

a prequel to
For Darkness Shows the Stars

Among ^{the}
Nameless
Stars

DIANA PETERFREUND

author of RAMPANT and ASCENDANT

One

The first week was the hardest.

Kai's fingers would itch for a paper glider to write down everything he saw and share it with Elliot, just as they always had. The ruins, sprawling and dangerous but utterly empty, even of other travelers. He'd heard that, at its height, the city had been home to a million people. And now there was nothing. By the second week of his journey, Kai had grown used to his solitude, though he still caught himself composing letters in his head.

Dear Elliot,

This morning, the sky was clear and I got my first glimpse of the volcano. It was just like the pictures in books: an enormous red cone pointing at the sky.

He was a good paragraph in before he realized what he was doing and stopped himself. He'd sworn he'd never write her. Never. If she wasn't coming with him, she didn't deserve to know what he saw.

Most Luddites who traveled south of the ruins took horses and the ferry, but that was only an option if you could pay the toll. For everyone else, it was the treacherous fire fields, the sinkholes and geysers, ash pits and crevasses. Even before the wars, the fire fields had been dangerous, desolate, reserved for wilderness lovers who somehow took joy in walking through a burned-out, lava-ridden desert. Now the geologic instability wrought by the wars had turned this entire swath of the island into a ticking time bomb. No one knew when the next eruption would

scald the landscape clean. Kai spent several days scrambling through the scree, searching for paths—or at least what he hoped were paths and not just trails carved by flash floods or lava flows. He'd come prepared for this, though, knowing that the fire fields would offer him no water to refill his canteen or shelter from the wind and the sun.

One day, at twilight, he heard the sound of hoofbeats. Two men on impossibly large horses, bearing down on him at full gallop. He stepped off the path to let them by, but they veered in his direction. He scooted farther off the raised shoulder of the road, and in the fading light, he could barely see them signal to each other, angling their horses to surround him. One began to swing a long piece of rope with weights on the ends over his head. A bola.

Later, Kai would say this moment—the split second before he realized that the horsemen were chasing *him*—was when he truly became a free Post. Before, it had meant getting out from under the command of Baron North. But as he spun around and started running, Kai realized the truth. He was also free of the Norths' protection.

That night, he ran faster than he'd thought was possible for humans since the Reduction. But even as he sprinted from the horses, he knew it was pointless. The fire fields offered no ground cover and no trees to climb or caves to hide in. And as slippery as the scree might be for those beasts coming after him, it wasn't easy on his feet either. He hit a patch wrong and went sprawling.

The bola flew over his head, its weighted tentacles twirling. Had he been upright, it would have wrapped around his throat. But Kai had no chance to feel relief, as the horses were nearly on top of him. One horse reared to a stop in front of him as he scrambled to his feet. He heard the other rider's feet crunch on the gravel at his back. Kai shot to the left, and the men started running, so he cut right, past the horse—and into nothingness.

He fell hard against the slope. Pain tore his knee in two, and he raised his hand to protect his head as he rolled, tumbled, rolled, then fell again.

After what may have been a minute, or maybe endless hours, he came to rest on the bottom of the ravine, battered and bloody. He couldn't rise if he wanted. From far away, he heard the men's voices.

"Is he dead?"

"Don't matter. He's useless now. I'm not hauling him up that scree in the dark just to find every bone in his body broken."

Kai didn't move until he was sure they were gone. He wasn't entirely sure he could. At last, when he could stand his twisted position no more, he dragged himself into the paltry shadow of a rock. With shaking hands, he evaluated his injuries. They were numerous, and serious, and he was trapped at the bottom of a ravine in the fire fields, all alone.

By the next morning, Kai had grown worried. The pain in his leg had mutated in the night, growing from sharp and stinging into a blunt and bitter agony. His head had stopped bleeding, as had the cuts and scrapes on his arms. He had deep gashes on his hands, at least one broken finger, and a few cracked ribs, but they concerned him less at this moment. Who needed fingers if you were going to die at the bottom of a fire field canyon? He had no material for a splint or a crutch, and crawling only netted him a few meters out of the ravine, even after hours of fighting the slide of dust and gravel.

The next day, he felt no better. He also ran out of water. That night, he had fever dreams. Dreams where Elliot came to him, and laid a cool hand on his burning face, and gave him water to drink, and kissed his battered face, and let the ends of her silky dark hair brush over his dusty skin. He reached for her with broken, bloody fingers, but she slipped through his hands like mist.

He'd left her there, on the North Estate. He'd gotten her letter, and instead of storming her big fancy house, instead of barging through the rooms he'd never walked through, breaking down the door he'd never seen, marching into the bedroom he'd never entered, and demanding the answers he needed, he'd turned his back on her—on the only friend he'd ever had—and walked away from everything he'd ever known. He'd walked away from Elliot.

And now he'd never see her again.

Two

To Elliot North of the North Estate,

Dear Elliot,

If you're reading this, it means I'm dead. I'm sorry. I left for a better life, but now it turns out I'll have no life at all. I'm glad, now, that you aren't here. I'm glad that you haven't been dragged with me to the bottom of this awful ravine. I'm glad that I don't have to look you in the eyes when it turns out all your fears were well-founded.

I hope this letter will somehow find its way back to you. I hope you know that I've always lo—

“You there!”

Kai looked up from the page toward the lip of the ravine. There, silhouetted against the sun, stood a man leading a mule.

“You write?”

That was not what he'd expected the man to say.

Kai raised his hand weakly. “Please,” he begged. “Help me.” Kai didn't care if this man was another kidnapper. Better to be enslaved than die here. He'd been born a slave. It didn't have to be permanent.

The man half walked, half slid down the scree, and when he got to the bottom, he remained a few feet away from Kai, his expression at once wary and calculating. “You look terrible.”

“Please,” Kai said. “I've hurt my leg. I can't move. Can you help me?”

“Might.” The guy jerked his chin at the page in Kai’s hand. “That real writing?”

Kai nodded, baffled. The guy leaned over and picked up Kai’s knapsack, then slipped his hands under Kai’s arms and hauled him to his feet. They made their slow, huffing way up the side of the ravine, and then the man threw him like a sack of grain on the back of the mule.

“Thought you was Reduced at first, looking so beat-up,” the man said. “They come out here sometimes, wandering away to die like animals.”

Kai wasn’t sure how to respond to that. “My name’s Kai.”

The man grunted. “Teb.” He said nothing else, and Kai did his best to stay upright and conscious as the man led him into who knows what.

Eventually, they reached a shabby gathering of mud huts. Kai collapsed off the side of the mule. Before him, in the dust, squatted a girl about his age. She was wearing a shapeless gray sack and nursing the scrawniest baby he’d ever seen. There were a few other children around, all skinny as sticks and covered in dirt.

“What’s this, Teb?” she asked his savior. “We don’t need no more bellies ’round here.”

“He writes,” Teb mumbled as he took the rest of the packages off the mule.

The girl raised her eyebrows. “For real? Get Jin.” She motioned toward one of the dusty children. “Get this man some water, now, you hear me?”

Kai gratefully accepted the water, and tried to keep his eyes averted from the girl’s bare breasts. She finished feeding the baby, handed it off to one of the other children, and covered herself up. Then she sat back in the dirt, watching him warily.

“How do you know writing?” she asked. “You Luddite?”

“No,” Kai croaked. “I’m Post. My da taught me—”

The girl nodded in understanding. “Ah, your da’s Luddite.”

Kai didn't have the energy to disagree with her. The girl seemed to take such relationships for granted, but Kai had ever known only one Luddite who loved a Post. And in the end, love hadn't been enough for Elliot.

"I'm from the North Estate, originally," Kai offered.

She blinked at him.

"It's north of here, beyond the ruins. By the sea."

"Must be bad there, for you to leave."

Kai looked around, at the huts, at the bare, rocky earth with no gardens or even grass for the children to play on, at the skinny, illiterate people living here, and said nothing.

Teb returned, bringing with him a woman Kai thought at first must be ancient, due to her weathered face and white hair, but when she came closer, he realized that beneath the creases and the dirt, she was probably closer to forty.

"You Kai? You read?" This must be the promised Jin. She thrust a packet of paper into his hands. "Read this."

Every one of these odd, dusty Posts had stopped what they were doing and were staring at him. He shifted slightly, and his leg cried out in agony.

"I'll read it," he said slowly. "But if I do, you have to help me. I hurt my leg and can't walk. I need a healer."

"I can fix you," said Jin. "But I can't read. Please, we've had the letter for a month. It's about my son." She pointed at the words. "That's him. S-I-D."

The envelope was labeled: *To Jin, mother of Sid, Miner Estate, Fire Fields.*

Kai unfolded the envelope and scanned the letter. He looked up at the woman. "You want me to read this out loud? Here?"

The woman's face turned to stone, as if she knew already what the letter contained. "Please," she whispered. So Kai read:

Dear Madam,

My name is Bess, and I'm a Post in Channel City. Your son Sid and me worked together on the docks, Sid mostly digging, me cleaning fish when I couldn't get any scribe work.

