said as he pulled Hannah through the first side alley they came across, which ran out onto the

big street. She was breathing hard and Riley heard her sob a little, but they didn't have time to stop to catch their breath. They had to get back to the ship, and fast. Assuming that Feather hadn't found it and grounded it, somehow.

They rushed out onto the street, which was thankfully still crowded with people bartering and shopping for wares. Riley knew the only chance they stood was getting to the ship before Feather and his men, so instead of stopping to walk to better blend in he pulled Hannah along and they kept running, dodging carts and people as fast as they could.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Flight

Riley was in better shape than Hannah, probably because there wasn't much space to run around at the Library compared to the hills of Shipbuilder Island. Still, after a few minutes of running every breath felt like daggers down his throat. Hannah was clutching at her side, gasping but still struggling gamely on.

"Come on," he managed to say. "Have to get...to the docks..."

Hannah put on a small burst of speed, calling on her reserves of energy, and Riley was grateful for the lessened pull on his arm while she kept pace with him a little better.

The street was crowded, which was a blessing but carried its own consequences. They couldn't always move as fast as they wanted to, having to weave around so many obstacles. People tended to get angry and yell at two kids who were running through a crowded street, so they left a clear trail complete with sound for Feather's men to follow.

Finally they reached the end of the main market street and everything got less complicated. There were less people

on the streets leading to the docks, which meant it was an all-out race to get there faster than the men who were hot on their tail.

There was a dicey moment when Hannah tripped once, but Riley pulled her up and on. They were almost there.

They rounded the last corner and saw the docks spread out below them. There was Seeker, at the very last dock, dwarfed by so many of the other ships loading and unloading their cargo. Riley hoped all of the men employed on Feather's various ships hadn't heard about detaining two kids, because if they had they were running straight into Feather's army.

They made it onto the wooden boards of the dock, though, and Riley spared a glance behind them. There were at least three men coming after them, and they were still a little too far for Riley to make out what they were yelling, but as soon as they got close enough he was sure all the adults on the docks would be trying to stop him and Hannah. He pulled her on faster, taking the turns on the narrow dock with reckless speed. He even bumped into a few stacks of crates on the way, some of them tumbling down the full twenty feet onto the netting that was always hung below docking areas. If he or Hannah fell down there, not

only would they be bruised and sore for days from the landing, but they were as good as caught because it took a long time to get someone back up onto the dock from the nets.

Finally they were coming up on Seeker. Her deck meant safety, and a chance to catch their breath. Riley pulled Hannah faster, which he hadn't thought possible until he did it. Jack was on deck, looking at them over the railing. He had hung a blanket over the side of the ship for some reason, but then Riley saw that it covered up Seeker's name on the hull. Riley yelled out as loud as he could, "Power up!" He had no idea if Jack would cooperate, so he was surprised and pleased to see him rush back toward the wheelhouse. And then they were there, they were on Seeker's deck, and Riley could hear the hum of the solar sails powering up and it was the sweetest thing.

Riley looked back at the docks and saw the three men getting closer. One of them peeled away to yell at a group of sailors clustered around a cargo ship. It must be one of Feather's, and they were being recruited for the chase.

Riley yelled toward the wheelhouse, "Get us out of here, Jack!"

Hannah had fallen to the deck and was clutching at her ankle, still gasping for breath.

The men were closing in, and now there were more of them. They were on the arm of the docks that led to the ship, then halfway down it, when the ship finally started moving. Thankfully Hannah had situated Seeker so that the bow was facing outward, so they just had to accelerate forward to clear the docks.

They weren't moving fast enough, though, and the group of men reached the end of the dock. One of them just didn't stop running and leapt for the opening in the railing that was still even with the dock's level.

Riley saw what was going to happen and jumped over Hannah to grab the crossbar that swung into place to connect the railing when they were in the air so that people didn't go sliding off the deck. He slammed it around into place just as the man was landing on the edge, having successfully leapt from the dock that was sliding away beside them more rapidly now.

The crossbar hit the man square across the stomach and he was flung off the deck. The dock had just slipped away behind the opening, so Riley watched as the man fell into empty space. The nets here were well designed and the man

landed almost at the edge of them. He was alive. Riley didn't need anyone's death on his conscience. He just wanted to find his mom, dammit.