I am sorry to inform you, but last night, Sid was killed in a fight with a Post named Pen. Pen is a very powerful man here in the enclave. He has a lot of workers of his own, Post though he may be, and he don't take kindly to refusals. Sid and me, we refused him.

I'm so sorry to deliver such bad news, madam, but I'm sorrier still for what I write next. Pen is still after me, and I don't have anyone here to protect me from him, so I'm going back home. My old estate is in the South Island, at a place called Mountain Pass. It's not horrible there, and I know at least I'll be safe. I don't think there's much of a chance that you or any of Sid's people will ever be down that far, but if you are, and if everything goes well, you'll have a grandchild at Mountain Pass Estate. If it's a boy, I'll name him Sid.

Fare well,

Bess

Jin nodded brusquely and took the paper back. She cradled it in her hands, like something sacred, then turned to Teb. "Get him in my hut, and find me a stick to use for a splint." She looked down at Kai. "Thank you, boy. I'll make sure the rest of your journey south's as safe as can be."

"Ma'am," he said, and laid his hand on her wrist. "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry for your loss."

She jerked away from him, her face like rock. “Well. That’s what happens when you leave your estate.”

Three

Dear Elliot,

Today I leave the fire fields. Once, I thought nothing was more unbearable than those nights alone in the barn, with you just across the fields in the big house. Once, I thought I'd never survive another night on the North Estate.

But now I know how much worse it can get. Now I know what it's like to really face death.

Now I know how cruel the Luddite Lords can be. . . .

Kai was kept out of sight of the Luddites on the Miner Estate, though they came to the village often enough—an older man and three younger ones, all built like the volcano itself, massive and menacing, with skin burnished a deep red-brown and faces filled with frowns. Two of them he recognized when he glimpsed them through the cracks in the walls of Jin's hut. They'd been the men who'd chased him down the ravine.

They came to the village for the women. Kai asked Teb about it once, and he just shrugged. Jin, too. "They gave me up a few years back," she said. "Always new girls coming up."

Kai shook his head in disgust. "Reduced girls, too?"

Jin clucked her tongue. "Depends how pretty they are. Most around here don't count the Reduced as much more than animals."

That phrase again. Was that really the way of things on this estate? Once, when Kai was very young, a Luddite on the North Estate had messed with one of the Reduced girls. The Baron had banished him. Elliot's father had some standards. These men, these Miner Luddites, *they* were the animals.

Kai was relieved when Jin finally pronounced his leg healed enough to walk on again. “I hope your limp goes away as you get stronger,” she said. “But I can’t make any promises. Try to hide it when you’re looking for labor. Folks might pass over a gimp.”

Kai cringed at the word. “I won’t be looking for physical labor, unless I get desperate. I was a mechanic, back on my old estate.”

Jin’s eyes widened. “A mechanic who can read and write?” She whistled through her teeth. “Best you’re leaving today before anyone here gets wind of that. You’d never get away.”

He thought back to the night he’d fallen down the ravine. Had the Miner Luddites known his skills then, when they’d chased him? Or had they just seen an able-bodied laborer?

“Bet your old master’s looking for you hard.”

“No,” Kai replied, swallowing. “None of the Luddites on my old estate are looking for me.”

Dear Elliot,

You aren’t looking for me, are you?

Sometimes, at night, Kai would lie on his back and rename the stars. The ones he’d learned from the books Elliot had smuggled out of her family’s library were all so long and ornate, like a Luddite’s name. He rechristened them with names more like the Posts he knew, like the Posts he missed, back on the North Estate: Mags and Dee, Gill and Jef, even his father, Mal. All except one, the bright blue one that greeted him every morning, the one that used to be called Venus. That one he named Elliot.

How did anyone see the stars and not wish for more than the confinement they were born to? How could anyone know that lands lie beyond their shores and not wish to find them for

themselves? The Luddite lords said that nothing remained of the world, that they were the only survivors. And maybe they were right, but they were also Luddites. Luddites never wanted anything to change.

Kai was done with that.

Now that he was off the roads, he counted on the stars to show him the way. South of the fire fields, the land was much more familiar, though still hillier and more open than the wooded, rocky beaches where Kai had been raised. His progress was slow, due to his leg, but it was progress nonetheless. He slept each night on thick, pillowy beds of grass and plodded each day through endless, rolling fields, punctuated here and there by baby mountains or glass-smooth lakes. He avoided any sign of settlement.

And he wondered what would happen if Elliot did come looking for him. What if she'd changed her mind? He didn't want her crossing the fire fields on her own. Who would protect her from the Miners? Would they care if she claimed she was a Luddite? And how would anyone ever know? Even if they both made it to Channel City, how would they ever find each other? Kai thought about the poor Post girl Bess, who'd very nearly failed to let her man's family know about his death and their baby. How many other Posts down in the enclaves were dead or married or had babies and had never gotten word back to loved ones on their old estates?

Oh, he didn't care if she *did* come after him. His mind was filled with fantasies—Elliot, travel-weary and tired, traipsing the streets of Channel City in search of Kai, who'd grown rich and successful. Or maybe one day, one day when he was the richest Post on the island, he'd write to her:

Dear Miss Elliot,

In his fantasy, she never married.

Dear Miss Elliot,

I am sure you don't remember me, but long ago, I lived in the loft above your barn.

Wait, no. He *wanted* her to remember him.

Dear Elliot,

Though it has been a long time since I've thought of myself as the boy who lived in your barn, I felt duty-bound to repay your kindness over the years.

Kindness? No. Generosity? No, not that either. It sounded too . . . grateful.

Dear Elliot,

Though it has been a long time since I've thought of myself as the boy who lived in your barn, I feel duty bound to repay you for the things you did on my behalf in those days. Thus I have sent with this letter

What? A cup carved of jade? A bolt of real silk? A pair of opal earrings as big as plums?

What would he send her once he had money? What would he send her just to show that he could?

Maybe, once he reached Channel City, he'd learn there were even more wonderful things than those. Things neither he nor Elliot had ever heard of, growing up in the far north.

Channel City. The very name gave him shivers as he drew closer, day by day. It was the only city in the islands that hadn't been destroyed by the Wars of the Lost. He'd heard many of the buildings remained from the old days, massively tall or astoundingly opulent or even just oddly shaped. The Luddites occupied the nicer parts of the city, but Posts had made communities of their own, on the outskirts and in the run-down areas, and they were slowly rebuilding, sometimes with permission of the Luddite lords and sometimes in spite of them. The Luddites had held power too easily, and for too many generations, without the slightest bit of struggle. Now that the Posts had emerged from the wreckage of the Reduction, Luddites—both on the estates and in the cities—didn't know quite how to handle them. Were Posts slaves, like their Reduced forefathers, or were they fully human, capable of autonomy, of freedom, of forming their own society where they no longer had to live by the Luddites' technophobic laws and their dark-age protocols?

That's what Kai had left the North Estate to find out. That was what he'd hoped Elliot would wish to discover at his side. But in the end, Elliot had made it perfectly plain. He'd never forget what she'd written in her last letter to him.

I will always be a Luddite. I was born this way. I'll die this way. I cannot turn my back on it.

Without us, the world would have burned, and all of humankind would have been destroyed. I cannot ignore that. I cannot forget who I am. But you are not a Luddite. And that is why I cannot go with you.

Kai would never let himself forget it either. Elliot chose the North Estate over him. She chose her position, her power, over the promises they'd made to each other. She chose the world of the Luddites over the wider world, the one they'd talked of exploring together.

He'd never forgive her. Never. And if he was rich one day, he wouldn't send her diamond earrings either. That night, he renamed the evening star again. If Elliot didn't deserve diamonds, she certainly didn't deserve to have a star named after her. Even in his head.

The next morning, he saw Channel City for the first time.

Four

People. More people than Kai knew existed. And almost all of them Post. Post or Luddite—one couldn't tell in Channel City. Posts and Luddites alike in carriages and on horseback and wearing fancy clothes. Sometimes he couldn't even define their caste after meeting them, for here in Channel City, Posts and Luddites alike had long names and surnames, quoted books and poetry, donned jewelry and perfume and bright colors. He'd never seen such bright colors outside of flowers and sunsets. And here, people *wore* them.

Clothes were how he found his first job. Right there, in the window of a tailor's shop, sat a sign. *Mechanic Wanted*. Wary of Jin's warning about giving too much information about himself to strangers, he walked in, hands deep in pockets, and asked if they were looking for any workers.

"Why?" A girl in the corner tittered. "Do you sew?"

He did, as it happened, but he wasn't great at it.

"Sorry, son," said the man in the front, who Kai quickly guessed was in charge. "We don't need any more laborers."

This wasn't proceeding according to plan. "I saw a sign in the window . . . thought maybe it was a Help Wanted sign—"

"That's for a mechanic," said the head tailor. "They're tough to get around here, but our carder's been broke for the better part of a month."

Finally. "I don't know what a carder is, sir, but if it's got an engine, you should let me take a look. My father was the head mechanic on the North Estate, and I apprenticed for him all my life."