He kept watching to make sure that they were well clear of the docks. The men they'd left behind were clustered together, shouting and gesticulating. Some of them split off to get a rope ladder to help the fallen sailor back up to the dock, and others were already running back into the city, no doubt to warn Feather. There would be ships after them, soon.

Riley ran into the wheelhouse. "We're clear for now, but they're going to be after us soon. I'm sorry you got wrapped up in this, Jack. You saved us, though. Thank you."

Jack just nodded and gripped the wheel tight enough to whiten his knuckles. Riley remembered Jack had said he didn't like flying. Well, he was stuck with them for now.

Riley nodded and went back out to the deck. He was glad Jack wasn't asking questions yet. They needed to regroup and figure out what they were doing, but first he needed to see if Hannah was okay.

She was still curled up on the deck, holding her leg just below the knee. She was crying, but trying to put on a

brave face and hold it in. Riley could see the streaks of tears falling down and soaking into the collar of her shirt.

"Hey, what's wrong? Is it your ankle?" He knelt down next to her.

She nodded.

"Okay. You must have twisted it when you tripped, and running on it didn't help any. But ankles aren't any big deal, right? One time this kid in the village busted his when he was chasing after a sheep that had wandered away from the herd. The very next week he was running on it again, no problem. It'll be okay."

Hannah nodded, sniffing a little.

Riley pulled out a handkerchief and smiled at her. At least they had gotten away--she wouldn't be able to do much running or even walking in the days to come, but she didn't have to now that they were on the ship. And Merchant Island was only two days away--they would be there in no time, pick up the trail, and be off again looking for his mom and the Master Librarian.

He went back into the wheelhouse to get Jack to help him carry Hannah in there. She only cried out once when they set her down on a chair at the charting table and her foot touched the ground. Riley took over the piloting to

bring them under the clouds to hide out for a while and throw off pursuit. Jack busied himself setting up another chair next to Hannah with a pillow on it for her to rest her foot on. They would elevate her ankle and make sure she didn't walk on it, and Jack found the medical kit with a bandage compress that they could wrap her ankle in.

Getting her shoe and sock off was a painful experience for all of them. Hannah was in real pain every time her ankle was jostled, and Riley felt guilty at hurting her as they pulled off her shoe. It was necessary, though, if they wanted her ankle to heal. He made Jack go to the wheel to hold their course steady while he wrapped Hannah's ankle, being as gentle as he could.

Once they were settled Riley put together some food for all of them, and they sat down together to strategize.

"We're headed to Merchant Island," Riley began.

Hannah had immediate objections. "Riley, we don't know if your mom even went to this compass person. She could have just gone off somewhere else. Mr. Corulus said she left in a hurry, remember?"

Riley stared her down until she stopped talking. "Yes, and besides the fact that we shouldn't trust him because he tried to get us captured, I know my mom. She didn't fly

anywhere without that compass. She would have gotten it fixed before she went anywhere else."

Hannah was frowning at him and Riley was about to ask her what her problem was when Jack spoke up. "Not that I mind seeing one of Frederick's ships in action, but, what exactly have I gotten into the middle of?"

Hannah turned to look at Jack. "Oh, I'm so sorry, Jack. And you don't even like flying."

Riley wasn't so sure, but he at least didn't have any evidence yet that pointed to Jack being a plant. He wouldn't put it past Feather to hire some young guy to "follow" them. Jack was looking a little distraught, but maybe he was a good actor. "Here's the deal, Jack. We can't go back there to drop you off. But we're going to Merchant Island, and you can get off there. We'll leave you some money, or something, to get back to Corsa."

"I like to know what I'm involved in. Why were those men chasing you? Am I going to be in danger while I'm with the two of you?"

Hannah looked really upset now, but Riley didn't have as much sympathy for Jack. They didn't know him, and now their supplies would be stretched pretty thin since Riley hadn't planned on three people when he'd bought them.

"Jack, maybe you could give Hannah and me a moment to talk alone?"

Jack didn't look happy about it, but Riley didn't really care. He waited until Jack had left the wheelhouse and his footsteps had receded before he spoke to Hannah. "We need to be careful. There's no reason to trust this guy. It's all just a little too convenient. Corulus was waiting for us to show up, he'd been tipped off before we even got there. He obviously left as soon as he heard us enter the shop, to tip off Feather's men. And Jack was practically on top of us from the moment we docked. Waiting, same as Corulus. I don't like it, and I don't think we should trust him."

"Not everyone on the islands is out to get us, Riley." She folded her arms over her chest and looked cross. "Jack seems like a nice person. Weren't you watching his face? Can't you see he's telling us the truth about not liking flying, and admiring Seeker because she was built by your father?"

"Even if he is telling the truth about those things, it doesn't mean he isn't working for Feather anyway. I bet Feather could pay him enough money to buy his own damn ship if he turned us in."

Hannah shook her head. "You can't be suspicious of everyone. We're going to be spending a lot of time with him, and we could use the help around here. Just think, one more person to take a shift piloting, and we'll both get more sleep."

"I thought we were doing just fine without him." Riley got up to check their course. Jack just complicated everything. By the time they let him off at Merchant Island he would know far too much about them and where they were going. Riley grudgingly considered the possibility that Jack wasn't working for Feather, and that was a bad situation too, because it meant Jack would probably be captured and made to talk if Feather knew he'd been with them. If they didn't know that Corsa was teeming with Feather's men already, Riley might have risked sneaking back there at night and dropping Jack off again.

"I'm going to talk to him. You stay here, okay?"

Hannah raised an eyebrow and looked at her ankle. She wasn't going anywhere. "Be nice, please, Riley. You don't know if he's just some guy who likes ships a little too much."

Riley found Jack in the galley putting away some of their new supplies. "So you're going to help out while you're stuck with us?"

Jack set down the bag he was unpacking and sat down at the small table. "So do I get to hear what I've gotten myself into?"

Riley sat down facing him and crossed his arms. "I'm not sure what to tell you when I don't know whether to trust you or not."

"Cute." Jack crossed his arms, too. "Hannah's really sweet. Very trusting."

Riley narrowed his eyes. "You might want to be careful there, Jack."

"Why? What's the point? You don't trust me, and I wouldn't trust me either if I were in your shoes. So, in for a penny, in for a pound, right? Look, I'm not after your girl, I'm not after your ship. I'd like to get back onto solid ground."

"My girl?" Riley sputtered. "She's not my girl."

Jack got up and waved a dismissive hand. "Yeah, yeah. Can we just cut all this crap? I'm not some undercover spy. My stupid obsession got me pulled into who-knows-what-this-is, and you're not going to trust me and I'm stuck on this

beautiful ship with thousands of feet of empty air directly below her hull." He was really agitated, pacing back and forth in the limited space available.

"Woah, okay." Riley thought Jack was right about one thing. In for a penny, in for a pound. If this guy was acting he was really good, so Riley might as well go along with it. He had enough to worry about without having to watch their backs while they were on Seeker, too. He would deal with whatever came. In the meantime, they could make Jack useful.

"Sit down," Riley said. When Jack didn't move to do so he added a polite, "Please."

Jack sat and looked expectantly at Riley.

"I don't have time to go into the whole story, but the highlights are this. I'm looking for someone, Hannah is looking for someone, and both someones are people that Mr. Feather wants to find."

"The Mr. Feather?"

Riley nodded.

"Great. Just great. You've got the most influential man on the islands chasing us?"

Riley shrugged. "It's just the way it is, mate. You're gonna have to deal. And when we drop you off on Merchant

Island, you'd probably better keep it quiet that you know us. Or else Feather might want to have a chat with you."

"A lucrative chat, if you're the two he was looking for this morning."

Riley raised an eyebrow.

"Word was spreading this morning. Two kids, a reward for information, a bigger reward if they were detained. I guess it hadn't spread around the docks yet, otherwise you would have been stopped before you could even finish docking. There wasn't a description, but there will be now. They know what you look like and what ship you were on. Enough people were starting to stare at Seeker before I covered up her name on the hull anyway. Putting two and two together, I guess."

This was bad news, and definitely meant they couldn't go back to Corsa, but it didn't mean their plan was shot. Feather might not have gotten the message as far as Merchant Island yet. They could be okay to go there, still.

Something was strange about Jack's story, though. "So you knew Feather was looking for two kids, and you didn't think anything was weird about two "kids" showing up in their own ship?"

Jack shrugged and gave a half-smile. "I'm not that blind. I did really want to check out Seeker. And maybe my curiosity got the best of me."

"Uh-huh."

"What, you're saying you wouldn't be the least bit curious about why a man like Mr. Feather is after some kids? And it's not like it didn't already come back to bite me. I'm flying, aren't I?"

"What does flying have to do with anything?"