“The North Estate?” The man looked him up and down. “Never met anyone from that far away. You come here on your own, boy? On that leg?”

“I can fix your machines, sir. I guarantee it.”

“Break them for good, more likely,” said the girl, with a sneer at his worn, dusty clothes. She must be a Post if she was working as a seamstress, but she reminded Kai of Elliot’s older sister, haughty and cruel.

The head tailor glanced at the girl, then focused on Kai. “You guarantee it? What’s your guarantee? You’ve got no references beyond your word. If you break my machines, you’ve got no money to replace them, and like I said, I don’t need any more laborers, lame or otherwise.”

Kai looked over at the sign in the window, at the thin film of dust that lay on the top. He turned back to the tailor. “Your carder’s been broken for a month, sir. How many mechanics wander in here?”

The man laughed then. “You have a point. What’s your name?”

“Kai.”

“Okay, then, Kai of the North Estate, you can give it a try. I’ll only pay you if you get it working, though.”

Kai nodded. That was fair. Besides, he wasn’t scared of failing. His father had taught him well. “I’m not of the North Estate, sir. Not any longer.”

The man smiled again. “Sorry. I meant Kai of the Post enclave.”

Dear Elliot,

You know what? I don’t think I will send you this letter. Why do you deserve to know that I have a job, a real job, for which I am being paid real money? You know what it’s like to hold

actual money, real coins in your hand. I didn't—not for fourteen years. But I do today. And with this money, I'm not going to pay to post this note. I'm going to rent a room. A real room, my own room that's all mine and that doesn't smell like cow manure.

So there.

It didn't smell like cow manure, but it did smell rather strongly of low tide, because the only room Kai found that he could afford was down near the water, by the docks and the fish market. He didn't mind it as much as he thought he might, though, for even though it stank to high heaven, it was still *his* stink. *His* room. His own.

Kai of the Post Enclave.

He learned that his employer was named Bartholomew Corson, and that he was a second-generation Post who'd been living in the enclaves since he was a young boy. The mean girl in his shop was Carolina, his daughter, and she warmed up to Kai considerably after he fixed the carder, the sewing machine, and the large press. The shop was well-regarded in the enclave, primarily because it was the only place you could buy the fabric Bartholomew called “velvet” that was currently all the rage in the more fashionable districts in town.

“If I'd guessed what I'd become known for,” Bartholomew said once as Kai repaired the loom where they wove the special tufts, “I would have given my family the surname of Velvet. Still might. Corson's getting a bit common around here.”

Kai nodded and went back to work. Corson was a surname he could take himself if he desired. It was popular among second-generation Posts like himself, to signify that they were, in fact, second generation. COR—Children of the Reduction—had been the term for Posts when Kai's father had been young, the term for anyone born of Reduced parents. When those people

had started having normal, non-Reduced children of their own, the term began to sound stale, restrictive. It was a Luddite phrase for what they were. Children of the Reduction, hardly better than the Reduced slaves who'd given birth to them. Identifying themselves as Post-Reductionists—Posts—or COR-sons gave them a little distance from their origins, and a little more independence from the Luddites who'd been their masters for so long.

But Bartholomew had a point. Corson was too common of a surname. And Kai Post didn't sound right either. Kai didn't want to rush into choosing a new name, anyway. He couldn't imagine writing to Elliot as Kai Corson. After all, where was the imagination in that?

Not that he was actually going to write her. Certainly not. Though if he did and if he sent along a present, just to show how rich and forgiving he could be, wouldn't she be the envy of every Luddite in the neighborhood if he sent her a velvet dress? Violet, maybe. Or midnight blue.

Or maybe he'd send her something in the most unflattering shade ever, just to spite her.

That's what you get, Elliot, for abandoning me.

Of all the wonders of the Post enclave, the oddest of all, and the one that took Kai the longest to adjust to, was the lack of Reduced. Where he'd grown up, on the North Estate, Luddites and Posts together were completely outnumbered by the Reduced labor force. Not a day in his life had passed without seeing them around, mute and simple and helpless. Broken inside, for all that they looked like normal humans. Now that he was in Channel City, Kai had to rid himself of the habit of assuming everyone he saw was Reduced. People took offense if you made any of the Reduced hand signs at them, but after a lifetime of doing so, he often had to clench his hands at his sides to keep from making them as he first spoke.

But there were no Reduced in Channel City. He supposed here, where all the Posts had escaped to live, it was just as easy to hire Posts for scant pay as it was to keep a Reduced decently clothed, fed, and sheltered. If a Reduced servant had a baby, its master was obliged to care for it, but if a hired Post servant had a baby, well, that was the Post's own responsibility.

So many Posts had migrated here, hoping for something better than they'd had back on their estates. How many found it? Some, of course, had come from appalling places like the Miner Estate. But Kai had always had enough to eat growing up. He'd always had clothes on his back and a warm place to sleep. His father had taught him to read, and Elliot, the lord's daughter herself, had given him books. Elliot had been his friend. A month ago, they'd imagined living here together.

Now, he couldn't picture it. Elliot, living in a single room that smelled of fish? Elliot, eating nothing but bread and bean butter, and cheese if they could get it? Elliot helping him limp up and down the streets and the stairs to their tiny flat—tinier even than the loft above the North barn? Elliot, in the same dress, day after day, working for ten hours sewing clothes like the girls in Bartholomew's shop? Elliot, with no servants and no family and no one even knowing that her father owned half the farmable land north of the ruins? No, it was impossible. She never would have fit in here.

Kai told no one in his new life about the Luddite girl he'd once loved more than any other person in the world. No one would believe it anyway.

Five

Dear Elliot,

I thought I'd left you behind me. I haven't written you a letter, even in my head, in months.

But I don't know what else to do. I'm afraid, and I have no one to turn to. Maybe writing it down will help me. Even if you aren't ever going to read this, thinking that we're still in it together, figuring out solutions—maybe that will be enough.

It had started when Kai was working on some improvements to the loom and was heading out on his lunch break. When he came into the front part of the shop, he saw a strange man in the center of the room, arms crossed over his chest as he surveyed all the workers. Bartholomew, standing behind the counter almost as if it was a shield, glanced in Kai's direction and gave a quick, almost imperceptible shake of his head.

"Who's this?" the stranger asked.

"New sweeper," Bartholomew mumbled. "Pretty lazy, actually."

The man snorted. "Lazy, huh? Don't oversell him." He beckoned to Kai. "Come here, boy."

Kai stepped forward, but remained out of the man's arm span. He didn't like the way he was standing, didn't like the way every worker in the shop was keeping one scared eye on him. It reminded Kai of how the Reduced acted whenever Baron North was close, how the chickens in the barnyard behaved whenever the cat came near.

"Name's Pen," said the man. "Heard of me?"

As it happened, Kai had. He nodded.

"What's your name?"

“Kai.”

“And you’re a sweeper here? On your feet all day with that leg?”

Kai looked at Bartholomew. There was a reason his employer had lied about him to Pen, and Kai was pretty sure he knew what it was. “Yes.”

The bigger man leaned forward, letting his gaze drop to the oil still smeared on Kai’s knuckles. “That’s not what I heard.”

Kai remained silent. The man rocked back on his heels.

“I heard the gimp working here’s a mechanic. Pretty good one, too. Not . . . lazy at all. And that’s what I like to see in my workers. I’m down on the docks. Some of my people seen you coming and going. Got a room down there?”

Carolina let out a strangled squeak, but Kai saw the trap for what it was. There was no point lying to this man. He already knew everything. Lying was only going to make this situation worse.

“Yes I do. And I am a mechanic, of sorts.”

“Want a better job?”

Kai stared into Pen’s mean little eyes and remembered Bess’s letter to Jin.

He has a lot of workers of his own, Post though he may be, and he don’t take kindly to refusals. Sid and me, we refused him.

“What kind of job?”

“A job with me. I’ll pay whatever Bart here’s been giving you.”

“Then what is the benefit of me moving?”

Pen's voice dropped low, and he stretched out his neck toward Kai. "The benefit, boy, would be you're working for *me*."

Kai highly doubted that would be a better situation. "I'll have to think about it."

"No you don't," Pen said with a shrug. "I made you a better offer."

Same money—if he was telling the truth about that, which Kai doubted—and working for a bully and a murderer?

"I like where I am."

Pen stared at him, long and hard, like he was used to staring folks down. But Kai refused to look away, and at last Pen snorted again, and turned to go.

"Not for long, you won't."

Oh, Elliot, what am I going to do?

I knew things would change. I didn't know how soon. Two days later, I came home to find my few belongings thrown out in the street. The money and food I'd been storing up? Gone. I know. I shouldn't have been so naive as to think it would have been safe in my room, but I was much more worried about being robbed on the street. The enclaves can be a dangerous place.

My landlord wouldn't tell me why he kicked me out, but the rates for my room have tripled.

At least, the rates he'd let me rent them for. I spent the night in the streets, and the next morning, when I went into work, Bartholomew said he had to let me go.

"Why?" Kai asked.