"I hate it, man. I'm...well, I'm scared of heights. Or rather, drops. It's...not fun, for me."

That deserved a healthy look of surprise and skepticism.

Jack just shrugged again. "Believe me or don't, it's your call. Just don't make me go out on deck if we can help it."

Riley got up. He had a lot to think about, and he needed to check their course and go over the supplies and a million other things.

Before he got to the door Jack got one last question in. "Hey, who is it that you're both looking for?"

Riley didn't turn around, just put a hand on the doorway and tried not to give away any emotion. "Hannah's

looking for the Master Librarian. And I'm looking for Miranda, the Expeditionist. My mom."

Out on the deck there was plenty of cloud mist obscuring everything. He checked the power indicator on the mast and calculated in his head how long they would have before they had to resurface. They could probably get by with staying under the clouds until a couple hours before sunset, but that was still cutting it close. With three people they could sail for half the night without depleting a fully-charged engine too much, and everyone would be able to get into a more normal sleep pattern.

He heard Hannah and Jack's voices coming from the wheelhouse, but he didn't feel like joining them. He wasn't in a very social mood. Instead he would take an inventory of all their supplies and try to get things in order for what was to come. When he passed by the wheelhouse on his way to the storeroom he saw that Hannah had the new jacket resting on her shoulders. Jack must have found it in the supplies and given it to her. So much for Riley being the one who thought to buy it for her in the first place. Jack would probably get the credit now. Having him around was making everything more complicated.

CHAPTER NINE

Directions

It took them less than two days to reach Merchant Island. They were flying northwest, so for a few hours when the sun was setting they flew entirely above the clouds. Any pursuer would have the sun in their eyes and might not be able to pick out the ship. Unfortunately speed was more important than stealth this time. They needed to get to Merchant Island before word spread to everyone to be watching for them.

Hannah slept in the wheelhouse since she said it was too painful to move. Jack spent most of his time in there as well, not seeming to require much sleep. He kept his eyes averted from looking out the window most of the time, which meant he was usually looking at Hannah and talking to her. Riley did everything else. He set out the water harvesting nets and cleaned the deck and shooed away all the interloping birds who thought they could take a rest on Seeker in between islands. He managed to net them some fresh meat, and he loved the work of being on a ship and seeing things running smoothly, but he'd been wrong about getting more sleep. Since Jack wouldn't go on deck and

Hannah couldn't walk much there was too much to do. As a result Riley was on a very short fuse, and after the second time he had snapped at Hannah and been looked at reproachfully by Jack he started avoiding their company as much as possible.

It was better to stay busy to try to keep his mind off things. He was updating their inventory again when Jack came to talk to him.

"Hey. So, we're going to be there soon, right?"

Riley set down the paper and pencil. "Yes. And you're wondering what happens to you when we get there."

Jack nodded and stuck his hands in his pockets, looking casual about the whole thing.

"You get to be on solid ground again. You try not to talk about us, you stay clear of Feather and his men. Someone's always going between Corsa and Merchant Island. You can find passage back home."

"Home." Jack leaned against the wall and looked contemplative. "That's an interesting word."

Riley didn't have time for this. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about never really feeling at home on Corsa. I don't know if you've seen the work of some of the

shipbuilders there, but it's...well. It pales in comparison."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"I want to meet your dad."

Right. That was a good one.

"Hannah told me who your dad is, and I'd like to meet him. I could help out, I could keep the ship safe. Three pairs of eyes are better than two. And eventually, when you go back home, I want to meet your dad."

"Yeah. Home." Riley laughed. What an absurd situation. "Listen, man, there's no guarantee I'm ever going home again. You want passage to Shipbuilder Island, find that with someone else. We're on the run. We have priorities that don't include you. And if it's all the same to you I'd rather not keep around someone who might be working for the enemy."

Riley left the paper and pencil behind. He could finish inventory later. He needed space right now, and at least if he went on deck Jack wouldn't follow him.

"Hannah said it was okay," Jack called out as he retreated.

"Of course she did," Riley muttered to himself. He changed his mind and went to the wheelhouse instead.

"You're taking a huge risk, just because you get along with him. You think he's charming because he wants you to think that."

Hannah was already frowning with her arms crossed, looking very stubborn and unapproachable. "I didn't say anything about charming. He's a nice person, Riley. He's genuine. You don't want to see that, fine. But it makes more sense to bring him with us. He still knows how to pilot, Riley."

"Yeah, great, the I'm-so-afraid-of-heights-I-won't-go-on-deck guy piloting the ship. I feel so safe."

Hannah's eyes were filling up with tears, and Riley almost backed down because of it. He didn't need to feel guilty about hurting Hannah's feelings on top of everything else.

"I know what you're going through," she said. "I'm missing someone, too. But you've been really mean lately, and at least with Jack around I have someone nice to talk to."

"You have no idea what I'm going through. You didn't lose a mother in this whole mess."

"No, Riley, I never HAD a mother. No parents, remember? Growing up alone with the Master in the Library? No other kids, just visits from Miranda to look forward to, since she was the only person who would talk to me."

Riley sighed and sat down.

"Be a martyr all you want, Riley, but Seeker belongs to the Library, and as the Assistant Library I get to say who stays and who goes. And Jack is staying. Do you have any idea how much he wants to help, and how long he's wanted to meet your father?"

There wasn't any good response to that. At least none without anger in it, so Riley nodded at Hannah and left to finish his preparations.

They found a sheltered spot to drop Riley off on Merchant Island. It wasn't flat the way Corsa was, and didn't have all the rolling hills that Shipbuilder Island had that made it so ideal for the sheep. Merchant Island was basically one big hill, instead, with all the houses situated on the top and spreading down about halfway, and then warehouses and factories below that. They approached just after sunset, and the side of the island opposite the main docks didn't seem to have many people out and about.

Hannah had argued that she should come with Riley, but there was no way she could climb down the rope ladder in her condition, let alone run if they had to again.

Riley jumped off the ladder onto solid ground, then gave it a tug to signal Jack that he could pull it up. He'd agreed to go out on deck for that, but was steadfast about not looking over the side. Then Jack was going to lower the ship below the island off to the side so that there was less chance of it being seen. They had set Hannah up on deck with blankets and her ankle still propped up, so that she could watch for Riley's signal to come back and pick him up. He patted his pack one more time, to make sure the candle was in there that he would need to signal them with.

The terrain was different here. On Shipbuilder Island everything was grass. They had plenty of land to roam the sheep on, they just had to make sure everything got enough water and that the sheep didn't stay in one area too long, eating everything and trampling the land.

Here on Merchant Island the ground was rocky and uncomfortable to walk on. He supposed they didn't really need soil to grow anything here. Enough ships came by to pick up the trade goods of clothes and furniture and everything else that they probably had a steady enough

system of acquiring their food. Still, it seemed strange to Riley that they wouldn't have some sort of safeguard system of vegetable gardens in case the ships didn't come.

Flying ships were the lifeblood of the island infrastructure. Without them the islands would be isolated. Shipbuilder Island might do okay with the wool and meat from the sheep, and the few milch goats they kept around. Most of the herders grew their own vegetable patches, so they might be okay in that regard as well. But when a water harvesting net broke down? Or when they started to need the fruit in their diets that only came from the orchards on the Agriculture Islands? And wool wasn't a practical thing to make all their clothes with. They needed the flying ships, they needed the trade that helped support all the islands and allowed for diversification. Even Corsa didn't have its own system for producing food. They had it all flown in from the Agriculture Islands.

Merchant Island was a bleak place, from Riley's point of view. Rocky and full of dirty warehouses and factories. It was so dark in the alleys between the big buildings that he briefly considered lighting his candle to find his way through. That would just draw attention to him, though, and it was best to do this with as much stealth as he could.

He didn't meet anyone on his way into the center of the island. Everyone probably went home around the time the sun went down. The roads were packed dirt, so he didn't have to worry about someone hearing him go by. He was surprised at how much the atmosphere lightened when he got up to the houses. The roads broadened a little and there was plenty of starlight to see by, as well as the warm glows coming from so many of the windows on the houses. The problem was, every person he saw looked a little too interested in him at first, and then avoided his gaze as much as possible when he looked back at them.

Riley kept walking, hoping he would get lucky and find a kid outside who he could ask directions of. The kids might not have heard to be watching for someone who looked like him. Merchant Island was definitely smaller than Corsa, and it had more individual houses than big complexes where many families lived at once. That meant far less people in the streets, and Riley wasn't spotting a single kid.