The tailor wouldn't meet Kai's gaze. He stood at the door, eyes downcast. Inside the shop, Kai could see the others watching him, eyes wide and wary. "You know why."

"Pen?" Kai kicked at the stoop with his bum leg. "I'm not afraid of him."

Now Bartholomew did raise his head. "I am. I know what he can do. What he has done. I got no choice. I'm sorry, son, I really am, but you're going to end up there sooner or later, so it might as well be sooner. I tried my best, but I got family to look after."

Kai clenched his jaw. He hadn't traveled all this way to be forced to work for another bully who thought people were his pawns to move around at will.

"That estate you come from," Bartholomew said. "Was it very bad there?"

"No," Kai admitted. He hadn't known how very not-bad it had been until he saw the state of affairs in the fire fields.

"Maybe you ought to go back."

I'm not going back, Elliot. First of all, I don't know how I could even get back on this leg.

Navigating the fire fields once was bad enough, and I was healthy through most of it.

But more than that —there has to be another way. I can't go back now. I can't look you in the eyes and let you know I've failed. I'd rather work for Pen. I'd rather I died in the fire fields.

Well, maybe not that. At least I've seen Channel City, had my own room, held my own money. At least I've had those things. And I can't give up now. I won't!

Sometimes I wish you were here so I could ask for your advice. But then I think about poor Sid, and Bess, and their baby, and I realize it's better you're not here. You're safe at home, where a man like Pen will never be able to touch you.

I had so many dreams, Elliot, and you knew all of them. If they die here—if Pen kills them—it will be a comfort to know that they're still alive somewhere up north. That they're still alive in you.

Yours,

Kai

Six

Seven days. Seven days since Kai had started sleeping on the streets.

Five days since he had run out of things to sell . . . or buyers willing to cross Pen.

Three days since his last meal.

One day since Pen had come to him again.

“You needn’t make this difficult, boy,” the man had said when he caught Kai looking through rubbish bins for food. Kai wondered if Pen had set people to watching him. He couldn’t imagine their meeting was an accident. “I don’t know what folks told you, but I’m not that bad. Not to people with skills like yours.”

Kai didn’t need to talk to anyone. He’d read Bess’s letter and, what’s more, he’d seen the truth with his own eyes. The day after he’d been turned away from Bartholomew’s shop, he’d gone down to the docks to see Pen’s people himself.

Pen was an appropriate name for the man, Kai had decided, since he kept his workers as if they were animals in a zoo. Kai had walked through the filthy, rusting metal boxes the people who labored for Pen called home. It didn’t take long. Even the huts on the Miner Estate were nicer than these. He’d seen things that looked like these in books, long ago. Before the Reduction, they were used as shipping containers, back when humankind had lived all over the world and had crossed the ocean in boats the size of cities. He was shocked any had lasted this long.

But now, as Kai wandered down a strange street in an unfamiliar part of the enclave, he realized that, even in those shipping containers, the people had food. An empty belly counted for quite a lot, a fact he was sure Pen was counting on.

Kai had been born a Post-Reductionist. He thought he knew hunger well. All his life he'd hungered. Hungered for more than growing old on the estate he'd been born to. Hungered for more knowledge than he could find in the books Elliot had given him. Hungered for the things humankind had possessed before the Reduction, for the places beyond the islands that now only existed on old maps or in forbidden books. More recently, he'd hungered for Elliot herself. For years, he'd felt these hungers like physical needs, gnawing away from a place deep inside.

Now he knew—that was nothing. True hunger tears you up, bends you double with cramps, gives you headaches, clouds your mind, makes you weak. True hunger was a weapon stronger than any of his abstract desires. It's what toppled countries and made men desperate. It's what gave Pen power.

Ahead of him on the path, a boy several years younger than Kai played in the dirt. As Kai drew closer, he saw that the boy was messing with a string box. Kai smiled in spite of himself. He had some experience with those. Back on the North Estate, he and Elliot had started a campaign to make enough string boxes for every Post on the farm. They'd created quite the little orchestra before he'd left.

The boy on the ground was trying to string his, but whatever cord he was using looked flimsy and fraying. Every time he tried to wrap a string around a turning peg, it snapped. As Kai approached, another string broke and the boy let out a shout of frustration and slammed the box against the ground.

"Having trouble?" he asked.

The boy looked up at him, blinking furiously the way you do when you're trying not to cry. "I can't get the strings back on this stupid thing."

Kai crouched beside him, wincing a bit at the pressure on his wounded leg. “These are bad strings. Are they all you have?”

“Yeah.” The kid shrugged.

Kai could understand that. He looked at the leftover strings, and then put one in his mouth, moistening it with his tongue, and then winding it over on itself so it was doubly thick. The string tasted oddly sweet, and he had to resist the urge to swallow it. It was nothing but a hallucination, brought on by his hunger.

Kai picked up the box and started stringing it with the new, stronger cord.

“Hey!” came a shout from above. “You leave him alone! He’s not for sale.”

Kai looked up to see a young woman bearing down on them both. She had the same blue-green eyes as the boy, though her hair was lighter. She was dressed in a shirt nearly open to her waist and a skirt that skimmed her thighs. But it was her expression that caught Kai’s attention. There was murder written all over her heavily made-up face.

Kai straightened and held up his hands. “I was just helping him with this instrument.”

“That’s what they all say.” She looked him up and down. “You don’t look like you have money, anyway.”

Kai blinked at her in shock. He raised his head and looked over her shoulder, at the building she’d come from. There on the porch stood several other girls dressed in the same peculiar fashion. Some of them were leaning on the rails, watching the commotion. Others were lounging on the steps or the benches. Almost all had shadows under their eyes and garish colors smeared across their mouths.

“What are you doing here?” the woman asked, narrowing her sunken eyes.

“I—” He looked at the girls on the porch, at the one in front of him. “I was looking for work, actually.”

She laughed, but there was no mirth in the sound. “There’s only one kind of work on this street.”

Understanding swept through Kai. “I didn’t come here . . . I didn’t know. . . .”

“No?” she said. “Well, then, you’re more stupid than you look.”

“I was just trying to help your son with his string box—”

“My *son!*” she cried. “How old do you think I am? That’s my *brother!*”

Kai backed away a few steps, his mouth open in dismay. “I’m sorry. I—” What? He was too hungry to see straight? He was too famished to pay much attention to what she looked like? His legs would probably give out underneath him if she gave him so much as a halfway decent push?

Suddenly, the air was filled with the sound of a string box chord. Both Kai and the girl looked down at the little boy, who had finished stringing the rest of the box and was playing. The sound was heavy and blunt from the thickness of the strings, but the boy played well despite it. He looked up at Kai, his smile the first true one Kai had seen in days. Possibly longer. “I fixed it!” the boy exclaimed. “Thanks, mister.”

The girl stared at him, and her expression softened just a tad. “Do I really look that old?”

Kai shook his head. “No.” Now that he had a chance to look, he could see that she was probably no more than a year or two older than he was. “I’m just not thinking clearly right now. I haven’t eaten in a while.”

“Hmph.” She regarded him for a long moment, then sighed. “Come back tonight, after sunset. I’ll meet you by that tree.” She pointed. “But get out of here now. I’ll get in trouble if I talk too long to anyone who’s not a paying customer.” Then she put her hands on the boy’s

shoulders and steered him back toward the house. The kid held tight to the string box, still playing.

Kai felt the eyes of every girl on the porch boring into his back as he walked away.

Dear Elliot,

I'm beginning to wonder if there are worse things that could happen than working for Pen. Starvation's the one I think about the most, but I know there are others. I ate tonight, because a girl that's worse off than me gave me some food. In five minutes of talking to her I knew that she was smart, she was caring, and she was way better than what she's doing for a living. But it doesn't make a difference. Once, she was desperate, too, and now she looks on every new day with dread. And she can't run either. She has a brother to look after.

Do you know what she told me?

She said she envies me. If I take the job Pen offers, I'll be a mechanic, which is a good job, an honest job. Even if it's for Pen. This girl never had a choice like that. Not when she was on her estate and not now.

I've been worried that if I take this job, I'd lose myself. But today I saw what losing yourself looks like. She lives for her brother now. Who will I have if I lose myself?

So I think she might be right. I'm good at the job Pen wants me to do, and it's one I've always liked.

If I remember that, perhaps I'll be all right.

But I'm still glad I'll never send you this letter. I'm glad you'll never know.

Yours,

Kai

Seven

If Kai had money like Pen, he'd live in nicer quarters than Pen did. He'd surround himself with fine art and comfortable furnishings. And books. Miles and miles of books. From what he could tell of Pen's gloomy house, there were no books at all.

Perhaps the bully couldn't read.

He was ushered into a large room where many Posts milled around, some playing cards or talking, others being served drinks and food by children Kai recognized from the metal-box village.

At the head of the room, in a great chair Kai guessed Pen wanted to look like a throne, sat the man himself. Kai did his best not to limp as he crossed the long room to stand before him, and to show no reaction at all to the slow, vicious smile that spread across Pen's face as he approached.

"Ah, the mechanic. Come at last."