After another five minutes of walking he was getting ready to go knock on a front door. It was conspicuous, sure. It was risky, if the people inside thought there was a problem with someone Riley's age being out on his own at

night. But it seemed like a better option than trying to talk to someone on the street where everyone else around could overhear.

Riley missed his own village, knowing that if he were there he could knock on any of the doors and be welcomed with open arms. There was something special about everyone knowing you. Corsa had been oppressive with its dense population. No one looked at each other on the streets or waved as they passed by. Riley hadn't thought it possible for people to be so isolated and alone when they lived so close together.

Maybe Merchant Island was a sort of middle ground between the two extremes, though. Riley hoped so, anyway, since he'd be knocking on a stranger's door and hoping they didn't slam it in his face. He started down a path to a front door but stopped when he heard a door a few houses down open up. A kid younger than Riley came out carrying a bag of trash. He went to put it in a bin on the side of the house, and Riley approached to stop him before he went back inside.

"Hey."

The kid stopped and looked at him, unafraid. "Hi."

"I was wondering if you could help me."

The kid stared at him. "You don't look familiar. You just move here, or something?"

"Uh, yeah, something like that. Listen, do you know where I could get a compass fixed?"

The kid nodded. "Sure. You got to find the Tinker's house. It's not too far from here. Go up this street, turn right, then left, and look for the one with the chimes in front."

"Chimes?"

"Yeah, the ones that make noise when the wind blows. You'll see it."

"Thanks for the help."

"No problem." The kid waved goodbye and went back into his house.

So maybe the kids hadn't heard to be looking for someone like Riley. It was something to keep in mind.

Riley followed the directions and found the house exactly where the kid had said it was. Most of the windows showed lights on inside, and there were children's toys strewn randomly about the front area of the house. Riley stepped over a small wheeled contraption on the path and took a good look at the chimes hanging by the door. A

breeze rattled them and they sang out with clear, pleasing notes.

The house might have looked friendly from farther away, but once he was at the front door he felt intimidated by its height and how sturdy it looked. They might not even hear him knock, the wood looked so thick.

Hanging beside the door was a rope with a loop on the end. Riley pulled on it and then jumped back when a bell's ringing sounded from inside the house. Had the rope done that?

It was too late to back down now. He waited to see if anyone would answer the door, glancing to either side as he did. There wasn't anyone on the street here to see where he went, but all the same he shouldn't risk going inside. They could easily have been trapped at the Bookbinder's Shop if Mr. Feather's men had come inside to get them.

After a minute or so the door did swing open, but Riley had to adjust his gaze downward to see who had opened it. It was a small child, probably only five or six years old.

"Help you?" the little boy asked.

"Hi," Riley said, trying to sound unthreatening. "I was wondering if there was someone here who fixes things. Maybe your dad?"

"Sure. Whatcha got needs fixing?"

"I don't have...I wanted to ask a question." Riley cleared his throat. "I wanted to ask your dad a question."

The little boy seemed to consider this for a moment, then nodded. "Come on, then." He turned away, gesturing for Riley to follow him.

Riley called out, "Wait, can't you..." but the little boy was already out of sight. He'd left the door open, obviously expecting Riley to follow him inside. This plan was already going wrong. The darkness at Riley's back felt inviting; he could leave, go back to the ship, tell them he hadn't found the Tinker. They would just go island by island until they found his mom. But she might need him sooner than that. She might be running out of food wherever she was. She might be injured. He needed to just suck it up and take the risk.

So Riley followed the little boy into the house, closing the front door behind him to be polite. It felt like cutting off an escape route, but he should play nice

while he was a guest in someone's home until he knew for sure whether they meant him harm or not.

It was homey inside, very lived-in. There were toys all over the floor, and all the upholstered furniture looked like it had seen better days. Riley went to the right, the direction the little boy had gone, and passed through what looked like a family room with couches. He heard voices from the next room, and when he got to the doorway he saw that it was a dining room, and a man and woman were eating with their four children.

At least, there was a sort of "let's sit down for dinner" vibe, but none of the kids were in their seats, and the woman was just walking away carrying a dish, to what Riley assumed was the kitchen beyond. One kid was standing on top of his chair and aiming to throw something at a sibling, the smallest was currently crawling under the table, and the one who had answered the door was tugging on his dad's sleeve, trying to get his attention.

"Yes, what is it?" The man turned to look at his son with a look of practiced patience on his face.

The little boy pointed to Riley, standing in the doorway.