"Good morning, sir," said Kai, his head held high.

Pen snapped his fingers in the air. "What do you want, boy?"

"I've come about the job you offered me." As Kai watched, a young woman approached Pen's chair, holding a sheaf of paper in her hands.

"Yes. The job." Pen's smile widened. "How many days ago was that?"

Kai swallowed. He was so hungry. "Ten, sir."

"Ten." The man stood and came close to Kai, looming over him. Kai refused to shrink away.

"Ten wasted days. What a shame, don't you think?"

Kai nodded.

Pen's fist connected with Kai's jaw.

He was thrown to the floor, landing hard on his sore knee. His vision went fuzzy, but he swallowed his gasp of pain and blinked away the tears swimming in his eyes. As soon as he could, he stood again.

And again, Pen knocked him to the floor.

This time, Kai stayed down, coughing and rubbing his jaw. Pen hauled him up and punched him again. Kai dropped like a stone, and Pen kicked him hard, twice in the stomach, and then, when he rolled into a ball, on his back, on his legs, wherever he could reach. Kai cowered, covering his head with his hands.

The room was silent. Blood roared in Kai's ears, and he fought to keep from crying, or grunting, or screaming for mercy. He'd never been beaten before. Once, he was kicked by a horse in the barn, but no foreman and certainly none of the Norths had ever lifted a hand against him. He was not prepared for this.

He was not prepared for any of it.

After a long time, Kai heard Pen's voice again, but this time from a distance, so he knew the man had returned to his chair. "Ten strikes, boy. One for every day you defied me. I hope I won't have to repeat it."

Kai unrolled himself and struggled to stand. It took longer than he would have liked, and when he did, he saw that every eye in the room was upon him. He opened his mouth to reply, and pain shot through his swollen, bleeding jaw. "No, sir."

Pen gestured to the woman at his side. She was young and slight, and she stood hunched over the paper she held as if she, too, would be beaten if she moved a muscle without Pen's say-so. "This is your contract. You can sign it with an X if you can't write your name. We have plenty of witnesses."

Kai took a deep, painful breath, hoping he hadn't refractured his ribs. "What does it say?"

Pen sneered. "The usual. You work for me and only for me until I say otherwise."

The woman approached, holding out the papers to him. Kai glanced down. That's not all the contract said. It also specified that he'd live in the housing Pen owned and buy his food from the shops that Pen's workers ran. He would bet that the prices were higher than the normal, if not higher than his salary, which—Kai checked—was not, in fact, the same as what he'd been paid by the tailor.

But what good did knowing that do him? Kai had zero negotiating power. He was starving. He was weak. He had never learned to fight, had never needed to. Even if he did tell Pen he knew the contract was unfair, he had no ability to get it changed. The fact that he was literate was the only secret Kai had left. He wasn't going to reveal it unless he had to.

"I'm sorry," the girl whispered to him as she handed him a pen. She held her other, ink-stained hand protectively over her belly. Now that she was close, he could see the roundness she tried to hide beneath her clothes. She was pregnant.

A pregnant scribe, working for Pen. What were the odds?

"Are you Bess?" Kai asked softly.

She blinked in surprise. "Yes."

Kai closed his eyes for a long moment. So there was no escape. Not even if he wanted to go back home, like Bess had once hoped to. If Pen wanted him, Pen would have him, or he'd end up dead, like Sid.

"Your letter got to Jin in the fire fields," he said. "I'm so sorry."

Then he signed the contract with a large black X.

Dear Elliot,

You were right. You were right all along, and I hate you for it.

I thought I was miserable on the North Estate. When I heard of Posts leaving their estates, I thought it was for the same reasons I wanted to leave. Freedom and the chance to make a better life. But now I see what they're really running from, and what brand of "freedom" awaits them in the enclaves.

I thought I was clever, but I don't have any of the skills I need to get by here. I'm not tricky enough. I'm not strong enough. If only my father had taught me how to fight instead of how to fix a tractor. If you were here, could you have stopped me from being so foolish, so rash? Could we have figured out an escape together?

But I forgot. For you, there was always an escape. You needed only to tell a passing Luddite who you were, and they would save you. They take care of their own. But we—we free Posts, who are so reckless as to leave the protection of our estate? We deserve everything we get.

Kai

Eight

Dear Elliot,

It's spring again. I imagine you're busy with planting, and I hope you're doing what you can to keep that tractor in working order. I've written you so many letters in the past few months—mostly in my head. It would look too suspicious if I bought paper, not that I have much money to spare. Pen makes sure of that. No money to spare for extra food or lessons or savings of any sort. No money to spare, or then we might escape. But I can't seem to break the habit of writing you letters, even if I don't write half of them down and would never send those I do put on paper.

I think of you constantly. Not just you but everyone on the North Estate. I can't help it. It's the only thing that's gotten me through this winter. The people here, especially Pen's people, are so different. Sometimes I talk to Bess, but only when we're sure no one can hear us, since we usually talk about books. She would be beaten if they thought she was teaching me to read.

The real secret is much more interesting. Because I'm the one teaching people to read. It's the only escape I have left.

Kai slid the paper beneath his toolbox as he heard footsteps behind him, and just in time, too, as Pen's voice boomed through the warehouse. "Kai! Stop wasting time on that stupid fishing boat. I've got a more important job for you."

"Right away." Kai straightened, wincing slightly. His leg was better now, the limp not quite so noticeable, but Pen's healer had warned him it might never vanish completely. At the time,

Kai had shrugged the diagnosis off. What did it matter if Pen's pet mechanic had a permanent limp?

Behind Pen, a bunch of workers were hauling in a large speedboat on a wheeled trailer. As it neared, Kai gave a silent groan. He had no idea where Pen had unearthed the antique piece of junk, but he knew precisely who would be expected to restore it to pristine condition.

Next to Pen, Bess stood silent. She was enormous now. Kai expected her to go into labor any day. He knew Bess lived in terror of what Pen might do to the baby. Kill it? Sell it? Or, worst of all, keep it as another of his slaves? She didn't dare get on his bad side now—not that any of them ever dared. She never complained when, because of some imagined mistake, Pen tore up letters she painstakingly transcribed for him. Pen insisted on examining every document, as if looking at the pages would convince people he could actually read them. But when they were alone, Bess was savage toward the man who'd killed her Sid and was keeping her prisoner.

"It's not that he won't get lessons either," she'd whispered to Kai once. "He *can't* learn to read—something's wrong with his brain. It mixes up all the letters. He doesn't want anyone to know. Puts him one step closer to the Reduced."

"I never knew a Reduced as mean as him," Kai had replied. He'd thought of his new friends, the brother and sister he was secretly teaching to read. The process was slow and frustrating, but it was moving forward. How awful would it be if you could never learn at all?

But he wouldn't feel sympathy for Pen. The man was a murderer and a tyrant.

He limped his way over to where they were waiting. Pen slapped the side of the machine and grinned with pride. "What do you think?"

"This is quite the contraption," was all Kai could bring himself to say. "What do you plan to do with it?"

“Race it, of course!” Pen said. His expression turned hard. “Got a race planned at the end of next week, against two Luddites from the Channel and that damned explorer. This beauty is going to win me a lot of money. At least, it had better do, or I’ll know who to blame.” He pointed a meaty finger at Kai and stalked off.

Kai swallowed thickly and stared up at the old boat. Threats from Pen were nothing new, and this latest one barely penetrated, as a single thought crowded out all the others in his mind.

Explorer?

“Can you do it?” Bess asked. She’d lingered behind, and her expression was grim. “Looks pretty bad.”

Kai shrugged. “I don’t see why not. He’ll have the carpenters in on the body, so I’m mostly going to be looking at the engine. Don’t see why it should be much different than any of the other boats I’ve been fixing for him.”

“Yeah, but he’ll want this one to go so fast. . . .” Bess shook her head. “I think he’s gone mad with pride. Since when does Pen know anything about boat racing? And against Channel Luddites and Nicodemus Innovation, too.”

“Who is that?” Kai asked, keeping his tone as subdued as possible.

Bess snorted. “You know . . . the explorer.”

No, Kai didn’t know. Kai didn’t know there were any explorers at all anymore. The very sound of the word struck his brain like the peal of a bell. Lightness streaked through every limb, sparking with a hope Kai thought long dead. “Where does he . . . explore?”

How does he explore? How do the Luddites even let him? Kai thought exploration was forbidden, like “innovation” itself.

“Oh, you know, nearby islands. Amazing, the kind of stuff he finds just days off the coast. All sorts of treasures from before the Reduction. He’s the one who found those wild horses a few years back. The giant ones all the Luddites around here have?” Bess rolled her eyes. “What Pen wouldn’t do to get his hands on one of those horses. But Innovation won’t sell him one, no matter what. I should know—I’ve been the recipient of all Pen’s anger when he gets Captain Innovation’s latest rejection letter. You know what they say—‘kill the messenger.’ Or the scribe, in my case.”

“Ever think about reading it wrong and telling him he can have a horse?” Kai joked.