"Oh!" The man stood up, wiping his mouth on his napkin and placing that on the table. He walked toward Riley, saying, "I'm so sorry, please excuse my manners. We weren't expecting company, I thought it might have just been a child at the door asking to borrow one of my children's toys. It's so important to teach them sharing at their age, you know."

Riley nodded, but he was a little confused.

"Here now, come into the family room and we can talk." He herded Riley back into the room he'd come through, and then called out behind him, "Jude, I'm with a visitor, can you make sure the kids finish dinner?"

There was no response, but the man didn't seem concerned. He gestured for Riley to sit on the sofa, and he took the armchair opposite. "Now, what can I do for you?"

If it wasn't weird enough, sitting on this guy's couch after he'd interrupted him at dinner, Riley also saw that the youngest kid was now clinging to the dining room doorway, peeking his head out and staring at Riley. Arms appeared and grabbed the kid, and Riley heard the mom say something about finishing food.

The man was waiting patiently, just staring at Riley. "Um, sir--"

"Brian, please call me Brian."

"Right. Brian. I was wondering if you were the person who fixes things?"

He was already nodding. "Yes, yes, that's me. The children around the neighborhood call me the Tinker, can you imagine? I do love to make things. It's a bit of a hobby of mine." He gestured to all the intricate toys that crowded the floors. It was good he had four kids, so that all the toys would get played with, because there were a lot.

"Do you have something that needs to be fixed, son?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, my name is Riley."

"Riley, then. Pleased to meet you. I would introduce you to the whole brood, but they need to finish their dinner, first." He said the last part menacingly and over his shoulder, and Riley saw that the little boy who had answered the door was taking his turn at peeking in at them. He slipped out of sight at his dad's words, though, and Riley couldn't help but smile.

"Sir--"

"Brian."

"Brian--I was actually wondering if you could tell me anything about a particular item you fixed in the past. Or

about its owner, actually. It was a compass. The cover was gilt in gold and silver inlay in a knot pattern, and the inside had a star chart on one half, and a map of the islands on the half with the needle."

Brian raised an eyebrow at Riley. "That's a fairly good description of that particular compass. Had you seen it before, then?"

He was taking a big risk, but it was now or never. He needed information. "It was my mother's."

Brian's whole face changed. It lit up in a wide smile that showed all his teeth. "Ah, you're Miranda's boy! Jude," he yelled toward the dining room, "make a plate for our guest here, won't you? Kids, come meet Miranda's son, Riley!"

The kids rushed into the room, followed a minute later by their mom, holding a heaping plate of food. The littlest came right to the couch and climbed up next to Riley, almost into his lap. He just stared, without saying anything. The others clustered around their dad's chair and waited for him to introduce them.

"So," Brian said, clapping his hands a little. "That one there is Michael, age two. And here we have Daniel, at

five, Ben, age six, and Meredith, age nine. And my lovely wife, Judith."

Judith pulled a small table up and set the food down in front of Riley, smiling at him.

He was completely overwhelmed. What was going on? Why did everyone seem to know his mom's name? And they all had such different reactions. Hannah was wistful, Mr. Corulus tried to capture them, and now this family was opening their arms to him like he was a long-lost son.

"Thank you, very much. Pleased to meet you all."
Michael was still sitting next to Riley, right up close to him. Riley looked down at him and tried a half-smile, and the kid broke out in a grin that mirrored his father's.

"Michael, give Riley some room, let him get comfortable."

Michael obediently climbed down and went to play with some toys on the floor.

The other kids and Brian and Judith were still smiling and staring at Riley.

"Um--so you knew my mom?"

Judith answered. "Oh, Miranda was a dear. When we met her a couple years ago she just hit it off with the kids

right away. She took a great interest in Brian's work, as well, and stayed several days with us."

Brian was nodding along, his grin just as big as ever.

"Ah." What was he supposed to say to these people to explain his presence? The truth was probably the best. They didn't seem like the kind of people who would work for Mr. Feather, so it might be safe to be honest with them.

"You see, I'm sort of...looking for her."

"For Miranda?" This time Brian answered, and Riley thought he might get a headache if there was much more of this multi-sided conversation. He just nodded in response.

"What's happened to her?" Judith asked.

But maybe Brian sensed that Riley was feeling overwhelmed, because he stood up and gestured the kids out of the room, and Judith with them. She picked up Michael on her way out, waving to Riley and gesturing meaningfully at the plate of food in front of him.