Bess smiled at the thought. “Yeah, but then who would get the beating when it doesn’t show up? Not Innovation, that’s for sure. And it seems Innovation’s rich enough without Pen’s business.”

Kai put his hand against the hull for support as surprise and envy coursed through his system. This man, this Innovation, was an *explorer*. He’d been *off the island*. He was rich. Rich *on his own*.

“That’s why Pen wants in this race. Each entrant is contributing to the prize pool and Innovation has put up one of his best horses. Guess Pen figures it’s his only way to get his hands on one.”

“The usual scare tactics didn’t work?”

“Sometimes,” Bess said ruefully, “I think Nicodemus Innovation is the only Post in the enclave who isn’t afraid of Pen.”

That settled it. Kai needed to learn more about this man as soon as possible.

“So about the boat—” Bess was saying.

“Yes.” Kai waved a distracted hand in her direction. “It’ll be in fine shape for the race. Won’t make Pen an expert skipper, though. I grew up near the Boatwright Estate, so I’ve seen what it takes to pilot a ship.” Kai was no expert either, but he’d always wanted to learn. Unfortunately, the Boatwright’s shipyards had been shut down since he was a child. “I don’t think he’s got anyone to help him there.”

Though, Kai thought, it wasn’t as if this was a sailing race, where the skipper’s ability to read the water and the wind was all-important. In a motorboat race, it took only an understanding of the physics of moving on water and the ability to make the engine work harder.

“No, I suppose not,” Bess said, frowning. “That’s some relief, at least, though I suppose in my condition I shouldn’t be hoping something happens to sour his mood. Most folks I know are dying to see him brought down in some way. If only we dared, right? Maybe if we weren’t so valuable to him, he would let us go.”

“He’ll never let us go,” Kai grumbled. “If we’re not valuable to him as a mechanic and a scribe, he’ll keep us around for brute labor. And when we’re not valuable for that— Well, there’s always chum.”

Bess squeezed her eyes shut, and Kai bit his tongue. That’s right: Pen had killed Sid just to show his power. Sid had been a good laborer, but he’d been far more valuable to Pen dead, as an example of how ruthless a master Pen could be. And though Kai didn’t really think Pen would kill Bess’s baby, he had no doubt their master would use the child to keep the woman under his thumb.

“I can’t stand it anymore, Kai,” she whispered. “I can’t stand it. He always wins, no matter what. Just once, I’d like to see him lose, the way we’ve lost . . . everything.”

“So, what?” Kai blurted. “You want me to sabotage him?”

She touched the hull, then lifted her eyes to Kai's face. For the first time ever, Kai read hope on her face. "Can you do that?"

Making themselves worthless was no way to escape from Pen's control. The only option was making themselves even more precious than ever. Precious enough for others to notice.

He shook his head once, very slowly. "I'm not going to make Pen lose, Bess. I'm going to make him win."

Nine

Dear Kai,

I have found the people you were looking for. I will meet you at the marina for the race and show them to you.

Best,

Cleopatra

The boat race was scheduled for late afternoon, and by the third time Kai had finished reviewing the instructions for boat operation with Pen, quite a crowd had gathered at the marina, the Posts in their gaily colored clothes and the Luddites in their great carriages or sitting astride their massive Innovation horses. The docks had been lit with sun-lamps, another device that Kai had never seen before coming to Channel City. Unlike the lanterns he'd known growing up, they took no oil and were powered by mirrors that captured the rays of the sun all day and used them to shine all night. Bartholomew had a few in his shop, and Kai knew Pen kept several in his residence, but none of the workers had them. The smell of kerosene was strong in the metal-box village. Tough to save for a sun-lamp when you were worried about putting food in your children's mouths.

Now the boats were all bobbing in position behind the starting buoy, and as the sun set over the channel, an air of excitement coursed through the spectators. Kai stood in the crowd, searching intently. Across the way, he saw a pair of light-haired figures waving their arms in the air and shouting his name. He waved back.

“*Those* are your pupils?” Bess asked, appearing beside him. She narrowed her eyes at the waving girl in her skimpy clothes.

“Yes. And they’ve helped a lot.” He started forward, but Bess grabbed his elbow.

“She knows you can read?” Bess clucked her tongue. “Not smart, Kai. You know what kind of girl that is. What makes you think she’d keep your secret as soon as she could use it to her advantage?”

He jerked his arm out of her grip. “Because she fed me when no one else would, and there’s no advantage in that. She no more chose her life than we did, Bess. Don’t be cruel.”

Bess snapped her mouth shut and looked contrite, but Kai didn’t have time to argue with her. Not today.

“Did you bring the bag I asked for?”

“Yes,” she said, and handed it over. It had been nice of Bess to offer to help him, especially in her delicate condition. He hadn’t wanted Pen to ask questions about the machine while Kai had been coaching him. “Do you really think it’s going to work?”

“Are you kidding?” Kai said. “I’m the best mechanic in Channel City. That’s the whole problem.”

“Yes,” Bess grumbled. “It is.”

He shouldered the bulky sack and took off toward his friends. When he reached them, he affected a formal bow. “Alexander. Cleopatra.”

The boy frowned, and his sister sighed. “He’s not Alexander anymore. Now he’s decided he wants to be Napoleon.”

Kai chuckled. “Of course he does. Short but powerful.” They’d rechristened themselves several times over the past few months, but the new names didn’t seem like they’d ever stick.

Kai had to call them several times before either Cleopatra or Alexander—or rather, Napoleon—realized he was talking to them.

Kai wondered if he'd have the same problem if he ever changed his name. He hadn't done so yet. To begin with, there was still the chance that Elliot might come, though that possibility diminished day by day. If she was going to come, wouldn't she have done so already? If she ever wanted to see him again, why didn't she at least take her father's carriage and come visit? If she really cared, wouldn't she be the slightest bit curious to see how he was doing?

The other reason was more personal. Kai didn't want to change his name until he'd made a new life for himself. If he was still Kai, still Kai of the North Estate, he could pretend he was still in transit, that he hadn't yet forged his own path into the future. This situation with Pen was not permanent if he was still Kai.

"The Innovations are over there." Cleopatra pointed. She handed him a small red slip of paper. "This pass will get you into their pavilion."

"How did you get this?"

He could have bit off his tongue as soon as the words left his mouth. He knew how she'd gotten it. Cleopatra wasn't saying anything, and he gave a clipped nod and stuck the pass in his pocket. He wouldn't turn down her gift. That would only make it worse.

He needed to make sure the pass was worth it. And then, one day, he'd pay them both back for helping him when no one else would.

"Wish me luck," said Kai, and took off.

He liked Cleopatra and her brother—whatever the boy decided his name was. Whether he was teaching them to read or scheming with them to track down the Innovations, they reminded him of Elliot more than anything else in this strange place. His elegant Elliot would probably be

appalled to think she was anything like the angry, coarse Cleopatra, but the resemblance was there nonetheless. They were both so strong and so loyal.

At least, he'd always thought of Elliot as the most loyal person he knew. But then she'd let him go on alone, after all the promises they'd made to each other. Maybe Kai didn't know her at all.

Those were thoughts for another day. He pushed through the crowd toward the spot Cleopatra had indicated. This close to the railings, the audience was a mess of rich Posts and Luddites. Everyone wore beautiful clothing, some in velvet or bright colors, and he could see jewelry glittering from every ear, neck, wrist, and nose. Nearby, a line of Innovation horses was tied to a rail, and colorful streamers that looked like they might be made of real silk bobbed along with sun-lamps over everyone's head. Kai was jostled and shoved by the crowd, and there were more than a few dirty looks and grunts of disgust aimed in his direction. Even the man who took his pass at the gates they'd set up looked skeptical that someone as grungy as Kai should possess one.

For the first time, he began to wonder if his plan was even feasible. He needed to get close to Innovation's wife and daughter for it to work at all.

At last he reached them—or the people he'd been told were they. Mrs. Innovation was dressed in a deep plum suit, with a split skirt that reminded him of the riding habits Elliot had been forced into for her lessons. For some reason, the trousers Elliot wore on a daily basis during her trips to the barn were deemed unacceptable for riding lessons with her father. The Innovation daughter, who he'd heard was named Sophia, looked to be about Napoleon's age or a little older and was wearing more pieces of velvet than Kai had thought humanly possible. He looked closer and thought that beneath her fuzzy and quilted jacket, she was even wearing a silk shirt. Silk!

Kai supposed if you were rich like Sophia Innovation, you could have whatever you wanted, even if what you wanted was to swathe yourself from head to toe in the most luxurious fabrics imaginable. She didn't even seem to care what colors she was wearing. Mustard yellow vied with chartreuse and rose and pumpkin and sea green, all in different patterns and textures.

He came as close as he dared, then set down his bag and pulled out the box he'd spent the last week devising. It was all cranked up and ready to go. He unfolded the antenna and aimed it in the right direction. There'd be one shot at this.

Though several bystanders looked over in curiosity, Sophia Innovation did not so much as turn her head. With her luxurious clothing and distant air, she acted more like a Luddite lord than any Post he'd ever met.

Kai supposed that's what happened when you never knew anything but wealth and status. He would never understand it, the way he would never understand what led Elliot to the choices she made. It wasn't just that she was a Luddite and he was a Post. It was that she was born with a place in the world and he was not.

Sophia Innovation was also a Post, but she didn't invent her own name. She was born with it. Like a Luddite, she was born with everything. He'd only recently realized how lucky he was among Posts, to have had a close relationship with a father who loved him, to have learned to read and write, and to have been raised in a safe and gentle place. But his position had been fragile. It depended entirely on whether his father survived, on whether Kai remained a highly skilled slave on the North Estate. He knew that now.

Sophia's position was certain. Even if her explorer parents perished, she'd have their money, and the protection of the Luddites who were her family's patrons. There wasn't one Post in ten thousand who had a life like hers.

Kai hadn't even realized how tightly he was gripping his device until the antenna snapped off in his hands. Dismayed, he turned his attention to the box. "Oh, no," he mumbled. "No no no no no no no." "

The girl at last turned in his direction. "What's the matter?"

He looked up, into her unfocused eyes, and guilt slammed through him. Of course she wore as much of the fuzzy velvet and precious, smooth silk as she could. Of course she didn't care if the colors clashed. Of course she wasn't paying attention to him.

Sophia Innovation was blind.

Ten

In his life, Kai had only known two blind people. One was a Reduced boy on a neighboring estate who'd somehow survived infancy. Unable to labor in the fields and unable to learn the hand signs that would help him communicate with others, he was confined to the kitchens, doing what little tasks he could—like pitting cherries or shelling peas. Another was an old Post friend of his father's who'd lost his sight with age. He'd been sent to the healing house, where all sick and wounded North Posts and Reduced went, and hadn't survived another winter. One never lasted long in the healing house, with all the sick people shoved in together to fend for themselves. Even Kai's father, Mal, had barely lasted a few months after his stroke, despite the medicine Elliot had sneaked in.

But here was Sophia Innovation, a young, free Post, rich and pretty and living the life that, a few short moments ago, Kai had envied with all of his heart. Here she was in a crush of spectators, all come to watch her father compete in a race that she could never see.

"I—" Kai stuttered. "I broke something. An antenna."

"Oh." Her brow furrowed over her blind eyes. "What do you need one of those for?"

"It's a long story. But I have nothing to fix it with—not here. And I —" His voice betrayed him then, breaking slightly. "I was really counting on it," he finished weakly.

She slipped off one of her velvet gloves and picked at a bandage wrapped around her index finger. After a moment, she peeled it off and offered it to him. "Does this help at all? I'm sorry it's used."

He took it gingerly from her fingers. "Thank you, I think it might." He wrapped the two pieces of the antenna back together, then tested the connection. "Will your finger be all right?"

“Oh, yes. It was just a pinprick, you know. I have . . . a condition, and my mother gives me blood tests. My name is Sophia.”

“I’m Kai.”

“Young man?” Kai looked up to see Mrs. Innovation peering over at the two of them. “Can I help you?”

Yes she could. She could help him in a dozen ways. In a hundred thousand. She and her husband were the only people in the enclave who *could* help him. He’d come this far to get their attention, and now he had it. Kai stood as straight as possible and swallowed his fear.

“I think your daughter already has,” he said. “I had a bit of a problem with my antenna, and she helped me fix it.”

“What do you need an antenna for?”

He smiled broadly. Like mother, like daughter. Good thing they were the curious sort. “To beat your husband at the race.”

Just then the sound of a pistol shot rent the air and echoed across the water, and the boats took off. Everyone’s attention turned toward the race, except for the two Innovation women.

“What are you talking about, young man?” Mrs. Innovation asked.

“Kai,” Sophia offered. “He said his name is Kai.”

Kai kept his eyes on the boats. His fingers hovered over the switch. He needed to send the signal at precisely the right moment. . . .

Mrs. Innovation’s hand came down on his device. “Talk to me—Kai.”

There was something in the way she said his name. Something Kai hadn’t heard for months. Hadn’t heard for far longer than that. He risked looking up at her.

“I—I work for Pen. I’m a mechanic.”

She raised her eyebrows in disbelief. “You can’t be much older than my daughter.”

“I’m fourteen, and I am Pen’s mechanic. I’m the best in the enclave.” He looked back at the water. Pen had almost reached the turn. He was in third place. Kai hoped he’d make the turn without falling even farther behind or even the trick he had planned might not be enough to save them.

“And you’re trying to cheat,” added Mrs. Innovation. She shook her head. “Should have known we couldn’t trust Pen to play fairly. Give that here.”

Kai swerved away from her, keeping his eye on the boats. Just a few more seconds and Pen would be around the turn and heading back toward the marina. “Pen has nothing to do with this,” he insisted as Mrs. Innovation lunged for the box again. He maneuvered himself on the other side of Sophia. “I invented this device all by myself!”

There! Pen had made the turn. Kai ducked away from Mrs. Innovation again and watched as the nose of Pen’s boat swerved back in their direction. All he needed was a clear shot. . . .

Kai flipped the switch.

Nothing happened.

There should have been a small explosion, a burst of speed, a turbocharged wave of propulsion that shot Pen far into the lead. But nothing happened at all.

“No!” he shouted. He tried it again. *Flick flick flick flickflickflickflick*. “Not now. Come on. . . .”

All around him, the crowd was shouting, cheering on their favorite racer. Captain Innovation’s boat was in the lead, with another racer close behind, and Pen a distant third. Kai watched in horror as Innovation crossed the finish zone and the flag went up.

Everyone in the immediate vicinity started screaming with joy. Mrs. Innovation stopped her pursuit of him and gave a gleeful little hop. She grabbed Sophia's hand. "Daddy won, sweetheart! He won!"

Pen had lost. He'd lost the race, and he'd blame Kai. But that was nothing compared to what Kai had just lost—the only chance he'd ever have to impress the Innovations.

His insides seemed to stick in place, dead as the device in his hands. His lungs wouldn't expand; his heart wouldn't beat.

Mrs. Innovation paused in her celebration and turned to him. "Let that be a lesson to you, Kai. Pen is doing you no favors by forcing you to do his dirty work. Cheaters never prosper."

"*No one* ever prospers!" Kai blurted out, his words choked with unshed tears. "No one does, unless it's by cheating, or lying, or hurting others. It doesn't matter if it's the Luddites, or Pen, or— or *you!*"

"Me?" The woman exclaimed. "I've hurt no one. Your machine didn't work all on its own."

Kai's eyes stung, but he would not cry in front of these people, even if Sophia wouldn't be able to see. He turned to leave, but the crowd pressed in tight. Still, he shoved his way through as best as he could.

"Wait!" shouted Mrs. Innovation. "Come back!"

"Kai!" cried Sophia. "Kai!"

But soon their voices were lost in the crowd.

Eleven

Kai had never been around so many people. They moved as one living thing, sweeping him along toward the dais, where the race officials sat and waited for the racers to leave the water. Kai had no desire to see Pen now. Doubtless, his master would be furious at him—not that his loss was Kai’s fault. Pen had no idea about Kai’s device, but he’d need to cast blame on someone, and Kai was as good a scapegoat as any.

He wanted to break free of the current, find Cleopatra and Napoleon, and get out of there. He’d deal with Pen’s wrath later. He tried to shove through the crush of people to no avail. Everyone was bigger than him. Someone banged against his bad leg, another shoved him out of the way, and soon he found himself pressed close to the base of the dais, his eyes level with the feet of the racers as they ascended the steps from the cove.

“The winner of the race is Captain Nicodemus Innovation!” cried the announcer. Another cheer went up from the audience, and Kai clenched his jaw. Even from this vantage point, he could see the storm brewing on Pen’s face. No one in the man’s employ would be safe tonight.

“And now,” the announcer said, “for the distribution of the prizes. Each entrant wagered something in the race, with the winner taking all.” He looked down at the sheet in his hand. “Captain Innovation’s pair of horses shall remain in his possession, but today he’s also going home with the following—” The announcer paused as his words were almost drowned out by cheering.

Kai watched as Innovation beamed and waved to his adoring fans. Now that he saw the man up close, he was surprised. After hearing of his reputation and seeing his pretty daughter and wife, Kai had been expecting someone handsome and dashing. But Captain Innovation was a bit

on the portly side, with thinning red hair and a sunburned face. Still, he had done marvelous things. He'd beaten the odds of his birth. Who was Kai to judge?

As the shouts died down, the announcer started again. "The Luddite Sheridan Lake wagered his yacht, the Boatwright-built *Long White Cloud*."

Innovation's smile grew so broad Kai feared it might split his face in two. And little wonder. Since the Boatwright shipyard had been shuttered, it was hard to lay hands on any vessel nearly so fine as the ones Elliot's grandfather used to make. A Boatwright vessel was worth a lot of money. As the announcer read from the list of wagers, Kai's fear multiplied. These were amazing prizes. He had no idea the race was as important at this.

Pen might be more than merely angry. He might kill someone.