When they were all gone Brian sat down again. "What's happened?" he asked.

"We're not sure. We haven't seen her in two years."

"Two years!"

"Yeah. I came to see if you knew anything about where she might have gone after she came here. She did come here about her compass, right?"

He nodded. "Yes, that was a beautiful piece. Made by your father, wasn't it?"

It was Riley's turn to nod.

"Well, Miranda certainly came here, and I helped her fix the glass cover that protected the needle. Hers had broken off and shattered, she said. I fixed it the first day, but she stayed on for a couple days when the kids begged her to. Meredith was quite taken with her, if I remember."

Riley saw movement at the dining room doorway again, and this time it was Meredith. She put a finger up to her lips, though, so Riley looked back at Brian and pretended nothing happened. "Did she tell you anything about where she was going?"

"Unfortunately, no. It was a curious thing. She left her entire crew here on the island, and they took up with other trading ships that came through after. When she left after her few days with us she shipped out completely alone, if I'm remembering right. I suppose I assumed she was just releasing the crew so that she could go directly

home. It didn't occur to me to question her decisions when it came to ships--she seemed to know what she was doing."

That was his mom, alright. And she left her crew behind. That was interesting. Dangerous, flying by herself, but if anyone could manage it it was Miranda.

"So you don't have any idea where she might have gone?"

Brian shook his head. "I'm so sorry, son. Have you been looking for her all this time?"

Anger rose to the surface quickly, and Riley tried not to let it show in his voice. "No, only recently. My father seemed to think it best to wait for her to come home."

"Ah." Brian nodded. His smile was awkward now, almost pitying. Riley didn't really want to stay any longer now that he knew this was a dead end. And it was even more undesirable if he was going to get looks of pity from Brian and his whole brood.

"Well, sir," Riley said as he stood up, "I'm sorry to have interrupted your dinner. Please say thank you to Judith for me. I really have to be going, I'm expected back soon."

Brian was still smiling in that uncomfortable way, and Riley decided to speed things along. He held out a hand to shake Brian's with a "Goodbye, and thank you."

"They're looking for you, you know," Brian said, as he clasped Riley's hand with both of his.

Riley tried to pull away, but Brian held fast.

"Word has passed around about a bounty for information, or capture. We won't tell anyone you were here, but please be careful."

He walked Riley to the front door and said a last goodbye before closing it behind him.

Riley stood on the path trying to recover a bit. So this was a dead end, and Feather's reach was longer and quicker than he'd thought. It meant he would have to go island to island to find his mom, hiding from Feather the whole time. It almost might be better to get caught so that he could ask Feather all the questions he had built up in his mind. That man was responsible for this, somehow. Riley knew it. But for Hannah's sake he had to keep going.

He had just started down the path again to take the streets toward the rendezvous when a square of light appeared, indicating that the front door was open behind him.

He turned around and saw Meredith walking out to him.

"Miranda's lost?"

Riley just nodded.

"I really liked her."

He nodded again.

"When she was here, one of her crew came to talk to her. They talked right here in the front yard, and they didn't know I was around the side of the house." She gestured to the places she was mentioning.

"Did she say anything about where she was going?" He tried not to get his hopes up. He didn't think he could stand the disappointment if this, too, turned out to be a dead end.

Meredith gave a half-nod. "I think so. I didn't know much about the islands back then, but she said something about settler. I had to ask my teacher what the word meant, that's why I remember it. But there's an island called that, isn't there?"

Riley couldn't believe it. A real clue! "Yes, there is. Settler Island. Wow. Thank you, Meredith. Thank you so much."

He was so happy he reached out and hugged her, and she laughed. "I hope you find her," she said.

"Me too," he said, finally smiling again.

The route back to the far side of the island felt like it took half the time to traverse. They had a real clue. A real trail to follow. Sure, it was something overheard by a seven year-old and related by a nine year-old. Who knew what two years could do to twist memories. But Meredith seemed pretty sure. Riley was going to trust her, because the alternative meant he had no idea where to go. So they would sail to Settler Island and see what they could find there. Even better, it was the last place Mr. Feather would look. No one lived on Settler Island anymore, so no one had any reason to go there. It was all ruins, overgrown with wild plants. They could hide out there for as long as they wanted. Maybe his mom was already there, living off the wild plants, waiting for someone to come rescue her.