"The Post-Reductionist Pen wagered the boat he raced on, ten ounces of gold, and the bonded services of his scribe, the Post-Reductionist known as Bess—"

"What?" Pen's voice sliced through the announcement. "I did not."

The announcer blinked in the setting sun. "I am reading your entrance form."

Pen took two steps forward and snatched the paper from the man's hands. He looked it over, as if reading the words, but Kai and everyone else who worked for Pen knew the truth. Pen could not read.

"Bess!" he roared. A few moments later, Bess emerged from the crowd and climbed the steps to the dais. Her hands were folded over her belly, her head was cast down.

"Read. This," he hissed at her, thrusting out the form.

From his spot, Kai could see how her hands shook.

"I—" she whispered. "*I, Pen, hereby submit my entrance wager for the boat race to occur at the marina on the third day—*"

“I know that part!” he growled at her. “Read the wager.”

“I wager the boat I race on, ten ounces of gold, and the bonded services of my scribe, the Post-Reductionist known as Bess—”

“You bitch!” He grabbed Bess by the hair and forced her to her knees. “How dare you!”

Kai’s jaw hung open, and he was quite sure he was not alone. Bess had planned this. She’d planned for Pen to lose. Was it Bess who’d sabotaged his machine before she’d brought it to him at the marina? Bess who’d offered to hold it for him so Pen wouldn’t find it? Bess who’d sabotaged his chances to escape in favor of her own and that of her unborn child?

Not that he could blame her, when he thought about it like that. After all, Kai’s plan had been vague. Bess’s was definite, and she was the one who needed results quickly.

And he couldn’t envy her at this moment either, as he watched Bess writhe under her master’s grip. She screamed in pain as Pen twisted his hands into her hair. “She did this! She changed my wager. I did not agree to that!”

Captain Innovation stepped forward. “See here, Pen. Let her go.” Pen glared at him, but the captain did not back away, and his tone went from calm and reasonable to calm but rock hard. “I said, *Let her go*. She’s mine now. Not yours.”

Pen dropped Bess, and she curled into a ball on the ground.

“That’s not what I agreed to,” he spat out. “This is treachery.”

Captain Innovation retrieved the form from where Bess had dropped it. “Is this your signature, on the bottom?”

“That’s not what I agreed to!” Pen shouted. “You cannot force me to abide by the treacherous lies of my . . .” He cut himself off, then leaned down and directed his next words to

Bess alone. “I’ll kill you, girl. Do you hear me? I’ll kill you and your baby, just like I killed your idiot lover.”

Captain Innovation turned toward one of the other racers, who Kai guessed, by his clothes and noble bearing, was one of the Luddites. “Sir, I would like to register a complaint against the Post-Reductionist Pen, who has just publicly threatened to destroy my property.”

The Luddite nodded. “Witnessed. Better be careful, Pen, or you’ll find your entire operation here in a bit of trouble from your betters.”

“My betters!” Pen said with one of his trademark sneers. “You’re no better than me, Luddite. How many people do *you* own?”

For once, Kai found himself agreeing with his horrible master.

Twelve

Dear Elliot,

I've failed. I've lost my only chance of escape, and even now when I think about it, I can't believe I ever thought it would work. What a stupid idea.

Not stupid because of the machine. That would have worked. It should have worked if it weren't for Bess's meddling. But stupid because, even if it did work, even if I did make Pen win and impressed the Innovations enough that they'd fight Pen to get me—even if all of that had happened, what would I have gained?

Nothing. I'd still have a master. Maybe the Innovations wouldn't be as cruel as Pen or as controlling as your father, but I'd still be theirs. I'd have no choice in the matter because they'd be the only thing protecting me from people like Pen.

I don't want anyone telling me what to do. Not Pen, not the Innovations, and not even you. I want to be my own master. I want it more than velvet, more than riches, more than a real name. I want to get away from this wretched island. I want to go someplace where no one can ever tell me who I am again.

Kai knew he'd never send this letter to Elliot. He'd never send any of them. All his life, he'd believed that no one knew him better than Elliot, and vice versa. But that wasn't true. More than time and distance separated them. She was a Luddite. She would never, ever know what it felt like to be born into Kai's life, into Kai's world. She would never understand what it meant for him to escape. People like the Norths, people who owned others, could never comprehend freedom.

All his life, he'd thought he loved Elliot. But he never realized how little they knew of each other.

It was night now, and Kai sat in his corner of the storage box he shared with six other boys. He sat on his pallet, scribbling away, not caring who saw. Pen had been beaten by those Luddites' bodyguards and was still in confinement in his house. It would be a while before he would be able to mete out any punishment of his own, though Kai wasn't looking forward to that day.

"So you write, too? What a variety of talents you have for a slave."

Kai lifted his head to see Mrs. Innovation standing in front of him, the hem of her purple skirt dragging on the grimy floor of the box. He opened his mouth, but she cut him off.

"Bess told me where to find you. That *was* what you were about to ask, wasn't it, young man? Or were you planning on offering me a cup of tea?" She wrinkled her nose. "Or an old tin can of tea, I suppose."

He scrambled to his feet, his letter still clutched tightly in his hands. "Bess. Where is she?"

"On her way back to her estate, I imagine." Mrs. Innovation glanced around at Kai's messy corner, at the papers and the gearboxes and the well-worn tools. "That wouldn't have been my choice, given her delicate condition, but it seems she values the safety that distance from Pen can bring."

"You freed her?" Kai asked incredulously.

"We don't *own* people, Kai. That's disgusting." She eyed him. "More disgusting than cheating. But you know that already." She continued her survey of his space.

Next to his bed was a tiny pile of books half concealed under a blanket. Some were borrowed from Bess's stash, but the dangerous ones had been procured by Cleopatra, who occasionally got access to a Luddite's home library. Kai moved to conceal them with his body, but Mrs.

Innovation sidestepped him and bent to look more closely. She lifted the edge of the blanket with two fingers and read a few titles. “*Geography of the Southern Hemisphere, Beginner’s Celestial Navigation, and Tales of the Conquistadors?* Bold choices.”

Kai swallowed. That last was Napoleon’s favorite.

“Aren’t you a curious one?” she said, straightening again. “I’m beginning to suspect things about you, Kai.”

“Ma’am?”

“My name is Felicia. Has been for the better part of twenty years.” Her gaze seemed to bore right through him, and Kai shrank back. This woman—this slight, pretty woman with her dark hair and her fine clothes—she was far tougher than Pen. “I gave some thought to what you said, and I think you may have a point. About the cheating.”

“I didn’t—”

“You didn’t end up in my pavilion by accident today, and you weren’t trying to cheat on behalf of your master,” she finished, though that wasn’t what Kai had been planning to say either.

Still, he didn’t correct her. She’d come to find him. That was enough.

“I was born on an estate, like you,” Felicia said now. “I was a skilled laborer, like you—but I was trained as a healer. I could have stayed there, helped my people, but Nicodemus and I, we wanted something more. For ourselves and for any children we might someday have. We didn’t want anyone ever to own us. Does that sound familiar, Kai?”

He nodded. His mouth had gone dry.

“But you are right. It’s hard to prosper in this world when the deck is stacked against you from the start. It’s stacked against every Post on this island. Some are born slaves; some have no choice but to become slaves to cruel and petty opportunists like Pen. I would be lying if I said

that everything I ever did was aboveboard, beginning with running away from the estate where I was raised.”

“So, what are you saying?” Kai asked. “That you’ve thought about it, and it was okay for me to cheat?”

“For you, for me, for Bess,” Felicia said. “It’s impossible to play fair when the entire game is rigged. And it’s ridiculous to expect people to follow rules in matters of life and death, don’t you agree, Kai? This race today, it was a matter of life and death for Bess. So she cheated. She cheated Pen, and apparently, she cheated you, too. And I, for one, cannot blame her for it.”

“Good for you,” Kai grumbled. “You’re not the one stuck here.”

“No,” Felicia said. “But neither are you. I have a proposition. I am looking for someone like you. Actually, I’m looking for a few someones. People who are young and smart and not afraid to break a few rules to get what’s been stolen from all of us.”

Kai stared at her in wonder. Was she saying what he thought? “I promise,” he said quickly, before she changed her mind. “I’m actually a great mechanic. The machine would have worked if Bess hadn’t sabotaged me.”

Felicia chuckled. “I’m sure it would have. After all, Pen keeps you around for a reason. So are you in?”

He hesitated. What was the point of those promises he’d just made in his unsent letter to Elliot if he didn’t believe them? “Are you offering me a job or another bond?”

Her smile grew as large as her husband’s. “I’m offering you a chance at the future you’ve always desired. Tell me, Kai. You say you’re good at fixing boats. Have you ever thought about living on one? Of finding out what lies beyond these islands, once and for all?”

Beyond the islands, beyond the Luddites, beyond everything he ever knew?

Kai looked down at the letter he was writing to Elliot. He crumpled it up in his hands and dropped it to the floor.

“Yes. I’m ready to leave now,” he said, and followed Felicia into a radiant new world.